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SUKOLUHLE

I throw the hoodie over my head, making sure that it covers me and I'm unrecognizable. I'm under pressure. It's either this or I lose the love of my life and I can't afford the latter . I had to take a pill to ensure I don't freak out and mess things for myself. It better not be a habit because I wouldn't want to relapse. Unibo students are easier targets or so I think. It's late and with the rate of crime in this field, I most probably won't be the only nigger trying to get lucky. Dammit Nosi for making me do this. I can't blame her though but rather my love for her and life for not having afforded me a living that'll enable me to provide for her. I hate being a disappointment. I mean she's been patient with me and we're about to reach two years together which is an achievement for me. I've never had a relationship go past a year. She could have had any man and

yet chose to stick with an unemployed dropout like myself. I live from hand to mouth and apart from my looks, there's nothing special about me. This thing stresses me because I'm a twenty-seven-year-old man but don't have anything to show for it. I live in a backroom at my friend's yard and basically live off her. It's emasculating. I only started living with her this year after I was chased out at home because of my drug addiction. She and Nosi were great help to me, having helped me deal with the withdrawal symptoms because we couldn't afford rehab. It's depressing more because I can't remember a time when my life worked out. All I have are just visions which no one understands and don't seem to ever materialise. I was even called a dreamer by most of my exes. Women are just complicated at times. I'd like to believe I'm a good guy who knows how to treat a woman right. I listen to them, give the best head, I clean after myself and I can cook. On top of that I have the looks, but I guess it's true that money makes this world go around. I have watched a lot of YouTube videos about this and drug aside, I can't believe I'm stooping this low.

Me: "Give me your phone bra. Let's not fight."

He didn't see me coming so he's genuinely surprised. I'm towering over him, having covered my face with the hoodie so he probably can't see much. The worst thing is that I recognise him. It's bad that his phone's the one I'm taking but he comes

from a lavish background so it's nothing he won't replace. The boy just gives me the phone on his hand then moves past me nonchalantly. What the fuck?!

I run back home which is about twenty minutes away. I call it home because Poppy makes it that. Nosi is one of the few women I've been with who aren't threatened by our friendship. We have been friends for ages, been together through thick and thin but have never seen each other that way. Poppy is the kind of crazy I wouldn't be able to handle and besides that, I see her as a little sister. I'm more like a brother to her because I took care of her when she first came here and taught her as much as I could about things this side.

Poppy: "And then? Why are you panting?"

Me: "Don't ask. I need you to wipe everything off this phone."

She whistles when I hand it to her. I think the run I took from that side to here has worn the drug off. She squints her eyes at me and I know what's coming.

Me: "Don't ask. Nosi has been complaining about her phone and our anniversary is coming up. I thought I should get her something."

Poppy: "Who wouldn't want an A30s. Good choice."

Me: "Yoh, I hope she's going to take it easy on me after this. Ngikhathele."

Poppy: "But she's endured you for too long chom. I'm not trying to insult you."

I sigh. She's right. I've had to depend on her at one point and she does more for me than I for her.

Poppy: "Look, I have an idea."

The look on her face tells me I might not like it but I'm walking on thin ice here.

Me: "Tell me, even though I don't think I'll like it."

Poppy: "You don't really have a choice. A phone won't be enough to show Nosi how much you appreciate her. This gig might actually ensure you take her out, by her a 20inch 360° 12A lace and throw in some lingerie in there."

Me: "How low do I have to stoop? The last time you spoke of a gig, I ended up sleeping with a forty-year-old."

Poppy: "But you said she was tight! Come on and that was like five years ago."

Me: "And how old was I? I ended up getting dumped anyway."

She laughs, waving me off with her hand. I don't want to remember that time.

Poppy: "I was speaking with Okinawa and-

Me: “The Nigerian? Poppy! Haven’t you been reading the news?”

Poppy: “Argh, don’t be a pussy. Look, all you need is to talk English. We’ll be attending a few prominent meetings ko Protea Hotel. You know those ones of the who’s and who’s of Mzansi. Now our role is to network in disguise though because we’ll have to make sure ba latlha sight so Oki can do his thing.”

Me: “What thing?”

Poppy: “Credit card scheming of course. I’ll train you in that regard.”

Me: “I’m not going to jail for credit card fraud.”

Poppy: “You won’t go to jail. Relax. You talk business at first then you flirt and wala. Those corporate bitches are lonely and a delectable man like yourself isn’t one they’d want to pass on. They have money which is what you need.”

Me: “It all sounds too easy to me. How will we get those cards? Technology is more advanced now

people bank from their phones. A missing card can be blocked within seconds.”

Poppy: “Yes, cellphones. They store everything on them, even their bank pins. All we need is their cloud email. I’m not going to bore you with the details. The real question is, are you in?”

I shrug. The plan isn't lucrative but beggars are never choosers anyway. She clicks her tongue and stands up.

Poppy: "Think about it but don't take your time."

And it's what I do when she's long gone. They have an idea but it's not well planned. I don't want to put myself in anything that has loopholes. Poppy is reckless, impulsive and never puts much thought into anything. She's smart yes but it doesn't go beyond numbers. I don't even know how she survives in the streets when she can run her mouth like that. She's also stubborn and there's no getting between her and her money.

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POPPY

I lay in my bed while listening to Given's snores as background music to my thinking. I don't think a lot. My sister's 25th birthday is just approaching. We'd talk about such milestones. Sometimes I feel like she knew her day was coming judging from how she'd talk about celebrating her birthdays. She spoke of getting a license at 18, throwing a huge bash at 21 then having a baby at 23. She wanted to get married at 25 but now she's not here to have all of that.

I've been up all night thinking of how I can commemorate it. I know the party will have a theme of her desired wedding and that's going to be costly which is why this gig has to work out. I

call Oki seeing that I can't sleep. He picks up almost immediately like he's been expecting my call.

Oki: "Happy birthday to Zuri."

Me: "You remembered?"

I sit up then get off the bed, not wanting to wake Gigi. I instead leave to the lounge and sit down. Why's he just breathing?

Me: "Okinawa?"

Oki: "I'm here baby."

Me: "Then why aren't you saying anything?"

Oki: "Poppy, you know how much I loved your sister. How are you always surprised when I remember her birthday?"

I sigh.

Me: "I'm sorry Oki. But you guys were barely together for six months. You can't fall in love that soon."

Oki: "Love isn't a time thing Poppy but you're a child so you won't understand."

Me: "I'm not a virgin, you know."

Oki: "Don't even go there. Have you spoken to that boy of yours? Is he in?"

Me: "Yes. He had his first theft last night and seemed fine."

Oki: "He better not mess up. You know I don't play with my money o."

Me: "He won't. I'll make sure he doesn't. You have to stop being scary, now he thinks you're dangerous."

Oki: "You're the only who doesn't. Three weeks have passed now Poppy."

I grimace. How did it pass so soon?

Me: "Are you sure?"

Oki: "Don't even think about it Mi amor. You're the one who goes ballistic when I find other means."

Me: "Do you even know what ballistic is? I told you to stick to the streets because English isn't for you. Stop trying to sound smart."

Oki: "Stop digressing. Ask that boy to look after your son then I'll send someone to fetch you."

Me: "How do you think Zuri would feel about that? You just said you loved her and yet-

Oki: "Don't start with your excuses Poppy. Don't make me lose my patience"

Me: "Fine, no need to get heavy on me. I'll bath him in the morning then call you."

I hang up on him. This one thinks he can control me but Poppy does what she wants. I don't have parents so no one else has the right to tell me what to do. I only have these four as my family, that's it. I end up taking a nap on the couch until Gigi wakes me up.

Gigi: "Food Pop"

Me: "No good morning?"

He giggles when I mess up his curly locks then gives me a kiss on both cheeks for good morning. I'm still tired but hustlers don't sleep.

We live in a five roomed house in the township. It's your typical family house that has two bedrooms, a bathroom, lounge and kitchen. My sister's room has been untouched since she died. I only go in there to clean and no one else is allowed. I feel like moving something would be like deleting a piece of her and I can't have that. I'm going to keep her memory alive for as long as I can.

Nosi: "He bought me a phone!"

Then she screams and jumps around. See, this is just the beginning if Suko comes on board. Nosi is like a cheaper version of me. I mean I'm all about the money so she's a little gold digger. She wants to be pampered but is also good for Suko in a way.

I told him long ago that he must never go for girls like me but he doesn't listen. And by me I mean those who love money. I make my own via whatever way possible and if this gig works, I might end up expanding my business. I want to buy a sewing machine then attend some wig sewing course training so I can do something legal on the side. I'm tired of being a hawker. I'm not a tan fan so this always sitting in the sun, waiting for cars to pass by or university students so they could buy tends to be exhausting. I got debts to pay and now I feel like all my livelihood goes there because I don't see what I'm doing with my money.

Nosi: "Earth to Poppy?"

Me: "Oh sorry. He bought you a phone?"

She cheerfully nods.

Nosi: "I didn't think he was listening when I complained about mine. I was even thinking of leaving him because he never buys me anything and I've been patient."

Me: "You know you have parents for that, right? Suko is trying and we all know there are no jobs in Maf. We're all struggling."

She rolls her eyes.

Nosi: "He's just lazy and picky. I told him cleaners are wanted at my job and he didn't go for that."

Me: "He applied for that and has been sending CVs but hasn't got anything back yet. He's trying."

Nosi: "Well, not hard enough."

I'm close to rearranging her face right now.

Me: "Know what, get your skinny ass out of my house. The only reason he's still with you is because he loves you. That man's a hard worker but you'll never see that."

Nosi: "Oh really? Why doesn't he bask in the sun selling lollipops with you then?"

Suko: "Really Nosi? That's the thanks I'm getting?"

Nosi: "I have to go to my job that has UIF and retirement package."

Me: "Yet you can't even buy yourself a decent phone hoe."

She clicks her tongue and struts out. Wtf just happened?

Me: "And then?"

He runs a hand on his face with a sigh.

Suko: "Our relationship is hanging by a thread."

Me: "But you were happy just yesterday."

Suko: "I know. I know. She's been like this since she came over after you left last night. I thought the phone would cheer her up and that's why I gave it to her early."

Me: "And she was screaming happily when she came here and now she's flexing on us? Is she hormonal or bipolar? You sure you didn't knock her up?"

Suko: "Of course not. I can't afford myself so why would I take that risk knowing I won't be able to afford a child?"

Me: "That was weird. Anyway, I need you to look after Gigi today. I'm going to Oki."

Suko: "Three weeks have passed already?"

I nod and he chuckles.

Suko: "Good luck. Come Given."

He hops off the high chair then takes his hand. My boy never pays attention unless he's being addressed. He probably didn't notice Nosi was here.

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POPPY

Oki lives in a double storey house in Riviera. Every time I look at its walls it's like I can almost see the blood that had to be shed to have it standing. I know he didn't sweat it, probably sold someone's daughter for it. Men like him thrive in the North West because the government is shit. Criminals get away with a lot and they have most of the men in blue on their payroll.

Oki: "I can feel the wheels turning in your pretty head from here."

Me: "Are you still selling people?"

Oki: "I told you I'm the middleman Poppy and I hate when you ask about that."

I click my tongue and take the glass of wine he's poured for me. He's a bad romantic but does try. He's top less and has his hair tied in a bun on top of his head. I love running my hand through that hair. I also like that he lets me mess around with his beard. Like now, I've plaited it so he looks funny.

Me: "I'm just asking. There's someone I'm willing to trade."

Oki: "Who messed with you now?"

Me: "Suko's girlfriend. She was busy saying shit and left him feeling like it. She's becoming a nuisance."

Oki: "Don't involve yourself in his business. He's a grown man."

Me: "Mxm, you never help."

Oki: "I told you I don't want any blood on those soft hands. Come sit on my lap."

Me: "I'm fine here, thank you. Let's talk about the plan. Have you identified any targets?"

Oki: "I got a guest list so we're now working on finding out their phone models. How far are you with the cloning software?"

Me: "Coming good. Will you give me that advance now? Joosubs wants to repossess my lounge suite. Please Oki."

Oki: "I gave you R5000 just last week. What did you do with the money?"

Me: "I have debts OK and it wasn't enough."

Oki: "It'll never be enough until you learn how to manage your money Poppy. You're always blowing it on shit then come crying to me like I don't take care of you."

Me: "So it's a no?"

Oki: "Yes"

Me: “ Come on daddy, please. I’m only three monthly instalments away from paying it off.”

Oki: “Give me the receipt and I’ll pay it myself.”

I frown. What the hell?

Me: “You don’t trust me?”

Oki: “With money? Yes.”

Son of a bitch.

Me: “Fine. I want to go back home. I miss Gigi”

Oki: “Finish up so we can play.”

Me: “You put a pill in here?”

It tastes a little funny and from his eagerness, I know my hunch isn’t wrong.

Oki: “It’s a little too late to ask, don’t you think?”

He smirks, smirks like what he’s just done is right. How dare he?

Me: “You always do this!”

Oki: “It’s the only way you don’t back out. It makes things easier.”

He shrugs with no care in the world. I can’t believe this dark skinned man! I’m scowling until the pill starts to kick in. Like usual, I act unaffected and ignore the tingling on the lady south.

He's watching me intently, waiting for me to get to the point where I can't fight it. He revels in those moments. I'm thinking of cutting a week to two days if he continues like this. Why would I back out on an arrangement we've had for a year now?

Me: "Wh... when did I ever back out?"

My lips feel dry or maybe that's the reason I give myself for licking them. I find my hands running over my body and I can't help it. I have my thighs clenched and I keep pressing them together, loving the sensation. I'm pooling, I can feel it and he knows that judging by the cocky smirk on his face.

Me: "You no fun"

He chuckles.

Oki: "I'm all fun baby. Come to daddy"

I bite my lip and shake my head. I'm going to fight this until I can't anymore. He's enjoying this. I feel hot and waving my hand on my face isn't helping. My hand isn't a useful fan so I stop and instead take off my top. My nipples are painfully erect and have me feeling like removing the damn nipple rings because I'm dying.

Me: "You win"

Because he's been waiting to hear that. I walk to him with wobbly legs and sit on his lap. He feasts on my nipples like a

starved animal, the moans escaping involuntarily. I want to be touched everywhere. The mom Jean I'm wearing has me hot and bothered. I need a fan down there or his tongue, I don't know. His other hand goes to my inner thigh while the other is cupping my breast. He's a good multitasker, I give him that. He unbuttons my jeans and a sigh of relief escape my lips. I have goosebumps all over and I don't know what to do with myself. I keep scratching my bald head, half wishing I'd grown hair so I could pull it. When his thumb runs on my bud, I feel my toes curl as my insides clench. I'm coming! And I hate when I don't last long. I love prolonged orgasms, they make me feel like I'm climbing mount Kilamjaro and the climax is its peak. I'm about easy money, not orgasms. This is why I hate when a guy knows all my weak spots. I might end up falling in love and that's destructive on its own. I'm a big Phora fan so I'm on the 'love is hell' tip and I want heaven.

Oki: "Taste yourself"

Me: "Stop with the nastiness and fuck me already!"

Oki: "Of course mi amor."

I don't know when he took off my jeans but my cum is all over his beard. I still can't tell whether he gives good head because I was too horny to notice. I know he has his good days but I don't know about today. My hands part my legs wider and I almost cry at the contact. I hate him for this!

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SUKOLUHLE

Given is a happy child. It doesn't take a lot to get him hippy. You give him food, play building blocks with him, force him to nap then bath him when he wakes up and he's good. He's the kind of kid that'll make you want to make someone's daughter pregnant but I'm realistic so I'll never fall into that temptation. I still can't believe I wasted my efforts with Nosi. I got her an upgrade from the Mobicel she used but she had the audacity to look down on us. It's not the first time she's done that and probably won't be the last. I hate that I love her so much because dumb me can't imagine a life without her. I know I need to hustle hard, get a good paying permanent job so I can make her happy. A man has to be able to take care of his woman and my being unemployed spits on my manhood. It's Saturday today so she'll come off work early. Nosi works as an admin clerk at the public hospital and rarely works on weekends. She does when there's a need which usually happens once a month. She's permanent that's why it's easy for her to brag. She decided to renovate at her home so most of her salary goes there. I don't want to think of how she'll be when she's done with that. She's money smart, something Poppy could grip from her but my best friend doesn't care.

Poppy takes care of Gigi, puts him to daycare and buys his clothes but she's also a shopaholic. I once brought that up and almost got strangled to death.

Gigi: "Food Soso"

Me: "You hungry?"

He nods with a yawn. I take his hand then we go to the main house. I don't have food in my room anyway so I'm hoping Poppy cooked before she left. Thankfully she did so I warm it up. I'll have to cook him dinner because there's no way she's coming back tonight. She'll come before any of us is up tomorrow morning then force us to go to church, me actually because Gigi loves Sunday school. I hand him the plate and he thanks me.

Nosi: "Baby, I'm back. My picture just got a 100 loves on Facebook. I know it's because of my new phone. I should take nudes neh baby and maybe open an Instagram account because I have the body."

Me: "You can do that. You know how I love that body of yours. I'm volunteering to be your photographer even."

She grins and blows me a kiss.

Nosi: "Great. I'm going to the room. I'll be ready and waiting so leave the brat and rush here."

She's lucky Poppy isn't here. She would have wiped the smirk off her face with a smack. She doesn't play when it comes to her son. I can't believe Nosi called him a brat when he's such a sweet boy. I'm thankful now that Gigi only pays attention when spoken to because I can't imagine how he'd be feeling at the insult. I go to the lounge, switch the TV on and change to a cartoon channel.

Me: "Come eat by the TV. I'll be back, OK? I have to help sis Nosi with something."

He nods and does as I say. I find the woman taking pictures by the mirror. She's in a matching bra and panty set which I've never seen.

Me: "You went shopping?"

Where does she get the money?

Nosi: "Not really. Come take pictures"

She hands me the phone, more like throws it at me and starts posing. I take the pictures, singing her compliments because I do have a beautiful girlfriend who's also sexy with a toned body. She's so photogenic so any angle makes the pictures look good. Not blowing my own horn but her photographer also knows what he's doing. The bedroom only has a bed, dressing table and one chair but at least I have a comforter set with

matching pillow cases. Poppy bought them from Home choice and they're probably the only things she's fully paid.

Nosi: "They're great. Thank you baby. I think I should do one top less, what do you think?"

Me: "I guess. I mean it's about you and whether you're comfortable with that."

She smiles.

Nosi: "You're a good man. Any girl would be happy to have you."

Me: "Thank you love. You ready?"

Nosi: "I'll do it slow so you can capture every moment."

Me: "Sounds like a good idea."

Nosi: "I should have borrowed Poppy's speaker so I can play some music."

Me: "Imagine a song then I'll take a slow motion video and then edit to add the music."

Nosi: "Ah, sounds wonderful. Thank you"

She should have thanked me like this when I got her this phone instead of spitting on my face. She's sweet but sometimes it feels like she's taking advantage of my benevolence.

Me: "What are you doing?"

She's about to take off her panty. She frowns, folding her arms.

Nosi: "It's called going with the flow."

Me: "What flow when you're getting all naked for the gram. It's your first time so have some decency and let them get to see you with some item of clothing on. Unless you have some guy who wants you to send him nudes."

Nosi: "Give me my phone. Congratulations for ruining the moment."

I go out so I can check on Gigi. I don't like leaving him alone for too long because he's still just a toddler. I find him sleeping on the couch while holding the TV remote. I pick him up then take him to bed. Nosi is beginning to frustrate me. She's beginning to change and I don't think I like who she's transitioning in to.

It sucks that I love her because I can't think beyond her. I just need to get a job so I can take care of her.

Nosi: "I'm leaving. I'll probably see you on Monday because I'll be busy tomorrow."

Me: "So, you're not sleeping over?"

Nosi: "How when you're baby sitting? I'm not about to play stepmom Suko, While uPoppy ene is busy getting her guts rearranged. I'm not compensating for her lack of responsibility."

Me: “Why unje Nosi? What have we done to you that has you suddenly so horrible to us?”

Nosi: “I’m fed up Suko, that’s what’s up. I have to spend all my money Ekhaya and be left with only transport money but I have a man. Good dick doesn’t pay the bills Suko!”

Me: “Ngiyazama Nosipho! It’s not easy getting a job with a matric certificate nje.”

Nosi: “Then join Poppy on her vendor business, become a herbal life distributor, do something, Anything!”

Me: “I think it’s best you leave. Gigi is sleeping.”

Nosi: “I won’t always be patient Suko, remember that.”

She clicks her tongue and leaves. She basically just called me useless. But she’s right, I’m not doing enough to sustain myself. I am business minded, I’ve been working on developing my own cellphone model where Poppy will develop its software. I’m more a hardware person so I can fix anything from keypad cellphones to fridges. I do help her out around the house and even in this two roomed house I’m staying in, the kitchen is filled with old appliances which I repaired. I wanted to study mechanical engineering but dropped out while doing N4. My life sort of went downhill from there. I was dating this other woman who convinced me to drop out and instead work at her father’s store. I did for low wages which all went to her. By the

time ngivuk' emaqandeni, I could no longer go back. I wish I could blame her for that but I'm the one who decided to listen. She was controlling and I'd failed to see that.

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POPPY

I can barely hide the limp as I get out of the car. Oki forgets that a week is a long time, he always fucks like it's his last time doing it. It's around 5am.

I unlock the door and slowly walk to my room. I can still feel this damn man's rifle inside of me.

Gigi isn't here, probably sleeping at Suko's room which means Nosi didn't sleepover. I'm too lazy to go fetch my boy so I take a nap instead. I've set my alarm to wake me up in a hour and half so I can make breakfast. I don't think I'll be going to church today. God will forgive me.

The hour passes way too soon and I have to force myself to wakeup. The house also needs some cleaning so I'll probably do that later today. I'm exhausted but there's no way I'm going back to bed.

Gigi: "Mommy!"

He runs and hugs my legs. I missed this boy.

Me: "You hungry?"

He nods. I pick him up, put him on a high chair then finish up with breakfast. I made him some oatmeal with fruits.

Suko: "You're back"

Me: "Duh. Go put on a shirt and come eat, this isn't man cave"

He chuckles and flexes his biceps for dramatic effects, making me roll my eyes.

Suko: "So, how was it?"

We're having breakfast with Gigi on the carpet who's playing with his train and tracks.

Me: "Son of a bitch put Viagra in my drink and acted like there's nothing wrong with that. I couldn't control myself Suko and I hate not having control!"

Suko: "Again? Didn't he promise not to do it?"

Me: "He wants me to drop him dead but I can't. I need his money and the scams pay out."

Suko: "Not unless we make our dream come true."

Me: "The smartphone?"

He nods.

Me: "That'll also need money. Continue doing your research. You must open an investment account so we can save up for it. It'll need patience."

He sighs and nods.

Me: "Is Nosi putting pressure on you? I can sort that bitch out."

He shakes his head.

Suko: "I'm almost thirty Poppy and yet there's nothing I have to show for that. I've been unemployed for three years. I don't know why she even gave me a chance. I'm a failure."

Me: "You're not a failure Suko and age is just a number. Don't put any pressure on yourself, stressing won't help. How about you join me as a hawker? You can sell amakikip or something. Anything so you can get some sort of income each day. You can sit on another corner."

Suko: "Nosi also suggested that. I guess it won't hurt. I'll sell my famous vetkoek with mince by the turf."

I smile.

Me: "See? It's something. Keep in mind that you're doing it for your project and not Nosi. We should now work on the prototype. I'd say we should find sponsors but I know you don't want anyone else taking credit."

Suko: "You know me too well."

I chuckle and take his hand.

Me: "It's going to work out. It won't happen now but it will.
You'll raise the Mncwabe name high up!"

Suko: "Thank you babe."

SUKOLUHLE

I've been a vendor for a week now and I can't complain much. It keeps me busy and at least I go home with something. Poppy came through for me with stock but made it clear I'll have to pay her back. She's a good friend and I appreciate her. I don't know why I've never thought of this. I haven't seen Nosi since she left last week and her phone takes me to voicemail. I miss her so much and I wish we could just talk about this. I don't remember doing anything that might have upset her. I got her a phone for God's sake, how's that not enough?

It's Friday. I'm hoping I'll get many customers plus it's the fifteenth so they're those who've been paid or who's parents have been paid. Most of my market are school learners.

Poppy: "You still game for the plan?"

Me: "Of course I am. When do we do this?"

Poppy: "Next week. Oki is coming over around 6pm tonight. Will you be there? He wants to us to run over the finer details."

Me: "I'll be there."

Poppy: "Are you OK? Still stressing about Nosi?"

Me: “Her phone’s still taking me to voicemail. Maybe she blocked.”

Poppy: “Check her insta. You said she wanted to take pictures for that, right?”

I nod. It’s been frustrating for me and this other night, I almost cried watching old pictures of us. I feel like the thread that’s been holding our relationship has been cut. It all happened too soon.

Poppy: “Don’t over think it. See you tonight”

We’re not in the same corner. I’m selling at another street, along with two other hawkers. I do vetkoeks, amakikip, nik naks and sweets. Maybe in time I’ll get more stock but for now, it’s what I’m pushing.

“Tinto!” an annoying voice shouts, making me suck my teeth. I love my family or used to until they threw me out and never even called. I remember calling my father after I was cleaned up, begging them to let me come back so I didn’t have to stress Poppy. He told me to man up and leave them alone. My mother didn’t pick up and Mosa never came to check up on me. I once thought we were close but life showed me otherwise. She’s working, unlike me. She followed our father’s footsteps and became an accountant. She’s doing her internship now.

Mosa: “It’s really you.”

Me: “ Are you buying anything my sister?”

She laughs, shaking her head then claps her hands dramatically.

Mosa: “ You’re more retarded than Zelda. Makipkip Mara? Come on Tinto.”

Me: “Firstly, don’t call me that. Secondly, you’re not going to talk about her like that, she’s older than you so show some respect. At least yena she actually calls and has been keeping in contact, unlike you. ”

Mosa: “I’ve been busy, being an accountant isn’t easy. Is this one of your plots to feed your addiction?”

Me: “Get out of my face if you’re not buying sister. It shouldn’t matter what I do with my money, I’m not at your home so phumakim.”

Mosa: “Seeing that you’re working, you should replace all appliances you sold ekhaya so you can buy your next fix.”

Me: “I’m not going to be told by you how to spend my money, now leave me alone.”

She giggles.

Mosa: “You have a customer. Here’s a R100, on me.”

She takes it out of her purse and throws it at me. Of course I pick it up, I want to buy a flash machine so I can sell airtime and electricity, even at our home. I'm working towards that.

Girl: "Hi, can I have a R10 sweets."

Me: "Of course sisi. It's 50c for all except for champions, they're R1 each."

She nods and takes them.

Girl: "Thank you. You're handsome"

The she giggles shyly, looking down.

Girl: "I'm sorry abuti but you are."

I chuckle.

Me: "Thank you."

As the days goes on, I'm able to put behind my altercation with my blood sister. At the end of the day, she's family and maybe it's good that they cut me OFF. No one really believed in me there less Zelda. I sometimes regret how I treated her in the past because she never held it against me. She's living happy and away from there. Home was only toxic for me when I didn't get support. They sent me to UJ or so they thought. I became a dj when I got there, partied like there's no tomorrow and chowed all the money they sent. Then I went back home because I couldn't sustain that fast life. I went to the local

college for IT and just when my life seemed to have a glimpse of light, I dropped out. I don't know why I listened to her, my life would have probably worked out. I've ran out of chances with my family and who knows when I'll run out with Poppy. She won't maintain me forever.

.

POPPY

Oki: "R80 000 Poppy? Are you fucken mad?"

He's enraged, his nose having turned pink and his eyes in slits. He's mad, I can see it and can almost feel his boiling.

Me: "It's 100% leather, come on. Look at how lovely they make my lounge. It's exactly what this room needed to bring it to life. And you can't say you're not enjoying sitting there, come on."

Oki: " That's besides the point. You took them on credit, which means 22% more on top of the 80k. That's R97 600 which is almost a R100k. How did you even get them because one, you don't have a payslip, let alone a job or good credit for that matter."

I grimace, scratching my head. Why does all of that matter?

Me: "Uh, I have my ways. Are you going to help or not?"

Oki: "You lied and said you're left with three months. You've only paid three months and your account is in arrears. It's a lot of money!"

Me: "But we're working akere. The plan is foolproof. We'll just need to be sleek and ensure it doesn't backfire. Since I'm the brains behind it, I'm getting 60% of the proceedings."

Oki: "And your friend? It's 60% if you're paying him. You're the one who brought him on board."

Me: "Yes, of course. I'll take 70% then give him 20% while you take 30%."

Oki: "No no. You're not taking that if I'm paying your arrears plus installment. I'll take 60% then you two will spread the 40%. This will teach you to handle your money. I have to pay my men on top of that so that's me being overly generous. How much time do we have before they come back?"

Me: "Oh Gigi should be here soon and Suko since it's almost 6pm. Why?"

Oki: "You know why"

Me: "I'm still sore."

Oki: "You like coming up with excuses eh. You know that's a lie."

I chuckle, he'll have to wait.

Me: “You know how I love seeing you talk business? It turns me on.”

I pull his beard and he smiles.

Oki: “For real?”

I nod with a bit lip.

Me: “I love focused kings, you should know that.”

Oki: “So you love me?”

I’m not a liar so instead of replying Verbally , I kiss him. He kisses me back, relaxing into the kiss. I break it when he’s trying to pull me so I can sit on him. Not on my couches.

Me: “Gigi will be here soon. We can have a little some in the car after our meeting”

The music of his transport is so loud that it’s making our roof vibrate. I bought Gigi ear plugs for this reason because listening to music at high volumes may damage his ears. I once spoke to the driver. He only stopped playing it that loud for a week then went back to this ear piercing music.

I wait for him at the door, feeling Oki’s eyes on my butt. I’m wearing boyfriend jeans but this guy still stares as if they’re clinging to my butt.

Gigi: “Pop!”

He hugs my legs while looking up at me with a grin. I crouch and kiss his forehead, messing up his curls.

Me: “Baby. How was crèche?”

He shrugs.

Gigi: “Boring.”

Me: “Ha! And aftercare?”

He grins, good. I’d be fuming if he’s not enjoying both when I’m paying such a hefty amount. I don’t mind because he’s my son and I want the best for him. He tells me about it, words mixed with his babbling but I conclude he enjoyed it.

Gigi: “Food”

Me: “Didn’t you eat at aftercare?”

He shakes his head. I know he’s lying because my baby loves food. I make him cereal since I’m lazy. Oki is still sitting on the couches he judged me about. They’re comfy.

Suko: “Is he here?”

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He’s whispering, peeking at the lounge and retreating when he sees the all familiar figure.

Suko: “You guys didn’t start without me, right?”

Me: “No. We’re actually about to start. He brought a projector. He’s prepared a PowerPoint presentation. Actually, we did.”

I take Gigi, put him on my hip and we all make our way to the lounge where Oki has everything set.

I sit with him on my lap while Suko sits next to us. Oki is looking like a lecturer with his suit and tie and the stick he’s holding. I know I’m sleeping with a red, bruised butt tonight.

Oki: “Right. The first slide is a map of the conference room which I need you two to familiarize yourself with. I don’t want you getting lost or not knowing where the restrooms are. I want a clean mission with zero slipups.”

Suko: “Will you be sending us that map?”

Oki: “Poppy has it. Now, second slide shows your targets. I don’t want us getting caught so it’s one each night. Since the conference would be for five days, it means ten targets in total. I’ve also sorted your targets according to each day, you’ll receive this as well. If you mess this up, it’s your life.”

Me: “Okinawa, there’s no need for threats.”

Oki: “You’re in no position to be saying that Poppy.”

I roll my eyes.

Oki: “Third slide is their phone models and screen covers/ wallpapers. The good thing is, all your targets are using the

same model which is an iPhone 8+ and that makes things easier for us. Current iPhone models don't have touch ID and instead use face ID. It'll be easy to unlock the phones when you have their thumb prints. All you need is minimum contact like a handshake."

Suko: "How will that contact get us the print?"

Oki: "Your stupidity is beginning to irritate me!"

His grunt has me scowling.

Me: "You could have just let me present. He's asking good questions"

Oki: "Shut up Poppy, I won't tell you again."

Me: "You're not going to handle me in front of my son Oki because it's going to piss me off. Continue the presentation then I'll answer whatever questions Suko has after."

Oki: " You'll use a USB OTG cable to basically download their cloud information and that should be done within 8 minutes. Poppy will explain that further to you. After the five days, I'll be the one transferring the money from their bank accounts to an untraceable bank account."

Me: "Then how will we get our cut if we don't know how much you'll have?"

Oki: "You have no choice but to trust me."

Me: “Why does it sound like we’re not getting the 60-40 we talked about. Are you trying to cheat us Okinawa?”

Oki: “Boy, take Gigi and excuse us.”

His voice is commanding and leaves no space for disobedience. Suko looks at him then me before taking Gigi from my lap. The boy was already drowsing off. They go outside. When they’re out, he chokes me. He literally blocks my air passage, tears filling my eyes while I try to conceal my whimpers.

Oki: “Don’t you ever disrespect me like that in front of that boy, you hear me!”

I nod with a side smile. He forces those big lips on me and only frees my neck when he breaks the kiss.

Oki: “Go cover your neck with a scarf.”

Yeah, like that won’t raise any suspicion. I hate that I’m turned on from this. I call Suko back in and the presentation continues. No one asks any question until the man’s done.

Suko: “(whispers) You look flushed”

Me: “Shh”

We turn back to Oki who’s looking at us.

Oki: “I’ll bring your phones a day before the first day of the mission. Poppy, I’ll give you my card for your clothes. Keep in

mind that I'll subtract the money you'll spend from your cut so use it cautiously. Walk me out."

Thank God my son's sleeping. My relationship with Oki is just... complicated. I don't love him but I also don't want to share him and we set all these rules that don't really govern it. He still cheats then laughs when I beat his accomplices up then shuts me up with a few hundreds. He knows money makes me happy. It started out of nowhere from one drunk night and suddenly he couldn't get enough of me. He does take care of me more than he should but I bust my bottom trying to make ends meet. Being a single mom isn't easy you know.

We have a quickie in the backseat so I take a shower after coming back into the house. I then prepare dinner. Gigi will wake up around 8pm hungry then go back to sleep. I like to keep him fed.

I'm minding my own business in my kitchen, having some white wine while cooking when I hear loud laughter. I know that obnoxious laugh, it's Nosi. I don't interfere though and instead put on earphones because she's annoying.

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SUKOLUHLE

I'm happy she's here. She apologized for going ghost on me, said that she'd misplaced her phone and only found it yesterday. Apparently her sister had hid it. I didn't know she had a sister! But I'm happy either way, I've missed her so much.

Nosi: "No, stop!"

Me: "Tell me you love me"

She's so ticklish so it doesn't take any effort. She tries prying my fingers off her but it doesn't work. Her laughter has filled the entire room, bringing it to life.

Nosi: "Fine, fine. I love you so very much"

She's panting when I stop. See, that's more like it. I wipe her tears with my thumb then kiss her cheeks.

Me: "I love you too."

Nosi: "I see you took my advice but baby, I hope you're not at a corner where people who know me pass. I don't want people laughing at me because I'm dating a vendor. They won't take me serious."

Me: "At least I'm doing something. What's the big deal?"

I'm failing to get it. She wanted me to do something with my life and now she's saying this? What do women want vele?

Nosi: "It's embarrassing Suko. I'm an admin clerk while you're a hawker, that combo isn't communicating."

Me: "I'm beginning to think nothing I do will ever satisfy you. I'm trying Nosi."

I sigh, letting go of her.

Nosi: "What did I say? I'm saying you shouldn't vendor at a corner where people who know that we're together pass. Go to corner shop or industrial site, not here."

I sigh.

Me: "I haven't seen anyone who knows us pass but when I do, I'll move."

That's a lie. Mosa saw me and she knows. I did introduce Nosi to my family earlier last year. She says I'll only meet hers when I get a decent job because they're judgmental and won't accept an unemployed son-in-law.

She exhales in relief.

Nosi: "Thank God. Baby, I need to do my hair."

Nkosiyam. My smile is forced; my cheeks are hurting from the crack.

Me: "Your hair looks fine to me."

She has a well groomed medium-sized afro. Her hair is soft and smells good as well.

Nosi: “Ha.a baby. Have you seen the girls on Instagram? I also want to slay.”

Me: “But I love the natural you, why do you have to change?”

Nosi: “The reason Poppy looks down on me even though she doesn’t have any shit is because I’m too plain. I want to look better than her, with weaves and long nails.”

Me: “So, you want to be fake?”

Nosi: “I want to be more beautiful. I’m just not satisfied with my current look and I want to change it.”

Me: “You’ll have to wait for the end of the month ke and cross fingers that I’ll make enough.”

I can’t tell her about the plan, she might blow it or want me to give her a big slice from my cut. I have to save up then use it to invest in my dreams. I know it might take time, years even but I’m hopeful now because I’ll be saving up capital. The cost of living increases as the days go on, the value of the rand goes down but if I invest in a bank that offers great return, I know I’ll get value for money. I want to put all of the money in there or at least an amount that won’t raise any red flags.

Nosi: “Don’t you make money every day?”

Me: “I also have to stock plus I owe Poppy. I don’t make much Nosi. I’ve just started being a vendor, geez.”

Nosi: “Why do you have to pay her? She has her kwerekwere boo that gives her money.”

Me: “Don’t ever use such insulting terms around me Nosi, are you even listening to yourself?”

She rolls her eyes.

Nosi: “Argh, you know what I mean. I’m talking about that foreigner of hers with a fancy car.”

Me: “What do you have against Poppy? I thought you liked her.”

Nosi: “Liked. Oa phapha and I don’t do that.”

Me: “I don’t want to talk about other people.”

Poppy: “Are you joining us for dinner?”

The door was not closed and she’s standing inside and I’m here wondering how much of that did she hear. Nosi’s eyes have widened. She shifts to me as if she’s trying to shield herself from the wrath that’s coming.

Poppy: “Suko?”

I nod then she walks out.

Nosi: “Did she hear all of that? I can’t fight baby and she never loses.”

Me: “Should have thought of that before you ran that tongue.”

I put on my slides and stand up. She does too and follows me to the main house.

3

POPPY

Suko: "What's for dinner tonight?"

Me: "Uh, white rice with tomato stew. It's one of the meals I learned from Oki."

I look at Nosi while saying this. Does she think she'll eat my food after what she said about me? She's tripping.

Gigi: "Yes!"

Then he yawns. He's still sleepy but my baby never wants his stomach to be empty. I'd initially set four plates but I removed one now because I'm being petty. I'm not going to hide or deny that. This girl's become a p.a. (pain in the ass) and I'm ten to popping her.

Me: "Your girlfriend will have to chow her words. Aker she has a big mouth, let that feed her. FYI, Oki is Angolan with a Nigerian father. It's none of her business but it's the same way she's South African. We're all one except for xenophobic people like her."

I know my food smells good. Her mouth's watering at the sight but this will teach her to control her tongue. I've tolerated her for too long.

Suko: "We'll share my plate"

The drama queen clicks her tongue and rolls her eyes.

Nosi: "Ke sharp. I'm not about to eat food I wasn't offered."

Suko: "But I'm offering you nje"

Nosi: "No Suko, and why didn't you cook? I'd rather much eat your food than hers."

Me: "I don't like arguing around my son and I'd very much prefer if you keep my name out of your mouth. Don't test me Nosipho 'cause you'll get it."

We have a quiet dinner after that, Gigi sleeping halfway through. The two leave after. I know my boy's going to feel that dumb girl's fury. I hate what she's Changed in to, she used to be such a nice girl. I'm itching to interfere, maybe find out the reason behind it but it's going to hurt Suko. I know he loves her which is why he can't see the girl might be cheating. I'm a woman for damn sake and I know how we are.

This is why I don't bind myself into relationships, I know I'm not really loyal so chances of cheating are very high. Oki knows that and it's why he thinks it's right for him to sleep with other women. I wash the dishes after putting Gigi to sleep then take my bottle of wine and it's glass then sit in front of the TV.

I'll probably buy a bigger one with my cheque. A smart TV at that. If things work out well then I'll buy it cash. This screen is way too small. I can't say that to Oki, he'll be on my case so I'll have to layby it. It comes with less legal liability and they don't need a lot from you like payslips and IDs along with bank statements. I'll probably go tomorrow.

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SUKOLUHLE

Nosi: "Then you wonder why I don't like her. Ungcolile! Who deprives someone of food? I told you she thinks she's better than me. Baby, I think it's time you found another place to stay. Nna I can't deal with this anymore."

My head stops at that and it feels like my hair is being pulled vigorously by the roots. The migraine attacks me on my temples, dizzying me a little. Did she suggest that I move?

Me: "Wh... what is your problem with Poppy? She's been good to me and in case it has slipped your mind, I'm staying here for free and she shares her food with me. Poppy helps me out, supports my ideas and actually sees things from my perspective. She's a good friend and I'm not losing all that because of you."

Nosi: "So you're choosing her over me?"

Me: "I don't need to choose because you both matter to me. I love you Nosipho, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want you to be there when things finally work out for me because they will. Poppy is also part of my life, has been and will forever be. Learn to get along with her because I'm not sure where this is coming from all of a sudden."

Nosi: "It was a nice speech until you mentioned her name."

I huff. I've just poured my heart out and she calls it a speech? I need to try harder. I don't want to choose, they're both important to me and I'm not looking to lose them. Not now, not ever.

Me: "Nosi, do you want to be with me?"

I know the answer will most probably hurt but I still ask.

Nosi: "Of course I do. We've been together for almost two years now. I hope our anniversary will be different this year."

Me: "Yes, don't worry."

I pull her to my chest then try to kiss her, she pushes me a bit.

Me: "And then?"

Nosi: "I'm mad Suko."

Me: "That's why you need to blow off some steam."

Nosi: "Ha.a"

I don't push any further. It's been a week, Nosi and I haven't made love in a while. She loves her sex, she's not on her periods so it's surprising for me. She turns away from me and gives me her back. I sigh, also turning away from her.

I really hope that things work out next week and we'll get the money.

Nosi is gone when I wake up in the morning, with not even a note left behind. There's not even a trace of her back here, like she never came. I do my hygiene process then get dressed in a navy blue overall set. It's what Poppy and I wear to the streets, no idea why. I don't mind though.

I go to the main house after. I knock once then let myself in.

Poppy is in the lounge with Gigi and is fixing his hair. Me:

"Morning"

Poppy: "Sukoluhle"

Me: "Why does it sound like you're mad at me?"

Poppy: "Do I have a reason to be?"

Me: "Haibo, not you too."

She chuckles.

Poppy: "I'm just pulling your leg. Where's your girl because she's not worthy of being called a woman?"

Me: "She left in the morning, had to rush to work. You know how it is."

Poppy: "Mm. How're things between you?"

Me: "They're fine but will definitely be good after next week."

Poppy: "You say she left in the morning, right?"

I nod. Where's she going with this?

Poppy: "Who fell asleep first between you?"

Me: "I did. What does that have to do with anything?"

Poppy: "Because I saw her sneaking out. Oki called me around midnight neh, I went out and got drilled in his car. After the drill when we were just talking, I saw her walk out and into a car that was parked by the street. She was busy watching her back that she didn't notice Oki's car that was parked inside the yard!"

I'm looking at her, waiting for a sign that she might be lying.

Nosi loves me

Advertisement

she told me that she wants to be with me.

Me: "I would have felt her leave."

Poppy: "Was her side warm when you woke up?"

Me: "I didn't check dammit! She loves me. I asked her if she wants to be with me and she said yes!"

Poppy: "OK, calm down."

She leads me in a breathing exercise which she compelled me into but it does the trick in calming me down. I feel like crying. The thought of Nosi cheating on me is too much for me to digest, it really hurts. I can't believe she'd do something like this to me.

Me: "We spoke last night, even talked about our coming anniversary. I think there's an explanation for this. I'm not going to overreact or blow things out of proportion. I'll ask her if she comes today."

Poppy: "She most probably won't but do that. I might have misread the situation."

Me: "Yes, you probably did."

I don't mean to snap but I do. I'm frustrated, this situation is frustrating. I can't lose her.

Poppy: "O... k... Gigi, let's go."

Gigi: "You done?"

Poppy: "Yes."

They leave me in my chain of thoughts. Myriad of them are running through my mind. Life without Nosi isn't one I can imagine, she's my world.

I finally decide to get up, lest I be late and miss my usual morning customers. I sit back down when I remember that it's Saturday. Where are they going then?

Anyway, I go to the kitchen and fix us breakfast. Maybe they'll be hungry when they come back. I should go to town as well so I can restock. Poppy said I should pay her only when I start making profit. Anyone else would have wanted their money with interest and ASAP.

I decide to try Nosi, surprised that her phone's ringing because she's been unreachable for the whole week.

"Nosipho's phone, hello?"

I look at my phone to check if I dialed the right number because that voice sounds like that of a man. Poppy was right?

Me: "Who are you and where's Nosi?"

Person: "I'm her sister, she left it behind. I don't know where she went."

Me: "So, she's not at work?"

Person: "No."

Me: "Why should I believe you're her sister when your voice sounds like a man's?"

Person: "I just woke up dammit! And it's not that bad. Our voices sound the same."

Me: "Right. Tell her I called and that she should come see me."

Person: "Sure."

I eat my food, then go back to my room where I bath. After that, I get dressed and leave for town.

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POPPY

I've decided to take Gigi out for breakfast then I'll go do my nails. I also have to restock. Suko suggested we buy Flash machines for airtime and electricity so I'm going to surprise him by buying for us. He'll pay me back when he's gotten on his feet. I had to move my waist pretty hard for this money but it's worth it. I'm worried about him. Nosi is turning into Lucy, trying to control him and all that. She's talking bad of me in an attempt to drive a wedge between us. I love my best friend and I'm hoping he'll see through her. He might be older and wiser but not when it comes to love. He loves hard which often blinds him to people's true intentions and character.

We start at Pep first, also getting Gigi some nice sleepers in advance for winter. I have a lot I need to do at the end of this month. Oki has agreed to me hosting Zuri's party at his house but I still haven't thought of a theme. We can't do a wedding, now can we? Unless the theme becomes the colors she wanted for her wedding. On top of that I want a smart TV! There's a lot I want to do with little money. We're optimistic about the mission, the plan is foolproof but that doesn't mean it might not fail. I can't depend much on money I'm not even sure of amount.

Then we go around town for the products I'm selling, ending up at the salon with Gigi sleeping.

Tsebo: "Your son is so handsome tthe. Sbw!"

I laugh.

Me: "You say that every time. Sorry to break your bubble but your man is ugly so it's impossible."

Tsebo: "Yuu and I love him which is unfortunate. He's worse when he wakes up in the morning with his nose swollen and those lips."

Me: "Hey, you don't say that about someone you love"

I still laugh through my scolding.

Tsebo: "I'm not blind though. How's daddy Oki?"

Me: "Ah, good but he still can't keep it in his pants."

He laughs.

Tsebo: "I don't blame him. You can't expect that very handsome man to spend a whole three weeks without getting any. You said it yourself that he has a high sex drive."

Me: "But I give it to him good like an out of the body experience. He'd be screaming like a damn bitch. I'm aware no one gives it to him good like I do."

Tsebo: "I know that doll. He's just greedy, they're all like that."

Me: "I'd give him a taste of his medicine if I had the time. It's just one last straw then I'll be done with him. He'll end up making me sick."

Tsebo: "Don't you use protection?"

Me: "Always but it's not 100% effective, you know. What happened to your assistant? I want to start a wig business, need some insight."

Tsebo: "She got deported. You know how black people don't like seeing fellow black people doing well. It all stemmed from jealousy."

Me: "Really? When did this happen?"

Tsebo: “Last week tthe. Her regulars come here everyday looking for her.”.

Me: “I’ll talk to Oki, I’m sure he can pull some strings. Bathong, people are evil hle.”

Tsebo: “Yes and thank you. Poor girl was determined to open her own stall and all. She’s a breadwinner back at home.”

Me: “That’s good. I help where I can.”

Tsebo: “She’ll appreciate it. You’re a good person hle.”

Me: “I try. She’s a good person, hard worker and its unfair for her to be deprived of providing for her family because of her citizenry.”

Tsebo: “You know how fellow South Africans are. They talk of foreign nationals taking their jobs while they’re sitting on their butts waiting for the government to provide for them instead of seeking means of survival.”

Me: “Reminds me of Suko’s girlfriend. That girl is a thorn on my shoe Yaz. She’s trying to poison him against me.”

Tsebo: “They’re still together?”

Me: “Yeah. They’re solid.”

He frowns. His crush on Suko is cute and they’ve never met. I don’t know how but he’s never been there when Tsebo visited.

He does house calls sometimes. Tsebo: “If only he wasn’t straight.”

I laugh.

Me: “Like you’d ever cheat on your baboon. You guys have been together for years. When’s he marrying you?”

Tsebo: “Yoh wena, soon. I’m kidding, there’s no rush but he’s hinted at it. You know my family is homophobic so they probably won’t accept his lobola. It’s what I’m scared of.”

Me: “Sorry chom but fuck them. They shouldn’t matter. Wena just love your man and let those who’re against you go to hell.”

Tsebo: “Thank you babe. You always know what to say.”

Me: “You’ve helped me through some of my hardest times plus I wouldn’t have my lounge suite if it wasn’t because of you.”

Tsebo: “Heh, they’re so comfortable. You have good taste shame. I hope you’ve been paying well.”

Me: “I have. Oki is also helping. When things calm down, I’m getting a smart TV via layby.”

We continue talking even when he gets other customers. He’s finished doing my nails. I only get to leave after Gigi wakes up.

SUKOLUHLE

She didn't come over yesterday, didn't answer any of my calls so I guess it's clear she didn't want to. I wish my heart could believe that. It's what my mind's telling me but my heart is disputing that. It's saying she had a reason and will come back to me when she can. It hurts though, no matter how much I try to convince myself it doesn't. It's my turn to cook Sunday lunch. Poppy and Gigi have gone to church. Her attempts to compel me to go with failed so she let me be. This cooking thing is helping me take my mind off things. It honestly feels my life keeps going downhill and nothing works out. My longest relationship is threatening to collapse all because I'm a failure. This thing has been affecting me for too long now and I'm beginning to think there's no purpose left for me on this earth. What am I living for? Things always go from bad to worse and there's never been a time when I was independent. It always has to be on someone which sucks to be honest. I cook a seven colors meal and even make some pudding for dessert. Poppy always buys this food which she rarely cooks. She doesn't have a sweet tooth so the instant puddings, jelly and all sweet junk usually sit in her cupboards until I come to their rescue.

Nosi: "I smelled your food before I even turned by the corner.
Hey baby"

She gives me a wet kiss on the cheek then takes the spatula I'm holding and licks it while moaning.

Nosi: "Taste goods."

There's something different about her which I can't put a finger on. She's wearing a short romper with heels and has miraculously done her hair. I thought she doesn't have money. Isn't that why she complained about her hair to me? She's installed a short black curly weave which suits her so I guess I can't complain.

Me: "You did your hair."

She nods with a grin.

Nosi: "Does it suit me?"

Me: "It does. It accentuates those doe eyes of yours."

Nosi: "Thank you baby."

Me: "Have you always had that? I've never seen you wearing something this short and revealing before, not that I'm complaining."

She rolls her eyes.

Nosi: "You can't know all my clothes Suko."

Me: "I'm just saying. We've been together for almost two years so I know your style. This isn't you."

Nosi: "You said you're not complaining but it sounds like you are."

Me: "I'm just curious. I tried calling the whole of yesterday."

Nosi: "Yeah, Sindi told me which is why I'm here. I uhm... went to do my hair and stuff."

Me: "Was it sewn in or pasted?"

Nosi: "Pasted. I can't sit on a chair for that long."

I raise an eyebrow at that. She just said she went to do her hair, now she can't sit for that long? I also know Nosi when she's lying. She blinks a lot when she's being dishonest.

Me: "You just said you did your hair the whole day."

Nosi: "Am I in police custody when I'm being investigated like this?"

Me: "I'm just asking, why are you getting worked up?"

Nosi: "You're making me seem like a liar Sukoluhle! I'm not lying!"

She clicks her tongue then storms out of the kitchen. I sigh, lowering the heat of the stove so I can follow her. Thankfully,

she's in my room. At least she didn't leave. She's sitting on the bed so I kneel by its side then hold her hand.

Me: "I'm sorry baby. I didn't mean to upset you."

Nosi: "Well, you did. I came, didn't I? It shows that I got your message then came as soon as I can. Why can't you appreciate that instead of interrogating me?"

Me: "I'm sorry baby. Please forgive me? It was stupid of me."

Nosi: "Just get out of my face. I'm hungry, when are you dishing up?"

Me: "Just waiting for Poppy."

Nosi: "I'm not eating with her so bring my food here when you're done."

I nod and kiss her hand.

Nosi: "Go Suko!"

Her tone is dismissing so I use that as my cue. She needs her space so she can calm down so I give her that.

Poppy and Gigi soon arrive. The boy runs to me then rubs his tummy, he's hungry.

Me: "How was church?"

Poppy: "Uplifting. My feet are killing me though."

She takes off her heels then throws them somewhere in the room.

Me: "Sit down, I'll dish up soon."

After I do, I put mine and Nosi's food on a tray.

Poppy: "You're not eating with us?"

Me: "Nosi and I will eat in the room. I made pudding if you want."

Poppy: "Well, thank you."

I find her scrolling on her phone while laying on her back on the bed. I peek to see what she's doing but she pushes me so hard that I almost drop the food.

Nosi: "Don't ever sneak up on me like that!"

Me: "You were consumed in your phone, I just wanted to see what had you like that."

Nosi: "Hayi man Suko!"

Me: "Are you eating now?"

She sits up then nods. I put the tray on the bedside table then we pray. After prayer, we eat silently while sitting hip to hip on the bed. Just this contact is enough to arouse me since it's been so long. I don't have a high sex drive or anything but sex with the love of my life is what I enjoy. I'm attracted to her so even if

we weren't touching, I'd still feel like this. My hand goes to her thigh and gives it a squeeze. She looks at it then at me with a frown.

Nosi: "I'm trying to eat."

Me: "I'm not stopping you."

She scoffs then continues with her food. I wait for her to be done, taking the plate when she extends it to me. I put both of our empty plates on the floor then lay next to her on the bed.

Me: "Baby, give me attention."

She sucks her teeth then turns to me. She looks into my eyes for a good minute then slings her leg over mine, getting on top. Her pelvic is right against mine which fuels my arousal. She leans in for a kiss and my reply is like that of a hungry carnivore. It's been a while so I can't help myself. My hands go to her butt cheeks, squeezing them gently while pressing our bodies together. It feels so good, I'm getting goosebumps and butterflies in my tummy. We're not even naked yet.

Nosi: "The door"

I walk to the door with my top off already. I make sure it's locked, testing whether it opens or not. I then go back towards her while taking off my pants. My cock springs out ready for action. I help her take her rompers off. If I could afford to replace it, I'd have ripped it into shreds but I can't.

Me: "You're freestyling?"

Nosi: "Baby please"

She's pleading, begging and the sight arouses me more. The shock from her lack of underwear subsides as she opens her legs, glistening moisture in her folds begging for my attention. We'll talk about this some other time. For now, I have a cake I have to have and eat. She's moaning profanities as I eat her out, using my thumb to stimulate her clit as my tongue goes deeper in her. She tastes as good as I remember.

We make love to the symphony of our clapping skins

hearts beating in sync and the fusion of our souls reemerging into one. I love her and she loves me too. We bask in the aftermath of our love making looking at the ceiling as we catch our breaths. She's laying on my chest, drawing slow circles on my forearm. I'm over the moon, way past cloud nine and for a moment, I'm content. It feels like everything is OK.

Nosi: "Baby, it's time you moved out from here."

Me: "Mm"

My cheeks are hurting from the goofy smile on my face that stretches to my ears. How did I ever doubt her?

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POPPY

Sunday nights are best coupled with slow jazz, good wine and great company. There's something about having a good conversation with that music as background while staring into each other's eyes. Damn, I sound like I'm falling in love or something. Gigi has long fallen asleep so it's just us now.

I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm with a guy who's not interested in a piece of this cake but rather just wants us to talk. I met him about a month ago when I was doing my nails at Tsebo's. The guy came for a hair cut, we talked and exchanged numbers. It's nothing deep really. I could say we're good friends who vibe, something like a premature version of what I have with Suko. When he asked for my location, I gave it to him thinking he's bluffing until he was knocking on my door. His name is Mpho.

Mpho: "How old are you?"

The question is random and comes out of the blue. He's looking at me in the eyes, kind of like he's reading into me. My poker face took years to master and unfortunately for him, I only let people see what I want them to see.

Me: "You don't ask a woman her age."

He chuckles with that sexy, monotone voice of his. I don't think he gets mad. I've never heard him raise or lower that voice. It's

captivating, inviting and like a whisperer of the soul. Too bad my soul is on lock.

He tilts his wine glass then takes a sip. Everything he does is classy. I can admit that he's an attractive man but I don't think I see him that way. He smells good, looks good and has an amazing fashion sense. He's a catch; your Mr. 'tall, dark and handsome' kind of eye candy. To top it off, he has a panty dropping smile.

Me: "You trying to charm me or something?"

Mpho: "I'm just looking at you. There's nothing else I'm doing really. You're beautiful."

Me: "Yes, I know. How old do you think I am?"

He puts his index finger on his cheek seemingly thinking about it. He then takes a sip of his wine and sits back.

Mpho: "22?"

Me: "Not bad. How old are you?"

Mpho: "I'm 32"

My jaw drops. He doesn't look a day over 23.

Me: "Really?"

He chuckles.

Mpho: "I know I look good and aging gracefully, thank you very much."

I punch him lightly on the chest which he holds, feigning hurt.

Mpho: "That hurt."

Me: "On all that muscle? Yeah. Tell me what you do."

Mpho: "I'm an estate agent with a few properties that I'm renting out. I also purchase houses, renovate them then sell them at an over market price."

Me: "You're like your own broker?"

Mpho: "Yes, basically."

Me: "Must be great being your own boss neh."

Mpho: "Most times, yes. I don't like reporting to anyone and I like being in control so it's great there. I'm used to keeping busy and just doing what I want, when I want and with who I want. It wasn't easy getting here but I do love finally reaping the rewards of my sweat and tears."

Me: "My best friend is 27 and hasn't made it yet. He gets demotivated and often looks down on himself because he feels his peers have surpassed him. I think your story will motivate him."

Mpho: "I'm always willing to tell my story to anyone who'll grasp something from it. The journey to success isn't easy and it's also a test of patience. I don't mind talking to him so I'll text you regarding when I'll be free some time this week."

Me: "Thank you. It'll really mean a lot to me."

Mpho: "He's lucky to have you as a friend. I wish my friends had been that supportive. I mean I like that I give all credit to me for all I've achieved in a short space of time but it's lonely not having friends I can trust around me. They all deserted me when things were not working for me while they were moving instead of pulling me up with them."

Me: "Well, you can add two more on that."

Mpho: "So, you friend zoning me?"

He gives me that panty dropping smile of his.

Me: "Ha.a, don't start."

He chuckles.

Mpho: "I'm kidding pops. I'd love to be y'all's friends."

Me: "Yeah but accept us as we are. Respect us and we'll respect you."

Mpho: "Noted. Can we click glasses to that?"

Me: "Of course."

I wake up tired. Mpho and I talked until around 3am. We'd finished two bottles of wine which he promised to replace. He probably has a wine cellar or owns a wine veld. I know I would if I was on his level. Black excellence inspires and motivates me. I hope Suko will be just as inspired. I know Nosi slept over. Gigi and I had to put on headphones because of the sounds that were coming from that room were too explicit for our innocent minds (don't look at me like that). I hope this means Nosi has stopped her craziness. Suko has too big a heart for her and I'm hoping it's at least reciprocated in a way.

The transport comes to fetch Gigi then I go back to fix my trolley. I've been a vendor for two years now and even my patience doesn't stretch that far. It's the perfect cover up, I admit but it's the feeling of being stagnant that I hate. I'd do herbal life but I can't have my pictures splattered around social media. It's way too risky and I have a son to think of.

They're laughing loud, unable to keep hands off each other like two lovesick teenagers.

Suko: "Good morning MakaGiven"

Me: "Hey. You seem to have woken up on the right side today."

Nosi: "Ee. Aker he has a girlfriend who loves him and makes him happy. He doesn't need anyone else, long as he has me."

Who asked for her opinion? This girl is becoming a nuisance.

Me: "Isn't she going to work?"

Suko: "She is. I'm walking her home."

Me: "It's so obvious that she slept at a man's house. Who wears a short romper at this time in the morning? It's cold sisi."

Suko: "Hayi Poppy."

Me: "What?"

I shrug. Did I say something wrong? I made an observation. The girl clicks her tongue, arms crossed above her chest.

Nosi: "At least it's my last time coming here baby. I can't wait for you to move out."

I look at Suko in disbelief. It can't be!

Me: "You're moving out?"

He scratches his scalp while not meeting my eyes. Wow. I clap my hands once then go back into my house. Relationships neh.

5

SUKOLUHLE

Poppy: "You're moving out?!"

Me: "Achi!"

She twists my earlobe harder while pulling it. Her long nails are making it more painful for me. Has she forgotten I'm not Gigi?

Poppy: "Just like that Sukoluhle?!"

Me: "Come on, let's talk"

I keep moving my head closer to her as an attempt to inflict less pain on my ear but it doesn't help. The damn part is burning, aching like a headache. She finally releases then pushes my chest. I'm looking down at her trying to conceal my laughter. She looks cute when she's mad. My focus goes to my released ear as I rub it.

Me: "You almost detached my ear."

Poppy: "Talk!"

Me: "Who's watching your stall if you're here?"

Poppy: "I'm quarter to clapping you Tinto."

That damn name that always annoy me and makes my ears ring. I hate it!

Me: "I'll still come see you, you know that. My moving doesn't change anything."

Poppy: "Where are you moving to and where will you get the money? You'll have to pay rent, buy food plus toiletries on top of that. Is it furnished? Are you going to bind yourself to a lease? How will you afford all of that?"

Me: "Nosi found me a place. We'll go see it on Wednesday since she'll knock off early. She'll help me for the first time. I'm also hoping the deal will make us enough money."

Poppy: "I thought you're going to use the money to invest in your vision?"

Me: "It won't be all of it."

She shakes her head.

Poppy: "No. This has Nosi written all over it. Don't you see what she's doing?"

Me: "She's pushing me to man up, be independent."

Poppy: "No Suko. She's isolating you. She wants to get you away from the people who care about you so you can depend on her. She wants your world to revolve around her so you'll

feel like you're nothing without her. She selfishly wants you all to herself."

Me: "That's absurd. We're in love and—"

She scoffs.

Poppy: "In love neh? Did you ask her where she disappeared to Friday night? I told you I—"

Me: "Saw her leave, I remember. Nosi is my woman Poppy and I've tolerated you speaking ill of her but that's enough. If you're going to be negative, rather shut your mouth. I don't need your opinion."

She looks taken aback. She raises her arms in surrender then nods.

Poppy: "As you wish. Just know I'll welcome you with open arms when she fucks you over. Trust me Suko, she will."

All that she's said leaves with her as I attend a customer. I had the best weekend and if moving out is what Nosi wants, then I see nothing wrong with making such a compromise. I'll work hard to ensure I'm able to sustain myself because ngiyindoda and I shouldn't depend on anyone else. Men are the head of the household and providers. They go out to work while the woman nurtures the home. It's those values that I grew up with. Yes, my mom had a job but dad worked harder so he could provide for all of us. He still does.

I hope Poppy is going to understand why I have to do this. I'm still going to check on her and Gigi so we'll still see each other. I honestly don't think there's anything she should worry about. I'm a grown ass man after all. I feel like I'm floating on this bubble of happiness that can't be popped. Poppy just tried but it didn't work. I love her but she has to learn to stop interfering in my business. Nosi and I are good so there's nothing she has to worry about.

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POPPY

Suko can be so frustrating at times. He's a typical example of pussy power. Nosi just gave him a few whips then suddenly became an angel in his eyes. This is a repeat of history on his part but I'll let him learn that the hard way. Maybe I should stop acting like he's a baby when he's grown and well... older than me.

Mondays are never busy. One can make little to nothing the whole day. The flash machine has come in handy, I had a few customers wanting airtime which reminds me I need to give Suko the one I got him. I hope he does accept it and won't need Nosi's consent. This is only the beginning of her hold over him. She'll probably stop him from completely fucking with me like

no phone calls, texts or simple meetups (which I won't allow). Then she'll start influencing how he behaves, talks and even what he wears. I hope it won't get there.

Mpho just called asking where I am and I didn't think he'll come here. I thought he'll perhaps wait until I get home or something. He's good company so I don't mind seeing him this much. I hope he'll be able to get through to Suko in a way though. I look forward to them meeting. Anyway, he's in his formal wear; beige slimfit suit with a white t-shirt and no tie. He's unbuttoned the first two buttons, giving us a peek of his taut chest. This man oozes sex appeal. He's giving me bottom vibes but we'll see.

Me: "Did you have to come here?"

He chuckles.

Mpho: "Sorry. I have a flight to catch tonight and I'll probably come back next week so I thought I should have a chat with your friend first. You made it sound important."

Me: "It's an SOS right now so thank you. Help me clear up since you're here muscle man."

We laugh. He didn't come with his car but instead got off a taxi. So, we pack up everything in its bags then put it on my trolley which he pushes.

Me: "Where are you going?"

Mpho: "My mom wants us to meet the new man in her life so she's summoned all of us home."

Me: "How many kids does she have?"

Mpho: "Three. I'm the middle child. I have a sister who's married and a little brother who's doing his first year at aviation school. That woman doesn't take no for an answer."

Me: "Where's your dad?"

Mpho: "I'd be lying. We haven't talked in over a decade."

I don't pry because his tone tells me it's a sensitive topic. The mood shifts into a lighter one when we digress. I tell him about Gigi and the naughty things he does sometimes. We're laughing and talking until we pass my gate. It's where we meet Nosi who gives me a look over with her nose raised up. I thought she said she'll never come here.

Mpho: "Hi."

This hoe's cheeks redden. She's brown skinned but I saw that.

Nosi: "Heyy"

It's high pitched, khwee. Has she forgotten my dear best friend?

Me: "She's Suko's girlfriend. Is he here?"

She shakes her head while her eyes are fixed on Mpho. She's literally drooling with hearty eyes.

Me: "Snap out of it!"

Mpho: "You look familiar. I feel like I've seen you somewhere."

Her eyes jock out of their sockets.

Nosi: "Me?! No, you haven't. We've never seen each other."

He chuckles and nods.

Mpho: "Your voice..."

Nosi: "I have to go."

She bolts away like a headless chicken, making the both of us laugh. She's like a thief caught in the action.

Me: "What the hell was that about?"

Mpho: "So, I went to the club with some friends on Friday and she was with one of them. He introduced her as one of his... excuse my language, hoes."

Me: "Really?"

He chuckles and nods.

Mpho: "They were all over each other. That guy literally went to drop one girl off then came with another."

Me: "Damn, y'all are really trash."

Mpho: "I won't dispute that."

Me: "Well, let's go in. Can you cook?"

He looks at me weirdly.

Mpho: "That's a woman's job."

Me: "Excuse me?"

Mpho: "I know it makes me sound misogynistic but I'll forever console myself with that patriarchal statement."

Me: "You son of a gun!"

He laughs when I punch him.

Gigi finds me almost done with the cooking. Suko still hasn't come which isn't like him. I don't want Mpho missing his flight because he'll have to go soon. The man comes when I'm setting the table, all topless while scratching his head.

Me: "Where the hell have you been and why aren't you dressed?"

Suko: "It's hot. You have a guest?"

Mpho is in the lounge and on the carpet, playing puzzles with Gigi. The two seem to get along. I don't have a problem with them hanging out because Mpho is a friend and not someone I'll ever be with. I don't have to worry about us falling out because he's not interested in me like that.

Me: “Yep. He’s actually waiting for you. Hey, wash those hands before touching anything! Where are your manners?”

Suko: “I’m hungry man Poppy. I didn’t eat all day.”

Me: “Wait a few minutes.”

He heeds to my order of washing hands then helps me move the food to the dining table. I call the two playing boys but not without reminding them to wash their hands.

Me: “Suko, this is Mpho. Mpho, this is Tinto”

Suko: “I don’t know who she’s talking about. I’m Sukoluhle or just Luhle, Soso. Anything you prefer”

I raise an eyebrow.

Gigi: “My Soso”

We laugh.

Mpho: “I guess I’ll stick to Suko since Soso has its claimant. Nice to meet you.”

They shake hands.

Suko: “Do you even do anything? Your hand is soft like a feather.”

Mpho: “OH thank you. I have people for that.”

Me: “Ah, who’s being such a man now?”

He chuckles.

Mpho: "I'm kidding. I just take good care of myself, that's all."

Me: "Can we pray?"

Mpho: "You'll have to leave me out of it."

The three of us hold hands. By the time I'm done saying grace, he's already dug in along with his new best friend.

Me: "You're such a bad influence."

Mpho: "Not always. I can be good too."

Me: "Oh Suko, Mpho is an estate agent broker and he's also a landlord."

Suko: "He's your new man?"

Mpho: "I'm single."

Me: "You know Oki would kill him anyway. If he was mine, we'd be sneaking around. Anyway, he's 32. He had to raise capital by working in a farm then later had a poultry business which sort of paved the way for him to go to varsity. Can you believe he spent years trying to make his business work?"

Suko: "You know a lot about the guy."

Me: "Same way I know about you. Are you jealous?"

Suko: "Not really. Why property?"

Mpho: “I’m a born capitalist so I’m always exploring industries where I can make the most returns. Property has been that for a while. People are always looking to buy, sell or rent space so I’m happy to provide that for them.”

Suko: “You have a qualification in that?”

Mpho: “Yeah

I did a BSc in Construction Studies but I had to work in order to raise money for that. I started doing piece jobs in Grade 11 then went full time after matric. So, it was two years at a farm then I started the poultry business after matric. That took five years overall so I went to university at 21. The degree took four years then from there I did a two years internship. I had my first Official job at 27. I quit a year after because I felt stagnated so I decided to start my own company instead. Now I’m here, flying in private jets and all.”

Me: “Oh, shut up!”

We laugh. Suko seems to be deep in thought and I’m hoping it’s because of what Mpho just told us. The dinner is finished under comfortable silence. Gigi goes to sleep then I go out because Oki just called.

Oki: “You’re cheating on me?!”

He’s like a raging fire. His raised voice almost broke his car windows.

Me: “You still have me watched?”

Oki: “Answer the damn question Poppy!”

Me: “No. Do you think I’d make it that obvious? I’m not a fool, you know.”

Oki: “So, who is he? You were laughing while parading the streets and didn’t even see me pass you by the road because your eyes were locked on his!”

Me: “He’s just a friend, relax. Besides, I wouldn’t be denying it if it was true. I was under the impression that you know that about me.”

Oki: “Mxm”

He quickly unbuckles his pants then frees his manhood. The man pulls my wig off, throws it somewhere in the backseat then his hand on the back of my neck pulls me down so I’m facing it.

Oki: “Open up”

He just manhandled me!

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SUKOLUHLE

Mpho: “I have to go. This has gotten too awkward for me.”

We've been sitting in silence since Poppy excused herself, each engrossed in his thoughts. His story is I guess inspiring and it's a little comforting knowing I'm not the only one who experienced struggles. He's arrived there and I'm a little confident I will too.

Me: "I'm sorry man, I have a lot on my mind."

He gives me a tight-lipped smile while nodding.

Mpho: "It's OK. I have a flight to catch anyway."

Me: "You're not going to wait for her?"

He'd barely stood up so he shifts to the back of the couch and relaxes, but not before glancing at his expensive wristwatch.

Mpho: "Tell me about you."

Me: "There isn't much to tell."

I can't compare to what he's sad and yes, I'm embarrassed that I don't have achievements to flaunt. I only have matric but how many people don't? It doesn't hold as much weight as it did in the past. Heck, I don't think it holds any weight at all nowadays. Not with the many graduates who are also sitting at home with masters and doctorates. Life is tough ouchea.

Mpho: "I doubt so."

I scoff bitterly, if only he knew.

Me: "I don't have anything really. I matriculated at least, I'm a former druggie and I'm currently a hawker."

I shrug. It's embarrassing saying this to a rich guy who has his own business and flies in private jets. At least he's older than me, even though he doesn't look it. It would have been more demeaning if he was younger than me.

Mpho: "That's depressing."

I snicker. He's nonchalant with a hint of disinterest. Why am I talking to him? People like me shouldn't even breathe the same air as people like him.

Me: "Do you come from money?"

He chuckles.

Mpho: "Do you think I would have worked in a farm by 16? Would I even have spent years working my ass off so I can go to university?"

That had slipped my mind.

Me: "I come from a middle-class family. They've given up on me and I don't blame them. I feel like such a failure. At least you had a job at 27. I have nothing."

Mpho: "You're 27?"

I nod.

Mpho: "And you think money is what's stopping you?"

Me: "Yep."

Mpho: "No, you are. If a boy from a village could make it to where he is now then what's stopping you? I worked five years just to get into university so I think you can work to build your dream. Every little bit counts. I'd advise you to leave the dating and rather focus on securing the bag because it's what's derailing you."

Me: "You a prophet?"

He chuckles and shakes his head.

Mpho: "I can see it, though. Girls are high maintenance and they can easily leave you for someone with more money then you'll be left feeling like a piece of failure and demeaning yourself."

Me: "How would you know when you've never had a girlfriend?"

He furrows his eyebrows.

Mpho: "What makes you say that?"

Me: "Don't worry. You might be right to a certain extent but I have a feeling this one is different."

Mpho: "If you say so. What can you do?"

Me: "I can make her come with my tongue"

I wiggle it out.

Mpho: "I'm talking about your talent, don't be nasty."

Me: "It is a talent. My sex game is out of this world dude."

Mpho: "I can't dispute that and back to my question, what can you do?"

Me: "So, you don't get tired of being a motivational speaker?"

I'm laying casually on the couch while he looks like he's in an interview; sitting with his back straight and shoulders not slouched.

Mpho: "Nope. Never."

Me: "I'm your hardware guy. If you need a computer to be fixed, laptop, iPad or phone then you can come to me but only if it's a hardware problem. Poppy can handle the software, she's bad like that. I stole a phone once and she made it seem brand new. I'm a handy man I guess since I can also fix appliances."

Mpho: "And you both have never thought of opening a repairs store? You're basically sitting on a talent that can make you loads of money."

Me: "Renting space is expensive and inviting people here is like sleeping with the door open. Besides, there are Indians at every corner who do that. Black people don't support blacks."

Mpho: "I'm only hearing excuses."

Me: "Do you have friends?"

He gives me a weird look.

Mpho: "I do, why"

Me: "What do you do with your friends for fun?"

Mpho: "Go to the club."

Me: "What kind? A night club?"

Mpho: "Well, yes. What's with the questions?"

Me: "You seem a little uptight. Don't you get tired of talking business? It's after hours."

He's making me seem stupid, useless even and I don't think I like that. Life is hard, struggle is real and everything isn't as easy as he makes it seem to be. He should know since he had to work when he was in high school.

Mpho: "I'm insulted. I'm the life of the party, how dare you call me uptight?"

'Well, you're making me feel worse but I'm not complaining!' my mind screams. It's a dick move but he doesn't seem affected.

Me: "I'll believe it when I see it. Let's make a deal." He nods. "We'll go out to a pub when you have the time so I can make my own observation. How did you and Pops become friends?"

Mpho: "We met at a barbershop. She was doing her nails; I needed a haircut."

Me: "You're a well-groomed fellow, aren't you?"

Mpho: "I like looking after myself."

Me: "I can see that. Anyway, you'll tell me, right?"

Mpho: "Sure. Where is she?"

Me: "Getting laid."

It's a high possibility when Oki is here mid-month.

Mpho: "How long will she take? I really have to go."

Me: "I'll tell her you left. She's taking longer than I thought."

Mpho: "Think about what I said, neh? About the store. Talk to Poppy and hear what she says. You guys can start by making posters advertising what you can do then take it from there, go from A to B. Bietjie bietjie maak meer"

I cogitate on his words, trying to see things from his perspective when I realise that he's right. I know Poppy did this for me so I owe her a big hug. I honestly don't know what I'd do without her.

6

SUKOLUHLE

Me: "I don't deserve you."

She looks at me for a few seconds then lightly slaps me. I touch my cheek then look at her.

Me: "What the hell was that for?"

Poppy: "Payment for that bull coming out of your mouth. I don't want to ever hear you say that."

She means business, her face says it. I sigh and hold her hand. We're having breakfast.

Me: "Thank you for yesterday, bringing that guy over so he can tell me his story. I was motivated and inspired."

She smiles.

Poppy: "Me too. He just reminded me of you in the way. He's like the persistent and resilient version of you."

I raise an eyebrow.

Me: "Excuse me?"

Poppy: “You’re lazy Suko. You want things to happen but you’re not putting in much effort. Look at how long it took you to join me on the streets, and I had been telling you about it!”

Me: “It’s not like I wasn’t applying for other jobs! You of all people know how much I have because you walked with me through every business and shop.”

Poppy: “What do you think of him?”

Me: “Your friend?”

She nods. I’m glad she changed the subject because I was getting worked up. I hate feeling useless but the feeling is stubborn, always hovering around my emotions.

Me: “He seems to have life all figured out but there’s a hint of sadness in him, loneliness even.”

Poppy: “That’s rather deep. I was talking about his physique.”

Me: “I wasn’t checking him out so...”

I shrug.

Poppy: “Is he handsome or not?”

Me: “Why are you asking me all this?”

She chuckles and shrugs.

Poppy: “Just. I wanted to know what you thought of him.”

Me: "Why?"

Poppy: "He's our friend now. You're going to see a lot of the guy, be around him."

Me: "Well, I don't have a problem with him."

She smiles.

Poppy: "Great then."

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POPPY

I never thought this day will come so soon. It's the first day of the mission, Suko is freaking out next to me. He's Mr. Goody two shoes so this doesn't surprise me. He's lucky its two hours before the car comes to fetch us. Oki went all out.

Me: "I'm going mess up this makeup if you don't sit still."

Suko: "I'm a man, I don't need makeup."

Me: "You also don't need a mugshot because you're going to jail if they recognize you. We're being safe."

Suko: "What if I mess up? There's a lot relying on this."

Me: "Then you better not. Ready to meet Asha?"

I turn his chair so he's face-to-face with my mirror.

Suko: "How do you know this? I can barely recognize myself."

Years of experience honey but you don't need to know that.

Me: "These are your lenses. I need to do my makeup."

Suko: "Are you also turning Indian?"

Me: "Wait and see."

Time moves faster than anticipated. An hour and half later, we're done and waiting for the car.

Suko: "Can't you give me something for the anxiety?"

Me: "No. I don't want you relapsing Suko, drugs are addictive."

He sighs then nods. It's for his own good.

Me: "You'll do good. Don't overthink it and don't try too much. You're smart Suko. You memorized your bio, right?"

Suko: "I did. I even have an accent"

Me: "Good. There's a lot at stake here."

I run to my room for the gift I got him. I'm hoping it'll cheer him up even though it's nothing big. I give him the gift box, the man looking at me with a raised eyebrow.

Me: "Open it. It's nothing much but it'll help."

He smiles when he does, pulling me for a squeeze then pecking my forehead.

Me: "I should have given it to you sooner, I'm sorry but I hope you like it."

Suko: "Thank you. I owe you so much already Poppy, you've been with me through my lowest and I'm grateful, more than you can imagine."

Me: "It's what best friends are for."

We hug again.

The car comes but before we leave, we hold hands in prayer. I invite God in all that I do (except when fulfilling flesh desires) and I know this is kind of twisted but we'll need the protection.

He's less anxious when we get in the car so I assume the prayer helped. We've familiarized ourselves with the map so we basically know how to navigate the hotel.

Entrance is strict at the conference hall, there's someone standing to mark the register. It's a beautiful slim, dark skinned woman who's high heels doesn't do much to conceal her short frame. She smiles at us, revealing her deep cheek dimple.

Her: "Good evening sir and madam. Initial and surname please."

Me: "P. Naidoo and A. Muhammed."

She gives us cards and allows us in. The cards also have our initials and surnames, probably to make conversation easier. The room already has a few people with waiters circulating while holding trays. It's sophisticated, classy and smells of expensive perfume and randelas. I might get nasty tonight, who knows. I'll have two weeks to clear evidence of my infidelity.

Me: "We can't look lost so... network"

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SUKOLUHLE

The first twenty minutes were awkward and nerve-racking for me. I tried not to look out of place but it was hard. I'd never been one to involve myself in corporate business events so I felt out of place. I've gotten the hang of it now, talking smart like the engineer I'm supposed to be. It's not hard because there was once a time in my life I was interested in being a mechanical engineer. Mosa is here too and the one I'm currently holding a conversation with. I should feel bad because she's my sister but after what happened a few days ago, I don't have any compassion. She's so oblivious which makes me realise how much she doesn't know me. She keeps brushing her hand on my forearm, laughing a little too hard and flapping her

eyelashes at me. I'm disgusted because this is my sister but it's under Asha's façade so he's unaffected.

Mosa: "Are you and that woman you came with together?"

Me: "Yes, we are due to get married soon."

She frowns, pushing her breasts to my face. I'm about to puke.

Mosa: "Oh? When's the bachelor party? I'm pretty sure we can... organize something."

Oki is wrong for this. Where does he think my sister gets money? But then I think of how I'm being deprived of the same money and how much of a loser she thinks I am. She ridiculed me and even threw a hundred rand at me so this is nothing. I'm more encouraged to go ahead with it.

I hear Poppy's laughter somewhere in the room, scanning it to find her entertaining two males. I chuckle inwardly, watching how they're eating her up. She has them in the palm of her hand.

Me: "We're supposed to be talking business. Didn't you say you're representing your father?"

I already have her thumbprint so what's left is for me to find a way to get her phone. When the waiter passes by us, I stop him then grab a glass of champagne for her. She takes it with a

blush. I know alcohol leads to countless toilet trips and with how she's going, it'll lead to that.

My eyes find Poppy's and she gives me a wink.

Mosa: "I need the restroom."

The stupid thing she does is giving me her purse.

Mosa: "Will you walk me? Tell me more about what inspired your love for machines."

Me: "They're more reliable than people. Machines don't switch up on you as long as you maintain them. They get the job done and are effective."

She laughs.

Mosa: "That's sweet. You sound like someone who's been hurt before. Ex-girlfriend?"

I chuckle.

Me: "You can say that."

Mosa: "So, you bury yourself in work instead? Relationship can be draining and come with a lot of expectations and responsibilities. It's why I'd rather do casual hookups"

Me: "Don't take too long in there"

She giggles. I stand outside the toilet and work my magic. I know she'll take forever in there

she's a girl after all. Relief washes over me when ten minutes passed and mission has been accomplished. Finally.

Mosa: "Did I take too long? I thought I had my purse so I was looking for it then I finally remembered you have it."

She finishes with a light giggle. I give it back to her. It's verified; I no longer have a conscience. My own sister? Yep.

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POPPY

The first night goes well. I was nervous of Suko messing up but I think he did well. I wasn't particularly watching him or anything but I did see him Leave with his sister.

The girl has no shame, flirting with her brother like that. Yeah, she probably can't recognize him but this shows she also doesn't know him. They're only two people who'd recognize me under any disguise (Oki excluded) even though I haven't seen them in three years or so. It feels like it's been more though. The event finally comes to the end or we excuse ourselves, I don't know. I've had about two glasses of champagne and a few snacks. I'm full and a little drowsy.

Me: "How did you do?"

We're now in the car, the man next to me seemingly deep in thought. I have an idea of what he's thinking of and I don't think I blame him. I might have done this myriad times but he hasn't. First time is always a little shaky and tugs at your conscience. You're obviously robbing people which makes you question your ethics and then there's the issue of karma. It's the fear it instills that makes people tread carefully in life. They don't inflict any intentional pain or hurt in people because they fear those actions haunting them in the future. I don't care really. There are people doing worse crime in our country who've gotten away with it. At least I'm not killing anyone or depriving them of anything. I'm merely taking cents from the rich which they might not have any good use for, no harm in that. Sure, it'll ping their pockets but it's nothing they won't be able to replace or multiply even.

Suko: "I'm a bastard."

He chuckles, looking at the roof of the car before his eyes find mine.

Suko: "My own sister was... flirting with me. I'm a damn good actor because she didn't see how disgusted as I was. Imagine the same little girl who grew up in your eyes, whom I share a surname with pushing her breasts on my face. I felt like a fucken pervert but I don't regret that."

Me: "Do you think she has money though?"

He chuckles.

Suko: "I don't know but I think Oki did his research. He probably knows how much she has in her pockets. It's not like we're looking to get millions."

Me: "Yeah, well. I think he wanted us to start with those with a smaller bank balance then more as we continue. It was the first day for you after all."

Suko: "As long as I won't have to sleep with women old enough to be my mother."

I laugh, he'll never let that one go.

Me: "It was just one time."

Suko: "One time too many. The image makes me want to puke."

I laugh again, pushing him.

Me: "You lie. She didn't look that old! And you said she was—"

Suko: "Tight. I remember. Oki was still wrong for this, can't believe I loved it."

Me: "Yah, Mosa is forward. She deserved it."

Suko: "I'm more surprised at her being interested in a man. When did she start being bisexual?"

I shrug. I don't like how he's looking at me like I hold the answers.

Me: "Ha.a Suko. I'm not about to discuss my sexual endeavors with you."

He chuckles.

Suko: "Come on."

Me: "You want me to tell you about your little sister's pussy?"

He grimaces.

Me: "Exactly."

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SUKOLUHLE

All I want is to relax. I'm still waiting for the guilt to choke me. I'm waiting to reminisce about tonight and taste it on my tongue but nothing comes. In fact, what does is adrenaline as I think of tomorrow and how easy it might be for me since I've gotten the hang of things. I feel like a double agent in a way; hawker by day and fake engineer by the night. I wonder if this could be a movie because it sure feels like it.

Poppy: "See you tomorrow Asha"

I laugh.

Me: "Tomorrow it is Miss Naidoo."

The lights in my room are on, which has me raising an eyebrow. Last time I checked; I was the only with the keys. Poppy is surprised to see me back in her house so soon. We've just parted.

Me: "Who else has my room keys?"

Poppy: "Me but I obviously wouldn't give them to anyone else. Why?"

Me: "The lights are on. I left them off"

Poppy: "Look, clean up because we can't have anyone blowing our cover then we'll go."

I nod.

I have her walking behind me because I'm not about to have her in any danger that I can prevent. I'd rather whoever it is go through me first. The door is open, which rings another alarm bell. What if rats get in? Or mosquitoes. Those little insects are annoying.

Poppy: "We don't have weapons"

Me: "Nosipho!"

She's on my bed, naked while on the phone. She gets startled, dropping the device then screaming while attempting to cover herself up.

Nosi: "Get her out of here!"

Poppy: "I saw it either way."

She chuckles on her way out.

Me: "How did you get in?"

Nosi: "Is that all you care about? Your little friend just saw me naked! Do you have any idea how embarrassing that is?"

Me: "Surely you didn't think I wouldn't come back"

Nosi: "I didn't expect you to be with her. Where were you?"

Me: "I was out. Nosipho, what did we walk on?"

She does the blinking rapidly thing so I know she's going to lie.

Nosi: "Nothing"

Me: "So, you weren't masturbating on video camera probably to some nigger's voice?"

Nosi: "I will not be demeaned by you Sukoluhle. Are you making me to be a harlot, taking videos of her private part like some pornstar?! You're insulting me!"

Me: "It's a question. You always bellow every time I call you out on things that you do but it's fine, let's not fight."

She gets off the bed and starts gathering her clothes.

Nosi: "I should have known better than to try and surprise you. Now that hoe is going to sing it to the whole world. How dare you do this to me Suko? I don't even know why I'm still with you."

I rush to her and grab her wrist, she can't leave. She yanks herself off then gets dressed. I bite my lip while looking at her trying to fit into her skinny jeans. She releases a breath of relief when she finally gets the denim past her thighs. She's getting thick.

Nosi: "Such a loser."

I block her when she tries to walk past me. We have to talk about this.

Nosi: "Move!"

Me: "Not before we talk. I'm sorry and you don't have to worry about Poppy, she won't say anything."

Her chest is heaving frantically, what wrong did I do?

Nosi: "You see why I want you to move? There's no privacy here!"

I nod, cupping her face.

Me: “I’m going to move, OK? By the end of next week, I’ll be out of here and you won’t have to worry about a repeat of today.”

Nosi: “You better Suko or you and I are over. I’m not bluffing”

Me: “I know baby. How did you get in here?”

Nosi: “I have my ways. I’m leaving. You’ll call me when you’re no longer here”

Me: “But it’s late and you know how dangerous the streets are at night, especially for a woman. Sleep over then I’ll walk you home in the morning.”

Nosi: “I’m not staying here any longer so you’ll walk me out now. You didn’t tell me where you were”

Me: “I was out. Let’s go then, do you have everything?”

She nods. We’re quiet on that walk, which isn’t like us but I have a feeling if I say something, she’ll get upset. She sends me back halfway through, like usual but I’ll obviously always wonder where she stays. The fact that she’s met my family and knows where I live while I can’t relate to neither weighs me down. I know it’s my fault for having nothing but it still doesn’t make it hurt less. I should work, make amends with my family so Nosi’s can know me as well. I didn’t know she had a sister

until the phone incident which makes me wonder if she has any more siblings I don't know of. Do they know I'm her man? But the questions breed no answers. Unemployment has robbed me of so much but I refuse for it to rob me of the love of my life. Never!

SUKOLUHLE

I'm in my room packing some of my things. I did search for available and affordable rooms around so the one I found costs R500. It's steep since I'm unemployed, considering I'll also have to buy food, toiletries and some furniture but it's low considering how much others cost. It's in the village which has a high crime rate but ke, beggars can't be choosers. I've never lived in a village before so this kind of feels like my life keeps going lower and lower. I'll have to acquaint myself with dusty, untarred roads along with living in a confined space. The room is small, like as small as Poppy's toilet. I'll have to use a pit, stinky toilet. The thought alone is depressing but I remind myself that I'm doing this for love. It's not like I'm stooping low or anything, the solution isn't permanent. I have to work hard, be the best hawker if possible by adding more stuff maybe amagwinya like I once thought and also distribute posters of what I can do like Mpho suggested.

Tonight is the last day of the mission. I feel like I've been holding in a breath somewhere and praying to God and my ancestors that we don't get caught. Sure, the more you do it, the easier it weighs on your conscience but then I imagine myself getting arrested as Asha Muhammed. That would be a

disaster, especially when the makeup falls off and they discover who I really am. Poppy does help keep me relaxed. She reminds me of what I stand to gain. I think of a happier girlfriend and an investment into my future then immediately become fired up with motivation and the need to thrive as a conman. She also reminds me that it's a once off for me. She doesn't want me affiliating myself with the darker underworld. She says the thrill is addictive and that once both feet are in, you can't easily go out. You'll find yourself in the wrong groups and might need to fight for your life. It's only then that I get a glimpse of her previous life but of course it's merely a miniature. Sometimes I do want to ask. I want to ask about that room which remains locked in her house. I remember I once tried to open, even though it was locked but she hit me with a spear. I realized then that her virtue isn't just mental, it's physical too because I fell hard on my arse. I don't pry now; I take what she gives.

There's a knock on my door so I let them in.

Mpho: "Hey. Where's Poppy? I've been knocking on her door to no avail."

Me: "I don't know but she's probably coming back soon."

Mpho: "I wanted to just... check on you guys. Are you moving out?"

Me: “Yes but only me though. I can’t live under my best friend’s shadow forever.”

Mpho: “Did she ask you to?”

I chuckle and shake my head. Poppy would never.

Me: “No, I did.”

I want to tell him about Nosi and how my relationship relies on this but I can’t. I don’t want to be seen as a shitty person. Who knows how this will look from another’s perception? Poppy has already voiced her disapproval; I don’t need any more opinions. The man looks at me in scrutiny, eyes having shrunk into slits.

Mpho: “So, you finally found a job?”

Me: “No Mpho, and what’s with the questions? Poppy isn’t here so you can leave me the hell alone! Nxa!”

I didn’t mean to snap but he’s also being annoying. His expensive cologne has filled my room, dominating it and making everything else seem inferior. I want him to go because I’m beginning to think his presence emasculates me. I should be where he is, like a man my age but look at me now. It fucken sucks and is bruising to the ego. He doesn’t say more but just steps out looking a little affected, good.

But the minute he closes that door, which I expected him to bang by the way, I feel bad. It’s not like me to react like that but

the frustration stemmed from his... success? Now I sound like a prick. The man worked hard to get where he is and I should be taking pointers, not chasing him out like a dog. I rush to the door and out, he's about to get into his car.

Me: "Wait"

He stops but doesn't turn to me. I walk closer.

Me: "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken to you in that manner, I'm not a bad person."

Mpho: "It's fine. Tell Poppy I was here."

He gets into his car and I sigh. The engine roars as he drives off, it's a C63. I sigh and walk back into my room. I'm no longer in the mood for packing so I halt and lay on my bed on my back instead.

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POPPY

I stare at my reflection on the mirror, doing different poses as I take pictures. Kiara did me good, she really knows what she's doing. To think jealous, lazy South Africans wanted to get her deported because of her greatness makes me want to puke. I wouldn't be looking this fly. It's the final day of the mission. I hope Oki won't Rob us after we go out the way. Him and I don't

trust each other when it comes to money; with good reason because we both love it. My phone rings somewhere in my purse, it's Suko.

Me: "Am I late?"

I've been staring at myself too hard, that I can admit.

Suko: "Where are you vele? You locked the house and you know I don't have food. Gigi is hungry"

Me: "He's back?"

Now my plans are ruined.

Suko: "Uh, yes. He was dropped by his transport."

Me: "I'm coming"

I hang up then call Rumi. I paid her a lot of money for her to bring my son before she should, how dare she?

Rumi: "I didn't do it!"

Me: "Didn't do what? Why's he back at my place? I told you I'll fetch him first thing in the morning."

Rumi: "The transport got there before me but I... I'll go to your house and fetch him there. I'm sorry A... I mean Poppy"

Me: "Don't you ever mess up like this. You know Gigi won't want to leave if I get there first. Buy him food while you're at it."

I hang up. She's my little sister whom I've hidden from the world with good reason. She's only fifteen. Why we aren't living together is a story for another day. Maybe things will work out in my favor in the future, I'll untangle myself from Oki and chains of my past and finally be able to move on. For now, this is what's best. At least Gigi knows his auntie, I've never kept them away from each other. I know shading her doesn't help but I've already lost one sister, I can't lose another. I don't think I'll survive it. My family is my life, heart and everything.

Now I wish I had a car. I look too good to be squashed in a taxi with sweaty beings. I dial Mpho's number with hopes that he's come back from his trip.

Mpho: "Hey"

Me: "Hi. I need a favor if you're back"

I prefer cutting straight to the chase. I'll ask him how he is when I see him.

Mpho: "I am. Where are you?"

Me: "I'm in town but I look too delectable for a taxi. Please come fetch me."

He chuckles.

Mpho: "That's the favor?"

Me: "Yes, it is. Are you coming?"

Mpho: "Yeah. Tell me where I'll find you."

Me: "I'm at KFC now."

Mpho: "I'll be there in ten."

He stays true to his word and compliments me the minute I get in. I only laugh, thanking him but not without mentioning I'm well aware of how good I look. He laughs.

Me: "When did you come back and how was home?"

Mpho: "Last night. It's good hey. The guy seems like he really loves her."

He clears his throat then starts the car.

Me: "You don't... like home?"

He chuckles, which seems forced then looks at me with furrowed eyebrows.

Mpho: "What do you mean? I love home."

I don't press. I understand we've only just known each other so I can't pry. The trust between us is in its foundation stage so I can't rush it.

Mpho: "I went to your house, you know then found your friend packing."

I roll my eyes.

Me: "It's that damn girlfriend of his

Advertisement

Suko is so frustrating when he's in love. He becomes blind to reality, ignoring signs which hit him in the face. I hate love."

Mpho: "You and me both."

I laugh.

Me: "You're married to your career, huh?"

Mpho: "Well, yes. It's not going to break my heart or want to change me; it accepts me how I am. I get what I put in."

Me: "So, you don't see yourself getting married?"

He chuckles and shakes his head.

Mpho: "Nope, never. You?"

Me: "Unless I'm a trophy wife to a guy twenty years older than me."

He laughs contagiously so I join him.

Mpho: "How old would he have to be, forty?"

Me: "Don't be sleek. I'm not telling you my age."

Mpho: "I'll ask your best friend."

I chuckle.

Me: “Why does it matter? Age is just a number Mpho and even he doesn’t know but go ahead.”

Mpho: “If it’s not a big deal, why not tell me?”

Me: “You’ll know when you have to. Have you got your heart broken?”

He chuckles and shakes his head.

Mpho: “Nop, thank God. Not in dating, I mean. I’ve seen what a broken heart can lead to so I don’t want it.”

I nod. There’s a nostalgic look on his face which makes him more of a mystery. He has a lot of layers which I’m looking forward to unfolding if he let’s me.

Rumi has fetched Gigi by the time we’ve arrived, which I’m grateful for. I don’t know how she came here fast but I hope she maintained discretion. I know Oki has his goons watching all the activity around my house. I might have taught her how to be invisible but who knows how he’s trained them?

Me: “Thank you for the ride. Suko and I have to go somewhere tonight but we can hang out tomorrow, that’s if you’ll be free.”

Mpho: “I can come around on Sunday, after church for you?”

I nod and kiss his cheek.

Me: “Take care.”

I wave as he drives off. Looking at the time on my wristwatch, I realize we don't have a lot left. I get everything from my room then go to Suko's. I make sure to knock lest I walk in onto what we saw a few days back. I never imagined Nosi to be nasty, and I don't mean that in a bad way. She's always seemed like a prude so for her to masturbate on video because a damn fool could see that, it was shocking.

Suko: "You're back. Some guy came here to take Gigi. I tried refusing but he threatened me and the boy seemed to know him."

Me: "It's fine. So, you're really moving?"

Suko: "Yep. I found a room in dusty Dibate"

Me: "That place is infested with nyaope boys and tsotsis. Do you know the danger you're bringing to yourself? A cheeseboy like you won't survive there."

He laughs.

Suko: "I can take care of myself, thank you very much. I'm older than you in case you forgot and I'm a man. I've never lost a fight so I won't be scared by druggies or tsotsis."

Me: "Well, if you say so. We need to get ready; we only have an hour."

Suko: “The new hair suits you. Good thing Nosi doesn’t want to come here, I’d be under pressure now because of it.”

I laugh.

Me: “Good riddance then.”

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SUKOLUHLE

I’m Mr. Khumalo now with a... well, a wife with blonde hair. The rings on our left fingers look expensive and Poppy also doesn’t stop cooing. The only change in me is the beard. She’s pasted an extended goatie that makes me seem... older but I love it. Maybe I should grow it or I would when I can afford to. Maintaining beards and grooming them is expensive, I can barely afford a cologne.

Poppy: “Try a deeper voice”

Me: “Don’t worry, I got you wifey”

She laughs. We’re in matching tuxedos. Hers is with a short mini skirt and her heels are the highest I’ve seen, not that they accentuate her height in anyway. She still looks short to me.

The minute we step out, she screams.

Poppy: “It’s an RR”

Me: “Yeah, yeah. We’re apparently a rich couple so we should drive like it. Where does Oki get the money though?”

Poppy: “He’s probably borrowed it for the night.”

Me: “So, he hires the cars?”

She chuckles and shakes her head.

Poppy: “More like takes them, removes the tracker then puts it back again when he returns them.”

Me: “So, he steals them? Why did you say he borrows them?”

I’ve halted my track, looking at her in disbelief. How’s she taking it this lightly? It makes me wonder just how dirty Oki’s hands are.

Poppy: “Because he returns them. Don’t overthink this. We’re going for the kill tonight.”

We’ve arrived at the conference room. Everyone seems to be in black and white too, a classic theme that matches with the simple yet sophisticated décor in the hall. I’ve gotten accustomed to this role so much that I almost feel like I’m... really here. With the beard and mature look, I have going on, it feels like I’ve arrived there. I see myself here in five years, dining with the rich and famous. I’ll get here, I know I will and then, it won’t be in disguise. It won’t be a façade but just me, Sukoluhle Mncwabe.

“Gotta love these events huh”

I turn to a woman I hadn't notice is next to me. She's as petite as Poppy but lighter. The rock on her ring finger is blinding, too big to be missed.

Me: “You tone says otherwise.”

Her: “Yeah well, it's boring. How do you guys survive this?”

Me: “We guys?”

Her: “Corporate people with your slim ties and creased pants.”

I laugh, giving her a look over. She's in a black bodycon formal dress with matching blazer.

Me: “You're one to talk. Vusi Khumalo”

I give her my hand.

Her: “Lorraine Moloi who's into anything that doesn't include talking business. I'm more into pleasure”

Me: “Oh is it? What kind?”

She looks at me from my feet all up until my face then smirks.

Lorraine: “The caramel, handsome with a well groomed beard kind. I have a suite here, how about you scratch my back?”

I chuckle. Not this again.

Me: “I'm a married man. My wife is somewhere here.”

Lorraine: “Look around Vusi, no one is doing business tonight. Your wife is that midget with blonde hair, right? I swear she left with Dr Daniels about a minute ago.”

Me: “And that rock on your finger?”

Lorraine: “Cock blocker. Don’t make me beg Vusi”

Damn Poppy. I know I also have to take this offer to accomplish my mission, I don’t have a choice. I strategize in my head on our way to her suite. I only need eight minutes and I pray I won’t have to well... make out with her until she blacks out.

POPPY

Me: "I really have to go. Thanks for the drink uhm but I... can't stay. My husband must be wondering where I am."

We're supposed to scam one per night but I'm already on my third. I'm the one who came with the silicone gel and my baby has come very handy tonight. I didn't think it'd work but boy, it did. How the hell can so many people use the same phone model? Sure, they love iPhone but usually monied people upgrade whenever a new model comes out. I don't care though because it works in our favor. This one oozes a dark aura that runs shivers down my spine. From his dark, cold eyes to his stoic face. He's handsome, which is a weakness to me when the man has a heavy wallet but the coldness in his eyes is what draws me in. His cologne is intoxicating, a fusion of mask and Cuban cigar. I think he can see right through me but I also don't give a damn. He doesn't look to be on the legal side anyway so he's not in a space to judge.

Kgosi: "The night is still young Cleo, perhaps a refill?"

Me: "I'm not much of a drinker"

We're in the hotel's bar. There aren't a lot of people here and we're sitting at a secluded table.

Kgosi: "Let's go to my room then. Since you got what you wanted, it's only fair I get what I want."

I stare back at him, successfully hiding my confusion. What the hell is he talking about? It can't be that he saw me, I'm too damn smart for that.

Me: "I have no idea what you're talking about."

He scoffs but it lasts as fast as it begins.

Kgosi: "Oh please Cleo. You really think I didn't see you messing with my phone? I know you're a hacker, probably looking to get some of my money. You really think I'll let you go that easily? You're exactly my type so how about you finish up that drink and we leave so I can finish what you started?"

That's not a question, it's a damn order. I don't panic. I saw the cold metal tucked in his pocket, his impassiveness isn't to be messed with but this is just a small price to pay. It's either him or Oki and the latter isn't one who's bad side I'd like to be on. The man really doesn't play with his money. I can pretend I don't know what this man is talking about and dismiss him but at what cost?

Me: "You're mistaken Doc. I'm not who you say I am."

Kgosi: "How old are you? Sixteen, seventeen? Now imagine how old I am. I'm married, three kids and born into the underworld. Do you think I'm someone you can mess with?"

I gulp. He's got me.

Me: "No."

Kgosi: "Are you at least eighteen? I'm not about to catch a statutory rape case."

I nod.

Kgosi: "Good. If it's good, I'll give you a fifty k bonus. I'll make sure my account has at least ten thousand for whoever hired you and your partner. I'm not a nice person so consider that a rare benevolent gesture from Terror."

I nod. I do hope I don't die. I'm too young and all Gigi and Rumi has, it's too damn soon.

He takes my hand after he gets up so I also get on my feet and allow him to lead me to wherever he's taking me. I'm supposed to be scared; this is my life that's on the line but I can't find that fear. Instead, I find pumping of adrenaline as his custom cologne continues teasing my nostrils.

I don't see much of our way there, my mind is at what awaits me in that room.

He locks the door after we get in while I'm standing next to it like a little virgin. This isn't about to happen, right? I'm basically about to have sex with a good looking man with a mean face because he's on to me? Yeah, sounds good.

Kgosi: "That little face isn't going to work on me."

I glance around the room. There's a bed in center, a bedside table next to it then there's a table with two chairs that's not so far from the door. He goes to the table and pours whisky in two glasses. He gives one to me.

Kgosi: "What's your real name?"

He decides to put that damn gun on the table. I don't know much about guns but from its size, I'm assuming it's a short gun? Short is in reference to the size? I've never been interested. He takes off his blazer, shirt and wife beater revealing a tattooed torso and another gun. This one looks like an AK47 judging by the length. How did he get in this hotel while heavily armed?

Kgosi: "I won't shoot you so relax. You just remind me of my wife and I'd never dream of killing the love of my life. Come sit on my lap."

He's on the chair and watching me. I follow like a meek lamb, sitting on his lap. This man smells good. His big hand goes on to my thigh, squeezing it sultrily.

Kgosi: "Still waiting for your name Cleo."

Me: "Poppy"

It comes off rushed, breathlessly but it's justified. I can barely concentrate with the way he's hand keeps squeezing and brushing my thigh.

Kgosi: "Mm, Poppy."

He puts his glass on the table then goes on to cup my boob with that hand, or whatever is there. He fiddles my nipple, playing with the ring like he knows it's there. His touch is igniting and awakens every fiber of my body.

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SUKOLUHLE

Lorraine: "You trying to get me drunk and reckless?"

Me: "Oh, you're the one who just asked for a refill."

She laughs.

Lorraine: "I've had enough. I'll quickly go to the toilet then we'll spice things up when I come back."

Me: "Oh but you were just there five minutes ago."

She chuckles.

Lorraine: "It's the wine."

I've completed the mission when she went to the toilet for the first time. I honestly don't know why I'm here because I'm done. I've been trying to call Poppy but her phone rings to voicemail. I hope she's OK.

Me: "I have to go."

She frowns. She's just come back from the toilet and finds me on my feet.

Lorraine: "But I thought... did I do something?"

Me: "My wife just called, I'm sorry."

Lorraine: "Oh. At least take my number then. We can hookup when I come back here next time."

I'm relieved when I finally exit the hotel's premises. Sure

I didn't cheat on Nosi since Lorraine and I didn't even kiss but I feel bad.

Lorraine is good company, funny and someone who seems to enjoy life and whatever it hits her with. Even though she was all talk when it came to instigating something but I did enjoy my chat with her.

I try Poppy again when I get in the car but this time, it goes straight to voice mail. The driver ends up leaving without her. She's a big girl and I know she can take care of herself but I can't help but worry.

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POPPY

I'm woken up by the shower running. The minute my eyelids open, every other part of me that's in pain reminds me of last night or rather this morning. I think I blacked out, not sure because the man did things to my poor body. I don't think there's any hole in my body that's not strained. I don't know what frustrations that man was releasing and even though I enjoyed it, I sure as hell wouldn't want a repeat anytime soon. How does his wife survive that? Yoh.

He comes out with a towel hanging lowly on his waist and glistening with water droplets. His aura alone is arousing but this isn't the time. I feel paralyzed on my lower half but I have to go. I'll probably be duck walking but I have Gigi whom I've missed dearly and Suko who's probably worried about my whereabouts.

Kgosi: "I've prepared you a bath. Breakfast will also be here shortly."

Me: "I'd rather just leave."

Kgosi: "You need to bath, especially after last night. I've sent someone to get you some clothes. Should I bath you? I wouldn't mind but only if you give me one nje. Just one."

Me: "I'm not a prostitute!"

He chuckles.

Kgosi: "Don't be a prude. Who said anything about you being one? I don't buy pussy."

Me: "Yet you preached of paying me last night."

Kgosi: "It's called giving credit where it's due."

He opens the blankets then picks me up bridal style. The only reason I relent to him bathing me is because I can barely move a limb. I feel much better when he's done. Our breakfast comes so we eat over silence. I'm trying not to think about last night and all that occurred. Did I really do that? If I accept the money, I'll be breaking one of the promises I made to Zuri before she died. I'll be disappointing her yet I need it. I'm conflicted.

Kgosi: "You should be careful next time."

Me: "Huh?"

He looks at me.

Kgosi: "The world is full of heartless men like myself who won't bat an eyelid when it comes to killing pretty girls like yourself. You're a chancer but know it won't always work out in your favor. My wife is the only reason I didn't kill you when you had my phone, you won't be lucky next time."

I find myself nodding. He's right but I know I'm going to do this again. It's the only life I know, all I'll have to do is be more careful. There's another knock on the door which he attends, coming back with a shopping bag.

Kgosi: "Is this fine?"

Me: "As long as it's my size"

He watches me change into the floral jumpsuit that's fortunately bootleg so I can get some air in.

Kgosi: "There's a driver waiting for you outside. Give me a kiss then you're free to go."

Me: "Are you nice to me because of your wife?"

Kgosi: "Yes."

It's all unbelievable for me. We kiss briefly then I'm released. There's a car for me like he said and the driver doesn't ask me anything. He drops me right at my house but not without giving me a duffle bag.

Me: "What's this for?"

Driver: "I'm just following orders. Have a good day ma'am"

He drives off after. How does Kgosi know where I stay? That alone irks me. Could he be in cahoots with Oki? Did the latter orchestrate everything that happened last night? Was there a

deal between them with me as some sort of compensation? The questions ran through my mind but I refuse to let them bother me. I'm trying not to limp but the walk of shame isn't one I can conceal. The bath only minimized the pain or at least attempted to. I know I have marks on my neck, chest and thighs which are going to take some time to heal. Not to mention the lady down south is on fire. I'm not going to mention the other part there.

Gigi runs to me so I let go of the bag and pick him up.

Gigi: "Missed you."

Me: "I missed you too baby. Did you have fun with aunt Rumi?"

Gigi: "Yes but missed you."

Me: "I'm here now, OK? Where's Suko?"

Gigi: "Cooking."

We go inside. He's holding my purse while I'm holding the duffle bag. Last night's endeavor led to my outfit being torn and the damn man refused with my underwear. It's weird because he's married so how's he keeping another woman's underwear? It's none of my business though, I just want to forget.

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SUKOLUHLE

Me: "Do you know how worried I was?"

She's squirming and trying to free her ear. Yeah, serves her right.

Poppy: "Point made but please let go."

Me: "Don't ever do that, you hear me?"

Poppy: "Yes daddy"

I let go. I must admit that felt good.

Poppy: "You're no fun."

Me: "Says you with your duck walk. What's in the bag?"

She shrugs.

Poppy: "Money maybe? I don't know."

Me: "So it might be a bomb?"

She laughs.

Poppy: "Don't be crazy. I'm going to take a nap, hardly did last night."

I laugh as she duck walks to her bedroom with Gigi on her tail. He really missed his mom, those two are really close. I've made enough for our guests since Nosi and Mpho are joining us. It was supposed to be Poppy's turn to cook but since she didn't

sleep here, I decided to. I'm glad she's fine though, even Oki was going crazy. I wonder how she's going to explain everything to that scary man. He's unfortunately someone I can't protect her from so she'll have to lie on the bed she made.

Mpho is the first one to arrive in denim shorts and a t-shirt. I haven't seen him this casual. It's not like I've seen a lot of him but you know what I mean.

Mpho: "She's here, right?"

Me: "Hello to you too."

Mpho: "You know nothing about being polite so why should I bother?"

Me: "Because you're not me. Being rude doesn't suit you."

Mpho: "It doesn't suit you either."

Me: "Sit down, rude ass with hairy legs."

Mpho: "Yuck fou"

I chuckle. Nosi arrives about ten minutes after him also wearing shorts. Hers are too short and she's matched them with an oversized t-shirt tucked in at the front. She's really changed. I'm not complaining but she's never liked revealing clothing, always voiced out her disapproval at Poppy's skimpy clothing.

Nosi: "Hey"

Me: "Babe, I don't believe you've met Mpho. He's Poppy's friend."

Mpho: "We've met"

I look at Nosi who's eyes don't even meet mine. What's he on about?

Me: "Babe?"

She chuckles nervously.

Nosi: "I uhm... came here and he was with... uhm Poppy."

Me: "When was this?"

Nosi: "Few days back. Look I... I need to rush. I've just remembered that there's uhm... something for work. I have to go."

She doesn't wait for me to reply but instead dashes out. She agreed to this so what's that all about? I look to this guy for answers.

Me: "Did something happen between you and my girlfriend?"

Mpho: "She's not exactly my type."

I groan. Like she'd ever be.

Me: "I'm not talking about that. Where the hell did y'all meet and why's she fidgety around you?"

Mpho: "I don't know. Maybe ke letswalo"

Me: "What exactly is that?"

He chuckles.

Mpho: "Oh nothing. That's what I meant when I said dating is what's holding you back."

Me: "Oh, because you fucken know me so much, huh? I'm not going to ask again."

He just stares at me looking bored.

Me: "I'm talking to you dammit!"

I don't know how. The action was impulsive. When I snap out of it, we're face-to-face and he's whimpering. I look at my hand then let go when the shock subsides. What the hell is wrong with me?

He coughs, eyes teary and I feel shittier than ever. I try touching him to see if he's OK but he pushes me then goes to sit down. I see it but act oblivious.

Me: "I'm sorry!"

He replies with a death stare which I deserve. I love Nosi too much. I can't really control myself when it comes to her, seeing the marks on his neck makes me feel so guilty.

Me: "I'm really sorry."

Lunch is tense. It's mainly Poppy and Gigi talking and that's it. I've never heard the boy talk so much. He seems to be the only one oblivious to the atmosphere thick in tension. I clear up the table after.

Poppy: "What's up with you two?"

Mpho: "He choked me because apparently I have something going on with his girlfriend."

Poppy looks at me.

Me: "I'm not in the mood to explain myself. If you'll excuse me, I'll be in my room packing the rest of my stuff. I'm out."

I don't await a reply; I leave immediately. I'm suddenly frustrated, mad even. Nosi wouldn't have left if it was just us.

I do hope Oki comes through for me because I want to make amends with Nosi. I just want our relationship to go back to how it used to be. I want it to be us, loving each other and enjoying each other's company. That hasn't been happening as much as it used to and I miss those times.

POPPY

I'm beginning to think Suko has something against Mpho. He's such a nice guy so it bothers me that they seemingly don't get along. It's obviously all Suko's fault because he becomes something else where Nosi is involved. I'm beginning to think that witch fed him something. I'm not one to accuse people of black magic but what else would explain this? The change in attitude is concerning. I know she's cheating; probably with some guy with a car and a dapper job but why's she still with Suko? I'm trying to conjure possible reasons which is disrupted by Mpho's voice.

Mpho: "You know he's a grown man, right? Don't stress about him."

Me: "I can't help it Poster. He's my friend, I worry about him. He's too kind and his heart is too big which always bites him in the end. He's moving out, letting her win but even a blind person can see it'll end in tears. She doesn't love him."

Mpho: "He doesn't see it. It's only a matter of time before he sees her for what she is. Wena just be there for him when the time comes. You've tried talking but he doesn't listen."

I nod with a sigh.

Me: “You’re right. I don’t know where his insecurities come from. He’s a handsome man, smart with a good heart. It sucks that he doesn’t see his worth.”

Mpho: “Some people want to learn the hard way. You did your part, the rest is up to him.”

I nod again. I’ll let him be and hope it won’t be too late when his eyes are opened.

I didn’t really think Suko is serious about moving out until I saw him and his girlfriend here to pick up his stuff. She’d apparently hired a van to help with the moving. I personally think it’s funny because she complained about not having any money since she’s extending at her home, so what’s this all about? I obviously took my nose out of it. Maybe the guy is her cousin or something. The room has been locked since then. It’s a week after the incidence and end of the month. We’re meeting with Oki with regards to our shares. I still haven’t opened the duffle bag Kgosi’s driver gave me. I’m a little nervous about it, don’t know why because it might just be money. I put it under my bed and memories of that night even deeper into my subconscious. Oki sent a driver for me, which wasn’t necessary because I know where he stays.

It's Friday morning so Gigi is at daycare. I don't know why he sent the car so early, neither does Suko. He's sitting next to me. He wouldn't know if I don't anyway. We had to pack up our stalls for this exact reason. Anyway, I'm still not talking to him because of what happened last week and it's killing me but it's for the best. How could he just move out like that? Of course I'm mad. When did he start being violent? He's never fought over a woman before so what's so special about Nosi? But the questions remain unanswered until further notice.

Oki: "My people!"

He seems excited, pearly whites all out along with his gums. Oki never smiles this wide unless he's gotten money. This means everything went well. He even goes on to hug us. The action doesn't only surprise me, Suko is just as shocked.

Oki: "Man, you deserve a dime and more. I was skeptical about your friend Poppy but he came through for me. Because of your magnificent performance, I've added a bonus. Poppy, your lounge suite has been paid off so you get nothing."

My smile immediately disappears.

Me: "Excuse me?"

He looks at me. He's now standing in front of us, still grinning.

Oki: "I know how irresponsible you can be so I used your share to be responsible on your behalf."

Me: “That’s unfair! There’s no way my share was fifty thousand. It’s impossible!”

Oki: “Of course it wasn’t. I paid off the eighty thousand you owed so you should thank me. It’ll teach you to choose your debts wisely in the future. I did you a favor so you should thank me.”

I click my tongue.

Me: “Fuck you.”

I walk out of his house. I can’t believe this! I worked damn hard in that hotel, got caught and had... I’m not about to reminisce now. My point is, I don’t deserve to be robbed like this.

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SUKOLUHLE

I can’t believe Poppy left me alone with this guy. She’s the one who can handle him, not me. I’m left with no choice but to act unaffected by his dangerous aura. I don’t think he tries to be scary, he’s just like that. I don’t care how emasculating I sound right now but I am scared of him.

Oki: “She’ll get over it. Here’s your share Mr Mncwabe. It was good working with you and I do look forward to such smooth sailing in the future. Happy spending.”

He gives me a thick, A4 brown envelope. I feel like I'm in those mafia movies. I do mask my excitement in nonchalance, bid him farewell then get out of his suffocating study room. I can finally breathe when I'm outside. It's good that I brought a school bag just in case. I find Poppy just outside the gate, sitting on the ground. She seems depressed.

Me: "Let's go."

Poppy: "Don't talk to me!"

Me: "You can sit here forever."

Poppy: "How will I throw up Zuri's party? Oki is so unfair. Who's he to dictate how I use my money? I fucken earned it. He's such a bully."

Me: "I can help with the party. You've done a lot for me so I wouldn't mind, come."

She looks at me. I'm now sitting next to her and she previously had her head on my shoulder.

Poppy: "Are you out of your mind?!"

I smile.

Me: "It's heavy. If he used eighty thousand to pay off your debt then I can more than afford to help out."

Poppy: "I'm not allowing you to do that Suko, over my dead damn body. You and I are going to Switzerland so you can open an offshore bank account and invest that money there. That way, you won't have to answer a lot of questions."

Me: "I'll finally get to see your home country, huh?"

She rolls her eyes.

Poppy: "I guess. Besides, I had contingency plans in place in case this happens. I should have known."

Me: "What do you mean by contingency plans?"

She looks at me smugly.

Poppy: "Let's get out of here. If that dark man thinks he has the upper hand, he has another thing coming."

I get up first then help her up. We walk to town over light chatter. I'm letting her vent but once it's done, we talk about her sister's party and possible ways of hosting.

Poppy: "I don't want you to spend so much of your money since you're saving it for a good cause. Take a little, spend it on yourself and Nosi but the rest should be for your vision."

Me: "But Zuri's party is important too."

Poppy: "I have it under control."

Me: "I'm going to help Poppy and it's not up for discussion!"

Poppy: “I have two people whom I was able to scam who Oki doesn’t know about. I’ll use that and you seem to have forgotten that duffle bag.”

Me: “The duffle bag you don’t want to open? Right. I won’t be told by you what to do with my money. I’m helping and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

She groans but I don’t give a damn. She’s done a lot for me and it’s time I return her monetary gestures, I can now and I’ll do it.

We arrive in town, at the mall.

Me: “How about you help me buy a few things for Nosi and for our room?”

Poppy: “Still mad about you leaving like that but sure. I’m the style master”

Me: “Oh and I’ll finally get to pay you back for the stock and everything. How’s that for an excuse to give you money?”

She chuckles and pushes me with her little hip. She’s mad but I love her.

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POPPY

I'm starting to feel like such a user because we're now in the parking lot and waiting for Mpho to fetch us. He asked me where I am, I told him and he offered. I still feel bad though because it seems like he's a chauffeur to me. I didn't want this but he insisted. The man hardly takes no for an answer.

Suko: "I'm taking a taxi when your friend comes."

Me: "I hope this isn't about your masculinity because I'll punch you. This is the twenty first century and we're saying away with toxic masculinity traits. Taking a lift with Mpho won't emasculate you."

Suko: "It's not about that."

I know it's a lie but I let it pass.

Me: "What is it about then?"

Suko: "He rubs me off the wrong way, that's all."

I laugh. Really?

Me: "He's the sweetest, how's he possibly doing that?"

Suko: "He likes saying shit about my girlfriend."

Me: "Do you know how they first met?"

Suko: "At your gate?"

Me: "He was out with a few friends and one of them happened to bring you dear girlfriend along as his chick for the night!"

He looks at me blankly.

Suko: “And you expect me to believe that?”

Me: “He’s not out to ruin your relationship like you think. He, like me, sees how bad Nosi is for you. The girl is out to ruin you.”

He snickers.

Suko: “You really want to press my buttons neh”

Me: “More like trying to open your eyes to what’s in your face. She’s slowly—”

Suko: “Enough Poppy! This is why I moved out, so I won’t have to deal with you bashing my girlfriend every chance you get. I get it; you don’t like her so I’ll repeat this

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get her out of your mouth! I’m a grown ass man and I can take care of myself!”

His chest is heaving, nose scrunched up. He’s really mad. A topic about Nosi agitates him every time.

Me: “If that’s what being in a relationship comes with, then I’m cool.”

Suko: “You’re a teenager, you wouldn’t know.”

I laugh and raise my hand in surrender.

Me: "Right."

We don't talk until Mpho comes. This time, he's driving a black 4X4. He comes out wearing khaki shorts and matching t-shirt with black combat boots.

Me: "Ooh, Jan van Riebeeck."

He chuckles, giving me a hug.

Mpho: "Miss Poppy"

Me: "You don't think I'm using you, right? I mean you're the one who asked where I am then came. We wouldn't mind taking a taxi."

Mpho: "We?"

Me: "Yes, me and..."

I look besides me where Suko was and find no one. When the hell did he leave? I turn back to Mpho who laughs at me.

Me: "He was here!"

Mpho: "Yeah, right"

He laughs again.

Me: "Stop!"

Mpho: “To answer your question, I don’t think you’re using me. I’m mostly the one who’s game for picking you and I wouldn’t come if I didn’t want to.”

Me: “Controlled orgasm huh. I like that.”

He freezes, now I’m the one who laughs.

Me: “We can leave. You’re such a prude”

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SUKOLUHLE

I’ve changed my bedding and also packed the gifts I got Nosi nicely. I hope she likes them. She’s been patient with me and deserves the best in this life. Poppy helped me buy a weave, makeup kit then also got her those artificial nails. It’s not my place to judge but between you and I, I prefer the natural Nosi. She’s beautiful as is and I wouldn’t want her to change.

Unfortunately, this isn’t about me. I bought groceries from Woolies and have prepared food for her. I cooked Moroccan beef with grains and broccoli. I even bought wine to go with the meal. We’re having self-saucing chocolate pudding for dessert and hopefully that honey pot as extra. They’re flower petals on the floor, I’ve lit those aromatic candles while Bryson Tiller is playing on the low via Bluetooth speaker. I’m tempted to get more things around here since I left my appliances at Poppy’s

place. She's one person I'd rather not think about right now. I won't tolerate her always speaking ill of my girlfriend of two years. It's officially two years now and I can't believe. What I've done is nothing compared to what Nosi has for me but I do hope she'll appreciate it.

I've switched the light off so the room is dimly illuminated by the candles. It smells good in here. Nosi has been spending more time with me since I moved out and it's something I've appreciated. Clearly the problem previously lay in my abode so I'm glad that she now has the liberty to come as she pleases. It's Friday so I'm hoping we'll spend this weekend together if she doesn't have to work tomorrow.

I've drank about two beers, usually takes me twenty four to feel something. I don't get drunk easily, probably because I'm accustomed to alcohol. The clicking of her heels on the veranda announces her arrival. She opens the door and sighs.

Nosi: "Why is it... baby?"

She smiles which warms my heart. This is the kind of reaction I hoped for.

She scrutinizes the room, looking from the rose petals on the floor to the plastic table I got today which I assembled. There's a vase with fresh lilies on it, together with the beautiful dinner

set I got specially for this occasion. The food is covered though, the wine on the table with two wine glasses next to it.

Nosi: "This is beautiful baby, thank you."

She comes to me where I am on the bed then kisses me.

Me: "I also got you a few things. Happy second year anniversary baby."

I pick up the gift boxes on the bed which she seemingly hadn't noticed and hand them to her.

Nosi: "For me?"

Her grin stretches to her ears and she's smiling with her eyes. It's a look that I've captured and locked vividly in my long-term memory. I didn't think it's possible for her grin to spread wider but it does when she opens the first box which has her weave.

Nosi: "Baby!"

She crashes me in an embrace that has me laughing then kisses me all over the face. I'm all goofy and warm inside. My girlfriend is happy with my efforts and I don't wish for anything else.

By the time she's opened all her gifts, her face is soaked in tears as she kisses me deeply. I love her so much.

Nosi: "I don't know how to thank you for this. Let's skip all the food then make love"

Me: "That sounds like a good idea."

Nosi: "I'm pumping with joy Suko, thank you so much. Fuck, you're the best boyfriend ever. I even feel like getting on one knee and asking you to marry me, that's how happy I am."

I chuckle. Marriage? No way.

Me: "Anything for you. I know I haven't been the best boyfriend in the past but I'm working hard to ensure I'm able to provide for you and treat you how you deserve."

She sits on my lap.

Nosi: "Enough talking."

I relent, reciprocating the sensual kiss. My hands are on her waist, squeezing them lightly as we slowly kiss. I don't think my heart has ever pumped this way. It's all love, joy and happiness. Life with Nosi keeps getting better and better. I love this woman so much. I'm tempted to plant a seed but stop myself. She has other ideas though. She stops me when I try to unwrap the condom. We're both naked now, breathing heavily and both fully aroused. I'm even getting goosebumps.

Nosi: "I want to feel all of you, no barriers."

Me: "I don't want to get lost in your warmth and forget to pull out."

Nosi: "I love you, you love me and nothing will change that. Don't worry, I'm on the pill. It's been two years Suko, why do I need to give a whole speech just so we can have raw sex? Don't you trust me?"

Me: "It's not you I don't trust, it's myself. Do you know how hot it is in there?"

I spank her inner thigh and she moans.

Nosi: "Come on baby"

She kisses me so hotly that I end up dropping the foil. I'd do anything for this woman.

Me: "Don't blame me when I never want to go back"

She giggles but it turns into a moan when I thrust into her. My hands are on her waist, guiding her movements. It feels too hot and too good, like paradise and way beyond cloud nine.

Me: "I love you"

I also love how she's moving that waist, pleasuring herself and me while at it. I love the feel of her butt on my hands, they've moved there. I'm more an ass guy than boobs so I appreciate these cheeks.

I feel an ignition of our love that's stronger than the fire
Shadrack, Meshack and Abednigo were thrown in. It surpasses
perfection.

SUKOLUHLE

It feels like I'm floating on cloud nine. Last night was marvelous, epic and the memories stay engraved in my brain. I never thought it's possible to fall for Nosi any more than I have but the way my heart's pumping right now proves it otherwise. I love her even more, probably more than I love myself. I want to give her the world, have her as happy as she was last night and have more night like that. I'm making breakfast while humming an incoherent song. I'm in a good mood which is fueled more by the fact that she's laying on my bed right now. Thoughts of her have my heart skipping a beat. I love that woman.

By the time she's up, I'm thankfully done with the breakfast. She comes wearing my t-shirt and hugs me from behind.

Nosi: "I could get used to this."

She kisses my back, making my stomach flutter. I'm too old to be getting butterflies in the stomach.

Me: "You better."

Nosi: "And more nights like last night. Where do you get the money, thou baby?"

Me: "I'm a hustler."

She kisses my back again then stands next to me, taking a piece from the plate. Of course, I ensured I have enough groceries even for the morning. I've made bacon, eggs, sausages, fruit salad and some tomatoes. I've even toasted some bread. I pull her chair for her so we can sit and have breakfast. My room looks a little like that of a living person now.

Me: "I wish this room wasn't this small so we can move in together."

She grins. We're now doing the dishes together. She wanted to do it alone but I refused. I want to pamper her; she should have allowed me. But my baby wanted to pay me for the breakfast, which is ridiculous because I'm not expecting any pay back. She's been too patient with me, it's the least I can do.

Me: "Let's go out tonight, if you can."

Nosi: "To a club?"

I nod.

Me: "A pub, lodge. Any place we could have fun, drink and dance. I haven't done that in ages."

I'm hoping she doesn't disagree. Nosi is unpredictable so I never know what to expect. I know she doesn't have a problem with being seen with me but that doesn't mean she'll be game. We've never done that.

Nosi: “We can do that, I don’t mind. I want to rock the hair my baby got me!”

Then she squeals. I lift her up and we kiss. This girl will be the death of me. I don’t think she realizes how much she makes me happy. I can’t imagine being without her. We take a bath together in a vaskom, something else I’m yet to accustom myself to but somehow we make it work. She has to leave after so I accompany her then take a taxi to town.

It’s time for me to make those posters and leaflets which I’ll use to advertise my skills. I can’t only depend on the money from Oki. If things work out well, I’ll open a repairs shop like Mpho said. That in turn would mean I’ll be able to provide for my girlfriend and finally meet her family.

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POPPY

I didn’t think I’d be crawling to the devil so soon. He did me bad but to not even wait a week? I didn’t think so. I’m not here for money, which I know he thinks is the reason I’m here. I can tell by the smug grin on his face. If I was brave, I’d wipe it off with a slap.

Me: “Okinawa”

Oki: "Poppy, how lovely to see your beautiful face so soon. You left here like a raging dragon yesterday."

Me: "I can't say the same about you."

Oki: "Careful now mi amor. I'd watch my words if I were you."

I snicker.

Me: "Or what?"

He only shakes his head.

Me: "I'm not scared of you and yes, I know I should be. You can relax your titties, I'm not here for money."

Oki: "Why else are you here? We're supposed to meet next week."

Me: "Next week for what?"

His face straightens as his back does. He leans by his table while staring at me.

Oki: "I own you Poppy. You're indebted to me the same way your sister was. Don't you dare play like that!"

I scoff.

Me: "You... own me? No one owns me Oki so stop deceiving yourself. I'm actually mad at you so stop adding fuel to that fire."

He leans back on his chair, his eyes still fixated on me like he's absorbing my words.

Oki: "You've gotten a little comfortable. Do you need to be reminded of the hand that feeds you?"

Me: "I want you to organize an ID and passport for me. Suko and I need to go to Switzerland."

Digression is best, especially because I'm not about to feed into his ego. If he wanted me dead, he would have long killed me. I don't get why he's trying to intimidate me when it's just the two of us.

Oki: "What for?"

Me: "He wants to open an investment account."

Oki: "So, you think it's safe for you to go there?"

I look at him like the crazy man he's being right now. Why wouldn't it be safe?

Me: "Why the hell wouldn't it be?"

Oki: "I'm just asking."

I chuckle.

Me: "Like you give a damn. Anyway, you going to help or not?"

Oki: "Why are we fighting baby?"

Me: “Between you refusing with my money and sealing a deal with my coochie

Advertisement

do you really have to ask?”

Oki: “I did what’s best for you, you’re just being stubborn about it. What deal did I seal with your coochie? Do I look like a pimp?”

I chuckle, placing one elbow on the table while my other hand points a finger at him.

Me: “You know nothing about what’s best for me Oki so quit fronting. Don’t you act like you don’t know what I’m talking about. The Kgosi Daniel’s thing wasn’t a coincidence. How the hell did he know what I’m about and that I was using a pseudonym? How could he get me figured out that easily?”

Oki: “He’s a smart man so it’s no surprise he figured you out. He’s been in this field way before you could even talk.”

A lot of things suddenly make sense and the realization has me spilling contents of the water glass that’s not so far from my reach on his face. I feel like choking the hell out of him. How could he play me like this?

I'm not surprised when he swiftly gets out his chair then chokes me, pinning my head on the table with me on my back. He's standing between my thighs, breathing on my face. I hate him!

Oki: "Don't you ever make this mistake again."

He's closed my throat. I don't bother attempting to redeem myself and instead let the tears fall.

Oki: "Know your place."

He then let's go of me and I finally catch a breath. My throat is burning, the tears still gushing out as I cough. I'm still laying on the table, trying to catch my breath when he slaps my thighs harshly. That snaps me out of it so I sit up, facing him with my tear stained face.

Oki: "Did you like it?"

I look up at him blankly.

Me: "What?"

My voice comes out raspy and not its usual rasp. This is from his choking me.

Oki: "Did you like how he fuvked you? He's known to be rough, paralyzing even. Is that what you like?"

Me: "I... I'm not having that conversation with you."

I grab my back from the table, walk past him then stop at the door.

Me: "Call me when you've arranged what I asked."

Oki: "Of course."

Some, if not most of his behavior doesn't surprise me. It's just hard to get accustomed to it. A man putting his hands on me is something I don't like but with Oki and my smart mouth, it's always going to happen. At least it's never gone beyond choking me but then, it always feels like I might take my last breath. Death scares me, especially because I have Rumi and Gigi whom I can't leave in this cruel life.

I take a taxi to town where I go to a liquor store first. I need some alcohol in my system today. I'll probably have a party for one. Two shots of vodka later, I call Tsebo then Mpho. I figure I could do with the company. The two both come after about an hour, following each other. Mpho isn't alone though, he's with a woman around my age maybe? I'm not sure. She's slim, tall and caramel skinned. She's beautiful with her doe eyes and a lace front that reaches her butt. She's in a denim mini dress and vans old school.

Mpho: "Hey Pops, this is Mose. Ntwana, this is Poppy."

Mose: "Was hoping to find a party but he lied. Hey girl"

Me: "Hi. This is Tsebo"

I have to nudge him because he's busy drooling over Mpho, which also makes me laugh. This guy is always turning heads wherever he goes. That's how hot he is and I think he knows that.

Mose: "Can I play some music?"

She already has her phone out. I nod. Party with more is definitely a good idea.

SUKOLUHLE

I feel good, even though it's hours later. I'm on my way to Poppy's, hoping she'll be game for a night out. There's music playing so loud, I heard it before I turned on her street. She's having a party and I'm not invited? That stings. I thought her sister's party is next week. Anyway, I only see one two cars parked in her yard. One is familiar, the other I have no idea. I wonder where Gigi is in all this noise.

The door is locked so I have to knock. I don't know how someone hears me in all this noise. Mpho is the one who opens, looking rather sober. He's dressed in black skinny jeans and a black Nike pullover.

Me: "Is Poppy here?"

He doesn't say anything but instead opens the door wider so I can pass. She's on her coffee table with another girl and they're twerking with some effeminate guy spanking their butts.

Me: "What the hell is going on here?"

He looks at me like I'm dumb. Fine, it's pretty clear but he doesn't have to give me that look.

Me: "Why aren't you drunk?"

Mpho: "I'm pretty sure you're not here to ask me questions."

Me: "What's with the attitude now?"

Poppy: "You're here!"

She gets off the table and comes to me, engulfing me in a hug.

Poppy: "Where's your little girlfriend? I'm surprised she let you come to me!"

She has to scream over the music. She still has her hand over my waist.

Me: "I'm meeting her after, we're going out. Don't you want to come with us?"

Poppy: "I don't mind taking this party somewhere else. Mose!"

Me: "Wait, where's Gigi?"

I feel like a mad person with this shouting.

Poppy: "Not here! Let's go!"

Mose: "Yes!"

SUKOLUHLE

My heart's beating out of my chest right now, which is apparently the case when it comes to Nosi. I don't know how she'll react to seeing me in the passenger seat of some girl's car whom she doesn't know. Turns out the car I didn't recognize is Mose's and I rode with her and Tsebo while Poppy is with Mpho. I know Mpho always unsettles Nosi so she's the better bet. The car's waiting where I usually turn when I accompany her home. We're all out of the car and while I'm looking far ahead to where Nosi usually comes, the two are busy dancing to the blasting music. I don't think they care about where we are. Finally, I see her. I'd recognize her from whatever angle. I'm watching her with a smile until she's in front of me. She looks beautiful in her weave and the romper she's wearing. She's done her makeup lightly and has paired her outfit with black court heels.

Me: "You look beautiful."

Nosi: "Who are these people Suko?!"

This is when I realise that she's mad. I look at the two who've stopped dancing and are now looking at us with folded arms.

Me: "It's Mose and Tsebo. They're coming with us."

She snickers.

Nosi: “You don’t even have a shame, bringing your hoe to come pick me up. How dare you?”

She’s pointing a finger at me. I’m now even more nervous because she’s really mad. The smoke from her nose and ears says it all. I know it would have been worse if I’d come with Mpho but it still hurts. I try holding her hands but she yanks off.

Me: “Baby, would you rather we use a taxi umuhle nje?”

Nosi: “You don’t see it, do you? You come to me with a bitch and you think I’ll be pleased?”

She’s pressing harder on my chest with her finger now.

Mose: “Yeiy, you don’t know me ngwanyana. Don’t you dare call me a bitch.”

Nosi: “Or what?”

Mose walks to us. Her and Nosi are the same height so they’re eye to eye, Mose is just slimmer.

Mose: “Call me that again o tle o bone.” (so, you can see)

Nosi: “Bitch, whore—”

Her string of profanities is halted by Mose slapping her. I didn’t expect that but I spring to my girlfriend’s rescue in the

aftermath. Instead of allowing me to comfort her, she slaps me then walks away. I follow after her. It only takes a few strides till I've reached her. I grab her wrist to stop her. Her cheek is red, with an imprint of Mose's fingers. I wonder if it hurts as much as my cheek does.

Me: "I'm sorry for that baby. Please forgive me, I beg you. You know I love you. If you don't want us to take her car, it's fine."

Nosi: "Let go of me Sukoluhle!"

Her raised voice catches the attention of passersby so I immediately let go.

Me: "Nosipho please. I want to do this for us."

Nosi: "I don't know what I'm even doing with you. You're just an empty man with a beautiful face. There's nothing to you other than your handsomeness. It's why I'd rather be with Vusi than you. I'm doing you a favor and you do me like this? Sies!"

She spits on my face. I feel my heart break as her words register. Who's Vusi? She can't be talking about my pseudo profile, can she? It also can't be that she's two timing me and yet I still ask.

Me: "You... you're cheating?"

Nosi: "Fokoff Suko. You're disgusting!"

She spits at me again. I watch her retreating form with tears spilling out of my eyes. My girlfriend hates me. She's disgusted by me over what? All I wanted was for us to go out and have some fun. I should have never gone to Poppy's. I should have made it my and Nosi's night, none of this would have happened. Things wouldn't have spiraled out of control like this.

I don't care that I'm being laughed at. All I know is I'm not losing my girlfriend, I refuse to.

Tsebo: "OK handsome, I think that's enough crying."

He's pulling me to the car and I let him. I let the tears continuing with their dripping.

Mose: "Beer? It'll help."

Me: "This... this is all your fault."

I'm pointing at her. My voice is groggy and my throat hurts. The lump doesn't seem to go away.

Me: "I should have never agreed to this madness."

Mose: "Are you kidding me? The woman spat at you not once, but twice. Not only is that condescending, demeaning, disrespectful, insulting but it also shows how much she doesn't care about you. That's not love Suko. She's toxic and you're way too good for all of that."

Me: "You know nothing about me!"

I'm raging. I feel like doing something to her but I can't. No matter how mad I get, I'll never put my hands on a woman. I despise her.

Tsebo: "Calm down man. That girl isn't who you think she is. Trust me, I know. I've bumped into her several times at groove."

Me: "Like I'd believe you! You're just like Poppy, not wanting the best for me. She might be the one who put you up to this."

Mose: "Hayi no, whatever she fed you is strong shame."

Me: "You shut up, acting like you know me when you've barely known me for an hour. Things wouldn't have turned out like this if I hadn't gone to Damn Poppy and turned my night for two into a crowd. I regret it and I honestly want nothing to do with all of you!"

Immediately after I say that, the car halts.

Mose: "Suko, don't make me turn heartless. We're going out and you are going to enjoy yourself, whether you like it or not. We're going to Moo bar."

She starts the car again and I remain silent until we reach our destination. I can feel the soggianness of my eyes, its puffiness

and the bags under them. I'm such a sissy for crying like this but I don't care.

Tsebo: "You need to wipe your face and maybe put some makeup to hide the bags. I have some wipes in my purse. Should I work on it?"

I absentmindedly agree. I can't stop thinking about Nosi and our fight. I'm praying in my heart that she doesn't leave me. I'm even willing to give her all the money I made if that's going to keep her. I just can't lose her. Breathing is even hard now, my heart is torn. I feel like it's being pulled out of my chest and squashed. I let the boy do whatever he wants to my face then get out of the car after.

At this point

I don't think I care about where I am.

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POPPY

Seems like a night out is exactly what I needed. Gigi is spending the weekend with Rumi, will only come on Sunday so I have lots of time for fun on my hands. He wanted to spend it with her so I let it. Mpho has loosened up after a few shots. We're waiting for bo Suko who are taking forever to get here.

Mpho: "I admit defeat. I can't keep up with you."

I chuckle as we go to sit down. We're from the dance floor.

Me: "I know doll. A drink?"

He shakes his head.

Mpho: "I'm driving so water will do."

Me: "Eish, I forgot. Why are they taking so long to get here?"

He takes out his phone.

Mpho: "I'll call Mose and hear where they are now."

I leave him to that, going to get myself a drink and water for him. I love that the pub we're at is chilled and isn't overcrowded. We're not brushing against each other and all that.

I go back to him after.

Me: "And?"

Mpho: "Moo bar but they'll come here after. Apparently they're trying to numb Suko's heart. His girlfriend went far this time. They fought, she spat on him and left."

I choke on my drink, coughing until I can breathe normally.

Me: "She did what?!"

He nods.

Mpho: "Spat on him twice and even slapped him."

I'm boiling now. Who the hell does Nosi think she is, doing my best friend like that? It's about time I paid that bitch a visit.

Me: "I hope he leaves her this time. This girl doesn't have a limit man! How dare she?"

Mpho: "She says he was sobbing in the car, snort and all. Tsebo had to put makeup on him to hide his eye bags."

Me: "I'm going to deal with her. I don't care if Suko hates me for it but I will. She went too far this time."

Mpho: "I don't think you should intervene. Suko is a grown ass man and this challenge is necessary. It's part of the crafting process. After the burning, he'll come out shining."

Me: "It's too much."

Mpho: "How about a bottle? Yeah, let me go get that."

His tranquility is so contagious, I relent. Suko and the others only come after about two hours, looking to really be in the mood.

Mpho: "Did you drive while you're that intoxicated Mose?"

Mose: "I've driven while I'm worse, relax dad. We're here and safe so nothing else matters."

I zone out the rest of their conversation because my focus is now on Suko. He looks bad. The hurt is reflected on his face, Nosi really did him dirty. I get what Mpho said but there's no way I'm letting this go.

Suko: "Why are you looking at me like that?"

He's already poured himself some Henny.

Me: "I'm worried about you."

He chuckles and gulps the contents of his glass.

Suko: "Why?"

Me: "I can see you're hurt and I'll sort it out."

Suko: "I don't even want to be here, let alone see your face so stay away from me. By the time it's all over and I'm dropped at my place, you'll be dead to me."

He says this so calmly and is yet so genuine. I know why he's doing this which is why I'm not surprised but he's mad if he thinks I'll allow it.

Mose: "You guys are sour man, dead. Poppy, let's go dance and stop being Dr Phil."

She grabs my hand and pulls me to the dance floor. I follow suit, remembering that I agreed to this because I want to let

loose. I'm worried about Suko but I'll partially follow Mpho's advice and let him be. For now.

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SUKOLUHLE

Mpho: "OK, that's enough."

He takes the almost empty bottle of Hennessy from me.

Me: "You think you're the only one with money neh. Fokoff Mpho!"

I stumble to the bar so I can get myself a bottle of Ciroc. The alcohol is starting to kick in. I don't get drunk that fast but I've really been sipping it like it's water tonight. I'm going to drink until all that's on my mind is happy memories of Nosi and I. I only want to remember the good. He's on me like a rash. I'm just about to take a gulp straight from the bottle when he takes it.

Me: "You really want to piss me off, huh"

Mpho: "I'm looking out for you."

We're at the bar. He's sitting on the chair besides mine. I glance at the expensive watch on his wrist then the diamond band on his small finger. This bastard is rich and doesn't conceal it.

Me: "You don't know me like that. Give me my bottle Mpho, I'm not in the mood for you."

Mpho: "Where do you even get the money? You were crying last time about not having a stable job and you're now splurging on alcohol? Have you gone crazy?"

Me: "You don't get to lecture me, I'm not your child. My finances also have nothing to do with you Mpho, you're not my wife. Give me the damn bottle nigger before I choke the life out of you."

Mpho: "Act your age for once Sukoluhle and stop with the pity party. Life's hard out there but you don't see us drowning our sorrows in alcohol we can't afford."

Me: "Once again someone who thinks they know me more than I know myself. Who do you think you are, lecturing me? You don't get to tell me how to I should conduct my life."

I snatch the bottle from him and take my desired gulp. He shakes his head than vacates his seat. I didn't need his negativity anyway.

I'm seeing double when I get off the bar chair. The music is making me dizzy, the beat playing in my ears and making them vibrate. I've just finished a bottle of ciroc one man, I should get a trophy for that.

I see two of him with his forehead furrowed. They wave a hand on my face and I laugh.

Me: "Where's Poppy?"

Them: "Smoking!"

I put my hand on the shoulder of one and hooray, he's now one. I blink a couple of times until my vision has gotten better.

Me: "I'm...dizzy"

I can barely stand so I use his figure for support.

Mpho: "Let's go out for some air."

His voice is clouded but I don't miss how he sounds like a parent. He has his mama bear boots on, on board with taking care of drunk Suko.

I close my eyes and let the air hit me, still leaning on him for support. My chest is burning, probably the alcohol doing its business on my liver. I can't remember the last time I drank that much. I hate alcohol because it makes me so aware, pumping endorphins and dopamine like it's crazy. I think this is what breeds substance abuse; the feel-good feeling it brings us.

Me: "You smell good."

We're in the parking lot where there isn't as much noise. I'm surprised my voice came out well. He clears his throat.

Mpho: "Thanks."

Me: "I have a question."

I've opened my eyes and now looking at him in the dark. Our proximity is unlawful but I'm testing waters here.

Mpho: "Ask."

Me: "Do you have a choking kink?"

He coughs profusely. I end up beating his back until he's done then laugh.

Mpho: "Why... why are you asking that?"

Me: "You got flushed last time when I did it accidentally. It's just us here so you can tell me. I won't judge."

Mpho: "I don't know what you're talking about."

I chuckle and nod.

Me: "If you say so. I think I'm ready to head back."

Mpho: "Back inside?"

Me: "To my place. I want to sleep it off."

Mpho: "Oh, then I'll drive you."

Me: "I was hoping for that. Thank you, man."

He nods. He easily spots his car. I almost doze off when I'm inside. My eyes are really heavy on me right now. I might be on a high right now but I dread what tomorrow is going to feel like.

SUKOLUHLE

Memories of last night aren't vivid, they're foggy. I wake up to myself sprawled on the bed which makes me wonder how I even got here. The headache symbolizes how much I drank, along with my dry throat and the twisting of my stomach. My chest is still burning, reminding me of my drunken state which hasn't escaped me yet. I need two quarts to curb this gruesome hangover. What happened to drinking water in between? My temples are pulsating, last night must have been rough. I'm only in my boxers yet I don't remember taking off my clothes. I put on a t-shirt then grab a hundred rand note, I don't bother with shoes. I really need a drink now, I feel like shit. The tavern isn't far from my room, about five to ten minutes walk. I get myself four quarts then walk back to my place in this scorching weather. It's late March and instead of transitioning into a little chilly weather because of the approaching winter, we have to deal with this.

His car is parked by my door when I get back. This guy is really something, I'll begin to think he's obsessed with me or something. He's leaning by it with his back and smoking. I didn't know he smokes.

Me: "What do you want?"

I left my door unlocked but I don't bother going in. It's suffocating. I sit on the veranda instead.

Mpho: "I came to check up on you. You were pretty drunk last night."

Me: "Details of last night may be foggy but I do remember saying I don't want anything to do with you and your friends."

Mpho: "You said Poppy but yeah, whatever."

Me: "How do you know where I stay?"

He furrows his brows

Mpho: "You told me. I drove your arse here."

He fringes at what I think he considers a profanity which makes me snicker. Goody-two-shoes.

Me: "You got me inside?"

Mpho: "Yes."

Me: "Mm, what else?"

Mpho: "What do you mean what else? What the hell are you accusing me of?"

I scoff.

Me: “Nothing, Just leave me alone man. You and that bitch you’ve mentioned have wrecked enough havoc in my life. I want nothing to do with all of you!”

Mpho: “You’re an asshole.”

I chuckle.

Me: “You’re still here?”

I open one with my teeth. I bought four blacks. I’ll probably go back to sleep after this. There’s too much going on in my mind, I need to forget. He looks at me like he wants to say something but doesn’t. Instead, he throws the stump away then gets into his car. Good riddance.

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POPPY

The bitter taste in my mouth when I wake up makes me gag. Last night was fun, I really went at it. I however heard that Suko went harder on it, all because of that... her. She’s really out to destroy his life and the man doesn’t see it. I keep asking myself what he wants to see happening before it registers in his mind that she’s not shit. How bad must she do her so he can see her for what she is? I’m honestly getting impatient with karma because she’s taking too long. I walk to the bathroom where I

brush my teeth then take a bath. Tsebo slept here while Mose spoke of sleeping at Mpho's. I proceed to the kitchen after my bath, lazy to dress up so I'm just in my underwear set. It's hot today.

I get a call from Oki when I'm busy making breakfast. I do hope he has news for me. I know his guys work very fast.

Me: "Okinawa"

Oki: "Poppy! I got good news for you; your passport and ID are ready."

Me: "That's more like it. When are you bringing them to me?"

Oki: "I'm not doing that. You want them, you come get them."

Me: "Right. Did you book a flight for me?"

Oki: "Done and for that friend of yours too but he'll have to reimburse me."

Me: "Hooray, you used a word right."

He chuckles.

Oki: "Oh fuck you. Do you know that tomorrow is D-day? I don't want to have to follow you Poppy."

Me: "It's not exactly tomorrow, it starts on Tuesday and I won't even be here then. You'll have to relax."

Oki: "I'm still tapping that before you leave and that's not up for discussion. Are you leaving with your son? I got him a passport and birth certificate just in case."

Me: "How generous of you. I think leaving with him would actually do him good plus it's a chance for him to see where his mama grew."

Oki: "Perfect."

Me: "You do know this doesn't change anything, right? I'm still mad at you for putting my life on the line like that. That man could have killed me!"

Oki: "Yet he didn't so why are you still grumpy about it? You're breathing and kicking. You should be grateful he spared your life and stop with the sulking."

Me: "You didn't care, did you?"

Oki: "Care about what?"

Me: "You didn't care whether I lived or not. In fact, you probably hoped he'd kill me. Isn't that what happened with Zuri?"

Oki: "I would never kill your sister, I loved her!"

Me: "You were bragging just yesterday about owning her so now you loved her? You wouldn't be banging her little sister if you did."

Oki: "I see her in you, that's why."

Me: "You're pathetic"

I click my tongue and hang up. This guy irks me sometimes. Tsebo finally wakes up as if he knows the food's done. I set up the table then we dig in.

Tsebo: "This is exactly what I needed."

I made it greasy with sausages, bacon, cheese and even some spicy chicken wings.

Me: "I know right, perfect hangover remedy."

Tsebo: "I don't get how you get to eat like this and still don't gain weight. The only thing that's fat is your booty"

I laugh.

Me: "I guess it's a genetics thing. I do hit the gym though every once in a while."

Tsebo: "Are we building up stamina for that Nosi girl? You're not about to let her be after how she treated your best friend, right?"

Me: "Of course. He'll probably hate me for it but someone has to set her right. I'll even spit on her like she did on him. I'm not waiting for karma; I'll be that bitch."

Tsebo: “Good. She deserves all that and more. You should have seen him crying when she walked away. It was almost like someone had died. He was weeping and she didn’t dare look back. She humiliated him hle. People who passed by were mostly laughing at him. It would have been more heartbreaking if I wasn’t drunk.”

Hearing this pumps me up more. I have no doubt that Nosi deserves what’s coming. Unlike Suko, I know where she lives and it’s where I’m going after this.

I let him do the dishes while I clean up around the house. I thank Nosi for the energy because I’d be so tired if I wasn’t hyped up about rearranging her face and reiterating the same humiliation she did on Suko.

I go refresh after then dress into black sweatpants and a matching hoodie. I wear my all stars, making sure to tie them tightly. Tsebo borrowed himself some of my clothes which I know he won’t return. I don’t ever bother with him.

Tsebo: “I had a wet dream about Mpho, I feel so bad. It’s not cheating, is it?”

He’s so random, I laugh at that. I wasn’t expecting him to say that.

Me: “It’s not cheating, relax. I don’t blame you though, that man is fire.”

Tsebo: "Imagine the kids we'd have."

I look at him and laugh at the dreamy look he has on his face.

Heh

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he probably has hearty eyes.

Me: "You know why it'll always be a dream?"

He rolls his eyes. I chuckle. He knows what's coming.

Tsebo: "Stop being a hater, a girl can dream."

Me: "Dream about having babies with your monkey and not my friend."

Tsebo: "Your friend has the hots for Suko, I saw him."

Me: "Argh, I'm not surprised. First time they met, Suko was top less."

Tsebo: "Damn! Why wasn't he like that when I met him?"

He frowns.

We've almost arrived at our destination. I wonder why Suko hasn't found where she stays. It's in the same village he's renting in which makes me wonder how she conceals it.

Anyway, we open the rusty gate when a dog comes barking at us. Tsebo screams next to me while I laugh. How's he scared of dogs while I have one?

Me: “Chill, it won’t bite you.”

The lanky male is holding on to my hand for dear life, using me as a shield from the dog which is no longer focusing on us.

She was right about the renovations though. She’s extended the previously three roomed house with three more and she’s almost finished. She’s also bored water because the last time I passed here; they didn’t have a tap. She’s worked for her family.

She’s surprised to see us, her eyes all wide. She’s wearing a pink gown with a leg of a pantyhose on her head. She looks like the joke she’s making out of Suko.

Nosi: “How did you even... what do you want?”

Me: “Bofebe is in your family’s blood neh? That’s how I know where you stay. I once beat up your sister for opening her thighs for my man but I never thought I’d be back here.”

Nosi: “You have to leave, Sporty!”

I laugh. Sporty is a Chihuahua, what does she think he’ll do to us plus we’re in the house.

Me: “You’re still wearing a gown at almost noon? And still haven’t cleaned, look at how the sink is filled with dirty dishes. Sies man!”

I spit at her and yes, I can see she wasn’t expecting that.

Nosi: "You... you didn't just"

She charges at me, throwing fists at the air which makes me laugh. Does she think I can't stand my own? I grew up in the streets. I'm about to catch an assault charge, that's for sure. I slap her cheek, hearing the impact echo in their kitchen.

"What's going on here?"

OH, it's that girl I once hit. She halts her steps when she realizes it's me instead of coming to her sister's defense. I fist her panty hose covered hair and she winces.

Me: "You think you can just spit at my friend? You have another thing coming."

I slap her again. She has her arms covering her face while screaming like she's on fire. I only slapped her twice.

Tsebo: "This one is for Mike, my ex I saw you with the other day."

He throws an upper cut just as she removes her arms then spits on her face. I let go of her hair.

Tsebo: "That's for Suko."

Heh, the mother (I think) comes with a sjambok and chases us out. Their dog also runs after us as we run. There's no way I'm going to stay for that. She chases after us until we're at the tar road. It's only there that she walks back. How can an old

woman have such energy though? Our chests are heaving, lungs burning and throats dry. We wait under a tree to catch our breathes. After we do, we both laugh about what transpired.

Tsebo: "Did you see that seekoie?"

I laugh and nod.

Me: "I'd never shame. I don't even do that during mdavazo so why would I stand such assault? Never. Kore that woman encourages her daughters behavior. She was like that the last time with the other one."

Tsebo: "Sies. Anyway, I'm just glad she got what she gave. I would have wanted us to hit her more Mara I'm not complaining."

Me: "I can't afford to go to prison hey. Nosi just gives me that feeling which is why I was easy on her. Worse, we went to their house, I had to be smart"

Tsebo: "Yep, you right. I'm going home now but we should definitely have more nights like last night."

Me: "We will. It's Zuri's party on Thursday, remember? I'll see you then doll."

We hug. He stops a taxi then gets in. I only walk to my place when the taxi drives away.

I find Gigi alone inside. Rumi probably just dropped him off then left. I don't blame her though, maybe she thought I'm around.

He hugs me and kisses my cheek.

Me: "How was it?"

Gigi: "Fun"

Then he grins. That's enough to show that it was.

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SUKOLUHLE

I wake up the second time feeling worse than the first. At least the hangover isn't that bad but I didn't eat and I stink. I've never liked over indulging on alcohol because I now have to deal with its withdrawal symptoms. The first thing I do is boil water so I can bath. I'm also hungry, I last ate yesterday. I was wrong about the hangover not being that bad, it's worse because of my hunger.

I look into the bar fridge to check if there's something I can quickly hit up. I don't think I have any patience to wait. I still have to think of how I'm swooning Nosi again. Every time I think of what happened two days before, my heart breaks. I end up making lean pork chops with fries then have them with

bread. There's mad salt and hot pepper here. I down everything with a 2l Kingsley that's been in the fridge. I'm much better after everything.

My phone rings somewhere in the room. I've forgotten about that little monster. I'm not one who's always on my phone so I always misplace it. No one really calls me and I'm not a social media person.

Me: "Hello?"

Zelda: "Tinto!"

This one is the only person who's allowed to call me that and I don't get mad. I don't think she even knows my real name.

Me: "Why are you screaming?"

Zelda: "For the fun of it. Let's have dinner, I'll cook."

I look at the time. It's around 4pm.

Me: "Tonight?"

Zelda: "No, on Friday. Come with your boyfriend that is a girl."

I laugh.

Me: "You mean girlfriend?"

Zelda: "Yes. We'll come get you."

Me: "That won't be necessary. I'll come to you."

Zelda: "Bye"

She hangs up then I sigh.

It's really time for Nosi and I to fix things. I try calling her and thankfully, she picks up.

Nosi: "They...they slapped me Suko. They came into our house and even spat at me. I spent hours trying to scrub my face as an attempt to remove their filth. You have to deal with them baby."

Baby. It's all I need to hear to know that we're good. I'm smiling like a retard now, happy that my baby is back to me.

Me: "Who?"

Nosi: "Poppy and that Ausi-abuti friend of hers. They came here and did all of that, my mother had to chase them out with a sjambok."

Me: "They know where you stay?"

It's all I heard and I'm wondering why I'm the only one who hasn't been at her home. Even Poppy?

Nosi: "Are you for real now?"

Me: "I'm asking baby because I don't."

Nosi: "They humiliated me and that's all you care about? Sies man Suko. For once I expected you to stick to my side and not for you to be selfish."

Me: "I'll deal with them baby, don't worry. You know I got your back."

Nosi: "Good."

Me: "Are we cool now?"

Nosi: "We'll be cool once you tell me that you've cut that bitch off. I want you to delete her number and anything that connects you to her. I don't even want to see pictures of her bastard son on your phone."

Me: "Of course baby, anything for you."

Nosi: "Do you have like a R1000? I need it for some stuff hle baby."

Me: "I'll make a plan."

Nosi: "Thank you. Just call me when you have and I'll come get it."

Me: "I will. I love you."

She doesn't reply but hangs up instead. At least we talked.

POPPY

It's Monday today. I woke up early as usual, prepared Gigi for crèche then readied myself to go down the street. Suko and I are supposed to leave tonight but I still haven't let him know about it. I decide to call him to let him know. I don't want this to slip his mind because it's important. The last thing I want is for Nosi to chow every cent of his and leave him with more regrets. I know he's going to beat himself hard when he finally sees her for who she is. At least let it be when he's saved.

The phone takes me straight to voicemail. I try his number again and that persists. I'm not a fool, I know what's up. The man has blocked me.

I don't even know where he stays but if there's anyone who does, it's Mpho. He's after all the person who dropped him off yesterday or the night before.

He picks up on the third ring whilst panting.

Me: "Hey, did I catch you at a bad time?"

Mpho: "Ah, not really. I just took a jog. What's up?"

Me: "I need Suko's address. I've been trying to call me but it takes me straight to voicemail. I think he blocked me."

Mpho: "Really?"

Me: "Yep. I didn't think he was serious when he said he wants nothing to do with me but it seems he was. We're supposed to go to Switzerland tonight."

Mpho: "I went to check up on him and he chased me out. I'll forward you his address though."

Me: "Thank you babe, you're a lifesaver."

Mpho: "I'm happy to help."

Me: "When am I seeing where you stay? "

Mpho: "You can come any time when I'm free. Mose wanted to host a pool party so I'm now agreeing. You can bring a friend, Gigi is also welcome."

Me: "When?"

Mpho: "This Saturday, provided you'll be back."

Me: "It's perfect. You haven't forgotten about Zuri's party, right?"

Mpho: "Of course not."

Me: "Awesome. I'll see you on Thursday. Don't forget about the address."

Mpho: "Will send it right now."

We bid each other farewell then hang up. Five minutes later, he's sent the address. I have to choose between my stall and going to Suko. I decide on the latter so I can get it over and done with first. The yard is big with a few peach trees. Blocks of rooms have filled it, usually students stay here but only those looking to cut costs. The rooms lack maintenance, not to mention the stinky pit toilet you smell way before you enter the yard.

The rooms have numbers I guess to make it easier for visitors. His is number seven. The door is closed, curtains pulled as if there's no one inside but the music playing says otherwise.

I knock first then open. He didn't lock it. He's sitting on a plastic chair while counting his money. I can't believe he keeps the money so carelessly. What if people break in? These nyaopists are capable of anything.

Suko: "What do you want? I made it very clear I want nothing to do with you."

I still pull an opposite chair and sit. The light is on so I can see his interior. The room is small, way smaller than the one he slept in at my house. Not even my kitchen is this small. It's probably the size of my bathroom.

Me: "How do you breathe in here?"

Suko: "What do you want Poppy? Should I open a restriction order against you?"

I chuckle.

Me: "Are we enemies now? How am I trying to harm you?"

Suko: "You touch Nosi, you touch me."

Me: "Do you know how stupid you sound right now?"

Suko: "Phuma Poppy, I don't have time for you nonsense."

Me: "Suko booked us flights to Switzerland. We leave tonight, that's if you haven't yet forgotten about your dream."

Suko: "I'm not going anywhere with you. I hate that I still trust you which is why I'm doing this. I'll give you the money so you can deposit it then spend the rest with my girlfriend. This is also going to benefit her in the future. I'm also done with the hawker business so you can leave with the stock I have left. I have no use for it."

Me: "How much are you putting away? How much did Oki give you?"

Suko: "You and Mpho seem to like acting like you're my wives, busy asking about my money. It's none of your damn business Poppy. Just take this money and go."

Me: "You know I can ask him, right?"

Suko: "Good, stop bothering me."

I don't say anything, just watch him count his money. I'm glad that he's still trusting me with it even after he's cut me off. It's enough to convince me that he has not completely lost his sanity. I however cannot stop thinking of how this is going to affect him. How will he handle knowing that Nosi is double crossing him? How will he feel when he realizes she doesn't love her? Above all, how will finally seeing how stupid he's acted in the name of this illusion he mistaken for love make him feel about himself? All I know is I'll be there. I'll wipe his tears, hold his hand and be his shoulder to cry on. I've tried warning him, told him all that she is but he stubbornly refuses to listen. I've stepped back now.

Suko: "It's fifty thousand. Here's a contract I've drafted regarding the money I'm entrusting you with."

Me: "I'm a con artist Suko, I don't have a signature."

He pushes the paper that's on the table to me, along with a black pen.

Suko: "Make it quick Poppy, I don't want my girlfriend finding a trace of you here."

I roll my eyes and sign.

I feel better when I leave. I'm glad he's still thinking of his dream but fifty thousand is nothing. Firstly

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the account needs to be maintained yearly for a certain fee. And secondly, I have no idea how long he's going to keep his money there. I didn't leave with his stock but did tell him I'll send someone to fetch it. He even gave me a deadline but I don't mind.

I don't feel like going to work anymore but I know I have to until I find an alternative. Keisha and I haven't met yet so she could train me when it comes to making wigs because it seems I won't have money for the school. I think I also need to draft a budget for once so I can cut costs somewhere. At least I no longer have to pay the lounge suite, Oki helped I guess. I'll use that money for a beginners stock package then take it from there. I'm really fed up with being a hawker too and no, it has nothing to do with Suko quitting. I just feel like it's time for me to explore greener pastures.

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SUKOLUHLE

I received a call about thirty minutes after Poppy left from someone who needs some appliances fixed. They gave me their address so I've just taken a bath for that. I know if I do good, they'll recommend me to their friends and family, broadening

my clientele. I wear the overalls I used to wear when I was a vendor. I'm glad that didn't last long. I think I'll continue selling airtime and electricity though. I've already put a board on my door for that. I take a taxi which drops me right at the destination.

It's a fenced yard, thankfully with no dogs.

An old man sitting under a tree waves at me so I walk to him. I think he's the one who called.

Me: "Dumela ntate"

Him: "Good morning son. Are you the repair guy?"

Me: "Yes sir."

Him: "My daughter gave me your number. I've been refusing to throw away some of the appliances in the house which just decided to stop working. She wanted to instead replace them but I think it's a waste of money. Can you check them out for me?"

Me: "It would be my pleasure."

I spend the whole day with him. He isn't a man of many words but somehow he kept me company. His daughter came twice to bring us food. I got to admire the amazing bond the two have. I don't remember having that with my parents.

I'm done by 5pm. The daughter took my number and said she'll call me. It was about five appliances and only one was beyond repair. It was a heater. The daughter wasn't surprised because it's apparently been in the family since she was born. I'm tired but content. I wish I could have more days like this.

Nosi: "Where the hell have you been?!"

She's stomping a foot while her one hand is on her hip. She's clearly displeased, judging by the look on her face. The room seems to be in a mess, nothing is how I left it. Everything has been turned upside down as if someone was searching through it for something.

Me: "Did someone break in?"

Nosi: "No and answer my damn question!"

Me: "I had a repairs gig. Were you looking for something?"

Nosi: "A gig? What gig?! Aren't you a vendor?"

Me: "No, I left that. What happened here?"

Nosi: "Are you accusing me of something?"

Her eyes are mere slits as she says this, taking careful steps towards me. I don't think I like the look on her face. I can't decipher it but it screams run for me. However, I keep my ground as she approaches until she's in front of me. Can someone be beautiful even when they're mad?

Me: “Baby, what—

The sound makes my ear ring as it echoes through the room. Where does she get such strength? I hold my cheek; confused. Did Nosi just... but why? Another on the other cheek and Jesus’s verse suddenly makes sense. The gates of heaven must be open for me. I flex my jaw. It stings.

Nosi: “You take me for a poes neh. I know you were with that hoe of yours. You probably wore that overall as a disguise. Do you think you can cheat on me heh Suko? Do you really think I’d allow that?”

She’s hitting me with her fists as she says this, tears streaming down her cheeks which makes me feel so bad. I’d never cheat on her. My loyalty to her goes beyond that of a dog to its good owner. It goes beyond that of old men and women to ANC. It’s way beyond that of devoted Muslims to Allah. I’d never dream of cheating on her. The fists start to hurt so I hold her tiny arms and force her into an embrace. I brush her back as she cries, the sobbing somehow becoming contagious. I find my own eyes glistening and with a blink, the tears fall. I wish I could open my heart so she can see how she’s taken control of it all. I wish I could bare my chest open so she can see how it beats for her.

I love Nosi more than I’ve ever loved. I love her more than I love myself. Cheating on her has never crossed my mind and I don’t think it ever will.

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POPPY

Oki: "Where's my money?"

Me: "He's no longer coming so how about you cancel and ask for a damn refund"

Oki: "Don't talk to me like that Poppy. It's not my fault that you had a fallout with your little friend."

Me: "He frustrates the hell out of me. He looked forward to seeing my home country the last time we spoke of this only for him to bail out on me. I thought I didn't care but it hurts. This thing doesn't sit well with me."

Oki: "Life is full of disappointments, you should know that."

Me: "Mxm. Would you ever listen to me?"

Oki: "I have other things on my mind. You should start taking off your clothes now."

He licks his lips with a nod. He's crazy if he thinks I'll do that.

Me: "It's not Tuesday yet."

Oki: "Don't bullshit me Poppy. I made it clear I'll tap before you leave."

Me: “And I said no. This is my body and I have every right to say no.”

He scoffs, the sound vibrating through the room. He then stands and claps his hands.

Oki: “Nice speech princess. Take off your clothes Poppy, I’m not going to repeat myself.”

There’s a knock on the door before it then opens. I can see the annoyance all over his face.

Oki: “I did not say you may enter!”

It’s his little skivvy, Loco. Someone follows after him who has Oki straightening up.

Loco: “I’m sorry boss but he said it’s urgent.”

Oki: “No, it’s fine. Go.”

I’m facing him with my back to the door. The standing of the hair on my back alerts me of the demon’s presence. I have to get out of here. I get up and grab the brown envelope that has my documents.

Oki: “You’re still here? Leave!”

His tone startles me. Just as I’m about to turn, I bump into his chest.

Kgosi: “Poppy, we meet again.”

He doesn't ask for my permission as he grabs the envelope from my clutches and takes a peak inside.

Kgosi: "Why would you need fake documents?"

I don't bother looking up. Every second that I'm standing here in front of him, so aware and smelling him, has memories of our night together crushing into my mind. I don't want to remember.

Oki: "I'm sure she's not the reason you're here."

He hands back the envelope to me and I scurry out like a child scolded. My heart is beating out of my chest now. I don't know why he scares me so much. I'm tempted to stand by the now closed door and eavesdrop but I value my life more. I'm not about to choose listening over whatever business those two have together over it. I'm just glad I've been saved from possible rape. Oki would have probably had his way with me even without my consent. I agree every time because I never want to be a victim but today, he really scared me.

I immediately pack when I'm back in my house. I've drank about two cups of wine to distract myself. Gigi is also packing his own bag. The boy is excited about our departure and I'd be lying if I say I'm not too.

I could do with a break and time to just recharge, refresh and all. The plane leaves at 9pm so we have enough time. I've

already hired a meter taxi which is going to drop us at the airport. I've bothered Mpho enough for the day. I don't want him to start thinking that I'm using him.

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SUKOLUHLE

She's been quiet ever since she bathed after our episode. We're now eating. The silence is dizzying. Tension is thick in here and can really be slashed by a knife.

Me: "I... I made a plan with the money."

Her eyes light up as she looks at me and she smiles.

Nosi: "Really baby?"

Me: "Yes. I even added more just in case it might be shot."

Nosi: "Thank you so much, you're the best. I love you."

Me: "I love you too."

POPPY

We've arrived at the airport and I'm somehow still hoping that Suko changes his mind and just comes. It's impossible of course but that doesn't curb my hope. We're taking a flight to Or Tambo then one from there straight to Zurich. Gigi is excited next to me. He looks around the airport in awe and the happiness his face displays warms my heart. I don't think this boy knows just how much he makes me happy. He completes me in a way I can't fathom, fills voids I never knew I had which is why I want to strive harder and regain my liberty. My hands are tainted in the blood of white-collar crime. Oki is turning into something I'm beginning not to like. It started with him drugging me just to have sex and then almost forcing himself on to me today. What happened to the Oki who listened when I say no? why does he suddenly speak of owning me and treat me like some sort of possession? Why did he want to kill me? These questions are playing in my mind as we wait for our flight number to be called. We've arrived at OR Tambo. It happens again; the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. They notify me of his presence and my heart does the beating fast thing again. I'm not scared of Kgosi but ever since that night and the morning where I buried everything that has to do with him, I

find myself getting nervous at thoughts of him. This shows how scared I am of losing my life. I wouldn't be if I didn't have Gigi and Rumi but the two are way too young and need me. Rumi is barely a teenager and Gigi is only two. I cannot put them in a situation where they'll have to live without me. Zurich is the only place they can be safe but I'm selfish because I don't want them out of my reach. He sits next to me, his thigh touching mine. I turn to look into those dark eyes and he smiles, just a half-smile. He leans in and pecks my lips, something that shouldn't be happening in my son's presence but I don't think he cares.

Kgosi: "You need to leave Okinawa."

Me: "What?"

Kgosi: "You need to leave him before it's too late, cut all ties with him."

Me: "I can't do that, I need –"

Gigi: "Rumi!"

I don't know when he stood up but turning. I see him running to her. She's pulling a big suitcase with her security detail behind her with more bags. What the hell is she doing here? I turn to Kgosi.

Me: "Did you do this?!"

Kgosi: “Don’t scream at me Poppy, it’s for your own good. Give me your phone.”

Me: “It’s untraceable”

Kgosi: “I’m putting my number in. I’ve gotten you another ID and passport. I’ve hired a jet which will take you there because I don’t trust the flight you’re booked into. I’m just waiting for a message from the pilot.”

All this information is making me dizzy. Am I supposed to trust him and what he’s saying? I’m trying to make sense of it all. I’m not a dummy, I get that my life and that of my loved ones is in danger, but I fail to get the root of it all.

Me: “I don’t understand. What the hell is going on? Why would Oki want to harm me?”

Kgosi: “I’ll come to you in a few days. There’s already someone waiting for you in Zurich, your aunt. I’ve spoken to her and she’ll ensure you’re all safe.”

Me: “You’ve just met me. Why are you going to such lengths?”

Kgosi: “Because I love you but can’t be with you because I’m married. It’s the least I can do for my love for you.”

He kisses my forehead then beckons me to follow him. I grab Gigi’s wrist and we all follow after him. My mind is foggy. Does Oki hate me that much? I’ve known the man since I was about

12 so all these years, he's been plotting to wipe my family? I also think of Suko. We don't know how long this is going to last, so who will look after him in my absence? There's only one person I can trust with that task: Mpho. Yes, Suko is a grown man but Nosi still has him by the ball. He needs a sitter. Someone has to be there when shit hits the fan and I know I can trust Mpho to deal with it. I've felt the vibes between them, I know he cares.

Everything is really blurry from here. Kgosi kisses me briefly then all of a sudden we're already in the air. I'm tired but I can't sleep. My mind is just too occupied and I'm failing to maintain control of its overthinking. I'm reminiscing, trying to piece memories together so I can know what's up. Then I remember Zuri's room which I haven't really gone through. I only go in there to clean, never searched through anything. What if there are clues in there which can shed some light into whatever may be going on? Maybe she left a letter, some photograph, anything. Regret overwhelms me and leaves me questioning my past decisions.

I don't know how or when I managed to sleep but I'm waken by someone shaking me. It's Rumi who smiles at me.

Rumi: "I'm sorry Poppy. The man didn't give me any choice"

I look at her confused until it clicks that she's talking about Kgosi.

Me: "It's fine, I'm glad you're here."

She exhales in relief. She's still standing by me, eyes fixed on me. I sit upright and return the stare.

Me: "Anything else?"

Rumi: "Can I sit on your lap?"

She covers her face with her hands after and giggles. I laugh, shaking my head then allow her to. She's lucky Gigi is asleep, he'd never allow this. I brush her hair with my hand as we remain in the silence. I don't know how long is a few days because I need this man to come and set the record straight for me. I hate being in the dark.

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SUKOLUHLE

The side next to me is cold but I could have sworn she slept next to me. I grab my phone that's under my pillow to check the time, 02:30am. When did Nosi leave? We had an amazing night. We made up differently this time, via the meeting of our pelvis bones and I slept while still in here. I was holding her tightly and how she managed to escape that beats me. The realization pings my heart. Did Nosi really leave in the night? I go out for the business that disturbed my sleep, wash my hands

on the tap outside then go back into my room. I even washed my face and I'm cold now, but I don't care. I try her phone. The device takes me straight to voicemail. I'm going crazy now. Where is she? I try searching through the tin I could a home, finding no one. It's not like she can hide somewhere in here. I sigh, sitting on the bed. I'm no longer sleepy now

Advertisement

my mind's racing with thoughts of what might have happened. The door doesn't look to have been tampered with so it's clear she's left.

But the same mind is stubborn, failing to see what's right in its eyes and choosing to side with the heart. She had an emergency and had to leave. Once that sinks in and I believe it, I get into the covers and sleep.

The first thing I do in the morning when the sun's risen is try her phone again. This time, it fortunately rings and I sigh in relief when it's answered.

Me: "Baby, are you OK? Did you get home safe?"

The concern in my voice is clear. I don't know what I'll do if she tells me other wise. I'll blame myself of course and I don't think I'd live with the guilt.

"Baby?"

Every thought in my mind halts. The voice is deep, so deep that it sounds like it's vibrating. I remove the device from my ear to check if I've dialed the correct number. It's really hers.

Me: "Who the fuck are you?"

Him: "Who are you calling my bitch baby? Are you mad boy?"

I snicker. First he calls her a bitch then insults my manhood by calling me a boy? He's trying me.

Me: "You listen here you little shit. I want my girlfriend so give her the damn phone!"

He chuckles into the phone, pissing me further off. I hear shuffling then it's calm.

Him: "There's a douche here claiming you're his girlfriend. Tell this little boy who I am and what you are to me."

My hearts now palpitate. I don't think I want to hear that. Call me a coward but I don't care.

Nosi: "Douche, this is Vusi my man. I don't know what you think we had or how you have my number but I'm his bitch."

'Vusi': "Tell him you're mine and mine only."

Nosi: "I'm yours and yours only."

'Vusi': "Heard that boy? Go fix some pipes or something plumber."

He hangs up on me and my phone immediately drops to the floor.

My chest feels like it's closing up on me and I can't seem to control my breathing. The lump on my throat is too big but I find myself unable to breathe. None of this makes sense. I pick up my phone that's on the floor then try her number; voicemail. My hands are shaking, my throat is painful but it doesn't compare to the pain in my chest. I go to WhatsApp. I have a business account and personal one. She's the only chat in the latter. I usually call her or text her via messages. I try calling her from there, a video call because I'll only believe it when I see it. It connects and instead of seeing just her face, I see a beard. The beard has Grey strands but black dominates. He then shifts the camera and a top less Nosi appears. Shouldn't she be at work?

'Vusi': "You want to see it, don't you?"

He switches to the back camera and my jaw drops. Nosi is naked and dancing for the camera. She's doing immoral things, bending and revealing parts I thought were only for me. My chest is still contracting it. It feels like an attack of some sort, heart attack maybe? I drop my phone again as I fall on my back on the bed, holding my below my left breast tight. I can feel my heart breaking and the pain is indescribable. The image is stuck in my mind, I blame it for the tears that cascade down my

cheeks. They don't stop no matter how much I'd want them to, neither does the pain in my chest nor does the lump on my throat shrink.

Nosi is naked, with another man not even twelve hours after we made love. How could she do this to me? The gif in my mind of what I've witnessed tortures me. I'm shaking uncontrollably until I can't keep it in anymore. I scream, not caring about my neighbors or what anyone else might think. I have a splitting headache, my vision has blurred and my eyes are ringing. I still scream though, letting it all out. I thought we were good, I thought she loves me. How could Nosi do this to me though?

It fails to make any sense to me.

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POPPY

Quinn is holding a board that has our names on it. She's wearing a Violet Habesha kemis with her curly hair styled back. She still likes her nails colorful, rocking yellow this time. It feels like yesterday when we escaped this place, Zuri pushing us into a ship we had no idea of where it was headed.

I sigh then slowly walk to her. I have Gigi on my back while Rumi is pulling her suitcase. I don't know why she's not leaving that to the security detail but I don't ask. Her eyes bulge out

when she sees its me. She drops the board then runs to me, suffocating me in a tight embrace.

Quinn: "I can't believe this!"

She's still squeezing the life out of me as if I don't have someone on my back.

Quinn: "Where's Zuri and who are these?"

Rumi becomes forward and introduces herself.

Rumi: "I'm Rumi"

My aunt's eyes widen again. She's not a crying person but her emotions have betrayed her. She squeezes her how she did me while I put Gigi down. She even lifts her off the ground and twirls her around.

Quinn: "Wow. You could barely walk when I last saw you. Where's Zuri?"

Me: "She died."

The eyes again. This time, the tears fall and she weeps. I pull her in for an embrace and brush her back as she cries. The woman raised us up after our parents died and treated us like her own. Things were tough but we managed. I feel bad for never having kept contact all along.

Quinn: "I'm sorry for that. Is this your son?"

She's beaming like she wasn't crying a minute ago. I've always admired her strength.

Me: "Yes. His name is Given."

Quinn: "Where's his father?"

I clear my throat.

Me: "We can't stand here all day auntie."

Jet lag has me. I haven't been on a plane in ages, jet never so the almost fifteen hours flight has exhausted me. We follow her as she leads her to her car. It's a bakkie, better than a carriage so I'm happy.

Quinn: "Poppy, there's a lot we need to talk about."

I nod with a sigh. Not much has changed here. There's been developments yes but other than the architecture, the place still looks the same to me.

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★★★★★

(After one week)

POPPY

Quinn has been welcoming of us. She's been feeding us, looking after us and has shown us around like I didn't grow up here. I know every corner because like I said, not much has changed. Gigi has warmed up to her but who wouldn't, the woman is naturally kind and meek. She's full of love and always spreading it. There's a lot that we've spoken about but nothing about why exactly our lives are in danger. She also doesn't know how long we're going to stay here. I've been calling Kgosì but it never went through. Like why did he give me his number if he's not going to pick up when I call? I get that he is married and all of that but it's not like I'm calling as a lover. I'm just tired of being in the dark. He's the only one who can shed some light into all that is happening. I hate being in the dark.

Quinn: "Stressing isn't going to help, you know."

Me: "This is my life and that of my loved ones on the line . I can't not stress."

I've been protecting them and I won't stop. This time I don't only owe Kgosi my life but also that of Gigi and Rumi.

Quinn: "Did you read about the plane crash? It apparently happened an hour after take off."

I almost drop the cup of coffee I'm holding. A plane crash? I haven't read anything. Heck, I don't read. She gives me a tablet and I skim through the article. It happened last week, on the same night we left.

Me: "It's the plane we were suppose to take."

I feel my hate for Oki blooming, growing higher than a skyscraper. It's no doubt he's behind it. How could he? All those people died but for what? How could he be that heartless?

Me: "He really wanted to kill us. I mean it's why he wanted me to take Gigi with. He wanted to finish us but... why?"

Quinn: "That's what I'm wondering as well. Your sister died while involved with this man and now you. He probably would have loomed his way into Rumi's life after getting rid of you."

Me: "I'm going to kill him!"

Quinn touches my hand which I've been clenching. I hate Oki! The thought of him with Rumi is one I don't let linger. My little sister? No. I thought I'd made sure he doesn't know of her but what Quinn is saying makes sense. He was going to get

entangled with her when she gets a little older like with me. Imagine a man that old with a thirteen year old. I want to shield her from the bad of this world. Fine, he wouldn't take advantage of her now but definitely when she's older. I wish she doesn't grow but it's not something I can prevent. She'll learn the world on her own. I've taught her how to survive and some other things her age mates don't know.

My phone finally rings, it took him long enough.

Me: "Give me something!"

Kgosi: "What did I say about you shouting at me? I'll beat you up Poppy."

I huff.

Me: "But why give me your number if the phone won't even ring?"

Kgosi: "It's been an eventful week, things have been crazy. How are you though?"

Me: "How do you think I am? I'm tired of being in the dark. Nothing makes sense anymore."

Kgosi: "Just be patient, alright? I'll come see you this weekend then we'll talk."

Me: "You'll tell me everything?"

Kgosi: "Yes and maybe have a taste of that good good."

I huff

Me: "I don't have time for jokes."

Kgosi: "I'm not laughing. Poppy, this might take long. You might stay there longer because we'll have to wait for the dust to settle. But your freedom is worth every risk, OK?"

Me: "My freedom?"

Kgosi: "Yes. I have to go now but take care. Don't go anywhere without informing your aunt. No picking up random calls."

Me: "My phone is untraceable so don't worry."

Kgosi: "Just don't Poppy. Only answer my calls and that of your friend but that's it. He's going to try and contact you. He knows you weren't on that plane."

Me: "And you keep confusing me. What's going on Kgosi?"

Kgosi: "I'll call you."

Yes, he hung up. I groan in frustration. Does this man have to be so difficult? I don't get why he won't just tell me, or at least give me a hint.

He's only emphasizing how much our lives are in danger and that's just it.

I call Mpho, hoping that he'll pick up this unknown number. I hate to burden him like this. I'd said I'll call him last time but never got to it. I was too consumed in trying to reach Kgosi.

Mpho: "Mpho Bloom, hello?"

Me: "Hi, it's Poppy."

Mpho: "Hey Pop. What's up?"

Mpho: "Nothing. I've been trying to call you. Are you OK?"

Me: "Yes I am. Are you?"

Mpho: "It can't be easy, can it? I saw the residue."

Now I'm confused.

Me: "What?"

Mpho: "Of your house. It was demolished."

Me: "What?!"

That on top of wanting to kill me. I think of Zuri's room and my heart breaks. It feels like she's been declared dead all over again. I can't help the tears. This isn't even about that very expensive lounge suit or my clothes. That room is... or was the only sentimental thing in that house and he took that from me. If I hadn't brought the duffle bag with me, I would have lost that money too. But that's the least of my worries now. I couldn't throw her a party and now this.

Rumi: "Is everything OK?"

I look at her while wiping my tear stained face and nod. My heart is breaking right now. Oki really pricked where it hurts the most. He killed Zuri again and I'll never forgive him for that.

Mpho: "Poppy? I'm sorry about that."

That's when I remember that I'm still on the phone with him.

Me: "It's not your fault. I just can't believe that has happened. What will I go back there for? It's only you and Suko but the latter wants nothing to do with me. There's nothing left for me there but I don't have a life here. I don't want to have a life here."

Mpho: "You'll stay with me when you come then we'll figure it out from there. You're my friend Poppy and I'll always have your back."

Me: "Thank you."

The stubborn tears keep falling making Rumi also cry even though she doesn't know why I am.

Me: "Can you do me a favor?"

I now remember why I called him. My mind's in turmoil, heart in shambles so I'm not in a good space.

Mpho: "Anything"

His voice gives out he's pained. The man's genuinely feeling for me.

Me: "Please go check on Suko for me. I'm worried about him, more so because I'm so far away. I need you to make sure that he's OK."

Mpho: "I'm only doing it for you because your friend is impossible. That girl really has him by the testicles."

I chuckle.

Me: "You mean balls?"

I can almost see him flinching at that, such a prude.

Mpho: "Come on."

I chuckle again. He's managed to cheer me up for the moment and I appreciate that. He's such a good friend.

Me: "Alright love. Will you do that for me?"

Mpho: "Yes"

Me: "And regularly, like two or three times a week even if he deems it annoying. I'll give you his number so you don't just do it physically."

He sighs.

Mpho: "Fine."

Me: "Thank you ."

Mpho: "How's my little guy? I miss him."

Me: "He's fine, out running in the yard. Aunt Quinn likes playing with him. She has a playground in the yard so they're always outside with some other kids in the community. She has a crèche."

Mpho: "Ah, sounds cool. Tell him I miss him."

Me: "I'll relay the message."

We talk further more until my airtime is depleted. Rumi hugs me tight after that. She gives the warmest hugs. She kisses my cheeks after and giggles.

Rumi: "It'll be OK sis. We're OK."

Me: "Good thing is we're all together and when we go back to SA, we'll live like that."

She beams.

Rumi: "We will?"

I nod.

Me: "You'll get to be a normal kid, go to school and make friends. We'll get to go to the mall together then you can even have a Facebook or Instagram account."

Rumi: "That's...that's good. I'm glad I'll live with you and Gigi, get to see him everyday. I can't wait for us to go back."

She hugs me again and goes out. I sigh.

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SUKOLUHLE

I ignore the burning as I continue scrubbing, feeling the peel of my skin but not even convinced. It's been me every day but the taint I feel is nothing close to ceasing. I don't stop trying though. The whole thing is just twisted to me. I don't think about it I refuse to. A whole b landed me in hospital. I apparently had a panic attack then an ambulance was called for me. Sasa says they had to break my door in order to come and assist. That was five days back. I didn't stay long, got released the following day. I haven't cried since then.

It comes back into my mind again, I heave. She really did cheat. I can't wrap my head around what I saw. Nosi has someone calling her a bitch and just like that she threw us away. I remember the condition I saw her in and almost puke. I scrub myself more furiously so I can get rid of her filth. I'm disgusted with myself. The man wasn't just old but he had a belly and breasts and she was there. She was naked, on his bed just after we'd made love. Yeah neh.

Someone knocks vigorously on my door. I feel refreshed but it's only physical. I'm really battling with the realization that I've been played. I wasted two years of my life, introduced her to my family, stole a phone and gave her a stack from my money but all for what? I was loyal, loved her and did my all to make her happy. I still love her which breaks my heart but I'm done. I blocked her number, deleted every picture of her and me and even packed all her things in a black refuse plastic bag. They're in a corner, just waiting for her to grace me with her presence.

The knocking continues, making me dizzy. I wrap a towel around my waist then go open.

Mpho: "Thank God!"

He pushes himself inside then scrunches his nose up while looking around. I huff. I'm heartbroken, I don't have time for his self-righteous self.

Me: "What do you want?!"

Mpho: "I came to check up on you."

Me: "I'm fine, as you can see."

He gives me a look over then turns away. I think he's only realizing now that I'm naked. I remove the towel and he screams. When did he look at me again?

Me: "What?"

Mpho: "At least put on something, traumatizing my innocent eyes."

I chuckle.

Me: "We're both men and it's nothing you don't have."

Mpho: "That doesn't mean I want to see your nakedness."

Me: "So you don't want to?"

I walk towards him until I'm standing in front of him. He steps back, more like stumbles back while covering his eyes with his hands. He's too damn old for this. I laugh.

Me: "Really?"

Mpho: "Stop!"

I laugh and let him be. There's not much space for one to move around here. The room is small after all.

Me: "Go out so I can finish up here."

I've never seen someone scurry out that fast. I need to buy some Dettol so I can bath with it. I need to call Zelda so she can give me numbers of her prophet friend. I need her to pray for me, cleanse me or something. I just don't want to feel like this anymore. Zelda was sad when I had to cancel our plans but we rescheduled. She still thinks I'm with Nosi.

When I come back from getting rid of my bathing water, she's here. She's wearing that wig I got her, shortest shorts with a bralet. She looks like a Poppy incarnate right now. But unlike Poppy, her skimpy clothes makes her look like a harlot. I don't see the beauty anymore, I see filth, disgust even.

I go into my room, wipe my basin and put it away. I then grab the plastic with her stuff and go out.

Me: "You have guts neh"

Mpho is leaning by his car, smoking a cigarette while looking at everything unfold I guess.

Me: "You think you can come here after... you're brave"

Nosi: "Baby, that was a mistake. Vusi and I... you're the one I love."

I scoff.

Me: "This is all your stuff, take it and get out of my life."

Those doe eyes widen then she laughs. She must think this is a joke.

Nosi: "Baby, come on. I'm only with him for the money. We've been together for two years and—

Me: "Out Nosipho, I won't repeat myself. You don't exist to me, I don't want you here. We're done!"

She tries grabbing my wrist but I slap her hand away. I've scrubbed myself way too much for her to taint me again.

Nosi: "You're being ridiculous. Can you not see why I did that?"

Me: "You're no longer the Nosi I knew, you've changed. You're willing to open those thighs for anyone, just because of their wallet. There was Mpho's friend then that grandpa and who knows who else. I refuse to date a harlot. I won't. Now go"

Nosi: "I'm not going anywhere."

She tries me by walking to MY door then going inside MY room with the plastic. That sets me off so I ignore Mpho's shaking head then go into the house. I grab her damn wrist before she sits on my bed and pull her out. I pull her like that until we're at the gate, ignoring her screams and whimpers. I throw her out and she almost falls.

Me: "Don't ever set your feet here."

I go back for the plastic to find her still on that one spot. I throw the plastic at her, her tear stained face not doing anything to me.

I'm so done with her.

MPHO

I refused to intervene even though the inner self wanted me too. I'd be lying if I say I wasn't happy seeing him handle her like that. That girl has been a thorn in his life for a while, which he obviously mistook for love but I'm glad that's over. I know Poppy will be too when I tell her. He's heaving when he comes back, his forehead furrowed. He comes straight to me then stands in front of me.

Suko: "I need a cigarette"

Me: "You're not going to smoke."

Suko: "I need to distract my mind, don't you get it? I've been trying not to think of her but she decided to come here and remind me of how blinded I was! Poppy was right, I shouldn't have gone for her."

His sigh is painful. He sits on the veranda and bows his head on his bended knees. I can see him breathing but standing here while he's crying makes me feel bad. I'm a little detached from my emotions but sympathy is still with me.

Me: "It's a blessing in disguise, you know"

He lifts his head to look at me, his chin still resting between his knees.

Suko: “What is? The fact that she played me? Fact that I was a fool and ignored the signs that slapped my face. You know when did she start cheating?”

It’s a rhetorical question but I still shake my head. He needs to vent and I promised Poppy I’ll look after him.

Suko: “A year into our relationship. I felt it Mpho. I felt that someone had been in there but I gave her the benefit of the doubt. Now we’ve even gone wrong and I’m scared to think that she might have given me something. I’ll probably hang myself if she did.”

Me: “Why did you stay for so long?”

He chuckles bitterly.

Suko: “She never made me feel it. She was there when I go hooked on drugs and sometimes, I’d even get the money from her. She helped me. She and Poppy did. I overcame the addiction and she was still there. She was there when I couldn’t buy her a birthday gift and when I could only buy her a streetwise two on our monthsary. Then all of sudden she changed. She started being demanding, acting shady but I still loved her. I was a fool neh. I mean firstly, she slept with someone else or more people and even spat on me. Poppy told me, you did but I guess I wanted to see it for myself. My heart

is in shambles man and I don't see myself getting over it. I hate myself more for still loving her through this."

I wish I can relate to this and maybe offer some words of comfort but I can't. Not when it comes to relationships. I'm a clueless thirty-two year old. I've never been in a relationship, not really.

Me: "I don't know much about what you're going through but I do remember something Steve Harvey once said. That you shouldn't think about the years you wasted with someone but rather that you won't waste more. You'll get over this."

He chuckles.

Suko: "And how would you know? You've never been with a girl, have you? You don't know the pain of a broken heart. You know nothing about what I'm going through right now, how much it hurts. I'm angry man, more at myself for having stayed. I sacrificed my friendship for her, moved out of a better space to this. I even stopped being a hawker and have no idea how I'm going to pay rent here. What if I don't get a gig? People won't always have broken appliances."

Me: "Take it one step at a time."

He sighs then stands up, stretching his arms. I don't miss how his muscles flex but I quickly look away. What the hell is wrong

with me? I cannot be sounding like a girl right now, Trixy better chill.

Suko: "Get me out of here."

Me: "Where do you want to go?"

Suko: "I need some motivation so your place will do."

This is a strange request, definitely not what I expected but I see myself relenting. I don't know why this excites me. The thought of him in my place that is.

Me: "Must I get your door for you?"

He scoffs.

Suko: "I should ask you that sir."

I chuckle and go to my own door.

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NOSIPHO

I'm angry. I'm angry at Suko and at how he threw me out like a piece of rubbish. How could he? I did try calling the past week to no avail and I guess it never crossed my mind that he's blocked me. I'm not moved though. I'll go check on him tomorrow. He probably did all of that to impress Mpho so he can score us some money. I remember when I went out last time with Cain. Mpho was the one buying and I was also let in

on the fact that he's the richest of the squad. They apparently only fuvk with him because of that. I wanted him for myself until I saw him with Poppy. Of course that bish would get him first. I don't know what's up with her that has all these guys swooning over her. Is it because she's light skinned with natural curly hair? Is it her body? I mean her voice is groggy and she associates with criminals so what's it with her? I hate that she takes all shine. The only reason I stuck with Suko through the worst was because of her. I've had him eating out of the palm of my hand, doing anything to please me and now this? I was hurt by his behavior and now I'm angry which is why I'm here.

Officer: "You said you want to open a case ma'am?"

Me: "Yes. I'd like to open a case against my boyfriend."

He stares at me boredly, silently telling me to continue. I clear my throat.

Me: "He hit me."

Officer: "What's the name of your boyfriend?"

Me: "Sukoluhle Mncwabe"

Officer: "Tell me exactly what happened. I need to know how it started and how far he went since I don't see any injuries."

His tone is unwelcoming and for a second, I'm tempted to get up and leave this pettiness. However, I don't chicken out. The

story easily flows as if it's premeditated and I even mention Mpho since he was there and witnessed it all. He writes it down while nodding until I've finished my narration.

Officer: "So to sum this up, he beat you because you broke up with him?"

Me: "Yes"

Officer: "And it only happened once, today?"

Me: "Yes."

Officer: "What harm occurred to you? Right now I only have your word and I'm not about to waste state resources over lovers squabbles."

Me: "He didn't touch my face."

Officer: "And this guy who was there when it happened didn't do anything?"

Me: "No. He didn't get involved because like you've just said, lovers squabbles."

Officer: "Do you know that it's a crime to lie to an officer of the law?"

He's frustrating me. I get that I'm lying but how does he know that? I've been lying to Suko for a year and he's never figured

me out. I've lied to my family about a lot of things, including my job description but no one figured me out.

Me: "Are you accusing me of lying?"

Officer: "No, just putting it out there. What proof do you have to support your claims?"

Me: "The bruises are in my torso. I can't take off my top in front of a man."

Officer: "I don't expect you too. I'll call a female officer. She'll observe, take pictures and write a report. We don't take gender based violence lightly in this country and if your boyfriend is guilty, he'll be punished. He has no right to put his hands on you, regardless of what you've done."

I nod. He'll pay for this. If he apologizes and stops this acting

Advertisement

I'll let it pass.

My phone rings when I'm walking home. I take a sigh when I see who it is and answer.

Me: "Hey daddy"

Vusi: "Where are you? Because I'm parked by your gate and I don't see you."

Me: "I was at the police station but I'm coming."

Vusi: "I brought you morning after pills, better make sure you take them. I'll leave them with your sister. Did you get the bank notification? I sent you something."

I check my messages quickly. ' +8000 into savings account'

Me: "I've only seen it now, thank you."

Vusi: "Buy something nice, new underwear specifically and get a wax down. I want it with no stubble."

Me: "Yes daddy."

He hangs up on me and I sigh. I'll be happy once Suko spends at least a night in a cell. I want him to pay for how he treated me this morning. First his friends come to my home and have the audacity, guts to slap and spit on me then he throws me out like some rubbish. He even put my stuff into a refuse bag.

I don't get what's the fuss about. I found someone to provide for me where he failed. As my boyfriend, did he expect I'm just going to stick with him when he doesn't work? Yes, he's handsome. He's the kind you take pictures with and spread them all over social media. He's the one who's hand you hold in public, claiming him in front of envious girls who'd kill for a chance with him. To top it all, he's better in bed than all of my ministers of finance less Cain. The guy does try and his package is bigger so I guess that's what makes him better than Suko. A girl has to do what she got to survive. I can't afford being seen

as a loser. Suko loving me so much just made it easy for me to play him. I did love him at some point but then I saw how much he really was into me. The guy worshipped the ground I walked on, literally obeyed me and that turned me off. He didn't take charge, always begging. He sucked up to me so I thought fvck it and just did me. I thought guys know when someone's been in their girls; Suko seemed clueless. Abo Vusi didn't say anything because our arrangement is pretty simple. They have no say in whom I entertain. I give them sex, they give me money. It's really that simple.

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OKINAWA

Those who love and know me call me the devil's second born. I don't give a damn about anyone except myself. I'm in a business that requires you to be heartless, courageous and ruthless. You can't be attached to anyone nor can you afford to let anyone closer.

I met Poppy when she was a tender yet curious little girl. I was busy with Zuri whom I got to know is the only responsible for the little one's curiosity. Anyway, I knew Zuri had to go when she started growing on me. Love messes you up, I know that so I had to make the problem go away.

I took care of Poppy, looked out and after her for Zuri's sake. Then she made a move on me, I relented and our arrangement began. She's a loose end that I need to get rid of. Her mistake was giving into Daniel's. The bastard was suppose to get rid of her on my behalf but he got taken by whatever has me by the claws and is forcing me to wipe her off. I need to.

Loco's voice disrupts me from the myriad thoughts running through my mind. I let go of the remnants of a broken whisky glass, not even wincing on the pain inflicted by the glass. I'm mad.

Me: "What?"

Loco: "We've lost four men today."

I stand up aggravated. This has been happening all week and I'm beginning to question his competency. I grab him by the collar and press my nose on his. He doesn't bother yanking himself free.

Me: "You're beginning to annoy me! How the hell did that happen?"

Loco: "We.... We... we found them shot, all between the eyes sir."

He coughs when I let go of him as he falls on the floor. My shoe attacks his ribs, getting more angry with every kick. I've been losing a lot of men lately. 8m not stupid, I know who's causing

this but none of our strategies have been able to counteract his. It's like he's always two steps ahead because none of our traps have worked. You'd think without his father's protection, he'd be easily accessible but no. I've heard his wife is the one with the brains now couple that with his father in law. He's a force to be reckoned with.

I stop kicking him when I get tired then overthrow every item on my table.

Me: "Get out!"

I groan when he's out. This man can't be so impossible. I know killing Poppy will hurt him, even if it's a tiny bit but his wife and kids? That's where he'll lose it. But the fight won't be easy. It's a losing battle. I'm not stupid nor am I weak but I know my limits. He probably anticipates my every move so what I have to think of is what he thinks I won't. I don't think he can predict what I won't do. It's making my head hurt just thinking of it.

But I will not give up.

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MPHO

Me: "You've had enough."

I try taking the bottle from the shorter man but he doesn't let me. He chuckles while shaking his head. He can barely stand. He burps.

Suko: "This... is... exactly what... I needed"

He swings the bottle weakly in the air then takes a gulp. I shouldn't have let him drink.

The first thing I did when we arrived here was offer him some food then he wanted a tour of my house. Mose went back to P.E. So I'm alone again if we don't count my helpers. This big house does get lonely but I work too hard to notice. After I showed him every corner, he wanted to chill in the bar. I had a conference call that lasted about an hour after which I took a shower. When I came back, he was already drunk. He didn't stop though and even forced some of the alcohol into my throat.

Suko: "It's not making me feel better though."

He can also switch between sober and drunk in a snap. One moment he's slurring and the next he's fine.

Suko: "My legs might give up on me"

He stumbles back to the living room with me on his tail. He still has the bottle of ciroc he doesn't seem to want to let go of. He puts it on his lap when he sits.

Suko: "You can sit closer, I don't bite."

He pats the space next to him and I gulp. I don't think I'll be able to sit in such a proximity. Suko just makes me feel some type of way. It's an indecipherable feeling I'd rather not explore. I felt it the first time I saw him all top less. It's an image that remains embedded vividly in my mind.

Me: "I'm fine here."

He chuckles then moves until his thigh is touching mine. I have to find a way to breathe. There's some shot of electric current I feel from the contact but I ignore it.

Suko: "Want some?"

I shake my head. He shrugs then takes a sip.

Me: "Don't you think you've had enough?"

Suko: "You don't look like you've had enough. Isn't this my pity party? You're supposed to indulge."

Me: "Not when you're drinking like this."

He shrugs.

Suko: "Oh well."

I stand up. I can't handle being this close to him. I can still feel the warmth from where our thighs had touched though. It's crazy.

Me: "Are you sleeping over?"

Suko: "I'm not sleeping. I'm going to sit here and drink my sorrows away. That bish did me. Heh, to think I even cried like a widow after she spat on me. We do things, yoh."

I snicker.

Suko: "You think it's funny? Imagine I blamed myself for that insulting gesture. Yah no, whatever she fed me was strong."

He yawns.

Suko: "Lay with me."

I shake my head. He shrugs then lays on his side on the couch, still not letting go of the bottle. About a minute later, he's snoring. I watch him for a minute, taking in his features. It has to be Trixy drooling all over another man because it can't be me.

SUKOLUHLE

Me: “You have the heaviest alcohol collection, might stay here for that.”

I take another gulp of the bitter liquid, feeling it burn my throat then lungs. I woke up painfully sprawled on his couch then I came here, to the bar.

He’s mad. I see it in his scrunched nose and how his chest heaves. He’s in his formal wear so I assume that he’s readied himself for work.

Mpho: “I have an important meeting I need to get to but when I come back, you better be cleaned up.”

I chuckle then burp, almost puking at that.

Me: “Sorry. Why would I listen to you?”

Mpho: “Because this is my house. I also work too hard to keep this bar packed for you to waste my alcohol like that.”

I huff.

Me: “Yeah, like you mind.”

He doesn’t say anything to that. He knows I’m right.

Mpho: "Go to the kitchen if you hungry. I asked them to prepare something that'll help with the hangover. I took out clothes that you will wear after showering. I better find you in them."

Me: "Or what?"

Mpho: "I'm not arguing with you about this. I have to go."

Me: "So, this is like our first fight?"

I take another gulp but with my eyes still fixed on him. He might be the master of nonchalance but I'm very observant (let's not mention my blindness with Nosi) so I notice every emotion that flashes past his face.

His phone starts ringing.

Mpho: "I better find you like I said..."

He leaves as he answers.

The alcohol just makes life bearable for me. I've never been played like this. Sure, I've had bad luck when it comes to relationships but this one takes the cup. I don't understand why I'm even mourning it. It was one-sided first of all and secondly, it's good riddance. But I'm licking wounds of its burn. I'm so done with this and maybe at the end of this bottle or the next, my pity party will end.

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POPPY

I'm already tired of being here. A week is just too long for me and what the hell am I supposed to do all day? Kgosi strictly instructed that I keep a low profile so I can't even go anywhere. I've been thinking of Suko a lot. Mpho told me about his breakup with Nosi, thank God, but I know he's not taking it well. Suko always finds it hard to pick himself up after a failed relationship. He gives his all, get disappointed then blames himself.

I've been laying on my bed, staring into space. Sometimes I do look back and wonder what bad I did to deserve living on the run. I've never really just lived, which is probably why I treat each day like it's my last.

Gigi: "Pop!"

He gets on the bed and climbs on top of me, pulling my cheeks. I kiss his.

Me: "Done playing?"

He nods, his curls bouncing. I need to cut his hair. I also haven't cut mine in forever. I'm probably going to just let it grow.

Gigi: "Come"

He pulls my hand so I'm compelled to follow him. I put my slides on and let him lead me to wherever. He's on a swing with

his back to me. Quinn is probably around because she'd never leave Gigi alone outside. Rumi is probably locked up in her room doing whatever.

Gigi runs back to the house after I stand next to him.

Me: "I thought you said weekend."

He looks at me in scrutiny, his gaze moving up and down.

Kgosi: "How are you?"

His eyes find mine. The swing is big enough to carry us both but I don't know about its strength. Kgosi is obviously heavy.

Me: "How do you think I am? I need answers. Why's Oki trying to kill me and why's our family in danger?"

Kgosi: "So you won't answer or ask me how I am?"

Me: "No"

Kgosi: "So ill mannered."

Me: "Will you cut the small talk and tell me what I want to hear?"

I'm impatient and it's stressed in my tone. The suspense has been killing me and again, I hate being in the dark. He doesn't reply but instead puts his thumb and index finger on my chin then leans in for a kiss. I sigh and reply, allowing him to kiss me

until he breaks it. Maybe he'll finally tell me all that I want to hear.

He pecks my forehead after then lets go.

Me: "And?"

Kgosi: "He wanted me to kill you because he's sick. He gets rid of any woman who creeps their way into his heart. So the whole scam thing was planned in that manner. I'm not a fool so I was obviously going to catch you then terminate you because no one crosses me and leaves."

I snicker, how convenient. I'm not buying this bull.

Me: "Try again."

Kgosi: "What reason do I have to lie?"

Me: "Why did he want to kill Gigi? He hasn't done anything to him. I get that maybe Rumi wouldn't have been affected but your reason isn't doing it for me."

Kgosi: "That's the only thing I've managed to gather. I'm trying Poppy. The reason doesn't make sense to me but I guess it explains why he got rid of your sister."

Me: "What about my house?"

Kgosi: "I'll build you a bigger one."

I huff.

Me: "That's not what I'm asking. Why did Oki demolish it?"

Kgosi: "He was angry his plan didn't work. He also wanted to destroy anything that might link him to your sister's death. You kept her room locked, right? Never searched through it?"

I nod.

Me: "I felt moving something would be like erasing some part of her memory so I couldn't. I wanted to keep her alive."

Kgosi: "You should have gone through it way before tying yourself to Oki."

Me: "What do you know?"

Kgosi: "That I love you."

He squeezes my thigh then pinches it lightly.

Me: "That's not what I asked."

Kgosi: "I've missed you."

Me: "You have a wife"

Kgosi: "That's business. I want pleasure."

He kisses me again but I push him off.

Me: "You might end up breaking the swings. Give me answers, surely you didn't come all the way for pleasure."

Kgosi: "I came all the way for it and more. Let's go for a drive."

Me: “But you told me not to go anywhere.”

Kgosi: “You’re with me. You have nothing to worry about.”

He takes my hand before I can protest and we get off the swings. He’s parked his car outside the yard so we walk to it. He spansks my butt as I get inside.

Kgosi: “How are you so thin with such a fat butt?”

Me: “It’s the Eritrean in me”

He goes to his side and immediately drives off when he gets in.

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SUKOLUHLE

Mpho: “Oh, you’re cleaned up.”

He sounds genuinely surprised. I can also tell by how he’s looking at me that he didn’t expect this. I stand up from the couch.

It’s late afternoon now. I’ve eaten, slept and showered in his absence.

Me: “What were you expecting?”

Mpho: “Don’t give me attitude.”

He places his phone and car keys on the coffee table then sits on the couch right next to me.

Mpho: "I received a call on my way back."

Me: "From who?"

Mpho: "Saps. You're a wanted man."

I laugh.

Me: "For being the sexiest man alive?"

Mpho: "It's a serious matter. You have to hand yourself in but relax, I've already gotten you a lawyer."

My smile drops.

Me: "You're serious."

He nods. I stand up, running a hand through my hair.

Me: "Poppy! Is she... is she in jail?"

The thought of my best friend in there pulls at the strings of my heart. We aren't on good terms now but I love her and imagining her in a steel cage isn't pleasing to the eyes of my mind.

Mpho: "She's in Zurich."

Me: "Good, good."

I'm now pacing around the room.

Mpho: "You didn't even ask what they're charging you for."

I halt my steps.

Me: "I know what it's about."

I sit back next to him.

Mpho: "It's not whatever you're thinking. Nosi laid an assault charge against you."

I chuckle.

Me: "Assault, me? Right"

Mpho: "Gender-based violence is a serious matter in this country Suko, you can't be taking this so lightly."

Me: "I've never abused her, not even once. I've never laid a hand on her unless we talk of choking during our steamy sessions. It's probably a stunt she's pulling to get back together. I wouldn't put it past her."

Mpho: "Even if that's the case, you'll have to defend yourself in court."

Just when I thought my life wouldn't get worse.

Me: "Take me to the police station then."

The ride is silent there. I'm deep in thought, wondering what the hell Nosi wants from me. I'm tempted to call her, ask her what it's about but Mpho has advised against it. He says it

might be used against me in court, something about intimidation. I know I'm innocent in all of this and it just... irks me that she went to such extends for my attention.

I let Mpho do the talking then the officer handling the case comes and tells us to follow him.

Officer: "What do you have to say about the charges brought forth by your ex girlfriend?"

Me: "I'm actually confused by this because I've never laid a hand on her."

Mpho: "Officer

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this is off the record, right?"

Officer: "Yes. We don't have enough evidence to make an arrest now. There's no case."

Me: "There isn't?"

Officer: "The evidence provided by her to support her claims was fabricated. You can relax, for now. I'd advice you to..."

He looks around then lowers his voice.

Officer: "stop fucking with her. She's bad news."

Mpho: "So, that's it?"

Officer: “Are you the reason he left her? Or you’re the lawyer?”

Mpho: “She lied to an officer of the law. She must be punished for her false claims. Think of the admin that went into opening this case and–

Officer: “We’ve wasted enough state resources on her. However, we won’t take her seriously if she comes here again. Apologies Mr Ncube.”

I feel relieved when we exit the police station. Mpho is mad next to me. He hates that Nosi is getting away with her attempt at destroying my life. I don’t get why he’s this worked up.

Mpho: “Wait until I tell Poppy, she’s going to agree with me.”

Me: “OK pretty boy, enough. I don’t care about Nosi, it didn’t work. In fact, she’s discredited herself now and they won’t ever believe her. I’m done with her and well, glad that the case was overthrown or whatever happened. Relax.”

Mpho: “I’m not a boy.”

I chuckle.

Me: “Yeah, whatever. Please take me to Poppy. I need to fix things with her.”

Mpho: “She’s still in Zurich. I thought I told you that.”

Me: “I don’t remember. I’ll call her.”

Mpho: "And her house was demolished. I told you this."

It's the first time I'm hearing of it. I regret a lot of things. First, I should never have let Nosi poison me against her. I knew Poppy longer and she'd done more for me than that snake ever will. Secondly, I shouldn't have moved out. The room I stay in is kak then there's the rent thing. Sure, I seek independence but the way I went about it was wrong. Lastly, I should have listened when she warned me. Poppy has never been wrong especially when it comes to the women in my life but I never listen. I don't know why I'm always blinded when it comes to love. It's why I'm saying fuck love now. I'm done settling, done searching for the one and all that crappy shit. I'm no longer aspiring to find a companion. I'm going to focus on rebuilding my life. I'm going to work on acquiring capital to kick start my dream. I'm going to work hard and do whatever I can for that.

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POPPY

Me: "Thank you for this. I'd forgotten about Suko's investment. Things have been crazy."

Kgosi: "It'll quiten down. Do you know that your ex wants to come after my family now?"

Me: "He does?"

He nods.

Kgosi: “My patience has ran out with him. I’m eliminating him and his workforce.”

Me: “Took you long enough”

I roll my eyes. I’m not about to act like the news aren’t pleasing to my ears. The man wanted to kill me and my baby, I’m not going to let that slide. If Kgosi doesn’t do it then I will. I’ve never killed before but there’s a first time for everything, right?

Kgosi: “You want a spanking, don’t you?”

I huff then take out my phone. I’m hoping Suko has unblocked me post Nosi breakup. He has no reason to still want to cut me off because the poison has dissolved itself.

Me: “Thank God”

He chuckles. I’m happy he’s answered.

Suko: “Pops, I’m sorry. I hate that I let someone get between us even after I vowed I wouldn’t. I was blinded by that illusion of love because that wasn’t some WAP. I’m sorry for everything, please forgive me.”

Me: “Of course I forgive you. Don’t be so hard on yourself. It happened so learn from it. I’ve been waiting for your eyes to be opened and I’m happy it’s happened and that you can now focus on self healing and bettering yourself.”

Suko: “She even wanted to get me arrested.”

Me: "I'm not even surprised. That girl just wanted to ruin your life. That's why she came between us then isolated you."

Suko: "That time she hit me then claims that I was abusing her."

Me: "She what?!"

She's getting it when I go back, no doubt about that. How dare she put her hands on my best friend? Who does she think she is?

Suko: "It happened once but looking at it now, I'd probably be in a physically abusive relationship if she hadn't revealed her cheating."

Me: "It's her loss, don't worry. You're an amazing man and she's going to regret ever ruining the good thing you once had."

Suko: "It's just hard Pops. I spent the whole week scrubbing myself for hours, wanting to get rid of her filth. I felt disgusted with myself. To top it all, we'd went raw and now I'm scared of testing. What if I'm positive?"

Me: "Let's just pray that she was being safe. Also ask Mpho to accompany you to the clinic so you get tested and know your status. I know it's scary but it's important."

Suko: "I see what you're trying to do."

I can hear the amusement in his voice. I chuckle.

Me: “What do you mean?”

Suko: “The whole Mpho thing. He’s been hovering over me like a fly on milk, not that I mind. I see you.”

Me: “You have the wrong end of the stick. I told him to look after you for me since I’m not there to do it, that’s it.”

Suko: “Mm, if you say so. But it won’t work.”

Me: “What won’t?”

Suko: “What you’re trying to do. We’re too different plus I don’t want to hurt him.”

Me: “You on savage mode now?”

He scoffs.

Suko: “Maybe. Relationships are shit, I’m done. Did you manage to do the investment?”

Me: “Yes sir.”

Suko: “Thank you. I’ll try booking a flight to come see you. I still have some money left.”

Me: “No, don’t do that. How about I get someone to book a flight for you instead? I don’t want you wasting your money.”

I look at Kgosi who shakes his head. I know he’s going to do it regardless.

Suko: "Uh, OK. That could work. Next week?"

Me: "Yes. I'll text you the details."

Suko: "Thank you so much. Thank you for forgiving me too. I don't know what I did to deserve a friend like you."

Me: "No need to thank me. I love you."

Suko: "I love you more."

I hang up after. My heart is in a better place knowing we're good. I hated us not getting along. It felt good hearing his voice after all this time.

This one's hand has slipped its way into my pants.

Me: "So, you'll book it?"

Kgosi: "Like I have a choice"

I peck his lips. We're sitting in his car on the back seat.

Kgosi: "Take these off."

He removes his hand and I do as he says. I'm in a good mood.

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SUKOLUHLE

I try the number for the fifth time, not about to give up. I got the number from Zelda who fortunately didn't ask a lot of

questions. She's such a curious person, always asking plethora of questions.

Tsholo: "Hello?"

Me: "Hi, my name is Suko. I got your number from Zelda."

Tsholo: "Tinto?"

I grimace at that name then sigh.

Me: "Yes."

Tsholo: "Sorry for taking long to answer. I'd misplaced my phone."

Me: "It's OK. Can we meet? I need you to pray for me."

Tsholo: "What's the problem?"

Me: "I want to get rid of sinyama that my ex left me with. I need deliverance."

She's quiet for a moment on the other end that I have to remove the phone from my ear to check if she's still on the line.

Me: "Hello?"

Tsholo: "I'll come to you."

Then she hangs up. Mpho looks at me and I shrug. That was weird.

It's morning now. I pick up the bedding I used last night upon arrival. I slept on the floor. It's time I washed my bed and spring cleaned this place. I got that Dettol antiseptic so I'm going to add the mattress on the list of things I have to disinfect. She slept on it. I just want to get rid of any trace of her.

There's a knock on the door as I'm sweeping. I look at the time on my phone and wonder who could it be this early.

Me: "Come in."

A short light skinned woman comes in. She smiles at me then grabs a chair to sit. I assume it's Tsholo. I don't really know her; just that she's a prophet and Zelda's friend. We've never met before.

Tsholo: "It's hot in here"

She fans her face with her hand. She's wearing a yellow short flare dress with white sneakers.

Me: "Should we sit outside?"

Tsholo: "Maybe open the windows to let some air in."

Me: "How did you know where I stay? Zelda has never been here."

Tsholo: "Do you have a Bible?"

Me: "I had one on my phone but had to delete it because of space shortage."

I scratch my head. I'm ashamed.

Tsholo: "I got you one. Tell me about this ex of yours and why you feel that she's Tainted your spirit."

Me: "Aren't you a prophet? Can't you see it with your third eye or something?"

Tsholo: "I only see what the Holy Spirit allows me to and I'm not here in that capacity. I know a breakup can't be easy to handle and I'm here to help."

Me: "So this is some therapy session?"

Tsholo: "More like counseling."

I sigh. Where do I begin?

SUKOLUHLE

Talking to her these past few days has helped. I'm now waiting for my visa to be approved so I can visit Poppy. I didn't know one needs a visa until Mpho mentioned it. Poppy understood though and joked about getting in contact with someone who'll speed things up.

Now, I'm here and drinking again. It's different this time. I'm not drinking to forget but to rather bid all the sorrows goodbye. He's with me and having gin and tonic. It's at his house because I'd rather hang here than at that toilet I call a home. This is in no offense to anyone but the place is suffocating.

Me: "I want to go out."

The alcohol isn't doing its work and perhaps summing it with music is going to help. I'm glad the heavy burden I've been carrying has lightened and I can finally move on with my life. I'm really not going to jump into a relationship. Maybe after a year or two, I don't know. I do need to get laid though.

Mpho: "Where?"

I shrug.

Me: "Anywhere is fine with me. Moo bar, PH or in the mix?"

He sighs then gets up.

Mpho: "Let me go shower quickly."

I look him over.

Me: "Why? You're fine like that."

He's in casual denim shorts and a golf shirt.

Mpho: "I'll be back in about ten. Don't overdose on that liquor."

Me: "This is nothing. Don't take too long, I'm bored."

My phone rings. I've been getting calls from unknown numbers. I'd answer thinking it's potential clients only to find it's Nosi. I always hang up when I hear her voice and immediately block the number. I don't get why she's hung up on me when she's never cared. She cheated on me, made me a fool then went on to humiliate me. What more does she want? I hate when I think of her but at least I don't feel disgusted with myself when I do. Oh, the phone again. I answer.

Me: "Hello?"

Caller: "Good day. Are you available tomorrow? Our fridge decided to stop working and my mother's breathing down my neck about it. Can you come check it out?"

Me: "Yes, I can. Text me your address then I'll be there."

Caller: "Great"

I'll be working with a hangover but I don't care. I'd do it even when I'm drunk.

He comes back when I've even forgotten about him. He's changed, wearing skinny check pants and a black t-shirt with red suede loafers.

Me: "You know you didn't have to, right?"

Mpho: "Let's go. I've just spoken to some of the guys, they're at PH so we're going there."

I don't argue. I don't mind where we are or with who, long as I get to have some fun.

Me: "Let me drive"

Mpho: "Who's car?"

Really?

Me: "Go on, make me feel shittier for depending on you for transportation. I'll get there too."

Mpho: "Aowa, I'm not letting you drive my car and you're not going to make me feel bad for it."

Me: "That's the thing. You keep reminding me of your accomplishments while I have none. I get it."

He huffs.

Mpho: "I've worked hard to get where I am. I've always listened to you demean yourself, speak of your lack with no judgment. Why should I be judged for what I've worked for?"

Me: "Let's just go."

The drive is silent. For once, my mind isn't overly active. There's no tension or any awkwardness, just comfortable silence. It all dissolves when we arrive at our destination. It's packed and buzzing. He finds a parking spot then we're out.

Mpho: "You good?"

I nod. We easily find his friends who already have drinks and ice. What I don't expect to find is Nosi on one of the guy's lap. I can't believe this girl. But then, it should come as no surprise after that video call. The surprise is maybe in how this is a different guy and also, why call me if she's moved on? There's clearly some loose screws here. She seems surprised to see me but I don't pay her any mind.

Mpho: "This is Sukoluhle, a friend of a friend."

The one who has Nosi on his lap speaks.

Him: "A friend of a friend, huh"

Mpho chuckles.

Mpho: "Yes." He turns to me. "That's Cain, Lindo and Vuyo."

Cain being the guy who just spoke. I nod at all of them.

Nosi: "And me?"

Cain: "Don't mind her. She likes acting important. How's it my guy?"

Me: "Oh, sharp."

I can feel her staring at me as time goes by but I don't pay her any mind. I'm not even bothered by Cain being touchy with her. The short skirt she's wearing gives him easy access. I almost feel sorry for her. The way these guys treat her is sad and between you and me, she's too damn pretty for this. Of course my vision is cleared now and all I see is a harlot.

I'm drinking in between dancing. I don't know who she is, something that starts with a K. I have my hands on her waist as we grind to the music.

K: "You're so handsome"

Then she giggles.

Me: "Thank you"

My hands move to her bottom as we continue with our sensual dance. I can feel eyes boring on me. I look around and they connect with Mpho who quickly looks away. He's being creepy again but that look makes me feel a little bad. It's only a little though so not enough to make me retreat.

K: "Let's go to the back."

Ah, easy... it'd be an insult to turn her down so I relent. I let her lead the way with her hand on mine.

Cain: "Heh, I need you to give me whatever you're using man. Do you know how difficult Khutso is? Then she just gave it to you like that

Advertisement

I have to give it to you."

I chuckle, taking a sip of my drink. Man, it's funny that he's saying this with Nosi on her lap. The downgrade is saddening but women are a complicated specie. I'll be lying if I say I'm not pleased. I don't care how bitter I sound but she deserves all this and more after how she treated me. Karma is working on her and I'm ecstatic.

Me: "I didn't put in any effort."

Mpho snickers besides me then stops when I throw him a glance. This is post break up me who doesn't give a damn. Like with the K woman... Khutso. I sort of left her there after flushing the condom but thankfully, she didn't mind. I guess she just wanted a taste.

Nosi: "When did you become this?"

I ignore her and continue with my drinking. I'm having Glendfich that has me feeling like I've finally made it. Hanging out with these guys is pressure on its own. The Lindo one is actually the one buying. It seems they do it in turns.

Mpho: "We're leaving now, time."

Lindo: "Ah, like usual. Don't be a stranger though."

We bid them farewell but it's only when I stand up that I realize how drunk I really am.

He's cursing as he helps me out the exit.

Me: "It's not my fault that you can't have fun."

He clicks his tongue. He seems more agitated than usual, spitting profanities that I don't pay much mind. I feel like I'm on top of the world man and nothing else matters. Yeah, no. I can finally admit that alcohol makes me happy. And sex. Alcohol and sex make me so happy.

We arrive sooner because this guy here drove like a lunatic. The way he's been clinging onto the steering wheel was also alarming.

Me: "Are you fine though? This is why you have to drink more than a dumpy. It'll help you loosen up."

Mpho: "Do me a favor and just shut up."

I grab his wrist but he yanks it. I sigh.

Me: "What's up with you?"

He scoffs.

Mpho: "You're asking, really?"

I shrug.

Me: "I don't know."

He takes off his shirt inside and sits on the couch, switching the TV on. I still have the Glendfich though I don't remember how I even left with it.

Me: "Here, have some."

He regards me briefly then clicks his tongue. I put the bottle down.

Me: "Oh, I see what's up."

He snickers, still channel hopping. I touch his thigh and squeeze. He looks at me with squint eyes.

Mpho: "What do you think you're doing?"

I shrug and lean into him but he pushes me. I huff.

Me: "What's wrong with you?"

Mpho: "Don't do that man, especially after whatever you did with her."

Me: "Oh, let me go wash my hands then."

I get up and go to the kitchen where I wash my hands in the sink with liquid soap.

He's stopped in a sports channel. I sit next to him, thigh to thigh. He doesn't shift so that's a good start.

Me: "Look at me."

He huffs then turns to face me. That's when I smash my lips on his. It catches him off guard but when he does retain his sanity, he pushes me off him and wipes his lips.

Mpho: "You're straight"

I scoff.

Me: "Says who? Come man, been waiting to do that."

That sparks some interest. I see it by the sparkle in his eye but he quickly erases it. He stands up.

Mpho: "Are you sleeping over?"

Me: "Yeah, with you. You got lube?"

Mpho: "You're drunk, stop talking bull."

Me: "I know you masturbate so you probably do. Condoms?"

Mpho: "I'm not sleeping with you Suko!"

Me: “You just asked if I’m sleeping over. Who else do you expect me to sleep with?”

Mpho: “I have a big house so you can pick any room except mine to spend the night alone. It’s not your first night here. I’m off to bed.”

I grab his wrist and pull him to me with ease. He lands on my lap, eyes unable to meet mine. My hands go to his neck, pressing lightly on it.

Me: “I know you got a choking kink”

He gulps. I look down to his crouch and it proves me right.

Me: “I also know you want this.”

I start kissing on his jaw and he lets me. I kiss under his chin, lower jaw and to his cheeks which has him giggling. I then move to his forehead before finally moving to his lips. I graze them lightly with mine until he lets out a pant, parting his lips. I insert my tongue and the kiss begins. It’s not slow but it’s sensual, passionate and rough. I press his neck a little hard but not too hard that he can’t breathe. I let go of it and move my hands down to his bubble butt. He breaks the kiss when I squeeze, his eyes meeting mine. He bites his lip, concealing a moan.

Me: “You done fighting it?”

What I didn't expect is a harsh slap to land painfully on my cheek. How can his hands be so soft yet hit this bad? I look at him in shock.

Mpho: "You have guts doing that after fucking a random just some hours back. To think you just kissed me with the same lips that.... Fuck you."

Then he walks away. Now is the right time to grab the bottle. It's burning where he's slapped me and I'll probably have a mark. That slap made me sober up a bit so I drink until I'm overwhelmed by happiness all over again.

Bonus

NOSI

I want to cry. The lump on my throat is painful, my eyes are burning but I don't. Instead, I look up while taking deep breathes through the nose and out the mouth. I don't know what made me follow them and even watch him pound her. Her moans are in my mind, going straight to my heart. I know exactly what she's feeling.

Cain: "I'm not going to have you disappearing while you're with me. Where were you?"

I've barely sat a second on his lap when he says this.

I couldn't watch that any longer. It's not even like Suko to act like this. He's one guy who respects himself and usually carries himself with dignity. Our sex life was confined to his room less the one time we had sex on Poppy's couches in her absence.

Now this...

Me: "Needed the rest room,"

He had to pinch my thigh for my reply since my mind is still at the scene I just witnessed.

Cain: "Just don't do that or I'll send you home and go pick up someone who's going to be by my side all night"

I nod.

Me: "I'm sorry."

He clicks his tongue then goes back to conversing with his friends. I'm like the only woman here and can't even comment on their conversation because I have no idea what they're on about.

I decide to turn to Mpho who's mind doesn't seem to be here. The way he's clenching his jaw shows he's mad and I wonder about what.

Me: "Are you fine?"

I pour myself a glass of wine while waiting for him to answer. I'm hoping he replies. I can only talk to him with alcohol courage.

He's sitting not so far from me. His couch is adjacent to mine.

Mpho: "We're not friends"

I didn't not expect him to snap. Ouch.

I chuckle with a raised eyebrow. He's too handsome for this kind of attitude.

Me: "I'm just asking. You don't look like someone having the time of their life. You look mad, depressed even"

Mpho: “And how’s that any of your business? Focus on Cain and stop bothering me.”

I’m taken aback by his tone but I recede. My focus goes back to my drink. It’s weird. He was fine before... Suko left? He hasn’t lost his composure nor has his face gained any emotion but this is weird. I think I’m missing something but I can’t seem to put a finger on it.

Suko comes back with a goofy grin and the gang fist bumps him like he’s the man. I wouldn’t believe it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.

Cain is busy talking of the bitch like I’m not sitting on his lap. Suko would never do this to me but at least he spends on me. When we leave here, he’s going to drive me home, have sex in the car then transfer money into my account.

Me: “When did you become like this?”

He doesn’t spare me a glance. I also notice the small smug that embraces Mpho’s face. There’s something here.

Cain’s hand makes its way into my skirt. He never cares whether we’re in people’s presence or not. He can just do this. He pinches my inner thigh then goes on to slide my panty to the side. All this while he’s joking around as if he’s not...

Suko scoffs and I already know what’s in his mind.

Mpho: "We're leaving, time"

Then they leave. I wonder what has those two hanging out because last time I checked, Mpho was with Poppy.

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MPHO

The first thing I do when I get into my room is shower. I scrub myself, trying not to replay the events of the night in my head.

He kissed me. His lips were soft like I anticipated and he turned out to be a good kisser. I should be disgusted, nauseated but it's almost like I can still feel his lips on mine. My body's twisted because I hate him for this but Trixy thinks otherwise. He made us feel... alive. When last did I have a kiss like that? I shake my head as if that can clear the thoughts. I wrap a towel around my waist when I'm done. The cold shower should have refreshed my thoughts but it didn't. In fact right now, I'm thinking of him and what he might be up to right now. It's crazy how I enjoy having him around the house. It makes it feel a little homey and I'd be lying if I say I don't envision a future like that. The crazy thoughts that Trixy conjures about him are above me. I sigh, going out the bathroom. My bed suddenly looks too big tonight and Trixy has me feeling tempted to call the man downstairs.

Me: "It's fuck him. You've slept years on your own less the times with Mose and tonight isn't any different"

I then go to my closet so I can dress up. Going back, I find him laying on my bed with a bottle of Hennessy. I huff.

Me: "How did you even..."

Suko: "Your bed is so comfy, has me bouncing and all."

Me: "Get off my bed!"

Suko: "You don't want us to fuck. Look at all the sexual frustration making you aggressive."

Me: "You must take me for rubbish, thinking you can just... do that with me after what you did with her."

He sighs then gets off the bed and comes my way. I watch him blankly, not missing the way my heart decides to pump.

He puts his hands on my shoulders, the proximity making my heart skip a bit.

Suko: "I used a condom."

The hands on my shoulders move to cup my neck and he gently squeezes.

Suko: "Come on."

I shake my head. I won't allow him to see how his touch affects us. It's not even about the choking but more about the fact that it's him.

Me: "No."

He squeezes again and a pant leaves my lips, I bite the lower.

Suko: "Come on"

I clear my throat.

Me: "Unless I'm fucking you."

Trixy will have to take a step back because this man's penis was in a female not so long ago.

He chuckles and let's go of my neck, steps back and finally allows me to catch a breath.

Suko: "You... fuck me."

I nod.

Suko: "As in your dick in my ass?"

I nod again. He and Poppy have a loose mouth but Trixy is worse. She's a dirty talker.

Suko: "Do you even know how to?"

I look at him in disbelief. Really? I'm thirty-two. Also, having no girlfriend experience doesn't mean I'm a virgin. He gives me a look that tells me I have to spell it out for him.

Me: "Yes, geez."

His face straightens then he closes the gap between us again.

Suko: "You fucked someone before? Who was it?"

I snicker.

Me: "You seem to forget I'm older than you, rich and good looking. Of course I did"

Suko: "Stop with the cockiness. Who did you fuck?"

Me: "Have you been with a guy before?"

Suko: "Not really. My first was with a guy though."

He licks his lips after then cocks his brows.

Suko: "He also happened to be five years older."

I look away. I don't like how he's looking at me like a predator, making me lose some of this control I have. I stay back at him after a few minutes to find his eyes still on mine.

Suko: "Wanna know how old I was then?"

Me: "I've heard enough."

He chuckles.

Suko: "Right. I think it's you."

Me: "Excuse me?"

Suko: "I think you were my first. That time, you also fucked my little anus."

I laugh.

Me: "You're mad. I've never seen you before meeting Poppy. I didn't even grow up here."

Suko: "Mm, keep playing like that."

He steps back and begins taking off his clothes. He starts with his shoes, then his top which reveals the torso that still looks as toned as the first time I saw it.

Suko: "I remember when I got back home that day, could hardly sit. I had to fake sickness for a whole week because of you."

Me: "It wasn't me!"

He laughs.

Suko: "It was you Graham."

I look at him with my eyebrows scrunched. His eyes are also on mine, even when he removes his pants. I'm tempted to lower my eyes but I don't.

Me: "How do you know that name?"

Suko: "I've changed so much, haven't I?"

I look at him in scrutiny, dating back to when I still went by that name. I remember a Thirteen year old at nineteen. I didn't know his age until a day after. It can't be.

Me: "It's... you. Tinto neh"

Suko: "Don't call me that."

Me: "You deceived me about your age. Luckily we're males or I could have gone to jail."

Suko: "I'd forgotten all about it until I stepped into this room. Be gentle this time, OK? I haven't bottomed since then."

Me: "You mean I'm the only one who's..."

He nods.

Me: "Have you been with any other guy like this before?"

He chuckles and nods.

Suko: "You're still dressed Gray."

I shake my head and begin taking off my pajama pants.

Suko: "I want to kiss you. I want to line kisses all over your face, plant hickeys over your neck to your chest. I want to wet your dick with my mouth, feel it stretch and almost tear the side of my mouth."

Me: "You've always been a talker."

He laughs.

Suko: "That hasn't changed."

Me: "A liar too because you deceived me."

Suko: "I've grown honest now."

Me: "Take off those shorts then."

Suko: "You're so handsome. Actually, you're beautiful."

Me: "I know"

He rolls his eyes as I walk towards him, moving back with every step I take. His legs hit the bed which he falls butt first on then lays on his back. I try to picture Tinto. He's right, he looks different. I didn't even recognize him. He wasn't handsome then nor was he caramel. I get on top of him but he swiftly switches positions.

Suko: "Let me kiss you first"

I nod. Having him on top of me like this, his body touching mine along with his full erect penis is torturous. I don't want all this foreplay but I also don't think I can say no to him.

Suko: "And those soft hands sure know how to slap."

Me: "Don't remind me!".

He chuckles as he leans in to kiss me while laying fully on me. His chest is touching mine, penises also touching. He kisses my lips first and I can't help it. I want him now. My hands go to his butt, parting the cheeks and he moans into the kiss. It's dirty immediately as his lips part for my tongue. My index finger grazes his crease, the kiss getting dirtier. He breaks it, panting.

Suko: "Maybe we can play in the morning. I want you inside."

And that's music to my ears. He gets off me then lays besides me with his eyes on mine.

Me: "I want you on your stomach."

He groans.

Suko: "It's going to hurt."

Me: "It won't. I promise."

Suko: "It's what you said that time but I couldn't sit for a whole week."

I laugh.

Me: "We're older now."

He rolls his eyes then lays on his stomach with his knees slightly bent. I grab the lube and condoms on the drawer of my bedside table.

I cover my two fingers with the lube then hover over his back, my legs caging him in. I bend to kiss his shoulder blade as one coated finger goes to his wrinkled entrance.

Me: "Is this you or you're drunk?"

Suko: "Definitely the latter"

I chuckle.

Me: "So, I'm taking advantage of you?"

Suko: "Yep"

I still keep kissing his shoulder blade while preparing him and in between whispering sweet nothing to his ear. It feels like his first time all over again. Except he's gotten taller and lost a chunk of weight. I'm tempted to go raw but with tonight, I can't.

Suko: "Will you put it in already?"

Me: "So impatient"

He keeps wiggling against my hand. He groans when I remove my two fingers, probably because of the loss of contact. I'm looking forward to feeling his warmth and hearing him reply to my hitting on his spot. Putting the rubber on swiftly, I line myself against his entrance, my teeth grazing his earlobe.

Me: "You feel so good. I love how responsive you are"

Suko: "All quiet until in the.... Mmm... bedroom. Fuck, you really aren't nineteen anymore"

Me: "Stop cursing."

I keep biting my lip and taste blood as I push into him, feeling him expand as more inches dive in. He feels so good and warm. He still pushes against me at the same pace, which drives me crazy but I have to be patient. This happened fourteen years ago, he's almost a virgin.

Suko: "Move"

I chuckle and do as he says. I wanted to be patient but well, I have to remind him who's daddy. The thrusts are slow, sensual with me pinning him down. I'm almost crushing into him but he's a man so I have no doubt he can take. He's still moving, throwing his bottom back at me. When last was I in this position? He's cursing, groaning. I want to record all the sounds he's making because they're dirty and hot.

Suko: "You're fucken thick! Mmm, yes. Damn!"

The claps, the heat from his skin and those moans make me wish I could pause time so we can have this moment. He might regret this in the morning, lash out at me and many things but for now, I choose to enjoy. He cranes his neck to turn his head so he can kiss me. It's all tongue which makes my heart skip and this feels like more than just sex.

Suko: "I don't come this fast when I'm... Gray!"

I hit that spot again and he shouts my name. I don't like it but he makes it sound so appealing to the ears that I don't mind. I hit him there over and over until he comes with a louder scream of my name. I thrust through that wave, chasing my own climax until it comes and he's snoring. I try shaking him but he's gone. I chuckle to myself as I slowly pull out from him, remove the condom and get off him so I can clean him up. He must have been so drunk that he'd blackout from one round.

SUKOLUHLE

My phone's ringing is what wakes me up. I always make a mental note to put it on vibration at least but never go through with it. The caller is also persistent so I stretch my hand to where the sound is coming from, grab it then answer with my eyes shut. I have a bad headache, along with pain I'm feeling all over my body.

Me: "Hello?"

From my waist, down feel paralyzed, not to mention the ache in my posterior.

Caller: "Sukoluhle?"

Me: "Yes?"

Caller: "I called earlier and your boyfriend told me you're still sleeping and spoke of rescheduling. Will you be able to come around 4pm today? My mom is on my neck about her fridge."

Me: "Mm, yes. Send me your address."

Caller: "I did but I'll send it again. See you then"

She hangs up on me so I throw it somewhere on the bed. What the hell happened? I open my eyes and take in my surroundings. The space is familiar, from the Grey walls to the

mirrored ceilings. It's spacious too and the bed comfortable and huge. My mind's foggy so I must have went hard at the bottle. Did I leave with Khutso? But I was with... Mpho. This must be his room. If it's his room then it means...

Speak of the devil and he shall grace us with his presence.

Mpho: "You're up. I brought you lunch."

He's in his creased suit, all black this time. The only color is in his shoes which are maroon suede loafers.

Me: "What did you do to me?"

He chuckles and sets the tray he's holding on the bedside table, before sitting next to me on the bed.

Mpho: "Slept well?"

I try sitting up but the pain crushes into me. This man paralyzed me for real.

Me: "Did you... how did I even... fuck"

Mpho: "What do you remember?"

Me: "In the mix. I thought I'm at Khutso's place but then remembered we parted."

Mpho: "I didn't do anything to you."

Me: "Yeah, you're a bottom but who did?"

Mpho: "I don't know. I have to go, wanted to bring you this. There's a driver outside who'll take you to that appointment of yours."

Me: "Thanks for making me feel like a bish."

Mpho: "You're in no position to have all that pride. I'll see you later."

Me: "No, wait. How did I get into your room?"

Mpho: "You wanted to sleep with me."

His phone rings and he answers, waving at me as he leaves. He only turns to give me his back when he's at the door. I'm a hundred percent sure this is all him but how did he manage to turn the tables? Was I really that drunk? I had sex with not one but two people, in one night? Yes, I have to quit alcohol.

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POPPY

He's been here for too long now and I'm not saying I don't enjoy his presence but this is someone's husband. What's his wife thinking when he's here? Him and Quinn get along quite well, which is why he's been sleeping on my bed, in my room. We even have breakfast and dinner as a family. This morning however, he brings me breakfast in bed. Quinn and the other two left last night to visit her former brother-in-law. So, we've

had the house all to ourselves and hardly slept. He kept me up all night.

Kgosi: "I know you're hungry so it's appetizing."

He kisses my forehead and puts the food on my lap.

Me: "Am I not brushing my teeth first?"

Kgosi: "Not before you suck my dick"

Me: "What?"

Kgosi: "You're still asking?"

There is this side to him which I haven't gotten to hate yet. I like how he takes charge and how dominant he can be at most times.

Me: "What about your wife?"

We're doing the dishes now. It's more like I am while he drinks his beer, spanking my arse every once in a while. I've showered and cleaned most of the house. The dishes aren't that many so I'm not complaining.

Kgosi: "What about her?"

Me: "What's she saying if you're here? And the kids, why are you away from them for so long?"

Kgosi: “Our first born is slightly younger than you, second maybe your little sister’s age and the third almost a teenager. Besides, I’ve been keeping contact with them. Have you grown tired of me already?”

Me: “Not even. I’m just asking because your marital status isn’t a fact I can ignore.”

He chuckles.

Kgosi: “How ironic. You never mind when I tap that.”

Me: “Your vows are with your wife, not me.”

He sighs.

Kgosi: “Yes. I’d actually give it all up if you loved me but I can’t take that risk.”

I frown.

Me: “I’m... sorry?”

Kgosi: “Don’t. Don’t pity me”

Me: “Hug?”

I open my arms for him and he comes

his hands on my waist instead of my butt which is new. It lasts as long as he needs it to until he breaks it. I get on my tiptoes to plant a kiss on his forehead.

Me: "I might not be in love but I do care. You have a big heart under all this dark exterior. I mean that both literally and figuratively"

He chuckles.

Kgosi: "You just had to."

Me: "Yep, couldn't help it. Want to help me cook for you?"

Kgosi: "I'd rather watch while fantasizing of you as my little wife."

Me: "Why little?"

Kgosi: "Because you are. Literally"

Me: "Mxm"

Kgosi: "I'm leaving tonight. I have to go make sure your friend makes it to you safely."

Me: "You are?"

Kgosi: "Don't be sad. You've insinuated that I've overstayed my welcome and you're right. There are loose ends I need to cut."

I frown.

Me: "I loved having you around."

I pout. He pecks my lips.

Kgosi: "I loved being with you. How about we make our parting memorable?"

Me: "I like the sound of that"

I throw the rug at him and the bastard whips my ass with it.
Jerk. I'll miss him.

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SUKOLUHLE

It's two days after the rather still foggy weekend and I'm packing a duffle bag since my visa has finally been approved. I haven't seen Mpho since then and I don't think I want to. He's been calling and I've been ignoring him.

I'm not dumb; I know what happened. I've just been having a hard time digesting that. I'm not disgusted nor do I have any regrets but for him to... I just can't understand how. There's a knock on my door but the person let's themselves in before I can tell them to. I catch a whiff of her perfume that makes me want to puke. What the hell is she doing here?

Me: "You have guts coming in here after trying to get me arrested."

I zip my bag then give her the attention I know she desires.

Me: "What do you want?"

She pulls a chair then sits facing me. She's not as sophisticated as she was at the club. She's freed her hair, has no makeup on and is wearing a simple t-shirt dress.

Nosi: "Hi"

Me: "Cut it out and tell me why you're here"

Nosi: "I miss you Suko. I miss us"

I scoff. She's crazy.

Me: "I'd think of trying to believe you if I hadn't seen you over the weekend, barely dressed and allowing a man to finger you in public."

Nosi: "I know how that looked like but he... he dropped me."

Me: "Sorry"

I'm being sarcastic. I don't give an inch what happens in her life or how dirty she's done. She deserves this and more for all she's done to me.

Nosi: "He did because I..."

She looks down and fiddles with her fingers. I don't think I'm going to like what she's going to say. When she lifts her head, her eyes are glossy.

Nosi: "I'm pregnant"

The banging of my door catches my attention after. I find myself on my feet then to the door. His car roars before it drives away. He heard that? Oh well.

I leave the door opened. She needs to repeat herself.

Me: "What did you say?"

Nosi: "I'm pregnant Suko."

I chuckle, shaking my head. I pull a chair adjacent to hers and look her straight in her eyes. Her glistening eyes leave me unaffected.

Me: "You must think I'm a fool, don't you? Isn't it convenient how you're suddenly pregnant after we break up and I've seen you for who you are? Could it also be that it's a coincidence that you say this after you wanted us to go raw. We'd been using a condom for two years then boom, out of the blue you want to feel all of me? You're mad wena. If you think this fable of yours will get me back into your web of lies, you're mistaken. Get out"

Nosi: "It's yours, Suko. You're the only one I've been raw with."

I chuckle.

Me: "Your scams never end neh. I mean you saw your false arrest scam didn't work and now you're coming with this? I'll be slow with you since you seem dumb; we're done. There's

nothing you can do or say that'll make me get back with you. I despise you Nosipho, I won't lie. But I'm working on that because I don't want to carry the burden of regret brought by your deception, cheating and betrayal. Leave"

She stands up then begins walking. She stops when she's by the door.

Nosi: "I'm not going to be a single parent because you refuse to take responsibility. I'll give you time to digest this."

Me: "That's not my child and you know it. You better go find your baby daddy and leave me the hell alone."

She clicks her tongue then bangs the door on her exit. Mxm.

I don't do much while waiting for an hour before my flight. I've packed, cooked then ate so now I'm playing candy crush while waiting for my cab. The meter taxi will drop me off at the airport. I've had to stop myself from calling Mpho since Nosi left. The fact that I let a guy like him... I don't even want to say it. Going to Poppy is exactly what I need; timeout. Maybe when I'm away, I'll be able to make sense of everything that's transpired. Heck, I might even remember.

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POPPY

Me: "Aunt, you didn't have to go all out like this."

Quinn: "Like what? I'm looking forward to meeting this friend of yours."

Me: "He's just a friend"

Quinn: "So? Don't be jealous if you don't see him like that."

Me: "Quinn!"

I can't believe that never crossed my mind. I can be slow at times. I should have judged by her makeup and the tight dress that something is up.

Quinn: "I'm fine, right?"

Rumi: "Hot auntie"

She comes in wearing a pair of shorts and matching spaghetti top. Gigi follows behind her while on the iPad Kgosi got him. He spoils them too much but I don't mind.

Quinn: "He better think so."

Rumi laughs.

Me: "And then wena?"

Rumi: "What? It's funny auntie has a crush"

Me: "And what do you know about that?"

Quinn: "She has a celebrity crush. Her pictures are all over her phone and she stalks her when she gets the chance."

Me: “Who’s this?”

Rumi: “Auntie, you promised you won’t tell!”

She scowls, folding her arms.

Me: “Relax, I’m not mad. I just want to know about the girl who has my little sister going crazy.”

Rumi: “She’s my little secret. Can we go now?”

We follow her out. We’re going to the airport since Suko’s plane is due to land soon. I’ve missed him so much, can’t wait to see him. We do everything as a family here which is why we all get packed into Quinn’s truck. She drives off after we’re all settled in.

Quinn is dramatic. She’s holding a board with his name while having a big smile on her face. She only saw pictures then all of a sudden she’s in love. Rumi keeps giggling besides.

Gigi: “Soso!”

He runs towards him then hugs his legs. I can’t believe he’s here. Unlike Gigi, we’re patient and wait for him to come to us. He hugs Rumi, then Quinn before finally hugging me. I slap his cheek when he breaks it.

Suko: “What?”

He's holding the stricken cheek.

Me: "That's for making me come here all alone. I wouldn't have missed you like this."

Suko: "Damn mama."

Quinn clears her throat.

Suko: "Oh hi. You're Poppy's aunt? She's told me a lot about you."

Quinn: "did she now? I hope she didn't badmouth me."

Suko: "Not at all. She did downplay your beauty though. You're more beautiful face to face"

He takes her hand and kisses its back, making her blush.

Rumi and I laugh.

Quinn: "Let's go now. The man probably has jet leg"



POPPY

My excitement is clear and it seems Gigi and aunt Quinn are just as excited for his presence. Rumi doesn't know him like that so she's just cool with him. He's squeezed next to us in the backseat of the van. Rumi is sitting on the passenger's seat next to Quinn.

Me: "So, what have I missed out on?"

Suko: "Geez, a lot. The past week has been mad weird. Did I tell you about Nosi trying to get me arrested?"

Me: "Mpho told me. Why did she do that? And abuse? That's madness!"

Suko: "It is. If she'd gone to a real makeup artist instead of trying to fake her injuries herself, I would have been in jail."

Me: "She really doesn't know when to stop, does she? To go to such extremes after all she did to you..."

Suko: "Knowing her, she was probably going to blackmail me to take her back. She was going to blackmail me on some, 'take me back and I'll drop the charges'"

It's him imitating her voice that makes me laugh. He's right though, Nosi is deceitful.

Me: "But didn't she cheat on you? I thought she'd be happy you're over considering how she treated you. She's the one who decided that being a blessee is better than being your girlfriend."

Suko: "She's going to miss me even more than this. I'm going to work hard, get a 9 to 5 job if I have to until all my dreams come true."

Me: "That's more like it. I think she regrets doing you dirty already"

Suko: "I doubt. She came to me yesterday and claimed to be pregnant. That time we'd only stopped using protection recently and all because of her. She must have already been pregnant then."

Me: "Or she saw she was losing you and wanted to trap you."

He looks at me with squint eyes.

Suko: "You mean she might be pregnant with my baby?"

Me: "She might be unless she was foolish to have unprotected sex with multiple partners."

Suko: "Tjo. You should have seen how one of her niggers treats her. He was busy fiddling inside her panty in public."

Me: "What? Nosi allowed that? You guys never had sex outside your room."

Suko: "She did. I think they all treat her like trash because even the older one who led to my eyes being opened treated her like that. He didn't mind showing her on camera while naked. It's demeaning and I can't believe she's resorted to that for money."

Me: "She was bragging to us about having a job with a retirement package not so long ago. What happened to that? Because I doubt those people give her that much money that she'd quit her job. I know how they work."

Quinn: "We're home"

Me: "We'll come when we're done here."

This is more important than going into the house.

Suko: "I don't think I'll ever be blinded when it comes to love. Nosi was a lesson I'll forever treasure because she opened my eyes to how evil women can be."

Me: "It was about time. Just always remember the lesson from your relationship and have that with you. I don't want you holding back in a relationship because of her. Don't let what she did to you affect you like that."

He smiles.

Suko: "I won't. Tell me what happened with Oki and why you've been here for so long."

I sigh.

Me: "Oki. I should have never messed with that one. First, he wanted to get me killed by wanting me to scam a ruthless man then the plane I was supposed to be in crashed. He wanted me killed in that crash because it had no survivors. What he did to my house was him being petty."

Suko: "But you can't stay here forever. I understand that it's your home and everything but you can't hide forever. Eish Pop, you should have never fucked with him"

Me: "Regret doesn't erase the situation nor will it turn back the hands of time. Kgosì is going to get rid of him for us then we'll finally get to go back. The only thing that sucks is I'll have to start from zero"

Suko: "I'll help where I can, don't worry. Tell me about this Kgosì of yours. Are you sure he isn't another Oki?"

Me: "He's been blunt with me from the go so if he bites, it's not something that's going to catch me off guard. I had no idea Oki wanted to kill me which shows how little I knew about him. He turned into something I didn't like all of a sudden. He even... he wanted to have sex against my consent."

Suko: "I knew something was up when started drugging you."

Me: “Well, I’m just glad I’m done with him. Mpho also offered that I stay with him until I get back on my feet. No offense friend but I’m not about to confine myself in that toilet of yours”

He chuckles.

Suko: “None taken. I would have been demolished with your house if I was still staying there so maybe things worked out as they should have.”

Me: “All God. Everything works together for good for those who trust in Him”

Suko: “Amen. Can we leave now?”

Me: “Not so fast. How’re things between you and Mpho?”

Suko: “Nothing. You should stop this”

I laugh.

Me: “What?”

Suko: “Trying to hook us up. It won’t work.”

Me: “Why do I have a feeling you did that all on your own? Did something happen?”

Suko: “Something like what?”

I shrug.

Me: "What's likely to happen between two people who have chemistry?"

Suko: "Nothing, stop fishing"

I squint my eyes.

Me: "So something happened? Yes. When and how?"

He sighs and shrugs.

Suko: "I don't remember. The only thing that sucks is that I... bottomed"

I laugh, clapping my hands. This I didn't see coming and he looks to be in disbelief as well.

Me: "I saw that little limp, thought I was seeing things. Is he huge?"

Suko: "I don't remember how it happened or even felt. I'm just blank. I was drunk. I've been avoiding him since"

I punch his arm.

Me: "Are you stupid?"

Suko: "Ouch. Why did you do that?"

Me: "You hurt his feelings. How do you think he feels about you ghosting him after y'all had sex? He must feel like shit now."

Suko: "I'll sort it out when I go back. I just need to clear my head. For now, I'd appreciate being shown where I'm going to lay my head."

I sigh then get out of the car as he does.

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SUKOLUHLE

A nap proved to be exactly what I needed. It feels like I've been asleep forever so I must have been really tired. I've never been on a plane for that long so it makes sense. I'm still tired and very hungry. Poppy showed me around their house briefly. It's not big yet it's spacious. I'm sharing the room with Gigi whom I was surprised to learn has been sleeping with Rumi instead of his mom. Rumi now shares with Quinn while Poppy is the only one who's not sharing. The good thing is all rooms have bathrooms so I step in there now and have a bath. I take as long as I need

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soaking with bath salts then get out when I'm content. My stomach has been growling like crazy. I get out of the bathroom all dressed. I find Quinn in the kitchen and greet.

Quinn: "Hi. I hope you're hungry"

Me: "I'm starving."

I pull a bar chair in the kitchen.

Me: "Where's everyone?"

Quinn: "They went to the market. Relax, I don't bite"

I chuckle.

Me: "You look like a sweetheart for that."

Quinn: "Exactly"

We both laugh. She puts a plate of food in front of me, along with a glass of juice. She then sits and watches me eat.

Me: "Do you know how creepy you're being right now?"

Quinn: "I know but you're hot, I can't look anywhere else."

Me: "You're not bad yourself ma'am. I especially love the boobs"

She giggles.

Quinn: "These little things?"

She wiggles her chest. She's wearing a white bandeau but they move. She's like a 32A.

Me: "Aren't these my eyes? I know exactly what I'm talking about"

Quinn: "Well, thank you."

Me: "That's more like it. Thank you for the food, it's exactly what I needed"

Quinn: "My pleasure"

I find myself dialing his number. It's something I've contemplated in the tub and even when I was eating with Quinn feasting on me.

Poppy gave me a burner phone that only had his number since he's the only one I'm in contact with that side. I can't say the same about my family and I won't be here long enough for Zelda to miss me.

Mpho: "Mpho Bloom, hello?"

Me: "Mr Bloom, it's Suko here."

He's silent for about a minute but I can hear his breathing.

Me: "I'm sorry"

Mpho: "Apology accepted. Is there anything else?"

Me: "Come on Mpho. I know you're mad at me and I get it. I acted like a jerk and should have dealt with things better, I'm sorry. Try seeing this from my perspective. I wake up the following morning with an aching posture with no memory of how it happened. I tried asking but you didn't humor me"

Mpho: "Is that all?"

Me: "Why are you being so damn difficult? I'm really sorry."

Mpho: "I accepted your apology. I'm failing to understand what more you want from me Tinto"

Me: "What did you call me?"

Mpho: "You're not deaf, baby daddy. Now, if there's anything else..."

Me: "What's with the attitude? I'm the one who bottomed so I should be the one with—"

Yep, he hung up on me. I look at my phone in disbelief then sigh. He accepted my apology so that's something, right?

Poppy: "What did you get up to in my absence?"

Me: "Hello to you too"

She frowns.

Poppy: "OK, why are you down?"

Me: "Your plan didn't work."

Poppy: "What plan?"

She actually sounds clueless.

Me: "With your aunt?"

She laughs.

Poppy: "I don't need to interfere in that. Quinn always gets what she wants"

Me: "I could do with blowing off some steam though . I tried calling him but he gave me attitude"

Poppy: "I don't blame him."

Me: "He called me baby daddy. He already believes that Nosi is carrying my child. He didn't even ask"

Poppy: "He knows about that?"

I nod.

Me: "He came to my place and kind of heard her say that."

Poppy: "That's... bad. But don't give up on him. Keep trying him, he'll come around."

Me: "He also called me Tinto"

She chuckles.

Poppy: "That's how I introduced you that first time, remember?"

I shake my head.

Me: "He's never called me that before. There's just something about the way he said it that made me nostalgic."

Poppy: "That's weird. So you think you might have met before?"

I sigh.

Me: "I'm not sure. I don't think we have but..."

I shrug.

Poppy: "Want me to look into it?"

Me: "And risk Oki finding you? No. This isn't any big of a deal."

Poppy: "Mm, OK. Let's go outside to the slides and be young"

I laugh.

Me: "Ah, you are young. You like acting like you're not a teenager"

She laughs and pulls my hand to get me off the couch. I follow her outside with our hands intertwined.

21

(Two months later)

★★★★★★

SUKOLUHLE

I arrive home tired, every part of me aching after standing for so long. I look at the tips I made tonight and it's enough compensation for the strife. I found a job two weeks back as a petrol attendant. I was referred by a neighbor, who told me he saw a poster there about them looking for one. Went there and was hired on the spot. It's a job that pays fine, I can't complain because sitting at home isn't going to earn me any money.

As tired as I am, I'm not sleeping. I'm going out tonight with Petro, the guy from next door. As if on cue, he knocks just after I sit down. I'm still renting at the same place, and I haven't seen Nosi since she dropped the pregnancy bomb on me. I'm glad I haven't. I've really moved on from her and just doing me, random sex every once in a while which could be once a week. I don't think I'm ready to commit. I have no space for that in my life. I also haven't seen Mpho since I started working. He understood I have to work and wished me all the best. Things are fine between us. It's like we never had sex which I guess is

good is I don't have any memory of it. I'm just glad we're fine.
Someone knocks on my door just as I'm spraying my cologne.

Me: "I'm almost done man!"

I take the basin filled with dirty water then go out. It's Petro.

Petro: "O feditse?" (You done?)

Me: "Let me just go dispose this"

He nods so I leave to do just that.

I have this habit of calling Mpho Every time I'm about to go out.
It doesn't matter whether it's work, to town or to get it down.
He answers on the second ring.

Me: "I'm about to leave"

Mpho: "Oh, hello to you too."

Me: "Awe."

Mpho: "Where are you going?"

Me: "Out. I think we'll just be local."

Mpho: "Just... keep your location on"

Me: "Anything else daddy?"

Mpho: "Have fun"

Me: "I plan to. There's no way I'm sleeping alone tonight"

Ti, Ti, Ti. He hangs up on me. I chuckle to myself as I shove my phone into my pocket.

Me: “Now, we can go.”

We don't go far from where we're staying, just some tavern. Now, I hate taverns because of the kind of women found there. They're just usually unhygienic and too ratchet for me, especially these ones in the village. There are those who smoke boxer and drink cartons everyday like they have no future. I'm speaking of women in their 20s and 30s. The students don't come here. They go to sophisticated places like PH networks and the likes.

We get a few beers as I scan the place. The crowd looks different tonight. There are a few I can take home with, my room that is.

Petro: “Stocko se tletse vandag” (There's a lot of chicks here”

Me: “Yah but these ones look like they'll want vula mlomo”

He laughs.

Petro: “Qwala. Ga o lape ke sekgoa?” (Don't you get tired of English)

I chuckled.

Me: “Nop. Besides, it's what they love”

I wink at some honey giving me the eye. She's been stealing glances at me or so I thought because when I catch her looking, she doesn't look away. I've just got here but hey, who am I to deny her some attention?

I go over to her after finishing my first beer. She's alone, unlike the others who've come in a crew.

Me: "Hey"

Her: "Hi"

Me: "May I?"

I refer to the chair with my eyes and she nods. She's drinking Strongbow red berries.

Me: "Can I buy you a drink?"

Her: "I'd rather buy you one. Black?"

I chuckle.

Me: "I'm flattered but no. Why can't I be the one to buy for you?"

Her: "Because I want you to go home with me and not vice versa. Don't you guys do that? Buy a girl a couple of drinks so she can leave with you?"

I lean back on my chair and really look at her. She's wearing black pants

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a bandeau with a black denim jacket on top. She's paired it with black block heels and has her makeup on fleek. She's caramel skinned, a little on the thick side.

I smile.

Me: "Black it is then. I'm Suko by the way"

I extend my hand towards her.

Her: "Jeannette"

She shakes it then kisses its back. I laugh.

Me: "You really keen on fucking me, aren't you?"

Jean: "You're hot"

Me: "Thanks"

Jean: "Let me go get that drink"

I let her go. I mean, I don't mind her taking charge. If she wants to be the one in the lead, singing Miss Independent then who am I to stand against that?

She comes back with the drinks. It's a six pack for me.

Jean: "I want to get you drunk"

I scoffed.

Me: "It's going to take a lot more for me to even get tipsy"

Jean: "Oh, I don't mind. My card is limitless"

Me: "Why choose this place?"

Jean: "I didn't feel like going out with my cousins. They're too...
urgh for me"

Me: "What's that supposed to mean?"

Jean: "They're typical slay queens who go out to spend other
men's money as if they're broke."

Me: "Yes girl"

She laughs.

Jean: "Don't"

Me: "We leaving after this"

She nods with a grin. Petro will have to forgive me. I didn't
think I'll want to leave this early but whatever.

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POPPY

I've grown attached to this place so it hurts that we're leaving.
I've had fun here, which I never thought I will. Quinn has been
amazing, taking good care of Gigi and Rumi as well. I'd even

gotten myself a job at a local hair salon. Most of us here have long hair but people surprisingly still put on wigs. OK, it's not a surprise because I do put them on most times but not when I was here. I now know how to sew it, having gotten all the training I needed so I'm ready to start that when I get there. We're all crying at the airport.

Quin: "Don't be a stranger OK. Visit at least once a year. I love you all so much."

Me: "I won't"

Quinn: "And come with that boy so I can have a piece of him again"

I laugh. They had us sleeping with ear plugs because they couldn't keep it down.

She kisses all of us. Suko was with us for about a month then left. It was great bonding again and I do look forward to seeing him again. He sent me a picture last night and he looked happy. He was out with some woman. I won't bother keeping track of his skirts but I did tell him to keep it safe. He's lucky Nosi didn't infect him with anything. He can't put himself in a situation where he'll be scared to test again.

We finally collect ourselves and part ways with Quinn. There's a duffle bag filled with containers of the assortment of food she's made us. I should be happy about this liberty that I've gained.

I'm no longer indebted to Oki, I won't see him or anything but I remember that he's destroyed my house. I think of the memories made in there, the pictures we'd kept of Zuri and I. Yes, I've mourned her again but the thought of never seeing them hurts.

We get into the jet Kgosi hired for us. He has family commitments which is why he's not here. I'm glad he isn't. The man is someone's husband and even though he's cried (not literally) about unrequited love, he has to honor his vows. I'm still waiting for the day he's going to demand some sort of compensation for all he's done for us. For now, I'm going to thrive in this newfound liberty.

Me: "You ready to go back home?"

Rumi nods with a big grin.

Rumi: "I'm ready to finally be a kid"

Me: "I really had your life in danger, didn't I?"

She shakes her head a little vigorously.

Rumi: "No A... sis. That's not what I mean. I'm grateful for everything you've taught me because I know I'll be able to survive this cruel world. I'm just happy I won't have to hide anymore and I can now do what kids my age do."

I smile.

Me: "I'm glad too. I'm also happy we're all going to be in one house and be a family."

Rumi: "Me too. Thank you for whatever you did for this. You're an amazing sister"

She hugs me and I return it. Gigi seems to be tired because he slept immediately after take off. We're not using a jet but a normal flight. I don't mind though, as long as we make it safe. I look forward to seeing both my friends. I only told Mpho that I'm coming because I want to surprise Suko.

He's waiting for us with a big smile. I've missed this guy. We haven't seen each other in what, three months or more? Yes. I hug him so tight then kiss him all over the face after breaking it.

Me: "I missed you so much"

Mpho: "I missed you too. You even grew your hair"

He pulls a curl then let's go.

Mpho: "This is your sister?"

I nod.

Me: "Her name is Rumi. Baby, meet Mpho. We'll be staying with him until I get back on my feet"

Rumi: "Hi"

They hug. He takes Gigi from my arms and kisses him how I've just kissed him. My son's giggles fill my ears.

Mpho: "I hired these guys to help with the luggage"

I look behind him to the guys he's talking about and clap my hands.

Me: "These people in Gucci loafers and Rolex watches?"

Mpho: "Yeah, they're my guys"

There are three but one catches my attention. I don't usually go for looks but his handsomeness is alluring. I don't look at them for too long though.

Me: "What did I miss out on?"

I ask after we get into his car.

Mpho: "Nothing much really"

Me: "Did you and Suko... you know"

He scoffs and shakes his head.

Mpho: "Nope. I don't see that happening again"

Me: "I wouldn't be so sure if I were you. Your kind of chemistry can't easily be ignored"

Mpho: “We don’t have chemistry. It happened and we both moved on from it”

Me: “Oh but you’d be so cute together”

He doesn’t say anything to that. His ‘hired help’ have their own cars.

Mpho: “Some man came over to my place last night and brought some things for you. Kgosi”

Me: “He did?”

Mpho: “Yes. Apparently they belonged to your sister.”

Me: “Kgosi had my sister’s things? What things?”

Mpho: “I put them in your room. You’ll see them then”

It’s what I’m thinking of during the rest of the drive. What are they and where did he get them?

I can’t believe this is my first time coming here. He stays in Leopard Park in what seems like a golf estate. The yard is huge and the house a triple storey. My mouth literally drops.

Me: “Just how much money do you have?”

Mpho: “Enough”

Rumi: “Wow”

I look back at her.

Me: "Right? This is beautiful. I'm proud of you man"

I side hug him.

We get out of the car and follow him inside.

Me: "Wow"

From chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, beautiful African portraits on the wall to his marble floors, not to mention wooden stairs. It's beautiful.

Me: "I love this."

Mpho: "Thank you"

Me: "Are you guys hungry? The cook prepared something Eritrean for you guys"

Rumi: "Yes!"

She's already making her way to the dining hall.

Me: "Please show me my room. I want to see what Kgosi brought over"

He nods.

Mpho: "Of course"

Gigi follows Rumi while we go to the room which is on the ground floor.

Mpho: "This is it. I chose one downstairs because of Gigi. My house isn't really child friendly"

Me: "It's OK. Thank you"

He opens the door but doesn't go in.

Mpho: "I'll give you your moment"

I smile.

Me: "Thank you"



POPPY

I spend about twenty minutes, if not more contemplating to open one of the boxes. I'm confused about how Kgosi managed to get these things. I think it's the ones which were in her room. If I'm right, then it means he might have known Oki was going to do what he did which makes me question how exactly? Did Oki's team have a rat? Or maybe he just...predicted it?

I sigh and walk closer to where they are. I've been standing on the same spot for a long time now. I get the first box which is the smallest. I open it and sigh when I peek inside. It's her jewelry collection. She had made beads which had all our names. How come I never went through any of her things? Before I go into it any further, I take my phone out and dial Kgosi's number. He has to do some serious explaining. It's risky calling him like this because his wife might pick up and the last thing I want is to wreak havoc in his marriage. I care about him and wouldn't want to crack what he's built for so long. I'm really not that kind of person who's petty and don't go around hurting people I care about and trying to destroy what they've built. I keep my distance when I need to.

Kgosi: "Poppy"

Me: "Hi, how are you?"

Kgosi: "Oh, I'm good...thank you"

I chuckle. He really sounds like I wasn't expecting that.

Me: "Are you not used to people checking on you?"

Kgosi: "Who would check on a ruthless motherfucker like myself? I don't expect no one to. It's just rare"

Me: "I don't care about all of that, just you."

Kgosi: "Thank you Poppy, I appreciate"

Me: "And modesty doesn't suit you."

He chuckles.

Kgosi: "Only with you and my kids so consider yourself special"

Me: "Oh that I am. Anyway, how did you get my sister's things? Did you know Oki was going to demolish my house? Where is he?"

Kgosi: "I was keeping an eye on him, had planted a rat. I made sure to have someone get them before he did because I had a feeling there were things of sentimental value in there. Did you ever open the duffle bag I gave you?"

Me: "I haven't."

Kgosi: "Alright. I'm going to say this again Poppy, my intentions are always clear. If I had ulterior motives, you'd know. Anything else?"

Me: "Uhm, no"

Kgosi: "And welcome back. Enjoy your freedom"

Me: "I plan to."

Kgosi: "This is where it ends for us. I wish you all the best."

Me: "Wait, what?"

Kgosi: "I'm a married man Poppy. I can't fall for you any more than I have now."

Me: "Oh"

Kgosi: "Don't do that Poppy. Letting go of you already hurts but it's what's best for the both of us. Goodbye"

I'm a little melancholic after the call. I mean I care About him, but I think I'm also a little attached. I feel it in my heart but he's right

it's for the best. I end up taking a nap. I'll eat after it.

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SUKOLUHLE

This girl has energy. I woke up with my waist painful, not to mention the aching in my back. I'm not even going to mention how my penis feel. I've come to know when it's him knocking and the mood I might find him in when I open the door. It sounds like he's mad at me from how he's banging on the door.

Me: "I'm coming, damn!"

He does not come in after I open which is good because Jean is still sprawled out on my bed. I close the door after stepping out.

Me: "You look good"

Mpho: "I know. Are you busy?"

Me: "For you? No. what's up?"

Mpho: "I need you to come with me to my house."

Me: "Now?"

Mpho: "I'm actually here to get you."

Me: "We can leave"

Mpho: "In your boxers with scratches and hickeys all over your chest?"

I scratch my head. Why am I feeling bad?

Me: "I'm...sorry?"

Mpho: "What for?"

I shrug.

Me: "I just feel the need to. I'll grab some clothes quickly then shower at your place."

Mpho: "You trust her enough to leave her alone in your room?"

Me: "Leave who?"

He looks at me blankly. I feel like a kid caught stealing candy or something.

Me: "Stop looking at me like that. You making me feel bad and I have no idea why"

He scoffs.

Mpho: "Throw her out, grab some clothes, come out then lock. It's that simple"

Me: "Right, I'm coming back."

She's awake when I go back inside the room. She's getting dressed even.

Jean: "Thanks for the amazing night and day Suko. We can keep doing this until you find someone you want to settle with."

Me: "That's going to take ages man"

Jean: "SO, we can be exclusive until then?"

I chuckle.

Me: “We’ll see. You did give me a pretty rough night and morning, definitely something I’d want a repeat of.”

Jean: “Greta. Let me get your number”

She gives me her phone then I type it in. she tries going for a kiss but I shake my head. Not when Mpho is outside. It just feels wrong.

Jean: “What?”

Me: “You know I have company, someone waiting for me outside. You need to leave.”

She frowns.

Jean: “Damn but I’ll call you. Better pick up when I call.”

Me: “I will”

I’m right on her tail with a duffle bag. I don’t even bother getting dressed. The man on the driver’s seat doesn’t seem pleased.

Me: “Can we go?”

Mpho: “Don’t force my hand Suko”

Me: “How am I doing that?”

He scoffs then starts the car.

“Ooooooh!”

It’s Mose’s voice somewhere inside the house. It’s been transformed into an all white and gold theme, everything just so classy.

Me: “What’s going on?”

Mpho: “It’s a little get together”

Me: “But you didn’t tell me there’s a theme. I took casual clothes”

Mpho: “We’re not exactly going anywhere. Besides, the clothes are for tomorrow. I got you something in my room.”

He gives me his keys.

Me: “I’m not your bitch Mpho”

He flinches at the profanity then sighs.

Mpho: “Don’t you get tired of your big ego? It’s just clothes. They didn’t even dent my wallet”

Me: “And you just bad to throw that at me, didn’t you? You don’t always have to make me feel shitty about not-

Mpho: “I’m one of your biggest supporters Suko but you’ll never see that. Just go and stop trying to argue.”

I click my tongue.

Me: “Fuck you”

Mpho: “Right back at you”

I halt and turn with a raised eyebrow.

Me: “Did you just ... you don’t curse”

Mpho: “I meant that literally but leave.”

Me: “You’re not dressed. You wearing blue denims”

Mpho: “You still here?”

I huff as I proceed to the staircase.

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POPPY

Light shaking is what wakes me up. I have no idea how long I’ve slept. I open my eyes to Mpho who smiles at me.

Me: “Hey”

I sit up while rubbing my eyes.

Me: “Did I sleep for that long?”

Mpho: “Yes but you needed the rest. I want you to shower, wear that dress with the shoes then come out.”

I look to where he's pointing.

Me: "You got me clothes?"

Mpho: "it wasn't me."

Me: "Who's getting married? Why are you dressed in white?"

Mpho: "Go shower then come find out"

It's hard for me not to think when I'm in the shower. I always have my life figured out but I find myself a little conflicted when it comes to Kgosi.

I manage to finish however then I remember he didn't tell me about Oki. I do hope he's permanently gotten rid of him because I don't see myself not doing it if I even get to smell him. Mpho isn't in my room. The dress is beautiful. It's a white above the knees silk wrap dress with a beautiful V-neck shape. It's paired with nude perspex block heels.

I spray some perfume when I'm done. I also do my eyebrows and put on some lipgloss. I fix my edges, grab the purse matched with the dress and go out after filling it with essentials.

My mouth hangs open when I arrive at the living room which has been transformed. There are about six high round tables with white rose bouquets with the same flower petals sprinkled on the floor. Classic, matrimonial music is playing.

Suko: "Poppy?"

He comes to me and we hug. I missed him so much. He kisses my forehead when we break it.

Suko: "Why didn't you tell me you're back? I would have come to fetch you. You look beautiful by the way."

Me: "You're not so bad yourself"

He shrugs.

Suko: "All Mpho. This is Zuri's party"

My eyes bulge out.

Me: "It is? I mean it explains the theme but wow. Mpho really did this for me?"

My eyes are watery. I wasn't expecting this.

Mpho: "Love it?"

I turn and engulf him in a hug.

Me: "Thank you so much."

The tears keep falling which makes me grateful that I didn't put on liner. He cups my cheeks after.

Mpho: "It's my pleasure."

He kisses my forehead after then let's go.

Suko: "Ready to party?"

I look around at the guests.

Me: "Hell yeah."

It's Rumi and us plus Mpho's friends whom fetched us from the airport. Even that handsome one is here and he looks exactly like what I need to forget about Kgosì.

Bonus



MPHO

The party went well so we're now at the pool and sort of just relaxing. Mose is on my lap, busy throwing her barely there ass on my face.

Me: "You really want that boyfriend of yours to kill me huh?"

She laughs.

Mose: "Trust me, he wouldn't care. He'd only give a damn if we ever slept together which would never happen."

Suko: "Yeah, never."

Me: "Why are you eavesdropping?"

Suko: "I'm still right though."

He shrugs. He thinks he knows me so much.

Mose: "I think we should play a game, Khanyi needs to loosen up."

Khanyi: "Don't you dare."

She laughs at the man's middle finger. Khanyi is a lawyer. I met him when I was helping him choose a house after his girlfriend

passed on and he moved here. She was from here so he wanted to be closer to her grave. Our friendship sort of stemmed from there.

Poppy: "I've been wondering about his name."

She licks her lips which has me chuckling. If only she knew how this one is.

Me: "I think you should leave it there."

Poppy: "Why?"

Khanyi: "No, stop. There's no one about to talk about me like I'm not here. What's up Poppy?"

I raise my hand in surrender. They both groan, I guess.

Mose: "I know what's going to make this night interesting. Let's play never have I ever"

I groan. It never ends well for me with this game, but Lindo and the others seem keen.

She sits up and giggles.

Mose: "OK, I think we all know what's up. I'm going to ask a question and if you have, you take a shot. This is the dirty version."

She's scrolling through her phone as she says this. So, we're sitting on the pool side and have made sort of a circle with our

chaise lounges. It's Cain, Lindo, Poppy, Khanyi, Suko, Mose and me so it's just seven of us. I'm surprised Cain didn't bring Nosi but I can't exactly ask that. I'm more surprised that he's not with a girl at all. We've put the ice bucket on the floor. She grabs a bottle of Tanqueray gin from it. We all have glasses on hand. The girls are the ones who've been drinking sparkling wine while we drank vodka. She refills all our glasses.

Mose: "OK, first question. Never have I ever woken up next to a stranger"

Everyone except Mose and I take a sip.

Mose: "Damn, you guys are nasty."

Khanyi: "And you way too young not to be. You should try it even though the guy will most likely end up dead."

we laugh at that. Her boyfriend is like that.

Mose: "OK. Never have I ever had a threesome"

I clear my throat and take a sip along with Poppy, Khanyi, Cain and Lindo.

Suko: "Who the hell did you have a threesome with?"

Me: "The rules of the game do not say we should share details."

Suko: "I'm just failing to believe you've had a threesome while I haven't"

Lindo: "It wasn't even once, just so you know."

The bastard takes a sip of his drink after saying that. Suko turns to him.

Suko: "Was it with you?"

He coughs and takes another sip. I chuckle. He turns back to me.

Suko: "What the hell are you laughing at?"

I look at Mose.

Me: "May we have another question?"

Poppy: "Sounds like a good idea. I've just remembered how I lost my damn virginity, damn."

Mose: "Never have I ever had sex without a condom."

We all take a sip.

Mose: "Never have I ever kicked someone out after having sex."

Poppy: "I'm not a savage"

But she takes a sip along with the others except for me.

Me: "Who did you kick out?"

Mose: "Who else? He had made me mad then thought sex was going to fix it. I threw him out and continued to sulk."

I chuckle, shaking my head.

Me: "Girls"

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NOSI

What hurts about going through a pregnancy alone is not having anyone to call when you having cravings. All I do is bite my lip with my eyes closed as I imagine my cravings being satisfied. I'm now only three months pregnant yet the exhaustion is on another level. I tried Cain again and he answered this time.

Cain: "Yes?"

Me: "Why haven't you been answering my calls?"

Cain: "I didn't want to. Where are you? I need some putthy"

Me: "I am home."

Cain: "I'm coming to fetch you, tired of third wheeling."

Me: "Please bring me some pizza when you come, double decker."

Cain: "Oh, you need some stamina? Sure thing. Plus, Mpho's bar has everything so I don't need to buy you a drink. I'm coming"

He hangs up and I regret calling him. What if Suko is there? The last time I saw him is when I dropped the pregnancy bomb. Cain cannot find out about that because he'll stop the arrangement between us and I'll have to find another way to make money.

I take a bath quickly and get dressed. My stomach isn't showing as of yet and I dread the day it will. No one at home knows and I want it to stay that way. They're all in no position to ask anyway since I'm their breadwinner. I put on some makeup, hiding my eye bags then a curly Malaysian 10inch wig. I spray some perfume then wait while scrolling through my phone.

He calls me after about thirty minutes so I grab my purse and leave.

Cain: "Oh shit

Advertisement

you're overdressed. Don't you have swim wear? Because we're chilling by the pool."

Me: "I don't but I can go change into shorts"

Cain: "Oh good but give me a kiss first."

The kiss is wet and dirty then I'm out. I look at my stomach for about five minutes after changing to make sure there isn't a

sign. My stomach looks flat so I'm ok. I'm wearing denim bumshorts with a swim bra and a black mesh dress on top.

Cain: "That's more like it. Put on your seatbelt because I'm speeding"

I haven't even securely buckled when he drives off.

All I'm doing on the ride is praying that something happens to this baby. I don't think I want to be pregnant, more especially because I don't know who's the father. Cain doesn't like using protection, especially when he's drunk because we've never really had sex sober.

My heart is beating out of my chest as I follow him. I'm too stressed that I don't even awe at Mpho's house nor do I check it out. He takes me to the bar and pours me a drink.

Me: "Why are you so nice?"

Cain: "I'm softening you up for something."

I take a sip of the wine.

Me: "This is good"

Cain: "Yeah, let's go."

They all look at me when we arrive at his patio. Poppy is the first to scoff then the rest except for some guy I have never

seen before. I feel humiliated, more so because Cain doesn't seem bothered. He sits on his chaise then pulls me to his lap.

It's awkwardly quiet after but I can see them exchanging glances.

Me: "Why are they like this?"

Cain: "Why don't you ask them?"

I now regret coming here because I'm a joke and I don't know why.

Mpho: "I'm calling it a night."

He stands up.

Suko: "Yeah, me too."

Poppy: "We're not fools Iona. I saw you guys whispering. What were they saying Mose?"

The Mose girl chuckles and shrugs.

Mose: "I have no idea but I'm also calling it a night."

The three leave with Suko and Mpho a bit close. I see Suko take the guy's hand as they disappear inside. There's something up there.

Me: "What's going on with them?"

I'm whispering with hopes that he won't embarrass me any further. If he didn't give me money, I'd be on my way out.

Cain: "Mine your own business"

Me: "I'm just asking, no need to be rude."

Poppy: "Alright, I'm done here."

She's holding the new guy's hand. Of course, she gets the handsome ones. First Mpho, now this guy. Maybe something also happened with her and Suko from how he'd always defend her. There's just three of us left now.

Cain: "How about you take the shorts off and we go into the pool for a swim?"

He's already fiddling with my pants.

Lindo: "That sounds like a good idea"

I don't like how he's looking at me. I look at Cain.

Me: "What's going on?"

Cain: "I'm thinking a threesome in the pool. Don't worry, we'll give you about twenty thousand for it."

Me: "You want to pay me for sex? I'm not a prostitute Cain!"

Cain: "Who said you are? If you don't want, you can say no. We're not going to force you."

Lindo: “Yah, we don’t do that. If you’re not interested, we’ll let you be.”

Twenty thousand is a lot of money and considering how the renovations had to take a pause at home because the other one bailed on me, I need this. I end up taking off the shorts then stand.

Lindo is the first to stand up. He comes to me and starts kissing me, his hands on my butt. I push all the thoughts to the back of my head as I remind myself of why I agreed. It’s for the house and nothing else.

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MPHO

Me: “So, you have no problem with her drinking while she’s carrying your baby and in a possible threesome that’s likely going to be raw?”

He looks at me then rolls his eyes as he takes a sip of his drink.

Suko: “She wouldn’t be here if she was pregnant. Do we really have to talk about this? You said you going to remind me of that night.”

Me: “Yes, which is why I need to get you some water so you can sober up.”

Suko: "I'm not that drunk so relax. How did it happen?"

I take off my tshirt.

Me: "Started with you breaking into my room and bouncing on my bed."

That night chooses now to replay in my mind. The images are so vivid that it feels like it's really happening.

Suko: "How did I get to bottom?"

Me: "You wanted to have sex with me so much that you didn't mind."

Suko: "But why didn't I fuck you?"

Me: "Because I wouldn't allow you. Not when the same penis had been in a female an hour prior."

Suko: "This means that you...wow"

Me: "You liked it."

He sighs.

Suko: "My first was with a male, you know. That shit hurt man. I spent about a week on bed rest, faking illness because my behind was paralyzed."

I laugh.

Me: "You're exaggerating."

Suko: “No, really. It was good but damn.”

Me: “You also reminded me that I was your first. You changed a lot over the years.”

He grins.

Suko: “No way, Graham Bloom?”

I nod.

Suko: “Wow. The only guy who was ever able to convince me... what happened to that confidence? You seem reserved now. Like you’re locked in the closet and have thrown the key away.””

Me: “A lot happened.”

I leave it there. My personal life isn’t something I find pleasure in talking about, especially my past. I’m enjoying the present and looking forward to the future so that’s all that happens.

Me: “Join me for a shower.”

He shakes his head and gets off the bed, making his way to me. He stops when he’s in front of me and puts his hands on my shoulders.

Suko: “How about I give you a reason to bath?”

The hands on my shoulders move to cup my cheeks then he’s kissing me. I sigh then reply, moving my hands to his butt.

Suko: "Really had me screaming your name Gray"

He's whispering on my ear while choking me slightly. He really wants to turn the tables. I can feel Trixy about to relent.

Me: "Not when you had that girl and still have her marks all over you."

Suko: "Tell me what you want."

I have a feeling he's referring to something a little more significant, but I can't trust him. I can't trust anyone.

Me: "I want you naked and on top of me."

Suko: "I've never done that."

Me: "There's a first time for everything, isn't there?"

He sighs.

Suko: "I can try"

I peck his lips.

Me: "That's more like it and I'll guide you."

Suko: "I just...I want to please you."

I cup his cheeks.

Me: "You will. Stop overthinking this. I'm pretty sure you've rode a lot of girls before."

He smirks.

Suko: "I guess."

I smash my lips on his. We've been talking a lot now which is important but I don't think now is the time.

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★★★★★★

SUKOLUHLE

Mpho: “I want to kiss you all over your body so bad but the thoughts of her having done the same restrict me.”

I groan.

Me: “Do you have to keep bringing that up?”

He kisses my shoulder blades. I find myself wishing those lips were somewhere else.

Mpho: “Bring what up?”

His finger grazes my entrance and I pant then bite my lip.

Me: “The Jean thing. I didn’t know we were going to be laid up like this. I wouldn’t have done it.”

Mpho: “Really?”

He’s teasing my entrance with his finger, not really going in but circling just around the wrinkles.

Me: “Yes, come on.”

I suck in a breath as it slowly goes in.

Mpho: "Why do you do it?"

Me: "You want us to talk now?"

I'm agitated.

Mpho: "Answer my question."

Me: "I get horny, like I am right now and Jean said –

That's when he fully enters his finger which happens to graze my prostate. This damn – I won't even say it.

Mpho: "What did she say?"

He keeps brushing against that spot which has me moaning like a damn b.

I bite my lip, trying to regain some of the sanity along with control here. It's hard with me on my stomach naked, him on top of me still in his pants.

Me: "That I can call on her whenever I need some"

Mpho: "We'll see how you'll do that with a painful back."

Me: "You don't like her?"

Mpho: "I don't like sharing"

Me: "Tell me what you want."

Mpho: "I want to be inside of you"

I don't get why he's shying away from my question. He's been doing this since earlier. I know he knows what I mean. I'd give it all up if that's what he wants and until he says it, I won't. yes, I know what I said about commitment, relationships and all that but he's different. He just makes me want to risk it all. Besides, I don't think he'll want me to go to illegal extremes just to please him. He inspires me, makes me want to better myself and he doesn't know it but I'm working hard to not only make myself proud, but him as well.

Mpho: "You ready?"

I look back at his handsome self and nod.

Mpho: "Alright but don't forget you still riding"

I huff, rolling my eyes.

Me: "We can go all night."

Mpho: "Didn't you do that last night?"

Me: "At least my penis has gotten a break."

Mpho: "And that's why I'll never give you head."

Me: "What?"

His hands are on my neck as he slowly thrusts in. the feeling of him stretching me is euphoric, feels like this is how it's meant to be.

There's something about his moans in my ear and the slow thrusts. He's not fully in but the pace sort of makes the mood like we're making love. The gentle hold on my neck, little bites of my earlobe. I crane my neck for a kiss and everything feels like it's alright.

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POPPY

He pushes me when my hand attempt to slide into his pants.

Me: "What?"

Khanyi: "We're sleeping."

I look at him in disbelief. I'm drunk and horny, what's he on about?

Me: "I'm not tired."

Khanyi: "I wasn't asking."

Me: "Then why did you ask me to come into your room if you just want to sleep?"

Khanyi: "I don't want to sleep alone."

Me: "Then you won't have to do anything"

Khanyi: "No. I'm saying this for the last time, let's sleep."

I click my tongue and relent. He's really not interested and I can't exactly coerce him. I really thought it's why he wanted us to go to his room. I would have stayed behind and watched Nosi degrade herself for money. Speaking of Nosi, I'm going to have a chat with her in the morning. What she's doing isn't on. I'm drunk now so I can't stop her or talk her out of it but I will tomorrow. He spoons me and soon, his breathing has steadied. I close my eyes and allow sleep to overtake me.

I'm grumpy in the morning. Imagine being woken up by a man's erection pressed against you then have to deal with the rejection once again when attempts to a morning glory fail. I left him taking a shower then came down to my room where I've just bathed. I wear a sundress, thong sandals then let my hair loose. I grab my phone then I'm out. I'm hungry, hungover and horny.

Me: "Nosipho"

I find her stuffing her face in the kitchen. She looks like she hasn't eaten in ages. She's a hot mess right now, wearing Lindo's shirt with her hair all over her face. She reminds me of when I was pregnant with Gigi.

Me: "Don't you hear me greeting?"

Nosi: "We're not friends."

I laugh.

Me: "So, you only greet your friends? What a shame."

Nosi: "Yes."

Me: "Are you pregnant?"

She chokes on her food then starts coughing. My eyes don't move from her until she's done. I watch her as she takes a sip of her juice then clicks her tongue.

Me: "I guess that's a yes. Do you know the father?"

Nosi: "Do you know Gigi's father?"

I laugh.

Me: "My bet's on two guys. What about you?"

She sighs.

Nosi: "Three"

Me: "Why did you drink and do all of that last night while you know you're pregnant? Do you want to give birth to a deformed baby?"

Nosi: "Why do you care? It's not like you like me."

Me: "I don't. I hate you more for what you did to Suko, my brother. However, I am concerned about you. The way you're

leading your life is alarming. Is the Instagram lifestyle worth all of this?"

Nosi: "You don't know me Poppy, don't talk like you do."

Me: "I've seen you posting in expensive cars, chilling in clubs and drinking cocktails. I've seen the pictures of gourmets you post

the glitz and glamour. What are you gaining from having multiple sexual partners?"

She scoffs.

Nosi: "You're one to talk."

Me: "I learned my lesson with Gigi's fathers. I keep it safe but sex for money? I don't do that. I was exclusively with Oki for two years or so, so I have no idea what you're talking about. The man I left with; we didn't fuck even though I wanted us to. If it happens that we do, I won't have sex with anyone else. All I'm saying is, you're living a risky life. Did you use protection last night?"

She looks down.

Me: "Exactly. I was drunk man, which is why I didn't stop you but sober, I wouldn't have allowed that bull. No amount of money is worth degrading yourself like that. That twenty thousand won't make a dent in those two's money. Heck,

they'll probably double or triple it but what about your dignity? Think of the child you're carrying Nosi. Consider finding a job, seeking your independence and stop using your vagina to generate income. Trust me, you'll regret it. It depreciates. You'll find someone who loves you and whom you love who'll be subjected to your damaged pussy because you didn't let it rest. There are STIs, STDs and HIV/AIDS. You'll regret having watched your life vanish before your eyes when you had time to do something about it. It's not too late to change. If not for you, then for that baby in your stomach."

I leave her and proceed to make my hangover shake. I hope my words marinate in her brain. I hope she takes some, if not all of it into cognizance.

Mpho comes down with Khanyi on his tail. The house owner is only wearing his pajama pants and barefoot. You can tell he had a rough night from his swollen lips and the scratches on his chest.

Me: "You know we know, right? You don't have to reveal your chest as evidence."

He chuckles while coming to me. He gives me a side hug and kisses my temple.

Mpho: "Good morning Poppy, how did you sleep?"

Me: “Mxm, don’t ask. Your friend didn’t want to give me some.”

Mpho: “That’s no surprise.”

I nudge him with the elbow on his rib

Me: “That’s not comforting. I needed that dicktherapy”

Khanyi: “I’m here, you know.”

I turn to him with my arms folded.

Me: “Why didn’t you want to give me some?”

Khanyi: “I’m too old for one-night stands.”

Me: “It wouldn’t have been an ordinary one. Enjoyment is guaranteed. Besides if you give as good as I do, it would have been a couple of one-night stands.”

Khanyi: “I prefer knowing you first.”

Me: “And sex isn’t a way of knowing someone?”

Khanyi: “Not to me. I’ll be seeing you though.”

Me: “Yeiy”

I can’t even fake the enthusiasm. Nosi decides to laugh at my dismay so I retract and point a middle finger at her.

Mpho: “Breakfast is served but Suko and I won’t be joining you.”

Me: "I wasn't expecting you to."

Khanyi's hand goes to my butt, cupping a cheek.

Khanyi: "Relax"

He kisses my neck and let's go. I find his touch to be burning, igniting where his lips and hand were. No, he's torturing me.

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SUKOLUHLE

I find myself laying on this bed and reminiscing about last night and earlier this morning. When I close my eyes, his touches haunt me. He was just...different this time. It felt like we were making love. But then this morning, he's been nonchalant like we didn't have that amazing night. I don't get why he's like this. He's no longer that expressive nineteen-year-old who broke my virginity then broke up with me after finding out my age and promising we'll try when I'm over eighteen. He's just so closed off, it's a little alarming. He's holding back on life, but I vow to make him live again. This Gray doesn't seem alive. He just seems to be existing. It's sort of like there's nothing to him except the money and how he loves and cares for his friends.

He comes in with a tray which I assume has breakfast and sets it on top of the bedside drawer.

Mpho: "I got you breakfast."

Me: "You didn't have to."

Mpho: "Still did. Have you showered?"

Me: "Yes. I'm just lazy to get dressed."

Mpho: "Oh good. What do you want to do today?"

Me: "Go back to my place. I'm working tonight."

Mpho: "What's with the attitude?"

Me: "I have no idea what you're talking about. Thanks for the food though."

I grab the tray, uncover the plates and indulge. He watches me until I'm done.

Me: "When will I top you?"

Mpho: "Don't worry, you'll know when you have to."

Me: "What does that mean?"

Mpho: "Exactly that. But only if you'll stick along long enough."

Me: "I'm for forever."

Mpho: "Good."

He leans in for a kiss which I reciprocate.

Me: "You know I'm here for you, right?"

He nods but I can see he doesn't believe it. It's also a task I'll have to take; showing him that I'm there for him and that I care. The rest will be all up to him.

I get dressed after, finally putting to use the clothes I came with.

He follows me out until we're on the ground floor.

Me: "Good morning."

Nosi: "Must have been a nice one for you getting your ass ate out."

Me: "You're a fine one to talk miss porn star. Is there even a baby in there since you were drinking and taking two dicks at the same time?"

Cain: "A baby?"

He looks at her and poor girl looks like a deer caught in headlights.



SUKOLUHLE

All eyes are on her. I'm wondering why she's still here because she's played her role.

Me: "Why are you even still here? This isn't your boyfriends' house."

Cain: "What baby Nosipho? You're pregnant?"

Me: "She came to me claiming it's mine and I was right not to believe her. The list is endless because there's also you, Vusi and who knows who else."

Poppy: "OK, I think that's enough insults."

Me: "Not insults, I'm spitting facts."

I shrug.

Mpho: "Keep quiet."

Cain: "I asked you a damn question. Are you fucken pregnant?"

She looks down and nods.

Cain: "How long because your stomach is fucken flat? Who else is the father other than Suko and I?"

Nosi: "It's Vusi but I swear it's only the three of you."

I scoff.

Me: "Yeah right."

This guy decides to spank my butt. That hurts but I'm speaking the truth.

Cain: "So, you knew while you did all that last night? Are you really that fucken infused by money? That you'd drink and put my possible baby's life in danger for it? It's not only the alcohol but the fucken pill you took. How careless can you be?!"

He's fuming. Mpho has to hold him back from choking Nosi's to death. The only thing he got in was a slap. I don't condone gender-based violence but Nosi deserved it.

She's crying like a widow, reminding me of the time she spat on me and then broke up with me. I was like this but worse, on the streets while people passed by. It's still an embarrassing moment for me. Anyone could have taken a video and then posted it on black twitter with the title, 'It ended in tears'. I'm so glad I'm over that. I'm not even moved by the situation unfolding here.

Lindo: "What's with all the noise? And wena, give me my shirt. I've been looking for it all over."

Cain: "She's pregnant. And she knew this but still went on last night because she values money more than anything else."

Poppy: "We all have no right to judge her because we don't know where she's coming from. Calling her names and slapping her won't change anything. It's a question of whether or not she's keeping the baby. If yes, then I think DNA testing can be arranged."

Cain: "She's keeping it. She would have terminated if she didn't want to, without any of our consent. You better pray that baby isn't mine because if it is, I'll put you under lock."

He takes his car keys from the table then leaves with Lindo on his tail. I guess he doesn't need his shirt after all.

Mpho: "When are you conducting this DNA?"

Nosi: "I'll uhm...arrange some time"

She rushes out after.

Me: "I also have to leave."

I look at Mpho who nods. It's been one eventful morning. I do hope the baby isn't mine though. I don't want to have to deal with Nosi and her shenanigans. She put me through the most and even though I obviously wouldn't get back with her if it happens to be mine, I'd rather not deal with her at all. Besides, I'm no way ready for a baby. I'm in no position to provide for

one, and that's not just financially. I am not prepared mentally and emotionally. Fuck, I barely have my life together at this point.

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POPPY

I'm a little sad that he has to leave when we haven't even kissed. This guy tortured me.

He kisses my forehead.

Khanyi: "I'll call you"

Me: "You don't have my number"

Khanyi: "I do. I'll see you maybe tomorrow."

Me: "So I don't even get a simple kiss?"

Khanyi: "Come to my office then I'll see what we can work out."

I sigh and nod.

Khanyi: "Mpho will take you."

I watch him leave then go back inside. I'm frustrated. I need to blow off some steam. Rumi and Gigi are up now and having breakfast.

Rumi: "How was the party last night?"

Me: "It was fine."

Rumi: "And your crush?"

I click my tongue and she chuckles.

Me: "Don't even ask me about that one. He was a waste of energy"

Rumi: "Sorry. You see why I'd rather crush on a celebrity? Because I know we'll never meet. But I can imagine how it feels"

I laugh.

Me: "You're sweet
you know that?"

She grins while rolling her eyes.

Rumi: "I know that."

Me: "SO this celeb, is she south African?"

Rumi: "Yep and I'm not saying anything after that. I know how you are. You might end up getting me her number then mess things up for me."

I laugh.

Me: "How will I be doing that? I'd be helping"

I shrug.

Rumi: “No way. I’ll ask if I want it. Maybe when I’m older like fifteen or sixteen.”

Me: “You’ll still have a crush on her?”

She nods.

Rumi: “I love her!”

The dreamy look on her face makes me laugh. Yeah, no. she’s captured.

I decide to go to Tsebo so I can see Kiara and speak of where she gets her hair. I’m hoping she won’t mind hooking me up. It’s not like I’ll be stealing her clients. I’ll build my own clientele. Since Mpho hasn’t come back and Rumi wants some air, I leave with them. We take a taxi which drops us off at town.

The salon is busy this time. He has clients waiting for him on chairs while he’s busy trimming someone’s hair.

Tsebo: “Oh my, a whole stranger! Where have you been?”

He comes to me and we hug.

Tsebo: “I haven’t seen you in months. I went to your place and there was like no house. Then I was mourning you and Gigi because I thought something happened. I also heard about your boyfriend’s shooting. Are you ok?”

Me: "I'm good. I was actually home for the past few months and it was good."

Tsebo: "I must go with you the next time and get myself a Muslim man"

I laugh.

Me: "Yeah, do come. I feel like doing my nails now."

Tsebo: "I'll get Kiara."

Me: "Yes plus I finally got that wig training I needed so I'm venturing into that. I want her to offer me some intellect."

Tsebo: "That's great love. I know she won't mind. Maybe you guys can work something that'll profit the both of you."

Me: "Yeah, hopefully."

She comes in about an hour which I didn't even feel because we were all just talking like there isn't people in here. Tsebo also came with a 5l box of wine which we've been on like it's water.

Kiara: "Hi, so sorry for coming this late."

Me: "It's fine doll."

I get up so we can hug.

Me: "I need my nails done as we talk hair"

Rumi: "Can I do mine as well?"

Me: "You have money?"

She frowns. I chuckle.

Me: "I'm kidding. Yes, you can."

We have a great chat and even come with a bombing business idea. It's now time for me to open the bag Kgosi gave me and put the money to good use.

I'm also thinking of giving a portion to Suko so he can rent space for his repairs stores. He now has regular clients who even refer people to him. I know opening a store is like a big deal but in this world, it's go big or go home. Sure, there are no guarantees and he'll probably make losses for a few months until he starts making profit but I believe in him and his capabilities.

We leave after about five hours with Gigi now sleeping. I called a cab because there's no way I'm about to be squeezed in a taxi against sweaty bodies. No way.

We ordered pizza and chicken back at the salon so they've ate.

Rumi offers to put him on her bed since she also wants to take a nap.

I'm excited in the morning. maybe it has to do with Khanyi or I just woke up on the right side. I don't know what it is about him that excites me but he does.

Mpho: "You really don't have to be that excited"

Me: "Good morning!"

My voice comes out in a singsong which has him laughing. He's already dressed in his creased three-piece suit and formal shoes.

Me: "You look good."

I fix his tie and he smiles, biting his lip.

Mpho: "Thank you ma'am. You're barely dressed."

I look at my mini wrap dress then smile.

Me: "I want to give him easy access."

Mpho: "That man can't be seduced."

I frown.

Me: "And how do you know that? Did you try?"

Mpho: "No, he's straight and that's besides the point. Khanyi has been asexual since his girlfriend passed on. it was his first entertaining a woman with you. I think he wants something from you though so don't let your guard down."

Me: "What?"

Mpho: "Let's go."

I brush him off then follow him out. Gigi and Rumi are both at school. Gigi is at creche actually.

Mpho: "Will see you at dinner. We going out"

He kisses my cheek as I get out.

His office is on the last floor of the ten storey building. The receptionist didn't give me any hassles because the big boss is expecting me. His words, not mine.

It's all glass and very transparent. From his big table to the walls. I can see the city from up here and it's amazing.

He's seated on his office chair while typing whatever on his imac. He looks hot in his formal wear but I'd rather see him naked.

Me: "Hi"

He hasn't acknowledged me yet but I know he knew when I got here.

Khanyi: "Just a second."

He takes about a minute then finally looks at me. I'm standing next to his window which is adjacent to where he's seated.

Khanyi: "How are you? You look good and I love the nails, suits you."

Me: "I'm fine but would be better with a limp. Thank you"

He chuckles.

Khanyi: "How old are you?"

The one question I hate.

Me: "Does it matter? I'm old enough."

Khanyi: "You don't look like it."

Me: "Looks can be deceiving."

Khanyi: "True."

Me: "How are we going to have sex here while it's so transparent? Or you don't mind giving your employees a show?"

Khanyi: "I didn't call you here for that. I have a job for you."

Me: "A job?"

He nods.

Khanyi: "You seem like the perfect fit."

Me: "For what?"

Khanyi: "The contract has already been prepared. You can leave with it, go through it then come back when you're content."

Me: "What?"

I'm shook. We just met and already there are contracts involved? He literally just saw me that night.

Me: "Is this a prank?"

I look around the humongous office for a hidden camera.

Khanyi: "No. you seem to be doing well with Gigi so I have no doubt you'll be able to handle mine."

Me: "Handle your...you want me to be a babysitter?"

Khanyi: "Nanny is the word."

Me: "You really shitting on me right now. You're insulting me. I came here for the D, nothing else."

Khanyi: "I called to offer you a job. Mpho told me you just came and all that. It's a good paying job and my kids aren't bothersome."

I scoff.

Me: "Fuck you."

I've never been this insulted. I'm fuming on my way out. How dare he?

POPPY

I give him a ten for audacity. I've spent the whole day replaying the scene in my head and scoffing. On top of that, he's been calling me like crazy. I don't know what more he wants from me.

I thought of drinking it away but a glass after, I found myself still thinking of him. What sucks more is the fact that I'm considering it. Trust me, it's not about the job title. I mean I wouldn't mind being a nanny, but I don't think I need a job. However, I think of seeing him everyday and find myself exploring possibilities of being a part of his life, even as just a helper. I can't believe I am. I want to be a part of his life, no matter the form which baffles me. I have no idea what is it about him.

Mpho finds me sitting in the bar, with an untouched glass filled with gin and tonic.

Mpho: "That bad?"

Me: "He's gotten into my system."

I'm not looking at him. We're sitting on highchairs by the bar counter and facing forward.

Mpho: "What did he say? He's my friend but I care more about you. Stay away from him."

I chuckle bitterly.

Me: "He's been calling."

As if on cue, my phone rings again.

Me: "He insulted me. I told him to fuck off but he's still calling. What does he want from me?"

He sighs.

Mpho: "I'm not getting involved in y'all business but like I said, don't let your guard down."

Me: "Why? I'm not planning on catching feelings but it's going there. Tell me."

Mpho: "He loved his girlfriend very much. She's the only girl who got him to open his heart to love, sort of like his first love. He's loved someone before but never like her. When she died, he closed himself off. He hasn't been with a woman since then. He still loves her. I just...I don't want you to get hurt so please, don't fall for him."

He kisses my cheek then leaves.

I end up answering this persistent man's call.

Me: "Yes?"

Khanyi: “Why haven’t you been answering my calls? I need an answer urgently.”

Me: “That’s why you called?”

Khanyi: “Why else would I?”

Me: “I have no experience as a nanny. Besides, I have a new business venture I’ll be working on so I want to give my attention to that.”

Khanyi: “So, it’s a no?”

I close my eyes for a minute. It’s like he’s hypnotizing me, challenging me to dare say no or else. I bite my lip with a sigh. why the hell can’t I say no?

Me: “How’s it going to work? I can’t be a live-in because of Rumi and Gigi.”

Khanyi: “The contract highlights everything. How about I come over to you and explain it?”

Me: “Uhm, maybe tomorrow. I have to prepare myself for seeing you without getting wet.”

He chuckles.

Khanyi: “I love how blunt you are. Do whatever you feel you need to do. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He hangs up on me after and I sigh. I hope I don’t regret this.

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SUKOLUHLE

I find her on my doorstep after work. She's sitting on the veranda right there with her bag on her lap. This must be some sort of a test. I'm tired, I don't think I want to deal with feminine energy.

Me: "What are you doing here?"

Jean: "Hello to you too Suko."

She stands up and dusts her bottom.

Jean: "You haven't been picking up my calls even after our agreement"

Me: "I haven't felt like sex. Besides, it's too soon for you to be back."

Jean: "I want to know if you're still up for it. If no, tell me now."

Me: "And you had to come all the way for that?"

Jean: "It's not like I live that far from you."

Me: "It's a little creepy, don't you think? I know I give good sex but you can't be coming for my dick like that."

I open the door and she follows me inside.

Jean: "Why are you like this now?"

Me: "I said I'll call you when I need some so why not wait for my call? I'm from work just now and tired."

She nods.

Jean: "Can we hang out this weekend?"

Me: "Sure"

This is when I need a shower. Having to boil water then pour on a basin is too much for me when I'm this exhausted. There's another knock on my door. It's after I've bathed and dried. I wrap a towel around my waist then attend the door.

I scoff. What the hell does she want so late?

Me: "What?"

Nosi: "May I please get in?"

Me: "Hell no. say whatever you want to say then get out of my house."

She sighs. I wish I could feel sorry for her but she did me bad so much that I can't find an inch of empathy in me towards her. Not even a miniature.

Nosi: "I need a place to stay. It's only for the night until I can figure something out. You won't even notice I'm here and-"

I laugh. She can't honestly be serious about this. What does she mean by I won't notice she's here? How won't I when first, this is a one room and secondly, the space is too small for me alone. To think she even has the guts to ask something of me.

Me: "You're mad. Why not call Cain or Vusi and the others? Do you think I'm stupid? Don't test me. I don't have time for your shenanigans shame. I'm not even bored."

Nosi: "Please Suko, I am begging you."

I watch her go on her knees and fuck; my heart constricts.

Me: "OK get up. You got me with that kneeling act but it's only tonight."

She crushes me in an embrace that has me pushing her away. This is pushing it.

Me: "Let's not get used to each other. You're sleeping on the floor."

She nods quite too enthusiastically for my liking.

Me: "Why are you even here at this time? What happened?"

Nosi: "I'd rather not talk about it."

Me: "Talking about it is actually compulsory since you're staying in my place tonight."

Her eyes get glossy as she shakes her head. Anyday

I'd believe her but letting her spend the day is too benevolent of me considering what she's done so I don't care that it's a touchy subject.

Nosi: "I...my mom found out about my pregnancy. My nosy cousin told her about it. She says I shouldn't come back at home until I know the address of the father so they can send the letter. I should have never kept this baby! I don't have money and no plan. What am I going to do Suko?"

Then she sobs.

Me: "What happened to the twenty thousand you got from the threesome?"

Nosi: "They didn't pay me"

I laugh. I know this isn't the time to but I find myself laughing.

Me: "Why didn't you ask them to give you what's due to you?"

I laugh again.

Nosi: "You don't have to make a mockery of me."

Me: "Says the girl who embarrassed me in public and even spat on me. Who are you to tell me what I can do?"

Nosi: "I know OK and I regret every bad I ever did you. You are a good guy Suko but I was too blinded by my love for money

and the soft life that I failed to see that. I'm really sorry for everything. If I could turn back the hands of time, I would-

Me: "This is what I hate about people. You bring up sappy stories when you apologize while you did what you did fully aware. You were not blinded by anything, you were fully aware of what you were doing. Now don't you act like you made a mistake while you treated me how you felt like it. I accept your apology but there was absolutely no need to come up with a support statement. It's enough talking for the night. You better shut your mouth until morning."

I throw a two blankets at her. I then remember that I haven't gotten dressed yet so I absentmindedly do it in her presence. I then get into my covers after.

Mpho always wakes me up in the morning. It's something that I've gotten used to that the phone only rings a second then I'm up.

Mpho: "Good morning"

Me: "Good morning to you. You know I don't go to work this early, right?"

Mpho: "But I am. How did you sleep?"

Me: "Hardly did. Nosi was busy crying, being a nuisance and-

Yep, he's hung up. I hit my forehead. Why did I tell him that? I guess I'm that used to being honest with him. He now probably thinks there's something going on between Nosi and I while there isn't. I try calling him back but it rings unanswered.

Me: "You need to leave."

Yes, it's bad of me to take out my frustrations onto her but she has to go. My butt is likely going to suffer because of her.

She nods.

Nosi: "Thank you for your hospitality."

Me: "It's also funny how you claim to have been thrown out but don't have any luggage with you. Was it a plan to ruin my life?"

Nosi: "You wouldn't understand."

She gets up then stretches. Her eyes are puffy and soggy.

Me: "You look like shit, you know that?"

Nosi: "You don't have to insult me every chance you get. It's out of your character Suko, don't be me."

I laugh.

Me: "And you don't get to tell me what I can, have or should do. What I say is my choice. Get your arse out"

I clean when she's left then take a bath. I call Poppy when I'm sitting on the veranda and basking in the sun.

Poppy: "Hey you"

Me: "Hi, how are you?"

Poppy: "I'm good, yourself?"

Me: "I'm fine. Is Mpho there?"

Poppy: "I haven't been out of my room but I think he left for work."

Me: "Oh and what time does he usually come back?"

Poppy: "Latest is usually seven. Don't you have work today?"

Me: "I do but I have to see him. He's mad at me without having given me a chance to explain myself."

Poppy: "What did you do?"

I sigh.

Me: "It's nothing hectic, just that he knows Nosi slept over her and he probably blew things out of proportion."

Poppy: "Are you mad?! Why would you have Nosi sleeping over there after everything she's done to you? Does that head of yours work?!"

Me: "So, you also not going to listen?"

She sighs.

Poppy: "Fine. What story did she hit you with this time?"

I tell her everything in a nutshell from her begging on her knees to her crying all night long.

Poppy: “And how’s her home situation your business? She spit you out like used gum and now she wants to cry to you?”

Me: “Like I said, she got me with the kneeling.”

Poppy: “And now she knows your weakness. When are you going to learn mara Suko? Nothing good ever comes from your association with Nosi. Mpho has every right to be mad because now, it looks like you just playing with his feelings.”

Me: “I want to fix this. Do you know where he works?”

And that’s how I find myself on a bolt cab taking me to his workplace. I’ve asked him a couple of times what he wants us to be and he hasn’t said it. Yet things like this affect him.

The receptionist has to call him first before I’m allowed to go to his office. I had to charm my way into her approval. She initially wanted me to set an appointment then go back, speaking of how tight his schedule is like I care.

Mpho: “What do you want? Shouldn’t you be out there with your baby mama?”

Me: “Why do you never give me a chance to explain and instead jump into conclusions?”

Mpho: "What's there to explain? You had your baby mama over and had her crying all night. I don't see any loopholes there."

Me: "So, you don't trust me?"

He scoffs, I nod.

Me: "I get it, you have trust issues. When have I ever lied to you?"

Mpho: "Really?"

Me: "I'm not talking about when I was a teenager, come on. We didn't even remember each other when we first met."

Mpho: "Fine, fair point."

Me: "That's you sitting on that chair. How come your office has no pictures? Shouldn't it display your work?"

Mpho: "I'm not an architecture or interior designer."

Me: "Right"

I walk over and plant myself on his lap.

I brush his chin.

Me: "Why don't you trust me? I mean sure, I've been a little...but I'm allowed to entertain other people or am I not? We've never spoken titles."

Mpho: "You can do whatever you want. If you want to harbor your exes then go ahead."

I chuckle.

Me: "So, there's no us?"

Mpho: "No"

I nod, biting my lip then get off him. This fucken hurts but I can't force him to be with me. I guess I need to go back home and digest everything.

Me: "You don't want me?"

He nods.

Me: "Say it."

Mpho: "It was just sex. I'm sure you've had that before, right?"

I scoff.

Me: "Of course. If this is how you want to play it then sure thing."



POPPY

I had the whole night to convince myself that it's purely business and, in this morning, I can conclude that the mission has been accomplished. I'm nonchalant, it's not much acting with me reciprocating his energy. I love whoever came up with the idea of colognes. They make a statement on their own. But with him, I know by shivers that make my hair stand that's he's here. I ignore them though. I'm aware of him but he doesn't have to know it. But with guys his age, they know a lot plus he's a lawyer so I know he's good when it comes to reading people.

Khanyi: "You want us to have this meeting in a bar?"

Me: "Good morning to you too".

Khanyi: "Let's go to Mpho's study"

Me: "I get that you don't want me but you don't have to be so fucken rude!"

I click my tongue then grab my phone and follow him to the study. I'm wearing a beige suit with black court heels.

Khanyi: "How are you? You look good. I've never said this but I love your hair"

Me: "I'm fine and thank you."

Khanyi: "You can relax, I won't bite."

Me: "I'm not scared of you dude"

He snickers.

Khanyi: "Dude? Mr Dlamini would be much better since you'll be working for me."

Me: "You expect me to call you by your surname and so formally?"

Khanyi: "Or you can just call me sir Miss Lucas"

Me: "Alright sir. Are we now going to go over the contract?"

Khanyi: "I want to know if you agree first."

Me: "That's why I have to go through it."

Khanyi: "Yes but before that, you have to sign a non-disclosure form. This means that'

Me: "I know what it fucken means but why the secrecy? You're not that much of a big deal."

Khanyi: "I hate people being in my business. I don't even want that best friend of yours knowing a thing about it."

Me: "And how will you know he knows?"

Khanyi: "I will."

You know when you get that feeling that says you should walk away? That's what I get but guess what I do, I sign the damn non-disclosure.

The contract seems fair and sound like an offer I'd be stupid to refuse but I still do not sign because I need a second opinion. There might be a clause there which I'm not aware of which he might use against me. He doesn't mind me getting that second opinion which concludes our meeting. He stands up.

Khanyi: "Thank you for agreeing to this."

Me: "Sure"

Khanyi: "I'm pretty sure you'll get along well with them. They really aren't bothersome."

Me: "Yes. If there's anything else..."

I stand up. He shakes his head.

On my way out of Mpho's study, I call Suko. We haven't spoken since I gave him Mpho's office address so I have no idea how that might have went. I hope they're now official because they've played Tom and Jerry for too long now.

I can feel this one's eyes on my back as I go down the stairs which I completely ignore because I'm waiting for Suko to pick up. He finally does on my third attempt.

Me: "Hey, did I disturb?"

Suko: "Not at all"

Me: "You're drinking?"

Suko: "More like numbing my pain. He rejected me."

I almost drop my phone as I scream.

Me: "He did what?"

Suko: "Looked me in the eye and told me he doesn't want me"

Me: "What?"

I almost drop my phone. These two have mad chemistry and seem compatible so why would he do that? It all doesn't make sense to me.

Suko: "I know"

I feel this one's hands on my waist. He squeezes once then let's go. What the hell is his touch doing to me?

Suko: "Poppy?"

Me: "Sorry"

I close my eyes for a second then open.

Me: "Where are you? I wanna come to you"

Suko: "My room. Are you coming now?"

Me: "Yes"

Suko: "I'll go buy your stuff in the meantime"

Me: "Ayt, see you soon."

Khanyi is still here. He's been behind me all this time.

Khanyi: "I'll drop you off"

Me: "That won't be necessary"

Khanyi: "I wasn't asking"

Me: "I'll call a cab"

Khanyi: "Stop being difficult. You're going to be my employee so I am going to take care of you"

Me: "What about our salon?"

Khanyi: "Like I said, the kids aren't bothersome. It's only for this year since they'll be in daycare next year. I don't see how this job will make wig sewing difficult."

At this point, I'm tempted to sign the contract but I don't. He takes my hand and I follow him to his car.

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SUKOLUHLE

I have been feeling like a piece of shit but it's also a blessing because I don't have any what ifs. I said what I feel and even though I got rejected

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I spoke what I feel. I think if I was not fully over what Nosi did to me, I'd think it's my fault he's rejected me. I'd probably think there's something wrong with me or that I lack something. But I'm feeling content now. I won't say I'm giving up on him but I won't pursue him any more. It seems to me there's something going on with him, like there's a reason he's holding back. Maybe someone did him bad and that got him closed off. Why doesn't he want to give us a chance? I just think there's more to it. Maybe he likes doing good and doesn't want the same for himself. Money can't be his everything because at the end of the day, he's human. He deserves to have someone love and care for him the same way he does for others.

Poppy's arrival snaps me from the trance. I missed this one. We share a hug then I pass her a can of BNG.

Poppy: "How are you?"

I shrug.

Me: "I guess I'm fine. It's life"

Poppy: "I just don't get what's wrong with him. He doesn't want you entertaining any girls yet he doesn't want to be with you. How does that make any sense?"

Me: "It's fine thou. I can't and won't force him to be with me."

Poppy: "Well, his loss"

Me: "And you? What's up with your crush?"

She shrugs.

Poppy: "Nothing. He doesn't seem to be interested in me like that. And I think I'll accept the job. Anyway, I want to give you money you can use for your repair store"

Me: "What? Where do you get money? I mean I... I wanted to save up for it because I can't be a petrol attendant forever"

Poppy: "It's from that bag Kgosi gave me"

Me: "I can't expect that from you"

Poppy: "You can take it as a loan or it'll be my share in the shop."

Me: "That's much better. I'll look for rental space then take it from there. And it's going to be costly so let's give it three months. I'll need money to sustain the shop until we start making profit. Before that, there's the name of the store, logo and all that."

She smiles at me.

Poppy: "I love seeing you like this. We should have thought about this a long time ago"

Me: "But it's happening now because it's the right time"

Poppy: "Very true. Things are finally coming together for us"

We chill together and just talk. This feels good, we haven't caught up in forever.

It's late when she leaves, around 9pm and I'm just grateful she came around.

My phone rings after I get into bed. It's Mpho and as much as I don't want to speak to him, I still answer. I feel like we don't have anything left to say to each other. At least not tonight. He should give me time to get over the rejection.

Me: "Yeah?"

Mpho: "You mad at me?"

Me: "Not at all."

Mpho: "Are you fine? Were you drinking?"

Me: "How do you expect me to feel?"

Mpho: "I'm sorry about that but I hope you understand"

Me: "Understand what exactly? It's not like you told me why you rejected me."

Mpho: "I know but it's for the best"

Me: "Don't worry, I'm cool with it."

Mpho: "You are?"

Me: "Yes. At least I won't feel guilty about this woman laying next to me"

He coughs.

Mpho: "You got a woman now?"

Me: "Yep. I needed to blow off some steam"

Mpho: "You can do as you please, it's fine"

Me: "I didn't need your permission"

He chuckles.

Mpho: "Oh?"

Me: "Why'd you even call?"

Mpho: "I always call you before you sleep, nothing new"

Me: "Oh, so things are continuing as normal?"

Mpho: "Why should things change?"

Me: "Let's switch the roles then"

Mpho: “No”

I scoff and hang up.

He doesn't bother calling back which is good.

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(THREE MONTHS LATER)

NOSI

My life has been...miserable. The baby has grown, I'm now at six months and they been kicking like crazy. We're going to get the results for the DNA test and I'm so nervous. If neither Suko nor Cain is the father, I know I'm fucked. Seeing him (Suko) for the first time in three months was depressing for me. He looked good, smelled good and was glowing. It just seemed like things had worked out good for him. He looked reborn and happy. To think we were good, and I had him loving me like the only girl in the world, but I failed to appreciate that. I think I will forever regret ever mistreating him. I don't think I'd ever get a guy who will love me how he did. In fact, I don't think I deserve to. My sanity is hanging by a thread now. I've been staying with Cain, but things can change now that we finally did the test. After I spent the night at Suko's place and was thrown out like that, my heart was painful. I had no choice but to call Cain and even reminded him of the money they owe me, as shameful as that was. I've put it in a savings account for rainy days. I have been

dependent on him since then, surprised that he even allowed me to stay with him after I told him I was kicked out. I didn't expect him to be kind or understanding. Now, the misery part. I've never felt this alone in my life. It feels like the whole world has turned its back on me. Imagine renovating a house, paying for the drilling of water and extending then be thrown out from the same house. I was the one buying groceries and everything in the house but I was still thrown out. It feels like wasted efforts to me because I spent every cent I had in that house. It hurts a lot and still does after all these months. I know my cousin is the one who convinced my mother to chase me out. She probably fed her lies but it's fine. I wish I had friends or just someone I can offload on. I have a lot of things that are weighing heavy on me but I have no one I can talk to. So I lay here, sinking deeper into this hole that gets darker the deeper I go. I know I did this all on my own and I have no one to blame but myself.

Me: "Morning"

I say to Cain who's having breakfast.

Cain: "We have to go. The sooner I found out, the sooner you can get out of my house."

Me: "So, you think it's not yours?"

Cain: "You better pray it is"

Me: "Or else?"

He scoffs, shaking his head.

Cain: "I know you betting on Suko and think that him being the father means you'll get to rekindle your love and all that. But if it's mine, you'll learn to live with me and forget about him."

Me: "That...that's not true"

Cain: "Whatever. I've been watching you, seeing you all stressed. I know you've been crying yourself to sleep. I've seen you come here with eye bags and puffy eyes. I'll tell you something; the sooner you accept your reality, the better. Because regardless of who the father is, that baby has to be healthy."

I sigh. Is it bad that I'm hoping it dies? I just...I don't think I want this baby. I don't have a job, a place to stay nor do I have a plan. Life is just so difficult for me. I miss the simplicity of it all. I miss when Suko and I had just started dating. I miss loving him for him and not having eyes for anyone else.

But there's nothing I can do about it now.

After breakfast, we do leave in his car. My mind isn't here. He has to tap me back into reality when we arrive at our destination. My heart is beating out of my chest now. It's the thought of the child being Vusi's. I don't think I'd be able to stomach that. I was just his puppet

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playing to his tune. I think I'd have swallowed his pee if he told me to. That's how much I was under his control.

Cain: "The moment we've all been waiting for"

We get out of the car and walk into the practice. I'm scared, no doubt.

We find Suko already seated in the bunks that in the waiting room. I greet him but he obviously ignores me. He only greets Cain back. He's busy tapping his foot down, seeming like someone who'd rather be anywhere else but here.

The doctor calls us in and by now, I'm quarter to getting a panic attack.

Dr: "Good morning, how are you guys doing?"

Suko: "We'd all be much better if we got the results. I think this question will be most appropriate after"

He looks over at me and lowers his glasses.

Dr: "How are you feeling? You look like you're about to faint"

Suko: "Happens when you can't bust it open for one guy"

Now I feel like asking the earth to open up and just swallow me. why am I even still alive? I don't see the reason now on. To

think Suko used to worship the ground I walked on...wheels really do turn.

Dr: "OK, let's get to the results. Are you guys ready?"

Cain: "Yes"

He hands an envelope to each of them.

Dr: "I want you both to be the first to open them. If the results in the conclusion states that 'is not excluded as the biological father' then it means you are the father."

At this point, I have my fingers twisted in my mind and hoping that it's not Cain. They look at each other then start tearing the envelopes open.

I want to excuse myself but one look from Cain has me back on my chair.

Suko: "Oh well, looks like I missed this one!"

My heart sinks. He's excited and doesn't even hide it.

Suko: "Says here that I'm excluded as the biological father. God is good!"

Cain: "Well, I am. You lucky it's a 99% match. Let's get out of here"

He grabs my hand and the minute I'm on my feet, he's pulling me out the door. I know my whole life is about to change and I doubt it's for the better.

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MPHO

The minute he comes out, I'm on my tenth cigarette. I've been praying he's not the father because after what that Nosi did to him, he can't have that girl back in his life because it's starting to change for the better. Things are starting to look up for him and all Nosi will bring is negativity.

He's grinning so I'm guessing he's not the father. He didn't want to be. I saw Cain dragging Nosi out but I couldn't read his face since it was blank.

Suko: "I've never felt so relieved"

He's just got into the car.

Me: "It's not yours?"

He scrunches his face.

Suko: "No. didn't I tell you that? she wanted us to hit it raw out of the blue, of course she was pregnant then. I'm not a fool, I know these things."

Me: "You didn't suspect any foul play when she wanted it raw though"

Suko: "You're lucky I'm over that"

I chuckle.

Me: "And I thought it's too soon."

Suko: "No. I want us to go celebrate with a few drinks"

Me: "Everything is a reason for you to drink."

Suko: "And your point is?"

Me: "You don't have to always drink"

Suko: "How else can one celebrate then?"

Me: "There are other ways"

I can feel his eyes on me as I drive off.

Suko: "I'm not having sex with you Mpho. I won't be used like that."

I laugh.

Me: "We'll just be celebrating"

Suko: "No"

Me: "I don't get why not because you stay fucking randoms"

Suko: "I have feelings for you so that's what makes it different"

Me: "I thought you were over that"

Suko: "I'm not a machine Mpho or some robot. I'm fucken human and not everyone's feelings disappear like that. I get that you don't want me and I've accepted that but don't tempt me. I won't be able to have meaningless sex with you."

Me: "It doesn't have to be meaningless."

He scoffs.

Suko: "That's impossible. You don't like me like that."

Me: "I never said that. I just said I can't be with you. It's for your own good"

Suko: "Own good how?"

Me: "I know how Nosi almost messed you up. I wouldn't want you to go through that or something worse."

Suko: "Talk to me. how bad can being with you be? Why would you think you're not any good for me?"

Me: "I'm a mess, I come with a lot of baggage and I'm...just know that it's best this way."

Suko: "Let's go to your house. I need a drink"

Like we weren't going there.

Sometimes I do get tempted to reveal a little of myself but Trixy always refuses, even with the sprinkles. It's for our own good.

People have been unkind in the past and that's one past we don't ever want a repeat of.

Poppy isn't home but Rumi is, along with Gigi. They're playing a card game on the floor in the living room. The little guy runs to Suko who takes him into his arms.

Family, priceless.

.

NOSI

Me: "My feet are killing me now. We should come back tomorrow"

Cain: "Oh, ok. I just want the best for my baby girl"

I huff, rolling my eyes. He dragged me here after we got from the gynae and found out the gender of the baby. We've been...actually, he's been shopping like crazy since then. I've just been following him like a puppy because what else can I do? cain always has his way and I don't think I can do anything about that.

Me: "But I'm tired"

Cain: "Let's go then"

I carry some of the shopping bags. There's a lot that he bought from tutu skirts, pink hats to diapers and pacifiers.

I don't worry when it comes to this child, especially because he seems to have it all figured out. I can't wait to give birth and just be done because I don't think I want the baby.

If Cain feels this way about her, then he can have because I'll be done.

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POPPY

Nqaba has to be the most energetic toddler ever. I spend most of the time having to run after him but I enjoy it. He likes playing with me unlike his brother who likes playing on his own with his puzzles and building toys.

Being a nanny isn't so bad and the pay came through for us. I want to save money so we can buy a stance somewhere and build a house. I won't live with Mpho forever.

Khanyi comes when I'm bathing them. It's morning.

Khanyi: "I love seeing you with them"

Me: "You always say that"

He chuckles.

Khanyi: "Because it's true. You're a good nanny and generally a good mother. I've seen you with Gigi. He's such a well-mannered boy, thanks to you."

Me: "I try, thank you"

Khanyi: "You're beautiful"

I stop wiping Lemo and look at him.

Me: "What's going on?"

Khanyi: "I'm just telling you the truth"

He shrugs.

Me: "It sounds like you want to hit on me. It's too early for all these compliments. I'm over you"

He chuckles.

Khanyi: "You over me?"

Me: "Yes"

He comes closer until he's standing right behind me. I'm sort of sitting on the floor while facing the bath tub.

I feel his hands on my back and shit gives me chills. Yeah, I haven't gotten laid in a while.

I am over him. He's been keeping things strictly professional so this is so random of him. I've toughened up a bit, built palisades around my feelings so I've managed to be around him and not want him.

He then crouches behind me.

Khanyi: "Over me?"

Me: "Yes and stop seducing me in the kid's presence"

The kids laugh, as if they know what I'm saying.

Khanyi: "I'm not doing anything. Take them out of the water. My mom's coming to get them soon"

He then stands and leaves. That was weird.

I've never met his mother or any of his family in my working here. Well, I don't need to since I'm just an employee but I've seen pictures. I'm just curious, maybe because of my interest in him which is alarming. I did do a background check on him so I know more about him than he thinks.

Anyway, I do as I'm told. He could have helped but he decided not to. I then dry them and get them dressed in the clothes he took out for them. Nqaba runs off immediately after I help him wear his shoes.

I have a room here, sort of like a studio where I make my wigs and things like that. I usually work when he's around or they're sleeping.

I get on it. We have about five orders. Kiara and I usually complete them together. She does the ordering of the hair since she knows a supplier and also does installations for those who want them. It's refreshing having a business and this feeling that I'm doing something with my life. I've stopped being a shopping addict even though I can afford to now. I've grown and I love it.

"Did you not hear me calling?"

I lift my head up and my eyes meet with Khanyi's mother.

Me: "Ah, no"

Her: "What's your name?"

The way she asks already let's me know she doesn't like me which is funny but I don't care.

Me: "Poppy"

She squints her eyes.

Her: "What do you want from my son?"

Me: "Excuse me?"

Her: "You heard me. I don't understand why you. Are you even eighteen? I know girls like you who-

Me: "Stop right there. Your son is the one who chose me to look after his kids, I didn't apply or even ask him for shit. Don't assume, ask."

Her: "Who the hell do you think you are speaking to me like that?!"

I scoff and stand up.

Me: "I don't think, I know who I am. I will not be disrespected by you, regardless of who you think you are. I signed a contract with your son, not you"

Her: "You're cheeky, you won't last here."

Me: "We'll see

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now if that's all, I'd like to continue my work"

She chuckles and walks out. What the hell?

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SUKOLUHLE

I haven't had time to rest in a while. I'm always busy with something, which has been good. It's nice to see things working out for me like this. I never thought my life would be like this. I can afford myself and have even bought some of the appliances I had sold at home back when I was a druggie

Even my sister is surprised at the change in my life. I remember how she was when I went home and apologized materially for the harm I've caused. I wouldn't say my relationship with my family has gotten back to where it was but we are civil towards each other.

I don't really go home a lot. I just don't think we'll ever be how we used to. My family did chase me out and had turned their back on me so I'm cool with the people I have in my life right

now. My entanglement with Jean has ended and I think I'm ready to be with someone. It won't have to be anything serious but we'll be exclusive.

I'm loving the direction my life is taking.

I'm still saving up for the renovation of my repair store. I'm thinking of having something where people can sell their old appliances then I fix them and resell at a reasonable price. Something like a pawn shop. It'll be a way for me to make money and so the store can have something. I've been taking a short business course at a college just to familiarize myself with business and so I don't under charge. It's challenging being back at school, especially at my age but I'm enjoying it. I still work at the petrol station but only part time. It's been great.

There's someone I always pass almost At the same spot Every time I go to work.

Today, I decide to greet. She smiles at me.

Her: "Hey"

Me: "How are you? Is it me or I always pass you here?"

She chuckles.

Her: "No, definitely not. I'm Zithabile"

Me: "Suko. I love your voice"

Zitha: "I know it's deep"

She rolls her eyes.

Me: "Aren't you being late for school?"

She's wearing school uniform.

Zitha: "I'd rather be. I hate attending assembly. I'm glad it's my last year"

She huffs.

Me: "See you later, don't want you being too late. It's lovely knowing you"

She nods.

Zitha: "Likewise"

I find myself watching her as she leaves. There's just something about her. I don't really do school kids but there's just that.

I receive a call from Mpho during my lunch break. He still calls as frequently as he used to.

Me: "Yeah?"

Mpho: "Have you eaten?"

Me: "Not really. I'm about to"

Mpho: "Let me buy you lunch"

Me: "I got lunch, I'm cool"

Mpho: "You've been refusing my offers. I'm not asking for sex, just lunch."

Me: "I'm saying I'm cool. I'll eat the lunch I made myself"

Mpho: "Things can't continue like this Suko"

Me: "Like what? I don't get it"

He scoffs.

Mpho: "I thought we were friends"

And now he's managed to make me feel bad. Avoiding him was a bad call, I know that. This is especially because I wanted to get to know him. It's been two weeks since the DNA test and that's the last time I saw him. Nothing happened when we got to his house. I drank, slept then went home when I woke up.

Me: "We'll do dinner"

Mpho: "Good. I'll pick you up at 7"

Me: "Ayt"

.

POPPY

Khanyi: "What happened between you and my mother? She wants me to fire you."

We've just arrived at Mpho's house since I'm done for the day.

Me: "When did she tell you this?"

Khanyi: "This morning."

Me: "She doesn't like me and thinks I want something from you. Your mother is disrespectful. She doesn't even know me and last time I checked, I didn't ask to be hired."

Khanyi: "She's overprotective"

Me: "Disrespectful"

He sighs and takes my hand.

Khanyi: "I'm sorry about that. She can be a lot sometimes, especially when it comes to her kids."

Me: "I get that but I don't care."

Khanyi: "Alright"

He then kisses the back of my hand while starring right into my eyes.

Me: "You're starting"

Khanyi: "I wanna shift your womb"

I retract my hand.

Me: "You for real?"

He nods.

Khanyi: "Tomorrow"

I get out of the car feeling excited. Yeah, it sucks that I'm looking forward to it. He just told me when I'm finally getting a piece of him. Yep, I definitely lied about being over him.

.

SUKOLUHLE

We're at a restaurant down town. I'm still in my work uniform since we came here straight from there. The first thing I ask is how he's been. He's gotten used to keeping it all in, acting like he's fine even when he's not.

Mpho: "I've been good. I'm leaving for Amsterdam soon. If you didn't have work, we'd leave together"

Me: "Is it business?"

Mpho: "Sort of. I also just need a break from life"

Me: "Why?"

He scoffs.

Mpho: "I don't usually spend this month here. It reminds me of things I'm battling to forget. Being away always works"

Me: "You leaving for the whole month?"

Mpho: "Poppy will be fine"

Me: "You don't like talking, do you?"

Mpho: "I have to go"

He stands up and takes out some notes from his wallet.

Me: "What? We haven't even had the main course"

Mpho: "I just... have to. I'll call a cab for you"

He's already on his way out. What just happened?

SUKOLUHLE

At this point, I'm not surprised. I don't immediately leave but decide to have dinner on my own. I pay with the money he left. He's weird and I'm now at the point where I'm no longer running from him. I'll meet with him when he wants us to but I won't pursue him.

I have abo Zitha who would appreciate my attention.

I call Poppy because we haven't spoken in a while. I miss her but we've both been busy with business and life in general. We're still close though, that hasn't changed.

Poppy: "He wants to shift my womb"

She's excited which has me chuckling.

Me: "Is it? I don't get why you're still hung up on this guy"

Poppy: "Aren't you on Mpho?"

Me: "We're just friends. I'm just being there for him that way, no fucking"

She sucks her teeth.

Poppy: "Whatever but I'm finally going to bend over for him"

Me: "I don't know Pops. Something is off about this. Why now?"

Poppy: "I think it was his plan all along. Now that he's seen me with his kids and how I take care of them, he's finally letting me in."

When she puts it that way, I guess he's making sense. The man's kids come first to him so maybe that's what it is. But why did Mpho warn her against him so much? He's known the guy longer so I don't think he was mistaken. I won't even say he's jealous because he's not straight.

Me: "Have you fallen in love with him?"

Poppy: "What's love?"

I chuckle.

Me: "That's more like it. Just don't forget what Mpho said"

Poppy: "You worry too much, it's not healthy"

Me: "But for you to still be hang up on this guy, do you think that's healthy?"

Poppy: "What are you saying?"

Me: "That you've caught feelings and from what I'm seeing, you'll love him more than he can ever love you. That's dangerous"

Poppy: "I appreciate your concern but I got this. I love that you looking out for me."

Me: "So, you won't acknowledge that you've caught feelings?"

She chuckles.

Poppy: "Sexual? I been"

Me: "This is serious. I don't want you to go through what I went through with Nosi. That was intense"

Poppy: "I don't see it getting there, relax Suko. I know you're concerned but really, it's just sex"

Me: "Not to you but fine, I'll stop being a nuisance"

Poppy: "Thank you. How's everything going thou?"

Me: "Cool, got no complaints. I'm happy with where I am and I look forward to finish up with the renovations so I can quit at the petrol station. It's tiring plus I'm tired of your mother's wanting a piece of me"

She laughs, like she always does when I tell her about this.

Those women are troublesome. Some of them really be beautiful but I've stopped the fucking around

1 There's more to life than random sex.

Poppy: "You know some of them are rich, right? Or you've forgotten how easily it is to make money?"

Me: "I'm not about to be a Ben 10"

Poppy: "There are no morals when it comes to money, don't you know that?"

Me: "And you're such a bad influence"

Poppy: "It's going to speed things up for you. The bonus is you're single right now so you can do no attachments. They're going to merely speed things up for you"

Me: "I wonder how you failed to convince Khanyi to give you some"

She laughs.

Poppy: "I didn't try hard enough. Besides, I didn't want to be pushy"

Me: "And you still haven't slept with anyone since Kgosi, which isn't like you."

Poppy: "So you love me hoeing? I haven't exactly met anyone"

Me: "You don't really have to. I'm trying to show you the fact that you caught from the first time"

Poppy: "I haven't!"

I laugh.

Me: "If you say so. I'm drowsy man so we'll talk"

Poppy: "Good night, I love you."

Me: "I love you too and Good night"

So crazy but I'd never wish her to be as blinded as I was with Nosi. That's one lesson I wouldn't want a repeat of or even wish on my worst enemy.

.

POPPY

I can't help my good mood in the morning. Khanyi doesn't seem like a guy who doesn't mean what he says. I feel shivers just when I remember his words. Is it normal to be attracted to someone like this? Yes, it's all sexual but I cannot ignore its intensity.

Me: "Morning everyone"

Rumi: "Hi sis, you going somewhere?"

Me: "It's Saturday but I do have plans. Why?"

Rumi: "I want to braid my hair, along with Gigi"

Me: "Your hair seems fine"

Rumi: "Yes but I want to braid it. Can you call Tsebo and ask him? I want to do my nails as well"

Me: “Why are you getting yourself dolled up?”

She shrugs.

Rumi: “Just feel like it. I’m also going out tonight with my girl friends. There’s a party but I promise I won’t spend the night away”

Me: “What party and why have I not heard of it?”

Rumi: “It’s Sandy’s fifteen birthday. I didn’t tell you? I bought her a gift and all. I cannot not go?”

Me: “Your Sandy?”

She giggles.

Rumi: “She’s not mine yet”

Me: “Mm, I hear you. It’s fine you can go but only because you want her”

Mpho: “Who wants who? Oa jola Rumi?”

Rumi: “What? No”

I laugh.

Me: “We can go to Tsebo after breakfast”

I’m excited about later on, probably might be why I’m not giving Rumi a tough time about this. Not that I would. I have no doubt that she can take care of herself, that’s a given.

Mpho drives us to Tsebo, without us asking since he offered. It can never be too busy for me. I also get to give Kiara the wigs I made which are already in their courier packages.

Tsebo: "Heh, are Suko and that hunk now dating?"

Me: "There's no hope for those ones"

Tsebo: "Let me guess, dark chocolate is in the closet."

I laugh and shrug.

Me: "Could be. Mpho is so... closed off. He doesn't like revealing details about himself. I think it's why he doesn't want Suko closer. He's probably faced disappointment in the past and doesn't want a repeat"

Tsebo: "Have you? Because I don't remember you having a serious relationship"

Me: "This isn't about me and no, not that I know of."

Tsebo: "Mm but they had great chemistry. Such a pity they didn't give it a shot"

Me: "Indeed. How are things at home?"

Tsebo: "Mxm. My sister is pregnant yet again. I don't get why she always comes home when she's expecting, now I have to deal with her mood swings. She's such a drag, always eating and sending me around"

I chuckle.

Me: “Doesn’t she have a car?”

Tsebo: “She does but why can’t she drive herself to go Chicken licken when she gets her cravings? I’m not the one who got her pregnant moss.”

Me: “You guys don’t get tired of your cat fights, do you? She’s like your twin sister and you have more in common than you wish to admit”

Tsebo: “I don’t care. She must bother her boyfriend with her pregnancy and leave me out of it”

Me: “Well, you’ll endure like you always do”

Tsebo: “As if I have a choice”

Khanyi is the one who fetches us. He came when Tsebo was done with Rumi and halfway through braiding Gigi.

The way he keeps looking at me is enough to have me squeezing my thighs. We’re dropping off Rumi and Gigi first then going to his house. We kind of have it to ourselves since his kids are with their grandparents.

Rumi: “Don’t forget I have to go to the party. I don’t want you tracking my location then coming to shout at me as if I left without letting you know.”

Me: "I've never done that"

Rumi: "But you capable of it. It's something you'd do"

Me: "Fine, I'll set a reminder."

I roll my eyes. She winks at me then gets off with Gigi who gives me a kiss. My baby looks so good with his braids.

Khanyi: "I'm glad you did nothing with your hair. I prefer it natural"

Me: "I didn't feel like it"

Khanyi: "I'm glad you didn't."

I don't say anything to that. The rest of the drive is rather silent. He opens my door like he usually does when we arrive then takes my hand.

Khanyi: "You hungry?"

Me: "Not really"

Khanyi: "It doesn't matter, I'm still feeding you."

Me: "For a moment, I thought I had a choice"

Khanyi: "Not when it comes to me."

Is that even right? I don't care but it makes me hot. He's had his chef prepare food for us. He's feeding me lamb chops with cream spinach and dumplings, something I wasn't expecting but

I don't show that. The food is amazing. I legit eat until my plate is empty.

Me: "Why am I having nonalcoholic wine?"

Khanyi: "I don't want you drinking, at least not today"

Me: "Why?"

Khanyi: "I don't want you thinking I took advantage of you in any way"

I laugh.

Me: "No one takes advantage of me"

Khanyi: "Yes but still."

He turns my chair to his so our knees are touching then leans towards me. Fuck, I can't believe this is happening. Just when our lips are about to touch, we hear a clap. Khanyi doesn't stop thou and still kisses me. The minute our lips touch, I feel a buzz of electricity. This is really happening.

"Heh Khanyile!"

He groans and let's go. It's a voice of a man.

Khanyi: "Really?"

Him: "Your mother told me about a woman. You?"

He's looking at me, standing a few feet away from us.

The question sounds rhetorical so I don't answer.

Khanyi: "Why are you here? You can't just barge in here. Where's little Miss Gold?"

Him: "That's not how you welcome your little brother. I'm expecting a hug"

It's only when he says this that I see familiar features. Nothing obvious but there's some resemblance.

Khanyi: "Man, I grew up seeing your face. I don't need to do anything"

Him: "Oh, because you're about to get your wick det. I get it. I'm Kanyo and who're you?"

He's looking at me again.

Me: "Poppy"

He takes my hand and kisses it.

Kanyo: "Lovely meeting you. His mom spoke of not trusting you and I'm here to spy"

Khanyi: "You like speaking as if she's not yours too. Now, excuse us."

Kanyo: "See you around Pops"

When he begins stepping away, Khanyi is kissing me again.

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POPPY

Mpho: "You've been quiet since yesterday. Was it that bad?"

Me: "Was what bad?"

Rumi: "The sex, duh"

I turn to her.

Me: "Who taught you about sex?"

Rumi: "Really?"

I huff. Kids of today, shaking my head.

Mpho: "What happened?"

Me: "It was good, really good but I just... I didn't enjoy it"

Mpho: "You're not making any sense"

Me: "Rumi, give us some space. Take Gigi with you"

She doesn't argue but does exactly what I say. She can be well-mannered if she wants to be.

Me: "We didn't do it on his bed, which kind of turned me off. Why should we have sex on the guestroom while he's not married or seeing anyone?"

Mpho chuckles.

Mpho: “Funny you say this after speaking of how you’re not into him. Why does it matter where you did it? You got what you wanted!”

Me: “Not how I wanted it. I just... it was just sex and I kind of expected more.”

Mpho: “You wanted him to make love to you?”

I bite my lip and nod.

Mpho: “From where I’m standing, he feels the same way you claim to feel about him. He gave you what he thought you also want – just sex.”

Me: “You said sex without cringing”

He shrugs.

Mpho: “Sounds like it. Anyway, you get me?”

I huff.

Me: “I do.”

My phone rings and speak of the devil. I contemplate not answering but he’s also my boss and it could be about the kids. I answer.

Me: “Hey”

Khanyi: "Hey yourself. How're you doing today? You seemed off yesterday"

Me: "I'm fine, happy"

Khanyi: "You sound like the complete opposite. What went wrong yesterday? It's something you've always wanted"

Me: "It doesn't matter. Is there anything wrong?"

Khanyi: "Come out so we can talk about this"

He hangs up after, leaving me no choice. I get on my feet.

Mpho: "He's here?" I nod. "This man acts like we're not friends. Why's he not coming in?"

I shrug.

Me: "I'll talk to him about it though. Let me go"

I kiss his cheek then walk out.

He gets out as usual to open my door. This time, he doesn't drive off immediately. We're in the back seat and he's watching me in scrutiny.

Khanyi: "Talk to me."

Me: "I felt offended when you didn't want us to well... do it on your bed or room rather. Why didn't you mind any where but your room? It's not like you're married or in a relationship. Unless I'm missing something"

Khanyi: “My room is off limits. It’s something you’ll just have to make peace with.”

Me: “Why?”

Khanyi: “You’re not my girlfriend Poppy and I thought you’re smart enough to know it’s going to be just sex between us. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

I scoff.

Me: “Then why the delay? Why didn’t we have it that time when we first met?”

Khanyi: “Because everything happens on my terms and not yours. I’m the adult here”

Me: “The age card, really?”

I snicker.

Me: “You’re unbelievable. Just so you know, I regret ever desiring you. The sex was disappointing”

He laughs.

Khanyi: “Why didn’t you make me stop? I don’t get why you’d be so responsive and participative when you weren’t feeling it. I’ve had sex for so many times that I’d know when a woman fakes an orgasm. Yours weren’t fake”

Me: “My body might have enjoyed it but it doesn’t mean I didn’t”

He squints his eyes

Khanyi: “Oh, now I get it. You want deep, slow love making, don’t you?”

Me: “What? No”

Khanyi: “No, no. You want emotions, don’t you? Because the rough fucking isn’t your cup of tea. You want me to look into eyes as I deliver slow, passionate strokes. I’ll give you that. You want my bed? You’ll get it”

Me: “I thought it’s off limits”

Khanyi: “Was”

I almost cum in my pants. He gets out then walks to the driver’s seat, immediately starting the car after he gets in. I have my thighs clenched together with my heart booming with ecstasy. Damn, it’s really what I want.

We’re kissing with my legs around his waist the minute we’re both out of the car. It’s different this time – slow, passionate and sultry. He pins me against his car, still kissing me. I expect his hands to explore my body but they don’t. They remain on my butt, squeezing every once in a while. He breaks the kiss but our foreheads remain pressed together.

Khanyi: "Make love huh"

I bite my lip.

Khanyi: "Say it. Tell me it's what you want and I'll give it to you. You're not shy, are you?"

Me: "I want you to make love to me"

He kisses my forehead then puts me down. He takes my hand then we leave the garage and proceed inside the house.

We're silent but my heart makes the most noise. I've never felt like this prior to doing the deed. He opens his door and the first thing I see is a landscape picture of a woman on the wall that's above his headboard. I halt.

Khanyi: "What?"

Me: "Is that her?"

He sighs.

Khanyi: "That's Lesedi

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Lemo's mom. It's why I didn't want you coming in here."

Me: "Uhm, it's fine."

Khanyi: "I can see it's not. Maybe you need time to –"

I smash my lips on his, catching him off guard. I don't care about his ghost girlfriend at this point. She's not here, is she? The man allowing me in here says something about him wanting to move on. I remember Zuri and how it took me such a long time to accept and move on. I had her room closed and... oh. He sits on the bed and makes me sit on him, legs besides his with his torso in between and us facing each other.

Khanyi: "You sure?"

Me: "Yes"

I have a feeling a nod isn't what he wants. He cups my cheeks and nods. There's something about how he looks at me. It gives off assurance which is comforting and makes me want this more.

He kisses me again, his hands brushing my back. It feels different, more intense and I wouldn't want it any other way.

Me: "You have condoms?"

Khanyi: "I do. Relax"

And I do just that.

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SUKOLUHLE

I didn't think I'd be doing this but here am I. I'm with Lindo and Cain to ask about Mpho and his history. Yes, I should not be snooping but maybe they know what's up with him that I don't.

Cain: "Why are we here? I thought the Nosi issue is settled. I'm the father"

I roll my eyes.

Me: "This isn't about Nosi. If it was, Lindo wouldn't be here."

Lindo: "So, it's about Mpho?"

Me: "I'm trying to understand what's going on with him. He has a trip due soon and he'll be away for the whole month. Why?"

Lindo: "Shouldn't you be asking him that?"

Me: "Y'all wouldn't be here if he actually told me. He's closed off. It's like with him we take two steps forward and ten back."

Cain: "He'll open up to you when he feels it's time, if he ever wants to. Just let him be."

Me: "So, you know what's up?"

Lindo: "Look, give him time. He's been through a lot. I'd tell you but he'll know you know from how different you'll be towards him."

Me: "Nothing will change"

Lindo: "It will. You can say that but you'll be different towards him. Let things work themselves out"

Me: "Give me a clue at least"

They both stand up.

Cain: "Dude, mind your business. If you're like this then I'm not surprised you're in the dark. Change your attitude"

I huff, watching them leave then shrug. I tried. Heck, I went a little over the boundary even. I'm done for real this time.

I call Zitha on my way home. I got her number this morning.

Zitha: "Suko"

Me: "Hey, you good?"

Zitha: "I am. I didn't think you'd call this soon"

I chuckle.

Me: "I didn't ask for your number just so I can keep it in my contacts"

She laughs.

Zitha: "I see. Anyway, are you good too?"

Me: "Yes, I am. I'm hoping I can see you"

Zitha: "You saw me today"

Me: “Without the uniform. I don’t want to be reminded of how older than you I am”

Zitha: “I’m almost 21 so you’re not that old.”

Me: “For real?”

Zitha: “Yeah. Not all of us finish school on record time. There were a few bumps here and there but I’m thankful I made it to matric.”

Me: “Exams are coming soon. Do you think you’re ready?”

Zitha: “I’m prepared but if you offer to tutor me, I won’t say no”

Me: “Then meet with me and we’ll talk about that too.”

Zitha: “Fine, what time?”

Me: “Did you just roll your eyes at me?”

She squeals.

Zitha: “How did you know that?”

Me: “I felt it. It’s disrespectful”

Zitha: “I’m sorry Mr Grey”

I laugh.

Me: “Hell no. I’m such a gentle lover, I don’t do all that BDSM shit”

Zitha: "You do seem gentle, soft evens"

Me: "Ah, that doesn't sound like a compliment"

Zitha: "It is. I just... I don't really like rough guys. I prefer teddy bears"

Me: "I'm not fat or chubby"

She chuckles.

Zitha: "I don't mean it like that. You're handsome, you know that?"

Me: "Nop but thank you. Can I take you out tomorrow?"

Zitha: "Lunch is fine"

Me: "Awesome. Take care"

Zitha: "You too"

MPHO

My bags are packed and ready so I'm waiting on the gents. Poppy still hasn't come home but I've bid Rumi and Gigi farewell already. They have Sophie who'll look after them when Poppy is at work or occupied with something, especially during weekends. I don't know what's happening with Khanyi but I do know they'll be spending some leisure time together. I can't keep warning her about the man, she's a grown ass woman.

Me: "Finally"

They're now here. I'm surprised Khanyi came since he has the tendency of parking in my yard and not coming into my house.

Lindo: "Uhm, we have to talk to you about something"

He looks at Cain who nods, making me wonder what the hell is up.

Me: "That serious that you won't even greet?"

Khanyi: "Yo, you good?"

We bump fists and hug.

Me: "I'm... fine, you?"

He smiles.

Khanyi: "I'm great"

Me: "You look weird when you smile"

Khanyi: "Whatever Trixy. I'm getting myself a drink, you'll call me when you done"

He's gone before I can reprimand him for it. You don't just say that, especially because Trixy hates when someone else talks about her. I don't want to get snappy and all moody, not now.

Cain: "I think you should sit"

We're in the living room so we do just that. Khanyi is at the bar, already pouring himself a glass of brandy.

Me: "What's going on?"

Lindo: "Suko is snooping"

Me: "What do you mean snooping?"

Lindo: "He summoned us then asked questions about you"

I huff.

Me: "Questions like?"

Lindo: "Basically wanted to know why you're leaving and why you're closed off and all that. He wanted to know why you haven't opened up to him. I'd like to know why too"

Me: “Suko has no right going behind my back and asking questions he has no right asking. I trust you guys but if you betray me...”

Cain: “Of course we wouldn’t. We wouldn’t be telling you this if we had. Put him on his lane before he starts digging elsewhere”

Then I remember Poppy and her IT skills. The girl has the ability to find out anything and everything. It’s not even just software but she’s messed with people who can really dig. That Kgosi guy is a longtime gangster. Together, they can find out anything.

Me: “That son of a bitch!”

Lindo tries stopping me after I grab my car keys but I yank myself. He’s going to get it. Who the hell does he think he is sniffing into my business?

Cain: “Look man, I –

I back slap him so bad that he stumbles back.

Me: “Don’t you dare!”

I’m fuming. I bump into Poppy on my exit and don’t even bother apologizing. I need to put this man on his place once and for all. After this, he’ll learn to mind his own business and leave mine.

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NARRATED

Poppy: "What just happened?"

Khanyi: "You're back. Come give daddy a kiss"

She turns to him with her hands on her hips, still astonished. She's never seen Mpho like that which is where the shock stems from.

Poppy: "What's going on? Why are you here and what's up with the bags?"

Lindo: "We're just going to let them leave?"

Cain: "You know there's no stopping Trixy. He wanted to know and maybe that's going to give him a clue."

Khanyi: "So, I'm not getting a kiss?"

Poppy: "Who's Trixy? What are they talking about?"

Khanyi walks closer to her and cups her face, planting a kiss on the woman's forehead.

Khanyi: "How was your day?"

Poppy: "Fine. Will someone tell me what the hell is going on?"

Cain: "Nope. You should also learn to mind your business"

Poppy: "Fuck you"

Cain: "Little girl, I'd make you limp. Keep talking"

Her face cringes in disgust at the thought.

Poppy: "You fucken wish. I'm not looking to catch some STD with the way you move, eeuw"

Cain: "Mm, keep talking"

Khanyi: "Let's leave these idiots and go to your room for something"

Lindo: "We all know what that is. You're a lawyer so you'll probably easily get rid of those statutory rape charges"

Cain: "She does seem like she can take that pipe"

Poppy: "I'm quarter to snapping your neck you bitch!"

The younger woman then storms off to her room

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leaving the two guys laughing. Khanyi shakes his head then follows her. He'll deal with Cain later but for now, he wants to make sure she's OK.

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TRIXY

I'm a mess when I get at his little house. The clothes I'm wearing are uncomfortable on me but I had no time to change. I've been waiting for the day I'll introduce myself to Suko and such a pity it'll be under such conditions. My hand is itching, my arse even more. I feel a little agitated too.

He's here because his door is opened. I don't bother with the knocking but just barge in. I find him laying on his bed with some girl on top of him.

This son of a bitch really doesn't waste time. I grab the girl's braids and throw her somewhere in the room. He's fucking kids now? Not surprised. There's no limit when it comes to him. I hadn't expected him to snoop but what did he do?

I just have to accept that he'll keep surprising us. He stands up, shocked.

Suko: "What the hell Gray? What's gotten into you?"

Me: "Don't fucken call me that"

I slap him hard too which has him falling back on the bed, bouncing a little. I get on top of him.

Me: "Who said you should snoop?"

I'm grinding on him a little, something I can't help even though we have an audience.

Suko: "What?"

Me: “You know exactly what I’m talking about”

Suko: “What’s wrong with you? Firstly, you barge in here and throw the poor girl into the table. She ran out crying and then the cursing and lastly, why you grinding on me like this?”

Me: “So many questions. Why’s your nose in our business?”

He sighs.

Suko: “So, they told you?”

Me: “Of course they did. They’re our friends, not yours”

Suko: “Our? You and who?”

Me: “Mpho and I obviously”

His face scrunches in confusion.

Suko: “But you’re Mpho or he has a twin?”

That itching hand? It slaps him and he screams like a little bitch.

Suko: “Get off me with your violence”

Me: “Answer the damn question. Why were you snooping?”

Suko: “Because I care about you. It won’t take rocket science to figure that out”

Me: "They always say that. It starts like that until I come out then suddenly they're disgusted. Then they pretend while ridiculing us, forcing us to be more male and caging us in."

Suko: "Who?"

Me: "You're so dumb"

I lean down and kiss him. Mpho's always too coward when it comes to making a move. I'm fierce, I'd never act like I don't want something when I do. He's the one who likes keeping secrets then suppresses me so I don't say a word.

He breaks the kiss.

Suko: "The door"

I unbutton my shirt as I go close the door. He's sitting down, looking at me intensely and in scrutiny.

Me: "You got lube?"

Suko: "Not happening"

Me: "But I want to feel you inside"

His eyes budge out.

Suko: "But you always say I'll never-

Me: "Could never be me."

I take off the shoes then pants. When I'm nude, I feel liberated. I hate wearing his clothes. They make me feel unlike me and the discomfort is nauseating.

Suko: "Who are you?"

I smile.

Me: "Took you long enough. I'm Trixy"

He mouths a wow which makes me halt and fold my arms.

Me: "You have a problem with that?"

Suko: "What? Of course not. It's good to meet you Trixy but it's just not what I expected. From the voice to just... never mind"

Me: "What the fuck are you trying to say?!"

Suko: "I'm shocked!"

He shrugs.

Me: "Then let the shit subside because he's trying to come back and I won't allow it until you fuck me"

Suko: "Fine, geez"

He rubs his face then stands.

Suko: "Zitha is going to kill me."

Me: "I don't care"

Suko: "Not a surprise. Mpho doesn't either"

Me: "You... you're not freaking out"

Suko: "No, just confused"

Me: "He's a fool"

Suko: "That he is."

Me: "Now, where's the lube?"

I catwalk to him then plant myself on his lap. My hand run through his toned torso, loving the feel of it on my hand.

Me: "So strong, huh"

Suko: "Mm"

I kiss his jaw, watching him take a deep breath in then out.

Me: "You want this?"

I'm slowing dry humping him in my nudity.

Suko: "You know I'm attracted to you"

Me: "Good"

I kiss his lips with my eyes closed. This feels good.

SUKOLUHLE

I've been awake for about an hour now, playing scenarios of how Mpho/Trixy is going to react when they wake up. My bet's on Mpho though. He's probably going to be as dismissive as he usually is of me then speak of how it was a mistake and shouldn't have happened. He's never said that after we have sex or made love but I have a feeling things are going to be different now. I smile at the thought of him feeling what I usually feel after he tears me apart. The way I kept squeezing and spanking his butt, it was bruised and obviously still is. His whole body is probably aching, much like mine. My dick is also painful. It did go into a lot of work plus Trixy bit it. She did that on purpose. Yesterday felt like I was being introduced to all of him, which I loved because now I know him more. I aspire to know each and every part of him. He squirms a little before opening his eyes, taking in the surroundings. When his eyes stop on me, he seems confused.

Mpho: "What happened?"

Me: "Good morning"

I internally laugh when he tries sitting up but fails dismally. His voice is screeched and shame, I almost feel sorry for him.

Mpho: "You son of a gun"

I laugh.

Me: "What did I do?"

Mpho: "I'm in pain, my whole body is. I need... did I come with my phone? I need to book a session with Sue"

Me: "Sue? Who's Sue?"

Mpho: "My masseuse . She needs to fix this"

Me: "Wow. You never suggested that when it was me"

Mpho: "Because I know you were going to get offended. You've never liked me spending on you"

Me: "So, you're not mad?"

He furrows his brow.

Mpho: "Mad about what?"

Me: "I know about Trixy"

He closes his eyes then sighs deeply.

Mpho: "I figured it's why my whole behind is on fire. Let's not talk about it"

Me: "I don't have a problem with it. In fact, I'm glad I know"

Mpho: "This doesn't change anything"

Me: "I don't have any expectations. See that woman Trixy threw out? I have to fix things with her"

Mpho: "I'm sorry about that"

Me: "Water under the bridge"

Mpho: "You know you took advantage, right?"

I laugh.

Me: "Me? Trixy threw herself at me."

Mpho: "Nah, that's just an excuse"

Me: "Are you kidding me?"

Mpho: "Now I have to be reliant on you because you decided to disable me."

I laugh again. He's still laying on one spot, by his side while facing me. He has his eyes closed as he speaks, his croaky voice making him sound more sexy.

Me: "That's a taste of your own medicine. Plus Trixy is definitely on the Cardi B level"

Mpho: "No one else should know about it, not Poppy or that Zitha of yours"

Me: "I'm not a snitch"

Mpho: "I never asked."

Me: “Out of curiosity though, how long are you planning to hide? Poppy lives in your house and I have no idea how Trixy operates but what if she... comes when there are there? What then?”

Mpho: “I’ll cross that bridge when I get there, just like we did with you. Fuck, I need a bath”

Me: “Should I prepare you one?”

Mpho: “Please and also borrow me your clothes if you don’t mind”

Me: “I don’t”

Mpho: “Is my car still outside? I can’t trust the security in this place since you don’t have any”

I laugh.

Me: “I don’t know but I’ll check. You have a tracker and insurance moss”

Mpho: “That doesn’t mean I want to have to tap into it. I still have to book another flight”

Me: “You do know that this changes things, right? No matter how much you say nothing’s changed, it has and you know it.”

Mpho: "I thought my bathing water would be ready by now. I need to summon strength to actually bath in that little container of yours"

Me: "Argh, it still gets me clean either way. This is just temporary"

Mpho: "I know. You've really come far from that man with low self-esteem who thought things would never work out for him. I'm proud of you"

I roll my eyes.

Me: "Thanks daddy"

He chuckles.

Mpho: "You're still here?"

Me: "Says the guy who has his eyes closed"

He opens them and I laugh. Getting up, I check outside and find his car still there then inform him. I then fill the kettle and switch it on for his bath water.

I want to call Zitha but I also don't want to ruin this moment. I just hope she's fine where she is and that we'll be able to continue where we left off. I can't rely on Mpho because for now

he's just using me and most likely does not see a future with me.

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POPPY

He didn't come home last night and didn't join us for breakfast. Khanyi and the others left after supper because they wouldn't just leave with empty stomachs. It's their words, not mine. Anyway, they told me not to worry but I couldn't completely not.

Me: "You never told me about the party"

We're chilling by the pool, watching Gigi make models with playing clay.

Rumi: "It was good, really good. Everything went well."

Me: "And Sandy?"

Rumi: "What about her?"

I chuckle.

Me: "Ah, did you make a move?"

She huffs.

Rumi: "I'm no longer interested. The party showed me who she really is. I found Ruben"

I laugh.

Me: "Heh Rumi or it's because she's also Ru?"

She laughs.

Rumi: "She gets me, that's why. Plus we've been talking and she seems like a really cool chick. I'm taking her out tomorrow to officially ask her to be mine"

Me: "But no sex until you're sixteen"

Rumi: "But we're girls. What's the worst that can happen?"

Me: "HIV /Aids, not forgetting STIs. That's worse than falling pregnant"

Rumi: "We'll keep it safe"

Me: "No sex Rumi, I mean it."

Rumi: "You know I know when you started, right? Gigi is proof of it"

Me: "You want me to whoop you Ir arse?"

Rumi: "No sis. I'm sorry"

She can switch that quickly to being afraid of me.

Me: "It's OK and I'm glad you're not straight because I only need to teach you the importance of using condoms and abstaining. Cover that dildo with a condom if you decide to disobey me"

She laughs and stands up, probably because she knows I'm not done yet.

Rumi: "Saying such things in front of a child, have you no shame?"

Me: "Whatever. Bring my phone so I can call Suko. Maybe he knows where Mpho is"

He doesn't take long to answer when I call.

Suko: "Hey"

Me: "Hi. Is Mpho with you?"

Suko: "Was. He went to the spa"

Me: "So, he spent the night with you?"

Suko: "Yes then left after breakfast"

Me: "Oh, so you fucked all night? I can hear by your scratchy voice"

He chuckles.

Suko: "I don't gossip"

Me: "But we haven't talked in a while. I need you to update me on what I've missed."

Suko: "Nothing much except that I'm kind of seeing someone"

Me: "So, you guys are now official?"

I'm beaming at this.

Suko: "Her name's Zitha. You'll meet when the time's right."

I frown.

Me: "Why are you leading the poor girl on? We both know your heart is with Mpho and after last night, you're still continuing whatever you have with her?"

Suko: "I can't continue being his 'sometimes'. It honestly feels like he's using me right now and I won't settle for that. I can't."

Me: "Then why did you sleep with him?"

Suko: "Even he said it was just sex. I don't want inconsistency in my life bro. I can't be with someone who wants me one minute then is dismissing me the next. I'll not wait for him to make up his mind. I've done that way too many times in my life and I refuse to put myself through that again."

I sigh.

Me: "That's uhm... good. It's good that you choosing you. I'm sad because I was rooting for you guys."

Suko: "Yeah well, it failed. Maybe in another lifetime"

Me: "Alright. How's the store coming up?"

Suko: "Good. We might launch before the end of this year"

Me: "Amazing. I've said this before but, I'm proud of you"

Suko: "I'm proud of me too"

SUKOLUHLE

It's an hour after being on the phone with Poppy. Zitha has agreed to come with me and I'm hoping things aren't ruined beyond repair between us.

Zitha: "Hi"

She's too sweet, greeting me like yesterday didn't happen. I feel bad because I didn't even run after her or check if she's OK. Can you blame thou! I was shocked. It was my first encounter with Trixy.

Me: "Hey. I'm... sorry. Yesterday, it was a shock to me. I sort of froze and –"

Zitha: "It's fine. Who's he? Do you guys have history? Because he seemed like those crazy exes"

I chuckle.

Me: "Something like that. I'm sorry you had to see it though. I've put him on his place so you don't have to ever worry about him"

Zitha: "So, it makes you bisexual?"

Me: "I'm more like pansexual"

Zitha: "Right. You're not a cheater, right? I mean you'll be honest with me if you meet someone else or you're no longer interested in me. I don't want to be led on or taken for a poes"

Me: "I promise I will"

I kiss her forehead.

Zitha: "Thank you. Are you not working?"

Me: "I'm off for two more days. I need the break. How's exam prep coming up?"

Zitha: "So far so good. Since you're off, I brought my books along. Remember your tutoring offers? I'm cashing in"

I chuckle.

Me: "You really want to make me work?"

Zitha: "Nope. I just want to pass, stop being lazy"

Me: "Yeh wena!"

She laughs.

POPPY

Time doesn't just move, it flies. We're now on the last month of the year which means my birthday is approaching. There's absolutely no way it can come without me throwing myself a party. It has to happen. Besides, I always look forward to receiving gifts from my friends and being spoiled.

Things between Khanyi and I are still good. There are no labels, just us going with the flow. One thing I can admit though is that I do have feelings for him. It's weird for me because I don't usually catch feelings. I'd vowed to protect my heart at all costs but look at me now. I don't know how he's managed to go passed the palisades guarding it but I'm warming up to him which is scary for me. I promised Zuri I'd never fall in love. She told me it breeds weakness and falling for a man would be the beginning of my demise. I believe her and I'm trying by all means not to fall in too deep. I cannot betray my sister.

Khanyi: "I've been searching for daycares. Do you have any recommendations? How's the one that Gigi goes to?"

Me: "Isn't it too late for applications?"

Khanyi: "It's why I have money"

He shrugs.

We're at his house. It's my last week working because the kids are going to Joburg, to his sister. He says he'll join them on Christmas eve.

Me: "Lucky you. I thought you'd want one that costs more"

Khanyi: "I want them and Gigi in one daycare. How old is he?"

Me: "He's three"

Khanyi: "So, you had him at-

Me: "Don't."

Khanyi: "Where's his father?"

Me: "Aren't we just fucking? Cause you getting personal now and I don't like it."

Khanyi: "Who knows where this will end? I asked about his father"

I sigh.

Me: "I mean, I don't know. I'm not sure who is yet. I never bothered to find out"

Khanyi: "So, you're cool? A person with your skills would have long found out"

I look at him with my eyes squinted.

Me: "A person with my skills? Am I a doctor?"

Khanyi: "No but I think you can easily get a DNA sample."

Me: "And how did you reach that thought? I don't even get why we're having this conversation. I'm fine being Gigi's sole parent. He doesn't need his father yet but when it happens he needs him in the future, I'll make sure I find him."

Khanyi: "Do you know how selfish that sounds? You're keeping a man away from his child. That man has already missed three years of his son's life."

Me: "Don't you dare judge me Khanyile! You have no idea who the fuck I am and why I do the things I do. That man doesn't even know Gigi exists. How will he be hurt by what he doesn't know?"

Khanyi: "So that's why you're not on social media? You're a fugitive?"

I snicker.

Me: "That's ridiculous. How am I a fugitive and what the hell does social media have to do with this? Not all of us are interested in that bull. It's depressing and pressuring. I know people who've committed suicide because of it. You can miss me with that."

Khanyi: “You’d rather wait for him to ask about his father? What about the resentment he might have for you for having kept his father away from him? The said father might take you to court and take your son away from you forever. Then what? You do know you’re putting your relationship with your son at risk, right?”

Me: “OK, stop! Geez. I don’t know why I even told you if you’re going to make such a big deal out of it. I’m gone, can’t take this”

Khanyi: “You’re not going anywhere. I’ll leave you alone to cool off but think about it. If you love Gigi and don’t want to lose him, you will.”

He kisses my cheek then walks out. I sit down then sigh. I hate that he’s right but am I ready to revisit my past? Do I have to? I’m reminded of my feelings for him then find myself contemplating it. Damn.

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SUKOLUHLE

Zitha and I are officially dating now and she’s such an amazing person. It feels refreshing being in a relationship that isn’t stressing me or making me question my worth. I’m not under

any pressure nor do I feel I'm not enough. Yes, it's early days but this feels genuine.

I've taken her out to a pub nje so we can drink and also so she can take her mind off her results which are only coming out in January. I don't get why she's stressing because she told me she wrote well. However, I do get where it comes from especially because it took her more than twelve years to finish school.

Me: "So, what are you drinking?"

Zitha: "I'll have hunters dry. I won't drink too much though. I'm not 21 yet."

Me: "But you're past eighteen moss"

She laughs.

Zitha: "Yes but you know African families and the whole twenty first key thing. I haven't gotten it yet which means I'm not completely free"

Me: "So, we can't book a room at the lodge for a weekend?"

Zitha: "We can. I'm done writing so I'll talk to my mom."

I smile.

Me: "Awesome"

Zitha: "She'll want to talk to you though"

I choke on my drink and she laughs.

Me: "What?"

She nods with a giggle.

Zitha: "I'm not going to lie Suko. Besides, she knows you're my boyfriend"

Me: "Uhm, wow."

Zitha: "I know, right? But relax. She's actually cool."

Me: "I'm not scared. I'm just... I wasn't expecting that."

Zitha: "I can see."

She squeezes my hand.

Zitha: "She's not going to pressurize you into marrying me"

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don't worry"

I chuckle.

Me: "Oh, is it?"

Zitha: "Yes"

Me: "Then I'm chilled. Let me go get our drinks then"

We have a nice, chilled time. I enjoy talking with her but even if we were quiet, it'd be comfortable because her presence is welcoming.

Zitha: “Kana when’s the launch?”

Me: “It’s on the 2nd of February. It’s festive now and people are usually broke in January. However, I’m still building clientele and I’ve already informed them about it. I’ll also be doing interviews soon for assistants.”

Zitha: “OH, great. I look forward to it. You’re my inspiration, you know that?”

Me: “I am?”

I’m taken aback by this. An inspiration, me?

Zitha: “Yes. Your hustling is on another level hle and when you told me where you come from, it motivated me. I admire how you’re pushing. Opening a business is a risk but you’ve taken it and are positively driven. I could go on but you’re amazing. I might write an article about you once I get my journalism degree”

Me: “Oh, you better. Thank you so much babe. It means a lot to me”

Zitha: “Argh, I’m just being honest”

Me: “Yes but still, thank you.”

Zitha: “You’re welcome”

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POPPY

Honestly, fuck Khanyi for making me overthink until I have a headache. I've taken a cab to Tsebo. I need to think about something other than our conversation. I don't want to find myself reminiscing. I can't. This is exactly why one shouldn't catch feelings. When someone speaks some sense to you, you won't take it into cognizance if you're not feeling them. It's funny how we both speak of it just being sex and yet he seems to care more than that. I know it's not that to me because he makes more love than he fucks and that's if I'm not imagining things. It seems real or at least I hope it is. I can't love him though. Maybe it's some form of twisted lust with infatuation masked as love. It doesn't make sense to me as well.

I find him drinking Savannah dry, out of all things.

Me: "Where's the wine?"

Tsebo: "Yoh, my boyfriend is coming to fetch me. You know this is Viagra"

I laugh.

Me: "You Lil hoe"

Tsebo: "Ah, the baddest. How're you though? You seem stressed"

I sigh.

Me: "I'm fine. I just need a drink because I'm falling for this guy and I can't handle it"

He laughs.

Tsebo: "Saw that coming. There's no way you won't fall for a guy who gives good pipe. It's just that sweet"

He hands me a dumpy then continues plating his client's hair.

Me: "I should have ran the first time"

Tsebo: "You didn't so just embrace it and keep it moving"

He makes it sound so easy.

I'm not with him for too long. When his man comes, he agrees to drop me off at Mpho's place.

Gigi runs to me. Just seeing him takes me back to the conversation and it's like the alcohol didn't help. I didn't drink that much either way, just three dumpies.

Gigi: "Missed you"

Me: "Me too baby"

I hug him, kissing his forehead.

Rumi: "Sis, I want you to meet her"

Me: "Hello to you too"

Rumi: “Hi. I spoke to Mpho too and he agreed. I know I should have spoken to you first but he was here and you weren’t”

Me: “That’s fine. We’ll do dinner then I’ll also invite Khanyi”

She smiles.

Rumi: “Sounds good and Suko”

Me: “And him if he doesn’t have any plans”

Rumi: “Great. Thank you sis”

We hug. I’d do anything to make them happy.

SUKOLUHLE

I received a call from Poppy who's invited me to dinner. Apparently Rumi wants to introduce them to someone so I've asked Zitha to go with me. It's the perfect occasion for her to meet my best friend, along with her family.

So, we're on a taxi there now.

Me: "You're not nervous, right? Because they're cool people."

Zitha: "I'm not. If they don't like me, still cool. Not everyone will."

Me: "Oh baby, that's good. But I know they will"

Zitha: "But you said that guy will be there. I hope he won't throw me off the chair again"

I laugh.

Me: "He won't. They live with him so he's bound to be there"

Zitha: "Mm but you better protect me just in case."

Me: "I will baby, don't worry"

I squeeze her hand for reassurance.

Honestly, I don't know what we might find there. I'm hoping for Mpho and not Trixy because he's the calm one. Mpho doesn't like drama and wouldn't act up in front of people.

The cab drops us right at the location and I hear Zitha gasp.

Zitha: "This is where he stays?"

Me: "Yep"

Zitha: "It's beautiful."

Me: "It is."

I grab her hand and we walk further in. The door is already open so we let ourselves in. Everyone is sitting in the dining hall. Zitha and I greet first then I pull a chair for her then sit next to her.

Poppy: "Didn't know you're bringing company"

Me: "Figured I might as well bring her along. It's the perfect opportunity for you to get to know her."

She smiles.

Poppy: "So, this is her?"

Me: "It is. Everyone, meet Zitha. She's my girlfriend"

There's silence for a while, everyone looking at her. Mpho coughs.

Mpho: "Hey Zitha"

She just waves at him with a smile.

Khanyi: "Aren't you with my brother here or am I missing something?"

Poppy: "The part where you have to mind your own business"

Rumi gasps while Mpho chuckles. If she's snapping like that then it means they had an altercation.

Mpho: "To answer your question, we're not together. Never were."

He looks at me briefly, nonchalantly but I feel it's not. There's more to that look. I clear my throat.

Me: "I'm with Zitha"

Khanyi: "Right. You love her?"

Me: "Do you love Poppy?"

Khanyi: "You can put it that way."

I look at Zitha and smile.

Me: "I'm on the way there"

She smiles back at me.

Rumi: "OK everyone. Let's not forget this dinner is for me and Ruben."

Poppy: “How can we Mara?”

Rumi: “Really sis?”

Poppy rolls her eyes.

Poppy: “Sorry. Ruben, that’s my best friend Sukoluhle. I believe she’s the only one you haven’t met”

Me: “Hi Ruben. You’re pretty”

The girl cracks a smile and waves.

Ruben: “Hi Suko”

I’m taken aback by her voice but still wave back.

When the chef brings the food and everyone digs in, it’s like the drama has been forgotten. I still catch Mpho’s eyes on me and he doesn’t even bother looking away. I don’t keep my eyes on him for too long. I don’t know what is going through his head and honestly, I don’t care. My relationship with Zitha might be fresh but I’m serious about her.

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POPPY

Ruben and Rumi go to her room while I clear the table with Khanyi. Suko left right after dinner with Zitha. I blame the looks Mpho kept giving him. I’m not getting involved this time. As much as I love Mpho, I’m proud of Suko for having chosen

himself. He refused to be in something he wasn't sure off and instead went with someone who was choosing him as he chose her.

Khanyi: "So, have you given our conversation a thought or you'll continue sulking and snapping at me every chance you get?"

Heh, this guy. He says this so calmly, like it's not an insult. Vele, he's being rude to me.

Me: "I'll consider it the minute you take that portrait of your ex girlfriend in your room and move it downstairs to the living room"

Khanyi: "The situations aren't even the same"

Me: "We're not the same, are we?"

He sighs.

Khanyi: "Would you think of Given for once and not yourself?"

Me: "Aren't you thinking of yourself when you're not letting go of your girlfriend who passed on?"

Khanyi: "We're both being insensitive, I get that but I'd appreciate if we never talk about her again."

Me: "Only under the condition that you also won't bring my baby daddy up."

He sighs then reluctantly nods. Maybe I'm bad for this bait but she should not speak on issues that he knows nothing of. It doesn't concern him anyway. Yes, even after he said he thinks he loves me. How else can one interpret that 'you can put it that way' he gave Suko?

Gigi: "Pops, ice-cream please"

Me: "Aren't you full?"

He giggles and shakes his head.

Me: "Ayt then"

He follows me to the fridge where I take out the tub then I grab a bowl from the cupboard and take out chunks for him. He thanks me then runs back to the living room.

He stands behind me, pressing his body fully on mine while kissing my neck. He knows his touches are my weakness and when I do get to experience them, I fall apart.

Khanyi: "I need time"

Me: "Wh... what for?"

Khanyi: "In time, I'll remove that picture"

Me: "Fine but I also need time. Besides, my son's conception wasn't exactly sunny"

Khanyi: "Were you raped?"

Me: "No. It's just... complicated. How my sister raised me... I didn't see anything wrong then."

Khanyi: "It's OK babe. I got you"

That alone warms my heart.

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SUKOLUHLE

Me: "How was dinner for you?"

Zitha: "It was cool and well, funny. Your friends are a little crazy bunch. And everyone came with a partner other than your ex"

Me: "He's not my ex"

Zitha: "Mm. And I saw how he kept stealing glances. I'm glad you respected me through that. I now know you have absolutely no feelings for him"

Me: "You're all I want"

She smiles.

Zitha: "Thank you."

Me: "I have interviews today. It's the final callbacks"

Zitha: "OH yes and I have to go home"

Me: "But it's 6am"

We came back yesterday and fell asleep while talking about anything other than the dinner.

Zitha: "I know but I don't want to go home too late"

Me: "Let me prepare you a bath then and no need to worry, I'll go out and leave you to it"

Zitha: "You don't have to"

Me: "I want to."

I kiss her cheek then get off bed. I boil water and then pour into a basin, mixing with cold water until it's warm.

Me: "You know where my stuff is

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right?"

She nods. I go out and leave her to it.

My phone rings when I come back from the shop. I bought bread so she can have it with eggs and bacon. I need to do groceries soon.

Me: "Yea?"

Mpho: "That's how you answer your phone?"

Me: "Is that why you called?"

Mpho: "Good morning. I don't get why you're being so rude this early"

Me: "I'm not being rude. How can I help?"

Mpho: "I thought we friends"

Me: "And?"

He sighs.

Mpho: "Never mind"

And he hangs up. I don't bother my mind wondering what it was all about. Not when it comes to him because I'll just be stressing myself.

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POPPY

A few days later and my birthday is here. I guess I'm excited or maybe it's the prospect of receiving gifts and spending it with people who are close to my heart. Rumi and Gigi are the ones who wake me up while singing Happy Birthday. A smile immediately embraces my lips as I open my eyes. They're with Mpho but he's not singing.

Mpho: "Happy Birthday Poppy. How old are you turning?"

I laugh.

Me: "I'm no longer a teenager"

I wink at him. You should see how his mouth goes agape.

Me: "Better close it before a fly gets in there."

Mpho: "You're serious?"

Me: "Bathong Mpho. I'm still young"

Mpho: "But Khanyi is like... wow"

Me: "I never said I want someone around my age. Besides, age is just a number"

Rumi: "Good because here's a cake with twenty candles"

She gives it to me then kisses my forehead.

Rumi: "Happy birthday Sis"

Me: "Thank you guys"

Gigi gets on my lap and gives me a hug after I sit up. I slice the cake and we all get a piece.

Mpho: "So, I was right when I guessed your age back then?"

I chuckle.

Me: "Can we drop it now? I want to enjoy my birthday"

Mpho: "Mm, yes but I got you a gift. Just accept it, OK?"

Me: "What did you buy me?"

Mpho: "You'll see. Anyway, I have to finalize some things for your party. I gotta love and leave you"

He kisses my cheek and out he goes.

Few hours later, I'm dressed up in a silk black backless bodycon mini dress, paired up with nude red bottoms. I'm not a makeup person but today is an exception. I do it lightly. I have an 8inch Bob wig on, dirty blonde in color. I look good, if I do say so myself.

Rumi: "Wow"

Me: "I know, right?"

Rumi: "You look hot Miss Party"

Me: "Thank you doll. Where's Gigi?"

Rumi: "He's in the garden, acting like it's his party."

She rolls her eyes.

Me: "Ah, it's also his party anyway"

I don't have a big circle of friends, however Mpho's friends are also here. By that, I mean Nosi and her baby daddy even. He must be taking good care of her because she looks good, is glowing even. It must be a girl, judging by how her nose isn't gigantic. Suko is here too with Zitha. Khanyi however, isn't. He's in Joburg, at his sister's place. It's my birthday so I'm not even

sad about it. Tsebo and his boyfriend are here too. I go around greeting all these people. Kiara came alone but she's been chilling with boTsebo.

Nosi: "Happy Birthday"

Me: "Thank you. Shame, you look good. See what fucking just one guy does? It makes you glow"

She chuckles.

Nosi: "Thank you. I've learned my lesson shame"

Me: "Good. Better be glad it happened now than in the future"

Nosi: "You're not so bad after all."

Me: "Sa mphaphela. Anyway, enjoy the party. I hope y'all got me a gift. I love nice things"

Nosi: "We sure did. I don't see Khanyi here. Is he not celebrating with you?"

Me: "He's not my boyfriend. Besides, he might not know it's my birthday"

I didn't get a text or call, nothing. But it's still fine with me.

Nosi: "Mm, what a shame."

Me: "You just had to ruin things neh"

She chuckles. I leave her there. It's my party and the people I have here are fine with me.

We have a good time though, with me thanking everyone for their gifts. Most of them gave me money vouchers. As I'm dancing, Rumi brings my ringing phone. I answer. I'm drunk, no lie.

Me: "Yes?"

"Come to the front"

I look at the caller ID. It's an unknown number.

Me: "Uhm, OK"

Heh, I might be going into my death but with this alcohol in my system, I don't even think of that.

I find him leaning by his car and halt my steps. It can't be. He smiles at me.

Me: "Kgosi"

My voice comes out in a whisper.

Kgosi: "Are you not going to give me a hug?"

Me: "Uhm, of course"

His hands go to my butt as we hug. I'm too drunk to be this close to a man.

Kgosi: "Happy twentieth"

Me: "Thank you"

He breaks the hug but doesn't let go. His hands are still on my butt, even as he leans for a kiss. I'm wrong for replying and more wrong for allowing him to pin me against his car.

Kgosi: "Let's get out of here"

I'm breathless but I still nod. He opens his door and I get in. This is so wrong but damn, it feels right.

KHANYILE

I remain stuck on the same position while watching where it all transpired. I mean I shouldn't be affected but I do think of the fact that I drove all the way here to 'surprise' her. I thought even though we're not 'dating', we'd at least be exclusive. I sure as hell didn't expect to see someone I've allowed around my kids to just... thinking about it infuriates me a little. And he's married, why isn't he with his wife? Doesn't she satisfy him? He's my sister's age so that's like twice Poppy's age. But who am I to judge?

Mpho: "Where did Poppy go? I'm yet to show her the gift I got her"

Me: "She just left with Kgosi. He came to get her"

Mpho: "How did he even go past security?"

Me: "He's a thug. He can enter anywhere"

He pats my shoulder.

Mpho: "I'm sorry man"

Me: "He's probably balls deep in her now"

Mpho: "Most probably"

Me: "Were they together?"

Mpho: "I'd be lying"

I look at him.

Me: "What do you know?"

Mpho: "I'm not getting involved man"

Me: "I'm your friend. At least tell me if they have history or not"

Mpho: "It's not for me to say. I don't get why you care because it's just sex, remember?"

Me: "That doesn't mean I want to share. This person just turned twenty, what's she doing with him?"

Mpho: "Don't we all have a type?"

Me: "Can't believe you're condoning this"

Mpho: "I'm not choosing any sides"

He shrugs then leaves. Damn, I feel like a fool.

I call this woman, with hopes that she'll answer so I can... I don't know. Maybe tell her I'm here?

Poppy: "Hey"

She's breathless when she does.

Me: "Hi. I'm at Mphos, where are you?"

Poppy: "Mm, uhm... ah... not there?"

Me: "So, you left guests on your own party?"

They're really doing it. She's answered my call while he's deep in here? Wow.

Poppy: "Mm, unfortunately. Apologize for me"

Me: "Should I leave now? I drove all the way here so I can see you"

Poppy: "Yesss... I mean... no, don't. Later"

Then she hangs up. Wow. I still need here though so I'll wait here and see how she's going to answer for herself.

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POPPY

Me: "This... is... wrong"

Kgosi: "Mmm"

Me: "We... should stop"

Kgosi: "Because of that boyfriend of yours?"

He's stopped sucking me and is now giving me an unimpressed look.

Me: "I don't have a boyfriend, you're the married one here"

Kgosi: "I haven't forgotten my vows. You know I love you, that hasn't changed. Besides, I wanted to make love to you on your birthday but I'm no longer in the mood"

Me: "Haibo. You're the reason I'm soaking. Come on"

Kgosi: "No. You can go to him"

Me: "So, I came all the way here for a quickie?"

Kgosi: "This is still your night. At least you got to orgasm. I missed hearing you scream my name as you fell apart"

I bite my lip.

Me: "Thank you?"

He chuckles.

Kgosi: "Get dressed. I'll drive you back"

Me: "No"

My voice even comes out whiny. I don't know if I'm drunk or I really don't want to leave. I get up and get on top of him. He's also naked. I kiss his neck.

Me: "Nope"

I then kiss along his jaw until my lips are on his. He replies soon as my tongue slides into his mouth. Just when I'm about to start moving on him, his phone rings. Thankfully, he answers it and only signals that I should keep quiet. I bite my lip then ride him slowly and sensually. He has his eyes on me even as he talks.

Kgosi: "Yes... when... I'm busy... tomorrow baby... yes, I'll be there in the morning... I love you too"

He throws it away after then his hands go to my butt as he stands up. I'm pinned against the wall then the rough thrusts begin. Damn, he's really about to mess up my walk now.

I'm drained in the morning and my head is a little heavy. I'm not surprised he's not next to me, especially after the call he received last night. I walk to the bathroom. I need a bath.

I soak in there, until the water turns cold. It's soothing and also helps with the soreness down there. Last night was hectic.

It's past breakfast but Kgosi actually ordered me some and did that thing he likes of leaving money for me. It used to make me feel like some hooker but now, now I just take it. This time, I take it as my birthday present. I've worn the clothes he got me, which are black cotton biker shorts with a black bandeau. It's with no panties so I guess the lady south has to breath. After taking all that's mine

I'm on my way out.

Arriving at Mpho's place, I have no idea where the exhaustion comes from. It's probably from not really sleeping since Kgosi was pounding me through most of the night.

I halt right after getting in my room. Khanyi is on my bed, sitting up while scrolling through his phone. When he looks up, I gulp. Of course he knows what happened, he's not a fool. It's nothing I'm proud of but I'd be lying if I say I regret it. I clear my throat.

Me: "Hey"

My voice is croaky.

Khanyi: "Hey. You're finally back"

I nod.

Me: "I... am. I wasn't expecting you to be here"

Khanyi: "You don't remember us talking on the phone last night?"

I only remember when he brings it up.

Me: "Oh, yes. I do now"

I put the bags on the couch and sit next to them.

Khanyi: "That good, huh"

Me: "Excuse me?"

Khanyi: “You winced after sitting down. I have to give it to Daniels”

Me: “You... you... know I was with him?”

Khanyi: “I saw him. I came after him, saw you guys kissing against his car”

I could apologize but not when what’s happening between us isn’t clear. I mean, it’s clear we’re not dating and it’s not like we spoke of being exclusive. Technically, I didn’t do anything wrong.

Me: “I didn’t think you’d come, considering how you didn’t bother wishing me a happy birthday”

Khanyi: “I didn’t want to do it over the phone, which is why I drove all the way here. Stupid me wanted to surprise you but it ended up being vice versa”

Me: “I... I didn’t know”

Khanyi: “That’s why it’s a surprise, right?”

He’s making me feel bad now. He came all the way but I also had no idea.

Me: “I thought you didn’t care”

Khanyi: "I thought we were exclusive. I don't even get why you're messing around with a married man that's twice your age. Do you know that his son is almost your age?"

Me: "Don't judge me Khanyile, don't."

Khanyi: "I'm always looking out for you. You can't always reduce it to me judging you"

I sigh.

Me: "We never spoke of being exclusive but just you preaching over and over again that it's just sex"

Khanyi: "I had you around my kids and even want them to meet yours. I thought that made it clear that I want us to last"

Me: "Say it"

Khanyi: "It seems I need to since my actions weren't loud. I want you to be mine. You're the only woman I find myself interested in after Lesedi's death and I want you as mine"

Me: "Even after last night?"

Khanyi: "Even after last night"

I smile.

Me: "Then I'll gladly be yours"

I get up from the couch and scurry to him where I hug him.

Khanyi: "How do you know him?"

OH, now I know why he refused to kiss me. I mean I get it but one kiss wouldn't have hurt.

Me: "It's a long story"

I'm not about to tell him about my card scheming and how I almost died until the man had mercy on me. I thought he spared my life for sex but then he continued caring and even got rid of Oki for me and my family's safety. He doesn't even expect any payment for it.

Khanyi: "How long?"

Me: "Why am I being questioned?"

He sighs.

Khanyi: "Fine. Let's go have breakfast"

Me: "I ate before I came here"

He nods.

Khanyi: "I'm going to shower"

I nod.

Kgosi calls like he knows he's out of the room. I answer.

Me: "Hi"

Kgosi: "I'm seeing you again tonight. I'll send a car"

Me: "I can't. I-

Kgosi: "I wasn't asking you. Be ready at 8"

Then he hangs up. Wow.

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SUKOLUHLE

Me: "Welcome to Suko Repairs and Pawn Shop"

I shake the two women and man's hands after. They're the three successful candidates. All we're hoping for from now on is that the store makes enough money for me to be able to pay them. Their salary is at basic level and I thank God I passed my short business course because I wouldn't know these things.

Nobantu: "So, when are we getting paid?"

I laugh.

Me: "How do you get paid when you haven't worked? You officially start on the fourth of January since we're opening them so see you all then. You already know your job description so we're done here"

Nobantu is the cleaning lady, Lesego is the admin while Joel is the cashier.

It's exciting really because I never thought I'd be an employer. I'd always been someone who seeks a job and not who people come to for one. The wheels have really turned, God has been good to me.

I call Zitha, asking if she wants me to get her anything since I'm in town.

Zitha: "Just some ice cream and snacks. Also, that wine I like"

Me: "Will I find you at my place?"

We're at that stage where she has my key. I'm yet to move out. The space is small and well, I need something more spacious but I'm putting it off to until the store starts making money. She's patient with me, doesn't demand and most of the time waits for me to offer. There are times when she really needs something that she asks. I'm thinking of giving her that girlfriend allowance because I can afford to.

Zitha: "Yes"

I bump into my sister when I'm at Woolworths. She's with a man I assume is hers. Every time I see her, I think of the time she threw herself at me when I had that façade on.

Mosa: "Ao Tinto. You're scarce"

Me: "You're talking to me?"

I look around. She knows I hate that name so why's she acting up now?

Mosa: "Oh, it's like that. Life's good neh. You're even shopping at Woolies"

Me: "You're wasting my time"

Mosa: "Oh, I am now? Now that you're becoming a decent human you think you can look down on me?"

I look at the guy she's with who's looking at me with his brows furrowed.

Me: "You're embarrassing yourself"

I walk past her after that. It's going to take a long time for me to move past everything that's happened.

*****TWO YEARS LATER*****

POPPY

Life has been rather... chilled these past two years. Khanyi and I have been good and I've found myself doing what I promised Zuri I wouldn't – I fell in love. He's just different and I like it. He loves me and shows it to me. It's not just by his words but his actions speak for him too. I'm even surprised we've been together for this long. It's hard to believe. Gigi is now turning five which means he has to start school. I want him to start on a clean slate, do things legally like Rumi which means getting him a birth certificate. It'll be easy for him since his father is South African which automatically means he is too. It's one past I had hoped I won't have to revisit.

Rumi: "Can't believe I'm doing my matric this year. It actually means I'll move to Joburg and who knows, I might bump into my crush"

Me: "Good morning ma'am"

She huffs, rolling her eyes.

Rumi: "Really? Aren't you excited? It's. A new year. You should be"

Me: "What happened with you and Ruben since you speaking of your crush?"

Rumi: "New Year, new me"

Then off she goes. I only shake my head at that.

I haven't checked on Mpho in a while. We moved out into our new home. It's in Airport view and far from most things. Our house isn't complete yet but five of the rooms are. There's the bathroom, two bedrooms, kitchen and the living room. I'm sharing with Gigi while Rumi has hers alone. My little sister is turning sixteen.

Mpho: "Pops"

Me: "Hey, how are you?"

Mpho: "I'm fine, you?"

Me: "You don't sound like it. I'm good. I know how home makes you feel"

Mpho: "It's exhausting but it's family, right?"

Me: "Don't let them feed off your peace. You don't have to be there"

Mpho: "Don't worry about me. Have you checked on Suko?"

Me: "Eish, I have but not in a few days. I've been stressing but I'll go to him today"

Mpho: "Is it Khanyi?"

Me: “No. It’s Gigi but nothing I can’t handle. I just wanted to check up on you”

Mpho: “I appreciate it. You know you can call if you need anything, right?”

Me: “Yes sir”

I dial Suko after hanging up. Things have been hard on my best friend. He’s been slipping in and out of depression so I’m really worried about him.

Suko: “Poppy”

Me: “Are you home?”

Suko: “I’m a single father. Where else would I be?”

Me: “I didn’t mean it like that. I’m coming”

I sigh after hanging up. It’s been three months and it’s still taking a toll on him. I suggested that he and the twins move in with us but he refused. I get why though, considering how small our house is but I know we could have worked it out. Mpho is usually the one who spends a lot of time with them. He’s been there for him since the twins birth.

Me: “I’m going to Soso, wanna come with?”

Gigi: “Soso? Yes. We can go”

He gets up from the floor and takes my hand. We bid Rumi farewell is on the phone with whoever.

So, Mpho got me a whole car for my twentieth birthday. That meant I had to learn how to drive. It's a Golf MK6. Anyway, I get in after making sure Gigi is buckled up. This one thinks he's grown.

Suko is renting a flat in Unit 5. He was staying there with Zitha. He's never spoken of buying a house or building one. His store is doing well, so well that he opened another franchise in another mall. I'm proud of him. Seems like his dream of manufacturing his own smartphone is just here.

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SUKOLUHLE

If it was up to me, I wouldn't have any visitors. We're fine on our own but you can't say that to people who care about you. None of them understands. It's hard for me because I've never had to experience this kind of loss. How do I look at my kids as gain when I lost their mother? It's been tough. Our first year together, we were happy. She got pregnant too soon and I begged her not to get an abortion. She wanted to terminate, spoke of how it wasn't part of her plans but I couldn't allow her to get rid of my seed. So, she listened, thank God. Little did I know that my departure would lead to her leaving us.

Sometimes I'd convince myself that I've gotten used to it, until one of them cries and I remember. I haven't named them, still call them the twins. I just... I don't know what to. My mother does come to check on us too. It's weird how close we've gotten again through the years. Zelda also comes but not frequently but she does call. Mosa? Well she got married the day we lost Zitha. She's never bothered coming and I hope she never does. See, raising two babies on the bottle means I am home all the time. The business side is taken care of and doing well. I was even able to expand. I just haven't had time for it since Zitha gave birth.

Poppy: "And I'm here. Where are my favorite twins?"

She snaps me out of it. She has the keys which explains how she can just barge in here.

Me: "They're sleeping"

Gigi: "Soso!"

He runs to me and I put him on my lap, kissing his forehead.

Me: "You keep getting bigger"

He smiles.

Gigi: "I'm a big boy"

Me: "indeed. You'll be at school soon"

Gigi: "Yes. I'll go to granny"

And off he goes. He's accustomed to this place and knows where he'll find her. Poppy walks to me after.

She walks to me and frowns. We're in the living room.

Poppy: "You look drained"

Me: "Tell me something I don't know"

She sighs and sits next to me, taking my hand.

I have not eaten in a week and I don't see that changing anytime soon. People can just move on like that and forget. I can't.

I don't want to start thinking that I'm not meant for good things. I don't want to think I'm not meant for love. Zitha and I were meant to be. I've never experienced that kind of love. It was pure and real, so fulfilling and made me so happy. It all doesn't make any sense to me. The hardest part has been accepting that she left us.

Poppy: "When did you last eat? You look frail and pale"

Me: "That's a compliment?"

Poppy: "We're back to the beginning, aren't we? Who helps with the kids if you're like this?"

Me: "My mother is here. She comes in every morning and leaves late. This... has become her day job."

Poppy: "Suko. You... you have to accept that she's gone. She made a choice OK. The same way you decided you want to keep them"

Me: "She made me think it's what she wanted. She... she seemed happy throughout the pregnancy. She was when we found out it's twins and even during her antenatal checkups. How can she just... I hate her for this"

Poppy: "I know things don't make sense to you but it's the same as when a man chooses to flee. You let them, just like you should let Zitha. She signed away her parental rights because she didn't want to have to take responsibility. It's the reality you unfortunately have to make peace with"

Me: "Just like that?"

Poppy: "Just like that. It won't be easy but it has to be done for the sake of your boys."

Me: "They're going to grow up and... and ask about their mother. What will I say?"

Poppy: "We'll cross that bridge when we get there. For now, I'll warm up something for you. You have to eat"

I sigh. The tears just keep falling. Maybe I haven't accepted because I've been praying to God for her to return. She didn't say where she's going, just disappeared from the hospital. It must have been something she had been planning for a while. One thing I can't wrap my head around though is where she got the money. For someone to run off, they'd need it to survive a few months in that new city. I try not to think about it a lot though because all it does is give me a headache.

Me: "Thank you"

She's just given me a plate of soup, which my mother probably made. With a sigh, I drink.

Poppy: "I'll call Tsebo so he can come shave you"

Me: "No, don't. I'm fine like this. You know I'm 29, right? This is growth"

She shrugs.

Poppy: "Fine then"

Me: "Thank you Poppy."

Poppy: "That's why I'm your best friend"

Me: "Let's talk about you before I become more depressed. Have you uhm... reached out to Gigi's possible fathers?"

She sighs.

Poppy: "I tracked them down and sent texts. I'm waiting for them to reply"

Me: "Are they related?"

Poppy: "Brothers but please, don't ask more"

Me: "Well, good luck"

Poppy: "I'm definitely going to need it"

Me: "Are they bad?"

She bites her lip then shakes her head.

Me: "Khanyi's age?"

She chuckles.

Poppy: "No, younger but it's still statutory rape or whatever. It's just... I didn't think I'd ever have to revisit my past. I can bet a R100 that they won't be pleased too"

Me: "Remember that you're doing it for Gigi. At least he gets to meet his father before he's at the age of asking questions"

She huffs.

Poppy: "I guess"

Me: "It'll be alright"

She smiles at me.

Poppy: “Right back at you. Let me go get him so we can leave. We’re doing dinner with Khanyi”

I nod.

POPPY

I drove to Khanyi’s place. Upon getting there, Gigi has already fallen asleep. Maybe it was a little late for us. We stayed too long at Sukos but I know he’s hungry. He’ll wake up in about an hour then go back to sleep after eating. He helps me with him after I get in. Gigi has gotten real heavy.

Diana: “You’re still here”

I don’t know where she’s coming from. I thought it’d just be us (Khanyi and I) with the kids.

Me: “What are you doing here?”

Diana: “This is my son’s house and who are you to even ask me that?”

Khanyi: “Ook, can the fight stop? I thought you two would like each other by now”

Diana: “You can do better. She should be on the streets, planning with other kids”

Me: “Oh, really? Like you were at my age?”

Khanyi: “Enough!”

He then turns to me.

Khanyi: "I thought we talked about you being civil with my mother"

Me : "she's the adult here. She didn't exactly set a good example"

He sighs.

Khanyi: "There are kids here, just in case you forgot. This bickering has gotten old"

Diana: "I'm your mother, you can't talk to me like that"

Khanyi: "Then start acting like it because you're the oldest here. Baby, come sit down"

He pulls a chair for me around dining table. I sit then he sits next to me.

Me: "What's going on?"

From the candlelit dinner on the table then his mom being here, something must be up. I don't know what though. He grabs my hand then turns to his mom.

Khanyi: "We have an announcement to make"

Me: "We?"

I have no idea what he's on about.

Khanyi: “Poppy and I had a conversation and we’re expanding our family”

Diana and I: “What?!”

POPPY

He's serious. He's serious while I have no idea what he's on about. How do I expand a family when I'm in the dark? Have we talked babies? My memory is foggy or maybe I was drunk.

Diana: "You're seriously not considering... we don't know anything about her. I tried running a background check but it came back blank. Poppy might not even be her real name"

I scoff.

Khanyi: "I'm going to tuck these two in, Poppy come help. Mom, I'll see you after this"

Great. A chance for me to be enlightened.

Khanyi: "Don't say anything until they're asleep"

When we get to their bedroom, I watch him read them a bedtime story. I thought Sbu would be up by now.

When he's done, he takes my hand and walks me out. We go to his room. I can't call it ours when that portrait is still there. I've gotten accustomed to it over the years but that doesn't mean I approve.

Me: "What was that about?"

Khanyi: "We spoke about this baby"

Me: "Why don't I remember?"

We sit thigh to thigh on the bed. He holds my hand.

Khanyi: "A year ago, I mentioned that Lesedi had... frozen her eggs. It's time and you're the perfect candidate. I love you and I know you love me too"

I allow myself a moment to register all that he's saying. Is it because he knows I love him and that I'd do anything for him? This is why Zuri hated love because all it does is make one weak.

Me: "You want me to carry you and your dead girlfriend's child?"

Khanyi: "It'll be ours, the same way I see Gigi as my own son"

Me: "So, that picture might never get removed?"

Khanyi: "No baby, come on"

Me: "I...I just need to uhm... do my own research on surrogacy and what it entails"

He smiles.

Khanyi: "So, you're considering it?"

Me: "I love you, don't I?"

He kisses my hand then cheek.

Khanyi: "Thank you baby"

What sucks more about this is that because of that non-disclosure I signed, I can't talk to anyone about it. Now, I'll just have to think it through, read whatever I can find online so I know exactly what I'm getting myself into.

We go back to where his mom is, finding Sbu finally up and her dishing up for him.

Just as I sit down, my phone beeps. It's a text I've been waiting for. With a sigh, I put the phone back on the table.

Khanyi: "Who was it?"

Me: "Just a lead on something"

I can't say much in his mom and Gigi's presence. Although my son never eavesdrop, he probably will at the mention of his name.

Khanyi: "Should I be worried?"

Me: "Not at all"

I know what he's thinking. He's been like this since Kgosi resurfaced two years ago and I don't blame him.

Mom: "Are you now going to tell me why the hell you want to make her pregnant?"

Khanyi: "Because I love her"

Mom: "Next you'll want to marry her when we don't know anything about her"

Khanyi: "She's my woman, not yours. You don't have to know anything about her"

Mom: "Khanyile! Is that how you're talking to your own mother?"

Khanyi: "You have to accept that I'm not a child and you don't get to control me. I respect you mom but please, know your place and stick to it."

Mom: "Wow"

She stands up, almost tripping the chair and leaves. She's fuming so this isn't a moment for me to laugh, even though I feel like it.

Me: "That was tense"

Khanyi: "Needed to be said"

Me: "Indeed"

Gigi: "Can I go back to bed?"

Me: "Yes baby"

Gigi: "Good night Khanyi, good night Popo"

Me: “Good night baby”

I kiss his lips. Yeah, maybe it wouldn't be so bad to have his sibling running around.

Khanyi: “Let me see your phone”

Me: “What?”

It's like he waited for them to leave so he can do this. I reluctantly give him my phone.

I watch as he goes through it. He gives it back when he's satisfied.

Khanyi: “So, those are your possible baby daddies?”

I nod.

Khanyi: “How did it even happen? When did you lose your virginity?”

Me: “Don't insult me”

I leave him there. This is why I don't like telling people my age. They count it back to when Gigi was conceived then question things that have nothing to do with them. He has no right to judge me, don't he read his Bible?

I take off my clothes then get in bed. I'm sleeping in the guest room. I'm too mad to have his late girlfriend's spirit hovering over me.

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SUKOLUHLE

I look at the two sucking on their pacifiers. They look more like her than me but maybe that might change as they grow and develop. I've taken Poppy's words into cognizance

mediated over them while introspecting myself in the process.

It's time I started living. I cannot rely on my mother forever to look after my kids and I can't stay off work forever. I had to get handymen for both shops so they can help with repairs. I haven't been to work since so I have a lot to catch up on. I have to accept and respect Zitha's decisions because she never wanted the twins. She did it for me, which was a selfish thing for me to ask. I should have understood why she left. It wasn't what she wanted. She stayed true to herself, which I applaud her for and now will move on with that acceptance. I hope the twins will get to be as understanding in the future.

Mom: "They can't be nameless forever. They need birth certificates"

Me: "She named them. I just... I can't accept that knowing she's never going to be part of their life"

Mom: "Never say never. She might grow up then realize she can't live without them anymore. Have hope"

Me: "No mom. She never wanted to be pregnant in the first place. She carried them for me. She'll have that scar reminding her of the sacrifice she made for love. I was wrong to ever judge her for that"

Mom: "That scar will remind her that she's a mother and regardless of how far she runs, that'll never change."

Me: "It doesn't matter. How's the white sheep of the family?"
I'm not interested but if I have to digress. I've spoken of Zitha enough for the day.

Mom: "Fine. They're moving into their new house soon"

Me: "Good for her. You must be so proud"

Mom: "You know I regret ever kicking you out of the house and turning my back on you like that instead of getting you into rehab"

Me: "Let bygones be bygones. They'll be Kamvalethu and Kamvelihle"

Mom: "AboKamva. I love them"

Me: "I'm all about them from now on. Relationships were never meant for me"

Mom: "Or maybe you aren't meant to be with a woman"

She shrugs.

Me: "Heh MA, are you calling me gay?"

Mom: "You wouldn't have these two if you were."

Then she walks away. She's been paying attention to our guests, now it makes sense.

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POPPY

I should have done this a long time but it doesn't matter because I'm doing it now. They came up with a location and I let them because I'm not in the mood for having my way. I'm doing this for Gigi, not for myself. I can't believe my baby has grown this much. He was just a toddler yesterday and now he's starting school. They grow up so fast.

Things between Khanyi and I are still a little Rocky but he knows about this. I told him we'll only go to a specialist after I've found Gigi's father. It'll give me peace.

So, I had to take a flight to Kimberley so I can meet up with these two. He wanted to come with me but I reminded him that it's something I have to do on my own. It's important I do.

Me: “Boys”

They click their tongues while mugging me. I laugh at their twin tendencies. You’d swear they’re from the same womb. I can hear them cussing me in my head.

Me: “I hear you’re both in serious relationships. How’s commitment going?”

I sit down and call a waiter. I’m famished.

AJ: “What do you want Aza? I’m not in the mood for small talk.”

Me: “It’s Poppy. P-o-p-p-y, get it?”

Thabang: “We don’t care. Why did you call us here? You disappeared to whatever hole then call us after five years demanding a meet up? What’s this about?”

Me: “You’re both acting like we never had that experience. This is important.”

AJ: “Get to the fucking point.”

He seems more mad than Thabang. He’s naturally a grumpy person but this, this is worse.

Me: “You’re mad at me really? I thought you’d be over it since you have a girlfriend.”

AJ: “You did me dirty so don’t expect me to just smile with you. You left!”

Me: "I never promised to stay AJ, come on. Anyway, do you remember that little threesome we had?"

They grimace at the memory which makes me laugh. The reminiscence is giving me tingles and goosebumps.

Thabang: "What about it?"

Me: "Well, we never used protection and we did that for like a week. Yoh, did you know I still fuck for one week every month? Old habits die hard I guess."

AJ: "So, you fell pregnant? I assume that's why you called us here."

Me: "Oh, you're smart. His name is Given or just Gigi. I brought a sample of his DNA so you guys can do the test. Whoever is the father will help him get a birth certificate because he's starting school soon."

Thabang: "What the fuck? You don't think we're going to believe your con woman arse. It could be anyone."

Me: "Do I look like I have time for games? I'm not even asking for child maintenance but a mere birth certificate."

AJ: "You're one selfish bitch!"

He's seething. I know if he could, he'd snap my neck right now and right here.

Me: “Yes, I am that bitch. I feel sorry for whoever is the father between you too because I’m going to be that baby mama. I hope your girlfriends have that gall.”

Thabang: “Fuck you Azania!”

He even spits on the floor like we’re not in a restaurant. Thabang leaves, after kicking the chair. We ignore the gasps and mind our business.

Me: “I hope you’re not leaving me to settle the bill.”

AJ: “Oh because that’s all you care about.”

He’s still mad.

AJ: “How could you do this to me then come back like nothing happened?”

Me: “We’ve both moved on. Besides, I was a teenager and dumb.”

He scoffs.

Me: “Book a room for us. I’ve missed you.”

I also need to distress. This Khanyi thing is bothering me a bit. It’s going to take a lot for me to carry a dead woman’s child. That alone shows that he’s not over her and probably never will be.

AJ: "Where's the sample? Do you have his picture? I want to see him."

I give him sachet that has Gigi's hair and a saliva sample just in case. He takes it then puts it inside his suit jacket pocket.

Me: "I can't show you a picture though. You'll meet him after we get the results. I know it doesn't matter who the father is because you're both going to be in his life."

AJ: "You know you're bad for doing this, right? You deprived us five years of our child's life and would have continued if you didn't need us now. Why are you so damn evil!"

Me: "It's actually six if you're counting the pregnancy."

He gives me a deadly look that'll have anyone shaking in their boots.

Me: "Ah, sorry."

He's agitated and I don't blame him. I also know he wishes he's the father but I'm hoping not. I want to rain havoc on Thabang's girlfriend instead. The girl seems like a weakling, not this harlot AJ is in love with.

AJ: "Let's get the Fuck out of here. I want to remind you what you lost."

I've picked my stuff that fast. He pulls me roughly and even that can't erase my excitement. I'm going to get laid! This isn't going

to be mediocre sex, I'm talking crème Dela dick baby. He's driving like a maniac. I'm sitting next to him, pressing my thighs together and clenching my mound. Thabang probably knew something like this is going to happen. I would have loved a repeat of our first threesome but this is good too. More than good actually.

Besides, I can't have that kind of cheating on my conscience. It's not like Khanyi also isn't cheating on me with a ghost. He probably imagines her when we're together.

POPPY

I'm going to be here for a week because that's apparently how long it's going to take for us to get the results. Between you and me, I think AJ just wants me to be around for sometime. He really had his way with me yesterday. The mere thought of it makes me shiver.

I'm on a video call with Gigi now. I miss him so much but I know he's in safe hands. Rumi is a good baby sitter.

There's a gruesome knock on my hotel room that coerces me to end the call.

Me: "I love you baby, see you soon ok"

He nods.

Gigi: "I love you too"

I walk barefoot to the door and open. There's a fuming Thabang on the other end. He pushes his way through, making me fall butt flat.

Me: "The hell?"

Thabang: "You should have stayed away!"

He's roaring. I'm unable to understand where this rage is coming from.

Me: "I didn't come here because I wanted to but it's because I had to"

He scoffs, shaking his head.

Thabang: "I don't believe that. You saw our lives going well and decided to come wreck havoc!"

Me: "I'm not that evil"

My butt is aching from the fall. I'm in a black backless romper with my hair let loose. I'm not feeling like going out, just going to stay here for the day.

Thabang: "You know he's never cheated on her before"

Me: "AJ is a grown man, older than me might I add. How are you blaming me for his infidelity? It was a choice. He's the one who led me there"

Thabang: "So that old man you're dating doesn't satisfy you or you just can't keep those legs closed?"

Me: "These are my legs and who I open them for has nothing to do with you. Is that girlfriend of yours satisfying you?"

Thabang: "Fiancé."

I move towards him.

Me: “Yes, her”

I get on his lap. I’m surprised he let’s me because he’s the strict one.

Thabang: “You know you’re his weakness Nia, always have been. History can’t repeat itself”

Me: “You should be having this talk with him”

Thabang: “He doesn’t care. He can’t just... he can’t break up his family over you. More especially because you won’t stay”

Me: “Again, you should be saying this to him”

Thabang: “He won’t listen to me which is why I’m here. Don’t give in to him”

Me: “Why?”

I run my nails through his goatie sensually, hearing him suck a breath.

Thabang: “For his own good. You’re bad for him, bad for all of us. I know I can have my way with you right now and he’ll still be down for you”

I chuckle.

Me: “So, that’s why you’re here?”

Thabang: “My woman satisfies me and I’m not weak like AJ. I can resist you”

Me: “Such a pity I’m not in the mood but I can give you bomb ass head”

Thabang: “Stop. After the results, stay away”

He gets me off his lap then fixes his pants. I watch him as he leaves then sigh when the door closes. I didn’t come here for all of this. I hate that I’m being blamed for AJ’s actions because it takes two to tango.

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SUKOLUHLE

Today, I’ve woken up feeling a lot better. It helps talking about her I’ve realized and it’s what gears my heart towards healing. My mother isn’t here so I had go get up early, do their bottle then I bathed them after they woke up. I fed them and now they’re sleeping. I’ve been on my laptop, trying to catch up on work while they sleep. I’ve already prepared their bottles. I know they’ll be hungry when they wake-up. The rattle of keys alerts me that someone’s about to come in. It can’t be Poppy because she’s in Kimberley and definitely not my mother which leaves Mpho. They’re the only ones who have my key.

When the person steps into the living room, I’m corrected.

Me: “Trixy?”

It's a first seeing him... I mean her like this. From the dress to the makeup which is smudged because of crying. I put my laptop on the coffee table and get up, walking closer to her.

Me: "What happened?"

Trixy: "I can't do it anymore Suko. I'm sorry for burdening you like this but I'm tired"

Me: "Tired of what?"

I take her hand and walk us back to the couch, helping her sit then sit next to her. I still hold her hand, squeezing it for comfort and assurance.

Trixy: "Of not living

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closing myself off. He's tired too. Home is always draining"

Me: "Talk to me"

Trixy: "I know you have a lot on your plate but there's... there's no one else I can talk to. Please hold me"

She gets on my lap, laying her head on my shoulder. I brush her back as she sobs, wondering what has her like this. Are they finally going to open up to someone? Because I know they're human and we all need a shoulder to cry on.

Trixy: "I... I'm sorry"

Then she gets off me, wiping her face.

Me: "Talk to me. What got you so worked up?"

Trixy: "My mom always blames dad whenever her relationships don't work. It's hard sitting there and listening to her shaming him for being true to himself. We get tired of hiding. Now... now she's planning to find me a wife"

Me: "She's what?"

Trixy: "Yes, imagine. We've never had a girlfriend before, what are we going to do with a whole wife?"

Me: "You can't let her do that"

Trixy: "Of course not. It's the last fuxxn straw. I don't know about Mpho but I'm done with that woman. Such a pity I can't be in control for too long, I was going to take a flat there and tell her what's up!"

Me: "Oh, relax. Should I get you a drink?"

Trixy: "Yes please. Can I use your bathroom? I have to fix my face. I can't believe you saw me like this"

Me: "You're still beautiful with your smudged make up"

She smiles.

Trixy: "Fuck you"

I wonder how Mpho will react when he finds himself with long acrylic nails. That's something I wish to see.

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POPPY

I've been cooped up in this room for too long plus I need to smoke and have a drink. I've showered and getting dressed now. I'm going to have a party for one here. I'm one person who enjoys their own company so I'm not bored.

I'm startled when someone clears their throat as I'm tying my hair up. How do he get in here?

Me: "You shouldn't be here"

AJ: "Why not? I got you some stuff. There's a bottle of Henny and pipe with your favorite flavor"

Me: "How did you know?"

AJ: "I know more than you think"

Me: "I was about to go get myself something. Did you bring some meat?"

AJ: "No but we can go get it since you're all dressed up or barely since those ass cheeks are barely covered"

Me: "Don't start"

AJ: "Go put on a Jean or something"

Me: "Hell no. You don't get to tell me what to put on my body, I'm not that girlfriend of yours."

AJ: "Fine, let's go"

He tries holding my hand but I don't let him. We're not a couple and can't be giving off the assumption that we are.

AJ: "So, I'm really not seeing his picture until the results come?"

Me: "Yes and you can't change my mind about that"

He chuckles.

AJ: "You sound so sure"

Me: "I am when it comes to him"

AJ: "Alright mommy. We'll do it your way"

Me: "There's no other anyway"

We get takeaways from Steers and he also drives to Nandos. He's a chicken fan, can never separate him from it. From there, we go back to the hotel.

Me: "Thabang was here. He warned me to stay far away from you"

AJ: "Hope nothing happened between the two of you"

Me: "Unlike you, he's loyal and devoted to his fiancé"

He chuckles.

AJ: "There's a lot you don't know"

Me: "Well, I know I'm not a home wrecker like he insinuated."

AJ: "Relax"

We eat in comfortable silence, after which he sets up the pipe. I'm playing music on the low. He pours the henny for us then we drink whilst smoking.

AJ: "How did you manage to make yourself untraceable? Apart from the Poppy thing"

Me: "You shouldn't have looked for me in the first place"

AJ: "I loved you. How could I have not?"

Me: "I was never good for you"

AJ: "That was up to me to decide"

Me: "it doesn't matter. You're happy now"

AJ: "I hope he's mine. Thabang already has two kids, he can't afford a third baby mama. Not to mention how this will affect his fiancée."

Me: "She'll be strong"

AJ: "Of course you don't care. Don't you get tired of being heartless? You're 22 and a damn mother. A little compassion won't hurt"

Me: "I'm not going to pretend like I do. Besides, she's nothing to me"

AJ: "You'll never change. I was almost convinced you love him but I see it's same old to you, still under Zuri's shadow"

Me: "Don't!"

He should never mention my sister. I hate when people speak ill of her, which hardly happens but they've both never liked her even when she was alive.

AJ: "Hit a nerve? You have feelings after all"

Me: "If you're here to test me, might as well leave. I can party on my own"

AJ: "I'm tapping first"

Me: "You want your brother to kill me, don't you?"

AJ: "Don't care. Who knows when I'll see you again"

MPHO

My head's heaviness is the first thing I feel when I lift it up. I open my eyes and scan my surroundings, where am I? I stretch, feeling my muscle loosen. I need a massage. I can feel knots all over. The bitterness in my mouth alerts me I had one too many. I'm not much of a drinker so it must have been Trixy. She'll get us in trouble one of these days. I sit up and try to regain some memory. I remember being at home and that's it. With a sigh, I get off the bed. I notice my toenails when I try to find shoes. She didn't! I look at my nails and notice the drastic changes she made. She must have been in control for too long. It's no wonder I'm wearing just a t-shirt. I sniff it and catch his scent. It just had to be him.

I don't even want to face Suko right now. What's he thinking of me? I'm grateful she didn't do anything with him but still. Coming here with makeup and all is already too much.

There's a light knock on the door then it opens. Great.

Suko: "Good morning. I got you some breakfast and uhm... pills"

Me: "Borrow me some pants please"

He puts the tray on the bedside drawer while looking at me.

Me: "What?!"

Suko: "You know you don't have to hide, right? I'm your friend and I want to be there for you. You've been a great support system to me and I want to be that for you. Allow me"

I squint my eyes.

Me: "What are you on about?"

Suko: "Trixy told me everything"

I sigh.

Me: "Everything? What do you mean everything?"

Suko: "About your parents"

Me: "Damn Trixy"

She sold me out. I hate when people know my personal stuff. It's where the judgment and pity comes from.

Suko: "It made me able to make sense of a lot of things. I'm not pitying you so relax. I just want you to know I'm here for you and when you're ready, I can hear it from you"

Me: "The pants?"

Suko: "I'll bring them"

I exhale when the door shuts after his exit. He's not looking at me any differently which makes me feel a little bad for how I've treated him. All he did was try but it's a new year and what we had ended two years ago. I did respect his relationship with Zitha.

He comes back earlier than expected and hands the sweat shorts to me. I immediately put them on and sit on the bed, grabbing the tray. He sits next to me, his thigh touching mine.

Me: "And now?"

Suko: "Your food is getting called"

Me: "I'd appreciate some personal space"

Suko: "There's no running now, no hiding. If you're not going to let me in, I'll force myself in. It's why I like Trixy, the real you Gray. Not this uptight Mpho guy who's all about put everyone before himself"

I feel insulted. The frown on my face shows it. He puts his hand on my thigh.

Suko: "So, you're not saying anything to that?"

Me: "No"

Suko: "Good because I'm taking charge"

He tries kissing me but I move my head.

Me: "You're not over Zitha. I'm not going to be your rebound"

Suko: "You were there before her. How could you possibly be my rebound?"

Me: "No Suko. It's too soon"

Suko: "Yes"

He puts a thumb on my chin then uses it to sway my face to him. He leans in again and this time, I don't turn. It feels like the dimensions have changed. I feel vulnerable and like there's no escaping him. He's in my space, something I've tried to avoid for years but now he's here. He's in charge and I hate that I'm allowing it. Maybe I'm just tired of being strong.

We pull apart when one of the twins cry.

Suko: "Lethu. He's the one with a piercing cry"

Me: "Go check on him then daddy"

He chuckles.

Suko: "Call me that when I'm balls deep in ya"

Me: "That's not possible but whatever. Leave so I can eat!"

Suko: "I'm coming back."

He gets off the bed and stops when he's at the door.

Suko: "You're mine now, it's official"

What? This man was mourning over Zitha a while back.
Anyway, I refuse to be his rebound. Besides

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I don't think it would work between us.

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KHANYILE

Kanyo: "Mom tells me you're expanding the family?"

Me: "Yes"

Kanyo: "How?"

Me: "What do you mean how?"

Kanyo: "You said you're never having kids with any other woman. You also told me about Sedi's eggs. Is this where Poppy comes in? You want her to be your surrogate?"

At this point, I want to hang up. This conversation is boring me already. I know what he's going to say next. He seems to think he knew my girlfriend more than me.

Me: "She's agreed to"

Kanyo: "Because she's blindly in love with you and also happens to be young and a little dumb."

Me: "I love Lesedi and doing this is honoring her memory"

Kanyo: "The sick thing is you thinking it's what she'd want. Lesedi would want you to get over her and move on. She'd want you to get – "

Me: "Don't! Don't you dare start talking as if you knew her more than me. She was my girlfriend. She wouldn't have frozen her eggs if she didn't want this"

Kanyo: "She was my best friend. She told me what she couldn't tell you"

Me: "Know what? It doesn't matter because I'm still doing this"

Kanyo: "Maybe it's Poppy I need to talk to. She'd appreciate my sense"

Me: "Stop interfering in my business and fix things with your confused baby mama!"

I immediately hang up on him. This is a low blow from Diana.

I calm myself then call Poppy. No one will ever understand why I chose her. In fact, I don't care. It's a video call because I don't trust what she might be doing. She's not exactly a loyal 'girlfriend'. She's probably already fxxkd her baby daddy if she's found him. Her history isn't exactly pleasant for a 22 year old but it somehow still feels like I don't know much about her.

One thing I'm assured of is that she loves me and would do anything for me.

I notice her flushed face and burst lip. Something happened. Her eyes are red but damn, she looks good. She's beautiful, attractive and sexy. The only thing she has in common with Lesedi is her slim body and that's it.

Me: "Hi"

Poppy: "Hi yourself"

Me: "Have you gotten the results yet?"

Poppy: "No but we're going tomorrow"

Me: "When are you coming back home?"

Poppy: "I'm leaving right after."

Me: "Good because we still have to see the doctor"

She sighs.

Poppy: "Will there be a contract? You seem to want to do everything by the book"

Me: "Yes but it won't be extreme, considering we'll raise the baby together"

Poppy: "It's a pity it won't be biologically mine."

Me: "You can't be thinking like that"

Poppy: "You mean I can't be realistic?"

I sigh.

Me: "No baby. Lesedi isn't here and remember you're the one who's going to carry the baby and bond with him/her. I'll be there every step of the way baby, holding your hand"

Poppy: "It's still not the same. That baby won't be related to Gigi but just your kids. In fact, this whole situation only favors you"

Me: "You don't want to do this for me? How can I make it favorable for you? How much do you want?"

Poppy: "Excuse me?"

Me: "Any amount"

She snickers.

Poppy: "That's what you think of me?"

Me: "What?"

Poppy: "That I'm all about the money and would do anything for it? Is that how low you think of me?"

Me: "No, of course not. I'm just offering in case you need the comfort"

Poppy: "Like I'd say no to you. I'll carry the baby but on my own terms. I'll tell you when I get there"

Me: "What happened to your mouth?"

She clears her throat.

Poppy: "I had a bit too much to drink"

Me: "Were you cheating on me?"

Poppy: "No"

That's a yes.

Me: "Was it both of them?"

Poppy: "I didn't cheat"

I scoff.

Me: "Like I'm blind. Let me see your neck"

Poppy: "No! I uhm... have to go"

Me: "Typical. You really need to grow up"

She rolls her eyes and hangs up.

It's always going to hurt knowing she's giving other men access to what's suppose to be mine. I'm not having sex with any other woman, not that I can. She's the first after Sedi and definitely might be the last. Every time, I have to imagine Sedi just so it doesn't feel like I'm betraying her.

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MPHO

Me: "I should go"

He shakes his head.

Me: "I can't be here forever"

Suko: "I want you here. Don't you see how Lethu and Lihle like having you around?"

Me: "You're using the kids, really?"

Suko: "Just look at them"

Me: "I need to go to the office, catch up on work I've missed. I can't afford to slack"

Suko: "You actually can but you wouldn't"

Me: "It's weird that your mother hasn't come in the two days that I've been here"

Suko: "I told her not to."

Me: "Oh"

Suko: "When are we having sex?"

Me: "We've just got together"

It feels weird even saying that.

Me: "Something that wouldn't have happened if Zitha hadn't left"

Suko: "Zitha wouldn't have been there if you hadn't played hard to get back then, had me begging you until I gave up. It's your fault"

Me: "I feel like second choice"

Suko: "All on you"

Me: "That's not reassuring"

Suko: "We can debate about this all day but it won't change the past. I'd rather we focus on the present, look forward to the future and that you stop looking back. This is the now where you're mine"

Me: "Being a father has changed you. You're no longer soft"

Suko: "I'm almost thirty."

He shrugs.

Me: "Damn, you're getting old"

Suko: "You're six years away from forty"

I laugh.

Me: "I don't have a problem with aging"

Suko: "Me too. So, the sex?"

Me: “Not yet. Things are different now, I have to get used to this”

Suko: “Fine. You can go but please come back. We love having you around”

Me: “I will.”

Suko: “Kiss?”

Me: “You’re clingy already?”

Suko: “Yep”

I chuckle and kiss his lips then the boys. It’s going to take me a while to believe this is happening. I’m more shocked at the fact that I’m allowing it. Trixy didn’t only make me vulnerable but she made me give in too easy. I hate her for this.

POPPY

I'm back at this place. I missed Gigi and Rumi who've been showering me with love since I arrived. I've switched my phone off, not yet ready to see Khanyi. I hate that he's stressing me like this. I need to go to the salon and see how things are then go check on Suko and the twins. I'll probably see him tomorrow.

Rumi: "So, when are we meeting him?"

Me: "This weekend. He wants to meet Gigi"

Rumi: "Great."

Me: "Why are you so excited?"

Rumi: "It's Gigi's dad. I want to conclude what your type is"

I laugh.

Me: "Stay away from my business"

Rumi: "Not my fault it's so juicy"

Then she laughs.

Me: "I'm going to the salon then I'll go see Suko. Are you guys going to be OK on your own or you want to come with me?".

Rumi: "We'll go with you. I need to do my nails"

Me: "You never book appointments"

Rumi: "Perks of having you as my sister"

Me: "I feel used"

Rumi: "I'm more like cashing in on the bloodline. Let's go"

Gigi hops onto my back and we leave. The pair get in the backseat while I take the drivers.

Kiara has been taking good care of the salon. I'm the one who's responsible for our online store and making sure that customers get their deliveries within reasonable time.

Kiara: "Shuuu, girl. You're finally here"

Me: "Hey"

Kiara: "I got a call from a woman who owns a chain of spas and salons around the country. She wants to expand her boutique by selling wigs from us"

Me: "What?"

Kiara: "She wants us to be her supplier and is willing to pay us double the wigs worth"

Me: "That's good but why?"

Kiara: "She's seen our online store and is very impressed. This means I'll be relocating to Sandton to run things from that side"

Me: "I thought we're just suppliers"

Kiara: "Her topnotch clients will need installations. We're talking high payers with means more money. From celebrities, socialites and influencers. This is an amazing opportunity"

Me: "It is. When are we meeting with her?"

Kiara: "She'll be flying here next week. I'm hoping you'll be able to convince Khanyi to be our legal representative"

Me: "Sure thing."

Tsebo: "Your sister is taking advantage of my soft spot for you. She can't come here any time and skip the queue"

Me: "Hey babe"

He rolls his eyes and hugs me.

Tsebo: "How're you doll?"

Me: "I'm good, thank you. How're you?"

Tsebo: "Exhausted. I can't wait for this week to end"

Me: "Shame and I'm sorry about Rumi"

Tsebo: "I'm going to snap one of these days."

We bought a bigger store. It feels nice to go from renting to buying. I didn't expect us to be this successful. The work we've put in past years Really came through for us.

When Rumi has done her nails and I've washed my hair, we leave.

I park next to Mpho's car. I hope I'm not disturbing. One can never know with these two. Gigi is obviously excited because he's looking forward to seeing the twins. I knock first and get in when we're allowed. They're cuddling on the couch. Mpho's top less and has his head on this one's chest.

Me: "This is cozy"

Rumi: "Very cozy"

Gigi: "Hi Soso. Where are they?"

Suko chuckles.

Suko: "The nursery but don't make noise. They're sleeping"

He runs there. We walk to where these two are and sit next to them.

Suko: "Yes Poppy. It's exactly what you think"

I clap.

Me: "I knew it but I hate that it took this long"

Suko: "Good things don't come easy"

Rumi: "And the nails Mpho?"

She takes his hand. I'm only noticing now that he has them long acrylics.

Mpho: "Long story"

Rumi: "They're good plus you have such beautiful hands. Do you cross dress?"

Suko: "You're asking a lot of questions. Leave my babe alone"

Rumi: "Next time we should go together. It's always nude for me but this ombre pink looks good on you. Maybe you can help suggest some colors?"

Me: "Go check on Gigi so the adults can talk"

She let's go of Mpho's hand with an eye roll then leaves. I feel like I'm in the dark about a lot of things.

Mpho: "He forced me into this"

Me: "It was about damn time even though y'all are happening when I've given up on you. Anyway, Mpho. What's up?"

Suko: "Don't. This is who he is and he doesn't owe anyone answers. I'm the one who encouraged him to keep them. He wanted to get rid of them"

Me: "I'm not judging him"

Suko: "You also don't need to understand anything"

Me: “This is me Suko. I’m the last person who’d even judge someone. Heck, my track record can never allow me to. I get that you’re overprotective over him but you don’t have to protect him against me. Does this have anything to do with your secret closet?”

Mpho: “How did you know about that?”

I shrug.

Me: “I was curious and snooped. I’m sorry”

Suko: “Damn Poppy”

Me: “It got boring at the house and well, I guess I wanted to know every corner. Are you Trixy?”

Mpho: “Yes”

Me: “I’d never judge you and Suko, you’re right. He doesn’t need to explain himself. I wanted to check on you and I’m glad you’re well. Mpho, please drive those two to my house after. I’m leaving”

I get what’s mine and leave. I feel like shit. It’s more because Suko felt he had to be defensive against me. But I guess he’s too overprotective over his boyfriend.

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SUKOLUHLE

Mpho: "You hurt her. I have a mouth you know and I'm not this... glass that you need to protect. I don't want people walking over egg shells around me"

Me: "You forgot the part where she snooped. She invaded your privacy"

Mpho: "She's also your best friend and has been for years. Poppy kept quiet about what she saw because she respects me. She asked now because of the nails, which actually makes sense. She used the opportunity to make sense of what she saw years back. Why would you Henk ekmjhejkueheheejkeheh think she wants to harm me?"

Me: "I was wrong. I'm sorry"

Mpho: "You're apologizing to the wrong person"

Me: "Really babe?"

Mpho: "No. You were mean and I'm sorry but she means a lot to me. I don't want her hurt. She's a good person and do I need to remind you what she's done for you?"

Me: "I'll make it up to her. I'll apologize and maybe buy her something"

Mpho: "Good. I'm hungry though"

Me: "Those two probably are too. I'll go cook"

I kiss him briefly then get up. The two come, following each other.

Rumi: "Where's Poppy?"

Me: "She left"

Rumi: "But why? Why did she leave us?"

Mpho: "I'll take you home."

Rumi: "Weird but OK."

I reminisce on our conversation and realize how defensive I was. There was no need for me to be. On top of that

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I hurt my best friend over something that could have been avoided. She didn't deserve to be treated like that. She came to see me and all I did is hurt her. She's been great support since the get go. How could I do my day one like that though? I'm ashamed at myself.

Mpho: "Babe, we don't want burnt food. Focus!"

Me: "Should I leave this to you?"

Mpho: "This is why I have a chef. They have no comebacks"

I chuckle.

Me: “Shame”

We eat around the dining table, after which Mpho drives the two home.

I call Poppy, hoping she’s not too mad that she won’t answer. Thankfully, she does.

Poppy: “What Suko?”

Me: “I was a jerk, I’m sorry”

She scoffs.

Poppy: “A jerk? That’s putting it mildly”

Me: “I know and I shouldn’t have acted like that. There was no need for me to be that defensive. It’s just... he’s been through a lot and always felt the need to put everyone before himself. I just didn’t want him to crawl back there”

Poppy: “I’d never cause him to. I’m disappointed and hurt because I thought you know me. I didn’t think you’d ever treat me like that”

Me: “I should have not. I’m sorry. Can we do lunch tomorrow?”

Poppy: “The twins are still too young. Just send me some cash so I can take myself out, seeing that you want to buy my apology. I’ll send you pictures”

I chuckle.

Me: "Now I feel bad"

Poppy: "You should. Imagine how I felt"

Me: "Fair enough. I'll send you something then, even though I know you don't need it"

Poppy: "If only you knew"

Me: "What's that suppose to mean?"

She sighs.

Poppy: "Nothing you should worry about. I have to go, bye"

Me: "I love you"

But it's too late because she's hung up already. I'm just glad we're good.

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POPPY

He's here. He's the reason I abruptly hung up on my best friend. I thought I'll go to him tomorrow, not now. I don't think I'm ready for this conversation.

Me: "Hi"

Khanyi: "I was expecting you. I thought you'd arrive at my house"

Me: "I missed Gigi and Rumi"

Khanyi: "You arrived early, even had time to do your hair"

Me: "I'm sorry"

Khanyi: "Come give me a hug"

He opens his arms which I walk into. He's been standing by the door. He squeezes me and the warmth wraps around me, something similar to love. I really have feelings for him.

Me: "I need you to transfer R200 000 to me"

He breaks the embrace and looks at me with a wrinkled forehead.

Khanyi: "What do you need that money for?"

Me: "You want me to be your surrogate, don't you? Then do it"

He sighs.

Khanyi: "Fine. We're consulting tomorrow"

Me: "Cool"

Khanyi: "When is Gigi meeting his father?"

Me: "Soon, this weekend"

Khanyi: "Don't sleep with him"

Me: "Really now?"

Khanyi: "I mean it Poppy. Don't. Are you even using protection?
You could be pregnant now"

Me: "I keep it safe, always. You should know that"

Khanyi: "We'll test. I have to go now"

Me: "Bye"

I sigh after he leaves. It sucks that I'm prohibited from talking to anyone about our relationship because of the nondisclosure. Now I have to keep it in and take it like a damn woman. I just hope I don't bust.

POPPY

He's transferred the money just like that. Well, I have a bank account that's obviously not in my name but fraud is easy in this corrupt country. A lot is happening today. First, it's AJ officially meeting Gigi then the meeting Kiara and I have.

I've already met with the doctor who'll do the IVF and done the necessary tests. It's a scary process to be honest. I'd have preferred getting pregnant the natural way, not this.

There's only one person who opens my door without knocking and that's Rumi.

Rumi: "You have a guest"

Me: "I just woke up"

Rumi: "Didn't you hear the knocking?"

Me: "No"

I yawn. I hardly slept last night, having a lot of thoughts brewing in my mind. I tried slapping myself, trying to understand what the hell is letting me go through with this.

Me: "Just let them in here"

Gigi is still snoring on the bed. This one can surely sleep. I get surprised to find Khanyi's little brother. What's he doing here?

Kanyo: "HI, can we talk?"

Me: "I'll just go wash my face first"

Heh, what if I slept naked? This is quite a surprise to me and I can't help but wonder what brings him here.

He's still standing where I left him when I get back into my bedroom.

Me: "We can sit"

I point at the couch where we sit next to each other. It's a two-seater.

Me: "What's up?"

Kanyo: "It's about the surrogacy. I tried talking to Khanyi but he's not listening. This is all ridiculous. How's Lesedi supposed to rest in peace when he's holding onto her like this? She donated those eggs to any woman who'd want a baby and can't conceive, not so Khanyi can do this. He's going to leave you after this"

Me: "Why are you betraying your brother like this?"

Kanyo: "Because what he's doing is wrong and sick"

Me: "You must care about this Lesedi woman as much as he does."

Kanyo: "She was my friend. Unlike Khanyi, I've accepted that she's no more and is never coming back. Listen to me Poppy, you can't do this"

Me: "And what do you suppose I do? That I should say no? We've already done tests and I've signed the contract"

Kanyo: "You did what?! Are you crazy?"

Me: "I think I love him"

Kanyo: "He only wants to use you Poppy and you know why? Because you're young and naïve. Why do you think he didn't go for someone his age? He knows he can easily manipulate you and its worked".

Me: "Are you calling me stupid?"

Kanyo: "Yes"

The audacity, nerve of this guy!

Me: "Look, I'm also not for carrying a baby of a dead woman so I'm thinking of tricking the system"

He frowns, brows furrowed.

Kanyo: "What? He'll be there through every process"

Me: "Yes but how will he know its her eggs?"

Kanyo: "You want to switch them?"

Me: "Only the one which will be used for the IVF"

Kanyo: "How are you planning to do that?"

I sigh with a shrug.

Me: "I have no idea. I'm thinking of bribing someone but then, there's also surgery to take some of mine then making the switch. It has to be a medical person, someone who..."

Then I remember him. Of course he's an ex doctor and can probably make this happen for me. Plus he has influence and is persuasive. He's the perfect candidate.

Kanyo: "I lost you there"

Me: "Look, I have a plan but it has to stay between us. Khanyi and your mother cannot find out about this"

Kanyo: "As long as you're not having Lesedi's baby. Will you need money?"

Me: "No"

Kanyo: "OK. Take my number and keep me in the loop"

Me: "That's cool."

Kanyo: "You aren't dumb after all"

I scoff.

Me: "Maybe not"

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SUKOLUHLE

It's the first time I'm out of the house with the twins. We're going to Mpho's place. He's invited Cain who's with Nosi and their child so it's going to be interesting. I haven't seen her since Poppy's party two years ago. I've hired a cab for us. Maybe it's time I bought myself a car. I don't want to get it on credit though so I'd rather keep on saving.

He meets us at the door just when we get out. They're in their car seats. He helps me with them.

Mpho: "I could have come get you"

Me: "Be the host, would you be?"

Mpho: "Still as stubborn. I've invited Khanyi and his kids

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Poppy won't be able to make it"

Me: "Aren't they a couple?"

Mpho: "We stay away from people's business babe"

Me: “Just asking. He might think he’s holding a candle or something”

Mpho: “He wouldn’t have agreed if he had such thoughts in his mind”

Me: “If you say so”

Mpho: “Let’s just go in”

I keep it shut and we do. They’re all chilling in the living room. I greet and sit down, putting the twins on the floor in their car seats.

Nosi: “They’re beautiful”

Cain: “They are. Oa rota mfana”

I chuckle.

Me: “Thanks I guess”

Cain: “Who would have thought”

Mpho: “Don’t start with your nonsense”

Cain: “He’s just too soft, you know it too”

Me: “And I’m still here”

Cain: “I’m aware. I’m just stating that it’s hard to imagine you with a woman”

Nosi: “I disagree. I actually thought he’s straight”

Me: “I see you’ve gained weight now. He must be treating you good”

Cain: “She doesn’t like when someone points that out, still a little insecure about it. I think the extra weight looks good on her though”

Nosi rolls her eyes but I don’t miss her rosy cheeks. She’s gained some complexion too, a result of glow that comes from happiness and contentment.

Me: “Where’s your daughter? I’d like to see her”

Nosi: “She’s with Khanyi and his kids at the back. I thought Poppy would be here”

Me: “You’re not friends”

Nosi: “Well, I’m glad she isn’t. I can’t have one more person calling out my weight”

Cain: “You can’t honestly still have a problem with her”

Nosi: “Baby, no”

I chuckle, is she for real?

It’s a chilled vibe with mostly fathers. Nosi shouldn’t really have come but I guess there’s nowhere Cain goes without her.

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POPPY

We're meeting at his hotel. It's where we'll have lunch. Gigi seems excited to be meeting his father while I'm just numb. I'm happy for my son but this Khanyi thing is hanging in my mind.

We knock when we arrive outside his hotel suite.

Instead of him opening, it's the girlfriend. She's not even looking at me but at Gigi who's looking right back at her. I clear my throat.

Me: "Is this AJ's room?"

She doesn't say anything but steps aside and we get in. It feels like we're invading this space.

Me: "Where is he?"

Snazo: "He's coming. Would you like anything to drink?"

Me: "No, just an answer. Why are you here?"

She scoffs.

Snazo: "You really want your son to hear this?"

Me: "I'm not going to jump at your damn man"

Snazo: "It's him I'm worried about. He told me what happened between y'all like there's nothing wrong with it."

Me: "When's he coming back?"

Snazo: "AJ!"

He comes a minute later, wiping his eyes. Did he forget I'm coming here? He looks at us then rubs his eyes again.

AJ: "Nia, when did you get here?"

Me: "Just did. Please go put a shirt and some pants on"

He only has his boxers on.

AJ: "I'll shower quickly"

Me: "You also have to explain the girlfriend"

Snazo: "Don't start with me girl"

I roll my eyes.

He's back in thirty minutes, with Gigi still on my lap. We'd sat down and waited.

AJ: "Let's go to Steers at the mall"

Me: "Fine"

AJ: "Did you tell him?"

Me: "Yes"

AJ: "Hi boy"

Gigi: "Are you my father?"

AJ: "Yes"

He hugs his legs after. AJ looks at me and smiles, mouthing a thank you.

We get to talk after having received our orders.

Me: "So, you have a bodyguard now?"

AJ: "She's been a little clingy lately. I just... I can't believe there's a boy that's mine in front of me"

Me: "Yes. It's supervised visits for now but when he's more comfortable around you, I'll no longer be there"

He nods.

By the time we get back home, I'm exhausted. Kiara's woman canceled then asked to reschedule to next week. She wants us to go to her instead. That's enough to buy me time before the surrogacy.

I call him when I'm in my room, praying that his wife doesn't answer. Thankfully, she doesn't.

Kgosi: "Poppy"

Me: "I need you"

POPPY

We've met an hour away from town, having chosen a BNB for us to be discreet. Khanyi might be watching me, who knows. At this point, I don't really know. He came as soon as he could, which I appreciate because this is a matter of life and death. I've filled him up on what's up so he's now just been looking at me without a word. He sighs.

Kgosi: "You're agreeing to this madness because you... love him?"

Me: "Yes"

Kgosi: "So much that you're blinded to the fact that he's still very much in love with the ex and that you're a pawn in his sick game of loving her while she's at the grave?"

Me: "I've received enough judgment already. Are you going to help or not?"

Kgosi: "You know the answer to that but this... this won't end well. What happens when he finds out what you did? What if that child comes looking like you or Gigi, how will you explain that?"

Me: "It's IVF. I'm sure the DNA can be altered so his is the most dominant, I don't know"

Kgosi: "You're smarter than this. What's so special about him that you're willing to go to such extremes for him?"

Me: "I'm not here so I can be questioned."

Kgosi: "I'll kill him if he hurts you. I know he's playing you right now but he's going to pay. Let's go. We're using my car"

Me: "Where are we going?"

Kgosi: "You're not in any position to question me. I really feel like literally knocking some sense into you"

Me: "Let's just go"

He pulls my hair too damn tight that it feels like he's uprooting it.

Me: "Ouch"

Kgosi: "You're damn lucky I've always loved you"

He let's go then takes my hand instead. What the hell was that?

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KHANYILE

Me: "Why are you in my house again? Because you're just annoying me"

Kanyo: "You can't be saying that to your own brother"

Me: "In my house? I damn sure can"

Kanyo: "You're really going through with the surrogacy?"

Of course it's going to get here. Firstly, I'm not paying with his money and secondly, it's none of his business.

Me: "You seem to forget that I'm much older than you"

Kanyo: "She doesn't deserve you"

Me: "Don't even think about it!"

He chuckles.

Kanyo: "Think about what?"

Me: "I can see it brewing in your brain. She's mine!"

He chuckles.

Kanyo: "Yours, huh? The same way Lesedi was?"

Me: "We're not dad and

Kanyo: "Well, I'm still single and she is too. I'll be there when you toss her aside after she gives you your baby"

Me: "Really? Are we just about to do this?"

Kanyo: "I'm bored"

He shrugs.

Me: "Is there really no hope for you and you know who?"

He chuckles.

Kanyo: "I'd rather continue being single"

He departs from me. I'm not stressed about what he said, no matter how weird that'd be. I know the kind of woman Poppy is but I hope the pregnancy will change her. I can't have her sleeping around while she's carrying mine and Lesedi's baby. I still can't believe this is close to happening. I go into my room where I find her portrait. It makes me feel so much closer to her. I sit and close my eyes, imagining she's here. It's like I can feel her presence.

Me: "We're having another one soon baby. Remember we said we'll have four? We're just two away. I found the perfect woman to carry the baby for us. No, no baby. Please don't be mad at me for having sex with her. I keep it safe and imagine that it's you when I'm with her. It feels like you. You left us too soon but you'll forever be with me"

I open my eyes. I haven't heard from her today and with Kanyo here, I'm a little unsettled. What if he ruins my plans? Our relationship can be bittersweet which has been proven by time.

We do butt heads. He tends to think he's older than me or knows better. He likes having his nose all over my business

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something which irritates me. It was worse with... I don't even want to think of it. I call Poppy.

Poppy: "Babe"

Me: "Where are you?"

Poppy: "I'm meeting up with a potential client. What's up?"

Me: "What client?"

Poppy: "For the salon. What's with the questions?"

Me: "I'm just interested in knowing what you're up to. You're not lying to me, are you?"

She huffs.

Poppy: "Why would I lie?"

Me: "Just checking. How did it go with Gigi's father?"

Poppy: "He's happy they've finally met."

Me: "That's good. Imagine how their relationship would be if you'd listened to me back then"

Poppy: "At least they've met. He managed to make him a birth certificate. He even took his surname"

Me: "That's good. Let me not keep you then. I love you"

She scoffs.

Poppy: "I love you too"

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POPPY

Me: "You still won't tell me where we're going?"

Kgosi: "Where are the dead girlfriend's eggs kept? Which fertility clinic are you two going to use for the IVF?"

Me: "I think he said one in Stellenbosch. We're going to spend a few days there"

Kgosi: "Send me all the details now"

I take out my phone and do as he says.

Kgosi: "A baby can never keep a man though"

Me: "I'm not trying to keep him"

Kgosi: "Don't you think you're too young to be having another one?"

Me: “No. I’m wiser now than I was when I had Gigi. I raised him up to where he is now and he turned out good. This coming one will”

Kgosi: “If you say so. I just hope this works and that he never finds out about your deception”

Me: “And no killing him, no matter what happens. He’s a father of two”

Kgosi: “Can’t promise that”

I’m dismissed just like that.

A few hours later, we’ve arrived at our destination.

Kgosi: “This has to be done at your fertility clinic and not here. I’ll get you a laptop so we can know what exactly are we dealing with”

Me: “You want me to hack their system?”

Kgosi: “Are you by any chance psychic? +”

I roll my eyes.

Kgosi: “We have to perform the surgery there then swap them with the eggs due to be used for the IVF. This also means we have to know the specialist who’ll be doing the IVF and their weaknesses. That’s in the case that they can’t be bribed”

Me: “This is making me dizzy. How much will all of this cost?”

Kgosi: “A lot but it’s nothing you should worry about for now. This favor doesn’t come for free though so you’re going to owe me”

Me: “I can pay for it. That way, I’m lowering my debt”

Kgosi: “I have more than enough money, don’t worry. I’m doing this because I hate that you’re going to such extremes to make Dlamini happy”

I scoff.

Me: “Fine. Just bring the laptop”

I sit down. We’re in his office I assume. I haven’t met his old friend yet. This seems like some lab or warehouse, not sure.

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SUKOLUHLE

Mom is here, whom I haven’t seen in ages. I’m even surprised that she’s come to check on us. She’s not alone but with Zelda who’s been gushing over the twins. She’s not even paying attention to us or our conversation.

Me: “Where were you?”

Mom: “Was with Mosa. You seem to have turned your back on her”

I snicker.

Me: “Me? Definitely not after how she’s treated me and still continues to. I don’t have the energy for sibling rivalry or to compete with her”

Mom: “She’s still blood”

Me: “Life showed me that blood isn’t all that. You guys hurt me very much and as much as I appreciate you being here for us, please don’t push it”

Mom: “I don’t want you to harbor any hate or anger. It’s only going to destroy you”

Me: “I’m indifferent. I’m happy with the circle I have right now. These people showed me that water is actually thicker than blood. Poppy has been with me through thick and thin. She’s never switched up or gave up on me. She supported me, believed in me when no one else did and still forgave me when I treated her bad.”

She smiles.

Mom: “I thought she’d be the one who mothers your kids”

Me: “She’s my sister. I’d never commit incest”

Mom: “That’s the relationship? Oh, she’s replaced Mosa”

Me: “Repl... that’s ridiculous mom. She’s more than what Mosa ever was and could ever be”

There’s a rattling of keys then the door opens. He’s wearing denim shorts with an almost cropped sweat top and my slides. He’s carrying shopping bags so I immediately go land him a hand.

Mpho: “Thanks babe. I didn’t know you have company, dumelang”

Mom: “Hi”

Zelda doesn’t reply. That’s how much she’s engrossed in the twins. It doesn’t bother my love though. He’s bought groceries which I help him pack.

Mpho: “Is there food?”

Me: “You’re hungry?”

He nods with a bitten lip.

Me: “Why didn’t you get takeaways? You can’t be starving”

Mpho: “I prefer your food”

Me: “I’m that good?”

He chuckles and nods.

Mom: “So, you’re official now? I missed out”

Me: "Eavesdropping is rude but yes, we are"

Zelda: "Isn't he a boy?"

Me: "A man. Are they sleeping?"

Zelda: "Yes, I'll go put them down"

Me: "Do that"

I get to the cooking now. He only assists with the chopping. He usually just watches me so this is something.

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POPPY

He comes in with food and drinks. Hacking a private clinic system isn't a walk in a park.

Kgosi: "How far are you?"

Me: "It's promising but I need a break"

I stand up and stretch. It's late now, maybe around seven and this is the second time he's getting food.

Me: "Shouldn't you go home to your wife and kids?"

Kgosi: "Not before you're done"

I nod. I'm too stressed to ask more. The door opens, revealing a light skinned petite yet curvy woman. She's wearing all white, like those uniforms worn by prophets with the doek and all.

Kgosi huffs.

Kgosi: "Don't you know something called knocking?"

Her: "What do you know about manners anyway? Eish, what am I here for?"

Kgosi: "To annoy me"

Her: "Why do you like acting like you hate me when we're around people? We're like best friends"

She winks then walks in until she's standing before me.

Her: "I'm Tsholo. Who are you?"

Me: "Poppy"

Tsholo: "I know I came here for something, just can't remember"

Kgosi: "Go to his office, you'll find it there. Why's he even sending you out this late?"

Tsholo: "Oh, he knows you're here so you'll drive me home"

Kgosi: "I might leave late."

They're so comfortable with each other. You can see she's not scared of him, not even slightly. I've been trying to fathom their relationship, trying to understand how they know each other. She's not his wife, so who is she?

Tsholo: "Doesn't matter. You're just wasting your time here"

Me: "What?"

Tsholo: "It won't work"

Kgosi: "Why are you here again? This barging into people's office thing should stop. I'm not Leon"

Tsholo: "He sent me to get him something. Anyway, your plan isn't going to work so you might as well save your money"

Me: "Why, why do you say that?"

Tsholo: "You're not meant to carry his kids, not when his soul is still tied to that of his dead girlfriend. She's the only one he can conceive with"

Me: "Why should I believe you?"

Tsholo: "You don't have to Azania but know that this will be in vain. If you want to conceive and fool him, you'll have to use the little brother's sperm. Besides, he's the one meant for you"

Me: "I'm Poppy"

Tsholo: "My bad"

Kgosi: "She doesn't seem to like her age group"

Tsholo: "Imagine exes dating sisters, weird. The universe can be twisted. A file, yes. I'd really suggest you just leave this and him. You don't love him anyway"

Poppy: "I do"

She chuckles.

Tsholo: "Not even. You wouldn't be cheating on him if you did. The day you fall in love, you won't even entertain any other man. You'll get scared, wondering what the hell is wrong with

you and would want to run. Then you'll miss him and realize there's no where you'd rather be than with him"

Kgosi: "Enough with the sappy romance now, we get it"

Tsholo: "A file yes."

Then she walks out. That was weird.

Me: "How did she know my name?"

Kgosi: "That one knows a lot. So, what do we do now?"

I sigh.

Me: "Maybe I should tell him I can't and just walk away. There's no way I'll carry his dead girlfriend's baby. I can't"

Kgosi: "Seduce the little brother then"

Me: "Are you crazy?"

Kgosi: "Let's get out of here then. Stop trying to hack the system. The ball's in your court now. It's either you straight up tell him you can't or you go against you and do it"

I sigh.

Me: "Are we leaving with her?"

He groans.

Kgosi: "That headache"

I laugh. Yeah right.

She comes after and we all leave to the car.

Tsholo: "This is why your sister didn't want you thinking you're in love"

This is now beyond creepy. How does she know about my sister?

Me: "What?"

Tsholo: "Oh, don't mind me. Wake me up when we there!"

Me: "No

no. What did you say about my sister?"

No reply. I groan in frustration.

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SUKOLUHLE

Who knew I'd be this happy though. When Zitha left, my whole world came crushing down. I could barely hold on to this life thing less the small thread which reminded me of the twins. They weren't about to be orphaned like they asked to live. I didn't see Mpho and I ever happening. I prefer calling him Gray though or just Trixy. It's great seeing him get out of his shell. I also love seeing him glow like this, cocky me knowing it's because he's being loved right by me.

Me: “Babe, when last did you talk to your mom?”

He groans. Yes, we’re having this conversation. We’re at his house now, chilling by the pool while the twins are inside with one of his helpers. They’re taking good care of them. I’ve just remembered Trixy once said something about the woman wanting to arrange a marriage for them, worse in the 21st century.

Me: “Gray?”

Mpho: “Not since I left home”

Me: “I’m not pressing for you to tell him about us but baby, what about the whole finding you a wife thing?”

Mpho: “Oh, that? Not happening”

Me: “It will if you can’t stand up to her”

Mpho: “I’d fight for us Suko. I... I have never ever felt this way. You make me so happy and with you, I feel like I can conquer the world. Thank you for loving me”

He kisses my cheek.

Me: “It comes so easy”

Mpho: “I’ll handle her when the time comes, don’t worry”

Me: “Mm, alright”

“Where is she?!” we hear coming from the house. We both get to our feet and go check out the commotion. It’s Khanyile. He marches to us.

Khanyi: “Where’s Poppy?”

Mpho: “You’re the one dating her, how would we know?”

Khanyi: “I’m not asking you man, I’m asking your boyfriend”

Me: “Isn’t she at her house?”

Khanyi: “No and I found her car at some BnB.”

Me: “Why are you looking for her this much?”

Khanyi: “She lied about meeting a client and isn’t answering her phone now. This isn’t the time for her to be out there cheating on me”

Me: “Uhm, I’m sorry man. She’ll call you when she can”

Khanyi: “Sorry for just barging in here. I’ll leave”

Then he goes.

Mpho: “Something isn’t right. He’s too mad”

Me: “Let’s not get involved. That’s usually what you tell me, right?”

Mpho: “Yeah well. Skinny dipping?”

Me: “The staff is around”

Mpho: "They know how to mind their own business, let's go"

He takes my hand and leads me outside.

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KHANYILE

I've been waiting for her here for over three hours now. How can she leave these kids alone? I'm even starting to suspect that perhaps Kanyo got to her. I wouldn't put it past my younger brother. Then I remember how he'd have straight up told me if he had. He's not someone who can keep secrets. Her car roars outside, snapping me from my racing mind.

Gigi: "Pops!"

She picks him up the minute she steps inside. When her eyes meet mine, she frowns.

Poppy: "Baby, go to Rumi. I'll come to you"

Gigi: "And we play? I missed you"

Poppy: "Whatever you want. I missed you too"

She kisses his cheek then puts him down. He runs off.

Poppy: "What do you want here?"

Me: "You're asking your boyfriend that?"

Poppy: "I'm just surprised"

Me: “Where are you coming from Poppy? And don’t hit me with that client bull. Kiara knows nothing about it”

Poppy: “Did I say it has to do with the salon?”

Me: “You’re lying, I know you are.”

Poppy: “You came all this way to argue?”

Me: “Don’t play dumb with me. We’re about to be pregnant, you can’t be gallivanting around with other men. Yes, the one who’s car you traveled in. My guess is Kgosi. How do I know you won’t sleep with him while carrying my baby?”

Poppy: “Then why don’t you find someone else then?”

Me: “Pardon?”

Poppy: “Yes. Why not find someone else to carry your baby since you don’t even trust I can behave?”

Me: “Where’s this coming from?”

I chuckle.

Me: “You signed a contract”

Poppy: “You can sue me if you want but I can’t. This isn’t how long is supposed to be. It doesn’t have to be this hard”

Me: “You gotta be kidding me. I gave you money and now this... we had an agreement dammit!”

Poppy: "Ouch! You're hurting me!"

Me: "You are going to carry my baby whether you like it or not you harlot!"

Poppy: "Let go of me!"

She knees my front which has me releasing her.

Poppy: "Go!"

Me: "This isn't over. You have no idea who the hell I am!"

I limp to the door. She can sure kick.

POPPY

Rumi has been fussing over me since Khanyi left. I really didn't think he'd even ever put his hands on me. I'm bruised from where he manhandled me. I can't believe I'd been so blind. Why did I ever think he loves me? All this time I was willing to go to the ends for a man who just saw me as an incubator? I'm sad for me. I pity myself really. She's made me a cup of lemon tea with peppermint that I've almost finished.

Rumi: "I think you should get a restraining order against him"

Me: "No, don't worry. I'll get our place security."

Rumi: "I'm more worried about you"

Me: "Don't worry about me"

She frowns.

Rumi: "Have you seen your arm? Clearly he's not the kind of guy we thought he is. What was that all about even?"

I sigh.

Me: "Let's just say, I should have listened when Mpho warned me against him. The man took me for a fool. He played me or more like I played myself"

She giggles.

Me: "It's not funny"

Rumi: "It is, a little. You're still the smartest person I know though. You just allowed love to blind you"

Me: "Well, no more. I'm going to stick to entanglements and leave love to you youngsters"

Rumi: "You're not even 25. Sis, I think you're the one who needs to start acting your age. Can we be sisters? Not even aunt Quin is as uptight as you are"

Me: "I'm not uptight!"

Rumi: "You act like a thirty year old. Maybe you should date someone who's like... twenty five? Someone who'll compliment you. You never got a chance to be a teenager but I think you have a chance to be a young adult now. Think about it"

Me: "Let me just deal with Khanyile then I'll relax like you say, go out to where people my age go"

Rumi: "Pinky promise?"

I roll my eyes but still take out my pinky.

Rumi: "I love you"

Me: "I love you too"

Two hours later, I'm in my bed and still can't sleep. I can't take his threat lightly. It's clear he's still hurting and isn't over his ex. This even seems to be deeper than that. The man is obsessed, psychotic even.

I huff and then dial his brother. I hope it's not too late in the night. I promised to call him either way.

Kanyo: "Hello?"

His voice is croaky. He was probably asleep.

Me: "Hey it's Poppy, sorry if I woke you"

Kanyo: "Poppy? Damn, thought you'd never call"

Me: "A lot has been happening. Your brother and I are done. I'm no longer going through with the surrogacy"

Kanyo: "Woah, what?"

Me: "Yep. He even threatened me. He didn't take it lightly"

Kanyo: "You did the right thing. It was all crazy."

Me: "He might get another surrogate"

Kanyo: "That's true but at least you're free"

Me: "Not exactly. He says it's not the end. There's something wrong with your brother Kanyo. He needs serious help"

Kanyo: "You're scared? I don't think he'd physically harm you"

Me: "He manhandled me. My arm is even bruised."

Kanyo: "Should I come over there?"

Me: "No, it's late. Didn't you leave?"

Kanyo: "Not yet. I was waiting on your feedback. I'm coming, open up"

Me: "No Kanyo. Your mother already hates me"

He chuckles.

Kanyo: "What are you thinking Pops? Better get your mind back here. I'll be there in a few"

Then he hangs up.

I've waited in the living room for him, not wanting his knock to wake Rumi and Gigi. My son slept early today. He has school tomorrow so it's understandable I guess. He doesn't knock, just opens. I almost get a heart attack thinking it's Khanyi. I'm in no way ready to see him. He walks to me then hugs me, which almost has me melting.

Kanyo: "Are you OK?"

I chuckle.

Me: "I am. Can we go to your car? I don't want to risk waking them"

Kanyo: "Of course"

He opens the door for me when we get outside. We sit in the backseat.

Kanyo: "What changed your mind? I'm just curious"

Me: "Some... woman came. I think she's some seer. Anyway, she told us it would not work. Kgosi seemed to trust her so I guess it's legit. Apparently I'd never be able to conceive with Khanyi"

Kanyo: "I'm sorry but I'm glad to hear this. My brother never deserved you anyway"

Me: "Yes but I'm replaceable. He could get anyone, even though he's so hung up on me"

Kanyo: "Don't stress too much about it though. The good thing is you've let go of all this madness"

Me: "I still can't believe I played myself like this."

He chuckles.

Kanyo: "This is why you shouldn't play in the big leagues. You'll get burned"

Me: "No need to rub it in"

Kanyo: "There's every need."

Me: "Fuck you"

He laughs.

Kanyo: "Don't be bitter"

Me: "Don't tell me how to be"

Kanyo: "What are you gonna do to me when you're this tiny?"

Me: "Dynamite comes in small packages"

Kanyo: "This package is also appealing though"

Me: "Don't even!"

Kanyo: "Don't tell me how to be"

Me: "My voice isn't that deep!"

He chuckles.

Kanyo: "Nah, it's sexy"

Me: "Trying to get into my pants already?"

Kanyo: "Eeuw, no"

I slap him lightly and he chuckles.

Kanyo: "Abusive little package"

Me: "Hey!"

Kanyo: "We sleeping in the car, right?"

Me: "What if he's watching my house?"

Kanyo: "I don't care."

He leans back and closes his eyes. A minute later, he's dozed off.
Talk about being crazy.

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MPHO

I'm at the airport waiting for my sister to come get me. I decided to go home, knowing I have to do this so Suko and I can be happy with nothing standing against us. The trip is long overdue. I know it's not going to be easy coming out to my mother but this has to happen. I'm just tired of living in the shadows and faking smiles in the sunshine. I've never felt this liberated and if I'd known this is how being with him is like two years ago, I would have gave us a chance. But then, we wouldn't have the twins who've grown to be a big part of us. I'm just so happy, it's almost surreal.

She comes and hugs me, kissing my cheeks.

Sonia: "You look lovely"

Me: "thank you. Is your mother home?"

Sonia: "She is. What's going on?"

Me: "Nothing much. Thank you for coming to get me"

Sonia: "No need. You're glowing

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new hun?"

Me: "Stop prying"

She fills me up on what happened in my absence. It's mom with her relationship issues, nothing much from there. The mention of dad's name is still forbidden. That's the only person I'd never had to pretend to. I miss him a lot.

I receive a warm welcome. She's been indulging which is why she's this zealous. She's speaking loudly on the phone. Music is playing even louder so she has to project her voice over it. I go over to the back where my room is and call Suko. I miss them already.

Suko: "Babe. You've arrived?"

Me: "Yes, just got here"

Suko: "Are you sure about that though? I really don't want you thinking you're pressured into it"

Me: "I have to do this. I need my liberty"

Suko: "Just keep me updated. I wish I'd have left with you and maybe booked into a hotel or something just to be closer"

Me: "You like forgetting I'm older than you."

Suko: "I'm still daddy, in case you forgot"

I laugh.

Me: "Really now?"

Suko: "Yes. I miss you so much already"

Me: "I miss you too. I'll be there tomorrow"

Suko: "That soon? Should we wait at your place?"

Me: "I'd love that."

Suko: "I miss eating your booty"

Me: "Stop with the nastiness"

Suko: "I miss kissing on your balls, licking them and shit"

Me: "I'm going to hang up"

Suko: "You're supposed to beg me to go on"

Me: "You're damn crazy"

Suko: "And you love me like this. Remember that I love you and nothing else matters. I got you Gray, now and forever"

I smile.

Me: "I love you too"

Sonia: "I knew it!"

I hang up. Trust this nosey one to eavesdrop.

Me: “Won’t you stay out of my business?”

Sonia: “Who’s she? Your mom will be disappointed to know you can’t hook up with her friend’s daughter. She’s just called them to join us for dinner”

Me: “What?”

Sonia: “Yep. Somehow the girl is convinced you’re all hers. Good luck”

She claps once then leaves. This is going to be harder than I thought.

The dinner has to be the most awkward. My mom is drunk, so is the friend so they’re having loud conversations with their mouths full. It’s so nasty. She’s sitting next to me, busy giving me dirty looks which has me gagging. I’m not into females, not even slightly.

Cleo: “So, you’re into property? You must have like a huge house neh”

Mom: “OH yes. His is a double storey, golf estate. Don’t you worry though Cleo. He’ll buy another one when you decide to have kids. I don’t think that one is child friendly”

The girl smiles.

Cleo: "Oh ma"

Mom: "You guys will have gorgeous babies. I can't wait for that"

Trixy has had enough. She decides to just step in without my consent.

TRIXY

This one likes tolerating shit, which I hate. There's really no need for us to be divided, we can become one. Gray had been a fusion of us but him separating his calm and crazy sides led to this.

The bitch touches my thigh, which has me slapping her hand.

Me: "Keep your fucken hands away from me"

They gasps. Oh, Mpho never curses, that's why. I roll my eyes. I'm enough with their bullshit. I miss my nails. Nothing beats pointing an acrylic finger at someone.

Mom: "Apologize. You'll not embarrass me like this"

Me: "Who told you female that I'm attracted to your kind? When did you ever see me with a woman?"

Gasps again.

Mom: "What's wrong with you? Are you possessed? You must be"

Me: “What the hell is wrong with you? Do you honestly think I can’t make my own decisions when it comes to who I want to spend my life with? Worse you bring this gold digging cunt who’s been chowed by the whole country as someone you think is suitable for me to marry. I’ve always known you don’t desire good things for me but this? Nyaa mosadi, ntseele matsapa. I can’t believe you!”

Sonia: “Mpho, you can’t talk to mom like this”

Me: “Oh because it’s so bad for us to have feelings, huh? It’s always been about her and pleasing her that we’ve never mattered. This woman is selfish, wanting us to push back how we feel so she can continue being the little victim who’s heart was apparently broken by our father. I’m enough with her. Ausi, I’m also a damn human being and I feel! I’m attracted to males, always have been. Yes, I am my father’s son! I don’t care anymore. I’m getting married to a man, might fuck this whole male thing and start my transition journey because I’m tired of this body. Lastly, I’m done with all of you!”

When I stand up, it feels like a whole load is off my shoulders. I’ve been carrying a lot, Mpho worse. He’ll be mad, yes but he’ll thank me for this. I get my bag which I hadn’t bothered unpacking and leave her yard. They need space for all of it to sink in. I did it. We’re finally free.

SUKOLUHLE

He's been sleeping since he got here. He arrived late last night while I'd expected him today. I left him in bed, knowing how hungry he's going to be when he wakes up. The man bought a new car just so he can drive all the way here. He says he couldn't spend the night in that doomed place. I didn't get to ask more.

The one person who's been scarce is Poppy. I hate how much we've drifted apart. It's really now like that time when I was blinded by Nosi except this time it's not because someone has spoken ill of her. I just hate that we're no longer how we used to be. Yes, I'm a father now and she also has a life outside but this isn't how things should be. I call her after putting the dirty dishes in the dishwasher. I don't have to do them but I like keeping the kitchen clean, especially after I worked on it.

"Poppy's phone hello?"

A man? Wow.

Me: "Where's she?"

"Dude, that's my phone!" I hear her scream then there's some shuffling while she's giggling, OK.

Poppy: "Hey, sorry about that"

Me: "I'm beginning to think you don't love me anymore"

Poppy: "You know that can never be. Life has just been keeping me a bit too busy. There's a lot you need to know"

Me: "Mpho's place?"

Poppy: "I'll come after dropping the kids at school"

Me: "I'd love that. We need to catch up"

Poppy: "Great"

He's here when I hang up. He still looks exhausted. His eyes are sunken with eye bags under.

Me: "Should you even be out of bed?"

He rolls his eyes then walks to me, kissing my cheek.

Mpho: "Good morning. I'm hungry"

Me: "I'll dish up. Oh, Poppy is coming over"

Mpho: "Really? That's good. She's been scarce"

Me: "I told her that exactly"

Mpho: "Mm, but I'm so tired"

Me: "Go sit down so we can eat"

He doesn't argue. I make two plates for us with juice and a teapot on a tray then take everything to where he is. We eat in the lounge so I put it all on the coffee table.

Me: "So, how did it go?"

Mpho: "I'd be lying. They know now so we can now live personally. I know my mother is mad but for once, I stood up for myself so it feels good"

Me: "That's great. I'm happy for you"

Mpho: "Thank you baby"

He clears the table when we done then leaves so he can shower. That's when Poppy comes.

Poppy: "Morning"

She kisses my cheeks after our hug.

Me: "Hey, how are you?"

Poppy: "I'm good, you?"

Me: "I'm great. What's been going on? Khanyi came here some time, angry whilst looking for you. He actually barged in here"

She sighs.

Poppy: "That one. I should have never messed with him like Mpho said. I didn't realize how deep his love for the dead

girlfriend is. He never loved me but just wanted to use me to fulfill his sick desires. I should have stayed away”

Me: “What sick desire? He wanted you to... maybe do surgery that reincarnates his dead girlfriend?”

She laughs.

Poppy: “What? That’s crazy. He wanted me to be their surrogate. He had me sign a nondisclosure then we had that contract for looking after his kids, which fortunately ended then the one for the surrogacy. He’s threatened he’s not done with me though”

Me: “Why the hell didn’t you tell me this? All this while... has he ever hit you?”

Poppy: “No. It’s only the last time that he acted out of character. He got mad because I told him I’m no longer going to be his surrogate. He now wants to hold the contract against me but that’s something I’m not worried about”

Me: “Why?”

She smirks.

Poppy: “Don’t you worry. He doesn’t really know me. I’m a tough nut, even though I played myself. I wasn’t sleeping on my brain”

Me: “Heh, you have an ace up your sleeve?”

Poppy: "You can put it that way. Tell me what I missed. Have you and Mpho made love? I bet it hits different now that you're together"

Mpho: "He's been playing hard to get, wanting to top me"

He launches himself on my lap.

Poppy: "But I thought you're the bottom"

He chuckles.

Mpho: "Why me? Anyway, that doesn't exist with us. Why are we talking about sex again?"

Poppy: "Because I'm horny and stuff"

We laugh and yet when that laughter ceases, worry envelopes me.

Me: "Do you think it's safe for you guys to be alone? You can move back here temporarily"

Poppy: "I'm not scared of him so relax. Khanyi is a small fish"

Mpho: "What did he do?"

Poppy: "Exactly what you warned me about. I don't think he'll ever be over his ex"

Mpho: "You can't underestimate him though."

Me: "I second that"

Poppy: "I got this, don't worry. If it gets too tough, I have Kgosi"

We spend most of the day together

with her only leaving when she has to fetch the kids. It was good. I'd really missed her.

.

POPPY

AJ calls every time he's from school. I always give Gigi my phone so they can videocall. The damn father wants to buy him a phone like he's not just five. I can't with the way his mind is wired.

Rumi opens my door again. I'm just from the bathroom after bathing. I could have been naked.

Me: "Why don't you ever knock?"

Rumi: "I forget. There's someone here to see you. I think it's Khanyi's mom"

Me: "Diana? What does she want?"

Rumi: "I have no idea. Should I let her in?"

Me: "Let me finish up here."

She nods and leaves. I wonder why she's here. She's supposed to be happy I've left her son alone. I get dressed in Adidas tracksuits, wear matching running shoes and tie my hair up tightly just in case things get messy. I don't trust this woman.

Me: "What do you want?"

She laughs.

Diana: "Are you not going to offer me a drink?"

Me: "Hell no. What do you want? I broke up with your son so why don't you leave me alone? You should be happy. You never wanted me in his life anyway"

She chuckles.

Diana: "Yes but that's before I knew about the surrogacy. Knowing that all he wanted was for you to bare kids for him and Lesedi makes me willing to tolerate you for more years"

I scoff.

Me: "I'm not crazy"

Diana: "Azania Omer"

I chuckle and clap my hands. Smart move.

Me: "Took you too long. I once thought you were a smart bitch."

Diana: “Oh my patience paid off. I finally have concrete proof to get rid of you. Except that I don’t want to now, I have an ultimatum for you”

I scoff.

Me: “You really want to go there with me?”

Diana: “I told him I didn’t trust you, told him there’s just something about you. I tried digging, nothing came up until I did some out sourcing. How long did you think you’ll continue deceiving him, us? It’s over for your gold digging ass. Khanyile will prosecute you and no bomb ass lawyer will be able to save you from multiple charges of fraud and theft. I’m talking twenty to life. That’s if you don’t agree to what I’m about to propose”

Me: “And who’ll save you from losing everything you’ve built plus your only sister?”

The smile on her face converts to a frown. She looks at me blankly, eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

Me: “Oh, don’t look surprised Dee. How will Aphiwe feel when she finds out she’s been raising your son? Imagine your husband knowing that the child they all thought is his sister’s is actually yours. How about Bandile knowing about the other one you have with your ex lover who he’s raising with his wife? Imagine if Minnie did a tell all and exposed you for the lie you

are! Let that sink in then you can come back to me with the threats. I'll be waiting. For now, excuse me. see yourself out."

She looks like a deer caught in headlights, I'm internally laughing at that. Did she really think she can threaten me? She'll have to do some deeper digging because I'm not going to be her son's surrogate. Not now, nor ever. But I can't relax now. She might have taken that bait but who's to say Khanyi can't find out? If she knows then he most probably might too which breeds a problem for me. I have something to hold over his mom, not him. I most probably might get jailed. I need to come up with a plan and fast.

Her other son calls me while I'm trying to wreak my brain with this new predicament. He's supposed to have left now but I'm not so sure.

Me: "Hey"

Kanyo: "Hi, are you busy?"

Me: "Not really. What's up?"

Kanyo: "I want to see you before I leave"

Me: "I thought you'd left"

Kanyo: "Not before I see you. Can you come to me?"

Me: "I can't go to Khanyi's house"

Kanyo: "I'm at Palms"

Me: "Oh, I'll drive there"

Kanyo: "Thank you"

I'm going there because I need to stop thinking about his mom and the stress she now has me under. My life just seems to get more and more complicated. Why did I mess with Khanyi again? Because none of this would be happening.

He hugs me when I arrive in his room then kisses my cheek.

Me: "And the kiss?"

Kanyo: "Couldn't help it. Why are you stressed?"

He has his thumb on my chin while looking straight into my eyes.

Me: "It's weird that you can read me"

Kanyo: "Yes, answer me"

Me: "It's a long story. Let's just say that someone went digging into my past which isn't gloomy so they want to blackmail me"

Kanyo: "You're not saying anything"

Me: "I'm not Poppy, Nkanyiso. My name's Azania Omer. I'm a former con artist. It's the only way I was taught to survive in

this country. Of course Poppy saved me from a lot but now they know. They know who I've robbed and claim to have concrete evidence which can land me in jail. I'm not even South African so I'll maybe be transported back to Switzerland and – I just."

I sigh. He pulls me into a hug, brushing my back. Why isn't he freaking out?

Kanyo: "I got you"

Me: "How?"

Kanyo: "Don't worry. You're too young to be stressing"

Me: "We're the same age"

He chuckles.

Kanyo: "What else do you know about me?"

Me: "That you're apparently my soulmate"

He breaks the hug, his hands going to my waist.

Kanyo: "Really?"

I nod with a chuckle.

Kanyo: "Damn. Then tell me who's threatening you"

Me: "Your mother. She wants me to go ahead with the surrogacy"

Kanyo: "My family's obsession with you is beginning to piss me off. Khanyi can get just anyone, why you?"

I shrug.

Me: "I'm not worried about her though but your brother. If he gets his hand on this, I'm really going to jail. What about Gigi, and Rumi?"

Kanyo: "We'll figure something out Nia. For now, can I feed you?"

I nod with a smile. We sit down on the bed.

Me: "Can't believe I can open up to you this easily"

Kanyo: "We're soul mates, remember?"

I laugh, rolling my eyes. Whatever.

KHANYILE

I run out of patience too quickly, a lot even. I need something tangible, something even my own blood brother won't be able to stand against. Who is Poppy? I've been trying to get some dirt on her, anything but I can feel I'm now close. People like me need something to be able to use against peasants like herself. I'd take Gigi but crossing AJ and his mob isn't something worth my time. Their chain is too powerful and way too long. It'll require a lot of resources from me and playing that dirty has never been my thing. I partially regret ever telling her to have him meet his dad but then again, she would have run straight to him or Kgosi if the boy got snatched. Kgosi seems to have a liking towards her, something his wife knows yet isn't doing anything about it. She's smart, that I know of but I'd be lying if I say I know the dynamics of their marriage. I've banged that in the past. She's sort of the first woman I feel in love with who broke my heart or rather I broke my own heart since it was one-sided. It was platonic on her end. We all know nothing hurts more than unrequited love. I peek at my wrist watch again. I've been waiting for this Roman guy for about twenty minutes now. He came highly recommended but he

charges an arm and a leg. If this gets me my baby then I don't mind. I'd even sell a kidney if push comes to shove.

Me: "You're late"

He scoffs, pulling a chair before me to sit. Our table is excluded, time something after eight in the evening.

Roman: "I'm here, aren't I?"

I huff.

Me: "What do you have for me?"

Roman: "She's a con woman, has been using a pseudonym since sixteen. She previously stayed in Joburg but then moved when her then boyfriend's mother paid her off to stay away from her son. Her name is Azania Omer. She's from Switzerland and has numerous pending cases of fraud. She's a fugitive, good one at that since she's managed to be free for six years now"

Me: "This is exactly what I needed. Thank you"

Roman: "Here's everything. Payment better reflect in my account in less than twenty four hours or you'll lose your precious eggs"

He's left before I can even react to the threat. This lanky guy. The brown envelope he's given me is thick. I peek inside and smirk to myself. I got her exactly where I need.

I'm in a good mood when I arrive in my house. I can almost imagine how our baby is going to look. I'm hoping for a girl who'll be the exact replica of Sedi. I know she'll be proud wherever she is. I'm reincarnating her.

Mom: "Where are you coming from?"

I halt my whistling and turn. She's in the lounge, sipping on a glass of whiskey.

Me: "You're asking me that in my own house?"

Mom: "It's a question"

Me: "Seeing that you're asking nicely. I finally have enough dirt to convince Poppy or should I say Azania to be my surrogate"

Her eyes pop out, her dropping the glass she held prior which shatters on to the floor, staining my white mat. She stands up looking... panicked? My forehead clenches in furrows.

Me: "You should be happy"

Mom: "No, no. You can't use that"

I snicker.

Me: "Why the hell not? I've hit the jackpot"

Mom: "Please Khanyi. We can find another surrogate, one way better than her. Please"

Me: "I want her and you're not going to stand on my way. I already have the prosecutor on speed dial, willing to put her away. She'll be shipped off to Switzerland and she'll never see her son again"

Mom: "If she goes down then I'm also going down"

Now I'm confused. She hurries to me, taking my hands into hers. Her eyes have bulged out and are begging. Yet even that puppy face won't make me reconsider.

Me: "What does she have on you?"

Mom: "She knows a lot, OK. If she... if she sings, I'm going to lose everything"

I snicker.

Me: "How's that my problem?"

Mom: "I'm your mother!"

Me: "A mother who's not going to give me what I need. You failed to convince her so brace yourself for losing everything. It'll teach you to be honest"

I yank my hands from her grip.

Mom: "You're doing that to me, Khanyi? Your own mother?"

Me: "Yes. I won't let you stand in the way of my happiness"

I leave her there with her dropped jaw. I need to go through everything before hitting up the prosecutor. Before that, I need to pay Poppy one more visit.

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POPPY

It's been a week since Kanyo left and we've been talking over the phone in that space. He's someone who's slowly creeping their way into my heart. He's food company, funny and so refreshing. It's weird that Khanyi has been this quiet though. It's not something I'm stressing much about because I have a hold on his mom. I'll just bring that up if he finds out.

Kiara: "Have you thought about it?"

I sigh.

Me: "It's a good deal, it really is. I can handle the digital side of things but to be at the store all the time? I don't know. I think it's time we got help since you're moving"

She nods.

Kiara: "That's a good idea"

Me: "So, are you excited?"

She giggles and nods.

Kiara: “Good thing is, I’ll be closer to where I renew my working permit. I’m happy and who knows, maybe I can meet someone there”

I laugh.

Me: “Tired of being single?”

Kiara: “Very. I’m tired of self-service”

Me: “Just be celibate like myself”

She chortles.

Kiara: “You? Celibate? I’d bleach my skin”

Me: “I haven’t been laid in weeks”

Kiara: “Not like you can’t afford to”

I laugh.

Me: “I wish. I have to go now and thanks for the nails, I love”

We hug then I leave. I have to cook before going to fetch the kids from school. I find my door open and that alone raises suspicion. I’ve been meaning to up the security here.

Khanyi: “Good

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you finally made it”

I drop my keys, feeling my heart begin to palpitate. Just the man I was thinking is too quiet. I hadn't expected him to be back this soon. I keep the door open, not too far from it just in case I might have to run out.

Me: "You"

He smirks.

Khanyi: "Me Azania"

OH no. No ways. Damn Diana. I snicker.

Me: "Of course she sang"

That wipes his little smirk off. He gets up from the dining table and makes his way to me.

Khanyi: "Who?"

Me: "Your damn mother. Why are you acting surprised?"

He chortles.

Khanyi: "No wonder she begged me not to come to you with this. She knows and I'm guessing whatever you have on her is too heavy compared to your sins. Well, I'm not Diana. You know what's up"

Me: "What's up?"

Khanyi: "I have the prosecutor on speed dial, who'd like to make an example of foreign chancers like yourself who think

they can do as they please in our country. Imagine getting out of jail only when Gigi is what, way over eighteen? Your little sister will probably be married by then”

Fuck, he’s got me. But to carry a dead woman’s baby? It’ll feel like I’m selling my soul. Yet I can’t losing my son or sister. I’m the only one Rumi has. We’ve really just got back together. We haven’t been a family for that long. It’s too soon.

Khanyi: “I’ll give you two days to think about it. Don’t take too long”

I scream after he’s left, feeling the tears wet my cheeks. My liberty is always short-lived. First, I was indebted to Oki, now him. Will this ever end though? I’m too young for this.

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MPHO

It seems commotion in my house is becoming a norm. I don’t know who’s just barged in here. I’ve been in the office, working while also looking after the twins who aren’t troublesome. Their dad is at work, now back at his office. I’ve been working from home since then, something I don’t doing because I get to spend the whole day with Lihle and Lethu.

Me: “What’s going on here?”

Mom: "Yes wena"

She's drunk. Her stink has polluted the air. She looks horrible but this is still my mother.

Me: "Ma, what are you doing here?"

Mom: "Grayson, o ntsentse matlho in front of my friends. How could you?" (You embarrassed me)

I sigh.

Me: "I had to"

Mom: "O stabane jaaka rrago?"

I cringe. The word is degrading, insulting even but I don't think she cares

My staff is here but one look from me and they scatter and disappear.

Me: "Please don't call me that"

Mom: "How could you hurt me like this? My only son wanting to be a woman? You think God made a mistake?"

Me: "No, of course not. I'm just tired of being someone I'm not. I want to be me and it's nonbinary. Sometimes I'm Gray and at other times, I'm Trixy. I hate the division. I want to be one"

She crouches until her butt hits the floor, the quart she's holding not spilling over. I watch her take a gulp then the tears

gush out. She cries like a new widow, which pulls at my heart strings. I want to walk over to her and brush her back but I don't. I remain in one spot and watch her.

She heaves a sigh when she's done, wiping her tears with her skirt. She doesn't get up though. Instead, she takes another gulp when a hiccup surges. She's had too much.

Mom: "I don't understand you"

Me: "You have to let him go"

Mom: "Consider yourself motherless from now on. I thought I could come here and... but I can't. I cannot accept this, not again"

She stands.

Mom: "If you want us to move out of the house you built then –

Me: "It's fine. That's your house, even when you don't want anything to do with me. Maybe I'm a disgrace, it's fine."

She scoffs.

Suko: "Honey I'm ho-

He sees her. Mom looks to me then him. She then claps her hands, picking her quart.

Mom: "A whole man like you. Sodom and Gomorrah. You have no shame"

Suko laughs. I shoot him a look and he stops, mouthing a sorry.

Suko: "Good afternoon ma"

Mom: "I'm not your mother wena"

Suko: "I'll go check on the two"

Mom: "Sies!"

She spits on the floor then stumbles her way out. I heave a sigh, brushing my forehead. I feel his arms wrap around me then his hand brushes my back. I didn't think it'd be easy but in war, there are always casualties.

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SEASON FINALE

FORTY-SEVEN

POPPY

I've always considered myself smart, resilient and fierce. I've always thought I can conquer anything and that my age wasn't a representation of my maturity. I've done things young adults my age would never think of, disobeyed almost all the ten commandments and never did it occur to me that my punishment would be this fierce. I'm turning twenty five this year and for the past three years, I've been existing. I thought I could stand up and come out a conqueror against Khanyi and his mother but who was I kidding? No one could help me escape what was deemed my fate so I relented. No, I didn't get to carry his beloved girlfriend's kids, that would have been too hard on me but I did get to carry a Dlamini baby. That alone weighs heavily on my soul because I didn't think at almost 25, I'd be a mother of three. I think of it a lot, of how things would have turned out if I'd just been a teenager when I had the chance and a typical young adult right after. I've been existing and not really living. I've dug a hole that's so deep that I don't

think I might ever come out. It's my fault – that I'm aware of and it's why I've given into it. There's no life left in me. The first, a boy I last saw when I stopped breastfeeding him at six months. I let him take it, watching Kanyo's heartbreak at the fact that he might never raise his own child. Not when we want me to be free. What hurts more is that we might never really be together. Not fully. He got back with his baby mama, dropping me off like the hot potato I am and I'd never blame him for it. Rumi is grown now, having joined Kiara in Joburg. They stay together. She also works part-time at the boutique.

She's turned out well, so well that there's a voice that whispers she'd be better off without me. Gigi and his father are good too. Sometimes it feels like my purpose on this earth was only to suffer. My baby boy has grown so much. He's in second grade now, having grown taller and smarter now. We talk as much as we can. It's in those conversations that everything almost feels like it's OK. It's hard not to imagine how better off they'd all be. He doesn't know of his siblings, more because I haven't seen the boy in two years. I wasn't even given time to breathe, having to get pregnant three months after giving birth. He seemed to change, seeming like he cares but I didn't buy it. Now, I'm on this hospital bed about to give birth to his daughter.

He's not here with me. I mean I thought he'll cut his trip short so he can be there for his daughter's birth but he didn't. I'm two days past my due date, laying on the hospital bed and waiting to be fully dilated. I'm trying to call him and once again, it takes me to voicemail. There's a knock on the door and with hopeful eyes, I let them in. I'm hoping it's Khanyile. My shoulders slouch when I see Diana holding a bouquet of black roses while wearing all black.

Diana: "Are you in any pain?"

Me: "Like you give a damn."

She laughs.

Diana: "Oh, I'm excited. You're giving birth to Sedi's third baby and it feels like she's still here with us. That's once again a sign that you'll never have his heart."

I'm tempted to wipe that smirk off her face but for the sake of my freedom, I don't.

Me: "And you're telling me that because...?"

She chuckles, putting the flowers on the bedside table then grabbing a chair that's next to my bed. I'm laying on my side, watching her. I can tell she likes the attention.

Diana: "They wanted four kids and now they have them, thanks to you. He's going to take his daughter then spit you out like

the used bubblegum you are. I'll be there, watching with a smirk when you pack your rags and get out of our lives forever."

Khanyi: "Mom, that's enough! She's pregnant and I'd very much like that she has an uncomplicated, smooth delivery."

He struts in, cologne dominating the air in the room and struts to me. He kisses my cheek then that of his mother. He acts like this sometimes, like he didn't coerce me into this. None of the plans Kanyo and I came with worked. It was wrong of me to always expect people to come to my rescue

Khanyi: "How're you feeling?"

Me: "Fine now that you're here. I was thinking you won't make it. Your phone's been taking me to voicemail."

Khanyi: "I wouldn't miss my daughter's birth for the world."

Diana looks at her son with a proud smile, the two exchanging glances like I'm not there. I get a cold feeling deep in the pits that sends shivers through my spine. I'm missing something here and I have a feeling the egg will be on my face when I find out. What has Diana planned?

An hour later, Diana's gone and I'm feeling it. The need to push along with contractions attacking my lower back and throughout my waist. I'll never get used to this piercing feeling. I'm naked and covered with a sheet while clawing on to his

hand, squeezing it for dear life and trying not to scream. I thought they said the pain gets less as you have more kids, it doesn't feel like it. In fact, this feels worse than my previous pregnancies.

Khanyi: "Should I call the doctor? Try to breathe baby, like we did in prenatal classes. In with your nose and out with your mouth."

He guides me through the breathing exercises and I follow like a meek student. It does help with the pain but only for a minute then it attacks me more ferocious. He let's go of my hand but not after ordering me to continue with the exercise. I do, watching his every step until he's disappeared out then again when he comes back in.

The doctor looks between my spread legs.

Dr. : "I can see the head so you can start pushing."

I nod and follow his lead. Within five minutes, our daughter's cries has filled the room. He hands her to me and the minute I land my eyes on her, I wish for the earth to open. My heart is beating against my chest, the vibration causing me to shiver as my sweat turns cold. I'm frozen and even my breathing has stopped. I'm stuck in this one place where I'm looking at her and everyone else has disappeared. I'm aware that he knows and I can almost hear the wheels turning in his head. My heart

is fighting against my ribcage, begging to be freed. The vibration from its banging oozes out of my ears. He's so mad.

Khanyi: "Poppy, what the hell is this?!"

His tone startles me, my eyes looking anywhere but at him. I can feel his raging breath which has merged with the rhythm of my heart to form my current state of mind.

Khanyi: "I am not going to ask again

woman! Why the hell is my... that child you're holding to your chest pink with blonde... or whatever that color her hair is. Explain!"

Dr: " Mr Dlamini, my patient has just given birth and we need to clean her and your daughter up. If you'll please excuse us."

Khanyi: "That's not my fucken daughter! You're going to pay for this Poppy, Mark my words!"

He storms out, banging the door on his exit while tears cascade down my cheeks. I've lost him, I can feel it which breaks my heart. I'm going to explain but with his poisonous mother and his enraged state, I doubt he'll understand. I'm numb. My daughter's taken away and everything from there happens in a blur. My mind is at Khanyile and the possibility that I might lose this freedom I sold my soul for. I don't understand why she's so pale. It doesn't look like she has any melanin.

Dr: “The possibility of having an albino baby is –

Me: “Wait, that’s why she’s...?”

He nods and I exhale in relief. Maybe all isn’t lost like I thought.

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KHANYI LE

I feel like uprooting my damn hair, anything to get rid of this rage. Even with everything I had against her, she does this?

Mom: “Relax”

Me: “Relax? She fooled me. I’m going to sue her and –

Mom: “Remember Khanya, your sister?”

I halt the pacing, turning to her.

Mom: “Nqaba?”

Me: “Where are you going with this?”

Mom: “Don’t you see any resemblance between them? You saw their baby pictures, didn’t you? You saw Nqaba grow up”

That sort of puts the fire off. That didn’t cross my mind but now that she mentions it, it makes sense.

Me: “I was going to kill her”

Mom: "You worry too much. Have you checked up on Loago?"

I nod.

Me: "The nanny's taking good care of her"

Mom: "Good. Let's talk about your whore now. What's the plan?"

Me: "Let's let her breastfeed her for six months like she did with Loago then I'll get rid of her, for good"

"You have no shame!"

I turn to see Kanyo who has bloodshot red eyes. Lethabo is on her tail, also having the same eyes.

Kanyo: "You want to get rid of her after all she's done for you?"

Me: "A few rounds with her and you suddenly her advocate?"

Kanyo: "The sad thing is that your mother supports this like she's not a lie her own self. You are indeed your mother's son"

Me: "Why are you even here if you hate us this much?"

Kanyo: "For Loago, who else? Come Thabo"

He holds her hand and the two disappear to the nursery. I grab my car keys. It's time for me to go to Poppy and pretend like I'm sorry.

Me: "I'm going back to the hospital"

She nods.

Just when I get into my car, she's here. I just unlocked this but with this one, you can never know.

Tsholo: "I warned you"

I huff.

Me: "I have to go see my daughter"

Tsholo: "You're not God Khanyile. Stop holding the other child back. Do you want her to become an angry spirit and drive you mad?"

Me: "What? She loves me"

Tsholo: "She's not pleased with you. I can't keep going back because of you. I'm supposed to be done with this life but she haunts me. She's there, whenever I close my eyes and screaming at me. You need to apologize to her and set her free or you shall lose everything, you and your mother. Don't say I didn't warn you"

She bangs the back door on her exit. I sigh and start the car.

She's sleeping when I arrive in her room, looking drained. She has creases under her eyes and her lips are dry, as if there's no life in her. My heart remains hardened, with not even an inch of empathy in me. If she had listened, I'd kept her close. Those eyes open, as red as those of Thabo and her boyfriend. She

looks at me and I see a tear cascade down her left eye. She looks older than she is.

Me: “Hi”

Poppy: “They’re bringing her soon. The... the doctor says she has albinism, which is why her skin is like that”

Me: “I overreacted. I’m sorry”

Poppy: “I don’t have any milk. My breasts aren’t producing any. That’s also common”

Me: “What? Breast milk is important. I want her to get the best nutrition she can”

Poppy: “Didn’t Nqaba use the bottle? Gigi too and he grew up fine”

It’s this attitude I hate. If that’s the case then I have no use for her.

Me: “Fine. When are you being discharged?”

Poppy: “Tomorrow morning”

The nurse comes in with my daughter. I’m naming her Lesedi, after her mother. They try giving it to Poppy but she shakes her head, pointing at me. I take my daughter who cries out when I do. The pitched cry catches me off guard.

Nurse: "Maybe she's hungry or has finally released some feces. Check her diaper"

Me: "When she's crying this much?"

Nurse: "It's normal for newborns. Let me go change her"

The funny thing is, she quiets when the nurse takes her.

Poppy: "Please leave"

Me: "Excuse me?"

Poppy: "I need space Khanyile. You know where your daughter went. There's no need for you to be here"

I click my tongue and go out. I'm not in the mood for her shit.

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SUKOLUHLE

Me: "Do you think it's a good idea to go with the twins? What if she's not in the right state?"

He shrugs.

Me: "You can't speak now?"

Gray: "I'm not in the mood for you Suko. The only reason I'm here is for Poppy, nothing else"

I sigh.

Me: “And our kids?”

Gray: “Isn’t it my weekend with them?”

Me: “It doesn’t have to be like that. I still don’t know why you’re mad at me”

Gray: “I’m not mad. Can we not do this in front of the kids?”

I sigh and start the car. Things have been like this since they started taking hormones. Sometimes they’re up, sometimes they’re down. I had to watch a lot of YouTube videos to make sense of everything which makes it easy for me to deal with. They broke up with me. It’s been two months now but when they’re horny, I have to rush to their house. I feel used sometimes then I remember all I’ve learned then it makes sense. I can’t wait until they’ve fully transitioned so I can finally get the Trixy I know. She won.

I start the car, music playing on the low along with the twins speaking about whatever. They’re almost coherent in their speech but when they’re talking fast, it’s hard to catch what they’re saying. I park next to Khanyi, who’s probably here to see her. Poppy never told us why she went through with the surrogacy. I was shocked when she told us, wondering why she’d even think of going back while knowing the man was using her. She hasn’t exactly been the same and no matter how

much I tried reaching out, she didn't let me. It hurts seeing her and not being able to help because I don't know what's wrong. She's never been an open book but in the past three years, things seemed to get worse.

I get Lethu while Gray gets Lihle when we get out of the car. Khanyi comes holding a baby wrapped in a pink blanket. He seems happy, so happy that he almost doesn't see us until Gray calls him.

Khanyi: "Oh, I didn't see you there"

Gray: "Is it her?"

He nods.

Gray: "And Poppy?"

Khanyi: "That fugitive is... oh, there she is"

He buckles the baby while we're astounded. We turn to the entrance of the hospital. First, we see two officers of the law. Now, I'm wondering what's going on. Then we see Poppy who's hands are cuffed. This one just drives off. We rush to the commotion.

Me: "Poppy, what's going on?"

Poppy: "It's over Suko. I love you and Gray. Please pass my love to Gigi and Rumi"

Gray: “What are they charging you for? I’ll get you the best lawyer money can get”

She shakes her head.

Poppy: “Don’t. This is my fate”

At least the officers are gently with her. I know she hasn’t even healed from the baby. Don’t they thread their vaginas or something after giving birth? I feel useless, tears silently fall as I watch my best friend being taken away. Why didn’t I do something?

.....**THE END**.....

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