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Prologue

HIS HEART TO KEEP by Nolwazi Mbuli

He groans on top of me as he reaches his climax and he spills his seed inside me. If God and the ancestors allow, that should be enough to plant a baby inside me. And if not, we will do this again in about a month. This week I am ovulating so possibilities of me actually getting pregnant are very high. He rolls off me and goes to the bathroom. I hear the shower running just as a tear falls down the side of my face. I quickly wipe it away, I can't let him see my weakness.

I lay there waiting for him to be done so I can take my own shower. I could use the guest bathroom down the hallway but I don't want our kids to wake up. It's almost midnight and my kids take after their father, they are light sleepers. One movement and they are up. He walks out of the bedroom with a towel wrapped around him, his body dripping with droplets of water. He is a handsome man strong and commanding in stature and presence. He is intimidating to some extent, but I'm used to him so I'm not easily intimidated.

As soon as he disappears into the walk in closet I get off the bed and go into the bathroom with his seed dripping down my legs. I grab my morning after pills from the back of the cupboard and throw them in

my mouth. I drink from the sink faucet and allow the water to carry the pills down my throat. I'll take two more in the morning just to be safe.

"I'm leaving." He shouts from the other side of the door. I don't give him an answer but the bedroom door closing tells me he is gone. I look at myself in the mirror and wonder if I will ever have him as my own.

Legally he is mine, publicly I am the one who is always on his arm smiling for the cameras, I am the one who carries his children, I am the one who stands up when he says 'sukuma mkami bakubone.' You'd think I'd be happy about all that, in some way I guess I am happy. There is just one thing I wish I had to complete this "picture perfect" life I seem to have, his heart.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

1

"How much longer?" He asks from the other side of the bathroom door. It's been a month since our last encounter and I am pretty sure he is hoping I'll tell him there are two lines on the pregnancy test. That's the only reason he showed up here so early in the morning with a paper bag from the pharmacy. He needs to know if I will give him another son in about eight months. I stand up from the toilet seat and grab the test off the vanity. I walk into the bedroom and hand it to him. There is only one line on it. I am not pregnant. Disappointment washes over his sculptured face with the perfect jawline covered by a neatly trimmed beard.

"I'm sorry." I say looking up at him. I sit on the bed and he sinks down next to me. He rubs his hand on my back and I almost feel bad for tricking him like this. I've never had a problem getting pregnant, or maybe I was younger then. I had our first child just after I turned 24, his first son and heir. The one destined to carry his father and his grandfather's legacy into the future, hence his name, Nqabayamantungwa. My poor baby, at only eight years old he already has such a heavy burden attached to him. I wish things were different, but this is his destiny, just like God couldn't save Jesus from dying on the cross, I also can't save my son from the legacy he was born into.

Four years ago I had our daughter, Zifeziwe, a bubbly and talkative little girl who I wish could have her father wrapped around her tiny little finger. For her to be the ultimate daddy's girl. But she's not. He loves her there's no doubt about that, but he seems to always be missing when it comes to her life. I am just lucky she took after me, as

handsome as her father is, I think as a woman he would fall under the not so pretty gang. If there is one. Nqaba on the other hand looks like a miniature version of his father. Thank God for that.

He sighs next to me and I can smell the disappointment in the air. I know I'm probably being selfish about this but the thought of bringing another human being into this messed up life we have is not fair. Nqaba and Fezi already see their father every other day. He loves them, but he can't be a full time parent. My children are already deprived of a proper relationship with him and I can't add another child into the mix. I try my best to fill the void but no matter how hard I try, I'll never be their father. The best I can do is be the best mother to them.

"We will have to try again." He announces as I stand up and put on my blazer jacket. I have to get to work and I don't have the time to be nursing my dear husband's bruised ego. His phone rings and he looks at it. I watch him through the full length mirror hanging between the bathroom and the closet. The disappointment he had a moment ago is swiftly replaced by a smile. A smile so beautiful it lights up his entire face. I wish it was me he was smiling at, but it's her. The love of his life.

He gets off the bed and walks out of the bedroom before I hear him speaking.

"Hey love." I hear him say as he walks away from the bedroom. I sigh and look at the image in the mirror staring back at me. No matter how many times I fool myself, no matter how many times I lie to myself and tell myself that one day he will come home and never leave, the reality is always a painful punch in the gut.

Ten years ago I married Dalingcebo Israel Khumalo, son to the great Mandlenkosi Jabulani Khumalo. Mining magnate and one of the richest men in Africa. I was promised to him as a baby. No, my father didn't owe his father anything, they were just great business partners and associates. They co owned a few businesses together, including the mines. My father has one son and three daughters. My brother is ten years older than me. Rumour has it my brother, Shlangu showed certain 'tendencies' early on in his life that made my father question his manhood. See my brother enjoyed spending time with girls instead of boys, he preferred dolls over guns or cars, he enjoyed having red nail polish on his nails and sometimes he would steal my mother's make up and put it on. Apparently my father tried to toughen him up and turn him into a man, but that backfired badly because instead of 'straightening' him up, it drove him deeper and deeper into his shell.

When I was five years old, my father gave up on trying to 'straighten' my brother out. His friend on the other hand had a proper son. A son who showed himself to be a 'real man'. With no prospect of ever having a grandson to carry on his legacy, three daughters who according to him would have easily been manipulated out of their inheritance, he got into a deal with his business partner. In order for their business to stay between them, Khumalo's son, Dalingcebo would have to marry one of my fathers daughters. My older sister Lindokuhle is 2 years older than Dalingcebo and my younger sister, Dvumolwakhe wasnt even born yet so that left me, Bahlengiwe Nxumalo. And just like that, my fate was sealed at five years old, inside a boardroom like a common business deal.

Why didnt I refuse? You ask. Because no one ever says no to Zwide Edwin Nxumalo. Crazy, I know, but my father is a man that is hard to

please. Having daughters and a son who came out of the closet with one purpose in mind, to piss his father off was enough of a curse to my father. He's always wanted to have a son, a proper son who would carry his family name forward like a true Zwide man. And when that failed he chose to entrust his entire legacy to the daughter who would marry his best friend's son. At least with Dalingcebo he knows his business will be in safe hands.

My father and my father in law are still best of friends. They have both retired from their businesses leaving the mines and every other business they own to be held in a trust. Dalingcebo runs the diamond mine as an appointed CEO and I run the lodges scattered all over Mpumalanga and KZN. My sister Lindokuhle runs the chains of supermarkets while her husband, Dali's older brother Sbusiso was appointed CEO of the coal mine. Their marriage wasn't arranged, they just fell in love. Sbusiso is the rebellious son who does whatever he wants whenever he wants. He is hard to control, hence he didn't get to run the diamond mine. My sister Dvumo decided to rebel too and veer away from anything business related. She is a model who travels the world thanks to her tall, lean, perfect size zero body. I don't know who she takes after because neither of our parents are that tall.

Sihlangu, my dear brother is making waves in Joburg as a renowned MC presenter, actor and whatever else the entertainment industry needs. My father and him don't get along very well, but for the sake of his reputation, my father keeps it civil. He can't afford for the people to know just how homophobic he is but he also can never accept his son as he is. So he pretends.

I put on my red stilettos after touching up my make up and making sure I look presentable. I grab my laptop bag and handbag and walk out of the bedroom. I walk down the stairs as laughter and giggles emanate from the kitchen. Dali is still here.

"Do you guys want me to take you to school?" He asks and the kids break into a loud yes making him laugh. "Okay, go get your things so we can go."

I enter the kitchen just as the kids go running up the stairs. Today is a special day that comes once every other week.

"I hope you dont mind me taking them to school." He says nibbling on a pancake. I grab a bottle of water and take a seat on the kitchen island.

"Of course not. Just dont let Fezi have any ice cream before school. I dont need the teachers calling me because she is climbing up the walls." He laughs making me smile. Sometimes, just sometimes, we seem like a perfect family.

"I'm never going to hear the end of that am I?" He places a pancake on a plate and hands it to me. One of his specialties and the kids favourite. Looking at him now, he looks like he belongs here. The apron wrapped around him and the shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows make him look so carefree.

"Nope." I say drizzling syrup on the pancake. I dont eat much, especially breakfast, but for today I'll eat. The kids come running down the stairs ready to go.

"We are ready to go." Fezi shouts in her squeaky voice. Dali unties the apron and hangs it on its designated area. I kiss the kids goodbye and watch them run out of the house. They are so happy.

Mam Aggie walks into the kitchen ready to clean up. She greets and gets on with her business while I go through emails. We have a celebrity wedding coming up in the next month and we've been busy. Imvelo Lodge is a world renowned five star luxury lodge that boasts the largest population of Africa's Big 5. Tourists from all over the world walk through our gates knowing they will at least see three of the big five on a slow day, something very few lodges can boast about.

As soon as I'm done with breakfast Mam Aggie takes the plate away. I say my goodbyes and head out to my car. From the outside my life is perfect, I have a husband, two kids, we both run our family businesses, we live in the 'richest' part of town but life is anything but perfect.

Yes I'm married and I have the children, but I feel more like a side chick than a wife. When Dali and I got married he had a girlfriend, Khanyisile. He was going to marry her, until our parents put a spanner in the works. From the time he was little he used to go to the mine with his father. He knows everything there is to know about the mine from the inside out. Going to school to earn his degrees was just a formality. He could run that mine with just his matric certificate and make it the best in the world. He loves it and ever since he was young he was groomed to take over. When our parents proposed the marriage idea to him he was livid. He swore he would never agree to it. He loved his girlfriend and he would never do anything to hurt her. He was given an option, marry Bahlengiwe and inherit the mine or refuse and pack your things

and leave. Of course he agreed, but he had a plan, a year after marrying me, he would marry Khanyi and live happily ever after.

Sadly for him, he was dealing with master manipulators. Both our fathers didn't get to where they are by being sweet and kind. They are ruthless, even to their own children. When we agreed to get married we signed a contract. I read it, Dali didn't and that's why we are here now. Ten years later, still married, with Khanyi as the official side chick. I had my own plans too, no, I didn't have a man, I just wanted to run the businesses and show my father that even girls can run successful businesses. Ten years later, even with lodges that are now five star, he still has his doubts. You'd think by now I would have given up, but I'm still going, trying to prove myself to him.

My phone rings just as I enter the lodge. Imvelo lodge has one of the biggest game reserves in the Southern Hemisphere. I also use it as a headquarters so I can keep track of the six other lodges. I park the car and grab my handbag from the backseat. Khanyi's name flashes on the screen. I don't know why she bothers calling me, oh wait, I do know, she is the unofficial sister wife and somehow when she wants to do something at the lodge, it's me she calls. I let the phone ring until it stops. But she calls again. I take a deep breath before answering the call.

"Khanysile." I'm pretty sure she can hear from my voice that I'm not interested in whatever she has to say.

"Bahle, unjani. (How are you?)" If I could roll my eyes any deeper they would be stuck to the back of my head by now. No, I don't hate her, I just think she should stick in her lane and allow me to be in mine. I don't bother her so she should return the favour.

"I'm fine."

"So listen, Dali's birthday is coming up and I was hoping we could use the lodge for the party." She sounds happy.

"When do you want to use the lodge?"

"In a couple of months. His birthday is on a Sunday but we can have the celebration on Saturday night so that by midnight we will still be there." She really has this planned out. Nice.

"I'd love to help but the lodge is fully booked for the next three months."

"Oh."

"Yeah, I'm sorry."

"Its okay. What about the other lodges. I'm sure there is one we can use."

"I dont know Khanyi I'll see what I can do." I hear her squeal in excitement. I dont know why cause there wont be a party at any of the lodges. Even if they arent booked. Dont look at me like that, what sane woman plays nice with her husband's mistress. No, I'm not trying to sabotage her I just dont understand why our lives have to cross. Like I said, she needs to stay in her lane just as much as I stay in mine.

I hang up as soon as she says her goodbyes. I dont know why Dali gave her my number. I've changed it twice and he still gives it to her. I grab my things and walk into the building. My office is just close enough to the entrance without it being right in the centre of everything. I get a text as soon as I take a seat at my desk. Its Dali telling me the kids made

it safe to school and they didnt get ice cream. Life neh, it's never a one size fits all, and mine is probably the ten XL version of it that very few actually use.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

2

Planning a wedding, no, make that planning a celebrity wedding is a mission and a half. Even though they have their own wedding planner who is just as dramatic as the couple if not worse, I still go home with a headache because of it. Since we took on this responsibility two months ago it's been hell. And today is no different. I am headed home now with a massive headache to boot.

The kids come running out the house as soon as I park the car. Their screams are not helping at this moment but as a super mum, I have to grin and bear it.

"Hey, you guys look happy, what's going on?" I ask as Nqaba takes my bags from me.

"Dad is making fried chicken with chips and burgers." Fezi answers, excitement all over her cute face.

"And we will have chocolate cake for dessert." Nqaba adds. We walk into the house and sure enough the smell of fried chicken fills the house.

"Okay babies, please go take a bath, I'm sure by the time you're done, food will be ready." They run up the stairs and I'm certain they will be in there for five minutes. I take a deep breath and go into the kitchen. Sure enough Dali is in here, apron on over shorts and a tshirt. He looks so carefree I wonder if Khanyi knows he is here playing happy families.

"Hi." He turns away from the pot and smiles.

"Hey. You're back. Can I get you a drink?" I'm not sure what kind of game he is playing but I know I don't like it.

"Dali what are you doing here?" His smile doesn't leave his face. I wonder what's got him so happy.

"Hawu, I'm making food. Is that a bad thing?" I take off my blazer and place it on the highchair.

"In the morning you were making pancakes, you took the kids to school and now you're here making dinner. What gives?" He laughs. Sure I have moments where I wish I could have a normal marriage like most people. But I know better and I've made peace with that. That's why I don't need Dali being here and acting like we are the perfect family when we are far from it. And I don't need the kids getting used to having him around when I know it won't last. Right now we have a good thing going, I am the main parent and he is the parent who sees them once or twice a week and I need it to stay that way.

"Hawu, am I not allowed to spend time with my family?" I swear the devil is trying to test me today.

"Of course you are. I just don't understand this twice in a day thing. The kids are happy and I like seeing them happy, but what I don't like is having to answer questions like 'where is dad', 'is he going to take us to school today', 'is he coming to my soccer game', or my personal favourite 'is dad mad at us.' " his smile disappears.

"What are you trying to say Bahle?"

"What I am trying to say is that it took me a long time to get the kids used to the fact that you live on the other side of town and we live

here. Getting them to understand that you not being here doesn't mean you don't love them or care about them. Right now you're going to get them used to a life they will never have. And it's unfair on them. I am an adult, I know what's going on but they are children. I don't want their hearts to be broken when things go back to normal." He sighs, leaning on the island. "I'm going to take a bath."

I leave him in the kitchen and head upstairs. The moment I get up to my room I feel him behind me.

"They are my children too and I have every right to spend time with them." He says closing the door behind him. I don't have the energy to fight with him right now so I ignore him and undress until I'm left with just my underwear. He keeps quiet until I turn around to look at him. I see his eyes roaming down my body and then I remember this morning's pregnancy test and his sudden need to 'spend time' with the kids. Something is going on with him.

"Why do you want another child?" His eyes quickly run up and become level with mine.

"What?" As if he didn't hear me. Mxm.

"You heard me Dalingcebo. Why do you want another child? You have a son, you have a daughter, why do you want another child?" He shrugs his shoulders and sits on the kist sitting at the bottom of the bed.

"I want a huge family. And since I can't have kids with Khanyi I might as well have more with you." All of a sudden he sounds sad. Maybe I would be too if I couldn't have a child with the person I love. I pull my leg up to sit on the bed, watching him play with his fingers.

"You can have kids with Khanyi. No one is stopping you." He chuckles and turns around to look at me as if to say I can't be serious.

"You know I can't do that. I want to but I can't."

"Having more kids with me isn't going to change anything. Instead we will be bringing more children to deal with our dysfunctional family and that's not fair."

"Is that why you've been using birth control and you didn't tell me." I swallow the bitter saliva that seems to have found its way to my mouth. How did he even find out about those. "I saw them earlier when I was looking for some paracetamol." He continues, answering the question that's stuck in my throat.

"Still doesn't answer my question. Why the sudden need for another baby?" I'm surprised at how calm I sound. As much as Dali and I have never had a conventional marriage, you never know how anyone will react to being lied to or kept in the dark about something important. He sighs and stands up.

"You could have told me you didn't want another child." He sounds just as calm as I do if not more.

"Dalingcebo, I still have no idea why you want a child. Give me a valid reason and I'll consider giving you a child. But right now right now you're not giving me anything." I say and he roughly rubs his hands all over his face, frustration masking his handsome face. Now I know something is really going on. He lets go of his face and takes a deep breath. His eyes closed and his face looking up at the ceiling. Why can't he just tell me what's going on?

He shakes his head just as the kids come running inside the room.

"Daddy, let's go eat." Fezi squeals jumping up and down. Dali's face softens as he picks her up.

"Okay, let's go." He turns to look at me. "Are you joining us?"

"I'll be down in a second." He nods his head and walks out with the kids. I quickly jump in the shower. I walk out and grab the paracetamol from the cabinet and down two. My headache seems to be getting worse.

I throw on some lounge wear before joining the gang downstairs. They are already sitting around the dining table, with food decked out in the middle of the table.

"Mummy look, dad says we can make our own burgers." Nqaba shouts excitedly. I plaster a smile on my face and take a seat.

"That's nice. So what are you going to put in yours?" I ask. The kids go off telling me about all they want in their burger, which in essence is everything on the table. And I must say seeing their stacked up burgers makes me want to do the same. I stack up my own burger with them telling me what to do. They are so happy and yet it's hard for me to be happy too.

"I don't think my mouth is big enough for this burger." Fezi says looking at the burger that seems bigger than her face making us laugh.

"You'll have to cut small pieces baby." Dali says. I look up at him and his eyes keep darting from one kid to the next. His eyes won't even look my way. I guess he realises what I said earlier is true. This is getting the kids used to something he knows he can't keep up. And tomorrow I'll

be left to pick up the pieces when the kids come back wanting to know where daddy is. My head is already spinning trying to find a way that will convey the message without breaking their little hearts.

Dinner goes off without a hitch, except Fezi has a hard time finishing her burger so she decides she'll take her leftovers to school tomorrow. When they are done eating Dali helps them brush their teeth before tucking them in. The moment I hear his footsteps coming down the stairs I already know he is on his way out. These moments never last anyway.

He finds me in the kitchen cleaning up. He takes a seat on the highchair and watches me move around, not saying a word. I continue what I'm doing till I finish. I pour myself a glass of water and sit down next to him. He sighs, playing with his phone.

"Can I ask you something?" He says breaking the silence. I nod my head without looking at him. But I can feel his eyes on the side of my face. "Why did you agree to marry me when you knew our marriage will never be normal." He asks. For a moment all the reasons I've used to convince myself over the years come flying in. But one remains constant.

"I dont know." I admit. I've had different reasons each time I ask myself that same question. Sometimes its 'I wanted to prove myself to my father', other times its 'I could never disobey my father.' But the reality is I dont know why I agreed. I never had thoughts or ideas that maybe Dali would love me one day. I knew it would never happen. But even a wild fire can start just because someone threw a burning cigarette stub on the ground.

It was only after Fezi's birth that thoughts of a proper family started wheeling around my head. Thanks to my only friend Tiyandza. The day she found out I had given birth to a girl she came to see me, pink gift bags and all. She sat on the couch watching me breastfeed my child. Dali was in the kitchen playing the dutiful husband and serving our guest refreshments before he had to go and fetch Nqaba from school.

"This is a first." She said as soon as Dali disappeared.

"What?"

"Your husband, so attentive and present. What has changed?" She questioned sipping the juice Dali had just given her.

"I dont know what you're talking about." I honestly did not know what she was on about at that moment.

"Really? How long has he been here?" She asked. I did the calculations in my head and told her he had been there for almost two weeks. Basically since Fezi was born. "See! Maybe he is coming around and actually realizing he has a good thing in you." She added.

He spent a whole month with us after that conversation with Tiyandza, for the first time in a long time I saw him differently. He was attentive and sweet. I dont remember him speaking to Khanyi while I was around, he tended to the kids and gave me time to rest. For that short while he was the husband I probably would have prayed for if I had been a praying person. I fell for him. Hard. But all of that was shortlived. As soon as I was up and able to do things for myself and Fezi wasnt as fussy as she was things changed and went back to normal.

He'd tell me he was going to spend a couple of hours with Khanyi, hours turned to days and days turned to weeks and things fell back in place. I was back to being a single mother and he was back in the arms of the woman he loved. As shattered as my heart was, I hid it very well. Till this day he doesn't know I'd cry myself to sleep each time he left. I got up, dusted myself and kept reminding myself that he was never mine to begin with. Sure I have his ring, but his heart, that's something I'll never have.

"The parents are coming back in a couple of weeks so I will be spending more time around here." He says and everything falls into place. Our parents still don't know that Khanyi is still in the picture, or maybe they do know, with those ones you never know. That's why they included a clause in the marriage contract that states that neither of us is allowed to have a child outside of this marriage, if we do, the guilty party will forfeit their right to, well everything. It means they won't inherit anything from the parents and the child will never be considered a full Khumalo. I told you those two men are ruthless.

"Okay." I say. The parents took a year long cruise a year ago to celebrate Mr Khumalo's seventieth birthday. I guess now it's coming to an end.

"Bahle!" Dali calls out. I turn to look at him. "I am going." I nod my head and watch him walk out. When I hear the car drive off I get up and lock the doors. I check all the windows to make sure they are closed and the doors locked before heading upstairs. I check on the kids and they are asleep. Well almost. When I open Nqaba's bedroom door I see his eyes are open. He smiles at me so I go in and sit on the bed brushing his head.

"Shouldnt you be sleeping?" He looks up at me like he wants to ask something but is reluctant. "What's wrong baby?" He sighs and looks at his fingers, playing with them.

"Is dad going to take us to school tomorrow?" He asks and then looks up at me. I feel my heart breaking. I knew this was a bad idea and now, as always, I'm left to pick up the pieces. Fuck Dalingcebo!

HIS HEART TO KEEP

3

Dropping the kids off at school isn't as fun today as it usually is. Fezi is humming a song and counting while Nqaba has been staring out the window since we left home. I hate how Dali walks in and out of their lives like a revolving door. I follow the queue to the drop off zone till I'm parked. I turn to the backseat and Nqaba is already opening the door. I turn on the childlock and he looks at me while a teacher opens the door for Fezi and she jumps out.

"Baby, I know you're disappointed that your dad is not here, but please try to enjoy your day okay and we will talk about it after school Okay?" He nods his head and gets out of the car. As soon as they are out the car and their bags pulled out of the boot I drive off.

This used to be easier when the kids were younger. They didn't have a concept of time and Dali could waltz in and out of their lives any which way he wants. But now Nqaba is eight, he is aware of his father's absence. I thought asking Dali to stay away would protect them but it looks like it might be doing more damage than I thought.

I dial his number while stuck in traffic. He picks up quicker than I expected.

"Bahle, hi! Is everything okay?" He asks. I don't usually call him for anything unless it's an emergency.

"We need to talk. Can you come by the lodge later today?"

"Uhm.... why?" I can hear hesitation in his voice. But it's time things change. Being a single married parent isn't helping me or my kids. It's time for daddy dearest to step up.

"We need to talk. It's important."

"Is it about the kids?"

"I can't talk about this over the phone. If you can please come by the lodge. We really need to talk." I say before hanging up.

I couldn't sleep last night after Nqaba asked me about his father taking them to school. I had no answer, not even a lie. After last night I realise I need to stop trying to protect Dalingcebo, he is a father and he needs to start acting like it.

I get to the office and I already have a ton of messages from the wedding planner. My PA walks in with my diary and takes a seat.

"How long before this wedding is over again?" I ask reading through the messages. She laughs.

"When it's over you will miss the rush." She says. I doubt. "So the new head ranger is coming in, he should be here in about twenty minutes. You also have a meeting with the vet, there is a lion that's been injured by a poacher's trap and we have to find it before it dies." Unlike most places where nature takes its course and animals die willy nilly, Imvelo lodge prides itself in taking care of our animals. We have a clinic where we treat the injured animals and then send them back to the wild. Most of them are already endangered as it is so we need to make sure they are safe and healthy. But poachers aren't helping in the matter. That's

why we have to add more rangers, starting with the head ranger since the one we had resigned.

She goes on telling me about my day and I realise I might not have a moment to speak to Dali. But that's something important and it needs to happen, today.

"Find me a spot sometime in the afternoon, I will be having a meeting with my husband." I see a naughty smile cross her face, she probably thinks it's a dick appointment. If only.

"Okay. I will see if the ranger is here and then bring him in." She says getting off the chair. I nod my head as she walks out. Ten minutes later I hear a knock on the door.

"Come in." I say and the door swings open. A man wearing the ranger uniform with our logo on it walks in. He takes off his cap and stands before me, his hand held out for a handshake. He looks good that's for sure. He is a shade lighter than Dalingcebo, he has a brush cut and his short stubble beard is well trimmed. Its almost the same as Dali's. His sleeves are rolled up and I can see a tattoo peeking out of his right arm.

"Hi. Sahluko Mthembu, it's nice to finally meet you." He says. I take his hand and he has a firm grip and his hand is a little rough. Testament of his hardwork I guess.

"Bahlengiwe Nxumalo. It's a pleasure to meet you. Please have a seat. He takes a seat bringing his one leg up to rest on the other then he places the cap on top of his raised knee.

"Its nice to finally put a face to the name. I must say, you look better than I had expected." He says making me blush a little. I clear my throat trying to get back to my professional mode.

"Thank you. I take it you've been shown around?" Even though I was supposed to show him around, now I regret giving that job to Martha, our HR.

"Yes. Martha was kind enough to show me around. I must say, I think I'll enjoy my stay here." He adds revealing a pearly white smile.

"I'm glad to hear that. Please dont hesitate to let me know if you need anything" I am interrupted by the door swinging open to reveal my dear husband. He walks in and greets Sahluko before looking at me.

"Hey, I'm here, we can talk." He says, his hands stuffed in his pants pockets. From the looks of it, he hasnt gone to the mine.

"I thought we said later this afternoon?" I ask sounding more irritated than anything.

"You said it was important so. " he shrugs his shoulder and sits down.

"I'm in the middle of a meeting." Now I'm angry. Why is he so rude.

"I'm sure we can finish our conversation later." Sahluko says standing up. "I think I'll go help out with finding the injured lion."

"No problem. By the way this is Dalingcebo Khumalo. Dalingcebo, this is Sahluko Mthembu, our new head ranger." Dali stands up and shakes his hand.

"Nice to meet you." He adds sounding a little more pleasant. "I'm sorry for budging in on your meeting like this."

"Its not a problem. I'm sure Miss Nxumalo and I can continue our conversation later." Sahluko says.

"Its Mrs Khumalo actually." Dali corrects him with a smug smile on his face.

"Oh

I apologize. I didn't know."

"Honest mistake. I'm sorry again for cutting your meeting short." Dali is way too nice right now and I dont like it. What was the need for him to tell Sahluko we are married in not so many words.

Sahluko walks out leaving me with my idiotic husband.

"So, what's so urgent." He asks sitting back down.

"About last night, I know I said you need to not involve yourself so much in the kids lives, but I was wrong." I say. I see him pop his eyes out in surprise.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nqaba is growing up, he is not as oblivious of his surroundings as he was when he was little. Now he notices things and he has questions. Questions that sometimes I cant answer. And I think that's where you step in. I cant teach him how to be a man Dali, that's your job." He sighs and sits back on the chair.

"I dont understand. I thought we had an agreement."

"Between you and I, yes. Between you and the kids, no. When I went to sleep last night Nqaba asked me if you will be taking them to school again. I think it's time you stepped in and played your role as a father.

And that means being there for them, anyway they need you. I can do all I can to be both parents but reality is, I am not. I don't want my kids growing up angry and resentful, especially because they have a father who is present but absent at the same time. I think it's time you become a father."

"What do you need me to do?" How do you even tell a father to be a father?

"I don't know Dalingcebo, take them to school, help them with their homework, take them out for ice cream, read them a bed time story, go swimming with them, something. Anything for you to bond with them. I just need you to be a father, a present father." I say half shouting, more out of frustration than anything.

He nods his head and plays with his car keys. I don't know what's going on in his head at this very moment. Things can go either way although I am hoping he will think about his children before anything else.

"And Dali this isn't about the parents coming back. I want our kids to be a priority to you beyond this. They deserve that much."

"I know. I'll try to be there for them."

"Thank you." He looks at his watch before standing up.

"I have to go. I have a meeting with the Minister. I will talk to you later." I nod my head and watch him leave.

I feel a tad bit better after talking to him. I know it's a big change from what I told him last night but there are children involved, things change pretty quickly. I go through my meetings pretty chilled for once. Even the wedding planning is not a huge bother today.

I decide to go to the restaurant for lunch. Its packed. Sometimes I think people come here just for the view more than the food. The restaurant sits on a high deck overlooking the watering hole and there are always animals there. It's quite nice for people to see the animals from here. I place my order with the restaurant manager then take a seat at the edge of the deck while going through emails.

I see two of our trucks driving towards the clinic. Judging by the bulky brown mound at the back of one of the trucks I'm guessing they found the lion. They park the car and I see Sahluko jumping out of the back of the car. I didnt even notice it was him because of the hat on his head. They disappear into the clinic with the lion on a gurney. I have my lunch although I am dying to go to the clinic to check out how the lion is doing. As soon as I'm done I walk to the clinic. The other rangers have gone back to their posts. But Sahluko is still here watching through the glass as the vets are busy with the lion.

"Hey, you found it." I say standing next to him. He turns to me and smiles. He has a nice smile.

"Yes, it wasnt hard actually, it's pretty hurt though. If we hadn't got to it in time it probably would have died of an infection." He says sounding, pissed maybe. I dont know. I cant seem to read him just yet.

"All this because some idiots think rhino horns have some sort of magic in them." He turns his whole body to face me.

"What's your policy on poachers? I know I read my contract and what is expected, but what's your take on poachers?" I also turn to face him and immediately regret it. I should have kept my heels on. These sandals make me look short.

"Shoot to kill." His brows shoot up in surprise.

"Really?"

"Yes. Most of these animals are tethering on the edge of extinction and if preventing that means putting a bullet in a poachers head, then so be it." He smiles again.

"I'm glad we are on the same page." We simultaneously turn back to the surgery happening. The vet gives us a thumbs up. The treatment is done. It went quicker than I expected. Now for the lion to heal and then go back to its pride.

I get back to the office ready to go pick up the kids from school. I get my bag and make my way to the parking lot. Before I get in my car I check my phone. I have a message from Dali saying he is picking up the kids from school. Okay, I guess the stepping up has begun. I turn back around.

My phone rings as soon as I take a seat. It's an unknown number.

"Hello."

"Hey sis." Dvumo's squeaky cheerful voice says bringing a smile on my face. I've missed her.

"Hey globetrotter. Where are you? I miss you." She laughs.

"I miss you too. I'm actually on my way to your house." I guess my day just ended it's time to go home.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

4

I'm excited. My sister is home. I text Lindo and tell her dinner is at my place since Dvumo is back. She texts back immediately saying she will be there. My sister's and I are close, in fact I am close to all my siblings. I decide to also text Shlangu and tell him to come by for dinner. I know Joburg and Witbank are hours apart but I'm sure he can make time, and he can sleep over if he wants. It will be great to catch up with all of them.

I go past the mall and get some groceries. I am going to make a feast. I get home and find the kids already home. Dali is in the backyard playing soccer with Nqaba while Fezi is sitting in the patio busy with her drawings. I dont know how long Dali will be able to actually do this and still keep his other life in check. For now I will just have to be grateful for the moment.

I unload the groceries and pack away what I wont be using. I put the wine in the wine cooler. I'm not much of a drinker but my sisters and I love a good wine.

"Are you having a party?" Dali asks behind me. I didnt even see him come in. I turn around and smile.

"Not really. My sisters are coming over, Dvumo is back so we will be having a catch up session."

"That's great. She's really doing well with this whole modeling thing. I saw her on an American vogue editorial a couple of weeks back." I scrunch my face up, confused as hell.

"You read vogue?" He laughs. He has a nice, throaty contagious laugh.

"No. Khanyi had a copy shipped out from the States. I dont know how those things add value to one's life but she seems to like them." We were having such a great conversation and he had to ruin it. Men!

"Right, anyways I have to start cooking. Let me go change." I leave him in the kitchen and hurry up to my room. I change into some denim shorts and a white vest. I just need to be as free as possible.

I go back downstairs. Dali is watching cartoons with the kids. Perfect, it means I wont be disturbed. I start by marinating the meat. I've decided we will have a braai. And if Shlangu is coming he can do the braaiing. I marinate the chicken, beef, pork and ribs. The wors doesnt need any more flavoring. I cut the rolls in half and lather them with garlic infused butter then throw them in the oven. I get started on the salads just as my phone pings. It's a message from Dali saying he is on his way. Perfect. I get even more excited. I cant wait to see everyone.

Lindo is the first to arrive. And she has more wine. She greets the kids and Dali before joining me in the kitchen.

"Manje? Happy families and all." She whispers, making sure Dali doesn't hear her. I shrug my shoulders and hand her the cucumber to chop.

"We will talk about it later." I whisper back and she nods.

"So how have you been?" She asks, back to her normal voice.

"I'm good. I just have a lot to do with this wedding we are planning."

"You still dont want to tell me who the celebrities getting married are?" I shake my head and she pouts her lips. I laugh cause she looks just like Fezi when she wants an extra cookie or cupcake.

"Nope. You and everyone else will find out on the day."

"You do know someone will leak the invitation? We are living in an age of social media and people want to teend and be the first to drop some hot news." She says and I know she's just trying to get me to tell her what she wants to know.

"No one will leak the invitation. Before they even get it, the guests will have to sign NDA's that are airtight. So trust me, no one will know." She rolls her eyes and I see she's given up her quest. For now.

Dvumo arrives and as usual she is the life of the party. The kids immediately jump on her, especially because she has gifts and these two love gifts. While these two tear up the gifts Dvumo joins us in the kitchen.

"Sisters." She says wrapping her arms around our shoulders and pulling us to her. "I missed you." She kisses our cheeks and let's us go.

"We missed you too." We say simultaneously.

"So what are we eating, I'm hungry?" She asks opening the serving dishes. "Salads? Please tell me there's meat somewhere and pap. Like proper pap and chakalaka?" She begs her hands clasped together in a praying pose.

"There is definitely meat, but you will have to make the fire so we can get started. The ribs need more time on the fire. And Shlangu is not here yet so. ..." I say. I see her look at me like I am crazy.

"There is a man in the house." She whispers. "Ask him." Not gonna happen. I'd rather make it myself. She sees the hesitation in my voice and she does what she does best. Being forward.

"Sbali!" She shouts going to the lounge. Dali looks at her, a small smile on his face. "Please make the fire for us. We need to start braaiing." She begs. I see Dali's smile fill his face as he stands up and heads out to the patio. Our house has a built in braai. I wanted a gas one, it would have been easier to use than having to make a fire, but my dear husband argued that meat tastes better with that smoky wooden flavour to it so I let him be. Now that I think about it, the braai is the only thing he had a say on in the house. Everything else was all me. From the tiles to the finishes to the entire design of the house. It was all me.

"See, that was easy." Dvumo says coming back to the kitchen. Well it would have been hard for me to ask Dali for anything. In fact I dont ask him for anything. As far as his manly duties in this house go, he gets me pregnant and that's that. Everything else he does of his own accord. Sure he sends me money but I never ask for it or remind him of it if he doesn't send it. It's not like I cant afford to take care of myself or my kids.

"Easy for you. This one has too much pride. She wont let him be the man and play his role." Lindo says gulping down her wine. I just roll my eyes and finish my chakalaka. You'd think these two would help instead of munching on everything in site.

"He has his role and you both know where that is." They look at each other before looking at the lounge to make sure he is not back.

"So vele the girl is still in the picture?" Dvumo asks.

"Where else would she be? That's the love of his life. She's not going anywhere." I answer and refill my glass.

"Its been ten years and she's still holding on with her teeth. Why torture herself?" Dvumo continues.

"Torture herself?" Lindo starts. "The only one torturing herself is Bahle. She's the one with a ring on her finger and her wakes up alone every single day while her husband plays happy families with another woman. Trust me

Khanyi is not the one being tortured."

I hate that Lindo is right but I also cant go back on my word. When Dali and I got married I agreed to Khanyi being in the picture. I knew from the beginning what I was getting myself into so I cant complain now.

"It is what it is." I say just as Dali walks into the kitchen to wash his hands.

"The fire is up and running." He says.

"Thank you Sballi." Dvumo says. My sister has her own way of getting men to do things for her. I dont know if it's the model in her or it's just in her nature but she men seem to fall at her feet each time she needs something done.

"So I was thinking of taking the kids out to The Ridge for some fun while you guys catch up." He says. I am about to say no, it's a school night, sure tomorrow is Friday but still. Unfortunately for me my kids have supersonic hearing and before I can even speak they are already in the

kitchen jumping up and down. Everyone is now staring at me waiting for an answer. There are ten eyes staring back at me and I realise saying no would not be in my best interest.

"Fine. But they need to be back before ten. And that's pushing it. They have school tomorrow." Their screams fill the whole house as they run up the stairs to change. Seeing them happy makes me happy too. So maybe Dali being involved in their lives will be worth it in the end. "I'm going to put the ribs on the fire." I say and take the Tupperware bowl but Dali takes it from me.

"I'll do it since I'm still waiting for those two." He says and walks out.

"So what's with him? Is he campaigning for husband of the year?" Lindo questions as soon as he is out of earshot.

"I just asked him to spend more time with the kids. They are growing up and they are slowly noticing his absence. I just asked Dali to be a little more involved in their lives."

"That's good. And wena, when are you having kids? You and Sbu have been married for a while." Dvumo asks and I'm glad the conversation is no longer on me.

"We will have kids when the time is right. Unlike this one..." she points at me with her glass. "We are not under pressure to bring any future Khumalo's into the world." There is plenty of truth in her words. But the sadness in her eyes makes me think she is hiding something. I'll let it go for now because she clearly is not ready to talk about it.

Shlangu arrives just as Dali and the kids head out. I must say my brother is a good looking man. He has on skinny Jean's, a Marvel graphic tshirt

and a leather jacket with Chelsea boots. His black nail polish would make my father grind his teeth in annoyance right now. But us, we don't care. As long as big brother is happy, we are happy. He gives us hugs and pours himself a glass of wine.

"So, what's hobby doing here? Umcoshile mamncane? (Did your sister wife kick him out?)" He asks as soon as he sits down.

"Can we not talk about him. This is a Zwide catch up session so please." They look at each other and whatever conversation they have with their eyes is going to drive me nuts so I ignore them.

Dvumo helps me set up outside while Shlangu takes over the braaiing. Seeing them again is nice. And being together brings a sense of joy in my heart. My siblings and I were each other's support system, especially against my father when he went into his tyrant mode. I know I can talk to them about anything and everything.

We sit around the table outside and dish up.

"No wonder you're the only one who is married. Uyalbhamula l'bhodo sis wam. (You can cook.)" Shlangu says stuffing a piece of meat in his mouth and earns himself a side eye from Lindo making us laugh. My sister is not the domesticated type and we always make fun of her for it. She has caterers and cleaners on speed dial. It's a good thing Sbu loves her just the way she is.

"Whatever bro. And wena, when are you getting married?" He rolls his eyes and keeps eating.

"Not anytime soon. Bahle, what's happening with your husband. On a serious note, why is he suddenly here?" He asks.

"I asked him to spend more time with the kids. Plus he wants more kids." They all stop eating and look at me.

"And you're not giving him anymore right?" Dvumo asks.

"She better not?" Shlangu says.

"Of course not. Two kids are enough. Plus I feel like he has ulterior motives for wanting a baby but I cant seem to get to the bottom of it."

"It doesn't matter what reason he has. Its ridiculous for him to expect you to pop out babies like you're a factory while Miss Khanyi lives her life like the perfect housewife. Do you know she just bought her mother a four bedroom house in Reyno Ridge?" Lindo says making my siblings gasp. They look at me somehow expecting me to be fuming and angry but I'm not.

Truth be told I don't get myself involved in Dali and Khanyi's life. Although Khanyi never got the memo because she likes sticking her nose in my life. Dali and I have an agreement and I choose to stick to it, even though him and Khanyi can do whatever they want while I keep my end of the bargain. And the house that he bought, yes HE bought it, doesnt bother me one bit. He started by renovating her mothers house in Extension 5 and now he has upgraded her. Khanyi doesn't work so its obvious Dali is the one who bought the house.

"So you're not going to say anything?" Dvumo questions staring at me. I shake my head and continue eating my food.

"Its none of my business."

"What do you think his father would say if he found out that they are still together?" Shlangu asks.

"He would forfeit his entire inheritance." Lindo blurts out. I look at her wondering how she even knows this. I thought Dali, the parents and I were the only ones who knew. I give her a side eye and she gives one back. "Dont look at me like that. You know it's true. And that's another reason why Khanyi hasnt popped a baby out yet. If she does, Dali forfeits his inheritance and their baby would not even lay a claim to the Khumalo riches." I see Dvumo and Shlangu's jaws drop.

"You mean if anyone were to whisper to Bab'Khumalo's ear about this, it would be game over?" Dvumo asks and I can see the wheels turning in her head. The way she hates Khanyi I'm sure if she had known this all along she would have long told Bab'Khumalo.

"Yes. But you won't open your mouth. Right Dvumo." She shrugs and looks away. But I need her word and not a shrug. Dvumo is as petty as they come. She wouldnt mind dropping this bomb to the parents then flying to Milan for fashion week like she didn't leave chaos behind.

"Dvumo, I need your word. You wont say anything to the parents, right?"

"I dont know why you're protecting him. Bahle, you are a married woman with a husband who is cohabiting with his side chick. At some point you have to put an end to this." She argues.

"Dvumo, please understand this, Dali and I have an agreement. We stay married while he lives his life. And it's been working very well for us. So please do not interfere." She rolls her eyes and mumbles a 'fine.' I just hope she doesn't run into Khanyi while she's here because things would fall apart pretty quickly.

After dinner Shlangu and Lindo leave. He will be spending the night at her place. Dvumo feigns exhaustion and jet lag leaving me to clean up alone. I look at the clock in the kitchen and it's way past eleven. Dali should be back with the kids by now. I pick up my phone and dial his number. He doesn't pick up, instead he cuts the call. I try again and the same thing happens. I try for the third time and this time he answers. But he doesn't say anything.

"Dali?" I look at my phone and the seconds are counting which means he is on the line. But why is he not speaking? "Dalingcebo?"

"Geez its late. Can you stop calling." I hear Khanyi say. I feel my temperature rising. I really hope and pray that this doesn't mean what I think it does. I really hope not.

"Can I speak to Dali please." I say as politely and calmly as I can say.

"He is in the shower. Anything else?" Her attitude is the one thing that's driving me nuts right now. I take a few deep breaths.

"Where are my kids?"

"They are sleeping. Dali will bring them in the morning." She says before hanging up the phone. This girl is really testing me right now. I call the number again and this time it goes straight to voicemail. Oh hell no!

HIS HEART TO KEEP

5

I've been debating with myself for the past hour whether to go to Die Heuwel to get my kids or not. Its something to one and I know if I show up there guns blazing it will draw unnecessary attention and that might lead to the parents finding out about Dali and Khanyi. And as always I am the one who is left to think about the bigger picture and protect Dali. Maybe Dvumo was right, this is getting out of hand.

I allow the sensible part of me to win. I will deal with this in the morning. I take a quick shower before getting into bed. It takes a while for me to fall asleep but eventually I do. I wake up in the morning and get the kids school uniform ready. I take a shower and get dressed before going down to make their lunchboxes. I make myself a bowl of cereal and wait.

I hear the car pull up just as I clean my bowl. I hear the knock on the door. I take a deep breath before I open. The kids rush in.

"Your uniforms are on the bed. Hurry up." They rush up the stairs while i go to the kitchen with Dali behind me.

"Khanyi told me you called." He says matter of factly. I'm glad I didn't go to his place last night. Right now I am not as boiling as I was last night. "I'm sorry, I know I should have called you first before taking them there. I just thought I should give you time to catch up with your siblings." He adds. I ignore him and get breakfast ready for the kids.

"Bahle!" I turn to look at him.

"Who did you say she was to them?"

"What?"

"Khanyi. How did you introduce her to them? Is she a friend, your girlfriend, their stepmother? What?" I ask. I look at him and see the frown on his face. Sometimes I wonder if he ever thinks before doing anything.

"A friend, I guess." So he didnt tell them who she is to him.

"Dalingcebo, do you ever think before doing something? And I'm being serious, do you ever use your brain?" I see his jaw clenching and unclenching. He tightens his hold on the keys in his hand.

"Bahle, dont talk to me like that. Those are my kids too?" He says trying his best to be as calm as possible.

"Okay. Our parents are coming back in a couple of weeks. How do you think the kids are going to explain them sleeping over at your 'friends' house. Especially a friend who doesn't have kids. Atleast then it would be easy to say they were on a play date. But now you took the kids to your girlfriend's place and you didnt even bother telling me about it. Because if you had I would have told you it was a bad idea." He runs his hands on his head. His eyes moving about as if the realization just dawned on him.

"They won't say anything." He mumbles. "And besides, Khanyi and I are going to get married and at some point the kids will have to have a relationship with her."

"That's fine. And until that happens, please keep my children away from your secret life. I asked you to spend time with them, YOU! Not you and your girlfriend so please, I respect your relationship with her

now I'm asking you to respect me too. Keep my children away from her. Please."

He opens his mouth to say something but decides against it because the kids come running down the stairs. Nqaba has a book in his hand.

"Please dont tell me you didn't do your homework?" I say. He takes a seat and starts writing.

"Sorry ma, I forgot." I look at Dalingcebo and he shrugs. He was supposed to make sure their homework is done yesterday. I decide to choose my battles and let this one go. When they are done eating Dali drives them to school while I clean up. Even though Mam Aggie is coming I still prefer to keep my house clean.

"Good morning." Dvumo says yawning and walking into the kitchen.

"Morning. Did you sleep okay?" She takes a seat on the highchair and I hand her a bowl with cereal. "If you want a proper breakfast you'll have to make it. I'm already late." She takes the bowl and digs in.

"I slept very well thank you. And cereal will do. Where are the rascals?"

"Gone already. Dali took them to school." She nods her head and swallows the food in her mouth.

"So vele they didnt sleep here last night?" I shake my head and she chuckles. "See why you should tell the parents about this secret life Dali has? Now Khanyi is playing stepmother to your kids."

"Relax. It wont happen again. I spoke to him and he wont do it again." I assure her. I hope I'm not lying to myself.

"If you say so. But if you ask me, you would literally put an end to this and have the mine signed over to you by just telling the truth. That's all I'm saying." Maybe she is right, one phonecall would put an end to this. But my conscience will not let me. I've debated about this for a while now, it could end this charade of a marriage and I would be in charge of the mine because the parents would sign it over to Nqaba and since he is young I would be in charge. But it is also one of the reasons I am reluctant to make that call. Dali has worked so hard for the company and to make it what it is. The past ten years he has elevated the mine and made sure to implement sustainable ways of getting the diamonds without destroying the environment. He would be heartbroken if it was taken from him. And it would be too big a burden to place on Nqaba's shoulders.

When I get to work I head straight to my office. Today will be busy. It's a Friday and we are fully booked for the weekend. It's draining but it's money in the bank so I'm not complaining. I run into Sahluko just before going into the office. He tells me we have game drives booked the whole weekend. We walk into my office with him telling me what the game plan is, how are they going to handle that many bookings and from the sound of it, he has everything under control.

Work is the one thing that keeps my mind out of my private life. No matter how lonely and alone I feel, once I get here I feel like I have purpose and direction and I enjoy it a lot.

"So I was thinking, we have a group of company executives hosting a meeting slash seminar this weekend. We've booked them for a game drive tonight, I was hoping you would also come. I'm sure they would

like it to have another boss with them." Sahluko says catching me by surprise.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Seeing you there might just be good for business. You know, make contacts and all that." I nod my head. He is right. We might be big but we can always be bigger.

"Okay. I will be there."

"Perfect. I will see you tonight." He says and walks out. The ranger uniform looks good on him. I mean I know they say a suit is to women what lingerie is to men. But a work uniform, now that's an entire new level on it's own.

I text Dvumo and ask her to pick the kids up from school and to also drop off my combat boots for later. Today will be a long day. Welcoming guests and making sure they are comfortable is a job and a half. Luckily we only truly get busy after lunch. By the time all the guests have arrived I can feel my feet throbbing. When I'm in the office I can slip into my slippers but outside I have no choice but to walk tall. Unfortunately for me I am wearing heels that were meant for driving and sitting not walking.

I go into my office after making sure all the guests are taken care off and slip out of my heels. I throw my one leg over my knee and try and massage my foot. It's way past knock off time for me so anyone who will complain can go throw themselves off the nearest cliff.

The door opens just as I move to the other foot. Sahluko walks in and is just as surprised to see me busy with my foot.

"Everything okay?" He asks, a little smile on his face.

"My feet hurt like hell." I say and he chuckles. He takes a seat on the couch.

"The things you suffer through for beauty. May I?" He asks holding his hand out. I'm not sure I should be doing this but my feet are begging for the attention. Oh what the heck, I have nothing to lose anyway.

I turn around and face him with my legs on top of his thick muscled thighs. The moment his hand makes contact with my foot I moan and close my eyes. His hands might be rough but he sure knows what he is doing. I dont even know why he came here and I dont care. My feet are loving this. I lean my head back on the couch and fully relax. I can even feel sleep creeping in. He moves from one foot to the other, silently working his magic. The only sound in the office my moans and breathing. His girlfriend is one lucky girl.

Someone clears their throat and in my dizzy relaxed mind I think its him. Only when he stops moving his hands do I open my eyes and stare at him. I follow his gaze and see Dali standing by the door with a small bag in his hand. The fire in his eyes enough to turn this whole place into ashes.

"Did I interrupt something?" He asks looking at Sahluko. Yes you did. I mentally scream.

"No. What are you doing here?" His glare is still on Sahluko and I have no idea why. I dont know what message he is trying to get across but Sahluko seems to get it. He clears his throat and gently places my feet back on the ground.

"I should get going. We should be at the meeting spot in 45 minutes. The drive will start then." He says and gets up. He stands in front of Dali who is busy sending daggers to him. "Mr Khumalo. It's nice to see you again." Dali doesn't reply. Rude much. Sahluko gets the message and walks out closing the door behind him. Dali's glare moves from the closed door to me.

"What was that?" He asks. I can feel the iced tone in his voice. Quite a contrast to the fire burning in his eyes.

"A massage." I say getting off the couch to sit at my desk.

"A massage from a staff member that's not even employed in the spa? If you wanted a massage why not go to the spa and get a massage there?" His voice is slowly rising with each word that comes out of his mouth. This man better not be doing what I think he is doing.

"I've been on my feet the whole day, my feet hurt, Sahluko was kind enough to offer a massage and he is good at it so why would I say no."

"Um, how about the fact that any of the staff would have walked in here and found you and him cozy on the couch. Did you hear how you were moaning as if you were close to getting an orgasm? What the heck is wrong with you?" I feel a tinge of guilt at the mention of my moans. I was kind of loud but I'm not about to tell him that.

"What is wrong with me?" I repeat his question as if I didn't hear him well enough. "So it's okay for you to have an entire secret family but I can't get a massage from a friend?" He chuckles.

"A friend? The man has been here for less than a week and you're already friends? What's going to happen when he's here for a month?"

Are you going to find yourself in his bed?" He asks throwing the bag on the couch. I feel my heart racing and I get off the chair.

"You have some nerve Dalingcebo."

"What do you want me to think when you're busy getting massages from strange men in the office?" I am definitely in the wilderness and the devil is testing me.

"Dalingcebo, in the ten years we've been married, how many times have I cheated on you?" He swallows. "How many times have I left our matrimonial home to shack up with another man? How many times have you come home and not find me there because I was sprawled out in the arms of another man? How many times Dalingcebo? Have you forgotten that you're the one who has a secret life outside our home. I show up for you anytime and everytime. Right now I am raising two kids alone while you have the time of your life with Khanyisile. And you have the nerve to come and tell me about another man's bed. Ungjwayela kabi." He takes a deep breath, rubbing his eyes with his hands.

"Look, I'm sorry. ... "

"Just leave Dalingcebo. I have a game drive in a few minutes and I still have some work to do." I turn around and face the window with my arms crossed on my chest.

"Bahle....."

"Hamba Dalingcebo. (Go)." I hear his footsteps as he walks away. As soon as the door closes I let out a deep breath. I cant believe him, after all his bullshit he is going to judge me for a mere massage.

I look at the time and realise I have ten minutes before the game drive. I quickly open my office closet and pull out a pair of camo pants and a matching crop top. I add a mid thigh army green jacket to finish my look. I should keep more comfortable shoes around here instead of only heels. I check the bag Dali brought and it has my LV combat boots that he gifted me for my birthday a few years back. Maybe that should have been my sign that I shouldn't be here. They do say never give your significant other a pair of shoes as a gift as that would be telling them to walk away and leave you. I guess I'm too stubborn to see the signs.

By the time I get to the meeting point I almost faint thinking I am late. There's only four people here and from the looks of it, they are couples. Now I'm confused, these are not the exec's I was told about. I turn around and see Sahluko coming up behind me.

"Hey, I thought we were taking exec's."

"We were. But they left 30 minutes ago. These ones are going to have dinner up on the veld." So why am I here?

"Okay. But why didnt you tell me?"

"I apologise. The exec's have a dinner in a couple of hours so they need to be back by then. I know I should have told you I just got caught up with the changes." He says. I'm not surprised though, VIP guests have a tendency to think they can do whatever they want and sometimes, just sometimes we let them be.

"Its okay. I guess I'm not needed now."

"No. You can come. Please, I cant be alone watching lovebirds." He begs, a little pout on his lips making me laugh.

"Fine. I guess a little sight seeing never killed anybody."

We get on the Landcruiser and start the drive. I've done this a few times before but today I'm nervous. I don't know why. I keep replaying my conversation with Dali and the more I do it the angrier I get. I can't believe him, of all people is worried about whose bed I land on when he himself is probably sprawled out in Khanyi's bed right now. Jackass.

"Are you Okay?" Sahluko asks bringing me out of my thoughts.

"Yeah, I am fine." I notice the car is parked already and the couples are being led to their table. It's quite romantic up here. The first time I saw this place I imagined Dali and I having a romantic dinner, even if it was just once. Unfortunately that's never going to happen.

I take a few pictures of the view and the set up even though from afar. I put some photos on my WhatsApp and Instagram. The rest will go up on the sight tomorrow. There are guards watching the area to make sure we don't get some surprise visitors. I decide to sit in the landcruiser watching the stars.

"I'm sorry if I got you in trouble with your husband earlier." Sahluko says joining me in the car.

"Argh, it's nothing. Thank you for the massage."

"Anytime. I'm no masseuse but I have some skills." He says dusting off some imaginary dirt from his shoulder.

"Of course. So, tell me about yourself, how did you end up being one with nature?" I ask.

"Well, I grew up in a farm. My parents used to work there so I was born and raised there as well. Being close to animals and just seeing them in their natural element makes me happy. After high school I studied agriculture because I thought I'd become a farmer but somewhere along the line I got into conservation and now here I am."

"And your parents, do they still work at the farm?"

"No. They retired a couple of years ago, on paper that is. Now they have their own small farm that keeps them busy." He says smiling and shaking his head. He seems so proud of them.

Growing up everyone told us we were lucky to have parents who could afford to give us anything but the one thing we, or rather I wanted, were present parents. All the money in the world couldn't buy us their attention and now I want better for my own children. But from the looks of it, my kids might just suffer the same fate we did.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

6

DALINGCEBO

"Daddy, will you take us to school tomorrow?" Fezi asks sipping her imaginary tea.

"Would you like me to take you to school?" A sad smile spreads across her tiny face and it tugs at my heartstrings.

"Yes." She says but the smile is no longer there. Instead her face is scrunched up like she is thinking of something. I take a sip from the empty pink cup and wait for her to say something.

"Daddy, are you and mummy married?" Oh God, wherever this is going is not good.

"Yes. Why?"

"Tiny's mum and dad are married too. They stay together in one house. How come you dont stay with us? Did we do something wrong?" She's holding her little doll close to her chest. For a four year old, Fezi is quite outspoken, smart and eloquent. I guess I should thank Bahle for that.

"You didnt do anything wrong baby. It's just that, things are complicated. Maybe one day when you're a bit older I'll explain everything to you okay?" She nods her head. "For now, it's way past your bedtime and mummy will be home soon so we need to get you to bed."

I pick her up and tuck her into bed. I give her a kiss goodnight before walking out of her room. It's almost nine o'clock and Bahle is still not

home. I should have known something was off when I walked into her office earlier. Who in their right mind gets a massage from an employee in their office? I dial her number for the hundredth time and she doesn't pick up. Instead she sends the call straight to voicemail. And on the other hand Khanyi is busy blowing up my phone.

"I'll be home soon." I text her. Before I can even put my phone down she calls.

"Khanyisile."

"Oh wow. Really?" I take a deep breath. I'm not in the mood to fight and I can tell she's not in a good mood.

"Not now Khanyi."

"Then when? Where are you?"

"I'm with my kids." I hear her sigh. I know she's letting go of whatever bullshit was about to come next, she knows my children are a no go area. I love her but when it comes to my children, she stays in her lane. Even taking them to our place yesterday was, in hindsight, a mistake. But it's one that can be easily rectified.

"So when will you be home?"

"Soon. I'll let you know if I decide to sleep over." I reply ready to cut the call.

"Sleep over?"

"Yes. Listen, I have to go tuck Fezi in. I'll talk to you later." I cut the call before things escalate. I am not in a very nice mood right now and Bahle being MIA isn't helping matters. I try her again and she doesn't

reply. This time she doesn't even cut the call because it rings for a while until it goes to voicemail.

I decide to watch some sports on TV although my mind is not fully there. I feel my eyes get heavier with each second that passes. I try to resist the urge to sleep but it doesn't help.

I am woken up by a car pulling up outside. When I check the time, it's something to midnight. The door opens and she walks in, heels and bag in hand. She sees me sitting on the couch and for a split second she freezes. I guess she wasn't expecting to find me here.

"Dalingcebo. It's late. What are you doing here?" She asks placing her things on the table and walking towards me.

"I thought I'd come and spend time with you guys. I didn't think you'd be missing in action the whole night." She chuckles and takes a seat across from me, her one leg crossed over the other and her chin resting on her fisted hand, watching me, her eyes slightly squinted as if she's trying to read my mind.

"What's your end game?" She asks, a slight smile quivering on her lips, teasing her dimple.

"What are you talking about?" She shakes her head and stands up, grabbing the bottle of water on the coffee table and gulping it down. Only now do I realise she is drunk and the thought of her, cooped up somewhere with that man sends my heart racing and my head spinning.

"Are you drunk?" I ask and she laughs. "So while I was here taking care of the kids you were out there getting drunk? Is that really how a

mother should behave Bahlengiwe?" She stops laughing and claps her hands. A slow clap filled with mockery.

"Let me get this straight, you show up to play daddy once or twice a week and now you think that qualifies you for a father of the year trophy?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean Dalingcebo? Or I get it. It's not my absence that's got your balls in a knot, it's the fact that I spent the night with another man, who happens to not be you and that alone is not making sense to you right?" I keep quiet, angry at myself because she is right.

"Dalingcebo, every morning you wake up with a woman in your arms that's not me. Every evening you go to bed with a woman that's not me, your wife. I dont complain about it. I dont bang down your door questioning your choices so you have zero right to be here and ask me where I was and who I was with. And one thing you will not do is question the way I mother my children. Not when you are a part time father at best. So, unless you have nothing else to say, you can get out and go be with your girlfriend and leave me to do what I want to do in my house. Good night." She says before marching up the stairs.

I lean back on the couch and close my eyes. I dont know why the picture of her with that man unsettles me. I mean on one hand I should be happy for her. She was pretty young when we got married, no one, including myself thought she'd be able to go all the way through with the marriage. I gave her two

three years at most, but ten years later she's still here, still holding on. I promised Khanyi I would marry her in a year after marrying Bahle. She'd

be my wife in every way and my marriage to Bahle would be a marriage on paper only. But I should have known better. My father would never let that happen. And that stupid marriage contract I signed without reading is so airtight, one wrong move and I'll not only be out of a job, I'd lose my inheritance and my father would make sure no one would hire me ever again. And even if I started a business, I'd be lucky if I got a contract to clean toilets in Marabastad.

I glance at the time and its going for one. There's no point in me driving all the way back to my place so I might as well sleep here. Bahle will just have to be strong.

BAHLENGIWE

Of course the first thing I wake up to are my kids screaming and chasing each other down the hallway. Usually it would bring a smile to my face but not today. Had I drank just champagne last night I'd be fine, but no, I had to go and add some cocktails and shots. Now my head feels heavy and it's like I have a bunch of minions hammering inside me.

After watching the couples have dinner, Sahluko convinced me to join the party at the bar. While others were swimming and dancing I was downing shot after shot after cocktail and now I'm paying for it.

Although I had a great time last night I dont know if it's something I'd want to continue. Last night might have just proved that my attraction to Sahluko is not one sided. The flirting, the constant touching that lit up fires I didnt even know I had within me, the eye contact like he was pulling me into his inner soul and the stolen glances. The attraction is

definitely mutual that's for sure. And that's why I have to nip this in the bud right now, while I still can.

The door opens and my dear husband walks in holding a glass with some green smoothie that looks like someone's vomit.

"This should help with the hangover." He says placing the glass on the side table.

"Thanks." I don't touch the glass and he stands there watching me. I remember our fight last night, if I can call it that. I thought he would have left but here he is, in the same clothes he was wearing. I wonder where he slept.

"Drink it." He orders, his hands tucked in his pockets, staring at me like I am some teenager under the scrutiny of her strict parent.

Turning over to the side is another struggle. I grab the glass and the pungent smell hits my nostrils, making my stomach bubble up in anger. I put the glass away, scrunching my face at the disgusting smell.

"Are you trying to kill me?" I look up at him and he has a smile on his face.

"No, I'm trying to help you. Drink up. Unless you're okay with the headache pounding you from every side." I pinch my nose with my fingers and quickly gulp down the liquid. It's not just the smell, the taste is just as bad and it leaves a horrible after taste in my mouth.

I open my side drawer and pull out a chocolate bar, I need to clean my tongue and my throat. Dalingcebo grabs the chocolate.

"You need to give it at least twenty minutes before having anything else. In the meantime I will make you breakfast." He says walking out. I lay back on the bed and close my eyes. Memories of last night quickly flooding in. I haven't had that much fun in a while. Not that I am a fun kind of person, but ever since I got married I've been sucked into this vortex where I need to be a good wife and a good mother, so much so that I've forgotten who I am as a person.

Last night was also a great reminder that I'm young, beautiful and smart. I deserve to be a bit carefree every once in a while. And I have Sahluko to thank for that. Last night I also got to see a different side to him. A fun, carefree side. A far cry from the serious game ranger he normally is. His smile, his dance moves, he is something else alright.

"Nice dream?" Dali's voice permeates through my mind and my eyes shoot open and my heart beat skips a notch. The headache is gone. Look at that.

"What?" I ask trying to calm my nerves.

"You were smiling. It must have been a nice dream." He says placing a tray with some greasy breakfast on it. As appetizing as it looks, my metabolism isn't what it used to be when I was a teenager. Now every ounce of fat I consume goes straight to my ass or my hips.

"I can't eat that." I say trying to ignore the dream comment. I'm not about to tell him I was day dreaming about another man.

"Why not?"

"I don't think my hips or ass can handle that much fat, especially after the alcohol I had last night."

"Your ass and hips are fine. Eat, I'll make breakfast for the kids." I watch him walk out leaving his greasy breakfast behind. I don't know if he noticed that he actually made a comment about my body, which is something he never does. His food tastes good though.

.....

For some reason Dali decided to spend the day here. It's cute but also suspicious. Especially since his phone has been ringing off the hook and he has been ignoring it. He went as far as switching it off and joining the kids in the pool. One thing his presence has done though is bring a smile to the children's faces. They are having the time of their lives right now and it makes me happy. But like everything else that involves Dali, I wonder when the other shoe will drop.

"You guys almost look like a perfect family." Dvumo says joining me on the patio. "You're like the family that makes it to commercials. Dad playing with the kids in the pool and mum sipping on her cocktail under the shade with her shades on. It almost feels like a dream come true doesn't it." She adds. A few years ago I would have been all giddy inside and dancing for joy seeing Dalingcebo step up and be a father. But over the years I've learnt not to get my hopes up when it comes to him.

"As long as there is the nightmare named Khanyi, there won't be any dream coming true." I take a sip of my drink.

"You do know one call to our father or even your father in law could end the nightmare for you and it will never be traced back to you." My sister whispers and I don't even cringe. I'm not ashamed to say I've thought about it. There's been plenty of times when I was left to care for a sick baby alone and thought if I got rid of Khanyi maybe things

would be different. But my mother also taught me that I should never force things. If something is meant to be mine it will be. And it's obvious that Dali is not mine to have. Ours is a story that will never make it to the perfect love stories.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

7

KHANYISILE

Two nights in a row and this man still hasn't come home. I swear Dalingcebo is testing my patience. Today we were supposed to have lunch with my mother but he is nowhere to be found and my patience is running thin. I've tried calling him and his phone is off. I've called his best friend and he also doesn't know where he is which leaves me with one person to call. His wife. I feel vomit bubbling up inside me just thinking about that woman.

I take a deep breath and dial her number. It rings for a while before she picks up.

"Khanyi." She's giving me attitude. This one seems to forget that she's a wife on paper only.

"Where is Dalingcebo?" I'm not in the mood for chit chat or playing nice. I want who I want.

"Ngyaphila unjan wena. (I'm fine how are you.)" Damn Dali for subjecting me to this bullshit. I can feel the smugness from her voice. Dali is definitely with her.

"Can you please just give him the phone." I hear her click her tongue before handing the phone to Dali.

"Hello." I internally count to ten trying to calm myself down. I guess my silence becomes too loud for him. "Khanyi!"

"Where are you?" I don't even know why I am asking because I know exactly where he is and that just fuels my anger even more.

"I'm with my kids. What's wrong?" And he is so relaxed about this. I'm truly being tested right now.

"What's wrong? Darling, are you seriously asking me that? We are supposed to have lunch with my mother and you're still not here. That's what's wrong." He heaves out a deep sigh.

"I'm sorry about that. I'll have to miss lunch. Please apologize for me to your mum. I'll see you later." He says then hangs up the phone.

I spend a whole minute staring at the phone as if it will apologize for Dali being rude. I'm being truly tried and tested right now. I call back and get no reply. I call again and it goes straight to voicemail.

"Wow!" I say to the empty kitchen. I finish off my coffee and get ready for my day. I'm not the church-going type but I know my mum and sisters are in church by now so going home would be a waste of time and energy.

I find some exercise videos on YouTube and get started. I need to let off some steam and exercise helps me do that. Plus it keeps my body in shape. And my lounge is big enough to also act as my home gym if I decide not to go to the actual gym. An hour and a half later I am sweaty and out of breath. And Dali is still not here. I still have two hours before I go over to mum's. I figure an hour at the mall will be good for me. I take a quick shower and put on a simple green midi dress and a pair of Gucci block heels. The advantages of dating a mining magnate. Dali's money has truly afforded me the life I've always aspired to live. In the 12 years we've been together, I haven't worked a day and Dali has zero

problems making sure I get the best. If it wasn't for his tyrant of a father I would be a proper madam of the house. But I'm a patient person and I know we will get there. Just a few more years to go and I will be Mrs Khumalo.

I stare at the engagement ring Dali gave me eight years ago as a promise that he will marry me. It brings a smile to my face looking at it as I remember the day he gave it to me. It was a beautiful day just after the birth of his son. I guess it was his way of reassuring me and reminding me that he still loves me and he will always be mine. I don't usually wear it, especially in public because people talk. But today is a different day, I need the pick me up so I put it on. I grab my bag and walk out the door. I drive straight to the mall and do a bit of shopping. I buy some groceries for my mum then drive to her house.

As I get closer to the house I notice there are way too many cars outside. At first I think maybe there's a braai at the neighbors and they are using my mum's driveway for parking. But another car pulls up and the occupants head straight for the house. Okay, something is definitely happening. I jump out of the car and head to the house. I walk in to people praying and speaking in tongues. I look around the room and see my mum in the lounge with the pastor next to her and some other women from church. My sister's are in the kitchen making tea, or is it food?

I tiptoe to the kitchen and join them.

"What the heck is going on?" I whisper. Before they can answer me we hear an Amen before my name is called. I head to the lounge and the congregants are now sitting around the couches. One is commenting

about how comfortable they are. They should be, they cost me almost 40 thousand.

"Mfundisi, you remember my daughter, Khanyisile?" Mum says proudly. The pastor holds out his hand and I respectfully take it.

"I remember her. You've done well my child. Buying this house for your mother. Just like your name, you've definitely been a light in her life." He says, his smile wide.

"Thank you. I try." I am not one to be irritated by church people but right now I'm glad Dalingcebo didnt come. Imagine having to present him as my boyfriend to the same pastor who officiated when he married Bahle. Sometimes my life is like a Latin telenovela I tell you.

"So when is the wedding day?" He asks looking at my hand. Shit. The ring. I chuckle nervously seeing all the other women especially with their ears pecked up and ready to hear 'thungisani.'

"Oh no, this is just a stop nonsense to keep the unsavoury men out." I'm hoping he will let it go.

"You shouldn't be wearing a ring if you're not married. That's just bad luck." One of the women chips in.

"Plus you dont have a husband, that ring will just prevent you from finding a man. You're not getting any younger you know. The clock is ticking." Another one says.

"Oh no, dont worry about that. I'm a lesbian." I walk away and leave them gasping for air. Church women can be judgmental as hell.

I join my sisters in the kitchen and we serve tea and scones. I wonder when these were baked. It takes another hour for them to 'tour' the house with my mum as their guide. The pastor's wife always ready to chip in with decor advice. It takes another hour for the last of them to leave. By then my feet are killing me. When I came here I had no intention of playing waiter.

I throw myself on the couch with a glass of wine just as my mother walks back in the house.

"Even on a Sunday Khanyisile." She says taking off her shoes. One of her biggest pet peeves is alcohol. I had to remind her before that she drinks wine in church when they are doing the Holy communion thing so this is no different. Eventually she gave in when she realised I wont stop drinking just because she said so. Of course she draws the line at drinking on a Sunday. Usually I respect her rules but today I am tired from serving her guests and I need a drink.

"Why didnt you tell me you were having guests? I wouldn't have come."

"Why not? All they wanted to do was hold a prayer and give thanks for this house. Why would I deny them that?" She asks.

"Where did you say I got the money to pay for this house because most people know I dont work?" Mum has a tendency to run her mouth anytime and anywhere, with no regard for who might be listening. Already there are rumours swirling around about my relationship with Dali, I dont need people putting 2 and 2 together because that may lead to Khumalo senior finding out about Dali and I living together and that would put an end to this entire gravy train we are on.

"I told them you got your payout from RAF. Remember the accident you had two years ago? Well as far as the church knows, RAF paid you and you decided to bless your mother with a house." She says, I hate that she has to lie about this but I hope people actually bought her story and they will forget about it because if anyone should dig deeper they would realize there was never an accident to begin with. I just got hurt while I was at a club in Joburg and neither Dali or my mother knew I was there, so I had to improvise and come up with a believable lie why I had a sprained ankle and bruises.

"I guess that should work." I drink my wine and get up to pour another glass.

"How long exactly are we supposed to keep up with this lie?" My sister Seluleko asks joining us on the couch.

"Well we've been keeping it for ten years, what's a few more." Senele adds.

"In case you forgot, this 'lie' put you through school so maybe you need to learn to be grateful and stop judging me." I yell.

"Okay there is absolutely no need for you to shout. Seluleko is right, the truth has a way of coming out Khanyi. And most people already know you live in the same house with Dali. How long do you think it will be before his father finds out?" Mum questions. I sigh and sip my wine.

"We all know when he finds out about you, all hell will break loose. For all we know even this house will be taken. Maybe if you gave Dali a child it might level the playing field." Senele suggests. My sweet naive sister. She has no idea how many times I've thought of that. There is absolutely nothing I wouldn't do to give him a child. But thanks to that

God forsaken contract he signed, I cant give him a child because it would destroy everything he has worked so hard for. All I can do right now is wait.

By the time this contract expires I'll be 44 years old. And having a child then might be a struggle, so I did what most sane people would do, I harvested my eggs and had them frozen, I also convinced Dali to freeze his sperm too, hopefully when the time is right they will all be viable enough for me to carry a little Khumalo. He might not be the heir to the Khumalo empire but he will get a slice of the pie.

"I dont want kids. You know that." I lie. I'd give anything to have my own child. But it will happen. All I need to do is be patient.

"You wont be doing it for you. You'll be doing it for your future. Do you know that that child would be rich from the time they are born?" Seluleko tries to convince me. "You know I heard rumors that Bahle's kids already have trust funds worth five million each. And the boy might just be worth more millions by the time he finishes school." She adds. Instead of motivating me, what she just said irritates me even more. I might pretend in front of Dali but I hate those kids. I know they are innocent but they are living the life my children should be living.

"Yeah well good for them. We all know I am not the mummy type so let's forget the whole baby issue. I don't want children and that's that. Anyways I have to go." I grab my bag and walk out while my mother is busy trying to remind me that I haven't eaten. I've already lost my appetite.

When I get home I find Dali's car parked in the driveway. Perfect. I drag myself into the house, I am a little tipsy, thanks to the wine I've been

guzzling down. I got so caught up in mums little prayer I forgot to unload the groceries. Oh well, her loss. I find my dear boyfriend busy working on the dining table. Tomorrow is a work day and I can bet my last dime he was too busy to get any work done where he was. He glances at me for a hot second before he goes back to his laptop. Strike one.

"Hey, how was lunch?" He asks, he's not even looking at me.

"It was fine. How was your weekend?" He stares at me as I take a seat across from him.

"It was great." He replies. His entire face lighting up. "I actually enjoyed spending time with the kids. I didn't realise how much I was missing out on. Nqaba lost a tooth yesterday." See why I hate these kids. He is smiling like someone who just won the lotto. There was a time when that smile was reserved for me. Heck, a week ago it still was. Now I'm wondering what could have happened that would make him suddenly want to play the present dad.

"That's nice. Are you still planning on having another baby with Bahle?" He swallows and goes back to his laptop.

"I dont know. She doesn't seem keen on the idea. I dont blame her though, I haven't been the kind of father my kids deserve so I understand her reservations." He tells me.

"So there was no trying this weekend?" He wont even look at me as he tells me no. I love him yes, but I would be a fool to believe that he slept in the same bed with his wife the whole weekend and there was no sex.

"Right. Are you hungry? I can make you something to eat."

"No, I'm good. I already ate." He replies.

"Okay then. I'm going to take a shower and watch a movie. Maybe you can join me." My voice is a little more seductive than it was a moment ago. I need to remind him why we've been going strong for more than a decade now. It's clear he is getting out of hand and I need to bring him back.

He looks up at me and smiles.

"In a moment. I need to finish up this proposal then I'll join you. Pick something nice." He's smiling and this time it's for me. I need to find a sexy movie for us to watch and then I'll show him what he missed out on this weekend.

I give him a kiss and head upstairs swaying my hips from side to side. I can feel his eyes on me, if there is one thing God gifted me, it's my thick ass. It's not too big and not too small. Just perfect enough to grab some attention. And right now it's coming through for the girl.

I take a quick shower and change into a little red lacy number. This one is my go to secret weapon, it always does the job it's supposed to. The red lacy thong is comfortable and covered by the see through negligee with the lace push up bra. I make sure to oil myself up before getting on the bed. I am tired and sleepy but I will wait for him.

10 minutes.

30 minutes.

1 hour.

I am slowly running out of patience and I'm getting sleepy. I can't afford to sleep right now though. So plan B. I get off the bed and head downstairs. He is no longer where he was. I check his office and he is here laying face up on the couch with his laptop open on top of him and his one arm draped over his eyes. I hope he is not sleeping. I really hope not.

The closer I get, I hear the soft sounds of his snoring. This must be testing Khanyi's patience today because there is no way. I'm tempted to empty the jug of water he keeps in here all over him right now but I also need to be smart about how I play this. I take a glimpse at his laptop and see that he is not working on any presentation. Instead there's a full page of information on someone named Sahluko. I wonder who he is and why Dali has such interest in him?

HIS HEART TO KEEP

8

BAHLENGIWE

This past week I've been somewhat living the dream I've had for the past ten years. Dali has been consistent in spending time with the kids and showing up for school meetings and just being an all around present father. Except for the part where he leaves as soon as the kids are tucked into bed. In terms of being a father I'll give him a five star rating for this week alone. But as for being a husband, now there he fails. Dismally. But if there is one thing I've learnt throughout our marriage it's that I should have little if any expectations when it comes to him. If he shows up, great. And if he doesn't, life doesn't stop and wait for him.

Today he has decided to show up again. He made sure to pick up the kids from school earlier and spent some time with them which has allowed me to have a farewell dinner with my siblings since Dvumo is going away again. New York fashion week is upon us and my sister is booked and busy so we tend to treasure every minute we get to spend with her.

I decided to invite everyone to come to the lodge. That way I won't have to cook or play hostess. Lindo shows up first looking like such a goddess. Besides the lifetime of trauma our parents gave us, they also added some great genes. The red pencil dress she has on hugs her just right, and knowing her, it probably has a low cut back. She loves exposing the tattoos on her back.

"Hey sis." I get up from the table and give her a hug.

"Am I early?" She questions looking around the table.

"Yes. How was your day?" I call the waiter over to take our drinks order.

"My day was good. Can I tell you something?" She asks. I see the worry lines etched on her forehead.

"Sure. What's going on?" I ask just as Sihlangu and Dvumo show up. Lindo quickly retreats back into her shell and she puts a smile on her face like she wasn't worried about something just now. I figure she doesn't want to talk about whatever it is in front of everyone so I let her be. As soon as we are alone I'll drag whatever it is out of her.

It doesn't take long for us to get rowdy and loud, it's always a party when we are together. The drinks are flowing and laughter is the main course.

"Forget about me for a second." Dvumo says turning to me. "How has it been playing happy families with Dali?" She asks. Sihlangu and Lindo stare at me. Now I have 6 eyes glaring at me.

"I'm not playing happy families with anyone. Dali is simply doing what he needs to do and I'm doing what I need to do. As long as the kids are happy then I'm happy. I know I was flip flopping about his presence lately but the kids love having him around so I will step back and let him do his part. But if he breaks their heart he will have me to deal with." They don't believe me. Their blank faces look like they've been frozen in time.

"Okay, let's start again, how has it been playing happy families with Dali?" Shlangu says.

"Y'all are being ridiculous. By the way, did I tell you Khanyi wants to book the lodge for Dali's birthday?"

"Changing the subject. Tactic number one." Lindo says.

"I'm not changing anything. Anyways, I need to use the loo. I'll be back." I walk away from the table and I know these one's will be discussing me.

Making my way to the bathroom I notice most of our tables are full. People are actually liking this place. The past few years I've been working on an idea that might earn me this lodge. If it all goes according to plan I might just be able to convince my dad and Mr Khumalo to sign the lodge over to me. In that way even if things go south with Dali, I will have something to my name. I know the kids will be taken care off. And people flocking here makes my plan ten times easier. And with this wedding coming up, it will just cement everything.

I get to the bathroom and pee. It's not as crowded as I expected. There's just a woman washing her hands who quietly walks out when I exit the stall. The door opens and someone else walks in. It's only after I hear the latch on the door that I look up and see the last person I expected to see. I ignore her and focus on washing my hands. I dry them while she's standing by the door, watching me.

"If you dont mind, I'd like to go back to my table please." She doesnt move from the door. Instead she stares at me like I owe her something. I'm not in the mood to play whatever games she is up to so I also shut my mouth and wait. The silence drags on for a moment before she opens her mouth.

"You and I had a deal. A perfectly working deal that served its purpose for the past ten years. All of a sudden it seems that deal is changing and I have no clue what is going on." She tells me. "So, Mrs Khumalo, please explain to me why Dali shows up at my house late at night and leaves early in the morning these days." I want to laugh, this is way funnier than I thought it would be.

"Shouldn't your questions be directed at Dali? He is the one who answers to you not me." I remind her. She seems to forget she doesn't share a bed with me.

"Well I'm directing them to you. We had a deal remember? You might wear his ring on your finger but he is mine. We established that a long time ago. You play the happy wife in public and I do the rest. It's simple really. But now, out of the blue Dali is attending teacher parent meetings, he is reading bedtime stories and driving kids to school, that's not our deal." She fires at me. I can see her anger. But she's barking up the wrong tree. But what irks me more than anything else is the fact that she finds it strange that he is stepping up and being a father. I'm sure if she had kids of her own she would want him to be a present father to them.

"Khanyi, firstly this is not the time or the place to be addressing this. Secondly, you should be addressing it with your boyfriend, not me. I don't control what Dali does, you know that. If I did you wouldn't even be in the picture. So the answers you're looking for, go speak to your man. Now if you'll excuse me, my siblings are waiting for me." I push her aside, open the door and walk out making a mental note to tell Dali to reel his little chihuahua in.

I decide not to tell my siblings about the little altercation with Khanyi, knowing them, they won't hesitate to turn tables over and make a ruckus over this. I don't need the attention and I definitely don't need to be trending on twitter for the wrong reasons.

Our little get together goes on till the early hours of the morning. It's a good thing I asked Mam' Aggie to stay the night. A sensible person would most probably stay the night in the lodge, especially if drunk, but not me. I decide to drive home at 3:30 in the morning. It takes every last strength I have to get home. Reckless, I know, but I want to be there when my kids wake up in the morning.

There's a car parked in my driveway. I squint my eyes to see the license plate, instead of things being a little clearer they just become blurry and weird. I give up after a few tries and head to the house, struggling to keep myself upright. I walk into the darkness hoping to make my way up the stairs and straight to bed. Instead someone switches on a side lamp in the lounge. I turn around and see Dali sitting on the one sitter couch, his leg draped over the other like a father waiting for his child who is coming home way past the assigned curfew.

"Where have you been?" He asks, anger flashing in his eyes. I am too drunk to get into it with him. I am tired
sleepy and drunk.

"I was at the lodge." I'm surprised at how calm my voice is.

"Since when do you stay this late at work? And I'm guessing you weren't actually working since you're clearly drunk." Two points for him.

"Can we do this in the morning? Like you said, I am drunk and I'll probably not remember this conversation by then. Goodnight Dalingcebo." I turn and walk up the stairs leaving him shouting my name. I thought he'd leave but he is getting closer.

I ignore him and head straight to my room.

"Bahlangiwe I am talking to you." He shouts behind me. This is not the end to the day I expected. I take my shoes off with him watching me. If he wants to be in my room then he will have to watch me undress because I need sleep.

"Khuluma phela, nglalele. (Talk. I am listening.)" I say seeing as he seems to be losing his train of thought. Or maybe it has to do with me taking off my dress. I don't know why I am enjoying watching him squirm right now but it's fun to watch. Even the alcohol is slowly leaving my body.

I unclasp the bra behind me letting my boobs breathe. If I didn't have my boob job done last year I am sure they would be hanging down my tummy right now. I see his eyes roaming all over my body.

"Dalingcebo?" I call out. His eyes shoot up to mine. The anger he had downstairs seems to have disappeared and its place taken by lust.

"Fuck it." He mumbles before closing the gap between us. Just two steps and his one hand is grabbing the back of my neck and while the other wraps around my waist pulling me to him. His lips catch mine without warning or permission, pushing them apart.

I'm not sure if it's the alcohol or my body deciding to be its own being but instead of pushing him away I hold on to his shirt. Pulling him closer

to me. I relax into his touch. Even with common sense telling me to put an end to this, whatever this is, I cant. His hands grip the back of my thighs pulling me up to straddle him, my hands automatically locking around his neck. At this moment nothing else matters except this, the little fires his touch ignite all over my skin, sending its warmth straight to my core.

I feel the bed move under me as he lays me down. He let's go of my lips, lifting his head up to catch his breath, leaving me panting and trying to feed my lungs some oxygen. He watches me, his eyes soft and filled with love. I feel a strange lump form in my throat. This look alone is something I've always wished for, prayed for and damn near begged for.

He leans down again, this time layering kisses on my neck, slowly making his way down to my chest. My erect nipples are begging for attention. He plants kisses all around my boob missing the nipples, taunting me on purpose before moving to the other boob and doing the same thing. I keep holding my breath in, anticipating the moment he gives my nipples attention. He is enjoying this. The torment and torture. I hate to say it but I am enjoying it too. Finally his warm lips find my nipple. A moan escapes my mouth as his tongue swirls on the sensitive bud while his other hand plays with my other nipple. I arch my body towards him, wanting more, needing more. I can feel my panties already drenched with my juices. He moves his lips from one nipple to the next, making sure to give it the same attention.

Moan after moan leave my mouth. I'm tethering on the edge of screaming but I have to keep reminding myself that the kids are sleeping. He stops sucking on my nipple for a second to pull my

underwear off me. My legs go up to his shoulders as he starts kissing my leg, going down to the inner sensitive part of my thigh with his eyes glued on mine. He comes so close to my throbbing clit before he moves to the other leg, starting at the top and working his way down to my exposed core. I feel his hands gently separating my folds before I feel warm air hit my clit.

I close my eyes taking in hurried breaths as his tongue swirls around my clit. His index finger runs down my slit a couple of times before he sticks his finger in. I gasp at the welcome intrusion and moan even harder as he swirls his finger inside me. He adds another finger, gently stretching my opening while his tongue works its magic on my clit. Now words are spoken between us, our bodies and their responses do the talking. Over and over again he thrusts his fingers in and out of me. That motion coupled with his tongue on my clit is enough to send me over the edge. I slap my hand over my mouth as I feel my body come undone around his fingers. He keeps going through my whispers and moans.

As soon as my body finally comes to rest he let's go of my clit, pulling his fingers out, leaving me empty. I can feel my mum dripping down to my ass. He slides his tongue over my slit, sucking up my juices before coming back up to my face. He leans on his one hand, looking down at me, our breathing almost in sync. His free hand pushes my leg up, resting my knee on my shoulder before I feel his head on my opening, he rubs his head on my clit and my slit a few times before sticking it in. My muscles expand as he pushes himself in.

This feels weird and different. Our sex life, or lack thereof is always plain and boring. I'm lucky if I get an orgasm. It's always methodical, no feelings or foreplay, just sex. Right now he is thrusting in and out of me,

slowly and gently as if he wants me to remember this for a long time. I probably will too because this is a first. He leans down, taking my lips in his. His tongue prodding the seal of my lips till I allowed him in. My arms instinctively wrapped around his neck and my legs locked just under his butt, pulling him deeper into me, hitting places I wouldn't know existed if it wasn't for my black silicone dildo.

I feel an orgasm building up again as he quickens his pace. Over and over again, faster and faster he hits that one spot that completely sends me over the edge. His lips on mine muffle my moans and whispers. He keeps going for about a minute more before I feel his seed splash inside me and his groans fill the room. He rests his head on my shoulder as I feel my eyes getting heavier. I can't even feel his weight on me as I drift off to sleep.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

9

BAHLENGIWE

Scenes from last night keep replaying in my head at the oddest of times. I am not sure what is going through Dali's head right now. Last night was odd. Nice but odd. Dali and I have never made love the way we did last night. We've had sex plenty of times, and each time was bland and boring as the last if not worse. For us sex has always been about procreation more than fun. Last night showed me a side to Dali that I didn't know. In the ten years we've been married I've never seen that side of him.

Seeing him take charge was sexy, but paranoid me thinks he is up to something. It's quite sad isn't it, that I, as his wife have to always second guess every aspect of our lives. Each time he does something I always have to wonder how real or genuine it is. I always have to find the ulterior motive so it doesn't catch me by surprise. That's not a life anyone should be living. But here I am, smack bam in the middle of it.

"If you look at the glass long enough maybe it will break." Lindo says pulling me out of my head. I'm not sure if Dali has left the house yet or if he has woken up. I woke up super early, got the kids ready and drove straight to Lindo's place. We've been here for the better part of the morning and I don't know if I want to go back to the house just yet. Especially if Dali is still there. I'm not ready for the awkwardness.

"Sorry. What were you saying?"

"Where is your head? You've been distant since you got here. And you still haven't explained to me why you showed up here so early in the morning." She says taking a sip of her drink. I sigh, watching my kids play with Sbusiso in the garden.

"Dali and I had sex last night." I blurt out.

"Okay, was it your first time?" She whispers. I can smell the sarcasm dripping off of her tongue.

"You're not funny." She laughs.

"You make it seem like you've never had sex before. You have two kids in case you forgot."

"I haven't. Last night was different. It wasn't the usual wham bam thank you ma'am. It was beautiful." I've never told anyone about my sex life with Dali. Not my best friend or my sisters so the gobsmacked look on her face is not surprising.

"Bahle, are you telling me that the other times you two had sex was weak and boring?" She whispers.

"Yes." She claps her hands once then folds her arms across her chest.

"What a wow. Ten years mntase, TEN!" I hate how she keeps emphasising the ten as if I am not aware of it. "Ten years of boring sex. Could never be me. How did you survive?" I shrug my shoulders and pop a grape in my mouth. "Please tell me you have a dildo at least. Or better yet a side. Anything to make me feel better." She begs. I don't know when this became about her. But I give her what she wants. I nod my head and she screams. The kids stop playing and turn around to look at us.

"Lindo, please cut it down."

"Sorry, I got stung by a bee." She shouts and the kids go back to playing.

"So what is it? A side or dildo?"

"The latter."

"I would have preferred a side but a dildo will do." And this is the person I am supposed to look up to.

"You're supposed to be leading me on the straight and narrow not manifesting a side for me." She laughs and picks up a grape.

"Bahle, you're not a child. If this was ten years ago I would tell you to be patient with him and that love will come but, it's been ten years mntase and no sane person would wait this long for a man to act right. So yes, if it was all up to me you would have somebody on the side to make those lonely nights hot and steamy. No strings attached and make sure its someone who also has something to lose. Not someone who will catch feelings too easily." Makes you wonder how long shes been thinking about this.

"Speaking of feelings. What did you want to talk about last night before Dvumo and Sihlangu showed up." The mood instantly changes. Her demeanor too. Her shoulders slump down and a mask of sadness washes over her.

"Sbu and I are trying to have a child." I swallow the drink in my mouth way too quickly and it runs down the wrong pipe. I cough until I feel tears run down my face. And my sister is just watching me come close to death. I take the drink and take small sips in between bouts of coughs.

"Since when?" The last time I remember my sister was adamant about not having children. And it helped that Sbu didnt want them either. It was a perfect set up. None of them had any expectations and all they were certain of was spending their lives together with nothing, or rather no one vying for their attention.

"Since last year. We've actually been pregnant twice but I lost them both." I feel my heart sink. I've been so consumed with my own petty issues while my sister has been going through the most. Alone. Although she had her husband but still, as her siblings we should have been there for her.

"Lindo. Why didn't you say anything? You didnt have to go through this by yourselves." She shakes her head blinking rapidly, trying to keep her tears at bay. I get off my chair and wrap my arms around her. "I'm sorry." She quietly sobs on my shoulder and I can feel her tears run down my back. I give her time and just let her cry. When she's done she pulls away and wipes her tears.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't be crying about this?" She says gently wiping her tears with the hem of her dress.

"There is nothing to be sorry about. Have you consulted a doctor?" She nods her head.

"She says there is nothing wrong with either of us. And the fact that we were able to conceive twice means everything is the way it's supposed to be. What I cant figure out is why I keep losing the babies. Sometimes i think maybe it's because I've always been so adamant about not having children that maybe my body has accepted that and now its

rejecting anything that makes a home in my womb." She says, it's hard to miss the sadness in her tone.

"Please don't try and blame yourself for this. Just be patient and keep trying. We will pray about this and who knows, maybe God will hear us. If all else fails, which I doubt, you could always look at surrogacy. There are many options out there and one of them will work for you." She shakes her head.

"I don't know if I want to keep trying." She says. This moment right now is one of my worst traits, I never know how to comfort people. I know she's my sister and if anyone should be hyping her up, it's me. But how do I encourage her to keep trying when the result could be just as heartbreaking and how do I tell her to quit when this is something she clearly wants.

"Lindo, I know how hard this is. But you can't just give up. You have to keep trying."

"What's the point of trying if the result will be the same."

"The point of trying is getting to the point where you hold your baby in your arms." A smile creeps up on her face as her mind drifts off to the positive side. "Look at how good Sbu is with the kids imagine how he will be with his own children. You have to keep trying. And I'll be here with you every step of the way." She nods her head wiping away her tears.

My siblings mean the world to me. Our entire childhood always felt like it was against our parents. Each time dad would try and pick on Shlangu we would always be there to protect him. Sometimes I think if it wasn't for us being United behind him, he would have ended his life a long

time ago. That's why seeing Lindo so heartbroken breaks my own heart. I never want to see them suffer or in pain, it's one of the reasons I agreed to marry Dali. I have plans, huge plans that will benefit all of us in the long run. And what happened last night cannot derail me in anyway, shape or form. I have to focus on the end goal.

I drive up to the house and he is still here. Khanyi must be losing her mind. I park the car and grab the brown clicks paperback from the backseat. I pop open the pills and throw them in my mouth. When I left this morning i forgot to take the morning after pills. The joy's of having a doctor for a best friend, she never questions me when I need them, sometimes in bulk. Although they last me a while because I am still on contraceptives. Of course Dali doesnt know that, as far as he is concerned the gates are always open.

I walk into the house and find him setting the table. I swear something has possessed him. I'm not sure if it's a demon or an angel yet.

"This is nice. What's the occasion?" I ask looking at the table. There are four places set on the table and a huge bouquet of red Rose's sits in the middle with a couple of candles on each side. There are three serving dishes and one platter with a roasted chicken on it. If there is one thing his mother taught them, it's how to cook. I know that chicken will be delicious. He turns to me, a smile on his face. He looks cute with the apron on. He looks like the perfect husband material.

"Just a normal family dinner." He says his smile turning into a wide grin.

"Where are the kids?" He asks looking at the closed door.

"They are with Lindo. She will be watching them for the rest of the week." His grin disappears.

"Why? What's going on?"

"I have a trip tomorrow. We have to go to KZN to check on the other lodges and make sure no one is slacking." I say opening one serving dish. Its creamy mashed potatoes, my favourite.

"When you say we, who exactly are you talking about?"

"Me and Sahluko." I pick up a small caramelized carrot and bite into it with him watching me. His nostrils flaring.

"With who?" I burst out laughing.

"You sound like that sound on TikTok." I say laughing. I look up and he doesn't get the joke. "You know that sound man." I keep laughing hoping he will get it, but his blank stare tells me he is not getting it. Nqaba would have got this one. "No? Okay sorry. What were you saying?" I try to compose myself but his voice saying those two words is still ringing in my head. I'll probably laugh properly later, away from the grinch.

"This isn't funny."

"You're right. It's not. I am sorry. So what was your question?"

"Why are you going with him? He is a head ranger here, not in KZN." He pulls off the apron and roughly drapes it on the back of a chair. Is he getting mad?

"Well actually I was thinking of making him in charge of all the rangers, here and there."

"Why?"

"Because he has the experience and the qualifications. His extensive research on conservation and educating communities about their interactions with wild animals is something we need to invest in. Plus making sure there are proper security measures in place, you know poachers are a different pandemic." He closes his eyes and takes a few deep calculated breaths.

"And how long will you be gone?" His eyes are still closed. I may be reading too much into it but I sense a bit of jealousy.

"The whole week. We will be back Sunday evening so I can prepare for the parents arrival, and you should too." His eyes shoot open.

"So you will spend an entire week away from home? What about the kids?" Weeeeeh, he is suddenly worried about the kids.

"The kids will be fine. They like staying with Lindo plus she is good with them. She is my sister so I trust her. I also gave Mam Aggie the week off as well. So if you are going to be here you'll have to find your way."

"Why would I be here when you're out gallivanting with your boy toy." He grabs his car keys and heads out.

"What about the food?" I shout after him.

"I just lost my appetite." He shouts before banging the door behind him. Was it something I said? Or did? The drama.

I pick up a plate and dish up for myself. I'll sit in front of the TV and eat then I will start packing. I grab my phoeb from my bag before I get comfortable in front of the TV. Netflix has some nice shows so I immediately browse through and find a nice romantic comedy. I dial

Sahluko's number and wait for him to pick up. As soon as he picks up I am met with deep breaths as if he was just running a marathon.

"Mrs Khumalo." He says between breaths.

"Mr Mthembu, please call me Bahle, everyone else does." He chuckles.

"Why are you out of breath?" I hope I didn't just disturb a make out session or something. Why does that idea sting a bit?

"Okay Bahle, I was just doing some exercising before my shift. How are you?"

"I'm good. So remember the trip we spoke about a couple of days ago?" Why am I nervous, it's not like I'm asking the man to come on a vacation with me.

"Yes."

"Well how about we head out tomorrow? I have the week free and I think this would be a good time to implement some of your ideas, but of course we need to figure out what needs to be done for each lodge hence the trip. I understand if you're busy." I'm sweating and it's not even that hot here. The aircon is on and the sun went to sleep a long time ago so why am I rambling and sweating all at the same time.

"Bahle! Relax. I'm in. What time are we leaving?" He says as water runs in the background. I guess he is about to take a shower. I wonder how hot he looks with sweat dripping all over his muscles. I'm pretty sure he looks like a god. I've never seen him without his clothes on but his tight shirt is always a dead giveaway.

"Bahle!" I hear him call out. Jesus, maybe this trip is a bad idea.

"Hey, I'm here."

"Where did you disappear to just now?" Thank God he is not here to see my flushed face right now. The embarrassment Jehovah.

"It must be the network. Sorry about that. What were you saying?" Bahle get a grip on yourself.

"I was asking what time are we leaving and if we will use my car or yours?"

"Or most definitely my car. I don't think I can survive driving long distance in your van. No offence but I need to be comfortable." He is laughing. Even his laugh is intoxicating. Jesus Christ woman get it together. He is your employee and nothing can ever happen between you. Nothing. The sane part of my brain reminds me.

There is no law against fun. Besides you're both adults. The side I never listen to reminds me. Yeah I need to stick to the employee employer relationship and let go of all this nonsense.

"You know I think you should climb on top of a tree or your roof, clearly the network needs a boost." He says chuckling a bit.

"I'm sorry about that. What were you saying?"

"I was asking for the time so I can be ready. And I need to know if you will pick me up or we will meet at the lodge?" The lodge is definitely a safer bet. Most definitely.

"The lodge. We will leave around nine. I don't like driving long distances at night."

"Perfect, I will pack now and take my bag with. I will be ready by nine."
He sounds excited now which makes me excited too.

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow then. Enjoy your shift. Goodnight." I hang up the phone and palm myself on the forehead. Who the fuck enjoys staying up all night watching animals and looking out for poachers.

Yeah Bahle you are definitely losing it.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

10

DALINGCEBO

I'm on my fourth bottle of Corona but it feels like my first. Raphael hands me another bottle just as I gulp down the last drops of beer from the now empty bottle. I swiftly open the new bottle and gulp down more than I should. I can sense my friends watching me. I got here an hour ago and they are still trying to get me to tell them what is going on. I also don't know what the heck is going on with me so how do I explain it to them?

"What did Khanyi do this time?" Busi, Raphael's wife asks placing a platter of meat on the table.

"It's not her." I reply.

"Oh wow, so you can answer her but not us?" Vusi asks feigning hurt.

"It's not my fault I am easy to talk to." She says sticking her tongue out at him. "I'm going to get the rest of the food and you can tell me all about your relationship woes because I can guarantee no man drinks like this over chiefs losing." She walks away leaving my friends laughing. This is why I am reluctant to tell them anything. These assholes will laugh at you for literally everything. I could fall in a pit of crocodiles and they would laugh first before helping me.

Busi returns with another platter with pap and spinach. She places everything on the table then goes back to get plates and a bowl of water. She sits next to her husband who immediately wraps his arm around her shoulders.

"Okay, Dr Phil is ready to listen. What happened?" She urges. She is right about one thing, she is easy to talk to. I've known her since varsity, I was the one who introduced her to Raphael. I must say their pairing has been going strong for years now and I'm happy to have been the one to bring them together.

"Nothing happened. I'm just frustrated that's all."

"About what?"

"His parents are coming home so the little vat n sit he had with Khanyi the past year is coming to an end." Vusi chimes in throwing a piece of meat in his mouth.

"Its not that." I place the bottle on the table and pick up a piece of meat. "Bahle is going to KZN for a week." My friends stare at me, their faces void of emotion. I need to explain this and I truly have no idea how. Or why the thought is driving me nuts. Oh wait, I know why, it's because for an entire week she will be in close proximity with that man.

"So what? Bahle goes on trips without you all the time. This is a work trip right?" Busi asks. I nod my head. "Okay so what's the problem? Shouldn't you be enjoying the last few days with Khanyi?"

"I know, it's just that Bahle is not going alone. She is taking the new head ranger with her." My friends look at each other before they burst out laughing. I did say they laugh at anything no matter how serious it may be.

"This is not funny you guys." Busi tells them. Their laughing doesnt stop though.

"Let me get this straight.." Raphael starts sitting forward on the couch. "You have a problem with your wife going away with another man but you have no problem going away with Khanyi? Do you see the hypocrisy in all that."

"And besides, who says she is sleeping with the guy. It's a business trip. You need to stop tripping." Vusi adds. Maybe they are right. I need to calm down a bit. I mean Bahle has not done anything that would jeopardize our agreement. In fact I should be less trusting of myself than her.

"Plus you dont need to be worrying about Bahle. You and Khanyi have a good thing going. And if she is sleeping with him, it's a win for you." Busi says. My senses slowly come back. I need to just breath and let things be. Whatever happens will happen.

Driving back to my house I am a little lighter. I dial Bahle's number and it takes me straight to voicemail. I'll speak to her in the morning. I get in the house and find Khanyi binge watching some serial killer show on Netflix. Women and crime shows are a phenomenon that needs to be studied. I kiss her on the cheek and sit down next to her.

"Cant we watch something else?" An action movie would be great or even a romantic comedy not a serial killer. Her head turns quickly and she stares at me.

"Did she kick you out?" She asks munching on the popcorn.

"No. So now I am not allowed to come here?" I didnt come here to fight and I am definitely not in the mood for one.

"No, it's just this week you've been dedicated to playing husband of the year I'm just wondering what led you here." I sigh and take a handful of popcorn.

"I can always go back if being here is a problem." She puts the popcorn on the coffee table and turns her full body to face me.

"Sthandwa sam, this is not the time for us to be fighting like this. Your parents will be back soon which means we will have to duck and dive just to spend time together. I thought you'd be spending more time here than there." I take her one hand and kiss the back of it.

"Look, you're right. I am sorry. It's just this whole thing with the kids caught me off guard. This week I will be here with you, no kids no Bahle, no interruptions. In fact I think we should book a few days, away from here and just be together. You and me with no interruptions." I suggest. The smile on her face tells me she is on board. Of course she is. It is easy to appease her. A shopping spree here and there or a weekend away always do the trick.

She throws herself at me, hugging me.

"I'll do the bookings." She offers. I am thinking Cape Town. Its beautiful and quiet this time of the year."

"Perfect. How about, for now, you put on that little lace number that I like and show me how much you've missed me." She is squealing like a little girl. Another thing I love about her, she is a happy go lucky type of person. Keeping her happy is easy.

"Okay, I will be right back. Dont fall asleep." She says walking away. I wont. Hurry up. She runs up the stairs humming while my eyes are glued to her ass. She has a nice one.

As soon as she disappears I pull my phone out of my pocket and dial my PI. He answers quickly. Too quick like he was expecting my call.

"Mntungwa."

"Siya, you still haven't found anything on the guy?"

"I already sent you the file though." He counters. He cant be serious.

"Siyabonga

everything in that file is something I would have found out myself. I hired you to get me the kind of information the man wants buried. Not his CV." I hiss on the phone trying to keep my voice low.

"That's the thing, there is nothing. The man literally lives in the Bush, if anyone holds his secrets it's those animals and trees. Other than that, the man is clean." No one is ever that clean.

"Do me a favour then, speak to those trees and animals and find out what they know. You have 48 hours to get me something tangible." I hang up the phone as frustration takes over. I have a bad feeling about this guy and I wont just turn a blind eye simply because his CV is impressive.

Khanyi prances down the stairs in the lace number that barely covers anything. Her sight alone sends the frustration out the window, making junior stand up in salute.

"You like what you see?" She asks making a slow turn. Her ass is on full display, the thong she is wearing covers absolutely nothing.

"I love it." I say reaching out to touch her but she takes a step back.

"Come and show me." She turns around and walks back up the stairs. I get up and fix the bulge in my pants before following her.

I find her in the play room. The lights are dim, soft music plays on the speaker and the pole stands proudly in the middle of the room. One of Khanyi's kinks is being tied up or swinging on a pole. I guess that's why our sex life is anything but boring.

"Sit down." She commands. I take a seat on the chair while she gets on the pole. She swings on it, prancing around it and bending like a contortionist before she makes her way to me. I sit back on the chair as she pulls my short slightly down, allowing my dick to break free. Our eyes lock as she kisses the head then proceeds to take it all in her mouth. I can feel myself hitting the back of her throat.

My groans and moans fill the room as the slapping sounds of her mouth on my dick get louder. When I feel myself getting close to a release I pull her up to her feet. Her legs go on either side of my legs before she lowers herself onto me, my dick slowly filling her up. She takes over and gyrates on me, pulling herself up and down on me. I feel her getting tired, I wrap my one arm around her waist and the other goes under her ass as I stand up with my dick still inside her. I put her down on the edge of the bed and bend her over it. I thrust in and out of her, quickening the pace with each stroke till I feel her dissipate around me. I feel her legs giving in but I don't stop till I get my own release. I plop

down on top of her on the bed, we might be tired now but the night is still young. I guess she did miss me.

BAHLENGIWE

Work trips are never my thing, i always hate leaving my children behind for more than a day. But work is work and i need to provide for them. I wake up pretty early and make sure all my luggage is in the car and I packed all I will need. I check around the house to make sure all doors are locked. We might be living in the suburbs but this is still South Africa and it's not safe. I a couple of lights in the house on, the outside lights automatically switch on when it gets dark and they switch off when the sun rises so I'm good with them. Once I am certain I have all I need I drive out.

The lodge is always quiet in the mornings, it wont be long now before the staff starts bustling in and getting busy. I make my way to my office making sure to leave instructions with the manager about the wedding and how to contact me should anything else be needed. I dont have to micromanage my staff and that is something I will always be grateful for, competent staff.

Someone knocks on the door before it swings open. Sahluko walks in looking tired but oh so sexy. I think I have a thing for the uniform. Or is it his body? I dont know. All I know is both look amazing.

"Good morning. You're early." He says handing me a cup of coffee in a disposable cup.

"Thank you, I was hoping we'd leave before the traffic starts." He nods his head as i take a sip of my coffee. Its bland. No sugar and no cream. I

know i love my man as dark as coffee but i prefer my coffee with sugar and cream.

"I wasn't sure how you take your coffee so i brought these." He says handing me sachets of sugar and coffee creamer.

"Thank you, I take mine with two teaspoons and some milk." He smiles and takes a seat on the guest chairs.

"I'll be sure to remember next time. I prefer mine black. Especially after a long night shift." He yawns, covering his mouth with the back of his one hand.

"I can imagine. Maybe we should get going then you can get some sleep in the car." I suggest packing up my things.

"Are you sure? I could do with a nap."

"Oh most definitely. I'd rather not apply for an accident by letting a tired person drive. Let's go." We get up and he helps me carry my laptop bag to the car. I decided to take the land rover for the trio, it just makes more sense. His bag is already sitting next to the wheel. He picks it up and tosses it in the boot before taking the passenger seat.

Barely ten minutes into our drive and he starts yawning constantly. I guess the coffee is not that strong. "Are you not hungry? We can get something to eat before the drive." I ask. I'm not a breakfast person but he has been working so he needs the energy.

"No, it's okay. We will find something along the way." I nod my head and keep driving. It doesn't take long before his soft snores fill the car. He looks so peaceful. His lips are slightly open. My lady bugs get tingle at the thought of his lips on me. This is going to be a long week.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

11

BAHLENGIWE

I haven't had a proper road trip in a long while. The last time I had fun driving with anyone was when I was doing my last year at varsity, Titi and I together with a couple of other friends decided to drive all the way to Cape Town. The trip took us almost two days because we somehow always found some spot or another to relax and enjoy.

Sahluko didnt sleep much. He took over driving two hours into the trip. He said he didnt trust my driving, just because I almost overtook a truck on a sharp curve. If it wasnt for the other truck coming from the other direction I would have passed the truck. I prefer not to drive behind a truck. Any truck at that. I watched Final destination, I saw what happened so I'm not prone to risking my life like that. So the safest option for me is either I pass the truck or allow three or four other cars to come between us.

We make it to Piet Retief with our stomachs already grumbling. The last time I had anything to eat was night.

"Which do you prefer? Spur or a proper restaurant?" He asks as we drive around. I dont know what proper restaurant he is talking about but I like spur.

"Spur. I'm in the mood for ribs." He gives me a side eye. "What?" I ask. He laughs.

"Nothing, I just figured you'd be the sushi and oysters type of girl."

"Are you saying I am a slay queen Mr Mthembu?" I'm offended. Yes I like sushi and oysters but not for everyday. He laughs. He has a beautiful laugh. But then again I probably think everything about him is beautiful.

"No. More like a cheese girl." He says. I hate that word. I had to deal with it my entire life. That and the coconut one. People think it's just a joke but no one understands how offensive it is. And you tell people that they just brush it off because apparently being raised privileged means nothing should offend me. At some point i had to learn to choose my peace and distance myself from people who saw nothing in me except a suburban girl with white people privilege. I know, makes zero sense to me too.

"Did I say something wrong?" He asks seeing as my silence has filled the car. I shake my head and get out of the car. I make my way inside and find a table. He joins me just as the waiter takes my order. I know what I want so there's no need for me to go through the menu. As soon as she is done with my order she turns to him. I pull my phone out of my bag and text Lindo. 'We are fine.' Her reply comes quickly.

"What's wrong?" Sahluko asks. "Did I say something?" Hos concern is evident. And now I feel bad for giving him the silent treatment.

"You called me a cheese girl." A smile forms on his lips and his eyebrows furrow. He doesnt get it. "I dont like that word. It's the same word people used to call me in primary school, and it wasnt because it was some cute nickname." I tell him. It takes a moment for it to register in his head but it does and he cast his eyes down on the table.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I didn't know it would offend you."
His apology sounds genuine so I let it go.

"It's fine."

"It's not. How about I buy you ice cream and apologise." His smile is back on his face. "Or better yet, a milkshake?" I nod my head and his smile widens. "Perfect." Our drinks come first. While I am having a glass of Savannah he is having orange juice. I should order a second one since I'm not driving.

"I take it I'm the designated driver now?" He jokes.

"Of course. You said you don't trust my driving so I will be a passenger from now on." He laughs. Either I'm really funny or he just enjoys my company. I'll settle for the latter.

"So tell me who is Bahlengiwe." He is staring at me with his arms crossed on the table. How do I even answer that question.

"I don't know how to answer that question." I tell him.

"Okay, just tell me what's most important to you." Well that's simple.

"My kids, my siblings and the business." He stares at me as if I left something out. And then I remember I am someone's wife.

"So your husband is nowhere in your list of priorities?"

"Not really. He is there just not as important. He has a life of his own and I have mine."

"Do you love him?" I sigh. Love, I don't think it factors anywhere in my relationship with Dali. But that's not something I want the world to know. At the end of the day I still need to keep my end of the bargain.

And as much as I am sexually attracted to Sahluko, i cant be dishing out information about my private life. Some things are just better off staying in the dark. For now.

"I do. We've been married ten years, I think somewhere along the way things just change."

"For the best or worse?" I'm saved by the waiter bringing our food. The ribs look so good. Lucky for me the conversation changes to something less depressing, my kids. As promised, my milkshake arrives.

"Where is yours?" I ask him. He shrugs his shoulders.

"I dont have a sweet tooth." Well I have kids so sugar is a necessity to get through some days. I catch him watching me with a smile on his face.

"What?"

"Nothing, you're just cute. If I'd known a milkshake would make you hum like this I would have bought it a long time ago." He says.

"I'm not that easy." His laugh is contagious and smooth. "Its your turn anyways." He puts his phone away and leans on the table again.

"My turn?"

"To tell me who Sahluko is." He smiles and casts his eyes down on the table before bringing them back up again.

"Well, Sahluko is just a normal, typical 34 years old guy who loves animals. I grew up on a small dairy farm in Big Bend, Eswatini. My parents used to work there. When I was ten my mother got a job at another farm in Piggs Peak, this one was bigger and it had more than

just cows. We left Big Bend in the middle of the night and never looked back. My father was abusive to my mother so much so he would beat her even when she was pregnant. I was her fourth pregnancy, thanks to my dad she lost the other three. Anyways when we moved to the other farm I got to see different animals and I loved them. The owner, Make Ndlela allowed me to help take care of them. That's where my love for animals came from. That woman helped shape me in ways I dont think I anyone else would have. Even encouraging me to go to school and then further my studies." He chuckles, playing with his watch. "When I was in grade 12 she made me a promise, if I pass my o'level she would send me to varsity. I did and she kept her promise." He narrates. It's both heartwarming and sad hearing his story.

"So how did you get into conservation?"

"I saw an article in the newspaper about how the number of Rhinos is declining in the world due to poaching, I went to make Ndlela and told her, although I'd already graduated she still agreed to help me pay for my studies and as they say, the rest is history." We are interrupted by the waiter placing the bill in front of us. Before I can grab it Sahluko is already looking through it. He pulls his wallet out.

"I can pay for that." He ignores me and takes out his bank card.

"Seriously Sahluko, this is a work trip, please let me pay." I beg. I dont want him thinking I am taking advantage of him. He ignores me still and hands the waiter the bill and his card. There's no point even trying to argue with him. He pays and gives the waiter a generous cash tip, judging by the smile on his face.

"I could have paid for that." I whisper.

"I know, but my mother raised me better than that." He turns his watch and looks at the time. "We should get going if we are going to get there while the sun is still up." I could just add this to his pay this month, but maybe he might be offended. For now I will let it go.

We get on the road and resume our trip. My phone rings. Looking at the screen I see Dali's name flashing. The kids are with Lindo and she would have told me if there was a problem so there is no reason for Dali to be calling me. I send the call straight to voicemail. He is going to ruin my day and I won't have that. The phone rings again.

"Maybe you should answer that. It could be important." Sahluko says. I take a deep breath before swiping the green button.

"Hello."

"Bahle, hey, have you arrived yet?" Of course that's the only thing he wants to know.

"Not yet. We are still on the road." This conversation is such a bore but I can't be showing people that there is trouble in my fake paradise. I'm used to it, it's been there since the beginning but other people might not understand.

"Why is it taking so long? You should be there by now?" He is getting frustrated and I'm not sure if I should laugh or cry.

"Oh, we stopped for some lunch and sight seeing." I hear him hissing. He really is jealous. Weird!

"Fine. Let me know when you get there?" He hangs up and I stare at the phone. Since when does he care about my trips?

"Everything okay?" Sahluko asks.

"Yeah. Everything is fine." I connect my phone to the car and play some music. It doesn't take long before I feel my eyes getting heavy. I shouldn't have eaten that much food.

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"We are here." Sahluko says shaking me. I wake up and rub the sleep off my eyes. Sure enough we are standing in front of the reception. I get off the car and stretch my arms before we make our way in. Right now I am on boss mode. I like making these surprise visits. It gives me an opportunity to see how the staff interacts with guests and even each other.

The receptionist welcomes us with a warm welcoming smile. Ten points for her. I've never seen her before she must be standing in for Nompilo, I know she's on maternity leave. "Can I get your name so I can check your booking." She says.

"I didn't book actually. Can I speak to Trudy."

"Of course." She picks up the phone and dials Trudy's extension. "Who do I say is looking for her?"

"Just tell her Bahle is here." She nods her head and conveys the message.

"She's on her way." She says, her smile not leaving her face. I think I like this one. "You can have a seat so long." She points to the chairs behind us. Trudy appears before we can even sit down.

"Bahle, this is a nice surprise." She says pulling me in for a hug. She is almost fifty years old and still looks like she could give the twenty five year olds a run for their money. She's also the reason I try to keep in shape.

"You know me, I pop up anytime." She laughs. "Anyways Sahluko, this is Trudy, she is the manager here and Trudy, this is Sahluko Mthembu, he is the head ranger in Mpumalanga. He is also a conservationist who is helping us with poaching and how to keep the animals safe, I was hoping he could get a tour of the place and see what can be done."

"Oh we'd appreciate that very much. The rangers have been finding traps these past few weeks. We are just lucky that no animals were injured or poached. Plus the rangers are on high alert so anything we can do to keep the animals safe will be welcome. Let me get our head ranger so he can show him around." She turns to the receptionist.

"Mpilo, please get Ryan on the line and ask him to come to my office. And then get us something to drink. We will be in my office." She turns back to us. "Please, lets go to the office."

We follow her to the office. Trudy has been working here for as long as I can remember. According to her file she started working in housekeeping and worked her way up. We get to the office and sit down.

"So how are the little ones?" Trudy asks.

"Growing up way too fast." I tell her. She laughs.

"Tell me about it. My first born is graduating varsity in a few months."

"That's great. And your youngest is doing matric now right?" She nods her head in agreement. "Where did the time go?"

"Only heaven knows." There's a knock on the door before Ryan walks in. He is a buff Afrikaans guy who is also mushy on the inside and tough on the outside. I'm greeted by his smile before anything else.

"Boss, nice surprise." I get up and give him a hug.

"I'm trying to keep you guys on your toes."

"Well it's working. How was your trip?"

"Pretty good. Trudy just told me about the traps. How is that going?"
He wipes his face with his hat.

"Not good. We literally find one almost every day. But the rangers have been vigilant, we are hoping to catch the poachers in the act."

"That's good. Where are my manners, Ryan, this is Sahluko, he is a head ranger in Mpumalanga." They greet each other and I tell Ryan why he is here. He ushers him out to show him the grounds leaving me with Trudy.

I dive into work as soon as they leave. I check the books, the website, all social media pages and bookings. Everything seems to be in order. But we are due for an audit in a couple of months and only then will the discrepancies be revealed. For now everything is just fine. Even though international tourists aren't coming in as much the locals are and the profits and reviews show it.

"So, about your sleeping arrangements. We have one chalet available so I think you will use that one and then Sahluko can crash with the other rangers." Trudy says.

"Didn't you say you brought in part time rangers?"

"We did. But I'm sure they can fit him in."

"No, there's no point in packing them in like sardines. Sahluko can share a room with me. He can use the floor or the couch. We do have a sponge or an air mattress around right?" I see the look she is giving me. You'd think I just asked her to put me in the same bed as him. That wouldn't be a bad idea though.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? You're married, people might get the wrong idea." She says.

"True, but I'm the one who brought him here without anyone's knowledge so I need to make sure he has a place to sleep. Just get me an air mattress and some extra blankets and we will be fine." She nods her head and walks out. Maybe I should have booked a room before we got here.

Our bags are here. It's not the biggest room but it will do. Sahluko fills the room with his presence. He looks around for only God knows what before he turns to me.

"Are you sure it's a good idea for us to be sharing a room?" He asks.

"No. But if you want to crash at the workers quarters with twenty other rangers, you're welcome to." He chuckles and looks around again.

"I'll take my chances here." Of course you will.

"Okay then, I am going to take a shower. You can pump the air mattress so long." I go into the bathroom already second guessing my decision. Yes people will talk but that's not my worry, what worries me is us being in the same room for the whole night together. The chemistry between us is clear, who knows what might happen.

I take a quick shower so as to not use up all the hot water. I head back into the room with the fluffy gown covering me. As soon as he disappears into the shower I change into my pyjamas. I take my iPad out of my bag and video call the kids.

"Hi mummy." Their little voices come in first before I can see their faces.

"Hey babies. How are you?"

"Good, we miss you." Fezi says, her little pout on full display.

"I miss you too my angel. But mummy will be home soon Okay." She nods her head and disappears again. This one gets bored way too easily. Nqaba picks up the iPad and gives me a huge smile.

"I got an A on my maths test." He says proudly.

"That's great. When I come back we have to celebrate."

"Again? Dad already took us out for ice cream to celebrate." Well that's nice.

"You spoke to him?" The camera turns to show Dali sitting on the couch with a pink crown on his head. Fezi's handiwork.

"He is here." Nqaba announces before handing the iPad to his father.

"Hey, how was your trip?"

"Good. Everything is in order around here."

"Its a good thing you took a bath first because we are out of hot water." Sahluko says walking out of the bedroom with a towel wrapped around his waist and another wiping his head and body.

"Who is that?" Dali asks bringing the ipad closer to his face as if that is going to show him the entire room.

"No one, just the TV."

"Bahle dont lie to me." He hisses.

"I'm not. Anyways goodnight. Give the kids a kiss for me." I cut the call with him still calling out my name.

"I'm sorry I didn't meant to disturb you." Sahluko says.

"Oh it's nothing." Just a few grey hairs on Dali's head, nothing major.

"Okay, lights on or off?" He asks.

"Off please." He turns the lights on and makes his way to the air mattress. I switch off the side lamp, preparing myself to sleep but it doesnt come. Counting sheep doesn't help and from the looks of it, Sahluko is struggling to sleep too. He keeps tossing around on the air mattress trying to find a comfortable position. He gives up after a while and gets on the couch. Well that's an even worse idea because his head and feet are dangling on either side of the couch.

"Just come and sleep on the bed. There's enough room for the two of us ." I blurt out. By the time my brain registers what I just said he is already coming to the bed.

"Are you sure, I dont want to impose."

"Its fine. The bed is big enough." He sighs and pulls back the covers. The moment he is in the bed I can feel his heat. Was this a bad idea? Most definitely. Am I going to correct it? Hell no.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

12

BAHLENGIWE

I need to pee. My bladder is crying out for the release but I'm scared to wake up. I don't know what happened during the night but somewhere between when we fell asleep and now, something happened that led me to this position, sleeping on Sahluko's chest. For someone with a hard chest, it sure is comfortable. And that's probably another reason why it's hard for me to wake up. A part of me is scared this might just be a dream. And I'm certain I don't want to wake up from it.

His alarm goes off and he reaches on the bedside table and switches it off without disturbing me. Such a gentleman.

"Bahle!" He calls out, stirring me a bit. Even though I've been up for a while I pretend to still be sleeping. He calls my name again and I pretend to wake up. I quickly move away from feigning ignorance.

"Hey, sorry."

"No worries. You need to take a shower so we can go on the hike." Oh yeah, another thing that happened during the night, I agreed to going on a hike. I need to stop making decisions when I'm exhausted and half asleep.

"Do we have to do it now? Today?"

"Yes. We have to be up on the mountain before the sun rises. You said you want to see the sunrise. Now is the time." He insists. I could remind

him I'm his boss so he cant order me around but where is the fun in that. I like a man who takes charge.

"Fine. I'll go take a shower." I get off the bed and go into the bathroom. My bladder reminds me that it's full before I can even do anything else. I pee and then get into the shower. It is still slightly dark outside but this hike could be a good idea. The lodge doesnt have proper hiking trail but if we can find one, a proper one we could add it to the packages we offer here.

I walk out of the bathroom to find the air mattress completely deflated and the blankets sitting on the couch. I hope that will be enough for people to see nothing happened. Although our staff is very discreet, you never know who might just open their mouth for no reason.

As soon as he takes over the bathroom I quickly get dressed. Thank god I brought some athletic clothes otherwise I'd have to climb a mountain wearing Jean's. By the time he walks out of the bathroom, I am already dressed and ready. He walks out in nike shorts and a matching tank top. His muscles all out in full display.

"So are we doing breakfast first or we are going to climb a mountain on an empty stomach?" I ask him and he laughs at me. This man.

"You will eat don't worry." He assures me. My phone rings from the side table. I pick it up and see Lindo's name flashing on the screen.

"Hey sis."

"Hey, where are you?" She asks. I walk out and stand on the verandah. Shit it's cold.

"You know where I am. What's going on?" She is laughing. "Lindo?"

"Your husband is looking for you." She says. Yho, Dali and his drama. What does he want now?

"I'll call him and find out what he wants." A girl just cant have time to herself.

"You dont understand, he drove through the night. He is in KZN as we speak. But he cant find you at either of the lodges he knows. So I take it you're at the new lodge?" She asks, still laughing. I don't know she finds this whole thing funny.

"Yes. Why would he come here because he knows I'm here to work. And since when does he give a fuck about my work?"

"We both know it's not about that. Apparently he heard a man when he was talking to you last night. I swear the moment you hung up it was like his mind was gone. He was pacing up and down, Sbu tried to ask him what's wrong but he wouldn't say. And then he said he was leaving and asked me to walk him out and that's when he asked me what is going on with you and Sa something. Obviously I told him I dont know anything. He didnt believe me, said he was going home. This morning I get a call from him asking which lodge you're at because both the ones he knows, you are not there." She tells me.

This is bothering on stalking and I dont like it one bit. It was fun seeing him jealous at first but now it's just plain ridiculous. I guess i should be grateful that he doesnt know about this lodge because he would be here by now.

"Dont tell him where I am. I dont even know what his problem is. He has Khanyi, shouldn't he be enjoying the last few days they have

together? Mcm. Listen I am going for a hike right now, please kiss my babies for me and tell them I love them."

"Of course. But Bahle, I dont know what is going on with you or what switch went off but I am liking this new you. I like seeing you so confident and sure of yoursel. But I am glad you're not waiting around for Dali to make you happy. You and you alone are in charge of your happiness and if being with mystery guy brings you even a tenth of the happiness you deserve then you know I am behind you, a hundred and ten percent." I take a deep breath digesting her words.

"I know. And thank you."

"Okay now go enjoy yourself. Please atleast get yourself one mindblowing round from the guy. Please. Do it for me." Ueah the responsible first born train missed this one. By a mile.

"Bye bye Lindo." I hang up the phone smiling to myself. Maybe a hike wont be so bad after all.

I see Ryan walking up the paved walkway coming towards the chalet. The man is already dressed, or was he working the night shift?

"Hey boss. Ready to go?" He asks when he gets to me.

"Yeah, let me put my sneakers on. And maybe a sweater, it's a bit chilly."

"That's a great idea. Please tell me Sahluko is not sleeping."

"I'm up Ryan." Sahluko shouts from the inside and Ryan laughs. I get in just as he walks out. I put my sneakers and sweater on then join them.

Okay maybe I was wrong, the hike is better than I thought it would be. And the views from up here are amazing. We walk a bit further and find a picnic set up overlooking the lodge at the bottom. From up here you can see some animals roaming down in the valley. This is beautiful. Ryan walks forward and stands behind the picnic, a huge smile on his face.

"What is going on?" I ask him his excitement is almost tangible.

"Okay, so I was going to write a proper proposal but I figured a display would be more effective." He starts. He goes on to present his entire proposal about a hike that ends in a picnic at the top of the mountain with the sun rising and animals prancing around at the bottom. It's an impressive presentation that's for sure. "So what do you think?" He asks nervously.

"I like it. It could work very well. But how sure are we it will be safe for people to be up here all by themselves?"

"Actually there will be atleast two rangers with them for safety purposes." He adds. I nod my head and my stomach grumbles.

"Okay, let's find a way to implement this idea to the packages we already have and see how its received. But we need to make sure this place is as comfortable as possible." His smile widens. "And I'm hungry."

"Please, let's eat." We sit down on the blanket, it's a bit uncomfortable with the pebbles underneath the blanket but its nothing that cant be fixed in the long run.

Thirty minutes and a thousand snaps breakfast is done and I'm ready to go back down but the view is way too captivating..

"Guys, I should get going." Ryan says getting up. "I have to check on the rangers before their next shift. I will see you guys down at the lodge."

"No problem. And thank you for the great idea." He smiles and gives me a mock salute before heading down the path. Sahluko lays down on the blanket leaning on his elbow.

"You know I'm glad you like the idea, he was so excited when he told me about it but he was afraid you would shut it down." He tells me. I follow his lead and lay on the blanket too, resting on my elbow to look at me.

"I dont know why people are afraid of me. I like it when people take initiative."

"Well you are a hard nut to crack. But it's good for business. Speaking of which, this lodge, its not on your portfolio. Why is that?" He asks.

"That's because this one is mine. The others are owned by my dad and father in law but this one, it's all mine. I bought it about six years ago. I only told my siblings about it and it's not registered in my name." He nods his head.

"That's impressive. You know I'm always of what you've done with these lodges. Ten years ago they were just there, existing and now they are some of the best in the country. Your hard work is really paying off." He says. Personally I know I work hard but it's nice for someone else to acknowledge that. I dont think even my father has

acknowledged my hard work. Even though they get the profits it's all my hardwork. And not a single thank you has been given.

I sit up. I'm ready to go before I bawl my eyes out right here.

"We should get going before the sun gets too hot." I'm trying not to look at him otherwise the lump in my throat will turn into fall blown water works. I feel him get up and stand in front of me. He pulls me up and we stand so close to each other I can feel his body heat seeping off his pores. He gently grabs my chin, lifting my face up to look at him.

"I have a confession to make." He whispers. His eyes keep darting from my eyes to my lips. My heart is racing.

"I'm listening."

"There is something I've wanted to do from the moment I met you."

"What is it?"

"Kiss you." He blurts out and my heart almost comes to a standstill.

"Then do it." I dont know where this bravery is coming from but I'm liking it. He dips his face, his lips brushing gently against mine. My lips voluntarily open, allowing him access. He takes my lips, sending bolts of lightning all over my body. His tongue invades my mouth and I swear everything around us stands still. Like two magnets pulling towards each other, our bodies merge. His one hand wraps around the back of my neck while the other tightens around my back, pulling me closer to him. My arm goes around his waist, feeling all the bulges of his muscles. He tastes like orange juice mixed with strawberries.

He stops and our lips part. I feel the gust of wind that makes its way between us. My eyes are closed, I feel like if I open them this whole thing will be nothing but a fantasy. A dream. But it's not. His hand rubbing on my back confirms it. I dare open my eyes and look up at him, his eyes are heavy lidded and slightly red.

"We should get going before we do something we will regret." He says, making no move to get his hands off me. Not that I want to.

"What makes you think I will regret it?" I swear these days I am brave. His lips curl up into a smile.

"We really should go." He steps away, picking up the blanket and the picnic basket. I'll need to take another shower and change my underwear when we get to the lodge.

DALINGCEBO

This is stupid. Really really stupid. I haven't had sleep in over 24 hours, busy chasing after someone who clearly doesn't want to be found. She lied about this guy. He is not some other employee, they are sleeping together. This doesn't need a genius to figure it out. It's obvious. I can't believe just hearing his voice in her room sent me on a downward spiral.

Why am I even worried about Bahle and what she does with her life. We have an agreement, I do mine she does hers. So why does the idea of her being with another man give me heart palpitations? What exactly is it that's making me act like some jealous love sick teenager?

My phone rings on the table. I reply without even looking at the caller ID.

"Khumalo!"

"Hey, its Siya. I found your missed calls. What's happening?" Here is another useless headache that's just draining money off me.

"Do you have anyone following Sahluko?" I dont even know why I am asking him because it's clear he is useless.

"No. Why? Is everything okay?" Mxm. I hang up the call and focus on my cold coffee.

I try Bahle again and get her voicemail. I take a couple of deep breaths before walking out of the filling station. I still have a long drive ahead of me.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

13

KHANYISILE

There is nothing that's more of a pet peeve to me than a person being late. And Busi is the worst. A twelve o'clock lunch date will always start an hour late where she is concerned. We were supposed to meet at 12, its 1:30 now and she is still nowhere to be found. I gave her an hours grace and she is still not here.

I order another drink. Ten minutes later she walks through the door like its nothing.

"You're late." She pulls out a chair and sits down.

"Sorry. My meeting ran late." As always.

"That excuse doesnt hold water anymore."

"Hey, some of us don't have mining magnates for boyfriends. Hold your horses." She says. Her statement might sound like a joke to someone who doesn't know her but I know her and there is obviously some jealous undertones attached to her words. But we move.

"Whatever. I've already ordered your usual. How is work going anyway?"

"Argh, work is work, kids drive me nuts but we do what we love so." I don't know how many times she's going to drum the 'we do what we love' mantra in her head till she believes it. We all know teaching was never her first choice. Busi chose love over her career. Teaching was the compromise she had to make since Raphael made it clear he wants

a stay at home wife not a jet setting business woman. I'll never be able to understand her.

"Lucky you. We should do a get together soon. We haven't spent time together as a group." I say. I miss my friend and being married and her job keeps her way too occupied. "And we need to do a girls trip to Cape Town as soon as schools close." I see the frown on her face and I know she's about to make some lousy excuse about money. "You can relax, I'll cover the costs." Only then does she relax.

"In that case, I'm in." The waiter brings our food just in time. "Speaking of trips, when is Dali coming back from KZN?" My fork stops halfway to my mouth.

"Dali is in Joburg not KZN." She freezes for a moment, her eyebrows snapping together like what I just said is foreign to her.

"Since when? He told Raphael he is going to KZN to see Bahle." And just like that my appetite goes out the window.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Take one huge breath in and then let it go.

This cannot be happening. Not right now. Heck not ever.

"Why would he go to KZN to see Bahle? And why would he not tell me that?" I'm hurt and disappointed in Dali. Since when does he lie to me?

"I dont know. But he was at the house a few days ago, walking around like he has the worlds problems on his shoulders , all because Bahle was headed to KZN with some ranger guy." A ranger? Maybe this is all about work and I dont need to worry myself about anything. But Dali has never involved himself in issues with the lodge so why would he start now? Something is not adding up here.

"Its probably work related. I'm sure everything is fine." I say, more to myself than her. I doubt she believes me either.

"Khanyi, what is going on between you two? Dali has never bothered when it comes to Bahle. He gets her pregnant, takes her on official work trips and then comes back to you so what's happening now?"

"Nothing is happening Busi. If there was you would have been the first to know." As if. I should have known her invite was more for gossip than catching up.

"If you say so. But just a little warning, I'm not sure what's happening between the two of you but be careful, Dali is slowly slipping away from you. And truth be told it would be easy for him to leave you for his wife. You have no ring on your finger, a child or even a job. Should he decide to make things work with Bahle you'll be left out in the cold with no one to blame but yourself." She says.

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Her words keep ringing in my head. She is right about one thing, I have nothing to my name. Just the car I'm driving. This house is in his name, the one I 'bought' for my mother is in a trust that he controls. He could easily take everything away and I'll be left with nothing but egg on my face. Maybe I should have taken him up on his offer to start a business for me. Problem with that is I don't know what business to do.

I pace up and down the lounge trying to figure out when the wheels turned. Two months ago we were in a great space. Dali knew his place, Bahle knew hers and I knew mine. Now it feels like the dynamics are changing and not in a good way. At least not for me.

He walks through the door as if he just came from a war. He is still wearing the same shirt he was wearing when he left two days ago. His eyes are bloodshot red. Was he crying?

He throws himself on the couch and sighs. I do some breathing exercises before standing in front of him, my arms crossed on my chest.

"How was your meeting? Did it go well?" I want him to lie so he can dig a bigger hole for himself.

"Yeah, it was productive." He says, his eyes closed and his head resting on the couch's backrest. I sit down next to him, my senses are slowly leaving me. I need to keep myself calm. I have to.

"Dalingcebo Khumalo, since when do we lie to each other?" His eyes fly open and he stares at me. The sweet, kind man I fell in love with is not there. I used to pride myself in knowing that one look in his eyes was all the confirmation I needed to know that he loves me. Right now I'm not sure. It could perhaps be that I'm upset right now or it genuinely could be that he has lost interest in me.

"What are you talking about?" And then he feigns innocence as if I don't already know the truth.

"You were not in Joburg, I know you followed Bahle to KZN. The question I have is why? And why would you lie to me about it? Do you think I would have stopped you?" He roughly rubs his hands over his face. He knows his lies have caught up with him. I hope, for his sake he doesn't make me out to be the crazy one. He takes my hand in his and intertwines our fingers.

"Sthandwa sam, I'm sorry. You are right. I shouldn't have lied to you." Okay, this is a change. I was preparing myself for a fight. "I went to KZN because I think there is something going on with Bahle and the new ranger. The other day I found him massaging her feet in the office and now they are taking trips together. Something is not adding up." He says. It's too soon for me to say this but this could be exactly what we need. If Bahle cheats, Dali wins and our lives are set. For good. And here I was thinking I'd wait another ten years to finally be Mrs Khumalo, meanwhile Mrs goody two shoes ain't so good after all.

"Okay, but what makes you think there's something going on? Did you catch them in the act?" I cross my fingers hoping he will say yes. Imagine the horror, will horror for her and a win for me.

"No. In actual fact I didn't catch them. I went to both lodges and they were not there."

"I don't understand!"

"I think they booked somewhere else. The lodge was just a cover story." Okay miss goody two shoes is smart, I'll give her that. But she's not smarter than me.

"Lool, there's no point stressing about this. Go take a bath, I'll make you something to eat and then you'll get some rest." He lifts our intertwined hands and kisses the top of mine before heading up the stairs. I pick his phone up from the coffee table. The battery is dead. I quickly plug it in and wait for it to get some power in.

If anyone would have told me that Bahle would be the one to shoot herself on the foot in this sham of a marriage I would have laughed. According to her parents and the in laws Bahle can do no wrong. I wonder what they will think when they find out she's been banging the help. Oh

the jokes write themselves honestly. And here I was thinking Dali doesn't love me anymore.

As soon as the phone hits 5 percent I switch it on. I scroll down and find his PI's number. I copy the number to my phone and dial. It rings a couple of times before the person answers and keeps quiet.

"Hello." I whisper. I cant have Dali hear me then ruin this. He might have a soft spot for Bahle because of the kids and this might be a big decision for him to make. And that's where I come in. Where he fails I plan to prosper. Operation get rid of the wife is officially underway.

"Can I help you?" The gruff voice on the other side says.

"Yes, hi. My name is Khanyisile Manana, I have a job for you." I have to keep glancing up the stairs to make sure I dont get caught.

"I'm listening." This man sounds bored. He probably thinks I'm another bored housewife looking for dirt on her husband. If only.

"I need you to track someone for me. Right now the person is in a lodge in KZN with a man. I need you to get me atleast one picture of them together in a compromising position."

"Which lodge?" That's the million dollar question isn't it. I'm not sure how many lodges are there in KZN but that's not my job to know.

"I dont know. That's where you come in. I need you to find out where she is and then get me that picture." I hear him sigh before he gulps down some liquid.

"So let me get this straight, you want me to go all over the province trying to find someone. Who is this someone anyway? Your husband's mistress?"

"More like his wife." Silence. Saying this out loud sounds weird to me too, but I cant back down now.

"So you're the mistress and you're looking for dirt on your boyfriends wife?" Sounds like a plot on a wattpad novel but this is my life.

"Yes. That sounds about right." He bursts out laughing. Where is the professionalism? I should report him. Do PI's even have some ethics board they report to?

"Okay, this is funny. So you think once you find the dirt the man will leave his wife and marry you?"

"Yes!" He laughs again.

"You do remember he is also cheating with you right now? What if she also has people watching her husband?" He asks. I would have noticed anyone following me so I know Bahle's brain isn't that developed.

"That's for me to worry about. Will you do this or not?"

"Sounds interesting. I'll do it. Let's talk about my fee." We are not even done and he already wants money. Idiot.

"Find me that picture and I'll double your rate." He chuckles.

"A 70 percent deposit is required before I can start work. Send me your details via email and the person you want me to look into and I'll send you my rate and we will take it from there." Well that's progress.

"What's your email address?" He tells me the address and I immediately type in the email and send him all the information he will need. Within two minutes I get a response. He is fucken expensive. But I hope it will be worth it in the end. I need this win.

BAHLENGIWE

Who knew a kiss could cause this much tension. Sahluko and I spent the better part of the day in close proximity to each other literally everything about his presence was intoxicating. I even had to excuse myself early from dinner because I couldn't stop staring at him and neither could he. If I'm not careful I might just give away whatever this is that's going on between us.

I take a quick shower then grab a book from my bag. I need something to keep my mind away from him. Hopefully by the time he comes to sleep I will be sleeping too. I perch myself on the couch with the TV on and get on with my book.

Ten minutes into my relaxation the door opens. His aura is the first thing I feel before I see him. My heart starts racing the closer he gets to

me. Each step he takes accelerates my beating heart. He sits on the couch, lifting my legs to sit on his lap.

"Why did you leave so early?" He asks, running the tips of his fingers on my exposed flesh, leaving goosebumps. Its either I am too horny or years of pent up sexual tension is ready to burst out. Or it could be both, either way, they are a lethal combination.

"I need to rest. I'm tired." He looks up at me, a smirk on his face.

"Tired? Well, at least your excuse is valid. Do you know what mine is?" I shake my head like a love sick teenager being courted under an oak tree. "I couldn't stop thinking about our kiss this morning." He says, his fingers travelling up my thighs.

"What about it?"

"How perfect it was." He drags me to him till my thighs are sitting directly over his lap. And his hard on. Somehow it makes me feel good knowing I can have that much effect on anyone without doing anything.

"Yeah!"

"Yes. But now the problem is that I have this urge to find out if I can do it again." He says, his eyes have gone back to my exposed flesh. This time he moves his hands around on my thighs. I should have worn longer pyjamas. Or not.

"What's stopping you from doing it again?" I see his lips crack into a smile before he looks up.

"I'm scared. What if I don't stop at the kiss? What if i cross an even bigger line than the one I've crossed already?"

"How about we start with the kiss and then see where it leads before you start judging yourself."

He grunts, wrapping his one hand behind my neck and gently, painstakingly slowly pulling me to him. I can see the desire in his eyes. The fire and need I've always yearned to see in someone else. I see it in him, it's all mine. All for me. For once in my life I am ready to let the night consume me and my thoughts, leaving my conscience to wake up in the morning.

Our lips meet, like feathers rubbing against each other before he claims mine. I feel his breath on my face and it's enough to drive me to the edge. I close my eyes as our lips merge like perfect puzzle pieces. His tongue brushes on my lips urging them open. I let him. Our tongues meet in a forbidden dance that's so perfect I see stars around us. His other hand on the small of my back pulls me closer to him. So close he lifts me up to straddle him.

I wrap my arms around his neck, sticking my hands down his back and feeling his bulging muscles. But there is one muscle that seems to grow thicker with each passing second. I find myself grinding on it. He groans in my mouth, a low sexy sound from deep inside him that unleashes the river Nile between my legs. While his one hand pulls me to him, squeezing my boobs over his chest, his other hand goes under my pyjama bottom, finding that one spot that's a dead giveaway of what I'm feeling right now. Lust and desire.

"You're wet." He whispers as our lips part. We are both taking in as much air as we can to rejuvenate our lungs. He watches me through hooded eyes as he runs his fingers over my swollen clit. My breath hitches with each movement he makes. He sticks my clit between his

two fingers then rubs it. I throw my head back as the sensation of his rough hands and my sensitive part grinding against each other summons a moan from deep within me.

I slap my hand over my mouth as I grind on his fingers. I hold on tightly to his shoulders as he hastens the momentum. I want to cum.

"I'm going to cum." I say, my voice no longer sounding like my own.

"Not yet." He lifts me up off him and deposits me on the bed, pulling down my pants together with my soaked panties. He separates the panties from the pants and sniffs them. He takes one huge whiff and his eyes close, taking a deep breath. That's creepy, but somehow it turns me on even more.

"You should bottle that smell and sell it." He says opening his eyes. Looking down at me, his desire palpable. He kneels on the floor, right between my exposed vagina. He brings his head down, his eyes not leaving mine. He sticks his tongue out and makes one swiping movement from the bottom of my slit all the way up till he has my clit in his mouth. I grab onto the bed as he laps up my juices like a thirsty dog. It takes every ounce of strength inside me to not scream.

A knock on the door makes us both freeze.

"Who is it?" He asks, I can see some of my juices dripping from his beard.

"It's Ryan, we need your help with something." Ryan shouts back.

"I'm coming." His head goes back in as Ryan's footsteps fade away. Why didn't we hear them when he was coming.

"You should go." I say even though I am pushing his head deeper into me. He summons whatever powers that be, sticking his hands inside me while his mouth works on my clit. The combination quickly sends me over the edge and I conclude around his fingers.

I lay down trying to catch my breath while he disappears into the bathroom, returning with a warm towel. He cleans me up, his eyes watching me as the warm towel gently massages my clit. Once I'm clean he leans down over my face.

"Saved by the bell." He whispers before kissing me again. I taste myself on his tongue. "We will finish this later." He gives me one last kiss and leaves.

I lay there like nando's chicken, a smile on my face. I pull the blankets over me and wait. Later cant come soon enough.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

14

BAHLENGIWE

In the morning, the sun always comes up, and with it reality sets in, the alcohol washes away and leaves behind a plethora of guilt. I'm not even sure why I feel guilty because I enjoyed last night. Although things didn't go as far as I would have let them had Ryan not shown up. Right at that moment I was ready to let go of my inhibitions and just enjoy myself.

If you would ask me why I'm so loyal to a man who has no loyalty to me I wouldn't tell you. No, I would, it's because for me this is more than about my marriage. I have a bigger plan on the works and I can't allow my own desires to cloud my judgement.

Sahluko came back late from wherever he was with Ryan. Even though I wasn't sleeping I had to pretend to be because the alcohol had left my body and my senses had returned. A whole lot of conspiracy theories ran through my head like Bolt at the Olympics.

What if this whole thing is a set up? What if I am supposed to fall for Sahluko and then boom, Dali rolls in and ruins my life and takes everything from me. I can't afford that. And what if the parents are behind all this? I know I'm probably wrong but hey, when it comes to our parents, you can never put anything past them.

Who am I kidding, I am just being unnecessarily paranoid right now. I am the one who hired Sahluko, everything I've done up to this far has all been my choice. I can't be throwing blame around as if I am a child

with no idea what she's doing. If anything happens between Sahluko and I, it will be of my own doing.

I left him in the room taking a shower. Today we are heading to the other lodge. It's not too far from here. Just an hour away. An hour of me being cooped up in a car with Sahluko.

Don't get me wrong, our chemistry is obvious. Although we both try to keep things professional in front of people, sharing the room with him made me realise that I don't need alcohol to lose my sense around him. There is just something about him that pulls me to him like a magnetic force. And I hate that I keep comparing him to Dali, and the truth is if I had to follow my heart right now, I would go with Sahluko. No, it's not love, just lust and a sexual attraction I don't think I've ever had with anyone else.

I order breakfast at the restaurant and find a nice quiet spot on the corner. I check on the progress with the wedding and it seems everything is on track. I'm just glad nothing has leaked yet. Those NDA's are doing the Lord's work.

I'm so engrossed in my emails that I don't even notice Sahluko standing over me. If it wasn't for his huge ass shadow I probably would still be oblivious to his presence. I look up and find him staring at me with a smile on his face. My heart starts racing. I told you the chemistry between us is insane. He pulls out the chair and sits down.

"Good morning." He says resting his chin on his fisted hands. I don't know why he is smiling.

"Hey. Have you ordered yet?"

"I have. I was hoping we would talk about last night before you left the room." And here I was hoping we wouldn't talk about last night. That's not really a topic I'd like to discuss when I'm sober.

"Okay, what would you like to talk about?" I can feel my heart beating in my throat. I've never had anything sexual with any other man besides my husband. Now here I am about to discuss a one night stand with an employee. Does it even count as a one night stand if all he did was eat me out and nothing else?

"Look, I know we were both drunk last night and our emotions or attraction got the better of us. I just want to say I am sorry for crossing the line. It's just that, I don't know what it is about you that makes me lose all my senses." He says. I can see his fingers itching closer to mine but he quickly talks himself out of it and holds his hands back.

"It's fine. To be honest, I actually enjoyed myself."

"Really?"

"Of course. But I don't see how any of this would ever work. As much as I am attracted to you I am married and I don't want to string you along and give you false hope because I am pretty sure I won't be getting a divorce anytime soon." As much as I was dreading this conversation

I am glad it's happening. It might just put an end to the awkward moments. The waiter places our food on the table and quickly retreats, giving us a moment to ourselves.

"I get you. And I understand your point. But can I ask you something?" I nod my head and take a sip of my tea. "Alcohol aside, why did you let

me do that to you last night?" I sigh and take another sip of the tea before placing the cup back down on the table.

"Because I enjoyed it. And besides, it felt nice to see the desire in your eyes and knowing it's for me. And the fact that what happened last night didn't feel forced or a chore. Sometimes that's all a girl wants. To be wanted." I wrap my hands around the small cup staring at the brown liquid.

"Then maybe we shouldn't stop." My eyes quickly shoot up to meet his, looking for some form of sign that he is joking but there is none.

"Sahluko?"

"Hear me out. I am a grown man and you're a grown woman. We both know and acknowledge the attraction we feel for each other. And the truth of the matter is that nothing seems to work when it comes to getting you out from under my skin. I thought last night would have been that but it didn't help. Instead it made me want you more." He confesses.

If there is one thing he is right about is that last night did nothing to quench whatever thirst I seem to have developed for him. I'm not sure what kind of temptation god is carrying me through because I always ask him not to lead me into temptation.

"I am not saying leave your husband and run off with me." He is serious about this.

"And you think you can handle being a secret? Because at the end of the day that's all this would be, a secret." I don't think I've ever met a man who would be okay with being in a secret relationship with a

married woman, unless of course he is also married. And there is nothing in Sahluko's file that suggests he might be. I could be wrong though, man hide a lot of things including human beings.

"Technically speaking it wouldn't be a secret, it would just be between you and me." I'm pretty sure that's the textbook definition of a secret.

"How about this, take some time and think about it. And if you say no, I promise I will take it like a man."

"I'll think about it." What's there to think about? I'm pretty sure I would not mind being flipped over like a pancake by him over and over again. And if last night is any indication to what he can do then I'm pretty sure I'd have the time of my life.

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We get to the second lodge and check in. Luckily this time there are plenty of rooms available since some people have checked out already. I introduce Sahluko to the manager and he shows him around while I catch up with the paperwork. I make sure to make copies of everything before I go up to my room. This is one of my dad's favourite places to come and when I'm here, I have to be on my best behaviour. As loyal as the people are, they still have more respect for my parents and Dali's parents than they do me. I had to explain that to Sahluko on our way here just to make sure we keep our hands away from each other.

By the time we leave there is so much sexual tension between us it's hard not to notice. We head to the next lodge and something catches my eye. A guy who was at the previous lodge too. I'm good with faces not names, so I can tell you where I met someone and what was happening, I won't tell you their name though. And this man, it's either he is following me or this is just purely a coincidence. But my gut says be careful.

On our last day in KZN, it is raining. It would be a good thing any other time but mother nature is not very kind to us. The dirt road leading to the lodge usually gets muddy which makes it hard for guests to drive in. Especially those driving small cars. As we are driving out we hit something. Sahluko pulls up to the side of the road and gets out to check what's happening. He knocks on the window and I quickly pull it down.

"We just hit a pothole and it punctured the tyre. I will change it now cause I saw a spare tyre in the boot." He says already pulling up his sleeves.

"Or we could call road side assistance. It's raining, you will get a cold." He looks up at the sky and a few drops of rain hit his face. The drizzle is a little lighter now but it is still rain nonetheless.

"It will take forever for them to get here. I'll change the tyre." He says walking back to the boot. Before I can close the window I notice a car driving past us, the passenger window of the car is rolled down. In the car is the same guy I've been seeing a lot of lately. I get an uneasy feeling each time I see him. Thank God he doesn't stop to offer help. Thirty minutes later we are back on the road.

By the time we get home I can feel my body ready to give in to the exhaustion. I think I'll fetch the kids tomorrow because right now I have no energy to deal with them. Sahluko drives the car in before requesting a cab to take him to the lodge so he can get his car. This whole admin process, we should have just left the car here.

I walk into the house and find Dali sitting on the couch watching a game of soccer. Usually his presence would not be much of a bother but I've had his number blocked for the whole week so maybe he might need answers.

"You're back." He says with his eyes still glued to the screen.

"I am. And I need a bath before I sleep."

"Why did you block my number?" This time he turns to look at me.

"I didnt. It must have been the network. Why what happened?" Dali and his drama, if anything had happened Lindo would have told me.

"Nothing happened. So what was that guy doing in your room?" And now I am in a court of law.

"He was doing the same thing Khanyi does in your room." I blurt out before making my way up the stairs. I am too tired for any of this bullshit and I'm not ready to deal with it. Not yet anyway. It's not like Sahluko and i did anything wrong. Yeah, nothing wrong happened.

"What is wrong with you these days?" Dali asks following me into the bedroom. I lower myself on to the bed and sit down pulling taking my shoes off.

"Did you send someone to follow me?" He swallows before denying it.

"Why would i send anyone to follow you?"

"I dont know. I figured since you couldn't find me when you went down there maybe you asked someone else to look for me?" He swallows again. "Why did you drive to KZN in the middle of the night looking for me?"

"It doesnt matter. Food is in the fridge if you're hungry. The parents are coming back tomorrow so some of my things have been moved back here. I'll go get the kids." He walls out and closes the door behind him.

I could be reading too much into his behaviour, but if I didnt know better I'd think he actually cares. For a moment there I saw a hint of pain in his eyes. I wonder why?

HIS HEART TO KEEP

15

DALINGCEBO

None of this makes sense. Siya does not follow people around. Yes, legally he is a PI but he is more of a hacker than a PI and there is no way he would have followed Bahle. And he would have told me if he was planning to do that. Something about this does not make sense. And only one person can put the puzzle pieces together. I dial his number and wait.

He picks up after a couple of rings.

"Mbulazi Omnyama."

"Have you been following my wife?"

"Of course. Your girlfriend ordered me to follow her and get a picture of her with the ranger guy." Of course she did.

"Did you get anything?"

"No. They were pretty professional throughout their stay. Separate rooms, although they had meals together a few times but its nothing to write home about. I couldn't hear their conversations though. But all in all I can say they are just work colleagues with nothing to hide." Okay, that makes me breath a little better.

"And did you find anything on Sahluko?"

"Nothing. The man is clean." That's all I need to know.

Instead of driving to my brothers place to pick up the kids I decide to take a detour and go see Khanyi. I pull up to the house and her car is not in the driveway. Hopefully it's in the garage. I head inside and thankfully I find her on the couch watching the real housewives of something. Or is it love and hip hop? I take the remote and switch off the TV.

She turns to look at me with a bored expression on her face.

"Aren't you supposed to be playing happy families with your wife?" She asks taking a sip of her drink. The fact that she is drinking a dirty martini means she is upset about something. No, she is upset I have moved back in with Bahle. I am not about to address that right now because I am certain she knows why things have to be this way.

"Where the hell do you get off telling Siya to follow Bahle around?" She swallows before gulping down the drink and regaining her composure then refilling the glass. She really thought I wouldn't find out.

"I was just doing what you should have done. What did Siya find?"

"Nothing. But now I do have to pay him a hefty retainer for his job even though he came up empty." She rolls her eyes and lays back on the couch.

"Its not like you can't afford it mosi."

"That's beside the point. I've said this to you a zillion times. Leave Bahle to me. I dont need you dealing with anything that has to do with her." I dont know why this is so hard for her to grasp. Bahle gets it, she stays the fuck away from Khanyi and whatever has to do with her but Khanyi

cant seem to grasp that concept. Especially lately. It's like dealing with a temperamental 2 year old.

"Are you pregnant?" I ask and her reply is to throw her entire drink on my face. The shock leaves me grounded on the same spot for a second I dont even notice her getting up to stand in front of me. I wipe the drink from my face and watch the droplets fall onto the carpet.

"How dare you?"

"It was just a question." And the only way to explain her erratic behaviour lately because PMS doesnt last this long.

"Question my left foot. All you want to know is whether I have done something to jeopardize your life. The answer is no. I am not pregnant. Even if I was you'd make sure I get an abortion within the blink of an eye." Okay maybe that was a stupid question to ask but I needed to know.

"I am sorry. I just wanted to make sure....."

"Make sure I haven't done anything to jeopardize your inheritance? No, I haven't. I have instead done everything I can, sacrificed everything I can to make sure you dont lose everything you've worked hard for. My morals and my unborn children and my tied tubes, for you. And you have the audacity to ask me if I am pregnant. Fuck you. In fact, get the fuck out and go back to your baby making machine." She yells in my face. She grabs the mixer and glass and marches up the stairs.

Maybe I am the worlds dumbest idiot. I need to change this shirt before I head back. Actually change everything. I slowly make my way upstairs. Lucky for me the bedroom is not locked. A slight push of the door and I

am welcomed by sobs. Yeah i already know i am an idiot. No need to remind me.

I make my way to the bed and sit down.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." I'm trying to rub her back but she keeps moving my hand. She turns her head to face the other side.

"Baby?"

"Please leave me alone." She says between sobs.

"I can't. Not when you're like this?" That gets her attention. She turns around and lays on her back.

"Like what?"

"I know I hurt you and I'm sorry. I'm trying my best to manage the situation we are all in and I dont need you interfering." She chuckles.

"You think I'm crying because I told your PI to keep an eye on Bahle?"

"No. I know asking you if you're pregnant was a stupid thing to do. I am sorry. I also know how much you've sacrificed for this relationship and trust me, if I could I'd give up everything just so we can live our lives the way we want."

"Then why dont you? Give up everything that is? You're educated, you could easily get a job. And now with your experience, every company will be fighting to get you on board." On paper that sounds like a great idea. In reality though, not so much.

"So you'd give up your fancy wines, expensive shoes and bags, designer clothes, vacations anywhere in the world, the private chefs each time you don't feel like cooking, this house, your mothers house. You'd give

up all this to stay in a shack or a backroom somewhere?" Her bulging eyes give me the answer before her mouth even opens. "We both know my father would not just sit back and allow me to walk away. If I did

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all these luxuries you enjoy so much will go up in flames. We both know that." She sighs, crossing her arms on her chest. I take her one hand and kiss the top of it. "Look, I know this is just as frustrating for you but I promise it will be worth the wait." She pulls her hand away and tucks it under her arm pit.

"If you say so. Are you staying or going?"

"I have to go. The parents flight lands at 4 in the morning. Chances are their driver will bring them straight to the house to see the kids so I need to be there." I get off the bed and quickly change my clothes. "I will call you before I sleep okay?" She nods her head and I give her a kiss before leaving.

I get back to the house and find Bahle in the kitchen making cereal.

"Can I have whatever you're having?" I take a seat on the high chair as she pulls out a bowl from the cupboard. She fills it with corn flakes then hands the bowl to me with the milk.

"There is food in the fridge you know." There are plenty of leftovers in there plus I ordered more food when I was coming here. Why we are having cereal is beyond me. But I've upset enough women for today I dont need to make it three in a row. That would just be tragic.

"I saw it." She says sitting next to me. "So what happened to the clothes you were wearing? And last I checked you said you were going to pick up the kids. Where are they?"

"I decided to pick them up in the morning. Did you speak to the parents?" I see the side eye she is giving me and I know it's got nothing to do with the parents. I'm trying to avoid the clothes question. If I'm going to have peace in my life I need to learn to separate this life with the life I live with Khanyi. Both need to be parallel to each other.

"Apparently they missed their connecting flight from London so they had to book another one and now they will be here around midday instead." She tells me.

"That gives us enough time to plan a small braai for them."

"Mhmmm."

"I will ask Sbu to bring the kids in the morning so they can help us out. Do you think your brother will come if I invite him?" I know Sihlangu and his dad aren't the best of friends but he is still his father and I'm sure he would be happy to have him here when he returns.

"No, he is in Namibia with his boyfriend. I doubt he would cut his trip short." Of course not. Makes sense though. My dad and Mr Nxumalo are like two pieces cut from the same cloth. Ruthless and conniving. But for me, my dad is still my dad even with all his faults and being here to welcome him home after a whole year of travelling the globe will mean a lot to him.

I get the meat from the fridge and throw it in the sink. It will defrost overnight then I will marinate it in the morning. I text my brother and

tell him about my plans. He texts back saying he is in. I get the grocery notepad from the fridge and make a note of everything I will need that's not in the house. I'll have to go grocery shopping in the morning. Once I'm done with that I decide to watch a movie.

"I am going to watch a movie, do you want to join me?" She looks up at me with the spoon of cereal halfway to her mouth. She places it back in the bowl and looks at me.

"Sure. As long as it's not scifi or action." Well there goes my options.

"We will watch whatever you want." She smiles. Bahle has the most innocent looking face I've ever seen in my entire life, add her smile to that and she is perfect.

She has changed a lot from the geeky teenager she used to be in high school. If anyone would have told me, at 16 that I would end up marrying the girl who beat me at debating when she was just thirteen I would have laughed. Forced or not, this marriage is something I never saw coming, but here we are, ten years later and somehow I am starting to see her. Not just as acknowledgement of her existence but seeing the real her has been weird to say the least. I'm still trying to figure out if all this was spurred on by the idea that some other man, besides me can see what I've failed to see for ten years.

By the time I get to the lounge with the popcorn she has already chosen a movie. A cheesy romcom that's probably as predictable as a chiefs game.

"Of all the movies you could choose, why this one?" I ask seeing the title on the screen.

"Because its perfect. It's got the drama, the laughs and the romance. Cant go wrong with a trifecta movie." She says. She's sitting on the couch with her feet tucked under her legs, so carefree and relaxed.

"Its also predictable and fake. Love like that doesn't exist." I argue. I am more of a practical person than she is and as far as I am concerned, romcoms only sell an unattainable dream that no person can ever live up to.

"Actually it does exist. As long as two people love each other, the universe will always find a way to make sure they end up together. The only thing that could separate them is whatever stupid decision either make. But love, it exists." I'm about to ask her how she knows that when he phone flashes on the coffee table. She quickly picks it up as I notice Sahluko's name on it. It's a text message. She reads it quietly and then her lips curl up into a smile. She doesnt even reply. She just puts the phone next to her, with the smile still plastered on her face.

"Good news?" I am nosy I know. She shakes her head and pops a popcorn into her mouth.

"Not really. Just work stuff." She says dismissively. Now I know something as banal as work cannot put that kind of a smile on someone's face. That smile, that's a smile of someone in love. She said there was nothing going on between her and him though. I should take her word for it but I refuse to believe that my gut is lying to me. Something tells me there is more to Sahluko than meets the eye and I refuse to believe Siya's findings. Maybe if I dig a little deeper I'll be able to figure out why Bahle's entire demeanor has changed since he came into the picture.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

16

BAHLENGIWE

Meat - check

Drinks - check

Clean house - check

Grandkids- bathe and ready with their sweet smiles.

You'd think we are getting ready for a president or something the way we are running around like headless chickens. Dali is on the braai making sure the meat is nice and ready, Lindo is setting up the table, I am doing the final touches to the salads, the kids are sitting quietly on the couch, not even paying attention to the cartoons on TV. For some reason I am nervous. These are my parents and my in-laws but still, its nerve wrecking. They always expect everything to be on point. My parents because they don't want me embarrassing them and my in-laws because, well you always have to be the perfect makoti, no matter who your in-laws are.

Sbusiso went to the airport to pick up the parents. Sometimes I wish I had half his liver honestly because that man gives zero fucks when it comes to the parents. Work wise he is good at his job but personally, he does the bare minimum when it comes to his parents and they have no choice but to accept it.

"Sbu says they are ten minutes away." Lindo says coming into the kitchen. I take a couple of deep breaths, I need to be calm for this.

Lindo is watching me like I am crazy. On this side of the family, she is the rebellious one. And just like her husband, she gives zero fucks. Me on the other hand, not so much. For as long as i can remember I've had to act a certain way, carry myself like a lady and liar be prim and proper. I was groomed to be Dali's wife from when I was just a child. It was always drummed into me that one day I would be the one standing next to him, to make sure I protect the Nxumalo legacy. I probably would have done better if it was just handed to me to run but hey, I have a vagina so that automatically disqualifies me from being a good leader.

"You know you dont need to be fussing like this. These are your parents not some head of states. Relax." She says gently massaging my stiff shoulders.

"You know how they are, I cant help it." She sighs as she unlocks a knot on my back.

"I hear you. I hope I dont become the kind of parent they are to us honestly. I want better for my kids. The idea of fearing your own parents, it's not right."

"I know." I cant imagine Nqaba or Fezi being afraid of me. It would kill me.

"They are here." Nqaba says running out the door with his sister on his heel.

"Its showtime." My sister says. We walk out to the front door and watch as they fuss over the kids. It's been a full year since they last saw them.

"You're so grown." My mother says picking up Fezi.

"I'm four now." Fezi tells her, holding out four fingers to emphasise her point.

"I know my baby, and gogo got you presents."

"Did you get me presents too?" Nqaba asks over his shoulder while dragging a suitcase into the house.

"Of course I did my baby." She shouts after him and they laugh.

They make their way to us and I can already see my mother scanning us from head to toe. She is about to make a comment about something, anything that is wrong with my outfit or Lindo's makeup.

"Babies." Mrs Khumalo says opening her arms for a hug. We hug her simultaneously before she steps back.

"My daughters in law. You look beautiful and glowing. Are you pregnant? Please tell me you are." She says clasping her hands together.

"No ma, we are not. At least I'm not." I say turning to Lindo.

"Dont look at me like that, you know kids are not in my plans." She lies.

"You do know your eggs aren't getting any fresher. Bu the time you decide to have kids they will be scrambled and useless." Mum says ever so bluntly.

"Good for them. I'll make sure I have aromat when that day comes."
Lindo replies walking past them to her husband.

I understand her need to lie to them. The pressure would be worse than it is now. Right now, their baby making plans are just between them with no outside forces to pile on the pressure and never ending questions.

"I swear there is something wrong with that child." Mum says marching into the house.

We gather around the table, with both dads sitting at across from each other as the heads of the family. Their wives right next to them. Dali and I sat on one side with his mum while Sbu and Lindo sat on the other with mum next to them. The kids are sitting in front of the TV. From the outside, this looks like a perfect united family. From the inside though, this feels like an informal business meeting. That's basically how our parents have taken on parenting, like another business project they had to complete.

"So, how have things been since we left?" Mr Khumalo asks looking at Dali. He clears his throat and basically gives him a progress report that sounds more like it was prepared for an annual shareholders meeting. Once he is satisfied by Dali's response he turns fo Sbu and poses the same question.

"Everything is fine. We are not bankrupt yet." Sbu replies and continues eating. Did I mention he gives zero fucks?

"How about specifics." His father urges.

"Baba, you just got back, can we focus on catching up instead of worrying about money you have plenty off." Sbu fires back. Sometimes I wish Dali had as much of a backbone as Sbu does, but then I have to remind myself that I'm not different from him.

"Did Dvumo tell you we got to watch her in one of the shows in New York?" Mum asks trying to break the looming tension before it escalates.

"Yes, she sent us pictures." I say with a little more excitement in my voice. Of all my siblings, I envy Dvumo the most. She lives a carefree life of a globetrotters and i couldn't be more proud of her. My siblings have managed to carve out their own places in the world while I'm stuck on the path laid out for me when I was five.

"I'll never be able to understand why someone as smart as her would choose to prance around a runway wearing ugly clothes when there is a family business to be taken care off. All the hard work we put into these businesses to make sure our children never want for anything but now we have to beg and plead with them to carry on the legacy." My dad says. His other favourite thing in the world is complaining about everything that the others do wrong and never being grateful for what is done right.

"Dvumo is doing what she loves and it makes her happy. Dont you want your children to be happy?" Lindo asks him. He shakes his head and goes back to his food.

Mum and Mrs Khumalo are more than happy to fill the silence with stories of their adventures, even showing us lots and lots of pictures. It seems they had fun. Now if only they could do it again. This time extend it for another two years. Life would be so much better.

"Anyways, we have news." Mr Khumalo says. We all keep quiet and turn to him. "We are moving to Badplaas. We bought two farms there and now we will be retiring there." He says excitedly.

"Why would you buy two farms for just the two of you?" Dali asks.

"Because the two farms are for the both of us. One will be a Nxumalo farm and the other a Khumalo farm." He clarifies. I dont know why I even thought they could, for once in their lives stay apart. At least they will be some kilometres away so we wont have to deal with them on a daily basis like we have in the past.

It takes a while to get the kids to sleep. They are too excited for their gifts. Their grandparents spoil them and they love it. Me on the other hand, I hate it. I dont want to raise spoilt brats. As soon as they fall asleep I head back to the kitchen to help Dali clean up. The parents will be sleeping over at Lindo and Sbu's because they have plenty of space. Lindo is going to be pulling her hair out by the time they leave.

We clean up the kitchen and make sure everything is back to normal before we slump down on the couch.

"Hosting those people is an extreme sport I tell you." Dali says scrolling through the channels.

"Those people are your parents." I remind him. He smiles and takes a sip of his drink.

"They are your parents too but my statement still stands. They are hard to please." Well he is right on that one.

"I guess. What do you think about them moving?" His smile grows wider.

"That I am happy about. It will give us time to breath. I'm glad they decided on extending the rentals on the houses. Now they can just go

to Badplaas and grow old there." He says, his excitement clearly visible for everyone to see.

My phone rings on the couch next to me. I flip it over and see Sahluko is calling me.

"Sorry, I have to take this. Its work." I say leaving the room. I make my way upstairs and answer the call before he hangs up.

"Hello."

"You sound happy, I take it lunch went well?" I can feel the smile on his face right now. I dont know how but hearing his voice makes everything about today just melt away.

"Somewhat. But I'm more happy to hear from you. How is work?"

"Work is great. Dont worry about anything. Did your parents enjoy their trip?" He asks.

"They did. So much so they are moving to Badplaas to enjoy their retirement. They actually bought farms right next to each other." I tell him.

"How old are they? Five? Why do they need to be next to each other all the time?" Same question that's been boggling my mind lately with the same answer. They are best friends.

"They are besties. And they like doing things together. It's their thing I guess."

"Or maybe they are part of a swingers club and they exchange partners atleast once a week." He says laughing.

That statement sends my head racing. Its impossible. My dad has never cheated on my mum and I've never heard of mr Khumalo cheating either. But the picture of my parents swinging doesnt leave my mind.

"You're nasty. Now I cant seem to get the picture of them out of my head." He laughs harder.

"That's your fault. I did not say imagine your parents doing the nasty. Anyways, forget old people, Ryan sent me pictures of the work they've started on the picnic spot. You should check your emails."

"I will. How is it looking?"

"Pretry good. I think many marriage proposals will happen there." And that means more money. Amazing. Dont judge me, I am not greedy I'm just addicted to success.

"That's great. Maybe once it's done we can go check it out. This time have a proper picnic together." I blurt out. I know its risky but I've been thinking about this for a while, what would be so wrong about me allowing another man other than my husband to pay me attention. I mean he gets ot from somewhere else too so its only fair. Right?

"What are you saying exactly?"

"What I am saying is that I've thought about what you said and you may be right. I think it's time I have some fun of my own." There is a sharp intake of air on the other end. I hope I'm not making a fool of myself when he has already changed his mind.

"Are you sure though? This would be a no strings attached type if thing."

"I am sure. But we will have to meet up and discuss the logistics and ground rules. This wont be as easy as it may seem." Sometimes it's okay to concede that you have failed. And honestly I have failed at making my marriage work. If having my own affair makes me happy then so be it.

"Okay, I will make some time next week. And Bahle, you wont regret this." He says and hangs up. I really hope not. I'm just ready to have all the fun I missed out on in my twenties. Now its time to put Bahlengiwe first. And if that means starting out with a steamy hot affair then I'm ready.

"Who was that?" A voice bellows behind me making me jump. I look up and find Dali standing by the door leaning on the frame.

"What are you doing sneaking up on me like that. You will wake the kids."

"I was just asking."

"Well stop asking. Its got nothing to do with you." I yell then quickly make my way to the bathroom. I close the door and stand behind it for a bit. Speaking of logistics, I need to get myself a new private phone. For all I know this one is bugged or something. Better safe than sorry.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

17

BAHLENGIWE

Having an affair is not as easy as men make it out to be. Mine hasn't even officially started yet and my nerves are already shot. Although on the other hand I've been giddy and smiling alone when no one is looking. Sahluko sent me a bunch of flowers this morning. He didn't put his name or a card on them but I know they are from him. Dali hasn't seen them yet and I know once he does he will have questions.

Speak of the devil. He walks in just as I am taking a whiff of the flowers.

"Nice flowers." He says.

"Thank you."

"Who are they from?" I turn to look at him.

"From me?"

"From you? Why?"

"Well I figured since no one buys me flowers, not even my husband, I might as well do it. I have decided that from now on I am choosing me and what makes me happy. If I feel like buying myself flowers I will do that. If I feel like taking myself on a solo vacation, that's exactly what I'm going to do and if I feel like going on a date, alone. I'm going to do that. I am going to celebrate every little thing that makes me happy. And these flowers are just the beginning. It's time for Bahlengiwe to be

happy, dont you think?" He swallows and stares at the flowers before turning to me.

"Good for you." I'm not sure if he means that or he is just saying it for the sake of it. But I dont care, I am making the choice to choose me above all else. Having an affair is a risky way to do that but who cares. As long as i am happy.

"Thank you, anyways i have to go, i have an appointment at the hair salon. Will you pick up the kids from Lindo's."

"Nope. Their grandparents are refusing with them. Yesterday when I went to pick them up I was told we should use this time to bond. But I might go there later to check on them." Bond with who? I know they mean well but there wont be any bonding here.

"Okay then. I'll be on my way." I grab my handbag and head out.

The salon is a little busy today. Lucky for me I made an appointment so the moment I walk in I am led to a chair. It helps that I got here in time too.

"So what are we doing today." My hairdresser, Sandy asks, massaging my braided hair.

"We are taking down the braids and cutting the hair." She stops massaging me and looks at me through the mirror.

"You're not serious." Its weird how she looks like she is in pain just because I want to cut my hair. MY Hair!

"I am dead serious. I need a pixie cut. And I need my nails done like this." I take out my phone and show her the picture of the nails I want.

Its nothing elaborate, just nude acrylic nails with a French tip. They are a little longer than I'm used to but I'll get used to them. Usually I do a really short set. But change is always welcome.

She cuts my hair while protesting as if it's her own hair. But I understand her frustration. It took me a while to grow my hair and she has been there all the way. After I had Fezi most of my hair fell out. I thought I'd never get it back but thanks to her patience and care, I got my hair back. And now I'm cutting it off again.

While she is busy with my hair a nail tech is doing my nails. This way I can finish early so I can do other things since my kids are with their grandparents. There is no need for me to go back and spend the day with Dali. I'm sure he has better things to do too.

Her voice is the first thing I hear. I look up and see her walk in with her friend. I'm not sure whose friend she is between Khanyi and Dali but their little circle of friends is one they met and befriended from varsity. I never could fit into their dynamic because it was always clear they would pick Khanyi over me. Not that I expected them to choose which is why I distanced myself from them a long time ago.

Busi sees me before Khanyi does and she gently nudges her friend, pointing at me with her head. She is really not subtle about it too because she can see I am looking at them and she clearly doesnt care. I decide to focus on what's happening in front of me when I feel them hovering over us.

"Sanbonani." Khanyi says, a little chipper than usual. I look up and give her a smile.

"Sawubona." I say.

"I didn't know you also come here." She says. I'm not sure what kind of weed she is smoking because I've been coming here for almost seven years now and she knows it.

"Well I do." I am getting irritated by her pretense but I am trying to remind myself that causing a scene would just give people something to gossip about.

"So how is hubby?" She asks. I know she is trying to bait me. Its something she does each time we run into each other and there are people around. I dont know it is she expects me to say but everytime I seem to disappoint her.

"Oh he is great. He is spending the day with the kids and our parents. They are catching up after their long trip." Busi scoffs and looks away.

"I thought you'd be with them." Khanyi says trying not to laugh. I'm not sure what is funny though.

"I was but they decided to give me some time to pamper myself. You know being a makoti is a hard job and lucky for me my in-laws understand that sometimes I need a break." Her laugh disappears and is quickly replaced by a fake smile. "Oh I'm sorry, I forgot you're not married so you wouldn't understand."

I turn my eyes back to the nails and I hear them move away from me. They take their seats, whispering about God knows what. Another decision I've made, letting Khanyi know which one is her lane and making sure she stays on it. I've put up with enough from her.

When I'm done I look like a different person. The pixie cut is beautiful on me. I look like I just wrote my final matric exam paper. And my nails are a bit long but I like them. I make my way to the desk to pay.

"So how much do i owe you?" I ask the lady. She looks up at me and smiles.

"Nothing!"

"Nothing?"

"Yes, nothing. Your hubby already took care of the bill." She says, a wide smile on her face. I'm guessing he also made sure to include a fat tip. The women close enough to hear our conversation are oohing and aaahing.

"How did he know how much it would be."

"He called while you were busy and asked how much everything you're doing will be. I told him and he paid. He sent the proof of payment and he added a little extra too." She shows me the proof of payment and it has Dali's name on it. It's not his name on it that's shocking, it's the fact that he went to all this trouble just to pay for me. And now I'm wondering why.

"Okay then. Thank you for your time. I'll see you next time." I walk out the shop confused as hell. Until I hear someone tap me on the shoulder. I turn around and find Khanyi with a huge ass smile on her face.

"You look beautiful." She says. "So what's the occasion?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know what they say about women who cut their hair." She says.

"I dont know. What do they say?"

"They say a woman who cuts her hair is about to change her life. So what change are you about to make?" I must be on checkpoint right now being questioned as if I've committed a crime.

"Khanyi, you and I, we are not friends, right?" Her smile fades immediately but she doesnt reply. "I dont owe you an explanation on why I do things. You're my husbands side chick, I would say you're a mistress but mistresses have a little more class about things. I dont know what makes you think because we share the same dick we are now sister wives. I've never interfered in your relationship with Dali and I'm not about to start now. But these phone calls and small talks, it needs to stop. You dont need to greet me when we see each other you dont need to call me about anything. In fact, block my number becaus I am not changing it again. What change am i about to make you ask, this change. Stay in your lane and I'll stay in mine. Have a nice day." I walk to my car leaving her standing there with her jaw on the floor. I think I am loving the new me.

KHANYISILE

All i did was ask about her hair and instead I got a full blown lecture. That girl is slowly losing it. I head back to the salon and finish my wig installation. I can sense Busi giving me side eyes but I'm not about to talk about this in front of people.

We finish doing our hair then head to the mall for lunch.

"Spill." Busi says as soon as we sit down.

"That girl is losing her mind. Can you imagine she told me to stay in my lane."

"What lane?"

"The side chick lane." Busi's jaw drops to the floor the same way mine did. "Apparently I don't even qualify to be a mistress because those are classy. According to her I am a side chick. Imagine, me, a side chick, when I am the one that man loves." Now that I'm thinking about it and replaying it in my head, it irritates me. In fact it's making me angry.

"But friend, she is right. She is the one with the ring, the kids and she is the one on the will and she is the one recognized by basically everyone." Who needs enemies with friends like Busi.

"This is not the time Busi."

"Sorry! So what are you going to do?" She asks. I'm not sure what I'm going to do. But then again there is little I can do. Busi is right, she is the wife and the baby mama. But one person can remind her about the dynamics of this triangle before she gets too rocky.

I pull my phone out of my bag and dial Dali's number. Lucky for me he picks up.

"Hello." I'm guessing he is with his parents that's why the hello he just gave me is as cold as an Alaskan winter.

"Hey, can you talk?" I ask, as much as I want to vent, I can't do that with his parents next to him.

"I can. What's up?"

"Your wife." Silence. "Do you know what she did?"

"Tell me!" He orders.

"She told me I am your side chick." Silence again. "Are you listening to me?" I hear him sigh. This man is changing right in front of my eyes and I dont know what to do.

"I am listening."

"Good. So what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing!" Did he just say.....

"Nothing?"

"Yes Khanyi, nothing. I dont know what happened between the two of you and I'm sure whatever it is you can sort it out like grown adults. I ma not getting involved." He says then hangs up. It takes me about a minute to move the phone from my ear to the table.

"Everything okay?" Busi asks just as the waiter places our food in front of us.

"Have you noticed anything different about Dali the past few weeks?" I need someone else to tell me I am not losing my mind because there is no way this man just hung up on me.

"Different how?"

"I dont know man. Something is off about him." I say. She shakes her head and shrugs her shoulders. Why do I even bother.

When we are done eating we do a bit of shopping before we go our separate ways. Before I drive out of the mall I decide to get myself takeaways for later. As I'm walking back in I notice a guy that looks familiar. His uniform is quick to give him away. It's the same guy Dali

was looking into. What's his name again? Sa something. He heads straight for his car, white Ford ranger. Ironic isn't it. I am still wondering why Dali was looking into him.

I go into the first restaurant I see. Before I can even walk in I see Bahle walk out with a takeaway. And then I remember the guy also had a takeaway from the same place. Could they have been here together? There is only one way to find out. I make my way to Bahle.

"Fancy seeing you here. Is your meeting done?" She looks up at me and I'm not sure if its irritation I see in her eyes or guilt.

"What meeting?"

"With the ranger guy. I just saw him leave." I tell her. She looks around like she is confused. Maybe I am reading too much into this. It could just be a coincidence.

"What ranger guy?" But maybe I could push a bit and see what comes out.

"You know, your boyfriend. The one you went to KZN with." She doesn't flinch. Either she is a good liar or I am grasping at straws.

"My boyfriend?" She asks and then laughs. "Let me guess, this is a fishing expedition? You saw some ranger guy and then saw me and you figured since we both maybe working for the same lodge then we must be dating?" She looks at me for an answer but gets none. "Khanyi, your desperation is getting pathetic to be honest." She says and I gasp.

"Me? Pathetic?"

"Yes, you. I told you earlier, stay in your lane. What you fail to understand about this is the next time you poke your nose in my business, one phone call to my father in law and your little relationship goes up in flames. So, if you still want to have Dali in your life, I repeat again, stay in your lane." She hisses before walking away.

Today is clearly not my day. I should have read my horoscope before I left this house this morning because this is not it. I swear this is not it. First it was Bahle, then Dali and now its Bahle again. It's like they are tag teaming me and they don't even know it. Whatever little bubble they think they are on right now, I will burst it. These two dont know me.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

18

DALINGCEBO

"Wow, okay, who are you fighting?"

"What?"

"Your hair. What happened?" She smiles and looks at herself on the mirror. When they said she was getting a hair cut I didnt think all her hair would be gone. Well most of it. But she looks amazing.

"I decided to get a small trim. What do you think?"

"You look beautiful." A blush creeps up on her face and she tries to hide it.

"Thank you. Did you eat? I brought fish and chips."

"I did. I got some braai meat from Sbu's earlier. I left some for you." I watch her make her way to the kitchen.

The new hairstyle seems to have given her a bit of a bounce in her step. And she's humming. Not that I'm complaining. It actually feels nice for us to be in a place where we aren't fighting or just simply existing with each other.

She walks back to the lounge with the plate of warmed up food and a glass of juice.

"Thank you for paying for my session by the way. You didnt have to." She says taking a seat on the couch.

"You're welcome." She looks up and her eyes land on the two bouquets of red roses on the console table.

"You bought flowers?" She asks looking at me.

"I did. You said I don't buy you flowers and I did a bit of an introspection and I realised you're right, as a husband, I should hide my head in shame for letting things get to a point where you have to buy your own flowers." She stares at me for a moment before she gets up and feels my forehead.

"You're not hot so this is not a fever. You're not coughing so it's not covid. So what gives." She looks so cute with her arms crossed on her chest. For someone petite, I'm pretty sure the only people she can intimidate are the kids. But it's cute to see her try it on me.

"Nothing gives. I am just trying to be a good husband. That's literally the bare minimum I can do." She scoffs and sits back down.

"Well, since you're on this do good trail, I need you to get your girlfriend on the same trail." She says picking up a piece of woad and shoving it in her mouth. Of course Khanyi has to be the one to put a damper on things even when she is not here.

"What has she done now?" That woman is seriously skating on thin ice.

"She was at the salon with me. And when I was leaving she asked me about my hairstyle and my trip to KZN and then she accused me of having an affair with Sahluko. And then I ran into her before I came back here and she again accused me of seeing Sahluko just because he was apparently also at the same shop as me. So now my question is who else is she sharing these stupid theories of hers with? I try to be

respectful of her and your relationship but she keeps poking her nose in my business, which has nothing to do with her. So, from the bottom of my heart, please get her in check because my patience is running thin." She tells me. Why am I not surprised though. Khanyi can be volatile when she wants to be. And the stupid part of it is that she doesn't realise that she has more to lose than Bahle.

"I'll speak to her." I assure her.

"Thank you. I am going to take a bath." She says getting up. I watch her move around the kitchen cleaning up before she makes her way upstairs. I'm definitely not imagining the bounce in her step. She looks happier.

I take my phone and dial Khanyi's number. Lucky for me she picks up.

"Baby!"

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I ask her. She sighs and I can hear her gulping down something. Probably wine. That's for sure.

"What now?" She says slurring her words.

"Are you drunk?"

"Maybe. What's up?"

"What did you say to Bahle?" She bursts out laughing.

"Of course miss perfect came running to you. But when I tried talking to you about her you told me you're not getting involved. Now miss perfect runs to you and you come out fighting. What are you trying to do? Play superhero?"

"You know what, I'll talk to you when you're sober." I hang up the phone and throw it on the couch.

It's not even there for a second before it rings with Khanyi's number flashing on it. I ignore it and she calls again. Seeing as I am not answering her calls she starts sending a barrage of messages. Drunk Khanyi can be volatile and sometimes stupid. Engaging her in any way is waste of time. I put the phone on flight mode before heading up to the bedroom.

The sounds of slow music hit me as soon as I get to the top of the stairs. And not only that but the smell of candles is slowly filling the room. I make my way to the bedroom and find about four candles lit. But that's not the surprising part though. It's the giggling coming from the bathroom. I get close to the door but I cant hear anything, except for the giggling. I decide to knock.

"Hey, are you okay?" I ask through the door. She clears her throat before she answers.

"Yeah, I am fine. I'm just talking to Dvumo."

"Okay. I wanted to take a shower but I'll use the other bathroom." I reply.

"No need. I'm done. Give me five minutes." She shouts back. I sit on the bed as she finishes whatever she is doing. Sure enough she walks out within five minutes. That's a first.

"How is she?"

"Who?" Wasn't she talking to someone just now?

"Dvumo. You said you were talking to her." I remind her.

"Oh yeah, she is fine. Just booked and busy. You know how it is." Not really but ok. I leave her and take over the bathroom. The smell of her shower gel coupled with whatever oils and bubbles she was using hit my nostrils, it's a strong scent but it's cute too. There are hints of vanilla and lavender too. Why am I even noticing that? I need rest or even better, I need to stop paying too much attention to Bahle.

The moment I get under the shower thoughts of her consume me. I don't even know why lately she seems to be right at the back of my mind. Maybe it's her confidence, I don't know. But lately she has been more assertive and strong. And for some reason I like it. Bahle is coming out of her shell in such a beautiful way it's hard to ignore. That naive girl she was years ago seems to be gone. And in her place has emerged this woman who is comfortable in her skin. And she seems happier too. When I saw her walk in earlier it was like seeing a whole different person.

I find myself getting hard just thinking about it. It doesn't take long before I jerk off to the image of her walking through that door. It took every fibre of my being to stay in place and not pin her on the wall and have my way with her. She is my wife yes, but when it comes to our sex life, it's mostly for reproductive purposes. Would I like to change that yes. But I'm sure she would be weirded out if I made a move on her like that. Maybe I should ask her on a date. Yeah, I should do that. And maybe buy her more flowers. I mean I don't really have to divorce her once all this is over, I can always marry Khanyi and have two wives. I've practically been doing it for a while now so why not make it official.

When I walk out of the shower I find her humming a song with a display of clothes on the bed. And lingerie too.

"Work outfit?" I ask and she quickly turns.

"Yes, help me pick something." She holds up a red high waisted miniskirt with a red shirt. "I can tuck the shirt in the skirt and get a pair of red sandals." She says rushing to the closet and coming out with the shoes she wants. There are just two problems with this outfit, one is the short skirt and the other is the plunging neckline of the shirt. I point that out to her and she frowns.

"You're right." She says, "I won't need the bra." She adds tossing the bra to the side. That is not what I meant. "Okay option two." She picks up another risque outfit that in my opinion is not appropriate for work. But I am a smart man and I know better than to tell a woman what to wear. She settles on the red outfit and honestly, I'm not happy about it. Her phone rings just as she is putting everything away. She quickly grabs the phone and frowns. She turns the phone around to show me who is calling and it's Raphael. I take the phone from her and answer the call.

"Hey."

"Dude, I've been trying to call you. Why is your phone off?" He shouts. I can hear some muffled noises in the background as if someone is being prevented from saying something.

"You found me. What's going on?"

"Khanyi wants to talk to you." He says.

"Tell him to come put here." Khanyi shouts in the background. I sigh and walk out of the bedroom.

"Raphael, are you outside my house?" I can't believe Khanyi would do something this stupid.

"Yeah man, Khanyi was being impossible. She insisted we bring her here or else she would walk." He says sounding defeated. I'm tempted to let them sit out there the whole night but that would be a mistake on my part. The neighbours might end up calling the police.

"I'm coming." I leave Bahle's phone on the dining table and make my way out. Sure enough Raphael's land rover is parked right outside the gate. I make my way to them and the back door is roughly pushed open.

"Why did you hang up on me?" Khanyi shouts the moment she sees me.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" She laughs and jumps over Busi, getting out of the car.

"I asked you a question first. You hung up on me because Miss Perfect told you lies about me. Did she tell you the things she said to me? Did she?" She asks poking my chest. I grab her hand and push her back till she hits the car with her back.

"Khanyisile, if you know what's good for you, you will get back in this car, go to the house and sleep off whatever it is you've been drinking. I will not talk to you when you're like this." I hiss. I see tears glistening in her eyes.

"You're choosing her over me. Again." She says then lays her head on my chest sobbing. I swear I am being tested right now.

"Maybe we should leave you guys to talk about this." Busi suggests.
This is another one who seems to lose the plot sometimes

"Leave her where? You brought her here, you'll have to take her back to wherever you got her. She cant stay here."

"You can always drive her back." Busi argues.

"Busi, I am not leaving my wife just because your friend is insecure and running her mouth over stupid things." Khanyi lifts her head and looks at me.

"Oh, so now I am insecure? I am insecure Dalingcebo? Okay?" She pulls her hands away from mine and gets in the car.

"While you're busy playing happy families with your wife, remember this, I am pregnant and this time I am not having an abortion." She says before slamming the door.

I'm too shocked to even say anything. I watch the car drive away as the reality of her words sink in. She is pregnant. For a normal person that would be something to celebrate. But not for me. This is not good. It's very very bad. And the fact that she says she won't be getting an abortion means I'm screwed.

"Everything okay?" Bahle asks behind me. When did she even get here. I fix my face and get back inside the yard.

"Yeah, nothing serious. Let's go back inside." I make sure the gate is closes before we go in. Khanyi cannot do this to me. Her pregnancy alone could make me lose everything. I have to find a way to get rid of that baby, come hell or high waters. She will not have that child.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

19

BAHLENGIWE

I swear my life is a movie. A whole blockbuster mntakadad. My husbands side chick is pregnant. Dali is trying so hard to hide that little piece of information but I overheard the whole conversation. Not that Khanyi was being subtle about it. I should call and congratulate her.

Since the kids are not here, I have plenty of time in the morning to just not think. Dali said he is going to the gym at 5AM. If you ask me, he is probably with Khanyi. I dont understand why he still needs to lie about it. I mean it's not like their affair has just started.

'Khanyi is pregnant.' I type and send to the group chat with my siblings. I'm pretty sure Sihlangu is up by now and he will be the first one to reply. The others though, it will take a while. Sure enough a surprise face emoji from Sihlangu pops up before he calls.

"Explain." He orders. He sounds like he is running and out of breath. I hope that's what he is doing.

"Its self explanatory."

"How?" Now I'm supposed to paint a picture for him?

"You know how babies are made."

"I know that. But how did you find out? Please tell me they are making their relationship public. I'd love to see the look on your father's face when he realises his perfect son in law ain't so perfect after all."

"I doubt it will get to that but we will wait and see." My phone beeps indicating an incoming call. This time its Dvumo. I decide to put us all in a conference call.

"Its midnight where I am and I just left a very happening scene inside for this so it better be good." She says. Last born tendencies. No greeting no nothing.

"Let me get Lindo on the line because I am not going to repeat this again." I dial Lindo's number and wait. She answers, yawning on the line.

"This better be good because I was having a nice dream." She says. Its almost six o'clock she should be helping the kids get ready for school. But knowing my parents, the kids are probably bunking even today.

"If you are in bed I need you to get out and go somewhere private." I say. I hear shuffling and a door closing before she comes back on the line.

"Okay, we are good. What's going on?"

"Khanyi is pregnant." I blurt out. None of them replies. I look at the phone and they are all still on the line. So why am I talking to myself?

"Here is the part I dont get. How is she pregnant when she knows what's at stake?" Sihlangu asks.

"Beats me. But all I know is that she is not having an abortion this time. At least that's what she told her boyfriend." I tell them. Thank God Dali left early, it would be awkward gossiping about him if he was here.

"For some reason I did not expect anything less from her." Dvumo says. "Khanyi always has a way of self sabotaging herself. I mean why in Gods name would you plant a bomb on the very same gravy train you're on. You are going to die too?"

"Maybe she wants a child." Lindo adds. "I mean the woman is 34 years old, her clock is not stopping for anything."

"Maybe. But why bring a child into this mess that she is in? She's not working, at this point if she decides to dust off her degree she will have to start from the bottom with kids fresh out of varsity and without any experience, we know exactly who companies will be going after. How will she take care of the child?" Sihlangu asks.

I really do not care. This could work out in my favour. If she keeps to her word and keeps the child then I'll be free with a whole new business portfolio to my name. Okay Nqaba's but he could decide he wants to be a rapper and not go into business and that would leave me with everything.

"Look, I dont know what her thought process is right now because she was drunk last night when she made her announcement so today she might be sober and think clearly." I tell them.

"That is true. Plus telling the parents would require proof and not just hearsay." Dvumo says. Well she has a point there. For all I know Dali is busy convincing her to get an abortion as we speak. Well that took a down turn pretty quick. Here I was thinking I am almost free.

"Or we could convince Khanyi to keep the baby." Sihlangu starts. "I mean if she is as dump as she makes herself out to be then we could get her to keep the baby."

"Yeah, except Dali has more to lose if she keeps the baby so I doubt he will let her do that." Lindo replies. But Sihlangu is right, as much as Dali will lose a lot with the baby in the picture, I could convince Khanyi to keep it, at a fee of course.

I say goodbye to my siblings and get ready for work. I put on the red outfit I picked out last night with a lacy set underneath. I add a pair of red heels for a monochromatic look. I look in the mirror and once I'm sure I like my look I get my bags and make my way downstairs. I find Dali in the kitchen making a smoothie. I look over at the lounge and see the flowers he got yesterday are still there. So I wasn't dreaming that part. Good to know.

"You're back. How was gym?" He turns around and his jaw is on the floor. Well if I needed a confirmation of how hot I am, his reaction tells me all I need to know.

"Thank you."

"Would you like some breakfast? I can make you something." He offers. If I'd known getting him to act right would only need a change in wardrobe I would have done this a long time ago.

"No, thank you. I will have something when I get to work. I will see you later. Have a nice day." I feel his eyes on me as I walk out the door. His reaction is cute but for some reason I am not moved. Not one bit.

I get to work way earlier than I usually do. I called Sahluko when I left home and told him I was on my way to work. I am looking forward to seeing him honestly. The past couple of days we've been missing each other. Although we did talk for a while yesterday at the restaurant. Thank God Khanyi only showed up afterwards.

I head straight to my office, it's not too busy right now so I can get some work done and hopefully free up some time to spend with him later. I power on my laptop and my PC and start working. My mind keeps drifting off to last night. Khanyi's pregnancy probably explains her weird behaviour lately. Hormones can turn a saint into a raging bitch.

The door opens and the first thing I see is a khaki clad leg and butterflies starting floating around in my stomach. He walks in with a cup of coffee in his hand.

"So its true what they say about the early bird." He says handing me the coffee.

"I dont know. What do they say?" He walks around the desk and my inner hoe comes out to play. I put my leg over the other and swing the chair around to face him.

"They say it gets the fattest worm." I see his eyes roaming over my thighs. Even with his hands in his pocket, the effect that that has on him is quite clear.

He pulls me up and wraps his one arm around me. I feel his breath fan my face and his lips on my forehead. The closer he pulls me to him the harder his bulge gets. I like this. It doesnt feel forced or expected, it just is and that's the best thing for me right now.

"So who between us is the early bird?" I could say it's me cause the fat worm I feel, it's a pleasant one.

"Me obviously. I get you." He says, leaning his head down and planting kisses on my neck. Everywhere his lips touched felt like it would leave a scar. Not a bad one, just a reminder of this moment.

He lifts me up and my legs instinctively wrap around his waist while my hands go around his neck. He is so strong, lifting me up is like picking up a piece of paper. His lips descend on mine, capturing them in a strong kiss that sends heat to my core, his tongue invading my mouth, allowing me to taste him. Toothpaste and coffee, that's what he tastes like. On a normal day, probably a bad combination but on him, it feels like the best thing in the world. I can feel the moisture filling up my underwear. I feel the wall on my back. I don't even know how we got here but I like it. He pulls his lips away

leaving mine cold and moist. Even with just a couple of inches between us, it feels like we are way too far apart.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" He asks, his eyes staring straight into my soul like he can see my deeper darkest desires.

"I've never been sure of anything." I whisper. His mouth falls back onto mine as soon as he gets the greenlight. His fingers squeeze my boob, twisting my nipple, making it stand at attention. I grind myself on his waist needing the friction to ease the pain filled pleasure between my legs.

With my back balanced on the wall his free hands get to explore every part of me. While one hand is busy with my boob the other explores the rest of my body, squeezing, grabbing and touching. A small moan escapes me as his fingers explore my inner thighs, inching closer and closer to heaven.

"You're wet." He whispers in my mouth. "Just for me." He adds and I can feel the smirk on his lips. His lips take mine again for a few seconds before he moves down to explore the rest of my body. He unbuttoned my shirt, pulling it out of my skirt and sliding it off my arms. He leans back for a moment, staring at my lace clad boobs. The desire and lust in his eyes clear as the sky outside. "Perfect." He says before his head goes down and he pulls a nipple in his mouth. I throw my head back, arching my back as the electric current shoots through my body.

I pull his shirt apart, thank heavens for the clips instead of buttons, makes the whole process so much easier, putting his full chest on display. I run my hand down to his belt, making sure it is out of the way before letting he zip down. I slide my hands over the top of the pants, going all around to the back before pushing the pants down together with his boxers. His dick spring out and standing tall between us. I look down and realise it's not bad. I've only ever seen one in my life but I'm sure this one can stand it's own amongst all others.

I wrap my hand around him, sliding them up and down. He groans and moans, there is nothing more sexier than this. I pull myself closer to him and run his dick over my moist underwear, making sure to make it touch my clit. He let's go of me and I land back on the floor. He pulls down the zip on my skirt and pulls it down, making sure to go with it. He tosses the skirt aside and comes back to pull down the underwear. He lifts my one leg up and tosses it over his shoulder, his lips coming face to face with my other lips. One swipe of his tongue over my slit sends shivers down my spine and a moan escaping my mouth.

I hold on to his head as his tongue dances with my clit. He keeps at it until I feel myself ready to explode. As if he can feel it too, he buries his

mouth on my core, sucking up all the drip and juices from my body as my muscles clench together in unexplainable pleasure. I slap my hand on my mouth to stop my cries from escaping and reaching the wrong ears.

As my orgasm dies down he lifts himself up with a foil packet in his hands. He rips the package open and slides the latex down his length. His head dances around my opening and with our eyes on each other, giving each other the encouragement we both needed. He sticks his head in and I feel my muscles expand to accommodate him, my dripping juices offering the best lubricant. He pumps in and out of me, different kinds of sensations taking over my body. He is slow and precise with his movements, and each move he makes drives me insane. His lips on mine silencing my screams and moans.

It doesn't take long for me to fall apart in his arms. Even as another orgasm surges through me he doesn't stop. Constantly hitting that one dangerous spot inside me. He pumps into me, long strokes sending him over the edge. He bites down on my lip as his own orgasm takes over his body. With one final grunt he collapses on my neck, our breaths finally coming down from their quick high.

I run my hands through his head, not wanting this moment to end. I just had sex with someone that isn't my husband, on a wall in my office. I should be drowning in shame and horror right now but I'm not. For some reason my conscience is as clear as pure water. I deserve this. I deserve to be happy too. I deserve to be wanted and cared for. As much as I know this will not lead anywhere, I will cherish it for as long as I live.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

20

KHANYISILE

I should maybe consider listening to my mother and cutting down on the alcohol because this right now, cannot be my life. My head feels like it has weights attached to it. Even getting down the stairs is a struggle and a half. And the smell of rotten eggs is not helping. I wish I hadn't taken the pregnancy test last night. But my periods are two weeks late and now I know why.

I make my way to the kitchen and find my darling boyfriend busy on the stove. His suit blazer is hung on the dining chair, his tie is tossed to the back and his sleeves are rolled up to his elbows. Any other day this would be a sexy sight to wake up to. But not today, mainly because I know why he is here. As foggy as last night is, certain aspects of it are as clear as day, like me telling him I'm pregnant.

He turns around and sees me sitting on the high chair. It's hard to tell what is going through his mind right now. He doesn't look angry but he doesn't look happy either. He takes a plate and dishes up. He hands me the plate with the eggs and some greasy bacon and toast. Yeah I am not eating that. Plus I don't know what he has sprinkled in there that could make me lose the baby.

Dali seems like a sweet person, well for the most part he is but he is also Mandlenkosi Khumalo's son, deep down he has his father's mean and evil streak. He just hides it very well. He pulls out a small brown paper bag from one of the drawers and hands it to me.

"You need to eat before you can take the medication." He says. Oh, so he expects me to take the abortion pills myself? I cross my arms on my chest and stare at him.

"I am not taking those. I told you I am not having an abortion." He doesn't even blink or show some form of feeling. This is his child and he is determined to wipe it off the face of the earth like some ant he can squash on the side of the road.

"That is panado, unless you're Okay with the pounding headache." He says. I grab the paper bag and sure enough it's a small bottle of panado pills. Sealed even. But now my paranoid mind thinks the eggs or bacon have something on them so I tear the toast and have that. It's brown bread so I should be able to see any white powder if he sprinkled any on it.

I turn the bread around and nothing. But I'm still sceptical. He takes one slice of bread, puts on the eggs and the bacon and takes a bite. Can an abortion pill affect someone who isn't pregnant? He finishes the toast and stares at me. Yeah I am not eating this.

"Are you going to eat or not?" He asks. He is not even angry or frustrated, he is so nonchalant and indifferent. I shake my head and he pulls the plate to him and eats the rest of the food.

"I have a meeting at 11." He says looking at his watch. "I have to go."

"Why did you come here?"

"I wanted to check on you. You were kak drunk last night so I wanted to make sure you're Okay." He says and I am touched.

"So you're not going to ask about the baby?" The least he can do is acknowledge that little information.

"What's there to ask. You're pregnant and drinking, getting kak drunk. I'm sure the baby is also just as hungover as you are right now, that's if its little body was able to expel the amount of alcohol you had last night. It's not like Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is real or anything." He grabs his jacket and walks out.

Only after he is gone does everything sink in. I was kak drunk last night and I'm pregnant. My poor baby. I grab my phone and call my doctor and make an urgent appointment. I need to make sure everything is okay with the baby. How can I be so careless and stupid. I palm my forehead a few times before banging my head on the counter.

I hear the door open, I quickly look up thinking its Dali but it's just Busi.

"You look like hell." She says.

"Thanks." I get off the high chair and make my way to the lounge. Seeing the three empty bottles of wine on the floor makes my heart sink to my stomach. What was wrong with me that I had to drink this much? Oh yeah, Bahle. I dont know who told her she has a right to talk to me any which way she wants, but I'm going to clip those wings of hers before she gets out of control. Clearly she is forgetting her place in this hierarchy.

I plop myself on the couch and lay my head back.

"I brought you some aspirin and breakfast." Busi says handing me a mugg n bean takeaway. I take it and shove down the food like I haven't

had food in a month. "Okay, you were hungry." She adds sitting on the other couch.

"Thanks." I say between bites.

"You're welcome. I saw Dali when I was coming here. Did you two speak?" I take the aspirin and drink it.

"Not really. I think he is mad."

"Can you blame him. You practically announced your pregnancy to all the neighbours. I'm pretty sure even Bahle knows about it." I dont think I was that loud but if Bahle heard then it's fine with me.

"I dont care about that one. She can go to hell for all I care." Bahle is the least of my worries right now. All I need to do is make sure my baby is okay. Hopefully I didnt do too much damage to him.

"You should, considering one word from her to Dali's dad and all this. ..." she motions with her hand around the house. "It all goes up in flames."

"I dont care. I'm keeping the baby." I wrap my hand around my tummy. This is my child and I will protect it with my life.

"Okay, and then what?" She asks. "You do realise this is literally you having a child with a married man? Yes Dali loves you and he has made promises to you but none of them have been kept. And now you want to bring a child into it, for what?"

"You wouldn't understand. You have a husband, a career, a child, your life is practically complete. I have none of that. Like you said, I have literally nothing but promises that may or may not be kept. My career

failed to take off. This child, this child could be my own source of happiness. Something to focus on instead of Dali and whatever is going on between him and Bahle. I am keeping it and no one can tell me any different." She sighs and takes a seat next to me, placing her hand on top of mine.

"Khanyi, I get it, you need some fulfillment in your life. I'm sure being a fulltime girlfriend is exhausting but you also need to realise that you still have your degree. Use it

now while you still have a chance. This baby will need money, especially when Dali is cut off and Bahle is given everything because you know it will happen." She says. I know she is right but I'm done thinking about Dali and what works for him. I always have to give more to him and his needs than to myself. This relationship is completely one sided and I am tired of it. Dali needs to make up his mind and decide who he wants to be with. But I'm not using my child as a sacrifice for promises that may never be kept.

I leave Busi in the lounge and get in the shower. My appointment is in less than an hour and it's more important than whatever bullshit she is trying to convince me off. I'm keeping this child whether they like it or not.

In less than half an hour I am done and ready to go. I grab my bag and make my way out. I find Busi cleaning up the lounge. Talk about a wife material.

"You do know I have someone for that right?" I ask descending the stairs.

"I know. I needed to keep busy. So where are you going?"

"I have a doctors appointment." She looks at her watch.

"I'd love to gi with you but I have to be in the office. Maybe next time."
She says. Then why was she cleaning up when she had to be
somewhere? Okay my paranoia is getting the best of me. Now I'm
overthinking everything.

We get in our cara and drive our separate ways. I make it to the doctors
office with five minutes to spare. I find Dr Booi at reception and she
quickly takes me into the examination room.

"So, Miss Manana, what can I do for you?" She asks pointing me to a
seat.

"I am pregnant. But last night I was drinking. A lot and now I'm scared it
could affect the baby." She opens my file and starts taking notes.

"Okay, how far along are you?"

"I'm not sure." She looks up at me and stops writing.

"What do you mean you're not sure?"

"Well I took the test last night. So I'm not sure how far along I am." I tell
her.

"Okay, let's get a pregnancy test done first then we will take it from
there." She hands me a cup and shows me the bathroom. I pee on it
and take it back. She puts inside test inside the small container and
then looks at me.

"So what made you take the test?" She asks, taking down notes again.

"My period is two weeks late." My eyes are glued on the little test. I
can't even see if the line is there or not because its facing her.

"Are your periods regular?"

"Yes. I've had a period every month from the time I was twelve. Never missed a single one." She nods her head and writes something down. She turns to the test and smiles.

"Well, the test is negative. I don't think you are pregnant. But to be safe we can do an ultrasound and then I'll draw some blood just to be a hundred percent sure." It can't be. Her test is wrong. I follow her to the bed and lay down. I lift my sweater up. She squirts some cold gel on my stomach then runs the transducer on my tummy. I look at the screen but nothing seems to be there. Not even the little dot to show there is a baby.

"Nope. You are definitely not pregnant." She says. "See this..." she points to the screen and all I see is nothing that I understand. "That's your womb and it's empty. There is nothing there." She removes the transducer and wipes the gel off my stomach.

"If I'm not pregnant then why did the test come out positive?" I'm not even sure what I feel right now. My brain and body seem to be two different entities. An hour ago I was certain I was pregnant and I was actually happy about it and now it's all been taken from me. Who am I kidding, it was never there to begin with.

"It could have been a false positive." She says as if this is normal.

"What about my period, it's late?" I ask her.

"It could be stress related. How are things in your life right now?" Great, now she is a therapist too.

"They've been fine. Nothing to complain about."

"That's good. I will get a nurse to come take your blood and then we will run some blood tests and try to figure out what's wrong." She says filling in the file.

The nurse walks in and takes my blood before giving me the all clear. I get to my car and sit there for a while just thinking about my life. I thought this baby would be my one good thing, but like everything else in my life, it's gone. Just like that. This would be easier if I had a miscarriage or even an abortion. At least I would be able to acknowledge my child but now this one, this one just existed in my mind clearly.

I should be happy, but I feel empty and hopeless. Maybe Busi is right, I need to put my degree to good use before it's too late. But the thought of starting at the bottom with kids fresh out of varsity is a little intimidating. What sane person wants to be overshadowed by kids.

I sit in the car for almost an hour just thinking about my life. Is this really all that's there for me? No child, no husband, no job, just nothing? I seriously need to rethink my life and figure out what my next move will be. Dali needs to decide if he wants to be with me or not and stick to it. Screw his father and the stupid contract. We will get jobs and live our lives the way we always planned. Not this bullshit we are doing right now.

I text him and ask him to meet me after his meeting. We need to have a conversation and there is no better time than the present. I start at the mall and get a few groceries before heading back to the house. Busi was right, being a fulltime girlfriend is exhausting and boring. All my friends are at work while I am bored and have nothing to do the whole day.

I get home and find a huge bouquet of red Rose's on the kitchen counter, a Luis Vuitton paper bag, a Gucci paper bag and a Dior one all sitting comfortably next to the flowers.

"You like them?" I hear him ask behind me. Of course I like them. It's expensive luxury brands, who can say no to that. I turn around to look at him. His mood is vastly different to this morning. Now he seems happier.

"I love them. Thank you. What's the occasion?" He steps closer and wraps his arms around my waist.

"Do I need an occasion to celebrate the woman I love? Besides, this might be the last luxury brands we get." He says.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean once my dad finds out about our baby, he will cut me off and all this will be gone. But it doesn't matter. We will be together and that's all that matters." I'm not sure if he means that or he is just saying it. Is he warming up to the idea of the baby?

"So you want the baby?" He smiles and kisses my forehead.

"Of course I want the baby. It's our baby. And you are right, it's unfair of me to expect you to keep having abortions as if it's just another hairstyle change. You deserve better than that." I have to tell him the truth.

"Babe, I have something to tell you." I say stepping away from his embrace but he pulls me back.

"Whatever it is it can wait. Right now, I need to show you something."
He lets go of me and opens the Gucci bag. He carefully unwraps the contents and he comes up with a pair of small sneakers. I have the same ones so does he. "Aren't they cute?" He asks holding them up. His smile is wide. Is he really happy about this baby or I am just imagining things?

"They are pretty?" I exclaim. I can't even bring myself to touch them or even tell him the truth.

"Right? We will be matching." He breaks into a chuckle. "We will probably be in a shack somewhere but we will be together and that's all that matters." He adds. Is he really willing to let go of all this, for me? Give everything up for love? Is he?

HIS HEART TO KEEP

21

DALINGCEBO

Khanyi thinks she is sleek. I'm not sure how her brain works sometimes. Well I almost got roped into her stupid scheme because i had sleepless nights worried sick about her being pregnant then i remembered she tied her tubes. Unless Jesus himself came down and untied them, there is no way she is pregnant. I'm not even going to bother letting her know that because she will say I am trying to control her. So I'll just let her go ahead with her imaginary pregnancy.

"For someone who is in deep shit, you sure look calm." Raphael says walking into my office with Vusi right behind him.

"Should I be running the streets acting like a psycho?" I ask him. They sit down and stare at me, then stare at each other before turning back to me.

"You do know Khanyi's pregnancy spells trouble for you right?" Vusi reminds me.

"I know. But she's not pregnant."

"That's not what she said." Raphael says.

"I know. But she is not pregnant." I assure them.

"You didnt make her get an abortion right?" Vusi asks.

"No, I did not." I see the confusion on their faces. Clearly i need to explain this properly. "Khanyi had her tubes tied a few years ago. She is

not pregnant. I dont know how she got that positive from the pregnancy test but she should have taken another one just to be sure."

"Hold on." Raphael says shifting in his chair. "Did she forget about the tubes?"

"I doubt it. She was drunk last night and a drunk Khanyi tends to forget a lot of things when morning comes. It will come back to her." I've dealt with enough mornings like today's and I am not about to lose my head over this.

"So how are you going to fix this?" Vusi asks.

"Nothing. It will come back to her and life will go on as usual. Until then...." I look at the time and it's almost time to go home. "I need to go home and take the kids out for some burgers."

"So vele you're doing it? Playing happy families with Bahle?" Raphael questions.

"Whether I like it or not, that is my family. Besides, the least I can do is be there for my kids. I dont want them having daddy issues when they are older." I grab my briefcase and pack my things. I'm not even sure if the kids are back yet but it doesnt matter.

When I get home there is no noise except for some rnb playing through the speaker. Not too loud but not too quiet either. The kids are definitely not here. I walk in and find Bahle singing along to Maxwell's pretty wings. I take a seat on the high chair and watch her moving from the stove to the sink. She looks happy. Really happy. I'm not sure if its the hairstyle or her attitude change, but she seems to be glowing.

Usually she is closed off and some would say uptight, but lately it's like someone turned on a switch and now she is basking in the light.

She turns around and her smile fills her face. Is she really happy to see me or it's just her newfound happiness?

"Hey, you're back early." She says wiping her hands.

"So are you. What's with the good mood?" She shrugs her shoulders and stirs her pot.

"I dont need a reason to be happy. Why are you home early?"

"I was hoping to take you and the kids out for some burgers." She closes the pot and turns to me.

"Well I made stew but tomorrow is another day. We will have to pick up the kids from Lindo's though because they are still not back." She says. Did she just agree to go out with me? Not to a work or business dinner but an actual restaurant. It will definitely rain cats and dogs.

"If you're not up to it we can always stay home." I offer.

"Of course not. We can go out. I'm sure the kids will love it." She really is serious.

"Okay I will go and change then we can go."

"No problem. I will also change into a dress right after I switch the stove off." She says giving me her smile again. This is actually weird.

I rush upstairs and get in the shower before she changes her mind. By the time I get back downstairs she is already changed and ready. How long was I in the shower? She is also on the phone with someone and she is smiling. I wonder who she is talking to.

"Okay, I will call you later." She says then hangs up the phone. I'm tempted to ask who she was talking to but i dont want to seem noseey.

"Lindo says the kids will be ready by the time we get there." She says putting her phone in her bag.

"Oh, was that her on the phone?"

"No, I called her before I went to change." So that wasnt her sister on the line? Okay. "We should get going."

The drive to Lindo's place is not even that long but it feels like it is. I'm just realising that besides work and the kids we have nothing else to talk about. If I told a stranger right now that we've been married for ten years I'm sure they would think I am lying. Our conversations feel like we are some coparents who have been broken up for a long time now and it's just crazy to me. I cant blame Bahle for it though, whether I like it or not this is all on me. Bahle has bent over backwards to accommodate me and my relationship with Khanyi. And she was right, she has respected it through the years and not once has she tried to get between Khanyi and I and yet somehow she has been the villain in my story.

I'm not sure when I started seeing her as a villain because as kids we were close and friendly. We played together, did things together that any friends would do. Maybe I do know when things changed, the day our fathers placed that contract in front of us and telling us we would be getting married in six months. There was no arguing about it or even negotiating. They said what they said and we had to tow the line. She gave in so easily, no question no fighting, nothing. I guess that's

another thing that made me mad how easy it was for her to allow our parents to define how her life should be.

We pull up to the house and make our way in. Our parents are way too comfortable here you would think they don't have their own houses. Maybe it's old age and they are trying to right their wrongs through their grandkids.

"Hey, you guys look cute. Where are you going?" Mam'Nxumalo asks when we walk in.

"We were hoping to take the kids out since we haven't seen them in a while." I reply.

"That's good. But the kids are in a zoom class right now." My mum says when we get to the lounge.

"It's almost six PM." Bahle exclaims. "And when did they start taking zoom classes when school is there."

"Okay fine they are not in a zoom class. Your dad took them to play putt putt. They will be back soon." Well that makes more sense.

"Fine, we will wait for them." Bahle says sitting down.

"Or you could go have dinner together and bond as husband and wife. I mean that's why we took the kids, so you two can get some time together. Who knows, maybe by the end of the year we will be expecting another grand baby." My mum tells us.

"Since your sister refuses to give us grandkids."

"Then I'm the designated baby maker." Bahle chimes in and the room goes silent.

"That's not what I meant." Her mum says sounding offended.

"Of course not." Bahle mumbles. Maybe it's time I get her out of here before things escalate unnecessarily so.

"Maybe mums right, we should go out together, we will take the kids out on the weekend." I say silently hoping she gets the memo and we get out of here. Lucky for me she gets it. We say our goodbyes and head out. The ride to the restaurant is a bit tense. I take us to Newscafe. Its more sensible and grown up.

"You shouldn't pay too much attention to them." I say as soon as we sit down. She rolls her eyes and picks up the menu.

"Yeah well they make it hard not to."

"I know. They are just typical grandparents looking for more kids to spoil." I'm hoping that lightens the mood but it doesn't.

"They have three other kids they can harass to have sex and have kids. Why am I the one who is supposed to keep popping out kids all the time? Dont get me wrong, I love how they love the kids and all but come on."

"Bahle, you dont need to explain anything to me. I get it. The best way to deal with them would be to ignore them. They will get over it eventually." She shakes her head and gives the waitress her order.

"I am just tired of people thinking they can control me. I'm not a child anymore and I know what's good for me and a child is not on that list. I've done all that was expected of me. I married you, I had kids. Now I am doing me." I reach my hands across the table and take her hands in mine.

"Hey, no one is trying to control you." I say. Her eyes go down to our hands laying on the table. Any other day I would have quickly pulled mine away but I dont. "If you dont want to have more kids, no one can force you. Not even me." I am not sure what is going through her mind right now. Her eyes are still glued to our hands. Now taking mine away would just be awkward.

"Thanks." She says absent minded. And that's when I decide to move my hands.

"So I've been thinking, we haven't done a family holiday in a while. How about we head to Cape Town as soon as the schools close?" I thought she'd be excited but she is not. "You dont like the idea?" I ask as the waiter places our drinks in front of us.

"I do. But you know how most of our 'family holidays' go. They always end up with you spending half the time with Khanyi instead of the kids." She says taking a sip of her drink.

"She wont be there." I blurt out earning myself a raised eyebrow from Bahle. "I promise, she wont be there." I assure her but she doesnt seem to buy it.

"Why?" What kind of question is that?

"Because it is a family holiday. Our family?"

"Since when?" These questions.

"Since now. All I want to do is have a holiday with my wife and kids." She chuckles, shaking her head.

"Dalingcebo..... "

"I know this feels some type of way. I know, trust me. But you asked me to show up for the kids. Be their father in every way and not part time or be in and out of their lives any which way I want. That's all this is."

"So this is about the kids?"

"Yes. And you too. I mean, we've been married for ten years and to be honest it doesn't feel like it. Not the time but how distant we are. I just want to right my wrongs and make this marriage work." She shakes her head. Is that a no? I just poured my heart out to her and all she does is shake her head.

"Don't do that." She says. "You've done this before and I bought it, raised my Hope's to the roof and then you went right back to the person you always go back to. Don't give me false hope and make me believe this marriage can work when we both know that's just a front you put up. You did it after Nqaba was born and you did it again after Fezi's birth. Both times I thought maybe this marriage can work and we could pen our own version of a love story. And both times I was disappointed. Both times you found your way back to Khanyi's arms and left me hanging. So no, you don't get to do that again. You don't get to raise my Hope's up a third time. I know they say third time is always a charm but no, not again." She takes a deep breath as the waiter places our food in front of us.

I can't get my eyes off of her. Everything she just said swirls around my brain. I know I haven't been the best husband let alone the best father in the world but how did I miss the hurt I seem to have caused. This whole time I thought I don't even know what I was thinking but I know it wasn't this. The hurt in her voice cuts deep in my heart.

"Bahle....." she raises her hand up to stop me from talking.

"For the love of God please do not. Just dont. Lets eat and talk about something else and not this. Please." She begs. I sigh. I take a bite of the steak and it feels like I just chewed on rubber. Clearly I have work to do if I'm going to make my life work. And the first thing I need to do is gain her trust because it is clearly running on empty.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

22

BAHLENGIWE

I've never seen a simple dinner turn so awkward. I blame Dali. I don't even know what he was thinking making his stupid declarations. Maybe he thought I'd jump for joy at the prospect of having a normal relationship but I've done that before, way too much and I always end up getting hurt so no, I am not going down that path again.

Even though this is the first time he has uttered the words, his actions have always given me hope and they've also hurt me. It took me a long time to come to terms with the fact that our relationship will never be normal and it also took a long time for my heart to come to terms with that fact. And now that I'm over it, I can't let Dali drag me back to that dark hole again.

The drive back home is silent. Not even the radio is playing in the car. To think when we left everything was fine. I'm not sure if he is angry or sad. It's hard to tell. Hopefully he is angry not sad. Not with me though but with himself. The moment we get home we go our separate ways. He makes his way to the study and I head up to the bedroom. I need my kids back now, at least with them here it would be harder for the awkwardness to last.

I change into pyjamas and get in the bed. I grab my phone and dial Sahluko's number. Maybe hearing his voice will get me out of this funk Dali just got me in.

"Mrs Khumalo." He says the moment he picks up.

"Why so formal?" I ask and he laughs.

"Well I dont know if someone else is there listening in so I need to make sure we are professional." He tells me.

"You were anything but professional this morning." I remind him. Flashes of this morning have been popping in my head sporadically through the day.

"Its not like you were complaining. How are you anyway? I didnt see you before you left."

"I'm good. I figured you were busy that's why I didnt wait."

"You did good. I am still at work as we speak." He explains. Its almost midnight. His shift ended a long time ago.

"Why?"

"One of the rangers is sick so I'm standing in for him." Okay that makes more sense.

"Okay. Dont work too hard though. We can't have a head ranger sleeping on the job." He chuckles.

"Dont worry. I never sleep on the job. Any job." He emphasises. I know he means more than just his regular job and that's why a hot flush just crept up on my face.

"Oh. I can definitely attest to that." I hear footsteps coming towards the bedroom. Cutting the call now would seem a bit suspicious because Dali is already walking in the room. I should have closed the door.

"So will I see you tomorrow?" Sahluko asks. As much as Dali is trying seem uninterested in my call, I know he is listening.

"Definitely."

"Make sure you wear something lacy. Preferably in red." He says. It takes my entire self control not to say 'yes sir.'

"Of course." I clear my throat trying to get my voice back to it's normal pitch and not to sound like a horny teenager. Sahluko laughs on the other end.

"Let me guess, your husband is there?"

"Yes." I see Dali side eyeing me. These one word answers are not helping my case right now.

"What are you wearing?" He asks. Did I not just tell him my husband is in here? I need to keep my composure as much as I can. A sane person would hang up right now but clearly I am not sane. "Can I guess?" He adds. I am going straight to hell for this.

"Yes, you can." Its not like he will know exactly what it is I am wearing. Dali makes his way to the bathroom but he makes sure to leave the door slightly open.

"Is it silky, and short?" This is seriously going to get me in trouble.

"Yes."

"Do you know what I would be doing if I was there with you right at this moment?" Jesus. The shower is not running this would be so much easier if it was.

"I have an idea. But let's meet tomorrow and discuss it over breakfast." I say and he laughs.

"You're such a coward. But it's fine. I'll show you tomorrow. Goodnight Bahle." I hang up the phone and take a deep breath. For the first time ever I wish Dali was with Khanyi cause I'd be able to alleviate the throbbing between my thighs right at this moment.

"Who was that?" Dali asks walking out of the bathroom. He didnt even shower, why is he wearing the towel like that.

"My PA."

"This late? She should claim for overtime." He says chuckling. If only you knew.

"She always does." At least his mood has improved from earlier. I switch off the lamp on my side. He gets in bed. I feel his hand wrap over my waist, pulling me close to him before his lips make contact with my bare neck. I could claim a headache but that would just be weird.

"I'm on my period." That does the trick. He sighs and lays down on his side.

"Goodnight." He says.

"Goodnight." I reply. I close my eyes and drift off to sleep with tomorrows expectations very high.

When I wake up in the morning Dali is not in bed. Works for me. I wake up an hour earlier than my usual time. This would be a perfect time to soak in a bath but I am looking forward to the day and what it holds for me so a shower will have to do. I rummage through my closet and find a lacy red lingerie set my sister got me when she thought there was a chance for Dali and I. Who knew this would be the year it gets some action.

I put on a tan pencil skirt with a slit right up the front, I pair it with a black blazer and black stilettos. I spray on some perfume and decide to forgo the makeup except for some lipstick and mascara. Sometimes my skin decides to comply and make it seem like the skincare routine I do daily and nightly works wonders. Today is one of those days.

Dali is sitting in the lounge. I thought he'd left already. He looks up when he hears my footsteps. I try to gauge his mood by his reaction. After yesterday, things might be awkward. He smiles. Okay false alarm. He is good.

"You look nice." He says.

"Thank you. Early morning?"

"Not really. I want to go and see my brother before heading to work. I need to talk to him about something." He sips his coffee and goes back to his phone.

"Give the kids a kiss for me. I think it's time they come back home." He chuckles, his eyes still glued on the screen.

"Good luck with that. If it were up to our parents they would be taking them with to Badplaas."

"Speaking of our parents

did you notice anything weird between them when they were here?"

He looks up, a frown covering his face.

"Like what?"

"This sudden need to be together all the time. I mean I know they have always been close but lately it's like they are way too close. Even their

trip, it was supposed to be a month long trip but it turned into a year, then they sold their houses and now they bought farms literally right next door to each other." His face softens as if what I am saying is too farfetched.

"Honestly, I stopped bothering myself with them a long time ago. Everything they do is always calculated and crazy so I'm not surprised." He says. Maybe he is right. I need to overthinking things.

"I guess. I'm off. I will see you later." I get my bags and make my way to work. The anticipation has me almost floating to my office. To my surprise there is a bouquet of Rose's on my desk. There's a card peaking in between the flowers. I pull it out and read it.

May the day be as beautiful as you.

Love

Dali

How did he even get in here? Or better yet, how did the delivery person get in here? I hit the intercom and then remember my PA is not in yet. I decide to call my husband.

"Hey. I take it you saw the flowers." He sounds happy. Like he is proud of himself.

"I did. But how did you get them in here because I know delivery isn't allowed before eight." I might sound ungrateful right now but this is Dali, this is more than just a bunch of flowers. He is up to something. Question is what?

"Confession, I stole your keys and I dropped them off earlier. Do you like them?"

"I love them. Thank you. They are beautiful." That's not a lie though. Red Rose's have never been ugly.

"I'm glad. I will see you later." He hangs up the phone and my mind goes haywire. What if my phone call with Sahluko made him suspicious so he came and bugged my office and used the flowers as a cover up? I can never put anything past him. Especially after the rejection he got last night.

I pick up my phone and walk make my way to the restaurant. I know it's not opened yet but I can get a cup of coffee. I find a table and sit down then text Sahluko and tell him where I am. He shows up within minutes. He gets a cup of coffee and joins me.

"What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost." He says sipping his coffee.

"Dali was in my office."

"Okay. And that's a bad thing why?" I sigh. I hope he doesn't think I am crazy.

"I might be a bit paranoid but I think he might have planted a bug or a camera in the office." He sips his coffee and stares at me for a good minute not saying anything. He places the cup on the table.

"You're definitely paranoid. Why would he want to spy on you?"

"Trust me. He did something in the office. I can feel it in my gut. And my gut has never been wrong." He sighs and reaches over the table to

take my hand then he quickly remembers we are in public. No PDA this side.

"Okay, tell you what. Let's get a cleaner to thoroughly clean the office, every nook and cranny and see what they find. If they find something, dont tell your husband you know its him." I'm not sure how that's going to work but okay. I nod my head and he gives me a reassuring smile.

I make my way back to the office and my PA is here. I ask her to get a cleaner to the office for a thorough cleaning. As soon as the cleaner arrives I grab my laptop and head back to the restaurant to work from there. I can't even focus on anything. The thought that maybe something is in my office makes me wonder what Dali's end game is. Maybe yesterday was also a part of his plan, to get my defences down so he can waltz in and catch me red handed with Sahluko so he can have some ammunition against me. If that's his plan then clearly he is not smart. Ewrybsane woman would be suspicious if their husband started acting lovey dovey out of the blue. He will not catch me slipping though. Because two can play this stupid game.

My Pa tells me the cleaning is done. I head back to the office and right next to the flowers are four small cameras. I knew it. My gut has never been wrong. Every time I feel like there is something wrong, there always is. I press the intercom and ask my PA to call back the cleaner. Instead of the usual cleaners we have a guy shows up who seems way scarier than usual. I dont know him.

"Sahluko asked me to check out the office for bugs." He says as soon as he walks in. The cleaners uniform he has on makes him blend in with everyone. You would actually think he works here.

"So what did you find?" I ask.

"Those four cameras and three more around the office. The ones on your desk are old. They've been there for a while and they are not working anymore. It looks like they have been there for a while. The other three are pretty new. Probably placed there yesterday or today." He says. He sounds like he knows what he is talking about which gives me enough confidence to ask questions.

"So they have been watching and listening to me for a while then?"

"More like watching. This brand of cameras doesn't have a mic to record conversations do all it shows are pictures. Whoever put them there probably just needed a couple of pictures of you, nothing hectic." Oh there is definitely something hectic and that's for sure. I hold my hand out and he shakes it.

"Thank you for your time and your work." I say before watching him go out.

My gut has never failed me before and I knew it wouldn't fail me now. Or maybe it's a guilty conscience, because these other cameras have been here for a while and not once did I ever think there is anything amiss in the office. Then one day, just one day of sleeping with Sahluko and now I see cameras in the office. Gut or Guilt? I'm not sure anymore.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

BAHLENGIWE

23

I am freaking out. More than I should. I thought my mind would be at ease with knowing exactly what was happening in my office but now I have more questions and unfortunately everyone is a suspect now. And I mean everyone. Sahluko included.

I asked Lindo to come over to my house because I need someone to talk to. Luckily Dali has a late meeting and since I can't go over to Lindo's place with the parents there then she has to come here. I'm pacing up and down the lounge trying to make sense of everything and none of it makes sense. None of it.

Lindo sends a text saying she is outside. Good thing I have my phone in my hand otherwise I would not have got the message since my phone is on silent. I open the gate and wait for her to drive in. She gets out of the car with two bottles of wine and makes her way to the house.

"Get the glasses." She says walking past me to the lounge. I pull out two wine glasses from the cupboard and follow her. She pops one bottle open and pours the liquid into the glasses then hands one to me. She takes a full swing of hers and then looks at me.

"Okay speak." She orders. I take a sip of the wine then look at it before looking at her. This tastes like normal juice. "It's non alcoholic. I'm trying for a baby bitch I can't be drinking alcohol." She tells me. I sigh and sit on the couch across from her after pulling out the old cameras and

placing them on the coffee table. "What are these?" She asks picking up one of them.

"Cameras. I found them in my office." Saying this out loud is not making it any better.

"What are cameras doing in your office?"

"I've been asking myself the same question for a while now. And those ones are old too. According to the guy who found them, they've been there for a while. Someone probably forgot to change the batteries. The new ones are still up though." I tell her. Her face spells confusion. "I wasn't sure who put them up there so I just let them be until I figure out who is behind them." She nods her head and picks up another camera.

"Who would want to spy on you?" She questions looking at the tiny camera. She looks up at me and her face says it all. We have the same suspect. Well we did until I started overthinking everything.

"Dalingcebo?"

"At first I thought so. But now I am not so sure."

"What do you mean you're not sure? Who else would want to catch you red handed and then use that against you because I doubt Khanyi is that smart." Well her name never crossed my mind.

"Sahluko!"

"Your little boyfriend?"

"Yes." She takes a deep breath followed by a swig of juice. I'm not calling that thing wine again.

"Okay, why would he want to spy on you? I mean you are already letting him eat the cookie so why would he want to ruin that? And his job too?" I hear what she is saying but ever since those cameras were found my antenna went up a thousand feet and now I'm catching things I let slip before.

"Here me out. Earlier today I asked for a cleaner to clean my office from top to bottom. When I went back in and asked for the cleaner to tell me what they found, guess who shows up, some guy I've never met let alone hired wearing the cleaners uniform. I know all my employees Lindo and I know for a fact I do not know that one. And then he tells me Sahluko asked him to find the cameras." I tell her. It takes a while for everything to register but she gets it. "See, that was my same reaction as soon as he walked out of my office?"

"Aren't you being a bit paranoid maybe." Okay she doesn't get it. "What if the guy was just trying to help by getting someone who would know what to look for? A cleaner wouldn't know anything about cameras."

"They would know. Remember a few years ago when we found out some of the workers at the time planted cameras in the chalets then used that footage to blackmail cheating clients, guess who found the first camera? A cleaner. If it weren't for her I'm pretty sure we would be out of business by now. So now they always make sure to check every room before a client gets in even though the culprits were fired and charged." She nods her head and drinks her juice. "And besides, it's a little convenient that the guy he got showed up to the lodge that quickly and, I dont know man, something is off about this."

"I'm hungry, what is eatable in this house?" Trust my sister to think of food at this crucial moment. I warm up the food I made yesterday and

dish up for her. She takes the plate and throws in a few spoonfuls in her mouth. "So if Sahluko is a suspect right now, does that mean Dali is off the hook?"

"No. He is still a suspect. I just have a feeling I trusted Sahluko way too easily. I mean the only background check I have on him is his cv and a few references who were more than happy to sing his praises." She nods her head.

"Okay, we need to look into the guy and figure out what his deal is. Although I think you're overthinking things but I will get someone to look into him."

"Someone Sbu doesn't know right? I dont want him asking questions."

"Of course. I have my own people too. Until then you two find somewhere private for your shenanigans." More like that's not happening. I dont know why I thought I would get away with this. I am not the cheating type. I've never been the cheating type. Now one encounter and all these things pop up from nowhere.

"Or maybe this is a sign for me to put an end to that. Clearly I wasnt built for any of this. I mean it was crazy for me to even think I could get away with it. I just need to accept that this is the life for me and then deal live with it." I feel a sting on my cheek and notice my sister standing over me. When did she even get here and why would she slap me? "Ouch. Why would you do that?"

"I'll do it again if you keep saying that bullshit." She says. "I am not going to let you go back to being that sad zombie you were a few weeks ago."

"Lindo."

"I'm serious Bahle. Did you notice how happy you've been lately. You're glowing and sure of yourself. Look at how you put Khanyi in her place. That's the sister I want. Not the sad pathetic woman waiting around for a man to show some semblance of interest in you. I'm not going to let you dig up that hole again. And if I have to slap you back to your senses I will gladly do it."

"You do realise you just called me pathetic right?" I am anything but that.

"Yes. Because you were. Operative word being were. Now you're happier, glowing and doing things that make you happy." I take a deep breath trying to make sense of what she is saying. In a way I think she is right.

"But look where that has got me." She sits on the coffee table and I hold my breath. I hope my glass doesn't break.

"I get that this has taken a sharp curve but let's do this. Until we have all the info we need on Sahluko, keep your distance from him. Find something else to do with your time. A hobby maybe. And then if we find something bad with the guy we will find another guy to rock your boat and break your back." She says giving me a wink. I'm not even sure I want a man anymore. "You have way too much salt floating around your body and that's not good for your health." She adds making me laugh.

I walk her to her car after promising her I won't tell anyone else about the cameras. Not even Dali. I head back inside and make sure to hide the cameras. I haven't spoken to Sahluko since morning. He has tried to

call a couple of times but since my head went haywire, everything just feels some type of way. I put my phone out of silent mode and leave it on the charger. I fill the tub with warm water and add some oils and salts, ironic isn't it.

I slide in and lay back, closing my eyes as the warmth of the water massages my tired muscles. I just hope I haven't made a mess of things. I have a plan about all this, I mean ten years of putting up with bullshit, there has to be a grand payoff at the end. And if I've fucked this up I will never forgive myself.

DALINGCEBO

Rejection has never been something easy to accept. I'm pretty sure it's the same for everyone but it seems worse to me. Hearing a no for me is like code for try harder or simply you're not good enough or your idea is not really good and I hate it. I didn't get where I am by hearing no. Well except from my father. Noe that's a man who always has no at the tip of his tongue.

I thought I'd talk to Sbu about Bahle and I this morning but I ended up having to go to work for an emergency at the mine. A bunch of miners got in an accident on their way to the mine when the bus they were travelling in burst a tyre and ended up rolling over a couple of times. A few of them are in hospital and some have bruises and scratches but overall, everyone will be fine. Thank God.

Once that was sorted I had to make sure we get other miners to take over their shift and that was a struggle and a half. But everyone showed up and the day went on. After checking on the miners in the hospital and getting their diagnosis from the doctors I make my way to News

Cafe where I am meeting Sbu. I find him already seated with a drink in front of him. I make my way to him and greet.

"Everything sorted?" He asks as a waiter takes my order.

"Yeah. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be."

"Good. So what's bothering you then?" I roughly run my hands down my face and take a deep breath.

"Well, I kind of did something and I have no idea how to deal with it." I tell him about the dinner I had with Bahle and what happened. My brother might be the one person in the world who marches to his own beat but he gives the best advice. He gulps down his drink, staring at me.

"Can I be honest with you?" He asks. I nod my head, that's why I am here. I need the truth and no one can give it to me as well as he can.

"Bahle did good by rejecting you." Okay that's not what I expected. I feel my face scrunch up in confusion. "Hear me out, do I think you care about her? Yes. Do you love her? I'm not sure. And to be fair, the only reason you're suddenly paying attention to her right now is because you've seen her happy and glowing and you hate the idea that she is all that without you." I open my mouth to speak and he holds up his hand to stop me. "Listen, I understand you, I really do, but for ten years, TEN bro, Bahle has been sitting on the sidelines waiting for you to see her beyond her being forced on you. But you have failed to do that, that's why even Khanyi is comfortable shitting on her because she knows you won't do anything about it. Unfortunately for you, Bahle is no longer on the sidelines, she is playing her own game and now the selfish man inside you feels like you deserve to be part of her game just

because she has your ring. It doesn't work like that unfortunately." I knew he would be honest but this is taking it a bit too far.

"What is wrong with me wanting to have a functional family with my wife and kids? Isn't that what everyone wants?"

"Everything about it is wrong. Bahle is not a toy you get to use and toss aside then pick up again when someone else sees value in it. If you want to have a functional family with Bahle then you have to do it right. And doing it right means letting go of Khanyi and being fully focused on your family. And we both know you won't be letting go of Khanyi anytime soon. So do what any sane person would do, leave Bahle alone. Continue what you've been doing and let her bask in her light. She deserves it." This is the price I pay for wanting honesty.

"But what if I could make both work? I could marry Khanyi and have the life I want."

"Not everything is about what YOU want Dali. Sometimes take the time to think about someone else for once. I get that you love Khanyi and that's fine, but expecting Bahle to keep the flame burning while you live your best life is unfair on her. If you can't be the husband she deserves then leave her alone. Allow her to enjoy her life."

By the time we head home I have a lot on my mind. Have I really been that bad all these years? I've tried to be a decent husband but clearly I wasn't trying hard enough. Was I even trying though?

I get home and find Bahle's phone ringing off the hook. Why did she leave it down here? I look at the screen and see Sahluko's name flashing on the screen. It's almost midnight, why would he be calling her so late? I swipe the screen and wait for him to speak.

"Hey, thank God. I've been trying to call you all afternoon. Are you Okay?"

"She is fine. What's the emergency?" I ask and he keeps quiet.

"Uhhh..... sorry, I didnt know you had her phone." He says sounding flustered.

"Its almost midnight, is there any emergency she needs to attend to?"

"No."

"Then goodnight. Please make sure to keep your interactions professional and within the normal working hours."

"Of course. I apologise. Goodnight." He hangs up the call. Siya might not have found anything but there is something off about this guy and him being comfortable enough to call her this late makes me wonder just how comfortable their relationship is.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

24

BAHLENGIWE

I am not going to work. Well I haven't been to work the past couple of days. Am I coward who is scared to face the man i had sex with in my office with my back against the wall like a common hooker because I dont know if he is the one who planted those cameras in my office? Yes. Yes I am.

A small part of me is still holding on to hope that maybe I am judging him too harshly and allowing my guilty conscience to have a field day with me, but the truth is none of this makes sense. And until I get to the bottom of it, the office is off limits.

I set up my work station on the dining room table. Right now I am wary of any office, even the one in this house is off limits. For now. Dali comes down just as I sit down and turn on my laptop. He is already in his suit and ready for work.

"No office even today?" He asks pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"Nope. I just need a breather from the office." He chuckles and takes a seat across from me.

"You know you could just apply for leave and rest with no work to think off."

"And who is going to approve my leave?"

"You obviously. You're the boss after all. And besides, that lodge runs like a well oiled machine, I'm sure they will survive a few weeks without you there." He says.

"Maybe, I'll think about it. But only after the wedding." I'd love to be on a beach somewhere sipping on some cocktails but I have a wedding to prepare for. There is no way I can leave just yet.

"I hear you. But you could do a weekend away before that. Dad says they are taking the kids to Badplaas this weekend so you will be free." When it comes to our parents, our kids are theirs and they make the decisions. I wasn't asked about my kids going to Badplaas but here we are. I need to set some ground rules and boundaries before I end up with spoiled brats for kids.

"I guess I can visit Titi. She's been pestering me to come to Joburg." I say and notice his face falls. He seems disappointed somehow.

"I was hoping we could go to Polokwane actually." He says. Am I in an alternate universe right now? Since when does he plan getaways with just me? Even our honeymoon was a three people affair.

"I don't understand."

"I actually planned a trip for us to Polokwane. That's why I asked the parents to take the kids to Badplaas with them." Yeah I am definitely living Khanyi's life right now. The hope in his eyes makes me feel guilty for wanting to turn him down.

"Before I agree or refuse, can I ask what prompted this trip? You've never taken me on a trip before. Why now?" He sighs staring at the coffee in his cup.

"I just wanted to do something nice for you. I know how hard you work and I figured a weekend away would do you some good." Its definitely the end of the world. How long have I been working hard and he has never done anything like this before.

"Okay. We can go." His smile fills his face.

"Perfect. We will leave tomorrow around ten." He says and walks away, for a moment there I thought he'd jump for joy.

As soon as I hear his car pull out of the driveway I dial Lindo's number.

"I haven't found anything yet." She says.

"I know. You would have told me if you had. I wanted to tell you that there's something wrong with my husband. I think he is broken." She bursts out laughing.

"What has he done now?"

"He is taking me on a weekend away. To Polokwane." She keeps quiet. Yeah, this is weird for everyone.

"See this is why I think he has something to do with those cameras. Maybe he is trying to ease his conscience." She mutters.

"Maybe. But we can't be too sure. I've already said yes anyway. And we are leaving tomorrow. Do me a favour, if I end up dead just know he did it." She laughs even harder. "Keep laughing, until you hear that I am dead somewhere in the forests of Limpopo." I say and hang up the phone. If I didnt know better I'd say she was the youngest.

My first zoom meeting for the day is with the wedding planner as well as the couple. They are so cute together. Holding hands, finishing each

others sentences and stealing kisses here and there. Mjolo is quite nice sometimes. By the time we are done I have a huge grin on my face. I dont know how my situation hasn't killed my faith in love. Maybe its because I've seen countless people fall in love all over again when they got married at the lodge, now I just live vicariously through them and my favourite novel characters.

My phone rings as I take a break and make myself breakfast. I take a deep breath before answering. I need to keep my composure when it comes to Sahluko so I dont give anything away. If he really is behind those cameras I need to make sure he doesn't cover his footprints before I get to them.

"Hey."

"Hi. You're not at work." He says. His concern is touching no doubt but right now I have my doubts about him.

"Yes, I think I'm coming down with the flu. I didnt want anyone catching whatever I have." Who knew i could ever lie so effortlessly.

"Oh, okay. For a moment there I thought you were spooked by the cameras in the office and you're avoiding me." Of course I am. Plus I dont trust you.

"No, it's not that. Besides, Dali has already admitted to putting them there so they should be down by the time I get back."

"He did?" He asks, surprise evident in his voice.

"Yes. But he apologized for invading my privacy like that so it's all good." He is silent for a while. "Sahluko?"

"Hey, I'm here. Sorry I'm just surprised he admitted it so easily."

"Well he did. I guess his jealousy got the better of him."

"Wow, okay." I thought he'd be happy about this, why is he acting like someone just knocked him for six.? "Uhm.. so when are you coming back to work? I miss you."

"Next week. I have to visit a friend this weekend so I will be away and my phone will be off. I need the time away."

"Okay. Can I see you before you leave?" He asks.

"I cant. I have a lot of back to back meetings today and later I am taking the kids to the movies with Dali. There is some new movie they want to see." Lie after lie spills out of my mouth like a waterfall. I should do this for a living.

"Okay. Have a safe trip."

"Thank you." I hang up the phone and get back to my food. I might be jumping the gun but now more than ever I am convinced Sahluko has something to do with those cameras. Now i need to figure out what his end game is.

KHANYISILE

Busi and I are doing a bit of shopping. Yesterday I went to see Dali at the office and when he stepped out I noticed his laptop was opened and when I stole a glance I saw he made a booking to some lodge in Polokwane. I figured he realises he has been acting like a douchebag lately and now he wants to make it up to me. Of course I have to act surprised when he tells me about the trip.

"Take the black one friend, that one screams 'look what you've been missing'." Busi says. I need new lingerie for this trip, something that's going to blow his mind and this one is definitely it. Busi is right.

"I am definitely taking it babe, but I need another one." I say browsing through the pieces on display. Busi lifts up a red lacy number.

"How about this one?" She asks. Its nice but white would be better. An angel one day and a devil the next.

"Do they have it in white?" She goes back to browsing the other rack and lifts up a white version of the red set. "Perfect."

"You do know white is worn on wedding nights right?" Busi asks chuckling.

"Please

its worn anytime, as long as your halo is straight it's all good." I say. We make our way to the counter. Lo and behold Lindo, Bahle's sister is in front of us with her own sets of lingerie. We could have been sister wives but her sister stole my life.

"I cant wait to get to Polokwane and show my man what he has been missing out on. I'm sure he hasn't had some since he has been with that uptight cold woman. I have to remind him what they mean when they say stove siku 6." Yes, I am pretty. Deal with it. Busi gets where I'm going with this and laughs.

"Of course friend, show him why you are the love of his life." Busi adds. Lucky for us this shop is not that busy, right now there is only one cashier helping us. As soon as the woman in front is done paying, Lindo places her items on the counter to be scanned. She turns around and

looks at me. This one is the straatmate of the family, she has no problem causing a scene unlike Bahle. Her and Dvumo act like they were raised at the zoo with animals. That gene must have skipped Bahle.

She turns to look at us. The smile on her face is not what I expected.

"Going on a trip?" She asks.

"Baecation." Busi corrects her. She nods her head.

"Where?"

"Polokwane." Its not like they will show up there guns blazing and embarrass me.

"Nice. Enjoy." She turns back and pays for her items and walks out.

"How long before Bahle finds out about this trip?" Busi asks starring at Lindo as she walks away.

"A few seconds. I'm sure she is calling her right now. But it matters not, this is mine and Dali's trip. There is nothing she can do about it."

We pay for my items and make our way out of the mall and go our separate ways. I decide to go see my mum before I go away for the weekend. I get home and she is not home. The only person here is my sister Senele. I join her on the couch and grab a handful of popcorn from the bowl.

"Where is your mother?" I ask.

"Work." She replies.

"Is she working the night shift?"

"Yes." Okay this is weird.

"What's with the one word answers? What's wrong?" She turns to look at me and I realise she is not her usual bubbly self.

"I am not going to graduate." Huh! She better not. Dali pays her fees and i cannot let his money go to waste. She better not try me.

"Senele, please, count your words before opening your mouth. What do you mean you won't graduate."

"Relax. Its not like that. I need to get an internship so I can graduate but everywhere I apply I dont get it. Most of my friends have been accepted except for me. I've applied everywhere and nothing." She says. My heart settles down a bit.

"Where did you apply exactly, have you tried lodges outside the province?" I doubt my mother will let her out her sight. Seluleko is already based in Joburg and comes home every other month so this one, she is stuck here.

"You know your mother." She replies. "Can you talk to Bhuti Dali and ask him if I can work at Imvelo. I just need the experience, please." She begs with her hands clasped together like she is praying. There is just one problem with her request.

"You do know Bahle runs the lodge right and not Dali?"

"I know. But Bhuti can ask her, he wont even tell her I'm your sister, just some kid he is mentoring." She says. That could work.

"I'll talk to him but I am not promising anything." She squeals and pulls me in for a tight hug. I don't know why she is celebrating. Bahle can still say no.

An hour later I decide to leave. As much as I would love to stay and keep her company, I have a trip to pack for. I call Dali just before I get home. The phone rings and then goes to voicemail. I take a deep breath and call again before I get in my head and jump to a million conclusions.

"Khanyi." I'm not sure how I feel about him using my name like that. To him I am baby and nothing else, but I will let it slide for now. We can't be going on a trip with tension between us.

"Hey, so listen, I was hoping we can hang out tomorrow, you know we haven't had time to ourselves in a while. I'll cook all your favourites." I say. I'm hoping he will say not to because of the surprise.

"There is no need for that. I'll come by there in the morning before I go to work." He says. This is perfect.

"Okay, I can't wait. I love you." I am so happy right now. My life is going back to the way it was.

"You too." He says and hangs up. What the fuck just happened? Since when does he say 'you too' when I say I love him.

I'm tempted to call him back and call him out on this but, I have to choose my battles and this is not one I should be fighting right now. I pull up to the house and unload everything I bought. I get my luggage and start packing. We will probably go on a hike or safari so I make sure I am set for that. A dinner, most definitely so a nice formal dress will do. Maybe a bit of shopping, a maxi dress and sandals will do. I set my

outfit for tomorrow on the side and pack another one to wear when I come back. I hide the lingerie so its not too obvious. I close the luggage and set it by the door. I pack my makeup and toiletries in a smaller bag. Once I'm done I pour myself a glass if wine. I don't know if sleep will come today, I'm way too excited. And time is going super slow. Oh well, they say patience is a virtue.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

25

KHANYISILE

Today is the day. It's just after eight, I'm pretty sure Dali will be here soon. Usually he starts at work in the morning before we leave and I'm sure today won't be any different. I get up and do my skincare routine. I need my skin to be on point when I post on Instagram.

An hour later and I'm done. My face is glowing the way I want it to. I head downstairs and make myself some breakfast before getting ready. Since this will be a road trip, a dress will do. A short backless summer dress to be precise. A pair of sandals for my feet and I am ready to go. I'm not wearing makeup today.

I check my phone and there is no missed call from Dali. Not even a good morning text. I don't let that get to me though because I am going to see him later. I feel like a child waiting for her father to come pick her up, except this time I know Dali will actually show up unlike my deadbeat of a father. I could ask my sister to come stay here while we are away but, no, there's enough security around here so I'm sure everything will be fine.

Time seems to be going slow. I want to call Dali and ask him where he is but I also don't want to seem like I am nagging. This trip is not about fights. He is supposed to be making up for being cold and distant lately. So I'll wait for him to call before I go crazy.

A romantic comedy on tv keeps me company until my phone rings just after 1. I'm hoping it's Dali but no, it's just Busi. I cut the call. I don't want

Dali calling and finding me busy on another call. She tries again and I do the same. Why is she not getting the message? I cant talk to her right now. She gives up after a few more tries. Thank God.

I make myself a sandwich. We will probably get food on the way but right now I am hungry. The breakfast I ate is already digested and gone. It's already lunch time, Dali should have been here by now. Limpopo is not next door. I grab my phone and find his number. It sends me straight to voicemail. It doesnt even ring. Maybe his phone is flat. That's the only explanation for this.

I dial his office number and it rings unanswered. For his sake I hope he hasn't changed his mind. I know this was meant to be a surprise but it's his fault for leaving the information on his laptop for everyone to see. I call his PA and lucky for me she picks up. She doesnt like me much. She is a tad bit older than Dali, she used to work for his father and somehow she thinks that makes her Dali's second mum.

"Miss Manana." She says sounding way more jolly than usual. I wonder what she is happy about.

"Mrs Ceko, I am trying to get a hold of Dali, his phone sends me straight to voicemail and his office phone rings unanswered. Do you know where he is?" This one is the kind of PA who can find him even if he disappeared to the moon..

"Oh, so that was you calling just now?" See, I told you she hates me. She probably saw the caller ID and decided not to answer just because it's me. She is lucky Dali likes her or else I would have convinced him to fire her.

"Yes that was me. Do you know where my man is?" She clears her throat. The disrespect.

"Well I am not sure about your man but Mr Khumalo will be out of the office for the next four days." As if I didn't already know that.

"I am well aware of that, right now I want to know where he is at this present moment?" I swear this one knows how to use her stupid privilege in the company to frustrate me. And I dont even work there. Jesus!

"Oh, well I'm sure by now he is entering Limpopo, that's if he hasn't entered yet." She says. I can feel smug smile on her face from here.

"What do you mean he is entering Limpopo when I am here? We are supposed to go on that trip together." I pray this doesn't mean what I think it does. Dali cannot be cheating on me. I will castrate him.

"Did he tell you that?" She asks.

"Of course he didn't tell me, its supposed to be a surprise. I just found out by accident." This woman is wasting my time.

"Well surprise, he went to Limpopo with his wife. You know, the mother of his children, the woman with his ring. That one. Surprise." She adds before hanging up.

I feel all the air leave my body. This cannot be happening. Dali cannot do this to me. I am numb. No, maybe she is lying. I try Dali's number again and it goes straight to voicemail. I try again. And again. And again and get the same reply. This house is getting hot. I feel swear dripping down my back. I get up and open the windows and turn the aircon on.

Nothing seems to help. I try his phone again and the result is the same. Voicemail.

I take a few deep breaths and prepare to do something I was hoping never to do again. Call Bahle. Her phone is ringing. Maybe they are not together. At least she picks up.

"Hello."

"Hi. Is Dali with you?"

"Of course, Dali and I are going on a weekend away to Polokwane." I thought the PA was smug but this bitch takes the cup.

"Can you give him the phone?" Dali has a lot of explaining to do.

"Can't. He is driving and he cant be on the phone when he has precious cargo on board. His words not mine." She says chuckling. I can even hear Dali laughing too. "I will update you about our trip when we get there. Or maybe when we come back. I'm not sure yet. Toodles." She hangs up.

Satan is trying me today. He is definitely trying me. I try to call her again and now her phone is off. I toss the phone onto the couch and sit down. Why would he do this to me? Not even a heads up or a warning or something. I hear a knock on the door. I dont want to see anyone right now. The knocking persists. I hear Busi calling out my name. I get up and open the door.

"Friend. I thought Dali was taking you to Polokwane, why is there a picture of Bahle standing in front of a board saying 'welcome to Limpopo'?" She asks as if I have all the answers.

"Where did you see the picture?"

"Instagram. There's even a selfie of the two of them right in front of the sign." She says pulling out her phone to show me the picture.

Hearing and it and seeing it feel vastly different. When I heard I got mad because in my head I was hoping it's just some prank someone was pulling but seeing it, the smile on his face the joy in her eyes, the playfulness, it's like a knife through my heart. There's even a real that she made and everyone is gushing about how perfect they are. I feel tears freely flowing down my face. It's like every picture I see brings about fresh tears. Dali has hurt me before but this, this is betrayal.

"Why would he do this to me?" I ask still staring at the pictures. Busi pulls the phone away and pulls me to her, laying my head on her lap. That just makes it worse because I weep like I just lost a husband.

"I'm sorry friend. I'm really sorry." She says rubbing my arm.

"After everything I've given up for him he goes and does me like this, what did I do to him that was so bad he had to pay me back by hurting me."

"I don't know friend. Maybe Lindo told her and she insisted on going on the trip. Maybe she threatened him with his parents." She says. I know she's trying to make me feel better but it's not working. I pull myself up and wipe my tears.

"I have to go home. I have to see my mother." I say. Busi gets the message and stands up too. The drive home feels so long. Luckily when I get there mum is home. Her shift starts in a few hours.

"Khanyi, what are you doing here, your sister told me you're going away with Dali." She asks. I sit on the couch and look at her.

"I'm losing him ma. I'm losing Dali." She switches off the tv and takes my hand.

"What do you mean?"

"Everyday it's like a different Dali shows up. Just the other day he paid for Bahle's salon session while I was there too, and then she yelled at me and when I told him he said he wasn't getting involved. I know I should have told him I wasn't pregnant but he seemed too excited about it I didn't have the strength to break his heart and now he is gone to Limpopo with her. It's like he is falling in love with her, and the more he does the less he pays attention to me." I narrate between sobs. Mum gently brushes my hand.

"We can't have that now. Don't worry. Mummy will fix it okay." She assures me.

"How ma?"

"Don't worry yourself about the how. All that matters is your mummy will fix this and you will be happy again. I promise you." She says. For some reason I believe her. My mother is not the kind of person to make empty promises. I lay on her lap feeling a little better.

BAHLENGIWE

Yesterday I had doubts about this trip but now I can fully say I am enjoying myself. I took Lindo's advice and decided to put my reservations aside and actually be in the moment. It could come to an end come Monday but hey, at least I'll have the memories. However I

don't understand why she insisted we take pictures in front of that board and post them. But it was fun though. Dali is not such a bad companion to have on a trip.

After what feels like forever we pull up to the Garden Court. We check in and we are showed our room. It's nice and cozy. I look at Dali and he is busy unpacking and hanging clothes in the closet. Me, my MO is shoving the whole suitcase in the closet, pull it out and take out what I need then put it back again. Simple. Not him, clothes need to be hanged.

"So why did you decided on a hotel?" I ask as I move around the room.

"I figured you're used to lodge vibes and this is different." He says. He is right, this is different, in a good way. He opens my luggage and starts hanging my clothes too. I grab a bikini set before he packs it in the closet.

"I think I'll go enjoy the pool."

"I was thinking we can go do a bit of shopping at mall of the north but if you want to lounge around then it's cool." Who says no to shopping, especially when it's not your money being used? Definitely not me.

I throw the bikini back in the luggage and he laughs.

"I guess shopping it is then?"

"Are you not tired?" He asks.

"Never too tired for a shopping spree. Besides, if it means using your money then no, I am definitely not tired. I'll get a red bull." He finishes

hanging the clothes and we make our way to the mall. Its huge and perfect to spend money at.

I drag him into every store we come across. I'm pretty sure he is regretting even suggesting this. We go into the tenth shop and I can tell he is already tired. Too bad, he has ten years to make up for.

"You know when I said we can go shopping I didnt mean you should bankrupt me." He says while I try on a pair of shoes.

"You'll survive." I reply sticking my tongue out at him. I like these shoes. I'm definitely getting them. I try on a dress and stand in front of the mirror looking at myself. I look good. I turn and face him.

"What do you think?" I ask. He gets up and walks around the pedestal I'm standing on with his hands in his pockets.

"Its perfect." He says, standing in front of me. I guess I am taking this one.

"Thank you." I go back into the dressing room and find another dress to try on then walk out to show him.

I find him standing up facing the door like he is watching something or someone. I hope his deranged mistress did not follow us here.

"Everything okay?" I ask tapping him on the shoulder. He jumps like I just scared him. "What's wrong?"

"I dont know. A woman just walked in here and handed me these." He holds up some white beads strung together to form a bracelet.

"What did she say?" I'm not a spiritual or religious person but people don't just walk up to someone and do this without a reason.

"She said I must wear them and that the fog is clearing. I dont even know what that means."

"Then wear them." I say. There is no other way to go about it. Whoever this woman is clearly knew what she was doing.

"And what if I wake up dead tomorrow? I dont know this woman or what her intentions are." He argues rolling the beads around in his hand.

"For starters, you dont wake up dead, you'll be dead so you wont wake up. However I understand your skepticism but there must be a reason this woman found you in a crowd of so many people. I mean what are the odds that she could walk up to you and hand you white beads at that. I'm sure if it was something evil they would be a different colour not white." He smiles and stares at me.

"Since when do you believe in these things?"

"I dont believe in them but I respect them. Now put them on and help with this dress, we still have more shops to explore." He laughs and rolls the beads onto his wrist.

"You know what else the woman said, she said it's time to go back to the hotel."

"Nice try. I'm getting this dress." I hear him laughing as I head back to the dressing room. I wonder what that woman meant. Where did she even come from? I dont remember a time in this family when ancestors were ever acknowledged but I read somewhere that just because you dont believe in ancestors it doesnt mean you dont have them. I just hope she was sent in good faith.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

26

DALINGCEBO

I don't remember the last time Bahle and I had this much fun. Heck, I don't even think I remember her being this much fun. Or maybe she's always been like this I just never gave myself enough time to get to know her.

I've been up for a while even though we slept pretty late. After dinner we came back to the room and she tried on everything she bought again. She was like a kid in a candy store. I got to see the carefree and happy side of her. The Bahle I married has always had walls up at every turn. I can't say I've tried to dismantle those walls though. But I like the person I got to experience last night. I want her to always be this happy and carefree.

I get my phone and get it off of flight mode. A barrage of messages start flooding in. I can safely say ninety percent of them are from Khanyi. I don't have the time or the energy to even try and read them because I have plans with my wife. Just as I'm about to put the phone back on flight mode it rings. I look over to the bed and Bahle is still fast asleep. I open the sliding door and walk out to the balcony before picking up the phone.

"You're alive." Khanyi says, I can feel her anger permeating through the phone.

"Khanyisile. What's the problem?"

"What's the problem? What's the problem Dalingcebo?" She hisses. An angry Khanyi is not a happy sight. I'm glad I am nowhere near her right now. "Where the fuck are you?" Did she just swear at me? Who the fuck does she think she is?

"Khanyi, count your words carefully. You will not swear at me as if I am one of your little friends. Be very very careful with what you say next." I snap. I hear her taking a few deep breaths. "Good. Now, what is the problem?" I ask again.

"Where are you?" I can feel her trying her best to hold in her emotions. Good for her otherwise I would hang up this phone.

"Not that it's any of your business but I am in Polokwane."

"With Bahle?"

"Yes. Is there a problem?"

"Since when do you go on weekends away with Bahle? Without the kids even? When did that start?" She questions.

"Bahle is my wife, in case you forgot. If you go to home affairs and ask about my marital status I can guarantee you will find her name on there, so if I want to take her to Polokwane I will do it, and if I want to take her to Dubai I will. I dont need your permission. In actual fact, stop calling me, you're ruining my baecation, I will talk to you when I get back. Nx." I hang up the phone and put the phone on flight mode again.

Khanyi is getting way too familiar with me and its getting boring. I make my way back in the room and Bahle is still sleeping. Thank God. I hope she didnt hear that conversation. There is a slight knock on the door. I open and it's the room service I ordered. I step aside and let the

gentleman walk in and set up everything on the table. I made sure to order all Bahle's favourites. I thank the guy and hand him a nice tip. I am in a good mood today, not even Khanyi can ruin that.

"Hey sleephead, wake up." I whisper in Bahle's ear. She stirs a bit and opens one eye. She's so cute when she's sleepy. "Wake up." She rubs her eyes and then stares at me like she's seeing a ghost for a moment.

"What time is it?" She asks trying to grab her phone. I grab the phone and keep it away from her.

"Who cares what time it is, we are on vacation, the concept of time should not matter." Her smile fills her face, revealing her perfect teeth.

"When did you become a philosopher?"

"There is a lot you dont know about me Mrs Khumalo." I reply mirroring her smile.

"Clearly."

"Come, let's go eat. We have a long day ahead of us." I say pulling her up.

"I need to wash my face and brush my teeth." She says trying to make her way to the bathroom but I pull her back to me. With her back to me I wrap my arms around her waist and plant little kisses down her neck.

"You look perfect just the way you are." I whisper.

"Even with stinking morning breath?" She asks.

"Yours smells like strawberries." She breaks free from my hold laughing her lungs out.

"Now I know for sure you're lying." She says.

I pull out the chair for her to sit and uncover all the food. Her eyes get wider with every reveal. Just the reaction I wanted.

"How did you get all this?" She asks her eyes scanning the table.

"You know what they say, money is king."

"I don't know where to start." She admits. I guess that's ten points for me.

"Wherever you want. It's all yours." She looks up and gives me a smile.

"Thank you." I hand her an empty plate.

"Anytime." She scans the table one more time before she decides to start on the French toast. I keep my eyes on her as she cuts the bread and puts a piece in her mouth. The moan of satisfaction that comes from her mouth wakes things that should not be waking up at this time. Not yet anyway.

I follow her lead and dish up the French toast too. Well this is divine. I take pictures of her as she eats, I don't think she is even here right now. She hasn't said a word since she started eating. It's a beautiful sight though. I mean I know she could make this herself at the house but this moment is worth it. Seeing the happiness on her face.

"So what did you say we would be doing today?" She asks popping a blueberry in her mouth.

"We are going to the Bakone Open-Air Museum. The rest we will figure out later." She nods her head with her mouth full. And the way she is rubbing her stomach I am sure her stomach is full too.

"Can we also go to the snake park?" She asks. The coffee I just drank burns my tongue and instead of helping me she laughs. "Why are drinking hot coffee so fast?" She hands me a napkin and I wipe my tongue.

"I can handle my coffee, what I don't understand is why you would want to go and see snakes? Snakes Bahle?" She is laughing. Am I a joke?

"They are in glasses, I promise you they will not bite you." Nope. Me and snakes do not mix in anyway shape or form.

"And what happens if one of them escapes? Hmmm? A black mamba is fast as hell and one opportunity for it to break free it will take it. And then where are we going to run too?" I know I am exaggerating but at this point I will do anything to not set foot in a place with more than one snake. I cant stand one snake now imagine a whole lot of them, different species at that. That's like the ultimate thousand ways to die.

"They will not escape. There are snakes we can interact with though. Definitely not black mamba, maybe a python." And it gets worse.

"So you want to watch me being crushed by a python and eaten alive?"

"You're so dramatic. Those innocent little things will not eat you. But since you're scared of snakes, we will pass." She says. I'm not sure I believe her.

"I am man enough to admit that I am afraid of snakes. I can do anything you want me to do except that."

"Well, atleast now I know what to get you as a pet. I'm going to take a shower." She gets up from the chair laughing. None of this is funny.

Watching her walk away brings a smile to my face. Although I almost lost a tongue, getting to know her is such an amazing experience. I remember the white beads on my wrist and look down at them. I roll them around my wrist. These make no sense to be honest. I try to pull them out but they refuse to go past my hand. When did they shrink? Did they even shrink or I am imagining things? I try again and get the same outcome. These are not going anywhere. I'll try them in the shower with water and soap. They should come out easily then.

MISS MANANA

She's been driving for over an hour now. The moment she clocked out at 6 o'clock she got in the road. She has a relationship to fix. As far as she is concerned her girls deserve the world on a silver platter and she is going to give it to them come hell or high waters. Yes she is a church woman, but when it comes to her children, even the devil sits back and takes notes.

She steers the Suzuki swift onto the gravel road leaving the tar behind. It takes another hour before she makes it to her destination. It would have been less than that if she wasn't driving at a snail's pace this car is her pride and joy, Khanyi bought it for her, well Dali but that's besides the point. She sacrificed a lot of her comfort to make sure her children went to the best private schools around. If it wasn't for that, Khanyi would not have met Dali. And now she needs to make sure he remembers why he fell in love with her in the first place.

She parks the car outside the steel gate. For a place that is detached from the rest of the world, this house is way too modern. She puts a dork on her head and changes her uniform before getting out of the

car. She knocks on the gate and it slides open. Gasas might seem like an old man but he sure loves nice things in life.

A young girl with a healers cloth wrapped around her waist greets her and leads her to the rondavel.

"You can wait inside, baba will be with you just now." The girl tells her then walks away. She takes a deep breath, the smell of muti and incense already clogging her sinuses. She bows and makes her way in, settling on a reed mat close to the door for some fresh air. She has learned to never look around the room, too many scary things that she cant explain.

She keeps her eyes on her hands and waits. 'Just now' turns into ten minutes, twenty, forty five, still no sign of Gasas. Exactly fifty five minutes after she sat down Gasas walks in. He greets her and takes his place.

"Zanele Manana, to what do I owe this special visit?" Gasas asks, a smile plastered on his face. He knows exactly why she is here. But it sounds better coming from her lips.

"You know why I'm here Gasas, I need your help?" She says, her head still bowed. If there is one person who sees through her church woman persona its Gasas, he even finds it funny how far she will go to hide her visits to him.

"Help you with what? I haven't seen you in a while." He says. She knows he is lying, she was here a few months ago, that's how she got her promotion to Matron at the hospital otherwise it would not have happened without him. And he knows it too.

"My daughters relationship, its falling apart. The man seems to be slowly going back to his wife. And that's not what we want." She tells him. He groans a few times hitting himself on the shoulders with ishoba.

"Have you been doing all I told you to do?" He asks.

"Of course. You told me to sprinkle that powder on his food once or twice a year. Anything more than that and he would end up not being the man we need him to be." She says. He nods his head.

"If you've been doing everything right what has changed?"

"That's the thing. I dont know." She admits.

"When last did he consume the powder?" She calculates in her mind the timeframe.

"More than a year ago." She replies. Gasa burps a couple of times and groans.

"I told you not to let a full year pass without him eating that powder. It's too strong that's why I said give him once or twice a year. So far it's been working well, so why has it taken this long for you to give him again?" He asks.

"Because I haven't been in the same room with him in a while. I invited them for lunch the other time and he never showed up. My daughter told me he was spending time with his wife and kids." She says. Gasa groans again.

"I told you to give it to your daughter and let her take care of things. She lives in the same house as him it would be easy for her to do what needs to be done." He says burping. Zanele shakes her head.

"My daughter can never know about this, you know that. Just help me with this, please." She begs. In her head she can almost see all the money Dali comes with slowly slipping away and that cannot happen. Gasas pulls his bag and tosses the bones around, he commands her to blow on them and she does as told. He shakes them a bit before throwing them on the floor. He is quiet. No groaning or burping. Zanele stares at the bones as if she can read them.

"What are they saying?" She asks.

"I dont know." Gasas replies much to the chagrin of his patient. How can he not know what his own bones say.

"What do you mean you dont know?" She demands.

"Exactly that. I cant seem to find the boy. I cant find him which means I cant read him." Gasas says.

"So what now?" She questions. She is not leaving without the answers and power she needs. It took her a long time coming here even after a 12 hour shift. Gasas gathers his bones and puts them back in the bag. She shakes them again then throws them on the ground.

"He is definitely unreachable." He concludes.

"Well I dont care about that right now, all I need is something to remind him of where his heart should be."

"You know I cant give you anything without reading the man first. I need to know the right medicine to give you and how much to give him." He argues.

"Well its clear you wont be able to read him. Just give me anything to make him do what he needs to do. Anything at this point will work." She says.

Gasa shakes his head and pulls out a bottle of mayonnaise with some black powder inside it. He pours a couple of spoonfuls of the powder onto a torn newspaper.

"This should work for now. It's not a permanent fix. Give him that for exactly seven full days and then come back here with any item of clothing belonging to him, only then will I be able to tell what is wrong. For now, use that. Make sure he eats that for seven full consecutive days. Are we clear?" Gasa asks.

"Clear as the morning sun Gasa." She picks up the paper and throws it in her handbag.

"Perfect. I will be back in a few days with his tshirt or something." She says excitement taking over her. She takes out a few notes from her bag and places them on the floor.

"Hhayike, akubongwa Gasa. I will be back in a week." She assures him.

She walks out with a bounce in her step she didnt have when she came in. Operation get Dali back is in full effect.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

27

KHANYISILE

"You do know at some point you're going to have leave this room." My mother says budging into my room. She pulls the drapes open letting in the sunshine I am trying to avoid. I feel like even the sun is laughing at me right now.

"Ma, please. Just close the curtains." I beg pulling the covers over my head.

"I'm not closing shit." She says pulling the covers away. "You need to get up and fight for your man. Being cooped up in here is not going to help you in anyway. Get up and go take a shower. When you're done come downstairs. We need to talk." The moment she walks out the door I pull the covers back and get under them.

I've been cooped up in this room for four days now and I dont see anything changing anytime soon. Dali has changed on me put of the blue and I'm not sure how I am supposed to deal with that. He made promises to me that he has diligently kept for ten years and now all of a sudden he is taking couple trips with Bahle. Why? How? He has never taken her on any trip without the kids or the rest of his family. Baecations were reserved for me and me alone. I cant believe I prepared for this trip only to be left just like that. Something is definitely not right with this whole picture.

And to make matters worse, Dali has been speaking to me any which way he wants lately. I should have picked up then that something is

wrong with him. And then a thought crosses my mind. I jump off the bed and run downstairs.

"If you fall down those steps who is going to nurse you?" Mum asks seeing me literally fly down the stairs.

"I know what's wrong with him." I say out of breath.

"Who?"

"Dali. It's the only explanation for his behaviour. Udlisiwe. (He has been bewitched.)" I say. Mum spits out the tea in her mouth, spraying the liquid all over me. Nice.

She hands me a dish cloth and I wipe my face.

"Sorry. What are you talking about?" She questions.

"I think Bahle did something to Dali. That's the only thing that makes sense. I should have picked it up when his behaviour started changing but I wasn't paying enough attention. We need to take him to pastor Kenny so he can pray for him. Maybe he will vomit whatever Bahle fed him." Mum is staring at like what I just said is impossible, people can do worse if given the chance. And this could also explain Bahle growing wings all of a sudden. She definitely did something to him.

"You can be dramatic when you want. And for no reason whatsoever." Mum says. She pours herself another cup of tea.

"Really? I am being dramatic? My life is falling apart and you don't want to help me."

"Bahle did nothing to him. He is probably going through a guilty phase, especially when it comes to his kids. But he will get over it and be back

in your arms in not time. Trust me. I know what I am talking about." I roll my eyes and shake my head.

"I'll just call pastor Kenny myself since you dont want to, I'm sure he will be happy to help me." I pick up her phone and she roughly grabs it from me.

"What the heck? Give it back." I yell.

"This is my phone. Not yours. Just because you bought it doesnt make it yours. Now, I said to you, go and take a shower then come back here so we can talk. Now go and stop annoying me." Here's another one with a stinking attitude.

I head back upstairs and quickly take a shower. I go to Senel's room to find some clothes since I left all my clothes at the house. We aren't even the same size but I do find a dress that's big enough to fit me. I put it on and join my mother in the lounge. Luckily today she is not working, maybe she will have time to help me with my problem.

I boil water and make myself a cup of coffee. I should go back to my house instead of drinking this imitation coffee. Who drinks Ricoffy in this day and age. I join her in the lounge while she watches Dumisa on TV. There is a pastor giving a sermon. A boring one at that but my mother is concentrating like there is no tomorrow.

"Ma, can we talk now?"

"Shhh. I'm still listening to the sermon." She replies sipping what's probably her fourth cup of tea. It's a miracle she hasn't started sweating rooibos tea. I sit there and watch the sermon as my mind wanders to Dali and what he could be doing with Bahle right now. Are

they making love, cuddling or sightseeing. Dali is not the type to plan some elaborate activities, he always left that up to me. If it was up to him we would stay the whole vacation cuddling and making love day and night. What if that's what they are doing now, making love.

I feel a stream of tears rolling down my face. I don't even have the energy to wipe them. This is not fair in any way.

"Why are you crying?" Mum asks bringing me out of my thoughts. I wipe my tears and stare at the screen in front of us. She has paused the sermon. Maybe she does care after all.

"It's nothing." I reply, my voice barely a whisper.

"I am your mother, talk to me." So now she cares? What happened to her sermon.

"Weren't you watching a sermon?" I ask.

"I was, now I'm not." She says. "What's wrong?"

"Everything is wrong mama. This is not how things should be. I am here crying for Dali when I should be in Polokwane with him. I hate his father and that bloody contract he signed."

"You need to be patient Khanyi, Dali will end up with you. That much I can guarantee it." She says sounding way more confident than I do.

"How? Are you going to call Pastor Kenny?" I cross my fingers hoping she says yes. She smiles and places her cup of tea on the coffee table.

"Khanyi, not everything has to go through pastor Kenny. We are going to pray for Dali to be free from whatever hold Bahle has on him so he can come back to you. What you need to do is go back to your house,

call him and ask him to come for dinner. Cook a nice meal and serve him. Remind him who you are and why he fell in love with you. And then we will pray and fast every day until our prayers are answered." She tells me, gently rubbing my hand.

I don't know how well this plan will be but I trust my mother. Prayer is second nature to her, she has a direct line to God. I nod my head and gather my phone and bag getting ready to leave. I feel more relaxed and happy than I did when I got here. Mum walks me out to the car and pulls out a spice bottle from her pocket.

"Take this, it's a new spice that Dikeledi wants me to try. Make sure you cook with it for the next seven days. While we are busy fasting and praying make sure you serve Dali home cooked meals only. No takeaways. Okay? Invite him over for a meal, even if he leaves afterwards just make sure he eats. Don't fight with him, And use that spice. Dikeledi says it's some sort of ground pepper and it will make the food to be nice. Just a teaspoon and everything will be good." She tells me. These are way too many instructions but I listen and nod my head.

I throw the spice in my bag and get in the car. I'm not going to argue with her right now, you know what they say about mama, she knows best.

Seeing the suitcases I packed sitting in the same place I left them on Friday leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. Before I can drive myself nuts again I unpack the luggage and put everything back in the closet. I take off the dress and put on a lounge set then head downstairs to start cooking. I know Dali is coming back today, at least that's what his PA said.

I'm not in the mood for cooking but I make a simple chicken stew with rice and mashed butternut. I make sure to add the spice on the meat. It smells weird but hey, a spice is a spice.

I take a chance and send Dali a message asking him to come through so we can talk. Lo and behold it goes through. I guess his phone is back on. I hold my breath waiting for a reply. As soon as the phone pings I take a deep breath and hope his reply is good news. I open the message and it's a simple 'Okay.' No, greeting or asking how I am and how I stayed, just an OKay. Atleast he is coming so I should focus on that. I text mum and tell her that Dali is on his way. She sends the praying hands.

Waiting for him is draining all the energy I thought I had. Mum said no fighting so I wont even bother asking about his trip. I could have seen it on Instagram but I blocked Bahle last friday. I knew she'd post a lot just to annoy me.

I'm not even sure how faraway Dali is but the mere sound of a car makes my ears perk up. That's how nervous I am. It's already afternoon though so maybe they have left Polokwane. Hopefully he is closer. I dose off on the couch still waiting for him.

I am woken up by a car pulling up outside. I quickly get up and peep through the window. I see him getting off his car and try and fix myself up. I go back to the couch and turn on the TV. He doesn't need to know how long I've been waiting for him. I pretend I can't hear him when the door opens and he walks in. My first instinct is to take him to task for his actions but I remember mums warning. I can't fight with him.

He makes his way to the lounge and sits on the other couch.

"Hi." He says. Why does he sound bored, like he doesn't want to be here?

"Hey, how was your trip?" I ask. He glares at me.

"Are you asking because you want to know or you're asking because you want to start a fight?" See, this man doesn't rate me shem.

"I'm just curious. Although a heads up would have been nice, you know, let me know you're going away with her."

"Her is my wife and I dont need permission from you or anyone else for that matter to take her anywhere." He replies. Yeah, whichever gogo Bahle is using, she knows her thing I will give her that.

"I didnt say you need my permission, I just meant" I take a deep breath as my mothers words seep into my brain 'do not fight him.'

"Anyways are you hungry, I cooked." I get up even before he gives me an answer. I dish up the food and serve him on a tray with a bowl to wash hands on the side. He looks at me funny as u do all this. If only he knew this is just as shocking to my system as it is to him.

I dish up my own plate and sit down. He is not eating though. Instead he is staring at me.

"What's happening with your pregnancy?" He asks after a while. I swallow the food before it goes down the wrong pipe.

"Its not going. The doctor said the pregnancy test I took gave a false positive. I am not pregnant." He nods his head and picks up the tray, placing it on his lap. He doesn't look surprised by what I just said. "You already knew didnt you?" He looks at me while poking the food with his fork.

"I did. But I wanted to see how far along you would go with the lie."

"It wasn't a lie. I genuinely thought I was pregnant. But I am sorry if I gave you false hope." He takes a spoonful of the food and throws it in his mouth. "Is it good?"

"Yeah. It's fine." He replies. I am not convinced. "You said in your text you wanted to talk. Let's talk." He says and places the tray back on the table.

"Are you not going to finish your food?"

"I will, as soon as we are done talking." He says. I follow his lead and place my food on the table too.

"Okay, I was hoping we could talk about the dynamics of our relationship. I feel like we are drifting apart and it hurts. Especially how you've been talking to me lately, it's like I am the scum of the earth to you. What did I do that's so horrible for you to treat me like this?" I feel tears sting my eyes and I blink a few times willing them to go back. And lucky for me they obey.

"What dynamics?"

"You, me and Bahle. I know she is your wife but lately you've been spending more time there and none here. I feel like I am in a relationship alone. I don't understand what happened between us." I can't believe I am pouring my heart out to him and he looks bored as fuck.

He tries to pick up his plate of food and quickly retreats his arm like something just hit him, whether it's a ghost or lightning I am not sure.

He holds his arm pulling up his sleeve, that's when I see the white beads around his wrist.

"Since when do you wear beads?" I ask. He is rubbing his arm.

"They are just beads, it's not that big a deal." He argues. His phone pings and he looks at it. A smile fills his face. That smile used to be reserved for me. And now she gets it.

"I have to go. We will finish this conversation later." He says halfway out there door. Bahle definitely did something to him. He is grinning like a Cheshire cat. He is out the door in no time leaving his food barely touched. I really hope these prayers and fasts mum wants us to hold will be beneficial because I am not ready to lose my relationship just like that. And what's with the beads?

HIS HEART TO KEEP

28

BAHLENGIWE

Coming back to reality is never fun. If it were up to me we would have extended the trip for a few more days. Seeing a part of Dali I haven't seen before feels both nice and weird. I like this part of him, his present and attentive part. For the whole trip I don't recall hearing him speak to Khanyi, even once. Or maybe he was respectful enough to not do it in my presence. Either way, I liked this part of him. I wish I could keep it forever.

Like everything else, the good times always come to an end. As soon as we got here he said he had to go somewhere and we all know where that is. My kids are back, so at least I am not alone sulking in the house.

I finish making dinner for the kids and get them ready for bed. I'm not sure if Dali is coming back or not and I won't even bother asking. Although I am curious to see if he will keep up his streak. My curiosity gets the better of me. I get my phone out and send him a text.

'Please bring me a magnum when you come back. The white almond.'

I hesitate for a moment before I press send. Within seconds I get a reply. That's a first.

'Sure. I'll be there in a few minutes.' He replies. I don't know why his reply gives me butterflies. I quickly calm myself down, reminding myself of who I am dealing with. Dali can just as easily change out of the blue. So getting my Hope's up is not an option.

I clean up the kitchen while the kids play in the lounge. I feel his arms wrap around my waist and he plants a kiss on my neck.

"What's your obsession with magnum?" He asks, his breath fanning my face.

"Did you bring me one?" He holds out a box of the ice cream in front of me.

"I brought you six." He sounds so proud of himself, it's cute. I take the box and turn around to face him, pinning myself between him and the sink.

"Thank you." I give him a peck on the cheek and he smiles like a boy that just got his first kiss. Yes I am paranoid but there is something off about him. Not in a bad way though, I guess I am so used to seeing the other side of him that now everything he does makes me think he has done ulterior motives.

"You are welcome. Let me get the kids to bed then we can have our time." He says. He quickly bundles the kids up and they head up to their bedrooms giggling. Seeing my kids happy, especially with him, is enough to make me think maybe we could have a normal family life. Ten years in the making but still, better late than never right?

I finish cleaning up and grab an ice cream and a glass of wine and head to the lounge. I put a movie on the TV and wait for him to come down. He makes his way down already in his pyjamas. He plops himself next to me and pulls the blanket to cover him. He pulls me close to him and I lay my head on his chest.

"What are we watching?" He asks, looking up at the screen while his hand gently rubs my arm.

"The Best Man Holiday." I reply. He nods his head and we start the movie. I must admit, this is kind of nice. As great as these past few days have been I'm cautious of what the future holds. Dali might sing this tune of making things right and stepping up but he is who he is and people break promises.

I hold on to his arm, turning the beads in his hand around. I wish I had been there when that woman gave them to him. I would have loved to ask her what she meant by her words. What does 'the fog is clearing' even mean. I know he was shocked by her presence, but a few questions would have helped. Moments like these make me wish we were spiritually aligned with our traditional side. But both families don't practice any significant traditional practices or acknowledge our ancestors. The last time we had a decent traditional ceremony was when we had our lobola ceremony. Till this day I have no idea of half the things that were done.

"I tried taking them off," He says. " But they won't come off. I don't know why." He adds. See, a traditional healer would be able to explain all this.

"Maybe they have some significant meaning." He chuckles.

"Please, I'll get a scissor and cut them off. I shouldn't have put them on to begin with. What if that woman put some voodoo spell on me." Talk about being full of yourself. Why would some random woman want to put a spell on someone they don't know.

"Don't cut them off. Maybe we should ask the parents about it. Or better yet, ask your uncle. He is more vested in these things than our parents." I suggest. He stares at the beads for a moment.

"I will think about it."

DALINGCEBO

Dropping the kids off at the school is slowly becoming one of my favourite things to do with them. Bahle was definitely right about me being in their daily lives. They are growing up way too fast and I need to make sure I savour every moment with them. The downside of it all is how long it takes for one to get off the drop off line after dropping the kids off. It takes atleast ten minutes for me to make it out the gate.

I get to work and my PA already has my cup of coffee and a muffin ready on her desk.

"Thank you ma."

"You're welcome. You have a guest by the way." She says. I look at my watch and it's too early for any client to be here.

"A client?" She rolls her eyes before shaking her head. That's all the answer I need. Khanyi is here. She doesn't like her very much.

I sigh and make my way into the office. Sure enough she is here, sitting on my desk. The skimpy dress she has on leaves nothing to the imagination. And for some reason that does absolutely nothing to me. The sight of her used to drive me nuts and ready to nut but now, now its like she is just another woman on the street.

"What are you doing here?" I ask setting my coffee down on the desk.

"That's no way to greet the love of your life." She says making her way around the desk till she is right in front of me. She leans down and gives me a kiss. For a split second I feel like pulling away but there seems to be something pulling me towards her. The kiss is slow and gentle and she quickly pulls away. "Now that's how you greet your girlfriend. Anyways, I brought you breakfast." She picks up a lunch bag from the couch and empties the contents onto the desk.

"I made all your favourites." She says. "I tried making pancakes the way you make them and that flopped badly, so you'll have to make do with these, toast bacon, eggs and mushrooms with cheese." Everything she has laid out on the table looks appetizing that's for sure. She hands me a fork. "Taste and tell me what you think."

I take a spoonful of the eggs and a a piece of bacon.

"Its good." Her lips curl into a wide smile.

"Perfect. So how was your trip?"

"Is that a trick question?" She laughs and moves from the desk to the chair.

"Of course not. It was childish of me to throw a tantrum just because you went on a weekend away with your wife. I mean, if anyone should know how this relationship works, it's me. So, I am sorry for being such a brat about the whole thing." She says. I try to read her face for any hint of deception and find none. I dont know if I should be impressed or worried. With Khanyi you never know. She looks at me, anticipation all over her face.

"Apology accepted." She let's out a deep breath and smiles.

"Thank you. Since we are good now, I need a favour." Of course she does. I should have known this was just a way to soften me up.

"What favour?"

"So Senele needs to do an internship so she can graduate. Problem is everywhere she applies, she keeps getting rejected. So I was wondering if you can speak to Bahle and convince her to give her one at the lodge." She says without taking a breath.

I stare at her for a hot minute wondering if she is pranking me or what. She stares back, tapping her fingers on the desk. I grab a tissue and wipe my mouth.

"This is a joke right?" She squints her eyes, bringing her brows together.

"Of course not. I'm serious." She says leaning back on the chair and crossing her arms on her chest.

"So, let me get this straight, you want me to ask my wife, to give your sister a job at the lodge she runs?" She nods her head. "Khanyi, do you ever think anything through before you speak?"

"Of course I do. I wouldn't be asking if this was important." She argues.

I pack all the leftover food and put it back in the lunch bag.

"I think you should leave, I have a meeting in ten minutes that I need to prepare for." I hand her the bag and see the shock in her face.

"So you wont help me?" She asks, her voice barely a whisper.

"I dont run the lodge for one, secondly you need to remember that Bahle is my wife and you're my girlfriend, you and her are not sister wives. Just because you and I are in a relationship doesn't entitle you or

your family to any favours, especially when it comes to the lodge that my wife runs. Tell your sister to keep applying, I'm sure she will get something. Right now I need to work." She grabs the bag and looks at me, tilting her face to the side as if she is thinking hard.

"What is going on with you?" She asks. "Lately you're cold and distant. And the way you speak to me, what have I done? I know I should have been honest about not being pregnant but that's no excuse for how you're treating me. You're being unfair." She walks out with tears streaming down her face.

As soon as she is out of sight I feel something like a lump on my chest. I massage my chest but it doesn't help. I get my coffee and take a few sips but even that doesn't help instead it makes my chest feel like it's burning. I get a bottle of water from the bar fridge and gulp it down. The cold water seems to ease the heat. I take more sips and everything seems to die down. I lay back on my chair taking slow breaths until everything is back to normal.

KHANYISILE

I have never been so disrespected by Dali in my entire life. Not once do I remember him speaking to me the way he just did. I am shaking and I can't even bring myself to start the car and drive away from this parking lot. No amount of breathing in and out is helping.

The way he just changed on me out of the blue is not normal. Something is definitely off about him. If only there was a way I could find out what is going on with him. One thing mum was right about though was getting Pastor Kenny involved, that would be a bad idea.

How would I explain bringing someone's husband to be prayed for because he is not acting right with me.

It takes a little over twenty minutes for me to get my emotions in check. I wipe my tears and touch up my make up before driving out of the mine. I'm not even sure where I am going right now. I keep driving around for what feels like hours before I make it back to the house.

The silence I walk into is enough to send me into a depressive state. I pack a bag and drive to my mothers house. I cant be alone right now. I walk in and find her in the kitchen. She is not working today.

"What are you doing here?" She asks as soon as she sees my bag.

"I am visiting." I throw the bag on the couch and sit down. She makes her way to the lounge, her entire face telling me she is about to shit on me for being here.

"Dont you have your own house?" She's glaring at me like I just broke a cardinal rule by being here. This is my home, where else does she expect me to go when life gets hard?

"I do. But I dont want to be alone." I am hoping for some sympathy from her but who am I kidding, being sympathetic is not one of her strongest suites.

"Khanyisile, where is your man?"

"He is at work?"

"And you're here instead of being there cooking for him? Did I not teach you anything? How is that man supposed to come back to you if you're here instead of being in your house and making a meal for him.

Have you been using the spice I gave you?" She sits on the adjacent couch waiting for a response.

"Yes. I made him breakfast this morning and took it to the office." She claps her hands as her lips form into a smile.

"Good girl. Do it again tomorrow. Dont leave that spice out." She says.

"What's your obsession with that spice anyway because it has no name."

"That spice is how you're going to get your man back." How can a spice get a person back? And then it hits me.

"That's not a spice is it?" I ask. She stares at me. No emotion whatsoever.

"Its whatever you want it to be. I have a meeting with some church ladies. Make sure you're gone by the time I come back." She leaves me in the lounge and leaves while I am trying to wrap my head around this spice business.

"Shit, that is muti. I've been feeding Dali muti all this time."

HIS HEART TO KEEP

29

KHANYISILE

My mind has been buzzing since mum left. I refuse to believe what my mind is telling me. There has to be a mistake and she will tell me when she comes back that she did not give me umuthi and expects me to feed it to Dali. Who am I kidding, I've been eating the same food that I've been cooking for Dali.

I get off the couch and start pacing for the hundredth time today. If I'm not careful I might leave a hole in the carpet. I hear the front gate opening. I know it's not my mother because if it was she would have opened the big gate. The small gate is way noisier than the big one. Senele walks in stares at me pacing up and down the lounge.

"Hi sis." She says. I wave at her and go back to my thoughts. "Did you manage to speak to him? What did he say?" She asks.

"Its not happening. You'll have to make another plan." I reply. I am too caught up in my own head to give her the attention she needs.

"But can he at least try, I really need this." She begs. Her voice is irritating me to be honest and i dont have the energy to deal with her right now.

"Try something else Sanele, Dali will not help you. Now leave me alone." I spit and she quickly takes a step back.

"Geez, thanks for your help." She says marching up the stairs.

"You're welcome." I shout.

The sound of a car outside pulls me back to my thoughts. I look through the window and see my mother getting out of the car. I open the door and wait for her to come in.

"You're still here." She says walking past me.

"Where else would I be? I've been trying to call you and you did not pick up your calls. I need answers." I follow her to the kitchen. She grabs the juice from the fridge and pours herself a glass before heading back to the lounge.

"Answers to what?" She is not even paying attention to me. Right now she has the remote in her hand and is surfing through the channels like I am not standing here losing my mind.

"The 'spice' you gave me. I've been eating the same food I've been giving to Dali." I tell her.

"Relax, it's not meant for you so it won't harm you." What the actual fuck.

"So this is meant to harm Dali?" I lower myself onto the couch, feeling weak in the knees.

"Of course not. Its meant to remind him who he loves." She argues.

"Why does he need umuthi for that. I know he loves me I dont see the need for him to be fed umuthi. That is wrong." She rolls her eyes and puts the tv on mute then turns to me.

"Khanyi, listen to me. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that spice. It won't harm Dali in anyway shape or form. All it will do is remind him who the love of his life is. All you have to do is make sure he eats the

food you cook for him for five more days and everything will be back to normal. Dali will be putty in your hands and you will live the life you've always desired. That's all that it is supposed to do. Nothing else." She says all this so nonchalantly you'd think this is normal.

"How long have you been doing this?" I ask. She pulls my hand and places it on her lap, gently rubbing it.

"It doesn't matter. All that matters is that Dali will come back to you and one day you guys will get married and you will live the life you've always wanted. I mean look at you now, you're living it. You're a stay at home girlfriend with a monthly allowance, a car, a house, designer clothes and bags, what more do you want?" This cannot be the same woman who prays until tears run down her face. It can't be.

"You do realise all of what you're saying is a lie right? It means Dali doesn't love me, he loves her." I state.

"Of course he loves you. Have you forgotten how you two met? The man loves you." She emphasizes. I pull my hand away from her. Blow by blow my mind goes back to the beginning.

Dali broke up with me because he had to marry Bahle. I was so heartbroken I spent days locked up in my bedroom. I didn't eat or drink. It felt like someone had ripped my heart out of my chest and left a gaping hole. I loved him and I thought he'd fight for me. But he didn't. A week later he was outside my door claiming he made a mistake breaking up with me. I didn't even think that anything else other than his love for me made him come back to me. Even when he suggested we keep our relationship a secret from his father because of the

contract he'd signed I never hesitated and just agreed. I'd still have him either way and that's all that mattered to me.

"Look, I know this seems extreme but, i couldn't let that man walk away from you. Do you know how hard it is for someone like that to look at a woman from elokshin and see someone he could love and build a future with?" She asks. "I did this for you. For us. Look at where we are right now, we live in a huge house that he bought, Seluleko managed to go to varsity and has no student debt, Senele too. All I've ever done was for you girls. You know how hard things were when your father left. And you know how easy things have been with Dali in the picture." She takes a deep breath. "I know this may seem extreme but it has paid off. Now if you want, you can stop giving Dali the 'spice' if you want, but remember that we cant own this house fully without his father finding out. The house you live in, is in his name, not yours. If he goes back to Bahle you lose everything. WE lose everything."

Nice speech, except its bullshit. My mind still can't wrap around the fact that my praying mother, the one who attends Thursday prayer meetings, is part of the women's league at church dabbles in some dark magic voodoo. Who is this woman?

BAHLENGIWE

My return to the office has been smoother than I imagined. I thought Sahluko would be here breathing down my neck but he has surprisingly stayed away. Which I am grateful for. I don't have the energy to deal with him right now. Especially with the cameras still in the office.

The door opens as I am packing up to leave and he walks in. I guess I spoke too soon.

"You're back." He says, slowly walking towards my desk.

"I am." I am trying not to pay too much attention to him. I don't know who is watching.

"You know, if I didn't know better I'd say you are ignoring me. First you work from home for almost a week and then you disappear to Limpopo, how was your trip by the way?" He asks. I finish packing and sit back down.

"My trip was great. I had fun. And no I am not ignoring you. I just think whatever it is that we were trying to do, it won't work." He pulls out the chair and sits down.

"What are you talking about?"

"Just that. There is too much at stake for me and unfortunately I am not willing to risk everything for a simple fuck." His eyes widen and he chuckles.

"So that's what it was? A simple fuck? It must be nice." He sounds hurt a bit and now I hate myself. But this has to be done.

"Sahluko, look, I am not built for this. The creeping and lying and all that is just not my cup of tea and I think it's best we keep our relationship professional from now on. It will be better for everyone." He pushes the chair back and stands up.

"Of course. Have a great day Mrs Khumalo." He says as if calling me Mrs Khumalo leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

I watch him walk out and finally I can breathe. That was harder than I anticipated but I am glad I've done it. Now I can move on and focus on

figuring out where these cameras came from even though my suspicions are still on him.

I get my things and drive home. Dali's car is here. He is early. I walk into the house and find him sitting on the couch, his shirt buttons open.

"Hey, you're back early." He doesn't reply. I get closer to him. He looks like he is sleeping but the way he is breathing is not normal. "Dali." Again he is quiet. My heart starts racing. I sit next to him and his breath is coming out as if he can't breathe properly. I shake him and his eyes fly open. They are red and look like he is in pain. "What's wrong?" He clasps his chest and roughly rubs his fist over it. What in the hell is going on?

"It's nothing. I think I am coming down with something." He replies. His voice is creaky and low.

"Okay, but why are you holding your chest? Is it sore?" He shakes his head.

"Not really. It feels like there is something stuck on my chest, something heavy. I don't know what's going on." He says.

"Where are the kids?" I need to take this man to the hospital or else he will die on this couch.

"They are with Sbu, I asked him to pick them up from school." It feels like the more he speaks the harder it gets for him to breathe.

"Okay, I am taking you to the hospital. Can you walk?" He shakes his head. How am I supposed to carry a grown man to the car? Maybe I should call an ambulance.

"I dont need a hospital, just a few hours of sleep and I should be fine."
He says, his voice breaking and becoming hoarse.

"It wasnt a question. Let's get to the car." I help him stand and he leans on me. He is heavy. Jesus.

We make it to the car even though I am also breathing out of control now. I swear I miss one day of gym and my body gives up on me. How am I breathing like I just ran a marathon when all I did was help Dali get to the car. I strap him in and quickly head back to the house and get my bag and phone. I lock up and get in the car.

The drive to the hospital feels like it's taking a long time. Dali's breathing is getting worse by the minute and my hands are sweaty. He can't die on me. Not like this. We get to the hospital and I rush in and a doctor comes out with a porter and nurse in tow pushing a gurney.

"What happened to him?" The doctor asks.

"I don't know. He said it feels like there's something heavy on his chest and he cant breathe properly." I tell him. They quickly wheel him in shouting instructions to the nurses.

"You can wait in the waiting room maam." The nurse tells me as Dali is wheeled into a ward.

I get my phone out of my bag and dial Sbu's number. He doesn't pick up. I try Lindo and she picks up pretty quickly.

"Hey sis, do you want us to bring the kids?" She asks.

"No. Something is wrong with Dali, I just rushed him to the hospital." I say. My heart is thudding on my chest like it will break free.

"What is wrong with him?" She asks.

"I dont know. I found him in the house, he said his chest is heavy and it feels like something is in there blocking his breathing."

"Okay, I'll tell Sbu, he will come to the hospital and I will stay with the kids. Dont worry, I'm sure its nothing serious." She says. I hang up and sink down onto the cold steel chairs. Dear Lord, please don't let him die.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

30

BAHLENGIWE

I've been pacing up and down this hallway for what feels like a lifetime now. In actual fact its only been fifteen minutes but my anxiety is at its peak level. I dont know what I am going to do should anything happen to Dali. I am way too young to be a widow. Way too young.

"How is he?" Sbu asks behind me, startling me. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." He adds. I finally take a seat on the steal benches. Atleast someone is here now to share my anxiety.

"I dont know. I haven't heard anything." I reply. He sighs, looks up and down the hallway before he sits down.

"What exactly happened?"

"I really dont know. I came home from work and he was on the couch, he said it felt like there was something heavy sitting on his chest. Next thing I know he is struggling to breath so I brought him here." I say. He nods his head, his eyes closed.

Footsteps coming down the hallway bring our heads up. We stand as the doctor gets closer.

"Evening. I am Doctor Msomi. I am treating Mr Khumalo, I just have a few questions if you dont mind. Does Mr Khumalo have a history of asthma or any form of bronchial disease?" He asks.

"He had asthma when he was little but he outgrew it. He hasn't had an asthma attack since he was nine I think." Sbu says. The doctor notes the information down on his file.

"No other sicknesses besides that?" He asks looking at me. I don't even know why he is looking at me because there is very little I know about the important parts of Dali's life. I should have called Khanyi, she could have been able to answer all these questions.

"No. None that we know of." I say.

"Okay, we are trying to eliminate any other problems he might have because his xray scans are not showing us anything. We've had to put him on a ventilator just to help him breathe. I will update you as soon as we have figured out what the problem may be." He says and walks away.

"This is weird." Sbu says. "Dali has never had any problems like this. He has never even been admitted to a hospital, his medicals always come back clean. So what could be the problem?" He asks.

"Maybe it's something he ate. He is allergic to raisins right?" I am just as confused as he is.

He shakes his head. "No, he just hates them. I'll ask his PA what he had for lunch. It could be anything at this point." He pulls his phone out and calls his PA, making sure to put the phone on loudspeaker.

"Mr Khumalo, is everything okay?" She asks as soon as she picks up.

"Not really. I need your help. Dali has been admitted to the hospital..."

"Oh my God. Is he okay? What happened?" She asks in a panic.

"That's what I was hoping you'd help me with. He has difficulty breathing and the doctors can't seem to find what's wrong with him so I was hoping you'd tell me what he had for lunch, maybe he is having a reaction from it."

"Okay, he didnt have anything for lunch. In the morning I gave him his usual coffee and muffin. He drank the coffee but he didnt eat the muffin cause it was still on his desk when he left." She says. It cant be the coffee. Besides, Mrs Ceko knows how Dali takes his coffee and he doesnt drink coffee made by anyone but her and I doubt she would have put anything in there. She loves Dali way too much. "Oh wait, Khanyi was here in the morning and she brought him breakfast." She adds. Sbu looks at me, I dont know what he expects me to say.

"Do you know what she brought?" Sbu asks her.

"No. She stayed with him when he ate and then left with her lunch bag. I didnt see what was in there. But now that you say he has difficulty breathing, he was coughing for the better part of the day and he kept gulping down water saying something is stuck in his chest." She adds. Now I know its definitely something Khanyi gave him. Question is what?

"Okay ma, Ngyabonga. I'll talk to Khanyi and find out from her if she knows anything." Sbu tells her. Even though he is trying to be calm I can tell he is getting angry. Not that I blame him. I'm angry too right now but I am more worried about Dali.

"I need to go speak to Khanyi." Sbu says standing up. "Let me know if there are any changes." I nod my head and watch him walk away. I dont know what he is going to say to her but I hope she is truly honest because this is a life and death situation.

KHANYISILE

Dali is not picking up his phone. I don't even know what I am going to say to him. I mean I have been feeding the man umuthi for him to love me. Yes I didnt know about it but still, I gave it to him, my conscience wont allow me to just let it go. There was a time when Dali loved me for me, not with outside help now all I can think about is that I have been living a lie.

My mother on the other hand, I don't even know how to look at her. I've always seen her as this praying woman who dedicated her life to the church and the hospital. I put her on a pedestal and praised her every day for being the strong resilient woman that she is, especially after my father left her. Now I am not certain about who this woman is. On one hand she holds the bible like her life depends on it and on the other she holds umuthi like it's nothing.

My phone rings for the hundredth time and her name flashes on the screen. I ignore it, again. I dont want to talk to her. She drops the call and then a car hoots at the gate. I peek through the window and see her car parked outside. I should have parked my own car in the garage then she would not know I'm home. Ignoring her now is not going to help me because she is making noise and if I'm not careful I might get fined for making noise.

I get the remote and the gate slides open. I sit back on the couch and take another shot of vodka. Knowing her, she will just let herself in. I pour another shot, I need the liquid courage in order to face her. She walks in like she's being chased by ghosts. Who knows, maybe her witchy spirit friends are right behind her.

"Why are you not answering my calls." She yells, throwing her bag on the empty couch. "I've been trying to call you the whole day."

"I really do not feel like talking to you right now." I say and she laughs.

"Really? And why is that? Because of some small small umuthi and now you think you can ignore me. Dont bore me please." I look at her and we end up in a staring contest. Me, I am looking for my mother behind that facade she is wearing. But I dont see her. I don't know why she is staring at me.

"Small small umuthi? Do you know what that small small umuthi would do if his family finds out? If he finds out?" I ask. I dont even have the strength to scream and yell at her even though I have played out this conversation for a while in my head.

"But they wont." She says clapping her hands. "Besides, I came here for more important things. My friend at the hospital just told me Dali has been admitted and he is on a ventilator. Apparently he can't breathe on his own. How much of the muthi did you give him today?" She asks so easily as if she didnt just say he is admitted in a hospital and breathing through a ventilator.

"What do you mean he is in hospital?" I get up and put my shoes on. I need to go there. I need to be with him.

"Where do you think you're going?" I look around for my bag. It's on the couch she is sitting on. I make my way there but she grabs the bag and puts it behind her.

"Ma please, I need my bag. I have to go to the hospital."

"And what exactly will you be going there as? His wife? His official mistress? How are you going to introduce yourself to his parents? Explain that to me and I will let you go." I sink onto the couch, tears filling my eyes. When did my life take such a drastic turn.

"I just need to know he is okay?" I mumble.

"He is fine. If anything happens my friend will update us." She says. "In the meantime I will make you something to eat." She pats my thigh and disappears into the kitchen. Another car hoots at the gate. I am definitely not in the mood for visitors but this person seems like a second version of my mother because they refuse to stop even for a second. I peek through the window and see Sbu's car. My heart immediately goes into overdrive. What if something happened to Dali?

I quickly grab the remote and head outside. I open the gate. I am anxious as he drives in. I know he doesn't like me very much and him being here means something really serious has happened. I cross my fingers and say a little prayer as he approaches me. Sbu is a whole lot scarier than Dali. And the scar on his face running down his jaw and tattoos on his arms make for a scary sight.

"Hi. Is everything okay?" I ask because he seems to have lost his words. He is looking at me, the side of his mouth slightly lifted and his brows arched together.

"What did you give my brother this morning?" No greeting. Okay.

"I don't understand."

"You do. You brought my brother breakfast this morning and soon after he ate that he couldn't breathe. And now he is in hospital fighting for his

life. So what did you give him." He says. As calm as he sounds its obvious he is angry. I can feel my heart thumping in my chest as if there are horses there running a race.

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about." He chuckles, nodding his head and looking from side to side. The tension right now is palpable. That stupid PA must have told him I was there this morning. But how does that make me the bad guy. All I did was give him food.

"What's going on here?" Mum asks walking out of the house. Sbu completely ignores her and shoots daggers my way.

"Just tell me what was in that food so my brother can get the help he needs." He says. If I tell him about mum's 'spice' and then something happens to him, I will go to jail. But if anything happens to him then I am screwed either way.

"Did she not just say she doesn't know what you're talking about?" Mum questions, only then does he give her attention. He stares at her from head to toe and back up again. Arrogant bastard. He turns back to me.

"For your sake, I hope the cameras in his office can back up your story. Because if they don't, and something happens to my brother, you will curse the day you heard the name Dalingcebo Khumalo. That much I can assure you." He walks away leaving me still stuck on the camera part. How are there cameras in Dali's office? We've done things in that office, nasty things that should not be on any camera.

"That boy is too arrogant for his own good." My mother says before walking back into the house. The fact that she can call a forty year old man a boy is weird to me. I close the gate as soon as he drives out. I

need to find a way to get into that hospital and see Dali. There is no way I can just sit back and do nothing.

"We need to find a way to help him." Mum turns to me, flour all over her hands.

"He is in a hospital with some of the best doctors in the country. He will be fine." She says. "And we are going to keep him in our prayers." She adds.

"I doubt God listens to anything coming out of your mouth." I mumble.

"Careful, I am still your mother, I brought you into this world and i can take you out. Dont try me." That used to scare the shit out of me as a kid and even now it still scares me, especially with the knife that seems to have popped out of nowhere and now its tip is stuck on the counter. Maybe this should have been my clue all along that this woman was anything but a saint.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

31

MISS MANANA

She is angry. This drive is the last thing she wanted to do but she has no choice. Things are not working out the way it was supposed to. Dali is in hospital, Khanyi is acting like some spoilt teenager, she needs to get her things in order.

The weather is a bit gloomy today, not her favourite type of weather to drive in. She parks the car outside the yard and Gasa is already waiting for her. He immediately ushers her into the rondavel.

"Sit down." He tells her. She obliges and takes a seat on the reed mat. "What seems to be the problem?" He asks as soon as he is seated.

"Something is wrong with the muthi you gave me. Khumalo is in hospital right now, apparently it started soon after my daughter gave her food with the muthi." She narrates. Gasa nods his head, slowly as he thinks about this means. Usually his guides show him what he needs to do for an individual, that's why the muthi has been working on Dali for so long without anyone noticing or any side effects. But this time they have been silent. It's like something is blocking him from getting access to Dali. The question is what? "What do you think is the problem?" She asks him.

He pulls out his bones and starts his chants. He brings the bag closer to her so she can blow into it. He shakes it a couple of times and then throws the bones on the ground. He stares at them for a few minutes, before he shakes his head vigorously.

"Something is blocking me from seeing him." He tells her.

"Ngyala Gasa, (I refuse.) You're supposed to be powerful, figure out a way to get to him. If he dies I will have a problem and I cant have that." She says, almost screaming. Gasa looks up from his bones, his eyes spitting fire.

"Watch your tone. This is not a place where you shout." He warns her. She cowers back, silently mumbling an apology. Gasa goes back to his bones and still nothing. "Something or someone is standing between my guides and him. Nothing is clear enough for me to see. It's like there is a huge wall between us and him. Do you know if he had some traditional ceremony recently or not?"

"Not that I know off. All i know is that they don't do any of the traditional stuff other people do. No one knows why but there has never been a specific traditional ceremony or anything of that sort." She admits. This is one of the things she likes about Dali and his family, besides the arrogance and thinking they are above anyone else because of their money, their ignorance when it came to traditional ceremonies always worked in her favour.

"I will have to consult no gobela wami (my trainer) so we can figure out what's going on." Gasa tells her. "In the meantime..." he pulls out a mayonnaise bottle with a brown powder and pours a teaspoonful onto a newspaper cutout and hands it to her. "Mix that with water and make sure he drinks it."

"Hhaybo Gasa, the man is on a ventilator to help him breathe, how am I supposed to get him to drink this?" She asks, her eyebrows raised.

"You're a woman who always has a plan, figure it out." He tells her. "That should reverse the muthi I gave you before and then we can figure out what is going on." She sighs, and nods her head.

She drives away from Gasas house with a million thoughts running through her head. Yes Dali is admitted at the same hospital where she works but getting access to his ward will not be easy, more especially now that Sbu thinks Khanyi had something to do with Dali's illness. But like Gasas said, she is a woman and she has to make a plan.

Her shift only starts tomorrow but she was more than happy to swap with one of her colleagues. Of course she had to make up a lie so can swap with the colleague. Now all she needs is to figure out how to get to Dali's ward. She gets to the hospital, her little package safely tucked away in her bra. She greets her colleagues and makes her way to her office. Perks of being a matron. Another thing she can thank Dali for. His connections came in handy when she applied here. And they worked well for her so much so she got this position within three years of being here.

It's still visiting hours and it will be a while before she can get to the ward without drawing any attention. She makes herself a cup of tea before she makes her rounds. By the time visiting hours end she is nearing the private wards. She puts a mask on and makes her way to the ward. Voices inside the ward bring her to a halt.

"I still say we consult." Someone says. She is not sure who it is, but it sounds like Sbu.

"No. You know we dont do that in this family." Khumalo seniors guttural voice seeps through the door.

"Its worth a try baba." His wife tells him. "Besides, what could it hurt? Doctors dont know what's wrong with him and he is getting worse. We need to figure out what's going on with him as soon as possible or else we are going to bury him." She adds.

Panic sets in. Her heart starts racing, if they consult everything she has done will be revealed and she can't have that. She backtracks just as Khumalo senior talents and agrees for the consultation to happen. She makes her way to the waiting room and waits. The family files out of the ward, this is her chance. They disappear down the hallway and she makes her way to the ward.

The situation is more dire than she imagined. It's clear the ventilator is the only thing keeping him alive. She needs to do this before his family comes back in the morning. She picks up the jug of water and pours the water into a glass. She pulls out her little package from her bra and empties it into the glass making sure to mix everything just right.

Pulling out the endotracheal tube is risky, but right now it's a risk she is willing to take. As soon as it is out she pours the liquid down Dali's throat, he gags and gasps for air but the mixture makes it down his throat. She tries to put back the tube just as quickly as she took it out but it's a struggle getting it back in. Especially with him trying to breathe on his own and failing.

"What are you doing?" She freezes and slowly turns around. Its Bahle.

"What are you doing here?" She asks again, getting closer.

"I was just making sure the ventilator is okay." Miss Manana replies.

"Why did you take it out? He can't breathe without it." She tells her.

"I know. That's why I am putting it back." She struggles for moment but she gets it in. "See, all done." She adds as Dali's breathing stabilizes. "I will leave you to it." She tries to by pass Bahle but she blocks her way. "What now?"

"Take off your mask." Bahle orders.

"I am in the ICU, I am not allowed to take my mask off because it might put the patient at risk." She replies trying to sidestep her again but gets blocked.

"I can always ask the security outside to help you take the mask off if it's a problem for you. I walk into my husbands ward and you are hovering over him, with his breathing tube in your hands. I dont know about you but for me, it's suspicious as hell. So, pull your mask down or I will get the man outside to do it for you." Dali starts convulsing and the machines beep out of control. A perfect opportunity for Miss Manana to make her way out as doctors come rushing in. She breathes a sigh of relief when she makes it to her office without being noticed by anyone else.

BAHLE

They have been in there for twenty minutes straight and no one is coming out to tell me what is going on. Instead the nurses go in and out of the ward, completely ignoring me.

"What happened." Dali's mother asks rushing to me. I can see the tears running down her face. I cant imagine what it's like seeing your child go from being healthy to bedridden and halfway to death in just a blink of an eye. Maybe I shouldn't have called them back.

"We've been gone for a few minutes what could have changed since then?" My father in law asks. I also have questions with no one to ask.

"I don't know. The doctor hasn't said anything." I tell them. A nurse walks out and Sbu quickly grabs her.

"What's going on with my brother? Is he okay?" He asks her. She pulls her arm away from him, her irritation spread all over her face.

"The doctor will be with you shortly." She says, her voice stern and commanding even Sbu is taken aback. When she gets no reply she turns and walks away.

The doctor walks out, a smile on his face.

"Well, I have good news and bad news." He starts. "The good news is that he is breathing on his own and he is conscious. The bad news is that when we pulled out the ventilator it came out with some blackish substance that we don't understand. We will be taking it to the lab for analysis so we can figure out what it is and why it was in his throat. Other than that, everything seems to be in order." He says. To say I am relieved would be an understatement.

"Can we see him?" I ask. The doctor looks at his watch then back at us.

"I will give you ten minutes with him but after that I need him to rest. We will keep him here for a couple of days for observation." He tells us before leaving. I lead them into the ward and sure enough, he is awake. He is staring absentmindedly at the ceiling until we get close enough for him to see us.

"Oh my son, I was so worried about you." His mum says leaning down to hug him. He tries to speak but ends up coughing instead.

"It's okay boy, don't speak. Reserve your strength. We are just happy you're back to the land of the living?" His dad says trying to make a joke. I guess Dali gets it because he smiles.

"I told you you would die before me." Sbu says and his mum hits him on the shoulder.

"Don't say that wena." He winks at his brother and Dali smiles, I guess this is an inside joke. He turns to me, his smile a little less wider than it was a moment ago. For some reason it seems like he is back to his usual self. The pretense and the coldness, it's back.

"Hi." I don't know what to say to him right now. The man I went to Polokwane with seems to have disappeared. I don't know if I am just reading too much into this or not but I know when Dali is pretending, I've had ten years to perfect that observation and right now he is pretending for his parents. They chat and laugh about something, I don't know what because my mind is on overdrive right now. I knew this would happen but for some reason I allowed myself to be sucked in by his charm and stupid 'I want to right my wrongs' speech. What the fuck was I thinking?

I look at the side table on the other side and see the white beads scattered on a tray. They took them out. When did that happen?

I am driving behind the parents as we make our way home. Sbu offered to drive me but I refused. I need to be alone so I can beat myself up in peace. I guess now I can fully admit that I am weak and possibly pathetic too. I keep holding out my hand to Dali and he constantly gives me crumbs, and that's on a good day. But this, this is the end. I am done panting over him like some irritating puppy clawing at his feet.

We get home and the parents quickly rush into the house. I'm sure they can't wait to update my parents. I sit in the car for longer than I should but the quiet helps me put things into perspective. A knock on my window startles me. When I look up I see Sbu bent down and looking at me through the window. I unlock the door and he pulls it open. He shoves his upper body into the car with his feet firmly planted on the concrete driveway.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong. I'm just tired." I lie. I can't tell him his brother is back to his old self again. To them it might be a good thing but to me it may just spell another lifetime of being a married single parent.

"I know you were worried about Dali but he will be okay. You heard what the doctor said but he is better now. That's all that matters." He says but my mind refuses to sit down and acknowledge what he is saying. He is alive yes, but for me, I am heading back to hell.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

32

BAHLENGIWE

Dali is coming home today. A few days ago I would have had a reason to celebrate but the past couple of days have been both weird and familiar at the same time. I don't know why I convinced myself that things would be different this time. For just that split second, he was my husband, fully and truly my husband. But now I am not so sure.

Everytime I go to see him at the hospital he is his cold and distant. He answers questions being asked and nothing else matters. Today I am expected to pick him up from the hospital as the loving dedicated wife I am supposed to be, but it's hard to be honest. I've been dragging my feet since I woke up this morning. The kids are excited that their father is coming home, our parents are planning a little welcome home get together. Everyone is in high spirits, except for me.

"What time are you going to the hospital?" My sister asks coming behind me. I've been standing by the sink washing the same plate for the past ten minutes now, still trying to prolong the inevitable.

"I don't know, what time is it?"

"11:30. Shouldn't you be there by 12?" I sigh and wipe my hands.

"Yeah."

"What's wrong with you? I thought you'd be happy Dali is coming home." She says taking over the dishes.

"I should be. But I feel like he is back to his old self again. Ever since he woke up he's been cold and distant. It's like he is back to being the person he was before." I tell her.

"Come on, maybe you're reading too much into this. The man came face to face with death, maybe he is still shook. Give him a chance." I don't know about that. And I certainly doubt it.

Driving to the hospital I am still not sure what awaits me. Maybe Lindo is right, he is just shocked by the events of the past few days. I get to the hospital and head straight for his ward. Giggles and laughter are the first thing I hear. I walk in and find Khanyi leaning over him, kissing him. He seems happy. I guess the shock has worn off. I clear my throat and they both turn to look at me.

"Hey, you're early." He says. I look at my watch, it's just five minutes before twelve. That's not being early in my books.

"Has the doctor been around already?" I ask him, completely ignoring Khanyi.

"Yeah but he should be back with the discharge papers." He replies. I notice their hands are still intertwined. Now I feel like the intruder at this moment.

"Cool, maybe you should get dressed. Your clothes are in the closet." He nods his head and gets out of bed. He opens the closet and takes out the clothes he will need before disappearing in the bathroom.

I take out the duffel bag from the closet and pack up the rest of his things with Khanyi watching me. Once I am sure I have everything I

leave the bag on the bed and get the tray with the beads. I carefully fill an empty tin I use for jewellery with the beads.

"I guess they didnt work?" She says. I look up at her and she has a smirk on her face.

"What?"

"The beads. I guess they didnt work." I ignore her and finish what I am doing. "You know I was wondering what changed with him all of a sudden. Now i know. You tried to bewitch him and it didnt work." She adds. Again I keep myself occupied with the beads. "I guess it's true what they say, God never fails. Hallelujah." She claps her hands, laughing.

The doctor walks in with the discharge papers just as Dali comes out of the bathroom.

"Ah, I see my patient is up and ready to go. How are you feeling?" The doctor asks him.

"Better than ever. I cant wait to get out of this hellhole. No offence." The doctor chuckles.

"None taken. It's always a great thing seeing a patient walk out on their own." He pulls out the papers from the file and hands them to me.

"These are the discharge papers. Please sign here and here." He tells me pointing out the blank spaces needing my signature.

"Shouldnt the patient be the one signing his own discharge papers?" Khanyi asks. The doctor looks at her then me and back to her.

"He could, but she is his wife and his next of kin so she has every right to sign them." The fact that he has to explain that to her icks me. I sign the papers and hand them back to the doctor.

"Perfect. A porter will be here to take you out." He tells Dali.

"Thank you Doctor but I can walk on my own." He argues.

"I can see that. But hospital policy, you have to be wheeled out." Be insists. Dali opens his mouth to say something and I quickly cut him off.

"We will wait for the porter doctor." He nods his head and walks out.

"I think I am capable of walking on my own." Dali says.

"Of course you are baby." Khanyi agrees, snuggling herself close to him. I am not about to entertain these two right now. I am just happy the parents decided to stay behind and not have to see this shit show happening.

I get his bag as the porter walks in with the wheelchair. Dali begrudgingly gets on it. The moment we walk out of the ward Khanyi takes the opposite direction since she cant be seen in public with him. We get to the parking lot and he tries to jump in the drivers side. I hold on to the keys and glare at him until he gets the message and makes his way to the passenger side.

"I am not an invalid you know." He says roughly pulling on the seat belt.

"I am sure you are not. But you just got discharged. The least you can do is allow other people to help you."

"I dont need help." He argues. I am in no mood for an unnecessary back and forth so I keep quiet.

The drive home is colder than an Alaskan winter. The silence feels strange. Especially because just last week we were singing along to some love songs on our way to Polokwane. How things can easily change. We get home and he walks into his welcome home party. Everyone is happy to see him. I see my best friend Tiyandza on the other side of the room. We lock eyes and I feel tears well up in my eyes. She makes her way towards me and drags me up the stairs to the bedroom.

"Why do you look like you just lost a husband. He is here, alive. You should be happy." She says wiping the tears that just escaped my eyes.

"There is nothing to be happy about." I sink down on the bed and she stands in front of me, her arms crossed over her chest.

"I dont understand. Weren't you two on some vacation just a week ago? You said things were looking up. What changed between then and now?" I shrug my shoulders.

"I dont know what changed. Or maybe I had my Hope's way too high. I dont know. Dali is back to being his usual self. You know when I got to the hospital Khanyi was there, you should have seen how happy he was with her. I felt like I was intruding." She sighs and sinks down next to me.

"And here i was happy that he had finally seen the light." She says. Her words ring in my head as I remember what the woman said in Polokwane. She said the fog was getting clearer, and that was when he was different with me. Even the way he spoke to Khanyi, it was like he was disgusted by her but now everything is back to the way it was.

"Do you think Khanyi is capable of bewitching someone?" I ask, allowing my inner thoughts to be heard.

"I wouldn't put it past her." She replies. "Why?" I tell her everything that happened in Polokwane and the woman who was in the ward before Dali started convulsing and then waking up. And the black substance they found in his throat. What if she had something to do with it. Now that I think about, that woman's eyes looked familiar. Even with the mask on her eyes looked like I had seen them before. I should have told Sbu when it happened, he would have found a way to figure out who she is and why she was there.

"Isn't Khanyi's mother a matron at the hospital?" Titi asks. We look at each other for a brief second and everything clicks. That was definitely Khanyi's mother. What did she do to Dali?

"It was her." I yell. "I knew she looked familiar."

"We need to tell his father. Maybe they can do something about it." Titi says. I sink back down on the bed as reality sets in.

Mr Khumalo doesn't believe in any traditional methods of doing things. Except lobola only because it involves money. The night Dali woke up Sbu had convinced them to go and consult but since Dali is alive and well, that seems like a farfetched dream now.

"Or we could just go there ourselves and figure out what's happening?" She suggests. I wouldn't even know where to start looking for someone to help us.

"I will talk to Sbu about it. Maybe he will know someone who can help." I say.

"Perfect, in the meantime this weekend we are going on a girls trip to Cape Town. I've already spoken to Lindo and she is on board, Dvumo will meet us there." She says.

"And when did you plan this?" She winks at me and stands up.

"You know me, I always have a plan up my sleeve. Let's join the party." She walks to the door and stops, turns around and looks at me dead in the eye. "Just so we are clear, this is not up for negotiation. We are going." She says as if she knew I would try and make up an excuse not to go.

"Got it. No negotiation." I give her a mock salute and then follow her out.

Walking down the stairs I see there are more guests. Dali's friends are here. Including Khanyi's bestie Busi. I greet them and make my way out to the garden. I find Sbu tossing the meat on the braai stand. And he is alone. There is no better time than now to speak to him about my suspicions.

"Hey, can we talk for a second." I ask.

"Sure, what's up?"

"The consultation, is it still going to happen?" He sips his beer and shakes his head.

"No. The parents think there is no need. And I agree. Dali is alive and healthy, and that's what we wanted. So there's no need for it anymore." He says.

"What if it would give us an idea of why he ended up in the hospital in the first place. What if it happens again? And what if next time it's worse? I mean the doctors are still trying to figure out what caused him to end up in the hospital and now they are baffled that he woke up on his own. There has to be an explanation and if they can't give us the answers we need then we should find other ways to get them." I urge hoping he will see things the way I do but it seems to be falling on deaf ears.

"Look, I know the past few days were scary but its over now. That's why we are here, celebrating his life."

"I know but....."

"But nothing. Let it go Bahle." I guess he is no help. I sigh and make my way back to the house. I join Lindo and Titi in the kitchen.

"And, what did he say?" Titi whispers low enough for Lindo not to hear us. I shake my head and she quickly gets the message. "Dont worry, we will find someone who can help us." She says.

"Do you guys need help?" Busi asks coming into the kitchen.

"We are fine, thanks for the offer." Lindo quickly replies. "We have everything under control." I see Busi shudder under Lindo's cold stare. I would too. She quickly retreats back to the lounge.

"That was rude." I comment.

"Please, the only reason she is here is to spy for her friend. And I hate snitches." She replies.

The little get together goes fairly smooth, everyone seems happy to have the old Dali back. Titi sends me a text with the number of someone named Gogo Mpungose. I look at her from across the table and she winks at me. I guess we are going to our own consultation then.

SAHLUKO

He has been sitting in his car for the past twenty minutes, constantly staring at his watch. She should be here by now. The flashing lights in his rearview mirror give him hope. It's dark so he cant see the car properly, he pulls his gun out from under his seat just to be on the safe side. The person pulls up behind him and switches the lights off. They get out of the car and make their way to the passenger side of his car. They open the car and get in. He puts his gun away as relief sets in.

"You took your sweet time." He comments just as the the person closes the door.

"I am a busy woman Sahluko. Here." She hands him an envelope filled with cash. "You can disappear now. I have no use for you anymore."

"I haven't done what you hired me to do." He counters. She turns her body to face him.

"Its not that you haven't done it its that you have failed at doing it. Big difference." She tells him.

"Girly... "

"Uh uh, its Miss Manana to you." She corrects him.

"Fine, Miss Manana, how do you conclude that I have failed when I haven't even started?" He asks. She bursts out laughing.

"Funny. You do remember you went on some work trip with her to KZN, ended up in the same room but there is no evidence of that. Not even a simple picture of her sleeping on your chest. And then you claim you had sex with her in her office and again, no evidence. That's all I needed. One simple picture, even if it was innocent, if I could spin it the way I want it would have worked for me. But you failed to deliver the evidence." She argues.

"There would have been evidence if she wasn't spooked by the cameras you set up. I told you to let me handle things my way."

"Excuses, excuses and more excuses. It doesn't matter anymore. I will handle things some other way." She says tapping her thigh with her manicured fingers.

"Does that mean you're Okay with your daughter not being Mrs Khumalo just yet?" He asks.

"Of course not. She will be Mrs Khumalo, come rain or sunshine. I've just decided to use some other means. Which means your job here is done. So you can go to wherever the road leads you. As long as it is far away from here. I would say it was nice meeting you but honestly, it's been nothing but a waste of my time and money. Now run along, find some other province to play at." She says blowing him a kiss. She gets out of the car, gets into hers and drives off.

He watches as her lights fade away before he pulls out his phone and watches the video of him and Bahle having sex in her office.

"You're way too nice for me to do this to you." He says moving to a picture of her he secretly took when they were driving to KZN. "If we had met at a different time, maybe things would have worked out better for us." He goes back to the video and deletes it, making sure its completely out of his phone and his cloud before he starts the car and drives off to God alone knows where.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

33

BAHLENGIWE

"Wake up bitch, Cape Town awaits." Titi's text reads. I'm still not sure why I agreed to this trip, especially the way things are between Dali and I right now. All this will do is give him a chance to spend time with Khanyi. Even though the parents have agreed to stay the weekend and watch the kids, Dali is a resourceful someone and he will find a way to get out of the house.

We've barely had a conversation since he came back from the hospital. Not that there is anything to say at this point because it's quite clear we are back to square one. Maybe this trip will help me get out of the fantasy world I had pulled myself into the past couple of weeks.

I drag myself out of bed and head down to the kitchen. The mums are in the lounge sipping on some tea and gossiping. Their favourite past time. I greet and make myself a cup of coffee before joining them.

"Why do you look like you didn't sleep much?" Mum asks.

"Hhay mkhozi, of course she didn't sleep and you know why, so stop asking." Mrs Khumalo says. They both burst out laughing. I dont see the joke.

"Of course. Who knows, maybe this time next year we will have another grand baby to spoil." Now they are talking about me as if I am not here. And that's my cue to exit the chat.

"I am going to shower." I say getting up.

"Maybe take a bath and add some salts in there for relaxation." Mum yells and they laugh. I'm still not sure what is amusing. I take a quick shower and then pack. One luggage will do. Once I have everything I will need I drag the luggage downstairs. Our flight is later in the evening but Titi wants us to go see the healer she found before we leave.

"Leaving already?" Mum asks seeing my bag.

"Yep. I have to pick up Lindo then we drive to Joburg." I grab a bottle of cold water from the fridge and a banana. "Please make sure you don't give the children too much sugary stuff. And stop letting them do whatever they want, please?" I beg and these two are laughing.

"Sweetie, we stopped parenting with you guys, now we are in our spoil the grandkids era." Mrs Khumalo says. That's just weird coming from her.

I say my goodbyes and drag my luggage to the car. I'm not even waiting around to say goodbye to Dali. That would just be pointless. I text Lindo and tell her I am on my way. Knowing how punctual she is, she's probably been ready for the past thirty minutes. Sure enough when I get to her house she is already outside with her bags. She throws the bags in the boot and gets inside.

"You're late."

"I'm here now." I reply.

"Did you speak to your husband before you left?" She asks.

"No. And after this consultation I'd like to forget that he exists. At least for this weekend. Please, no mention of him at any point during the trip." She nods her head, gently squeezing my hand.

"Maybe this consultation will give you the answers you need. You deserve way better than this sis wam. Way better." She says. "In the meantime, let's get ourselves in the mood for this weekend." She connects her phone to the speaker and starts blasting out some Beyonce.

By the time we get to Joburg the mood has improved ten fold. I am actually looking forward to this trip now. I know it will be good. Dvumo is flying in and so is our other friend, Makgotso. We pick up Titi from her office and drive to her house in Bryanston. While she changes we pack her luggage in the car and get ourselves some drinks. Hopefully we won't have to drive far for the consultation.

"Okay, I am ready, let's go." She says coming down the stairs. We head out and she gives us directions to a house in Soweto. It looks busy, there are a few cars parked outside the yard, there is smoke coming from what seems like a fire and the sounds of drums beating tells us we are where we need to be. I wrap a cloth over my Jean's and we make our way to the gate. A young lady greets us and leads us to a hut that's further away from where most people are gathered.

"You can get in and sit down, gogo will be with you soon." The young lady says. We get on our knees and crawl inside. My heart is racing. I don't know what this woman will say, and for all I know I could be imagining things. If she is real, I hope she will tell me the truth, that I am crazy instead of making up some stories.

The room is not as dark and scary as I expected. It is clean with just the standard cloths hanging on the wall and a cupboard on the far end with all types of roots and herbs. Ten minutes later Gogo Mpungose walks into the hut and takes her seat.

"Thokozani." She greets. We clap our hands, echoing her words. "So, how can I help you?" She asks. Isn't she the one who is supposed to tell us what is going on.

"We are here for a consultation. My friend here has issues in her marriage." Titi tells her. I am glad I came here with her because I wouldn't know what to say to be honest.

"She can't speak for herself?" The woman asks.

"I can." I reply. She chuckles and grabs her bag filled with bones. I am fifty percent sceptical about this whole thing but if she can give me answers without me filling in the blanks then maybe I will be fully on board.

"Blow in here." She says holding the bag out to me. I blow on it and she does her chants before throwing the bones on the reed mat. She moves them around a bit before sitting down on the floor, her legs spread wide with the bones sitting between her open legs.

"What happened to the beads that were given to your husband?" She asks, her eyes squinted slightly.

"The doctors took them out of his wrist when they were helping him."

"Big mistake." She says shaking her head. "They shouldn't have done that. Why did you allow it to happen?" As if I was there when they did it.

"I only saw after the beads were taken out. I wasn't there when they were cutting them off his wrist." She shakes her head, mumbling something's that are incoherent.

"Those beads were meant to protect him. They weren't supposed to leave his arm." She says.

"So what do we do now?" Lindo asks.

"Nothing." Did she just say nothing?

"Nothing?" I ask trying to get exactly what she is saying. How can she say nothing. Isn't she supposed to be a healer?

"Yes nothing. Your in-laws, specifically your father in law, he has turned his back on his ancestors. When was the last time he had a ceremony or anything to honor them? Even slaughtering a chicken, when last did it happen?" She asks, staring straight at me.

"In all the years we've been married to that family nothing like that has happened." Lindo replies.

"You're married within the same family?" She questions, staring at Lindo.

"Yes. Our husbands are brothers." Lindo tells her.

"Explains a lot. Okay." She picks up her bones and puts them back in the bag. "Right now there is nothing you can do for your husband, the woman who gave him those beads, she is the one who was given a mandate to help him. And by helping him she will also realign the family with abantu abadala (the ancestors) since your father in law has clearly forgotten about them. Your husband has been fed some concoction that is meant to be idliso (a love potion) but instead it becomes sort of like a mild mind control thing."

"Can you tell us how we can help him?" I ask. I know she said we should do nothing but that just feels like a stupid thing to do. How do we sit back and watch while he suffers.

"There is nothing you can do. I know this may seem like a waste of time but idlozi does not turn its back on us, even if we do. Yes your father in law has neglected the altar but the elders are still looking out for his family, especially his late mother. She is the one fighting for him and she is the one who sent that woman to your husband. That woman has been given the job of fixing the family. And she will. I cant give you anything right now because it will mess up with whatever idlozi has planned." She says. She is too relaxed for my liking, it's like she is not even looking for a solution, just a way out.

"But we dont know who this woman is or where she is from. What if she shows up ten years from now?" Lindo asks.

"The same way she found your husband and gave him those beads is the same way she will find him when the time is right. All you need to know is that once your husband's grandmother has everything in alignment and the way she wants it to be, everything will fall into place and hellfire will rain on anyone or everyone who has played a part in hurting or messing up with her family. I dont know when that will be, it could be tomorrow, it could be next month or next year, but it will happen. I need you to believe that and leave everything in her hands. All you can do now is live your life, be happy and dont let anyone take your joy. That's all I can help you with." She says rolling the reed mat.

I pull out a hundred rand note from my handbag and place it on the floor, say our goodbyes and leave. The drive to the airport is rather

quiet. We are all trying to process what this woman said and on my part, I am failing.

"Maybe we need to get a second opinion." I blurt out. It wouldn't hurt right?

"Or not. I know doing nothing may seem like a bad idea but gogo Mpungose comes highly recommended, if she says you do nothing when you do nothing. Besides, what if we do get a second opinion and they give you something to help Dali and it ends up hurting him worse, it will come back to bite you in the ass and it will be like you're the one who is responsible for whatever happens to him." Tit says.

"She has a point." Lindo reiterates. "Coming here was a risky move all on it's own. We've got an answer, not the one we were looking for but it's an answer nonetheless. And we've been given a solution so we stick with that and let's focus on the future." She adds.

I am still not convinced about this whole thing. Not even the two hour flight to Cape Town could convince me otherwise. But I am here now and the only thing I can do is get this mess out of my head and enjoy my weekend. If gogo Mpungose says Dali will be fine then he will be. The only thing I can do now is pray that he gets the help he needs as soon as possible before things get out of hand.

My phone rings just as we pull up to the Air BnB Titi booked. Sahluko's name flashes on the screen. I'm tempted to not answer but he hasn't been to work the past couple of days and no one seems to know where he is or how he got there. I pick up the phone while my sister and Titi make their way into the house.

"Hello." He keeps quiet. I can hear him breathing on the other end. From the sounds of it, it doesn't seem like he is kidnapped or in danger.

"Sahluko." I call out.

"Hey." He says quietly. "I uh, I wanted to say I am sorry for ditching you with no explanation."

"That's fine. I'm sure you have a good reason. Where are you?" He sighs.

"I can't tell you. I have emailed you my official resignation. I know it seems sudden but trust me, this is for the best." He says. The only thing that pisses me off about this whole thing is that I need to find a new head ranger who has all the right qualifications.

"Fine. I will read your email when I get back to work. Goodbye Sahluko." I say ready to hang up but he calls my name.

"You're a good person Bahle, but please be careful who you allow into your space. There are many wolves in sheepskin right now. Take care of yourself." He says before hanging up. I stare at the phone for a good two minutes before making my way inside the house. Titi already has music blasting out of the speakers. Seeing my friend and sister so happy makes me realise life is short. Maybe Gogo Mpungose is right, I've spent so much of my time worrying about Dali and his needs. Now I need to make myself happy because happiness does not always have to involve a man. Sometimes.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

34

KHANYISILE

This feels like old times. Dali and I, cuddling on the couch watching a movie. Except this time I know he is not here voluntarily. I do feel guilty though because I know he is not here because he actually loves me. Or maybe he does, at least he did when we were in varsity. Sure we had to break up because of his marriage but he came back. He swore he never meant to hurt me and he promised me we would be together come hell or high waters. And that was not because of anything my mother did. I refuse to believe that.

"What are you thinking about?" He asks handing me a glass of wine. I didnt even realise he got up.

"Nothing. Just thinking about us and our future." He smiles and sits down.

"What about our future?"

"Do you think we will ever get married? I know with the contract and all it will be hard but do you think we will ever get there?" I ask. Everything that has happened lately has made me re-evaluate my life's choices. Whether I like it or not I cant hold on to Dali forever. Especially now that I know he has help in loving me. But a ring could secure my future. I just need to figure out a way to get it without jeopardizing his fortune.

"We will." He assures me but I dont believe him.

"Can you look me in the eye and tell me that we have a future? Can you honestly promise me that you love me enough to want to have a life with me? Beyond all this, do we have a future?" He stares at me, his eyebrows drawn together.

"Where is all this coming from?" He questions. The fact that he seems to clueless about this makes me wonder if he is pretending or he genuinely has no recollection of what happened the last few days.

"I am just asking. I am not getting any younger and time is not standing still. I want to have a family, children, I also want to be called mummy and have the house filled with kids and their noise. That's what I want and we dont seem to have that right now so I am wondering if we will ever have it. Or I am just holding on to a pipe dream." He sighs and takes my hand in his.

"Baby, you know our situation. But if what you want is a for us to have a future and have all that you want, we will have to make a few sacrifices, and one of those sacrifices will be all this." He says looking around the room. "We will have to start from the bottom. With nothing but our names. And knowing my father, if I break this contract, my name will be worth nothing by the time he is done with me." He says. I know he is right but it doesnt make me feel any better.

"I know what's at stake Dali, I know all of that. It doesn't make it any better for me. What if tomorrow you wake up and decide that you are done with me? What then? What will happen to us? To me?" I cant believe I am getting emotional about this.

"Okay so what would you like me to do? Give up everything and be with you? How will that work? How are we going to live? Tell me and I

will do it." He let's go of my hand and sits back, watching me, waiting for an answer. Maybe bringing this up was a bad idea.

"I just need your assurance that I am not wasting my time here. I need to know that I haven't thrown away ten years of my life waiting for you. I need to know that all this will pay off in the end. That's all I need." He takes my hand in his again, gently rubbing it.

"Khanyi, I made a promise to you before and I plan on keeping it. I dont know what else I need to do for you to see that I am committed to you. I am here right now instead of being with my children and parents, that should be assurance enough." He says. Speaking of parents, his phone rings on the coffee table and mama flashes on the screen. He looks at the phone then looks at me, probably thinking he should just let it ring.

"Answer it, unless you want her to be suspicious." I say. He sighs and picks up the phone.

"Mama." He answers. I only hear his side of the conversation but it's clear they want him home. "Give me twenty minutes." He says then hangs up. I knew he would leave but I didnt think he would go before we sort out the issue at hand. "I have to go." He stands up and pat's his pockets looking for his keys. He looks around the room and sees them on the console table. "I will call you." He leans down and plants a kiss on my forehead before going back to his life, the life I was meant to live but now I am here, looking in from the outside.

I wonder what my life would be life if i had never agreed to be with him knowing what was at stake. Maybe I would be married by now to someone else, probably have a three kids by now and a thriving career.

But here I am, waiting for a married man to see me and see a future with me.

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Trust my mother to show up early in the morning like someone who suffers from insomnia. I haven't even had my morning coffee yet and she's already here.

"This is not the time for you to wake up. Did you make breakfast for Dali?" She asks barging into my house.

"Good morning mother?"

"Wash your face and come make breakfast for your man. In fact put on some lingerie while you're at it. Breakfast in bed should be appealing and right now you look like you just woke up under a bridge." She is giving orders while busy getting pots and whatever else she needs from the fridge for this breakfast that she plans to make.

"Dali is not here mama." She drops the pan on the stove and turns to look at me as if I have just committed the worst crime ever.

"Excuse me? What do you mean he is not here? He was here last night." She says.

"How did you know he was here?"

"I came by to see you last night and I saw his car here so I decided to give you some privacy. So what did you do?" Of course it's my fault, not that he is a married man with a family to go back to.

"I didnt do anything. His mother called him and he had to go." She clicks her tongue and pulls out a chair, dropping herself into it so hard the chair squeaks.

"Mhmmmm." Her eyes drift off into space and she starts tapping the side of her face. I can literally see the wheels turning in her head. "We need to find a way to get him to stay and not sneak in and out of here like you're some secret he needs to keep hidden away." She says making me chuckle.

I pull up a chair and sit down. "I hate to break it to you mama, I am a secret he needs to keep hidden. The only way to make him stay is if he marries me and we both know that's not going to happen." I say. Her lips form into a wide smile.

"See

now you're thinking. He needs to marry you. ASAP. I mean it's not like he is not open to polygamy. It's way better than these childish games he is playing." She explains with way more excitement than I anticipated.

"You do remember that if he marries me he loses everything?" I remind her. But she doesnt seem to be grasping anything I am saying.

"No. The contract says if he divorces Bahle then he loses everything. But if he marries the both of you then you get to have the life you've always wanted. It's a win win. He keeps his inheritance and you get a

ring. Simple and straightforward." She says clapping her hands. She gets up and starts humming a song while she makes breakfast. Her idea might seem like a far fetched dream but she could be right, yes Dali's father was adamant that he can never marry me but what if there is no clause in the contract saying he cant marry me? Every contract has its loopholes and I think I just found mine. Now all I have to do is get my hands on that contract and go through it before I convince him to marry me. Last night he asked what he needed to do to convince me that he was committed to me, well marrying me is a start. Maybe my mother is not so evil after all.

BAHLENGIWE

I didnt realise how much I needed this vacation. I've been here for almost forty eight hours and I already feel lighter. Or maybe it's the massages we got today or the yoga we did yesterday. Either way, I am loving it here. I've even forgotten about Dali and his issues. Gogo Mpungose said the woman who found him and handed him those beads will find him again so everything is out of my hands now. She can take over.

Tonight we are going to a club. I am definitely not sure about it, if it was up to me we would just have a nice cozy dinner and then come back and get in bed and sleep. But I know these women will not hear it.

"That dress looks like you're going to a church conference." Makgotso says walking into my room with another dress hanging from her arm. She already has black shorts on with a bedazzled top. Why does she need the dress?

"My dress is fine." I argue. I consider myself a stylish person, the only thing I don't wear much of are short skirts and pants. For a picnic during the day, sure, for a night in a club, not so much. I don't want people touching me the wrong way. That's why I prefer pants or long dresses.

"You look like you're about to attend an alter call." She fires back. Makgotso is almost the same loudmouth as Titi. Both of them can talk for days and they will say what's on their mind. "Put this on." She says handing me the dress.

"I am not wearing that." She sighs and takes a couple of steps towards me, stopping right in front of me, I can practically feel her breath fanning my face.

"Bahlengiwe Nxumalo. . ." she starts. She also hates using the Khumalo surname, besides the fact that she doesn't like Dali and how my marriage came about, she says she worked way too hard to get the click right for her to stop using it out of the blue. I've been married for ten years. "You will get in this dress. And if we have to hold you down to get you in it, trust me we will. Right girls?" She says the loud part loud enough for the others to hear.

"Yessss." The scream from wherever. I have no doubt they would do it. These people are bullies I swear. I scoff and take the dress and change into it. It's not as bad as I expected. At least the hem covers all of my butt and then some. My boobs are covered, it's a sparkly dress with a mock turtleneck and it's sleeveless. Works well I guess. Makgotso pulls out a different pair of shoes from the closet and hands them to me with hoop earrings and matching bracelet to complete the look. I

turn to the mirror and I can safely say, I don't look half bad. An the dress is not riding up my thigh so that's a plus.

"No you look like someone worthy of a VIP spot." She says as we make our way to the lounge. "What do you think?" She asks stepping aside for everyone to see me.

"Way better." Dvumo says. "Now I can claim you as my sister." She adds.

"You are beautiful." Lindo responds.

"Okay, it's time to go. Our car is outside." Titi says. We scramble to get our bags and phones then rush out to the car. Luckily we all fit in the car.

We make it to the club and it's already packed. There is literally a line going from the door and wrapping around the side of the building. If I can have my way maybe we will end up not getting in and having to go home instead. Fingers crossed.

"Wow, its packed." Lindo exclaims.

"Are you sure we will be able to get in?" I ask hoping the answer will be no. But as luck will have it, we are here with Titi, she knows people apparently.

"Of course we are, someone is coming out to get us." She says as we step out of the car. In less than a minute someone is already making their way to us, a guy who doesn't look like he belongs here. Or maybe he does and I'm just clueless about these things.

"These are my friends, Lindo, Makgotso, Dvumo and Bahle." Titi tells the guy. He shakes our hands before leading us inside. We head straight up to a VIP section with a 360 degree view of the entire place.

"What would you ladies like to drink?" The guy shouts over the loud music. Titi places our order and he disappears.

"Is he a waiter?" I scream in her ear.

"No. Just a friend I work with." She replies. He returns as swiftly as he disappeared with a waiter behind him carrying more drinks.

"First things first." He shouts handing us shooters. "To a great night." He says lifting his shot glass up. We toast to a great night and the party officially begins. After about three shots, two glasses of wine and a cocktail, I can already feel myself getting tipsy. Instead of adding on more alcohol I turn to the water to sober me up before I start again. Come morning and I'll be blaming the alcohol that's for sure.

I pull out my phone to check the time and find a missed call and a text message. Both from Dali. Before I start to panic and think something is wrong with the kids I take a few deep breaths then open the text.

"I miss you. When are you coming home?" The text reads. I gulp down another bottle of water then read it again. I am definitely not hallucinating. I hand the phone to Lindo and ask her to read it.

"He misses you." She says and that's a surprise to both of us.

"Maybe he sent it by mistake." I conclude. There is no way he sent that. Or if he did he probably meant to send it to a Khanyi not me.

"Ask him if he sent it by mistake before you say anything else." Lindo suggests.

"I think you sent this to the wrong number." I type out and then press send. I'm sure he won't respond tonight, it's already late and I'm sure he is asleep. Before I can put my phone away a message comes in.

"I sent this to my wife. Are you not my wife?" He replies. I swear I am being tested on all fronts right now. I know he was with Khanyi last night and tonight he is missing me. How? This shit is just confusing. I put my phone away and focus on having a good time. I will not let Dali's indecisiveness ruin my vacation. I need this. More than ever.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

35

DALINGCEBO

I've never been a sickly person. I try to eat healthy, most of the time, I don't drink much and get in my fair share of exercise every week. I don't even remember being admitted to a hospital. Not even when I had asthma as a kid, but I outgrew that so I am still baffled about how I ended up in a hospital fighting for my life. And how quickly I seemed to have gotten better. According to my brother I went from breathing through a ventilator to being fully healed in less than a couple of hours. What was wrong with me and how did I get better so quickly? I know I should just be grateful that I am alive and well but this, this is still a mystery and I do not like mysteries. I need to know what happened to me.

"Penny for your thoughts." My brother says pulling out a chair and sitting down.

"You're late." I say looking at the time. He is ten minutes late but he is still late nonetheless.

"I'm pretty sure that's not what you were thinking about. What's going on?" He asks. We are disturbed by a waiter who takes his drink order and walks away again.

"Tell me something, what did the doctors find when they were running tests on me?" I really need to know what is wrong with me so I can fix it.

"They didnt find anything. Just some black substance in your mouth soon after you woke up. They ran tests on it and all the tests were inconclusive. They've been running tests on your blood for a while now and nothing concrete comes up." He says. See this is what bothers me, there has to be something, anything to explain why I ended up unconscious and unable to breath on my own.

"Something about that whole thing doesn't sound right." I mutter.

"I know. We even wanted to go and consult but then you woke up." I stop swirling the drink in my hand and look at him. We dont consult in my family and my dad would not have allowed that. But if he did, then things must have been really bad. For the first time since I 'woke up', I look at my wrists and realise the beads I had are not there anymore.

"What happened to the beads?" I look at my brother and he is staring at me as if I have lost my marbles. Maybe there is a reason that woman gave me those beads. And now they are gone. "What happened to them?" I push.

"The doctors took them out. Why? What's so important about them?" He asks. I dont know either but I know things were different when I had them on. I felt like me again. Which in itself is weird because I've always felt like me. But having those beads felt different. It felt like everything made sense, and now everything is a mess.

"What happened to the consultation? Why didnt you go ahead with it?" Maybe that would have given me the answers I need right now. I mean if modern science has failed to figure out what happened to me then maybe traditional science would help.

"You know your father, he was against it from the beginning so when you woke up he decided it wasn't worth it. We can just be grateful that you're here, alive and well." He chugs his drink and then flags down the waiter for another one. "What's with all the questions anyway? You're alive aren't you?" I sigh and sit back on the chair, crossing my hands on my chest.

"I think something is wrong with me. No I know something is wrong with me."

"What do you mean?" My brother asks, his brow drawn together and concern filling his face.

"I don't know what it is but sometimes every moment that happens lately, feels like an out of body experience. Like when I was with Khanyi the other night, I was talking to her and making these promises to her but it also felt like I was watching someone else do it. Like there were two of me and the other me who was watching this whole scene happen was also begging me not to make promises I can't keep. It just felt weird." I admit. This has been on my mind for a while now and it still doesn't make sense.

Sbu taps his fingers on the table, watching me.

"You're right." He says finally. "Something is definitely wrong with you." He picks up his phone and scrolls down till he finds what he is looking for. "I am going to set up an appointment with the doctor so they can do a CT scan. You could have a tumour in your brain." He waits for the doctor to pick up before setting up the appointment. I am not opposed to it, things don't seem to be making sense in my head and I need to figure out what's wrong.

"Done. You will see the doctor tomorrow for the scan." He tells me. "I will pick you up and then take you to the doctor. Luckily the mums are still here so the kids should be fine." He adds. Not that I have a problem watching my children but with everything going on I am happy both mothers are here to make sure all is well.

"Thanks."

"Anytime brother. Anyways I have to go, I have a meeting on the other side of town. I will talk to you later." He gulps down the last of his drink and stands up. "You'll take care of this right? Good. I'm out." I shake my head and take a sip of my drink, watching the view outside.

I turn around to find a woman sitting on the chair Sbu just vacated. I look around the room to make sure I am not the only one seeing this woman. Where did she even come from? Sbu left less than a minute ago.

"Relax, I am not a ghost." She says. Her voice, it sounds familiar. I squint my eyes staring at her trying to figure out where I know her from and nothing comes to mind.

"Do I know you?" I ask once I realise my brain will not give me answers.

"Yeah, we've met before." She says. But where did we meet? She pulls my hands towards her, glaring at my wrists. "You're not wearing your beads." She adds with disappointment in her voice. She looks up at me and I swear for a moment I see fire flashing in her brown eyes which sends a bolt of lightning down my spine. I pull my hands away from her and she sighs. "What happened to your beads?" Her voice is calmer now.

"How do you know about the beads?" I know there are probably people who have seen me with the beads but this woman doesn't know me like that, how would she know about them.

"I gave you those beads to protect you. They were meant to shield you from bad things and then reveal the evil spirits around you." She admits. I still don't remember her but I remember the beads.

"What evil spirits?" I ask. My heart is galloping like a horse at the Durban July, ready to jump out of my chest.

"That's what the beads were meant to reveal and then we could figure out a way from there. But now you've set us back." The disappointment in her voice makes me feel like a shitty person even though I am not the one who removed the beads from my wrists. "But it's fine, we can always start again, idlozi never gives up." She admits.

"I still don't understand." I admit.

"For now you won't, but eventually you will." She opens her bag and pulls out two more sets of beads and places them on the table. Only then do I notice the beads on her own wrists that were hidden by her long sleeves. From the way she is dressed you would never think she was a traditional person. I'm not sure yet if she is a healer or something bad.

"Open your hands." Like a well-taught puppy I follow her instructions without question. She places the beads in my hands, closes my hands, holds on to them and then bows her head and mumbles something that's like a prayer or a chant, I don't know. Once she's done she opens my hands and takes the beads, rolling them into my wrists. The moment they sit there it's like something weird is pulled away from my

shoulders. Like I was carrying something heavy and now it's been taken away.

"Don't take these ones off. Make sure they stay around your wrists at all times." I nod my head. "Where is your father?" She asks after a while.

"He is in Badplaas, he bought a farm there." I volunteer information as if I've been fed a truth serum. At the back of my mind a little bounce keeps reminding me that I don't know this woman. And yet speaking to her is so freeing, it's like speaking to someone I've known for a very long time.

"He needs to do right by his ancestors. There is a lot that he did wrong. Which is not a bad thing really because his father taught him everything he knew, including turning his back on his own ancestors." She tells me. I am too stunned to speak. She seems to know a lot about my father.

"He needs to fix his altar before he departs this earth and joins his ancestors. His mother is the one constantly fighting for him and you. But if he dies before doing what he needs to do, the next generation will not be given the same grace that he has." Every word she utters feels like soothing sound, these things should be scaring the shit out of me but it's not.

"When last did you go to your grandfather's grave?" She asks.

"I don't know. We don't go there. The last time I was there was probably when we buried him." I admit, shame washing over me. She shakes her head, her eyes boring into me like daggers.

"I understand that this is how you were raised so I won't judge. But you need to go to his grave and fix it up. It's leaking. When it rains water seeps into it, softening the soil underneath and making the tombstone

slowly get pulled into the earth. Part of your father fixing the family altar includes fixing that grave and bringing his father home to be with his people because right now he is roaming alone in the spirit world." She says. I dont even know how to reply to her. What do you say to something like that. Maybe I should ask her about why I was sick. I mean they were going to consult anyway. I might as well.

"Can I ask you something?" She nods her head, smiling. She is a beautiful woman, in a different lifetime I would have been attracted to her.

"The beads I had, they were cut off my hand by the doctors at the hospital. Now the thing is, no one knows why I was sick or what was wrong with me. Maybe you can help, you seem to know more than the ordinary person." Her smile widens.

"That is something you don't need to worry yourself about right now. Once this altar thing has been fixed, everything will be revealed to you. The truth will be laid bare and things will go back to the way they were meant to be." Well that's not much of an answer. "Anyways, it was nice seeing you again. I will see you around." She gets up, picks up her bag and leaves like she didnt just add a burden on my shoulder. How do I tell my own father that he needs to fix things before he dies. When is he going to die anyway because her words made it seem like the time was near. Maybe I should have asked her all that instead of worrying about my sickness or none sickness. Whatever that is.

I stare at the beads, twisting them on my wrist and then I remember where I know her from. Polokwane. That's where I met her, she was right about the beads, she is the one who gave them to me.

BAHLENGIWE

Today is our last day in Cape Town, tomorrow we go back to our normal lives. I can't wait to see my kids. But for now we have a picnic at the beach, of course Titi has everything set up. I'm pretty sure in her previous life she was an events planner because the whole time we've been here we've been going off of a strict itinerary. But I have enjoyed it.

"Do you guys mind if Dumi joins us? I know this is a girl thing but he is my friend and I don't want him having a pity party alone at the hotel?" Titi asks walking into the lounge with the phone in her hand and her hand covering the speaker.

"He can come." Dvumo shouts and we agree. Titi passes on the message while I put my sandals on. She says her goodbyes and we gather our bags and head out.

We get to the beach and there is a beautiful set up under a gazebo. From far it reminds me of the picnic Sahluko set up for us in KZN. Am I crazy for missing him? I mean I know I didn't know him that long but I like the person he is. Calling him is out of the question because that will just make me seem desperate.

We sit on the pillows set up.

"This is beautiful Titi, you've really outdone yourself." Makgotso says.

"Yeah friend, this is truly amazing. And thank you for this, I really needed the break." I admit.

"Anytime ladies." She replies, smiling.

"We should do this often. Especially now that I am going to be a mother. I will need as much breaks as I can get." Lindo says and we all gasp.

"You're pregnant?" Titi asks, I'm sure everyone is shocked more so because she swore up and down she would never have children.

"Yes I am." Lindo says rubbing her tummy. I can see the joy in her face. And knowing what she's been through, this makes me happy.

"Congratulations sis." I say hugging her. The others follow suit giving her well wishes.

"How far along are you?" Dvumo asks.

"A little over sixteen weeks." She admits. Now it makes sense why she wasn't drinking this whole time. And here I thought they were still trying.

"Okay now I have to plan a baby shower and a gender reveal. It's going to be busy." Titi says.

"Oh most definitely. This could be my first and only so I want the best of everything. I want to go all out." She admits.

"Good, and as the official godmother, I will make sure we give you the best." Dvumo says.

"Since when are you godmother?" I ask. This is news to all of us.

"Don't even try it. Lindo is Nqaba's godmother, Titi is Fezi's, you're Naledi's, so that leaves Makgotso and I as the undesignated godmothers, so I am taking this spot. Now Titi needs to get pregnant so

Makgotso can be godmother and we are all even." There is no point in arguing with that.

"She has a point." Makgotso admits.

"Well then, godmother and I have a lot of work ahead of us, but I am definitely looking forward to it." We lift our champagne glasses and toast while Lindo lifts her juice up. I see on the corner of my eye Titi's friend Dumi coming towards us. The man seems sad, I wonder why he is here alone and throwing pity parties in his hotel room.

"Ladies." He says.

"Ah, you made it. Have a seat." Titi tells him. He lowers himself onto the pillow, he struggles to sit on it because it keeps slipping but eventually he gets it right. Makgotso hands him a glass of champagne.

"Thank you. And thank you for having me, although I would have been fine all on my own." He says taking a sip of the drink.

"We dont do pity parties around here." Dvumo tells him. "I am going for a swim." She adds getting up and taking off her sarong, then rushing down to the ocean. Lindo, Titi and Makgotso follow behind her. They start by taking pictures.

"Aren't you joining them?" Dumi asks, looking at me.

"I will." I pick up a cracker and throw it in my mouth. "So why are you having pity parties in your room? Who broke your heart?" I ask. He smiles and takes a sip on his champagne.

"My girlfriend of two years, I found out she got married a couple of weeks back. And that time i was planning to propose to her." He says, his voice laced with pain.

"I'm sorry." I dont know what else to say.

"Dont be. Maybe this was God's way of showing me she wasnt the one." He admits. "And you, happily married?" He asks looking at my wedding ring.

"Married, yes. Happily? That's debatable."

"So its true what they say about marriage, those inside it want to get out and those outside want in?"

"I guess." I'm not sure if I fall under the ones wanting to get out or the ones holding on to nothing and calling it something.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

36

KHANYISILE

Looking at this table, I really have to give myself a pat on the back. It looks amazing and I am sure Dali will be impressed too. If this doesn't scream wife material, then I don't know what does.

I look at the time and it's just a little past six. Dali will be here any moment now. I place the rice, roasted vegetables and coleslaw on the table while the oxtail simmers in the oven. It's basically done but it won't hurt for it to fall off the bone.

My phone rings and I quickly pick up thinking it's Dali, but it's not. It's my mother. As much as I know everything she has done has been for my good I still have no idea how to deal with her. Not that I haven't forgiven her for what she has done but it's forgetting that's hard.

"Mama."

"Hi hi. So, how is dinner coming along?" She asks, she sounds a bit more chirpy than usual. I'm pretty sure in her head she is already budgeting what she will do with the lobola money. That's if I can get through to Dali.

"It's fine. I am done with everything. Just waiting on Dali to come home." I reply. I need to quickly freshen up. I put her call on loudspeaker while I change to a proper dress.

"Good. Did you use the 'spice' I gave you? That's what's going to make him agree to everything you say." She asks.

"Of course I did." I can't believe I am turning into my mother. The important thing right now though is the bigger picture and that's my future. This is just a means to an end.

"Good girl. I will make sure not to disturb you during your dinner, but let me know in the morning if I should get your uncles ready." She squeals then hangs up. Wouldn't that be nice, me finally being someone's wife.

I open my jewellery drawer and take out my 'engagement' ring and slip it onto my finger and look at it. It really does look good on my finger and it definitely should be there permanently.

"Mrs Khanyisile Manana- Khumalo." It has nice ring to it. "Mrs Khanyisile Khumalo." Now that sounds even better. I put the ring back and head to the kitchen. I take the oxtail out of the oven and put it on the counter to cool down a bit. While I wait I pour myself a glass of wine and take a seat on the couch.

Time seems to be moving way too slow. Or maybe I am just anxious. I've been practicing how I am even going to start this conversation with him. I know he made promises to me but now it's time for him to keep his end of the deal. Mum is right, I can't be on the sidelines forever.

The clock hits eight o'clock and still nothing. The food is getting cold. I grab my phone and dial his number. It sends me straight to voicemail. I try again and get the same outcome. I swear to God if this man is playing me he will regret it. I can't call his house, I know his mother is there. I can call his friends though.

I dial Vusi's number and he is quick to pick up. It could be a good sign. Maybe Dali is with him.

"Khanyi, what's up?" He says as soon as he picks up.

"Hey, have you heard anything from Dali, I've been trying to call him but his phone sends me straight to voicemail." I hear him groan before he replies.

"No, I haven't heard from him. I think he is with his kids." He says.

"Why? Were you planning something? Did you cook? I can eat on his behalf." He offers.

"No thanks. Goodbye." I hang up the phone and throw myself on the couch. I know spending time with his kids is important but I also need my time. He cant just up and disappear without a heads up.

I call his landline and a small squeaky voice picks up.

"Hey, is your dad home?" I ask. There's laughter and people talking in the background. It must be nice.

"Yes." She replies.

"Cool, can I talk to him?" I asks as gently as I can.

"No. He is busy." This stupid child.

"Its important. It's an emergency. Do you know what an emergency is?" I can't believe I am begging a snot faced four year old to speak to my own boyfriend.

"I know an emergency. Mum taught me."

"Good. Well this is an emergency. Please get your father on the line."

"What's your name. My name is Zifeziwe, everyone calls me Fezi but my dad calls me Princess." She says. I swear this child is frustrating me.

"My name is daddy's friend. GET HIM ON THE PHONE!" I yell. She is quiet for a moment before she starts crying. Great.

"Fezi, why are you crying baby." This idiot I call my boyfriend calls out in the background. There's some shuffling before I hear him speak on the phone. "Hello. Who is this?"

"Hey, it's me." He sighs.

"Khanyi, what do you want? What did you say to my child?" He half yells. I didnt even say anything bad to her. Why does he have his panties in a knot.

"I just asked if I can speak to you."

"Why? You do know I am home right? You cant be calling my phone like this?" He hisses.

"I was waiting for you to come by. I made dinner and you didnt show up. I was worried."

"Listen to me, this is my house and that's my child who is crying. Because of you. I've told you before if you cant get me on my cellphones then it means I am busy, with my children and my wife. I dont need anyone disturbing me. So do me a favour, do not call this phone again. EVER!" He says before slamming the phone on me.

My jaw is on the floor. Dali talking to me like this? It must be a dream. That's the only explanation. I place the phone down on the couch and pinch myself. No. It's not a dream. This is real. This is the same person who was making promises to me just yesterday. Today he is telling me not to disturb his precious family time. Even Job was never tested like this.

I pick up the phone again and call my mother. If I don't speak to anyone about this I will burst.

"How long do I have to plan for your wedding?" She asks.

"There might not be a wedding mama." I say on the verge of tears. I'm trying so hard to keep my emotions in check but I am failing. If I was drunk this would be easier to deal with. But I had one glass of wine because I wanted to be sober for the marriage conversation. Now I regret that decision.

"I don't understand. Did you speak to him? What did he say? He is supposed to say yes. That's the only answer that was supposed to come out of his mouth." She screams. "What did you do Khanyisile?" Of course it's my fault. I feel tears run down my face. I'm losing Dali and it hurts. It really does. "Ukhalelani? (Why are you crying?)" She yells. I shouldn't have called her.

"I am losing him mama. I did everything you said I should do but he is still slipping away. He has never spoken to me the way he did just now." I tell her.

"Okay, listen to me, I will fix this okay, stop crying. Mama will fix this, I promise you my love. Just wipe those tears, take a relaxing bubble bath and let mama bear take over. I will fix this." She says. I know she is trying to be supportive but her little spice doesn't seem to be working. If it was Dali would be here right now. Not there.

"How are you going to fix it?" I ask between sobs.

"Let's just say by this time tomorrow, someone will be filing for a divorce. And by the time I am done with this

Dali will be all yours. Now go take that bath and relax. Mama will take care of this." I dont know why I trust her, especially after she fed my boyfriend muthi, but hey, whatever works. I've invested way too much into this relationship to let it fall apart just like that.

BAHLENGIWE

It is great to be home but I miss the fresh breeze that Cape Town offers. Maybe I should move there and just be an official housewife living in Camps Bay. It's not like I cant afford it. It would definitely be nice but I am self aware enough to know I would get bored way too easily.

Dali and Sbu decided to come pick us up. While Dali and I drove Titi to her place in my car, Sbu took Lindo and Dvumo home. Dali and Titi are chatting but my eyes are glued to the beads on his wrists. I'm not sure if they are the old ones or new ones. Wait, it cant be the old ones because those are in my bag as we speak. We drop Titi off and then start our journey home. For a moment its awkward, I dont know if this is the Dali I saw in Polokwane or this is the everyday him.

"You're quiet." He says after a while. "Was the trip okay?"

"It was great. I had fun." I reply.

"Good. You should do these trips more often. You deserve to rest, you work way too hard." To say I am confused would be an understatement.

"Yeah. I see you're wearing beads again. Where did you get those." He sighs and looks at the beads.

"I ran into the woman who gave me the previous ones. She gave me these ones." He says. So gogo Mpungose was right, that woman did find him again. This is both weird and creepy.

"Oh, that's nice. Did you speak to her about why she keeps giving you the beads?"

"We spoke. And she said the beads are for protection. And she also said something about us having to fix the mistakes made in the past. But I have to talk to my father about it and let him fix things before it's too late." Okay, I know I doubted gogo Mpungose for a second but she was clearly right. I should go back and thank her.

"And how are you planning on telling your father all this? You know he doesn't believe in anything traditional." He shrugs his shoulders.

"That's what I've been trying to figure out. But I think I will speak to Sbu about it and if we both sit down with him, maybe he will listen." I'm impressed to be honest. I never thought I'd see the day Dali even considers getting involved in anything that has to do with tradition and culture. Growth.

"So what made you change your mind about this? I know you were reluctant to use the beads before, so what's changed?"

"Honestly, I almost died. Before the beads were more of an accessory but now, now that I've stared death in the face, I want to make things right. Not just for me but our children too. They deserve to know where they come from so they can know where they are going." Wow. Surprise after surprise.

We get home and all I want to do is hug my babies. Lucky for me they are just as excited to see me. Fezi is fully in her Princess mode. She's wearing a princess dress with a tiara. She is so adorable.

I hand out the gifts I brought back before we lounge around and watch a movie. An animated princess movie because the princess of the house wants that and her grandmother's are both in support. The phone rings and Fezi rushes to answer it. I'm not sure who she is speaking to but the conversation seems to be going well one minute but then she bursts into tears. Dali quickly gets up and grabs the phone from her. He takes the cordless receiver to the kitchen leaving us baffled. I pick up my daughter and comfort her while Dali deals with whoever that is.

He comes back a few seconds later looking pissed and he takes Fezi from me.

"Are you Okay Princess?" He asks her. She nods her head and rests her head on his chest. We continue watching the movie in silence. I have so many questions and I'm sure our mothers too but no one wants to ruin this moment, especially with the kids around.

Fezi falls asleep on his chest. He takes her upstairs together with Nqaba.

"Who was on the phone?" Mum asks as soon as Dali is out of earshot. I was right here with them, why is she asking me again?

"I don't know."

"Whoever it is seems to have rubbed him up the wrong way." His mum adds. "I am going to bed, find out what happened Makoti." She tells me.

"Let me join you. Baby, we will see you in the morning." Mum says giving me a peck on the cheek.

Dali comes back after about ten minutes and pours himself a glass of whiskey. He throws the entire shot down his throat and then pours another one.

"That bad?" I ask. He sits down, running his hands up and down his head. "Who was that?"

"Khanyi." Of course.

"What did she say that made Fezi cry?"

"I dont know. She wouldn't tell me. I will ask Fezi in the morning." He says and takes a sip of his drink.

"Maybe you should go to her and see what's going on. It could be important." He raises his head and looks at me, his eyebrows arched.

"Why would I do that?"

"She is your girlfriend and she must have been desperate to get a hold of you." I tell him. I'm used to him disappearing in the middle for the night to be with her, that would not shock me, but her making my daughter cry, that's something me and her will discuss face to face.

"No. This is my home and I am not going anywhere. I'll run you a bath so you can have a relaxing bath before bed." He stands up and goes back upstairs. Would I be making a mistake to just assume he might be doing all this to throw me off. Yes the beads are there and I am inclined to think he is now the man I need as a husband but I am also not naive enough to think those beads are magic. Only time will tell I guess.

My phone pings before it starts ringing. I see Mr Khumalo seniors name flashing on the screen. For a moment I want to let it ring but this man doesnt call me directly that often. What if something is wrong? I swipe the green button and out the phone in my ear.

"Baba. Is everything okay?" I ask, nerves taking over my entire system.

"It will be. I just sent you something. Your father and I will coming there tomorrow, I will need you to explain those images to me. Goodnight." Okay this is weird. I check my phone and sure enough I have WhatsApp messages from him with pictures attached. Not just any pictures, pictures of me and Dumi at the beach. Ti me they seem innocent because I know they are but to someone else they may not see it that way.

In one picture Dumi is rubbing sunscreen on my back while my sisters and friends were taking pictures. In another photo my sisters and friends are not in frame which just makes it seem like we had a romantic picnic for two. I'm nervous, not because I am guilty because I am realising that while I was busy having the time of my life, someone was following me. First it was the cameras in the office and now someone is going as far as following me even on vacations. Something is definitely not right. And I need to figure it out before I come face to face with those two men. Otherwise I am screwed.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

37

♥♥NOT EDITED♥♥

BAHLENGIWE

I didnt sleep. I couldn't. Not with everything hanging over my head. Those pictures Mntungwa sent me, I keep looking at them and trying to figure out how they got them and who because we were at a private beach that was literally empty. So how did anyone get those pictures.

Dali went to work and the kids are in school. Mam Aggie is somewhere in this house doing something. The mums decided to go back to Badplaas so I'm guessing Mntungwa hasn't told them anything. If he is the only one who knows about those pictures then I have more of a chance to get through to him. I push the oats I've been trying to eat for the past hour away and grab my phone. He needs to tell me how he got those pictures.

"Makoti. I'll be there tomorrow. We cant talk about this over the phone, its a face to face kind of conversation." He says as soon as he picks up. Well I have an extra 24 hours to come figure out what is happening.

"I know baba, I just have a question. How did you get those pictures?" I ask, trying to sound more confident than I feel.

"What difference will it make where I got them from? They are still damaging." He tells me.

"I know. But right now they are just accusations and if I am going to properly defend myself against them then I deserve to have all the information about them. For all I know they could be photoshopped." I argue. He sighs. Well I must be getting through to him.

"Fine. Someone sent them to me. I don't know who it is though because the email is generic, with just numbers and random alphabets." Okay, we are getting somewhere.

"Can you send me the email?" I cross my fingers and hope to God I can make sense of it. I'll need to find a PI or someone who can trace emails so I can figure out where they came from. The contents of the photos don't scare me much because it would be easy to prove I only met Dumi in Cape Town. And if I was going to have an affair, why would I involve my siblings and friends. I know Lindo would cover for me but I'm not sure about the others.

"I'll send you a picture of the email." He says then hangs up. True to his word, a moment later I get a picture with the email and the address. Whoever wrote this clearly has an issue with me because the words they have used are just crazy. I never thought I'd see the day I am referred to as a whore or a disgrace to my family.

I type the email address into my emails and one pops up. Shock rushes down my spine. Whoever sent this is someone I know? How? I open the emails I've received from the address and I swear my body just goes cold. Every cell in my body turns into a snowflake. I shouldn't be surprised but I am. How is this even possible.

I check the email Mntungwa sent me to make sure I typed in the right alphabets and numbers and it's pretty obvious. I know this email, Khanyi

uses it to make bookings at the lodge just so her main email doesn't appear on our database. Most bookings were for Dali's birthday.

I don't know how long I sit in the same spot just going over the email multiple times. Khanyi is not this stupid, or is she? My shock quickly turns to anger. This is beyond her crossing the line, she just jumped off a cliff. Unfortunately she is taking her little boyfriend with her.

The day goes pretty quickly. Way quicker than I anticipated. I pick up the kids and bring them home and make sure they are occupied while I finish working. I am not cooking today, I don't think I will be able to cook anything edible. I need to have a conversation with Khanyi. Dali comes home and quickly occupies the kids, playing with them.

"Hey, can I borrow your car so I can get some food? I am too lazy to cook?" I ask him.

"Sure, but you can just order. You don't have to drive to the mall." He says.

"I know. But I need to fresh air."

"Everything okay?" I nod my head.

"Everything is fine. I just need to clear my head. I am going back to work tomorrow and this wedding is getting closer and closer and now things are becoming stressful." I lie. He gets closer to me and wraps me up in his arms. I take in the scent of his cologne and just close my eyes.

Maybe if I had fought harder from the beginning we wouldn't be here right now. If I had chosen me like Khanyi does then things would be different. But no, I had to consider his feelings and now I am about to pay the price for it.

"Don't worry too much. As soon as the wedding is done I will take you away for a whole week just to relax." He says. I wonder if we will get to that point. "My keys are on the table." He adds, planting a kiss on the top of my head.

"Thank you, I will be back soon." I grab the car keys and with them I get exactly what I need, the keys to Khanyi's house. Now to get some answers.

I've never been in this house before but I must say it's beautiful. I pull out Dali's keys from my handbag and press the remote. The gate slides open. I drive in and I must honestly give Khanyi some credit. The girl has a beautiful eye. The grass looks like it stays green the whole year, it's beautifully trimmed with different flowers at the edges. There are even statues in the centre of the grass.

As much as I would like to get lost in all this greenery, I have things to do. I get out of the car and head inside. I punch in the security code, crossing fingers it's the one. It gives me the green light. Dali is so predictable when it comes to passwords. Anybody could have cracked this code. How hard would it be to find out when Nqaba was born.

The inside of the house is, well the layout of the house is beautiful but the interior design is just tacky. The gold accents just make the place look like some new money mansion. Not pretty, at all. I give myself a mini tour while looking for the cinema room. Knowing Dali, there is definitely one in this house. He likes watching his soccer on a big screen. I find the cinema and quickly set up all I will need. I check to make sure I can operate this projector, not that hard.

I kick my shoes off and head to the kitchen. More gold accents. Jesus have mercy. I get some popcorn and pop them in the microwave. While they heat up I pour myself a glass of wine. Khanyi has a nice collection. I'm not a huge wine drinker but this is impressive. The timer goes off on the microwave. I open the cupboards in search for a bowl, I find one and empty the popcorn in it. I grab the wine and the bottle and make my way to the cinema. Now we wait.

Thirty minutes in and I'm already bored. I get off the chair with the bowl in my hand, munching on the popcorn and make my way to the lounge. I'm not a fan of half the things in this room but it's definitely on brand for Khanyi. She is loud and so is this room. There's a crystal chandelier hanging in the middle of the lounge with another hanging over the dining table. The glass table sits about ten people, the chairs are white with gold accents. On the wall is a huge mirror also with gold trimmings, the table legs and edges are gold, yeah, this is what happens when you go crazy on pinterest and end up mixing things that dont mix. Her lounge is livable, still not my style but I can survive it.

A car pulls up outside as I make my way to the kitchen. I peek through the curtain and see that the madam is home. Perfect. I lean on a pillar facing the front door, the popcorn takes even better now. The door opens and she walks in. The moment she turns and sees me she gasps.

"What are you doing in my house?" She asks as the shock slowly wears off.

"Mgcaki wam, welcome home darling." She marches towards me and throws her bag on the couch.

"What are you doing in my house?" She asks again.

"Come with me." I lead her to the cinema room. For a moment I think she's not coming until I hear her heels clicking on the tiles.

"Bahle, I asked you a question." She barks walking into the room.

"There is no need to be loud, it's just us two in here. Anyways have a seat." I grab the remote and sit down. She takes a seat, still staring at me. "Focus on the screen Khanyi, that's where the surprise is." She turns and faces the screen. I press play and the screen comes alive. A picture of her and Dali starts the slideshow. Its them sitting together at a booked out restaurant, there is absolutely no question about the romance and spice happening there. A second picture pops up, this time she is sitting on his lap, they were at a lodge somewhere in Limpopo, just two weeks after I gave birth to Nqaba.

"What is this?" She asks as realization sets in.

"Shhhhh! Keep watching." Different pictures of them and even videos keep playing, every single intimate moment they have shared, trips and even their stay in this very house is well documented. I can almost feel her heart beating out of control. I steal a glance at her and see tiny drops of perspiration forming on her forehead. I'm not sure if it's clear yet what's going on, but it's getting clearer by the second, I hope.

"Bahle, what is this?"

"Khanyi focus man. My favourite part is coming up." I throw more popcorn in my mouth as a video of her having sex with Dali pops up. They were at the same hotel we were at in Paris, Dali booked her a room right next to ours. And sometime in the middle of the night he had left me sleeping and went to be with her.

We didnt have our honeymoon immediately after the wedding. We decided to go after our one year anniversary, and that's only because his father insisted we go relax and just enjoy being newlyweds. Little did he know.

The screen goes dark and I turn to her. Her eyes are still glued on the blank screen.

"What do you think? I had fun making this, I hope you enjoyed watching it." She turns to me, I can see her heart throbbing at the base of her neck.

"What is this?"

"Sweetie, you know exactly what this is. Don't act dumb." I watch her as different emotions cross her face. "But to answer your question, just to make it clear, this is the file I've sent to uMntungwa, by the time morning comes he will be privy to every little part of your relationship. Including all the money spent on you and your family."

"Bahle, why are you doing this?" She has the audacity to even ask. I throw my head back laughing. I get up and refill my glass and take a sip.

"Why?" I gently pace around the room a bit, sipping on the wine. "Why you ask? What did you think would happen when you sent Mntungwa pictures of me and Dumisani?"

"Who the hell is Dumisani?" She asks standing up. Is she really going to play dumb right now?

"Dont play dumb. You know exactly what you did. Those pictures were innocent and as innocent as those pictures were you made sure to cook up an elaborate story to go with them. A story that could make me lose

everything I've worked for." I take another sip and stop pacing to look at her. "You know when Mntungwa sent me the pictures demanding an explanation I was thrown between a rock and a hard place. I kept asking myself how do I save myself from this. Even though I know I did nothing wrong, it still bothered me that those pictures were sent together with some bullshit story to go with it. And the solution was simple really, I dont need to do much except play my own ace. Now who do you think has more to lose between us?"

"Bahle you cant do this. Do you know what this will do to Dali? Cant you atleast think about him? And you know those pictures aren't as innocent as you would like everyone to believe. I know you and Sahluko were sleeping together, so what's to say you are not sleeping with this Dumisani guy?" She says standing in front of me. So she is well aware of what's going on. Her blonde moment has gone out the window.

"Let's say you're right and I am doing something with him, but so are you and Dali. This was a perfect arrangement really. You get to play house with Dali and I get to focus on my business. A little tumble in the sheets with some guy every once in a while shouldn't hurt. It's a win win situation really. Well it was until you chose to be greedy and selfish. Because you wanted to have the cake and eat it too while I get crumbs, if I'm lucky."

"Please don't do this!" She begs.

"You know I've always known someday you would self destruct. For years now I thought you were patient, too patient. I mean no sane woman would be okay with being an official side chick knowing that a ring may never come. And I dont mean the promise ring Dali gave you.

So what happened? Patience ran out?" She starts pacing and mumbling things I cant hear.

"Okay, listen, I will tell Mntungwa that I made up the whole thing." She pleads. "Even though we both know it's true, i will tell him it was all a lie, just the ramblings of a jealous ex."

"But it isn't true, it never was, the question though is what's it to you? Hmmm? For years I've been quietly sitting on the sidelines watching you play madam with my husband. MINE! It doesnt matter how you flip the story but at the end of the day, Dali is my husband. Not ours, not yours, mine. I afforded you the respect as Dali's girlfriend and you went and had to throw it all away. How do you think he will feel when he finds out he is going to lose everything because of you? Mhm? How?" I'm getting angrier with each second. I was pissed when I received the message from Mntungwa yesterday, now I'm angry. So angry I'm ready to let everything burn to ashes.

"Bahle, listen, we can sort this out. I will fix it. I promise." I gulp down the last remnants of the wine and grab my handbag.

"There is nothing to fix honey. All you need to do now is prepare for the inevitable. Loss. I really hope you were smart enough to do something with the money you've been getting the past ten years." I walk away and quickly turn when I get to the door. "By the way, let your mother know she needs to start packing, that house, I want her out of it." She marches towards me, and I swear I can see the smoke coming out of her ears.

"That's my mothers house, you have no right to it." She hisses.

"Actually, since Dali wanted to hide his secret life with you, this house and the one your mother lives in right now, its registered to a trust. And guess who is the beneficiary of that trust? My children. So I will be claiming my children's houses back. That means your days here are numbered too. You can keep the USB, see it as a souvenir, memories if you will. They will come in handy when you need comfort and you're alone back in your tiny house. Goodnight Mgcaki wam."

I walk away and I can feel her eyes glaring at me. I'm done letting people walk all over me because they think I am still the same naive, sheltered 22 year old who married Dali. I've tried to be civil and respectful to Khanyi, I've been okay with playing second fiddle because I had bigger plans, and she had to go and ruin it. So the disrespect ends now. It's a good thing I used Dali's car to drive here, that's why she didnt suspect a thing finding his car parked outside.

I get in and sit in the car for a moment. Ten years of my life I have been treated like a side chick and not a wife. I've been the baby maker, the face of a union someone else had bigger shares in and I kept quiet. Not anymore. It's time I show everyone I am Edwin Nxumalo's daughter. I can be just as cruel and conniving.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

38

KHANYI

Breath Khanyisile. Breath. This is bad, really really bad. Dali is going to kill me. I should have known my mother was up to something when she said she'd fix this. Why did I even let her do this? Maybe Bahle is right. I am greedy. I shouldn't have allowed my mother to do this. Now I'm screwed. We are screwed.

I grab my phone and dial mums number. Of course she doesnt pick up. I swear that woman is going to make us lose everything. I grab my car keys and drive to her place. Well apparently it won't be her place for long. That's if Bahle has anything to do with it.

Seeing her car parked outside reboots my anger. The drive should have calmed me down but now I am pissed. First it was the muthi, now this? I jump out the car and rush inside. For someone who just blew up my life she is pretty relaxed. Too relaxed. She is sitting on the couch with cucumbers on her eyes, a face mask, a white robe on and a glass of most likely non alcoholic wine on the side. Soft music is playing out of the speaker. She is in heaven right now.

"You should enjoy it while it lasts." I say and she jumps, the cucumber flying off her eyes and landing on the floor and the coffee table. The wine splatters all over her robe and the glass falls to the floor.

"Khanyi. What the heck, dont you knock?" She yells. "Look at the carpet, how am I supposed to get the wine stains out." She cries.

"Don't worry, you won't have to worry about the carpet or anything else in this house." Her lips curl into a huge smile. She stands up, completely forgetting about the stained carpet. Her hands fly to her mouth.

"It worked? Dali asked you to marry him?" She asks. Before I can even reply she starts ululating. "My plan worked?" She adds.

"Of course it worked. It worked so well Bahle was able to figure out that that's my email, an email I use to make bookings at the lodge?" She deflates like a balloon losing air in high speed.

"How did Bahle know the email, I didn't send those pictures to her." I chuckle and grab the bottle of wine from the coffee table and take a couple of swigs.

"Did you really think Khumalo wouldn't show her the email and the pictures? Sometimes I wonder if you ever think." I scream.

"Khanyisile Manana. Don't forget who you're talking to." She says, reprimanding me as if I am the child when she's the one acting childish.

"What difference does it make mama. My life is over. Bahle has ten years worth of pictures and videos of me and Dali. Pictures she has already sent to Khumalo. Do you know what that means? Dali will lose everything and once Dali loses everything, this life, it goes up in flames. No more monthly allowance, no more double story house, no more tuition payments for your daughter. All this, will be over in a matter of hours." I tell her. She sinks back down on the couch as reality sets in.

"This is a joke right? You're lying to me." She says. This one is like Thomas, she believes by seeing. I switch on the TV and plug the USB in and press play. I watch her as the blood drains from her eyes. Picture

after picture, video after video of my relationship with Dali filling the screen. Any other day this would be a great way to reminisce about the past and all its memories but right now every picture that slides across the screen and every video serves as a reminder of a life I had that I am about to lose. All thanks to my very own mother.

"Where did she get all this?" Mum asks, her eyes glued to the screen.

"Clearly the both of you have the same minds. I'm sure she has a PI on standby, watching every move we make."

"That bitch." Its a little too early for her to be insulting Bahle, especially because there is more.

"She says she wants the houses back." I say gulping down another sip of the wine. I need something stronger.

I open the drinks cabinet and pull out a bottle of vodka. Getting a glass will just waste my time so I chug the contents down my throat. The burning sensation is the only thing I feel right now.

"She can't have my house." Mum says standing up and marching towards me. "This is my house, over my dead body will she get it."

"Technically speaking this house belongs to Amantungwa Trust. Her children are apparently the beneficiaries of that trust. And as their mother, she by extension owns the house. Both houses in fact. So she wants us out." I chug another shot of the vodka and throw myself on the couch.

"No. No. No Khanyi, do you know how people are going to look at us? We haven't been here for even three months and now I am supposed

to pack my bags and leave. Never. This is my house. If she wants me out she will have to carry me out of here." She says.

Her ramblings don't even move me. It's her fault we are here right now. I am getting tipsy with all the vodka I keep drowning myself in. Usually I have a plan on what to do but right now I am blank. Not even the law can help us.

"What did Dali say about all this? Surely he can do something." She sinks down next to me, the hope in her voice almost palpable.

"I haven't call him."

"Hhaybo Khanyi, call him and tell him what his stupid wife is trying to do." She grabs her phone from the coffee table and hands it to me.

"Call him." She orders. I swear sometimes her brain short circuits because there is no way she is failing to connect the dots.

I take the phone and place it back on the table.

"If I tell him what is happening then i will have to tell him what led to it. I will have to tell him that my mother sent a PI to get dirt on his wife. I will have to tell him that she sent that dirt to his father. I will also have to tell him that his wife has an entire dossier on our relationship that she sent to his father. And then I will have to tell him that he is likely to lose everything because my mother allowed her greed to control her. Do you see where I am going with this?" I ask her. She shakes her head, clasping her hands on her lap.

"We have to do something. Anything." She mumbles. I keep key eyes on her as an idea pops into her head. She turns to me, half smiling. "I know what we can do. Take her out." She says so easily it takes a moment for

what she just said to register in my head. And when it does I jump up the couch and stumble, thanks to the vodka. I manage to keep my balance and take a step back away from her.

"What did you just say?" I ask. She gets up and stands in front of me.

"Listen to me, if we take her out then Dali will be the one left standing. And that will mean you and him can be together without having to hide. Its better to be with a widower than a divorcee. No one will look at you some type of way then." She says. She is doing it again. Thinking like a retard.

"And who do you think will be the first suspect if anything happens to her? Khumalo already has the file he knows what's going on. It's only a matter of time before everything blows up."

"Dont be stupid. There are many ways to skin a cat. I'll find someone who will make it look like she died from a heart attack or something." She grabs her phone and scrolls down. I'm pretty sure she is calling whoever gave her the muthi.

"He is not picking up. I'll have to go see him tomorrow." She says. This woman is unbelievable.

"Ma, you're not having Bahle killed."

"Oh relax, nothing is going to come back to you." She makes her way upstairs. This woman clearly doesnt think. I take a few deep breaths before calling Dali. I'm not going to sit back and watch my mother kill someone. Especially when I know what the implications may be if everything traces back to us.

"Khanyi." I ignore the coldness in his voice. Bahle must be there.

"Hey. I need you to listen to me and dont say anything. You can scream and yell at me after but right now I need you to listen." I say.

"Okay."

"Something happened today. I found out that my mother got footage of Bahle in a compromising position with some guy and she sent them to your father." I wait for him to say something but he is quiet. The timer is still going so I know he didnt hang up. "Dali?" I call out.

"You said I should listen. I am listening. Unless you're done." He doesnt sound angry. Maybe Bahle has told him what happened.

"Okay, anyways, Bahle found out about the pictures and confronted me about it. But the thing is she also has footage, ten years worth of you and I and she said she has already sent it to your father. So just so you know, by the time morning comes your father will know about us. I'm sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen."

"I will deal with you later. I have something I need to take care of." He says before hanging up the phone. Yeah I am dead.

BAHLENGIWE

I'm not one to get into fights or confrontations but I will admit that tonight felt good. It felt like I was taking my power back. And I did. I am done being anyones doormat.

I've been locked in the study since I came back from getting takeaways. The footage on Khayi and Dali looks like a whole movie. I have a PI on a monthly retainer who gets me the information I need and then I store it away for a rainy day. Turns out the rainy days have come.

I could send this to Mntungwa but then it would defeat the purpose of me taking my power back. It would be like giving Mntungwa the power and letting him and my father fight my battles. This is a fight I need to fight on my own. I know i told Khanyi the footage had been sent but I am going to hold on to it a little longer. Plus seeing the fear in her eyes was worth the lie. Who is on top now?

The door bursts open and my husband walks in, seething. Ah, Miss Khanyi has reached out to him.

"What did you do?" He asks, his teeth clenched and his voice barely audible.

"What did I do about what?" Having power is nice. I have no qualms about anything right now. I know I have the upper hand and he will not intimidate me in anyway. I won't let him.

"You have pictures of Khanyi and I that you sent to my father. Do you know what you've just done?" He hisses.

"Oh you can slow your horses. I didnt send the footage. Atleast not yet. But I will." I close the laptop and walk around the desk to stand in front of him. His face is visibly relaxed by now. Shame, he was really ready to fight for his life. "You see your little girlfriend decided to be greedy and try to get me out of the way. A smart move, but a stupid one too. Because I have made sure to protect myself too." I tell him.

"Okay, so we can still fix this?" He asks, clasping his fingers together.

"There is nothing to fix."

"Of course there is. Besides, who is this person you were found in an uncompromising position with?" Oh so now he remembers that part.

"No one important. And besides, if being on a beach and having someone put sunscreen on your back is being in an 'uncompromising position' then I wonder what it would be if I was found in bed with him."

"Bahle....." I lift my fingers and place them on his lips, shutting him up immediately.

"Here is the thing, I know you want to protect your girlfriend but the time for that is over. This little three way street we've been on comes to an end. Today. I am done being your wife in public and then having to watch you be with another woman. I'm done." I tell him. He scrunches his eyebrows, staring at me as if I am drunk.

"I dont understand." Of course you dont.

"Its simple really, you are either going to break up with Khanyi and we make our marriage work or you walk away, be with her and walk away with nothing. Because you know what's going to happen should the parents find out about your secret life. So the choice is yours." I lower myself onto the desk, positioning myself to make sure I can still look at him straight in the eye without having to break my neck.

"That doesn't seem like much of a choice." He argues.

"It is actually. I am taking everything that's mine back. My properties, my dignity, my husband. Everything. So I will give you seven days to make a decision. And while you're making that decision, please ensure the lawyers serve Khanyi and her mother with eviction notices. I am going to rent out those houses. Or better yet, sell them. I'll decide later."

"You want me to throw them out of their houses?"

"Our houses. Did you forget those houses are under Amantungwa Trust? That means our kids own them which means we own them. Now I could fix this myself but you know, this is a problem you created so you will have to fix it. Assignment number one, break up with Khanyi and make sure she and her mother are served with eviction notices by the end of this week. Everything else we will decide after. If you fail to do what needs to be done, I will just ask Mntungwa to do the honors. And we both know if he gets involved, Khanyi will not be the only one getting evicted. Goodnight husband. Or should I practice saying ex-husband?" I shrug my shoulders and make my way out of the study, leaving him stunned.

They say power is addictive and they were right. It is addictive, but taking back power that was mine to begin with feels, liberating and I love it.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

39

BAHLENGIWE

He is here. Now my nerves have started all over again. Mntungwa is hard to intimidate. Not that I have to, but it would be nice to be on the same wavelength and not feel like I have to make myself small at his presence. My only saving grace right now is that I am innocent and I have nothing to worry about.

There's a slight knock on the door before he walks in. I fix my dress and glance at myself on the microwave making sure my doek is tied on right. Although its unnecessary, especially in my own house, I hope it eases the tension. I quickly make my way to the front door and find him standing there, hands in his pockets. His stature is already intimidating enough, now add the look he is giving me and I can feel drops of sweat dripping down my spine.

"Baba, come in." I lead him to the lounge and he takes a seat. "Can I get you something to eat? Breakfast maybe?" I ask.

"Of course. I'd like some breakfast." I hurry back to the kitchen and set everything up on the tray. I knew he would want something, asking was just me being polite. I take the tray back and place it on the coffee table in front of him.

"That was quick." He says.

"Well I knew you were coming so I made sure to have everything ready for you." He nods his head and gives me a smile. Okay, that may be a good sign. He is still smiling.

"Well thank you." He picks up the cup of tea and takes a sip. I know he is just testing the waters. His tea has to be precisely made and if it's not it might ruin his entire breakfast. Rooibos tea with the teabag left inside the cup, two teaspoons of sugar, a dollop of honey and a splash of lemon.

I don't know why I am nervous because I have done this more times than I can count. He takes another sip and nods his head.

"It's perfect." He says. I slowly let out the breath I've been holding in. I'm pretty sure his mood just went up a notch.

"Thank you. It took me years of practice to get it right." He throws his head back laughing. Wow, okay. Maybe I am just worried over nothing.

He has his breakfast while I update him about the kids and their latest stunts. He is always attentive when it comes to them. Him and my father make it seem so easy when it comes to Nqaba and Fezi, sometimes I think maybe they are compensating for being shitty parents to us by being great grandparents. Once he is done I take the tray to the kitchen. I could clean the dishes but that would be me prolonging the inevitable. I return to the lounge and take a seat.

"Baba, can we talk about the pictures?" I ask. "I know how they look....." he lifts his hand up, stopping me. I keep quiet and look at him.

"I already know they are not what they seem. I had my PI question the guy and according to him it was all innocent." He tells me. I don't know if I should be impressed or scared, this PI of his seems to know everything except for my husband being in a relationship with Khanyi. Or maybe he has specific assignments?

"Oh, I didn't know you had a PI." I am not surprised though.

"It's just a guy I use from time to time. Anyways, I wanted to know if you were able to figure out who sent those pictures?" So the PI didn't find that out?

"Not yet. But I am looking into it."

"Good. I'll also look into why this person seems dead set on trying to ruin your life." Oh I have an idea.

"I know you're trying to help but can I ask that I take care of this one myself." He looks at me, his one eyebrow raised and a little smirk on his lips.

"So you want to sort this one out on your own?" He questions. I nod my head and his smirk turns into a full blown smile. "Okay then, I will leave it all to you. But if you need help, let me know."

"I will." He looks at his watch and stands up.

"I should get going. I need to see your husband and his brother." I walk him out to his car. He stops and turns to look at me. "You know when I got those photos I was shocked. But I had to remind myself that things are not always the way they seem and that's why I brought in the PI. And I am glad I was right." How right was he if he already sent me the pictures demanding an explanation? Men will shock you.

"Well thank you for having faith in me."

I watch him drive off. I head back inside and grab my phone. I still have to get to the lodge. I am tempted to call the lawyer and speed up the whole eviction process. Leaving everything in Dali's hands seems like a

risk. One I might regret tomorrow. But I also want to give him a chance to fix things. This is the last straw, I am done begging for crumbs from him, so if he doesn't come correct with this then I will have no choice but to do what I have to do. Blow the lid off of this whole marriage.

DALINGCEBO

Bahle has me by the balls, and that's just putting it mildly. It doesn't matter which side I look at this from, I am between a rock and a hard place. Either way, I am going to lose. Although one lose will not hold as much weight as the other.

The eviction letters should come in anytime today. I'm not sure how Davies will do it but that's for him to figure out. Seven days is not a lot of time to get this done. I just hope Khanyi and her mother have an alternative place to stay because Bahle is not letting up. I saw it in her eyes last night, she wasn't joking. I will admit though that seeing her be so assertive and bossy was a major turn on. I'm so used to her always being timid and shy that this side of her has surprised me. A welcome surprise though.

My landline comes alive, its loud ringing filling the entire office. I should get it fixed. The loud ringing is starting to annoy me.

"Hello."

"Your brother and father are here." Mrs Ceko says. She is one stern woman, even my father respects her. That's why he didn't come nudging in here announced.

"You can let them in.," I reply trying to hide the smile on my face. No, I am not happy to see them I just have a picture of my dad glaring at Mrs Ceko just because she won't let him through without my approval.

The door opens and the big man walks in. He looks around the office and smiles. This used to be his office. It's a lot different to what it was then.

"Nice office." He says. I get up and shake his hand.

"It is." I greet my brother and then sit back down. They take the guests seats and my dad's eyes are still roaming the room.

"This place has really changed." He observes.

"It had to. It was stuck in the eighties when I found it." He smiles and I swear I just saw him roll his eyes.

"That's not true. But it doesn't matter. This office is yours now and it's clear you've made it your own. Impressive." Getting any sort of praise or acknowledgement from my father always feels like a climb up a hill. "Anyways I wanted to talk to you boys about something, it's more of a security issue than anything else." He says. I can guess what he wants to talk about but I let him continue.

"I was thinking you should have people watching your wives. If someone can follow them to vacations and then take their pictures, who knows what's going to happen next. What if they get kidnapped?" He asks. I'm pretty sure that's not going to happen but I also know this is no longer a conversation but it's him telling us he has already done it.

"So when is the security getting here?" Sbu asks. Our father is that predictable.

"In a week." He replies. "Anyways, now that we have that out of the way. I have to go. It's already late and I don't want to be driving in the dark. I am too old for that shit." He stands up and fixes his shirt. I have way too much work to do so I let Sbu walk him out. Ours is not the usual father and son relationship, ever since we took over the family businesses everything shifted and became more professional. It's another reason why it's hard talking to him about what that woman said. One thing I know for sure though, it has to be done. Now all I need is to gather some courage and make sure it happens.

I am supposed to be on my way home, instead I am driving to see Khanyi at her mother's place. She called me in a panic earlier asking me to come see her before I go home. I am guessing they received the eviction letters.

I pull up to the gate and call Khanyi. Before she can even answer the call the gate slides open. I drive in and park my car behind hers. I am still not sure how I allowed myself to spend so much money buying this house. Khanyi's mother had a decent home before this one. The things we do for love.

I walk into the lounge and they are all here. All four of the Manana girls. You would think someone has died, the way it's so sombre and sad inside. I greet and sit down. Before I can say anything else, Khanyi places two brown envelopes in front of me. I pick them up and sure enough it's the eviction letters. Davies needs a bonus. Getting these in one day, I wonder who he has in his pockets.

"What am I looking at?" I ask, feigning ignorance. I don't feel as bad as I thought I would. They brought this on themselves.

"Eviction letters. Bahle wants us out of the houses. You have to talk to her." Khanyi says. Everyone is looking at me as if I have the answers.

"And say what to her?" I ask her. How does she expect me to fix this when they are the ones who acted out of stupidity.

"Ask her to put a stop to this." Khanyi yells.

"Ndodana, I know what happened was an unfortunate incident and I am willing to apologise to your wife. I will get on my knees if I have to but please ask her not to do this." Her mum begs. I almost feel sad for her but Khanyi did say she was the mastermind behind this whole thing so why is she acting like actions have no consequences.

"I dont think apologising will help. Bahle is determined to go through with this and unfortunately my hands are tied." I tell them.

"Baby please..." Khanyi says, sitting on top of the coffee table. "I am begging you, just talk to her. I know she will listen to you." I shouldnt have come here.

"I still dont understand what it is you want me to say to her. When you sent those pictures to my father what did you think would happen? Did you think Bahle would roll over and let you walk all over her."

"It was a mistake." Khanyi yells. I dont know why she keeps yelling at me.

"And mistakes sometimes have dire consequences. And this is one of them." I remind her.

"Dali"

"No, I will not speak to Bahle about anything. You started this when you chose to have my wife followed and have her pictures taken without her consent. For all we know whoever took these pictures also took naked pictures of her that they could sell to the highest bidder. You didn't think about the consequences of your actions. These are the consequences of your actions." I stand up ready to leave but Khanyi grabs my arm, holding on tight as tears stream down her face. For some reason I don't feel bad or guilty seeing her like this.

"Baby, please, I am begging you. At least let us move into one house. I will leave the other house and you let us keep this one. Please." She pleads. I gently pry my arm away from her hands.

"Unfortunately that is a conversation you will have to have with Bahle. She is in charge here and what she wants she gets. I'm sorry." I make my way to the car with Khanyi screaming my name and hurling insults too. I get in the car and text Bahle.

'It's done.' I press send and quickly get a reply. A smiley face. I guess that's done. I drive out and head home. Ten minutes into the drive I notice that a car is behind me. It's been taking the same turns as me. I could be paranoid but I decide not to take any chances. I take a wrong turn heading the opposite direction from home and the car follows. So I am not paranoid. I take another turn and sure enough the car follows. I take my phone and dial Sbu's number. He picks up pretty quickly.

"It's late." He says. It's not even eight o'clock. What is he on about?

"I think I am being followed." I hear shuffling on the other side before a door opens and closes.

"What do you mean?"

"For the past ten minutes there has been a car on my tail. Every turn I make its right there." I tell him.

"Okay, the fact that they are following you means they dont know where you live otherwise they would have gone there. So dont go home. Drive around a bit and I will call you in five minutes. After five minutes drive to mum and dads old house, I will meet you there." He says and then hangs up.

My heart is beating in my throat right now. I take a few wrong turns, counting each second as it passes. This is not good. As soon as the phone rings I take another turn. I answer the call as the car gets closer.

"Okay, get here, now." Sbu orders. "And dont hang up." I say a silent prayer, hoping God understands the mumbling I am silently making.

I increase the speed and so do they. I keep driving, headed to my parents old house. Just a street away I notice a car up ahead, lights on facing my direction. Its parked right in the middle of the road and the one behind me is speeding up to catch up with me. There are houses on either side of the road, no way to turn and no way to go forward. I am stuck.

"Sbu, I am stuck here. There is another car in front of me." I say, trying not to panic. I make sure all my doors are locked as the people in the other car get out. The ones in front of me are already looking at me, making no movement. Is this how I die?

HIS HEART TO KEEP

40

KHANYISILE

I cant believe he is really going through with this. All the time I've spent with him, the time I've wasted and this is the thanks I get? Dali doesnt see me. After everything we have been through he thinks he can throw me away like trash. All thanks to his sanctimonious wife. I might not be able to prove it but I know she slept with Sahluko and now she is here acting like she is Jesus's twin.

"Did you even sleep?" Seluleko asks walking into the kitchen. I've been stirring this cup of tea for a while now and it's gone cold. But it doesn't matter, everything else in my life is a mess so what's a cold cup of tea. She pulls the cup away from me and takes a seat. "Listen, I found a couple of apartments we can check out. They are two bedroom apartments so they should accommodate the three of you. Plus, you can move in as soon as possible." She says. I turn to look at her and she seems so relaxed about this. Of course she is, this doesn't affect her in anyway, she has her own life away from us.

"I'm not leaving my house." I tell her. She rolls her eyes and stands up. She plugs the kettle taking out another cup from the cupboard.

"Unfortunately that is not up to you. You are going to move out whether you like it or not." She says matter of factly. "More tea?"

"I'm not leaving my house Selu, that's my house. I picked it out, decorated it, everything in it has my sweat, blood and tears."

"Everything except the title deed." She is mocking me. At this time? She places a fresh cup of tea in front of me and sits down. "Look, from a law standpoint, you don't own that house. Neither does mum own this one. That's why I asked her not to sell our old house. She could have just rented it out but she refused because past things must stay in the past." She adds trying to imitate mum's voice. I don't think this is the time to be pointing fingers, but Selu has a hard time mincing her words. She will say what she wants to say anytime she wants to say it.

"I'll speak to Bahle. Clearly she is the one who is pulling the strings here and Dali is just her puppet." That's the only way I can fix this. Find a way to apologise to Bahle and do whatever she wants me to do. If I have to crawl on broken glass for her to forgive me then so be it. But I refuse to give up my home. That house is my home. I made it what it is. That's why Dali always found his way there any chance he got. Now I am supposed to just give it all up because Bahle is some power trip? Never.

"Where is your mother?" Senele asks joining us in the kitchen.

"She's supposed to be in her room." Selu answers. I really do not care about her whereabouts right now. For all I know she is carrying out her stupid plan to get rid of Bahle. For her sake I hope she knows what she is doing. She's already fucked up once, we can't afford to have her fuck up again.

"She is not in her room. It's empty and her bed is made." Senele says.

"She probably had errands to run." Maybe I am my mother's daughter, here I am already making excuses for her disappearance when I know she could be doing something dangerous.

"I'll make breakfast then we can start packing." Selu says. I swear she seems to find this amusing.

"So vele its over? Barely six months in this house and now we have to leave?" Senele says. I feel the cold, sad air wash over me. This is not what I had in mind when I promised myself we would fix our home situation.

No one could have imagine we would move from our old home to a house like this. Heck, I'm sure everyone thought we wouldn't finish high school let alone get tertiary education. But here we are, all of us with degrees to our name, well Senele is working on hers but still, we did it. We made it. And now we have to start back from zero. All thanks to Bahle. I knew there was a reason I hated that girl.

"There is no point in crying over spoilt milk. We had our run, it's over, its time to go back to the drawing board." Selu and her glass half full mentality will drive me nuts. I take my cup and head to my room. I dial Dali's number for the hundredth time and it sends me straight to voicemail, again. I need to apologise for going on a rampage last night. I know his hands are tied but I could have handled the situation better.

Since I can't get hold of him i decide to call the madam who is calling the shots.

"I hope you're calling me to come and collect my house keys." And she is full of herself. Bloody bitch.

"Can we talk? Face to Face." I ask.

"I'm pretty sure you can say whatever it is through the phone." I hate how smug and bold she sounds. If it was up to me I would take her

down a peg or two. But I have to remind myself that I am the one in need here, not the other way around.

"Bahle please, can we just meet and talk about things like adults? I'm sure there is a lot we need to sort out between us." I hear her snort before she says anything.

"Okay I'll send you an address where we can meet." She says then hangs up. A minute later a text comes through with a time and place to meet. The lodge. Of course she would choose that, it's her playground. Talk about getting the upper hand.

I have an hour to get there. I quickly change into a pair of sweatpants, a tshirt and sneakers. It's a bit chilly outside so I throw on my coat. This is not the outfit I would choose to face my arch enemy but time is not on my side. And with the power trip she is on, Bahle might just refuse to talk to me if I get there late.

I make my way downstairs and my sisters already have all the cutlery packed away in a couple of boxes. They will have to unpack those things when I come back, that's if I can get through to Bahle.

She is not here. But her PA leads me to the restaurant. I order a glass of juice and wait. And wait. And wait. Almost an hour later she shows up. I've already had three glasses of juice and I can feel my bladder complaining. But hey, I am the beggar here so I have no choice but to put up with whatever bullshit she is giving.

I watch her as she makes her way to me. Her holier than thou attitude is definitely working overtime. Even her walk has changed. Her outfit is vastly different to mine. Pink power suit, black stilettos and a wavy wig that looks like it's just been installed. It probably has though, last time I

saw her she was rocking her pixie cut. She smiles at a passing waiter before pulling out the chair and sitting down. I could tell her she is late but I am tethering on the edge right now so I keep my mouth shut.

"You wanted to talk." She says looking straight at me. A waiter places a cappuccino in front of her. She takes a small sip and places the cup back on the table. "I dont have all day. I have a lodge to run and tenants to find." I pull out the eviction letters from my bag and place them next to her cup. "I dont speak sign language Khanyi, say what you want to say."

"I received those yesterday. Eviction letters." I tell her. I dont know what kind of reaction I was expecting but it definitely wasnt the blank stare she is giving me right now.

"You're still mute."

"Why are you doing this? I get it, sending those pictures was a mistake, a huge one but that doesn't give you the right to throw us out of our homes." She smiles. A smug curl of the lips and all I want to do is wipe it off of her face.

"A mistake huh?" She asks and takes another sip of her coffee. "A mistake that would have cost me everything if Mntungwa had believed your stupid story. A mistake that would have led to me losing custody of my children. That was no mistake Khanyi, you make a choice. And your choice was to throw me under a fast moving train and then watch as pieces of me are scattered all over the tracks. So no sweetie, that was no mistake. Get it right." She says. Her mood has changed. I can tell she is getting pissed.

"Fine. I messed up. But please dont punish my mother for this. I will move out of the house. Just let my mother and sister continue to live in

that house. Mum already sold her old house so if she moves out of there she won't have anywhere to go. So please, have a heart and think about an old woman with nowhere to go." I plead. I can feel the vomit rising to my throat. I am actually begging her. Me? A whole Khanyisile Manana begging another woman. Her of all people.

"No. I need all of you out. I want no trace of you or your family in any of the houses."

"Why are you this cruel? Are you really so bitter about Dali loving me that you would punish my family?" I half yell. The only other people in the restaurant turn and look at us. Bahle seems unbothered though. She actually bursts into laughter.

"You're funny. To actually think you hold that much of a significance in my life? Hilarious. But to answer your question, I am not bitter about your relationship with Dali. In fact, for ten years I was on the sidelines watching you play house with my husband. I didn't fight or get in your way. I let you be. Even with all the evidence and footage I had, I still respected your relationship with him. But you couldn't. That's why we are here. It's you. You're the problem. Now, if there is nothing else to be said, I have work to do." She stands up and fixes her blazer. I can't believe she is being stubborn about this.

"Bahle please....."

"You know your way out." She struts away and I try so hard to fight this nagging itch to just throw the salt and pepper shaker onto her head. I refuse to give up on this. That's my home and if Bahle wants it she will have to drag me kicking and screaming out of it.

DALINGCEBO

The sound of wheezing bullets is still fresh in my head. I'm pretty sure my ears are clogged because of it. Last night I thought I was dying. All I could do was pray for my sins and hope that God takes late applications.

I saw the gun first before I saw their faces. This was clearly not a hijacking, I've had plenty of advanced driving lessons to know how to identify a hijacking. That was an assassination. And it was clearly someone who knows me because they followed me from Khanyi's place. The first bullet shattered my windscreen and lodged itself on the backseat. That moment felt like a scene straight out of a movie. When the second bullet was released I ducked down and hid myself between the seat and the dashboard. Even that wasn't nearly enough because they could have come around and started shooting from the sides.

I closed my eyes and imagined my children. At that point, their laughing and smiling faces brought me such comfort I knew if I died there and then I would be okay. I was lost in my own thoughts till I heard someone knock on the window. I looked up and it was my brother. The shooting had stopped. There were sirens and police cars all over the place. Even the neighbours had come out to see what's happening. And I thought only people in the rural areas and townships liked gossip.

"What happened?" I asked my brother as he pulled me out of the car. Four men lay face down on the ground with handcuffs on. Another two is covered in some foily blanket like thing. They are dead.

"They tried to kill you m, now they are going to jail." He said leading me to a police car. He introduced me to an officer who took my statement. Or the version that doesnt involve Khanyi or her mother. Driving away from that entire scene felt like I had cheated death. Again.

"Drink this, it should help with the nerves." Sbu says handing me a glass of sugar water. I've been drinking this since yesterday. I'm sure by now I am sweeter than honey.

"Can you tell me how did you find me?" I ask.

"Your phone. After the first call I called a guy I know in the force. When they got to the old house they were ready. And then when you said you've been boxed in we had to come and get you. Those guys were not willing to go down without a fight." I guess that explains the dead ones and bullet holes riddled in their car.

"I know you said you dont know who might be responsible to the cops, but you know something. Tell me so I can deal with it." He says. Always the protective brother. But how I do I tell him that top if my suspect list is my girlfriend and her mother?

"I really dont know." I reiterate.

"Of course you dont. But it's fine, I will find them, with or without you." He promises. I know I can always count on him but this, this is something I need to do myself. Those two women will wish they had never met me.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

41

MISS MANANA

She is panicking. This is not how things were supposed to happen. She had a perfect plan. A plan that was dependant on her patience and Khanyi's. For the longest time, it worked. Everything was going according to plan. Khanyi had her own place, a car, a monthly allowance that would rival any corporate executives salary in a corner office, her house was renovated, she was also getting her own allowance on top of the salary she gets every month and that salary was barely touched each month. They wanted for nothing.

Maybe Seluleko is right, it is her greed that has brought them here. She wanted a bigger house, one that was worthy of her name and status, one that would earn her the respect of her church mates. And this house has done that. And now she has to give it up.

'Never!' She muses. 'I am not giving up just yet.' She is pacing up and down an abandoned house just outside extension 5. She stops and look at the time. It's a little past six, people have woken up and they are already on the streets, she cant afford to be here much longer.

The rustling of the grass outside gets her attention. She tiptoes to the window and stands on the side looking out. She sees him. He rushes into the house, his hoodie pulled over his face and his hands in his pockets.

"You're late." Miss Manana says, her arms crossed on her chest. The man pulls the hoodie off his face and looks around, making sure they

are alone. "Do you seriously think I would bring anyone here." She asks clearly offended. She has more to lose than him so why would she set herself up.

"You can never be too sure." The man says rubbing his hands together.

"I didnt hear anything on the news. What happened?" She asks him. She's been anxious the whole night waiting for the news.

"The plan failed. Two guys are in jail as we speak, two dead and the other two are in hospital being treated for gunshot wounds." He says and she gasps.

"How did the plan fail because it was certainly a water proof plan when we discussed it. What did you do wrong?" She hisses. She doesnt care about the dead ones, the ones in custody are a different matter. She never spoke to them, except him, T-Man. She trusts him, he wont say a word even if the others spill their guts.

"Plans fail all the time. But I think he made us. He kept driving around and not going to his place. And then when we finally cornered him, we didn't even get enough shots to the car before the police showed up. I managed to escape as soon as they pulled up but the others couldn't." He narrates. She watches him as the words slip out of his mouth. This is not what she wants to hear.

"What's so hard about a botched hijacking? No tell me, because you had one simple job. Kill him and take his car. Strip the car and ditch it somewhere far from here. That's all you needed to do." She yells.

"We tried."

"Not hard enough clearly because he is still alive." She says. "Not even in hospital? Something? Anything?" T-man shakes his head and she chuckles and starts pacing again. "So I paid you for nothing." She mumbles loud enough for him to hear.

"Nothing? People are dead and some are fighting for their lives in hospital and you think it was all for nothing?" T-man asks her. "Do you even care that people are dead or you only care about the end goal, for you?" She stops pacing and looks at him.

"I paid you good money to get this done. Money that I will not get back. Money that could have fed my kids. So no, I don't care who is dead or who is fighting for whatever. My money just went down the drain." She sighs and takes off her jacket. "Besides, this is the job you chose, they knew what the risks were. They should have taken out insurance. Lay low and make sure this whole thing doesn't come back to me. And for your sake I hope your friends know nothing about my involvement in this. Because if my name spills out of their mouths we will have a problem." She makes her way to the door and stops, turns around and looks at his turned back.

"T-man?" She calls out. He turns and looks at her. "I hope we are clear about this because you know what's at stake if my name is uttered." He nods his head and she leaves. He watches her as she gets into her car and drives away. He knows his friends won't speak. They know nothing about her involvement, he made sure of it.

"Your day will come." He whispers. "Maybe not today, but it will definitely come."

Miss Manana drives straight to work and locks herself in the office, her mind is racing, she needs to come up with a new plan. Muthi is not working and the hit didn't work.

'I must be doing something wrong.' She muses. 'Or maybe there is something else at play here. Dali was easy to control and easy to get access to him and now it's like there is a whole barrier surrounding him.'

She stands up and paces the room. 'Maybe Gasa was right. The man is suddenly untouchable.' She thinks. She suddenly stops as a lightbulb goes off in her head. 'Maybe it has something to do with the beads he was wearing last night.' She sits back down. That's the only thing that makes sense to her at this point. The beads. He had them at the hospital too. Clearly those beads mean something.

When her shift starts she gets to work. She tries her best to keep her mind off her troubles but it's hard. Things are on a downward spiral. And it's not looking good for her. A message from Seluleko telling her she's found a flat for them pisses her off. She's not ready to give up her house just yet.

When she knocks off she drives straight home. She needs to have a conversation with Khanyi so they can figure out a way forward. She finds boxes already sitting by the door. She looks around the lounge and almost all the decor items have been packed away. The only things left are the couches and the tv. Her anger starts all over again. Seluleko is behind this, that's a given. She's probably the only one in the family who easily let's things go. Which is surprising because she is supposed to be a journalist.

She makes her way to the kitchen and she is met by more boxes. Her cupboards are empty except for a few plates and bowls, a few pieces of cutlery and a couple of pots. She marches up the stairs and makes her way to the bedrooms. She finds Selu and Senele packing their clothes.

"What the hell are you doing?" She asks them. They have made peace with their fate already.

"Packing. What does it look like?" Selu asks. She's also the loudmouth who has no problem talking back.

"Why?" She questions. Her children stare at her as if she has grown new limbs on her body.

"Why?" Selu asks. "Did you not get the eviction notice?"

"We are not going anywhere." She yells. "Where is your sister anyway?"

"Probably at her place, hopefully she is also packing." Senele tells her.

She marches out the room and out the house. She drives to Khanyi's house. Sure enough her car is parked in front of the garage. For once she chooses to use the remote Khanyi gave her for emergencies instead of calling her to open. She drives in and makes her way to the house. Her emergency key comes in handy. She finds her daughter sitting in the lounge with the lights off. She switches them on and sees her daughter on the corner of the large comfy couch, a bottle of wine already laying on the floor and another one sits open on top of the coffee table with a half empty glass next to it. Khanyi sits there with bloodshot eyes.

"Alcohol is not the answer." Her mother tells her picking up the bottle on the floor. "This is not the time for a pity party." She adds pushing Khanyi's legs off the couch making her groan and mumble something.

"When will it be time for a pity party then? After I am evicted from my house? Thanks to you?" Khanyi says slurring her words.

"This is not the time to be pointing fingers." Her mother warns. She lifts her head up, despite its heaviness.

"Then when will it be the time mama? This is all your fault." She yells, tears running down her face. "My life was perfect. I had it all right in the palm of my hand and now I am about to lose it all. And you know what's worse, Dali was almost killed last night. He didn't tell me but I found out through rumours and when I called him he barely talked to me, he sounded so annoyed even hearing my voice. Your greed led us here." She is sobbing now. Her patience was supposed to pay off. This is not how it was supposed to be.

Miss Manana looks at her daughter as she lowers herself on the couch, sobbing like a woman who just lost her husband. Clearly this is not the time for this conversation. Khanyi is too drunk to make sense of anything. She pulls the throw from the other couch and throws it over her. She takes her phone out of her pocket and sends a text to Gasa letting him know she will be at his house early in the morning. This is not how things were meant to work out but with Dali dead and a couple of millions from his life insurance policy should be enough to wipe their tears. Her daughter deserves something after all the time she's put into this relationship.

BAHLENGIWE

For some reason I am not as torn up about Dali's shooting as much as I should be. I am his wife, I should be the one going up and down with him trying to figure out what happened. But I'm not. Maybe something is wrong with me.

He walks into the house looking like he has the worlds problems on his shoulders. His tie is loosened and his top two buttons are open, his blazer hangs on his one arm and his laptop bag on the other. Maybe seeing death beckon twice in a space of less than a month is enough to change a man's perspective about life.

"Hey, are you okay?" I ask taking the blazer and the bag. I lead him to the couch and he sits down, closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

"I will be fine." He says. I dont want to pry, we might be married but we've always kept out of each others way unless necessary. But maybe this is not the time to stay out of each others way.

"What happened at the police station? Are the guys saying anything?" He shakes his head.

"No. The detective is hoping that the ones in hospital will be willing to talk. The ones in the holding cells are not saying a thing." He replies. For some reason I don't believe this was another botched hijacking. Everything about it seems planned and well coordinated. If he didn't call Sbu when he did he'd probably be dead by now. I looks at the beads in his wrists and wonder if maybe they have something to do with protecting him. Seeing the bullet holes in his car, it's hard to believe not a single one got him. Not even a scratch.

I lift his hand up and run my hand over the beads. He opens his eyes and stares at the movement of my hand.

"Do you think these have anything to do with keeping you safe? Ever since you've been wearing these its like you've become a different person." I say.

"Is that good or bad?"

"I dont know. I just know I like this version of you better." I let go of his arm and he drops it to his lap. "But maybe I am putting my faith in something that's not even there. Are you hungry? I cooked." I try to stand up and he pulls me back down. I look back at him.

"What if it is there? What if this is the real me? Would that be a bad thing?" He questions.

"No. It wouldn't be a bad thing." I reply, staring straight into his eyes. He is really different.

"Then maybe I need to make sure I do everything that woman said I should do and see what happens. Maybe even these attempts by death to claim me would stop." He says. Wouldn't that be great. But I know better than to put my hope and faith on him, hut I'd love to see him try.

"Maybe. Let me run you a bath and then I'll make you something to eat." I get up and make my way to the bathroom. I turn on the faucet and add in some bubbles and salts. While the tub fills up I stand over the sink, looking at my image on the mirror. Do I really want to put my hopes on Dali finally being the husband I've always wanted? I've been burnt plenty of times by him. And the newest wound is still fresh as a newborn baby. If he is going to do what the woman said needs to be done, he needs to do it for himself and his family. Not me. At this point I think we are better off staying out of each others way because when

our worlds collide, I am the one who is always on the losing end.
Always. This time I am putting myself first.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

42

BAHLENGIWE

Today is the day that the Lord has made. Okay maybe not, but its officially the day Khanyi and her family move to God knows where. The past couple of days I've been debating with myself wondering if I am doing the right thing. I dont know if they even have a place to go to. But then I have to remind myself that this has been a long time coming. I've put up with enough from them and now it's time I put myself and my needs first. I swear reclaiming my power is harder than I thought.

I decided to monitor the move today, luckily it's the weekend so I dont have to worry about work. A Jean, tshirt and sneakers are the only thing I need today. I throw on a cap and I'm ready to go. By the time I get downstairs my sisters are here.

"Finally, we were starting to think you've forgotten what day it is." Dvumo says munching on an apple. She clearly cam ready for anything, her shorts putting her long legs on display and her crop top revealing her toned flat stomach. Lindo on the other hand is too focused on the mayonnaise she's eating like it's a tub of yoghurt. Cravings!

"What are you guys doing here anyway?" They look at each other and burst out laughing.

"You seriously think we will miss the movie that's about to play? Never!" Dvumo says. "Let's go. I want to see the movie that's about to play." She is way too excited about this. She is five to jumping up and

down. We make our way to the car with Lindo still eating the mayonnaise.

"You're going to have to buy me my mayonnaise." I tell her.

"Not gonna happen. This is for your niece or nephew anyway. So your aunty duties have already started." She sticks her tongue out and gets in the car.

I drive straight to Khanyi's place. The place is quiet. Too quiet. It's like she has forgotten what day it is today. Lucky for me I have Dali's keys so I just drive in. Her car is not in the driveway. Well technically speaking it's my car now. I should keep it. Or sell it. Whatever works.

"Does she know what today is?" Dvumo asks squeezing herself between the two front seats and looking around the property.

"If she doesn't then she will." Lindo says closing the mayonnaise tub and placing it on the floor of the car. We get out and make our way to the door. I knock a couple of times but there is no answer. Hopefully it means she has left. I use the keys and get in. The place is still the same as it was the last time I was here. There has been no packing or anything.

Dvumo opens the curtains and looks around. There are bottles of wine on the floor and the couches. Guilt stabs me right in the chest. This is all my fault. But then I quickly remind myself of all the times I've suffered because of her and Dali. Ten whole years of suffering, she cant even handle a week. Pathetic.

I make my way upstairs and find her sprawled out on the bed. Probably drunk. I go into the bathroom and grab the small paper bin. It has no

holes on it so it should work. I fill it with cold water and head back to the bedroom. I pour the water all over her and she screams and shrieks, jumping off the bed, dripping wet.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" She yells. Hearing the commotion, my sisters quickly rush into the bedroom.

"You should be packed and out of the house by now. I do not have time to waste. Get to it." I yell back. She breathes in and out a few times, squeezing the water from her dress.

"You're enjoying this aren't you?" She asks, glaring at is.

"Of course she is." Dvumo replies. "Every dog has its day, and today is your day. My sister has suffered enough in your hands." Khanyi chuckles and squeezes the water out of her weave.

"Right? I am the problem. Meanwhile she will go back and sleep in the same bed with the same man who is responsible for all this. But I am the problem?" She snorts. For some reason i know she is right. At the end of the day there is one common denominator between us, Dalingcebo, and yet here I am making her pay for crimes they both committed against me while Dali walks away scot free. Am I really that kind of a woman who will always punish the other woman instead of facing facts, my husband is the problem in all this. A bitter pill to swallow but it's the truth.

"You both are actually." Lindo says. "The only difference is that Bahle respected your relationship with Dali because she knew he loves you, but you couldn't afford her that same courtesy. Instead of enjoying being with the man you love you choose to try and destroy her marriage for your own selfish reasons. Now that's why we are here, not

because of anything else. You lack of boundaries and respect. Now, pack up, its time to go." She adds. I love how my sisters will always fight for me but right now I feel bad. Really bad. But I've started this now I have to end it.

"You might want to call your friends and sisters and whoever else you need to call, I need this house to be empty in a few hours, the cleaners will be here by then." I tell her. I walk out of the bedroom and head straight to the car. I dont even think Khanyi has made provisions for a moving truck or anything. My phone vibrates somewhere in my bag. I pull it out and Dali's name flashes on the screen. For someone whose girlfriend is being evicted today, he seems unbothered.

"Khumalo."

"Hey. Where are you? We are back." He says, I can hear the kids screaming in the background. One thing he has done pretty well lately is stepping up and being a present father. Everything else is still dicey.

"Helping Khanyi move." I reply. He is quiet for a moment.

"Oh, okay. How is it going?"

"It's not going. She has barely packed anything." I tell him.

"Maybe we should give her another day." He suggests. The scorned wife in me wants to say no and throw all her belongings out on the lawn, but the human in me thinks otherwise. It's not like a few more hours will change anything.

I call the cleaning company and reschedule the cleaning for tomorrow before making my way back into the house. Dvumo and Lindo are watching her pack her clothes. She's changed into dry clothes.

"We should get going." I tell my sisters. They look at me as if I've grown tentacles on my forehead. I turn to Khanyi. "You have until tomorrow noon, I need you packed and out the house by then. Let's go." I don't wait for any of them to say anything but I know my sisters are right behind me.

"What was that? What happened to her leaving?" Lindo asks, pulling the seat belt and securing herself.

"She will leave. Tomorrow."

"Why not today?" Dvumo questions.

"I do not have the time or energy to sit around and watch her pack. This house is too big for me to do that. We will come back tomorrow and I'm sure she will be ready to leave then." Why am I even making excuses for her.

"And if she is not? I swear your heart needs to be donated to science because there is no way anyone can be that kind to her husband's mistress." Lindo says.

We drive to Khanyi's mum's house and this side, there seems to be more action. There is a truck parked inside the yard and men walking in and out coming out with boxes and loads of furniture. I park the car and we walk in. Khanyi's mum is sitting on a chair against the wall fence, monitoring everything. As soon as she sees me an inferno builds up in her eyes. Yeah there is no question she hates me. Her eyes look somewhat familiar. I know about her, I've seen her from far but this up close, her eyes feel so familiar. Like I've seen her somewhere.

"Sanibonani." She doesn't reply. Instead she glares at me.

"What do you want?" Feisty. Reminds me of someone.

"Just came to check if you're done. The cleaners need to be here in a few hours." She chuckles and stands up, her hands on her hips.

"This day has 24 hours. As long as it's the day given on that stupid eviction notice then we will go. Even if its 12 midnight." I nod my head. I want to remind myself that she is an elder and therefore I should respect her but then I remember who she is.

"Yeah I dont think it works that way. You have a few more hours before whatever is left in there will be thrown out in the streets. And make sure you dont leave any damage." She looks at me from head to toe and back again.

"It must be nice. Thinking you hold all the power." She says, crossing her arms on her chest. "How does it feel, knowing you're out here fighting for a man who doesn't love you? A man who has treated you like shit all these years and you're here, fighting for him, as if that is supposed to make him love you. Sweetie, you can have the ring and the kids and the trust funds and shit but you will never have his heart. No amount of flexing your powers will make him love you. You will always be an obligation he never wanted to begin with. But go ahead. Flex your little muscles, for now." She turns and walks away, feeling smug and full of herself. She turns around, "Dont worry Mrs Khumalo, we will be out of your house soon." She says and walks away.

"I knew Khanyi got that stinking attitude from somewhere." Dvumo says. Her attitude might stink but her words definitely sting. Today might be stick it to Bahle day. And to think I woke up in high spirits today. My pings in my pocket. It's a text from the lodge.

"Let's go. I need to go to the lodge. I'll drop you guys off at the house."

That woman's words keep replaying in my head. I might not like her very much but she is right, I might fool myself into thinking I am taking my power back and fighting for me, but if that were the case I would file for divorce instead of expecting Dali to stay with me just because he is afraid of what his father will find out. And what that will mean for his future. At the end of the day I am blackmailing the man into being with me.

I drop my sisters off at my place and head to the lodge. It's the weekend so I know it's busy. I just wonder what's going on. I head straight for the reception.

"Hey, I got a text, what's going on?" I ask her.

"Oh yeah, the wedding that's coming up, the couple is here with their planner." She tells me. Last time I checked we were supposed to meet next week. I hope I didn't forget anything. That would be bad for the business. "They are in the restaurant's private section." She adds. I take a deep breath and make my way there. I cross my fingers, hoping they are not here to cancel the wedding. I see the wedding planner first.

"Mrs Khumalo, sorry to ambush you on the weekend." She says pulling me in for a hug.

"It's not a problem, Letti. We all want to make sure this wedding goes off without a hitch. Weren't we supposed to meet next week?" I ask her. She hooks her arm with mine and we make our way to the lovely couple.

"We should but the groom has to fly out for some award thing in Ghana in a couple of days and he will only be back after a week so we figured why not do the rundown today and get it over with before he leaves. The big day is drawing near and we need to make sure everything is on point." She tells me. "Anyways, you remember the bride and groom, Sabusiswa and Dumezweni. And that's his big brother Dumisani on the phone." She says pointing to a guy in a cap looking over the balcony with a phone on his ear.

"Its nice to see you guys again. How excited are you for the big day?" I ask pulling up a chair. The two lovebirds look so smitten with each other its actually cute to watch.

"Honestly if it was up to me we would be married already." Dumezweni says.

"Patience my love. We are almost there." Sabu says tapping his arm. He looks at her, stars in his eyes and a smile on his face.

"Did I miss anything?" The other guy says. I look up and its Dumi. He sees me too and he smiles.

"What are you doing here?" He asks taking a seat.

"I run this lodge." I tell him. I cant believe he is Dumezweni's brother. They have zero resemblance whatsoever.

"Wow, okay. Small world." He says.

"You guys know each other?" Dumezweni questions, his eyes darting from me to his brother and back again.

"She is Titi's friend. We met in Cape Town." He tells them. They all give out an oh and nod their heads. I guess they know Titi.

"Small world indeed. Can we do a run down of everything that's been done and what else needs to be done." Letti says, her notes already on the table. I open my phone and go to my notes app to make sure I also write down what needs to be wrote down and make amendments to my previous notes.

The meeting goes pretty smooth. Almost ninety percent of what needs to be decided has been decided. Vendors are booked and back up vendors are on standby. Yep, if it comes down to it we will have back up vendors for the back up vendors.

"So guess what happened to me last week." Dumi says as I walk then to their car after the meeting.

"What?" I ask. I'm pretty sure it has everything to do with Mntungwa's PI.

"I had a man question me about the trip to Cape Town. He wanted to make sure we are not lovers." He says, so blunt.

"I'm sorry about that. It's a long story." He stops and looks at me.

"I figured. Maybe one day you will tell me all about it. Have a nice day Mrs Khumalo." And lead us not into temptation Lord. I say my goodbyes and watch them drive off before I head home.

My sisters are gone and so are the kids. Dali is working in the lounge.

"Hey, you're back. How did it go?" He asks, his eyes glued on the laptop. This side of him feels like an act he is putting on. I sit on the couch across from him and watch him work.

"It went well, I guess." He looks up, his eyebrows raised.

"What happened?" He asks.

"Do you want to be married to me?" I blurt out. The confusion on his face deepens.

"Where is that coming from?"

"Its just a question."

"What kind of question is that?" I should let this go. I really should but I cant.

"The kind that needs an answer. Are you here because you really want to be with me or it's because i have this secret hanging over your head? Because if that's the case we can go our separate ways. I wont say anything to the parents about you and Khanyi. You can be free to live your life the way you want." I offer. He closes the laptop and shoves it to the side.

"Bahle what is going on with you? This morning you were happy and singing and now you're asking me this. What happened? What did Khanyi say to you?" He asks.

"She didnt say anything. I just " I heave out a deep sigh. "I just want you to be happy. And truth be told I dont know if I can ever make you happy. I wouldn't hold it against you if you chose yourself over this

marriage." He stands up and walks around the coffee table to sit next to me.

"Bahle, what is going on? Where is all this coming from?" He takes my hand in his and gently rubs it. This would be cute but...

"You haven't answered my question." I remind him.

"Of course I want to be married to you. I know lately things have been foggy and confusing for me but I know one thing for sure, and that is I want to be married to you." He says. I want to believe him, I really do but time has taught me to take everything he says with a grain of salt.

"If you say so."

"I do. And I mean it." He adds. Only time will tell.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

43

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

BAHLENGIWE

"Here." Titi says handing me a glass of wine. She is busy making Sunday lunch while I drown in my own sorrows. I decided to drive here early in the morning for some fresh air and to get my mind in order. I take sip of the wine and pull the chopping board towards me and start chopping the vegetables. "Why do I get the feeling you didnt just drive here to have sunday lunch with your best friend. What's going on?" She asks. Well she is right, this is more than a friendly visit. I need advice.

I look up and she is staring at me.

"I want a divorce." I say. Her face doesnt change. It just remains the same as it was a minute ago. "You dont seem surprised." I add.

"The only surprising thing is how long it took you to get to that decision. Honestly I expected that five years ago." She says. "So what prompted this decision?" I shrug my shoulders and continue chopping. "There must be something that's made you want this now. What happened?"

"Its not really what happened, it was a conversation I had with Dali yesterday. I asked him if he actually wants to be married to me and it took him a while to answer."

"And when he answered, what did he say?" She prompts.

"He said he does want to be married."

"What then made you think you want a divorce?" I sigh and push the chopped vegetables away.

"Everything. You know how when you get into a fight or an argument with your significant other they will do everything possible to assure you that they care and they love you..." she nods her head. "Well I didn't get that. Not even a false, of course I want to be married to you, I love you. None of that. And then it dawned on me, in the entire time we've been married he has never said he loved me. Not even by mistake. Not even a slip of the tongue. So what am I holding on to exactly?" She sighs and comes around the island, taking a seat next to me. She swings my chair to face her and then takes my hands in hers.

"Bahle, I am so happy you came to this decision all on your own because tomorrow you won't say we pushed you into it. But the truth is you've been holding on to nothing. I know gogo Mpungose said something about him being given idliso and all that but it won't erase the years of unhappiness you've had to endure and put up with. So if a divorce is what you want, I will get you the best divorce lawyer in town and I will be right next to you. Every step of the way." She assures me. I'm glad I came to her and not my sisters, as crazy as Titi is she gives the best advice.

"Thank you."

"That's what friends are for. So what are you going to do because you signed a contract which is as good as a pre nup?" She asks. I've thought about this the whole of yesterday and there is no other way to do this except make a clean break. I know the parents will try and punish me for this and they will do everything they can to frustrate me. But I've made my decision and nothing they do will stop me.

"I'm pretty sure I will have to resign from running the lodge and then Dali will want full custody of the kids, but I can easily get around that by making sure he remembers the files I have on him and Khanyi. Money wise, I will be okay. I have my savings, my investments, the lodge they know nothing about, I have shares in Makgotso's boutique and it's been doing pretty well, I have the three apartments here that I'm renting out so I will be okay." Her lips form into a big smile.

"I've always known you were smart. Now, are any of those properties in your name?" I shake my head no. "The lodge?" I shake my head and she smiles.

"Everything is in the trust you helped me set up."

"Good girl. So those are safe. It should be an easy divorce, if your in laws dont fight you." I take a deep breath. I knew that trust would come in handy one day. But now it feels like I have one less thing to worry about. "I will speak to a friend and set up an appointment for you and then we will take it from there." She says. I am actually doing this.

Cooking goes smoothly. Plus the wine we are drinking helps gets us a little tipsy. I need to stop though because I still have to drive to Witbank. We set the table and I notice there are three places instead of two.

"Are we expecting someone?" I ask her.

"Yeah, Dumi is coming over." She says. As if on cue her phone rings. She gives the person the access code then hangs up. "He is here." We set everything up and the table looks good. Dali texts me pictures of the kids playing on what looks like a water slide. They seem happy. I hope this divorce doesn't hurt them.

"Mrs Khumalo." Dumisani says behind me. I turn and he is smiling. He looks good in his light pink shorts and a white golf shirt.

"Dumisani Mhlongo. Why do you always show up where I am? Are you stalking me?" He throws his head back, laughing. He has a nice laugh.

"If only. How are you?" He leans in for a hug and I hug him back.

"I'm good."

"Okay you two can stop flirting now, sit down so we can eat." Drunk Titi has no filter. And how is greeting anyone seen as flirting? We take our seats and dish up.

"This looks good." Dumisani says.

"Thank you." Titi replies. Well she did most of the work anyway so she deserves the praise. It does look good and even tastes better too.

"So, Mrs Khumalo, what brings you to our neck of the woods?" Dumisani asks. I'm starting to think he is mocking me by constantly referring to me as Mrs Khumalo. It is technically my name but it's not a name I use, especially with those close to me.

"Argh, I needed a break." I say. A thought crosses my mind. "Are you two dating?" I ask them. They stop eating, look at me then at each other before they burst out laughing. I mean they are always together, Cape Town and now here, plus most guys would rather be chilling with the boys on a Sunday surely.

"No. We are not dating." Titi says firmly.

"Why not?" I ask. They are not related, they like each other so why not.

"Because Dumisani is like my brother. It would be weird." She answers.

"You're not related. So why would it be weird?" I am about to play matchmaker. Maybe once I resign from the lodge I can take up a career as a matchmaker.

"We actually tried dating when she was doing her articles. We realised we are better off as friends." Dumisani tells me. And this one never told me they dated.

"Okay so there is no hope of the two of you ever being together?" I ask and they shake their heads in unison. Okay then, that train is clearly not going anywhere.

"Speaking of being together, you still haven't explained to me why I almost had my arm broken because apparently there is a picture of us together in Cape Town." He says and I swallow a whole piece of meat. Luckily it goes down pretty quickly but not before it restricts my breathing for about five seconds.

"What are you talking about?" Titi asks.

"Oh, I had a visit from a guy questioning my intentions with Mrs Khumalo here." He is so relaxed about this it's crazy. Titi turns to me gobsmacked. There is clearly no point in hiding this so I tell her everything.

"That bitch!" She hisses. Dumisani finds this funny.

"It's not funny." He laughs harder. How is he not even bothered by this.

"Actually it is. Imagine my surprise being accosted by someone I don't know asking questions I have no answers to."

"And yet you're here, with me. What if someone takes more pictures."
He lifts his hands up in surrender.

"All I came here to do was have lunch with my friend. I'm not responsible for people's twisted thoughts. Besides, I am a bit of a dare devil. I like danger." He says. That's pretty obvious.

Dumi leaves first, apparently he has a game of golf with some friends. Explains the shorts. Once he is gone I help Titi clean up and even score myself a takeaway. She pours two glasses of juice and leads me out to the balcony.

"So we need a gameplan." She says sinking herself onto the patio chair. "The contract you signed, getting out of it will be hard but that's where Dali comes in." I'm not sure where Dali comes in but I listen. "I'm sure he doesn't want his affair with Khanyi to come out so we will use that to your advantage, starting with joint custody of the kids but with you as primary caregiver. His parents don't know about the two houses so we will convince him to sign over the houses to you, you know, use them as your source of income." I nod my head, I don't know how that will happen but I trust her.

"And if he says no?"

"Then we expose his affair and you get everything. Right now we are being generous with this. He will know it too. You could literally get everything but you're being kind enough to get a tenth of his fortune. So he has no choice but to play ball. He will be the one convincing his father to play ball too. But do me a favour, do not say a word to him before I speak to my friend and the papers are drawn up with all the

stipulations you want." She says. I nod my head once more. I need to speak to my children too before this escalates.

"I'm proud of you, I know this won't be easy but, it will be worth it in the end. Your happiness and freedom will be worth it." She says. We clink our glasses, the future beckoning and me ready to answer.

KHANYISILE

I can't believe this is my life. Cramped in a three bedroom apartment with my siblings and my mother. This is not the life I want for me. This bedroom is too small for my king sized bed. It literally goes from one wall to the other. And only one side table can fit, barely. This is straight up poverty. I have to share a bedroom with my Senele since Selu is going back to her bachelor flat in Joburg. I've never envied her as much as I do right now. What I would do for some privacy.

"Khanyi, food is here." Mum yells from the lounge. The fact that I can even hear her loud and clear is testament of how small this place is. I jump over suitcases and make my way to the lounge. Mum's couches are too bulky for the space, everything just makes zero sense.

There's a bucket of KFC on the cramped coffee table, with two litres of coke and some rolls. Everything just screams poverty. Selu places some plastic tumblers on the table. I guess the glasses are too far. Thank God I found storage space at such short notice, where would my things even fit here.

"Couldn't you buy something else?" I say and plop myself on the couch.

"Like what? Sushi? Seafood? What would you like your highness?" I swear this girl was sent to torture me. She forgets even her stupid

apartment was being paid by me. And now she will have to do it herself. Clearly her brain hasn't caught up to the reality.

"If you're going to mock me then just shut up." I say.

"Mock you? The only thing worth mocking is your lack of foresight. I mean you should have known this would be a possibility." She picks up a piece of meat and breaks the skin off, looking at me, challenging me to say something. What can I say, she is right, I should have known this would happen. I should have known that behind that sweet smile was a conniving petty bitch. Bahle will rue the day she decided to make a mockery of me. Tomorrow I have to go to the bank and find out how much money is in Dali's card, and whatever I find there I will have to withdraw before he decides to cut me off financially too.

"Anything would have been better than this." I mumble.

"Well you need to get used to having this as a treat, this is a luxury to some people." She replies.

"Oh for fucks sake, shut up." Mum yells. "Sesvile! (We've had enough.) Hawu, out here throwing jabs like nobody's business, have you forgotten that you have a degree because of your sister? That little job and that apartment, its because of her. So before you open your mouth remember that." Selu's eyes fall to the floor.

"I'm sorry." Now she is the one mumbling.

"I'm not the one you should be apologising to. Do you think any of us are enjoying this? Do you?" Mum asks. Selu shakes her head.

"Apologise to your sister." She turns to me, her eyes downcast.

"I'm sorry." She says. Her apology means very little at this point. All I am worried about is making sure my future is secure. And I need to make sure my frozen eggs are still intact and viable. If push comes to shove, those eggs will be my saving grace, especially the embryos.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

44

♥♥NOT EDITED♥♥

DALINGCEBO

I have about a hundred messages from Khanyi, voicemails and missed calls. I could just block her but a part of me feels bad. Which only lasts about a second before everything is wiped away and nothing makes sense. My CT scan came back clear so I am not sure what is happening to me. Why do I keep going in and out of my head. And the weird thing is that lately its been happening more frequently. Sometimes I will be sitting at my desk and my brain will doze off and my relationship with Khanyi will play out in my head like some film. And instead of those memories making me happy they just make me angry. And when I come back to my senses my mood will be different.

I decided to make the drive to Badplaas to talk to my dad about fixing umsamo. I'm starting to think all these 'visions' or thoughts have something to do with that. I haven't told Bahle where I am going yet but I know she will be supportive. That's another thing I need to fix, my marriage. It feels like its been on the back burner for so long that now feels like everything is starting over.

I grab my overnight bag and pack a change of clothes. I leave a note for Bahle on the fridge. I am hoping to come back tomorrow, and fingers crossed I come back with good news. Just as I drive out of the house I notice a car parked just a couple of houses down. Ever since the shooting I have been wary of any car or anyone that I don't know being too close to me. The guys who shot at me still haven't said a thing to

the cops about why they targeted me. The police think it was definitely a hit. As for why, no one knows.

The security my dad hired follow behind me and the car all of a sudden is right behind them. Coincidence? I think not. I'm just hoping they will be able to see it and figure out what to do. I need to get to Badplaas, speak to my dad and come back today. I look on the rearview mirror and notice the car is gone. Hopefully its not taking a short cut.

Three hours later I drive into Badplaas. I put in my dad's address and follow the gps. It's weird how he actually bought this place while he was on a cruise somewhere. Technology. Or stupidity. I'm yet to figure out.

I pull up to a locked gate and there seems to be no life in sight. I text my dad and tell him I am at the gate. Luckily he replies pretty quickly saying he is on his way. It takes about ten minutes before he pops up. This place is clearly huge. He even needs a golf cart to get to the gate. He signals for me to go in while he closes the gate. I drive up to the lone house on the premises. It's not too big but it's not small either. From the outside it looks like it could do with some work. There's a construction van parked on the side of the house. I guess they are working on it.

I park the car as mum walks out of the front door. I get out and make my way to her. Her smile is all the courage I need to do this. I lean down and give her a warm embrace.

"Hello mama."

"Hello boy boy. This is a surprise." She says stepping back and looking at me from head to toe. "How are you? Why didn't you bring the kids?"

"I am fine. The kids are at school. They can't afford to miss any more school days to hang out with you guys. Especially Nqaba." She rolls her eyes and leads me inside. There are people walking in and out of here, there's dust in every corner. How do they even survive here.

"Please, there is nothing a little generous donation to the school cant fix." She leads me to the kitchen which seems to be the only functional space around here.

"That wont teach them anything except to be spoilt brats. How do you survive with all the dust?"

"Argh, it will be over soon." She tells me. From what I am seeing, I doubt that very much. "Are you hungry? There's some leftover soft porridge from this morning. I'm still making lunch."

"No. I'll wait for lunch. So they are not doing the kitchen?"

"They are. As soon as they are done with the lounge and the dining room they will do the kitchen before moving to the bedrooms. I have to make sure everything is properly done." And knowing my mother, she will not pick every little thing until she is satisfied. I pity those guys. "So, what's with the surprise visit?"

"Oh I need to talk to dad about something."

"I am right here." Dad says walking into the kitchen. "Is everything okay at work?"

"Work is fine. I have another problem?" Mum stops staring her pot and looks at me. I dont think this is a conversation I should have with her present just yet. Dad sees my hesitation and gets the message.

"Okay then, let's go out to the pool house." He says. There's a pool? Nice. I follow him out and sure enough there is half an Olympic size swimming pool in the backyard. Its covered, probably to protect it from the construction. The pool house is much cleaner and livable. "Do you want something to drink?" He pulls out a jar filled with juice and pours me a glass before I can even reply. I guess I am drinking juice now. He places the glass on the side table and joins me on the couch. "So, what's so urgent you had to drive here and not call?" I take a deep breath. I've tried to figure out a way to start this conversation all the way here but none of what I was thinking seems to be the right way. But I need to do this. I am here and I can't be wasting petrol in this economy.

"Can I ask you something?" He looks at me, his face stoic. He says nothing but I know his raised eyebrow is his silent way of saying go on. "When last did we have a traditional ceremony? You know like an ancestral ceremony? And my wedding doesn't count because everything we did there was just for the sake of doing it." His brows quickly snap together, forming lines on his forehead.

"Why?"

"What do you mean why?"

"I mean why are you asking me that? Since when are you interested in any ancestral anything?" I sigh and feel the beads through my tshirt sleeve. This will not be a walk in the park.

"A few weeks ago I took Bahle to Polokwane for a weekend away. I met this woman while we were shopping and she gave me some beads. She

told me something about a fog clearing." I tell him. I'm hoping this will make him understand the severity of the situation we are in right now.

"Was this before or after your illness?"

"Before."

"And you wore those beads before you fell sick?" He asks. I nod my head. "Then there's your answer. Clearly those beads had something sinister in them. That's why you fell sick." I quickly shake my head and turn to face him.

"Baba, that's the thing. When I wore those beads I felt different. In a good way. It was like there was light and clarity and everything around me made sense. And what didn't make sense I stayed away from."

"Then how do you explain falling sick right after and literally going into a coma? Doctors don't know how you survived all that. And it all started because of those beads." He insists. I knew this would be an uphill battle but I should have known it would also include a backpack filled with rocks.

"I met the woman again a week or so back. She gave me another set of beads."

"So you want to die?" He hisses.

"She told me that the beads were meant to protect me. She said our ancestors are slowly turning their backs on us. We don't acknowledge them in anyway. And they are tired." I say.

"They are also dead so why do you care?"

"She also said that if we don't acknowledge them we might lose everything. She said the only reason why we still have a connection with them is because of gogo. She is the one who is working as a link between us and them. But they are getting tired and if we continue the way we are doing now, everything will crumble to nothing." He is staring at me. You'd think I just grew a set of horns on my forehead.

"Dalingcebo, you drove all the way here to tell me a whole lot of nothing." I should have brought Sbu with me. Maybe he would have gotten through to him. "Zwide and I worked very hard to get to where you are now. Everything that we have, is because of our hard work. Not some dead people. Especially not my father. That man refused to believe in us when we started now he wants me to acknowledge him? As what? A hater?" I never thought I'd see the day my father says he has a hater. "What am I supposed to acknowledge him as? My father was an enemy of progress who had zero ambition. Now that I've proven him wrong he expects me to what, thank him for it? Please. I have better things to do with my time." He stands up and marches to the door I can almost feel him puffing out air like a wounded bear.

"If you don't want to do it I'll ask Babomkhulu to help me." That stops him dead in his tracks. He turns around, steam coming out of his ears. He will do this, even if I have to manipulate him into doing it.

"You will do no such thing?" He bellows. I stand up and face him like a man.

"I will. I get that Mkhulu hurt you and whatever, but the man has been dead for over twenty years. At some point you have to let your anger go. Before he died he saw your success, he saw that he was wrong not

to support you, and I'm sure if he didn't have an ego like yours he would have admitted to his shortcomings."

"But he didn't. He waited until he died only for him to want 'acknowledgement' for something he had no hand in." He says. I don't know how we concluded Mkhulu was behind all this honestly. But clearly he knows his father better than I did.

"I understand baba, not getting support from him was heartbreaking. But you did it anyway, you did it without him. If you want to do this for gogo then do it for us. For Nqaba and Fezi. This may affect them too. We have to fix our family altar and make things right for them. Ngyakcela Mntungwa, just think about it. That's all I am asking. Put your differences with Mkhulu aside and do this for your children and grandchildren. Please." He shakes his head and marches out the door. I'm not sure what that means but at least it's not a no. That's progress.

KHANYISILE

I haven't lived like this in so long it now feels foreign. Like I just downgraded to being a pauper. At least Seluleko and her big mouth is gone so I don't have to deal with her 'I told you so's'. I swear that girl can talk.

I've been trying to find job posts online so I can apply but all of them need experience. The only experience I have is working retail when I was still in varsity. It's been a long while since I did that. I apply though even with my lack of experience. Hopefully my qualifications will draw some interest.

"I am heading out." Mum says peeking through the door. "Should I bring you anything?"

"How about a bigger house?"

"I'll bring you samosas. I know a place that sells some nice ones." She says and closes the door. I don't want samosas, I want my life back. I close the laptop and lay back on the bed.

I still can't wrap my head around how easy it was for Dali to toss me to the side just because Bahle said so. After everything we've been through together? How could he? I swear I am going to make him pay for this. But how? Revealing our relationship will do nothing to his relationship with Bahle, she's proven she can handle just about anything. Telling his parents will get him written out of the will but he will still have Bahle and that means he will still have his money. I could blackmail him though and threaten to tell his parents if he doesn't do what I want him to do. No, that won't work. He'll probably call my bluff. And knowing his father, he will probably want to punish me too.

There is only one way that will get Dali to do my bidding. I pick up my phone and scroll down until I find what I want. I press dial and the phone rings.

"Sandton Fertility Clinic how can I help you."

"Hello, this is Khanyisile Manana, I'd like to speak to Dr Pillay please."

"Please hold." It takes about a minute for my call to be paged through to the good doctor.

"Miss Manana. How are you?" She asks. She sounds happy, hopefully she will be happy enough to do this one thing for me.

"Dr, I would like to set up an appointment with you if possible. I am looking to have my embryos inseminated as soon as possible." I cross

my fingers, I'm praying she can do this without having to involve Dali. But if we need his consent, I can fake his signature.

"Okay, how about you come in tomorrow so we can discuss this in person. And then we can run some tests to make sure everything is okay." She says.

"Of course. I'll be there early in the morning."

"Looking forward to it. Have a good day." She hangs up the phone and I feel a little giddy. This is what I needed to improve my mood. Dali will not get rid of me that easily. I've invested too much into this relationship to just let it go, just like that. And if I have to take him down with me then I'll make sure I do it with a bang. I rub my tummy. Pretty soon a cute Mntungwa baby will be sitting there, ready to help mummy claim back what's rightfully hers.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

45

KHANYISILE

I am early. I pour myself a glass of cold water from the cooler and sit down. I have ten minutes before my appointment. I'm still trying to figure out what I am going to do should the doctor say I need Dali's consent for this insemination. I know for a fact he won't agree to it. I've signed plenty of documents using his signature, this should be easy too. Unless they expect him to be there for the signing.

A couple comes in looking happy and excited about something. They sit down across from me, giggling and joking around. I remember the last time I was here with Dali, we were like the perfect couple that just needed help conceiving. Now I am here, alone. Life, it comes at you very fast.

The time seems to be on a glacial slow, or maybe it's the nauseating couple in front of me making it worse. I get my phone out of my bag and scroll through my call log. I have almost twenty calls to Dali and none of them were answered. Not a single one. At least he didn't block me, at least not yet.

"Miss Manana, Dr Pillay is ready for you." The receptionist says. I get up and follow her to the doctor's office. She opens the door, allowing for me to go in and then closes the door behind her. Dr Pillay stands up for a handshake.

"Miss Manana, it's nice to see you again. Please, have a seat." I sit down while she pulls out my file. "So, you said yesterday you're looking to use your embryos?"

"Yes, I think I am ready."

"So what prompted this decision?" A man's betrayal. I think to myself.

"Growth I guess. My boyfriend fell sick a few weeks back and literally fell into a coma. He was close to death and somehow it made me realise life is too short. Why wait, I know I wanted to wait until I was ready for a child but, like my therapist made me realise, you can never be ready for a child. Even the most prepared parents can encounter problems. So i decided there will never be a right time so why not get it done now." She nods her head, smiling. She is actually buying this. Perfect.

"I'm glad to hear that. I know motherhood can seem daunting but it can also be rewarding. And I am happy you have a therapist to help you through this. IVF can be taxing, emotionally and otherwise so you need all the support you can get. Is your man on board as well?" Nope. But he will be.

"Of course. He would have loved to be here too but he is busy catching up on all the work he missed out on when he was in hospital." I lie.

"I understand. But we will need him to sign a couple of documents giving his consent as well."

"Of course. Can I take those documents to him to sign because we want to get the ball rolling on this as soon as possible?" I ask. There is no way Dali is coming here.

"Uhm, our policy requires for him to be here to give his consent." Shit. Now I'm screwed.

"Right. I'm not sure when he will get the time especially with his workload right now. We might even have to wait a few months." I say, staring at my fingers like a sad, unhappy woman..

"Tell you what, maybe we can make an exception this one time." I quickly raise my eyes to look at her, making sure my fake tears are out to play.

"Please, I cant have you breaking policy for me." She chuckles.

"Dont worry. No one will know except for you and me." She says. My kind of girl. I reach over the desk and hold her hands.

"Oh thank you so much. You have no idea what this means to me." I say as a lone tear runs down my face. I can see the pity in her eyes. I should have been an actor. I'm sure Hollywood would have beckoned by now.

"It's nothing. I will put you on some hormonal injections just to get your body ready for the insemination. I'll give you the documents, read them and have them signed then we can start on the process tomorrow." She says. The sooner I can get this done the better. Dali won't know what hit him.

"Of course. Speaking of the process, I had my tubes tied a few years ago, will it be possible for the insemination to happen or do I need to untie my tubes?" Untying my tubes is a process I am not looking to do right now but I will do it if I have to.

"I doubt there will be a need for that. We dont have to harvest your eggs because you already have embryos and eggs frozen. All we will do

is inseminate the eggs straight into your uterus. Your tubes will not be affected." Thank God for that.

"Perfect. So when can we start with the hormonal treatment?"

"As soon as possible." She opens her drawer and pulls out a file. She picks out a few documents and hands them to me. "Get your man to sign these and we will get to work." I take the documents and say my goodbyes. I can feel every cell in my body dancing as I walk to the car. I'll sign these at home and bring them back tomorrow. I'll be damned if I let Dali move on like he didn't just waste ten years of my life. Hell no.

I get to the apartment and find Senele with her bags packed in the lounge.

"Going somewhere?" I ask looking at the bags.

"Yes. I start my internship in a couple of days. I finally got placed at a lodge in Limpopo. Mum's driving me to the taxi rank right now." She replies, excitement written all over her face. I'm glad she got a place, it would have been nice for her to be close by but of course, all this had to happen.

"Congratulations. I didn't even know." I admit. I've been so caught up in my own drama I forgot to check on her.

"It's okay. I know we've all been preoccupied." Mum walks out the bedroom ready to go. I help them with the bags and watch them drive off. One thing I am grateful for, all this drama happened when both of them are pretty much done with their degrees.

I start on lunch while mum is gone. These documents will be signed later in the evening and tomorrow my journey to motherhood begins.

Well somewhat. While the stew simmers on the stove I switch on the tv and find something to make me laugh. Mum returns with some takeaways. She stops when she smells the aroma of stew.

"You cooked?" She asks.

"Of course." She stares at me her eyebrows snapped together.

"Where did you go this morning? Your little trip seems to have put you in a good mood." She asks placing the takeaways on the table. I cant help the smile that creeps up on my face.

"Let's just say, if everything goes according to plan, you will be back in your house in a few weeks." I tell her. At this point that's all I can tell her. My mother has a tendency to want to control everything and this is not something I need her hand in. She did enough with her science to last me a lifetime. Now it's time for me to take matters into my own hands.

"Okay, and how exactly are you going to do that?" She asks.

"That my dear mother, is for me to know. But don't worry, everything will be back to normal soon." Somewhat.

BAHLENGIWE

We are a few days away from the wedding. Everything is pretty much done, the glass marquee is up, steady and ready for the big day. I make my way to the bridal suite to make sure everything is in order. I find the housekeeping manager with a few of the housekeepers spring cleaning the room.

"How is it going?" I ask her. She stops yelling at the girls and stands next to me.

"So far so good. We will bring in fresh flowers the day before the wedding day since the bride and her party will be sleeping over. The other rooms are ready." She tells me.

"And refreshments?"

"The chef has everything they bride required. It will be delivered in the morning while they get ready. And breakfast will be served here as well." She says. One less thing for me to worry about. As soon as this wedding is over I need to give them bonuses because they have taken on more tasks than needed.

I live them to it and head to my office. The last time I was in here was this morning when I arrived for work. I slump down on my chair and take a deep breath. The distraction of the wedding is something I need these days, with my divorce looming and the consequences that will follow, my mind has been on overdrive. I know this might be the last month of me working here. For a while I was thinking of ways to stay here despite everything, getting Dali on my side would work but if I want a fresh start I need to leave certain things behind. And these lodges, despite all the work I've put into them, they are not mine. My dad and Mntungwa still own them. And being here will also mean being under their thumb, and those two can easily make my life a living hell.

I power on my laptop and find my resignation letter. It's been three days since I wrote it. All I have to do now is send it to both men. As soon as this wedding is done I am pressing send. Lately, letting certain

things go has been easy. I guess my heart and soul are coming to terms with me living my life, my way and not how everyone expects me too.

I have a divorce lawyer now. She seems to think this will be an easy divorce, especially since I want nothing. Of course she was not happy about that. The only thing I want is custody of my children. The rest, Dali can have. The home, the businesses and everything else that comes with me being Mrs Khumalo.

My phone vibrates on the desk. I check the screen and see my lawyers name flashing on the screen. I take a deep breath before answering the call.

"Hello."

"Bahle, hi, listen, I have your divorce papers ready. Do I have them delivered to you or him?" She asks. I didnt think everything would happen so fast. I haven't even spoken to Dali about this.

"Deliver them to me. I will hand them to him. I owe him the courtesy of not hitting him by surprise."

"Okay. My driver will be there tomorrow morning. Have a good day."
She says before hanging up. This is really happening.

As soon as I am done with today's tasks I make my way home. There's smoke coming from the back of the house. I wonder what's going on. I head inside and find Lindo in the kitchen cooking pap. The patio door is wide open and I can see Dali and Sbu from here. The kids are busy running around in the garden.

"What's going on?" I ask my sister. Her little bump is starting to show and it's so cute. I've never been this happy about anyone being pregnant. Not even me.

"We are having a mini braai, your husband insisted on it after Sbu told him we are having a baby."

"So why are you the one slaving over the stove, you should have called me I would have come back earlier." I pull the apron off of her and take over the kitchen. She takes a seat on the high chair munching on a tomato.

"So Dali seems a lot happier since he came back from Badplaas. How is it going between the two of you?" She asks. I haven't told her yet about the divorce. I don't want her and Sbu to be caught in the middle of my mess. I know my dad will find a way to blame her as my big sister for not advising me to stay in my marriage. So this is a journey I will have to take on my own. I just hope the security is not updating the parents about who I meet.

"We are okay. You know how it always is between us, one moment it's up the next it's down. So it is what it is I guess." I say trying to not make it obvious that I am hiding something.

"I thought you two would be on a high since the devil's spawn is out of the picture now."

"I doubt she will ever be out of the picture. But it's good to not have to deal with her." I reply. She swings her head and checks to make sure the men are still outside. Once she is sure she leans and whispers.

"Speaking of the devil's spawn, I hear they are crammed in some apartment in town together with her mum and sisters. It's crazy how easily life can change but she deserves it." She says.

"And Dali walks away scot free as if he didnt play a part in their relationship?" I ask, my voice a little snappy. Lindo tilts her head, sitting back on the chair.

"What?"

"You said Khanyi deserved it. And yes in a way she does, but what about Dali? He is the one who promised her heaven and earth if she stayed with him despite his marriage. So what does he deserve? A pat on the back? A chance to play happy families with a woman he doesnt love? Why is it so easy for him to move on as if he didnt string her along this whole time?" I ask.

"What is going on with you? Dont tell me you're regretting what you did?" I sigh and toss the knife to the side.

"No, I dont regret it. I jsut hate the idea that Khanyi somehow deserves a bulk of the punishment as if she forced herself into this relationship. Dali knew what he was doing too. And the idea that he was an unwilling participant in their relationship is not fair. Not on Khanyi and certainly not me because all it does is absolve him of any wrongdoing. And that's not right." I say.

"Okay so what do you suggest should happen? Are you going to throw him out of the house too?" Lindo is not taking this seriously. I understand her stand in this but I wish she could understand mine. I hate Khanyi and I dont regret what I did one bit, but to paint her as the villain is not fair. And this is one of the reasons this divorce makes

sense. Dali also needs to feel and understand his part in this entire mess. Me constantly bending over for him is another reason why he will always expect me to be waiting on the other end of the line, ready to take him back as if nothing happened. And that has to end. He needs to know that I am just as capable of walking away as he is.

"No. Forget about it. I'll make the chakalaka, you can go out and enjoy the braai outside." I tell her. She shakes her head and immediately makes her way outside. I'm convinced now more than ever that this divorce is necessary.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

46

BAHLENGIWE

Weddings are always hectic but this one seems to take the cup. Most of the guests spent the night here and the rest of them are already piling into the venue. Luckily we prepared for the influx and everything is still on track. Still nerve wrecking because one wrong move and we will be trending on Twitter. The #becomingMrsMhlongo is already top of the trends list. I don't care what anyone says, this will be the wedding to rival all weddings.

I make my way to the bridal suite, the mood is clearly a happy one, I can hear laughter even before I get there. I have a gift for the bride from the groom. I knock once and get in. The wedding planner sees me first and immediately comes my way.

"Bahle, I have to say, you guys have outdone yourself. We haven't even got to the actual wedding and the bride is already happy. The make up artists were here before we even woke up, food was delivered and is top notch, literally, everything is going right, I'm even scared something might happen during the actual wedding." She says.

"Nothing is going to happen. We have prepared for every scenario we could think off. Plus you planned this, all we did was execute the brief you gave us. And as long as the bride is happy then we are happy too." I tell her. She nods her head.

"You are right. We need to let negative thoughts go and summon positive vibes only."

"Speaking of positive vibes, I have a gift for the bride. From the groom." I announce and everyone stops and looks at me. The bride is already blushing. I hand her the white box wrapped in a gold satin ribbon.

"What's in here?" She asks shaking the box. I shrug my shoulders and stand back as she opens it. Luckily the photographer is close by to snap the moment. There is a black velvet box inside also wrapped in a gold satin ribbon. She gasps when she opens the box to find a set of diamond stud earrings and a necklace to match. She picks up the little note inside the box.

'To the girl of my dreams, this is your something new. I cant want to make you my wife. I love you." The note reads. Ooohs and aaahs fill the room.

"Are you sure there isnt more of them where you got him?" One bridesmaid asks and the room breaks into a fit of laughter.

"Let me go check the reception area." I whisper to her mother before making my way out. I check the reception area and everything is ready to welcome the guests in. There is nothing more for me to do except bask in the positive reviews and possible future bookings.

Walking out of the reception hall I bump into someone, they quickly catch me before I stumble backwards and fall to the ground. I look up and find Dumisani looking down at me with a frown on his face. I should have worn heels, I look like a small person right now.

"Are you okay?" He asks, his hands still tight around my forearms. I quickly shake him off and fix myself.

"I'm good. Where are you going? The matrimonial is about to begin?" I ask him. His frown disappears and he sticks his hands in his pockets.

"I'm actually headed to the garden for some pictures before the ceremony." He says.

"Well then, let me not hold you up." I step aside for him to walk past but he doesn't.

"You did good you know. Everything has been amazing." He tells me. I give him a faint smile and mock bow and he laughs.

"I try." Another groomsman shouts his name, telling him to hurry up.

"I will see you around." He brushes my shoulder before walking past, leaving the scent of his cologne behind. He smells good, that's for sure.

My phone vibrates in my hand. I look at it and a message from Lindo fills the screen.

'We are here.' It says. I make my way to the entrance and see them huddled in a corner. Our parents are here as well as Lindo and Sbu, Dvumo and Sihlangu. Dali decided to stay with the kids. Also he hates weddings. I make my way to them and greet.

"Are we early?" Dvumo asks looking at her watch.

"No. You're right in time. You should head to the matrimonial area and get seats. The wedding will start soon." I tell them. "Just follow the signs. I will join you soon." I leave them and head to the office to change. I change into a black and white fabrosanz dress with polka dot heels and a small black clutch bag. By the time I get to the matrimonial

space everything is ready for the wedding to start. I leave everything in the hands of the wedding from here on out.

The matrimonial goes smooth, the couple chose to say their own vows and by the time they were done, there was not a single dry eye in sight. Phones have been banned so no actual wedding pictures will be floating around the internet before the couple is ready to share their news. Once the matrimonial is done the bridal party moves to take pictures while guests head to the cocktail lounge.

"I must say, you did amazing here." My mum says walking up behind me. I take sip of the champagne and turn to look at her. "Your father is really proud of you." She adds. That would be more heartwarming if it actually would from his own lips.

"If you say so." I mumble.

"I'm serious. He is."

"Who are you trying to convince ma, me or yourself?" I ask and she sighs.

"Bahle...."

"Ma, dont do that. We both know if he cared he would say that himself." She sighs again and picks up another glass of champagne.

"Why is your husband not here?" A change of subject is always welcome except when it means having to talk about Dali.

"He is taking care of the kids. Besides, he hates weddings." She chuckles.

"Of course, all men hate weddings. I even had to drag your father here." We fall into an awkward silence for a moment before she speaks again. "So what are you planning for your tenth anniversary? A vow renewal maybe? That would be nice." She says. "Maybe this time you can actually plan it and not leave it to us to plan." She adds. I won't be planning anything of that sort anytime soon.

"We will see."

I head home as soon as the after party starts. I am not a party person. One club outing every other month or year is enough for me. My siblings are staying behind, including the pregnant one who should be asleep by now.

I get home and find Dali sitting alone in the lounge, a drink in hand. I plop myself down on the couch.

"Hey, I thought you'd be sleeping by now." I say. He doesn't reply. Instead he glares at me like something is bothering him. I don't have the energy to deal with his moods right now. I take off my shoes and pull my feet up onto the couch. "Are you Okay?" I ask. He throws his head back and pours the whiskey down his throat. I know that liquid burns the throat but he doesn't even flinch. He pulls out a brown envelope from behind him and places it on the table. My heart immediately goes into overdrive. It can't be the divorce papers.

He stares at me, expecting me to say something. But what am I supposed to say? He is the one who went through my stuff and found what he was looking for. Although my heart is beating out of control I try to maintain a cool outside facade.

"When were you planning to tell me?" He asks after a while.

"After the wedding." I reply, my voice coming out way calmer than I anticipated. He nods his head and stands up, makes his way to the wet bar and pours himself another drink.

"So you want a divorce?" He questions, his back to me.

"Yes." He turns and looks at me, anger flashing in his eyes.

"So this isnt a prank or some sort of a joke?" He asks.

"No." He chuckles and gulps down the drink.

"Why?"

"Because it's the right thing to do?" He shakes his head and pours himself another drink. I wonder how many of those he has had. He takes a sip and starts pacing for a moment and then stops.

"Right for who Bahle? Do you have any idea what this means? What's at stake?"

"I know. I've thought long and hard about this and this is the right thing for me. I deserve to be happy too and the truth is I haven't been happy in this marriage. I could literally count the number of times I've been genuinely happy in one hand. And that's not fair on me." He lowers himself onto the coffee table and drags it towards me till he is so close to me I can smell the whiskey in his breath. He takes my hand in his.

"Bahle, I know I am the reason you've been unhappy

my relationship with Khanyi has not made things easy for you. I know that. And I am trying to make things right. She is out of our lives, you made sure of that. So what's the problem now?" He asks.

"This is not about Khanyi, its about us. At some point we have to admit that this marriage has not worked for either of us. Admitting we've failed is not a bad thing. We tried, we really tried Khumalo and it didn't work." I say. His eyes are getting redder by the minute. I'm not sure if it's the alcohol or he is sad. I pull my hand away and sit upright. "Look, I know that the things you've done the throughout our marriage has not been your fault

"What do you mean?" He questions. I'm not even sure I should tell him everything but maybe this is not the time for secrets.

"Just before our trip to Cape Town, I went to see someone, a sangoma." His eyes pop open.

"What?"

"She said that you were fed isidliso, after you woke up from the coma and doctors not being able to figure out what was wrong with you I figured a different opinion would help. She said that there is nothing anyone can do because your ancestors were now in control and they would send someone to help you."

"The woman with the beads?"

"I think so. She said that your ancestors have seen everything and now they have chosen to stand up and help you. I understand all that, I really do and I know a good wife would stand by her husband through this. And maybe I am failing at that but what's new." He sighs and sits back, his hands resting behind him on the coffee table.

"Since when do you go and see sangoma's? Would I be wrong to think you're the one who gave me isidliso?" No he did not. I must have

completely miss heard him because there is no way he just asked me that.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"You heard me." I must be in the wilderness being tested by the devil himself.

"Dalingcebo, if I was using isidliso on you, do you think you would even know who Khanyi is? Do you think I'd would have endured all the things you've put me through these past ten years? You don't see me clearly, and that's why we are getting a divorce." I get up and pick up my shoes, ready to exit the room and put some distance between us but he pulls me back, his hand tightening around my wrist.

"Okay, okay, I am sorry, I shouldnt have said that." He admits. "I'm sorry." He adds. I pull my arm away and gently rub where his hand was starting to cut off my circulation.

"Dalingcebo, the truth of the matter is that this marriage has been nothing more than a marriage on paper. When you said you wont give Khanyi up I could have easily ended our marriage then. I could have ended it when you brought her on our honeymoon or vacations, I could have ended it when you spent days on end with her while I had to lie to your father saying you were away on business trips or conferences, I thought if I was patient enough you'd find your way back home where you were meant to be. But it never happened. Even now, whether you choose to admit it or not, you would not be here if I hadn't blackmailed you to it. So why are we forcing things? Why are we doing this to ourselves? I am tired. I am tired of trying. I am tired of forcing matters."

He roughly rubs his face before picking up the glass of alcohol and gulping it down.

"I dont understand you. I really dont." He says. "You just said none of the things I've done were my fault. And yet you're punishing me for them. You're making me pay for those things. I am going to lose everything because you're tired." He adds. So this is what he is more worried about. I should have known.

"Nowhere in those documents does it say anything about your relationship with Khanyi, all it states as a reason for the divorce is irreconcilable differences. That's it. You can relax, I won't say a word about it. You'll still have everything, I am the one who is going to lose everything."

"Then why do this? Why choose to give up so easily?" I sigh and look at my ring, a 4 carat cushion cut diamond with a platinum band. I used to wear it with so much pride when we first got married, even with everything going on, it was my comfort. I truly believed being the one to wear the ring made everything better. As time went on it became heavy. The pain and tears I've cried seemed to transfer to the ring, making it heavier with every season that came and went. I was wrong. The ring didnt mean a thing. It was just another that became a constant reminder of my less than ideal life.

I pull the ring out of my finger and place it on the table. The last time I took it out was to have it cleaned, I could never bring myself to take it off even when I was in the shower. And now it sits on the coffee table. For some reason my hand feels lighter and so does my soul. If I ever had any doubts about this divorce, taking the ring off feels like I am setting myself free. I need to find my own healing now. Heal my heart

and soul, who knows maybe some day in the future, if its meant to be, Dali and I will find our way back to each other. Maybe by then we will both be healed and not dragging baggage we definitely dont need.

I make my way to the bedroom and power on my laptop. I find my resignation letter and press send without a second thought. When the morning comes, everything will be different. The journey to find Bahlengiwe Nxumalo will begin.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

47

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

BAHLENGIWE

"Hey, wake up." Someone's voice seeps into my head. I try to ignore them and turn to the other side but they tap me on my back. "Bahle, wake up." My sleep fades away as the voice registers fully in my head. Its Dali. I slowly pry my eyes open and see he is dressed and ready for the day.

"What's going on?" I ask, my voice a little hoarse.

"Your dad is here. He wants to see you." He tells me. I pull the cover up and hide my face. I knew he would show up after I sent the resignation letter but I didn't think it would be so soon.

"Tell him I am dead." I say. Dali pulls the cover off me.

"Not a chance. He is already in a bad mood. Did you tell him about the divorce?" He asks. I shake my head no. "Well, you'll have to go and face him." I guess there is no better time than the present. I drag myself out of bed and put on my robe. I say a quick prayer as I make my way downstairs. I can see my dad pacing the lounge as I descend the stairs. I say another quick prayer before I make it to him. He stops and looks at me. He is angry, that's for sure.

"Sawubona baba."

"What's this?" He asks throwing a piece of paper at me. It falls on the ground. I pick it up and it's the resignation letter I sent him.

"It's a resignation letter." As if he doesn't know that.

"What am I supposed to do with it?" What do people do with resignation letters again?

"Accept it." I walk past him and take a seat. Despite everything he is still my father and I know it's disrespectful to talk to an adult while standing.

"Bahlengiwe, what is wrong with you? Why would you want to quit your job?" Maybe I should have not sat down, right now he is way more intimidating standing above me like this.

"Because it's time. I need to move on. I've enjoyed working for Imvelo lodge but now it's time for me to find something more challenging and that offers room to grow." His brows snap together as he sinks to the couch.

"Are you listening to yourself? You're the CEO in charge of two five star lodges. How much more growth do you want?" He asks. I knew he wouldn't understand. "And to top it off, this is a family business, your father's legacy."

"A legacy that has too many terms and conditions." I mumble. I figure telling him the real reason for my leaving might make things a tad bit easier for him to understand. "Dali and I are getting a divorce." I tell him. I expect him to come at me guns blazing but he doesn't, instead he stares at me as if I have lost my mind.

"What did you do?" Of course it would be my fault.

"I didn't do anything. Our marriage isn't working and there's no point flogging a dead horse. We tried. We failed. It's time to move on." I say.

"Okay, so what did he do?" I swear speaking to this man is like pouring water on a ducks back. He hears what he wants and does what he wants.

"He didn't do anything."

"So let me get this straight, you're getting a divorce for no reason at all?" I wish my mother came with him. She would be able to explain things to him in a way he would understand because right now he is not hearing a damn thing I am saying.

"Its not that I am getting a divorce for no reason baba, I hav my reasons but the main one is that this marriage is not working for me. I just need a break." He chuckles.

"A break? Bahlengiwe? A break from what? Your life? If that's the case you take a vacation, go to Dubai, Paris, Cape Town, wherever. You dont file for divorce just because you're bored." He yells.

"I am not bored, I am tired." I yell back. Shit, maybe I should not have done that.

He is glaring at me, his nostrils flaring, I can almost feel his beating heart from where I am.

"I am sorry, I shouldn't be yelling at you." I admit.

"You're not getting a divorce Bahlengiwe. Do you know what your signature on that paper means? All my hard work, my legacy, it all goes up in flames. Do you understand that?" He asks.

"I know that. But you have no one to blame for it but yourself." I blurt out.

"Excuse me?"

"Baba, you have a son, one who would have gladly carried on your legacy for you but you cant trust him just because he is gay. His sexuality has never changed him or made him any less smart or capable. But you've never trusted him. And you dont trust us either because let's be realistic, if I hadn't married Dali you would have never let me run the lodge. And if Lindo hadn't married Sbu you would have never let her run those supermarkets. Everything you've ever given us was because you knew Sbu and Dali were there. I've been stuck in a loveless marriage for ten years and you've never even noticed how unhappy I am." I wipe the tear that has escaped down my face. I didn't think I'd be so emotional.

"I had a plan when I agreed to marry Dali, I knew love wouldn't be there but I thought I could stick it out, get the shares and then sign them over to Sihlangu just to spite you. But over the past couple of years I've realised that it wouldn't be spitting you in anyway, your legacy would still be in the family. But what's the point of chaining myself to a loveless marriage just to spite you? You never wanted us to have those shares so why bother fighting for them? They are yours, you worked for them. Gave your sweat, blood and tears into building this legacy only for you to sign it away to your best friend just because you have zero faith in the children you raised. Why should we have to jump through hoops rigged with fire just to even claim a percentage of that legacy. Look at the lodge, the work I've done with it, turned it into one of the best in the continent and you've never even give me a simple thank you. Not even a one percent stake in the business. Nothing. And I'm supposed to be okay with that?" I'm not sure what pouring my heart

out to him will do but it's clearly not doing a damn thing because he is blankly staring at me like nothing I just said is registering in his head.

He gets up, fixes his pants, gives me one last side eye before walking out. I dont know if he heard me or all I did was make him even angrier. Whatever it is I mentally prepare myself for the worst that's about to come.

I feel a hand rubbing my back. For a hot second I want to believe it's my dad, returning to tell me everything will be okay, but Dali's cologne quickly bursts that little bubble.

"Are you Okay?" He asks. "I saw your dad leaving, he seemed pretty angry. What happened?"

"You can relax, I didnt say anything about you and Khanyi." I snap.

"Thank you. But that's not why I was asking. You're crying." He tells me as if I cant feel the tears. I sigh and sit back.

"I told him about the divorce and I sent him my resignation letter last night."

"You're resigning from work? Why?" Whatever he was fed all these years clearly had side effects that include his brain not working.

"You know why? Do you think our parents will let me touch anything that has their name on it after this?" He is quiet for a moment as if he is thinking.

"They are not that petty or vengeful." He replies. I wish I could believe that.

"Are you going somewhere?" I ask. He looks down at his clothes almost in surprise, as if someone else dressed him.

"Yeah. Raphael is taking me to some woman. I couldn't sleep last night thinking about what you said. It could explain why I keep zoning in and out of my head sometimes. Maybe I can get the answers I need." He says.

"Well, good luck with that." He nods his head and stands up.

"Thanks. I made pancakes for the kids, they are in the microwave." He is not bad as a father. Well recently he hasn't been bad.

"Thank you." I watch him leave, maybe the kids will be in good hands after all should the parents decide to enforce the clause in the contract about one parent giving up their parental rights.

A ping on my phone draws my attention to it. I pick it up and it's an email. I open my emails and it's one from my dad, he has accepted my resignation. And with that he states I do not need to go to work tomorrow, my resignation will be considered with immediate effect. I need to brace myself because clearly I have started a war with my own father. All because I am choosing to be happy.

DALINGCEBO

I am nervous. I can feel my leg shaking as we sit on these chairs, watching people go in and out of the rondavel. The smell of imphepho mixed with herbs boiled fills the air. I thought Raphale and I were early but clearly I was wrong. There were about ten people before us when we arrived. Apparently others have been helped and they have left already.

I look at my watch, we've been here for almost two hours. There are now two people in front of us. We keep shifting seats as the others go in. My heart rate increases the closer we get to the rondavel. The only thing that seems to distract me is my pending divorce. I'm still not sure how to take this whole thing. I'm not even sure I want a divorce but after my conversation with Bahle it would be cruel of me to hold her back. I've wronged her, I know she said something about isidliso but I doubt that information will change anything. It won't erase the hurt I've caused and it certainly won't make her feel any better.

When I found the papers I was angry. But now I realise I was probably angry because I thought she'd tell our parents about Khanyi and I. What a mess my life has been. This is definitely not how my life was supposed to go. That much I am certain of. I signed the papers last night and left them on the table. I am hoping she will find them. Yes I am a coward because I should have given them to her but I couldn't do it. I couldn't face her because why am I not fighting for my marriage?

"You're next dude." Raphael says tapping my thigh. I get up and make my way to the rondavel, I take off my shoes and walk in, my head bent. I take a seat on a small bench that looks like it could fit Fezi and not an adult like me.

"Thokoza khehla, you made it." The woman says. I look up and it's the woman who gave me the beads. So she's been here all along. I actually believed she was from Polokwane.

"Sawubona." I am shocked to say the least. She smiles and lights imphepho.

"I'm happy to see you. I knew your ancestors would lead you here eventually." She says. Smoke fills the room, and for some weird reason the smoke goes from light to completely dark. Like she is burning something horrible. She notices it too. She looks up at it and starts chanting. She gets on her knees and makes her way to me with the burning incense. She moves the plate in a circular motion, allowing the smoke to fill my face. It fills my lungs, making me cough like crazy.

"OKhumalo, Mntungwa, Mbulazi omnyama, I've heard you. Your son is here. You said he would come and he has. I have prepared all that you asked me to, now help me to help him. Help me free him from the chains pulling him back. Nina oMzilikazi kaMashobane, guide my hand as I begin this journey with him, I cannot do it alone. I need you, I need your wisdom and guidance. Mntungwa." She goes back to her spot on the reed mat, leaving me coughing so hard I am afraid my lungs will spill onto the floor.

She calls someone's name, I'm too preoccupied with my upcoming death to even notice who she called. Through my tear filled eyes I see a young girl rush in on her knees. She gives her instructions and the girl quickly makes her way out. My coughing slow downong enough for me to gather my thoughts. I should not have come here.

"Are you Okay?" She asks, her smile as wide as the ocean. She thinks me dying is funny.

"I'm fine." I guess.

"Did you eat anything this morning?" She questions. I didnt have an appetite this morning. Not even for water. I shake my head and she smiles again. "Perfect. So this should work." The girl returns, crawling

on her knees. "This is Liyana, she is an initiate here. Please follow her, she will let you know what you need to do. I'll be there in a while to check on you." She says. I follow the girl out just as Raphael gets in.

We go into a hut at the back of the main house. I get in and sit on a slightly bigger bench. By the time I leave here my back will be 90 years old. The girl drags a 25 litre bucket and puts it in front of me. It has a concoction that seems to be mixed with everything. She puts a huge wash basin next to me and then hands me a small plastic cup.

"Drink." She orders.

"Drink what?" I ask. Stupid question. She chuckles.

"Drink what's in the bucket. You'll have to finish this before you go. If you don't go, you will keep you here overnight and you will finish tomorrow." She tells me. This definitely sounds like a threat. How is one supposed to finish a whole 35 litre bucket filled with probably something that's bitter.

I take a sip and it fills like I am drinking boiled alcohol. The girl throws a reed mat on the floor and keeps her eyes on me. About an hour later I haven't even touched a quarter of the liquid but I can already feel my stomach rumbling, ready to send everything back. I quickly pull the wash basin and bend over it. The liquid comes back unprovoked. At first it's just the water filled herbal drink. But then something else happens, dark clots that seem like old blood start pouring out of my mouth. One after the other, and they seem to be getting thicker.

The girl leans into the basin and smiles when she sees what I've just thrown up. It's definitely getting hot in here. I wipe the sweat from my forehead and take my t-shirt off.

"Keep going." She says. I start drinking again and it feels like with every cup I want to throw up. I fill my stomach with more of the drink before throwing up again. This time the clots come early before what looks like chopped up pieces of meat start coming out. I wipe the tears in my eyes and look at the mess that just came out of my body. I see something that looks like a head of a snake or a lizard. It can't be. I think to myself. I lean in closer to see exactly what it is and sure enough it's a head of a snake. The room starts spinning and my eyes can literally see stars. The room starts spinning faster, my body fails to catch up and I feel myself slowly drifting out of consciousness before everything goes dark.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

48

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

DALINGCEBO

My head hurts. My back is even worse. Its like I've been sleeping on concrete. I open my eyes and I'm met with a candle light a few feet from me. Except for the light from the candle, it's dark in here. Last time I checked it was sunny outside. I close my eyes again and fall back asleep.

When I wake up again my back is worse than before. There is light coming from the open window. The door is slightly open and people are walking up and down. Is it morning already? How long have I been sleeping?

The door is pushed open and the woman walks in. She smiles when she sees me awake. I dont even know who she is. She never told me her name, and I never asked. I should have asked Raphael.

"Mntungwa, you're up. That's good." I pull myself up cracking my bones back in place.

"How long have I been sleeping?" I ask her.

"The whole of yesterday." That's a long time to be asleep. She pulls the bucket and places it in front of me.

"You cant be serious." I say.

"Deadly. If you want to get better and get your life back, you'll have to finish this bucket. We need to make sure you're completely clean."

"But I haven't even eaten, the last time I ate was 2 days ago." I can literally feel my intestines turning on each other inside me. "I cant vomit anymore, my stomach is empty."

"Even better. Come on, get to drinking." She says tapping the bucket. Today she is the one watching me. I should not have come here.

I grab the cup and start drinking. This thing tastes worse than it did yesterday. I'm pretty sure it was marinating while I was asleep. By the time I am done with the bucket I've vomited at least ten times, there are more clots and things I dont understand. Now all that's coming out is just the liquid. I'm sweating like I was running a marathon.

"You did good." She says then pulls the basin away from me. She calls for someone and the girl from yesterday, I've forgotten her name comes in. They empty the vomit onto a different bucket, making sure to leave the clots and whatever else is at the bottom. "Throw this outside the gate and then bring him some soft porridge." She orders. She grabs a five litre bucket from the corner and empties the remnants of my vomit onto it then closes it again. I can feel my eyes getting heavy again. I dont know if its exhaustion, hunger or both. Probably both.

"Liyana will bring you something to eat and then she will bring you something to eat and then she will bring you to me okay?" She tells me. The only energy I can master is to nod my head and watch her leave. I lay my head back to rest my eyes a bit.

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"Bhuti, vuka, you have eat something." A voice penetrates into my brain. It sounds so far and distant. "Bhuti!" It says, shaking me. My eyes pop open and I quickly sit up. There's a girl in front of me wearing a red cloth around her waist and another one is draped over her shoulders. She looks way too young to be a sangoma.

"Where am I?" Looking around the room, nothing here seems familiar. I dont think I've ever been here.

"You dont remember?" The girl asks, her eyebrows raised. I shake my head no. "Well, you are in gogo Mphotholozzi's hut, she is the one who has been helping you."

"Helping me?"

"Yes." She replies. Helping me? What is she helping me with. "You have no idea what I am talking about do you?" She concludes, clearly my confused face must be working. "Dont worry. Gogo will explain everything to you. For now, here is some food. Eat, you will need your strength back." She adds placing a tray on my lap. I look down and see the enamel bowl filled with soft porridge. There's a small bowl with sugar next to it. "I would give you proper pap with meat but your body has been through a lot so you need to take it slow." She stands and leaves.

My stomach grumbles as if it's been waiting for her to leave. I take the spoon and add the sugar to the soft porridge. Its not too hot and not to warm. I finish the bowl in less than ten minutes. I am still not full, hopefully I can get the pap and meat.

The girl returns with a slightly older woman than her. She's not old enough to be someone's grandmother but she is definitely mature. And beautiful. They pull up a reed mat and sit in front of me.

"Mntungwa, Liyana tells me you dont remember anything?" The woman says. She knows me, that's good. "How are you feeling?" She asks.

"Like I had too much to drink and now i have a massive hangover." I reply honestly. I need to go home. I'm pretty sure Bahle is worried sick.

"I know it may seem crazy but that headache is a good thing, it means everything we did has worked. It will wear off, don't worry." She assures me.

"Can I go home now?" I ask. I really need to sleep in my own bed right now.

"You will. Your wife is on her way to pick you up. I found her number on your phone." She says. Wife? Last I checked Bahle and i are engaged not married. But it doesnt matter, she's going to be my wife anyway.

"Can I take a bath atleast. I feel sticky and stinky." They burst out laughing. I must be a comedian.

"You will. Liyana will prepare some water for you. But you will have to go down to the river to take the bath." She says. I hope we get to that before Bahle shows up.

BAHLENGIWE

I am on my way to pick up Dali. He didnt sleep at the house last night. I was certain he was with Khanyi because I saw Raphael at the mall. That

was until I got a call this afternoon saying I have to come and get him. I don't even know this place, if it wasn't for the GPS I'm sure I would be lost.

I pull up to a house that has a few cars parked outside. I sit in the car for a moment wondering why I am even doing this. Dali and I are done, I found the signed divorce documents. For a moment it did hurt how easily he was ready to let this marriage go but at the same time I am glad we won't have a drawn out divorce, those tend to become messy. If everything goes according to the lawyers' predictions my divorce should be final in a few months. It might seem like a long time to go but I am already apartment searching already. I need to find a place big enough for me and my kids.

A knock on the window sends my juice flying and spilling all over me and the car. I turn to the window and see a girl in full traditional healer regalia. I slide down the window and she gives me a smile. She has a beautiful smile.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." She says. My heart is already halfway to Durban right now.

"It's okay. How are you?"

"I'm good. Gogo is waiting for you inside." Now I am supposed to meet people's grandmothers. Why can't Dali just come out here.

I get out of the car and the girl looks at me from head to toe.

"You look decent enough. Let's go." She says. I quickly close the car door and follow her inside the yard. She leads me to a rondavel at the back of the house. I follow her lead and slightly bow to get in.

"Sit over there." The girl says pointing to a reed mat. I do as instructed and sit. Another woman walks in and the girl bows her head a bit.

"MaZwide, thank you for coming." The woman says as soon as she is seated. "My name is Nompilo Fakudze but everyone calls me gogo Mphotholozzi. I have been given an assignment to help your in-laws, but first I have to help your husband." She narrates. I'm still trying to figure out why she is telling me all this. Shouldn't she be talking to Dali?

"She pulls a five litre bucket from the corner, opens it and empties it onto a sack. The stench alone sends my hand flying to cover my mouth and nose. Why are they acting like it smells like Rose's in here.

"What is that?" I ask.

"That is everything that came out of your husband." She tells me.

"This is his pop?" They laugh.

"No, since yesterday we have been helping your husband vomit isidliso. This is what came out." She says. She must be who gogo Mpungose said would help him. So they found each other.

She picks up a stick and starts pointing at things on the pile of sewage.

"This, all this is years of him being constantly fed isidliso. Everything that has happened has not been of his own doing. He was being controlled. This..." she points to something and separates it from the pile. "This is the head of a snake." She says and I swear I just threw up in my mouth. "It was living inside him." How does one live with a snake inside them? This feels like a page from some Harry Potter book. There is no way this is real. No way.

"Have you ever had a miscarriage?" She asks. I look at her, there is no way she would know that. But then again, if she can pull out dead snakes from inside someone then she clearly can see everything.

"Twice, before I had my son." I admit. I never talk about that. The thought of those moments bring back memories I'd rather forget.

"Tell me about it." Is this supposed to be a therapy session now?

"Can we not speak about it?" I ask.

"We have to talk about it, it will make sense once we're done." She tells me. All I came here to do was pick up Dali and go back home to my children.

"I had a miscarriage about six months after we got married. I found out it was a boy a few days before the miscarriage happened. The same thing happened with the second one." I feel a lump forming on my throat just thinking about those times. I want to forget it ever happened but it's not easy.

"Were you intimate with your husband before the miscarriages happened?" She asks. My mind quickly goes back to there, it was weird how it all happened. Until now I never thought there was anything sinister about that moment. Dali and I would have sex mostly for reproduction purposes and when I fell pregnant he wouldn't touch me. But both those times he came home, we had sex and twenty four hours later I was bleeding and losing a child.

"Yes, we were." I say. She uses the stick and separates something from the mess, and then another.

"Come closer." She orders. I get on my knees and crawl up to the mess. Yeah the smell is worse up close. She points to two things that look like doll feet. "This..." she points to the snake head. Its actually a real head snake. I can even see the tongue sticking out. "This is the reason you lost your children." She says. And then it dawn's on me, these are not doll feet, they are actual human feet. Baby feet. My baby's feet. I look up at her, tears streaming down my face.

"I am sorry you have to find out this way. I would have explained this to your husband but his memory is a little foggy right now. But everything will come back to him, bit by bit. All I am going to ask from you is to be there for him. He will have questions and you need to be there to answer and make him understand. This is not going to be an overnight thing. Even helping his family will not be a snap of the finger and everything will be fixed. It will take time. But it will be fine eventually." She says. I really dont care about all this right now, all I want to know is who is behind all this. I need her to tell me before I start accusing people because I already have a suspect already.

"Who is responsible for all this?" I ask.

"I cant tell you that. Not yet anyway, but the truth will reveal itself eventually." She says. Just then Dali walks in with a guy also in traditional healer regalia behind him. I'm guessing these are initiates. Dali smiles when he sees me. I cant even return the smile, my emotions are all over the place.

Driving back home feels like I am just floating through the road. My head is trying so hard to reconcile everything that gogo Mphotholozzi said. I know I shouldn't be mad at Dali, clearly he had no idea what was happening, but right now I hate him. He has tried to talk to me but I

don't know what to say to him. I'm afraid if I open my mouth I'll say the wrong things so I keep my mouth shut. He gets the message and keeps quiet too.

When we get home I leave him in the car and rush up to the bedroom. I close the door and throw myself on the bed, allowing my tears to run free. I haven't thought about the children in so long I convinced myself I had healed. But I was wrong. I can never heal from that. How does one heal from losing a child in that way. The first time I lost a child I was alone in the house, Dali was at work when I started having cramps. Within an hour I was bleeding on the floor, I called him a few times before he picked up and when I told him what was happening he sent a driver to take me to the hospital because he was busy. He couldn't even come to see me in the hospital. He only showed up when I was at the house, exactly a week after the fact and the first thing he could say to me was 'what did you do'? Apparently losing the child was my fault.

The second time it happened I called him again and he wouldn't pick up. I found out later he was in the Maldives with Khanyi. He had left that very morning. I never thought I'd get to a point where I would hate him but right now, I do. I hate him. I hate Khanyi. I might not have the proof but I know she is behind all this. She is behind my pain.

"Bahle, wants going on?" Dali asks banging on the door. I bury my head in my pillow, drowning my sobs as the pillow gets wetter. I can never forgive him for this one. And now that we are getting a divorce I don't need to pretend like everything is okay because clearly it's far from it.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

49

KHANYISILE

Busi invited me to lunch. I was reluctant at first but she insisted. Apparently what she needs to tell me is way too important for it to be done over the phone, which is why I am here. I ordered a glass of orange juice as soon as I arrived. The doctor told me to stay off alcohol for now. It's been almost a week since the insemination happened. For the first two days I was stuck at home, resting and giving the embryos a chance to implant. Hopefully they do.

Busi joins me, for once she is on time. Whatever she wants to tell me must be important then. I stand up and give her a hug before she sits down.

"Since when do you order orange juice for our lunch?" She asks staring at the orange liquid. "Or is it a mimosa?" She whispers.

"No. Its juice." She doesn't believe me. She picks up the glass and takes a sip. "Now do you believe me?"

"What's wrong? Are you sick?" The drama.

"Of course not. It's literally the start of the week, it would be weird to be downing alcohol at this time."

"Its never stopped you before." She reminds me. I cant tell her about my plans. Not yet anyway.

"Fine, the truth is I am trying to cut down on alcohol. I need a break friend, I've realised when it comes to drinking I tend to overdo it so this is me trying to be a responsible adult." I tell her.

"I dont believe you but okay." She flags down the waiter and orders her own drink. Orange juice too.

"So, what was so important you couldn't tell me over the phone?" I ask. I need to go back home and rest, I cant be out here like this. I might end up running into people I dont want to see.

"Okay." She looks around the room, making sure no patrons are close enough to hear her. She leans on the table, bringing her upper body close enough to me to hear her.

"Bahle and Dali are getting a divorce." She whispers. Wishful thinking.

"Okay now what's the real story? What's going on? Why am I here?" I question. I'm pretty certain this was just a ploy to get me out of the apartment.

"I am serious. Bahle and Dali are getting a divorce. I overheard Dali telling Raphael that he found the papers in Bahle's drawer, he confronted her about it and she admitted that she wants a divorce. And you know what Dali did? He signed the papers." I dont want to believe her but everything she just said is plausible. I mean she did hear it from the horses mouth. But now I am wondering what is so extreme that happened for them to even consider a divorce.

"You're not lying are you?" I ask. She shakes her head and sips her drink.

"You know I wouldn't lie about that. I heard this from Dali himself before they went to see some traditional healer."

"Traditional healer?"

"Yes." My heart starts racing. This is not good. Dali doesn't believe in anything traditional so why would he do something like this? "They actually left on Sunday and Dali ended up staying the night there. The woman said something about cleansing him. Raphael says it was hectic. When he went in to see him before he left he was fast asleep. Couldn't even speak. But he says the woman is good." I feel a drop of sweat run down my spine. This is certainly not good. Not good at all. I grab my bag and stand up.

"I have to go. I will call you later." I rush out of there with Busi calling my name. If that woman finds anything I am screwed. If I thought this current situation we are in is bad, when the truth comes out, my entire life will go to hell. Literally.

As soon as I park the car I speed walk to the apartment. I can't be running or else I might find myself without a child. I find my mother making tea in the kitchen.

"Why do you look like you have lions coming after you?" This is not the time to be making jokes honestly.

"I might as well be." I sink down onto the couch and fan myself with a newspaper. There is sweat dripping down my face you'd think it's raining outside.

"What happened? What did Busi tell you?" She asks sinking down next to me.

"She told me Bahle and Dali are getting a divorce." Her mouth drops to the floor.

"You lie!"

"I wish." A smile creeps up on her face. I'm pretty sure she thinks this is the change we've been waiting for. If only.

"Not that I'm not happy at the news but why would they get a divorce now? With so much at risk, why would they just give it up. Something about this doesn't sound right. What if Bahle has told her parents about your relationship with Dali?" I know that would be messy but that's the least of my worries right now.

"That's not the worse of it. Dali went to a traditional healer. Apparently she insisted on him staying the night at her place so she could 'cleanse' him properly. Do you know what that means? Everything that you did will be out in the open. And when Dali finds out that this whole time you've been feeding him love portions, do you know what's going to happen to us? This will seem like a luxury resort once that man is done with us." I whisper. She stands up, her hands on her hips and stares outside the window.

"We can't have that." She murmurs. "We cant allow that." Did she even hear what I said. Its already too late for anything to be allowed.

"You did hear me say he went there? That means he probably already knows everything." She shakes her head and turns around.

"Then we have to stop him before any of this gets to his father."

"And how are you going to do that? Please dont tell me you're thinking about killing him?"

"Do you have another suggestion?" Yoh, this woman.

"Ma do you ever listen to yourself or your thoughts? We are in this mess because of you. And now you want to make things worse?" I ask her. Sometimes I think I am the one with a brain because hers seems to short circuit at the worst of times.

"I asked you if you have another suggestion. And stop saying all this is my fault when you were happy to enjoy the benefits. You were not complaining when you were taking in the money and expensive gifts so stop acting like a saint." She yells.

"I didnt send you to do what you did. I was hurt when Dali broke up with me but I accepted things as they were until you meddled." She laughs, clapping her hands.

"Shem dade, were you not the one bawling your eyes out asking why you were not good enough for him? Why he didnt love you enough to fight for you? I gave you a good life and now you want to throw it back in my face. Awuna frankie man." She screams then marches to the bedroom mumbling something. I know she's going to execute her plan one way or another.

I pick up my phone and dial Dali's number. It sends me straight to voicemail. I have to warn him about this. I'm not going to let my mother ruin my plans. Not this time.

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BAHLENGIWE

I don't know which part of my body hurts more, my head, my heart or just the entirety of my body. I've been sobbing since we came back. They say knowledge is power but this is knowledge I could have done without. But then again its given me the answers I've always had but always shoved to the back of my brain because no one could explain how I ended up losing two kids back to back. Not even the doctor could figure out what was wrong. And now I know, and all it did was open up old wounds and they are gushing blood.

I turn over on the bed and look at the time, its something past one in the afternoon. I've been cooped up in here since yesterday. I drag myself out of bed and make my way to the bathroom and take a quick shower. I look at myself on the mirror, my eyes are puffy and red. Not even make up will help me so I might as well forget it. At least I dont have to report to work with the luggage under my eyes.

I throw on a maxi dress and some sandals, i cover my hair in a doek and grab my bag. I need to pick up the kids from Lindo's place. Lately I've been pawning my kids off to my sister each time I am going through something. Not that she minds but she's pregnant and I need to give her a break. I unlock the door and make my way downstairs hoping Dali is not here. But he is. He is laying on the kitchen island, sleeping. I don't know if I am ready to face him just yet. I'm pretty sure sleeping on a chair and resting on an island is not comfortable a good person would wake him up and tell him to go and sleep in the bedroom but I am clearly not a good person.

I tiptoe out of the house and get in my car. Driving out I find Khanyi's car parked outside the gate. She quickly gets out and stands in the middle of the road. Knowing what I know now, God would forgive me if I ran her over. Right? I know he would. Why wouldn't he? This woman has put me through enough pain to last me a lifetime. Even God would understand.

My hands tighten on the steering wheel. My foot itching to press the accelerator and just put an end to all this. But I can't. My children still need their mother. I roll down the window and stick my head out.

"Are you applying for death?" I yell. She makes her way to my window.

"I've been trying to call Dali, he is not picking up my calls." She tells me. I don't know why she is telling me all this.

"So why are you telling me?"

"Because he is in. " she keeps quiet, looking around as if she is scared of being caught.

"Ma'am, is everything okay?" One of the security guys asks, popping out of nowhere. I look at Khanyi who is staring at this man as if he is a ghost.

"Is everything okay?" I ask her. She swallows and takes a step back.

"Everything is okay?" She replies, sticking a fake smile on her face before she quickly gets in her car and drives off.

"Is she okay?" The guy asks. I wish I knew. I shrug my shoulders.

"Well, we'll be right behind you." He says and disappears again.

I drive to Lindo's place and then I remember she is probably at work. I should have called first. I take my phone out of my bag and call her.

"Get in, I'm inside." She says. I guess I wasn't wrong to come here. The gate slides open and I drive in. I find her making a sandwich, which is not surprising, however the things she has in there are a cause for concern. I'm pretty sure I can see peanut butter, lettuce, cheese and even mayonnaise. "Do you want one?" She asks when she sees me eyeing the monstrosity on the plate.

"No. I'm good."

"Okay. Why are your eyes puffy?" She asks. I follow her to the dining area and sit down. She has all her work documents out on the table.

"You're working from home?" I say.

"Yes. Stop trying to change the subject. Why are your eyes puffy? Were you crying?" I sigh and take a sip of her juice, fresh tears welling up in my eyes.

"Kuningi sis wam, I dont know how to deal with it. (Its a lot.)" I tell her as a tears run down my eyes. She reaches over the table and holds my hand.

"Tell your big sister what happened. Maybe I can help." I doubt anyone can help me but I tell her everything. By the time I am done she is crying too. More from anger than pain.

"So Khanyi did this?" She asks.

"I dont know but all my suspicions point to her. The woman helping Dali said everything would be clear eventually and the truth will come out

but it's hard for me to not point the finger at her because who else benefited from all this? It definitely wasn't me." Lindo shakes her head, pushing the plate aside.

"It's pretty obvious. I can't believe she is that cruel."

"You know what's the hard part of all this, everytime I lost a child I had to deal with it on my own. He was never there. He never cared. And now he can't even remember anything. And I know it's not his fault, I know that but I can't help feeling like he opened that door. Yes he suffered too and maybe I am being selfish for putting the blame on him but let's be honest, through out all this he was living. He got to live his life and enjoy it somehow but I didn't."

"Is that why you filed for a divorce?" She asks. I stare at her, I don't remember telling her about that. "Dad told me." She clarifies. Of course he did.

"I am tired Lindo, I am tired of everything and I need to just let everything go and start afresh." She nods her head.

"I know. And I understand. But I doubt Sihlangu will." She says.

"He will have to get over it." She sighs.

"So what now?"

"I don't know. Divorce papers are with my lawyer, probably have been filed already. But now I feel like this woman has added a whole new burden on me because Dali has no clue what's going on. He looks so innocent and clueless it's hard for me to not feel like I am being played for a fool. I know he is innocent, I really do but I can't help how I feel."

And now I feel like such a monster for feeling this way." I say. Lindo pulls my hand towards her and kisses it.

"Bahle, you're allowed to feel how you do. And your feelings are valid. At the end of the day you will have to address this whole thing with Dali and yes right now it seems impossible, but you said it yourself, things will be clear soon and you will speak to him about it. Whatever happens after that, you know I will always have your back. Always." She assures me.

I take a slow deep breath. I thought a simple divorce was all I needed to start my life all over again but now it feels like I opened a whole can of worms. But maybe I need this, if I'm going to heal and start my life afresh then I need to make sure I heal from the past and its pain.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

50

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

DALINGCEBO

I am not sure what is happening to me. One moment I am minding my own business and the next thing these movie like flashes fill my brain. Every single one feels so real. Khanyi is in almost all of them, we are happy and just living. Which is weird considering that we broke up before Bahle and i got married.

I'm driving to gogo Mphotholozzi's house. Maybe she will give me the answers I need because asking Bahle is out of the question. She is going through something and she wont even tell me what's going on. She keeps herself locked in the bedroom all the time, sometimes I hear her sobbing. I wish she could tell me what's going on. One thing I know for sure though is that I've somehow contributed to her pain, as to the how, that's what I need to figure out.

I pull up to gogo Mphotholozzi's house and its packed. I just hope I wont have to wait too long in line. I walk inside the yard and the girl gogo Mphotholozzi works with immediately makes her way to me. Her name is Liyana I think.

"Bab'Khumalo, you're back." She says.

"Yes, I was hoping to see gogo." I tell her. I have my fingers crossed I can actually see her despite the long line of people waiting to see her. She is one busy woman.

"Okay, come with me." She turns and walks away from the people waiting. I follow her and she leads me to the rondavel I was in the last time. Today its different, there is a table with two chairs in the middle of the room and the reed mats are standing in the corner.

"You can have a seat. Gogo will be with you in a while." She says and walks out. I pull out a chair and sit down and wait. Five minutes turn to ten and then twenty and still nothing. I'm not even bothered because I saw the long line outside. Liyana walks in with a tray and places it on the table. There's a covered plate with a glass of juice next to it.

"You should eat something. You might be here a while." She says then walks out again. I should have made an appointment. I uncover the plate and its dumplings with beef stew. It smells nice. I pick up a piece of the meat and bite into it. The bite sends a chilling sensation in my mouth, it feels like my tooth is being torn into pieces.

I hold on to my throbbing cheek and close my eyes, hoping the pain goes away but it doesn't. Bahle's image pops into my head. An image of her laying on a hospital bed, sobbing. It feels so real, like I can touch her. I try to but it's like I am just grabbing air. I try again and again but nothing. Lindo walks in and makes her way around the bed. She can't seem to see me. I call out her name but nothing. She wont even acknowledge my presence. I walk around the bed and try to touch her but nothing. It's like grabbing air. They can't see me.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" Lindo asks her. Instead of answering Bahle just cries. I feel a stabbing pain in my chest. Lindo gets on the bed, taking Bahle into her arms. "He is still not here." She adds. Bahle nods her head. "I'm sorry, I'm sure he has a good reason for not being here." She continues. Who is not here?

"If that reason is Khanyi then yes, he probably does." Bahle says after a while. Is it me they are talking about?

"Dont dwell on it sis wam. Dali will come around." Lindo assures her.

"That's just wishful thinking. He wanted this. He wanted a child and the moment I lose that child he cant even acknowledge it or even show a bit of sympathy. Maybe this marriage was a bad idea to begin with." Bahle argues. She lost a child? And I wasn't there to help her through it. What kind of jackass am I supposed to be?

Someone taps me on the shoulder and my eyes fly open. The pain on my teeth is gone. Gogo Mphotholozhi is sitting across from me and Liyana is right behind me.

"What happened?" I ask looking around the room, I didnt even notice them coming in.

"You zoned out for a moment. I take it your memory is coming back?" Gogo Mphotholozhi asks. Was that really a memory or just a figment of my imagination? It cant possibly be real. Why would I leave my wife to go through the loss of a child alone.

"Those cannot be memories. It cant be." I argue.

"Unfortunately they are. Things were not clear to you before because of everything you were fed. But now it's going to play out in your mind like a movie. I cant say it will be easy but it will give you an idea of what the past few years have been like, not just for you but for your wife as well." She says. Maybe this explains why Bahle has been crying, it's all my fault.

"How do I fix this? How do I make it better?" I ask. I have to find a way. Bahle deserves way better than this.

"I dont know. The only thing I can do is help you spiritually and physically, make sure you're strong and able to fight whatever dark forces are being plotted against you. Everything else unfortunately is on you." She tells me.

"So all these constant images flashing into my head are not just some random stuff but actual things that happened?" I ask. She nods her head, her arms crossed on the table. "I dont understand how I got back together with my ex because if I remember correctly I broke up with her to focus on my marriage. So how did I end up spending so much time with her after that?" None of this makes sense. None of it.

"You were fed idliso just before you got married. That is how you were manipulated and conditioned to stay with her even after you were married. The truth though is that you did love her, and I know it will be easy to blame her for all this but she is innocent. She also didnt know. Her mum on the other hand is the one who is dangerous. She orchestrated all this. Your ex only found out about it later and by then it was too late." She says.

I drive back home feeling like the worlds worst human being. I know they say we all go through seasons of change but this feels like I am on a downward spiral and just when I think I've reached the bottom I find out I can actually go deeper. Bahle is out of the bedroom, that's a relief. But she is not alone. Her mother is here. I hesitate going to the kitchen to check on Bahle so I decide to just risk it with her mother.

"Ma, sawubona." She gives me a full blown smile before pulling me into a hug.

"Mntungwa, it's so nice to see you again. How are you holding up?" She asks. I take a seat on the couch, playing with my car keys.

"I'm okay. I didn't know you were coming today, I would have been here to welcome you." She chuckles. For some reason I get the idea that even her laugh is not as genuine as she portrays.

"Oh, I just need to talk to my daughter about something. I heard you two are getting a divorce." She says. This is not the first time the whole divorce issue has come up. Sbu said it too the other day. I am not sure where its coming from but maybe Bahle can she some light on it.

"Yeah." I reply. I dont know what else to say. This conversation is just awkward. I excuse myself and go to the kitchen. Bahle is cooking.

"Hey." She turns and looks at me her eyes are puffy and red. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She goes back to her cooking so I decide to let her be. Besides the anger and pain in her eyes I cant help feeling like there is also hints of hatred in there. Not that I would blame her, everything that's been coming back to me makes me think I've been a jerk all along.

This house is as cold as an igloo. No amount of trying to make things right will work right now. Maybe I should just let things play out the way they see fit.

BAHLENGIWE

I know he is trying. I really know and understand that. But it's so hard for me to soften my heart and just let things go. This past week, things I had thought were long buried resurfaced and brought with it emotions I had hoped I'd never feel again. And my mother being here is not helping. I was fine being locked up in the bedroom and wallowing in my own self pity, but not with her.

I set the table for two and place the food on it before calling my mother. She stares at the table then glares at me like there is something wrong. I know there is nothing wrong with this table, not with the cutlery, not with the food and certainly not with the flowers.

"So who is not eating?" She asks, her hand on her hip, ready for a fight. From the moment she came in here she's been itching for one. Although I've tried to ignore her, her small jabs and comments here and there have made her intentions pretty clear. Her husband told her about the divorce and now she is here fighting his battles.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"There are two settings and yet there are three people in this house. Have you forgotten that you're married?" She says.

"I'll take some to him later."

"Now!" I swear this week is definitely not my week. I grab a tray and a plate and dish up for Dali with my mother's steady gaze on me, making sure I do not embarrass her.

I find him in the bedroom staring at the laptop with his headphones on. I place the food on the side table and tell him to eat. He doesn't say anything. I figure it must be the headphones so I pull them off his head

and only then does he look at me like I just pulled him out of a different realm.

"Are you okay?" I ask, feigning concern.

"When did you get here?" He questions.

"Just now. I brought you food." I say pointing to the tray. He looks at it and mouths an oh. "Are you sure you're okay?" I ask.

"I am fine. Thank you for the food." He is definitely going through something. Hopefully his memory is coming back.

I reluctantly head back downstairs. I take a seat at the table and dish up for myself. Mum won't stop staring at me, I'm sure she has a lot she wants to say but she's probably trying to figure out where to start. I ignore her until she opens her mouth and speaks.

"Help me understand this decision of yours. Why are you filing for divorce?" She asks.

"Because my marriage is not working and it's time to let it go." She chuckles and puts the fork down.

"It doesn't work?" She asks. "And what have you done to make it work?"

"Everything!"

"And what exactly is everything? Couples therapy, communication, what?" She pushes.

"I have done everything I could to make it work and it still won't work." I repeat.

"You're still quiet." She says. I take a deep breath, there is no way I am about to tell her the real reason why I am headed for splitsville. How do I even start explaining that there has been a third wheel throughout our marriage or that said third wheel is most likely the reason my husband treated me like trash all these years.

"Ma can we please just drop this. The divorce papers have been signed so it's done. Let it go." She throws her head back laughing and clapping her hands like a lunatic. Thank God I am on the other side of the table.

"Drop it? Bahle did you stop to think about what this will mean for our family?" Of course that's why she is here, it's not about Bahle but the family.

"I've been thinking about it for ten years. Every anniversary, every birthday, every single day, I have thought about it. And now it's time to stop thinking and start acting." I reply.

"You're so selfish you know that." She says. "Do you know what your father stands to lose because of your decision?" I've already had this conversation with my father and it ended the way I expected it would, not good. And I'm pretty sure even this one wont end well.

"I am selfish? Really mama? I am selfish?" I swear it must be crack. There is no other explanation.

"Bahle, do you know the blood, sweat and tears your father put into this business that you want to throw away?" She asks.

"Ma, I'll say this to you but I've already said it to your husband, dad fucked up his own work and legacy when he decided to entrust it to this marriage instead of handing it over to his only son. It's not like he only

has daughters, he has a son and he could have easily groomed him to be his heir instead of worrying about who Sihlangu gets in bed with. So the only person who threw away his hard work is your husband." I say.

I grab my plate and head upstairs to Nqaba's room and just sit there in the dark, with my hands shaking and my heart beating rapidly. I've never been one to speak to people any which way I like, especially not my parents.

My phone pings and when I check it's a message from an agent with the lease agreement for me to print out and sign. I finally found a place I like enough to commit to. Now all I have to do is pay the deposit and at least three months rent. It should give me some breathing space while I look for a job.

I hear a door open before footsteps make their way down the hallway. I'm pretty sure mum is going to give me an earful for not taking my husband's plate to the kitchen. I'm still not sure how to deal with everything that was revealed to me but I've been praying, more than I've prayed before. I need God to give me the strength and the heart to forgive and truly put this behind me because, despite my feelings, Dali is just as much a victim in this as I am. Giving him a little grace would not hurt. I hope.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

51

KHANYISILE

This is taking longer than it should. The box says two minutes so why does it feel like I've been waiting for ten minutes already. The timer goes off on my phone, I flip the tests over and they are all positive. My heart skips a beat. This is actually happening. I am doing this. I pace up and down the bathroom, shaking like a leaf. This is actually happening. I know I planned it but the reality is overwhelming. If my plan doesn't go accordingly I might find myself as a single mother.

I quickly set up an appointment with Dr Pillay for tomorrow before I make the call I've been waiting to make for weeks now. It rings and goes straight to voicemail. I dial again. This time he picks up.

"Khanyi, what do you want?" He asks. At least he still has my number.

"We need to talk. I'll send you an address where we will meet. I'll be there in an hour." I tell him. I hear him sigh.

"And if I don't show up?"

"Then I'll get your father to meet me. I'm sure he would love to hear what I have to say." I reply and then hang up the phone. I quickly send the address before jumping in the shower. I'm not even sure if he will come but I can only hope. One thing he won't do is toss me to the side like a used rag. I also know I should blame my mother for it but hey, it is what it is.

I change into a pair of Jean's and a tshirt, I pull my wig into a bun then add a cap. Good thing my mother is not here to question me. I am nervous driving to the restaurant. Although its private enough for us not to be seen it's still risky. Especially now that there is security involved, you can never know what those people report back to their boss.

I find a table that's right at the back and wait. I'm five minutes early. I order a glass of water with ice and wait. I can feel sweat running down my back. This could either go right or very very wrong. I see him walk through the doors. I look at the time and he is right on time. He looks around the restaurant, when he spots me I can see his clenched jaws from here. He is angry. I didnt expect him to skip over here but a little happiness would have worked. He makes his way to me, it's hard not to notice his presence. Especially now that whatever mum fed him is slowly losing its hold on him. I hate that all this time I was holding on to a relationship that was technically based on lies.

He pulls out the chair and sits down.

"You called, your majesty." He mocks. To think just a few weeks ago he would look at me with love in his eyes and now he loathes me.

"How are you?" I ask, ignoring the sarcasm in his voice. He chuckles and leans forward, crossing his arms on the table.

"I am fine. Now what do you want?" He asks. I guess there is no point in holding on to whatever love I fooled myself we had.

I pull out all three pregnancy tests and place them in front of him. He looks at the tests before lifting his eyes to me.

"What's this?" He asks.

"Pregnancy tests. I am pregnant." I am nervous. Even clasping my hands together under the table is not making them shake any less.

"I can see that. Why are you giving them to me?"

"Because I am pregnant with your child." Or children. You never know with Insemination. He sits back again, a smirk on his face.

"Where did you buy these?" He questions.

"I bought them at the pharmacy then used them at home. Would you like to ask something else?"

"If I remember correctly, I could be wrong though, you had your tubes tied right? So how is it that now you're pregnant, especially since I don't remember being intimate with you recently? How did it happen?" He asks. I swallow as my heart starts beating in my throat.

"What difference will that make? The point is that I am pregnant with your child. If you have a problem with this baby we can always get with families involved and figure out a way forward." I tap my fingernails on the table, trying my best to keep my composure in check and not let him see me sweat.

"You wouldn't dare."

"Wanna bet?"

"What do you want Khanyi?" Now we're getting to the juicy part. I'm glad he brought it up not me.

"Simple, my mother's house, the one your little wife kicked her out of, I want it in her name. That's one thing, number two, I want an

apartment, no, make that a penthouse in Sandton and a deposit of at least a million rands into my account. That's all, for now. Of course we will discuss payment of rates, levies and taxes once everything is done." He chuckles, clapping his hands.

"You're good. I'll give you that. But you're not getting shit from me." He says.

"I'd be very careful before I make that decision if I were you. I mean, I know Bahle filed for divorce which means you get to inherit everything, but imagine what would happen if Bahle's father found out you've been cheating on his daughter the entirety of your marriage. Who do you think will come out as a victim? And who do you think will own everything that has to do with the mines and every other business your family is involved in? Who stands to lose in all this Dalingcebo? I can guarantee you it's not me." I say, my confidence coming back. I see his jaws clench and his hands ball into fists on top of the table. Thank God I chose to do this in a public place. I can only imagine what he would have done if we were in a private space.

"You're playing with fire right now." He tells me.

"I've been playing with fire for ten years while waiting on you to do right by me, only to be tossed to the side like a used rag. Not me baby, not Khanyisile Manana." He slowly nods his head chuckling.

"You dont know what you're doing right now." He warns again.

"I know exactly what I am doing. And since you and your wife gave me a week to vacate MY house, i will give you a little grace, I'll give you two weeks to get this done. I mean, I know it takes way longer than that to get a house registered and shit but by the end of the two weeks I need

to have an offer of purchase for the penthouse drawn up and submitted and the paperwork for change of ownership needs to be done by then. And dont even think about trying to play me because I know you can make anything happen, including this. So get on with it." I pull out a file from my bag and put it in front of him. "These are the three options I found for the penthouses. They are reasonably priced, but it's not like you cant afford atleast one of them." I stand up and brush my nonexistent bump. "Anyways, I'm tired, baby and I need to rest. You will let me know once the process has started. Remember, two weeks Mntungwa. Two." I lift my two fingers to emphasise my point before blowing him a kiss and making my way out with my knees threatening to give in.

I make it to my car and take a deep breath. My hands are shaking, its hard to even hold on to the steering wheel. I grab a bottle of water and take a sip, the water is hot, I roll down the window and spit it out. I make eye contact with Dali as he exits the restaurant, I see rage and anger in his eyes. I roll up the window and start the car. I need a place to hide before this man makes his next move. I'm pretty sure by now he already knows about what mum did and I'm sure he thinks I knew. But trying to convince him will not work. I've read enough horror stories to know that sometimes when muthi leaves people's bodies they act out and become animals. I'm not about to be in the receiving end of whatever repercussions that will come with this.

I get home and quickly pack a bag with all my essentials and a few clothes. I just need to lay low for atleast a month until I'm certain he has done what I asked. I cant go to my friends because those are technically his friends too, there is only one place he will never look. As much as I hate it, it's the only place I will be safe right now.

BAHLENGIWE

I found my apartment. Well more like a townhouse really, its spacious enough and has enough privacy to keep nosey people out. My mum is still here, I've been trying to avoid her every chance I get. I'm pretty sure in her head, when she decided to come here she figured I'd change my mind about this whole thing. Unfortunately for her I am more certain now than I was before. According to the lawyer, the divorce will be easy because it is uncontested which works for me. I just pray the kids like the place I found.

I pull up to the house and my mothers car is gone. It would be such a nice thing if she is gone. I need the breather. I get in the house and she is nowhere to be found. Her usual place in the couch is occupied by Dali's feet. I peek over the couch and he is fast asleep. Except he is mumbling things and shaking his head side to side and he is dripping sweat as if there is a heatwave outside.

"Dali, wake up." I call out but nothing. I shake him a bit but it doesn't help. I make my way around the couch and take a seat. I grab his shoulders and shake him as hard as I can calling out his name, but its like the more I shake him the worse things get. I slap his cheek and his eyes pop open. His pupils are dilated and his eyes are red. He is starring at me but it's like he is looking through me, like there is something behind me. I turn my head to look and there is nothing there. When I turn back to him I feel his hands wrap around my neck, constricting and cutting off the air supply to my lungs.

I grab his arms trying to get him off me but fail. I can literally see the muscles protruding in his arms. He pushes me back until I'm laying on my back on the couch with him hovering over me. I can feel death

coming. I dont know who this person is. The Dali I know has never been violent. Never laid a hand on me so this is new. I feel my lungs ready to give in. But I'm not. I keep trying to gasp for air but the more I try the more his hands suffocate me.

I muster up the last strength I have in me and knee him in the balls. He groans and lets go of my neck and grabs his balls. I drag myself back, gasping for air and coughing uncontrollably. I hit my chest a few times as if that will make anything better. He is on the floor, crunched over with his balls in his hands groaning like a mad man.

I grab the opportunity and wobble up the stairs with my phone in my hand. I lock myself in the bedroom and slide down to the floor and dial Sbu's number. Lucky for me he picks up pretty quickly.

"The kids are fine Bahle." He says laughing.

"I need you help." I wheeze still trying to get air into my lungs.

"Bahle, what's wrong?"

"Dalingcebo, he is..... I dont know, please come."

"I'm on my way." He says. I can already hear shuffling on the other side and I know he will be here soon.

I dont know what is going on with Dali but that was definitely a different person. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think he would do something like that. I cant even think straight right now, all I know is that I almost died in the hands of my husband. I grab my phone again and find Gogo Mphotholozzi's number.

"MaZwide." She replies.

"I need your help. Something is wrong with Dali." I say, my coughs getting a little less frequent.

"Wrong how?" I explain to her what just happened and she listens attentively. "Okay, who are you with there?" She asks.

"I am with him. He is in the lounge and I am in the bedroom. But his brother is on his way."

"Good. Send me your address, I'll be there soon." She says. I'm not sure how Sbu will take a traditional being here but right now, I need all the help I can get.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

52

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

BAHLENGIWE

There's commotion downstairs. I don't even have the energy to get up and go check what's happening. I hear Sbu's voice calling out my name as he comes up the stairs. I unlock the door and he walks in, out of breath.

"Are you Okay?" He asks looking around the room. "What happened?" I show him my neck. He steps closer, inspecting the damage. "Did he do this?" I nod my head. He nods his head and makes his way out again. I follow him and pull him back before he goes down the stairs.

"Stop, I don't think it's his fault." He looks at me, pity all over his face.

"What do you mean? Is he not the one who did that to you?" He asks pointing at my neck.

"He is, but I don't think he was himself. Something is wrong with him." I say. He sighs.

"Okay, I will take him to the hospital."

"I don't think a hospital will help. I've already called someone who can help him." I'm pretty sure he won't take this the way I hope. My phone pings in my pocket. I take it out and it's a message from Gogo Mphotholozhi saying she is outside.

"Who did you call?" Sbu asks.

"You'll see." I rush down the stairs and open the gate. Gogo Mphotholozzi drives in. I stand by the door as she gathers her work tools before making her way to the house.

"You look like you have the world's problems on your shoulders." She says.

"I was almost strangled to death by my husband so yeah, I might not have the world's problems but I have plenty of my own." She leans in and gives me a hug. For the first time since I made the decision to walk away from everything and someone gives me a hug, assures me everything will be okay.

"You're going to get through this. I promise you." She says. I take a deep breath, wipe my tears and lead her into the house.

Dali is sitting on the couch, staring into the distance. Sbu keeps waving his hands in front of him but he is not even blinking.

"I'm taking him to the hospital." Sbu says.

"A hospital won't help him." Gogo Mphotholozzi tells him. Sbu lifts his head and immediately I can see the disapproval in his eyes.

"What's going on?" He asks, directing his deadly glare back to me, sending my heart galloping like a horse at the Durban July.

"Uhm, this is Gogo Mphotholozzi, she has been helping Dali."

"Helping him with what?" He bellows.

"Can I explain everything to you once he has been helped. Please." He stands between Gogo Mphotholozzi and Dali, his right hand disappearing

behind his back. I know what's there and if it comes out, it will not be a good thing, for anyone.

"Explain now." He orders.

"Dali went to her for help because he couldn't understand what was happening with him. She helped him vomit isidliso and she's been helping him since then." I tell him. I can't go into all the details right now, especially with Dali looking like he is about to pass out any minute now.

"Isidliso? Where did he get it?" Sbu asks.

"Khumalo, I will give you an explanation and tell you exactly what's going on but right now we need to help your brother, unless you want to bury him." Gogo Mphotholozzi tells him. He turns to his brother and looks at him before stepping aside. "Thank you. Can we get him into a bath tub?" She asks. Sbu helps him up while I rush to the downstairs bathroom and fill the bathtub with warm water. Gogo Mphotholozzi comes in and pours different herbs into the water.

"Help him out of his clothes." She orders. I go into the bedroom, Dali and Sbu are sitting on the bed. I can see the skepticism in Sbu's eyes but this is the only way Dali can get help. I mean he was in a hospital in a coma and till today no one knows what was wrong with him.

"Can we help him undress." I say. He shakes his head and helps him stand. I unzip his pants and pull them down, leaving him with his underwear on. I pull off his tshirt too.

"Get him in here." Gogo Mphotholozzi shouts. Sbu helps him into the bathroom and into the tub.

The moment he touches the water it's like he is burning.

"Make sure he stays in there." Gogo Mphotholozzi orders. Sbu holds him down even though he is fighting. Dali keeps fighting to get out, begging to be let out. Sbu gets in the water making sure to keep him in the tub.

"What is happening to him?" Sbu yells over Dali's screams.

"Give it a few minutes and he will calm down." Gogo tells him. I stand by the door, my heart racing, Dali looks so different, besides the screaming he is doing, his eyes are bloodshot red and he looks like he is in pain. And not just physically.

After a while he calms down, closes his eyes and rests.

"You can let go of him now." Gogo says. Sbu gets out of the water, his pants dripping on the floor.

"What did you do to him?" He asks.

"He was given something by the person he met today. Not physically, and the person didn't know either." Gogo replies.

"I don't understand." He admits. Honestly, neither do I at this point.

"It's not that easy to explain but in simple terms, you know how when someone slips something in your bag or pocket and you carry it somewhere else, unknowingly so and when you get to where you're going someone else takes that thing. Except in this case, the thing was told exactly who to latch on. And it did." She explains. I understand a bit of what she is saying but Sbu seems like he is completely lost.

"And you got all of that how? Aren't you supposed to throw bones or something?" He questions.

"Not everything needs bones. Plus this thing was supposed to take effect while he was driving causing an accident. But your grandmother has been working overtime. That's why you need to fix your family altar and make things right with your ancestors." She tells him. Sbu looks at me and all I can do is shrug.

I leave the bathroom and make my way to the kitchen. I wonder what Dali saw when he looked at me. I grab his phone off the counter and punch in his code. I go through the call log and find Khanyi's number. It's the only number on his call log for today. So basically she called him, they met up and this happened. But now Gogo said she didnt know she was 'carrying' something. So who was it that gave her whatever she carried.

I decide to throw caution to the wind and dial her number. It rings a couple of times before she picks up.

"Mntungwa, I knew you'd get back to me. I didnt think it would be this soon though. So when do you need me to sign those papers?" She asks. I can tell by the sound of her voice that she is happy about this call. So now I wonder what it was they were discussing with Dali.

"You wont be signing any papers." I say.

"Bahle...."

"Yes, its me."

"What do you want? Where is Dali?" She asks. "Put him on the phone." She orders.

"You dont give me orders, remember? Besides, the chickens are coming home to roost, whatever it is you've been doing to Dali will come back to you tenfold." I tell her.

"What are you talking about?" I hang up the phone when I hear footsteps coming towards the kitchen. I turn around and find Sbu looking at me.

"She is cutting him." He whispers.

"Cutting him?"

"Yes. With a razor and then sticking some black thing inside the wound." He says. Good thing I left the room, I dont think I can handle any more than I've had to deal with today.

"I'm sure she knows what she is doing." I fill a cup with water and head to the lounge, throwing myself onto the couch, rubbing my neck a bit. Now that the adrenaline has worn off, I can feel the pain more. The bruising seems to be getting worse.

"You can change into one of Dali's pants, you can't be walking around with wet pants." I tell him. He sighs and sits down.

"I dont understand any of this. I've never been into traditional stuff. As far as I am concerned science is supposed to have an answer for everything. But this, this is hard to understand." He admits.

"We live and we learn." I say.

"I'm still trying to figure out where he got this isidliso from. I mean, it's supposed to make a person comply and do what the other person want. So my guess is Khanyi is responsible for all this because we both

know Dali has not been an upstanding husband to you." He says, looking at me.

"I know, but throwing accusations is not going to help anyone. Right now we can only hope Dali gets the help he needs and maybe then he will be back to his old self." He chuckles.

"She will pay for this. I'll make sure of it."

KHANYISILE

Bahle calling me was the last thing I expected. And her call was unsettling to say the least. Maybe they already know about what mum did. I hate that now I have to pay for her sins. She started this and now I am the one who is going to pay for it. Maybe this distance will also be good for us.

I drive into Nelspruit and put the address in the GPS. It leads me to what looks like a game reserve. Maybe he works here. I park on the side and double check the address, its definitely the place. A security guard knocks on my window, scaring the living shit out of me. I roll down the window and he taps his baton on his hand, if this is supposed to intimidate me then he needs to work harder.

"Sisi, this is not a parking space." He says.

"I'm sorry, I think i am lost. I am looking for this address." I hand him the piece of paper and he looks at it.

"You're not lost, this is the place you're looking for. I see Vusi Hlophe on here, is he the person you're looking for?" He asks.

"Yes that's him, he is my father. Does he work here?" He throws his head back laughing.

"Work? Are you sure this man is your father?" He says laughing. What did I say that was funny?

"He is actually my father. Do you know where I can find him?"

"What's your name?" He questions.

"Khanyisile Manana."

"Okay, wait here, I'll be right back." He says and makes his way to the gate. He gets into the little booth. I'm not sure what he is doing in there but I'm sure he said something about me because two of his colleagues peek out the door.

He is in there for almost a minute before he returns.

"You can go in. Follow that guard, he will lead you to where you need to go." He says. Okay then. I make my way to the gate and they open it. I follow the guard in a golf cart, it's like following a toddler using a baby walker. Although I get to look around the place, its definitely not a lodge but it looks like an estate. I'm still unsure of why my father would be living in an estate honestly. Not according to what my mother told us about him.

The guard pulls up to a huge ass house, no, make that a mansion. There is a man standing outside the front door. I park behind a whole ass Rolls Royce. Where the fuck am I?

While the guard greets the man I get out of the car and make my way to them. He is watching me as I walk. A smile forms on his face the

closer I get. I want to say this is my dad but I don't want to jump the gun, he does look like Senele though.

"Khanyisile." He says. "You actually came." He adds. "You know when Nana said she found you on Facebook I thought she was joking."

"Yeah I came. You stay here?" His smile fills his face as he looks at the house. Clearly it's his pride and joy.

"Yes, this is my house. Your home. Come on in." This cannot be real. Mum lied to us. I follow him into the house and the inside is even better than the outside. "Would you like something to drink?" He asks as a maid makes her way to us.

"No, thank you." The maid disappears again.

"Let's have a seat. I'm sure you have many questions." He says. Right now I am too dizzy to even make up a coherent question. All I can think about is the fact that mum lied to us.

"You know my wife is eager to meet you guys." He says.

"The same wife who stopped you from taking care of us?" He doesn't seem surprised by my words.

"Let me guess, your mother told you that?" He asks.

"What else was she supposed to tell us?"

"The truth perhaps. I'm glad you came, now you can hear my side of the story not the bullshit you've been fed all these years." Now I am wondering what other lies I was told by my dear mother.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

53

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

KHANYISILE

Waking up here feels both weird and refreshing. The guest room looks like a room in some five star hotel. I've been questioning everything mum told us since I got here. She told us my dad's new wife hated us and tried to kill us but shes been very nice to me since I got here. She even said she had been looking forward to meeting us and our dad talks about us a lot. Reading people is not one of my strongest suites but this woman seems genuine. I even have an extra sister and brother.

There's a knock on the door. "Come in." My newest sister Nana comes in, already in her school uniform. When she found me on Facebook I thought she was some scammer until she mentioned my father and gave me his address. Coming here was a leap of faith all on it's own and I have her to thank for that.

"Good morning." She says sounding chirpy. Morning people bore me.
"Dad says I should come get you, breakfast is ready."

"Thank you, but I'm not hungry." I reply, hoping she can leave me alone. I'm still unsure of how to act around them. At the end of the day this is a whole entire family and I am the intruder.

"Dad wont be happy about that. We all have breakfast together in this house." She tells me. Of course, perfect families have proper meals together.

"Well he will get over it. Please close the door on your way out." I turn over on the bed and face the other side. I'm not ready to watch them be the perfect family. The only thing I came here for is a hiding place and nothing more.

I hear her footsteps as she walks away before the door closes. I grab my phone and look at the time. It's a few minutes before seven. Who has breakfast at this time anyway. It's too early. I have several missed calls from my mother. Calling her back is not an option. I still need to get answers from the man that brought me into this world, and if I tell my mother where I am she will find a way to manipulate me like she always does. I send her a text telling her I am fine and a short video as proof of life.

I lay in bed contemplating my life. Truth be told I played myself. Investing much into my relationship with Dali and all I was investing in was nothing but a lie. I want to put all the blame on my mother but this is all me. All of it is me. All she did was start the car and I drove it. I should have used my degree, got a job and made something of my life. Or at the least saved as much as I can from what Dali gave me, instead I was more focused on living the dream and I forgot that once morning comes, dreams disappear and all one is left with are memories.

Maybe mum is right. I am stupid. So stupid in fact I went and got myself pregnant just to blackmail a man. And there's even a possibility I might not get what I want. If boo boo the fool has a face then it's definitely mine. That's for sure.

Another knock breaks into my thoughts. This family is something else. "Come in." The door opens and my father walks in with a tray in his hands. Breakfast in bed, impressive. He places the tray on the side table

before sticking his hands in his pockets. Judging by the shorts he has on, he is not going to work. Does he even work?

"Good morning."

"Morning." I'm yet to see the good in it so I'll reserve that good for later.

"Breakfast in this house is at seven in the morning. Every day without fail. We all sit at the table and eat together." He says.

"That's great, what's that got to do with me?" He chuckles and takes a seat at the foot of the bed.

"Khanyisile, you need to understand that in this house there are rules and everyone follows those rules. I don't care if you're an adult, rules are rules." He insists.

"I don't think you're at liberty to be telling me anything about rules. Like you said, I am an adult. And yesterday I told you why I am here. I just need a place to lay low, not to play happy families with your wife and kids. I am grown, you can't parent me at this age." He nods his head as if he is trying to digest what I just said. This is his family not mine so why should I hold hands and sing kumbaya with them as if it's normal. It's not.

"I'll say this to you again, seven AM we have breakfast in this house, together. We also have dinner together. I don't care if you're an adult or not, you're still my child and I expect you to be a child in this house." I might have dug myself a hole by coming here. I slow clap my hands, glaring at him.

"For a moment there I almost believed this strict father role you're trying to play. But let's be honest, you failed to play that role when I needed you too. When mum was struggling, alone, you weren't there. So please, if me being here is a problem for you let me know and I will gladly leave."

"Why were you struggling?" He asks. Of all the things I said that's what he got out of this? Men and their selective hearing.

"What difference does it make, we suffered, we got out of it. It doesn't matter anymore." He looks at his watch and stands up.

"Eat your food then come down stairs. We seem to have a lot to talk about." He says and walks out. My curiosity is peaked. Now I want to know what it is he thinks we need to talk about. I take the tray and place it on my lap. It's nothing fancy, just bacon cheese, eggs, a croissant, a sausage and a glass of juice. The coffee is already cold.

I finish eating and change into a pair of shorts and an oversized t-shirt then head downstairs with the tray. Every inch of this house looks like it was planned and well thought out. It's beautiful no doubt about that.

A maid takes the tray as soon as I make it to the bottom of the stairs before directing me out to the patio. I find my father with his laptop opened on the table and a few files piled on the chair next to him.

"Take a seat." He orders. For once I act like a child and do as I'm told. He picks out a file and hands it to me. "Read that." I open the file and the first thing I come across is a picture of a baby. A newborn. Cute.

"That's my son." He says. "He died when he was three months old." Okay, I was not expecting that. I'm not sure if I should give my

condolences or keep flipping the pages, I choose the latter and come across another picture of a baby. They look similar, I'm not sure if it's the same baby or not. "That's my other son, he also died at three months old." He adds. Something is definitely off about this.

"Were they sick?" I ask. He shakes his head.

"No, the second one died of poisoning. Your mother was babysitting him when he ingested said poison." He says and for a brief moment my world stops. I know my mother can be cruel but she wouldn't kill a child.

"My mother is not a murderer. A baby killer at that. She has her flaws but she would not do something like that." I burst out.

"I'm not asking you to believe me, I wont ask you to believe me. Plus there was no evidence to prove it so" he shrugs his shoulders. I close the file and toss it back to him.

"Are you also going to tell me she 'killed' your other son too?"

"Khanyi, your mother is not the saint she makes herself out to be. I dont know what she told you about me but I can guarantee you it's all a lie."

"Which part of it is the lie? The part where you abandoned us and chose your wife over us? The part where we went hungry because you couldn't be bothered to care? Which part was the lie?" I ask.

"Everything you just said." He says so confidently it shakes every wall I've built up inside me. "You do know your mother and I are still technically married. Traditionally she is my wife. I paid lobola, she was smeared with red ochre and poured with bile. She is my wife. Mercy is

wife number two." He adds. Now I am not sure what to believe. Mum told us they got divorced because he was cheating on her.

"If she is your wife then why are we using her surname and not yours?" I ask.

"That's a question you need to ask her. All I know is that I came home one night to find your mother standing in the backyard, a black powder in her hand, calling out my first sons name saying he must die together with his mother then blowing the powder in the air. Two days later my son was dead." Sadness washes over him. I cant help feeling sorry for him. As I've come to learn, my mother is a master when it comes to African science so that is something I cant put past her "I packed her bags and asked my uncles to accompany her back home so her people would know what she did. The day before she was set to leave, she disappeared. You were about five years old when it happened so I understand if you dont remember. Seluleko was just a baby and Senele wasnt even born yet. I went out searching for her and found her in Barberton. She apologised and said she was ashamed of what she did, I loved her so I forgave her. For a few years things were better. She was the wife I needed. Mercy fell pregnant with another son, your mum was happy. Or atleast she pretended to be. Senele was a few months old when my son was born. Your mum, she fooled everyone when she pretended to be this repented saint. When my son was three months she offered to babysit him when his mother had to go for a job interview. Mercy was reluctant but I convinced her that your mother had changed. She believed me. I'll always regret that. When she picked him up he was asleep but lethargic so she assumed he was tired. That night he was foaming in the mouth and his lips had turned purple. He died the very next morning. When we tried to question your mother,

she was nowhere to be found. She took you and your sisters with and disappeared. So you see, you were not abandoned." He adds.

I sit there not sure how to react. I don't want to believe this is real but this is Girly Manana we are talking about. You can never put anything past her. Not even the death of not one but two children.

I remember leaving in a hurry one time, I just can't seem to wrap my head around where we were or why we left. All I can remember is mum packing our bags quickly and ordering us to hurry up. I had to carry Seluleko to the taxi because she couldn't walk fast enough. How did I even forget that.

I've been cooped up in this room the whole day. Mercy has been welcoming and nice to me meanwhile my mother is responsible for the death of her children. How does one even face a person like that? My phone rings for the hundredth time. My mother won't stop calling me. I take a deep breath and answer the call.

"Khanyisile, where the hell are you? Sending me a text saying I am fine is not assuring enough. Not even that stupid video you sent. Where are you?" She yells.

"I am with my father." I reply and there's silence. I know she is still there because she is still breathing on the other side.

"Where are you?" She whispers.

"I am with my father. You know, the man you said abandoned us. He tells a different story." I tell her.

"Khayisile, Manana. If you know what is good for you, you will get in your car and come back home." She hisses.

"This is home too." I say and I can hear her groan.

"That is not your home. Your home is here, with me and your sisters."
She screams.

"Did you know I had brothers. They died though." I tell her. I'm not sure what kind of reaction I was expecting but her silence speaks volumes.

"They were babies when they died. Little babies. Imagine that. Small babies dying. How cruel?" I add.

I hear the beeping sound and know she hung up. Is it guilt? I doubt it. My mother has no heart. She feels nothing. How do you even poison a three month old baby? How do you look into the innocence of the child and have enough courage to end the child's life? I place my hand on my tummy, the idea of this baby's life being taken so easily, would I be okay with that. The plan was to have an abortion as soon as I get what I want from Dali, wouldn't that make me just like her?

HIS HEART TO KEEP

54

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

BAHLENGIWE

I couldn't sleep last night. Sbu and I have been watching over Dali since gogo Mphotholozzi left. Watching him sleep so peacefully like he didn't just almost strangle the life out of me. He stirs, turns over to the side and opens his eyes. He looks around the room, pulling himself up to sit properly.

"What's going on? Why am I in here?" He asks. Sbu gets up and pulls the curtains open. "And why are you wearing my pants?" He yells. I see a smile on Sbu's lips and I know he sees what I am seeing. He is back. Although it's too early to celebrate but he is back.

"These are mine. And besides, they look better on me." Sbu replies.

"You wish. I'm hungry."

"I'll make you something to eat." I get off the couch and head to the kitchen. I'll have to make porridge so he can have it with the powder gogo Mphotholozzi gave us. I boil the water and turn the stove on. I whip up the pap as quickly as possible, while it simmers on the stove I hurry to take a quick shower and change into a polo neck, making sure it covers my bruises. I head back down and dish up for him. I add a glass of juice on the side.

"I still dont understand why you went to see her." Sbu says. I slow my steps down to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"I dont know man, she said she had something important to tell me."
Dali replies.

"And what did she say?"

"That she is pregnant." He says. I take a step back. "She wants to tell dad unless I sign over her mothers house back to her and then buy her a penthouse in Sandton and a million into her account. Possibly more in future." He says. One thing Khanyi has in abundance, is audacity.

"Is she nuts? How is she pregnant? When was the last time you two were together?"

"I dont remember."

"We have to put a stop to this before it gets out of hand. Khanyi is doing too much." Sbu says, I can hear the anger in his voice clear as day. He meant it when he said she will pay for this.

"No. If she wants to tell dad then she should." I walk in and their conversation stops.

"She cant do that." I argue. I hand him the tray and pick up the container with the powder and hand it to him. "You have to put a teaspoon of that in the porridge." I tell him. He mixes the powder with the porridge and eats. He is not even going to ask why? So much faith. "Khanyi cant tell your father anything. You will lose everything."

"I dont care." He says.

"You dont care about a legacy you've worked hard to preserve all these years?" Sbu asks. Dali shakes his head.

"If it means dad will stop controlling me then so be it. It's just a business, I have my degrees, I can get another job." Dali says. For once he seems certain about his decision.

"Maybe you need to think this through, we have children to worry about." I tell him.

"Bahle, I know you're trying to protect me but the truth is I don't deserve this, especially after everything I did to you. You deserve to this more than me so if Khanyi wants to spill the beans then so be it." He insists.

"I have a better idea." Sbu says. "I called dad and told him that you're sick, I'm sure by now they are already on their way here. How about you sit down with them and tell them everything yourself before Khanyi gets to him. Take the wind out of her sails and then we will see what leg she has to stand on." He adds. We both turn to Dali and he seems to be thinking.

"Okay!" He says. That was easy. "I will tell them myself." I'm still not sure about this but I keep my opinions to myself. If he feels this will make him feel better then so be it.

Sbu leaves while I start on lunch. I don't know how our parents are going to take this, they love control, finding out that the past ten years have not gone according to their plans may not be such a good idea.

"Don't you think it's hot for that poloneck?" Dali asks. I turn around and find him leaning on the wall, his hands in his pockets.

"It's a bit chilly." I reply. I can literally feel the sweat dripping down my back but I cannot take this off. Or maybe I can put on a scarf instead.

"Its not chilly. What did I do?" He asks.

"What makes you think you did anything?"

"Because I have this vague memory of me being kneed on the balls and someone begging for their life. My guess is I did something to you." He steps forward and gently pulls down the polo neck, revealing the dark bruises on my neck. "I did this?" He says, his jaw clenching. I pull the polo neck and step away from him.

"It's nothing. You weren't yourself when it happened." He chuckles and sits down.

"You sound like a victim of abuse." He says. "Maybe you are."

"I'm not."

"Not physical abuse but definitely emotional and mental abuse." He argues. "I'm sorry."

"So you only discovered this now? Come on, none of this was your fault. Its everything that was done to you." I tell him. This is not something I want to get into. Especially not now, not with the parents on their way.

"Bahle, I know gogo Mphotholozzi might have helped cleanse and purge whatever BS was inside me but she didn't erase my memories. At least not permanently. Everything I did to you keeps replaying in my mind like a movie on a constant loop. I hurt you and yet you protected me." He says. I dont know what to say to him to make him feel better. The past couple of weeks have been a painful discovery of how far people will go to get what they want, even if it means stepping on others and hurting them in the process.

They are here. Today they are using one car. The wives get out of the car first. I am scared of their reception so I stay back and peek through the window as Dali goes to welcome them. Of course they are surprised to see him up and about. Sbu pulls up behind them. I hope he brought Lindo with, if Dali insists on confessing today then I'll need her support.

The mothers get in and greet. Well Mrs Khumalo greets, all I get from my mother is a deadly side eye before she takes a seat at the table. The dad's walk in and as expected, my dad is still pretty pissed.

"What's with the emergency meeting?" Lindo whispers when she comes into the kitchen. I turn around and pull her into a hug.

"I'm so glad you're here." I whimper.

"Of course. So what's going on?"

"You'll find out." I say.

"Bahlengiwe

I am pregnant, any shocking news might send me to early labour. And that will not be a good look. So spill." She insists, grabbing an apple from the fridge.

"Dali wants to tell them about Khanyi." I whisper. Her jaw drops to the floor.

"What? Why?" I shrug my shoulders and take the juice to the table. We all gather around the table and eat.

No one says anything. Only the cutlery is making noise. I look up from my plate and find my mother glaring at me. I cast my eyes back down

onto my plate, silently praying that this day does not make a quick left turn.

When lunch is done we gather around the lounge. My heart is beating at a rapid speed. I look at Dali, he wont even look my way. He seems determined to do this. On the one hand I understand why, this is a secret that Khanyi is trying to use to her advantage, so getting it out the way means she has nothing to use to blackmail him. But how am I supposed to explain knowing for ten years and not saying anything.

"So why are we here?" Mntungwa senior asks looking around the room.

"Dali looks fine."

"I am." Dali starts. "But that's not why you are here. I have a confession to make." Silence fills the room, you can literally feel a pin drop as everyone waits for him to speak.

"I know you're aware that Bahle filed for a divorce. I also know you've been asking yourself why. The truth is the divorce is my fault. I've been having an affair for the past ten years." He proclaims.

"Is this supposed to be a joke?" Mntungwa questions.

"Its not a joke baba." Dali tells him. "I have wronged my wife and that's why we are here today."

"Is it still an affair or just a full blown relationship?" Mrs Khumalo asks.

"An affair lasts a couple of months maybe a year at most. Anything more than that is a relationship. So basically you've been living two lives." She continues.

"I guess." Dali replies.

"You guess what? Was it an affair or a relationship?" His father shouts.

"It was a relationship." He admits.

"Amen." His mother says clapping her hands once. My parents have been silent since Dali's confession, I wish they could speak up and say what they are feeling or thinking.

"Bahle, did you know about this?" Mntungwa questions, now all eyes are on me. I could lie but today is confession day apparently.

"Yes, I knew."

"And you didnt think to say anything." My mother speaks finally. "You didn't think to open your mouth and tell someone about it." I should have known she'd find a way to turn all this around and make it my fault. The only thing missing now is her asking me what I did to run Dali off into another woman's arms.

"I didnt it would last this long." I admit.

"And when it did you still decided to close your mouth and say nothing?"

"Ma it wasnt her fault." Dali cuts in, coming to my rescue. "Blame me for this one, not Bahle. I am to blame for everything. It's all my fault so blame me. Not her. She is the biggest victim in all this."

"I hear all this affair business and what not, what I am curious to know is why you felt the need to admit it now? You've kept it secret for so long, why reveal it now. What does this other woman have on you?" My dad asks. Dali looks at me, almost as if he is looking for permission to tell them the whole truth. I nod my head and he turns back to them.

"She is pregnant." He tells them. Each one of them gives a different reaction, it's hard to tell what the collective mood is supposed to be. My dad is smiling like someone just handed him a major trophy, both mums are disgusted in separate ways and Mntungwa is fuming.

"So if it wasn't for the pregnancy we would still be in the dark." Mrs Khumalo says.

"There is more to it but I doubt you will believe anything I say beyond this." Dali adds.

"What else is there to say Dalingcebo? What?" Mntungwa yells. "I can't believe you. All this for a piece of vagina. She must be really good for you keep this relationship going for so long." He adds, trying to bait a reaction out of Dali and getting none. I'm pretty sure he has beat himself up enough to last a lifetime. "You know what, I can't believe I drove all the way here for this bullshit. I'm leaving." He grabs the car keys and walks out.

"Cha niyatenta tintfo tenu." My mother says and follows her friend as they trek behind Mntunhwa, leaving my father behind. We turn to him, hoping he will say something more sensible. Instead he just laughs and stands up, following his crew.

"That went better than I imagined." Lindo says. I'll admit, I was also expecting some insults, maybe even a punch but none came. It may be too presumptuous of me to assume but I think we are on the right track. And now that Khanyi has no leverage, we will wait and see what card she has left to play.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

55

BAHLENGIWE

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

I have never felt this much at peace in a long time. Having this secret out in the open is freeing. Now I can move on with my life without feeling like there is something holding me back. Even watching the sunrise feels like a whole new experience all together.

"Coffee?" Dali offers holding a cup in my face. I take it and take a sip.

"Thank you." He pulls up a chair and sits down, his own cup in his hand.

"So, how are you feeling?" He asks.

"Relieved." I reply honestly. "It feels like a huge burden has been lifted off of my shoulders." He nods his head.

"Can I ask you something?" He says, his eyes stuck on me. "Why did you let it go on for so long? You could have told our parents about me and Khanyi but you didn't. Why?" He asks.

I stare at the black liquid rolling around in the cup. Truth be told I had a plan when all this started, I wanted justice for my brother. Gay or not, he deserved to carry the Zwide legacy. He deserved it because what he does in the privacy of his bedroom has zero bearing in what happens in a boardroom. He is my dad's only son, his heir and yet he gets treated like trash just because of his sexuality. I promised him one day he would lead this family the way he deserves. I thought I would take it to the end no matter what. But I didnt count on how hard it would be to

pretend to be happy all the time, plaster a smile on my face and portray this perfect happy family. It ate at me at every turn. And now I have to face my brother and tell him I failed our mission.

"Honestly, I thought it would end early on but I was wrong."

"Come on. Ten years, somewhere along the line you could have put an end to it, or filed for divorce or anything." He insists.

"The truth is I was holding on because I had hope that once all this is over and the companies were signed over to us I would give my share to Sihlangu."

"Oh! So what changed?"

"Everything. Feelings were caught, the heart got involved and everything went left after that." I admit.

We sit there in silence, it's not as awkward as I expected it to be. Telling him my plan, I was expecting for him to be upset but he seems okay.

"So what now?" He asks after a while. "The divorce should be an easy one since its uncontested. What's going to happen then?" I sigh and sit back on the chair, pulling the throw up to cover me. My apartment is paid up for the next three months, I've been looking at schools for the kids and even selling my lodge and starting afresh, but now things are different. The truth is out in the open now, Dali is clear headed and Khanyi has no hold over him now. Things should be easy and straight forward but they are from it.

"I dont know. What do you think?" He is laughing. I'm not sure what's funny.

"I've decided to resign from work?" He announces. I look at him and he is no longer laughing. He is serious.

"Why?"

"Because I think it's time I get out from under my dad's controlling thumb. I want to go and talk to him again about fixing umsamo and if he refuses again I'll have to speak to my uncle." He says.

"Maybe if you had tell him about what Khanyi did it might make it easier for him to see the need for it." I tell him.

"Maybe, but the idea of having to admit that everything that happened was because I was too stupid to see the signs doesnt sit well with me." He admits, his voice laced with pain.

"It wasnt your fault though." I remind him. "None of what happened was your fault so maybe you need to stop being hard on yourself."

"How can I not be hard on myself with everything I did?"

"Its all in the past. It happened, now we know why, the best thing we can do is move on with our lives." I say.

"I guess, anyways I have to go and see Sbu, hopefully he can help me convince dad about the issue of umsamo." He says standing up. "I'll see you later." I didnt even notice he was already dressed to go.

I sit there a while longer just trying to figure out what my future holds. Our parents are as petty and vindictive as can be. They are not going to be happy about Dali quitting his job. Especially now. The fact that their control over us and our decisions is slowly diminishing will not make sense to them. And once they are pushed into a corner they may just

retaliate in the worst way possible. Our kids. Dali and I have to find a way to coparent our children without the parents interference. And moving them to Johannesburg may be the first step to achieving that.

I get off the patio and clean my cup before heading up to the bathroom. I need a shower before I pick the kids up. I take a long one, for once I don't have this feeling of heaviness on my shoulders. I am more relaxed than normal, it's amazing what the truth coming out can do for one's stress levels. I get out and wipe the fog off of the mirror before opening the cupboard. I have an extra packet of pads. Usually I just use one, so why do I have two?

I open the drawer under the sink. There are two more packets of pads. Something is not right. When last did I have my period? I open my period app and I almost fall to the floor. I am almost 14 weeks late. It can't be. I know I had my period a few back. If I am late it means one thing. I am pregnant.

I start pacing the floor. My mind is on overdrive, trying to pin point the exact date when I had my period. I refuse to believe I could be pregnant. No, it's probably the stress of everything. Yeah. That's why. Its stress and nothing else. Now that everything is sorted I will get my period and everything will be back to normal. I take a deep breath and push the idea to the back of my head but it refuses to go.

I get out of the bathroom and find an outfit to wear. I head down to the kitchen and fry a couple of eggs. The smell isnt bad so that's a good sign. It's not pregnancy. If it was, the egg smell would be unbearable. I toast a slice of bread and sit down to eat. My phone rings while I am paging through LinkedIn trying to find some job posts.

"Lindo."

"Open the gate, we are outside." She says. Who is we? I get up and open the gate. She drives in, I watch through the window as my brother and Dvumo jump out of the car. Of course Lindo would bring him here especially now. He doesn't look too happy. I take a few deep breaths and make my way to the door. The moment the door swings open and I look at my brother and I can't read his face. It's as blank as a piece of paper.

"Hey, I didn't know you were around." I say, trying to keep calm. "Come on in." I stand aside and let them in. Lindo mouths and 'I'm sorry' and I'm pretty sure this visit is not going to be a pleasant one. "Would you like something to drink or eat?" I ask them.

"I'm good." Dvumo replies. Sihlangu is quiet. He sits down, rubbing his hands together.

"I think maybe we should sit and talk about this." Lindo suggests.

We gather around the lounge, no one wants to speak first. I look at Lindo and she shrugs her shoulders. Dvumo is pretending to scroll through her phone and Sihlangu has his head bowed and God alone knows what is going on in there.

"I am sorry." I finally say since he won't talk. He looks up, now I can read his face. He is angry.

"You are sorry?" He asks. "About what Bahle? What exactly are you sorry about?" He adds. I'm not sure what he expects me to clarify because he knows exactly what I'm talking about.

"Everything. I know this is not what we had agreed on but Bhuti I had to do this. You have no idea how hard this has been on me." He chuckles, shaking his head.

"Really? We could have ended this on your first year of marriage but you refused." He reminds.

"I know... "

"Do you? Because this whole thing would have been sorted a long time ago but instead you chose to protect Dali and his shenanigans. We would be running things by now, but you insisted on holding on a little longer. And now that it suits you everyone is supposed to jump and feel sorry for you?" He barks.

"Sihlangu!" Lindo yells.

"What?" He says turning to her. "You do realise if she had agreed for us to put an end to this marriage a long time ago you would be an owner of the supermarkets you've worked so hard for? You'd actually be getting dividends on top of the salary and bonus you get." He tells her.

"Not everything is about money." Lindo tells him. He laughs.

"Really? It's not? Does your father agree? Or better yet, does Khumalo senior agree? Who do you think orchestrated this whole stupid arranged marriage to begin with? It sure as hell wasn't your stupid homophobic father." He screams.

"Okay, stop." I yell back. "Be angry at me that's fine, but calling our father stupid is out of line. I get that you're upset and I'm sorry that I broke my promise to you but you will not disrespect our father."

"The same father who married you off to his best friend's son who gladly treated you like trash this entire marriage. That father?" He questions, running his hand down his face.

"You know what's funny?" He starts. "As far as he is concerned he is a failure. He has one homosexual son who according to him is not 'worthy' to carry his name on and three daughters who are just as useless and yet the two of you have worked your asses off to make sure his businesses grow. And what thanks have you got for it? A bonus every year while Dali and Sbu get dividends?" He says. Of all the things he just said, I am well aware of, except the part where Sbu and Dali have shares.

"Dividends of what?" Lindo asks the question that's plaguing me.

"The lodge and the supermarkets. They both own ten percent shares in both the supermarkets and the lodge. That's five percent each. So while the two of you are working your asses off for a salary, they sit back and take in the profits. And get this, your father knows too." He tells us, a smug smile on his face. Lindo and I look at each other, I'm still not sure I believe Sihlangu, the deal was that no one would get any shares in any business until this contract expired. So if this is true, that's a breach of contract.

I've been pacing around the kitchen for almost an hour now. I want to believe my brother, but he could also just be angry and lashing out. If Dali has shares in the business then I should have got them too. I hear his car pull up outside. I'll ask him. I'm sure he will tell me that Sihlangu is mistaken.

He walks in, smiling. That alone pisses me off.

"Hey." He says.

"Do you have shares in the lodge and the supermarkets?" I ask. He blinks a couple of times. He is about to lie.

"What?"

"You heard me." I reply. He swallows and puts his keys and phone down.

"It's complicated." He says.

"What's so complicated with saying yes or no? It's that easy, yes or no. So which is it?" I insist. These men will not play me like this. Not after all the work I put into making the lodges what they are. And for them to sit back and rake in the profits from all my blood sweat and tears, hell will freeze over.

He sighs. "Yes, I have the shares." He admits. "But I can explain."

"Explain what?"

"Everything. This was not my idea." He says.

"No. I don't need an explanation. I wanted an answer and you gave it to me. Thank you." I grab my phone and head up to the bedroom. I dial my lawyer's number.

"Mrs Khumalo." She replies. "How are you?"

"I'm good thank you. Listen, about the divorce"

"Relax, once we get a court date I will let you know." She says.

"No, it's not that, change of plans, I want half of everything."

"I'm sorry?" She asks.

"Yes, I want half of everything. And on top of that I'd like to bring a lawsuit against my father and my father in law for breach of contract." I tell her.

"Okay, this is a lot, what the hell is going on and where is all this coming from? Maybe we should set up an appointment for tomorrow." She offers.

"Works for me. I dont know how you're going to do it but I want this done. I'm done letting these men dance on my head just because I am nice."

HIS HEART TO KEEP

56

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

DALINGCEBO

I've never believed witchcraft was real or something to be wary off until I found myself knee deep in the middle of it. Even with all the evidence in front of me it's hard for me to wrap my head around it. And just when I think that the road ahead is clear, Bahle happens. I'm not sure who told her about the shares but I'm not mad about it.

She's been avoiding me since she came back from picking up the kids. I decided to cook while she plays with them. I'm not sure how many brownie points that will score me but it should help ease things a bit. I dish up for the kids first and give them their food.

"Thank you daddy." They sing in unison. I dish up for Bahle and put her food in a tray. I hand her the food before getting mine.

Sitting together in the lounge with our food feels nice. I wonder how much of our kids lives did I miss out on. Nqaba is eight going on eighty while Fezi is a sweet well rounded child. I'm pretty sure I had little to do with how they turned out. I silently watch them giggling and feeding each other and a sharp pain sticks through my heart. If there is one thing I will never forgive Khanyi for it's this, making me miss out on so much of my children's lives.

They finish eating and take their plates to the kitchen. And they actually wash them. Nice.

"We have to let them know about the divorce." Bahle says, she's been picking at her food for a while now. I'm not sure if she is enjoying the food or not. It's hard to tell with the scowl plastered on her face.

"I know." I reply. "I just wish we didnt have to." I admit. I want to make things right with her but I also know I cant force her to change her mind.

"I've spoken to a child therapist, I'm hoping she will tell us the best way to go about it without damaging them." She adds.

"That's a great idea. When will she be able to do it?" I ask.

"In a couple of days. But she will meet with us first so we can establish how we will do it." She has thought of everything. I nod my head as she stands up, takes my plate and goes to the kitchen.

"Okay babies, go and fill the tub with water, I'll be there just now." She says. The kids go running upstairs, their giggles filling the house with such a beautiful sound. To think pretty soon this house will be nothing more than a empty lifeless shell. Maybe I should sell the house, it makes no sense for me to stay here alone.

We need to address the elephant in the room and there doesnt seem to be a better time than the present. I join her in the kitchen while she is washing dishes. I lean on the counter watching her, it's hard not to miss the sadness in her face.

"I'm sorry about the shares." I blurt out. There is no beating around the bush about it. She deserves to know the truth and the least I can do is make sure she hears she rest of it from me. She is quiet, earlier she was pretty pissed and now she is calm. Too calm. I cant help feeling like this

is just the calm before the storm. "I should have told you about it and not keep it from you." I admit.

"Its fine." She says. I wonder what happened between earlier and now to make her change her tune.

"There is something else you need to know about the shares. It's not just shares in the lodges and the supermarkets, its shares in KN Holdings." I tell her. She stops washing the dishes and turns to look at me. Now she is back to being pissed.

"KN Holdings houses both mines, the supermarkets and the lodges." She says as if she is trying to reconcile everything in her mind.

"I know."

"So you've been taking in the profits while the rest of us work our asses off. It must be nice." She goes back to washing dishes and humming a song. Now more than ever I am certain something big is coming. And I doubt Its going to be pretty.

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This morning I was certain about resigning from my job but now I am second guessing that idea. I spoke to Sbu and he thinks it's a bad idea. This is our legacy and we need to make sure the company stands for the coming generations to find. It's odd coming from him especially

because when he was younger he was certain he would not let my dad control him. I guess growing up gave him a different perspective.

I decided to catch up on some work before I sleep. There is a lot that I missed out on. It's almost midnight when I decide to retire to bed. I close the laptop and pack my files in my bag. My phone vibrates on the table. Khanyi's name fills the screen. It's way too late to be calling anyone, but clearly she gives zero fucks. I pick up the call.

"Khanyisile."

"Baby daddy. How are you?" She says, she sounds chirpy.

"What do you want?"

"Oh come now, you have to be nice to the woman carrying your child. It children." I'm pretty sure how I am feeling now is exactly how Jesus felt when Satan was irritating him.

"I am hanging up now."

"Wait." She almost screams. "I want to know how far you are with our deal? I hope you're done with the paperwork." She says.

"Khanyi, now that you called, I will not be signing the house over to your mother. I will not be buying you a penthouse and I sure as hell am not going to give you a million rands." I tell her.

"Excuse you? Do you think this is a joke Dalingcebo?" She yells.

"Of course not. I know you're serious. Which is why I will forward my dad's phone number, email address and physical address for you to get in touch with him. And you know what else would be better, if you went there to report the pregnancy. I'm sure he'd be happy to find out

he is getting another grandchild or grandchildren. Until then, I will be blocking your number. Have a goodnight. Baby mama." I hang up the call and block her number immediately.

I'm still not sure how she got pregnant but I will get to the bottom of it. I make my way upstairs. I get to the bedroom and stand outside the door, I'm not sure what is the protocol with couples in the middle of a divorce when it comes to sleeping arrangements. Although the past few days I've been using the guest bedroom. The kids were not here so it was easier. I open the door and get in. This is still my bedroom too. I change into my pyjamas and get in bed. Bahle is already fast asleep, hopefully she doesn't wake up and kick me out of the bed.

MISS MANANA

To say she is angry would be an understatement. She is beyond angry and pissed. Ever since that phone call with Khanyi her mind has been racing. Over and over again she has been replaying their conversation, trying to figure out where she lost her daughter's loyalty. She has worked hard to keep that man and his good for nothing family away from her children. She has made sure to burn the bridge between them, so what has changed? Why now?

Gasa has been failing at his job recently. Everything is upside down and he is not coming to the party. Dali has slipped from their hands and now Khanyi is acting up. Clearly she needs someone else who can do the job and take it seriously.

She wakes up and takes a bath. She has a trip ahead of her, she has found someone. Everyone is raving about this person and their work so she is ready to give them a chance.

The drive is not as long as she had expected. And the house is easy to find. She is early, there aren't many people yet. She gets out of the car and makes her way inside and joins the queue. There are four people in front of her. There is a woman next to her. She greets her and sits down.

"So how long have you been coming here?" The woman asks her. She is not the friendliest of people and making small talk is not one of her strongest suits. But she plasters a smile on her face.

"No. This is my first time." She admits. The woman smiles.

"Don't worry, she is good. You'll get the help you need. Trust me. I've seen her work myself. This woman is gifted." The woman says. She nods her head, takes out her phone and pretends to answer a call just to stop this woman from blabbering away. She stands up and walks a distance away from everyone, talking to her nonexistent caller.

She sees her. The woman she came to see, she is hard to miss. Everything about her screams power and respect. They lock eyes. A shiver runs down her spine and fear invades her bones. There is something about this woman, it's not dark or evil like she is used to this one seems to hold some kind of power that keeps her in place when her mind tells her to turn around and leave.

She gets back in her seat as people go in and out of the rondavel. Her turn comes. She stands up, ready to make her way in. But her path is blocked.

"And now?" She asks the girl standing in front of her.

"Come with me." The girl says, turns and walks away. She follows her into another rondavel. It's dark, it doesn't seem there is a window in this room. She gets in and the door is locked behind her as she is plunged into darkness.

"What the hell." She mumbles, trying to open the door and failing. She bangs the door, screaming for someone to help her.

A candle is lit behind her, bringing light into the room. She turns around and comes face to face with her. Fear fills every inch of her body.

"There is a dark cloud hovering over you?" She is told.

"Then help me. Isn't that your job? And why are we not in Indumba? Isn't that where everyone gets help?" She asks, her voice cracking.

"You're evil. Indumba yami is a sacred place, your aura alone will not allow me to let you close to my work space. My ancestors do not collude with darkness. And you my dear, you're as dark as midnight." The woman says. She tries to wreck her brain, trying to remember what they said her name is. Her mind has gone blank.

"I am not." She argues. Gogo Mphotholozzi stands up and makes her way to her.

"You've done so many bad things it's hard to see even a simple good thing you've done. But every dog has its day, and your day is slowly approaching." She tells her. Miss Manana stands her ground, trying her best to keep calm and hide her fear.

"I came here for help, not to be judged." She says. Gogo Mphotholozzi laughs, walking around her.

"Every tear that has been shed because of you, every drop of blood that's been spilled because of you, it's all coming back to haunt you. You're losing your grip on everything. It's not by mistake. There are forces fighting back. And trust you me, if I were you I would concede, now while I have a chance to redeem myself. But if you decide to continue on this path you're on. Woe unto you." The door swings open as air fills the room, putting off the candle and plunging the room back into its darkness. The only light coming from the door.

Miss Manana rushes out and heads to her car. It was sunny when she came in. Now you would swear the rain will fall at any moment. She drives away as quick as she can, the further away she goes the clearer the sky becomes. All of a sudden the sun is back and everything she just went through feels like a nightmare that she just woke up from, panting and out of breath.

She pulls over on the side of the road, grabs her phone and dials Gasa's number. This time he picks up.

"Girly!" He answers, sounding bored.

"Do you know a gogo Mphotholozzi?" She asks. The name gets his attention. He knows her. He knows about her.

"Of course. Who doesn't? Why?" He questions.

"I just came from seeing her." He bursts out laughing.

"You're funny. Gogo Mphotholozzi would never see you." He tells her.

"And why wouldn't she? If I need help, isn't it her job to help?" He sighs.

"Girly, you have too much darkness inside you. Gogo Mphotholozhi does not deal with darkness. If you want anyone to help you, trust me it's not her. She is good, but she fights the kind of darkness you love, so if you know what's good for you, walk away from her. And if she said anything to you then heed her words, otherwise you will regret it. Goodbye." He hangs up the phone leaving her more confused than ever before.

"Mxm. I am Girly Manana. I never give up on anything. And I am not about to start now. Loya gogo can go jump off a cliff." She says starting her car, her mind already coming up with plan B, C, D and E.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

57

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

KHANYISILE

"He hung up on me. And then blocked me. That son of a bitch." I throw my phone on the bed, I need to come up with a plan. I went to a doctor earlier who confirmed I am pregnant. This baby was supposed to be my gateway to fixing things. Getting my mother her house back and setting myself up for an even better, independent life. Now I have to start from zero.

Whoever is helping Dali is clearly doing the most. He has never spoken to me like that, granted my mother's concoctions had a hand in it but still, a little respect would go a long way. Maybe he thinks this is a joke. He has no idea what's at stake or he is just choosing to be blatantly ignorant about everything.

I've been here way longer than I should be. It's time for me to head back home. I'm sure my mother is driving herself nuts not knowing where I am. To think I came here to hide away from Dali and now I am hiding from my mother. But maybe I should start by going to see Seluleko, I'm sure she would love to hear about our long lost 'dead beat' father. Before I can sit down with my mother about this part of my life I need my sisters to be well aware of her shenanigans.

My bags are packed, it's almost breakfast time. And like a good daughter I have adjusted my schedule to fit in to their early morning routine. It's not as bad as I expected it to be. Mercy is nice. For

someone who had two kids killed by my mother she has been very kind to me. She is clearly a better person than me. I change into a pair of Jean's and a tshirt then make my way down to the kitchen. Mercy is already setting the table, well more like she is supervising the maids. Yes, she has two. If my mother wasn't such an evil person she could be living this life. This could have been her life but she chose the devil over doing something good.

"Good morning." I greet. Mercy turns around, a big smile on her face.

"Good morning. Breakfast is almost ready." She says.

"Can I help with anything?" She shakes her head.

"Just have a seat. Everything is done. Your father should be down in a moment." She tells me. I pull out a chair and sit down. Sure enough my dad comes down soon after that with Nana and her brother, well my brother too, Ncamiso right behind him, arguing about god alone knows what.

We gather around the table, a flood of sadness washes over me. It's too early for it to be the hormones so I know it's because of what's happening right in front of me. Ncamiso is busy trying to write his homework which should have been done yesterday, Nana is hiding lipstick in her blazer because dad will not let her wear it.

My sisters and I missed out on having the perfect family just because of my mother. Sure this could have been a polygamous marriage but still, she would have lived a life of luxury and we would have had a father figure in our lives. Maybe I wouldn't have been so desperate to hold on to a man who clearly didnt love me. Maybe my desperation and

heartbreak would not have led my mother down the path she embarked on.

I wipe my tear before it embarrasses me in front of everyone and enjoy my food. Lucky for me I am yet to get morning sickness so for now I enjoy everything. Before everyone leaves I decide to make my announcement and say my goodbyes.

"Uhm, I am leaving today. I think it's time I go home." I announce.

"I thought you'd stay a bit longer." Mercy says.

"Yeah I thought so too but, I need to go home. I can't run away from my problems."

"That's true. Well I'm happy you came. And you're welcome here anytime. Hopefully next time you can bring your sisters too." Mercy. I swear this woman is either an angel or she is pretending. I'll believe the angel part though.

I say my goodbyes to my siblings and watch them leave. They are sweet, clearly Mercy has rubbed off on them. I get back in the house to find my dad still sitting in the same spot.

"I didnt know you were planning to leave so soon." He says. I take a seat.

"It's time. Besides, like I cant said, i cant keep running from my problems."

"And what problems are those exactly? You haven't told me what it is exactly you're running from?" He asks. I don't think telling my newly

found father that I've been an idiot the past ten years is going to make me look, well, like an idiot.

"Its just some personal relationships, nothing hectic." He nods his head.

"I understand. But just know that this will always be your home and if you decide to come back, my doors will always be open."

I text Seluleko and tell her I'm coming to her place before I leave. I need to sit down with her and tell her everything. As much as she annoys me sometimes she is also sensible and has a working brain.

I decide to take a detour before heading to Joburg. The drive isnt long. Just a little over an hour and I am parked right in front of the new Khumalo farm. I would call Dali right now but I'm blocked so I have no choice but to go in. The gate is open so I make my way in. The place is big. Money is such a nice thing to have. I pull up to the front of the house, it's a tad bit quiet.

I take one huge deep breath before getting out of the car. Before I can even knock on the door it swings open. This man is scary. My heart feels like a thousand beating drums creating and scary melody.

"Can I help you?" He asks. He is rude too. No greeting.

"Mntungwa, I would like to have a word with you." I reply. His eyes scan me from head to toe.

"How did you get in the gate?" Another question. Who cares how I got in.

"The gate was open." He steps aside allowing me to go in. His cold stare is hard to miss as I make my way past him. I stand in the middle of the empty room. It looks like they just finished renovating it.

"Speak." He orders and I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

"Can we sit down?" I ask. My knees cannot handle this standing any longer. He sticks his hands in his pockets. I guess we will be standing for this one. "Okay then. I'm not sure if you know this but I have been seeing your son for the past ten years. In fact its more than that if we count the years in varsity and high school." I tell him. He is unfazed. "I am pregnant." I add. No reaction. His poker face is impressive.

I keep quiet. I've said what I came here to say. The only problem is that he is quiet too. Staring at me as if he is ready to gut me.

"Are you not going to say something?" I ask after a while. He pulls his hands out of his pockets and crosses them on his chest. He is really determined to be intimidating.

"What would you like me to say?" He asks. "Now that you've given me this information, what would you like me to do about it? Throw you a baby shower? What?" This is not how I saw this playing out.

"I dont know what you should do. All I know is that I am tired of being hidden. And my child will not be some dirty little secret that Dalingcebo gets to keep. This is a Khumalo child." I rant.

"Congratulations then. Again, what would you like me to do about it?"

"Dali wants nothing to do with me, which in essence means he wants nothing to do with his child. And I know for a fact that my relationship with him is a breach of his marriage contract. So now be a father and

make sure he pays for his choices." I almost scream but remind myself this is an elder I am talking to. A smirk appears on his face.

"Speaking of breach of contracts, I guess you're also aware that you being pregnant means nothing to me. Your child, Khumalo or not will never be eligible for anything that I have worked for. I guess you also know that that child you're carrying will be your child and yours alone. He or she will never get a single piece of the Mntungwa fortune. So, if you coming here was meant to piss me off and drive me up the wall, I'm sorry, Dali beat you to it. He already told me about you. And I know about your baby. And yes, Dali may or may not lose everything, but that's not your business. That child on the other hand is yours. So, now that you've been kind enough to come here and tell me a story I already know, you can go home." He says, pulling the door open.

I'm numb. I walk out of there like a robot with new batteries. I get in my car and drive out. A few metres away from the gate I park my car. My hands are shaking and sweaty. That's why he was so corky, he called my bluff. I scream and hit the steering wheel a few times. This is not how things were supposed to go. Why is everything falling apart?

BAHLENGIWE

I have a meeting with my lawyer today. I've been in her office for almost an hour. Her head is buried in all the files I brought her including the lodges financial statements. She closes the file and looks at me. A smile on her face.

"You know when you said you wanted nothing from the divorce I was disappointed. But my clients wants always supersede my own. But now,

now you and I are on the same page." She says. I'm pretty sure if she could she'd be jumping for joy.

"Okay so what does that mean?"

"It means we will be cleaning out your husband first and then your father and father in law." She hands me a document. It's a share certificate. "I had my PI look into your husband's finances, the shares are real, and he has made a pretty decent amount of money from the dividends. And since none of those warnings made their way to you, we will make sure you get every penny owed to you. The contract you signed was between you and your parents which means your marriage was in community of property. And that my dear means you have a lot coming your way." She tells me. I love the sound of that. Even though it's not about the money but rather about respect.

"What about my assets? Will those be shared between us even though they are in a trust?" I ask.

"We will have to declare those assets and then see how the judge sees it." She answers.

"And the lawsuit?" Her smile widens. I'm pretty sure the idea of bringing my dad and his best friend down a notch can be appealing to anyone.

"That my dear, is definitely a breach of contract and you have a case. Your father and father in law should have considered you in the decision to give your husband the shares. And since they failed to do that, they will have to pay for it." She tells me. Music to my ears.

By the time I leave the office she has drafted a rough copy of the new divorce papers and the lawsuit. If all goes according to plan they will be getting their summons by the end of the week.

I make my way to the car and the smell of bread baking at a spar across the street almost empties everything inside me. I grab my bottle of water and gulp down the clear liquid. I sit in the car with the window open trying to calm the bubbling happening in my stomach. I hate what this means, a pregnancy is the last thing I need.

"God, please do not let me be pregnant. In actual fact, if you can make all this nausea be nothing but a sign of exhaustion I would appreciate it. Please. I cannot afford a child right now. Pretty please." I mumble. I'm not sure if he can hear me or it's too late but I wont stop praying. For now I will just keep living in my ignorant bubble.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

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♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

BAHLENGIWE

"Bahle hurry up." Lindo screams from the other side of the door. I've been in this bathroom for almost ten minutes. My mind refuses to wrap around the five pregnancy tests sitting on the counter, all with positive, pregnant or two bold lines. I knew it's possible, but seeing the tests makes it all so real.

I pick up the tests and walk out of the bathroom. I throw the tests on the bed and sink down onto the floor. Lindo picks each one and looks at it.

"Wow." She exclaims. Hard as it is for her she drops down next to me.

"You are pregnant." She says as if the tests were not clear enough.

"What are you going to do?" She asks. I'm nowhere near figuring that out. Half an hour ago I was in denial about this pregnancy even though the signs were there.

"I dont know Lindo. I am going through a divorce, I have a lawsuit pending, I still have to move and now this. Everything is just piling up." I lay my head on the side of the bed with my eyes closed.

"I hear you. But I'm sure Dali will be happy." Well that goes without saying. He has wanted a child for a while now. Except now I'm not sure if it was him or whatever spirits had possessed him.

"Maybe."

"There's no maybe about it. He will be happy. And I'm sure the parents will think this is some second chance for your marriage." She tells me.

"There's no second chance here. I'm not about to put the burden of holding this marriage together on the poor child. I already did that with Nqaba and Fezi and that did not work out." I made that mistake once and I'm not about to do it again. The divorce will happen, pregnant or not.

"BAHLENGIWE NXUMALO. BRING YOUR ASS DOWN HERE!" A loud voice penetrates through the walls. Lindo and I look at each other. That voice is unmistakable. I know it's my dad. I get up and help Lindo up.

"What did you do?" She whispers before we leave the bedroom. I shrug my shoulders. I'm pretty sure this has everything to do with the lawsuit. I can't believe he has been served already. But then again my lawyer did say this case will be like an uphill battle. My dad and Mntungwa will not sit back and just take this lying down so the sooner we get the ball rolling the better.

We make our way downstairs, my dad is standing at the bottom of the stairs, his skin has turned two shades darker. His nostrils are flaring and his jaws are locked. He is beyond angry. He has the envelope in his hand.

"Baba, sawubona." I greet. He glares at me, his pupils are dilated and dark. Lindo walks past me going to the kitchen.

"What is this?" Dad asks, waving the envelope around. "You're suing me? Your own father?" He screams. I walk past him, intending to go to the lounge till he pulls me back, his hand tightening around my arm. I stumble back, almost falling over but I manage to stay upright.

"You're hurting me." I say. He tightens his grip. My ego and stubborn attitude refuses for me to let him see me flinch. Painful as his grip is.

"You are sending lawyers to me. Are you out of your mind?" He hisses. At least he is not screaming now. I pull my arm away and rub myself, trying to ease the pain.

"I am not out of my mind. I'm fighting for what's mine." I tell him. He chuckles.

"What's yours? What exactly is yours Bahlengiwe? Have you forgotten that you filed for divorce?" He asks. I swear the older he gets the less his brain works. Maybe its retirement, its definitely dealing with him.

"Have you also forgotten that the contract we signed, clearly states that should there be cheating, the one who cheats forfeits their inheritance. And I'm sure we are still going to discuss that but this lawsuit is not about that. It's about the fact that you and Mntungwa decided to give Dali a five percent stake in the company when the contract again is pretty clear that neither of us will get a stake in the company until our contract expires. Have you forgotten that part?" I ask. He swallows and steps back. I was hoping he would say he knew nothing about that but clearly I was wrong.

"Dalingcebo deserved those shares, he worked hard at the mine."

"Right, and I was busy playing hide and seek at the lodge. You do realise ever since I took over the lodge has never been empty? At our lowest months we would be at least 80 percent booked. It's not rated one of the best lodges in the continent. That's all my work. My blood, sweat and tears. And you don't think I deserve a stake in it? Lindo turned your supermarkets into a franchise, bringing in millions every year. Does she

not deserve a stake in the company?" He is quiet. I guess I hit a nerve. "You dont see us. All the hard work we put in and you cant even give us a simple thank you, so yes dad I am suing you. I want my share, my hard work cannot go in vain. And if that means getting my share by force then so be it."

I walk past him as a bout of nausea starts bubbling up. I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and gulp it down.

"Are you also in on this?" Dad asks. I turn around and he is staring at Lindo. For a moment I think she will cower away but she holds his stare.

"Dont you think we deserve to be compensated too baba? Have we not done enough for you? What more do you want from us? We've proven to you that we are just as capable as any man when it comes to carrying on your legacy. You've been retired for a while and your businesses are still standing. Is that not enough?" She asks, a tear running down her face. I blame the hormones.

Dad clicks his tongue and walks out. I walk around the counter and pull my sister into a hug.

"Why am I even crying?" She asks. We burst into laughter. "I cant believe I'm crying for that man." She adds, wiping away her tears.

"I blame this one." I say, rubbing her tummy.

"Of course. And the good news is that this one will have a cousin to grow up with." She reminds me, draining whatever energy I had.

"Please do not remind me. I need to set up an appointment with the doctor and confirm. It could be a false alarm." She throws her head back laughing.

"You're worse than a teenager. That baby is not going anywhere." She adds. This is not the freedom I wanted. Who wants a baby right now?

KHANYISILE

I swear I keep shooting myself on the foot at every turn. What the hell was I thinking going there. I am such an idiot. A big, stupid idiot. I played myself and I have no one to blame for it but me. I did not get my mothers house, I did not get my penthouse or the money. All I got myself was a baby. One who will never claim or be part of the Khumalo riches.

I stand by the mirror, looking at my flat tummy. To think there is a life growing in there. One who is probably destined to be the unwanted bastard child from an affair. Well from my own stupidity but still. I did this to myself.

"Are you pregnant?" Mum asks standing by the door, watching me. I've barely said a word to her since I came back. I keep myself locked up in my room and only come out when she has gone to work. I'm still waiting for my sisters to come back so I can tell them face to face about mum's betrayal.

"What if I am?" I reply. She chuckles and walks in and sits on the bed.

"So who is the father? I know it's been a while since you've been with Dali. So who is the lucky guy?" She questions.

"Why do you care? Do you want to feed him your concoctions too?" I ask. Her smile disappears instantly.

"Khanyi don't forget I am still your mother. You can't talk to me like I'm one of your friends." She says. I turn around and look at her. She looks

different. And not in a good way. There are dark patches under her eyes. My mother is lightskin but her skin is slowly turning darker.

"What's happening with you? You look like you spent too much time under the sun. What happened?" I ask. Now I'm concerned, she is even losing weight.

"Nothing. Just tell me who is the child's father." She insists. I get close to her, planning to sit next to her so we can have a conversation but the stench coming from her sends me back a couple of steps.

"Are you going to tell me or I have to dig it out of you?" She asks. I keep staring at her, trying to figure out what I missed. My mother bathes twice a day, she wears some expensive perfumes, she leaves her scent everywhere she goes but this is not it. I can't even pinpoint what the smell is. It's way worse than an unwashed armpit or sweaty skin.

"Ma, are you Okay?" I ask. Her brows snap together as if I am the one who is crazy.

"I am fine Khanyisile, answer my question, who is the baby's father?" She yells, clapping her hands after each word.

"It's Dali." I reply. Part of me is hoping she will leave but she doesn't.

"How far along are you?" This interrogation is taking longer than it should. The smell is going to summon the breakfast I had if I'm not careful. I step further back and open the windows and breathe in the fresh air.

"A few weeks." I reply. I'm not even

"How?" I could tell her the whole story but that would mean she will stay in the room a little longer, suffocating me with her stench.

"We met a few weeks ago and ended up in bed together." Her ringing phone in the other room saves me from further interrogation. The moment she walks out I close the door and lock it. I get my perfume from the closet and spray it around the room. Something is not right with her. Now more than ever I need my sisters here so we can figure out what is happening with her.

I get my phone and dial Seluleko's number.

"Khanyi, I'm in the middle of something. Can I call you back?" She answers.

"Of course, but please don't forget. It's about mum." I whisper. I hear shuffling then a door opening and closing before she comes back on the phone.

"What's wrong with her?" She asks.

"I'm not sure. But there's this stench coming from her and I don't think she can smell it." I tell her.

"Maybe she is just sweaty or she forgot her deodorant."

"Have you ever known mum to be sweaty and even forget deodorant?" I ask her. She keeps quiet. "Exactly. Plus her skin is getting darker and she has dark patches under her eyes. Call me crazy but there is something wrong with her." She sighs. At least I am getting through to her.

"I hear you. I'll try and come home as soon as I am done with this story." She promises.

"Okay, I'll keep you updated." I hang up the phone. Something is definitely not right with her, I just hope she didnt meet her match in the dark world and now she is paying the price.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

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♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

DALINGCEBO

"Man you are screwed." Sbu says. He's been staring at the new divorce papers. I didnt think Bahle would go this far but at the same time I am not surprised. I probably would have done the same thing too.

"I know."

"So what are you going to do? Have you spoken to a lawyer?" He asks.

"Nope." His brows draw together like what I just said is something crazy. I have no intention of fighting Bahle for anything. After everything I've put her through, she deserves all that she wants.

"You do realise she wants to take you to the cleaners. By the time this divorce is over you'll have little to nothing." He tells me. I've seen the papers and read them. I know what's at stake.

"I know and I don't care. Bahle deserves everything. I've put that woman through hell. Yes I didnt know what was happening but still, the fact that she put up with me this long is a feat all on it's own. So if she wants to leave me with the clothes on my back then I will not stand in her way." He nods his head and sits back on the chair, his arms crossed on his chest.

"You're clearly a better man than I am. I understand wanting half of everything, but to include pain and suffering in there, emotional abuse, that's just a bit of an exaggeration."

"So you dont think everything that happened was emotionally difficult for her?" I ask. He shrugs his shoulders.

"Maybe. But she could have easily left too if she felt things were tough. She stayed. No one put a gun on her head and told her to stay. She knew what she was doing." He says. I'm sure she did but that's no excuse for my behaviour or anything that Khanyi did.

"Technically speaking that contract was the gun. Maybe if that contract wasnt there she would have left. I know I would have. But either way, she is going to get everything she wants." I grab the envelope and pull out the papers, I pull out a pen from my pocket and sign on the dotted line. This spells the end of my marriage. Although I wish she could give me a chance to rectify my wrongs, I can't force her to stay with everything that has happened.

"And just like that you're going to lose everything you have." Sbu says as I put the papers back in the envelope.

"Its all material things anyway. I will make more money and buy more things. Right now I need to know how Khanyi got pregnant. I know she's not far along enough for it to have happened naturally, plus her tubes are tied. The last time she tried this stunt it turned out to be a false alarm." He pulls out a piece of paper from his pocket and hands it to me. I open it and I'm not sure what I am looking at. "What's this?"

"Your consent forms allowing her to be artificially inserminated with the embryos the two of you kept at that fertility clinic." He tells me.

This cannot be real. I know for a fact I would not have given consent for that. Having a child with Khanyi has always been out of the question.

The fact that even in my bewitched era I did not give my consent should mean something. But the signature looks like mine.

"When did I sign this?" Maybe i was too strung out on Khanyi's concoctions to know what I was doing. That's the only explanation.

"You didnt. I gave that document to a handwriting specialist together with one that you actually signed and apparently that one is fake. So you didnt sign it but clearly Khanyi did. That's the only explanation." He tells me. Well it explains the blackmail. I guess this baby was supposed to force me into giving her all that she wanted. That's why she was so quick to tell my father about the pregnancy.

"How did the hospital allow it? Isnt it their policy that both parties are there to sign these consent forms?" I ask. I'm pretty sure this is against the law. Now this is something I can contact a lawyer for. Everything else irrelevant.

"That's their policy but obviously she came up with a good lie to get this done. Now the question is what are you going to do about it? Remember there is a baby involved now." He questions.

"I'll speak to my lawyer about it and then have Khanyi arrested for fraud." He is starring at me, his eyes bulging out as if I am supposed to jump for joy about this.

"You did hear me say there is a child involved in all this? It might still be the size of a pea but it's a baby nonetheless." Of all people I thought he would be happy about Khanyi paying for her sins. But I guess a baby is the biggest pacifier.

"You dont see the bigger picture in all this?" I ask him. "If there really is a child then Khanyi goes to jail, and if she is in jail I'll fight for her to sign over full custody of the child to me."

"I guess that's one way of getting her out of your life." He says.

"Exactly. Plus if I use the hospital for using those embryos without my consent then they will push for Khanyi to be charged with fraud. And that's a sure way of making sure she goes away." I tell him. He nods his head.

"And what happens if Khanyi decides to have an abortion? Or worse disappears with the baby?" Sbu asks.

"One less problem to worry about." I'm pretty sure it's not normal how detached I am to this baby, I mean whether I like it or not, the baby is mine. And I know my parents will probably never acknowledge the child but as a father I have no choice but to acknowledge and claim the baby. But if Khanyi says she will have an abortion then I will not stop her.

"Well, I guess the decisions is yours anyway. I have to go. Lindo has a doctor's appointment. We will talk." Sbu says, standing up. We fist bump and he leaves.

I bury myself into my work for the rest of the day. I still need to hand in my resignation but I've decided to see what the parents decide about this whole contract thing. The fact that I was in a relationship with Khanyi is supposed to automatically make me lose my share of the inheritance but things may change how that Bahle is suing them. Bahle has certainly grown since we got married, heck, she has grown since a few months ago. Just a few months ago she could barely look at them in the eye and now she is suing them. How things change.

"You've always been a workaholic." Someone says. I look up to find Khanyi standing by the door. She looks so innocent, you wouldn't think she was capable of even half the things she has done.

"How did you get past security?" She chuckles and pulls out the access card. I guess I gave her that too.

"You know exactly how I got in." She says, waving the access card around like it's some trophy. She pulls up a chair and sits down.

"What can I do for you?" I ask. She stares at me, like she is reading me and looking for something, anything.

"You know there was a time when you were happy to see me." She says.

"Probably when I was still blinded by your muthi." I say. I'm staring right back at her, hoping for a reaction. And I get it. She swallows, her eyes popping open as if she just saw a ghost.

"What..... what are you what are you talking about?" She stammers. I lean on the desk, bringing myself close to her.

"I know what you did. I know everything." She shakes her head.

"I still dont understand what you mean?" She says. It must be nice.

I chuckle and sit back. "Your problem is that you think you're the only one who is clever. I might have been stupid for a while, but that time is over."

"Dalingcebo, I still dont understand what you're on about. Why are you saying all this?" Tears are flowing down her face, it's almost laughable.

If I didn't know what i know now i would feel like such a jackass right now.

"Khanyi, stop acting. Stop being dramatic, you cannot play innocent with me when i know exactly who you are and what you're capable off." I say. She starts sobbing like someone is dying or has already died. She's even hyperventilating.

"I know I'm not a saint, Dali but there was a time when you loved me. I mean I am carrying your child for God's sake. Why are you being mean to me?" She says and sobs even harder. It's a good thing almost everyone has gone home.

"How far along are you?" I ask. Her sobs die down.

"Why does that matter?" She questions, wiping away her fake ass tears.

"It matters. How far along are you?" She laughs, I guess her little crying spell has ended just like that.

"A few weeks." I'm not sure what a few weeks is supposed to be but I know she is lying.

"That's fine. I'll pick you up tomorrow morning and take you to the doctor to confirm."

"So you dont trust me?" She asks, her arms crossed on her chest. "After everything you and I have been through, you're going to treat me like I am the scum of the earth?" She asks, fresh tears making their way down her face. I swear this has to be bad luck or something. The constant tears, fake ones at that.

"Khanyi I dont know why you're acting like a victim right now. I know about the muti you fed me all the time we were together. I know everything. I also know about you faking my signature so you can get yourself artificially inserminated. I know everything." Her tears stop once more. This is definitely a talent because there is no way anyone can just turn their tears on and off like this.

"Now you're calling me a witch. On top of that you're accusing me of something I did not do. When did you start hating me so much?" She asks, rubbing her nose. "I'll never be good enough for you will I?" She adds, standing up and picking up her handbag. "Its fine, hate me, hurt me even, I should have known from the day I met you that you would hurt me eventually." She makes her way to the door, stops and turns back around. "You know what the worse part of all this is? I still love you and yet you're determined to hurt me." She adds before walking out. I need to speak to gogo Mphotholozzi so I can protect myself from whatever she is planning.

MISS MANANA

"Matron, please open the door." A nurse yells from the other side of the door. Girly sits in her corner, cradled in a fetal position, tears streaming down her face. She knows something is wrong with her, everyone pinches their nose each time she comes close to them. She cant smell what everyone is smelling but she has figured it's coming from her.

She came and locked herself in the office when a patient told her to her face that she stinks. She ran to her office and locked herself in. Smelling herself gave her nothing. All she can smell is her deodorant and her perfume and nothing else. But clearly her nose is missing something.

Nurses have been knocking at her door for the past hour now and she cant bring herself to open the door. She stands up, picks up her phone and calls Khanyi. The phone rings for a while before she picks up.

"Mama." She answers, sounding bored.

"Khanyi, I need you to come pick me up." She whispers.

"Ma, why are you whispering? And where am i picking you up from?" Khanyi asks. Girly keeps quiet and listens as the nurses outside talk. She steps closer to the door and their voices get louder.

"I wouldn't come out either if I was her." One nurse says.

"Stop, I'm sure there is a good reason why she smells like that." Another replies and starts knocking again. "Matron, its almost the end of our shift. We are about to leave." She shouts but gets no reply.

"Hhay wena, just leave her alone. Let her die in her own shit in there. Mine I am going home. My shift is coming to an end. Bye." The other nurse says walking away. The remaining nurse knocks a couple more times before she gives up too. Girly turns back to her phone and realises Khanyi has hung up.

She grabs her bag and tiptoes to the door, she turns the key and peeks out, looking down the passage. When she doesnt see anyone she walks out, rushes down the passage, making sure to avoid all the areas where the other nurses may be. She makes it to her car and quickly gets in, breathing in and out, allowing her heart to rest a bit. When she sees the other nurses coming out she starts her car and drives off in a hurry.

When she gets home she rushes up the stairs, making sure not to wait for the lift. She runs into the apartment as if there are lions chasing her.

Khanyi is in the lounge, watching the TV. The moment her mother walks in her stench fills the room. Khanyi quickly pinches her nose, thinking her mother can't see her but she notices her change in demeanor, even the food she was eating is now sitting on the coffee table.

"Khanyi, why are you pinching your nose?" Girly asks, stepping closer to her daughter. Khanyi sighs and turns to her mother.

"Ma, you know I love you right?"

"Just speak Khanyisile." Girly yells, scaring the living shit out of Khanyi.

"Ma, there is something wrong with you. There's a smell, I don't know where it's coming from because I know you bath twice a day and you wear the best perfumes. I don't mean to insult you but please, you need to see a doctor." She tells her.

Girly sighs and sinks down on the chair, reality setting in. The nurses were not lying. Neither were the patients.

"I'll make an appointment with a doctor tomorrow morning." She says then drags herself to her bedroom, locking the door behind her. She throws herself on the bed, tears streaming down her face.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

60

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

MISS MANANA

She has been driving since five in the morning. Gasa claims to not be in his house but his car is parked inside the yard. Even the gate has not been opened for any other people. She doesn't believe he is away so she has chosen to wait. She'll wait for however long it takes.

An hour fly's by, another follows and yet nothing. Inside the yard Gasa is getting frustrated. His clients are also waiting, some have gone home, he is losing money the longer she sits out there.

"You can't avoid her forever." His wife tells him. He has been watching Girly through the window. He shakes his head and pulls up a chair, settling down and sipping the tea his wife just made him.

"You don't understand. That woman is driving me nuts." He says. His wife laughs, pulling up a chair, sitting across her husband.

"She is your client. She's always been your client. I don't understand why you are acting like she is forcing herself on you. You enjoyed her money." She tells him. He sighs, takes another sip of his tea and sits back.

"I warned her about the implications of this thing, now she's paying for it and she expects me to stop it. There are certain things I cannot do, once the ancestors start on their revenge spree, there is nothing anyone can do." He says.

"Maybe you can find a way to appease the ancestors, if she apologises maybe they will be merciful." His wife replies. He shakes his head, stands up and looks out the window. Her car is still there, now she is left alone. All the other clients have left.

He opens the door and walks out of the rondavel, standing just outside the door. He sighs and makes his way to the gate, sliding it open. Girly hears the gate and gets up from her nap. She sees him standing there and quickly gets out of the car, rushing to him. Her stench meets him before she does. He takes a step back, trying not to show any disgust.

"Gasa, thank God you're here. You need to help me." She begs. She doesn't look like the person he knows, even her eyeballs look like they've sunk deep into their sockets.

"Girly, what are you doing here?" He asks her. She looks around, making sure no one else is close enough to them.

"Gasa, you have to help me. I smell. Really really bad. I can't even leave my room because of it. I take a bath every hour but it doesn't help. I can't be around people anymore. I can't even go to work." She laments, tears filling her eyes. Gasa sighs and leads her into the rondavel he uses to consult. She takes a seat on the grass mat, holding her hands together on her lap to stop them from shaking.

Gasa lights imphepho and picks up his bag, shakes it around then hands it to Girly to blow on it. She blows, he pulls back the bag and throws the bones on the the reed mat. He notices imphepho has died down, there is no longer smoke coming from it. He gets on his knees, picks up the white candle and sets it alight. It doesn't burn. He tries again and again but nothing. He takes a different coloured candle and lights it. Nothing

happens. He tries to light imphepho again and still, it refuses to burn. He sits back on his heels, defeat written all over his face. Girly has been silently watching him, she knows this is not a good sign.

Gasa shakes his head, pulling his feet out from under him and sitting flat on his butt. "Its not looking good." He says. "Its bad. Really really bad. Everything that you did is coming back to you tenfold." She lifts herself up, getting on her knees.

"Gasa, please, help me." She begs. "Tell me what I need to do. Whatever it takes I will do it. Please."

"There is nothing I can do for you Girly. I cant read the bones, imphepho won't burn, the candles wont light up. Even your own ancestors have turned their backs on you." He tells her. Tears stream down her face, her heart racing.

"They can't do that to me. You have to help me." She screams. Gasa looks at her, shooting daggers her way.

"Control yourself, you cannot be screaming in here." He tells her. She takes a few deep breaths, trying to calm herself.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I shouldnt lose my temper. But I need help. Please help me. I am begging you." She cries.

"Unfortunately there is nothing that can be done right now. You'll have to face whatever is coming. I dont know what the end result will be but this, unfortunately is a road you'll have to walk on your own. Who knows, maybe if you're lucky you will be given a second chance to right your wrongs." He says. He gets up, and walks out, leaving her in the rondavel, sobbing.

After some time she gets up, and slowly walks to her car. She gets in and starts the car but doesn't move. She sits there, sobbing with her head hung on the steering wheel. Her sobs die down after some time. She wipes her tears and starts driving. She drives for a while before deciding to move to the other lane. Cars start hooting and screeching trying to avoid her. She keeps her eyes on the road as cars swerve out of the way making sure to avoid her, till a huge truck comes along, honking its horn. She keeps going, her eyes set on the truck until reality sets in. She serves the car to the far right, finding herself in a ditch, she hits her head on the steering wheel and passes out.

BAHLENGIWE

I should be happy, in fact I should be celebrating my freedom, instead I am pissed. I am angry. Mntungwa and my dad think they can control me even now and the worse part is that they think they can use my children to get me to comply. Unfortunately for them I am way past the point of being a puppet in their stupid games.

"What did the carrot do to you?" Dali asks walking into the kitchen. I take a deep breath before turning my attention to him.

"Nothing." I reply, sounding calmer than I feel.

"Then what's going on? Are you okay?" He questions. I put the knife down and push the carrots away. I don't even know why I am bothering myself with cooking. The kids have already eaten and I'm sure Dali ate too wherever he was.

"I am not okay. Your father is what's going on." I tell him. He takes in a deep breath, putting his phone and keys on the table.

"What has he done now?"

"He went and told the kids about the divorce." His eyebrows shoot up.

"What? I thought you said we would tell them together."

"That was the plan and that's what I told your father when he called earlier. He said he wanted to talk to the kids because he misses them. I said fine, but I asked him not to mention the divorce. And what does he do? He mentions the divorce. And the worse part is that he told the kids it's my fault. According to him I am the one breaking up their family. And then he went on to convince them that they will come stay with them because apparently I am a bad mother. Now my kids are angry at me. Nqaba wont come out of his room and Fezi is, well she's four, at least she doesn't hold a grudge." I narrate. He pulls up a chair and sits down.

"I'll speak to him. I'm sorry he did that." He says. I feel a little lighter than I did a moment ago. I guess I just needed to vent to someone.

"Its fine. I'm sure he will just find another way to get in the kids heads."

"Still, he needs to realise their hold on us is over and he has no right to speak to the kids about things he shouldnt." He argues. I know he means well but as much as I appreciate Mntungwa's way of doing things i cannot deny how much he loves his grandkids and I dont want us to be the parents who keeps the grandparents away from the kids. Unless of course they find a way to step over the boundaries we have set.

"Honestly there is no need. Mntungwa will do what Mntungwa wants anyway." He nods his head and picks up a carrot.

"So what were you trying to do with the carrots?" He asks taking a bite out of it.

"I was trying to cook....."

"But you ended up annihilating the poor carrots. You know there are rabbits who would appreciate them?" He asks, making me laugh.

"Well you're the rabbit now." He laughs, pulling himself up.

"Thank you for that. Let me go take a shower. Dont worry about the food, I ate at Sbu's." He says making his way upstairs.

I clean up the kitchen before checking on the kids. Nqaba still refuses to open the door. This is why some parents end up taking the door off its hinges. I get the spare key and open the door. Nqaba is under his blanket, the sound of a game playing on his phone. I pull the blanket off him and take the phone.

"Mum!" He yells. This one thinks I'm his age mate. He tries to turn and face the wall but I pull him back, forcing him to look up at me.

"Listen to me Nqaba....."

"I dont want to listen to you." He mumbles. I have to keep reminding myself that beating a child is illegal in this country otherwise this one would be laying across my knee right now with my shoe working his behind.

"Too bad, because I will speak and you will listen. Okay?" He crosses his tiny arms on his chest, his little jaws clenched together. "Listen, your father and I were supposed to talk to you about this divorce before

your grandfather did. And we will, tomorrow. But right now I need you to know that none of this is your fault... "

"Of course it's not my fault. It's yours. You're the one who wants to break up this family." He screams.

"Okay I know you're upset, rightly so but that does not mean you can talk to me like this. I am still your mother. Remember that." I say. He frowns. Aren't boys supposed to be the sweet ones. Or did I miss the memo?

"Now, as I was saying, we will talk about this in the morning and we will explain everything that needs explaining. But I can promise you one thing, daddy and I love you very very much okay?" I get no reply. "Go to bed, you have school tomorrow." I get up and kiss his forehead even though he tries to fight me. "Goodnight. I love you." He is supposed to say he loves me back but he doesn't. Oh well.

I head to the bedroom and change into my pyjamas then get in bed. Dali is already working on his laptop. For two people who are getting a divorce, I cannot explain why we are still sharing a bedroom, let alone a bed.

"How is he?" He asks.

"He will be fine. I think we should explain everything to them in the morning." He nods his head, turning his laptop to face me. "What's that?"

"Khanyi is pregnant and it turns out she faked my signature to give consent to the fertility clinic for her to be inseminated." He says. Okay,

I know she would do anything to get what she wants but this is extreme, even for her.

"Why would she do that?" I ask.

"To blackmail me. She wanted me to buy her a penthouse in Sandton, sign over her mothers house back to her and then give her a million rands or else she will tell our parents about it and our relationship." He says. Okay I can see her doing that.

"But the parents already know." I tell him.

"She didnt know they know. That's why she went and tried to tell my dad. Unfortunately for her she left with her tail between her legs because he already knew." Now that's something I wish I could have witnessed, seeing her lose her mind when she realized her new trick wasnt working.

"I'd pay a million rand just to see her face the exact moment Mntungwa told her he knows everything." I say. Dali chuckles, closing the laptop.

"You and me both." He admits.

"So what are you going to do about the baby she is carrying. It's yours after all." He closes his eyes for a moment before opening them again.

"I'll find a way to make sure I get full custody." He says. I'm pretty sure he already has plans on how to do that.

"Speaking of babies, I have to tell you something." I tell him. He turns to look at me. "I am pregnant." For a moment he looks like he is in shock, until his face lights up and his lips curl into a huge grin.

"Really?" I nod my head. "Wow." He pulls me into a hug. "That's great news." He says. I am not sure about it but I let him bask in his little bubble. At least one of us is happy.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

61

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

KHANYISILE

This feels like a nightmare I am supposed to wake up from but I'm failing. I need my mother to help me figure out how I am going to deal with this whole mess I'm in. I know I dug myself this hole but I did all I did for her. And me too but mostly for her. But she is locked up in her bedroom like a prisoner. Every other hour I hear the shower running and I know she is in there. I wish she could come out so we can figure out a way to help her. But on the plus side I don't have to deal with the stench she comes with. I know it's a cruel thing to say but I am pregnant, that smell would probably make me vomit the baby.

The shower is running again. I swear the bill we are going to pay for water will be huge this month. While she is in the shower I prepare some food for her. As soon as I hear the shower stop running I take the tray and head to her bedroom. I knock a couple of times before I hear her speaking through the door.

"Khanyi, ufunani? (What do you want?)" She asks.

"I brought you food." I reply.

"Leave it there." She says. I place the tray on the floor and leave. For a moment I think she won't take it but I hear the door open and shut in less than ten seconds. I need to figure out a way to help her. This is not right. I know my mother is no saint but she can't be suffering like this. It's not fair.

I try to call Seluleko again and her phone sends me straight to voicemail. Again. As much as I am the oldest, I cannot do this alone. We all need to come together and figure out how to help mum. I cant even talk to my friends about it because what am I going to say. Tell them my mother stinks? I'd be the laughing stock in this town. I dish up some food and set myself up on the couch. Just as I sit down someone knocks on the door. I wonder how they got past security. Or maybe its the neighbours and the smell is starting to make it's way out there.

I pull the door open and find my sister on the other side of the door.

"Surprise." She yells. She is in a good mood. Pity I also have a surprise for her. I open the burglar bar and she walks in. "Why do you look like someone who is facing hardships?" She asks. She chucks her luggage on the corner, picks up my plate and starts eating. Normally I would be fighting her for my food but right now I have bigger fish to fry.

"Where is mum? I saw her car in the parking bay." She says.

"She is in her room." I tell her.

"Okay, maybe I should go greet her." She places the plate on the coffee table and stands up.

"Before you go, I have to tell you something." Her brows snap together but she sits back down. "There is something wrong with mum." I say. She looks at me, confusion washing over her.

"Is she sick?" She asks. I'm not sure if I can call her sick but something is definitely going on with her.

"I dont know. Physically she seems healthy. She hasn't co.plained about any pain or anything like that but she has this smell coming from her."

"A smell?"

"Yeah, if you close your eyes and get near her you will think there is a dead animal somewhere. She literally takes a shower every other hour and the smell won't go away. Honestly its baffling. But she refuses to go to the doctor." She sits back, biting the inside of her mouth.

"Okay, then call a doctor to come and see her here." She suggests.

"She refuses to see anyone. A few days ago she left here early in the morning but she didnt say where she was going. A few hours later I get a call saying I should come pick her up from the side of the road. I get there and I'm told she was driving on the wrong side of the road, cars had to swerve off the road to avoid her. And then she tried to drive straight into a truck but somehow in the last minute she swerved off the road and into a ditch. She passed out and when she came too she locked herself in the car and refused to get out. The police officer who was there asked her if they can call anyone and she gave them my number. They said they would let her go with a warning because it looked like she was disturbed and luckily no one was hurt." I say.

She sits there, staring at me with her jaw literally on the floor. I'm tempted to also tell her about our father and what mum did nut I need her to help our mother and telling her about our father will just make her hate mum and probably turn her back on her. Right now I need all hands on deck, not just mine.

"Wow, so what are we going to do?" She asks after a while. I shake my head, defeat taking over me. I dont know how to help her. She doesnt want anyone close to her so how do we get a doctor to examine her?

She pulls out her phone. "My phone is dead. Borrow me yours, I need to call someone." She holds out her hand for my phone.

"Who are you calling?" I ask. Mum is not going to just let anyone into that room. Even I have a hard time getting her to open the doors with me there.

"Someone who can help us." I hand her the phone. Hopefully whoever she is calling can help us. She dials a number and stands up, making her way to the kitchen. All I hear is her mumbling things but I get the idea that whoever she just called is willing to help.

"Okay, see you soon." She says she hangs up and hands me the phone.

"Who did you call?"

"A doctor friend of mine, Neo. I did a story on her about a year ago. She is medical doctor but she also has a calling as a traditional healer. She doesn't practice the traditional healing but she can see things." She says. Well, I guess we are getting two for the price of one. I get up and dish up for myself while we wait. I hear the shower running again. Seluleko looks at me.

"That's probably the twentieth time she has taken a shower today." I say.

"This is serious mosi." She replies.

"Yeah."

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This person got here earlier than I expected. I guess she must leave close. We've been trying to figure out a way to get into the bedroom. Mum refused to open for Seluleko when she tried to go in and greet her. She could only speak to her through the door.

"Maybe I can tell her I need the dishes." I say. "I dished up for her earlier and the dishes are still in her room."

"That should work." Seluleko says. We make our way to the bedroom, we have to tiptoe around so we don't startle her. I knock on the door while Neo and Seluleko stand to the side.

"Ma, I'm washing dishes, I need yours." I shout. She is quiet for a moment.

"I'll bring them out." She says. I know she is lying. I stomp my feet pretending to walk away and then stand to the side. I hear the latch on the lock turn and the door opens. As soon as there is a small gap between the door and the door frame Seluleko sticks her foot in there, startling mum. She stumbles back inside giving us enough time to push open the door and get in.

The smell almost sends me back. I'm not sure if Seluleko can also smell it or I am just overly sensitive because she walks into the bedroom as if she has a mask on her face. Neo and I follow her in and I can see the fear in mum's face. Which is weird because my mum is not scared of anything, right now she is like a deer caught in headlights.

"What are you doing in here?" She asks taking steps back. I realise she wants to go into the bathroom. I quickly stand between her and the bathroom, blocking her way.

"Ma, this is Neo, she is a doctor, she is here to help you." Seluleko offers. The fear slowly evaporates from her eyes and her menacing aura returns.

"Did I ask you for your help?" She yells. "Did I?"

"No but we are going to help you anyway. You cant stay pocked yo in here forever. You need help." I tell her. She chuckles and turns to look at me.

"Khanyisile, if I need help, I will ask for it. Now get your friend and leave my room." She hisses.

"Unfortunately this is not up for debate right now." Seluleko tells her. "You either allow Neo to examine you and figure out what is going on with you or we will all gather in this bedroom till Jesus comes back." She adds, she is actually pulling up a chair to sit down. I swear this girl is not thinking straight. Does she want us to suffocate in here. Mum is seething, I'm pretty sure if Neo wasnt here she would be ripping into us, or worse, Seluleko would be pinned to the wall by now with mums hands wrapped around her neck.

"Ma, uhm, I am jsut here to help you figure out what is happening with you, maybe we can find a diagnosis so we can treat you accordingly." Neo chimes in.

"There is no diagnosis. I am a nurse, I should know." She tells her.

"Okay, that's good. Then maybe we can figure this out together." Neo offers. "Khanyi and Selu dont need to be here for this, it will just be you and me." She adds. I can see the walls falling around mum. Neo is really good at this.

"Fine." Mum mumbles. If I wasnt close to her I would have missed it.

"Okay then, we will leave you alone." I say. Selu and I quickly make our way out, closing the door behind us.

"Oh my god." Seluleko says opening a window. It's late already and she is busy inviting mosquitoes in here for a late night buffet. Good thing my bedroom door is closed, they wont make it there. She stands by the window breathing in the fresh air for almost five minutes. Once she is satisfied she closes the window and sits down. "How does she survive in there?" She whispers. I shrug my shoulders.

"Maybe she cant smell herself." I reply. Selu shakes her head.

"No way, I'm sure she can smell that. Have you ever smelt something like that. Even a dead animal smell is better than this." She says, her voice breaking. "Khanyi what is wrong with our mother? What if it's something serious?" Tears are running down her face. "What if she is dying?" She adds. I didnt think that far. How are we going to survive without her. Yes she is not a saint. She has hurt people, done some shady things but to us she is our mother. And when it came to us she made sure to protect us. Everyone knew never to mess with us because our mother was a fierce protector. And now the possibility of her dying makes my stomach turn.

"She wont die." I blurt out. There is no way she is dying. I dont know what help is needed but I will not let my mother die just like that. Plus

she still has a lot to answer for. Neo walks out of the bedroom and we stand up.

"So, what's wrong?" Seluleko asks.

"Sit down." Neo says. This is not a good sign. We sink down onto the couch, my heart is threatening to jump out of my mouth. "So, there is nothing medically wrong with your mother." She tells us. We stare at her waiting for her to keep going. "Its more spiritual." She adds.

"Spiritual? Are you saying mum has been bewitched?" Selu asks her. I dont think anyone would dare bewitch my mother, she clearly knows her way around muthi and stuff, if the past years are any indication of her capabilities. There is no way this is some jealous person. Unless of course she has met her match.

"She is not necessarily being bewitched. It's more of a punishment. She has a dark cloud around her, there is a dark aura surrounding her. And it doesnt look like it is going away anytime soon." She tells us.

"I dont understand what that means." Selu says.

"What can we do to get rid of this dark cloud and dark aura. We need our mother back." I ask.

"Honestly, there is little that can be done. The smell your mum has comes from inside her. There is no discharge or a sore or anything to suggest otherwise. Whatever is eating her has moved on to her skin. Her skin is peeling." Neo says.

"Peeling?" Selu repeats.

"Yes, if you've ever seen a burn victim before their wounds heal, that's what's happening. Her skin is literally falling apart and her scrubbing herself every other hour is not helping." She tells us. Wow. I'm not sure what to think honestly.

If this is punishment then it must have something to do with what she did to Dali. But now I am worried, I benefited the most from what she did to him, what if I am next? I am going to church first thing tomorrow morning so I can repent from my own sins.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

62

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

BAHLENGIWE

I have officially moved into my new apartment. It's not as spacious as the house but it will do. Dali walks in with the last box. Now the unpacking awaits. First things first though, I have to start with the kids rooms before anything else. I decided to buy all new furniture just so they have their old rooms when they visit Dali. A bit of normalcy will help.

"So what now?" Dali asks looking at the mess in the lounge. I should have hired an interior designer. I would be moving into a fully decorated apartment right now.

"I think I'll start with the kids rooms." I say.

"Okay, I'll set up the big pieces of furniture then you can do the rest." He offers. Its surprising how easy our relationship has been since Khanyi's concoctions left his body. I wish we could have seen it earlier, all this mess could have been avoided.

"Alright, in the meantime I will find the pots and make something." I say. He looks at me, smiling.

"When did you buy groceries?" Shit. He chuckles when he sees my baffled face. I actually should have done that before because I am tired.

"Takeaways it is then." I say and he breaks into a deep laugh.

"Right. Please make it pizza. My card is in my wallet." He says. I grab my phone and order three large pizzas and some drinks.

When I'm done I make my way to the bedroom. I stand outside the door hearing my kids laugh and giggle with their dad, he has been super present lately and I am truly grateful for that. My kids deserve the best version of him and I am glad they get to experience that fully.

I head back to the lounge and sink into the couch. I could join them but the kids, especially Nqaba still think this entire divorce is my fault. Yes I filed the papers but it was bound to happen. I think Nqaba hates me though, Fezi is four and easily forgets what upset her in the morning, Nqaba is determined to make his displeasure known. His feelings are valid and I know it will take time for him to get used to things the way they are but I wish he didnt make it so obvious that he sees me as the problem. If I can walk in there right now there laughter will disappear. I'll never forgive Mntungwa for sticking his nose where it doesnt belong.

A knock on the door startles me. I was drifting off to sleep already. I look at the time and it's barely twenty minutes since I ordered the pizza, it can't be them. Plus they would need clearance from security. I get up and pick through the key hole. I dont see anyone until the person knocks again.

I open the door and find one of the security guys hired for us standing there. He holds out his hand, giving me his phone.

"Maam, your mother is on the line." He says. No smile no nothing. I wonder if he is always this stoic and grumpy. I take the phone and slightly push the door, not closing it completely.

"Ma."

"Why did you block me?" She asks. She should blame Mntungwa for that. After his outburst with the kids I decided to block all of them.

"I'm busy mama, can I help you with anything?" She chuckles.

"Bahlengiwe, I know you've discovered yourself lately and now you think you're something but you will not keep me away from my grandchildren." She hisses. I'm pretty sure if I was close she would be breathing on my face.

"Ma, I hear you but I need you to understand that Nqaba and Fezi are my children first before they are your grandchildren. Right now they are trying to adjust to the divorce and all it comes with so I don't need you or anyone else for that matter whispering things in their ears. That's why I blocked you." I tell her.

"And what things do you think I will whisper? Hmmm? What things?" She yells. Okay maybe I was a bit hasty in blocking everyone for the sins of one man but those four are like fingers, never apart and always operating at the same pace and breath. I'm sure she knows what Mntungwa did and she is just acting innocent.

"Ma, I understand that you miss your grandchildren and I promise you will see them. For now I need to focus on making sure they are okay. I'm sure you already know what Mntungwa did and I cannot allow something like that happening again. Once the kids are better about this thing I will let you know and you can talk to them or they can come visit. Goodbye." I hang up the phone before she can say anything else. I hand the phone over to the guard and close the door.

The food is here. I dish up for everyone and pour some juice for them and take it to the bedroom. As expected Nqaba goes silent when I come in. Fezi on the other hand is easier to bribe with pizza. She takes her plate and sits down. I hand Nqaba his and he shakes his head.

"I am not hungry." He says. I swear this boy is testing me.

"Give me the slice, I'll eat it." Dali takes the slice of pizza and puts it on his plate. I can see the shock on Nqaba's face.

"Okay then, I'll leave you to it." I walk out and close the door behind me. Nqaba's moods are going to drive me nuts. It doesn't help that since I found out I am pregnant the symptoms, especially the morning sickness seems to want to make up for lost time. Mine is no longer morning sickness but all day sickness.

I feel my stomach turn ready to empty its contents. I rush to the bathroom and nothing comes out. Just air. And just as quickly that feeling is gone. This is going to be a long one. I wash my face then stare at myself in the mirror, it's not showing yet, thank God. I can keep it private for a little while longer.

My phone rings so I rush to the lounge and pick it up. It's Titi.

"Hey friend." I say.

"I am at the gate." She replies. I give her the code and try to clear up the lounge. Until I realise it's just Titi. I can't be cleaning up for her.

She knocks on the door and walks in. But she is not alone. Dumisani is with her. And they have flowers and bottles of wine. Well Titi has champagne.

"Hey babe." Titi says giving me a hug. I dont know why I am feeling awkward right now. He steps close and pulls me into a hug.

"Welcome to Joburg." He whispers in my ear. He stands back and hands me the flowers and the bottle of wine.

"Where can we find glasses, we need to celebrate your freedom." Titi says rummaging through my boxes. "Found them." She yells from the kitchen.

"So, how are you finding Joburg so far?" Dumisani asks. I've been here officially for less than a day. That's not enough time to make a major assessment like that.

"I just arrived." I say. He bursts out laughing. I'm glad he gets the sarcasm.

"Right. We thought we would come help you unpack." He says when Titi hands him a glass of champagne.

"Yep, we are your helpful servants for today." Titi says. "Before we get down to it though, a toast, to your freedom." We clink our glasses together and they quickly finish their glasses while I put mine to my lips and pretend to drink. I cant tell them I am not drinking, they will ask why and I'll have to tell them about the pregnancy and I dont think I know Dumisani well enough to share this kind of information with him present.

"Dont I get a glass too?" Dali asks walking into the lounge. Titi turns to me like she has just seen a ghost. I shrug my shoulders and hand him my glass. He takes a sip and spits it right back in the glass. The horrified

look on Titi's face, if looks could kill Dali would be dead right now. "You bought this?" He asks lifting the glass up to the light.

"And if i did?" Titi challenges him. Now I know why I was feeling awkward, these two dont like each other. And I guess things have not changed one bit.

"It shows. It's cheap and tasteless." He says. Titi is glaring at him like he is worse than Hitler. I should put a stop to this before things escalate.

"You lousy son. ... " Titi starts and I quickly cut her off.

"Okay that's enough. I am not in the mood to play referee with you two." I say. Dali tries to hide the smirk on his face but fails. Dismally.

"Anyways, Dali this is Dumisani, he is Titi's friend. Dumisani, this is Dalingcebo Khumalo." I introduce them. They shake hands and stand back again.

"Your ex husband?" Dumi questions.

"Current husband. The decree has not been issued yet." Dali corrects him. "I know you." He adds.

"I doubt that." Dumi replies, this starrng contest of theirs may not end well. But now I'm curious to know how Dali knows him.

"You're the one who headed up that investigation into the mine." Dali says. I look at Dumi thinking this news will jog his memory and remind him of what Dali just said but he seems unbiased. Like someone who already knew who Dali is.

"Oh that. Yeah that was nothing personal." Dumi tells him. Now I am really curious.

"Right. If you say so." Dali says then turns to me. "Listen, I have to go. I will see you tomorrow. I've done most of the big items the rest we can finish up tomorrow. Please get some sleep and rest." He leans in and kisses me on the cheek before he leaves. I don't know what power move he thinks he is playing but for now I will let him be.

"What was he doing here?" Titi asks as soon as he leaves.

"He was just helping me move. That's all." I reply. I shouldn't even be explaining myself.

"Are you planning on getting back together with him?" She questions. Trust Titi to jump into the nearest conclusion.

"Of course not. He helped me move. That's it." I explain.

"Okay, let's forget about him. Let's get to work." Dumisani says. I know Titi and Dali hate each other but the way she is going on right now, you would think he was also moving here too. But now I am curious about this investigation. I will ask Dali about it tomorrow.

DALINGCEBO

I don't know why my dad is here. I literally had to leave my kids early because he showed up here unannounced. I open the gate and he drives in first. I follow and park next to him. He gets out of the car first and marches to the house. I swear he has the worst tantrums in his old age.

I open the door and get inside with him behind me.

"You know I've always known you were weak but this has exceeded my expectations." He says. To think I left my kids for this childish tantrum.

"Would you like something to drink?" I ask, looking into the fridge.

"What will a drink do? Make you any less stupid?" He barks. I close the fridge, take deep and turn to him.

"What have I done now baba?" I ask.

"What have you done? What have you done? Are you seriously asking me that when your children are not living under the same roof as you?" He says.

"The kids are fine baba. It's not like they moved to Mars." I tell him.

"Right, until another man finds his way into Bahle's heart and all of a sudden your children are being raised by another man. That's not how we do things in this home." He preaches. I haven't even thought about the possibility of Bahle meeting someone and maybe getting remarried. I'm not sure how I feel about that but I am not going to let him see that.

"If he is a good man, I'm sure the kids wont mind having two dads." I say. I see the vein on his forehead stick out like a sore thumb.

"You're an idiot. A stupid brainless idiot." He yells. "I am filling for full custody of those kids. I will not let them be raised in a toxic environment." He screams before marching out of the house. He can huff and puff all he wants but it will be a cold day in hell he takes my kids from their mother. Knowing them they would poison the kids even further against Bahle.

My phone rings and his name flashes on the screen. I chuckle at the realisation that he needs me to open the gate. His grand exit is not so grand anymore.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

63

KHANYISILE

"Its witchcraft." Seluleko says stuffing her face with cereal. "There is no other explanation." She adds. She's been singing that song for the past few days and it's getting boring. "We need to get a strong sangoma to send it back to sender. That's the only way."

"The sender is the one suffering right now." I mumble.

"What?"

"Nothing. You heard what Neo said, there is very little that can be done." I tell her. She starts tapping the spoon on the bowl, making noise and its irritating the hell out of me.

"No, something needs to be done. We cant just sit back and do nothing. I'm pretty sure its someone who wants her position at work." She says. The delusion.

"I doubt that." I whisper.

"Khanyi, stop mumbling stuff, speak. We need to help mum." She yells. I sigh and place the laptop on the couch.

"There is nothing we can do for mum. She is paying for her sins." I say. Her eyes pop out as if she has just seen a ghost.

"You cant be serious." She says. There is no point in hiding this from her anymore. Besides, she is not a child anymore, she deserves to know the truth about who our mother is. Mum is no saint but she is our mother.

"Seluleko, mum is not the person you think she is." She stops chewing and puts the bowl on the table. I've got her attention now.

"Remember when Dali broke up with me, just before he got married?" I ask. She nods her head.

"I was young but I do remember. You were heartbroken you didn't even eat for almost a week. Mum literally had to force you to eat." She says.

"Yes, well, mum promised she would find a way to make things better. I thought it meant buying me ice cream or whatever but she brought Dali back." I say. Her eyebrows snap together.

"Bring him back? How?"

"She invited him for lunch, fed him food and by the time he left things between us were fixed. Promises were made and a life was planned. Until a couple of months back I didn't know mum had been feeding him muthi just so he stays with me." Her jaw hits the floor as her hands fly to the top of her head.

"Yeah, it turns out all this time I thought he loved me, he didn't, he was just listening to whatever he was being fed." I add. She shakes her head vigorously, stands up and starts pacing.

"You're lying." She repeats over and over again.

"I wish I was. Dali knows too, it seems he got help and he told me I would pay for what I did. He thinks I am the one who was feeding him muthi all along, so I'm guessing what is happening to mum is a result of whatever they did to help him." She stops pacing and looks at me.

"So they bewitched her. This is all their fault." She is not hearing me.

"Seluleko, I'm pretty sure all they did was do a back to sender. The very same back to sender you wer advocating for just now." I say. She sits down, tears pooling in her eyes.

"What's going to happen if mum dies Khanyi? She is the only parent we have. Cant we do something, beg them to put a stop to all this. She is suffering. Did you hear how she was groaning last night. It was pretty obvious she was in pain." She suggests.

"And how exactly are we going to say to them Seluleko? Tell them we know our mother has been bewitching their son but we are asking for mercy?"

"YES! If that's what we have to do then yes. We have to do whatever it takes to help our mother." She says. "In fact, we can ask Bahle, she is nice." She adds. I pick up the bowl and take a spoonful of her cereal, tossing it around my mouth. "What are you doing?" She asks.

"Making sure you have not been secretly eating your cereal with vodka."

"What?"

"Seluleko, you want me to go to Bahle, the biggest victim in all this, get on my knees and tell her our mother has been bewitching her husband, I'm pretty sure she is also responsible for the miscarriages Bahle had, and you want me to tell her to help her? If you were in her shoes would you do it?" I ask. She sits back on the couch, letting her tears flow.

"This is not fair. What are we going to do if mum dies?" She whispers.

"She is the only parent we have."

"We have a father Seluleko." She rolls her eyes.

"A dead beat that left us a long time ago. Please. Plus you know mum's family has always been jealous of her." She adds. Now that everything has been unfolding around us I've been trying to make sense of things we were told and taught. And none of them make sense now.

"Our father is not a dead beat Seluleko. He never was. I found him and I've been talking to him. He has a different story to the one we were told. In fact knowing what I know now, his story makes more sense." I tell her.

"What are you talking about? Where did you find him? And how?" She questions.

"Actually his daughter found me. Sent me his address, I showed up at his doorstep and he told me his side of the story. He also told me how mum is responsible for the death of his two sons." I say.

"Death?" I nod my head.

"Yep. She bewitched one child and poisoned the other." Seluleko shakes her head, standing up.

"No. Mum would never do that. I know she is not the nicest of people but she wouldn't kill children." She says. Between her and Sanele, I didn't think she would be the one to defend her.

"I wish I was lying sis wam. He wants to meet you and Sanele. Maybe it will be easier hearing from him." She chuckles, wiping her tears.

"Khanyi, I dont know what you think you're going to achieve by saying all this but I refuse to believe that." She says, crossing her arms on her chest in defiance.

"I can't force you to believe anything. But you're a journalist. You know when a person is lying or hiding something. Call him, go and see him and hear everything from his own lips. If he is lying you will know."

We hear a door opening and turn to the passage. Only one other person is in this house. Footsteps make their way to us, slow deliberate footsteps. Maybe our arguing woke her up. She stands by the door, holding on to the wall. I stand up and take a step back. This looks nothing like my mother. Her skin is peeling like she was burnt with boiling water. I can literally see her flesh, her entire body is red and patchy.

"Help. Me." She whispers before sinking into the ground. Seluleko rushes to her while I stand still, my entire body is numb. I don't know if I should go to her or call an ambulance.

"CALL AN AMBULANCE!" Seluleko screams between sobs. Only then do I come out of whatever trance I was in and dial the number. Maybe asking for Bahle isn't such a bad idea now.

BAHLENGIWE

Dali and I are headed to my first official doctor's appointment. This pregnancy is nothing like the others clearly. I don't remember a time when Dali was present at any of my doctors appointments. He would be there a few days after the birth though. So that's something.

"I've been thinking." He starts. "Maybe we should tell the kids the truth." He says. I'm not sure about that but I listen. "I don't think it's right that Nqaba is angry at you meanwhile you're not the one responsible for any of this."

"They are kids Dali, this will be traumatic for them."

"Kids are more resilient than you give them credit for. And with Nqaba you know our parents have always told him how he is a man and he will one day lead the family so he takes that very seriously. And right now I hate it because that's too much of a burden for a child. And his with all this he is angry at you because he thinks you're breaking up the 'family' so he needs to know the truth now before his anger turns to resentment and then something else entirely." He says.

I hate to admit it but he makes sense. The idea of my son hating me for the rest of his life is not nice to think about.

"Fine. We will do it when I come back from Badplaas though." He nods his head. He has been trying to talk me out of going there but I have to. Ever since he told me that his father is planning on suing us for full custody of the kids, I've been worried. The divorce might be happening but they still have the contract and the custody clause is something they can enforce and if they do I might lose my kids. Now that's not something I want to gamble on.

We get to the doctor's offices and wait. We almost look like a normal couple amongst all the others.

"Mr and Mrs Khumalo." The nurse calls out. I see the smile on Dali's face. He thinks it's funny. We stand up and follow the nurse to an examination room. "You can have a seat, the doctor will be with you shortly." She says then walks out. The doctor walks in just a minute after her.

"BoMntungwa, it's nice to see you again." He says.

"Its nice to be back, Dr Selepe." Dali replies, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"So what can I do for you guys?" He asks. He is an OBGYN, he knows exactly why we are here.

"I'm pregnant." I say. He pulls out my file and starts jotting down notes. He asks all the relevant questions then points me to the examination bed. I get on it and lift up my tshirt.

"This will be cold." He says before squirting the gel on my stomach. I flinch as soon as it touches me. Dali tightens his hand around mine.

"Are you Okay?" He asks.

"Yeah, I just forgot how cold the gel is." I say. The doctor runs the transducer on my stomach. The ultrasound screen comes alive.

"And that's your baby." The doctor says. Our eyes are locked on the screen. The smile on Dali's face is so wide you would think he just won the lotto.

"Would you like to hear the heartbeat?" The doctor asks.

"Yes please." Dali answers excitedly. He presses a button and the beating sound fills the room. The reality sets in. I am having a child. With my soon to be ex husband. Who does that?

The drive home is silent. Although Dali is happy, the ultrasound picture is on his lap. Everytime we get to the robots he stares at it.

"I can't believe we are having a baby again." He says. "This time I'll actually be present from the start." He adds. And then it dawn's on me why he is so excited. It's not just the fact we are having a baby but its the fact that he missed out on Nqaba and Fezi's early years. There are

barely any pictures of him with them as kids. Even though Fezi is a daddy's girl, one day she'll probably wonder why the only baby pictures she has with her dad are during her birth and a few days after.

"Do you think it's a girl or a boy?" He asks. I regret saying we shouldn't find out the gender. We will have a guessing game till the baby comes.

"As long as it's a healthy baby I am fine." I reply.

"I hope it's a boy."

"Why?" A baby is a baby to me. I've lost two already so I appreciate whatever God gives me.

"Because then Fezi can be the only princess." He says.

We get to the apartment and he gets out of the car. I go into the driver's seat while he heads to the house. The kids should be back from their new school soon. I'm just happy it's close enough for them to walk. Hopefully Dali can walk with them so they get some fresh air.

"So I'll see you when you get back?" He asks.

"Yeah, hopefully I'll be back by tonight." I say.

"Okay, please be careful and dont forget you're carrying precious cargo." He shouts as he walks away.

I get to Badplaas a few minutes before four. And here I am thinking I will be back before the kids go to sleep. I drive straight to my parents farm. I've blocked all of them so I'm not sure what's happening with them. I just hope mum is here as well, it will be easier to have this conversation with them together.

Mntungwa's car is here. Nice. I could turn back but I've already got this far I might as well go in. I knock on the door and get no answer. I try again but nothing. I turn the doorknob and it gives. Okay, so there are people here I am just being ignored. I walk in and the house actually looks good. It's my first time here and I can safely say I can see my mothers touch on everything. The marble floors, the art on the wall, the kitchen that looks like it's there for show. It's amazing.

This house is a single story house, hopefully I'll find the people I am looking for sooner. I check the patio first and its empty. I head down the passage opening and closing doors. I find the door to what looks like the main bedroom and its empty. I head down further and I hear muffled voices. They are not speaking though. They get louder the closer I get. I find the only door on this side of the house slightly open and that's where the sounds are coming from. I push the door slowly and from here it looks like a study. I push the door further and I swear my heart stops. I must be seeing things. My dad is laying on the desk, Mntungwa is right behind him. And they are both naked.

"Dad." I call out and they both turn. I am not seeing things. This is real. I feel the pie I ate on the way coming right back up and it splatters on the floor.

"Bahle!" He says. I look up and the horrified faces are all the confirmation I need. My father is sleeping with my father in law. What kind of mess is this?

HIS HEART TO KEEP

64

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

BAHLENGIWE

I'm numb. This whole thing makes zero sense to me. The whole drive from there to here has been hazy. I cannot tell you how I got here but here I am. Parked in my parking spot because I don't know how I am going to explain the horror on my face. I know I'm good at pretending but this, this is something else entirely.

For once I'm actually grateful for blocking my parents before this. I'm sure my dad has tried calling to explain himself but how do you explain any of this. My dad sleeping with my father in law. I get nauseous just thinking about it.

My phone rings and it's a number I don't know. A part of me is pretty sure it's my dad using someone else's number but it could be something serious. I answer the call and keep quiet. I can hear someone breathing on the other side. They don't say anything and neither do I, this goes on for about a minute before I hear them clear their throat.

"Bahle." Of course it's my dad. I want to hang up, but I seem to be stuck in whatever trance I am in. My father has never been close to any of his kids. The distinction between parent and friend was made pretty early on in our lives. Dad was a parent and nothing more. Maybe if we were closer to him we would have seen something going on.

"Bahle!" He repeats. I don't know what to say to him. "I can explain." He says. I'm curious how one explains that. "Please come back so we can talk." I'm not sure if its pain or guilt in his voice but it's way softer than it usually is. I guess that happens when you're caught doing something you shouldnt be doing. "Please." He adds. I cut the call and sit there. Lost in my own thoughts when a knock on the window startles me. I look up and see Dali standing there.

I roll down the window and he stares at me, his eyes burning with curiosity.

"When did you get back." He asks. I'm not sure how long I've been sitting here to be honest. I shrug my shoulders. "What happened?" I feel tears sting the back of my eyes and I quickly blink them away. He sees me rapidly blinking and he opens the car door. "Come on. Let's go inside." He says holding his hand out. I take it and get out of the car. He grabs my bag and locks the car.

We make our way up to the apartment with my hand firmly in his. The kids are already sleeping, and the lounge is actually clean.

"Have a seat, I'll make you something to eat." He says. I cant argue with that. My stomach hasn't seen anything worthwhile since I left my pie on my mums marble floors. I take a seat and close my eyes. A part of me is hoping I will wake up and this will all just be a bad dream.

"Here." He says handing me a plate. It actually smells nice.

"You cooked?" I ask.

"Of course, I couldn't let the kids eat junk on a school night." He says, feeling proud of himself. I nod my head and dig in while he opens his

laptop. I guess he went down to his car to get the laptop. He doesn't bother saying anything, just focused on his work which is something I am grateful for.

When I'm done he takes the plate to the kitchen. He comes back and sits down.

"So, wanna talk about it?" He asks.

"No. I'm fine."

"You dont look fine." He says. Well that is true but how do I explain to him that I found his father and my father fucking. God alone knows how I'll ever be able to utter those words. I just wish erasing the whole thing from my memory would be as easy as not speaking about it.

"I'm just tired that's all. I underestimated how long the drive would be to get there and come back here again." He nods his head. I doubt he believes me but right now, all I want to do is go an sleep.

"Okay, I should get going then so you can get some rest." He says closing his laptop.

"Can you stay?" I blurt out. He looks at me.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, if you dont mind." He is silent for a moment. I almost think he will say no.

"Okay. I'll stay."

I didnt think I'd get a proper sleep. But I guess laying on someone's chest helps. I slept better than I thought I would. I wake up and hear the sounds of the kids, they seem to be in a way better mood than me.

Except there is an extra voice. One that should not be here. I get up and put my gown on and make my way to the kitchen. He really is here. I don't think I will ever see him the same again.

"Hey, your dad is here." Dali says, I'm not sure what kind of message he is trying to give me with his bulging eyes but I'm not getting it.

"Hi." My dad greets. If I could I'd ask him to leave right now but I need to think about the kids.

"Hello." I reply. I'm pretty sure my voice is as cold as a winter in the Alps.

"Okay, kids. Let's go. We will walk to school." Dali says. The kids pick up their bags, hug my father and follow their father out the door. Now it's just us, he is staring at me and I stare right back. He can't seem to hold my stare for long though.

"I know for a fact I didn't tell you where I live now. So how did you find me?" I ask. He sighs and sits on the arm rest of the couch.

"Your sister told me." Well someone is not getting an invite to the housewarming.

"Okay so why are you here?"

"I want to explain." He says.

"Explain? I don't think you can explain this away baba." I reply.

"Let me at least try." He begs. I swear Jesus is coming back soon. Edwin Nxumalo is begging. I never thought I'd see the day.

I sit across from him and wait. "What you saw was a mistake." He says. I break into a small chuckle, I know he is lying, they were way too

comfortable for that to have been a mistake. But I choose to indulge him anyway.

"So this was just a once off thing that happened by mistake?" I ask. He sinks down onto the couch.

"Yes. Please believe me. It was a mistake." He emphasises.

"I don't believe you." I say. His eyes pop out as if I'm just supposed to believe everything that comes out of his mouth.

"Bahle, I swear. ..."

"Don't patronize me. I'm not a child. This was not a once off thing. Now that I think about it, everything makes sense. This is why there has never been any rumours of you or Mntungwa cheating or any scandals like that

we all thought you were these upstanding men who respected marriage meanwhile you're busy fucking each other behind everyone's backs." I yell. I see his jaws clenching.

"That's not true." He whispers.

"Does mum know?" I ask. The blood in his face quickly drains.

"You cannot tell your mother about this." He says. "You can't."

"Why not? If you say it was a once off thing then it should be easy to explain away right?" Defeat washes over him. This man really thought I am a child he can pacify by claiming a mistake. Maybe it was a mistake on his part, but for me it's a mistake that has put a lot of things into perspective.

"Bahle, I'm begging you, I will sign over all my shares to you. Just dont tell your mother." He is actually begging me, I can even see tears filling his eyes.

"Oh dont even play with that. I am going to get what's due to me, rightfully so. But what you're not going to do is dangle that in my face just so I can cover your dirty little secret. Mum deserves to know. And so do your kids." I say. He blinks a few times but a lone tear escapes. He runs his arm across his face, wiping away his tears. I am not moved, not one bit.

"You know, a lot of things make sense now. The business meetings you took together, the overseas trips, the joint vacations with your wives, it was all just a cover for all this." His eyes have turned red. I'm no longer sure if its guilt that he was caught or anger that his story doesnt add up and I'm not buying it.

"Bahle, I swear. "

"Dad, please don't. Dont make a fool out of me. I'm not stupid. I need you to be honest with me. Tell me the truth and stop with the lies because we both know you're lying. Just tell me the truth. How long has this been going on? And dont tell me it was a once off thing." He takes a deep breath and lays back on the couch.

"Since we were seventeen." He admits. I'm pretty sure my insides just descended to my feet. My parents have been married for almost 45 years. That means this whole thing started before they got married to their wives. Now I'm not sure if their wives were duped into this whole farce or they were willing participants. A part of me is hoping they didnt know, because why would you willingly put yourself in a situation

where you know you'll never have that person fully. Who am I kidding, I lived that life for ten years so maybe I need to withhold my judgement.

"So you're gay?" I ask. He shakes his head.

"Not really."

"Okay so you're Bisexual?" Again he shakes his head.

"I guess. I love your mother. She means the world to me." There must be different meanings to the saying because this one makes no sense.

"Is this why you hate Sihlangu?" He squints his eyes, his brows coming together.

"I don't hate him."

"Of course you do. Or maybe you resent him because he has never had to hide who he is. He is who he is and he lives his truth loud and proud. Meanwhile you're here trying to get me to keep your little secret buried. You hate him because everytime you look at him you see a reflection of the life you want to live that you cannot or choose not to live." I say. He rests his elbows on his knees, holding on to his hanging head.

"I dont hate my son." He mumbles. I'm not sure who he is trying to convince between the two of us. I know I'm not.

"Keep telling yourself that." He looks up at me.

"You dont understand. Things aren't as easy as they seem." He says.

"Then make me understand. You being gay or bisexual is not a crime. You do know that right?" I ask. He shakes his head.

"Legally yes, its not a crime, but where we come from it's a shame. And that's worse than having a criminal record. Knowing that each time you show your face anywhere there will always be someone ready to make jokes and sometimes beat you up. Not everything is as easy it seems."

"Back then, maybe. But now we are in the 21st century. People are allowed to be whoever they want to be." I tell him.

"And where will that leave you and your siblings? Your mother?" He asks.

"Oh come on, you're going to pin this on us? You chose to have a wife and kids while still fucking your best friend on the side. Dont try and put the burden of you not living your life on us." I scream. "I wouldn't be so mad at this if you hadn't mistreated Sihlangu his entire life because he wasnt 'man enough'. If anyone should have been more sympathetic it's you. If you know how hard it is to be gay then why was it so hard for you to show a bit of grace and understanding to Sihlangu? He is your son. Your only son at that." I yell. The door opens before he can reply and Dali walks in.

He senses the tension in the room and he looks at me.

"Dad was just leaving." I say. Dad glares at me.

"We are not done talking." He argues.

"I am. Dali will walk you out." I get up and head to the bedroom. A part of me wants to sympathize with him. Its hard not leaving your life the way you want, but I'll never be able to understand why he had to bring my mother on board just to cover up his little secret. Yet on the other hand I know mum is happy. Dad provided her with a life many would

dream off, she has a bank account that never runs dry, but is all that enough to make one look the other way and pretend your life is perfect. Can I live with myself if I pull the rug from right under her feet. Mum deserves to know though. She deserves to know the truth.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

65

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

KHANYISILE

My mother is getting worse by the minute. Doctors have no idea what is going on with her and it's highly likely they will not be able to figure it out. I don't even know who her go to sangoma is, maybe they could help.

A doctor walks out of her room in full protective gear. You'd think she is patient zero carrying a deadly virus. He takes off his gear and throws it in the trash bin before making his way to us. I've stopped being hopeful each time a doctor comes out of there because I know they won't tell us anything concrete.

"How is she?" Seluleko asks. The doctor's eyes hold no hope. Personally I've given up.

"It's hard to tell. We have sedated her and we are running some tests to try and figure out what exactly is going on with her. I don't think I've seen a case like this." He admits.

"But will she be okay?" Senele questions, her sniffles and red eyes as clear as day. She's been crying since she got here. A part of me wishes I hadn't called her to come but then what if this is the end for my mother. She needs to be able to say her goodbyes too.

"It's hard to tell. We will run more tests and see what we come up with. But we've given her some medication to deal with the pain." The doctor says. I doubt their tests will reveal anything.

"Can we see her?" The doctor nods his head, giving Senele a pitiful look.

"A nurse will come by to help you into some protective gear before you can go in." He says.

"She is not contagious." Seluleko fires at him.

"Until we know for sure what is happening, we have to take all the necessary precautions unfortunately. A nurse will be with you shortly." He says and leaves.

"What happened between the time I left and now? Mum was healthy when I left and now I come back and she is like this. What exactly happened?" Senele questions, looking at me for answers. I shrug my shoulders and scroll down mum's phone. I need to find whoever her go to sangoma is. Maybe they can do something to help her. "Khanyi?" Senele calls out. I do not have the energy to deal with this right now.

"I need some air." I grab my bag and walk out. I head to the cafeteria and order a cup of tea since I can't drink coffee anymore. It's been weird lately, I think I'm actually embracing being pregnant. Although I had a different plan for this baby but now the idea of bringing life into the world and having someone I can love unconditionally has been more and more appealing.

I find a seat outside the cafeteria and sit down. Mum's phone holds no clues as to who her person is. Her contacts all have names and surnames you would think this phone belongs to some business person.

Not even a lightning emoji next to a name as a clue. Her text messages are also just as dull. Her WhatsApp is even worse. Just church groups, work groups and stokvel groups. I decide to update all of them before they think she vanished into thin air. I post on the church groups first before the others. Not even a moment passes and already someone is replying planning a prayer meeting. Maybe that's what my mother needs, divine intervention.

"Tell her to admit her sins to the people she wronged." Someone says above me. I look up and my heart almost jumps out of my chest. There is a sangoma standing in front of me in full regalia. I look around and people don't seem to give a flying fuck that she is here. Which makes me think I am imagining her. I close my eyes a couple of seconds and when I open them she is still there. I look around again and people are carrying on with their business. She pulls out a chair and sits down. "Relax, everyone can see me, they are just minding their business." She says.

"Okay, then what are you doing here?" I ask, my voice giving away the nerves and anxiety I am feeling.

"Tell your mother to admit her wrongs. She did a lot of people wrong. Especially your father and your boyfriend. She needs to speak to them, face to face and ask for forgiveness." She knows so much about me and my mother and it's scary.

"My mother is not a bad person." I mumble. Her lips curl into a smile.

"Bad? No. Bad can be corrected, bad can be overlooked, your mother is pure evil." She says and I feel a tear run down my face. "You, you are

bad, your mum is evil and nothing can be done about that." Did she just say I am bad? What the fuck did I do?

"How am I bad? I didn't do anything." I say defending myself.

"Not intentionally at first, hence I say you're bad. You didn't know about your mothers evil ways but you benefited from them. And while you were benefiting you became complacent in perpetuating another woman's pain. And that you knew, and now you're doing it again with the child you're carrying." She says and my hand immediately runs to my stomach, covering it as if that's going to protect the life growing inside me.

"How do you know I'm pregnant?" Stupid question. She is a whole sangoma, of course she knows.

"The child is not going to survive." She says and a cold gust of air blows past me. I know I had a plan and I wasn't going to keep it but it's been growing on me. "Your mothers darkness is all over you. If you plan on keeping this child, you too need to be cleansed." She adds. "Anyways, let me leave you to it." She stands up and walks away humming some song.

I quickly get up and head back inside. I get to the ward just as my sisters are being suited up to go and see mum. I join them and put on the protective gear. My heart is running on overdrive. We walk into a yard and there is a glass wall between the door and mums bed.

"Only one person can go in at a time." The nurse says. Senele goes in first. We watch her through the glass wall. Mum is laying there, covered in a flimsy disposable blanket, if I can even call that thing a blanket. Her body looks like someone emptied a whole gallon of boiling water on

her. Sores cover every part of her body. If this is the punishment for being evil, I wonder how the devil is doing.

Seluleko goes in as soon as Senele comes out, sobbing as if mum is dead already. Seluleko doesn't stay long. She just stands there, stares at mum shakes her head and walks out. I go in and the smell is still there. And now it's mixed with the smell of blood and puss and open flesh. The mask I have on is doing very little to keep the smell out. I pull up a chair and sit down. I want to hold her hand but I'm scared so I just sit there, looking at her, I'm sure if it was not for the sedatives she would be in so much pain.

"Ma." I start. I get no reply. I just hope she can hear me. "Ma, I don't know if you can hear me or not but I can see you're in pain. I wish I can do something to make things easy for you." Her chest moves up and down as if she is just resting and she will wake up and the pain will be gone. "I saw a woman earlier, she said you have to admit your wrongs to put an end to all this. I'm not sure if it will make you better or what but she said you have to do right by all the people you hurt." I sigh. I wish this was an actual conversation not just a one-sided one. "I know I didn't tell you this but I'm pregnant. I wish I could say this child is a product of love but the truth is he or she is a product of my own stupidity. But now that it's here, I want to keep it. The woman I met said I have to be cleansed because I also have a dark cloud hovering over me and the baby will not be able to survive it. So please ma, help us help you, do what's right and admit whatever you need to admit to. If not for anything else then for us, your children. We still need you mama." I wipe my tears and walk out of the ward. I take off the protective gear and head to the waiting area and take a seat on one of the chairs.

"Did you notify the church about mum?" Seluleko asks.

"Yes. Why?" She holds up mums phone.

"They are on their way for a prayer session." That was quick. I dont want to be here when they arrive. I am not ready for any of their questions, especially when it comes to the house.

"So who will be here to welcome them because I am not ready for their questions." I say.

"I'm not staying either." Seluleko says. We turn to Senele and she rolls her eyes.

"Dont look at me. I am the youngest here. I am not staying." She says.

"Well then, I am leaving. Are you coming?" I ask. They get up and pick up their belongings and we leave.

BAHLENGIWE

The past few days have messed up my brain to be honest. The only logical thing I can think off is telling my mum about dad. But I dont know if I am ready to hurt her like that. And my brain keeps going to the possibility that she knows. I mean they have been married for almost 45 years and I'm sure somewhere along the line she suspected something. The business trips, the late nights at the office, she is not stupid enough to not have seen those little signs.

Since the kids are at school and I am jobless, I decide to go visit my friend. Maybe I can vent without giving anything away. I decide to buy lunch along the way before I get to be office. Lucky for me I am known around these parts so getting to her office is easy. Her office is

unlocked so I gently knock and walk in. Its empty though. I guess I'll have to wait. I put the food on the desk and my attention is caught by a huge whiteboard standing on the corner. It's not the presence of it that's interesting but its what's on it.

Its divided into two by a marker. On on side is my dads name and photo at the top. On the other is Mntungwa's. Then there are arrows pointing at different things and other names. Including mine and Dali's, Sbu is also there as well as Lindo. There is an arrow that looks like it is pointing to something at the bottom. I swing the white board over and on the other side is a whole line graph of dates and events that happened. I cant make sense of it all but I know it's not good.

"Bahle. What are you doing here?" Titi asks coming through the door. I keep my eyes glued on the board in front of me.

"What's this?" Answering a question with another.

"Its not what you think." She replies. Now I know it's bad. I turn around. I can see her nerves but Titi has an impeccable poker face. Right now she might seem unfazed but I've known her since we were kids, I know her better than anyone. At least I thought I did.

"What am I thinking?" She sighs and puts the files she's carrying on the desk. "I'm guessing that's more research on my family?"

"Bahle, this has nothing to do with you." She tells me.

"My name is up there." I remind her.

"I know but you're not the focus." She admits. "Your father and his best friend are." Knowing my father and Mntungwa I'm pretty sure they did something to deserve this but I don't understand why I am in it.

"Okay, and as my best friend you didn't think to tell me. Give me a hint, a sign, anything so I am aware. I get that this is your job and all but a little heads up would have been nice." I say.

"I know. And I'm sorry." I glance at the files she just put down and I see her name and Dumisani's and something clicks in my head.

"The trip to Cape Town, was it a genuine thing or a fishing expedition?" I question and she blinks a couple of times. That's the one thing she always does when she is about to lie.

"Of course not. It was about us as girls getting together." Lies.

"Except you and Dvumo have never been friends. You're civil to each other but you've never been close enough to warrant inviting her to a getaway with us. And the questions you kept asking about our childhood and our parents business. And then Dumisani showing up out of the blue. You had a plan and you carried it through and stupid me, I was too naive to see it." I feel like such an idiot right now.

"Bahle, look, lets sit down and talk about this." She offers.

"I think your board has said enough. But thank you for the offer." I pick up my food and head for the door.

"Bahle please, you're my friend, can we talk about this like adults." She shouts. I turn around and look at her.

"I think from now on, before you and I speak, I'd like for my lawyer to be present. And if it's got nothing to do with your investigation, please do not call me." I walk out and bump into a hard wall.

"Hey, careful." He says. I shake his hands off of me and he steps back. "Are you okay?" I can't believe I thought he was hot. Now he looks like a chunk of coal. "Bahle?" He calls out. I roll my eyes and walk past him and head for the lift. I'm sure his friend will fill him in. I text Dali and ask him to come by tonight. I might be angry at my father but I am not about to let Titi and whatever agenda she has ruin his legacy. I just need Dali to fill me in on what's happening with the business and we can figure out how we can protect our children's legacy.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

66

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

BAHLENGIWE

Dali is taking forever getting here. I need him to get here as soon as possible before I explode. I can't believe Titi can be such a sleaze ball. I know it's her job and all but a little heads up for a friend would have been nice. Instead she smiles in my face while scheming behind my back.

"Is dad coming?" Fezi asks jumping on top of me. Between her and Nqaba, she seems to be adjusting to this whole thing easily.

"Yes. He is on his way." I tell her. She lays on my chest, her tiny hand rubbing my stomach. I haven't told them I am pregnant but this has been her favourite way to fall asleep for a while now.

"Why is he always here?" Nqaba asks. His head is buried on his tablet for a moment I think he is speaking to the characters in his game.

"What did you say?" He presses pause on his game and looks at me. He looks so much like his father you would think Dali was denying the pregnancy.

"I mean dad, why is he always here? I thought you two are getting a divorce." He says.

"How old are you again?"

"Eight years, 11 months and 2 days. My question still stands." My mouth dries up, not at the question itself but the fact that my almost 9

year old is questioning me like a sixteen year old. I dont know if I should be proud or offended.

"Your dad is always here because you guys are here. Just because me and him are getting a divorce it doesn't mean he is divorcing you too. Dont you like having him around?" He shrugs his shoulders and goes back to his game.

"I do. But its confusing." Oh God. A knock on the door saves me from any more interrogation. Nqaba runs to the door and opens for Dali.

"Shouldnt you be sleeping?" Dali asks him.

"We are on our way to sleep. We were waiting for you." He replies. Dali picks him up and they sit on the couch. Fezi is already snoring on top of me.

"Hey." Dali greets.

"Hi."

"Let me put the kids to bed then we can talk." He suggests. He puts Nqaba down and picks up Fezi and they disappear into the bedrooms.

He comes back after about ten minutes and sits down.

"So, what's so urgent?" He asks.

"Tell me something, the investigation Dumisani was leading on you, what did they get out of it?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"Because it's still on going." I say. He doesnt seem fazed. Not even a frown or something to show he is bothered.

"Okay." This man. Is he listening to me?

"Dalingcebo, are you listening to me?" He chuckles and loosens his tie.

"Bahle, I don't care if they bring in the FBI too, they will find nothing. I don't know what Dumisani is hoping to achieve because the last time they did this he ended up being suspended for a while." Okay I did not know that.

"So does that mean there is absolutely nothing to find?" He chuckles again and takes my hand.

"Bahle, listen, this whole thing started because the former minister of mineral resources was trying to revoke our license and give it to some American company. He had to have a reason for revoking the licence hence the investigation. Unfortunately for him we did our own digging and we found our own dirt. And when that was presented to the president the man was fired and Dumisani was suspended." Now I am confused.

"Did you do some digging because there was something to find and you needed them to back off?"

"No. We waited until they concluded their investigation but the problem started when they tried to manufacture 'evidence' that would grant them the right to revoke the licence. Other than that, we are good so you have nothing to worry about." He assures me. I guess I can breathe now.

"Thank God. You know Titi is helping him with this investigation." I tell him.

"Of course. That woman has always been shady and sneaky." He says.

"You dont have to be smug about it." He throws his head back laughing.

"Don't worry. I wont say I told you so. But I'm not going to pretend to be surprised either. That woman moves funny." He adds. I guess I was the only one in the dark the whole time.

"Are you hungry?" He nods his head. I get up and dish up for him and serve him. I get myself a glass of water and sit down.

"Are you not eating?" He asks me.

"I ate with the kids earlier. And by the way, your son wants to know why you're always here. Apparently its confusing." He laughs.

"That one thinks he is a man now. By the way, I spoke to my dad this morning and he said he will do the whole fixing of umsamo thing." He says.

"What changed?" He shrugs his shoulders.

"Beats me, because I was ready to go and ask his brothers for help. So now we have to go home and figure that out. And the kids have to come too which means you have to come too." He says, whispering the last part.

"Okay." His head snaps up so quick.

"Really? Just like that?" He asks.

"Its not like I have anything better to do with my time since ngingumahlalela. (I am unemployed.)" His lips curl into a huge smile.

"That's great. Thank you." I dont think we've had this decent of a conversation in a long time and I'll admit, it feels nice. He is slowly

coming back to himself and becoming the man I remember before Khanyi worked her magic on him. I just pray it stays this way.

My phone rings on the table and Titi's name flashes on the screen. How did I forget to block her. I let it ring till it goes to voicemail but then she calls again. Dali picks up the phone and puts it on loudspeaker.

"Bahle's phone hello." There is a bit of silence before Titi speaks.

"Can I talk to her?" She asks.

"Tiyandza, I thought that was you. How are you?" He asks.

"I am fine. Now put Bahle on the line." She demands. I can hear the frustration in her voice. Meanwhile Dali is having the time of his life mocking her. I should put a stop to it but I'm still angry at her and I don't see myself letting this go anytime soon. Yes there is nothing to find but loyalty means something.

"Unfortunately she does not want to speak to you right now. Hopefully ever again."

"Listen to me you bloody son of a bitch. " she starts and to say I am shocked would be an understatement. Dali is laughing. I grab the phone from him.

"Tiyandza, what the heck." I yell.

"Bahle?"

"Why would you say that." I ask.

"Listen, can we talk "

"I told you I will not say a word to you without my lawyer present. Now stop calling me." I cut the call and make sure to block her. Dali is still laughing. I wonder which part of this is funny. "Dali this is not funny."

"Of course it is. Even a snake has to come out for some sun every once in a while. Anyways I should go back. I have work in the morning." He says.

"You can always wake up early in the morning." I suggest. The look on his face tells me he is giving me a chance to take back my words. Why did I even say that to begin with. I could tell him I'm joking but I'm not. I kind of like having him around, especially now that he is back in his senses.

"Uhm, yeah the problem with that is sleeping on the couch. It's too small for me." He says.

"Who said anything about you sleeping on a couch." I blurt out. Whatever part of my brain that's supposed to process my thoughts before they come out of my mouth is clearly not working right now. He turns and faces me.

"Bahlengiwe Khumalo. Do you want me to sleep here tonight? Admit it and say it with your chest." He demands, even though I can see the smirk on his face.

"I am just saying it's late, you cant be driving at night. What if you get hijacked?" His smile widens and I can see a twinkle in his eye. He doesnt believe me. Truth be told I dont believe me either.

"Say it with your chest." He repeats, gently beating his chest. "Say it."

"Shoot me for caring." I stand up trying to walk away since he is giggling like a teenage girl right now. At my expense too. He pulls me back and I sit on the down.

"I know you care. Now say it, you want me to sleep over?" He asks.

"Yes, Dalingcebo, I want you to sleep over. Happy?"

"Very." He admits.

I take the plates to the kitchen and wash them while he takes a shower. I wreck my brain for a moment trying to find a plausible excuse to give the kids in the morning. I'm sure Nqaba will be rolling his eyes when he sees his father slept here. But then again a good coparenting relationship is always beneficial for the kids.

My phone vibrates on the table. I wipe my hands and pick it up.

"Hello."

"Hey, listen, Sbu is trying to get hold of Dali but his phone is off. Do you know where he might be." Lindo asks.

"Yeah he is taking a shower." I reply. She is silent for a second.

"In your flat?" She asks. Maybe Nqaba was right, this is confusing.

"Yes Lindo in my flat. He was here because we had to talk about something and since it's late already I suggested he sleeps over. That's all." Why am I being defensive about this. It's not like Dali and I are doing anything wrong.

"That whole entire statement just told me all I need to know. Tell Dali to call Sbu before he goes to sleep." She says. "And Bahle?"

"What?"

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do." She says, laughing before hanging up on me. Mxm. She's not getting the baby shower I promised her.

KHANYISILE

Things are getting worse and I have no idea what to do. Not a single doctor can help my mother, even if its alleviating her pain, it's not working. I called my father yesterday and told him everything and he said he is on his way. I know him and mum are still married so technically he needs to be here too. This is his wife and he needs to deal with it. Who am I kidding, no one wants to deal with my mother. Not even her own family wants to deal with her. When I called them yesterday they flat out refused to even come see her. Her own mother said I should call them when she is dead and a funeral date has been set. A whole mother ready to bury her child.

"We need to be a specialist." Senele suggests. I look at Seluleko and she is playing with her porridge. I know we should tell her the truth but this whole thing is traumatizing enough for me, at least one of us has to have a different view of who our mother is.

"There is nothing a specialist will do that hasn't been done by the doctors." I tell her.

"And what exactly have they done? Mum is still in pain and getting worse. So what have they done exactly?" I do not have the time for all this. I stand up and grab my bag.

"I'm leaving."

"Are we not supposed to go together?" Senele asks.

"You will go with Selu. I have to go somewhere first." I hear them mumbling but I keep going. At some point they also need to grow up and be adults. If mum dies no one here will be mothering anyone. I cant mother a small child and then have to take care of my grown siblings.

I'm not even sure if being here is a good idea but I can only hope. I press the intercom and wait for a response but I get nothing until a some buff guy comes around the corner. I get out of the car and make my way to the gate.

"Sawubona bhuti. (Hello brother.)" I shout. The man makes his way to the gate, walking as if he owns the place.

"Can I help you?" He is staring at me as if I'm some criminal mastermind.

"Yes, I am looking for Bahle, is she here?" His eyes shoot down to my feet then move up to my face again.

"And you are?"

"I'm just a friend." More like frenemy but friend is there too. A car pulls up behind me. I turn around and its Dali. I thought he was in the house.

He rolls down his window and his stare sends chills down my spine. This man despises me.

"If you dont mind I'd like to get in my house." He says.

"I'm sorry. I thought you were inside."

"What do you want?" Wow, okay, no hello no nothing.

"My mum is sick. Very very sick and she might die." I say. I'm taken aback by how calm and collected he is. A bit of a reaction would be nice.

"And let me guess, someone told you you can find a doctor around here? Well I'm sorry you have the wrong house." He is so cold.

"Dali, I'd like for you to come see her. You and Bahle." He smiles.

"And what will our presence do? Raise her from the dead?"

"Of course not. She just has somethings to say to the both of you. Please, just meet with her and I will never bother you again." I beg. My tears seem to move him because he kills the engine and gets out of the car.

"So help me understand this, you want me, to get my pregnant wife to come and see your mother? Why? What relation does Bahle have with her? With you even?" He asks. Did he just say she is pregnant?

"Bahle is pregnant? I thought you two were getting a divorce."

"I think you're missing the point of my question. What does Bahle have to do with your mother?" He asks again.

"Dali, I know you dont owe me anything, at all. But please. My mother has some things she wants to say to you and Bahle. All I'm asking for is for you to listen. You dont have to say a word. Just listen. Please. I am begging you?" I am five to getting on my knees right now and groveling.

"Fine. I'll come. But leave Bahle out of it. She doesn't need the stress or the bad energy. I'll follow you." He says. I let out a sigh of relief. This is

just one hurdle. I have a whole lot more to get through before my mother takes her last breath. Or not.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

67

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

DALINGCEBO

"This side." Khanyi says leading me down an isolated passage. We haven't said a word to each other since we got here. I don't even know what my presence is going to do for her mother but my curiosity seems to precede common sense.

We get to a ward that's supposed to deal with highly contagious diseases. Now I'm really curious.

"I'll get a nurse to help us." She says. I get to the waiting area and her sisters are here. I greet and sit down.

"Thank you for coming." Seluleko says, breaking the awkward silence. I nod my head and focus on my phone. I should be at work right now. I'm just grateful that there are no urgent meetings right now. Khanyi comes back with a nurse.

"Please come." She calls. I follow her to some room where I'm handed some protective gear.

"Why am I wearing this?" I ask.

"Please just put it on. You'll understand." Khanyi replies. For some reason she is humble. I wonder if her mother being sick has anything to do with it. I put on the protective gear and follow the nurse to the ward. As soon as she opens the stench sends me stumbling back a few feet.

"What the heck is that?" I ask tightening the mask around me. I really hope Khanyi didnt bring me here to see a dead body.

"Come in, you'll get used to it." She says. What the fuck is that supposed to mean. I don't want to get used to dead bodies. I follow her in and the sight of someone on the bed makes me stop. Now I'm really having second thoughts about being here.

"Dali." Someone says. I look around and neither the nurse or Khanyi said anything. I look at the body sleeping on the bed and realise its Khanyi's mum. Dear God, I'm going to have nightmares for the next 2 business years. What the hell happened to her. She tries to hold out her hand and a piece of flesh falls onto the floor. I'm definitely going to throw up.

"Please come close." Khanyi says. Why did I agree to come here. What the hell was I thinking. I get close and see her eyes, they are bloodshot red and some of the skin on her face is still intact. But for how long?

"Ma, you can talk to him." Khanyi urges her. She opens her mouth and she starts breathing heavily.

"Dali, please forgive me." She starts. Her voice is hoarse and low. "I've wronged you. You and your wife. I wish she was here so I can ask for forgiveness." She adds. Well I'm glad she is not here. I'm pretty sure she would have thrown up a few times already by now.

"Forgiveness for what?" I ask.

"Everything that I did to you. I am the one who fed you muthi all these years so you can stay with my daughter. I just wanted her to have a better life than I did." She says and my heart sinks. "I want you to know that Bahle losing the babies was because of me. I couldn't let her give

you a son. A daughter maybe, but not a son, I wanted Khanyi to do that. To give you a son. I know it would take a while to marry her but i was willing for her to wait. I'm sorry I took all that away from you. And I'm sorry I let you miss out on having a good marriage with Bahle. Please ask her to come too so I can apologise to her in person." She adds. I dont know what to say. I feel like words are stuck in my throat and the more I try to speak the harder it becomes.

"Is that all?" I manage to say after a while.

"Please find it in your heart to forgive me one day. I know I dont deserve it but please try." She says. I nod my head and make my way out. I quickly take off the protective gear and leave. I dont even make it to the parking lot before I hear Khanyi calling out my name. I try to ignore her but she is running.

"Dali wait." She says catching up with me. She bends over, resting her hands on her knees trying to catch her breath.

"I've done what you asked me to do. Now what do you want?" I ask.

"I wanted to say thank you. I know you didn't have to do this but I am grateful you did. It means a lot to me." She tells me.

"You knew didn't you? You knew all along what your mother was doing and you said nothing."

"Actually I didn't know until recently." She admits. I dont believe her. Not one bit.

"And what did you do about it? You helped her? Is that why you went and got yourself pregnant? Because you realised your muthi wasnt

working anymore?" She takes a deep breath. She doesn't even have the decency to deny it at least.

"Look, you know why I did that. But I've decided to keep the baby." She says, crossing her arms on her chest. I chuckle a bit. If it were up to me she'd have an abortion but I know it's her body her choice.

"Do whatever you want Khanyi, but just know that I will be filing for full custody. Especially since you will be going to jail for fraud."

"Dali you cant do that. I know doing this was fucked up but you cannot take my child from me. That's the only thing I have that makes sense in my life." She begs. "Please, do whatever you want, I get it and I understand but do not take my child from me. Please."

"A child that happens to have my blood running through its veins. A child that I will have to pay damages for? If I had a choice in the matter I would have nothing to do with that child but that's not how I do things. I cannot abandon my child, it doesn't matter how it came about. But you, I want nothing to do with you or your god forsaken mother." I snap. I try to get in the car and she blocks my way.

"Dali, please. I'm begging you. Do not do this?" She begs.

"Its a little too late for that. And another thing, make sure your mother knows that Bahle will not be coming here for her apology tour. The further away the both of you are the better for my wife and our unborn child. I will not allow you or her to cause her any more pain. You've done enough. Now, please get out of my way." She sighs and steps aside. I get in the car and drive back home.

I try to keep my mind off of her mother and the sight of her but I cant. Whatever is happening to her is clearly something bigger than some sickness. I feel the bile rising up my throat. I quickly pull over and get out of the car. I empty the contents of my stomach on the side of the road. I dont know if I'll be able to eat anytime soon without throwing up. I just hope Khanyi doesn't go behind my back and try to get Bahle here.

ZWIDE NXUMALO

The coffee he has been massaging for the past hour is now cold, but he has no energy to brew a fresh cup. His mind is all over the place. A lawsuit brought on by his own daughter, the possibility of having to give up his legacy, the likely chance Bahle might not allow him to see his grandkids and his children finding out about a secret he has tried so hard to bury. For almost 50 years he was able to keep that part of his life sealed and buried. But every secret, no matter how deep its buried will always find it's way out.

He picks up the cup of coffee and takes a sip then quickly spits it out again. He places the cup back on the table. His anger rises again for the hundredth time. He grabs the cup and throws it straight to the wall, shattering it to pieces, missing his friend who just came by the corner.

"Your aim has always been bad." Mandla says.

"I wasnt aiming for you." Zwide tells him. Mandla takes a seat.

"I know. How are you?" He asks him. Zwide sighs and roughly runs his hands up and down his face a couple of times.

"I dont know. Bahle is determined to tell her mother everything." He tells his friend.

"She cant do that. It will ruin everything."

"You dont think I know that? But she doesnt care." Zwide admits. "I cant believe my life will go up in flames in my old age. I'm too old for this." He says. Mandla shakes his head.

"You make it seem as if you're the only one who has something to lose. I do too. How am I supposed to explain this to my children? This whole thing is a mess. Did you try giving Bahle the shares?" Mandla asks. Zwide chuckles, looking away in the distance.

"She made it pretty clear she will get the shares, trying to bribe her with them is not going to work." He says.

"Then I'll give her mine too." Madla offers. Zwide shakes his head. "Her biggest gripe with this whole thing is how I've been a hypocrite because I have treated Sihlangu worse than shit because of his sexuality meanwhile I am busy with my best friend. Before she was fighting for herself, now she is fighting for her brother too. And once the kids and our wives find out about this it will be all over." Zwide tells him. Mandla gets up and goes inside the house. He returns a few minutes later with two fresh cups of coffee. He hands one over to his friend.

"What are we going to do?" Zwide asks.

"The wives are not back from their trip. And knowing Bahle she will want to tell them face to face not over the phone." Mandla muses.

"I know, that's why I offered them tickets to Dubai. Their flight leaves this afternoon. They should be there for atleast two weeks." Zwide confesses.

"That's good. That should give us enough time to get Bahle out of the way." Mandla says. Zwide slowly turns to look at his friend. His words keep ringing in his head. Mandla cannot possibly be saying what he thinks he is saying.

"Mandla, please tell me you did not just say you want to have my child killed?" Zwide probes.

"It will save us a lot of trouble." Mandla continues. Zwide throws the scalding coffee on his friend, who squeals and jumps up as the hit liquid makes contact with his skin. He quickly pulls of his shirt and wipes himself.

"Are you out of your freaken mind. You just burnt me." Mandla screams.

"You're lucky my gun is in the safe otherwise you'd have a bullet in your head." Zwide hisses. "How dare you threaten my child." Mandla sighs and sits back on the chair, trying his best to ignore the pains on his body.

"I wasnt threatening her. It was a suggestion." He says.

"A stupid suggestion." Zwide fires back. "If anything happens to her, I will personally hold you responsible."

"You're overreacting. I was just making a suggestion to our problem. You do realise once this comes out our reputation will go down the drain so quick we wont be able to fix it. We will lose everything. Those

women will take us for everything we have. I'm sorry but I am too old to start afresh with nothing. I cannot lose everything I've worked hard for. So before you toss my idea to the side, make sure you come up with something before I take matters into my own hands." Mandla says getting up and walking away.

As soon as he turns the corner, Zwide listens in as Mandla's footsteps fade away. Once he is sure he is gone he picks up his phone and makes a call.

"Zwide KaLanga. Long time." The man says on the other end of the line.

"Listen, I need you to get me at least four men to tail my daughter." Zwide says.

"Which one?"

"Bahlangiwe. I need you to make sure those men don't leave her side, but from a distance. I dont want her knowing that you are tailing her." He says.

"Okay. Send me her address and I'll get on it. I should have some men there by the end of the week."

"No. Today. Latest tomorrow." Zwide orders. The man sighs.

"You're asking me to pull of a miracle. Most of my guys are not in town." The man says.

"Then get them in town. Your best one's too. I do not want any problems. I need to make sure my daughter is safe. Get those men here. You know money is not a problem." Zwide assures him.

"I'll get on it right away." Zwide hangs up the phone and sighs.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

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♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

BAHLENGIWE

Breathe in and out. One more step, one more flight of stairs and I'll be good. Just one more. Nope. Not happening. I am done. I put the bags on the floor and sit down. Whoever came up with the idea of load shedding needs to be arrested and charged with something. I'm not sure what yet but there are plenty of educated people who can come up with something.

I am stuck on the second floor of this building. All I wanted to do was get to the eight floor. The tenant in my apartment is moving out since her lease is coming to an end. Now I need to figure out if I can move here or not. But now i am pretty certain it won't happen. There is no way I am climbing eight flights of stairs because there is no electricity for the lift.

I breathe in and out trying to get my breathing in check. I decide to call the agent and let her know I will come back here some other day. Her phone rings a couple of times.

"Mrs Khumalo. I am on my way." She says. That name, hearing it now and I know it won't be long before I am back to being Miss feels like a dream.

"Don't bother. There is load shedding here and I am stuck on the stairs. I cannot go up any more." I tell her and she laughs.

"The generator should have kicked in by now." Maybe it has, I don't know. All I know is that I will not be going up anymore. Just back down.

"I don't hear anything and the lights are off so I doubt. Anyways I will head back home, please update me about the flat." I say.

"Of course. Goodbye." So formal. She hangs up the phone and I make my way back down the stairs. It's a good thing I wore loose fitting clothes. I'm sure by now I would be drenched in sweat.

I make my way to my car and then I hear someone calling my name. I think about ignoring them at first but the voice sounds familiar. I slow down my steps and try to listen. I hear my name again and now I'm pretty sure I know that voice. I turn around and come face to face with Sahluko.

"For a moment there I thought you didn't hear me." He says, his smile on full display. Unfortunately I am too shocked to return the smile. He steps in for a hug but my cold demeanor quickly makes him stop. "How are you?" He asks.

"Fine." I reply.

"Right. I'm surprised to see you around here. Were you visiting someone?" I clear my throat trying to buy myself enough time to come up with a feasible lie.

"Yes, I came to see a friend." I reply.

"Okay, that's nice. I also live here." He tells me. That's information I really do not need.

"Cool. I should get going. I need to pick up the kids from school." I open the car door and get in. Just before I can close it he leans his hand on the door looking into the car.

"You look good." He says. I will my lips to curl into a smile.

"Thank you. You look good too." I say. "It was nice seeing you again." He returns the smile, I'll admit, he still looks good. My trust in him however is down the drain now everything he does annoys me.

"We should catch up sometime. Maybe have lunch." He suggests. I know for a fact that this is a bad idea but I am alone in a parking lot with a man who could possibly get violent if I don't say what he wants to hear.

"Sure. I'll call you." I pull the door closed and start the car. I watch him through the mirror as he walks away. I'm not sure why the sight of him freaks me out.

I get back to my apartment and find Dali already parked in the extra parking space. I didn't even know he was coming. Maybe Nqaba was right, this is a bit weird. We get out of our cars at the same time. He has a brown envelope with him.

"Hey, aren't you supposed to be at work?" I ask. He holds up the envelope, smiling.

"I should be but I had a delivery to make." He says. We make our way into the apartment. I pour two glasses of cold juice and hand one to him. He pushes the envelope to me.

"What's this?"

"Open it and see." He says. He is way too excited about it. Maybe its nothing bad. I open the envelope and the first thing I see is a share certificate. According to this I officially own a ten percent stake in K N Holdings.

"I am pretty sure my lawsuit has not made it to court so what's happening with these?" I ask, placing the certificate back on the table. I'm pretty sure this is all part of my dads manipulation.

"I know but they decided to give all of us shares. I'm not sure what pushes them to it but you, Dvumo, Lindo and Sihlangu all have a ten percent stake, Nqaba has fifteen from my dad and five from yours, Fezi has five from my dad and five from yours. Dad added ten percent more to the five Sbu and I already have so now we have fifteen." He tells me. I'm still not sure I should be celebrating just yet. But the biggest winner in all this is Nqaba.

"I don't understand. Why now? What's going on?" I ask. He shrugs his shoulders and sips his juice. I may be paranoid a bit but I know my father and I know Mntungwa. There is no way they would just sign over their lives work out of the blue. Could this have something to do with what I saw?

"Those two have a mind of their own. You know that." He says. He may be right but this is too sudden. I hope they are not planning on doing anything stupid.

I still cant wrap my mind around the whole shares thing. Even though I have been given power of attorney over the kids shares it still makes no sense. My dad never just gives away anything just for the sake of it. Something about this is not right.

My WhatsApp is going haywire. My siblings are celebrating the shares. I wish I could share the sentiments but my gut refuses to just believe this. Those two men love having control so there is no way they would just give it up unless they are planning something crazy.

I open the envelope again and I realise besides the certificates there is also one small white envelope. A sticky note is stuck on it.

'Open only I am dead.' The sticky note reads. I'm tempted to open it but I don't. Instead I change into a pair of sweatpants, sneakers and a hoodie. I grab my bag and head to the lounge. Good thing Dali is here he can stay with the kids.

"Hey, going somewhere?" He asks.

"Yeah, I have to meet some friends for a late dinner. I'll be back soon." I announce and quickly make my way out before any more questions are posed. I drive out of the complex before I unblock my mother and call her. Her phone sends me to voicemail. Maybe she blocked me too. I dial Lindo's number and she doesn't pick up. I try again and she answers.

"Bahle, it's late." She mumbles. It's not even eight o'clock yet and she is already drowsy and tired. Fear pregnancy.

"I know. Listen, when last did you speak to mum?" I ask. I hear her yawning before she answers.

"A couple of days ago just before she boarded her flight to Dubai." She says. Weren't they in Cape Town a few days ago?

"Dubai? What happened to Cape Town?"

"Sis, they have husbands. Apparently dad bought them tickets to Dubai so they boarded from Cape Town." She says. I really hope I am not reading too much into this one but things seem to get bizarre with every passing moment. "Did you want to talk to her?" She asks.

"Yeah but it's fine, I'll do it when she comes back. Go back to sleep." I say.

"I can't. Now I'm hungry. I'll talk to you tomorrow." I hang up the call and hit the gas hard.

Three and a half hours later I pull up to the farm. It's dark around here I hope I don't get robbed. I tried calling my dad before I got here and I got no reply. I get out of the car and try to open the gate. It's locked. There's even a padlock holding the chain in place. I need to get in there and since dad is not answering my calls I have to find another way. I was never one to jump over fences as a teenager but there is a first time for everything. I grab my phone and stick it in my pocket then lock the car and switch off the lights. The sky is too cloudy and the moon is nowhere to be found. I feel my way to the fence and then make my way up. That's the easy part, now to get down on the other side. I carefully climb down the fence. I make it down and pull my phone out of my pocket and turn the torch on.

I light my way through the path till I make it to the house. Well everything seems normal. The lights outside are on. There is one light that's on inside. I knock on the door and get no reply. I knock again and then start banging the door but still no reply. The door is locked. I make my way to the back of the house and knock on the sliding door. I pull the door and it gives in and actually moves. I hope I am not walking into another horror porn movie.

I call out for my dad and get no reply. Not even my hard footsteps are helping. I make it to the main bedroom and knock. The light is on, I can see it under the door. I knock a few more times while listening in to make sure there is nothing bad going on inside. Once I'm sure there is silence i turn the knob and call out for my dad. No reply. My heart is already racing, I just hope my gut is wrong.

I switch on the light and see my dad sleeping on the bed. I breathe a sigh of relief until I remember he hates the light when he is sleeping. And the fact that he didn't even flinch when I switched on the light sends my heart racing again. I make my way to him, hoping and praying that my thoughts are just misleading.

"Baba." I call out. I shake him and get nothing. I feel for a pulse, I'm not even sure if I'm doing it right but I dont feel anything. His skin is not cold though so maybe that's a good sign. I see an empty bottle of pills laying between the bed and the side table. A glass of sits empty on the side table. He did not just try to off himself. What the hell.

I place my finger in front of his nose and feel some warm air coming out. Okay, that's good. I call for an ambulance and the woman who answers, dear God, a person could die while trying to explain themselves to her.

"Maam, I need an ambulance, I have an unconscious man in front of me and he could die." I yell.

"Hhay sisi, dont shout at me. I've already told you we don't have ambulances right now. Try again in an hour." She says and cuts the call. Wow.

Okay what do I do now? Mntungwa. Of course, why didnt I just think of him first. I unblock him and then make the call. I haven't seen or spoken to him since that horrific day and I'm not sure how I'm going to react to him but right now I need his help.

"Makoti." He says. I swallow before I find myself saying something nuts.

"Mntungwa I need your help. My dad is unconscious and i think he just drank a whole bottle of pills. I cant get an ambulance here. Please help me."

"I'm coming." He says. I cut the call and wait. I keep checking to make sure he is still breathing. I don't even know when he took the pills and what damage they've done to him but I hope he doesnt die. There is no way in hell I'm going to let him take the easy way out.

In less than five minutes Mntungwa is here. He rushes to the bedroom and pauses when he sees my dad there. To think this man used to intimidate me and now I cant unsee him naked. It's either I need Jesus or therapy. I'll vote for therapy.

"How long has he been like this?" Mntungwa asks.

"I dont know. Can we just get him to a hospital. My car is down at the gate."

"Of course. The gate is far. I'll take him in his car and you can follow us." He says as he picks up my father and throws him over his shoulder and rush out of the room. I hope to God he doesn't die. He doesnt get to clock out right now when he has so much to answer for.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

69

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

BAHLENGIWE

"Here. Have something to eat." Mntungwa says handing me a KFC paperbag. We've been here for almost four hours and I haven't said a single word to him. To be honest I don't know what to say. I have questions but those are mostly for my father. I take the paperbag and mumble a thank you. I open the bag and the smell alone is enough to remind me that I last ate in the afternoon. At least he got me things I like. Wings, nuggets, a wrap, chips and a bottle of water. I didn't even realise they have a 24 hour drive through around here.

"He is going to be okay?" He says. For his sake he better be. The man needs to give us answers.

"Did you know he was planning to do this?" I ask. He sighs and sinks down onto the chair next to me.

"No. You know I wouldn't have let him do that." I want to believe him. I really do but some things aren't making sense. I turn to face him.

"So why did you sign over your shares to us? Dali told me that you also gave them your shares. I just don't understand why?" He massages the coffee in his hand, his head bowed as if he is not sure of what he should say, or maybe its guilt or fear. I'm not sure.

"Because its the right thing to say." Bullshit. That's what this is, utter bullshit.

"I don't believe you." He lifts his head up and looks at me, disbelief washing over him. I've always been respectful to him, I've tried to keep my head down and be the perfect makoti. And now here I am speaking to him as if I am talking to an age mate.

"What don't you believe?" He questions.

"Everything. You and my father are known control freaks. You never just buckle and give in out of the blue. There has to be a reason why you did this. And telling me it's the right thing to do does nothing to sell your story. You even agreed to help Dali with fixing umsamo, something you were adamant you will not do. What changed? Did me catching you change your mind? Is this supposed to be your way of getting me to say nothing to anyone? Because if that's your angle then you got it all wrong." I rant. He sighs and leans back on the chair, his eyes closed and facing upwards.

"It's not about that. It's really about doing the right thing. Your father and I are old, it was time we passed the baton on to the next generation. We've done our part and holding on to control wasn't allowing either of you to grow. I mean you had to resign from a job you love because of us. And maybe forcing you to marry Dali was a mistake to start with." He admits. A few weeks ago I would have agreed with the wedding being a mistake, heck, I filed for divorce because of it. But knowing what I know now I wonder if things would have been different if there wasn't a third party involved. Worse, that third party came with supernatural things.

"It's a little too late for that, don't you think? Giving us shares is not going to fix anything. My father still needs to fix things between him

and Sihlangu. He cant just take the easy way out just to try and hide his hypocrisy." I say. A doctor walks towards us. We stand and wait.

"How is he?" Mntungwa asks.

"He will be okay. We managed to pump the pills from his stomach. He is stable now. We should be able to discharge him in a few days. A psychiatrist will meet with him tomorrow for a psychiatric evaluation." He says.

"There wont be a need for that." Mntungwa chimes in. "We will get him a therapist." He adds. The doctor turns to me as if I will give him a different answer. Right now all I need is to see my father and figure out a way to tell my siblings and maybe try and call my mum again.

"Well, if you change your mind, the psychiatrist will be on standby." He announces before leaving. My phone vibrates for the hundredth time.

"I have to take this." I say.

"No problem. I'll go and see your father." Mntungwa says giving me some privacy. I answer the call and sit down on the chair.

"Dali."

"Bahlengiwe where are you? You've been gone for hours and you're not picking up my calls. What's going on?" He asks. I can feel the concern in his voice. I wish I could tell them what is happening but until I talk to my father, I need to keep my mouth shut. For now.

"I'm sorry. I just got held up. I'll explain everything when I get back. I promise." I assure him.

"Where are you?"

"I'll tell you everything when I get back. Please take care of the kids." I say.

"You don't have to ask me that. Please be safe and call me if you need anything." I hang up the call and make my way to the ward.

"That was a stupid thing to do." I hear Mntungwa say. "Why would you do this?" He asks.

"Can we pretend none of this happened? I just want to forget about this and go home." My dad replies. I hear a chair being pulled.

"That will not be an easy thing to do considering the fact that Bahle is the one who found you." I decide to make my presence known then. My dad's eyes bulge out when he sees me.

"Bahle." He whispers.

"Hi." I reply. Mntungwa stands up.

"I'll leave you to it." He says and walks out. I take over the seat he just left. My dad can't even look me in the eye. We sit there, no one saying a word. I don't know what to say to him and it's clear he has no clue what to say.

"I'm sorry." He says after a while. "I'm sorry you had to see me like that."

"Why did you do it?" I ask. He turns his head, looking out the window.

"Why did you come here?" He asks, dodging my question.

"You signed over your shares to us. I didn't understand why so I needed answers." I reply. He turns to look at me, this time his eyes don't run away after a few seconds.

"You are suing me for the shares. I just decided to give you what you want." He says. Why is he trying to turn this around and make it my fault.

"So now its my fault? Is it also my fault that you tried to kill yourself?" His eyes flash with guilt before they dart away from mine. "Baba, I know you as someone who is strong and fearless. You're ruthless and calculating, everyone knows that. So who is this weak man in front of me? So weak you'd rather kill yourself than face your problems. Dying is not going to resolve anything. It's not going to fix things between you and Sihlangu and it sure as hell is not going to make what I saw disappear from my memory. Lindo is about to have her first child and you dont want to be here to see that. I know you're selfish but I didn't think you would be that selfish." I grab my bag and walk out.

I walk past Mntungwa in the hallway.

"Bahle, are you leaving already?" He asks. I stop and turn around. It's late, I need to get back to my kids.

"Yes."

"Its late. Maybe you should leave in the morning. You cant be driving alone in the middle of the night. It's not safe. Your dad will not be discharged tonight, so you can sleep over at the house and then drive back in the morning. Please." He says. I hate that he is right. This is not the time for me to be driving back to Joburg.

"Fine. I'll stay." He nods his head.

"Good. I'll talk to your father first and then I'll go home too." He tells me. I guess now I understand why no one ever suspected anything was

going on between him and my father. The way they speak about each other and to each other makes it seem all so innocent. I should give them props for their acting because this is a stellar performance.

KHANYISILE

This mess that I got myself in is coming back to haunt me every morning at six o'clock like clock work. The moment I open my eyes my stomach will lead me to the bathroom and I'll sit there for almost half an hour. Today is no different. I've been throwing up for the past fifteen minutes, even though my stomach is empty, I am still gagging. It stops after a while and I get up. I brush my teeth before getting in the shower. I have to go to the hospital to see mum.

Once I'm done with my shower I get dressed and make my way to the kitchen. Senele had to go back to work otherwise she would be fired. At least Seluleko is still here. I find her in the lounge busy on her laptop.

"Going to the hospital already?" She asks, her eyes not leaving the screen in front of her.

"Yeah. Are you coming?" I turn on the kettle and stick a two slices of bread in the toaster.

"I will. Later though. I still need to do some research on a story and interview someone." She says.

"Okay. Dad will be there too." She stops typing and looks at me. I can see the annoyance in her eyes. They met him a few days ago. The two of them are still as cold as ice when it comes to him. At least they are civil towards him.

"Let me know once he leaves then I'll come." She replies and turns back to her screen. There is no point in even arguing with her.

I make myself a black cup of tea and eat it with the toast. I log into my banking app. My savings are slowly depleting. I need to get mum to tell me her banking pin so we can pay some bills. I know she has a sizeable amount in her bank account. I paid all her bill's before and I know Dali used to give her a monthly allowance which means her salary was sitting idly every month.

I finish eating and make my way to the hospital. Dad is not here yet. I head straight for mums and get the protective gear on. Before I can make my way in I see the doctor approaching. For once he doesn't have a gloomy look on his face.

"Miss Manana, I'm glad you came. I was hoping to catch you before my shift ends." He says.

"Okay, what's going on? Is my mum okay?" I'm not even sure why I am asking because things seem to get worse every day.

"Actually, your mum is okay. In fact she is getting better." He tells me. I'm pretty sure this is a joke.

"I don't understand."

"I dont know what changed but this morning your mums vitals were strong and parts of her skin seem to be healing." This has to be a joke, a bad one at that.

I make my way in and find her sleeping. It's hard to tell which part of her skin is healing but it's not dripping puss like it did the past few days. If there us healing it's way too small for someone like me to see the

difference but the doctor grinning behind me seems to be well aware of it.

"I dont see anything." I tell him. He steps closer, standing next to me.

"I know it seems insignificant right now but there is a change. And we are hopeful this is just the beginning of her healing." He says. I'm still not sure if I should be happy or afraid. Could this have anything to do with dad forgiving her? If it is then what kind of punishment is this? To bring a person to the brink of death and then snatch them back again like some toy. I dont want my mother to die but this sudden healing scares the shit out of me.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

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♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

BAHLENGIWE

I've thought about this hard and staying is not an option. I pull up to a garage and fill up. I head inside while the attendant is busy and get myself some water and snacks for the road. I'm tempted to get an energy drink but I know that's not good for the baby. I pay my bill and make my way to the door. And lo and behold, Sahluko walks in. For his sake I hope he is not stalking me.

"Hey. Come with me." He says and drags me to the back of the shop.

"What are you doing?" I half yell, making sure my voice does not go all the way to the cashiers who are gawking at us right now.

"Look, I know this is awkward but I need you to come with me. It's not safe for you here." He says.

"Fuck no." I reply. He pulls out his phone and dials a number.

"Bahle, I'll explain everything some other time but your father hired me to watch over you." This has to be a joke even Trevor Noah would never even think to come up with.

"You're joking right? How does my father even know you?" I ask. I see him looking towards the door. He has been doing a lot of that since he came in here. I turn my head to the door and two men have just walked in. I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. "What's going on?" I ask turning back to him. He hands me the phone and I can

hear someone saying hello over and over again. I put the phone on my ear and I hear my dad's voice.

"Baba."

"Bahle, oh thank God. I'll explain later but for now I'm begging, please go with the man you're with right now. He will protect you." My dad says. Either I am being pranked or this is a real thing. I look up and the men are walking around touching and holding things, but their eyes are glued on us. Are they here to kill me?

"I don't understand." I whisper.

"You will, just not now. For now just go with that guy and he will protect you. That's all you need to know. Right now he is the only one I trust to take care of you. I know you and I are not on the best of terms but I am your father, and my job is to protect you. And right now that's what I am doing. Go with that man and I promise you I will come to you and explain everything." He assures me. I look at Sahluko and notice he has a gun in his hand and his finger is literally resting on the trigger and his eyes are glued on the two men.

The door slides open and another guy walks in and makes his way to us.

"We are ready to go." He says, shielding my view of the other men. My heart is racing at this moment. Now I can feel the danger all around me. I hand Sahluko his phone and he quickly shoves it in his pocket. They lead me out of the garage, both men holding on to guns. The other guy is holding two of them while Sahluko has a gun in one hand and my arm in the other.

"We will use our car." Sahluko says just as a third comes running and joins the one behind us. They are walking in reverse, their eyes glued to the entrance and the men still inside, all their guns drawn. If I dont die tonight, I will go pay my tithes.

Sahluko shoves me into a car I dont know with tinted windows.

"Give me your car keys." He orders. I pull them out of my bag and hand them to him. He shuts the car door and tosses the keys to the third guy. The guy rushes to my car, gets in and starts it. As soon as he is gone Sahluko and the other guy jump into the car with him in the drivers seat and drive out in high speed. Thank God for the seat belt otherwise I would be rolling around this car like a soccer ball.

"Slow down brother, they won't be catching up with us anytime soon." The other guy says. "Ngcebo already slashes their tyres so we have a pretty tight head start." Only then does Sahluko slow down, not enough to ease the bubbling in my stomach.

"I need to throw up." I announce. Sahluko keeps driving. "Unless you want to drive with the smell of vomit in the car, it would do you good to stop the car." I add. That gets his attention. He pulls up to the side of the road and gets out, his phone torch on and opens the door from outside. I jump out and throw up on the side of the road. When I'm done he hands me a bottle of water. I rinse my mouth and spit out the water.

"Feeling better?" He asks. I nod my head and get back in the car. He starts the car and drives off. I have a lot of questions but now is not the time to be asking them. For one, I need to know how Sahluko went from being a conservationist to a bodyguard.

For almost an hour, no one says a thing. The only sound in the car is the radio playing soft music. He pulls up to Alzu on the N4.

"Do you need anything?" He asks turning to me. I'm sleepy but I refuse to even close my eyes until I get home.

"I'm fine." I reply. He turns to his friend and all he requests for is a cup of coffee. He heads into a mugg and bean and comes out ten minutes later with three cups and a paperbag. He gets into the passenger side while his friend goes to the drives side.

"I got you a cup of coffee since you are too stubborn to sleep." He says handing me a cup.

"I cant drink coffee." I reply.

"Why? You like coffee."

"I'm pregnant, I cant be drinking coffee. It's not good for the baby." I blurt out. Only after I've said it does it occur to me that I should not have told him that. It's none of his business anyway. I feel his eyes boring into me as if I said something wrong.

"You're pregnant? I thought you were getting a divorce." He says. Now I might not remember everything that comes out of my mouth but I know for a fact I did not tell him I was getting a divorce.

"And how do you know that?" I ask. He clears his throat and hands me a different cup.

"That's rooibos tea. You can have it." He says. I take the cup and hold it in my hands.

"You still haven't answered my question. How did you know about the divorce?" He ignores me. He sips his coffee then hands me the paperbag. I take it and throw it on the chair next to me. For his sake I hope he is not stalking me. The rooibos tea is nice though. A few sips and i feel my body relaxing and my eyes getting heavier.

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My eyes shoot open when I feel the car come to a stop. For a moment i think i am home but looking around, this is not my complex.

"Where are we?" I ask, trying hard to keep the panic at a minimum. It's already morning and the sun is out. I have a blanket over me. How long have I been sleeping?

"A safe house." Sahluko says getting out of the car. A safe house? What kind of dramatic movie shit am I in? He come to my side of the car and opens the door. "Come on in, you can freshen up while we wait for your father." What if this is another plot for them to get me into that house and then kill me. Why did I agree to come here again?

"Tell me what is going on? I'm not going into strange houses just because you say so. Even being in this car is a risk on it's own." I tell him. He sighs and takes off the jacket he is wearing.

"Your father will explain everything."

"And how do I know that person who called is actually my father? For all I know he could be an actor you hired to pretend to be my father." His lips curl up into a small smile. Now that I play that back, i do sound ridiculous.

"Bahle, you know your fathers voice and you know me." He says.

"Actually, I don't know you." His smile disappears as quickly as it appeared. "One moment you are a head ranger I hired, the next moment you disappear without even a goodbye and then you show up again, this time you're my bodyguard. I dont know you." I tell him. He runs his tongue across his bottom lip. That action alone sends tingling sensations all over me. Damnit, I need to focus.

"Xan we go inside, freshen up and I will tell you everything you want to know." He holds out his hand for me. I let my guard down and take it. He leads me inside the house. It doesnt look like much. Just a standard two bedroom house with a kitchen, a lounge and a bathroom. He leads me to the bathroom.

"There are fresh towels in there and some body wash. There's a dress and some lotion in this room." He says pointing to the room behind me. I get in the bathroom and make sure to lock the door. I take off my clothes and jump in the shower. Ten minutes and I'm done. I get out and wrap a towel around me. I make my way to the bedroom and quickly get dressed. The dress is nice. And new. Its a bit oversized but it will do. I head out to the lounge and there is some food on the coffee table. Slap chips, six Russians a loaf of sliced white bread and a two litre of coke.

"Have a seat." Sahluko orders. I sit down and his friend comes out of the kitchen with a plate and hands it to me. "Dish up so we can eat." How am I the one who has to dish up? It's their food.

"Uhm..... "

"Simz eats like a bear, if you want to eat you'll have to dish up for yourself or else you wont eat." He warns me. I turn to Simz and he has a wide smile on his face. He doesn't seem offended that he was just called a bear. "That is Simz by the way. Simz, this is Bahlengiwe." He adds. I wave at him and he nods his head.

I take the plate and dish up some chips, and two slices of bread, a russian and I pour myself half a glass of coke. My growling stomach serves as a reminder that I last ate at the hospital. We eat in silence. Well I do because the two men in front of me have their own conversation going on. Sahluko was right, Simz does eat like a bear. They are done in no time.

"I'm going to have a smoke." Simz says walking out. I'm sure that's his subtle way of giving us privacy. Sahluko is watching me, I can feel his eyes on me. I look up and sure enough he is sitting back on the couch with his hands extended over the back rest.

"How far along are you?" He asks.

"I'm sorry how is that any of your business?" I fire back. He doesnt even flinch.

"Just curious."

"You know what they say about curiosity, it killed a cat. You said you would tell me who you are exactly. This is the time." I urge. He sighs and puts his hands on his lap.

"My name is Sahluko Mthembu. I am an agent with the State security agency." He says. I'm pretty sure he is bluffing. There is no way. "I would tell you what I do but that's confidential." He adds. So basically he is going to tell me one thing and then refuse to elaborate?

"Okay then, what is an agent with the State Security Agency doing guarding a nobody like me?"

"Its complicated." He says. I'm being tested right now. The door swings open and my dad walks in. Simz and the other guy who took my car are right behind him. When he sees me he takes a deep breath before marching over and pulling me into a hug.

"I'm so glad you're okay." He whispers. Seeing this side of him is shocking. I can feel him sniffing on my shoulder.

"We will leave you to it." Sahluko says before they make their exit. My dad pulls away, holding me by my shoulders.

"I'm so happy to see you."

"Baba, what's going on?" I need answers and since he is here now, he might as well give them to me. He sighs and takes a seat.

"I sorry that you had to find me like that." He says.

"I still dont understand why you would do that to yourself?"

"I didn't." He quickly replies. "Mandla did." Now I'm definitely confused.

"I dont understand."

"Mandla tried to kill me and he is trying to kill you too." He tells me. I am not surprised at Mntungwa trying to kill me, the man is as ruthless as my father, if not worse. But trying to kill his best friend, now that's a low, even for him.

"He wasn't there when I found you. How would he have tried to kill you?" I ask.

"Look, ever since you found out, he has been trying to come up with ways to silence you. For you not to say anything to anyone about what you saw. The truth is, for him, this is deeper than just some life long secret life. His father knew about us, and when he found out he disowned him. He told everyone the distance between them was because his father failed to support his dreams, he did everything in his power to paint him as a bad person. And it worked. He told me Dali came to him and asked him about fixing some traditional things, he is reluctant about it because it would mean owning up to his family about his past and the real reason there was distance between him and his father." My dad says.

"So he is trying to kill me to silence me?" I ask.

"As far as he is concerned his sons cannot find out about this."

"And you, what about your children? Can you afford for them to find out about this?" I question. It's easy to put this on Mntungwa when he himself is in it too. He sighs.

"The truth is I would have preferred for this to not be out in the open. But I cannot put a target on your back because of it. You're my child, no matter how many mistakes you make, I could never want you dead.

You know me, I face my problems head on, I'm too stubborn to run away from my problems." He admits.

"Okay, so how exactly did the pills end up in your system?" I ask. I saw the empty bottle on the floor. "And you admitted to it when Mntungwa was talking to you immediately after you woke up." I remind him.

"There were no pills. It was poison. I convinced the doctor to say it was pills but it wasn't. I'm pretty sure he put it in my food because we ate together. And as for admitting it, I had to pretend I was clueless about what's going on and make it seem like I am losing it." He says. This is an entire movie.

"Okay, now what?"

"Now, you call your siblings, call Dali and Sbusiso and tell them everything." He says. Is this man listening to himself.

"Telling on him means telling on you.: I tell him.

"I am a grown man Bahle, I can face my problems. Yes I was worried at first about this coming out, but now that Mandla tried to take my life and yours, nothing else matters. Tell them everything and I will deal with the consequences."

HIS HEART TO KEEP

71

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

BAHLENGIWE

I have an hour before everyone arrives. My nerves are shot. I can't even take a glass of wine or whiskey to calm me down. Lucky for me Dvumo is in the country this time so when I called everyone last night she booked the first flight out of Cape Town. And now she is on her way here together with Sihlangu. Lindo and Sbusiso are coming together obviously.

My dad is still at the safe house so I have to do this on my own. He figured if he is here it will look like some conspiracy theory against Mntungwa and his sons might not be too receptive to that. But if I do it on my own I will just be a concerned daughter.

"You need to stop pacing. You'll get dizzy and that's not good for the baby." Sahluko says. I know he is supposed to be guarding me but his presence is adding to my anxiety. I stop pacing and turn to him.

"How about you disappear until I've spoken to everyone?" I suggest.

"My job is to protect you." He replies.

"I doubt those hitmen will make it past security. Besides, Mntungwa doesn't know where I stay now." He shrugs his shoulders and slices through the apple with the knife. He seems to know more than I do.

"Do they know where I stay?" I ask, panic setting in.

"I doubt it." He replies. I let out a sigh of relief. Dali will be here first. I asked him to come sooner because I don't want to ambush him. He should be here any minute now.

"Okay then, I will need you to disappear. Dali is on his way here and he can't find you here." I tell him. He stops chewing and looks at me.

"Why? You're divorced. Plus I am working here." He replies. I am definitely not in the mood to fight with him so I let him be. "How far along are you?" He asks.

"I told you it's none of your business." I don't know where he is going with this question but I can feel it's not a good place.

"Not if the baby is mine." And there it is.

"The baby is not yours."

"If you're anything close to twelve weeks there is a possibility the baby is mine." He insists. I mentally punch the air in victory because the thought of him being the father had never crossed mind until yesterday when he asked me how far along I am. And now I can fully relax knowing the baby is Dali's.

"Lucky for you, I am way past that. So it's not yours." The door swings open and Dali walks in. Sahluko already has his gun drawn and pointed at him. His reaction skills are better than mine. Dali stands frozen, looking from him to me, his eyes filled with a thousand questions. Sahluko puts down the gun.

"Knocking is always a good idea." He says while putting his gun back in its holster. Dali closes the door and stands there.

"Who are you again?" He questions. Yeah the testosterone levels right now.

Sahluko doesn't reply. Dali turns to me.

"What is he doing here?" Only then does Sahluko find his tongue.

"I don't think that's any of your business." He tells him.

"I wasn't talking to you." He answers, stepping up to him.

"She is your ex wife, she doesn't owe you shit." Sahluko says. My senses come back when I realise they are about to get into it. I jump between them. Damn I am short. They are literally staring at each other over my head.

"That's enough. Sahluko can you please give us some privacy." He dips his eyes, looking at me. "Now." I insist. He shakes his head and walks out the door.

"And now? What's going on?" Dali asks. I pull him to the couch and we sit down.

"Okay, so I have something to tell you. I figured you deserve the courtesy of hearing this from me and alone before I tell everyone else." He nods his head urging me to keep going. "So remember when I went to Badplaas to talk to my dad after that whole custody threat your father made?"

"Yes."

"Well, I found out something when I was there. Your father and my father are sleeping together. Apparently it's been going on for years now." I blurt out. Beating around the bush is not an option. The others

will be here in less than an hour and he can at least have the few minutes to digest everything.

He is staring at me, his face blank as a white piece of paper. I can't keep going until he says something but he is quiet.

"Say something." I urge. He shakes his head, shrugging his shoulders.

"I dont know what to say. This sounds like a joke but not the funny kind of a joke." He says.

"Its not a joke. I wish it was. But I walked in on them. If this was one I would be ecstatic but it's not. The sight of them going at it is etched in my memory and I dont think it will be going anywhere soon."

"So you're serious?"

"As a heart attack." He sighs, running his hands down his face.

"My father would never do something like that. He would never cheat on my mother. With his best friend even. You do realise this makes no sense, at all. Those two have been as close as brother for as long as I can remember." He says, the reality slowly setting in.

"I know, it was hard for me to believe it either. If I hadn't seen it myself I'm sure I would have thought someone was lying." He shakes his head. I can see the disbelief in his eyes coupled with pain.

"This makes no sense." He says.

"Actually once you think about it, it makes a lot of sense. Remember those two would always go away on business trips, just the two of them, I remember mum saying they would share a room sometimes. The joint trips they would take with their wives. Send them off to shop

while they stayed in the hotel. We never thought there was anything more than two best friends just being friends. But after I saw them like that, a lot of things fell into place." I tell him.

"Is that why you called everyone here? To tell them about this?" I nod my head. "Bahle you can't do that? Do you know what this will do to our family?" He asks.

"I know. But I have no choice. Your father is trying to kill me." He stands up, his hands on his waist like an old woman ready for a fight.

"Okay now you're pushing it. Why would my father want to kill you?"

"Because I know about this. My dad told me yesterday that if your mum finds out and files for divorce, your dad will lose everything. You know what they say about a secret being a secret when its between two people, once a third person gets involved it becomes an issue. And right now I am the issue." He shakes his head and starts pacing. "Plus he doesnt want you and Sbusiso seeing him any differently."

"No, I know my dad can be hardcore but he wouldn't do this Bahle. He just wouldn't." He sits down and takes my hand. "Look, I know my dad is not one of your favourite people, especially recently but there is no need to make up all these stories. I know my father, would never try to harm you in anyway. You're the mother to his grandkids and family is very important to him. There is no way he would do this. So please, just let this go. You cannot repeat this to anyone else." He insists.

"Do you know why Sahluko is here?" I ask. He shakes his head. "My dad hired him to protect me. Your father also tried to kill my father. When I got to the house my dad was laying in his bed like someone who had tried to kill himself. I called your dad and he drove him to the hospital.

My dad told me the doctors found poison in his system not the pills I initially thought he had taken. And when I was coming back here I was almost killed by two hitmen who followed me to a garage. If Sahluko hadn't shown up when he did, I probably would be dead right now." He sighs and sits back on the couch, his eyes closed.

My phone pings with a message from my Dvumo saying they are outside. I text her the gate pin. I turn to Dali. I cant really read his face. Besides his eyes being closed, he looks like he is just sleeping. But I know he is not. I'm tempted to ask him if he is okay but that would just be a stupid question. Clearly he is not Okay. I get up and go into the kitchen. Seeing his reaction makes me rethink the refreshments I was thinking of putting out. Or maybe I will just take them out once everything is out in the open.

A knock on the door sends my heart racing. I take a deep breath before opening. Lindo and Sbu are also here. Lindo looks around the lounge as if she was expecting something.

"And here I was thinking this is a surprise baby shower." She says.

"Your baby shower is coming, just not today." I reply before giving her a hug.

"So what's the emergency?" Dvumo asks coming in for a hug. Sihlangu is cold as ice. And so is Sbu for some reason. I wonder what's his deal.

They all gather around the lounge, I can see Dali looking at me begging me to keep my mouth shut. But I cant. Not about this. Especially after what Mntungwa did. Keeping quiet will just make him try again, and next time he might succeed.

"So, what's the big emergency?" Lindo asks, her swollen feet perched up on the coffee table. Dali keeps staring at me, I can feel his eyes on me, even though I am trying to avoid his gaze but it's hard.

"Okay, so I called you here to tell you something." I start. I tell them everything from start to finish. Lucky for me no one says a word until I'm done. As soon as I am done I realise everyone is gawking at me as if i just lost my mind. "Say something." I urge.

"You're cranking us right?" Sbu asks. I knew he would be the first one to speak up. He might be a rebel but he loves his father. And the older he gets the more he holds his father in high regard. "Because there is no way you just opened your mouth and said this without cameras being plastered all over this house. So where are they?" He asks, his eyes scanning the room.

"I wish it was a prank. But it's true, your father is trying to kill me." I say.

"And why would he do that? Even if this was true, which I highly doubt, why would he want to kill you for it?" Sbu asks.

"Because if this comes out and your mother files for a divorce, he is going to lose everything." Sbu laughs.

"You almost had me." He says between laughs. His bout of laughter goes on for about a minute before it completely dies down. My siblings have said nothing. I'm still not sure if this is a good thing or not.

"Is this some revenge thing?" Sbu asks. He seems to be the only one who has digested this and is choosing to ask questions instead of being silent. He might not believe me but it's already in his head.

"Revenge for what?"

"For all the times our fathers have controlled your life? I get that it wasn't easy for you. I know that and I sympathise. I really do. But you got all you wanted. Dali made sure of it. You have the money, the shares, everything you wanted in the divorce you got. So why do this? Why make up this bullshit story? Are you that bitter and greedy? Didn't you get enough from the divorce." He spits.

"Okay that's enough." Dali chimes in.

"No, it's not enough clearly because she still wants more." Sbu says turning to his brother. "And the fact that you're sitting there and not defending your own father makes me think maybe Bahle's muthi is stronger than whatever Khanyi was giving you." He yells.

"Don't forget who you're talking about." Lindo speaks finally. Sbu turns to her, his rage pouring out of his pores.

"I know exactly who I am talking about." He says, glaring at her. "In fact, I am not going to sit here and listen to this bullshit. Let's go." He orders. He stands up and grabs his keys from the table and walks out. Silence fills the room the moment he walks out. It's weird and tense in here. Sihlangu is staring at me like I am nuts, in Dvumo's eyes you'd swear I just committed a cardinal sin.

"LINDO LETS GO!" Sbu says banging the door. When did he come back. Lindo sits on there, eyes closed and relaxed like her husband is not spitting fire. "LINDO!" He yells again. She opens her eyes and turns her head to look at him.

"I'm not going anywhere with you acting like a fool. Go. I'll find my way home." She says. He clicks his tongue and bangs the door shut.

"You know for once I agree with Sbusiso." Dvumo starts. "I know you don't like dad that much. If it wasn't for him and his stupid contract, God alone knows where you would be. So I understand the need to want to get him back for it but this is not it. Lying about him is not it." She adds.

"I am not lying Dvumo."

"Whatever anger issues you have, deal with them. Find a therapist and get help." She grabs her bag and follows her brother in laws path. Now it's just the four of us.

"Please say something." I say looking from Sihlangu to Lindo. Of everyone I thought Sihlangu would be the one happiest about this. I mean our father treated him like trash all these years because of his sexuality meanwhile he was getting bent over by his best friend. The hypocrisy of it all is something I expected him to address. Instead he is quiet. He sighs and grabs his keys.

"Come on, I'll drive you home." He says holding out his hand to Lindo. She takes it and waddles out of the apartment. No goodbye, no nothing. Wasn't she just defending me from Sbu, why isn't she saying anything?

I should have expected this to be honest. Sbu's rantings have little to no effect on me. It's my siblings whose silence and lack of trust hurts. I understand though, if I was in their shoes maybe I would not believe it either.

"I should go pick up the kids." Dali says. He gets his keys and walks out. I'm not sure what he is feeling. A part of me thinks he believes me, but you never know.

My dad is calling me. I take a deep breath before picking up the call.

"Baba."

"Sahluko tells me they've left. What happened?" He asks.

"I don't think they believe me." I admit.

"That's fine. As long as the idea is planted in their heads. That's all that matters." He says.

"Baba, if you don't mind me asking, why are you so determined to have this out there? I thought you'd want to protect your reputation." I ask.

"I wanted to keep it quiet, until he came after you. The man has known you since you were in your mother's womb, you're practically a child to him and yet it was easy for him to put out a hit on you. My child. That was the biggest mistake. If it was just me he'd tried to kill then I'd understand. But coming after you was a huge mistake." He says and I feel some warmth feel my chest.

"Me not being there would be one less problem for you to deal with." I tell him.

"Bahle, I know I can be strict and controlling sometimes, but you and your siblings mean the world to me. Anyone who comes after any of you becomes my enemy. Best friend or not." He says. "By the time I am done with him he will regret ever crossing that line." He adds before hanging up.

I'm not sure what that means but I know it's not good. Those two men together can be extremely conniving and dangerous, them going up against each other spells trouble. I just hope and pray none of us get

caught up in the middle of it. Who am I kidding, I'm already front and centre of this mess. Maybe I do need the security afterall.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

72

♥♥UNEDITED♥♥

DALINGCEBO

What I wouldn't give to turn back the hands of time and not have to hear what I heard yesterday. I know everyone seems to think Bahle is delusional or making this whole thing, and I want to believe that, I really do, but something in my gut tells me she is not lying. She wouldn't make something like this up just for fun. There has to be some truth to it.

Last night I kept thinking about the day she actually went to Badplaas. The person who came back was vastly different to the one who left. That alone makes me think she is not lying. I kept asking her the whole time if she was okay and she said she was fine but her mind would constantly drift away like she is thinking of something or replaying something in her head. And now it makes sense.

I pull up to Sbu's house and send him a text. We are going to Badplaas so we can hear everything from the horses mouth. That's if he will be man enough to admit it. But knowing mu father, if there is no proof he will definitely deny it.

Sbu walks out of his house as if he is being chased by ghosts. I can see the anger all over his face, even his steps carry so much anger, I'm sure he didnt sleep last night. He pulls open the door and jumps in, throwing his jacket in the backseat.

"Let's go." He orders.

"Hello to you too." I mumble as I start the car. We drive for a while with him just huffing and puffing next to me. "How are you feeling?" I ask. He heaves out a heavy sigh.

"I'm fine."

"You dont look fine." I reply. He shoots me a deadly side eye.

"How exactly do you expect me to be? Your stupid wife thinks it's okay to make up stories about out father. So how am I supposed to feel?" He asks.

"Okay, firstly, what you are not going to do is speak about Bahle like that. That's still the mother of my kids and you will respect her." I say. He chuckles.

"She's still letting you hit isnt she? I mean that's the only explanation for your delusion. Or maybe you vomited Khanyi's muthi and then took Bahle's? Which one is it." I pull the car over to the side of the road and turn to him.

"Sbusiso, you're my older brother and I respect you. But please afford me the same courtesy. And that means respecting the mother of my children too, especially in my presence. And if that's going to be hard for you, you can always get out of my car, I'll go alone and you'll find a way to get yourself there." He chuckles again, shaking his head.

"Wow, she is good. Very very good." He says.

"Sbusiso?"

"Fine. I'll keep my mouth shut. But you will be eating your words when you realise you're being played." He pulls his jacket from the backseat

and takes out his airpods, sticks them in his ear and starts blasting music. So mature.

I start the car and we drive in silence the rest of the way. I swear he is worse than Nqaba. I turn on the radio, soft music gently blasts through the speakers. Its enough to distract me from everything. The news intro starts, the reader starts with the headlines, but one in particular gets my attention. I listen attentively as she reads the news, anxiously waiting for the story that's likely to change our lives forever.

'In other news, The State Security Agency has reopened its investigation into the illegal blood diamonds that were rumoured to be brought in the country illegally and then passed off as diamonds from mines within South Africa. The investigation was started about fifteen years ago but nothing came off it. The SSA claims to have some new found information that could blow this case wide open and most likely implicate some of the country's big wigs. We will keep you updated as the story unfolds.'

Blood diamonds. I remember this story making the rounds a few years before I took over the mine. It fizzled out like a coal thrown into water. Till this day I don't know how it just disappeared because those guys had some strong, damning evidence, and my father was implicated in it too. I wonder what has changed.

We pull up to the house, luckily the gate is not locked. I drive in and park right up front. I'm not even sure if dad is here or not. I shake Sbu and he groans.

"What?" He mumbles.

"We are here." I say. He opens his eyes and looks around. I get out of the car first. I guess my dad heard us come in because the front door opens and he walks out.

"Baba." I greet and shake his hand.

"What are you two doing here?" He asks. I'm not sure if he is happy to see us or he is just being apprehensive. He keeps looking from me to Sbu and back again.

"We need to talk. Its urgent." Sbu says walking past him and into the house. My dad looks at me and I shrug. We follow Sbu into the house. He is already sitting on the couch, tapping his foot impatiently on the floor.

"Would you like something to drink?" Dad asks. There's a glass of whiskey on the table.

"We dont have time for that. There's been some disturbing allegations against you." Sbu says. My dad picks up the glass and takes a sip.

"Apparently, you're sleeping with Bab'Nxumalo." He adds and my dad spits out the whiskey, splashing it over the table. This is surprising, my dad is always cool, calm and collected so this reaction is something else.

"Wh....wh. ... what?" He asks as soon as his coughing fit has died down. His eyes are roaming everywhere and landing nowhere. That alone is suspicious in my eyes. "What are you talking about? Where did you hear that?"

"Bahle told us. Apparently she saw you two." Sbu tells him. I had my doubts before but now I am certain Bahle wasnt lying. My dad is

fidgety, he keeps pulling down his tshirt as if its choking him, beads of sweat have formed on his forehead. There is nothing more telling than that. He is definitely guilty of something.

"And you know what's worse, she also claims you tried to kill her and her father." Sbu adds. I dont know if he can see what I'm seeing or not. Or maybe he is still engulfed by his own anger he can't even see what's happening right in front of us. "Tell us it's not true."

"Of course it's not true." Dad yells. "Why would I want to kill Zwide, he is my best friend?" He says.

"You two are sleeping together aren't you? Bahle wasn't lying." I say. Sbu glares at me, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Dalingcebo, why would you say that? You really believe that girl?" He screams.

"That girl is the mother of my children. And unless you've been wearing blinders the whole time we've been here, then you missed your fathers reaction to everything. Look at him, he is sweating as if he is in a sauna he keeps stammering and look at his hands, he is shaking." I say.

"Baba, tell him he is lying." Sbu urges. Dad stares at me and I stare right back, daring him to lie. "And wena how are you not going to believe our father?" He adds.

"Tell us baba, tell us Bahle is lying, tell us she didnt find you and bab'Zwide in a compromising position. Tell us she is lying." I say. He swallows. He cant even say a damn thing. He stands up, grabs his chest as if something is happening and starts breathing heavily.

"Baba." Sbu screams rushing to him, holding him and putting him back on the chair. "Baba." He fans his face with his tshirt. "Dali call an ambulance." He yells. I should have my dad audition for a Mzansi horoscope because this acting, is sub par at best.

"Or maybe we can drive him to the hospital." I suggest.

"You're right, an ambulance will take forever." Sbu says as he leans down and picks up our father. The man is clearly struggling to carry him but his stubbornness wont let him admit that. I wonder where this little act will go.

KHANYISILE

I dont know if this is a miracle or what but I am grateful for it. My mum is getting better. Everyday her skin is healing. The smell is completely gone. It's like a whole new person has emerged. I'm going to see her today. Hopefully the doctor can give us a date for when she will come home. I'm sure Senele will be happy to hear that mum is home.

I finish getting dressed and spray on some perfume. This one is one scent that puts me in a good mood. Except for today. I rush to the bathroom and vomit my entire breakfast into the toilet. Now I have to change because this perfume is on everything. When there is nothing left in my stomach I get up and gargle with mouthwash before changing into another dress and sneakers.

A knock on the door disturbs me as I am making myself another bowl of soft porridge. Hopefully this time it will stay. I open the door and two men are standing on the other side of the burglar bar.

"Miss Manana?" One of them asks. I know I didn't order anything, plus they are not carrying anything.

"Who is asking?" How did they even make it past security?

"Detective Mahlaba and this is my partner, Sergeant Dliwayo. Can we come in." The short one says flashing his police ID. My mind immediately races to my siblings, what if something happens to them?

"Why? Are my sisters okay?" I ask.

"Can we come in." Mahlaba repeats. I open the burglar bar, my heart already beating in my chest. They walk in, scanning the lounge as if they are looking for something.

"What's going on?" I ask. Mahlaba takes a seat as the other one walks around the room. He is clearly the less talkative one. Or maybe this is a case of good cop bad cop, I don't know.

"Miss Manana, a case of fraud has been opened by the Sandton Fertility Clinic. Apparently you forged a signature to get yourself inseminated." He says. So Dali was right about pursuing this. I swear that man is vindictive.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I reply. I don't care what anyone says or thinks, no one saw me sign those papers and they can't prove it so I will deny this till I take my last breath.

He pulls out his notebook and looks at it.

"So you're telling me you did not go to the clinic and made a request for your fertilised embryos to be inseminated in you?" He asks.

"If they are mine, what is the problem if I use them?" I've watched enough law and order to know not to break easily when it comes to cops.

"See, the problem with that is the other party, the one whose sperm was used to fertilise those eggs, they did not agree to have them used." He says.

"He agreed to have them fertilised though. So what was supposed to happen to those embryos afterwards? Sit there until they expire. If there is even such a thing." I answer. I can see the frustration taking over him. I should keep going till they leave.

"Ma'am, the person whose sperm was used is suing the clinic for using those embryos without his consent. So now the hospital is looking into how you were able to use those embryos. Documents show you used a fake signature. A handwriting specialist has already confirmed that the signature you provided was fake. So it will do you good to cooperate with us." Is he threatening me? He better not.

"Detective, I'm not sure why you are here to be honest, but we can finish this conversation some other time, when my lawyer is present." I say. He shuts the notebook and puts it back in his pocket. He pulls out a card from his pants pocket and places it on the coffee table.

"This is my card. Please get your lawyer and report to the Sandton Police Station by tomorrow. We have a lot to talk about." He says. The moment they walk out I let out a huge breath. I need to speak to Dali, this has to end. Right now.

I drive to the hospital with my stomach grumbling but my appetite went out the window the moment those men showed up. I head

straight for the ward and find my mum sitting up on the bed, she looks so much better. Although most of his skin has scars now, but its better than it was a while back.

"Mama, how are you?" I ask. She turns and looks at me and immediately cowers, pulling the covers up to her neck. "Ma, it's me, Khanyi." I say. She starts screaming.

"NO. NO. DON'T TAKE ME. PLEASE. DON'T TAKE ME." She yells. What the hell is going on with her? She starts rocking back and forth, her hands covering her ears. "They are coming for me. They are coming for me. Stop them. They are coming for me." She repeats over and over again.

"Ma, who is coming for you?" I ask. She grabs my wrists and I can feel her nails digging into my skin.

"They are coming, please help me. Dont let them take me." She whispers, tears streaming down her face. A nurse rushes in and sticks a needle in her drip. What the hell is happening.

"Nurse, what did you give her?" I question seeing my mother get drowsy.

"Its just a sedative. It should help her sleep." She says.

"What is wrong with her?"

"We are not sure yet but she will be going for a psychiatric evaluation later today. Then we will know what is happening." She tells me.

"When did this start?"

"Last night. She kept saying someone or something was coming for her. We had to sedate her and put her on restraints otherwise she would have hurt herself. Or worse, hurt someone else."

This cannot be happening. My mother is losing her mind. Just when I thought things were coming together. Why am I being punished like this?

HIS HEART TO KEEP

73

DALINGCEBO

I'm not sure how long dad's acting will take. They've been in there doing God alone knows what for almost two hours now. Sbu is pacing up and down the waiting room as if dad is undergoing some major heart surgery.

"What is taking them so long?" He mumbles, looking at his watch. He stops pacing and looks at me. I'm sure according to him I am the world's worst son. But I know my dad, that reaction screamed guilty.

"Why are you not worried about our father?" He asks. "The man could be dying and you're here, relaxed." The drama. Although I am relaxed, but I'm certain dad is faking this whole thing.

"What would you like me to do? Go in there and help the doctors?"

"You could at least pretend to be concerned." He hisses, dumping himself on the chair next to me. "That man is your father. And you're taking someone else's word over his. Do you really think our father would.. he would" he looks around the room making sure everyone is out of earshot before leaning in. "He would fuck another man?" He whispers, disgust dripping off of his every word.

"Honestly, until a few hours ago I was ready to give him the benefit of the doubt. But now I know for sure Bahle was right." I reply.

"This is our father we are talking about. A hardworking, strong black man. There is no way this is true." I sigh and turn towards him.

"Sbusiso, tell me something, have you ever seen dad react the way he did when we confronted him?" I ask.

"No."

"Exactly. Dad stood firm and didnt even blink when the hawks were investigating him for some smuggling crime, he didnt even blink as they went through his office looking for God knows what. Even after they claimed to have witnesses who would testify against him he did not falter. That case went away. Now you're telling me that between now and then something has changed for him to all of a sudden react this way? The man doesn't even have heart problems so explain that reaction to me? He was shaking and sweating. If that is not a clear sign of this being true then I dont know what is." I say. A doctor walks into the room and looks around.

"Khumalo." He calls out and we stand up.

"Yes. How is our father?" Sbu asks.

"He will be fine, he just had a panic attack." So much drama for a panic attack. "You can go see him if you'd like while I prepare his discharge papers." He taps Sbu on the shoulder then walks away.

"Still not clear enough for you?" I ask him.

"Dali stop." He says.

"All I am saying is that clear signs are there. If you still dont believe by now then I dont know. I am going in, are you coming?"

"I have to call mom and find out where they are." He replies pulling his phone out of his pocket. I know that's just an excuse, their flight will land in two hours.

He is laying there, his eyes closed as if he is contemplating his life's choices. I clear my throat and his eyes shoot open.

"The doctor says you'll be fine, it was just a panic attack." I tell him. I pull up the chair and sit down.

"I know, he told me." He says. The silence that follows is both awkward and uncomfortable. His eyes are spinning all around the room.

"So if you dont mind me asking, does this mean you're gay?" I blurt out. He quickly snaps his head and turns to me.

"Dont ask me that?" He hisses.

"Why not? I'm not judging you. I just want to understand." I say. He sighs and turns the other way.

"You won't understand." Maybe he is right, I wont understand. I should just stick in my lane and focus on my own life. But I do have one more question though.

"So were you really willing to kill Bahle to hide your secret? Kill even your grandchild that she is carrying?" I ask. That gets his attention.

"Bahle is pregnant?"

"Yes. Almost eighteen weeks." Guilt washes over him like a flood of rain.

"I didnt know." He admits.

"You know what pisses me off about this whole situation, I get you wanting to hide your secret, I get you wanting to protect your reputation, what I don't understand is why you would want to take the mother of my children away from them. Even if you didn't know she is pregnant, she still has two kids, your grandkids, and you were ready to leave them motherless for your own selfish reasons." I say. Until this moment, I didn't realise how angry I am. He can fuck whoever he wants for all I care, but trying to kill Bahle, that's taking it too far.

"I'm sorry." I'm not even sure if his apology is genuine or it's just another way of him trying to absolve himself and maybe go after her again tomorrow.

"I'm not the one you should be apologising to." I push the chair back and stand up. "This might seem extreme but I'd like for you to stay from my kids and I. And stay away from Bahle." His bulge out as if he is a cartoon.

"You're punishing me for this?" He asks.

"No. I am protecting my children and their mother." I say.

"You know I love those kids." He barks.

"I know. And yet you were ready to kill their mother. I can't just forgive that. Or forget it." He sighs and sits back on the bed.

"What about the fixing of umsamo, we still have to do that."

"We will. But my kids are not involved in that. And if you feel that will be hard for you, I'll speak to Babelomkhulu, he is more than willing to help. I have to go." I walk out of the ward with his eyes piercing my back. I find Sbu sitting on the bench outside.

"You can go. I'm leaving. I can drop you off at the house so you can get his car and come back to pick him up." I say. He looks at me, confusion all over his face.

"You're not taking him home?" He asks.

"No. I'm going back to Joburg."

"You mean Witbank, that's where your house is." He reminds me. As if I don't know.

"No. Joburg. I want to see my kids." Just then a bunch of police come marching down the hallway. People come out of their wards to see where they are going, some even have their cameras out taking videos. They get closer to us walk past us and get into my father's ward. Sbu and I exchange glances before we rush into the ward.

"Mr Mandla Khumalo, you're under arrest for the illegal smuggling of diamonds. You have the right to remain silent, anything you say, can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have a right to an attorney, and if you can't afford one, one will be provided for you." An officer says as another sticks handcuffs on him. It's a good thing he wore his clothes, it would be awkward for him to walk down the hallway.

"I'll call the lawyer." Sbu says pulling out his phone as our father is dragged away. I'm not even sure where they are taking him right this moment but I'm sure Sbu and the lawyer can take care of this one. I have a long journey ahead of me.

My phone has been ringing non-stop with journalists wanting a comment on dad's arrest. I answered the first call and replied with no

comment and it was like I opened the flood gates. Calls keep coming every five minutes. I've decided to just ignore the calls because I have no idea what is going on. I'll just call the lawyer later and find out what's going on.

By the time I get to Joburg it's already dark outside. I text Bahle and she sends me the code. It changes every three days. Makes me sleep better at night that my kids are safe at least. I walk into the apartment and the kids are playing in the lounge with the guy who is supposed to be Bahle's security.

"Even if I was a robber you'd be dead by now." I say as my kids come running to me. He gives me a side eye, maybe I should tell Bab'Nxumalo that someone is slacking in his duties.

"Daddy I got a star at school." Fezi says, intruding into my thoughts.

"That's very good. Did you do your homework?"

"Already done." Nqaba chimes in.

"That's good. Where is your mum." They both point to the bedroom.

"Okay, let me go say hi then I'll come back and we can play together okay."

"Okay." I put Fezi down and they run back to the lounge. I make my way to the bedroom. I lightly tap on the door before going on. Bahle is laying on the bed, curled up as ifis she crying? I get closer and sure enough she is crying.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I ask taking a seat on the edge of the bed. She gets up and wraps her arms around my neck and starts crying again. Okay, then something must have really happened. I hope she's not

crying for my father. I hold her, rubbing her back and assuring her that everything will be okay. After a while she wipes her tears and sits back, leaning on the headboard.

"I'm sorry, I ruined your shirt." She says looking at my shoulder. I pull the shirt and sure enough there is a stain.

"This old thing. It's nothing." She smiles but I can tell she's not okay.

"What's wrong?" She pulls out another tissue from the box and blows her nose on it.

"Lindo is having her baby." She tells me.

"Okay, shouldn't you be happy for her?" Another tear drops down her face.

"I am happy for her. But she doesn't want me there." Okay that's where the problem is.

"Maybe she just wants to be with Sbu." I don't even know why I am lying because I am sure Sbu is still somewhere trying to get my father out of jail.

"Sihlangu and Dvumo are there. When I offered to come she said there is no need. She hates me. Maybe you were right, I should have kept my mouth shut." I sigh and take her hand.

"Listen, I know she's upset right now but she will come around. Give her some time." She shakes her head as fresh tears escape her eyes.

"I know she's mad at me but I am missing out on being there for her first child's birth. That's something I can never get back. She was there for my kids and we promised each other we'd be there at every birth.

But now she does not want me there. Even Dvumo said it would be better if I didnt come." She says. I pull her in for another hug.

"I wish I knew how to make all this better." I whisper.

"Its fine, it's not your fault." She pulls back and takes a deep breath. "I heard your father was arrested." Well, a change of subject will get her mind of Lindo but does it have to be my father we talk about.

"Can we talk about something else other than him?" She chuckles and I can fully say I love that sound. It's way better than her sobbing.

"Okay, our divorce decree was delivered today." She says.

"And how do you feel about it?" I ask. She shrugs.

"I dont know. I guess it's not as freeing as I thought it would be." She admits. I'm more surprised she actually said it herself.

"What do you mean? I thought this is what you wanted."

"It is but I thought it would come with this feeling, I dont know, like taking a deep breath or something. Anything." I take her hand again and she stares at me.

"You know what it brings me?" I ask. She shakes her head. "It brings me an opportunity." She squints her eyes, her brows snapping together.

"An opportunity for me to make things right. An opportunity for us to start again, on a clean slate." I say.

"I dont know what that means." Of course she does.

"What do you think about me?"

"I dont know."

"Come on. You must think something. Anything, even if it's bad. I'll take it." I urge. This might backfire on me but I'd rather try and fail than not try at all. One of my dad's greatest lessons.

She takes a deep breath and stares into my eyes. It feels like she is looking straight into my soul which is both scary and exciting.

"I think you're great. The new you that is. You're present, attentive and somehow I feel like that's always been you. Before everything." She admits.

"Do you think our marriage would have worked if it wasn't for everything that was done?" I question. Right now I am putting myself out there in hope of getting something back, my family. But I might end up getting rejected instead. And that is scary.

"Probably. I like the new you and I'm sure if you were yourself these past ten years maybe we would have ended up falling for each other." She says. "This new person that you've become, everything about you now is what I wished you'd have been throughout our marriage."

"But I'm here now."

"What?"

"You said this me is what you wish I would have been, now I'm here, the person you needed me to be. You can have me. This time you can have all of me. Not the strung up on muthi me but the real me. The me who was willing to give everything up to make things work even though our marriage was arranged. This is the me you wanted. And now you can have me. All of me, no muthi, no side chicks no nothing that can stand in our way. No parents to dictate how we do this, just us. You and

me and no one else to interfere in anything. Just you and I deciding to walk this path, all over again."

HIS HEART TO KEEP

74

BAHLENGIWE

I am stunned. I'm not sure how I am supposed to respond to this. I've waited ten years to hear these words from Dali, ten years of hoping and praying that one day it would happen. And right after I've given up, right after our divorce decree is finally out he says it. I don't know if I should be scared or happy.

"I want wings." I blurt out the first thing that comes to my mind. As much as I appreciate this moment right now, all I want are wings. Dunked wings to be specific. Dali is looking at me like I've grown an extra head.

"I'm sorry, what?" He says, his eyes squinted and his lips pursed.

"I want wings. Dunked wings. I don't know why because I don't like sweet things but yeah, I want wings." He gives me a lopsided grin and shakes his head.

"Okay then. I'll go get you wings." He stands up and pulls out his phone from his pocket. I will leave this charging. I'll be back." He walks out and I heave out a sigh, I'm not sure yet if it's relief or what.

I want to call Lindo and ask for her advice but she's not talking to me. Titi, well, that's a dead end. Dvumo answers only what I ask and says nothing more. Sihlangu won't pick up his calls. It seems I've alienated everyone in my life. All I wanted was to tell the truth and nothing else.

Dali's phone is off. I turn it on before making my way to the kitchen. I put the kettle on so I can make some pap. I don't know why I want to eat pap with wings, or wait, I do know. I'm pregnant. I leave the kettle simmering and head to the lounge. The kids are glued to the TV and Sahluko is busy on his phone. Luckily tomorrow is not a school day so they can do with an extra hour before going to bed. I go back to the kitchen to make my pap.

"So you're really going to give him another chance to hurt you." That would be my bodyguard sticking his nose where it doesn't belong. I turn around and he is standing in the middle of the kitchen with his hands in his pockets. "Small apartment, thin walls." He adds seeing the confusion in my face.

"I don't think that's any of your business." I turn back to the stove and peek at the water. It's close to boiling.

"Help me understand this, you've freed yourself from him, from his family and now you want to dive back in again. Do you have a death wish?" He questions. I try to ignore him but he is here, I can feel his presence behind me. He is too close. Way too close.

I turn around and almost bump into him. I need to talk to my father about getting him out of here.

"Explain to me why you seem to enjoy being hurt by him. Why do you want to go back for round two?" I should have just stayed in the bedroom to be honest.

"Sahluko, since you like eavesdropping, because I know for a fact these walls are far from being thin, you should have listened more carefully because I did not say I was going to give him a second chance. And even

if I did, it is none of your business. You know what is your business though, you still haven't told me why you upped and left like you did. Maybe answer that question before you go questioning anything that I do." I fire back, pushing him out of the way and getting the mealie meal from the cupboard.

I cook my pap with him standing there, watching me like he is some overbearing supervisor. I close the pot and stare up at him.

"I'm still waiting for an answer." I say. He becomes fidgety for some reason. Even though he is trying to hide it, my gut tells me he didn't just up and leave. There was a reason. Or maybe it has something to do with his actual job. I could hire a PI but I remember Dali already did that and found nothing on him. Now I'm more curious than ever what his deal is.

"I'm worried about you." He replies after a while. He is trying so hard to ignore my question.

"Don't be. Your job is to keep me safe. Which I believe I am. So now if you don't mind, I'd like to be alone with my kids. You can disappear to wherever you disappear to normally. I mean you're good at that. So please excuse me." I turn back to the stove and turn the pap. I only turn back around when I hear the door close.

I take a deep breath, I can't believe he has the guts to question me. Let alone think he knows me or my situation. I know Dali is no saint but everything that has happened was because of the muthi. I mean the signs are there, he is way different now than he was a couple of months ago. Anyone who knows him can tell how much he has changed. Would it be such a bad thing to give him a chance

give him an opportunity to do things differently?

I pick up my phone and go through my people's statuses on WhatsApp. Lindo has a date typed into her status. I go to the next one and she has a some tiny hands. She's given birth. It feels like someone has a hand around my heart and they are squeezing tight. I should have been there. That was the plan, I would be there when she has her baby and she would be there when I have mine. And now I've missed an opportunity to see my niece or nephew being born. It's hard to tell with this picture because the baby seems to be cradled in a white blanket.

I dial her number. I dont think she will answer but I call anyway. At the most I can always leave a message. It rings a few times and she answers. Shocking.

"Bahle." She says. Her tone is cold as hell.

"Hey. I saw your status. Congratulations."

"Thanks." Wow, she really doesnt want to talk to me. And one thing I can do is read the signs. I know when I'm not wanted.

"Uhm... yeah that's all I wanted to say. Congratulations. Bye." I hang up the phone and a lone tear runs down my face. I close my eyes, taking in deep breaths and trying to calm myself down.

"What's wrong?" Dali asks. I open my eyes to find him standing in front of me. When did he get in. He gently wipes the tears running down my face. I'm glad he is here.

"Lindo had the baby. I called her just now to congratulate her and she was cold as ice."

"I'm sorry." He says. "I wish I knew what to do to make things better between you guys." I wish I knew what to do to. He pulls a bouquet of flowers from behind him. "Maybe these can make you smile, even for a second." Well they work. I haven't received flowers in a long time. I smell them and they are amazing. For about five seconds before I feel the nausea coming back. And here I thought it stops during the second trimester. I guess I was wrong. I hand the flowers over to him and hurry to the bathroom.

When I come back to the kitchen he has decked out the counter with food. I asked for dunked wings but he seems to have bought the entire KFC menu. And the kids are loving it. My flowers are nowhere in sight.

"Where are the flowers?" I ask.

"In the bin." He replies. Is he nuts? I get them out of the bin place them on the counter. "You were just throwing up because of them." He reminds me.

"If I smell them. But if they sit on a vase, and somewhere far from me, it should be fine." I dish up for the kids and they head back to the lounge to eat. To think they ate less than two hours ago, but because it's junk food they will eat again. I dish up my pap and sit down to eat. Dali is looking at me like I am crazy.

"What's going on with your dad?" I ask.

"I don't know. I haven't spoke to anyone. I will call the lawyer later and find out what's happening." He seems way too relaxed about this. I know he is angry at him, and it's my fault, but the man is still his father despite his faults.

I finish eating and make my way to the bedroom while Dali puts the kids to sleep. I ate way too much and I need to lie down. Dali's phone lights up as soon as I walk in. It looks like someone has been calling him.

"Dali, your phone is ringing." I shout down the passage.

"Please answer it." He shouts back. Look at me turning into a whole PA.

I look at the screen and it's an unsaved number. I answer the call and put it on loudspeaker. Before I can even say anything the person starts talking.

"Dali, thank God, I've been trying to call you but you seem to have blocked my number." She says. I know that voice even in my sleep.

"Khanyi, Dali is busy at the moment." I reply. She's quiet. "Khanyi?"

"Bahle?"

"Yes. It's me." I hear her sigh.

"Why do you have Dali's phone?" Heh, third degree mntakabawo.

"I dont see how that is any of your business." She chuckles.

"Right. Can I please talk to him?" She asks. I could just hand the phone over to Dali but I'm too lazy to get out of bed.

"Dali, Khanyi wants to talk to you." I shout.

"I'm busy." He shouts back. I'm pretty sure Khanyi also heard him.

"Tell him this is important." She says.

"He is busy. Anyways thank you for calling. Bye." I hang up the phone and lay back.

KHANYISILE

She hung up. She actually hung up on me. After all the trouble I went through to call Dali, she is the one who hangs up on me. I don't even understand why she is answering his phone. I may not know much about divorce but I know divorced people don't live together, let alone answer each other's calls. Or maybe the whole divorce thing was just a lie.

"Are we going to the hospital tomorrow?" Seluleko asks coming into my room. I'm not even sure why we bother going there. I don't want to give up on mum but it's getting to that point. I thought when they said her sores were healing it meant things were getting back to normal. But clearly I was wrong.

"I don't know. I have a doctor's appointment, so maybe after that." I tell her. She nods her head and walks out. I could try to call Dali again but I'm sure he won't reply. Especially now that he knows the number. I'll try again tomorrow with a different number. I need him to put an end to this fraud thing. I am not going to raise my child in a prison cell. Especially his child. One way or another they will raise this child.

I scroll through my phone, looking at our pictures and videos. I am well aware that all this seems like a dream that never happened but to me it was real. It felt real, the plans we had, the dreams we had, it was real to me and I refuse to believe anything else.

I feel a cramp slice through my abdomen and I almost scream. I bring my feet up trying to put some pressure on my stomach, just enough pressure to not affect the baby. Another cramp hits and I scream. It feels like someone has a knife and they are slicing through my insides.

I'm trying not to panic. The doctor did say the chances of a miscarriage in the first trimester are very high.

Seluleko comes running into the room.

"Are you Okay?" She asks. I shake my head as another cramp hits. Now I can feel the tears filling my eyes. This cannot be good. "Let's go to the hospital. Cramps this early are not good." She says. She holds my hand, helping me out of the bed. I see her gasp, her eyes glued to the bed. I turn around and there is a pool of blood on the bed.

No. No. This cannot be happening.

"We have to get to the hospital. Now." I hiss as another cramp takes over.

"Okay, let's go." She helps me out to the lounge before rushing to the bathroom and coming back with a towel and my robe. She wraps the towel around my waist before helping me put on the robe. The only prayer I know is the Lords prayer, but today I pray. I ask and bargain with God as we make our way to the car. I can feel sweat dripping down my back and I know my face is peppered with droplets of sweat. I am not saint but God cannot do this to me. He cannot take the one good thing in my life right now. He cannot punish me like this. Haven't I suffered enough?

HIS HEART TO KEEP

75

KHANYISILE

I dont know what is going on. I've been in this bed for hours now. The cramps are over but the pain is still there. I feel like someone just ripped my heart out. My head already knows what is happening but my heart and soul refuse to accept it. After all that I went through to have this baby, I literally committed a crime to carry this child and now I have nothing to show for it.

The doctor walks in with a nurse behind her. Seluleko quickly stands up. I'm glad she is here. Going through this alone would have made it ten times worse.

"Doctor, what's going on?" She asks. I cant even look at the doctors face, I'm afraid of the pity I'll see there. I keep my face buried in my arm as tears drip down to the pillow.

"I'm sorry. We tried everything we could." She says. And right there, I feel an emptiness in my chest that I never imagined. My baby is gone. I'm convinced God hates me. This is the only explanation.

I feel Seluleko's hand squeezing mine. I'm not shocked by the doctors words, I'm just hurt.

"I will have the nurse prepare the discharge papers and the medication." She adds. Their footsteps fade away and I silently sob into the pillow. This baby was the only light at the end of the proverbial tunnel for me. He or she was the one thing keeping me going despite

everything. And now that it's gone I don't know what I am going to do with myself.

"I'm sorry sis wam." I hear Selu say, rubbing my back. I take a deep breath, wipe my tears and try to get off the bed. I am in pain. Physically and emotionally. Selu rushes around the bed to help me off it. "You need to take things easy. Let's wait for the nurse to come back before you exert too much pressure on yourself." She says. All I want to do right now is go home. I don't care about anything else.

"I just want to go home." I tell her.

"I know. And we will. Let's wait for the doctor." She urges.

"Please just give me my gown." She picks up the gown off of the couch and helps me into it. It has some blobs of blood but it's not too much. I'll have to wash it when I get home.

"I was thinking we can go see mum before we go back home." She suggests. It's almost morning. I'm pretty sure she is sleeping.

"Maybe later."

"Why not now. We are here already." She adds. Right now I do not care about mum or whatever else is happening with her. I just lost my child, I just want to focus on me.

"Seluleko, if you want to go see your mother then go. I don't even know what we will be doing there because she doesn't even know we are there." She takes a step back like I just offended her somehow.

"Of course she knows we are there."

"No. She doesn't. You saw how she is, she is always daydreaming and seeing things and people that are not there. So how will she know if we're there?" I ask her.

"So you're giving up on her?" I swear I am not in the mood for this. "We have to help her. She is our mother."

"Help her how Seluleko? How are we supposed to help her? Didn't your friend say that there is nothing anyone can do to help her. Everything that's going on right now, everything that's happening to her is karma for all the witchcraft and all the bad things she has done. No one can save her from that." She slowly claps her hands and step further back.

"You're unbelievable you know that. This is our mother we are talking about. The same mother who did all that witchcraft so you can have the soft life you've been living. And now that it's all gone up in flames you're going to turn your back on her. How selfish can you be?" She yells.

"Selfish Seluleko? I am selfish? Why do you make it seem as if I was there when she was doing all that she did because i was also just as clueless as you."

"And yet you were the biggest beneficiary of her evil doings. Si where is your karma then?" Yoh. This girl is testing me.

"Newsflash ke sisi, you are just as complacent." She gasps, clutching her chest like an old white woman. "Yes. You can wipe the shock of your face. Do you think Dali would have paid for your varsity if not for this 'evil' you speak of? Do you think you would have the job that you do, the life that you do without his connections?" I see reality finally setting in. "Yes sisi wam, you can get off your high horse now because you and

I am in the same boat. We knew nothing about mum's actions and yet here I am, this is my karma. I just lost my child. What other punishment would you like me to get? Run the streets like a mad person?" She is quiet all of a sudden. "If you want to go see your mother then go. Just hand me my car keys, I want to go home and get some rest."

I'm not waiting around for the nurse. I'm going to reception to sign those papers so I can go. Luckily I find her there, although she is busy yapping instead of getting the papers.

"Miss Manana. I was just bringing your papers." She says scrambling to find the papers. Any other I would rain hell on her but right now, I need to go and rest. She hands me the papers and I sign them. She then hands me my medication. "If you're still bleeding after a week, please come back. This medication is going to help eliminate any residual tissue in the womb. Please make sure you get some rest and not do anything extreme. Give your uterus a chance to rest." She says. I take my medication and leave.

I'm not even supposed to be driving but here I am, sitting in the driver's seat. I take a deep breath before starting the car. Seluleko knocks on the window. I roll it down and wait.

"I'll drive." She offers. I won't even argue with her. I scoot over to the passenger side. She gets in and we drive home. I guess she is not seeing her mother today.

The drive home is silent. Not even the radio is playing. I don't know if I should tell Dali about this. Whether he likes it or not, this was just as much his child as it was mine. He deserves to know. I should have brought my phone with me, I would have called him from the hospital.

When we get home the first thing I do is get my phone and dial his number. I guess he hasn't blocked this number because its ringing.

"Hello." He replies his voice sounds like he just woke up from his sleep. Well it is pretty early, so that's expected.

"Dali, its Khanyi."

"Well this must be a nightmare." He mumbles. Wow. So now I am a nightmare. "What do you want Khanyi?" I hear shuffling, like he is getting out of bed, then a door opens and closes.

"I wanted to tell you that..... that" " I feel tears welling up again and my chest constricting. These pain is worse than anything I've ever felt in my life.

"I want to go back to sleep. Just say what you want to say." He says.

"I had a miscarriage tonight. Our baby is gone." I tell him as a son escapes me.

"Oh, thank you Jesus." Did he just.....? No. He did not. There is no way he just opened his mouth and said that. No way.

"I'm sorry did you just say thank you Jesus?" I ask. I hope to God my ears are deceiving me. He cannot possibly be this heartless. I refuse to believe that.

"I did. I dont know if its God, my ancestors, Allah or whatever higher power is there but I am thankful for this. Now there is nothing tying me to you. And no child of mine will be walking this earth with you as a mother. So yes, I am grateful to God for this blessing. Goodnight. Or Good morning. Which ever one it is." He says.

I sit there with the phone stuck in my ear. He didn't cut the call. I can hear him peeing and then flushing the toilet. I hear a door open and close again. I should hang up but I'm too stunned to do anything.

"Who was that?" Someone asks. Well, Bahle asks. He is with her.

"No one important." He tells her. The phone slips from my fingers and falls onto the floor. I know he didn't want this child but couldn't he pretend at the least. Pretend like he cares. Not even an I'm sorry or condolences. He just went straight for the celebration.

I slowly make my way to the bedroom. The sight of dry blood on the bed welcomes me. I go to the bathroom and get a bucket, fill it with water and soap and a rag and go back to the bedroom. I pull the blankets and sheets off the bed. The blood seeped into the mattress. I get a brush and start scrubbing the mattress like a mad person. The stain won't go away. I scrub and scrub, my tears mixing with the soapy and bloody water. Dali's voice keeps playing in my head. He hates me so much he is ready to celebrate me losing my child. I thought my mother was heartless but clearly I was wrong. Dali takes the cup.

DALINGCEBO

I've been humming and whistling since I woke up this morning. God is definitely good. I need to go to church and give him his dues. I am making breakfast. The kids will be up soon. Strange how easy it is for them to wake up when they are not going to school. I hate morning phone calls but this one has made my entire day. I've been trying to figure out how I am going to deal with having to coparent with Khanyi, especially if she doesn't go to jail but now that's a problem I will not have to deal with ever.

I set the table for the kids and set Bahle's breakfast in a tray. I make my way to the bedroom, Bahle is in the bathroom. I place the tray on the side table. I gently knock on the bathroom door.

"Hey, are you Okay?" I ask through the door.

"Yeah, I'll be out just now." She replies.

"Okay. I'll wake the kids up." I go back to the kitchen and the kids are already up. I dish up for them and they rush to the lounge and turn on the TV. Well its Saturday so I can let it slide. I head back to the bedroom and find Bahle sitting on the bed with the tray in her hand. I have my soft porridge with the muthi gogo Mpungose gave me. Apparently its supposed to kill whatever animal Khanyi's concoctions might have created in me. Gogo Mpungose says if I dont eat this then I might end up being violent and find myself becoming a worse monster than I was.

"So what are we celebrating?" Bahle asks. I could tell her, but I also dont want to upset her so I just shrug. "You know if we are going to do this again we cant have any secrets between us." I lift my head up and look at her. She is actually thinking about giving me another chance. My lips curl into a huge smile. "I said IF. A big IF." She insists. I dont care if it's an if or definitely, what matters is that she is thinking about it.

"Okay, but I dont think this is something you want to know." I'm hoping she will let it go but she doesn't.

"Try me."

"Well, this morning Khanyi called and told me she had a miscarriage." I say. Her jaw almost drops to the floor.

"And you think that's something worth celebrating?" She asks. I shrug again and focus on my food. "Dali, that is not something to celebrate."

"You do remember who we are talking about right?" She can't be feeling sorry for her. That's like having pity on the devil.

"She is still human Dali and I'm sure she wanted that child." Someone needs to donate Bahle's heart to science so we can know what it's made off that makes her feel sorry for someone who has turned her life upside down so many times.

"Well I didn't and I'm not going to pretend to be hurt because i am not. And I'm sure she didnt want it either, she just wanted to use it to blackmail and when that failed she decided to keep it to spite me. Well, my God and my ancestors clearly decided to take matters into their own hands. And I cant say I am sad about it." I say.

My phone ringing disturbs us. It's my mother. I wonder what she wants.

"Ma."

"I'm outside the gate. Come and open for me." She says.

"Which gate?" If she is at my place then she is at the wrong one.

"Are you not at Bahle's new place?" She asks.

"I am."

"Then come and open for me. I am at the gate." She says and hangs up. I send her the code and the flat number.

"Where is she?" Bahle asks.

"She is at the gate. I just sent her the code." Bahle jumps out of bed as if she has been struck by lightning.

"I should get dressed." She says.

"No. Stay in bed. I will deal with my mother." I make way to the lounge and wait. From the sound of mums voice, she is here for a fight. I get the kids to the bedroom, they can use their tablets for the cartoons. Now to wait and deal with my mother.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

76

BAHLENGIWE

I'm not sure what Dali's mother is doing here but from what I can hear, she is not happy. But then again her husband is in jail so she can't exactly be dancing in the street.

I take off my pyjamas and change into a dress. My bump is visible now. Hiding it is not going to help. Everyone who is supposed to know about it knows already. I take the tray and make my way out of the bedroom. I see Nqaba and Fezi peeking from Nqaba's bedroom.

"What are you doing?" I whisper. I dont even know why because I know exactly what they are doing and they should not be eavesdropping on adult conversations.

"Gogo is shouting at dad." Fezi says.

"Get back in there and close the door." I hiss. They get back inside and shut the door. And to think I am about to add another one. Jesus help me.

I head to the kitchen and the voices stop. I greet and walk past my ex mother in law. I can feel the daggers she is shooting my way. I'm sure Sbu has told her what is going on. That one was pretty quick to change on me. In fact ever since he found out Dali wouldn't be contesting the divorce he has been hostile. If he wasnt married to my sister I would have cut him fully out of my life. But I cant, he is my brother in law and an uncle to my children.

"Why is my husband in jail?" I hear her speak behind me. I sigh and pack the dirty dishes in the sink. I turn around and find her standing right behind me. She is way too close. Her eyes land on my bulging tummy. "Whose child is that?" She asks, her eyes not leaving my stomach.

"Mum, this is not the time for any of this." Dali says and that sets her off. She turns around, glaring at him.

"Then when is the time? When will it be the time?" She questions him. "My husband is in jail and you're here doing God knows what while Sbusiso is busy trying to get your father out of jail. Explain to me when will it be the right time?" I should not have come out here.

"Like you said, Sbusiso is working to get him out of jail. There is nothing more I can do?" I know he is lying. There is more he can do, but I guess Mntungwa's actions have led us here.

"And wena what are you doing about it?"

"I have too much on my plate mama. The mine has been closed and I need to figure out a way to distance it from dad's arrest. As it is right now the mine is also being investigated. The sooner we distance ourselves from him the better." He says. I see his mother gasp and take a step back.

"Distance yourself from him?" She asks. "Dalingcebo, are you listening to yourself?"

"Mum... "

"You wouldn't have that mine if not for your father. That is all of his hard work. His blood, sweat and tears is entrenched in every diamond

that comes out of that ground. And you're here, acting like he is the enemy. What happened to you Dalingcebo?" The hurt in her voice is palpable.

"Nothing happened to me ma, I'm just being practical. You can't deny the fact that his charges are serious. Way too serious. And if I don't do anything about it, the mine will be a thing of the past. His legacy will die with him. Is that what you want?" I can't believe I am literally standing here looking from one to the other like some cartoon. But I dare not interfere in family business.

"Are you also distancing yourself from him because of the rumours she is spreading?" She asks, pointing at me but her eyes are glued to him. I can feel the venom in her voice.

"What rumours are you talking about?" I chime in. I need to know what exactly Sbu told her. She turns and looks at me, a somewhat not so nice smirk on her face.

"Why? You don't remember the lies you've been telling?" She asks.

"I haven't told any lies."

"So you haven't been going around telling everyone my husband is sleeping with your father? Or that he tried to kill you?" Okay, so she knows, she's just in denial.

"That wasn't a lie." Dali tells her. She makes a quick turn, I swear for a moment I think her head will snap off her neck.

"You believe this bullshit." Dali and I exchange a quick glance. His mother never swears. If there is one person who acts like a lady, no, who is a lady, it's her. From the way she dresses to the way she speaks.

As far as she is concerned, a lady watches what she says. And spewing insults is unladylike.

"Dad confirmed it." Dali says.

"That's not true." She whispers. "My husband would never do that to me. He would never cheat on me, let alone with his own best friend. A man for that matter." She adds, her voice breaking.

My phone rings from the bedroom. I hear a door closing and the phone goes silent before tiny feet come running down the hallway.

"Mum, gogo wants to talk to you." Nqaba says handing me the phone. Mrs Khumalo senior has turned the other way, not allowing the kids to see her shedding tears. I take the phone and make my way to the lounge.

"Ma."

"I'm at the gate. Send me the code." She says. I hang up and quickly text her the code. I take a couple of deep breaths before going back to the kitchen. The kids have disappeared again. I don't know if mum knows anything about any of this and if she does, how much does she know. It doesn't take long for her to come up. The moment she walks through the door, the tension escalates. Her best friend won't even look at her.

"Hi ma."

"Why haven't you gone to see your sister?" She asks after greeting.

"Because she doesn't want me there." I tell her. If Lindo told her I haven't come to see her why didn't she also tell her why.

"She is your sister and she just had a baby do you need an invite to see your nephew?" She had a boy.

"I cant force myself when she's made it clear she doesnt want me there."

"Maybe you should ask why Lindo doesn't want her there." Mrs Khumalo says. Now she just wants to throw me under the bus. Mum looks at me, her one eyebrow raised, waiting for an answer.

"And?" She questions. "Why doesnt Lindo want you there?" I open my mouth to say something but Mrs Khumalo decides to butt in.

"Bahle has been telling anyone and everyone who cares to listen that our husbands are sleeping together." She blurts out. I keep my eyes glued on my mother, waiting for a reaction but I get none. Not a raised heartbeat, tears or anything else. "Tell her!" Mrs Khumalo urges. I dont know what she expects me to say because I wont change my story just because mum is here. "Tell her the lies you've been spreading."

"She didn't lie." My mother says. I'm not sure if I heard her right and from the looks of it, everyone in this room is just as confused as I am. "They have been sleeping together for years now." She adds. For a moment I think I am dreaming. She knew. This whole time sne knew.

"You knew?" I ask.

"Of course I knew. The man is my husband, he could never lie to me." She slowly walks to the lounge and sits down. The rest of us are stuck in one place. I have so many questions. Mrs Khumalo finally gains some strength and follows her to the lounge.

"I must have misheard you because there is no way you just said they have been sleeping together for years. There is no way." She screams.

"You heard me correctly." My mother tells her, she is staring at her straight in the eyes as if daring her to do something.

MamKhumalo sinks into the other couch. Now I feel sorry for her. Dali and I give each other side eyes before making our way to the lounge.

"Ma, what do you mean you knew?" I ask. MamKhumalo gets up.

"You are supposed to be my friend." She says, I can feel the hurt deep in her voice. She grabs her bag and walks out, tears running down her face. Dali is going after her.

I sit down. I don't know what to say to my mother. The fact that she's known about this thing this whole makes me look at her some type of way. No, I'm not judging her, I'm sure she had her reasons, but I'm keeping room for judgement.

"So how long have you known about all this?" I ask eventually. Whether I like it or not, this needs to be addressed.

"Long enough." She admits. She is so relaxed about this whole thing I almost feel like I am the one who's been overreacting.

"What's long enough? You can't be giving me encrypted answers." I yell and immediately regret it. She's glaring at me like I just committed a cardinal sin.

"Don't forget I am still your mother?" She reminds me. As if that matters at this point in time.

"I know who you are, at least I thought I did but clearly I was wrong. How long have you been keeping this secret? And why didn't you tell anyone?" She sighs and crosses her legs.

"I found out when I was pregnant with Lindo." She starts.

"And you didn't think to leave?"

"Why?" I've never seen her with weed but right now I am certain she is high as fuck.

"Because your husband was cheating on you. With a man even. Was that not reason enough for you to leave?" I yell again.

"I'll admit when I found out I was hurt. But I had to sit down and ask myself what is more important. So, I stayed." Whatever she smoked is rubbing off on me because right now it feels like I am also high.

"And what exactly was more important mum?"

"You!" Did she forget I wasn't born yet?

"Me?"

"My children. Plus it meant I never had to deal with mistresses and illegitimate children popping up from every corner. I got to live my life without having to worry about any woman. And I made sure my children grew up in a happy loving home. You had a good life." She sounds so proud of herself and all I can hear is stupidity. God forgive me for saying that but right now she sounds stupid.

"Can you look at Sihlangu and tell him he had a good life?" Her face changes and I can see her jaw clenching. I guess she didn't think about that part. "Can you honestly look him in the eyes and tell him that

knowing all the hell he went through because of dad. He deserved so much better and you couldn't protect him. Even from his own father." She chuckles. I wonder what's funny.

"Why is it that when it comes to other people's issues you're always ready to fight tooth and nail for them but when it comes to your own issues you roll over and play dead, allowing everyone to walk all over you." She fires back. I don't know how we went from Sihlangu to me.

"We are talking about Sihlangu and not me." I remind her.

"Sihlangu is almost 40 years old. He is a grown man who can fight his own battles should he choose to. If he wanted an ounce of respect from his father he should have fought for it instead of running off with his tail between his legs. He is the only son, the one who is supposed to carry this family forward. Who he sleeps with factors not into that decision. He should have fought to prove himself. But what did he do? Ran off the first chance he got leaving you to fight for him. Who does that? What kind of man leaves his baby sister to fight his battles. Right now he has shares in the company and guess who he has to thank for that? You. Sihlangu is weak. Forget his sexuality but he is a weak man. Sometimes I think I coddled him way too much as a kid. He is my only son after all. You on the other hand, you're here instead of being with your sister. You're here trying to play happy families with a man who treated you like trash for ten years. Where is the energy you have for other people's issues when it comes to your own?" Her rant sends my heart racing. Maybe there is some truth to her words but now it feels like she is just gaslighting me to protect herself and her stupid decisions.

"This is why that Khanyi girl could dance on your head this whole time because you allowed it." She adds and that stings to be honest. She gets up and deposits herself next to me, taking my hands. "Bahle, I'm sure your siblings are super grateful to have you in their corner because they know they will always have you fighting for them. But at some point you have to start fighting for yourself. Who your father sleeps with is not your business. Why I stayed after the fact is not your business. Sihlangu is not fighting for you wherever he is, but you're here, neck deep in his issues. Let it go and focus on you. You almost got killed a few days ago, have your siblings even bothered to come check on you? Have they called to find out how you're coping with the trauma? No. So now it's time you start giving you attention. And if you're going to play this game with Dali, make sure you have the upper hand this time. Dont let this pregnancy and its hormones cloud your judgement."

She gets up, grabs her bag and kisses the top of my head.

"I'm going to greet my grand babies before I leave." She disappears into the bedroom and the kids screams let me know she found them. I sit there, more numb than shocked. Maybe she is right, it's time I start putting Bahle first. But what do I do about my feelings for Dali?

HIS HEART TO KEEP

77

BAHLENGIWE

I decided to take myself out to lunch today. It's been almost two weeks since I last spoke to my mother and siblings. Now I can fully say that mum was right. None of my siblings have bothered to reach out to me. Not even a simple Hello. The only person who has been consistent is Dali. He spends more time here than he does in Witbank. Its both scary and heartwarming. His presence has shown me what I could have had. And to be honest, despite all the naysayers, I still want it. The life we were supposed to have. I want it.

I find myself at The Grillhouse in Rosebank. I can easily satisfy my meat craving and still get some air. Since the mine is still closed, Dali will be picking up the kids. I place my order. I go through my WhatsApp messages. A part of me is still hoping my siblings will reach out to me, I took my mothers advice and decided not to bother them and focus on my own life. The truth is out in the open and now everyone knows so there is no need for me to be begging people to believe me.

I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. It feels like someone is watching me. I take a couple of deep breaths trying to calm my bearing heart. Sahluko is no longer on duty when it comes to guarding me, but now if someone is watching me it may mean letting him go was a hasty decision. I slowly run my eyes around the restaurant trying to figure out who looks familiar or who looks scary enough.

My eyes land on the last person I was expecting to see. He gives me a smile but I dont return it. He gets up and I know he is coming this way.

"Mrs Khumalo. Or should I say Miss Nxumalo?" He says pulling put a chair.

"Advocate." I reply. He chuckles.

"Come on, you know you can call me Dumisani." I stare at him. I am not about to do a back and forth with him. "I guess I should say congratulations on the divorce. I heard it's been finalized." He adds. Is he really expecting me to tell him my business? I guess he realises I am not particularly happy with his presence. He sighs and takes a sip of his drink. "You know I understand you hating me, but Titi is not your enemy. Please give her a call." The waiter places my food in front of me. The smell alone makes my mouth water.

"If you dont mind I'd like to enjoy my food. In peace please." I say.

"Bahle, hate me, I understand and probably deserve it. But dont punish Titi for my sins. I got her into this and I swore her to secrecy. Please just call her, she misses you. A lot." He emphasises. I'm really not in the business of forcing loyalty. I trusted Titi and she betrayed me. Even though the investigation was not on me, it still affects me somehow. I pick up a rib and bite into it. I guess that's enough of a message for him to get up and walk away.

It's easy for people to say forgive but truth be told Titi hasn't said a word to me. She hasn't tried to reach out and apologise or do anything to show she is remorseful. And in my world, all that tells me is that she knew what she was doing and didnt care about how it would affect me. So no, she can miss me all she wants but I'm not going to be chasing after her.

I order a second plate of ribs. Dont judge me, I'm eating for two. While waiting for my plate I see my mother walking into the restaurant. She makes her way to the counter and speaks to a waiter. She turns around and sees me, she makes her way to me. I wonder what she is doing here. She pulls out a chair and sits down.

"Fancy seeing you here." She says. She is so relaxed even though her husbands best friend/ side dude is behind bars. Or maybe she's finally celebrating him not being there to be a third wheel in their relationship.

"You too. I thought you'd be home or with Lindo." She shrugs.

"I'll see Lindo later, I came here to get some food for your dad. The prosecutor is not giving him room to breathe and I need to make sure he is well fed." Why is my dad meeting with a prosecutor.

"Why is he meeting prosecutors? Shouldn't he be with his lawyer instead? I know Mntungwa's arrest may also affect him somehow so he needs to be prepared for when that day comes." She leans in, looking around to make sure the other patrons are far enough not to hear her speak.

"Your father has turned state witness. It's the only way to ensure both mines aren't affected by Mntungwa's crimes. Your father will be giving evidence against him to show that the mines were not used to clean the diamonds Mntungwa smuggled in." She says. I dont care what anyone says but this is the highest form of betrayal. Why would my father turn against his own lifelong best friend like this?

"Why would he do that? Mntungwa is his best friend and. " I want to say fuck buddy but I quickly remind myself that I'm talking to my mother right now and some things I cannot just say. "Does this have

anything to do with Mntungwa trying to kill me?" She nods her head. Now I truly regret that day. I don't know what kind of spirit led me home that day but I curse that day. If I'd known everything would go on a downward spiral after that I would have just taken my dad's bribery offer and kept it moving.

"Have you spoken to MamKhumalo?" She sighs and picks up my drink and takes a sip before shaking her head. "You need to talk to her. Her husband may be going to jail and finding out he was sleeping with his best friend this whole time may just drive her to depression." I don't know why I am encouraging her to do the right thing right now. I'm back to sticking my nose where it doesn't belong.

"She will be fine. Besides, if Mntungwa goes to jail, nothing is going to change for her except for her husband not being there. But she'll be fine." She says. I hope she doesn't believe the words coming out of her mouth right now. But I choose to let it go.

"And you, how are you feeling about this whole thing? I know you say you've always known what was going on but I'm sure it bothers you too?" She smiles, reaching over the table to take my hands.

"Bahle, I am a big girl. I can take care of myself. I made peace with this a long time ago. It was the only way for me to be happy and I am. I know you may think I am not but I am. Right now all you need to focus on is yourself and your babies. Leave everything else to the parents and we will deal with it. Okay?" I don't know what's worse about this whole situation, the fact that she knew about and said nothing or her seemingly being okay with it. I know I'm not at liberty to judge her but still, this is just plain weird. The waiter places my food in front of me.

I've lost my appetite but it would be rude to send the food back and ask for a takeaway.

"Let me get my food and go. Take care of yourself." Mum says getting up. She kisses my forehead and walks away. As I watch her leave my eyes land on Dumisani. If he is here and my dad is with the prosecutor it means he is not the one in charge of the case. So all those years investigating Dali, a small fish in this pond clearly he has missed out on the big shark. I want to say it's a pity but I like it.

I mastered enough courage to ask for a takeaway and then ordered more food for my kids and Dali. Lunch will be one less thing for me to worry about. I know the kids are back by now. I get to the apartment and no one is here. Except for Dali who is busy working in the lounge. I look around and I can't see my kids. I hope he didn't forget to pick them up.

"They are playing outside." He says. I look at him and he is smiling. Not an earth shattering thing to do but it's the stars in his eyes when he looks at me. I place the takeaways on the kitchen counter and join him in the lounge. I take off my shoes and get on the couch, pulling my legs up and tucking them under me. "How was your lunch?" He asks, gently running his fingers on my exposed thigh, leaving my flesh peppered with goosebumps.

"It was great. I brought you ribs." His smile widens. I decide to throw caution to the wind for once in my life. I pull his head down and kiss him. For a moment he is too stunned to respond. Until I feel his arm wrap around my waist pulling me close to him. I lift myself up and throw my one leg over his thigh, straddling him. His hands go down and

squeeze my butt, waking up sensations in my body I didnt think were still there.

We pull away from each other to catch our breath. He is starring at me. His pupils have dilated and his breath is hitched. But I can see the doubt too. Or is it fear?

"What are we doing?" He asks.

"Giving each other a second chance." I reply. "You said you wanted us to start again and maybe do things right this time. This is me saying yes. I want the life we could have had. We cant go back and redo things but we can forge a new path and see where it leads."

"Are you sure?" He asks in disbelief. I lean down and kiss him again. I can feel him smiling.

"Thank you." He says. "I promise you, you wont regret this." He assures me. And for some reason I believe him.

DALINGCEBO

I am happy. Even with everything going on around me, I am happy. I'm pretty sure it wasnt easy for Bahle to let her guard down and give me another chance but I am glad she did. I've wanted this for a while now, not because I want to relive the past but because I feel in my gut this is where I am supposed to be. Being with her makes sense.

I watch her sleeping. She's so cute. With her silk bonnet on and her bare face, she looks so innocent and beautiful. As much as I am happy she's giving me a second chance, a part of me will never forgive or forget how badly I treated her all these years. Yes I had no control over it but still, it will haunt me for a long time.

My phone rings on the side table and I pick it up. It's the mine. Why would they be calling at this time?

"Ngwenya, what's going on?" I ask as soon as I have the phone in my ear. I get out of bed and tiptoe to the lounge just so I don't wake Bahle.

"Boss, we have a problem." He replies. I don't know why he is telling me, he is the head of security.

"And what's the problem?" If push comes to shove and we have to retrench people, Ngwenya will be at the top of the list because of this.

"Sir we caught a couple of guys trying to take advantage of the closed mine. They are wannabe zama zamas who were trying to sneak in." I won't just retrench him, I will fire him so he leaves empty handed.

"Ngwenya, why are you calling me and not the police?"

"The police are here already, they are the ones asking for you." He says.

"Did you see the time? It's past midnight." I tell him.

"I know boss and I've been trying to tell them that you'll come to the police station in the morning but they are not hearing it." He insists.

"Fine. I'm coming." I hang up the phone and head back to the bedroom. I can't wake Bahle up so I just write a note and leave it on the side table. I put on some sweatpants, a hoodie and sneakers and quietly make my way out.

I get to the mine and sure enough there are sirens already here. It's almost three in the morning and they are still here. This must be important then. I get out of the car and I can already see the two men sitting in front of the police and security cars with the lights shining on

them. Their hands are tied behind their back and they are sitting on the ground looking like they've been beat up. The closer I get I see a familiar face. Sahluko. What the hell is he doing here?

"I'm here. What's going on?" I announce. He turns to look at me. I'm pretty sure he expects me to be hostile somehow but I won't give him the satisfaction.

"Mr Khumalo. Glad you could come. I hope we didn't disturb anything?" He says.

"You did but it's nothing I can't go back to later." I reply and I see his jaw clench. "So why am I here?" He pulls up one man and an officer pulls up another.

"Your security caught these men trying to break into your office. They apprehended them and then called the police. When the police got here, they searched them, this is what they found. Which is why they called us." He says pulling a tiny velvet pouch from an evidence bag and spilling diamonds onto his hand. I can see them gleaming.

"Where did they get those?" I know for a fact there are no diamonds in my office safe. Everything worth something was taken when the police executed a search warrant right here and if there were diamonds they would have taken them too.

"That's the thing. We think they brought the diamonds with them to try and plant them in your office." He says.

"Why?"

"To set you up obviously. Despite your father's case, this mine has not been implicated in the smuggling of diamonds which makes me wonder

who would want to set you up?" He questions. I'm asking myself the same thing.

"I dont know. But can we do this in the morning. I am tired right now. I will come to the station with my lawyer and maybe these men can tell us who sent them." I reply. He nods his head and signals to the officers to bundle up the men and shove them in the back of the van. I cant believe they called me here to ask stupid questions. I'm pretty sure this was all Sahluko's idea.

Ngwenya and I watch as they drive off.

"Did you get all that on the body cams?" I ask him.

"Of course boss." He says proudly. Maybe I will keep him after all.

"Good, make sure it's all logged into server. And email me a copy as soon as it's done."

"Will do boss." He answers. Getting the security body cams was clearly a great idea. I hope whoever tried to do this does not come back and try to turn the story around.

By the time I leave the mine it's almost five AM. I decide to go past the house and get myself a change of clothes. I hope Mam Aggie dis the laundry. I walk in and the smell of perfume catches my attention. It's not a scent I'm familiar with. I turn the lights on. The first thing I see is Khanyi sitting at the bottom of the stairs. She is starring at me, her eyes are red and puffy. The anger in them is clear as daylight. That's not even the scary part. It's the gun in her hand pointing in my direction.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

78

DALINGCEBO

"You haven't been here in two days. This is supposed to be your house but clearly you're living somewhere else now." She tells me. The only thing running through my mind is how did she get in here. The walls are high, there's an electric fence for added protection, there are cameras, how did she by pass all that and get in here?

"How long have you been here?" I ask after a while, my eyes dancing between the gun and her face. She chuckles and rests her elbows on her knees, allowing the gun to face upwards. I'm too far away to disarm her and I'm too far away from the door to run. It feels like I am in the middle of the ocean with a storm approaching on one end and a shark on the other. Either way I am screwed.

"Remember when we were in high school, that one time we bunked the whole day and we didnt even know there was a maths test? We both got zero but it didnt matter. That was the best day ever." She says. For a flitting moment I see happiness in her eyes, but its quickly wiped away and her smile vanishes. She stands up and slowly makes her way to me. Her eyes glued to me like a lion approaching its prey.

"You lied to me Dalingcebo. You made promises to me and you broke every. Single. One of them." She says walking around me. I dont like guns, never have and never will so her walking around me with the gun lifted like this sends shivers down my spine. "You said that one day, when we are done with school we are going to get married and have four children. We even had names for them. Do you remember?" She

asks standing in front of me, starring deep into my eyes. "DJ, Khanyisa, Dalizwe and Kwandokuhle." She tells me. I honestly didnt remember any of these names until she said them. I was young and high off of adolescence when the naming of future babies happened. But I can't tell her that. "Do you remember?"

"I remember." I lie and that brings a smile to her face. She's so close getting the gun could be easy. But it going off and hurting one of us could also be that easy. Right now I cant afford to play hero, I have a child on the way, two more who need me and Bahle just gave me a second chance to right my wrongs. Dying is not an option.

She takes a step back, sadness and anger filling her eyes. I almost feel bad, but then I remember all that she did to me and I come back to my senses.

"So what changed?" She asks. I can feel the pain in her voice. "We had plans, a future and promises were made but none were kept. Why? Why wasnt i good enough for you anymore? Is it because I came from a single parent, middle class home? Weren't we good enough for the mining moguls son?" Tears are running down her face. I dont know what it is she wants me to say. I didn't know I would have to marry Bahle until I graduated from varsity. It's not like I woke up and decided to break the promises I made. I had no choice.

She picks up a photo from the console table. It's a photo of Bahle, I dont know where she was when it was taken, but the huge grin on her face tells me she was happy that day. Of all the photos in the house that's one photo where it's clear she was genuinely happy. The rest of them, she was faking a smile because her eyes tell the whole story. She

was sad. My heart starts beating when Khanyi gently taps it with the gun. That's one of my favourite photos of Bahle, she cant break it.

"Please put down the photo." She lifts her head up and chuckles.

"Of course. She's the one you chose. She's the one who got you despite everything we went through together." She tosses the photo and the glass frame shatters on the wall and glass spreads all over the floor. I look at the sight of it and I feel myself getting angry. She laughs seeing me stare at the photo. "Oh, are you sad? For a photo?" She asks. She picks up another photo and tosses it at the same spot and it shatters.

"Khanyi, stop it." I yell. She laughs and tosses another photo. Clearly this girl is crazy. I take a step towards her and she stops laughing, lifts up the gun and points it at me. I stop.

"You know what is crazy, the past ten years felt like I finally had what we've always dreamed off. A life together. We had it Dali, yes my mother might have cooked you but still, it was the life we've always wanted." She says. Did she just say her mother cooked me? "What's that supposed to mean?" I question. She laughs and roughly wipes away her tears.

"You thought I am the one who was feeding you muthi sorry to burst your bubble. That wasnt me. That was my mum. Remember those Sunday lunches we used to have at her place, she made sure to add a bit of spice to your food." So this was a family project. Mayne that explains why her mother is the way she is. Everything is coming back to bite her.

"Did you know?" I question. Not that it will make a difference. Clearly that family is full of witches.

"Not until recently. I was shocked at first but hey, it worked so why stop then." She admits and I swear if she didn't have the gun in her hand I would have my hands around her neck squeezing the life out of her.

"So you were okay knowing that the past ten years were a lie? Knowing that I wasn't with you because I loved you but because your mother decided to take matters into her own hands?"

"It was a lie to you. To me it was real. Everytime you told me you loved me, it was real, the ring you gave me, it's real. Everytime you promised me forever, it was real. I had it, the life I've always wanted with the man I've always loved. I had it. And then it was taken from me. As sad as I was, I accepted it. I was ready to move on. I just needed one little reminder that there was a time when you loved me." She says as a flood of tears run down her face.

"The baby?" I ask and she chuckles despite her tears.

"That's all I wanted." She says between sobs. "And I got it. Sure I didn't go about it the right way but I got it. My own little piece of heaven and even that was taken from me." She roughly wipes her tears as anger takes over her entire face. "I told you about it and all you did was thank the heavens that our child was dead. Do you know the pain of scrubbing blood from your mattress knowing that's your child you're washing away? DO YOU?" She asks as a bullet wheeze past me and hits the wall. I turn around and there is a hole on the wall. I turn back around and the gun is pointed straight at me. And here I was thinking she is a bad shot but clearly she missed on purpose. Now I'm really scared. She can actually kill me.

"My child. The only thing I had shining a light into this cold, sad life that I'm in and you thought it would be okay to celebrate its death. You thought it would be okay? I am no saint Dalingcebo but you had no right. No right to throw my pain in my face like that. You had no right." She whispers the last part just as the intercom rings.

"I have to answer that." I say. I'm sure it's the security company and they were called because of the gunshot. I could say their response is pretty quick but I'm sure they were just patrolling around hence the prompt response. I take a step towards the intercom and she stops me.

"Dont you dare." She says.

"If I dont answer them, they will call the police. When the police get here, they will not even bother calling." I tell her. Realisation sets in.

"Fine. Answer it. But if you dare say anything about me or what's happening here, I promise you, you and me will reunite with our child. Today." I sigh and pick up the phone.

"Hello."

"Mr Khumalo, neighbours report hearing a gunshot coming from your house. Is everything okay?" The security asks.

"Yes. Everything is okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. It must be the other neighbours." I'm not even sure if they believe me.

"Okay. We will check with them. Have a nice day." And here I was thinking they could at least want to come in and check. Useless people.

I hang up the phone.

"Good boy. Now, come and sit down." She orders. Now I am a dog. Nice. I take a seat on the couch. "No. Here." She pulls out a dining table chair and points me to it. "Sit here." I follow her instructions and sit down on the chair. "Where do you keep your ropes?" She's looking around the lounge. Why would I keep ropes in the house? She walks in reverse till she gets to the kitchen. She's busy opening and closing drawers with her eyes and her gun glued to me. She finds a ribbon and she smiles. "This will have to do." She pulls my hands to the back of the chair and I feel the ribbon being tied around my wrists. "Stop fidgeting." She says pulling the ribbon tighter. Okay she pulls another chair and sits in front of me and places the gun on the table.

"Okay, now, let's talk." She starts. "Did you ever love me?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you marry her?"

"You know I had no choice." She laughs.

"You had no choice? Dalingcebo, come on. You had no choice? Dont make me laugh."

"What did you expect me to do Khanyi?"

"FIGHT FOR US!" She shouts banging the table so hard the gun moves.

"Fight for us. That's all you had to do. We wouldn't be here right now if you were not a coward. One moment you're professing your undying love to me and the next you're marrying another woman, and you're here saying you loved me? Do you even know what that means?" She

asks. Every word she says is laced with so much pain it's hard not to feel sorry for her.

"Would you have married me if I was a pauper, with nothing to my name? Because you know that's what would have happened if I'd refused to marry Bahle." I remind her.

"I loved you Dalingcebo, I could followed you to the ends of the world. Lived with you in a shack or under a bridge if that's what it took to be with you. I would have done anything." A new set of tears is running down her face. And this damn ribbon is so tight.

"Do you actually believe that Khanyi? On a serious note, do you actually believe that? Or that's just something you've tried to convince yourself with. You love the soft life. You love everything to be easy. That's why even after graduating you've never bothered to work because I catered to your every need. You knew I was married and you were still okay with playing second fiddle because it afforded you the life you've always wanted. A life of luxury. An easy life void of hardwork. What's the hardest thing you've ever done? Ordering luxury bags to be brought in from Europe or America because you didnt trust local stores. So tell me again Khanyi, would you have followed me to a shack?" She swallows and I know all that I'll follow you to the end of the world speech was just that, a speech and nothing more.

"I loved you Dalingcebo. I love you." She says.

"You didn't love me Khanyi, you loved what my money and my family name could get you. That's why even when you found out what your mother was doing, you did not do a damn thing to put an end to her evil. So you can lie to yourself all you want, but you will not lie to me."

The ribbon loosens around my wrists and before it can fall onto the ground I catch it. The gun is so close. I have to distract her if I'm going to take it.

"You know its funny how you think you know me." She starts. "I guess we will never know now will we because you are a coward who failed to fight for us." She leans back on the chair and closes her eyes. I see my chance and try to reach for the gun but I overestimated my speed because she quickly opens her eyes and reaches for the gun too. We reach it at the same time but she has her hand directly on the gun and mine is on top of hers.

"Let it go." She screams. I can't. I wont. We struggle for the gun. Now we are both standing trying to push each other away from the gun and each other. I managed to grab her wrist and twist it hoping it will be painful enough for her to let go but she doesnt. I push her back till she hits the wall, her head thumping on the concrete but she's still holding on. Damnit. She is stronger than I thought she would be.

"Let it go." She hisses.

"I cant. I gave kids to go back to and I wont let you do this." I say. My breathing has escalated. Khanyi twists her wrist and I can feel the nozzle of the gun between us. A shot goes off. I feel warm liquid seeping between us. I'm not sure if it's me or her who has been shot. Maybe it's the adrenaline that makes it hard for me to feel anything. But I'm looking in her eyes and she seems terrified. There's a pool of blood on the ground and yet neither of us let's go of the gun. Dear God I hope it's not me who is shot. I cant die right now.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

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KHANYISILE

Theres blood. So much blood. What have I done. He takes a step back and grabs his stomach. He pulls his hand back and looks at it. Its bloody. I stand there frozen. Everything feels like it's happening in slow motion. He grabs the dining table, leaving streaks of blood all over it. The intercom rings again. The alcohol in my system deserts me. Now I'm sober. Back to my senses.

"Let them in." He whispers. His voice getting raspy and hollow. He is losing so much blood. The intercom wont stop ringing. If he dies I'm definitely going to jail for the rest of my life. I rush to the kitchen and open the tap water and run my hands under it. The water quickly turns red. I scrub until there is no trace of blood. A phone rings somewhere. I'm not sure if it's his or mine. I dont care at this point. I need to find my bag and get out of here.

I go back to the lounge and he is laying on his stomach, a pool of blood slowly forming under him. He is losing a lot of blood. I can hear him speaking but I cant make out what he is saying. The phone has stopped ringing. I find my bag in the bedroom. I change my tshirt and put on one of Dali's, I grab my bag and quickly try to leave but someone bangs on the door. I freeze at the top of the stairs. The only way out is through the sliding door opening onto the garden. But if I go down I may just find myself being chased by the security. I take one step down the stairs and the door is broken down. I take a step back.

"Search the house." One officer shouts to the other while he makes a call. I quickly make my way back to the bedroom. Dali didn't make it up here but I did do some redecorating while I was drunk. I've been here for almost a week and he hadn't shown up until today. I just wanted to talk. Nothing more. I pace around the bedroom, I can hear the security coming up the hallway. I open the bedroom door and go into the balcony. Jumping here, I might break a leg. But I have to try.

I throw the gun in my bag and zip it. I grab the steel rails. I'm hanging on them trying to find the strength to jump. The moment I hear the bedroom door open I jump. I land on my foot and it twists a bit, a bolt of lightning surges through me. I pull myself up and lean on the wall. I need to get out of here before the police show up. I limp all the way to the wall fence at the back. The last time I jumped over here there was load shedding and the electric fence was not working. Today it is. I drag myself by the wall and head to the front of the house. The gate is wide open with a security car upfront. I manage to slip out of the gate unseen. I hope.

I limp all the way to the main road. I see police cars and more security making their way to the house. I flag down a taxi and get in. I need to get home. My heart is racing, I keep looking back to make sure the police are not on my tail. Everytime the taxi stops my heart sinks. Why did I do this? I should have never come here to begin with.

I get off the taxi at the rank and take another one that's going to take me home. My conscience won't let me rest. I feel like everyone who is looking at me can see that I did something wrong. I hold on tight to my bag. I need to get rid of this gun. I get off right in front of the apartment building. I drag myself in and make my way to the apartment. Seluleko

is not here. Thank God. I lock the door and lean on it. I take a deep breath. Reality sets in and everything I've just done registers in my head. I slip down and sit there, crying. This time I really fucked up. Faking a signature is one thing, shooting someone is another. But why did he have to fight me for the gun. All I wanted was to talk to him nothing more. He didn't have to fight me for it. I wasn't going to hurt him. I swear I just wanted to talk.

I don't know how long I've been sitting here. My ass is numb. I feel someone banging on the door. I pull myself together and shove the bag under the couch cushion. I drag myself to the kitchen and splash some cold water on my face before opening the door. It's Raphael and Vusi. How did they know I live here?

"Hey. Are you Okay?" Raphael asks. "We've been trying to call you." He adds.

"Uhm, yeah I'm fine." I pat myself but my phone is not in my pocket. I open the door and the two come in. I grab my bag and search for my phone, making sure I have my back turned to them. I can't let them see the gun. I close the bag and put it on the couch. "I can't find my phone, I think I lost it." For the love of god I hope I didn't leave it at Dali's house.

"That explains it. Listen, there was an accident earlier, Dali was shot." Vusi tells me. I'm not shocked but I have to pretend to be. I lower myself onto the arm rest of the chair, feigning hurt and shock.

"What happened? Is he okay?"

"We don't know. He was rushed to surgery. We just wanted to let you know. We are going to the hospital now, his family will be there so it might not be a good idea to bring you with us." Raphael says.

"Yeah, Busi is on her way though, she will stay with you and we will update you." Vusi adds.

"Its fine. Busi doesn't have to come." I reply. I might just find myself grabbing and telling her everything. And knowing her, she is judgemental and she cannot keep a secret. Raphael looks at his phone..

"Too late. She is already here." Vusi makes his way to me and pulls me into a hug. I know he means well but right now I need to be alone so I can think. But I cant tell them that.

"Its going to be okay. Dali will be okay." He whispers. Busi comes walking in and rushes to me. Vusi steps aside and Busi takes over.

"Oh sweetie, I'm so sorry. I'm really sorry." She says.

"Okay, we are leaving. We will update you." Raphael announces. He gives Busi a kiss before they leave. As soon as they leave I untangle myself from Busi's hold. I limp all the way to the kitchen to get myself a glass of cold water.

"What happened to your leg?" She asks. "Why are you limping?" There's a reason I haven't been in contact with her these past few months. I dont need the judgement and pity.

"Its nothing. I sprained my ankle at the gym." I get my water and head back to the lounge. I turn on the TV and find the news channel. Busi sinks down next to me and picks up my bag.

"Why is your bag so heavy?" She asks lifting it up as if the higher it goes the less heavy it becomes. I grab it from her.

"Its nothing. Just has a bit too much into it." I lie. Well it does have a bit too much.

"Breaking news, the CEO of Malo diamond mine in, Mpumalanga, Mr Dalingcebo Khumalo has been shot. Its unclear how serious his injuries are but he was rushed to a private hospital in Witbank where he is receiving treatment. Our reporter , Sibahle Moloji is currently at he hospital. Sibahle good morning. Any update on Mr Khumalo?"

"Good morning Zuleikha, unfortunately there hasn't been any update as yet. The family is slowly arriving at the hospital. As we know his father is currently behind bars but his mother, his brother and his former in-laws are all here. His ex-wife is yet to make an appearance. There are rumours saying his condition may be critical at this point and doctors are working hard to save his life."

"Do you know what happened exactly? Was this a hit or a robbery gone wrong?"

"Well we are not sure yet but a neighbour I spoke to earlier said a gunshot coming from his home was reported earlier and when security enquired about it from him he said it was nothing. A security officer speaking on condition of anonymity also confirmed this. He also said that almost half an hour after the first gunshot was heard, another gunshot was heard and when security arrived there was no answer on the intercom. And when they called him he was apparently begging on the phone for them to help him and that's why they used their own remote to open the gate and when they got in the man was laying in a pool of his blood. As for this being a hit, it's not clear yet but police are speculating he might have disturbed a robbery because his neighbours also say it had been days since he was seen around."

"Talk about being at the right place at the wrong time. Please keep us updated Sibahle."

"Will definitely do Zuleikha."

I grab the remote and switch the TV off. I stare at the blank screen. I can feel Busi stealing glances at me.

"Crime. That's one thing I hate about this country." She starts. "To think a person can be killed in their own home. For their own belongings that they worked hard for." She says. I dont know what to say to her. I need to get rid of this gun as soon as possible or else I might find myself in deeper shit. I need to find my phone. But I cant call it to figure out where it is. For all i know the police already have it.

"Khanyi?" Busi calls out. I sigh and look at her.

"He will be okay. I know you're scared but he will be okay." She says. I nod my head and divert my attention back to the blank screen in front of me. "Speaking of being okay, why have you been distant lately?" She asks.

"What do you mean?"

"I've tried calling you but you dont pick up my calls or you've blocked me, I'm not sure. I just want to know what's going on with you?" And this is another reason why I've been avoiding her. Besides the judgement, having to explain myself to people when they can already see what a shit show my life is lately.

"Khanyi?"

"Busi can you please just stop. I'm trying to think." I yell. I grab my bag and head to the bedroom. I throw the bag on the bed and lock the door. What was I thinking? Why would I do this? I need to get out of town. Right now that's the only option I have. But how do I get rid of Busi without raising suspicion? My mind is blank. Except for the picture of Dali laying there bleeding. If he dies his family will not rest until I pay for my crimes. It doesn't help that they already hate me. I'm sure they will make an example of me that generations will talk about.

An idea pops into my head. I quickly change into dress, grab the washing basket, luckily it's empty. I get a few clothes and throw them in there. I get a duffel bag and toss it in. I pull out a t-shirt and wrap the gun then throw it in the basket, I add some toiletries and underwear before adding more clothes on top. Hopefully this works. I drag the basket to the lounge.

"You know Dali is trending on social media. Everyone is talking about the shooting." Busi says. She's busy scrolling on her phone. I wonder where mine is.

"He is a prominent businessman, of course he will trend." I say. She looks up and sees the basket.

"Going somewhere?" She asks standing up. I try to put on a brave face and not give anything away.

"Yeah, I have to take this to the laundromat."

"Oh okay. I'll go with you." She offers taking her bag.

"No need. You can go to work, I just need to be alone right now. I have a lot on my mind and I'm sure I'm not good company."

"Nonsense. We are friends. And right now, you cant be on your own. I know you love Dali, despite your break up, you still care about him and this is hard on you." She says rubbing my arm. When did she become a psychologist?

"Busi, I appreciate this, I really do. But I really need to be alone. I just want to be on my own. I have a lot going on and I just need to think." I'm trying so hard to keep my emotions in check but truth be told she is wasting my time. I'm sure I would be far right now.

"Fine. I'll come check on you later." Thank God she finally gets it.

She helps me load the basket in the boot of my car. I'm really glad I left my car here when I decided to go to Dali's place. Busi gets in her car and I follow her out. We head out in different directions. Hopefully by the time i get back, or if I get back here things will have died down. I have mums cards and i finally got her pins. Turns out she had a little black book with all her bank pins and insurance information. I wont have to use my card anywhere.

I start at the mall and head straight to the bank. I withdraw about ten thousand. This should help me get a new phone and fill up until I get to wherever I'm going. Nelspruit is definitely out of the equation.

I buy some food then get in the car and drive off. Before I leave Witbank I park on the side of the road.

"God.

I know I'm the last person to be asking anything from you but I'll ask anyway.

But before I ask I want to say I'm sorry. I never meant for things to get this far. But I was angry. I was angry at Dali for celebrating my pain. He doesn't know the pain of losing a child. He doesn't know the pain of feeling and knowing that a little human is growing inside you and then have all that taken away. He will never know.

Either way, I should not have done what I did. But it's too late now, I can't go back and change things.

I know one day I'll stand before you and account for his life should he die. And I'll gladly do that, but I cannot do that on this earth. I am not built for prison. Please Lord. Forgive me. And please let him and his family find it in their hearts to forgive me too.

Now Lord, please go with me. Please keep me safe until I find somewhere to make my safe place. Please Lord, do not leave me now.

All this I ask in the name of Jesus Christ my saviour.

Amen."

I take a deep breath feeling like there is a bit of the burden lifted off of me. Maybe I'll come back here one day. I start the car and start my journey. There is traffic up ahead. It's way past rush hour. Why is there so much traffic? I keep driving as more and more cars follow behind me. The closer I get I realise there is a roadblock. There are about five police cars parked on the side of the road there are cops everywhere. Shit. This is not good. It is definitely not good. There is a barricade between the lane I'm in and the other one, there are about fifteen cars behind me. Turning around is not possible. I am fucked.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

80

KHANYISILE

This cannot be happening right now. Okay, I need to take a deep breathe and act normal. I take a few deep breaths and wipe my sweaty palms on my dress. I hope I get a Male officer, it will be easier to get away. I put on a smile and drive up.

A female officer points me to the side. Yeah, I'm pretty sure this is how Jesus felt when he asked God why he had forsaken him. Right now I feel like God is nowhere in sight. I pull up to the side and wipe my hands again. Palms should not be this sweaty. I take a deep breath as the officer makes her way to me. I roll down the window and put on my best smile. Not that it will work on her.

"Hello. License please." She says. I pull out my license and hand it to her. She goes around the car with a clipboard and taking down notes. I dont even what she's looking for because my license disc is fine, my lights are working, basically everything is up to date. She comes back to the window and hands me my license. "Please step out of the car." She asks.

"Why?"

"I need you to open the boot for me." Does she even smile. She looks like she eats stones for breakfast.

"Why?" I ask again.

"Z."

"Excuse me?"

"You said Y, I said Z. Get out of the car and open the boot. Please."
Traffic cops are annoying when they are hungry.

I pull out a two hundred rand note from my purse.

"Can we just finish this here, I have a long drive ahead of me." I say showing her the money.

"Are you trying to bribe an officer of the law?" She asks. She looks so serious. Did she not see the money?

"Of course not. I'm sure its been a very long morning and the sun is hot, I just thought you could do with some cold drink?" She chuckles. Maybe it's working. She steps closer to the car and almost sticks her head inside the window.

"Maam, you have five seconds to get out of the car and open the boot or else I will arrest you and charge you with bribery." She hisses. Okay. I open the door and make my way to the boot. The only thing in here is the laundry basket with a gun inside.

"I was just trying to be nice." I mumble.

"Be nice to your friends. Open the boot." I say a little prayer, hoping that she doesnt go through the basket.

I open the boot and the laundry basket tips over, spilling all the clothes on the ground. My heart starts racing. I can see the gun, although concealed, I can still see it.

"Where are you going?" She asks staring at the clothes.

"I'm taking my clothes to the laundromat."

"Where because you left town behind?" I feel like I am in an interrogation room already.

"I prefer the ones in Joburg." I say. She chuckles, leans down and starts picking up the clothes. "Wait, leave them. I'll pick them up." I say almost screaming. Now I'm convinced God has forsaken me. She picks up the gun and then stands up.

"What kind of heavy cloth is this?" She asks. She's staring at me and I can feel sweat dripping down my face and back.

"It's nothing. Can I please have it back." I beg. My pleas fall on deaf ears. Another officer comes around the corner.

"Bhengu, what's the hold up?" He asks. His colleague still has her eyes glued to me. He sees that and looks at me. "It's not that hot for you to be sweating like you just ran a marathon." He says. If I run now I won't make it very far. I'm sure they will shoot me before I even make it past the barriers.

"Feel this." Bhengu says handing her colleague the gun. He takes it.

"Does that feel like a cloth to you?" She asks. Her colleague peels the t-shirt and reveals the gun. I don't know if it's urine or sweat that's running down my leg right now.

"A gun? Why do you have a gun and why are you hiding it in a pile of clothes?" She asks.

"I can bet my entire salary this is an illegal gun." The colleague says.

"Of course it is." Bhengu agrees. "If it was a legal licensed gun it would be kept in the front of the car, maybe under the seat, inside the handbag or even in the glove compartment."

"Look, I can explain." I say. My voice is breaking.

"You will explain at the station. Turn around." She says pulling out her handcuffs. I get on my knees and literally beg.

"Please, I swear I did nothing wrong. I dont even know whose gun it is." I lie. Right now, every liquid that's produced by my body is out to play, tears, sweat and pee.

"Sisi, dont waste our time." She whistles and more of her colleagues join us. Now I'm really screwed. They pull me up and I try to fight them. "If you keep fighting you'll get hurt." One officer says. I can see people have come out of their cars and they are busy taking videos. They pull me kicking and screaming into the police car. No amount of begging and pleading gets to them. I will be a #trending topic by the end of this day.

BAHLENGIWE

I still feel like I am in a daze. When I got the call this morning that Dali was rushed to the hospital I felt like my insides were being turned inside out. I had to leave the kids with a neighbour and rush here. How I managed to get here without causing an accident is beyond me.

I dont know what kind of bullshit is happening right now. Just yesterday we were promising each other that we will make our relationship work and now this. If I was a superstitious person I would think the universe is against us. But I am not. Whoever did this wasnt sent by the universe or God. They are just some heartless, evil being. Dali is no saint but no one deserves to be shot and left for dead like that. Nobody.

I drive into the hospital and already the media is here, parked by the front entrance. Vusi is the first one to see me. He rushes to my car and opens the door.

"Hey

you made it. Let's go in." He helps me out of the car and shields me from the reporters who are firing every kind of question my way. I keep my head down despite the camera flashes and the microphones being shoved in my face.

We manage to get inside and Vusi leads me to the waiting room. Everyone is here. Except for his father. Tension feels the room the moment I walk in. I was expecting that from Sbu but definitely not everyone else. Mum is the first to stand up and give me a hug.

"How are you feeling?" I sit down between her and my father. This feels like an all out war. Sbu and his mother are on one side throwing daggers, my parents and I are on the other side and Dali's friends are somewhere in the middle. I've never really been close to them, they have always been team Khanyi.

The doctor comes out sooner than anyone expected. We all stand as soon as he walks in.

"How is my son?" Mrs Khumalo asks.

"He is stable. Actually he is very lucky. The bullet went in and out the back. It didnt affect any of his organs except for scraping the liver. He did however lose a lot of blood, nothing a blood transfusion won't fix. Luckily the bullet didn't affect his spine so he should make a full recovery." He says. I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Can we see him?" Sbu asks.

"Of course, but for now it will be immediate family only." He tells us.

"I'm his brother and this is his mother." Sbu says. A little acknowledgement would be nice but hey, I guess I am the enemy now.

"And she is his wife." My mum announces and the daggers from Sbu and his mother, I might just end up on a bed next to Dali.

"Ex-wife!" He corrects her.

"Until the divorce is finalised, she is his wife." Mum is not letting up and I can see Sbu clenching his jaws.

"If she is his wife then she takes precedence." The doctor says.

"They are divorced. It was finalised." Sbu fires back. When did he start hating me?

"Did you see the divorce decree?" Mum asks. I would stop her but she seems to be on a roll so I let her be. "Until a divorce decree is issued, Bahlengiwe Khumalo is Mrs Dalingcebo Khumalo." I'm not sure where this woman was hiding all along but now that she is here, I love her.

"In that case, Mrs Khumalo, please come with me." The doctor says breaking the back and forth.

I follow him into a ward. I thought I'd find things worse than I imagined but it's way better. Dali is laying there with just a nasal cannula, his eyes closed. I make my way to the bed and hold his hand. He opens his eyes and a smile plays on his lips.

"Hi."

"Your note said you're going to the mine. This doesn't look like a mine."
I say and his smile widens.

"I made a detour. How are you?"

"I should be asking you that? How are you feeling?" I pull up the chair and sit down.

"I'm okay. Doctor says I will be put of here in just a few days."

"What happened?" He sighs and lays his head back.

"Khanyi happened." He says. That name gives me a rash but I'm sure there is a good explanation for it. So I put my reservations aside and focus on the present.

"Khanyi. What does she have to do with this?"

"I decided to go to the house to get a change of clothes when I left the mine. She was there. I don't know how she got in. But from the looks of it, she was there for a few days, maybe more. She was angry, going on about me laughing at her pain because she lost her baby and all that. Tied me up but I managed to break free, we struggled for the gun and it went off. For a moment I didnt think I was shot until the adrenaline wore off and I ended up here." He tells me. As a woman I want to feel sorry for Khanyi but as someone who has been at the receiving end of her evil vile ways, I'm tempted to say she got what she deserved. Am I evil?

"Wow, so she came to the house, with a gun ready to shoot you? Because you laughed?" Now that I am saying it out loud it sounds ridiculous but Dali being here is proof enough that it did happen.

"Yep."

"Well, I'm glad you're okay. Hopefully the police will find Khanyi and have her charged for this." Speak of the devil and he will appear. Two police officers walk into the ward and greet.

"Mr Khumalo, glad you're Okay. We are here to take your statement." The officer says. Dali narrates the story from beginning to end. For some reason I was expecting him to protect her but he gives the officers her name and surname, her license plate number and her last known address. I'm just happy she is put of his system. Literally.

"So this wasnt some random shooting, she was waiting for you, ready to ambush you?" The officer asks. Dali nods his head. I cant believe Khanyi would do something like this. Who am I kidding, this is right up her alley.

"This woman, do you know her?" The other officer questions.

"Ex-girlfriend." He tells them. Once this gets out everyone will know. Their relationship will be out in the open and everyone will know he was cheating on me the whole time we were married. My entire life will be scrutinised from top to bottom all because Khanyi wanted revenge. Even though she is out of our lives she is still ruining things somehow. God I hate that woman.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

81

KHANYISILE

She's been in the holding cells for almost a full day. She's barely had anything to eat. Not that it hasn't been offered. But she refuses to eat dry brown bread with nothing but black tea and sugar that tastes like it was poured by someone on the other side of the river.

It's morning and she has barely slept. The stench, the cold and the itchy blankets have not been helpful. There is just one saving grace for her, she is in a cell alone. She gets up from the cold concrete slab and starts pacing from one end of the cell to the other before she starts banging the steel bars.

"HEY!" She yells. She bangs the bars some more until an officer comes to her. She is pissed.

"What do you want?" The officer asks her.

"I need to make a phone call. I need to call my lawyer." Khanyi tells her. The officer laughs.

"Sweetie, you don't get to make orders around here. This is not a hotel." The officer turns around ready to leave.

"Hey, I know my rights and you cannot keep me here without allowing me a phone call. It's my right." She says. A plain clothes officer makes his way down the hallway and stops right next to them.

"Is everything okay?" He asks his colleague.

"I need to make a phone call." Khanyi chimes in. The officer smiles.

"Miss Khanyisile Manana, right?" He asks. She nods her head, a glimmer of hope rising. Maybe this officer can get her out of here. "I am so sorry for this hold up. My colleague here will take you to my office so we can have a chat." He says. His colleague opens the cell and leads her down to the 'office'. Except the 'office' is an interrogation room.

"This is not an office?" Khanyi says looking around the full cold room with a single metal table in the middle and two chairs on either side of it.

"Ten points for you. Sit down." The officer says and walks out. Khanyi rushes to the door and tries to open but fails. She sighs and makes her way back to the table. She pulls out the chair and sits down.

Ten minutes later the male officer walks in with a plate in one hand and a cup in the other. He places both on the table. Khanyi's stomach growls seeing the steaming cup of coffee and the ham and cheese sandwich. The officer pulls out the other chair and takes a seat.

"Miss Manana, I am sorry to keep you waiting. My colleague told me you didnt eat so I thought I'd bring you this." He says pushing the plate and cup towards her. Pride tossed aside, she picks up the sandwich and takes a huge bite. The officer watches her as she finishes the food in just under ten minutes. She takes a deep breath and washes down the sandwich with the coffee. "Feeling better?" The officer asks. She nods her head as he pulls out a notebook and a pen from his pocket. "Good. We aim to please." He adds. The sarcasm is not missed.

"I am Detective Skhosana." He introduces himself. "So, yesterday, early in the morning, there was a shooting." He starts. "From all intents and purposes, it seemed like an easy case. A house robbery gone wrong."

He goes on. Khanyi's heart starts racing as she listens to him speaking. "The victim managed to get help and he was rushed to the hospital. Doctors worked on him and they say he will survive. Thank God. Now, I'm sure you're wondering what this has to do with you? Dont worry, I will tell you. Yesterday, just before noon you were arrested at a roadblock with a gun. Nothing wrong with having a gun as long as its licensed. Yours isn't. And to make matters worse you couldn't explain to the officers why you had the gun. Now this is where both stories merge, my victim says you shot him. Hard to deny that because you were caught with a gun. Your phone was found at the victims home. Your fingerprints were dusted all over his house. Now all we are waiting for are ballistic reports that will tie your gun to the shooting. Those usually take a few weeks maybe months even but the victim is a well known somebody and you know this is South Africa, money gets things done pretty quick." He pauses and looks at Khanyi. Although she is trying to put on a brave face, her heart is beating at twice it's normal rate and her forehead is peppered with droplets of sweat.

"I'm sure you're wondering why I am telling you all this, it's simple really. This is a slam dunk case. And crazy enough you weren't even a suspect when you were brought in. You were going to be charged with possession of an unlicensed weapon. But now you will also be charged with breaking and entering and attempted murder." He adds. "So, would you like to say something?" He asks.

"I'd like to call my lawyer." She answers. Skhosana chuckles and pulls out his phone, unlocks it and hands it to her.

"I'll give you some privacy." He says and walks out. For a moment she's not sure if this is normal procedure but she quickly dismisses the

thought and picks up the phone. She tries to dial Busi's number but she can't really remember it by heart. She remembers the first few numbers which she punches in. She tries to think and remember. Eventually she gives up and calls her sister. Seluleko picks up pretty quickly.

"Hello." She whispers. There are sounds of people talking in the background.

"Selu, it's me, Khanyi."

"Oh hey, I've been trying to call you. What happened to your phone?" She asks sounding like she has moved away from the people.

"It's a long story. I need you to come get me. I am at the police station. Or better yet, get me a lawyer." She says. Selu is silent for a moment. "Seluleko did you hear me?" She asks.

"I don't know. I could swear I heard you say you are in a police station." Selu replies.

"I am. I need you to come get me."

"Khanyi, why are you at the police station. What did you do?" Selu questions.

"I'll explain everything later. Just get me a lawyer and come get me out of here. Please." She begs.

"I'll see what I can do. Right now I have to go into a press briefing. Sbusiso is updating the press about Dali's shooting. Did you hear about it?" She asks.

"Times up." Skhosana says walking back in. Khanyi cuts the call and hands the phone back. "Thank you. We will continue this conversation

later when your lawyer arrives. In the meantime, my colleague will take you back to your suite." He walks out laughing, seeing the disgusted look on Khanyi's face.

BAHLENGIWE

Dali is doing better than anyone thought. He's even walking. Although he is still in pain but he seems better than he was yesterday. I am driving to the house to get him some pyjamas. He hates the hospital gown and lucky for him the doctor says he can get his own pyjamas to wear. I volunteered because the tension with Sbu and his mother there was starting to suffocate me. The divorce really changed things between us.

I park just outside the garage. It's been a while since I've been here. I get inside and the first thing I see is the pool of blood on the floor. Although dry, it's still very much visible and makes me want to throw up. I don't know if cleaning it will be a good idea. Let alone touching anything in here.

I make my way up to the bedroom. Being here again feels weird. I open the closet and almost turn back. There are clothes scattered all over the floor. Most of them are my clothes that I left behind. And the worse part is that they are all torn up and cut up. I'm pretty sure this is all Khanyi's work. I wonder how long she was in here.

I grab a duffel bag and throw in Dali's clothes, at least some of his were spared from the massacre. I head back down and the blood gets my attention again. I'm itching to clean it up but I also don't want to mess up with any evidence the police may need to collect.

I pull out the card Detective Skhosana gave me and dial his number.

"Mrs Khumalo." He answers.

"Hi. Listen, I am at the house and I want to clean. Can I do that or are you going to need to do something." I ask.

"No. We have everything we need. So you can clean up."

"Okay, thank you." I hang up and throw the bag on the couch. I get a bucket and fill it with warm water and soap. I get a cloth and a brush and get to work. The water turns bloody pretty quickly but I don't stop till I'm done. At least now the house looks decent and not like a crime scene.

I get the bag and leave. I turn on the radio and hear Sbusiso speaking. He did say he was going to have a press briefing today together with the police commissioner.

"Is there any progress on the Khumalo shooting? Any suspects?" One journalist asks.

"I'll pass this one to the commissioner." Sbu answers. The commissioner clears his throat.

"I am happy to announce that we have a suspect in custody as we speak. She was caught yesterday during a routine roadblock while she was making a run for it. Our officers managed to make the connection between her and the shooting and right now we are working with the prosecutor to make sure we have all our ducks in a row before we proceed."

"That was a quick response. Is it because Mr Khumalo has money?" One reporter asks. I'm sure everyone is going to think the same way.

I switch the radio off and make a u-turn. If Khanyi is in custody already maybe I can have a word with her. The police station is not as crowded as the hospital was. Lucky for me. I make my way in and bump into Detective Skhosana on his way out. Today is my lucky day clearly.

"Mrs Khumalo. What are you doing here?" He asks.

"I heard on the radio that you caught Khanyi. I'd like to have a word with her if you dont mind." He shakes his head.

"That's impossible. I can't let you in. Please just go home or go to the hospital. Please." He tells me.

"Detective, please. I wont be long. And you can have an officer there too to make sure nothing happens. I just want to talk to her. That's all."

"Mrs Khumalo. ... "

"Detective please. You know how important this case is. And all I want to do is talk to Khanyi before the press descends here with their cameras. I will be five minutes tops. Please. I am begging you." He sighs and looks at his watch.

"Follow me." I follow his lead and we head down a passage and into the holding cells. Khanyi is alone in a cell. Sitting on the concrete bench with her head buried between her knees. He opens the door and she lifts her head. Our eyes meet. I walk in and the door closes. But the Detective is not far off. He stands against the wall, making sure everything is fine.

I make my way to her side and sit down. Her eyes have not moved from me. She looks different. No wig, no lashes, no makeup, even the scent of her perfume has been swallowed up by the stench in this place.

"How are you?" I ask. She chuckles.

"How do you think I am?" Well maybe my question was stupid. She is in jail, how else is she supposed to be.

"I'm sorry." I say.

"Excuse me?"

"Dali told me about your baby. I'm sorry. I know what it's like to lose a child. I've lost two." I tell her. She laughs and shakes her head.

"So what now? Are we supposed to be besties? Did he also celebrate when you lost your children?"

"I don't know. But the first time it happened he took you on a trip to France while I was in the hospital. So maybe that was his way of celebrating it." She looks away and starts twiddling her thumbs.

"Why are you here Bahle?"

"I don't know. I guess a part of me was hoping to try and understand your side in all this. But the more I think about it the less pity I feel for you. For ten years you were all high and mighty, basking in his love for you. Meanwhile you knew his 'love's for you was a facade. A lie that you cooked up. And you were always ready to throw it in my face that he was with me out of obligation and not love. But now the tables have turned. He is no longer under your control or your spell. Now he is himself. And everything around you is falling apart. That's the danger of building a house of cards. You never know when or how it will tumble. But it always does."

"So you're here to gloat?" She asks me. I stand up and dust the dirt off of my pants.

"Gloat, no. That would be low of me. I don't need to gloat, the universe, God, the ancestors, whichever one you believe in, they seem to be doing a very good job at exerting their punishment for all you've done. So I don't need to gloat. All I need to do is sit back and watch the gravy train come to a crashing halt." I turn and walk away.

"You think you've won." She says. I turn around and find her standing. She steps forward, standing right in front of me. "I know you think because he is playing happy families with you now it means you've won. You haven't. Nothing can bring the past ten years. Not another baby or even a divorce. Dali will always be Dali, and you will always know, even in the throes of passion, you were always his second choice."

"A year ago I would have believed you and probably went home to cry alone in my bathroom. But this is a very different time, a time where the fog has been lifted off of him and everything he knew seems like a far off nightmare. You can fool yourself and tell yourself you were his first choice but the truth is if you were his first choice he would have never agreed to marry me. In fact, he would have fought tooth and nail to be with you. Instead he dumped you right? That's before you did your little Hogwarts spells. But it's all over now. He is free from you and whatever hold you had on him. That's why you even tried to kill him. Good luck with that by the way. You'll be lucky if you get less than twenty years behind bars." I walk out and watch her through the steel bars as Detective Skhosana locks her in. I wave and wink at her before walking away.

I walk out into the sunlight and take in a deep breath. Sbu may not like me right now but I know he will do everything in his power to ensure Khanyi pays for what she did. Although I still have to deal with the fallout that's going to happen once her relationship with Dali becomes public knowledge. But I will cross that bridge when I get to it.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

82

KHANYISILE

"You need to get me out of here. Now!"

"Yelling at me is not going to help. Sit down and tell me what happened so I know what I'm dealing with." This woman says. U dont know where Seluleko found her but she looks like a badass who can get me out of here. But then again, looks can be deceiving.

I pull out the chair and sit down. It's just the three of us in the interrogation room. I take a deep breath. My arms are itchy. It's those bloody dirty blankets in that cell. When I get out of here I am getting under a shower and scrubbing all this dirt off of me.

"Okay, start from the beginning." She says. What did Seluleko say her name was again? Zama? Zinzi? No, its Zuziwe. Zuziwe Mathenjwa. I hope she knows what she is doing.

"I didnt mean to shoot him. We were fighting for the gun and it went off. I did not intentionally shoot him." I tell her.

"But you went to his house with a gun, camped there for days. The prosecution will say this was premeditated." She tells me. "Explain to me why you went there to begin with. Maybe that will shed some light on why this whole thing happened." She is starring at me. She's beautiful, and she really does seem like someone not to be messed with. Seluleko is quiet. I'm not sure if she's being a journalist right now or my sister. But I hope she is on my side and not here for a scoop.

"Okay, a little over a week ago I had a miscarriage. I was pregnant with Dali's baby." I tell her and she starts taking notes.

"So the two of you were in a relationship?" She asks.

"Yes. For ten years." She nods her head and notes everything down.

"Go on." She urges.

"So, after the miscarriage I called him and told him. He was ecstatic." Zuziwe snaps her brows together. Imagine how I felt hearing him celebrate my baby's death.

"Ecstatic?" She questions.

"Yes. He was happy. I'm sure he jumped for joy as soon as I hung up the phone." Thinking about it now makes me think maybe Dali deserves this. Or worse. Him and Bahle want to make this seem like it was my fault. That the past ten years was all me. It was my mother and I was just as clueless. Yes I could have put a stop to it when I found out but I love him. Letting go of a ten year relationship can never be that easy. Especially when promises were made.

"Keep going."

"I was angry hearing him be happy about it. This was my child, a little piece of our relationship and he was more than happy to see it all end. I drank a lot of alcohol. Somehow during my drunk state I grabbed my mothers gun, got a cab and went to his house. I pressed the intercom for almost ten minutes and there was no reply. I guess that should have been my clue to go back home but loadshedding hit and everything became dark. Before the generator could kick in I jumped over the fence. Went in through the back door."

"How did you get past the alarm?"

"I remembered that he had told me the alarm before but I couldn't remember so I punched in his birthday, Bahle's birthday and then the kids and then it was disabled." I say.

"And you stayed there even though you knew he wasn't there? Why didn't you leave?" I sigh and rub my forearms.

"I don't know. There was alcohol, I kept drinking it to numb the pain. Plus there was no way for me to jump the fence, since the electricity was back I couldn't jump over the wall."

"You could have opened the gate from the inside. I'm sure there is some button attached to the intercom you could have used." She says. Why didn't I think of that.

"I honestly didn't think of that." I admit. Now that I am sober, I feel stupid for staying there despite everything.

Zuziwe looks at her watch and closes her notebook.

"Okay, I need to prepare for your bail application. I'm sure tomorrow you will officially be charged then we will be able to apply for bail." She says packing her bags.

"Do you think she will be able to beat these charges?" Seluleko asks after being quiet for so long.

"It's hard to tell right now. But I think I may have a defence strategy in mind. But the most important thing we need to deal with right now is making sure she gets bail. Everything else we will figure out once she is

out. Let me speak to the Detective before I go." She pulls her bag out of the room.

Seluleko sighs and takes over the seat Zuziwe just left. She won't even look at me. I'm sure she is ashamed of me. I would be too if I was in her shoes. Despite my anger, I shouldn't have done what I did. With mum literally being moved from the ICU to a psych ward it means I am the oldest in the family now and it's my responsibility to look after my siblings. But here I am. Locked up. I can't count on my father because even though he wants to be in our lives, he has his own family he has to worry about.

"Please say something." The silence is way too loud. Seluleko looks up and I can see her eyes are red, like she was crying and now she is holding her tears back.

"What is happening to us?" She asks.

"What do you mean?"

"Khanyi, you're here right now, mum is in a psych ward, what's next. Who is next? Me? Senele?" I try to hold her hand and the officer quickly reminds me that I am not allowed. This is not prison though. "Are we cursed?" She adds. I'm pretty sure we are but I can't tell her that.

"I don't know. I honestly don't. Mum, maybe. She's done a whole lot of shitty stuff so it's understandable she is paying for it. But we did nothing wrong. This was just a bad choice on my part. I shouldn't have gone to Dali's house the way I was." I tell her. I hope she believes me. As soon as I get out of here I need to find a healer who can clear this dark cloud that's hovering over us. Or me rather.

"My editor wants me to write about this." She tells me. I knew the journalist in her would come out eventually.

"And what did you say?" She looks down and starts playing with her hands. "Please dont tell me you're considering it?" This child. Shes supposed to be my sister. If anyone should have my back right now, its her.

"If I dont do it someone else will."

"Then let them. Where is your loyalty Seluleko?" I yell. I cant believe her right now.

"Look at it this way, if I do the story I'll be giving your side and not writing it as some gossip. The other journalists will sensationalize and turn it into some side chick turned psycho story. This way you control the narrative and you get to tell the story your way." She argues. The fact that she has thought about this makes me so mad. I have to fight to stay out of jail and also fight my own sister to be loyal to me.

I push the chair back and stand up. "I can't believe you. And here I was thinking you are here because you care."

"Of course I care." I walk to the door and the officer opens for me. I walk out I can hear my sister calling out my name. I'm pretty sure my name is already out there and I know my so called friends will distance themselves from me. All I have left is my family. Or so I thought.

BAHLENGIWE

Dali is getting discharged today. If there is one thing I am grateful for its that he basically survived this by the inch of his skin. This whole fixing of

umsamo needs to happen as soon as possible because if this is not some supernatural miracle then I dont know what is.

I hand the discharge papers and head back to his ward. He was alone when I left but now he is with his mother and brother. And his father is here. I wonder how he got out of jail. The temperature drops to below zero the moment I walk in.

"Where are the discharge papers?" Sbu asks. This one is the worst of them. Despite being married to my sister he still wants to treat me like an enemy. Wonders shall never end.

"I've already handed them in. We are ready to go." I say. He quickly grabs the bag and his mum takes the medication.

"Okay then. Let's go. We have a long drive ahead of us. And we can't be driving with you at night." His mum says. Dali's eyebrows snap together and he looks at them.

"What are you talking about?" He asks.

"We are taking you home so I can take care of you properly." His mum says while Sbu tries to help him off the bed.

"Uhm, there is no need for that. I'll be staying with Bahle." He says. Everyone literally stops what they are doing and look at him.

"Are you listening to yourself?" Sbu asks. "Mum says she will take care of you." He repeats as if Dali has hearing problems.

"I heard her and my statement still stands. I'll be staying with Bahle."

"Why?" His mum questions, her voice almost breaking.

"Because I want to. And also, I want to be with my kids. I almost died, I just want to go and hug my children." He says. I know that's not the only reason why but I am glad he is not listing me in his reasons.

"We can take the kids with us to Badplaas. It's not like they are going to school anyway. Schools are closed." Sbu tells him. My kids are not going anywhere where their mother will be bad mouthed and painted as some villain. No way.

"Thank you. But no. I want to be here. I also need to make sure the reopening of the mine goes smoothly and I can't do that while I'm there."

"Its fine. We will come and see you." His father finally says and I can see the other two are not happy. "Let's take everything to the car." A nurse comes in pushing a wheelchair.

"I dont need a wheelchair." Dali quickly tells her but she doesnt move.

"Hospital police. Please, sit." He sighs and gets on. Once he is secure she pushes him out.

We decide to use the back entrance to avoid the media storm parked outside. The silence is filled with tension. I dont know why Sbu expected Dali to hate me just because I filed for a divorce. We have kids together, even if we weren't giving our relationship a second chance, we would have to be civil towards each other for the sake of the kids.

I unlock the car and they put everything in the boot. Sbu bangs the boot as he closes it. I dont know why he is acting up honestly. Mntungwa helps Dali into the passenger seat, making sure he is strapped in. They say their goodbyes and I can see them watching us as we drive away.

"Your family hates me." I blurt out the moment they are out of sight.

"They dont hate you." Dali says. I'm sure he also didn't feel the tension in the ward or the daggers being thrown my way. I'm sure if I had said anything they would have chewed me alive.

"Really?"

"Okay, maybe there was some tension but it doesn't mean they hate you. Angry maybe but not hate. And I dont even know why." Either he is playing dumb or he is just being an ignorant man. But I will let it go. I dont want to be arguing about people who have no significance in our lives right now.

"I've been thinking, I want to do the ceremony before I go back to work." He says. Great minds think alike I guess.

"I was thinking the same thing. With everything that has happened lately, we need to do something before we lose a life."

"I'll speak to my uncle and get the process started. And since dad agreed to do this, we will have to have it eBadplaas." Well, let's hope he is still on board, especially with everything that has happened lately.

I feel a kick on my stomach and I almost lose control of the car. I swear this child thinks I am a soccer ball.

"Are you Okay?" Dali asks looking concerned.

"Yeah, someone probably just woke up and decided to play soccer with my stomach." I say and he smiles. He reaches over and touches my stomach. The kicks intensify. The joy in Dali's face makes me so happy right now.

"He is strong." He says.

"He?"

"Of course. This is a boy." Another kick and Dali laughs. "See, he agrees. That's right Mntungwa, Mbulaz'omnyama, Nina bakaBhej' eseNgome, Mzilikazi kaMashobane, you cant be kicking your mother this hard while she's driving. Slow down."

He rubs my tummy and the kicks slow down, not before one last hard kick, making Dali laugh again. "He is stubborn clearly." He adds. But the kicks stop. I wait for a few minutes anticipating another one but it doesnt come. Clearly this baby listens. Or maybe its the clan names? It must be. Sahluko can go jump, this child is definitely a Khumalo.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

83

BAHLENGIWE

I am waiting for Dvumo. She decided she wants to see me before flying off to New York. I'm still not sure why I agreed to this but here I am, in Sandton and going through a menu. I'm early but knowing my sister she will be late. The only thing she is ever really early for is a flight. Only because there is a set time, unlike taxis.

I feel the presence of someone before they pull out the chair and sit down. I look up and come face to face with Sahluko.

"I think I need a protection order now because this is bordering on harassment." He smiles and crosses his arms on the table.

"That would not stop me." He says. Clearly, because even blocking him hasn't helped.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"You know exactly what I want Bahle. The truth." I look around to make sure i am far away from people to not have to end up on some gossip sight. It's bad enough Dali and Khanyi's little affair was trending for the whole week. And to make matters worse, she has her bail hearing today and there's a lot of sympathy from people who think she was played for ten years. I dont know how that's going to affect her hearing. I dont need to be a trend again and this one is not helping matters.

"Truth about what exactly because I have told you countless times that this baby is not yours." I hiss.

"Only a DNA test will confirm that. And until one is done, I am not letting this go." The devil comes in many forms I swear.

"I will not put my child at risk just because you refuse to believe the truth. This is Dali's child. A Khumalo child. Please, for the love of God, let it go." I beg. I cant believe I'm being reduced to begging a man to leave me alone. Jesus needs to come back.

"Everything okay?" Dvumo asks standing over Sahluko. When did she even get here?

"Everything is fine, he was just leaving." I say. Sahluko stands up, leans on the table and brings his face close to mine.

"This is not over." He whispers before leaving. Dvumo sits down but her eyes are glued on Sahluko.

"What was that about?"

"Its nothing. You're early." I note. She takes off her shades and rolls her eyes just so I can see clearly that she doesn't believe me. Mxm.

"Who was that?" She asks.

"No one you need to worry about. You asked to see me. I'm here." I say hoping it will keep her away from Sahluko and it works.

"Actually..... " we are disturbed by the waiter who takes our order. Once he is gone the awkward silence starts. Dvumo is starring at me and when I look up and our eyes meet she looks away like she is ashamed or feels bad about something.

"So we are going to stare at each other the whole time?" I ask. She sighs and places her hands on the table.

"You're right. That's not why I asked you to come. How are you?"

"I'm fine." I reply.

"No, I mean, how are you? Like for real, how are you?" She emphasizes. I'm not sure what it is she wants me to say. Or maybe I am just wary of opening myself up to her. After the stunt they pulled I came to the realisation that maybe its every man for himself. Or rather me for me because they still have their little clique and I am the one standing on the outside looking in.

"I am fine. Really?" I tell her.

"Look, I know things have been awkward between all of us lately but you need to understand that it's not that easy finding our your father is not the man you thought he was." She says. So I take it the others nominated her to speak to me.

"And how do you think I feel? I saw them with my own eyes. I have that picture engrained in my head for eternity. And then I almost got killed for seeing it. How easy do you think it is for me?" I ask her. She casts her eyes on to her fingers. The waiter sets our drinks and cutlery on the table and walks away. I take a sip of the juice. Its exactly what I need.

"I am sorry. I know how we reacted wasnt the right way." Every word that comes out of her mouth upsets me instead of making me feel better.

"Wasn't right? You literally walked out on me and never bothered to call or text me afterwards. For weeks on end. Lindo even refused for me to be there when her son was born. Sihlangu acts like I dont exists meanwhile all i did was endure a gen years of a loveless marriage to try

and do right by him. He has shares now, you all do, because of me but none of you have even bothered to say a simple thank you. And now you're here making excuses because the thought of your father fucking another man is too 'traumatizing.' Give me a break." Our father arrives in the nick of time. I take the moment to gather myself and keep my emotions in check.

"Okay, I get it. There is no need to go off like that." She says picking up her cutlery and making noise while at it. Why is she getting upset. I'm the one who was wronged not her.

"How would you like me to do it Dvumo?" I ask. Maybe she has the manual on how a person should act when they are upset because I never got it.

"Look, all I wanted to do was apologise. That's all."

"But you're not apologising, just giving excuses for everything." I tell her.

"Bahle....."

"Dvumo, you're my sister. You're my siblings, as much as I would like to hate you I cant. But if there is anything I have learned these past few weeks it's that I need to stop trying to fight other peoples battles and focus on me and my children."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She questions.

"It means from now on, Bahle goes to the top of the priority list. I dont care what either one of you do as long as it doesn't affect me I am good." I pick up my cutlery and cut my steak. This baby is making me love meat, I hope I dont grow out of it once I've given birth.

"So what you're saying is that you're giving up on us? We are family remember? Blood? You can't just turn your backs on us just like that." She says. Either she has selective hearing or she is simply being dumb on purpose. Either way it's not a good look.

"I am not giving up on anyone. I am choosing me and my battles first. If you need me I'll be there. But I'm done reaching out to all of you as if I get paid to do it."

"You do remember I am the one who called you right? Not the other way around." She reminds me.

"Oh, I know. And I'm grateful for that. But my point still stands." She takes a deep breath and digs into her food. For a moment it's silent. The only sound available being the slow music reverberating through the speakers and the clinking of our cutlery. Until my phone rings. Dali's name flashes on the screen.

"Hey."

"Hey. We are done. I am on my way back now." He says. I guess court finished earlier than I imagined.

"How did it go?" I ask. I'm holding my breath right now. I hope Khanyi did not get bail. After everything she has done, she doesn't deserve it. And with that article her sister wrote, making her out to be human, garnering sympathy from everyone, I won't be surprised if she walks away from this scot free.

"Not good. She got bail. And her lawyer is using the temporary insanity defence. Apparently losing the baby was too much for her." He tells

me. Her lawyer is clearly good then. As disappointed as I am, I am not surprised.

"How are you feeling about it?" I hear him sigh. This plus the mine reopening has not been easy for him. I understand his frustration. Khanyi not getting bail would have been one less thing to worry about.

"We will talk when I get home." He replies. Hearing him refer to my little townhouse as home is both satisfying and scary. Home. I guess it will forever be anywhere as long as we are all together.

"So you two are officially back together?" Dvumo asks as soon as I hang up the phone.

"I guess." She chuckles.

"So you put up with ten years of a loveless marriage only to go back again? Are you sure you were doing it for all of us or that was just a shield you hid behind?" She questions. A few weeks ago I would have been offended at her words but now, more than ever I am pretty sure I want to do this. Whether or not people judge me and call me names, like they are doing already on the internet, at the end of the day, the only person I owe an explanation to is me. And I dont want to live the rest of my life wondering what could have been.

When I get home Dali is walking in through the gate with the kids in tow and some snacks.

"Hey, you're back." He says giving me a hug. He sounds better than he did earlier.

"Yeah. You sound better than you did when you called me. Everything okay?" I ask. He pulls me close to him, snuggling his head between my neck and shoulder.

"It turns out kids are a great form of dopamine. Plus you're here now so everything is right with the world. At least my world." He says planting a kiss on my shoulder before lifting himself up. "Come on. Let's go in and we will talk about everything. I brought takeaways by the way so you can relax. Do you have something in the car that needs to go in?"

"Yeah. Just a few shopping bags." I reply. It's nice seeing him happy.

He opens the car boot and takes out the shopping bags. I did go a little crazy, but despite all the drama with Khanyi, dividends from Makgotso's boutique came in. We are doing better than I anticipated since the second store opened. I need to give her a call later.

We head inside and the kids go through the clothes I bought them. Kids grow like weeds and some of their clothes are starting to not fit. They are always happy to receive anything. One thing I'm grateful for is how oblivious they are to the just how much money their family has. On both sides even. Put them in pep clothing and they are happy. I hope they never lose their innocence. They pick up their shopping bags and go running to their bedrooms. Pretty soon we will have a fashion show.

I turn to the man grinning next to me. "So. Tell me what happened?" I say.

"Well, her lawyer is good. And there were some women's movement there to support her." He tells me.

"Are those not supposed to support victims of GBV?" Maybe I am the one who is ill informed.

"I dont know. I guess the whole ten year drama, her losing the baby and the abortions she claims to have been forced to have somehow has turned her into a victim." He sounds defeated. Well he needs to toughen up. It's too early for him to give up.

"Despite all the muti she used? Shes the victim?"

"Unfortunately witchcraft is not really something a prosecutor can present to a court of law." He says. Maybe not in a court of law but a court of public opinion can change the whole thing. "Forget about the case, are you excited for tomorrow?" He asks. He is back to his normal happy self again. Tomorrow we are finding out the gender of the baby. He thinks it's a boy. I'll be happy for a healthy baby.

"I was thinking we can combine the ceremony at home with a Thanksgiving dinner." He says.

"That's actually a great idea. Lord knows we need to show some gratitude for everything we've gone through and came out alive."

"Exactly. I've spoken to my uncle and everything is being set up. Mum said the renovations at the house are done she's just waiting for some furniture she's bringing in from overseas then we can go ahead." He adds. He is really excited about this.

"Speaking of your mum, how is she handling things with Mntungwa? It must be awkward?" He laughs.

"You know my mother. She will always put on a brave face, mostly because no one is allowed to know how imperfect her life is. But they

seem to be working things out. I'm not sure how that will happen seeing as they are neighbours with your parents. But I hope once dad's case is done they can really sit down and figure out a way forward." I hope so too. And since Mntungwa will not be going to jail anymore it will give them time to fix things.

I still cant get over how easy it was for Mntungwa to throw his accomplices under the bus just to save himself. Apparently he sang like a canary when he was confronted with evidence of his involvement in the smuggling. And in exchange for full immunity he literally gave the police names, dates and even buyers of those diamonds. I hope the people he sold dont come back gunning for revenge.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

84

KHANYISILE

This cannot be happening right now. My name is all over social media and not in a good way. I'm being called a witch and every other insult you can think off. Just last week people were sympathetic and on my side. Today I am being dragged to hell and back.

"Stop reading that." Seluleko says grabbing the phone from me. How can I not. I went from being the victim in all this to now being the villain. Posts of support are being deleted every minute.

"How do you think Jade Mini got this story?" Senele asks. I shake my head, I have no idea. But the way its told it feels like it was someone close enough to know everything. I wouldn't put it past Bahle. But then again I doubt she'd want her life being plastered all over social media.

"Maybe we can sue." Senele adds.

"Its a gossip sight, plus they have allegedly on every paragraph. Suing would be a waste of time." Seluleko counters. As much as it is a gossip sight, eighty percent of what's in there is the truth. Kade Mini clearly did their research too because they have statements from the fertility clinic as well as comments from some nurses who were taking care of my mother. I could use them but how would I know which one talked.

I grab my phone and make my way to my room. I lock the door and throw myself on the bed. As much as I know I shouldn't be reading this posts, I cant help myself. I need to know what people are thinking of me.

'This is what happens when you blindly support a person without knowing the full story.'" One user on Twitter says. He has about 200 likes and almost fifty comments, every one of them bashing me..

'The only person I feel sorry for in this whole mess is the wife. Imagine having to put up with a witch as a side chick.' Another one says.

'Her mother being crazy is the karma she deserves. In actual fact she should join her mother in the psyche ward because it's clear they are both witches.'

'Bringing an innocent child into the world without the father's consent and then getting mad when he wants nothing to do with it. Sometimes as women we create problems for ourselves.'

'I hope Dalingcebo sue's her for using his sperm without his consent. We preach consent all the time when it comes to women but what happened to extending that same courtesy to men as well?'

I got down a rabbit hole of constant bashing and name calling. If it's not facebook its Twitter, and if not that then its tiktok. I want to put my sim card back and call Dali but I'm not ready for the barrage of calls from journalists that will come. I swear if we didn't have Wifi this would be so much better. I wouldn't even be feeling the need to do this.

A knock on the door brings me out of my funk.

"Khanyi, someone is here to see you." Seluleko says. The audacity to even bring someone in here when I made it clear I don't want to see or talk to anyone. Especially my no good friends who've disappeared like mist under the morning sun. I ignore her and turn the other way, cuddling my pillow and staring out the window.

"Khanyi, open up." A mans voice bellows through the door. It sounds familiar, I think it's my father. I open the door and sure enough its him. I stand aside and he walks in. He sits on the bed and looks at me. I join him on the bed and we sit there in silence. It's not comfortable or awkward, its just silent. Right now I am grateful no one knows he is my father. Imagine the embarrassment he would have to deal with.

"I'm sorry." He says after a while. I'm not sure what he is sorry for so I keep my mouth shut and let him talk. "I should have tried harder to find you and bring you back home. I should have fought for you. Maybe none of this would have happened." He adds.

"Its not your fault." I assure him. It really isn't. Even though it's a hard pill to swallow, all this is because of the choices I've made. He turns to face me. I can see the disappointment in him.

"It is my fault. If I had been man oigh to look for you and find you then we would be telling a different story. You would have never felt the need to settle for being second best with that man because maybe you would have known that you are enough just the way you are. I feel like I failed you. And there is nothing I can do about it now." I cast my eyes on my hands, growing up means I have to take responsibility for my own actions. And this is one of them.

"Maybe. But going back will not help in this moment. You cant go back and change the past, I cant go back and make different choices. It is what it is. I am going to plead guilty to the charges, maybe I will get a lesser sentence." I say.

"Like hell you are." He grumbles, almost screaming at me. "You're not pleading to anything. You will fight this. You can't just give up."

"What's the point. I did it. Everything they say I did is actually true." He sighs and takes my hand.

"Khanyi, you can't give up now. Fight for yourself. Your mother is the one who started this whole thing." He says. I know he is right but still.

"Yeah but I did nothing to stop her when I found out. And now she is paying for her sins. Maybe it's time I admit my own wrongdoings before I find myself in the same boat as her."

I decided to come and see my mother. I doubt she can even see it's me. Seeing her like this makes me sad. I wish there was a way I could help her. Watching her try to catch invisible flies and then bursting out laughing tears my soul apart.

"Mama." I call out. Either she doesn't hear me or she is so lost in her own world that nothing else matters. "Mama." I call out again. She stops what she's doing and looks around the room. Her eyes land on me and she smiles. Right at this moment, her smile makes everything alright. But like everything else in my life, it's short lived. Her face has contorted into a frown. Fear engulfs her. She pushes herself against the wall and starts scratching her skin until blood appears.

"Ma stop doing that." I scream. But it doesn't work. She keeps scratching herself. I call out for help and two buff men come rushing in with a nurse behind them with a syringe in her hand. They hold her down and the nurse sticks the syringe into her. Finding a nerve with the way her skin is is a struggle all on its own. Her screams break my heart. Once the nurse is done she stops screaming her body becomes lax and she falls asleep.

"Maam, please come with me." The nurse says leading me out of the room. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"Does she do that often?" I ask.

"Yes. I think since her skin is healing it becomes itchy so she scratches. Unfortunately it's like opening a wound. That's why we try to keep her sedated. At least when she is sleeping she doesn't get the chance to scratch herself." She tells me. I don't know if I can come back here and see my mother like this. I thank her and make my way to the parking lot.

"So, do you think you can hook me up with your sangoma, or is it inyanga? Whoever. Can you hook me up." Someone says behind me. I turn around and find some girl.

"Excuse me?"

"Oh come on. Help a girl out. You know what they say, women should stay united. Nami I want to get myself a big fish like Dalingcebo. You know I've been following you on Instagram this whole time. If I'd known you can make things happen I would have DM'd you a long time ago. So, hook a girl up." She insists.

"Mxm." I turn around and open my car door.

"Really? You're going to gate keep idliso." She shouts and I can tell she just wants to draw unnecessary attention to me. I turn around ready to smack the shit out of her until I find her with a phone pointed at me. I hate social media. I get in my car and drive off. Maybe all I need to do is stay in the house and never leave. Ever again.

BAHLENGIWE

I love a story with a happy ending. Well somewhat. Watching Khanyi being dragged to filth on the internet has made me extremely happy. I know its probably a mean thing to say but its frustrating seeing someone who did you wrong get away with everything. And I know life is not a Nigerian movie that someone will suffer just because they did you wrong but hey, it's nice to see it happen.

"You seem to be in a good mood today. What's going on?" Dali asks wrapping his arms around me.

"Nothing much. I am just choosing to be happy. Life is short. Might as well enjoy it." He chuckles and kisses my shoulder.

"Could this good mood have anything to do with the chaos happening on social media right now?" Well it does, but he doesnt need to know that. I turn around and face him.

"I have no idea what is going on on social media. All I know is that I am happy. You're here, healthy and slowly going back to your old self, our children are healthy and thriving. We have another baby on the way. Why wouldn't I be happy?" He nods his head.

"I hear you. Speaking of which, I was thinking, maybe we should take a family vacation before I go back to work full time." He suggests. "I am thinking Cape Town. I'm sure the kids will love it, you can shop till you drop, picnics on the beach, anything we want we can do." He adds. Well I could do with a vacation.

"Okay. Cape Town it is then. Are you planning it or am I?" I ask. His lips curve into a smile.

"Nope. This one is on me. I will take care of everything." He says, excitement taking over. He looks at his watch. "I have to go. I'll update you about everything when I get back. I love you." He adds and plants a kiss on my mouth before rushing out.

I stand on the same spot for almost five minutes trying to digest the fact that he just said he loves me. He has never said that. I don't know if he realises what he just said. I turn back to the stove and focus on my pots. I shouldn't focus too much on his words or else it will drive me nuts.

Once I'm done cooking I dish up for the kids and leave their food covered on the table since they are out playing. I go through the socials again. They don't seem to be done with Khanyi and I am loving it.

My phone rings as I am busy scrolling. Lindo's name flashes on the screen. I'm not sure if I should answer her or not. Things have been awkward between us for a while now. Although Dvumo tried apologising it still felt forced and like she was doing it because she had to.

I watch the phone ring till it goes to voicemail. Another call comes in, this time from a different number.

"Hello."

"I owe you a huge thank you." The person says. It's hard to tell if it's a man or a woman because their voice is disguised but all I know is that it's Jade Mini. "My sight has crashed twice because of the traffic." They say.

"I'm glad I could help."

"So you still won't tell me how you're related to Bahle and Dali?" They ask.

"No. It's best I keep that to myself, for the sake of trust within the family, you know." I reply.

"I hear you. Well, thank you. Hope we can talk again." They say before hanging up. I doubt there will ever be a need for me to call Jade Mini and spill some tea. For now though, I am happy to play along.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

85

BAHLENGIWE

FIVE MONTHS LATER

"What do you think?" Dali asks. We are standing in the middle of an empty house in Bankenveld estate. We've been looking for a house since I agreed to us moving back here. The kids are not happy with me, well Nqaba isn't. Fezi is just looking forward to seeing her friends again.

"It's huge." I reply. It is though. Six bedrooms. Who needs all that space. A four bedroom house would have been fine. He wraps his arms around my waist, or what used to be my waist and nuzzles onto the crook of my neck.

"That's good though. Everyone gets to have their own space and we have two extra rooms for the other kids." I turn around and he is laughing.

"You're not funny. We are not having any more kids after this." He snaps his brows together.

"No, we have to have another one just to balance the scales. Preferably a girl but as long as it's a healthy baby we will be fine." He is not serious. I need to get on contraceptives as soon as possible.

"That's not happening. But I like the house. It's beautiful." I change the subject. I'm still carrying one child, the thought of having to do this again will drive me up the wall.

"Perfect. Because I already bought it." He announces.

"What if I didn't like it?" I ask. Lately he has been impulsive. I don't know if its excitement or what. I even have a new car thanks to his impulses.

"I guess we will never know." He says as the kids come running from the backyard.

"Are we moving here?" Nqaba asks.

"Yes. Do you like it?"

"Yes. There is a dam and a pool." He tells me. I haven't been to the backyard but I am happy if they are happy.

"Maybe you should go and check out the bedrooms then you can choose which ones you want." Dali tells them and they run off.

If I could I would join them but this bump I am carrying means some things are impossible to do. Like going up the stairs.

"I'll go check on them, you go to the car and rest." Dali says handing me the keys. I make my way to the car. A sharp pain hits me on the side just as I sit down. I take a few deep breaths. It's too soon for me to go into labour although these pains have been coming and going since early this morning. Except now they are getting persistent.

Another one hits just as I close my eyes trying to take a nap. Something is not right. Dali and the kids come running out of the house. It's a beautiful big house and if I had the time I would take it all in but right now, I need to get to the hospital. I dont know if we will make it to my doctor but I can only hope and pray.

"Are you Okay?" Dali asks as soon as they are in the car.

"I don't know. But I think I need to go to the hospital." I am trying not to panic and scare the kids so I have to suck it up each time a pain hits.

"Okay. Let's go then." He says. He drives out of the gate and a sharp pain cuts through my abdomen like someone is slicing me in half. "Okay we won't make it to Joburg. We will find a hospital around here." Good thing my hospital bag is in the boot. I stick my fist into my mouth trying to not scream.

We make it to a hospital in under thirty minutes. The cramps have not let up. Dali rushes inside and comes back with a four nurses pushing a stretcher.

"I'll call Sbu to come get the kids then I'll be with you just now." Dali says already on his phone. Sbu might not like me but he loves his niece and nephew so I know he will be here soon.

I get to the maternity ward and the nurses help me undress and set me up on the bed.

"How long have you had the cramps?" One nurse asks sticking her fingers into my private parts.

"Since this morning." I tell her.

"You're about seven centimetres dilated. We will keep you on the monitor to make sure the baby does not go into distress." She tells me. I nod my head and try to breathe in and out. The other nurses leave and only one remains. She keeps checking the monitors and hovering over me. I know she means well but right now her presence is irritating me.

Dali comes in after what feels like forever with the hospital bag.

"Where have you been?" I ask him.

"I was filling in some forms. How are you feeling?"

"Tired. Hot and everything else in between. Sbu took the kids?" He nods his head, holding on to my hand. I might not be his favourite person but I am glad he came. I've kept my distance from him and my siblings. Lindo's baby is five months already and I have not met him. Not by a lack of trying on her part. But I am pregnant and dealing with Khanyi's upcoming trial plus our marriage making it to front page gossip sites every other week. Maybe once I've given birth then we will deal with our relationship.

"Lindo called while I was at reception." Dali tells me. "She wants to come and see you." He adds. He is staring at me as if the answer he is looking for will be written across my forehead. I keep quiet. I don't know what he wants me to say. "You know at some point you have to talk about this and fix things. You're sisters. And sisters in law at that. You've been avoiding her since the ceremony at home. Can't you try and find some common ground. And fix things." He begs. Of all my siblings, Lindo is the only one who has tried to reach out. I don't if she means it or she's just doing it for the sake of doing it. I know dad went in on her when he found out they were not talking to me. So now I am thinking she's only reaching out because of that. Forgiving and fixing things would be easier if she was being genuine.

The sharp pains get worse and worse. I keep turning on the bed, getting on my knees and laying back down.

"Let me get a doctor." The nurse who has been monitoring me says. Dali is rubbing my back but I don't think its helping. I am in pain. And Dali wants me to do this again. Never.

The nurse comes back with a doctor and another nurse behind her.

"Okay, let's see." The doctor says lifting my legs up. She sticks her fingers inside me and I flinch. "Well, you're fully dilated. It's time for you to push." I say a silent prayer before I start pushing. The doctor claims she can see the head but it doesn't feel like there is an end in sight. I push for about ten minutes before she says she sees the head again. Didn't she say the same thing five minutes ago? I push and she says the head is out. I push one last time and the baby is out. A loud shriek fills the room. I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I can feel my limbs giving in and the sounds of the baby fading away.

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When I wake up the room is quiet and everything has been cleaned up. I look around the room and see Dali sitting on the couch with his head buried between his hands.

"Hey." His head shoots up and he makes his way to me.

"Hey. You scared me. How are you?"

"I feel fine. Where is the baby?" He rubs my hand then helps me adjust the bed so I can sit up.

"He is in the nursery. I'll get a nurse to bring him in. He is so cute though. He looks like me." He says proudly. He pulls out his phone and shows me the pictures.

"He is not even a day old and you already have a hundred pictures." He throws his head back laughing.

"What can I say I was excited. Let me get a nurse." He says. As he makes his way out a nurse comes in.

"Hi. Can you bring us the baby?" He asks.

"Of course. Let me check on mummy first." She replies. She asks me questions, takes my blood pressure and shines a light in my eyes making sure everything is okay. "Everything seems to be okay. Let me get the little one." She walks out and nerves take over. I know I've had two babies before but this is the first time Dali has been present throughout the pregnancy and the birth. It still feels surreal but I am truly enjoying it. He has made sure to be fully present throughout the whole thing, making sure my cravings are fed and I am resting and taking things slow.

The door opens and for a moment I think it's the nurse but it's only Lindo. I look at Dali and he won't look at me. I'm sure he is the one who told her to come.

"Hey. How are you feeling?" She asks me.

"I'm good." I reply. She seems nervous. "Im sorry." She finally says. I dont know if this is the right place for this conversation but I am glad she is apologising. The nurse comes back with a doctor and another

woman who is wearing formal clothes. My baby is not with them. Something is definitely not right. The look nervous too.

"What's going on?" Dali asks them. The doctor and nurse wont even look at us.

"Uhm, sir my name is Doris Jones, I am head of this hospital." The woman introduces herself.

"That's great. Where is my son?" Dali asks. I grab his hand and hold on tight. A whole lot of scenarios are going on in my head. And none of them are good.

"Uhm, there's been an accident." Doris starts. I can feel my heart beating at a thousand beats per minute. This cannot be happening.

"What kind of accident?" Sbu finally asks.

"Someone walked into the nursery wearing a nurses uniform and took your baby. From the security cameras we've been looking at, it's hard to tell if it's a male or female. But we believe the person left the hospital with the baby stuffed into a bag. That's why security could not notice anything." She says.

"What exactly are you trying to say?" I question. None of what she is saying is fully registering in my head.

"I'm sorry ma'am but your baby is gone. We have called the police and they will be here to take your statements." This has to be a nightmare. That's the only explanation. I am still passed out and when I wake up my baby will be in my arms. Yeah, that's it. This is a nightmare.

"This is a private hospital right?" Lindo asks.

"Yes maam." The woman answers.

"Then explain to me how someone can walk in here, go to your nursery, take a child and walk out of here like they are walking out of a market. Explain that to me because it's not making sense." She shouts. For once I am glad she is here because I am too numb to process anything.

"I'm sorry maam, we are doing all we can to find the baby. We've called the police and they are on the lookout for the person." This woman is too calm for my liking. The way she is carrying on, giving out apologies as if its Christmas is actually making me angry.

"Pleuse leave. And the next time you come back in here make sure you have our child with you." Dali hisses. The three women walk out and the reality finally hits. My baby is gone. Someone out there has my child. "I'll make some calls." Dali says. Lindo takes his place and holds my hand. My body is too numb to do anything. Not even tears are coming out of my eyes.

"It will be okay. They will find him." Lindo assures me. I get my phone and send my father a text telling him what happened. He calls immediately.

"Your text is not making sense." He tells me. I explain everything again. "I'm on my way." He says and hangs up. I'm not going to cry. I can't. My baby will be back soon. He will be back. I know he will.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

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DALINGCEBO

"Do you have someone in mind who would want to do this?" The officer asks for the tenth time. They've been coming in and out of here asking stupid questions instead of being out there looking for my son.

"Didnt you already ask this question?" Bab'Zwide asks.

"We are just being thorough." The officer replies.

"While you're here being 'thorough', who ever took the baby is probably half way to a border. Cant you just do your job and find the baby?" My dad screams. I didnt think he would come but he is here. Even Sihlangu decided to come too. Things are still shaky between him and Bahle but I'm sure she appreciates his presence.

Bahle has been sitting on the bed, not even shedding a single tear. It's hard to tell what is going through her mind. I know she's scared though.

"Hey, would you like something to eat? You haven't eaten since we got here." I ask her. She shakes her head.

"I'm not hungry." She says.

"Baby you have to eat something. You need to keep your strength up." Her mum tells her. She slightly nods her head and I pull the table closer. Its hospital food and I'm sure it's not as nice as her home cooked food but right now it will have to do.

She takes a couple of spoonfuls of the rice and stew and then pushes the plate away.

"How long is this taxi rank madness going to take? I want to sleep?" She says. Her mum turns to everyone and asks them to leave. They listen and make their way out. My dad signals for me to follow him.

"Hey, I'm going to talk to Mntungwa, I'll be back okay?" I say and she nods her head.

"Don't worry, I will stay with her." Her mum offers. I turn to leave and Bahle holds me back.

"Please dont go." She asks. For the first time since this whole thing started I see her eyes well up with tears.

"I'll leave you too alone." Her mum says and walks out.

I get on the bed and pull her to me.

"I didnt even get to hold him." She starts. "What if I never get to hold him? What if he never comes back? Why would anyone do this?" She asks, her sobs getting louder. I dont have answers for her. I wish I did. I wish I could tell her everything will be Okay. I wish I could tell her our son will be back and she will get to hold him. With every passing minute that he is not found, chances get slimmer and slimmer. Its only been a few hours but it's still scary.

"I have an idea." Sihlangu says rushing into the room. "We should do a video and ask the public for help. Even offer a reward if we have to. Social media can be toxic but it can also be helpful. All we have to do is ask people for help. We can post the video on all.our social media platforms." He tells us. I dont think Bahle is up to it.

"I will do it. Bahle needs to rest." I tell him. Bahle doesnt seem to have an objection to that. She has fallen asleep. I lay her down on the bed

and walk out with Sihlangu. He knows social media more than I do so I'm sure he knows what he is doing.

"We will do it in the waiting room." He says. I follow him to the waiting room where everyone is camping. He moves everyone around and finds me a place to sit. He opens his phone and points the camera at me. I take a deep breath and wait for him to say go. "Okay, let's start." He tells me.

"Hi. My name is Dalingcebo Khumalo. This afternoon my wife gave birth to our son. Unfortunately my wife passed out immediately after giving birth. While the doctors were taking care of her the baby was taken to the nursery. A couple of hours later she woke up and asked to see our son. A nurse went out to get him but she didn't return with him. That's when we found out our baby was taken out of the nursery and subsequently out of the hospital by an unknown person. Our child was taken from us at just a few hours old. My wife didn't even get to hold our son before he was taken. As much as the police are working the case I would like to appeal to the public to help us get our son back. I'd like to appeal to the person who took our son to please bring him back. Even if its anonymously we wont mind. As long as our son is back where he belongs. And anyone who can give us any information that will lead to our son being found, there will be a hundred thousand rand reward. Thank you."

"Perfect. I'll edit this and then post it. Send me the pictures of the baby and I'll get security to send me the image of the person." Sihlangu says getting up and leaving.

"They will find him son. We wont stop until he is back where he belongs." Mntungwa says. I get stuck on the we part. Who is we? I turn to Bab'Zwide and he is nodding his head. I guess they fixed things.

"I have some guys already out looking for him." Bab'Zwide adds. "He will come home."

"Khanyi." Lindo blurts out. We all turn to her and she looks like she just had an epiphany. "The police asked who could have taken the baby, it could be Khanyi. I mean who else has been acting crazy lately?" There's a small part of me that wants to dismiss what she is saying but I can't. Khanyi could be behind this. If she could camp at my house for days on end waiting for me to return and then turn around and shoot me because I 'celebrated' her having a miscarriage, what would stop her from actually taking the baby, maybe to replace her child.

I get up and rush down the hallway. I'm not even sure where the police are right now. I go through the different hallways until I see them standing in the front entrance of the hospital. I make my way to them.

"Is everything okay?" One officer asks.

"You asked me earlier who I thought would do this? My sister in law just reminded me of someone who has it in for me."

"Okay, and who is that?"

"Khanyisile Manana. She's an ex girlfriend. She is currently out on bail for trying to kill me." I tell him. He pulls out his notebook and starts writing things down.

"Do you know where she stays?"

"Not really. But her friend might know. This is her number and address." I take the notebook from him and write down Busi's name, number and address then hand it back to them.

"Okay, we will go find her and bring her in for some questioning." He says. They get in their car and drive off.

I head back to the waiting room and find Sihlangu here already.

"I'll send everyone the video so we can all share it on our socials." He says. I pray to God this works and by the time Bahle wakes up we will have some idea of where the baby is.

KHANYISILE

"Dinner is served." I say. My sisters look at me like I am crazy. I woke up in a good mood today so I decided to cook a three course meal. Beef stew with dumplings for the main. Wings and a salad for starters and creme brulee for dessert. I should enter Masterchef. I am good at this.

"Do you know that someone took Bahle's baby from the hospital?" Seluleko tells me. Well asks. I dont even know why she is asking me.

"I don't know and I don't care. Are you drinking juice or wine? You know what, I'll get both." I grab the wine from the fridge and the juice and set everything on the table.

"You're in a good mood. What are we celebrating?" Senele asks.

"Life. My trial is coming up I might find myself behind bars for a long time. So instead of wallowing in self pity i have decided to enjoy whatever time i have left as a free woman." I don't think these two believe me but I don't care.

The past few months I've been miserable. I've barely left the house and faced people because of shame and people calling me a witch to my face. This house has been my safe haven. After listening to some podcast, or was it a sermon? I don't remember, all I know is that it reminded me that I still have a life to live. Yes, I may have problems but I should not let them define me. I could go to jail but I could also be saved if the judge has a heart. So instead of focusing on the worst case scenario I am choosing to focus on the best case scenario.

A knock on the door disturbs our dinner. Senele gets up to open and returns with Busi and two other men. I haven't seen her in a while, I wonder what's going on.

"Khanyisile Manana?" One of the men asks. Busi mouths an I'm sorry. What the hell is going on?

"Yes, that's me." I reply. The other man rushes to me and pulls me up by my arm. "You're hurting me." I yell trying to fight off this man but he tightens his hold on my arm and it stings.

"You're coming with us to the station." He says dragging me to the door.

"Why? What did I do?"

"No one said you did anything. We just want to ask a few questions." I'm pretty sure this is against the law.

"Selu please call my lawyer." I shout as they drag me to the lift. I hope to God this has nothing to do with that baby. Or so help me God I will sue everyone including the grieving mother for harassing me.

NARRATED

Inside a shack somewhere in Alexandria. A woman lights a candle and sets it on the table, illuminating the cold room. She lays a baby on the bed. He has been fussy or maybe he is hungry. She pulls out a small tin of formula from a plastic bag and a pack of two new baby bottles. The baby starts crying just as she lights the gas stove and puts a pot of water to boil. While she waits for the water she picks up the baby trying to calm him down. He sucks on his tiny fingers, oblivious to anything around him.

The woman sits down and scrolls through her phone, she comes across a video of a father begging for his son to be returned to him. She gasps when she hears how much the reward is for the safe return of the baby.

"Hhay, your parents are rich shem. Who gives away a hundred thousand just like that?" She asks the baby who stares at her, his fingers still stuck in his mouth. She lays him back down on the bed and checks the water. Its boiling. She makes the formula and then puts the bottle in a pot of cold water to cool it down.

She picks up her phone again, this time to make a call. It sends her straight to voicemail. She tries again and gets the same result. She throws the phone on the bed, scaring the baby who starts screaming. She takes the bottle and checks if it's cool enough for the baby to drink. It's still a bit hot but he can drink it. She sticks the bottle into his mouth and he sucks on it as if he has been starving.

"You're hungry huh?" She says. "I need to get you diapers tomorrow and I dont have any cash on me. I swear if this person tries to play me, they will regret it. I'll sing like Whitney Houston to the police. She thinks i am afraid of them." She adds. The baby falls asleep with the bottle still in his mouth. She lays him back on the bed and picks up her phone. She

makes the call again and it sends her to voicemail again. She waits for the beep to leave a message.

"Lalela la wena, you better not be ghosting me or so help me God you will regret it. If you dont get back to me in the next 48 hours I am going to the police and collecting that reward. Its better than whatever peanuts you're paying me. Call me back." She half screams on the phone before hanging up.

She stares at the sleeping baby. He is fresh out of the womb, still wrinkly like an old man, but he is cute.

"If your parents can give away a hundred thousand this easily, maybe they can go up to five hundred. If this oke doesnt get back to me soon, you sweet baby are going to be my payday."

HIS HEART TO KEEP

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NARRATED

Outside the hospital that's swarming with cameras. The media is everywhere, each of them wanting to be the first to get an update on the current trending story. Mr Nxumalo walks out of the hospital leaving everyone inside and makes his way to a car parked on the far end of the parking lot, out of sight of the prying cameras. He opens the door and gets in.

"So, what do you have?" He asks.

"Nothing. Khanyi was grilled the whole night, her phone was searched but there was nothing there. CCTV footage from her complex shows she was there the whole day." Sahluko tells him.

"What if she has an accomplice? The person who took the baby doesn't even look like her." Zwide says.

"It's possible. That's why I have some guys tailing her. She left the police station and went back to her apartment. Hopefully she makes a move soon and we will see where it leads us."

"What if she doesn't make a move?" Zwide asks. "She knows the police are looking at her."

"That's the worse case scenario. The best case scenario is that if she knows she has been questioned and let off she will get cocky thinking she has got away with it. She will make a mistake and we will catch her." Sahluko assures him. "I've also been looking at her sisters and any

family members she has. So far nothing has come up." Zwide nods his head, staring out into the empty wall in front of them.

"What if we are looking at the wrong person? What if we are so focused on Khanyi meanwhile the real culprit is getting away with the baby?" Zwide asks. He turns to look at Sahluko. "I can't have that. We have to find him. I can't stand seeing my child like this. I might be shitty as a father but my child does not deserve this. You have to help me find her son. I don't care what you do or how you do it. I need you to find him." He insists.

"I'll do the best I can." Sahluko replies. Zwide nods his head and gets out of the car. One journalist sees him before he gets inside and quickly rushes to him.

"Mr Nxumalo, any update on your missing grandson?" She asks. Others follow suit firing questions. He keeps his head down and makes it back inside the hospital. Sahluko sits in his car for a while, his tablet in his hand going through all the footage they have of the kidnapper. They have concluded it's a woman. Men don't carry handbags. Her face is not visible. Somehow it's like she knew where the cameras would be and she tried to avoid them at all costs. One thing catches his attention, a tattoo on the woman's left arm. He zooms into the picture but the more he zooms in the blurrier the picture gets.

"Damn it." He says hitting the steering wheel in frustration. He pulls out his phone and dials a number. The person picks up pretty quickly.

"Sahluko?"

"Hey, I am sending you a photo of someone pulled from surveillance footage. I need you to zoom into the left arm and clear up the photo. I

think this person has a tattoo and I want to see what it is." He tells them.

"Okay. I'll see what I can do." He hangs up the phone and waits.

DALINGCEBO

This is worse than hell to be honest. I haven't been able to sleep the past forty eight hours. Not knowing where your child is can drag the life out of you. I keep going back to the day he was born and then taken to the nursery and wondering what I could have done. Maybe I shouldn't have let them take him. I should have stayed with him in the room with Bahle. But dwelling on the past is not going to help right now. I need to find my son. If not for me then for Bahle. Maybe I deserve the pain but I know she doesn't.

"Have some food." Mum says handing me a takeaway bag. Bahle has been sedated for a while now. Everytime she wakes up she starts crying and then ends up with a migraine. Its better if she sleeps. "I cant imagine what is going through her mind." Mum says looking at her as she sleeps. "No mother deserves this." She adds.

"I shouldn't allowed them to take him to the nursery. Maybe he would still be here if I had just..... "

"You're not God Dalingcebo. You cant predict what's going to happen in the future. No one could have known something like this would happen." She tells me rubbing my back. "Eat. You need your strength."

I open the takeaway bag and find a burger with chips and a cold drink.

"What's happening with dad's case?" I ask her. She sighs and sits back on the couch.

"He took a deal and turned state witness. He has been helping the State Security with the names of everyone involved in the smuggling and giving them paperwork and everything else that they will need to convict." She says. I guess I should have known he would snitch. At least he will avoid jail time so that's good.

"Is he not afraid the people will come for him when they find out he is putting their business out there?"

"I doubt it. Only two people know about the deal. As far as anyone else is concerned he is in the frying pan with them. So if anyone decides to come for him it means one of the two people leaked that information and I doubt they will." She assures me. I guess he knows what he is doing. I just pray it doesn't come back to haunt us later.

BAHLENGIWE

I thought the ten years I spent in a loveless marriage was sad and heartbreaking but this pain right now, nothing compares to it. It feels like someone ripped out my heart and left a huge gaping hole in there. I didn't get to hold my son, I didn't get to touch him and feel how warm and fresh his skin is. I didn't get to see his perfect toes and fingers. And now I am beginning to doubt I will. It's been almost three days and my son is still nowhere to be found. I wish I could do something other than lay here, cry and be pumped full of drugs.

It's dark in here. I wonder where everyone is. I switch on the side lamp and get out of bed. I need to pee. Sitting down is a struggle but I manage. I must have tore when I gave birth because peeing is another struggle. I finish and look at myself in the mirror. I am leaking. My

pyjamas are wet. I need to pump some milk. What if my son comes back and my boobs are already dry.

I find the hospital bag in the room and pull out the bottle and pump. I lower myself onto the couch and start pumping. By the time I am done two bottles are full. I don't have the energy to get back in bed so I sit there, my mind going into overdrive. I should be out there looking for my son. Sitting here just makes me overthink and come up with the worse kind of conclusions.

The door opens and Dali walks in.

"Hey. You're up." He says. He lowers himself next to me. "You were pumping."

"Yeah. I need to get those freezer bags for the milk. I need to make sure the milk is stored properly. When are we going home?" Being here is going to drive me nuts. Honestly I'd rather be home with my kids. The only downside is having to explain to them why their brother is not coming home with me.

"I'll speak to the doctor and have her discharge you tomorrow." I nod my head and silence fills the room. I feel Dali's hand on mine. He pulls my hand towards him and plants a kiss on my knuckles.

"I'm sorry." He says. "I shouldn't have let him out of my sight. I should have stayed with him and made sure he was okay. Instead "

"Instead you were worried about me and you believed the private hospital we chose was equipped enough to keep our son safe. That's not a crime and that's not something to be guilty off." I say. I want to put the blame on someone and it would be easy to put it on him but

the truth is he is just as much a victim in this as I am. In actual fact maybe it's all my fault. I should have stayed home when I felt the pains starting. I should have stuck to my guns and went with my original birth plan. Now here we are, running around like headless chickens because someone decided to kidnap an innocent child. Why am I always getting the short end of the stick when it comes to life?

NARRATED

In Alex, a woman tries to soothe a sleepy baby when someone knocks on the door.

"Nontle, vula. (Open)" a woman shouts. Nontle rolls her eyes and makes her way to the door. She pulls the door open and her friend walks in.

"Pretty, ufunani? (What do you want?)" She asks. Her friend looks around the room and her eyes land on the now sleeping baby.

"When did you have a baby? And when were you pregnant?" Pretty asks, her jaw on the floor.

"Its a long story. Remember I told you I was visiting a friend in Joburg?" Nontle asks and Pretty nods her head. "Well

while I was there I started having cramps. I thought it was period pains until I got to the hospital and they told me I was in labour. I thought I would die right there and then." She narrates. Pretty claps her hands and pulls up the lone chair in the room and sits down.

"I thought those things only happen in movies." She admits. Nontle lays the baby down on the bed.

"So did I till it happened to me." Pretty bursts out laughing and quickly stifles her laugh as the baby stirs.

"You know for a moment I thought it was this missing baby that's trending."

"Yoh, I heard about that. I cant imagine what they must be going through. My baby was a surprise but the thought of not having him here with me would kill me. Now imagine one who was planned and prepared for." Nontle says, starring at the baby.

"So what's his name?" Pretty asks.

"Huh?"

"His name, what is it?" She pushes. Nontle opens her mouth to answer when another knock comes in.

"Hold that thought." She says. She opens the door and her new guest walks in and greets.

"Pretty, this is my friend, Millicent. Milli, this is my best friend Pretty. She was just leaving." Nontle says. Pretty looks at her, shock washing over her face. But she decides to say nothing except her goodbyes. She walks out of the room leaving the two women alone.

"Millicent? You couldn't come up with a better name?" Khanyi says peeking at the sleeping baby.

"Would you rather I gave her your real name?" Nontle asks. "Anyways, I've been trying to reach you. Where have you been?"

"Busy. The cops were grilling me the whole night." Khanyi tells her as she occupies the seat.

"Cops? So that means you are a suspect? And if you are a suspect it won't be long before I am a suspect." Nontle starts pacing up and down the small room.

"Oh for heavens sake sit down. You're going to drive me crazy." Nontle sits on the bed, beads of sweat forming on her forehead. Khanyi pulls out a piece of paper from her bag and hands it to her.

"What's this?"

"A bus ticket to Lesotho."

"Lesotho? Are you crazy? I dont know anyone in Lesotho let alone how to speak SeSotho. I am not going there." Nontle says throwing the ticket back at Khanyi.

"Please you grew up in Soweto, I am pretty sure you know all eleven languages."

"Khanyi..."

"And besides, you're not the first person to move to a different city without knowing their language. You will be fine." Khanyi tells her.

"A different city Khanyi not a whole country. Why cant it be Durban, Cape Town or even somewhere in the Eastern Cape. No one would know who I am there." Nontle argues.

"Okay, let's do this. You will move to Lesotho for a year until the heat has died down and then you will come back and move to any city you want. Heck, you can even move back here if you want. As long as this cute little thing is as far away from Dalingcebo as possible." Khanyi picks up the baby and looks at him, a smile on her face. "Start packing.

Your bus leaves in three hours." Nontle mumbles something and stands up.

Twenty minutes later her bag is packed and sitting on the bed. She is dressed and ready to go. Khanyi pulls out a stack of money from her bag and hands it to her.

"You will use that to buy the necessities for now. When you get to Maseru, find a room to rent, call me then I will send more money. I'll send money to you every month. If I end up going to jail I will make sure someone keeps up with the payments. Dont worry, you will both be taken care off." She assures her. "We should get going before you miss the bus."

Nontle picks up the bags while Khanyi picks up the baby. Khanyi opens the door and freezes as she comes face to face with Sahluko.

"Khanyisile Manana. Fancy seeing you here."

HIS HEART TO KEEP

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KHANYISILE

I blink a couple of times hoping he is just an apparition that will disappear but he is here. He is really standing in front of me. I take a step back and he takes a step forward. Once he is in the light I can see clearly who he is. Sahluko. I remember seeing him somewhere with Bahle, I just don't remember where or what was happening. I can hear sirens getting closer and my heart racing.

"Who are you?" Nontle asks him. Stupid idiot. Can't she see we've been caught. All my plans, all the months of planning and waiting down the drain in just hours. How did he even find me here?

"You must be the one who took the baby from the hospital." He says looking at her. I can't move my eyes from him but I can feel Nontle glaring at me. I should have just got her on a bus the very first day she took the baby.

"Can I have the baby?" He asks holding out his arms. There is no way I am losing my bargaining chip. Right now this baby is the only way for me to get out of here. I take steps back and shake my head.

"No. He is not going anywhere." I tell him. He smiles. The sirens are getting closer and louder.

"You do know you're not going anywhere right? There is literally nowhere for you to go. You hear those sirens, they are coming here. I knew you'd get cocky and slip but I didn't think it would be this soon. So

hand over the baby and I might ask them to be lenient with you." He holds out his hands again but I shake my head.

"Who is them?" Nontle asks. I swear this one is the weakest link. If she gets a chance she will sing like a canary forgetting everything I've done for her.

"The police. The Khumalo and Nxumalo families." He tells her. She sighs and sits down on the bed and the creaks make this whole thing pretty awkward.

"I'm not giving him up. If anything I'd rather watch his head meet the concrete floor." I say. I see his jaws clench.

"You already have an attempted murder case to answer to. Now add kidnapping to the mix. And if you want to add murder go ahead and I promise you, I will personally make sure you never see the light of day again. So the choice is yours. Hand me the baby." He says.

"That's not a choice. Hand you the baby or what?" I ask. This one thinks I am stupid. The sirens are still ringing but it's like they've stopped moving.

"It is a choice. Hand me the baby or do whatever you want to do and see what happens." He insists. A bunch of people come rushing into the shack and now it feels really crowded. The baby starts crying.

"You found him." The first officer says. He is the same one who grilled me the whole night. His lips curl into a devious smile.

"Of course its you. That little innocent act you put on at the police station was just that. An act." He says.

"Hand over the baby Khanyi." Sahluko says. I have guns pointed at me. Despite the need to risk it all and end it right here right now, I still want to live. He steps forward and takes the baby from me. Before I know it I am turned and my head hits the wall. My arm is twisted and brought behind me. I can feel the handcuffs tightening around my wrists.

"Khanyisile Manana you're under arrest for kidnapping. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say will be used against you in a court of law." The officer says spewing his saliva onto my face.

"Officer, I can explain what happened." I hear Nontle say as I am dragged out. I should have known her ass would snitch the first chance she gets. Even though it's dark outside people are out and watching the spectacle. Some are even taking pictures and videos. I'm sure I will be trending the whole night.

BAHLENGIWE

For once I dont have to have drugs pumped into me in order for me to relax. Convincing Dali to go home and be with the kids was a struggle and a half but I need him to prepare the kids for when i come home tomorrow without a baby. They've been looking forward to seeing thei brother and I need the strength to tell them he wont be coming home for a while. Or maybe forever.

I switch on the side lamp and get out of bed. Since I cant sleep I decide to keep myself busy by packing my bags for tomorrow. The door opens and I can feel someone behind me. For a moment I think its Dali but the cologne is different. I turn around and its Sahluko. I turn back to continue packing. I am not in the mood go deal with him.

"Going home already?" He asks.

"Yeah. There is no point staying here and raking up unnecessary bills." I reply.

"Someone wants to see you before you go."

"I'm really not in the mood to see anyone right now." I tell him.

"Not even him?" He asks. I can feel his steps getting closer to me. I turn around and he has a baby in his hands. My heart skips a beat. I can't afford to get my hope's up. Not right now.

"You were not holding a baby a minute ago." I say and he smiles, looking down at the baby.

"He was in the car seat." He says. "Do you want to hold him?" He asks. My hands are shaking. I move the bag and throw it on the couch then get on the bag. I'm afraid I may drop him. If I'm on the bed at least he will not fall too far down.

He hands me the baby and I feel tears freely flowing down my face. He is perfect. My baby is perfect. He has his tiny fingers inside his mouth. His pink lips, his cute nose and his big eyes are the best thing I've seen today.

"He is perfect." I whisper.

"Of course he is. He is yours." Sahluko says. I unwrap the blanket and undress him, leaving him with just his diaper. None of these clothes are the ones I bought. Not even this blanket but whoever took him was taking care of him. I count his toes and his fingers, turn him over and look at every little part of him. He has a head full of hair. Weird because they say that's the main course of heartburn during pregnancy but I never had it. What if this is the wrong baby.

"How sure are you that he is mine? I never got to see him after his birth." I ask.

"The person who took him confirmed it but if you want you can have a DNA test done just to be sure." He suggests. I'm sure that's what I will do. I nod my head.

"Can you get me his baby bag. Its in the closet." He opens the closet and pulls out the bag. I rummage through it and find the clothes I wanted him to wear from the get go. I put them on and wrap him in the blanket I bought. Now he looks like my son.

"Who took him?"

"It doesn't matter. They are behind bars now." He says. I dont care where they are, I still want to know who had the audacity to kidnap my son.

"Who took my son Sahluko?"

"Khanyi. She was working with some girl who used to be a nurse and worked with her mother. Apparently she was fired after she gave a patient a lethal dosage of drugs while drunk. She has been more than happy to tell the police everything. She says Khanyi has been planning this for months. There was someone who was watching your every move so they would know which hospital you end up at. They are still looking for the third person too." He tells me.

I suspected Khanyi. But a part of me refused to believe she would stoop that low. I guess I overestimated her.

"I've called your father and told him the baby is here so they are on their way." He tells me. I even forgot that I have a family to notify. I

figure while we wait for them, it's time to address the elephant in the room.

"Do you still want the DNA tests?" I ask. He smiles and shakes his head. Thank God.

"No. I'm sure he is a Khumalo through and through. As much as it would have been nice if he was mine, it's better off this way." He says.

"What changed?" A few weeks ago he was adamant this was his baby and now all of a sudden he has made a u-turn.

"Everything. I am going on a mission soon and with the work I do, having a family is not something that's advisable. Plus he doesn't have the birthmark under his left arm that everyone in my family has." Well thank heavens for that.

The door opens again and everyone comes rushing in with Dali leading the pack. The baby is sleeping already. I shush them and they literally tiptoe to us. Dali wraps his arms around my shoulders and kisses the top of my head while my dad and Mntungwa shake Sahluko's hand.

"Oh you poor thing." Mum says peeking at him. "He is so adorable." She adds.

"I can't believe he is really back." Lindo chimes in wiping some tears away.

"Thank you man." Dali says extending his hand to shake Sahluko's. Right now nothing else matters except this moment.

"So what are you going to name him?" Sihlangu asks. He already has his phone out taking pictures and videos. I look at Dali and he nods his head.

"Well, initially we were going to name him Lumiphakade." I start.

"And now?" Lindo asks.

"Now, now I think Kungumusa is more fitting." I say.

"Its a beautiful name." Its way past visiting hours but this place is buzzing. The doctor walks in with the hospital director and a nurse.

"Evening. We just wanted to say congratulations on getting your son back." The director starts. "And again we would like to apologise for everything that has happened." She adds. I dont care what she says I'm still going to sue the shit out of this hospital. We pay exorbitant amounts to be here only for our child to be taken right out of the nursery and out of the hospital. No, sorry is not enough.

"If you dont mind I'd like to check on the baby to make sure he is okay?" The doctor offers and I let her. She checks his heartbeat and shines a light in his eyes and ears. "Well

he seems to be doing great. Again, congratulations." She says. They make their way out again.

"So you're going to let them leave without saying anything?" Sihlangu asks.

"We will have plenty to say through our lawyers." Mum tells him. Well I agree with that.

KHANYISILE

I cannot believe I am back here again. I'm pretty sure this time I am not leaving. The door opens and the lead detective walks in with the officers who were grilling me just a day or two ago.

"You like this place, don't you?" The detective asks pulling out a chair. The officers stand on either side of him like they are his bodyguards.

"Where is my lawyer?" The three men laugh.

"She is on her way. Dont worry." One officer tells me.

"I hope so because I will not be answering any questions without her present." I know my rights and I will not be trapped by these people.

"Oh, don't worry, we will not be asking any questions." The Detective tells me. "In fact we thought we'd come and tell you what we know. Your friend on the other side of this wall was actually quite happy to comply. She sang like a bird." Of course she did. Stupid idiot. I should have hired someone else. "Also, we are picking up the third piece in this triangle. The guy you hired to watch Mrs Khumalo, he should be here in a few minutes and I'm sure he will be just as willing to tell us everything we want to know. But to tell you what we know so far, you paid Nontle to take care of the child, lucky for us she kept receipts of every penny you sent her. Every text, every phone call. Basically going to court is just a formality right now. Your ass is headed straight to Sun City." He says. He closes his file and stands up. "You know, I understand why you did what you did, both the shooting and this. But lady, didnt anyone, not even your mother tell you that you cannot love a person to the point of losing yourself? Look at you, beautiful, smart and educated and now you're going to be someones wife in jail. Nx nx. Hay, ahem, I hope I

never get to this level of loving someone. Anyways, your cell awaits."
He adds and leaves.

The one officer pulls me up with the handcuffs and they cut into my skin.

"They are so going to enjoy you eSun City." He says and then breaks out into a fit of laughter with his friend.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

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BAHLENGIWE

1 Month Later

Having a newborn has been a whole lot easier than I anticipated. Musa is a calm baby. The only time he cries is when he is hungry or his diaper is full. Other than that he is always smiling and happy. As great as that it is, it has made Dali think having a newborn is a breeze. I tried to prepare him for the sleepless nights and the exhaustion that comes with it. Nqaba and Fezi were the usual sleeping 45 minutes newborns but not Musa. A month later and he sleeps through the night.

Dali comes into the bedroom with Musa in his arms. He looks cute in his all white outfit. Today is his Christening. And since we have moved back to Witbank to a bigger house we will have a party after church. We have guests coming. Plus Lindo's son is also being Christened. I wasn't for this whole thing but both mums insisted.

He lays the baby on the bed and helps me tie my shoes.

"These shoes are too high." He says. Of course they are. I am a mother of three but I am not about to let myself go because of it. Another two weeks of healing and I am joining a gym. It took me two whole years to get rid of Fezi's baby fat and that's only because I started gym when she was one. Now I am not wasting time. "How are you going to carry the baby?" He adds pulling himself up to look at me.

"He has a father. Besides, his grandmother bought him a very expensive pram. It's time he used it." He shakes his head and takes a seat next to me on the couch.

"He hates that thing."

"He is one month. He will get used to it." He rolls his eyes and stands up.

"We need to get going and I am not putting my baby in that thing that he hates." He picks him up and he coos, sucking on his thumb. They walk out talking, well Dali is talking.

I stand up and look at myself in the mirror. I look good. Still have some baby fat but its nothing major. Everyone is wearing white. We only go to church for Easter, Christmas, a funeral or a wedding but I guess the tithes we pay are enough to get us what we want whenever we want it.

I grab my bag and make my way downstairs. The moment I touch the first step everyone turns to look at me. I love this house for it's open plan but I hate that everyone is gawking at me. What if I trip and fall.

"Now that the queen is down, we should get going. We don't want to be late." Mum orders and everyone stands up to leave. I dont miss the shade she throws at me but I'll let it slide.

"I'll stay here and make sure everything is being done properly outside." Dvumo shouts. Mum stops and takes a step back.

"Get your ass in the car you heathen." She hisses and walks out.

"Your mother has drama for days." Dvumo says catching up to me. "I see where you get it from." She adds.

"I am not dramatic." I defend myself.

"Bahle, you're wearing a dress dripping with Swarovski crystals for a child's Christening. If that doesn't say dramatic I don't know what does."

"This is my last child. This is my grand exit from the pregnancy world." I say.

"Drama." She whispers.

Dali, Me and our kids get in one car while the others get in different cars. We make our way to church. Lucky for us it's a Saturday and it won't be as full as it usually is. As soon as we park the car I see Titi standing by the door. I don't remember inviting her but I won't cause a scene. Not today. I get out of the car and help the kids out. They go running to the others. While Dali is busy with Musa I make my way to Titi. I guess she also got the memo because she is also wearing white.

"Hi." She starts.

"Hey."

"I hope you don't mind me being here. Lindo sent me an invite." She says.

"I don't."

"I was also hoping we can talk. Maybe after the service?" She asks. I look at my watch.

"We can talk." We have ten minutes before the service starts anyway so we might as well.

"Okay. Uhm, firstly I want to say I'm sorry. I know what I did, I broke your trust and I am truly sorry."

"Are you sorry you got caught or are you sorry for lying to me?"

"Both. But mostly for keeping the whole investigation from you. But I need you to understand that I was sworn to secrecy, plus I signed an NDA. But as your friend I should have found a way to give you the heads up without putting my job on the line. And for that I will forever be sorry. Bahle, I miss you. I miss my best friend. Tell me what I need to do for you to forgive me. I'll do it. I swear I will. Even if I have to climb mount Kilimanjaro I will do it if it means getting my best friend back. Please, please find it in your heart to forgive me." I've never seen Titi begging anyone. She even has tears forming in her eyes.

"It will take time for me to trust you again." I say and she nods her head.

"I know. And I will do whatever it takes to earn your trust, I don't care how long it takes."

"Maybe we can start with lunch on Tuesday." I offer and had face lights up. Despite everything, I missed my best friend too. With everything that has happened there were times I wished she was there. Even just to talk.

"Of course. My treat." She offers.

"Obviously. You're paying for the next twenty lunches and dinners." I tell her and she laughs.

"You drive a hard bargain but I'll take it." I pull her in for hug and hear someone clapping their hands behind me.

"Finally." She says. Trust Makgotso to show up out of nowhere. She wraps her arms around the both of us. "I'm so happy right now." She whispers.

"Me too." Titi adds.

"Me three." I chime in.

"Perfect, the service is about to start. Let's go in." She pulls us in to the church.

The service goes pretty smooth. Kungumusa and Vuyolwethu have been dedicated to the Lord. We head back to the house and I change into a white midi dress and flats. Its time to run around and serve people. I feel Dali wrap his arms around me as I try to zip up the dress. And instead of helping me he is pulling down the zip.

"You're supposed to be helping me zip up the dress not unzipping it." I tell him. He plants a kiss on my neck.

"It looks better with the zip down anyway." He says.

"Right, I'm sure all our guests will see it the same way." He laughs and bites my neck.

"Let's get married." He blurts out. I'm pretty sure he didn't mean that. Or maybe he did. He is staring at me through the mirror, searching for a reaction.

"What?"

"You heard me. Asishade. (Let's get married.)" He emphasises. I am not sure what to think right now. Yes things have been great between us. Khanyi is in jail. Gogo Mphotholozhi has given us the green light and told

us everything is back in alignment. So there is nothing actually stopping us from getting married. Except my heart.

I love Dali. Since I decided to give him a chance he has stepped up to plate. He is everything I've ever needed him to be, present, attentive, kind, a great dad. I don't know if it's the trauma from the past ten years that has me second guessing myself or what.

"Bahle!" He calls out, pulling me out of my head.

"Hey."

"What are you thinking about?" He asks. Everything. I turn around and face him.

"Can I think about this?" I see disappointment wash over him but he quickly masks it with a smile.

"Of course. We should go downstairs before they come looking for us." I turn around again and he zips up the dress. "You know I love you right?" He asks, back to staring at me through the mirror.

"Yes. I love you too." I reply. His disappointed smile is quickly replaced with a genuine one.

"Good. Lets go." We walk out of the bathroom with our hands intertwined.

KHANYISILE

"Manana, the warden screams, opening the steel door. I jump down the bed and make my way to him. This place is crowded and hot. I'm pretty sure there are twelve of us in a cell made for six people. I miss my bed.

"Your lawyer is here." He says and leads me out of the cell, making sure to lock it as soon as we are out. I hate this, way more than I hate Dalingcebo and his stupid family.

I find my lawyer already sitting with documents in front of her. I hope she is here to get me out. I greet her and sit down. She pushes a file towards me.

"What's this?" I ask.

"A deal. I spoke to the prosecutor and we came up with a plea deal. Plead guilty to both crimes and you will get ten years behind bars but you will be eligible for parole in five. I think it's a good deal." She says, she's proud of herself for this bullshit. I close the file and toss it towards her.

"Five years in this hellhole. Jail is not for me. Look at me." I show her the bruises on my arms and neck. Every day in here is a fight for my life.

"I'm sorry about that. I wish there was something I could do but this is the best I can get you." Are lawyers even supposed to give up this easily.

"You said you can get me out." I remind her. "This is not getting me out."

"That was before you went and added to the charges you already have. Getting you out of the attempted murder charger would have been easy. The doctor who evaluated you was going to testify that your actions were due to post traumatic stress disorder resulting from your miscarriage. But then you had to go and mess it all up by kidnapping a newborn straight from the hospital. One you were planning to keep

away from its parents for years." She rants and I mentally roll my eyes. She sighs and leans back on the chair. "This is the best thing I can do for you right now. If we go to trial you may end up spending fifteen to twenty years in here. So it's up to you. If you want us to fight, I'm game, we will fight. But I'll tell you now, it will be like going into a gun fight with a blindfold on. So, tell me what to do?"

I hate this. But maybe she is right. I should just accept defeat and face the consequences. I wish I could turn back the hands of time right now and make better decisions. But it's too late. I am here and Dali is out there living his best life. Not that I blame him, if it wasn't for my mother we wouldn't be here. He would have focused on his relationship with Bahle and not made stupid promises to me. I will always curse the day Girly Manana became my mother. That woman is evil to the core.

"I'm waiting." She says tapping her manicured fingers on the steel table. Another luxury I will never get to experience for a long time.

"I'll take the deal." I mumble. She strains her ears, leaning closer.

"I didnt hear you." Of course she did.

"I will take the deal." I repeat and she smiles gathering her files.

"Perfect. I'll get the ball rolling. Who knows, with good behaviour you could be out in three years." Good behaviour, in this hellhole? Mxm.

HIS HEART TO KEEP

90

BAHLENGIWE

Ask me what I am doing here and I won't tell you. That's because I also don't know yet there is this part of me that pushed me to come here.

I follow the line as people in front of me mark the visitors register. We are searched and then taken to a huge room with steel tables and chairs. I pick one right by the entrance. I need to be able to run out of here should anything happen.

The sounds of the steel bars being pulled open sends shivers down my spine. An influx of people all dressed in orange walk in. Each one looking around for their visitor and lighting up as soon as they see them. I see her, her eyes search the room, land on me and she turns around to leave. A warden pushes her back into the room. I see her sigh before she makes her way to me. She stands over me, watching me until a warden pushes her down to sit.

"You're a long way away from home Bahlengiwe." She says. I was expecting some smug, satisfied grin on her face but it's not there. It's not fear I see in her eyes either. Her hair has been cut short, no makeup, bags under the eyes and short nails. How the mighty have fallen.

"Orange doesn't suit you." I say and she smiles.

"You're bold. That's new." She crosses her arms on the table, leaning close to me.

"I've always been bold. You just learnt to underestimate me and I let you." I correct her. She chuckles and sits back again, this time her arms are crossed on her chest.

"So, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"I wanted to see for myself that you're indeed in here. When I heard you took a ea bargain I thought it must be a different person they are talking about. Khanyisile Manana giving up and accepting defeat just like that. It must be a mistake. But here you are indeed." I tell her. I see her jaws clench for a moment before she relaxes.

"You've seen me. Now what?" She asks. "Justice has been served?" I shrug.

"Nothing really. But as for justice, five years behind bars will never be enough justice for me. You tried to kill someone and then you stole my child, taking away the experience of the first three days of his life, days I will never ever get back. So no, justice has not been served." Her lips creep into a smile.

"You'll get over it eventually. I did." She says.

"I know." I admit and her smile falls. I'm sure she thought she could use that to get under my skin. I've been in therapy for a few weeks now. I know I'll learn to live with that pain but I'm not going to let her see the damage she did. "And seeing you here is actually helping with that." She leans in again, this time her hands are clasped together under the table.

"It must be hard having my ghost hovering over your relationship. So much so you had to come here and see me to make yourself feel

better. You won't right? Shouldn't you be home celebrating with your man and your expanding family?" She asks. The smug look I was expecting finally making an appearance.

"Don't worry yourself about that. My husband and I are doing just fine. Our kids are happy and thriving. Not that I owe you an explanation. But I wanted to come, more than anything else, to pass my condolences." Her smile quickly fades and she sits up properly.

"Condolences? For what?" She asks.

"Your mother of course. Jumping out from the fifth floor of a building and her brains being scattered on the pavement like that must be an image you can never get rid of. I guess the demons chasing her finally won." I muse. I see her chest rising and heaving rapidly. She gets off the chair and makes her way to the door. A warden opens and she runs out. Oh well, I guess that's the end of that.

KHANYISILE

She is lying. I know she is. There is no way my mother died and no one felt the need to let me know. I get to the phones and dial Seluleko's number. It rings a few times, and for a moment I think she won't pick up but she does.

"Khanyi." She answers. She must have the prison number saved on her phone. I take a couple of deep breaths to calm myself down. This could all just be Bahle trying to get in my head.

"Hey, how are you guys?" I ask.

"We are okay. We miss you though." She says. I miss them too.

"And mum, how is she?" I hold my breath, fingers crossed and hope raised. Her silence is loud. I feel a tear running down my face. Bahle was right. "She is really dead isnt she?" She sighs.

"I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you." She admits.

"Then why didnt you?"

"Khanyi you are in jail, what were you going to do?" She asks. Yes there was probably nothing I could do from in here but hearing the news from them would have been ten times better than having my worst enemy deliver the news..

"She is still my mother Seluleko and I deserved to know. I am in jail not out of space." I yell.

"I'm sorry. I just didnt want to add to the problems you already have." How considerate.

"When did it happen?"

"Two months ago. Her policies paid out and we were able to bury her. Plus our father helped. Don't worry, we made sure to save you your share of whatever was left over from the funeral. Plus her life insurance also paid out." She tells me.

"Life insurance does not pay out if someone kills themselves."

"Well this one did. Besides, she's had that cover for over ten years so it paid. Don't worry

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we saved you your share." I sigh. This is not about money, I dont care about her money. "You know five years is not that long plus the lawyer

said with good behaviour you can be out sooner. I'll take you to mums grave as soon as you are out." She assures me.

I head back to the cell. I get on my bed and lay down. Mpumi sticks her head out from the top bunk.

"So, who was your visitor?" She asks.

"No one important." She jumps down the bed and get besides me.

"Come on, tell me. Please." She begs. Mpumi is the only person in here that I get along with.

"My exes wife. Or ex-wife I dont know anymore." I tell her and she gasps.

"The one whose baby you took?" I nod my head. "Hha, what did she want?"

"To gloat I guess."

"Well, you did kidnap her newborn baby." Mpumi also has a loose tongue. I know what I did, i dont need a reminder right now.

It's been six months since I've been sentenced. My lawyer was right about the plea deal, if I'd gone to trial I probably would have got more time. The state had a solid case against me. Nontle was ready to testify against me. Although she still got two years for actually taking the baby, I am the one who planned this whole thing so I got the bulk of the sentence. Everyone says five years is not a long time but when you're stuck in here it feels like a lifetime. Maybe I can use this time to plan my future. It's obvious Dali and I are done. Bahle won. Getting a job will be

impossible with a criminal record and no work experience. I guess business it will be.

BAHLENGIWE

Maybe Khanyi was right. I did win in the end. Here I am, healthy kids, a potential husband, yes, i call him a potential husband because I am still not decided on getting married. Lucky for me Dali has not pressured me or shoved the whole idea down my throat. A part of me keeps going back to the past ten years and thinking how perfect this would all have been then. It's perfect now too though but my thoughts still get the better of me. Going to therapy has made me realise that I need to let go of the past. It happened, I can't change it.

Fezi is turning six today. Well she turned six a couple of days ago but today is her party. Last year we couldn't really celebrate but this year we are going all out. She wanted a Moana themed party and that's what she's getting.

Dali went to pick up the cake while pur mothers are busy with the kids. I thought their dynamic would have changed by now but they seem to have got over the whole thing with dad and Mntungwa. As to what is happening between the two men is still a mystery. But they are civil towards each other, especially in front of us and the grandkids. That's all I care about at this point. Nothing else matters except my own little family.

Lindo walks into the kitchen and pours herself a glass of juice. She is pregnant again and this time she is craving orange juice.

"Didn't you just come back from the toilet because of that juice?" I ask. She rolls her eyes and gulps down the liquid.

"I can't help myself." She says wiping her mouth.

"That's what happens when you decide to have sex way too soon after giving birth."

"Hey, I figured since my womb decided to work, I might as well utilise it now while it's still willing." She shouts making her way to the backyard.

The front door opens as I put the glass in the sink. I hear someone's footsteps behind me and I quickly turn to find my brother. He gives me a lazy smile and I smile back.

"Hey. You came." I say seeing the gift bag in his hand.

"Of course. Wouldn't miss it." He replies. Our relationship hasn't been the same for a while now. He has never apologized for what they did and I've never bothered even looking for that apology. It's not like I am the one who put my dad and Mntungwa together yet people got angry at me for finding out and talking about it.

"Where are the kids?" He asks, killing the awkward silence.

"Upstairs getting ready." He nods his head and looks around the kitchen. I think he will leave but he doesn't. I turn back to the sink and wash the dirty dishes.

"Bahle. I am sorry." He says. I turn around thinking maybe I am imagining what he just said but he repeats it.

"For what?" I ask.

"For everything that I put you through. I know why you agreed to marry Dali in the first place and I am sorry I let you do that." Wow. Unexpected but wow.

"Its fine. It was my decision anyway." He takes a step forward and minimises the distance between us.

"Yes it was your decision but it's a decision you never would have made if you weren't trying to fight for us. For me. I should never have allowed you to fight my battles. As your older brother it is my duty to protect you not the other way around. And for that I am sorry." He says. I wrap my arms around him and pull him into a hug. No one is perfect, and my family is far from it but they are my family. Cant live with them, cant live without them.

The party goes off without a hitch. By the time it's done the kids are climbing up the walls because of the sugar rush. But they have fun nonetheless and that's all that matters. As soon as the party is done our parents bundle Nqaba and Fezi into the car and take them to Badplaas for the holidays. They try to take Musa too but the thought of being away from him for more than a day gives me anxiety so he stays.

I take a shower while Dali prepares him for bedtime. I walk out to the bedroom and find them playing on the bed. Musa's giggling is everything. I am glad he will never have a recollection of the first few days of his life.

"Hey. Do you still want us to get married?" I blurt out. Dali stops and looks at me.

"What?"

"Well, you said we should get married. I'm just wondering if you still want to?" All of a sudden I am nervous. What if he says no? He is good. Would it really change anything?

"I do." Oh thank God.

"Okay then. Let's do it." His lips curve into a huge smile.

"Do you mean that?" He asks. I nod my head and he rushes to me and takes lips in his. I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him down to me.

"Thank you. I promise you wont regret it." He whispers.

"I know." I look to the side and see Musa crawling to the edge of the bed. Dali follows my view and quickly rushes to pick him up.

"Did you notice that he has a birthmark on him?" He asks. I stop lathering myself with lotion and look at him.

"What?"

"Musa, he has a birthmark just under his left arm." He says. My heart starts beating faster than normal. It can't be. I bath him everyday, I would have seen a birthmark.

"No he doesnt." No way, no how.

"Come see." Dali says pulling up his tshirt. Sure enough there is a little mark under his arm. It's not too big but it's there. How did I miss it.

"I didnt realise." I admit.

"I also saw it when i was putting his pyjamas on just now. It's cute right?" He ask. I nod my head and put on a smile as realisation dawn's on me yet my brain refuses to comprehend what all this means. It can't be. It just can't.

THE END

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