



BURN

For Better Or Worse

BURN...

PREFACE...

The creaking sound of a door opening and closing always turns my head in this hovel, not this time. Shivers ripple through me and a familiar scent prickles the most sensitive parts of my nostrils.

Two years away from him and I have not forgotten the scent that got me high on ecstasy, it once made me feel safe, like I was untouchable. Time killed that feeling, now his scent torments me, it comes with an overflow of painful memories.

This rocking chair should have a voice by now, I use it more than I use the bed. I have made this window and everything outside it my companions. There was nothing else to do, the loneliness of this place would turn a nun into a party animal.

“Are you here to take me home?” Seven hundred and thirty days I pictured him walk through the door

and ask me to come home with him, I yearned to hear the words roll out of his tongue.

What I did not prepare myself for is my reaction to the request. I'm angry, I was angry when he brought me here that day and I am still angry today.

The 23rd of August 2018, it was a dusty Tuesday around 4pm. The receptionist was wearing a...let me stop there before I prove men right, they say we keep track of dates, time and how far the sun was positioned away from the crescent moon when a particular event took place.

“Yes.” He replies to my question.

Why do we inquire about things we don't want to hear answers to? What will I do with this 'yes' he has just given me?

The sound of his footsteps run to my ears, he's taking slow strides in. I can see him from the corner of my eye. He always thought I was in sync with him, went wherever he pointed. Somehow I believe this is how my downfall came about.

“Let's go.” A commander he is, he should have

joined the army.

“I don’t want to go.” My mouth ought to hurt after this lie, my punishment will be ten times fold. I prayed every day to a God I do not know exists anymore, I asked, pleaded and cried that he takes me out of this hospital, since I was locked away with my demons.

The world thought they would be safe if I were put away with my secrets. They were not ready to hear the terrible reality that only my mind concealed.

“Thandiwe.” Argh, I am overthrown that he still gets what he wants. I’m looking at him, although I didn’t want to.

Sjava’s long lost brother, I can hardly recognize him with that bushy hair and the beard that has built a forest of hair around his cheeks.

His face had become a distant memory to me, I was beginning to forget it. Why did he have to come back and torment me? I was better off without him, his toxic past and the half of him that took my soul away.

“I love you.” His heavy-lidded eyes do not lack the passion, although stained with fatigue and dread, the love that once dwelt there is glazed in them. The struggles of life are creased beneath his eyes.

However I hate this expression and everything it comes with, everything it represents. Love is evil.

“Don’t tell me that.” I didn’t stop him years ago, I can do it today.

“I love you Thandiwe.” His deep voice rings in my ears bringing about a thud in my heart, I can’t fall again. I would come crushing face down, and no matter how much he tries to catch me, he would fail.

“Thandiwe.” He snaps.

I would think he missed calling my name, I need him to stop. I am not strong for this, maybe I am better off in this place.

“Come home with me.” He says, moving away from the door post, he’s coming to me. One step closer and I would be following him like a lost soul that can’t find the light. Unwillingly, my feet move back, I

gasp as my back hits the window.

“Is that what you really want?” I ask, I can hardly recognize my voice. It could be fear, the sound of my heart breaking or having him close to me after two whole years.

Guilt is one mean dictator, his heart might not be in it. My mother always told me that, if you want to know what a man is thinking, look into his eyes. I’m afraid of the truth, hence my eyes are everywhere, but on him.

“I want to be with you.” He reveals the secret behind his dark eyes, I want the same thing, but how can we be when my hands are stained with blood? I turn back to face the window, I wish for him to go. I wish I never heard his voice nor looked at him.

“Thandiwe.” If I’m not afraid of a dog growling at me, what makes him think his growl would make me tremble? I can hear his heavy breathing from behind me, his anger is nothing compared to mine.

“I left you here years ago and I’ve regretted it everyday, I will not do it again.” Guilty is burning him,

that's the only reason he came back.

“What about Zulu? What do I tell him?” He asks.

The last time I heard that name I was being dragged into this place. My Zulu, he hasn't seen me or heard my voice in a long time. How did he survive without me?

“Whatever you told him two years ago.” I've been given a hammer and I am using it to shatter my own heart, I yearn for my Zulu. I yearn to hold him close and tell him that I love him.

“That you're going away?” I don't know if that's meant to be a question or he is checking if my screws are still loose. I take offence in everything since I was diagnosed with Schizophrenia, a fancy English word used to describe a gifted black person who sees the supernatural.

He's too close to me, I can feel his warm breath sliding down my neck. I feel suffocated, I can't breathe and I want it to stop.

A tight grip on my waist forces me to turn around, I refuse to look at him. I will not be looking into his eyes. But then again, my hands have found shelter on his chest and I feel the weight of his eyes on me.

“Look at me Thandiwe,” his voice is pleading, yet demanding. “Remember all you have to do is look into my eyes.” That’s what I don’t want, I hate him. But my cheeks recognize the touch of his hands and they decide to get comfortable.

“All you have to do is look into my eyes.” He moves his face lower to meet my eyes, he is waiting for an answer while drilling his gaze deep into my soul, he won’t let go until I give it to him.

“And I will never get lost.” Eventually I finish the sentence like I always did.

“Mommy, mommy, mommy.” They are back, the demonic voices are chanting my name again. Whimsical, eerie whispering, child-like voices murmur my name in a rhythmic tune.

I knew I shouldn’t have touched him, this is a punishment. God decides to take a walk down the

streets of gold each time I enter his throne room
meanwhile in the other spirit realm, my ancestors
are napping.

“You have to go, please get out of here.” A
desperate appeal splutters out of my mouth.

My scream refuses to block the voices, I’m curled
up under a white sheet. It keeps the evil away, that’s
what I believe.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the
shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” I chant the
verse as loud as I can, my hands have gone to
battle with my ears, it’s an order to push out the
voices and bring my mind back to submission.

This is our new read, if you’re all about love and the
supernatural then sit back and enjoy the ride.

Before you do that please like, comment and share.

There is no schedule for this story, anytime is tea
time.

WELCOME FAMILY!!!

BURN>>>

1>>>

Years earlier.

THANDIWE>>>

Every girl dreams of this day, the day she will commit her entire being to the one person who makes her world stop and spin at the same time. I never thought I would live to see it, I was a given the role of a mother and denied the right to be a wife. I don't know when he changed his mind, but I'm glad he did.

Standing before him at the altar with friends and family watching us exchange our wedding vows almost feels surreal, I don't remember a day when I hated this man. Okay maybe I can count a few, however the love I have for him outweighs the hate.

“You may kiss the bride.” The marriage officiate

announces, I am officially a wife. The time has come for me to doek up, wear the most tedious dress because only my husband has to see the attractive me. That's what my aunt advised, she is not married by the way.

I smile up at him as he slowly opens my veil, he smiles and winks. The kiss is brief, he is not a fan of PDA while I am as clingy as they come. Also his mother is sitting right in front. I think she hates me, I'm not sure, I'm still weighing her attitude and clap backs. The scale should be broken by now, I'm surprised she hasn't caught pneumonia from her hot and cold moods.

Ntuthuko has never really stood up for me when it comes to her, this one time he told me that she would always come first because without her he wouldn't exist.

He would get chicks to boycott against farmers just so they don't slaughter the mother hens, if you never chew a Chicken Licken bone again in your life, Ntuthuko is the man to blame.

Me: “I love you.”

I love him more now that I bear his name.

Ntuthuko: “I love you to death.”

He always adds that last part, I don't like it. How do you associate death with love? What puts me off is the serious expression that covers his face. He was once human and expressed love like the rest of the world, he changed overnight.

I met Ntuthuko Biyase when I was 18, we hit it off and a few months later I was in love and pregnant. I was careless, my parents were disappointed in me. I felt bad for having to put them through that, my father had dreams for me. He was not privileged to go for his dreams, while my mother's family saw marriage as an achievement.

Of all her siblings, she is the only one who left her father's house in a wedding dress. The rest of them scattered everywhere, from squatting with men to job hunting in the city of gold Johannesburg.

I would be lying if I said I have a close relationship with my cousins from both parents. You would think there is an unending war between the adults and the children are stuck in the middle.

Abraham and Sarah thought it best that they should have a sequel of their story through my parents of all people. Vusi and Linda Mshengu struggled to have a child for years, her womb refused to do its job.

They had given up hope, until one day a miracle happened. I'm that miracle, mom was fifty three and dad, well let's just say his age mates were retiring for bed at 7pm.

“I still think we should have gone with the colour purple, this looks like a toddler's birthday party.”

I have scored myself a Cruella De Vil, my very own devil. The night was not going to end without her coming to our table, she hates the reception deco.

Our bank accounts are not overloaded with Mandela's face, life is just normal. We're a couple that's trying to make it through the next month, money is not really friendly with any of us yet.

Me: "Purple is not my colour, it makes me cringe."

I clap back and try to be as nice as I can, but she's creeping under my skin and I can't ignore the itch. I am side eyed by mommy's favourite, he doesn't like my words.

"What do you know? You're a child." She adds.

Are all Barbras like this one? I have never met one before, she's the first. Why is she at our table? The rest of the grannies are on the dance floor dancing away to 'isencane lengane.'

Ntuthuko: "She's a woman mom, she's my wife now."

Ntuthuko takes the stage, this is the first time he stands up for me.

Barbra: "Twenty years in the world does not qualify one as an adult, look at this circus she has created."

She makes a face while waving her hand around, trust me when I say her nose is close to touching her forehead. I am 25 just to correct Miss Know-it-all.

I don't know what Barbra's problem is, the deco is beautiful. I went for rose gold, it is the colour of the season. Although twenty nine, Ntuthuko is still treated like a little boy by his mother.

The woman blamed me when I fell pregnant, her mind had convinced her that I wanted to trap her son with a baby.

I would understand if she had a cheque book, a pen in hand and was ready to write me any amount I want just so I stay away from her son. But Barbra hardly earns enough to buy herself a brand new car at the snap of a finger. Her husband is a retired financial advisor, don't ask me where his retirement fund is, I don't want to lie.

“Mother your husband is looking lonely over there.”

I know that voice.

Nqabayomzi Biyase, he's the rugged type,

pokerfaced, has the nerve of the devil, the heart of Robin Hood and an aura that would intimidate Dracula himself. If he doesn't like you, you would know that he doesn't like you.

At thirty five he has not achieved much in life, from what I have observed. His days are spent at a Petrol garage, deciding between diesel and unleaded petrol.

Nqaba does not care about looks, wealth and driving the latest car. Which also explains the Khaki pants and the red shirt he's wearing. I can't say the same about my husband here, money is all he talks about. He's chasing it with a sling shot and one day he will hit the target.

Barbra: "Are you trying to get rid of me Mzi?"

Barbra says, her infuriation is almost half full. The family christened him Mzi, Nqaba sounds better to me.

Nqaba: "Don't shoot the messenger, the old man sent me here."

We all turn to their table and find Duma Biyase

entertaining a puppy look, can you believe these two still...

Forgive me I talk too much, let me not spoil anyone's appetite by painting a picture of two old people getting it on.

Barbra: "Argh! Your father can be a nuisance sometimes, I've spent almost 38 years of my life with that man and he still can't get enough of me."

Barbra should be thanking God, some women have barking husbands.

Nqaba: "What is it mother? You've had enough of him?"

He is not one to joke, he's different with his parents. Although Ntuthuko is the trophy son, the golden boy and the elder brother is side lined. This is what family does when you're pockets have holes in them.

Barbra dances away to a tongue click leaving Nqaba with an unanswered question. He's over it before she even gets there.

Nqaba: “Did you hear that Ntuthuko? This will be you in 35 years.”

He’s cracking a joke, but his face never welcomes a smile. Ntuthuko chortles. I’m trying so hard to avoid the eyes that keep pursuing my gaze, Nqaba and I hardly say more than one word to each other.

Me: “I will never complain about my husband giving me all his attention.”

I feel a need to retort, the frown Nqaba is giving me must have fallen out of the Guinness world book of records. It’s stinging me and compels me to wonder if I said something wrong. He blinks once and takes his gaze back to his little brother.

Nqaba: “If you say so.”

He shrugs his shoulders, I need a translator to tell me what this sign means.

Nqaba: “Congratulations again bafo.”

Nqaba says glancing at his brother, I guess my congratulations is wrapped up and kept with one of

the wedding gifts.

Ntuthuko: “Thanks, this should be you, you know?”

Where is this coming from? I need a drink. I get a fierce look from Nqaba as I down a whole glass of champagne, he clears his throat. I’m nervous and this dry throat will put me in a coma.

Nqaba: “Meaning?”

Nqaba enquires, I know him as a man with less words, as to why he decides to ask this question puzzles me.

Ntuthuko: “You’re the eldest Mzi, you should’ve gone first. But I understand with your situation, you would have to save for years in order to afford a wedding. Going from a truck driver to a petrol attendant is not exactly an upgrade.”

Ntuthuko has a mouth I could just smack it, Nqaba is not offended, but I am. He is not exactly Bill Gates but he has a vision, if only his family would give him a chance.

Me: “Baby, you can’t say that.”

I add my opinion, I don't usually bud in their business. Ntuthuko is ready to throw a hefty clap back, trust me when I say his come backs dig deep. He is not exactly the kindest person I know, he respects his brother though and I have seen the reverence he has for him.

Nqaba: "Life is not all about marriage bafo, besides I loved once and I will not take that road again."

This is when I wish the days of Noah happened in my time, I would jump in that flood just to escape this moment.

Ntutuko: "So you keep saying, I would love to meet the one that got away." Ntuthuko states.

A slight huff escapes from Nqaba's nostrils.

Nqaba: "You're a lucky bastard bafo, don't mess this up."

Nqaba articulates, whatever he means by his statement. I get another mysterious look before he waltzes away, my eyes are involuntarily following him. He tilts his head a bit as if looking back, probably feeling my gaze on him. I can only see the

side of his face, but with no doubt I spot a smirk on the corner of his mouth before he continues on.

I'm snapped back by a tight squeeze on my hand. Ntuthuko takes it and places a soft kiss.

Ntuthuko: "Are you okay?"

He questions. Am I okay?

I nod, what can I do, but nod? He receives a call, he's forever getting calls. He won't even take a break on our wedding day.

Ntuthuko: "Excuse me babe, this is important."

And with that he leaves me alone. What is more important than me, his bride? Oh that's right, business is more important than his family, Ntuthuko's departure gives my bride's maids a chance to turn on the devil's radio.

This wouldn't be happening if I had a group of friends. I was compelled to ask my cousins to accompany me to this new life, I have two words to say to them 'drop dead.' I would trade them for anything and right now I would trade them for a

glass of something strong.

“Mama.”

Zulu shouts through the loud music and chattering, he’s our little baby. He’s the image of his father, has a little of his features, the flat nose, big ears and plump round lips.

I hear he looks more like his uncle than he does his father, well it happens. I look like my great grandmother and I’ve never met her.

I once had a Zulu man who taught me how to love, he was everything a girl could ask for. Like a severe earthquake, the age difference cut through our love. I was left broken, only to find solace in the arms of Ntuthuko. He might not be everything my first love was, but he put my heart back together.

This is how the name Zulu came about, he reminds me of my first love.

Zulu is bouncing to me with his aunt. Veronica the calf of the Biyase clan, Ntuthuko and Nqaba would die for this girl. She is my age, but her mind is confused. She has a mind of a seven year old, you

wouldn't say until she opens her mouth to speak.

I am pulled to the dance floor by her, she's swaying me around giggling like a little girl.

Vero: "Look at your dress sisi, look how it flies." She says spinning me around, my feet hurt, I should've taken my shoes off for this.

"May I cut in?"

That voice again, Nqaba sure knows how to sneak up on people. Funny how I never hear him coming, Veronica smiles at her brother. For a second there I thought he was talking to me, he's spinning her around in his arms.

I'm that unwanted chicken wing that didn't come right in the oven, I guess this is my queue to go back to the husband (less) table.

Ntuthuko will pay for leaving me alone, I'm sure there's an underwear with a lock in some China shop. I will not be having sex with him anytime soon.

"Sisi wait."

Vero halts my tracks, Nqaba is glowering at me like I cursed him.

Vero: “Dance with Mzi.”

She says taking my hand into his. If anyone could put you in an awkward situation, then Vero has a PHD in that. His rough hand fits on mine, this is wrong we should not be holding hands.

I ought to be respecting my husband.

I know culture says when the husband dies, his brother takes over from him. That’s not a hidden secret, but I doubt he should be holding me like this when my husband is still alive.

Nqaba has a tight grip on my lower back, he has intertwined his fingers with mine. I want to protest, but I somehow feel safe in his arms although he looks like he will slaughter everyone in this place.

The perks of having a local wedding planner from across the streets, David Tutera would retire if he hears Adele’s ‘Hello’ being played at a wedding. That’s it, the DJ will only get half of his payment.

An unexpected spin catches me off guard, I see stars till I come crashing on his chest. His large strong grip finds its way back to my waist, he pulls me closer shutting all space that threatens the touch.

I have to check if my parents are not giving me murderous looks, the coast is clear. The old couple is engrossed on their grandson who is dancing like he just won SA's got talent.

Nqaba: "How are you?"

Nqaba queries, his face is too close for comfort. Why does he smell so good? His attire clearly contradicts with his cologne, his girlfriend needs to start dressing him, if he has one. He doesn't look like the type that would have a woman strapped on his arm though.

Nqaba: "Thandiwe."

He hardly ever says my name and when he does, it's never around people. There is a way he says it, I can't put my finger to it, but it's soothing.

Me: "I don't understand your question."

I have no answer for him, his grimace is justifiable. I have been warned about my rudeness a couple of times.

Nqaba: “It’s simple, are you happy?”

He did not just ask me if I’m happy, he does not get to play Dr, Phil with me.

He won’t let me pull away from his arms. The grip is strong and I am caged, we have been dancing for too long.

Me: “We’re done Nqaba, my mother needs me.”

It’s not an excuse, she is glaring at me probably a two page speech has been prepared in her head.

His gaze remains in my eyes, I’m not sure what I’m looking at. The gaze is deep and spring cleaning every corner of my soul.

Me: “The song is over.”

The words unhurriedly swim out of my mouth, he takes his God given time to let go, his hands slowly leave my body as if letting go is a dread. I don’t waste time to rush to my parent’s table, his cologne

follows me. What just happened must not be repeated.

I'm attacked with a bear hug by Zulu as he sees me approaching, this child will outgrow me, he is too tall for his age.

Linda: "Your husband should not be leaving you alone, you're his bride."

My mother is referring to the dance, she looks at me like I was having sex with the guy. Old age must be painful, I will have to skip this stage.

Me: "He's on the phone mama, he has business to take care of."

I jump to his aid, although I sound like an understanding wife, I am boiling inside.

Linda: "Couldn't he take you with him? We would've understood."

To answer a phone call? What did I say about old age?

If it were up to her I would be strapped on

Ntuthuko's belt, my father is quiet and reserved. The only time I have heard him say a whole paragraph is when he's talking to his wife.

These two have what we call pillow talk, the only difference with them is that they jump into their "1920's" night wear and converse until one of them falls asleep.

Did I mention I've seen Princess Diana wearing my mother's night dress on a magazine? It was an evening gown she wore to one of her outings.

I have a dream to give my parents everything, the pain to see your mother wearing second hand clothes...The furthest I have to a degree is a call centre certificate.

Linda: "Your father is tired Tan-tan."

They call me Tan-tan, I popped out of her with this name. It haunts me till this day, I will never grow into it. I know someone who used to call me Tan-tan, funny enough I didn't mind him calling me that. He gave it a whole different meaning.

Linda: "We need to go now."

She continues. Dad smiles at me, reaches out his hand to touch mine.

Vusi: “You’re a woman now my baby, take care of your family. Listen to your husband.” Vusi advises...

A secret to a perfect marriage, that’s what he would say. My stubbornness doesn’t listen to me. How will it let me listen to someone’s nonsense? Ntuthuko can be full of it sometimes, like today. I have a whole book of complaints waiting for him.

Me: “I will baba.”

If he listens to me.

Ntuthuko’s parents are housing them, they travelled a long distance from KZN. I see Nqaba approaching the table, can he remove those hands from his pockets before he gets here? My father is so rural he would ask Julius Malema why he wears an overall and not ibheshu and J uju is not even Zulu.

Nqaba sends his acknowledgement to my parents while rubbing his hands together, my mother is not happy about his presence. She probably thinks he will take me in his arms and spin me across the

floor and in her eyes that's an abomination.
Paranoia comes with old age.

Nqaba: "Can we talk?"

He will get me in trouble with this ageing woman.
He pulls me aside, I was ready to decline his
request. What he whispers into my ears breaks me
into a million pieces.

What have I gotten myself into?

To be continued...

BURN

2>>>

THANDIWE>>>

I'm supposed to be on my way to my honeymoon
with my husband, but here I am stuck with his
brother in the middle of nowhere. Employee of the
month goes to the devil, I bet he was promised a

promotion or a raise. Is this what I signed up for when I said for better or worse?

Zulu: “Mama, can I go and help uncle?”

The curiosity of this child leaves me bemused all the time, he’s only eight and is as hyper as an Easter bunny.

Me: “You can’t help him, it’s dark outside baby.” I dispute.

Ntuthuko was called to work on our wedding day, apparently there’s this business deal he’s been chasing. Nqaba didn’t give much details and I’m glad because I was fuming when he told me that Ntuthuko had to go to a meeting and asked Nqaba to take us home. What the hell is that?

So his car has broken down. I told him to call for help, Mr. Almighty does not accept help from anyone.

Zulu: “I’m a man, I’m not afraid of the dark.”

His father is not this courageous, I’ll take the glory for this one.

Me: “Let me see, an eight year old sitting on his mother’s lap with his head pressed on her chest is considered a man?”

He moves faster than a kitchen mouse and lands on the driver’s seat.

Zulu: “I’m going to help uncle fix the car mama.”

He insists as he reaches for the door.

Me: “I am not playing with you Zulu, do not disturb your uncle.”

The driver’s door opens just as I chide him, Nqaba glares at me. I should have declined this offer to go home with him.

Nqaba: “Why are you shouting at the child?”

I think I’m the one being reproached here.

Me: “Is the car ready?”

I dodge his question, I am in no mood to be explaining inconsequential things. He answers with a raised brow, a sulking Zulu is hiding under his wing. I’m not sure I’m comfortable with their relationship, Nqaba hardly visits, but when he does

Zulu is all he focuses on.

Nqaba: “It is.”

He jumps in after pushing Zulu on my lap, he’s looking at me and it’s getting uncomfortable.

Nqaba: “Are you okay?”

This is the second time I am asked this question today, my husband is away from me on my wedding day and I am in the middle of nowhere with his grumpy brother.

How can I be okay?

I reply with a shrug, I have a feeling he’s trying to scare me with his menacing deportment. He starts the car as he fails to bully a response out of me, the drive seems longer. We should be home by now.

Zulu is reciting his days at school and Nqaba entertains him with all sorts of questions.

Me: “Why are you taking the route to Roodepoort?”

Our home is in Orlando.

Nqaba: “He said to take you home.”

He replies and I repeat, our home is in Orlando.

Me: “What’s going on Nqaba?”

I’m getting annoyed.

Nqaba: “I’m taking you home.”

He repeats without turning to glance at me.

Me: “Nqabayomzi.”

I snap causing Zulu to leer up with a creased forehead as if I should not be raising my voice.

Nqaba is giving me the same look as this little brat on my lap. What does a woman have to do to get answers around here?

Nqaba: “Your husband...”

He swallows his words, grits his hands on the steering wheel and a substantial sigh drags out from his chest.

Nqaba: “Ntuthuko has business to take care of, he told me to drop you home. I thought you knew about the new house.”

What house? This lack of communication will be

our downfall, we are newlyweds and already secrets are lurking amongst us.

Me: “Your brother didn’t tell me anything about a new house.”

How can Ntuthuko make such decisions without informing me?

He ignores me and decides to answer a call.

Nqaba: “What?”

Whoah!! I feel sorry for whoever is on the other side of the line.

Nqaba: “I told you I have something important to do.”

He sounds angry.

Nqaba: “I don’t care, do what you want.”

He cuts the call, I could swear he just cussed under his breath.

Me: “Is everything okay?”

The look on his face makes me regret ever asking the damn question. Back to silence it is.

We arrive to the so called new house it's a gated community. Ntuthuko is taking this fake it till you make it thing too serious. How is he going to pay for this place? When was this planned?

Nqaba pulls up outside on the driveway, this is no new house, I wouldn't be surprised if I find Matilda in there.

Nqaba: "Will you be okay? I have to go home."

How will we be okay in this place?

Barbra must have chosen it, only witches have an eye for such. The house is thin and long, it was built with dark bricks that have been stained darker in places by the rain which makes the place seem gloomy and grey.

I'm startled by small arms wrapping around my waist, Zulu is glaring at it from his view. He hates it as much.

Zulu: "Are we going to sleep in there?" He makes a face and immediately reminds me of someone, I

once knew. I wish he could ask his father that, Nqaba will have to answer on his brother's behalf.

Nqaba: "The house is okay, there is nothing to be afraid of."

Great, he also sees that it looks like something terrible will jump out of it.

Nqaba: "It comes with the contract, it's a package. I will help you settle in."

He offers brazenly.

Me: "You can't leave us alone in this house."

I sputter tentatively, if I wanted to go to the house of horror I would have bought myself a ticket to gold reef city.

Nqaba: "It looks completely different inside."

He's been inside? That means he knew about the house and didn't tell me. If this is Ntuthuko's way of a surprise then I suggest he leaves it to the professionals, this is what happens when blacks try to imitate white people.

Me: "If that is so, why does it look like Hansel and

Gratel killed a million witches in there?”

I retort rapidly and get a low chuckle, no teeth shown or mouth stretched, that's how cold his chortle is.

Nqaba takes the first step, Zulu runs to him. He whisks him up in his arms, the boy looks terrified. I can only hope that the interior is different.

I twist the handle of the door and it creaks, the sound compels my heart to react out of fear. My house does not have creaking doors, it's not dark and dull.

Shaka Zulu's warrior reaches for the light switch and he was right, it doesn't look that bad inside, although I would give it a 4 out of 10.

The first thing that greets me is the wooden flight of stairs, it doesn't look like anyone has ever come back from up there. I hate stairs, even more when they look like they are from the series Charmed.

A wide arched entrance on my right shows the

kitchen, I hate it because of the single door white fridge that's peeking from there and the cabinets look outdated. As Nqaba moves, the floorboards moan with age. This ought to be a fixer-upper.

I knew there's a Matilda in here. Why are there antique glass dolls displayed all over the living room? Whoever lived here was out for a serious doll collection, although I admire their vintage attire, I am not keeping these in my house.

Don't get me started on the sofas, couch is too fancy a word to describe this terrible furniture I am looking at. Brown floral, tasteless material, must've been made before the apartheid. Ntuthuko has disappointed me, I thought he had an eye for good stuff.

Nqaba: "He said you'll buy furniture together."

Nqaba says, he sees my objectionable facial expression. I have not uttered a word since we entered Kobus's humble abode.

Me: "Who gave him this house?" I ask.

Nqaba: "I don't know."

He says. Shouldn't he know everything? They are brothers, they used to share dirty underwear growing up.

Nqaba: "I told you it comes with the contract." He moves ahead.

I'm surprised Zulu is snoring on Nqaba's shoulder, I doubt I will be getting any sleep tonight. How do I ask him to stay behind until the husband gets home without sounding like a coward? Yes, 'the husband', I am in no mood to be claiming that fool as my own.

On second thought...

Me: "Please take us to Orlando."

His brow arcs, I'm annoying him. I did mention my stubbornness, right? It comes natural, I am a Mshengu by blood.

Nqaba: "I can't."

A normal person would say 'I can't because' and give reasons why. This one wants me to ask him why he can't take us back home, let me humour the man.

Me: “Why?” Rubbish...

Nqaba: “He sold it.”

What the fuck? That bastard sold our house? What am I? A trophy wife? Will I have no say in this marriage? The next thing he’ll be telling me to quit my job, a cold day in hell that would be.

Is it true that men can put up an act for years? I’ve seen Diary of a mad black woman and I thought Tyler Perry was unnecessary until now, he’s their gender and knows how they think.

The question comes to mind again, what have I gotten myself into?

Me: “Did I make the right decision?”

Doubt is doing a happy dance in my head, Nqaba does not understand my question. He needs more lucidity, how do I put this without sounding like I regret marrying the husband? I’m angry and I have so many questions, like where is the man I married? It’s 10pm at night.

Nqaba: “You’ve known him for eight years, you had

enough time to decide if he's right for you." says Nqaba.

I should've kept my mouth shut. I want to click my tongue and roll my eyes, but with that look on his face he'll probably pin me against the wall and threaten to cut my tongue out and...I'm kidding, it's the atmosphere of this place that is making me exaggerate.

Nqaba: "I'll put Peanut to bed."

Zulu does not appreciate this pet name, it is only acceptable when his uncle uses it. The child could only eat porridge mixed with peanut butter when he was a baby and because Nqaba is a man and their brains are...

Refrain from insulting the other gender Thandiwe... So Nqaba found it funny so that's how he dubbed my baby with such a name.

Me: "I'll come with you."

I flap behind him, firstly I'm scared and secondly I need to make sure spiders are not throwing a party on the boy's bed. I'm glad the staircase is steady

and there is no squeaking sound.

It takes about more or less ten steps to get to the corridor and Lord have mercy. Who lived in this house?

The corridor is long and reedy, there are three brown doors on each side and one straight ahead.

Me: “Put him in my room.”

I instruct, Ntuthuko will see where he sleeps tonight and that’s if he comes home. The bedroom is not bad, my bed is here at least his shabby brain thought of that. Nqaba receives a second call after laying Zulu down, he frowns at his phone and...

Nqaba: “What is it?”

He snaps at the person again, to say he’s pissed would be taking it lightly. He listens, clicks his tongue and without another word rams the phone into the pocket of his jeans.

Whoever the person is, wants him home or wherever, tough luck because I am not letting this man go. Not until his brother gets home.

I see flying pots and spoons already. I'm an over thinker, I don't cross the streets before the traffic light turns green. I turn back reciting the Lord's prayer after an encounter with a black cat, I don't walk under ladders. I don't open an umbrella in the house and I don't eat in my dreams. Being a black person is a full time job, if you were to google the word superstition, you would probably find my face next to it.

Nqaba stands close to the door, his hands in his pockets and a scowl claiming his face. The caller made him angry.

Nqaba: "I have to go."

Oh no you don't, I will follow him if I have to. He is not leaving us alone in this black hole.

Me: "I don't know what you and your brother discussed."

I start.

Me: "But you are not leaving me alone here."

That came out wrong and I did not contribute to the

harsh tone, I'm just so angry at Ntuthuko, the grin Nqaba is giving me makes me feel like the world's biggest idiot.

Nqaba: "Are you afraid?"

Me: "No."

I am terrified, but I won't tell him that.

Nqaba: "Then there is no reason for me to be here."
He says.

How do I tell him that I feel safer when there is a male figure in the house?

Me: "Zulu will feel safe with you around."

We give birth to it for days like these. I'm given an eyebrow raise, he does not believe me and I don't care.

Nqaba: "You're a prideful woman Thandiwe."

And he knows me better?

Me: "It's not pride, your brother can not be doing things without letting me know first. I am his wife."

It is too soon to be complaining? He slightly tilts his

head to the side, I see a clenched jaw. I finally gather up the courage to sit on the bed, Nqaba leans against the wall, crosses his arms while his gaze is fixated on me.

I would like to say this is awkward and I want it to be awkward so he can stand outside and guard the door, but we are nowhere to the world of awkwardness. The gaze though makes me shy away from him, he is not exactly the least intimidating man on earth.

Nqaba: “Why did you marry him?”

There’s a reason he’s asking me this question. He is not going to ask again. Since he’s dishing up questions today, the next one should be, why am I taking long to answer the first one?

Me: “I love him,”

There it is, Nqaba huffs.

Nqaba: “Right.”

He gives a frustrated reply, turns and walks out of the room.

Me: “Where are you going?”

My panicky voices chases after him, he peeps through the door with a smirk on his face.

Nqaba: “Uyigwala Tshabalala.” (You’re a coward.)

I hate it when he calls me that.

Me: “I don’t care, we’re coming with you.”

I dispute, tonight I am not playing with anyone whether they look like the bogeyman or the guy next door.

Nqaba: “To the kitchen?”

He thinks he’s smart, he leans on the door post his eyes are probing. Ntuthuko never seeks answers to his questions, this one is different and can be annoying at times.

Nqaba: “Rest Thandiwe, I will never leave you.”

He sizzles in a whisper and this staring contest is not good. I curtail my eyes and they fall on my son. Nqaba’s gaze is burning me, I feel a deep urge to turn and glance back at him. By the time I do it, he’s out of the door.

There's a ticking sound that has dug deep into my last nerve, I've been avoiding it while talking to Ngaba. It sounds like a clock, I didn't know they make this much noise.

Ahhh!!! Scanning my eyes around the room, I see it on the wall next to the wardrobe. It's an antique mantel clock, I haven't seen anything so beautiful as yet. How did the owners leave such an expensive piece behind?

As I turn it over to remove the battery, it slips out of my hand and the whole thing breaks like a thunder storm. Unexpectedly the light in the room flickers for a few seconds, I doubt anything works in this house.

I'll clean the mess up later, I need to change out of this wedding dress and take a shower, that's if there is one.

The sound of footsteps outside the door catches my attention, I find something to cover myself with. Barbra didn't teach her kids how to knock. Someone is standing at the door. Why are they not knocking?

Me: “Nqaba! Is that you?” I call out to no one specific.

As curious as I have always been, I rush to open the door only to find no one. The eerie corridor is empty, that’s odd.

“Mama!” Zulu is awake.

Me: “What is it baby?”

He sits up from the bed, leans back on the headboard and pulls the blanket up to his chin. He’s not looking directly at me, but into space.

Zulu: “I’m cold.”

He states between shattering teeth. The temperature is above thirty degrees, the heat is enough to melt the coldest heart. Ntuntuko’s heart per se, I hate him right now. Why is he not home with his family?

Me: “Are you coming up with a fever?”

His temperature is normal though.

He lays his head on my chest, coughs a little and this has me worried. He was perfectly fine before he

fell asleep.

Me: “Baby.”

He’s gone, I hear his soft snores emanating from him. I’ll have to prepare a remedy for him.

We have a leaking tap back in our old house and Ntuthuko has failed to fix it. How is he going to fix this house? Everything is old, from taps to tiles. The bathroom light is dimmer than I would like, I’m not a friend of the dark. I opt for a bath, relaxing would do me good right now.

My mind keeps wandering to places it shouldn’t as I lie in this warm water, control your thoughts Thandiwe. A trip to memory lane is the last thing I should seek.

I feel myself drifting into a deep slumber, as if I had taken a whole bottle of sleeping pills. This could be my eyes playing jokes with me, but the light is flickering.

My mind sends a message to my body that I should

get out of the bathroom and sleep on the bed. I feel myself getting up, taking snail movements. On the other hand, I'm still lying in the bathtub the water covering my naked body. I'm not surprised, I've hallucinated before. Those half-asleep, half-awake dreams, happen fairly a lot.

Suddenly I'm kneeling in an empty bath tub, covered in blood from head to toe. Whose blood is this?

I want scream, but my voice has left me. Only my mind has the strength to yell, nonetheless there is no audio. I hear a soft whimpering, I hold my breath unsure of what it is. Or if I'm dreaming or it's a reality.

The cry intensifies sounding like a wounded child, it's loud and desperation is coated over it followed by the sound of footsteps like a person stepping on dry leaves. I see a tiny figure from the corner of my eye, I thought Zulu had gone back to sleep. I want to ask him to call his uncle, I need help. I can't move and my body is covered in blood. I can smell it, the stench is so strong that I can almost taste it.

Me: “Zulu...call...your...uncle...”

The words drag out of me with no audio, every syllable is dense. The figure stands next to me, I can't see its form, but I know now that it's not my Zulu. It's a shadow of a little person and its presence sends cold shivers right through my body. I can still hear its snivels, in my ears. The sound is so agonizing that I wish for it to stop.

My heart starts pounding fast and fear has paralyzed me. There's an uncomfortable silence before the sound of a child screaming emerges from the dim bathroom, it sounds distant at first then draws closer becoming more intense. It pierces through my ears and abruptly changes into a horrendous laughter.

This is a dream, it has to be a dream.

Me: “Aaaaaahhhhhh!!!”

I force my eyes open and jump out of the tub screaming, my mind is not anywhere, but on escaping this bathroom. The door swings open as I

reach for the handle, a horrific scream flies out of my mouth. I try to turn back to the tub only to slip and fall flat on the large figure in front of me.

Arms clasp my back, my head is hidden on its chest. I would have jumped if it were not human, but I recognize this scent from earlier today.

“It’s okay, I’m here now.”

The familiar voice soothes, his chin is pressed against the top of my head and I realise that shit, I’m naked. I jolt up, he shuts his eyes as if he’s looking at a body covered in leprosy. I’m in the bedroom in a flash, trying to find something to wear in my suitcase.

Nqaba: “I’m sorry, I heard you screaming and thought you were in danger.”

He sends his apology behind the bathroom door, he’s not supposed to see me naked. I’m his sister-in-law for Christ’s sake.

Nqaba: “Thandiwe.”

Nqaba says incredulously. This is what I had

mentioned, he expects an answer for everything.

Me: "It's okay."

He wants a response and I shall lie to him. It's not okay, it will never be okay. I never should've asked him to stay.

Nqaba: "Are you decent?" He asks.

Am I decent? Whatever the hell that means. I find a dull dress, I am convinced that my aunt packed my clothes, my mother has no time for anything, but my father.

The house was crowded last night, I was so excited about the wedding that I didn't have time to get a second look at it. If I knew I would not be coming back, I would have said my goodbyes, admired my living room one last time and maybe packed my own clothes as well.

Nqaba: "I'm sorry."

He says, I almost feel sorry for him.

Me: "You can come out, I'm decent."

I shout as I drop on the bed, leisurely he walks out

like he's taking that last walk to the electric chair. I chastise my eyes the moment they meet his, he's back to looking like South Africa's most wanted criminal.

Nqaba: "What happened?"

He asks, what really happened in there? All I know is that I was not alone, I had a vision which sounds farfetched. Or was it hallucinations?

Me: "There was someone in the bathroom."

I reply, I'm not sure of what I'm saying, it makes no sense coming out of my mouth.

Nqaba: "Who?"

How the hell am I supposed to know?

Me: "I don't know Nqaba."

He'll think I'm crazy if I tell him the truth, he's giving me a look that makes me feel like my senses drowned in that bathtub.

Nqaba: "I'm making tea, would you like some?"

He brings his reason for his presence forward,

downright ignoring my explanation.

Me: “I’m okay.”

I’m surprised by his proposal, Nqabayomzi Biyase is a typical Zulu man. He can spell patriarchy in his deepest sleep, people change.

I follow him out of the bedroom right after checking on Zulu, after the dream I had, I won’t be sleeping tonight. My dreams are never that clear, it felt more like reality than a dream.

The tea I declined is placed in front of me as I sit down on the sofa, the stubbornness of a Zulu man will leave you defeated. I have decided that I hate this house and everything in it, starting off with this sofa.

Me: “Have you spoken to your brother?”

I’m never this bold with him, tonight’s events have given me the audacity to speak out. The man is probably shocked, he glares at me from across the wooden coffee table.

Nqaba: “No.”

He says and dips his face in the coffee mug.

You know that loud sip that alarms your neighbours that today you have enough sugar and milk to experience once again the white man’s hot beverage?

Yeah that’s the one he keeps making, I should be annoyed by it, but surprisingly he’s still alive. If it were someone else my cup would be flying across the room in an attempt to get them to stop.

Me: “I need clarity here, what kind of business is Ntuthuko into?” I ask.

Ntuthuko once told me something about bricks, concrete and cement. I was not paying much attention.

I’ve seen the papers though, I’ve been to the site and that business does not run at night unless he’s into drug trafficking and whatever black market business out there.

Nqaba: “I’m surprised that you know less about the

man you've shared a bed with for eight years.”

That's his response, Nqaba does not talk like this. Respect comes first with him, although his rejoinders makes one want to shower him with boiling water. I'm scowling at him as I try to grasp his statement and from which rural ground did he reap it from.

I am reminded as to why I don't converse with him, I hide my face. His unyielding gape is judging me and I don't do well with judgement.

Nqaba's phone is ringing again, reaching for it, his forehead crumples.

Nqaba: “You're what?”

He springs up to his feet half-shouting at the caller, he's headed to the door. Is he leaving?

How do I stop him without sounding desperate and needy? I cannot take the blame for this, that dream I had crept me out. The stench of the blood still hovers in my nostrils.

I plod behind him, taking slow quiet steps. He's a

tongue clicker, I've lost count today. He flips the door open and a young woman in a garish attire slithers into my house wearing the biggest frown, her eyes miss Nqaba and immediately fall on me.

“Finally, I can put a face to the name Thandiwe.”

She seethes walking up to me, I've been thrown on the seat of pure confusion. I don't know this woman nor am I aware of what I did to her.

To be continued...

BURN...

3...

THANDIWE...

I had a bad feeling about this house from the moment I stepped out of the car, first it was the experience in the bathroom and now this woman

who is ready to turn my house into a wrestling ring. Nqaba is standing between us and this has me wondering if she wants to attack me.

“How does it feel to be married Thandiwe?” She asks, I am not sure where the question is coming from, she’s a stranger and I have no reason to be answering her.

Me: “Excuse me?”

I sense anger coming from her, if only Nqaba could stop glaring and explain what is happening here. I’m not a fighter only my nails can do the fighting.

“It’s just a simple question sweetie, I want to know because Mzi and I are about to take a walk down the aisle and I would hate to have another man over to my house on my wedding night, while my husband is away.” She adds, she is plainly insulting me

Nqaba glances at me as if wanting to see how I handle the news that he’s getting married. I am shocked rather.

Nqaba: “What are you doing here Reba?”

Took the words right out of my mouth.

Reba: “I came to get you, it’s late Mzi let’s go home.”
She says.

I’m not judging him, but she is not his type. She’s the type that would jump out of a flashy car, ask for e-wallets and come home with shopping bags that could fit the whole wardrobe.

Nqaba: “I told you that I’m busy. How did you find me?”

He pulls her to the side, she squirms fighting to get out of his tight grip.

Reba: “Let me go Mzi.”

Nqaba: “Not until you tell me how you got here.”

I watch them as they stand at a corner arguing, Nqaba has finally found someone. He sure knows how to keep secrets, I don’t recall seeing her at the wedding. Is he ashamed of her?

Reba: “If you must know, I called your brother and he gave me the address.”

She confesses and this does not sound right to

Nqaba, the glower on his face verifies it.

Nqaba: “You called my brother Reboana?” He growls, his voice laced with disappointment.

Reba: “You wouldn’t talk to me, you’d rather watch over this woman while you have a daughter waiting for you at home. What about me Mzi? What about Ofents e? We’re your family, your brother s should be here watching over his family.”

Reboana’s words throw me on the couch, my mind is trying to register everything she just said. Nqaba has a family? Is this why he kept his life private? It’s good news, right? But why is there a little sting in my heart? He’s looking at me, this is what being put on the spot light feels like.

He’s glancing at me and I don’t know what to make of his expression, he wants to say something, but will not bring himself into saying it.

Reboana takes his chin and turns his head back to her, she cradles his face.

Reba: “Come home with me Mzi, our baby is waiting for you.” She leans over to kiss his lips, at first he’s

reluctant but eventually returns the kiss.

I can't watch this.

Nqaba: "I can't." He says and I am shocked by his answer, Reboana is desperate. I don't know her so I don't care, but why would he choose to watch over us than go home with her?

Reboana: "Don't do this please, I need you home."

I have a feeling she sees me as a threat. From the way she approached me when she got here, to claiming her rights on him as his fiancé. Her insecurities were birthed by something, it's not rocket science that she did not wake up one day and decided to hate on me.

Nqaba: "Did I say I won't be coming home Reba?" His question comes with a snort, he's walking back to where he was seated and I am not sure of what to make of this. I want to release him, but who will protect us in this house? Maybe it's time I call Ntuthuko, he hates it when I call him while he's at work, says his colleagues will think his woman controls him.

Reba: “I don’t see a reason for you to be here, Thandiwe is a grown woman. She can take care of herself.”

Damn right I can.

Me: “It’s okay Nqaba, I’ll be fine. Take your wife home.”

Nqaba seriously has a wife?

Nqaba: “She is not my wife.” I am corrected with a stern tone.

Why is he denying her? And why am I glad?

Reba: “Mzi.”

She’s a feisty woman, she marches to him, hands across her chest.

Reba: “We’re getting married, tell her?”

She persists, giving me a death stare. I think I heard it the first time. Is this how insecurity looks on us women? I am ashamed because I have been in her position before, Ntuthuko has given me my share of insecurities. He is not the most perfect man on earth, I’ve caught him cheating a few times.

Threatened to leave and now that I think about it, this is where the expression 'I love you to death' came about. Men and their egos will have you giving up your life for them.

Nqaba: "Will you stop Reboana? Go back home. Who did you leave the child with?"

I know the angry Nqaba, I've seen the angry Nqaba and he is Romeo on steroids.

Reboana: "I am not leaving without you."

On that note.

Me: "Thank you for your help Nqaba, please go home now. Your girlfriend needs you." Let me paint that out.

Nqaba: "Will you be okay?"

He stands too close, I'm taking unnoticeable steps back while he's moving closer. Why is he doing this and in front of her?

Me: "I'll be fine."

Lord forgive me for I do not know what I'm saying. His fingers brush against mine, I see in his eyes

that it's not planned. He's not moving and I'm not claiming my hand back, his eyes are deep into mine.

Nqaba: "Take care of yourself."

He's almost leaning down, his mission here is to catch a closer glimpse of my eyes and he is succeeding. I'm only anticipating that he does not catch the fear in them. I am terrified right now, my stomach is doing a flip flop.

"Mzi."

It is when Reboana's voice echoes that I recall that, we are not alone. She drags her tail out first, Nqaba stops by the door, turns back to me and I fail to hide the fear in my eyes.

Nqaba: "You'll be okay Tan-tan, call me if something happens."

I don't have his contact details, I am beyond selfish at the moment and it takes so much in me not to ask him to stay.

My heart drops when I hear the car pull out of the driveway. Zulu is a baby, what will I do if something

happens? I run back up, hide under the covers and curl up next to Zulu. God hears silent prayers...

A strong masculine scent arouses me out of my slumber, Ntuthuko is home. Usually my heart would jump up from joy, not today. I have been given a taste of what married life is like and I hate the after taste.

I'm a hopeless romantic so Ntuthuko and I clash, he's can be rough and inconsiderate. He does not see anything wrong with it. Like right now, he messed up, but he's between my legs having his way with me. I should have ordered that underwear, I wanted to starve him.

Ntuthuko: "Hi."

He greets me with a kiss, Zulu is not beside me, he must have moved him to his room.

Me: "Where is my baby?" He frowns, stops his joy ride and sighs in sheer frustration.

Ntuthuko: "I'm making love to my wife and all you're

thinking about is Zulu?” There is a way Ntuthuko makes one feel bad about themselves, he is a master at that.

Me: “I’m sorry.”

The first apology should have come from him, eight years and I cannot read this man. I might not tolerate his nonsense, but there are times when he overpowers me. He’s a slick one.

Ntuthuko: “Good, now kiss me.” I don’t want to kiss him, I want answers. The aroma of his shower gel lingers over him letting me know that he just got home.

I’m not enjoying myself here, our sex life is not fun, it’s only sex. Don’t be fooled by the words he used, he doesn’t know what love making is.

He’s kissing me all over and groaning in my ears, I would like to say I’m turned on by this, but God will strike me dead if I utter another lie. Ntuthuko is having a good time, he’s not bothered about me.

Am I okay? Am I enjoying him? Does he make me orgasm? I’m bloody human, his newly wedded wife

and not a blow up doll. He's done, my performance was poor here, his was worse. My hand would do a much better job, the men we choose to love, my mother should have taught me better.

Ntuthuko: "That was amazing." Unless the word means terrible then yes it was amazing. He kisses my neck, his warm breath on my skin makes me gag. I don't want to be touched when I'm angry, make up sex doesn't do it for me.

The door slowly opens just as he jumps out of bed, Zulu's eyes widen in fear. He didn't expect to see his father here.

Ntuthuko: "What's wrong with you boy? Don't you know how to knock?" He shouts at my baby, Zulu drops his gaze and stands against the wall. I know he's afraid when he starts fiddling with his fingers, he's fearful of Ntuthuko who has given him every reason to be. Zulu doesn't know his father's embrace, his words of affection and I have grown tired of teaching him how to be a father.

Zulu: "I'm sorry dada, I thought you were not home."

Ntuthuko: “So you don’t knock in your mother’s room when I’m not around?” I jump from the bed as he starts to move toward Zulu, not today. My son will not be slapped again.

Me: “What are you doing?” The push I give him earns me a deadly stare.

Ntuthuko: “This boy is disrespectful.”

He replies, he has never given a reason why he treats his son like this. It started off when he was a toddler, Ntuthuko would lock him in the closet when he would cry. There were a few slaps on the wrist and being a first time dad, I excused him only for it to grow. .

Me: “He’s your son.” I’m taking risks, Ntuthuko can be unpredictable. He has never laid a hand on me, but anything is possible with him.

Me: “Baby go to your room.” He’s afraid to follow my instructions, he’s waiting for Robert Mugabe here to give him a go ahead. Ntuthuko needs to stop bossing my child.

Me: “Zulu I said go.” I have to snap for him to move.

Zulu: “I’m sorry dada, please don’t do anything to mama.”

Where is that coming from? Sure he lets his anger get the best of him, but to lay a hand on me would be taking it too far.

Ntuthuko: “Dammit!”

He curses as soon as Zulu shuts the door closed.

Ntuthuko: “You need to stop spoiling that boy, how will he man up if you continue to treat him like a girl.”

Me: “He’s only eight, he doesn’t need to man up. What is your problem Ntuthuko? You can’t keep treating him like that, how will he warm up to you when you’re always ready to attack?”

I study him as he falls into his clothes, he’s going out again?

Me: “You just got home.” I’m not happy about his negligence.

Ntuthuko: “Someone’s got to put food on the table.”

I hate his response, I put food on the table too. My

four digit salary is enough to buy a month's grocery.

Me: "Babe, we're supposed to be on our honeymoon. The plan was to leave today remember?"

I'm not selfish, I'm a woman and I have rights. He owes me for not satisfying me in bed, bloody hell. It's been years, how does he not get it right?

Ntuthuko: "That was before I signed a contract, I can't pack my suitcase and head to a holiday as if I have millions sitting in my account. It's not like we're new lovers Thandiwe, marriage is not about staying in and having sex till sun set." He says, throwing a blazer over his shoulders. These are one of his come backs that sting, he's insensitive.

Me: "And this house? When were you going to tell me about it?"

I find it better to ignore him, his unsympathetic gaze pauses on me. He has said a million things with that look.

Ntuthuko: "I thought my brother told you."

Am I married to his brother or him?

Me: “Your brother didn’t seem to know it all.”

Ntuthuko: “I don’t have time for this, I need to get to work. I’ll explain everything when I get back.”

Me: “That’s if you come back.” That slipped out of my mouth.

Ntuthuko: “What the fuck do you want from me?”

Why is he shouting?

Me: “I want you to treat me like your equal Ntuthuko, you moved us out of our home without letting me know. You spend our wedding night away from home and you don’t think I deserve an explanation.” This is half of what I have prepared for him, I have so much to say. He gives a smug look, kisses my cheek and walks out like I said nothing at all. Who the hell was that?

To be continued...

BURN...

4...

THANDIWE...

The bathroom has a leaking tap, I will need to call a plumber, Ntuthuko won't do anything. Plodding to the bathroom I find nothing, it's dead quiet and the taps are tightly closed.

Convinced I'm imagining things, I troll back to the bedroom to find the window wide open and the curtains widely dancing to the violent wind. Cold shivers rush down my spine, the darkness of the night brings an uncanny presence.

My steps to the window seem to be slow, compelling me to trudge my feet. I barely make it to the window when the wind stops and the curtains go back to compliance. The violence of the wind has crept into my heart causing a hammering that has me gasping for air.

The sound of water dripping fills the bedroom again, aggravated and surprisingly I march to the bathroom, this time I tighten the taps. I shut the

bathroom door behind me and hope that it has halted.

Is it true that people can steal your luck? It must be the case with me, the leakage heaps on, each drop comes with a fretting torment. My mind is playing tricks with me, I cross my fingers as I walk back to the bathroom hoping to finally put an end to it.

My tracks stop at the sight of thick blood on the white ceramic tiles, I trace the trail with my eyes and it takes me toward the bathtub.

The crucifixion couldn't have hurt this much, I reel back to the point of falling as my eyes land on Zulu. He's strung up on the ceiling with a noose around his blood stained neck, there is so much blood oozing from it that the drops have made a pool in the tub.

I can't grasp how this could be possible, the bathroom was empty both times I came to check. My head spins and my heart stops for a second before a thunderous scream erupts from my mouth.

Attempting to get up and pull his body down I slip

on the blood and fall. My screams refuse to stop, I need to get to my son, I need to get him down. How am I going to explain his death?

No one will believe me if I tell them the truth, he's only eight suicide is ruled out. The bathroom door slowly shuts forcing me to shriek in fear and giggles of a child resound from the bedroom.

"Incy wincy spider climbed up the water spout.
Down came the rain and washed poor incy out."

I hold my breath to listen, it's a little girl's voice softly singing. It sounds like a terrible lullaby and she hisses as she sings, she falls into more giggles before a deep silence immerses.

I jolt up and my eyes scan my surroundings, I'm on my bed and it's daytime, I was dreaming.

Me: "Zulu." My first thought is to check the bathroom, it's squeaky clean.

I run out of the bedroom screaming my baby's name, God let him be okay. I'm losing my mind, this can't be normal.

Relief washes over me the minute I see him, he's seated on the sofa watching TV, the food I made him a while ago is still untouched. Feeling my presence, he turns his head and scowls, it's probably the horror layered on my face.

Zulu: "Mama!"

I pull him into my arms, a shower of kisses has him pushing me away.

Zulu: "Mama stop." Thank you God, it was all a dream.

Me: "Are you okay?"

I receive another frown from him, he turns his focus back to the cartoons.

Zulu: "You're weird mama." That's all I'll get, maybe I am weird or losing my mind.

Me: "Why haven't you eaten your food yet?"

Zulu: "I'm eating." He takes a slice of bread and bites more than he can chew, he eats like his uncle.

Me: "Since when do you take forever to eat?" Zulu needs to stop with these looks he keeps giving me,

they make me feel like I'm crazy.

Zulu: "You gave me the food seconds ago mama," he says and it can't be. I've been sleeping for hours. I grab the TV remote to check the time, it's 10:05am. I had prepared the food around 10am.

NQABA...

Reba: "Don't tell me you're going to see Thandiwe." Reba says as I approach from the bedroom, car keys in my hand and my feet leading me toward the door.

This is not the life I had envisioned for myself, how I wish things could be different. There is no turning back now, Reboana and Ofents e are all I have and I have to take care of them. It's hard though when my heart is not in it.

The stunt she pulled last night broke the little of whatever was left of our relationship, if I should call it that.

Reboana had become my escape goat, I was on a quest to heal from a broken heart only for it to ache more. Ofents e was a year old when I met Reboana, her father left them when she was pregnant.

I took Ofents e as my own, it's been two years of ups and downs, Reboana is a tough woman to please and my salary does not necessarily make her happy. Neither does our two bedroom house, it's not the castle she dreams of every night.

Me: "Why are you obsessed with Thandiwe?"

A day does not pass without hearing Thandiwe's name slip out of her mouth.

Reba: "No, it's you who's obsessed with her." She squelches, pushing a crying Ofents e in my arms and gathers the dishes on the table. I follow her to the kitchen.

Me: "Excuse me?"

Reba: "You heard me Mzi, when are you going to delete those pictures you have on your phone?"

This is what it has come to.

Me: “You’ve been going through my phone Reba?”

She turns to face me, she has a habit of uttering pure nonsense.

Reboana: “Yes, I had to. I’m tired of competing with her.”

Me: “What are you talking about?”

Reboana: “You call me Thandiwe when we make love, you call her name in your dreams and what about the times when I would find you reminiscing on that hideous bracelet you keep inside your ID book? You’re heartless Mzi, you don’t care about me and my feelings.”

Me: “That is not true.”

Maybe closure is what I need, perhaps only then will I be able to move on and give Reboana the love she deserves.

Rebaoana: “Okay, where are you headed to now?”

Shit!!!

Me: “I have to check on them Reboana, they are in a new house and Ntuthuko...”

Reba: “Bullshit.”

Me: “What did you say to me?” This is when she crosses the line and lets her anger do the talking.

Reba: “Thandiwe is married Mzi, get that through your...”

Me: “I wouldn’t finish that line if I were you.”

I give Ofentse back to her.

Me: “I’ll go straight to work after, don’t wait up, I’m doing a double shift today.”

I hear her click her tongue as I plod to the door, she will be okay.

THANDIWE...

Zulu has school tomorrow, I want to give him a few days off until we settle in. Money indeed does limit you, if it were not an issue I would book us into a bed and breakfast.

My baby has been tailing me since, I’m glad though

that he's forgotten about his father's scene this morning.

I managed to clean up the house a bit, I might be crazy, but I have lost count of the number of times the hairs on my body stood. For an unknown reason I don't feel safe here. Climbing the stairs still scares me, they are creepy until you get to the top. Maybe if we paint the house white or grey the atmosphere would change.

Flashes of Zulu hanging on the bathroom ceiling haunt me, I need to talk to Ntuthuko. We can't live here, something is going on in this house.

Me: "Baby give me my phone." I say to Zulu, pointing at the ringing phone on the kitchen table. It's almost lunch time and I've been bustling in the kitchen.

It's an unknown number...

"Tan-tan." I'm not expecting a call from him.

Me: "Nqaba!" I greet and wonder what he could possibly want, it's not normal to receive a call from him.

Nqaba: “How are you?” There must be an answer that he seeks from me as he continues to ask me this dreaded question.

Me: “After I was left alone in a haunted house? I couldn’t be better, in fact Anabelle and I are having a great conversation over tea and biscuits.”

Nqaba: “You’ve made friends already? That was quick.” He says and I have to stop my laugh.

Me: “No, it’s just Zulu and me.” I knew he wouldn’t get the sarcasm.

Nqaba: “Oh, then who’s Anabelle?”

Lord, what have I started?

Me: “The evil doll from the horror movie Anabelle, you’ve never seen it?”

Nqaba: “Why would I watch a movie about dolls? Peanut should be watching that.”

Peanut definitely should not be watching that, I’ll keep my thoughts to myself because he will ask me why.

Me: “Are you and Reboana okay?” It’s none of my

business honestly, but things didn't look good last night.

Nqaba: "I called to inquire about you Thandiwe."

The topic is dismissed and won't be brought up again.

Me: "I'm fine, thank you for checking up on us."

Nqaba: "Okay, open the door."

Why would I want to open the door?

Me: "Why?"

Nqaba: "It's the only way I'll be able to come in."

He's here?

Zulu follows me as I rush to the door.

Zulu: "Uncle." He's in his arms in a flesh.

Nqaba: "You're getting heavier by the day, what is your mother feeding you?"

A chuckle complements the remark.

Zulu: "Pap and milk and I hate it."

These two will gang up on me given a chance, I lead

Nqaba to the kitchen leaving Zulu to do his homework in the living room. Nqaba gladly accepts a plate of food, I'm sitting across him with nothing to say.

Nqaba: "Can I ask you something?"

He starts, wiping his hands after cleaning his plate.

Me: "What is it?"

"Mama, hurry I'm hungry." Zulu whines dragging his feet into the kitchen, I hand him a plate of sandwich and he goes back to the living room. Nqaba sits back on the chair, his eyes are searching for something in mine and yet he has not brought his question forward.

Nqaba: "Did I take too long to come back?"

Deep down I know what he's talking about and I cannot bring myself to admit that the time has come to talk about the past.

Nqaba: "You said you were going to wait for me Thandiwe, did I take that long?"

There is nothing we can escape in life, for years I

have averted memories of him. I didn't want to think of him and what we once had, Ntuthuko became a great distraction. A little of him reminded me of Nqaba, he became my crutch, this is why I have held on to him for so long. Though I had asked myself, what life would have been like if I waited a little longer.

Nqaba: "You were still in school when we met, but I loved you regardless. Thandiwe I saw a future with you, people told me that you were too young for me and I didn't care. I had to go and work for us, I was saving for us, for your worth Thandiwe. I wanted to make you my wife, I wanted to make you mine. I promised that I would come back, all I asked was for you to wait for me."

Me: "But you didn't come back Nqaba, you stopped writing and I thought you found someone better in Joburg."

Nqaba: "I did come back, I came back for you Tantan. That's when I saw you in my brother's arms, you were pregnant and I knew that you were the girl he'd been raving about. I couldn't disturb that, he

was happy and...”

He takes his gaze away from me.

Why is God pulling back from striking me with lightning? I can just see him and Jesus sipping on tea and discussing if they should strike me with lightning or bring back my past lover as my current’s brother.

You can imagine the shock I had when Ntuthuko introduced Nqaba to me.

None of us had the courage to tell him that we used to be lovers and my legs were once a bridge for his body. Nqaba would fall asleep between my legs right after showing me the gates of heaven. I should have entered the dam gates, better than having to look at him, knowing that I am sleeping with his little brother now.

Nqaba and I did not have the discussion about telling Ntuthuko the truth, probably our guardian angels got together and agreed that Ntuthuko should not be told that we were once lovers. Due to our age difference, our relationship was kept a

secret.

No one in the family refers to him as Nqaba, I'm the only one. This is how I missed the part where he's the elder brother, I was told about the truck driver Mzi who lived in Voslorus, not my Nqaba who left because he needed to work in order to afford lobola.

He wanted to make me his wife after college, it's true that when you make plans the devil is also busy at work with his own plans for you...

Nqabayomzi Biyase is the one that got away.

Nqaba: "Why didn't you wait Tan-tan, why did you break my heart?"

This is wrong, I'm his brother's wife now. I move away from the table to keep myself busy with the dishes. I hear his tread, he's standing behind me. He takes my hand into his slowly turning me around to face him, his palm meets my cheek. I don't want to talk about this, it's too painful hence I have buried my feelings and the memories of him.

Me: "Please stop Nqaba, I can't do this with you, not here." I pull away from him.

Nqaba: “Okay, let’s go and talk somewhere then. There’s a park close by, Zulu will love it there.”

Nqaba is not listening to what he’s saying, I understand the desperation painted on his face. I’m on the same pedestal, however I can’t do this with him.

Me: “I think you should leave.” His eyes buck for a bit, he cannot believe what I just said. I’m hurting him again and it’s not my intention. Our love is forbidden, it doesn’t matter how much we want it. A lot of lives will be destroyed if we choose to become selfish. He’s able to gather himself quickly, covering the pain in his eyes. He clears his throat, takes a couple of steps back and crosses his arms on his chest.

Nqaba: “I crossed my boundaries and I’m sorry, I’m not sorry for expressing myself though. Day and night I wondered what I did wrong, if I loved you right or...”

I hate that he’s doing this to himself.

Me: “Nqaba please...”

Nqaba: “Were you happy though? Did I make you happy Tan-tan?” By God he did, I have only known the true essence of happiness in his presence.

“Mama.” My heart drops at the sound of my son screaming, we both rush out of the kitchen to the living room. Nqaba is faster than me so he gets to him first, he’s on the floor holding Zulu’s wounded hand.

Nqaba: “Peanut, what happened?” He questions while inspecting his hand.

I run back to the kitchen to grab a dish cloth only to bump into them on my way back.

Me: “What happened?” I follow them to the sink, Nqaba seats him on the counter and places Zulu’s hand under running water.

Zulu: “The glass fell, but I didn’t drop it I promise. It was on the table, I don’t know how it happened. I cut my hand while trying to pick up the pieces.”

He explains fighting back his tears.

Me: “My baby, does it hurt?” The wound is deep and

I can tell he's in pain, he shakes his head no.

Me: "It's okay my love, you can cry if you want to."

He disagrees with me by moving his head to and fro.

Zulu: "Dada said men don't cry, I need to be strong mama. He'll be proud of me when I tell him that I didn't cry."

Ntuthuko sulks when he's sick and he expects Zulu to man up as he would put it. What is wrong with that man?

Nqaba: "You're eight."

Zulu: "Going on nine."

He winces in pain as Nqaba wraps a cloth around the deep cut.

Nqaba: "Pain is no respecter of persons Peanut, it's okay to cry if it hurts."

Zulu: "It is?"

Nqaba: "Yes."

His tears do not waste time, they flood out of his eyes. There is nothing worse than seeing your child

in pain.

Nqaba: “We have to take him to the ER, it could get infected if it’s not treated.” He suggests and does not wait for me to reply, he takes Zulu in his arms and heads to the door. I’m rushing behind him taking full steps.

To be continued...

BURN...

5...

NQABA...

I’m proud of Zulu, he didn’t fuss when the doctor asked us to wait outside. However what he said back at the house bothers me, Ntuthuko is neglecting his son while chasing the next coin.

I have a feeling that he mistreats him, I don’t have any kids of my own, Zulu is a Biyase he might as

well be my son. My goal in life is different from that of Ntuthuko's, protecting Zulu and his mother is at the top of my list.

"He's okay you know." I send words of comfort, she looks at me, worry clouding her eyes and feigns a smile.

"How did you end up with my brother?" Our conversation was left half way, her eyes buck before she hides them from my stern gaze. The hardness on her face indicates confusion and disapproval.

"I didn't know he was your brother when I met him." She accounts, nervously intertwines her fingers and begins to fiddle with them.

"I asked how you ended up with him." I push for an answer in hopes that she will not escape my query.

"How did you and Reboana meet?" Is she fucking kidding me? After gathering so much courage to ask her this question that has been long coming, she refuses to acknowledge it.

Reboana is the farthest from my mind, I need to

know how this woman slipped out of my hands. She owes me an explanation, the truth to say the least. Goaded, a deep exhalation erupts from her chest as she glares at her ringing phone. An infuriation emerges from the depths of my stomach at the blaring ringtone, I only need a few minutes with her, that's all I ask.

“What is it Ntuthuko?” She answers hostilely.

“Where are you?” I can hear him, the volume of the mobile is high.

“I'm at the hospital, Zulu cut his hand.” There is a prolonged silence on the receiving end. I would be on my way to the hospital upon hearing that my son is injured.

“Oh, when will you be home?” Thandiwe exhales before clenching her teeth, Ntuthuko is a son of a bitch. This is how little he cares for that boy, he doesn't deserve them.

“You won't ask me, how he is?” She snaps.

“You're at the hospital so that means he's okay, I'm not a doctor you know. How did he cut himself

anyway? That boy is careless, he never does anything right.” He distributes a harsh remark.

“That boy is your son Ntuthuko, he needs you and this is what you say to me?”

“You’re my wife, but you don’t see me following you around, I’ll make the money and you take care of the house and the boy.”

I have to clench my fist to stop myself from grabbing the phone, the nerve of my brother to say such things to Thandiwe. These strikes will not go unnoticed.

“Voets ek yezwa Ntuthuko.” She lashes out at him and this has bystanders turning their heads in curiosity and wonder.

“Thandiwe...” It’s his turn to snap.

“Aii! Go to hell man.”

Her phone comes crashing on the hard floor as she smashes it with so much force and a low scream breaks out from her mouth.

“Tan-tan.”

“I’m sorry, you shouldn’t have heard that. He makes me so angry, I hate him.”

I know she doesn’t mean it.

“I heard what he said, is he always like that?”

Growing up with Ntuthuko was not easy, he was the spoiled child while I had to work to earn what I wanted. And that put him on a high horse, he’s been on it since. The world should stop at his command, I blame mother for it.

“No, he’s changed Nqaba. The man who came back home this morning is not my husband, he’s different. He’s been aggressive with Zulu before, but there was a little care. Now he ashamedly wears his feelings on his sleeves, I don’t recognize the Ntuthuko I was talking to just now. Is it the money? Does it make one heartless?”

“Money does not change people Tan-tan, however it brings out ones true colours.” I’m scaring her with my reply, if Ntuthuko is to be unmasked then let it be. He is not God to treat people as he pleases.

“I don’t want it then, he can keep his money and his

bloody ego.”

She growls shrugging her shoulders in defeat.

“Are you going to leave him?” I’m hoping she would say yes, Lord if she asks me to take her away I would do it gladly.

The doctor walks out with Zulu who looks less in pain, Thandiwe embraces her son in her arms. He’s pushing her away, he doesn’t like hugs. Is this a sign that we should not dwell on the past? The interruptions are getting to me.

“How is he?” I ask, you know everything is okay when the doctor smiles.

“He’ll be fine,” he replies and gives instructions on how to treat the wound before walking back into his office.

“Is it okay if Peanut sleeps over at my house tonight?” A change of scenery would do him good and I would like to spend time with him.

“I thought you said you were going to work,” her.

“I called in sick, little man here needs attention.” He

smiles as I brush his head.

“Will Reboana be okay with it?” Her question throws me off guard, I almost forgot about Reboana.

“She will.” A wild guess from me, she loves children, I don’t see her wrangling over this.

“I don’t know Nqaba, I’ve never spent a night away from him and what if Ntuthuko won’t come home? I’ll be all alone in that creepy house.” She voices out her worries of which I completely understand.

“Ntuthuko will be home that, I promise you,” her eyes squint inquisitively.

“How do you know?” She raises a question of which I cannot give an answer to, Zulu interpolates rejecting my retort.

“Please Tan-tan, can I sleep over at uncle’s tonight?” He flashes a big smile, it has Thandiwe chuckling.

“Don’t call me Tan-tan, I’m your mother.” She corrects the little boy, I love how protective she is of him. She is like a lioness that watches over her

cubs, Ntuthuko tends to bring out the lamb in her compelling her to fall into a well of fear and submission. He takes it from his mother, that woman would tell you the sky is pink and you would believe her. She is a master of manipulation.

“But uncle calls you Tan-tan.” Zulu disputes, inclining a ready ear for his mother’s response. Thandiwe is left dumfounded by the question, her eyes have suddenly become coyly.

She struggles to keep curb them as they move around in a shy manner, I’m on standby to meet her gaze, but she is trying by all means not to glance at me.

“She’s my Tan-tan, that’s why only I can call her that.” Her eyes bulge in astonishment, oh how I miss the diffident look in her eyes. It’s what kept me alive the past years, I struggled to come to terms with the fact that she was my brother’s lover and was having his baby.

Although I tried to keep myself away from her, I was proven human after all. Strange how fate can play

games with people's lives, it's not funny. It's actually cruel, did I have to lose my only love?

The woman who gave me a reason to live, the only woman I would gladly spend my whole life pleasing.

Memories spent with her have collected dust in my mind, it is a treasure that can never be discovered and no matter how hard I try, my heart will not give me the justice that I desire, a touch, a whisper or a glimpse of her. How long do I have to crave for those?

“You call her Tshabalala, Tan-tan and Thandiwe. I think you should pick one name uncle.” The child advises through a line of complaints.

“Okay that's enough, he won't stop talking if you give him the spot light.” Thandiwe says, the world has to stop for a bit as I admire them. If only I didn't leave, Zulu would be my son and Thandiwe my wife. They would be mine to keep.

THANDIWE...

“Do you want me to walk you in?” He offers, I have to decline. The husband is home, the house lights are on.

The sun set hours ago, I didn't think I would spend the day with Nqaba, I lost track of time. Zulu is fast asleep on the back seat, I guess it won't hurt to let him spend a day or two with Nqaba.

“You don't have to, I'll be fine.” I say and unexpectedly his hand brushes against mine, I look up to find his gaze on my hand, his fingers are brushing on mine causing a tingle in my stomach. If this is his attempt to take me down memory lane then it's working. This was one of his habits, it made me feel loved like I was the only woman alive.

His eyes shoot up to meet mine, I know when Nqaba takes a serious look he's about to be deep. I take this moment to bask on his face, God didn't do him justice with this flat nose, but he surely made up for it with the full lips.

The way they used to dance on my lips making me

feel all kinds of nice, the nice that had me giggling with pleasure and my cheeks burning from the shyness of having a man please me.

His high-forehead and broad face, his short and narrow jaw that is fond of clenching and unclenching involuntarily. His high cheek bones that compliment his cinnamon wide-set eyes, almost like joint twins. His smooth chocolate skin that was once my territory, at some point in life he was mine to claim.

“What are you doing?” My voice trembles betraying me as it assures him of my nervousness, Nqaba was the only man responsible of the goose bumps that played on my skin, the warmth on my cheeks as they would react to his touch or his words of affection. The twitch in my heart because only he could make it dance. The heat that surged down my spine, sending me into an erotic whirlwind that had my breath swirling hard in my chest with an attempt to gush out in pleasurable moans.

Reminiscing on our first time, a Duchene smile creeps up on the corners of my mouth. I was young and didn't know much about sex, he handled me with care, his hands ever so gentle. The words of comfort emanating from his deep gruff voice that it had me wanting to surrender my entire being to him.

Ntuthuko is different, I love him and have no doubts about that, but romance does not know him. There is never any excitement when thoughts of him pass through my mind. The love Nqaba and I had is something that comes once in a lifetime.

“It would be so easy for me to fool myself and go back in time Tan-tan, to relieve those passionate sleepless nights and pretend that time has stopped.” He mumbles beneath his heavy breathing, the heat from his hand burning into my skin causing a surge of goose bumps to spread all through my body.

“I have to go,” I feel like I'm cheating on my husband.

“I’m not stopping you, you can go.” His grating voice lightly booms as if discharging from deep within his chest, reminding me of the times when I would lie on the same chest and listen to the sound of his heart beat.

I know that he is not stopping me from leaving, but why am I not moving?

I flinch as my door opens, Ntuthuko stands with hands shoved in his pockets. This is what I meant when I said he has changed, he dresses different now. Chino pants, designer shoes and a white collared shirt, unless his reason for the look would be that he had a magazine shoot because he would fit perfectly right next to Idris on People Mag. I was not told about the amount he made from the business deal, it must be a hefty one.

“My love, won’t you come out of the car?” His speech has changed as well, is he trying out for a reality TV show? You would never know with

Ntuthuko. I can't miss the mock in his tone and the condescending smug that claims his mouth as if it is its rightful place.

Ntuthuko reaches his hand to help me out, I'm reluctant to take it. My anger has not subsided, my questions have not been answered and my heart is swimming in a dead pool of heartache.

Unnecessarily Nqaba exits the car as well, there is a roughness in the way he does it, as if he has been called to war and is set to win the battle. The sound of his footfalls resonate on the concrete ground causing a loud thump with each counted step, should I cover myself with the hedge of protection? These two have never butt heads before, though there has been shade thrown between them, Ntuthuko being the one on top.

With the reverence he holds for his big brother, his pride and ego subjugates him. A mantra 'pride comes before the fall' should be his day-to-day morning prayer, I would hate to see him come crashing down.

“Bafo, thank you for bringing my wife home.” He keeps the arrogance, no, whoever took my husband I want him back. I don’t see a reason for the squared shoulders, the flared nostrils and nose that has been raised up just so to look down on Nqaba.

Taller than his brother, Nqaba is made to look less of a man with power, money can surely place one under its feet.

My heart clunks with fear as Nqaba’s response takes forever to come, then I remember he is a man who does not fight unless it’s obligatory.

“Wake Zulu up, he has to go to bed.” Ntuthuko gives an order, his stern gaze still cast on his brother.

“Zulu will be spending the night with his uncle.” My retort earns me a stare that brings judgement day to a standstill.

“My son does not sleep out.” Now he deems it fit to claim him as his son?

“My son will sleep wherever I see fit for him.” A

haughty snigger emanates out of his mouth, he laughs rich too? I did not see this one coming, since he has decided to play richy-rich, I'm very much certain that he's heard of an annulment. It's pretty common with them, get married today and wake up divorced the following day. I have been tried and tested and I will not tolerate this.

“Thank you Nqaba, please tell Zulu I'll see him in two days.” I add an extra day, he is my son. I raised him and I have rights over him.

“I'll take care of him, don't worry.” A short smiler lingers for a minute on his plump lips, his hard eyes turn dark as they fall on Ntuthuko. His lip curls and with that an eyebrow rises exposing more of the white part of his eye, this powerful gesture illustrates anger and disgust. And that pushes Ntuthuko back to his rightful place, a loud gulp passes down his Adam's apple as he shuts his chest with arms crossed, a motion of protection.

We stand back watching Nqaba pull out of the

driveway, I should be in that car with them. My life was okay before I said I do, these two words are meant to be magical, I'm supposed to be at my happiest. The husband went to a business meeting and came back a changed man, how can that be? If this was a movie, I would say he has an evil twin who stole his identity after bagging Mandela notes.

“Will you stand here the whole night?” I'm nudged back by a wrathful tone, the kindness that once dwelt in his eyes has become a stranger. Giving him one hard look, I toddle toward the dark house. I hate it more everyday here, tonight is the night we should have the talk. If I get my way, we'll be moving out first thing in the morning. If he can afford designer clothes now, he surely can afford a house or apartment of some sort. I will not live with my heart on the edge, it's a gnawing thing to experience.

“What were you doing with my brother?” I scream at the pounding sound of the door shutting, my mind was captivated by the heavy presence in this house that I forgot Ntuthuko was walking behind me.

“I told you Zulu injured his hand, but you don’t care about that, do you?” He hates it when I walk away from him while he’s talking, hence the arm grab. It’s so rough and forceful that my head spins as he turns me back to him with one twirl.

“Are you going to hit me now your majesty?” Biyase has placed himself on a seat of godliness, he’s looking down at everyone with judgement in his eyes.

His fingers leisurely slip off my biceps, leaving behind a throbbing heat and a bearable pain.

“I know you were not at the hospital the whole day Thandiwe. Where did you go?” What is he trying to insinuate? He hasn’t answered any of my questions, but he stands here and plays quiz with me?

Me: “What is wrong with you? You didn’t even bother to check if your son was okay nor have you asked me how he is, yet you’re worried about me spending the day with your brother.”

“I didn’t say I was worried, I want to know where my wife was the whole day when she should’ve been

home cleaning and cooking.”

Hell no, and I thought Nqaba was the patriarchal son. This flashy bastard just dubbed me a house wife.

“Don’t you dare talk to me like that Ntuthuko, I am your wife.” He gives a devilish smirk at my sally, his hand reaches for my face and he has my jaw in a tight grip squeezing my mouth into an oval. His lips slightly open as he readies himself to utter what I think will be untainted bullshit.

“Yes, you’re the wife and I’m the husband. Baby we’re not on the same level, how do I put this? I’m the king of the castle and you my love are my mistress.”

Utter bullshit I said and it eases out of his mouth as if it is the wisest sentence ever made in the English vocabulary.

Me: “What has happened to you Ntuthuko? You do not speak like this.” Why was I not warned about this?

“Nothing has happened to me.”

“Then why are you telling me shit?” I flinch as his high-pitched guffaw startles me, what the fuck is going on with him?

“Oh Thandiwe darling, you have a mouth now...” Is this what made him laugh like a hyena?

“You’re a piece of shit Ntuthuko.” I interpose clashing my palms on his chest, the shrug takes him a few steps back. How dare he talks to me like this? I have a mouth now? What the hell does that mean?

His face hardens, his eyes shrug out the little softness that was left. Correct me if I’m wrong, but you do not look at your wife like this. So much anger is smeared in his eyes, I’ve pushed him before and like Rich standing before his Brooke, he took it in.

“You’re changing you know that? Is it my brother? Is he fucking you good?” The devil has escaped from hell’s fires and he is standing in front of me.

“I am done with you Ntuthuko.” My trip to the staircase is short lived, I’m pulled back to the spot I

was marked on. His face is so close to mine as if giving me a personal look into his now dark soul.

“Repeat what you said to me.” His sinister voice lobs me into cold shudders, it resonates in this unnerving room.

“I said I am done,” yanking my hand from him, I stagger back a few steps.

“I am done with you, I am done with this farce of a marriage and I am done with this house.” My voice rises with each word.

“No you’re not,” he contradicts my decision, typical Ntuthuko.

“Yes I am, I’m leaving this house first thing in the morning.” He doesn’t seem fazed by my announcement, turning from me, he ambles to a couch. He sits back and crosses one leg over the other. Pompous bastard.

“Look, I know I messed up when I left you that night, but baby I did it for us. I want to give you the world Thandiwe, I want you to have everything you want. I love you, you know that.” He says and I am

confused for a while, what game is he playing at?

“If you want me to have everything then move us out of this house, find us a place to stay.” I return, crossing my hands over my chest. There is no promise hidden behind the windows of his eyes.

“We’re not going anywhere,” just as I thought.

“Maybe you’re not going, but I am.” I didn’t crack a joke, why is he laughing like that... Money see your works...

The guffaw halts, his mouth strings back to its place. It’s as if he never laughed. He takes a second to scan my entire body, gets back on his feet.

Eyebrows raised, a scornful grin leaping on his mouth and his eyes intensely penetrating me to a point where I gasp as he takes that final step closer.

His hand slides to my lower back and pulls me into a soft gentle hug. He presses his lips on my ear and what he whispers next is any mother’s worst nightmare.

“You can’t leave me Thandiwe, I will take Zulu away from you so fast you’ll forget you ever carried a

baby in that useless womb of yours.” Gasping in fear and shock I push him back with so much force to find a spine-chilling sneer on his face.

“Ntuthuko?” My voice bears witness to my disbelief, I glower at him incredulously.

“Think about it baby, money talks in this world. I can have anything I want on the palm of my hand. Including our precious Zulu boy.”

“Why did you marry me? What do you want from me Ntuthuko?” My question will go unanswered it’s a given, the smirk on his face promises nothing.

“I thought you loved me.” I try to get the truth out of him, his eyebrow curves making it impossible for me to recognize this heartless man.

“I do love you oh sweet Thandiwe,” he says, getting rid of the smirk and accepting a frown.

“To death,” he whispers lastly, pecks my cheek and ambles up the staircase. I want to protest and scream at him, why am I unmoving? What does he mean he will take my son from me?

NQABA...

Reboana didn't reply to my text when I told her I was on my way home, I waited for her response just so I could tell her that Zulu is with me. She has never met him before, the only person who knows about my little family is my father. He approves of them, says my happiness comes first.

It's considered strange that I would hide them from my family, after I came back from Johannesburg to find the woman I love with my brother, I lost the will to continue with life.

I kept to myself most of time, built walls around me that no one would be able to enter. My family specifically, Reboana was a rebound, I needed a distraction as I was tired of my heart aching over Thandiwe. Heaven, if I knew what I was setting myself up for, I would have stayed away from Reboana.

My relationship with Ntuthuko is not built on strong ground, growing up I had the favour of my father while he had both parents holding him up. The best schools were reserved for him, I stayed back home to herd cows while he was sent to study further.

My mother had everything to do with it and I was given an excuse that being the eldest son, my presence was required at home.

That's when I met Thandiwe, life changed for me, suddenly I had a reason to live.

My mother was against me going to the city to look for work, she hated the idea and said the cows needed a Shepard, that's how little my future means to that woman. But I had a woman I needed to take care of and so I ventured on leaving mother alone.

My father's job required more travelling, he was hardly ever home. Mother moved to the city with him a few years after Zulu was born.

Reboana wants marriage, she wants her rights in this relationship and that is something I cannot

grant her. She cried fiancé that day at Thandiwe's house, a title she gave herself. Days on end I would hear an unending story about getting married, given no peace in my house the word 'fine' spewed out of my mouth.

The peace I seek remains hidden, now I am obliged to get her an engagement ring. I can't see a happy ending to this, my heart loves another. So how can I commit to a woman I cannot love? God knows I tried to no avail. Ofents e has my heart though, she is my piece of heaven.

Carrying a sleeping Zulu in my arms, I stand at the door in search for my keys. I built this house with my own hands, Thandiwe and I were going to live here and raise our little family.

The door opens and I meet Reboana's angry eyes, she's dressed up for battle.

"Hi, " my acknowledgement finds nowhere to land, I don't have time for this. I push my way in, Ofents e's bed is enough to accommodate them both.

After tucking Zulu in I saunter back to the living room, my food is kept on the table. I'm not hungry, but she will burst into a fit of rage if I deny her food after slaving in the kitchen for me. I appreciate how she takes care of me and my needs, though it's my heart that needs taking care of.

“Thank you.” I give my gratitude, adjusting my pants as so to sit comfortably on the chair. The mouth-watering aroma of the meal loiters about, but it fails to draw back my appetite.

“Who is that boy?” She has seen him in pictures, hence her question puzzles me. Her way of seeking for answers is rather disrespectful. I sink my hands in the warm water she's holding, her eyes are boring me compelling me to leer up at her.

“Zulu,” my riposte is greeted by a scornful chuckle, she pulls the dish away in anger and hands me a towel.

“Why did you bring him here?” She expects me to eat while standing over me and probing me.

“He’s my nephew.” I give an obvious answer, it’s been a long day. I want to rest and her demeanour tells me that she won’t let me.

“Were you with her?” She presses her lips together, her chest moves robustly beneath the silky material of her blouse. A hefty sigh once again emits from me due to her insecurities which I have very much subsidised to.

Squabbles...tantrums...accusatory fingers pointed and not to forget the name Thandiwe, this is my daily life, it’s what I come home to everyday. I need some peace of mind and she’s withholding it from me.

“Yes.” I say cutting through a chunk of samp with a spoon, it’s enough to remind me that the doors of my stomach have been closed.

“Am I a joke to you Mzi?” Her voice reverberates in the kitchen, the bawl is enough to have woken the kids.

“We had to take Zulu to the hospital, he was...”

“Bullshit Nqabayomzi, bullshit.” She snatches the

plate, her puckered brow daring me to react to her impudence. I don't believe in laying a hand on a woman, but a number of times she has planted the shinking thoughts in my mind.

Pushing the chair back, I hunch and I'm on my feet in a millisecond. I need her to see the solemnity in my eyes when I say,

“Don't you ever talk to me like that again Reboana,” I sizzle, my teeth gritted in resentment. The breath gushing out of her nostrils pours to my face, her shoulders move with her chest, a show and tell of how angry she is.

“That's it Mzi, I'm going to wipe her out of your life. I will get rid of everything that reminds you of her and first thing in the morning I want that boy out of my house.” She spits out the words, they hit me like a venomous snake bite, frozen and trying to figure out where her mind is at. My eyes trail her debauched movements, her feet are directing her to our bedroom.

Wipe her from my life?

The treasures I hold of my past love are safely kept in there, I dash in to find her with the old photographs in hand.

Two to be exact, Thandiwe was about seventeen when she took them, they were the only memoirs I had of her when I left the rural to look for a job in the city. And coming back to find that she had moved on with my brother, my broken heart led me back to Johannesburg with my love frozen in time in pictures where her smile remained like Monalisa's...never changing...

“What are you doing with those?” I cautiously wander in, my intrusive glare stuck on my treasure. Her eyes glowing with waterworks, an anger so fierce appears to be overriding the pain in her eyes.

I'm stationary due to shock, as a tearing sound secretes filling my ears and lands on the depths of my heavy heart. Reboana tosses the two pieces of the pictures at my feet, I deny her the opportunity to tear the second photograph. I'm not a man to be

consumed or swallowed by anger and provoking me is a mistake she tends to make.

“Don’t challenge me Reboana, I will kill you. Do you hear me?” I seethe and this has her blinking away the fear grazing her eyes.

“You wouldn't,” she exclaims, obstinacy pushes her to be audacious.

“Try me,” and with that I pick up the pieces from the floor, if Zulu was not around I would go for a drive. I’m suffocating...

To be continued...

BURN...

6...

18L

NQABA...

“Aaaaaahhhhhh!!!! Mama, mama, mama.” Zulu’s heart wrenching screams perforate through the bedroom and skid to the depths of my stomach, my heart leaps with fear of the unknown.

My mind flunks, leaving me for a mere second. It only excels in guiding the quick steps of my feet to the children’s room, oblivious of what I might walk into.

Choosing peace, my bed has been set on the couch tonight, sleep has deserted me.

Fate has fallen into boredom and found a victim in me...throwback...slow music...she’s in a wedding dress...her brown eyes coyly smooching with mine...a tight grip on her waist...her breasts cushioned on my chest...her scent teasing me with promises of pleasure, a taste of her once again.

It was on that day I sought for answers, the day she committed her life to my brother. Instead of making a run for it, my heart pinned me down demanding answers, a reason why it was shattered into pieces

and maybe in the midst of all this commotion, I will find a way to put the pieces back together. I will learn how to breathe again.

To say my heart is not in turmoil would be denying my very existence, gradually my lungs are refusing to pump air and I am slowly forgetting how to breathe.

My heart tugs at me with threats of halting its beat, it misses the feeling of being loved. It misses its beloved and how it would spring with excitement at the sight of her, the sweetness of her voice that made a permanent home in my ears.

Her small hands that tenderly caressed every edge of my skin with a tint of desperation and desire, her delectable moans that birthed butterflies in the belly of a grown ass man. Oh how I was once lucky in love...

I stayed away, I tried to stay away. The same stupid heart pulled me back to her presence, forcing me to glance at her once more and twinge in pain of seeing her with my brother.

I can't help, but wonder if Thandiwe is okay with Ntuthuko, it's something I have never vexed about. It could be the way he spoke to her earlier, the cold look in his eyes or the unpleasant tone of his voice as his foul mouth wrote the words 'my love.'

Zulu's cries have woken Ofentse up, she is on her own quest of ear-splitting screams. My first thought when I open the door is to go for Zulu who is rolling on the bed like a crazy person, a crying Ofentse is standing on the bedside. I don't have time to think how she got down, something is wrong with Zulu, his eyes are shut as he screams like his body is on fire.

"Mama, mama, mama..." Zulu blares, my heart breaks, I can't bear to see him cry out like this. Ofentse stops wailing upon seeing me and falls into snivels, she appears to be okay.

A small build pushes against me as I attempt to lift Zulu up, I tilt my head to the side to find Reboana.

She roughly grabs Ofentse, scurries out of the room after she curses underneath her breath and showers the room with a series of tongue clicks.

The strikes keep building up...

I sit Zulu on my lap to realize that he's dreaming, probably trapped in it because he's not waking up as I lightly tap his cheek.

"Wake up Peanut," I hold him closer to my chest, my arms clasp around his structure. He seems to calm down bit by bit, his eyes slowly open and his tears seek to be accredited.

In a miniature, his fear dusted eyes widen. He kneels on my lap, his arms fasten around my neck, the grip is so tight as if terrified that someone is out to get him.

"Hey, it's okay. You were dreaming Peanut, it was a nightmare." I console him with words and a stroked back.

"She took mama, she took mama." He reveals a

little of his dream in a quavering voice.

“It was a dream sweetie, it’s okay. I’m here now, nothing will happen to your mother I promise.” What am I promising?

Judging from the way he was rolling on the bed, the dream must have felt real. I will ask him about it in the morning. He snuggles on my neck, his body trembles in my arms.

How scary was this dream that so much fear has been instilled in him?

Reboana appears at the door just as I rock Zulu back to sleep, her arms are over her chest as she stands with a cheeky poise.

I had hoped that this wouldn’t happen, but I see hate in her eyes as they drop on this innocent little boy.

“I’m not letting my daughter back in here.” I wish she would keep her voice down, is it required to start a fight at 3am in the morning?

“Okay.” I say.

I am not going to entertain her tantrums, she is a grown woman and should know better than to hate on kids.

“What would’ve happened to Ofents e if I didn’t come to get her? You only cared about your possessed nephew tha...” I am not trying to hear any of her garbage, interjecting would be for the best before I do something I would regret.

“Get out and close the door behind you.” She knows when I’m serious, her retort is ready unrelatedly.

“Mzi this boy...”

“I said get out, get the fuck out Reboana and shut the bloody door,” my angry reproach doesn’t reach her well. Rudely she rolls her eyes and moves away after her signature exit move...The tongue click...I continue to jot down the strikes.

THANDIWE...

The house suddenly looks different, it’s brighter...

the walls are white...the ceiling is high and the furniture looks new. There is a sound that's drawing me toward the living area and my feet are reluctantly leading me there.

Looking down at them to search what could be drawing me to where I'm certain I don't want to be, I notice a pair of 2inch brown heels on my size four feet.

I don't wear heels especially hideous ones, I don't think of taking them off, my mind is averted away by an off-tune female voice singing to a birthday song.

Taking the last step on the stairs I see a flashlight coming from the kitchen, toddling closer the voice heaps on. Now I can clearly hear sounds of a little girl giggling in pure joy and there she is.

Seated on one of the kitchen chairs, dressed up in a white princess dress.

A cake with eight candles is placed before her, her eyes riveted on it. The pink creamy cake is all that

appears to matter to her. I can't see the lady who's happily singing the soul draining song, I decide to slog my heavy feet a little closer to the entrance.

The sight drops my jaw in awe and bewilderment, the singing lady is me. Dressed in a knee length poker_dots vintage dress and singing to this little girl I have never seen in my life.

Ceasing to watch as a third party, I'm cast into the scene taking the role of the mother.

Unwillingly I take the knife on the table and leisurely cut through the sponge of the cake. I flinch as a sharp pang pricks my finger, as I lift my hand to inspect, heavy blood drops rain down on the pastry, with immediate effect I bury my index finger between the seams of my lips to stop the bleeding.

Driving my eyes up, I find the girl indulging on the piece of cake that's glazed with my crimson blood. I want to stop her, my voice won't come out though.

The lights flicker before we are standing in wholesome darkness, strange enough I can still see

what's before me. The white walls have turned dark and dull, the cake that was ornamented on the now vacant table feels like it was a figment of my imagination. The living room no longer holds the beautiful furniture it did when I came down a while back.

“Mommy,” a slow spooky whisper of the little girl nudges me back to the melancholy kitchen, I scream upon seeing blood smeared on her mouth. There is so much of it that it drips in loud drops, she grins revealing her blood shielded teeth.

My eyes widen, knees weaken and my heart screams for a way of escape. Feeling my spirit fight, I feel my body jolt out of a deep sleep, my eyes are too heavy to open but I'm lying on a soft surface.

The bed moves, someone is climbing. I can't think straight, I'm caught between the land of dreams and reality. A small frame crawls on top of me. Zulu is back?

He is supposed to be home in two days.

“Zulu I told you to sleep in your room, you’re a big boy now.” Although difficult, my voice makes it out of its box. A little head presses on my collarbone taking up a contented rest, while tiny hands clasp over my shoulders.

Why is his body icy cold? This child was eating ice cubes again.

“Baby go to your room.” I say, in my mind my eyes are open but only sheer darkness welcomes them. I’m fighting that heavy dozy feeling, that’s pushing me back into a deep slumber.

“Zulu, you don’t want mama to be upset.” With my tired voice firmer than before, I chide the little person. In seconds it appears the figure is climbing off of me, my body begins to feel lighter.

I open my eyes at the sound of footsteps toddling away from the bed, I can’t see clearly, a white covering in my eyes hazes my vision. The figure pulls the door open, stops and turns back to me. The blurry sight brings cold shivers down my spine. It could be my eyes playing tricks with me. The little

person gradually walks out and like a jolt of electricity my strength claims me back, pushing me up to a sitting position.

The sun is out, time remains unknown at the moment.

Ntuthuko is not in bed, I told him to sleep in the guest room last night. I couldn't have him rubbing against me with his stinking ego.

Trying to grasp if what happened was a dream because it feels so unreal, I send my hand to rub away the itch on my eye only to wince at the pang of pain on my index finger.

I inspect it to find a cut so deep like a sharp object sliced my flesh. No, no, no, this cannot be. It was a dream, it had to be a dream. I kick the blanket off and my breath shoots up and fills my ribcage.

The bed sheet is painted with so much blood. I'm surprised I'm still alive, it looks like I had shared a bed with a wounded animal. God what is happening to me?

BULELWA...

There are many ways to wake up in the morning, a cup of fresh brewed coffee, a kiss on the forehead or your mother frustratingly yelling out your name.

In my case, I get to wake up in the arms of a sexy beast or a Greek-god as I recall calling him last night. I knew there was something behind that sexy ass of his, the pack hidden behind his muscle hugging V-neck t-shirt. I'm a daredevil and taking chances is my prerogative.

God is good at this show off thing, I can count a few of these hunks he has placed on the face of the earth, the world is bad already so why not brighten it with such beautiful men. I run my hands on his broad shoulders, sinking them down to the pack that has me dancing with excitement.

“Baby, baby, baby...” I hum in a rhythmic tone loud

enough to wake him up, my eyes can't get enough of this fine art. It's so sad he won't be gracing my bed again, yep that's me. Bulelwa Msibi, I don't do seconds. Whether it be clothes or men, Brad Pitt or S'dumo. Why should I when there is so many of them.

Ginger hair, green eyes and skin as pale as snow. That's how I love them, they sail my boat perfectly. The party life has gotten me a few, it begins with a number of drinks, flirting follows and by the time it's almost over I have my driver racing us home while we make out on the back seat. Poor guy is traumatized, he once sent me a resignation letter, but promising to raise his salary he had no choice, but to stay.

"Bhulelwa." Butchering my name, his perfect white teeth appear from beneath his pink lips, I hear those are expensive, I should get myself a set.

"No, no darling. I know there is no master of pronunciation, but not with my name hot stuff." He

laughs at my correction...I can be dramatic- his words for the first few minutes we were mingling last night.

“Oh yes, you said to call you Boo-boo.” He butchers the shortening as well, there is no winning here.

“Yes, it’s pronounced Boo-boo, but that’s not how you say it. Follow my lips, Bu...bu...” He gives up after a few tries, I should be the one to throw in the towel.

“What’s for breakfast?” He asks, sitting up from the bed, I drool over him as he stretches God’s best work, he turns his eyes and finds me jaw dropped.

“I was thinking we could have last night’s leftovers, they taste better in the morning.” He says and so I’ve heard, but nope. I do not do leftovers, just the word itself has put me off.

He leans forward to kiss me, I duck and jump out of the bed as if a bedbug sucked on my blood.

“What is it?” He asks, his Afrikaans accent sounding deeper filled with confusion.

“Ndlondlo!!!” Shit, my world stops as my father’s voice rings in my house. What is he doing here? He always calls first, this better be a matter of life and death or else I am dead.

“What's wrong?” Ginger is curious, more like worried, he probably thinks we have a thing after the freaky-steamy sex we had last night.

“A witch,” my response has him widening his eyes, either shock or confusion.

“A witch?” This guy should be jumping out of the window in his boxers, not asking me a million questions.

“You see that’s the thing with witches, they don’t announce their arrival. Why do you think they use needles as means of transport?” I say, pacing back and forth in the room and trying to think of a way to get rid of the stud on my bed.

“Witches use brooms as...” OH! I get it, he’s a Harry Potter fan.

“Not where I come from Beastie,” my comeback earns me a seductive smile, I got him at Beastie.

What can I say? The guy is sex on legs and I forgot his name.

“Now get out of my bed and leave.” I point at the window, we’re two stories up and panic has clogged my brain. Poor thing will break his leg when he jumps out, that’s the least of my worries though. Better that than have my father castrate me.

“Won’t you introduce me to your father Boo-boo?” Butcher my name Beastie, butcher my name. Bubu is so easy to say, you don’t need your tongue for it. And like hell I will introduce him to Lucifer.

“Listen to me, my father cannot know that you are here. He will kill me, slice me into a million pieces and send my body parts to my mother so she can grieve for half a day...then he’ll cremate my body, scatter my ashes in a witch’s kraal. And he won’t end there, he won’t let me unite with my ancestors, instead he will make sure that they reject me and I spend eternity screaming daddy I’m sorry.” His eyes are widened by the time I finish my speech, my

eyebrows are sweltering...my heart wants to leave me and my armpits have a sudden new itch. I'm nervous as hell.

He takes his time to get out of bed, my anxiety grows.

“Oh God, oh God, I think I'm about to have a heart attack. I'm going to die young, I haven't enjoyed life yet. I can't be trapped in a coffin for eternity, my handsome body will decay and muggets will devour me. I will be the most hedious looking corpse.” Blethering about my none existent life after I've been killed by the man I call baba, I turn to face the snack on my bed. Wide-eyed his mouth hangs open. I can't be making sense to him but...

“They'll have to bury me in my Giorgio Armani suit, at least that should cover up the ugliness.” I use my hand to fan away the throbbing heat that has threatened to smoulder me.

“Gcinumzi!” I swivel on my heel as my father's voice nears my bedroom, my eyes fall on the door knob and they bulge at the unlocked door. I jump to it in a

speed of light.

“Hurry Beastie,” I say, panicking should be a sport, I am dead beat.

“How will I leave? There is no other way out.” He states jumping into his pants, my eyes are undisciplined. Being in a dilemma I shouldn’t be lusty over this man, but geez he has my d*** twitching and my heart palpitating. Pride will kill me, I should have accepted his offer of a morning glory.

“Gcinumzi!” Dammit! When the Msibi lion roars then you know all hell is about to break lose.

“Baba!” Damn my voice comes out squeakier than it should, making me sound like a bitch who is getting fucked to infinity and beyond. That’s how nervous Ndlangamandla makes me.

Ndlangamandla Msibi or bab’ Mandla as the world calls him is a multimillionaire, I’m lying. That’s what I tell people, in order to get things in life you need to polish yourself.

The money is there though, I don't know how much and I don't like to care. My father takes care of everything, his family. His lovely wife who happens to be my mother Lilian Msibi, a Xhosa woman who fell for a Zulu man's charms.

He went and gave her two daughters Thobekile and Lindiwe, I'm the third seed, the unplanned one.

They wanted two kids, but my father had been hoping for a son and ten years after Lindiwe the second born was conceived, a bouncing baby boy emerged into their lives. That's me, my father's pride and my mother's well...everything.

"Boo-boo, I can't jump out the window, I'll break a leg." Beastie lurches me back from my thoughts, the old man is knocking on my door. It's good that he's mannered, I would be in a ditch if he walked in to find a half-naked man in my room.

I haven't come out of the closet yet, my parents don't know that I'm gay. They would disown me in a heartbeat and that will be after my father has killed me. He will cry self-defence and go on with life as if

I never existed, that's how powerful his bank account has made him.

“Ngena ngapansi kombede.” I mumble, in my mind he's sliding under the bed as fast as lightning. It looks perfect, it's a great plan, but not according to the disordered expression layered on his face.

“What?” What as in he doesn't understand Zulu, or what as in I must be crazy for telling him to crawl under the bed of a twenty three year old guy who is as straight as an arrow in his father's eyes?

“The bed Beastie, the bed.” Thinking his mind is slow because it happens, beauty and brains do not come together. I have to force him under the bed adding more to the confusion he was birthed with.

He's not the first man to find accommodation under my bed, these one night stands happen quiet often. From a night of partying, drinking myself silly and to bringing home a man.

“Vula isango Ndlondlo, what are you doing in there?” This old man wants to send me to an early

grave, I almost wet my pants as the daunting voice provokes me to open the door. By fire by force...

“I’m coming baba, I’m not dressed.” Lies...lies...lies...they will get you somewhere in life, in my case I will be granted more days on this earth.

“Psssttt! Boo-boo.” What does he want now? I can’t believe I’m bent over, peeking under my bed while my father is banging on the door like a loan shark who came to collect his R300 with interest.

“Pass me my phone, I’m bored.” He mummurs.

Again, looks are not everything, this man is stupid on legs. I grab all of his belongings and toss them to him, everything appears to be in order. I don’t make the bed, my father knows I sleep late much to his irritation.

Opening the door, I fight to control my heavy short breaths, he will think I was servicing myself. He has a wild imagination for someone his age. How do I greet him with that unapproachable look on his face?

“What are you doing?” His voice is so deep that you’d mistaken it for a growl, I believe it’s his way of intimidating people. I’ve heard the softer version when he’s locked in a room with his wife.

His curious eyes scan my capacious room, if Mandla finds out about my shenanigans he will disown me so fast I will look like I’ve been poor my whole life.

A silent prayer jets into my mind, I will never change men like they are on sale. I’ll only have sex with just one, okay maybe two. But three is the perfect number so Lord I’ll stick to three. I’ll even go for seconds just so I don’t have to taste every man in Joburg. Save me from Arnold Schwarzenegger here because he will definitely terminate me.

Mandla shunts me to the side to make way for his gorilla looking body and ambles into my room, his slow steps are intimidating. He is like a detective who is inspecting a crime scene, Ginger better not sneeze and I hope his phone is on silent.

With his nose held up, My father furrows his brows still in search of devil-knows what. I'll be dead if he smells the stench of sex that's comfortably hovering in the air. His fossil nose should come through for me along with his ancestors, I've done my duties as their son. Snuff... uMqombothi..Black label...my uncle was a fan, he died three months ago.

He drank like a pipe and only Black label could make him happy, so he should be in front of the line to deliver me from this mess or else he'll join the Mqombothi drinking oldies.

“Ndlondlo, Mabuya bengabuyi, Ngonyama...” This right here is my mass weapon, recite his clan names and he will marry me off to Beastie right there under the bed.

I see a ghost of a smile as he proudly takes in his clan names, his heart though is as cold as ice...the softness has faded.

“Okay stop.” He growls, I soldier up and wait to hear what brings King Kong to my door step so early in

the morning. It's never good when he clears his throat, this man has never been to the land of nervousness while some of us vacation there.

“Get dressed and come meet your bride,” kill me now and bury me tomorrow, what the hell did he just say to me? I need to call Thandiwe...

To be continued...

BURN

7...

THANDIWE...

My mind has fallen into total disarray, my body is rigid and screams of terror continue to discharge from my mouth. My bed is covered in blood and I have no idea where it's coming from, it can't have been from my finger.

“Thandiwe.” Ntuthuko badges into the room

shouting my name, he's half naked, strapped in a towel. Horrified I try to explain to him the dream I had and piece together the reason my bed is soaked in blood.

“What blood?” His fingers are digging my biceps, confusion playing tricks with him. What does he mean what blood?

“Right there on the bed, I don't know how it got there.” I'm yelping faster than a parrot, “the bed is drenched in blood Ntuthuko.” Through my rushed explanation I fail to grasp why he's looking at me like I have lost one of my screws.

“Thandiwe there is no blood, look,” my eyes follow his as they move to the bed, my mind has made me see things that are not there. The sheet is as white as it was when I spread it on the base last night.

“That's impossible, the...ther...” I'm stammering, unable to get the words out of my mouth.

Dumbstruck and in a desperate need to prove that I am not losing my mind, I put my index finger up to find nothing. It's completely healed. Slap me and

put me on a bus back to the village. Lord what is happening to me?

“Did you get any sleep last night?” I don’t like the way he’s looking at me, I am not crazy, I know I’m not. Breathe Thandiwe, breathe... God, I think I’m losing my mind.

“I know what I saw, I had a deep cut on my finger and woke up to a blood stained sheet.” I’m trying to convince myself mostly, Ntuthuko has decided that he doesn’t believe me, it’s evident in his eyes.

“Is everything okay Thandiwe? You’re probably strained from all the wedding preparations, maybe you should take more days off from work. ” Who died and made him Dr. Phil?

“I am fine Ntuthuko.” I’m absolutely not fine.

“If you say so,” he dismisses with a shrug and heads to the wardrobe to pick out clothes. His statement and gesture mean more than that, he’s calling me crazy. I’m ready to throw my comeback at him when my phone rings, I haven’t heard from this cartoon in a month.

“I’m still angry at you for missing my wedding.” I salute with a complaint, my thoughts are still wrapped around the terrible dreams. My hands tremble in one accord with my hammering heart. I can almost taste this thing we call fear, religion says fear is a lie, psychology calls it a primitive emotion while tradition reckons it a negative emotion. However way it is justified, the damn thing feels so real. As real as that bastard husband over there.

I was upset when my best friend told me that he won’t be at my wedding, they had a family emergency he couldn’t escape from and having a father like his, sparing a day or two for my celebration would have gotten him in big trouble.

I met Bulelwa’s crazy ass less than two years ago at a hotel where I worked, he had checked in for the weekend.

I made a nasty comment about the men that came in and out of his hotel room, my mouth was on

heroine that day. Spewing shit to anyone that dared to talk to me, Bulelwa's rudeness happened to clash with my moods and I gave it to him raw and crude. I was sure ready to grab my bag and leave because the manager was going to fire me.

I felt more like an idiot when he burst into a sea of laughter, like a disrespectful spoiled brat, he pated my head as if congratulating me for a job well done. He went on to tell me a story about how people were afraid to address him anyhow because who wants to correct a snobbish rich friend? I might need his money one day if not the next.

His first encounter with Ntuthuko is not one to be envious of, they hated each other at first glance. Ntuthuko hated that I had a male friend, although Bulelwa's attraction is pointed to his gender. I am far from being his type and hell will freeze over before he is found in the arms of a woman.

“Bitch get over here, I'm about to be slaughtered into pieces.” I meet the panic in his voice first, his

mumbling tells me that he is trapped and can't be as loud as he usually is.

"What happened?" I need to stay calm for this, I'm already losing my mind.

"The gorilla happened." I can't help but laugh, due to his strict nature and large self, Mr. Msibi has earned the gorilla title and not because he looks like one. My father is strict, but Bulelwa's old man wears the crown.

"I thought you were out of town, when did you get back?"

"I'll tell you about it when you get here, I have Romeo under the bed and my father is here with a woman he calls my bride." I'm not shook, Mr. Msibi is a control freak, he might not know about Bulelwa's sexuality, but that doesn't give him the right to choose a partner for him. He's a grown ass man, who's capable to lure any man into his bed.

Bulelwa is a true definition of a man whore, Jezabel if he had a vagina, his life alone speaks of promiscuity. I doubt he changes his underwear the

way he changes men and Bulelwa is a clean freak.

“I’m on my way, do me a favour please while I travel to the other side of the world.” I say.

“What?”

“Don’t die, I wouldn’t want to face your father alone.” His high-pitched laughter fills my ears causing me to drift the phone away, as much as he is a play boy, he is fragile. He’s more of a daddy’s boy, whatever he wants is granted to him. He hasn’t learned any responsibilities yet, how will he take care of a wife?

The thought of it is funny though, the man is more feminine than me. Throws his hands around a lot, shakes his invisible hips and his eyes are always doing that thing, we females are fond of.

His fashion sense is better than mine, I throw anything on. With me it’s all about being comfortable, while Bulelwa takes everything into consideration, including shoe laces, how they should be positioned.

He's different when his father comes around, he has to act like the man he's not...hide his skinny jeans and tights...change his voice...his walk and sitting posture.

He claims this one time he woke up to his father seated on his bed with a frown that could rip your heart out and asked why he was smiling in his dreams, to the point of giggling like a little girl. Mr. Msibi's words not mine, I think he kind of suspects that his son plays for the other team.

“You're still friends naleso sitabane?” (With that gay man.)

Ntuthuko is so homophobic it's sickening. I don't answer him, he is arrogant, even worse now that he has money cheering him on.

“Please drop me at his place,” his curved brow forces regret down my throat, I shouldn't have asked him for a ride.

A taxi can take me there without the driver giving me funny looks. Is this man really going to ignore me? As he ambles out the door he utters, “you can't

leave the house, Vero is on her way.” That sounds more like an order. I have to follow him out. My steps can’t match up with his fast moves so I jog here and there.

“Why is she coming here?” I don’t mind having her around, but she needs guidance like I said before, Vero has a mind of a child and I would have to watch her every move.

“Aunt has to go to the village,” his riposte ends here, he sees no need to ask if I have time on my hands. “You sent your son away, so I don’t see a problem with having Vero over.” Ntuthuko doesn’t speak lately, he vomits shit. Just as I’m about ready to wear my drama queen outfit, a hair-raising sensation nudges at me.

There’s an extra pair of footsteps trolling behind me, a wetness sound of someone trampling on soaked wooden tiles, each footfall is bloodcurdling and drawing closer.

My throat throbs with fear as my heart has come to settle there, afraid of what I might see, I fight the urge to turn around.

The thought that I might be losing my mind visits me while my wide eyes send an SOS to Ntuthuko, he walks on without turning back. Can't he hear that? It's loud enough to alarm the next person.

"Ntuthuko." I mumble his name and pray that he will turn around, if there is something behind me and he sees it, then it will be confirmed that I still got it together. He stops at the top of the stairs and turns to face me, he waits to hear why I have called him. The footfall has halted, however there is a heavy presence.

Why is he not in shock? His eyes should pop out any minute now.

"Is there someone behind me?" That's it, book me a room at a mental institution, I sound crazy. A scowl on his face and irritation in his eyes, Ntuthuko looks over my shoulder. His frown deepens as he brings his eyes back to me.

“What’s wrong with you today?” His hands rush into the pockets of his formal pants, the look in his eyes has me thinking of which rock to crawl under.

“There’s something in this house, a little girl and I think she’s a spirit. She’s haunting my dreams Ntuthuko, the first day I came here I had a dream where I was covered in blood and there was a shadow in the room with me. The next night I dreamt that Zulu was hanging on the ceiling and today she...” A guffaw denies access to the rest of my words, I kick back the tears that are threatening me.

This is when I need him and he won’t grant me a second to voice out my worries. Love listens and understands, right?

“Oh wifey, wifey. Are you losing it Thandiwe?” He mocks me with his tone, laughs and continues with his steps. I refuse to believe that I am losing my mind, I need to call my mother. She will listen to me, she gets me.

I can't believe they let Veronica take an Uber alone, that's like letting Zulu travel on his own. The world is not safe for her.

When she was nineteen she got involved with some dimwit who made her believe that he loved her and promised her every beautiful thing in the world.

Veronica was smitten, she wouldn't hear a bad word about him. He asked her to move in with her and like any woman who is blinded by love she accepted, the three men in her life who would take a bullet for her fought against that terrible relationship that was doomed from the get go and their actions provoked Veronica to elope with the guy.

Her father almost had a heart attack, Nqaba was the one who went after them, he came back home with an unconscious Veronica. He said the boy ran away which I found eccentric, this is the same boy who fought tooth and nail just to have her. There was an impassive look in his eyes, one that made me

believe that we will never see the boy again.

The guilt of not raising their child ate their father up while Barbra was as cool as a cucumber, she gave an impression that she didn't care about what happens to her only daughter. For a reason only known by Barbra, she handed Veronica over to her aunt to raise when she was about ten years old.

She wasn't a problem child, but fear had made a home in her heart. Her eyes were forever drenched in tears, her voice involved in a series of screams and her body compressed in shudders. I would like to believe that something triggered her behaviour, Barbra knows what happened to that child.

My curious eyes have noticed how Veronica draws back when Barbra walks into the room, her eyes swell up and she immediately isolates herself from everyone.

She is trapped in the mind of an eight year old, a past that refuses to leave her. I once brought up the

idea of taking her to therapy and Ntuthuko gave it to me good, talking about how she is not my responsibility and his parents will handle it.

NQABA...

“I’m taking the kids out for breakfast.” Reboana is banging anything and everything she could get her hands on, the two acquitted cartoon eyes glaring at her in wonder mean nothing to her.

“Careful? You will hurt the child with that spoon.” The leer she gives me is meant to pin me back to inaudibility, she continues to shove heaps of porridge down Ofentse’s throat. Wide-eyed, a little frown on the baby’s guileless face, she swallows in a fast pace.

“You’re going to teach me how to feed my child, now? I am not a delinquent Mzi, I am very much aware of what I’m doing thank you.” The coldness of her voice swooshes out of her mouth like a cold winter storm, I’m getting tired of her evil eye.

Dammit Reboana!!! Out of frustration I groan internally...

Ofentse's innocent looking face prevents me from deserting her mother, they have no one. Reboana is a casual worker at a retail store, works 80 hours a week, so that gives her approximately three days off in a week.

Her lifestyle contradicts with her job. All her salary is spent on hair she can't afford, clothes she doesn't need and lately she spends a lot on data bundles.

Her phone is forever glued to her face, I would find her stupidly smiling to herself. Her mind seems to convince her that she owes me an explanation because her mouth would start interpreting a bunch of jokes I do not understand. A friend sent them, she would say.

"You love putting words in my mouth, don't you?" I try to stay calm, Ofentse understands when two people are quarrelling.

Reboana jangles the spoon against the plastic plate,

gathering the last scoops of the soft porridge in one corner before roughly plunging the measure in Ofentse's mouth. She winces in pain as the spoon clashes with her minuscule teeth, used to her mother's anger falling upon her, she lets her tears fall without making a sound.

"I'm sorry that I'm blunt and don't take bulls hit from anyone," Reboana rejoinders, gets up to throw the plate in the sink. I have Ofentse in my arms, hushing away her pain. I seem composed and unaffected, but in my mind I have her pinned against the wall, forcing her to take back her words. Violence does not solve anything Nqaba...Strangely I'm chastising myself a lot lately.

"I'm ready uncle." Zulu voices out, walking in the kitchen. He woke up on the right side of the bed, it's normal for kids to have nightmares and the new environment must have contributed to the bad dream.

"Drop my baby off at school, she can't miss a day."

Bitter and petty highness says, her back pressed against the sink, an unfriendly mien swaying on her face.

“I’m sure she won’t miss a thing if she skips a day.” Standing with this final answer, I grab Ofents’e’s backpack and amble out the door with Zulu leading the way. Arguments in the morning give me a headache, it’s best I ignore her.

Zulu takes the front seat while I strap missy here on a baby car seat, her soft hands find my cheeks, she puckers up with a salivating mouth. Kids though, she wants a kiss with all this drool on her mouth.

And because I can’t resist her cuteness, like an obedient ugly frog to a princess, I accept the sloppy peck. Sweet giggles sashay from her bow-shaped lips as I swipe my mouth across my shoulder to wipe off her drool.

“Ewww uncle, that’s disgusting.” Zulu vents, a displeased look taking over his face. Kids...

He needs some clothes, I don't know how I forgot to ask his mother last night. Apparently I should call before visiting, something that slips my mind a lot.

I'm not a planner, I'm a spur of the moment type of guy. I go where the wind blows and at this time it's blowing towards Thandiwe. Maybe this is an excuse to see her, Zulu will be with me for two days and I can get him anything at a clothing store.

“Tshabalala.” I hold my breath, waiting to hear her voice over the phone. My heart engages in a summersault as her voice resounds and glides into my ear with the name...

“Nqabayomzi.” This because she detests the name Tshabalala, I find a chuckle at the back of my throat and let it out.

“Uyaphila kodwa?” My eyes are scanning the neighbourhood as I lean against the car, it's quiet. A few cars passing by and no people in sight.

“Yes.” The yes is weak and disbelieving, makes me think that all is not well. A woman of pride she is.

“Are you home?” I ask.

“No, do you need anything?” Her question is pure and untainted, but it reaches my mind with a different meaning. ‘Yes, I need you Tan-tan, I need you like I need air.’ I conceal the secrets of my heart from her and my throat clears as it prepares to give the real reason I called.

“Peanut has nothing to wear.”

“I packed his backpack, I was going to drop it off later today.” She says.

“Don’t worry about it, I can come to the house later.” I don’t want this phone call to end, I could listen to her voice forever and a day. It has a soothing sound that calms my throbbing heart and in this instant the world is bright once more.

I find a reason to live through the sound of her breathing over the phone, I’m making things awkward for her with my silence. I promise to drop by later and bid farewell.

Wonderful...Here comes UmaDlomo with two police officers accompanying her, it’s too late to escape

her. She approaches people with either a complaint or gossip and in this case I see an objection. Why bring police men with her?

“Mzi, I didn’t want it to come to this, but.” The woman doesn’t greet, I have a good mind to get in the car and drive off. And I don’t know when we got to first name basis, I hardly say a word or two to her. She is that neighbour you would jump into a Piki-Tup waste truck just to avoid her.

“Your wife left me no choice.” I’m not comfortable with people referring to Reboana as my wife, the thought of it is unsettling. True, I had taken her as my woman, but not a potential wife. This word ceased to exist with my relationship with Thandiwe.

“My wife?” My mouth finds a way to steal the question from my unrestrained thoughts.

“Yes,” her eyes judge me which is so typical of MaDlomo. “That rude Tswana girl, strange noise has been coming from your house. Unpleasant sounds that children should not hear. I have teenage daughters Mzi and I had to take action or

this wouldn't have stopped. Your wife insulted me when I told her to keep the noise down. Every Tuesdays and Thursdays around 3 to 4pm, it's a bad repetition that puts my thoughts in nasty places. Look, you're a fine man to look at and probably to touch as well..." A tint of seduction and amusement settles at the top of her voice, her eyes sharply uncovering me. I don't care.

What pisses me off is the revelation, I am mortified, mostly irate. What does Reboana get up to while I'm not home?

"But your private life should not be exposed to the world, it doesn't help that our houses are close to each other that I can hear you sneezing in the morning. You should do something about those sinuses, my late husband had a nasal spray. Come over to my house tonight so I can give it you." She steps closer that I'm awkwardly pinned against the car.

The officers are as perplexed as I am, I know she is

a flirt, but it's not something you would warm up to. Madlomo is not really an appealing woman to look at, I'm not saying she's ugly. She's way older than my mother, this wig on her head that looks like a dead squirrel is the first thing that catches your eye when you see her approaching.

The seductive smile that she tries so hard to pull and fails bleakly making her appear as if she's about to burst into an ugly cry.

The officers cannot find humour in the woman's weirdness, they decide to leave and that's before they whinge about her wasting their time.

I escape her claws by luck, leaving her calling out to me amusedly and that quickly turns into complaining about the wife she claims I have.

MaDlomo could be lying, she is after all the biggest gossip in Xavier Reef. The noise could come from TV, Reboana is not shy to sit back and watch

adulterated movies.

However, if it's true and she wants out, then I will grant her full access in fact, I will even open the windows for her. What I will not tolerate is disrespect towards me and my house. I am sure to catch her red handed one of these days.

THANDIWE...

Ntuthuko agreed to drop us off in Waterfall estates, his sister is good at this pleading thing, moreover she is his weakness, he drives off in full speed after giving me a lecture about my friendship with Bulelwa. I have to accept that he will ever accept it.

Loud voices coming from the living room pull us there, I would know that growl from a mile away. Mr. Msibi doesn't speak when he's angry, he growls as if ready to murder someone. I can only pray that he didn't find Romeo.

My poor friend, he's settled on the couch, legs spread out, elbows resting on his thighs and a ruffled brow. I can't distinguish the masculinity he has taken, Bulelwa sits with legs crossed, back against the seat and a vivacious look on his face. Msibi would even make the devil admit that he made a mistake by giving Eve the forbidden fruit.

It's hard to miss the woman shyly sitting next to Bulelwa, her head bowed and fingers wrestling against each other. I'm familiar with the frumpish look on her, a head wrap, knee length dress because we village women cannot expose our thighs in public. Trust the gorilla to find a village woman for his son, I still say part of me thinks he knows about his son's sexuality.

Bulelwa almost jumps with joy as we walk into the lounge, he composes himself, clears his throat and pulls his body up. He suffocates me with a hug, I think he will let go because Miss potential is here and probably feeling uncomfortable but he's holding on.

“I was ready to give the devil a list of the booze I want when I get to hell,” he whispers his dramatics in my ear, I want to laugh, but Mr. Msibi is already looking at me like I want to steal his son’s virginity.

“I think we should let go now, your father has killed me a million times with the look in his eyes.” While the lady on the couch has sliced me into pieces.

“Nonsense, he loves you.” He’s right, I was lucky to fall on his father’s good books. He calls me makoti, thought Bulelwa and I were an item. I remember sadness swamping him when he found out that I was getting married.

My greeting is welcomed by an extensive beam, white teeth, sparkling eyes and open arms.

Awkwardly, I plod to accept the hug Mr. Msibi is offering. His hugs feel like that of my father’s, he’s huge so his arms swallow me.

“Makoti,” there is still pride in his voice.

“Yebo baba.” Pulling away from the encirclement, he looks at me like I am his most-priciest possession.

I don't bother with the lady after she shrugs off my friendly smile, Bulelwa forces me in the middle of him and her. Seconds later she is introduced as Xolile, rudeness knows her.

Veronica has occupied herself with cartoons.

This is rather awkward, a light conversation emerges between Mr. Msibi and I. He's doing most of the talking. Bulelwa is uncomfortably shuffling on his seat, it must have something to do with the man in this room.

He keeps gabbling that I make his father disappear. Friends should start getting paid. My magic probably wore off the day I said I do, getting rid of his father will be difficult especially since he brought home a potential bride for his only beloved son. The apple of his eye, Bulelwa would rather die than disappoint him.

Also he doesn't want to lose the luxurious lifestyle, his life basically is crafted by his father. Coming to his saving grace, we escape the intense situation by

supposedly going to play housewife in the kitchen. Vero is lost in the world of Timon and Pumba, supposed future Mrs. Msibi stays behind with her supposed father-in-law.

BULELWA...

“Why did you offer him tea? I could have done that while waiting for you to get here. I need that man out of my house.” I’m not okay, this is the longest day I’ve ever had and it’s far from being over. Mondays do not come close to this.

Xolile is Mr. Mchunu’s daughter, my father’s business associate and long-time friend. I don’t know much about her. I don’t care about her and I want her to disappear. My father thinks this is 19-vantoeka where marriages are arranged, I am capable of finding myself a partner. I’m not a child that needs to be spoon fed.

“Relax.” Relax? Since when does Thandiwe speak foreign?

“Don’t tell me to relax, did you see that woman?” I snap, not because I’m angry with her, but I am suffocating. It’s hard to breathe with that gorilla in the room with me, pretending to be straight is not fun.

“How are you bustling in the kitchen level headed? I am about to be beheaded. Put that cattle down and get that man out of my house.” I’m snapping, wheezing and panicking all in one. Thandiwe turns the kettle on after I get chided by a stern look. Her calmness nettles me, no sane person can be calm with Mandla around.

“I think you should tell him the truth, it’s the only way you’ll be able to freely whore around.” She suggests, amusement laced in her contemptuous tone.

“I earned that title, thank you very much. Anyway, Mandla is not a man he’s an ancestor and you know how they want things done their way.” I need a drink, my dry throat dances at the intoxicating aroma of

the fine wine in my hand, if anything then this drink will bring my nerves to tranquillity.

“Ndlondlo.” I shriek at the sound of my father’s voice, fallaciously dropping the glass of delicious liquor. My spirit crashes along with it, Thandiwe falls into sneering titters.

“Did you have to scream like a little girl?” She questions through a scornful mirth.

“You don’t know how nervous he makes me.” I return, trying to clean up the mess I made.

“Bulelwa.” Oh, he’s not in a bad mood anymore. He hardly calls me Bulelwa, it’s either this Gcinumzi shit or Ndlondlo.

“Baba.” I make use of the fact that he can’t see me and dramatically roll my eyes.

“Hurry up, your bride is waiting. She is here for you not me, remember that.” It’s good that he’s still seated, I’m at a point where I’ll use anything to pour my frustrations on. Thandiwe is having a good time at my expense.

“That’s it.” I grab a packet of Bicarbonate of soda from one of the cabinets. “Which one is his cup?” Dazed, she points at a large white mug with thick milk, and probably half a teaspoon of coffee. Her idea of coffee is dreadful, Mandla says she makes the best. I think he has a little crush on her.

I drop three tea spoons in there and an extra one for coming to my house bearing nonsense.

“You know I’m going to spill that right?” No she wouldn’t. “Why would you do that?” Whose side is she on?

“Survival of the fittest darling, this little baby right here will give him a few good runs to the toilet and by the time he decides that he’s had enough he will be driving home to his wife so she takes care of his upset stomach.” This is the most ingenious thing I have ever thought of and after giving my reason, Thandiwe loves it as much, the mischievous smile on her face is plastered so beautifully.

“What about Cinderella?” My partner in crime. Our eyes meet, there’s a communication and...

“Sleeping pills/ Vodka.” We chorus in unison, I think my idea is great.

“She won’t accept alcohol while J an Van Riebeeck is seated across her, think Tee, think.”

“I don’t think sleeping pills will work either.” She disputes my perfect plan.

“We won’t know until we test it, I have a whole bottle in my room.” Scuttling to my room, I walk past my father and Xolile like they are not there.

I don’t know if my plan will succeed, desperate times call for desperate measures, right? I’m desperate, sure guilt is eating me up, but the universe has made a way and boy I shall tread on it.

Beastie is lying on his stomach, fast asleep. Who told him to come out from under the bed? He better not be catching feelings, I don’t have space to accommodate those. Life is good without any

attachments, Love is overrated...Clingy...Boring...I'll pass.

I want to wake him up, but sleeping beauty looks so peaceful.

With the bottle of sleeping pills in my hand, I make it back to the kitchen to find my father loudly sipping on hot piping tea. He likes it hot, summer...winter...tea is not tea unless it's hot. Girl cracks a smile when our eyes meet, I have no zeal to return it so I move on to join Thandiwe in the kitchen.

She refuses to give Xolile her special tea, so I take matters into my own hands. It's not long till she starts yawning, my father has been to the toilet twice, suspects nothing and I scream victory when he drives out the driveway with his bushed Xolile after promising to call and set another meeting.

This ought to teach him a lesson or two. I find Thandiwe standing behind me the moment I turn my head, a cranky sneer claiming her.

“You’re an asshole.” I take it as a compliment, a smile of victory sidles on my mouth as I wink at my best friend.

“A beautiful asshole.” I sputter, and mentally release a sigh. My father will not give up until he sees me with a woman in my arms.

To be continued...

BURN...

8...

THANDIWE...

Bulelwa is toxic, he woke that man up and ousted him out of the house as if he did not have a taste of his soul last night. The man was not given a measly glass of water.

The door opens and he walks in shaking his

obscure hips, this is the real Bulelwa, sassy and dramatic.

“Vero, baby, how are you?” There is no reason to be so loud, he throws his flat ass on the couch beside Veronica who shies away from his inquisitive stare.

“Okay Bubu,” she returns bashfully. A naughty smirk on his face, Bulelwa glances at me, suggestively. My poor above suspicion brain can’t even fathom what’s going on in that crazy mind of his.

“I know this guy, he’s just as innocent as you sweetie.” I nudge his scrawny elbow, he returns a frown. “I’m serious friend, they would make a great couple.” He finishes as if it makes sense.

“Vero doesn’t need a man, she’s a child.” I forget that he is not normal at times.

“She is no child, are you a child sis Vero?” His lanky hand slides over her shoulders, he sits closer to the already intimidated girl.

“Nooo, I’m 25. What about you Bubu? Are you a child?” Vero answers and questions, Bulelwa turns

his naughty eyes back to me, his skanky smirk draws a seed of uneasiness from deep within my stomach.

“No Vero-listo, I am not a child that’s why I have men fighting to get my attention.” Liar.

“You should fight back Bubu, don't let them take your attention.” Vero says, she appears to have gained confidence with Bulelwa’s hand over her shoulder. He still can’t comprehend how she’s like a child at twenty five, hence the frown he gives me.

“Do you know what attention is Vero?” Why is he asking this?

“Yes, your friend and you have to protect them from men.”

“Do you know what a man is?” He questions, stupidly. Where is Gabriel the angel when you need him? We need devine intervention here.

“Yes, daddy is a man. Mzi is a man and Ntuthuko is a man.” He sneers at her answer. “I had a man once,

buuut...Mzi said he's not good for me. He said all men are not good for me," she reveals, her voice slowly drawing out of her bust.

"Asazi." He breathes out, raising his hands in surrender.

"What are you doing? You know she doesn't understand anything." I cannot stress how insane Bulelwa tends to be, he moves away from Vero.

Like a hurricane, his focus falls on me. The stupid grin displayed on the corner of his mouth recites his senselessness.

"You need to get this girl laid." A whisper runs out of his mouth, I would run too, it's foul and naughty and unfiltered.

"No she doesn't, she doesn't need any of that."

"Trust me Tee, she'll wake up normal in the morning." He tells, a death wish is what he has because those Biyase brothers will not let that happen.

“Not everything is about sex, what the fuck is wrong with you?”

“If it’s not about sex then what is it about? You people cannot hide this girl from the world forever.” He’s making sense, nonetheless it’s not for us to decide, like Ntuthuko said, they will handle Vero the way they see fit.

“But Tee, she’s watching Barney at her age, even Barney is getting some. Look at that belly, relationship weight I’m telling you.” Instead of laughing I snort and choke on my saliva, Bulelwa is an idiot. How am I sitting in this house with him?

“Stop it.” I rebuke him, he waves me off with an attitude.

“So you’re a wife hey?” His curious self is asking, he can’t help, but do that. Then again it’s a scornful query. “Ukuphi uNtuks ngekhandanda lobhatata?” (Where is Ntuthuko with his sweet potato head?)

His question pulls a smile to my lips which in a millisecond transitions to a laugh.

“Don’t let him hear you say that,” even if he did, Bulelwa wouldn’t care.

“That man thinks he’s the one who walked on water and not Jesus. How are you married to such an asshole?” He asks, venom covering his voice. I have no answer for him.

“That brother in-law of yours, Dracula. I thought you said he works at a petrol garage?” It’s good he’s moved away from the topic of getting Veronica a man, I thought he would never stop because he never stops, however he jumped into the wrong boat.

I don’t want to talk about Nqaba, I never gathered the guts to tell Bulelwa that I once dated my husband brother.

“Nqaba?” Goose bumps swim all through my body as my mouth smoothly breathes his name, the beating of my heart spirals and my mind is instantly

filled with scrumptious thoughts of him.

“Yeah I saw him in Eshowe like three weeks ago driving an expensive car and looking all yummy in a three piece suit. The man can clean up well, no offense because he’s already doing justice to that hideous petrol station uniform. But damn, the suit was screaming his name like a bitch having an orgasm” I don’t understand how he can spew words out, one after the other, his contaminated mouth has no timing. Veronica is too innocent to hear such things.

“Stop being extra Squid-ward.” I spit.

“U Squid-ward ngunyoko,” he throws back and adds a tongue click, his rejoinder has me laughing out.

“It couldn’t have been Nqaba babe, maybe he has a look-alike.” I say.

“No one can miss that flat nose and potato head.” He rolls his eyes, finishing it off with a head shake.

“If it weren’t for the dark, powerful aura, I’d pass him without a blink. Do you think he’s taken? Pretty boys

usually play for both teams, you know? How does he deal with one night stands? My bed calls his name nana,” mind that devilish smirk on the corner of his mouth. He's probably watching an erotic movie of him and Nqaba in his dirty mind, I cringe at the thought.

“He’s not for you Bulelwa.” A pang of jealousy knocks me out, my stomach turns at the thought of Nqaba pleasuring my best friend. I shouldn’t be feeling this way, I’m a married woman for Pete’s sake.

However, Nqaba is not into men. I would know if he were, you can take me to court and I will be acquitted due to my evidence. The way he was with me each time we made love, the roughness of his large hands mapping my body with placidity and adoration, making me feel like I was wrapped up in velvet.

The way my breasts fitted in his palms, how he’d bury his face on my cleavage and breathe in like my

bust provided all the air he needed to breathe.

His moans and groans that spoke on behalf of his vocals, letting me know he was enjoying me.

How he gently submerged himself inside me and whether smooth soft love making or pure fucking, his gentleness never isolated from him.

“Earth to Tee, where did you go?” I’m brought back by Bulelwa’s fingers annoyingly snapping inches away from my face.

“Do you need water for that dry throat?” With a sly grin, a befuddling question jumps out of his mouth.

“Huh!” In shame, I clear my dry throat as Bulelwa predicted. My voice husky and unrecognizable.

“Are you having sex in your mind?” His eyes are taunting, his voice derisive and his lip curling into a simper.

“Don’t be ridiculous slima,” I am not revealing my dirty thoughts.

“Is there something I should know? Are you lusting

over brother man?” Bulelwa will dig the truth out of me if I am not careful.

Tongue tied and my lust-filled eyes trying conceal my past, I dig into my hand bag for my ringing phone. It’s a call from Nqaba, he makes me nervous and this prying fool seated next to me will put the puzzle together.

“H...hi.” I’m faltering, it wasn’t this bad before. Thank the heavens Mr. Casanova here has diverted his attention to innocent Vero, I can only imagine the nonsense he’s whispering into her ear.

“What shoe size does Peanut wear?” Strange greeting this is, he is Nqabayomzi anyway and I doubt he knows that he should greet.

“Did he lose his shoes again?” Okay. Again? The boy never loses his shoes.

“No, he saw something he likes.”

“Is he not with you?” Unless rules have changed, the last time I checked customers were allowed to fit clothes.

“Simple right? But I don’t have kids of my own, so this is new to me. I don’t want to get the child something his mother will detest. I’m at East Gate mall, you’ll find me waiting outside J et.” The call is disconnected, I’m not given a chance to repudiate his demand.

Did he just ask me to meet up with him, without asking me to meet up with him? Strange! I make it known to Bulelwa who is excited about the idea.

NTUTHUKO...

“Give me more of you baby.” She whimpers in my ear, her sweet moans fuelling me on. My hands exploit her back as she digs her long nails on my shoulders, it’s painful but a pleasurable pain. She knows better than to leave any scratches on me.

To clog a scream, her teeth dig deep on my right shoulder as I intensely drive into her. We’re racing against time, racing to the end, the happy place that’s calling out to us.

She semicircles her back, her hips going round and round. Up...Down...In...Out...Pleasure...Enjoyable pain...heart rate increasing...Orgasm...heart skips a beat...stops and races violently.

Her hips have a life of their own, as if writing a word I cannot make out. Whatever she's doing, she's doing it so lusciously, I want to eat her up, all of her. I want to scream her name, thank my ancestors... God...daddy...

A thick like warm sensation washes down my spine. I think I'm about to die, breathing has become difficult, I want to take a break, but I don't want to stop.

I grab her hair, pulling her head back and my face finds a way into the curve of her neck. I like how she moans for me, verifies that I'm doing it right. Her body presses against mine, she's the first to cross the line and I gladly follow in hot messy pursuit.

My breathing virtually matching hers, my face dormant on her sweaty neck. I feel her heart against

my chest, slowly going back to its normal rate, sweet giggles of pleasure escaping her mouth.

Straddled by this sexy woman, is part of my everyday treat. One of the reasons I look forward to coming to the office.

“Mr. Biyase you were on fire today,” she compliments me like she usually does.

“It’s all you baby, you made me see stars.” Pressing my lips on hers I deepen the kiss, like I haven’t had her yet, my d*** gets too excited. A burning sensation down my spine, veins pulsating with rage.

“Why don’t we do this again tonight? Come to my house, I’ll cook you a great meal and I’ll let you guess what desert will be.” Alluringly, she proposes, her soft lips drawing to mine and fall into pecks and kisses. I love the thought.

“I can’t, my wife...” with a wolfish kiss she clogs what my brain has relayed to my mouth.

“Your fat wife will be fine by herself, she always is.” She says, I hate it when she talks like this.

“You know my wife is off topic Lumka.” I say firmly.

“But you don’t love her Ntuthu.” Side cheeks always think they can replace main cheeks, I don’t like nonsense.

Out of frustration, I grip her waist tightly to get her off me.

She presses herself down on my length driving me insane, this woman knows how to get me excited.

“Who says I don’t love my wife huh?” I continue with the topic, ignoring the twitch on my groin.

“You were with me on your wedding night, clearly that says something.” And I regret that, I should have been home with my wife.

“It so happened that you were there when we sealed the deal, I got drunk, one thing led to another and I ended up in your bed.”

“Like you always do every night before going home to your fat boring wife. Why did you marry her Ntuthu? I’m supposed to be your wife.”

Lumka was not meant to catch feelings, I should have dropped her the first time I realised that she had crossed the line. Now I'm neck deep and no woman has satisfied me the way she does.

Thandiwe doesn't come close to her. I was tired of the boring sex, lights out...clothes off...kissing... and only then we get down to business. That's what I had been subjected to for years, her mind would take her places I know nothing about.

Places where my pleasuring her meant nothing, there came a point in time where I suspected that she was having an affair and had her followed.

She came out clean, I had no choice, but to accept that she didn't enjoy me like I wanted her to. Her body might be mine, her heart though is forever lost somewhere. I had to take what was mine, whether she was in the mood or not.

Sex had a whole different meaning when I met Lumka, we were stuck in an elevator together. Surprisingly we had a lot in common, our first time

together and I knew there was no turning back. I love my wife, but not enough to wait for her to love me fully and pleasure me as her man.

“Do not talk about my wife, you know how much I despise that.” My disapproval forces a scowl on her face, she wants a ring on her finger. It’s absurd, I had made it clear to her from the start that I had a woman. We agreed on no strings attached.

“But Ntu...” A familiar voice speaks, halting Lumka’s grumble.

“Get off my son you harlot.”

Mother! Lord, why did I have to get this one? Her anger crusted voice forces a starkers Lumka off my lap with a shriek, she works to pick up her clothes that are scattered on the floor.

Mom guards the door like a soldier at war, her piercing gaze shooting at Lumka. She can feel it, hence her visibly trembling body. Her eyes agape, luscious lips slightly open in shock, she fights to throw her garments back on.

Mom seizes her hand just as she bends to wear her undergarments, Lumka winces in pain as if the grip is too tight.

“I’m sure you can wear that outside, you’re a prostitute after all, so you’ll be okay walking around without underwear.” Barbra is the rudest person I know, she has no backbone.

“Listen to me young lady, my son is married. If you’re used to riding donkeys, Ematatiyela, don’t think you can come here and ride my son like an underpaid porn star.” She retches and I am embarrassed on behalf of Lumka.

“I’m sorry.” Lumka finally gains the courage to speak, she’s a brave one.

My mother would make one jump out of the window just to escape her dragon-lady moments.

“Sorry is what your father should be telling you for bringing such an unruly child into the world. Get out of here and crawl back to the brothel you came from.” I want to protest, but you never know with this woman. She can be heartless when she

chooses.

Lumka hardly gives me a second look, tears streaking face, she grabs her handbag and runs for her life.

“This place reeks of sex.” Disgustingly she hisses, throwing the windows open.

“Sex is a nature of man mom, at least I’m getting some. Duma has become useless, a man who fails to pleasure his wife cannot be counted amongst men. Uhlazo lolu nje. Seriously mom, you can do better than him.” Shit, sometimes I forget that respect means everything to her.

Her cold stare makes me feel like a disobedient little boy, it’s too late to dodge her palm that collides against my cheek, leaving behind a throbbing hot sensation.

The impassive look in her eyes is more painful than this slap.

“Don’t ever, ever talk to me like that again. I am not one of your floozies, I will kill you with my bare hands Ntuthuko and bury you in a shallow grave wrapped up in a blanket.” She churns through her teeth, voice as conniving as a snake.

Her eyes burn with rage and disgust, I made a mistake, I’m only human. There is no reason to be hostile, yet voicing out my opinion will earn me another slap. I’m too old for this shit.

“Sorry,” unenthusiastically, I mumble, my hand rubbing away the pain. You’d swear she was a prison guard once upon a time with her hard hand.

“Shove that damn apology up your ass, I don’t need it you stupid boy. My mistake was loving you above your brother, that’s why you think you can disrespect me.”

“Geez mother, that’s enough. I said sorry, come on.”
Women never shut up.

“And I said shove it up your ass, I will not tolerate shit from you. I don’t care how much you think you have in your account or is it that little d*** of yours

that's driving you insane? I am your mother you piece of shit, you treat me like one or all of this." Her hand flounders around, gesturing my spacious office. "Will feel like it was a dream by the time I'm done with you." Fuck this woman.

"Okay there's no need to overreact mom, let's calm down." I take her hand into mine, place a kiss. Softening her up is a mission, it needs soldiers from Iraq. "Ngiyaxolis a ndlovukazi, ngilos i yami. Duma Biyase's beautiful bride, the rain queen. You who sits on the throne of the Biyase dynasty." A smile prowls on her once pouted lips, thankfully.

Bloody nonsense, I'm a man and still treated like I wear a size five shoe. With a sanitizer she just dug out of her bag, she wipes the chair before settling down.

She probably thinks Lumka and I had sex everywhere in this office.

"Sit and tell me how everything is going with that wife of yours." Barbra irks me with her demands

sometimes.

“She’s settling in, I guess.”

“She better be, we don’t want any mistakes. This is your future we’re talking about here.” Must she remind me though?

“I know mom, I’ve got it under control.” The assurance I give her brings about a smile on her face.

“Good, I’m proud of you son.” I know she is and it’s refreshing to know.

THANDIWE...

My heart stops for a second as I spot Nqaba outside Jet like he said, my stride changes. A desperation to have him closer grows, the walk appears to be longer than I thought meanwhile Veronica is in his arms and he’s spinning her around.

My eyes were too occupied on him that I missed the part where she ran, glancing at them I see myself being twirled like that. He would spin me like I weighed nothing, it was the most peaceful experience I had ever felt. His large arms would enwrap around me after and he would kiss me like he hasn't seen me in years.

“Gosh, Tee. Look at that beautiful chocolate man, I think you went for the wrong brother.” Bulelwa had ceased to exist for a while as I was lost in the past, he makes me feel like a guy walking next to me.

He's flamboyant, dresses like he's about to walk down the run way while I look like I'm about to clean my grandmother's kitchen.

“I suddenly have a craving for older men.” His brain needs holy water, hours of Teletubbies and maybe Purity.

“You will burn Bubu.” I riposte.

“I'll burn a happy man,” he tales, in all probability he's scrutinizing the man under his gaze. I am not

okay with him lusting over my Nqaba...dammit!!!
Did I say 'my Nqaba? I meant Nqaba, just Nqaba.

“This can't be a coincidence Tee, he is the same man I saw driving that beast of a car weeks ago.”
He takes me back to the conversation we had at the house, funny how Nqaba's current attire gainsays with Bulelwa's truth.

A plain white t-shirt, washed-out bootleg denim jeans and black safety shoes. It's the ones he wears to work, this man who's aging like fine wine has drastically changed his apparel.

He looked better back at the village, either he's trying hard to look poor or he really doesn't have much and this makes me feel bad because he wants to buy Zulu shoes. I'll have to pay when we get to the till.

Our eyes interlock as we approach, either a figment of my imagination or my eyes are reciting a tale of lies, but his lips are fighting a smile.

Zulu jumps on me before I could grasp his presence,

he's attacking Bulelwa with punches and dramatic Bulelwa screams in return dodging his little thumps.

"Take it easy Bafoza, I bruise easily." He calls my son bafoza.

How did I not see the baby in Nqaba's arms, she must be Ofentse.

"Tan- tan," his eyes seem like they can't see anything else but me. He's taking camouflaged steps towards me, his masculine scent greets me first, forcing the hairs on my skin to stand at attention.

My heart dances to it compelling me to hold my breath. A ghost of a smile gains ownership over his lips, his furrowed brow pulls a question. 'You came?' I can mentally hear it, as he looks at me like I'm a hologram and would disappear at the blink of an eye.

An electric current surges on my fingers, dropping my gaze, I realize his fingers are brushing against mine. How does he expect me to breathe when he's standing so close?

Everything about him is enthralling, his gaze, his aura, his fragrance and this unexpected touch. His big build towers over me, his lips part equipping his voice on its marks.

“Unjani Tshabalala.” His voice sings to me although I still cringe at this name, my mouth betrays me and gives him a smile.

“Good, you?”

“Ngoba seng’bona wena, sekuyakhanya manje.” He says, leaving me dumbstruck. Our whispers are interrupted by a throat clearance, Bulelwa has met Nqaba before.

I don’t think he needs an introduction, but knowing him, he wants one and he does the honours. His hand lingers on Nqaba’s as he forces a hand shake, unbothered, Nqaba does not read too much into it.

“Chemistry huh?” Bulelwa intones beside me as we follow Nqaba into the clothing store, I’m good at

pretending so I keep my eyes where my feet are leading me.

Nqaba keeps stealing purposeful glances at me, nervously his hand flies to rub the back of his neck each time our eyes meet. He's already picked out shoes for Zulu, sneaky man isn't he? There is absolutely no need for me to be here.

I decide to grab some clothes for Zulu and a couple of items for myself. Halfway through the shopping, Bulelwa looks bored to sin. He has retired on a bench and counting sheep, the excitement he had when we came here has gone with the wind.

Zulu, Veronica and Ofents e have teamed up and are keeping a visibly aggravated Bulelwa on his toes.

Like magnet, Nqaba is quietly tracing beside me, he hasn't left my side. I feel his heavy presence like an electric flow that draws me closer to him, his deliberate footfall and his self-effacing breathing. All of these make me feel safe, he makes me feel safe.

I stop at an aisle of denim jeans, a certain pair catches my attention. He would look good in these, he's next to me looking at the same. Is he thinking what I'm thinking?

"You won't fit in those," he says, so I guess we're thinking about two different things.

"They are not for me, but for you." I tell him, grabbing the pair. "I won't know what you think if you don't tell me," he's frowning at them like they were exported from Mars.

"Not my style." What style? He doesn't have style.

"You won't know until you try them on." I'm good at convincing people, I do it for a living and get paid for it. Waiting to hear what his mind is secreting, I get a sigh instead.

"Come on Nqaba, try them please." He shunts a nod in the midst of a displeased expression. "Great, go fit them." he hates me right now, it's all good because he's obliging. I make use of the spare time to find him a pair of sneakers, he's not happy about

it when he gets back. I think he still can't say no to me, the sneakers are coming home with us.

Being the 15th of the month, the mall is packed. Queues longer than one would like and people bumping into each other with overloaded trollies and grocery bags. Kids, scratch that. Bratty kids screaming for one thing after the other, tantrums and cries that give you an unwanted headache.

I'm jolted by a familiar dynamic grab on my waist inside a pile of drooped jackets. He's pressing against me, his arms claiming me to be his as they firmly rest around my love handles.

His face so close I can smell the fruity wine gums he was nibbling on earlier. My body shudders, my breathing reacts to his closeness.

He's too close, close enough to taste, there's a deep urge to enfold my arms around him. A need so great, desire, a past love that is awakening due to these senses.

He leans over and my body quivers at the feel of his

lips brushing on mine, they linger as if waiting for consent only I can give. His hand covers my lower back, pulling me into him so our bodies are touching.

It's slow, it's rough, it's gentle, it says I am needed. My hands have no home to rest, they settle for his broad chest, his heart beats vigorously under my touch.

I'm trembling like a satin cloth kissed by the wind, my heart sees, recognizes and calls out to him.

“Nqaba,” his name is a quavering whisper.

“Tshabalala,” he returns. Is it too late to pull away? I don't want to pull away, I want him close to me, forever if possible.

I want his lips swaying with mine, I want to be loved again. ‘Please say something, anything.’ My plea is inaudible, there's a deep longing in me as I stand waiting for syllables to fly beautifully out of his mouth.

There was a moment in time when his plum lips would utter the three simple, but most powerful words ever formed. 'I love you.' They were the very air in my lungs, the strength in my bones, the veins in my heart and my a.m wake up call.

His eyes burn with desire and take me captive, I miss the way he tastes, but it will be wrong if he kisses me and I'll die if he doesn't.

I want him to punish me for leaving him years ago, I want him to take out his frustrations on the kiss.

A love hate kiss, lips flatten, teeth crashing and tongues at war. Hands searching, mapping, worshipping, practically destroying my soul.

"Give me my breath back Thandiwe, I want to live again. Kiss me or I'll die." A whisper rough with emotions, my dramatic body vibrates. His hand firmly standing on my lower back, he sends the other to my cheek.

His touch is electrifying, it takes my breath away, making me feel like I am trapped in a pool of ice

cold water.

“Let me taste you once more, maybe, then maybe I’ll learn to breathe again.” The intimacy feels better than sex, crazy butterflies in my stomach, his warm breath whiffing my skin.

It’s him, his body against mine. It’s the brush of our lips, the softness, the wetness, I’m in his arms like I never left.

He captures my lips into his, slowly and reluctantly he indulges. I reciprocate, it’s what I wanted, right?

It feels good, it feels right and for the first time in a long time, I feel alive. Home, heaven, hell, whichever it is, feels good.

Tell me this is right, tell me we are not crazy, tell me I made a mistake all those years ago.

To be continued...

BURN...

THANDIWE...

Month end is my favourite time of the month, this is when everything seems bright. The loud traffic in the morning suddenly sounds harmonious, taxi drivers fighting over who should go first feels like a movie scene and makes you want to grab a box of popcorn, sit back and enjoy the show.

My manager transitions from being an intolerable asshole to someone I can stomach for two seconds.

Finally it is almost lunch time, I've been counting the minutes.

“Thandiwe.” Oh great, the unbearable boss I spoke of wants to ruin my perfect day. I have money in my account and it's a Friday-Pay-day, I need to run to the mall and see what I can get myself. That cursed husband of mine has the balls to boast about paying the bills and taking care of all the expenses,

so I'll ravish my salary the way I like.

This reminds me, I have to transfer money into Nqaba's account, he insisted on paying for the items that day at the mall. Insisted? I meant he called his patriarchal ass to play, a real man doesn't accept money from a woman. What kind of nonsense is that?

I haven't seen or heard from him since he brought Zulu home the following day, not much was said between us. I couldn't let him in the house afraid of what might transpire.

I don't trust myself around him anymore, he makes me weak and I'm forever dreaming of being in his arms.

Suddenly I want more of him. I want to taste him again, I want to feel his strong grip on my waist.

My body dives into a heatwave when I think about the fanatical kiss we shared... possessive... daring... needy and insatiable, it was like nothing I had ever known.

Thandiwe stop it... I chastise myself, self-control is

imperative, no matter how much you try to uphold it, it laughs in your face.

I use an app to transfer at least R2000 into Nqaba's account and that leaves me with just about enough to get myself that handbag I wanted from Wool Worths. Habitually, I pass that store like I pass the cemetery, last week I was dragged into it by a colleague and saw a beautiful master piece.

I have a fetish for handbags and I might just be reckless and empty my bank account there. I'll have to put aside transport money as well, travelling expenses have doubled now. From Roodepoort to Braamfontein, Ntuthuko really didn't think that far when he accepted that god-forsaken house.

I'm in the bitch's office, he's a man classified as a bitch because he's given a chance to act like one every once in a while. Like yesterday when he embarrassed me in front of the whole staff only because his bloody coffee was one tea spoon of

sugar short.

We have tea ladies, but the fool is forever sending me. He's lucky I haven't spit in it yet, the thought has crossed my mind.

“How are you Thandiwe?” Why do people see a need to enquire about my life? Maybe the question wouldn't vex me so much if I didn't feel like my next stop is Sterkfontein.

The nightmares have halted, the house though is still as creepy as ever. Ntuthuko's threat haunts me till today, I have to think of a way to leave that house without losing my son. The cursed marriage is not what I had envisioned before I married him, stupid me thought I had found my fairy tale with the Biyase jerk.

Sometimes I would watch random videos of him on my phone, the man he was before the wedding is completely different from the man he is now. His eyes were soft, his words gentle, not all the time, but he was more human. I live with a robot now.

“Thandiwe!” A cold hand on my thigh startles me so much I gasp in fright. Caught in my thoughts, I missed his steps when he walked to sit on the table in front of me.

“Sorry,” he says and I don’t care about his lousy apology. Why is he touching me?

There is something in his eyes that puts me off, Cele has worked for this company for ten years.

Apparently he started off as an agent before being promoted to manager, I’ve seen ladies walk into his office with heads held high and coming out looking like the devil snatched their souls. Did I mention that you don’t enter Cele’s office and come out without a promotion?

“What are you doing?” I’m not one to panic, this is not the first time the bloody snake has slithered his hand on my thigh. His touches are perverted and sickening. He jolts up, his dubious eyes run to the closed door then back to me.

I was that loud, he better not think that I am a floozy and will drop my underwear for him.

“Sorry, you were out of it and I was trying to help.” Out of what? His voice gives away that he’s entertaining sick thoughts. Strapped in disgust, I make sure to shift my chair back. He clears his throat, his deviant eyes not shying away from me.

“Why am I here Mr. Cele? It’s lunch time.” My voice is as cold as the devil’s, I’m not okay with the smirk on that crooked mouth of his.

“Right! Mrs. Biyase. You’re a Mrs now, huh?” I so badly want to roll my eyes, and storm out of this office. I don’t find the humour in his saying, he seems to think Trevor Noah has handed his comedy crown over to him.

“Your sales are looking good this month, you’re doing a good job. Keep it up.” Okay. He could have told me this without summoning me into his office as if his favourite cat died.

“Thanks.” I shrug, I don’t care about that really. My salary remains the same, forget about the sales we

make around here. I don't get to taste a single commission from my hard work.

When I was hired by this insurance company I thought my financial problems were over. Boy was I wrong.

“You might be getting a promotion, there's an open post. I gave in your name.” He says, smiling down at me. Do all old men have creepy smiles like this one? I wonder if his wife sees it too or has love deemed her blind?

“Okay.” No thankful bone in me has risen, I am not bothered about promotions. I have dreams too and being a call centre agent is nowhere close to them.

“Aren't you thrilled?”

“Should I be?”

“Other girls would be, I did you a favor, you know?”

“I am not other girls Mr. Cele,” and I didn't ask for any favours, I'm okay with my position. My mind finishes off.

“I know, you're special Thandiwe. Does your

husband know that he is one lucky bastard?” Did he just call my husband a bastard? Where does he get the right? This is my queue, ‘walk out Thandiwe, walk out.’

My steps are terminated by a tight grip on my arm, it takes everything in me not to slap the living day lights out of him.

“What the hell are you doing Mr. Cele?” I snap, maddened. This man must not try me. With a raised eyebrow and a contemptuous smug, he takes a step closer. Defensive and feeling starkers because he has undressed me with his eyes, I cross my arms over my chest.

“I haven’t dismissed you Thandi.” His eyes probe my body like a cashier scanning a stubborn barcode, his tongue swipes over his lower lip and everything I ate this morning violently twirls in my stomach. I have to hold my breath to stop myself from retching.

“It’s Thandiwe.” I correct the fool, I’m so close to

puking on his face.

“Yes, but Thandi sounds more sexy, don’t you think?” This is sexual harassment.

“It appears that you’re too comfortable in your position now, Mr. Cele. I wonder what H.R will think about this.” He doesn’t seem fazed by my threat, imbecile.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, I didn’t do...” I figure this is how he plans on denying everything before H.R.

A soft knock pushes his revolting words back, my eyes widen at the sight of Nqaba in his work uniform. Bulelwa was right, he’s doing justice to it, which is something I have never paid attention to.

I can’t miss the deep scowl on his face, glaring at Cele like he’s ready to kill him. His eyes are violent with what appears to be wrath, his comprehensive chest tangled in a rise and fall movement. He has covered himself with a blistering type of anger.

Wide eyed, lower lip trembling as it opens and closes in an attempt to release words, Cele

stumbles backwards. Nqaba hasn't acknowledged me yet, my mind swims in a mix-up. I can barely put two and two together as to what brings him here.

“Nqaba.” I gasp, failing to hide the shock in my voice. Why is he not looking at me? He moves and my heart skips a beat, my eyes distended. Why is he like this? He's scaring me in all honesty, it doesn't help that he looks like a dangerous man at this point.

While Cele looks like a wet cat terrified to his wits, whereas I can't comprehend what could be wrong with this man who is towering over us in the room.

“I...I'm...” The perverted manager fails his speech, his voice fighting against him. Nqaba takes another step towards Cele...one...two...and...

“Nqabayomzi.” I shriek as I have pictured what his next move would be, his conduct is that of a bull ready to kill. An angry flame that cannot be quenched.

His footsteps halt at the sound of my voice, he inclines his head back, waiting for me to speak

without fully turning to face me.

“What are you doing?” I choke the bother out, not here, not my boss. He could get in trouble, who will bail him out of prison? He’s just a mere patrol attendant.

Like a soldier whose mission has been immobilized, he turns completely. His scary eyes soften up a little, a distant smile moves at a snail's pace at the corner of his mouth. It’s wiped off almost immediately by an aggressive click of a tongue.

I have to follow him when he marches out, he’s taking long strides and I’m failing to keep up. What happened in there? How did he know what was happening and why was Mr. Cele scared stiff of him?

Nqaba has a big structure, wide-ranging shoulders and he's tall. It’s a Biyase bone, they are all big boned, from father to sons. An appearance that would cause any man to drift away from their intimidating presence. But the kind of fear displayed on Cele’s face was that of respect, not terror. And

now that I think back to minutes ago, his eyes seemed to recognize Nqaba.

“Nqaba wait up.” He’s in the lift and I’m rushing to catch up. Hesitantly, he holds the door for me. A dense silence pushes us back with our backs against the wall and takes over. Alone with him, my heart stops.

Involuntarily my breath refuses to leave my chest, my ears are burning or is it my cheeks? Thoughts of that day flood my mind, it’s like front row tickets to a cliché overrated romantic movie.

His lips against mine, his large hands caressing my backbone while the other played with my ear. Taking me back to the days we were once in love and free, he would play with my ear while I was hypnotised by his kisses.

“Thandiwe.” His voice sounds so far as it jolts me back to the confinement box, I realise that I’m panting. My chest moving on its own accord and lower lip caught between the grips of my teeth.

“Are you okay?” His voice penetrates through my soul, causing a visible shudder on my body. His fingers do that thing again, like a plug to a socket, they brush against mine and sparkles evade between the touch. His intense gaze burns through my eyes and reaches the depths of my soul. Eye captivating and soul slurping.

BULELWA...

My father has been blowing up phone days on end, sure I can't avoid him forever. I feel like I'm hiding from the mafia, the way he's so bent on getting a hold of me. I had to change the locks, I don't turn the lights on at night. The TV keeps the house bright.

I have to check my surroundings before driving in my yard, I don't trust Mandla. He could have me followed and I wouldn't know it.

Today is shitty hot, the sun is out for war. Scuttling away from it, I rush into the house after locking my

car.

My heart almost stops as my eyes fall on the woman on my couch, how did she get in here? These people will never give me a moment's peace, groaning in frustration, I make my way to the living room.

Her eyes find me and they smile before her mouth captures a smile as well. I haven't seen her in a while.

"Mama ka-Bubu!" I salute with a kiss on her forehead, she suffocates me in a hug right after. "How did you get in?" Let's start here, before anything else.

"I'm your mother, I have my ways." She says, smiling like what she did is not illegal and takes her place back on the couch.

"I changed the locks Lilian, you have superpowers now?" She huffs at my sarcasm, unbothered by it. I would smile and be merry if she were here for different reasons, but I know King Kong sent her, he knows I can't say no to this beautiful goddess.

“Did your father give you permission to change the locks?” Her smile is so warm and welcoming, can fool any idiot into thinking her question comes from a good place. “It is his house,” she finishes, needlessly. Mandla bought me this house when I turned eighteen, it’s in his name by the way. Argh!!!

I wanted freedom and wouldn’t stop nagging him about how cramped up I was with him and mom. Working my magic on him which is hardly ever, the giant threw a set of keys at me one day during supper. Mom had one of her smiles whisking on her mouth, ‘Angifuni amantombazane emzini wam’ or you will live in a trailer until you’re fifty.’ (I don’t want girls in my house.) These were his exact words.

Trust a Zulu man to be forthright. My excitement came close to ending in tears because I was reprimanded for screaming like a sixteen year old little girl.

Lilian’s smile flips from warmth to adoration, she’s

practically the only person I know who has different kinds of smiles, it could be a super power mothers have.

Nonetheless, my posture has everything to do with the gleam on her face. Her big round inquisitive eyes observe every inch of me, my arms that are crossed over my chest, my legs hugging each other and my folded lips that have formed a thin line.

Disorderly and in search of a reason behind her demeanour, I roll my eyes and only for it to be received with a sweet giggle. What's wrong with this woman?

"I love you Ndlondlo, you know that right?" How can I forget? She lives to sing the song.

"Is this your apology for breaking into my house?" I throw back.

"No, I did not break in. Your sister did." Traitor... It has to be Lindiwe. Thobekile is tied down in Mozambique by some fool who calls himself her husband and has given him three bratty girls who look exactly like their father. The biggest betrayal of

all time.

“Where is Twiggy?” I ask eager to see her, my eyes have grown restless and are in full search of the scrawny second born.

“In the kitchen,” everything is okay in this woman’s world, will she ever stop smiling?

“Whose kitchen?” Better not be mine.

“Yours of course.”

“What is she doing in my kitchen?” I can’t cook yes, but I don’t want with my kitchen.

“Cooking for her fiancé,” her response jerks me up from my seat. Lindiwe has a fiancé? She’s afraid of men, she’s a thirty three year old virgin as far as I know. Men are aliens from space, she can’t have a man.

“Uyaxoka mama ka Bubu.” (You’re lying mom.)

To heal my heart I have found humour in her answer. Having a man means Lindiwe will be taken away from me like Thobekile, I can’t lose another sister. What if he’s also foreign? A guy from

Jamaica, I've seen Usain Bolt... Lanky... dark skinned and tastes like chocolate. Well... I've tasted him in my dreams, that man has done things to me that... Bubu zip it.

Lindiwe and Usain Bolt? Lord intervene, you know what they say about tall skinny men plus these foreign men will love the fuck out of you, that's how Thobekile ended up following her husband to the ends of the earth.

My poor sister will have to move to Jamaica and... and... and I need a drink... anxiety...

“What happened?” Lilian wants to know why I'm suddenly drowning myself in a glass of liquor.

“Lindiwe can't get married.” Sure I'm crazy, we can blame it on this one glass of alcohol.

“Why not?” I twist on my heel at the squeaky voice that could only belong to my only remaining sister, she's standing with a man and I knew it, he's long-legged, dark and a looker.

“When did you go to J amaica?” Curiosity nudges me, pushing a question out of my big mouth. I get frowns and stunned expressions.

Like magnet, they move from the kitchen doorway, headed towards me. I have to take another gulp as I spot the big bump on her belly, the fool got her pregnant.

“I didn’t know I was in J amaica, when was that? I would have taken pictures,” she jokes, dazed.

“Then, where did you meet this tall chocolate-coated pretzel?” He’s ridiculously tall, God was probably going for the Goliath look and forgot to give him the build, making the guy look like a streetlight.

“Pretzel?” He speaks? At least God got the voice right.

“Forgive him Lonwabo, my son is...special.”
Lonwabo? He’s local? Wait! Did Lilian just call me crazy?

Lindiwe hooks her arm around Lonwabo’s, her head finds comfort on his chest...or torso rather. She’s

too short for this ruler.

“My chocolate-coated pretzel,” she mimics my voice. “This is my annoying little brother Bulelwa, we call him Bubu.” She sticks her tongue out at me, I need to move away from this shocking chair I’ve been placed on.

“I’ve heard a lot about you Bubu.” Who’s Bubu?

“It’s Bulelwa or Gcinumzi to you. Or Ndlondlo as my father calls me, he’s the man who planted a seed in Lilian’s womb and nine months later she gave birth to Twiggy. The unmarried pregnant girl next to you, did I tell you her father is King Kong? He won’t hesitate to squash your pretzel body when he finds out that you got his daughter pregnant.” I am not about to smile with a man who’s milking our remaining family cow for free.

“Your plan of scaring him away will not work, I’m pregnant.” Lindiwe.

Like I’m blind to what’s in front of me, I don’t like this fool she brought home.

My mother grabs my glass of heaven from my trembling hand, I don't know why I'm shuddering.

Fear though has me by the balls, I guess I don't want to lose my best friend to this man who's looking at her like he can't breathe without her. I guess my selfish ass has realized that I will be left alone.

"Control yourself Bubu, you know I don't like it when you drink." Lilian is getting on my nerves, I need something strong.

"A word...in the kitchen." Lindiwe says, finding her way back to the kitchen, leaving Mr. Streetlight. He's making himself comfortable on my expensive couch, I need to get a dog. People can't be coming in and out of my house like I'm selling the cheapest kotas on the block.

"When did you start having sex? I thought we preferred Shrek over men," I say parading behind her. She's laughing, these are the perks of being the last born. No one takes you serious.

“Stop being weird, I’ve been having sex since I was twenty one.” Her revelation forces saliva down my throat, making me choke.

“What? I thought men terrified the shit out of you,” I’ve been fooled and why are there four steaming pots on my stove? Is she cooking for a village or that tower light of hers?

“They did, in daddy’s eyes.” She gives a mischievous smug, stirring what smells like tripe. My mouth waters, she pushes me back as I dip my head in the pot.

“You skilled slut, and you made me think you were virgin Marry.” I scrutinize to find a grin on her lips, finally she gives me her attention.

“Because you have a big mouth, you spill when the gorilla is around.” She’s right, Mandla’s intimidation is a special kind. He’d find Osama Bin Ladin’s hideout in a day.

“Well because he scares the shit out of me, tell me, does Usain fit inside you?” Her mouth drops open and still maintains a silly smile. “Seeing that he’s

tall, or is it a myth that tall men have...” her scrawny palm crashes on my mouth, shutting me up completely.

“My man is hungry please, I don’t have time to entertain your silly thoughts.” she says, reaching out for plates in the cabinet.

“How much does he eat? This is enough to feed the whole OPW crew.”

“He’s a man, they never have enough to eat.” True.

“I didn’t know I had tripe in my fridge.” I say opening my pots to have a look at her mouth-watering food again.

“You didn’t, I brought it. Lonwabo likes home cooked meals.” Lonwabo this, Lonwabo that, I have a feeling I will never hear the end.

“Did you buy prepaid electricity as well, Twiggy?” I spit, it hits her but she welcomes it with a chuckle.

“My daddy’s money bought the prepaid, I can cook a storm if I want to.”

“We’ll see how long you’ll hide behind him, wait till

he sees that you've been knocked up." She becomes uneasy due to my remark, how do you hide a whole human? "How far are you?"

"Eight months." Hey, this woman has a death wish. "I'm thirty three and that means I'm old enough. Daddy will have to understand, besides we are getting married." Trying to console herself, I see.

"So the fool messed up and proposed to escape the death penalty." I can be blunt, it's nature.

"He loves me Bulelwa, I love him too." Sighing, she drops her flat ass on a chair. The love she speaks of finds a need to shield her eyes.

"A Xhosa guy hey? I hear they are good at sports, dribbling girls is their most famous move." I know I should be comforting her, but let me test the waters. Mandla won't be as kind as I am.

"You truly are Mandla's son, an asshole." She dabs my shoulder, finding no offense in my statement.

"A beautiful asshole," I return with a wink and get a head shake from her, gesturing displeasure. I'll accept the beautiful laugh erupting from her mouth.

THANDIWE...

Seated here in the midst of the crowd, I can feel every inch of his presence. Almost as if he's leaning up against me, my nostrils take in every scent emanating from him and washing my body with a tidal wave of goose bumps.

I offered to buy him lunch and he went for street eats, we're at Bree not far away from Braamfontein. The plan was to grab something at KFC or Wimpy, but Mr Biyase had a "better" idea. He said he wanted food, I didn't know that they don't sell food at KFC. We're seated outside some local shop and he's ravishing on a hot plate of pap and chicken feet, I settled for a sandwich.

I am looking at my most favourite thing in the world at this moment.

Nqaba eating can only be the most fascinating thing I have ever seen, the pucker between his eyebrows. The adoration in his eyes as he takes

one scoop after the other.

The way his mouth would move while his teeth grind the food, he chews funny, it's cute and adorable and I want to observe him for as long as I can. Take in all of him because when I go home, life goes back to normal. I won't smell him, steal glances at him or love him from a distance.

I reprimand my eyes when they meet his, not knowing where to drop them I close them which is stupid of me. People don't just randomly close their eyes in crowded places.

“When did I become too ugly to look at Tshabalala?” I can hear the amusement in his tone, it forces my undisciplined eyes open to meet a coy look.

“Do I have something on my face?” That smile makes my knees weak, it's a bit windy, but my body feels like it has been thrown in a fiery furnace. Every bone in me burns with a need of him as he catches my chin and lowers his face to meet my reluctant gaze.

“Kungani ungifihlela umphefum'lo wam? Ithi

ngibone we-Thandiwe?” (Why are you hiding my soul from me? Let me take a look.)

He searches my eyes with this demand, his soul does not dwell in me. It did once and I snatched it by betraying him.

“What were you doing at the office?” I divert from his mandate, his intense scrutiny and his finger that’s drilling blazing traces on my chin.

“To return your money.” I foresaw this, but he could have transferred it back. I want to know why he was ready go all Bruise Lee on Cele.

“Nqaba you...”

“I’m not going to take money from you Tan-tan.” He hands me a brown envelop, its contents reveal a stack of R100 notes. Did he have to withdraw the whole amount?

“Nqaba please, you need...”

“Don’t.” He intrudes, offense waving on his face. It wasn’t my intension to offend him and it’s not a lie

that he needs the money. I choose not to argue with him, so I take it. He's on his feet, ambling to his car parked on the side of the road.

He jumps in and I'm numbed and rigid trying to process how he could just walk away without a word. I want to protest, call him and apologise. My feet hold me down as he starts to walk back with a box in hand.

My heart betrays me by letting me know how much he means to me. What he thinks of me matters, his opinions and the way he sees me.

"This is for you." He hands me the box, a shoe box to be exact.

"You bought me shoes?" I don't know if he knows about the myth of buying a girl shoes, I wouldn't want to be away from him again. I hate how superstitious I can be.

"Open it," he gives an order of which I follow. Letters, dead yellow roses that have changed colour with time. Raising my eyes I meet his probing stare, a

quick smile moves stealthily on the corners of his mouth and dissolves before it reaches his ears.

My gaze holds a question, ‘why is he giving me this?’

“It’s for all your birthdays that passed and I couldn’t call,” he says, who is this man? Why is he so bent on making me cry? I don’t deserve this. How can he continue to think of me when I betrayed him?

His hand slides across the table, it’s slowly crawling on mine, creating a friction has my heart aggressively thumping on my chest.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call, I’m sorry I didn’t write. I’m sorry I wasn’t there and I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, I love you every day.” He says, his voice cracking with every vowel. I have to fight the urge to throw myself in his arms, I shiver as his thumb swipes over the back of my hand.

He won’t move his eyes from mine, everything around us falls away. I can’t see anything else, but this man before me. I would capture this moment in

a photograph if I could and carry it with me forever.

“Why did you hold me only to let me fall again, Thandiwe?” Like a tsunami, I’m washed off shore with this questions. “You’ve been burning at the back of my mind, I can’t move from the past. I’m static in one place, will you let me stay frozen in time?” He seeks answers I cannot give, I wish I could tell him what happened. I wish I could recreate that day and change its happenings, I wish I could wait for him.

His hand slowly slides up to my cheek, his thumb effortlessly sashaying back and forth on my cheekbone. To take in the moment and maybe savour it just to let time seem worth existing. I shut my eyes and take in all of him. His touch, his fragrance and his breath whizzing on my skin. A stabbing gaze forces my eyes open, he’s staring at me dumbfounded. By what exactly? I cannot say.

“Tshabalala wami, if I get a chance to love you again, I swear I will love you right. I won’t leave you.” His voice continues to crack and I hate it. I hate that he’s hurting because of me, I hate myself

for breaking this good man.

There is something tugging and pulling at me from the corner of my eye, it demands my attention, I'm forced to move away from this touch of heaven and assist my eyes across the road.

A little girl about Zulu's age stands alone, her gaze transfixed on us. The bright red raincoat stands out, the hood of it thrown over her head. She's bare foot and there is something about her presence that's drawing me to her, the force brings me to my feet.

“Kwenzenjani?” (What's wrong?)

Nqaba's voice resounds and fades away in a flash, I have to get to her. There's a strong force that's pulling me to her and I can't fight it.

To be continued...

BURN

10...

NQABA...

“Thandiwe.” I holler after her, it appears she has fallen into a trance. We were seated down and everything was going well, until something grabbed her attention.

At first I didn't understand why she was getting up, until I noticed how her mind had taken a break. It's lunch/rush hour and the roads are witlessly busy, Thandiwe is caught in the middle of the road. Vehicles are hooting for her to move out of the way, drivers shouting and throwing cuss words at her.

Surprisingly, not one single car has touched her, she's oblivious to her surroundings though. Like a robot she moves down the road, treading towards something I can't see.

“Thandiwe!!!” I shout from across the bustling streets of Bree, it's taxi after taxi... full of commotion.

When one traffic light closes the other opens, they are all headed to one place and each time I try to cross the road, a vehicle speeds by, compelling me to move back to square one.

“Tan-tan stop.” My voice is shrunk a number of decibels by the taxis sounding the horn. I manage to cross the first lane, a taxi rustles by on the second one and this gives me a chance to scuttle before an imminent motor flies by.

“Who is Mapula?” I hear her say, taking slow frightening movements. Each proves to be life threatening as motors changeover to angels of death.

“Yeyi! Yeyi! Suka lapho wena. Voetsek, uzofa nja.”
(Move out of the road, you’ll die.)

An angry driver booms, his taxi hurtling towards Thandiwe, the hoot rises above his furiousness.

I scamper to grab her waist, my arms wrapping around her and with one scoop, we make it to the sidewalk with her in my arms.

Her face hidden on my chest, we stay in this position for a while. So many things are going on in my busy mind as I try to process what just occurred.

“What the fuck is wrong with you Thandiwe? Why would you want to kill yourself? What will happen to Zulu if you die?” My reproach does not accomplish what I send it to do as it falls on a confused and shaken woman, her body is trembling, eyes widened and lips quavering.

“D...didn't you...didn't you s...see that?” She mutters, pointing to her right side and shifts her gaze to where her finger is pointed.

“Thandiwe,” I grab her shoulders and twirl her back to me “What I saw was you throwing yourself on the busy road without a care as to what will happen to you.”

“She was calling me Nqaba, she...” She stops, exhales deeply and drops her head on my chest. Her arms surround my abdomen, without wasting

time, I hold her back.

“I think I’m losing my mind Nqaba, I’m seeing things. I can’t sleep at night because of the terrible dreams and my husband doesn’t believe me. He thinks I’m crazy, maybe he’s right... maybe I am losing mind.” Her confession knocks me out, I could tell that something wasn’t right with her.

“Tan-tan.” I take her face in my palms as I move her from my chest. Her eyes drop, she’s hiding from me.

“Tell me everything,” I say in an undertone, bringing her face up to meet my eyes.

“It all started that night when...” As she narrates her life I observe her gaze, there is truth in her eyes. No way would Thandiwe lie about something so serious, I have known her for a long time. Although I spent a little while away from her presence, I know how the truth presents itself in her eyes.

“You need to leave that house,” I advise, walking her back to my car.

“I can’t just leave Nqaba, I’m married.” I pin her against the car, my body pressed on hers. Her eyes run up to meet mine, her mouth slightly opens and I see an invitation to kiss her once more. But I don't.

“You don’t have to be, you don’t have to be married to him,” my hand slides up to bathe her cheek.

“We just got married, I can’t...” her whispered reply forces me to press against her, a desperate plea to feel her.

“Dammit Thandiwe, this is not what you want. You don’t love him, I know you don’t. I regret that I was away or else I would have prevented you from marrying him. I came back from Eastern Cape that morning only to be told that my little brother is getting married, I knew it was with you and had to see you urgently. I came to your house, saw you in that cursed white dress. You looked so happy Tantan, I wanted a minute with you before you went to church. But your mother forbid me from seeing you, she practically chased me away.” I tell and seemingly grief and frustration clots behind her eyes.

“She didn’t say anything to me, I didn’t know Nqaba. I didn’t know that you still cared. I thought you had moved on, I was told that you had moved on.”

“Who told you that?” she shrugs, her gaze travelling in waves of thoughts.

“Your mother, it was two months after you left for Joburg. You stopped all forms of communication and I thought something had happened to you so I went looking for you. I told her who I was, she said you were getting married and that your fiancé was pregnant. She showed me pictures of you and some woman...”

“That was my cousin, she lied.” I interject, Barbra and her toxic traits have cost me the love of my life. Why would she go to such an extent? “So you went for my brother just to spite me?” Her eyes bulge in wonder. “Come with me.” I request, people are watching. This is Bree anyway, the posture Thandiwe and I have taken brings us more attention than we would like. People are glaring like we’re

sinning in public.

“Where are we going? I need to go back to work.”

“Don’t worry about that.”

“Nqaba I’ll lose my job, I can’t just disappear.” She stresses as I open the door for her.

“That won’t happen.” I rush to take her belongings on the table we were settled on, we can’t talk in such an open place.

NARRATED...

It was more or less than twenty five years ago when Linda Mshengu, a resident of Nquthu a town in Umzinyathi was medically declared barren after years of trying for a baby with her husband.

Her in-laws were growing tired and needed an heir. They would throw insults at her and threaten to bring a second wife for their son, Vusi Mshengu.

Linda was against polygamy, she hated it with

passion and the only way to avoid her husband taking a second wife was to have a child.

Vusi was kept in the dark about the infertility, Linda was too afraid to tell him the truth. Afraid of losing him, afraid of her siblings mocking her.

Desperate and hopeless, Linda sought after a witchdoctor which was something she never would have considered alone. A friend introduced her to one, the witchdoctor lived in the outskirts of Endumeni. His house was in a secluded place, in the forest where no brave human dared to step.

Shivers rippled through her as she entered the witch's hut, every bone in her body screamed WARNING!!! In red. Shouting that she leaves the place, but desperate Linda had no option, God had turned a blind eye to her demands and cries.

Her ancestors were probably vacationing somewhere sunny.

“You can’t have any children, the doctors were right. Your womb is incapable of carrying a child.” The witchdoctor told her after casting some bones on his reed mat.

“Please there must be something you can do, I need a baby or my husband will leave me or take a second wife. I’ll do anything, please Makhosi.” From the depths of her heart Linda pleaded, she pleaded as if she were pleading for a second chance at life. She pleaded as if she would die if she didn’t give her husband the heir he wanted.

“There is a way,” the witchdoctor introduced, seeing the desperation of the woman. Age was doing away with her and it was imperative that she had a child before the age of fifty five. “I will give you something that will allow your womb to accept your husband's seed, however there’s a condition.” Her heart sunk, it can’t be a good condition.

“Makhosi.” She said, holding her breath as she waited for the condition to be revealed. The witchdoctor fiddled in his dirty animal-skin, sling bag and revealed a single bean. He threw it on the

reed mat, groaned and fell into a series of burps.

“Take this seed,” he instructed a now terrified Linda who was having second thoughts. The thought of Vusi kept her steady, she reached out to take the seed from the reed mat.

“Buy a flower pot and plant this seed in it, but don’t use any soil.

You need to gather soil from the river and water it with milk every day at 12am and 12pm, don’t skip a day. After planting the seed, you will have to be intimate with your husband that very day. In three days a plant will grow from this seed along with a baby in your womb.” Out of excitement, Linda accepted the part where she will fall pregnant in three days, it didn’t matter how it would happen.

“You will bear a girl child, claim it as your own, but it will belong to me. Her name will be Mapula.” Linda choked in her saliva, the witchdoctor wasn’t making any sense. She and Vusi would be the ones to bear the child, how would the child belong to the

witchdoctor?

“I don’t understand Makhosi,” her heart pursued clarification.

“This is the only way for you to be a mother, your husband’s seed alone cannot harvest in your womb. Like I said, water it with milk every day, don’t starve it or the child will die. There will come a time when the child is almost twenty six, the plant will wither, it will be a sign that her time has come.

Twenty five years of life in this earth will be given to her, she will die on her twenty sixth birthday. Her soul will go back to its owner.” Linda couldn’t care less, happiness had filled her heart that she was finally going to be called a mother.

She will be respected in society and in the Mshengu homestead. Though she prayed that a time will come when the curse will break, or the witchdoctor dies before her child turns twenty six

“There’s another thing, when the time comes I will go and collect Mapula myself.”

“But Makhosi, will you be alive then?” She had to ask, the man was so old he could wake up dead the next day. In that instant she wished for his death, more than she wished to have a child.

“That is not for you to worry about, your job is to make sure that she stays away from that man.” He said confusing an already confused Linda.

“What man?” She asked.

“A love that is true, a love she can’t live without. I see a man, he holds her heart. Only he can save her soul, but I won’t go down without a fight. She is mine.” The witchdoctor spoke as if the child had already been born, he pointed at a rock sandwiched between the bones on the reed mat and a bone-chilling laugh evaded from his mouth. “He thinks he’s clever I see, he won’t stay away from her.”

“Who is he Makhosi?” Inquisitive Linda questioned.

“His face is hidden from me, his ancestors are shielding him from my sight. He is amongst us in this earth as we speak, I would kill him if I could. His heart is pure and his love is true, it’s a stubborn kind

of love. Keep him away from her or a war will arise, there will be bloodshed and lives will be lost. I am greedy with what is mine, Mapula is mine.” Again, he referred to the unborn child as if she breathed on the earth.

“Makhosi,” she bowed her head in agreement to the man’s orders.

“One more thing before you go, bury the child’s umbilical cord in the pot plant.” That was the last straw, the umbilical cord belonged to the Mshengu ancestors. How would they protect their child?

Nine months later Linda had a bouncing baby girl and named her Thandiwe Mshengu, the second name ‘Mapula’ was concealed from the family. Linda didn’t want to be reminded of the future, that her child will die one day. She fell in love with the baby and swore to protect her with her life as she remembered the deal she had with the witchdoctor. There had to be a way to save Thandiwe, she couldn’t destroy the plant that had flourished

beautifully in her garden, it held her daughter's life. The secret was only known by her, she would secretly feed it milk and watched it grow into a beautiful tree.

NQABA...

“Whose place is this?” Thandiwe inquires, carefully walking into the apartment in New Town close to the Junction.

“A friend's.” I respond as I shut the door, my thoughts are tangled up in our previous conversation. “Would you like something to drink?” She's sitting on a couch, her eyes full of life, scanning every corner of the studio apartment.

“I'm okay, thanks.” Her response. “This place looks expensive, your friend lets you come here whenever you want?”

“Is it a bad thing?” Her furrowed brow answers for her. “I've earned my trust in people Tan-tan.” I settle

beside her, preparing myself to finish the discussion that had left me with more questions than answers.

“I ask that you don’t withhold anything from me, I need to know everything. How you ended up with my brother,” I say, Thandiwe releases a hefty sigh confirming that she dreads this topic and would rather avoid it.

“I didn’t know he was your brother, Ntuthuko wouldn’t let me meet his family. I met them when I was six months pregnant, your mother hated me instantly because she knew who I was. I doubt she ever told Ntuthuko about us, he would have asked me if she did.”

“Where did you meet him?” I ask, agape she hides her eyes out of shame.

“A house party, he...” Her answer comes in mumbles clothed in humiliation.

“A party? You never went to parties.” I interrupt.

“Well, I did that weekend you left,” she shrugs her shoulders in a dismissive manner.

“And what? You had a one night stand and fell pregnant? It took us three months for me to finally have you Thandiwe, but you were in my brother’s bed the same day you met him.”

“How dare you say that to me? You have no right Nqaba.” She shouts jerking up from the couch, I shadow her movements. Anger glimmering through her eyes, her hands forcefully bang on my chest before she turns towards the door.

My hand grips her wrist, stopping her from leaving the house. This is so typical of Thandiwe, always walking away when the going gets tough.

“No, I have every right Tshabalala. I have every right to know the truth.” I’m pulling her into me with this demand, her body collides against mine.

“What truth? I told you what your mother did.”

“You could have waited...didn’t you trust me? Didn’t you trust my love for you?”

“Two months Nqaba, two months I couldn’t get a hold of you.” Her voice peaks, she’s hurting I know, but I need answers.

“Is this when you decided to pass my baby over to my brother?” Softly and regretfully, the words spill out of my mouth like an open tap. They have Thandiwe wide eyed, shock rendering her speechless. She squirms in my arms, anger clearly visible in her eyes.

“What?” she gulps.

“Is Zulu my son, Thandiwe?” She shrieks at the loudness of my voice. “Tell me the truth, tell me if that boy is my son.” Her hand prevails in detaching from my grip.

“Zulu is...”

“Don’t even think about it, don’t you dare lie to me.” I interpose, she is keen on hiding the truth.

“I don’t know okay.” She shouts. “I don’t know Nqaba, I...that day...y...” she’s sizzling, I need the truth, but I’m not sure I’m ready for it. My hopes have been built and finding out that he’s not my son

will break me.

“I’m listening.” I have to compose myself, yelling will not get me the answers I search for.

“I would never betray you Nqaba,” too late. “I loved you and when you left I couldn’t...look I was heartbroken, I struggled to come to terms with your departure. A friend proposed that we go to a party where I met Ntuthuko. I didn’t know who he was, his kindness won me over. He listened to my problems and gave me advice, we were drinking, one thing led to another..”

“You cheated on me?” This is not what I expected, a ‘yes Zulu is your son’ would have been adequate. Not this, not this heart shattering revelation.

“I’m sorry.” Her eyes swell as a flood of tears stand at attention, ready to be called to the show.

“I told you I was going to come back, you should have trusted me Thandiwe.” I hiss and grab her wrists once more, causing her to squirm in my tight grip. Her eyes held in a muddle and puddle of pain,

though I am certain and convinced that it is nothing compared to what I feel.

“Stop it Nqaba, you’re hurting me,” I want to hurt her, I want her to feel the pain that I feel at this moment.

I cradle her cheeks in my hands tighter than usual and pull her face closer to mine, the urge to wipe the tears cascading on her face is null and void. Nothing in me says comfort your beloved, I want her hurting like she hurt me.

I hate how my heart wrestles with my mind though, two contradicting organs that have one thing in common. ‘Loving Thandiwe.’

“Hurt? You know nothing about pain,” my stupid heart forces me to bring her face closer...forehead against forehead...nose to nose...a prayer from the depths of my heart to let this be a dream. “I had barely made it to Joburg and my brother was already inside you.” I’m unable to keep my thoughts and feelings intact. Her betrayal evokes a type of resentment that leaves me asphyxiated.

“Nqaba you’re insulting me,” snivelling, she fights to move away from me, my grip stands ground.

“Why? Why did you cheat on me? I went to work for us, our future. I couldn’t fathom to look at another woman, I didn’t see anyone but you Tan-tan. I was far from you, but you were all I could see.”

Her head falls on my chest as I release her cheeks and I don’t know what to think about her sobs. I can’t comprehend why she’s crying, she betrayed me and broke my trust.

“Thandiwe.” Moving her away from my chest proves to be a struggle, her arms are clasped around my waist. This is no time to shed tears, we need to solve this matter.

“I’m sorry Nqaba, I’m sorry.” She’s wailing and I cannot make out what her apology means. “Forgive me, please.” I can’t hold her back, for the life of me, rage considers me weak. Now that she’s here, before me. I realize that I’m more upset than anything, I loved this woman, gave her everything I

could give and this is what I get?

“Thandiwe sit.” I snap and have to use force to put her on the couch, her eyes do everything to avoid me. Which is bad for me because I need to know the truth while looking into them.

“Is Zulu my son?” I know he is, hearing it from her would seal it.

“I don’t know, he could be...I found out I was pregnant two weeks later, that’s when I went to your house in search of a way to get to you and your mother told me that you were getting married to your pregnant fiancé. I died Nqaba...everything in me died. Ntuthuko had gone back to the city then and I wasn’t sure if he was going to come back. A few days later he came to my house and I went with him, told him about the pregnancy, he promised to love and take care of me.” Bullshit!!!

“Does my brother know that Zulu could be mine?” she gestures ‘no’ with a head shake. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You were gone Nqaba, I thought you were getting

married like your mother said.”

“Fuck! That doesn’t make sense Thandiwe. Let’s say that was the case, what right did you have to keep him away from me?” This time I’m struggling to keep my voice from rising, her explanation is lame...and ludicrous...and I want to hate her.

“Please...” she pleads, her tears mean nothing to me right now.

“I want a DNA test, if Zulu is my son, I want him with me.” My introduction is not mollifying her.

“I’m sorry,” this is all she can contribute, a lousy apology that cannot change the past and it pisses me off.

“Fuck you Tshabalala, fuck you.” The cuss spews out of my mouth against my will, God knows I respect this woman, but she broke my heart.

“Where are you going?” I don’t answer to her outcry, I’m too angry to answer, too angry to be around her. I dash out of the apartment and lock the door behind me.

“Nqaba open this door, don’t leave me here.” She bangs on the door while shouting, she’ll be fine. I need to get out of here, I need to think.

LINDA

Nquthu KZN...

It’s been hours since Linda watered the plant, she feels a need to check on it. Toddling out of the house, the sun hits her. She is so used to the scorching heat that it doesn’t bother her, Linda drags her bare tired feet on the thick blistering soil that has been baking in the sun since 12 noon.

She lets her feet guide her to the little garden she had built behind the house. Her world crumbles as she finds the plant emaciated, Thandiwe’s life is about to end and she is powerless. The prayers she offered to God from the moment Thandiwe was born were in vain.

Her baby is no longer known as Thandiwe because it is time for the witchdoctor to collect his Mapula. Whether he is still alive or had died from old age, remains a mystery to Linda. When Thandiwe turned thirteen, Linda had gone looking for the witchdoctor and her mission was fruitless.

The place where the old creepy hut had stood was occupied by a series of trees, no evidence that a house once claimed the land.

“Baba.” She calls out to her husband, her world is crumbling beneath her and there’s nothing she can do about it. Vusi appears taking tortoise strides, the walking stick assisting in his walks. Old age has taken away the strength in his legs.

“Nkosazana.” Standing a few feet away from his wife, he observes her old face that’s adorned with wrinkles. Agony, grief and regret presented on its frontage.

“It has begun baba, I prayed and asked God for forgiveness. I asked him to save our baby.” The

time has come to tell her husband the truth, he can't twig what she could be talking about.

“Thandiwe is going to die.” She reveals, Vusi has always been a strong man and her heart almost stops as her husband falls on the ground with a loud thud.

To be continued

BURN

11...

THANDIWE...

BANG!!!

“Shit! What time is it?” I jump from the couch, only to slip and fall face down. Nqaba is helping me up before I could grasp what just happened. Did he have to bang the door though? And why is he only coming back now?

“I still knock you off your feet I see.” Is this what he says after cussing at me and locking me in this apartment? I am in no mood for his mood swings, it’s dark outside and I should be home. Zulu... Oh my God...

“He’s safe.” Nqaba answers, did I say that out loud? “He’s with your feminine friend.” My feminine friend? Nqaba though, I give up. Wait till Bulelwa hears this.

“Where have you been? Did you have to go the whole day? Why did you lock me up in here Nqaba? I have to be home before Ntuthuko.” My words bounce on an unbothered jerk, he’s ambling to the kitchen, ignoring my rantings.

“We need to talk.” Is he not the one who locked me in a flat and left to heaven-knows where? Now he wants to talk?

“Tell me why you locked me up, what if your friend had come back? I was alone in here and unprotected...” I’m following him to the kitchen.

“I would never let anything happen to you.” He says after spinning to face me, I only get one glimpse of

his calm face before he turns to open the fridge.

Ngaba was really pissed off a while ago, hurting him was never my intention. I was young and stupid and I regret everything.

“Do you think there are still taxis at Bree?” What will Ntuthuko think when he finds out that I’m here with his brother? The man’s mind creates strange concepts.

“Taxis to Roodepoort? I doubt it.” He ripostes calmly and it aggravates me. His slow movements in the kitchen grab my attention, he moves like he was born for it. The way his torso would shift as he reaches to grab a pot on the top shelf, his hands moving from spoons to plates and how his eyes focus on so many things at one time.

“What would you like to eat?” I’m not hungry.

“Take me home please.”

“I will, after supper.” What makes him think I want to have supper with him? I hope he’s not planning on poisoning me, I would poison me after what I did to him.

“Are you trying to kill me?” Great, I sound like a psycho now...

“Like you killed me eight years ago?” He questions courteously and that should scare me right? His voice is disdainful, it also tells me that he will never forgive me for what I did. “My love is genuine Tan-tan, I wouldn’t dream of killing you.” Yeah tell that to the cold tone dancing down your throat and that emotionless look in your eyes.

“I...I think I should go, Zulu must be asking for me.” Anything to escape the shame I have put myself in, till this day I live to regret my actions. I’ll never forgive myself for what I did to Nqaba, he deserves better. He deserves Reboana...I punch myself in the stomach at the thought.

“Do I scare you Tan-tan?” He forgets the boiling water in the kettle and gives his full nerve-wracking attention to me, shrugging my tense my shoulders is all I can do.

“Come closer,” this feels like a scene from the movie *Scream*.

The knife in his hand has me shuddering and mumbling shit I don't know. All the same I trust this man, why am I thinking he wants to end my life? If anything, he's the only person that makes me feel safe, he would drive a knife through my heart and I would still trust him indisputably.

"I need you to cut these onions for me, four hands are better than two, right?" The sarcasm in his tone stretch my lips into a smile, brows furrowed and a simper on his facial features, he tips his head as his eyes search my face.

The only way to avoid this intense gaze is to let my feet follow his scent, I swear I'm drugged each time my nostrils get a taste of him. It scares me that I will not be able to stay away from him.

"Just dice them, it doesn't have to be perfect, I hope you're knowledgeable in the kitchen. Last time we shared a kitchen you could only boil water." He takes me back to my days, thanks to my mother I

can never feature on a cooking show. I can put a meal together, but not something edible.

“I try, you ate my food that day at the house.” I say, pride residing in my voice. Nqaba’s arched brow confirms that it wasn’t the best dish he’s ever tasted, but the chump wiped the plate clean.

“I knew that was you.” What does he mean he knew it was me? “Your food has too much oil in it, it doesn’t rain, it pours.” He continues, laughing at his stupid jest, it’s not funny although I’m enjoying the sound of his laughter.

The most peaceful sound in the world. I wouldn’t mind being here with him, safe. Gosh the thought of going back to that hellhole I call a house.

Nevertheless, this is not him. He’s with me, but he’s not with me. He’s bothered by something and I might just know what it is.

“What are we making?” I ask, trying to diverge my mind from the gnawing thoughts that bring me nothing but heartache.

My mind travels and ears clog as he tells me about

some dish a friend presented, this is the first time making it and I don't hear the rest as his voice becomes background noise. I need to make things okay with Nqaba, apologise for my whoring and for not trusting him.

"Nqaba, I..." Great, my phone is ringing. It's probably that man who's been fooled into thinking he's a husband.

"I should get that." My forward-nervous-self stumbles and almost falls on Nqaba as I attempt to rush out of the kitchen, his hands are tightly circled on my waist, eyes judging me.

"What's wrong with you? Are you trying to lose a tooth?" He's right, my clumsiness is out to get me today. Partly I blame him, he makes me nervous since that fight we had.

It baffles me that he hasn't said anything about it, he was livid when he left and it worries me that he came back calm. Makes me wonder if he's planning something.

"S...sorry." I fight to move out of his grip, he won't

let go. He's breathing down my face, his lips too close to mine.

"You seem to have adopted a new word Tan-tan, how long will you continue saying 'sorry.'" I see what he's insinuating, my conscious has probably beat me to it and apologized on my behalf as my mouth keeps spewing the apology unnecessarily.

I find myself closing my eyes as he holds my cheek in his palm, this way I feel all of him. My body shudders violently at the feel of his cold lips brushing on mine.

"Can I kiss you?" I drown in shivers at the request, my lips twitch while they reminisce about his and how they perfectly and refreshingly fit on mine. I already feel all of him, although he hasn't kissed me yet.

"I...the..." My dry hungry mouth can only get crummy syllables out. The grip of his large hand on my waist must be sinful, he holds me like I will escape from his arms.

I don't think I can wait anymore, is this Zulu man aware of what he's doing to me? The fire he awakens from the depths of my stomach, like a black hole his presence sucks every breath from my lungs, making it hard for me to breathe.

A stifled scream emits from my mouth as he grips my waist and scoops me to place me on the kitchen counter.

With a smirk playing on his face, Nqaba slowly separates my thighs and one step has him standing in between them.

The fire in his eyes has me timidly looking away, my chin is caught in his fingers. He brings my gaze back to him and crashes his lips on mine before I could grasp anything. The kiss is fast, wolfish, and just what the doctor ordered.

His tongue is fighting to take mine, I let him in because I want all of him in me. I want to be covered with a 'Nqabayomzi blanket', soft, gentle and full of love. We're breathing like wild animals,

no one is keen to break for air. I know I'm not, lest this be a dream and if it is then let me die in his arms, in this delicious taste of heaven.

His hand slides under my garment and a jolt of energy surges through me, my legs hook around his torso pulling him closer. My hands have gone on their own mission to try and remove this heavy t-shirt he's wearing. When last was I kissed like this? Lips biting...nibbling...sucking...and tongues doing a tango. Nqaba groans and pulls back, his heavy-lidded eyes are doing what his lips are supposed to be doing, smile at me. He simpers, running a finger on his bleeding lower lip.

Oh my God, he's bleeding.

"I'm so...I..." I can't get the apology out, I bit the poor guy's lip. He must think I'm a weirdo.

"Don't be," his forefinger lands on my lips to shut me up. "I like it," he smacks my lips once. "Just hold on to me like this and I promise to never let you fall." His breath hits my face, he smells like meat. It

is now that I realise.

An adequate smile on his face, Nqaba takes my lips into his, I can taste the coppery blood in my mouth. It's not long till our clothes are flying around, the hunger for each other grows. Hands move with desperate touches, he pulls back and his now small eyes run to my bust. He buries his head on my cleavage and breathes in like he's searching for every ounce of his breath.

"Nqaba," I whimper as he slides his hands behind me and unhooks my bra, the removal is fluent with his touch. He tosses it and my eyes broaden at my undergarment landing on the hot stove.

"Nqaba." A warning has him jumping for it. "That's my favourite bra." He sneers, dropping it on the floor.

"We'll get you another one," An amused frenzied Zulu man says, kissing me once again.

His hands nonchalantly play on my breast, my veins fill up with an outpouring of electrical energy. It

travels down my spine, driving me insanely crazy.

He trails his kisses down to my breast, my hand finds a spot on his head. I lock my legs around him again and draw him closer that our bodies are fluent. There's a loud sound that's hard to ignore, it's pulling me away from this moment of ecstasy. It's my bloody phone, I should have put it on silence.

“Nqaba.”

"Mmhh," he groans, the warmth of his mouth on my breast feels so unreal.

“Nqaba my phone,” I whinge in short shudders, my heart racing faster than the blood in my veins. I don't want him to stop, but it could be about Zulu. He brings his seductive glance up and sighs before burying his face on my cleavage, gradually he moves away from me and helps me down. My t-shirt is held to me before I begin to search for it, I throw it on and rush to the living room to answer the call.

“Where are you? Go home now.” My mother's

unnerved voice resounds over the phone.

“Mama?”

“Go home, you’re supposed to be home with your husband Thandiwe. What are you doing with that man?” How does she know where I am?

“Are you in town?” I ask mystified by her knowledge.

“Are you not hearing me Thandiwe? Go home now.” her heated reprimand fills my ears. “And call your father tomorrow, he’s not feeling well.” And with that she cuts the call, leaving me in a state of confusion.

In a second an abrupt smell of smoke catches my attention, the kind that comes from the burning of timber. As I wonder whether my nose is detecting the wrong whiff, smoke particles dance in the room until it is deep and dark grey in colour.

Panic rises up and my mouth goes dry, the living room is engulfed in infernos. Watching the profound flames of infuriated fire, I can hear the

simplicity of my heart racing in my chest.

Intoxicating...pungent...

I choke and splutter under the dense smoke, it clogs my voice as I try to call out to Nqaba. Then I spot her, in the heart of the blue and orange flames, wearing the red raincoat, barefooted and glaring at me. I can almost feel the extent of her anger hitting against me...

“NQABA!!!” A scream from deep within me forces its way from my mouth, it’s as if my soul has unleashed a demon.

NTUTHUKO...

“Where the hell is Thandiwe mom? I’ve been trying her phone and it rings unanswered.” I told Thandiwe that I need her home when I come back from work, this is the second time I arrive to an empty dark house.

An hour has gone by and there is no trace of her or

Zulu.

“Relax, panicking will not get you anywhere.” She takes her sweet time to settle down on the couch and throws her feet on my table, it must be the wine she’s drinking. It makes her think she’s the queen of the castle. Her calm voice contradicts with the poker-face she’s giving me.

“I’m not going to relax.” I snap, and this is enough to get a killer stare from her. “There is a possibility that my brother is fucking my wife and you’re telling me to relax.”

“What will Nqaba do with her? Besides, he has nothing to offer her but pies and pineapple flavoured Tropika. A plain patrol attendant cannot be compared to an aspiring millionaire.” Almost comforting, but no. This is what piques me about Thandiwe, she thinks she can do anything she wants in this marriage.

“If Nqaba touches my wife...” Mom shakes her head, a smile playing on her face.

“This is your problem Ntuthuko, you seem to forget

your place in that foolish girl's life. You're her husband, you call the shots in this marriage." Her serenity is getting under my skin.

"What are you proposing mom?" A sinister smile twitches on her mouth as it teases a genuine one.

"Do what you have to do to keep her intact, get her fired from work."

"I can't do that, Thandiwe is an independent woman. She will divorce me when she finds out."

"Then make sure she doesn't find out, must I do everything for you Ntuthuko? Is it not enough that I had to help you get this lavish life? Keep that woman on a leash, control her steps. If you have to use force, do it."

"You mean hit her?"

"Well?" Clearly this old hag knows nothing about Thandiwe, she penalizes me with a stern gaze as I fail to swallow my laughter.

"Oh mom, you don't know Thandiwe do you? I might be an arse, but hitting her would be taking it too far.

She would walk from Gauteng to KZN just to get away from me,” everything about Barbra is daunting.

There’s this look she gives you that makes you feel inferior, that’s the one I’m getting right now. I shouldn’t have brought her to my house, she had insisted on coming because she saw Lumka waiting for me at the office. Barbra is going to ruin my life, I can’t not get laid because she wants me to tail my wife.

“If you want to succeed in your plans, then you have to do what I say. I’ve seen her stubbornness, she forgets who the man of the house is. Put that woman in her place or our plan will backfire,” the devil must be proud of this woman.”

BULELWA...

“Okay family it was nice while it lasted, now everyone get out of my house.” I announce to the pack, I love my family to death, but being cooked up in the house with them is not my idea of fun.

Lindiwe had proposed a thirty seconds game and I have to say that I am bored to sin, I hate having my mind challenged. Overthinking bores me and boredom makes me horny. It's 8:30pm and a bloody Friday, I should be at a club grinding on some vanilla coated hunk.

“No we can't leave now.” Twiggy and her big mouth, her pretzel is still here as well. Shouldn't he be with his side chick, promising her heaven and earth?

“Why not?” I'm on the edge of the couch, ready to show them the door. All I need is these people cramped up on my couch, to drag their asses out of my house and it's 'party baby'.

“Your father is on his way,” Lilian breaks the news that leaves me ajar.”

“That's my queue.” Ignoring gawking eyes, I grab my car keys. They can have a party here for all I care, I am not staying for Mandla. No way in hell will I spend Friday night with my father breathing down my neck.

“Where are you going?” Lindiwe needs to shut up.

“To get fucked,” I tell, shocking Lilian in the process. I’m twenty three, of course her son is getting some or I would die.

“Gcinumzi.” Lialian roars, displeased, she won’t die. “Is this the way to speak in the presence of our guest?”

“What guest? He got my sister pregnant, he is no guest, but a dead man walking. Mandla is going to kill someone when he gets here.” Lonwabo looks terrified, the sister forgot to mention that we have a crazy father. The undertaker is what he’ll be known as once he’s done with this cockroach. I get a look of disapproval from my mother, Lindiwe drops her gaze. I told her how I don’t like this fool she wants to bring into our home, she said I will learn to love him. ‘When pigs fly.’

“Your father is on his way.” Lindiwe says struggling to hide the hurt caused by my words, I’m her brother and it’s my job to protect her from vultures.

“Yes I heard you Twiggy and I’m not staying, I have a monkey on my back.” My feet are inching, I need

to get out of here.

“A monkey?” Mother is astounded.

“A craving Lilian,” my hands fall on my waist reluctantly, joy in my heart as the thought of having my daily treat surges through me. Thandiwe says I’m a sex addict and need to see a shrink, I say I’m young and living life to the fullest. “What are you craving? We can order in, you don’t have to go out son.” Mama ka-Bubu is funny, I like her.

“No darling, we can’t have that one delivered I have to fetch it myself...”

“Mommy don’t mind this idiot, he’s talking trash as usual.” Lindiwe cuts in.

“No, my son is hungry and we have to order whatever he wants.” Reaction less, but inside I’m dancing like David when he danced for God, maybe I should tell Lilian about my sexuality. She might understand, she’s like strawberries with cream... sweet and lovable.

“Mommy if you only knew what he wants,” Lindiwe narrows her crazed eyes at me, she’s the only one who knows that I’m gay. I don’t know when she found out, but she says I was obsessed with her dolls growing up and I would wear her dresses and pretend I was on the runway.

I don’t remember any of that, I dubbed her a liar because well, I’d rather be dead than seen in her clothes. Her dress sense is like Amasi with sugar, terrible. “Wena Mr. long legs, you can’t leave. You have a child sleeping in your room.”

Argh! If Nqaba did not make my d*** excited and had me drooling, I would have taken Zulu to his father a while ago, but Thor said he’ll fetch Zulu along with Thandiwe. Those two have a history together, I will find out what that sneaky girl is hiding from me.

“I am in no mood to meet Mandla, mommy please call him and tell him not to come.” I throw myself on the couch next to her, my head finds a place on her

shoulder. She feels like home and smells like it too, as old as I am, I'm still addicted to her sweet floral scent.

"I'm mommy now? I thought I was Lilian." No feathers, diamonds or sparkles for her...

"Please mama ka-Bubu," I have to plead for people not to come to my house, what is this world coming to? She brushes her hand on my cheeks causing me to wrap my arms around her shoulders.

"Fine, but you can't avoid him forever. You'll have to tell your father the truth Bubu, you can't keep pretending to be something you're not." What? I scoot away from her, agape and my heart ready to leave my ribcage. God is this your way of calling me back home?

"Mama ka-Bubu!" A wheezing whisper slides out of my mouth, Lilian wants to kill me. My eyes chase Lindiwe from opposite the room, shock has her captive. The lanky bastard next to her is watching this family drama as if it's a lousy episode of Rhythm City.

“You’re my baby, I changed your diapers and raised you.” And don’t I know that? “I know your preference,” she concludes.

“How?” I ask, can’t get my voice right.

“A mother knows everything Bubu.”

“You’re okay with it?” Lindiwe’s curiosity takes over.

“He’s my baby, my son. All I want is for you to be happy Bubu.” I love her more now. “You will need to tell your father, or else you’ll wake up married to a woman you don’t love.” I cringe at her words, I would rather jump in a lake of fire.

“Let’s say I can’t bring myself to telling him, will you let your son marry a woman mama ka-Bubu?” Her teeth spark as she finds amusement in my question, the woman lives in Takalani Sesami Street. Life is not that rosy, adult-ing is not fun, but she makes it seem like the easiest thing in the world with her smiles.

“Your brother is gay?” Mr. Long-man interrupts our

family discussion, pushing his skinny self to the edge of the couch, his dubious eyes throw me on the brink of uneasiness.

“Gay and proud darling.” I riposte, it feels so good saying it in front of my mother. I was afraid of her rejection, her approval means everything to me. I am who I am and I wouldn’t change it for anything.

“Oh!” His shifty eyes turn to his fiancé, a forceful smile on his face. “Baby, lalela neh, I have to go. Remember I promised my mother I would pass by the house? She’s probably wondering where I am.”

“Okay, let me get my things. We’ll go together,” Lindiwe says. Lonwabo stops her from dragging her pregnant self from the couch.

“No baby, I’ll go. I didn’t tell her that I was bringing you along. You know how that woman hates surprises.” Bloody fool...

“O- okay.” Pour Lindiwe is confused, I see right through his homophobic plank ass.

“Let me walk you out brother-in-law.” Let me put him to the test...he squirms and jumps a foot away

as I place my hand over his woody shoulder,
Lindiwe can't see what I see. She brought a
homophobic in my house. He bids farewell and he's
gone before we could complete the word 'goodbye.'

NQABA...

The scream slices through me like a great shard of
glass, my eyes amplify and pulse quickens. My
heart thuds like a rock rattling in a box, the scream
resounds again, desperate...terrified...Thandiwe.

My feet move before I'm aware of making a
conscious decision...one...two...three step and I'm
furiously scuttling to the living room, I have no clue
as to what I will find or what I'll do when I get there.
I find Thandiwe on her knees beside the couch,
coughing her lungs out.

"Tan-tan!"

"Umlilo Nqaba, umlilo!!!" She declares in horrific

screams and my mind is blank instantly failing to put her words together.

“Fire?” My voice founders in keeping the bewilderment away.

“Do something she’s going to burn to death, please, UYASHA NQABA, UYASHA!!!” (She’s burning.)

A crude and battle-like, heart wrenching scream of pain erupts from her mouth as she roughly grabs my shirt.

Her widened eyes tell a story of terror and torment, while as I can’t see a thing. There is no trace of a fire, the only thing occupying this room are her screams that could undoubtedly be heard from down the hall.

“Thandiwe.” I clutch her arms trying to keep her steady and maybe snap her back to reality. She’s fighting me off...

“UYASHA NQABA, SAVE HER, SAVE HER.” She somehow screams with her whole body. Eyes wide with horror, mouth sagging and exposed, her face travelling to and fro. I trace her finger to the exit

door to find nothing still.

“There is no fire and there is no one there.” I raise my voice thinking it might snap her out of the supposed dream she’s trapped in, this is the only coherent explanation.

I don’t know where Thandiwe gets the strength to push me off, she’s frantically headed to the kitchen. I trail her steps afraid of what she might do, she’s not fully sensible of her surroundings.

Eyes still locked wide, legs pounding back to the living room, a jug of water lies in her hand.

“What are you doing?” I ask overcome by her insanity, is it true that she’s losing her mind? Could it be that..no. no. no Nqaba.

I deride at the thought as it pierces the brain and ignites some instinctive pathway. Not my Tan-tan.

“I have to put out the fire, she’s going to die. Why are you standing here? Why aren’t you helping her? You should be helping her.” A scream of hysteria

and disbelief bordering on terror, my ears are straining from all that loudness. As my fingers curl around her biceps she becomes flaccid.

“Thandiwe stop!!!” My voice is authoritative and challenging, tears take pleasure in tasting her cheeks. Her chest moves in heavy puffs, her breathing rapid and shaky. I take the jug from her and place it on the coffee table.

“She’s going to die Nqaba, save her please.” I watch her drown in untold emotions, confusion and terror being the ones I can point out. She shakes her head uncontrollably and hides her ruffled face in her palms.

“Look at me Tshabalala,” my hands nestle her cheeks, fear is blatantly staring back at me through her eyes as if mocking or daring me. “All you have to do is look into my eyes,” a whisper leaves my mouth...a promise...a solemn promise. I don’t know what’s going on, but I will protect her with everything I have. “And I will never let you go.” her

hands falls on mine, assisting in caressing her cheeks.

“You will never let me go?” She repeats and I know she has found comfort in these words, her eyes are slowly falling back into calmness as they ride every corner of the room, her breathing cooperating with its owner.

“What’s wrong with me Nqaba?” and just when I thought we’re okay, her tears decide otherwise.

“Nothing is wrong with you s’thandwa sam.” She goes quiet for a while, just panting. Her mind tangled up in misperception, her facial features hold a raw quality of torture, the realness of a person consumed by pain that knows no limit or end.

“She won’t leave me alone,” she speaks, leisurely taking a sit on the couch. “Sh..she’s always in my dreams and tormenting me, sometimes I...I see her the moment I close my eyes. I was talking to my mother on the phone and then...” the verses strain from her mouth as if talking about the experiment pains her deeply. “Then there was fire and she

appeared, but she wasn't screaming, she was just standing there laughing. I wanted to run to you, but she started crying, that's when I decided to help her. I couldn't get to her, I couldn't help her."

"It's okay, don't speak anymore." I sit beside her and hold her hand, the desperation in her eyes is louder than her preceding screams.

"Ntuthuko will think I'm crazy and he'll take my son from me," she speaks of her fears.

"No one will take your son from you," Thandiwe hides her face on my chest, her arms find their way around my torso. She scoots closer and presses her body on mine. My arms gladly embrace her, one thing I am certain of is that, Thandiwe and Zulu will never be separated.

To be continued...

BURN

12...

LINDA...

It was about a few hours ago before Thandiwe's horrific experience, Linda was preparing a concoction for her husband Vusi who was lying unconscious in the bedroom, when the door swung open.

The force aroused a horrific scream from Linda's chest. As she freed unsteady breaths out of fear, a heavy presence hovered over her house in a millisecond.

Linda's body froze as terror captured her in a tight space, everything in her mind fell away leaving eerie thoughts, beyond her scariest imagination.

She crunched her teeth over her lip harder than she ever had, salted blood filled her mouth. Beads of sweat dripped down her brow, her body wanted to either run fast or hide under the table. Hide from the unknown dark presence that had evaded her house.

It felt as though her bones had no more strength and muscles had fallen numb.

Somewhere in the back of her mind a feeling of déjà vu tickled her, twenty five years ago when she entered the witchdoctor's hut and her whole being froze in fear. 'He's here, he came back to collect,' she dreadfully thought to herself. It's not fear or the numbness that's worse, but the anticipated approaching events. Thandiwe's death.

"I want out," she screamed the words, but they were inaudible. Her mouth moved with no vocabulary spewing out of it.

"Mapula." The appalling name was caught in puffing whispers as if the wind itself had released it. Thoughts of prayer were far from her, too far to reach. Sluggishly her brain picked up her feet in unbalanced movements, adrenalin rushed in floods in her system causing violent pumps.

Her quick steps were leading her to the room her husband was resting in, perhaps she'll be safe there. She missed a step, only to come crashing down with a loud thump. A petrifying wicked laugh

harassed her ears as she fell into unconsciousness.

A WHILE AFTER THANDIWE'S EPISODE.

Linda wakes up after what feels like a lifetime, the house is dark and there is no one in sight. Her mind works overtime trying to recall why she has been lying on the floor and not in bed beside her husband.

It is as if everything that happened has been wiped out of her brain. Dusting herself up, she searches for answers to her strange questions, yet a still silence awaits her, leaving her dumbfounded.

THANDIWE...

An awkward silence is standing between us as we walk to Nqaba's car, my hand is buried in his. He took it when he exited the elevator. The streets are buzzing with cars and people, most vendors are packing away their goods while others are hopping

for that extra coin.

The evening breeze is heavenly I can just stay here and bask on this man next to me. The Junction is visible from the here and surprisingly we're headed there on foot, I raise my head to find Nqaba staring back. He keeps the stare until I can't look at him, how does he make me forget my troubles without trying? Now it is guaranteed that I made a mistake by choosing Ntuthuko.

“What's wrong with your car?” I ask, wanting to know why we are walking away from it.

“Nothing,” he replies, tightening the grip on my hand.

“Okay, where are we going then?” Trust me, my curiosity will not kill me.

“I thought you might need a walk to clear your head, I don't want you cooked up in that place. It's driving you crazy.” Driving me crazy? I don't know if he means it sarcastically or he's serious, he looks

down at me apologetically. “I didn’t...”

“It’s okay, I know.” I exclaim and rest my head on his arm, as we cross the street to get to the other side.

“Mzis to ntwana.” A male voice resounds from behind us, a man in a black SUV is parked on the side of the road. He has his head out of the window, his face unapproachable and aloof, but strangely kind.

“Ndoda, unjani.” (How are you man?) Nqaba says and...okay, we’re walking back. They engage in a handshake, a few laughs before he finally acknowledges my presence. He jumps out of the car, his inquisitive short-lived look pinning me on Nqaba’s side.

“Awu suka madoda, sponono ke mang?” (Who is this?)

He says reaching out to take my hand and pastes his lips on the back.

“Ousie!” His salutation, I return with a smile. “Mzisto, this is you ntwana?” He continues smiling at me, I don’t know what he means by his observation.

“Indaba uyaphapha, I warned you about this Mzisto name.” It sounds funny coming from Nqaba, this man though makes it sound natural. He chuckles as he throws his hand behind his neck and nervously rubs it.

“Hade ntwana, eish you Zulus are a problem neh. Learn to embrace change Nqabayomzi. This is Joburg, we’ll call you by any name suitable.” He taps a displeased Nqaba’s shoulder, I have to hold back from laughing. Biyase is too reserved to be witty. “So when is the wedding?” He’s forward, Nqaba chortles bashfully.

“Did you ask who she is before concluding things in that brain of yours?” Nqaba throws back, the man takes off in a quick laugh and he’s back before we miss him.

“What else should I conclude ntwana? Le tshwarane ka matsoho.” (You’re holding hands.)

He reminds me that my hand is still wrapped around Nqaba's. I don't want to let go and I won't.

"So?" Nqaba.

"So it's not normal for Mziso to be holding hands with a woman. You remind me of Uze ntwana, eish sethoto seo was afraid of women. Nahana." He shakes his head as the thought brings a smile across his face.

"That arrogant bastard, how is he?" Will I stand here and watch them converse like I don't have a home to get to?

"The bastard is okay." The amusing stranger replies.

"Does he know that you call him a bastard behind his back?" Nqaba questions, his voice giving off a warning.

"Well if I perish, I'm taking you with me." His riposte is escorted by a grin.

"You're still crazy Neo, I thought you would've gotten help by now."

"Please refrain from saying such things in front of

beautiful women, I don't want my reputation tainted." How is he sarcastic with that straight face? "Are you going to introduce me?" his eyes point at me.

"Thandiwe this is Neo, a friend." Nqaba finally familiarises, I want to ask if he's the owner of that apartment. He looks affluent, from his attire to the car he's driving.

"Nice to meet you Neo." His charming smile pulls a beam at my lips, he's kissing my hand again.

"The pleasure is all mine Nkosazana, how does a beautiful lady like you end up with a goat like Nqabayomzi." With no words for his query, I laugh it out.

"You're Sotho?" I ask and he nods, his charismatic smile is gone. "How are you able to pronounce the clicks?"

"My wife is Zulu and she'd kill me if I butchered her language," his eyes light up at the mention of her. "This is what I get for getting a wife at Sterkfontein." He jokes but I struggle to find my way through it as

I'm reminded of my episodes.

"Do you need a ride?" Neo asks.

"No, we're good." Nqaba

"Sharp, I have to go. The wife has been blowing up my phone, women have issues Mzisto. Think about it before you commit, or better yet 'hippo it'." Okay, he laughs at his own joke. "No offense ousie."

"None taken." I lie. Neo says his goodbyes after advising Nqaba to shave and cut his hair because he will be mistaken for Sjava. Lies.

"Your friend is something else." I introduce, comfortably walking beside him. We're still going to the mall.

"He's special." It's a shocker to me that he is friends with wealthy people, first the apartment and then Neo. We make it to the mall, it's packed. Music, vibes and serenity. I love the atmosphere, Nqaba on the other hand is wearing this frown, the commotion must be getting to him. He's not really a fan of crowded places and noise.

He drags me to a table at the food court, it's packed with people feasting on different meals.

“Is street wise three okay?” Streetwise three? I thought we hated KFC, I hardly ate anything today. Lunch was disturbed by the creepy little girl same as supper. “You stay here, I'll go and order.” he's gone before I could protest.

I observe him as he walks towards the eatery, he hasn't changed over the years.

Still the same man who left me in eNquthu to make a living for us, Johannesburg swallows people.

Ntuthuko is living proof of it, speaking of the garish husband, I have a couple of missed calls from him. I'll see him when I get home, I don't need any stress. Also I have to find a way to tell him that I want out of the marriage, I was an idiot for marrying him. He has no intentions of holding my hand, I'm all alone in this godforsaken marriage.

KFC and its long queues will have you going home empty handed, Nqaba is back in twenty minutes.

Streetwise it is, he got himself pap.

“Aren’t you eating?” I ask because he’s staring and making it hard for me to open my mouth and eat, I’m not a shy eater, but his intent look makes me want to hide under the table. “Nqaba you’re...”

“I love you.” Nothing could have prepared me for this and how can he love me? I betrayed him...broke his heart and married his brother. Oh God, he’s getting closer, he reaches for my hand and it sinks into his. Warmth...security.... His eyes are piercing into mine, eager and challenging, it’s a deep penetration one that vacuums every inch of my soul. He has a way of digging into me as if he can see the most sacred parts of my being.

“I love you Thandiwe,” he repeats, his voice a winded whisper.

“Nqaba...”

“I want to fight for you, give me a word and I will fight with my life.” He cuts my words and I lose the rest as they sink back down my throat. I’m the last person he should be trusting, after everything that

has happened in the past years he still wants me?

The universe will not let us unite, there's Ntuthuko who says he loves me to death and I have a feeling he means it literally. He won't let me go that easily. Nonetheless, I want Nqaba more than anything. Then there's Reboana who has his child, she doesn't look like the type that would let him go.

"I don't know what to say." It's not the answer he wants, a twinge of disappointment plays in his eyes, he brushes it off before it takes full ownership of him.

"I want you Thandiwe, you're mine to keep and I want you back Tshabalala." This Tshabalala thing is here to stay, I see.

"What about Reboana?" I murmur, he hates it when I bring her up, he flinches as his eyes run away from me. A sigh of frustration emits from him, his hand clasps around mine, he's back to glancing into my eyes.

"Tell me you want me too and I will take care of

everything, I will take care of you and Zulu.” Take care of everything? Is there a hidden agenda behind these words? I wouldn't want him to do anything illegal.

“I messed up Nqaba, I messed up and I'm sorry. I'm sorry for betraying you, I'm sorry for not waiting like I promised and...”

“Awukahle mama,” he lightly presses a finger on my lips, clogging my words. My eyes are glued on his intimate flaming gaze, his deep fiery stares are almost like having an orgasm, but more intense than that. It's unexplainable. The love we had eight years wasn't this concentrated. “Khawula Tshabalala, that's in the past.” (Stop.)

He brushes a finger on my lips. “I had time to think and I still want you like I've always wanted you,” he regards me with this declaration, a type of hunger dwells in his eyes.

I respond with an insatiable kiss, I can't get enough of his kisses.

His hands cage my back, a tight hold that has me

trembling in his arms, I can hear his breathless inhalations as he deepens the kiss. The noise and everything around us fades away, only these two people remain with a burning passion for each other.

“Ngiyakuthanda Tshabalala.” (I love you.) He declares while his lips are pressed on mine, “ngiyakuthanda mama, ngenhliziyo yami yonke.” (I love you with all my heart.)

His sweet whispers bring about tears in my eyes, I feel it...the love...I feel its deepness...It's winged above us and hedged around us.

The lights are on, Ntuthuko is home earlier than usual. I'm not looking forward to seeing the pompous bastard, a gentle touch grabs my attention. He's the only one I want to see, the man my heart yearns for.

I love everything about him, the way he breathes, his touch...how his eyes sparkle when they look into mine. His actions tell me he loves me, his hands tell me he's there and his arms speak of unbounded protection.

“I'll walk you in. You can't carry Zulu, he's too heavy.” I can't argue with him about that. Bulelwa wasn't happy when we went to fetch Zulu, I was accused of keeping secrets from him. Apparently the friendship will cease to exist if I don't tell him about Nqaba.

My heart dives to my throat and my stomach flips and knots at the thought of having to explain my whereabouts to the spouse, I have no zeal in me to explain anything.

“Thanks.” I say to the giant walking beside me. Zulu is snoring on his shoulder, I wish my son didn't have to be in this house.

The door opens as we approach, you'd swear that Ntuthuko is that nosy neighbour who's always peeking out the window. His hands plummet into

the pocket of his chino trousers while holding an implying furrowed brow. Nqaba is greeted with a cold glare.

“Bafo, what were you doing with my wife?” A breathing fire Ntuthuko questions, the urge to attack his brother is beyond him. I see it in the way his shoulders have squared, the clenched jaw and stabbing glower. He’s ready to release his pent up rage. Nqaba is unmoved, undisturbed as if he knows that Ntuthuko will not do anything.

“NtuthI had an accident at work and Nqaba was close by, he helped me out.” Lying has become so easy lately, I will never see heaven with this untruthful mouth. Ntuthuko reputes me with a straight face, he would cuss at me if he could.

“You seem to be mistaking my brother for me, sthandwa sami and we hardly look alike.” His scornful tone is hinting.

“I’m not an idiot Ntuthuko, maybe I would call you if you availed yourself to me, but your job comes first,

right?” Somebody wipe that smirk off his face for me.

“Ulaka mkami? I am only asking, unless there is something I should know.” (Why the rage.)

“Get out of the way please,” I push through him, not before I notice Nqaba’s dangerous deadly glare directed at Ntuthuko.

Ahh! Look what the devil dragged in, my dear mother-in-law. Sitting on my sofa like she owns the house, she huffs at the sight of me. Scans me with an intimidating look. Witch.

“The man of the house is home.” Bitterness escapes her heart and evades her mouth.

“Mrs. Biyase!” I salute, so I am not allowed to address her as mom and I don’t care.

“Is this the time to come home MaMshengu?”
Argh...She’s one to talk, shouldn’t she be home with her husband?

“Mother.” Nqaba to the rescue, honestly I didn’t

have a comeback for the old witch. “You’re here?” He welcomes her with a peck on her cheek, she feigns a smile as her eyes find Zulu who is clinging on to Nqaba’s neck.

“What’s this?” A raised brow accompanies her stupid question.

“Your grandson of course.” Nqaba replies unsmilingly and places a sleeping Zulu on a two seater sofa, I don’t miss the exchange glances between Ntuthuko and mother dearest. There seems to be a veiled discussion between them. To think Nqaba will leave, he crushes his big bone on the tiny space where Zulu’s legs end. His hand lands on the child hip and takes occasional taps much to Ntuthuko’s irritation.

“I’m hungry.” Ntuthuko randomly says, that look is suggestive. I am not going to slave in the kitchen, hence I brought food.

“I brought fried chicken, I’ll dish up for you.” The smile on my face is as fake as the Gucci bag I got from Small Street.

“Since when do we eat that shit in this house?”
Since forever.

“This house? Never, but our house in Orlando?
Almost every weekend.” The truth puts a grimace
on his face, he asked and I answered.

“Is this what you’re feeding my son? Nonsense?”
Why is this witch still here?

“Surely you don’t expect me to slave in the kitchen
at 10pm.” I spit, moving to sit on one of the chairs,
Ntuthuko settles down next to his mother.

“If you were home earlier and not gallivanting the
streets with other men you would..”

“Mother, would you like me to drop you home?”
Nqaba intrudes, the tone of his voice is icy and
unwelcoming. I wouldn’t catch a ride with him if he
asked with such a tone, Barbra uncomfortably
shifts on the chair.

“What’s going on between you and your brother’s
wife?” Caught off guard by her question, I gag on
my saliva. Ntuthuka the spoiled brat sits with his
legs crossed over the other, his demeanour tells me

that they were talking about us in our absence.

“What have you established mother?” His voice is standard, but eyes are stone-cold.

“You’re always with your brother’s wife Nqabayomzi, surely that cannot be normal.”

“Define normal.” Nqaba, not backing down from his glare that has Barbra stumbling in her words.

“I- you-” she chokes, clears her throat and I instantly become her target. “Will you sit there Thandiwe while your husband is starving?”

“Would you like your food with rolls or bread?” I say to the husband who returns with narrowed eyes. I stand on my decision, I will not be cooking.

“I am not hungry anymore Thandiwe seeing that you’re useless?” he murmurs a frown claiming his features. Food is food to me and if he thinks he’s better for this type of food then the husband will starve, I can’t miss the big elephant in the room. The silence is dense and could cut through a bone.

My heart bleeds as Nqaba bids goodbye, I want to go with him. I steal glances at him as he walks to the door with Ntuthuko trailing behind him, he's walking him out. Catching a glimpse of his face as he stops at the door, a smile flutters on my mouth, a lump builds up on my throat. I don't want to cry. I spot a ghost of a smile on his facade.

Ntuthuko proceeds to move and that pushes Nqaba out as well. Blinking a few times I find Barbra blatantly glaring at me. I am done with this woman, she monitors my steps as if she's a perfect wife.

Duma is terrified of this cat, I wouldn't be surprised if she wears the pants in that marriage. Hypocrite. The sound of the banging door brings me out of my musing, Ntuthuko is back. His head is bowed and shoulders dropped, he's trying hard to hide his face with his hand.

“What happened to you?” Barbra is on her feet, inspecting an annoyed Ntuthuko's face. He doesn't want her to see. “What did that animal do to you?” Animal? Nqaba is her son as much as Ntuthuko is. Because I like things, I'm standing next to Barbra

trying to see what the fuss is about. Mama's boy has a cut lip, spots of blood around it. He must have said something to piss Nqaba off. Nqaba doesn't react unless provoked and Ntuthuko has a big mouth. I'm going to bed, these two will drive me crazy.

I decide to call my mother after putting Zulu to bed, it's late I know, but I can't sleep. I need to know what the call was about.

"Yebo," she answers just as I'm about to hang up, sounding very much awake.

"Mama, are you not sleeping?"

"No, I was praying. Your father is not feeling well my child." This is odd, she sounds calmer than she did when she called.

"What's wrong with him?" There's a minute of silence before her voice resonates on the receiving end.

"He fell, but don't worry. He'll be okay." That's a

relief, I can't afford to lose my father.

"Mama, how did you know where I was?" I ask, keen to get the problem out of the way.

"What do you mean?"

"A few hours ago, you told me to go back home to my husband." I hope she's not having memory loss.

"I haven't spoken to you since last weekend, I was waiting for your call." No way, then who was I talking to?

"Are you sure? I swear I spoke to you on the phone today, you were telling me to go back home and you said ubaba is not feeling well." Panic mocks me, my heart feels like it's about to explode.

"Your father is sick yes, but we didn't talk on the phone." her voice breaks and a hefty sigh springs over the phone. There's a heavy silence followed by sniffing, she's crying. "Thandiwe listen to me, you need to pray. Turn to God my child, he will never disappoint you." she's panicking and I am dragged into the same panic.

“What is going on mama?” My chest is heavy, I can’t breathe and everything around me is spinning. My heart beats like it’s trying to escape.

“I am sorry my baby, I love you Thandiwe, please don’t ever forget that. Pray my baby, pray.” The call disengages, either my mother is acting strange or my fears are coming to pass. I am losing touch with reality.

To be continued...

BURN

13...

NQABA...

The past few days have been hard for me, staying away from Thandiwe has become more difficult now that I have tasted her. Responsibilities kept me away from her, texts and phone calls are not enough.

Limited phone calls actually because my brother is said to be watching her moves, I am certain though that if she gives me a go ahead I will confess everything to my brother without any fear.

The time has arrived to take back what belongs to me, Thandiwe was never his to keep.

It's been a long day and I'm rushing home from KZN, Reboana knows nothing about my arrival, I didn't call to ask if she's home.

Excitement fills my heart at the thought of seeing Ofentse.

Ambling in the house, I'm welcomed by familiar sounds, erotic. Reboana better be watching porn or I swear to God, I am going to kill her.

First I check Ofentse's room, she's not there. I hope the child is not next door at this time. Reboana has this tendency of leaving her with a neighbour, she says she wasn't ready to be a mother. It's not an excuse though to neglect the child.

The bedroom door is open, barely a crack and there she is, arms and legs wrapped up around a man in my fucking bed. Since it's my house, I let myself in. The sound of the door shutting grabs their attention, Reboana is frozen in fear, while the bastard covers himself with a bed sheet.

“No, don't stop on my account.” A dark chuckle emits deep within, images of her lifeless body play in my head. How dare she disrespect my home like this?

“Mzi...” she gasps, pulling away from the man riding her.

“Please continue.” I groan, anger located in my voice.

“I'm...so...sorry Mzi...It's not what it looks like.” Stupid bitch, I decide to turn my attention to the man who's been giving her pleasure in my absence.

“Mfowethu, maybe you understand what I'm saying since usisi has her ears blocked by her screams. Qhubekani mfowethu.” (Continue my brother.)

“Ngiyaxolisa bafo, she said you were out of town...”
Is this fool justifying, defiling my house? It appears they are both dimwits.

“Ngithi bhebha lomuntu mgodoyi.” Reboana shrieks as I pull out a gun from my waist.

“Mzi, baby...I’m sorry. Please...” her voice quavers, she jumps off the bed, falls to her knees butt naked and starts to crawl to me, I move avoiding her filthy hands from touching me. “I’m sorry Mzi, please listen to me.”

“I want you out of my house now.” My calmness narrows me, I’m afraid I will kill someone today.

“Please, don’t do this to me. I love you, where will I go?” Incapable of controlling my anger, I grab her by the neck and pin her against the wall, legs dangling from the ground, eyes widened, mouth slightly open, she gags trying to speak. I tighten the grip, the plot is to squeeze the life out of her.

“My guy stop, you’re going to kill her.” The idiot shouts, unyielding from the bed. I shrug his petition away, my goal is to see this woman lose her life.

Her hands clasp my wrists, struggling to loose from my tight grip. I find joy in seeing her squirm and throttle.

“Mz...” she rasps and quickly swallows my name.

“Mfowethu, I’m begging you, my brother. She has a child, what will become of her if you kill her mother.”
Fuck! I hate how this moron is knocking some common sense into me.

“Two minutes Reboana, two fucking minutes and I want you out of my house.” My voice trembles with rage, freeing her from my grip she falls with a clatter. I ignore her hysterical coughs, her little boyfriend is trembling under the sheets. I am going to deal with him my own way.

THANDIWE...

I’m in the kitchen when someone presses against me from behind, I shriek and panic until a familiar voice calms me down, but not enough to keep me

still.

“You smell good,” a kiss comes with this declaration. His face is buried on the curl of my neck, he plants kisses that make me want to gag. Ntuthuko did not sleep at home last night nor did he call to report his location.

He’s grinding against me, pushing me toward the table, his perspiration rubbing on my neck. He smells like sex and Avon fragrance, no one can miss the smell of Avon. At least I know the woman he’s fucking is not some sugar mama who’s paying his bills since I’m not sure what he does.

“I’m on my periods” I move the hand sliding up my thighs, I am not going to let him inside me. The thought is revolting.

“I won’t go all the way in, just a tip.” He says, unbuttoning my shirt and kissing his way down my chest. The smell stemming from him makes me want to puke. Eight years, I was submissive, I supported him during his toughest times in life. And today he treats me like a piece of meat he wants to

ravish whenever he feels like it.

“Stop.” I can’t take my mind off the scent that has filled my nostrils. What does Ntuthuko take me for? I clench my teeth at the disrespect he portrays to me as his wife, I am not a saint, but to come at me reeking of sex and some cheap fragrance. Fuck him.

“What the hell is your problem?” He howls as I move away from him, his face has changed to that of a monster.

“You smell like another woman and sex.” If I perish, I perish.

“What?” The twitch in his eyes is evidence, I caught him red handed.

“You’re disgusting.” I can’t hold back my thoughts.

“Stop being paranoid, you’re imagining things Thandiwe?” Of course he’ll deny it.

“Am I Ntuthuko? Am I really paranoid?”

“Yes,” he snaps. “Why don’t you ask me where I was yesterday? Were you entertaining other men that

you didn't notice my absence?" he grips my wrist and pushes me against the fridge, he looks different. Almost drunk, red cells laced over his dark eyes. It's a creepy look that has my heart racing for first place.

"What are you talking about? It's not my job to keep tabs on you." My riposte earns me another rough push against the fridge, pain rushes down my back.

"It's your fucking job as my wife, what if something bad had happened to me? Who were you with last night Thandiwe? Was my brother here?" He seethes, moving his face closer to mine. His presence switches, a dark aura and a hair-raising occurrence lingers over him.

A look of disgust and hate resides on his features, I can't recognise this man. This is not Ntuthuko, his eyes are full of wrath and evil. His appearance is that of a man who is possessed.

"You're hurting me, let go." I snap, trying to push him off. I'm trying hard to stay calm and halt the shudders that have taken over my body.

“Tell me who you were with last night,” I gasp, shocked by his unexpected outburst. Desperate to move away from him, I smash my shoulder on his chest. My actions are unproductive, I’m pushing against a concrete wall.

“I was here, at home.” Crying would give him the satisfaction, I have to deny him that at all cost, push back the tears that are fighting to be seen.

“You’re mine, woman, no other man will ever have you. I will kill them all, starting with the who thinks he owns you.” he growls and pulls away with a devilish smile that has me shivering with fear.

“Now feed me, I’m hungry.” The pompous bastard, I hate him. Panting and a bit shaken I turn back to my pots...tonight...I’m leaving this house tonight.

“It’s time Mapula.” A creepy whisper spins me around to find Ntuthuko standing on the doorway with a patronizing appearance. My eyes widen, heat rushes through my body...this name...that girl had mentioned this name.

“What did you say?” I have to double check, nothing

makes sense anymore. I'm living in a world where nothing seems real.

"I said don't burn the food." He replies and walks out leaving me in total disarray.

Ntuthuko appears to be a bit calm now, I've been observing him seated on the couch. He is not the man who attacked me in the kitchen.

"Do you want to say something dada?" Zulu's minuscule voice pulls me back from my pondering, I hardly noticed Ntuthuko scrutinising my baby under his gaze.

"Dada!" Zulu calls once more, he doesn't seem to understand why his father is glaring at him. Ntuthuko clicks his tongue, I know he's not fond of Zulu, but I did not expect him to jump at the child.

"Ntuthuko!" I stand on my feet ready to stop him from hitting my son, he pauses before his hand reaches his face. Zulu is curled up on the floor

terrified, he cannot find a reason behind his father's hostility towards him. Is he being crucified for my sins?

“You are a stupid boy, how many times do I have to tell you not to call me dada. What is that? Are you gay boy?” That is half of the anger buried in the depths of his stomach, if he were to release all of it. Little Zulu's soul would be soaring to heaven in a spark.

“Answer me, are you gay?” His fierce angry voice echoes through the house, Zulu would answer him if he knew what the word meant. I rush to take Zulu in my arms, my gaze transfixed on this child-bully. Eye ball to eye ball, his glare challenges me to make a move.

“What are you teaching my son Thandiwe? Why does he have gay tendencies?” He doesn't have to shout for you to feel insulted.

“What is gay da...baba?” His lower lip quivering, eyes flashing with tears. The whole of Victoria Falls is ready to flow down his face.

“Zulu go to your room,” he hesitates at my request, but eventually moves. I watch his little feet scurry away. Ntuthuko is not happy about my parenting, well I am not happy about his.

“Why does he call me that?” A stupid question resembling him sweeps out of his mouth.

“He’s been calling you that his whole life, why do you suddenly have a problem with it?”

“I’ve always hated it, he needs to stop.” I don’t see the need to shout.

“You bastard, you have no right Ntuthuko, no right to lay a hand on my son. I don’t know who the hell you think you are, but I am not going to allow this.”

“What are you going to do Thandiwe? You are powerless.” He spits, provoking me.

“Dare try me, touch my son and I swear to God I will kill you.” These haughty laughs of his are so exaggerated, I’ve gotten used to them.

“Just so you know, Zulu might be Nqaba’s son.”

This ought to put him in his place, agape his laughter halts.

“And I’m sure you know how your brother Mzi can be, he doesn’t take shit.” I declare insultingly, I feel his eyes stabbing me as I gait away from him. My bags are packed, I will take my son and leave while the pompous bastard sleeps.

To be continued...

BURN

14...

THANDIWE...

“Oh no you don’t,” he churns and pulls me back as I take my third step. Rage boiling in his eyes that have turned red in a microsecond. “My brother, Thandiwe? You slept with my bro...?” The truth shatters something in him. Amidst the rage, there’s a sadness in his eyes, a heaviness, a stiff sorrow

that slows his speech. “How could you do this to me?”

“I knew him before you Ntuthuko and I swear on Zulu’s life that I never slept with him while I was with you.” Is there even a reason to mention this? The marriage is over in any case.

“That’s a load of bullshit and you know it, you’re evil Thandiwe. Jumping from one brother’s bed to the other, are you an aspiring prostitute?” His insults hurt more than I would like to admit.

“You take pride in insulting me lately, look I was wrong, I know and I should’ve told you.” I rejoinder and he esteems me with an unbothered countenance.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” He barks, apparently he can’t stop grabbing my arm, I claim it back from his tight grip.

“I was afraid okay.” My voice peaks, I have stirred up a fight, something that could’ve been avoided by keeping my mouth shut. Anger really is a bitch, letting me spill the news to him like that was harsh.

He's hurting, it's in his eyes and I don't understand it. Ntuthuko has no stitch of kindness in his being for Zulu, he treats him like an outcast.

"Afraid of what? That Zulu might lose his trust fund? Because there is no way my brother can afford his school fees? You're not far from a gold digger Thandiwe, my mother warned me about you. She warned me about village girls and how they are always looking for a walking atm."

"Damn you Ntuthuko," I have to stop myself from landing a slap on his face, I've had enough of his insults. Yes I fucked up, but I don't deserve to be degraded like this. I shared my life with this man, the least he can do is respect me.

"No, damn you Thandiwe. Damn you for lying to me, damn you for making me love a low life like you, only to deny me my place in your life." He yells at the top, restraining me against the wall with the palm of his hand pressing on my chest.

"I loved you Ntuthuko," Snapping, I push back and

move inches away from him. “I loved you for the years we spent together. Hell, I loved you when I said I do.” I say a little louder, walking away from the living room. It’s too close to the bedrooms and Zulu will be alerted of this quarrel. Ntuthuko grabs my arm and twirls me around with one powerful jerk.

“No you didn’t...” he’s in my face as he gets in my personal space.

“Yes I did-” shouting back is expected in this case.

“You didn’t, you didn’t love me Thandiwe. You fucking loved the idea of having my brother, I reminded you of him, didn’t I? The whole time I was with you and you loved Mzi, you made a fool of me.” He’s thrown into a cold humourless laughing frenzy.

“Now that I think about it, our sex life has been awful, dry and unsatisfying. So all this while you were thinking about him, you kept me in the cold because of Mzi. Everything makes sense now,” the cold chuckle again. “I had my suspicions, saw how he looked at you. I’ve been betrayed.”

“I didn’t betray you, I gave you everything, all that I was.” I crackle, loudly.

“Stop lying, stop lying. You gave me nothing, but years of heartache and miserable sex. I waited for you to love me, I waited Thandiwe. But you never bothered to look at me, no matter how hard I tried to make you love me. ”

“I’m not going to argue about this anymore, I’m tired...” I’m brought back to where I was standing by another painful jolt.

“You brought this up, didn’t you? Now finish what you started.” He maintains.

“What do you want from me Ntuthuko? I made a mistake, should you crucify me for it?”

“Oh please,” he throws his head back chortling.

“You knew very well what you were doing, you had many chances to come clean, but you enjoyed these two brothers fighting over you. You toxic whore.”

“What about you Mr. I don’t want any more kids, I went through three miscarriages and not once did

you comfort me. I was broken and depressed, yet you would blame me for losing the pregnancies. You were never there for me Ntuthuko.”

“What? Was I supposed to organise a funeral for wasted sperm? I told you I didn’t want any more kids, but you made sure to get pregnant all three times.” He spews audaciously.

“You’re an evil bastard Ntuthuko, I hate you and I want a divorce.” I feel the declaration come from the core of my stomach.

“No, no sweetheart, till death do us part, remember? I am not letting you go Thandiwe, you’re not going anywhere.” Rage...jealousy...pain...all these have taken over, we’re yelling at the top of our lungs. Each fighting to be heard, each fighting to be understood...it’s ‘each’ man for himself now...I have put his feelings aside and he’s done the same with mine. The fire I have ignited cannot be extinguished...

“My brother will never have you, I swear Thandiwe.

Even if I have to slaughter this little family we have, so help me God I will.” His threat stops the beating of my heart.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because I love you my sweet Thandiwe,” a cold glare glazes his face, a devilish spine chilling glare. “I love you to death.”

“I hate you and I am not going to stay in this house. If I die, I die, I am taking my son away from you.” I allow my feet to move me up the old staircase, the wooden stairs creak with each pounded step. There’s an extra pair plodding behind, his presence weighs heavy on my shoulders. I make sure to pick up my pace, rushing to Zulu’s room.

“Thandiwe.” Ntuthuko yells, loud enough for Zulu to have heard. I don’t want my son exposed to this, whatever this is. “Stop Thandiwe, you’re not leaving this house.” A tight grip pulls my hand, the grab forces me a few steps back. Goggle-eyed, I stagger to meet Ntuthuko’s cold face.

“What are you doing?” I shout, disregarding my question and in a unit of time, he pulls the bedroom door shut and locks it. Zulu is in there.

“Open this door Ntuthuko,” I must be pulling his leg, judging from the smirk on his face. I’m unaware of what’s in his mind, I have to get my son out of there.

“You’re not leaving this house, not if I have anything to do with it,” he booms.

“What the fuck do you want from me?” I murmur, minding Zulu in his room.

“To be a fucking wife, is that too much to ask? I am not stupid Thandiwe, I will not have my brother take my son from me. That boy is not going anywhere, he is mine and no DNA test will be done on him.”

“Yes, yes you are stupid Ntuthuko. You’re a useless father...” dishing out all the possible cuss words my brain can provide, I push past him with a task to force the door open. It's a futile move, the fool has kept the key in his pocket.

Cussing and belittling him...his arrogance...sudden fashion sense...ego and somewhere in between I mention his mother. I don't know if that's what got me the slap that has left me stunned and my head spinning.

My hand takes up the job to ease the throbbing pain on my cheek while I try to grasp what just happened.

Ntuthuko Biyase did not just hit me, not this man in front of me. My pig-headedness will get me killed one day, my hand crashes on his cheek before I could register everything.

And it's like I poured gasoline on a burning house, he punches me across the face. My heart falls right through my heels when another punch sends me on the floor, an unexpected battering begins.

“Mama, mama!!! Open the door, mama vula!!!” Zulu has heard my suppressed screams and probably the loud thumping, he's banging on the door pleading to be let out. His little screams are more painful than the blows on my body. Ntuthuko continues like he can't hear the child, his eyes are emotionless.

All of his anger falls on me, the kicks, the punches... he's groaning like an animal as he beats me like I am a nothing and the only defense I have is to curl my body on the wooden floor.

I can't recall how long the beating has been going on for, only the final kick and sound of his footsteps moving away from me.

“Ungijwayela amasimba wena Thandiwe, we'll see if you'll leave this house without your son and if you dare call for help. I will end everyone in this house before anyone gets here, Zulu will be first on the list.” He speaks of a murder suicide, my heart and breathing stops, my world comes crumbling at the realization that he could kill us and there is nothing I can do about it.

I hear my son crying from the background like his heart has been split in two. I want to get to him and comfort him. I want to tell him it's okay, that I'm okay, but just like my ancestors my voice too has turned against me.

Weak, battered and immobile, I watch Ntuthuko's steps lead him to my son's room. He pauses, turns and with a click of a tongue, shuts the door behind him. Everything crashes around me as I hear the crack of the key. One move from me and he'll kill my baby, he's left me powerless.

NQABA...

"Thank you for letting me stay," she's brazenly standing behind the couch, staring right at me. Reba knows how to play with her tears, the crocodile tears streaking down her cheeks do not move anything in me.

"I did it for Ofentse, she needs a home." I riposte, indifferently.

"You hurt me Mzi, you brought another woman into our relationship." Her sobs begin a story I will never hear the end of, I give her a look and she drops her gaze. "I was lonely, somehow I knew that I would never taste your love. Thandiwe was..."

“Don’t say her name.” I hiss quietly, Ofentse is sleeping in her room. The neighbour brought her after hearing a commotion outside, Reboana screaming and pleading that I let her stay and Ofentse’s presence put out the blood boiling inside me. I can’t abandon that little girl, I’m the only father she knows. Taking a long weighty sigh, Reboana settles down next to me. Extends a hand to reach mine and meets my rejection.

“I’m sorry,” quietly, she declares. “But shouldn’t you take responsibility as well Mzi? I am not the only one at fault here, you brought me into your life and failed to fulfil your duties as my partner.”

“What duties? Didn’t I give you a home, I took care of you and our child.” Reboana shakes her head, renouncing my declaration.

“You might have done all that, but you had no plans in fulfilling your duties as my man. You denied me a chance to love you right, you were selfish with your love and kept it for her. Do I even have a place in your heart?” I don’t need to think about this, my heart had fallen into numbness. Against my will, it

refused to love anyone else.

“I care about you,” I say, she huffs and emits a quick chuckle. “I know it’s not what you want to hear, I’m incapable of loving myself Reba, let alone anyone else.”

“Because you gave it all to her?” Her jaw clenches, not out of anger, but pain. “That’s not fair Mzi, what about the rest of us who crave and yearn for your love? The world doesn’t consist of Thandiwe alone, I’m here and I want to love and take care of you.”

“You’re asking for something I can’t give.” I return, guilt laughing in my face. I hurt this woman with my selfishness, put my feelings before hers and drove her to infidelity.

Her hand flies to her bruised neck, I don’t need these showers of guilt that have come to victimise me. “How is your neck?” she shrugs. “I’m sorry, I could have handled this a lot better. You didn’t have to bring him in my house Reboana, couldn’t you do this somewhere else, but here? Do you disregard me that much that, you would bring a man in my

house? My bed Reboana?”

Dropping her gaze she says, “I’m sorry, it was stupid of me.”

“Does he love you?” Her teary eyes rise.

“He says he does,” softly and unfeeling she replies.

“Do you trust him around Ofents e?” she nods and I believe her.

“But I want you Mzi, I love you not him.” her voice cracks.

“We can’t force this anymore, it’s over.” I say.

“No,” she stifles a sob. “Please don’t do this.” A strain in her voice, Reboana desperately implores.

“It has been long and coming, even if I decide to give us a chance. It’ll never work, not after what I saw. I’m moving out, you can stay here, Ofents e needs a home.” Eyes glistening with tears, shock avails itself and her pupils dilate.

“Please you can’t leave me Mzi, can’t we work

things out?” She hooks her arms around my neck, plants kisses on my face. Leisurely I push her back and get up on my feet.

“Go to bed, it’s late. We’ll talk in the morning.”

Reboana closes her eyes to my request, leans back on the couch and entertains waterworks. The bruises on her neck conjure up an unavoidable guilt, I would never hurt a woman. How did I let myself go like that?

“I’m sorry again Reboana, I’m sorry for hurting you,” and I mean about everything, I sit back down and let her rest on my chest. Reboana and Ofentse will be okay, I will make sure of it. Life has to go on though, I can’t continue to live a lie.

THANDIWE...

The knowledge that Ntuthuko can do something like this breaks something inside me, something that will remain long after my wounds have healed.

I have no strength to get up, my mind fails to relay a message to my body.

Time seems to pass me by, every tick, every minute and every second passes me like I'm a soul that has left this earth. Eventually I am able to get my body to cooperate with my mind.

My body is struggling to numb the pain, to repair the damage.

Unable to move, with any grace my movements are lopsided, it takes me a while to drag my painful body to my bedroom.

Gaiting in front of the mirror, I strip off my top layer, on my ribs there are black swellings that will only hollow out over the coming week. My jaw is as blue as my ribs that bare congealed blood. Relief embraces me seeing that my eyes were spared.

I have work tomorrow, but I don't need to be strolling about in public, so I guess I'll have to hide in this dark hovel for a while. Leaving this house means leaving my son behind, something I can't afford to do.

The doorbell calls for my attention, great I forgot I had asked Bulelwa to fetch us at 11pm. It's almost 12am, Ntuthuko hasn't come out of Zulu's room.

Knowing Bulelwa, he won't leave until I tell him to, my silence will alert him and he'll call the police. Walking to the door takes me longer than usual, I reach the light switch to turn it off before opening the door. This way my bruised face will be hidden from his sight.

"I didn't get this beauty from Mandla's genes Tee, it's all from sleeping. What's going on? I've been waiting hours, you said eleven." He's whispering, I told him Ntuthuko would be sleeping by this time. "Why are you standing in the dark? Where is bafoza? We should get going," he continues without stopping, his eyes scanning the house. "Yoh girl, this is one ugly ass house, the darkness can't even hide its ugliness. How did that potato head convince you to live here? It's so unnecessary,

where are your bags?” I think he can sense my foul mood hence he stops blabbering. His full attention turns to me.

“What’s going on Tee? Why are you standing in the dark?” He asks, softly.

“We’re not leaving anymore.” I have to push away tears, it’s a good thing he can’t see me.

“Why? You said you’re leaving that fool, don’t tell me he convinced you to stay. And where is the light switch? My eyes are straining.” He finds it, don’t ask me how. He’s too forward and shrewd. Open-mouthed he ogles at me, his gaze points out every bruise on my face. “Oh my heavens, did he do this to you?” He reposes me with pity which instantly switches to anger. I’m ashamed to speak as I’m packed up against the door.

“Where is he?”

“Locked up with Zulu in his bedroom, he won’t let us go. He said he’ll kill us-” Attentively I narrate everything leaving nothing uncovered, from my life

in the village to this very moment.

“Tee let’s go, I’m taking you out of here.” His tone is demanding and final.

“I can’t Bubu, I can’t leave my son.” I reply, frightened.

“He won’t do anything to him, but you’re not safe Tee. That man might kill you. Look at you, looking like you were having wild sex with John Cena.” Everything boils down to sex with this one. “How are you going to explain those bruises? Uphilo Mike Tyson, I’m going to deal with him.” He starts moving towards the stairs and I can’t let him do that, Ntuthuko will hurt him.

Bulelwa is not really masculine, his emotional capacity is that of a woman. One slap from Ntuthuko will send him in tears.

“Please Bulelwa, you’ll make things worse. Ntuthuko is not himself, he’ll hurt you.” He shakes his head because what I’m saying is not registering, mostly because he’s stubborn.

“What could be worse than this?” He groans, waving his hand over my discoloured face. He doesn’t care about being discreet anymore, tears streak down my face. I brought this upon myself, it’s my fault, I put my son’s life in danger.

“A murder suicide Bulelwa, you didn’t see the coldness on his face.” Desperation covers my voice, and I hope Bulelwa will let this go. He needs to let this go, maybe Ntuthuko will snap out of it in a few days. He’s angry right now and I understand, I hurt him. “You have to go.”

“I’m going to call Thor.” He dubbed Nqaba with this name.

“You’re not listening to me, Ntuthuko is locked up in the bedroom with my son. If I call the police or anyone, he will kill him and himself, that’s if he can’t get to me first. So calling Nqaba will make things worse.” His breathing peaks as he begins pacing about the room, his movements make me dizzy.

“Oh my God Tee, what are we going to do?”

“Nothing, I will take care of this. You need to go now,

he can't know that you're here." I implore, dragging him back to the door.

"This is wrong Tee, he's holding you hostage. This is illegal." Bulelwa is only adding to my stress, I don't want to think what Ntuthuko might do if he finds him here. In due course he leaves, but not before giving me a speech about my stupidity and promises to come back the next day.

To be continued...

BURN

15...

NTUTHUKO

"Why are you calling me so late at night Ntuthuko? Is everything okay?" Barbra complains in a sluggish tone.

"Our plan might backfire mom, Thandiwe wants to

leave me for Mzi.” I haven’t been able to sleep since the fight. The insults got too much and I was compelled to lay a hand on her, she wanted to leave me and no way would I ever let that happen.

Suddenly I remembered mom’s words ‘put her in her place.’ And that’s what I did, if I lose Zulu and Thandiwe I will lose it all. “Those two betrayed me mom, they made a fool of me.”

“Oh, she eventually told you?” The casualty in her tone digs a hole in my heart.

“You knew?” I can’t imagine why she would hide this fact from me.

“Oh come on, sometimes I think I babied you a lot. Don’t tell me you’re about to cry.” There is no remorse in her voice, mom is as cold as ice.

Sometimes I wonder how she became a mother. Could she be the reason Veronica is the way she is? My sister is terrified of this woman.

“You’re evil mom, I have been deceived by my wife and brother.” I pop.

“Oh suck it up, it was long before you knew

Thandiwe.”

“Okay, what about Zulu? She says the boy could be his. I know Mzi, he will want to do a DNA test. What if he is Mzi’s son?” I say moving away from Zulu’s bed, with great difficulty I managed to put him to sleep.

“Don’t worry about that, Zulu is your son and no one will take him from you.” I don’t know if I should laugh at her or believe her, how is she so sure of what she’s saying? “Where is Thandiwe? Don’t let her go.”

“Probably sleeping, she won’t be going anywhere. I threatened a murder suicide, if she dares call anyone they will meet a gruesome discovery.” Mom chuckles proudly, if she were here she would be patting my shoulder.

“Good, kindness will not get you anywhere in life. You have to fight for what you want.” She says and fight I will.

THANDIWE

I don't know when Ntuthuko came to bed and I didn't think he would ever leave Zulu's room. I have to call Nqaba, maybe he can help us. I need to get out of here.

Making sure that Ntuthuko is fast asleep, I toddle to the bathroom to make a phone call. My hope dies when I leave two missed calls on Nqaba's phone, he's probably sleeping.

I decide to try Bulelwa, it feels like forever till his husky voice fills the line.

"Is he dead? Did you use a gun or a knife? Please tell me you poisoned the son of a bitch." Bulelwa's talkativeness has to be a disease.

"I need you to come and get us, Ntuthuko is sleeping. We'll wait for you outside the gate. If I'm not out in ten minutes, leave." I quickly make my request known.

"Why leave? Did you call Thor? He can help you Tee."

“He’s not answering the phone, he’s probably sleeping. Please hurry, this is our only chance.” Peeping through the bathroom door, I see Ntuthuko tossing on the bed. Calmness kisses me as he continues with his snores.

“Say, do you know if witches Uber at night? I might as well pretend to be a son of a witch, since I’ll be travelling in the witch-hour.” This is his way of complaining.

“Bubu come on, there is no time.” I’m whispering, one wrong move and everything could backfire.

“Fine,” he groans. “I need to find my cross, bible and the anointing Lilian got from that church where they shout I receive throughout the whole sermon. Black people don’t travel at this time of the night Tee.” Lord thank you for this friend.

It has been decided, I am leaving this dark hovel.

After making sure that Ntuthuko is fast asleep, I sneak out of the bedroom taking gentle steps to Zulu's room. The dark corridor is eerie, creeps me out every time.

The last time I spoke to my mother she told me to pray and I've been doing just that. The bad dreams have stopped, though I can't shake the feeling that whenever Nqaba is around these episodes seem to take place. I might just be exaggerating.

This is what I have been reduced to, a woman who leaves her husband's house like a thief in the night, "Zulu wake up." He tosses on the bed like a little puppy, I hate to do this, but there is no other way. Ntuthuko promised to take my son from me, I have to keep him away from him at all cost.

We're going to go to Nquthu, Zulu will have to miss school for a couple of days until I sort out our living arrangements. We make it down safely, the lights are out, I can still find my path, though.

"Where are you going?" If witches were to reveal

themselves like this, we would be rid of them before the second coming. Who doesn't want to hear the words 'well done my good and faithful servant? What is she doing here? Barbra slowly walks to me from the kitchen's doorway.

"We're going out," my answer. Her cold eyes narrow, they race to Zulu who is clinging on to my jacket then back to me.

"Not with my grandchild," she snaps.

"My son-" I make it a point to emphasize on that. "Goes where I go." Barbra is as hard as an iron, emotionless and unkind. She regards me with a grave frown.

"My son is not going anywhere." Startled by Ntuthuko's roars from behind, my brain fails to arrange answers as to how or when he got here. He's plodding in from the kitchen as well.

Slightly I shove Zulu behind me, taking random steps back. Ntuthuko glares with a peculiar look, he seems to take delight in this.

"I wouldn't move if I were you Thandiwe." A cruel

smirk forms on his face, eyes glued on me.

“Please let us go Ntuthuko,” I implore, but deep inside I am seething.

“Zulu come to dada.” The bastard stretches a hand out to Zulu.

“No.” My voice fails me due to distress.

“It’s okay son, come to dada.” I feel my chest tighten into a knot like a cramp and a quiet rage builds inside.

“I want to go with mama.” Zulu declines.

“Mama is not going anywhere,” The spouse exclaims, with a smirk on his face he reveals a gun on his hip and winks. I have to force myself to remain calm for Zulu’s sake.

“Ntuthuko...”

“Ssshhhh!!!” he gestures by pressing a finger on his lips. “Not in front of the boy. Would you be so kind and take Zulu to bed, mom.”

“Nooo.” Shielding Zulu, I snap at the old hag who’s trying to walk over me.

“You’re scaring the boy MaMshengu.” Her glare is scaring me, but I refuse to give in.

“Don’t touch my son.” Barbra staggers back as I push my hands against her chest, in a split second Ntuthuko has me trapped around his arms. He’s so big I can’t fight him.

Zulu accepts a confused look. His panicky eyes shifting from me to this man, he doesn’t understand what is going on. If I scream he will be notified that something is wrong and I can’t have that.

“Please Ntuthuko, let us go.” A frantic murmur calls out to him.

“Come my baby, let mama and dada play.” Barbra and her bloody smart mouth plant a lie in my son’s head, he’s eight. What else can he do, but follow his grandmother?

Ntuthuko moves away the moment they are out of sight. The devil must be angered that I took my mother’s advice and turned to God. He’s going all out to ruin my life.

“Don’t hurt him please,” I have no tears to cry,

thoughts of death is all I can offer.

“Nothing will happen to him if you behave. My love, why do you want to leave me?” He’s strolling back to me, cockiness playing around him. “You know I was browsing through some caskets on the internet. And I found three perfect ones. Did you know they have his and hers coffins? Shocking right?” He gives out a quiet laughter.

“And I found this perfect little one for our son, it’s white. He’ll look like an angel in it. Pity we won’t see him. Do you think our funeral will be beautiful? I know it will.” I’m frozen in my spot, hopeless. His words drain me of every feeling, replacing them with despair and fear. Its claws wrap around my brain, chokes every breath from my lungs, leaving my body heaving.

“Why are you doing this? Why won’t you let us go?”

“You will soon find out, stop thinking a lot, you’ll give yourself a headache.” He says and walks away. The door is just behind me, but I can’t leave.

NTUTHUKO...

“NTUTHUKO, NTUTHUKO!!!” And so it begins, Thandiwe’s voice resounds from upstairs. I can hear her feet violently pounding on the floor. “Where are you, you son of a bitch?” This is going to be fun.” And she appears in the living room, approaching me in staggering exhaustion, quickening the pace to an almost-run.

“Where is my son?” she grunts, temper dancing on her face. I made plans while she slept last night and what a good morning she has woken up to.

“He’s safe, don’t worry.” I reply looking up at her. I am not one to give up, Thandiwe and Nqabayomzi will pay for what they did to me. She claims that they are in love. Bull.

She is my wife and I am not letting her go. What good will Thandiwe be to me when we’re divorced?

My mother will kill me if I let this happen, the plan is

in motion and a divorce will ruin everything. Death though is a perfect way out, but hiding Zulu is even better. This will drive her insane like mom had said.

“Where is my son Ntuthuko?” Her voice cracks.

“Please tell me where my son is. Where is Zulu?”

She pleads, in the grip of sorrow, wild eyes, pupils dilated, a shrill scream and arms flapping almost comically.

“You worry too much wifey, am I not his father? Our son is safe, at least he’s far from this negative environment. We can fix our marriage while he’s away.”

“What do you mean he’s away? Where did you take him?” Thandiwe is glaring at me bewildered, in wait of an answer I can’t provide.

“Let’s just say our son will experience life in a new country for some time, let the boy live a little. He’s been cooked up in South Africa since he was born.” She falls into a complete state of panic, her body wracks with raw sobs and shudders like a leaf.

Terror devours every cell in her body, swelling them with fear.

“Please give me back my son.” Crying, she grabs my leg. There is a desperate plea in the way she clings to it, her head presses against my knee. “I will do anything please, I won’t leave you and go Ntuthuko.” An overwhelming sense of dread consumes her, I think of getting her a glass of water as she starts hyperventilating. Dry mouth, chest moving on its own accord.

“Would you calm down?” I snap as the sound of a knock at the door catches our attention.

“Thandiwe open the door, are you in there?” I knew he wouldn’t stay away, I could kill him. My arms wrap around Thandiwe’s waist from behind as she attempts to run to the door.

“Let me...” My hand makes it to her mouth in time to clog her words, she kicks and squirms in my arms.

With my lips pressing on her ear, I mutter...

“You need to calm down, if you say anything to him, you will never see your son again. I am not kidding Thandiwe, if the people who have Zulu don’t hear from me in thirty minutes, they have orders to take him down. The next time you see your son will be in a tiny coffin.” I hear her scream in sobs against my hand, her body sinks to the floor and she slaps her mouth to shut her cries.

“Clean yourself up, I don’t want my brother thinking I’m abusing my wife.” Taking heed of my request, she takes a minute to pull herself together. She could do a better job, but this will do. “Fix your hair, you look like Fiona.” I exclaim plodding to the door, Nqabayomzi is smart and might dictate anything. Thandiwe better pull this or her nightmares have just begun.

Nqabayomzi glares as I open for him, the fire in his eyes could burn him to ashes, an inferno too much for his heart to handle. His enquiring yet apprehensive eyes flick from me to Thandiwe, she’s staring right back. There is a way they look at each

other, a way that builds knots in my stomach, creating a jealousy type of feeling. It's as if they are one person, naturally communicating through a simple glance. I would object if I were in alignment with them, but then I would be hailed as crazy.

“How can I help you bafo? It's too early for a visit, don't you think?” Nonchalantly, I question, giving nothing off.

“What is going on Ntuthuko?” he strides in uninvited, an anxious gaze fixed on my wife again. “What the fuck have you done?” he hisses as if his jaw is wired shut. He must be talking about the bruise on her face.

That thing should have been healed by now, he's standing before her with his probing hands that trail every inch of her face. Thandiwe allows him to touch her. He has her cheeks in his hands, looking at her like she is a precious gem.

“What did he do to you Tan-tan?” I hear him whisper.

“Tell him what happened to you, my love. My wife can be clumsy sometimes. I always say to watch

her step.” Nqabayomzi’s presence makes me nervous, I have to stay calm. Thandiwe’s hands stretch to push his grip from her cheeks.

“I’m fine, I bumped into the fridge.” Not convincing, but it will do. Good girl.

“Thandiwe is everything okay?” He pushes. If she were light skinned her face would be red from suppressed rage, her hunched form displays acrimony that’s like acid, burning, carving and intoxicating. With Nqabayomzi’s back turned to me, one look from me puts her back to order. She stares blankly.

“Yes,” I can almost feel the fear that has covered her voice like a bed of dark clouds covering the blue sky.

“You heard her, now get out.” I sneer at his loud throaty huff, he shifts his attention to me, hands packed into his pockets. Glare piercing and threatening, I would think he knows what’s going on.

A picture of them standing together is unsettling,

my mind points out how Thandiwe appears to be a piece of a puzzle that has been removed from my brother, a tender faultless fit.

“Thandiwe, come with me,” Nqabayomzi grimaces at me with a demand directed to my wife, agape Thandiwe looks at me with a far-reaching desperation. She knows what’s at stake, one word and she will be motherless. It’s a win-win situation, if I can call it that. Nqabayomzi kills me and wifey will never have her son back.

“No.” the most dreaded word in the universe and I love it.

“Are you willing to stay here with this abusive maniac? Is that what you want Thandiwe?” He grips her wrist compellingly.

“Let go of my wife Mzi, you have no right-”

“You... have no right to lay a hand on her.” Freeing Thandiwe’s hand and marching to me, he barks with an accusatory finger pointed at me. I’m obliged to wobble back, but quickly stand still, this is my house and Nqabayomzi is trespassing. “No right

bafo,” he finishes.

“Bafo?” (Brother) His statement tickles, triggering an unfriendly laugh from me. “What right do you have to call me that after fucking around with my wife?”

THANDIWE...

A person cannot be subjected to such cruelty, pain and helplessness, I'm at war with my mind and heart. I can't breathe with all of this rage suffocating me, I want to scream and tell Nqaba that Ntuthuko has taken my son. But that will be putting a bullet through Zulu's head, maybe if he had loved Zulu once, I would call him bluff and sing like a bird.

“You slept with my wife Bafo? You fucked my wife.” Ntuthuko accuses Nqaba of what he knows to be false, he's purposefully riling him. The same

Ntuthuko who is terrified of his big brother suddenly has the boldness to bark in his face.

“What are you talking about?” Nqaba stands too close, not showing any fear or hesitation.

“I know everything, you bastard.” Ntuthuko ripostes, furiously glowering at him, this is a game for Ntuthuko.

“That we love each other.” Nqaba says, every part of his body language causal.

“She squirts, you know that?” Ntuthuko’s words sting my heart, the cocky bastard. A grin pulls at one corner of Nqaba’s mouth, I can almost feel the energy of his wrath.

“Did she squirt bafo? Did she scream like the bitch she is?” That’s the final straw that unleashes Nqaba’s wrath, with one blow he tackles Ntuthuko who lands on the floor with a thud. Nqaba straddles him and every stomach-turning blow comes with a loud groan.

“I am going to kill you.” Nqaba proclaims as if killing his brother has been on his vision board. I watch

the horrific scene, numbed and shaken. Ntuthuko has my son, he can't die. He will, if I don't stop Nqaba and I will never find my son.

“Nqaba stop.” My mind says move, but my body refuses, my legs won't obey me anymore. Wide eyed, nauseous, my heart racing. The grisly sight is nauseating, I can feel saliva thickening in my throat. My heart rate is accelerating and my mind replaying the blood-spattering punches. “Nqaba stop, please stop.” I strain my vocal chords, emanating a high-pitched scream. He swings his dark eyes to me, I've seen darkness before, the kind that sends chills down your spine and the hairs on your body rising.

This is not it, the darkness in his eyes is the paralysing kind. If it could have a voice it would spit nothing, but unbearable confrontations.

“Please.” A whisper is the last thing my diminishing strength can provide, the last ounce of it drops me to my knees. My stomach gives out, letting me know that I'm about to pass out. It feels like the

innards are being replaced by a black hole. The nausea creeps from my abdomen to my head and the world falls black.

To be continued...

BURN

16...

NQABA...

Little brothers get you like nothing else, brutally loyal and over protective. There was a time when I was everything to Ntuthuko, before mother decided to poison his mind against me. He was always her golden boy, the apple of her eye. She hated how he shadowed everything I did.

The boy would remind me how I was the best brother in world, of course I would laugh and call him stupid, wrapping the word with love. His admiration for me changed when he turned thirteen,

we grew apart and somehow I think Barbra had everything to do with it.

Joburg made him worse, he came back haughty and unkind. Suddenly I wasn't the cool brother anymore, I was the uneducated cow herder. Sure he didn't have the boldness to say it to my face, I would over hear him and Barbra having a laugh about my misfortune behind a veil of gossip. I love him still, we are of the same bloodline.

Honestly, I don't know how to feel about this situation we are entombed in, hurting him is not my intention, I am trapped between the woman I love and my little brother who is caged in Barbra's claws.

I woke up to a text this morning from a nameless number, saying I should check on Thandiwe. There were missed calls from her as well and that's when panic settled in.

“Hello police, a man broke into my house and attacked me and my wife.” I hear Ntuthuko say as I

place an unconscious Thandiwe on the couch. Stirring my alertness to him, I find him dragging his injured-self up from the floor. The cocky bastard. I don't care about that right now and his threats don't faze me.

“Stay away from my wife.” He commands after his call, jaw thrust forward with exasperation. This is how he speaks to me now?

“See what you've done?” A complaint parades out of my mouth, his narrowed eyes trail my hand that's pointing at Thandiwe. “Is this what you wanted? Do you like seeing her like this?” He studies her with a critical squint, unbothered. Therefore he snorts, pushing me from her presence.

“Easy with the interrogation bafo, I would be running if I were you.” His voice tingles with menace. “The police are on the way.” A cloud of warning settles on his features, the smug look he holds has convinced him that he made a smart move.

“I'm not going anywhere until Thandiwe wakes up.” I

mutter spacing the words evenly.

“Suit yourself, but stay away from my wife. She will be okay. Of course she would faint, you were beating up her husband. The man she loves.” He highlights the last statement, arrogantly so. I don’t know what he’s trying to prove. It hurts me that I am at war with him and there is nothing I can do about it. Barbra has brainwashed him, he is far gone with no hope of salvation.

I have to stand back and watch him take care of her, the woman I love, my Thandiwe. She was mine before him, a sweet innocent girl who knew nothing about love and how to hold a man’s hand.

“Why did you wait all these years to pursue my wife, bafo?” The question comes unexpected, he’s placing a cold wet towel over her temple, yet his withering gaze remains on me.

It wasn’t planned, the news of their wedding came as a surprise. Maybe I was too focused on staying away from Thandiwe that, I missed all these things, or maybe the wedding was purposely kept from

me.

The dance we shared at the wedding changed it all, holding her in my arms again aroused the deep passion that had been smothering me for years. I would stay away, but I have become a puppet to this selfish heart.

There's a sudden knock at the door which Ntuthuko gladly attends to, I was hoping that Thandiwe would be awake by now. With my brother snitching on me to the two police officers, I take the opportunity to slip (ubuhlalu) a beaded bracelet on her wrist, my heart leaps and my soul reacts as I am taken back to the day she gave me this bracelet. The day I left the village for the city.

Undoubtedly, Ntuthuko is narrating some hocus pocus, judging by the looks they are giving me. I am not a coward to run, however I will need back up and I know just who to call.

“Mzisto, Mazistos. Mzistariza, Mzistnator. Awu

suka madoda, Nqabayomzi Biyase. Ugrand ntwana?” (Are you good?) If only life can be as bright as Neo’s personality.

“I need your help, the police are taking me in.”

“Where are you?” His tone transitions from playful to stern.

“Roodepoort.”

“I’ll be there.” Neo has come through for me in the past, I have known him for two years. If anyone is loyal, it is Neo and my brain has convinced me that he would take a bullet for me. As much as he is a coward, he is a great friend.

I fight the urge to lay a kiss on Thandiwe’s temple when my brother and the men in blue approach.

I am asked multiple questions which I don’t give answers to. What is the point when they’ll take me in still?

“Don’t touch me,” I snap as the policeman tries to grip my wrist. He moves an inch back not giving me enough space to breathe.

“Next time you’ll stay away from my family affairs bafo, my wife and son are off limits.” I see pride dancing on his face, one of these days I will wipe that wicked smile off. I’ll need to do a DNA test on Zulu as soon as possible, if he is my son then I want him away from Ntuthuko.

BULELWA

Mandla has no timing whatsoever, after achieving in avoiding him for so long. The man ambushes me at 7am in the morning, he demanded that I make him a cup of tea. I would add my special ingredient if I were in the mood, my day has been ruined.

“Here’s your tea Ndlondlo.” I think he senses my foul mood, I just want to disappear. I hate how he’s scrutinizing me under his gaze, I would think he’s measuring me just to see if I will fit in a coffin. This man is after my life.

“Why are you still in your nightwear son? Men are out there hard at work and you’re only waking up now?” Gag me.

“It’s barely 8am baba.” I slouch on the couch, too tired to entertain him.

“Sit up straight,” he snaps “and what are those bunny things on your feet? Do you call those shoes?” Dammit, how did I miss these? I push my feet under the table.

“Sleepers Ndlondlo, they make my feet warm.” He snorts at my retort.

“I blame your mother, she spoils you a lot.” Actually, he spoils me a lot. “I found a spot for you at R.S Logistics, you’re starting tomorrow.” He’s a shareholder at this company.

“You want me to do a nine to five?” I knew I forgot to do something this morning, from today I will make it a point to clean my ears first thing in the morning. Mandla is talking, but I am not understanding what he’s saying.

“Yes,” he says and I have to double check.

“Yes to what Ndlondlo?” With uttermost respect, I question this man whose presence is making my armpits itch and I have an itch down there. In fact every hairy part on my body is itching.

I take a few seconds to remove my gown while waiting for him to explain this ‘yes’ that has me suffocating. Bulelwa doesn’t do a nine to five, I’m still a kid. Enjoying his money. Stuck in an office will ruin my social life.

“Yes to your question, you’re a man now and will be a husband soon. You need to learn responsibility.” The devil is out to get me, apparently I have been having too much fun on his territory.

“I can’t get married-” misguidedly my voice surges, his mouth forms into an unpleasant twist and his nostrils flare. You don’t raise your voice at this man, he demands respect. He sees it as a right because he was part of the crew that escaped Egypt with Moses. Ancient. I clear my throat due to his eyes that are saying something I would not like

to hear.

“Ngenhlonipho efanele Ndlondlo, I don’t want to get married.” (With all due respect.) The words slip through my tongue and I instantly fall into regret as he gives me a fairly lethal look.

“What do you mean? What kind of a man will you be if you don’t take a wife?” Mandla is too smart a man to let such nonsensical things spew out of his mouth, he should be ashamed of himself. “Or are you that type?” He shoots daggers at me that have me wishing I was fatherless. What does he mean that type?

“What...type?” I ask, regret sitting on my head now.

“That Zondo boy Bhekizizwe, he touches men in a way a man would touch a woman.” Zondo boy? And again, the gorilla proves that he is from the jungle, spitting nonsense. It’s the twenty first century, he lives in Johannesburg for Pete’s sake.

“He’s gay?” A pucker grows between his eye brows. I have to adjust myself on the seat, he’s probing me with his impassive glare. I can’t tell what he’s

thinking, his face is blank.

“Lowo msangano wabantu abasha.” (That madness the young people are accustomed to.)” My father ladies and gentlemen.

“The bible is against it. A man cannot lust after another man, it says in the book of Timothy...” Since when does this man read the bible? I doubt he has one, and since when does he preach? Might as well give him a podium. Bible bashing does not become him.

You thought the world was bad? How about having a homophobe for a father? The same man who taught you how to walk, bloody hell, he’s been my hero since my eyes could recognize him. How do I tell him that his words are breaking me? That I am the very same person he hates, yet I am his son and nothing will ever change that.

“Kodwa baba, homosexuality is not evil. Being gay is not a disease nor is it a curse. Why must...”

“Gcinumzi!” With a hefty scrutiny, he puts me in an

uncomfortable position, I take my eyes away from his heavy glare. “Are you supporting that nonsense?” I wish I could hate him.

“Ndlondlo, I’m just...”

“You better not be acquainted with those people. Or they will turn you into one of them.”

‘Your son is fucking gay’ I shout inwardly, one day I will shout at the top of the roof.

“I had to end my friendship with Zondo because he failed to teach his son good morals, it’s an abomination.” He speaks with hate and resentment in his voice, I wouldn’t want him to feel this way about me.

“Will that be all bab' Mandla?” I have to stop him or he will go on the whole day, he scowls, a look of displeasure caressing his face.

“I came to inform you about your job, that will be all for now. We’ll talk about the rest this coming weekend.” That’s if I will be available, Mr. Tea lover

leaves after emptying his cup. Next time I'll add Brooklux. I take it his wife hasn't told him about Lindiwe's predicament, that's what he should be focusing on and leave me the hell alone.

NQABA...

“Thank you for coming through.” Neo was waiting at the police station when we arrived. I didn't think he would bring Styles with, he's talking to the detective while we wait outside.

“Don't mention it. How does Mr. Goody-two shoes like you end up in a place like this?”

“My brother.”

“Ntuks got you arrested? Why would he do that? You ate his leftovers?” He finds humour in his remark.

“Your brother called the cops on you? What? Did you eat his leftovers?” Styles repeats Neo's absurdity as he nears us.

“Nahana Stylos, getting me arrested because I ate your food.” Neo is amused and so is Styles, they follow behind me stupidly laughing. I want to be upset, but I can’t help the minor grin pulling at the edge of my mouth. I am surrounded by idiots.

“It’s days like these I miss Randall, you two are like kids and I can’t be seen in public with clowns.” The comment fuels their laughter. “I was thinking we drive through McDonalds and get you two a kiddie’s meal.” Neo clicks his tongue while as Styles gives a quiet laugh with a head shake.

“Oa nyela ntwana.” (You’re talking crap.) Yes, you don’t insult Neo and expect him to keep quiet. They demand to know why my brother would want to see me behind bars, so I brief them in.

We’re driving to Robertsham Primary school, I need to fetch Zulu. My first thought is to get him away from Ntuthuko. If he is capable of hitting Thandiwe, I can’t imagine what he would do to Zulu. Styles has taken the driver’s seat, Neo is perched beside

him and has tuned in to a Pedi radio station.

“Thobela FM, again Neo?” Styles complains as if this is a regular.

“My mother is going to be on radio, she said to watch out because-”

“..she gave a speech at church and it will be broadcasted on Thobela FM.” Brownd off, Styles throws in, mimicking Neo’s voice. “It’s been two months already, I doubt the radio station has the recording.” He concludes.

“Jealousy doesn’t suit you Stylos, leave it to your exes.” Neo’s clap back.

“Go to hell.” Offense teases Styles, he immediately brushes it off by coughing out a chuckle.

“Mziryza,” Neo decides to shifts his attention to me. “Are you sure the boy is yours?”

“I have never been sure of anything in my life, Peanut is my son.” Boldly I say, Neo regards me with a short-lived inquisitive look and gives me a sigh. I don’t know what it means.

“How will you get the DNA test done without his mother? Stylos can help you, though.” Styles nods in agreement, I will have to decline. They have done enough for me, moreover it can’t be that difficult to get a DNA test.

“Maybe.” He is not contented with my answer, hence the cocked brow. “What?” I ask, his eyes are filled with curiosity.

“Nothing, just that you and Uze are so alike. Proud.” he says with a smile.

“Well.” A shrug earns me another disapproving look, before he turns back to the road ahead.

At school we’re told that Zulu has been transferred. It’s mid-year, why would they do that?

“Something is not right,” None of this makes sense.

“I suggest you stay away from your brother and his family for now, if you want to stay out of prison.”

Styles advises as we head back to the car, I’m not sure I can take it, not after witnessing the bruises on Thandiwe’s face.

“Eish nahana Mzi ntwana, I don’t see this ending well. That big-headed brother of yours o nahana hore ke Duduzane Zuma. This is not Nkandla, he’ll get hurt if he’s not careful.” (Your brother thinks he’s Duduzane’s Zuma.)

I know what he’s implying and I know how these two settle scores, nevertheless there is a possibility that my brother can be saved.

THANDIWE...

It’s the same each day, with the morning comes a soundless grief that can’t be reduced, my baby has been away from me for three days. I only spoke to him once. Each day moves on until it’s afternoon and then panic visits me, it grows stronger in the evening.

My body has spiralled into exhaustion, if only I could dislocate my spirit from my body, maybe ask God to keep it for a while and let me rest in quietness. I want to be numb, free from the

excruciating pain that sucks every breath in me. I want to close my eyes and sleep for a minute until I have my angel back, only then can God return what I have given him to keep. My soul.

Ntuthuko won't tell me where my baby is or who he's with, only shows me snippet footages of him and that's only when he's in a happy mood. I miss my child so much it hurts.

Ntuthuko publicised that he got Nqaba arrested, I can't even begin to imagine how he's doing.

Barbra's brat said not to visit Nqaba, I think he's having me followed. But I need to see my heart and maybe apologise for bringing trouble upon his life. I have on my wrist the bracelet I had given him before he left for the city, he must've put it on me while I was out.

It makes me feel closer to him, almost as if he's here with me.

The insignificant other forced me out of the house, said go to work lest people become suspicious. I

can't share my burdens with anyone, Zulu's life depends on my silence.

"Thandiwe." I haven't made it to my desk yet and Cele is out for my blood. Last time I was at work was days ago, how did I forget to report my absence. This pervert is going to fire me.

"Yes." He looks at me up and down, it's not the usual spine-chilling search. He's judging me, probably my attire or the bags under my bushed eyes. Insomnia forced its way into my life, it came and found me powerless.

"Are you okay?" Like he ever cares how his employees are doing, the feeble shrug I give answers his question. He pushes his office door open and gestures with his hand that I enter and I am not doing that. I'm safe here, where everyone can see us.

"Relax will you? I believe I was misunderstood last time, I would never touch any woman inappropriately. If I gave you the wrong impression,

forgive me.” Lessons on how to get away with murder, gosh I almost believe him.

“Okay. Is that all? I have to get to work.” I did not plan to be a bitch, but this man constantly forces the crown on my head. I don’t give him a chance to excuse me, but begin the dreaded walk to my work station.

There’s someone on my desk, I didn’t get a notification that I’ve been replaced.

“Excuse me.” I say, ready to throw questions at the person. A young lady moves with the swivel chair, she smiles immediately as her eyes meet mine.

“Hey,” she’s too chirpy.

“Hi,” my spirit is too low to return a smile.

“I’m new here, I was told that you were going to train me,” she reveals.

“Train you? Aren’t you a little too young to be working? Shouldn’t you be at school or something?” Cele is hiring small girls now? I hope he didn’t sleep

with her, she's so young. The lady sighs and her obvious irritation compels her to roll her eyes.

"I know, right?" She huffs as I gesture that she moves from my seat. "That's what I told brother, but he's so stubborn. He thinks he's always right. Sometimes I hate him..." It's too early to be talkative, she blabbers none stop and instantly I am reminded of Bulelwa. They would butt heads, fighting on who should go first.

"Apparently this is a punishment for hanging with the wrong crowd, I'm young and you only live once. Sometimes I think he wants me to be like his wife. Boring. She's two years older than me, I love her, but hey that girl needs to live a little. One day I took her to this club and brother almost sent me back to Ghana, even after she took the fall for me. I think I was sleeping when I filled the brother's application form, I must've written Hitler because God delivered." Gosh. Will she ever stop talking?

"Listen I have work to do, I have a lot to catch up on. You can just sit there and observe, we'll resume training tomorrow." I say and bring about a brash

smile on her face. My eyebrows rise as she begins wiggling her little hips while humming to a song I'm not habituated to.

“So I don't have to do anything today?” Her query comes with enthusiasm, I doubt I will be able to keep up with her energy.

“Yes, just don't roam around the office. The boss bites.” Literally.

“Oh, I met him already. He's kind of creepy,” her face tells me that she has fallen victim of Cele's perverted wandering eyes.

“You'll be good if you stay out of his way, lunch is at one and we knock off at 04:30pm.” Her downward smile is funny and adorable.

“That's basically the whole day, when will I see my friends? Brother gave me a curfew, ‘be home at five Ifeanyi or I will send you back to Ghana’.” She mimics an unfamiliar male voice and I think she rolls her eyes a lot. “Yoh! I am tired, Ghana this, Ghana that. He should be in Ghana not me, hypocrite.” I sense love and hostility in her tone,

they are in conflict. She loves her brother, but hates him as well.

“Your name is Ifeanyi?” I have to stop her prattling or I will never get anything done, the flashy smile pulls at her mouth once again.

“Yes, Ifeanyi Okolie. Call me Ife,” I’m given a hand to shake, a big smile...teeth out and eyes sparkling.

“Thandiwe, call me Thindiwe.” I say...

“Tan-tan.” A deep voice resounds, my heart should stop jumping to my throat, I hate this feeling and what is he doing here? I can’t face him, what if I break down?

To be continued

BURN

17...

THANDIWE...

“Nqaba?” I can’t dictate the look on his face, he shifts his eyes to Ife who crosses her arms over her chest, beaming at Nqaba. The crinkle on his forehead should have her walking away, but the girl is stagnant.

“Ife.” I have to snap her out of her meddlesomeness. A huff and a little attitude in her walk, she strides away.

“How are you?” I’m at work, he shouldn’t be standing this close. I miss him though and everything he is, I want to confide in him.

“I thought you were in jail.” I say, observing the airy office as I feel heavy eyes on me. Why is Cele always standing at his office door? Doesn’t he have work? He’s looking right at us, Nqaba can’t see him as his eyes are examining me.

“Can we talk?” Firmness plays around his voice.

“I have a few minutes to spare.” No one ever uses the bathroom in the morning. My heart leaps at the sound of his sluggish footfall behind me, somehow I am astounded that he is here.

A lump on my throat makes it hard for me to hold back my tears, by the time I enter the bathroom they are streaming down my face. My arms enwrap around him the moment he shuts the door and I cling to him, seeps of tears intensifying.

This is all I can do, hold on to him. Burying my face on his chest, I knot my fists in his shirt, pulling him harder against me. He's not saying anything, his muscles are tense...chest rising and falling and breath ragged.

His arms wrapped around me bring the kind of peace I crave for, a calming of the storm in my heart. In his embrace I start to believe that fear is a lie, that the world is filled with nothing, but light.

In due course, I manage to compose myself. Nqaba grips my head, his mouth knotted oddly, brows crowded together in a frown.

“I knew that something was wrong, tell me what happened Tan-tan.”

“I’m tired Nqaba, I want to jump out of my skin or fade into extinction. I am suffocating and yet I can’t bring myself to take my life.” I grip his unshaven face into my hands, his eyes are straight and investigative. He wants to know what is really going on. “I’m in so much pain, I wanted to come to you like a child needing you kiss it better. Ntuthuko said you were in jail, are you okay?” He nods, removing my hands from his face. He nestles my cheeks instead, his thumbs swiping away the tears.

“Is he hitting you, Tan-tan?” The question moves through gritted teeth.

“It happened once.” His mouth pinches shut as if holding back from what he really wants to say.

“That’s the least of my worries, listen to me. You can’t confront him after I tell you this or he will kill him.”

“Kill who?” His eyes gaze, intently.

“My baby, Ntuthuko has my son. He took Zulu from me and said he will kill him if I tell anyone.” I expect him to panic but, he stares blankly unreadable.

“Is this why he transferred him from school?” I didn’t know about that.

“Possibly, he took him out of the country, I want my son Nqaba.” He moves to stand against the wall, deep in thought and his eyes not meeting mine.

“Why?” He questions with a tiny sigh, I’m not used to the cold tone. “Why is he doing this? Why would he take Peanut away?”

“He knows about us, that Zulu could be your son. I told him that I want out and he went crazy, threatened a murder suicide if I were to leave him.” It hurts more when I talk about it, nails dig into my crossed arms to suppress the pain. “When I tried to escape with Zulu, he and your mother stopped me. The next morning Zulu was gone, he shouldn’t know that I told you or he will have my son killed.”

“Mother?” He says quietly and manically rubs his head as if holding back screams of frustration.

“She’s helping him, she-” I swallow my words as he pulls out a phone from the pocket of his jeans.

“Makhathini, kunjani ndoda endala?” (How are you old man?)

He’s talking to his father, they have a few chortles before he announces his visit. “Come.” He offers an embrace after dropping the call, I can breathe in his arms.

“Are you going to tell him? What if he tells your mother? She’ll report back to Ntuthuko and they’ll...” my voice wavers with each syllable, overwrought by what’s to come.

“I don’t want you to worry about anything, you will have your son back Thandiwe.” He replies, his voice low and rasping.

“What are you going to do?” I need to know, instead I get a glance that shuts me up.

“Remember this?” He’s referring to the bracelet on my wrist, his lips find their way to my hand. “You gave it to me the day I left the village. Remember what you said?” Every word.

“It might take us months, years or a lifetime, but our love will always find us.” I say, taking us back to the dreaded day, I had to bid my beloved goodbye. His eyes are smiling and his aura is light.

“My heart will never forget you,” he strolls down memory lane with me. The words echo in my ears and seep into my heart, soothing every inch of it. Ngaba cushions my face with his large hands and brushes his nose alongside mine.

My arms work around him and rest on his back, he leans down, his lips faintly against mine...a subtle kiss...barely touching. They are soft and warm. He feels like home and I feel safe when I'm with him.

“My heart will never forget-” the rest of my words are lost against his mouth, he puts his hand on the back of my head, pulling me closer to him. He kisses me mildly and cautiously like I would crack if he were to be unkempt. A strange sound pulls me out of the kiss...

“Do you hear that?” There's a whimpering sound

coming from the closed door situated at the corner.

“What?” His inquisitiveness comes with a face of utter casualness, he’s not taken aback like I am, his body is as relaxed as his face.

“Someone is crying.” He sends me an unusual stare that has me questioning my rationality. “Hello, is anybody there.” A need to inspect the strange noise arouses, it sets me off my feet, slowly leading me to the direction.

A tight grip my around my middle stops me, Nqaba is pulling me back to him. Eyebrows upstretched with a question I cannot make out.

“Don’t,” there is a hint of warning in his word, but to describe his facial expression would be describing a blank piece of paper.

The agonising cries intensify as Nqaba cups my cheek and snuggles my neck. “Please, divert your mind from whatever you’re hearing. It’s not there Tan-tan.” He continues...careless whispers...his lips pressed against my neck. I don’t know what to

believe, his voice or the strange snivels of a child.

I wish I could say it doesn't freeze everything in me. It's not the first time tasting this fear...that day when I was out at Bree with Nqaba and at the apartment...

With one glance, I move away from him to investigate the matter.

"Tan-tan, there is no one there." Something about the way he says this tells me that, he knows I am going crazy. I ignore him and rush to check, the door is slightly open, barely a crack.

I don't ask anything, but push it fully, to find the bare-footed, red raincoat-wearing little girl, standing on top of the toilet seat. Her head bowed and body whimpering in sobs. The world drops through my feet, my face falls faster than a dead body, mouth hangs open and eyes as wide as they could stretch.

"Nqaba." My voice manages to break free, he's standing next to me looking at the same thing, but his stare remains blank. Can't he see her?

“Now you know that I am not crazy, right? You can see her too, right?” I’m ogling at him, desperately waiting for a confirmation. He turns to look at me and the first thing I see is pity glazing his eyes.

“I’m not crazy Nqaba,” the first thought is to defend myself. “She’s there, look.” My finger rushes to point in the toilet, my eyes follow and everything around me shatters as I find nothing. How long will I dwell in panic? Will my heart be able to handle it one more time?

“We’ll figure this out Tan-tan, you’re not alone.” A nice way of telling me that I am crazy, is this where I will always hide? In his arms? What will I do when I lose it and he’s not around?

“I need to get out of here.” I introduce.

“I can take you somewhere else.” Then I would have to kiss this lousy job goodbye, something I am not ready for.

“No, I need to work or I’ll go crazy from over thinking.”

Yeah! I know I will not be coming back to the bathroom, I need to see my mother and tell her what has been happening to me. She is a prayer warrior and most likely God will hear her.

BULELWA...

Day three and I feel like I have been here for a month, this is something I will never get used. I went and cried mommy, but mommy supports her husband, I couldn’t be saved from this torture.

“Bulelwa, the boss wants to see you in his office.” Manto says, standing over my desk. It’s her desk actually, she’s the eyes and ears of R.S Logistics. Has been showing me the corners and every irrelevant thing her talkative-self thought I should know.

“Finally, I thought this day will never come.”

Apparently the CEO hardly comes to the office, I will finally be signing the darn contract today.

“Come in.” A male voice shouts from the inside, I slide in to find him on the phone. He gestures that I take a sit on a chair before him. The office is spacious, not much in it, a table...three chairs...a one seater couch and book shelf by the big window that overlooks the city of Joburg. I can see the Vodacom big building from here.

“You complain when I don’t call you and when I do, you want me to hurry up and cut the call. I don’t know what women want anymore.” The boss says over the phone, the conversation seems to have been going on for a while.

“Me hemma come on, you can’t be upset because of that.” Great now I must sit in here and listen to his conversation, not that I mind. I love the images playing in my head right now...me...him...my bed... I’m the bottom and he’s my top...he’s the perfect

freak and like a symphony we fit without a glitch. In my mind he tastes as good as he looks...Bar-One chocolate.

My pondering is interrupted by someone clearing their throat. Oh, it's Mr. Chocolate-man, his frown wipes the seductive smile on my face that was brought about the images held in my mind.

I shoot him a bashful smile, it's not reciprocated and I am tempted to iron out the furrowed brow on his face. He'd probably kill me.

“Okay, okay, I love you too.” I heard that, his eyes move away from me as he whispers. “Wear that net thing you got yesterday,” a seductive tone, he wants to talk dirty.

Why did he let me in then? Now I must listen to this fine thing seduce his wife, why are the yummy ones married? Men and those big rings that are spottable from a distance, argh.

He wraps up the call and finally, I can be the centre of his attention.

“Bulelwa Msibi?” He says, flipping through my file.

“The one and only darling.” Can’t be forward with this one, his unfriendly face is not letting me out of my shell.

“Your father said to appoint you on the third floor.” There must be something on my nose because he still refuses to acknowledge me.

“What’s happening on the third floor?” There better be a gay strip club and I’ll be managing it.

“You’ll be a driver.” He says, shocking me right off my socks.

“A driver?” My vocal sound squeaks, this is when he lifts his eyes and frowns at me. “I’m sorry, I can’t be a driver darling.” His brow elevates in question, maybe they should have gotten someone else to interview me. This man is worse than my father, that gorilla is going to pay for this.

What will my driver say? Baba will probably fire him? It won’t come as a surprise if he takes my car and forces me to use taxis as means of transport.

“That’s not my problem, you’ll have to bring it up with your father. We’re running a business here Mr. Msibi, not a day care.”

“Okay, as long as I will be driving a nice car, not a taxi.” I return.

“This is a logistics company, we deal with trucks.” I might as well grow a potbelly if I’m going to be a truck driver. Fathers don’t abandon their kids anymore, they do this kind of shit. Mandla had twenty three years to tell me, I was a designated truck driver. I hate surprises.

“Will I have to wear safety shoes and a dungaree?” My life is over, the man frowns or is it permanent? I haven’t seen his soft expression, yet. I should have a talk with his wife, she can’t starve such a sexy beast like him. I wouldn’t mind taking her place.

“Mr. Msibi.” Argh! I would rather live in my imagination, thank you. “Do you get lost in your thoughts a lot?” If only he knew.

“Sorry darling.” I bite my tongue and chide myself, this is a work place. I need to control my raging

hormones. “I’m sorry sir.” My sincere apology is not warmly welcomed by this grumpy man.

“Here’s your contract, you can go through it when you get home. Manto will show you where you’ll be working, your uniform will be deducted from your monthly salary.” I would rather die.

“A uniform? Oh darling, Bubu doesn’t do uniforms. Look at this body, I can’t ruin my image.”

“Pity, that’s what your father instructed.” Says a lofty coloured man, walking in the office. I have been in this god-forsaken place for three days and not once did I bump into these people.

“Mmmmmhh, you look like you taste like vanilla, diluted but I don’t mind. Hiiii.” Oh! This one smiles. I have no intention to hide my sexuality in public and they look too young to be friends with Mandla, so I am safe.

“Gcinumzi Msibi?” He shakes my stretched out hand, I was hoping for a kiss.

“Bulelwa darling, but you can call me, Bubu.”

“Bubu...right.” He hands the Bar One man a file. “I take it Randall has filled you in on your job description.”

“Yes, Randy said...” I have to face Randall as he clears his throat, dismissing my forwardness. He is not going to smile anytime soon. “I mean Mr. Randall said I have to wear a uniform and drive trucks.” My complaints are never ignored, there is hope.

“Yes, I heard that Bulelwa.” He shakes his head amusedly

“Can’t you put me somewhere else? Like, maybe... your PA or Randy’s...I mean Randall’s PA.” I wouldn’t mind mopping just his office.

“That will be all Bulelwa, Manto will know what to do.” Randall says, grumpier than when I came here. He gets up to his feet and I gulp at his towering large build, my father must know I’m gay and he brought me here to be tempted by this man. I see you daddy, I see you.

I blink away the lust in my eyes, he looks like he's ready to throw a punch. I don't blame the man, I've stared at him too long to make him feel uncomfortable.

Beastie makes me feel uncomfortable as well with his wolfish stares, he comes around the house uninvited, bearing wine and nice delicacies and not to forget temptation. The vanilla treat wants a relationship, something I am not okay with or ready for. I refuse to be bound.

I might be open for an open relationship one day. I'll see how life treats me. Right now, I am surrounded by the likes of Mr. Bar One, a relationship is the last thing I want.

"Believe me, being a truck driver is not as bad as it sounds. You'll get the hang of it as time goes by. You'll be okay." The nice man comforts and fails, like he's ever driven a truck before.

"Styles stop." Randall decides to reign on my parade, he has a problem.

“The boy is new at this, is it not bad enough that you’re intimidating him with those wrinkles on your forehead?” Styles winces at the chilly look he gets from Randall. I should get going, seeing that I am not winning.

“And I thought Bar One is supposed to be sweet, this one is as bitter as a mother f****r.” I mumble, dragging my feet out with my tail between my legs. A chuckle from Styles tickles my ears as I step out, I hope he didn’t hear what I said. This better be a one month contract or I will move to India and open a corner shop.

NEO

“Mantos, hoe gaan dit?” (How are you?) Manto is the receptionist at R.S Logistics. Talkative from a distance and shy at close range. I am greeted by her usual bashful smile and I doubt she knows what I look like, the girl’s eyes are forever cast down.

“Ke sharp Neo, wena?” (I’m good and you?) She

giggles the greeting, I have to force my ears to catch her words. Her voice is so low.

“You’re glowing today Mantos, I see they are feeding you well, hey?” I bring my observation forward, the reception area is graced with more of her giggles.

“Let me go before you start looking like a tomato.” She laughs this time, half of my conversations with her consist of cackles.

Just as I turn, a figure bumps into me. He squeals, gripping my waist for balance, his face falls on my chest and I think he’s holding on too tight.

“Yey uena saan.” (Hey you.) He grips on when I try to push him off, this person has put me in an uncomfortable position. “Yey, ntlohele monna, utlo nyela nou. J ou hond.” (Let me go.)

“Bulelwa, what are you doing?” Manto shouts over my shoulder, the fool chuckles as he moves away. He’s blinking at me or winking, I can’t make out what it is, either way he looks stupid.

“Sorry, I almost fell. I had to hold on, imagine a

beautiful man like me...falling...face down.” I’m distracted by his hands swinging in all directions, they are as loud as he is. “The world might as well stop and wrap it up. Thank God for men like you who are always there to help us- damsels in distress, the name is Bubu by the way, darling.”

The day is almost over, I will live besides, I have tackled bigger obstacles. Clicking my tongue, I walk past him and the hand he has stretched out for me to take.

“You’re a whore.” Manto can actually speak? Her loud voice chases me to Randall’s office door, titling my head back, I spot her pushing the clingy guy. The push has a little tease in it.

“A beautiful whore.” The idiot retorts, his voice drowning in amusement.

Styles and Randall nod in salutation as if they were expecting me.

“What’s wrong with you? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Randall asks.

“I need to call Zee and tell her I love her.” Maybe I am freaked out, that grab was a little too tight for my liking.

“Anything?” Styles ambushes me with a question, completely disregarding the shock dancing around me.

“Nothing, it’s work, side chick and home. The bastard is clever, he’s not giving anything away.” I reply, perching myself opposite Styles. He’s not impressed with my work, I brought it upon myself and Styles that we help Nqabayomzi find Zulu, after he called and told me that Ntuthuko took the boy away from his mother.

“It should be easy to find him, I thought you said you got this.” Styles declares disagreeably eyeing me.

“It should be easy yes, but it’s not. Ntuthuko used a fake passport to get him out of the country. As far as we’re concerned, Zulu Biyase has not left the country. That son of a snake Ntuthuko is smart.”

“Who’s missing?” Curiosity flashes beneath the

surface of Randall's hardened expression, the emotion disappears before I could answer him.

"Biyase's boy." Styles honours him with an answer.

"Mzi has a child?" Randall makes it a point not to mind people's business, his focus is always on Amara and I've told him he needs to shift his eyes a little and look at his friends, they might need him. This is proof, he might not be that acquainted with Nqabayomzi, but he is a friend.

"It's a complicated story Uze, Mzi and his bother ate from the same plate and now they are fighting over a bone." Styles extends his eyes my way, making me feel stupid.

"You're not normal," he throws and like a slap on the wrist I take it. Nothing new...

"It's the truth though and Ntuthuko is the greedy brother, he won't share, but would rather hide the child from his mother. Such cowardice makes me sick to my stomach." I fail in keeping the repulsion out of my voice.

"So you two want to find him?" Randall paints us

with doubt.

“Why not?” I know we will find him.

“I don’t know Neo, maybe because the world is so huge and that child could be hidden anywhere. Asia, Africa, Europe. It could take years or never, unless Ntuthuko reveals his whereabouts.” I hate to say this, but Randall has a point.

“The man is willing to die first before giving the child back.” I voice out the bitter truth.

“Beat the truth out of him, don’t tell me you’ve lost your touch Styles.” Randall finds a low chuckle at the back of his throat and throws it at Styles.

“I’ve always been a lover, not a fighter. Sethu will kill me if she finds out, I promised her I won’t be that guy again.” Styles says.

“I agree with Miss. S. There has to be a way to talk some sense into that potato head of his.” I say.

“A man who is willing to die before revealing the truth? Good luck.” I sense sarcasm in Randall’s tone. This is going to be harder than I thought, I don’t

want it to result to violence, we've had enough of that and there comes a time in life when you have to grow up and put your family first. However, Nqabayomzi needs his family as well and he's counting on us to help him. Now we're stuck between a rock and a hard place.

To be continued...

BURN

18...

BULELWA...

Manto is suggesting that we escape for a while and have lunch at some restaurant, I am not interested, my spirit is down and I don't want to adult today. Three days of laughter, loudness and gossip has her thinking I'm her better half.

“You go ahead darling, I will hang around here and sulk about my miserable life.” At least I am polite about it, I tend to be cranky when I’m hungry. She sets off with a few colleagues... I need a long bath and maybe a day at a spar. My whole body reeks of petrol, I hate this orange jumpsuit, I hate this job. I hate my father and I hate my life.

Two men enter the kitchen, making enough noise to kill the little energy I have left.

“Bafo.” One of them greets, I don’t bother to look up, but send a nod. “Are you okay?” The same voice, a little curious. Nodding is all I can do. I am not okay. I’m not happy about this job, I don’t want it. I want to be free and enjoy life. “Let him be bafo, he’s clearly going through something.” The second voice says and I appreciate his rudeness because I want to be left alone.

Their loudness continues, all this racket is giving me a headache. The horselaughs...kettle boiling...microwave counting down...spoons hitting against

the metallic sink. This is worse than having a hangover.

They join me at the table, which I don't get because there are two more tables in this kitchen. One of them sits beside me while the other settles opposite.

I feel like I'm cramped up in a taxi as the guy next to me has his thigh slightly touching mine, so much for wanting to be alone.

They push their loud conversation, soccer is at the table. One is a supporter of Pirates and says Chiefs should change their name because the current one clearly carries bad luck, the second guy is a diehard fan, judging from the way he defends Chiefs with his life.

I don't care. I know nothing about soccer except that there's a bunch of hunks running after a ball and whoever gets it first wins. I think.

Feeling a pair of eyes grilling me, I turn to my left to find my thigh-connector staring. A pucker builds on his forehead as if I was the one caught

rubbernecking, he turns his gaze away almost immediately and continues with his friend.

The stolen gazes go on for a while, I want to stand and leave, but I am trapped between the wall and this man who looks like a descendant of Hulk. My exaggeration comes to play again.

Who chose this stupid long bench? The interior of this place is terrible. A Tupperware lunch box is pushed my way, my eyes meet slices of white bread sandwiched in tomatoes and cheddar cheese.

“Let’s eat.” The guy situated next to me says, I bring my eyes up to meet his hard face, but gentle regard. I might as well be squid-ward like Thandiwe had dubbed me because everyone is bloody bigger than me, annoyingly. Makes me feel like a kid stuck in a big man’s world. I quickly hide my gaze when he slants a brow, a coy look charging at his face.

“Bafo, awulambile?” (Aren’t you hungry?) He asks and I am, but white bread and my waist don’t mix. If I accept this bread, I will really end up looking like a

truck driver, Mandla wants to make a mockery of me.

“I’m okay thanks, I already ate.” I should get a degree in lying. He doesn’t say anything, but claims his Tupperware back.

“You don’t eat much do you?” His question is accompanied by probing eyes, they trail my body up and down. I am not sure I get what he’s saying hence the dazed look I shoot him. “You must weigh like what, a feather?” He thinks he’s funny, his friend though finds him funnier.

“My weight is perfect, thank you.” I retort, I have looked at my body and it’s gorgeous.

“Not from where I am sitting, but- suit yourself.” I have a new daddy now?

“Are you trying to convince me to eat your food?” I ask.

“Is it working?” Is he trying for a smile or a grin? Because he’s miserably failing.

“No, may I pass please? I need to go back to work.”

He's crowding my space.

"Relax bafo, there's still time. Thirty more minutes left." Like I need to be reminded. "You're not happy here, are you?"

"Should I be?" This man is sitting too close and I need to breathe.

"Well, it's a given that this is not your dream job, but at least try to lighten up. Your attitude stinks." His attitude stinks and no one snaps at me. I am Bulelwa Msibi...Argh! What the heck? I can't fight to save my life.

"Your attitude stinks and you don't know me." He tilts his head up as I snap back, an unnerving presence from him pokes me.

"Sure, but we'll be working together and no one wants to be surrounded by some grumpy spoiled brat, who thinks he's better than everyone here." Where does he get the nerve? "Go to hell, asshole." I spit, and push past him to get to the other side. I will not sit here and entertain this nonsense. He's sniggering at my retort...arrogant asshole.

“Next time watch your words buttercup.” He says, voice gifted with hilarity and I have to peek over and find him smirking at me. Imbecile.

NQABA

I get to my father’s house to find Ntuthuko and mother informally sipping on drinks as they usually are. My presence is not appreciated. “Shouldn’t you be at work?” Arrogance in his voice, he regards me with an unpleasant glare. “I should be asking you the same thing.” I return, shaking father’s hand and a soft kiss on mother’s cheek which is welcomed, indifferently.

“I’ve signed whatever needed to be signed, my work is done for the day. What about you bafo? Isn’t there a long queue at the garage? We wouldn’t want you to lose your job. You’re almost an old man, it would be so wrong for you to depend on the folks for money.” I will let him ride this one, he chooses not to grow up. “Behave Thuko, he’s your elder

brother.” Father chastises an unmoved man-child.

“Don’t call me that dad,” Ntuthuko barks which earns him a warning look from mother. The woman might suck when it comes to raising her kids, but her husband comes first in everything and disrespect towards him is not acceptable.

My heart skips and a smile crawls to my mouth as a pair of minuscule arms encircle my neck from behind, my sweet sister. She is the light of my life, the heart of this family. “Nompopi.” (Doll.) Her giggles amuse my ears, she jogs around the couch and dives on me, suffocating me with a hug.

“Bhut’ Mzi, you don’t love Vero anymore.” She sulks, her head resting on my shoulder.

“I might as well donate my heart because it will be useless, it only knows you my sweet Vero.” She giggles, pasting a kiss on my cheek. “Daddy said I can move back home because aunty is not coming back from the village.” It’s about time they acknowledge this child, she doesn’t deserve to be away from her parents. “See this?” I point at the

smile dancing on my face. “This is how happy I am for you Nompopi.” (Doll.)

“That’s not a smile bhut’ Mzi, you look constipated.” Father finds his way through the joke, Ntuthuko gives out chortles and mother is not at her happiest at this point.

“It’s a smile, take it or leave it,” I riposte.

“Vero maybe you should give your brother smiling lessons, don’t you think?” Father throws in a jest that leaves Vero delighted.

“You people can’t be serious,” Vero winces at the sound of Barbra’s stony voice and leans on me, she buries her face on my arm as her body falls into trembles. “How long do you plan on treating this twenty five year old like a child? Veronica is a grown woman who should be married with kids, she will never grow up with all of you treating her like she still wears diapers.” Barbra can’t leave without her bitterness.

“That’s not fair mom,” Ntuthuko interjects. “You of all people should understand her, you’re her

mother.”

“Unfortunately,” she hisses, lips curled with disgust.

“Barbra!” Father chastises her and like always his authoritative reprimand falls on deaf ears. Visibly annoyed, Barbra jumps to her feet.

“I told you that I wanted an abortion, but you said no, look at her Duma. Are you proud of what your daughter has become?” Father furiously jolts up at mother’s statement, his feet leading him to Barbra.

His manic steps are stopped by Ntuthuko jumping in front of him, he’s shielding Barbra from her giant of a husband. Not once has father laid a finger on his wife, no matter how stubborn and or ill-mannered she gets.

“Who gave you the right to talk about my daughter like that? Let this be the last time you mention that nonsense in my house Barbra, this child has done nothing wrong.” Barbra does not accept the warning, instead she stands with puffed up self-importance.

I have to whisper words of comfort in Veronica's ears to get her to calm down, they usually help, it's not much though.

The intense moment is saved by Tryphena as she calls everyone to lunch, she's been working for my parents for years. My father is fond of her, while his wife finds fault in everything she does.

Ntuthuko takes Veronica's hand and moves with her to the dining room, the old man follows behind and once they are all out of sight, I pull Barbra aside.

"I didn't say anything out of respect for my father, but if my sister ever sheds tears because of you. The old age home will be the least of your worries, mother."

"You will not tell me how to raise my child Mzi," with arrogance and contempt, she rejoinders. "I'm simply asking that you treat that girl like she really is your child, this bitchiness you're portraying doesn't suit you." I don't usually address her with foul words, today she has pushed all my buttons.

“How about you have your own kids, raise them the way you see fit? And leave me to raise my daughter.” She mutters, turning on a cold eye and I have to bring this up.

“How about you give me, my son back.” Agape, she staggers.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Her denial is almost believable.

“Cut the crap mother, I know what you and Ntuthuko are up to. Where is Zulu?” Thandiwe would advise against this interrogation, but I know these two. They don’t have the guts to carry out their threats.

“Zulu is not your son Mzi, if that’s what you think.” She grumbles, her deceitful eyes repudiating the glare I give her.

“I don’t think he’s my son, I know he is and I will bring him home.”

“So that girl ran to you? You ought to be ashamed of yourself Nqabayomzi, sleeping with your brother’s wife.” This accusation is not new, my dear brother laid it down for me as well. There is no use

in defending myself.

“Like you’re sleeping with that old disgusting-wrinkled-bastard Pule?” Her slap comes as fast as the shock in her eyes, her attempt fails though, as I grip her hand before it touches my face.

“You bastard, how dare you talk to me like that. I am your mother and you will respect me.” Her reprimanding glare illustrates the level of her rage, she moves back, keeping her intimidating glower on me. My mother is not exactly good at hiding her shenanigans, it was easy for me to find her secret out.

Pule is a show off and no way would he keep his so called relationship a secret, people talk and walls have ears.

“Believe me, I do respect you, but what do we do about Pule? Because as much as I respect you, I respect my father as well. He deserves to know that his wife has been warming his best friend’s bed for the past five years.” Kindly, I riposte, showing her

the respect she demands. She hates me, her censured eyes can never lie. Her lips have grown thin with anger.

“You wouldn’t dare.” It comes out as an undertone, if she could choke on her words she would.

“Tell me where Zulu is and maybe your secret might remain a secret.” She shakes her head negatively and a belly laugh discharges from her, catching me by surprise. This is where she’s supposed to grovel and beg for forgiveness.

“Nice try son, but we both know you worship the ground your father walks on. You wouldn’t dream of hurting him.”

“Father is strong, he can handle anything. Should I go in there and tell him how his wife and her favourite son kidnapped his grandson? Oh there’s more, his sweet precious wife is having an affair with his best friend. I don’t know about Father, but my heart would stop upon hearing such terrible news.” Barbra settles down on a chair, her head bowed in defeat.

“I don’t know where he is, Ntuthuko wouldn’t tell me.” I don’t believe her.

“Fine, I guess it’s about time father finds out what has been happening right under his nose.” She bolts up at my movements, her small figure blocks my way.

“Brazil...he said Brazil.” She reveals in a haste, while imploringly ogling at me.

“Where in Brazil and under what name?”

“I don’t know, this is all he told me,” she buries her face in her hands...is she crying?

“Come on mother, you can do better than that. I know you are the driver of this vehicle, Ntuthuko only moves at your command. Tell me where Zulu is, now.” We’re interrupted by the sound of footsteps trailing to the living room.

“Are you two okay?” Father is walking in with Ntuthuko not far behind. He scrutinises our mother and his demeanour tells me that, he knows what we

were talking about. Thandiwe might not be safe alone with him tonight. “Mother and I have been talking,” The introduction I bring forward has Barbra gobs macked.

“Please.” She mouths the word, desperation burning through the windows of her soul.

“Do you want to tell them mother or should I?” I insist.

“What is going on Mzi?” Ntuthuko inquires, leaning on the arm of the couch.

“Mother thinks it will be a great idea if Thandiwe visits, maybe for a couple of days since Vero is around.” I take in Ntuthuko’s manner, he is uncomfortable. His hands are across his chest, eyes deceitful, moving from Barbra to me.

“That is great, I would love to have my daughter-in-law and grandson around.” Father says, Ntuthuko grills Barbra with a lingering glare. A muted conversation between them is taking place, she clears her throat and looks away.

“Zu...Zulu won’t be around dad.” His voice breaks,

he rubs his sweltering forehead, nerves have him by the balls.

“Why not?” The grandfather questions.

“Yes, bafo. Tell father why he won’t be seeing his grandson.” I rub salt to the wound. Barbra has decided to keep to herself.

“Zulu...” his mind works overtime, trying to come up with an excuse to deceive the old man.

“He went on a school camp, I don’t know when they’ll be back.” He lies so naturally, his eyes rimmed red and his appearance agitated. Catching my glare, he gulps and blinks away the crookedness in his eyes.

“There won’t be a problem if Thandiwe comes here then, since Zulu is away, right mother?” She gazes up, startled by my sudden remark. She is compelled to approve, what other choice does she have?

“Yes...she can stay here as long as she wants.”

The approval I need glides out of her tongue.

Ntuthuko slithers into a fit of annoyance, he could have a clue of what is going on. I see confusion owning him.

Hurting Zulu is something he will never do, Thandiwe is easily manipulated. She believes anything Ntuthuko says, he is a coward as much as he likes serving threats.

I need to get a hold of Neo, he should be able to trace Zulu in Brazil, fake name or not.

THANDIWE

Going home feels like torture, it hurts to know that I will not find my son there. Though my mind calls out for his, there is no connection. My Zulu has become a shadow lingering in the depths of my mind.

I resent Ntuthuko for doing this to me, it will take a miracle for me to forgive him. The thought of going to an empty house comes with memories of my son,

playing like a song in my head.

“Hey, you can catch a ride with me if you like.” Ife offers, jolting me back to the present. Having to face life without Zulu hurts, I wouldn’t wish this pain on any mother, not even Barbra herself.

“Where are you headed?” Work is not complete, I’ll tackle the rest tomorrow. My mind is not functioning well today, it has deserted me and I can’t seem to think of anything else, but my baby.

“The north and you?”

“South, I don’t want to inconvenience you.” she gives me a shrug. I bought a bus tag, it’s easier than taking a taxi and cheaper.

The bus will take me to Ghandi square and from there I will commute to Roodepoort. I make sure to leave the office with everyone, Cele is always the last to drop out of the office and I wouldn’t want to be stuck with him.

He disappears somewhere in the parking lot, while I head to the bus stop to meet an elderly man seated on the bench. Unconsciously, I send my greeting and position myself adjacent to him, it takes a millisecond to notice that he didn't greet back. It's a week day, I don't blame him.

"Have you ever lost a son?" I am staggered by his question that I have to turn my gaze away from the busy streets to him.

"Excuse me?" He's not looking at me, but staring into space.

"I lost my son, he is away from me," he continues with an aggrieved tone. My thoughts run to Zulu and my mind reminds me how shattered my soul is. Is this the price we have to pay for loving someone? Having to relate to the stranger's grief brings about tears to my eyes.

"I'm sorry." That's all I can offer, I'm broken as well.

"I can't find my son, I wronged him and now he is far from me. I have looked everywhere, but I can't find him." I can't seem to understand him, how old

is this son he speaks of?

“Maybe I can help you find him, sir. Where did he go?” There is a strange aura emanating from him, almost in humane.

“Away from me, I betrayed him and he hates me. Will I ever cross over? My father wants me to apologise, he rejected my spirit.” I can almost hear the sound of his heart breaking through the pained words he utters. “I need to apologise to him, it’s the only way I will be free and join my ancestors.” He turns to me and it’s like someone pours gasoline onto the spark of fear in my belly as my eyes land on the blood drenched bullet hole on his temple.

My breathing quickens, I can feel the oxygen flooding in and out of my lungs. My body feels hot and sweat drenches my skin, fire in a form of water sting my eyes as they burn with tears and ringing screams vibrate in my ears. I’m rumbling in terror, eyes locked wide and every muscle rigid.

He's been shot, but he should be dead, right? Or is he a ghost?

He grips my shoulders, violently shaking me. "Find my son, I want my son. I want my son." His horrific screams torment my ears, my hands tremble as they find a way to reach my ears and clog them. This is not real, this is not real. Mentally I repeat the mantra, I can still feel his tight grip on my shoulders.

"Thandiwe, Thandiwe." An identifiable voice rises above his and my yelps, forcing my eyes open to find Nqaba. His hands are tightly gripped on my shoulders.

It's days like these when I feel like my brain has been randomized. There is no sight of the man, like he was never here. Was I hallucinating or was he really here?

"A ghost, I saw a ghost...Nqaba." I say as the

realisation settles in, I just had an encounter with a ghost.

“Are you sure of what you saw?” I hate how he thinks I am crazy, this is what he did this morning.

“I know what I saw, okay? He was sitting next to me...Nqaba, he said he wants his son and that.”

“Maybe you should take her to the hospital.” There is a man with him.

“The hospital Randall? What will we say to them? That she sees the supernatural? Do you know what they will do to her there?” Annoyance is all over Nqaba’s vocal sound. The Randall guy raises his hands in surrender and with impatience on his face glances at his wristwatch. He is not bothered by how I am engulfed in panic.

“I saw a dead man...” My speech finds me, but springs out in a scream, Nqaba pulls me back as I attempt to flee from his grip. My delusional self, tells me that I need to run and hide. Though I don’t know what I am hiding from, probably myself... the world perhaps or my ordinary life that has turned

into a horror in a space of a few weeks.

“Thandiwe, Thandiwe.” A tight painful clutch on my shoulders, Nqaba shouts my name through clamped teeth, while pushing me back on the metallic bench. He’s angry, at me mostly and I don’t know where the rest of his anger is directed. It’s not my fault, this is not my fault. Whatever this is...

God must be having fun writing my life, my mother once told me that He is the author and finisher of my life. I don’t like this script he’s writing, I am not a puppet or a cartoon character. Has he forgotten that he gave me a human heart and a fragile one at that?

“Look at me Thandiwe,” Nqaba substitutes my shoulders with my face, locking my cheeks on his palms. “Stop, please stop.” I want to stop, but how when my mind refuses to.

It’s running at a fast rate, I have to run after it or I will be doomed if it leaves me. “Remember Tantan...all you have to do is look into my eyes.”

Glancing into my bouncing eyes, he waits for an answer.

He wants to know if I'm still with him, if my mind is still in one piece and I haven't fallen into the pool of insanity.

I see it in his eyes, for the first time today, they hold an unquenchable fire. A plea for my life...my sanity and peace of mind...

"Tan-tan..." He exhales deeply when all I do is stare back, disarrayed and irresolute. "All you have to do is look into my eyes..." he insists.

"..and- I will never- get lost." The same mind that is ready to reject me, dubs me a liar, telling me that I am already lost. But I still find unfathomable peace in the same eyes that promise to always find me.

"Please, please...don't let me lose my mind Nqaba... Whatever happens, don't let me go crazy, please." I murmur desperately, my famous tears plead for me as well. I need more than this, a divine intervention... Nqaba's love...my mother's prayers...my son's presence...I can't be crazy, I don't want this.

My mundane life is okay, I have never complained about it. So why is it being taken from me?

“Is she okay?” Randall searches with an unmitigated blank stare, the weird thing is that there is a familiarity to him I can’t shake, not a memory but echoes that call my intuition. Nqaba swallows me in his outsized arms, much to Randall’s impatience.

“Can we hurry this up please, I have a wife to get home to.” The same impatience displaying around him feels a need to show itself through his voice.

“Do you trust me?” A random question from Nqaba. Who else can I trust, but him? A simple nod gives him the answer he needs. “Vero just moved back home and I thought it would be a good excuse for you to get away from...” he pauses, jaw clinched and a blazing aggravation in his gaze that’s holding mine. “You will be safe there, Ntuthuko won’t do anything and you don’t have to worry about Zulu, I will bring him home to you.” He’s candid and I continue to trust him, I will go where he leads me with no questions asked.

King Promise's Selfish plays as Randall starts the car, I've heard Bulelwa play this song a few times. He is a fan of Naija Afro-beats.

Nqaba ogles down at me, pressed against him like vegetables stuffed around a thanksgiving turkey. Both arms wrapped around him and finding comfort in the occasional kisses at the top of my head...

There is something about Nqaba that brings me tranquillity...the way he smells...the aura of power around him that intensifies his physical appeal...his command and confidence... the sense that he will always catch me when I fall.

To be continued...

BURN

19...

BULELWA...

I am extroverted, usually the life of the party. The confident one among a crowd, but right now the men gathered at the corner make me want to turn back to the building.

It could be the way they are staring at me, throughout the day I would hear offensive words like faggot to name a few. The idiots didn't have the guts to say it to my face and I didn't have the strength to confront them.

This takes me back to primary school, the boys called me all sorts of names because I preferred to hang around girls. I wasn't aware of my sexuality then, but at the age of thirteen, I started feeling some type of way when a boy would randomly place a hand around my shoulder or sit next to me.

I was confused, scared and alone. With no one to

turn to I fell into depression, isolated myself from friends and family. Most days I spent crying in my room and I hated myself for it because boys/men don't cry.

Lilian became more depressed than me, she thought her only son was dying. She can be extra sometimes, I was forced to see a shrink and had to tell a stranger that boys my age made me feel funny and the horrific part about it was that my d*** would twitch when a boy I 'regretfully' thought was cute would touch me.

I cried when the therapist told me that I was sexually attracted to boys. Being raised by a patriarchal man like Mandla, my sexuality had to be a curse. I would beat myself up for disappointing him, it went as far as having nightmares about him finding me out.

I was insecure once upon a time, Lindiwe helped me

understand that my sexuality was as normal as breathing. I believed her more than I believed the shrink. Eventually I gained back my confidence and embraced myself, it was meant to end there...my happy ending. But the bullying continued...

At fifteen, I had a crush on the cutest boy at school...an acquaintance of mine, he was two grades ahead of me.

The daunting, arrogant Tshupo, was always nice to me. He was to blame for the feelings I had for him, he had me dreaming of a future together. The gods, the universe and every higher power out there convinced me that it was okay to tell Tshupo that, my heart longed for him. What harm could there be, right? The boy was an angel, so I lured him behind the school and poured my heart out.

It wasn't two seconds before he was barking and spitting on my face, told me how I disgusted him and was an abomination. His friends joined in, I was stripped naked, ridiculed in front of the whole

school.

No one dared to help, even the girls who I thought were my friends. Footages of my shame were taken and trended on social media for an entire week.

I don't know how Lindiwe did it, but she went and got all those homophobes expelled and managed to hide the whole saga from Mandla. The attack changed my whole life, I turned to partying, drinking and hid behind my silliness. All just to forget.

I identify the idiots at the corner as the same men who were giving me a hard time during work. I could run to the car, but then that would be stupid of me. One of them whistles as I stride by, amusing the idiots he's with.

“Ouse Bubu, don't you want to give me a ride in your sexy car?” This feels like the longest walk ever, usually I would have thrown insults at the fools. My comeback is clogged by the fretting memories of my school days.

The Albany bread bastard is standing amongst the crowd, staring at me like I am some alien, I can't read his expression though.

As I reach my car, I turn back to find his gaze still on me. He frowns, mumbles something and looks away immediately. He's uttering something to those men, they all scatter irritably. Fixing his backpack, his eyes shoot up to me. We hold the stare for a while before he blinks and hurries away. Don't ask me what that was about. I am just as confused.

NQABA...

Bringing Thandiwe to my father's house is a good idea, a change of scenery might do her good. Her episodes have me worried, it could be that she is losing it or she might be seeing the supernatural.

Randall says to take her to the hospital, which I effusively disagree.

I have to persuade Randall to come in the house, he is reluctant about it, but eventually agrees. I was with him and the other guys throughout the day discussing a way forward on how to find Zulu. It has been decided that Styles and Neo will travel out of the country while I keep an eye on things and by things I mean Ntuthuko.

Thandiwe walks and looks like a zombie, I wish there was a way to help her.

She leaves to find Vero after greeting the old man, father introduces himself to an intolerant Randall, if he could fly home to his wife he would.

“What is wrong with you?” I ask, observing his foot that's occasionally tapping on the floor. “What?” He gives me a shrug that tells me to go take a hike.

“Are you that desperate to get home?”

“Why am I here, Mzi?” He's scowling again, this man would mentally cuss you and reveal it through his facial expression.

“You had to drop me off, remember?” I have never seen any man so eager to get home to his wife.

“You should’ve requested an Uber, if only I knew I was going to drive all over Joburg.” he grumbles, inspecting his wristwatch. My car broke down, Styles and Neo have a flight to catch so none of them could give me a ride, fetching Thandiwe was part of the plan. If Ntuthuko had beat me to it, he would have taken her back to their house and maybe come up with a story of how she can’t visit her in-laws.

“Young love, I used to be like Randall. Wanting my wife with me all the time, I would count the minutes while at work and rush home right after. It all changed when I moved to Joburg, I had to get used to not seeing my wife every day.” Father recites and this giant sulking bear doesn’t know what to say, so he nods and bashfully rubs the back of his head.

“I thought I heard voic-” Barbra chokes in her words and her feet falter as she walks in the living room, mouth ajar and goggle eyes fixed on Randall.

“Is everything okay?” I have to ask seeing her

drowning in shock, she blinks and reels a couple of steps back. Her mouth prepares to release words, but nothing comes out.

Randall is not okay with the staring, I know I wouldn't as well. The woman has gone pale like she's seen a ghost.

“Wh...who...” She struggles to get a word out.

“Are you okay?” Father questions, we would like to know the same.

“Ntuthuko called, he needs help with something... Don't wait up.” Avoiding the rest of us, she kisses her husband and flies out the door.

“Your mother?” A question from Randall, one I am not sensible enough to answer. Mother is probably going to see that bastard Pule. I offer to see Randall out, but he snubs me and says he's not a child that needs to be guided. Arrogant bastard...The friends I keep...

THANDIWE...

“Mama, I think I am going crazy.” It’s the first thing I say to her when she answers the phone, there must be a bad reception because she is not saying anything.

“Mama!”

“Why do you say that Thandiwe?” Hearing her voice eases a little part of my aching heart, it’s not much though.

“Strange things have been happening, at first I kept seeing a little girl in a red coat, she appears anywhere and today I saw a ghost.” My mother is Christian, it is expected that she will sack this topic and tell me to pray as if I haven’t been praying.

“I don’t understand.” How clear can I be? I need her to understand me, who else if not her?

“I see dead people mama.” I half shout, panic trying to overpower me again. “And a little girl, I don’t know who she is. I’ve never seen her in my life, she appears and disappears like she was never there. Sometimes she calls me mommy and sometimes Mapula.”

“Oh Jehova, Thixo.” I hear her lament over the phone and my heart dynamically knocks on my ribcage, causing me to sit up on the bed. Why is my mother not offering the comfort I need?

“Mama, what is it? What happened?” My hands are shaking, I have stirred to the edge of the bed. I don’t know what my next move would be, it depends on what she will say to me and I am persuaded that it’s not good.

“Do you pray Thandiwe?” I don’t want to hear that, prayer has not delivered me from this horror.

“Why do you keep telling me to pray? What are you hiding from me?” It’s her fault that I’m screaming, she induced these vicious emotions.

“How is your husband?” What?

Is she seriously diverting from this topic? I am in a world where Ntuthuko has ceased to exist, how do I worry about him when I have grave issues to deal

with? God if this is a test, I am done.

The door flaps open, Nqaba jolts in, scare and disquiet painted on his face.

“What’s wrong? Why are you screaming?” A great urge to be in his arms arouses in me as he slowly trails my way, the aether around him, pulling me into a boundless love.

“Hold me Nqaba please, make me feel alive.” It’s like we have never been apart as he embraces me with such intensity, the largeness of his arms clasped around me, our chests pressed together. Our breaths in unison. My stomach flatters at the feeling of my body pressed against his.

My human shield he is...an embrace of strong arms, stronger than anything I have ever known. It assures me of my safety. As if holding me is not enough, I feel my soul connect with his. Every ounce that I am, sucking out of me into him. In this moment of having him, warm tears parade down

the runway of my cheeks. I want to let go of the tears swirling in my soul.

I am drowning and needing a saviour, his sheer gaze holds me up, preventing me from going deep under water. It is more than sufficient for me, his arms hold a cure to my insanity and I would forever stay hidden under his wings if fate lets me. The world has refused our love, this stubborn love that is forbidden.

Ngaba shuffles on the bed and lies on his back, pulling me down with him. I'm in his arms once more, my head resting on his chest.

“How did I survive eight years without you?” It seems so impossible now that I think about it. Did I smile, laugh, dance or even shed tears of joy? If so, how did I achieve that with an empty soul? His arms squash a fraction tighter around me, my body melts into his as every muscle loses its tension.

“What are you thinking Tshabalala?” I soak in his warmth and the smell of his entrancing fragrance

tickles my nostrils, the world around me melts away as I squeeze into him not wanting the moment to end.

Edging my nose a smidgen nearer to his neck, I breathe in his scent. It's exotic and awakens every sensual desire in me, I can recognize the brand of cologne he used- the name is far from my lips, but my memory serves me right.

“I need you Nqabayomzi, I need you like I need this heart that beats for you. I need you my Zulu man, stay with me for every moment of my life, I want my breath to be linked with yours.” He pulls me closer against his chest, I don't know how much closer we can get. We're one person now, his hand glides down my waist and lands on my hip. A ghost of a smile creeps upon his face.

“I am here Tan-tan, this time I am here and I will never leave you.” Goosebumps line up my skin as it screams with the need to be allied with his. “You will never have to worry about anything.” At his

words, his hand touches my face. The acceleration of my heart beat has nothing to do with fear but everything to do with the way he's holding me, the warmth of his hands caressing my skin.

With a mild touch he tilts my face up, claiming back the gaze I had taken from him, stealing the fire from my eyes that ignites sparks of passion.

His warm lips linger against mine, before fully taking me in. The kiss is plump and delicious... warm in all ways with a growing rhythm, his lips perfectly moving with mine.

A fervent dance for dominance as he dominates over me, his hand mildly darts to my ear, the rub calls forty winks upon my eyes. Sleep has come to claim me, take me away from my Zulu man. It calls with a desperate need for attention, however, the passionate kiss not only keeps me awake, but shouts out loud to every feeling in me.

It engulfs my senses and tosses my troubles away. Not wanting to let go, I move with him as he pulls back from the kiss. I feel a smile creep on his face,

he pampers me with a few pecks and I want more than that, I want all of him.

“Khawula Tshabalala wam’. (That’s enough.) His arrogant yet mischievous smile grows against my lips, his hands pressed on my back. Fencing me into him, he leans in so his forehead rests against mine. “Ngiyakuthanda Tshabalala.” He purrs, his voice low and grating. “Phumula sthandwa sam’ seng’khona manje.” (Rest my love, I’m here now.) Sleep finds joy in the words of my beloved and it claims me like a predator claiming its prey.

NEO...

The sudden trip will get me into trouble with this woman I love so dearly, she is following me around as I gather my clothes from the closet to shove them into my duffle bag. Ayize is an understanding woman and I tend to take advantage of the fact, all being well, one day she will not give up on me.

“What do you mean you’re going to Brazil?” I don’t know how else to explain it, Styles said not to tell the reason for our mission. Two years and our lives have been crime free, we stopped fighting demons and dragons. And by that I mean our enemies were taken care of. How do I tell her there is a friend who needs help and we can’t turn our backs on him?

“Exactly that Zee,” my riposte is thoughtless. “Who are you going with?” She settles on the bed, shooting daggers at me and taking away my opportunity to cook up some lies.

“Stylos.”

“You’re leaving me alone Neo?” She brings out her manipulative side, knowing I always fall at her feet with just one glance from her.

“Uze will keep an eye on you.” Listen to me handing my woman over to another man on a silver platter. Absurdity nudges at me and I swallow my words at the ice cold look she offers.

“I am not married to Uze,” the brats in her stomach

have anger issues. I should sign them up for anger management classes so they will be sorted when they get here. Zee snaps more than she speaks lately and I have fallen victim to the triplet's wrath. "Although I would've loved to, but..."

"What is that supposed to mean?" a silly smile two steps on her mouth at my reprimanding voice. "I don't like this crush you have on Uze. When is it coming to an end?" Her words waver as she opens her mouth to speak and just as I thought, my silence is bought with another smile.

"I love you baba." Her skin is so warm, she lays a lingering kiss at the corner of my mouth that spreads goosebumps on my skin. Zee knows when she starts touching me like this my mind sees it as a way to take a vacation, leaving me completely vulnerable.

My gaze traces her face and finds a home on her pretty lips that send my mind into a sensual state of intoxication.

I reach toward her plump face to lightly let my

fingers graze her lips before the urge to kiss her with my aching lips takes over. A fetish for her lips had grown over the years, it's not just any lips, but hers. Zee-lips is what I call them, perfect in all edges, they drive me to the brink of insanity. I would die a happy bastard tasting them.

The top lip is thin, not too thin, but a little bow-shaped and the bottom one is larger and heavy. Their deliciousness makes me want to feel them against mine. As if jealous that I get to indulge in this sweetness a smile decides to go first and parades on her mouth, a deep curve on her lips makes me feel happy that she is mine. A promise to forever cherish these moments fills my soul as I lean in to taste this heaven that is staring back at me. She pauses, not to resist, but to savour the moment.

With a smile playing on my mouth, I press my lips into hers, everything slows down around me taking me fully into this moment. A party emerges in my stomach when my mind takes me to places I didn't

know existed, a new adventure with every twirl.
Playful. Slow. Hesitant.

And suddenly hunger takes over like a rough diamond crafted with passion, her body fits stupendously in my arms, like God had handed her to me for keeps seconds after crafting this beautiful being.

“Brrrrrhhhh, mamasita. This food sweet well well.” (Delicious.) Sweet giggles dub her majesty as she takes delight in my declaration. “Yeah! Keep talking like Randy baby and I will never stop drooling over him.” The real world sucks, I was okay trapped between her sweet enchanting lips.

“You just had to go and ruin the mood, I was hoping for a quickie before I leave.” I’m in her plump face once more, taking in my obsession at close range. My happiness crashes when she pulls back, denying me what is rightfully mine. My territory... my heaven...my very own drug... Zee-lips.

“Forget it J ohn Black,” her steps are drawing her to

the bathroom, taking a piece of me with. “I love you too.” Like a tennis ball, she throws back a loud chortle. This sappy yet enigmatic heart of mine eases into a pool of comfort when she shouts, “I love you too baba.” My shoulders wiggle with jubilation at the sound.

“Dammit, I love this woman.” Another declaration finds a way out of my tongue, “Aren’t you walking me out baba?” I blame the clinging on the brats, wait till they get here. They will know who the boss is.

“I’m pressed, wait for me. I’m almost done.” Yeah, almost is an elongated millisecond. It took a while for us to fall pregnant, tears, prayers, our faith being tested, repeatedly. I don’t know how much we both came to giving up, there came a point where adopting was laid at the table.

My idea, while Zee dwelt upon the idea of surrogacy. Having another woman carry my seed...I couldn’t fathom the thought.

My heart had deemed Zee alone, fit to bear me a child. We fought more than we made love. She left and came back, I left and came back. Tug and pull from both ends, until God called us back to his throne room and made it known to us that pulling against each other will only leave us in shreds. Forever broken.

Our love was reignited in the presence of God, he reminded us of the promise he made to Abraham. Father of all nations. We stood still and let him lead, so the man upstairs did a number on us. He kept his promise and delivered three blessings that deprive me of sleep before they are even born and are the source of my headaches.

I love them like I love their mother. I love them like I love Kagiso. The three musketeers will arrive in four months, I am more excited than anyone.

Kagiso can't wait either, he keeps asking and I quote 'when will the aeroplane bring the babies.' We decided to keep the gender a surprise, it will be fun finding out that way.

THANDIWE...

My feet are gradually trampling on thick grass, it's wet with the threat to drop me on the ground should my feet hesitate to move. A little girl is leading me to an old hut. It's the only one in this dense forest, a line of tall trees stand witness to my observation.

The girl moves with sly steps, her bare feet holding a secret that ought to be kept secreted. A forbidden walk as if God himself has banned this moment.

My heart sends a warning as we approach the hut. The devil's cage is what I would call it.

"Tan-tan." A whisper repeats in the shadows of the wind, compelling me to look over my shoulder.

"Come back to me Tan-tan." It calls out to me.

Yearning. Searching. My soul familiarizes with this voice, turning around to stride away from this eerie place another voice overrides the whispers of the

wind.

“Mapula.” The roaring sound forcefully spins me, to meet an old man standing before my presence. Half naked with only a goat skin covering his waist down, his back is hunched. Long grey-white beard flows from his chin and sits on his massive round potbelly. He’s bald-headed, face wrinkled and eyes stabbing with wrath.

“Mapula, Mapula.” Although standing before me, he booms with viciousness and anger. Numbed by fear, my muscles abandon me. Leaving me defenceless.

“Who is that man in your bed Mapula? Who gave you the right to have that man in your bed? I gave you his brother, is he not enough for you?” There’s a tightening in my chest, my face frozen like the rest of my body, but tears manage to steal a glance. “Do you know who you are? You are mine Mapula, you belong to Makhafula. You belong to me Mapula, you belong to me.” His voice blasts with tormenting echoes, my breathing stops as he spreads his arms and closes in on me.

I can't move. No. no. no. This is a dream, it's not real Thandiwe, it's not real.

A cold gust of air bolts out of my chest as I'm pulled up into reality from the dream world, confusion and dizziness makes its presence known. Vivid images of the nightmare flash in my head replaying like a bad advert, the terrible feeling sinks in.

Where is Nqaba?

My heart loudly thumping against my ribcage. Breathing prompt. Tears streaking my face, there's an overwhelming grief I can't explain. In this muddled state an adrenalin rush in my blood and body trembling...I shoot up out of bed, running. Gaze kept forward, I don't know where I'm going.

There's a door, it's open. A cold breeze kisses my face as the darkness of the night welcomes me and my body shivers, but I pay no heed to it. My feet have a life of its own, they won't stop. I'm conscious, more awake than I was a few seconds ago.

But I'm trapped, trapped in a fuzzy nightmare. The pain, exhaustion and grief seek to show their power. They carry me up the balcony against my will. My heart doesn't want this, it's fighting with the emotions that have engulfed me. They are stronger and drawing me to my death.

“Thandiwe...” The voice with hard-edge, echoes, a reproaching tone swirling around it. Something tight chains around my belly and I'm pulled back with one bolt, the tug is forceful that air rises from my lungs and surges out of my mouth.

This scent...these arms...the warm breath whiffing my face is real and familiar. He's here, my head resting on his robust chest. My body swallowed in his large arms. When or how or maybe there is a God, maybe he wants me to see another day. Maybe this is his way of saying it is well.

“What were you doing?” How do I respond to a question I have no answer to? Overcome by my emotions, the walls that frequently hold me breakdown and salty floods burst forth like a stream, pouring down my face without a sign of

stopping.

There is motionless in my head, the after effects of the relentless fear and anxiety I live with.

“Are you insane? What if you-” he loses the rest of his speech probably at the grasp of the word that has been hovering around me for weeks. “I’m sorry, ngiyaxolisa sthandwa sami. Ngiyaxolisa Tshabalala.” (I’m sorry my love.) “Take me to my father please, take me to my father.” The words are almost inaudible as they are covered by quavers from a lumpy throat. I’m trembling, I can’t stop. Nqaba squeezes me in his arms, words of comfort leaving his mouth and sliding into my ears.

But there’s another voice, the old man’s. Nqaba’s voice seems to overpower the one of the old man with each soothing term.

I pull away with a lapse of a few inches, to meet the hardening of his face. Eyes rimmed red as if tears are daring to drip out of them, his hand rushes to

hide clear watery snot that escapes his flaring nostrils. Jaw tensing and relaxing as if there is a violent war between his strength and weakness.

He captures my face and worships my eyes with his lips and wipes away the evidence of pain from my face. The touch is kind...smooth...warm...home. It smears the soreness and confusion away.

“I need my father...” my voice is brittle and appealing.

“I’ll take you, you’re going to be okay.” The low rumble of his voice comforts me as it consumes all that I am and chases away every bad thing in my messed up world. “Ngiyak’thembis a sthandwa sami.” (I promise my love.) His voice is like a roll of thunder, but low and soft. Yet he speaks like he controls the world, like fate moves at his command. “I want you to come with me first thing in the morning, then I will take you to your father. Will you do that for me?” Instinctively and positively, I nod as my previous words echo in my heart. ‘I will go where he leads me.’

Perhaps my father would know why God has abandoned me.

To be continued...

BURN

20...

THANDIWE...

I don't know where Nqaba is taking me, he is not saying much and is too quiet for my liking. He keeps observing me, like he wants to see something that's not there. When I told Cele I won't be making it to work he said that's what happens when you're rubbing shoulders with the big bosses.

I don't know what he meant by that. He can be annoying at times, scratch that, he lives on the streets of annoyance.

I don't know how I managed to fall back to sleep last night, the dream I had feels like a distant memory, I can't puzzle it together no matter how hard my mind works. It feels as if I have forgotten something, it's sitting at the back of my mind and I can't seem to reach it.

I was woken up somewhere around 5am, a bag containing my clothes positioned on my bed. As I was wondering how Nqaba managed to get my clothes, mother-in-law came with answers. Now I'm wondering how she agreed to bring my apparels from the house. The woman does not take orders from anyone.

We left around 6:30am, before the rest of the family woke up. Nqaba is driving us to...I don't know where, he said he's taking me somewhere and I have to trust him. I saw a sign saying J ourbert Park, we're in the town of J oburg. He has slowed down the car, and I figure it means we're almost at our

destination. There's a free parking space outside an Indian shop selling blankets.

"Why are we here?" I don't know what here is. He's still wearing the deadpan expression and he won't reveal what's going on in that mysterious mind of his.

"There's a man who lives in this flat, his name is Ngidi and I think he can help you." It has come to this? I am a little dazed by his introduction.

"A traditional healer?"

"He's a seer, prophet. Whatever you want to call it, he has a gift." I watch him as he exits the car, my heart leaps to my throat when my feet hit the ground. I wobble back and hit my back on the car, everything around me is spinning. Nqaba comes to my aid in a flash, worry defeating his face. "What's wrong?"

"My head hurts and I feel lightheaded." I doubt I will make it inside.

"I have no idea what's happening to you Tan-tan, I think there are forces trying to stop you from going

in there. Please fight sthandwa sami, do it for Zulu. Do it for us.” His hand is on my face and in his gaze is where I find my strength. We get looks as we walk inside the building written Park Court in bold letters. My arm is around him, I’m walking like I have just been discharged from the hospital. With every stride my feet fall heavy, making it hard for me to take another step.

“Are you okay?” Nqaba asks as we enter the elevator, I have no answer for him. I’m leaning on him, my head resting on his upper limb. This feels like a spiritual battle, there’s a sudden heftiness on my nose. Warm thick moisture leaks my hand as I send it to rub away the heaviness. I’m bleeding...

“Here.” Nqaba hands me a handkerchief, an urge to cry arises but the tears are not there. I’m weak, too weak to fight whatever battle this is. “You’re going to be okay Thandiwe, all of this will pass.” At this point nothing is believable. How does Nqaba manage to keep calm in the midst of everything that’s happening? My world is falling apart and I

want to scream my lungs out, meanwhile he is as calm as a toad in the sun.

I let my body slide down to the floor. We're going to the sixth floor and this elevator is moving slow. Nqaba settles down next to me, my head finds its spot on his shoulder. The bad feeling fades away when I'm close to him like this.

"Do you think he's okay?" He gives me a glance of confusion. "Zulu... he's never been away from me for so long." Talking about him makes my heart happy, I would like to think that he's not crying where he is. That he doesn't think about me too much.

Silence.

"Nqaba." I need someone to tell me that my baby is okay, even if it's just a lie."

"Yes," he speaks in a low tone, a glint of worry decked in his voice. I trust his affirmatives, no matter how they are portrayed.

Flat number 60...A boy about the age of fifteen lets us in, he seems to be acquainted with Nqaba by the way he accepts a head rub from him. We're led to the living room where a middle aged woman is located, naturally I smile at her. It takes about a minute for her mouth to stretch into a smile.

Nqaba sits next to me, I want to chide him for not greeting the lady. Why is he acting like he can't see her. The living room is big enough to fit a dining room table, there are three more doors probably leading to the bathroom and bedrooms.

The boy offers us drinks which Nqaba accepts. In one gulp the glass is empty while as I can't stomach anything. The cartoons playing on TV remind me of Zulu, he loves them.

The boy disappears into one of the rooms, he's back in less than two minutes and leads us into the same room, where an elderly man in a long white garment is sited on a reed mat. He must be Ngidi. Cold shivers rush through me as his eyes meet

mine, a cough erupts from his chest before burping multiple times.

“Biyase, hayi... hayi.” (No.) His shoulders heave while vigorously shaking his head. We’re not welcomed here, that body language cannot lie. Violent shudders claim my body, Nqaba catches me when it gives in and goes downhill. He lays my convulsing body on the cold floor, my vision blurs, spine-chilling whispers fill my ears. Words fail me when I try to push them out of my mouth... Keep your eyes on him Thandiwe, it’s where you will find your strength!!! A reminder comes to mind, he’s not saying anything, though his eyes are speaking to me.

A smell of incense drifts my way, I shift my eyes to see Ngidi blowing the smoke towards me. My body accepts it and finds peace.

“Thandiwe?” Nqaba must have told him my name, I was given a doek to cover my head and a towel to wrap around my waist. We’re seated on a reed mat

opposite Ngidi. “Thandiwe.” He repeats.

“Nguyena baba.” (It is her.) The man is not okay with Nqaba answering for me.

“You are Thandiwe, right?”

“Yebo baba.” His eyes are incisive. (Searching)

“Did your mother tell you how you were conceived?”
If she wants me traumatized for life...

“No,” I breathe out the word in disgust. His eyes are searching me again.

“I can’t see your future ntombazane, your life will be cut short.” I don’t understand... my gaze falls on the man who brought me to this place. His head is bowed, body clothed in burden, Nqaba doesn’t bow his head. Where is the Nqaba who stands tall with confidence? I need him to look into my eyes and tell me that this is a lie, that it’s a prank. “Someone has claimed your life as their own.”

“Who?”

“A powerful witch,” it’s as if someone emptied a bucket of fear over my head. My stomach lurches

and adrenalin pumps. “You had a dream last night?”

“Yes, but I don’t remember much. It’s a bit fuzzy.” It could be my subconscious protecting me from the horror.

“He came to you in a dream, the little girl you’ve been seeing is him. He can’t take any other human form but that of the little girl. The child was made a sacrifice by witch's living offspring, it was the only way to get to you. He is no longer in this world, he wants you with him in the spirit world.”

“Why? What does he want from me?”

“Your mother will have to answer this question for you and whatever she tells you, try to understand her. Don’t hold any grudges against her, or you’ll be opening a door for the enemy.” What is this man saying to me? A witch? My mother? Secrets?

“Is there any way you can help her baba? If this witch is after her life, then he can be stopped right?” Nqaba jumps in, his gaze is on me and like always I fail to read him.

“That man was a powerful witch and whoever tries to fight him will meet their death, I would love to help you, but I have a child. But you Biyase, you have every right to claim her as your own and save her from that witch.”

“How?” He asks, desperate for answers as I am.

“Your heart will lead you, he will fight you Biyase. Your love for this young lady is stronger than his powers. He hates you for that and he is set for battle, but his wrath will fall on Thandiwe. He has a piece of her, it gives him the power to invade her world. If you two part ways, the evil man will win and take Thandiwe’s soul.” This makes me wonder what my mother did. What does she have to do with this?

“So, I am not losing my mind?” I need to know.

“You’re not, you have a gift of seeing the dead. They come to you with a message to relay to their loved ones. Some need help to cross over and some seek forgiveness or want to give their families closure. The world though will not understand your gift, the

road ahead will not be easy. Like I said, I can't see your future." I don't need to be reminded of that, it could only mean death and I don't want to die.

"There is nothing else I can help you with, your mother has answers to your questions and if you find someone who is willing to help you, then pray for that person because this battle is not for the fainthearted." He says and dismisses us. I don't see a need for him to scare me like that, whatever is happening is bigger than me. Now that I think about my mother's song 'pray Thandiwe, pray.' She knows something and it won't be easy getting the truth out of her. This will need sis Angie's intervention... 'Please Step In.' Linda is one stubborn woman.

Nqaba wants to know if we're still going to Nquthu. I think I should stay here until I have my son back, then I will take him with me. Probably stay there for a while, I will need to apply for leave at work. Cele will not be happy about it. Am I glad he does not have the final say? Hell yeah!

“Good bye ma,” a smile flicks on her face, as she waves at me. She doesn’t speak, I guess. Nqaba should drop his rudeness.

“You can see her?” Ngidi says, my heart stops for a second. What does he mean I can see her? “My wife. She died last year in a taxi accident. I can’t see her, but her presence is always with me. Please tell her that she needs to cross over and join her ancestors.” Where do I even begin? The man just told me the woman seated on the couch is his dead wife. As if this is normal, my heart is racing faster than it should. I need to get out of here. Grabbing Nqaba’s hand, I attempt to pull him towards the door but the man is immobile.

“Let’s go,” I whisper, still pulling his hand. Ngidi sees through my cowardice, this is no gift I am willing to accept. Not until I find out where it comes from, no one in my family had such a gift. According to Ngidi, my mother has answers to everything.

“That’s alright, you will get used to it.” Seeing Ghosts? I don’t think so. Nqaba is quietly standing next to me, observing everything. Or overthinking, I’m not sure. His body is stiff and his hand not responding to my touch. Odd.

He hasn’t said much since the revelation. Knowing that the person willing to deliver me from the clutches of the witch might die is gnawing, otherwise Nqaba will have to take up the responsibility.

NTUTHUKO...

Lumka would be the ideal woman for me if she weren’t money driven, I have spent so much on her, more than I have on my wife. She would definitely milk me dry if I were to take her as my wife. The sex is good, I have no doubts about that.

No thread of emotion moves in my being as I watch

her sleeping on Thandiwe's side of the bedside, this is all Lumka will ever be- a side chick. Thandiwe is different, I love her and I hate her. I take joy in seeing her cry, but also I don't want to see her in the arms of another man. If it happens that my brother Ngaba succeeds in attaining her, I would have to kill them. A perfect murder is what I have in mind, no one will ever know.

"Lumka, wake up." Thandiwe doesn't sleep as much as this woman, I don't know what I was thinking inviting her to my house. I'm late for work, this woman had me drinking all night.

"What is it?" She groans and tosses on the bed, pulling the blanket up to her neck.

"Hey, get up, this is not your bed. You need to go Lumka man."

"But I'm tired, let me sleep a bit more." She jolts up as I pull the blanket, exposing her naked body.

"Baby!" She grumbles, maybe I should set boundaries again. Lumka seems to forget that we

are not a couple. Sharing a bed means nothing.

“I told you not to get comfortable, get up and leave my house.” I don’t do well with tears, women are strange creatures.

“Why do you treat me like this? I’ve been nothing, but good to you...”

“Oh please, I don’t need this right now. Get out of my bed,” for an unknown reason, it bothers me that she’s sleeping in my bed. Mind you this is the same woman I enjoy, but right now I am disgusted by the sight of her.

“Okay, let me take a shower first.”

“No,” her steps halt at my command. A look of confusion on her face. “My mother is on her way, you know how she can be.

“I’ll hide in here till she leaves, please baby.” Her pleading glance puts me on the spot, my mind wavers. The innocence in her eyes forces me to surrender to her entreaty.

“Fine, don’t make any sounds. I don’t need Barbra

breathing down my neck.” She regards me with a suggestive glance, her tiny feet toddling to me. I don’t need this confusion in my life, she’s turning me on. My mind and emotions are at a battle field. I duck as she flails her arms with a shot to hook them around my neck. “There’s no time for that, go shower.” Regretfully, I reject her. With shame grazing her eyes, she gives me a weak smile and moves to the bathroom. I have never cast her off before, something must be wrong with me.

My brother thinks he’s smart, I can see right through him. I am not okay with Thandiwe away from me. How do I control her from afar? What if she decides to go ahead with the divorce? I’ve seen the confidence she gets from my brother and I hate it.

I get to the living room to find my mother sipping on tea.

“Did I leave the door open?” My salutation comes in a form of a question and a peck on her forehead,

she demands those from all her kids. Though Vero is not allowed to get an inch closer to her.

“You’re lucky your furniture is still here. Is sex with that whore that good that, you forget to lock your doors?” How does she know Lumka is here? I give her a tangled glare that sends her on an eye roll.

“I’ve been here for an hour, I saw her sleeping in your bed.” We were so drunk last night, nothing else mattered. “Are you trying to lose us millions Ntuthuko? You know if Thandiwe provides proof of your infidelity, the court will grant her the divorce on a silver platter? Do you want to be poor son? Because that will happen if you’re not careful.”

“Thandiwe will never know about Lumka, relax.” I shoot back, tired and frustrated by her constant nagging. A tongue click squeezes out of her mouth as I sit myself down. “What happened between you and Mzi yesterday? I walked in on something and I have never seen you so nervous before.” There’s a whiffle waffle in her eyes, a secret lies in them. “Did you tell him about Zulu?”

“Of course not, don’t be ridiculous.” Defensively, she snaps without meeting my gaze.

“Are you sure?”

“Don’t be stupid, I’m on your side here. Haven’t I proven that time and time?” The authority in her voice catches my full attention. “Don’t hurt that boy Ntuthuko, he’s only a child and remember, we need him more than we need the mother.” Her recap has me shifting unnervingly on my seat.

“I would never hurt my son, but Thandiwe doesn’t know that.” I say, looking away from her severe gaze.

“Says the man who terminated all three of his wife’s pregnancies.” Only Barbra would throw this back in my face.

“That was your idea.” I get a reprimanding glare for cracking at her. Thandiwe knew I didn’t want more kids, but had the audacity to fall pregnant. I had to take matters into my own hands or this house would be flooding with big-headed brats.

“I only put the idea in your head. You could’ve

ignored me, but you made her that special milkshake with abortion pills, all three times.” An ingenious idea I saw on TV, I had to think fast when Thandiwe told me she was pregnant, five years after Zulu was born. My mother planted the seed in my head and as if fate was on my side, I came across a show where a man terminated his wife’s pregnancy simply by serving her a shake with the special ingredients inside. That way, she will never find out.

“Thandiwe should’ve known better than to fall pregnant and keep your voice down, Lumka might walk in.”

“Oh shut up, don’t chide me as if I am one of your floozies.” I hate it when she says that, knowing Lumka is the only woman I’m seeing outside my marriage. Barbra’s persona has always bugged me, from when I was a little boy. The respect she thinks she deserves as if she birthed the Son of God. No wonder she sometimes butts heads with her husband, you would think she grew up surrounded by men.

BULELWA...

“Shit.” I jump out of bed upon seeing the time, work starts at 9am. It’s past 8am and it takes me three hours to get ready. Only Mandla can subject me to quick showers. One day when he’s old, wrinkled and unable to walk, I will remind him of this day.

There’s someone in my kitchen, it must be Lindiwe or Lilian. They don’t knock, because Bubu is not financially stable to afford himself a house and this is Mandla’s house. What is the point of changing the locks if they will keep breaking in?

Wait!!!

My sister is not a white man who walks around naked in my kitchen with nothing but an apron on. I grab the nearest vase, ready myself for battle. My feet falter as the idiot turns upon hearing my footfall.

“Beastie?” I shriek, in bewilderment. Dammit! Does

he have to have a beautiful smile and those abs peeking through that apron. 'Focus Bubu, focus.'

"What the heck Beastie?" What is his name again? He told me the other day.

"Jacob baby, I don't mind Beastie, but it would be nice if you called me by my real name." He should flip himself out of my house with that spatula.

"Boy, why are you in my house and how did you get in?" He turns to grab something on the counter, and waves it around.

"Spare key." Oh hell no, who gave him a spare key?

"Where did you get that?" I ask, he better spill or this vase will decorate his beautiful head. "My mother doesn't even have a key to my house."

"Boo-boo bear"

"Yeey, stop right there." I shout at him, commanding his moves to halt. He raises his hands, surrendering. A smile of victory moon walking on his delicious mouth. Blink Bubu, it chases the devil away. How long do I have to chide myself before I feel like a normal person? This is a regular now.

“Is this what your parents taught you Beastie?”

Dammit...I bite my tongue, the name Beastie gave him the wrong impression. That’s why he came back, men are like puppies, you pet-name them and they cling to you like a bloodsucking parasite.

“Where I come from, breaking in a house is considered a crime. I can get your fine ass arrested.” He’s gleaming like a fool. What did I say? No, seriously, what did I say?

“Why would you want to get my fine ass arrested? Wouldn’t you want to have it yourself?” That voice dear Lord, that’s it. Let the rapture happen, your children will not survive in this world. The devil is after us daddy-God. I’m doing more blinking than talking. Trying to blink away the blinding in my eyes.

“Lo...Look, Bea...” Shit!!! “Jacob Mason,” the grin on his face.

“You remember my surname?”

“I do.” I’m returning the grin, which I shouldn’t, but remembering his Home affairs name is a victory. I

smash and forget or rather they smash me and I forget them.

“Forget that, you have to leave. This is creepy, you’re creepy Jacob. Creepy-sexy...” I will lose my tongue if I continue like this. Should his chest be moving like that? “Stop doing that, stop moving those muscles.”

All this doesn’t make sense, Beastie came to seduce. The hard-on in my pants never lies. I need help, it’s not funny anymore. The man broke into my house and here I am salivating like some sex-freak, this can’t be the cause of my death.

He winks, I gulp, pursuing his every movement. His round tight butt blinds my sight when he turns to flip something in the pan. Damn, how does he manage to fuck my mind?

I find myself lusting over him, my eyes trailing every

muscle on this stud's body. Vanilla latte is my favourite and I can't start my morning without it, someone must have told him this.

"I can help you with those lips," I blink to find him ogling at me with his seductive look. "I can kiss them better, you know it is said that biting your lip while staring at someone likely means you're attracted to the person." He's in my face, way too close. "Lips are the most exposed erotogenic zone and a passionate kiss can awaken the love hormone. You know what I think about this sweat forming on your brows Boo-boo?" (Erotogenic zone = a part of the body that excites sexual feelings when touched or stimulated)

He sends a finger to draw out my brows, without moving his lips an inch from mine. And my sex crazed-self is turned on like an oven on a hot Christmas morning. It's all wrong, Mr. Fifty shades is sin in a human form.

"I think you're attracted to me and already have a picture of what we should be doing right now. Don't you miss these arms wrapped around you? Me

beautifully inside you, our souls connecting.” Experienced people should be locked up, life without the possibility of parole. How do innocent people like us survive around them? My lips are inviting his in, the light touch sends shivers through my nerves. The vase is taken from my hands. Heart rate boosted by the adrenalin rushing in my body, it doesn’t take a second for it to start trembling under his touch. Judas. Can’t even trust my own body.

Satan, you devil Lucifer. Dammit...you didn’t have to replay that night in my mind. Steamy, freaky, erotic... Even God knows I don’t eat leftovers. Hell my body would cringe at the thought, but today it’s like a fat kid offered a death-by-chocolate cake.

Jacob traces the line of my cheekbone, keeping his lips against mine. How do you define the word ‘focus’ again? I need help, this is stalker tendencies. I’ve seen the red flags, he will think this is okay. That I’m allowing him in, you’re an adult Bubu. Get this vanilla dip out of your house.

“Ndlondlo.” I snap, calling upon my uncle. I’ll buy him a whole crate of his favourite beer if he does his job.

‘There’s a special at Tops at Spar.’

“Special?” Jacob has finally moved back, good work unc... Wait, did I say that out loud?

“My uncle says you should leave my house.”

Dying doesn’t mean you rest where you’re going. You think the world is hard, wait till you become an ancestor, it’s double the work. We demand left, right and centre. Get to work uncle, take this white man out of my house.

“Shit, your uncle is here?” Only now he decides to cover up, his clothes are packed on my couch... Satan this one...

“Yes, uncle is here and you won’t like it when he’s angry. He lived in Limpopo most of his life and God entrusted them with lightning.” This is better than

cooking scrambled eggs, lies are fun to tell. I should have my own reality show. 'LIES WITH BUBU'.

Folding my arms across my chest, I watch the sexy beast throw his clothes on like he's on Amazing Race.

“What do you mean Boo-boo? Your uncle has ligh-” I should be laughing out loud right now, but he'll call me out on my lies.

“Lightning darling,” I had forgotten how stupid he is. Beauty without brains. Shame. His eyes widen, his fidgety hands struggle to put the shoe on his foot.

“You can do that in the car, you need to go. Ndlondlo is not a happy man right now.” I hand him his other shoes, drag his fine ass out the door. He turns and I know he's going to say something stupid.

“My eggs...” I can't...

“I'm sure your daddy has enough chickens in his farm.” He smiles at my return, damn...so his daddy has a farm?

“Can I call you?” Why is my door still open? I smash it on his face and lean against it to cool myself. I need to google sex-addicts anonymous or whatever it’s called...Death by sex? The world will mock my none-existent life and I will be the first person to literally turn in my grave.

Skipping work is not an option, my father would come and drag me out of the house. It won’t end there. The man will go as far as embarrassing me in front of those baboons I call co-workers. I need to run away from here, go to an island where I’ll bask under the sun. I haven’t heard from Thandiwe since the night I was meant to fetch her, I’m such a bad friend.

“Bitch where are you? You better be alive, I hope Thor came to your rescue that day, I’m sorry I had to tell him. You know what, I am not sorry, that son of Barbra Ntuks deserves to be locked up. Anyway, call me when you get this.” <BUBU

Her last seen is dated five days ago, but I get two ticks. I'll call her when I get to work.

To be continued...

BURN

21...

THANDIWE...

“How am I going to cope without you? I'm new here Tee, the work is complicated.” Ife woke up today and decided that she will sit on my neck, she has been following me around since morning, complaining about how she needs me to train her.

Her drama happened when Cele approached me and said I have been granted a week's leave, one which I didn't ask for. I plan on declining the offer. My son is not back with me yet and I would rather

not be cooked up with Barbra in her house.

“Relax will you? I am not going anywhere.” Ife is too conversational, too energetic. I can’t imagine how they deal with her at home.

“Awesome, thank you Tee.” And these hugs she keeps giving me are not needed. “Honestly I hate this job, but you make it simple for me. Boss man is such a mood killer, he complained about my attire. Said I should wear skirts or dresses to work, he said I have a great body and shouldn’t hide it under long pants and cardigans.”

“What?” Cele is eyeing the child, no woman is safe from that man.

“Yeah,” a disgusted appearance takes full form on her face. “I guess it was a compliment?” She’s trying to convince herself, her eyes do not lie though. Whatever Cele said to her has her bothered.

“Ife you need to be careful,” I can’t voice out my assumptions about the man lest I get in trouble, but I can warn her to keep away from him. “You’re a big

girl, you know when someone is doing something inappropriate. Report to H.R if someone does or says something that makes you feel uncomfortable.” This should help.

“You mean like the way Cele looks at me?” She asks, her mouth pulling a downward sneer. She’s seen it too, I don’t understand why no one has reported that pervert. “It’s as if he’s slowly undressing you with his eyes, I left his office feeling dirty. Like I had done something wrong. Is he always like that?”

“Yes, hence I said keep away from him. Whenever you find yourself alone with him, make sure you have some sort of protection. A pepper spray or something.” I send my direction with the hope that she will go with it, her head moving to and fro oozes me into relief. Ife seems like a smart girl, she should be able to avoid Cele or defend herself if need be.

My attention is instantly absorbed by the ringing phone. What does he want?

“Ntuthuko?” The sun must be doing a vosho today, I

haven't heard from him in two days. I'm staggered that he has surfaced from the face of the earth.

"You need to come home, you've overstayed your visit." I knew he would never call bearing good news, I was expecting to hear something about my son. Why is this man so evil? The man turned into 'Shaka Zulu' overnight.

"I am not coming home anytime soon, besides father-in-law wants me to stay." I'm lying, I was told to stay away from him until Zulu comes back home.

"I am your husband Thandiwe and I want you home today." He shouts, forcing me to move to a quieter place. Ife chases my steps, curiosity calling out to her. Fighting with the husband was not part of my routine today.

"Don't talk to me like that Ntuthuko," I sound calm because the angels are most likely singing a lullaby trying to keep me still.

"I don't like your tone Thandiwe," what tone? "You think because you have my brother fighting your battles, you can practise your sassiness on me? I

am your husband, I paid your bride price. You belong to me.” The sound of his voice crashes through the phone in vocals of frustration. There goes my day...Only Ntuthuko can do this...Shatter you into pieces.

“Think whatever you want Ntu-” I stop mid-sentence as my eyes zoom in on the man sited on my chair next to Ife, his back turned. Ife is scrolling on her phone paying no heed to him.

Who is that? He can't be a colleague, his clothes are dirty...Muddy... wet, like he has been swimming in a puddle of mud. There's a pounding in my chest, time seems to have slowed down. Ntuthuko's voice becomes background noise.

An eagerness to investigate arouses and begins to pull me towards him. Am I the only one who can see him? A dirty man in a place of business, how was he allowed in?

“Thandiwe,” Cele slides in front of me, blocking my view. A grimace on my face and exasperation

enhancing through my veins, I tilt my head to peek over Cele's tall build to find the man gone. It's as if he was never there. Disarrayed, I take panicky steps to Ife, completely ignoring Cele.

"Where is he?" Ife raises her eyes, they shift to my left and in a flash, she rams the phone in the pocket of her pants. Cele is standing next to me, ready to complain.

"Who?" Ife answers my preceding question.

"There was a man sitting on this chair." Pointing at my chair, I mutter lest Cele hears me and concludes that I am not normal.

"There was no one here," Cute little Ife whispers back. "Are you okay?" My eyes have taken the task to browse the spacious office, every corner. Was he here or am I seeing ghosts again?

"Come to my office Thandiwe, I need to have a word with you." He's at it again, what does he want to talk about?

“I’m still busy sir, but I’ll make sure to avail myself once work is complete.” Like hell I will. His gaze runs to Ife who is trying by all means not to look up at him.

“How are things going Ifeanyi? I hope you’re learning.” Ife gasps and freezes as Cele drops his big hand on her shoulder, the grip makes me uncomfortable.

His thumb moves back and forth, rubbing the curve of her neck. Ife is holding her breath, I can tell from the way her back has straightened. Her eyes glancing into nothingness, the spaces between the white tiles on the floor.

“Excuse us sir, we’re working.” Politely and not giving anything off, I shrug his disgusting hand from the visibly terrified girl. He clears his throat, gives me an icy glare, his teeth clamped together.

I watch him scurry back to his office and takes his frustrations out on the door as he slams it. Ife remains a little shaken, I don’t know what’s going on

in her mind.

“Are you okay?” she hasn’t moved an inch. “Ife.” Blinking is good, she’s still with me.

“Yeah.” She mumbles under her breathe and crosses her arms. We can’t get that man fired without any proof, everything about him screams pervert. His walk. His words. The look in his eyes. The fact that he is constantly standing in the doorway of his office. Is he looking for his next target? Cele is bad news and I am afraid for every woman in this place.

BULELWA...

“There is someone here to see you.” This man only speaks to me when necessary, otherwise he pretends as if I don’t exist. Apparently he has been given the task to train me. He’s the supervisor around here. Everyone calls him Zizwe, I don’t know his full name. I don’t care to ask.

He still stares a lot...he's staring right now, with a frown as I push my jumpsuits out of my body. His eyes flowing down from my chest to legs, strangely nothing screams uncomfortable. Could he be...? Nah...impossible...Or is it?

“Who is it?” My voice snaps him back to life, clearing his throat, he turns away. Shame pulling him by the nose. It's a good thing I have clothes on under this ugly work suit.

“I don't know, it's a woman.” His rasping voice does something to me, it all began when he was teaching me how to drive a stupid truck.

Seated next to me... Giving me instructions...the next thing he's leaning over me and instantly my heart gave in. It jumped to my throat, hot flashes swamped by body... Cheeks burning...palms sweating...and I will not mention other embarrassing effects his voice had on me. “You should close the window.” He said, his face neighbouring mine that his voice gently glided into

my ears, stimulating every sexual feeling.

I am still embarrassed by how my body convulsed at the sound of his voice. While still leaning over, he turned his gaze and slowly traced my eyes down to my lips. For that God-given moment I thought he was going to kiss me. Only for him to snap out of it and dismiss the lesson and had some homophobic fool who thought he would catch a “gay-disease” by touching me- take over. I am done with these people.

“Okay,” I return his answer with the same attitude he gave me and get a glare from him. He should do something about that scowl on his face. Smiling has never hurt anyone. I’m caught by a hefty huff from him, I’m only treating him the way he treats me.

“Your attitude stinks,” he snaps, stealing glances or glares.

“So you’ve been telling me and guess what darling? It still stinks, according to you.” My big mouth will lend me in hospital, I need to check if my medical aid is up to date. I aim my jumpsuit at the chair next

to him, perfect shot this would be. It's where I hang my uniform when going out. I don't want anyone to see me in this dull hideous attire.

"What's your problem?" Ooops!!! I didn't mean to hit him.

"Sorry! Life is a bitch, isn't it?" Shut up Bubu...

Inwardly, I rebuke myself and gulp at his face, anger blazing under his stony expression... His narrowed eyes holding me captive. Such handsome features have never welcomed a smile? Life is not fair.

He's stomping towards me, I want to escape, but something in his gaze demands me not to move. It has me standing at attention like a soldier ready to take orders. The work suit hits my face as he nears me, his throw is hard and painful. Not fair on the strength attack... My muscles wouldn't defend me even if I paid them.

Clutching on the suit, I move back, hypnotised by his preying gaze. I'm thinking he's going stop, but the gigantic man towers over me as my back hits

the wall. What is he doing?

Oblivious to his next move, I wince when he raises his hand to me.

The unexpected touch locks me in confusion. It's trailing my face, every edge. With astonishment on my face that is enthralled in his fierce gaze, I chastise my eyes and send them to my feet. I am not one to shy away from anything, why is Hulk an exception? The trailing continues until it finds my lips, a shuddering breath leaves my mouth. I feel giddy from his scent, it's hypnotic and appetizing. My body is denying me again. I want a new one. I don't do well with Judas.

“What makes you think you can talk to me like that, Buttercup? Your mouth will get you in trouble, you need to watch it.” His face is impassive, but his voice contradicts it. It's swirling in amusement and what sounds like compassion. I'm confused. His pull-away, at the sound of someone clearing their throat is not rushed, his scrutiny still chaining me.

My eyes chase him as he saunters away without acknowledging the person at the door.

“Oh my God! He is so yummy.” Lindiwe’s chirpy voice pulls me from the sight of Zizwe’s daunting strides.

“What are you doing here?” Lilian must have given her the address, my mother is in cahoots with everyone who wants to see my downfall.

“I came to check if you’re still alive, seeing how much you hate working.” We settle down on the benches. “I didn’t know you have a boyfriend. Are we keeping secrets from each other now?” Says the girl who kept a pregnancy and an engagement from me.

“I don’t do relationships you know me and if I happen to date, that bastard would be the last person I go for. Besides I don’t think he’s gay...” Who am I kidding? The guy is bisexual, that chemistry was real.

“You two looked quite close for people who are not in a relationship.”

“Can we not talk about him? What brings you here? You know this place is mostly surrounded by men?” She laughs at my statement.

“Your definition of heaven. Does daddy know that his son is a whore?” Lindiwe’s proclamation would usually throw me into a laughing zone, but not today. Today it bothers me, Jacob gave me a fright that day at my house. The life I live proves to be dangerous, attracting the wrong people.

“Does he know that his daughter is pregnant and is about to pop?” I clap back, it has her dropping her gaze with sadness painting her face. “What happened?”

“Lonwabo wants to postpone the wedding.” I knew that pretzel was a crook.

“Why?”

“I don’t know, he’s acting weird Bubu. I don’t know what’s wrong with him, he’s changed.” She explains, pain in her tone.

“I’m sorry Twiggy,” I glance at her apologetically, the tears knocking behind her pupils break my heart. That bastard Lonwabo...if I had the strength of a thousand soldiers I would go after him or else he would squash me like a cockroach. “Crying doesn’t suit you, you know? Have you seen how your nose grows when you cry? No...your father...I give it to him shame. Of all the things he could have given you, he had to go for the nose.” She laughs, just what I wanted to see. “Remember Mandla from Generations, that fool who was in love with Karabo Moroka? Are you sure he’s not your father’s twin because this nose...wow...darling.” I swallow my jest at the scowl she regards me with.

“You mean Fana Mokoena?” The question surges out in a guffaw.

“Who is that?”

“His real name is...” Is she really going to explain?

“Would you like some tea?” I cut in, time is not on my side. I have to go back to work. “Since you don’t have a life, you can sit here and wait for me.”

“Forget it and I have a life. I need to go, I’m meeting up with Lilian. We need to discuss a way forward. Your father has to know that his daughter is pregnant and her fiancé wants to postpone the wedding.” The pain in her voice when she speaks about that fool.

“Call me when you decide to tell Mandla, I want to polish his guns for him.”

“Mandla doesn’t have guns.” she disputes.

“I know, I’ll buy them for him and polish them myself.” The sound of her sweet glee fills my ears. No one wants to see their sister hurting.

“How is work?” There is a hint in her eyes, she wants information I do not have.

“Oh darling, it’s raining men. Top-deck, Bar-One and...Hulk.” I should stop rolling eyes, people look stupid while doing it.

“When will you retire from being a prostitute?” Her question has me guffawing and this is when Zizwe

walks by sneering at me. Am I not allowed to laugh?

“Is that Hulk?” Lindiwe should learn to keep her voice down, he heard her, judging by the cocky smile on his face. Why is he back in the kitchen? Shouldn’t he be supervising some idiots?

“No,” I mumble, hoping that Zizwe is not listening in on our conversation. “What are you doing Twiggy?” It’s too late, the scrawny pregnant brat is offering the frowning man a hand shake. This girl will kill me.

“Hi, I’m Lindiwe. Bubu’s sister.” She needs to wipe that smile off her face, if this table was big enough I would be hiding under it.

“Lindiwe, awu madoda. Ubuhle obungaka. Are you sure he is your brother? You can tell me if he’s adopted, I promise I will believe you.” He says and I don’t know if he’s joking or serious. His impassive face is still on play mode.

“Excuse me, I happen to be the most beautiful one in my family.” I mean, I have to defend myself. His raised eyebrow pushes me back to where I was positioned.

“We’ll let him think that, his ego will be bruised otherwise.” Lindiwe cues a jest.

“I’m sure he can take it, he is a grown man.” Zizwe replies. Grown man my foot, he knows nothing about me.

“You said your name is...?” My sister and her forward flat ass.

“Zizwe.” He’s kissing the back of her hand and I have to jump to drag her away from his clutches.

“She’s pregnant and engaged,” I say, pulling her hand away from him. A cocky smile plays around his mouth. Imbecile. The kiss he places on her cheek before beautifully plodding away is utterly unnecessary along with the stupid smile on Lindiwe’s face.

“What are you smiling about?” I am not okay with this.

“God knows how to show off hey? I didn’t know he still makes them like that, I thought he had given up

when he created you.” I will take that as an insult.

“Hey, I am beautiful. Better looking than Hulk. Did you see how he’s so full of himself?” I tell her, feeling a bit intimidated by that man. There is something about him that puts me in a position that goes against everything I believe in. inconsistency.

He has me questioning myself and thinking about him in ways I shouldn’t, I’m the only one who should dwell in my mind and...fine wine and parties and the next vanilla flavoured stud. Besides, I swirl. I’ve never tasted chocolate before, since that idiot Tshepo ruined my view of black men. I never looked back.

“He is full alright, in all areas I noticed.”

I gasp at her reply and the silly smirk on her face.

“Bitch, that Xhosa guy has turned you into a whore.” I want my sister back.

“Leave Lonwabo out of this, it’s the Msibi genes. Look at Mandla’s only son, a professional slut.” She shoves me to the side and begins her dramatic walk out.

“Hey, not even a goodbye kiss?” I shout after her.

“Hulk will give it to you.” Dammit... That was too loud... The man is continuously flying around me, a mosquito is more bearable. I can only hope he didn't hear any of that.

“I'll get you for this Twiggy.” My voice reaches her and she throws a middle finger back at me. I need to stay away from Zizwe, I can't afford to catch feelings.

NEO...

We're in Kenya... Sometimes it's hard to believe Stylos and his mind. His mental capacity is out of this world. I don't want to appear stupid by asking how he came about the conclusion that Zulu is in Kenya and not Brazil like Barbra had said. Now we're left with the task of locating the child. We have booked into a Motel in Mombasa.

Stylos is on the laptop going through names of

South Africans who entered the country in the last two weeks.

“Yoh, Stylos.” Throwing myself on the bed beside him, I groan with lassitude. The flight was not long, but I feel like I have travelled from SA to Europe. Stylos is not happy about my dive. He’s as tired as I am, but insists on working. I would ask him what the rush is and he’d tell me that his wife and kid are waiting for him. “What?” I question the deadpan look that has taken over his features, cranky is what he is right now.

“Do you have to throw yourself on the bed, my bed?” He flares his big nose at me..

“You know Stylos, if you didn’t want to come you could have said so. Now I must deal with your sour face, I need a break from sour faces man. Zee constantly looks like she just ate a bunch of lemons, those monkeys are turning my baba into a Godzilla. Yeyi that woman barks...snaps...shouts...screams and cries. Drama ntwana every day, I was so close to calling Mam’Sonto so she can cast the three demons out.” I’m blathering, I know I am when he

goggles at me like I'm some alien.

“Great, check this out.” Flipping his laptop over to me and a grin on his face, he points at the screen. My eyes can't find what he's showing me. Must I work even when I'm tired?

“What is it?”

“I recorded you,” the revelation pulls me up from the bed.

“J y het wat gedoen?” (You did what?) My eyes widen as I squeak trying for a condescending tone and dismally failing.

“Your speech, Trevor Noah. Zee is going to love this.” He replies, with a cocky smile that instantly puts me off. Friends turn to enemies with in a split of a second.

“Go ahead, she won't believe that recording. I see where your loyalty lies neh Stylos, you don't want to see me happy.”

“You talk too much Neo that sometimes you don't realize what you're saying. Your big mouth will get

you into trouble one day and I have been saying it.” He chortles at his own deplorable pun.

“Yoh hai, relax Dr.Phil. We came here to find the big-headed boy, not to give me a pep talk about my big mouth. You can’t find a cure for everything.” Stylos laughs in a quiet gleeful way.

“But honestly Stylos, am I the only one who is happy to be away from the lady of the house?” I’m working to comfort my aching heart, this shit is hard. I didn’t think I would miss Zee so much, my mind is filled with nothing but thoughts of her. Nothing is left out, from the way she laughs at me, to the way she smiles. When she reprimands me, but with love, making me want to kiss and kick her at the same time.

“This coming from the man who checks his phone every second, Ayize must be partying where she is and you’re here missing her like a puppy.” Stylos sure knows how to burst one’s bubbles. “When are you marrying her Neo?” Nice, now I am forced into

this conversation again, like a thread through the eye of a needle. He always seems to bring it up when given a chance.

“Soon” The glare is not appreciated.

“You’ve been saying that since you two got engaged, Sethu seems to think you’re taking advantage of the fact that Ayize doesn’t have a father.” That’s absurd.

“I would never do that, I love that woman Stylos. Marriage changes everything, I don’t want to lose what we have. The friendship, the connection, I’ve seen a lot of people change after getting married. They drift apart and I don’t want tha...”

“What makes you think that’s what’s going to happen? Is it you or her?” His query gets my mind working. Marriage scares me, the divorce rate in this country scares me. Marriage is like a demon that sucks love out of every relationship and only a few survive it. Acquaintances of mine got married and divorced in three months. They went from lovers to strangers, they can’t be in the same room without barking at each other. I’ve seen the hate

they have for each other. It scares me and I don't want that for Zee and me. I had every intention to marry her when I proposed until my view about marriage was changed.

"I don't know how she feels, she doesn't talk about it and I'm too much of a coward to ask her."

"You my friend have what we call Gamophobia."

"Gamo what?"

"Gamophobia, a fear of getting married and commitment." Styles illuminates, gazing at me for a second with worry shaded eyes.

"Makhooa, everything must have a name. Can't it just be a situation feela? Gamotonia..." (Whites.)

"Phobia stupid." He interpolates with a snap.

"Yeah whatever. Mamele seo, matlakala feela. The name doesn't make sense, u ka tseba hore it was made up. Hore a white man woke up one day a re vandag I feel like gamotonia." (It's rubbish, you can tell it was made up.)

“You’re stupid Neo man and stop saying gamotonia”

“Yeah professor Stylos, nna ke stupid, but at least I don’t use words like gamatonia.” My retort has him scratching his head in frustration, it just doesn’t make sense to me. The word sounds dumb. What normal person would make up such a word? “I understand words like custa...crus...claustr...”

These words are so hard to pronounce, I have to put my intelligence on hold so Stylos can complete his annoying laughter. He shakes his head in defeat and ogles at me with judgement in his eyes.

“Claustrophobia stupid,” he smacks the word into my head.

“You see why I would rather stick to my language, I still want my tongue. You carry on biting yours, while I pronounce simply words like lenyalo ke nyonso.” (Marriage is nonsense.)

“I will have to disagree with you Neo, marriage is beautiful. It’s not perfect yes, sometimes you hate each other, but the love outweighs the hate. So that

eliminates a degree of worry. Sethu and I argue a lot, that woman is stubborn.” There is a way his face lights up when he mentions his wife, their love is something to be envied. Styles Sishi, in love and unashamed.

“It’s the Mkhize in her, what did you expect?” I catch the snigger that escapes through his breath, had it been Uze, I would be grilled meat.

“Voetsek..” He spits and I am not catching this one. “The point I’m trying to make is if you two love each other, then you will make the marriage work. You will argue over small things, like who should make the bed today. Why your shoes are lying around in the house. The way you chew or how you brush your teeth might get to her and she’ll snap at you and the fight begins. But that’s all normal, it’s marriage. It’s not what we see from outside Neo, the perfect Instagram pictures. Outings, trips, date nights or whatever might be laid for the world to see. It’s what happens behind closed doors, the arguments, the silent treatments and Sethu’s

favourite- hunger strikes. I hate it when she does that, but I still love her and life without her seems impossible. The thought of it kills me.” Everything he lays out makes sense and I can familiarise with it.

“But not everyone is lucky Stylos, sheba Lesiba le vrou oa hae. Three months Stylos, they went from Bonny and Clyde to Mr. and Mrs Smith. Those two hate each other man, daai vrou sent him a picture of a coffin, a re it’s a gift from her to him. Poor guy sleeps with one eye open.” (Look at Lesiba and his wife.)

“They were probably not meant to be, I don’t know. What I know is that I would fight to keep my marriage, you should fight for Ayize as well. That woman has been through enough, she deserves a happy ending Neo. Don’t deny her, you don’t layby a woman. What’s wrong with you?” He throws a pillow at me, I throw it back with the same force.

“What layby? I didn’t layby any woman.” I say my

mind collecting the clutter in my brain and... Oh shit...

“Yeah stupid,” he exclaims upon observing the shock on my frontage. Zee must be devastated, she was happy when we first got engaged. The wedding was all she would talk about, little did I know that she was hinting. Come to think of it, it’s been long since I’ve seen her wearing the ring. Neo, you really are stupid.

“You two should communicate, this is where the problem begins. Lack of communication. What will you do if she wakes up one day and says she wants out?” The thought gives me heart palpitations, my life is worth living with her in it. How will I stomach going to bed without her and waking up to an empty bed? I think I would give up on life, call me weak, but Zee has given meaning to my life.

Hell! I miss her so bad right now and sometimes I miss her when she’s only a distance away from me.

“You need to divert yourself from negative thoughts, stop looking at your friends who failed in their

marriage. You will be attracting that, what you think, see and feel is always a match every single time. The universe will give you exactly that because you're attracting it. What you think about, you bring about. It's time you change the way you view marriage, cancel all those negative thoughts. You know it's been proven scientifically that an affirmative thought is hundred times more powerful than a negative thought." I get that this is all coming from a good place but...

"Stylos man, eish! You're seriously going to preach? We're in Kenya ntwana. It's hot, I'm tired, hungry and horny. Please spare me, my woman is back in Joburg. Imagine the torture I am going through." I grumble, bringing about a look of total boredom and infuriation on his facade.

"Voets ek Neo, voets ek." He grunts, only I know how to get under his skin.

"Yeah, so you've been singing and I haven't voets ek-ed yet, ke ntse ke le mona." (I'm still here.) With a hefty sigh, he shuts the laptop. Frustration closing in on him, I have to move away from the bed. For

protection, just in case. Stylos curves a brow as I stand at the door, my hand gripping the door knob.

“I’ll get Randy to talk to you.” His calmness worries me, an aggravated Stylos is a dangerous Stylos.

“Would you relax? You’re getting on my nerves.”

“I have three monkeys to welcome into the world, just think of them before you try anything.” The warning falls on an angry man, maybe I should shut my mouth. Averting from his blazing gaze, I place myself on a chair situated by the window.

“You should take Randall as a mentor,” Uze is whipped honestly. “He’s still all about Amara, still looks at her like she’s the only one in the room.”

“Yeah, then she must give me the address of the witch who gave her a love potion. Zulu girls Stylos! I’m telling you, Miss S must have gotten a share from Amara.” I return and perhaps my serious nature is thought to be senseless. He looks at me, withholding the response. His eyes piercing my surface. Sishi sighs in defeat, I tried to be me.

“I’m done, your idiocy will land you in trouble with Ayize. Don’t break that girl’s heart Neo.” With words of advice, he breaks the silence, I wouldn’t dream of it. My rejoinder sinks back in my throat at the sound of his phone ringing.

“Nkosi, talk to me boy. I only want good news.”

“Put him on speaker.” I say, moving closer. Nkosi was sent to fish out information on Ntuthuko. He never fails.

“Nkosi ntwana.” I send my greeting, he’s always in high spirits.

“Neo, the dog has barked. The boy is in Kenya under the name Xolani Mabuza.” There we go.

“Did he say where?” Styles queries typing away on the laptop.

“It won’t be hard to find a Xolani Mabuza in a country where Zulu is a foreign language.” I introduce my thoughts, Ntuthuko didn’t think this through. He should have used a Kenyan name. Idiot.

“Thank you Nkosi, we’ll take it from here.” Styles, ready to drop the call.

“Dankie Siyabonga, you need to hurry though. He knows we are on to him.” Nkosi gives advice.

“Dankie siyabonga Nkosi.” He chortles at my copying of his words, the call is disengaged.

“Got him.” Styles says, grinning with victory.

“What are we waiting for then, let’s get the boy.” This was easier than I thought, I won’t be away from my woman for long.

To be continued...

BURN

22

THANDIWE...

“What are you doing in my kitchen?” Barbra is one

unhappy woman, I am not in the mood today. I came home early and Duma kindly asked that I make supper, since Tryphena is on leave.

Seeing that Barbra was not home, I took the opportunity and made myself comfortable in her kitchen.

“Preparing supper.” I reply, not giving her a single glimpse. I am okay with not seeing her sour face.

“Who said you can touch my pots and stove?” She’s dipping her head in ‘my’ pots and banging the lids as she closes them. “What nonsense is this? I hope you’re not making this for the whole family because no way am I letting my husband eat this shit.” Bitter ass bitch...Her foul words force me to give her my attention, she’s standing with hands pasted on her hips, a disrespectful posture if you would ask me.

“Your...husband sent me to the kitchen and he happens to think the food smells good, if you have a problem with it take it up with him.” She narrows her eyes and purses her lips in disgust.

How did I get tangled in this web? I knew Barbra hated me from the start but, I stayed.

“Is this how you talk to my mother now Thandiwe?”

Here is another one, his footfall was so light that I missed it. These Biyase giants walk like they are floating on air. He looks different, I don't understand the clothes he wears.

I know nothing about fashion, but I know an expensive piece of clothing when I see one. I'm still fighting my way through small streets and finishing off a layby at Rage.

“What wrong did I say?” Ntuthuko must not try me, not today. Not when father-in-law is in the next room. I might have nothing to stand on when we're alone, but he doesn't call the shots here.

I watch him as he greets his mother like she's a queen. I will never understand this, for someone who grew up in the village she sure demands a lot of kisses.

“You seem to be forgetting who she is and as a daughter-in-law of this family, you need to know your boundaries Thandiwe and stay within your limits.” This man...

“I’ve always said it son that you need to put this woman in her place.” I have no clue what Barbra means by this, her tone though is drawing the picture for me.

Deciding to ignore their foolishness I turn back to ‘my’ pots, the food smells nice. This woman is just petty and bitter.

I am taken aback by a peck on my cheek, it’s him his scent confirms it. I turn to him with eyes filled with questions.

His hand glides to the small of my back and instantly I am nauseated by the heat surging from him into my body. He frowns as I scoot back.

“I am here to take you home, like I said earlier, you have overstayed your welcome.” Ntuthuko says, pushing his hand back on my lower back like it

belongs there, like I am his to keep. What am I saying? I am his- his wife.

How did I get myself into this mess? I have no one to blame but myself.

Growing up I was surrounded by my mother's unconditional love, she would protect me like I would disappear from her life if she didn't. I swam in my father's love, being his only child he gave me all the love his heart could provide.

I can't say I had guidance, a life coach in my mother.

'Stay away from boys until you're 21 and if you're strong enough to wait 25 would be good. Don't hold a man's hand because you will fall for him and you'll find yourself pregnant and alone. Hate can disguise itself as love, be careful, you need to know how distinguish between the two.'

That's all I needed from my parents, I wouldn't be here looking at the man I only loved till our wedding

night. The man who is hate and came disguised as love.

The man I gave eight years of my life and trusted with my son, the man who has taken my heart, trampled on it and showed me my place in his life. Which is under his feet.

“And I told you that I am not going anywhere.” I move to grab a stack of spinach in the fridge, Duma said Nqaba is coming over for supper. I remember how he loved spinach, boiled with just salt. I’m still trying to figure out how he’s able to stomach that terrible food.

“Thandiwe.” I spin at the sound of Ntuthuko’s reproach, my mouth is stretched into a small smile. Thoughts of Nqaba do that to me. “I’m talking to you?” Barbra has left the kitchen, I must have really been lost in my musing.

“What?” He’s annoying me, never trust a woman who has pots simmering on the stove. Anything is possible.

“I said get your bags, we need to go.” Okay, so he’s not asking me here.

“I don’t know how to tell you this...hubby, seeing that you refuse to understand my words. I... am... not... going... anywhere.” I take my frustrations out on the spinach, hoping I don’t cut myself in the process. The knife falls to the floor as a strong grip encircles my wrist, his gaze is not a friendly one.

I’ve known Duma Biyase for a long time and the man does not tolerate abuse against women. Part of the reason why Barbra gets away with almost everything, she has her fingers in his nostrils pulling him in whatever direction she sees fit and Duma... let’s just say he is a man in love and would do anything to keep his family together. Would he go to the extent of hiding a dead body? I would like to think so.

“You seem to forget that your son is with me, his life is in my hands. One word from me Thandiwe and you’ll be asking God why he made you a mother in

the first place.” Nqaba said not to be afraid of anything, that he will bring home Zulu.

How do I stay calm when this man dishes out threats like this? Zulu is only a baby, my heart breaks when he hurts his toe. Or when he bites his tongue from chewing recklessly. When he has a headache or a simple cough. How do I stomach these threats against my son?

“Let me go,” I snap and yank my hand from his grip. These snapping trips he takes lately are kind of scary, he has gone from a cute little puppy to a Chihuahua and all it took was for me to say ‘I do.’

“I thought I taught you better than this, son.” Here’s another Biyase who floats, I’m glad he is here. It will be nice to watch Ntuthuko tremble in his fancy boots. I have had enough of the threats. Is not having my son punishment enough?

For a second there I think he rolls his eyes before turning to face his father’s hardened expression. The man has the audacity to ram his hands in his pockets in the presence of Duma Biyase.

“My wife...” his gaze pays me a brief visit and...he’s back to looking at his father. Shoulders squared and face crinkled. “...and I were just talking, baba. I miss her and want her back home.” Liar, he misses torturing me.

“Do you want to go home MaMshengu?” I drop my eyes to hide from Duma’s gaze, maybe I’m hiding my shame or pain, I don’t know really. But I am hiding something, something I don’t want him to see.

Duma’s presence is that of a principal when he stands in front of the whole school to address it. Or when you’ve been called to his office and you don’t know whether to sit or stand.

I find myself shaking my head, I will not lie and say I am ready to go back home, I will leave this place once I have my baby back. I am sure I can afford a room in Joburg CBD.

“There you have it son, MaMshengu is not going anywhere. She will go when she’s ready.” Thank you

Makhathini.

“Will I be kept from my wife baba? Aren’t you being unfair? You have your wife with you and I need mine with me.” Shake it off hubby...

“Oh give it a rest, you’re my son and I know everything there is to know about you. I know you don’t miss your wife.” Duma articulates, Ntuthuko seems to know what he means. I’m not there. I want them to leave the kitchen so I can finish up preparing supper.

The first born of the Biyase clan is here, he’s standing behind me. I know because his fragrance never lies to me. I ease into his hand resting on the small of my back, although his presence makes me nervous. He must have used the kitchen door to enter the house.

Ntuthuko would be all over him if he saw him...and Duma?

Well I don’t know if father-in-law is short sighted. Why does Nqaba have to stand this close, I can

almost feel his heart beating on my back, his warm breath on my neck. Lord please don't let Ntuthuko turn around...

“Tshabalala.” His whisper tickles my ears, causing me to shudder at the sensation. I want to move because I think Duma just spotted him, but he's not saying anything. His face is impassive.

Somehow I think Nqaba is smirking, he's enjoying this. Finally gathering the strength to turn around, I see him walking away from me.

“Bafo,” he sends a salutation to a half-shocked Ntuthuko. He returns with a nod as Nqaba walks past him. Duma is regarded with a hand shake.

“Ndodana.” (Son.)

“Mkhulu.” Duma sniggers at Nqaba's declaration.

“This is what jealous people do, they call us old to make themselves feel better.” Duma returns the jest, this ‘Mkhulu’ as Nqaba has dubbed him is in love with both his sons. He looks at them like he would die without them, pride glistening in his eyes. He loves them the same and I wish Ntuthuko didn't

have to be the person he is because Duma will be heart broken when he finds out that his son is not a saint.

“I am hungry, when will supper be ready.” That’s Ntuthuko deciding to stay. He’s glaring at me, so I shrug my shoulders. “Well, hurry...wifey and feed your husband.” The sarcasm in his tone...Argh!!!

I would think he is bipolar, his mood swings are annoying. My gaze follows Nqaba as he leaves the kitchen and disappears like he was never here. I think his departure has something to do with Ntuthuko being stuck on me and I can’t push him off because Duma is here watching us.

BULELWA...

I’ve been called to dinner at my father’s house, I have no choice but to attend. The joys of depending on another man for source of revenue. After a long day at work, all I want to do is go home, throw my feet on the couch, grab a book and a nice bottle of

wine...yes, I read.

I'm not just a party animal who has no vision, I have plans for my life. Mostly because I am tired of my father controlling me, I need a break from Mandla. Must I die because the man has a hefty bank balance?

The kitchen is the first thing you see when you enter this big family home, you'd think they were going to have a big family only for them to have three kids who scattered everywhere once they grew up.

Thobekile has been gone for ten years, she hardly visits. Lilian has tried to convince her to show her face, but sis will hear none of it. I think she's running away from Mandla's dictatorship, he wants everything to go as he says. His rules or nothing.

Would you believe me if I said my bratty nieces hardly know what I look like. The uncle Bubu they know is a man behind photographs. No one in the family has thought of visiting Mozambique...

“Sis Betty,” She’s the house keeper, was my nanny before promoted to house keeper. Betty is within the same age group as my mother, she’s been with the family for thirty eight years. I know...a long time to remain loyal to one family.

As kind as my mother is, she is not fond of Betty. I think they hate each other, I would find them arguing in whispers. My mother is soft spoken and her battles are never won, but she can be intimidating.

“My son, how are you?” Betty says I’m her baby, in a way I am. She is like a second mother. All three of us were raised by her, I wish Thobekile were here so her brats can meet this great woman who doesn’t have kids of her own, but treats children of another woman like they are hers.

“Your husband called me here for supper.” I have always referred to her as Mandla’s second wife, that’s what I thought she was when I was young. That my father had two wives, Lilian would chastise

me and put me in my place. She hates everything Betty...

Betty smacks my head, and it's painful. I bruise easily.

"Don't let your father hear you say that," she's stirring something in the pot and it smells so good.

"Where is the gorilla?" I get another smack that almost drowns me in a pot of hot soup as I dip my head in it.

"Respect your father boy," and so I have heard these words all my life. Here is something adults do not get, respect is earned. I can't just give respect when I'm not getting any back. Mandla is a big bully we tolerate because his bank account has a voice.

"Where is he, sis Betty?" I need to know so I know where to hide. Lindiwe had texted me saying she's on her way with Lonwabo, I thought they were having problems. Apparently Mandla is the one who called the meeting, I'm guessing Lindiwe is forced to tell him that a man has been humping on her and

left a seed inside her that's developing into a full human being.

“How is Thobe?” I'm not interested in that, I need to know where my father is. “Bubu...” She half-shouts, stopping me from peeking in the living room, the coast seems to be clear.

“I don't know sis Betty, you should call her maybe she'll take your calls this time. That's if she's ready to take a break from that husband of hers.” I hate that man, he took my sister from me.

“It's okay, she's always too busy to talk to anyone of us.” Housewife Thobekile? Her routine consist of morning sex, get the kids ready for school- clean the house- bath- do a little shopping- cook supper and wait for her husband so she can feed him and give him more sex. Yeah she is busy alright... wasting her life away...

“I'm sure she can close her legs for a second and speak to her family.” I am thrashed with a dish cloth for my retort. “Ouch, that hurt.”

“Don’t ever talk about your sister like that,” why is she so angry suddenly?

“It’s true sis Betty, Thobekile chose to run away with a man while the rest of us stayed behind to endure Mandla’s patriarchy and actually got ourselves an education while at it.

“I understand your anger Bubu, your sister left you and never looked back. However she is still your sister and you can’t say such things about her.” Betty loves Thobekile more, she’s always taking her side.

“Ouch, Betty stop that.” She thrashes me again for rolling my eyes at her. “This shit hurts,” I grumble and get another one probably for swearing.

“My son is not your punching bag Betty, I don’t appreciate this abuse against him.” Lilian says walking in the kitchen. Her aggressive approach has Betty rolling her eyes. “Had you had your own children, you wouldn’t be subjecting them to such violence.” Lilian says moving in on Betty, what’s wrong with my mother.

“I would have my own child if you hadn’t...” Twa!!! A slap from Lilian steals Betty’s words. So loud that I felt it on her behalf.

This is the second time seeing my mother lay a hand on Betty, the first time was when I had come home from school to find all four of them arguing. Mandla, Lilian, Thobekile and Betty.

The killer slap happened just as I walked in sending the nanny crashing on the floor, Mandla comforted Lilian leaving Betty crying. I had to come to her aid while Thobekile furiously stormed out of the house.

That was the last time I ever saw her, only to find out that she had gotten married to some Mozambican idiot whom we didn’t know.

“Lilian,” I’m holding her back while Betty rubs away the throbbing pain on her cheek, tears and sorrow coated in her eyes. The same pain she held that day. I need to hit the gym, Lilian can pull away from my grip so easily.

“Don’t test me Betty, if you dare repeat that, I will kill you and bury you myself. I don’t mind going to jail for your murder.” Yep, she is Mandla’s wife. Betty runs off in tears, I’m left to witness Lilian’s heavy tongue click.

“Why did you do that Lilian? She didn’t do anything wrong.” The look she gives me is enough to turn me into a little boy who needs a spanking.

“Your father is looking for you, he’s outside by the pool.” If she thinks I am going there then I am not her son.

“I’ll see him during supper, I can’t see Mandla’s face twice in one night. I need my beauty sleep.” I mumble but she hears me, nothing misses this woman.

“Let your father hear you say that,” yeah I know he’ll go all out on how disrespectful and ungrateful I am. I will never hear the end of it. Mandla can talk when his ancestors give him a chance, I won’t even bring God in this. He has nothing to do with the Ndlondlos and their controlling ways.

“How do you stand that man Lilian?” I regard her with a inquisitive glance, she’s glaring until she gives in and falls into a quick laugh. I am waiting for an answer because I am serious.

“Get out of here,” Okay...

“I’m going to check up on Betty, since my mother felt like stretching and her hand landed on poor Betty’s cheek.” I take off with these words, but I don’t get far. Lilian’s reprimanding voice stops me.

“Get back here you stupid boy.”

“But you said I should get out of here.” I retort and she hates it.

“Let her be, I will check up on her.” She’s lying, she’s going to finish off what she started. “And don’t get smart with me, I am your mother and it won’t be nice when I outsmart you.” she leaves me with this advice. I hope she doesn’t have a knife with her. Betty is not safe with this woman.

ZIZWE...

“What’s with the suitcase?”

“I’m moving out,” I walk past her like leaving her is not hurting me, but my heart is in pieces. If I could do it differently I would.

“Zizwe baby, please don’t go. What will I do without you?” she follows me, leaving the bedroom door open. I hate it when she cries and her voice cracking like this means she is about to burst into tears. I love this woman more than life itself, but I can’t continue like this.

I am different and there is nothing I can do to change it. I can’t live here if I will be treated differently like an outcast.

“Please don’t stop me,” It takes a few steps to reach the front door. This house is not that big, it’s a four-roomed house. Two bedrooms, a kitchen, living room and a bathroom.

I was born here and grew up here, the second son to my parents Zanele and Mduduzi Zondo. We're a middle class family, not well off and not poor. My father has been working for Msibi holdings all his life, a loyal employee who has dedicated his life to that company.

Not once have they thought of giving him a promotion, nor has he ever complained about getting one. My mother works for home affairs, started off there about seven years ago. She was a receptionist at Centurion College, a private school in the heart of Joburg.

My parents were blessed with three children, I was physically connected to my better half at birth, conjoined twins. We were joined on the head, doctors said only one twin will survive during an operation.

My father took the decision that the doctors go through with the operation while my mother wanted both her children. We we're five months then and

the woman had built a bond with both her twins only to have Bhekisizwe taken away.

Archie and I are the remaining children, we're a year apart, I don't know how they did that, but here we are. Archie is twenty one and I'm on my way to reaching twenty in a few months.

We were a close knit family until I came out of the closet, thinking they would understand. My father has been off since, he has distanced himself from me. I bet he wishes the doctors had saved the other twin instead. Archie lives on his own somewhere in Gold Reef City, he said I can come stay with him. I don't know why I never thought of that before.

“Mdu, please stop him. Don't let my son leave me.” My mother is on her knees grovelling with a man who won't bring himself to look at me.

“Don't waste your time mama, he won't listen to you.”

“Mduduzi if you let that boy leave, I will follow him, I swear. You will be left all alone in this house.” She calls him Mduduzi because my father has not paid lobola for her, nor has he married her.

I understand not paying lobola because my mother’s family disowned her after she fell in love with the enemy’s son and eloped with him to Joburg. Dad met the same fate. My grandfathers from both parent’s side hate each other, their hatred runs deep. If one were to find the other dying on the streets, they wouldn’t lend a helping hand. That’s how much they despise each other.

My parents wanted to be together and running away was the only option. My father once went back home to ask his uncles to help him, but my grandfather had influenced them.

The lobola can’t be paid nor can it be accepted. My mother is a Christian, a prayer warrior. She believes that prayer would solve anything. I don’t know why her boyfriend has not taken this woman to home

affairs and signed. Getting a marriage certificate is not expensive.

“This boy is matured,” I have transitioned from Zizwe to this boy. My father is the one who named us at birth, Bhekizizwe, that’s me and Bhekisizwe, the twin who died.

Today he can’t bring himself to saying the name he was proud of nineteen years ago. “He knows what he’s doing and I will not stop him from doing what he wants.”

Why am I still here? I guess I’m hoping for him to at least look at me, I need him to acknowledge me. I am his son.

“Mama, don’t do anything stupid. I am not living the world, just the...”

I don’t finish my words because she slaps me so hard I almost stumble back. Eyes red with fury, tears streaking down her face and a clenched jaw, she glares at me without saying a word. The look says it all though, making me drop my gaze.

“I’m sorry,” And with these words, a broken heart, I

leave my mother.

She hates it when we associate ourselves with death since Sizwe died. Sometimes I wonder if he has been accepted in the ancestral world because umkhulu 'Zondo refuses to acknowledge us.

NEO...

Yes- we found the location, the kid though is nowhere in sight. My head hurts, my butt hurts, it's probably as flat as an iron now. Stylos insisted that we wait it out, although the house is empty. It's close to 9pm, I have lost count of the hours we've spent in this car.

The smell of gas makes me nauseou... I have nothing against cars. Stylos had gone to knock when we got here, an old woman opened the door. She said she lives with her son who recycles dirt for a living, he pushes those big carts full of plastic bottles and whatever dirt is recyclable. I find it strange that her son is not back yet.

“Weitsi Stylos, Nkosi is not a genius. He is allowed to be wrong, I don’t trust this location.” Stylos has his gaze engrossed on the house, we’re parked across the streets. There’s a truck parked in front of us, all Stylos’ idea. It’s a font to disguise our prying. How he managed to organise one in a foreign country...

“I think he’s in there,” he says without looking at me. His eyes are zoomed in on the old woman’s cracked door. “The woman said it’s only the two of them, it’s been like that for years. But I saw a shoe, small enough to fit an eight year old.”

When did he see that because he was not allowed in the house.

“It could be an old shoe, maybe she kept her son’s baby clothes.” I’m starting to see the stupidity Stylos speaks of, he brings his eyes to me for a second and it is confirmed I have said something stupid. “I’m trying to be useful here, don’t shoot me with Richard’s eyes.”

I get a tongue click for my clapback.

“Zulu is in there Neo,” he says.

“Did you see him?”

“No,” he’ll tell me something about his intuition and science and the universe and why X is equals to Y . The man can be annoying sometimes, such intelligence should be banned. Making the rest of us feel stupid.

“The eyes never lie Neo, that old witch was sweating in her panties.”

“Hey, finally.” I shriek with excitement and victory and get a piquing reproaching look. “What you said is...”

“Say the word Neo and Zee will be visiting you in Kenya after I have taken away your passport and left you here.” Not fair.

“Tsek Stylos, you and Uze are bullies. I thought we were at the stage where I can tell you how you sound right now and I am not the only who rides the train of stupidity.” Boy am I relieved that it has

brought a smile on his face and a chortle out of his mouth.

“I think Zulu is being drugged, either that or he was sleeping. I will need to go back, maybe have a look around the house.”

“I doubt she will let you in, or open the door for a foreign stranger. Unless...” he grimaces at my winking at him. I might as well come out and say it. “Brig out Mr. Casanova.”

He’s disgusted by my suggestion.

“Think about it Stylos, you used to charm them back in the day.”

“Yeah, they were not this old. The old hag has no teeth she can hardly stand straight.” Yes she’s strong enough to utter lies.

“Did I say kiss her? You’ll just charm your way in there, it’s the only way.” He’s musing, it’s a good sign. “Don’t let marriage change you, bring that old Stylos back.”

“Stay here...” with this order, he jumps out of the car.

It takes a few strides and he's knocking at the door. The woman pushes the door closed as she sees Stylos, annoyance embracing her, but he blocks the door from closing.

This is going to be fun to watch, if only I can get closer and record the conversation. Have a hold on him for days when he decides to be smart with me.

To be continued...

BURN

23...

BULELWA...

That woman is here. Mandla's supposed daughter in-law, I don't know which son she is going to marry because Mandla's only son is homosexual. I should've known this was a trap. My father is a smart bastard.

The kitchen door opens. Lindiwe's tiny skeletal head is the first thing I see. Yeah, so I am still in the kitchen. Mandla doesn't enter the kitchen, it's a place for women, he says.

"Where is he?" Lindiwe whispers, scanning the backdrops.

"I don't know," I'm afraid of moving from here.

She goes back out and a few seconds later the door fully opens, a lanky pretzel walks in, eyes out and all. Bastard... The girl came prepared, a dress too big to be a maternity attire and a cardigan to cover up the baby bump.

"Shouldn't your pretzel use the front door? What will Mandla say when he sees him waking out of the kitchen?" Her expression says she didn't think about this. Lonwabo can't hide the judgement in his eyes, looking at me like my existence is a mistake.

"Baby, I'm sorry neh. Please use the front door." Did I ever mention how much I love my sister?
Delivering the fool to the wolves.

"Kodwa baby, what if your father opens the door?" Lonwabo states, glaring down at her. Bloody street light.

"Sis Betty will open for you, my father never gets the door, even when he's home alone." Lies, Mandla better open that door.

"Hai Lindiwe, what you're saying doesn't make sense. What will I say if he actually opens? It's my first time here and you expect me to..."

"Yoh! Sis, you got yourself a complainer, hey. So many words at one time." I interject, which Lindiwe doesn't appreciate. She pins me with a glare heavier than Zizwe's aura.

Speaking of Zizwe, the past hours have been hell. The man is winged in my thoughts, his scent is stuck on my clothes. It's not strongly there, but keeps nudging at my beak every now and then. There's a little skip in my heart as my senses take in this strange indistinct fragrance, my knees weaken and this is not me.

No man makes my knees weak, let alone move my heart. I should've gone home first and taken a shower. I smell like my worst nightmare.

"Stop, Bubu." She's still there? I thought the topic was closed. "Okay baby, you sit over there and I'll get you something to drink." she puckers up and they share a few kisses, I think I'm going to throw up.

I make a gaging sound to get them to stop, I don't want to lose my appetite. Clearly irked, pretzel follows instructions, he is so grumpy you'd think he's the one carrying a baby.

"I thought you were over." Worry grows inside me at the observation of my sister eyeing Lonwabo with a bit of fretfulness in her eyes. He's too far to hear anything and since when is she afraid of him? "Is he hitting you?"

"What?" my quick thinking has me catching the glass that slips out of her hand. Why is she

suddenly jumpy? Her eyes are all out, I'm not sure of what's hidden behind them.

"Is he hitting you Lindiwe?" She writhes as I grip her hand, gnashing my teeth in a new found anger that is conjuring from the depths of my stomach.

All my life I had to hide behind my sister, she protected me from anything and everyone who was out to get me. Lindiwe is a strong woman as scrawny as she is, don't let her emaciated body fool you. The girl can fight her battles and come out with a trophy or belt. But now I am ready to fight for her, as tall as that man is, I will find a way to tackle him. Not my sister, no man will lay a hand on her.

"You're crazy Bubu, Lonwabo loves me." Is this not a red flag?

"Are you sure Twiggy?" She sighs, I'm frustrating her.

"Stop annoying me," for now I will stop.

Mom calls us just as I'm about to riposte, Lindiwe falls into a mini panic mode, but she is not as worried as Lonwabo over there. Let the games

begin.

It bothers me that my father is friendly with this cheek, whatever her name is. Why is she here? Aren't there men where she comes from? Because I am not interested, eww...

She's smiles upon seeing me, it's a friendly smile...way too friendly. It has me hiding under my mother's wing.

"Ndlondlo." I send my salutation. That's a firm handshake right there, he doesn't do hugs.

"Ndlondlo." The girl is brought in front of me with just one push from my father, she's gleaming from ear to ear. I would ask her to tone it because this Msibi beauty loves dick.

"Do you remember Xolile? Your future wife?" My father is a foolish man if he thinks I am going to marry this woman. She is pretty though, nice smile... Just tone it down...

"Baba, your daughter is here." Lilian cuts in with a deadly introduction. That dress and cardigan does nothing to hide the brat in Lindiwe's stomach and Mandla having a sharp eye has probably seen it, his anger is never half, he waits for it to build up and then the gorilla unleashes. Lonwabo is sweating next to the source of his death.

"Ndlondlo." Lonwabo greets and I have one thing to say... Shit...

"Lindiwe!" That's Mandla's condescending tone.

"Daddy..." yeah, the sweet innocent girl look won't work, daddy is angry right now.

"Who is this idiot?" Mandla and his deep voice, I understand Lonwabo trembling the way he is.

We're his children and we're not used to his gorilla side. Lindiwe and Lonwabo exchange tense glances, I feel sorry for her, although I'm glad the focus is off me.

"Lonwabo baba... he is my..." The sentence skips my ears as I'm startled by Xolile harassing me, I could get her arrested for this. Grabbing my ass like

that, she winks at my rebuking glare. What do you know? Sweet Xolile is naughty. Whoever planned this gathering went about it the wrong way, Lonwabo and Xolile should not be here.

"Is this what I deserve for loving you people?" What does he mean you people? I missed the speech thanks to Xolile over here, I make sure to scoot away from her. "First your sister falls in love with a foreigner and follows him to god-knows where, she went to the extent of marrying herself off and you do this to me, Lindiwe? Have I not been humiliated enough?" Mandla will never say it openly, he will never admit to having a broken heart.

But I can hear it in his tone, his words and see it in the posture of a man who has been defeated. In the midst of it he tries to stand tall, he's already towering over everyone in this room, except this fool Lonwabo who's about to be turned into... I don't know what, but he is about to get it from this livid man.

"I'm sorry daddy," Sniffing, Lindiwe drops her gaze. Mostly because my father is stabbing her with a disappointed glare, trust me, a knife in your heart is way better the look of disappointment in his eyes. I've been pinned with it once upon a time.

"And you," voice deeper, he points at Lonwabo with his eyes. The fiancé lifts his gaze once and what I expected happens, he freezes, eyes widened and fear dancing in them.

I would look away if I were him.

"Is this how you do things in your father's house?" Oh no, Mandla's feet are moving. He's preying on the guy.

"Baba, let's calm down." No Lilian, calm down for what? Lonwabo deserves whatever happens to him, I don't like him for my sister.

"Ungijwayela amasimba wena mfana, coming to my house..." And so the gorilla roars... Xolile jumps on me, grips my arm like a scared little puppy.

"No darling, believe me this dick will never know you." a whisper is all it takes to convey this message that has her ruefully stepping back. I side her as she perches her fat ass on the couch.

"Daddy please, I asked him to come."

"So he can disrespect me, Lindiwe? What makes you think we have abandoned customs and traditions in this family? All in the name of money?" Lilian stands before her husband, shielding Lonwabo. Now I get where Mandla's rage is coming from. The lanky fool was supposed to bring elders, not just show up as if this is a restaurant. So mommy and her daughter went about this the wrong way.

We won't eat today, this could go on the whole night. I might as well attend to the knock on the door.

My brain stutters for a moment and my eyes take in the man standing at the door step, every part of me goes on pause while my thoughts catch up as

questions bounce around in my head. What is he doing here? How did he know where to find me?

"Buttercup," a subtle grin pulling at his lips, the stupid name he labelled me with pounces out of his mouth.

"If you don't know my name, ask." I'm surprised I can speak with him looking down at me like this. Why is he shaking his head? It's a disapproval head shake and for the first time in my existence I shy away from a man's gaze. I hate that he has this effect on me, he makes me jumpy... angry... excited and piqued all at once. Did I say how much I hate it?

"Okay," he offers a shrug and a disdainful tone.

"Buttercup." I give up. What kind of a name is Buttercup anyway?

"What are you doing here?"

"Is Mr. Msibi in?" Keeping the arrogance in his tone, his face falls into a deadpan expression.

"He's busy."

"Call him for me," A demand I see and he stares a

lot. He hasn't removed his gaze from me and I'm trying to control my raging hormones.

"He's busy..." I could call Mandla but he won't bother to attend to Zizwe, not when he's attending to his precious daughter.

"Here," a brown envelop? "I was asked to drop these, he needs to sign them." and with that he turns to walk away... arrogant bastard.

"I am not your errand boy, do it yourself." I don't know what I'm expecting to gain from trailing behind him. Tall people don't walk, they stride. I have my own long legs but keeping up is becoming a struggle. "You're a pompous bastard, you know that?"

The words spring out of my mouth and detain him, the brown envelop lies on the ground after lightly crushing on his broad shoulder. I've halted my footsteps.

Eyes widened, heart wanting to burst out of my chest. For some reason I regret accepting this courage that always seems to leave me when Zizwe

is around. I should have let it wander about. One punch from this giant and I will be hospitalised.

"What did you say to me?" He asks without turning to face me. Why are arrogant people like this? Do they think this posture makes them look cool?

I'll just shut up, it will be embarrassing when I start screaming 'daddy' while Hulk is beating me to a pulp. I drink in a sharp breath as he fiercely turns around. I don't know what he's going to do, his face is not giving anything off. I should be running back to the house, but my feet have turned on me.

Fear settles on my body like a pillow over my mouth and nose, crippling me and taking away my ability to move. My palms are suddenly sweaty and the adrenalin coursing through my system shuts down my ability to think.

Half shadow, every muscle on his body flowing from the street light into the darkness. He looks freakishly strong, every move gives away his

strength.

Zizwe actually looks better under the moonlight, his brown skin so tempting to touch. In the daylight he looks normal, big and strong but normal, but God help me... I am looking at sculpted art, if God would tell me that the credit goes to Leonardo da Vinci, I would believe him without a doubt.

"You don't listen, do you?" He's closing in on me, face serious like I had never seen before. His faint scent, heavy aura and warm breath on my face suffocate me.

But in a good way, a way that has my mind entertaining thoughts I shouldn't.

Like... how his dark lips would feel on mine. Will he keep the same facial expression while humping on me? If yes, it would be hell-a sexy.

"Hey..." he snaps his fingers, slurping me out of my crazy fantasies.

"What?" These strange feelings have me snarling at

the man. I would be at ease if a chortle had escaped between his lips, but an icy snicker takes first place, head slanted to the side.

I choke on my saliva as he raises his gaze, casually, face scrawled. His eyes though are warm and tender and I find myself drowning in them, he holds my chin with his warm hand, bringing my face close to his.

"You're not worth it, Buttercup," His words cold and cruel contradict with the tender, timid look in his eyes and this warm touch. A chill creeps up from my stomach, spreads through my rigid body.

With one shove on my chin, he turns and begins with his overconfident steps. I want to hate him and shout at him and tell him to go to hell and I want to wipe these unsolicited feelings.

"You're still a bastard Zizwe and you're nothing too. You think I care what you think about me?" I'm shouting and hoping my voice doesn't reach the house. Like lighting flash, he swivels on his heel, his

darts have a purpose. Rage in his eyes, power on his strides.

I'm a coward as much as I talk too much... I stagger but my feet take me two steps back, delivering me in the hands of my nemesis. I slurp in a breath when his hands shelter my face, tight grip and smashes his lips on mine.

Everything melts away as this moment is stolen by these two strangers. I feel his lips smile against mine, his hands flexing around my back and so I hang my fingers on his waist band, pulling him closer.

I'm not thinking straight, he's consuming all of me and I have no control of myself. I can taste the sweet passion on his lips. Instead of detaching from the intensity of the moment, Zizwe pushes his lips in more firmly, forcing an intoxicating wave to surge through me, making my head swim as he pulls back to take in my face.

Regret sways over me when his head slants to the side after my hand crashes on his cheek.. jaw ticking... a simper slowly crawling to his lips, with a huff he spins and I'm stunned as he starts walking away,

"Don't ever do that again." Dammit, I shouldn't be this breathless.

This is the third time he's stopping at the sound of my voice, twists his head back, a smirk kisses his lips before his arrogance takes over.

"Noted, Buttercup." A wink and he's gone. Bastard. My heart is dancing around for nothing... stupid heart.

I'm not a kid, I know what I'm feeling and I can't afford to fall for someone. Especially that pompous bastard who thinks he's God's master piece. I have to keep this to myself no matter what, I can't afford to have him find out. Zizwe is always so close and my body betrays me at his presence, I can only pray that he will never be able to decipher my feelings.

STYLES...

"I'm sorry Mrs?" her shifty eyes start to soften up, she is a bit hesitant but she will give in.

"Miss Mwangi, I'm not married." I know that.

"So all the frogs were intimidated by the beautiful princess?" Let's start here... she's getting comfortable...

"Well I used to be a beauty in my days, all the boys were after me. But the one who caught my eye got me pregnant and fled." The smile on her face fades with the last syllable.

"That's his loss, I would have stayed if I were him. What fool would leave a beautiful woman like you?" Jeez, Neo and Nqabayomzi owe me for this. There is nothing appealing about this toothless woman and she smells like a brewery.

"Don't worry, I made sure that he paid for it. Wherever he is, he has forgotten how it feels being with a woman." A dubious smile creeps up on her

face, it's devilish and bone-chilling.

"You castrated him?" This small talk is a waste of time, but I have to use all techniques to get her to let me in the house.

"No he still has his penis, it just doesn't work the way it should. The only thing he does with that useless small thing of his is number one. One day he will remember that the only son he has is alive, he will come back. Don't worry." Dammit! What's wrong with women and grudges?

"Good on you," witch. "You deserve better, a prince who will treat you like royalty." The toothless smile comes to play again at my praise.

"Say, what do you think about young man?" A full blown smile reaches her ears, her eyes fall to her feet, she's blushing as if it's the only option she has.

"Young men hey?" she says, using her foot to draw circles on the floor. "An old woman like me?"

"Why don't you let me in, so we can talk properly inside. You look tense, maybe I can offer a few massages. I'm great with my hands, so I've been

told." With regret, I offer myself to her.

Bashfully and without any hesitation, the old hag slides aside. My eyes get to work immediately, scanning everything in the single-room living space, there is one more door. Could be the bathroom.

The house is muddled. Clatter everywhere. The shoe is not here, she must have moved it. There is no sign of the child. I turn as I feel her breathing down my neck to find her invading my space. Eyy, she's brave this one.

"When last did I smell a man? One who smells as good as you?" She's moving in on me, gums out in a slimy smile and hands stretched out. If this witch traps me in here with her black magic, Neo will have it from me.

"What are you doing?" Don't panic Styles... I don't panic, I never panic and I don't believe in back magic.

"Wewe ni mtu mzuri." (You're a handsome man.) This better be Swahili and not her, casting a spell on

me like she did on her baby daddy.

"Look at the time," my wrist shoots up as I pretend to check the time, and probably flash my wedding ring in hopes that she will spot it and back off.

"It's still early," she retorts, my skin crawls as her hands land on my torso. She draws them down to my lower torso. Heavens help me if I don't throw up right now. Her eyes light up, it's a disturbing sight, traumatizing.

"Excuse me," I say and with a gentle shove, a way is made for me to escape her claws.

I have never walked so fast in my life, I can see Neo as I cross the street. He's having a seizure, oh my god. Picking up my pace to investigate, it hits me that the idiot is convulsion due to laughter. His shoulders heaving and head ticked back. Fool.

"Give me MamSonto's numbers, I need cleansing, that woman touched me Neo. She said some shit and wouldn't translate.." He's laughing at me. Why is he laughing at me? It's not just a laugh, it's a

horse laugh.

"Imagine leaving Miss. S for a toothless old witch," his jest is accompanied by more laughter. "She would let you go, I doubt Miss S would fight an old woman for you, never."

I should take offense in that.

"I didn't see anything in there, except that the shoe is gone. There is no sign of a child being in that house, however there is another door."

"What's in it?"

"Could be the bathroom, I didn't get a chance to check, the old hag was all over me." Should have kept my mouth shut, he's laughing again.

"Let's go Stylos, Nkosi will have to pay Ntuks a visit. This is a dead end." I doubt it is.

"I think we should wait for her son to come back, he might have answers to our questions." I understand Neo's frustrations, but I have a feeling this woman and her son have something to do with Zulu.

BULELWA...

I come back to Lindiwe crying her eyes out, Lilian trying to pull back her husband who has Lonwabo pinned on the wall with an arm pressed on his neck, Lonwabo is scared out of his wits, it shows in his eyes.

"Baba, wenzani?" (What are you doing?)

My strength laughs at me as I struggle to pull Mandla back, he just had to be this strong. I can't stand the cries emanating from my sister, this is all wrong. I know I wished for this, just a little punishment. But I didn't wish for Lindiwe's tears, not my sister.

Mandla is like an animal who is out for blood, he will kill the man if he's not stopped.

Think Bubu, don't panic... calming myself down is ineffectual. I need to think and fast or else Lindiwe's

child will be visiting his father at the cemetery while Mandla goes on with his life like he didn't kill a man.

"TM GAY!!!" Silence...

My head is spinning, ears ringing... heart racing and all I want to do is run out of this house, especially since my father is glaring at me like I insulted his existence and the Msibi dynasty.

Lindiwe rushes to Lonwabo as he drops to the floor after being unrestrained.

Lilian's proud look will not save me from this man who is ready to murder me, there is no turning back. The truth is out, perhaps fate had chosen this moment. An unplanned moment.

"What?" Unbelief wrapped around his neck, Mandla chokes on the word. The stabbing displeasure I spoke of earlier is hugging his eyes and it hurts. He hasn't said anything about my sexuality but it hurts.

"I... I'm... gay baba." Confidence has come to claim

me back, but is it aware that I am about to be killed by the man who gave me life?

I haven't had the chance to write my will. Who will I leave my assets to? What do I want people to wear at my funeral? Seven colours or gourmet?

"What the fuck is that?" It should be a good thing that he hasn't shouted, right? Wrong, not this man. Hence my mother is holding him back, she knows he's about to slaughter me. Once again my eyes chase Lindiwe and her fiancé on the floor, I don't know if it's regret I see on her face or pity.

"A... a homosexual, baba..." My words are faltering and so are my feet as I take them back, a few feet away from this man.

"I know what that is," he booms and I can't say I'm used to his outbursts, not in this lifetime. "But you're my son, Gcinumzi. You can't be gay, you can't."

"Baba, calm down please." Lilian implores, her hand on his chest and I wish it was powerful enough to curtail Mandla's anger.

"What is this Lindiwe? Why are your children such disappointments? After everything I have done for them" No, I don't want him to think he failed as a father. If anything, he is a good father, although he's Shaka Zulu's reincarnation. Strict, hard and merciless. He is a good father, he stayed, raised and loved us like a father should.

"Where did I go wrong Lilian?" He questions his wife with doubt in his voice.

"Ndlondlo ngiyak'cela." (I am begging you.) Me, bringing forth my entreaty.

"Get out of my house." The words roar from his tongue as if it's a norm to throw your child out.

"Baba?" I knew it was possible, but part of me refuses to believe that he would do this.

"Lilian get this boy out of my house before I kill him." Okay... I guess it's finally happening.

"Don't bother Lilian, I know where the door is." Softly and hurtfully, I utter.

"You're not going anywhere," Lilian says, standing up against her husband? Mandla can't believe it, he is as shocked as I am. He's glancing at his wife in disbelief...

"What are you doing Lilian?" A question from Mandla...

Yeah Lilian, what are you doing? I don't voice the question, but keep it in my eyes.

"My son is not going anywhere, he is my child Mandla and you will not abandon him, not him too." Him too? Who else did this gorilla abandon?

"You knew about this?" Mandla... stopping himself from roaring because hey... this is his wife. He has never raised his voice at her, she's an egg- this one and might crack.

"Yes." Back straightened, head held high and nose above everything else, Lilian confesses to what appears to hurt Mandla.

"You Lilian? You of all people, did this to me?" The pain escapes with his words, Mandla doesn't cry. But Lilian does, tears purge out of her eyes as they

meet the pain in her husband's gape. God you gave a fragile heart to the wrong woman, I need her to fight my battles. Not tomorrow but now, she's falling for the gorilla's pain and forgetting about her son.

"Since when do we keep things from each other mkami?" Shit, he used the mkami card. That's his ace card, his check mate. Lilian is about to drown in regret and I am about to be put under her back pocket. My teary eyes find Lindiwe's worried expression, she sees what I see. I am doomed, my father will never let me back in this house.

"I also knew daddy," Lindiwe speaks up, commanding tears to emit from my eyes. I can always count on her to lift me up when I'm down. Mandla denies her even a glimpse. Does he hate bisexuals this much? I am his son. "Nothing changes daddy, he is still our Bubu. The brat we love and adore, he's your last born, your only son."

She's trying but it will take a miracle to convince Mandla, that's how hard-headed he is. It's not good when he releases that sigh, it's him giving up. And at this point he's giving up on me, his only son.

"My son is a man, not..." His jaw inflates and deflates. "Not this..." My heart shatters as he points at me like I am some piece of trash, his scrutiny cast away from me.

Xolile and Lonwabo have gotten themselves a free show. I don't care about them, they shouldn't be here. My mother has ceased to be the strong woman I know, snivelling behind her husband. I'm trying to communicate with her using the desperation floating in my eyes, but she won't look at me.

"I want this boy out of my house," Lilian stifles a sob at Mandla's order.

"Ndlondlo," my voice is a whisper, he stops but keeps his back turned. "I am not sorry for what I am, but I am still your son Ndlondlo. I need you, what

will I be without my father?" I am very big on family, whatever we go through, we stick together. My father taught me this. Why is he not practising what he preaches? Why is he walking away from me?"

Okay, calm down Bubu. He's just upset, he'll get over it. He has to get over it.

"Bubu, my baby" Lilian reaches for my hand, I am not letting her touch me. She failed to fight for me. "I will talk to him son, he just needs time."

"Excuse me, I have work tomorrow." I need a strong drink and some distraction... a party will be good.

"Will you be okay?" Lindiwe queries.

I have no answer for her, I need to get out of here.

"Spend the night baby, you'll leave in the morning?" Is Lilian trying to get me killed? I leave her crying and calling out to me, Mandla will kill me if he finds me in his house in the morning.

To be continued...

BURN

24...

In human sexuality, top, bottom and versatile are sex positions or roles during sexual activity between two men. A top is usually a person who penetrates, a bottom is usually one who receives penetration and someone who is versatile engages in either or both roles. The terms may be elements of self-identity that indicate an individual's usual preference and habits, but might also describe broader sexual identities and social roles.

NQABA...

"How I wish I can offload the burden you're carrying? I will take care of you Tan-tan, you will never have to shed another tear in your life." Sleep can seem like a beautiful thing, the real definition of 'not all that glitters is gold.' I've been watching Thandiwe sleeping for over an hour now.

Her rhythmic breathing, the rise and fall of her chest. The peaceful appearance her body has taken, would fool you into thinking her life is perfect, not knowing her every day struggles.

Neo and Styles haven't gotten back to me regarding Zulu, their phones are not going through. I was hoping that Zulu would be home when Thandiwe wakes up in the morning. I should've gone with them. I promised Thandiwe that I would bring him home, I've seen the trust she has for me in her eyes.

A soft knock on the door scoops me away from Thandiwe's bedside, father peeks in with a ghost of a smile. There's a quiet moment as he stares into my eyes from a few feet away, he's trying hard to read me and I am not giving anything off. A snigger sashays between his lips, followed by the shaking of a head.

"You can't hide anything from me, Mzi." His first words. I can proudly announce that father is the

only man who can put me into a boat of nervousness. I'm talking about sweaty hands, heart racing, dribs of sweat forming on the eyebrows and wanting to hide away from his probing gaze.

"I don't understand baba," my foolishness births another chortle from him. Of course I know what he means, the man is not blind and my eyes have probably sold me out. The love I have for Thandiwe can be naïve.

"Come with me," he wants me to follow him and I am not sure about leaving Thandiwe alone lest she has another bad dream.

It's around 10pm, she went to bed early today and nothing has happened yet. My brother left right after lunch, he wasn't happy about having to leave Thandiwe behind. Duma's word stands, it's always been this way. He taught his sons discipline and respect which some abandoned on the way to adulthood. I respect this man and trust him with my life.

I make sure not to be far away from Thandiwe's room, the TV room is a good place to talk. A small room with a two seater couch, an old room divider Barbra refused to throw away. It has everything inside, Tupperware, plates, spoons and glasses that are only used on special occasions. The room accommodates about four people who do not mind being squashed up in a couch during an episode of a good television show.

Father bought this house before taking my mother to live with him years ago. It was a two bedroom house, they renovated over the years. It's not their dream home, but it is a comfortable home.

"You're around a lot these days," he introduces as he settles on a couch, I perch myself at the far end corner.

"Ingabe ubaba uyakhononda?" (Is father complaining?) I know he's not, it's good to pull his leg sometimes.

"Get me my special drink in the fridge and a glass of

water for yourself." He orders.

"Shouldn't it be the other way round? Alcohol is not good for you." There was a time in life when he had become an addict, Barbra's hand. She will drive my father crazy one day and I am afraid he won't survive the news about her infidelity. He worships that woman. She is all he's ever known.

"Here," I hand him a bottle of Castle Lager, he doesn't drink anything else and I have adopted to his habit over the years.

"How is MaMshengu?" My eyes almost fall out as he pulls out a cigarette and lights it. Duma doesn't smoke, as far as I know.

"Being married to your mother is nie pap n vleis nie, don't worry it's not an everyday thing." (Is not easy.)

Yet he's puffing it like he's been doing it all his life.

"Should I be worried, Makhathini?"

"Am I not allowed to smoke Ngabayomzi?" His question is icy and dismissive, I know better than to

continue. "You know when I found out you left the village for Joburg, I knew you made the biggest mistake of your life."

"What do you mean?" I query, with a look of curiosity.

"You left Thandiwe behind Mzi, you never should've done that. Look at you going after your brother's wife." It can't be as bad as he makes it sound and how did he know about us?

"It's not like that baba, Thandiwe doesn't love him." I riposte, my father cannot be against this. I will hate having to go against him.

"So? She is still your brother's wife. You had eight years to fight for her, Mzi, but you wait for your brother to take her as his wife." The disappointment in his tone worries me, his approval would mean a lot to me. "I don't want any conflict between you two, my sons will not kill each other."

Too late for that, I am ready to kill for Thandiwe.

"I'm not giving up on her..." talking back is not my intention, but he doesn't understand where I'm

coming from. His love was not taken from him.

"I'm not saying give up, but don't quarrel with your brother. Have you ever thought how you will take care of Thandiwe and her son? Your source of income is not enough to feed a family of three Mzi, there is school fees to consider. Bills will double, including groceries."

"I am a man, I will make a plan. Like I always do." I didn't know he has so little faith in me.

"Being a man means nothing when you can't provide for your family, I used to have your pride. Your brother is too young to remember, but you were old enough. About ten, we went through drought in our family. Financial drought, we would go to bed with pap and sugar water. Your mother allowed the two of you to play out the whole day, knowing the neighbours would give you food to eat. That thing takes a strain on a man, son. I fell into

depression, lost my dignity.

Eventually I came to a point where I convinced myself that suicide was the only way out. Stupid, I know, but I was sure that all of you will be better off without me. So I took a gun, went to the woods where I was going to end it all. Your uncle is the one who found me, I don't know how, but the bastard beat me to a pulp that day." He finds humour behind it and a chortle leaps out between his lips. I watch him as he drinks and smokes without a care, I know Barbra will not be happy when she finds him like this.

"Weeks later, your mother found a job in town, she cleaned for this man who was visiting from outside the country. The pay was okay, but as a man, I felt that it was my duty to provide for my family. Your uncle found me a job as an intern at a bank and that's where my career took off." A frown takes over his features as he stubs the cigarette on a magazine lying on the table.

"I will manage baba, it won't be so hard to take care of them." I still stand on my word and father doesn't seem to approve.

"I hope you're not talking about those high and mighty friends of yours, sure they gave you a job, but you need something to stand on. You're good with your hands, open a mechanical shop. Start from scratch son and build a legacy for your future generation. Friends will not always be there, they come and go." The old man is still wise, I would take his words and run with them, but I am not going to turn my back on Thandiwe again.

"I hear you baba." I choose not to argue with him, he is wiser than me after all and disputing with him would be foolish of me.

BULELWA...

The Chinese woman singing off-tune on the mini-stage sounds better than my father's roars, though I wish the music brought me peace. Nothing can heal

a broken heart, not even alcohol.

Planning to spend hours here, I sent my driver home. I should probably camp here, loneliness is waiting for me at home.

"Walter!" The waiter steals a glance, I'm a regular at this bar. A place where I drown my sorrows when reality comes knocking. It's a karaoke bar, quiet and peaceful. Although packed with men and women drinking, everyone seems to have their own issues to deal with.

"I'll be with you now Bubu." He gives me a wink. Walter is gay too, vanilla but not my type. He's hinted a fling, however, I'm not interested. He says he's versatile... I don't mind, but what will I do with his skinny ass?

I like to be held by strong arms, sink into a comforting type of embrace.

I beat myself up as Zizwe comes to mind. What the hell was with that kiss? Okay, I had my suspicions that he could be gay, but I didn't think he could be

into me.

Listen to me thinking highly of myself, 'not everyone wants to get into your pants Bubu.' I chastise my forward-self. Also, I need to stop dubbing these men. Somehow they end up in my bed. Even Walter has a name, Mr. Barman and no! The thought of Walter in my bed is yuck.

"I need a drink, Mr. Ba..." Shit!!! "Walter, give me another shot please." I should call in sick at work because I am going to drink myself silly tonight.

"Don't you think you've had enough?" And who is this fool? "Boo-boo, it's me Jacob. Your Beastie." He says, brushing his long ginger hair back. Wait!

"You're growing your hair?" How did I not notice this the last time I saw him?

"Yes." He leans on the counter, hunching his back so he's standing closer. "Do you like it?"

He wants me to like it... "I guess."

"Do you want to talk about what's bothering you?" I don't and I want to be alone... Nice, he's alighting himself next to me. Can't a man have a drink in peace?

"Are you following me, J acob?" I will never get used to his smile and those teeth, the devil knows how to choose his best workers.

"My uncle owns this bar, I come here to help out when I'm free." Sure he does... I've been coming here a lot and I have never seen him.

"You better not be stalking me, Beastie..." Perfect, my uncle too has abandoned me. This fine ass is beaming from ear to ear, I know he loves it when I call him Beastie. He will never get the message if I continue like this.

"I don't have to stalk you Boo-boo and you know why?" I bet you all my father's cows he will tell me. "Because you and I have a connection, a sexual chemistry no one can break and fate is well aware of that."

I think I'm too sober to listen to this nonsense.

"Oh Walter darling..." I'm annoying the guy, but he likes me and I shall take advantage of that. "Another shot please my snookums, Bubu bear is thirsty"

All he does is nod, Ginger here is giving me funny looks. Why is he still here?

"You shouldn't be drinking so much Boo-boo, you're drunk already." Why is he talking to me again? You know what...

"Walter, you sexy thing..." not... "Bring me a bottle of your most expensive wine, these tequila shots are not doing the trick. There's a fly here, it could be a figment of my imagination, nothing a few glasses of wine won't fix."

What do you know? I made poor Walter laugh.

"That hurt, but it's alright. I would leave you alone Boo-boo, but you're drunk..."

"Stop saying I'm drunk and stop calling me Boo-boo." I'm a ticking bomb and this white man better leave me alone or I swear...

"I'm sorry, at least let me take you home."

"Leave me alone Jacob..." he's pissing me off, I know how to handle my alcohol. Mosquitos must have retired early today and so the devil has sent this one in a form of a sexy man to irk me and maybe tempt me. Beastie doesn't take no for an answer.

"I'm joining you, someone needs to keep an eye on you." He proclaims after meeting the scowl on my face, I am offended, extremely... highly... I am no Cinderella who needs rescuing, okay maybe from my father's wrath.

He will never look at me the same. Family functions. Dinner parties. He probably won't let me attend.

"You know Beastie..." I'm wasted, so is Jacob. I've lost track of time and on my way to forgetting my problems. The bottle of wine is half empty, I guess we'll both need rescuing tonight. "My daddy..." a burp gets in the way of my vowels, much to Beastie's amusement.

"Wait, are you supposed to look this sexy? Maybe. I Should. Meet. your father..." he laughs shaking his head. "He can be my daddy too, mine doesn't want me, Beastie..." I'm prattling, but Jacob is not listening to me. Why is Jacob not listening to me?

His eyes have been lost on my lips, for the past... I don't know, but it's been way too long and his hand has found rest in between my thighs. I would have told him off if it didn't feel good and there wasn't this tingling feeling down there.

Dammit... This sexy bastard knows where to touch, to make me melt, now I'm also looking at his lips that are moving in on me. Although fuzzy, my mind remembers how they taste, but Zizwe's lips tasted better.

I want more of them, more of him. He told me that I am not worth it, but his kiss told me otherwise. I have never felt so wanted in my life even by this sexy fool pressing his lips on the corner of my mouth. Jesus! He's licking me. Lips, chin, cheeks, neck and nibbling my earlobe. See why I said he's a freak?

Shivers ripple through me, forcing shudders to take over my body. I want to stop him because he's yesterday's food, damn the man is out to prove that leftovers taste better than fresh snacks. Just a taste and I want a big bite of this hunk.

His warm hand cradles my cheek as he moves to stand in between my thighs, lips dancing with the same rhythm, it's a slow kiss.

"Beastie," my numb lips release the gnawing name that has put me in this compromising position. This has to be witchcraft, I am going against my own notions. I need to check his apartment, there must be some Harry Potter shit there. A gasp pushes through our locked lips, his hand has entered my territory. Gripping my stiffness, we're in public.

A sudden jolt pulls Jacob from the heated moment, he goes tumbling to the floor. My intoxicated mind is trying to dot the numbers together... an injured Beastie groaning in pain on the floor, hand pressed

on his nose. Who punched him?

I should stop drinking, I think I'm seeing that pompous bastard and he's glaring at me like a bull ready to attack. Chest undulating, hands formed into a fist.

"Hulk?" I narrow my eyes to get a closer look, the vision is blurry. I could be imagining him standing in front of me.

"You're full of shit, you know that?" Okay, he's real and cussing at me. "I didn't know you're a prostitute by night? Are we not paying you enough?" Oh hell no...

"You're a bastard, you know that?" I throw insults back at him. Only a fool would succumb and take these offences. Who does he think he is? "One kiss and you think you know me?"

"I warned you about this foul mouth of yours, Buttercup." He grabs my chin, too tight. "Perhaps if you stop going around kissing every fucker, you wouldn't be spewing so much shit." He spits.

I am highly offended, sure I'm drunk and Beas... I

mean Jacob and I took it too far, but this pompous shit head has no right to talk to me like that.

"Asambe." (Let's go.)

A demand? This is new, he's lugging me towards the exit as tired and sloshed as I am. People are watching, I hear whispers and giggles not amusing... My eyes run back to where Beastie is trying to pick himself up. How hard was that knock out? Walter runs to his aid... Anything to get into Beastie's fine pants. Walter is a low-key whore.

And this giant dragging me, I don't like what he did.

"What the hell is your problem?" I haven't claimed my hand back and don't ask me why. I'm just following this beau who is taking angry strides and ignoring me like our hands are not intertwined.

As we get outside, my stomach twirls like a tumble drier, my head spins and my mind alerts me that I am going to throw up. The vomit overshoots the hand covering my mouth and luckily misses Zizwe by an inch. He casually moves glancing at me like

the sight is not gross.

More vicious chunks spew out of my mouth, splattering on the paving with disgusting loud sounds. Lurched forward, choking and coughing, I raise my teary eyes to investigate why he's rubbing my back.

Had it been him throwing up, I would be hiding in a corner somewhere. A frown is dictating his face. Why is he here if he will grimace about it? The repulsive stench raids my nostrils and I press two fingers to clog them. My feet lead me away from the foul, disgusting, repulsive sight. Reaching a wall to lean on, I crouch, taking a semi-bow, and trying to stop the bile from clawing at my throat. Someone get me a bottle of water.

"Are you done with your dramatics? Can we leave now?" The prick takes up his bastard demeanour, arms folded and a glower.

"Drama?" This question should hit him like a ton of bricks, okay, maybe I'm exaggerating it. He shrugs

his shoulders as if confirming his remark. "Do you know how hard it is to throw up, I'm lucky my intestines are still intact."

"Wow," he huffs. Head bent downward a little, he saunters, the pace of his footfalls not changing one smidgeon.

"You call this a car? I might as well walk home." Zizwe has exposed me to a lot of things, things I wouldn't do, like run after a man. Trying to keep up with him is a waste of time, the man has long legs. Now I have to ride in this van?

"Fine, walk." There is carelessness in his voice. You know what? I will walk...

"Where are you going?" He shouts after me.

"Walking, no way am I riding with you, asshole."

He's going to follow me and beg me to get in the car, I mean it's after 12am and the streets are dangerous at this time. This is me wanting to feel wanted and... Is that the sound of a car? I spin to

see the jerk driving off.

"Hey!" No way am I going to be left here. My feet can only take me thus far, gosh couldn't I get Mandla's long legs? Nooo... Lilian is life.

My tallness is what we call short in the world of tall people. Finally Zizwe stops, I scuttle just in case he changes his mind.

"You should be arrested Zizwe, drunk people are a special case and should be handled with care." He frowns at my prattling and drives on, flashes of what happened at my father's house haunt me because it's too quiet, Hulk has gone quiet on me.

I need him to speak, say something so I can forget about my father. The terrible memories take advantage of this inaudible moment.

"Mr Hulk..." blame my drunk mouth, I hate it too. Zizwe frowns at my hand pinching his cheeks. "You think I'm sexy, don't you?" Yes, I have the audacity.

That's the only thing I can hold on to when insecurity and my past come to haunt me.

"Shrek? Yes... You? No, you're ugly." Liar...

"You like me, don't you, Mr. Hulk?" I can be persistent and I will get what I want.

"No." Somehow he seems to be tolerating me, but shoves my hand away from his cheek still. A song comes to mind and escapes through my big mouth.

"I know you like me, you think I'm sexy, you think I'm gorgeous, you want to kiss me." I'm a mess...

"Will you stop singing that? The answer to all your questions is no." Gosh, I love annoying this man, his growls are so sexy.

"Dammit, it worked for Gracie. Why isn't it working for me?" Hollywood is definitely a lie.

"What?" A question and confusion hover over him.

"You should know who Gracie Hart is, Hulk. Miss Congeniality, it's a new millennium movie. You were probably fifteen then, you should know it." The scowl again, I don't know if I said something wrong.

"I wouldn't know it because I wasn't born yet." What? My ears must be intoxicated too, did he say...

"How old are you?" Please don't say sixteen, I've watched Twilight and Jacob had us thinking he's off his mother's breast. Boy was only sixteen and looking like Hulk.

"Nineteen, twenty in a few months." The casualty in his tone as he reveals his age. Lord, I am being driven by a child who looks too grown for his age. You have a flawless sense of humour, but not now God. I am not in the mood.

"You're a boy?" I squeak and I didn't mean to make it sound so judgemental.

"So are you." Bastard, he knows I don't mean it like that.

"What has your mother been feeding you? Beans?" Curiosity swallows my hand, it moves to press and squeeze his biceps. Yey... His body heat consumes me, my hand is sliding and gliding up and down his strong arm.

The forwardness of my heart fools me into thinking

he makes my heart skip a beat, it's dancing, probably to the sound of his heavy breathing. Stupid trembling hand has gone to discover the broadness of his chest, he's stealing glances at me and trying too hard not to shuffle on his seat. My eyes stop chasing the map of my hand and sky rocket to his face when he grabs my hand, jaw clenched and eyes cast on the road.

"Stop." It's a whisper, firm and authoritative. It forces me to obedience, which is not me at all. With a clearing of a throat and a pulsing dick, I pack myself on the seat.

Pulling myself together is going to be torture. He's here, next to me. I can smell him, I can hear him breath and watching him drive is turning me on. It's bad enough that I am already turned on by his body, I need help.

Relaxed, I take in his features, eyes cast on the dark road ahead. The cords of muscle knotting his neck and pulling the shoulder layers of his t-shirt that

hugs his bulging chest. The furrowed brow, full lips, cheeks bones. Good enough to eat and probably go for seconds. He sits with heavy awkwardness. There's something so sexy in the way he commands the steering wheel... Bubu, you like things, you better not end up on serial killer documentaries.

NEO...

Time: 4:35am (Almost break of dawn.)

Location: Kenya Mombasa (Cooked up in the car.)

Relationship status: Single (If I don't get out of this place.)

Zee is going to kill me, I haven't spoken to her since I left the country. Mostly to avoid her nagging, as much as I miss her, I have to keep my distance. The woman will have me borrowing one of that old witch's brooms just so I can get home on time.

Stylos is snoring beside me like we're not on a

mission. He has it easy because his wife is not angry most of the time.

"Stylos wake up." Finally that man is back, where the hell has he been? He's pushing the waggon and it's bigger than I thought. I was thinking Shoprite trolleys.

"Stylos man, yes es." One more shrug gets him up like he was never sleeping.

"What happened?" Nx!

"Look over there." I say, pointing at the fool who kept us outside his mother's house for the whole night.

"He's in there, the kid must be in that cart." I'm frustrated, hungry, I have bad breath and my body is sticky from sweating all night in this quarantine and Stylos has the audacity to throw his theories at me.

"So you're telling me that fool has..." Okay... He can be rude when he wants to. There he goes after that short man in loose jeans and sandals. Stylos still moves without letting us in on the plan.

I follow behind him, like I always do.

"What's in the trolley?" I hear Stylos interrogate him as I approach. The man brings his dubious eyes to me, then back to the intimidating man soaring over him.

"Wewe ni nani?" (Who are you?) He's a chance taker...

"Don't shit with me Peter, I am not a morning person. Trust me, you don't want to mess with me." Stylos proclaims and I won't ask how he knows his name.

Peter gulps, eyes widened and dribbles of sweat doubling on his forehead.

"Siju chochote, una mtu mbaya." (I don't know anything, you have the wrong man.) His voice breaks, this could only mean one thing, he knows what we're talking about. Stylos pushes him aside and flips the trolley open to find nothing but empty plastic bottles, this can't be another dead end.

"Am I a bad person Neo?" Oh shit, and so it begins.

"No, Stylos."

"I know right, people provoke me, right?"

"Sho sho Stylos, oa tseba moes." (Yes Styles.)

"Okay." Stylos accepts a loud guffaw, almost startling me. I don't know how this is going to play out because this is a first for me, I've heard his psychotic horselaugh, but not this kind. It's eerie, he'd beat the joker in a competition.

"Eish, mamela ntwana. I know you understand English, this man is not normal. Don't be fooled by his smartness." I'm trying to save Peter's life, but he's calling me bluff by huffing at me.

Styles shoots him with a glare- yes a glare accompanied by a creepy sly grin on his face, probably borrowed it from the devil and I can guess he's thinking of ways he's going to torture Peter.

"You two are not from around here." Ahh!!! The fool speaks. "One call to immigration and you will be

deported." He's a funny guy...

"Neo, do you think his mother is awake? When last did I torture someone?" Stylos arrogantly asks.

Thank God the neighbourhood is quiet, this gun will get us in trouble. But also it has this short shit agape, his confidence is gone.

"Let's hurry Stylos, but be gentle with the witch. You don't have to cut out all her fingers at least spare one. How will she cook for her useless son?" My saying brings a smile on his face. Psycho.

"Please, not my mother. She doesn't know anything." He shouts after Stylos who is half way to the house, but does he stop? No, he continues on.

"Voets ek move, mgodoyi." Peter stumbles due to the forceful push of my hand, but attains balance. We're trailing Stylos' steps, the banging on the door is loud enough to get anyone's attention. It's not long till the witch appears through the crack of the door.

"Mama alifunga mlanga sasa." (Mom shut the door now.) Peter shouts what sounds like a warning, too late though.

The witch squeals and rams on the floor as Stylos pushes the door open, Peter is helpless under my grip. He is forced to watch Stylos pull the woman up with her hair, screaming and kicking. I have to put MamSonto on standby because if Stylos doesn't kill this witch, we are in deep shit.

"Please, please, he's under the bed. The boy is under the bed." A confession gushes out of her mouth. Stylos is bent over in a millisecond his hand digging under the bed balanced by bricks. I doubt anyone could breathe under there.

Peter flies to help his mother up, he is the least of my worries.

"Shit..." A grumble from Stylos, I think he's got something.

"Keng Stylos?" (What is it?)

My breathing stops while I observe him lugging something. The first thing I see is a limb, a feeble one. It's not moving, Zulu's body comes into full view, utterly still. Eyes closed, his face a perfect misery. Lips ashy as if deprived of water for days on end.

Styles checks his pulse, panic licking his face. My brain floods me with a million questions... What will I tell Mzi? How will I look at him after this? What did this child do to deserve this?

"Stylos bua, is he okay?" (Speak.) I want to cry, but in actual fact I feel numb as if I will never feel again.

"Dammit, he's cold Neo. There is no pulse." I saw it... I saw it when he pulled him out, it wasn't confirmed though. The confirmation puts me in state of panic, my knees fail me, bringing me down before these murderers. A lump on my throat, but tears refuse to avail themselves. They are waiting for my emotions to come into play first, to take over the numbness.

"Mama, what have you done?" Now he speaks English with this witch. "Why did you hide him under

the bed mama?"

"Sikudhani atasongwa. Umesema kumficha." (I didn't think he would suffocate. You said to hide him.) I don't know what she just said, but there is no remorse in her voice nor do her facial features accept its embrace.

The woman is stone cold, nothing says regret on her. After many tries of CPR, Stylos falls on his buttocks, brings his knees to his chest and buries his head in his hands. A sign of defeat, Zulu can't be dead... No. no. no.

To be continued...

BURN

25...

THANDIWE...

“Wake up and pray ntombazane, asikho is'khathi

sokulala. You're at war, wake up and pray. The Spirit will lead you, wake up and pray ntombazane." (This is no time to rest.) And with that my eyes pop open, I don't know who that feminine voice belongs to but it has brought me to my knees and I am not sure what I am praying for.

"Father you're all knowing and all seeing, it has been put in my spirit that I should come before you. I don't know what I am praying for, let your Spirit lead me, Lord."

The prayer takes more or less than ten minutes, my mind is muddled. I cannot find a reason behind the dream and the need to pray. The day is long, God will probably reveal it to me.

I know that tickle at the door, it could only be Veronica. Everything about her is soft, from her voice to the way she touches and does things. I am greeted with a big smile as she jumps to sit on the bed, her beautiful face gleaming with happiness. Come to think of it, girl is glowing. A certain look

resides on her face, a guise I haven't seen since... no I can't conclude such things, she knows better than to do that.

“Bhuti said to give you this.” She hands me a note and doesn't say which brother. “He said he'll come and see you at work.”

It could be Nqaba, Ntuthuko doesn't do that, even when I thought we were happy, he's not the romantic type.

'I love you.' that's what the note says and I can't help the smile that kisses my lips. It appears to be contagious and has Veronica smiling too, although it seems there is another reason for that bashful beam on her face.

“And you? Why are you all smiles so early in the morning?” Okay...it has nothing to do with my grin. It's that smile new lovers have, I know because this was me when I first met Nqaba. Loss of appetite, insomnia, coyly smiles and unnecessary giggles.

“Tell me about love sisi.” I wish she would stop calling me sisi, we're practically the same age. Now

this love thing...

“Why do you suddenly want to know about love?”

The giggle attacks her again and I thought she knew what love is, she was once a victim of it.

“Tell me, sisi.”

“I don’t know, you can’t explain love. To me it’s when a song that sounds nothing like a silly love song suddenly becomes one to you. That person you love becomes everything to you that, you can’t see your tomorrow without them in it and you would do just about anything for them. I know this might sound strange and very sappy, but you know given a chance you would die for that person.” Vero is so attentive, my theory would be she has fallen in love and probably wants to get it right this time around.

“There’s a strange feeling in my heart, I think it’s on fire. Sometimes I think it wants to jump out of my chest.” She expresses with her hand flying to her chest.

“You’re in love sweetie.” It’s confirmed. The lip and

nail biting and shying away from my gaze. “Who is the lucky boy?”

“I can’t tell you now sisi, I don’t want bhuti to know. He wants me to stay away from boys. He is not fair.” True, she can’t be alone forever.

“Okay, fair enough.” I would probably spill to Nqaba, my mouth takes up a life of its own when I’m too excited. “How old is he?”

“Twenty one.” Oh gosh. I hope he’s not some skrr skrr fuck boy who is after her gold.

“Promise me that you will be careful. Don’t let this guy play you, don’t give him your whole heart. Take it one day at a time.” If I had time, I would keep an eye on her. Most twenty one year olds are very immature, Veronica will not survive another heart break.

“I will, he loves me though. I see it in his eyes, the way he looks at me.” He better love her or he will disappear like the last guy did. The girl is persuaded and I hope she is right. This proves that she is not really damaged, she just needs good therapy.

ZIZWE...

“Zizwe, I can’t find the shoe polish. Have you...” My brother loses his speech, seeing me and Bulelwa in bed together. His head on my chest, lanky arm draped over my torso.

He kept singing about his shortness last night, which is bizarre because I know short people and Bulelwa is not one of them. He dozed off on me while giving me directions to his place and I had no choice but to bring him to my brother’s apartment.

Is it not good hospitality to offer your bed to a visitor? I was taught better. I would have carried Bulelwa to the flat had he not had these long legs he kept asking God for on the ride home.

I have never met anyone as crazy as him.

I dragged him up to the apartment and dropped him on my bed. I could have taken the couch, I don’t fit

on the couch so the bed it was.

Archie was asleep when we got home in the early hours of the morning, luckily he's a heavy sleeper or he would've forced Bulelwa awake and drove him home himself. He got his strictness from our father, it gets to me sometimes.

I can stand anything from my brother, not the look he's giving me. His tongue click is strong, it's always been. It's that heavy one that lets you know that he has used all the swear words available.

"Archie..." Something must be wrong with me because Bulelwa is still comfortably lying on my chest and I have to double check my sanity as I manoeuvre him to the side, careful not to drop the golden boy.

His turn lands him on the edge of the bed, with a foot dangling. Archie bangs the door on his way out, it's loud enough to have woken Bulelwa up, but he's snoring his troubles away.

“Archie ndoda, ngi...” His cold glare steals my speech.

My grandmother, our mother’s mother gave him this name. While dad christened him Ntsikayethu, he was okay with the name Archie until he grew up and found out about the injustice done to our parents. He denounced the name Archie along with the grandparents and embraced his second name instead. It’s not easy to adapt to it, Archie is what our mouths are used to.

“Ntsika, ngiyaxolis a ndoda. Lalela, he’s a friend. He was drunk and I couldn’t take him to his place because...” (I’m sorry man.)

“I don’t care Zizwe.” He interrupts dismissively.
“This is my house. You don’t just bring your friends over without talking to me about it.” I’m not sure I’m comfortable with the look he’s giving me. “Why was he leaning on you like that?”

“Like I said, he was drunk last night and Bulelwa

doesn't know how to sleep. We always make fun of him, me and the crew. It's a bad habit" All lies...
There is no crew, I'm a lone walker. Friends are not something I have always craved.

It took me all my life to accept that I was attracted to men, I've always known, throughout my childhood and I embraced it earlier in life. But society expected something different from me, something I am not and I gave it to them. Dated girls, which surprisingly was as normal as breathing.

The longest relationship I had with a girl was two years, from the time I was sixteen. She broke up with me, saying I was holding back in the relationship and didn't love her the way she deserved to be loved. She cried when I easily accepted the breakup and cursed me and my future generation. I guess she wanted me to fight for us.

Just to put up a sham in front of my brother, I surround myself with girls and I don't really have to

put up much acting because they flock around me. Since Fikile left me with curses and hurtful words, I am not looking in to jumping into another relationship with the opposite sex. Maybe have fun yes because I enjoy pussy, though I have never been with a guy before.

Gay porn, I have watched, first time it scared me, I was about eleven and curious. My body was already too big for my age.

My masculinity helped me hide my sexuality, no one suspected at thing. The only reason I came out to my parents was because I was tired of living a lie and needed to vent to someone and my father being my best friend and open minded was the only person I could turn to.

Coming out to my father was so easy, I thought him to be unbiased. But not my brother, I've heard the slurs about homosexuals coming out of his mouth and they hurt like hell. How my own could be the very cause of my heart shattering into a million

pieces.

I decided to test him one day and brought a question forward ‘what would you do if I were gay?’ the look was enough to tell me how he’d feel about me. ‘I would kill you.’ and that’s it, a deadpan tone and an impassive mien, he uttered the words like I was nothing to him. Like we didn’t grow up together and were not best friends.

“You should have slept on the couch if you were willing to give out your bed.” Here we go. “Men don’t share a bed ndoda, and not in that state I found you two in. I will need to get rid of that image.” He says rubbing his eyes

“It won’t happen again, I assure you.”

“Yeah, you can sleep on my bed. I have to prepare for work, my shift starts at six. The boss is coming in today, he’s doing a spot check. I have to see if everything is in order.” Archie, sorry Ntsika is a manager at a petrol garage. He’s the smart pants in the family, completed matric at the age of

seventeen. Has a bachelor's degree in Accounting and Finance but this is South Africa, you won't find a job waiting for you after graduation.

"I have work too, remember?" My mouth stretches into a smile, it's not genuine. One more uncomfortable look from my brother and leaves me standing in the middle of the living room.

NTUTHUKO...

I've been trying to get a hold of the man who has Zulu, I gave that idiot money so he can book at a hotel with the boy. I had to find a poor family in Kenya, that way it would be easy to cover my tracks. What do I conclude if he's not answering my calls?

Lumka walks in my office with a basket in hand, I am not in the mood for company. Zulu is my worry right now...

"Baby, I brought you breakfast. All your favourites sthandwa sami." I hate it when she calls me that, it

gives her false hope. She drops the picnic basket on the table and unpacks the different kinds of food she brought. I would be grateful if I didn't have breakfast already.

“Not now Lumka, I am busy.” She pauses, giving me her famous sullen look. I know she is about to cry about how ungrateful I am and everything women complain about.

“Don't.” Raising a hand contemptuously, I beat her to it as she opens her mouth to speak. “I am busy right now, please leave.”

“What's wrong with you lately? You're changing Ntuthuko and it's not cute.” Whatever she means by that, I don't have time to nurse her hormones. Peter's phone is ringing now, he better answer my call.

“Sir...” He's speaking softly I can hardly hear him.

“Where have you been, you fool?” I'm failing to curb my anger, I am not a fan of incompetence. “Where is my son?”

Silence can mean a lot of things, right?

“Peter, where is my son?” I half shout, startling Lumka.

“I left him with my mom and the boy suddenly stopped breathing sir, I don’t know...” No, this can’t be...

“What do you mean he stopped breathing? Where is my son, dammit?” This was not the plan. What will I tell Thandiwe? Yes, I wanted to scare her, not rip her heart out.

“Sir, you can’t go in there.” A commotion from outside my door gets my attention, it’s not seconds till an angry dark skinned man dashes in with my PA scuttling behind him.

“Yeyi, voetsek.” A bark from him sends her stumbling back, he looks as scary as he sounds.

“Who are you?” I query and seem to bring a slimy grin on his face. His eyes are cold, impassive. His face is dead, and unkind. Anyone can tell this is not

a friendly visit.

“Will you tell these women to voetsek out of here or should I do it?” He says, standing across me with the table between us. Lumka looks as scared as the PA, they move at my motion.

“Who are you?” Fearful, I ask, staring into his black emotionless eyes.

“What will a dead man do with my name?” He responds, each word covered with ice and awful purpose, he is here to kill me.

“Look, I’m a good citizen. I’ve never harmed anyone...”

“Shut up, is’khathi se drama asikho. You and I have to go for a ride. Someone wants to see you.”

(There’s no time for drama.) I don’t trust the way this message is portrayed and what makes him think I’m going to follow him? He draws out a gun from his belt buckle as I reach for the phone to alert security.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, by the time they get here, you will be lying in a pool of blood. It will be so easy for me to escape this place and no one will suspect anything.”

“Where are you taking me?” Instead of giving me an answer, a smirk is what I get.

“Asambe ndoda, asambe.” (Let’s go.) He demands and gestures with a hand stretched out to the door. “One more thing, we’re going to walk out of this building without giving anything off. One move from you and I will have to empty uS’dudla, she ate a lot today.” He says, waving the gun on my face. I have no choice but to obey.

THANDIWE...

Lunchtime is approaching, Ife didn’t come to work, she said something about a family emergency. Nqaba’s phone is off, I tried calling him this morning. Something is not right, I find it strange that he hasn’t said anything since that note he left

me.

“Listen up everyone.” That’s Cele, he has nothing else to do than roam around the office. All attention falls on him. “Today is a lucky day for you lazy arses, you get to go home early.”

As expected people cheer and love him for that mere second.

“Wrap it up, I want this place closed by twelve.” The smile on his face tells me that he’s also happy about this.

I guess I will have to take a taxi home, since the first bus arrives around three in the afternoon. I could visit Nqaba at work if I knew where he worked, I am in no mood for Barbra and her hysterics.

“Hey, everyone is going out for drinks. Join us.” Zeneeth, my colleague says, she works at H.R. Like Ife, she was left in my hands to train and two months later girl was promoted to H.R. I don’t want to lie and say she didn’t enter Cele’s office and came out without her dignity. That office is Sodom

and Gomora itself.

“It will be fun, come on friendie.” She calls me that and no we’re not friends.

“I’m not in the mood for company Zee, maybe next time.” A party is the last thing I want, I need to focus on getting my son back. Nqaba might call with news.

“Don’t look back, but there’s a hunk in a uniform behind you.” Of course I’m going to look back.

He looks different, like he’s carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. My first thought is to rush to him, Zeneeth’s big mouth stops me. “Is he the husband? You know I’m still upset with you for not inviting me to your wedding.” Again, we are not friends.

“Excuse me.” I take my gaze back to Nqaba who’s still grounded on the same spot, dominated by profound sadness. Hands hidden in the pocket of his pants, fatigue engraved on his worn face.

“What’s wrong?” My hands travel to touch the sadness covering his face, his eyes lock with mine. They are trying to tell me something, I can never read him so he needs to speak to me. “You’re scaring me Nqaba. What is it?”

My hands sink into his as he takes them, the intent look in his eyes intensifies.

“Is it Zulu?” Don’t let it be my son, Lord.

“Come with me.”

“Nqaba...”

“Just come with me.” He’s pulling me by the hand, the whole time I’m looking at his paces. Thinking of what could have made him so sad, Nqaba is not easily influenced or hurt.

My footfall falters as he opens the passenger’s door to a fancy car.

“Whose car is this?” He curves a brow at my curiosity.

“Would you rather I drive a taxi?” Gosh, since when

does he take offense?

“Wouldn’t it be strange driving around in someone’s car Nqaba?” He could have gotten it at work, it’s the only explanation I have.

“Will you get in or should we wait for a taxi?” Not only is he taking offense today, he’s also losing patience. Something must be wrong.

“Is everything okay? Are you in some kind of trouble?” The look he gives me tells me to shut up and get in the car and so I do that. I love the man, but jail is not where I want to visit him.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” I ask as soon as he jumps in, it’s my turn to be edgy.

Nqaba is pissing me off with his silence, by the time we get to wherever he’s taking me, I would have lost my mind. The looks he keeps stealing do not tell me anything, I can’t read him if that’s what he thinks.

“You’re getting on my nerves Nqabayomzi, I have no

clue what's going on with you. You come to my work place driving this expensive car and expect me to follow you to god-knows where and you refuse to tell me what's going on. What did you do? If it's something illegal we can get you a lawyer..."

"Awukahle Tshabalala." His voice is soft but strong enough to push me back to submission. He gives me a brief stare, crumpled brow, eyes bloodshot red. This is the reason behind his silence, he was trying to stop himself from crying.

"Zulu has been found, we're going to Kenya. Your bags are packed, someone is waiting for us at the airport." That's a lot to take in. My son has been found, that's good news, but why are we going to Kenya? And who sponsored the flight tickets?

"What's in Kenya Nqaba?"

"Zulu, something has happened to him." He tells with a clamped jaw and I wish I can read him right now because I am afraid to ask what has happened to my son.

"Nqaba!" An undertone swirled in dread flounces

out of my trembling lips, he doesn't say anything except take my shuddering hand into his.

Unexpectedly, I'm reminded of the feminine voice in my dream telling me to pray. Could it have been about this?

To be continued...

BURN

26...

NTUTHUKO...

Where will I begin to look for that man if I manage to escape from this place? The only thing I have is his description, he gave off an aura of a smart criminal. He probably does this for a living, kidnap people and lock them up in strange houses. My

crime remains unknown to me, I was blindfolded on our way here and I can't guess my whereabouts. I can hear birds singing, it could be a forest, a secluded place away from the busy town.

The man refused to tell me why I was being taken against my will, instead tied me up like an animal. If this has anything to do with Barbra and her stupid group, I will never forgive her.

BULELWA...

If this is part of adult-ing then I'm okay with growing up, I don't want it. Waking up in another man's empty house is not me. Last night's events are vague, I can't recall everything. I remember a ginger all over me and he tasted so yummy until the pompous bastard Zizwe decided to be Mike Tyson. He punched Jacob.

So there was a note pinned on my chest when I

woke up... ‘The Cornflakes are on the kitchen counter, the milk is not enough you’ll have to mix it with water. You’ll see yourself out and please make my bed Buttercup. P.S you should do something about that loud noise you call snoring.’

The bastard...I do not snore and anyway, I ran out of that place like I was running for my life.

The Uber drops me off outside my gate, this is where I would rather be, at my house where there is enough milk.

“Oh thank God, you’re okay.” Lilian attacks me with a suffocating hug as I step into the house. There is no use complaining, she will never stop breaking in.

“What are you doing here?” I have no energy for her.

“I’m worried about you Bubu. Why are you still wearing yesterday’s clothes?” Her hands are annoyingly touching my face, a mother’s touch should ease the hurt in my heart, but this mother’s

touch is doing nothing. Lilian failed me, she couldn't stand up for me to her homophobic husband. It pains me to know that my mother would not take a bullet for me.

“Does your husband know that you're here?” A hefty sigh from her follows me to the kitchen when I move past her, I need this woman out of my house.

“I'm sorry my baby, you know how your father can be.” The sound of her footsteps harass my ears, it's not good for my headache.

“Yes Lilian, I know how Mandla can be, everyone knows how that stone cold man can be. Of all the men in the world Lilian, you had to fall in love with that devil's agent...” A burning sensation stings my cheek as Lilian slaps me across the face, there is a first time for everything and I will forgive her for it. But damn, it hurts. She might as well have used Thor's hammer.

“I am still your mother and you will not talk to me like that. That man is your father, you will respect

him Bulelwa.” J eer, I badly want to roll my eyes. If only she wasn’t stabbing daggers at me.

“Yes ma’am.” Translated ‘whatever.’ Rubbing my throbbing cheek, I turn to make something to eat. If Lilian was not here, I would be drinking to get rid of this hangover.

“Look baby, I know you’re hurting, but your father will come through. He’s not really open minded, this wasn’t a thing growing up.”

“Isn’t that a lame excuse?” This is not the morning I expected. I should have gone to work.

“It’s not an excuse, but the tru...” Her statement fades, eyes widely ogling at me. “You’re eating cereal?” It is shocking but not that deep. Lindiwe turning my house into her second home bought cereal.

My hand dives into my back pocket to fiddle with the note Zizwe left, he’s behind this craving. Don’t look at me like that, sure I took it with me and I will not be taking any questions... Thank you...

“Yes Lilian, beautiful people eat cornflakes, ask bo

Mbali.” I love the sound of her laughter, it’s soothing. Although I don’t want her here.

“You’re crazy son, be careful with that ego. Don’t let it grow into pride, no man wants a prideful partner.” Does this woman know who I am?

“I am Lilian’s son. Look at this body mom?” The laugh attacks her again as I spin to give her a good look of my shape. “Jada is lucky I was born in South Africa or else Will smith will be waking up in my bed, we’ll have our own entanglement me, Will and Hulk.” Shit...Did I say that out loud? The look she’s giving me is the one Gladys from next door gives you when she comes to your house for tea, biscuits and gossip.

“Who’s Hulk?” ‘Ousie Gladys’ is making herself a cup of coffee, strong and black. She’s not a milk person like Mandla. My father grew up with nothing in Ntuzuma Kwamashu and milk was a luxury. They were lucky if they ate rice and salads on Christmas. They lived on borrowed everything, he made a promise to himself and his future generation that he will work hard and build a legacy. Years later, here

we are, but he hasn't abandoned the love of coffee with more milk than water.

“No one.” To avoid my mother's probing eyes, I move to settle on the chair with my bowl of cereal, Lilian plans to follow me around today. A gratifying smile lies on her face as she pulls a chair to sit, her hands wrap around the coffee mug as she brings it to her nose, a habit of hers. I can't comprehend how her muzzle can stand that strong smell.

“How is it?” She points at the bowl filled with cereal, it's not bad and I have no idea why I'm eating this... Zizwe...

A shrug from my side, it's cereal. You can't critic cereal, right?

“Your father loves you, Bubu.” I thought we were done with this topic.

“His actions say otherwise.” My riposte.

“Do you know where the name Gcinumzi came from?”

If I loved the name, I would have cared to find out. Mandla uses it to torment me. ‘GCINUMZI!!!’ Geez, my blood boils when he shouts my name like that.

“Your uncle.” Lilian gives an answer to her question... Great, black people and naming their kids after uncles and aunts, that thing should stop.

“Black Label uncle?” I have always known Mandla doesn’t love me.

“No, his elder brother.” She corrects my mistake and I thought Mandla was the first born.

“Mandla has an elder brother? Where is he? And why was I named after an old man?” Lilian simpers at my query, it’s not a matter to smile about.

“He died when your father was about nine years old, Gcinumzi had a physique like your father. At sixteen, he could be mistaken for a twenty five year old.”

That’s Hulk, I will never get used to it.

“He always kept to himself and was very quiet, your grandfather hated that. He wanted him to be out

there and mingle with other kids, but Gcinumzi would rather stay home with his mother and his only friend, Ifalakhe who lived next door. They grew up together and were inseparable. One day his aunt found them in a heated kissing session in his room, apparently the woman had a habit of not knocking.” Whaaat?

“Gcinumzi and Ifalakhe were lovers?” Not shocking really, let’s talk about the name Ifalakhe. Why would you name your child that? Again, black parents ‘STOOOP’ with the heavy names. I know a guy... note that- a guy by the name of ‘Senzeni’ (What did we do?) You bloody had sex, that’s what you did.

“Yes.” A casual yes from Lilian like it’s not a biggie and this is what I love about my Lilian. So open-minded... She continues, as I vigilantly give her my attention.

“The woman was known to be cold and manipulative, whenever the devil presented a chance to ruin a life, she would accept it with open arms. She ran out of the room screaming and shouting for everyone to come and see an

‘abomination’ that’s what she called it. She went on to say Gcinumzi had turned her brother’s house into Sodom and Gomora and God will punish the entire family, unless Gcinumzi was to be punished for his sins.”

It’s not easy being an aunt and have a good heart, I really commend those aunts because aunts... Yey... especially the ones from your father’s side.

“Gcinumzi confessed his love for Ifalakhe and that they had been together for over two years. That time homosexuality was taboo, even worse in the rural areas, no one understood it. The whole community came together and bible bashed them, throwing slurs and judgements upon them. All the while, Gcinumzi was out to protect Ifalakhe. The boy was only fifteen and was as small as a grain of sand. Your uncle fought his aunt who had Ifalakhe chained under her large arms.”

“So she helped with the ambush?” Evil woman...

“She was a big woman. Your aunt escaped without an ear.” Ohh! She’s talking about that evil witch who has no ear, now I know why everyone calls her Ndlebe. She’s ninety two years old and lives alone in Ntuzuma. Her children left her all alone. I hear she was a hard woman to live with, would hide food and complain about anything and everything. This one time she hid a tray of eggs under the bed and went away to work for her ‘madam.’ Came back a week later to find the eggs rotten. Satan...

“The lovers were necklaced and burnt alive.” My mother continues, bringing me back to her surroundings... “No one was implicated and no one noticed the nine year old in the background who was watching everything in horror. Your father watched his brother burn to death, he said Gcinumzi’s desperate eyes would run between him and Ifalakhe. He had never seen anyone so helpless, there was no way out for them. His mother wanted to throw herself into the fire, but was held back. The lovers died and people went on as if nothing

happened. Your grandfather was working at a white man's farm and due to return home the next day. You can imagine how he felt when told that his first born was killed for being homosexual." This is not supposed to make me cry, I don't know Gcinumzi. Why is my heart breaking though?

"I want justice for my uncle." My proclamation has her widening her eyes, I don't see the big deal here.

"How? It was a long time ago, most of them have died." She says, chasing me with doubtful eyes as I stand on my feet to place the plate in the sink.

"Yes, but Ndlebe is still alive." This one can't be left to God, it's been too long and Gcinumzi deserves justice. Lilian is not okay with me calling that old witch by a name she's known as. I'm too upset to be rectifying a bloody name.

"It's a thing of the past son, let it go." It might be, but two innocent people were murdered.

"No mom, I owe it to my uncle and his great love Ifalakhe. I owe it to the whole LGBT community.

Must we die because of who we are and who we choose to love?" I'm angry at the world, ignorant people, God for allowing this to happen and Ndlebe for being so stupid and heartless.

"You're not a crier." Lilian expresses, crowding my space, the woman will not let me breathe. I'm not a child to have my tears wiped.

"This fucking hits home, mom." Okay. The word slipped out and it would be a good idea to hide from her piercing glare. "Sorry."

Only she would force an apology out of you with just a glower.

"Your father would be proud of you, it's what he's always wanted, but his heart is too broken to revisit the past." I hear the proclamation and maybe Mandla will help me with this because I do not have money to pay for a lawyer. For all we know, he has cut off my allowance since I started working. I need to check with my bank.

ZIZWE...

“Did you give Mr. Msibi the file?” Mr. Okolie is never hands on with the company, he’s on the grounds a lot lately.

“Yes sir.” I hope Bulelwa did, the man is stubborn.

“Good, we have eight deliveries today. Five trucks should leave for Mpumalanga at 11am and three for Potchefstroom.”

“We’re short staffed today sir, we have six drivers...” I didn’t report Bulelwa’s leave and it will need to be approved. He probably won’t get fired, seeing that he is a Msibi. Had I been nosy, I would’ve asked what a man from an affluent family is doing working as a truck driver. He is spoiled and drives like the truck would chide him the moment he steps on it.

“Bhekizizwe Zondo?” At the sound of my name being called, I turn to find a man in a police uniform.

I take my eyes back to Mr. Okolie, he's regarding me with a glare that lets me know that I'm in trouble. The police never come bearing good news, it's either they come to arrest you or tell you, you've lost a loved one in an accident or whatever.

"Yes." I might as well respond.

"A Jacob Mason has pressed charges against you, for assault." What? Who is this Jacob Mason, I don't know anyone by that... Oh! The idiot from the bar last night.

"A punch is not classified as assault poyisa." My first defence.

"That's not what his nose says, you broke his nose. There are witnesses who are willing to testify." The arrogant police officer says moving in on me. Is this even allowed? Handcuffing me without proof? I can't bring myself to look at Mr. Okolie. I would have to call my brother to get me out.

THANDIWE...

The flight attendant couldn't understand why I was wailing like a crazy person in a plane full of people. Same as, white people who couldn't understand that black people grieve different. We cry so much that we don't know what to do with ourselves and the only option is to throw yourself on the floor screaming and rolling like your body is on fire.

Never in my life did I think I would have to mourn my son, I've always thought he would outlive me. Parents are not supposed to bury their children, it's all wrong, this thing we call life is wrong and unfair.

Two days have gone by, Ngaba hasn't said anything to me. I think he doesn't know what to say, all he does is sit on the chair situated by the window and stare into thin air as if thinking of a way out. Of what? I wouldn't know... I'm trapped as well and suffocating. There is no air and I'm afraid that one day I will go to bed and not wake up in the morning.

My heart constantly dances to the sound of his footfalls, it's a crazy dance that has me pressing a hand on my chest to curb it. I'm stuck in this hotel room in Mombasa, waiting for a call from the authorities to inform me that I can take my baby home. It's what Zulu would want, to be home with his family.

He stops at the door, it takes a minute for him to open it. My eyes are ready to embrace his presence but his...his eyes do not want to cuddle me. I haven't seen them in two days.

"You're back?" Somehow and strangely, I'm the strongest one between us. I speak, make sure he has eaten and bathed while he seems to have given up on life and everything that has anything to do with life. Nqaba gifts me with a nod and takes up his spot by the window, I hate that chair. I want him here with me, close to me.

There's a guy who keeps coming around, I heard Nqaba mention the name Styles while talking to him.

What I hate are the pitiful looks that Styles guy throws at me.

“Would you like anything?” I’m on my feet, I don’t know why. My heart says go to him, my brain says you’re not strong enough to comfort him.

“Have you eaten?” At least he still talks, he hasn’t said this much since he took me to my son. I was given a few minutes with him and that was after Nqaba convinced the nurses to let me see him. Apparently I don’t have proof that he is my son because the child was brought into the country under a false name.

“No.” I re-join. How can I when my stomach wants nothing?” Nqaba looks worse than I do, yet I need his arms around me. I need him to comfort me, cuddle me and tell me that it’s going to be okay that, I’m going to be okay because I am close to giving up.

“I’ll get you something to eat.” He says, grabbing his phone that he abandoned on the table. I won’t let

him leave again...

“Please don’t go.” I’m in front of him, looking up at him. He’s trying so hard not to look into my eyes, I’m not certain how he’ll react to me, forcing him to give me a glimpse. Just a mere preview of my home, the same place where I find my peace...his eyes... Leisurely, he warms into my touch. The eye lock is intense, his, flow between my eyes and lips. A pucker residing between his brows.

“Talk to me, Nqa...”

“I’m sorry...” he cuts in with an unexpected apology. What is he sorry about? This has nothing to do with him, I am to blame for the predicament that has befallen Zulu. I should’ve protected him from Ntuthuko. “I’m sorry Thandiwe.” His forehead sprays on mine. Goose bumps take pleasure in tasting my skin at the feel of his heated breath on my face. “I failed you, I didn’t keep my promise...”

We’re inaudible, bodies even. His arms fervently flowing on my back, he’s giving me more than what I wanted, but it’s not enough to mend my broken

heart. Not enough to make me feel better.

“Ungakhali Tshabalala.” (Don’t cry.) The tears decline the touch of his hands, they persist on streaking down my face.

Hand in hand, he leads us to the bed and pulls me to sit on his lap. His arms enfold around me, face on the curve of my neck. I’m swallowed in his embrace, the feeling is satisfying.

“He’s a baby, he doesn’t deserve this.” His lips pressed on my collarbone, Nqaba begins his talk. I love it when he talks, when he talks to me. Everything lights up, yet his silence seems to bring darkness.

“I blurted out to Ntuthuko that Zulu might not be his son, I might as well have signed his death warrant.” I’m a useless mother.

“We’re not taking this path Thandiwe, where you blame yourself. Life is unpredictable, nothing is guaranteed.” Sure it’s not, however God cannot give and take.

“You’re going to be okay Tan-tan, Zulu too. He’s a strong boy, he will survive this.” The words leave his mouth in waves of assurances. Zulu suffered a brain hypoxia, his brain was deprived of air for longer than ten minutes and this caused brain damage. The doctors are not sure if he will pull through, we don’t know anything else.

“But they won’t give me, my son back, they won’t let me spend a minute with him, Nqaba. I need to let him know that I am here, maybe if he hears my voice he will wake up.” I cry, lighting myself against him. His arms squeeze tighter around me.

“Tell your tears to stop, I hate how they seek attention.” A chortled joke as he tries to lighten up the mood. A smile is so far from me that I can’t reach it even if I want to. “Zulu will be released to us, Neo has someone delivering his birth certificate.”

“How is he going to do that? The papers are at the house, Ntuthuko will not...” A hand over my mouth clogs my words.

“You like worrying Tshabalala, I don’t know you to

be this kind of a person.” Why wouldn’t I worry? My life is not exactly what I envisioned before I got married.

“Why do you say that?” I’m given a few kisses on the curve of my neck and my cheeks, my figure quivers as his lips linger with each kiss.

“Exactly that.” He replies while his lips are pressed on my open neck. “I’ve got you, Tan-tan and you will have Peanut back.” How do I perceive this? I’m in the middle of a fire and Nqaba is telling me that he has a bucket of water to put out the fire. But I see him empty handed, yet my heart says he’s carrying the bucket.

Nqaba moves me from his lap, his hand holding mine, he lies on the bed while carefully drawing me to him. In this moment, he wraps his arms around me from behind. All the thoughts tormenting my mind stop as if my heart takes over from my head.

“There’s a knock at the door.” I didn’t know employees should be knocking like that.

“I don’t hear anything.” He declares, creating doubt in my mind.

“What do you mean? The knock is loud enough for you to hear...” The knock transitions into a scratch, it now sounds like an animal desperately scratching the wooden door with its claws. Nqaba holds me in place, tightly enfolding his arms around me and stopping my plan to see who or what could be at the door.

“No Tan-tan.” A whisper mildly winds in my ear, like an energy fighting the force that’s pulling me away from his presence. “Focus on the sound of my voice, I love you. You’re here with me, I am here with you, focus on that.”

It’s hard, a battle that’s weighing me down. The need to check on the agonizing sound intensifies...

“Just close your eyes and focus on us, my lips grazing your skin.” I do just that as he murmurs, planting soft kisses on my ear. “Focus on these arms that are holding you tight and will never let you fall. Your body on mine, this moment right here

is what you should see and centre on.” My mind is diverted from the noise that seems to be fading. It’s us now, me...him...each other.

“I can’t believe how much I love you, Tan-tan. It shocks me sometimes that I can love someone this much.” I love him the same. He squeezes me as if he needs to check if I’m really, really here, lying next to him. My mind might not be here, but my body and soul will never disappoint me.

“I love you too.” And I don’t know how to express it, words alone will never point it out. A yawn attacks my mouth, this tiredness is so sudden.

“You haven’t been sleeping well, I’ll be here.” My eyes are giving up on me, but I don’t want to sleep. It would be a bad idea.

“I’m okay, let’s get some coffee.” It’s hard to move locked in his arms and he’s not letting go at my writhing.

“You don’t have to be afraid.” Nqaba predicts and he is right. I hate sleep, I hate that old man that

seems to force his way into my dreams. “Even when you’re asleep, look for me inside your dreams. I’ll be there.” Sure I know Nqaba to be romantic, but cheesy? No...It’s comforting though, knowing that he’ll never leave.

To be continued...

PLEASE LIKE AND COMMENT

BURN

27...

Unedited.

The day Zulu was found.

Watching Zulu lying on the concrete floor, lifeless. Neo had felt a need to call MamSonto, his go-to person when the going gets tough. Only she would pray the dead to life, he has witnessed it before. He

has witnessed the power God bestowed upon her and a believer is what he became because of that woman of God.

“MamSonto, please ask your God to bring him back.” Neo’s introduction had MamSonto confused. Sure he doesn’t greet, maybe when he’s too excited. She thought.

“Who” A peaceful and calm woman, MamSonto emanated a single word.

“Zulu, he can’t be dead. He’s only a child...”

“Standstill...” She interrupted him as she had been shown in the spirit what was taking place...the witch and the little lifeless boy in a foreign country. ‘Wake up and pray Ntombazane.’ After a few minutes of silence, MamSonto muttered the message that reached Thandiwe through her dreams.

“Put the phone on speaker Neo, make sure you’re

close to the boy. I need to speak to his spirit.” Neo obeyed the woman of God.

Styles Sishi is no believer, but he too has witnessed MamSonto’s powers. Faith as small a mustard seed is all you need and Styles’ faith has grown to be bigger than that, church though is out of the question. He leaves it to Sethu and Sihle. Every Sunday, they prepare for church while he’d rather spend the day with his brother, Randall. His wife Sethu has given up trying to drag him to the house of God.

“MamSonto.” Neo told Styles when he gave him a look filled with questions, his stupid Neo can be smart sometimes. He never would’ve thought of calling her.

“You’re on speaker MamSonto.” Neo conveyed, in desperation but his faith and hope were revived only from the calmness of MamSonto’s voice. The woman smiles till you fall into annoyance because

only a peaceful person can entertain a smile while you yourself are falling apart along with your life.

“What’s his name?” MamSonto.

“Zulu Biyase.” Styles muttered with hope and that faith that came to stay in his heart, a chuckle sounded from the receiving end of the phone. MamSonto filled with joy from the revelation that Styles is a believer now.

“MamSonto ke eng nou? Why are you laughing?” (What is it?) Neo questioned her, knowing very well why she was laughing...she was being herself.

“Siyabonga, unjani?” (How are you?) She asked much to Neo’s aggravation, of course he loves her, but no way will he ever get used to her traits. There’s a dead boy on the floor, a witch a few inches away and her son who looks more terrified than anything.

“I’m fine ma, but the boy is not.” Styles answered to her probing.

“The boy will be fine, don’t worry. I need you to lay a hand on his heart and his temple.” MamS onto transferred the instructions, Neo took over Zuma’s temple while Styles placed a hand on his abdominal. “Done.” Neo said, eyes closed as he couldn’t wait for the prayer.

“There’s a woman in the room with you.” Neo’s eyes shot open to land on the old witch across the floor, her arrogance and bravery had vanished. The woman of God was in another country, but the witch felt the presence of God and had been ignoring the heat that was slowly crawling up on her body.

“Yes.” Through clamped teeth and stabbing daggers at the old woman, Neo confirmed MamS onto’s saying.

“You witch.” MamS onto authorized their suspicions, Peter fell into panic. Panic for his mother, her witching ways was no secret to him.

The old woman stood to her feet with an attempt to run, but her feet couldn't recognise her as their master.

“Why do you want this child?” MamSonto seemed to be revealing a secret only known by the witch.

“I don't know what she's talki...” The old witch tried to deny the accusations, but MamSonto, not entertaining demons cut in with a voice of authority.

“Enough! You better confess what you did to the child or you will not live to see another day.”

But the old witch would not reveal what she does in the dark- yes, she is a witch, yet it's not something she would proudly broadcast.

“SPEAK!!!” MamSonto's voice boomed over the phone and in that moment the old witch began to scratch her body, not because of an itch. No... The heat engulfing her body was intensifying, an uncomfortable feeling. She's felt it before once upon a time, but survived it.

Things seemed to be different, the woman on the phone held a power that the witch herself could not comprehend. She wasn't like the other messengers of God who could only torment her a little. She was strong, so powerful that even a light from a match stick would burn her alive in a second if she were to toss it at her.

“Ahh!!!” A quickened scream from the stubborn witch, one by one her garments fell to the dirty ground as the heat started to hurt more than anything. Peter knowing what was happening could not help out, it was bad enough that he was implicated in a murder of a child.

With placidity, Neo moved from the presence of Zulu and sought refuge behind Styles, wanting to be safe just in case the witch went crazy and attacked them. Styles would protect him.

“Really Neo?” Styles moved an inch, only to have Neo follow him. Styles could feel a heaviness on his nose, the feeling escalated to his temple causing a

headache and dizziness. He fell back and landed on Neo whose eyes widened with shock.

“Stylos.” Neo yelled, alerting MamSonto. She was already aware of what transpired.

“Don’t worry Neo, he’s going to be okay. He’s not covered by the blood of Jesus and so he’s weak.” The old woman screamed upon hearing the name of Jesus.

“Help him MamSonto.” Forgetting about the boy for a split second, Neo pleaded for his friend’s life. Eyes half lidded and head spinning, Styles could not fight the dark presence that was taking over him.

“Drop...the...call.” Slowly and whinging in agony, the old woman dared to challenge God. “I will kill this man...”

“The devil is a liar.” The declaration shot out of Neo’s mouth, he could hear MamSonto softly praying. Eerie screams erupted from the witch as she dropped to the floor with a loud thud. Rolling and screaming could not quench the fire that had consumed her body.

“Silence!!!” MamSonto was done playing games with her, the old witch fell into complete stillness. A pail of water would do, just to pour over her sweltering body, perhaps it would ease the heat.

“Release this boy’s soul now.” MamSonto’s command tossed Neo into total disarray. Zulu’s soul has been captured?

“No...” This one was stubborn, not like the witches MamSonto had dealt with. “They will eat my son if I let this boy go.” Finally, the witch confessed.

“Heee J eso Morena” (J esus) Neo yelped in shock, still holding Styles in his arms feeling he was safer there.

“Mama?” Peter said, his heart almost stopping for a second. He was well aware what his mother was talking about.

“Yes, yes.” The witch shouted. “All my friends sacrificed their children, we ate them all and now it’s my turn. I was the last one, it’s been months and I have been delaying because I can’t give up my

only son. I can't let them eat my son, so I had to find a replacement and this boy is perfect. He's young and innocent."

Peter made sure to move away from his mother, sure they sacrifice souls but to eat them? That was pure evil.

"I was meant to take his body to them tonight, we meet on top of the big tree next door. Exactly at 3am, the feast will begin. And I am taking this boy with me and no one will stop me, not even your God." Kneled on the floor, hands flailing on her body to rub away the heat, her eyes fell on a terrified Neo as she declared her powers she thought were stronger than that of the God of Neo and MamSonto.

"Release the boy now." Another command from MamSonto.

"No, no, no." Her stubbornness had to be a demon itself. "Do you know how long it took for me to suffocate him with a pillow? This boy is strong, I have never in my life come across a child this strong. Someone was fighting me through him, but I

conquered him. I conquered his ancestors. My work will not be in vain.”

“Neo, move closer to the boy.” More instructions came from MamSonto. Hand shuddering, Neo did as told. His vacant hand ran to Zulu’s temple. “Lord let this be done so that you may be glorified, Zulu belongs to you Jesus. Zulu Biyase, by the name of Jesus Christ, come forth.”

The old witch was made mute and had no strength to move, her powers were failing her. At that moment Styles rose, healthy as a horse.

A sneeze from Zulu shocked even the ones who believe and know that God is able and has been performing miracles since the beginning of time.

“MamSonto, he sneezed. Zulu sneezed, but he’s not awake. His eyes are still closed.” Neo recited the scene.

“He’s going to be okay, you need to take him to the hospital now. His brain is not receiving air, hurry Neo.”

“Can’t you heal him MamSonto? You just raised him from the dead?” Neo asked, not understanding why she would not finish the work.

“Sometimes God does things we do not understand, maybe this is his plan. There is nothing more I can do now, but tell you that the child will be fine.” If MamSonto said it then it will be so, she is a woman of God, the same God who does not lie.

“Mama!!!” Styles and Neo turned at the ear-splitting scream from Peter, his mother was convulsing on the floor. Body shuddering vigorously and mouth forming and in seconds she became still. It was a quick death and the witch was travelling just as fast to hell.

“Let this be a lesson to all witches out there, you do not play with the God of MamSonto.” With pride and in awe, Neo declared. That time Styles had Zulu in his arms, rushing him to the car...

IFEANYI...

Life with brother and Amara has been okay, I don't have much to complain about. Brother is everything. He's taken the role of both parents in my life and Amara...we're more like best friends. Though, I wish she would tame her husband...Chaii, that man is strict, he surpasses Segun. I can't breathe without him asking if I'm breathing in air or the scent of weed. There is no getting used to his dictatorship.

Thandiwe is not around and Cele has been on my case since morning. I was assigned to data capturing, my desk is filled with stacks of papers and Cele said he wants it done before 5pm. An impossible task, lunch is around the corner and I'm not half way done.

“How is it going?” His creepy voice forces its way into my ears, I hate that he always creeps up on me. It makes me feel like he's been watching me.

“I...” Warm breath washing down my neck numbs my mouth, I feel violated by it and his heavy

presence behind me. I can feel his eyes drilling holes on my head, the fear to turn and face him smacks me. I'm afraid of what I might see... the lust in his eyes... The smug on his face... His gaze undressing me.

“Mr. Cele I need you to sign these.” I know that voice, it's Zeneeth. With my arms folded across my chest, I turn with the swivel chair to find Cele standing barely an inch from me. My eyes chase Zeneeth as Cele looks down at me, her gaze says she knows what's going on.

A lump builds on my throat as I get up at her motion. I can feel heavy eyes on me as I rush to the bathroom in search of a breather, I don't know why I turn around, but Cele's eyes are literally tracing my body like a pencil on a canvas. Chastising mine, I force my steps to hasten.

I'm heaving and eyes wet when I budge into the bathroom, the lump on my oesophagus and the

burning sensation confirm that I am a cry baby. I need to call brother, ramming my hand into my pocket to get my phone, it hits me that my hands are shuddering. My heart beat has left its comfort zone and fallen into a foreign thud.

Brother's phone rings unanswered, Amara is at school. Who do I talk to? I can hardly recognise myself on the big mirror in front of me, I'm never this jumpy.

Ifeanyi Okolie is audacious, not this girl who is afraid of a man who can't keep away from women. The fear sent to me refuses to leave and I don't know how to get rid.

“Brother, I need to talk to you. I'm scared, really scared. Please call me when you get this.” My feet lead me out of the bathroom after leaving a message on his phone.

Great, Cele is not there anymore. Feeling eyes on me, my eyes find the force and fear locates me again as I meet his eyes from across the floor. He's talking to Zeneeth but his perverted contemplation is on me.

His appalling wink compels my knees to weaken, my stomach to lurch and my heart to ache. My body takes a rapid turn and falls on the chair. I will run out of this place right after work.

BULELWA...

People were talking at work about how Zizwe was dragged out by the police. He has been locked up for three days and no one would tell me why he was arrested. Failing to concentrate at work, I decided to leave early.

It's easy to fake an illness and ask for the rest of the day off. Of course Randall believed my drama, I

doubt he would have if I didn't fall in his arms pretending to be fainting. The man dismissed me and gave me an extra day off, gosh employment is too much work. How do people deal with it?

Jacob is such a nuisance. Why is he calling me?

"What do you want?" I'm an idiot to answer his call.

"Where are you?"

"Driving home." Why am I telling him this?

"Come to the bar." He says, orders rather.

"You're stupid if you think I will obey you." He laughs at my retort.

"Oh Boo-boo, if you want your lover boy out of jail then you will bark when I say bark." I should have known he's behind this.

"You bastard."

"You have ten minutes to get here." He cuts the phone after his declaration, I find myself speeding to the bar. It's not far from me and so I make it there

in fifteen minutes.

And there he is, the beautiful bastard. Seated at the bar, sipping on a glass containing golden liquor.

“Jacob, you...” My speech begins while I march to him, the bar is vacant. There’s an old man situated at a corner table drinking his sorrows away. His troubles are sitting on his shoulders, you can tell from the way he’s hunched on the chair.

“Be my lover Boo-boo and I will get your boyfriend out of prison.” Jacob eats my words with his ultimatum... and Zizwe is not my boyfriend.

“What are you talking about?” He turns his beautiful face to glance at me, flashing his cunning eyes. I thought I was the only dramatic person around, Jacob has a plaster on his nose. It actually looks terrible, but I don’t remember seeing blood on him that day. I am pretty sure Zizwe did not punch him that hard. “And this?”

“Walter was there, he saw how that animal attacked me and I was completely defenceless. It took four men to get him off me.” What? That’s not what happened. I was there, Zizwe barely touched him.

“Why are you lying J acob?”

“It’s not a lie, ask Walter.” His eyes point at Walter over the counter, he hides from me. I see what’s going on here.

“How did he agree to lie for you, J acob? You slept with him didn’t you?” Whore...

“Boo-boo, you know what you have to do to get your lover out of prison. I know how to make him disappear. I mean prison is not a nice a place for a gay man. He might drop the soap one day and...”

“You wouldn’t...” I know he would, no one is daring as this fool.

“White privilege...Ever heard of that?” Who has n’t?

“All I have to do is bring forward an x-ray with fractured ribs plus this broke nose and cry headache, as for witnesses, it’s sorted. Nothing a few drinks and notes couldn’t solve.” He is not

bluffing.

“We’re you not the one who said it will be so easy for you to get me? Why are you resulting to this now? Have you lost faith in your abilities to pursue J acob?” Desperation has a name...J acob Beastie Mason...

“Oh baby no, I’ve never dealt with a stubborn lover like you...”

“I am not your lover, you bastard.” He smiles at my interjection, damn the man wears arrogance so perfectly. It’s beautiful but I want to kill him, how dare he think he can blackmail me into a relationship.

“You will be if you want that trashy boyfriend of yours out of jail.”

“You’re not going to get away with this.” I spit, ready to throw in a punch, but I might injure my feeble hand.

“I have, the ball is in my court. This is simple Boo-boo, all you have to do is let me take care of you. It’s not much really, avail yourself sexually and

emotionally. I mean baby, you're damn good. That night was a..."

"Argh, spare me." I intrude on his stupidity, my conscious did tell me that he has stalker tendencies. But, no Bubu didn't think of running.

"I love you, Boo-boo and all I want is to make you happy..." He's touching my face, I'm angry at him, so why am I letting him touch my face?

"Yeyi Stefano Dimeria. What do you think this is? A telenovela?" Push him off Bubu, push him off. I'm saved when Walter the traitor slams a glass on the table, he's glaring at me and I don't care about him. I need to find Zizwe and get him out of jail, first I will need to use my father's contacts. Beastie seems to be wealthy and could ruin Zizwe with just one word.

NQABA...

"It's done, Zulu has been released to us." Styles

came with good news today, he and Neo have been at work trying to get the Kenyan government to release Zulu. Thandiwe will be ecstatic, I left her sleeping in the room when Styles called. We're booked in the same hotel room.

"It's wise we have him transported to South Africa, he needs to be at a hospital that has more advanced care." Neo adds, we're in his hotel room.

"But I hear it's risky." My theory.

"It's all sorted Mzi, nothing will befall him." Styles says.

"And don't ask how he did it, you'll lose your mind." Neo slides in some advice.

"I just want Thandiwe to be with her son, she's been through so much."

"Speaking of that, Nkosi has your brother locked up." Styles breaks the news. "I gave him the orders the day we found Zulu dead."

"I don't understand Styles, what was the plan when you captured him?"

“Torture him to death.” He declares, his voice cold and eerie. Eyes emotionless and spine-chilling. I know he can be psychotic, but this is not okay. You don’t just kill people.

“What will I tell my father if you kill his son?” Styles doesn’t care about my question or worries, he leans forward as if giving me a closer view of his dark soul. Keeping the deadpan expression on his hardened face.

“Ntuthuko is evil, how else do we deal with evil people?” What does he mean he’s evil?

“Evil? Evil is what we saw that day.” Neo discloses, lying back on the bed. He kicks his shoes off and smiles as one hits Styles on the face. “Hade ntwana.” (Sorry.)

“That witch is haunting my dreams.” Styles, brushing off Neo’s silliness. The cold Styles has taken a break, strange how he transitions from normal to creepy in the blink of an eye.

“What happened?” I haven’t been filled in on what took place.

“Mzi ntwana, I thought I had seen it all with Segun and Bensen. Ghana has nothing on Kenya, that old witch captured Zulu’s soul. If I didn’t call MamSonto your boy would’ve been a meal.”

“A meal?”

“Yes.” He laughs it out, I sense a bit of fear in the tone of his voice. He’s still in shock and this sally is to cloak the fear. “When she saw she was losing the battle, she targeted Stylos.” The rest is narrated in a very dramatic manner, with Styles adding his bit into the division.

“So my brother trusted Zulu with those people?”
Who would’ve thought that he would go to this extent to keep Thandiwe?

“Now you know how evil your brother is, you can actually use this against him.” Styles lays his suggestion on the table. “You said he refuses to divorce Thandiwe, I know how to make him sign the papers.” I know he does, there is no turning back now. I am caught up in this mess, this is how these

people get things done. Though I wouldn't have my brother killed.

"I'll talk to him." Styles sneers at my offer.

"You're not going anywhere near him, he'll play the defenceless innocent brother and knowing you, Mzi, will believe him. I'm not going through another Randal saga, he couldn't believe that his brother was no good. In the end, he took him out himself." Styles.

"He killed his brother?"

"Like he was nothing." Maybe I'm underestimating their abilities to kill people as if they are ants.

"Raven wanted to kill Randall's wife and Randall had no choice. I'd like to believe he would go as far as killing me for her." And Styles appears to be okay with it, the smirk doing a twirl on the corner of his mouth confirms it.

"You're next Mzi, your brother will die by your hand." Neo adds and it scares me that I would actually do it.

"Tell me about that fool that had Zulu." Styles and

Neo regard me with devious eyes, something tells me they know what I'm thinking.

“Let him be Mzisto, he's not worth it. He has a witch to burn, I mean bury.” Neo is serious but his voice is always comical.

“I'm not going to do anything to him, I just want to meet the man who had my son.” Styles seems to love what's flowing in my mind, a grin lies on his face and Neo is absolutely against it.

“I'll take you there.” Styles undertones with psychotic hints in his voice, I won't touch on the look in his eyes. I am scared for whoever crosses this man.

“I'm staying, I've had enough of that place. Those people are evil and I love my sleep thank you.” Neo stays then, the plan was to go alone, but if Styles insists...

THANDIWE...

“You know you’re not a friend Tee? I can’t believe you went to Kenya without me.” Bulelwa called just to chide me for travelling without him as if I’m on holiday.

“I’m sorry friend, next time I’ll surely let you know.” My sarcasm is dry but he laughs anyway.

“Tell me, are there men in Kenya?” Is there a country where there are no man?

“I wouldn’t know, the only man I’ve seen so far is Nqabayomzi.” The only man I literally see, I hear him dramatically yawn over the phone.

“Boring, I’m talking about African men, Tee. You know the ones that look like they taste of chocolate.” I get where he’s coming from, though I am not going to humour him. Bulelwa will force you out of depression, that’s how chirpy he is. “Like my boss, Randall. He’s from Ghana and you know how God sent all the beautiful men there, leaving us with the likes of Ntuthuko.” A startling laugh erupts from stomach.

“Maybe you should move to Ghana then.”

“I would if I wasn’t occupied by two hunks.” Yes, he told me about Bhekizizwe and Jacob. Bulelwa swirls, it’s surprising he could have feelings for a black man.

“My friend is growing up, you’re coming back to your roots.” He snorts and clicks his tongue, he’s not okay with having feelings for anyone.

“What roots? I’m staying away from Zizwe, besides it’s the only way Jacob will drop the charges. That white man will know me one day, lovers my foot.” His grumbling is loud and filled with infuriation.

“I think it’s cute that he’s willing to go this far just to have you.” What the hell am I saying? A scream from Bulelwa reproaches me.

“What are you eating in Kenya? Jacob has psycho tendencies, normal people don’t do what he did.” He’s louder than he should be and as his friend I understand him. “What scares me is that I won’t be able to stay away from Zizwe, I’m drawn to that man, Tee. He’s in jail as we speak and I don’t know what to do, the gorilla won’t take my calls. He blocked my

accounts, I need a new father. Do you think Thor would qualify?" His bitchiness always seems to sneak its way in.

"You're creepy Bubu."

"No, I'm dead serious darling. He can be my 'Dzaddy'." Why am I listening to this?

"Bulelwa Gcinumzi Msibi, hou jou bek." (Shut up.) His laugh is contagious.

"I told you that man has money." He introduces his assumptions.

"I don't know hey, he averts from the topic when I bring it up." Nqaba is not the type to be involved in dodgy things, I would vouch for him and I feel bad for judging him.

"Talk to your man, don't assume things you don't know." Rich, coming from him.

"Says the king of assumptions." I love that he laughs at things I say, and ninety nine percent of the time it's things that do not make sense. Bulelwa would genuinely laugh like it's the funniest thing

he's ever heard.

"I have to go, I need to see Zizwe. Poor guy has been in jail for two days. Kiss bafo for me, I'll see you when you get back." Zulu remains bafo till this day.

"I will..."

"And give 'Dzaddy' a big spank on that fine ass, tell him it's from me." I need a new friend.

"Whore." The retort slips between the seams of my lips.

"A beautiful whore, bye darling." We're disconnected before I could send my farewell. Bulelwa might be crazy, but he is a blessing. The conversation was therapeutic.

To be continued...

BURN

28...

Masochism and sadism are both about the enjoyment of pain. Masochism refers to the enjoyment of experiencing pain while sadism refers to the enjoyment of inflicting pain on someone else. Sometimes in a sexual sense.

BULELWA...

There he is, seated on the concrete floor. Knees brought to his chest and his head buried between them. There are two more guys in the cell...

“I have never seen a more beautiful sight in my life,” his head shoots up at the sound of my voice, a shocked expression takes over his features and disappears before my mind could grasp it. Now I’m looking at a man with a dead expression.

“What are you doing here?” He hisses.

“Well, I am not here for you if that’s what you think.” I can’t tell him that I’m worried about him. “I was passing by and...”

“At a prison?” Who’s the prisoner here? What’s with the questions?

“Yes, why not? I have friends here.” I must be on the most wanted list in hell, these lies will make me the devil’s favourite. Zizwe gives me a black look, probably seeing through my folly and goes back to the sitting position I found him in. I fold my arms across my chest and lean on the cell bars, a tough nut to crack this one.

“Why are you in here?” I ask.

That’s it Bubu, continue to make a fool of yourself. He doesn’t reply, instead paints me with his black look again and curves a brow that dubs me stupid.

“Why do you have to be rude?” I’m talking to myself here, the man leans up against the wall. I see he would rather entertain a frown than me. “Maybe you deserve to be in here, you’re rude as fuck.”

I probably shouldn’t have said that, he splutters before grinning at me. It’s icy, uncanny and he’s getting up. I start to move back and my feet are not

as fast as they usual are because he catches my arm before I could make it far. My chest slams hard against the bars as Zizwe pulls me back to him.

“Ouch.” Delicate as I am, I whine at the pain. “What the fuck is...”

“I hate that word.” He jumps in, gripping my cheeks, he should be arrested for this. Again... “You like pissing me off Buttercup, don’t you?” An undertone that sounds more threatening than this grip on my cheeks.

“Let me go, you bastard.” I speak through a squashed mouth, my complaint forces a simper on his face.

“Fuck huh? You seem to like this dirty word, don’t you?” There’s erotica in the way he says this, almost as if he’s hinting at something. At this moment I have to say I have never yearned for anything, but to have him on top of me giving me nothing but pleasure. The bastard smirks as I gulp in nervousness. “Awusho Bulelwa, have you ever been

“tied to a bed teased sexually until you cum?”

“Fifty shades shit, what are you? Christian Grey wannabe?”

“I can be anything you want me to be.” I have never seen such overconfidence and he’s unashamed about it.

“I love my sex life the way it is, I am not looking to be debased and controlled during sex and I wouldn’t let you inside me even if you were the last man standing.” He laughs at my riposte.

“Funny how you say this, but your eyes tell me a different story.” Guy is full of himself today. “Do you know that pain is a beautiful thing to experience during sex?”

“Are you a masochist bastard too?” He grins and shakes his head and I’m not sure if he’s agreeing to my question, the faint smile on his face is confusing me.

“No, but my sadism comes out to play in the bedroom.” Bold, aren’t we? “I like acting both parts though, a dominant and a sadist. I see an image where we’re both naked, sweaty with uncontrollable sexual feelings. You’re the masochist and I’m the sadist, it’s a perfect pair. Could be today, tomorrow or anytime from now.”

This is my chance to run... Why am I aroused by his voice? And why do I like the idea of him inflicting pain on me? I am officially not normal.

“Don’t flatter yourself fuck boy, you need to get help for this sexual sadism disorder. It’s not cute and I will not avail myself for your sick fetishes.” I spit back.

He’s laughing, it’s not cold this time. I’m released from the grip, this police station is dead quiet and weird. You can’t tell me that no one saw the sexual tension between us.

“That word again, you’re lucky I’m locked up in here Buttercup.” He says moving back to where he was

seated. “It’s all good.” That’s it, he’s done and for some reason I know he is not going to say anything further.

“Don’t you want to get out of here?” Of course he does.

“Don’t worry about me Buttercup.”

“I’m not worried.” The arrogance, his response is a chuckle. I’m confused, do I succumb myself to the beautiful vanilla or find other means to get Zizwe out of here.

Bhekizizwe?” An elephant would be jealous of this man’s big structure, he’s marching towards the cell and I almost stand at attention, his walk is straight and commanding. An army man, I would call him.

Zizwe leaps up as if he was caught doing something wrong, yet he gives no expression on his face. What is this world coming to? I’ve heard my mother talk about how the hearts of many will grow cold in the last days. Could this be what she was talking about? Humans have emotions, we’re fragile

beings.

“What are you doing in there?” Anger in his voice, pity on his face, the man questions a Zizwe who has walked back to where he was standing. He’s trying hard not to look at me, I can’t possibly comprehend why I am still standing here.

“He’s been arrested.” Me and my big mouth... Unless people vacation in prison cells.

“Who are you?” This must be how God questions Jesus where he’s been out the whole day instead of attending to his flock. I’m wide eyed with nothing to say, my mouth won’t close like it has been glued open.

“Hu..hu...” I probably look like a dying fish and what is this sound emanating out of my mouth?

“Bhuti...” My saviour calls out to his brother. “I wanted to call you, but you know how these people can be.”

“Ungangits heli ngalabantu, wena, how did you end

up in here?” (Don’t tell me about those people.) His brother growls.

Zizwe is dismissing me with a look, he wants me to leave and I don’t want to, it’s not every day you get to see two big elephants under one roof. I should grab a seat and watch the drama unfold, because lollipop here looks ready to explode.

“They said I hit someone.” It’s cute, he looks like a child being scolded.

“They said Zizwe? I know you, you’re always starting trouble.” I knew this was going to be fun. I should ask for a chair, Zizwe continues to chase me away with the evil looks. I’m not missing out on this.

“Ntsika come on, not here ndoda.”

“Where if not here?” I like Ntsika, he’s strict. He might just make my day and punish my Hulk...I mean just Hulk...“You’ve crossed this path before remember? And mom had to use her savings to bail you out. How are we going to get you out this time Zizwe?” Okay. I thought I was enjoying this. Not anymore.

Zizwe glowers at me as I open my mouth to speak, he wants me gone and his brother hasn't acknowledged me. It's as if I'm not here at all, now I see where his arrogance was birthed. By the sound of it, they can't afford bail. Dammit... Jacob is my only option now.

THANDIWE...

I'm sure about the hope Nqaba has given me, through the look in his eyes. An assurance that everything will be okay, my Zulu will be okay. We're taking him home and as soon as he's fine, I will take that leave and go home to my parents. I haven't had any supernatural encounters lately, just the nightmares. They are not as intense as when I'm back home.

My clothes are all wrinkled and we don't have an iron in this room, when I told Nqaba to go ask next door he laughed at me and said you don't do that in

hotels.

I haven't asked him how he was able to pay for a hotel room and plane tickets, I wanted to chip in the first day we got here and boy did I bruise the man's ego. I didn't have the energy to argue with him.

He left thirty minutes ago, I've been walking around with nothing but a towel on.

I'm folding our clothes on the bed when I feel arms wrap around me from behind, his arms are familiar, so I'm not startled.

"Nkanyezi yami." (My star.) A whisper in my ear that calls shivers upon my body.

"That's a new one, what did I do to be called such?" He nuzzles his lips on the nape of my neck, I can never get used to this feeling.

"Hawu kodwa Tshabalala." He just had to ruin the moment by this Tshabalala thing. "You should know by now that you're everything to me."

"And Tshabalala is your favourite?" A snicker is his

response, while drawing circles with his hand on my belly. “You make me feel like a guy when you call me Tshabalala.”

“Why is that?” The question is accompanied by kisses on the crook of my neck, targeting the sensitive parts that have me shuddering under his hold.

“I haven’t met a female by that name Nqaba.” He’s humming through the lingering kisses as if there is a deliciousness in what he’s getting from them.

“Nqaba be serious.” I say, trying to distract myself in the process. Because...yey...all this kissing is not doing justice to my clit.

“I am serious Tshababala wam.” He replies, his lips pressed on my skin. Hands mapping my belly and headed for my breast. “You should wear this look more often.” This is random of him.

“The towel? I don’t think so. Did you get the iron?” I want to turn around and see his face, the grip is tight in a good way. I’m struggling to think, with him

doing these things to me.

“Neo said he’ll lend us one.” He seems to be attached to this Neo guy and Styles. Could this be the right time to ask about them? “I meant the peace surrounding you, s thandwa sam, you look better than yesterday.”

“I feel better.” For the first in days, I can see the light.

Can I ask you something?” His hands grip the towel, my heart skips as I feel it loosen. My lips part to release a gasp as he traces his lips down my shoulders, it’s wet kisses that have me throbbing down there and the rest of my body responding by quivering.

“Sure.” I give a go ahead.

“You know Christmas morning when they are baking and you can’t wait to taste the scones?” Why are we talking about scones at a time like this?

“Yeah!” A breathless response swooshes between my lips.

“When am I tasting the scones?” Scones?

“Who is baking scones Nqaba?” The question seems to tickle him, he’s chortling while grazing his teeth and tongue on my shoulders.

“God baked and I’ve tasted the scones a long time ago.” This time he whispers in my ears and...hell no...he did not just refer to my cookie as scones. Scones? Of all things in the world? Although I would never name it or let anyone name it, but scones Nqabayomzi? Have you tasted scones? Dry and they choke the life out of you.

“What scones are you talking about Nqabayomzi?” I’m surprised I can still talk with him all over me like this. I’m turned around to meet the sneer dancing in his eyes, crooked eyebrow and a smirk perched on his mouth. He thinks he’s funny I see.

“I want you, Tshabalala.” That’s how a gentleman speaks, we’ll leave the scones for Barbra. With one tug from him, the towel tumbles to the floor. We both watch it and our eyes meet instantly.

His eyes, burning with fire move to trace every inch

of my naked body. I can almost feel the heat in my veins. This is the second time he's seeing me naked since eight years ago.

I love how his gaze is so gentle on me, how I'm covered by a blanket of love just by the look in his eyes. Every nerve in my body is electrified without him touching me, it's the anticipation of being together in a way that's more tangible.

"I've waited too long for this and once we go there, there will be no turning back. Once we are that intimate again, I'll be in love with you all over again and I need you to feel the same Tan-tan. That this is what you want, that you will keep me and you want me to keep you." Tears fall me at the sound of his verses, I give him an affirmation. He smashes his lips on mine, it's rough..it's hungry...wolfish. His hands are gently coursing my back, my blood is hot and a sweltering heat engulfs me.

REMOVED...

BARBRA...

What is Veronica doing alone at South Gate? This girl is not allowed to roam around, she is so dumb she might get herself kidnapped or even worse, killed.

I shouldn't care, but Duma tends to be strict when it comes to her. I had to play the desperate wife and cried for days about how hard it was to raise her, all that drama was so we could send her away to her aunt. The child made my life difficult, when I thought she could be a liability, she proved me wrong. Now I'm stuck with a child I didn't want to begin with.

Her eyes widen as she sees me approaching, she spins to face some tall man and a few words are exchanged between them before he scuttles into one of the clothing stores. She turns back to face me, I hate this innocent look she pulls.

“What are you doing here?” It’s not a second till her eyes water and she starts fidgeting with her hands and her body is visibly shuddering, I hate it when she does this, everyone pities her, not knowing that she’s faking it.

It’s been years and I refuse to think that she is not over what happened.

“I’m talking to you, stupid girl.” She mumbles something under her breath, I’m not going to get anything from her.

“Let’s go home, you’re going to explain to your father what you were doing at a mall and who that man was?” Reaching my hand to grab her, Veronica draws back, tears washing over her face.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry.” I was afraid that this would happen in public, her hands are pressed on her ears as she repeats the word annoyingly. People are watching, it’s embarrassing.

“Stop it,” my chiding is like pouring oil in a pan of water.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry.” The word continues to evade her mouth.

“Okay, okay. Calm down, I won’t hurt you.” How do I get this brat to calm down? Calling Duma would cause trouble for me, he will want to know why I’m here. I still have to cook up a story as to why I didn’t sleep at home last night. Dammit. I hate working with incompetent people.

“Veronica my love, let’s go home to daddy.” Or I could just leave her here, but people have seen me talking to her. I will probably be labelled as a bad parent.

She opens her eyes at the mention of her father, only the men in her life can calm her down. That’s because they have time to nurse her. This is nonsense, I have to hold her hand and lead her to the car. I should’ve sold this child when I had a chance.

LILIAN...

I tend to be insecure and maybe it's because my husband has given me many reasons to be. Life was not always rosy with Ndlangamandla, I fought tooth and nail to have and keep the father of my children. Ndlangamandla has put me through so much, no man is perfect and I forgave his mistakes many times.

Finding his car parked outside our house is troubling, I don't like Betty one bit. She will do anything to get my husband's attention, I put her in place thirty five years ago. It still makes me angry that he insisted we keep her around.

The woman has no respect for me, the impudence and conceit she carries is pushing me to my limits. I am so close to having her thrown out of my house and no one will stop me, not even my husband.

My quick steps are leading me to the loud noise in the kitchen, the fact that I can hear his voice above anything else makes me nervous. I don't want to do

anything that will destroy this family, I don't want to eliminate any threats.

“What's going here?” This man does not enter the kitchen, not even when I'm in it. What in the devil's name is he doing with that evil woman?

“Mkami.” He exclaims after turning to me, a raw dumpling lies in the palm of his hand and a silly smile resides on his face. It's parallel to Betty's smile, I could just smack it off her ugly face.

“Betty was teaching me how to make dumplings.” His explanation comes with a kiss on my cheek, I would have appreciated the salutation had I found him alone, not with this witch.

“Since when are you interested in cooking Ndlangamandla?” He knows I don't call him that, unless he's messed up. Not forgot my birthday or our anniversary messed up, but set his eyes on other women messed up. I'm not the type that shares, I don't know how to share.

Growing up, I had everything I wanted and being the only child, I didn't have to piece my things with anyone. Ndlangamandla knows this, my children too know that I should come first in their lives.

Bulelwa and Lindiwe have kept their bits, as for Thobekile, I expected this from her because she's...I knew that child to be unruly from the time she was a baby.

“I had nothing to do mkami and Betty thou...”

“Stop.” I interpolate with a raise of a hand, he knows I hate it when he mentions her name. Not with the mouth that calls my name. “You're my husband, not hers. I know my way through the kitchen. Do you not trust my skills baba?”

“You know I do ngilos i yami.” (My angel.) He replies snatching a kiss from my lips, I want him to get rid of the stupid dumpling in his hand.

Betty has not removed her cold gaze from me, I see

nothing but her death. That's how deep my hatred for her lies.

I snatch the dumpling from Ndlangamandla's hand and throw it in the trash.

"My husband and I are going out for dinner, don't cook up a storm. You'll be wasting food." I give the maid instructions.

"But I've made the stew and salads, what should I do with it?" Betty grumbles, the audacity to dispute with me in my house.

"You've been doing this your whole life Betty, I'm sure you'll think of something. I don't know if you've noticed, but the economy is bad. We'll have to cut your pay if you continue wasting food like this." She sneers at my proclamation, this is the disrespect I spoke about.

"I'm not the one wasting food here Lilian." She throws rudely, impudence louder than her annoying voice. God, everything in me hates this woman. I am pretty sure my ancestors hate her too.

"What right do you have to..."

“Ngilos i yami, khawula mama. Let’s go.” (That’s enough.) Ndlangamandla interrupts, I know this is his way of saving that witch from me. One day he will see her for who she really is. He takes my hand and pulls me away, we’re escorted by a tongue click from Betty. I am not done with that witch.

To be continued...

BURN

29...

IFEANYI...

“How far are you?” Cele queries, towering above me, standing over my desk. How far am I really? I will have to finish the work tomorrow because it’s too much and I am nowhere to the end. Why did I have to be given this task?

“I still have a lot to do, I will have to finish the rest tomorrow.” He curves a brow upon hearing my

answer.

“That’s not an option Ife, I need the work first thing in the morning. If you weren’t so busy with taking selfies you would have been done. We’re not on holiday Ms Okolie, we’re working here.” Like I don’t know that.

“I am not a slave Mr. Cele.” He scowls at my response, his eyes narrowing in disapproval. Working in this god-forsaken place is not a must, if only brother wasn’t so strict.

“I want my work before you leave.” The bastard gives an order and leaves me. I want to go back to Ghana, I’m an Ashanti princess and this cannot be the life I’m living.

THANDIWE...

“Vuka Tshabalala.” Is this how I’m woken up? After allowing him inside me, he wakes me up with a nudge. His build is squashing my lungs, the things

we go through for love.

“When did you get dressed?” I ask, smiling up at him and he smells nice too. He thrusts his hands into my braids, his tongue begins to lick my neck.

“I can strip naked if you want.” An undertone of tipoffs as he grinds on me, creating an oscillation. I can feel his erection on my abdomen, I’m not having sex with him again today. It’s dark outside now and we can’t stay in bed the whole day. My mother would chide me about how a black woman does not sleep in during the day.

“As much as that sounds great, no I will not have you humping on me anytime soon. I’m a woman Nqaba and God made these scones very delicate, they are not like the ones Barbra makes.” I spit out the sentence thoughtlessly and bite my tongue in wait for his response, a look of disapproval or a head shake. Nqaba is not modern he’s your rural type and respect is everything. I’m a bit quaked by his light gentle chuckle, it’s satisfying to the ear.

“I want you to be my wife Tshabalala.” He hums, raising his gorgeous face to leer at me. My heart is the one to respond because it’s forward and thinks it has a life of its own.

“When?” I nearly slap my face as the question slips out. What the hell do I mean when? Ntuthuko won’t let me go. I have seen the fortitude to keep me, in his eyes.

“We’ll have to sort some things out first, like your freedom.” He says, gradually my body regains its normal softness as he transfers to the side of the bed. Watching him step down, I pull the bed sheet to cover my naked body. I give up with Nqaba’s choice of clothing. Khaki pants? Jesus fix this...He dresses like he’s going to sell pillows at President Street, I’m glad he hasn’t been introduced to flip flops or those ugly male sandals. I would die.

“Are you going out?” I need matches or a lighter and gasoline, there are clothes that need to be burnt. Sneering at my thoughts, I begin to hurdle myself up in the bed sheet, Nqaba denies me a glimpse, but answers my question.

“Yes.” Slides a rejoinder, tucking in his coffee brown collared shirt. There is nothing colourful about this hideous outfit. He might as well look for a job at a farm, I can’t with this man and his terrible fashion sense.

“Where are you going?” Because he’s a one word type of a person, I have to puzzle my statements.

“To meet up with Styles and Neo.” Great, he expects me to ask why he’s meeting up with them. Or not... the look in his eyes is dismissive.

“Tell me about them?”

“Who?” He questions, stealing a peck on my lips as he settles on the edge of the bed to tie his shoe laces.

“Styles, Neo and that angry man from back home.” Curious by nature, I expect an answer from him. I don’t know what to make of his silence.

“Randall?” He speaks, finally.

“Yes, Randall.” He turns to face me, his gaze

beautifully stabbing me.

“They are the most tangible bunch I’ve ever known.”
There’s a ping of pride in the way he speaks of them.

“Did they help you in finding Zulu? I know you didn’t do it yourself.” He grabs my hand and begins an escapade of twiddling with my fingers, my favourite are the kisses on the palm of my hand. My response can only be a coyly smile, heat threatens my cheeks. Black people don’t blush, right? Right? Because I am not going to admit to reticence.

“They did, they did all the work actually.” He says, his hand flying to my cheek. All this touching is making me think wild things.

“I want to thank them.” It’s the least I can do.

“I will, on your behalf.” He says grimacing at my frown. “What?”

“Nothing.” I riposte and shrug my shoulders, he sees nothing wrong with his response. Opposing

with him would be a discarded twinkling. “When will Zulu’s plane take off?”

“In five hours.” He says, showering the back of my hand with subtle kisses. This cannot be real, I have snubbed this gorgeous man for years. It’s hard to believe that he’s here with me, loving me like I have never been loved.

“Thank you Nqaba for taking care of my son.”

“He’s our son Tshabalala,” the test has to be taken, I don’t want him to get his hopes up. I rest my head on his shoulder as he moves to settle next to me, his hand disappears somewhere under the sheets. I feel it skating up and down my thigh. He clears his throat when I writhe on the bed, my body accepts a flow of heat, I did not will it to be so. Again, he’s got me under his power.

“I’m taking Zulu home to my mother once he has recovered.” I introduce.

“Why?” His voice is calm. He hardly panics, his ruggedness doesn’t allow him to.

“I need time away from the city, the noise and the stress.” I’m overwhelmed by my surroundings and I need to be surrounded by nature and my father’s love. I don’t know about my mother, she has some explaining to do. “I’ll send in my resignation at work.”

“Uhamba unompela Tshabalala?” (Are you moving there forever?)

“No, I’ll probably be there for three months or so. And I doubt Ntuthuko will dare to come to my father’s house.” My voice breaks at the mention of his name, I’m not shaken though. Nqaba’s hand on my thigh keeps me distracted, I will need a shower, he’s got me wet and throbbing.

“I have a house in Eshowe, you and Zulu can live there while you’re in KZN.” A house where?
Bulelwa’s assumptions visit me, was Nqaba the

person he saw driving a garish car? “And I will not be taking no for an answer, you two are my responsibility and I will take care of you.”

Did I ever mention that you don’t argue with this man?

“Is there something I need to know Nqaba?” If I don’t ask now, I won’t get another chance anytime soon. His lips loiter on my forehead as I enfold an arm over his lower torso, I’m trying to curb the sexual feelings immersing over me. “The house, the apartment, the car, showing up at work during working hours and flying to another country on short notice. I didn’t have a visa. How did you sort that out?”

“Styles did.” This Styles guy... “Not everyone is comfortable exposing themselves in public Tan-tan, you know how private I am?” If possible, he would live under a rock.

“Yes, but why hide it from me?” I should be upset with him.

“I didn’t hide anything from you, Tshabalala.” This

man is clever, he's trying to distract me by rubbing my breasts.

“Nqaba.” My voice embarrasses me by snitching on me. I'm releasing breathless gasps, wriggling on the bed.

My leg slithers over his, I'm on top of him, starkers. His hands beautifully embracing my bare back, our faces too close to touch. His brow curves as he deepens the gaze, his eyes kiss my lips then rush back to my eyes. It's a recurrence and it has me craving for his lips on mine. My frame quavers at the warmth of his hands as they float down to grip my buttocks.

“Ngicela ukuk'qabula Tshabalala.” (Can I kiss you?)

I almost sneer at the name, but his request forces my toes to curl and a tingling feeling pursues the entrails of my stomach.

“Do you have to ask?” I say, it wouldn't be a surprise if I orgasm right this moment. The look in his eyes is intense, his toe curling words and his hands sensually moving about my butt. Nqaba takes time

to cage my lips, without breaking the kiss he flips us over so that I'm on my back. I always love his weight on me, it's heavenly.

“Ngiyak’thanda Tshabalala, I will not miss a chance to tell you that I love you. I promise to make up for all those years I wasn’t around, I want to drill the words in your heart until you feel them.” He says and I feel them, he doesn’t have to repeat them. He leans in to press a quick kiss, his forehead even with mine, he murmurs...

“Ngiyak’thanda Tshabalala, ngiyak’thanda mtwano muntu. Uyak’thanda uMakhathini.” (I love you.)

“I love you Nqaba, I love you.” I’m not given a chance to grasp the moment as he’s kissing me all over. I take in every kiss I get, I’m kissing him back while fighting to rip his shirt apart. He smiles against my lips, realizing that my strength has nothing against his unsightly shirt.

Nqaba breaks from the kiss leaving me wheezing and panting, ogles at me with a puckered brow and a smirk on his face. It takes him less than two seconds to strip naked. He's taking me to the gates of heaven and I am loving every ride, deliciously wrapped around him.

My body vibrates as his wet kisses tattoo my skin, his soul calling out to mine... They meet in the midst of the rollercoaster ride, I am yet to get used to his sexy moans and growls ...slow strokes...kisses of ecstasy...striking consummation...his skin glowing under sweat and the face he makes that affirms me that he's enjoying me.

“Please tell me, I'm not dreaming.” I tell him, leisurely rubbing his back and trying to find my hormones and my mind that had shied away from our sexual encounter. His head is buried on my cleavage as he has taken his favourite spot between my legs.

“If this is a dream, then may we never wake up,” his response is clichéd, but I love it. I love him. “This is where I want to die Tan-tan, right here in your arms. Connected to you, body and soul.” He’s kissing my breasts, I hate that he easily mentions death. I can’t think of him in that manner.

“Why must you ruin the moment?” He chortles as I chide him.

“Tomorrow is not promised Tshabalala. I worry I won’t be able to control the ending of our story as we approach the climax. I would take you away from this if fate allows me. Or else death will come for you and it scares me to think that I won’t be able to save you. Darkness will celebrate your sacrifice for a thousand years or more.” Where is this coming from? Why is Nqaba saying these things to me? I refuse to die, not when my life has just begun. If he wasn’t planting kisses on my body, I would be panicking. His weight...body heat...gentle touch and kisses, calm me down. They bring serenity to my troubled mind.

“What’s going on Nqaba?” My voice cracks, I’m

asking but I don't want to know if I'm going to die.

“I need to save you, Nkayenzi yami, if I can't save you, I can't save me. Safety without you would be worse than death, I have to keep you safe. Our story can't be another tragedy, we owe past lovers a good ending.” I'm troubled by his allusions. He pilots his body up so he reaches my face, my one leg remains around him. My hand flies to wipe the tears on my face as he glowers at them, I know he hates them and would rebuke them had they had ears to listen.

“We're going to be okay Tshabalala, ngiy'kthembis a MaMshengu. I will fight for you this time.” The attention pursuing tears call upon their accomplices, they blur my vision with a mission to leave my eyes swollen and itchy. “I'll kiss away the pain and I'll love you till your faith is restored. Angiyindawo Tshabalala, angiyindawo.” With this pledge, Nqaba craves my lips with his. It's a slow kiss and I feel it... the peace that comes with this soul binding

moment. I will hold on to him this time, lest I perish.

BHEKIZIZWE...

Her scent salutes me before she does, I didn't think that she would come when I called her, she is the one person I can count on at a time like this.

"Bhekizizwe." She calls me, in shame I stand to my feet afraid to move closer. A policeman opens the cell.

"You're free to go." He says, sliding to the side. I can feel her intense gaze, I haven't directly looked at her. She moves first and I follow behind her like a child, taking time to ogle at her. My heart moves with the sound of her slow sexy steps, her ass jiggling from left to right.

I met this woman after Fikile left me, she was stranded on the road with a flat tyre. I found her boldness fairly attractive. Story short, the lady drove

us to a hotel and I had the best sex I've ever had that day.

Thinking it was the first and last time, she found me that same week.

Let's just say we've been at it almost every day for two years, no strings attached. We both know it and she has priorities, her life would be ruined if her family were to find out. I've been sworn to secrecy. I'm not interested in a relationship with another woman, the arrangement we have is okay with me.

In silence, she drives us to a house in the east, she bought it a month after she spotted her daughter at a hotel we were in, said something about hotels being risky.

It's a beautiful small comfortable space. It has a lounge, a kitchen, bathroom and a bedroom. It's more of a cottage. The keys glide over the mahogany table as she tosses them. This is how her anger is portrayed, she throws things around. I

know just how to soften her up. My arms slowly wrap around her, they move to rest on her stomach. I can't believe three children have laid in here, I love how she takes care of herself.

“I'm sorry sugar puss.” She purrs like cat as I bite the curve of her neck.

“Don't call me that, you know I hate it.” She hates the sugar part, she says she's not a sugar mama. I don't know what they call it these days, but she is that and more. Let's just say my back account is never overdrawn.

Flouting her statement, I continue kissing and licking her neck, my hands are gently caressing her breasts, they fit perfectly in the palm of my hands. Although it's an overload, it's a perfect one. I love how she's squirming under my touch, she's easily turned on and I am ready for her.

“You're not going to go inside me with all that disgusting prison dirt, go take a shower.” Ouch, she

can be insensitive and that's also what attracted me to her...a rugged woman...there's nothing sexier than that.

"Yes, ma'am." I spank her fine ass, leaving her in laughter, it's always a quick one and sometimes it has no emotion.

The warm water feels amazing on my skin, I needed this. Archi...Ntsikayethu is worried sick about me, I saw it in his eyes. I can be a disappointment sometimes, I make a mental note to call him later, I'll have to lie and say I'm at a friend's place.

Warm miniscule arms enwrap around me, swaying on my torso. My body shivers at the feel of her starkers breasts pressing on my back, she's planting soft kisses on my shoulders.

"Now I can touch you and I want you to do me good." She leaves a whisper in my ear, pressing her lips on the back of my neck. Her height doesn't allow her to reach the curve of my neck. This is the only woman who gets me hard just by one touch,

not even Fikile could do that.

With her I can go on and still want more, her hands are meandering to my erection. The urge to turn around and pin her against the wall over takes me, a sexy loud gasp reaches my ears as her body collides with the tiled wall. I pull one of her leg up so she's half-straddling me, I watch her as she bites her lower lip in expectancy, her eyes wet with passion and lust.

The sound of the water behind us mingles with her loud moaning when I crouch down and push inside her. Her arms clasp around me and her nails dig into my shoulders as I grab her butt and hoist her up. She straddles me with the other leg, her screams are quick to approach.

We're going at a fast pace like hungry animals who have been deprived of food for days, I move us under the shower. Turn the water to cold, she loves sex in the shower and says cold water makes her

body sensitive and her orgasm comes in slow motion and lingers on.

I don't know how possible that is, but my aim is to please this woman. We've done it a lot of times against the wall, the dominance I experience during the heated moment turns me, while she loves the experience of vulnerability and confinement.

Bending my knees slightly, she slides her back down the wall to lower herself onto me. My hand slips under her butt and the other slams on the wall above her head. Firmly, she presses her back against the wall for leverage, her arms circled on my back. The thrusting is left to me due to her limited mobility, rocking her pelvis back and forth with my hands tandem with my movements.

(Tandem= to work together, especially well or closely.)

Her teeth dig into my shoulder as she hides her face on the nape of my neck, her hand grips my hair a little too tight. It's a pleasurable pain, one that has me craving more of her. She's loud as usual and it's a major turn on.

I can't feel the coldness of the water, our bodies are flush together creating a heat that would have us witlessly sweating had we not been in the shower.

“Bhe...kizi...zwe.” My name is a loud moan, I'm moving inside her like I will never stop. She's looking for a way to practise her movements but I have her under my control.

I know when she's happy and satisfied and this is it, her arms clench around my waist, nails dig into my skin and in a second she's juddering and screaming out my name. A victorious smug visits my lips at the sound of her helplessness, she spots it and bashfully shakes her head. Her wet forehead meets mine.

“You arrogant bastard.” A smudge of amusement

lies in her tone, I will take that as a compliment.

“You don’t know what you do to me when you call my name like that sugar puss.” I declare, reaching for the tap to close the water.

“I will forgive that stupid name because you made me orgasm, I haven’t had that in days. Why have you been ignoring my calls?” My concentration was Bulelwa, I don’t know what I’m expecting to gain from him. The man is older than me, but acts like a child.

“I’ve been busy.” I place her down and with one kiss on the cheek, jump out of the shower leaving her to dry up.

“Have you found another cougar better than me, Bhekizizwe?” Her voices chases me to the wardrobe, I need to cover my naked body. I have a few clothes kept here. She wants me to live here fulltime, something I can’t do. What will I say to my brother when he wants to visit, this woman has an expensive touch.

With one twirl, I have her in my arms, my lips drinking hers in. We hardly exchange lips during sex, and when we do it's usually wolfish. As I pull out of the kiss, she lets out the breath that was knocked out of her lungs. Wheezing, agape, bleary-eyed, her face hangs with lust. I know that look, she wants it again.

“Sugar puss madoda, my sexual dreams consist of you alone. I would never disrespect you by looking at another woman.” She whimpers as I squeeze her buttocks.

“Or another man,” she sends a shock my way, while slanting up against me.

“Man?” Her eyes roll up at my query.

“My son is older than you Bhekizizwe and that means I have more experience in this life thing than you. I've seen how your eyes wander when you see a fine man walking past, you're miserable at hiding it.” I'm not turned on by her hand sliding down my naked body, the revelation has numbed me.

“Relax Bhekizizwe, I don’t care about your sexuality as long as you know that I will not share your d***k with anyone else. I am a jealous woman and I don’t like sharing.”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit unfair? I get to share your p*** with another man.” My big mouth earns me a hard slap across the face, I would be angry if her hand was made of rock. I hardly felt a thing, but the fact that she’s norm to slapping me angers me. Respect means everything to me.

“Don’t ever mention him again, do you hear me, Bhekizizwe? I will not tolerate any disrespect towards him.” The chiding begins, I won’t hear the end, if I don’t stop her. I swallow her into an insatiable kiss, my hands grabbing and squeezing her ass. She’s a little hesitant at first, the first moan depicting pleasure escapes her. She’s touching me like she wasn’t reproaching me seconds ago.

“You say die and I perish sugar puss.” The words

flush out as I pull out, I know she hates the smug on my face. She won't say a thing about it because I have turned her on again and I won't be giving her any more tonight.

"Get dressed..." Nervously, her voice breaks and her eyes run away from my naked body.

"Your wish is my command." A wink from me and a tongue click from her, she hates my dry sarcasm. This is how we argue, no words directly said. My sarcasm comes to play while she throws slaps.

She's ready to go in fifteen minutes, she will never spend a night away from him and if I was attached, I would be jealous as fuck.

I'm alone again, alone to think about my life and where I'm headed. Will it be like this in five years? Knowing that woman, she will never let me go. What if I come to a point where I want to get married and have my own family? I'm okay with what we have at the moment, we're benefiting from each other.

BULELWA...

Mandla's house is my first stop, I need to get Zizwe out of Jail. He might act strong like the bastard he is, however I know he's miserable in there.

Driving through the long cemented driveway I notice that my father's car is not here. Good...I'll be able to freely talk to Lilian.

"Is this how you knock at your father's house?" Betty salutes after opening the door.

"Like you said sis Betty, my father's house." I kiss her on the forehead and slide in like it's my father's house.

"Where's my Lilian?" Her face transitions from soft to bitter.

"She's not home, neither is your father. They left hours ago." Her elucidation comes with her lugging her feet, her body slightly hunched.

"What's wrong sis Betty?" It's not like her to be so

gloomy, I hate being around melancholy people. They drain the life out of me, perhaps I shouldn't have asked her this question. Women are weird, she'll start by narrating this long story I care nothing about and I do not have time.

“Why do you bother yourself with this woman son?” Lilian waltz in from the kitchen, her arms always acknowledge me at first sight.

“Mama ka Bubu, I thought you were out.” A furrowed brow from Lilian threatens Betty, her narrowed eyes dismiss her. Betty knows how to roll her eyes too, women...My gaze follows her dead steps down the corridor until she disappears around the corner.

“I hate it when you're trying to make me jealous Bulelwa.” Lilian sharply says, her heels loudly clicking their way to the lounge. I perch myself beside her where she throws her handbag.

“What did I do now Lilian?”

“Call me Lilian again, I will smack you back into my

stomach and have you aborted.” Harsh, someone is in a bad mood today. Where is Mandla? I’m sure he’s got everything to do with this. As much as I love him, I will kill him if he dares to play with my mother.

“I’m sorry mama ka Bubu, it’s your fault. You gave birth to is’duphunga by the name of Bulelwa.” I knew this would make her smile. “What did Mandla do to my beautiful mother?” I just took her smile away with my forwardness, this woman will hear nothing against her gorilla.

“What brings you here my baby?” Now I know where not to go if I need to gossip about Mandla.

“Where is dad?” A smile is what I get for being a good boy and recognizing the gorilla as my father.

“I don’t know, he’s running some errands. He gave me the car after dinner, he should be on his way home.”

“I need money mama ka Bubu, a friend is in trouble and I need to help them. Mandla froze my accounts,

I have nothing to my name Lilian...I mean mama ka Bubu. You can imagine the embarrassment. My life is over, I might as well go live under a bridge. Your husband has deserted me and-

“Shut up, s’duphunga.” Lilian stops my prattling with one shout, she smiles as I flap my eyelashes at her while fighting to catch my breath. Thank God she’s smiling, I might get out of here moneyed.

“Sorry mama ka Bubu omuhle.” (Bubu’s beautiful mother.)

Don’t look at me like that, I need to use all my skills to get that money.

“I’ll see what I can do, at the...”

“Over my dead body.” Oh shit, the gorilla is here. Shouldn’t we have angels that warn us about such things? Lord we need to talk, right after this man has dealt with me because I know he will surely kill me. He marches to the lounge like a Boko Haram soldier ready to attack. My hand wraps around Lilian’s arm, I will need protection.

“What are you doing in my house?” He’s towering over me, anger in his eyes and nose flaring. You heard it right, my own father is flaring his nose at me.

“Ndlondlo, please calm down.” Lilian moves from my grip, shields me from her husband while I’m on the edge of the couch ready to scuttle away the moment the threat pulls at me.

“Not today Lilian, I am not going to listen to you today. I want this boy out of my house.” The gorilla roars, he’s roaring at his wife. For the first in my life, I am witnessing what I thought I would never see.

“Mandla, is this me you’re talking to like that?” Lilian says with coldness in her tone, but still holds on to the reverence she has for him.

“Ngiyaxolisa mkami.” He better be sorry, I saw the slap Lilian gave Betty the other day and it wasn’t a nice sight to behold. “Tell this boy to get out of my house and you will not be giving him any money. He has a job, he needs to work like a man and earn a

living.”

“But myeni wami..” This card is not the strongest but it works wonders sometimes.

“My word stands.” Mandla growls, my presence makes him angry.

“Ndlondlo..” He cuts my words by grabbing my arm and begins to lug me towards the door, my eyes run back to Lilian who’s standing helpless and this time I will not blame her for not standing up for me. I knew coming here was a bad idea.

My hands grip Mandla’s waist as he attempts to push me out the door.

“Ndlondlo listen to me.” I’m ready to go down on my knees, he grips my neck with both his hands. The clasp is uncomfortable almost depriving me of air, I don’t know what lies in his eyes, it hurts me though. No son would want their father to look at them like that.

“If you ever come to my house again, Gcinu..” he pauses, drops his deadly gaze. It takes a minute for him to bring his eyes up. The gaze is probing,

digging to the bottomless parts of my soul, I'm uncomfortable. The hate and judgement from him stings, I'm not sure if it's directed at me or someone else. It's suffocating me though, like the tight grip around my neck.

“Baba, I can't breathe.” My eyes are wet, his hands are too big. I can't move from them, I want to call my mother but this will cause conflict between them. A tear escapes from his one eye, yeah I hear monsters hardly cry and when they do, only one of their eyes gives itself up for a sacrifice.

“Ndondlo.” He's not responding to my whimpering and squirming. Is he trying to kill me? The grip tightens, my knees weaken. His eyes swirl with rage and what I think to be pain. Tightening the hold and pressing his thumbs on my throat, he scowls.

Tears coming out to witness the terrible happenings, my knees hit the mat written ‘welcome home.’ This is no longer a home, I don't have a home. My father

deserted me and now he's going to kill me.

“Baba please, you're hurting me.” I don't know why I'm still whispering, is this how far I am willing to go to protect Lilian's marriage with this monster? I'm snivelling like a child, I can't breathe and there's a burning sensation in my eyes. Forget that my tears always look for an opportunity to show themselves.

“Mandla, what are you doing?” Only Lilian can scream like that, his eyes flash like a light was placed in front of them. Instantly, regret washes over him as he ogles at me wide-eyed. My flat ass slams on the floor as I choke and cough trying to catch my breath. Lilian is helping me up and screaming that Betty brings a glass of water. I don't want it, I want nothing of this man.

“Ndlon...” He stops, he can't bring himself to call me by my clan name nor his brother's name, the name he dubbed me with when I was a baby.

“Let's go inside Bubu.” I stub Lilian's suggestion by staggering back.

“I hate you.” My declaration is directed to Mandla, yet Lilian is the one to stifle a sob.

“Bubu, you don’t mean that.” She says, disbelief looping in her tone. Mandla and I have been locking eyes since Lilian came to my aid, his enflamed eyes are intimidating, compelling me to respect him and throw my eyes on the floor. I am done here. Lilian shouts after me when I run to my car, failing to curtail my tears. My father hates me, I have nothing in this world.

RANDALL...

“The boy was found, we’re bringing him home.” Styles says over the phone, you would think he has gotten over his tendency of helping people. It’s in his DNA and whoever has him in their life is fucking lucky.

“When are you coming home?”

“Miss me already?” He’s starting with his nonsense.

“Wouldn’t you like that?” Styles queries, sarcastically before his chuckle flaunts in my ears.

“Because I’m the only person who would miss your crazy ass, Sethu and Sihle must be dancing on the table and hoping your plane would delay.” He bursts into a guffaw, I don’t know how he finds my sally funny.

“Wrong, they called me last night crying.” He’s always laughing, I don’t see him stopping anytime soon.

“Are you planning on staying in Kenya forever now? When are you coming back Styles?”

“Relax daddy, we’re leaving in five days. I’ll make sure to come and see you first since you’re more desperate to see me.” Neo has influenced my brother, he sounds like him. A message pops on my phone indicating an incoming call.

“Amara’s calling me, I have to go. I’m stuck in traffic and she’ll be asking me where I am.” I say, to have him laugh at me.

“A kept husband is what you are.” Idiot. I am far

from being a kept husband, I happen to love my wife a little more than normal.

“Bye Styles.” He’s laughing and so I drop the call before his thoughtless brain decides to take over.

“Me hemma.” (My queen.)

“Hurry, it’s Liya. She’s having an episode again.” What do they want now? It’s been years since they visited her.

“Is she saying anything?” I ask, making a U-turn. This traffic will only delay me.

“She keeps saying death, I’ve never seen her like this Randall. Hurry please.” Amara says, hastily. I never wanted this gift for my daughter, she’s too young to be carrying such a burden.

“I’ll be there in less than ten minutes.” What has happened now? Grandfather never comes bearing good news. Can’t that Oldman sleep in peace and leave us alone?

To be continued...

BURN

30

RANDALL

“How is she?” A question flies out to Amara as she opens the door to my car, it must be so bad that she has to meet me outside.

“She’s sleeping now.” She says, accepting a kiss on the cheek. “I’m worried Randall, what if something bad is going to happen?”

I take her hand into mine as we walk back to the house. How do I comfort her when I don’t know what’s really going on?

“Where is everyone?” Ife is usually packed on the couch around this time, catching up on her shows.

“Ife is not back yet, I had a missed call from her. Her phone is off which is offbeat, Ife never misses a

chance to charge her phone. Who will update her statuses?” Amara exclaims, laughing. Now that she’s mentioned it, I had a message from Ife.

“What is it?” She questions following me to a seat.

“Ife had left a voice message, I didn’t listen to it thinking she was complaining again. She better not be sleeping over at a friend’s house.”

“She wouldn’t do that without your consent.” Amara has a habit of taking Ife’s side and fighting her battles and this gives Ife a ticket to do whatever she wants.

‘Brother, I need to talk to you. I’m scared, really scared. Please call me when you get this.’

“Shit.” I jump to my feet and begin to head outside.

“Randall, what’s wrong?” Amara's question leaps on me as she scuttles behind me.

“I think Ife is in trouble, I’m going to look for her.”

“What did the message say?”

“That she’s scared, something must’ve happened to her.” My voice sends off a panic, it’s too late to take it back. Amara has heard the hint, Ife is in trouble. No matter how disobedient she is, she makes sure she’s at home earlier than 9pm.

“I’ll call all her friends, please be careful out there.” With her words still ringing in my ears, I dash to the car. My mind is already entertaining the worst, this country is not a safe place for a woman. Women are killed like it’s a trend, they go missing and are found dead in a ditch somewhere. There’s a demon lurking over the country and I need to keep my family safe.

I can’t lose another sibling, Raven’s death haunts me till today.

Sleepless nights are what I’ve been subjected to, I can’t tell Amara about it. She was there when I killed my brother, she witnessed everything. My heart broke that day and I had to pretend that I was fine when I was dying inside. I don’t regret killing him,

but I hate myself for it. I can't help but think that if only there was another way.

LINDA...

The moon is out in its full glory, giving light to Linda outside the rondavel they use as a kitchen. Her husband is a few yards away, warming himself near the bonfire, Linda hasn't explained why she exclaimed that their daughter was dying. She's afraid of what he would think of her, this is the same man she sold her daughter's soul for.

The same man she took desperate measures just to keep, days have passed and he hasn't asked her about her revelation.

Linda is desperate for a way out, she waits for answers from God. Fasting and praying, faith has come to dwell with her. But fear remains as well, her heart would stop when she would receive a call

from Thandiwe...

‘Umkhuleko unamandla, uma sikhuleka ngokukholwa.

Ujesu ulalela, aphenkul’ umkhuleko,

letha konke ku J esu, ngomkhuleko.’ (Prayer is powerful when you pray in faith.)

Linda sings with faith and whole heartedly, hoping God will hear her prayers and forgive her sins.

“Linda.” A whisper flies from behind the rondavel, stopping her notes. Linda peeks over to find nothing but sheer darkness. The woman is never afraid of the dark, but tonight it has her shivering and her heart thudding against her ribcage.

“Linda.” The whisper is accompanied by a flood of footfalls, they seem to be treading her way. Like any human being, her first thought is to run. How? When her feet have fallen numb, she remains seated on the bench the wet plate gripped in her hand.

“Jesu, ngivikele ezitheni zami. Ilwa nalaba abalwami.” (Lord, protect me from my enemies, fight those who fight against me.)

A prayer to the most-high God, her faith has not waivered, but fear seems to be overtaking her. Her eyes widen as a little girl appears from the darkness. Rage lies on her face, Linda doesn't know this person in front of her, yet her presence is bloodcurdling.

Her eyes trace the red raincoat and stop at her tiny bare feet. What is a child doing in her compound at this time of the night? Parents do not let their children out after 7pm, everyone lives in fear of having their children abducted.

“What are you doing here?” For a reason unbeknownst to her, Linda's voice quavers with this question. A hair-raising smile creeps up on the little girl's face, it's wiped away in the blink of an eye.

“You have what belongs to me Linda Mshengu.” Her voice is a ghostly whisper, almost inhumane. Linda

has no clue what the girl wants and why a child would address her by name. Her sixth sense though, alerts her that this is no ordinary child. There is something eerie about the girl in a red-raincoat.

“Where are your parents? Go home, it’s late.” Linda snaps, fear sitting on her throat this time, a growl is what she gets from the girl.

“That man is overpowering me, I can’t reach Mapula. His soul is holding on to hers, I can’t reach Mapula.” The little girl reveals, bringing Linda into the light. Her old and frail mind could now grasp who the little girl is.

“You! How is that possible? Didn’t you die?” Shock and incredulity in her voice, Linda enquires.

“I told you to keep him away from her.”

“Please, spare her. Spare my daughter, don’t take her from me,” this is her chance. The devil was once an angel, maybe there is a tiny light in his heart and that's if he has one.

“Give what belongs to me Linda, or I will take your husband and your grandson. You will watch everyone you love die, give what belongs to me Linda.”

The girl turns to Linda’s husband who is far in thought, his precious daughter haunts his thoughts every day. The girl mumbles a few foreign words, turns to Linda with an evil smirk pulling at her lips. It has the old woman shivering in fear, it’s not long till Linda hears a growl from her husband and this time she’s able to jump and drag her old tired body to him. Unwillingly, her head turns back to find the child gone, her husband is on his feet, eyes scanning the dirt around the fire.

“What happened?” A worried Linda questions, Vusi leers at her. He doesn’t want to answer since they are in conflict.

“There was a snake, it’s gone.” Vusi says, taking his seat. He appears to be too calm for someone who saw a snake.

“We should go inside, it’s late.” Linda’s suggestion is stubbed by an upset Vusi, he’s not going anywhere with her. He wants answers, why is his daughter going to die? What is this secret his wife is keeping from him?

Linda makes herself comfortable on the floor next to her husband, she won’t leave him alone after that threat. Where is God when you need him? How cruel can life be to put her in such a conceding situation? Choosing between her grandson, husband and her daughter, there has to be another way.

NQABA

“You should let him go, Ntuthuko is not worth it. Thandiwe is with me now.” Neo regards me with a scowl, Styles’ face is blank. I know though that he’s not pleased with my decision.

“Bad idea ntwana,” like always, Neo's voice is filled with amusement. I would run with his advice, on the other hand I have a father to think about and...

“I don’t want to break Peanut’s heart, he...”

“Ke mang Peanut nou?” (Who’s Peanut now?) I haven’t answered Neo yet and he’s laughing, throwing his big feet on the two seater couch.

“Zulu, he knows Ntuth...”

“Wait, you named him Peanut?” Neo again.

“You shouldn’t be laughing Neo, especially since you know a child by the name of Goku.” Styles who is positioned on the bed articulates, I miss the joke because they both burst out in laughter.

“You two are not okay.” I would think they smoke weed.

“Ntuthuko is not going anywhere Mzi, not until we get that DNA test done.” Styles is fond of giving orders. “He might temper with the results, the man thinks he can do anything because he has money now.”

He’s right about that.

“I know, we don’t have to do it at the hospital. My

brother doesn't have to know." I think it's a good idea, I don't trust Barbra as well. She lied about Zulu's whereabouts and that confirmed that she and Ntuthuko are in cahoots.

"Why are you so bent on releasing him? Fuck that he's your brother, the man has ridiculed you..."

Styles questions and grumbles, unhappy about my decision.

"That doesn't change the fact that he's my brother. I want him out Styles, tonight." He sneers at my command.

"Tomorrow," I forget that he can be hard headed.

"I'm not going to disturb Nkosi's family time.

Unfortunately, your brother will not die if he spends one more night away from his mother."

Neo finds Styles' arrogance very funny.

"Yeah, just get him out." I say and receive a tongue click from Styles.

"S'dididi." (Idiot.)

Neo derides tossing a pillow at me.

THANDIWE

“Excuse me, I’m meeting someone at the restaurant. He said a table has been reserved.” I say to the short plump lady at the reception, she gives me the pan am smile. She must be having a bad day.

“Name?” The attitude in her tone is unashamed.

“Nqabayomzi Biyase or Thandiwe.”

“Yes, table for two Ms, follow me.” I’m led to a small table in the middle of the room, the place is packed. I send my gratitude before settling down. She takes off after handing me the menu.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” An elderly woman says, taking a seat beside me.

“I’m sorry, this seat is taken.” This is not KFC where strangers share a table.

“I know my darling,” a warm smile is what I get and

it halts my rudeness. “That’s my granddaughter Zawadi.” The only lady standing where she’s pointing at is the receptionist who brought me to my table and what do I have to do with her granddaughter?

“Is there anything you need? Should I call her for you?” Okay. I’m getting fed up with her never ending smiles.

“She won’t see me, but I have a message for her.” What? “Her husband has fallen out of love with her, he’s the reason for her sadness. Today is her last day.”

“What do you mean?” I’m intrigued, you hardly find someone willing to fill you in on their life story.

“He’s going to kill her, he wants to bring his mistress into the house. Please tell her not to go home today.” I don’t understand why she can’t tell her, herself.

“I think she would listen to you, I’m a stranger, she’ll think I’m crazy.”

“My time in this world expired years ago, I couldn’t cross over. Something kept me here and now I know what.” It feels like I’m being struck by lightning as the old lady reveals that she’s a ghost. How can I accept my destiny readily without understanding where it was birthed from? I’m only human and her presence suddenly terrifies me. My eyes scan my surroundings and people are minding their lives, no one has noticed the strange woman exchanging words with a ghost in the middle of a spacious room.

“Lo...look...I...” Struggling to put the words into a full sentence, they stumble out of my mouth. It’s hard to grasp that I’m talking to a spirit.

“Zawadi will die tonight if she’s not warned about her husband.” There’s desperation in her voice, I chase Zawadi with my eyes to find her staring at me. Great, she’s probably shocked that I’m talking to myself...and here she comes...

“Is everything okay?” Zawadi questions, I look at her

grandmother. So much love is illuminating from her as she glances at her granddaughter.

“Zawadi?” Here goes nothing, a twitch of confusion takes place in her eyes as her pupils dilate.

“Please sit with me for a second.” The confusion grows at my request.

“We’re not allowed to mingle with customers Ms, I’m sorry.” I feel stupid already, the grandmother looks at me with expectant eyes.

“Akinyi Maina, that’s my name.” The granny says.

“Akinyi Maina?” I repeat after her, Zawadi drops on the chair. Mouth ajar and eyes glassy.

“That’s my grandmother’s name, she died five years ago. How do you know her?”

“She’s here with me,” absurdity mocks me, the look in her eyes confirms it.

“What?”

“She says you need to leave your husband, he’s

trying to kill you.” I tell her and what happens next, makes me regret ever opening my mouth. Zawadi stands up, dramatically pushing the chair back, everyone’s attention falls on us. Rubbernecks...

“What are you saying?” She shouts, clearly the woman has been insulted. Imagine a stranger telling you that your husband wants you dead.

“Your grandmother just told me this, please don’t go home tonight. You will die if you do.” Why am I continuing?

“Oh, I see. So it is you? You’re the woman sleeping with my husband.” She’s yelling and...what the heck? I stand up, wanting to defend myself. The woman who started this...the grandmother...Akinyi is reticently perched on the chair, quiet as a church mouse.

“No, I don’t know you nor do I know your husband. Your grandmother came up to me and told me that your husband wants to kill you.” In panic, I’m explaining myself, these people will kill me. Their

eyes are boring into me, stabbing and uncomfortable glares.

“Nonsense, you’re the witch that wants to destroy my family.” Zawadi will never listen to me.

“Please Zawadi, hear me out.” I murmur, trying to control the situation.

“This is the witch that’s after my husband, home wrecker.” The woman is yelling, calling anyone who cares to watch or listen, looking over my shoulder I find the ghost gone. She starts fire and takes flight from the scene...Nice...

“I heard everything too, she claims that your dead grandmother visited her.” A man from a near table jumps in with hisses. I have to get out of here, these people look ready to attack. I sashay past her, my scuttle is stopped by a tight grip on my biceps. I turn to see the man who was attesting to my so called lies.

“Don’t touch me.” A sharp snap targeted at him, he doesn’t let go even after fighting to yank my hand

from his tight grip.

People are shouting and pointing fingers at me as they stir closer. I can't comprehend why they would all act this way, at least one of them has to understand. Zawadi looks the lividest, I should be able to control this situation, right?

“She claims to see dead people and she speaks of this woman's death, nothing explains witchcraft than this.” The man gripping my arm makes a speech, I'm fighting for my freedom, but I'm too weak compared to him.

“I am not a witch, let me go.” Through clamped teeth, I taunt. He doesn't heed my words, instead continues to stir the crowd.

Then I see it, in the midst of the crowd. The old man from my dreams, he's perched up against the window. A distance away from here, a grin playing on his mouth. It's evil...spine-chilling...

I can't believe my eyes, at least I don't want to. I've never seen anything like this before, only in my worst nightmares. The image of him standing there and glaring at me covers my mind as I'm looking at something my eyes will never be able to erase.

Adrenalin flies through my veins like lightning during a storm, I can't move a single muscle. Not even scream, the horror has captured me, leaving me paralyzed. The more I think about escaping, or a simple movement, the more I feel disheartened and frightened.

I can't breathe all of a sudden, it feels as if someone is choking me. My heart is racing, there's a deep desperate need to break free from this man's hold. The commotion worsens the situation, throws me into total panic. Then I remember his words... 'All you have to do is look into my eyes...' His eyes... they will set me free...his love will set me free.

Trusting fate, I close my eyes in search for Nqaba's. I've looked into them a million times and it won't be

hard finding them. If only I could concentrate hard enough. The grip on my arm tightens, then there's a pull accompanied by loud grumbles. Angry voices calling me a witch and declaring my death. I'm being lugged away and I can't afford to open my eyes, not before I find my strength or I will die tonight. Where is Nqaba anyway? He had said he won't be long.

Then I see them, his eyes...in utter darkness. Slurping in my strength from them, my eyes shoot open and we're headed to the exit. Is this allowed? What kind of a place is this? Something tells me the creepy old man is responsible for this, he's still standing in that same position, the grin though is gone.

"Help, someone help." A choked cry for help forces itself up my throat, a drop slips down my cheek.

"Where is the manager? This is harassment." I'm shouting, it's futile. A total waste of time.

"Zawadi, please listen to me." I plead for her time

and attention, it's like talking to a wall. I have no other option but to scream and fight for liberation.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Nqaba's voice pierces through the noise, I turn to see him and Styles running towards the angry mob. The man's hand boots from my arm, leaving a throbbing pain. He gets ready to fight Nqaba who is charging at him, fiercely.

Styles pulls me away from the crowd while Nqaba engages in a fist fight with the strange man. Two men grab Nqaba's arms, pulling him away from the injured stranger, his eyes find me, he wants me to leave. I can't do that, I'm worried about him.

“Stay out of this, this woman is a witch. She claims to be talking to this lady's dead grandmother.” The man growls, viciously pointing at me. Nqaba doesn't respond, but somehow manages to break free from the two men. It's not surprising because he is bigger than them, body wise. He's back to punching the man, straddling him this time. He's

going to kill him, I've seen his anger, it's not a nice sight.

“Stop him please.” I plead with Styles, he looks at me like I'm crazy and without a word, pulls me away from the scene. I want to scream and call for Nqaba, the look Styles gives me rejects my voice from emanating. The old man is gone, I don't see him anymore. The noise dies down as we quietly stand in the elevator.

What the hell am I doing? Nqaba is going to go to jail, there is nothing worse than being jailed in a foreign country. They will torture him, I've seen it.

“There's nothing you would've done to help him.” Styles says, leaning up against the elevator. How is he so calm at a time like this?

“How could you leave him like that?” His calm demeanour worries me, we left Nqaba alone to fight an angry mob.

“He'll be fine, relax.” Gosh, this man. I want to bang his head against the wall. Nqaba better be okay, I

hate how he can be so stubborn.

To be continued...

BURN

31

RANDALL

There is nothing worse than calling a loved one to have their number take you to a voice message, I'm going crazy trying Ifeanyi's phone while driving full speed to where she works. It's a crazy idea, but that's where I knew her to be throughout the day. Amara said she'll keep a look-out on the news, and social media. We have tried everyone we know and no one has heard from or seen Ifeanyi.

The lights are off at the building, there are no signs of human life. There should be a guard in this place,

these people are incompetent. This is unacceptable. How am I going to get in? Nqabayomzi is in Kenya, he's the only person with the extra keys. The gate to the underground parking is locked, however I can see inside, there are no cars in sight. That means Ifeanyi drove out of here, or else her car would be here.

Where will I begin to look for you Ifeanyi? I need to know that you're okay.

“Baby, I just saw Ife's WhatsApp status.” Amara hastily says over the phone, I'm driving to...I don't know where...but I'm moving unhurriedly, checking the dark empty streets of Braamfontein. “It was updated around 12pm today, it reads ‘The pervert won't keep his eyes to himself, they are disgustingly undressing me. Men are trash.’

I can only think the worst now.

“Amara.” I breathe, she's quiet and the silence is shortly replaced by cushy snivels. She's thinking what I'm thinking. I know my sister, she is

mischievous and unruly but running off is not like her. And her status can only mean that...no...I can't think like that about her, not my Ife.

“Randal, what if...”

“No, she's fine. I will find her and when I do, she will hear it from me. I know she hates it when I chide her, I do it because I love her Amara and I want what's best for her.” I interrupt with a speech, clenching a fist to control the stodgy lump on my throat.

“Please find her Randall, bring Ife home.” She's crying and I have no words of comfort. My heart is splitting into a million pieces, there's a heaviness on my chest that's blocking air from emanating from my lungs. I have to pull up on the side of the road as tears blur my vision...No, curb your emotions Randall. Mentally, I reprove myself. You will not mourn your sister, she's alive and you're going to find her.

“Randall?” I have to take quick silent breaths to gain

control over my voice. “You need to go to the Johannesburg police station, there’s a story on the news, a...gi...” I hear her exhale heavily.” “A girl was found dead...under the Mandela bridge in Braamfontein.” Amara is wailing, I wish she would stop. It’s not her, my sister is alive.

“Amara please don’t, don’t cry for her like that. Ife is okay, we don’t know if that girl is her. Did they give any descriptions?” I have to wait for her to pack her tears away.

“They said a young girl, she...she...Randall...she was found without her clothes on.” Amara ruptures into sobs and I can’t listen to this, I have to drop the call. My heart is hammering hard on my chest, drum beats I have never heard before. My body swelters, the heat has me removing my coat. Changing my course of direction, I take the road leading to Newtown.

NQABA...

“Where is Thandiwe?” Styles grimaces at me as we jump into the car, he hasn’t said anything since he came to fetch me in jail. I was arrested after beating that fool to a pulp, like it was my fault he harassed Thandiwe. I gave him what he asked for.

“Styles.” He takes no notice of my probes and I can’t grasp what he could be distraught about.

“What is it Mzi?” Styles shakes his head after snapping at me, he drives with anger displaying on his hands, basically taking everything out on the stirring wheel.

“What is your pro-”

“My problem is that you’re stupid Mzi, I thought you had it all under control.” His voice is cold and unwelcoming, it’s a first for me because Styles is hardly ever grumpy.

“Of course I had it handled, I gave that idiot what he deserved.” I have no regrets whatsoever.

“Hats off to you for that, but did you have to get arrested? Do you know how much I had to spend to get your stupid ass out?” I don’t know why he’s

shouting, money is never problem with him.

“Is this about money Styles?” An icy glare is thrown my way, if he doesn’t slow down we’ll end up in an accident. I’m washed with multiple tongue clicks, maybe I should stay out of his way until he calms down. He releases a slow long breath then uses his left hand to rub his eyes.

“What’s going with you?” Is he crying?

“Sethu called to tell me that Ife is missing.” Oh! And I became the perfect target of his anger. “Randall is probably going crazy, I can’t imagine what he’s feeling.”

“I’m sure she’s fine, you know how teenagers can be. She is most likely at her boyfriend’s house and afraid of going back home.” There was a time when Veronica used to do this kind of shit.

“I doubt it, plans have been changed. We’re leaving tonight, Zulu is on his way home as we speak.” Should I bother asking how he did it? Neo would advise against it.

“Does Thandiwe know?”

“Yes,” he says hastily, his voice rough with an emotion I can’t quite place. “All bags are packed, Neo and Thandiwe are waiting for us at the airport.” Okay, it is an emergency after all.

“You’re really fond of her, aren’t you?” He glowers at me, silence takes over the moment. I can’t make out if I will be getting an answer.

“I know how it’s like to lose a sister, I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.” He speaks, in conclusion. Veronica suddenly comes to mind, I would die if anything were to happen to her.

BULELWA...

My stupid stubborn ass drove to jail, I’m here and I don’t know why. I’m parked outside and have this great urge to talk to Zizwe. Only an idiot would do this, gathering up whatever courage or stupidity I have, I exit the car. My steps are faltering, making my movements slow, this was unplanned.

What will I say to him when I get there? Perhaps I'm looking to talk to a sane person, someone who will listen to me and not judge me. My father is not different from Tshepo who bullied me at school nor is he different from those homophobic people at work. Zizwe seems to understand me, I'd like to think that we're on the same page.

The prison warden tells me that the big giant man was bailed by some flashy woman who wouldn't show her face. She wore a big hat and shades, he says he found it strange because no one wears shades at night. I'm not interested in the rest.

Just great, Zizwe was my last hope. I'll have to turn to alcohol, I've never been disappointed by a bottle of wine.

The cashiers at the liquor store give me funny looks as I carry five bottles of wine, one for each day. Some make remarks about wanting to join the party, mxm. Who said I'm throwing a party? I'm broken

and need to drown my sorrows away.

My phone rings as I get to the car, it's Lilian. I let it ring, Lindiwe's call follows. I don't want to talk to them. They won't stop calling so I switch off my phone, I'm going to lock myself in the house, hopefully I won't find them waiting for me.

BHEKIZIZWE...

I don't know how Ntsikayethu found out that I was released, he's calling me nonstop. I send him a text full of lies, 'I'm at a friend's place.' I'll go back home tomorrow, we're only two years apart, yet he treats me like a child. I have to find a place to live, living with my brother will restrict me from doing certain things. Moving in with him was a bad idea.

Cleaning up after myself is a habit, I don't believe in leaving dishes in the sink. After making sure the kitchen is spotless, I retire on the couch. My mother

had sent a message two days ago and I blue ticked her, I'm not ready to talk to her. She wants me back home, she went as far as lying about my father wanting to apologise. That man doesn't express regret.

What's this? Bulelwa's number is saved on my phone, as Buttercup. Very odd, I remember saving his number, what I don't have memory of is saving it under this name. I find myself going through his statuses, I'm not surprised that he's updated nothing but alcohol.

The man loves his bottle, I know since I've been following him around. Not stalker tendencies, but I'm fascinated by him. I came to the realization when he came to visit me in jail under the pretext of seeing a friend.

As loud as the man is, he's gives off a certain peace that makes me want to be around him. I never thought I would feel like this about someone, I have to have a talk with him about drinking. He's young,

but drinks like he won't see another day.

The next image pulls a smile to my own lips, he's twerking to an Afro-beat song 'Runtown- Mad Over You.' Bulelwa is crazy, his vitality is drinkable. Something I would want to consume every day. His intake worries me though, he drinks till he forgets who he is.

"Hey." I type and delete the message. What will I say to him? Bad idea.

"Heeeeyyyy." I frown at the face smiling on my phone screen..Shit... I video called him, I need to get a new phone. "Hello, Hulk. Can you hear me?" Hulk? Watching him talk wouldn't be a bad idea, it would be creepy though. Loud music keeps him company, I love his taste of music, Afro-beat. I wouldn't be found listen to it nonetheless.

"What do you want?" My voice is unwelcoming, yet I

have yielded my being to this beautiful man smiling at me. He looks like a fool with his face zoomed in like this, also I'm stunned by his beauty.

“Were you not the one who called me, Hulk? You know, I don't answer to video calls, you're an exception because...this man..” He points a finger at himself. “Can't resist you.”

A loud burp is followed by giggles, I hate that he drinks. Alcohol will only ruin his beautiful face.

“You're drunk?” I raise an eyebrow disapprovingly at him, to have him show me all his teeth. It's not a smile, but a sneer.

“Nope, I only had two glasses. I'm not drunk.” He pronounces, dancing to the music in the background.

“You know your problems won't drown in alcohol?” My father has crossed this road, it almost cost him his marriage.

“Mr. Know it all, tell me more.” Idiot, he reaches to his left and comes back with a full bottle of alcohol. I observe him as he drinks from the bottle, rich kids

have issues too? What could possibly be wrong?

“I want you at work tomorrow Buttercup or you will be given your first warning.” My directive reaches him in a form of a joke, I feel a smile tickling me at the sound of his laughter. It’s beautiful, I would say music to my ears. All of this is crazy, why am I consumed by this idiot? I shake my head at him kissing the screen, the kissing sounds he makes are funny.

“A big kiss for you Hulk darling, byyyyye.” A huge smile embraces my screen and he’s gone in a flash.

To be continued...

BURN

32

LILIAN...

“What a day.” Ndlangamandla breathes, bouncing on the bed next to me. If he thinks we’re going to share a bed after what he did to my son, he has another thing coming. I reject the kiss he tries to tattoo on my cheek and my smart move earns me a scowl.

“What’s wrong with you?” He asks, sitting up and leaning back on the headboard.

“What’s wrong with me? What’s with me, Mandla?” My voice raises grudgingly, emotions have taken over.

“Haibo mkami!” This man.

“Don’t mkami me, Mandla,” I snap, hopping out of bed. “Get out.” I’m standing over him, pointing at the door. If this man knows what’s good for him, he will get out of this room.

“Lilian-”

“You know what Mandla, I’m tired. I’m tired of you treating my son like he doesn’t matter.” He frowns, glaring daggers at me.

“This is about Bulelwa?” I don’t get the shock in his voice, is he okay with what he did back there?

“Nobody touches my children, not even you.” I am dead serious, he snorts and increasingly moves out of bed. My eyes measure his tallness until he’s standing straight, shoulders squared...chest out... nose flared and eyes scrutinizing.

“Are you talking to me like that, Lilian?” His voice grates, I have pressed the angry button.

“You’re the only one in the room with me,” I’m not deterred by the intimidation hovering around Ndlangamandla, he knows that he does not scare me.

“I am your husband.” Calm and collected, yet his voice displays a great amount of fury.

“I am a mother and I will do anything to protect my children.”

“Lilian-” His voice transitions from power to shock in a split of a second, his eyes hunt my hand that’s

raised to stop his speech.

“I didn’t say anything the first time you ousted Bubu out of the house because I thought you needed time to process the news, but what you did today Mandla is something I will never forgive.”

“I didn’t mean to do that, I love my son Lilian. I love my children, I would never hurt them.”

“How do I know that after what I witnessed today?”

“That was a mistake-”

“You had him by the throat Ndlangamandla...” He makes me so angry and I want to slap him across the face, raising my voice at him seems to be helping.

“Don’t shout.” He says, calmly so. I hate that he’s telling me not to shout, I hate being told what to do.

“Get out of my room.” Tilting his head to the side, he narrows his brown eyes at me. Hands folded across his chest and a demeanour that tells me he’s not pleased with my rantings. That’s it, I am done playing nice with this man. I’m quick on my feet,

marching to the closet to get an extra blanket. He catches it when I throw it at him, confusion sweeping over his face in a flash.

“Get out.” I’m pushing him out and surprised that he’s not fighting me. “You think you’ll touch my baby and I’ll let it slide, awundazi wena Mandla. Uyandiqhela qha.” I get to meet the pain in his eyes before shutting the door on his face. My husband and I have never slept in separate rooms before, but today he crossed the limit. I let it pass with Thobekile and the whole Betty issue, not again. I’m done playing the naïve wife.

THANDIWE...

I’m annoyed by this man next to me, yet I love how his arm is enfolded over my shoulders. I dread the question he gifts me with.

“What’s wrong?” It has me churning on the seat. He gets arrested and I’m supposed to be okay? Men are not normal, no scratch that...Nqabayomzi

Biyase is not normal.

“Thandiwe.” I don’t want him calling my name when I’m upset with him, I turn my back and he doesn’t get the message that I’m dismayed.

We’re boarding in Twenty minutes, Styles and Neo are seated opposite us. The waiting area is not crowded, just a few passengers.

“Nothing.” Everything is wrong.

“Okay, would you like something before we board?”
Is he serious?

“So you’re not going to explain yourself Nqaba?” He smiles raising his huge shoulder like it means nothing that he was arrested

“Am I not here with you, Nkanyezi yami?” The problem with Nqaba is that he thinks he owes no one an explanation.

“Keep doing whatever you like Biyase and let’s see where that will get you, stubbornness leads to distraction-”

“No it doesn’t.” He laughs and the deep echoing sound of it drags a smile on my lips. I’m trying to make a point and he’s playing. “I love that you worry about me though, I missed it. But you don’t have to Tshabalala, I can take care of myself and as long as I have you to go home to, nothing will happen to me.”

“You’re not God, fate is not in your hands.” Fate is no one’s friend.

“I don’t care, not even God will keep me from you.” He catches my chin, lifting it so I’m looking at him. “Fate fooled me once and I won’t let it happen again.”

That’s the thing with fate, it’s like a storm. You don’t see it coming until it’s standing right before you.

“If we’re going to be together, I need you to be frank me with me. Don’t keep me in the dark Nqaba, I need to know everything about you.” Taken aback, he curves a brow. I know this look, he’ll never tell me anything. I’ll be told what he thinks I need to

know.

“I hear you, Tshabalala.” He hears me? That’s all I get? I want to reproach him some more, but Styles and Neo’s presence halt my expressions.

“Sis Tee, le uena oa bona?” (Are you also a seer?)

Neo’s question catches me off guard, it takes a millisecond to run with him.

“Why?” It is a random thing to ask.

“Look at this.” He sits beside me to show a footage on his tablet. “Is this not that idiot of a woman you warned not to go home?”

She’s on the news, a man was attacked and killed by the community after butchering his wife to death. Their names are mentioned, Zawadi is gone. I should’ve tried harder, she didn’t deserve to die like that.

“You’re crying?” Neo again, dazed by my humanity.

“Neo!” Nqaba jumps in with a reproofing tone, pulling me into his chest.

“I’m just saying Mzi, sis Tee is wasting her tears. Zaza almost got her killed by the angry mob and she had no remorse whatsoever. The fight will continue in hell, shame those idiots bathong.” One percent of Neo's words make sense, instead of listening to me, Zawadi panicked.

“She didn’t deserve to die though.” I say, moving away from Nqaba’s chest.

“She’s dead, there’s no use in crying over spilt milk.” How can he be so cold about it? She was an innocent woman. Neo is a strange man.

“You tried my child.” That voice, I turn to see Akinyi. Her appearance is different, peace dwells on her face. These men are engaging in a conversation, debating about Zawadi’s fate. I’m relieved that they won’t witness me talking to a ghost. “My job here is done, I have to cross over now.”

I want to ask her where her granddaughter is.

“Zawadi refuses to cross over, she’s looking for her husband.” She says like she read my mind, a distant smile resides on her face at this saying.

“Where is he?” I manage a whisper.

“A place where no soul wants to be, she won’t find him here. I tried to convince her, the girl is stubborn like her mother. There’s nothing I can do for her now.” I feel for Zawadi, she’s a lost soul, looking for someone she will never find. “Thank you for trying, you have a beautiful gift. Although the world won’t accept it so easily, you need to embrace it.”

“It won’t be easy,” my voice flows louder than anticipated, catching the men’s attention. My eyes move between them and by the time I turn to Akinyi, she’s gone.

“And then?” Neo...two seconds in his presence and I am defeated by him.

“Nothing.” Nqaba and I exchange glances, a conversation takes place between us. He knows what’s going on.

“Who is it?” I’m not comfortable with his question, there is a lot to process here and he wouldn’t know the person.

“So ousie sepoko...” (Sister-ghost.)

Did he just call me what I think he called me?

“There’s a man and I want him burning in hell, the problem is that I’m not sure if he is there or not. Have you perhaps seen him or bumped into him? If you have, I’m sure we can make some kind of a deal with the devil. You see the devil too, right? I bet you do, ghosts are similar to the devil so...I have a picture of him here.” He scrolls on his laptop while Styles holds an unreadable simper on his face. The man I love is breathing heavily beside me, I know he’s irritated when he clicks his tongue and Neo is not bothered.

“This is him, his name is Segun. Please tell me you haven’t seen him. That would mean he’s dancing in the fires of hell, if you have we can talk to MamSonto. I can even do a forty day fast just to

send his soul to hell.” I didn’t catch anything he said, the man on the picture looks familiar...He’s the man at the bus stop...

“I’ve seen this man before, I found him at the bus stop and he asked me to look for his son.” Styles frowns exchanging a grave look with Neo, there’s sudden heavy tension hovering around us.

“What else did he say?” Styles shoots a question, Nqaba squeezes my hand into his. He’s worried about me, it’s written in his eyes.

“You don’t have to talk Tan-tan, I know you’re not comfortable about...” Nqaba.

“No Mzi, let Tan-tan speak. This is an important matter.” Neo interposes, he’s not clowning anymore. Strange how his demeanour changed in the blink of an eye. I take in their facial expressions as I narrate the horror I experienced that day.

“A bullet on his head huh?” I nod, harmonizing with Neo’s confirmation.

“It’s Segun alright, the bastard won’t leave just like that. It won’t be long till he finds Randall and starts haunting him.” The words seep through Styles’ clenched teeth accompanied by a heavy sigh. I’m lost... What are they angry about?

Ngaba hasn’t said anything since Neo chided him, my hand continues to hide in his. I wouldn’t be this sane if he wasn’t holding me like this. He makes everything okay, brings my mind at ease and peace in my heart. Turning to catch a glimpse of him, he mutters...

“I love you.” Through muted words, I love him too.

RANDALL...

“Do you know what car it is?” A car has been found in the Vaal River, Styles organized a search party. He’s keeping tabs on everything from Kenya, not once has he made me feel alone. The young girl

that was found is not my sister, identifying her was the hardest thing I've ever had to do.

“No.” I'm driving to Vaal, Mbuso is tailing me. I found him at the police station. “It can't be her, Styles, I'll never forgive myself if anything happens to my sister.”

“Try to think positive Randy, you need to be strong for Ife.” How do I do that when all I want to do is break down? “Are you alone? You need to call someone, just in...”

“No, there is no just in case. Ife is fine.”

“We need to look at both ends Randall, there is a poss...” I can't listen to this.

“I'll call you back, don't worry about me. Mbuso is here.” I say, in a hurry to end the gnawing conversation. Mbuso pulls up just as I park.

“We're about to board, I will let you know once we land.” I can hear hopelessness in Styles' voice. The same hopelessness that has been poking me and I have succeeded in pushing it back thus far.

The lake is surrounded by police cars and an ambulance, the sight of it makes my insides coil. Mbuso lands a comforting hand on my shoulder as we watch the car being dragged out of the river. My eyes take in the white Toyota Yaris, Ife drove the same car. The image knocks a wisp of air from my lungs and I stagger back, struggling to inhale and exhale. Totally stunned...eyes locked on the vehicle as the number plates come to light.

“Randy.” His voice echoes in my ears, sounding further than it is. He’s holding on to me as if I would fall.

“Ife...” Her name leaps from my lips and the shock lingers regardless.

“I’m sorry man.” At the sound of his words, I drop on my knees as my body falls weak. Repeatedly, I blink away images of her flashing before my eyes, from the moment my parents brought her home from the hospital.

‘Brother, brother.’ Her tiny voice resonates in my ears mingled with childlike sobs, I’m carrying her in my arms trying to calm her down. She’s five years old and we’re closer than anything. ‘Uche pushed me and I fell.’ The memory serves clear in my mind as if it happened yesterday. I pull her into a hug and promise to always protect her.

I couldn’t protect Uche and now I have broken my promise to Ifeanyi.

“Randall.” Mbuso wipes the fragments of my recollection with his firm voice, I look up to see a police officer standing before me.

“We found this.” He hands me a bag, Amara bought Ifeanyi this bag on her birthday. With shaky hands, I reach out to take it, it’s drenched in water and that doesn’t stop me from holding it to my chest.

“Wh- where is she?” I dread these words, deep down

I wish she's not in the car. I'm suffocating, dying if I could put it harshly. The evening breeze is no longer gracing us, leaving us with a rigid humid air.

"There's no one in the car, this is all we found." The whole world silences around me... Where are you Ifeanyi?

BULELWA...

They lied about alcohol swallowing your problems, my attempts to drown my problems is futile. This shit doesn't comfort like they said it would.

I'm lying in bed, embracing the sadness travelling through every cell in my body. I happened to wake up earlier than usual when I'm swimming in hangover lake.

Is it raining? I hear thunder, it's bad today, God must be as angry as Mandla. I don't blame him, humans are a big disappointment. Look at me, my own

father doesn't want me.

“God, Keep it down. Some of us are trying to sleep and I have a hangover.” I grunt, frustrated by the loud noise. It hardly rains in Johannesburg at this time of the year.

Why is the thunder not stopping? In fact, it's getting louder. As my mind brings me back to my senses, it's made known to me there's a fool banging on my door. That's what the racket is, whoever that is will find their way out of my gate.

It's not long till someone badges into my room, my bushed eyes fail to puzzle the figure together. With heavy steps, he dashes to the window and draws the curtains open.

“Get up.” I hear his voice, raspy, rumbling and commanding. I force my heavy-lidded eyes to paint him out as he stands in the light and I swear I think I just died and gone to heaven. Can a man be so beautiful? Greek gods are real, I am convinced.

“Will you lie there and drool or should I come and drag you out of bed?” Hands folded across his chest, his arrogance slaps me hard.

“What are you doing in my house?” He shoots me a blazing glare that sends me shuffling uncomfortably on the bed. I’m losing to the staring contest, his stare is intimidating.

“Do you want me to come there Buttercup?” That name again, I hate it. There’s something sinister about his question as he grins, grimly. The whole scene has me shivering unconsciously and shaking my head like a drum-shaped rattle. “Then get up.”

It’s my house, I will get up when I want to... Why am I not voicing this out? It could be the look that has chained me on this bed. I hear him growl as I pull the blanket to my chin and turn on my side, ignoring his stupid command.

“Bulelwa.” He can call me whatever he wants, I’m not getting up from this bed.

“Fuck off Zizwe.” I spit placidly, I don’t know what happens next but I am drenched in water. My bed is wet and I’m blinking away water from my eyelids.

“What is your problem?” I squeak, he catches my hand in his grip, halting it from colliding on his cheek. Kneeling on the bed, I squirm and clench my eyes as he twists my arm so that it lands on the small of my back.

Feeling his gaze on my face, I open them to meet his lingering eyes, burning with a liquefied fire to take me captive.

Every inch of me tingles with desire, having him close to me like this. His noticeable chest flush against mine, the smell of his fragrance lingers in the air, coating my everything...skin...hair... clothes, it sends a shot of adrenalin right through my heart.

I try to blink, thrash about or turn my head, to break the connection between us, but I am hypnotised under his gaze. My foolish fingers shift to trail his

jaw line, perfect even to the touch.

Moving to his chest I could feel his heart hammering away as rapidly as my own. His breathing becomes stiff, eyes stabbing my face, I speedily flip my eyes up to his. He's moving in, I think I can't breathe.

“Do you touch yourself, Buttercup?” A whisper in my ear that has me bashfully quivering against him.

“What?” A gasp is what I manage to emit, face too close his heated breath fans my surface. He's a coffee person.

“You know, Buttercup.” His hand grips my ass, pulling me into him. The act has me desperately gasping for air. Our bodies flush together that I can feel his heart dancing against his chest. “Pleasure yourself until you cum.”

My mouth falls open, why is he asking me this?

“Yo...you...” What do I want to say again? I want him to scoot away, yet I don't want him to move an inch.

“Yes?” A raised brow and a smug on his face, the pompous bastard says.

“Go fuck yourself Zizwe.” My hands clash on his broad chest, he’s like a brick wall unmoving. It’s an embarrassing move on my part as I fall back on the bed. He catches me before my back hits the mattress. Again, we’re breathing the same air. Eyes sheltered in each other, chests pasted together.

“How about I fuck you instead?” The superior tone in his voice, who birthed this man? How can one be so sure about themselves? I’m loving the thoughts of him having me, though.

Because Bulelwa is an idiot, I move in to kiss him. He returns it for a second and pulls out, I hardly felt it.

“No, this is wrong. I can’t lose myself with you.” He says, leaving me yearning for him on the bed. It’s not such a big deal, right? Then, why am I crying? I control men, they all play on the palm of my hands. Why is this one affecting me like this?

“Why are you crying?” His voice is a whisper, yet he’s regarding me with a frown.

“I’m not crying.” I am crying, snivelling this time. I want to hide under the blankets and cry my eyes out. So many emotions are tugging at me at one time, I fail to clutch them.

Bulelwa doesn’t cry like this...I don’t cry at all...I didn’t cry when Tshepo and his friends attacked me at school and stripped me naked, I didn’t cry when Thobekile left me. I didn’t cry when I told my father about my sexuality and he threw me out of his house. A tear or two is hardly crying, I don’t understand these sobs emanating from my lips.

“Buttercup,” Zizwe grunts through clenched teeth, a hint of anger lies in his voice. “Wipe those bloody tears.”

“Now you’re going to hold my tears captive?”
Looking at him through glossy eyes, I snap at the fool. Look at him standing there like he owns the

world, is this why he's playing with my emotions?

"Buttercup." Another angry whisper, I could be mistaking anger with defeat. This is how arrogant people guise, right? My teary eyes widen as he charges at me, heavy steps moving to a known destination. Eyes burning me that I can't look away from him. My back clashes on the headboard and he has me cornered and caged in his arms. I'm breathing heavily, open-mouthed.

"I said stop crying," Zizwe releases a deep growl and the sound of it ties a knot in the pit of my stomach. "Dammit... your tears are...they...dammit Buttercup..." Clenched jaw, he catches my waist between his strong hands and pulls me to him so that the space between us is covered.

His mouth takes mine and it's as if my body falls into a volcano, sparks of fire are lit beneath my skin.

My arms wrap around his shoulders and he pushes me to lie on my back, kissing me still.

Something is dancing in my stomach, he's

consuming me and I'm completely giving in to him. His kisses wipe the pain away, they are doing what the alcohol failed to do. My hands run down his sculpted back, a fine touch, I would dwell here all my life. The feeling of his body against mine is the most glorious sensation I've ever known.

He pulls out and runs his mouth across my neck compelling me to moan with pleasure. His hand gradually takes the passage to my non-existent hip, my leg is between his legs and his hand is moving to pull my pyjama pants down. Meanwhile, I'm on a mission to remove his t-shirt. A desperate need to feel his skin on mine. His mouth makes it back to mine, I disappear in the feeling of his lips. My joy ride stops when he hastily jumps up and stands on his feet, I sit up, confusion disrespecting me. What the hell just happened? Why did he stop? I want to ask him, instead I glance at him panting and summoning my breath.

He's scrutinising me under his gaze, forcing me to look away and pull my pants up.

“I can’t lose myself with you,” that again. What the fuck does he mean? I want him to lose himself with me.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

Surprisingly, I snap. I’m frustrated, it’s not me to be sexually frustrated. The pompous bastard snorts, Beastie is a bastard too, but he would have given me what I want. This one was definitely sent by the devil. I just know it.

IFEANYI...

If death were not crude, I would’ve called upon it and asked it to take me. I would’ve made an eternal friendship with it. I’m incarcerated, away from humanity, left alone in a room that reeks of semen. Retching and heaving hasn’t gotten rid of the bile threatening to come out.

The sound of his footsteps rip my heart, there is no use in crying over it. It's crushed. It's been going on for hours, he comes in and forces himself on me, then leaves. It's a repetition, my body can't take it anymore. I want to die, it's the only way it will stop.

He tore my clothes off and tied me up on the bed like a dog, there is no way out for me.

It all started in the parking lot at work, Cele came up to me asking for a ride. He claimed his car had broken down and of course I told him to get lost. The next thing I was hit on the head with a blunt object, the rest is blur. I woke up in this small room with the most excruciating pain and him breathing hard on top of me. It took a second to grasp that he was raping me, loud screams took over from there.

My hands worked to fight him, I could only manage frail punches until scratching him was the only option. My struggle appeared to be giving him more drive.

“Daddy is back.” he hums, grinning at me from directly above my head. I clench my eyes as he starts stripping naked. “Don’t be shy Ife, I’m your man now. You need to get used to seeing me naked.” The tone of his voice mocks me, he’s sure that I will never be free from him. If that might be so, then only death can get me out of this place. Death is so far from my reach, I have no choice but to lie on this bed chained like a sex slave.

“Please, please don’t do this.” With my husky frail voice and desperation, I cry. Heaven must be keeping count of the number of times I implored for my life.

“I love it when you beg Ife, I like it rough.” Viciousness in his voice, he scrambles on the bed and roughly forces my legs open. My blood boils at the feel of his skin touching mine, he drained out my strength, leaving me helpless, shivering, shattered and feeble.

Screams emit in hushed sounds, a mockery. My

eyes wide, yet tearless. His build crashes my lungs, making it hard for me to breathe. The revolting sounds he makes sound like they are from another realm, I'm fallen numb, my mind's way of protecting me from the pain and nightmare.

I've always been useless, father used to tell me this. He said my incompetence will get me in trouble one day, his words have come to pass. A strange man is forcing himself on me and I can't even fight him, I'm so useless. I want to die as his coarse tongue licks at my skin, stumpy fingers grip my hair.

"No, no sweetheart, open your eyes. I want you to see me, I want you to take in this moment." This is what he's been doing, every time I close my eyes, he would pull my hair and bang my head against the headboard, demanding I open them.

I don't want to, so I keep them closed...Tightly, anything rather than watch his debauched face rise with power and lust.

It makes him angry, the first time I got a couple of slaps. The second time, punches and my stubbornness proved to be stronger, only to receive multiple blows on my face. He walked away without a backward glance, leaving me throbbing in pain and calling upon death.

“I said open your eyes.” He releases cruel words through clenched teeth, his hand crashes on my neck, squeezing and squeezing and squeezing. He finds pleasure in molesting me while choking me like my life means nothing to him. I’m breathing, but the air won’t go in, it feels like my lungs are surrounded by glass as if there’s less space in them for air.

I start to go limp, eye sight blurs before my eyes close. Images of my life faintly flash in my eyelids, a rush of fear shoots through my body as I feel death embracing me. I have no will to fight anymore and so I let it take me.

“You lasted longer than the others, nice ride sweetheart.” I hear a whisper close to my ear, it’s oceans away and fades with me into

unconsciousness.

To be continued...

BURN

33

BULELWA...

“I told you, I’m busy, I can’t just leave because you want to see me. I have a life too, you know?” The smoky voice arouses me from a deep slumber, I can’t recall falling asleep but I hark back to Zizwe cuddling me to sleep after asking him to say. The new dramatic Bulelwa wouldn’t stop crying, my father has everything to do with it. I was like a child yearning for his fatherly love and Zizwe was there, it wasn’t the same as being in my father’s arms, but he made me feel safe.

I can still smell him all over me, the scent sends shivers all through my body.

The people I have ever depended on in my life are my family, all this is new to me. The deep pull between Zizwe and me is scary, what will I do with all these feelings constraining me?

I sit up from the bed with the urgent need to pee, the guy is in the bathroom. He'll think I'm eavesdropping..I wouldn't dare. Nonetheless, it won't be such a bad idea if I move closer.

“You have a life too, you don't see me pulling you away from your family.” He sounds angry. Who is he talking? There is a prolonged silence, I can hear his breathing though.

“Yes ma'am...” His voice grumbles, unpleasant. “I'll see you later, bye.”

I fly back to the bed as I hear his footfall, he flashes a smirk when our eyes meet.

“I told you to do something about that snoring.”
Bastard.

“I don’t snore.” I articulate, shifting on the bed to make space for him. His scent hits me first, could this be my obsession? I could bathe in his scent the whole day.

“Please, I kept poking you to get you to stop and that only drove you to snore louder and you drooled on me again.” He’s mocking me, I want to protest, but his fingers are trailing my cheek bones. It’s a soft touch, barely there. I’m burning up, trembling. He sees the quaver on my lips and his fingers find them. His eyes adore them, they are smiling, hungry and probing. For what exactly?

“Buttercup,” a lengthy murmur, winded. I will have a seizure if he continues like this, I want to touch him, but I don’t trust myself. I’ll end up throwing myself at him...Everything I stand against. “Your skin is like velvet.” He exhales leaning in, my breath halts. The world fades away, I can’t think straight.

“I...I...” my voice is caught in my throat. I’m visibly trembling. “I have brown bread...” Jesus... What just

came out of my mouth? A coy look forms on his face before his lips brush against mine.

“Boo-boo.” Lord take me now, what is he doing here? Zizwe recognises the racy voice, his eyebrow arches higher than usual, square jaw tensed visibly. His eyes accept a definite anger, a gasp leaves me, yearning as he releases his warm hand from my face.

“Where are you going?” My voice is not usually wobbly, he’s scaring me. His feet stop at the door, he doesn’t turn to me. I don’t see a need for his clenched fists.

Jacob will not forgive this one, he will make sure that Zizwe is locked up with no possibility of parole. I know how his sick mind works.

“What is he doing here?” Zizwe mutters furiously under his breath. What’s it to him if Jacob is here? It’s not like we are a thing.

“You’re not going to go out there Zizwe.” I’m standing behind him, wanting him to turn and face

me. My wish will not be granted. “I’ll take care of him, please stay here.”

“What? Are you going to shove me under the bed?” Eventually he turns with this fired question. How did he know I specialise in hiding men under the bed? It takes a minute for me to answer, a wasted time really because Zizwe snorts and storms out the door to find the man calling out to me as if we’re lovers. Dammit, Jacob has a key to my house. I forgot to take it that day, the man is sick.

My feet aren’t as fast as Zizwe’s, I’m behind him though, desperately moving. Beastie is in my kitchen, his head dipped in my fridge. Hearing our footfalls, he appears. The smile on his face dissolves, he’s glaring at Zizwe who is ready for war.

“What is he doing here?” That’s exactly what Hulk asked me. “Shouldn’t you be in jail?” Jacob has a big mouth. Zizwe’s arrogance doesn’t allow him to reply to Jacob’s question, his eyes have stabbed the ginger man to death a million times.

And how did Zizwe manage to get out? As far as I know, his brother said they didn't have money for bail.

"Why are you in my house J acob?" The fool smiles at me, having me roll my eyes in infuriation.

"I came to make you lunch, I know you love my cooking and..."

"No I don't." When did I tell him that?

"Are you going to tell this fool to leave?" Oh wow! The pompous bastard still has a voice?

"I'm not going anywhere, I don't know who you think you are, but you don't want to mess with me, boy." J acob grunts, wanting to start trouble.

"Bulelwa, are you going to tell this fool to leave or should I?" Zizwe speaks with grave deliberation. Why am I not sending Beastie away? I don't want him here, he shouldn't be here.

"Hey, fuck off out of here." Oh, oh, wrong choice of words Beastie. Zizwe wheels towards J acob, eyes

full of contempt. J acob is not frightened, his feet move to meet Zizwe half way.

Who the hell do they think they are? Fighting in my house like wild animals. The fist fight is intense, I'm screaming trying to get them to stop. My voice reaches them, but it's not powerful enough to wipe away their wrath. Zizwe overpowers Beas...bloody J acob and straddles him. His blows are dominant, he's going to kill J acob.

“Zizwe stop.” I get close enough to grab his arm, his elbow lands on my nose as he attempts to throw another punch at J acob. I did say I bruise easily, the blow sends me flying across the kitchen floor with a cry. The pain travels in all sensitive parts of my body.

“I'm...” I reject his hand trying to pull me up.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Tears flow down my face, I don't know if it's because of the pain or that Zizwe is an ass.

“Let me help you, Bulelwa.” He says, visibly

concerned. His voice strangely soothing and somehow sounding more approachable than how he looks.

“I...huh...I don’t want your help,” I hate that I buffered for a while.

“It was a mistake Butterc...”

“Fuck that Buttercup shit Zizwe and fuck you, get out of my house.” His eyes twitch for a second, he’s hurt and hides the pain before it’s spotted... I spotted it...How the hell did I get here?

He doesn’t want to leave, his eyes are desperate, he wants to explain and I don’t want to listen. This is why I don’t do attachments, look at the mess I am in.

“Get out now!” Zizwe flares his nose as I yell at him.

“I will never hurt you, Bulelwa.” That’s his last statement, he jumps over Beastie as his feet thunder out of the house. There’s a sting in my heart the moment he bangs the door behind him, a feeling I don’t understand.

“You did the right thing Boo-boo, that hobo doesn’t deserve you.” J acob says, gradually getting up from the floor. Zizwe messed him up pretty bad, he’s face is covered in blood. Then again, I don’t care. I want him out of my house.

“And wena J acob, I want nothing to do with you.” Shock visits his face, the fool knows I don’t want him anywhere near me.

“What did I do? Was it not that hobo who...”

“Call him a hobo again and I will finish what he started.” I am tired of this white man, what does he want from me?

“You’re taking his side Boo-boo?”

“Oh stop and get the fuck out of my house. Bastard.” With a click of a tongue, I stride out of the kitchen. I need to see a doctor, I think my my nose is broken. Zizwe is an angry man, I can’t be surrounded by such a person. My life is messed up already. Will I be able to keep away from him though?

LINDA...

Linda has fallen ill due to stress, yet in her condition she continues to cater to her husband. No way would she tell him that she has to choose between the three people she loves.

Vusi is taking his usual nap in the rondavel opposite the kitchen, while Linda slaves away as lunch hour is approaching.

“Where is Mapula?” Linda jumps up at the sound of the hiss, coming from outside. Her heart racing, she toddles towards the door to investigate. Her eyes widen as she sees a snake bigger than anything she’s ever seen. Its length covers almost the whole yard. She would fall dead had she not been a strong woman. The snake raises its head, standing taller than Linda that she has to look up at it. Although a strong woman, her body trembles in fear.

“You think I’m a fool Linda? You came to me a desperate woman and I gave you what belongs to

me.” The snake booms with anger causing Linda to stagger and fall flat on the ground. Makhafula has come in a form of a serpent, it speaks as if it were human. Wasting no time the serpent slithers to the rondavel where Vusi is sleeping, much to Linda’s horror.

“No, please. Not my husband.” A scream of terror dives out of her mouth, her love for her husband pulls her up to her feet and she runs after the serpent. Linda has no clue what she will do when she gets there, pleading is the only thing her mind can think of. Or maybe make empty promises, buy herself some time until she figures a way to keep her family safe from this demon.

Linda’s heart sinks to the pit of her stomach when she finds the snake wrapped around her husband on the bed. Vusi who clearly can’t breathe, glances at his wife. Eyes made wider, skin turning whitish.

“Tell your husband how you were able to bear him a child, at least he deserves to know before his death

or maybe I will spare his wasted life.” Makhafula speaks, playing games with a terrified Linda

“Please, spare him.” Falling on her weak knees, Linda pleads with the devil. She can’t lose her husband, not the man she sacrificed everything for. Her stubbornness will not let her confess and that provokes Makhafula to squeeze harder pushing Vusi closer to his death.

“Okay, okay stop. I’ll confess, I’ll tell him everything.” With desperate screams, Linda accepts the challenge. The devil cannot be trusted and who is to say he will spare Vusi after the confession? Her eyes are glued on her life partner as she spills the beans. Never in his wildest dreams did he think his wife would do such a thing. That’s the least of his worries though, he needs to live for Thandiwe. He wants to live, to save his Thandiwe.

As Makhafula clutches tighter around Vusi’s body depriving him of air, the father knows that his time

has come, he makes a promise that he will protect Thandiwe from beyond the grave. Linda remains on her knees screaming for her husband's life while an angry enemy sucks the life out of him. He releases him after sending the old man to the afterlife and slithers out of the house leaving Linda who collapses from shock.

NQABA...

Ifeanyi's disappearance has put a strain on Randall and his family, he looks terrible. He's withdrawn from everyone and spends most of his time on the streets looking for her, the whole ordeal has made me draw closer to Veronica, my only sister.

Thandiwe came home with me, she wants her own place and I promised to sort it out once I'm free. Ntuthuko was released a few days ago, Styles kept him for another day just because he could. He's not the same, my brother I mean. I saw him once at home, he's staying with our parents. Not once has

he made a move to get back with Thandiwe.

Zulu is making progress, the boy is a true Biyase. His whereabouts are concealed for safety purposes, Barbra demands to know where her grandchild is. She's a sneaky one that woman, father is still in the dark about Zulu... and Styles... the man came through with the DNA test, the results will be available in a week.

“Awu awu madoda, ngabe iyaphi lendlela usumuhle kangaka Tshabalala?” (Where are you going looking this beautiful?)

She looks over her shoulder, a simple smile forms on her plump lips.

“I want to see Bulelwa before going to the hospital.” She says, turning back to the lengthy mirror in front of her. “And this is just a simple outfit, you can't call this beautiful.” She doesn't know, does she?

“I happen to find it beautiful, everything about you is. You know what my favourite part is?” My arms work around her and rest on her stomach, she breathes

as I hide my face on the arch of her neck. “It’s when you’re completely naked, wrapped around me and moaning my name. That’s the most beautiful thing to me.” She’s wriggling in my arms, I love how her breathing has changed.

“Please don’t get me in the mood Biyase, my friend is waiting for me.” I’m left hanging as she pulls out of my arms. Is it my fault that I can’t get enough of her? I want her all the time.

“Tshabalala, will you leave your man craving for you like this?” I settle on the bed, to watch her bustle about the bedroom.

“You’re cravings are never fed, haibo awukahle bo.”
(Come one.)

“But I’m hungry Tshabalala,” a groan strides with my words. Thandiwe halts her movements, eyes narrowed and hands pasted on her waist.

“I can make you something to eat before I leave.” I reject her offer with a head shake, a smile is her response. “Well then, there is nothing more I can help you with. Should I take a taxi to the hospital?”

We're visiting Zulu today.

"I'll come and get you."

"Okay, Mr. Biyase, I will see you later then." She puckers up and gives me a peck, I want to grab her and devour her, but she's fast.

"Come on Tshabalala, will you leave me hanging?" I'm following behind her as she's striding to the door.

"Okay, tonight you can have me all to yourself." Never have I heard anything more soothing than this. I kiss her forehead, opening the front door for her only to find Reboana standing at my doorstep with Ofentse in her arms. She scans Thandiwe from top to bottom, the glare confirms that she is not pleased with Thandiwe's presence.

"What are you doing here?" Reboana huffs at my question, handing Ofentse to me and makes her way into the apartment. Thandiwe studies me, her eyes searching. She bids me goodbye with a tongue click, I can't run after her with the child in my arms, so I let her go.

BHEKIZIWE

Ntsikayethu has been blowing up my phone the whole day, if it's not him, it's sugar puss. I can't breathe with these people suffocating me. I messed up with Bulelwa, I didn't mean to hit him. That white man makes me so angry, the thought of him irritates me. He won't be pressing charges, the bastard gave me a few blows so I have back up.

“Ndoda.” The last thing I want to hear is his grumbling.

“I'm off today, let's go shoot some hoops.” I miss that, Ntsikayethu is good at this basketball thing, he taught me everything I know and I grew a love for it over the years. My dreams swirl around there, to be in the NBA which is farfetched. It will only remain a dream...

“I'll meet you in ten.” I hear him chuckle, this game will be good for me. I need to release some steam.

Bulelwa won't leave my mind, I can't get over the look in his eyes. I'm not a monster, I would never hurt him intentionally. The fact that he's alone with that man worries me, I hate that shit. My fists clench at the thought of him nursing that bastard.

“I hope you still got game because I am going to beat your ass.” Ntsikayethu usually does and would go hard on me, in the pretext of teaching me. Go hard or go home, that's his motto. Ntsikayethu supports my dream of being a basketball star and has been trying to get me a scholarship in the USA. I gave up hope, it will ever happen. What chance does a South African have against those tall assholes in the United States?

RANDALL...

“There is no footage at the call centre and no one

has heard from Cele, he hasn't been to work in days. No one knows where the guy is." Styles updates me, it's been a long week of searching for Ifeanyi and nothing has come up yet. Styles and Neo spend more time in my house helping out with the search. The police are not doing much really.

"Don't you think it's odd he went missing the same time as Ife?" Neo queries, inquisitively as he moves to the edge of the seat. "What if he..."

I see where he's going.

"Then we need to go to his house, can you get his address Styles?" He answers with a nod, his fingers working on the laptop.

"How did Mzi miss this?" A good question from Neo.

"How did I miss what?" Nqabayomzi interrupts, walking in the lounge accompanied by Amara. She settles down next to me, I can't begin to explain how worried she's been. Liyana is having a hard time as well, the ancestors haven't relayed a message since the day my sister went missing. This is when I need them the most, but they decide to jump ship.

“Cele is missing, he hasn’t reported to work.” Neo.

“Wait, do you think he had anything to do with this?” Nqabayomzi questions, laid back, his face depicting nothing.

“It’s not definite, just assumptions. What do you know about him?” Styles asks.

“Nothing really, the general manager is responsible for hiring people. I don’t know anything about the employees.” Bummer, then again...

“How can you not know about your employees Mzi? That motherfucker has my sister, he could be a serial killer and you had him working for you. Isn’t that a bit incompetent.” My voice rises without my consent, my frustrations have taken control of all that I am. Amara has a hand on my shoulder trying to calm me down, I don’t want to calm down so I shrug her hand away.

“I understand your anger Randall, but rebuking me will not bring Ife back.”

“Then what will Mzi?” I snap, getting up to my feet. Amara follows my movements, I wish she would let me breathe. I understand that she wants to be there for me, but I am not in the right space to accommodate her. Just last night we had an argument, she said I’m pushing her away. “Ifeanyi better be okay, or I will hold you responsible for anything that happens to her.”

“Randall that’s not fair, Mzi runs a business, not a day care. Surely he can’t keep track of everything...”

“I don’t want to hear it Styles.” I cut in unable to control the anger in my voice, maybe I’m looking for someone to blame, however the accusatory finger is pointed at me. I asked Nqabayomzi to give Ife that job, I sent my sister into the lion’s den.

“It’s okay Styles, Randall has every right to be angry although it’s pointed at the wrong person. I had my suspicions about that man, there was a time I walked in an uncomfortable situation between him and Thandiwe. I think he...he was...” His words

hesitate, lips grow thin with anger.

“What is it? Speak Mzi.” I’m already thinking the worst, if my sister survives and Cele did rape her. Then she will never be the same, how will I undo what has been done.

“Do you think he’s a rapist?” Neo is not afraid to say it, my stomach clenches with the force of their restraint. Ifeanyi is so fragile, I will never forgive myself if she’s hurt like that.

“Where are you going?” Amara shouts after me as I begin trudging to the exit, my feet stop their movements. Everyone is looking at me strangely, like I’m losing my mind.

“I’m going to find that son of a bitch and kill him. Styles send me Cele’s location.” He nods at my instruction, sitting around and guessing is not going to change anything. I ignore Amara’s plea to stay and rush out the door. I will find her, I will find Ifeanyi even if it’s the last thing I do.

To be continued...

BURN

34

BHEKIZIZWE...

Not only is Ntsikayethu a sports person, he loves nature too. Something I don't understand, he forces me to take walks with him admiring trees, that's what he calls this walking... thing... Mother-nature appreciates it when we praise her works blah blah blah... Here I am in the scorching heat, taking this stupid walk with him. I'd rather be at the court playing.

"You're distant lately ndoda, I'm worried about you." My brother says, jumping over a big log standing on his way.

"I'm fine," I lie easily when I have secrets that need to stay hidden.

"You can tell me anything, you know that right?" Not

anything, he wouldn't understand that I think I am falling for the biggest idiot I've ever met, a beautiful idiot who caught my attention at first glance. That I keep track of his movements and can't go to bed without him running through my mind, he's the first person to wish me good morning when I wake up as his sweet smile plays before me.

"Sure," another lie to get him off my back.

"There's a beautiful stream behind that big tree, we can sit there and talk." Did he say a beautiful stream? I don't want to talk about me and my problems. If it's him we're talking about, then I'm game.

The stream is beautiful I have to give it that, but the left side of it is as dirty as a riverbed making it appear dark. I find a rock to sit on while Ntsika picks stones and throws them in the water.

"Hey, move up." He says, spotting a comfortable rock to perch himself on, beside me.

“No way, find somewhere else to sit.” He laughs as I stretch my legs to cover the space. “You’re such a bully.”

“I’m older, so I’m allowed to bully you.” His push is so hard that it tosses me in the water, between lanky branches that hang lazily to the ground covered in leaves of sea foam green. I fall face first. I can’t swim and have a phobia of water, the deeper the scarier. He knows this, but teases me about it. His loud chuckles pester me as I frantically try to get out of the water. There’s something under me, I can’t make out what it is and the water in my eyes make it hard for me to see anything.

I suck in air when Ntsikayethu pulls me out. The fool continues to laugh, I hate this shit. He doesn’t understand my fear for water and it’s not a laughing matter.

“There’s something in there Archie, it...”

“Voets ek, Archie is your grandfather.” He spits back, knocking on my laugh box.

“I’m serious man, check between those branches over there.” My finger moves to point at where I had fallen, he scratches his head and with a scowl coating his face, Ntsika moves to inspect.

“Shit, it’s a body. Quick, call the police.” A hysterical shout from him gets me moving, it’s a body of a black woman lying face down. We look at each other, horror evident in our faces.

THANDIWE...

Life without Ntuthuko is easy, I don’t have to look over my shoulder every now and then. He doesn’t know that I live with Nqaba, I don’t want to know what he’ll do if he finds out. I’m glad his face has not come before me since I came back from Kenya, Nqaba says he’s agreeing to the divorce. I hope he won’t fight me for Zulu. My baby is making progress, hopefully he’ll be home soon.

My friend looks like hell, I'm such a bad acquaintance. Bulelwa is going through so much and I have not availed myself to him. It's funny seeing him in a work uniform.

"But you can't live like this. What are you going to do? Marry the woman?" He shrugs. Mandla is not fair on him.

"Maybe I should. I won't be the first gay man to marry a woman." He has given up faith and it's not like him to be so negative.

"Bubu, you can't do that, are you insane? Think about yourself." He rolls his eyes at me, shuffling on the seat.

"That's exactly what I'm doing. You don't know how hard this is for me. I need him by my side Tee. Is it so wrong for me to want my father with me?" Why is he so emotional? It's not like him to burst into tears.

"Are you pregnant? Please tell me Beastie is the father, he's my favourite." An attempt to make him

laugh, I get two out of ten as he manages a chortle.

“Doti.” (Nonsense.) He spits, using a finger to wipe his tears.

“What happened?” He accepts the offered hand of comfort.

“I don’t know Tee, I can’t breathe. My anchor of strength has rejected me and right now I will do anything to have him by my side.” Choosing to marry someone he doesn’t love for his father’s sake is a bad idea, one he will live to regret.

“You need to talk to him Bubu, sort things out. I’m not going to let you marry that girl, even if it means we kill her and bury her in a shallow grave, then so be it.” His eyes widen at the choke released from my throat.

“Thandiwe Biyase, what has Thor done to you?” A smile gradually pulls at his lips, it’s not there but it’s there.

“I’m serious Bulelwa. I know you, you won’t survive a minute with that woman. If your father loves you, he will accept you.” Bulelwa sighs in response,

giving me an inquisitive look.

“I’ll talk to Lilian, there’s something I need to sort out first. I need to go to Ntuzuma.”

“Back to your roots?” It’s a joke, he doesn’t laugh. His face is drenched in nervousness.

“It’s for my uncle, remember that story I told you?”
Yes, it’s sad how his uncle died.

I spend a few more minutes with Bulelwa before checking out, Ngaba was going to fetch me, but I’m upset with him, so I request an Uber that will take me to where Zulu is.

I must say the looks the Uber driver keeps steeling are making me nervous, I’ve heard stories about them and looking at me through the rear view mirror sends an SOS message to my sixth sense.

“Excuse me, you’re going the wrong way.” Doesn’t he have a GPS?

“I’m taking the shortest route sisi.” What? I have been to that hospital a number of times and there is

no short cut. “And we’re there, so relax.” He says, pulling outside an old brick house. The house looks abandoned and it’s in the middle of nowhere. I don’t see any other buildings but this one. When did we get here? How did I miss this? I was so focused on my phone that I didn’t see the direction he was taking.

“Where are we? This is not my destination bhuti.” He denies me an answer and jumps out of the car, I follow him and fear claims me as I see my husband walking up to me.

“Wifey, wifey, wifey.” Scornfully, he ridicules, forcing a kiss on my cheek.

“What’s going on Ntuthuko? Why am I here?” A smirk leaps on his mouth, it’s deadly and spine-chilling.

“I’m taking back what the devil stole from me,” a laugh accompanies his words. “My brother thinks he’s smart, but nope, I’m the educated one here.” He seethes, grabbing my hand.

“Let me go.” I scream as loud as I can, his voice dances to my screams, a haughty laugh.

“Relax wifey, we’re in the middle of nowhere. No one will hear you, you can scream as loud as you like.” With one scoop, he throws me on his shoulder like a bag of potatoes.

NQABA...

Thandiwe is late, I knew I should have fetched her when she texted saying she’ll find her way to the hospital. Reboana’s presence didn’t treat her well and she’s still upset.

“Have you heard anything?” Neo came with me to the hospital, I’m glad because I would be going crazy trying to figure out where Thandiwe could be.

“No, her phone is off.” It’s unlike her to turn it off, she knows she has to be here by 4pm.

“What about the friend she went to see, try her.” Great idea, “I’m going in, I need to use the toilet.”

And with that, he's out of the car trailing towards the hospital entrance.

"Bubu hello." Thank God he answered, I saved his numbers the day he sent me a text message to check up on Thandiwe.

"Nqaba here, is Thandiwe with you?"

"Thor, hi darling. No Thandiwe left an hour ago, she's probably home by now. Why don't you call her?" It's unlike Thandiwe to keep her off.

"Thank you." I end the call, to try Thandiwe again.

"Dammit, where are you Tshabalala?" I have to go back home and check if she's there, otherwise people don't just disappear.

NTUTHUKO...

"Where is she?" The woman with the plans says, this is all her.

“Tied up in the room,” my words put a smile on her face.

“I’m proud of you son, good job.” I love hearing these words from her, making my mother proud is my greatest achievement.

“You’re the mastermind mom,” It was her plan to abduct Thandiwe and request to have an exchange...Zulu for Thandiwe. Settling on the couch, she leans back and throws her feet on my lap. I hate this, I almost roll my eyes at her. She wants a massage, I don’t know why she doesn’t go to a beauty spa like most women do.

“I Know Mzi will find her before the week is over,” then what was the point of kidnapping her? “He’s sleeping with your wife.”

“Like I don’t know that.” I acknowledge her remark, a little louder than I should. The black look is forever present.

“Here.” She places a small bottle in my hand containing brown liquid. “Put a drop of this in her

food, this will make her weak. Next time she sleeps with him, her body will fight her. It's either she dies or falls ill. Her death will be beneficial to us, meaning we will have Zulu to ourselves." Death is a little too extreme. "I know what you're thinking, there's no time for sympathy Ntuthuko. It's your fault that we're in this mess, this time I'm in control and you will not mess up our plan." And I thought I was making progress, is this not the same woman who said she was proud of me seconds ago?

STYLES...

"Don't be hasty when you get in there Randall, you need to stay calm." I instruct Randall while we wait for someone to open the door at Cele's house. At this point I expect anything from Randall, he's angry and when he's angry his humanity switches off.

"Randall!" He doesn't reply, but holds this frown on his face. I came here with him after Amara asked that I follow him and make sure he doesn't do

anything stupid, meaning kill someone. Because that's how he feeds his anger, he tortures you to death. He tortured Olivia the mother of his daughter and not once did he feel sorry for her.

If Cele is not around, then his family will fall victim to Randall's wrath.

And just as I thought a little girl about the ages of fifteen and sixteen opens the door, her widened eyes move between the two strangers standing in front of her. Randall has no time for her, his eyes have found their way inside the house, probing.

“Hi, is your father home?” I ask, trying not to scare the girl. She nods negatively and that has Randall pushing his way in the house. Stunned, the child screams for her mother. I move in to see a frail woman seated on a couch, a drip is attached to her wrist and she has a non-Rebreather oxygen mask over her face. Two girls younger than the one who opened the door scoot to the sick woman's side.

Randall has kicked open every door he could find in the house, he comes back playing the strings of anger and dancing to its rhythm.

“Where is your husband?” He sounds calm for someone who is drenched in wrath.

“My father is not home.” Says the door opener, perching herself on the arm of the chair beside her mother.

“Where is he?” Randall repeats the question, his voice is close to spraining, but he’s fighting the emotions.

“I don’t know, he hasn’t been home in a week. No one cares where he is.” The same girl answers, I take in her appearance and how she spews viciously about her father. Oversized track suits in this heat? That could only mean one thing, she’s either a victim of rape or lives under the chains of molestation every day.

“What’s wrong with your mother?” I get a frown from Randall for my probing.

“She has cancer, stage four.” The strain in her voice forces tears out of her shifty eyes. She’s terrified by Randall, which I fully understand. The man is fuming, chest rising and falling.

“Where do you think your father is?” I notice that the more we speak of Cele, the more her face clips, a certain hatred for him rests behind her eyes. The girl shrugs her shoulders in response.

“What...do...you...want...with...m..”

“He has my sister.” Randall replies to the sick woman's question before she finishes it, her eyes expand confirming that she knows something.

“He took her.” The girl in a track suit interjects, tears parting down her cheeks. “He took her.” A repetition...it’s not shocking when she falls on the floor weeping, her hands pasted on the concrete

floor, head bowed and sobs telling the story of her pain.

“I told you mama...I...I told you... to report him. But you...you said he’s my father, now he’s done it to another girl.” It takes a while for her to finish her words as tears come in the way of her syllables. The mother can only cry, without a word, I turn to find Randall glaring at me. The confirmation has shattered him, I see it in his eyes.

“What do you mean?” I know what she means, but we need to confirm things before jumping into conclusions. We have to wait a while for her to compose herself with Randall growing increasingly impatient next to me.

“M...my fa...my father comes to my room...every night and rapes me,” I am proud of this child, it’s not easy to admit to have been raped. An unexpected sob leaps from Randall, he smashes a hand on his mouth to block it. This is Amara all over again, I

know it reminds him of her. I watch my brother tilt his head to hide the tear that sneaks out of his eyes.

“Randall...” His heavy footsteps take him out of the house, he doesn’t cry and sure as hell not about to cry in front of strangers. If Cele is what he is then Ifeanyi has been molested and probably killed.

To be continued...

BURN

35

THANDIWE...

My heart rejoices as my eyes taste the sight of the man I love, I didn’t think I would ever see him again. In my head, it’s been a while since I last saw him, since I have been locked up in this room. He still looks the same, nothing about him has changed. The oversized pants that annoy me and the collared shirt, at this moment I wouldn’t change anything

about him.

I breathe in his structure as he stands at the doorway, his thick lips curving into a wide smile which I find strange, Nqaba hardly smiles fully, he simpers... It doesn't matter, he's here to take me away and I couldn't be happier.

“I knew you'd come for me, Nqaba.” Gratitude and relief leave me, he accepts them with a broadened smile. I have questions at the back of my head, they are far and I can't reach them. Doubt being at the top of the chain, my heart can't accept this complaining spirit. It's too happy that the love of my life has come for me.

“I'll always come for you, ndlovukazi yami.” That's a new one and why am I not okay with him calling me that? I should be elated, right? But there is something about the way he says it, a hidden possessiveness...Entitlement...it's like he would have nothing else but me and would stop at nothing

to have me as his queen.

“What took you so long?” He’s standing in front of me, his eyes have lost their usual colour. I know these eyes, but today they are different. I can’t get over how unsettling they are, the hope I would see in them is not there.

“Don’t you know?” His eyebrows raise in question, one I don’t have an answer to. My body jerks as his hand brushes against mine, unpleasant shivers ripple through me. Nqaba is not cold blooded, I know his skin to be warm.

“I have always been with you, from the beginning and I will never leave you.” The words that are meant to comfort me churn my innards, a great need to throw up arises. Scrunching my teeth, I win in pushing the bile back to obedience.

“Thank you coming for me Nqaba, Ntuthuko said I will never be free from him. We need to go now, before he comes back.” he gives me a small smile, I

don't want a smile. I want him to get me out of here, I need to be with my son.

"We'll go, there is no rush." He says, his eyes boring into mine. He looks at me like I'm a toy he lost and just found. My whole being swims in an uncomfortable pool, usually I would be happy about it. But not tonight, regretfully, I hate that his eyes are possessive.

"I don't understand Biyase..." His hand jolts from mine as if my hand electrocuted him, he takes a few steps away from me, his features scrunching up in pain and a flood of irritation tapping in his eyes.

"Don't call me that..." It's a snap, one I don't understand, he's a calm man and so this is new.

"Why?" My question takes me closer to him, I'm looking for the love that usually illuminates from him into me, it's not there and I need to feel safe. For the first time his eyes have failed me, there is no security in them. Just a dark hole, hallow and emotionless.

“Wena ungowami ndlovukazi.” (You’re mine my queen.)

He says, his hand getting to work, removing my attire from my body. I assist by raising my hands so the garment slips over my head without any hassles.

My head works overtime to figure out how and when we got on the bed, his weight on me deprives me of air, he doesn’t feel the way he normally does, I love Nqaba on top of me, but today I hate this feeling and I want him to get off. I’m not comfortable, the inside of my skin is crawling.

A million ants eating away at my flesh, I want to scratch desperately, but he has me pinned under him and I can’t move. My heart is against this, it wants to speak and push the words to my mouth, the mouth that refuses a collaboration.

His naked body pressed on me makes me want to vomit, why am I feeling like this about Nqaba and why does he want to make love to me in this place?

“Let’s go home, please. I’m scared.” The answer I

expect doesn't come as he literally licks my neck and face, his tongue feels slimy and disgusting. A foul smell on his mouth knocks my nostrils, the need to vomit intensifies. Lurching becomes a problem and so it remains only a feeling.

"Get of me, Nqaba." I don't want this...I don't want this, I want to go home...I want to be away from him. My heart doesn't recognize him, my skin rejects him and my arms won't acknowledge him.

"Ungowami, Mapula." Terror fills my eyes, making them as wide as golf balls. This cursed name, I know this name. My senses pick up and a need to fight arises, but my body is frail. He raises his face and I scream as I meet the old man who's been haunting my dreams. He has eyes of a snake, hardened features and his skin cold as a winter's night. He smiles, pinning me harder on the bed. The image of him makes the hair strand straight up on the back of my neck.

"No, no, no." My mind can't provide anything else

but this one word, in my head I think he will stop trying to enter me. Every fibre of my being freezes in fear, feeling him rub against me. I want to close my legs, reject him...push him away...anything. But he's pushing in and this is when my spirit takes over. He's taken my voice from me, I can't breathe, but I feel my spirit fighting.

“This is your destiny Mapula, to be with me,” I go crazy with fear, hearing these words from him. The Oldman cackles with brutal, malicious laughter, the laughter of an evil man.

“Wake up Thandiwe, wake up. You need to pray sisi.” There is so much insistence in the voice that calls out to me. It's an unfamiliar feminine voice, I am awake, I know when I'm dreaming and this feels nothing like a dream.

“Vuka MaMshengu, vuka.” My ears recognize the second voice, it's my father. He's here?

“Baba, help me. Help me, Tshabalala.” The verses

surge from deep within my stomach and I'm surprised that I can finally speak. The old man is rigid and remains on top of me.

“No, you're mine Mapula. You're mine, you're mine.” He hisses, his eyes flickering with anger.

“Baba ngisize, Mshengu, Tshabalala, Mavuso, Nombe, Sdwaba siluthili.” The Mshengu clan names wind out of me...I keep hearing the feminine voice telling me to pray, but I jolt up to find the room empty and realization is knocked into me as my mind registers that everything was a dream. But it felt so real. I can still feel the old man's weight on me. I can't breathe, my stomach churns violently. I make it to the nearest corner and throw up all my stomach's contents.

“MamShengu.” My father's voice echoes in my ears, I can't still be dreaming. “Thandiwe,” I hear him behind me, his voice sounds suppressed like there's a blockage on his throat. This too doesn't feel like a

dream, his presence feels so real I can almost touch him. Spinning to scrutinize, my eyes widen with shock and a loud scream fizzes out of me.

BULELWA

Going to Kwamas hu was a last minute decision, something I decided on last night. This trip will do me good, I need it. Emotionally, I am drained, people drain me, places drain me and familiar faces drain me. I didn't quit my job, but being a daredevil I took this chance in hopes that I will find it waiting for me when I get back, since...well since my father has turned his back on me and Lilian is not allowed to support me financially.

The gorilla didn't take his car, like he knew I wouldn't survive a second in a public transport.

It's mind-boggling for me to want to put myself second just to have Ndlondlo back into my life, he's

a huge part of me, a part I can't let go.

What I said to Thandiwe sounds crazy and unlikely, the thought has been ghosting around my mind. Hence I'm taking this trip to Ntuzuma, it will determine my faith. Maybe I will find myself along the way and when I get back Mandla will be so proud of me that he will forget his anger and embrace me just as I am. I would have him come with me had he not been so stubborn and filled with hatred and bitterness.

Speaking to a therapist friend of mine, he said Mandla's resentment is caused by the trauma he faced as a child. He sees his brother in me and thinks I will face the same fate as him. He was so young when Gcinumzi was attacked and ridiculed for being gay that his mind convinced him that it was wrong and gay people deserve nothing but death. Now I must drag the man to a therapist who is gay because I don't know any other who will be

willing to help me for free since I'm a poor man and can't afford to buy myself the latest phone.

This is going to be one lonely ride, maybe I will learn to heal on the way. I spoke to my father's lawyer Markus, some fool who walks with his ass up expecting the world to kiss it. The bastard told me point blank that he won't be able to help me lest I showed him proof that I can afford him. The nerve of that monkey, after everything we have done for him. Well...after everything my father has done for him, same thing...I am an Msibi so I'm allowed to wear my father's shoes and I know I would fit perfectly in them.

After locking the door, I turn and lo and behold a figure lurks in the dark. I'm not a fan of ghosts, they scare the shit out of me. I decide to hurry to the car, my eyes zooming in on the figure until it comes to light and my heart does something foreign like leap to my throat at the sight of a man.

I had succeeded in avoiding him at work the past few days, I haven't spoken to him since I threw him out of my house. He looks better, way better. We stand in silence, eyes acknowledging each other, no words said until his throaty voice breaks the silence.

"Going somewhere Buttercup?" Curse that name, I told him not to call me that. The man's voice is more warm than sunlight on amber, he has that air of power, total confidence. I like that.

"Yes," my response is cold, he drops his head and his haughty nature won't let him keep that big head of his dropped for more than a fraction of a second.

"Great," he opens the back of the car and tosses his bag in. Flabbergasted, I observe him move to open the driver's side and jump in. "The keys?" What in the actual fuck is happening here?

"What are you doing?" My feet are glued to the ground, this man better explain now. He hasn't apologised for almost breaking my nose, I've forgiven him, but that's a secret of mine I will not be

revealing any time soon.

“Are you coming or not?” Whose car is it again? Why am I willing to obey? He could tell me up is down and I’d follow him to hear more of his sweet words. And here I am, following the idiot into my car, no questions asked. I feel his eyes stabbing me as I buckle up on the passenger’s seat, the gaze is so enthralling that it compels me to raise my eyes to him and find him staring with a smirk pulled at his lips.

A twinkle dwells in his eyes, there’s something in the way he glances at me, like he’s doing so much more than just taking in my form. There’s so much I want to say to him, but I reserve it for when he decides to piss me off, KZN is far and this bastard’s egotism will want to be a part of the ride. I will show him that I do not play with little boys.

NTUTHUKO...

Strange whispers nudge at me as I approach the room my mother is in, I had left her alone in there. Who is she talking to? As I get closer they sound more audible, I strain to listen against the shut door, curious and investigative.

“It is done great one, there won’t be any mistakes this time.” Mom says, fear and reverence dancing together in the stage of her voice.

“Don’t mess this up again woman, you think that man is powerful? What they create together will destroy me.” No human speaks with such tones. His voice rises and falls, hissing as it speaks. “I failed to plant my seed...”

Suddenly it goes quiet, the door swings open before I get a chance to move away from it. A black cat dashes out of the room, passing on my feet as if chased by a dog.

My eyes immediately fall, to hide away from mom’s disdainful glare. The red head wrap on her head puzzles me, the woman doesn’t wear head wraps.

“What are you doing?” Her eyes are questioning, Barbra doesn’t shy away from anything. I stand curious as to who she was talking to, moving my gaze inside I don’t see anyone.

“Who are you talking to? How were you in there with a cat? I thought you’re terrified of cats.”

Crookedness cages her eyes, affirming that she is hiding something.

“What are you talking about? I was on the phone with a friend.” I follow her inside and a spine-chilling sensation consumes me. The room wasn’t this cold when I went to check on Thandiwe, as if something sinister lurks in here.

“Since when are you a spy Ntuthuko? Your job is to make sure that Thandiwe doesn’t escape, but you’re spying on me, the only person you should be trusting, you’re an idiot. Those kidnappers should have toughened you up a bit. Why must you be weak? Can’t you be like your brother Mzi?” There is no need for her to be so defensive, unless she has

something to hide.

“Mom,” I call her, positioning myself on the chair beside her. “You wouldn’t hide anything from me, would you? We’re in this together, right?” Her features do not shy away from the frown knocking on her surface.

“What are you talking about?” Humans are frail, our emotions give us away in the way we talk, no matter how cold hearted you are. “You know what? Don’t answer that, you’re a grown ass man Ntuthuko, yet you speak and think like a child. I don’t see a difference between you and Veronica, you’re useless man, useless.” She shouts, storming out of the room.

NEO...

Randall and Styles are out looking for that moron Cele, people have death wishes and Cele has touched the untouchable. Whether Randall finds him or not, he will not be free from the hands of the

Okolies. Ancestors or the living.

Styles said we shouldn't tell Randall about Segun's spirit searching for him, the plan is to wait it out and see what move the ghost will make, which I doubt he will make any. He's helpless and lost.

“Thandiwe, Thandiwe.” Nqabayomzi shouts, dashing into his apartment. I wait for him in the lounge while he checks the rooms in the house. Nqabayomzi drove like a crazy maniac on the way to the apartment, claiming something is wrong with his Tan-tan. Talk about being whipped, women can't keep their phones off without men like him freaking out about it.

“Neo.” The panic in his voice draws my attention, I throw the remote on the couch as I sit up straight. “We need to find her.” Shoulders dropped, he speaks with defeat and a glint of pain peeking behind his dilated pupils. The sound of my ring tone steals my chance of responding to this love-sick

man standing in front of me.

“MamSonto!” She hardly calls me unless it’s important.

“Something has happened Neo, Zulu’s mother is in danger.” I can’t miss the urgency in the tone of her voice. Ngaba needs to hear this, confusion kissing him, he draws closer as I motion.

“MamSonto, I’m here with Mzi. Thandiwe’s...” He frowns as I gesture that he introduces himself... What are they really? Because Thandiwe is married. “What is sis Tee to you, Mzi? Or uena u side dish eahae, makhwapheni? The stern look in his eyes chides me. “Okay MamSonto, I don’t know what these two are to each other, mara ke entanglement.” I get a frown for adding on my speech.

“Biyase.” With a grave voice, MamSonto acknowledges him.

“Yebo mah!”

“Thandiwe is in danger, come to my house now.

Neo knows the place, there's a demon after her and she will perish if we don't save her." We're dealing with demons now?

"No MamSonto, what is your God doing now? I don't mind dealing with enemies, not demons. Those things possess people, my Zee modimo. How will she handle sleeping with a demon?" Nqabayomzi frowns at my prattling, shaking his head. It's like looking at Uze, strict and too serious for my liking. I'm not going to fight the devil, I barely survived with those gangsters.

"This is serious Neo, two lives are at stake." MamSonto says, she doesn't know that I'm also serious.

"What do you mean two lives mah?" Nqabayomzi has grown curious.

"Let's not talk on the phone, I'll explain everything when you get here." And with that she drops the call.

"What's going on?" I think I'm very much aware of what's going on, I've dealt with the supernatural

before and it's not for the faint hearted.

“There's a spirit after Thandiwe's life, it claims that she belongs to him.” He speaks like he knew this day was coming, his voice quivering. Face hard and unwelcoming.

“Sis Tee has a spiritual husband?” The question evokes something dark that surges to settle in his eyes. Wrath...Fire...deadpan features...teeth grinding...mouth crimp. With quick steps he scuttles out of the house, leaving me to lock up.

STYLES...

A source at Hellen Joseph Hospital says a girl with the same descriptions as Ifeanyi was brought in, we get to the hospital sooner than the word defined.

Randall's strides are faster than mine, he's almost running as the nurse walks us to Ifeanyi's room. She was raped, smothered and left for dead at a

swamp. We need to be prepared for the worst when we see her, she will recover, but she will need help to deal with the trauma. The nurse explains, Randall hardly hears a thing, he's desperately marching to Ifeanyi's room. Eyes wide with anticipation.

A man seated on her bed jumps to his feet as we walk in, Randall looks between the man and Ifeanyi. A grimace building up on his face, his mouth forms into an unpleasant twist. The man is hardly intimidated by the angry dark man before him, but he makes way by moving to stand at a distance.

"Who are you?" Randall spits, deadpan tone

"He's the man who found her." The nurse answers.

"My brother and I found her, I don't mean to intrude. I thought it would be best if I stayed with her until her family..."

"We're here now, thank you." Randall cuts in, his tone dismissive. He hovers over his sister to kiss her swollen face. This is the most vulnerable I've

ever seen him.

“I’m here now Ife, your brother will take care of you. I will keep my promise this time and I swear I will find whoever did this to you. You’re an Ashanti princess and this will not be forgiven.” It’s in his voice, a solemn promise. Cele better run, I’ve witnessed the wrath of the Okolies before. It’s sad for his family because they are all doomed.

To be continued...

BURN

36

THANDIWE...

“Baba, what’s wrong? Why are you here and why do you look like that?”

“What’s wrong with you, Thandiwe? Have you forgotten how to pray? Is your spirit so weak that

you can't remember you belong to God?"

"How do I belong to God when that old man says I belong to..."

"Enough!!! Do not decree the devils words, you are a child of God." He shouts, I have never seen my father so angry.

"Am I dreaming baba? I don't understand how you're here." He steps forward, giving me a closer look in his angry eyes.

"You're too playful Thandiwe, for years your ancestors have been lenient on you and this demon has made your soul his territory. You need to fight Thandiwe, fight for your life, fight for your child." Although his voice is quiet and concerned, his eyes depict a great amount of rage, not directed at me.

"Zulu is at the hospital baba, I wanted to tell you and mah but I couldn't break your hearts like that. I'm sorry." With hushed silence I speak, fighting the big lump on my throat.

"I'm not talking about Zulu, but the one in your womb. It will be a miracle if you reach two months.

Your eyes are yet to open, you're too blind my child and the devil will take you away if you don't turn the lights on."

"A baby in my womb?" My hand instinctively flies to my belly, how am I pregnant?

"Get out of this place Thandiwe,"

"But how baba? My husband locked me up in here, he won't let me go." My father shakes his head, he reaches for the top of my head and palms it.

"Be strong and courageous my child, your God is with you. Have faith Thandiwe, Daniel trusted in God and the same God shut the lion's mouths when he was thrown into the lion's den so they may not hurt him. You do the same, it's going to be a long journey, but you will overcome." I want to believe his words, but that old man's confrontations scare me.

"Baba, he calls me Mapula. That's not my name, why does he call me that?" That's the same man who makes me question my sanity, so much that if

anyone were to take me to an asylum I would not fight them.

“Do not listen to the devil’s lies, remember the word says resist him and he will flee from you.” My father says, eyes filling up with tears. His forearms streak with green veins that pull on his now pale white skin, I freeze seeing how my father appears like a corpse that’s been drained of blood. His eyes are more wild than a deer caught in a trap, his feet a few inches off the ground.

“BABA!!!” A horrific scream reverberates in the room.

“I’m...not stro...ng yet, he’s fighting me. G...go Thandiwe, go my...child.” There is something in his declaration, a pain behind it.

“Baba, what happened to you? Why are you like this?” I can’t be seeing a ghost, no. My father is not dead...he’s not dead...he’s not dead. I want to curl up to a corner and cry my lungs out, God can’t take my father.

The creaking sound of the door unlocking pulls my

ears along with my eyes, the second I turn back to my father, he's gone. I can't help the tears mocking me, it hurts so bad.

“Mapula.” It's a whisper, a blood-curdling one. Thinking about my father's warning I turn back to the door to find the doorway standing there as if it's an invitation to run out of this place.

NQABA...

“Mzi, when you get in there please don't be like Uze. Keep watch of your words and your attitude. MamSonto is a divine woman, God will strike you dead if you disrespect her. Also, kneel when you greet her, we all do that.” Neo instructs as if I were some wild man who lacks morals.

“I know how to show respect towards adults.” The door flings open with my words, an elderly woman stands before me with the warmest smile I have ever seen. I love how her eyes light up as she glances at the fool next to me.

“MamSonto.” Neo salutes, going down on his knees, the act draws a chuckle out of MamSonto, she sends a hand behind his head and a light smack sends Neo back up on his feet. “Ouch MamSonto, what did you do that for?” He rubs his big head like it’s actually painful.

“You’re an idiot,” sniggering, she declares turning to me right after. “Did he tell you to kneel when greeting?” A nod from me and a twitter from her.

“Come on, you just had to spoil the fun. I’ve always wanted to see Uze on his knees and Mzi is kind of like him. You’re a dream thief MamSonto.”

The old lady is defeated, moving her head back and forth.

She lets us into her humble abode. It’s a beautiful house, has the touch of a woman. A mother’s touch, I can’t say it reminds me of my mother because she never fully bothered about house chores. A young lady about Ifeanyi’s age is positioned on the couch, we’re greeted with a smile before she leaves to get refreshments.

Neo has requested for Oros, the colder the better, he murmurs that they don't drink alcohol in the house, hence I shouldn't ask for any. I'm pretty sure MamSonto wouldn't have had a problem if I came here alone. I'm accompanied by a lunatic.

"That's my niece Orabile, she visits me during school holidays. The house can get lonely."

MamSonto says helping the girl place the tray filled with pastry and two glasses of juice.

"Dankie, dankie Ora." Neo's tone familiarises with the child, a bashful giggle is her response.

"So MamSonto, sis Tee has a spiritual husband. Mzi and I have concluded this fact." Neo begins, mouth filled with scones. He's comfortably perched back on the couch.

"We did not conclude anything Neo." I refuse to think that's the case, not my Thandiwe.

"Neo is right, Thandiwe has a spiritual husband. There's a dream that was wiped off from her memory where she was married off to this strong

man.” Concern prickles me, I’m heated mostly.
“That man is angry Mzi, he wants her back, but you’re powerful together, you and Thandiwe.”

“Wants her back how? She was never his.” A smile plays on her face.

“I’m telling you this because you’re the only person who can save Thandiwe from the strong man. Her mother couldn’t conceive, desperate, she sought the help of a witch doctor.” MamSonto narrates the story about how Thandiwe was brought to the earth. Neo’s face falls in wonder and disbelief, I don’t blame him. Although I am far from being shocked, I am livid.

“I was shown a vision were he came to her dream and tried to sleep with her,” my hand tightens on the glass of juice, I can’t fathom how this could happen to my Tshabalala. “He wanted to plant a seed inside her, but Thandiwe is with child. The seed you planted inside her is stronger than the evil man.”

“Wait, Tshabalala is pregnant?” I ask, her voice rises

with a chortle, it's soothing.

“Yes, the child is the one to destroy that demon. Her birth will bring his destruction to the evil one, she is your love combined. It was destined that the girl child will be the one to be powerful enough to tackle this matter. Zulu's birth was easy because he served no threat to the evil man.”

“You mean Zulu is my son.” Her famous smile answers, moving ahead of the following audio.

“Yes, you come from a powerful dynasty Mzi. Your ancestors from both your fathers are protecting you, they are fighting your battles.” MamSonto delivers shock after shock, it is too much to grasp.

“Fathers, MamSonto? I have one, Biyase.” There must be a reason behind her smiles, they don't answer anything though.

“That's all I can tell you Mzi, your identity lies with your mother. Another thing, I need your sister here. She's surrounded by darkness and can't find her way out, bring her to me for cleansing.” Like I said, the blows are one too many.

“Do you say that because of her condition?” She nods, attesting to my words.

“That and more, I would tell you everything Mzi, but a family will be destroyed in a second. You will find things out as you go along, for now you need to know that that child is betrothed to three men. I see unnatural men claiming her, her life is disarrayed and nothing will ever go right for her. No man will ever want her, even if it happens that she finds a man, the relationship won’t last. They will always leave her.”

“This is too much to grasp mah, how is my sister so unfortunate?” I ask, moving to the edge of my seat as heat surrounds me. I need a glass of water, I can’t think straight.

“Your mother has all the answers, one day the truth will be revealed.” Her demeanour tells me that she won’t be sharing anymore. “I’m going to help Thandiwe, it’s going to be risky, but with fasting and praying God will see us through. The devil is

powerless in the presence of God.” She stands to take the dishes to the kitchen, leaving me with a million thoughts running through my mind.

“Is she done?” Neo queries, he’s too loud and his voice sounds strange. Looking at him, I realize that he’s got earphones on his ears. The fool hardly heard a thing that was said. “Is she done Mzi?” An annoying shout from him, he would know if he removes those darn earphones from his ears. He does so at my gesture.

“You’re off tune even when you speak, what the fuck?” If he were a little more dramatic, he would roll his eyes at me.

“I didn’t want to hear any stories about demons and the devil, I’m go...” His remark is left halfway as he spots MamSonto walking back and plugs the earphones back on his ears.

“Don’t worry about Thandiwe’s safety, she will be fine. I can’t see where she is, but I can sense her spirit. She’s fine, she will make it back home.” Like

she knew I was going to ask, she articulates.

“Was she taken?”

“Yes, I would tell you where she is, but all I see is a dense dark forest. Thandiwe is stronger than she looks Mzi, she will make it out alive.” If only her words could comfort me, I need to go after Thandiwe.

BULELWA...

“Are you done sulking or should I get you a pacifier?” What did I say about his arrogance wanting to come along on the ride? Someone remind me why I agreed to travel with this man and why he’s driving my car.

“The one who needs a pacifier is you, you’re the baby after all.” I spit back and my words find him chortling.

“I’ll take that as a yes and look, there’s a garage. Let’s go and see if they have one or too because

you, Buttercup have a big mouth.” From where I’m seated he has the biggest mouth. He’s looking over me grinning and I don’t know why.

“Whose son are you?” I ask, feigning curiosity.

“Why?” The grin remains.

“I would like to offer them an apology for birthing an asshole like you.” With my nose high, I fold my arms across my chest, looking out the window. Zizwe snorts and without a word continues to drive, a minute later the car stops. We’re at a garage, a petrol attendant approaches.

“Unleaded sisi.” My hand plummets into my small waist bag in search for my card. I guess I’m a bit slow, there goes the petrol attendant with Zizwe’s card.

“Hey, I have a garage card. Call her back.” He looks at me, I have splashed him with the biggest insult.

“Why are you looking at me like that? That’s what we use to pay for petrol, garage cards.”

“Is this a habit of yours Bulelwa? Flaunting your father’s money around us poor folks?” Why would

he say that? I'm not flaunting.

“I hope you're not about to sing a song about how the rich look down on the poor because I am not in the mood.” How about I piss him off and have him hitch hike back home. I might just love annoying him.

Zizwe's smile moves a little too slow and his eyes take in my form from top to bottom, then a grin spreads over his face, showing his grown ass man teeth. In this moment his motives are laid bare. He seems to enjoy the images playing in his haughty head.

“One day buttercup, one day.” He says, taking his card back from the petrol attendant. His ‘one day’ declaration has me sweating in all the wrong places, my forward dirty mind has played out all the unnecessary things that would happen on this ‘one day.’ I'm still stunned and disciplined when he starts the car, the idiot is satisfied with himself that he starts humming to Afro beats. I'm going to get him for this.

THANDIWE...

The woods are ominously quiet, all that I can hear is the sound of my footfalls and the leaves crumpling under my feet. It is yet to be determined whether the dark is my friend or foe. Growing up in the village I am used to it, but not the eerie feeling that accompanies this dense forest.

The woods close in almost covering the moonlight, a bed of stars is adorned on the dark velvet sky, there is so many of them that God himself would have a hard time counting them.

I'm running like my life depends on it, which it does. I don't know where fate is taking me, nor am I aware if I will make it out alive.

My father has always been a respected honest man, lies were against everything he was and believed in.

He told me to run and I know he would not lead me in the shadows of darkness. My eyes haven't adjusted to the violating gloomy dusk...

My breathing stops with my heart, to listen closely on the extra pair of footsteps trailing behind me. Fear you bastard... It creeps into me like a spider on a web, funny how my body that always falls into trembles can never get used to them. I can hear my teeth hitting against each other as my mouth quavers. If whatever is behind me can smell fear then I'm a goner.

A sudden heat engulfs my body, hearing the sound of a snake hissing. I stop my tracks, I think I'm about to have a heart attack.

"God of Daniel, deliver me from evil. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I know you are with me." A silent prayer, my mother used to say he is the God of now, the God of the impossible.

The courage to turn must have come from the same God, I know I'm scared when everything in me freezes. Standing face to face with a snake is not normal, none of this is normal. I want my life back, my old boring life where I lived in the village with my parents and was in love with the most amazing man. Not this nightmare...

“Mapula” The voice knocks breath out of my lungs... it speaks. What did I expect? It's as big as the next tree in this thick forest.

“Let's go home Mapula.” It hisses and laughs with taunting laughter. My thoughts tumble to the darkest places, places no human could ever imagine.

“J e...J e...” the name is at the tip of my tongue, but it won't come out. I'm going to faint any second, I know this because my head is spinning. Shutting my eyes to wish the snake away, a vision comes to mind.

‘Let’s try it again MamShengu, you have to perfect this.’ My father’s voice resonates in my ears, I’m ten years old, seated on his lap and I feel safer than I have ever felt in my life. The holy bible is gripped on his right hand, he’s teaching me verses for Sunday school and I have to make him proud. He is a deacon and the whole congregation expects perfection from his family.

“Joshua 1:5 No one will be able to stand against you as long as you live, for I will be with you as I was with Moses. I will...I will.” I’m stuck, I can’t continue. My head fails me, it won’t bring the words to me.

“I will not leave you or abandon you.” He finishes and cheers in the process.

“We did it baba,” Excitement in my voice, I proclaim scooting from his lap so I can jump around the house.

“No MaMshengu, you did it.” With a smile warmly fondling him, he reaches his arms motioning that I move into them. I’m swallowed in my father’s

arms...safe..home...my hiding place.

“Remember Thandiwe, whenever you feel defeated let this verse come to you. Meditate on it and let it dwell on the table of your heart.

“Mapula, Mapula, Mapula. You’re weak, he will never protect you. You’re mine, Mapula.” The snake hisses with authority.

“You demon from hell, you’re a liar. I bind you in the name of Jesus.” My heart is racing and I don’t have the strength to fight this snake, I want to curl up into a corner and wait for someone to save me. The snake slithers as if boasting about its victory.

“Mapula is coming home, Mapula is coming home.” I swivel at the sound of voices behind me to find three boys in jubilation, only they don’t look like boys but little men with long grey beards, bald heads and potbellies. I could hear my pulse banging in my ears, sweat drips down my back and my body goes cold. Every natural body movement halts, trying to force myself to move is futile.

To be continued...

BURN

37...

NEO...

“I think we should go back home Mzi, we’ll resume the search tomorrow.” I don’t like this, I don’t roam around the bushes in the darkness of the night. Thandiwe is nowhere to be seen and if we carry on the search we’ll get lost in this dark forest.

“You go, I’m not leaving without Thandiwe.” Stupid idiot, love is stupid actually, I mean look at us.

“We’re black mara Mzi and you know the devil targets us for some reason. Why do you think witchcraft is practised by black people? Makhooa are not afraid of that shit, that’s why ba na le bo Harry Potter, le bo Cinderella. That’s fancy witchcraft.”

“What?” He wouldn’t know, he doesn’t watch television.

“I’m just saying man, this is not worth it. There are so many women in South Africa, beautiful women. Ho feta sis Tee, you’ll survive Mzi, you’ll survive.”

“You’re not about to start your shit right now, I’m too worried about Thandiwe to entertain you, Neo.”
Black person look at you, I’m trying to help a brother out and he rejects my hand.

“It’s not shit, ebile I’m offended. People like you are the cause of unemployment in this country, you...”
Ngabayomzi cuts through my words like a knife, spinning to stab daggers at me.

“How about I tie you to a tree, go look for Thandiwe and maybe come back for you?” He growls, pushing me against a big tree. Due to darkness, his eyes are not that visible so I can’t decode, what’s written behind them. It could be murder, he’s capable of it because men who are in love are fools.

“How about we go and find Thandiwe together?” I

articulate, stepping away from the angry beast.

“I thought as much.” He murmurs and the big bully walks past me. My phone vibrating in my pocket startles me that I jump to grab the sour man’s arm.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Sorry, I slipped.” The lies we tell...Zee is livid wherever she is. I’m pretty sure she’s standing on top of the bed cursing me and the brats in her stomach.

“And screamed like a girl?” I didn’t scream.

“Just so you know Mzi, I’m going to be a father to triplets and I have a boy waiting for me at home. If anything happens to me, yoh ntwana. I will haunt you saan, I will haunt you until you ask God to raise me like he did Lazarus.” The threat is welcomed by a chortle, we’ll see if he’ll still be laughing when he’s face to face with a ghost.

“This is messed up Neo, how did I let her go? I should’ve insisted on fetching her.” He’s not about

to cry on me, is he? Men don't do pep talks."

"I trust MamSonto with my life, she's been in this line of work almost her whole life. If she says sis Tee will be okay, then she will be okay."

"Then where is she?" People like Nqabayomzi give in to anger so easily, surely he can keep his voice down. We're in the woods for Christ's sake, anything might be listening or watching us. I am not about to face creatures of the night, my heart won't be able to take it.

"Lower your voice Mzi, we're going to find sis Tee." He frowns upon my remark, ducking a huge branch hanging from a big tree.

"Do you hear that?" My heart stops with his tracks, why did I agree to accompany him?

"What?" I'm perched up on him, eyes browsing the dark forest and that's all I can see, nothing but darkness.

"Water, there's a river close by. That means there must be life somewhere close." He explains and without warning changes the course of our

direction. I will die if I follow this man, I'm not good with rivers. I have tried to stay away from them since Bensen and his cult.

THANDIWE...

How do you define strength? Having been surrounded by evil and facing it eye ball to eye ball, I am dazed by how I'm still alive. My heart should have stopped by now. Those three creatures carried me to a hut and kept me locked up, it feels like it's been hours since I've been kept in here.

The place reeks of urine, traditional medicine and some odour I can't untangle. I'm struggling to breathe, there's no air coming in my lungs. I prayed till I felt like I was talking to myself, faith and fear do not mix and at this moment they are entangled together. This has to be a nightmare, my father is silent. I expected him to come to me hours ago and get me out like he did back in that house.

RANDALL...

The doctor said Ifeanyi will be okay, but she hasn't opened her eyes. In a way I'm glad and I feel bad about it. I don't know what I will say to her when she wakes up. How will I explain what happened to her?

"Baby," Amara's voice soothes the pain in my heart, it's not entirely but enough to allow me to breathe. Fighting the lump on my throat, I turn to face her.

"Those tears do not suit you, me hemma, you look strange. If R.J were here, he would be crying and running away from you." (My queen.)

The joke is to lighten the mood, get her to stop crying. I know it hurts and this conjures painful memories. We can get through this, we will get through it as a family. A puffing chortle, she falls into my arms sobbing painfully. Her face buried on my chest to curb the noise, it's past 11pm. The hospital is soundless.

“Don’t finish your tears now, you’ll need them when you decide to be dramatic and blame me for things I didn’t do.” I say, holding her tighter and shaking my head to deny the tears that threaten to flourish and use my eyes as an escape.

“Don’t start,” pulling away from my embrace, she wipes away her waterworks and turns to Ifeanyi. “What are we going to do Randall? How are we going to pacify her?”

I wish I had an answer for her, my mind is blank. When my sister wakes up, she will be in the most excruciating pain. The terrible memories will come flooding in, I worry as to how she will deal with them. I will never be able to change what happened, however I can make those who hurt her pay.

“Ife will need us more than ever, we’ll have to be there for her.” It’s the best I’ve got, Amara sighs, taking Ifeanyi’s hand into hers.

“How did this happen? How did we miss this

Randall? She came to me last week and hinted about how uncomfortable she was at work.” She tells me, her teary eyes glued on my sister.

“These things happen every day. It’s shocking when it happens to someone you know and worse someone you love. We can’t protect the females in this country, we just need to change. But there will always be men like Cele, we might wipe them off the face of the earth and another one will surface.

They’re everywhere, breeding the next generation of rapists. It’s a sad reality we can’t run away from and change is inevitable, but it needs everyone to come together which is mostly likely impossible.”

My arm enfolds over her shoulders, her head soundly rests on my chest. Amara and her stubborn tears. She will have me crying as well, which is something I can’t afford. My family needs me to be strong.

“Has he been found? The man who did this? I want him to pay Randall.” Given a choice, Amara would

not know about my shenanigans.

“I don’t want you to think about that.” The tone of my voice marks her statement as inconsequential and this should not be repeated. Another sigh manages to sneak out of her, it’s not necessary for her to know everything.

NQABA...

The award for the best nit-picker would go to Neo, he’s close behind me. Not once has he led the way. I understand him, he is afraid. The quietness of the woods make it easy for me to hear Neo’s phone vibrating in his pockets, he’s too focused entertaining fear that he can’t hear or feel it.

“Your phone is ringing Neo.” I notice that his hands are shaky as he rams them into both his pockets, but one side gives him the mobile.

“It’s MamSonto.” He says, not even a kid would smile like that on their birthday. It’s understandable,

MamSonto carries a presence that makes you feel safe. Must I always tell him to put her on speaker?

“I don’t know how this happened, the evil man must have changed fate. He has Thandiwe, there’s a hut close to where you are. Keep moving east and you will find it.” Neo raises his gaze to find me staring back, I can’t tell what he’s thinking, but I’m glad we’re close to finding Thandiwe.

“MamSonto, is he there?” How can one man be consumed by so much fear? He will have a heart attack if he doesn’t calm down.

“You need to relax Neo, trust in God.” That’s the advice Neo would usually give, not today, the man is shaking like a leaf. “I prayed for you, you’re both covered and angels will go before you. Don’t let fear feed on you, be strong and courageous. Be strong.” And with these words she hangs up, in silence we move along the bushes. Thank God for the moonlight or we wouldn’t be able to see anything, I won’t be surprised if Neo sees nothing but sheer darkness.

“Look, there’s the hut.” There is only one beam of light illuminating outside, voices of what sounds like men sniggering or quarrelling, I can’t really make out.

“I’m not going in there.” Of course I expected him to say that.

“It’s not like you have a choice Neo, we’re here so we might as well do it.” He hates my remark, the snort gives it away.

“You see Mzisto, this is what happens when you fall for your brother’s wife. Matata fella, sheba nou. I almost died three times because of a women and twice those women were not even mine. Now I must die again, no Ntuks must come and get his wife.”

“Maybe if you talk less, we’ll be on our way home with Thandiwe by now.”

“Thandiwe from where? Are you talking about the girl who’s trapped in that hut? Mzi let’s be serious

here, this is a hopeless situation. Are there people or creatures in that hut? MamSonto spoke about covering ourselves with the blood that could mean that demons are in there. If I don't die today, I will never die again." Again? He talks as if he was caught in the hands of death before.

"I'm going in, if you stay here, they might catch you first." This is so he follows me, I know Neo is a coward. He can't stand the darkness.

"Mzi ntwana." He sends a whisper, shaky and terrified. I can hear the fear in his footsteps.

"MamSonto said I should take care of you, you're not supposed to leave me behind like this. I'm the one who's powerful enough to cover you with the blood of Jesus." Neo lies so naturally, it's normal to him.

"Sure." I would entertain him and I'm sure he would love that, however I have a woman to save.

I have made out what those three men are from this distance, Neo is oblivious to the fact and I'm glad or

he would be screaming his lungs out if not faint. An evil presence lurks in this place, the hairs on my body rise. Familiarising with fear, I'm able to curtail myself, I can't say the same about Neo who is shivering beside me.

The hand he's decided to grip on my arm, tightens with every move we take. I would yank my arm away, but let me not scare him further.

"The blood of Jesus, the blood of Jesus..."

Murmured repetitions from Neo, if those things seated around the fire could smell fear then, our plan would be ruined.

The door to the hut is open, peeking in my eyes meet a bed and there she is, lying down. A red lit candle gives light to the room, making it easy for me to see that it's really her.

"Watch the door for me, I'm going in." I tell Neo, taking a step in, but he doesn't let go of my hand. He's holding on for dear life, I turn to find him glaring at the creatures seated around the fire.

“Who are they?” The fear has moved to his throat, his voice is hardly recognizable with the way it wobbles when he speaks.

“Just stay here Neo and whistle when they move.” Stupid thing to do as it will alarm them, but we’re here and there is no turning back. The hut smells like a toilet and reeks of umuti (traditional medicine.)

My heart leaps at the sight of Thandiwe, she’s alive.

“Thandiwe.” I shake her and get no response from her. A few more tries get her to open her eyes, they appear heavy. She’s looking up at me, her eyes don’t recognize me, like she’s looking at a stranger. Something is amiss, it’s either she was heavily drugged with muti or she’s under a trance.

“Tshabalala get up. We have to go, get up.” The heavy presence in this room is weighing me down, I can’t lose hope though. I’ll have to carry her out of here. If I knew how to pray, I would pray for her. Neo can do that when we’re far from this place.

“Finally, what took you so long?” His voice is still shaky, he keeps his gaze between me and the creatures. His eyes big with fear fall on Thandiwe.

“Is she dead?” He’s serious. “We can leave her here if she’s dead, dead bodies are heavy, you know?”

“What are you doing here? How dare you trespass Makhafula’s compound.” A small, yet ear-splitting voice hollers, Neo turns immediately as if someone pressed the swivel button. His eyes widened, he mumbles a few words that do not make sense. I don’t blame him, these creatures are weird looking. They don’t look human, although close to it. It not a while when Neo falls face down on the concrete floor, I can’t believe he just fainted on me.

To be continued...

BURN

38...

NQABA...

I think of calling the woman of God and have her pray us out of this situation, it's the only logic thing I can come up with. Since my friend here thought falling in a faint was his greatest escape. Growing up in the village you come across creatures like this while gallivanting at night with your friends.

I have seen things that made me question my sanity and prove the existence of the anti-Christ. These creatures don't faze me, they are just zombies generated by a witch who wishes to have the world in the palm of her hands.

With the knowledge I have of Neo, he would reprove me for chanting his name in the presence of evil, so I send my foot to nudge him back to realism.

Oh finally he's moving, like a fool he agrees to take panic as he opens his eyes and they immediately skirt his surroundings, fear smothering him once more. Does MamS onto know how much of a

coward Neo is?

“Shit,” he blasphemes and bolts to his feet, in a split second he is hiding behind me.

“What the fuck am I looking at?” Neo doesn’t cuss, he hates profanity. “Zom...Zomb...” he stammers in a quaver.

“It’s good you’re still alive, I have a plan.” For some reason these creatures are scared to come close, they haven’t said a word since Neo collapsed. The same fear engulfing Neo is the same one held on their faces as they flap about on one spot.

“I also have a plan...RUN MZI, RUN!!!” With this shout he takes off running, leaving me to deal with these creatures. My eyes dart to him for a few good seconds before whirling to Thandiwe in my arms. I have one option left, get her to wake up. If love is the most powerful force in the world, then my plan has to work.

“Tshabalala,” her empty eyes are glancing into mine. I know nothing about this look in her eyes that conveys nonentity. I know how my Tshabalala looks

at me. Her eyes dance with love and affection.

“I need you to be strong for me Tshabalala, we have to get out of here and I need you Tan-tan.” Sending whispers in her ears, I hope for the best. The zombies are glaring with frightened eyes and I don’t know what’s running through their minds. Whatever it is must be scaring them to death.

BARBRA...

“Where are those three idiots? The appointed time will pass.” Veronica is fast asleep now, she’s more vulnerable when she’s sleeping. This stupid child almost ruined my life, she owes me this much. Five years old was the perfect age for her and she failed to do a measly task, one simple task. Her incompetence almost cost me my life, giving her off to spiritual husbands was the only way I could make up for her failures and have the Great-one pardon me.

“You’re always worried when it comes to le ntokazi.”

(This lady)

Sgwili says, scuttling on my lap. He's my trusted source, has been with me for as long as I can remember. No one knows about him, they would surely burn me to death. What normal human keeps a talking black cat as a pet? I was brave enough to accept the gift my grandmother passed on to me while my sister thought it to be a curse and ran off to Nigeria, changed her identity and married herself off to royalty. I deemed her stupid of course, who would pass the opportunity of having the world at the tip of your fingers?

Never did I think I would birth a child who is as feeble as my sister, Veronica is a disappointment. I can't express the amount of hate I have for her.

“Do I have a choice? I have to keep a close watch on her. Makhafula will have my head if I slip up again, that ugly witch is never satisfied. He wanted my son after I gave him Veronica, he couldn't get to Mzi and

thought Ntuthuko would be the perfect weapon to keep them apart. Thandiwe needed a distraction and marrying her off to the brother of the man she loved was mastermind. But their love has proven to be strong, not even a marriage certificate has kept her from falling back into the arms of Mzi.”

Thandiwe and Ntuthuko's meet up was not a coincidence, everything was planned from their meeting to the day of the wedding. Little did Thandiwe know that it was I who orchestrated her life, till the day she fell back into Nqabayomzi's arms.

I wish I could say I hate him as well but he is my son, I don't understand the protection surrounding him. How his ancestors choose to protect him the way they do, my powers do not work on him. I wanted control over both my sons, with Ntuthuko it was easy. I had him kissing my feet at a very young age. Nqabayomzi will be the cause of my death, it's no secret.

“Can’t you kill Thandiwe, get her out of the way. Your son gains strength from the love they share, once Thandiwe meets with death, Nqabayomzi will be weak. He’ll lose the zeal to live and you can have him under your control.” Sgwili can be stupid sometimes.

“You fool.” He growls as I shout and jumps off my lap. “Thandiwe can’t die before her time is up, if that happens her soul will go to her Maker and not Makhafula. She has to die the second she turns twenty six and Mzi is protected. How many times do I have to tell you this? Weak heart or not, his ancestors are beyond me, they are stronger. Those bloody idiots, I don’t know why they don’t mind the business of the dead and leave us alone.” Cursing from the depths of my heart, I shift on the seat opposite Veronica’s bed. It’s suddenly hot.

“I’m sorry, ndlovukazi.” He scampers back to me. Something is wrong, every inch of my body is sweltering with heat. I move to the window and swing it wide open, there is enough wind to ease the

heat, but instead it intensifies compelling me to strip naked, whimpering.

“I thought MaZwane was off the hook, you’re visiting her again?” How did my grandmother leave me with a stupid cat?

“I’m burning up you idiot, someone has lit a fire Sgwili. I’m burning, ngiyasha.” I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m pacing back and forth, fanning myself with the garment on my hand. “Hayi, huh, no man. Sgwili ngiyasha, ngiyasha.” (I’m burning.) My voice rises a little, I can’t control it. There’s a dampness on the nape of my neck, I’m not sure I can stand the heat anymore.

“What’s going on Ndlovukazi?” Sgwili asks.

“He found her, that useless son of mine has found Thandiwe.” Numerous screams erupt from my mouth as I jump around trying to cool my boiling body. The noise has Veronica jolting out of her sleep, this is one of the things I hate about her. Normal people do not wake up after we have put them in a trance, but Veronica is different.

The child is aware of everything I have been doing to her, hence she fears me. Her eyes bug-out and my mind falls into a muddle as I can't grasp how she's able to scream today. Usually I'm able to clog her voice, Duma will come running and I can't afford that.

“Go Sgwili, go now.” At this urgent warning he scuttles out the window at my command. I know my husband's footsteps, it takes a millisecond to throw my garments back on.

“I don't want to do it, I don't want to do it.” Curled under the covers, my useless excuse of a daughter repeats a familiar denial. If Duma walks in here and finds her in this state, I will be in trouble.

“Shhh, shut up.” I didn't expect that she would scream when I chide her.

“Vero,” argh, this father and daughter get on my nerves. I move away from her bed to make space for Duma so he could comfort his sweet Veronica. With annoyance crawling under my skin, I observe

the father trying to get his whimpering daughter to show her face from under the sheets. He hardly recognized me, since I cease to exist when she's around. This will give me time to jump into a cold shower. Sgwili better do something or I will die tonight.

BULELWA...

I'm not sure if it's safe to park the car in the middle of nowhere at around 3am at night. Zizwe is daring and instead of irritation filling me, I find it very attractive. I'm surprised I have kept my hands to myself, his presence makes me sweaty and breathless.

I think he has a thing for lakes, he's been ogling at it for more than a minute and I think he is meditating because no words have come out of his mouth. Suddenly I feel a need to swim, it is a beautiful night and the water looks refreshing. The lake is met by the moon with such grace as if two of them are

enchanted by an eternal dance, with the stars reflecting on it.

Call me a creep, but I don't feel bad for stealing glances at Zizwe. The lines on his face carve the story of a sad life, his clenched jaw speaks of a man who lives in sorrow more than a child giving away laughter. A sorrowful face I have never seen. A film of water have made his eyes glossy and his face is fallen, submissive to gravity. Zizwe holds the face of a man who is in search of happiness... himself and maybe acceptance from the world. Although, I have deemed him the type that does not care what the world thinks.

"Let's go for a swim," the silence is starting to get on my nerves, so why not break it? He's leaning up against the car, arms folded across his chest, a little frown swaying on his face.

"I don't swim." A face will tell you things before a word is spoken and I have to say that I saw this coming.

“Come on, it’s hot and we’ve been travelling for fairly a distance now, I’ve been meaning to tell you this, your armpits aren’t doing you justice brother.” His face turns, stern.

“I’m not your brother.” I’m thrown off by his sudden grunt.

“Relax ndoda,” that’s what he and his brother call each other so whatever, a grin jerks on his lips. I swear I can almost see and feel his sick desires, he probably wouldn’t define them as sick, but pleasurable.

“Do you want me to be one?” His eyes probing... digging...slurping my soul...I didn’t realize that I was retreating until my back hits the car, he’s got me cornered, towering over me. I wish I was tall like him, it would be so easy to duck because I don’t want to crave in the middle of nowhere with no one to satisfy my needs. This Zizwe bastard is the last person I want to have inside me, maybe I’m lying but his arrogance gets to me. It crawls under my skin and travels to the most sensitive parts of my body.

“To be what?” Something tells me I’m going to regret asking him this.

“Indoda yakho?” (Your man.) He digs his face on my neck, the sensation of his tongue builds me up in a nice way. I want to touch him too, but I know he’s teasing me and will leave me hanging. This is the torture we face as submissives... What am I saying? I will never submit to this man.

“What are you doing?” Breathless, wheezing, I question his acts and motives. He doesn’t respond but moves away and looks over the lake. Jaw clenched, he rubs the back of his neck, blinking away and mumbling something I can’t make out.

“Let’s go, Ntuzuma is far.” He says, toddling to the driver’s side. I have not driven my car since we left Joburg, I miss my baby.

“If you want to leave, then leave my car. I will drive myself right after a nice swim.”

“I wish I could say your stubbornness is a turn off, but I would be lying. Be careful Buttercup, my desires aren’t so kind. One slip and I will not be able to control myself, you will hate me for taking you hard.” The idiot ladies and gentlemen, just sang praises to himself. He thinks he’s good in bed.

“Please, such arrogance. Who have you fucked that has confirmed your allegations?” I try for a smile, its intentionally fake, contradicting with the shrewd smug playing at his plump lips. Not getting an answer from him, I strip off my jeans and t-shirt, I will not be leaving this place without that swim.

His eyes are curious and undisciplined and he better explain the boner on his pants. I have to clear my throat to get him to stop crafting my body with his gaze. He looks away, not bashful about what just occurred.

Zizwe is going through something, I will have to get comfortable first before asking him what’s eating him. For now, I need a swim.

THANDIWE...

I hear him, I hear Nqaba's words, yet he's so far from me. Fear is louder than him, I can't silence its voice. I'm in the dark, trapped, lonely and cold. That man is here with me, I can't see him but he's wrapped himself around me. Clogging my chances of moving.

"Fight Tshabalala, I'm here. I won't leave you, fight." Nqaba's voice is comforting, but I don't know how to fight. I'm weak.

"T...tell me how...tell me how and I will do it." It's a mental response, inaudible. He won't hear it.

"Thandiwe, Thandiwe, Thandiwe." The voice of my father barks with authority...reprimanding...sounding stronger than the last time. I want to call out to him and tell him that I'm here. "Are you at daggers drawn with your Creator? Why the stubbornness Thandiwe? Pray Thandiwe, pray."

“He took my words from me, I can’t speak baba. He makes me forget how to pray.” My mind replies to him.

“Foolish child, don’t you know God is an invincible God? He knows everything and sees everything. He is waiting for you to call upon him, Thandiwe, call on God now or you will perish.” My father shouts with so much anger. My head is cluttered, there are so many things running at a speed of light. My heart feels like it’s drenched in ice, I remember him though. The God my father speaks of, he’s a silent God, but he’s always there and he’s here in this dark hovel with me.

“God, help me. Help me, you said you will never abandon me. Help me Lord, get me out of here.” At first, my chest closes in as the old man tightens himself around me. There’s a hissing sound in the air, he appears to be losing his strength. The enfoldment loosens from me as I move along with desperate pleas to God.

“That’s it Thandiwe, come back to me. Come back to me.” A jerk takes ownership over my heart, hearing the closeness of my beloved’s vocal sound. His large strong arms enwrapped around me. He’s near, his scent is now heady its almost poison, one I would gladly consume and die peacefully in his arms. It crashes down my nostrils, easing me into a homely space. Even fear has ceased its torments on me.

Eyes that give promises, fulfilled promises, are the first thing I see. My true home, they are looking down at me... calling... owning... possessing... the right kind of selfishness.

“Welcome back Tshabalala.” His salutation is a winded gasp, I never thought I would hear his voice again. “Can you stand?” I think I can. Gently and leisurely, he places me down planting a lingering kiss on my forehead. Our reunion is taken away by a serpent slithering into the hut, but stops at a

distance away from us. The creatures are here as well, goggle eyes fixated on Nqaba and mouths ajar. Fear seems to be reigning over them, something about Nqaba has them terrified

“That snake...it...it speaks Nqaba.” I snitch, pulling his arm to get his attention. His elongated silence straps me in the seat of worry, he could be thinking I’m crazy or better yet, he could be thinking of a way out...I comfort myself.

NQABA...

Thandiwe telling me that the serpent can speak is no shock, I’m standing in the presence of zombies, anything is believable right now. Serpents are fast and this one is ridiculously big, nothing I’ve never seen in village. If we try to manoeuver past it, one of us won’t make it. These three baboons are not a problem, they lack power and brains.

We're trapped in a corner, a snake and zombies threatening to take us out. In the blink of an eye a wood lit with fire flies into the hut. I look up to see Neo at the door throwing in more burning woods, aiming for the snake that hisses with anger. It won't move from the direction it wants to take and that is towards Thandiwe, while I on the other hand will not give my heart to the devil. I will leave this place with Thandiwe alive.

"Mzi..." Neo pauses, horror claiming his eyes. "Sorry, I called your name. Get out ntwana, get out of there. I've got you covered." He continues, tossing more of them. We could move, but the serpent is on the way.

"Ne..."

"Huh ah, huh ah. Don't say my name, the devil is listening." He interposes with a loud scold.

"Aim for its head." If he hits the target, we'll be out of here in a flash. I'm not bothered about the Zombies.

Grabbing Thandiwe's hand, I get ready to run out. It

takes Neo two missed targets before he actually hits the snake on the head. It is not enough to kill it, but blind it for a while. Thandiwe follows me as I dash towards the exit. I don't care to glance behind me, Neo grabs Thandiwe's hand and starts running. "Close the door ntwana and run," his advice dashes to me as he runs hand in hand with Thandiwe, she is not strong to be running like that. Her wobbled tracks are evidence, but Neo doesn't care, survival is playing loud in his head that it has him distracted. As I follow behind him after closing the door, sharp screams emanate from the hut engulfed in flames. The devil is on his way back to hell. Great idea Neo.

To be continued...

BURN

39...

BARBRA...

“Barbra open the door.” What does he want now? Is Veronica sleeping already? I’m not jealous of their relationship at this moment, I want to be alone, soaking in this cold bathtub. “Why is the door locked? Open the door.” He’s pissed off, Duma can be a nuisance sometimes.

“I’m busy baba,” I send a shout, deep down I’m annoyed by his persistence. He can’t see me like this, I know he will surely ask what the problem is.

“Why are you taking a bath at this time? Is everything okay?” Is he supposed to be asking me that? As a man, he should be minding his business.

“It’s hot and this is the only way I can cool down, please go back to bed. I’ll be with you in a while.” I hear him grumble before the sound of his footfall take over. What the devil does that grumble mean? Queen of witches, Duma better not be suspecting anything. Sgwili is useless, where the hell is he?

BULELWA...

I don't remember setting a wakeup call, why is my phone infuriating me so early in the morning. My brain sends a message to my hand to fish for the loud phone under the pillow. I accomplish in opening one eye, the other is stubborn. Lilian will not let me be, I guess I have to take her call because she will never stop calling me.

"Mama ka Bubu," even my voice is on strike today.

"Open the door, I'm outside." What? She followed me all the way to Ntuzuma?

"When did you get here?"

There is no place like home, I always feel at peace here like my spirit knows that this is home. The overwhelming serenity that fills my heart is unexplainable, we arrived early this morning. My parents have a house here in Ntuzuma, my father's cousin sister lives with her husband and their children two boys Qhaphela who is my age and Silwelane, he's eighteen and their last born daughter Notofo the brat is fifteen. She's literally a

brat, if he could her father would roll the red carpet for her everywhere her s crawny feet trample.

Mandla and Lilian didn't want to leave the house vacant and aunt Deliwe was the perfect candidate and reliable enough to take care of Mandla's property.

"A few minutes ago, get up and open the door Bulelwa." The devil follows you everywhere.

"I'm sleeping Lilian, aunt Deliwe will open for you."

"What is that woman doing in your house? You didn't tell me you..." My house? Where is this woman? The confusion sets me on my ass, Zizwe slept on the floor, so unnecessary. I offered we share the bed for the sake of being hospitable but guy blankly refused. Said he wouldn't be able to touch me all night without losing it. I don't know what night he spoke of because it was morning when we arrived. I thought I was dramatic, but Zizwe...

“Where are you, mama ka Bubu? I’m in Ntuzuma.”

“What?” I have to remove the mobile from my ears when her loud voice disturbs them. “Is this how it is now Bulelwa? You do things without telling me?” It’s really not as deep as she makes it seem.

“It was a last minute decision.” It’s too early for this conversation, I don’t like talking so much before brushing my teeth and this mother is ruining my day. “I have to go aunt Deliwe is calling me.”

“Wait, I think I should I come over there. Deliwe won’t know how take care of you, she’s busy with her flock. She won’t know how to prepare your eggs and...”

“Hiabo Lilian, I am not a child. You’re embarrassing me, I have to go bye.” I’m quick on my hands. I need to clean up before rushing to the kitchen, I hear loud voices when I exit the bathroom. Zizwe is among them, my family has probably embarrassed me. It won’t be shocking if they are filling Zizwe in on my childhood.

“His head was bigger than his body, he was that type with big feet, a big head and a small body.” Silwelane that bastard, I will get him for this. The whole crowd bursts into laughter, they haven’t seen me approach yet. How would they when they are engrossed on gossip? Zizwe spots me first. Why did my heart leap to my throat at the wink he just threw at me? I can tell that this family has amused him. Deliwe and her cooking skills, my stomach grumbles at the sight and aroma of her food.

“What happened? Why are you suddenly quiet? Continue talking about me.” I sputter, finding a seat next to Zizwe.

“Morning to you too Buttercup.” A whisper that has my insides dancing in a tingly sensation. Oh no, I don’t do that morning shit. What the hell is he eating?

“What’s that?” He shrugs, digs his fork in whatever the Gordon Ramsey is on his plate and shoves it in his mouth.

“Tongue.” The audacity he has to open his entry and admit to feasting on tongue.”

“Whose tongue?” A suppressed snigger is his response, my insides turn as he eats like it’s steak.

“Come on Bulelwa, your father grew up eating ulimi. It was his favourite actually.” Deliwe throws her coins in.

“I have seen a cow’s tongue and it’s not something I would throw in my mouth, all that slimy...”

“Hey, your friend is eating. Manners bafo.” That’s Qhaphela, he has a tendency of jumping into my mouth.

“It’s okay bafo, I’m not bothered.” Zizwe says, he should be bothered. “Butter...” Eh Eh!!! This man...he clears his throat before changing his speech

“Bulelwa is special.” I get a smirk, it has a hidden naughtiness, one the villagers will not get. This man is too smart for his shoes, I should reprimand him for this.

“How long will you be around?” Deliwe’s husband Sphamandla inquires, need I mention the uncle hates visitors. He won’t say it to your face, but his

actions and demeanour speak for him.

“I’m not sure yet, I came to get justice for Gcinumzi.” It appears I have dropped a bomb, Deliwe and Sphamandla exchange looks. A conversation I cannot make out. Zizwe regards me with a puckered brow. I haven’t briefed him in on why I’m here. He hasn’t asked as well, so I can’t really bombard the guy with my problems.

Saved by Zizwe’s ring tone, my eyes drift to the screen of his phone. ‘Sugar Puss.’ He finds my inquiring gaze...probing and nervously snatches it.

“I have to get this.” He’s up before I could ask who Sugar Puss is, damn it, my heart is acting up. Doing things I am not accustomed to, flipping and stinging. Jealousy prodding at me, my eyes track his steps until he is out of sight. Everything in me says I should follow him and find out who he’s talking to. ‘Sit this one out Bubu.’ I discipline myself.

RANDALL

Ifeanyi is awake, but unresponsive. My sister is staring up at the ceiling, without blinking. It's been like this for the past two hours, the only thing that emits from her are tears.

"I think we should call the doctor," Amara offers, we did that when she woke up and the doctor said there's nothing wrong with her.

"She's in shock Amara, the doctor will tell us the same thing he did." Ayize is here too, she understands what Ifeanyi is going through as much as Amara. I believe they'll be able to help her through this. I can't show my face to her, not when I failed her.

The doctor prescribed pills, fortunately there was not much damage due to being in the water. She was found on time and had she been found a day later, her story would be a tragic one. The bastard thought she was dead after strangling her and disposed of her like trash. Nkosi is taking long with this one, I want to get my hands on him.

Grandfather will have to leave this one to me, Cele will be sorry he ever laid eyes on my sister.

“Randy baby,” The concern in Ayize’s voice snatches me out of the imaginary world, I find it in her red-rimmed eyes as well. “Our Ife is gone, the Ife you knew is not coming back. The moment everything registers and she starts talking, be prepared to face a different person. She will be more cautious, less trusting of strangers and more fearful. Her wounds will heal over the next weeks, but her mind will remain shattered.”

“He took her soul Randall, our Ife is gone.” Amara interjects, tears running from her eyes. In this instant my blood grows cold at the sound of a familiar sob, it stops my heart and instantaneously my gaze hails to Ifeanyi. She’s trembling...sobbing...whinging...it’s more than crying, it’s the kind of desolate sobbing that comes from a person drained of life.

Her gasping wails echoing around the room slice my heart into a million pieces. Amara is the first to get to her, arms of comfort encircle around Ifeanyi, though she doesn't hold her back. Her head falls on Amara's shoulder, mouth open as a painful silent sob takes over. The pain flowing from her is as tangible as a black hole.

"We're here baby, we're here now. You're safe." Oh how I wish Amara's words could comfort Ifeanyi's heart. I turn to the scenery outside the window, struggling to keep my tears silent. Face creased, fists closed so tight I can feel the sweat trapped inside them. A hand on my shoulder forces me to restrain the tears, Ayize stands behind me, in her own tearing session.

"I'm sorry Ife, I'm sorry we couldn't protect you."
Amara.

There is no response other than an intensification of the grief and the sound of struggling to breathe against the crying. It takes me a minute to turn to

the door as someone strides in.

“I’m sorry, I’ll...I’ll come back later.” Or never. I don’t like this guy coming around to see my sister, I appreciate that he found her and had it not been for him...Anyway, Ife doesn’t need to be surrounded by men.

“Why are you here?” The question is for this tall man standing at the door way. Amara’s face crunches as she helps Ife lie back down, she’s quiet again. Staring into thin air, probably lost in that nightmare again, probably reliving it.

“I’m sorry sir, I...I thought...I thought...” His stammering gets on my nerves.

“Speak or get out of here.” I don’t know why my eyes rush to Amara when I snap at this boy, she’s against my reproach. I don’t care, I’m only protecting my sister.

“Randall, he saved her life.” No he didn’t, no one saved Ife’s life. Not even me, that’s why she’s here, in the hospital. A victim of rape and attempted

murder.

“He doesn’t need strangers around her, Amara, I’m grateful for what he did, but I want him to stay away from her. Let her heal in peace.” The man gives me a small nervous smile as he sends his hand behind his neck and begins rubbing it. His eyes darting all over the place, nervously.

“Why are you still here?” I need someone to receive this anger heaving inside me, until I find Cele or else I will explode. The man is not intimidated by me and that doesn’t sit well with me.

“O... Okay, I’ll go. I’m glad she’s awake.” He leaves us with these last words, Ayize gives me a death stare and I don’t think she has the right to do that. She pulls the door closed as she follows the man outside.

“Why did you do that?” Amara queries in a whisper, I don’t need her looking at me like that. I’m already swimming in guilt, it bloody has me by the balls.

“He’s worried about her, Randall.”

“And who the hell is he?” An incredulous gasp from her slaps me hard, her hand claims mine as she pulls me to a corner away from Ifeanyi’s sensitive ears.

“You don’t have to be mad at the world Randall, only one person has to pay for what happened to Ife. You can’t punish everyone for it.” Like hell I can’t.

“Surely Amara, you don’t expect me to let that man anywhere close to my sister, do you?” Her eyebrows crow at my question.

“So, what if he wants to know about her wellbeing? What is wrong with that?”

“Everything, Ife is fragile right now and...”

“And don’t you think I know that Randall?” She intervenes, raising her voice a little too loud. “If anyone then I understand exactly what she’s going through, I know how it’s like to have your soul snatched out of you, but you don’t see me bashing the world”

“Since that is the case, you of all people should understand that strangers will only trigger the

nightmare. Let me protect my sister the way I see fit.” She gives me a horrified look like I said something wrong.

“Like being an ass?” Okay, I didn’t expect this from her.

“Excuse me?” I’m caught in a frenzied exasperation, my eyebrows raised at her.

“Yes Randall, you’re not the only one hurting here, but you don’t notice that. You’re too busy blaming yourself and being angry with yourself that you have forgotten that the rest of us are here too. Ife belongs to all of us.”

“I’m not going to say anything to you right now because you won’t like what comes out of my mouth.” I watch her folding her arms across her chest, lips pursed in irritation. I have to get out of here.

“Where are you going?” her voice reaches me as I get to the door.

“To breathe.” That’s my answer, making my plausible getaway. I’m actually going to find Cele. Perhaps that’s what I need to feel better, this anger is suffocating me.

THANDIWE..

My mother is not taking my calls, I don’t know if she’s ignoring me or busy. Why hasn’t she called and told me about my father’s death. I hardly slept when we got home last night or this morning rather. Memories of my father occupied my mind, it’s hard to believe that he’s gone. I have a headache from crying, this one was sent straight from hell.

Nqaba is not beside me which is normal because he’s always the first to wake up although I doubt he slept a wink last night. There’s a knock at the door, a thought to get up and attend to it comes to mind. I

look like hell and might probably scare whoever is there. Voices emerge from the living room, a feminine voice is amongst them.

A sudden knock resounds from my door, with instant movements I sit up while fixing myself. Nqaba walks in just as I do that, he looks different today. I notice the pair of jeans he's wearing, it's the ones I got him that day at the mall.

“You're awake.” People that ask obvious questions worry me, is it their way to start a conversation?

“You know you don't have to fix yourself for me, I like you ugly and I like you beautiful.” That stupid smile on his face will not get him off the hook, I get a kiss after being insulted. I didn't know I had ugly days.

“Who was at the door?”

“Neo and MamSonto, the lady I told you about. Clean up and come meet them.” Clean up? Clean up? What is wrong with him today? I guess today I'm ugly but he likes me anyway. Stupid.

“I’ll take a quick swim and I’ll be there.” He grimaces, rejecting my remark.

“A quick swim? Take your time Tshabalala, no need to rush.” Hey, listen to this man. I should have checked myself in the mirror the second I woke up. There must be something on my face.

“I can’t get a hold of my mother, she’s not taking my calls.” I announce, deciding to let him be.

“I spoke to my father, your uncle called him last night. The funeral will be this weekend.” This organ, the one that keeps me alive sinks to pit of my stomach. This seals it, my father is really dead. I look up at the ceiling, trying to control the waterworks. Crying should be illegal, it drains your soul leaving you empty. Fat tears start to drop down my cheeks, hot and stubborn, leaving my garment soaked. Crying is hard to hide, no matter how much I try.

Ngaba leans back momentarily, pulling up the sleeves of his white shirt. At least today it’s white

and he looks better than every day. His forearms are streaked with green veins that are comfortably settled on his cinnamon skin.

His arms open, they are large enough to swallow me and so I sink into them, sitting on his lap and rest my head on his chest. The close hug is everything, not enough to stitch my heart back together, but it helps me breathe. I can hear the sound of his heart, dancing away with fast beats. His comforting hands stroking my back, I'm covered in him and he's the best thing that's ever been mine.

“Grief is part of life Tan-tan, we can't escape it. I'm sorry for your loss sthandwa sam, you will heal from this and I will be with you every step of the way. Now I need you to be strong, I understand that you're hurting. But also you need to keep a level head, we're not safe yet and the moment we lose focus we will lose it all.”

I know and I wish I could be as strong as he wants me to be. I never experienced grief this bad before.

It has suddenly sneaked up on me quietly and took me under its wing in an instant, I have lost a big part of me. I will never get that part back, no matter how bad I wish for it.

“My mother is alone Nqaba, I need to go to her” my vocabulary quavers.

“We’ll leave for home today.” He kisses my head, haunting. “I love you Tshabalala, we’ll get through this together.” I nod, burying my face on his chest and clasping my arms around him.

“What about Zulu? Who will keep an eye on him while we’re gone? Ntuthuko will find him, he...”

“My brother will do no such thing, Styles will keep an eye on Peanut.” His voice is virtually inaudible, convincing.

“Now get ready, we have guest.” And that’s an order, the tone of his voice says so. “Don’t forget to brush your teeth.” His last statement as he walks out, I’m not going to forget this... Men mxm...

I finally get to meet the woman who saved my son's life, figuratively. She's warm and approachable. Neo is his usual self, talkative. I'm surprised he's not traumatized by last night's events.

"The war is not over yet, he's a spirit. You can't get rid of him simply by torching him." I was afraid of these words, it baffles me how this demon is after my life.

"Let me just put it out there, I will not be going to war next time. Last night was enough to convince me that the devil actually exists." Neo sizzles, sipping on a glass of water.

"If God wants you there, then you will have no choice but to be there Neo." MamSonto puts Neo on a hot seat.

"Never, your God will have to excuse me this time. Tell him I'm busy or something." MamSonto is amused by his retort and it has Nqaba shaking his head.

"I want this to be over with mah, Thandiwe can't be going through so much. Especially since she's

expecting, how will the baby survive this?" The baby, I'm yet to accept the news. It came as a shock, an unexpected surprise.

"Nothing will happen to your baby, she will be born a healthy child. But something puzzles me, I can't see her after her birth, it's blank." She says, the little features on her face depicting worry and it puts me under a great amount of stress.

"Is she going to die?" My vocal sound tries to deny me.

"God is in control sisi, the baby will be a special child. She will not belong to you, but her father's ancestors and half of her will belong to God. That's double the protection, a lucky child she will be."

"But you said you can't see her after her birth, that means something will happen, right?" I ask, she's not making sense. I can't give birth only for my baby to be taken away from me.

"Prayer will give you the answers you seek, go and bury your father. We will talk when you come back."

I thought I would get clarity from MamSonto, but I'm more confused than ever now. "There's a pot plant I need you to bring for me, it's in your mother's garden. But because you're pregnant, you can't touch it. Mzi will have to get it."

"Don't tell me that it's a talking plant MamSonto, sis Tee said the snake spoke to her." Neo utters, his facial features inquiring.

"No, we spoke about this Neo. It's not my place to tell Thandiwe, her mother will explain everything." With a smile swirling on her face, she gives her attention to Nqaba. "I will give you holy water, you have to sprinkle it on the pot plant before you touch it. There is a special soap you will need to use to wash your hands after touching it, wash them in the river. Don't make the mistake of washing them in a tap at home Mzi, this is a serious matter."

"I hear you mah, I will do just that." Nqaba agrees, adding a head nod, while I'm in a swamp of confusion, drowning by the second. What is the use of asking her questions when she will tell me that my mother has the answers.

“What will happen if Mzi touches the pot plant with unclean hands?” Neo brings a question forward.

“Thandiwe will lose her baby.” Mamsonto articulates, her answer pricks my heart. This road is long and dark.

To be continued...

BURN

40...

BULELWA...

“Aunt Delz, have you seen Hu...” Listen to me. “Have you seen Zizwe?” I can’t find that giant anywhere, for someone as tall as him he should be spottable.

“He went to the butcher with Qhaphela.” The butch... With a sigh, I run my hand over my head. Qhaphela better not introduce Zizwe to those bitches he hangs around with.

“Aunty, what butcher are we talking about here? I watched The Queen and I know Qhaphela is a man whore.” She wipes her hands using a dish cloth, a smile I can’t crack, pulling at her face.

“They went to buy meat, Qhaphela needed a ride and Zizwe offered. He’s such a nice boy.” A nice boy? Does this aunty hear herself? The man took my car, he’s probably giving rides to those loose whores and she’s singing his praises.

“So you let them take my car?” I ask, leaning up against the counter.

“They will come back, won’t they?” She thinks she’s smart.

Walking away, I dial Qhaphela’s number. It’s not about the car, but the fact that he’s out with my- I mean Zizwe. Qhaphela is a typical Zulu man. Sleeps with anything that has two legs, yes- I am making a mountain out of a molehill, I want to because how dare he leave with Zizwe without telling me.

Calm down Bubu, calm down.

Dammit! He's not answering the phone. The thought of Zizwe eyeing someone besides me aggravates me, or someone else wanting him. His eyes are meant for me. He can't look at anyone the way he looks at me, I won't be able to handle it.

I hate these feelings, how long will I have to endure this? Ignoring the thumps and skips in my heart has been harder than driving a bloody truck. I try Qhaphela again, the phone rings for only a few seconds before a deep voice takes over the ringing tone.

“Bafo?” Bastard.

“Where are you?” I make sure he catches the displeasure in the tone of my voice.

“We'll be home soon bafo...”

“Where are you, Qhaphela?” I cut him off, sternly.

“We went to buy food, mom sent us.” He says on the other end of the line, I think my dear brother skipped a grade at school. How does he not get the question?

“Buttercup...” Zizwe’s voice stops the beat of my heart and makes my d**k twitch. Qhaphela that idiot didn’t warn me that he’s passing the phone over. “Is there a problem?”

“N...no, wh...why would there be a problem?” I’m a stammering mess, this man knows what he does to me. That’s why he’s here, he followed me all the way to the village just to make my life hell. I will explode if he does not come back now.

“Did you get my note? I left it on your bed, it explains my whereabouts.” Lord, what is this? Who does that? He’s not even old school, but he’s a note guy. I want to cry, but I won’t.

“I did.” Lies, choke me now.

“Really?” He doesn’t believe me. “You should get ready, there’s a place I want to show you.” Huh? Now I want him home this instant.

“Where’s that?” I ask, forever curious.

“It won’t be a surprise if I tell you?” He says, predicting me a little there. I love surprises, suddenly my heart is at peace. But there is that

vicious feeling deep down, Zizwe is a sight for sore eyes. Handsome as hell and I'm pretty sure everyone who sees him wants him, I cringe at the thought.

“Okay, hurry please.” Shit! I smack myself on the head, stupid, stupid Bubu. The sound of his snicker oozes smoothly in me, comforting my heart.

“I know how you feel Buttercup, I too can't stand being away from you. I die a little inside.” That's it, he's the one. If anyone can turn me into me a marshmallow, then he's a keeper.

THANDIWE...

Ntuthuko's presence at the funeral is settling and also troubling, settling because he is far from my son and troubling because he might create problems for Nqaba and me. No words have been exchanged between us, he and Barbra won't stop

stealing glances at me.

Nqaba has to stay away from me because he is not the son – in-law of this family. My family is oblivious to the trouble brewing in my marriage. I miss him, for two days I had to meet up with him in secret while Ntuthuko came and went as he pleased in my father's compound.

My mother fainted when she saw me walk through the door, there was chaos after that and for a strange reason I couldn't bring myself to comforting her. We arrived two days ago, it's been a few hours since my father has been buried, it hurts more than ever now that it's official.

We're back at home, people have started moving departing.

I think of changing my path, but this is the only

route that leads to my mother's rondavel. Ntuthuko is standing in the way, over dressed as usual. He definitely went shopping for this one.

“Thandiwe” he calls, blocking my way. My gaze is everywhere but on him, he has the audacity to show himself here after what he did to me. How dare he? “Can we talk please?”

“What are you doing here Ntuthuko?” I question, bitterness laced in my voice. His face shudders a little, he rapidly wipes it and wears a deadpan expression.

“I'm allowed to bury my father in-law.” He replies with such arrogance, undaunted...bland.

“After what you did to me and Zulu, you have no right to claim my family as your own.” I tell him, furrowing my brows.

“My brother stole my family from me, what else could I have done?” Should his actions be a splinter in his flesh forever or is he willing to burn the world?

“Protect Zulu, you raised him Ntuthuko. What changed? When did you grow to hate him?” He

shakes his head as if the matter is trivial.

“We’re you two not safe with me for eight years? My brother surfaces from the face of the earth and you decide to abandon me and follow him.”

“That is no excuse for what you did. Do you have any idea what we’ve been through? What my son and I have been through? And it is all your doing, Ntuthuko.” He scoffs as if his ears are hearing nothing but gibberish.

“You’re crazy if you think Mzi loves you, I’m the one for you Thandiwe. I will take you away from him while he watches and there is nothing he’s going to do about it.” I open my mouth to argue, but his threat steals the words from me leaving me with nothing but...

“Excuse me.” Manoeuvring past him, he grips my upper arm, pulling me against him so that our bodies are flush together.

“Tick-tock, Tick-tock.” Ntuthuko whispers, topping it with a chuckle. I’m pushed aside as he walks past

me, arrogance directing his steps.

LILIAN...

“Mrs Msibi, there is someone here to see you.” My assistance Ndongolozzi announces, peeking through my office door. He knows I hate it when he does that.

“Who is it? I’m busy?” A snap paints a frown on his structures.

“A white man, he says it’s about your son.” Who could that be?

“Let him in.” He moves at my instruction, a white man walks in tall and arrogant, flashing a smirk on his face.

“Mrs. Msibi.” He offers a hand shake, and I cock a brow, sinking in my seat. I don’t accept handshakes from people I don’t know and so my arms choose to isolate themselves by covering my chest.

“Can I help you?” He raises his eyebrows before

grinning like a cheshire cat, I don't know this fool and his demeanour piques me.

"I'm a friend of your son Bulelwa," he offers himself a seat, I could tell him off but my mind refuses me permission. Inquisitively, I shoot an inquiring look at him, gesturing that he continues. "I believe you and I can help each other, you see I love your son and your toy is standing in my way."

"Excuse me?" I don't like where this is going, what irks me the most is the attitude in his voice.

"You're a beautiful woman Lilian, ageing like fine wine and I don't blame you for wanting to explore with younger men." My eyes narrow, no one knows about my illicit affair. We were cautious, if this news gets to Mandla, my life will be over.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I test the level of his knowledge, he might not know everything. I love my husband more than anything, but there is something about Bhekizizwe, that

something keeps me going back for more. He's so many things Mandla is not, daring...a hidden danger. The type that makes anyone fall at his feet and worship him. He's bold, steps in without being invited. He holds a face of nonchalance, as if the world is his and rests under his feet.

His body is never slumped, then again he's too muscular for that. It's always as relaxed as his face. He holds a swagger of someone you wouldn't want to lock eyes with, let alone cross. Yet I lie in his large arms daring, maybe it is the danger drenched on him that attracted me to him or the fact that he would betray me and I would still want him as trashy as he is.

“Come on Lilian, we're both adults here. No need to be sneaky, I won't judge you.” Beneath this man's gait, his eyes are direct, not even blinking as much as the average person. “I know you're chowing that Zondo boy, how does it feel sharing a d**k with your son?” He's quick to stop my hand as I jump to slap him across the face, lucky bastard.

“How dare you talk to me like that? Who the hell are you?” My tantrum is received, there is a hint of the victor in the smile surrounded by stiff cheeks, not the grin of a friend, but the joy of the enemy after a battle is won.

“I come in peace Lilian, I want your baby boy and you want your toy. They are together as we speak and I can’t have that. Boo-boo is mine, I hate sharing.” He announces, sternly. His voice is final, this man doesn’t know who he’s dealing with. “It would be so sad when your husband finds out that his wife is a cougar and not only that, but she’s fucking his son’s lover.

“What is the plan?” Let me humour him, I will deal with him after dealing with Bhekizizwe. I told him he can look at anyone he wants and he goes for my son. My baby? I will have to play this one cautiously, he’s smart and one mistake, Bhekizizwe will be alerted that I am on to him.

“Great, I knew you would cooperate.” This man

thinks he has the upper hand, I am not Lilian Msibi if I don't make him pay for this.

“No, this will pass. He'll go away.” Cele takes several deep breaths, pacing about the small one roomed shack his cousin calls a home. His heart warning him of the danger ahead. Just last night he found out the identity of the girl he raped and that her brother was after him. His cousin's house became his hiding place the day he raped and dumped a girl in a swamp, it's not a surprise that the cousin agreed to harbour a criminal, he too has been on the wrong side of the law and the stupid decision has made him an accessory to the fact.

“You're stupid Alfred, Randall Okolie doesn't go away. He's going to kill us for what you did to his sister.”

“Dammit.” Cele growls as if he was made to do what he did. “I hate her, I hate that bitch. Why didn’t she die?”

“You’re delusional, I never should have helped you. How can I be so stupid?” The cousin spits, regret bubbling under his skin.

“We have to think of a way out, you’ve been to prison before, right?” Desperate and feeling death nearing, Cele pleads with the man who gave him a roof above his head. Sweat has come to make a home on his body, the beating of his heart threatening an explosion he’s never known. “Or maybe we can offer an apology, I didn’t mean it. She was too damn sexy and I was aroused by her every time I saw her and I couldn’t fight the heat anymore. It’s not my fault.” The pedophile in him justifies his sick desires, the cousin glares, eyes wide. Only now it hits him that Cele is sick.

“She’s at the hospital remember? Fighting for her

life and if even she wasn't, do you think she would accept your apology? Forget her, her brother won't even let you breathe the same air as her. I've heard stories about that man, he's as sick as they get. We're dead meat Alfred, we're dead because of your stupidity, I can't believe I let you fool me into helping you. You deserve what's coming to you."

"Fuck you." Anger and fear eating at him, so intertwined that their names ought to be emerged to add more torture on the man with no remorse. Cele turns on his brother, his fist coming in contact with his cousin's face. He stumbles back and retaliates as he gives what he got only tougher. Stars burst in Cele's vision as he stumbles creating space between them and blood pools into his mouth, he tilts his head to the side to spit it out.

In a second they are on the floor, wrestling. Their fists slamming into each other's faces. The wrestling match is interrupted by a loud bang on the door, frozen, they fight to catch their breaths, eyes wide.

"He's here." Cele crows, blood humming in his veins

and so it dawns on him that he can run, but he can't hide.

THANDIWE...

“Mama, what happened to ubaba?” She can't ignore me forever, I need to know how my father died. Rumour has it that he was smothered by a snake, people talk around here and there are rumours about witchcraft in my mother's house. Her so called friend Danile spread the tales, funny how friends can be two faced, stab you in the back the second you turn.

Nqaba is here along with his father, that's the only way he's able to enter the house and sit like a Mkhwenyane. I asked that he be here, my mother is not happy about his presence. Her eyes are stabbing daggers at the man who has my heart, he didn't do anything wrong to her. His crime could be loving me, I have to tell my mother about Ntuthuko

and what he did.

“Mama,” she’s settled on a reed mat, head bowed.

“He was attacked by a snake,” Okay, we heard that already. But...

“What really happened?” I lived here my whole life and not once did we have a snake enter the premises. Her face freezes, mouth slightly turned down, eyebrows curved downwards, her tears are on the way again. It’s what she does, cry until tears dry up on her wrinkled face.

It shows feelings of sorrow, of being sorry for something. The guilt I see in her dips my heart in anger, probably she had something to do with my father’s death. Accusatory fingers have been pointing at her, although they were assumptions, hints and rumours.

“Thandiwe.” Nqaba’s rumbling voice snatches me back in to their presence. He locks me in a serious gaze, reminding me of the words he spoke before we entered the rondavel. ‘Don’t act rational, whatever you hear in there. I need you to stay calm,

do it for the baby.’ Taking his advice, I’m able to curtail myself and wait for my mother to give an explanation.

“Thandiwe my child, I sinned. I sinned against God, against you and against my husband.” Her voice trails slowly as she speaks, like her words are unwilling to take flight. There is sadness in her eyes, tears playing a big part. I’m watching her, my heart hammering, but I keep my gait casual with no hint of emotion. My mind flickers back to my father, he was a good man. A great father, he didn’t deserve to die the way he did.

“When I married your father, my in-laws immediately pressured me to give them an heir, but I had found out that I was infertile...” She starts, hesitant. It feels like I’m watching a movie, featuring my parents. In my head, I’m not allowed to watch this movie, the contents will rip my heart out of my chest.

Never before, have I noticed how time is so much like water that it can pass slowly, a drop at a time, even freeze or rush in a blink.

“No...no mama, that’s not true.” My mind refuses the revelation, I can’t belong to that old man. She says I’m going to die on my twenty sixth birthday, things like this are not real. They can’t be real.

“I’m sorry, I was desperate.” I don’t care what she says, I will not accept this.

“Did you at least stop and think about me, mama? You sentenced me to death before I was even in your womb. Is this how little I meant to you?” I’m yelling, a quaver in my voice.

“I did think of you, my baby, you’re all I thought about.”

“Unamanga mama, unamanga. You wanted to be deemed a woman and so you became selfish, it wasn’t for dad nor was it for me.” (You’re lying)

Ngaba shoots up to his feet when my feet bring me up, clamped teeth and coiled brow. He’s reproaching me, silently.

“I prayed for you every day, I asked God to keep you, to reverse the curse my child.” How am I so unlucky to have a mother like her? Mothers sacrifice everything for their children, they don’t sacrifice them.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” I’m standing over her, my voice raising with each syllable. My entire life, I respected this woman, I don’t remember a day raising my voice at her. Parents are equivalent to God, you regard them with a great amount of reverence. What do you do when they do things like this? Because of her I have lost my father, the only person who loved me and I will never have him back.

“MamShengu, please calm down. She is still your mother.” Duma calmly says, I’m not interested in this calmness. He’s not the one whose soul has been sold to the devil.

“Please baba, talk to her for me. Ask her to forgive me, I was young and stupid.” Impossible, not in this

life time.

“Remember what MamSonto said Thandiwe? Do not hold it against her, ngiyak’ncenga Tshabalala, yehlis a umoya.” (Please calm down.) Why is this one touching me? Nqaba’s request cannot be granted, maybe they should wear my shoes and let’s see if they will forgive such an atrocity.

“Let’s go,” Turning to him, the man who is asking for the impossible, my heart pours out. This is what I want, I don’t want to see my mother’s face anymore. He’s chiding me again, with the look in his eyes. His words can only be limited in this house and it’s a good thing for the reason that I know he has a mouth full of things I don’t want to hear.

“Thandiwe, please.” My mother implores, crawling to me. I cringe when her arms wrap around my legs, her warm tears daubing them. “Ngiyacela sisi, ungangishiyi. I just lost your father, I can’t lose you too.” (Please don’t leave me.)

“Cha mama, cha.” (No) Nqaba interrupts, his hands

take her shoulders as he helps her up to her feet. Instinctively, her head falls on his upper torso. Sobbing like the widow she is, I'm hurt seeing my mother in pain, but my pain and anger surpasses the hurt.

“Ngiyaxolis a sthandwa sam, xolela is alukazi sakho. Xolela uma wakho Thandiwe.” (I'm sorry my love, please forgive your mother.)

Tears spill over, flowing down her face like a river escaping a dam. Her face finds a hiding place on Nqaba, as he pats her shoulder like a son would a mother.

“I'm sorry, I can't forgive you for this. I will never forgive you mama.” I want to be numb, numbed of all the pain surging inside me. The thought of dying soon and leaving my son, my mother's betrayal, her excuse of selling my soul to the devil.

I feel the first tear break free from my eyes, the rest follow like an unbroken stream. My chest heaving, a painful rise and fall, I crouch dropping my hands on

my knees as my feet relay that they are tired and can't keep me grounded anymore.

With a soft thud I fall on the floor, pressing my palms to the reed man and begin to cry with a force of a person retching with force.

Nqaba has abandoned my mother, his arms are my tragic hero, the only antidote I have for my pain. My body is moulded into his own, fingers curled into the fabric of his jacket tight enough to let him know that I need him and I don't want him letting go.

Words of comfort swooshing from him into me, I receive them but my heart refuses to heal. His head lounges to my shoulder, his chest rising and falling against my head

"That's enough now Tshabalala, enough." he murmurs with a tiny sigh.

Moans escape my lips through the suppressed sound of hiccups, my mother has ceased the stream of her tears. Snivels are the remaining evidence of her heart break, I can't look at her. I need to leave this place.

“Thandiwe buya, buya Thandiwe. Ngiyak’cela ngane yami, ungangishiyi.” (Come back, please don’t leave me, my child.)

Her desperate cry chases after when I surge out of Nqaba’s arms and run out the house, I don’t know where I’m going. I want to be away from this place, away from my mother.

To be continued...

BURN

41

NQABA

Catching up with Thandiwe, I snatch her from behind wrapping my arms around her waist. She screams fighting me off, it’s not like her to act like this.

“Let me go.”

“Thandiwe it’s me, it’s me, Tshabalala.” My alert doesn’t seem to register to her, more screams erupt as she kicks and flails her hands violently. Burying my face on the nape of her neck, I clip my arms around her waist pressing her build to mine. A hope that she will stop, however hope laughs in my face when she continues fighting me off. The screams discharging from her are horrific, and heart wrenching. I would mistake her for a crazy woman.

“Thandiwe calm down, please calm down.” I tighten my hands on her hips to turn her around to meet the blank look in her eyes, no- not again.

“Tshabalala, I’m not losing you again, not again.” My head tilts to the side when she flounders her hand and scratches my cheek.

“Get away from me.” A growl bleeds past the seams of her lips, shock washes over me when she attacks me. My mind is blank for a second so I let her jump on me, the attack is enough to throw me to the floor. And it hits me immediately that she’s not herself, she’s possessed.

Pain mashes my heart, draining me of the little hope I had. I grip her waist and flip us over so I'm straddling her. She doesn't stop fighting me when I pin her on the grass. I know this is not her, so I limit my might instead. My eyes lock with her wild crazed eyes, the grudge...it's the grudge. It gives the evil man access into her life.

"Thandiwe," I try for a murmur, one hand pinning her down so she doesn't move and the other caressing her cheek.

Her head shakes back and forth violently, she's doing everything she can to avoid my eyes.

"Tshabalala look at me."

"Mapula, my name is Mapula." With words she fights me back, her voice sounding unusual. I am not going to let that demon win. I don't expect Thandiwe to grab a fist full of sand and blind me with it, her hands slam on my chest to push me off but I press my legs on her sides to keep her down. Once I've rubbed the sand from my eyes, I grip her

cheeks forcing her to look into my eyes.

“You will die Nqabayomzi, I’m going to kill you.” Her grip on my hand is hot and menacing, her eyes darting all across my face and her body desperate to be set free. I’m comforted that this is not my Thandiwe, she’s somewhere in there and I have to reach her.

“I’m not afraid of you, demon.” I pause, remembering MamSonto’s words. ‘Don’t entertain demons, you’re a child of God.’ How do I command it out of Thandiwe? I don’t want to hurt her, but the actions the demon is taking are forcing me to do so, a sleeper choke will take her out. It’s a good thing the coast is clear, moving to lie on the side, my arm snakes around her neck from behind.

She squirms in front of me, struggling to gain liberation. My heart poorly stapled shut at the pain of the woman I love is thudding hard without purpose.

“I’m sorry I have to do this Thandiwe. I love you, I love you Tshabalala wam and I will make it go

away.” I pour my heart out, slowly whispering in her ear while depriving her of air until she passes out. My lips kiss hers before I take her in my arms, holding her closer than I ever had.

BARBRA

“Sgwili, you’re a genius. I didn’t think the voodoo doll will work,” Nqaba is untouchable and that leaves Thandiwe, she’s unprotected. Sgwili came up with the idea of a voodoo doll, the easiest way to control Thandiwe. I hold it up, admiring my perfect work, the devil would have made a great creator. Imagine creating a human and having control over it. It’s genius. God gave us free will which I find boring. Look at the power I have in my hands.

“I’ve been in this business all my life Ndlovukazi, you’re grandmother never had any problems with me around. I come highly recommended.” Sgwili sings his praises, I had to bring him with me to KZN for the funeral. He had to collect soil from Vusi’s

grave, the voodoo doll would not have worked without that soil.

“That’s a good thing. Makhafula can’t control her when she’s with Mzi, that witch should promote me to queen of the witches. I should rule in that kingdom, but no he wants Thandiwe to sit on the throne. The thought of being ruled by two corpses makes me sick, you’re only powerful in your human form.” I deserve that crown.

“Makhafula will never let anyone rule. What will he do if he loses Thandiwe to Mzi?” A sudden strong wind swooshes into the room, it’s bone chilling, the hairs at the back of my neck rise. Sgwili snarls and scuttles to hide behind me.

“What did you say?” A demonic growl booms in the air, scaring Sgwili some more. “Will I lose Mapula?”

Dammit! Makhafula was listening in, thankfully Duma is not at home. The man can smell anything from afar.

“N- no...” Sgwili struggles with his answer, fear

choking him.

“Barbra, Barbra, Barbra.” Shit! I hate it when he calls my name three times. “Control your zombie, Mapula is mine.” Nonsense. There is no reason for him to be howling like this, we all know that Mapula is his. A song he sings every day.

“Forgive him Great-one, he is an old stupid cat.” Now I must fight Sgwili’s battles, he needs to learn to keep his mouth shut.

“Makhafula doesn’t forgive.” Tell me something I don’t know. “The appointed time is approaching Barbra, is your grandson ready?” I don’t even know where the boy is.

“Sgwili is still searching for him, Great-one.” My response is cut off by the cat I should’ve traded for a monkey.

“Why me? You didn’t tell me to...”

“Shut up,” I chide him with a soft voice.

“Enough, you two are incompetent. Remember this is the only way to have her fully under my control,

the blood of her son will bring Mapula to me. The night of his birthday there will be a full moon and that's when the ritual will take place. I thirst for that blood Barbra, I want that boy with you." Makhafula says, I have too much on my hands. He expects me to control Thandiwe, find Zulu and lie to my son while at it. Ntuthuko will not forgive me when the truth is revealed.

"I will find him Great-one, his birthday is in two weeks, that's enough time."

"If you mess this up, you will follow Linda's husband." The room suddenly goes quiet, he's gone. I hate that witch.

"Mdidi." (Asshole.)

Sgwili cusses, comfortably striding across the room.

"Careful, he might be listening and I won't be able to save you."

"If we can have Thandiwe under our control, I'm sure we can find a way to get you to sit on the throne. Only you are worthy to sit on that throne

Ndlovukazi.” I love it when Sgwili boosts my ego like this.

“We’ll find a way Sgwili, I have been a servant for far too long. It’s time for an upgrade.” Laughter surges out of him.

BULELWA...

I thought I would find Zizwe back after taking a shower, it was a long one. Now I’m more worried than ever. I choose a pair of shorts, it’s hot today. Deliwe went to work, she won’t be home until later tonight, so I’m all alone. Looking for a shirt to match the pink shorts is a struggle, hence I always go for black. It’s simple, yet stylish.

“Buttercup.” I feel and hear him behind me, his presence heavy. It’s a delicious sensation that has me yearning to be sheltered in him. His arms slip around my waist and hands find a location on my stomach, his strong arms tell everything I am, body, soul and mind. A feeling I have never experienced

before, I want to be locked in this moment. “You smell good.” A whisper in my ear, my body shudders as he starts tattooing my bare shoulder with kisses.

He turns me around, presses into me before I could paint his face with my gaze. His right hand hops to cradle my cheek, a furrowed brow based on his face. My heart dances with crazy moves as he leans down and kisses the corner of my lips, lingering... deliciously filling.

“Do you have feelings for me, Buttercup?” Do men get butterflies in their stomach? There’s a tingling feeling, it has me squirming against him.

My face is showered with a million kisses, a hand tightly gripped on my waist grounding me.

He makes me believe that I belong to him, body and soul and perhaps I do. Zizwe buries his nose into my neck, every fibre of my being goes insane. He breathes in, a heavy loud intake that has a moan

slipping out of my mouth. He leaves hot kisses on my neck, the most sensitive parts being his target.

Instinctively, I throw my head up to give him access. Cupid, this man feels so damn good. My lips fall into a quaver as if I were caught in a pool of ice, the hands that were practising their stubbornness go on an escapade and find his shirt with a tightened grip. Curse Romeo as Zizwe moves to glances at me with fire in his eyes.

“You didn’t answer me, do I make your heart stop?”

“N...no you don’t and I- I don’t have feelings...for...you.” My words discharge in breathy gasps. This would have been my answer a month ago, now I have fallen, or I’m falling. Whatever it is, has caged me and there is no way out. Zizwe brings his face in front of mine, the closeness is intense I can feel the breath from his nostrils fanning me. Poker-faced, he takes my hand, landing it on his chest. His touch is intoxicating.

“The way you look at me says you do, I make you

sweat.” He drives my hand down his torso, my body fills up with heat. “Dance with me Buttercup.” I’m not for this name, but he makes me feel like royalty when he calls me that.

“There’s no music,” I don’t know why but I pin myself on the ground when he moves to retrieve a phone from his pocket. Curiosity nudges me as he scrolls through the mobile. “Ask me how I feel about you?” If Zizwe continues to speak to me in these breathless whispers, I will orgasm on the spot.

“How do you feel?” I’m stupid, we’ve tackled that part so thank you for not judging me. It’s only counted seconds when a song sashays into the room, it’s Jonas Brothers- Lover/LoveBug.

“This is me in a nutshell, my feelings...my heart... you and what I want us to become. I want you to be my home Buttercup, a place I go to when I’ve had a bad day. I want you to be someone I call when I’m lost, frustrated or horny. You’re mine” He takes my

hand, kisses the palm. While intertwining our hands together, his other hand and eyes map my shoulders down to my vacant arm. An admiration I have never seen before, he buries his face in my collarbone. His tongue moving in slow motion, smooching to the nape of my neck. I bite my lower lip from the pleasure of his warm tongue slowly dancing on my skin.

I'm not this patient, Bulelwa would have stripped him naked and we'd be on our way to paradise. My body ceases to be mine, I now belong to him. It falls into hot water when his lips smash against mine, he's looking for a way in. My lips part involuntarily, granting him access and it's like I've poured gasoline on a burning flame. Zizwe deepens the kiss, what was a slow dance, lips moving with a tango becomes an insatiable wolfish kiss.

A loud gasp escapes through our lips when my back collides against the wall, the pain is wiped away by his tongue dancing with mine.

My hands find his back, I slide them up to his wings and use them to pull him into me. His second hand wants in on the fun and so it boards on my waist, giving the other hand a hand. He tugs me up against him so that we're even, he hasn't made a sound, yet while I'm heaving and whimpering like a ballerina. Groaning, moaning and gasping like a high schooler experiencing her first time.

I feel him, his erection against me. A cloud of pleasure covers us, we're moving fast...hands undisciplined...mouths doing their own things.

Zizwe's lips leave mine, a yearning and throbbing persist. Pressed up against the wall, panting and failing to keep my eyes to myself, I bite my lower lip, yearning to taste his lips again. I should've known, I should be jealous of this arrogance that always wants his attention. A smirk claims his delicious lips, lust and contentment swirling in his eyes. The bulge on his pants is crazily displayed, compelling me to squirm with pleasure. I'm not shy when it comes to sex, God blessed us and so why not

embrace it and paint it if we can.

“Can we always be this close Buttercup?” Zizwe repeats the lyrics of the song. Looks can be deceiving, the man is a marshmallow. Someone call Jub-Jub, I found his twin. This one is mine though, I want to say yes to his question, but I have never claimed anyone to be mine. I cut people off, that’s what I do, it’s what I’m good at. I cook it, pack it and take it home. How do I agree to something I’m not sure I’ll keep, I don’t trust myself.

My body heats up at the amount of love twirling in his eyes. He is dubbing me worthy and important, a feeling I have never felt before. My lustful eyes could be deceiving me, though. “I want to be your lover, I want you to dwell in my heart and take care of it. I’ve given it to you, Buttercup. The day I saw you, I had to make you mine, you had already stolen my heart and so why not claim you as my own?” He smiles, leans down once more, his lips press into

mine...uncorrupted...exploring...I whimper as he trails his lips from my neck down to my chest, with his eyes locked into mine, he takes my hands and kisses my knuckles one at a time...slow worship. My hand still in his hand, he directs us to the bed and my senses interrupt by reminding me of the family member he arrived with.

“Qhaphela?”

“What about him?” Stupid, he knows what I’m asking. “If you’re worried about screaming, don’t fret. It’s just us two, you can scream as much as you want.”

REMOVED...

Like the Hulk I presumed him to be, the man jumps up to his knees, he’s touching me again. His hands are on my waist, why is he lifting me up in his arms?

“What are you doing?” I want him to put me down,

I'm not strong enough to utter too many words.

"Round two." He says, smashing my back against the wall. Hell no, if he continues to handle me like a stuffed chicken, I will break.

"There will be no round two." That time my legs are wrapped around his waist and I'm moaning to his wet kisses on my neck.

"Please Buttercup, I'll be gentle." The whisper is planted on the nape of my neck, drawing out shudders from me. I hate how I can't say no to him, my hands are wrapped around his neck, head tilted back. I'm basically giving him consent to rough me up again. My butt hole is on fire, I'll have to fake a sickness after this. Delive is too inquisitive, she will spot my limping and ask things that do not concern her.

"L- let me heal first Zizwe." Wrong words Bubu, you don't do seconds. That's what you should be telling him, tell Hulk you don't do leftovers. "I- I..." Speak dammit...

“Please, ngiyacela Ndlondlo,” and there I go melting away. He’ll fuck me through the pain, great... My legs are wrapped around his waist and my hands digging on his shoulder, I dig them deeper and wince in pain when he slowly slides into me. He makes a sound I’ve never heard, like he loves the feeling of being inside me. “Phephis a Ndlondlo,” (I’m sorry.)

He kisses my lips, more than enough to make me forget the pain. It’s there, but it’s a fading pain. Why does his voice do this to me? Seducing me to an extent that I can’t control myself. I shouldn’t be melting into a puddle, I’ve caught feelings for this man and if he continues like this I will die if he’s a second away from me.

We both stop when we hear the door swing open, everything comes crashing down when I see my father and Lilian standing at the door. The look in his eyes is of disgust and deep hatred for this man I

am growing to love. I jump off Zizwe, my head telling me to grab our clothes and cover up. My eyes wander to find his trousers, I need him covered up.

I don't make it to the foot of the bed as the sound of a gunshot and a feminine scream catch my attention. My wide eyes dart to my father who is aiming a gun to where Zizwe is standing, only he's not standing but lying on the tiled floor covered in blood. I fall into a panic, unable to speak or move. The song...Zizwe's song fades into the background when my world falls into a volcanic eruption. The song now carries good and bad memories.

STYLES...

We meet Cele's frightened face when Randall kicks the door open, he staggers back until the wall blocks his way. There's someone with him, the cousin. He's just as terrified as Cele. Randall cares little about him, his eyes are cast on the man who

raped his sister.

“Who are you? What did you want from me?” He’s a mess, visibly shaking like a leaf.

“What will a dead man do with this information?” It’s not an answer Randall gives but a declaration, one thing I know is that Cele is not leaving this place alive.

“I- I didn’t do anything wrong,” the fool stutters, fear pinching him, eyes widened. With his hands in his pockets and a hardened face, Randall takes a few steps toward Cele. The look on Cele’s face says he knows who the man before him is and that nothing is going to go right today.

“Do you know what happens when people piss me off?” Randall’s stern voice fills the room.

“W- What do you mean Mr. Okolie?” The cousin dares to open his mouth, his words are all over, stumbling on his tongue.

“Randall, it seems these two think we’re fools.” My

opinion of what I'm observing.

"With all due respect sir, there must be a mistake."
The foolish cousin again. "Yes." Cele testifies of his
cousin's sayings, nodding like a maniac.

"You son of a bitch," Randall roars, throwing a
punch that sends Cele flying across the floor.

"I'm sorry, please. It was nothing serious at first, I
don't know how it escalated to..." Randall doesn't
give Cele a chance to finish, he's straddling him,
smashing his face with heavy blows. Eyes wide, the
cousin takes his feet to the door. He's not that
fortunate as I block his way. He flinches frightened
by my high pitched laughter.

"Going so soon?" A question flows through my
teeth, it has him trembling in his boots. There is
nothing more beautiful than seeing a man drenched
in fear, I could paint the picture and frame it. "Like
your cousin said over there, it was nothing serious.
So what we're about to do to you is nothing serious.
We'll just be just having fun."

“Wh- What are you talking about?” If only he knew, half satisfied with his work, Randall moves away from Cele, leaving him groaning in agony. Blood oozing from his mouth. Randall shoots me a brief look, conveying a message.

“You two seem to be close hey, I see you have that brotherly kind of love.” I start, gesturing that the cousin helps his cousin up. Randall wants to kill him, I see it in his eyes, but not before Cele gets a taste of his own medicine. I want him to beg for mercy and I just know how to make it happen.

“What’s your name?” The question is directed to the cousin, it takes barely a second for his shifty eyes to dart to Randall and less than that to rush back to me.

“Sbuda,” A huff from me receives the response.

“Sbuda huh? Do you want to live?”

Of course he’ll nod like a fool.

“To what extent would you go to save your life?” My question seems to have thrown him into a muddle of confusion.

“I don’t understand.” He stutters, exchanging an enquiring glance with Cele.

“We didn’t come here for tea and biscuits, you surely don’t think we’ll let you live after harbouring the man who raped my sister?” Randall exclaims, he’s getting impatient.

“I didn’t know he messed with one of your own, I swear.” The man is pathetic.

“You know Sbuda,” Randall ambles towards him, too close to make Sbu shuffle and nervously flutter like a bird. “I don’t usually give second chances, if it were up to me, you both would be dead by now.”

“Am I getting an answer today Sbu or will you keep me waiting?” I ask, Cele is oblivious to what is happening, he’s quietly standing next to his cousin. Confusion fucking him up.

“Anything, I would do anything to stay alive. Please I have children and a mother who depend on me.” He finally cracks, just what I wanted to hear. Randall tilts his head aside, I see a smirk playing on his lips. It’s pompous, coy and daunting all in one.

“Even fuck your brother, Sbudu?” Randall lays out the plan on the table much to Sbu and Cele’s astonishment as they release incredulous gasps.

“W- What?” Agape and eyes fallen out, Sbu bites his tongue and chokes on his saliva. The laughter erupting from me is unplanned, I enjoy such moments.

“Strip him naked now,” Randall commands, sternly. Sbu wants to live, but this is not how he wants it to go down.

“No, please I’m sorry.” Frail Cele cries, funny how he showed strength when he overpowered innocent children.

“I said strip him naked now.” I see Randall’s impatience come to play, he won’t let them go so easily. This was my idea and I love how he’s taking lead, this will ease the anger suffocating him. “If any of you hesitate, I will kill you and make sure your families never find your useless bodies.”

With shaky hands Sbu turns to a terrified hesitant Cele, his hands start to unbutton Cele’s shirt. It’s a slow process, annoyingly slow. I have to pull out a gun, it will surely make them dance.

“Oh come on Sbuda, I’m sure you can do better than that. You’ve been to prison, right? Are they this gentle? Rip those clothes off man.” He nods, shredding Cele’s shirt off. Horror and fear have come out to play. A gun is held on his head as his hands falter when he has to remove Cele’s pants. Cele pushes him, only to receive a kick in the gut from Randall. Unable to scoot away and at my command he’s pushed on the bed by Sbu, back facing up. Randall holds him with a foot as he tries to move.

“Hayi, ngiyacela. I’m sorry, I’m sorry please kill me, rather kill me please.” The bastard... Randall crouches to bark on his face.

“Is this how my sister begged for her life Cele, is this how she screamed and pleaded that you let her go?”

“I’m sorry, you can do whatever you want. But not this, I’m begging you to have mercy. Sbuda, don’t do this please.”

“I’m sorry Alfred ntwana, I don’t want to die.” I like Sbu, he’s smart.

“Go for it Sbuda, make me proud ntwana. This is your life, it’s either you go down with your cousin or you jump ship and save yourself.” Tears playing on his face, Sbu nods climbing to straddle a trembling Cele. “Go hard, don’t play with this rapist. I want him to feel what his daughter and Ife felt.” Anger flashes on Sbu’s face, I see he didn’t know that Cele was molesting his daughter. Randall moves to the door when Sbu slides into his cousin, the sound of Cele’s

screams of agony resonate in the shack. It's as brutal as I imagined, he'll be traumatised after this.

I know Neo is here when I hear a commotion outside and a knock at the door, Sbu is done although I wish he would continue all night, I love hearing Cele cry like a little girl.

“He's in here, this man has gotten away with rape for far too long.” That must be one of the women Neo hired for this mob, he never disappoints.

“Enough is enough, we have to take matters into our own hands. How many of our women and children does he have to rape and kill until we actually take action?”

My gaze darts to Cele who is now curled up on the bed, trembling like silk on a windy morning.

“Nice job Sbuda, you and I will go far.” Shame has

embraced him, his eyes refuse to leave the floor. Randall grabs Cele naked as he is, drags him out screaming and crying. He throws him in the midst of the angry crowd, the number is so many I can't count them in both my hands.

“The gates of hell are open, the devil better take what belongs to him.” With anger dancing on his throat, Neo grumbles. We watch as the angry mob attack Cele with whatever they can get their hands on. If I could I would take a video for Ife, she needs to see that justice has been served.

“Randall!” Jaw clenched and eyes fixated on the ambush, Randall shifts his gaze to me for a second.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Castrating Cele was Ayize's idea and Randall wants to be the one before the man breathes his last. Without a word, he snatches a machete from one of the men in the crowd. His steps are intimidating and commanding

as he tramples to where Cele is helplessly lying. This is it, Randall will finally scratch the itch and hopefully he will focus on his family after this. Cele's screams are suppressed by the grumbles of the angry mob, he is lying in his own blood, bleating like a dying goat.

To be continued...

BURN

42

BULELWA...

My father walked out of my room without so much as a word after almost killing Zizwe, I had to help dress him up while crying like a kid. Watching him bleed and wince in pain did something to me and I will never heal from it. The few moments I thought he was dead were the worst moments of my life, even my father ousting me out of his house could

not be compared to the fear of thinking I had lost Zizwe.

Mandla is a big bully, to think I almost sacrificed myself for him. I scold myself for thinking I could be with a woman for the sake of the gorilla.

“Are you okay?” Lilian and I sing in unison, my eyes flounder to her. Hers are wet, too shifty. It must be the guilt, her husband almost killed a man. I would be ashamed as well. Zizwe escaped with a bullet hole on his wrist, he probably saw it coming and raised his hand in defence.

I used his t-shirt to cover the wound. Thank God he’s not badly injured, but I can’t stop crying. With an impassive expression, Zizwe frowns at the tears disturbing my eyes. He has given up wiping them, not once has he acknowledged my mother. These people saw my lover naked...if I could call him that. He wants us to be lovers and my heart wants it too.

“Why are you here Lilian?” She told her husband about my trip, hence they are here. If she hadn’t, we

wouldn't be in this predicament.

"Your father found out about your plan and he came to stop you." Why do I find it hard to believe her?

"So he happened to have a gun with him?" The memory of seeing Zizwe lying on the floor haunts me, tears come to play on my face.

"When will you stop crying Buttercup? You know what your tears do to me." He whispers this part in my ear and no, I don't know what they do to him. Lilian scuttles away from the bed to stand at the door way.

"Who is this boy Bulelwa?" My mother is not so vicious, the Lilian I know would be rushing this boy as she calls him to the hospital. The blank countenance on her features confounds me, Zizwe is hurt and she doesn't seem to care.

"He's my friend," I answer her, although I would rather not. My arm is snaked around his shoulders, I'm floating over him.

“You sleep with your friends, Bubu?” Who doesn’t?
“What you two did was very stupid and reckless.” I don’t expect her to castigate us, we didn’t do anything wrong.

“We need to get him to the hospital mama ka Bubu, can you complain later?” Lilian’s gaze is kept on Zizwe, a condescending glare. A smile abides on Zizwe’s plump lips, yet worry has broken into his eyes. Maybe Lilian is right, it was stupid of us to have sex here, but no one was going to know. The house was vacant, how were we supposed to know that Lilian and her streetlight of a husband were on their way. Things like this happen when you don’t announce your arrival. What are they doing here anyway?

“Knowing your father, no one is leaving this house. I am very disappointed in you, Bulelwa.” Great, I’ll be getting a lecture from her and my father.

“I’m taking Zizwe to the hospital and no one will stop me.” I tell Lilian, ascending to my feet to help

Zizwe up. With careful steps, I lead him out the door. I'm not comfortable with the deadly glare Lilian regards Zizwe with as we walk past her. Suddenly she holds a malicious guise. Did she leave the soft Lilian in Joburg? I need her on my side this time, Mandla is going to kill me.

He is not in the living room when we reach there, Lilian's shoes loudly clunk behind us, it makes Zizwe uncomfortable, I can tell with the way he clears his throat.

"Your father is on his way." Mandla's voice booms behind us, holding us down on the spot. My arm is wrapped around Zizwe's waist to keep him stable, in slow motion we turn to find my father with the murder weapon on his hand. I will never forget his eyes, his red laced eyeballs glaring at the man next to me.

"Gcinumzi!" And it begins. "You're a disgrace mfana wam. You have so little respect for me that, you turn my house into a brothel." I don't know if the insult is

directed to me or Zizwe, the sigh emanating from him tells me that he doesn't appreciate my father's words.

"I told you how I felt about Zondo and you choose to sleep with his son." Zizwe is Zondo's son? I'm so ignorant that I never bothered to find out his full name. People called him Zizwe or bafo at work. I look up at him, his gaze is laid on the floor. "You know how I feel about that man."

"I can't talk to you right now Ndlondlo, I need to get Zizwe to the hospital since you decided to shoot your friend's son." I don't see us coming out from this, I won't be able to look at him without seeing the damage he did on Zizwe. I want to hate him and by God I would if it were possible.

"Zondo is not my friend, look at what he birthed. A failure..."

"Hey!" I'm taken aback by Zizwe's snapping. "You don't get to insult my father, I don't care who you are."

"Do you see this Gcinumzi? This boy is unruly..."

“I don’t understand you, baba, this boy is badly injured. You should be lending a helping, but you’re persecuting him. How do you expect Zizwe to react after almost killing him? You’re lucky he’s not dead, I was never going to forgive you.” I mean every word, I’m tired of Mandla thinking the sun rises and sets with him.

“Gcinumzi!” That’s all he knows, shouting my name like he’s the king of the world.

“You will never accept me and I have to come to terms with it. I will heal baba, I’m not the first gay to be abandoned by his family.”

“Bulelwa.” Lilian is about to take her husband’s side and I am in no mood to argue with them.

“Excuse us.” Zizwe’s gaze is locked with my father’s, a lot of bad energy emanating from both of them. My hand falling on the small of his back, I lead him out.

“Stay here, I’m going to bring the car around.” He nods, leaning up against the wall. Who would have

thought that I would care about someone this much? It hurts me that my father hates his guts, if I agree to this attachment, nothing will ever go right. Mandla will make sure that I am not happy.

Zizwe has this bad boy attitude, he does it so well it almost looks perfect. Falling for him would be like jumping in a lake filled with leeches. This is a risk. Why do I have a feeling that he will take me down? I can see the end from where I'm standing and still I want him to take me down. I want to drown into him and if I go under, then fate has chosen it.

I come back to Lilian standing outside with Zizwe, they look too cosy. Her hand is gummed on his chest, although he tosses it off, Lilian persists on touching him. My feet falter a tad, my mind trying to paint out the picture before me. Why is my mother touching Hulk like that? It looks so wrong I can't stand it.

“Mama ka Bubu?” She flinches, scuttling a distance away from him. Zizwe's shifty eyes call upon my

gaze, a grimace kissing his face. I don't know how to read faces or else I would know what he's thinking.

"Baby, I- I was checking if your friend is okay." Lilian provides me with an explanation before I could put the question out there. "He needs to have that hand taken care of."

"That's what we're about to do." The image of them standing together comes in front of my eyes.

"Buttercup, let's go." Zizwe sees the worry seated on my face, he takes my hand, kisses my lips and walks us to the car. I could be imagining things, Zizwe wouldn't do that, would he? Then again, I don't know much about him. I'm probably thinking too much into it. Lilian loves my father, she worships that man.

Zizwe takes my hand and kisses it as I grip the gear, shifting my eyes to him they find his staring, admiring. A party is thrown in my stomach and it has me curling my toes.

“You’re still mine, Buttercup?” Why is he asking me this? “Your father-”

“I’m twenty three Zizwe, my father cannot choose who I love.” A naughty smile takes the stage on his lips.

“Did you say love?” Bubu, you need to learn to shut up.

“No.” I will deny this for as long as I can, my forward heart dances at the sound of his laughter as it booms in the car, deep horsey. It’s a beautiful sound.

“Let’s get you stitched up before you lose that hand, you still owe me a session on the wall.” I’m graced with his guffaw again, a smile pulls at my lips at the sound. He reaches for the radio and the man plays that song again, I’m starting to like it. It explains his feelings for me, we have a long way to go, but I’m sure we’ll make it.

This is beyond my wildest dreams, if he asks me to ruin myself for him then I would do it without a dash of a doubt. That’s how deep I’m beginning to feel for

him.

NQABA...

My ears twitch at the sound of footfalls outside my bedroom door, it takes a millisecond for me to register that I have visitors. Neo and MamSonto drove down to Eshowe after I reported Thandiwe's ordeal, she hasn't come to.

"Mzi." A tickle on the door comes with a feminine voice, something must be wrong for MamSonto to be awake at this time. I check the time on my phone, it's 2:58am.

"Are you okay?" Concern rises higher than my voice, Neo is behind her, eyes as wide as a deer in headlights. I know when he's swimming in fear, there's trouble, I presume.

"There are people outside." Visitors at this time? My family doesn't know about my house in Eshowe, neither are they aware of my bank balance. For

years I was able to keep it from them, knowing how Barbra and Ntuthuko are controlled by bank notes. They would plan my murder to have all my assets, it took me years to build an empire for myself.

Things went good for me when I went to Joburg to find a job, I thought luck was on my side until I met a man who told me that I was blessed when it comes to money. A blessing from my ancestors, he went on to say that I had royal blood and so my ancestors would never let me live in poverty. Confronting my father about the matter, he confirmed that the Biyases do not come from royalty. You know how we have false prophets, that's what I assumed the man to be.

“Who are they?” I question MamSonto's allegations, my eyes find Neo again to see him visibly trembling. “What's going on mah?”

“Three women are outside your house Mzi, this house is not protected. It's a playground for anyone

who wishes to enter. Would you like to see them?" I thought you can't see witches with your naked eye. "Let Thandiwe sleep."

At her request I shut the door behind me and follow them to the living room. Neo has not uttered a word, I'm worried about him. I notice how he's hovering around MamSonto as if seeking protection.

"I'm going to rub this oil on your eyes, it will help you see the supernatural." I'm not sure I want to, lest I become a coward like my friend over here who has gone mute due to fear.

"What will we do when see them?" Maybe we should let them be.

"I want you to see how real this is, they are trying to enter but the presence of God is hindering them. The fools are laughing, they think they can take me on. Three against one, that's what they are saying."

"You can hear them?" Neo's quavering voice seeps through my ears, I was starting to miss his voice.

"Every word, they are not using their mouths to speak, but minds. They are in the spirit realm and

things there can be very tricky and unexplainable. Why do you think witches can get to you through dreams? When you're sleeping, you fall into the spirit realm. That's why when you eat in your dreams, someone is surely feeding you. The spirit world can be dangerous Mzi, so when you see those witches, they won't be your normal women you see in your everyday life. They move at a speed you've never seen, you might even die from seeing them with your naked eye.

So why does she want me to see them?

"I'll stay with sis Tee, you two can go, but please make sure they don't enter the house. I don't entertain demons MamSonto." Neo speaks, dashing to a couch. Ignoring Neo's remark MamSonto rubs the oil on my eyes, she gestures that I bow my head a little. She engages in a little prayer, I hardly hear what she says.

"Lock the door Mzi," Neo with an open bible in hand advises.

The night sky is victim to dark clouds, the backdrop reminds me of the dark cloud in Thandiwe's life. It is a beautiful night though, the wind is so bracing one would camp out here. As we step out I see three figures turn a corner, headed around the house. If humans were as brave as fear, life would be much easier. My heart has found a home on my throat, the churning on my stomach makes it hard for me to move boldly. MamSonto is mute in front of me, we're moving to the direction the figures went. I have a question and my mind is ready to release when MamSonto raises her hand to curb my inquisitiveness like she knew I was about to speak.

I can hear whispers and feet fluttering, it doesn't sound human. Too many voices at one time, amongst those voices Thandiwe is mentioned. They are here for Thandiwe, something flies past us, with this oil MamSonto rubbed on my eyes I see a human figure.

"Jesus." A shout from MamSonto and the figure freezes on one spot, a female starkers and her back

turned to us. MamSonto gestures that I look up at the roof, my eyes meet a shadow of a small child. It's moving like a snake, slithering on one spot. I regret coming out here, Neo would have died on the spot.

“What do you want?” I respect this strong woman. The witch doesn't reply, nor does she move. You would think she's a statue the way she stands rigid on the ground. “What do you want from this man?” Authority lies in the tone of her voice, my eyes scurry from the witch in front of us to the shadow on the roof.

“Mapula.” The voice is ghostly, forced and insolent. Her body has not moved an inch to show signs of life.

“There is no Mapula here, you should leave.” Authority takes lead as MamSonto commands the devil's agent to depart from my premises. I don't hear the whispers anymore, but the shadow of the little is stubborn. My eyes seem to twirl around

there from time to time, they expand as the shadow begins to slither down the roof, seeing a human form slithering like a snake with such ease down the wall raises all the hairs on my body.

I give MamSonto a vigilant alert, the look in her eyes says she didn't see it coming. Everything speeds up after that, but slowing down at the same time. The shadow jumps on MamSonto twirling itself around her, I don't see it anymore, but MamSonto is lying unconscious on the floor. With speed too fast to believe, the witch dashes away, disappearing around the corner. I don't bother to think about anything else, my instincts tell me to whisk MamSonto up and rush into the house.

IFEANYI...

I'm aware of my surroundings and the people that have been coming to see me, they speak to me and send their apologies. I don't mind that, what I hate are the looks of pity they harass me with. I can

almost hear their minds, ‘there’s that girl who was raped.’ My whole life I will have to live under the umbrella of a rape victim and no matter how much I try to remove it, it will forever stay with me.

My brother himself will not be able to help me, I know this. Each day is a thing itself, I’m stuck in the past. Surrounded by darkness, I don’t see the light breaking through it. I’m stagnant in a moment of horror. I can still smell him on me, his sweat, his semen. His scent is as strong as it was on that day.

‘Nice ride sweetheart.’ I smash my hands on my ears to shut his voice out, but it’s in my ears. In my head, the sound of his heavy breathing. I jerk up from the bed as I feel his weight on me, I have to get out of here. He’s going to get to me, I can’t let him find me. I will die if that happens. My knees bring me to the floor as I jump out of bed.

“Help, help.” I shout, it’s inaudible. I can’t hear myself as well, so I lie on the floor trembling. Reliving the worst day of my life, I want to die. He

should have killed me, it would have been better if I died that day.

“Hey, are you okay?” Naturally, my eyes shoot up to see a man wearing a concerned look on his face. I have seen him before, he comes around a lot and brother would chase him away. I flinch when he tries to help me, I don’t want him touching me. I don’t know him.

“I only want to help.” There is warmth in his voice. “My name is Ntsika, I won’t hurt you, I promise. Let me help you up, please. The floor is cold, you’ll catch a cold.” I’m not incapacitated, I refuse to be. Palming the floor, I start by pushing my legs up along with my body. It takes a while for me to balance on the bed and scramble on. Ntsika folds his arms across his chest, he’s staring and I want to tell him to go. My voice has turned on me, I can’t find it. I resort to the only thing I’m able to do, turn on the side and cover myself with a bed sheet.

“I will be outside if you need anything.” He says, I’m

able to breathe when I hear the door shut. Why is he here at this time of the night?

NQABA...

“What happened?” Neo places the bible on the couch as I shut the door behind me. “Pray now!” I drill, rushing MamSonto to the couch.

“What’s wrong with MamSonto, Mzi?” If only he could dispose of the fear and pray, I don’t know where that shadow disappears to. Did it possess MamSonto?

“She was attacked, pray Neo, pray now.” There is an urgency in my voice, I’m kneeling in front of her as Neo hastily grabs the bible. He falls on his knees, and reads from it.

“Palms 35, Plead my cause Oh Lord with those who strive with me.

Fight against those who fight against me.

Take hold of shield and buckler and stand up for my help.

Also draw out the spear and stop those who pursue me.

Say to my soul, I am your salvation.

Let those be put to shame and brought to dishonour who seek after my life.

Let those be turned back and brought to confusion to plot my hurt.

Let them be like chaff before the wind,
and let the angel chase them.

Let their way be dark and slippery,
and let the angel of the Lord pursue them.

For without cause they have hidden their net for me in a pit.

Which they have dug without cause for my life.

Let destruction come upon him unexpectedly,
and let his net that he has hidden catch himself,

into that very distraction, let him fall.”

Neo goes silent for a while, eyes shut, a furrowed brow playing on his face.

“We have to join hands, the bible says when two or three stand in agreement, I will be there in the midst of them.” I don’t know if I count as two, my heart is not familiar with God, nor is God familiar with me. I knew there was a God my whole life, but I never bothered with finding out who he was nor did I care about it. I didn’t think I needed him, especially after observing how the pastors seemed well off than the congregants. They drive to church, while the members walk, some shoeless and not once would the pastor offer a congregant a ride. That equation got me to see the hypocrisy behind Christianity.

“Mzi, man.” My hand is taken by force, it’s natural to close your eyes during prayer. “Lord we bring your servant before your throne of grace and mercy. You said in your word, touch not my anointed one. It

says Lord, if God is for us, who can be against us. You are able father and you won the victory more than two thousand years ago. Fight for MamSonto Lord, fight her battles. The devil is already defeated, remind him of his future and how much of a loser he is. Nothing can stand against you, neither can anyone stand against you. You who sees all things, You who is able to do exceedingly, abundantly, above what we could ever ask or think of. We come against every onslaught of darkness, every works of the enemy. We speak death over it in the name of Jesus. Lord also, when you rebuke this spirit troubling MamSonto and Thandiwe, send it next door. I'm sure that old woman I saw at the gate around six is the one that was here. They are after my life Lord, bring the enemies to shame. They will know that my God is alive. Also, soften Zee's heart, she's angry that I had to leave her alone again. That woman is making my life a living hell Lord, can't you do something? A little portion nyana to make her heart soft. Thank you in advance. We pray in the name of Your Son Jesus Christ, Amen."

Dazed and in awe, I watch as MamSonto's eyelids flap. She's coming to, I'd be damned.

"MamSonto, are you okay?" Neo offers her a glass of water, she takes a sip as she brings her body to a sitting position.

"I'm fine, God is always with me."

"What happened?" A smile scrapes on her face, this woman never ceases to amaze me.

"We'll talk in the morning, there's nothing to worry about now." How, when there were three witches outside my house? And that shadow thing was the scariest thing I had ever seen. "Mzi, we need to burn that pot plant first thing in the morning. Prepare a fire around 5am before everyone is awake." With this instruction, she retires to her room.

"Can I sleep with you, Mzisto?" The idiot Neo is terrified after that powerful prayer?

"No, you can't." My answer is blunt, he will have to brave it up.

“Please, I’ll sleep on the floor. I won’t snore tonight I promise.”

“You’re such a coward Neo.” He is following me to my bedroom, I feel for him so I let him be.

“Don’t you think we should tie sis Tee up, just in case she wakes up?” I’m confused now.

“We’re not doing that, I’ll watch over Thandiwe. You can sleep over there.” I point at the couch opposite the window, it has Neo roughly shaking his head.

“I’m not sleeping by the window, never. There’s enough space down here, next to the bed.” I shake my head at his protest.

“Suit yourself.” The remaining hours are going to be the longest with Neo here, I know he won’t sleep a wink.

To be continued...

BURN

43...

BHEKIZIZWE...

Just when you think you have it all under control, life takes a U-turn while your gaze is fixated on the one thing you want the most and before you know it, you're headed for the tree, and your whole existence is flashing before you. Bulelwa is my first gay experience, I knew I wanted him at first glance, the feeling was not that deep, a pint-size vague but it was there- at the back somewhere, always nudging at me, irking me in the process.

I had no choice but to heed to its calling and let my stupid heart lead the way. That's the way of life, right? The 'follow your heart' path is what we tend to take, and it's not up for discussion nor does it concern you if the route will take you to the destination of your dreams or lead you astray. The sign says 'follow your heart' and that's what you will do.

I have followed and look where it has led me, in the arms of the man whose mother I have been fucking for close to two damn years. What did I say about this route? How will I fix this? Lilian might as well be a don, the woman can be as ruthless as nice.

The look in her eyes drew pictures of how she will never let me be with her son. I haven't seen the kid in three days, I miss that little loud mouth and as much as my heart yearns for him, I can't let him close to me, not when I have this huge secret squatting on my chest. Bhekizizwe, I don't know whose son you are because promiscuity does not run in your family, a disappointment I have been.

Another incoming call from Bulelwa pinches my heart, the sting threatens my whole body with pain. I need to see him, but self-control needs to be practised in this man's life. Will I be able to keep him safe from my tumbling life? I'm drowning and there are no life guards to pull me up. I know I am because luck has not taken my side yet, I can't recall a time getting what I want. Maybe I should go

back home, maybe I should take a break from Bulelwa. Whatever it is I feel for him, could be a phase and what do phases do? They pass and this too shall pass, right? Why am I not convinced?

<You better answer my calls wena Hulk if you know what's good for you.> Buttercup.

He calls me Hulk, that ugly huge green monster. Offence pricked me at first, but because Bulelwa sounds and looks so adorable when he says it, it's forgiven and forgotten. There is no point of me sticking around, my leave days were extended for this reason, to be here in Ntuzuma with him. But I don't need them anymore. I will go back to work.

“Bhekizizwe.” When my father uses that tone, know that the man is caught under the waters of anger and frustration. At least he's talking to me, he came the following day that day Bulelwa's father summoned him. I hate that he still jumps for that

man.

“Baba.” He towers over me as he looms over the couch.

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” God gets five stars on his forehead for this man’s authority, maybe I’ll take one away because he fails to practice his authority in the presence of Mr. Msibi.

“Ngiyezwa baba,” (I hear you, dad.)

I have no strength to argue, my mind has been made up anyway. It is better we leave before I spend all my money paying for a room in this B and B.

“Why can’t you be like your brother?” Why can’t he sit down? He’s choking me with his heavy presence.

“I am not Archie, baba, people are different. Even if Bhekisizwe were here, we would be poles apart. It’s how God made us.”

“God didn’t make gay people.” He snaps, stepping away from my presence. I let out a sigh, thankful of

the threat removed from me.

“So I’m not worthy of God because I happen to be attracted to my gender?”

“You’re not attracted to men, you’re only a foolish boy who is brain washed by society. What about Fikile?” What about Fikile? She is my past, perhaps part of me will always love her, but not the kind of love that she deserves. She did point that out when we went our separate ways, life cannot remain the same.

Who would have thought I would feel so much for a man, a man I met not too long ago? And in this little space of time, life seems impossible without him. I don’t see it, the future.

All I see is his pretty little face and that smile that seems to wake me up every morning, and I know without it, I would sleep for eternity. Yet again, here I am risking the eternal sleep. I’m ignoring the guy like I have a mind map and instructions on how to live without him.

“She came to the house the other day.” What did she want? Fate has dished up enough drama on my plate, it’s overflowing.

“Why?” Lack of interest flashes in my voice and I know damn well its showing on my face.

“Looking for you of course, she said it was important.” And I bet he saw a chance to turn me into a “real man” again.

“I’ll call her as soon as we get back.” Lying to my father is so easy, my mother on the other hand is different. If you’re not careful, she will spot the lie before it creeps into your mind.

“Maybe you two can rekindle the old flame.” What old flame? “Fikile is a good woman, she will make a great wife, son. Think about it.” You know what, fuck that shit. I’m not leaving Ntuzuma, I will fight for my Buttercup. My father is a strong man, I hope he can be stronger than he already is because I’m about to board a bus and he’s not tagging along.

THANDIWE

I have a headache from hell, Nqaba says I have been out for days. I don't see how that is possible, my mind can't recall anything, but the gnawing alteration I had with my mother. It still pains me deeply that the woman who gave me life, gave me a time frame of twenty six years.

This man I love talks about forgiveness, grudges open doors for the enemy. Jesus once took the form of a man, he's not shocked when humans refuse to forgive or fall into temptation. I have no control over my feelings, it's not easy to wake up and embrace my mother after being responsible for the death of my father.

“Are you ready to go back to Joburg?” He's asking me because he thinks I need to spend time with my

mother. I haven't left his bedroom since I woke up this morning, it's noon and girl is under the covers feeling like shit. MamSonto left early this morning and Neo of course, he wouldn't stop raving about his fiancé and how she hasn't stopped complaining since he left the city.

Nqaba is more worried than I have ever seen, he cooks and brings me food I keep packing aside. My appetite is fast asleep and yet this man is spoon feeding me mash potatoes and gravy like I have lost my teeth and have a loose bowel. The mash is nice though, he said he made it for his baby. I don't know about the baby, but I am not on a mission to gain weight and if this man carries on like this, I will surely qualify to be on 'The biggest loser.'

"I want to be with my son." Zulu is awake, he's with Styles and his family. I can't wait to see my baby.

"I was thinking you should talk to your mother first, she's not doing well." I know that, I want to care, but I'm not doing well too.

“Your house is beautiful.” By all means, I will do anything to avoid the ‘your mother needs you’ topic. Why is he frowning at me?

“Thandiwe!” I see he is getting fond of growling at me, one day I’ll tell him how I feel about him calling my name like it belongs to him. Today I’ll just shut up and eat mash. “Remember what happened to you that day?”

The devil had put me out and taken over my body. How can I forget? Nqaba still bears the mark of the scratch I apparently implanted on him, at least it’s not the type of scar that needs Bio oil and I won’t have to look at my guilt every day.

“Are you going to hang that over my head my whole life?” Frustrated, I snap and earn myself a puckered brow that has me dropping my gaze. Wait a minute! Why am I dropping my eyes? I didn’t say anything wrong.

“You can’t hate your mother Thandiwe, she...”

“I don’t hate her, Nqaba, I want space. Is it so wrong

for me to want that? That woman hurt me and I'm sorry I'm not programmed to forgive people so easily, even after they have dug a hole in my heart." I know I should not be shouting... Calm down Thandiwe. Why are you not eating mash? Bloody hell, I'm frustrated and angry and bitter and I want my father back. I want my life back.

"Will you shout each time your mother is mentioned?"

"I have a reason to shout Nqaba and I am allowed to do so. That woman hurt me, you don't know how I feel. My own mother has killed me and I will never be the same." Anger will make one sell his soul to the devil and wake up the next day only to claim it back.

"Kungani unolaka Tshabalala?" (Why the anger?)

He places the plate on the bed side, I didn't want the damn food anyway.

"Ulaka Nqaba? I'm not angry, I am livid." My voice rises and I didn't approve of it.

"I hear you, kodwa Tan-tan ulaka ngeke lushintshe

lutho. This is not you, Thandiwe. My Thandiwe is not this bitter?” (Anger will not change anything.) He is trying to put it nicely, but I see through him.

“Why are you saying this to me? You don’t love me anymore?” I’m unable to control my tongue, confusion covers Nqaba’s face, with sprinkles of irritation on top.

“Ang’zwanga?” (Excuse me?)

“Did I stutter?” That’s right Thandiwe cross the limit.

“Inkinga ukuthi uyathandwa Tshabalala, Awu zifundise ukukhuluma. People are respected, you don’t go around throwing your mouth like that.” (The problem is that I love you, you need to learn how to speak.)

I should be terrified of the look he considers me with, but there is this thing pushing me to lash at him. For some reason I want to push him away, I want him to leave me alone. I don’t get to fully jump

off the bed as he snatches my hand and gradually pushes me back. “Are we disrespecting each other now? Is this how we speak to each other now, Tshabalala?”

Claiming my hand back, a thought is put in my head to go lock myself in the bathroom. This bedroom doesn't have one, so it will take me more steps to get to the one in the corridor.

“Where are you going Thandiwe?” I wish he would stop calling my name...his voice...all of him irks me right now. I can't be around him. “Thandiwe!” With this, his hand clenches my arm, pulling me back to him.

“Don't walk away, we're still talking.” He's angry, I see how his words force themselves through compressed teeth.

“Let go of my hand Nqaba.” What is happening to me? This is the man I love and would gladly spend the whole day wrapped around him.

“Why are you like this? I'm trying to help you fix your

life here. Why won't you let me?" I try to compose myself as best I can, but there is a force and it seems to be powerful. More powerful than his eyes that always calm me, I feel like a puppet and have no control of my actions or words.

"Don't bother Nqabayomzi, it's not like my life was perfect before you came along. All I want is for you to leave me alone, you're crowding my space. Jeez Nqaba, let me breathe." As brutal as I can be, I utter the words like this man means so little to me. My heart is reproaching yours truly, it's against this. In his arrogance, he smirks- just a small pouting of the lips, a narrowing of the eyes and a titling of the head. It's so subtle, even more infuriating as I fail to find a reason, why the egotistical expression.

"I don't know what to say to you anymore, but if you want to ruin your life do not pull me down with you. I am a part of your life and I have no plans of leaving. So I suggest you clean up your act because I will not be your punching bag." I didn't say he was and why is he talking to me like this? "One more

thing, do not ever talk to me like that again.”

A tongue click is his exit as he leaves me unaccompanied in his bedroom, Ngaba is pissed off, the tone of his voice and the command in his steps painted the picture.

BULELWA.

“I will ask you again Bhekizizwe. Why are you here?” This man ignores me for days, then comes back, asks me to escape with him like he didn’t shove me in a trash can.

“Come on Butter...”

“Yey, I am not your Buttercup.” He smirks at my response, I’m a joke to him.

“You can’t take that from me, I gave you that name and...” Take cover Bubu, he’s coming in. Why am I allowing his hands to touch me? A breathy gasp bolts out of my mouth as his hand falls to explore

my ass. His lips are dancing around my ears and the nape of my neck. "... as long as you dwell in my heart, you will always be my Buttercup."

Jesus, I can't breathe.

"Now, let's go."

"Where are we going?" You guessed it, I am ready to follow the bastard to wherever he wishes to take me.

"Away from the village." He says, pulling my hand towards the car. "Out of the city, to the vineyards." That's funny, he said the vineyards. There are vineyards in KZN? A typical Zulu man by the name of Bhekizizwe Zondo and Maphikelele might be his second name, I should take a peek at his identity document; wants to escape to the vineyards. This man eats tongue for breakfast for Pete's sake, like it's normal. What does he know about vineyards?

Holding hands is an attachment, hell, I let all of him inside me, so this is nothing. Zizwe has me stepping away from my notions.

“My father is inside Zizwe, I can’t leave just like that.” I protest, following him like I have been doing since he took over my car. The Gcinumzi issue was brought up and the old man forbade me from venturing into it, I don’t care what he says. My uncle will get justice, it’s not only about him, but the entire LGBT community.

“Do you want me to ask him if I could take his son out, I know he’ll give me a curfew...”

“Do you want to die?” Laughter is his response, he hasn’t officially met my father. That bullet that went through his wrist was nothing, he wants more.

“Your father is harmless, I know he’s just confused that’s all.” Yeah, confused with a gun that shoots naked men who cum inside his son. Continue, Mr. Your father is harmless.

“Bulelwa, where are you going?” Lilian’s authoritative voice halts us on our tracks, I have a forward mother and willing to give her away for free.

Zizwe interlocks my hand with his, my eyes slide up to his as he squeezes his hand on mine. He wants us to go, I don't know him that much, but he is talking to me through the gaze. God forgive me for disobeying my parents. Taking off on my feet, I pull the giant man with me. Giggles leap out of my chest as we jump into my car, ignoring my mother's tantrums.

"Drive, drive, drive." I yelp upon seeing her savagely trolling to the car, Lilian's anger will kill her one of these days.

"Woohh!!!" I'm too excited not to shout out loud. I know I will be in trouble when I get back, but heck I don't care. This beautiful man driving like a criminal is daring and I love it, I didn't know taking risks can be so much fun.

"Won't you let me drive, your hand must hurt."

"No wifey, I've got it." The insult comes with a smirk, doubling the slur.

"I am not your wife." His chuckle is insulting me this

time.

“One day you will be.” Mxm. Why in God’s name is a smile being forced on my lips? I don’t want to smile, he makes me angry.

“Don’t piss me off Zizwe, I am not feminine okay. I’m a guy, fully.”

“A guy who wears pink shorts?” What is happening here? Lord intervene, I am ready to slaughter this man.

“Fuck you, you’ve seen my d**k and touched my balls. Now stop spewing that nonsense.” I’m angry and I don’t know why. But it aggravates me that people regard me as a woman because I dress different from other men and I’m not masculine. I love myself and take care of myself better than most females would.

My nails are always clean and manicured, my hair neatly cut short and I would never let it grow any longer. Victoria secret would envy my wardrobe even though most of my clothes are black. I’m kidding, I’m allowed to dream right? I wince when

Zizwe grips my wrist and lugs my hand toward him.

“What is with you and foul language? You need to clean that mouth Bulelwa.” I’m not afraid of him, even though the tone of his voice sounds scarier than usual. Reminds me of Mandla when he scolds me.

“Or what?” Spitting is disgusting and I have spit out these two words that will get me into trouble.

Lindiwe did right by trapping a Xhosa guy, these Zulu men are stressful. Too much controlling I tell you.

My gaze locked outside the window while fighting to get my hand back from the pompous bastard, my breathing stops as I feel a warm wet sensation on my thumb, the stimulation forces my head to turn to this man who has now slowed the car. Eyes cast on the road ahead, he has stuck my thumb in his mouth.

My breathing pattern changes, I’m breathing like a

painter who has lost control on his canvas, like I have made this intake an art form, my chest rising and falling with the sedative qualities of a lullaby.

A second, I breathe like my lungs have been starved of oxygen as I watch him gradually suck my thumb until his mouth releases it.

A smile creeps on his face and he simply lets it sit there warming his face against the rays of the sun bursting through the windshield, a second, his gaze kisses me and he grins like his teenager way, part love and mischief.

“Breathe Buttercup.” He sizzles, ogling at the road ahead, and the process I was oblivious of bolts in my thoughts as my breathing pattern changes once more. Zizwe laughs in the same way he did like a teenager. The laugh is contagious, so I laugh too and here we are beautiful bastards, laughing together on our way to the Vineyards.

“What are you thinking about?” His voice reverberates on his chest, canoodling my ears.

“Where have you been all my life?” The question doesn’t make sense, but I want to know. My hand is still hidden in his large one, a tight comforting hold. He brings it up, kisses it a few times without as so much as to look my way and keeps it on his chest. My hand will tire, but I don’t mind. I will watch him drive while he focuses on the road with that furrowed brow.

LILIAN...

“Lilian.” My husband’s firm voice pierces through my thoughts, blinking the blur from my eyes, I find him scrutinizing me under his gaze. To cover up my shame, I move to sit on the empty chair next to him. “Is everything okay? You have been out of it lately.”

Nothing is okay, Bhekizizwe thinks I’m a fool. Gallivanting with my son like that, his stubbornness piques me. He won’t heed my words and stay away from Bulelwa, I can’t let my son date a man I’ve

slept with more than I can count. I don't play when it comes to my children, they are too precious to me and deserve the best the world can give.

Bhekizizwe does not fit the bill, I don't want to be pushed and forced to take drastic measures to keep my baby safe. Bhekizizwe is mine, he won't throw me away just like that. If he thinks he and Bulelwa will have that fantasy kind of life; white picket fence...two dogs...and three little brats, then he has not been sleeping with Lilian Msibi.

"There you go again, drifting away." Husbands are naturally annoying, so I will let him be. The knock at the door saves me from explaining myself.

"Where's Deliwe?" I hope she doesn't expect me to attend to the knock.

"She's busy, won't you get it?" Ndlangamandla thinks I'm a joke.

I don't want to argue with him, so I drag my feet to get the stupid door. To my astonishment, my daughter stands before me.

“Thobekile!” I sound less shocked than I really am, turning back to my husband, I find him up on his feet and his face drowning in shock.

To be continued...

BURN

44

NQABA...

Thandiwe is not in the house, I looked everywhere. After the alteration we had, my heart led me back to the bedroom to apologize only to find it evacuate. Something seems to take control over Thandiwe, MamSonto is aware of it.

She wouldn't tell me what it was, only that she had to go to the mountain to pray. Forty days is what she told me, so much could happen in forty days. After the attack she had last night, her spirit had lost its strength. So fighting the evil man with a

weak spirit could prove dangerous for her.

Now thandiwe is missing, her phone is on the nightstand. How will I find her? Ngidi had warned me about the spiritual war, I didn't think it would be this bad. I feel so alone in this, I can't keep troubling Neo. Ayize is heavily pregnant, she needs him more than I do.

Grabbing whatever I need, my mind falls into panic as I drive out of the compound in search of Thandiwe and can only hope that she is okay wherever she is.

BULELWA...

Abingdon Wine Estates, the sign says. Zizwe has an eye for nice things, this place is beautiful. I am wilfully brushed into the vineyards as it brings divine palette to the rest of the eyes, from bright soulful greens to royalty purple hues.

“I didn’t expect to see this.” My big mouth as always, vomiting offensive shit. I dart my eyes to catch an amused glance, at least he’s not offended. Plodding beside me, Zizwe’s body works on auto pilot as he reaches to take my hand. The touch sends a blaze of fire up my arm, he felt it too. The beam illuminating in his eyes attests to it.

“I thought you would love it.” I do, no one has ever considered me in this manner before.

“What’s the plan Hulk?” He studies me for a moment, his lips twitch up in a small smile at my question.

“We can do whatever you want.” Wouldn’t he like to know what I want? Get your mind out of the gutters Bubu, your man whose days are over. You have rare gold standing before you. I grin and motion him to lead the way, hands entwined we begin our walk in the vineyards.

I’m blabbering, pointing and touching whatever I can get my hands on. He’s beside me, quiet as an introvert and I know he’s not one. So forcing my

mouth shut, I turn to wrap my arms around his waist. I love how he looks down at me with a furrowed brow, it's the most, sexiest thing, makes my blood heat up.

“Talk to me.” It might be too soon to think I have claim over him, I wouldn't be the person I am if I wasn't forward. The man is troubled about something and I'm here so, why not?

“What about?” Like he doesn't know.

“Something is troubling you, I want to be there for you.” I can be cogent, Zizwe raises an eyebrow and runs his hand on the back of his neck. Hey, I know a nervous man when I see one.

“You know this is serious, right?” I haven't met a more, blunt person than Zizwe, he's been forthcoming with his feelings from the moment our lips touched. “What I feel for you is real Bulelwa.”

Okay, I guess we're serious now. He better not propose, I don't see myself as a husband. I'm too young to be tied down.

“I know.” Love can’t be a beautiful thing if it has us agreeing to things we are not a hundred percent sure of.

“If I ever do anything to break your trust, would you forgive me?” Betrayal and I do not see eye to eye, I don’t think I would forgive him. Love doesn’t betray, does it?

Zizwe sighs anxiously, I’m taking too long to answer. I’m still trying to read his eyes and getting nothing but a darn headache that will have me crying on my mother’s lap later tonight.

“What’s going on Zizwe?” I hate serious talks, they drain me. Can’t I be happy all the time, life is too short for grave talks.

He pulls back from my tight enfoldment, to look into my eyes. Various emotions are swirling in his eyes. Sorrow... pain... desire... regret. His hands fall on my face, I shut my eyes to take in their warmth. Just when I’m comfortable in this embrace, his hands move to my back. They pull me closer, into a hug.

He puts everything in it, as if it's the last one.

A quick gasp evades from my throat at the sudden whisk. I'm in Zizwe's arms as if I am nothing more than a doll, my legs enfold around his waist, arms circled around his neck. My face coyly cradles his collar and I press my lips in his neck. He smells like a man, masculine and sexy. I take in his heady-intoxicating scent that has my stomach falling victim to tingles. He's moving, in a minute we're sheltered under a tree that towers over us.

“Whatever I tell you, Buttercup, promise you will keep an open mind.” He's scaring me, yet the whispers in my ears are comforting. I'm about to answer and tell him that I'm here for him and willing to help in any way I can when a male voice beats me to it.

“Bhekizizwe.” I look up to see a buff man standing behind Zizwe, his face is the kind that would make me turn back if I were to bump into him at night.

Gradually and with me wrapped around him, Zizwe turns. I quickly wiggle down, wanting to see what this idiot wants.

“Yes?” Good, the tone of Zizwe’s voice doesn’t familiarize with this man. I wouldn’t handle him having dodgy friends that look like they bomb ATMs for a living.

“I have a message for you, from...” He says this moving closer, I would be jealous if I thought he’s gay. There is no shade of it on him, why is he coming closer though? I’m suspicious of the way he sends his words. Then I see it, the tip of a kitchen knife, hidden in the long sleeve of his black hoodie.

“Zizwe watch out!” I yell out a warning covering his figure with mine, his hands instinctively enwrap around me. The attack is so sudden and swift, I hardly have time to think but save him. A gasp escapes my mouth, my eyes bulging in disbelief. I feel the blade slice into my right side and up towards my heart.

Zizwe is confused for a second until his eyes flicker with pain and anger, they scurry from me to the man pulling the knife out of me and back to me as gurgling and splattering sounds come out of my mouth.

Time is slowed down, too slow that when he places me down after my knees have failed me, my attacker is sprinting like a racer, racing against Caster Semenya. Watching Zizwe run after the strange man, my hands claw at the green grass that is smeared with my crimson blood. I want to get up and go after them, I want to shout to Zizwe and tell him to come back. But I get no volume. Finally getting on my knees, and down onto my hands, I drag myself about a body-length across the grass. Why is that tall man not stopping? I need him. Like he hears my thoughts, he breaks the race and swivels on his heel. Eyes wide, chest rising and falling violently from exhaustion.

“BULELWA!!!” A great shout surges from him, today I don’t mind him calling me Buttercup. I want him to call me, his Buttercup and be the clingy Hulk I have come to know and on my way to love. It feels like Zizwe will take a lifetime to get to me, yet he’s running faster than anything.

Maybe I’m seeing things, tears are spouting out of my eyes. I’m seeing a million things at once, my life before and after I met him. His smile, those perfect white teeth. Then I hear his voice in my head, whispering... ‘Buttercup.’ With a splattering gasp, I collapse face down.

“Bulelwa.” Wheezing and panting heavily, he spins me around in his arms. Tears are disrespectful, they have no shame, parading on this man’s face like this. I want to raise my hand and wipe them away, yet strength dubs me a weakling.

“Stay with me, Buttercup. Please stay with me.” I’ll

die after seeing a grown ass man cry, but curse it. I don't want him to cry, the sight of tears burn my already weak heart into ashes. His voice seems to fade as he pulls his phone out, I don't hear what he says over the portable device. My mind is in a stupor, all I hear are his sobs and the words 'don't leave me' seem to find their way into my ears.

"I- I..." Lord give me strength, so I can tell him how sorry I am.

"Don't speak, the ambulance is on the way."
Vineyards are a curse, anything can happen here and no one will know what happened to you.

"S- Sorry." Blood splutters out of my mouth, accompanying the word, my heart stiffens at the sight of tears pouring down Zizwe's face. A smile manages to creep up my lips when he holds me close, sobbing. I get to smell his scent one last time. I can survive anything if I feel loved, even with these pains that come to explode within. He buries his face on my neck, pressing his wet lips on it.

Gently, he pulls me back to caress my face.

“You’re going to be okay, Buttercup, you’re going to be okay.” I wish I could take his words and run with them, but I don’t see a future. He frowns at the subtle smile on my face...I give you only smiles because I want you to live. Remember me by having fun and laughing often. These pains maybe unwelcome guests, yet they can never take away what we shared. Even though it was brief. My limbs feel like they don’t belong to me, everything hurts now, every damn thing.

“No, no, no. Don’t do this to me, Bulelwa. Keep your eyes open please.” Brow creased and face tense, his mouth twitches upwards until his jaw clenches in anger and pain. I would keep my eyes open, I would do it for him. However I’m tired, I want to sleep.

“C- Can I sleep...wa- wake me...up...later.” A sob leaps out of his mouth, before he’s weeping silently.

“Please, please. I love you, don’t leave me. I love you.” Strength jolts out of me just when I want to

return the words, he will never get to hear them from me. The last thing I hear are these three words mingled with heart wrenching sobs and the last thing I feel are his arms clasping around me as my being falls into oblivion.

THANDIWE...

My feet seem to have a life of their own lately, I don't know how I sneaked out of the house, but after the mini argument I had with Nqaba, strange dark voices invaded my mind. Whispering sounds I couldn't make out and no matter how much I pressed my ears, I couldn't get them to stop. Before I could call out to Nqaba, I was toddling out the door. Heaven knows what the destination was.

I'm at a coffee shop, it's not packed. There are enough people to make enough noise to annoy a reticent person. I don't know how far I walked, but I've forgotten my way home which is odd because

I've been to this place before. I can familiarize with a few places in Eshowe. Why am I a stranger to it today? I need to get home, I don't have my phone with me though.

"Excuse me, ma'am." This waitress is here to annoy me again, when I got here which feels like hours ago, she told me to leave, that they don't allow homeless people in their shop. The nerve of the woman, I caused a scene telling her where to get off and forced my way in.

"Here's the manager." I asked for this fat white man hours ago, he's only attending to me now.

"My employee tells me, you refuse to leave the shop." Of course I won't leave, I'm a paying customer too.

"Is this how you treat your customers?" I'm on my feet so I can tower over him, unfortunately we're the same height. I would have exercised my power, over this man.

"No, but we don't run a homeless shelter lady." I

know this short shit did not just 'lady' me and why do they assume I'm homeless?

"Do I look homeless to you? This is not the apartheid era, where you treat us like shit and we fall at your feet." Hell I'm angry, how dare he?

"You're wearing a nightdress with no shoes on in the middle of the day," What? No I'm not... My eyes trace my figure... Thandiwe, you have done it. How did I allow myself to walk out the house like this? Shame joins this white man in mocking me. My mind runs, but I can't let them see me panic, they already think I'm a crazy woman who walks around barefooted, dressed in sleepwear.

"I- I need to make...a call." I'm a garbled mess, unable to construct a sentence. Who do I need to call again? My mind deserts me in this moment of need, I'm not always this gawky and it's not like me to forget things. Think Thandiwe, think.

What is happening to me? Something steals into my

mind like a deranged thief, taking what's important to me, my memory. It adds new dangerous ideas, launches a new personality and muddles up the rest. I feel myself cascade out of control, something luring me further and further from the person I once knew until I'm so deep and no longer recognize my surroundings.

“Tshabalala!” Nqaba? I turn on my heel at the sound of a familiar voice calling out to me, but he's not there. I need to see him, he has to tell these people that I am not homeless.

Where am I running to? I don't see anyone out here, but a bunch of strangers. Where is he? Where is Nqaba? Maybe she can tell me, Nqaba is tall and anyone can spot him passing by.

“Excuse me, ma.” The middle aged woman twirls around, kissing me with a furrowed brow. “Have you seen Nqaba?”

“Get away from here.” That's rude, I decide to ask the next person. People are mean, no one wants to

tell me where Nqaba is.

“Nqaba, Nqaba.” I’m shouting at the top and this is the only way he will hear me, again, he is tall and won’t hear you when you whisper.

“Excuse me, bhuti.” He gives me one quick stare and continues cleaning the windscreen of the white Toyota Fortuner. It must be nice being rich, you park your car on the side of the road and someone cleans it for you free of charge. When I grow up, I want a car just like this one and I will drive it around town, showing my friends that I have made it in life.

“I’ll help you clean this car if you tell me where Nqaba is.” I offer my services with a bright smile, the boy eyes me from top to bottom. Like I’m wasting his time, he pushes me aside and moves to clean the other side of the car.

“How did they let you out of Sterkfotein sisi?” I don’t take kindly to insults. “We’re working here, trying to make a living. This is my spot, if you want to wash

cars... There's a street after this one, a few people work there, find a nice spot for yourself and you'll be sorted." Does he think..?

"Oh no bhuti, I'm not a hobo. I'm looking for Nqaba, he must've passed here. He's tall and looks like the tyres of this car, he always looks angry and walks like this..." I hear him laugh as I impersonate Nqaba's serious face and intimidating walk.

"Haii, ngiyayesaba le ndawo. Kanti abantu bahlanya kanje? I think I should go back to Joburg." (I fear this place, it has crazy people lurking around.)

I find offence in his words, they have me walking away from him.

"You're the crazy one, mageza." (Hobo.) I shout, striding away.

"Voets ek, umageza uwena." (You're the hobo.) The boy retorts with a vulgar shout.

"Voets ek nawe." (Cussing.) I send it back just as loud.

‘Tshabalala!’

I hear it again, louder this time. But where is he? Is Nqaba playing hide and seek with me? I won’t talk to him if he continues like this.

“Nqaba come out, I’m not playing anymore.” Why are these people looking at me funny? I’m looking for a man and they refuse to help me and when I shout his name, they consider me with wide eyes.

I’m in the middle of the road, wildly and desperately, searching for Nqaba’s car. I think I remember the car he drives. But all these vehicles passing look the same. How will I point his out?

The world passes in a blur, the hiss of the tyres over the smooth tarmac is lost under the hammering of my heart. They are coming at me, I can’t move. My heart is pushing me to look for Nqaba. I have to find him. Ignoring drivers shouting and cussing at me, I continue to zoom in on the cars passing by.

“Tshabalala!!!” There it is again, it’s louder and more audible this time. I hear dark voices as well, but his...the lone true voice of love, light, rises above the dark voices.

I’m pulled out of the streets with a whisk, my mind works to recognize the man who has me in the grip of his large hands. The man is somewhat too tall for his build, I have to strain my neck looking up at him. Somehow, he isn’t lanky though, there’s bulk on him. His face is mostly obscured by a black unkempt beard that clings to his skin like fur on a velvet couch. He meets my gaze with a blunt refusal to avert his first.

“Don’t touch me, you’re not my Nqaba. Respect yourself.” I snap, pushing him away. Men are undisciplined swine, only Nqaba is allowed to touch me like this. I find the man scowling in confusion as I fix my dress and run my fingers through my loose

braids.

“Tan-tan.” A snap, firm and commanding...His hands cup my face, the hold forces my eyes to drown in his gaze. “It’s me, Nqaba.” From his eyes comes a sense of home, he has eyes as open and honest as any child, a warmth and safety. Nqaba blinks and the warmth is momentarily covered by the shield of his eyelashes, naturally long and soft looking. The cloud in my brain clears slowly, memories of him flash in front of me.

“Never lose sight of my eyes Thandiwe, all you have to do is look into my eyes.” His voice has that silky tone, it seeps through my ears and into my soul, awakening what had been put to sleep. My senses bolt and things seem to make sense now. Nqaba is here with me...

“And I will never get lost.” In this moment I find my home, my place to hide when darkness comes knocking. I still haven’t recovered from his intense gaze as he pulls me into his arms.

“Don’t do that again Thandiwe, don’t ever walk out

on me like that.” I was forced out of the house and I don’t know how I forgot my way.

STYLES...

Zulu blends in perfectly with the crew, he’s a bit quiet, probably misses his mother. I thought bringing him around Liyana and R. J would brighten up his mood and my assumptions were right. Although he’s not really out there.

“How is Amara going to look after him, Styles? She has a lot in her hands with Ife and R. J is a lot of work.” Randall has taken a roll of a woman like Neo, complaining. Finding a seat on the couch opposite him, I blink at him trying to read his blank expression. I don’t know if he doesn’t want the boy here, or he’s still stressing over Ife.

“Zulu is eight Randall, turning nine soon. The boy doesn’t need to be carried around or breast fed,

Sihle is too young to keep him company and I thought he'd make friends with Liya”

“Liya hasn't been herself since Ife went missing, she isolates herself and hardly eats.” That makes sense, Amara had to force her to come and keep Zulu company, the thirteen year old doesn't want to associate herself with boys.

“Did you talk to her? Girls her age go through a lot and find it hard to voice out their feelings. Maybe Ife's ordeal got to her.” I tell him as my mind has concluded.

“I doubt that's the case, she hasn't been to Ife's bedroom since we brought her home.”

“Dada, dada.” R.J's voice pierces through the room, interjecting Randall's statement. We turn to find Zulu assisting Liyana in her walk, her back hunched and a hand pressed on her abdomen. Randall doesn't waste time to jump to his feet.

“We were making sandwiches and she started crying.” Zulu explains,

“Papa, my stomach hu-” Vomit clogs her words as she chokes on the vile eggs forcing their way out of her throat. She looks paler than a sheet of paper, Liyana leans into Randall who rubs her back and pulls her away from the revolting sight. Tears gush out of her eyes.

“Dada, ewww.” His nose scrunched and lips pinned together, R.J whines, his miniscule finger pointing at Liyana’s breakfast on the floor.

Giggles swoosh out of him when I take him in my arms, before the child swims in his sister’s vomit. I don’t have to tell Zulu to move aside, he’s found a place behind the couch. Worry taps in his eyes that are cagily glued on Liyana.

“Pass me that glass of water.” Randall instructs Zulu, children are always eager to please. There is enthusiasm in the way he moves. The glass tumbles to the floor and splatters into various pieces as it touches Liyana’s fingers. She sinks to her knees, her body falls into shudders. Randall is

quick in catching her head before it crashes on the tiled floor.

“Not again.” He sputters, annoyance playing in his throat. His ancestors have no timing whatsoever, the least they can do is be gentle. Liyana is a child and can take so much.

“He...is...coming...home...” Confusion swirls around the room with the words that spew out of Liyana’s mouth.

“Come...home.” A norm R.J is accustomed to, he mimics his sister.

“Death. Death. Death.” Out of her chest, the gnawing words leisurely slip out of her mouth. There can’t be another death in this family, Raven’s death was enough. I’ve known Randall my whole life and I see right through him, how his brother’s death has been troubling him.

“Death dada...Death...” R.J again, giggling in my arms while pointing at his father. If only life was as simple as a child’s, Randall frowns up at me. Confusion and uneasiness flapping around his face,

I can see the questions flying around his brain.
Someone is going to die. Who?

To be continued...

BURN

45

LILIAN...

After so many years, this child comes back as if nothing ever happened. Ndlangamandla is not a happy man right now, he's settled on the couch, hands folded across his chest. Nothing has been said between father and daughter. A little girl who has a few of her features is perched on her lap, her eyes wandering between me and Ndlangamandla.

"When did you arrive?" The silence has to be broken, her eyes are glued on her father, I don't know what

to make of the blank expression dawdling on Thobekile's face. Maybe she wants her father to acknowledge her.

"Last night, Lindiwe told me that you all came to Ntuzuma." She keeps her voice low and unhurried.

"Yes." I have nothing else to say, I wish my husband would say something already.

"She is beautiful." I point at the little girl who reticently drops her gaze. "What's her name? How old is?"

"Aurora, she's thirteen." For some reason, my eyes find Ndlangamandla. I don't know what I expect to see, but this time he raises his gaze glaring with shifty eyes. The stare compels Thobekile to clear her throat. Tradition and customs mean a lot to him and I hope to God Thobekile's children know their mother's language and maybe have native names.

"Aurora! That's a beautiful name, does she know who we are?" I hope to God she does.

“Yes, you’re my grandma and he’s my grandpa. Mom has pictures of you on the wall.” The girl speaks, grandpa takes up his famous glare. Are those tears I see in his eyes?

“Go give grandpa a hug Aurora.” Thobekile’s voice wanes, she’s not sure about her decision. Hopefully the man I’m married to will not take his anger out on the child. Hesitantly Aurora rises, takes gradual steps to Ndlangamandla who hides his eyes from the little girl. Her arms wrap around his neck, for a second I think he won’t hold her back. He is human and still has a heart, one hand is better than nothing. Relief and tears take over Thobekile’s face, my baby craves for her father’s love.

“Excuse me, I have to take this.” The sound of my phone ringing sends me on my feet. I told this fool I was going to call him...I know I will find my family in this silence I leave them in. The kitchen is a good place to talk.

“What did I say about calling me, you idiot?”

Unskilled people miff me, this is why I prefer doing things myself.

“The plan went wrong, your son got in the way.” He says bluntly, with no emotion in his voice.

“What do you mean my son got in the way?”
Keeping my voice down becomes a struggle as panic presses the volume button.

“He got in the way magriza, the knife went through him instead of that fool”

“No, what have you done you imbecile?” Shit, I just screamed. Those two will come to investigate.

“What happened?” Too soon... Thobekile and her father are standing in the kitchen goggle eyed and curiosity pushing their stares on. I can't fake this one. My baby is injured. What have I done?

NQABA...

“We're going back to the city.” I tell Thandiwe as she walks back into the bedroom after her bath, I'm

worried about her and I'm afraid that I will lose her to insanity.

“Did you talk to MamSonto?” Averting my statement, she jumps into another topic.

“She’s not around remember, we’ll have to fight alone this time.” Worry rains on her face, bearing a heavy exhalation. I wish there was a way to comfort her, praying is all we can do now.

“Tan-tan, I need you to listen to me.” I stand to my feet from the bed and amble to her across the room, my arms wrap around her as I meet her mirror reflection. I greet her with a kiss on the nape of her neck and a smile crosses my mouth at her body trembling against mine. “We’re going to get through this sthandwa sam, but I need one thing from you.”

“What?” She gasps, her breathing heading north. I feel our connection hum with the satisfaction of us being so close, I can almost feel her soul saluting mine. This is the love I yearned for all my life, the love I will fight for till death.

“Pray Tshabalala.” It’s not something I would normally advice, yet I have seen enough to throw me down on my knees and call upon God.

“I do pray.” My gaze meets hers in the mirror reflection, pain resonates loudly in her eyes and fear dances in jubilation.

“You’re weak in prayer Thandiwe, hence the enemy laughs in your face at every chance he gets.” I will never understand why God didn’t strip the devil of his power when he ousted him out of heaven. He uses it to bully the weak and my Thandiwe is weak. “You pray while entertaining fear, faith and fear do not mix. Neo told me this, doubt is your biggest enemy. When you go down on your knees and call on God, forget everything else. Forget your problems, me and your mother. Put your eyes on Jesus, only this way the devil will be defeated.” Neo is a good teacher, a fainthearted one. Still you can learn a lot from that man.

“I’ll try Nqaba, everything is so overwhelming and

frustrating. I see no way out, but through death.” She stirs in my arms until she’s facing me, her breath whiffs my face. She smells of mint toothpaste.

“Death is a lie, but Jesus is real and he will pull us out of this. Don’t let your faith waver or you will lose to the enemy.” The words keep slipping through my tongue, it’s what I saw today that has me wanting this more than anything. I almost lost the woman I love to insanity, that’s something I can’t afford. Fear pressed heavily on my chest when I saw her in the middle of the road, cars dangerously passing through her like paper airplanes. It was made known to me that Thandiwe had to change, forgive her mother and turn to God during this battle.

THANDIWE...

Nqaba’s words are registering, however there is a bit of distraction in how his arms play on my back, his lips refuse to let me catch my breath as he

presses them on the sensitive part of my neck.

“Shall we blow off some steam?” Nqaba growls lowly in my ear, his tone possessive and arousing... then I’m reminded how I am in love with an idiot, this is how he asks for sex?

“Blow off?” Thank the heavens I am able to speak, although it is rather a choke. Nqaba doesn’t provide an answer. He’s kissing his way down to my bust, heat pools into my stomach at the feel of his wet lips. Time is not wasted as he unwraps the bath towel cuddling my body. His eyes travel around my naked form, not lustfully, but to admire me.

We’re on the bed, breathing hard...touching each other wherever our hands feel like imprinting. I hold on to him as he enters me with care and cautiously, there is so much love in the way he moves in and out of me. The sweet whispers in my ear, although they sound gibberish. I would listen to them all night for they bring about tranquillity.

Nqaba touches me like I only exist for him, he murmurs my name like it came out of his mouth the first day I entered this earth. A whimper escapes my throat when he runs his tongue from my neck to my ear, slowly and lovingly stroking his length inside me.

The feeling is overwhelming I lose all my senses. My legs lock around him, a desperate attempt to pull him deeper into me. He uses his hand to brush my clit without pulling out, I respond with a hungry kiss, my hand brushing his head. This gives me a chance to pull him obsessively close, our kiss is sizzling and desolate, close to animalistic.

I grumble in my throat when Nqaba grazes his lips down the side of my neck, sucking and nibbling, leaving tattooed kisses behind. While his hand works on my clit, his other hand caresses my breasts and nipples. I connect my lips with his neck, my tongue playing on his collarbone. I feel him shiver on top of me and that sensation drives me crazy, I could die in his arms and go in peace.

I shriek with pleasure as Nqaba quickens his

strokes and buck my hips to let them grind just so to accommodate his mind blowing thrusts. The peak is near, I feel it, in every inch of me. The sensuality of it is so overpowering that I want to scream, I need to scream.

“Nqaba...” I moan, wordlessly pleading for more. I want it to stop and I want it him to go on, if death came in this form, where I am wrapped up on my beloved then it isn't such a bad thing. Our eyes meet, his pupils are blown, his breathing heavy it's so darn sexy. His eyes tell me how badly he wants me although he already has me, the feeling sends a jolt of confidence through my body. I want him just as much. I want a picture of this moment, a photograph that will last a lifetime. With my legs wrapped around his waist, I force him deeper inside of me.

“Shit...” He semi gasps and semi growls, peaking his thrusts. My arms wrap around his neck as my

ecstasy approaches, I'm high on love. My mind goes blank, toes curl and body shudders before a loud cry erupts from my chest as he hits my G-spot. My vision blurs and eyes roll back as I ride this erotic chariot that has me feeling like I'm going to explode with pleasure.

"I love you...I...love you. I love...you." I pant in his ear, the man has me humming the words out. With a blurred vision I spot a smirk on the corner of his lips... That's alright, nothing can upset me right now.

There's a twist in my stomach, it tightens, making my breathing pick up as I fall off a cliff into a puddle of tingling ecstasy. The feeling is just too damn good that I lose control over myself and this has me letting myself go. An earth shattering orgasm takes over my whole being, leaving me helpless and seeing stars. Nqaba continues with his ride, repeatedly slamming into me, the roughness sends me on another pleasurable ride and my form shudders under him. I'm holding on to him, legs and hands as if we're climbing down a tall building and I would fall if I let go. I hear him growl and cuss

loudly as he reaches his own high, filling me completely with his deliciousness.

“I love you Thandiwe, I love you.” He pants breathlessly before collapsing on my chest, this habit of his will have to stop once the baby starts growing. He can’t lie between my legs like this.

“I love you more Nqaba.” More than he will ever know, more than I will ever exclaim. His lips play on my chest with gentle brushes and his arms caress my sweaty skin. Lord, let me keep this man forever if there is such a thing.

RANDALL...

There is no other way to get a hold of my grandfather, MamSonto is away and she is the only person that can get through to him. I don’t know what they are planning, but I am not happy. My baby is suffering and I can’t sit back and watch

while they do as they please with her. That stupid gift means nothing to me if it will put Liyana's life in danger.

"Dada, sleep." R.J my pride and joy, the boy hardly sleeps. It's past his bed time and yet here he is on my lap fiddling with his hands.

"Yes, R.J needs to sleep." He giggles a lot for a three year old.

"La. J no sleep." He finds it hard to pronounce the R in his name, I've tried. Maybe a few teeth later will help the man out. His miniature hands fold around my neck, it's tight. This is how he tells me that he doesn't want to sleep.

"Baby, Liyana is sleeping in his Zulu's room." Amara peeps through our bedroom door with these shocking words.

"What?" My voice hints at disbelief.

"I tried to wake her up, but she's in a deep slumber."

That's really odd...following Amara, with my son tangled in my arms. We find Liyana curled up on the floor next to Zulu's bed. A blanket coated over her.

"Lili." This child is hyper tonight.

"Do you think it's the ancestors who brought her here?" That's the only explanation, she sleep walks when they have a message to convey.

"It could be." Amara's response is brief, a dumbstruck expression plastered on her face. It has been years, yet it's hard to get used to this... whatever it is. MamSonto has not said anything about it. When she consults, they refuse to communicate with her. We need to know if this is a calling or something that will pass, I don't like my daughter being used like this.

R.J toddles to his sister after wiggling off my arms, he is giggling as if the thought of getting to her excites him. Amara is amused as the little boy tumbles to the floor beside Liyana and rests his head on her stomach.

“He’s your son, don’t look at me.” She argues, placing a hand on the small of my back.

“He’s not going to sleep there, neither is Liyana.” My protest is welcomed by a head shake.

“It will be pointless to remove Liyana from here, she will be back.” Amara is right, Liyana tends to sleep walk when troubled or when the Okolies are troubling her.

“I’ll take R.J then, who’s going to nurse his strained neck in the morning?” He can’t sleep like that the whole night.

“Dada...” He raises his head and a contagious giggle embraces his lips. “Come...La. J sleep.” He reaches his hand out to me much to Amara’s annoyance.

“Does this child know who birthed him? He hardly acknowledges me.” A smile is all I have to answer her, I leave her on the door way as I walk up to my son who is anxiously waiting for me.

NEO...

“Come on Zee, I said I’m sorry. How long will you carry that long face?” I know I messed up, but I couldn’t turn my back on Nqaba. The man is going through so much, if tables were turned he would have done the same for me.

“I said I’m not talking to you, Neo. Now stop trying to touch me.” Her hand spans mine as I reach for her thigh, women are evil. If only God knew the kind of torture we have to go through in this world, this woman of mine decided to torture me by wearing nothing but a T-shirt that barely covers her buttocks and has the audacity to tell me that she has nothing on under there. What am I supposed to do with myself now?

Zee moves away from the bed, my lustful eyes follow her steps to the dressing table. She’s swaying her hips purposely, I know by now how her mind works. I will explode if she doesn’t let me inside her.

“You know my babies can feel the torture their father is going through.” Maybe I shouldn’t have said that, the look she’s giving me is deadlier than a snake bite. “Zee, my baba, ngwana Neo man. Look at you, beautiful as ever.”

I get a tongue click for my praises.

What the heck am I doing? Pregnant women are easy to seduce, my arms snake around her after I’ve made it to her. Her breathing quickens as I bury my face on her neck and press my lips on it. Riled up she stirs in my arms, mauling me with kisses. What did I say about pregnant women? Breathing like a washing machine, Zee pulls back her big bust moving in such a perfect harmony.

“Just this once Neo, I’m about to give birth and I can’t keep having you push inside me.” Yeah like it is, this very night she’ll be moaning my name as if it’s the only thing she can utter.

“You know me baba, I have self-control.” Says the

man who's leaking from his fiancé's kisses. Zee pushes me on the bed, a naughty smirk attacks her lips. God knows his thing, our sex life has been great.

Within a second I strip her naked.

There's a scream, I don't know if it's from me because hell I'm excited or from Zee... But I haven't touched her yet. How is she screaming?

"I know I'm good baba, but you're giving me too much credit. And I'm offended that you're faking an orgasm." What's wrong with women?

"No, get off me." I will ask again, what the hell is wrong with women? We were having fun and now she's asking me to scoot. "Neo get off."

"Okay, okay, you don't have to scream." Half groaning and half Grumbling and frustrated in between, I scramble off the bed, thinking of ways to put my erection to rest. A thump on my head has me turning around to see why I am being attacked.

"What did I do now?"

“You’re so insensitive Neo, can’t you see I’m in pain?” Zee yells in frustration, I notice the hand pressed on the small of her back.

“I told you to exercise, look now you’re getting cramps.” A warning I had given her when she was four months pregnant.

“My water broke you idiot, it’s time Neo. The babies are on the way.” Oh Lord, it’s too soon, they can’t come now.

“Like now? Could you tell them to wait, I haven’t had sex in days. I’m in the desert baba, thirsty as hell and it’s hot in here.” I announce, staggering back while throwing my hands on my head. Her response is an ear-splitting scream. “Okay, I’m sorry baba. Breathe in...breathe out.” She shakes her head as I act it for her, blaring in agony and that throws me into panic. Those three brats can’t come peacefully, they want attention.

“So you’re going to push, right?” I have seen this on TV, it’s not a nice scene. Zee scowls at my question,

her nose pinching up in annoyance. As she tries to speak, nothing but screams fill the room. She's writhing on the bed.

“Neo!!!” These screams are only making me nervous and I don't know what to do at this point.

“What do you want Zee? Should I get you a banana?” I think she's nodding. “This is going to be easy, I'll get you the three bananas because there are three monsters in your belly.”

“Neo get back here,” Oh shit! Zee draws out a yelp, I scurry back to her. This is what panic does to you. She grips my ear, pulling me closer to her and through clamped teeth whispers... “Take... me... to the... hospital... now.”

“Hau baba, why didn't you say so in the first place?”
Women... women... women...

To be continued...

BURN

BHEKIZIZWE...

“Excuse me, sisi.” The nurse turns with an attitude that does nothing but piss me off further. Bulelwa was taken into the theatre room hours ago, I haven’t heard anything yet. The nurses keep passing here as if they are on patrol and ignoring me like I’m invisible. I am aggravated by their attitudes, plus the amount of people that are on this hall way. Hospitals should not be this crowded.

“Bhuti, I said wait over there, the doctor will update you once he’s done.” The same story she told me when we first got here.

“So you keep saying, I want to know if my...” Irritation claws under my skin, it has me scratching my head vigorously.

“Haibo bhuti, I have work to do. I can’t be here entertaining you.” Wrong choice of words.

“We-nurse, I have been waiting here for hours and

no one has come to update me.” The nurse scowls, clearly I’m getting under her skin. Her eyes run through my body from head to toe followed by a tongue click.

“The doctors are going to be long,” She starts with her down sided mouth, her eyes probably cussing me out. “You might want to run to the canteen and buy fat cakes and tea, I’m sure they have J oko too. You’re going to be here for a while bhuti.” I want to retort harshly, but Lilian’s face distracts me. Hard and flushed, she’s marching down the hall leading her husband. His expression is easier to read, he’s devastated.

“Where is my son?” Lilian’s question is commanding and cold, her voice disregarding the nurse who looks smaller and almost invisible in front of the flashy Lilian Msibi. Her pupils kiss me for a second and her shifty eyes dash back to the nurse.

“This hospital is big mama, there are many sons here. Go to the reception and inquire about your son there.” It’s shocking that Lilian lets her finish the road to rudeness.

“Don’t piss me off you stupid girl, I will have you mopping floors in this hospital before your shift is over.” This is the Lilian I know, arrogant and mean, the world doesn’t really know the lion disguised as a lamb.

“Lalela nurse, my son was brought into this hospital today. He was stabbed and...” The father jumps in, pushing his wife under his wing. I’m not affected at all, she means nothing to me. She hasn’t stopped stealing glances at me though, what puzzles me is how dubious her eyes are. The nurse, seemingly humbled explains how the doctors are trying to save Bulelwa’s life.

“Follow me sir.” The nurse flies across the hall and disappears into one of the rooms, she hardly acknowledged me because I don’t come with shiny clothes. The husband is the first to move, his eyes did not see me. He is followed by a woman I hardly

noticed was there.

Lilian doesn't make it far as I pull her back, she dips her eyes in anger, yanking her hand away. Her other hand hops towards my face, I see the slap coming. Denying her to practise her authority on me, I block the insult and grab her by the neck to pin her against the wall.

“What are you doing?” Through stifled teeth a grumble bubbles out as she questions my anger. How have I been so blind? This has her name written all over it, Lilian has her son's blood in her hands.

“You heartless bitch, I could kill you right now.” Sharp words spring forth wrapped in a blanket of threat. “How could you do this to your son?”

Lilian's eyes amplify, tears gush into them as she struggles against my hand.

“You're hurting me, Bhekizizwe.” I want to do more than hurt her, I want to watch her lose to life.

“Believe me, Lilian, you would know if I were hurting you.” A passive cough escapes her throat, if only she would choke on it and die. My ears send a warning, there’s a pair of footfalls that force me to pull my hand away. I have to compose myself and act natural as two nurses walk past, Lilian places her hand on her neck and falls into a series of coughs the moment they are out of earshot.

“You’re stupid if you think I would ever hurt my son.” She stammers, this is when I know she’s lying.

“Bulls hit, I know you sent that man to kill me and Bulelwa got in the way. He ...he could die.” The slap I had prevented eventually makes its way to my cheek, I hate this habit of hers.

“My son will not die.” It’s almost as if she’s trying to convince herself, this is the first time seeing Lilian reduced to tears. I pull her close to me, the tight grip on her wrist has her squirming and flinching in pain. My face neighbouring hers, so close that her inconsistent breath whiffs my features. Fear finds a

home in her for the first time, mouth ajar. She glares up at me, wordless and flabbergasted.

“If anything happens to him, Lilian, I swear you better run because I am going to destroy you.” The threat dribbles through gnashed teeth.

“You seem to forget who I am Bhekizizwe, I can ruin you with just one word.” Her threat is whack, I’m not afraid of her. I might have given her the idea that she scares me, I don’t care about anything anymore. I have nothing to lose. “Now let me go and let’s talk about this like civilised human beings.”

“Get out of my sight Lilian, I swear I would not be responsible for what happens next.” I see her shivering, face scrunched in confusion and a glint of frustration.

“Bhekizi-”

“I said get the fuck away from me,” I let anger take control of my whole being as I pin her on the wall. “The only reason you’re still alive is because you are Bulelwa’s mother.”

She gasps, pushing me away from her. Like the

composed woman I know her to be, she irons out her outfit with her hands and without an eye turn, Lilian follows the path her husband took. I need to know if Bulelwa is okay, his father will spot me if I go in there.

THANDIWE...

“Tee wake up.” That’s Bulelwa’s voice, it’s discreet and filled with sadness. He doesn’t have to call me twice my eyes obey his voice, the room is not that dark. The streetlights from outside keeps the room well-lit, Nqaba is fast asleep next to me. Wait a minute, Bulelwa? Was I dreaming of him calling me?

“Over here.” Narrowing my eyes I scan the bedroom in search of him, a silhouette lurks in the dark.

“Bubu?” My voice is a shaky whisper, there’s something about his presence that throws all the hairs on my body skyward.

“I need your help.” No, Bulelwa doesn’t speak like

this. My friend is forever swimming in happiness, his voice drowned in amusement. The sadness in his tone breaks my heart. I get out of bed to turn the light on.

“No don’t...” The firmness in his voice stops me from moving.

“What’s going on? Why are you here? How come I didn’t hear you knock?”

“I don’t want to die Tee, it can’t be my time.” Bulelwa is acting strange, he’s standing in the middle of my bedroom in the dark and refuses that I turn on the light.

“What are you talking about Bubu? Is someone chasing you? Let me wake Nqaba up, he’ll help you.” As I spin to Nqaba, a light goes on in my head. Bulelwa is supposedly in Ntuzuma, why is he suddenly here in Eshowe?

“He won’t see me, only you can see me, Tee. Please I don’t have much time, I need your help. I don’t want to die.” I’m suspicious at the fretting tone of

his voice, my friend is not okay. I speed to the light switch and my stomach drops at the blood oozing from his side down, sudden chills ripple through my body, like I'm being washed through with ice water. Every warm feeling and thought is sucked out of me. Bulelwa's eyes are wide with fear, his body hunched and hands pressed on the source that provides the well of blood.

“Bulelwa!!!” I yelp, waking Nqaba up. He doesn't think twice about his movements but jolts to me, his right hand finds the small of my back. He's panicking, so am I...

“What is it?” Nqaba questions.

“Get to the hospital, pray for me please. It's after me Tee, I can't escape it. It said I belong in the fires, I don't understand what's going on.” Bulelwa's entreaty breaks my heart.

“What happened to you? Why are you like this Bulelwa?” Tears flush down my face as the realisation that he's dead hits me. “You can't be

dead Bubu, please tell me you're okay.”

“Bulelwa?” Nqaba browses the room, his eyes broadened. “It's here?”

“Pray for me, it wants to take me away” I watch him disappear like he was never there, my breathing quickens due to shock.

“Thandiwe talk to me.” I think I can't breathe, turning to Nqaba, I grip my hands on his arms. Questions are flooding his head, I can't point them out though.

“Bu- Bulelwa is- he's gone.” I say through quick breaths, leaning into his touch I sink to the floor weeping. He goes down with me, clipping his arms around me.

“What did he say?” He sounds as shocked as I am, replying is a struggle. A lump builds up on my throat, clogging my words. I shake my head in an attempt to get rid of it. “Thandiwe, what did he say?”

“Pr- Pray.” Tears help in answering the man who is shaking me to get me to talk.

“That's what we're going to do, pray.” Nqaba is more

sane than I am. He pulls me up with him. “This is no time to cry, you’d think I’m being rough and insensitive, however that’s not the case. We pray first and cry later, your friend needs you Tshabalala.” My cheeks are hidden in the palm of his hands, his thumbs work to wipe away my tears.

I’m nodding to his words, shifting my attention from the pain to Bulelwa’s plea and how desperate he looked. The man I love goes down on one knee, he gestures that I do the same, I join hands with this man who knew nothing about God a month ago.

NEO...

If someone knows how to scream, then it’s Zee. Who said child birth is fun? I have captured pictures of her screaming and pulling the ugliest faces I have ever seen. I will keep the memories for when she decides to dominate over me. I hold her to support her structure as we exit the car to enter the hospital premises, Zee’s steps are faltering on the

path, they are short, almost like a doll with stiff legs. She must be in a great deal of pain to walk like this. From her face I can tell she's fighting hard to regulate her breathing. She doubles over as contractions swamp her.

“We're almost there baba, hold on.” Comforting words always ease the pain.

Two nurses approach with a stretcher as we walk through the hospital doors, she is wheeled to a private room. Screams from other rooms are audible from here, it must be tough being a woman. My jaw drops when an Indian man walks into the maternity ward.

“Huh uh, Huh uh... Where is Doctor Lisa?” We don't know this Indian man, Zee's doctor is a woman.

“She's on leave, doctor Naidoo is standing in for her.” I don't understand any of this.

“Neo!!!” There she goes screaming again. “Come here please.” Don't be fooled by the polite word, she sounds brutal and looks ready to kill me.

“I’ll be there baba, let me sort this issue out first.” I point at doctor Naidoo with my eyes, he returns with a smile.

“Mr..”

“Maake, she’s my wife.” With pride, I tell him. “And can we please get her a bigger bed, she will fall on that thing.”

The doctor smiles, while the nurses cackle at my request. They don’t understand how serious this is. Zee is carrying triplets...

“Trust me, you have nothing to worry about. This is my profession, I do this every day.” This man.

“Spare me the details doctor..” I interrupt.

“Doctor...please...ignore him. He’s crazy, come and get these babies out.” Desperately, Zee shrieks.

With each contraction comes a pain that seems to dominate her entire being, for these delayed moments Zee could do nothing but scream.

“Zee..” I call, moving to her side. She stops me with

a raised hand, the pain seems to pass for a minute or so and she breathes with closed eyes. “Baba, are you okay?” Her hand curls on my collar and she pulls me to her face. Her cheek falls on mine and the woman in agony whispers... “You’re dead Neo, dead. You put these monsters inside me, let this man get...them...out.” She finishes with a loud cry, pushing me away while at it.

“But Zee, he’s going to see your...”

“Shut up Neo, shut up and let this man get these things out of me.” I didn’t expect the guttural grunt.

“Naidoo wasn’t going to listen to me anyway, look at him, baba.” She cares nothing about my words, but getting the babies out. I will never recover from this. Feeling Zee’s hand tighten around mine, I bring it up to kiss it. Her response is a yank as she breathes heavily and rapidly. Now she doesn’t want me touching her.

“What do you think he’s doing under there?” I want to know, but Zee is not acknowledging me. The two nurses are laughing, they don’t know how I feel.

Only a man would sympathise with me, I should have called Uze, he has experience.

“Nurse, please, shebella ngaka ena. I don’t want him doing funny things there.” (Watch this doctor.)

She shakes her head with a smile, brushing off my request.

“Are you a first time dad Mr. Maake?” The doctor asks, I’m not okay that he’s crouching in between Zee’s legs.

“He’s not...” Zee breathes. “He’s stupid, that’s his problem.”

“Is the pain gone baba? You can speak now?” She narrows her eyes, she might as well use them as a weapon. “The results of tlof tlof modimo, doctors are looking into things they are not meant to see.”

“I hate you, Neo. I shouldn’t have opened my legs for you, look at what you’ve done to me.” She doesn’t mean that, does she? I refrain from answering her.

The doctor keeps prompting her to push.

“I see the head, I need you to push for me.” He announces, excitement fills my every being and that has me rushing to take a look. My face falls, eyes and mouth freeze wide open in an expression of shock

“What...am I...looking...at?”

“Are you okay?” I don’t feel so good, the last thing I hear is the nurse’s voice and Zee screaming my name before crumpling to the floor like a puppet and the world goes black.

To be continued...

BURN

47

AYIZE...

I saw this coming, I'm not surprised really. Neo is a coward, besides it was too late for me to warn him.

"Nurse, please check on him." I tell her as she gives me one of the babies, the second nurse is carrying the other boy and the girl. Two boys and one girl, a beautiful combination.

"Don't worry about him, he'll be fine." Doctor Naidoo cuts in, I know Neo will be fine, but we can't leave him lying on the floor. Also, what if he hit his head?

"Believe me Ms, we see this every day, he is not the first man to faint after seeing how child birth works." The nurse's attempt to put my worries at ease lacks that thing that actually pushes you to settle down.

"Please wake him up, I need him here. He has to see these three baboons he created." The doctor nods at the nurse, gesturing that she helps Neo. It's not a minute when his eyes open, at first he's confused about his surroundings as he browses his eyes around the room.

They find me when he hears a baby crying, I want to

laugh when they widen. I'm not sure of what I'm seeing, fear or shock. But there is something swirling in his eyes.

"Yeah rabobi, you fainted." I think he lost his voice, he's glancing at me wide eyed and mouth partly open. "Neo!"

"I- Zee. I had a nightmare." Oh great, men are such babies. "You were giving birth and then I saw...I saw."

He's rubbing his eyes as he says this, not only are men babies but they are so clueless. With the help of the nurse, he stands up to his feet. His legs are shaky.

"It wasn't a nightmare baba." I say and witness his mouth drop in shock, his wide eyes run from the baby in my arms to the ones the nurse is holding.

"No man, no. I can still see it, I can still see it." The eye rubbing thing again. "How do I get this image out of my head?" Neo turns to doctor Naidoo with this question. "Doc, I'm sure you can prescribe

something. A drug, a pill. I'm not afraid of injections, yes I'll take an injection."

"You'll be fine, relax." The doctor says and this should put Neo at ease, but then again this is Neo.

"I will never be fine..."

"Neo stop..." He halts my speech with a raised hand.

"Woman please, this is all your fault. You seduced me and these are the results." Whaaaat?

"Are you insane?" This man should be celebrating the birth of his children and not whining like a little girl.

"Yes Zee, remember that day in the car when we had sex? I told you I didn't want to but no, you had to seduce me. Death did not come for me that day, it was waiting for today." This is embarrassing, he doesn't have to do this in front of people.

"I think we should give him a sedative, he's shocked." Doctor Naidoo offers, Neo shakes his head, he does not approve.

"Sedative or not, I'm done. I am done doctor, nna le

tlof tlof are officially enemies. Huh!!! Modimo, women are aliens. That's the only explanation." He exclaims, pacing about the room, Neo is getting on my nerves. Something clicks in his head, it compels him to stop his movements.

"MamSonto, I need to call MamSonto. My eyes need cleansing, I have to un-see what I saw."

I want throw something at him as he takes out his phone, the serious expression on his stupid face grazes every being in my body.

"Doc, forget the sedative. How about you inject poison in his system? Let's get it over and done with." The doctor laughs at the urgency in my voice, these nurses too, they better stop that man or I will kill him.

"Huh Zee, I'm not okay." That's Neo being an idiot.

"I don't care, put that damn phone away and take your babies." I instruct confidently, Neo hesitates a bit, but eventually takes one of the babies from the nurse. It doesn't take long for him to smile like an

idiot as he looks down at his daughter.

NTUTHUKO...

My mother is the one to knock so early in the morning, sometimes I wonder if she ever sleeps. I open the door to meet a delivery man.

“What is it?” He looks as grumpy as I feel.

“Ntuthuko Biyase?” He questions, impolitely.

“Yes.”

“You’ve been served.” A brown envelop is pushed on my hand, I have no choice but to accept it. It irks me that I have to sign some stupid paper, for this delivery from the court. With eagerness and curiosity scratching me, I tear the envelop open.

“Damn you, Thandiwe.” She has the nerve to serve me with divorce papers, it says here she wants full custody of my Zulu. I will not allow it and I won’t sign these papers. Dear wifey will never be rid of me.

“What is that?” Lumka asks, striding down the stairway. I don’t know how to get rid of her, she is stubborn and insists that we are a thing. Wait till I have my wife and son back.

“Why aren’t you ready for work?” I examine, frowning up at her. She shrugs her shoulders, it’s her way of brushing off my enquiry. “I asked you a question Lumka, why are you not ready for work?”

I have to follow her to the kitchen, Lumka must be joking if she thinks I will ever marry her.

“I quit.” She answers, dipping her head in my fridge.

“And, may I ask why?” I have a good guess, she turns back to me scowling like my question makes no sense.

“I don’t need a job Ntuthuko, you’re here. You’ll take care of me.” My predictions were right and I am dazed that she thinks this is okay.

“I’m a married man, I have a family Lumka and even if I didn’t. I would never consider you as my wife,

baby you're not wife material.”

“I don't care, I am not going anywhere Ntuthuko. My mother knows about you, what will I tell her when I go back home without a man?” I don't see how this is my problem, she knew from the start that we were not serious. Yes the sex is good on days when I don't feel nauseated by her, but I have no feelings for Lumka.

“I feel sorry for you, but continue and let's see where this arrogance and stubbornness will lead you.” Her insolence is provoking, it slaps me so hard that I want to retort and throw her out of my house. I watch her as she empties my fridge, I am not going to eat her food. I can't ignore the fact that she eats a lot lately, jeer, this woman better not be pregnant or I will have to pull a Thandiwe on her.

THANDIWE...

Last night after praying we had to locate Bulelwa's whereabouts, Nqaba made a call to Styles.

Apparently the man can hack into any system, we were at the hospital before midnight. Bulelwa is not doing good, the doctors don't look hopeful. Nothing much has been given except that he's fighting for his life, doctors are trying to save him.

The sun is out, I don't know what time it is. The waiting area is crowded and a lot of angry eyes are lurking about. Lilian swirls between anger and pain, Mandla is swamped in nothing but agony. It's not a normal sight to see on him.

Zizwe is here too, he is prowling in the corners, careful that he is not seen. He has kept a frown on his face for as long as I can remember. I really didn't think they were this serious. Bulelwa had told me that something was brewing between them, he didn't get into much detail.

“Are you awake?” Nqaba’s rasping voice flicks my ears, it’s usually throaty in the morning even though he hardly slept the whole night. He woke me up about three times saying we should pray, I remember checking the time and it was about 3:05am. We have been sitting on these plastic chairs in the waiting room, waiting for someone, anyone to tell us if Bulelwa is okay.

“Yes,” Nqaba squeezes my hand, my head has found a padding on his shoulder. He kisses the top of my head as he plays with my fingers, the touch is electrifying, it always is.

“Here comes the doctor.” He announces, finally someone will update us. Everyone but Zizwe crowds the white man dressed in a white coat, his face showcases fatigue. The ghost of a smile on his withered lips drains faster than water poured on soil.

“How is my son?” Lilian is the first to voice out, I don’t see good news coming from the doctor.

“The knife pierced through the nerve of his heart,

your son has internal bleeding. We tried to stop it but-” He speaks so eloquently, explaining everything in words we can understand and rounds everything off with... “There’s nothing more we can do for him, he’s not going to make it...” Unconvinced gasps and sounds of shock intrude on his announcement.

“I don’t understand doctor, this is a hospital. You save people, don’t you? Save my son please.” Lilian shouts, frustration circled around her.

“I’m sorry Mrs. Msibi, there is nothing we can do for him. You might want to get a priest to read him his last rites.” Did he just say...

The waiting area falls into complete silence when the doctor departs, I feel Nqaba’s hands on me, I had forgotten that he was next to me. I lean into him, detached. Part of me doesn’t want to believe that my friend is going to die, it can’t be. Why do bad things happen to good people? Lilian is sobbing in her husband’s arms. Their daughter is silently sniffing beside them.

My eyes find Zizwe, he looks ready to explode. His back pressed against the wall, knees slightly bent and hands over his head. His eyes are wide with hurt and a dash of rage, his chest moving robustly. I think he's going to shout, he doesn't, but bolts out of the room. There's a temptation to follow him, he's alone. I can imagine what he is going through. He has no one to share his pain with.

“Look after him Tee, he might appear strong, but he's falling apart inside.”

Bulelwa's voice whispers in my ears, I can't see him, however I can feel his presence. How does he do that? He's not dead yet? This must be his way of fighting.

“Excuse me, I'll be back.” I tell Nqaba and walk out before he becomes himself and asks where I'm going.

NTS IKAYETHU...

Ifeanyi is her name, the nurse told me how her brother took her, saying she will heal at home. The last time I had gone to see her, he pushed me against the wall and dished out all kinds of threats. I didn't see anything wrong with wanting to know if the girl was okay.

It's been days and I still get nightmares of her miniscule body lying face down in that swamp. Only the devil can be capable of doing something so ghastly to a woman. There's a pull I can't ignore anymore, I want to see Ifeanyi, I need to know if she's okay.

For a strange reason guilt has been eating me up that it has me going crazy with thoughts of what if. What if she wasn't abducted? What if she had someone watching over her? What if I had seen the animal attacking her and came to her aid? What if... What if... What if?

I chase the ring tone of my phone to the kitchen table, I have a few missed calls from Veronica. I met her at the garage where I work, she had come with her father. While he was filling up the petrol tank, Veronica slid into the shop to grab a few snacks. I was mesmerised by her innocence and how oblivious she was of the things surrounding her, I noticed how she had a mental capacity of a child when I asked if she needed any help.

She giggled bashfully and her choice of words sold her out. That didn't stop me from wanting to get to know her, but something is happening to me lately. I can't seem to look at her, something pulls me away from her presence. When I'm alone, I have this desperate need to see her, but once we meet something pushes me to leave. The feeling is so intense that I find it hard to ignore it. She's calling again, I can't keep flouting her, it's not fair on her.

“Hey,” my salutation is low and unbothered, it's not

purposeful.

“I miss you.” She says, I love how she is so blunt and forthcoming.

“I miss you too Onica,” God knows I do.

“You’re lying Ntsika, you don’t miss Vero. I called you ten times, I was counting. Three when I woke up in the morning yesterday, two times when I was having breakfast with daddy, he wanted to know who Vero was calling and so I stopped. So that’s one...two...three...” I hear her unhurriedly count up to five, using a hushed tone. “That’s five, right? Then I called you five times when I was alone in my bedroom.”

“I’m sorry my love, I was busy.” I hate lying to her, her innocence won’t let her understand what’s going on with me. The pull away.

“Are you really sorry Ntsika?” She questions softly.

“You know I love you, right?” There’s that giggle that got my attention.

“I do, Vero loves you too.” How do I fix this? How will I be able to be around her without feeling like I want to leave?

“Can I call you later? I have an incoming call.” She bids me goodbye after telling me how much she wishes to see me, I should set a date, maybe things will be different this time around. Maybe Ifeanyi’s ordeal is highly affecting me. Zizwe is calling, he must be back from KZN.

“Bafoza.” The salutation is met by snivels, he’s crying. “Zizwe?”

THANDIWE...

“Bafo, he’s going to die.” The shaky voice is coming from the room on my left. I contemplate between eavesdropping and walking away. I go for the third option and find Zizwe on his knees with a phone stuck to his ear. A pained expression flicking on his face, our eyes meet.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.” I have to explain my forwardness. “Bulelwa is my friend, he...”

“I have to go.” He exclaims over the phone and clears his throat, shifting uncomfortably on the floor. “No- I’m...I’m fine, I’ll call you later.”

Dropping the call, Zizwe gets up to his feet, he looks stronger than he did back there. Men know how to act strong while they are crumbling inside, the aching in his eyes is still there. A frown takes a stage on his features as he folds his arms across his chest. Owkaaay!!! He’s waiting for me to say something, otherwise we’re going to stand here staring into each other’s eyes.

“I saw how devastated you were back there.” What else do I say after this? The man is looking at me like I’m crowding his space. “Are you okay?”

His eyebrow shoots up, the grimace grows. He is still quiet, I guess this is his answer.

“I’m fine,” finally he speaks after a prolonged minute. “You’re Thandiwe?”

“Yes, I’m Bulelwa's best friend.” That’s so irrelevant,

he gives me a nod. This is awkward, Zizwe clears his throat. Must be his way of shrugging off the elephant in the room, I don't blame the guy. What were you thinking Thandiwe? That he would cry on your shoulder?

The tall man towering over everything and me included finds a chair to seat on, there's a hospital bed in here as well as hospital equipment. We could be trespassing.

"I saw him," I start and have no clue how he will respond to the shocking news. The last time I told someone I see dead people, I was attacked. Zizwe does not turn to look at me, his gaze is lost somewhere between the white walls. I continue anyway.

"Bulelwa came to me last night," now he turns. Mouth slightly ajar, his eyes questioning me.

"I don't understand." I don't understand either, Bulelwa is not dead yet, it puzzles me how he was able to reach me.

“I see dead people.” That’s right Thandiwe, make a mockery of yourself. Continue, no co...nti...nue.

“Bulelwa is not dead,” a soft undertone and I thought he would question my claim and sanity but the guy takes up a defence mechanism.

“The doctor said...”

“The doctor lied,” he snaps, sounding defensive. I too don’t want to believe what the doctor said, however we can’t sway away from the truth. “He’s not going to die, Bulelwa is stronger than that. He won’t give up on life just like that. He knows what he’s leaving behind, who he’s leaving behind.”

Zizwe is trying to convince himself, the tone of his voice verifies it.

I decide to move closer, offer a hand of comfort or something. This is what Bulelwa would want, he would want me to be there for Zizwe.

“What did he say?” His question halts my movement, Bulelwa’s words fill my head.

“He doesn’t want to die, he’s afraid of dying.” I see shock register on Zizwe’s face before he could hide it. A sting in my heart takes my strength away.

After the prayers offered to God, Bulelwa should at least be fighting for his life. Zizwe frowns, it’s a pained appearance. This is my chance to offer that hand of comfort.

“Buttercup,” comes out almost like a misfortune, dripping out of his quavering lips. His brown eyes lose their harshness, becoming rounder, more glossy. Then all at once his face buckles, his breathing stops momentarily and tears stream out. Tall men are a problem, he is seated yet taller than me.

Zizwe doesn’t hold me back as I enfold my arms around his shoulders, his head falls on my bust. There is no sound coming from him, but his shoulders are convulsing. This is the most painful cry, inaudible crying that does not draw attention. Where you’re unable to scream and shout and

throw things, if possible pour your heart out.

“Tshabalala.” The seriousness and low rumble of Nqaba’s voice forces me to draw away from Zizwe. He’s standing on the doorway, hands rammed in the pockets of his jeans and a face straighter than a poker player. Now I will have to explain why I had another man’s face on my chest.

To be continued...

BURN

48

NQABA...

“Where are we going?” Thandiwe questions why I have her hand in mine and pulling her away from that boy she was embracing, you could say I’m insecure. After my brother took her from me years ago, I tend to be cautious when it comes to other men eyeing her.

She is a beautiful woman and I have seen eyes turn to her. I pull her into an empty room, she makes a breathy sound as I back her up against the wall. My lips press against hers, a barely there brush. They shift from the corner of her mouth to the centre, the focus moves to the rest of her face as I tattoo tiny pecks everywhere, worshipping her because that's what she deserves.

“What is that for?” Her eyes smile, I love how she looks at me.

“Did I tell you, I love you today?” I ask, a smile creeps up upon her lips, her palms embrace my cheeks and I shut my eyes to take in the feeling of her warm hands kissing my skin. My hands slide to the small of her back and I pull her into me. Her body shivers as I move to hide my face on the curve of her neck.

“I can still hear the tone of your voice when you said it.” A whisper, it rushes into the inner most parts of my being and all that I am cries out with the verses

'I love you'. My phone begins to ring in my pocket, reaching for it, I place one more kiss on the corner of her lips.

"Randall." I salute over the phone, Thandiwe takes a step, but doesn't get far as my hand stops her movements.

"Where are you?" Randall enquires while I watch Thandiwe shrug her shoulders in question.

"I'm still in KZN, is everything okay?"

"No, I thought I should check up on you." That can't be the only reason he called. "I had a strange dream."

"Okay, you called me because you had a dream? Had it not been for that dream, we wouldn't be talking right now, am I right?" He releases a dry chuckle that has me sighing impatiently.

"When do I ever call you, Mzi? You should be thanking me for this call, I doubt you have any friends blowing up your phone." The bastard.

"Yet here you are." The retort I give is accepted by a

tongue click.

“Will you let me give my reason for this call or continue to annoy me?”

“Fine, go ahead and annoy me instead. I’m here for you.” He doesn’t get the sarcasm.

“I had a strange dream.”

“Oh yes, the dream.” He did mention that...

“Will you stop and listen?” Randall snaps, his voice stern and authoritative. I expected this from him and funny enough I’m forced to obey. Thandiwe appears to be impatient, she leans up against the wall, her arms fold across her chest.

“In this dream we were swimming in an ocean, I don’t know where we were headed to. The destination was on an Island in the middle of the ocean, there were thousands of spectators dressed in traditional African costumes and headdresses. Some were standing in an arch. As we walked down

they threw rose petals on our pathway, the petals were gold in colour. Many in the crowd reached out to touch us, suddenly there were two guards leading us. Both were carrying ceremonial muskets and wore five gold-handled daggers on their backs.

The guards had menacing scowls that kept the excited crowd away when they pressed towards us. We got to the podium to find my grandfather waiting for us, he was dressed like a King and had two crowns in his hands. He looked at you and said welcome home, with smiles on our faces we knelt before him and bowed our heads. Suddenly Zulu appeared, he was standing next to my grandfather and what he said next shocked me.”

“What did he say?”

“Innocent blood belongs with the pure.” Randall finishes. What does that even mean?

“I’m confused Randall, what kind of a dream is that?” My gaze turns to Thandiwe who is now inquisitively ogling at me.

“I don’t know, I thought you would. Maybe it was

just a dream, don't stress about it" Randall articulates, light-heartedly.

"How is Zulu? Can I speak to him?" I miss that little man, Thandiwe draws in at the mention of her son.

"The whole bunch accompanied Amara to the supermarket." There is a tint of exasperation in his voice, it has to do with Amara being away from him. He would rather have her all to himself than share her with anyone, including the kids.

"Did you say supermarket? Normal people say shops Uze Okolie." I clear, remembering that his speech tends to differ from ours.

"Go to hell Mzi." He bids me farewell with these words.

BHEKIZIZWE...

The coast is clear, with no one in sight I dash into Bulelwa's room. My heart shouldn't be reacting like this, I hardly know this kid, yet I can't stand the

machines attached on him. They must be the ones keeping him alive, a lump builds on my throat as I watch my future slipping away on the hospital bed. He doesn't look like the strong Bulelwa I am acquainted with, but I know he is still in there. Locked into a body that won't quit like the doctors said it would, chained to a heart that insists on beating despite his chances of recovery being non-existent. My chest tightens into a knot-like cramp and a quiet rage builds inside.

“Hey kid,” I take his hand, the warmth of it has goosebumps tapping on my skin. Tears pour out as I open my mouth to speak, I am stronger than this. Breaking down like a weakling will not change anything.

“Look at you, Buttercup, lying there like you don't have anyone to come back to. You can wake up now, it's not funny anymore. I know how much you love attention, that's why you're doing this. Well you have it now, all of it. Everyone is here waiting for you to wake up kid.” An unexpected snigger

bubbles out from the seams of my lips. I love to touch him- never in a sexual way, never anywhere other than his face, his hands. His warmth seeps into my being as I trace my hand and fingers on his face, barely a touch. He comforts me without opening his eyes nor his mouth.

“Did you hear that? I called you kid because you act like one.” I choke out a painful chuckle at the thought of Bulelwa’s dramatics, how much I miss them. “You can wake up now Bulelwa, I can’t stand it anymore. I promise to let you talk all you want if you wake up, I will listen to your blabbering. You belong next to me just like I belong next to you. You’re the only one for me, how do I move on without you? I just found you Buttercup, I can’t lose you. Come back to me, please.”

“Maybe this is for the best.” I raise my eyes at my father’s voice, I haven’t caught what he said. I heard every word though, but I’m struggling to believe that

he would say something like that.

“What are you doing here?” He sends an intimidating scowl, walks in and shuts the door.

“How many times will you embarrass me in front of Msibi?” He queries, glowering down at me. I thought Mr. Msibi hardly noticed my presence.

“I’m not doing anything wrong baba.” He glares at the hand clinging onto Bulelwa’s hand, irritation and disgust twitch on his features.

“Don’t fool yourself ndodana,” his eyes shake to point at our hands. I don’t plan on letting go anytime soon, I can only breathe when I can feel him. “I don’t know where we went wrong as your parents, this is not how we raised you.”

Perhaps it was better off when we were not on speaking terms, I don’t want to argue with my father, but his tough words and painful glares are provoking me to say something that will take us back to first base.

“God is against this Zizwe, that’s why your friend is lying in this hospital bed.”

“This God that you talk about baba, does he hate his own creation so much so that he would do this to an innocent soul? I don’t know this God, I know the one you and mom introduced me to. The God who loves without limits, the God who died for me so I can live, the God who does not condemn and that God will never do this because my Bulelwa and I love each other.”

“Your Bulelwa? Love? I thought I would never live to see this day. You love men now Bhekizizwe?”

He makes it sound like it’s a curse to love a man.

“No baba, I don’t love men. I love this man, my heart beats for him.”

I deliver my answer with the utter most respect, maintaining that level of reverence. My father is a man of integrity and respect is something he holds high. I haven’t looked directly at him since he walked in here, I have seen enough with the stolen

stares that he is not pleased with me.

“That’s enough Bhekizizwe, I will never allow this abomination, never.” His voice rises above normalcy, the forefinger pointed at me is almost as heavy as his presence. His demeanour tells me that he is ready to explode. “We are going home today and I don’t want to hear any excuses, you will not be here for this boy’s death nor will you attend his funeral.”

Pain shoots inside me like a bee sting at his declaration that it has me jolting to my feet, in my mind I have him pinned on the wall.

“Take that back Zondo.” A gritted command erupts from my throat, birthed from the depths of my stomach.

“Do you want to fight me, ndodana?” A bully he is, his eyebrows raise...an act to intimidate me. Calming my outer self, I take a step back. Showing respect like I have always done.

“With all due respect baba, the man I love is not going to die.”

He snorts at my exclamation, I wonder when he became this heartless person that has no remorse. There is someone at the door, I hold my breath, hoping that it's not Mr. Msibi. My hope dies when he strides in, our eyes meet and he instantly glares daggers at me.

THANDIWE...

“What does the dream mean?” My question directs to Ngaba, we have made ourselves comfortable in the hospital room. He is settled on a chair with me perched on his lap, his arms are comfortably encircled around me and his chin pressed on my shoulder.

“I don't know, we have to wait for MamSonto to come back. Only she can translate the dream for us, I would go to Ngidi, but Randall doesn't trust anyone.” Ngaba's answers come with more kisses tattooed on my shoulder and neck, he's been somewhat clingy... I love it.

“How long have you known Randall?”

“Long enough to know that he is an asshole who has no time for anyone but his wife.” His tone is humorous.

“You love him, don’t you? The way you do Styles and Neo.” I heard it in his voice, there’s a way Nqaba speaks of these men. He used to regard Ntuthuko in the same manner once upon a time.

“I hate him, he’s stupid and arrogant.” I find this man of mine amusing, his arms squeeze tighter around me as he breathes me in.

“Hey careful, I might just suffocate.” I throw in a sally which is accepted by a low chuckle, his chortles resonate from within his chest, deep rumbles that have me shivering pleasantly.

“I’ll just have to kiss you back to life.” And I thought he was a little funny, I have to hug my stomach as I burst into a loud guffaw.

“It’s not like you to be so corny Biyase.”

“The plan was to make you laugh Nkanyezi yami and it worked, although I didn’t expect the ugly laugh.” Really? Is he saying this to me?

“Not funny,”

“I love you too Tshabalala.” He declares, pecking my face with kisses. He should be laughing at the lame joke he made, it better be a joke. I know I don’t have an ugly laugh.

The light in the room begins to flicker, a sudden shiver runs through my body like an electric current, the room is filled with a heavy presence.

“Someone is here.” The thought escapes my mind in a whisper, Nqaba didn’t catch it as he’s bent on making me squirm in his arms.

“Don’t be afraid, I come in peace.” Says a gentle male voice, my mouth drops when a man appears before me. His structure is buff, he’s as tall and young as Zizwe. He is dressed in scrubby pants and

a charred t-shirt that hangs loosely on his body. He has a face of a man you wouldn't want to cross, a frown resides on it and he stands tall and confident without slouching or faltering. Knowing he is here because he needs something, his motive remains hidden, hence the appeal.

The man has a stand-offish quality that dares contact without inviting it. The curved brow reminds me of someone I know, this man whose lap I'm sitting on. I want to alert Ngaba, but he won't see the person. I've heard stories about how hospitals are swamped with ghosts.

"I can't find Gcinumzi, I was tracing him and then I lost him." The cracking of his voice does not suit his demeanour, he speaks of Gcinumzi. I know two, Bulelwa and his late uncle.

"Which one?" I manage a question.

"What?" That's Ngaba, maybe I should tell him that we have company.

"There is someone in here, he's looking for a certain

person.” I feel strange each time I say this out loud.

“Right now? Don’t they make an appointment or something?” This man is mocking me once more, he lets me move from his lap and gets up as well.

“Ifalakhe lives in him, we were separated years ago and found each other again. Now I have lost him, I can’t find him.”

“Ifalakhe? Gcinumzi’s lover?” A small smile tics on his lips, a confirmation is showcased in his eyes before he answers.

“My lover yes, he’s been burning since yesterday. That’s when I couldn’t reach him anymore. Help me find him please. Gcinumzi has him, he has Ifalakhe.” Okay, hold it right there Mr. Ghost.

“Ifalakhe was Gcinumzi’s lover, they were killed years ago.” Unless I have the wrong information, I peer over at Nqaba who is casually standing on the side like this is not a strange moment to behold.

“Yes, that would be me.” He says nonchalantly, his emotions are closed. Then it is made known to me that he is a ghost, ghosts have no souls. “Gcinumzi

Msibi... before we died, Ifalakhe and I promised each other that we will come back in another lifetime to complete our love story. Everything was fine until yesterday, he started burning and suddenly disappeared.”

The ghost chases his gaze to the door and whispers... “He’s calling for me.” And with that he disappears, leaving me with questions and confusion stuck in my head.

BHEKIZIZWE...

“You?” Bulelwa’s father rumbles, taking dominant steps towards me, they are authoritative and unwavering. I stand still ready for whatever he has in store for me, I am not leaving Bulelwa.

“Mandla, let go of my son.” My father grunts when his former friend pins me against the wall, I’m not comfortable with the look on Mr. Msibi’s face. A sinister expression, diabolical. If he could, he would kill me on the spot.

“What are you doing here?” He spews out in anger, repeatedly smashing my back on the wall, you’ll find that he expects me to show my anger and when I do he will drag me into compliance. If he continues like this I will let it flood out all at once, this rage I keep inside will be unleashed.

“Mandla!” My father’s command is like nothing I have ever heard, his eyes are burning with an unfamiliar rage. He slithers behind Mandla, I’m oblivious to his thoughts. They can’t be good, although Mr. Msibi shadows him, my father stands firm and tall ready for whatever may be thrown at him. Bulelwa’s father raises a fist, hatred cheering him on.

“Not here Mandla, not in the presence of my son.” I’m not sure when Lilian walked in, but her cold gaze is on me, she looks terrible. Guilt is eating her up, I hope it suffocates her.

“It’s his fault that my son is gone, my son is dead because of you.” Mr. Msibi’s declaration evokes

something dark in me that compels me to push against him. A feminine scream emerges in the room as he tumbles to the floor, falling on his back. Like a robot I jump to straddle him, he is the third person to tell me that Bulelwa is dying. These words drive me crazy, I will hear them no more.

“Take that back,” I have my hands tightly curled on his shirt. “Take it back, how dare you say that. He will not die, you hear me? Bulelwa will not die.”

“Bhekizizwe.” My father’s reproach captures my attention, he is trying to pull me back, to get me off of Mr. Msibi. But my anger won’t let me. I hate him, I hate all of them.

“Bulelwa is not...he is not going to die.” I grunt, losing all power that I had. My father catches me as I tumble to the floor, I tried to control them, these emotions that are suffocating me.

“Ndodana.” He pulls me into a hug, my head falls on his chest.

“My heart is dead baba, I can’t breathe. Make it stop,

please make it stop.” This is not supposed to be happening, I didn’t accept these tears flooding my eyes.

“Bhekizizwe asambe, please son lets go home.”

“Why would he hurt me like this? Why would he go away from me baba? I hate him, I hate him for leaving me.” Clinging on to my father, I cry like the world is falling apart.

To be continued...

BURN

49

THANDIWE...

Nqaba helps me up from the floor after we declare our prayers and call them into existence, he had insisted that we pray for Bulelwa once more.

“I have a meeting to get to, will you be okay?” He

says, walking behind me out of the hospital room. I turn to him and rest my head on his arm while hooking my arm around his.

“I’ll be fine, hurry back.”

“I will,” a kiss follows these two words. He pulls me into a quick hug and whispers in my ear, “I might not be around, but I’m always with you Tan-tan. If anything happens, close your eyes and look for me. You will find me waiting for you, don’t forget to look into my eyes.”

I know what he means by this, my mind rejects me lately. The scene I pulled the other day still freaks me out, anything is possible. MamSonto did say we are at war and fighting this demon is not easy.

“I won’t, I love you.” I feel him smile against my cheek, he pecks it and pulls away. His warm hand slides up my cheek and behind my ear, eyes locked into mine, Nqaba stares like it’s the last time he will ever see me. My eyes close when he leans in to kiss the bridge of my nose, his vacant hand swims down to my lower back to draw me closer to him.

“Uyathandwa Tshabalala, don’t ever forget that.” A whisper that has cold shivers running through my skin.

“I won’t.” It would be impossible for me to forget that I am loved by this man. My mouth forms an O as I yearn to feel his lips on mine, curiosity taps and I open my eyes to find him smiling down at me. With a rushed peck on my lip, Ngaba strolls away towards the exit.

“Hey, my kiss.” The complaint reaches him, he turns with a raised brow.

“Respect yourself Tshabalala, there are adults here.” He jests pointing at a random old woman seated on one of the waiting chairs.

“You started it, you’re not fair Biyase.”

“Huh Thandiwe, what are you saying to me in front of people?” What is he trying to do? He turns to the old woman who is already minding our business.

“Ma, you see how shameless this young generation is.”

I am going to get him for this, the old lady finds this Zulu man funny. He winks at me and walks away as if he did not just cause damage. The woman is drenched in a smile, she can relax now. Nqaba is gone.

“Young love.” Her comment, I know it’s sent to me, but I still turn to see if there’s no one behind me. Getting ready to escape her, I send back a smile. Old women can break a record in holding the longest conversations in the world.

“I came to see Gcinumzi’s nephew.” Okay she’s coming towards me, I should have walked away when I had the chance. Wait! Did she just say Gcinumzi?

“Are you family?” She shakes her head, takes my hand and leads me to a seat.

“Forgive me, my child. I’m an old woman and my knees do not allow me to stand for even a minute.”

I don’t have an answer for her.

“That Msibi boy is my elder brother, I was about four years old when he was killed.” What is she

saying to me? Bulelwa is twenty three and this old woman could be about eighty years old.

“I don’t understand.” I will never know if I don’t ask, a smile sneaks up on her lips.

“Do you believe in reincarnation?” She questions.

“No, that’s a myth. Although there are religions that believe in it, Hinduism and Buddhism. They believe that the soul upon death comes back to earth in another body or form.” The old woman nods at my answer.

“Rebirth of the soul in a new body, especially if your death was untimely. My brother was killed by the community, I watched him burn to death and I couldn’t do anything about it. His only crime was to love, Ifalakhe loved that Msibi boy like he was only created for it. They had big dreams together, but their lives were cut short. ”

“Bulelwa told me about Ifalakhe and Gcinumzi, they died a painful death.”

“Yes, no one deserves to be killed so brutally. Gcinumzi’s nephew had a few of my brother’s features when he was young. His parents would bring him to the village to meet his grandparents and my heart would stop when I see him. It was almost as if I was looking right at Ifalakhe, now that he is grown he looks just like him.” She says, shedding a tear that stops right between her eye and nose.

“You’re saying Bulelwa is Ifalakhe’s reincarnation?” I ask with interest.

“Yes, God is a mysterious entity and we can’t question the things he does or we will grow crazy.” My mother used to say the same thing.

“But Bulelwa has no relation to you, how is he connected to Ifalakhe?” The poor woman has to bear my many questions, I have more.

“I don’t know, but their love story was cut short and this could be his way of wanting to find the man he loved. I believe Gcinumzi was reincarnated as well,

he is out there. It's too bad that Ifalakhe won't be reunited with his rib." Her quip reminds me that we're losing Bulelwa, he is so young. God, Bulelwa has so much to live for. He can't be robbed of life like this, what about Zizwe? The man just found his soulmate, fate can't be this cruel.

"Wait a minute, Zizwe. There's a boy by the name of Bhekizizwe, they are in love and he could be Gcinumzi's reincarnation. But if he is, he would have his features, right? Bulelwa's father has met him, he would've recognized him, right?" My heart jumps to my throat, two souls are going to be destroyed once again. Gcinumzi is losing his Ifalakhe again, it's almost as if fate has a score to settle with the two lovers.

"It's not always the case, the reincarnated might only have the past memories." I hear what she says, though my mind is a bit muddled.

"Would you like to see him?" I ask, she gleams with tears streaming down her face.

“I do, but I don’t think I will be able to bear losing him again.” Doctors can be wrong sometimes, they are not God. Bulelwa has to make it. Regardless of her fear of losing her brother again, she follows me to Bulelwa’s room.

BHEKIZIZWE...

I had to get away from those people, they were suffocating me. My father doesn’t understand me, he is blinded by his hatred for gay people. The rooftop is where I have been led to, no one will find me here. I need to call my brother, perhaps it’s time I let him in on my life. I have nothing to lose now.

“I was worried about you.” Ntsika salutes into the phone with his concern, I don’t want to beat around the bush.

“I fell in love Ntsika, with the most amazing man I have ever met and now he’s losing his life to death. No one understands me bafo, my heart is breaking and I don’t know what to do.” The silence makes me

extremely nervous.

“You’re in love with a man?” The contempt in his voice is pointed out, I’m not going to explain myself.

“Yes and he’s dying. You’re the only one who understands me bafo, I need my brother with me please.” Ntsika falls silent again, he is a homophobe, I might have just ruined my relationship with my brother.

“Where are you?” He asks and I’m mystified by his question.

“Kwamashu, in Ntuzuma,” I have no clue what this could mean. “I’m at the hospital rooftop and the view looks good from down here. Jumping over wouldn’t be such a bad idea.” I laugh at the suicidal thoughts scraping into my mind.

“Bafo, don’t even think about it. I will try and get time off at work please don’t do anything stupid, wait for me.” As he says this, the door to the rooftop swings open and out walks an aggravated Lilian with an unapproachable look on her face, she came for a reason. Her daunting strides show and tell.

“I’ll be waiting for you bafo, please hurry.” I tell my brother as I fix my gaze on Lilian.

This time she plays her cards right, her hand sends me a step back as she slams it across my face. I want to return it just as hard, but I was taught better.

“What the fuck is your problem?” I ask, not giving her the satisfaction of rubbing away the throbbing pain on my cheek.

“How dare you disrespect my husband? You uncultured swine, you had no right to touch him.” Lilian returns with insults, her speech cuts so deep that it has me roughly grabbing her biceps and pushing her back. Her eyes pop out and mouth ajar while we move in this fast pace until the wall becomes a stumbling block. I have her caged to the wall, a soft gasp leaps out of her mouth as I bring her hands above her head and pin them together. Her wrists fit in one hand, I use my feet to separate her legs.

Her breathing takes off as I do this. The witch is

turned on, I see the fire and lust burning in her eyes and her chest moving in a rapid motion.

“What are you doing?” She questions sharply. “Let me go now.”

“Why Sugar Puss? This is what you want, right?” I growl lowly in her ear, she whimpers as her body trembles against me. “You wanted me all to yourself, well now you have me Sugar puss.”

“Bhe- kizizwe.” My acts take away her inability to speak, I don’t know about her husband, but I know how to bring this woman to her knees. I know how to make her weak and vulnerable...I dodge her mouth when she leans in to kiss me. I’m in control, she will not be initiating anything.

Lilian moans into my mouth when I roughly crash my lips against hers...teeth clashing...mouth flattening, one would be convinced that I’m trying to destroy her mouth. She grips my head firmly, as if to keep me from escaping. I reject her tongue that’s battling to push into my mouth while she works her

mouth against mine. A wheeze like air escapes from her decreasing and swelling chest.

“Is this what you want sugar puss?” It’s a rhetorical question, visible shivers claim her body at the whisper in her ear. I can hear her breathing quicken as I sensually grind on her.

“Y- Yes.” A desperate cry glides out of her... panting...needy...begging for more. Lilian is aroused, it’s in her eyes...her slightly open mouth and her body squirming against me.

“You want me to kiss you the way I kiss him?” I question and smash my lips on hers one more time, need fills her eyes when I pull out. “You want me to touch you the way I touch him, right?”

My hand maps her body from her waist to her breast, leaving her moaning and disorganised. I think she gets where I’m taking this, she shakes her head in disapproval. Tears pool into her eyes.

“Bhekizizwe?” An incredulous gasps, a whisper, shock.

“That’s what you want Lilian, you knew I was done with you and so you sent someone to kill me because dear Lilian Msibi does not share.” We’re at the rooftop, I can yell as loud as I want. She winces at the blast and the tight grip on her wrists.

“Let go Bhekizizwe, you’re hurting me dammit.” She shouts, fidgeting like a spider under the sun.

“But this is what you want sugar puss, we’ve been doing this for years. It’s your obsession, I’m your obsession and you can’t handle me being with your son Lilian. You hate that Bulelwa is the one who gets to lie on my chest, he gets the kisses, the hugs, the crazy sex and this has made you bitter and hateful.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh you know damn well what I’m talking about, maybe your husband would like to know too. How about we tell Mandla that his wife enjoys riding another man's d**k? That she screams while I give her pleasure until she can’t scream anymore.”

Lilian’s eyes widen at my words, I chuckle at the

sight of fear displayed in her eyes.

“You bastard!!!” We both turn to the right at the sound of Mr. Msibi’s booming. How did he know we were here?

NEO...

“We came to see the babies, I hope they don’t look like you.” Uze says, sliding into my house like he has a bedroom with his name on it. Amara follows in behind him. “Where is our wife?”

“Your wife is here, in front of you and my wife is in the bedroom.” He snorts at my response, Amara finds him funny.

“Let Ayize hear you say that, she will tell you how she is Randall’s first wife and you’re just...” She pauses when Randall clears his throat. Her eyes rush to him then back to me, I hate these secreted conversations they always have in front of me.

“If you two came to gossip about me, then I suggest you leave my house.” I tell the couple that giggle at my sally. Randall gradually settles down on the couch, crosses one leg over the other while Amara finds her way to Zee in the bedroom.

“So, you’re a father of four now?” He starts, his gaze lost on his phone. “You need to marry that girl Neo and stop playing.”

“Doctor Phil, thank you for coming to my house.” He raises his eyes without bringing his head up, I clear my throat as he scrutinises me under his gaze.

“Are you okay?” He thinks there is something wrong with me.

“Why wouldn’t I be okay?” I think I’m okay, Uze grumbles as I push past him to find a seat on the one seater couch. “Can I ask you something?”

Uze shrugs his shoulders gesturing that I go ahead.

“Were you there when Amara gave birth?” My question has him shifting uncomfortably on the

couch, he keeps the reticent expression but sends his hand to rub the back of his neck.

“You saw it didn’t you?” His question takes me back to the hospital room, at times it feels like a nightmare until Zee brings it up then reality kicks in. Just this morning she and Sethu were having a thrill at my expense. How did God create this gender? They have no heart, that’s why they give birth like aliens.

“I will never look at that woman the same again, I jump when her hand brushes against mine. Sometimes I think she’s going to attack me because no human can be capable of doing that.” I express, rubbing my eyes to get the image out of my head. Uze shakes his head, disapproving of my statement.

“That’s what I thought about Amara, but with time I came to admire her strength. When I look at R.J, I stand in awe of the power God gave women. Amara carried that beautiful soul and brought him into the world singlehandedly, if you ask me that is the true

definition of a strong woman.

Do you know a human body can bear only up to forty five units of pain? Yet at time of giving birth, a mother feels up to fifty seven units of pain. This is similar to twenty bones getting fractured at a time. Child birth is not easy Neo, some die during or right after and those who survive should be celebrated. I love Amara more every day and that love intensifies when I see my son, our little creation."

Okay, he is one proud father. Don't we all know that?

"Okay, maybe men should stay away from the delivery room. I'm not okay Uze, I'm not okay ntwana." He's laughing at me.

"You will live, look at me, I survived." Amara walks back with the two boys just as Uze tells me words that do nothing but stress me further. Uze is given one baby, Zee can't make it to the living room. Walking is still a struggle.

“Aren’t they adorable?” Amara brings a question forward to her husband who is playing with the baby’s fingers. He looks between the two boys then at me, his eyes trace them again and a pucker builds between his eye brows.

“Why does this one have a big head?” Uze asks, pointing at my son.

“That’s not true Randall.” Tell him me hemma, I don’t want to bring R.J into the picture.

“Bring my son.” He snubs my stretched arms and continues to play with my baby’s hand. The brat is giggling in his arms after being insulted. We haven’t named them yet, the chance has not been granted to us. I did bring a few names forward and Zee pretended to be sleeping, I know she heard me. Mpho and Mphonyane are cute names.

BHEKIZIZWE...

Perhaps this is for the best, Lilian deserves all the

heartache coming her way. However this man's anger is directed at me. I recognize the rage in his eyes, although now it's more intense than when he had me under his grip.

"Ma- Mandla, what are you doing here?" Lilian's voice breaks, her lips quaver, the woman is shaking like a leaf.

"How could you do this to me Lilian? You've been sleeping with Zondo's son." The old man is hurt alright, Lilian staggers back when he takes a step closer to her. I can hear her sobs.

"I can explain Mandla please..." Mr. Msibi's mouth quirks in annoyance, his top lip pulls up on one side. I can tell from Lilian's voice that her whole world just came crushing down, Mr. Msibi's eyes are on me, burning with rage.

"You son of a bitch, this was your plan, wasn't it? You wanted to destroy my family and so you seduced my wife and son." Angry words bubble out of his mouth, holding a predatory expression.

"How about you ask your wife? She's the one who

went after me.” I decide to calm myself and think where an unkind remark will take us, so instead of being defensive, I try to understand how he came to feel this way and that in the same situation I would feel it too.

“You expect me to believe that? You are Zondo’s son, you and your father planned this, didn’t you?” I feel the tension and hear the intensity in his tone. A great deal of emotion lies behind the words he speaks, in this frozen intense second between a standoffish demeanour and mean words, I see Lilian’s eyes flicker from me to her husband. The man’s face is unreadable, no fear, no invitational smirk.

In this instant, he flies at me, a punch throws me a few steps back. He’s on my face throwing more before I could feel the first hit, I don’t want to fight him. As much as he hates me, he is the father of the man I love. I have seen and heard how this man is important to Bulelwa, I’m doing everything I can to dodge Mr. Msibi’s blows and this only aggravates

him. High-pitched screams erupt from Lilian in the background, pleading for her husband to stop, that is something he's not going to do.

“Fight me like a man you piece of shit.” He spews, charging at me. Ducking his wrathful attack, Mr. Msibi flies past me. My eyes widen as the old man falls over the building, Lilian's ear-splitting cries bypass my ears to land on my conscious.

“Mandla!!!” She scream cries hysterically as she follows me to check if he's holding on to something. My stomach drops to the soles of my feet upon seeing Mr. Msibi's body lying ten feet down on the concrete floor.

“Noooo, Mandla, noooo.” I hold her back when she screams like a crazy woman while attempting to jump off the building. “Don't touch me, you killed him, you killed my husband.”

“I didn't want to fight him back, I swear I didn't touch him.” I sizzle, trying to comfort a panic-stricken woman. Lilian pushes me away from her

and lands a hard slap on my face. Her surface frozen, deadpan. In a jiffy, her trembling mouth curls and eyes narrow as she falls into a painful heart breaking cry. I don't know if I should comfort her, so I stand, watching her breakdown.

The sound of many footfalls from the entrance catch my attention, my father strides in accompanied by two security guards. Confusion takes over his face when he sees Lilian bawling on the floor, she looks up at him. Tears flooding down her face like a broken dam.

“He killed my husband, he killed my husband.” She cries desperately, the look on my father's face is blank. I'm not sure if he believes her or not, I'm in deep trouble.

To be continued...

BURN

50...

IFEANYI...

My mother is here, she hasn't left my room since she arrived this morning. All I can do is stare when she tries to feed me, the last time I saw her, she didn't look this strong. She has gained weight, I guess she's over Raven's death.

"Eat for me, my baby." She brings the spoon up, I haven't had anything to eat yet, it's been days. I can't stomach anything, my insides churn at the sight of food.

"Oh Ife my child, I should have never let Uze take you. This is my fault, things would be different had you stayed in Ghana."

She blames my brother and herself for what happened to me, my finger is pointed right at me. It's my fault, I saw the red flags and didn't tell Randall on time, I stayed in that place knowing that that man is a pervert.

My mother grabs my phone from the bed when it rings and scans the screen, invasion of privacy, but naturally I don't voice it out. I don't voice anything out lately, sometimes I feel that tears will come out instead of words. Amara tries to get me to say something, her worried eyes affect me a lot. Maybe I should ask my mother to take me back to Ghana, perhaps I will heal there.

I want to forget, I want to forget the horror and the terrible dreams that haunt me. I can still feel him inside me, his dirty hands on my skin and because of that, my baths have been longer than they should, trying to rub off the disgust and dirt I feel.

"It's an unknown caller, it could be one of your friends. Do you want to take it?" My friends don't know what happened to me, that's how private my brother is. "I'll hold it for you."

She does as she says and puts the phone against my ear.

“Ifeanyi!” I recognise the gruff voice that resounds over the phone, it’s him... The man from the hospital... he said his name is Ntsika. “Please don’t freak out Nkosazana, I got your numbers from the hospital. I had to lie and say I’m your cousin, I was surprised that the nurse believed me. Honestly, the money I had kept aside for a bribe was my last.” I close my eyes as his chuckle smoothly pours into my ear and warms the coldest parts of my innermost being.

This man is determined, to go to such lengths to get my contact details. I don’t know what to feel about this, I should be freaked out by his gestures to talk to me, but I’m not. The presence of any man who is not family should put me in an uncomfortable era. This one though is different, a certain sense of peace washes over me at the sound of his voice. It could be that he saved me and this... whatever I feel towards him is anything less but gratitude.

“Anyway, how are you?” In less than a millisecond, he chortles, it lacks humour. It’s as if he’s reprimanding himself for the question. “I’m sorry,

that was a..."

A lifetime of silence emerges between us, I should be dropping the call. I don't know him. Why am I comfortable with him talking to me?

"Thank you for taking my call Ifeanyi." Many people struggle to pronounce my name, him included hence I introduce myself as Ife. "Although you haven't said anything, hearing you breathing is more than enough for me. Let me not keep you, please save my numbers so you'll know it's me when I call and take care of yourself Nkosazana."

Turning to face the wall, I curl like a ball on the bed when he hangs up and pull the covers up to my chin. My mother will see herself out. A hefty routed sigh emanates from her and in counted seconds I hear the door shut.

THANDIWE...

Nomalanga...that's the old woman's name, asked if she could have time alone with Bulelwa. I'm having a hard time believing that Bulelwa is a reincarnate of Ifalakhe, which is absurd for a woman who sees the dead. I'm right outside the door, in case anything happens and I need to run in there.

Turning to my left, I catch a glimpse of Bulelwa's sisters, Lindiwe and Thobekile, Betty is with them, I've met her once or twice. She is different from Lilian, there's something about Lilian that makes you feel like an ant under an elephant's foot. She gives you that fake smile white people give us, like she pities you for being poor and if there is something she can do about it, she won't because... someone has to be poor and envy the rich.

I salute the bunch with a smile, Lindiwe and Betty return with faint grins while Thobekile remains with her mother's deadpan expression. I understand, there is nothing to smile about, their brother is dying.

"Please tell me there is change." Lindiwe implores,

desperation scrambling at her throat. A negative head shake from me is enough to get her into tears.

“It’s in God’s hands now Lindiwe, he is in control and we can’t question him.” That’s Betty comforting a heartbroken Lindiwe, I would expect this from her. Bulelwa once told me that she is a loyal member of the Universal Church of God and boy do they pray at that church.

I’ve been there once, Betty had dragged us this one Sunday and we spent about two hours feeling out of place as almost every congregant was praying in tongues.

Bulelwa had to fake a bathroom break, he lugged me with him much to Betty’s disapproval and that was our escape.

“Please that’s just ignorance,” Thobekile jumps in with bitter words. “You have no proof that this is God’s doing. Must we bring him into everything? My brother is dying and if this God you talk about is as powerful as you say then he should bring Bubu

back.”

“Thobe?” Lindiwe chastises her with a tone.

“Not now Lindiwe please, this woman thinks she knows everything. Christians always bring God into everything even when he doesn’t want to be a part of the situation. Why must you force him? If he wants to save Bulelwa, then he will. I don’t see it anyway, there is so much happening in this world and your God is comfortably sitting on his throne while the world is falling apart.”

Words of a bitter woman I tell you, something tells me this is not about Bulelwa, but rather something deeper.

“Okay Thobe, we get it. You don’t believe in God, spare us the lecture and I don’t get why you have to talk to Betty like this. She raised you dammit, the least you could do is respect her.” Lindiwe interjects, wiping away the tears pouring down her skeletal cheeks. How is a pregnant woman so undernourished? It can’t be healthy for the baby.

“She is nothing to me, I don’t owe this woman anything.” Thobekile spews back venomously, this is one angry woman. I can’t help but notice the deep stares between her and Betty, something lurks amongst these two. My inquisitive nature has officially concluded.

The little sibling argument is interrupted by police officers loitering around the hospital corridors. My curiosity is like that meddling neighbour who makes sure nothing passes her, it has me ambling to a nurse and asking why the whole of Kwamas hu police station has graced us with their presence.

“A man fell from the rooftop.” She says, shaking her head in grief.

“What happened? Is he okay?” Yeah, the darn curiosity hasn’t been fully fed.

“I don’t have the full details but...”

“Mom, what happened?” Lindiwe’s voice cuts through the nurse’s explanation, turning to investigate, my eyes land on Zizwe who is

handcuffed and caged by two men in blue. His emotionless eyes find me, I can't read them. Why are they arresting him?

“Why are you crying mom?” Lindiwe again, her voice cracks this time. How did I not see Lilian? Anyone would've seen a flashy woman weeping like she has lost something she loves dearly. It can't be Bulelwa, he's still in there waiting for fate.

“He's dead, your father is dead Lindiwe.” Lilian announces through a flood of tears and an unsteady voice, she falls on her knees weeping. Lindiwe and Thobekile take up shocked expressions, unbelieving of the news delivered to them. In an insignificant moment screams erupt from them as they fall before their mother, capturing her in their arms.

My eyes don't take long to chase the man cuffed, his gaze runs through Bulelwa's door as they pass. Pain flashes through his eyes, his jaw clenches and features soften. You could swear he's about to cry. It's impossible, Zizwe couldn't have killed Mandla,

he loves Bulelwa and would never hurt him. Why is he not fighting for himself? Has he given up on life too?

“Don’t worry ndodana, we’ll get you out.” An elderly man shouts after Zizwe, following behind them. My attention is taken away by a woman wailing, Betty is sitting flat on the cold floor, hands on her head and tears painting the pain in her heart on her face.

“What is she doing here?” Lilian shouts, she’s up in a jiffy, trooping to Betty who makes no effort of getting up.

“Mom no,” Lindiwe’s reproach loses to Lilian’s hard slap. I felt that honestly, Betty glares up at her while rubbing away the pain on her cheek.

Lilian pays her daughter no attention, her eyes have fallen to the two male nurses wheeling in a body on a stretcher. I guess that’s Mandla because Lilian dashes to them and takes a brief peek in the sheet casing his head. She quickly covers it, her sobs are heart breaking. Her daughters and Betty’s too, the

woman rises from the floor and with quick steps flatters towards the corpse.

Thobekile is the one to stop her before she reaches a grieving wife, browsing Betty's face, I notice that a threat was said, it has the woman leisurely sliding back.

“The investigators are done with the crime scene, your husband will be taken to the morgue.” One of the officers proclaims, breaking their hearts even further. Mandla was not such a bad person, he was strict and demanding, but he loved his family. If God has mercy on our Bulelwa and he happens to wake up, his father's death will kill him. I don't see him surviving it.

BARBRA...

Duma was against painting our bedroom black and getting black curtains, it would've been perfect when I work during the day. I had to plead with him then to turn the garage into a room I could use

when I want to be alone with my supposed sewing.

With this room I can do anything without worrying that someone will walk in, they know it's off limits and no one comes uninvited. The decoration is of my choice, Sgwili dwells in this room. He used to share it with those three idiots who were killed by Nqabayomzi.

Sgwili managed to find a replacement within a week. A soul of some fool who died before his time, the black cat had been trailing him. He knew about his sickness and we had to do something to send him to an early grave and capture his soul. Veronica will meet her new husband soon, it's how Makhafula wants it and what that old witch wants he gets. Veronica was cursed from the time she was a child, when she failed the task given to her and that old witch doesn't forgive and forget.

“Thandiwe Mshengu, I have you in the palm of my hand. Your life is not yours to claim, I will destroy

you if it's the last thing I do." I wish this voodoo doll could speak so I know the kind of pain Thandiwe is feeling. Ntuthuko is so useless, how hard is it to keep a naïve woman like Thandiwe?

"Sgwili, pass me the red thread." He scampers to the table, and comes back with it. I kneel in front of the bonfire, tie the thread around the doll.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Sgwili enquires as I smear black powder on the voodoo doll, a chuckle seeps out of him when I dunk it in a bowl of boiling water.

"If this doesn't work then I am not a witch, now we just have to wait and watch. It's a good thing Makhafula is unaware of some of things I do." The second time around I join Sgwili as he bursts into laughter, I love it when a plan comes together. Our joyful moment is interjected by the old witch's presence. He comes in his true form, old, grey and ugly. His attendance has me bowing my head in reverence, one day he will be bowing to me. That's if I don't kill him.

“Don’t dare me Barbra, Mapula cannot die before her time. If you take her, I will take your eldest son from you. The one you love the most, remember him Barbra?” I hate this demon. He was listening in on our conversation, it is a habit of his to keep tabs on us.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, that boy is highly protected. You would be declaring a war you will measly lose to.” Knowing what he’s talking about, I answer him.

“Are you daring me Barbra?” He roars, I don’t know how he thinks he can waltz in here uninvited when everyone respects my privacy. I am a bloody queen in the making for witch’s sake.

“No Great-one, I’m only looking out for you. We wouldn’t want to lose you as our leader, what would the cult be without our great Makhafula?” Go die...

“You will still be punished for thinking you can challenge me, you might want to check on your precious Mzi.” He laughs coldly and disappears in

the blink of an eye. I need to find a way to increase my powers and get rid of that annoying witch.

“Mthakathi ndini, mxm.” Sgwili cusses under his breathe, he hates Makhafula just as much. “What do you think he’s going to do to Mzi?”

“I don’t know, whatever it is won’t be that bad. Mzi is protected as much as his brother is. Why do you think my powers won’t work on him?”

“Makhafula will annoy us with this Mapula of his.”

“I’m tired of it, we have to do something to get Thandiwe out of the way. In the meantime, I have to pretend that I’m on his side. So Zulu has to be found Sgwili, maybe I can have his blood to myself. The blood of the innocent should make me more powerful.” I didn’t think of this, it’s a great idea. Sgwili laughs, I’m miffed by it.

“I didn’t take you as one who watches TV, that’s only fiction Ndlovukazi.” The cat voices, gesturing that I am not as smart as I thought.

“If Makhafula can use Zulu’s blood to control Thandiwe, why can’t I use it to gain more powers?” My statement has him laughing again, I will prove to him that it actually works.

BHEKIZIZWE...

I’m stripped of all my belongings and thrown into a prison cell, my father hasn’t left my side. The broken look on his face has birthed shame in me, I could have stayed away from Lilian and I didn’t.

“What happened Bhekizizwe?” I wish I could tell him, but he will probably die when he finds out that I have been having an affair with a married woman and not just that, his friend’s wife.

“I didn’t kill him baba.” I make sure to stand about a few feet away from him, I need to hide the shame in my eyes.

“I know, what I don’t know is why Mrs. Msibi is accusing you of her husband’s murder when she

was there when he fell off the building. Why would she say you killed him?" This man will make me confess to my sins with that intimidating glare he's regarding me with. His hands curl around the prison bars, he would tell me to come closer if he could so he can get a look into my eyes. They never lie to him and he knows it.

"Mr. Msibi knows about me and Bulelwa, he came up there while we were talking and wanted to fight me." I'm probably not making sense, my father grimaces at me. The windows to his soul narrowing with nosiness and doubt.

"What were you doing with Mrs. Msibi?" Detective Zondo! I drop my head, his eyes are boring into me and it's getting uncomfortable.

"Just like...her husband, she came to ask me to stay away from her son." Why am I lying to my father?

"Do you know if this goes to court, which it will, the truth will be revealed Bhekizizwe? Is that how you

want it?” Dammit...

“What do you want from me baba?” I should be with Bulelwa, he needs me. “Please get me out, I have to be with Bulelwa.” My father scoffs at my plea, it hurts me that he is not thoughtful of my love for that man.

“Bhekizizwe?” He demands answers with this condescending tone, bringing my eyes back up, I find him frowning at me. A displeased expression playing at his facial features.

“Lilian and I shared a bed for two years, we have been having an affair.” The confession slips through my tongue into my father’s ears. His face changes, there’s suddenly no emotions on it. It’s completely blank, unreadable...impassive. “Baba uyaphi?” (Where are you going?)

He’s walking away from me, without turning to my desperate voice.

“Ngiyak’cela Zondo, ungahambi.” (Please don’t go.)

“Yey, yey, uyarasa sboshwa.” (You’re making noise.)
A police officer chastises me. “I hope you have a lawyer boy, you don’t know the trouble you have put yourself in.”

Does it matter now? If Bulelwa is going to leave me then maybe I am better off behind bars. I have nothing to live for now.

To be continued...

BURN

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NQABA...

The meeting was brief, my focus was by a hair's breadth. I need to get back to the hospital, leaving Thandiwe alone is not wise. I am tired of this unending war, something I wouldn't openly confess to her.

“I knew it Styles, I’ve always known it and this confirms it.” My heart dances at the news delivered by Styles, Zulu is my son. I received his call when I jumped into the car after the meeting. Styles’ vocabulary has no limit, the man can hold a conversation till a river runs dry.

“Congratulations Mzi, your brother has no say in Zulu’s life anymore.” That is a relief.

“I have you to thank Styles.” He laughs at my words.

“No, you have Thandiwe to thank. She gave you an heir.” He articulates and I couldn’t be happier, I will forever be grateful to her.

“That’s odd, dark clouds are gathering up. It was sunny just now.” I inform Styles while scanning my eyes outside the window.

“Why would it be odd? Haven’t you been informed? It rains on planet earth.” A snigger accompanies his joke, just as I’m gathering a clap back lightning strikes before my eyes. Startled and shaken, the car hurtles out of the road as I try to manoeuvre past

the lightning that strikes twice at the same place.

The hiss of the tyres over the smooth tarmac perforates through my ears, I barely have time to register everything before the airbag knocks me back and sideways as the car hits the tree, I assume I'm dead. Something in me won't let me shut my eyes.

I can feel blood grazing my teeth and soaking my tongue, my bones ache it feels like rocks ploughing into my skin. Feeling my lungs caving in, a need to breathe arises and so I suck in confined air.

“Mzi, what happened? Talk to me man.” Styles’ voice resonates in the background, virtually inaudible I can barely hear it. My ears are filled with a buzzing noise.

“Styles.” A muffled murmur is the one to escape, I doubt he heard it because he’s still shouting. The phone is connected to the car’s Bluetooth and I presume he should hear me when I speak audibly.

“Nqabayomzi!” Panic has taken over his voice, glued to the wheel of my wrecked car I try to calm

myself.

“I’m here, I’m okay.” Finally I find my voice and let him in on my situation. I think I am okay, there is pain here and there but I will live.

“What happened?” Worry has taken over from panic.

“I think I have an enemy in Limpopo, someone just sent three bolts of lightning to take me out. Talk about a coward, Inkabi would have been a better option.” I tell him, feeling a need to turn the situation into a joke.

“You’re a lucky bastard, you should rush to the hospital. Have yourself checked, you might have a concussion.”

“I’ll do that, it’s not a busy road. I will have to wait for a car to pass by, mine is wrecked.

“Send me your location, I’ll get someone to come to your aid.” Styles never ceases to amaze me, my phone beeps. I have an incoming call from Randall.

“Your brother is calling me, I’ll text you the location just now.” I exclaim and send my farewell while

gradually reaching for the phone on the seat.

“Are you okay?” Randall scuttles through with an apprehensive tone, my head hurts. I will pass out if I continue talking.

“Not really, I just hit a bloody tree.” Shock hasn’t left me yet, I almost died.

“I knew something was wrong, I started getting these headaches and the only thought I had was to call you.” That is strange, we have no connection none whatsoever.

“You’re sweet, thank you.” He clicks his tongue at my sarcasm, I think I love annoying him.

“Don’t get used to it, I don’t know why this happened. You should get to the hospital and have yourself checked before your big head grows any bigger.” He sounds dead serious, yet I know his instructions are soberly words of concern.

“I love you too daddy.” My rejoinder will surely have him sweating with irritation.

“Fuck off.” That’s his exit... I know Styles will come through.

THANDIWE...

After all the prayers sent to heaven, it didn’t cross my mind that the Msibi heir would come back to us. All hope was lost, now I’m looking at my best friend who is staring right back at me. If you were to tell me that he was at death’s door then I would dub you the devil’s inheritor. I wasn’t here when Bulelwa opened his eyes, Lindiwe was the one to deliver the news after I had come back from the canteen. The family deserves good news after losing Mandla.

“I am officially done with your drama Bulelwa, I’m officially retiring as your friend.”

“Hey don’t even dare, or else I’m taking this case to the Friendships Complaints Commission. Ebile J uju

will take my case and you know you can't lose with that man." His riposte is bracingly funny.

"The man upstairs was tired of hearing from me, you did good by coming back. How are they at the land of the dead?"

"Hahaha, where is hulk? Shouldn't he be here by my side? Fancy face always woke up with Bo Brady by her bedside." And so it begins, I have to be the bearer of bad news.

"Estimated one to ten, how strong is your heartbeat?" A natural smile pulls at his lips, he purses them as he prepares to answer the question.

"Why?"

"I don't want to send you back to Casper the ghost because after what I tell you..." Now we're serious, it's not my place. But knowing Lilian, she will keep it from him.

"What is it Tee? Is he okay? Did something happen to him?" Bulelwa interjects, growing weary.

"He's alive, still breathing relax." Keeping a positive

attitude is good for the fragile, I shall do that.

“Are you going to tell me what has happened to that man or will you keep me in suspense?” He questions, worriedly shifting on the bed. “Demedi.”

He winces in pain with this word, it tickles my laugh box but I fight to hold it in.

“Was that idiot trying to stab me or butcher me like a goat? This shit is painful.” His hand wanders around his rib, careful not to press on the wound.

“So the crazy came back with you.” I’m trying to lighten up the mood before breaking his heart, it’s futile because he doesn’t laugh.

“Where is Zizwe, Tee?” The grave look on his face has me pulling a chair, delivering bad news is not an easy job. People like us should get paid for it, the trauma we see on people's faces is not for the faint hearted.

“In prison.” One step at a time.

“Why? Who did he hit?” He asks, a frown building up

on his features. “Zizwe can’t go around beating people up.”

“Babe, I think your mother should explain that part.” He scowls upon my declaration which is highly unlikely, this man is forever in a good mood.

“Finish what you started Tee. What does my mother have to do with Zizwe being behind bars?”

The door slides open just as I prepare to break the news, Lilian graces us with her presence. She looks between Bulelwa and I and directly considers me with a killer look, she is aware of what just happened.

“My baby.” Lilian salutes, trailing to the bed. She wants me out of here, her unyielding glare has thrown me out of the room. I’m not going anywhere.

“I want him out.” Bulelwa doesn’t waste time.

“Baby?” Lilian plays the confused old hag and no doubt Bulelwa will not fall for it.

“Zizwe had nothing to do with my attack, that man

was actually after him and I happened to get in the way.” Oh no, this is what he thinks it’s about.

“Bhekizizwe is going to spend the rest of his life in prison, I will personally make sure of that.” The stubborn Lilian says.

“No he’s not, I want Zizwe out today mama kaBubu.” Bulelwa unsympathetically states, glaring at his grieving mother. I can only hope that he doesn’t change his mind when he finds out the truth. “Are you teaming up with Mandla now? Do you want to destroy my life as well?”

Pain and anguish twinkle on her face and for a brief moment, her eyes shut. For a second there I think she will cry like she’s been doing for the past hours, but she won’t be Lilian Msibi if she does not portray strength.

“Your father is gone Bubu, that boy killed him.” The mother breaks the news to her son, his eyes amplify, disbelief shining behind them. His heart is probably bleeding, nonetheless he is strong. He kicked death

right in the curb, he just needs support and he'll be fine. More than our support, he needs his beloved with him.

“No...he didn't.” There is no doubt or hesitation in the tone of his voice, Lilian gasps in shock. She can't believe what her son has uttered with his mouth.

“Did you hear what I just said?” She takes his hand into hers, Bulelwa rejects the touch by yanking it away. He turns his pained gaze to the ceiling, I can see tears pushing to come out, he opens his eyes and the tears glide towards his ears. I want to hold his hand, let him know that I'm here. Still, Lilian will undoubtedly amputate my hand.

“Get Zizwe out of jail or consider me dead.” Bulelwa delivers in a dead pan voice, in her stumped state Lilian cradles his cheeks and leans in to link her forehead with his. I'm baffled as they both start crying, Bulelwa sends his hands to grip his mother's wrists. It breaks my heart to see him cry in this painful manner, it has me walking out. Hopefully he won't give up on his love, Gcinumzi and Ifalakhe will

probably make sure of it.

Like my mind is a radio to the dead, my eyes land on the two lovers as I step into the corridor. Hand in hand they stand, peace lodged on their faces.

“You found him?” The question slithers out of my mouth, the couple smiles as they nod in unison. Nomalanga was right, Ifalakhe really looks like Bulelwa. It’s not a freakish comparison, but I would call them out as brothers. Ifalakhe is a bit short and adorable, he’s small in structure and about a few shades lighter than Bulelwa. Could be four teaspoons of coffee with milk, if I were to exaggerate it.

“Thank you.” Ifalakhe’s appreciation is directed my way, the warm smile on his face goes to the tall man standing proudly beside him. Gcinumzi returns a faded simper, they lock eyes for a good minute.

“Tell him not to go ahead with the investigation, we are at peace. If he continues old wounds will be opened, it will affect him and the man he loves.

They will be fine if they fight for their love.”
Gcinumzi articulates, it sounds like he’s bidding
goodbye.

“We’re going to cross over now, Ifalakhe has found
his Gcinumzi.” I believe he means Bulelwa has
found his Zizwe, my friend didn’t believe in love. He
would never be seen dead with the same man twice.

“Tell Bulelwa to love freely and make sure to tell
Zizwe he loves him every day, these men need to
hear it every day if not every second.” Ifalakhe
delivers, he glances up at Gcinumzi. “They might
look strong and hard-hearted, but they have the
softest hearts.”

I believe him.

“I will.” They smile at my response, I watch them as
they walk away hand in hand.

“Excuse me!” My grazing is disturbed by a frail
voice, I turn to a tall man. My brain recognises him,
but I’m too focused on the star crossed lovers that I
give the man a brief look. I want to see how the

couple will exit the earth. They are gone by the time I turn, all my senses work together as Mandla's face flashes in front of my eyes. I meet his sad face mingling with tears when I turn to him.

"That's my brother." He sounds wounded, his brother is gone. If they are going to the same place then he will meet him after crossing over. Now the difficult mission will be telling Bulelwa that I can see his dead father.

VERONICA...

"Veronica." A low voice eases into Veronica's ears, thinking it's probably nothing she ignores it and continues with her favourite show. "Veronica." The soft voice again, a little louder this time. It catches her attention and she is tempted to respond to the ghostly whisper.

"Are you okay princess?" Duma asks from across the coffee table, veronica traces the sound of his voice until her eyes meet his.

“Someone is calling me.” Like the creepy voice, Veronica whispers the words to her father.

“There is no one here, just us two.” He says, thinking it could be coming from the television show.

“Vero will go to bed, her eyes are tired.” Her announcement brings her to her feet, worry cradles Duma. His daughter retires very late for bed, 7pm is too early for her. Something must definitely be wrong, nonetheless he lets her be.

The bedroom feels somewhat strange, a dense presence that has her head spinning and her nose feeling heavy lurks about. She shakes it off, changes into her nightwear and jumps into bed. Praying before bed is something her aunt taught her, sleep takes over her soul after three words have been sent to God.

Instantly she sees herself lying on her bed dressed in a red dress, one she knows she doesn't own. The dim lights make the atmosphere chilling, then she

sees her. The woman who gave her life, the one who carried her for nine months and tirelessly pushed her into existence; standing by her feet. A black cloak is her covering and beside her there is a man with the height of a child plus a black cat. All six eyes are on Veronica, she can smell and taste the fear clawing at her.

“You have to sleep with your husband Veronica, the time has finally come.” Barbra tells her, grabbing both her feet. Veronica struggles to wriggle out of bed, her mind tells her to move, yet her body refuses. The scary creature who hasn’t said anything scampers on the bed, adding to Veronica’s fear. In her head, she is screaming no.

“I will not do it, Vero is not married.” Her spirit finds the will to speak on her behalf, it is a dream after all and her mother is well aware of her thoughts.

Veronica is informed about God and the power he possesses, hence the little prayer in her heart.

“You will sleep with him, if not you, then who else?”

Her mother insists and this gives the creature a push. He grabs Veronica's leg and this has the young lady shouting 'Jesus' a name Barbra has heard come out of her daughter's mouth more than once. She knows what this means, the show is over. It takes a few seconds for Veronica to jolt up from the deep slumber she was forced in and dash out of her room in search of the man she feels safe with.

"Baba, baba, baba. I had a bad dream, there was a man and they said I'm married to him." Veronica throws her trembling body in her fathers' arms, overwhelmed that she bursts into a flood of tears. Duma does what he always does and that is to protect his child by covering her with his large fatherly arms.

RANDALL...

I'm baffled by Zulu's attire, a black suit with shoes to complete the outfit. I keep my eyes on his as he

walks into the living room with careful steps.

“Uncle Randall, I would bring my uncle Nqaba but he’s not around and he’s the only uncle I have.” The boy says, settling down on the opposite couch.

“What is it son?”

“This is going to be easier than I thought, YouTube showed me something totally different. I thought you were going to ask for ivula mlomo before you start talking.” (Mouth opener.) He smiles brightly and I’m affected and obligated to return it.

“What is the occasion Zulu? Why the suit?” Clearing his throat, Zulu pushes his body to the edge of the couch and takes up a serious expression.

“You see I will be turning nine in a few days, which means I will be a man. So this man,” he taps his shoulder before crossing one leg over the other. This boy is definitely Mzi’s child I see a lot of him in his tiny self. “This man right here has seen a flower in your compound.”

Did he just say compound?

“There are plenty of flowers in this compound Zulu and they all belong to Chioma, she will kill you if you pluck them out.” He laughs, shaking his head.

“No Uncle Randall.” He gets up, runs to the kitchen and comes back with a piggy bank in his hands. I don’t know what game he’s playing at but it has me inquisitively observing him, I can’t wait for R.J to grow up.

“I’m here to pay lobola for Liyana.” He says, his face as serious as a heart attack.

“Excuse me?” I probably didn’t catch what he said.

“I want to marry your daughter Liyana, my heart has chosen her.” This child must be joking.

“You want my daughter?”

“Yes, UmaBiyase. My last name fits perfectly with hers.”

“What makes you think you deserve her?” I ask, he gives me a wide smile.

“Because I am good looking and I will make her

happy.” He replies, brushing his hand over his head.
“Amara, Amara.” I shout for the wife, she has to hear this.

To be continued...

BURN

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RANDALL...

“You’re only allowed to call me like that when the house is on...fire.” Amara’s speech drags when her gaze falls on a formally dressed Zulu, a ghost of a smile takes play on her lips. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t think she should be present uncle, you see it says here on YouTube...” He scans the little device on his phone, swiping his finger from corner to corner.

“Why does he have a phone at his age?” I whisper to an entertained Amara who shrugs and perches herself next to me.

“Yes, here it is. It says women are not allowed to participate in the negotiations, unless she’s an elder like grandma Barbra.” He explains, passing the phone over to Amara.

“What negotiations?” Amara questions inquisitively.

“Lobola of course aunt.” Serious faced, Zulu answers hunching over, he places his elbows on his thighs and intertwines his hands together. Amara turns to face me, confusion draping her facade.

“You’re taking a second wife King Uze Okolie?” She’s teasing me.

“Aunt no, he’s the negotiator because he gets to decide if I marry his daughter or not.” He smiles.

“Buuuut he will choose wisely. I believe you need a smart man like me in this family. I promise, your daughter will never lack anything, she will be in good hands.”

“You want to marry Liya?”

“The one and only.” He retorts with so much confidence, Amara is holding in a laugh. This is where she tells him to go to bed.

“How are you going to take care of her? Liyana can be very demanding.” Is she seriously entertaining him?

“I have it all planned out.” With a clearing of a throat, he stretches his hand to Amara who hands him the little gadget. “It’s called a vision board, I saw that on YouTube as well. We’re going to get married in three months, we’ll give you guys a week to say your goodbyes and...”

“Goodbyes? Won’t you live here with us?” Amara continues to entertain him, Zulu disagrees with a head shake.

“No aunt, we’re moving to Disney Land.” He gleams brightly, showing all his teeth. “We’re going to live there, happily ever after. So uncle Randall, please accept this bride price. It’s not much, but it’s my best. I saved an entire year for this, I wanted to buy a play station, but Liya is worth every cent. I believe

no one can give you a better offer.”

“You think my daughter is worth the price of a play station?” He grins nervously at my question.

“Well, I managed to save five hundred rand. It’s a lot, trust me.” His reply is accompanied by a confident nod.

“You might want to take that money and buy a lollipop or something, Liyana will never…” Amara nudges me with her elbow, interjecting the announcement I’m about to throw out there.

“Since when are you a heartbreaker?” She whispers, chastising me with a glare.

“Talk to him Amara, talk to him.” That’s all I have to say, Zulu’s mystified eyes follow me as I move up and begin to walk out of the living room.

“Is that a yes Uncle Randall?” He shouts after me. “I can add more, but I’ll need three months.”

I hear Amara giggling loudly. “Come baby, let’s get you some ice cream and you’ll tell me about this plan of yours.” She says, tickled by Zulu’s

absurdness.

BULELWA...

It hurts to know that I will never see Ndlondlo again, we were never on good terms. I let my stubbornness and ego get in the way of our relationship, no father should have a son like me. One who defies his orders, maybe if I had listened to him and married that girl he had chosen for me this wouldn't have happened. Ndlondlo would still be alive.

“Did you hear what I said?” Thandiwe’s voice joins in on the thoughts torturing me. I blink to find her with a raised brow. Uninterested of the small talk we were engaging in before I zoned out, I shrug my shoulders. “Oh Bubu, you’re going to be okay. You’ll see, this storm will pass too.”

“Storm? Girl don’t tell me you dumped Thor for a pastor.” She laughs, loudly...an unexpected horse-laugh.

“I’m serious Bubu, God will pull you out of this.”
Okay! Who is this girl?

“Tee, since when do you speak church?”

“Since you came to me as a spirit and asked for help, you said something was out to get you and that I should pray for you because you didn’t want to die.” I am baffled by her answer, as to why I’m smiling God knows.

“You’re kidding right?” I’ve heard of life after death.

“How do you not remember? You came to me asking for help, something was after you.”

“I don’t remember coming to you, the only thing I saw was this boy on fire. At first I thought it was the angel of death wanting to drag me to hell, but he showed himself to me. He didn’t say who he was, only that we were connected. I was him and he was me, he said I shouldn’t follow the light because he would never find his love if I did.” The memory is not that clear, I wouldn’t point him out should I bump into him.

“That must have been Ifalakhe.” She says, my mind is muddled. This ought to be good, eager to hear what she has to say I watch her fervently as she pulls a chair to settle down on it.

“I finally met the two love birds, Gcinumzi and Ifalakhe.” Thandiwe has always loved pulling pranks on me, nothing in me is amused. My heart is too broken to jump for joy. “You know how I told you I see dead people?”

I nod at her question, it’s hard to believe that someone I know has this gift.

“And you say you saw them? How?”

“They came to me and you won’t believe this Bubu, you and Zizwe are reincarnations of your uncle and Ifalakhe.” Excitement cloaks over her as she pronounces, I would have to christen her insane because there is no way.

“Don’t pull my leg Tee, it’s not funny. Do you know what I feel for Hulk?” My heart breaks at the thought of him, I have a deep urge to see him. I can’t accept that he killed my father, Zizwe is not capable of that.

“My point exactly, you know how you wanted nothing to do with relationships and along came Zizwe and swept you off your feet.” She’s tickled by her own verses, she is right though. Zizwe knows which Buttons to press to get me to melt, he does it so impeccably. I’m gobs macked while listening to Thandiwe recite my uncle’s story, how Zizwe and I are fated to be together.

THANDIWE.

“Are you sure this is not a movie you watched?” Bulelwa questions the past events, I don’t blame him. Take a random stranger and tell them this story. They will definitely laugh in your face.

“Would I lie to you babe? Zizwe needs you now, you need to get him out.” He grimaces upon my advices, I think I sense doubt in him. “Don’t tell me, you believe your mother.”

“I know he didn’t kill my father, I just...I don’t get why Lilian would accuse him, she is okay with me

being gay. She said it herself, she is not homophobic Tee.” He states, I watch him fall into deep thought while biting his lower lip.

“What’s on your mind?” His gaze runs to me.

“The day my parents found us in an uncompromising position, my...”

“Say what?” How do I not know about this?

“They walked in on us having sex.” The thought makes him giggle, it’s good to see a genuine smile on his face. “You should have seen my father’s face, I could swear his world came crushing down. I almost died when he shot Zizwe, the man escaped with a bullet on his wrist.”

“To find your baby having sex is a sight any parent dreads.” Bulelwa boos my retort, we both know with Mandla it was beyond that.

“When I went to get the car, I came back to Lilian with her hands all over Zizwe. She was too comfortable, I brushed it off thinking it wasn’t a big deal.” He sputters, going back into the thinking booth.

“Her husband shot your boyfriend, it makes sense that she would check up on him.” My justification does not make sense in my head.

“Whatever, I told her to get Zizwe out.” Bulelwa states grimly, he is never this serious.

“I’m pretty sure she will do the right thing, you have too much on your plate already.” I remind him of his father passing, the tensing of his jaw hands over his deep frustrations.

“Have you seen him...my father? Has he come to you?” An undertone, like he’s afraid to say it out loud.

“I did, I don’t know where he is now. They never stay for too long, he will come back.”

“Is he...is he in pain?” His eyes dig into mine as he asks, they are searching for the truth.

“He looked fine to me, just sad.” Bulelwa sighs at my response. “He will come back, he was looking for you.”

I enfold my arms around him as he breaks into a silent cry, the sound of the hospital door opening pulls us apart. Nqaba slides in with a puckered brow, his gaze finds me before moving to Bulelwa.

“You’re back.” He says to my friend while ambling to me. I get a brief kiss on my cheek, with an indistinct smile on his face, he leers over at Bulelwa on the bed.

“Thor.” Bulelwa salutes, pulling Nqaba’s facial features into a mope. Looking at him, I notice a scratch on his left eye brow.

“What happened?” My hand rises to smooth that area, I think he will wince, that’s how painful it looks. The man disappoints.

“Nothing.” The tone of his voice cans my concerns.

“It doesn’t look like nothing Nqaba.” I nag, he is not okay with it. The narrowing of his eyes tells me so.

“Relax tee, he’s not the one lying on the hospital bed.” That’s Bulelwa, seeking back his attention.

“You see, give the man attention and stop worrying about me.” Nqaba wants to see me upset.

“How can I not worry about you? Look at you...” I can’t stop, Nqaba shuts me up with a kiss. His hand slides to the small of my back. He pulls me into him so that we’re flush together. I’m so lost that I forget my speech.

“Are you two trying to kill me?” Bulelwa’s objection breaks the intimate moment. My whole face is on fire, flushed, I hide on Nqaba’s chest. “I’m pretty sure I will not be coming back this time, please control your hormones Thor. I don’t do polygamy if that’s what you’re hinting at.”

He has me laughing at his foolishness, Nqaba doesn’t seem to get the joke.

BHEKIZIZWE...

“Bhekizizwe Zondo!” A police officer calls from

outside the cell, he holds an unfriendly face. He's different from the one who locked me in here three days ago, just as I make my way to him, Lilian appears. The she devil herself, I take my hat off for her. She's good at this game. From my view Lilian does not look like a grieving wife, she is finely dressed, in black of course. A head wrap covers her head and her face never lacks make-up.

“What is she doing here?” The question is for the short officer who looks intimidating as hell, his response is a scowl and in this stillness he opens the cell. The officer's refusal to speak to me has invited confusion in my mind, I am muddled and upset, he shuts the prison bars after I have walked out and leaves without another word uttered.

“What game are you playing Lilian?” She better explain, or I will be sent back into that cell.

“This is no game, you have ruined my family Bhekizizwe. My husband is dead, my children have lost their father because of you.” I grab her finger

that continuously pokes my chest and shrug it away.

“You don’t get to touch me, woman.” I hiss, anger has made a home in my heart. “...and you don’t get to blame me for your husband’s death. We both know I didn’t touch him, he fell.”

“Still, if you hadn’t shouted at the top of your voice that we...” Her eyes ramble around the station most likely in search of any observers, when they meet me they are swimming in disgust. This is the same woman who used to regard me with so much love, she might not have said it but I saw it in the way she touched me. Her jealousy testified to it as well...

“You’re to blame for this and I will never forgive you.”

“I don’t care.” I sizzle, stepping back with my arms folded across my chest. At the declaration, Lilian observes me with a gaze of a stranger, that aloof judgement with no strings.

“Fine, I don’t care either.” Her voice breaks, she is hurt but refuses to let it show. I’ve known her for a

long time and can see right through her. “There is one thing I care about, my children. Keep your distance Bhekizizwe, you’re not welcomed at the funeral.” She breaks the news and everything pauses while my brain makes a new connection that brings a high emotion of sorrow.

“Bulelwa is...he’s gone?” My voice whispers the curse, my heart breaks into shards that can never be put together. Lilian’s eyes take in my form, a furrowed brow on her face and mouth slightly open. She’s reading me, I don’t know why when she should be saying something. She closes her eyes and answers...

“Y- yes, he’s gone. Bulelwa is gone, I have lost my husband and son. Their deaths are in your hands Bhekizizwe, I hope you can live with yourself.”

“Bhekizizwe.” My brother’s voice interposes, Lilian turns to him while I drop my gaze. I can’t look at him, not when I’m this weak and vulnerable. How could Bulelwa leave me like I meant nothing to him, like

what we shared meant nothing to him?

“Do not come to the funeral or I will change my statement, I’m a grieving widow and confusion tends to attack the weak, any judge would believe that.” Lilian murmurs before ambling to the exit without giving my brother a second look.

“Ndoda.” He gives me a brief hug, I want to hold him back because I need one right now, but I don’t.

“Did you bring the car?” Upon the nod he gives, I walk to get my belongings and follow him out to the car that’s parked outside the gate.

“Are you okay bafo?” He wants to converse right here at the parking lot.

“I’m fine.” Actually I have died a thousand deaths, I can’t breathe at this point. My heart has sunk to the pit of my stomach and rejects the invite to come back to its home. “I’ll drive.”

Snatching the car keys from him, I scurry to the

driver's seat, he jumps in and I take off in full speed.

“Habe, Zizwe. Yehlis a amafutha ndoda, uzos'bulala.” (Slow down, you're going to kill us.)

I pay no heed to his request and continue racing down the streets, the adrenalin rush is not helping. My mind is haunted with images of Bulelwa, I see them play before my eyes. My brother's voice becomes background sounds, the only thing I can sense is the reproach in his voice. Tears blind my vision, I send my hand to cast them away. My chest is closing in, I can't breathe. It feels like a heavy object has been put on it and it's depriving me of air.

“Bhekizizwe stop, stop.” He shouts, gripping my shoulder as tight as he could. We're in the middle of nowhere, an open field.

After plunging the car on the side of the road, I run out headed for the open field of dry crops and long grass. I can hear Ntsika shouting after me, the desperation spiked in his voice is not adequate to get me to stop. My ears are filled with Bulelwa's laughter, the cusses that constantly dwelt on his

tongue. His face continues to appear before me, he can't be dead.

The thought of never seeing Bulelwa again weakens my knees, they give up on me and refuse to cooperate. I fall knees first, my hands palm the wet grass. A shout or what sounds like a scream leaps out of my mouth, no matter how much I shout, I can't get rid of the pain in my heart. It hurts so bad that I want to cry, I clench my jaw trying to suppress the overwhelming emotions.

My brother has caught up, his hand is on my shoulder. He kneels before me, enfolds an arm over my shoulders. My head finds shelter on his chest and I let it all out, this is what Bulelwa has subjected me to. A man who cries like a child.

To be continued...

BURN

BHEKIZIZWE...

My brother is upset that I don't want to go back home with him, I can't leave without seeing Bulelwa. Lilian banned me from going to the funeral, but I don't care. She can't stop me from paying Bulelwa my last respects. Sadly my father went back home, I bet my mother is well informed about my shameless ways. I won't be surprised if I get a call from her.

Ntsika walks into the bedroom from the bathroom. He said he needed a shower after the long drive from the city. Our eyes meet, his are stubborn and intimidating, so I drop mine first.

"Are you still crying?" He teases, standing ground with the stare.

"Can we talk?" He knows what I'm talking about, his unyielding gaze has me shifting uncomfortably on the bed.

He sighs before joining me, we're both quiet, I guess waiting for the other to break the silence.

"Why didn't you tell me?" He's the first to voice out.

"You hate gay people." His silence bothers me.

"You're my brother, how can I possibly hate you ndoda?" He turns his gaze to me, his eyes are genuine and soft.

"Do you recall that day I asked you what you would do if you were to find out that I'm gay and you said you'd kill me." I remind him of his past words, I could tell him how much they hurt me, but that would be too dramatic of me.

"That was out of context, I didn't mean it. Your question needed a response and I happened to have that one in mind." Ntsika is suddenly different, this is not the brother I know. I did not imagine his homophobic ways, he wasn't ashamed of it.

"So this whole time..."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not really routing for this."

For me it's hard to stomach a man and man in love, but you're my brother and your happiness comes first. I saw you in that field today Zizwe and it broke my heart to see my little brother breaking like that."

"I'm sorry you had to see that." I exclaim, Ntsika nods, whatever that means.

"You loved him?" I'm surprised by his question,

"I did, I don't think I will ever love anyone like that again." The wound is still fresh, I wonder how long it will take me to heal from the pain and grief.

"Then you should go to his funeral, say your goodbyes." He's right, what could Lilian possibly do? She really doesn't have proof that I killed her husband.

"Do I just rock up there though?" He shrugs at my question.

"Why not? He was the man you loved, you have every right to bid him goodbye." My brother is right, Lilian is not going to keep me from the funeral.

“Your phone is vibrating.” I reach for it on the nightstand, Mr. Okolie is calling. My leave days are over, I need to come up with an excuse.

“Mr. Okolie.” Ntsika pats my shoulder as he walks out of the bedroom.

“Why are you not at work?” He is not happy.

“Something came up sir, someone close to me died. I have to stay in Kwamashu for a few more days, if that’s okay with you.”

“My condolences, but don’t stay for too long Zondo, we need you here.” That is a demand I presume.

“I won’t sir.” He hangs up without saluting goodbye, I’m used to his standoffish demeanour. I need to find a way to get into the Msibi residence without Lilian recognising me, then again it would be better if I go to the cemetery.

BARBRA...

I am done for, Veronica seems to be stronger than I

anticipated lately. Something is not right, her mind is supposed to be confused. If she goes back to her rightful state, it will be the end of me, the brat will confess everything and Duma will kill me.

Dammit, malls can be annoying when crowded. People always find a need to gather in one particular mall, you can't walk without anyone bumping into you.

“Ouch.” There goes another one, she stops and turns with a smile on her face. Why is she smiling at me? She should be apologising for her clum... Wait a minute...I know this woman.

“Sandra?” Shock dives out from my chest, this woman is supposed to be in Ghana playing queen. Her eyes widen as her mind puts the puzzles together, she recognises me. We are sisters after all. There is a woman with her, probably the same age as her if not older. Panic takes over Sandra's face when I snatch her arm to stop her from walking away.

“Don't ever touch me again.” She sizzles, yanking

her hand.

My sister is afraid of me, she still thinks I'm after her life. You see the plan was that we both take over from our grandmother, make the old woman proud by accepting her powers and the call to be witches. We were going to make a hell of a good team if Sandra did not run.

“Relax Khabonina, those days are over.” She purses her lips at the sound of her native name, the name our grandmother christened her with.

“My name is Sandra Okolie.” That’s funny, she can’t run away from her identity. Look where we are today.

“Sandra Khabonina Blose is who you are.” She turns to the lady beside her.

“Chioma wait for me in the car, I’ll be there just now.” Chioma takes the car keys offered to her and walks away.

“What do you want from me Barbra?”

“Really Sandra? After everything I have done for you, this is how you speak to me?” Her eyes roll up upon hearing my question.

“Let’s find a comfortable place to sit so we can talk.” I have so much to ask her, it’s been years. I almost forgot my sister’s voice.

“I have nothing to say to you Barbra.” Ouch!

“At least tell me how he’s doing.” Sandra crosses her arms and purses her lips, she’s withdrawing from me.

“You don’t get to ask about him, he has nothing to do with you.” She spits painfully, I love my sister. We grew up together and being two years apart, we were each other’s best friends and needed no one to complete our circle.

“Remember thirty five years ago Sandra when you came to my doorstep, crying that the Okolies wanted to take the crown from you because you couldn’t give them...”

“Shut up Barbra, we swore never to speak of this again. Do you remember that? Or does your cold

heart not care? Don't you get tired of hurting people?"

What is she talking about? All I have ever done is help her, she wouldn't be sitting on that throne if it were not for me.

"Don't you think I have the right to know about him?"

"No!" She interposes. "Stay away from me Barbra, I don't want to do anything I will regret."

Heavy-hearted, I watch my sister walk away from me until she disappears into the crowd. We're going to meet again Sandra, this is a small world.

THANDIWE...

Nqaba woke up too early today, he said he had work to take care of. I won't let him leave this house, knowing him, he won't make it to the funeral. He's bathing, he took his clothes to change in the bathroom. Strange. Come to think of it, it's been too

long. He better not have snuck out to god-knows where.

I feel out of breath after making the bed that I have to take a minute to get my heart back to its normal beat, this baby is growing too fast. With Zulu, I started showing at six months. I thought it strange until my mother told me it was common, some women hardly show until the day of the birth.

I hear the door crack open, my heart smiles at the sight of him that it reflects on my face. He doesn't return it, but plods to me. My stupid brain can only think marriage proposal when he drops on his knees before me. I quickly raise my eyebrows and drop them again, Nqaba places a pink flower on my lap. I saw these next door, the lady has a small garden full of them right outside her gate. This man is not giving me a stolen flower, a pink one at that.

“This is for you.” He states the obvious.

“What did I do to deserve stolen goods?” He smiles at my enquiry.

“I borrowed it, I was taking a walk outside and it caught my eye. I thought it would look good with you, not in that lousy garden.” Lord! Lord! Lord! That’s all, my heart will finish the rest.

“You do know that people use flowers as muthi right? Or ukuthwala? This could be Tshepo and he’s the only source of income in that household.”
(Uk’thwala: To attain wealth and fame using dark powers.)

Nqaba laughs, heartily. It’s strikingly refreshing and calming.

“I guess this is Tshepo’s new home, he will just have to get comfortable.” This man is not serious, I am getting rid of this once he’s out of sight. Jokes aside, Nqaba allows his facial features to tread towards a deadpan expression, his hand wanders to my belly.

“She’s growing.” He mumbles, rubbing it with gently strokes that make me feel sleepy. “Thank you Tantan for making me a father.”

I have to palm the bed with my hands and lean back when he rests his head on my stomach, his hands encircle around my waist.

“Thank you for giving me a son, Peanut is my son Tshabalala.” I’m not surprised, he brings his face up to look at me. “Styles came back with the results, we have a baby together. You don’t how happy that makes me.”

“Zulu will be happy to know that you’re his father, he loves you and you have done a great job with him, Nqaba. I am proud of you.” I tell him while cradling his face in my hands. I meet him halfway as he leans in to kiss me, the moment has to be cut short. We have a funeral to get to, I won’t let him leave for work.

“Come on Biyase, change into something decent. We don’t want to be late.” He smiles at the request, it has to do with me deciding that we’re going to the funeral. I had picked out something for him when he

was out, I'm proud to say we have gotten rid of the ugly, shabby clothes. Sometimes you have to give this gender a hand when it comes to outfits or you will die of embarrassment, imagine convincing your friends that the man you love is not as bad looking as he appears in pictures because he dresses like he doesn't care.

"I'm not wearing Jeans to a funeral." He's observing them like they are made of snake skin and fragranced with its venom.

"Everyone does it." I guess I said something stupid, he doesn't have to look at me like that though. He manoeuvres past me and begins digging in the wardrobe, my eyes take in his half naked body. I've said it before and I'll say it again, Nqabayomzi Biyase looks better with just trunks on. That's probably my lustful mind convincing me, the thought has me wrapping my arms around him from the back.

My lips trail over his broad shoulders, to think he'll

stop and accommodate me...No...The man continues with his search of finding the darn pants, thankfully I donated his ugly trousers and brown shirts and that red one he wore at the wedding.

“We’re going to miss the funeral if you continue like this, I won’t let you go once I get you on that bed.” His voice is a breathless rumble, good to know I’m turning him on. I was hoping he doesn’t find the formal pants and wears the jeans instead, maybe he still can. He spins with a bored look when I snatch them from his hand.

“Wenzani?” (What are you doing?)

His gaze chastises me like a strict parent would, it reminds me of my father.

“I’m going to throw these in the bathtub,” He sighs, defeated.

“Why would you do that?”

“I want you to wear those jeans.” My answer is stupid, but oh well.

“Thandiwe!” He’s not impressed with me, I scurry out of the bedroom when he tries to grab them. I can feel him marching after me, so I pick up my pace.

“Thandiwe slow down, you’re pregnant.” His reprimanding voice reaches me as I take a turn to the living room.

“Tshabalala stop.” He yells after me, for a reserved guy he really is entertaining my nonsense. I run behind the couch seeing that he’s close enough to grab me. He stops, exhales out of frustration and folds his arms across his chest. “Are we done playing now?”

“No.” I shake my head while swinging the pants up in the air and dancing randomly. Somehow I’m enjoying, seeing him defeated like this. “Come and get them.”

Google ‘annoyed’ and you will find Ngaba's face plastered right next to the word.

“Give my pants back Tan-tan, you know these are

the only black formal pants I have. Someone decided to fill my wardrobe with jeans as if I'm a child." He reminds me...once more I thought he needed change.

"Well, maybe I like you more without your pants on." This statement might just score me some points.

"Really?" A wayward boyish smile creeps on his lips, it's shadowy. His eyes lustfully trace my build, they are undressing me.

"Must you always think about sex?" I throw the question at him, he receives it as a joke.

"Hey, I strongly disagree. It's my wife I always think about." Did he just say wife? This man and his claims...The pants are forgotten, my eyes are trailing his body. Thoughts of touching him and having him on top of me occupy my mind, I stand mouth ajar, immobile. His hands are all over me, his lips grazing my neck and face.

"You are proving yourself wrong right now Nqaba." Breathless, I recap on the words he spoke seconds ago. He knows my weakness and is using it against

me. I'm letting him win, actually my body is letting him win. It has turned on me, my hands take him in. Gosh, I love it when he is all over me like this. His lips move to mine, the kiss is slow and heated...He is delicious, I don't want him to stop, but he does. The pull away leaves me panting and seeking for more.

“And you say I have a dirty mind.” He says, holding the pants up with a frown on his surface. Jaw dropped in shock and speechless, I stand with questions in my head. When did he do that? Was I that distracted? Nqaba steps back, winks and begins his walk back to the bedroom, I'm left to nurse my ego and the craving he has left me with.

“You're a cheater Biyase.” I hope he heard that.

“Two can play that game.” He yells back, his voice disappearing into the next room.

BULELWA...

I had to spend a few more days at the hospital, each day I would sit with my eyes glued to the door, thinking Zizwe will walk through. Disappointment laughed in my face when someone else showed up. It hurts that he hasn't been to see me. Lilian says she dropped the charges and has no clue where Zizwe is, I didn't think him to be this kind of a person. Doesn't he care about me anymore?

I had to be bedridden for two days after I was released from the hospital, today my heart is heavy. We're burying my father and I need Zizwe the most. My siblings try to be there for me knowing my history with Ndlondlo, but nothing has soothed my heart yet. Zizwe should, seeing him and being in his arms.

The house is awfully quiet, aunt Deliwe and sis Betty have been hard at work taking care of everything. Lilian is bound on the mattress, it is her duty as a widow. She has to grieve her husband, my

sisters are not taking the death well. Lindiwe seems to be losing more weight than she should, Thobekile is awfully quiet.

Her husband arrived from Mozambique, he didn't bring the other girls, said they are too young to attend a funeral. Thobekile wasn't happy about it, she wanted them to bid their grandfather farewell. At least Aurora is here, she is the oldest apparently.

I look and feel like a corpse, the thought comes to mind when I stand in front of the lengthy mirror in my room. When I bought this suit a month ago, it wasn't this loose. I wore it once to an event and it fit perfectly, now I hate how it looks on me.

“You're so sexy Buttercup.” I swivel on my heel at the sound of the whisper, to find no one in the spacious bedroom. I'm losing my mind, he's everywhere, in my head, my skin...my lips. My heart stops and skips all in the space of a millisecond, how am I to survive with such a commotion.

“You should be here with me, Zizwe. I can't express how much I need you.”

There's a sudden knock at the door, the person on knocks once more and toddles in. My eyes fall on the skinniest pregnant woman I have ever seen. Lonwabo is stressing my sister, there is no doubt about that. She's dressed up for the funeral, her bloodshot red eyes are puffy.

Lindiwe breaks out in painful sobs almost every minute, it could be that she's the middle child, they tend to be babies when given a chance. I have confined myself in my bedroom, I can't meet depressing faces every time I walk out, they add to my depression.

"You need a plate of Morvite, you can't be this thin Bubu or else you'll break." Noticing my weight, she mocks me. I fail to give my sister a paltry smile, she pats my cheek with her lips and gives me a brief hug.

"You look worse than me." I retort, compelling her to emit a soft laugh.

“You look beautiful.” Maybe I can smile at this statement. “We’re going to be okay Bubu, you’ll see.” She cradles my cheeks, it doesn’t take long for her to play with them.

“I miss him.” I don’t want to cry.

“Me too, everyone does.” At this remark, Lindiwe moves away and her tired pregnant body finds a chair to sit on.

“How is mom?” I have been avoiding her as well, she cries a lot.

“You know Lilian, she’s a strong woman. I can’t even begin to imagine how she feels, losing your husband, your soulmate. They spent almost their whole lives together and suddenly he’s gone.” Lindiwe says, her voice breaking with each word.

“I know, like you said she’s a strong woman.” She nods, blinking her tears away.

“Betty worries me though, don’t you think she’s shedding too many tears for someone who cleaned and made tea for dad?” Lindiwe is right, just yesterday Betty collapsed after crying a river. Lilian

was so angry, they haven't stopped arguing. Deliwe suggested they stay away from each other.

"She probably had a crush on the gorilla." I didn't mean for that to come out, Lindiwe glances at me as her lips purse to subdue a pressing laughter. It escapes into a burst, it's contagious that I burst out laughing as well. The emotion stems from the depth of my stomach, my sister has stopped laughing but I can't... Suddenly, I feel tears swell in my eyes, their warmth kiss my skin as they pass down my face. The sound of my laughter transitions into a weepy sound, I position myself on the bed in case my knees give up on me.

"Oh Bubu, it's okay my love." I don't know when she got to me, but she's embracing me in her arms.

"I'm... I'm sorry... I don't know what's... wrong with me. I feel so overwhelmed by these emotions targeting me, sometimes it's hard to breathe sis." I paint my heart out.

"I know baby, I'm here for you. We all are, don't keep

things to yourself. We don't want to lose you too. Who is going to annoy us if you follow the gorilla?" I appreciate her smile and effort to make me join in.

"I'm not going anywhere, heaven is not ready for me." Slightly, she thumps my arm with her bonny elbow. "Careful, that's a sword, not an elbow."

Her giggles are interrupted by a loud scream, I could swear that was Betty's voice.

"Betty?" Lindiwe confirms, wide-eyed.

"I hate you, Lilian. I hate you." Yep! That's definitely Betty. Panic pulls me to my feet and leads me out the door in search of the two women.

To be continued...

BURN

BULELWA...

I get to my mother's bedroom and find Betty straddling her, hands gripped on her hair. She's screaming hateful words, while Lilian is trying to fight her off, to no avail. As much as I am in pain, I pull Betty kicking and screaming, her elbow punctures my wound that it has me wincing and moving back from her. Worried about my mother who is trying to bring herself up, I ignore the pain and rush to her aid.

"I want this woman out of my house now." Lilian barks, pointing at Betty with her forefinger.

"I'm not leaving this house, I have every right to be here." Betty throws back, charging at my mother. Thobekile who was quietly watching the two women fight like bulls, pushes Betty back, she stumbles till her back hits the wall. Lindiwe walks in accompanied by Deliwe and Qaphela, the looks on their faces are of shock and concern.

“What’s going on?” Deliwé questions, I thought she was keeping an eye on these two. How did she let them out of her sight?

“Bubu, baby. Did you see that? Did you see how she was attacking me?” Lilian takes the roll of a tattletale, I instinctively hold her close. Vicious Betty is glaring at her with so much hate in her eyes, I don’t know what to make of this, but I am troubled by what I saw when I walked in here. My mother being held down like that. No child likes to see their mother in such a distasteful position.

“Sis Betty, what’s going on?” I deserve answers, my father just died and his house is turned into a mad house on the day of his burial. I hope Betty has a good explanation as to why she is so bent on attacking Lilian otherwise I do not tolerate any insults against my mother.

“Lilian is evil Bubu.” Betty sizzles suddenly breaking into a loud cry, shit you see on those over exaggerated Nollywood films. A little too dramatic if you ask me, had her sobs not been heart breaking, I would call her out on her pretence. Thobekile is the

least bothered, nevertheless Lindiwe cares enough to comfort her.

“Mama ka Bubu, please explain what happened here. Why is Betty crying like this? Why did she attack you?” Her eyes leisurely roll up, followed by a spiteful snort. What do I make of Lilian’s silence?

“Your mother hates me, she hates me because I had your father first.” Mother of all mothers, what in the Lord’s name did this woman just spit out of her mouth?

“Betty!!!” It’s too late for Lilian to interject, the cat has been let out of the bag.

My gaze finds Lindiwe, thank God I’m not the only one whose breath has been knocked out of their chest by this revelation. What I can’t pin together is Thobekile’s demeanour, the lady is as cool as a cucumber. She really doesn’t say much, we haven’t conversed since I came to. Just your normal greetings and send offs.

“She’s lying son, don’t listen to her. She is the one

filled with hate. This woman is jealous of me, she's manipulative and conniving. She wanted to take my husband from me and now she's here to grieve him like he belonged to her. I will never allow that." Lilian adds her side of the story, I don't understand what's going on. Betty claims to have had Mandla first, how is that possible?

"Why are you lying Lilian? Tell them the truth, tell them how you took my man and daughter from me." Betty yells for the neighbours to hear as well, the confusion builds up. Lindiwe and I exchange glances again, my eyes chase Thobekile to find her glaring at Betty with hate in her eyes. Her silence is starting to get to me.

"What man are you talking about?" I have to hold my mother as she barks at Betty, this is embarrassing. Today is my father's funeral, the disrespect they are showcasing is disgusting.

"Mandla was mine..."

"Hey!!!" Lilian shouts so loud that she startles

everyone in the room, “Don’t you dare claim my husband as your own. You have no right, no right to talk about him like that.”

“Mama ka Bubu, what is sis Betty talking about? What does she mean you took my father from her?” Lilian sniffs as she turns to look up at me, this is a different side to my mother, one I have never seen.

“You see why I say she’s evil, this woman is out to destroy my family. This has been her plan all along.” Lilian disputes.

An argument commences between the two women, we have to hold them back as they charge at each other. I’m tired, drained and in pain.

“Can we please calm down, fighting like cats and dogs will not help. We’re burying my brother today for crying out loud, respect his memory.” Deliwe is making sense, however we have to finish this.

“I don’t want tension during the burial, the visitors will surely sense it. So you two are going to calm down and tell me what this is about.” My mother

snorts disapproving to what I have laid on the table.

“I am not a child that you have lay rules for me Bulelwa, I birthed you and...”

“Mom please, you’re clearly aware that you two will take this outside in front of the family if we don’t sort it out now.” Lindiwe and Deliwe agree with me, Qaphela has been quiet. I need a little help here, the wound is throbbing painfully and I feel driblets of sweat building up on my forehead. Betty did a number on me.

“I’m not staying for this.” Thobekile angrily states, she storms out of the bedroom, banging the door behind her.

“Bulelwa there is no time, people are waiting outside, let’s bury uncle first, then we will deal with family issues after the burial.” It is only now that Qhaphela decides to be man enough to help.

“I agree, Mandla is not six feet under yet and already a war has broken out in his house.” Deliwe adds, she seems to hold a certain detestation for Betty, my long time nanny clicks her tongue as she

bursts out of the room.

I trail Lilian with my gaze, my mother is going through a lot. She lost her husband and now this happens. I want to comfort her, but she might not accept the hug. I know never to crowd her when she is upset.

“Will you be okay?” Poker-faced she nods, tying the black head wrap back on her head. I’d be damned, whatever is going on between those two is heavier than I think. Could Mandla have played these two ladies?

THANDIWE...

“Won’t you answer that phone?” He doesn’t want me to answer it, so why is he asking? I choose to ignore him, he gives me a brief look then sends it back to the road ahead. We’re on our way to the Msibi residence, I think we’re running late.

“Thandiwe.”

“Geez Nqaba, if you want to talk to him then you take the call.” I didn’t mean to snap, he glares for a brief moment. It’s a warning, I know that look, not that he would do anything to me. I have nothing to say to Ntuthuko, he will just aggravate me. I have a crazy number of missed calls from him.

“Ulaka Thandiwe?” Nqaba uses an uncommon reprimanding tone, I look away as he briefly scrutinises me with an icy glare. “Is this you talking or the hormones? I think we’re making it a habit to disrespect each other.”

“You want me to take his calls when I don’t want to talk to him.” My last encounter with Ntuthuko was not pleasant, he threatened to separate us. How do I move past that? Nqaba has no knowledge of what happened that day and I find it best to not let him in on it.

“Ngakus ho nini lokhu? I merely asked if you’re going to answer your phone. Is that a reason to throw a fit?” (When did I say that?)

Why is he being hard on me?

“Okay Nqaba, let’s forget about it. Drive faster please, the ceremony is about to start.” The tone of my voice is initially not the one that played in my head, I bite my tongue after hearing how rude I am and pray he won’t chide me. Not looking in his direction should work in my favour as well, or perhaps I should cry, I hear that works. He’ll think he’s at fault. I will jump out of this window if he continues to glare at me like that.

“I’m not in the mood to teach a grown woman respect.” He grunts, nonchalantly. Sure, I let my mouth run there, but it wasn’t on purpose.

“Sorry,” that what’s I can offer, I would give him more but...Nqaba’s hefty sigh states how upset he is, it really is not that deep. Then again, my mind takes me on a little trip to memory lane. How he hated it when I practised my smart mouth on him, I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Probably my hormones are acting up, something has switched inside. There is a deep urge to start a fight with him.

“I’m not going to accept that lousy apology Thandiwe, not when you say it so coldly.”

“What do you want from me?” There it is, the urge to fight him. It compels me to snap and practice my rudeness on him.

“Okay stop right there, it’s better we drive in silence because I’m not going to fight you.” I’ve always cringed when he referred to me as Tshabalala, but right now I need to hear it or I will go crazy. Nqaba takes a sudden rigid posture, fists with white knuckles clenched on the steering wheel. On his facade is a tiredness, creased brows and a tensed face. I can heavily sense his abrupt withdrawal from the conversation. His demeanour gets me thinking if I’m pushing his buttons that hard, I need to evaluate myself. What is it that’s pushing me to snap at this man who holds my heart, I have to fight against it.

“It’s Zulu’s birthday in two days.” This should do it, it

doesn't take long for a faint smile to switch on his lips.

"I know, I was thinking of doing something small for him, a small gathering he will enjoy with his friends." I'm not against it and I'm not for it either.

"I think we should ask him what he wants, he's a smart boy. He won't ask for something crazy like a trip to the moon." I bring out my thoughts that slightly tickle him, a quick chuckle that pulls my mouth into a smile.

"Kids will surprise you." His comment.

"I know, when he was six he said he wanted a girlfriend for his birthday." I remember the day like it was yesterday, Ntuthuko put the child on time out for two hours straight. When I disputed, he accused me of refereeing his parenting skills. Kids are so innocent, by the grace of God they forgive within seconds.

"He's a true Biyase," Ngaba's tone is casual and light. I scowl at him and hope he will turn and see this displeased look on my face.

“Should I be worried?” I have to ask because the man is driving as if he’s not carrying a passenger, he continues driving, serious faced.

“About what?” Really? I should keep to myself, better that than holding a conversation with a clueless man. I get a text message from Bulelwa saying they are leaving for the church service, we should drive there.

“Drive to the church.” His face crumples for a reason only he knows, he’s grumpy today.

“What happened to the other car?” I haven’t seen it anywhere, Nqaba clears his throat as a response. I need a proper answer, his hand flies to scratch his head as he feels my gaze on him.

“Why do you worry yourself about things you can’t change.” Why does he answer a question with a question? Enough Thandiwe Mshengu, you will cause trouble with your probing. I suppose we’re going to drive in silence.

IFEANYI...

I appreciate my brother's efforts to help me, but I don't want to see a shrink. How will I bring myself to talk about what happened to me? Shame mocks me without fail every second thoughts of that awful day flicker in my head.

"R.J is so spoiled, I've been trying to get him to eat his porridge but all he wants is to run after Liyana." My mother grumbles, walking into my room with a bowl of what I presume is porridge. She feeds me more of that as if I were a sickling.

"That white man's wife is here," she means Sethu, my mother is not fond of Styles. I see the way she looks at him when he comes around to see me. Randall is not bothered by it neither is Styles. Sethu walks in as my mother places the plate on the bedside table, her features crease to show her dislike for Styles' wife.

"Hi baby." Sethu salutes with a smile, she looks different every time I see her. Like she's happier

than the last time, I flinch when she places a kiss on my cheek. Normally I would return it, but I have become very sensitive and it gets worse with time.

“I’ll give you space,” my mother says. “Please eat your food.”

She knows I won’t touch the plate, I feel a bit relieved when she walks out. I feel more comfortable with Sethu, Amara told me that she has been through the same.

“Do you want me to feed you?” She takes the plate and puts it back as I gesture with a head shake.

“Perhaps we should take a walk in the garden.”

“No.” She smiles at the sound of my voice, it doesn’t last nonetheless.

“Amara tells me, you don’t want to see a doctor?”
Nice, now the whole world knows. I don’t justify her question with an answer.

“I know how difficult opening up is, I’ve been there.”
She sits on the bed with her legs crossed.

“I was once in love with this man who treated me with so much affection. I thought I was one of the lucky few who found their soulmates, but he changed. Became obsessive and very controlling. He would abuse me mentally and physically, I went back to him each time he came begging. When I finally put a stop to it after he cheated with my cousin, he broke into my house, beat me to a pulp and raped me. The devil was at work that day, he attempted to cut my chest open so he can remove my heart. God knows how I survived that attack.”

Sethu speaks with so much peace in her eyes, I can't help but wonder how long it took for her to heal.

“I know your pain Ife, every inch of it. I know how it is to not feel protected, thinking every man out there is out to get you. When I came out of the comma, I prayed for death, even my father couldn't make me feel safe. I came to a point where I had to dig a hole and bury the memories, the pain and hate I had towards the man who raped and left me for dead.

That didn't help because the hole would open up and take me back to that day. You need to heal my love, only a doctor can help you."

"I'm ashamed Sethu, I'm still bleeding. I can't talk to a stranger about this."

She takes my hands into hers as she moves closer till her knees are touching mine.

"I know Ife, I know. It will be hard at first, but you'll get used to it. Do it for you baby, do it for your loved ones. Do it for that little girl who was raped at the Dros restaurant. Do it for Uyinene Mrwetyana, for the young schoolboys from Cere who were raped by older boys at the school's library. You're not alone, I will be there to hold your hand, Amara too. Your mother is also here."

"Will you come with me?"

"Of course my love," her arms cuddle me into a soft hug. She feels like comfort, home and peace.

BULELWA...

“Here,” Lilian hands me a handkerchief. “You’re sweating, are you okay?”

I nod, although I don’t feel okay. It must be the medication I took before we left the house, my body feels weak.

I knew my father’s funeral would be packed, the number of people we have is ridiculous. How well known was Ndlondlo? His business associates and partners, Mr. Okolie and Mr. Sishi are here sitting right at the front row.

“You’re not strong yet my baby, you just got out of the hospital. I told you that you needed more days, but you’re so stubborn.” I stand the lecture for I am in no mood to argue.

“I’m fine mama ka Bubu, let me take a sit, I’ll be okay.” I get a kiss on the cheek and dash to sit down before she babies me some more. Thandiwe and Nqaba are here, my seat is reserved between Thandiwe and Lindiwe. Lonwabo clears his throat upon seeing me, my sexuality still makes him

uncomfortable. Thobekile and her husband are on the other row with my mother.

“What’s that?” That’s the friend enquiring, her hand is pointed at the floor. I’m stumped by the blood spots on my brown shoes.

“Dammit, the stitches must have ripped.” That’s why I’m in so much pain, Thandiwe’s eyes widen.

My friend is forever panicking even when it’s not necessary, I send my hand to inspect the amount of damage. A warmth of thick liquid smudges my fingers, Thandiwe gasps when her eyes fall on the blood smeared on my hand.

“Oh my god Bubu, you’re bleeding.” Lindiwe whispers beside me, I didn’t think she was paying attention. Just as she and Thandiwe fuss over me, the pastor takes the stage. It says on the obituary that I will go first, I have a few words to say about my father.

“I’m fine Twiggy,” I lie and she knows it. The pastor calls me forward, Lindiwe grabs my hand to stop

me. The stern look I give her clogs the thoughts swirling in her mind, she leans back on her fiancé's shoulder.

I feel myself getting weaker as I move to the podium, one hand pressed on the attention seeking wound. My eyes wander around the church in search for the only man who makes my heart race and stop at the same time, frustration washes over me when I realise that he's nowhere to be seen and I might never see him again. There's a lump on my throat, I'm afraid if I open my mouth I will tear up.

"My..." Words fail me...Relax Bubu, you can do this.

Instinctively, my eyes run to the church entrance and my heart jumps at the sight of him. Zizwe is here, standing at the door, browsing the capacious building. I guess looking for a place to sit. In this cramped gathering, he doesn't appear to truly belong here. It's like he's been transported from a different dimension, he gives off that kind of

mysterious impression. Zizwe looks strikingly handsome and powerful in a black tux, it highlights the frown placed upon his face and somehow makes him seem more authoritative than his aura suggests. I become lost in him, my thoughts... mind...heart...scream out to him and like he hears them his mahogany eyes rush to me.

I can't look anywhere else as he makes his way to the front, eyes still widened and unblinking. As he ventures close, they hungrily envelop mine and suddenly pull my feet towards him. It's nothing he did precisely, it fairly looks like he holds a secret I would enjoy hearing about. This must look strange to people, probably the crowd that crucified my uncle and Ifalakhe. I saw a bunch of oldies lurking about, the hypocrisy...they came to bury the man whose brother they burnt to death.

It matters not anymore, only he matters. The man who is looking into my eyes like it's the first time seeing me, his eyes glimmer with watery tears. In the midst of it, I fail to recite his facial expression.

“You- you’re here?” It’s almost as if he can’t believe it.

“I’m here,” a confirmation from me, he sniffs quietly and tears are ready to spill. The unexpected happens, Zizwe drops down on his knees, his gaze still on me. Lord he’s going to cry, I don’t want that. The man is too strong to allow tears to bully him, I should be the one in tears and as crazy as it sounds I would take his place and not once would I hesitate. His shoulders begin to convulse as he silently cries, I want to kneel in front of him and hold him. He beats me to it, my eyes shut as his arms enfold around my waist. He buries his face on my stomach and the need to hold him back is stronger than me, stronger than the eyes stabbing us and the audible whispers in the background. I use my vacant hand to snake my hand over his shoulders.

“Bulelwa!!!” Lilian’s voice erupts into a loud shout, it’s startling that it forces me to jolt back.

To be continued...

BURN

55

THANDIWE...

I have been called bad before...bad child by my mother when I failed grade three...the day I let a pot of beans burn after she asked me to keep a close watch...when I started my first period and kept it from her because I was ashamed and didn't understand why I was bleeding.

I have been called bad...bad girlfriend when I forgot to meet up with Nqaba after school like I had promised...the time I fought with him for not giving me enough attention when I was needy...

Bad friend by my primary school best friend when I refused to let her copy from my work... when I woke up to a dozen missed calls from Bulelwa after he was drunk at a club and had no one to drive him

home...Bad wife when I told my husband that I was still in love with his brother...

Today I'm back on the bad-train, Bulelwa is in a cross fire between his mother and the man he loves. Everyone has gotten a free show. I mean, who doesn't love drama at a funeral? I should be excusing the people, the service is nowhere from over, but this show that's unfolding is not for everyone.

“Hlala phansi.” (Sit down.)

Nqaba commands as I stand on my feet, he knows where I'm going.

“My friend needs me.” I'm tired of being useless.

“What will you do when you get there?” What will I really do when I get there? “These people should sit down so we get this out of the way, we can't spend the whole day here.” Nqaba grumbles. What is this man annoyed about?

“What are you doing?” I turn due to Bulelwa’s whispers, his mother has him by the hand, lugging him away from Zizwe who is now standing. His face welcomes a scowl as he watches the man he loves being dragged like he’s a first grader. Zizwe is not going to fight her. I knew he wasn’t a bad person, what worries me is the amount of shock draped around him. He won’t stop shedding tears, his hand works tirelessly to wipe them away.

Lilian moves her granddaughter to make space for Bulelwa. He frowns at her, shakes his head and makes his way to where he was sitting before, leaving Lilian breathing fire. She will live.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

He’s not looking at me, his eyes are engrossed on Zizwe. That tall man should find a seat somewhere, they will kiss later. Zizwe nods at whatever Bulelwa gestures and finally walks to the back where there’s probably a seat or two. To think the drama is over, Jacob walks in just when Zizwe is striding to the

last row.

Bulelwa releases an incredulous gasp, I would too considering the history between them. Zizwe gives him one look and eases past him like he is nothing but a door post, much to Bulelwa's relief. My friend settles down after Jacob finds a seat.

The service continues, thankfully. This one beside me is breathing like he's running out of breath, I have to plead with him that we take him to the hospital. I know I'm wasting my time, there is no way in hell Bulelwa is leaving this place before he buries his father.

God is good, we make it to the cemetery without any hassles. The devil must have been playing here before we arrived, it's hot as hell. People are still coming in so we have to wait for everyone to gather around. Lilian has not left Bulelwa's side, she's keeping him under her watch. I'm surprised she hasn't noticed how sweaty he is and that hand kept

under the jacket.

“What’s wrong with your friend?” I know what Nqaba means, he notices how pale Bulelwa looks.

“His wound is bleeding, he refuses to go to the hospital.”

“I don’t blame him, I would also die burying my father. This is a moment that will never be repeated, it’s not a birthday party.” Okay...I want to move my chair a little further from his, but he has his arm around my shoulders. I can’t see Zizwe anymore, he’s probably lost in the crowd.

“Here comes dumb and dumber,” Nqaba proclaims, Dumb and Dumber hear him and Styles is amused by the slur, but Randall hardly smiles. I’m yet to see him smiling and I don’t know if this is his funeral outfit or an everyday attire.

The last time I saw him with Nqaba, he was in black. You’d think he’s ready to rob a bank or something, his aura kind of scares me a bit. It’s something I can’t put my finger to, like he wouldn’t hesitate to

kill a person and go on about his day as if it never happened. Randall raises an eyebrow, adds a daunting scowl when he catches me staring.

“Relax Randall, you’re scaring Tshabalala.” Styles is forward, he’s like Neo. They joke around too much, how are they friends with this intimidating black wearing freak. Randall’s eyes are dark as well, not in colour, but too many secrets are laid in them. Secrets that would send you to an early grave if you find out about them. Randall doesn’t respond, but positions himself next to Nqaba without a word.

I don’t know why my eyes are following him, he crosses his leg over the other and fishes for his phone in his pocket. Everything around him falls away when he begins typing with a ghost of a smile playing on his lips.

“I would stop staring if I were you, he bites.” Styles again, snapping me out of the trance I have been reluctantly put in. Nqaba’s hand squeezes my shoulder.

“Are you okay?” His rumbling voice brings light that covers the darkness I see in Randall. My eyes again disobey me, they find the lone walker. Something is pulling me towards him, and I see it or him rather. The elderly man who was desperate to find his son, he’s standing right in front of Randall. Wearing traditional African clothing, but they are stained with blood and dirt, torn on the sleeves.

“What’s wrong with you?” Ngaba.

I’m familiar with that tone, but it’s nothing really. I have no interest in Randall, the old man though, now I’m curious to know why he’s here.

“Get him out of here, now.” A whisper in my ear, it brings about chills on my body...unsettling and bone-chilling. I thought it’s the old man, until the voice sashays in my ear again...demanding...urgent...panicking.

“Get him to safety now.” Turning my head, my eyes meet Mandla. Lord of lost souls! Two ghosts at the same time? I am no medium, neither am I a ghost

whisperer. I don't appreciate the ambush, one ghost at a time please.

"You look like you've seen a ghost." That's Styles, still standing in front of us. I have noticed that he's an observer.

"I have, there's a man who..." His focus moves from me to the back, I'm still looking at him. My mind can be slow sometimes, I can't believe it's buffering at a time like this. I should be asking Mandla who has to leave this place.

"Get him to safety now." Mandla repeats just when Styles declares...

"SOS." With the same urgency Mandla used.

"Shit." Nqaba cusses, shoving me under a seat. In this slow confusing moment my senses sharpen with adrenaline as deafening sounds of gunshots fill the air.

Screams and shouts follow in a distance of a second, I don't see Nqaba anymore. Styles is still

here shooting at whatever, like he's been trained in the military. Randall is not where he was seated, my eyes scan the grave yard. I see him using a chair as a shield while shooting like his friend here.

But where is Nqaba? Tears knock and like a fool I let them out. I'm lying on my stomach under a chair, the man I love is nowhere in sight. People are scattered everywhere, running around like headless chickens. The clever ones have found shelter under chairs like me, if Nqaba was not here I would be lying dead like the pastor over there. The list of people going to hell is adding up. Who kills a pastor, really?

"Where is Nqaba, Styles?" He looks at me like I'm a crazy freak.

"Stay there, Nqaba is fine." I didn't say I will move from here nor did I ask if he's okay. I asked where the father of the baby I'm carrying is, Nqaba better not do this to me. This is messed up, I don't see Bulelwa either. An angry Lilian is curled up under a chair as well, her daughters are close by with Lindiwe looking like she's going to give birth any

second from now.

I have to look for the people I love. A random man runs past, but he doesn't get far. A bullet spat from the back hits him in the chest, propelling him to move backward in an awkward cartwheel. He falls next to the coffin, I smash my hand on my mouth to clog my screams. Somehow I find comfort in seeing Styles here, although he's like a killing machine with no emotions or remorse.

“Sir, give me a gun.” When did he get here? What does he know about guns?

Zizwe is crouching beside Styles, trying not to get himself killed. Styles reaches for his ankle, pulls out a 23 calibre gun. I know guns, thanks to the crime channel.

Zizwe is not pleased with the size of the weapon, judging by the way he looks at it. Either way, he begins shooting. And there he goes running with his back huddled, to the direction I last saw Bulelwa. Bulelwa? Mandela was talking about him. Where is

he? Oh God let him be okay.

STYLES...

“Randall, go help Mzi. He’s alone.” Ngabayomzi has moved to a secluded place, he’s unbothered by the bullets sent his way. Instead aims to kill, I know he’s good at hitting a target. I’ve gone gun shooting with him, he’s better than Neo who is terrified of the sound of gunshots.

“Mzi is okay, we have to get these people out of here.” Randall shouts back, engrossed on the shooting.

“Damn, I wish everyone would just lay low. They’ll get themselves killed if they continue running like this.” The stampede is crazy, a few people have been hit. Some are left with injuries and a small number left for dead. There are about more than ten men shooting at us, if I hadn’t seen the man pull out a gun this place would have turned into a massacre. None of us would be alive, their plan was to attack

from the back. Bloody cowards are hiding behind big trees and that makes the job easier for them.

“Styles please find Nqaba.” Thandiwe shouts from under the table, she’s crying. I told her not to worry, this woman’s stubbornness reminds me of Sethu. I ignore her, I want to move from here, then I remember Nqabayomzi is trusting me to keep an eye on her and because of that I have to put her mind at ease.

“He’s fine Thandiwe.”

“Then where is he? Why can’t I see him?” She’s starting to give me a headache, her eyes desperately begin searching for him. Relief takes over when she spots him yards away, then again she lets shock and panic take over her whole being. It must be the gun in his hand, the deadpan expression on his face as he shoots at the men firing at us. There’s actually three, four with Zondo against more than ten men.

“Styles look.” Thandiwe screams pointing towards

Nqabayomzi's direction, he is headed this way with a limping Bulelwa and there's a man with a gun behind them. I push Thandiwe back when she attempts to escape from under the chair, she will only make matters worse.

"Stop." The man demands, the bastard wears confidence like a tailored suit. Nqabayomzi stops at the command, his eyes find Randall first then me. Gradually, he turns. Bulelwa is holding on to him, the boy is weak and pale as a ghost. The shooting stops, a few have managed to escape the grisly scene.

BHEKIZIZWE...

I knew Jacob was here to stir trouble, I have no doubts that this is him. He's behind this, I was standing right at the back, carefully watching my stubborn Buttercup just in case he fell and I would be there to catch him. He's injured, I noticed the blood on my shirt after the intimate moment we

shared. He said he will go to the hospital after the funeral.

It wasn't long after everyone gathered around when a black Toyota van emptied about ten...twelve men dressed in black, at first I thought they were here for the funeral. But their shifty eyes gave them away, I was surrounded, standing in the midst of the storm.

Then I noticed one had a gun on the belt of his buckle, Styles was strangely staring at them and that's when I knew that it was happening. He shouted SOS, I don't know what that means, but I took it as a warning. My first instinct was to run to Bulelwa to ensure his safety. The shout seemed to give the strange men a go ahead, that's when they started shooting.

Now I'm watching this man pointing a gun at Bulelwa and Nqaba. Carefully, I manoeuvre closer, right where Styles is standing.

“Give him over.” The man demands, pointing a gun at Bulelwa and I recognise that voice, the accent.

“No.” Nqaba grunts, his arm around Bulelwa’s waist.

“I said hand him over or I will kill her.” Our eyes follow his hand, it leads us to find Lindiwe held at gun point by one of the goons. She is trembling, crying and in pain. My eyes find Lilian on her knees a few steps away from them, pleading for her daughter’s life.

“Now hand him over.” The arrogant bastard continues with his demand and my mind finishes the puzzle...

“Jacob, you son of a bitch.” I yell from across the yard, Bulelwa turns to me with eyes wide as golf balls. His dry lips move to utter something, nothing comes out. His head spins back to the man with a gun.

“Beastie?” His voice cracks...astonishment... disbelief...heartbreak...Jacob pulls the mask from his head, a sly grin lies on his face.

“You sick bastard.” Bulelwa hisses, too weak to speak.

“I’m sorry boo-boo, but I have to do this. You will

understand one day.” He thinks that makes sense?
“Now come with me or your sister gets it.”

“No, not my son. Not my son.” Lilian shouts, tears playing with her. The man ignores her like she’s not even here.

“Fine, I’ll come with you. Just let her go first.” What is he doing?

“Buttercup!” I get a glare from Styles, I’m not bothered. I won’t let Bulelwa leave with that man. Bulelwa glances at me and I swear I have never seen anyone portray such strength.

“I’m sorry.” A whisper that pierces through my heart and sinks it down to my stomach. I can’t lose him again.

“You are in no position to compromise baby, I’m the man with the plan, a gun and your sister’s life in the palm of my hands.” The idiot sings with pride, left with no choice, Bulelwa begins to toddle to him. I just have to shoot that fool who has Lindiwe hostage, then it will be easy to get to Jacob.

Randall is slowly plodding to Nqaba, gun pointed at Jacob. Styles hasn't dropped his either, as Bulelwa gets to Jacob, he grabs his waist and pulls him closer. I need to think fast so I aim at Lindiwe's gunman, he can't see me as he's focused on Jacob. Knowing I have the perfect target, I shoot the man right on the side of his stomach.

I hear Lilian screaming, she's not the only one. Her and Lindiwe's sister rush to the pregnant woman's aid, as I spin back to check on Bulelwa, Jacob is backing away with him. He knows never to show his enemies his back.

He shoots immediately when I point the gun at them, but Bulelwa hits his hand compelling Jacob to miss the target. Jacob continues shooting our way, Styles takes cover, Nqaba has not moved an inch. Meanwhile Randall is striding to him.

Jacob is bent on killing me, he hates that I'm still standing, it's written on his face.

I'm not familiar with dodging bullets, however the

white man is missing dismally. Everything feels like slow motion, the shooting, the screams, suddenly I see Randall push Nqaba to the floor when a bullet spews his way. He lands right next to Nqaba, none of them are moving. I think they've been hit...

“Nqaba no, no, no.” Thandiwe screams her lungs out...

“Randall, Mzi.” Styles yells, taking cover. He begins crawling towards them, I know if he could he would shoot at the bastard. That would be risking Bulelwa's life though.

My stubbornness has me following Bulelwa and Jacob, my heart drops to my feet when they reach the car. He's getting away, he glares with a victorious smug, winks and I don't know why I freeze when he shoots.

“Watch out.” A familiar masculine voice shouts, he dives on top of me as I turn to verify my suspicions. We land on the floor with a loud thud. A man who

was in front of me, running to safety is hit on the head, the shot sends him straight to his death.

Ntsika is still on top of me, I shift my eyes to him. I thought he went back to the city, he said he had important work. And why is he wearing a balaclava? I know it's my brother, I know how he smells, I know his voice, his build and these eyes that are looking at me.

“Get off me, they are getting away.” I push him off, he holds me back when I attempt to run after the car as it drive away with the man I love.

“They are gone Zizwe, don't think of following them. Those men are dangerous.” He sputters, removing the mask from his head.

All the more reasons why I have to run after them.

“They have Bulelwa, we have to help him Ntsika please.” Why is he looking at me like that?

“We can't bafo, you will never find him again.” He mumbles, shame envelops him. Wait a minute...the black clothes...the balaclava...the guilt in his eyes.

“Uyi nkabi ndoda?” (Are you a hitman?)

Is this how he's able to afford that flat in Gold Reef? He's only a manager at a petrol garage, his salary can't be that much. "What have you done?" I ask.

"I didn't know it was you, I was hired to kill someone. The white man said one of his guys will show me the target at the funeral, I was shocked when they pointed you out." He explains, his eyes shamefully cast away from me.

To be continued...

BURN

56

THANDIWE...

I forgive my mother, I'm letting her go. I'm letting go of all the hate, the grudges and bitterness. I forgive my husband for everything he did to me, I forgive myself for the hurt I caused him and Nqaba. Lord, hear me. Let Nqaba live for my sake, you can't take

him away too.

Frozen, heart in the pit of my stomach and body shuddering. Everything around me is stiff, my ears are ringing. A noise I can't bear, yet my hands find it hard to clog out the sounds. It must be the after effects of the thunderous gunshots or that my world is crashing before my eyes and there is nothing I can do about.

I want to call out to him, Nqaba, I mean. My voice has failed me, I'm not complete at this moment. Nothing works.

Mandla appears right before my eyes, blocking my view, I can't see Nqaba anymore. But this ghost who is glaring with so much sorrow and tears of a lost soul.

"I'm sorry." Unexpectedly, my voice decides that it's time to speak.

"Tell my wife to repent, I don't want her to go to that

place where there is fire.” What does sweet Lilian have to repent for? She’s not perfect and she’s not a saint either. What could she have done that has let this man dipped in sadness?

“Tell her to bring my son home,”

Ehhh! Bring Bulelwa home?

“I’ll tell her, they took Bulelwa. Will you help find him?” Listen to you Thandiwe, such a question should christen you mad.

“Tell her to bring my son home, tell my wife to repent.” Like a broken record, he repeats the words. Tears break out and he disappears before I bring a question forward.

STYLES...

My heart stops for a while, seeing Randall static on top of Nqabayomzi. How come I didn’t see this coming? I’m always alert and on top of things, I refuse to believe that they have been shot.

Gradually, I amble to them, I can literally feel my heart thudding against my ribcage as if it wants to explode.

“Randall!” Sethu prays every night, I’m still foreign to it, it’s not easy to ease up to a God I do not know. Like the saying ‘there’s a first time for everything; my heart and the love I have for my brother lead me to the entity’s domain.

“God of my wife, you’re probably shocked to hear from me. Can we talk about that later? Right now I need you to let my brother be okay and Mzi, but my brother first.” I say a little prayer, maybe I’m too dramatic or exaggerating things because Randall groans as I near them. Hope rises in me, I rush to help him up.

“Ahhh Randall, you’re heavy man. Get off me.” Nqabayomzi grumbles from under him, they gave me a fright for nothing.

“You’re injured Mzi!” It’s more of an observation, Nqabayomzi pats himself to check for wounds, the

inspection sits him up.

“I’m okay.” He articulates, accepting the helping hand I offer after assisting Randall. His eyes are kept on Randall as he pushes himself to his feet, I shift mine to see what he’s glancing at. There’s a hole on the sleeve of Randall’s shirt.

“Let me see,” I want to check how bad the injury is, Randall rejects me by stepping back withholding a grumble. He inserts two fingers through the bullet hole and rips the sleeve open, it only grazed his biceps... left a deep scratch that will need a few stitches. “You lucky bastard.”

He shakes his head at my declaration, worry painted on his puckered brow and ogling at Nqabayomzi who is now marching to his dramatic woman.

“He’s okay Randy.” He nods, his jaw clenching and unclenching. He is infuriated by something, I could be riding the wrong bus, but Randall seems to have a new care for Biyase. “What’s going on?”

He's glaring at the couple who are lost in each other's arms, I wait a while for an answer.

"I thought he was dead." He murmurs, I know Randall, he wants me to guess the rest. I'm not that clever this time. I fail to see the relationship between them.

Like a controlled robot, Randall takes slow steps towards the couple. They break their intimate hug at our expense, Thandiwe wipes her stubborn tears as she continues to hold on to the man whose life flashed before him minutes ago. This time Nqaba acknowledges Randall.

"You're not going to cry from a little scratch are you?" Nqabayomzi teases, unlike many he finds it easy to mock the grumpy man. Randall places a hand on Nqabayomzi's shoulder, a tight squeeze and takes up a sigh of relief. I see his worries, I was on the same boat when I thought they had died.

No words are said between the two for a good minute, actually nothing will be said. They are

grateful to be alive, grateful the other is okay. I am too.

“Can we please get that son of a bitch, we owe it to Mandla to save his son.” Surely, we can’t let the boy be taken like that.

“Yeah, he has a father to bury.” Randall lets his voice be heard. We should get Amara to travel with him, the man becomes mute when she’s not around.

“I’ll take Thandiwe home,” this one is like my brother here. I love my wife, but these two are overdoing it.

The police will start hovering around, we should leave. I brows the graveyard, death at a funeral is not what I expected. I dial Neo as we move to the car, he would be able to get me information on that Jacob dimwit.

BHEKIZIZWE...

“You’re taking me to that man now.” I’m pulling my brother by hand towards the cars, I don’t know

which one we'll take. He should know how to break into a car since he's full of secrets. There's a commotion in this place, wails, shouts, mourning. People have died, it's understandable.

Bulelwa's father lies in his coffin waiting to be buried, I would die if anything like this were to happen at my father's funeral. I can't even begin to imagine how Bulelwa must be feeling, I am well aware that he needs me.

"I don't know where they are taking him, don't do this Zizwe. He is not worth your time." Ntsika did not just say this to me after everything I told him, he lied when he said he was okay with me loving Bulelwa.

"Don't piss me off Ntsika, you're my brother and I don't want to fight you."

I shouldn't be talking to him like this, in fact I've never spoken to him with such disrespect. He claims his hand back, clenches his jaw and flares his nose. The expression illustrates anger, but not with my brother. He's a special case, he does this

when he's in deep thought. Ntsika better be having good thoughts or I swear to God, I will disregard him as my brother.

“You!” Oh great, here comes trouble. I don't need any of this, I have to find Bulelwa. She is furiously treading our way, her hand is ready to smash my face like it always done. Ntsika is my saving grace, he pushes her back before she even touches me, this act aggravates her.

“You're a curse Bhekizizwe, look what you have done.” Typical Lilian, always finding someone to blame when things don't go the way she wants.

“Please, I won't be surprised if you planned this.”

“You're insane. Why would I do that?” The shiftiness in her eyes give an answer to her question.

“If you were capable of lying about your son's death then you're capable of anything. I'm going to find Bulelwa and I will tell him everything, the affair, the lies, everything Lilian.” God I have been an idiot, to get myself entangled with this evil woman. I saw

the possessiveness, how she claimed me. Her obsession to own something and not want to share it. Life should come with a manual, how does one get themselves out of this mess?

“You wouldn’t dare.” Through clamped teeth, she seethes, challenging me and boy do I love a challenge. I’m not fazed by her unnerving aspect.

“Try me and do yourself a favour, will you? Be a real wife to your husband for once and focus on arranging the second funeral since this one didn’t work out. I want Buttercup to bury his father without any hassles.” I leave her growling like the animal she is. Confessing is a risk I am willing to take, Bulelwa will hate me. However I can’t live with this secret my whole life, we will have to start afresh and he will learn to forgive me and hopefully give me a chance.

An SUV lurches in front of us as we walk away from the chaos at the cemetery, Ntsika is like a trained machine, he draws out a gun and with no hesitation

aims it at the car. The black tinted window rolls down, Styles appears on the driver's seat with an icy smirk playing at his lips.

“Careful with that toy boy, you’ll hurt yourself.” Ntsika clicks his tongue, motioning his hate for the downgrading insult. I have to shove his hand to get him to back down.

“He’s my boss,” I tell the stubborn brother. Randall is on the passenger’s seat, lost in a phone call. I can only hear undertones of soft words.

“Get in, your lover is waiting.” Styles.

I don’t know if I should smile about that or simply frown at the declaration, the second option seems to be the best. Ntsika is surprisingly cautious, or this hitman shit has gotten into his head. He follows me into the car, trusting that I will never lead him to a death trap.

“Who is this fool?” Styles is referring to Ntsika, the big brother scowls at me.

“My brother sir.”

“It’s not a train smasher that he is your brother, I want to know if he was with the bandits who vandalised my friend’s funeral.” Ntsika raises an eyebrow, ogles at me, undaunted by the menacing tone twirling in Styles’ voice.

“I’m not mute, neither am I a child.” I have an aggressive brother people, or is it because he almost killed his own flesh and blood? It this where his aggravation stems from?

Styles chortles, finding Ntsika’s sally amusing. My gaze chases Randall who just slightly tilted his head to the back, he gives Ntsika a fleeting glare and he’s back to typing on his phone. The phone call ended when we jumped into the vehicle with the words “I love you.” Must have been talking to his wife, by the affection used at time of the declaration.

“What are you doing here?” When Randall speaks, he demands to be heard with the way he carries himself and it’s not decisive, you would think he

was born with it.

“I came for my brother,” to kill your brother, you mean. I mentally write corrections on Ntsika’s response. Wait a second...

“How do you know Mr. Okolie?” The man in question frowns, Styles graces us with a frozen snicker.

“He’s after my sister.” Randall answers much to Styles’ amusement. Ntsika doesn’t know who he’s dealing with and analysing the boss’ response, the way the syllables soared out of his mouth, he is not happy about Ntsika chasing his sister. Whatever that means. This is going to be one awkward ride.

NEO...

“Mme, please sit this side. I will bring biscuits and Oros for you.” My mother just arrived, Zee needs all the help she can get. Three monkeys that cry the whole night is no joke.

“What will I do with Oros Neo? Give me tea with half a cup of milk and five teaspoons of sugar.” The ambulance should be on standby for this one, I don’t see her surviving another thick cup of tea.

“Huh Ousie Ntsoaki! You’re ready to meet your creator?” She narrows her eyes in annoyance, leaning back on the couch. I am right, she’s too old for sugary goods.

“O tlo swaba, stlaela ke uena.” (Don’t test me, idiot.)

“I’m stating the truth mme, gugo-thandayo ea eng? Gugile gugile ousie Ntsoaki, there is no turning back. You have to take care of your heart, the battery is low, anytime it will stop.” (You have aged.)

“Baba, who is it?” Zee yells from the corridor, her footfalls follow the sound of her voice. I let her get to the living room without providing an answer, let her be surprised and...surprised she is. She frowns at me, I will forgive the fake smile offered and those eyes that have turned hard.

“Baba, tell mme that MamS onto eats the Lord’s supper for breakfast, that’s why she’s so strong physically and mentally.” It is better I avoid the questions that are dangling in her mind, I can just hear her shooting me with question after question.

“What?” Zee is confused, but my mother gets it. The tongue click is evidence.

“This mother of mine wants milk with tea and a mountain of sugar.”

“You mean tea with milk Neo?” Miss know-it-all.

“Not this mother, she’s different from other mothers. Mine wants more milk than water.” Ousie Nts oaki throws a cushion my way, I’m attacked both sides as Zee smacks me on the head. They share a hug while I rush to the kitchen to get the food.

I’m worried about Stylos and Randall, they will never be able to escape this life of guns. I spoke to Stylos, there was a shooting at the funeral. Had they not been there, I doubt it would’ve have happened. Chaii!!! We can’t live like this, something must be

done.

After serving my mother, I call Zee to the bedroom. The babies are sleeping in their cots. I would have them in the baby room I prepared, but Zee insists that they sleep here. It's true that the devil comes in many forms, these little demons sleep during the day and decide to scream all night, depriving us of our sleep.

“Why didn't you tell me, your mother was coming?” I saw this question. She sits on the bed, scrutinises me with a deadly stare. I should jump before I'm eaten by sharks.

“I have something for you baba.” I find the parcel in the top drawer of the dressing table, Zee frowns as I hand her an envelope.

“Here”

“What's this?”

“Your passport.”

“Okay?” Her face lights up with confusion. “This is a

picture of me, but that's not my name. It says Udoka Ugezu."

"Yes Zee, you're so slow." She tilts her head to the side and glances at me like I have sprouted an extra head.

"What's going on Neo?"

"I found us a little village in Nigeria, it's in Anambra state. We're moving there, all of us." I have thought this through, our lives should be perfect over there. No crime or people baying for our blood. Zee's features crumple, she hesitates with a response, but eventually lets it out.

"May I ask why? And why do we need to change our identity?"

"The village I found doesn't have a chief, so I will be the one to rule. We need Nigerian names for that or the villagers will never allow it. Who wants to be ruled by someone called Neo Maake? Mamelala, it doesn't fit. No offence to Ousie Ntsoaki, Chukwudoro Ugezu sounds perfect." I'm a genius, no really. I should have thought of this before the

babies were born.

“Are you going to tell me why we’re doing all this? Is Rama closing the country already?” She loves the idea, I just know it. We’re always in sync.

“Uze was shot baba, he escaped with a scratch. He won’t be lucky next time, I’m done with this country. Rama can keep it.” She laughs at the short reply, her fingers fiddle on the papers splattered on the bed. Kagiso and the monkey’s passports are there.

A smile crawls up my lips as I watch Zee open them one at a time. Now I’m confused, is she okay with this or not.

“I haven’t even named my babies yet and they already go by the names of Taiwo, Etaoko and Idowu.” I smile at her as she reads out the beautiful names from the passports, the smile transitions into a frown when she scowls at me.

“They are perfect, don’t you think?” I enquire, holding my breath. I don’t expect her to throw the documents at me.

“Neo Maake, you will burn these documents. Do you hear me? You need help wena Msoto ndini..”

(Stupid Sotho man.)

What is with the anger? I’m trying to secure our future here.

“But Zee...” The cold glare shuts me up, I follow her with my gaze when she scampers off the bed to check on the monkeys.

“My poor babies have an idiot for a father,” I’m offended by her declaration.

“Zee listen to me...” she interposes my speech again, with a raised hand the second time around.

“Get out, you’re making my head spin. Tell your mother she can come see the kids, I want to ask her if she gave birth to you at a hospital or at the mental asylum.”

I’m not given a chance to argue any further, the lady has spoken. I will address this issue again once she is calm.

To be continued...

BURN

57

NQABA...

Thandiwe refuses to speak to me, she has not uttered a word since we left the graveyard. Making small talk in the car made me look stupid, she won't tell me what the problem is nor does she give off any signs of what could be the matter.

I watch her dash out of the car after I pull up in the driveway and rush into the house, there is anger in her steps.

“Tan-tan!” She overlooks my call and strides on, women can be unpredictable.

There is no one in the living room or kitchen, so I

figure she is in the bedroom.

My house is not that big, it's a spacious abode that could accommodate a family of six. A five bedroom single story house, I had it built more than two years ago. I don't know what the plan was, I guess in the midst of my heartache I still believed in love. That one day I might find a woman for myself, although I might not love her like I did Thandiwe.

The same reason I had that house in Xavier Reef built, Reboana and Ofents e live in it now. But I know one day she will find someone who will want to marry her, so I plan on gifting the house to my sister Veronica. I believe that one day she will be normal again.

Once everything has settled down, I will have to inform my parents about the wealth I accumulated for myself. Barbra and my dear brother will not jump for joy, I fit perfectly with them as a petrol attendant. I have invested in a major company as a silent partner, the money goes to an account I

opened under my father and Veronica's names. If anything were to happen to me, they will be taken care of. Thandiwe and Zulu basically own everything I have.

The water is running in the bathroom, she's in there. I contemplate between joining and waiting out here for her, my heart is stubborn, hence it takes me to the bathroom. I walk in to find her naked and jumping in the bathtub filled with steaming hot water.

Thandiwe does not bath with normal warm water, it has to be extra hot. Our eyes meet, a frown builds up on her features. She takes her gaze away and slides down into the bathtub, the bubbled water covers her form, leaving nothing exposed.

"Can I join you?" I'm ignored, that's alright. It takes so little time to appease this woman of mine. I strip naked and slide in behind her."

"The water is not so bad today." This is meant to

make her laugh, her brows furrow as an alternative. “Sondela phela Nkanyezi yam.” (Come closer my love.)

A whisper in her ear, she leans back on my chest and emanates an overlong sigh. It feels good to have her in my arms. I have one arm over her abdomen and the other just under her breasts. She moans so sweetly when I press my lips on the delicate part of her neck.

“How long do you plan on holding on to that anger?”

“You scared me today Nqaba, I thought you died.” Thandiwe says with a tone that holds me in contempt and reveals the cause of her resentment.

“What did you have me do? We had to act fast or else everyone was going to die.” I say, trying to make sense of the risk I took today. “Besides, I didn’t think that man would shoot at me after taking your friend.”

“If Randall wasn’t there, you...you would have...” Her voice cracks, she sighs as she fails to complete the

statement.

“Nothing would’ve happened to me.” I tell her what I think she wants to hear.

“I saw Bulelwa’s father, he wants us to find him.” Thandiwe is slowly accepting her gift, I am glad in a way. She will not live in constant fear anymore.

“He’s not buried yet and already making demands?” She giggles and twizzles around in my arms, I get a genuine smile, but her eyes keep the worried expression. Her body presses into mine and my arms encircle around her waist. Thandiwe puckers up, I smile at the adorable sight before accepting the peck offered to me. A few soft busses later, her head finds a pillow on my chest.

“Something is going on with Lilian, Mandla said to tell her to repent and bring his son home.” She says, her voice laced with concern.

“That’s simple, Lilian had something to do with her son’s kidnapping and the shooting.” I voice out my thoughts, it’s not really hard to guess. Thandiwe

brings her head up, our eyes meet. Hers are searching mine, she seeks validation of what I said.

“Lilian?” A whispered question.

“Just a thought Tshabalala, I’m not saying go with it.” Her friend would be devastated.

“Yeah, but Lilian?” Her nose scrunches up in confusion, I’m tempted to kiss her pouted plump lips and so I indulge.

“Nqaba!” She grumbles, trying to break the kiss.

“Ngilambile Tshabalala, let me feast.”(I’m hungry.)

I feel her smile against my lips, this is what I need after the experience at the cemetery...to be in the arms of the woman I love.

BULELWA...

Life has changed for me or rather I have matured, I’m no longer that loud mouth who felt a need to express himself even when it was not necessary.

The man who jumped from one man to another, the man who was too hyper and had nice life problems.

It all changed when my father forced me into a job, when I realised that I was falling and hard for a man I hardly knew. I had to be humbled and composed, I had to grow up within a space of a month.

“Where are we going?” I ask J acob, he’s driving casually as if he did not force me to go with him. I wouldn’t be in this car, honestly I had no choice. It was either Lindiwe or me and now that Mandla is gone, I have to take responsibility, take care of my family the best way I can.

“Far away from this place.” I always knew he wasn’t smart, what kind of an answer is that?

“Where are you taking me, J acob?” It takes half my strength to utter these words, my body is soaked in heat that has me removing my blazer. The pain shoots right through my entire body as I stretch my arms to slip the blazer off. J acob steals a glance, I don’t want to believe the worry in his eyes. It’s an

illusion.

“What is it?” Care glazes his voice.

“Take me to the hospital.” I’m not about to grovel.

“I’ll take you once we get to Joburg, it’s too risky here.” Is he serious?

“Look at me, Jacob,” I snap, breathless and frail. “I’ll be dead before we get there.”

“Relax Boo-boo.” Gosh, I have always hated his pronunciation of my name. “I will never let anything happen to you, I love you.”

“I hate you, you’re a sick bastard. Do you know that?” He huffs and detains his answer. “What do you want from me?”

“You’re mine Boo-boo, all of you. Do you know how hard it is for me to love you and not be able to be with you?” He wants to be with me, hence the crazy stunt? Argh! I am not an idiot.

“Jacob Mason,” a smile on his face, he flashes his green eyes at me. They are still beautiful and he...

What the hell am I doing? “Listen to me, I don’t love you. I never have and I never will, I told you that I don’t do relationships.”

“Bullshit!” He roars, clenching his hands on the steering wheel. I’m startled by the outburst, this man is not okay in the head. “You don’t do relationships, but you’ve been fucking that boy.”

“He’s different,” he is- different. There is a pull between us, the force is stronger than us. Something we can’t run away from, I wouldn’t say I would die without Zizwe. However, he has become a big part of my life. Sometimes I can only breathe when he’s next to me, I can’t explain the feeling. I think about him more than I should...

I have seen how Zizwe looks at me, like I hold his very being in the palms of my hands. It scares me that I will not be able to return the same amount of love, I love him sure...I mean I risked my life for him.

“Is it because he’s black and...” What on earth?

“That’s bullshit and you know it.” I snap back at his racist assumptions.

“Then, what Boo-boo?” Another roar, this man is insane. Such a waste of Beauty.

“This obsession is only going to destroy you, Jacob. You simply can’t force someone to be with you.” I tell him, between gritted teeth. I’m tired of talking, I’m too weak to be holding a conversation, especially with a stubborn person like him.

Jacob suddenly throws his head behind to leer at the back seat, his eyes are wide and wild. His mouth is slightly open and beads of sweat begin to form on his pale forehead.

“Hey watch out,” I yell, warning him of the accident I foresee as he drives straight towards a truck. He quickly gains control of the wheel, gasping. I don’t know how pale he can get, but he looks like he has just seen a ghost. “What is wrong with you? Are you trying to get us killed?”

“Didn’t you see that?” He queries, horror coated in his voice. “There was an old man in the back.”

He is definitely on drugs, now I see why he’s acting

like a lunatic. Ambushing my father's funeral like that, I will never forgive him for it.

I run my eyes to the back, it's as empty as that brain of his.

VERONICA...

It's a Sunday, a few days after Veronica's dream. She is lost in her mind and can't find a way out, images of her mother and her accomplices haunt her like a ghost in the woods. Veronica has refused to sleep alone in her room, nor does she want to share a room with her parents, knowing that her mother is a lady of the night.

The family is seated in the TV room, silence taking the centre stage. Barbra keeps stealing glances at her daughter who hasn't uttered a word to her in days, nor look in her direction. Duma is perched beside Veronica, a phone in hand. The plan is to call the brothers, they have to discuss a way forward. Help his daughter who has gone mute, not that she

can't speak. Trauma prevents her from doing so.

“Veronica get me a glass of water.” Barbra demands, she wants a chance to be alone with her. Duma has been hovering around Veronica, giving Barbra no room to ambush the child.

“She’s not feeling well Barbra, won’t you get it yourself?” Duma rescues his daughter with these words and oh, dear Barbra is one unhappy witch. Veronica hardly moves a muscle or even blink. She is engrossed on the TV screen, if you were to ask her what’s playing, you would surely be wasting your time. The girl is lost somewhere in her mind, so the TV is watching her rather.

“There is nothing wrong with this child, Duma.” Barbra fails to hide the bitterness in her words, the hatred she has for her daughter seems to show itself one way or the other.

“I’m not stupid, so I suggest you stop. When Mzi gets back from Durban, we’re going to find a way to

help this girl. Something is happening in this house and it's affecting my child.”

“Not that again,’ Barbra rolls her eyes, it’s not the first time her husband has mentioned this.

“I hope you have nothing to do with it Barbra, if I find out you do, I suggest you run because I will not be kind to you.” Duma’s threat hits a nerve, the witch is not afraid of anyone, but this man seated across her. It could be that he knows her when she’s weak and powerless under him, although Pule her lover tickles some parts on her body and makes her scream out of pleasure.

Duma is the only man responsible for the euphoria that consumes her completely, the toe curling moments and many orgasms that leave her with the realization that she is only human not a powerful witch she thinks herself to be.

The intimidating demeanour of her husband takes her back to her son’s words, Ntuthuko had concluded in his mind that his father is a weakling

and not man enough to keep a strong woman like Barbra. Unbeknownst to him that Duma's only weakness is to love his family beyond limits.

“Don't be ridiculous Duma. What do you think of me? Veronica is my child, I carried her for nine months and pushed her into life. What harm could I possibly do to my only baby girl.” Too many words said at once, her voice triggers something in Veronica and so she leans in on her father and hides under his wing. Duma circles his arm around his daughter's shoulders and pulls her closer. Clamping his jaw, he places a kiss on top of her head and while doing that scrutinises Barbra under his gaze.

“I gave you this child, you didn't buy her at a shop. You're acting like the world's...”

“Usaqhubeka” (You're continuing?)

He asks in a deadpan voice, giving her a very uncanny look. Barbra nearly bites her tongue, she goes for a click. A norm Duma is aware of and the man is counting. One day he will call her out on that

disrespectful tongue click. He lets her leave the room, perhaps she is going to cool down. He thinks to himself.

BULELWA.

Bulelwa has lost track of time, weak and falling in and out of consciousness...seconds have become minutes, minutes hours and hours...well strangely, they are inactive. Jacob has grown worried, he loves this man and wouldn't want anything bad to happen to him.

More than that, he doesn't want to lose him to Bhekizizwe Zondo, not by a long shot. Everything is set, a house in Mpumalanga in the outskirts of his father's farm, a cabin lies in wait for them to start their lives together.

They are going to get married, adopt a baby girl and maybe a dog and a cat. A complete family with

Bulelwa is what J acob dreams of, from the time he lain in bed with him.

There is a force though that is out to destroy his plans, he thinks he's losing his mind or hallucinating. In his head, what is transpiring is impossible. Out of the ordinary, he really can't explain the eyes filled with rage that keep appearing in the rear-view mirror. Neither can he explain the old man he thinks he's seeing in the back seat.

J acob has grown anxious, his body is sweltering, his clothes soaked in his own sweat. The four lane highway is not packed, it's after midday. Time stating 13:47pm.

They have driven so far and he hasn't noticed any cars following them, it is a relief to J acob. Now he needs to stop at a garage and get himself an energy drink, fatigue could be the cause of the daydreaming.

The creepy eyes flash in the rear-view mirror again, staggering a demented J acob. He lurches the car to

the side and manages to gain control of it. It's not over a second when a frog jumps on his lap, he's not frightened by it instead finds it adorable and therefore gently pushes the frog down.

The poor thing must have gotten in the car when he was visiting his father, he does live on a farm after all. Trying to get his act together, Jacob continues driving.

There seems to be peace in the car and his mind takes this chance to manoeuvre back to Bulelwa and how badly he's injured until a tight slap on his right cheek pulls him back into the world of craziness. Panic visits him, terror clouds his heart.

He looks around the car to find nothing, but a conscious Bulelwa. And it couldn't have been the sick man, the slap came from his right. The window is closed, plus the car is moving. Who could have slapped him?

"Is...Is anybody there?" Jacob shouts to no one in particular, he has heard of the paranormal and

believes it is real. His mind concludes the worst; perhaps Bulelwa has just died and become a ghost. This thought has him checking the man's pulse, relief befriends him when he catches a weak pulse. He sees the frog again, but this time there's two of them on his lap.

“What the?” He blasphemes under his breath, unbelieving of what his eyes are seeing. Two become three, then four, then more frogs join in. They are all jumping from the back, the car is now filled with a plague of frogs.

“Boo-boo wake up, wake up.” Jacob screams, needing company, but Bulelwa doesn't move an inch.

The man's mind is drowning in confusion, his heart thumping hard against his chest. The frogs are corrupt, they jump on him more than one at a time. Jacob feels a few more squatting on his head and works diligently to shove them off, but his work is

fruitless.

There are too many of them, suddenly his vision blurs. Between that and trying to fight off the frogs, Jacob loses control of the car, he hurtles over the road until he comes to a stop.

Screaming and shaking like a leaf, he rushes out of the vehicle, leaving a sick Bulelwa behind. Some frogs are still stuck on his pants and shirt, he growls as he slaps them off.

Jacob sees the old man again, he's standing right before him, fiercely stabbing him with his enraged eyes and a forefinger is pointed at the man Bulelwa nicknamed "Beastie."

"Who are you? What do you want from me?" Jacob screams, pointing back at the old man who appears undisturbed.

Passing cars are attentive to the crazy white man on the road side, they can't see what he's fighting though.

An SUV slowly parks on the side, Jacob can't see it as he's busy shouting at the unknown. Zizwe is the first to jump out of the car, his first instinct is to attack a crazy Jacob. They hit the floor with a terrific thud, Zizwe is quick on his hands as he punches Jacob to oblivion.

Randall remains in the car unbothered by what's happening, the wound on his arm has begun to itch. It needs to be cleaned and stitched before it is infected. From this wound, the rage of his ancestors was aroused.

Ntsika scuttles out to check on his brother. Styles has found a passed-out Bulelwa, his pulse is weak and he looks as pale as a ghost. His lips have turned purple, black circles around his eyes. Styles immediately dials an ambulance as he does that, a panicky Zizwe leaves Jacob unconscious and rushes to check on his beloved.

“Buttercup,” with gentle fingers he cradles Bulelwa's

cold cheeks. A kiss is placed on his lips, Styles frowns at the man in love. He almost reminds him of the love his brother Randall has for his wife Amara, it's an obsession kind of love, a beautiful one. Sure it's not perfect, but a love where two people can make it work if they work hard at it.

"He'll be fine," Styles assures Zizwe who hears his boss' words, but not one syllable is able to comfort his broken heart. He wants it to stop, all of it...the suffering...the fighting...the unwanted visits to the hospital. He wants to love Bulelwa in peace.

There is no sign of the frogs or the old man. The Okolie ancestors haven't tasted the blood of their oppressor, they have gone to find more. Jacob has a big family and they are willing to avenge their own blood. You spill their blood, they let yours rain.

To be continued...

BURN

58...

Barbra...

“I want nothing, but good news Sgwili,” I say to the cat as it strides into my cave. He meows and scuttles up the chair.

“I found the boy, but there’s a problem.” I leave the potion steaming on the stove, I have been working on it the whole day. This baby right here will make Veronica forget everything, just one scoop of it into her food and my baby will be the Zombie I want her to be.

“I said I want good news Sgwili, not problems.”

“I can’t enter the premises, it’s protected.” This cat is full of excuses.

“Protected by what? You never have a hard time entering people’s premises.”

“It’s different this time, I felt the energy from the gate. Not even Makhafula can enter that house.”

The sound of that witch's name makes my blood boil, I hate him.

“Where is Zulu?”

“With the Okolies.” He says, if that's the case then we have a big problem. “You will have to go there yourself and get him. I won't make it out alive.” Sgwili continues.

“As long as I don't use dark powers while in there, my job should be easy.” I tell him. “Mzi has made friends with that boy, I didn't think their parts would meet. How is a pauper like him friends with the high and mighty?”

“You know how ambitious your son has always been Ndlovukazi, you kept him from going after his dreams as a young man. Now he's free to do whatever he wants.” Sgwili is right, the truth is set to come out. We can't hide from it forever, I kept Nqaba in the village while Ntuthuko went to study in the city. Not because I hated him, but I had to protect him from his people. I'm going to have to

pay my sweet sister a visit.

RANDALL...

Randall when are you coming home?” Amara sounds anxious over the phone with a hint of panic.

“I don’t know, me hemma, maybe on Wednesday.”
(My queen.)

“You need to come home now, Ife is missing.” My head spins at the breaking news.

“What do you mean?” I sit up from the chair, I thought I left my sister in good hands.

“We can’t find her, we looked everywhere Randall.” She mumbles, her voice is trembling. I sense fear in it, although I can’t straighten it out, whether it’s fear of losing Ifeanyi or fear of me. My outbursts have made Amara a little uneasy, she is more cautious around me and I hate that I have instilled fear in her.

“Were you not keeping an eye on her, Amara? I asked you to do a simple task and you fail.” I don’t mean to snap at her, but incompetence gets to me. Ife is fragile, she can’t be exposed to the world yet. What if some guy has gotten his hands on her? What if the same... No don’t think like that Randall... I scold myself for the terrible thoughts clawing at me.

“I’m sorry, your mother went to look for her.” As if that’s going to make me feel better.

“I’m coming home,” Styles walks into my room, instant worry cloaks him. I guess he sees the irritation on my face, I shake my head at his shoulder shrug.

“Today?”

“Yes Amara, today. My sister needs me, I have to go bye.” I get a glare from Styles when I hang up and throw the phone on the bed.

“Is that how you talk to her now?” he makes me feel worse than I already do with that look he’s giving me.

“Life is missing again Styles.” I sputter, annoyance crawling under my skin. Shock visits his face for a mere second, he brushes it off with a deeper scowl.

“Life is fine, if anything happened to her we would know.” He exclaims, comfortably throwing himself on the bed.

“What are you talking about?” He scrutinises me from head to toe, the look on his face gives an assurance that he is not pleased with me.

“I put a tracker on her.” Casually, he reveals like he did with Amara years ago.

“How do I not know about this?” I ask and his eyebrow curves, I feel a bit insulted by it as it reckons me stupid.

“I thought I told you, I did it when she was at the hospital.” He rams his hand into the pocket of his

jeans and reveals a cell phone, impatiently I wait as he scrolls on it without a word. “Just one touch and it shows me where the princess is.” He gulps as his eyes widen at the screen, I have a feeling I am not going to like what he is going to tell me.

“Where is she?” Anxiety is tugging at me, my heart has chosen a path of its own and wants to escape through my throat.

“Summit Club in Hillbrow.” Dammit Ifeanyi! What is she doing there?

“I’m going back,” I scuttle to the wardrobe to get my bag.

“I’m coming with you, one thing before we go.” Styles gets up, slowly plods my direction. The eye contact makes me a bit edgy, it’s the serious face that’s getting to me. “Don’t make the mistake of disrespecting your wife, Amara is not a child and she’s not going to let you use her as a paint brush to paint your anger. We all care about Ife believe it or not. Lashing your anger out on the people you love will only push them away.”

“Thanks for the lengthy speech Styles.” I mean this sarcastically, he huffs and turns to get his luggage.

“Don’t say I didn’t tell you,” that’s a warning, I believe. “I’ll get Neo to fetch Ife, I saw this coming. It’s the beginning of a long road for her.”

Styles finishes, in that case Ifeanyi is going to need a guard.

BHEKIZIZWE...

Bulelwa will be okay, he’ll be discharged in a few days. I spoke to his sister Lindiwe, she said the funeral will be on Wednesday. Bulelwa will be out of the hospital by then, this time they are keeping the funeral within the family.

Many people lost their lives that day, Jacob was arrested for the shooting. The case is under investigation. I’m worried about my brother, but he says he’s covered, nothing will lead him to the

shooting.

It's past 5pm, I haven't left the hospital since yesterday. Lilian and I try to stay away from each other. She knows I'm not going anywhere, like the devil's wife I know her to be, she continues to dish out threats that do not faze me.

I walk into Bulelwa's hospital room to find his sister Thobekile, she directs a smile my way. I return with a nod.

"My brother sure has taste." Her eyes run through my body, putting me in an uncomfortable seat. The deep stare has me folding my arms across my chest.

"I'm Zizwe." The smile again.

"I know, Lindiwe told me. I was curious about Romeo who hugs my brother in public like it's the last time and shoots people for him." She appears to be humoured by it. "He's lucky to have you."

“I’m the lucky one.” I sizzle confidently, Thobekile reminds me of Bulelwa. She has his smile, the poise and I know given a chance, she would be as talkative.

“You don’t really look..” She pauses and bites her lower lip just like Bulelwa.

“Gay?” I interpose, striding to a chair. Her eyes are on me the whole time, she doesn’t have a shy bone in her. I pull a chair toward Bulelwa’s bed and catch her staring when I raise my eyes.

“Yes.” Blunt aren’t we?

“I’m not gay,” the response leaps out of my mouth. I’m not really sure what I am, still trying to find myself. I enjoy sex with women and hell I enjoyed it with Bulelwa. The confusion is greater now because Bulelwa is my first gay experience and from what I felt while with him is more powerful than anything I have ever felt with Fikile and Lilian.

This kid gave a different meaning to sex, I don’t see myself filling anyone else but him.

“So you’re bisexual?” Thobekile is one inquisitive woman, no one has ever been interested in my sexuality. It actually feels good to have someone to vent to, although she is a bit too much into my life.

“It’s not really about gender, if it were I would have a line of exes cussing at me from both genders.” Her eyes widen, she wants to hear more.

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t know how to explain it, but I don’t look at gender. The first time I saw Bulelwa my heart did a little flip and my hands started sweating. There was something about the way he carried himself, even when he was quiet, he was dressed in confidence. Someone would walk into the room and Bulelwa would pay them no attention, his eyes do not wander. He’s genuine, hard-headed and straight forward. I like that in a partner and he is not so clingy. That too is a bonus for me because I can be as clingy as fuck.” A chuckle volunteers to drop out of my mouth.

“So it’s the personality, not the gender?” I have never looked at it that way.

“You could say that.” I answer, my mind trying to gather everything I said.

“And my mother? What is it about her personality that attracted you to her?” Thobekile’s question has me shifting unnervingly on the chair, my eyes run from hers and fall on Bulelwa. “You’re probably asking yourself how I know, right?”

I drown in nerves as her eyes demand an answer, she has a little Mandela in her.

“Did she tell you?” I ask, the truth will come out anyway.

“No,” she moves to the window, turns and gestures that I follow. Leadership right there, the lady would make a mean president. Being a dominant, I don’t want to submit, yet my feet chide me and follow the woman.

“I’ve seen how she looks at you, it’s how she used to

look at my father once upon a time.” A murmur is what she offers. “I’ve seen how much you love my brother and if you want to keep him, make sure he doesn’t find out.”

“No, I can’t continue lying to him.” My stomach sinks, suddenly there’s not enough air coming in my lungs. Shit! Who made me so weak? I didn’t ask for this kind of love, I don’t want it. It’s too much, and I am convinced that I will die without Bulelwa.

“Bulelwa is understanding, but I know my brother, Zizwe. He will never forgive you for sleeping with his mother.” Another whisper, her gaze darts to Bulelwa. She splatters him with concern in her eyes, she’s back to leering at me in a jiffy. “You say you love him, then listen to me. Keep this secret for as long as you can, it will destroy you if it ever comes out.”

What the hell does she mean? Secrets have a way of coming out, even if it takes forever, Bulelwa will find out one day.

“My brother deserves to be happy, he’s been through enough and I will personally make sure that he’s happy no matter what. I don’t know if he has ever told you that he was bullied at school because of his sexuality.”

My heart falters, my palms begin to sweat. Everything is too much to process, keeping a secret I was willing to let out...the unforgiving Bulelwa... the bullying...

“Bubu hides behind a smile, yet he holds anger in his heart. It’s waiting for a day when it will unleash and I believe that day is when he finds out that, the man he loves has had a taste of his mother. My uncle Gcinumzi couldn’t have his love, they were killed by an angry mob for being gay. I won’t let my brother suffer because of love like my uncle did.”

Thobekile’s exclamation has me staggering an inch back, so many things are knocking in my head. I rub it vigorously to rid of them, I need to breathe so I pop the window open. Barely a crack.

“Are you okay?” I can hear her vocal sound, but it is background noises.

I need to get out of here, I can't breathe. My feet take control and lead me outside the room, the corridor is spinning, or is it my head? So many voices at once...so many people...they are crowding me, suffocating me. My hands move to block my ears. Someone bumps into me, I don't get a second look at them, I have to leave this hospital. Air, I need air.

My knees feel weak, they refuse to listen to me. I use the wall as a crutch, the corridor looks longer than usual. My feet feel heavy, it's like I'm in a nightmare.

“Gcinumzi help me.” A horrific scream fills my ears, fire flashes before my eyes like an explosion. The image drops me to the floor with a loud groan, escaping from my tongue. Tightly, I close my eyes. I'm burning suddenly. So I remove my shirt, it's not

enough, removing my shoes doesn't help either.

“Babulale, Babulale.” (Kill them, kill them.)

The sound of many voices evade my head, screams, bottles breaking, cries of agony. I'm oblivious to my surroundings, but I can feel the coldness on my feet. There are visions, images, vivid images of a crowd carrying torches, tyres, bricks...

“Hold on to me, Ifalakhe, don't let go.” A deep masculine voice rumbles, there's a crack in his voice...hopelessness...

“Bhuti are you okay?” A female voice breaks me out of the nightmare, I open my eyes to find a nurse squatting in front of me and a few people gathered around, some look terrified.

The screams and ridicules are still in my head, I'm able to get up to my feet and heave through the people to get outside.

“I don’t want to die Gcinumzi, don’t let them kill me.”
I hear the voice in my head again as I walk out of the hospital building. My eyes shut tightly at the pain in his voice. The person is crying, painfully. They are desperate and terrified, I want to help him. But I feel helpless and an anger I have never felt before surges inside me, I want to scream and shout.

I want to burn the crowd. Get them to stop the uproar, get them to drop their weapons.

They are surrounding me. I can see them now, and him. I think that’s Ifalakhe. He’s holding my hand, the grip is tight. His face is bruised, blood oozing from his mouth. He can’t come closer, the tyres on his neck and mine prevent us from getting closer. I can’t stand the tears in his eyes, I want to wipe them away. I want to hold him in my arms and hide him from the world.

“Ifalakhe don’t let go,” the deep voice says again. I can familiarise with the voice this time, it sounds like mine. It is my voice.

“Bhekizizwe.” A loud shout startles me, I open my eyes to find Thobekile standing before me. The angry mob is no longer here, my eyes scan the empty parking lot.

“Are you okay?” Thobekile asks and I don’t know. What just happened to me? I think I had a vision or a remembrance.

THANDIWE...

I’m on the phone with Zulu, he is so happy to hear from me.

“When are you coming back mama?” He asks, I thought he would be saddened by my departure. He sounds more at peace than ever.

“Tomorrow my baby, do you miss me?”

“I guess,” he mumbles as if he’s not sure about the

answer.

“You guess? Okay out with it, who has taken my place?”

“Liyana,” I can hear the pride in his voice. This is a different side to Zulu, he doesn’t sound like the reserved boy I know.

“Who’s Liyana?” I have to entertain him, I’m interested in knowing who is behind my son leaving his shell.

“My future wife, I already told uncle Randall about it. He hasn’t given me an answer yet. Can uncle Nqaba speak to him for me?” What am I hearing? Nqaba walks in at the right time, he nods with what appears to be a smile.

“He’s here, ask him yourself.” I put the phone on speaker and inform a confused Nqaba that his son is on the line. He attentively grabs the phone from me, suddenly I cease to exist as he moves to sit on the bed with an inquisitive look on his face.

“Peanut.” He whispers, his voice rumbling through the mobile.

“Uncle Nqaba,” Nqaba shuts his eyes, a peculiar expression lies on his face, it hides his feelings. “Please talk to...”

“Khathini, don’t we greet each other anymore?” Nqaba asks.

His eyes are glossy with tears, now he’s becoming a little transparent, I can see a glimpse of his feelings.

“Hello uncle.”

“Unjani mfana wam?” (How are you, my boy?)

“Fine...uncle can you please talk to uncle Randall for me?” Zulu is eager to send this message, he speaks without catching a break. Nqaba regards me with a confused stare, wait till he hears what his son is requesting.

“What about, Peanut?” Nqaba.

“Liyana, I want to marry her.” Zulu exclaims, Nqaba’s face wrinkles into a frown. He looks at me with a worried expression, I shrug my shoulders. I

have no clue what is happening with that boy.

“You want to marry Liyana Okolie.” His voice is deadpan, he finds no humour in Zulu’s innocence.

“Soon to be Biyase, uncle Randall has been avoiding me.” There’s a glint of pain in his voice, I can’t believe he takes this seriously.

“I will see what I can do.” Look at this grown man making empty promises, his brows furrow as I shake my head. I know Zulu, he won’t let this go.

“Thank you uncle, I knew I can count on you. Also... I need money for lobola. I don’t have enough on my piggy bank.” Zulu says, a smile pulls at Nqaba’s lips. It disappears before it gets comfortable.

“Let’s talk when we get there,” Biyase states, I hope he’s not planning on involving me.

“When are you coming back? It’s my birthday tomorrow.” And we have nothing planned yet.

“I know Peanut, we’ll arrive today.” Nqaba tells an over excited lad.

“Awesome.” Zulu expresses, joy sizzling in his voice. “One more thing, do girls like Stumbo Jumbo or Yogueta?”

“This is a hard one,” That’s Nqaba, I can’t deal with these two.

“I know uncle.”

“Go for Stumbo Jumbo, girls are always chewing bubble gum. You will surely win her heart with this one.” Nqaba answers the child and I want to walk out of this room, men are idiots, no matter what age.

“There goes my father’s cows, at least we still have goats and chickens.” Zulu.

The seriousness in my son’s voice throws me into a fit of laughter. Nqaba is humoured too, but only emanates a low chortle.

“Whose child are you? Where is my Zulu?” I can’t control the tickle, Nqaba sends his hand to rub at his neck. A ghost of a smile sits on his mouth.

“Take care of yourself Peanut, we’ll see you later.”

“I love you uncle,” My heart swells, stern Biyase

drops a tear after a minute. His eyes hide from my gaze, I settle next to him to comfort him.

“Uthandwa yim ndodana.” (I love you too son.)

A whisper returns, Zulu hangs up, forgetting about my presence. Nqaba still has his head bowed, I think he’s crying. He clears his throat suddenly and looks at me. His eyes are plain white, I thought he was crying.

“That child has had too many promises broken, I don’t think he will be able to take another one.”

“Don’t worry Tshabalala, those days are over.” Does he hear himself?

“We ndoda, you can’t possibly tell me that you’re granting his wish.” (Hey man.)

It borders on ridiculous, honestly speaking.

“We ndoda?” (Hey man?)

His tone is laid-back, but still gives off a demand to surrender. I chase my eyes away from his glare, can’t he be normal?

“I’m only saying, you should have told Zulu the truth.” I don’t want my son to be too expectant only to have his heart broken.

“He’s just a kid Thandiwe,” he argues. “He’ll be over her before the end of the week, kids get bored easily.” The stubborn man leaves a kiss on my cheek and slips out of the bedroom.

To be continued...

BURN

59...

BARBRA...

The Uber drops me at the gate, just as the sun is setting. I’m in the north of Johannesburg. A gated community, you can’t see the next house with how big the walls are. The energy Sgwili spoke of is here,

heavier than anything I had ever felt. I have to be careful going in there, there's a guard and a menacing expression sits on his face.

He eyes me up and down as he takes his devil-given time to approach me, the slowness on his feet births a deep frustration in me.

Sadly I can't use my powers here, I would cripple the idiot since he doesn't use his stupid legs the way he should.

“Who are you?” His voice is husky, could intimidate anyone and have them thinking twice about entering the premises.

“My sister lives in this place, Sandra Okolie.” I don't strain my words, unlike him I don't have time on my hands. He should buy this innocent façade, I'm growing anxious.

Things can't go wrong, I've gone thus far and I can't turn back. Where do they find these people who look at us like we're a threat to the human race?

I give him a grateful smile as he opens the gate, it's not reciprocated. I don't care, I'm in. He tells me to follow the lollipop trees, they will lead me to the main house. Main house? How many houses are in this place?

Chills ripple through me as I toddle down the driveway, the energy is actually stronger than I thought. There is no determined person like a witch, daring and willing to push just to get what we want.

My sister is living the life, not once did she think of me while swimming in riches. This place is beautiful, fit for a queen like me. The big white house stands before me, it's breathtakingly beautiful. I can only dream of living in such luxury... Sandra, you have always been a go-getter. Look at you today...

Heat swallows me as I near the entrance, my head throbs painfully and my stomach churns. I grind my teeth to push back the bile clawing at me.

Headlights of a car blast on the big brown door, I turn to see a small black car with tinted windows. It could be the residents, my mind works overtime thinking he could be there. The last time I saw him, I couldn't stand in his presence and ran like a coward.

Stepping aside, I wait for the people to exit. A tall light skinned man pipes out of the car, his brows furrow as his angry eyes slap me. He rushes to the other side, opens the door and a skinny girl dressed in the shortest leather skirt bolts out. Her clothes are too revealing, I can't tell if she's wearing a t-shirt or a bra.

“Don't touch me.” She...the girl snaps rudely at the man when he attempts to take her hand. He lets her be and follows behind her...time to fake a smile again.

They don't acknowledge me, but bolt inside the house and I don't get to take a good look at them either. The devil is on my side, they left the door open so I slip in. The house is more majestic inside,

it has a royal touch to it.

Barbra! Barbra! You were an idiot. This should be your life.

“Ifeanyi, come back here.” That’s my sister chiding the girl who angrily marches up the staircase, there’s a young woman with her. The man who came with the girl in black is also there. I’m standing in the corridor and surprised they can’t see me from the lounge.

“Don’t worry magriza, Uze is on his way home.” The tall man says, settling down on the couch. He puts his feet on the table and reaches for the remote where he’s seated. The young woman shakes her head considering him with a warm smile.

“Can I get you anything Neo?” She asks the man, who returns with a big grin.

“Egusi Soup, me hemma and pounded yam.” (My queen.)

The guy...Neo replies, his hyper eyes move to

Sandra who I'm astounded hasn't sensed my presence. "Mama, you made pounded yam, abi? I wan chop." (Did you make pounded yam? I'm hungry.)

His accent suddenly changes to Nigerian, Sandra articulates by rolling her eyes.

"I'm sure Chioma can make some for you." The young lady puts him out of his misery, her remark fills the man with joy.

"Me hemma, my woman-oo. You're definitely married to the wrong king." He states, channel searching. Sandra freezes, she raises her head and in a second her gaze swooshes to me. Her eyes widen and mouth falls ajar, I would be shocked too, seeing my sister close to the secret we promised to go to the grave with.

Sooner than I can count, the young lady is ogling at me as well, I see her drowning in muddle. Her features are still soft and welcoming. It takes about five to seven steps for her to get to the corridor. My

dear sister is frozen in fear.

“Hi, can I help you?” The lady says, she’s pretty up close. Smells and looks like royalty, the witch in me senses the innocence in her. A taste of her blood would be delicious. She is like a child, unblemished and blameless. A smile takes over my frontage.

“I’m Barbra, I came here for my grandson.” I tell her, throwing my eyes back to my sister Sandra to see her shaking like a leaf.

“Your grandson?” The young lady furrows.

“Zulu Biyase, my son told me that he’s here.” I lie through my teeth, she flashes hers as a full smile pulls at her lips.

“Nice to meet you,” she smiles. “I’m Amara, come in.” She shows me the way to the living room and walks away after announcing that she will bring the boy. I find a seat right where my sister is standing.

“Mme.” (Ma) The man greets, I come-back with a head nod. He looks between me and Sandra. “Yoh, yoh, yoh. Le a tshwana maan, you look together.” (You two look-alike.)

This is when Sandra snaps out of it, she blinks a few times. Her eyes wide as saucers.

“That’s ridiculous, I look nothing like her. I don’t even know this woman.” My sweet innocent sister lies.

“Mmmhh.” The man hums, his inquisitive eyes probing our resemblance.

“If that’s okay with you, we can go wait in the backyard. Amara will bring Zulu.” She takes my hand and pulls me outside. This house shocks me with each room.

STYLES...

The flight to Joburg is a bit delayed, Randall has grown anxious. I thought the news that Ifeanyi has been found will make him happy, the man remains grumpy. Nqaba took him to get some coffee, leaving me with Thandiwe at the waiting area. She is lost in a book, it’s been fifteen minutes and not

once has she raised her head to rest her eyes. I don't know if she's still reading the book or the book is reading her.

"That has to be romance for you to be so engrossed in it or a typical modern day Romeo and Juliet." I start, she raises her eyes. I see disarray mingling with inquisitiveness in them. "You know? Boy meets girl, they go through trials, their love is tested before they get married and live happily ever after."

"I don't know, I just got the book. I'm on page sixteen." She flips the book to show me the cover.

"The Beloved Mashenge." I read through the cover, interesting.

"Nelly Page Magwaza, I heard of her and had to get the book. I'm loving it so far." The grin on her face says so.

"Mind lending me once you're done, my wife is a fan. She'll definitely love it." Sethu has become a reader over the years, it came about when she had to take leave from work to look after our daughter Sihle.

Being a house husband didn't work out for me, the business was growing and I was needed at the office.

"Sure." Thandiwe agrees, nonchalantly. A shoulder shrug takes her back to the pages of the book, I guess she's not into talking.

"How is your friend..Bulelwa right?" Her eyes find me again, she gives a message that she doesn't want to engage in a conversation.

"I'm sorry, who?" I thought I got the name right.

"The guy who was stabbed, his name is Bulelwa, right?" My question appears to be causing confusion in her head.

"I don't know anyone by that name," her voice leaps out in wonder and astonishment. "I'm sorry, who are you?"

Okay...Nqabayomzi didn't say anything about Thandiwe having amnesia.

"Styles, Mzi's friend." Let her remember who Mzi is,

please.

“Look I don’t know what you want from me, but I’m married. My husband is around somewhere and he won’t like it when he finds me entertaining another man.” She is definitely losing it, Thandiwe was fine when we got here. Goggle-eyed, I brows the airport for those two fools who left me with this woman. Where on earth are they? They have been gone for far too long, I move away from the lady who is losing touch with reality and dial for Randall.

“Tell Mzi to come get his woman, crazy women freak me out.” I whisper to Randall over the phone as soon as he answers. He chuckles for some reason and tells me they are coming. The idiots were actually sitting at a coffee shop catching up while I had to entertain her.

I count the seconds till they come back and meet them halfway.

“Nice one Mzi, you don’t tell me Thandiwe is losing touch with reality.”

“I thought she’s past that.” Distress glazes over him as his eyes trace Thandiwe, he lurches past me to reach her.

“What’s going on?” Randall questions, handing me a cup of coffee. He’s not looking at me, but at the couple that is engaged in what appears to be a deep conversation.

“Chilling at a coffee shop, huh?” I get his full attention with this question, we lock eyes for just a moment, just enough for him to confirm his loyalty to me. Gradually he tilts his head to the side, the furrowed brow tightens.

“We were waiting for our order and lost track of time.” It’s a casual response, as if it’s not a big deal and I have nothing to worry to about.

“Yeah right, it’s not enough that I have to worry about the darn comparisons between you two and now this connection.” Don’t give me that look, I jump when I feel threatened. A smug smirk pulls at his lips, he raises a brow and bashfully rubs the back of his neck.

“I’m flattered Styles, you’re jealous.” Idiot.

“I’m not, I’m just saying I’m your brother first and you’re mine.” A need to remind him arises, he nods once...twice...and tries for a smile that fails to complete its course.

“And I will never forget that.” He says and he better not, this sudden care he has for Nqabayomzi makes me feel second in his life. I don’t want to be packed in a shelf, I won’t be comfortable there.

“Yeah only when you two are having coffee without me and bring me a cold one, you know I don’t drink cold coffee.” I tell him and he chuckles, but a frown remains on his face.

“Are you seriously acting like Liyana right now?”

“I don’t care Randall,” I hand him the coffee back.

“Give this to Mzi, he probably takes it cold.” The sound of his dry chuckle follows me to my seat.

“Baby come on, I’m sorry.” He’s teasing me, I hear the humour in his voice. As I turn to sit down, I meet

a mocking smile on his face. He raises his hands in question and offers an apologetic smile before striding to join me on the silver bench.

“Kiss and make up?” The question meets my ears in a whisper.

“Fuck you.” I sputter, nudging him away with an elbow and I’m honoured with a chortle.

NQABA...

“Where have you been?” Thandiwe continues to ask me the same question, she appears to be confused. My answer doesn’t seem to be reaching her, she can’t be lost again. I don’t know what to say to her anymore.

“That man is strange,” her head points towards Styles. “I think he was hitting on me.”

“Styles is my friend, Thandiwe.” I utter, caressing her cheek. Mystified by the answer provided, her features crumple.

“He’s your friend?” She shakes her head frantically, renouncing my claim. “I don’t know him, I know all your friends and that man is not one of them.”

“Thandiwe.” I grip her cheeks to keep her busy eyes on me, the distant look in them is there. The one I saw when I chased her outside her father’s yard after her mother’s confession. “Do you know who I am?”

She gives me a nod, it raises the little hope I have up a notch.

“You’re my husband, Ntuthuko.” She looks at me with love in her eyes, they are almost smiling. I position myself next to her, my eyes meet Randall’s. There’s a silent conversation between us for a brief moment. My head shakes involuntarily, I see his jaw clench probably at the worry in my eyes.

“Can we go home? Our home in Orlando.” Thandiwe says, resting her head on my shoulder and snaking her arm over mine. “I don’t want to live in that big house Ntuthuko, it’s scary and dark.”

A deep sigh flings out from my nostrils, I enfold my arm around her shoulder and bring her close to me. There's a fluency in the way she leans into me, like my arms and chest are her rightful place. Only this part comforts my shattering heart.

"Promise we won't go back there, promise we're going back to our home in Orlando." She grabs my attention back as my mind was beginning to wander. How do I permanently fix this? Forty days is too long for MamSonto to be gone.

"You're going to be okay Tan-tan," a chuckle is her comeback.

"That's funny, you never call me Tan-tan. Your brother Mzi used to call me that."

It feels like my heart has been thrown into a lake of fire, her words make me uncomfortable, but more than that they evoke anger in me. I'm angry at myself that I can't help her, I've tried. If this God thing works, then I have to put my all in it. Neo says you're stronger when you are on your knees. I will

have to go down in order to fight this demon.

“Where’s your brother? I haven’t seen him in eight years, did I tell you he was my first love? I still love him though, Nqaba is a good man. Sometimes I wish that Zulu was his son, I robbed him Ntuthuko. He asked me to wait for him, but I cheated on him with you.” Her words falter, syllable after syllable while her voice quavers. It doesn’t take long for her to start sobbing.

“I’m such a bad person, I have to apologise to Nqaba.” She continues with urgency in her voice. My stomach staples, heat rains down my body. I don’t have words for Thandiwe.

“Don’t speak anymore, that’s enough Nkanyezi yam.” I comfort her with whispered verses and kisses at the top of her head.

BARBRA...

Sandra brought me out here to only glare at me, no

words have been spoken between us. Nor has she offered me something to drink, we keep locking eyes. I can't ignore the anxiety that has swallowed her, it has her leg bouncing and the grown woman has resorted to biting her nails.

"I'm not here for what you think?" I put her out of her despair, my remark is not appreciated. Her nose flares and eyes narrow, her leg hasn't stopped shaking though.

"How did you manage to walk in here Barbra? The elders of this place are more powerful than you and that ugly cat of yours." Her statement evokes a loud guffaw out of me, Sandra is not humoured. She's too grumpy for my liking.

"I come in peace Sandra, relax. They won't do anything to me." I'm not really confident about that. "Coming from an evil family, how did you manage to marry into such a powerful one?"

"I'm not evil, neither was our mother. You were no different too Barbra until you accepted the stupid powers." That's because I wanted to better myself

and I have no regrets about it.

“I’m the wise sister, remember? And being the eldest, I had to make a decision for both of us, but you decided to run from your destiny.” Deep down I am mad at her for abandoning me.

“Being a witch is not my destiny,” she seethes through her teeth, her eyes dart to check the backgrounds.

“You don’t want people to know who you really are, the truth will come out one day like how we shared a man.” I remind her.

Sandra jolts up from her chair, with anger controlling her, she strides to me. I’m thinking she wants to sit closer, but my eyes widen when she slaps me hard that I fall back on the chair.

“How dare you?” She hisses, eyes stone cold and face holding a scowl.

“You hit me, Sandra?” No one has ever dared to lay

a finger on me.

“Yes and I will do it again if you...”

“Grandma, grandma.” Zulu’s voice interferes my sister’s threats, we both turn to the boy who is enthusiastically running to me with a big smile on his face. I stand to my feet to welcome him, I’m over the slap. Seeing my grandson has healed my heart, I am winning this one. That’s it Zulu, come to grandma, just one more step and I will take you away from here.

I kneel down with my arms wide open for him to fall into them the second he nears me. A little girl about the ages of Twelve to thirteen suddenly slides in front of Zulu, her arms are stretched out, creating a bridge between Zulu and me. Her eyes are piercing...fiery...too much anger for a small child. She’s looks ready to attack.

“What’s going on?” I ask Sandra, she’s as shocked as I am.

“Liyana move, let the boy meet his grandmother.”

Sandra instructs the child, Liyana rejects her order by standing still.

Sgwili should see this, the amount of power this child has.

She has a spiritual gift, a powerful one. More powerful than me and Makhafula put together, I want it. I want her gift. If I could get her on my side, I will be able to use her. She will make me the most powerful witch.

With ancestors there's always the good ones and the bad ones. If only I could connect with the bad ones through her, it's nothing new, this has been done for generations, people buying amathonga amabi (bad ancestors) that do not belong in their dynasty.

“Zulu come to me, my baby.” My eyes manoeuvre past Liyana to locate Zulu, I've been trying to avoid the heat growing on my body. There is a powerful ancestor living inside her, he will never let me have her powers. He's angry at the world, angry at me

and my presence makes him more livid.

“I can’t move grandma.” Zulu declares behind Liyana who continues to stab daggers at me.

“Firi ho ko.” (Get out of here.)

Liyana shouts in a foreign language, her head is strangely tilted to the side and slightly bowed. Her eyes are raised and widened, probing and digging deep into my soul. It’s a creepy sight for a child to take and of course being a witch I can see what the others can’t see. The ancestor behind this anger, my secrets are laid out for him, making me feel exposed. He seems to be claiming Zulu as his own. What right does he have over a Biyase?

“Liyana stop it.” Sandra lashes out at the child, I’m a great witch and I don’t bow down so easily. This realization has me marching to the child, I see myself grabbing Zulu from Liyana.

“Move little girl, I want my grands on.” I tell her, her eyes are rigid. Her demeanour standoffish.

“Gyae...me!” (Don’t touch me.)

She roars when I reach for her arm, her voice almost sounds strange, it is blood-curdling... threatening...it’s the ancestor. Sgwili didn’t say anything about going head to head with the departed, neither did he mention that there’s a gifted child in this place.

“Ko.” (Go.) Liyana growls like an animal, I hear Sandra gasp behind me. “Firi ho ko.” (Get out of here.)

“Barbra, what have you done? Are you using black magic in my son’s house?” Sandra mumbles accusations behind me, I shrug at her questions. “This child does not just act like this.”

Maybe this was a bad idea. I shouldn’t have come here.

“I’m going to get my grandson and leave.” Just as I tell my sister, Liyana’s animal growl peaks. She falls on her knees with an inhumane scream erupting from her mouth. Zulu drops behind her and starts

convulsing vigorously.

The stubbornness of the ancestor aggravates me as he refuses to move this little girl who is now shaking her shoulders aggressively, her head moves rhythmically to and fro as if dancing to spiritual drums.

“Liyana!” The young woman who had welcomed me into the house runs out with these words... Yes, her name is Amara... Behind her is the tall man. This is my queue to leave the house, I will never win.

Liyana crosses her arms in a form of an X on her chest as she continues the spiritual dance, the drums resonate in my head. They start off as a distant sound until, they are deafeningly loud. Looking at everyone’s faces, they can’t hear a thing.

“What kind of witchcraft is this?” The man... Neo questions, I can smell the fear emanating from him. But there is a power stronger than fear, surrounding him, I see red smeared on him. Blood, not just blood. The sacrificial blood, the blood that threatens the

existence of all witches...all things evil. The blood that deems us powerless, this same blood, I see on my daughter lately.

I won't mention whose blood it is, just the mention of that name will send me to an early grave.

The young woman next to him is terrified to her wits, I see love for Liyana emanating from her. The love of a mother, she must be her mother.

“Nsamanfo Okolie, ko tia me tamfo.” (Okolie ancestors, fight against my enemy.)

Whatever Liyana is saying is not good because I am burning.

To be continued...

BURN

60...

NTUTHUKO...

“Where is she?” I ask my father the moment he peeks through the crack of the door, he looks like he has aged a few days older. If there is such a thing. Exhaustion has kept him prisoner.

He opens the door fully to let me in, I’m welcomed with a hug and a hefty sigh.

“She’s sleeping on the couch.” He answers, shutting the door. “She doesn’t sleep in her room anymore, says there is someone who…” His mouth thins with displeasure. “I don’t know if it’s a creature or what, but whatever that thing is claims that it’s married to her and wants to sleep with her.”

“That sounds like witchcraft dad.” Shock bolts out of me, Veronica is too innocent to be going through something like this. “Veronica was given a spiritual husband.”

Spasm of irritation crosses his face, his head drops as he emanates a silent grumble.

“Who would do this to her? Who would want to destroy my daughter’s life like this?”

“I wish I knew, we have to consult dad.” Spiritual husband are not easily cast away, they claim you as their own and hold on to you for eternity if they could. Only a spiritually gifted person can send them back to where they came from.

“Mzi is on his way, let’s hear what he has to say.” I nod my head, although the mention of my brother fills me with anger. Duma raises his eyebrows and gestures we go in the living room, I follow behind. Veronica is peacefully sleeping on the three seater couch, a little grimace has settled on her features. I perch myself beside her and begin to stroke her hair, this should feel peaceful.

“I want to know who is behind this, I want them exposed for everyone to see.” I tell my father who is standing with his arms folded across his chest. He nods, his eyes fixated on Veronica. She is not alone, we’re going to help her.

BARBRA...

The pain takes over a portion of my body, it is the sort of pain that burns, as if some invisible flame were held against my skin. It burns and dribs of sweat have covered my forehead, yet I am resolved to remain true to who I am...a great witch who is feared by many witches.

“Barbra.” Sandra furiously grips my arm. “Get out of here, now.” Her voice commands, I’m older but she orders like a big sister would. I’m too stubborn, I would heed to her advice, but I need that boy on the floor.

“No, I’m not leaving without Zulu.” If that girl is looking for a fight then a fight she will get. I battle the urge to fan myself, I should be stripping naked because I am on fire.

“Get the boy, now.” My heart sinks to my stomach as Makhafula’s voice swooshes into my ears, the bastard is watching everything from wherever he is.

He should be here helping me. “Don’t leave that place without that boy.”

Bloody witch!!!

“No” A scream erupts from my mouth like a volcanic explosion. It’s the heat, I want to jump and scream some more. For years I have kept this secret and now, I am close to being exposed. I have always known Makhafula will be the death of me.

“You.” Neo takes my attention, I don’t like the way he’s glaring at me. His eyes seem to know what I am and my intentions are revealed to him. “You’re not wanted here.”

He nods towards me, his frontage scrunched up in accusation. I don’t know what he’s accusing me of, but this is bad. Exposure means death for witches, although it won’t be instant.

“Look, I don’t know what’s going here, but that boy is my grandson. Zulu Biyase.”

“Daabi!” (No.)

Liyana’s bark sends venomous shivers throughout my body. The shudder is visible that Sandra catches it, hence the question she sends me.

“You want to kill that boy, don’t you Barbra?”

I don’t get time to answer because Neo shouts. “Get out.” I’m startled by the outburst, so is Amara beside him.

“Neo, what’s going on?” She questions him as she considers him with a mixed up expression.

“You don’t pray, that’s what’s going on.” He exclaims, ramming his hand into the pocket of his pants. His intense eyes are fixated on me, probing and surfing my innermost secrets. Liyana’s dance ceases, her hands are still crossed on her chest. She, too is stabbing daggers at me.

“Sandra,” a whisper calls my sister. “Stop them now, or else I will be exposed.”

“I told you to leave, go now Barbra.” Sandra snaps, a warning lies in her tone. Desperate and angry as

hell, I turn to my grandson on the floor. Makhafula is going to kill me, still I will die if I stay here.

Neo: “We don’t accommodate demons in this house,” Neo declares, my eyes dart to the small bottle on his hands. Gods of witches, let that not be what I think it is.

“That holy water will definitely expose you.” Sandra gives another warning, I’m already burning. My mind pauses, thoughts of death evade in it. Fear clings on to me, causing my body to tremble with terror.

“What is this?” I smash my mouth to clog the scream that forced its way out.

Sgwili, if you can hear me help me. I’m burning, they won’t have mercy on me. I know he can’t hear me, maybe he can sense my pain, the agony.

“Control yourself.” Sandra reproaches with a stern undertone.

“I can’t, I’m on fire.” I whisper back, desperately.

Gradually, Neo starts to approach me, his deep gaze holding me in place. Using my powers here will get me killed by the entity that dwells in this house. I opt to step back, my hand finds Sandra’s. She tightens the grips and steps in front of me. My heart stops and races when my sister shields me from the water that Neo splashes towards me.

“Mama aah aah, wetin dey happen? Comot for road.” (What’s going on? Make way?)”

There is authority in Neo’s tone, he speaks like a man who has been given authority and he knows the power he has through the God he worships.

“Neo stop, we respect our guests in this house.” Sandra will be my saving grace, I thought my sister hated me.

“I think I should leave, my son will fetch Zulu.”

Makhafula will have to do this, or else I will leave this place in ashes. Zulu is now seated, Liyana has her arms wrapped around him...possessive... claiming and owning. This gets me thinking, Could

Zulu be Mzi's son? Liyana's intense blazing gaze finds me, the glare compels me to look away.

"I don't know what's going on here, but I think it would be best if you leave." Amara says, striding to stand beside Neo. "Everything was okay until you came here and Liyana's wrath seems to be directed to you."

Only now she sees it, even this Neo who thinks he can stand against me. Humans are stupid.

"I'm leaving, but I have nothing to do with any of this. I'm only here for my grandson." With these last words, I begin my steps out of the house. Without so much as a back turn, I need to leave this place.

NQABA...

"Will you two be driving with us?" Randall asks as we walk out of O.R Tambo airport. Thandiwe is strapped on my arm, she was sleeping throughout

the flight and hasn't uttered a word since she woke up. I have avoided speaking to her, not wanting my heart to break due to her amnesia.

"We're going to my father's house."

"You're welcome to spend the night at my house, since Zulu is there." Randall offers, I'm eager to meet my son.

"I don't mind, I want to see my son. Is it okay Nqaba?" Shock nudges me, she called me by my name? "Nqaba." She calls when I ogle at her, mouth ajar.

"You remember?" Styles pipes in, casually.

"Remember what?" It appears she has no recollection of what happened the past few hours.

"Nothing," I don't want to worry her. "We'll drive with you." I tell Randall.

Thandiwe's grip tightens with this announcement, there's a driver waiting for us. Randall takes the front seat, Styles sits with us at the back. Thandiwe perches closer, my arms snake around her. I

squeeze and hold. Her gentle hand settles on my chest, the touch is barely there.

“How are you feeling?” I murmur, it’s inaudible.

“Just tired.” I feel her shrug her shoulders.

“Tshabalala!” Another murmur. “Say my name.”

I hear Styles clear his throat, that has me searching for him till my eyes find an amused idiot seated next to Thandiwe, laughter is tickling him. It erupts inside him causing his shoulders to convulse, it takes a second for them to stop. He raises a brow in question, “Lover boy.” He lip syncs, derisively. I’m not bothered by his childish deportment, I need to confirm that Thandiwe remembers me.

“Tan-tan!” I call her, bringing her head to face me. I settle my hand on the small of her back and cup her cheek with the other. Her eyes are first to assure me that she remembers me as she reaches out with them as a child reaches with open arms. They illuminate my soul.

“I see you Nqabayomzi, my Zulu man.” Her random declaration has a deep impact on me that my body shivers with pleasure and comfort. “I do.”

My lips stretch into a subtle smile.

“You do?” I ask.

She nods undoubtedly and cradles my face with the palms of her hands so that I’m looking at her.

“You have beautiful eyes,” a smile walks this exclamation out of her mouth. “I see doubt in them, but you have nothing to worry about because your eyes are my home and they will always find me.”

“So you remember what happened?” She shakes her head at my question.

“No, I lost a few hours. The last thing I remember is you saying you’re going to get some coffee, the next thing I was in a plane and we were landing. I must have scared you, Biyase.” I wouldn’t admit to her, but she did scare me.

“I don’t want to lose you.” This I have no problem

admitting.

“You won’t lose me, Nqaba. I trust you, I trust in our love.” There’s fear in her voice, but the words hint at confidence. She kisses my lips, a quick brush.

When she comes for the second peck, I gently grip her cheek to hold her in place and deepen the kiss.

I take in the delicious feeling of her soft lips mingling with mine, my heart flutters and a tingle flows down my spine. I kiss her hard, my hand drawing circles on her back as I pull her closer into me, leaving no space between us.

“Maybe we should drop you two at a hotel or something.” Trust Styles to interrupt, we pull out with a need to breathe. A bashful smile takes form on Thandiwe’s lips. “Get a room you two.”

“Don’t mind Styles Mzi, he’s been away from home for too long and misses his woman.” Randall chirps in, I wonder what it is he always does on that phone. He is constantly glued on it.

I don’t miss Styles’ huff. Thandiwe’s body is still

moulded to my own, her hands move around my middle, warm and soft. Our foreheads meet, her breath whiffs my face, just as mine does hers. I could never let anyone close to me like this, but Thandiwe is so different, from the day I met her. She is my lifeline, without these touches, this connection, I would be a lost soul.

BARBRA...

“Barbra wait for me.” Sandra’s voice chases me out the door, I stop the moment I step outside. She pulls the door a little, closing us outside.

“Did you hear how they spoke to me, Sandra?” I am angry, those people are going to pay.

“That’s not my problem Barbra, you came here knowing very well about the Okolies.” Those damn Okolies are ungrateful.

“So what? So what Sandra?” I seethe, slightly pushing her. She pushes me back, harder. I’m

reminded of days when we would fight over clothes. “Those damn Okolies should be kissing the ground I walk on.”

“Barbra!” Her vocal cord vibrates and rolls out of her tongue to rebuke me.

“No, you know I’m right. I gave them what you couldn’t, I gave them an heir. A king who will sit on their throne. I gave them two heirs Sandra.” Her eyes narrow at my shouting, her chest moves up and down with deep exasperation.

“I saw this day coming, you’re evil after all and it was only a matter of time when you will rub this on my face.” Her words are stained with pain.

“I’m not rubbing anything on your face, I hate how ungrateful those people are.” The pain on her surface takes me back to the day she came to my doorstep years ago, crying that her husband’s family had cursed her. Sandra leans back on the wall, her eyes void.

“Do you think I like what I did Barbra? My womb

was cursed because I had a child outside my marriage, apparently their future king couldn't share a womb with an outsider. I had stained the King's abode and they said I was to never bear them an heir. I will never have a boy child. I had no choice but to come to you, I had to give them a son and the traditional healer told me that you were the only option. We're sisters, we share the same blood and only you could substitute for me." She explains through tears.

"And they know about it, the Okolie ancestors know that I, Barbra gave them two kings Nqabayomzi and Thamsanqa. The twins you should have never separated." I remind my sister of the sacrifice I made for her when I was young and naïve, thinking I was protecting her.

"Please lower your voice." Desperation laces her speech as she browses the environment for any eavesdroppers.

"What for? After what has been done to me in there

then the world should know that I mothered the King of the Ashanti Kingdom.”

“Barbra please, I have already lost a son. I can’t lose another one.” I don’t care what Sandra says, at this point I care about myself. It looks like I will be dying soon anyway, either by Makhafula’s hand or that little girl in there.

“You’re so naïve my sister, you’ve always been naïve. Nqabayomzi and Thamsanqa have met,” her eyes widen at my announcement. “Didn’t you know? Those two are friends and the only reason they are still oblivious to the truth is that they are fraternal twins, no one can guess Thamsanqa is Mzi’s twin.”

“Stop calling him that.” She shouts, again bullying me with her hands. “His name is Randall Uze Okolie, my son Barbra, my son.”

“I gave birth to him,” I push her back, and a screech surges out of her mouth as she staggers toward the door. My heart drowns when she falls into Amara’s arms, Sandra quickly pulls away from her and

glances over to me. Our eyes meet, shock, fear and worry. Amara is drenched in tears, accusation and judgement twirling in her eyes. She heard us, she heard everything.

To be continued...

BURN

61...

“What’s going on?” Amara questions the two sisters.

“Amara, go...go back inside.” Sandra stammers, fearing that her secret has been exposed. She can’t lose her son and she knows Amara to be as loyal as a dog to Randall.

“Who is this?” Her eyes fall on Barbra, sure she heard everything, but wants to hear it from Sandra.

“That is non- of your business.” Sandra snaps at her son’s wife suddenly annoyed by her insistence. “Go away from here.” She commands firmly, but Amara is just as stubborn. Her husband was mentioned,

hence she is bent on finding out the truth.

“No, I’m not going anywhere till I know why this woman says she is the mother of Randall.”

“That is rubbish” Barbra pipes in, Sandra is not the only one who has something to lose. Duma has no clue that Nqabayomzi is not his biological son and the man fell in love with his so called son from the moment he laid eyes on him.

Barbra grips her sister’s hand and begins to lug her down the driveway, Sandra is oblivious to where they are going, but follows still. And Amara? There is no way she is going to let them leave without an explanation.

“What is wrong with you? I said mind your own business, you should be taking care of Liyana in there.” It can’t be so easy for Sandra to lie her way out of this one, she knows it hence the anger that has risen inside her.

“I will tell Randall about this, let him be the one asking questions.” Due to their rudeness, Amara

finds a need to throw in a threat.

“You wouldn’t.” Oh Sandra, why the shocked expression? You’re talking to Randall’s muse.

Amara folds her arms across her chest, boldly glaring at the twisted sisters. Barbra doesn’t take threats lightly, she is a witch and does not bow down to anyone.

The witch steps back, crouches down on the ground. Her hand finds soil in the midst of the grass, she draws a circle and a triangle in the middle. Amara observes with wonder, her mind ignorant of the supernatural.

“Creatures of the night arise and...” Sandra nudges her sister when she realizes what she is about to do. This will not only kill Barbra, but her entire family.

Everyone who has Barbra’s blood running through their veins, that includes her second Okolie twin who hasn’t been introduced to his ancestors.

Nqabayomzi Biyase... the Okolie ancestors can only reach half of him because of the twin bond between

him and Randall, otherwise he needs to be fully introduced to his ancestors.

“Do you know who she is? The future queen of Ashanti.” Sandra whispers to her sister, Barbra shows no care. They have been found out and they had promised to keep this secret. Her sister saved her in there and she feels a need to return the favour.

“What is she doing?” Amara’s voice quavers, a smidgeon of fear finding her, she turns back to the house as she thinks of calling Neo. “What’s going on? Who are you really?”

“I can make her disappear, no one will know what happened to her.” Barbra is as stubborn as the devil, the sisters ignore Amara’s questions as they are engrossed on keeping their secret covered.

“Are you deaf? She’s an Okolie, a queen in the eyes of the ancestors. If you’re ready to die then go ahead, but you are not taking me down with you.” Sandra argues, Amara is glazed in confusion. She

can't hear the words uttered by the duo. Barbra rises to her feet, hatred fills her eyes as she ogles at Amara.

“What exactly did you hear Amara?” Sandra.

Trying to see if they are safe or not.

“That you two have been lying to Randall his whole life, you are not his mother, this witch is...” Amara points her head towards Barbra who has birthed a new hatred for her daughter in-law.

“Who are you calling a witch? I am not Sandra, you stupid brat. Don't try me because when I'm done with you, this luxury will seem like it was all a dream.” The witch throws a threat of which Amara is not fazed by.

“You're not God, you can't touch me.” Daunting and daring, Amara stands head to head with Makhafula's co-conspirator.

“Stop please.” Sandra slips in between them, she knows how the fight will begin and end. Amara won't even lift a finger because the Okolies are at her beck and call. “Amara, you can't tell Randall

about this.”

“What? You can’t expect me to lie to him.” It’s absurd, they don’t keep secrets from each other.

“If you love him like you claim then you will take this to your grave. It will break his heart.” Desperation lies in Sandra’s voice.

It only sinks in now, Amara realises that Randall will be devastated.

“His whole life has been a lie.” Amara whispers loud enough for them to hear.

“You’re the only truth in his life Amara, you and the family you have given him.” Mother in-law is not a fan of the young woman standing in front of her, her words do not come from her heart, but a vicious plan to soften the lady up so they can keep their secret.

“And yet you’re asking me to lie to him.” Sandra is asking for too much.

“You’re not lying, you’re just not telling him the

truth.” Sandra tries to make it, make sense, but it’s a crazy thing to do as far as Amara knows.

“Please, protect him from this truth, it will destroy him. I know my son, family means the world to him. God knows what he will do if he finds out the truth. We have kept this from him all his life and I can’t let him find out now.”

Amara can’t believe what her mother-in-law is asking of her, she has never lied to Randall. How can she live with him knowing she’s keeping something so big from him? If he comes to know, he will never forgive her, she might as well have been there when it all started. Now she knows something she wishes she didn’t know. How on earth will she keep the truth from Randall and how will she tell him the truth?

“I have heard and seen things in my life, but this one takes the cake.” An incredulous laugh surges out of Amara’s mouth, not in her craziest dreams did she

think something like this could happen. “I thought such things happen only in movies, but you people have hit the spot. You deserve an award, I am disgusted by the two of you. I will make sure Randall finds out about this, if you think I will keep secrets from him then you don’t know me.”

“I can make her lose her mind, give me a sample of her hair.” An annoyed Barbra murmurs to Sandra, her evil eyes have not moved an inch from Amara.

“And dig my own grave? I don’t think so. You need to get out of here Barbra, I will handle Amara.” It’s not that easy to get rid of Barbra, Sandra knows that.

The witch chooses to ignore her wise sister, a fake smile takes form on her lips as she slowly slithers to Amara. One would advise her to run, but Randall’s better half is bold for a strange reason. Barbra’s malicious plan is cut short by a car driving into the yard, knowing who it is Amara takes a step to welcome her husband. A grip on her arm stops her trip, she turns to Sandra who regards her with a

desperate look.

“Please, let me tell him myself. I need time, I lost Raven and I can’t lose Randall as well. You do realise I’m going to lose my son after the secret has been revealed?” If manipulation doesn’t work, why not try emotional blackmail.

Amara is not given a chance to reply as Randall swoops her into a suffocating hug, she holds him back just as tight.

“I’m sorry,” a whisper sashays into her ear, he’s apologising for his stupidity. The way he spoke to her back in KZN. Amara accepts the apology, thinking if she keeps this big secret from her she will have a lot of apologising to do.

Overlooking everyone’s presence, Randall takes Amara’s hand and leads her into the house. The new hatred Barbra has for Amara grows intensely, her son hardly noticed her. He hardly noticed even the woman he thinks is his mother...his aunt.

NQABA.

I'm surprised to see my mother, she feigns a smile when our eyes meet.

"Mother!" She nods at my salutation, hiding her shifty eyes from me. "What brings you here?"

"I- I came to see my grandson." That's strange, no one knew about Zulu's whereabouts. How did she find out?

"Who told you he was here?" I ask, exchanging glances with Thandiwe. Barbra clears her throat and shifts her attention to Randall's mother. Where there is Barbra, there is fire.

"This is my friend, I came to visit her."

"But you just said you came to visit Zulu." Thandiwe chirps in, doubt visible in her voice.

"She actually came to see me and you can imagine the shock when she saw Zulu. This is a small world." Randall's mother says.

These two look really nervous, I have never trusted

my mother and something is going on. I mean this is the same woman who helped Ntuthuko hide Zulu.

“Thandiwe, I haven’t seen you in a long time.”

Barbra.

She attacks Thandiwe with a random hug, Thandiwe doesn’t give in return. They are not the best of friends.

“Ouch.” Thandiwe yelps, breaking herself free from my mother’s arms.

“What’s wrong?” Worry glazes my voice, my eyes search hers for an answer she is yet to provide.

“Something pricked my neck,” her eyes are kept on Barbra as she says this while her hand works to rub away the pain. Her forefinger comes back smeared in blood.

“Tshabalala, you’re bleeding.” An obvious alert.

“Sorry, that’s my bracelet. It’s old, I should get a new one.” My mother is not sorry, I know and have seen the animosity she has for Thandiwe.

Thandiwe takes my hand with a scowl on her face.
“I don’t feel good, can we go in?”

“Mother.” I nod, sending my goodbye. She replies with a subtle smile before we leave her standing with her friend.

Neo is here, he says the kids have gone to bed. I was looking forward to seeing Zulu... Thandiwe doesn’t look okay, so Amara offers to take her to a room where she can rest.

THANDIWE...

“You can use this room,” Amara says, showing me the bedroom we’re going to sleep in. “You’ll shout if you need anything.”

“Thank you.” I wait for her to leave, she doesn’t, but sits on the bed. I hope she’s not the gossiping type, I am not in the mood. My head feels like it’s going to explode, I need to sleep the pain away.

“You look tired.” I’m glad she notices.

“I am actually.” This should be her cue to leave.

“Mzi looks different, he looks happy.” A fluency lies in her voice, she sees my confused face. “He wasn’t like this the first time I saw him, he seemed to carry a dark cloud with him. I was shocked when I saw a smile on his face, you’re good for him.”

“What makes you think I’m the reason behind his happiness?” She raises her brows in confusion.

“It’s obvious, the way his eyes light up when he looks at you. Even Randall doesn’t look at me like that anymore, he’s different since his sister was...” She drops her head, I sense this is a heavy topic, so I won’t dig in.

“Thank you for accommodating us.” Time I send her away, I’m tired.

“No problem, we hardly have guests over, Randall hates visitors.” I get a feeling Randall is her favourite thing to talk about. “This one time he wanted everyone to move out including Liyana so it’s just us two in the house.” Her face lights up for the first since she brought her husband up.

“That’s insane.”

“He’s insane, but he wouldn’t be my Randall if he wasn’t. I wish we could be the way we were, lately all he does is snap and when he’s not snapping he’s completely quiet.” Sadness fills her voice.

“I’m sorry.” What am I sorry for? I don’t even know what she’s talking about.

“We’ll be okay, I’m comforted by that he loves me and that man sure knows how to love a woman.” The smile is back, this is one confused woman. “I will leave you to it then.”

Amara probably senses my unapproachable conduct.

“Thank you, where is Zulu?”

“I’ll send him to you, goodnight.” And with that, she walks out. I am deadbeat tired, I decide to lie down while I wait for Nqaba and Zulu.

RANDALL...

Randall's scent welcomes Amara as she walks into their bedroom, her heart jumps and goose bumps embrace her skin. The room is empty, he's probably in the bathroom. She freezes on the doorway and shuts her eyes.

Randall's whole life has been a big lie and now that she knows, it's her duty as his wife to tell him the truth. But how will she look into his eyes and break his heart?

"It's okay, you're in the right room. Welcome Mrs. Okolie." Randall says as he walks to his wife from the bathroom. Startled by his voice, Amara opens her eyes to find him smiling at her, hands tucked in his pockets.

"What happened?" He questions, wondering why she is standing in the doorway. Amara shakes her head and wraps herself around him.

"Did you miss me this much?" He teases, staring down at her.

"I always miss you." A whispered confession,

usually she'd chuckle and tease him about how he is full of himself.

“Are you okay?” He knows her well enough to see when something is eating her up. Meanwhile, Amara is bothered by the secret she holds, it has her feeling like the worst person in the world for knowing what she knows. Her gaze falls away from his, she finds it hard to look into his eyes. Now that he is in front of her, she can't tell him and deep down she knows that she will live to regret it.

“Actually, there's...” His phone rings stopping her from spilling the news and wasting no time Randall searches for it in the pocket of his jeans.

“Hello.” He answers. “I have to take this.” He whispers to her and walks out and the devil orders a special visit from her mother-in-law.

Amara rolls her eyes at her, her heart has not stopped racing out of fear. Fear of the unknown, Randall doesn't respond to things like normal individuals do. He shuts down or goes beast on

general publics. She of all people knows Scar and how his mind works when he switches his humanity off.

“What do you want?” The question is directed to Sandra who toddles into the bedroom.

“Are you okay?” Sandra.

Like she cares, the only thing she cares about is Randall not finding out the truth. “Get rid of that guilty look please, before he starts suspecting something.”

“Who said I feel guilty about this? I’m not the one who lied to him all his life.” Amara becomes defensive only because the secret is clawing her and she can’t gather up the courage to tell her husband.

“I know, I know” Sandra pushes away the courage to slap her senseless, she hates that Amara knows her secret. Segun might have died, but she is still queen of the Ashanti and when Randall finds out that Sandra is only his aunt, he will oust her from

the kingdom. “And you better not mention this to anyone, not even to your dog. Do you hear me, Amara? I will talk to my son, I will tell him everything. This is not your secret to tell.” That feels more like a threat.

Sandra doesn't wait for Amara to throw her out, she leaves on her own accord, confident that the annoying girl will not utter a word.

THANDIWE...

Morning came faster than usual, Thandiwe feels dead tired. She hardly slept, tossing and turning the whole night. Her eyes pop open at the creature smiling down at her, at least that's what she sees. It has to be a demon, her mind concludes. Her eyes search for Nqabayomzi, he's not in the room.

“Mama,” Zulu calls his mother who is glaring at him like he's an alien, but Thandiwe only hears the word “mommy.” She gasps as if breath has been knocked out of her lungs.

“Mama, you’re scaring me.” Zulu tells her, he doesn’t see that his mother is out of it. Her sixth sense tells her to take defence and the only thing she can grab is a pillow, Zulu ducks when his mother violently throws it at her. She falls butt first from the floor and covers her ears when the little boy pleads with her to stop. Her ears do not take in what is being said, but many voices screaming “mommy”

“Get away from me,” Thandiwe yelps, her body trembling. “Nqaba, Nqaba.”

Zulu is terrified by her screaming, he takes off running towards the door and bumps into his father. Nqabayomzi’s first thought is to comfort his frightened son, he scoops him into his arms to hold him close. Zulu clings on to Nqabayomzi, silent sniffles emanating from him.

“Uncle, mama is scaring me.” Zulu snitches to the man he assumes is his uncle. Nqabayomzi offers a back stroke, it’s comforting and calms the little boy

down a bit.

His eyes are engrossed on Thandiwe who is perched on the floor beside the bed, her wet eyes hidden behind her shaky hands.

Everyone comes running to the room to see what the noise is about so early in the morning.

“What’s going on?” Amara is the first to question, Randall stands beside his wife. They have just gotten out of bed, and didn’t have time to freshen up when they heard screams of a woman.

“I don’t know.” Nqabayomzi replies to Amara’s question, he turns to hand Zulu to Randall who takes him and places him on the floor. He’s a big boy according to Randall.

Little Liyana heaves through the tall people standing in the doorway and reaches for her cousin’s hand. Zulu trusts and feels safe with her, especially after what happened last night, he feels a much stronger bond with her.

“Come with me.” Liyana’s voice brings a smile to Zulu’s face, he is worried about his mother, but she is a scary woman right now and staying away from her wouldn’t be such a bad idea. The two siblings toddle away to find Chioma.

“Thandiwe!” Worriedly, Nqabayomzi calls for his lady. Her eyes dart from one corner to another in search of the monster she had seen sitting beside her. Nqabayomzi starts to slowly approach her and just as he does, voices evade Thandiwe’s head. Covering her ears, she kneels and hides her face in between her thighs.

“Stop, stop.” Screams of terror leap out of her, it doesn’t take long for Nqabayomzi to rush to her. He takes the woman in question in his arms and picks her up as if she weighs nothing.

“I’ve got you Tshabalala, I’ve got you.” He sits on the bed with her on his lap, rocking her back and forth. Jaw clenched and anger suffocating him so much so that he feels the clench on his throat,

Nqabayomzi takes his gaze to the brother he thinks to be a friend and finds him staring back with a puckered brow. Worry and wonder playing on his face, hands folded across his chest.

Nqabayomzi wants privacy, he silently motions to Randall and Randall sees it, he blinks once and takes his wife's hand to lead her out. Sandra follows pursuit.

“I won't let anything happen to you Thandiwe, I swear to God. Even if I have to fight this demon myself.” Nqabayomzi's declaration comes with occasional kisses on her forehead, the woman appears to be calming down. Slowly but surely taking back her sanity.

A thought knocks in the man's head...a bible...he needs a bible if he wants to know how the God of Mam'Sonto works and Neo is just the right guy to connect him. Nqabayomzi fishes for his phone in his pockets and sends a text to Neo whom he knows will come through for him.

To be continued...

BURN

62...

THANDIWE...

“Are you okay?” He asks as he cups my face into his hands, I nod dropping my gaze, ashamed of what transpired. I scared my son.

Nqaba studies me long enough for me to squirm on his lap. He grips my waist to hold me in place as I attempt to hop up. The hold compels me to comfortably slump on him, I tighten my arms around him and bury my face on the curve of his neck. I feel his hands slip under the garment of my nightwear, the warmth of his hands on my skin has me shivering.

“I want you.” I whisper into his ear and suck on the sweet spot below his earlobe. The sound of his

appreciative moan weakens my knees.

“Here? Now?” He questions, his voice sounding huskier than it did before.

“Please, I need you inside me. I need you to remind me that I’m not losing my mind, I want to feel human.” I sound desperate, but I don’t care.

Nqaba stands with me in his arms, he turns and lightly throws me down. A gasp leaps out of my mouth as I land on the mattress, I impatiently bite my lip as he crawls over me and his weight pins me on the bed.

“I love you,” Nqaba hints in my ear, causing my breath to hitch. His lips graze my jawline to my collarbone. “You’re very attractive Tshabalala and I would have you every second if I could.”

Why does this sound like a rejection?

“Right now is not the time, Zulu needs you.” He’s looking into my eyes, if I wasn’t sure of the look of love I see in his eyes, I would be embarrassed.

I move to sit up, pushing him off in the process. His brows furrow in response.

“I love you.” He’s trying to convince me, I hop off the bed.

“I’m going to take a bath.” I shouldn’t be upset, but I am. Shoot me...

“You’re angry?” Gee! You reckon? “I’ll make it up to you.” A naughty boy smirk takes play on his lips, his eyes lustfully paint my body.

“I won’t be in the mood.” He’s standing before me in a jiffy, his hand snakes over my waist and he draws me into him.

“Even if I promise to fuck you senseless?” He growls, huskily. There is a hefty amount of possessive dominance soaked in his tongue and twirling in his eyes that it has me feeling giddy.

I respond by squirming under his touch, I claw at his shirt. My body trembling from denied pleasure.

“You’re mine Thandiwe and I can have you anytime I want.” Nqaba declares through a deep command

and I shiver at it, leaning in for an expected kiss. He disappoints by pulling away. “It’s your son’s birthday, get ready. He’s waiting for us.”

I nod, submissively and watch him leave the room.

“Thandiwe?” I blink to see Ifeanyi, standing by the door. She looks different from the last time I saw her, she’s not the usual vibrant energetic girl. Her body is scrawny, bags around her eyes and she’s sacked in baggy clothes.

“Ifeanyi?” Her mouth stretches into a tiny smile, her eyes are confused though.

“What are you doing here?” This is the reason behind her confusion.

“Long story, how are you?” I give her a hug, she flinches and slightly pushes me back. Her demeanour says she’s uncomfortable.

“Where did you go?” I don’t understand her question and the pain in her voice, she covers her hands with the sleeves of her jersey and folds her arms across

her chest.

“What do you mean Ife?”

“You left me alone in that place, with...him.” My heart jumps, my mind is quick to discerning. Lord, I hope it’s not what I think it is.

“Ife! Did Cele...” She slams her hands on her ears to clog my voice from seeping into them. “Oh my God.”

Tears voluntarily cascade down her cheeks, I should’ve seen this. What am I saying? I did see it, there were red flags and I did nothing about it.

“Ifeanyi, I’m sorry.” Words will never get back what Cele stole from her.

“I asked you not to leave me alone there, remember that day Thandiwe? The day...he wanted you to take a break?” My heart shatters at the sound of her sobs. She sinks down to her knees, her body is visibly trembling.

“He took me away from my family and locked me up

in a dark world, I can't find my way out. No matter how hard I scream, no one can hear me." Ifeanyi laments painfully, her words shake due to sobs emanating from her mouth.

"I'm sorry Ife." This is all I can offer her, it's all I have.

"Why me? Every day I ask myself why he chose me, I have never hurt anyone in my life. Only that time, I dated the man who worked for my brother's enemy. But I repented for my sins, did God not hear me?"

"It's not your fault Ife, Ce..." I recall her fear for this name. "That man is a monster..." she uses the sleeve of her jersey to wipe her tears away, but they are persistent. Ifeanyi jolts up and runs out of the room, leaving me shocked to the core. I have to tell Nqaba about this? Does her brother know? Cele has to be locked up.

BULELWA...

Hulk looks ridiculously cute sleeping on that chair, with his head hanging on the side. He must feel me watching him because he opens his eyes, at first he is confused as his eyes browse his surroundings. They find me on the hospital bed and a smile plays on his scrumptious lips.

“Mubiza, you’re awake.” (Ugly.)

I laugh at his comment, he’s an idiot.

“Not as ugly as you, I knew people were ugly while sleeping, but I didn’t think it was this bad.” My riposte has him smiling, not fully, but enough to let me know that he appreciates the dry joke. We lock eyes as he moves closer, I am stunned by the random hug. It takes about a minute to hold him back, he smells the way I remember him. I missed this scent, the feel of his arms and his clingy arse.

“God gave me a second chance at life and you want to take it away, I can’t breathe Hulk.” My heart dances at the sound of his chuckle that pours into my ears, he draws back with his eyes smiling down at me. His face though is a deadpan.

“You don’t have to cry, I’m okay.” I exclaim, taking his large hand into mine.

“You came back.” His statement puzzles me, I wasn’t dying. I just bled a little too much and had to recharge my batteries. “I thought I would never see you again Buttercup.”

“Well, aren’t you a little too dramatic for a sadist?” His hand meets with the back of his neck, bashfully he rubs it with a chortled groan. “Did you think I would die before I called you out on your lies?”

“What lies?” He questions with shifty eyes.

“That you’re a badass in bed, after your confession that day, I went and investigated. I was curious how your mind as a sadist works and I have to say, you lot are evil.” Zizwe catches the sarcasm in my voice, he’s tickled by it. I take in the sound of his laugh, it finds its way into my soul causing a sense of serenity I have never felt.

“Wait till your first experience, you’re going to beg me for more.” I missed this pompous bastard.

“I’m sorry to break the news to you Mr. but my father is part of the underground gang now, knowing Mandla, he is bossing everyone around. I know he will be watching me like a hawk, Ndlondlo will not let me enjoy sex. That man was an enemy of nice things.”

Bhekizizwe again takes delight in my words, I might just become his Brook if he continues charming me like Rich Forester.

“Stop laughing before I orgasm from that raspy sound.” I express, feeling silly. This amuses him just above a subtle laugh.

“God, what will I be without you, Buttercup?” His voice is on top of a whisper.

“Nothing I hope,” I mean it, he takes my hand into his and places a kiss. I whimper into a mess, he appears to take delight in my mess.

“We’re going to be okay, I know it.” That’s a random statement.

“We are, I promise to stay if you increase your clinginess.” I tell him and mentally face palm, I should rephrase the statement. “Seriously, the Zizwe I know would be suffocating me in his arms right now.”

I score myself a cuddle with these words as his huge-self perches on the bed and hides me in his arms. I can hear the sound of his heart increasing with each beat.

“Tell me more about Bulelwa, my Buttercup.” His voice saddens, I find it odd. His bold chappy image is reinforced by despair. “How does Bulelwa respond to lies?”

“Are you planning on lying to me?” The question slips out, it’s firm.

“Say I did lie to you or keep something from you, would you forgive that?” His question makes me look at him in surprise, his arms are still holding me. If anyone shifts here then they would fall off the bed, that’s how small the bed is.

“Lying to me would mean you don’t love me as much as you say, it means you don’t trust me enough to let me in.” I state earnestly, he glares at me sharply and grinds his teeth. “What’s going on Zizwe? Why the sudden questions and the worry on your face? Did something happen?”

“I would never hurt you deliberately, you know that right?” Well, he’s shown me once and I have trusted his actions. I nod to his question. “Please say it, I want to hear you say it.”

“You will never hurt me, not on purpose at least.” I repeat his words and add a little spice for taste, he grins subtly. Our lips meet into a slow heated kiss, his hand cradles my cheek while the other moves to the small of my back.

THANDIWE...

Ifeanyi is not at the breakfast table when I get there, I keep searching for her hoping she will walk in after me.

“Tan-tan.” Nqaba’s voice calls out to me, I blink to find that I’m standing in the middle of the room and all eyes are on me. Nqaba comes to lead me to a seat beside him, this place is beautiful. Chioma called it the foyer, when she came to tell me breakfast was ready. People are living comfortably out there.

“Good morning Thandiwe.” Amara smiles at me with this salutation, I return it but not as big. Her husband is seated next to her, too close if I may add. You would think he is strapped to her waist. Randall doesn’t greet, let alone acknowledge my presence. The man has his eyes glued on his plate, if not on his wife.

He’s having a hushed conversation with her, Amara’s responses are giggles. This is the same Amara who told me, her husband hardly gives her a minute of his time lately. I happen to see the opposite, Randall is engrossed on nothing else but her. The mother doesn’t look like a happy woman, the deadly look directed at them could kill an army.

“Where is Ife?” Everyone stops and glares at me like I cursed them, their eyes are shifty.

“Ife went to therapy.” Amara answers, her voice dismissive. I guess they are informed about her predicament.

“You didn’t wish Zulu a happy birthday.” Nqaba’s undertone brings me back to him, my eyes search for my son. He’s settled beside Liyana, sadness has taken over his face.

“Zulu.” I call him, but he doesn’t look at me. Nqaba’s hand finds mine under the table, I take comfort in the squeeze. “Happy birthday.”

Zulu shrugs, still refusing to glance at me.

“It’s okay Zulu, you can talk to her. Remember what I told you?” Liyana’s interference jolts me into shock, even more when Zulu nods to her words. He gazes up at me and takes a faint smile, gosh he almost looks like his father.

“Thank you.” It’s formal and melancholy pours

inside me.

“Won’t you hug me?” He looks at Liyana for assurance, I don’t think I’m okay with this. Zulu stands and gives me a brief hug, his tiny hands cup my cheeks.

“Thank you mama,” this time it’s a genuine appreciation. A smile takes ownership of my lips as he kisses my cheeks and enfolds his arms around my neck.

“I love you baby.”

“Mama you’re embarrassing me, my potential wife is here.” The child mumbles in my ear, Nqaba catches the phrase because he chortles.

I have to let him go as he insists on going back to his seat, next to his “potential.”

“You’re doing good.” Nqaba checks, it’s more of an assurance.

“Liyana said we’re going to Gold Reef City with her

papa.” Zulu’s announcement catches Randall’s attention, he looks up at the little boy with a frown.

“Where are we going?” Randall questions, surprised by the news. Liyana appears to find humour in whatever is happening, she giggles as she answers him.

“Gold Reef City papa, you said you will take us there.”

“When did I say that?” The question is directed at mother hen Amara who shrugs with a smile.

“Amara will have to take you there, I’m not going to babysit...”

“You’re not babysitting baby, you’re taking the kids on an outing.” Amara clears.

“Let Mzi take them, he seems to have time in his hands.” Randall’s voice is nervous, he’s afraid of being alone with the kids.

“I don’t mind.” Nqaba gladly states, Zulu’s birthday was not planned. I hope this will make him happy.

“If Randall comes with me.”

Randall is not happy about Nqaba's suggestion and seeing the two men, none is willing to lose the battle.

“What will I do there? I can't be going on those rides like a child, It is stupid...” Amara pinches Randall's arm to stop him from expressing himself.

“You always have excuses when you have to be alone with the kids.” Amara recalls him of what appears to be his lifestyle.

“Kids? You mean demons?” Randall gets another pinch, on his cheek this time. “Ouch, will you stop that.” Annoyance lies in his voice, yet he is like a child. Ignorant and blunt. “Mzi, get ready. You're taking the brats...I mean kids to the playground.”

“It's an amusement park papa.” Liyana corrects him, with giggles.

“Same thing princess,” Randall ignorantly says, his nose nuzzling Amara's cheek. These two are so in love it's disgustingly cute, I find Nqaba beside me and appreciate him with a grateful smile.

“I have a meeting with my father, I can’t take them. Bully someone else Uze,” Nqaba says, these two are like teenagers.

“I have a meeting too, with...” his voice waivers, yep the man has caught himself in a lie.

“Dada, dada.” R.J saves the day as he toddles into the foyer. His steps are not solid, the child looks like he will fall, rushing to his father as if he won’t find him seated where he is. Chioma is behind him with a wet cloth, probably to wipe the porridge smeared on his mouth and ready to catch him if he falls.

“R.J .” I think Randall has found an escape. “I have a date with R.J .” He’s on his feet to meet with the toddler who has grown anxious because it’s taking long to get to his father. The child giggles as if he gets paid for it when Randall scoops him up in his arms.

“Papa,” Liyana mumbles under her breath and drops her spoon in the plate. Her head jolts up, her eyes roll back before the child falls from her seat and starts convulsing.

“Fuck this shit.” Randall declares, clearly annoyed.

“Randall?” His wife chides him, he doesn’t care.

“Chioma take the kids please,” Chioma obeys the instructions, but R.J is against it. He screams when Chioma takes him from Randall, the room is quiet the moment she walks out with a crying R.J and Zulu rushes behind them.

I’m standing next to Nqaba, my hand curled around his arm and wondering why everyone is glancing at the child and not helping her.

“Nqaba, what’s going on?” The child is convulsing and it looks painful.

“Her ancestors are relaying a message, this is how they show themselves to her.” I’m taken aback by Nqaba’s response, Liyana is too young for this.

“She’s in pain Nqaba, look at her.”

“Believe it not, the child can’t feel a thing.

Sometimes she gets a headache and starts throwing up until her stomach is empty. Nqaba fills me in, my eyes scan the room. Her parents and grandmother are casually watching Liyana as if waiting for something to happen. Randall’s face has grown in irritation, he stands with his hands rammed in the pockets of his black pants, an intimidating demeanour standing at attention. Amara is a worried mother, I would be too. Liyana’s body calms, her eyes fall on her father.

“Uze!” Liyana’s voice sounds a bit strange, it’s different from that of the little girl who was giggling at her father’s silliness.

“Nana! Biribiara bokoo dee?” (Grandfather! Is everything okay?)

Randall speaks in an unknown language.

Mtu aliingia langoni.” (Someone just walked in the gate.) Liyana reveals, this can’t be the reason for

their visit, right? Otherwise I would think ancestors have time in their hands.

Ni nani huyo?” (Who is it?) Randall...

“Aberewa.” (An old woman.)

Liyana says, I can't make out what is being said between them.

“There's someone outside, an old woman.” Randall directs the message to Nqaba, it seems like an emergency. Nqaba rushes toward the exit, I don't know what's going on, but I trail after him. The yard is empty, only the guards are lurking about.

“What's going on Nqaba?”

“There's no one here.” His response, small hands pave through us. I leer down to see Liyana, she looks better than she did in the house. Her parents and grandmother are behind us. Liyana points at the gate and utters.

“There she is, standing at the gate.” If it is a ghost then I should be able to see it. I think she is the only

one who can see the person.

“Who is it Liya?” Randall asks a question that is probably in all our heads.

“Her face is covered, she is here for Zulu and she’s not alone. An old man just joined her.” My head spins, the word old man always makes my skin crawl and what does she mean she is here for Zulu?

To be continued...

BURN

63...

LILIAN...

“Why is this woman still in my house?” Betty must have bought the nerve she has from the devil, to top it off she is seated on the breakfast table with my family.

“Not today sisi,” I see Deliwe has caught the nerve

virus.

“I want you out of my house now Betty and since when do we dine with the house help?” She glares up at me, her brows knotted in frustration, grinding my teeth, I fight back the urge to slap her across the face.

“You are one bitter woman Lilian, one would think you are sexually deprived meanwhile you had that young man...” I don’t waste time to snatch a cup of whatever Qhaphela is drinking and pour it on Betty’s face, she screams as she bolts up from the chair.

“Lilian?” Deliwe better not test me, I am not in the mood. I don’t acknowledge her reprimand, my focus is on this disrespectful woman who thinks she can take me on.

“How dare you, Betty? Are you forgetting who I am?” My anger emerges in splitting sounds.

“You didn’t have to do that mom.” Lindiwe butts in, I side eye her and take my gaze back to the maid.

“Why do you hate sis Betty so much?”

I roll my eyes at Lindiwe, I hate the affection she has and shows towards this woman. All she has ever done is take from me, I will never forgive her.

“This has nothing to do with you Lindiwe, keep out of it and move away from there.” She’s wiping Betty’s face with a dish cloth, this is what I’m talking about, my children see a mother in her. I hate that, I hate her.

“No mom, please. This is not you, you’re not this bitter.” What is this child talking about?

“Oh this is her alright, Bitter...old...Lilian.” Thobekile slides in with a mocking tone while sipping on tea with an unbothered expression playing on her face. She eyes me under scrutiny, her eyes are empty... deadpan. “But we love her irrespective, she is our mother after all, right Lilian?”

Maybe allowing them to address me by name was a mistake, they have no respect for me as their mother. Betty glowers at Thobekile, pain seems to wipe her face. Her pupils dilate as tears flood

behind them.

“You’re my daughter Thobekile, not hers.” My heart cracks and my world comes crashing down, there is silence in the dining room. All eyes are on the woman who just dropped the bomb... Betty.

“What?” Lindiwe gasps in whispered shock, my eyes go in search of Thobekile to find her stabbing daggers at Betty. Eyes wide with anger and tears cascading out of them.

“What did you say?” That’s Bulelwa’s voice. I turn to find him on the door way with Bhekizizwe holding him close.

“Baby, why are you here? You should be in the hospital.” He rejects my arms, my heart breaks at the tears in his eyes. He too is ogling at Betty, there is no way out of this.

“Sis Betty?” Bulelwa calls, noiselessly. “What do you mean Thobekile is your daughter?”

“She’s lying Bulelwa, don’t listen to her.”

“Mama ka-Bubu please, no more lies okay.” He interposes. “Last time Betty said my father belonged to her first...”

“Your father was always mine, he never belonged to that witch.” I see anger rising on his face at my proclamation. “Baby, you haven’t recovered fully yet. Let me help you to your room.”

I wait for Bhekizizwe to move, our eyes lock for a minute. Hatred swirls in his eyes, his lips grow thin with anger.

“Will you excuse us? This is a family matter.” I snap at him, annoyed by the arms wrapped around my son and how he regards me with so much disgust.

“Zizwe is here with me.” Bulelwa.

“He’s not supposed to be baby, it’s his fault you almost died.” Maybe this is the distraction I need to run from Betty’s claims.

“Zizwe is not going anywhere, he’s with me Lilian. We’re together.” I can’t stand this, I should have

killed this boy. I knew he would come between me and my family.

“Bubu, come my boy. I will tell you everything, I will tell you how your mother stole from me.” Jeer, as if I need this stress in my life. The hired help will not let this go.

“Stop it, stop trying to poison my family.” I lash out at Betty, she has a hidden agenda. Why choose to speak out now when Mandla is gone? Thobekile and I exchange glances, I know she is not fond of Betty hence the unmovable look on her face.

“It’s about time these two find out, there is no use in keeping them in the dark anymore.” Thobekile’s decision breaks my heart, I don’t want to lose my children. I was lucky when she didn’t resent me when she found out years ago, but Bulelwa and Lindiwe are not as strong as her. Their feebleness will have them reject me, I can’t let that happen.

OKOLIE RESIDENCE...

“What do you mean she is here for Zulu?” Nqaba is the one to ask, his brows knitting together quizzically. Liyana’s body locks up, Randall holds her as her feet fail to keep her still and gently lets her down. She kneels, head cast down and palms on the ground.

“The same thing happened last night,” Amara unlocks, making Randall leer at her. “There was a woman here and...”

“That’s not true, nothing of the sort happened.” Sandra’s interjection earns her a scowl from Amara, she can’t let her sister be exposed. Maybe she should have let Barbra deal with Amara like she wanted to. The woman won’t be able to keep secrets from her husband.

“Amara, what happened last night?” Randall doesn’t trust his mother, she was once in cahoots with his brother when he wanted to kill Amara. His actions resulted in Randall killing him, with no thought to it Randall chose his wife over his brother. There was nothing more he could do at that point.

Amara's gaze moves from Sandra to the man with a demanding glare...

"The woman that was here last night gave off weird vibes and Liyana..." Amara starts...

"My mother?" Nqaba interferences, the only woman that had visited the Okolie residence is Barbra.

"Yes, she..." Amara's explanation is cut off by Liyana's screams.

Barbra hardly had a peaceful night, not that she always does. Makhafula had paid the woman a visit, it was the night of Zulu's birthday and the child was meant to be in their possession by 12am on his birthday.

Angry as hell Makhafula who had been in hiding as

there was a great force after him, emerged into Barbra's cave seeking the boy who will be a vessel used to get to Mapula, the woman he claimed before she was born.

Barbra being untruthful, promised to get the child after the old man threatened to kill her and her family.

Morning came and the woman took her witch form in pursuit of Zulu, she had to drag Makhafula with her. Knowing the ancestors would defeat her without a doubt.

The duo thought they would enter the premises with such ease, Barbra seems to have forgotten about the little girl with a spiritual gift.

"We can't go in." Barbra tells Makhafula, beside her. The old man is not bothered, he wants Mapula. He can see her from where he's standing, his blood boils at the sight of Mapula clinging on to Nqabayomzi.

"I know, but from Mapula's blood sample you gave

me, I can take control over her mind along with her son. I can make her do anything, run to me, cut herself and my personal favourite, kill your son.” Makhafula reveals his evil plan to his accomplice, Barbra hates the last part. No way is she losing her son.

The old witch stretches his hands to Barbra, she takes them reluctantly. Makhafula has done this spell before, take a person’s feelings and turn them to his advantage.

“Makhafula, ngwenyama zasebunyameni, mathonga amababi, mimoya emibi, ngithi phakamani. Heed my voice and arise, take up your cups to drink the blood of my enemies. Igazi labamsulwa, creatures of the night, arise, arise, arise. Ngithi phakamani, phakamani, phakamani.” (Evil spirits, arise to drink the blood of the innocent.”

Makhafula shouts as loud as he can, Barbra has never been part of this spell. She can sense the

extent of power emanating from the old man, it has her trembling with fear. Whispers of many voices surface into the atmosphere, it's ghostly whispers, nothing Barbra has ever heard before.

Her eyes shoot open in search of the creatures whispering about. She see nothing, but her ears suffer from the noise. Makhafula is on full focus, his eyes shut closed and his are lips emanating words Barbra can't make.

“AHHH!!!” Everyone staggers in shock as Liyana screams in agony, her arms hug her stomach as she lurches over screaming. The sound is heart wrenching, Randall crouches over before her. Her body stiffens as he tries to take her up in his arms.

“Randall do something, she's in pain.” Amara can't stand to see Liyana growling and screaming, her face scrunched...a gesture of torture, the child falls on her side and rolls on the floor as if something

were in control of her body.

Everyone is so focused on Liyana that they can't see Zulu standing on the balcony, lost in a trance.

“Papa, save him. Save him papa.” Liyana screams, her body rolling on the ground. Randall hardly panics, but the sight of his daughter suffering has his heart racing faster than its normal rate.

“Who Liyana? Who do you want me to help?” He catches her into his arms and places her on his lap, her body temperature has risen. She is burning up like someone who is placed under a heater.

Randall holds her closer against his chest in hopes that she will stop wriggling, but the child begins shuddering. Her eyes roll up, foam pours out of her mouth. A panicky Amara runs into the house, tears gushing down her face. She makes it to the living room where her phone is.

“Me hemma.” (My queen.)

Neo answers immediately, as if he was expecting a

call from her.

“Liyana is suffering Neo, please pray for her, please.” Urgency in her voice, Amara delivers the sad news.

“What happened?” Neo goes into serious mode.

“I’m not sure, there’s a presence here and Liyana can see it. She’s screaming. I think she’s in pain Neo, please pray for her.”

“I’m on my way, if there is a bible in the house open it Amara and read from the book of Psalm chapter 91 until I get there. Make sure she can hear you, read it out loud.” Amara nods to Neo’s instructions while sniffing.

“Please hurry.” She pleads, desperation swirling around her voice. Amara knows Chioma has a bible stashed somewhere in her room and she takes off up the flight of stairs in search of the woman.

Meanwhile outside, Nqaba feels helpless watching his friend struggle with his daughter, he offers to

call an ambulance, but Randall disputes. This is a spiritual thing.

“I have nothing against my ancestors, but I hate this. I resent them for treating my daughter like she is nothing.” Randall growls, still trying to keep his daughter still. He’s occasionally wiping the foam that constantly drizzles out of her mouth.

“Papa, save him.” Liyana yells one more time, her eyes wet from tears. Suddenly they turn white, she convulses robustly, they can hear her teeth shattering and more foam cloud her mouth.

In that split moment, something falls to the floor with a loud clunk. Thandiwe, Nqaba and Randall turn to see Zulu lying on the ground, Nqaba rushes to him leaving Thandiwe behind.

Time slows down like a drop of water, her heart explodes in her chest, her insides contract, cold... her eyes as still as a mannequin. Thandiwe comes tumbling to the floor when her mind blacks out.

“Kose papa.” (Sorry.)

Liyana mumbles before her eyes shut and her body goes still.

“Liyana,” fright takes pleasure in glazing Randall’s voice as he calls upon his daughter who is not responsive. “Liyana open your eyes.” He grunts, fighting the tears that are creeping up on him.

Nqaba on the other hand is calling out to his son, there is no pulse. He takes Zulu's body into his arms, a small pool of blood lies on the ground where his head was. Nqaba looks up from where Zulu fell, it’s a story up. A child Zulu’s age would walk away with a broken leg and arm, the fall wouldn’t do that much damage. Why is Zulu not responding?

“Peanut.” With a gentle touch, he pats his cheek. There is no sign of him opening his eyes, they are tightly shut.

“Liyana.” Nqaba turns to Randall’s screams, his thoughts scatter in confusion as he can’t seem to

grasp what is happening. Dark clouds suddenly cover the sky, it is strange because the sun was out in all of its glory with no signs of rain.

IFEANYI...

Therapy is not working for me, Sethu has been kind enough to accompany me, but I can't look a stranger in the eye and tell them how I was brutally raped and almost killed. Doctor Kamo is a nice lady, gentle voice and a permanent smile on her face. Anyone would ease into her with no hassles, but not someone who went through what I went through. Cele harasses me, I can't seem to run away from him.

"How are you today Ife?" Kamo's voice pierces through my pondering, I blink a few times to remove

the blur from my eyes. She's smiling as usual, the weather is gloomy today. Grey skies and a little showers, hence the light in the office. It's brighter than I would like and giving me a headache.

"Are you okay Ifeanyi?" I'm comfortable, physically. It's the couch, it makes me feel sleepy as well. Mentally and emotionally, I feel like death...come to think of it...

"I think about death a lot." The words leave my mind on their own will, I frown at her scribbling something on her little note pad.

"Tell me about the thoughts." Her voice is gentle and calm as if I did not drop a bomb.

"Yesterday I saw a bottle of pills and I thought to myself, I wonder what would happen if I took the whole bottle. Would I die and where will I go if I die? My sister-in-law was preparing breakfast this morning and the knife on her hand caught my attention. I saw myself pushing it in stomach.

That's where the thought ended. Sometimes I see cars and think what would happen if I jump in front of a moving car."

I wish Dr. Kamo would stop nodding her head, she does that a lot and it bothers me.

"You're having suicidal thoughts?" Her question puzzles me, I don't answer her.

"Ifeanyi, the only way we will make progress is if you talk to me. I'm here to help you, I want to help you. You don't have to share everything at once, say whatever you're comfortable with."

"I went to a club yesterday." I study her eyes to see if she will judge me, my family judged me. My mother, Amara and Neo. My brother hasn't said anything yet, he's occupied with the visitors. He hardly looked at me this morning.

"Did anything happen at the club?"

I slowly rub my hands together, suddenly I feel nervous. The trip to the club wasn't planned, a

friend invited me and I thought it was a good idea. Being in the house suffocates me and I needed a breather.

“I drank a little and danced with a man I don’t know.” My body shudders as I cringe at the memory of me dancing with that man.

“How did that make you feel?”

“Dirty...and cheap.” I say, too ashamed to look into her eyes.

“What made you dance with him?” The questions are starting to suffocate me, there are so many of them that I have to force myself to answer.

“He said he’s from Nigeria, so I thought I would view men differently through him because my attacker is...” My brain chastises me, it withholds the rest of my speech.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to continue.” I have been waiting for these words.

“Can I go now?” She smiles at my question.

“You may, I’ll see you next week.” I have an appointment with her every Tuesday, I don’t think I want to come back. A nod is all the assurance I can give her.

Sethu couldn’t come with me today, my mother is the last person I want to accompany me. Amara and my brother are too busy for me. Hence I was driven by a guard. I find the car waiting for me outside, Remi is my brother’s trusted guard. He has been working for him for years, we were acquainted once. He was like a brother to me, until my perception of men changed.

He usually starts a conversation when I enter the car, I guess today he chooses to drive in silence, I will take that. The ride home is long, my phone keeps me company.

The car stops at a traffic light and my heart thuds when an accustomed voice says...

“How was therapy?” It’s not Remi’s voice, fear

engulfs me. My body starts trembling, my mind takes me back to the day Cele abducted me. I freeze, terrified and unable to think of the next move.

To be continued...

BURN

64...

IFEANYI...

“Nxese nkosazana, I didn’t mean to scare you.” (I’m sorry.) It’s Ntsika, why is he giving me a bottle of water. My heart hasn’t relaxed, it’s knocking hard on my chest. “Remi is a friend, I told him I know you.”

He thinks I’m supposed to be okay with this.

He’s looking into my eyes, we maintain the staring challenge until I throw in the towel and drop my gaze.

“Please don’t be afraid,” I’m not, I should be but

seeing his face has cooled me down. “I wanted to see you, Ifeanyi, I had to see you.”

“Ife,” the whisper shocks me. I can feel his eyes on me.

“Ife.” I don’t know what it is, but I feel something as my name rolls out of his tongue. There is a gentleness in the way he says it, a promise to protect. “You can call me Ntsika.” Sure I know his name.

There is a prolonged silence, I start to play with my fingers. My eyes still cast down, though he’s ogling at me.

“Is therapy going okay?” I nod my head, I swear I don’t know why I’m giving him a minute of my time. “I’m glad, is it okay if I accompany you next week?”

My eyes raise to glance at him, a question lies in his as he waits for a response. What does Ntsika want from me? He doesn’t know me, yet he’s making efforts to be near me and God I must be insane to feel safe with him.

“I won’t bother you, I will only be around so you

don't feel alone in there.”

Say no Ife, you don't know this man. Like an idiot, I nod, consenting to his request. His lips draw a refined smile.

OKOLIE RESIDENCE.

The sun has decided to shy away from the scene happening at the Okolie residence, medium showers pour down from the sky, the guards stand and watch in astonishment. Sandra has gone to look for her sister, she has to make sure that Barbra is not the one said to be in the premises.

Amara lashes out of the house with a bible in hand, her feet freeze when she meets a ghastly view outside. Randall's red-rimmed eyes meet his wife's, there is so much pain radiating from his gaze. When he loves, it's too strong, like God turned up his emotions full blast...way too far and right now he

feels like he can't breathe. He has an idea where his daughter is, but he is not confident that they will let her go.

“Randall?” A question, though her mind is muddled. Her eyes see Thandiwe lying on the floor and Nqaba with a still boy in his arms, but her feet and heart lead her to her family.

“I don't know what's going on Amara, there's no pulse.” Randall stresses, his own heart growing cold by the second.

“Take her inside please, it's raining.” Randall nods to Amara's words and takes Liyana up in his arms, the couple follow each other into the house.

Nqaba scoops Zulu up and rushes him to the car, he places him in the back seat. His jaw clenches at the pain in his heart as he strokes his son's head. A scowl forms on his face when he presses his lips on Zulu's cheeks.

The showers are transitioning into heavy rain and he remembers Thandiwe.

A guard walks up to the car with Thandiwe in his arms. Nqaba is not happy about what he's seeing, his possessive side is not okay with his woman being in the arms of another man. Grimacing at the guard, Nqaba snaps a cold deadly glare and moves to take Thandiwe from him. The guard does not wait to be told to leave...

"Tshabalala wake up." A desperate whisper into her ear, his lips brush hers right before he puts her in the car on the passenger's side. Nqaba bustles to get in on the driver's side.

Faintly, he slaps her cheeks two times...a few more times and Thandiwe's eyes flutter open. Her mind is quick to play a flash back, her lips quiver and her son's name softly erupts from her mouth.

"Z- Zulu." Nqaba fights back the zeal to tighten his jaw. How does he tell her that her son is not breathing?

Amara was given strict instructions by Neo, although she can't see the spirit realm with her natural eyes, she knows something is out there and it is after her family. Kneeling before Liyana and Zulu, Amara opens the verse Neo had mentioned. Her eyes rake Randall who is sitting beside his daughter on the floor, face buried in his hands.

The wife places the bible on the floor as the thought to comfort her husband tackles her mind. Shaky hands grip his cheeks to bring his head up so that he's looking at her. The pain in his eyes salutes her, he is a man who has given up. Defeat mocks him...

"It's okay baby, she's going to be okay." Soothingly, she whispers as her lips brush softly against his cheeks. "Pray with me," a plea from her. Randall finds it illogical, no way is he praying to a God he hardly knows.

"Amara!" He calls with a raised brow, doubting

everything that has to do with this God Amara is talking about.

“Please,” she reaches for the bible.

“Lord I believe, I believe in you. I don’t have facts to prove your existence, but I believe father. Fight for us, fight for my baby, Lord. Our enemies have hidden themselves and come to attack us, you are an all seeing, omnipotent God. Don’t take Liyana and Zulu from us, they are only kids, pure without sin.” She takes Randall’s hand, but he snatches it away. He wants to hold his daughter. “Randall please,” with tears in her eyes, she pleads for them to stand in agreement.

“No,” that’s all he says and a thousand words have been interpreted from that one word. He doesn’t believe, not when his daughter has been through so much. How can the powerful think they can use the weak and we should be okay with it?

Amara drapes Randall's hand with hers, the touch has him looking up at her.

“I know Randall, I feel your pain. I might not have given birth to her, but she is my daughter too. Let me be strong for you, you don’t have to hide behind all that toughness. It’s okay to be weak, it’s okay to cry baby and it’s okay to believe. If you can’t do it, then I’ll do it for us, I will believe for the both of us. Please take my hand.” Randall is tired. Everything is too much for him, but still he takes her hand.

NTUTHUKO...

Veronica hardly slept last night, it was one bad dream after another. She’s sleeping on the same couch, Mzi should be here already. He’s not taking my calls, I know he is busy with my wife, hence neglected his family. My father ambles into the living room with two cups of coffee,

“Have you heard from Mzi?” I would if he answered his phone, I shake my head and accept the coffee. He positions himself on the single couch near me.

“We can’t wait for him any longer dad, Veronica is

getting worse. Mzi is busy turning my wife in bed.” I get a chiding glare.

“He’s your elder brother Ntuthuko, show respect.” He’s got to be kidding me.

“Respect you say? What about him stealing my wife from me?”

“You two should talk about this, I don’t like it when my children quarrel.” There is nothing to talk about.

“Your son thinks he’s better than me, you should see how he carries himself around me.” I hate that and I hate what he did. “We were hardly married a month dad, a bloody month and Mzi had his dick deep in my marriage.”

Okay... That came out wrong...

I squirm on the chair due to the glare my father is stabbing me with, I’m old enough to speak my mind. He needs to loosen up.

“Is this how you speak around adults?” I’m an adult as well.

“I’m sorry dad, I’m just so angry.” Any excuse to get

him to stop glaring.

“That doesn’t justify your terrible choice of words, you have no right speaking to me like that.” He’s continuing?

“Relax dad, it wasn’t directed to you.” I whisper-shout and get a reprimanding glower, Duma and Barbra are the same honestly. This respect they demand miffs me. I clear my throat as I feel a tad suffocated by my father’s formidable demeanour, if I were still a kid he would have thrashed me right here.

“You’re very disrespectful son and your mother lets you get away with anything, it’s her fault you have become this person.” He voices through scrunched teeth, I fight the strong urge to click my tongue. If he continues like this I will explode.

“Mzi is your brother, he’s older than you.”

“So that gives him the right to take my wife from

me?” Is he hearing what is coming out of his mouth? His brow springs up as he continues to pierce me with his eyes.

“Thandiwe is not a child to be taken away, she is an adult who is capable of thinking for herself. I don’t approve with the way Mzi went about this, I will rebuke him for that. What I will not have is my sons killing each other over a woman.” His voice raises in the last words, I feel each syllable as he speaks with purpose and firmness. “Dammit, there are plenty of women out there. You can’t continue to cry over spilt milk.”

“You wouldn’t understand, you have never had your wife taken from you.” Anger has me up on my feet, I need to get out of here or I will fight this man.

“Ntuthuko.” I ignore his call and proceed towards the exit.

Liyana has been here before, she remembers the place from her dreams. The mountains, the river, the trees, the bonfire... Her grandfather dwells here, her heart is racing. Her chest clenching, the feeling has her hyperventilating.

Tears gush from her eyes as she fights to breathe, memories of Zulu falling from the balcony flood her mind.

The pain he felt when falling whelms her, trying to catch each breath given to her she lugs her feet towards the bonfire. Nana is nowhere to be seen, but the little girl knows there is healing where she is going. She has seen and experienced the power that lies with her ancestors, the gift is not something she likes, but being an obedient child she has to do what is required of her.

“Liyana!” Her grandfather sings when she reaches the bonfire, Liyana turns to him. A restrained simper abides on his lips.

“Na...na...” (Grandfather.) She manages these

words, urgently and tearfully.

Nana takes a step closer, reaches his hand to touch her head.

“Peace.” With this word emanating from his mouth, Liyana’s falls into peace just as the old man has called it. She tumbles down on her knees, as she is reminded that she is in the presence of royalty.

“Nana they killed him, please take revenge, they killed him” Liyana blares frantically, her heart is broken, hence the sobbing.

Nana shakes his head with a grin on his face, he ambles past Liyana to sit by the fire.

“Nana!” Liyana screams, seeing how he shows no care for Zulu. She can get up and follow him, yet she chooses to crawl to him. “Do something please, there are witches in my father’s compound. They killed Zulu, take revenge nana.”

“Revenge will be taken yes, but the boy belongs with me now.” Nana declares, but Liyana can’t have that.

Zulu is still young, he has so much to live for. He can't take him just like that.

"No," the thirteen year old rumbles, defying the elders. Nana's heart dances merrily as he sees Uze in her. "You can't have him, not now."

"He belongs here now Liyana, he can't go back." Nana exclaims untiringly.

"Why? I don't understand."

"It's not for you to understand." The audacity he has to say this after they have used her all these years.

"Nana you can't have him, I won't let you have him." Liyana grumbles while she tries to maintain respect in her tone, she can't handle the information thrown at her and it has her on pins and needles.

Nana nods boldly and reaches behind the big rock he's sitting on to pull out a dagger.

"Give me your hand." Liyana doesn't dispute, her shaky hands stretch to him. Predicting what is about to happen, she nervously bites her bottom lip.

“Your blood for his.”

“M...my blood?” Her voice shakes, terrified of the knife held to the palm of her hand. Liyana clenches her eyes to hide away from what she sees as a grisly scene, blood makes her cringe.

A sharp pain on her palm throws a gasp out of her mouth, tears run down her face yet she doesn't dare open her eyes. Suddenly strong winds and dark clouds gather over the blue sky. Thunder resounds as if a perfect storm is on its way, the impact compels Liyana to flip her eyes open.

Lightning flashes three times before her gaze flickers to Nana. He smiles brightly, but the smile sends shivers through her body.

“It is done.” Nana declares triumphantly, Liyana doesn't have to ask twice. Her heart is at peace, she grazes the bloodied wound on her palm.

“I am always with you Liyana, don't forget that. There will come a time when we will fully need your attention. You will have to sacrifice a lot in order to avail yourself to us.” Nana's words make no sense

to Liyana's miniature brain, she only knows that they communicate through her when they have something to say. What sacrifice is he talking about?

"Go your way my child? Look after your brother."

Liyana frowns and almost rolls her eyes, R. J is a pain as far as she knows.

"Chioma will do the looking after, R. J doesn't want to see me happy nana. He's making my life difficult." She tells on her little brother, Nana laughs at her innocence.

"R.J is in good hands, I mean your other brother. He is going to need you, don't be hard on him." Nana is not making sense to Liyana, her mind falls into sixes and sevens. Heaps of confusion flood her head, her parents want more kids. She has heard her father mention it, however Amara never responded to the idea. Could it be that she is pregnant? "Go well my child." He touches her head, his warm smile is the last thing Liyana sees before she is sent into a deep slumber.

NQABA...

Zulu suddenly woke up on the way to the hospital and that was after Thandiwe had cried herself silly. She held him in her arms, pleaded with God to bring him back. It took so much of me not to pull over and comfort her, I refused to believe that he was gone.

Now we're waiting for the doctor to update us, I can feel Thandiwe's body trembling in my arms. She won't stop shedding tears.

"This is the second time he almost died." She takes me back to Kenya as I help her to a bench in the waiting ward. "Is God testing my love for him?"

I don't know how to respond to her question, I hold her closer instead.

"I'm tired Nqaba, when is this going to end? My son died today, he doesn't deserve all of this."

"Liyana said there was someone at the gate, could it have been that old man?" He must be a coward to

keep himself hidden, I don't care if he's a spirit. If he's able to invade our lives then he should show himself.

"I don't know, I don't dream about him anymore." She states and sighs as she leans into my chest, I squeeze her in.

"Yes, but I think he has something to do with your memory loss." There is no other explanation.

"But how do I run away from him? I pray, not as much as MamSonto wants. But I pray Nqaba and God is not a respecter of persons. He doesn't take sides, even a few words should mean something." Thandiwe sniffs, I can't validate her remark.

"I'm still getting to know him, we can do it together. Like we've been doing. We are going to defeat that demon Tan-tan." This I know for sure, I see the doctor plodding to us. Thandiwe is the first to get up.

"How is he?" The doctor smiles at my probing.

"He's fine, there are no head injuries. We're going to keep him for the night, you can take him home

tomorrow.” Thandiwe looks the happiest, the doctor tells us to go in and ambles away.

“You go ahead, I need to call Randall.” She nods and makes her way to Zulu’s room whereas I make a call.

RANDALL...

“Zulu is awake,” Nqaba says over the phone.

“How?” I ask, glancing down at Liyana. Did she sacrifice her life for Zulu? Nana wouldn’t do this to me, he wouldn’t take my baby from me. I feel a hand rest on my shoulder, I twist my head to find Amara kneeling behind me. I wish Nqaba good luck and drop the call.

“You said your God will help her, why isn’t she awake yet?” I search for answers, I should have taken Liyana to the hospital. We are distracted by the sound of footfalls treading to the living room,

Neo casually sashays in.

“Jeer, the witch at your gate is strong man.” These are his first words, he gives Liyana one look and smiles. “This one loves attention, why is she still sleeping?”

“Sleeping?” Amara questions caught in disarray.

“Yes, get her a glass of water me hemma and make her something solid to eat. She will be weak when she wakes up.” (My queen.)

Neo scoots Liyana up and places her on the couch.

“It is not a pretty sight for a king to be sitting on the floor like that Uze.” The idiot says, he seems different. Not the clown I know him to be. Rising to my feet, I prepare to attack him with a bunch of questions.

“What’s going on Neo?” This is not a game.

“There is a witch outside your house Uze, she can’t move because she was struck by lightning.” He explains and I can’t put the pieces together.

“Lightning?”

“Yes, she pissed off someone out there. When are you telling your new best friend his mother is a witch?”

“I don’t follow.” You can never tell if Neo is serious or playing around.

“Mzi’s mother is a witch, she’s the one outside.” He throws his head back laughing like he cracked a joke. “I don’t know how she is going to move from there, magriza is stuck.” (Granny.)

As I gather Neo’s words, Liyana opens her eyes and gasps in a breath. Amara is here with the water, I missed her leaving the room.

“Shame poor child, she is too young for this gift. Can’t you tell your grandfather to wait for her to grow up? Let her enjoy her childhood.” I agree with Neo, Nana wouldn’t. That old man does whatever he wants.

“Zulu.” Liyana fusses softly. Zulu can wait, I need to embrace my baby. She squirms when I pull her into my arms and shower her with kisses.

To be continued...

BURN

65...

RANDALL...

Neo dragged me out to the gate in search of the witch he claims is trespassing and the most bizarre thing is that the woman is Nqaba's mother. I am in no place to clash with him, I don't know anything just that my daughter saw someone today, someone we couldn't see. Neo hasn't stop prattling about how the person will be exposed soon in due time.

Liyana is sleeping in her room, Amara is with her. Today has been a long day, I don't ever want to go

through whatever happened today, ever again. Neo hasn't stopped reading the bible, I find it strange. I find him strange, the serious face and the whispered prayers he keeps sending to God.

I need a stiff drink or I won't stop fidgeting, maybe a smoke too. Amara thinks I have stopped which I did at some point in time, but life becomes so tough that the only thing that helps is smoking my problems away. What am I saying? The problems hardly dissipate from a blow of a cigarette.

"Neo let's step outside for a minute." He leans up at me from the couch, his face crunches as if disgusted by the very reason I want us to go outside. I will leave him here if he won't follow me.

"You're going to spend time with the devil, aren't you?" He says, cocking his brows at me.

"What are you talking about?"

"You want to smoke?" Should I be offended by the condescending tone?

“Are you coming or not?” I’m already irritated by the urge to smoke and he is unknowingly adding to the aggravation.

“Me hemma is in the house Uze, you can’t smoke around her.” (My queen.)

Why can’t Neo be normal and agree like normal people?

“You will find me in the back yard if you change your mind, I want to hear everything about that Barbra woman.” I leave him with his bible and saunter out to the back yard, the sun is about two hours from setting.

Making myself comfortable on one of the outdoor chairs, I lit the cigarette. Each drag should come with a calmness, yet I don’t find it so I take more drags, the puff generates a cloud of smoke. My eyes follow it twirling skyward as if it is taking my troubles to the heavens.

“You know that could kill you?” I narrow my eyes to the large figure before me, Nqaba is standing grimace on his face

“I would die a happy man,” I answer, his mouth forms a questionable downward smile as he plods closer to the benches. “I have loved and been loved, is it not what men live for? If you have had that in life, then there is nothing else to look forward to.”

“Family is everything I agree, but when you die you take their souls with you. They die too and although they move on, your ghost will always lurk around them.” He retorts and reaches his hand to take the cigarette from me, I didn’t know he smokes.

“Anything else I should know about you?” I ask, watching him struggle with the cigarette, he’s not really a smoker. Very nearly fooled me there.

“I almost lost my son today, I need something to get that image out of my head.” His voice cracks and yet there is so much agony resonating in it. His hand is shaking out of agitation, so I sit next to him, although I don’t know how I will comfort him.

“I’ve been alone my whole life, when Thandiwe left me loneliness became a part of my life. I embraced it, but it terrified me. I have always been afraid of it and now Thandiwe and Zulu’s lives are not guaranteed. I can’t lose them Randall.” He sucks in more puffs from the cigarette, he should take more because that’s the only thing that is going to comfort him. I’m not good with this consoling thing, it’s easy with Amara because she’s my wife, she makes it easy for me.

“That’s life.” He looks at me expectantly, unfortunately I don’t have more words for him.

Thank God, here comes Neo, my heart leaps a little at the liquor in his hand. He’s carrying three glasses, God I need it.

“Yeah lona,” (Hey you two.)

He salutes as he settles down.

“What’s this for? Were you not playing pastor a

while ago?” Neo nods at my question while pouring the liquor into the glasses.

“Jesus turned water into wine.” He responds sternly and hands Nqaba a glass almost half filled, I get one as well. “Since when does Mzi smoke?” He looks at me, more like a dirty look.

“Uze, you’re a bad influence. Le uena Mzi, you let this bear bully you.” (You too.)

“You’re stupid.” Nqaba retaliates, gulping down the beverage. Neo doesn’t seem bothered by the retort, he sits back and lands his feet on the table.

“Yeah neh Modimo, you know I have Holy water in my bag.” He opens up, I think I know where he is taking this. “Tell me about your mother Mzi.” Confusion slaps Nqaba in the face, his eyes drink in my inquisitive gaze.

“Why do you want to know about my mother?”

“I had a dream last night where she was chasing Thandiwe, no matter how fast sis Tee ran she

couldn't get away from her. I kept calling out to her, telling her to come to me, she couldn't hear me. Thandiwe's spiritual life has been weakened, no matter how much she tries to connect with God, the spirit of laziness will overcome her. Sometimes she second guesses her prayers before she begins, she would ask herself if it is worth it... Is God even listening? I don't blame her, it happens to the best of us. We're human and the flesh tends to be stronger than the spirit." That was lengthy, I should have seen this coming. The sermon was bound to happen.

"We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and Thandiwe is no different. She is a married woman Mzi, we all know that. In the eyes of God she still belongs to Ntuks."

"Thandiwe belongs to me." Nqaba snorts, refusing to accept whatever Neo and God have concluded together. Neo brushes him up and down with his eyes.

“Relax or you’ll faint, hau.” Neo states, too calmly.
“It’s no secret that you’re living in adultery.”

“Are you judging him Neo? Is this what this is about?” I ask, it is not like him to bible bash people.

“You know me Uze, I don’t judge. I’m stating facts, I’m simply trying to help my friends. Sis Tee has to cut all ties with Ntuks before giving herself to Mzi. The wages of sin is death, sis Tee is spiritually dead. I’m not saying God can’t hear her when she prays, but she is at war with darkness and living in sin while at it. The devil has cast an evil eye on her, mogirl is spiritually dead. You need to control your hormones until they have divorced.” Neo.

This is hard-hitting, Nqaba is unsettled. He’s warily ogling at Neo, possibly trying to piece his words together.

“Here.” Neo places a bible on Nqaba’s lap. “Now call your mother and ask where she is?” I see we’re back to Barbra being a witch.

IFEANYI...

“So my brother is at a crossroad now, he’s stuck between the man he loves and his sugar mama.” He chuckles in disbelief, I thought the ride home would be sad and drearily and I thought Ntsika was not the talkative type. That’s the aura he gives off, to my surprise smidgeons of smiles have been stretching on my lips since he started reciting the story about his brother in a love triangle. Apparently there was a shooting at his boyfriend’s father’s funeral. I might be reading too much into things, but Ntsika’s voice became dark when he was telling that part, self-blame and regret lain in his voice.

“I feel sorry for the kid.” His voice radiates another chortle, I want to ask...

“Your brother is gay?” Mind...you traitor you... Honestly I didn’t think the words would dribble out of my mouth, also I’m not shocked.

I haven’t felt at peace in a long while, I haven’t felt anything and right now I can see the light. I’m

hurting yes, but I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. Oddly, this stranger driving me home as slow as possible is standing at the end of that tunnel and suddenly I'm not afraid of the dark.

Chioma once spoke about God working through people, it could be your parents, friend, colleague or that someone you love dearly or a total stranger. Angels come in different forms. Could Ntsika be that angel? Why am I okay with a man I hardly know, hijacking my car?

The car has stopped at a traffic light and he's looking at me again, those eyes...there is something about them, something that pulls me into a serenity of some sort, one I can't explain. The stare has me bashfully hiding my eyes from him, heat rushes to my cheeks. Thank God for the dark genes I have, or else I would be exposed.

"Pansexual." He says, my eyes can't resist the urge to glance up at him. Will he ever stop staring?

“That’s what he told me, apparently he’s attracted to personality not gender. The world is full of strange people and my brother is one of them.” He expresses and turns back to the front when he picks up how uncomfortable I am. A terrible song booms in the car, I see his hand reach for a mobile on the seat next to him. He answers with a clearing of a throat.

“Makhathini...ngiyaxolis a ntokazi, I’ve been busy...I know...” He sighs, I would paint it as a sigh of frustration. “I know Onica and I’m sorry...okay...Are you able to get away?... I’ll come fetch you.”

It is clear now that he’s talking to a lover, I reject the sting that wants to force its way into my heart. I mean what the heck?

“Thirty minutes...me too.” Feeling a bit awkward, I hug my tummy. I shouldn’t be here, listening to this, I wish he would drive faster and take me home.

Remi is waiting at the gate, I knew he wouldn't dare go in lest he has to answer to my brother. Ntsika pulls up a bit far from the gate, he turns to me. His eyes are smiling, but his face is hard.

"Can I call you?" I don't think that will be a good idea, Onica will not be okay with it. I reach for the door handle and pull it open. "I'll take that as a yes."

I don't provide him with an answer, but bolt out of the car. Remi gives me a faint smile, I should give him a mouth full for risking my life that.

"Miss Ife." He has always called me that. "I'm sorry I..."

"It's okay." I interpose and look at Ntsika, he has drawn the window down. He's looking directly at me, after what feels like minutes I remove my keen gaze from him and head towards the gate.

BARBRA...

"Will you be careful? It hurts." I snap at my sister

Sandra, she found me at the Okolies after Makhafula left me alone after I was struck by lightning. That damn thing struck three times, I missed the first two which were headed for him, but because he's more powerful than I am. The man escaped without a scratch. Sandra came just in time, as my powers had worn out. The guards would have seen me.

“Will you stop whining? I don't really have to do this, I'm not obligated to do it.” She grumbles as she helps me to a bed, I don't know whose house this is. She says no one will find us here, we're safe.

“See what your people have done to me?” The excruciating pain is unbearable, I can't stand it. Death is near for me, I just know it.

“Don't even go there Barbra, you caused this. I warned you about going after the Okolies, you knew what they were capable of.”

“I wasn't there for their own, I had come for my grandson. He's a Biyase, they have nothing to do with Zulu.” Sandra chuckles lowly, she stands with

her hands on her hips.

“You’re stupid, has it ever occurred to you that that boy belongs to Mzi? Remember how Liyana was so bent on protecting him, the Okolies only protect their own.” She reveals.

“I’m not surprised, my son’s wife has always been a whore. I called it when I first laid eyes on her. How can she lie to Ntuthuko? My boy will be disappointed to learn that Zulu is not his.” I say, much to Sandra amusement. I can’t grasp why she is laughing.

“Are you serious?” She raises her voice, I don’t like the poise she has taken, it is darn right disrespectful. “You’re at death’s door Barbra and you’re worried about your son finding out that his wife is a whore.”

I did say she is disrespectful.”

“Don’t speak to me like that... Sandra... I’m your...”

“Oh please,” she raises a hand to shut me up. “Look at you, you’ve been fried because of your stupidity. I’m shocked that you dared the Okolie ancestors.” To hell with the Okolie ancestors.

“Well I think it’s about time we call a meeting and tell the elders back in Ghana that I am the mother of Thamsanqa and they have another heir who should also sit on the throne.” Sandra growls deep in her throat at the sound of my words, I have nothing to lose now.

“No such thing will be done or I will personally finish what they started. You are not taking my son from me, Barbra.” She shouts, pointing a finger at me. The audacity...

“Get...me water...please...” Dammit, I’m struggling to breathe. Sandra simpers at my request. “Please and get sgwili for me, he will be able to help me.”

I get an eye roll as a response.

“I’m not going to do that, I don’t practice witchcraft. Keep that cat away from me.” Whatever, Sgwili will find me anyway. The problem now is Makhafula,

that witch was desperate to get his hands on Zulu. Who knows what plan he has up his sleeves now? I hope he won't turn to Ntuthuko, I agreed when he wanted to use him to get to Thandiwe, now my son is obsessed with that woman. I hate her.

NQABA...

“What do you mean my mother is a witch?” Neo seems to have drunk a little too much. I don't understand how he is seated with the most chilled expression as if he did not just accuse my mother of being a witch.

“I don't know if there is another way to put it, witches are called witches. Abathakathi in zulu, baloi in my language and Uze?” He gives his attention to Randall who is smoking his life away, I don't know how much more he can smoke. Randall shrugs, you'd think he will roll his eyes, but that's something Neo would do. A smile stretches on my mouth as Neo does what my mind is entertaining.

“How did you see her?” I ask, refusing to believe that my mother is actually a witch.

“I don’t know, I guess God showed me. You’d be surprised by what God shows you when you fast and pray.” Yet he is drinking. “MamSonto had asked me to join her in prayer, I opted for a three day fast. Today is my first day, I’m dying ntwana. Hunger is not for the faint hearted.”

“Okay I hear you, why didn’t you bring her in? You said she was struck by lightning, right?” He leers, shaking his head in disapproval.

“You wanted me to touch a witch Mzi? Are you okay? Is Thandiwe not loving you right?” What worries me is that he’s saying this with no sign of amusement.

“Look, this is the only thing I know. Your mother was here for something, I don’t know what, but I suggest you ask her what her plan is before she finishes us.”

I have to talk to my father about this, Barbra can’t be

a witch. I wouldn't mark her absent from doing evil, but an actual witch?

"Also, MamSonto said you need to keep an eye on Zulu and Thandiwe. Thandiwe is not entirely herself, someone is controlling her. There's a voodoo doll with her name on it, it has to be found and destroyed before it's too late." Neo's words sink deep, bursting at the seams of my heart.

"Look, I wouldn't just make this up Mzi. The life of Thandiwe is at stake." Neo continues to dish up sad news, I'm struggling to grasp everything at once.

"You know Neo..." That's Randall, his focus is on the glass of scotch in his hand. He keeps a furrowed brow as he gradually stirs the liquid. He is a bit wasted. "I'm confused, when did you become a seer? Did MamSonto transfer her powers over to you?" My thoughts too.

Neo chortles lightly as he considers Randall with a black stare.

"The problem Uze is that you're always confused

and that is the only reason you will never understand the supernatural. God uses whoever he wants to use and he chose me, not a king from Ghana.” Wow.

Randall frowns at him, his face dipped in grumpiness.

“Hey, you say you saw Mzi’s mother and I want to know how?” Randall.

“I told you, I’m fasting and praying, who knows? I might be Bab’Sonto now.” Okay he did not just say that. I turn to find Randall giving him the same look as I...Neo can’t be a real life character, he can’t be. I expect Randall to laugh because I am half way there, but he continues to drink his scotch with no expression on his face.

I need to call Thandiwe, I left her at the hospital. I needed a breather, time to process everything that happened.

“You have to be careful Uze, no more secrets ntwana. I will be the one telling me hemma what

you're up to. You know God has no timing, he will let the words spill out of my mouth and you, my friend can't blame me. You will have to take it up with God." Neo says, sipping on his drink, Randall hardly takes his words into consideration. He drops the cigarette butt on his hand and tramples on it, I'm shocked by how much he smokes.

"That's alright Neo, as long as God exposes you to Ayize. We'll be even, buddy." Randall jokes, at least I think he is joking.

Thandiwe doesn't answer her phone so I try her again, I've got to keep her and Zulu away from Barbra until I find out what is really going on.

"Eish, then God should use someone else. I'm not ready to take Bushiri's place. Prophecy for what? Aowa." I walk away to Neo's complaint as Thandiwe answers the phone.

To be continued...

BURN

66...

NTUTHUKO...

My brother texted me last night, he has something to tell me and I can't comprehend what it could be. I slept over at my father's house, we still need to tackle Veronica's issue. I sit up at the sound of a door knock in the guest bedroom, my father walks in immediately.

"Morning." He salutes, grouchily. "Have you seen your sister? I can't find her anywhere."

"Is she not in her room?" He shakes his head negatively, I scamper off the bed, throw on my slippers and follow him out.

"Your mother didn't come last night, her phone is off. Did you perhaps speak to her?" This is so careless of her, she never sleeps out.

"No dad, I haven't spoken to her in days." Truth.

We search the house for Veronica, it's not that big so we would find her if she were hiding. There are voices outside, I peep through the kitchen window to see her ramble out of a small red car. The driver draws the window down to speak to her, I can't recognise him.

"Dad, dad." I call for my father as I push the kitchen door open, anger brewing inside me, I rush out toward the gate.

"Veronica." I boom and her head spins to me, her eyes hump at the sight of me. "Who the hell is that?" The man drives away in full speed as I near them, I know this child did not sleep out.

"Who was that man?" She yelps when I roughly grab her arm.

"It hurts Bhuti." (Brother.)

Tears instantly pour out of her eyes, her lower lip quavers.

"Who was that man Veronica? Where do you come

from so early in the morning?” I can’t control my anger, shouting at her happens by a whisker, but today she has crossed all limits.

“Bhuti stop.” (Brother.)

Veronica cries, her tears won’t work on me this time.

“Did you sleep with him?” I’m shouting, she’s not answering me and that makes me so angry. She squirms under the grab, trying to get away from me.

“No.” She yells, tearfully. I know she’s lying, men take advantage of naïve girls like my sister.

“Let her go Ntuthuko.” My father commands as he walks out from the kitchen, I lighten the grip on her arm and she takes off into his arms. Veronica is spoiled, I’m not against it, but she has to be told when she’s wrong.

“She spent the night away from home dad, with a man.” I’m going to kill that bastard, let me get my hands on him.

My father gently pushes her from his arms, his hands gripped on her biceps, disappointment licks his face, yet it splits a faint smile.

Knowing that she has let him down, Veronica's face falls faster than a bun removed from the oven too soon, her lip pokes out under the blistering morning sun.

"Where have you been?" Dad questions, I hate how he is so calm with her. How will she learn if he doesn't chide her?

"With a friend." This child...

"A friend Veronica? That was a full grown man I saw there, since when do you have friends that are guys?" I yell, my father frowns at me and shakes his head, gesturing that I stop.

"I'm sorry I didn't sleep at home." The audacity she has to let the words surge out of her tongue.

"Mom was right, dad is too lenient with you. Have you forgotten what happened the last time you were

with a man?” She bites her lower lip as she turns to look at me.

“Let’s go inside, people will wonder what is happening.” My father orders, he walks with Veronica in his arms, I know he’s going to let her go so easily. I have to find that idiot, he’ll tell me what he wants with my sister.

THANDIWE...

“We’re going to tell my brother about Zulu today.” He is telling me this for the third time, he told me last night when he came to the hospital, the second time when we got home this morning and now as we prepare to leave. I think he is nervous about it, hence the same thing hovers in his head. I’m nervous too, I don’t know how to feel about Ntuthuko finding out that Zulu is not his. He has never loved the boy.

“Are you having second thoughts?” I ask Nqaba, glancing up at him from the bed. He’s standing

before me, hands across his chest and worry splashed on his face.

“Will it make a difference even I did?” Not really. “It’s about time we tell him and he has to sign the papers, I want to make you my wife.” He announces, taking my hand into his. I want to be his wife, but not anytime soon. I love Nqaba and can’t imagine life without him, but I can’t jump from one marriage to another.

“Maybe a year or two from now.” I chew on my lip, lying in wait for his response. Nqaba simpers, my remark confuses him.

“Why?” Suddenly, he sounds grumpy.

“I married Ntuthuko not so long ago, jumping from one brother to another in a space of a year? People will talk and I..”

“You care what people think.” Who doesn’t? And what is he angry about? I only stated the truth, my hand slips out of his. He is as grumpy as Garfield, I’m not in the mood to pacify him.

“I don’t Nqaba...” Lies. “But what’s the rush? We’re

together, that's all that matters." He slightly tilts his head to the side with a blank expression.

"Finish up, we'll be in the car." My heart drowns as I watch him walk away, Nqaba is so good at hiding his feelings that I don't know what he's thinking at the moment.

NQABA...

My hearts splits in half each time my eyes land on my son, it still pains me to think that I was close to losing him.

"Uncle Nqaba." His voice reaches me from the back seat, I take a peek through the rear-view mirror. He is buckled up, while playing with a toy.

"Yes, my boy." Will I ever get over the fact that he is my son?

"When are you taking me to the amusement park?" He will never stop raving about it, I meet Thandiwe's gaze next to me, she shrugs. I don't mind taking him

today itself, the mother though says Zulu needs to recover fully.

“How about next week, we’ll take Liyana and R.J along.” I see him smile through the rear-view mirror.

“Can dada tag along too, I miss him.” It’s the first time he mentions Ntuthuko, we decided to tell Zulu that I’m his father right after having a talk with Ntuthuko. Thandiwe slides her hand on top of mine, I can’t look at her now as I’m driving through traffic.

“I don’t know Peanut, we will have to ask him.” I doubt Ntuthuko will be keen, he hardly ever spent time with Zulu before.

“Does he hate me?” His words cut like a double edged sword, Thandiwe shifts on the seat. She wants to say something, but I have a feeling she won’t. Last night she voiced out that she is confused as far as this matter is concerned. It’s not a lie that Ntuthuko put Zulu’s life in danger and as for best father, I wouldn’t give him an undertaking. He is no better than a poisonous snake.

“Where did you get that idea from?” I probe not

knowing how to respond to his question.

“I don’t know.” His answer, Thandiwe turns to get a look at him.

“Baby, I don’t want you to never second guess dada’s love for you. You are a special boy and everybody loves you.” She is doing good, Zulu does not have to be exposed to Ntuthuko’s vile nature.

BHEKIZIZWE...

Lilian hasn’t been the same since Betty told everyone that Thobekile is the child she had with Mandla, Lilian was her friend from school.

While Lilian came from an affluent family, Betty was the only child to a domestic worker. She caught Mandla’s eye, they hit it off. But Lilian had other plans for the man, somehow she wormed her way into his life and his bed.

Betty caught them in bed in together, heartbroken she broke up with him and refused to forgive him.

After many tries and failing to pacify an angry Betty, Mandla decided to move on with Lilian.

Unbeknownst to him, Betty was expecting a child.

She wanted to punish Mandla by keeping him away from his child, but woke up one day with a change of heart. Mandla took Betty in promising to take care of the baby, Lilian was not for the idea, she preferred they give her a job as a maid and adopt Thobekile.

Betty must've been smoking something strong that day because she agreed, she claims she had no one and nothing and her daughter needed a father.

Thobekile hates Betty because she signed her away to another woman, that's right, she let Lilian adopt her child. The whole story is a mess.

When Lilian decides to put her foot down no one can stop her, poor Betty has to gather her belongings and leave the house. She has nowhere to go and I feel for her because she has lost a home

back in Joburg as well. She lived with Mandla and Lilian and now that he is gone, Lilian will not hesitate to throw her out. If Mandla was clever enough, then he secured Betty's future. Lilian is a Tornado with legs, she banned Betty from attending the funeral.

Bulelwa has overslept his sleeping tokens, while some people stress eat, he stress sleeps. I shut the door after plodding into his room, he's buried under the covers.

His emotions are bottled up in his heart and he refuses to speak about his father, the secret revealed and Betty leaving.

"Buttercup." He snores when he is fast asleep, so I know he is fake sleeping. The mattress bounces as I settle on the edge, Bulelwa holds on to the blanket when I pull it.

"Come on Buttercup, get up please."

"I don't want to," he's been crying, his shaky voice gives him away.

“I know you’re hurting, please don’t do this, don’t shut me out.” Gently, I stroke his back, a heavy sigh escaping me.

“Let me sleep please I’m tired.” He fidgets to get my hand off of him, I can be twice as stubborn.

“You’re not tired, you’re hurting.” I’m victorious in pulling the blanket off, his grimaced face slops to the side. His eyes are puffy and red from crying, my heart halts due to the picture.

“Leave...me alone.” I don’t listen to his plea, but take his face into my hands and slightly squash his soft cheeks. The frown on his face doesn’t waver, I lean in to place a kiss on his pouted lips.

“Won’t you let me take care of you?”

“I don’t need taking care of, I’m a big boy.” He whispers defiantly and pushes me off, only to lie back down and pull the blanket up to his chin. I want to snatch it off, but I don’t want to aggravate him any further.

“Betty is leaving, won’t you speak to your mother?” He’s upset with both women, so is Lindiwe. She almost went into labour, her fiancé had to take her with him. The stress is not good for the baby, I have a feeling Bulelwa doesn’t like him.

“I don’t care, let her go.” Bulelwa sighs into the pillow, his attitude towards Betty and Lilian’s lies has me worried. Now I’m certain I will lose him when he finds out what Lilian and I have been up to.

“Please tell me, you’re okay, I need to know that you’re okay.” Bulelwa throws the blanket off, setting himself up. His face glistening with anger and pain, it hurts me that he’s hurting and I can’t help him.

“What do you want from me?” His anger is justifiable, I won’t hold him against it.

“I want you to stop pushing me away.” I answer without a second thought, keeping my voice at bay. He is already riled up and nothing will work if we’re both screaming. “I want you to open up and talk to me, let me be there for you. You have been through

so much and I understand that it is too much for you to handle, at least let me carry some of your burdens. Seeing you hurt, hurts me too Bulelwa.”

He scowls at my dramatics.

“My heart is split in two Zizwe, my father and I didn’t have a good relationship. Now he’s gone, I will never have a chance to make things right.” I let his words sink in before I take his hands and rub my thumbs across his knuckles. His breathe hitches as I move closer to him, the closing distance between us makes my heart knock on my chest.

“It’s okay Buttercup, you can let it all out. I’m here my love, I’m here.” I tell him due to the tears raining down his face and press a lingering kiss on his quaking lips. As I pull away, I press my forehead to his. Our breaths twirl between our mouths.

A choked sob bursts through Bulelwa’s mouth, his arms enfold around my neck. I hold him close as he buries his face within my neck and collarbone and sobs like a child. I have taken note that Bulelwa is a

crier and that is okay. I will always be here to wipe his tears away.

THANDIWE...

Seeing Ntuthuko again makes my stomach churn aggressively, he still has that vicious look lacing his eyes. His words ring in my head once again, the threat he lashed out that day. My hand instinctively find Nqaba who is standing beside me with Zulu in his arms. He squeezes my hand, once...twice...the third time lucky, I ease into his touch, feeling the safety I was searching for.

He and Ntuthuko are engrossed on an eye lock moment, these two are at daggers drawn and it is my fault. I mean it's not a given.

“Bafo.” Ntuthuko welcomes, his tone taking the stern route. Nqaba nods in return, I don't want war today. My wish won't be granted, wishes are for

white people, while we have to cross our fingers and hope for the best. Whatever comes we take it and move, if it's too much to handle then we get elders to intervene and again hope comes to play as we hope that they make the right decisions for us.

Ntuthuko reaches out his hands to take Zulu from Nqaba, however Biyase refuses to let go, it takes me pacifyingly rubbing his back, a motion of approval. Ntuthuko will not do anything to the child, we're all here.

“He's my son.” Here is a grown man acting like a child, his hand tightens around mine as he watches Ntuthuko walk into the house with Zulu in his arms.

“No one said he's not,” I comfort him. “Remember Zulu doesn't know yet, and I think it's good that he doesn't hate Ntuthuko, he is his uncle.”

The grown ass man flouts my remark and leaves me behind as he plods into the house.

Brabra is not home and Duma does not look ecstatic about it, Veronica is sleeping in his room. Not wanting to make things awkward for Ntuthuko, I find a seat away from Nqaba. He still has that jealous look on his face, Zulu is comfortable where he is. Ntuthuko is suddenly gentle with him, something new.

“Where have you been?” Duma questions his eldest son, Nqaba finally removes his gaze from his brother and son. He clears his throat, preparing an answer for the father.

“I’m here now father, why have you summoned me?” I have always found the formality in his voice jaw dropping, it is darn sexy.

“Your sister is not well, she needs help.” Duma recounts Veronica’s current situation, the nightmares...the strange man claiming to be married to her.

“What do you think we should do?” Nqaba.

“I suggested we consult, this should have been done yesterday, but we had to wait for you Mr. Important.” Ntuthuko wants to start a fight.

“Anything that will help my sister, I’m for it.” Nqaba completely snubs his young brother’s slurs. “Where is mother?”

“I don’t know, she didn’t come home last night.” Nqaba’s lips curl in disgust at Duma’s response. He knows something we don’t.

“Does mother practise witchcraft?” Whoah! This is not a bomb, but a grenade... make it ten grenades. All eyes are on Nqaba, mouths ajar and eyes bulging out. My son shouldn’t hear this.

“Baby, go find aunt Vero in her room.” The girl must be awake by now, it’s been too long. Zulu scurries off Ntuthuko’s lap and sprints out of the room. There is tension in this chamber, all the same Nqaba is unshrinking.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Ntuthuko fumes, bolting from his seat, the table becomes a

stumbling block as it stops him from getting to Nqaba. Duma and Nqaba calmly remain seated.

“It’s a question bafo, no need to act wild.” I believe Nqaba means this with uttermost respect, but knowing him...sigh!

“Bullshit!” Yep, Ntuthuko is not about to let this go. “Do you realize what you just said Mzi? You accused your mother of witchcraft.”

“I didn’t.”

“You did, you plainly asked if she practices witchcraft.” Ntuthuko needs to calm down and sit his arse back down.

“Son, take a seat.” Yeah son, why are you offended? I don’t get it really, unless he knows something we don’t.

“Dad don’t tell me that you’re okay with this, he just called your wife a witch.” It’s a good thing I sent Zulu away, Ntuthuko will not stop yelling.

“Boy sit your arse down, you’re getting on my

nerves.” Thank you Duma...dammit...Ntuthuko breathes as if he will never breathe again, his chest heaving robustly. Gradually, he carries his tail between his legs and drops on the couch.

“Mzi, continue.” Duma gives Nqaba the stage, I hope he has his facts right because Duma will not take the accusation lightly. Hey! This man loves that witch...I mean his wife...pardon me. My eyes widen as Nqaba tells us how he thinks Barbra is a witch and was seen by Neo. I believe Neo, I’m not going to lie. Barbra is probably stuck at someone’s gate as we speak, naked as a new born baby.

“There has to be a mistake, Barbra cannot be capable of something so evil.” Duma sputters, I wish he would believe Nqaba. I for one have witnessed her evil heart.

“Yes, Mzi owes us an apology.” Ntuthuko just has to open his mouth, giving him timeout wouldn’t be a bad idea.

“I don’t owe you anything.”

“Yes you do.” Ntuthuko dribbles, he is on his feet yet again. Forget timeout, he needs to be tied down on the couch. “You owe me, your life bafo. You took everything from me, my wife and kid. I have nothing now.” I see where his anger stems from, it’s not about Barbra being a witch.

“That’s where you’re wrong, I only took back what was mine.” Nqaba.

Should I start calling the police? Nqaba’s calmness worries me.

“What the fuck are you talking about? Thandiwe is my wife and Zulu is my son, they belong to me, Mzi, me and you stole them from me.” We’re all here, he doesn’t have to scream... Wait...the man says I belong to him, this is my cue.

“Ntu...”

“Zulu is my son.” Nqaba opens the secret, interjecting me. This is not how we planned on doing it, not through a heated argument and I didn’t expect him to yell back.

“You’ve lost your mind,” Ntuthuko crackles, his cold

snigger forces Nqaba to clamp his teeth. Duma has to stop this, the brothers are standing head to head. If it were not for the coffee table standing between them, they would be breathing each other's carbon dioxide. Or fire if I may put it roughly.

To be continued...

BURN

67...

THANDIWE...

Ntuthuko has challenged Nqaba and the big brother loves challenges. He digs into his pocket to reveal a paper, I didn't think he would throw it at Ntuthuko.

“What is this?” The younger brother queries disdainfully.

“Pick it up and find out.” Nqaba sneers, hands crossed and face as hard and cold as ice. Curiosity

eats Ntuthuko up, he stretches for the paper on the floor. I will say this again, this is not how things were supposed to go down.

His eyes widen with shock and scepticism, he runs his eyes between me and Nqaba.

“I don’t believe this, anyone can buy this paper even at Clicks.” This is a different reaction, I thought he would believe the evidence presented to him.

“The tests were done at a lab, Peanut is my son.” Ntuthuko does not receive the message with gladness, he shoves Nqaba on his chest, Nqaba returns the assault.

“This is a lie, you’re a liar Mzi. I know what you’re trying to do.” I’m getting tired of this shouting.

“You do?” Nqaba calmly asks, it would be so easy for him to ignore his brother. Why the need to stoop to his level?

“Yes, first you call our mother a witch and now this. Clearly, this is a ploy of yours to destroy the family. You don't deserve to carry the Biyase name, you’re a disgrace.” Does anyone know if Barbra has a magic

wand? I need to turn someone into a donkey, Ntuthuko is an arse and his pride has him on a high pedestal. He can't say such things to Nqaba.

“Stop!” Right at the rooftop, Duma booms. The bickering brothers fall into a deafening silence, their eyes piercing each other. I want to move closer to Nqaba, get him to calm down. God knows how he will respond to the touch.

“Are you two insane? Must you quarrel all the time? Duma’s question is mostly directed at Nqaba, his dark fiery eyes are on him. Undaunted, Nqaba glares at his father as he feels his eyes on him.

“We are leaving.” Nqaba.

We’re leaving? We just got here and I haven’t seen Veronica.

“You’re not going anywhere Mzi.” Duma chimes in, stepping in front of his sons. “And I asked you a question.” He reminds him.

Nqaba narrows his eyes at Ntuthuko who looks just as angry.

“Tell your son to stay away from me and my family.”
Oh Lord, this is bad.

“You don’t have a family Mzi.” Through gritted teeth Ntuthuko bolts in, if it were not for Duma standing in between, one of them would be nursing a black eye. “Typical big brother, falls for his brother’s wife and...”

“Qhubeka bafo.” (Continue)

Nqaba dares Ntuthuko, clasping his fists in anger. I don’t like this side of him, the angry possessive side. I wish he would see that Ntuthuko is stupid and not worth his time. Duma looks like a ticking time bomb about to explode.

“Why are you two so immature?” Father-in-law enquires. Still, I have a feeling Duma expects a lot from Nqaba as the eldest. Why does he interrogate with his eyes holding Nqaba hostage? Ntuthuko gives his brother a droll stare, middle-children must be from the devil. Look at this one...Satan...

“I’m sorry father, you know how I feel about people invading my personal life.” Nqaba discloses, the most private person I know is this man right here.

“Personal life?” The middle child...devil...huffs. “The only invader here is you, you came like a storm and turned my life upside down.” I need a thread and a needle, Ntuthuko’s mouth needs to be stitched shut.

“Well shit happens, get over it.” Nqaba fires back, they are at it again, I pity Duma. I can’t really say much, argh! I have to show respect to the in-law. I am still the daughter in-law of this family.

We’re dumfounded by Ntuthuko’s sudden fit of laughter before he utters...

“You piece of shit, you have the nerve to say that to me.”

Nqaba heaves past his father, a gasp whiffs out of my mouth as he grabs Ntuthuko by the collar and

drives him back with so much force until he pins him down on the couch. Guilt washes over me as Duma turns his gaze on me, is he judging me? Because I feel like he is. There must be a place in South Africa where they make rocks big enough for me to crawl under.

I drop my head, not being able to keep my eyes on this giant figure before me.

“Watch it Ntuthuko, you will not like it when I even the score.” I love him...Nqaba, I love him to death, however his father demands respect and they are not listening to him. Ntuthuko is not making things easy with that humorous smack on his face.

“Mzi let go of your brother.” Duma shouts above his normal tone. “You two are brothers, do I need to produce birth certificates? Have you forgotten that you have the same the DNA?” Shame Duma, he’s already old and this bickering will send him to the ancestral land before his time.

“Nqaba stop, Zulu is in the house. What will he think when he walks in here and finds you two like this?”

Jumping in can't be such a bad idea, I must talk sense into these big kids. I am relieved when Ngaba pulls away from Ntuthuko.

BHEKIZIZWE...

I almost aged trying to convince Bulelwa to get out of bed, take a walk down the street or something. As long as he is not cooped up in his room, he's eating now, thankfully, it's also been hard to convince him to eat.

The sun is blazingly hot today. I had to remove the heavy pants I had on and wear something light. A crashing sound wafts from outside the bedroom, making my ears stand at attention.

"Are you going to break all my plates you stupid child?" That's Lilian's voice and of course she's yelling. That woman knows no peace, I run out of the bedroom to investigate what the commotion is about.

Deliwe's fifteen year old is standing in front of shards of glass, head bowed and fear fisted on her face. Lilian is not far from her, scolding the child as if she killed her pet. I feel a strong pull from the left, the force compels me to divert my gaze towards it. A smile tickles my lips as my eyes land on Bulelwa, standing near the fridge.

I frown at how weak and miserable he looks, how long will it be until he is himself again? I miss the old hyper Bulelwa, the loud mouth who can't stop cursing.

"S- Sorry aunty, it was a mistake." You can hear the sincerity in Notofo's voice as she apologizes to madam Lilian.

"It's just a plate Lilian, we can get another one." Deliwe finds a need to speak for her daughter.

"You and who else Deliwe? You're a house wife, the only thing you can afford is a R10 toothbrush." Wow, the bitch is not having a good day. Deliwe narrows her eyes at the dragon lady, Qhaphela who is

positioned on a chair scowls at Lilian and Notofo takes off in tears. It's a good thing Lindiwe and thobekile are not here to witness their mother's wrath. Bulelwa would have said something by now, his silence worries me.

I notice his legs slightly wobble as he sluggishly moves from the fridge to where everyone is, and I'm next to him in a flash, pushing a small figure out of my way. A brief look shows me, Lilian, she will be alright.

Bulelwa is my worry. Winding my arm around his waist, I put his arm over my shoulder and let him lean on me for support. He smiles, appreciatively. A clearing of a throat interrupts our eye lock moment. Qhaphela is the one to interpose, the look on his face is that of condemnation.

“You too really don't have to do this now, don't you have a schedule for this type of thing?” Nice... another homophobe.

“Is there a problem bafo?” I ask, glowering at the fool. He blinks a few times, avoiding my eyes

“Cha, cha bafo. It’s just you two are unashamed of this thing you have.” (No.)

His nose wriggles in disgust.

“I really don’t want to say anything to you, Qhaphela. You won’t like my unfiltered mouth and I am tired of arguments.” Buttercup saves the day, Qhaphela is put in his place with just these words. “Besides, Nkululeko would hate it if he heard you say such things after you fucked him to oblivion last week. It was on his birthday, right?”

Qhaphela’s eyes swell in shock, he runs them to his mother, and everyone around the room.

“What did you call it again??” Buttercup is on a role and I am not about to interject, this will teach Qhaphela a lesson. “Ahh yes, birthday sex. Shame... you were a starring that day bafo, couldn’t get enough of Nkululelo’s asshole.”

Okaaay! This I do not approve. Qhaphela grunts in anger and charges after Bulelwa, one push from me sends him back to his spot.

“I thought you said you’ll hold your unfiltered mouth?” My question is an undertone. Bulelwa shrugs.

“I’ve been bullied enough by homophobic people, I won’t let it happen again and not by the likes of him. Men who are ashamed of who they are, you scream other men’s names behind closed doors and once you walk out you throw slurs at us. You ridicule us as if you’re perfect...without blemish, I will not have it. I don’t need cousins Qhaphela and I can disown you in a split second.”

“Bulelwa there is no need for all of that, Qhaphela was only saying...”

“Saying what aunt?” Bulelwa cuts her remark in half. “You should be correcting him, he’s talking nonsense. So what if I’m gay? Are we not allowed to show PDA because we are two men in love? Well I say fuck it and fuck you, Qhaphela.” This I agree

with Bulelwa, Lilian clicks her tongue and leaves.

This house is dull, everyone is in a gloomy mood. Deliwe doesn't give Bulelwa an answer, instead walks out of the kitchen. Qhaphela decides to leave as well, using the backdoor.

I need to go back home, back to work right after the funeral. I would leave soon if Bulelwa didn't need me, he doesn't say it, but his eyes never lie. This environment is not good for him, I'll take him with me.

A pair of small arms wrap around me from behind, knocking me back to the present, it's just us two, Bulelwa and me.

"Where are you lost?" He's lacing kisses on my back and moving up my shoulders.

"Nowhere." I reply to have him twizzle in my arms, his breath whiffs my face as he glances up at me. Lifting my hand, I delicately trace the lines of

Bulelwa's face, carefully running my fingertips over his smooth skin. I smirk at how he shivers due to my touch, his nose crumples as he feigns irritation. I know he loves it when I touch him.

"You're having fun, aren't you?"

"Yes." I respond, sniggering. He shakes his head and lets me go on with my escapades.

My thoughts circulate around the man trapped in my arms, I fear losing him. Maybe I won't, maybe our love is like that of Gcinumzi and Ifalakhe. I haven't told Bulelwa about what happened at the hospital, I'm still not sure if it was a dream or what.

I drink in Bulelwa's beautiful face, while he's so focused on what my fingers are up to.

"What's the next move?" Bulelwa questions.

"Next as in?" I kiss the bridge of his nose, he scratches it with a grin playing on his face. He is oblivious to what he does to me when he does these little adorable things.

“Well, the day you fucked me.” I hate that word.

“You said we are lovers. So I want to know what the next move is.”

“Must you say that word? You know how much I hate it right?” He rolls his eyes at my question.

“Why? Everybody uses it.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s a good word,” I say, I’m not okay with it. There is something about the it that puts me off. Bulelwa flares his nose, before pushing his lip between his teeth and bites it. How adorable can he get?

“So tell me how we’re moving on from here.”

“I could make you, my wife.” I grab his hips and yank him to me, his chest collides on mine.

“Asshole.” He gasps, pushing me back. I stagger barely an inch and laugh at his expression, enveloping him in my arms. He squirms trying to break free.

“I’m kidding Buttercup.” I grin, suckling his earlobe and grabbing his ass...I feel him relax in my arms.

“But I’m allowed to fuck you like you’re my wife.”

“Zizwe.” He flushes and pulls back enough for the bridge of his nose to touch mine. “Let’s move in together.”

“What?” Not that I mind, but I don’t have a place of my own.

“My brother will not be comfortable with us around, he’s not really our number one fan.” Bulelwa gives me a bored look and waves my words off.

“I have a house, we can live there.” Not happening.

“No.” That’s ludicrous.

“Why? Don’t you want to live with me?” He slips out of my arms as he paints the words with the wrong colour.

“That’s not what I mean,” My hands grab his hips again and I pull him into me, digging my fingers into his hip bone, the impact causes him to deliciously moan.

“I want to live with you, you’re all I think about

Buttercup. My life basically revolves around you, being away from you is torturous for me.” Bulelwa snorts, dabbing my shoulder with a fist.

“You’re too much, all this drama and I only asked a simple question.” He jests, this is why I love this man. I can’t imagine loving anyone else.

“Let me find my own place, then we’ll take it from there.” I promise, brushing my lips on his collarbone.

“Do whatever you want, it’s not like I want to live with you.” He grumbles, annoyed and moves out of my arms. “I was testing you that’s all.”

“I didn’t say no Buttercup, I can’t live in a house your father bought.” I try to explain my way out, but he’s walking away from me. “Bulelwa!”

“Whatever asshole.” He is slowly taking back his profanity throne, a smile scampers on my lips at the fading sound of his voice down the hallway. I have to go after him and hopefully, we’re still taking that walk.

NTUTHUKO...

My brother can't always win, I will not accept it. How is life so cruel? Hearing him claim my wife shatters my heart into chards, a deep jealousy shoots through me like a dagger, watching Thandiwe hold on to his arm in the way she has. Shit, it annoys me. Like a possessive animal staking its ownership, I separate her hand from his arm.

“Move,” I growl, pushing Nqaba away from my wife. His body barely moves a fraction, he turns to punch me on the nose. The effect sends a jolt of pain throughout my entire body, I yelp palming my now bleeding nose.

“Nqabayomzi.” My father shouts in a way that demands respect from both his sons. Tears flood into my eyes, not because I have been hit. The pain on my nose forces tears up my eyes, I leer at Mzi, needing to return the blow.

“Tell this son of yours father.” Muscles flick angrily

at Nqaba's jaw line, if I were an entity the scent of his jealousy would be suffocating me. I'm just as possessive and Mzi will never win against me. This time I use enough force to push him and throw in a suitable punch as he finally stumbles back.

Thandiwe screams while my father sighs out of frustration and crosses his arms in defeat. I'm broken seeing Thandiwe run to my brother's aid, she inspects his lip and to think I wasn't wrecked enough. The way she takes care of him puts a final nail to the coffin. Nqabayomzi stabs me with an icy glare from the north.

"Are you two done acting like kids or should I get my belt?" My father reminds me of the olden days when he would belt us for misbehaving.

No one provides an answer, we stand shooting each other with deadly stares.

"We need to sit and talk about this." My father announces, I don't agree with him. "Let's talk over lunch, you two idiots need to get along. I'm tired of

this nonsense, it's exhausting."

Lunch? I am bloody bleeding here.

"We're not staying." My idiot of a brother bluntly refuses my father's offer. Someone just pissed off Duma Biyase...he raises his brow and damn it's not directed at me, but I'm uneasy on my brother's behalf.

"I said we're having lunch." My father demands.

"And I said we are not staying father." Nqabayomzi dares to contend.

"Are you defying me, Mzi?" He is definitely defying you dad, stupid mutt.

"No father, I am simply telling you that Thandiwe and I are not staying."

"You're driving me crazy with your stubbornness, you know it won't take you anywhere?"

"I am my father's son." Nc...nc...nc... Where does he

get the audacity to talk to my father like this?
Duma's jaw drops, not dubiously, but in defeat.

"You see dad..."

"Shut the fuck up." My father interjects as I try to pipe in and show him how much of a douchebag Nqabayomzi is. "I swear today I will kill someone, I want everyone in the dining room now. We're are going to sit and eat like a family, this will give us time to talk about this divorce."

Great, they told him about the divorce. My wife and brother's eyes give-and-take, engulfed by nerves.

"Thandiwe go see if Veronica is awake, tell her lunch is ready." It is an order from this angry old man, you know he is pissed off when my father takes control like this. Thandiwe reluctantly nods and rushes out of the room. "Ntuthuko call your mother and find out where she is, Mzi call Ngidi and set an appointment. Your sister is not going to suffer another day."

This father is throwing demands like a racket, Nqabayomzi and I must be shocked because we don't move an inch, but stare at the angry bull standing between us. Perhaps we're waiting to see if he will laugh and call himself bluff.

“Do I need to call the president to tell you?” There is no need to shout at grown men. “Get moving, and you're doing it in the dining room where I can see you.”

Case dismissed, Duma is not going to say it again. Not wanting another lecture, I follow behind him and my brother is not far after. I can hear his heavy steps, plus his eyes boring into me.

My mind falters at the sight of my mother, Barbra and a woman I have never seen standing at my doorstep. Nqaba didn't tell me his mother had planned to visit, we have been looking for this woman and this is her first stop after ghosting her

family? My mother is the leader of the pack, she's standing in the middle with these two women winging her sides.

“Mama? What are you doing here?”

“You have sinned Thandiwe, we have to get that baby out of your womb or God will punish you.”

I can't grasp what she is talking about, get the baby out? I'm already taking steps away from them, I can't let them hurt my baby. Nqaba must have told Barbra that I am pregnant, no one knew but us.

Who is the woman they brought to my house?

“I don't understand mama.” My feet take me back as they enter the house without permission.

“I called your mother Thandiwe and told her that despite being married to Ntuthuko, you're having Mzi's baby which is an abomination. They are brothers, you should be ashamed of yourself.”

Barbra seethes, manoeuvring past my mother. In a split of a second I'm trapped against the wall and the three women are hovering over me like hungry wolves.

“Mama no, not my baby.” Feeling powerless, the only thing I can gather are tears...useless tears that will do nothing to get me out of the situation. My own mother, the woman who gave me life wants to kill my baby. Have they brain washed her? Then again, she did sell my soul to the devil.

“No.” A scream erupts from my mouth as Barbra grabs my arm, pushing her off is fruitless. My knees weaken under her grip, she has me by the hook. Her arms press around my body and all I can do is scream... scream for Nqaba, I’m home alone. He did say he didn’t want to leave me alone, yet I insisted that I will be fine.

“We have to get that demon out of your womb, only then your marriage will be saved.” Barbra exclaims. I don’t have a demon in me, my baby lives in me. Nqaba’s baby...

“Mama, mama ngiyakucela, ngiyakucela mama. Don’t do this please.” (I’m begging you mama.)

I plead aggressively and struggling to loose from

Barbra's clutches. The two women help Barbra in pushing me to the cold floor, flatly banishing my screams. My mother pushes my arms above my head and pins them on the floor, Barbra grips my legs as if I'm a chicken that is about to be slaughtered.

"What are you doing mama? I'm your child, your only child." I scream, writhing to fight them off.

"I'm sorry my baby, but this is for you, for your own good. You betrayed your husband Thandiwe and the only way he will accept you is if you kill that baby in your womb."

The same voice that comforted me while I sucked milk from her breast is telling me this?

Wide eyed, I plead to the strange woman who is holding an object to my private part. Her eyes have not met mine since they got here, maybe if she would look at me, she would pity me.

"Please, not my baby." I beg, trying to close my legs. Barbra is stronger, and why are my knees weak?

Why can't I fight them?

“Nqaba!” I cry out loud as the woman pushes the object inside me, first I feel an excruciating sharp pain in my womb tailed by a dragging and pulling sensation. I have exhausted myself from screaming, the pain doubles, weakening my body.

The woman draws the object out of me and holds it up to show my appealed mother and a self-satisfied Barbra, the blood dripping on the object makes me dizzy as I realize that that is my baby.

“M- My...baby.” Even my voice has turned on me.

“It is done.” Barbra declares merrily, the smile on her face has shudders coursing throughout my body.

To be continued...

BURN

68...

NQABA...

“Nqaba!” I jolt up from the couch at the sound of Thandiwe’s screams. Bolting into the room, I find her tossing and turning on the bed. She’s having a nightmare. It’s been a minute since these happened and for that minute, I was fooled into thinking things were gradually going back to normal. I miss her, the old Thandiwe...the sane Thandiwe...life was simple back then.

“Thandiwe, wake up.” Her eyes snap open and she thunders up to a sitting position, dribs of sweat coated on her face... eyes filled with fear. With no warning, panic takes over her body, she probes the sizeable bedroom before her horror filled gaze finds me.

“My baby.” A frown crosses her face, she opens her legs to search for something between them. When she doesn’t find what she is looking for, her

structure recklessly moves from the bed. My hands make it to her hips to stop her from falling.

“Hey, careful. You’re pregnant.” I chide her careless act that has disordered my mind. “What’s going on Thandiwe?”

She snubs my question and manoeuvres past me, I turn to see her headed for the full length mirror. Her eyes stretch into panicked saucers as her hands lift the nightgown and gently brush on the small baby bump. Okay, the dream must have been about the baby.

Her search comes to a halt, she sighs, relieved and her face agrees to take a calm expression.

“Are you going to tell me what the dream was about?” I ask, towering her from behind to cover her body with a gown. She leans into me, this gives me a chance to enwrap my arms around her and taste the sweet delicious flavor on the crook of her neck with an open mouthed kiss.

“Your mother was in my dream, my mother too and a strange woman. They killed my baby, our baby. It felt so real Nqaba, I can still feel their hands on me.” Her voice trembles as she tells me about the nightmare.

“It was only a dream Tshabalala, our baby is fine. Remember MamSonto said you will give birth.” I comfort, holding her closer in my arms.

“Can we go to the hospital, please? I won’t be okay until I see the ultrasound.” Thandiwe murmurs, her voice still a little shaky. We might as well go, or she won’t be able to sleep.

“Get dressed, I’ll grab Zulu. Styles and Sethu won’t mind looking after him.” With these last words, I leave her to change. Neo’s accusations are starting to make sense, maybe I’m crazy. But my mother is up to something.

BARBRA...

Dammit dammit, dammit.

“The plan didn’t work Sgwili, that child can’t be separated from her mother’s womb.” I hiss, shifting to find a comfortable position on this stupid bed. Every joint hurts, I can’t move without wincing in pain. Sgwili found me after Sandra plainly refused to locate him, that evil witch Makhafula is hiding like a coward since he ran that day.

Sgwili was able to find a witch doctor for me, he said if I needed quick healing, I need to drink the blood of an infant who is still in her mother’s womb and it has to have my blood as well. Thandiwe came to mind, she is pregnant with Mzi’s baby, my grandson.

“The night is still young ndlovukazi.” Sgwili reminds me of something I am aware of.

“Does that even matter? What if she doesn’t bleed? I can’t stay here for a month, Duma is obviously wondering where I am.”

“Mapula is not an ordinary woman and she is

carrying an Okolie, if it were someone else their blood would be splattered everywhere right at this moment.” There was a time I thought Sgwili was useless, he proves me wrong every day. He hasn’t left my side since my sister abandoned me, I will deal with Sandra when the time is right.

“You know how those damn Okolies work...you spill their blood, you’re cursed.” I shuffle Sgwili’s memory.

“The child has not been born yet, I don’t think the curse applies to it.” I praised this cat way too soon.

“You don’t think? We’re working with assumptions now? This is my life we’re risking here, my family’s lives.” I chide, seeing him carelessly tread the road back to incompetence. “They can take Veronica, I don’t care. Mzi and Ntuthuko are my sons, a son is a mother’s greatest achievement.”

“If the curse works, does it matter who they take? You will be dead too.” This idiot.

“Listen Sgwili, those ancestors make sure you

watch your family die before taking you down. That's how cruel they are, I don't know why they are regarded as ancestors when they dwell in the pits of hell, right beside the devil. What kind of evil is that?"

"You need to relax ndlovukazi, nothing will happen to you, trust me. If Thandiwe doesn't miscarry, we will look for another carrier. We can always make sure Veronica falls pregnant." I take my words back, he is smart after all. "There is a man in her life, he loves her. The bad omen hasn't succeeded in completely pushing him away."

"In that case, I will have to call my husband and tell him I will be away for a while." Duma will not be happy about it.

"You can do that, or get a replacement. A shadow of you." Sgwili suggests, his stupidity comes and goes I guess.

"Duma will spot it from a distance, that man is very observant. You figure out on how to make Veronica fall pregnant, we need her on standby in case

Thandiwe disappoints. I will deal with Duma.”

“Ndlovukazi.” (Queen.)

That girl Thandiwe is stubborn, when is her twenty sixth birthday so she can die?

THANDIWE...

It hasn't registered to me that Nqaba is moneyed, this is my chance to ask if he has medical aid, but of course he does. In that case, we need to get a gynaecologist, trips to the doctor or clinic are not fun.

My life has been so crazy that I haven't had time to grasp the fact that I'm expecting a baby, history has an eccentric way of repeating itself – a carefully sick twisted plan to get the attention of raw humans.

When I was pregnant with Zulu, I was too focused on Nqaba and my heavy heart to actually breathe in the pregnancy. Ntuthuko was there for me,

nevertheless a major problem dwelt among us – he wasn't the man I craved for, he wasn't Nqaba.

My second pregnancy and fate deems it fit to throw me to the wolves, wolves is too insubstantial an example. My whole existence is being shredded into a zillion pieces, I try – the Lord is my witness. I know what is at stake, what I will lose if I don't call out to God and I do as I am told...pray.

The battle though was presented to me when I was weak and the only thing I could lean on was a wall, till this moment, my back is against the wall. I try to move, with everything in me. But where do I move to when a black cloth has been put over my head. I have been made blind to my surroundings.

I know God is there, I know he is calling out to me and heavens, I am screaming for him, that's it. At the end, I am only a grain of sand. Completely no one in the crowd and I am no super human.

There is a woman staring at me, with no shame

sharply scrutinising me, making me feel like a rat under observation. She's sitting across us at the doctor's waiting area. This one has not been informed that staring is rude, I would know if she were a spirit. Her creepy snooping eyes tell me she is one hundred percent human, there is something about them - something bone chilling, I can't put a finger to it.

Feeling uneasy, I clasp my hand around Nqaba's arm and rest my head on his shoulder.

It's a mission to take my eyes off of the strange woman, there is basically three of us in the hallway. The staff is counted to more or less than four. The male receptionist, he reminds me of Bulelwa. His structure, his sassy appearance and the way he has been blabbering on the phone for the past fifteen minutes. But Bulelwa wouldn't be seen dead wearing that pink floral shirt, so my mind and eyes ramble away from him.

"Are you okay?" It's the fourth time Nqaba is asking

me this question and till now I don't have an answer for him. The dream I had felt so real, it still feels like there was something plunged inside me. Cold chills have doted my skin since I woke up, I feel them on my scalp as well – an uncomfortable tingling sensation.

“When are we se...” A wave of cold rushes through me, completely knocking the breath out of my lungs. It's not a second when my body heats up, it's so intense that I jolt from the chair, fanning myself.

“Tan-tan?” Nqaba enquires, caging me with his inquisitive gaze. His form lengthens past my height as he stands to his feet.

“I'm burning.” I shriek unwillingly, someone turned up the heat in here. It feels like I have been thrown into a lake of fire. My heart sinks into my stomach when I see boils pop out of my arms, covering inch by inch of my skin. Hysterical, I chase Nqaba with my eyes, to find him gawking back with a dark confused gaze.

“Nqaba get them off me, get them off.” Horrific screams dive between my lips as I fretfully jump up and down.

“Thandiwe what is it?” Worry coats his voice, his hands are tirelessly trying to hold me down. My crazy jumps make it hard for him to catch me.

Me: “B- Boils... Help me please, get them off.” Wild panic fill my lungs, the screams erupt from the depths of my stomach. Oblivious of my surroundings and horrified, I strip my clothes off.

“Thandiwe stop, stop.” Nqaba shouts, he’s trying to cover my half naked body with his coat. His arms clasp around me from behind – when he succeeds, he pins my hands to my sides, caging my entire body.

“Thandiwe its okay, you’re okay. There is nothing, I promise.” He assures me, breathless from anxiety. I want to believe his words, it’s hard when what I see is the opposite.

“I promise you, Tshabalala.” Another assurance, his

lips trailing my ears. Quietude parades through me at my skin clearing up as if the simmers were nothing, but hallucinations. My heart is vigorously thudding in my chest, louder than spiritual drums. My head is spinning and throbbing painfully.

“It’s gone...Nqa...Nqaba it’s gone.” Nqaba nuzzles my neck, arms clasped around me.

“I see blood.” Still stuck in my lover’s arms, I shift my gaze in search of the female voice. My eyes meet the lady who was staring before the crazy stunt for several long seconds, before I turn them to the staff ogling at me as if I have grown horns.

“Excuse me?” Nqaba breaths, anger perfected in his voice.

“You!” The strange woman points my direction.
“Your blood will be scattered all over the streets of Joburg...”

“ENOUGH!!!” Nqaba booms furiously, his deep rumbling voice echoing in the spacious room.
“You’re a liar, do you hear me?” He doesn’t tone it

down, I haven't heard him this angry before.

The lady's eyes enlarge, she staggers back a little at the sudden outburst.

"I- I'm only saying what I see." She stammers, insisting with her evil prophecy. As if I haven't had enough horror in my life.

"I don't care, you don't even know her. You're a liar, those words will fall upon you." Incredulous gasps fill the place at Nqaba's assertion.

"S- sir..." Shaken, the lady fails to construct a sentence.

"Listen to me, woman, whoever sent you with this false prophecy is a liar."

"The prophecy is from God, he..."

"Which God?" Nqaba interjects, his arms slowly loosen around me. I want to stop him when his feet tread to the woman, but I'm unable to move, my body is numb. "Are you talking about the God of Abraham? The Lord of heaven's armies?"

I'm flabbergasted by his sudden knowledge.

“The God who opened the red sea?” The woman is visibly trembling with fear, it could be that this giant man is hovering over her and his angry voice could make one crawl under the bed. Perhaps it is the mentioning of an almighty God.

“Y- yes.” She responds with enough hesitation to call her a liar.

“LIAR!” Nqaba booms one more time, fright hugs the lady when he grabs her hand. “God does not give negative prophecies, you are the devil’s agent aren’t you? It’s you, isn’t it? You’re the devil after Thandiwe?”

The old man? Could it be? My feet gradually drag me to Nqaba, he is going to get in trouble for this stunt. He’s too close to her, his eyes intensely and fearlessly digging into her soul – if she has one.

“You’re not going to get her, do you hear me?” A

whispered threat, the staff has gone mute, no one has dared to utter a word or question this giant's actions "I will fight you, tooth and nail."

I make it to Nqaba in time to see a cold smirk, at the woman's lips...

"You and who else?" She mumbles. Nqaba is daunting enough to return the smirk.

"Jesus," at the sound of this name, the lady's eyes widen with fright, she staggers back. If it were not for Nqaba's grip on her arm, she would be lying on the floor.

"You have no power over me, whoever you are." My mouth is almost too dry to speak, her eyes shift to me, her face welcomes the smirk again.

I had more to say, but it has petered out of my head leaving it blank.

"Mapula." The whisper sends jolts of fear through my heart, I shouldn't be this afraid, not when the name of Jesus makes her tremble. Nqaba pushes

her back, she staggers with chuckles erupting from her. He grabs my arm and begins lugging me down the hallway.

“You will not respond to that name, it is not your identity.” He tells me while I try to keep up with his steps, there is someone walking behind me. I can’t hear the footfall, but a heavy presence. Whoever they are, they are compelling me to turn.

“Nqaba...” I call out, with a hushed tone. “There is something behind me.”

“Don’t look back.” His response is quick, authoritative. I’m pulled to his side, his hand glides to the small of my back, leading me to the exit.

NQABA...

“Are you sure Nqabayomzi,” Thandiwe questions, her voice is spooky. At least I think it’s her until her unnatural vocal sound compels me to turn to my

side to see an uncanny grin on her face. “Are you sure I shouldn’t look back?”

She repeats, her eyes have gone an eerie pitch black, and there is white fizz around her mouth. I grab hold of her lest she runs off, she sniggers coldly.

“You think you can defeat me, Nqabayomzi?” She speaks as one who is being controlled by another, I don’t need to deal with this, dammit. Doesn’t the devil ever give up? Thandiwe growls like an animal, attempting to yank her hand from me. It’s a good thing we have made it outside, we created enough drama in there.

“Stop, Thandiwe.” I command with as much authority as I can gather, the spirit in her doesn’t listen. It’s fighting me, entertaining it will be a waste of time. Knocking her out could be risky too for the baby, so I will have to force her to the car and strap her to a seat.

“My name is Mapula.” She squawks, struggling against my hold. To keep her still I confine her in my

arms, her back against my chest.

“I said stop in J esus’ name.” This time she listens, I have to get her out of here. I lift Thandiwe in my arms, she doesn’t fight when I strap her in the car, Neo is my first thought. Besides MamSonto, I haven’t met anyone as powerful, although he is a joke with weird theories.

It takes a while for Neo to take my call.

“I’m on my way, call anyone who can pray, Thandiwe is possessed.” I don’t give him a chance to send his greeting, not that he was going to greet.

“On your way, where?”

“Your hou..”

“Wait!” He interposes. “So, am I supposed to be in this house when you arrive, or should I take my family and leave it vacant for you and the demon?” Neo enquires, he could be joking, you never know with him.

“I need your help Neo, a spirit has taken over

Thandiwe.”

“I hear you, Mzi, I hear you ntwana. What I don’t understand is how you want to bring a demon into my house. To me, Neo Maake. I’m the only child of my mother, I made it alone through the fallopian tube, I don’t have a twin ntwana. Now if the devil was my twin, I’m sure ousie Ntsoaki would have told me.” Neo prattles, I’m not surprised...it’s all he ever does. “You don’t take me seriously uena Mzi, you think demons call me uncle ke ao bona.” (I see you.)

“Look MamSonto is not around, you’re the only one who can help me. If I knew any exorcists, I would get one.” I tell him, knowing he will agree to my request one way or the other. I pass the green traffic light, desperately speeding down the road.

“I deal with Information Technology, computers. I would even hide a dead body for you, but never face demons.”

“Neo come on, I’m almost at your house. Call them please, Sethu as well.” This man has subjected me to grovelling.

“Fine, but let’s meet at your house. I have infants here.” Finally he agrees, he is not ashamed of the displeasure in the tone of his voice.

“Okay, I’ll see you then.”

He drops the call after clicking his tongue.

To be continued...

BURN

69...

NEO...

“Are you a pastor now Neo?” I lift my eyes from my feet and find Zee glaring at me. I don’t blame her for interrogating me, it’s late at night. The babies are a hand full, my mother would have stayed, but she

had duties at church. We finally named the Maake triplets, Naledi is our little girl and the two baboons are Lesedi and Lebone. Zee loves the names, she cried when I introduced them.

“I’m sorry baba, I really have to go. Thandiwe has been visited by the devil, she needs help.” She slides in front of me, blocking me from walking out the door.

“Why is this Thandiwe so important? You went to Kenya for her and now you’re leaving us alone for her.”

“You don’t know Thandiwe? I thought I had introduced you two. She’s married to Ntuthuko, remember Mzi’s brother? The one with a big head.” Her eyes drag down my frame, she gives me a distasteful glare.

“I’m not happy about this Neo, this is the last time you’re doing this. It’s almost midnight, you have a family who needs you.”

“I know baba and I promise I will make sure to

carpet Mzi about it. He will never call me at night again.” I nudge her cheek and kiss it, she responds with a deep exhalation...fatigue...apprehension...love...it’s a cocktail of emotions. I take her face so she looks into my eyes.

“I love you, Ayize, you know that right?” Reluctantly, she nods. She’s not doubting my love for her, if anything Zee knows I would die for her. It is something I don’t have to think twice about, a decision I made the day she accepted me. No one has ever loved me the way she does, perhaps the time has come for me to make her my wife.

My lips brush against hers, I yearn to feel her lips dancing with mine. “I love you baba.” I declare against her lips and feel her shiver in my arms, slightly she pushes me back.

“Go before I change my mind.” I want to kiss her, and I do. Nothing tastes better than this, my own drug. It has my heart exploding with so much love, it blares at the rooftop ‘I love you Ayize.’

We are interrupted by the sound of a baby crying, Naledi is the attention seeker. The boys hardly ever wake up at night, but girl wants to be seen.

“Go, I’ll take care of her.” Zee gives permission, I tattoo a swift kiss on her lips and dash out.

AMARA...

“What are you doing here?” Her face completely changes seeing her mother-in-law walk into her bedroom.

“Now you think you have the right to talk to me anyhow?” Sandra snaps, she has been enraged by the secret and her sister’s sickness has not made things better. Amara rolls her eyes, ignoring the urge to retort rudely. She sits on the chair by the window, her body language speaks volumes. She doesn’t want Sandra near her.

“Where is my son?” Sandra finally speaks, she’s

been restless since she arrived from Barbra's secret hiding. Now she has two threats, her daughter in law who finds it hard to hide things from her husband and her sister who is livid and wants to reveal the truth about the twin's identity just to spite the Okolie elders.

Amara glowers at Sandra, she is not fond of her mother-in-law because she's never liked her from day one – never gave her a chance to prove herself as the daughter-in-law. And now that she knows what she knows, she hates her and even more that she is standing in her bedroom asking her about the 'son' she betrayed.

"I asked you a question." Sandra barks rudely.

"I also asked you what you're doing here, but you chose to answer my question with a question."

Amara squelches, this only fuels Sandra's wrath.

She bustles to Amara, grabs her shoulder, weightily turning her to face her. Amara issues an intake of breath, she did not expect that at all.

“Listen here little girl, you do not know who I am or what I’m capable of.” All of Sandra’s frustrations fall on Amara as she snatches her arm, pulling her up with force. “Do not mess with me or I will crush you.” She put pressure on the grip, Amara’s face crunches in pain.

“MOTHER.” Randall’s roar echoes in the bedroom. The two ladies turn to him with their eyes widened, they have never heard him shout that loud, knowing him to be reserved and contained.

“R- Randall!” Sandra forces a smile.

“Let go of her hand.” He demands and Sandra does as she is told. Leave my house.” He continues with the same tone. At this time of the night? Where will she possibly go?

“You don’t understand...she...” Sandra tries to explain her way out.

“I understand perfectly.” Randall walks up to them and pulls his wife to his side. “This is Amara Okolie...my wife. Do you remember her Sandra?” A

rhetorical question from Randall, his eyes piercing through his mother's, the shock on Sandra's face is unmistakable. For the first time in her life her son addressed her by her name.

“You called me by my name? Your mother?” Her voice trembles as she points out the obvious. “Because of her?” She continues still in shock.

“I will not have you come to my house and attack my wife, I won't let that happen. Hence, I am kindly asking you to pack your things and leave.” Randall tells her, his mind is made up and he isn't a man to go back on his word. Bringing her to his house was a mistake, he thought she had changed and witnessing her ruthless behaviour towards the woman he chose to share his life with is proof that a leopard never changes its spots.

“Randall, it's okay.” Amara touches his shoulder, hoping he'd keep calm down. He tilts his head a little giving her a side look, it's not okay. It can't be okay, after he witnessed Sandra's cruelty towards

Amara.

Amara had no one to teach her how to fight battles, all her life was lived under her uncle's evil wing with no way of escape, until Randall rescued her from him. In his eyes, Amara is still fragile. She is like a child learning how to walk and talk. The years of rape and abuse she was succumbed to can't be wiped away overnight.

"Why are you still here?" He questions his mother.

"You're my son." She reminds him and in response to that, Randall lugs her towards the door, her arrogance has filled him with frustration.

"Randall please, she was rude to me and like a normal person I reacted." Sandra tries to explain her way out.

"Reacted to what? You think I didn't hear what you said? I heard and saw everything." He snaps at her, his anger is quick when it comes to Amara. He would forget everything including family bonds to protect his wife. "If you will come to my house and

disrespect my wife then you're not welcome here.”

“Let me explain please.” Sandra pleads – a little more steps and she would be out of their bedroom.

“I am your mother.”

“I said get out.” Randall barks, giving both the women in his life a fright. Sandra’s eyes run to Amara to find her narrowed eyes, in her mind Amara is enjoying the show.

Sandra eventually gives in, she is convinced that her son needs to sleep on it. He will be much calmer in the morning. Dropping her head, she lets her feet lead her out to her room. Randall slams the door shut, he turns to Amara with an apologetic gaze.

“Are you okay?” He cradles her cheek, she nods.

“You need to speak to your mother.” She knows why she is telling him this, Sandra has a secret to reveal and Randall has to know about it.

“I don’t want to talk about her.” He dismisses bluntly.

“But Randall...”

“I said I don’t want to talk about her.” He claims his hands back and leaves her defeated in the bedroom. God knows where he is headed to.

NQABA...

Sethu suggests we form a circle and place Thandiwe in the middle. She brought four elderly women with her, I presume they are from her church. It burns my heart seeing the woman I love lying face down on the floor, foam has covered her mouth. She is growling like a possessed person would, the devil has power over her. I hope she will be freed from these chains after this. Sethu opens the bible and places it on the floor in front of her.

“I’ll read from the book of 2 Samuel 22 verse 1 to 4...
The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my saviour.
My God is my rock in whom I find protection, he is

my shield, the power that saves me and my place of safety. He is my refuge, my saviour. The one who saves me from violence. I called on the Lord who is worthy of praise and he saved me from my enemies.”

One of the elderly women instructs that we join hands and stand in agreement, this way we invite Jesus in the midst. A song is sung, Neo is silently praying beside me. On an occasional day he would be terrified as hell. I can't get my eyes off of Thandiwe, waiting in anticipation for her to come back to me.

All of a sudden, Thandiwe bolts to her knees. Palms on the floor, her braids tangled into an untidy frame making her look windswept. Most of the strands flow down her face, almost covering half of it.

“Nqaba,” her voice is a ghostly whisper that sends cold chills down my spine. She angles her head to the side, her eyes try for an innocent look. But I see

through the demon. “I need... you, please... come to me.” She stretches out her hand for me to take.

“Pray Mzi, that’s not her talking. It’s the devil.” Sethu warns, the other women have broken into spiritual warfare. They pray with so much authority as they command the demon out of Thandiwe, I only have a few words to say to God unlike these Christians. I take a silent prayer while listening to Neo’s loud prayer. There is authority in his voice.

“Lord you are a promise keeper, a miracle worker. Your word father says we are more than conquerors through you. Thandiwe is a conqueror, the devil has no power over her. It is written that when the enemy comes against us the spirit of the Lord will raise a standard against him and he will flee seven different directions. You said your word will not return to you void, it will accomplish what you please and prosper on the thing on which you sent it. Demons run at the mention of your name, they

shriek because they know you are the one to set the captives free. They try and hide from the light of the world, which is you Jesus.”

“Noooo.” Thandiwe screams at the mention of the name, I know I shouldn’t, but anger has brewed inside me. I am livid and I want to vanquish that demon inside her. She falls on her side, whirling on the floor. Her screams rise above the voices of everyone praying. Neo’s hand tightens around mine, he wants me to continue praying.

Thandiwe fights to go back to her knees, wheezing she glares at me. I see hatred in her eyes that are surrounded by dark circles, her skin is pale and lips dry and white.

“This is my home, I’m not going anywhere.” The demon speaks, its words compel me to pray harder. I fix my eyes on Thandiwe as I get ready to cast the demon out. Her eyes do not move from mine as the demon dares me to make a move.

“Biyase, surely you’re not going to hurt me. It’s me,

your Tshabalala.” She whispers, her voice is a mocking tone. The demon can’t keep a straight face for a second, a cold smirk stretches on Thandiwe's mouth.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” I roar, unable to curtail the wrath building inside me. I’m looking straight through her eyes, I can feel that it is not Thandiwe looking back at me.

“You demon from hell, you do not have power over this body. All power on heaven and earth belong to Jesus. Loose and let her go now, she is not your own to claim. Her body is not your territory, you have no authority over this woman. Get out now, in the name of Jesus.”

At my command, Thandiwe’s body falls again. She curls up, shrieking in excruciating pain. I clench my jaw as everything in me shatters upon seeing her like this, the baby has to be okay. All this reckless movement can’t be good for the baby.

Neo binds and rebukes next to me. Sethu and the

ladies from church continue calling upon the name of J esus. The praying voices peak at the sound of Thandiwe's screams, it feels like forever and a minute when her body falls rigid. I want to rush to her when her eyes shut closed, Neo holds me back.

“We are not sure if the demon is out.” He exclaims, I don’t care. I need to get to Thandiwe.

“The demon is out son.” One of the women releases me from stress, wasting no time I dash to lift Thandiwe from the floor and take her to the couch. There is a soft throw I use to drape her body, I need to clean her face. Sethu must have read my mind, she hands me a warm face cloth. In no time Thandiwe is clean.

“We’ll come and check on her tomorrow, don’t leave her alone. Demons have a tendency of coming back to the body they were cast out of.” Sethu’s words have me worried all over again. How stubborn is this demon?

“Has she given her life to J esus? If not, then she is

empty, she needs to invite the Holy Spirit to live inside her. If the demon finds her empty, it will invite more.”

“No Ms. S, this one is not a demon. Thandiwe’s story is different, her mother sold her to a witch doctor before she was born and now it has come to collect.” Neo slides in with an explanation.

“I see, but there is nothing God cannot do. We will help her any way we can.” Should I tell Sethu that anyone who tries to help Thandiwe will meet their death? I can’t let them risk their lives for us.

“It’s okay Ms. S, we’ll let you know when we need you.” Neo rescues, he knows the truth behind helping Thandiwe. Sethu and the elders bid us goodbye.

“I should leave as well, Zee is alone with the kids. Take it easy Mzi, this too will pass.” I want to believe him, I move from Thandiwe’s side to walk him out. His phone rings, stopping us at the door.

“MamSonto?” He answers, I thought she had more days to go.

Neo gasps in shock, his eyes glaze with unshed tears, a picture you hardly ever see. He drops the call without saying anything more.

“What is it?” Fear has crept into my heart, pulled out a camp chair and settled there. It can’t be his family, can it?”

“MamSonto.” A trembled whisper that has my heart knocking hard against my chest. The mind is entertaining the worst, MamSonto has to be okay. I need her, Thandiwe won’t make it without her. I hark back to Ngidi’s words, whoever helps Thandiwe will meet their death.

“Is she okay?” I ask Neo, my gaze stealing a glimpse of Thandiwe peacefully sleeping.

“There was a fire, her parents, brother and his ten year old daughter died. Apparently someone left the candle on when they went to bed, somehow it caught fire. It was too late when the neighbours got

there.” The hurt in his voice is as loud a rock song, he leans back on the wall and sends his hands behind his head. I don’t know how deep his relationship with them was, but he is pretty hurt.

“She’s going home tomorrow morning, there were thirteen days left for her to break the fast and this happens. The devil must be angry with her.”

“I’m sorry Neo.” A sigh drops a tear out of his eyes, he swipes it away and sniffs to pull himself together.

“I need to go, will you be okay?” He turns to Thandiwe, I think we will be okay. I nod to permit his leave, he drills past me with a shoulder tap.

“Will you be able to drive home?”

“I’ll be fine.” He guarantees, I believe he will be fine. Neo is strong, he will handle this well.

To be continued...

BURN

70...

BULELWA...

Will I ever get used to having someone in my bed? Thandiwe has mentioned waking up next to someone you are fond of, or in their arms. She described the feeling as heavenly and close to perfection, I didn't know until these past days. Zizwe shares a bed with me every night, we don't have to do anything, but talk while snuggled up. Secretly that is my favourite part of the day. He listens to me and when I have nothing to say he speaks until I can't stand it.

“Zizwe wake up.” Lord, your son sleeps while your precious Bubu fights insomnia.

Images of my father have plagued my mind, the

man must not be comfortable in the ancestral world, hence the need to bother me in the wee hours of the morning.

“Zizwe man.” What is wrong with this man? Can’t he hear me calling him? If you ever find yourself with questions on who to marry, do not...I repeat...do not go for men like Bhekizizwe Zondo who sleep like world peace has finally reigned in this godforsaken hovel.

“Mmm, mmhh.” He hums.

Look at him, no...just look at him, stirring like my lack of sleep is nothing to be bothered about.

“Will you wake up please?” I’m getting frustrated, I want him to stay up with me. This is not his father’s place, he can’t sleep like a log here.

God of all wonders...the man leisurely shoots one eye open and I’m confused by the pompous look he regards me with. Does he have to look so delicious when doing that?

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” Listen to him...He stretches his arms above his head before folding them across his bare chest, yes you guessed it... Hulk is shirtless, and then people say avoid temptation. How? How, when temptation goes to bed without a shirt on?

“I can’t sleep.” Time to sulk Bubu, I want all the attention he can give. I want him to feel me up with his neediness until I feel loved and cared for, until Mandla decides to take up the rock offered to him by his elders and sleep so I can finally sleep too.

We buried the old man..my old man. I can’t express the pain I felt when the coffin was rolled down into the pit, sealing everything. My father is gone, I will never see him again. It’s hard to get used to his absence, Lilian says he is in a better place. I don’t see him in that better she claimed he’s at, my mind has imprinted the image of him lying in a coffin, buried six feet under.

Dammit!

Zizwe is the most caring person I know, it is too much. He sits up... Good...

“Buttercup!” I love it when he tilts his head to the side like that, it shows off his arrogance which I can bet you all the 5rands I spent on lottery tickets; is not intentional. “You do recall our conversation?”

“Which one?” There are so many of them.

“You can talk to me about anything, I promise to always listen.” Clever guy, but...

“I don’t have anything to say, I want you to do all the talking.” The left side of his mouth moves into a droll smirk as confusion swipes over his sculpted face. Don’t we just love him?

“What do you want me to say?” He questions.

“I don’t know...anything. Tell me about that day, the day my father died. What exactly happened?”
Zizwe’s eyes become dubious, they move from

mine to the wall ahead. His sigh is arrogant as he is, it's gnawing as well.

“Can we do this in the morning,” He darts his eyes to the clock on the wall, time is moving closer to 2:30am.

“You want me to sit here and watch you enjoy your sleep?”

“No, we are both going to sleep.” Zizwe has the audacity to say this to me. This is how people fail at school, listening is important.

“I told you, my slumber has departed from me, how do I call upon it when my ancestors are as stubborn as a witch?” He snorts, my question makes sense, hence it has him offended, or I'm making up my own assumptions.

Something is up with him though, either way, Zizwe will not be sleeping tonight, even if I have to blast the radio and wake everyone up.

I hope Deliwe is home, aunts are a special case.

Witchcraft must be an aunt thing, they love that shit.

“Come here.” He calls, and of course I’ll come after you have called me with that voice that has kicked all thoughts out of my mind and left erotic ones. Lord, you speak of forgiveness. Thank you in advance.

I guess “es fubeni” it is. (On the chest)

I make myself comfortable like this is home, his arms are beautifully wrapped around me. This is when he should start with the story, I want to hear it all.

“Have I told you, I love you lately?”

“You did, before bed.” I take him back to a few hours ago when this man decided to chain himself with the shackles of love, I knew it was deep. I have always known, but hey...Hulk just had to say it. He repeated the words he said the day I almost died, I thought he was overwhelmed by emotions seeing

me lose the battle of life therefore the words slipped. Tonight, he uttered those words right in front of my mother who had come to ask him to sleep on the couch, her reasons were that he is a guest and Mandla did not approve of us so we couldn't share a room in his house.

“You didn't say it back.” Pause... What is this? I asked to know the happenings of that day, not a sequel of Romeo and Juliet.

“Are you going to tell me or should I go back to sleep?” It's not that I don't...you know...that word. Argh let's just leave it.

Zizwe is quiet for a lifetime, he is not the type that is easily offended. I lift my head from his chest and find his eyes fixed on me. How much love does Zizwe have for me? I see it illuminating in his eyes, they burn with an overwhelming passion. He should not be kissing my forehead, he should be upset with me.

“It’s not that I don’t appreciate you, I do. Every day I thank God for you, Zizwe. I don’t want to express my feelings because I have to, I want to say it because my heart can’t keep it in any longer.” This should do it, guy is too soft shame.

“I know Buttercup, we have the rest of our lives.”
What did I say about his spaghetti heart?

“Thank you.” Gratitude leaves my mouth, I accept the lingering kiss. This is by far my most favourite thing, kissing him.

“I’ll share a story, not about that day. We’ll talk about it some other time.” He states, I would ask Lilian, but my mother seems to enjoy lying lately.

NQABA...

The branch were Thandiwe worked is closing down, nothing is going right. People suspect that the place is haunted. Some claim they have heard strange

voices in the bathrooms. The cleaner who is first to arrive says she has seen a man seated in Cele's office, when she would go to investigate, she would find the office empty. People are scared to come to work, they want to resign and a few have found other jobs.

I decided to transfer half of the staff to the offices in Midrand, the rest will have to be at home while we sort out their papers. I have a 9am meeting with the branch manager and the managing director to discuss a way forward for the employees that have not been placed yet.

I'm running late, it is not like me. Thandiwe gave me a hard time this morning, she had been vomiting since 4am. She said it's morning sickness, it could be food poisoning. I'm worried about her, she hasn't been the same since a spirit took over her body weeks ago.

We prayed and cast it out, I hope we did, otherwise, why is she living in her own little world... sometimes?

She tends to be too quiet.

Zulu was told that he is my son, my biggest fear was that he would reject me. He was actually happy about it, he says he has two fathers now. He loves Ntuthuko and I have no problem with that, I just would never let him anywhere near my son.

My phone vibrates from the dashboard, I make sure not to miss any calls since Thandiwe's situation. It could be her or about her and..it is her.

“Biyase.” There goes the gloom out the window as my mood elevates at the sound of her sweet voice, she says I'm too sensitive lately. Perhaps it's the realisation that life is too short and I might lose her anytime. What am I thinking? I cannot let that happen, losing Thandiwe would be death itself.

“Tshabalala.” Her giggles glide into my ear to warm my heart, the effervescent I spoke of.

“Where are you? What time are you coming home?”

And just like that my heart jumps into a puddle of worry.

“Is something wrong? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, stop worrying about me.” The exclamation is after a soft lenient sigh, some days we argue about how cautious I tend to get. I don’t see why I shouldn’t be, there is a demon out there after her life and MamSonto’s plate is flooded, she can’t accommodate us at the moment.

“Amara invited me over to her house.”

“Okay, I won’t be long. I’ll come pick you up once I’m done.”

“I’ve got that covered, you can pick us up around 6pm.” Thandiwe and Amara have become rather close lately. I’m glad in a way, she needs friends to keep her mind busy. “Have you heard anything from Ngidi?”

Ngidi is in Lesotho, so far he is the only person I know who can help Veronica. MamSonto is not in her right state of mind, losing her family and all.

“He’s still in Lesotho, but Veronica is doing well lately. She laughs, eats and sleeps normally.”

Strangely how all of this is happening in my mother’s absence.

“That’s great right?” It’s more than that, my father is relieved of the burden a tad bit. He is worried about his wife, she called to explain why she is not coming home.

“Yeah, I have to go. I’ll call you once I’m done, I love you.”

“Me too.” She says and disconnects the call. I have to run by my father’s house to check on Veronica, we all try to be there for her and I believe she feels the love we have for her.

Traffic is a night mare, I should have driven straight. This is a short cut and was supposed to get me to the office thirty minutes before the meeting starts.

I'm annoyed seeing people exit their cars to inspect what appears to be an accident, I wait it out for a while and...we are not moving. The place is surrounded by an ambulance and police cars in jiffies, curiosity says go check it out. It might be someone I know.

I have to walk through a crowd that has been ogling at the scene. A woman lies in her own blood on the street, her dead eyes wide open motioning that she died a painful death. It couldn't have been a car accident, unless a truck ran her over. There is so much blood, how do people stand to watch an unspeakable sight?

Leering closer, my mind starts drawing a picture of the woman who had prophesied Thandiwe's death.

I'd be damned, her words have come back to bite her. I hope the devil is watching, this is what happens when you touch God's children.

THANDIWE...

A BIG THIRTY SIX!!! Wow...

Nqaba will probably not care about this, he is not big on celebrations. Amara suggested that we throw them a birthday party after she told me that Nqaba and Randall share a birthday. I am for the idea, we have been through so much and a little party will help distress.

Their house is beautifully decorated, it's simple... not too flashy. A wall near the door that leads to the patio has been filled with a cake table, if you're not afraid of sugar then that is your spot. Overall the setting is minimalistic, the long table in the patio is adorned with white tiffany chairs, black and white dishes and glasses are the base. There are white candles, standing on clear candle holders that have been filled with black and white beads to enliven the table. A few bows and ribbons here and there.

Amara says Randall is not fond of celebrating his

day too, to him it is like any other day. Strange how Nqaba and Randall share similar opinions.

We didn't have to do much really, Amara got the woman who planned her wedding to plan this party. From the looks of it, it's going to be packed tonight. The party starts at 6pm, I'm worried about what Nqaba wore to the meeting today. Those chino pants do not fit tonight's theme, I have to get someone to take him shopping or something. If I meet up with him before the surprise, I won't be able to hide my excitement and end up telling him about it. I settle down in a chair in the backyard, grab a glass of water as I watch Amara and the planner converse about today's event.

“Thank you, Khanyi, this is perfect.” Amara says, admiring the planner's beautiful work. She introduced herself as Khanyisile Shezi, founder and owner of Little Black Dress. I agree with Amara, the lady has an eye for beautiful things. Simple, yet

elegant.

“Anything for my favourite couple.” Khanyisile replies, proudly nodding at her masterpiece.

“I’ll see you tonight then, you’re bringing someone I presume?”

“Unless you’re talking about a hired date, maybe.” Khanyisile’s joke throws Amara into a puddle of laughter. “The world lacks real men, God doesn’t make them the way he used to back then.”

“Maybe you will be lucky and get to mingle with someone tonight.” I throw in an opinion, Khanyisile turns with a small smile on her face.

“I guess I should keep my fingers crossed then.” She has a warm laugh. “Let me run, I’ll come a bit earlier to check up on everything. The caterers should be on their way.”

“Great, see you later.” Amara ripostes.

“I’ll see myself out.” Khanyisile bids me farewell with a smile.

“She is good.” I tell Amara as I continue to admire the place.

“I know, you should’ve seen my wedding. Remind me to show you the pictures later, right now we need to get ready. Neo and Ayize will probably be the first to arrive, she hates traveling at night with the triplets.” This reminds me.

“How is Neo?” The last I heard, he is not taking MamSonto’s loss pretty well. Weeks later and Neo is still affected by it. I feel bad, it’s my fault. Although, I don’t know whether to blame myself or my mother.

“He’s taking one step at a time, I can’t say the same about MamSonto. I doubt she will ever be the same again, I can’t imagine losing your whole family.” Amara’s response sends goose bumps on my skin, this is the fear I live with every day. Zulu has been in danger relatively a number of times, it scares me that one day I will completely lose him.

“Death is not proud and it is not a respecter of persons, sadly when it comes there is nothing we can do about it.” My heart jumps at the sound of my words, I hate death just as much as I hate diseases that bring death.

Amara’s mind wanders off, I snap my fingers to get her to come back. She blinks, her mood has suddenly changed.

“Are you okay?”

“I think I’m going to lose Randall.” Shocking... These two love each other, what she is saying is impossible. I don’t respond, but wait for her to explain why she is having such troubling thoughts.

“Something terrible happened Thandiwe, I found out about it and kept it from Randall and Mzi.” Nqaba? What does he have to do with this?

“You’re scaring me, Amara. What is it?” She finds a seat next to me.

“Randall and Mzi are twins.” Her tone sends a whisper as if it is a secret to be kept, I’m unable to grasp her words. Still, I wait on her. I don’t want to make a hasty judgement before considering all the facts.

“I found out about it two months ago, Barbra and Sandra are siblings. I heard them arguing about it. When Sandra married into the Okolie family, she couldn’t conceive so she asked her sister to help her out. I don’t know how Segun agreed to it, Barbra gave birth to twins, Randall and Mzi. She gave Randall to Sandra and kept Mzi. He is an Okolie, he doesn’t have the Biyase blood running through his veins. The twins are unaware of their identity and I have no idea how I’m going to tell Randall, he hates lies Thandiwe and he is going to hate me after he finds out I knew.”

This must be a joke, Nqaba’s whole life has been a lie. Finding out that Duma is not his father is going

to break him.

“Why didn’t you say anything Amara? This is big, it’s not a white lie one can easily forgive.” I’m hurt and upset that she kept such a big secret, I would understand if it was about Randall alone, but Nqaba is involved too.

“Believe me, I hate myself for it. I plan on telling him after the party.”

“I will have to tell Nqaba too.” Where am I even going to start? Barbra is not around to answer for herself, Sandra will probably try and lie her way out. This is messed up. “Nqaba and Randall have to know that they are twins.”

“TWINS?” The loud voice startles us so much that we jump to our feet, our heads turning to the door separating the living room from the back yard. The night might not go as planned.

To be continued...

BURN

71

THANDIWE...

Jaw dropped, eyes widened with shock, Ayize strides into the backyard. Her gaze moves to and fro as she glares at Amara and me. I can hear Amara's unsteady breathing from where I stand, fear has claimed her.

"Amara, what is this I hear? Randall and Mzi are twins and you have been keeping it from him for months?" Ayize chides, I don't know what she's looking for when her eyes keep finding me. I'm not in on this secret, I was kept in the dark like everyone else.

"Ayize." Amara breathes, hinting that she fears Ayize like a little sister would fear her big sister.

“What have you done? How do you keep something like this from Randy, knowing very well how much he despises lies?” Ayize gives off an impression that she is very familiar with this family, they must be related in some way.

“I wanted to tell him –”

“Then why didn’t you?” Ayize cuts off Amara’s quavering voice. “This is so careless of you, who put you up to this? You of all people, the one person he trusts with his life betrays him like this?”

I knew Amara was soft from her miniscule voice to the way she handles things, so the tears in her eyes are very much expected.

“I’m going to tell him today after the party.” I feel sorry for her, if Randall hates lies like these two have mentioned, then he is not going to take this well.

“You better do it before he hears it from someone

else and if Sandra happens to be the one to tell him, she will turn things to her advantage and you will be the bad one.” Her voice is cold and stern, Amara nods vigorously, wiping the flood of tears cascading her cheeks.

“I promise,” Amara assures, my heart skips when Ayize’s eyes travel to me. I have never been intimidated by a woman before, she gives off a strict, but also playful aura. She smiles, it’s warm, yet her eyes are disciplined as they remain hard.

“Thandiwe?” I suppose that’s a question, my mouth opens and nothing emits. I must look like a fool bobbing my head like a naughty kid caught in the act. Ayize laughs, a quick laughter that leaves me working out if it was genuine.

“Relax, I don’t bite. Are you okay?” I’m bewildered by her question, due to that I don’t give an answer, my mind is blank. The smile again, it lingers on her lips. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to pry. There is sadness in your eyes.” The intimidating lady exclaims.

“I’m – I’m fine.” Something is stuck on my throat, it must be nerves. Ayize stares for a long uncomfortable second, I can’t interpret the shrug she gives me.

“Where are the kids?” Amara saves me from the interrogation.

“With Chioma, I need a break.” She sighs, depicting a heavy case of exhaustion

“Thandiwe.” A distant whisper steals my attention from everyone, I turn to search the owner of the voice. A silhouette lurks behind the small trees by the pool.

“Do you guys see that?”

“What?” The ladies ask and in this brief second, I turn to them, it takes another second for me to take my eyes back to the trees. I feel like a fool when I find nothing, fear twirls around my heart. I hate that I always find myself in the claws of fear, why can’t I

be strong like Nqaba?

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” I repeat the mantra in a soft whisper, I have held on tight to this scripture since the possession and it seems to be driving away whatever spirit is after me. I don’t want to think about the old man, my mother’s betrayal and that I will lose my life to the hands of a witch when I turn twenty six.

“Are you okay Thandiwe?” Amara’s voice jolts me out of my mind, I turn to them with a weak smile.

“Yes, let’s get ready. Time is flying.”

I need a distraction...Amara leads the way back to the house, I’m not too far behind her and Ayize is a few feet behind me.

Zulu insisted that we get balloons, the kid thinks it’s

his party. I don't blame him, we owe him one, the atmosphere is amazing. Screaming groups of children run through the house as bubbles hover in the air and balloons float around without direction on the wooden floor and on to the fur rug in the midst of the couches.

I make my way to the back yard to find Veronica, my eyes trail the crowded area. I saw her with Sethu a while ago, shocking I know. Veronica has always found it hard to mingle with people.

The guest were on time as expected, now what's missing are the twins. My goodness, Nqaba has a twin brother. My mind struggles to grasp the thought.

"Tee." A smile takes ownership of my lips upon hearing the sound of Bulelwa's voice, the smile dissolves seeing the glass of wine in his hand. I told him to slow down when he got here.

"Let me guess, your third glass?" He smiles at my

prediction and sips on the wine. His face scrunches up when I snatch the glass from him.

“I need that.” He thinks he needs it.

“No Bubu, you will be drinking water until Zizwe gets here.” Bulelwa frowns in astonishment.

“Hulk is coming?” His voice is drowning in disbelief, he was sad earlier when he told me that Zizwe didn’t want to come to the party. He didn’t have a problem with it after I told him that Bulelwa was planning on drinking like a fish.

“I called him, you’re going to need someone to look after you. The party hasn’t started yet and you’re drunk.” Bulelwa is a party animal, he never misses a chance to get wasted. Carefully, he stumbles to whisper something into my ear. The strong stench of alcohol dives into my nostrils, the baby must not like it because I’m close to throwing up. I hold my breath and do a five second count down in my head. The feeling dissipates like it was never there.

“Zizwe is hiding something from me.” An undertone of tipoffs, the tone of his vocal sound tells me that he is not sure about what he’s saying. He steps back, his eyes fiercely beholding mine. “I see it when he looks at me, I thought I was imagining things, but that man...that man has a secret and he won’t tell me about it.”

“Did you perhaps ask him?” He shakes his head, back and forth. “I think you should, maybe he’s afraid to tell you. Ask him and see how he...”

“Buttercup!” Zizwe’s voice turns us around, he stands tall and bold in the doorway.

“I need to find Vero, behave.” Bulelwa simpers, at least he can handle his alcohol. I manoeuvre past Zizwe, sending him a smile on the way. He replies with a head nod, by the looks of it, he is not happy. They will talk it out.

“You promised you won’t drink.” I hear Zizwe’s deadpan voice chiding my friend, by the time Bulelwa retorts, I’m too far to hear anything.

SURPRISE!!!

That's what the twins get home to, a crowd of people singing them happy birthday. It is a surprise indeed, Neo chuckles lightly as he makes way for them. He was given instructions to keep Randall away from home and he took the opportunity to detain Nqaba as well.

Nqaba turns his gaze to his twin to meet his unmoving demeanour, cold as a block of ice. Nqaba is used to it and does not take offence.

“Did you know about this?” The question leaves his mouth before he could stop it, Randall grimaces further than he already was and his brother finds a response there. “Of course...it's a surprise...for us both” Nqaba scoffs, as if displeased.

The placard on the wall says so, but the two brothers are not entirely over the moon about this. Nqaba tries to show a little excitement, while Randall's face remains as dead as a vampire's. They don't get time to process their surroundings, the crowd they are not fond of plagues them with birthday greetings and the noise has them scrunching in displeasure. They accept the handshakes, the brief hugs and kisses on the cheeks from friends and families.

Nqaba breathes, relieved that he has made it to Thandiwe in the corridor. People scatter all over the house as the party commences.

“Why are there so many people here?”

“It's a party Biyase, Amara thought it would be nice to link your birthdays.” Thandiwe is greeted with a kiss, an urge to tell Nqaba about his identity rises now that she can smell him and touch him.

“I don't know ninety percent of the people here.” He

is complaining, Thandiwe frowns at that.

“Well, Amara went out of her way to surprise you two. The least you could do is smile.” This is asking for too much, when has she seen him excited for anything?

“The party should have been for Peanut, he deserves it.” Nqaba scowls, not that he is not grateful, he feels the whole thing is unnecessary.

If it were anyone else, they would be offended by his response to the party, but Thandiwe knows the man like the back of her hand. Her arms find their way around his torso, her lips linger on his earlobe as she stands on her toes to reach his height and whispers the words...

“Happy birthday Biyase.”

Nqaba smirks lightly and takes pleasure in conjoining their lips.

RANDALL...

Randall spots his wife in the front row, she has the biggest smile on her face. He winks as their eyes meet, Amara's feet tread to meet Randall halfway.

"Happy birthday." She says after grabbing a kiss.

"A party?" Amara expected this kind of response, she sends her hand to straighten out his crumpled brows and shrugs to answer him. Randall is not fond of surprises and crowds, but what the heck? Change is good. Right?

"Really? What happened now?" The grumpy expression has Amara questioning him, his hands slowly glide to the small of her back, blood rushes through her body, making it warm as Randall pulls her close into his arms.

"Let's go upstairs." A normal suggestion from him, the whisper sent into her ears causes her to shudder lightly.

"Why?" She whispers back, enfolding her arms

around him.

“I’d rather be having sex with my wife than pretending that I’m enjoying this party.” He states with a straight face, Amara takes it as a joke hence the cackle.

“Stop it.” She loves the idea, but it’s out of the question.

“I have an idea.” The restrained smile on Randall's face is priceless. “Let’s dismiss everyone and we’ll have a party for two.” Amara finds him funny, although she is mindful that he is dead serious.

“We are not doing that.”

“Hey, don’t say I never come up with ideas in this marriage.” At least he tried.

“Radical ideas? I am yet to see that day Mr. Okolie.”

“Will we also get a chance to wish him?” Sandra grouchily enquires, wearing rudeness from head to toe, from the way her arms are folded across her chest to her narrowed eyes that are glaring at Amara.

Sandra’s presence reminds Amara of how she has betrayed the man she loves,

Amara forces a smile and moves away to grant Sandra the space she demands.

IFEANYI...

It is safe to say Ntsika has become my confidant, I have found it easier to talk to him than anyone. He sees me, there is a way he looks at me. It is different from the way other people do, he looks at me like he is ready to take a dagger through his heart for me.

I last spoke to him last night, he said he was

coming to the party and I didn't believe him, but here he is standing in front of me. We're in the garden, I can hear the loud voices and soft music coming from the back yard.

I don't wish to go there, crowds suffocate me since the incident. I would rather be here with Ntsika and pray that my brother is not searching for me.

I have been afraid to look at Ntsika each time he was in front of me, today I feel bold enough to do it. He is too close for me to smell the intoxicating scent that has me relaxing in the moment, his teeth flash with each word he speaks, the corner of his eyes crinkle when he smirks at something he says.

He's tall, north of six foot I would assume. Ghanaian men are tall, like my brother and meeting another towering South African man who is as lanky as my brother is kind of nice. I have plenty male friends

and their heights are limited, some are shorter than me.

I'm impressed with Ntsika's height, he has beautiful features for a man and I have come to know that he speaks Zulu a lot. His is different from the one Mbuso speaks, Ntsika has an accent, it's quite deep. He says he is originally from KZN.

His eyes are soft and warm, I can't say what colour they are, I haven't stared long enough to find out.

“Are you listening?” His voice drags me back to the present, I blink away my thoughts and play with the idea of asking him questions about him and his family as I am intrigued by the type of person he is, but stop myself short. I'm not as quiet as I was, I'm taking baby steps. “Do you need anything?”

See this? He takes care of me more than he should, and has made me trust him. I am convinced that I

am safe with him, I shake my head. I don't want him to move from here.

"I'm okay." He smiles at the sound of my words, I find a place to sit on one of the garden benches. We have been standing for too long, I'm guessing Ntsika would rather remain standing.

"There's a place I would like to take you when you're free." I raise my eyes at his remark. "If you don't mind, maybe tomorrow."

So far the only place we have been to together is the doctor's office, I would find him waiting for me without fail.

"Maybe next time." I tell him, I'm not ready. His eyes twitch briefly, I bruised his feelings.

"Yes next time, there's no rush."

"Ntsika!" A female voice calls from behind him, I can't see her because he is standing in front me. Ntsika doesn't turn, his eyes are on me and I can't twig what's behind them. "Ntsikayethu!"

The voice has transitioned from soft to stern, Ntsika turns eventually. As I stand to my feet, I see this young woman treading towards us with glossy eyes. Being a woman, it's easy to detect jealousy in another woman's eyes and that is what I see in her eyes.

“What are you doing here?” Her question is a murmur, her voice breaks as she speaks. She appears to be too fragile.

“Onica,” something stings my heart as I realise that this is the Onica, Ntsika occasionally speaks to over the phone, I have heard love in his voice when he speaks to her.

“You said you couldn't come to the party, you lied to Vero.” Her tears are showing off right now, I want to leave. Why am I still standing here?

“Who is she? You're here for her and not me?” Her

eyes find me at the last word, I don't want to be part of this.

“Excuse me.” Ntsika grips my hand as I move past him and this Onica girl, the unanticipated grab sends fear shooting right through me and instantly I'm taken back to when I was abducted. My body freezes accompanied by a gasp, Ntsika notices and immediately releases my hand. A wave of regret coats his eyes.

“I'm sorry.” A whisper is sent by his muffled voice, I believe him. “Please stay.”

He must be crazy, I don't give him a chance to speak any further, neither do I look at the girl beside him. My feet take me back into the house, they have issues to solve and I have no business being there.

To be continued...

BURN

72...

NQABA...

I can't find Thandiwe anywhere and no one seems to have seen her, how did I lose sight of her? She was with me one minute and the next she was gone.

Amara must know where she could be. She smiles seeing me approach from the kitchen, we meet in the corridor. I can see Randall from here, his eyes are on this woman smiling at me. He needs to relax, honestly.

“Happy birthday.” Oh that, I almost forgot.

“This is all you huh?” Thandiwe had already told me, I don't have a response to the birthday wish.

“You two deserve it, you're twi...” Her hand smashes against her mouth as if chastising herself. “Twice my age.” She winces before nervously laughing.

“We're not that old, maybe Randall is. I'm way too young.”

“You’re the same age.” Amara simplifies.

“Have you seen Thandiwe?”

“I saw her headed toward the garden, she looked distraught.” Dammit, I leave Amara with no answer and rush to find Thandiwe.

There she is curled up on the bench, in a fetal position. Undertones of complaints leave her mouth, I can’t make out what it is she’s saying. As I near her my ears find her words.

“I can’t do it, don’t make me do it.” Her voice is a seething whisper between shattering teeth and like Amara had said, she appears distraught. I remove my jersey, cover her with it and sit her up.

“Thandiwe?” I kneel before her to catch her eyes, they will tell me if she is okay. She doesn’t look into my eyes, but keeps hers cast down. This confirms it, she is not okay. My hands cradle her freezing

cheeks, I bring her face up so that she is looking at me. I don't know where the idea comes from, but I connect my lips with hers.

My heart clips when she doesn't respond to the kiss, I'm not giving up on her so I deepen the kiss, gradually plunging my tongue in her mouth.

My hands glide under her shirt from the small of her back to her middle, a thought to warm her freezing body. It takes a painful minute for her to respond to the kiss, my heart relaxes at the sound of her muffled moans. Her arms wrap around me as she holds me tight, I could hear her snivelling and this compels me to stop. I don't remove my hands from her body, but bring her to sit on my lap.

“I won't leave your sight again, I promise.” Thandiwe doesn't riposte, her head finds shelter on my shoulder. I make sure to hold her in a way that makes her feel safe and loved, while hoping the warmth of my love pours from me to her.

BULELWA...

Don't drink Bulelwa, take it easy Buttercup. You can talk to me Buttercup. Hey!!! Do these people know what stress does to a person? I am not okay, can I be allowed to not be okay and drown my problems in a bottle of alcohol? Zizwe is getting on my nerves, I blame Thandiwe for calling him.

Dammit, he is seated too close, I can't breathe.

"Will you give me space?" I don't mean to push him too hard, I want to help him when he falls from the chair. Thankfully these fools around here are too occupied to have noticed a giant falling.

He probably fell because he didn't expect the push. At least he didn't fall into the pool. Zizwe raises his eyes to leer at me while getting up, I should be helping him, but I'm a messed up mess who needs a helping hand himself.

“Why are you here Zizwe?” I snap a little too harsh, he doesn’t show any emotions. My eyes follow his figure as he rises to stand before me, Jesus...look at this giraffe annoying me and I hate that he’s keeping secrets from me.

“I’m not going to leave you alone.”

“Why not?” My racket turns heads, hell yeah I’m drunk. Shoot me...

“There is no need for you to yell?” What is he saying to me? I have many reasons to yell, not only did I lose my father, my mother has withdrawn from the world. I didn’t think she would fall into depression, she doesn’t talk to anyone nor does she come out of her room. She’s forever hugging a picture of my father, repeating the words ‘I’m sorry’ with tears in her eyes. Every time I see her I feel like I’m watching a bad episode of Generations.

Betty is missing in action since she left Ntuzuma, her phone is off. No one has heard from her, apparently she is in my father’s will and it can’t be

read in her absence and while Lilian is not in her right state of mind. The all-powerful Lilian Msibi has fallen weak.

“I’m taking you home, now.” Home! He said home. I laugh at his statement. Does Bulelwa have a home? Zizwe better not be talking about that empty house my father got for me, home is where your family is. It’s where the person you love is and this man I love refuses to move in with me, it’s important that we live together, I’m terrified of loneliness.

“I’m not going anywhere with you.” I exclaim, walking away from him. A hand grips my wrist and I’m turned around with force that I come crushing on someone’s chest..Zizwe’s chest. This man is testing me...wait! That look in his eyes...maybe I’m testing him.

“Don’t walk away from me when I’m talking to you.” He hisses through clamped teeth...May I please be reminded who is older here. Big Bully.

“Let go.” I snap, above my normal tone. He glares

down at me, eyes burning with what could be anger. Then again, I'm drunk...never trust a drunk person.

“What is wrong with you, Bulelwa? I'm trying to help you here.”

“I don't need your help.”

“That is not what it looks like from where I'm standing.” To hell with him, I don't need this shit.

“I can't breathe Zizwe, you're always breathing down my neck. Fuck, I can't even go to the toilet without you there. You're depriving me of air, leave me the hell alone.” These are words I will never take back, nothing can erase the pain I have caused him. Fuck whoever invented alcohol. Look at us, honest as snorty brats.

“Is that what you want?” His voice is a whisper. I want to say no, but I want to push him away. My life is toxic.

“Will you tell me what you're keeping from me?” I

decide to take Thandiwe's advice, my heart breaks as the look in Zizwe's eyes confirms my assumptions. "What is it?" I ask him, wasting my time.

"I asked you a question first." Is this man seriously kidding me?

"Yes!" I snap. "At least one of us is honest." Pain twitches in his eyes at my words, I'm serving stings on a silver platter today. Leisurely, Zizwe releases my wrist. I send my hand to rub away the discomfort on my wrist.

"You're childish, do you know that?" His declaration cuts deep, I don't want to lose him. Why am I hurting him? Maybe I'm afraid one day he will decide I'm not worth keeping and leave me. Zizwe glares with a blank expression, my eyes are wet. I blame it on the alcohol knowing very well that it's my heart that is responsible of these tears.

I beat myself up when his feet carry him away from me. Stop him Bubu, you fool. Stop that man...your...your man. Ndlondlo, what has my drunk ass done?

RANDALL...

“Chioma has the kids snuggled up in the TV room, Liyana is grumpy as usual. Her and Ginger want to join the adults.” Amara tells her husband as he pulls her to a dance in the foyer.

“And R.J ?” That’s all he is worried about? A thought slips through Amara’s mind.

“He’s sleeping.”

“Dance with me.” He says, when she refuses to move her feet.

“People will laugh at me.” It’s all in Amara’s head, it could be the public display of affection. Randall is too affectionate, he holds her in his arms as if there is no one else present, but them.

“What people? It’s just us two.” He leans down for a kiss, but Amara tilts her head and his lips fall on her cheek. “Come on, me hemma, let me taste you.” (My

queen.) He tries again, she doesn't budge.

"Taste me?"

"Yes, so are we going to go to the bedroom now?"

"You're too much Randall?" Amara grumbles, frowning this time, Randall buries her in a kiss reminding her that he can't get enough of her.

"I promise we'll come back before they notice the birthday boy is missing."

The couple turn at the sound of someone clearing their throat to meet Styles, scrutinising them with a smirk on his face.

"Three years later and you two are still obsessed with each other." A miniature of annoyance prickling him, Styles voices his opinion. Randall growls, frustrated by his friend's interference.

"Go away Styles." He waves him off, Styles doesn't move an inch.

“Forget it, I’m not going anywhere. We’re here for you, you will have to tolerate us until the party is over.” Styles retorts, pulling Amara away from a grumpy Randall.

“I’ll go and check on the kids.” Amara.

Randall is not for it, he glowers at Styles’ amusement.

Perfect timing, Sandra has been looking for a way to speak to Amara. Somehow Amara and Randall’s closeness worries her. She walks in on Amara in the kitchen, preparing snacks.

“Hi.” That’s a first, Amara chooses to ignore her and continues with what she is doing. “Great party, hey?”

“It is.” Amara coldly accounts, wondering why they are having an awkward conversation. What does

Sandra want? She turns to open the top cupboard and pulls out packets of snacks. Sandra shoots her with a stone cold glare as her back is turned.

Can she drop dead? Diabolical thoughts visit Sandra's head, she loves the idea and would like to see it come to life.

“Do you need help?” Sandra does not mean it, the small talk is a way to enter the conversation she has been meaning to have with Amara. She wants something and Amara has a pretty good idea what it is. “Thank you for not telling him the truth.” Mic check 1..2...1..2...

Sandra ladies and gentlemen has found her way in.

Amara side eyes the woman and mentally rolls her eyes, if only Sandra knew what daughter in-law dearest has in store.

“Who?” Come on Amara...Of course she knows what Sandra is talking about, we'll just play along as

well.

“Randall.” Sandra scoffs, catching Amara on her sarcasm.

“Are you serious?” Amara shouts above whispered words... What makes Sandra think she won’t tell Randall anything? She can’t live with this secret her whole life. “When do you plan on telling him?”

“Not in this life time.” Sandra exclaims, the decision has been made and no one will get in her way.

“Randall can never find out about this and you won’t tell him.” She finishes, suddenly angry.

This only frustrates Amara to her wits, she wants to scream at Sandra for being such an idiot.

“How long do you think the truth will stay hidden?”

“As long as it takes, we were able to keep it from him for thirty six years.” An absurd exclamation from Sandra.

“I will not spend my life lying to my husband, you can’t force me to keep this from him. I’ve made up

my mind, tonight after the party I will tell him everything.” Amara Sizzles.

“I forbid you from doing that.” Sandra spits back, nearing Amara who is not daunted by her coldness.

“How do you sleep at night? Don’t you feel bad about what you did to him?”

“I didn’t do anything, but raise him like my son, I gave him everything. My sister would have never taken care of him the like I have done.” She is not careless to raise her voice, unlike Amara who has giving up, keeping this secret has been a heavy burden to carry.

“Randall deserves to know the truth, he deserves to know that he has a twin brother who was taken away from him and that you are not his mother. He has to know Mzi is his brother and Barbra is his mother. What kind of a woman are you? Don’t you have any remorse?”

Sandra is not going to take any insults from Amara, hence the hand she raises on her, a daydream

Sandra has had since the day the young woman found them out. Rolls of shock wash over her when a hand grabs her wrist, stopping her malicious plan, her heart drops into her stomach, it tightens into knots and heat consumes her body as her eyes fall on Randall. Her life is over, she knows it.

Amara's eyes trail the large hand on her mother-in-law's wrist, they meet Randall's eyes...hurt...anger and disbelief are reflecting on them. He releases Sandra's hand, his eyes lock with his wife's with an intensity that leaves her breathless. Amara and Sandra have figured he must have heard everything.

“Randall?” Amara's voice quavers under the whisper.

“S – Son.” That's Sandra, words fail her. She knew from the beginning that Amara was more of a threat than Barbra, look at the mess Amara has created. How does she fix this now?

“Is it true mother?” Randall enquires with his eyes still fixed on his wife who is drenched in tears as

the fear of the unknown has paid her an unwanted visit. It terrifies her that Randall has found out like this.

“No.” Will you ever learn Sandra?

“DON’T LIE TO ME.” Randall barks, startling the women. “I heard everything.” He continues, no one dares to say anything and that enrages him more.

“Okay. Mzi’s father will tell me the truth.” He states and marches to the living room where he last saw Duma. Randall doesn’t have all the facts, but it drives him crazy to think he might not be an Okolie.

Amara and Sandra follow, running here and there as they fail to keep up with his quick steps.

“Son, please.” Sandra yells after him.

“DUMA!!!” Randall roars, disrespectfully calling out for Duma. The room goes quiet as the guests turn to him. “Everyone out now.” He announces, Amara runs to his side with a worried look on her face, she wants to explain and can’t imagine what he must be feeling.

“What’s going on?” Nqaba materialises from the crowd without Thandiwe who is sleeping in one of the guest rooms.

‘He has to know that Mzi is his brother.’ Amara’s words ring in Randall’s ears and his heart sinks as his world comes crushing down on him, accepting that Nqaba is his brother will be accepting that he is not an Okolie. He shakes his head and blinks a few times to rid the words.

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” Randall’s eyes probe the living space, he finds Styles and takes no notice of the worried gaze he regards him with. “THE PARTY IS OVER, GET OUT NOW!” He booms as strips of wrath evoke inside him.

“Randall, what happened?” Styles has to ask, his friend is acting like a lunatic. A shaky Amara finds Ayize ogling at her, she is unable to decipher the blank stare on her face. Amara tries to wipe the tears fooling around her cheeks, they are bull-

headed.

“Please show everyone out.” Randall pleads with Styles and he has to obey seeing how troubled Randall has become. Duma surfaces from the crowd that is slowly moving out in low voices and grumbles. Close friends remain, Ayize leads everyone to the foyer, a plan to leave the family to talk in peace, leaving Styles and Neo behind.

“What happened?” Duma’s question is sent to Nqaba who shrugs his shoulders as he has no clue what is going on.

“This woman –” Randall points at Sandra without as much as looking at her. “Is not my mother.” Duma has no idea what Randall is talking about

“Son, I can explain.” Sandra gets in his space to have him step back.

“IS SHE OR IS SHE NOT?” He shouts at the top of

his lungs, frightening them again. Any given day Nqaba would chide him for yelling at his father, however shock has him by his nostrils. Randall thinks Duma knows something about this secret and if that is the truth, Duma better start talking.

“Father, answer him.” Nqaba murmurs to a confused old man.

“I don’t know what he’s talking about son.” Duma answers, placing the puzzle together has become a mission he will never win.

“Are you not my father?” A whisper sashays from Randall’s mouth, Nqaba’s eyes amplify with shock. Randall is his brother? How? His faltered steps lead him closer to his father, he sees the confusion and shock in his eyes, but brushes it off.

“What is he talking about Father?” Dumbfounded, Duma shakes his head.

“Tell them the truth Sandra.” Amara screams at

Sandra from behind Randall. Why is Sandra standing there without saying a word? “Can’t you see what you’re doing? Look at this mess.”

Randall blinks as his eyes find his wife again, she can’t stomach the hurt flashing in his eyes. Her body trembles, her lower lip quavers as he keeps his intense gaze on her.

“Sh – She is not your mother Randall, Barbra is. She is Sandra’s sister.” Amara sighs as she painfully confesses the truth, nothing has registered in Duma’s head yet. Time seems to have slowed down, the next words have his ears buzzing with a deafening sound. “You and Mzi are twins, you were conceived by the same woman. I don’t know if Duma is aware of the truth or if Segun was. Mzi is an Okolie, he is your twin brother.”

Unbelieving gasps fill the room, Randall is in shock, the truth hurts more coming from his wife. Duma loses his balance and stumbles back, Neo catches

him before he falls. Hate has wrapped around Sandra's heart, tears have covered her face. She cries because she was caught, she cries because she can't kill Amara like she wants to. Nothing in her says remorse. Her son is hurting, she sees it, but selfishness has taken over her being.

"I don't understand," Nqaba speaks, his eyes are on Sandra. "How is this possible?"

"How long have you known?" Randall's question to his wife is a mumble, heat rushes to Amara's ears. She has seen the finale, Randall will never forgive her.

"I – I wanted to tell..."

"How long have you known?" Randall yells loud enough to startle her, she tries to blink away her tears and fails miserably.

"M – Months," Amara murmurs, her heart is breaking too, she cannot fathom what Randall is feeling. "I'm s – sorry I didn't tell you, Randall."

He shrugs her hands off of him, he is angry at her for keeping a secret from him, angry that she didn't

trust him enough to tell him what she knew.

Her touching him would probably ease the anger he feels toward her and that is something he is not ready for.

Sandra stands in the middle of the room with burning eyes intently glaring at her, Nqaba still waits for his answer. Suffocated by the lies and what could possibly be the truth, Nqaba's softer self takes the backseat, his brain takes on a different mode as he switches from compassion to cold emotional indifference. Never has he directed this side to an elder, not even his mother Barbra. This is a full on protective mode, his hand is on Sandra's throat and her back is against the wall. His eyes translate that he could kill and not care one bit, Sandra trembles under his grab. Eyes bulging out of their sockets.

“Is this true?” Nqaba snarls slowly, his lips barely

moving. Randall does not think to help his struggling “mother”, he only feels hatred for her at this point and nothing could change that.

“Ye- yes.” The word forces its way through her clogged throat, the confirmation the twins needed.

“Let her go, Mzi.” Duma demands, he too wants to hear the truth from Sandra herself. How is it he doesn’t know that his wife has a sister? Nqaba gradually steps away from his aunt.

Sandra sees no way out and falls into the shackles of confession, waves of shocks linger about as she reveals how she and Barbra came up with a plan to appease the Okolies. Duma can’t stand the pain in his heart, he trails his feet out of the house. Nqaba wants to follow him, but they both need space.

“Where is she?” Randall asks.

“What?” Sandra.

She knows who he’s talking about.

“Don’t play dumb with me, Sandra, where is the

woman who gave birth to us?”

“I don’t know.”

“Stop it Sandra, stop fucking lying. You know damn well where Barbra is, call her now.” Nqaba yells, annoyed by Sandra’s lies.

“I think we should all calm down...”

“Not now Styles.” Randall rebukes his friend’s bad timing. Nqaba rams his hand in the pocket of his jeans to get his phone. He smashes it on Sandra’s trembling hand.

“Call her.” Nqaba demands.

“I don’t know where she is, I swear.” Lying is a walk in the park for Sandra.

“She won’t do it Mzi, forget it.” Neo chirps in, the sisters have had each other’s backs for thirty six years and they are not about to betray each other.

“I want that woman here now.” Randall growls at his mo...pardon me...his aunt.

To be continued...

BURN

73...

*Rating 18+

NOTE: This chapter contains Gay Sex, as you all know the story has bxb love (meaning gay)

*This is my second attempt at writing bxb explicit scenes, keep in mind that I'm not experienced.

*Mature rating for graphic sexual content and language.

*If You're under 18 and are not comfortable with the explicit scenes, please feel free to skip Bulelwa's POV.

*Removing scenes is a drag, please don't report if this is not your cup of tea. Or else I'll come back with sexual scenes that will make you wash your eyes with holy water.

Enjoy my beauties...

BULELWA...

‘Shit.’ My heart shivers at the loneliness that embraces me the moment I walk into my house, I stumble in the dark to get to my bedroom. Zizwe’s phone is off, it hurts knowing he is upset with me. My stupid brain has convinced me that this is for the best, but my heart...my heart is not at rest.

I make it to the bedroom unharmed, I’m not as drunk as Hulk had assumed. He is too much, honestly. My temperament dances as Zizwe’s macho scent prickles my nose when I toss my body on the bed, the scent makes me feel frustrated.

Zizwe and I haven’t had sex since I was attacked. I’m no sex addict and I can go a week or two without it, I just miss Zizwe. I miss feeling him inside me. My mind launches, wandering off and

my eyes close as I think about the man that has captured my heart. His plump lips, his large hands mapping my body and how his Adam's apple moves when he speaks.

My d**k twitches as his naked toned body comes before my eyes, I have to touch myself to ward off the sexual frustration. The thought that follows is where I had placed the bottle of lube, just above me on the nightstand. My cheeks flush as I realise what I'm about to do, the thought is embarrassing. I quickly throw off my pants, spread some of the lube on my hand and gently rub it on my throbbing erection. It's sensitive to the touch, a hiss flounces through my lips.

My head falls back on the pillow as I begin to slowly stroke myself, this is nothing compared to how Zizwe touches me. It's practically too frustrating, the temptation to relieve myself is intensifying though.

My mind entertains the thought of calling him just

for a quick fuck, however I acted like a d**k and because of that I will not be getting any.

How the mighty have fallen, this is the same man who never struggled with getting a man on his bed, look at me today. All because the heart wants someone's son.

Masturbating is not a norm for me and it feels weird, I frown and close my eyes as I picture the only man who insanely pleases me till I can't breathe. I imagine Zizwe thrusting so ravenously inside me, his delicious sweaty skin and the enjoyment on his face he gets from filling me. My toes curl as I am reminded that he gets pleasure from me.

"Zizwe." Nearing the gnawing finish, I moan his name and fuck I feel like hell.

"Having fun?" Shit! I jump hearing his voice, my eyes rocket in the dark. I can't see a damn thing... And...there was light.

My eyes widen in shock, I quickly cover myself with the blanket. My face flushing in embarrassment. Zizwe is standing at the door, hands folded over his chest. He is trying to hide the hilarity that wants to take over his blank expression.

“H- How did you get in here?” Useless tongue, making me stammer. Might as well cut it off.

“You gave me a key, remember?” Well... because I never do stuff like this. I gulp nervously as Zizwe guides his steps to me. I want to hide under this blanket, I’m not the shy type. What is happening to me? “Is this what you do when I’m away?” His rasping whisper makes me shiver, I scoot off a bit as he slowly climbs on the bed.

“N- No.” My voice fails me, I don’t squeak when I speak. Zizwe hums, hovering over me. Instinctively, I scoot a little more. He moves with me, eyes sealed on mine. “I was...I was...” Speak Bulelwa! What were you doing?

Zizwe raises a menacing eyebrow, “I’m listening.” He strips his shirt off while his eyes paint my build. The blanket is snatched by this man that makes my heart beat slow and fast at the same time, a burning sensation kisses my cheeks as his eyes pause on my member. The pompous bastard grins widely.

“W- What are you looking at?” I’m embarrassed enough already and nerves had to be added to that.

“I am looking at what is mine,” the grin grows. Overly mortified, my eyes drop and I start to chew on my bottom lip. “I’m a very...very jealous man Buttercup. You can’t touch yourself without my permission, your c**k belongs to me. Only I can pleasure you.”

He places a finger on my chin and tips my head awake, Zizwe runs his thumb over my lower lip, liberating the flesh from my teeth.

“Did you hear what I said Buttercup?”

There I go laying on my back with him moving closer in, his weight is on me, his lips trailing my collarbone and my heart is enthusiastic. This is what I have been craving for. All of him. My arms travel around his neck, I hook one leg over his hips.

“I want you Zizwe, all of you.” I find myself confessing, this is what lack of sex does to a person. “I want you as demanding as you are, I want you in your gigantic form. I want to surrender to you.” A smile cracks his lips, it’s impish... The pompous bastard, I hang my heart on the washing line and he smirks at it. I’m annoyed...okay maybe I’m not.

My mouth forms an O as he preys on my lips, my throat feels like it’s going through drought while I wait for this Greek god to claim my lips... A vindicated kiss.

As much as I hate how Zizwe takes time to pleasure me, I love the anticipation, the wait and longing of having to finally taste him.

Zizwe nuzzles his long nose on mine, pecks the corner of my lips and...

“You smell like alcohol.” What? The nerve of this man...I want to scream at him when he sits up, I need him. Can’t he see that? I haven’t cum in weeks. My jaw gradually drops as Zizwe strips naked, my eyes take time to appreciate his beautiful build. Exactly how I saw him in my imagination.

I gasp when Zizwe scoops me up in his arms.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking you to the shower, I’m not making love to a drunk man. I want you sober so you remember everything I will do to you.” Do I have to whimper at his words?

“I can walk Zizwe.”

“That’s because I haven’t fucked you yet.” Bastard... my lips turn on me and form a bright smile. I bury my face in his neck to hide it.

Zizwe turns on the shower, once the water

temperature is to his approval, he climbs us into the shower.

“Put me down.” I whinge, the bloody water is not even hot. Heck it is cold, this man was checking if it’s cold enough to torture me. “This water is cold Zizwe.” I complain, jumping off his arms.

“I know, we have our bodies to warm us up and it will help you sober up.” I’m not drunk anymore, just a little tipsy. Zizwe presses soft kisses all over my face.

“I hate it when we fight, I can’t stay away from you. Don’t make me, Buttercup.” His eyes twinkle with worship for me.

“I’m sorry, I was a dick.” He smiles and shakes his head, his hands cloak around my waist and I coil my arms around his neck. He was right about heating each other, this closeness makes my body hot, making me forget I’m under a cold shower.

My eyes flap shut as his lips touch mine, the kiss is insatiable. A hunger that has not been fed for a

while, savouring his lips has me moaning with pleasure. My tongue plunges through his teeth to taste his tongue and God this man tastes like heaven.

RANDALL...

Sandra throws herself on the floor screaming that she does not know where Barbra is, she is not going to give in so easily. She can't, not when Barbra is the only the person who can help her take revenge on Amara.

“Are you kidding me?” Nqaba sees through Sandra’s drama. “Get up woman.” He grunts, grabbing her arm. Sandra sits up, but refuses to stand. You would think the tears floating down her cheeks are real.

“I want you out of my house now.” Randall says, bluntly.

“Randy, please.” Sandra does not want to leave like

this, she can't have her son hate her.

"Get out now." He repeats, glaring down at her. Sandra frantically shakes her head as if possessed by a crazy demon.

"NO!" Sandra screams, folding her arms across her chest.

"I SAID GET OUT." Randall tracks his steps towards Sandra, "Get out of my house." Sandra fights to remain on the floor as Randall grabs her arm and pulls her up with so much ease. Styles and Neo know they don't interfere when Randall is this upset, Nqaba thinks Sandra knows something and they have to force her to speak. Letting her go should not be an option, but he has no say in his brother's house. He wants answers from Barbra and will have to find her.

"No Uze, please don't do this. I have nowhere else to go." Sandra grovels, wasting her breath. "I am your mother Randall, don't throw me out please."

Randall pushes her outside and without a second

look, shuts the door on her face. Desperate, Sandra thinks of the only person who can help her, she takes off to find them.

Meanwhile in the house, Styles and Neo join the others in the foyer so they can give the couple space. Nqaba and Randall have so much to say to each other, right now he just needs a moment with his wife. Nqaba departs, leaving a shaken Amara alone with an enraged Randall. Waves of emotion consume him the minute his brother leaves, the only person he can be weak around is Amara.

Randall's legs fail him, his body drops to the floor next to the coffee table, Amara covers her mouth with her hand and tears spring out. Seeing her strong husband break out in tears like this kills her, Randall buries his face in his hands and cries without making any sounds. Amara can see his shoulders convulsing, he is in pain and heart broken.

“I'm sorry Randall, I'm sorry.” She comforts him, softly. Her trembling hands reaching out to him,

they land on his shoulders. Randall doesn't protest, but continues his inaudible snivels.

Amara kneels down in front of him and pulls her husband into her arms, Randall's head finds shelter on Amara's chest. She cries along with him, her tears are caused by the pain she feels from seeing the man she loves in pain. In all their days together, Randall has never been this vulnerable.

"Randall, please. Don't do this please." She begs him not to shed tears anymore. "I can't see you like this, it breaks my heart."

Randall pulls away at the sound of her words as reality hits him, the most important person in his life betrayed him. He wipes his face with his hand and gets up to his feet, with tears running down her cheeks, Amara follows him not sure what his next step will be.

Randall turns to Amara to meet her desperate gaze, her whole body is visibly shuddering. Randall

notices how terrified she is and as much as he wants to confront her, the love he feels for her just won't let him as she is in a bad state. Randall glares at Amara with tears running down his cheeks, her heart sinks when he turns and starts to walk away from her.

"Randall wait, don't go please." Amara screams running after him, Randall wants to turn and comfort her. He can hear pain in her voice, however he is hurting too. Amara falls on her knees as Randall shuts the front door behind him.

"Amara?" Amara's head whips around to see Liyana standing behind her, tears streaking down her face. "What's going on? Are you two getting a divorce?" Fear takes over Liyana's voice, while her confrontation pierces Amara's heart. She opens her arms for Liyana who runs into them.

It all feels like a nightmare, Amara cannot believe what just happened. How can she turn back time and tell Randall everything the moment she found

out? How can she change the past?

BULELWA...(Explicit content.)

My erection bumps against Zizwe's hardening pecker, his hands wolfishly roam around my body. His lips move from mine to trace all corners of my neck, I buck my hips forward to grind against him. My hands go on a pleasure trip.

"Wait here." Like I have anywhere else to go. Zizwe bolts out of the bathroom. He is back before I finish counting the tiles on the wall, he has the bottle of lube in his hand. Zizwe coats himself with the liquid, he smirks as he finds me mouth ajar, staring at his member. He is back to showering me with kisses, there are bites that have me whimpering in his touch.

"Zizwe." Bashfully, I murmur against his lips, feeling needy. I need him buried inside me now.

"I know my love." The whisper tickles my most

sensitive parts, my d**k throbs at the warm sensation of his breath on my skin. Zizwe spins me around and pushes me against the wall, he imprints kisses on my back to my neck. His hands slide from my shoulders to my hips, he pulls my waist back so my ass is out.

“I would prep you, but you’re so impatient.” He bites my earlobe as he whispers, making lustful moans escape from my mouth. I bite my bottom lip, thinking how painful it will be if he doesn’t.

“You like torturing me, Zizwe. You saw the state you found me in and now you’re making me wait.”

Zizwe goes down on his knees, I brace myself when he spreads me. I’m adjusted gently and pleasurably. My forehead lightly hits the tiled wall as his two fingers repeatedly poke my prostate, I flinch and gasp at the emptiness when he pulls his fingers out.

The longing does not last, Zizwe thrusts into me, erupting a loud gasp from my mouth. I palm the wall to support my body, my channel stretches with

each slow push. I hiss at the burning sensation, grind my teeth and hold my breath, trying to adjust to his length. His hand is on my hip and the other on my back gently pushing me against the wall.

“That’s it buttercup, I’m in. You’re okay now, that’s my good boy.” He groans, slowly pushing himself inside me, his lips are on my neck and shoulders, pasting open mouthed kisses. “My flawless Buttercup, you’re doing good Ndlondlo.”

He kisses me while whispering comforting words, he doesn’t move until I nod to motion that he continues.

Zizwe grips my hips and plunges in and out of my stiff channel, he increases his pistons. My mind is wiped out, Zizwe nuzzles his face on my neck, leaving wet kisses. He tightens his hands on my hips as he goes deeper. He groans in a way that makes me feel like he takes delight in me, I surrender myself to this man relishing me so

perfectly. My body fires up, and the cold water hitting our backs makes my body more sensitive.

His thrusts are deep, my moans are louder than his grunts, my prostate is being relentlessly pounded and pleased in ways I have never experienced before. Hot tears spike my eyes at the intense pleasure.

“Zizwe...I...lo...I love...” I can’t get the words out, they are at the tip of my tongue. I’m sobbing from the fervent amount of pleasure flowing through my body.

“I love you, Buttercup...I love you.” Zizwe says, repeatedly. My back is against his chest, I can feel his heart thumping on his chest. His face on my neck, lips on the curve of my neck and breath whiffing my sensitive skin. I feel like I’m going to explode as the pleasure intensifies, cries of euphoria erupt from my mouth.

“Z- Zizwe.” I cry out his name as my legs begin to shake and I release hard on the wall in front of me.

“Good boy.” His husky voice makes me whinge, Zizwe sends his hand around my hips to pump me through my orgasm. The overstimulation has me crying out, it does not take long for Zizwe to reach his high. I love the way he moans, warmth fills my channel as he releases inside me. His arms claps around me and he places kisses on my neck.

“I love you.” A whisper, I can be a cry baby. I’m crying because of this intense love this man has for me, I feel it in the way he touches me, looks at me and things he does for me.

Carefully, Zizwe slips out, making me hiss from the hollowness. He turns me around and shuts the water, his hands embrace my sides before he holds me down, my legs are still shaking and right now, standing is the same as solving for X...Hard as fuck.

His eyes are fixated on mine, hunger glistening in them.

“You said you love me.” Did I? Why does he make me shy all of a sudden? I snap my eyes away from

his, the adoration in his eyes makes me feel bad for being such a jerk. This man deserves all the love he can get, I only have a small amount in my heart and I want to give it to him. I want him to accept it with hopes that it will one day grow into a delicious love.

“I love you Bulelwa.” He says with a warm smile and presses a soft kiss on my cheek. His hands that are smoothly rubbing my arms feel like home, I relax under his tenderness.

“I love you too.” I tell him, trying hard to hide the shyness that is nudging me. Zizwe smashes his lips on mine, the kiss is quick. I’m whisked up again, is he hinting at something?

“Round two?”

“Never.” He chuckles at my reply, walking us out of the bathroom. I know I will end up under him before we say goodnight.

THANDIWE...

My eyes snap open as a conversant voice harasses my ears, even in my deepest sleep I can recall that aggravating vocal sound. My eyes narrow in on the man standing in the doorway to see Ntuthuko with a devilish smirk on his face. I bring my body up, ready to question my husband's unwanted visit.

"I'm going away Thandiwe, won't you come with me?" Ntuthuko's voice sways in undertones.

"What are you doing here?" He tilts his head at my question, giving me a reason to jump off the bed in search of answers.

"Remember, I said I will take you away from my brother? The time has come Thandiwe. Come with me." Is he crazy? I would never follow him even if he were the last man left breathing.

"I'm not going anywhere with you." I snap, finding his request insane, a cold chortle erupts out of Ntuthuko's mouth.

“Fine, Zulu and I will leave you behind.” I’m puzzled by his remark. How is my son with him? Nqaba will never let Ntuthuko anywhere near Zulu.

“Mama.” Zulu’s tiny scream erupts from outside the bedroom door, my heart leaps to my throat at the devilish smirk on Ntuthuko’s face.

“Zulu.” I scream for my son, running towards the door. Ntuthuko smoothly saunters out, he’s moving slow, yet I’m unable to reach him. As I turn the corner I see him and Zulu strapped on his back.

“Ntuthuko stop, give my son back.” He doesn’t heed my cries, if my feet could move at a speed of light they would. My mind is completely muddled by everything that is happening, Ntuthuko has disappeared on me. I can’t see him anymore.

Where is Nqaba? Where is everyone? The living room is unoccupied, the house was packed before I went to bed.

I hear footsteps coming from the corridor, I'm there in no time and see Ntuthuko dash outside. If I let him take my son, I will never see him again.

"Ntuthuko wait." My steps are dense, there is a force weighing heavy on me. I don't let it stop me.

As I step outside, the cold night breeze pushes against me almost sending me back into the house. This place is usually packed with guards, there is no one out here. I'm frantic as I scatter around the yard in search of Ntuthuko and Zulu, my ears are tickled by Zulu's screams.

How is it that there is no one around? Did Ntuthuko get rid of them? That is impossible though, he doesn't have that kind of strength.

I shadow Zulu's voice, it leads me to the outhouse. Amara said the guards live there, the lights are off. Moving closer, the door slightly opens and I see a glimpse of Ntuthuko.

I run into the house and the light goes on instantaneously. I'm in the kitchen and Ntuthuko is standing a few steps away from me, my eyes find

my son next to him. His hand stuck in my husband's claws, my baby is sobbing and I want to comfort him.

"Baby, come to me." Zulu leers up at Ntuthuko for approval. "Please give me, my son." I desperately plead.

"It's time Thandiwe, we are all going to be together, forever." Ntuthuko does not wait for me to give an answer, but pulls a knife from the pocket of his pants. My world crashes when he lugs Zulu to him and positions the knife on his throat.

"No, no Ntuthuko please don't do it." A terrific scream. I see a gun on the kitchen counter, my feet move fast toward it. I don't know how to use a gun, it can't be that hard.

Ntuthuko's brow puckers as I aim the gun at him. Without warning I pull the trigger, my eyes clasp shut. One...Two...Three...Four...I lose count of the number of shots and open my eyes to see him lying

on the floor in his own blood. With my son in mind, my eyes find Zulu standing next to Ntuthuko's dead body with a blank expression, his hand is still in Ntuthuko's hand.

Thinking my child is traumatised, I rush to get him, but their hands are stuck together. The knife lain on the ground catches my attention, I grab it and start butchering Ntuthuko's wrist. I want him to let go of my son, my plan is not working and that only frustrates me. Exasperated, I scream while putting more pressure.

“THANDIWE!!!” My head spins at the sound of Nqaba's voice, Styles is with him and their eyes are judging me. I see fear and shock too in Nqaba's eyes.

“What have you done?” Nqaba breathes, my eyes move to my hands and I start to panic because of the blood smeared on them.

My gaze flicks from side to side until they find the

man on the floor next to me, eyes widening in terror, an ear piercing scream surges from my chest through my mouth. Reality kicks in, my heart starts pounding as if searching for an escape out of my dark chest.

This is not Ntuthuko, the man I just killed is not my husband, but a stranger. How is that possible? I swear, I saw Ntuthuko. He was about to kill my son and I killed him first. I search the kitchen for Zulu and he is no longer here, everything feels so unreal. Like a terrible nightmare.

Disjointed thoughts fill my head as the mind sips from one unrelated thought to another. I have killed an innocent man.

To be continued...

BURN

74...

BARBRA...

“Someone just walked through the gate.” Sgwili panics on behalf of me, no one knows this place. Who could it be? The house is in the middle of nowhere.

“Go check and get rid of them.” The cat grumbles at the instruction, he is grumpy lately. It could be that I am too demanding, the plan to get Thandiwe’s baby failed. Veronica is having problems with her boy lover, Sgwili has found a way to get them to mate, but they have to be on good terms. I haven’t spoken to my husband in weeks, I have to go back home.

“Relax.” Sgwili’s voice jolts me out of my thinking. “It’s your sister, I can smell her from here. She is covered in fear.”

What could have happened with Sandra? She has the keys to the house, she comes running in. Her puffy eyes course from me to Sgwili, this is the first time she is seeing him. Sandra jumps to my side as if Sgwili bites.

“Khabonina, is this you? Your grandmother is very ashamed of you.” Sgwili is forward, who gave him the right to speak?

“Barbra get that thing away from me.” Sandra yaps, I would be offended if I cared about Sgwili, he can fight his own battles.

“You’re the prodigal daughter, you need to come back home Khabonina. Work along side your sister, she needs you.” What is this cat talking about?

“You know nothing about me.” Sandra seethes.

“Sgwili shut up, are you suddenly a prophet?” He jumps to a chair, making my sister scoot further away from him. “Oh relax, he doesn’t bite.” I chide her.

“He’s a demon.” Sandra rejoinders, much to Sgwili’s annoyance.

“A demon is that husband of yours who died like a dog. Do you know he is roaming the earth with no place to go? He is a lost soul, his ancestors will never accept him.” Dammit! How do I get this cat to shut his whiskers?

“Would you stop it Sgwili? I am not going to tell you again.” I don’t give a damn about Sandra and her dead husband. I want to know why she is back.

“What are you doing here Sandra?” Her wide eyes dart to me, I see fear in them.

“We’re in trouble, the truth is out. Randall knows everything, Nqaba too. They are looking for you.” This stupid woman, they could be following her.

“You’re so careless Sandra, you could have led them here.”

“Where did you want me to go? He threw me out of his house, that stupid Amara ruined everything.” Sandra screams, getting up from the bed. She has forgotten that she was terrified of Sgwili seconds ago. “I hate her, Barbra, I hate that woman. She is the reason I lost Raven and now I have lost Randall because of her. I want her dead, I want her body to lay on the streets for days with no one to identify it.” Pride takes a bite at me as I hear my sister speak

such beautiful words. She has it in her to be a witch.

“We can have that arranged.” I also hate Amara, what did Thamsanqa see in her?

“Ndlovukazi, you’re forgetting that she belongs to the Okolies now. We don’t want trouble, look at you. You’re struggling to get back on your feet.” Sgwili voices and he is right.

“The okolie curse does not apply to an Okolie.” Sandra’s eyes shift from me to Sgwili then back to me. “There is a rift between Randall and Amara, all we have to do is make it bigger and get Randall to kill her. My son...”

“He is my son Sandra and your nephew.” She narrows her eyes at me, the truth hurts.

“My...son...” The underline makes me want to laugh. “Will take care of Amara, it will be so easy for him to do.”

“You’re stupid, Randall loves that woman. Do you want him to kill himself as well? Can’t we get

someone else? Like his brat, what's her name again?" My plan sounds amazing. "We can possess her."

"Liyana belongs to the ancestors, that child can't be touched. They won't allow it, she is stronger than you and this ugly cat combined." Sandra exclaims, giving food for thought.

"Or...get a total stranger to do it, you don't have to tell them about the curse."

Sgwili the genius. A content smile creeps upon my sister's lips.

"I'll find the person, as an Okolie wife, the curse won't affect me." Okolie privileges I see, I should be the one with this title.

NQABA...

I'm frozen to the core watching the woman I love covered in someone's blood, the blood she spilt. I

thought seeing her own blood could be the worst thing, but this is live horror. Thandiwe has murdered someone, it's all my fault. I knew not to leave her alone.

Her big innocent eyes are drenched in terror and drowning in a puddle of salty water, she wants this to be nothing, but a dream, her eyes never lie to me. I want to move and take her away from there, I want to hide her from all this and make her feel safe. But I can't, I don't know how to.

“Mzi.” Styles brings me back from the trance I am trapped in, I blink a few times without removing my eyes from Thandiwe. “Get her out of here.”

My mind grasps Styles' words, it relays a message to my feet and I move towards her. Thandiwe's eyes snap around the kitchen, fear lurking in them. Her blood covered hands cover her ears, my feet falter when she screams horrifically.

“No, shut up, shut up.” Thandiwe plummets down and curls in a foetal position right next to the dead

body. As I close in on her, I hear her reciting the verse from the book of Psalm. Her eyes are more wild than a deer caught in head lights, there is nothing beautiful about her face anymore. There is so much blood smeared on her plump cheeks.

My gaze chases Styles who is on the phone, I wish I could be as calm as he is. His composed eyes point at Thandiwe, gesturing I get her out of here.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” She continues as I scoop her stiff body up, my heart clenches at her trembling frame.

“I’ve got you Tshabalala.” I know she can’t hear me, her hands are clogging her ears from something only she can hear.

“I’ll take care of this,” Styles says as I walk past him, I trust him. I think of taking Thandiwe home, but it’s too far. She needs to clean up all the blood covered on her. I’m surprised no one has come to inspect

the place, those gun shots were too loud.

Sauntering outside, I pass two guards rushing to the outhouse. This is worse than I thought, I can only hope that Randall's employees are loyal otherwise Thandiwe will be in trouble. What I fear the most is that she will never be able to forget this day.

“Nqaba.” I drag my eyes down to her, a huge lump sits on my throat as my eyes meet hers. How do I get rid of the fear living inside her? I see it mocking me through her teary eyes, unable to take it, I shift mine from hers and keep them on the path I'm treading. Her hands curl around my top garment, the grip is tight, it's a fearful one.

Randall's house looks ghosted, to think it was packed today. My brother is hurting...I have a twin brother. I haven't had time to process the news yet and with Thandiwe's situation, I won't be able to give my brother time. He is hurting, Randall does

not hurt easily. Today he was broken beyond repair, people like him find it hard to move past betrayal.

The room appointed to Thandiwe has a bathroom, I run her a bath while I rinse her hands in the sink, she is ogling at them with no emotion. I help her out of the blood stained clothes... slowly, she gets into the tub filled with water. Her hands enfold around her legs as she brings her knees to her chest, I find a place to sit on the toilet seat. Thandiwe hasn't directly looked at me, I'm worried about her.

"Styles will take care of everything, you don't have worry about anything. No one will come to know what happened today." Is this enough to comfort her and put her mind at ease? She doesn't say anything for a good miniscule second.

"I..I killed...him." Thandiwe breaks the silence, my jaw clenches at her words. I want to erase this memory from her mind. "I'm sorry Nqaba, I'm sorry. I tried, I can't fight anymore. It's too much for me,

I'm not strong enough.”

“No, don't you give up on me, Thandiwe. I told you that I will protect you.”

“Until when Ngaba? My life is a mess, I have become a burden to you and everyone around me.” I'm blank, words can't find the way to my mouth. The silence must be giving her wrong thoughts.

“I will call my mother tomorrow, it's time I go back home.” She announces with a deadpan tone, reading her wacked face I know what her words mean. My mind is still buffering, trying to find knowledge in her statement.

“Zulu is your son, he still has to know his father. He will stay with you, I will die on my twenty sixth birthday anyway.”

“I would stop talking if I were you, do not piss me off Thandiwe.” My voice is cold, only because her plan is stupid and selfish. She turns her head to leer at me, I am looking at the stubborn Thandiwe. The one who gets closed off when she feels she has

become a burden, convincing her to stay won't be easy. A minute passes while we are locked in the silent moment, I move to kneel in front of the bathtub and take her face into my hands.

"I didn't go through all this for you to leave me in the end." I tell her, hoping she will at least shed a tear. I can deal with the emotional Thandiwe, not this one. She is too cold.

"I killed a man." She reminds me, I can see how she is trying to convince herself that nothing of the sort happened.

"Don't talk about that anymore."

"It won't erase what I did, I took a life Nqaba. An innocent man is dead because of me."

Dammit! I make the decision for her and ignore her declaration, it is depressing. Seizing the sponge, I start bathing her, no words said nor do I keep eye contact.

Thandiwe doesn't lift a hand. When I'm through, I

help her out of the bathtub and take her to the bedroom. Amara must have gotten my message through Chioma. Comfortable sleepwear is laid on the bed, Thandiwe insists on me not helping her dress up. She scampers into bed and hides her body under the blankets, there's a deep urge in me to cuddle her to sleep. My arm drapes around her waist as I pull her in, she moves closer until her back is against my chest.

“Nqaba.” Her first vocabulary.

“I won't leave you, I'll be here.” I assure her, burying my face on the arch of her neck. As she starts drifting off, my mind runs to Styles. Will he be able to convince the guards not to say anything? Thandiwe killed their own, they must be fuming.

AMARA...

Amara does not know how to get out of the mess she has put herself in. Randall's phone is off, she has no idea where he is, the man who never goes a

minute without talking to her is avoiding her.

Amara's heart pounces in crazy beats as she enters her bedroom, it smells like Randall. Of course it will, she has never been a fan of fragrances. Her husband on the other hand has quite a few masculine fragrances and whatever scent he would use on a particular day, would linger in the room the whole day.

She lugs her feet to the bed and tosses her body on the mattress, the door opens, depriving her a chance to sob in peace.

Sethu and Ayize walk in, Amara hates the pity glazed on their faces. Tears form, but she refuses to let them fall.

“Are you okay?” Ayize questions her friend, she is the most worried as she is aware of Randall's wrath.

Cold tears begin to stream down Amara's face. She swipes a hand at her eyes, but the tears are determined, they come anyway. Sethu and Ayize rush to hug their friend, at the feel of their warm

arms around her, a flood of tears gush down Amara's cheeks.

BULELWA...

I feel like I was on the Karate Kid movie, my back hurts. My brain had told me to put a pillow under me when Zizwe was having his way with me, stupid me didn't listen. Look where that has led me, a painful back. If anyone is looking for me, I will be the guy walking like an old man.

I stir in bed and stretch my hand to where Zizwe was sleeping to find it empty, my eyes pop open. The room is dark, Zizwe must be in the bathroom. Usually I wake up with him clung on to me. Zizwe's clinginess is on a hundred. Sometimes he would hold on to me for no reason, you can imagine how heavy his body is compared to mine.

The time on my phone says it is 5am, I need a glass

of water. Zizwe will probably come back while I'm in the kitchen and I bet you he will freak out, finding the bed empty. My feet slide into my sleepers as they hit the floor from the bed, I have to take it easy. My back aches.

I thought Zizwe was in the bathroom, there he is in the living room. I want to sneak up on him from behind and maybe scare him a bit. Gliding closer, I start hearing sounds. He is not alone, there is someone with him. I can't see the person though, he is towering over them.

“You made your bed, now you can't sleep on it?” Zizwe grunts, I can't see his face, however I'm certain he is full on mad.

“I don't care Bhekizizwe.” That is my mother's voice, what is she doing here at this time?

“You should care Lilian, I'm done hiding the truth from him.” What is going on?

“That's enough.” Lilian barks, trying to keep her words faint, but failing at it. Why is my mother

s colding my boyfriend? “Don’t you think you have ruined my family enough already? My husband died because of you, leave us alone Bhekizizwe. My son doesn’t need you.”

“Then you don’t know your son as you think you do, Bulelwa can’t live without me, just as I can’t live without him.” Zizwe disputes, I think of interfering until my mother’s next words kill every feeling in me.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, sleeping with both mother and son.” In this moment of emotional disorientation, I realise it will take forever for my brain to find the words to sufficiently express what I feel, so I let my feet lead me into the living room. My steps are silent as I walk on the grey fuzzy carpet, words have failed me, but tears are always faithful unlike these two people in the room with me.

As if feeling my presence, Zizwe turns. His eyes guardedly trace the tears streaking down my face, he is caught in confusion at first until a light bulb

switches on in his head.

“Bu...Buttercup.” He stutters a whisper, a rush of cold seeps through me when my mother slides from behind Zizwe. It’s not hard to note the shock on her face. I guess like mother like son, her tears are quick to show up as well.

“Y – You slept...with my mother?” My heart smashes to smithereens...a billion splinters, Zizwe is quiet and that drives me crazy.

“DID YOU SLEEP WITH MY MOTHER ZIZWE?” He clamps his jaw at my shouting, Lilian is a shuddering mess. I couldn’t care less, I feel like I’m going to explode with anger and that has me throwing the closest thing I can find. I don’t care if it hits him or Lilian. Zizwe ducks the glass coming at him, it misses Lilian by an inch and smashes against the TV, leaving a crack on the black screen.

“Buttercup, please.” This man better not come any closer, only God knows what I will do to him.

“Bubu, my baby...what you heard is not...”

“I don’t want to hear anything from you Lilian, I want him to tell me.” My gaze fixated on Zizwe, I demand for answers.

“Let me explain my love.” Zizwe pleads, pissing me off, I can’t stand this.

“Did you, or did you not fuck my mother.” I’m shouting with all that I am, it’s the only way I know how to free myself from the pain and anger that’s suffocating me.

Zizwe glances at me, hands across his chest. This is no time to be arrogant, I want answers. He drops his head and leisurely nods.

“Yes, I did.” His confession feels like a dagger through my heart, a rapid transition takes place as my heart feels like it has been ripped out of my chest. My legs fail me, causing me to stagger back. I am going to kill them.

To be continued...

BURN

75...

BULELWA...

“It’s not what you think Bubu,” Lilian sniffles, trying to help me up from the table I fell on. I push her hands away and she stumbles back, a tiny shriek fleeing her deceitful mouth.

Zizwe is standing tall, furrowed brow and compressed jaw. Eyes gleaming with tears, he stares painfully at me. The betrayal they caused me is indescribable, I opened up to this man and gave him all of me.

“Get out of my house.” Something flashes in his eyes, I don’t see it because it’s wiped away in a jiffy.

“Bulelwa!” Zizwe hardly takes my name, when he does he is usually serious. Like when he told me he loved me last night, at least I think it was serious. If he loved me, he wouldn’t have cheated on me with my mother.

“Gosh! How can I be so stupid?” A painful laugh surges out of my mouth as I give this giant a round of applause. “Great one Zizwe, you played me well.”

“I didn’t play you, I promise.”

“You’re good, I give it to you.”

“I didn’t play you, dammit.” Oh hell no, he does not get to shout at me. Not when he fucked up like this. Everything in me itches with a need to scream and shout, my bones feel like they are about to jump out of my skin. “I’m sorry.”

At his lousy apology, I grab a vase and throw it at him. It makes me angry that he ducks, I want to see him bleed. Zizwe raises his hands in surrender, his

eyes are bloodshot red. This bastard better not start crying.

“Bulelwa calm down please, let me explain.” Why the hell is Lilian talking to me? I hate how she is hiding behind Zizwe, she is trying to drive me out of my boots.

“SHUT UP!” I scream at her. “I don’t want to hear anything from you, Lilian, you should be dead, not my father.” Tears dribble out of her widened eyes.

“You don’t mean that baby, I’m your mother.”

“You are nothing to me,” I hiss under my breath. The declaration hurts, I don’t mean it, but the pain she caused me won’t let me take the words back. “Get out of my house Lilian.”

“Bubu...” She takes a step headed my way, I will kill her if she comes closer.

“I said get the fuck out of my house, I don’t ever want to see your face again.” I don’t want to hear

anything from my mother, I want her away from me.

“You’re upset, we will talk when you have calmed down.” Lilian glares at Zizwe and turns to leave, that look should have killed this man standing a few feet away from me.

“I didn’t cheat on you, it happened before I knew you existed.” When did he get this close, close enough to touch and smell him. “I would never hurt you like this, I love you, Buttercup.”

“It’s over.” My heart cracks tenderly under the bulk of his hurt-filled eyes. A great need to comfort him arises, I fight it. I’m hurt for fuck’s sake, yet I want to take him in my arms and comfort him.

“We just started, Buttercup. How can it be over?” He says shakily, his eyes become foggy with unshed tears.

“I don’t care, we can’t be together. Not after you... you” The thought of his lips kissing my mother

makes me gag, his hands caressing her body makes my blood rush to my ears. I turn away from the pain reflecting in his eyes, something I can't stand to see. Damn you 'love', damn you to hell.

In a split second his arms enfold my body from behind. I feel his face rest on the crook of my neck, the hot breath from his nostrils paints my skin and rushes into my stomach to form crazy tingles. This is not the time.

"I'm not letting you go Buttercup, I just found you please." Zizwe mumbles against my neck, a warm wet substance pours down my collarbone. I figure it's his tears, the thought of his eyes watering, painfully twists my heart.

"You have to let me go Zizwe, we can never be." I grip his hands to unlock them from my waist, my hands are shaky, body weak and I have no strength to fight this giant.

"Do you know what you're talking about? Do you

have any idea what you're saying to me?" Zizwe questions, hurt dripping in his voice. His nose nuzzling my ear.

"I don't want it to be like this." Gosh "You made me lose my mind. Do you know how hard it was for me to open up to you? I don't know anything about relationships Zizwe, I don't know how it feels to be cheated on."

Slowly but surely, Zizwe turns me around. His arm slides to the small of my back, pulls me into him so that our bodies are even. I can almost feel every inch of him, it's as if he's inside me. His hand glides up my cheek to rest behind my ear, our eyes stationary on each other.

"I didn't cheat on you, Bulelwa, it all happened before I met you. I promise I stopped once I realised who she was and that I was in love with you." I always loved the way he whispered, but today it hurts.

"You mean to tell me that during those stolen kisses,

you were sleeping with my mother?” He clamps his teeth and presses his forehead against mine. Why is he not saying anything? “You’re a sick bastard Zizwe, I hate you.”

God was not gracious when it came to giving me strength, Zizwe doesn’t move an inch when I push him away from me. Instead holds on to me tighter.

“No, you don’t.” Is he deaf?

“I said I hate you, dammit.” A yelp volunteers to show the level of my anger. He’s glaring daggers at me, a puckered brow holding me hostage. My heart clips, jumping to my throat. Tears cascade down my cheeks, the lump on my throat clogs the air in my lungs. Zizwe takes a step forward, I want to move, but his gaze is holding me down.

“S- Stop.” Dammit Ndlondlo at least stop me from squeaking. Zizwe pays no heed to me, he cushions my cheeks and without warning smashes his lips against mine. The kiss renders me weak, I can’t move anything, but my lips.

Zizwe releases a growl from his throat that has me shuddering, he pushes me without breaking the kiss until the back of my legs hit the couch. Don't ask how it happened, but I'm on the couch with him on top of me. He feels good, Lord he does. But my mother evades my head, I see Zizwe kissing her the way he's kissing me and that vision alone drives me insane.

"Stop." I murmur when he starts grazing his lips down my jawline to my neck. "Zizwe...stop."

His lips quickly move back to mine, kissing his sins into a wave of forgetfulness. I can't do this, it is not happening.

"Get off me," I kick him and he tumbles to the floor with a loud thud.

"What was that for?"

"You don't respect my decision, I told you to stop."

"Bulelwa you..." His eyes widen in shock.

I know what he's thinking and to hell with him, I hate him...I- I hate- fuck it...I love him, but I hate him for fucking my mother and thinking I would be okay with it.

Fresh tears throw an after party on my face, I'm sobbing like a stupid naïve teen who got their heart broken by their first love.

“Buttercup.” I'm done with this man.

“It's over.” This is the last thing I tell him before I rush back to my bedroom, maybe I'm going to cry myself to sleep or drink like there is nothing else to do. Anything to make me forget their betrayal.

NQABA...

A text from Styles sends me to the foyer, Thandiwe is fast asleep in the bedroom.

Neo is here as well, he gives me a look while sipping on a cup of coffee. Styles is positioned beside him, they look dead tired.

“Where is Randall?” I find a chair at the table, where a cup of black coffee is placed. Chioma is responsible for this, she is the most cordial person I know.

“He’s fine, I spoke to him not so long ago.” I forgot Styles is the brother Randall never had, my mother is selfish. How do you keep twins away from each other? It stings to know that I was never there for my brother, there were times when he probably needed me and I had no idea.

“Is he okay?” I’m worried about him.

“He’s Randall Okolie, he will be fine.” Styles makes it sound like Randall has a heart of stone and can handle anything thrown at him. “How is she?” He is enquiring about Thandiwe.

“She hasn’t woken up since last night, she wants to leave me.” I sound weak, Thandiwe is the only person capable of making me this vulnerable.

“What do you mean?” Styles.

He is too serious right now, usually when he's with Neo, they joke around. They are indifferent today, there is a gloomy atmosphere prowling in the air. A man died, this is expected.

“Thandiwe wants to give up fighting, she spoke about going back to her mother and wait for the day she will die.”

“She can't do that,” Neo interposes, a grim expression playing at his face. “The spirit world is real Mzi, Thandiwe will not be free if she dies. That demon has a claim on her and if he succeeds, sis Tee will be doomed for eternity.”

Of course there is a reason why that demon is so bent on getting his hands on Thandiwe.

“Mams onto had said the baby in her womb will be the one to defeat the demon, I don't know how and at this point I'm losing hope along with my

saneness.” I let my hands roam around the seams of the white mug, I have no appetite.

“We could call MamSonto, but she is going through a lot as you know. She just buried her family and now her niece has been hospitalized. Remember the little girl who was at her house the first time we visited her” Neo rubs his forehead, taking a few deep sighs. The real Neo is in there somewhere, quieted down by the depressed Neo.

“What happened to her?” I ask Neo, his brow furrows, his eyes are dipped in the cup he’s holding.

“No one knows, MamSonto said she’s been having nightmares since her father and sister died. The child had gone mute after hearing about her family’s death and MamSonto couldn’t get her to speak. Last night the girl suddenly started convulsing and foaming in her mouth, they rushed her to the hospital. The doctors are doing tests, they haven’t found anything yet.”

“It could be spiritual,” I voice out the first theory that comes to mind.

“It is, anyone who tries to help Thandiwe will meet a terrible fate, remember?” Neo.

How can I forget? I shrug at Neo’s remark, not because I’m not familiar with the truth. Words have failed me.

“Didn’t you say she had gone to the mountain to pray?” Styles brings his confusion forward.

“Shouldn’t God be protecting her and her family?”

“You’re asking me things I can’t answer Stylos. That same God works in mysterious ways. No one knows the plans he has for our lives, I have seen his power in my life and I refuse to believe that he is sitting back watching MamSonto suffer. Something has to give, she has been through enough.” Neo speaks with dread. “We have to keep this in mind, she is human and needs us. The only thing we can offer her are prayers and support.”

“I’m here if she needs anything.” I’m ready to lend a helping hand.

“I want you to focus on sis Tee, her situation is bad Mzi. Another thing, your mother has to be found. I don’t understand why you’re waiting for that Ngidi guy to confirm things for you, by the time he comes back, it will be too late for Thandiwe. You have to stop your mother.” Neo’s gaze is caught in the cup of coffee, he is doing his best to avoid eye contact. A way to hide the pain in his eyes.

“I know how to deal with my mother.” It’s time we bring Barbra back from her vacation, my eyes shift to Styles who winks, returning the mischievous gaze I send his way.

“What did you do with the body?” Styles raises a brow, I’m trying to find a reaction on his blank face while waiting for him to answer, but nothing. He should be affected by what happened considering the man who died was an innocent citizen.

“I’ve got this one Mzi, don’t worry about it. Like Neo said, Thandiwe should be your focus right now.”

“I don’t know what to do with her anymore, MamSonto has lost so much because of us. It won’t be right to expect her to continue helping us. Thandiwe has five months left till she gives birth, I’m afraid it will be too late by then. She is slowly losing her mind.” I feel the most powerless at this stage, how can I have my love only to lose it again?

“I would take on this demon if I could or had the strength, but this war is not for the fainthearted. He would’ve finished my entire family by the time I’m done with him. On the other hand, sis Tee has become a danger to everyone around her.” Neo.

He stands and plunges his hands in his pockets. His eyes are engrossed on me, they articulate a suggestion I am not ready to hear nor accept.

It’s too late to tell him not to say it, his words are faster than mine.

“The time will come when you will have to lock her away to protect your family, you have a son to protect as well. Don’t forget about him while you’re fixated on helping sis Tee.” With a pat on my shoulder, Neo ambles out of the foyer, leaving me with something to chew on. Styles continues drinking his coffee, you would bet he has no problems in life.

AMARA...

Amara has tried his phone multiple times and it went straight to voice mail, she is going out of her mind. Styles is around and claims he doesn’t know where Randall is.

Nkomo is the last person she wants to call, but maybe he might know where her husband is.

Nkomo has changed over the years, he is not the cow who tried to rape Amara years ago, he is not

the idiot Randall hated with every marble of his precious cold heart. Randall has ceased to see Nkomo as an Mkhize, but regards him as a friend. They might not be as close as Randall, Styles and Neo.

R.J feels neglected by the mother who obsesses about him the moment he opens his miniature eyes, this morning Amara is different. Her mind is trapped in thoughts of her husband, leaving her children in the hands of Chioma.

What if something bad happened to Randall? What if he got in an accident while driving in anger? Amara tries hard to brush out the thoughts, but fails dreadfully, her worry for him is understandable. Randall can never distance himself from his queen, the fact that he has done this means the situation is bigger than anticipated.

“Chioma, please take R.J .” Amara is talking about the little boy who is clinging to her leg, tears

streaming down his face as he cries for her attention. It's not that she doesn't love him anymore, she wants to bring the boy's father back home. Her marriage can't fail, they have so much to experience together.

R.J throws an unusual tantrum, seeing his mother walk out of the kitchen without giving him a second look. Although Amara can hear her baby scream crying, she fights the urge to turn back and take him from Chioma.

“Why is my son crying Amara?” Randall's voice reverberates in her ears. At the sound of her husband's voice, her heart thuds fast almost suffocating the life out of her.

Amara stops just at the bottom of the flight of stairs and turns toward the door to find no one behind her. Randall's voice was in her head, her heart splatters into two. R.J's screams have stopped, Chioma is good with him. A second mother to him, she is.

Amara drags her feet up the stairway, each time she enters their sacred room, her heart stops beating for a second.

The portable mobile has been in her hand since she woke up, waiting and checking for anything from Randall. While swiping her finger up and down the gadget in search of Nkomo's number, Amara finds a place to rest her feet on the small couch adjacent to the window.

She holds her breath when Nkomo's phone starts ringing, the last time she heard his voice was about eight months ago. He is hardly around, unlike Styles and Neo who can't really stay away from their brother, Randall.

"Hi!" It is an awkward salutation, they are not best of friends. Out of respect for Randall, Nkomo has made sure to stay away from Amara, also to make things less awkward between the trio. Now to receive a call from her is strange, but he is aware of the reason behind it.

“I’ve been trying to call Randall, but his phone is off.” Straight to business... Time has already been wasted, she needs to know if the man who promised her for better or for worse is really staying for worse.

“Don’t worry, he’s with me.” Nkomo’s response is surprising to the woman, the thought that Randall might have ran to him was only a thought. She didn’t think he would actually be there.

“Put him on the phone.” Excuse her rudeness, she is anxious to speak to Randall.

Nkomo wants to pass the phone, God is his witness. But he can’t force the man, this is his millionth chance to prove his loyalty to the man he has known since they were teenagers. A long-term friendship is what he has always wanted with Randall.

“I’m not sure he’s ready to speak to anyone Amara.” Nkomo hates the conflict between them, if anyone

deserves to be happy then it is the woman he's talking to on the phone.

“Okay, I understand.” Amara swallows the pain slurping her soul. “Where are you? I'll come there and speak to him.” Great suggestion Amara dear, beauty and brains is a good thing.

Her mind has convinced her that the plan is perfect, once Randall catches a glimpse of her, he will melt and forgive her, he will forget he was ever upset with her.

“I don't think it's a good idea” Oh Nkomo, come on now... Okay give her a hint and she will find her way.

“Then, what do you want me to do? Tell me. My husband is away from me, he's in a bad state and I need to know if he's okay. Please get him to talk to me.” Her soft words have failed in making Nkomo a marshmallow, she doubts her tears will do the trick. Besides, she has cried enough.

There is no time for that now, she needs to be strong for the whole family. R.J probably feels his

father's absence, hence the clinginess and Liyana is not doing well thinking her parents are getting a divorce. Amara has no choice but to cling on to strength, crying at a time like this would call her weak.

“Listen, I’ll speak to him and he’ll be home tomorrow, you know he can’t stay away from you for too long.” Who doesn’t know that? The words are comforting, thank you for trying Nkomo. As we clap hands for a useful Mkhize. Who would’ve thought?

Look who walks into the lounge, the man who has run away from his problems.

Nkomo understands Randall’s problem, but that doesn’t stop him from grimacing at the gloomy man who looks like he just survived an earthquake.

By the look on Randall’s face, he knows who is on the other receiving line, immediately he scowls at

Nkomo putting him in a spot, now Nkomo has to choose. Amara who is desperate or his friend who wants him to respect his privacy.

“Please put him on.” Nkomo’s loud silence gives him away, it hints that he is not alone. Amara can only think of Randall. It doesn’t matter if he is upset, she needs to hear his voice just once. “I know he’s there.”

While R.J is giving poor Chioma a hard time by throwing tantrums, Randall is doing the same this side, throwing adult tantrums. The glower on his face grows and he walks out without a word, leaving Nkomo to deal with a grief-stricken Amara. Randall is not ready to listen to any explanations she has.

“He’s sleeping, I don’t want to wake him up.” The Mkhize in Nkomo speaks, they are known for deceiving people after all, but we will take our hats off for him as this lie is for a good course.

“Please take care of him.” Amara implores, as she

harks back to how her husband is a big baby who needs to be followed around just in case he stumbles and hits his forehead against the wall. There is no strength to argue in her.

Randall is clearly not coming home today, the thought hurts. Her face is doing a good job in hiding the pain in her heart. How is she going to sleep without him? They have never been apart like this before. Everything that happened last night feels like a terrible dream.

To be continued...

BURN

76...

BULELWA...

“Buttercup,” Zizwe’s voice calls from the other side

of my bedroom door, I thought I told him to leave.
“Buttercup open the door.”

“Get lost asshole.” I jump from the bed when the door flies open, our eyes instantly meet.

“Bulelwa.”

“Why are you still here?”

“Please don’t leave me.” Tears? Why is he crying?
I’m the one whose heart has been grilled.

“I told you, it’s over. Get out of here Zizwe.” He ambles towards me, body shuddering, lips quavering and tears streaming down his face. I can be an arse sometimes, but that doesn’t mean I enjoy seeing him cry. With one move I turn to leave the bedroom, I’m stopped by a pair of large arms encircling around me.

“Let go Zizwe.”

“I don’t want to let go.” His voice painfully cracks, he buries his face on my neck. God knows I don’t want to break him, I want to be with him, but I’m broken.

“What if... What if I say I still want you? I can't live without you, don't send me away please.”

“What do you want me to do with this betrayal? How do I move on from it? How do I forget that you had an affair with my mother?” Finally he lets go, I turn to find him on his knees, sobbing like a child. Zizwe is not shy when it comes to expressing himself.

“What are you doing? Get up.”

“Don't leave me please,” his arms enfold around my waist as he pulls me in an embrace. “I'll do anything. I'll move in with you, right here in this house. I'll let you drag me to a club and I'll drink a whole bottle of wine with you, I'll even let you curse me as much as you want.” He cries on my belly, I don't have the strength to say no to Zizwe. However if I don't put myself first, he will think I am okay with what he did. “Don't leave me Buttercup, don't break up with me. I will make it right I promise, I will love you right.”

“I can't do this Zizwe.” I can't curtail my own tears, it hurts me as much as it hurts him. Kneeling before

him, my palm cradles his cheek.

“I didn’t cheat on you.” he breathes.

“I know, I believe you. But this is for the best Zizwe, we were never going to last anyway.” His head shakes in denial.

“Why? I love you, we love each other.” I shake my head at his declaration, the tears in his eyes have me tearing up as well. His eyes close as I plant a soft kiss on his forehead. My whole being is numbed by the pain in my heart as I walk away from the man I love, maybe if he were sleeping with someone else I would forgive him. I’m going to leave him in the house. The sound of his sniffles have me wanting to turn, but I fight the urge. I have to get out of here, Zizwe knows his way out of the house.

NQABA...

“MAMA NO!” I’m half way up the stairs when I hear the agonizing screams of my son, they have me scurrying up like a crazy man to the direction they are coming from.

“MAMA, MAMA!!!”

“PEANUT! PEANUT!” I give myself to panic as I move faster with each stride and bolt into the bedroom. Eyes wide with alarm and my heart knocks on my chest, my eyes move around the empty room until my brain swiftly relays an emergency message that my son is in the in-suit bathroom. My feet turn to that direction, leading me with fast steps. Kicking the door open, I find Thandiwe forcing a naked Zulu inside a bathtub filled with water. He is screaming his lungs out and kicking, trying to jump out of the water, but Thandiwe is stronger.

“THANDIWE!” I shout, in a second, I push her from Zulu and whisk my son in my arms. His small arms tightly hoop around my neck, his face buried on the

corner of it. His body is hot, taking my eyes to the bathtub I notice that the water is extremely hot.

“What have you done Thandiwe? What have you done?” Zulu hasn’t stopped screaming, I rush him out of the bathroom to find Chioma. She knows where they keep the medical kit.

“It’s okay Peanut, your father is here now. I’m here my son.” His body trembles in my arms as I rub his back to get him to shush. I can’t find Chioma, nor do I know where the medical kit is, Styles emerges from the backyard into the lounge. He is not alarmed by Zulu’s cries, but raises a questionably eye brow. He wants to know why I’m carrying a crying, naked nine year old in my arms.

“I need the medical kit,” I inform him with urgency.

“Follow me.” His eyes have caught the problem, I follow him to the kitchen. Zulu’s cries are not so loud anymore, his body is still shuddering.

“What happened?” Styles questions, taking Zulu from me. “It’s okay son.” He says as Zulu struggles

in his arms, he relaxes at Styles' words who sits him on the kitchen counter. I can't stand to see the tears streaking down my son's face.

"What happened Mzi?" Styles repeats, my jaw clenches as my mind shows what I walked into upstairs.

"She burnt my son Styles." Anger takes over my tone, I don't know if I'm angry at Thandiwe or myself. Styles doesn't raise his gaze, but continues attending to Zulu's legs.

"It...hu...hurts." Zulu grips my hands, scrunching his eyes shut.

"You will be okay Peanut, I won't leave you."

"And Thandiwe? Where is she?" Styles queries, I didn't think of checking up on her after pushing her from Zulu. I was so worried about my child that I forgot about Thandiwe.

"I think it's time you take Neo's advice, you can't do this alone. While you wait for help or whatever, take Thandiwe to a place where she will be closely looked after. Unless you're willing to put your life on

hold, distance yourself from your son and take Thandiwe somewhere where you will look after her until the time she gives birth.” Styles has ripped my chest open with his statement. Could this be it? Am I losing the woman I love?

Zulu is too focused on crying to understand what Styles is saying, I send a hand to wipe his tears away, his innocent eyes rise to me and more tears cascade down his face. I can't stay away from my son, not again.

“I wouldn't want to be put in a position where I have to choose between my son and the woman I love. I don't like this feeling Styles.”

“I know, honestly I don't know what I would do if I were put in such a position. I love my wife and baby and I would do anything to protect them both, Sihle though is so tiny and innocent. Sethu would want me to choose our daughter over her and I would do just that, Sihle sees me as her hero. If I can't protect her, then who would? This won't mean that I'm

giving up on her.”

“Is it wrong that I’m upset with her?” I can’t seem to wipe away the image of Thandiwe forcing Zulu into the water, to have my son screaming like that did something to me.

“It’s not, but don’t forget that she is not okay. Take her for evaluation, let the professionals diagnose...”

“She is not crazy Styles.” What is he saying to me?

“I’m not saying she is and...”

“Nqaba.” A familiar whisper has me turning toward the kitchen entrance, Thandiwe is standing in the doorway with an apologetic expression. As our eyes meet, she holds me a small gown. “He needs to cover up.”

Her words are unhurried, eyes wet with tears. Zulu starts crying when he sees her.

“I’m sorry baby, mama didn’t know the water was hot.” Not wanting to scare Zulu any further,

Thandiwe doesn't move from where she is. Of all people, I should be the most understanding, but I'm upset with her. I take the gown from her while her eyes hold me in place.

"I'm sorry," an undertone. I should tell her that it's okay, why am I not doing it?

"I'm taking my son to the hospital." Hurt flashes in her eyes at the sound of my words, it must be the coldness in the tone of my voice.

"I don't know what happened Nqaba, please believe me. He came to my room and I wanted to bathe him...then...I..I spaced out, I don't know how. The water wasn't hot, it..." I let her take my hand, the touch doesn't wipe away the anger I'm feeling.

"Please tell me, you believe me."

"He was screaming Thandiwe, didn't that at least snap you out of wherever you were." I don't understand how her eyes are so cold and inexpressive all of a sudden.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Her arms snake around my torso, her head falls on my chest as she pulls me closer to her.

“I’m taking him to the hospital, I’ll ask Chioma to keep an eye on you until I come back.”

“I don’t need babysitting.” She shouts, startling Zulu. Styles doesn’t turn, but snatches Zulu’s gown from me. Puts it over him and takes him out of the kitchen.

“What is your problem? Don’t you think you have scared Zulu enough?”

“I didn’t mean to shout,” her riposte is half a shout.

“I’m taking him to the hospital, Chioma will keep an eye on you.” My tone is stony and final, with one tongue click Thandiwe bolts away. I would follow her, but Zulu needs me.

RANDALL...

“Aren’t you going home?” Nkomo questions Randall, he has been laying on the couch since morning. It is not like him at all, three whole days away from his wife.

“Home where?” Funny question from Mr. Okolie.

“Home to your wife.” Nkomo replies, he settles on the corner couch where Randall’s long legs are dangling. Not wanting to get into it, Randall rebuffs Nkomo’s answer.

“You can’t hide from your problems, Amara is waiting for you. She’s worried sick, go home and talk to your wife. You know she’s not at fault, she just happened to overhear the conversation and your mothers had no choice but to tell her.” Nkomo explains to his stubborn friend.

“But she had a choice to tell me the truth, she knew about it for four months and said nothing. How do I live with someone who can easily lie to me? She claims to love me, yet...” Not Randall, not the man who has always been obsessed with Amara from the first time he saw her.

“That is not fair Randy, Amara loves you and you know it. Do not make the mistake of staying away from your wife because of your mother’s mistakes, you’ll regret it.” Great advice Nkomo, we are treading on the right path. Randall scowls at the advice-giver and emits a great sigh, he misses his wife deeply and craves to see her.

The future king of the Ashanti kingdom hates himself for taking his anger out on his naïve Amara, she is not at fault and she probably kept the truth from him to protect his heart. But no matter how he tries to look at it differently, he fails.

“I hear you.” The king still has his voice.

“Yeah, we can’t stay here. I also have a woman waiting for me.” Nkomo states as he sits back on the couch.

Randall’s phone beeps, and what he sees on the screen of the portable device has him smirking coldly.

“There is something I have to do first.” A sinister

smile lies upon Randall's lips, Nkomo can only wonder what it is. He hops off the couch and doesn't think of taking a shower first. Whatever news he received must be more important than his hygiene, not that he would have people giving him looks if he presents himself in public as he is.

NQABA...

3rd person POV...

Nqaba has always had trust in Thandiwe, he believes she will heed his words and not leave. Just like every day, he knows she would be waiting for him when he gets home from work. That is not the case tonight.

Nothing prepared him for what is going to happen next, something about the atmosphere in the house is gloomy. Trying not to panic, Nqaba searches the house, thandiwe is nowhere to be seen. His heart stops when he sees a note on the coffee table, he somehow has an idea of what is written in it.

‘I know we spoke about this and I understand where you’re coming from, but I need you to understand where I’m coming from. What all of this is doing to me, I don’t have the strength to face this battle anymore. I hurt my son again, he is with Sethu. I thought I was okay, but I have become a danger to him, today I scolded him for spilling water on the carpet. I didn’t know what I was doing, until tears in his eyes snapped me back.

I can’t see you worry about me all the time, I have become a burden. I am tired of leaving in fear, I need to breathe. I promise I will be back, I love you too much to leave you. At this point my baby is my number one priority, I know my decision will hurt you, this is hard for me too. By the time you read this I will be on a bus back home, I hope you forgive me, my love.’

Some dreams seem so real until you wake up and realize you were dreaming and hopefully Nqaba

would wake up any second now. He is not one to have bad dreams so it is quiet strange for him to be stuck in one.

Nqaba stares at the piece of paper in his hand hoping it would disappear, after all it was a dream and anything is possible in dreams. His head starts spinning when the letter is still in his hand.

Thandiwe claims to love him, so why leave? Luck has always been on his side, guess it must've have run out. Perhaps if he hurries he would make it to the station, he would follow her to the ends of the earth if he had to.

'I can't see you worry about me. I have become a burden to you.'

Those words keep repeating in his mind like a broken record. How could Thandiwe even think such things when she is his everything? She means the world to him and he would give up anything to be with her. He would protect her with his life if

needed. Yes, he says stupid things when he is upset, but that does not mean he has stopped loving her.

The station is loud and busy. Nqaba remembers how he got home to a silent house, the piercing silence almost killed him the moment he walked in like he already knew she was gone. Thandiwe had mentioned leaving before and he was completely against it and dismissed the matter, little did he know she had had enough and wanted to get away, but how could he let her?

He is selfish with her, wants her with him every second if possible. KZN or any other place is out of the question, they have something special or so he thought. Why leave him a note and not tell him in person? There are times when he feels that she is childish, she doesn't consider his feelings.

Nqaba clogs the tears, wanting to spurt out of his eyes as he spots Thandiwe from a distance in the busy crowd.

“Tshabalala!” The profound croaky voice pierces

Thandiwe's ears, and startles her. She didn't expect to see Nqaba standing before her, he is still in his formal work clothes. Black pants and a royal-blue unbuttoned collared shirt. He has no tie on, probably left it at home or in the car. Thandiwe knows he saw the note the second he got home, hence his presence at the station. He looks like he has been to hell and back. She sees in his eyes something she would never forget and it breaks her heart.

“What's going on?” That question though. How is she going to answer it? Suddenly, Thandiwe remembers everything she wrote on the note and mortification washes over her, his eyes are condemning her, she can't look into them anymore. “Where are you going?” The questions keep coming. Nqaba knows where she is going, everything is explained in the letter. However he wants to hear her say it, but Thandiwe can't speak, she doesn't want to.

“Nqaba.” Finally, he was starting to think she is

ignoring him.

“Why are you doing this to me?” There is confusion in his eyes as he throws this question at her, he needs answers hence the variety of questions.

Thandiwe can't blame him either, when someone who promised to love you forever suddenly packs up and leaves, you would be confused. “Let's go home.” He orders, he hasn't moved an inch since he stood before her.

Is Thandiwe about to lose another battle to Nqaba? Walking away is easy when he is not there, but how would she bring herself to walk away from him now that he is looking at her like that? Why did he have to come?

“Thandiwe.” Nqaba purrs when she refuses to converse with him.

“I'm sorry.” She whispers unable to look at him.

“Let's go home.” This habit of repeating himself, there is no way he is going to let her board that bus.

“I need this Nqaba” Nqaba has heard these words before and he still finds them egocentric. What about him? What should he do with himself when she leaves him?

“And I need you.” There he goes again being self-centred,

It doesn't help that their eyes are locked for a few seconds, it's like every inch of pain in his heart is being transferred to her. He loves her and it's real, more real than anything she has ever known. So it is not strange that he is in tears. There was a time when he told her that only she could make him cry and hoped he would never live to see that day.

“Please.” A pleading whisper, they are in love after all and you don't decide to pack up and leave your significant other because you can't handle the test life has thrown at you. They are meant to be a team. Doesn't she get that?

“It's not about you.” She lets that out, her mind still has a tendency of running to her mouth.

“It's about us right? We are a team right?” He states,

his eyes still fixed on her.

“Yes.” She counters, naturally.

“Then why are you leaving me?”

That question again, Thandiwe still has no proper explanation for it except that she has to go. She ogles at him unable to respond. Why did he have to make things hard?

“I’ll come back.” Of course she knows it sounds stupid.

“It’s not enough, I don’t want to be without you. I don’t want to miss our baby’s birth.” The look in his eyes kills her. Nqaba would follow her if he could, but their lives are in Johannesburg.

His twin brother, the one he just found. They are yet to bond... His sister needs him and his father who hasn’t spoken to anyone since the truth has been revealed. Nqaba has proven to be the strongest, he stayed and faced what Randall couldn’t, faced what Duma is currently avoiding behind closed curtains

and a bottle of alcohol.

“Please, I need this please.” Thandiwe finds herself repeating the exact words again and sounding more selfish each time. With trembling hands, Nqaba takes Thandiwe’s cheeks into his.

“I need you Tshabalala, I need you to trust me. Baby I’m scared, I’ll die if you leave. I know I sound like a coward, but I have never been afraid of anything in my life until now. I can’t lose you again Thandiwe, what if I don’t get you back this time?”

“Nqaba you are the strongest person I know.” Thandiwe assures he him, making physical contact, her arms enfold around his torso.

“Then why this fear? Why is my heart racing like this?” As much as Nqaba tries he can’t hold back the tears.

“Nqaba.”

“I’m sorry.” He apologizes for the noticeable pain running down his face. This has Thandiwe

rethinking her decision. Look at the damage she has caused, the man is crying.

“No, I’m sorry.” An apology from Thandiwe after taking his hands and kissing them. Their foreheads meet, a quick kiss is shared. As his mannish scent tickles her nose, she wonders how she would be able to leave without that.

“Hold me.” Nqaba requests.

The love Nqaba has for Thandiwe has deemed him a weakling, he doesn’t care about that now. What matters is taking his beloved back home. This is a different Nqaba, the sensitive one. The sensitive side of him is always hidden especially in public, but tonight Thandiwe has him crying in the presence of a crowd.

“Hold me.” He repeats and Thandiwe can’t resist as she wraps her arms around his shoulders. Right at this moment in her arms, Nqabayomzi Biyase is at his worst, his weakness displayed in public. But that should be alright because he is hidden in the arms

of the woman he loves. He is wrapped with a cloak of love, safe from the cold world.

“Let’s go home please.” A kiss on Thandiwe’s ear accompanies this request. He is not going to repeat himself, he grabs her luggage, takes her hand and walks with her. There is nothing more to say, he wants to take his woman home.

BARBRA...

“I have found someone who will do the job for us.” Sandra smiles with this news, she is like a child who has been given a lollipop.

“Do you trust him? Randall has eyes and ears everywhere, we have to be careful about this.”

“I’m not stupid Barbra.” Her eyes narrow at me, my sister is easily offended. I stretch my hand to push her off the bed, her presence annoys me at the moment.

“What is your problem?” She yelps, glaring daggers

at me and refusing to move from the bed.

“I’m tired Sandra, don’t you get it? I don’t want you making any mistakes, this plan has to be perfect.”

“Oh trust me, Barbra. Amara will be dead by next week, my son will thank me one day. He doesn’t need that witch..” I have to agree with Sandra, men tend to be weak when it comes to beautiful women and both my sons have been influenced by these two woman who will do nothing, but destroy them.

Suddenly the door is kicked open, my heart jumps at the sight of Randall in the door way. He looks ready to explode with anger, his eyes blazing murderously, teeth grinding and veins in his neck standing out in livid ridges.

“Randall?” Sandra mumbles, her voice trembling. I would stand too if I wasn’t this sick, how did Randall find this place?

“My wife, mother?” He grinds out the words through

clenched teeth. “You want to kill my wife?” He barks with authority, spacing out the words evenly.

We are dead.

To be continued...

BURN

77...

RANDALL...

Sgwili is not around, he seems to have escaped with Sandra’s tongue. The woman can’t speak, she stands frozen, goggle eyed and in disbelief that her son has found her hiding place. Rigid in the doorway, Randall awaits an answer from his trembling mother.

He can’t imagine that she is still the same person she was years ago. The woman who let Raven have

his way with Amara, self-blame licks his heart. If he hadn't allowed her back into their lives this wouldn't be happening, he wouldn't have found out his life has always been a lie.

“W... Why are you here?” Sandra can only serve a question, her heart has fallen into various beats, leaving her shaken and terrified to her intellects.

“You didn't think I would sit back and do nothing about this, did you?” That is exactly what she thought, hence the plan to kill his wife. His gaze chases the woman on the bed, his biological mother...the one who gave him life.

The first thing he notices is her burnt skin, her charred legs and arms. She could pass off as a corpse, or rather a pig left in the grill half-cooked. His mind wonders how Barbra is still alive considering the 3rd degree burns. She is nowhere close to death's door.

“What is going on here?” Randall has never believed

in the supernatural, although Liyana's gift seems to be changing his mind, it is not definite yet. If you would tell him that his mother, Barbra is a witch and was struck by lightning, he would call you bluff and if he were a laugher, laugh in your face.

Thick spittle glides down Sandra's throat as she contemplates a response, her eyes move to her sister who is just as nervous. How do they explain this?

"She...She burnt herself with water." Quick thinking Sandra, Randall glowers at the two women and shrugs his shoulders, depicting how much he doesn't care about Barbra.

"Fate can be a bitch, hey? To think I was going to burn this little house down with the two of you in it." Sandra's eyes widen at her son's declaration, he wouldn't hurt her like that, would he? Barbra knows she will never survive a fire, not even Sgwili would be able to save her.

"Son..." Barbra's attempt to intervene is interjected by Randall's raised hand.

“Don’t call me that, I do not know you.”

Randall finds this conversation impractical, hence the need to check the time on his wrist watch. A sneer takes form on his facial features, he turns to the door and motions for his acquaintance to stroll into the little house, Nkosi strides in with a box and a diabolical look on his face. The ladies are oblivious to the contents of the box, they exchange glances. Neither knows what the other is thinking.

“Baby...” Sandra’s voice trembles, she is aware what her son is capable of. He did kill his brother once upon a time, all for the love he keeps in his heart.

“Wh... What are you doing?”

Sandra questions the secrets of her son's mind, the man is merrily whistling to a song that appears to give him joy. Randall’s head slants to the side, a smug look taking full control of his features.

“Relax mother, I don’t want to spoil the surprise.”

“W...what surprise?” That’s Barbra, dammit she doesn’t want to die. Her dream of being queen of the underworld will be shuttered.

Randall pulls a chair from the corner of the room, he slides it toward Sandra and commands that she sits. The authority in the tone of his voice has her obeying the command, Barbra does not see a happy ending to this.

Her life is flashing before eyes and calling upon Sgwili is the only thing she can do, but they won't be able to take on an Okolie. Those people are highly protected.

Makhafula has turned on her. She has no knowledge of his whereabouts. Is he dead? Did the Okolie ancestors deal with him? That would be a gain for her, she can finally sit on that throne she has been craving for.

“I’m not God, but I have decided that your time is up.” Randall has pliers in his hand, Lord knows what

he plans to do with those. Sandra jiggles with fear of the unfamiliar.

“W... What are you going to do with those?” Randall grimaces, a menacing glare upon his face.

“I had different motives when I came here, but after hearing how you two are planning on having my heart ripped out of my chest, it would be so unfair to let you live.” History can’t repeat itself, Randall cannot kill his mother like he did his brother and all for Amara’s sake. Fearful and shaking like a leaf on a windy day, Sandra screams. She would rise from the chair, but paralysis from fear has her unyielding.

“Shhh!!!” A finger on his lip, Randall orders his mother not to make a sound. He leans in, his hands placed on the arm of the chair. “You see mother, I have this pent up anger I need to release and torturing you is the only thing that will make me feel better, I don’t know about your sister over here.”

His eyes dart to Barbra, her face is unmoved. However her heart is ready to escape her chest.

“This whole scene is wrong,” Randall sighs at the sound of Styles’ voice, he stands straight to glance at his friend at the door. Styles is all smiles, as if happy he came just in time. “That’s my role you’re playing Uze.” A smirk that leaves Randall huffing out of frustration.

“What are you doing here?” Randall grunts, he knows Styles will ruin the fun.

“You didn’t think you were the only one looking for these two? Your twin has been hard at work as well, unfortunately he can’t be here right now.”

Nqaba hasn’t visited Randall’s mind thus far, he crosses his arms, contracting his gaze. Styles’ smile has not faltered, he keeps it to annoy his friend and it seems to be working.

“We’re going home Randall, home to your family.” The voice of reason commands.

“Not before I deal with these two.” Stubborn Randall clashes.

“You’re not going to do that, I won’t let you take another life. Raven’s death has haunted you till today. What do think killing your mother will do to you?”

“They want to have my wife killed.” Randall snaps, Styles is further getting on his nerves.

“I know, nothing of the sort will befall Amara. Don’t you trust me anymore?” That is a rhetorical question from Styles, if anything, Randall would jump off the bridge knowing Styles would rescue him. Styles finds an answer in Randall’s silence, Barbra and Sandra are grateful to their saviour. Little do they know, their son has a mind of his own, he is not controlled by anyone and once he has made up his mind, no one can change it.

“I’m taking you home.” That is a mandate from Styles, he spots a wounded Barbra on the single bed. “This one needs to face her family, the damage she has caused is bigger than she can ever imagine.”

Barbra frowns, unable to understand the words of the man who just saved her life.

“You want me to trust you, right Styles?” Yeah! His mind is unchangeable at this point, Styles knows it hence the shoulder shrug. “I’m asking you the same, I am not a child, I know what I’m doing.” Randall shoots his gaze at Nkosi gesturing that it is time for plan B.

“Mhlonishwa.” Nkosi nods, receiving all that jazz. The man grabs Barbra’s hand, roughly pulling her up. Pain engulfs the witch, causing her to scream in agony. Styles wants to intervene, nonetheless his friend is stabbing daggers at him, daring him to make a move.

“Where are you taking them?” Styles queries, without turning his eyes away Styles; Randall grips Sandra’s arm and begins lugging her toward the door. The woman does not scream like her sister. Instead, follows her son out.

“Nqaba is not going to like this Randall.”

“If he has a problem, he will take it up with me.”

Nonchalantly, Randall throws an answer back. Barbra is helped into the car, no word has been uttered by her. She would call upon her dark powers, but strength is what she doesn't have. The moment everyone is in the car, Styles dashes to his car to trail them.

NQABA...

My heart thunders robustly as my eyes relish the sight of Thandiwe fast asleep on the bed, a man cannot be this powerless. Failure laughs in my face the second my knees hit the ground, it's hard to pray when you don't see any progress. I do it anyway, I pray for her more than anything. I want my family to be okay, I want to live a normal life with the woman I love and my children. Am I asking for too much?

My phone rings, I retrieve it from the bed to see Ntuthuko's name flashing on the screen. I dash out of the room to take the call, my brother barely calls me. It must be important.

“Come to the hospital now, it's dad.” The urgency in his voice has me worried.

“What happened to father?”

“Suicidal attempt, he shot himself...” His voice breaks, he's crying.

“I'm on my way.” Hanging up, I rush back to the bedroom to find Thandiwe seated up. She sees the worry in my eyes and curiosity takes over.

“Are you okay?” I don't get time to stop her from getting out of bed, nor do I have the strength. Everything around me is tumbling, as Thandiwe gets into my personal space, I stumble back and hit the wall. I have no idea what to do with myself, my mind is in disarray. Nothing makes sense, I have been locked into a blurry world where nothing is vibrant.

I think she can hear the hammering of my heart because she places a hand on my chest, her eyes expand with worry and panic.

“What’s wrong?”

“My father is in the hospital, he shot himself.” It’s hard for me to say the words out loud.

“What?” A gasp bubbles out of her mouth. “How is he?”

“I don’t know, I have to see him.”

“Go, he needs you.”

“I can’t leave you alone.” I can’t take her with me either, I might be at the hospital till late.

“I will be fine, go to your father.” Thandiwe assures as her arms enwrap around me, the embrace she offers is soothing. “Duma is a strong man, he’ll be okay.”

“Let me drop you off at my father’s house, the maid is there. At least you won’t be alone.”

“Take me to Sethu’s, I want to be close to my son.”
It’s not such a bad idea, since she will be surrounded by people.

The drive to Sethu’s house does not take long, I park outside and wait for Thandiwe to exit the car.

“Nqaba!” There is sadness in her voice. “I love you.” She exclaims when our eyes meet. “You have to know I love you beyond anything.” Why does this sound like goodbye? My mind goes on recess for a moment as I pray that she is not bidding me farewell. I reach for her cheek to kiss her lips.

“I’ll come home to you, right? You’ll be here when I get back?” My eyes are fixated on hers, knowing she would never lie to my face.

“I’ll be here, I promise.” She say, releasing me from the bondage of fear.

“Take care of yourself and our babies.” I give directives, to receive a nod from her. I wait for her to go in the house before driving away.

Last night I had spoken to my father, he sounded fine over the phone. I should have told him to wait for me, that I will come to see him. It's so unlike him to do such a thing. Duma Biyase is a strong man and nothing has ever brought him down. Could it be that someone shot him and cried suicide?

Or maybe the truth was too much to handle. Besides his children, my father has a weakness and that is his wife Barbra. He loves her like she is the only woman in the world, she is everything to him and only she has the power to break that man.

Veronica meets me halfway in the hospital hallway, she is a whimpering mess. Her body collides into mine, I don't know how to comfort her. Words have failed me, Ntuthuko emerges from one of the rooms looking frazzled. He takes leisured steps, heading my way. Veronica shifts as I remove my arms from her.

“Bafo.” I'm still speechless, a tear escapes his eye.

He gets rid of it with one swipe and for the first time in a long time my brother cries in my arms. I hold him back with one arm, Veronica is holding on to my other hand. She bursts into painful waterworks, this puts me on the spot.

Who do I comfort? I too need a shoulder to cry on, however I have to be strong for my siblings. Judging from their cries, father's case is bad.

Counted minutes later, we perch ourselves on the silver benches. Veronica is needy and clingy, I don't mind...she is the baby of the family.

"How is he?" I ask Ntuthuko, he is seated with his head bowed, entertaining snuffles.

"He is in surgery, there is no hope bafo. He put a bullet through his head." Ntuthuko explains.

"I was in my room when I heard the gun shot, I thought he was dead when I found him lying in his own blood. It was terrible." My sister tells her side of the story, did I mention that she is getting her normal speech back? Nothing has been done to

cleansed her yet, but she is starting to sound more like an adult. “Dad has to be okay bhuti, we can’t lose him.”

“I knew he loved mom, I didn’t know it was this much. How can he try to take his own life because his wife is away from him?” Ntuthuko says, roughly scratching his head. I trust father did not disclose the reason behind his depression.

My attention turns to the mother and daughter who walk in the hallway crying hysterically, my heart goes out to them. I don’t want my family to go through that, my father has to make it. He is my crutch, I need him with me.

I’m growing impatient, this wait is frustrating. Thirty minutes have passed and no one has come to update us, Veronica has fallen asleep on the bench.

“This is for you.” Ntuthuko hands me an envelope. “I signed them last night, I’m tired of this war. Thandiwe never belonged to me, I won’t fight you

anymore.” Had we been in different circumstances, I would be ecstatic. “The plan was to leave the country, a new start, you know? I got a job in Germany, I was meant to leave in three days. I can’t now that father is...”

“He will be okay.” I’m trying to convince myself as well.

“He has to be okay, dad is the pillar of this family. He keeps us together, our family won’t make it without him.” I am astonished by my brother’s sudden change of heart. “What about mom? Where will we start looking for her?”

Styles hasn’t gotten back to me regarding Barbra’s whereabouts, I trust him to find her.

THANDIWE...

My mind races to Nqaba, Duma’s situation reminds

me of my father and how he lost his life. If anyone, I know what Nqaba is going through. Memories of my mother flood my head, I need to call her. I excuse myself from Sethu and the kids in the lounge and head outside to make a call. It's getting dark, the evening breeze has taken its position.

“Thandiwe.” My heart clasps, I miss her so much.

“Mama, how are you?” She is quiet, her floppy breaths speak to me.

A cold shiver abruptly runs down my spine, the atmosphere is swiftly painted with an eerie feeling.

“Mama.” At the sound of a whisper, I turn around and my heart jolts as if electrocuted by a voltage. How is she here? I thought she had left me alone. I was meant to be free from her. It is her... the red raincoat...the bare feet, I can never get this wrong.

“Mama!” she ghostly calls, titling her head back and cackling with brutal, malicious laughter. The phone drops from my shaky hand with a clatter. My mind

goes into protective mode, I start picking stones from the ground and throwing them at her. They seem to do nothing, but make her guffaw. These stones are big, why do they have no effect on her?

“Mama, mama.” Her voice escalates along with her mocking laughter, this doesn’t stop me from trying to protect myself. I think of screaming for Sethu, but I can’t find my voice.

“THANDIWE WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” Sethu booms from behind me, I turn to find her pale faced and terrified as if she is looking at a ghost. Somehow, I’m glad that she can see the little girl. Though she is looking at me, her eyes convicting.

“Sethu, she...” Rapidly, Sethu moves with my hand as I point it toward the little girl. She lifts her up and it takes a second for me to realise that Zulu is the one in her arms and he is injured, my mouth drops at the open wound on his forehead, there is so much blood oozing from it. It trickles down to his chin. No, no, no... This can’t be, I swear I saw her...

she...oh! God, what is happening to me?

“It’s okay baby.” Sethu consoles my baby, while rushing him into the house. Zulu is crying, my heart bleeds at the sound of his cries. I follow pursuit to find Sethu in the kitchen, applying pressure on the wound.

“I...I didn’t see him...I swear, it was someone else.” Sethu won’t look at me.

“Give him to me, please.” She rebuffs my stretched arms, turns away from me and rushes to take Sihle from the floor in the living room.

Her daughter is a few months younger than R.J, she cries when she sees an injured Zulu in her mother’s arms. The noise seems to be frustrating the life out of Sethu, she won’t let me help. All I can do is stand and watch her grab whatever she needs with two crying kids on her hips.

I shadow them to the car, Sethu orders that I sit in

front. Comforting words mollify Zulu as she places him in the back seat, she straps Sihle on a baby car seat.

“I don’t know what happened back there, there was a little girl and she...” I need to explain, Sethu has to know that I didn’t intend on hurting my son. I feel like an idiot with her ignoring me, she’s making a phone call, driving as fast as she can.

“Sethu!” Nqaba’s unnerved voice flounces from the phone, it’s connected to the car’s Bluetooth. Biyase is going to kill me.

“Nq...” I want to explain what happened before Sethu gives her side of the story.

“Why is my son crying?” Oh shit! “Where is Thandiwe? Why is Zulu crying Sethu?” He sounds crosser with each word.

“I’m rushing him to the hospital, please wait for us at reception.” Sethu hastily says, she didn’t have to call him.

“What happened to my son?” He shouts, Nqaba doesn’t just shout. What have I done? This is the second time I have hurt Zulu, but it was unintentional. He’s my son, I gave birth to him, I would never dream of hurting him. I turn to catch a glimpse of Zulu, the blood on his face is suddenly nauseating. I would jump to cradle him and get him to shush if he were not terrified of me. It’s written in his bloodshot red eyes and how he tries not to look back at me.

“We’re almost at the hospital, I’ll explain when we get there.” Sethu sounds as angry as Nqaba, I don’t blame her. I’m a disgrace, what kind of a mother does such a thing to her son?

“Is Thandiwe with you?” Oh my heart...How do I get out of this? I can never forget the look on Nqaba’s face that day I burnt Zulu with hot water. I can’t imagine what he looks like now, will I be able to bring my face before him? Sethu gives me one good glare, I feel bad as it is. My son won’t let me anywhere near him.

“She is.” Nqaba takes a moment of silence right after Sethu’s response. Lord I know what he is thinking, he knows I’m the cause.

“My son better stop crying now, or I swear to God...” He retorts and the line goes dead. That exclamation was directed to me. I turn back to check on Zulu again, Sihle has his head on her shoulder, patting him.

“Zulu.” He doesn’t look up, I need him to stop crying.

“Let him be, you will only upset him further.” Whose child is he? I don’t want to argue with Sethu, keeping my mouth shut is best. Sihle seems to be doing a good job with Zulu, slowly but surely he is settling down. He won’t be wailing when we get to the hospital, that won’t curb Nqaba’s anger though. Jesus! Either way I’m screwed.

To be continued...

BURN

78...

AMARA...

Another disappointment from the man who has never let her down before, mornings are not the same without him. She can't express how much she misses that man of hers.

Four days have passed and Amara has grown tired of calling someone who doesn't want to speak to her, eventually she gave up. If he wants to come home then he will come home. Randall is a big baby, we all know that. However, the big baby knows his way back to his family. Amara is not going to force him.

She has been in the kitchen preparing food for god-knows who, she is not hungry, but needs to keep herself busy before she goes crazy of thinking.

Life is currently not going the way Amara hoped,

she hasn't heard Randall's voice in days and that hurts more than hitting your toe on the corner of a wardrobe.

"Amara." Ifeanyi calls, although she has her own problems, she is worried about the couple. Amara neglects the pots and takes her attention to her sister-in-law. The old Ifeanyi would offer an apologetic smile on behalf of her brother, this one has a poker-face.

"Where is brother?" Ifeanyi wants to know, in her opinion she thinks Randall is acting like a child. Amara shrugs, trying to avoid talking about the man who has frustrated her more than anything. Ifeanyi guides her steps into the kitchen, she wants to see what Amara is preparing. Ghanaian dishes, just like Ifeanyi taught her. This could only mean one thing, Randall is on her mind as expected.

"You miss him?"

"I can't think of anything else, but him."

"Brother is stupid, I don't care if he is heir apparent.

Nana will have to forgive me, but their king is an idiot.” The urge to laugh is there, Amara clogs it. It is not what her sister-in-law has uttered, but the tone introduced in her voice. Her eyes smile at the girl in front of her, Amara would point out that Ife is coming back, their Ife. Nonetheless, that would probably take her back to the hovel she had shut herself in.

“Hey, that’s my husband, you’re talking about.” Amara manages a soft laugh, Ifeanyi rolls her eyes like most girls her age...it’s dramatic and speaks a lot of words.

“Thank God he is your husband alone, imagine if he had two wives. Brother would be a mess, he can’t make one woman happy. What did you see in him anyway? He is just a giant who is clueless about women.” Amara spots a smile on Ifeanyi’s lips.

“I am not a giant.” Speak of the devil... Welcome home sir Okolie.

If Amara's heart had legs, it would escape through her ribcage and run a mile. It is as if she's seeing him for the first time in a long time. An exhilarating feeling overcomes her, she hates being needy and obsessed over her husband. She is comforted by the excitement she feels of having him home.

Amara lets her eyes inspect every part of the big man and notices how he has lost so much weight.

"You are a giant brother." Shock nudges at Randall at how his sister is coming back to them, his eyes shift to Amara then back to the little princess. He wants to hug her, and spin her around, but decides against it.

"You're a big clueless giant," Ifeanyi finishes. "If you ask me, Mzi should be next in line to rule. He's taller and handsome, we want a handsome king." Is it a miracle that Ifeanyi just smiled? Randall seems to think so, he is not bothered by her lame speech. Happiness overwhelms him, with a ghost of a smile

he takes two large steps and has his sister in a whirlwind. Ifeanyi churns in his arms, fighting to be put down. Her head spins as Randall twirls her around.

“Brother put me down,” Ifeanyi complains, her wish is granted after a few more swirls.

“You’re back.” His vast hands cover her whole face as he cradles her cheeks, Ifeanyi flashes a smile again.

“My clothes are wrinkled now, Chioma will shout when I change.” Ifeanyi is bothered with her outfit, a laugh surges from Amara’s mouth. It touches something in Randall’s heart, all of a sudden he yearns for her touch. Rage wins over his heart though. Seeing the elephant walk into the kitchen, Ifeanyi excuses herself to give the two space.

Randall fights the strong urge to embrace Amara, this is when it dawns on him that he is still upset and needs more time to heal.

“Where have you been?” Amara’s mind betrays her

as it runs to her mouth, but at least she managed to say something through all this tension and is not sure if he'll respond. What she fears happens as Randall turns around and walks away.

Relief swamps her still, she is glad that Randall is finally home, Nothing else matters at this moment.

THANDIWE...

Agitation and angst have come to keep me company, they have me immobile and chained in my own body as if I am a prisoner. Nqaba is going to kill me, I know that this will have a dire ending. I can't breathe while waiting for him to come back, time has slowed down.

Zulu has been taken for treatment. I had to stay back, my presence was upsetting him. Sethu is perched beside me with her baby on her lap. She's talking, but I can hardly pick up a word. My muddled mind fails to grasp her verses. Her voice has become background noise.

My heart takes a break for a second as the door cracks open. I hold my breath waiting for the inescapable, Nqaba emerges a second later Ntuthuko appears behind him. I knew he was here, I guess I missed the part where he went into the doctor's room with Nqaba.

Steadily, I rise, my whole being standing at attention, it matters what Nqaba thinks of me. His eyes are avoiding me, I yearn to look into them, it's where I find my sanity.

“How is he?” Sethu speaks.

“He'll be fine.” That's Nqaba.

His arms are folded across his chest, a pucker has taken over his face. Desperate to be comforted by only him, I send my hand to touch his chest. His body tenses, he takes one look at me and I drown in the anger he holds. That doesn't stop me from throwing myself at him, my arms loop around his neck and clasp. I cage my face on the curve of his

neck, my body shuddering like I was thrown in ice water. He is not holding me back, I long for his embrace...his words of comfort.

“You said you’ll always be there when I need you.” Whispering into his ear, I remind him of an accustomed saying. “I need you to hold me, please hold me, Nqaba.”

I feel him come loose, his hands move from his chest and slowly they cage me in, kicking fear out and everything else fades away. Nqaba brushes his nose on my neck, taking in my scent.

“I’m sorry Nqaba.”

“It’s okay...I love you.” Tears burn my eyes, he leaves a wet kiss on my neck “I love you.” Hearing these words from him is enough for me to rest assured that he will never abandon me.

“We need to talk.” He introduces the dreaded words, I am glad though that he is willing to let me explain

what happened. “Come with me.”

As Ngaba grips my hand, my head spins and everything instantly blacks out.

RANDALL...

“I made you food.” She tells him when she finds him in the bedroom after searching for him all over the house. Randall is laying on the two seater couch, his legs crossed and hanging on the end of it. He used his arm as a pillow, the position can’t be comfortable; Amara figures as she comprehends how tall he is for that couch.

She stands in the door way waiting for his response even a glimpse from him would suffice, but Randall is Randall.

“You’ve lost weight.” Amara points, he sighs indicating he doesn’t want her talking to him although she gives him so much peace. “I miss you

to death it hurts my heart.” Her mind and mouth do what they do best, turn against her.

Amara waits for his reaction, even though it’s not something she planned on saying, she still expects a word from him.

And since Randall can’t stand to see his wife in pain, he sits up and without a thought to it, buries his head in the palms of his hands.

“Are we okay?” The wife needs to know.

“I don’t know.” Well, aren’t we a bit childish? Amara lets herself in, plodding towards him, he is tempted to raise his head and look at her.

“We have never been apart, let’s not start now please. We can get through this like we’ve gotten through everything else.” There is an urge to touch his head and caress it like she always does, but she is not sure if she still has a right over him. Hold on,

hold on Amara... You're his wife, of course you have a right over him. If not you, then who does?

Amara goes down on her knees in front of him, meeting his height and places her hands on his lap. This is the second time in her life she kneels before Randall, she has no idea what has driven her to such a decision. It could be desperation? Or does the thought of losing him terrify her that much?

“Don't be silent please, talk to me. You can scream, shout, anything. I can't stand your silence.” It is hard enough that she spent days without him. “This is not you, Randall, you don't run away from your problems. You don't run away from me.”

Randall has never been a lover of lies, from when he was a boy he hated them with passion. Amara is very much aware of it. Needing to look into his eyes, she takes his chin, tilting his head up so he is looking at her. Their eyes meet and there it is, the hurt and disappointment she didn't want to see.

The stubbornness of an Okolie...Randall slowly removes her hand from his face and doesn't miss the shocked look in her eyes.

"Stop." Typical Okolie, they are fond of commanding and having their way. "You always say I should let you be angry, I am asking the same from you." He reminds her of a familiar proverb. "Am I asking for too much? Are you the only one who is allowed space when hurting?" He simpers in anger as he questions his wife. In this heated moment, Amara senses that Randall is not ready to forgive her.

"N... No." Well, well, well...My voice would also tremble when glared at like that.

"I'm hurt...a lot." Randall admits "I never thought you would do this to me."

"I said I'm sorry." I think the queen can get up now, then again, she is kneeling before a king. Not just a king, but her king. "How long will you keep me away from you?" Amara struggles to hide the pain in her eyes and somehow wants him to see it, to know

how sorry she is. Just one glance from Randall, one glance from the man who couldn't keep his eyes off of his wife for three years.

"I'm protecting my heart." He says as he leans back on the couch and carries his large hands on his head.

"From me?" Randall's words hurt so much that they suffocate her.

"You failed to protect it as my wife, when I trusted you the most, you left me out in the cold. I'm sorry if I'm frozen, but there's nothing I can say or do right now, I can't feel anything." He spills his frozen heart out, piercing hers with his words in the process. Amara clenches her eyes shut as his words bruise every fragile part of her.

"You can trust me." Sure he can, this is the same woman who has watched him kill people and stayed with no questions asked. Randall derives an aura of someone who doesn't want to be disturbed.

"Please leave." Relax Okolie... Argh! What the heck?

The man is hurting.

Amara is just as stubborn, the boldness to lay her head on the lap of an angry man. Now, now Amara... let's not forget his beast days, how he shot his father right in his living room and stabbed his brother to... Okaay! This is not why we have gathered here.

“Randall please.” Amara implores... Tears? That should help, don't we all use tears as an escape? They plummet on his lap, penetrating through the thick fabric. They warm his dark skin and in this instant there is a crazy, insanelly, undeniable urge to grab her and comfort her, but something is stopping the king and he hates whatever the obstacle is because it is keeping him from his beloved.

Randall's mind works over time trying to figure out what it is, he would know if it were ego, but Randall Okolie is not an egoistic person. Maybe arrogant... He clamps his fist in anger and grits his jaw as he can't stand the tears of his wife, looking away

seems like a better alternative.

“Will you leave or should I?” Randall crosses his arms. We spoke about the stubbornness of an Okolie, here it is at play once more. Randall’s pig-headedness is beyond Amara, it is downright draining.

A strong willed queen is what she aspires to be and this is her chance to show off her skills. Taking up a straight face, Amara wipes her tears, gathers herself together and with her head held high begins to saunter out of the bedroom. Careful not to drop that crown.

Randall has his eyes on her and for a second there he thinks she will look back, but our queen disappoints. Is that all he is going to do? Sigh his life away?

Is he punishing her or himself? His heart questions him, he needs that woman and misses her deeply. Let’s revisit that part about egos, perhaps he is

egocentric.

THANDIWE...

“Is the baby okay?”

“The baby is fine.” Then why the hug? Why the gloomy face?

You know that feeling when your heart jumps to your throat and you feel like your whole life is falling apart? That is the feeling I woke up to in this hospital room, something is wrong. I can feel it and it has salty water exuding from my eyes.

“Nqaba, what is going on? You’re scaring me.” Why is he holding me like it’s the last time?

He tightens the grip around my waist, his body shuddering and now his breathing has rocketed. Is he crying? I don’t want him to cry.

Maybe I should stop snivelling because it seems to fuel whatever it is he’s feeling. Sometimes I hate my emotions, they always get the best of me.

I hear him heave a sigh like he feels suffocated.

It takes a few minutes before I am able to pull myself together... What is this thing I am feeling? Trapped in his arms is the best thing that could happen to me, there is comfort here.

God! Did I ever thank you for this man and the love he has for me?

Nqaba kisses the camber of my neck, his lips graze up to my chin.

He pecks my nose, then forehead and lastly worships my lips with a sweet kiss causing my heart to jump out of my chest.

He cots my cheeks, making me look at him.

“I hate these tears, the only tears you’re meant to cry are tears of joy.” He declares as his thumb wipes them away. My conscious tells me something is terribly wrong, that’s why I’m crying. Nqaba’s lips linger on mine before we hear the door crack open. I’m about ready to pull out of the kiss,

but no Nqaba doesn't stop on anyone's account.

Whoever enters the hospital room clears their throat and thank God Nqaba stops. We both turn to a middle aged white woman in a doctor's coat, she gives us that smile that white people give black people, that one that has you wondering if it's fake or she feels like she owes us a smile for whatever reason.

"Yes?" He raises an eyebrow. Let's scratch this part, Nqaba is not rude, maybe condescending. Overawed, the lady clears her throat again. She keeps the smile and I doubt it's going anywhere soon.

"Hi, my name is Dr. Haco Africa. I'm a psychologist, Dr. Lithuli sent me here. She explained everything about the hallucinations." This is highly upsetting. Who said I need a psychologist?

"I'm not crazy." She is here for me, they think I have lost my mind. I want that annoying smile on her

face gone, it makes me feel stupid. I am not a child who speaks things that do not make sense.

Nqaba kisses my cheek, I know that look, he is about to convince me to speak to this woman.

“Tshabalala!” My ass... I am not interested in whatever he has to say.

“At least try and hear her out.”

“I’m not crazy Nqaba.” I repeat, I can even put a stamp on it. I don’t care how dominant he can be. I will not listen to him when it comes to this.

“Please Thandiwe, there’s obviously a reason behind everything that has been happening.” What the hell? He damn well knows why I’m going through what I’m going through. It has nothing to do with my sanity.

“Most patients diagnosed with schizophrenia are in denial, they...” Haco.

“Schizophrenia?” I want answers from Nqaba, not this woman. Her mind has been made up, she

thinks I have lost touch with reality.

“Yes, it’s a...”

“I know what it is and I assure you doctor Haco, I am not schizophrenic. I know what the problem is and you can’t help me. I don’t expect you to understand the spiritual world. You’re a doctor after all and you will surely take the scientific route.” I’m upset, and why is this man not saying anything? Why is he not telling this woman that I am not crazy? He even has the audacity to look me straight in the eye.

“I understand your fear ma’am, it’s normal to be afraid. But we can’t ignore this any further, from what I have heard, you’re far gone and the only way for you to heal is to be admitted. That way we will keep an eye on you.” Admitted?

“You mean a mental hospital?” Nqaba takes my hand into his, I snatch it back before I slap him across the face.

“Nqaba please tell her to leave.”

I don't even bother to look at her, I'm not crazy and the last thing I want is a woman in a white coat telling me that I'm losing my mind."

"Thandiwe please..." He is touching me, Lord...

"Tshabalala..."

Go and 'Tshabalala' away from me.

"Get this woman out of here, Nqaba." I'm not one to be rude, but they are pissing me off.

"I can come back later." How about never? I am not going anywhere.

"Wait." My eyes widen at Nqaba stopping Haco from ambling out of the room.

He fixes his gaze on me, browned off.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

No, what the hell is wrong with you, thinking I would agree to this hocus-pocus?

"Nothing is wrong with me. I told you, I'm not crazy. You of all people should know that." He glares at

me for a while without saying anything.

Uncomfortable I tell you.

“Are you going to let them take me away Nqaba?”

No, he does not get to drop his eyes. I want him to look me in the eye and tell me that he is not having me locked up.

“It’s for your own good.” His hands trail my arms, from shoulders down to my fingers. I would have him stop, but his touch is having an effect on me. It is the last time I will ever feel him? “Something is wrong with you Tan-tan, we tried everything and this is the only option left.”

He is lying to me, I have heard Nqaba praying for me in the middle of the night. I have heard his cries to God, I have heard his tears and I have heard his heart break into a million pieces. All of this happened every night, in the wee hours of the morning in utter darkness. He thought I was sleeping the whole time, I know he doesn’t think I’m crazy.

Where is God when you need him? Why is he not answering our prayers? Why is he sitting back watching the devil have his way with me? The God who said he will never leave me is silent and it hurts.

“There has to be another way, I don’t want to be away from you. I don’t want to be away from my son, I’ll die Nqaba.”

“We’ll visit you every day, I promise.”

“No, I don’t want to hear it. Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“Thandiwe.” He continues to touch me, I push his hand away. “Look at what happened to Zulu, twice Thandiwe. What if he won’t be lucky next time?” How could he say that to me? I would never consciously hurt my son.

“I’m not crazy.” That’s all, I won’t say anything more.

I don’t know what he gestures to the doctor, she saunters out briefly and comes back with two

nurses a male and female. I am not going to cry, although the lump on my throat is forcing me to.

“I love you.” Nqaba whispers in my ear, nestles my cheek with his hand and pulls me into a tight embrace. I don’t return it, if he loves me, he wouldn’t be doing this to me.

I wanted to go to my mother, I should have gone to my mother and waited for my death there. This is it...he is sending me away to die alone.

When Nqaba lets go, I sink on the bed and glance at the ceiling. I hear him sigh, I have no idea what it is about. I don’t give a rat’s arse either. This man wants me locked up, he wants me to mingle with crazy people.

“I love you, Tshabalala.”

To be continued...

BURN

79...

NQABA...

My heart has died, right after making the decision to separate myself from it. Since I broke the news last night, Thandiwe hasn't uttered a word to me, nor has she looked at me. I thought I would spend time with her before she goes away, today was meant to be our day. Some kind of goodbye I guess, but my love refuses to let me touch her. My arms have been itching, desperate to feel her body.

Sethu understood the situation when I explained to her last night and agreed to watch over Zulu.

Thandiwe refused to eat breakfast, she hasn't had lunch yet. The baby will be in danger if she continues like this.

"Tshabalala." She flinches and gives me a glimpse before darting her eyes back to the TV. "It's time to

go.” Saying these words, darkens my once ruby red heart. I wish she would say something, I need to know what she’s thinking. I take her hand into mine, she doesn’t move.

“Nkanyezi yami.” (My star)

She blinks at the whisper, her eyes release tears of pain. Her lip quavers as more tears disrespectfully pool from her eyes. I take her in my arms to comfort her, she doesn’t hold me back, however cries on my chest.

“I’m sorry.” A whisper is what leaves my mouth. In a minute Thandiwe calms down, she lets me help her up and permits me to hold her hand. We head out, with loud silence keeping us company.

We arrive at the mental hospital, it feels like we flew here. Thandiwe doesn’t get out of the car until I help her out, her eyes are dead. There is nothing reflecting in them, she keeps them in one place as if she is caught in a trance. A nurse approaches, takes her luggage. I need to see her room, if it is

fitting for her.

Thandiwe stops at the door when we get there, her body is discernibly shuddering. Fear has taken hold of her, yet she refuses to speak. She remains inaudible... Why does it feel like this is the last of us? Our story ends here? I know she will never forgive me, my heart crunches at the thought.

“It’s not bad, look; you have a comfortable bed.” That’s the only thing I can think of saying, my feet saunter to her. Her eyes do not rest where I am, perhaps on the wall behind me or the shadows lurking about; not taking in what is in front of her. She is lost in her own pain, lost in her own thoughts. I cradle her face with my hands, hoping for a twinkle of sort, a bizarre expectation I know.

“Please say something, I miss your voice.” Desperation swirls in my voice, but fails to touch Thandiwe’s heart.

“Mr. Biyase.” Doctor Huco is here, a look of pity

resides on her face. I turn my eyes back to Thandiwe to find her looking at me. The eyes that were dull when we arrived are suddenly filled with panic.

“You’re going to be okay, we are going to get through this. I promise you, Tshabalala.” My promises mean nothing to her, her eyes attest to it. Enfolding my hand around her waist, I lead her inside the room. I would stay if my heart was not breaking, I can’t let her see me cry. My lips ache to taste hers for the last time, I expect her not to return the kiss. Moreover, I am deprived of a chance to feel her arms around me one final time.

My arms clasp around her, her body trembles under my hold.

“I love you.” I declare and start to march toward the door without so much as looking back, a weak hand grips my arm. The snivelling I have been anticipating gushes in the room, my breath catches and my heart clips...I want to turn to her, but it will

be hard to walk away.

“D...don’t leave me here, please.” Thandiwe’s voice cracks, if the soul could bleed an ocean through her eyes, this is the terrible nature of her sobbing. The sound of her broken heart has me tearing up. “Take me home Nqaba, I don’t want to be here.”

God, how I wish I could do that. Making her believe she has lost touch with reality is the only way I can keep her here.

“I’m not crazy, you can’t do this to me.” Thandiwe scream cries, I can’t face her. Not when she is sobbing like this.

“I’m sorry.” I whisper under my breath and wring my hand away from her hold.

“NQABA!” The scream jolts my heart as if it has been electrocuted, my tracks are halted by arms that tightly wrap around my waist from behind.

“I’m sorry Nqaba, I didn’t mean to hurt our son. I won’t see him again if it will keep him safe, I’ll stay

away from Zulu, just..don't leave me here. I will lose my mind in this place, ple...please don't leave me here.”

Anger and pain wrestle in my heart, I'm angry at myself that I can't face the woman I love. Her cries are heart wrenching, three nurses rush in and pull Thandiwe away from me. She screams, fighting for liberation. I catch a glimpse of them pinning her down on the bed, our eyes meet and I die a thousand deaths seeing the pain reflecting in her teary eyes.

The sight of Thandiwe kicking and screaming, while trying to reach her hand out to me will forever be imprinted in my head. I almost tell them to stop and take her home with me, but thoughts of Zulu plug my mind.

“I'm sorry.” The words are soundless, but she reads my lips still. This sets her on a crazy rampage.

“I hate you, I hate you, Nqaba.” Almost breaking

down, I turn away from her screams and hurtful words. As I shut the door behind me, her yelps elevate. My knees give in, I can't move so I sink on the floor and let it all out right in the corridor, with Thandiwe hysterically calling out to me.

“I'm sorry...forgive me, Tan tan. I'm sorry Tshabalala wam.”

BARBRA...

Never have I imagined myself in a cage, I am incarcerated like an animal ready to be slaughtered and all this happened under my son's command. The man I brought into the world has reduced me to a worthless animal, he has left us to die of hunger and thirst. Sandra has not stopped crying her heart out. She is detained in a cage next to mine, the dimmed lights create a gloomy feel to this hovel.

“Will you stop?” I croak as loud as I can.

“I am scared Barbra, he’s going to kill us.” She cries, I detest weak people.

“He is not going to kill us, I’m sure this is only a punishment.”

“Are you stupid? Randall is evil, have you any idea of the things he did in the past? He is your son after all.” Her hands curl around the bars as she leers over at me.

“Today you are ready to disown him? What a hypocrite you are my dear Khabonina.” Imbecile is what I would dub her.

“AAAHHH!!!” Sandra yells out, a shout mingled with rage and terror. Her breathing comes at longer intervals, her strength begins to ebb. In shock I watch a demented grown woman allow fury to consume her; she draws in ragged breaths after another.

“You’re only going to lose your mind if you continue with those tantrums,” Sandra flouts my warning, she gasps and groans, sinking down to the cold

concrete floor.

“My son, how could he do this to me? I am his mother, I nurtured him and protected him. Is this the thanks I get for loving him?” Sandra shouts painfully, I am getting tired of her outbursts. “You have to do something Barbra, call Sgwili to come and help us. I don’t want to die, I can’t die Barbra.”

“Oh shut up Khabonina, I already told you no one is going to die. There is nothing Sgwili can do here, he won’t be able to unlock these locks. If I had Makhafula’s powers, I would be home by now.”

“You’re useless, you are so quick to brag about your powers, yet you can’t save us from this trap.”

“I am not a magician, I am a witch. I work with herbs mostly, it’s not like I can shoot lightning right out of my hands. Besides, I am weak. Have you not seen my state? We have no choice, but to wait and see what Randall has in store for us.” What am I saying? Sandra bitterly cackles at my statement.

“Fine, you’re willing to die a painful death? Then so be it, because that is exactly what will happen here. We will die of hunger and thirst and don’t think Randall will give you a befitting burial. Like I said, he is evil. That man will let us rot before burying us in shallow graves like dogs.”

Sandra exclaims, falling into tears again. I can only believe that she is pushed by fear, hence the words she speaks. Call me stupid, but I choose to remain positive.

BHEKIZIZWE...

Maybe it’s my fault I fell in love with Bulelwa, maybe it’s my fault I had an affair with his mother. How do I breathe without the one I love? Isn’t love supposed to be the most beautiful thing in the world? Why does it hurt so much?

I haven’t spoken to him in days, I am losing my mind. My brother keeps looking at me like I am not normal. I don’t know what his stares mean, he’s

giving me one right now from the kitchen.

“How long will you sulk over another man?” Trust Ntsika to say this to me, I have always known that he is homophobic, but his words still sting. I don’t give him an answer, he is stupid and I refuse to entertain him.

“Look, I don’t mean to be rude ndoda. But don’t you think it’s about time you let go and move on with your life?” Like that’s an easy thing to do, I turn my gaze from him and lay face up on the couch.

“Zizwe come on, stop acting like a baby.” I would curse him if he were not older, he joins me in the living room and perches himself on the opposite couch.

“That boy doesn’t love you,” my brother better stop talking, or I will lose it. “He would have understood if he did.”

“What do you know about love?” I don’t expect him

to understand.

“Trust me, I know a lot.” His introduction has me sitting up, he sits back, crosses one leg over the other.

“I’m in love with two women.” Well, that is expected of him.

“Archie Zondo! What have you gotten yourself into?” He simpers at the name calling.

“How I wish I could burn that name to ashes so it ceases to exist.””

“You can’t, your ancestors recognise you as Archie.”

“That’s because your grandparents were too forward, what sane Zulu man would name their child Archie? That is a western name, it simply does not make any sense at all.” The tongue click does it for me. “Speaking of old people, your mother was here yesterday. She says you’re not taking her calls.”

“That’s because your father asked her to convince me to move back home, they think I’m up to no good. Dad wants me to marry Fikile.”

“Fikile?” His face scrunches in confusing.

“The ex.” Ntsika nods, as the memory of Fikile is served in his head. I bet all my father’s cows he is for the idea.

“That wouldn’t be bad, you two were good together.” How easy these words jump out of his mouth.

“There is a reason Fikile and I didn’t work out and never will, she is simply not the one for me. Bulelwa is, he is my heart.” Ntsika huffs at the exclamation, he will never understand.

“Look, I’m not judging you or anything. But think about this ndoda, what future do you have with another man? Society will never approve of your relationship, it will always be seen as an abomination.” He is lucky he’s my brother. “What did you think was going to happen? Get married and adopt children? That is insane Zizwe, is it not bad

enough that your grandparents deemed our parents unworthy and disowned them? Do you want society to do the same? Do you want your father to be a laughing stock once again?”

“Fuck society and what you think,” anger materialises through these words. Ntsika has no right whatsoever to say this to me.

“Bhekizizwe!” Fuck that shocked expression on his face too, I will not be told what to do.

“I know you’re against the LGBTQ community, you have never hidden that from me, but I am your brother. My happiness should at least mean something to you, my heart is broken bafo and I expect a shoulder to cry on.” I lash out at him, he is not bothered. I almost lose my cool when he huffs once more and waves his hands like I’m a stupid teenage boy who is controlled by his hormones.

“Cry over another man? Indoda enamasende njengawe? Give me a break.” (A man with testicles

like you?)

“How dare you, Ntsika. You have no right to drag me down like this. You don’t see me judging the things you do, I don’t throw them in your face and I sure as hell don’t make you feel like shit about them.”

“What are you talking about? I have never done anything as disgraceful as shooting my seeds inside another man.” Disgust paints his tone, his eyes catch on as well as my brother glares at me like I am covered in shit.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Disbelief leaps out of my mouth in a chuckle, my brother frowns, disapproving of my loudness. “You’re a hitman ndoda, inkabi. You kill people for money, if you think that is not disgraceful then there is something wrong with you.”

“That’s what real men do Bhekizizwe, we point guns at other men, not fuck them as if they are women.” His ignorant exclamation is enough to jolt me up

from the couch, he stands too. Shoulders straight, nose flailing and chest rising and falling.

“You’re saying this to me? You of all people are talking to me in this manner?” I utter, my voice brimming with hurt.

“Yeah, well...maybe you will wake up from this stupid dream you’re in. I am glad that fag dumped you, he has a demon and the only thing he did was corrupt my brother. Nothing good comes from people like him, they are as disgusting as their deeds. You should thank your ancestors you haven’t caught any diseases. That boy is brainless, an idiot with no manners at all. I don’t blame him, his parents didn’t do their job right in raising him. That’s why he turned out like that, if you ask me, he should get tested for infections. Who knows how many men...”

My fist collides with his jawline, interjecting his hate speech. He staggers back a little and gains balance.

“Zizwe!” The bastard calls out my name with a

bleeding lip.

“I don’t care what you say about me, you can look down on me...but do not insult Bulelwa.” I roar, ready to throw in another punch.

“You hit me because of that fag?”

“I will do more than just hit you if you continue to let your illiterate ass control your tongue. I’ll take anything from you, Archie, but not insults on my Bulelwa. Do you hear me?” His angry eyes widen at my shouting, I don’t care what I lose at this point.

“So you’re choosing a gay man over your only brother?”

“I choose Bulelwa over anything.”

“You’re a disgrace Zizwe, you should have died instead of Bhekisizwe. He would have never brought shame upon this family.” I could care what he says, but I am too angry to care.

“Damn you to hell Archie, you son of a bitch.” I push him out of the way and storm out of the house, fucking asshole...

To be continued...

BURN

80...

BULELWA...

Zizwe is stupid for listening to me, he is gone and I miss him to death. Almost everything I do reminds me of him and I am so sick of it, to make matters worse, I have this urge to call him and plead that he comes back to me. However, I cannot conjure up the courage to do so. A broken heart is something I never thought I would experience, look at me; love sick and starving myself because of a wrecked heart.

The knock on my door summons an aggravation that leaves me panting with irritation, I've been avoiding the world since the break up and by the

world, I mean my siblings. Thobekile is still around, pestering me. She is team Zizwe, I need an escape.

“Bubu!” Speak of the devil.

Don’t they have tidal waves in Mozambique, there’s a woman here who needs to be flushed back there.

“Thobe.” The smile is fake, she knows...she doesn’t care. I’m shoved aside as she makes her way into my house. The scrawny penguin is here as well, looking like she is about to give birth any second from now.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at the hospital, ready to push or something?” I get a goofy face for my question, Lindiwe pushes a bag of what smells like fresh doughnuts on my chest and glides in like this is her father’s place. I turn to find the duo crowding my living space, the baby carrier flipping through channels.

“What are you people doing here?” I have an attitude,

these two know they can't compete with me when it comes to that.

"If Mohammed can't..." Thobekile.

"Yeah, yeah... spare me please." I interject, it is late at night and that one brought me doughnuts at 8pm. Pregnancy must be a disease because wow!!!

"Betty made those by the way, she said they will help heal your heart." Lindiwe introduces... wait!

"Betty is back?" I ask, still standing in the middle of the living room. If I sit, they will think I am okay with their late night visit.

"Last week, she's staying at a guest house in the east." Thobekile is not okay with this Betty topic, the stony glare she is giving her sister makes me feel cold. I need coffee.

I head to the kitchen to boil water, the sisters won't bother helping. They think they are guests here, being the last born is not fun sometimes. Lindiwe doesn't drink coffee, the orange juice is for her. I

serve the monkeys like they are royalty...the smiles on their faces...rubbish!

“What’s the deal with Betty anyway? Why did she disappear?” I ask.

I know why she left KZN, but the least she could have done was contact us.

“She was going through some things,” Betty has a special place in Lindiwe’s heart, she is always standing up for her.

“Do we have to talk about her? I thought we came here to console bubu.” That’s my father’s displeased first born complaining.

“Shouldn’t you be hating on Lilian and not Betty? Lilian is the man-stealer, she took Mandla from Betty. That woman has a PHD in man-stealing.” Zizwe has suddenly come to mind and how my mother had him for two years, I need to curtail my emotions or I will burst with fury.

The sisters are giving me looks as if I blasphemed

against the holy one.

“What?”

“How long will you keep that grudge? It will swallow you, are you aware of that?” And then? Dr. Phil...

“You do not expect me to forgive that woman overnight, do you?” I ask Lindiwe who seems to have the biggest mouth out of us all.

“All I am saying is that, you need to let go. You’re holding yourself prisoner by not forgiving. I know mom was wrong, she cheated on dad, but...”

“But nothing Lindiwe.” I interpose, it is not a good night. I am not in the mood... Why is she trying to convince me that Lilian deserves my forgiveness? Thobekile is the favourite sister at the moment, she is quiet as a church mouse.

“Okay fine, at least forgive Hulk. The poor guy looked terrible, I saw him at a petrol station yesterday, argh shame. I would give myself to him if I did not look like a balloon.” Lindiwe.

I want to laugh, however there is a sting in my heart. I don't want Zizwe to suffer, perhaps I was hoping that he wouldn't leave and fight for us.

"I don't know about Lilian, I do know though that Zizwe is your soulmate." Thobekile adds, suddenly finding interest in the conversation. "Did he tell you that he had a vision of some sort about uncle Gcinumzi and Ifalakhe." Did she just say vision? She frowns at my hilarity.

"Vision? In case you have forgotten my dear sister, this is real life not Passions.

"Says the man whose best friend sees dead people." Thobekile retorts.

"But it can't be possible, Zizwe has no relation with any of the deceased."

"Tell that to the universe." She is the universe kind of girl, don't mention God or you will be added to her list of the most annoying people.

“What did he say?” I scoot closer, I need to hear this properly.

There is someone suddenly tapping on my door, I guess I should get it since it's my house. Betty smiles as our eyes meet and puts her arms around me. What is she doing here? Thobekile is not going to be happy about her sudden visit.

NQABA...

3rd person POV

Visiting hours are over, however, Nqaba finds himself at the hospital. After today, jumping down a bridge is but a good idea. Something a strongman like him would never contemplate, nonetheless, humans are weaklings compared to this thing we call fate. It will toss you sky high and let you hit the ground face down, sending you to your demise.

“I'm sorry, but I can't let you in.” The nurse has

grown tired of convincing the man to leave, stubbornness knows him best and he is not used to being told what to do. He is a boss after all, gives rather than takes orders.

“Did I say I want to sleep over? Let me see my father.” Exasperation has come to dwell in his heart, it could stay a little while longer until guilt decides to pack up and leave.

Thandiwe is a forgiving person, sure Nqaba knows that too well. Will she forgive him for separating her from him and their son? To top it off, the baby will be born in a few months. Will Thandiwe’s situation have changed by then? She is showing a little and it pains him that he won’t be around for every kick and her cravings. Four more months and he is going to be a father of two, Zulu and the baby will have to be his first priority.

“Sir, I already told you...”

“And I told you, I want to see my father.” His loud guttural voice catches the attention of the members

of the public.

“Strange, I never pictured you a bully.” That’s Randall’s voice speaking behind him, the Biyase giant turns to his twin brother. Nqaba doesn’t do hugs, they both don’t do hugs, but Nqaba needs one right now. This is his twin, they were cramped up in their mother’s womb thirty six years ago. What difference will it make if he steals a shoulder to cry on from his twin brother?

“What are you doing here?” Nqaba decides against the hug, the nurse leaves relieved that she doesn’t have to deal with the tall grumpy Zulu man who thinks he is in the stone ages. The ‘I say bark and you say woof woof’ type of guy.

“You look spent.” Randall observes, snubbing Nqaba’s question, he is Randall and he can do that. Nqaba cannot find an answer, he opts for muteness. They stand in awkward silence in the reception area, a clearing of a throat is heard.

The awaiting king of the Ashantis is the one to give it, he sees his brother's agony, but comforting is not one of his strongest attributes.

“Shall we grab a drink?” We are making progress with the future king, but why is he walking away? Nqaba has not agreed to have drinks with him yet...

Oh there he goes, striding behind his brother.

Nqaba could take his car, driving with someone seems like a good path to take so they jump into Randall's car. It's a Toyota Fortuner 2.4V, Amara uses it when taking the kids to their designated institutes. Randall would explain the smell of cheesy snacks and baby milk, but that is the last thing he wants to entertain.

“Are you okay?” Randall probes and this is after ten minutes of silence, Nqaba nods forgetting his brother's gaze belongs to the road as he is driving. King Okolie would find him rude, but they are similar and the man takes no offence.

They get to a pub in Sundowns, Randall loves his whiskey. The more expensive, the better while Nqaba is a castle lager type of guy. They settle at the bar area, silently drinking their troubles away.

“She will never forgive me.” It must be raining outside, Biyase has found his voice. Randall was briefed by Styles, since Sethu happened, Sishi has a female tongue. The one that wants to share everything his ears get a chance to hear.

“Give her time.” Randall.

What else can he say? He too is stuck in this train of unforgiveness. Why must life be so difficult?

“You didn’t see her Randall, she begged me not to leave her there.” Tears are ready for the show, but Nqaba will not give them the satisfactory.

“I have learnt that women can hold grudges, but once you wholeheartedly offer a heartfelt apology, they will forgive you like you never sinned.” Maybe Amara, Nqaba is not sure if Thandiwe would do that.

“You need to relax Mzi, you’re thinking too much.”

“I would relax if my heart would stop beating so fast, dammit I can’t breathe.” Nqaba.

“Well breathe dammit, it’s the only way you will survive.” That is meant to be a joke, still Randall does not give a chuckle, not even a smile to show that he is trying out for comedy.

“Where is mother?” Random, aren’t we? Randall does not react to Nqaba’s sudden question, he continues to gulp down the soul-hugging liquid without a care. “Are you going to kill them?”

Nqaba seems to know a lot for someone who has been busy with his family, Randall can’t help, but wonder if it was Styles or Neo who ran and told his brother everything. Those two combined are a mess, a chattering mess.

“Maybe.” The dark skinned brother, Okolie retorts.

“You are not going to do that.” Oh Nqaba! Are we trying to save Barbra the witch? Randall turns to

Nqaba, a threatening frown on his face.

“And, you are not going to tell me what to do.” Are the twins having their first twin-fight?

“I’m not kidding Randall, she’s my mother.”

“She is my mother too, unfortunately and she has to pay for what she did.”

“Yes, but not with her life.” Nqaba sizzles.

A furrowed brow is Randall’s signature, but this time it has grown, elucidating how exasperated his brother is making him.

“What is it Mzi? Are you still sucking your mother’s breast? Is that why you are so attached to her?”

This question must have come from the heart, the little boy in Randall is bothered by the fact that his mother chose Nqaba over him. The insult does not hit any nerve in Nqaba.

“Unlike you, I don’t make hasty decisions when angry. You need to calm down Randall.”

“You need to focus on your woman and stop telling

me what to do, surely you are aware that you're wasting your time?" Randall is not backing down, he's using his 'Okolie-head', hard as a rock.

"As if you don't have problems of your own, give our mother back and I will deal with her myself."

Randall would if he were not as stubborn, their stubbornness clashes though...let the best man win.

"Give me a week or three and I will make sure to deliver her corpse right at your doorstep." Oh Randall! Are you challenging this Zulu man? I mean Ghanaian man...

"Don't test me little bro." Nqaba snorts, Randall gives him one unaffected glance, stirs the glass of whiskey in his hand and slowly brings it to the seams of his lips to take a sip. He purses his lips once the liquor trickles down his throat.

"How do you know you're the eldest?" Randall

questions, Nqaba is denied a chance to respond by a hand that slams on the table in front of them. A R50 note is left as the hand slides away.

“R10 says Uze wins.” They know that voice, it has to be the crazy Sotho boy from Pretoria.

“But you put R50 on the table?” The twins turn at the sound of the second familiar voice, Styles and Neo are engrossed on a stupid conversation.

“I don’t have change, I’ll win the bet anyway.” Neo.

“I say Mzi wins.” Styles fishes for a R10 in the pocket of his jeans, he finds two R5 coins and places them next to the R50 note.

“Cheapskate.” Neo mumbles, he would roll his eyes if he were dramatic. The two fall into a witless argument, much to Randall and Nqaba’s annoyance.

“What the hell Styles? I expect this from Neo, not you.” Randall cuts the dispute.

“Thank you, Uze...” Neo interjects and poses when

he realises that Randall is not singing his praises, but insulting him.

“We heard you two arguing about Barbra and Neo thought it best to place a bet.” Styles explains his childish behaviour.

“I never thought I would see people fight over a witch and you two just found each other. You should be going out for ice-cream dates, buy each other socks and underwear, do sleepovers, hold hands or something. Not this bickering you’re doing, you remind me of those two short Nigerian actors. Those idiots fought about anything, but they also got into mischief together. I expect you to do the same, go rob a bank and blame it on covid. Do something, fighting over Barbra will get you nowhere.” Neo prattles.

“Why do I know you?” Nqaba is the first to argue, he is done and dusted with this friend of his.

“I’m out of here,” Randall takes the first step.

“Wait for me,” Nqaba follows his twin, leaving dumb

and dumber thunders truck.

“Were those two not fighting seconds ago?” Neo questions, his eyes glued to the twins who are ambling toward the exit, side by side.

“That’s what we get for intruding, look who the idiots are now, while they sail off into the sunset.” Styles replies and adds a tongue click, he should get back home to his family.

“God is not serious, why did it have to be them born into royalty? I know I have royal blood ntwana, I dream of being a king every night. Maybe Barbra had triplets and gave her third son to ousie Ntsoaki.” Neo broods over the fact, Styles would laugh, but he is used to Neo’s mindless behaviour. The Sotho boy searches for his phone somewhere in his pockets, he scrolls through the screen in search for his mother’s number.

“Who are you calling?” Curiosity visits Styles.

“My mother, she needs to explain where she found me and why I am not with my rightful family, the Okolies.”

Styles is finished, he decides to walk away before losing his mind like his friend.

“Breakfast tomorrow?” Randall invites his brother, Nqaba turns to him from the passenger seat. They are parked at the hospital, Nqaba had to go back for his car.

“9am.” Nqaba replies.

He has plans to go see his beloved at 8am, the thought of it makes his heart flutter. He is oblivious to how Thandiwe will act around him. He gets out of the car, Randall draws down the window.

“Go home and sleep, today has been a long day.” Claiming the big brother title I see.

Nqaba huffs at Randall’s order and heads to his car. The Okolie brother drives off when Nqaba pulls out of the parking lot. Looking out for his brother is

what Randall plans on doing, he wants to make up for lost time.

To be continued...

BURN

81...

18SLN

-The Chapter contains sexual scenes that may be offensive to some readers. If you are uncomfortable with the scenes, you're more than welcome to skip the chapter.

-Please do not report, if this is not to your liking rather ignore and pass.

RANDALL...

Randall couldn't wait to get home to his wife, the

long ride from the hospital was lonely and agonizing. All he could think about was what his brother must be going through separated from the woman he loves...He wouldn't be able to cope without Amara.

Now that he is home, he can't wait to get to Amara and hold her. Forgiving her has been long overdue, it is time he grows up and tackles his issues like an adult.

The house is dark and quiet, everybody has gone to sleep. It's after 12am, he starts with Liyana's room. She is sound asleep, he is extra cautious when he enters R.J's room lest the little man wakes up and starts fusing over him. He takes this time to check on his sister as well, it makes him happy that she is healing.

Quietly, Randall climbs into bed beside his wife, careful not to wake her up and spoons her. He

missed having her in his arms and at this moment Randall realises he has been a jerk.

The feeling of love and safety has him clingy, it is an overwhelming feeling knowing that the woman he loves, loves him back. He loves the way she smells and the feeling of her warm body in his arms has him drifting off to sleep...

Stirring in bed is what humans do, especially when sleeping comfortably. Like Randall right now, though he can't move effortlessly. He exerts strength to move his hands, it is not happening. His senses wake before him, in a miniscule he flicks his eyes open. The first thing he sees are his hands tied to the headboard with his very own ties.

Randall's brain drowns in confusion as his eyes scan the capacious bedroom. They first land on the clock, it's 6am. As he moves his gaze, it finds his wife. She is standing by the window, hands crossed

in her chest. She has a coat on, Randall frowns. He can't comprehend what is happening and why he is tied to a bed half naked. He doesn't remember going to bed in boxers. How did Amara manage to do all this?

“What's going on?” He sounds calmer than he feels, Randall is good at schooling his emotions.

“What does it look like?”

“Don't play games with me, Amara. Why am I tied up?” Oh! Oh! Someone is grumpy.

“You...have been...a bad...bad boy.” She exclaims doing a little catwalk toward him. Randall is flabbergasted, his timid fragile Amara has transformed into a tigress. How on earth did that happen? His jaw drops as she throws the coat from her body, revealing a nice sexy number, black to be exact since it is his favourite colour.

His frustrations jump out the window at the sight of

her half naked body, has she been working out? It's been days since he has seen her unclothed and he can't believe he has deprived himself of such bliss. His eyes wander, trailing every inch of her. Her cleavage that is screaming for attention. Her little underwear that is barely there, almost revealing her lady parts. Randall gulps, his throat suddenly dry.

"I don't understand," seriously he doesn't. This is not the Amara he knows, this woman is confident and daunting. She looks sexier than he has ever seen, his heart is palpitating at the sight of her physique.

Amara climbs on top of Randall, straddling him. All this while, he has a frown on his face.

"What is it baby? You seem tense." She mocks, leaning in to sniff his neck. He can't deny that he loves those. Amara trails her lips to his, she gives the corner of his lips a slight lick just to taste him. Craving to taste her as well, Randall chases her

mouth, but she moves to his collarbone. Amara cradles his face, their eyes lock.

Unhurriedly she kisses him, Randall tries to gain control by pushing his tongue into her mouth. She rejects him access and pulls away, leaving him frowning. The man is not one to be patient.

Amara licks Randall's lower lip, smirks before kissing him passionately. Her tongue plunges inside his mouth, meeting his. Randall uses this chance again to dominate over her using his tongue.

Amara fights for her spot at the top. She is not willing to give it to him so easily, she moves away and grazes her lips to his neck in search of a sensitive spot. Just above his collarbone, Amara takes a slow gentle bite that forces an erotic sound from Randall. She knows she has found it and starts sucking and biting on that one spot. Her hips grind against his erection, sending him high on ecstasy, pure torture is what he dubs it.

“Amara.” His voice a winded whisper, he knows

what she is up to. How will he explain a hickey to his friends? Neo will surely have a field day and it is too hot to be locked in a turtle neck. “Don’t do that, please.” He loves the feeling, but not the after math.

“Where did you learn that Amara?” Concern or rather jealousy takes over him.

Amara grazes her teeth on his neck and licks the swollen spot where she left a hickey, the sensation jolts to Randall’s d**k. “Fuck! Don’t do that.” He curses, afraid he might explode from the euphoria.

“I am not a child anymore Randall.” Her voice is sensual, arousing to the ear.

“Okay, that’s nice.” His voice now husky.

Randall wants to be in control...he has to be, that’s his position in her life. “Untie me now.”

The command is heard, but not accepted, Amara smirks at his words. She nibbles on his earlobe, licking him. Her tongue slowly plunges into his ear

causing Randall to squirm and shiver under her. His d**k finds happiness in it, it hardens just the way she wants it. Randall grits his teeth as he feels himself about to lose control, it would be embarrassing if he climaxes just from this.

“You better know what you’re doing Amara because when you untie me from this, I won’t spare you.” Amara gathers what he means from that, his words have her aroused, the thought of Randall dominating her whole body.

Amara jumps off of him to retrieve a tie on the drawer, Randall can only watch and wonder what his wife is up to.

“What is that for?” He asks, confused.

“Relax, I’ve got you, baby.” She replies, slowly bringing the tie to blindfold him. Panic takes over Randall, she can’t do that to him.

“No Amara, you already took away my hands, don’t take my sight from me.”

She giggles, it sounds sexy and does something to his manhood. Randall frowns. Where the hell did she learn to giggle like that? Has she been watching porn? The thought of her seeing other men naked angers him.

“I told you to relax,” Randall has no choice, but to do so, Amara blindfolds him against his will.

“Fuck! I can’t see a damn thing Amara. I need to see you.” She loves seeing him so powerless and under her control. Amara straddles her man, she feels his hardness and this has her grinding on him, the friction drives Randall to the edge. He wants to grab her hips and stop her, but he doesn’t have hands.

“Stop doing that.” He snaps, only to have her laugh at him.

“What is it my king? Are you wet?” That’s ridiculous and she should know it. Her words are just not helping him at all.

“Is this a punishment Amara? Is this because I am upset with you.” Damn right it is... You bloody left

home and stayed away for four days. Amara refuses him an answer, instead kisses him down to his chest.

On her way there, her hand glides to his nipple, she fondles it. His heart beats faster when she takes his nipple into her mouth, not this...it will make him weak. Her teeth graze around the nipple, throwing her husband into the world of euphoria.

“Shit! Shit! Okay, I’m sorry, I’m...I’m sorry Amara.” No use in apologising Randall, there is no turning back now.

Amara repeats the process, biting, licking and blowing air on his nipples, her warm breath on his skin sending goose bumps everywhere. She circles her tongue on his teats while her hand glides down to his boxers. Randall’s breathing becomes lengthy, he is able to curb it along with his body that wants to betray him by tossing and turning off the bed.

Amara has a crazy surprise for him, she has no idea where the confidence stems from, however this is

her husband and they have explored so much together. Right there in the bedroom, although Randall has been holding back, afraid he might hurt his fragile Amara. A whole sex-god had to limit himself for the sake of love. Amara lowers down his boxers and his erection springs up as if it were waiting for her. Feeling himself completely naked heightens his sanities, it is bad enough that he can't see her nor touch her. He would be on his way to heaven.

The king anticipates his wife's mouth on his length, but the queen lets her tongue play around his bellybutton. She seems to like licking him today, her tongue draws slow circles around his navel. She licks her way down to his boxers, feeling where she is treading, Randall clamps his teeth. Euphoria taking control of every fibre of his being.

Randall arches his hips when Amara grabs a hold of his erection, as if holding a torch. He is as hard

as a rock, she swipes her thumb on the tip and the feeling has him tossing and turning on the bed.

“Amara stop teasing me.” Randall grunts, his phallus desperate to be pleased. She licks the tip of it like it is something edible. Ookay! It is not as bad as she thought.

“Mmmhhh.” The first moan is heard and it is coming from the giant man lying face up on the bed blindfolded. Amara takes another lick...one lick...two licks...three licks..she sucks the top as if it is a lollipop.

“Oh fuck...fuck!!!” Randall curses once more.

Amara gulps courage down her throat before grabbing a block of ice from a glass on the nightstand. She puts it in her mouth and braces herself before swallowing Randall into her mouth. He jolts at the cold sensation on his sensitive male member that he almost throws Amara off the bed. She holds on to his thighs, pressing them down.

“What the hell Amara?” He is frustrated, sexually, hence the cursing. This is her first time doing this, he can’t but wonder if she will be able to take it.

“Stop torturing me, I need you to move.” Patience is virtue oh dear king.

The ice is still in her mouth, beginning to melt due to the warmth of her mouth. She closes her eyes and swirls her tongue round and round along his tip, Randall can barely contain himself. He feels the back of her throat and tries to drawback afraid it might be too much for her.

Amara pushes his hips down, holding them in place and strokes him with her mouth. She is sucking, twirling her tongue as if she has done this before, her head bobbling on top of him.

“Amara...oh god.” Oh how she loves hearing him desperately call her name, it could only mean she is doing things right. Randall is trying to loosen himself from the bind, desperation has visited him. He yearns to touch his wife.

In the darkness, Randall can only try to imagine how hot his wife looks while pleasuring him.

“Dammit, I wish I can see you right now Amara.” His voice sounds huskier than usual, the sound arouses Amara. Her clit throbs with need, but she doesn’t want to take away this moment from Randall. For days she has been memorising and trying out positions, the plan was to take him out and bring him home to a romantic setting then take it from there.

Amara squeezes Randall’s balls, a soft but gentle touch while devouring his erection. Salivates of ice water in Amara's mouth drip down Randall's balls to his hole, he finds the feeling a bit uncomfortable. However the pleasure given to him by Amara surpasses the unease.

“Faster me hemma...” (My queen.)

Randall grunts, losing control and about to explode. Amara ups her pace, moaning with all of him in her

mouth. She swirls her hips, grinding them left..right..up..down. She is nearing her own climax without being touched, there is an itch to touch herself, but that would distract her from the task at hand.

“I’m going to cum me hemma.” (My queen.)

Yeah. Yeah. We notice how you have transitioned from Amara to me hemma...

“Move...Amara let go...” Randall growls euphorically as his member pulses, depicting a load that needs to be released. Amara could let go, but she was told that letting him shoot inside her mouth is an added bonus.

“No matter what you do, do not vomit. It offends those creatures.” The words of Ayize ring in her head.

“Fuck...Oh fuck...” The king has been lowered to a weakling, he is heaving and grunting and cursing

under his breath. He needs to release, but his wife won't let go. She continues to move faster, her head bobbing vigorously. Randall's hands fists the tie noose binding him. His head falls back on the pillow, he clenches his eyes and with a loud groan shoots his load into Amara's mouth. Amara quickly liberates Randall's cock and clamps her teeth to stop herself from throwing up. The feeling is there... last night's dinner and his cream wants to gush out of her, but she holds it in. She will have to brave it up... Randall immediately brings himself back, Amara is on his mind. He needs to see her and know if she is okay.

“Me hemma.” (My queen.)

He calls chasing his breath. “Are you okay? Let me loose Amara.” Amara hovers up his body until she is looking at his face. She starts with the blindfold and meets a worried expression in his eyes, she gives him a genuine smile. She is okay, she would say if she were not.

“Are you alright?” Randall panics.

He has not recovered from the sexual abuse Amara went through as a baby. Amara kisses him to answer his question, her hands roaming all over his body. He tilts his head to the side, breaking free from the kiss. His eyes glisten with love and adoration.

“I’m okay, I promise.” She whispers kissing the tip of his nose.

“Okay, untie me. I feel like a pig ready to be roasted.” He says, Amara laughs and unfastens his hands.

“Come here.” He cups her cheeks and kisses her passionately so. “Thank you, that was amazing.” A smile creeps upon her face, she is proud of herself, it feels like an accomplishment. “Where is your phone?”

“Why?” She queries..he better not start.

“I want to delete the porn you’ve been watching.”

Typical Randall, Amara rolls her eyes.

“Pointless, I’ll download more.”

“You can’t watch that Amara.” He grumbles, his hands lovingly moving up and down her back.

“I’m not a child Randall.” She reminds him again, he is too possessive and it gets to her sometimes.

“You’re my wife.” He prompts and flips them over so he is topping her. Amara gasps at the sudden move, Randall’s arms are still around her, holding her.

“You’re mine Amara, I’m the only man you’re supposed to see naked.” He dips his head to bite her neck, Amara whimpers at the feeling. “The only man who should arouse all your sexual senses. Only I have the right to do that.”

Randall strips her bra off and like a beast trails wet kisses down to her belly, causing her to scream erotically at the roughness. Randall presses his face on her lady parts, to kiss her. She snakes on the bed, yearning for him.

“You’re not even allowed to touch yourself, unless I permit you to.” As if a sex god like him would ever give her the chance, every vent of her body aches for him when his teeth grip her underwear to pull them down.

His eyes not moving from hers, Amara’s breath is ragged. She’s squirms on the bed, her legs unable to remain still.

Randall snatches Amara’s legs and pulls her toward the edge of the bed. He floats over her naked form and as he meets her face once again, he claims her lips. There is no gentleness in the kiss, he plunges his tongue into her mouth as he enters her without warning.

Amara releases a muffled scream, Randall deepens the kiss at the sound of her scream. His thrusts are not gentle, he is a man on a mission to drive her to the edge and is succeeding in doing so. His hands have claimed every inch of her body, while hers play with his head, his back and making circles on the bed sheets.

Randall's mouth leaves Amara's lips to suck her neck, nipples and back to her neck. There are bites here and there of which Amara yelps at the feel of them. It is a pleasurable pain that has her moaning, he is giving her all of him.

Amara doesn't know what to do with herself, she throws her head back...her hips are relentless, she bucks them up to get more of him.

Kneeling on the bed, Randall puts Amara's legs on his shoulders. Grips her sides, his large hands almost covering her stomach. They press her down on the mattress and he slams in and out of her lady part...once...twice...then continues with his deep thrusts. They are fast, hitting her pleasurable spots.

"Ra...ndall...I can't...breathe." She wants to tell him to stop, yet she really doesn't want him to stop. Randall slams harder, fucking her to oblivion.

Amara screams in orgasmic fury as Randall roughly thrusts in and out of her without any mercy. Tears

burn her eyes, she stifles a sob and to hell with it... the intense sexual pleasure has her crying. Her hands flail with nowhere to land, they find his chest...his head...his back..his ass. She is turned on beyond anything how he knows what he's doing, he doesn't have to think or falter, but does it effortlessly.

“Ran..nd..all...” Her voice skips syllables, every part of her body trembles, including parts she never knew could.

“You look so good like this Amara, won't you let me keep this image a while longer?” He is talking too much, that's what Amara seems to think. Her mind is lost somewhere in the world of euphoria, her body is not hers anymore. Her heartrate increases, her breathing as well...

There is familiar feeling exotic feeling, it starts off in the exterior of her body...the tips of her fingers... inside of her knees..tips of her toes...and lastly the top of her head. These body parts begin to vibrate and hum with electricity. As the sensation envelops her core and pulses through her stomach, chest and

thighs, she feels as though there is a thousand effervescent bubbles slowly gliding across her skin.

Amara feels like she is having an outer body experience, a sensation of flight. Eyes closed, head fallen back and panting crazily her body gives in. Her hands tumble to the mattress, deeming her weak, her limbs have lost their strength. You'd think she has passed out from an orgasm.

Randall's thrusts come to a hiatus as he notes that she has left him, he waits for her to soar into nothingness.

He didn't think it would take this long for her to come back. He nibbles her lower lip before kissing her.

“Don't keep me waiting me hemma.” (My queen.)

The whisper takes place on her swollen lips, he sucks them again and this time Amara gradually falls back to reality. Her vision is blurry, her body

buzzing and trembling and head spinning as if she ran a marathon around the globe. Panting, she looks at Randall with drunk eyes, he smiles down at her.

“Took you forever to come back,” the effort is to kiss her back to her senses, she forces a weak smile.

“What did you do to me?” Her voice still has to find its way back, Randall caresses her face.

“I threw you up.” He murmurs, loving the thought of her flying. The undertone has her whimpering and shuddering under him.

“Now shall we continue?” He means it, Amara can’t go for another round.

“Can we take a break? I feel numb.” She is pleading for probably an hour to rest.

“Do you really think I will let you go after what you did to me?” Should’ve seen this one coming, he was bound to avenge himself for being tied down like that. Randall is still inside Amara, he begins with slow thrusts, having mercy on the poor woman by

making slow love to her. Amara is enthralled again, ready to fly higher this time.

To be continued...

BURN

82...

NQABA...

Last night I went home to shame, sadness and anger. Shame that I failed her, sadness for the loneliness in my heart and anger that I couldn't help her fight her demons.

Spending the night without Thandiwe was hard, being separated from her years ago broke me. It is nothing compared to now, I find it hard to breathe. I have pent up feelings I need to release, my chest is constricting and heavy. There is no one I can turn to for assistance, people have lost their lives because of us. I cannot risk that anymore.

I fail to understand how Thandiwe became worse instead of healing after I was told that only I can keep her safe from the demon. Our love was meant to conquer the witch doctor. Is it losing its power? So many questions haunt my mind, they suffocate me.

Doctor Haco approaches with her hand extended, I reach out to shake it.

“I am sorry for keeping you waiting Mr. Biyase.” She rams her hands in the pockets of the white coat, hanging loosely on her small structure.

“What is going on doctor? I was told I can’t see Thandiwe.” A nurse stopped me from going into her room, said something about Thandiwe not wanting to see me. That is ridiculous, I refuse to believe the woman who was screaming for me just yesterday has suddenly changed her mind.

“That is true sir, these are some of the signs of mental illness. Extreme mood changes and withdrawal from friends and family.” What is this woman talking about? I know Thandiwe is not crazy, I brought her here to keep our son safe, to keep her safe. “It’s normal for her to feel neglected and perhaps this is her way of dealing...”

The rest of her words become a blur, I want to see my Thandiwe. I am not interesting in learning about mental illness, my heavy heart needs to catch a glimpse of Thandiwe.

“I appreciate the lesson doctor, however I do not have time. Excuse me.” I don’t give her a chance to respond, no one will stop me from seeing the woman I love. I curtail my anger when I get to the door and open it to take a peek, my heart jolts seeing her seated on a rocking chair facing the window.

Regret swamps my entire being.

“Tshabalala.” She flinches, I wait for her to turn around. Okay, okay. She is still upset, that’s okay. I can make it up to her. I let myself in, her scent has filled the room and that scares me to death. The thought of her being locked up here for a long time.

“Won’t you look at me?” Silence...

I need her to speak, hearing her voice will probably make me forget that I’m an asshole.

“What are you doing here?” Her voice is cold...dead.

“I promised to come see you.” God, turn around so I can take a look at you Tshabalala.

“I won’t leave your sight again, I promise.” Thandiwe articulates words that sound familiar. “The night of your birthday party, you made me this promise.”

“Tan-tan...”

“It’s okay,” she interjects. “You don’t have to keep your promises.” What does she mean I don’t have to keep the promise? I need to keep it, for my own

sanity. Listen to you, Nqaba, sounding like a selfish bastard.

“I don’t understand.” I’m an idiot.

Why hasn’t she turned around yet? I know this heartbreak, I felt it years ago. Will I survive it this time?

“I need to be independent Nqabayomzi,”
Nqabayomzi? Nqabayomzi? Since when am I... “I will be fine here, I promise. You go and take care of our son, he needs you more than I do.”

This sounds final and it hurts.

“What is going on Thandiwe? Tell me you’re okay.” I hear her sigh.

“I am, I will focus on getting better. You focus on our son.”

“Are we okay?” Please say we’re okay. I wait for her to make a move, tilt her head..raise a hand..rock that chair she is sitting on. Move for me Tan-tan,

please.

The silence is getting to me, it's too much for me to handle. I don't want to panic lest I scare her. I opt to move closer, a touch from me should have her turning around.

“Look at me Tshabalala,” her hands link with her ears. Loud screams gush out of her mouth before she starts chanting a familiar bible scripture.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”

“Thandiwe.” Panic cradles me, I try to hold her and she jumps from the chair. Her eyes are wide with fear, they look at me as if I'm a stranger. Like they have never looked into mine. I want to console her, but Dr. Haco and two male nurses rush in.

I don't want to see what happened last time, I can't see her hurting like that again.

The coward in me forces me out of the room, I

stand by the door facing the lobby. I can hear Thandiwe from here, she recites the verse with fear. I want to clog my own ears as I can't stand to hear her being tormented. It doesn't take long for her to quiet down. Dr. Haco saunters out, looking hopeless and irritated.

"I told you not to go in there Mr. Biyase. The patient will not make any progress if you continue to upset her." This doctor is annoying me.

"Do you expect me to abandon her?"

"Absolutely not, but we have to put her first. What we want is for Thandiwe to heal and go back home, come back in a few days. Perhaps her anger would have subsided."

How can Thandiwe not want to see me? I know I hurt her, how can I go on without seeing her?

"I'll be here tomorrow, 8am sharp." I will not neglect

you Thandiwe...

BULELWA...

Lindiwe went into labour last night right after Betty made her presence known, she gave birth to a baby boy. The lanky Lonwabo looks the happiest, I still don't like him. His mother is here as well, I don't know why he brought her, the woman looks sour than a lemon.

She better not be those wicked mother in-laws, I will pave the shortest way back to Eastern Cape and shove them in it. We are cramped up in Lindiwe's delivery room, Thobekile is the one with the baby in her arms. Lonwabo is seated on the bed next to Lindiwe, the little shit better not forget he has to marry my sister.

“Have you chosen a name yet?” That's Lilian, I did not plan on seeing her soon. Life is a bitch, that's

why I drink wine and I need a glass right now.

Lindiwe and the giraffe lovingly glance at each other with corny smiles on their faces. Don't throw up Bubu...I smell love in the air and it's nauseating. I hate my life.

I'm creeped out as their eyes turn to me, I shrug motioning a high case of confusion.

"We were thinking that you could name him."

Lindiwe states...

Is she cross eyed or is she really looking at me? I turn to see if there is anyone behind me. Okay...she wants me to do the honours.

"Are you sure?" This makes me feel special, however, I don't want to be crucified when I give the child a heavy name from the ancestral world.

"Yes, you are my little brother. My first love, my number one. You are the bravest person I know Bubu, you have been through so much, yet you're standing here strong and ready for the next battle. I

want my son to be like you, you are my Hercules and I want him to be a Hercules to his siblings.” Lindiwe is going to make me cry... Breathe Bubu, it is not that deep.

“Thank you Twiggy, I don’t know what to say really.”

“Just give us a name.” Lilian chirps in... Who said she can laugh with me? Nonsense.

“Bhekisizwe.” I say without a second thought to it, big eyes pin me on the spot. What did I say? Oh God! Did I say a different name? My mind is not with me lately.

“Bhekisizwe?” Lindiwe confirms, I nod, relieved that I did not curse at the baby.

“I thought Zizwe and I were going to get married and maybe adopt one day, but life does not love me. Bhekisizwe was his twin brother, unfortunately he didn’t belong with them. I have seen the love and pain in Zizwe's eyes when he talks about him and

that's when I decided that I will name our child Bhekisizwe so he can have half of his heart back." I explain my insanity behind the name I have chosen, the name of the one who has half of Zizwe's heart.

I did not intend to cry, so I drop my head to stop the tears from embarrassing me.

"Wow that is beautiful, I love it." Lindiwe says, faces in the room gleam including Lonwabo's. I nod proudly.

"You do?"

"Yes and I want you and Zizwe to be Bhekisizwe's god parents."

Is this woman trying to give me a heart attack?

"Zizwe and I broke up Twiggy, it's not going to work." I don't see it, I just don't.

"You will make it work." Thobekile twitters. "You have no choice now, look at Sizwe's angelic face."

“Excuse me.” Lilian flies out the room, I almost forgot that she is here. Does she have feelings for Zizwe? Stop it Bubu, don’t entertain such malicious thoughts. You will only give yourself heartache.

“It is settled then, Bhekisiswe Banele Mtlontlo.” Lonwabo concludes, I am shocked by his change of heart towards me and my preference. What was the drama for in the first place? Xhosas!!!

BHEKIZIZWE...

I feel like a dipshit for attacking my brother, he might be an ass, but he is the closest thing I have. If only he didn’t say those things to me, I wouldn’t have raised a hand on him. No words have been said between us, I see guilt in his eyes each time he looks at me. He wants to apologise, but he is a prideful man so I don’t see it happening.

I can’t tolerate any insults against Bulelwa, he

doesn't deserve to be degraded like that because of his preference. Lord knows I love that man and I love him more now after what I have heard.

Following or stalking Bulelwa rather was not in my bucket list, I couldn't help it. I needed to know how he is doing, if he is coping and my curiosity grew each time I saw him. I would prowl around his premises before going to work, just to catch a glimpse of him in the morning.

After work, my path included going to his place or following him around.

Here I am at the hospital, his sister just gave birth. I overheard their conversation, I didn't think Bulelwa was listening when I would talk about my brother who died. Naming his sister's child Bhekisizwe is the greatest gift he could ever give me. I need to make amends with him, we have been at dagger's drawn for far too long.

NQABA...

I had to cancel breakfast with Randall yesterday, Zulu needed my attention. He is back home with me, we are preparing to go to the Okolies. Thandiwe refused to see me today as well, I didn't force myself in this time, but watched her from a distance. A glimpse of her was enough for me, I intend to go back every day.

Now I am left with a task of telling my baby that he won't see his mother for a while, hopefully until I find a solution to the problem at hand. Or God finally intervenes. I join Zulu in the living room, he has a bandage on his forehead. He is a strong little boy.

"What are you watching?" I ask, perching myself beside him in the corner couch.

"Dragon ball Z." He retorts without looking at me, he won't give me attention with this thing on. I reach for the remote on the coffee table and switch it off.

His inquisitive eyes immediately meet mine.

“Peanut!” I start, hoping he won’t be hurt by the news. “Mama has to go away for a while.” There is no other way to say this, getting to the point is the only way I know.

“Where? Can I go with her?”

“Uh... What about me? Who will keep me company if you both leave me?” He shrugs at my question.

“You can come too, we’ll all be together.” That is a beautiful picture son, our time will come one day.

“That’s the thing Peanut, mama has to go alone. We won’t be allowed in, but she will be in good hands. There are doctors who will take care of her until she gets better.” His eyes twitch with pain, he is not a crier thank God.

“Is mama really sick? Is that why she hit me?” Zulu questions, I try to decipher his emotions, but kids are so pure. I can’t see a single dose of resentment for his mother.

“You know she loves you, right?”

“Yes uncle...” His eyes extensively move from left to right, then a wide smile flashes and lights up the room. “I mean...yes Dad.”

“Good, here’s what we’re going to do. We will write her letters every day without fail, hearing from you will make her happy.” Thandiwe will love those, they will make her feel closer to her son.

“Can I draw pictures as well?”

“Yes, you may do that.”

He’s suddenly sad, how fast he transitioned from a happy kid.

“What is it?”

“Will mama come to my wedding?”

“Wedding?”

“Yes, I’m going to ask Liya to marry me. Look what I got.” Zulu plunges a hand in the pocket of his shorts and reveals a purple plastic ring.

“I got this from a lucky packet at school, Liya’s favourite colour is purple. She won’t say no to me when she sees this baby.” He grins mischievously at the ring and kisses it. Where is my baby?

“About that...there is something you have to know.” How will I break his heart with those bambi eyes staring at me and that innocent smile? “Liyana’s father is my brother, so that makes Liyana your cousin.”

He keeps the smile, I don’t think he understands me.

“So...you can give us your blessings?” His miniature brain hasn’t grasped anything yet.

“No, Liyana is your cousin.” Zulu frowns.

“First cousin?” There we go.

“Yes Peanut,” Zulu scratches his head, pondering upon the news.

“Dad, I will go down in history as the first man to marry their first cousin.” Did he say man? His eyes light up and I am confused. “Aweeesome!!!”

“Who are you? Why do you speak like an adult?” I ask, drowning in confusion.

“Come on dad and don’t say that in front of uncle Randall. He might give Liyana away to someone else, I’m too young to die of a broken heart.” I am defeated by this little boy.

“You are giving me grey hairs already Peanut.” I tell him and the little brat throws his head back and laughs, it’s adorable. I am in love with this child, my baby. I reach out a hand to gently rub his head.

“I’ll allow that dad, but don’t do it when Liya or uncle Randall are around. I have worked so hard to get him to like me.” Zulu says and I give up.

“Let’s go get some ice cream before we go meet your uncle Randall.” I whisk him up and he laughs,

bashfully.

“Daaaadd.” He whines.

“What is it?”

“You can’t do that, I’m not a baby. Put me down.” In his dreams.

“You’re my baby, I don’t care how old you get.” I tell him, walking out the house with him in my arms. Funny enough he is not fidgeting.

“My life is over, I will never get married.” Zulu grumbles.

This time I’m the one to laugh, who knew that Zulu would be my cure, the pill I needed? His arms loop around my neck, he buries his head on my shoulder. “I love you dad.”

My heart leaps, tears flood my eyes. This is pure genuine love, I hold him tighter and kiss his head.

“I love you too Peanut.”

I pull up the moment we are settled in the car.

“Can we bring Liya ice cream too?” The boy says.

I will never hear the end of this.

“And R.J , he’s a little messy so we’ll get him an ice pop. Chioma loves sweet things too, she says even though she loses all her teeth she will never stop eating sweets.” He giggles and continues to tell me stories, all I do is listen and bask in his ambiance.

To be continued...

BURN

83...

RANDALL...

The king of the Ashanti kingdom had to give in to his brother’s demands to see their mother and aunt, the man formerly known as Duma Biyase’s son would not stop nagging his twin brother.

Day and night Nqaba would bug Randall with

questions about Barbra and Sandra's wellbeing. The two women have been locked up for ten days without food or water. Does it matter to Randall that his twin thinks he will let the women die? Don't we know the answer to that? There is a beast living in that man and it is not kind to his enemies.

"We're here." Randall announces as he parks the car in front of a tall building in the outskirts of Johannesburg. They step out of the vehicle at the same time.

"Why here?" Nqaba queries, letting his eyes scan the lavish glass to glass building. Biyase is left wondering why his brother has brought him to an over-the-top hotel.

"Why not here?" That was expected and damn it still stings, you sure wear arrogance well Mr. Okolie.

Randall answering a question with a question is not a banger, Nqaba has officially found his brother rude as fuck. It is something he has always known,

but Randall seems to be worse as Nqaba spends time with him.

Nqaba has no choice but to follow suit. The hotel building has inhabitants, it is a busy place with people coming and going. Nqaba bumps into a few as he tries to keep up with his brother. The lobby has a clean efficiency, yet welcoming all the same. It is illuminated with a soft and hospitable light.

“Whose place is this?” Zulu definitely lives in Nqaba, the man has the curiosity of a child. They get to an elevator, Randall calls it by pressing the big green button. In seconds the elevator whistles, like he has been doing, Nqaba follows his brother inside the sparkly clean elevator. Randall is yet to give an answer for the question that was asked seconds ago.

“Kwame Heights, I wanted to invest in R.J ’s future. This was a good way to start, every profit from this place goes to his trust fund.”

“I see, so you thought it best to give our mothers a luxurious life while holding them hostage?” So no one is willing to shut this man up?

In a way, Nqaba is grateful that his mother is not going through pain. Randall however denies him an answer, they reach the basement floor. He hands Nqaba a face mask and ambles out. Look at that bastard leaving his brother behind without feeding his curiosity.

Nqaba is tired of being kept in the dark. The basement is just as clean as the rest of Kwame Heights, nothing is stored in it. The floor is cemented, the walls painted white and lights work perfectly fine. However it is as cold as a winter's night, the Ac must be on; Nqaba thinks as he rubs his hands together to create friction so to warm them up.

“You should have told me to bring a jersey.” We will let Nqaba complain, he was never given a chance

as a child. Ntuthuko's spoiled private-school-ass had all the attention.

Nqaba tries to keep up with Randall's big steps, as he gets closer a strong smell harasses his nose. His brain relays a message that something must be rotten, Nqaba is quick to put the face mask on, Randall is already set. He stops in front of two big cages where Barbra and Sandra lay weak, dehydrated and dirtier than a snorty brat who was out playing all day on a dusty street.

"What is tha..." Nqaba's words are cut short when his eyes fall on his mother laying almost unconscious on a single mattress. The smell of urine and faeces is so strong that it penetrates through the masks. The skin of the twins' mother seems to be peeling off, it is decaying and smells as bad as a rat that died under a hoarder's bed. Barbra has not found a cure for her condition. Time is not on her side, death is at the door ready to ship her to

hades.

“Mother!” Nqaba’s heart pains, seeing his mother in a terrible state. “What happened to you?”

Oh how the witch has descended from her throne. Barbra is able to turn her weak eyes to her sons, shame kisses her. If there is a way to hide, she would be hiding now. She is ashamed that they have to see her like that. Nqaba’s gaze turns to a passed out Sandra in the cage next door, he can’t help, but wonder how his brother could do something so vicious to these women.

“What’s going on?” Everybody take a sit, Biyase is not done asking questions. However his enquiries are directed to an unbothered Randall.

“You said you wanted to see them, here they are.” Nonchalantly, Randall rejoinders. Nothing in him is touched nor moved by his mothers’ sufferings.

“What have you done Randall? How can you be so evil?” Oh Nqaba, you should know by now how cold hearted your twin is.

“Are you done? I need to get home.” Randall folds his arms across his chest, leans his shoulder on the bars while maintaining his deadpan expression.

“Let them out now!” Nqaba orders, ready to fight for his mother. She needs medical treatment. Can’t Randall see that?

“Relax Mzi, today is their last night. If they survive the night, maybe I will take them to the hospital. Or I could dump them under a bridge and leave them to die. If they are lucky, someone will find them.”

Randall seems to find delight in his deeds, his eyes are on his brother, trying to decipher his emotions.

“Close your mouth,” Randall demands, predicting an ajar mouth under his brother’s mask. Nqaba grimaces at Randall’s sixth sense and shuts his mouth.

“You can’t kill Vero’s mother Randall, you can’t kill

our mother and aunt. They are not animals you dispose of, they are human.” Yes, yes... Poor Mzi is doubting Thomas, he wants to see Barbra flying with a broom before believing that she really is a witch. Nqaba is angered by Randall’s coldness. How was Amara not able to curb this man of hers?

“Who said anything about murder?” How can someone sound so demanding and arrogant yet his face looks as cool as a cucumber.

“Randall, I am not playing with you. Give me the keys now.” Randall sees the hurt in his brother’s eyes, something he has come to hate. Nqaba must have a hold on him because Randall gives in, he rams a hand in the pocket of his fitting black jeans. Pulls the key out and hands it to Nqaba.

“Fine, have it your way Nonso.” Randall reveals his Brother’s second name told to him by Barbra when she explained how they came into existence.

While on vacation in South Africa with her husband Segun, Sandra and her sister put their plan into motion. They drugged Segun, got Barbra to sleep with him, luckily the witch fell pregnant. Sandra had to fake a pregnancy for nine months, her husband wasn't really hands on with the "pregnancy" and that worked in Sandra's favour.

Two months before the twins were born, Barbra travelled to Ghana courtesy of her sister. All this while Duma thought his wife was in the village while he toiled under the Jo'burg sun just to make ends-meet.

Barbra named the twins Thamsanqa Uze and Nqabayomzi Nonso... The native names had to be given to the children so no calamity befalls them as the Okolies had to recognise them. The babies were then separated, Sandra did away with the name Thamsanqa and named her nephew Randall Uze Okolie.

"What the hell?" Yep Biyase, let the name sink in...

Nqaba is shocked by the foreign name. Who is Nonso? He sure as hell knows it's not him. Randall leaves his brother behind with questions he is not willing to answer. He is done arguing with him.

IFEANYI...

Ntsika asked to meet up, I agreed for the reason I want to tell him face to face that I need space from him. He has been there for me, we became close in a very short space of time. When all men seemed like monsters, he came and changed my perspective. I will forever be grateful to him, for his efforts to teach me to smile again.

I chose Cresta Mall, my brother seldom comes here. I am still disconcerted by crowds, small movements or someone walking behind me. I have to watch my back everywhere I go and I have cut my circle of friends short.

I selected a table at a far end corner, away from people. My eyes wander all over the restaurant in search of Ntsika, they find him right at the door. He just got here, a waiter approaches him and says something to him. I want to stand and wave, he sees me first, dismisses the waiter and makes his way to me.

We don't do hugs, he knows it.

"Sorry I'm late." He kept me waiting alright.

"That's alright." He looks at my drink, dry lemon is what I'm having. A taste of alcohol will have me craving for a bottle, it is best I avoid it. Ntsika asks what I'm having, I tell him. He orders the same from the waiter, Ntsika looks edgy, tensed. I would think he knows what I'm about to tell him, I couldn't bring myself to answer his calls after the day of the party. This is our first meeting since then.

"Are you okay?" I ask, a bit worried. The man looks like he is about to pass out, he sighs anxiously and

gives me a nod. I don't know what to make of it. This tough man who always wore power and confidence like a tailored suit is trembling like a silky gown on a washing line.

The waitress doesn't waste time with his drink, Ntsika gulps it down in one go and orders something stronger. Now I'm worried.

"How have you been?" He queries unbuttoning his black button down golf shirt, showing a little bit of his chest. This man is sweating profusely.

"Good, I'm glad you called." Am I ready to break his heart? I know Ntsika is looking for a relationship, it is something I cannot give him right now. Maybe in the far future, I don't know.

"There is something I want to tell you." We both sing in unison, I move my eyes from his intense gaze.

"Go ahead nkosazane." (Lady.)

“I want us to take a break from each other.” Hurt flashes in his eyes, he wipes it away with in a blink of an eye. “I’m grateful to you for being a good friend, you came when I was ready to give up on life and helped me stand. You became my confidante and I will never forget that.”

“Are you leaving?” He questions.

“No, I just need space that’s all. Ntsika I know that you have feelings for me, I have seen how you look at me. The love in your eyes does not shy away when our eyes meet.” Ntsika drops his head and rubs his nape.

“That obvious, huh?” He chortles.

“Yeah and I am not rejecting you, maybe we will meet again one day. Right now I can’t give you what you want, I haven’t crossed that bridge yet Ntsika. I have bruises all over my soul, my mind is muddled and my life is a mess. You’re a great man, you deserve someone who will give you the love you want. I am not that person.” I feel like hell for breaking him apart. He’s trying to hide the

disappointment, but I see it.

“I understand Ife, I will back away and give you the space you need. I want you to know I will always be there for you. You can call me anytime and I will drop it all to get to you.” He articulates, my heart should skip a beat. Nevertheless, it hasn’t reached that stage yet. The only thing I can contribute is a smile of gratitude.

“What did you want to tell me?” My question brings a smile upon his face.

“You have said it all Ife, let me not ruin this.” Now I am certain that he wanted to confess his feelings for me, he looks calmer now; like the old Ntsika I know. We decide to order and stay a bit to converse, it is needed considering it is the last time we are seeing each other.

NQABA...

Spending time with Randall has become my escape from reality, there is a way he calms me without knowing. He is where I run and hide when life seems to throttle me, I find myself in his presence every day after visiting Thandiwe so I can have that taste of being wanted and loved. Thandiwe is so far from me, yet so close. My heart is not strong enough to endure her silence.

My brother hasn't been to the hospital to see Barbra and Sandra. He was not happy about my decision of taking them to the hospital. Barbra's case is bad, she is not making progress, her sister just needs better care.

Today on my way from the mental hospital, I received a call from my father's doctor. Duma is brain dead, his brain has stopped relaying messages to his body. He will never be able to do anything by himself. The strong man I knew is gone,

all that is left of him is a body incapable of moving.

“Mzi?” Randall salutes when I walk into his lounge, Styles and Neo are present, settled on the same couch. Randall is seated on a single sofa, one leg crossed over the other. His right elbow relaxing on the couch’s armrest, a forefinger and index finger pressed on his cheek.

The man exudes power and authority without doing anything, he owns the room the moment he enters, even before he says something. Even if nobody knows him, the room goes quiet. Everyone immediately senses his presence, he is the type of man I aspire to be.

“My father is brain dead.” I pronounce, positioning myself on the couch.

“You mean he’s a cabbage?” Neo spills without thinking, he realises his mistake and gives an apologetic glance.

“How am I going to cope? Ntuthuko is leaving for Germany, Vero is not experienced to take care of him.”

“And your bank account is flooding with Mandela notes.” Neo interposes, frustrated. “I hate it when people throw pity parties, some people are going through real shit out there. Are you aware there’s someone who can’t afford a wheel chair, they have to drag themselves on the ground to go from A to B? There is someone in your father’s condition who can’t afford a private nurse, their child has to drop out of school just to look after them. And you’re here Mzi sulking about how you won’t be able to look after your father, yet you have money that can buy you nurses.”

Shocked by Neo’s speech, I chase Randall with my eyes to find him glaring at Neo. He shakes his head, disapproving of Neo’s statement and heads to the mini bar to pour himself a drink.

“I didn’t mean it like that Neo.” I have to defend myself, I am grateful for what I have.

“Don’t mind Neo, Mzi. He has days when he feels like being a preacher, maybe if he finally builds a church he will cut us some slack.” Styles interpolates, throwing a glare at Neo.

“What?” Neo snaps.

“You insensitive bastard, Mzi is going through enough.” Styles smacks his head.

“Hey, I tell it like it is. People need to start counting their blessings.” Neo.

“Shut the fuck up Neo, what the fuck?” Styles snaps back, clearly annoyed. Neo could roll his eyes judging by the irritation on his face.

“You know you can’t continue with this Biyase name.” Randall drops a bomb, taking his seat back. His way of bringing this gnawing conversation to a stop. “Forget it.” No way am I going to change my surname.

“Tell that to your ancestors, they tend to be very jealous. They are not going to share you with the Biyases.”

“That is absurd Randall, I am not changing my last name.” My brother shrugs, why is he shrugging his shoulders like that? Styles and Neo are ogling at me expectantly, I am oblivious as to what they want from me.

“Randall is right Mzi, Zulu needs to change his as well. You’re an Okolie, you have to recognise your ancestors.” Styles seems to know a lot about being an Okolie..

“Don’t be an idiot Mzi, do you think they will let it go just like that? Worse now that you know who you are, ask Uze about his grandfather. He is the leader of the underground gang, that old geezer will turn on you so fast your whole family will join the ancestral land.” That’s Neo, Randall is suddenly discreet. He started it, why the silence now?

“That’s the thing about being an Okolie, you have to acknowledge your people. You two are twins, you have to be reunited.” Styles exclaims, giving me something to think about.

“What happened to your tongue?” I question an unbothered Randall, his silence is starting to piss me off.

“What? You want me to grovel and kiss your ass?” The pompous bastard arrogantly ripostes, I can’t believe he is my twin brother.

“That is exactly what you should be doing actually, considering that I am older.” I retort to have him laugh at my remark, I don’t appreciate his conceited demeanour. He sits back on the couch, crosses a foot over the other and focuses on the liquor in his hand.

“Funny how I’m bigger and taller, yet you claim the big brother title.”

“You’re not taller than me Thamsanqa.” I knew this name would rile him up, he scowls, shooting me a

glare ordered from the deepest pit of hell.

“Curse that name Nonso.” Randall throws back with an uglier name, curse Barbra for dubbing me Nonso.

“That is low Randall.” I shoot, the fucker is not touched. He smirks and continues to kiss the glass. I hear laughter, I almost forgot these two idiots are here. They are slumped on each other silently laughing, Neo has tears running down his face. Styles should stop, this stupid act does not suit him.

“What is funny?”

“Sorry, Nonso.” Neo laughs the meaningless apology.

“I need a drink.” As I get up, I feel Randall’s gaze on me. His serious expression has me worried.

“You can’t escape from them Mzi, you have to recognise the Okolies or things might go south for you. I will call my granduncle and let him know that you’re ready.” Randall is so used to giving demands, how sure is he that I am ready?

“Am I being forced into this family?” I ask.

Everything is happening so fast, I can't turn my back on Duma. Especially now that he has become a delinquent.

“You were born into this family, if something ever happens to me, you will be next in line to rule the Kingdom. A biyase cannot rule in place of an Okolie, it is not done.”

“Shouldn't my blood be enough?”

“Denying to accept who you are is the same as spitting in the faces of my ancestors, your forefathers Mzi. One more thing, Thandiwe is having your baby, both the kids will have to take your surname and for that to happen, you have to marry her.” Who is he? My father?

“Why do I feel that you want to control my life brother?”

“On the contrary, your ancestors are controlling your life. Mine as well, we don't belong to ourselves brother. Now you're going to do everything I have mentioned, end of discussion.” Randall and his controlling tendencies, I have never met these

Okolies, yet I am expected to change my entire life to please them.

“And stop thinking too much, your head will explode.” Styles sings, he and Neo seem to be enjoying the dispute between Randall and I.

“I wish Barbra was my mother,” Neo declares from nowhere. His interjection is brushed off by everyone.

There is no turning back now, I will need to ponder upon what Randall has said.

To be continued...

BURN

84...

BULELWA...

My heart races faster than its normal beat when I spot Zizwe walking towards me, looking pompous as ever. My head says turn around and walk away, but my heart won't let me. He looks a bit thin, roughed up and has grown a beard. Look at this twenty year old, looking so grown.

“What’s going on?” The question is directed to Thobekile who dragged me to the mall in the pretext of buying baby clothes, the sister hasn't bought a single sock.

“You’re so stubborn that I had to lie to you.” I want to roll my eyes at her stupid answer.

“You didn’t have to lie though, maybe I would have agreed to see him.” That is a big maybe, I’m a shameless prick.

“Really?” She probes, catching me on my lie.

“No Thobe.” When is the next flight to Mozambique? This woman is all up in my business.

“Please hear him out, you two have been apart for

too long. It's enough now Bulelwa, we are tired of this bickering." I'm tired as well, am I ready though to have him back in my life. Will I ever be able to let him touch me without thinking about my mother? Confusion knows how to make itself at home.

Musing upon my sister's words, I spin my head around to find Zizwe staring, I can't look away. His eyes are pleading, Lord give me strength.

BHEKIZIZWE...

Now this is my chance, I have to get him back at any cost. We stand, staring at each other for what seems like forever. My heart jumps vigorously when he turns around to walk away.

"Buttercup!" He stops and swivels, eyeing me like he expected me to stop him.

It's now or never. This is not something I'd do, but I have to take a chance.

<You gotta go and get angry at all of my honesty.>

<You know I try, but I don't do too well with apologies.>

<I hope I don't run out of time, could someone call a referee?>

I see Thobekile subdue a laugh, am I that bad. Serenading Bulelwa was her idea. Bulelwa is as serious as my mother at a church service. I can't stop now, I need to continue. Bulelwa is a music lover, he might find this gesture sweet. I would embarrass myself a million times for him.

<'Cause I just need one more shot at forgiveness.>

<I know you know that I made those mistakes maybe once or twice.>

<By once or twice I mean maybe a couple of hundred times.>

<So let me, oh let me redeem, oh redeem, oh myself tonight.>

<‘Cause I just need one more shot at second chances.>

<Yeah, is it too late now to say sorry?>

<‘Cause I’m missing more than just your body.>

<Oh, is it too late now to say sorry?>

He’s moving closer, this is working. I’m taken aback when he presses a palm on my mouth, bringing my performance to a halt.

“You’ve said enough.”

“Said? I thought I was singing, am I that bad of a singer?” Bulelwa nods unashamedly.

“You’re embarrassing me, don’t ever sing in public. Your singing belongs in the toilet, forget the shower you’ll make the water cold with that voice.” This is the blunt Bulelwa I know and love. I missed this Bulelwa.

“...and here I was thinking I sounded better than Justin Bieber.” He throws his head back, laughing.

“I didn’t know you knew the song.” Bulelwa places his hand on my chest, this gives me assurance that I can touch him as well. My hands snake around his waist as I bring him closer so that we are flush together.

“Someone once told me that google is your best friend.” My explanation, I had to memorize the lyrics in two days.

“Well that someone was right, look at this Zulu man singing a white man’s song.” Bulelwa is trying to be funny, I will never hear the end of this.

“Can you believe my luck, I happen to love that someone and he is mocking my voice.” I express, he laughs disdainfully.

“Can we get past this, you’re becoming too mushy and we’re in public.” Bulelwa folds his arms across his chest, he is still as dramatic as ever. I just have to laugh at his sally. I force my arms around him and pull back into me, Bulelwa stiffens his body.

“Thank you for forgiving me, I love you Buttercup.”

His eyes sheepishly wander everywhere, he's flushed.

“I had to forgive you. You need to shave and cut your hair, Big Zulu is not my type.” Bulelwa mocks, I'm not complaining. I send Thobekile a smile of gratitude, this wouldn't have happened if it were not for her.

“Let's have dinner, I miss watching you chew.” I tell him.

This is surely to annoy him, my plan fails when he laughs at my lame joke. We walk with my arms wrapped around him, that's right I intend to be clingy for as long as we are together.

NQABA...

Three months later...

It is Thandiwe's birthday today and the day I break my fast. I didn't tell anyone that Thadiwe is turning twenty six today, only MamSonto is aware. She told me to fast and pray and that the baby's birth will save Thandiwe's life, erase the death curse. I don't know how accurate that is. I have heard so many theories over the past months. As to how the witch doctor will be defeated is still unknown.

In spite of my father being excessively ill, Ntuthuko could not stay behind. I understand where he is coming from, he lived most of his life under the wing of our mother. Venturing out on his own is good for him, perhaps in the near future we will rebuild our relationship.

Anxious and trembling from fear, I prepare myself to head to the hospital. I believe Thandiwe is still alive, the hospital would have called me if something happened to her. I should call doctor Haco before going there. Speak of the devil, the

doctor is calling.

“Yes.” I hold my breath, not knowing what to expect.

“Thandiwe is in labour, we can’t get her to push. Her condition seems to have worsened, all she does is scream. She is in the theatre room right now and they need you to sign consent forms. The baby has to be taken out immediately.” The doctor says over the phone, I knew today wasn’t going to be easy. The birth of the child is unexpected though. Thandiwe had two more weeks before giving birth.

“I’m on my way.”

Thandiwe’s case worsened two months ago, she completely withdrew from reality. Everything around her came to a stop, she stares at a wall all day without blinking. She has to be force fed, cleaned and put to bed. I was with just her yesterday, not once did her eyes twitch. I am losing control, I hate it when I can’t find solutions. It drives me crazy.

I'm driving faster than I should, my mind drowning in a million thoughts. MamSonto... Yes, I need to call her.

The phone rings unanswered... please pick up, please pick up. A female resounds on the receiving line seconds before I contemplate on hanging up.

“Mzi.” Her voice sounds urgent.

“Thandiwe is in labour,” I try to stay calm as I deliver the message to MamSonto.

“Thandiwe is not alone, the witch doctor is sitting on her stomach. He doesn't want the baby to be born, the child's birth is how the curse will be broken. Thandiwe will not die today, the baby will give her life. Don't worry, your daughter will be fine.” MamSonto's words are comforting, although her voice sounds gloomy. She is still in a dark place, I can't ask her to do anything more for me. Intervening will put her niece's life in danger.

“Mzi don't let the baby out of your sight, no matter what happens.”

“Is something going to...” The line is disconnected, I try her number and it sends me to voicemail. What the hell is going on?

I get to the hospital to find Doctor Haco waiting for me, she hands me consent forms to sign. It's too late to see Thandiwe as the doctors were on standby. I am combusting with fear and plausible anger for the one I cannot see. The one who won't leave us alone.

Thandiwe has to be okay. I can't lose her again. I can't lose our baby...I can't concentrate...My mind is not with me, it's scattered everywhere, causing panic to rise inside me. I cannot even think of praying, I fail to conjure up that tiny amount of faith.

I want to scream. I want to shout. Release all this anger assembling in my chest. Pacing about in the

foyer, I see Randall formidably emerge from the elevator. His presence eases a little of whatever shit I'm feeling, he nods and when at earshot says...

“You're not breathing again.”

“My chest is heavy, feels like a plane is sitting on it.” I puff out the comeback, he cocks a brow, face impassive.

“It's supposed to be a truck..” His hand presses my shoulder. “We'll take plane because you're a baby right now.”

I appreciate my brother's effort to make me laugh. I fail at it still, feeling disconsolate rather. Forty minutes go by in a daze, I'm losing my mind waiting.

“Your mother is dead.” Randall delivers with a deadpan voice, I whip my eyes to him. He is on the phone, unbothered as usual.

“Barbra is dead?” He nods like it is no big deal. It is for the best, we will be okay without her.

“What happened yesterday?” I scowl at Randall’s question, he gave the impression that he doesn’t care about Barbra when I told him she wanted to see us. Perhaps I’m reading too much into things, if he cared about her he would have helped and not kept her locked up like a prisoner.

>>>>>>>>>>

Rewind to yesterday...

“You called for us mother?” I say, showing sympathy towards her. We had to wear masks entering her room, her skin is decaying. There is an undeniable nauseating foul smell, she had to be quarantined. Veronica and I are the only ones who could come here when Barbra requested for all her children. Randall blatantly refused, my brother sure knows how to hold a grudge. Ntuthuko of course could not fly down from Germany due to the short notice update.

“Wh...Where...is everyone.” My mother struggles to speak, her voice rough and breathing weak. I look at my sister who has a shawl over the face mask, a look of disgust on her face.

“They couldn’t make it.” Pain flashes in Barbra’s eyes before they shift to Veronica, my sister does not want to be here. I had to force her.

“Thank you for coming Vero.” My mother starts, gratitude covering her voice. Veronica won’t give her a single glimpse. “My time is near, I’m going to die. I want to apologise for everything I have done to you, I failed to love you as my only daughter. I let power and greed take over my heart, I didn’t mean to sacrifice you.”

“What do you mean mother? What are you talking about?” I enquire, inquisitively.

“I haven’t been a good mother to my daughter.” Don’t we all know that? “Vero was chosen to be a sacrifice when she was in my womb, she wasn’t meant to be born alive. The great one was angered

by her birth and I too had my own wrath brewing inside me.

I hated her the moment I heard her crying in the delivery room, I wanted to smother her to death. Her father became obsessed with her that he didn't let her out of his sight, as she grew my hatred for her did too.

I hated it when she smiled at me with her innocent eyes, when she would cling on to me seeking my attention. I hated everything about her. I took her brain that is the reason she has the mental capacity of a child at this age.”

I check to see if Veronica is okay to meet an impassive expression on her face, her jaw clamped and hands formed into a tight fist.

“I married her away to a spiritual husband, so no man can ever see a woman in her. My wicked heart loved seeing her in agony, I wanted her to suffer.”

“Why mother? Why would you do that to your own child?” I cannot express how angry I am.

“I’m sorry, I can’t provide you with a solid reason son, please accept my apology. Both of you, Ntuthuko as well. I used him to get to Thandiwe.” Mother explains how she worked with the witch doctor that is after Thandiwe, the evil things she did to her. I am in bafflement listening to her confession, this woman is evil.

“Burn the small room in the back yard, make sure everything is reduced to ashes. My cat and the spiritual husband I had given to Vero live there.” I am taken aback by Barbra’s confession, an incredulous gasp slips out of Veronica’s mouth. Her face melts into a puddle of mixed emotions, hurt being amongst them. “If that cat is not killed, he will want to convert Vero into a witch or her future children. This is also the only way she will be completely free from the curse, the only way she

will be able to live a normal life. Thandiwe will be free from my curse as well.”

Neo was right all this while, Barbra is a witch and had bound Thandiwe. My surroundings are unexpectedly gloomy, Veronica leans her head on my shoulder for comfort. I enfold my arm around her.

“The demon that is after Thandiwe will never stop until he gets her, he is stronger than you think. Do not misjudge him.” Barbra continues, I am aware of that.

“How do I stop him?”

“I would tell you if I knew, please burn that room tonight. The cat is aware of my confession and he might do something to stop the plan.” Barbra says, urgently.

I don't care to enquire about her decaying skin, I feel nothing but hatred towards her.

“Tell your father, I’m sorry for everything. I loved him, I always have.” That is something I find hard to believe, an evil woman like her cannot be capable of loving someone.”

End of flash back..

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“We burnt the small house that last night.” I finish, Randall has kept the poker-face since I began the tale.

“How is it that we had evil parents?” He questions with no tint of hurt in the tone of his voice. Segun was just as evil, it is unfortunate.

I don’t know how to feel about Sandra, I don’t know if helping her would cause trouble between me and my brother. She went back to Ghana after she was banished by Randall and his granduncle from the Ashanti Kingdom.

I have vowed to protect my family and love them

the best way I can. I want to move Veronica and my father out of that house, I'll need to contact my broker. Go house haunting, that house has bad memories.

“Afia Okolie.” Randall randomly says, coolly leaning on the wall with hands in the pocket of his black jeans.

“What?” He faces me and faintly smiles.

“It means born on a Friday, it comes from Afiada which is Friday in Akan.” A ghost of a smile takes over his furrowed brow. “Afia Okolie.”

“That is a beautiful name, but I haven't changed my surname yet. We still have to do the ceremony.” I have delayed this for way too long, it is time I accept my people. Randall's soft features transition to a glare.

“Afia Okolie, you need to whisper this name in her ear. It is the only way the ancestors will protect her.

Otherwise they won't see her, they won't be able to protect your daughter." Randall exclaims gravely, where is this suddenly coming from?

"I hear you Randall, MamSonto said..." The sound of a baby crying surges out of the theatre room, interjecting me, my heart stops for a second. Consumed by euphoria, I turn to an inexpressive Randall.

"She's here." My voice is a whisper, Randall smiles. It's not there, but it's there. I hug him out of excitement, I don't feel his arms on me and that has me awkwardly drawing back. He is back to the cold faced man, I am accustomed to.

"Congratulations, I need to call Amara." Randall states already walking away. Without being told, I direct my path to the operating theatre. My eyes find Thandiwe first, she is unconscious. My baby is in the arms of a young female nurse, there are two doctors in the room, plus another nurse.

"Afia Bongiwe Okolie..." The name plays in my head

as I ready myself to whisper in her ears. My arms are extended to the nurse, a gesture that she gives my baby to me.

“We have to clean her first sir,” she says and goes to a corner table.

“Mr. Biyase, congratulations.” Doctor Haco appears from behind.

“Thank you, how is Thandiwe?”

“Physically, she is fine. Mentally, she is still lost in her own world. She is oblivious to what is going on around her.” The doctor explains something I am conscious of, swiftly I feel something in my chest. My heart jumps to my throat, something is amiss. The baby’s cries have stopped, I turn back to where the nurse was.

“Where did she go?” I try to calm down, it is not working.

“Who?” Haco absentmindedly asks.

“The nurse, where did she take my daughter?” My

voice rises a little, panic evident in it.

“To clean her, Mr. Biyase.” No, MamSonto said not to let the baby out of my sight. I only turned my gaze for a second. How did the nurse slip out? I scurry out of the theatre room, browse the hallway to find no one, just the hospital staff doing rounds.

There is no one in the baby room, but three babies who look a few days old.

“What is it?” Randall asks coolly, while I’m losing my mind.

“I don’t know Randall, I don’t know.” I don’t mean to snap. “The nurse said she was cleaning the baby, I turned away from her for a second. Just a mere second Randall, now she’s gone.”

“Did you check the baby room?”

“There is no one there.” I grunt, fighting to control the fury evoking inside me.

“Calm down, we are going to search the whole hospital. She can’t be far, this place is big.” My brother’s words are not enough to comfort me.

“Mr. Biyase, I don’t understand. What is happening?” Doctor Haco’s stupidity is starting to piss me off.

“The nurse that was assisting in there, I want her file.” Randall demands, the doctor looks offended.

“We don’t give...”

“A baby has been kidnapped, do you get that? Now get me the file of that bitch or else you and your doctor friends will be doing surgeries behind bars.” Randall growls in anger.

I don’t know how stupid this woman can be, it only clicks in now that a crime has been committed.

“I’ll get it right away,” she trudges off in search of the file.

Randall fishes for his phone in the pocket of his jeans. “I want every entrance of this hospital closed now.” His tone is demanding, whoever he’s talking to must be one of his workers.

“I don’t care who owns the damn place. We’ll deal with them later.” He grunts dismissively.

Randall is on the phone with Styles this time, I decide to run outside to check. The parking lot is empty, there is no one in sight, no cars nor taxis passing by. How is that she disappeared in broad daylight? It’s so hard to breathe, it’s as if someone is choking me, depriving me of air. My legs give me away, I stumble and come crashing knee down. A hand squeezes my shoulder, I tilt my head to have a double check.

“We will find her, Mzi.” I want to believe Randall, but MamSonto’s words kill the little hope I have.

“Your daughter will be born, but I don’t see her future.”

“What will I tell Thandiwe?”

BULELWA...

Running a business is not as easy as it looks in movies, I am depleted. I have always known a nine to five is not for me. My father left me in charge of all his asserts, he left me with 60% of the company shares. The 40% being shared between my siblings.

Desires Inc. is doing great.

Thobekile said Mozambique is her home, she trusts me not to bring the business down. I work alongside Lindiwe, we're a great team. My mother was left with the house and a motel my father built in Limpopo, I thought she would fight tooth and nail for a bigger share, she surprised me.

I think she has repented for her sins, our relationship is still rocky, we are trying to make it work for the sake of little Bhekisizwe. Betty was

given a house in Bloemfontein, plus enough funds to last her, her whole life.

Lilian will never accept Betty and we have come to live with that. Thobekile on the other hand is trying to build a relationship with her biological mother, although she says they will never have a mother and daughter relationship. Betty is okay with it, her daughter acknowledges her presence and that's what matters.

“Is it safe to come in?” I look up from my laptop to see Zizwe peeking through the crack of the door, his chiselled features creating a whirlwind in my stomach. I think it's time I get used to the fact that he is mine and he's not going anywhere. I close the laptop when he strides in and meet him halfway. He cups my cheeks to capture my lips into a deep passionate kiss.

“I came to get you for lunch.” He reminds me, I almost forgot about lunch.

“I have been swamped with work Zizwe and I still

have more to do.”

“We are having lunch with Ntsika and his girlfriend, remember?” He reminds me of the dreadful lunch date, Ntsika makes me nervous. The last time we met, he grilled me. Talking about how I made his brother cry when I broke up with him. Veronica looks grown, I must say I am proud of her progress.

Lindiwe and Lonwabo are going on a vacation today, leaving baby Sizwe with Zizwe and I. The joys of being a godfather, this will be our first time babysitting him for more than a day. I am a nervous wreck, two weeks is too long to play daddy. What if we mess up?

“Okay let me get my phone and wallet.” As I turn my phone rings, it’s a call from an unknown number.

“Yes.” I answer, clearing my throat. Zizwe is browsing his eyes around the office, he says he still

can't grasp that I'm a CEO of a company. All lazy me, it's funny because I don't want to do anything at home. Yes, we live together now.

He moved in with me not long after we made up, he is a clean freak. Cooks and washes dishes while I'm whining about swollen feet, he is gentle with me. Perhaps one day I will help him around the house, when my laziness has decided to pack up and go.

My whole world comes crushing down as the caller tells me that my sister has died in a car accident. I feel my chest constricting, my hand clasps around the gadget.

"There are no survivors, both victims have died." The caller finishes, I don't hear the rest of the words. My knees weaken, they drop to the floor with a thud. Zizwe is beside me in flash, cupping my cheeks. His vision is blurry due to the unshed tears in my eyes.

"What's wrong?" His breathing is shaky, fear lurking in it. The words are stuck in my throat, I'm afraid I will burst into tears if I open my mouth to speak.

Tears are banging my pupils, they want out. I shake my head to stop them from falling.

“Don’t do that Buttercup, don’t scare me like that. Tell me what’s wrong.” Zizwe commands, my arms loop around his neck and I hide my face in his neck.

“Lindiwe and Lonwabo are dead.” Painfully, I breathe the words out, clasping my arms around Zizwe.

To be continued...

BURN

85...

Season finale Part 1

Two years later...

THANDIWE...

“Someone is coming.” She says to me, running to hide under the bed, I blink a few times and my mind suddenly seems to recognise my surroundings. This has been happening for the past two years, I lose myself when the girl comes to visit me. The moment she appears, my world stops. Everything around me slows down and I become lost in a world where it’s just me and her. I haven’t told anyone about her, they will think I’m crazy. I don’t want them to think I’m crazy.

“Thandiwe.” This is the same doctor who made Nqaba bring me here years ago, I don’t like her. I don’t like many people here. I don’t like Nqaba too, he left me alone here.

The girl says everyone hates me, she is the only one who loves me.

“Do you mind if I sit?” The doctor asks, I shrug. I don’t care. She sits on the bed and I am afraid that she will see the girl. Perhaps I should tell her about

her, maybe she will understand and help us escape.

“Don’t squash the bed, my baby is under the bed.” I tell the doctor.

“Your baby?” The doctor looks interested. Let me tell her.

“Yes, she is my baby.” A smile formulates on my face. “She tells me things, like how we should escape this place and go live in the mountains. She’s been living with me for two years now, she’s sweet, but when she’s angry she changes into a monster.”

“A monster?”

“Yes, until I sing to her. That’s when she changes back to a sweet little girl.” I remember the first time I had an encounter with her, I had to hide under the white sheets to get away from the angry monster. She turns into an old man when she is angry, his voice is the scariest thing I have ever heard. He looks familiar sometimes, my mind always fails to remember him.

“And what song do you sing to her?” The doctor questions, I love that she is interested in my story.

“Do you want me to sing it? I’m shy.” This is exciting, I can’t wait.

“I won’t laugh I promise.”

“Incy wincy spider climbed up the water spout, down came the rain and washed poor incy out.” I expect her to clap for me, but she writes something down on a notepad.

“Mommy, send her away.” The girl whispers, she is under the bed, yet her voice is in my ears.

“Did you hear that?” I ask the doctor, she shrugs.

“Send her away now!” The girl growls this time, she is getting angry. I don’t want her to change into a monster. “Mommy, mommy.”

Her voice is eerie, it scares me. I clog my ears and scream for the doctor to go.

“She says you need to leave, get out of here.”

The doctor doesn't argue, when she closes the door behind her, the girl creeps out from under the bed. Her smile is bone-chilling, her eyes alluring and hypnotising.

“Well done mommy.” A chilly whisper, I want to move when she rests her head on my shoulder. She feels heavy and cold.

BULELWA...

I wake up with a splitting headache, everything in my body hurts. My butt cheeks are throbbing, I didn't know spanking can be so painful and pleasurable at the same time, well the pleasure left me. All I feel now is nothing but pain.

I need to use the bathroom, I'm naked as the day I came into this world. My eyes scan the bed and what do you know? Christian Grey left a pair of pyjamas right on his pillow. Soreness mocks me as

I throw the pants on, dammit.

I force myself out of bed, pain jolts to my butt hole as my feet hit the floor and I shriek. Zizwe is in the bedroom in a flash, holding me up. He's dressed in jeans and a simple t-shirt. Where is he off to this early?

“What happened?” You happened bastard.

“I need to pee, my butt hurts. I think you split it into two.” An arrogant smile creeps on his face, the pompous bastard.

“Let me help you to the bathroom.” He says, attempting to take me in his arms.

“Don't, you dare pick me up.” I snap, pushing him off.

“You said you want to release yourself.”

“I also said my butt hurts, not my legs.” Fucking asshole. “I hate you right now, I don't want you touching me.” I know he is hurt by my words, he will heal while I still walk around with my ass on fire.

As I finish the gnawing morning mundane, I feel Zizwe's arms wrap around me from the back. He snuggles his face on my neck.

“Are we okay?”

“Yes.” Why would he think otherwise? Oh yes Bubu, you have a way with your mouth.

“Did I hurt you last night? Maybe we should stop, I'm okay with it. It's not really a necessity.” Zizwe is crazy, I know he loves this type of stuff. Damn he's been singing the song ever since we met. The man loves control and inflicting pain strangely arouses him. I'm in love with a freak.

“I don't want to stop, it spices up our sex life. I don't want you getting bored and start letting your eyes wander. I will gauge them out Zizwe and serve them to you as meat balls with spaghetti.” He chortles, dipping soft kisses on my nape.

“But you're in pain Buttercup...” This man...I turn to face him, he pecks my lips swiftly. His arms caress my spine and back.

“I researched what BDSM is when you introduced it

and I knew what I was getting myself into.” I cup his cheeks and hate the regret in his eyes. “I love you Zizwe, I would literally go to hell and back for you. Heck I would kill myself if you asked me to.”

There’s the smile, it goes away too quickly.

“I knew you were a fucking sadist when my heart decided to love you, the pain you inflict on me is not to hurt me. I know and have accepted it.” He cradles my cheeks and captures my lips.

“I love you Buttercup.”

“You’re too corny, I thought this BDSM shit would have changed you.” He laughs and kisses me again.

“Let me see your hands.” He takes them and rubs his thumbs on my bruised wrists.

I was wriggling on the bed while my hands were tied and these are the results of not obeying the master. Zizwe had told me not to move last night, of course erotica took over my whole body that I

couldn't control myself. He was exasperated by my disobedience that he untied me, placed me on his lap, stomach down and gave me multiple butt spanks. The pain was too much, yet so arousing. Tears cascaded down my eyes, tears of pleasure and pain. The bloody sadist went on to deny me an orgasm, he flew alone. I hate punishments.

Zizwe gently kisses the marks on my wrists and blows air to lessen the pain. "Does it hurt?" Like hell. "No!" Lies love my mouth.

"Can I carry you back to the room?" If I had the strength, I would carry him as well. I nod, so not to break his heart. I'm scooped up again and taken to the bedroom.

"Dada, papa." We freeze and turn to the little brat standing in the doorway, dressed in animated pyjamas. His big eyes glistening with unshed tears, he extends his arms to Zizwe. I know Sizwe wants him because he loves being in his arms and fidgets

when I'm carrying him.

“Put me down.” I order with a frown on top.

“Dada.” Sizwe whines, waiting for attention. Zizwe smirks and chortles before placing me down gently. Sizwe toddles his way in and is scoop up too, I'll sleep the pain away while those two bond since it seems I am not welcomed.

“Are you hungry baby?”

“Yes.” I say, settling down on the bed. Then I realise he is not talking to me, but Sizwe. Zizwe smiles, arrogantly. Why is that a natural demeanour? And I hate that he wears it so well.

He tells me he is going to make breakfast and I shouldn't move from the bed. How will I move when he made sure I won't be able to walk?

In their will, Lindiwe and Lonwabo stated that they are leaving Bhekisizwe to Zizwe and I, we wanted him to legally be our son. So we got married at the magistrates, had a small ceremony. My husband's

parents distanced themselves from their son.

When he told them we were going to get married, Zizwe was made to choose between me and his parents. I was ready to give him up, but he would have none of it. He hasn't seen his parents in two years, his father probably influenced his mother's decision.

We started the adoption process soon after we got married, it wasn't hard for us to get Bhekisizwe because he was already ours. He's over two years now and a bundle of joy. Being a young married couple is not easy, we make it work. As long as we have each other.

I have made peace with my mother, she and Zizwe are not best of friends. Nonetheless for Sizwe's sake, they have to get along. I'm okay with the hellos and byes, it's good that they keep it like that. I can be very jealous.

Over the years, I visited Thandiwe without fail. I

doubt she knows I have been to see her, my friend is lost somewhere in her mind. It is a sad thing to watch, all she does is glance at the wall while mumbling words no one can make out. With any luck, she will come back to us one day.

RANDALL...

Two long years, searching high and low for Afia and finally something has come up. Nkosi, Randall's loyal dog worked tirelessly to find the child. Visits to various traditional healers became Nkosi's daily bread... "The child is cloaked with a black cloth, therefore her location remains hidden." The healers would say, giving him no hope that he will one day find her.

Ngaba dedicated his life to finding Afia, he couldn't bring himself to visit Thandiwe without her daughter. Even Mamsonto could not see the child, she is not God after all. Besides, her primacies

since the passing of her family is her niece, her only family. She had to keep her safe by all means, the only valuable information the woman of God gave Nqaba was that Afia's presence in Thandiwe's life meant the destruction of the witchdoctor.

Being a family man, Nqaba understood and respected MamSonto's decision. Finding Afia was imperative, he vowed to unite mother and daughter and bring them home to live with him and Zulu.

Nqaba accepted the Okolie surname, his granduncle had suggested they fly to Ghana, however Randall was not ready to go back where it all began. He knew they would convince him to sit on the throne.

They had been driving for hours to get to Limpopo, a small hut in an isolated land. The sun just set, there are no street lights in the place. A child silently plays outside an old hut with no one to keep an eye on her.

“That’s her.” Nkosi says to Nqaba and Randall, he has been here a couple of times. Observed the little girl about the age of two, each time Nkosi would find her seated alone outside the scorching heat until night fall.

What stood out was the old black dress the child wore and black head wrap that never left her head, he knew he had found her. The witchdoctor was smart, he was well aware that killing Afia was an impossible task, so why not hide her in the dark?

That’s my baby?” Nqaba mumbles, trying not to get emotional. But he can’t help the lump on his throat.

Oh come on, dispose of those judgemental looks. Don’t blame the man for being a crier, his heart has been shred to pieces. Losing the love of his life and his daughter destroyed him.

“I have no doubt that it is her, an old woman lives in that hut with her daughter. I asked around the village, the villagers said it has always been just the

two of them until two years ago. There was suddenly a baby, the daughter was never seen pregnant. She is a loner just like her mother, people are actually afraid of them as there are speculations of witchcraft. No one dared to question them.”

Nkosi dishes out the information he gathered, catastrophe nudges at Nqaba.

He blames himself for the terrible fate fallen upon his daughter. His vision becomes blurry, eyes start to water. He does not want to be seen crying nor can he stop himself from shedding tears.

His hands cover his face, he drops his head and his shoulders begin to vibrate. It is not a good sight for Randall, he doesn't want his brother hurting.

Randall grips the door handle, pushes it open and dashes out of the car. Nkosi follows along with the man he's been working with.

Gathering himself, Nqaba follows suit. His strides are longer, he passes the three men and swiftly takes the toddler in his arms.

We will pretend this is a normal thing to do... Oh! What the heck? The Okolie brothers were probably present when God created the world, hence they think the world is theirs.

Shockingly the child does not make a single sound, she stares incredulously at the man who is looking at her like she is an alien. Nqaba sees Thandiwe in her, mostly himself. She has his eyes and nose, let us not forget the plump lips.

“Yeah, that’s Afia alright. Can’t miss that bighead.” Randall mocks his brother, Nqaba wants to laugh, but tears of sorrow are not letting him. He cuddles the child amidst of the strong smell of traditional herbs. An egg ought to be jealous of the way this happy father holds his long lost baby, as if she would crack the moment he drops her.

“Hey! What are you doing?” That’s it, who failed to tell the young witch there are two raging Okolie beasts outside her house?

The four men turn to a young woman, standing by the door. Her clothes and appearance scream poverty, her skin probably charred by the blazing sun. “Mama.”

The young woman screams for her mother when she spots the little girl in the arms of a strange man. Quick at thinking, Nkosi pulls out a gun. He points it at her and gestures that she walks back into the house. Goggle eyed and afraid for her life, she obeys.

“Go to the car Mzi.” Giving orders is what Randall is known of, he has taken the big brother title. Tells his brother what to do and when. Nqaba does not object unless he feels it is necessary.

Right now he is headed to the car with the baby in his arms, Thandiwe occupies his mind. He can't wait to introduce the two, hell he can't wait for Thandiwe to be whole again.

“Why did you take the child?” Randall questions the young woman, shaking in her boots. It must be his intimidating muscular structure, perhaps the way he is standing erect like a soldier. One would say he was once in the military. It could be that he is towering over the two men beside him, or the murderous look on his face. His cold black heart that only comes to play when provoked, very much evident on his demeanour.

“My mother...sent me.” The young lady cries, stumbling on her words. Tears not shying away from her eyes that run to the middle aged woman sitting on her haunch next to her. Fear has them by their tits, bodies visibly trembling. Randall tilts his head to the side to get a good look at the witch, there is no mistaking that she is one.

Their hut reeks of muti and other funny smells he cannot make out. It is a dark hovel, no human can live like this. The thought of Afia sleeping in this hell hole angers Randall. An Okolie princess lived like a slave...he can't forgive this atrocity.

“She received orders from the witch doctor, he said he will spare my life if I took the child. He didn’t give any reasons as to why I had to kidnap her. We haven’t seen or heard from him since.” Give fear of death a medal, the lady is singing like a bird.

Randall shoves his hands into the pocket of his pants, he slants his head towards Nkosi and nods, gesturing he does what he was instructed to do before they got there.

Nkosi and the second man hurry outside the hut, while Nkosi comes back with a can of gasoline and starts pouring it from corner to corner, his accomplice paints the outside with enough gasoline to burn the house down.

The young woman’s brain is quick to thinking, she starts screaming, grovelling and pleading for forgiveness. The mother can only sob, she has no strength to fight anymore. She would rather die, than be the witchdoctor’s slave.

When done, Nkosi hands Randall a box of matches. Oh how the king loves torturing his enemies.

With an impassive expression dancing on his face, he lights the matches and without blinking tosses it on the ground.

“Enjoy.” A sinister grin accompanies the term spewing out of the angry king’s mouth. Randall is the first to walk out with Nkosi following behind. He stops at the door, turns to the horrified women, a smug look laced on his face.

“Dankie Siyabonga.” (We thank you.)

Nkosi sings before locking the screaming lady and her mother inside the hut. He is the one to set the hut ablaze, they stand at a far distance, watching it burn.

Nqaba has undressed his daughter, leaving her with nothing on. He uses his jersey to cover the toddler’s miniature body. He jumps out of the car, covers Afia’s head to hide her eyes from the fire. Randall sees his brother just as he walks past them, Nqaba

tosses the black dress and head wrap into the fire and immediately marches back to where the others are.

Heart wrenching screams are heard from inside the hut, not one person watching is touched. They leave once the hut has burnt down to ashes.

Nkosi is driving, the twins are perched in the back seat with Afia. There is silence in the car. Afia has fallen into a sound slumber in her father's arms. Randall's eyes chase his brother beside him, he frowns as he sees Nqaba's red eyes, he looks like he is about to break down.

“A grown man crying?” Randall is talking about the unshed tears in his twin's eyes. “I will need to sanctify my eyes after this.”

Nqaba chortles, he has no comeback for the sally.

“Don't fret, no one will take her from you again.”

It is a promise from the Okolie King, Nqaba nods. He is not willing to let go of his baby anytime soon.

“Thank you.” Nqaba sends gratitude down his brother’s way, it feels weird for Randall. They don’t say thank you, they don’t say please...they don’t say I love you nor do they say I miss you. That is the nature of their relationship, they speak with actions rather than words.

To be continued...

BURN

86...

Season Finale.

Part Two...

THANDIWE...

The creaking sound of a door opening and closing always turns my head in this hovel, not this time. Shivers ripple through me and a familiar scent prickles the most sensitive parts of my nostrils.

Two years away from him and I have not forgotten the scent that got me high on ecstasy, it once made me feel safe, like I was untouchable. Time killed that feeling, now his scent torments me, it comes with an overflow of painful memories.

This rocking chair should have a voice by now, I use it more than I use the bed. I have made this window and everything outside it my companions. There was nothing else to do, the loneliness of this place would turn a nun into a party animal.

“Are you here to take me home?” Seven hundred and thirty days I pictured him walk through the door and ask me to come home with him, I yearned to hear the words roll out of his tongue.

What I did not prepare myself for is my reaction to the request. I'm angry, I was angry when he brought

me here that day and I am still angry today.

The 23rd of August 2018, it was a dusty Tuesday around 4pm. The receptionist was wearing a...let me stop there before I prove men right, they say we keep track of dates, time and how far the sun was positioned away from the crescent moon when a particular event took place.

“Yes.” He replies to my question.

Why do we inquire about things we don't want to hear answers to? What will I do with this 'yes' he has just given me?

The sound of his footsteps run to my ears, he's taking slow strides in. I can see him from the corner of my eye. He always thought I was in sync with him, went wherever he pointed. Somehow I believe this is how my downfall came about.

“Let's go.” A commander he is, he should have joined the army.

“I don’t want to go.” My mouth ought to hurt after this lie, my punishment will be ten times fold. I prayed every day to a God I do not know exists anymore, I asked, pleaded and cried that he takes me out of this hospital, since I was locked away with my demons.

The world thought they would be safe if I were put away with my secrets. They were not ready to hear the terrible reality that only my mind concealed.

“Thandiwe.” Argh, I am overthrown that he still gets what he wants. I’m looking at him, although I didn’t want to.

Sjava’s long lost brother, I can hardly recognize him with that bushy hair and the beard that has built a forest of hair around his cheeks.

His face had become a distant memory to me, I was beginning to forget it. Why did he have to come back and torment me? I was better off without him, his toxic past and the half of him that took my soul away.

“I love you.” His heavy-lidded eyes do not lack the passion, although stained with fatigue and dread, the love that once dwelt there is glazed in them. The struggles of life are creased beneath his eyes.

However I hate this expression and everything it comes with, everything it represents. Love is evil.

“Don’t tell me that.” I didn’t stop him years ago, I can do it today.

“I love you Thandiwe.” His deep voice rings in my ears bringing about a thud in my heart, I can’t fall again. I would come crushing face down, and no matter how much he tries to catch me, he would fail.

“Thandiwe.” He snaps.

I would think he missed calling my name, I need him to stop. I am not strong for this, maybe I am better off in this place.

“Come home with me.” He says, moving away from the door post, he’s coming to me. One step closer

and I would be following him like a lost soul that can't find the light.

Unwillingly, my feet move back, I gasp as my back hits the window.

“Is that what you really want?” I ask, I can hardly recognize my voice. It could be fear, the sound of my heart breaking or having him close to me after two whole years.

Guilt is one mean dictator, his heart might not be in it. My mother always told me that, if you want to know what a man is thinking, look into his eyes. I'm afraid of the truth, hence my eyes are everywhere, but on him.

“I want to be with you.” He reveals the secret behind his dark eyes, I want the same thing, but how can we be when my hands are stained with blood? I turn back to face the window, I wish for him to go. I wish I never heard his voice nor looked at him.

“Thandiwe.” If I’m not afraid of a dog growling at me, what makes him think his growl would make me tremble? I can hear his heavy breathing from behind me, his anger is nothing compared to mine.

“I left you here years ago and I’ve regretted it everyday, I will not do it again.” Guilty is burning him, that’s the only reason he came back.

“What about Zulu? What do I tell him?” He asks.

The last time I heard that name I was being dragged into this place. My Zulu, he hasn’t seen me or heard my voice in a long time. How did he survive without me?

“Whatever you told him two years ago.” I’ve been given a hammer and I am using it to shatter my own heart, I yearn for my Zulu. I yearn to hold him close and tell him that I love him.

“That you’re going away?” I don’t know if that’s meant to be a question or he is checking if my screws are still loose. I take offence in everything since I was diagnosed with Schizophrenia, a fancy English word used to describe a gifted black person

who sees the supernatural.

He's too close to me, I can feel his warm breath sliding down my neck. I feel suffocated, I can't breathe and I want it to stop.

A tight grip on my waist forces me to turn around, I refuse to look at him. I will not be looking into his eyes. But then again, my hands have found shelter on his chest and I feel the weight of his eyes on me.

"Look at me Thandiwe," his voice is pleading, yet demanding. "Remember all you have to do is look into my eyes." That's what I don't want, I hate him. But my cheeks recognize the touch of his hands and they decide to get comfortable.

"All you have to do is look into my eyes." He moves his face lower to meet my eyes, he is waiting for an answer while drilling his gaze deep into my soul, he won't let go until I give it to him.

"And I will never get lost." Eventually I finish the

sentence like I always did.

“Mommy, mommy, mommy.” They are back, the demonic voices are chanting my name again. Whimsical, eerie whispering, child-like voices murmur my name in a rhythmic tune.

I knew I shouldn’t have touched him, this is a punishment. God decides to take a walk down the streets of gold each time I enter his throne room meanwhile in the other spirit realm, my ancestors are napping.

“You have to go, please get out of here.” A desperate appeal splutters out of my mouth.

My scream refuses to block the voices, I’m curled up under a white sheet. It keeps the evil away, that’s what I believe.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” I chant the verse as loud as I can, my hands have gone to battle with my ears, it’s an order to push out the voices and bring my mind back to submission.

Nqaba's presence has cleared every blurry thing in my mind, I haven't felt so alive in a long time. Being in his arms, feeling him...the warmth of his skin. Now he is gone again, I chased him away...again.

I haven't moved from under the white sheets, there is a presence with me. It's him, he is always with me. I'm tired. I don't want him here anymore, I don't want the girl here anymore.

“Mapula,” that name...I haven't heard it in years and that voice sounds so familiar. “It is time to go, come with me.”

“No, I don't want to go.” I dispute, not brave enough to get out of the sheets.

“You have no choice Mapula, you belong with me. We will escape through the window, no one will see us.”

As he continues to speak, I start to remember his

face. It's the old man, the witchdoctor. He is the one who was with me all this while, he is the little girl who called me mommy.

Lord, he slept in my bed, sat on my lap and made me believe that he was my child.

The bed sheets fly open, I muffle a scream when I see him standing before me. He is the way he was the last time I saw him, the way he was when he would change from the little girl into him.

How is it I couldn't recognise him or the little girl? He glares deadly, I scoot back, afraid of the blazing stare. His presence weighs me down, my head feels like it's going to explode.

"Jump out that window Mapula." He points to the closed window, I have never seen it open. And if I jump from this window, I will break an arm. We're five stories up, I won't survive the impact. He wants me to die, I don't want to die.

“Get up Mapula, get up.” The lights flick as he yells at me, I want to run out of the room. Fear has me paralysed. Out of the blue, the door swings open. Nqaba came back? He came back for me.

I think of running to him, but the old man stands between us.

“He is here Nqaba, he wants me to jump out the window.” I shout to Nqaba, but I think he can’t hear me. Am I dreaming? Perhaps I’m hallucinating, my head spins with confusion when Nqaba turns back around. He doesn’t walk out though, I see him extend his hands and Randall appears with a toddler in his arms. He gives the child over to Nqaba.

“No. No. What is that thing doing here?” The old man yells with shouts of horror, he stumbles back when Nqaba ambles in with the kid. Nqaba puts the child on the bed next to me and perches himself on the edge.

“Who is this? The old man doesn’t want her here.”
Panic takes over, I don’t trust this evil man. He might hurt them. Meanwhile, I can’t help, but notice the similarity between Nqaba and the toddler.

“She is our baby Tshabalala, you gave birth to her two years ago.” What? I touch my stomach, it’s empty. I remember being pregnant, I don’t remember giving birth though.

“I don’t understand. Why can’t I remember?”

“I’ll explain all of that later, Afia is your lifeline. Your saving grace.” Nqaba places the child on my lap, she hasn’t whined or shed a tear. She is a peaceful child, my heart leaps with unspeakable joy at the sight of her. I want to give her all my love, a yearning I can’t seem to ignore. So I hold her closer and love on her.

The lights start flickering again, the old man is raging mad.

“I will kill her, Mapula.” His voice sounds weak and I am suddenly not afraid of his threats. The baby in my arms gives me so much peace.

“Come with me.” Nqaba takes my hand to lead me out.

“Nqaba, he’s looking at me.” I tell him. I understand he can’t see the old man. He knows about him though.

“Don’t look at him,” Nqaba exclaims, his hand tightens around mine. I’m still holding my baby for dear life. I find it strange how the old man is not able to show the full length of his powers. His back is pressed against the same window he wanted me to jump from, the confidence and supremacy he held is no longer there.

“You are mine...Mapula, you...are...mine.” His voice falters with anger, I do as per Nqaba’s instructions and keep my eyes glued forward. Nqaba touches the door knob and twists it. The door refuses to open, it is locked. In the twinkling of an eye,

something explodes from the roof. Nqaba has us covered under his wing, the baby must be startled. Her cries erupt, I hold her closer to my chest.

“Dammit.” Nqaba curses under his breath as he looks back, my eyes follow his gaze. The bed is on fire, the light burst and must have caused a fire.

“MAPULA! MAPULA!” Gosh, can he shut up already? I don’t want to accept that name, it is not my identity.

“God, I know you can hear me. Get us out of this place.” Nqaba prays silently while trying to pull the door open. Thinking straight has become a mission with the baby screaming and the old man calling for me. My head is filled with so many voices, I can’t take it anymore.

“Don’t let go of her Thandiwe, hold on for me. I’ll get you out of here.” Nqaba promises.

I’m facing the door with him, afraid to look back. Thick smoke hovers about, the fire seems to be

growing profusely. I can feel the heat on my back, we can't die in here. Not like this, not after I have come back to my family.

“Mzi, hold on.” That sounds like Randall from the other side of the door. We step back, the door is kicked open, agonising screams break out from behind us. Failing to chide my curiosity, I turn to see the old man engulfed in flames and screaming his lungs out.

“Let's go.” Nqaba pulls us out first, we are fussed over by nurses. One tries to take the baby from my arms, Nqaba rejects her by raising a hand. The fire drill is on, panicky patients are scattered everywhere. Some blaring, others crying. I want to get out of here, Randall leads the way as we follow the line of people marching outside. Lord, I hope they won't think I started the fire.

“Are you okay?” Nqaba questions, cupping my cheeks, I nod. I think Afia is okay too, she is looking up at me, peacefully.

I don't know what is going on in there, but I think the old man is dead.

"It's over Tan-tan." Nqaba seems to think so too, his arms are around me. I lean my head on his shoulder thankful that he came back for me.

"I'm going home to my wife." Randall murmurs and saunters dauntingly towards the parking lot.

"We should get you checked, and take you two home." Nqaba states.

I can't wait to get home to my son, my family.

"Don't ever let me go again." I tell him, I would die if that ever happens again.

"You're stuck with me, Tan-tan." His arms enfold around me, he kisses my forehead while at it and strokes baby Afia's head.

Five months since I came back and my life has been nothing, but blissful. For the first week I had nightmares about the little girl and the old man, I had to see a psychiatrist. The dreams are deflating, MamSonto said she can't see the old man anymore. Meaning he is gone and I pray we will never have an encounter with him again.

Afia had to be taken for cleansing, since she lived under the spell of witchcraft for two years. The black dress and head wrap they found her wearing were meant to shadow her, so no one would ever find her. Hence MamSonto could not see her future.

My baby is getting used to her surroundings, she is gaining weight as well. She can't speak yet. The people who had abducted her kept her isolated from them, she was kept away from human interaction. A child her age should be able to at least put a miniscule sentence together.

I suggested speech therapy, but Nqaba declined. He said she will learn by imitating the people around

her like every child does. I think he has developed a fear for hospitals since my and Afia's experiences at hospitals.

Veronica is officially a working woman, Nqaba told me how Barbra was responsible for her daughter's travail. I'm glad she is an independent woman now, she rewrote Matric last year and is studying Journalism through Unisa.

Veronica is writing a book about her life experience, she is obsessed with the project. I'm proud of her. I got to meet the man who is responsible for her relationship weight gain and I approve. The meeting was not planned, I happened to bump into them at a mall. She had no choice, but to introduce us.

Duma lives with us at our new place, we just got a house two weeks ago. The flat was too small now that we are a family of four, five if we include Duma. He has a live-in nurse who is at his beck and call.

I still see dead people, they come to me for help. Speaking of the dead, Randall refused to communicate with his father. Segun was with me when Randall openly said he wanted nothing to do with the dead. Segun hasn't bothered me since, I believe he roams the earth with no place to go. Nqaba had no say in the matter, it seemed his brother made the decision for them both.

Did I mention that Nqaba bought a bungalow before I was released from the hospital? It's a two bedroomed cabin out in outskirts of Johannesburg. It is beautiful, the set is picturesque, pleasing to the eye and so peaceful.

The cottage is comfortable, made of cedar wood.

There is a wood burning chimney right in the living room, the backdrop outside is my favourite. There is an arch of pine trees lined around, I can imagine us growing old together in that place.

There is a knock on my bedroom, Bulelwa peeks in and his eyes widen in marvel.

“Wow, look at you.” He sings, striding in. I twirl for him and my dress flies with me.

“Do you think Nqaba will like it?” I’m nervous, from the time I put the dress on. My hands are trembling and I feel like I can’t breathe.

“Are you kidding me? He is going to love it, you look perfect in this dress.”

“Thank you, Bubu. Thank you for being here.” I can’t express how grateful I am that he is still in my life, we share a brief hug. Bulelwa pulls out first, he is as emotional as I am.

“Stop crying, you’re going to ruin your makeup.” He loves rolling his eyes lately. “You’re going to be Mrs. Okolie. How do you feel?”

Yep, you heard right. Nqaba and I are getting married today right at the cabin, the scenery outside is breathtakingly beautiful, I knew from the moment

I saw the pine trees that it would be a great place for a wedding.

“I am overcome by intense happiness, I swear I am drowning in it.” My face probably shows.

“I would feel the same if I were marrying Nqaba, have you seen that man?” He’s starting, I can’t help but laugh.

“Believe me, I have seen him and Zizwe. I’ve seen how possessive he can be, let Zizwe hear you drool over other men.” I love bursting his bubbles, he fizzes in laughter.

“Let’s get you married before you ruin my day.”
There’s a single knock at the door, Bulelwa rushes to open and my breath catches when my eyes meet the person at the door. What is Randall doing here?
His eyes are on me, I think he will smile, but not this man.

“I’ll be outside.” Bulelwa excuses himself.

Randall makes me nervous, he’s standing in the

doorway, hands rammed in the pockets of his pants and a pucker on his face. He looks so powerful and majestic in that black tuxedo. I don't know if I should offer him a seat or let him stand there.

"Nqaba is a good man." Okay, awkward. Is this what he came here for?

"Yes." That's all my stupid mouth can utter.

"He loves you." He continues and I can't grasp the reason behind his visit.

"I know, I love him too." Dammit, I am sweating. My hands feel clammy, my makeup will be ruined before I say I do. He's nodding, that means something, right?

"Good because there is no divorce reported in our family history." Randall confidently reveals, is it safe to say I am intimidated by him?

"I will never leave Nqaba, like I said, I love him." Another nod.

"Good." He sizzles, I guess he approves? He's frowning at me as if studying or searching me, my

eyes can't look into his anymore, so I drop them.

“Congratulations.” He says and is gone before I could respond, that was the most awkward conversation for me.

I take one last glance in the mirror, today is my day. The beginning of forever.

“Thandiwe!” My mother is here, I asked her to walk me down the aisle. We share a brief hug and head out.

Looking at Nqaba slip a ring on my fourth finger, my mind takes me back to where it all began. Back to the village where our love began. He cribs my cheeks when the pastor declares us man and wife, his lips meet mine in a slow gentle kiss. Applause and ululation resonate from family and friends.

“Ngiyak'thanda Tshabalala wam.” (I love you.)

An undertone that sends shivers throughout my body, he nuzzles his nose against mine and kisses

me softly.

“I love you more Ngabayomzi, my Ghanaian man.” I love him more than I could ever say, a ghost of a smile plays on his lips before we share one last kiss and turn to the guests who are drowning in jubilation.

“We have made it Tan-Tan, don’t ever let go of my hand.” Nqaba declares beside me, squeezing my hand into his while dotingly ogling at Zulu and Afia in the front row.

“I will never let go.” I murmur, fighting the tears that want to be present at my wedding. God has finally touched my life.

At the wedding reception...

“Me hemma.” (My queen.)

Liyana turns to her cousin to meet a wide smile on his face, she finds him funny hence she returned smile.

“Here, wear this.” Zulu hands Liyana a pair of sunglasses.

“Why?” He is causing confusion, maybe we should have him checked out by a psychologist.

“Because our future is too bright, you might go blind me hemma.” (My queen.)

Who said the age of eleven is a normal age for a human? This is proof. Zulu thought imitating his uncle Randall will score him points with Liyana. Ah! The joys of being a child.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you see it? Look at my parents, that’s us one day.” Zulu points at the couple dancing to their song.

“I can already see you in my mother’s wedding dress and me in my dad’s tuxedo, standing at the alter declaring our love for each other.” Liyana shakes her head in disapproval, she is aware of Zulu’s crush. Liyana pushes the sunglasses back into her cousin’s hand, she goggles at him with a raised brow and a smirk pasted on her lips.

“That is never going to happen.” Good girl Liyana, now go ahead and school your little brother.

“Never say never baby.” The smug on Zulu’s face.

“Look over there.” Liyana points at a healthy Afia and R.J jumping to a song on the crowded dance floor. “I’m Afia and you’re R.J . We are siblings, idiot.”

“Like brother and sister?” Child, how did you not know this?

“Yes Pea..nut...” She pokes his chest with a forefinger. “I... am... your...sister.”

“Eeeewww!!! I have been deceived for three years.” Gee! You don't say...

Zulu presses his temple, he can’t imagine how he could have seen a wife in his sister. “I need to clean my mind, erase three years of terrible data.” Liyana is having a blast watching her cousin freak out.

“You do that while I join my brother and sister on

the dance floor.” She puts emphasis on brother and sister, causing more damage in Zulu’s traumatised head and marches to join the little kids recklessly dancing on the dance floor.

Zulu shrieks in shock, he rushes to the cake stand and begins stuffing his face with sugary treats. Anything to make him forget the crush he has on his cousin.

Well...took him long enough to wake up and smell the damn coffee...

The end***