



Heart of GOLD

1

ABIGAIL

I am very happy. This runs in my thoughts while I watch my husband chase after our son in the garden. It took us a while, and required a lot, for us to be at this point in life. We deserve this happiness.

Mpho's giggle puts a smile on my face. Whenever I take time to admire him, I am reminded of how he, my son, saved our marriage. Married at twenty-four, having kids was not part of my plans until my career dreams were realized. My husband knew this when he proposed and married me. However, he changed his mind just after a year of marriage. We fought like cat and dog until we both settled for a divorce. I think it is okay to want different things in life, and I was content with the idea of a divorce until I found myself in the doctor's consultation room, questioning him

about my fatigue and cold in the middle of summer. Well, Dr. Makau did not waste time sending me to the toilet for a urine sample. I brought back the small clear urine container to Dr. Makau's office, laughing at how he should sometimes listen to his patients. There was no way I was pregnant. But, boy, was I wrong. I was just a little over three weeks pregnant. Ndumiso was delighted when I broke the news to him. There was no way in the world I could be saddened by a blessing to my marriage. There was just no way.

A timer from the oven goes off, jerking me back from my thoughts. I quickly twirl away from the window and hurry to pull out two pans of vanilla cake. Mpho's best friend has a birthday party later this afternoon and I promised to bake a cake for him – Mpho reminded me of this promise the minute he woke up. Oh well, don't I promise to bake for everyone? I live for baking. I

live for everything sweet, so whenever I get a chance, I show off my skills.

With a burst of loud laughter, Mpho runs into the kitchen, aiming for the fridge. I freeze as my husband sprints into the room and jumps to open the fridge. My husband pulls a bottle of water and lifts it to the air as a sign of victory.

“Arg, you won again.” Mpho’s face turns sad as he drags his feet away from the kitchen to the living area. Shaking my head at Ndumiso, he stares at me and shrugs his shoulder.

“I told you to let him win sometimes,” I mumble, setting the two cake pans at the end of the counter to cool.

“That’s not how you succeed in life,” Ndumiso responds before gulping the water.

I pull one bottle of water from the cupboard and head to the couch where Mpho sits sadly. I throw myself next to him and attack him with a

tickle. When he burst into a laugh, I remind him about what I always teach him. You cannot always get everything right. You win some and lose some. When I finally let him go, he wipes his little face and takes the bottle of water from my hand.

“Are you helping me decorate the cake?” I ask, making my way back to the kitchen. Our house is an open plan, so everything is right in front of our eyes. When we bought this house, it wasn’t like this. We renovated it to fit our needs –– mostly mine.

“No.”

Well, I am not offended by his response. He always jumps on the opportunity when he is in a great mood. Ndumiso throws his empty bottle in the trash bin and reaches to kiss me on the cheek.

“If I don’t get ready now, I’ll be late,” he says,

turning towards the staircase.

“Do you have plans today?” I thought I was dropping Mpho off at the birthday party and spending the rest of the afternoon with my husband.

“Attending some launch. I got the invitation late and I don’t want to disappoint a friend. I’ll just show face and come back before you return from dropping the boy. We can Netflix and chill.”

A smile rests on my face when he wiggles his eyebrow. Only he and I know the meaning of that.

I think I enjoy raising my son. No, I do. So much that I am part of everything he does and I am well acquainted with all his friends’ mothers. Being a housewife, for now, offers me the opportunity. It isn’t by choice that I am a stay-at-

home mother. My husband and I have been saving up for a few years so that I open a Bakery. I am great at what I do and even though I take a few orders at home, it is not enough for me. I want to see 'Miss Sweet Delectables' on the window of my pink, purple and white bakery somewhere in Brooklyn. I don't want it in a mall. I want it outside where I can see the happy faces of customers rushing in to grab a piece of cake and coffee to kick start their day. Just a little more patience and I will be living my dream. I was right about children delaying one's dreams. Well, in my case. When Mpho arrived, he came with his own set of bills. The hospital bills to nurse his asthma, the helper, and the new house to accommodate him and the full-time help. And the older he gets, the more money he demands. The school he goes to and all the sports activities he participates in? It all dig deep in the pocket and there is no way I could expect my husband to handle all of it all

on his own. Ndumiso does his best – he always does.

“Oh, my goodness, why did I bother ordering the birthday cake from... that store?” Mrs. Nelson shrieks the minute she opens the door and sees the cake. Since Mpho caught me off guard, I didn’t box the cake the way I would have loved to. She reaches for the cake and happily turns to lead the way inside. Her house is beautiful and huge – I cannot help but admire it each time I am here. “I cannot believe I just wasted my money on the...cake. This is perfect.”

Mpho disappears into the house since he knows his way around. Even if I wanted to stop him, I wouldn’t have succeeded. The chaos down the corridor tells me he found his friends.

“I had forgotten about the promise I made to your son. I would have baked him a theme cake,” I say, pulling a bar stool at the kitchen counter. From here, I can see the preparations

for the party taking place in a huge backyard. Mrs. Nelson places the cake carefully on the counter and calls her daughter to bring her purse. It always makes me feel good when people admire my creation.

“Willie always told me you were a great baker. I know you make killer cupcakes. Never did I expect anything close to this,” she says, spinning the cake which is now on the cake holder. When her little daughter hands her the wallet and runs off to join the chaos, Mrs. Nelson pulls a few notes and walks towards me.

“Mrs. Nelson, this is a gift to your son from me. I promised him.”

“This is too much. And I am swapping the main cake with this one.”

“Please...I won't take your money.”

“I insist.”

“No,” I sternly say. It even took me less than an

hour to bake this cake. There is no way I am going to make her pay.

When I arrive home, I find Ndumiso already home as promised. He has changed from his favourite grey tailor suit which I picked for him this morning. He is now in just a vest and lounge shorts. I love days like these when the helper and Mpho are away.

“Babe, you won’t believe Mrs. Nelson wanted to pay for the birthday cake,” I call out to Ndumiso, who is searching for a movie while I prepare the snacks.

“I would pay for it too. It was beautiful.” His response is faint but I heard it because I am dropping the bowl of popcorns on the table.

“You are my husband, you are supposed to say that.”

Curled up in his arms, we watch a rom-com

which I picked. At the end of the movie, I turn to face him to check if he is still awake. I earn a kiss on my lips but I am concerned about his quietness. I normally would beg him to stop talking when we are in the middle of the movie. But not today.

“Are you alright?” I ask, brushing the back of my fingers on his lips.

“Yes.” He clears his throat and carefully moves my hand away. “I had a chat with Sihle.”

“He wants money, doesn’t he?” I sigh, turning back to face the television. It all makes sense why he looks bothered. Sihle is his little brother – his spoilt little brother who steals his mother’s money for a living. Almost every second week, Ndumiso would be forced to call him and put him in his place. Sihle is the reason our mother-in-law’s bills are my husband’s responsibility. It is a lot of money we spend to run their household, but I don’t mind. She is my

mother-in-law and my mother is well-off. As a single mother, my mom did her best to raise my sister and me with just a salary from her nursing job. And now that my sister and I are married, she is living independently and doesn't need any of our assistance.

Monday morning, after dropping Mpho off at school, I receive a phone call from my little sister just when I put my car to park on our driveway. Smiling, I roll my windows up so that I can gossip with her without the garden boy eavesdropping on us.

"I know I have been a bad sister," I say just when I answer the phone call. She gave birth to her firstborn just a week ago and since I saw them at the hospital, I haven't visited them. I

have been giving her and her in-laws some space.

“Right! You have been a bad sister. Why?” she responds faintly, sounding offish. We are supposed to laugh it off. She knows I love her so much as to neglect her.

“Come on, sis. I didn’t want to come over when your mother-in-law is there. Don’t worry, when she leaves, I am going to spoil you and my niece.”

“I don’t care about your visit. I am talking about your launch. I know my baby is small but you could have just told me if you didn’t want me there. Mom didn’t even know about it.”

“What launch?” I frown, sitting up straight.

“What are you talking about?”

“Really, Abby?” her voice breaks. “Okay, let me read just a paragraph from the LifeStyle Magazine I have in my hand right now.” I shift

on my seat as I hear her fiddling with what sounds like paper. She clears her throat and says, "LifeStyle Magazine attended a launch of a beautiful cozy bakery in the heart of HydePark, Miss Sweet Delectables. Amongst the attendees was the High-Tech businessman, Ndumiso Gumede of Gumede Enterprises, who is the main investor to the establishment."

I roll down the windows of the car because right now, I cannot breathe. Miss Sweet Delectables is the name of the bakery I am only launching soon and Ndumiso Gumede of Gumede Enterprises is my husband. What the hell is going on here?

"Oh my God... wait a minute," Poppy gasps just when I start unbuttoning my blouse. "I didn't read the whole article but it says here...the owner of Miss Sweet Delectables is Kim Lehumo." She clears her throat and goes quiet for a few seconds before she continues. "Really,

sis. I am confused because I don't see you in any of these pictures and... Ndumiso is here with... someone."

"What do you mean Ndumiso is with someone?"

"I...I...didn't even page through the whole thing. I just saw the title 'Miss Sweet Delectables opens its first door' and the first paragraph and...and... I thought you didn't invite us but...but..."

"What do you mean Ndumiso is with someone?"

"He... he is... standing with this person...Kim Lehumo I suppose," she shakily says.

"I'm coming there right now," I say this while I start the car and put the car on reverse.

Miss Sweet Delectables? Ndumiso Gumede?

How?

None of this makes sense.

I stay in Waterkloof and my drive to Mabopane

has never been this fast. I can only wonder if I didn't skip any robots on my way here. Parking outside the gate, I don't even call Poppy to come to pick me up to avoid running into her unfriendly bulldog. Luckily, her mother-in-law is by the washing line hanging the baby clothes. I pull the sweetest smile to her as I greet her before running to the living room where I am directed to. Walking into the room, I find Poppy cradling the baby on the couch. I do not miss her sympathetic look as I aim for the magazine which is on the table.

"Page 17," Poppy mumbles.

There, on page 17 is the picture of a purple and white bakery with my future name on it. The pictures on the next page include a lady wearing a white branded apron, showing off a white cake, and then a picture of my husband posing with her - both of them laughing. Even if I wanted, I could not miss her long white

manicured digging on my husband's chest.

“Miss Sweet Delectables, Poppy?” I breathe out, sinking onto the nearest couch. I'm defeated.

“Did it have to be Miss Sweet Delectables?”

Kindly share!!!

Heart of GOLD

#2

ABIGAIL

Poppy and I sit in silence. My hands are trembling from the anger I have right now. But nothing makes sense. Nothing does.

Why Miss Sweet Delectables, huh? Even if I want to be delusional and call it a coincidence, there is no way it is when Ndumiso is attached to this. He gave her my idea. Miss Sweet Delectables is mine.

MINE!

The reason Poppy called me when she saw that name on the magazine was that she was certain they were launching my store. That name is scribbled everywhere on my vision boards. From when I was still young - when our mother could let me create the chaos in her kitchen. All her stokvel ladies told my mother not to expect a scientist or doctor from me - I was 'called' to bake. My husband knew all my plans. For God's sake, he is my husband. He is supposed to know everything. We share dreams and more.

And now? Now? He goes and gives it to some woman?

Who the hell is she, anyway? Can she even bake?

"I don't know what to say," Poppy sadly says, putting the baby on the camp cot which is just beside the couch she was sitting on.

"You don't have to say anything," I respond, cleaning the tear which just escaped. I don't even know why I am crying. It serves me right for being so stupid and understanding. For the past six years, I have been waiting for my husband to make my dream come true. My son is turning seven years this year, and I am still waiting on my husband to do what he promised.

It serves me right, doesn't it? Being so understanding of our financial position.

"Maybe there is an explanation to this. There must be an explanation," Poppy says, standing in the middle of the living room.

"What explanation, Poppy?" My sister disappears out of the room and walks back with

a box of tissue. I pull out a few tissue papers before she places the box on the table.

"If you ask him, maybe he..."

"If I ask him, then he is going to lie to me...straight up."

"Maybe Mom would know how to help you," she says with a shrug. I give her a weak smile. She is a newlywed and I have been at it for the past eight years. There isn't any marriage advice I don't know. Calling my mother right now would be asking for her to remind me to be strong. My two friends are out of the question. One is divorced and the only advice she would have for me would be to leave the damn dog alone. My other friend is living her single life like a pro and has no time for problems like mine.

We sit in silence until Poppy's mother-in-law walks into the room. When she asks if we need tea, I get on my feet and promise to visit them

very soon. Right now, I need to get some answers.

Back in the house, I turn Ndumiso's office upside down, searching for anything that could make sense to me.

Who is this Kim? How did Gumede Enterprise fund her? What is so special about her? How long has he been with her?

I give up the search when I feel a little lightheaded. I am crushed. Before I head to my room for a nap, I clear up the office and leave it the way I found it. He was smart enough not to leave any clues in the house. I have no access to his bank account except the joint account for the household expenses. Well, he doesn't have access to my personal account too.

A loud bang wakes me from my deep sleep. I hear a muffled voice from afar until I realize it is

my helper, Sis Martha. I summon her in, still in the blankets.

"Is Papa ka Mpho picking him up today?"

"Please call him and tell him to."

She nods. "Should I bring you tea? You haven't eaten anything today."

As if tea could solve all my problems.

"No, thanks."

I am disgusted by the sight of him but I keep a smile on my face when I pull the dining chair to join him and Mpho for supper. Before I could even settle down, my son interrogates me about why I didn't make it to pick him up from school. He always prefers that I do, because I take some time to watch him practice his

sports and meet his friends. His father never has the time to stay long at school. Come to think of it, he probably uses the time to entertain everyone else who is in his life. I thought we were through with this - these cheating chapters. If he is cheating... of which he is... it isn't his first time. And what did I do as a naive wife when I found out about this other woman once? I forgave my poor husband for the temptation. He became so loving to make it up to me but I guess it was just a front for him to continue.

"Do you want to see the doctor? I can take you there tomorrow," Ndumiso says before shoving a piece of steak into his mouth.

"I will be fine. It is just a migraine"

"Eat a salad or something and take some aspirin," he advises like a good husband he has been portraying to be.

How stupid does he think I am? How does he pose for pictures just a few days ago and think I wouldn't find out?

Didn't he know the pictures were going to be published everywhere?

Or...did he want me to find out so that he could get rid of me?

I don't understand.

And all these questions need answers.

I haven't been myself but I am doing very well convincing everyone that I am feeling sick this week. Ndumiso has a hectic week at work so he doesn't dwell much on my act. He is just playing the perfect husband and father. The guilt is probably eating him up.

“Are you feeling better?” Ndumiso questions when he finds me sitting on the edge of the bed.

It is a Thursday and I still haven't said anything to him. One of my friends, Phindile, knows about what he did to me because Poppy reached out to her when she couldn't get through to me. I am numb. I have no energy to yell at Ndumiso. I know asking him all the questions would be a waste of time. There is no way he could plan this whole thing and execute it without a version of a rehearsed story to tell me when I find out.

"No," I mumble, lifting my eyes to him.

"You still don't want to see a doctor?"

"Maybe it is my periods, they are on their way...or something. Sometimes I feel offish on a bad month."

He stops unbuttoning the shirt he has on and smiles widely.

"What if you are pregnant?" Maybe you should buy a pregnancy test."

“Yeah, maybe.”

“I would be so delighted if you are pregnant... I cannot wait for our second-born,” he says, happily darting to where I am seated. He drops a kiss on my lips and thereafter jumps back to the mirror.

He would be delighted if I am pregnant. That is all he wants from me. Babies and finding me home waiting for him after a long day at work.

I should have known.

Mpho feels neglected now that his father drops him off and picks him up from school every day. I just don't have the energy to push through any day. I haven't baked since Monday and that is so not me. I bet you, my husband hasn't figured out what the problem is because he is waiting for the day I will throw a tantrum and break things around the house like the last time I find out about his infidelity. This is different. This is

betrayal. What he did is worse than sleeping with ten women. He screwed me up. He destroyed everything I have been living for.

Just after eight-thirty, Phindile came and dragged me out of my bedroom. We are now in the living room. She is having tea, while I sit blankly staring at the TV in front of me. When Phindile notices Sis Martha walking up the stairs with a bucket and a mop, she places her cup on the table and leans closer to my couch.

“Divorce the bastard,” she whispers. “There is no coming back from this one.”

“I just want answers first.”

She sits back and reaches for her wallet. She pulls a red business card and hands it to me. An address, contact number, and a name:

Theodore Masindi are written on the small card.

“He helped me catch Lucas and his stupid lies. Pictures, phone records, bank statements, and

hotel bookings. He pulled everything. When he brought a hundred-page report, I didn't even think twice... I divorced the dog without a doubt."

"Who is he?"

"A very reputable and intelligent private investigator."

For the past days and the weekend, I have been contemplating going to the PI's office. I kept his business card at the bottom of my handbag and today, I am going to see him. Last week after Phindile left, I went to the pharmacy and bought a handful of useless pills just to keep my husband away from me. I have nothing to say to him and acting sick kept him away from me the whole weekend.

Ten minutes to eight, I am parked in front of a row of offices at a business center in Centurion. I didn't even call to make an appointment, but I am willing to talk him into helping me. I have the money but I am so embarrassed to resort to this kind of assistance. Answers are what I need, and answers are what I shall get.

I pull my bag from the backseat, put on my huge sunglasses, and make my way to the office. The door is open but there isn't anyone inside the small... dodgy-looking reception with just a two-seater couch, a glass coffee table and a counter. Just from my observation, the dirty magazines which are on top of the coffee table have not been touched in ages. Taking my sunglasses off, I walk around the room, looking for any sign of the receptionist...or anyone.

"Oh, the first candidate," a man's voice startles me. I turn to find a tall man standing by the door which leads to what seems like an office. He

has his eyes glued on a report he is reading. It is not even eight o'clock but his not-so-white anymore shirt is already wrinkled and folded on the sleeves. The black-tie he has on is just...hanging loosely on his neck.

I clear my throat and straighten my back, summoning the little confidence left in me.

“Morning... I...”

“You are here for an interview, I know.” He closes his file and lifts his eyes to me. He could be a fine gentleman if he took care of himself.

“You are the first to arrive, you got the job. Tell everybody else that the interviews are canceled.” He marches back to his office, leaving me confused. When he returns, he continues, “I hate these stupid cases.” He sighs deeply and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Why do women love doing this? Paying so much money for us to follow their husbands around? If you suspect your husband is cheating, he

definitely is cheating on you. If it didn't bring so much money into my business, I wouldn't even bother. But jeez, I hate doing it." His face tells it all. He really loathes the task. "Right now, for the whole day, I have to follow a grown-ass man around to see what he is doing and catch his ass to report to his miserable wife." He marches back to the other door that leads to another office and walks back with a huge camera. "Look... that's my office and that one over there is going to be yours. I'll see you after lunch... so until then...just find something to do. Oh, you can start with filing in your office. Just find a filing system that works and makes life easy for us."

"Sorry, sir..." I try to stop him but he marches to the main door. I don't stop calling after him.

He stops, checks his wristwatch and says, "Listen, if I don't go now...I'll miss a breakfast date between a freaking cheating husband and

his bloody third side chick...and I won't be able to tail them for the rest of the day." With that, he darts out of the building.

Ohh-kay!

Still frozen on the same spot, my phone rings from my bag.

"Did you find him?" Phindile asks the minute I answer the phone.

"I don't know if it is him but I met someone..."

"Talkative and all over the place kind of a guy..."

"That's right."

She chuckles. "I also found him...different. But he knows his job. Ohhh...and he is too hot, isn't he?"

"He is untidy."

"Right! What did he say? Did he take your case? He is normally fully booked."

“He just left me here.”

“What do you mean he just left you there?”

“He told me I got the job and left me in the office.” I don’t tell her about how embarrassed I was when he said all the things he did about women spying on their cheating husbands. And to think I was here for the very same thing he loathed? I felt every word he said.

This wasn’t a great idea.

“Okay, I am confused.”

“I am wearing that black suit you love so much. Maybe he thought I was here for an interview... and because I was the first one in his office, he concluded that I was here for a job.”

Phindile laughs. I do too - for the first time since last Monday.

“Why don’t you take the job? You needed one anyways.” That is what I told her last week. I

need a job and a game plan. I need to take charge of my life - without Ndumiso.

A lady in a grey formal dress walks into the premises. I hang up the phone after promising to call my friend when I get home.

“Good morning,” she greets, scanning me from the black heels I have on to my friendly face.

“Are you also here for the interview?”

I clear my throat, searching for the right words to convey the message I was given.

“Sorry, the interviews are canceled.”

“What?”

“I know,” I respond, putting my handbag on the counter. Behind the counter was supposed to be a chair for a receptionist but there isn't any. This office does need a lot of work. I am just a pastry chef but I believe I wasn't just brought here to spy on my husband.

Mind-blowing, I know!

“You are also here for the interview, aren’t you?”
the candidate asks, narrowing her eyes at me.

“No, I work here.”

Please like and share!

Heart of GOLD

#3

THEO

It is always the rich dudes.

I shake my head, snapping a hundred pictures for my client. I wonder how my client is going to handle the news of her bastard husband. This man is a piece of trash. This is the third side

chick that I am capturing and I think I will stop here. As strong as she might be, she won't handle the long list I found prior to this exercise. Three is more than enough evidence to prove whatever she wants to prove in court.

The man kisses his lover before pulling her chair to help her stand after their intimate breakfast date. I bet you he doesn't do this for his wife. I bet he doesn't even remember when last he took his wife out for breakfast. I snap more pictures, following them to his white Porsche car. He opens the passenger's door and helps her in. And again, I am certain he doesn't do this for his wife. When he runs to the driver's seat, I place my camera on the car seat, pick my coffee cup to take a sip, and thereafter start the car.

When I became a private investigator, I never thought this was going to be anything close to what I would spend my day doing. I thought I

would be getting serious and intense cases only. Those do come in but after a little while and unless it is a television project or a state government project, they don't pay too well. It is usually families looking for their missing members. Or a kidnapping case after the police fail to do their job – sometimes I do those free of charge when the families are shuttered and cannot afford my services. But the day the first miserable wife called in to beg for my services, I haven't turned back. Women are ready to pay any amount to find out the truth about their husbands. Ever since I succeeded in getting the concrete evidence for my first client, my office is forever flooded with different women desperate for my assistance. I used to refuse but the more I do, the more they tempt me with more money - it was like one dangling a bone in front of a dog. I couldn't resist.

This is a norm with these men. Dining. Hotels

and spending money. What I don't understand is where they get all this energy and time to cheat? I bet with all hell of money they have, they can pay everyone else to make more money for them.

When the car stops at the entrance of a hotel in Sandton, I park on the side of the road and hurry not to miss them before they disappear in.

While they check-in, I take a couch on the far end of the room. I have done this so many times, there are less chances of getting caught. Reading the receptionist's lips from where I sit, I get the room number.

Room 402.

Guests rarely pay attention to a random guy by the elevator. So I wait for my guests and when I see them head to the elevator, I press the button to call it down. Pretending to be on a phone call, I try to pay no attention to them.

Little do they know. Laughing on the phone, I let

them in first since I know the elevator might need the room key to go up. Once inside, Mr Thabethe places the guest key on the slot.

“Fourth floor, please?” I quickly say before he presses the button, to avoid them thinking I am following them. I continue to laugh and make a conversation on the phone until the cart reaches our destination. Before they walk out of the elevator, I shift closer to the woman’s handbag to plug a bug. A very small black device that picks voices and sounds from as far as 5 meters. It is perfect to pick voices in a confined space.

“You are here already, okay... wait for me at the reception,” I say, pressing the ground floor before the door closes.

I hate this task because it is not easy to execute. Some hotels’ security is watertight and getting closer to the accused to plug bugs is never easy. Sometimes I risk getting caught.

Sometimes I get caught and have to pretend to be a jealous boyfriend or something.

I just hate doing this.

Jumping into my car, I swipe to the recording App. Everything my client wants to hear will be here.

I had totally forgotten that I left someone in the office. The door is wide open and two people are standing in the reception. One is my new employee – I forgot to ask her name when I left. The other is a lady in a cleaning uniform, carrying a bucket of soapy water.

“Hello,” I greet, looking around the mess that is around the room. The lady in a suit, my employee, startles slightly and turns to where I

stand. I don't know, but I think she gets frightened easily. She relaxes, smiles at the cleaning lady and walks to where I am.

"I am sorry... I didn't know what time you would be back. She walked in, looking for a cleaning job so I hired her for just a day to dust the place around and turn the place upside down. I'll pay from my pocket because I didn't get your approval. She just needs R300."

"No. I'll refund you," I respond, looking around at how fresh the room looks. I normally do hire these walk-in cleaners but they don't clean the place like today. Unless if my employee has a hand in telling them what to do. "I didn't get your name."

She puts her hand up for a handshake. "I am Mrs... Uhm... I am Abigail Gumede but please call me by my first name. Abigail." My eyes immediately land on her left ring finger where a huge diamond stone sits. It is quite massive

and looks extremely expensive.

“Mrs Abigail Gumede,” I repeat after her. Just Abigail, I mean. “I am Theodore Masindi. I prefer to be called Theo. Not Sir, not Mr Masindi or anything else. Theo is just fine.” I cross the reception to get to my office. From the drawer, I pull the forms I need her to fill in for me to register her to my employee program. Also, the employment contract that I had ready yesterday. The last time I had one full-time employee was more than six months ago when Glen resigned. If it wasn't that he needed to relocate, he would still be working for and with me. When he left, he suggested that I hire a woman. She doesn't necessarily have to be a qualified investigator but all she has to do is run the office and assist here and there. He advised that I need a woman's touch in the office. He advised that a female employee can bring life to the place and make it more welcoming. I don't know much but

I surely took his advice.

Heading back to the reception area... I find Mrs Abigail standing by the door, answering to a phone call. She has abandoned the blazer she had on this morning. Only now do I notice the shoes she is wearing. The red bottoms are expensive, aren't they? And now that I pay enough attention, for the first time, I can tell the suit she has on is not just a mere Woolworths suit.

What the hell was she doing here looking for a job that could buy her just two of her attires?

She hangs up the phone and turns, finding me staring at her. Dammit, I shouldn't have stared for long.

“Well... I need you to fill this up for me. You can go with the forms and bring them back tomorrow morning.” She hesitates and something flashes in her eyes before she clears

her throat and walks to where I am. She receives the forms and focuses on scanning through them. "Look, I normally start at seven o'clock every day but you don't need to be here that early. I don't care much about your ins and outs, as long as the job is done perfectly, I am happy. I leave the office at four o'clock each day."

"What are my duties?" she asks.

"Didn't you read all that up on the advert?"

"Oh...yes..." she drops her eyes to the floor. "My nerves are... just all over the place."

"But anyway, we will still go through the performance agreement and all...so I'll have the duties on the agreement." She nods. "If you are done for the day... you can be excused. Can't keep you here on your first day."

"I'll leave when the cleaner is done," she responds.

“Do you have cricket after school?” I ask my eight-year-old son as he opens the door. I am parked outside the school on Thursday morning.

“Yes.”

“What time should I pick you up?”

“Four-thirty,” Alu responds at the time he closes his door. I don’t know what to do with him anymore. Since the death of my wife two years ago, he hasn’t been himself. Nothing I try works. The therapist could not get into his head. My mother is too old to entertain his mood swings, calling him spoilt. I, as his father, know that his issues are deeper than being spoilt. I don’t spoil him. He probably gets the bare minimum from me.

It is seven o'clock when I unlock the office. Today, I am reporting and delivering the case findings to Ms Moipone at eight-thirty. I am dreading the meeting – they are never nice.

When the door opens again, it is just after seven-thirty. The same time Mrs. Abigail arrived to work yesterday. I quickly pull my papers which are scattered all over the table and throw them into the drawer. I don't know, but since Monday I have realized that Mrs Abigail is too neat for my liking. She is my employee; it shouldn't move me. And on top of that, she is a woman so she is supposed to be the way she is. But, still, I just get a feeling that I should do better.

A few minutes later, she knocks on my door like she did yesterday and greet me. Today she has a transparent container in hand.

"I made these," she says, placing the container on my table. "I am used to fresh bakes every day so I woke up early to make these for my

family.”

“Thank you,” I respond, attempting not to jump on the scones – I missed breakfast and these things smell so divine.

“I’ll be in my office if you need me.”

“Ahhh, yes, we are meeting in an hour. When Ms Moipone gets here, please join us for her report session.”

“Noted,” she says before walking out of my office.

The minute I hear her chair move from her office, I grab the container and pull one scone. I buy scones just outside my office sometimes but I have never seen anything so perfect. The softness. The smell.

What on earth is this woman doing here? I am tempted to ask her when I shove the rest of the scone in my mouth. I haven’t received her background check report so I can only wonder.

Just as I devour the third and last scone, there is a knock on my office door and Mr Molepo appears before me. Shoving the huge scone into my mouth, I immediately get on my feet, ready to welcome him. I search around the room for a tissue paper but I don't have any, so I just dust off my hands.

"I see I am disturbing your breakfast," he says, shrugging off his jacket and hanging it on a stand next to my door.

I swallow fast. "I was just finishing off."

"I won't take long," he says.

"Please take a seat." I show him the seat while I hurry back to mine. I am happy I cleared the table a minute ago.

"I have a biggest case for you. A biggest in your career and I am just wondering if your institution can handle it."

"I can take on the challenge, Sir," I quickly

respond, making myself comfortable on the chair. Mr Molepo used to be my boss when I worked for one of the local intelligence agencies that report to the state. He taught me most of the things I know about investigation. He doesn't just show up on your door. He always means business. He takes out his phone and switches it off. I do the same, for security reasons. The last thing you want is your phone hacked and people listening to your conversation through your phone mic.

"I need to know if you can be able to put a few cases aside to focus on this one? It is going to need you to pull up your game. And you are going to need to put all the stops and exhausts all your resources."

"I don't have any major cases."

No cases at all.

He lays it down for me. It is a major money

laundering case with so many business men involved. Mr Molepo could not give the case to one of the agencies that report to the main SA Intelligence because he believes there have an informant, who cannot be trusted.

“I’ll take it,” I quickly say when he finishes laying down what he expects to be done. I have freelancers who can assist me. I already know that the cheque is going to be fat.

Mr Molepo gets on his feet, walks to the coat stand and picks his jacket.

“Oh, I was welcomed by a young lady at the reception.”

“Yes. My new colleague.”

“I don’t know why I thought she was your woman and just visiting you at work...maybe because she gave me a warm wifely welcome...,” he says, putting the jacket on.

“Oh no...” I laugh. “She is even married.”

“Ah! So it means you are still obligated to go on a date with Tshepiso next week,” he responds with a laugh.

“That’s right.” I lost on a dartboard game last week when I joined my old colleagues for a few drinks. Christopher, the winner, then dared me to go on a date with Tshepiso. I counted on her to refuse, but she didn’t. I am meeting her next week and I am not looking forward.

I walk my guest to the parking lot. Only when I see his car drive away do I walk back to the office. Instead of heading to my office, I turn towards Mrs Abigail’s office. I tap on the door and she asks me to come inside.

“Can I help with anything?” she nervously asks when I walk inside.

“Do you have more of those scones?” I see her blush or smile a little, making me feel like an idiot. I am her boss from crying out loud. I can't

be asking for scones. “I’m kidding... but they were nice.” I clear my throat. “We have a big case coming up, so I wanted to get down to training as soon as possible.”

“Oh, sure, yes,” she says, jumping to her feet. Today she is wearing a black skirt and a crisp white shirt tucked in. She picks her yellow diary and a pen from her drawer.

“Okay. You can join me in my office,” I tell her while leading the way. I get settled on my chair while she pulls the other chair.

“I’ll bring more scones tomorrow,” she says, her eyes on the container which is now empty. The container I devoured in less than fifteen minutes of receiving it.

Heart of GOLD

#4

ABIGAIL

Now this, when Theo guides me through what he is going to need assistance with on this new case, confirms that Private Investigation is his calling. The man speaks with passion. The man has the widest smile on his face and he oozes confidence.

He is showing me a list of applications he uses to track information. The main door opening grabs both our attention. Since Theo's door is open, I am able to see a young woman standing in the reception area.

"I'll welcome her in," I say, placing my diary on the table and getting on my feet. I hurry to where she stands and greet her.

"I am here for a meeting with Theo," the lady says.

“Are you Ms Moipone?” I ask with a smile, trying to make her comfortable.

“Yes, Moipone Thabethe,” she advises, shaking my hand.

“Please come this way. We are ready for you.”

I lead the way to Theo's office. While she takes the chair I was seated on, I drag one from the corner of the room and place it closer to her. I can smell her fear as Theo lays down a file in front of her. She is here for her report and I understand her panic. She already knows the truth but just needs confirmation. What she finds out today might change her whole life...or maybe not.

I haven't gotten the courage to tell Theo why I made it to his office on Monday morning. It was for the same reason Mrs Thabethe is sitting with us today. When I signed the employment agreement, I had promised to come clean

before handing it to him but when I had to tell him, I freaked out. From what I have seen since my arrival here, Theo is a nice guy. He wouldn't be angry at me for how the events turned out but the fact that I lied to him all these days makes me feel sick.

I'll tell him next week. I know what I need to do. I just need to bake a perfect cake for him or something of that nature to bribe him.

A smile creeps on my face when I remember his request. He told me he was kidding but when I saw that empty container, I knew he enjoyed my scones. I am not shocked; everyone asks me for a recipe whenever I have them taste. But even when I give up my recipe, their end product will never match mine.

Theo introduces me as his partner and when he asks if I could be in the meeting, she didn't mind. The first thing I read about on my employment contract was NDA and Theo emphasized to her

that what we discuss here ends here.

“Is he cheating with a woman called Nthabiseng?” Mrs. Thabethe spits out before Theo says anything about the case. Her hands tremble as she clears her throat and shifts on her chair. Theo looks uncomfortable. I can just imagine how he feels. I feel bad for her and to think I am in the same position as she is...is mind-blowing. She wants answers that her husband can never give her. She wants answers to either move on with her life or continue to live with a lie. She wants answers for closure, or just to mastermind a game plan. Either way, she deserves answers.

“Nthabiseng is one of them,” Theo responds and a gasp escapes Mrs. Thabethe.

“One of them? I thought it was just her because she keeps harassing me on social media,” Mrs. Thabethe says. “Who else is there?”

Theo lines up pictures of three different women on the table. My heart breaks for her. Her tears come easily, because as she picks the pictures... tears are running down her face.

“I found a long list of women... and three sons,” Theo informs.

Children!

Wow.

She zones out while Theo gives her an update. When I stare at him, I can tell that he is trying to be lenient with her. The situation is worse than she thinks. He places a USB on top of the thick file with all the documents he acquired. His spending on these women. All their text conversation and any details that confirms her husband’s infidelity. The USB has the audio which he tells her was recorded from the hotel visit on Monday.

This feels like torture but I understand so much,

the desire to know to truth can push you to this. When done with his torturous report, Theo rests on the chair and sighs deeply. The room is filled with Mrs Thabethe's sobs. I cannot help but rub my hand on her back. When she gets on her feet, I stand with her.

"Can I give you a hug?" I ask, not able to resist. The tissue she has been using to clean her face is wet. I really feel bad for her and also feel bad that she has to go through this in a room with strangers.

I embrace her tightly, allowing her to let it all out. I am not one to judge, so I let her cry until she pulls out and grabs the file.

"Can I maybe get you a therapist or something?" I ask and she shakes her head, making her way out of the office. I follow after her and walk her outside, promising that I will check up on her and if she needs me to refer her to someone, she should just let me know.

Walking back into Theo's office, I find him already paging through some files.

How does he do that?

"Maybe you shouldn't be too attached," he says when I slump on the chair.

"Maybe we should, you know?" I say.

"I am just glad that I won't be taking those until we are done with this massive case."

The following day, my alarm goes off at 04:30 and before I could get up, Ndumiso grabs me by my waist.

"Where are you going?" he mumbles, pulling me close to him. I am the last to come to bed and I am the first to jump out. Yesterday I woke up early to bake and it improved my mood. I want

to do the same today before going to work.

“I need to bake,” I say, fighting out of his arms. Since the beginning of the week, he has been nagging me for sex and I am running out of excuses. I don’t want to have sex with him now. And how do I do that when we share the bed?

“I am not going to the office today. You can bake later while I take Mpho to school,” he says.

I freeze.

He doesn’t know about the job.

Normally I leave the house to drop off Mpho at school and by the time I come back from the school, he is already gone for work. He is usually home after I pick Mpho from sports.

This past week, I could get away with it. I wasn’t ready to tell him. His betrayal made me be this kind of a woman. A woman who lies.

“I have an interview today,” I say and he immediately sits up. This is at 04h30, and the

man cannot hide his shock. He reaches for his side lamp and switches it on. I cannot even miss his frown.

“What interview?”

“A job interview.”

“Why am I hearing about this now?”

“I... I got a call yesterday and... I thought I should give it a try.”

“Is it me?” he questions, looking and sounding wounded.

“What about you?”

“Am I failing to provide for you? So much that you have to go look for a job?”

“No... this has nothing to do with you,” I say, getting up from the bed and reaching for the gown. Yes, it has everything to do with him. Had he gotten me my bakery, I wouldn't be going behind his back like this. I wouldn't be looking

for a job.

“Then...where is this coming from?” he asks.

I am so tempted to yell at his face and tell him exactly what is going on. It took me so long to realise what kind of a husband my very husband is. He doesn't mind spending on my clothes and all the gifts he showers me but never wants to invest in my business. I enter the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face.

“Abby, am I missing something?” he asks, standing behind me.

“No, you are not,” I respond after spitting the water into the basin.

“When were you going to tell me about the interview?”

“When you wake up.”

“You have been trying to keep distance for the past week... You were sick, you got better... I

cannot even touch my own wife and today you just woke up because you want to bake and go to an interview?”

“I wake up to bake almost every day... what is wrong now?”

“The interview. Where is this interview?”

“It is definitely not at Gumede Enterprise,” I spit out. My husband has a whole Enterprise but he has never thought of squeezing me in. Not that I blame him... I also didn't beg for a job. But he has no right to come here and claim that looking for a job is wrong.

“You know things at Gumede Enterprise are not as great as before. We are trying to...”

Lies!

Lies!

Lies!

He is making me sick right now.

“Then let me go try somewhere else for a job. I am no longer getting baking orders...so I am bored. The doctor said I should get up and get busy to avoid anxiety,” I lie. That is what I have been doing lately.

He sighs deeply and hugs me from the back.

“I miss my wife,” he mumbles, landing a kiss on the back of my neck.

“I am here...and I am going to be late,” I respond, cutting his lovey-dovey moment short. I head to the kitchen to start baking. He joins me, trying to help me. Now that I know his shenanigans, he becomes extremely nice when he feels guilty.

Today I made sure to fill up a bigger container of scones. When Theo sees it, his eyes light up.

If it wasn't the reaction I am used to, I would think he is smitten. We go through the training once more and this job gets exciting by the minute.

"I love my job but no one can keep secrets from me," he jokes when he is showing me to track a phone call. This is not a joke. I can literally trace anyone and get to know their business.

Wait til I get my hands on it.

During lunch, when I am back at my office and having a moment to myself, Theo knocks on my door and tells me I can be excused for the day. In preparations for the upcoming case, we are not taking any jobs. Mr Molepo is delivering the case on Monday and that is when we can start working.

Since Ndumiso will pick Mpho up from school, I can choose to go home and face my husband or I could go take a stroll at the mall.

I choose the former because I have to get to the bottom of this and convince my husband that I got the job today and I need to keep the job. Ndumiso had sent me an SMS earlier, asking how the interview went so I take the opportunity to tell him it went very well and I have great news to share with him. He promises to take me out to celebrate. I wish to tell him not to bother but then again, I have to play the happy wife.

It took me this Kim situation to realise that my husband is an idiot and doesn't care about anyone but himself. No one in the world can betray someone like that and carry on with their lives like nothing happened.

Mpho has a sleepover at a friend's place so before going on our date, we drop him there. Ndumiso begged us to have a perfect night out.

At our dinner table, while we wait for our starters, he takes my hand and kisses it before

smiling at me.

“I am sorry about this morning,” he starts. “I was just shocked that you kept such great news from me. I thought we shared everything.”

That is what I thought too.

“I understand,” I respond, trying to pull my hand from him. I do it with diligence so that I do not show how angry I am at him.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Yes... I just need to see the doctor tomorrow morning. I finish the vaginal cream she had prescribed so I want to find out if I need more or if everything is back to normal.”

He frowns and shifts uncomfortably. “You didn’t tell me...”

Of course, I didn’t tell him. What other excuse do I have to keep him away from me for a little longer? I hate it when he touches me. The

pictures of Kim come to mind when I look at him.

“I did last week. It was just thrush... I hope,” I respond.

“So, tell me about your new job,” he says, picking his wine glass and taking a sip.

“Just some admin work for some consulting company. Nothing big.”

“Babe... I cannot imagine you doing some admin work when I can take care of you. I buy you everything you want. I give you everything you need. What will my friends say?”

“You don’t have to tell anyone,” I say. “Nothing changes. I am back home before you are home... I mean, I’ll be home before you are home. I will stick drop Mpho at school and pick him up after. Nothing changes.”

“What about your baking?” he asks.

“Are you ready to fund me?” I ask, my eyes aiming at his. He drops his eyes and if I didn’t know better, I was going to think that he is disappointed in himself because he is struggling to make me happy. But because he is a snake, I know it is all guilt.

“Give me another year or two... things are starting to look great.” I pick my glass and aim at him for a toast. He clinks his glass with mine.

“I can wait another year,” I say.

“Maybe we can make another baby while we wait,” he says, his eyes dancing with excitement.

I pick up my phone from the table.

“Oh, yeah,” I respond, setting up a reminder on my phone to get the contraceptive implant.

No one is going to trap me.

Heart of GOLD

#5

THEO

I do have a life outside my private investigation world. It is just unexciting but I am so used to it by now. Between Alu and me, I am the first to wake up. Only during the week when the nanny is here can I go for a 10 km run. On weekends, when she is off, I settle to workout in my yard. Since I started my PI work, I have been a little paranoid about who might want to get to me. Maybe someone out there who I have blasted would want to come back at me for revenge. So, leaving my son alone, even for a thirty minute run is not an option.

I pick the rope from the pavement and start my fifteen minutes skipping exercise just to close off my routine. I try to stay fit. With my kind of

job, I don't have a choice. Also, those scones Mrs Abigail brought to the office yesterday did a number on me. She brought enough for a few days or so, but did I not almost finish the whole container in one sitting? I left a few and brought them home, only for Alu to empty the damn container.

My watch vibrates a few times, so I stop skipping. Fifteen minutes challenge done. I am almost out of breathe as I make my way to pick my water bottle and my phone. While gulping the water, I go through my phone. There is a text from a number I do not know. Opening the message, I sigh deeply. The text message comes from Tshepiso. I make a little prayer, hoping that she wants to cancel.

'Hey, I hope you are good. I cannot wait for our date on Wednesday. There is a new restaurant I want to try out. Are you keen to try it out with me? Tshepiso.'

I am not lucky!

I don't know, but I find texting to be a little intimate for me. The back and forth is just not for me. I prefer making a call and get done with the conversation once and for all. And why is she texting me on Saturday? ... regarding a date which is only taking place on Wednesday??

I dial the number.

"Hey Theo," Tshepiso answers joyfully. It is either I caught her off guard or she is really excited to answer this call.

"How are you?" I ask while I lean on the wall.

"Been good. How have you been?"

"Been good too." I sigh. "Look...about Wednesday..."

"Do you want to cancel?" she asks quietly. I wish I could but it would be so heartless of me.

"No. Not really. I just wanted to find out how far

the restaurant is. It is during the week, so I can only do just an hour and have to rush home to help my son with homework.” This is a story of my life. At least some times he does get his homework done at after-care but with all the sports practice, he doesn’t get to finish his work at school.

“That is not a problem. We can pick somewhere else because the place is in Sandton. It is a little far.”

“Let’s do Brooklyn. It is the closest.”

“Perfect. Send me the details. I am so excited.”

Send her the details? What do I know about restaurants? I haven’t gone out on a date since my wife passed away. I don’t know what is popping now. I even have no idea what shops are in the malls.

“I will,” I respond before excusing myself from the call.

I need to find a place for a date.

Truly speaking, I understand what Christopher is trying to do. My personal life is depressing. I am miserable and I am making my son's life miserable too. He might not tell me, but I know that I am failing him somewhere. I just don't know what I need to do.

I pick my gym kit from the pavement and drop everything into a storage box in the garage. Walking into the house, I find Alu lying on the couch watching TV. He doesn't have a cricket match so he will probably spend the whole day lying on this couch.

"Morning," I greet as I cross to the open-plan kitchen.

"Good morning."

"I am making breakfast, what do you feel like?" I ask, already opening the fridge and picking the butter and cheese.

“Can you buy more of those scones you brought from work yesterday?” he asks.

I smile. This is the longest sentence he has said to me, willingly, in ages.

“My colleague brought some for me yesterday.”

“Can you ask him where he bought them?” he asks, his eyes illumination with excitement. I am loving this interaction and I don’t want to pop the bubble as yet.

“Let me ask her,” I tell my son while I pick my phone from the counter.

What do I say to her?

Am I even allowed to call her on a weekend? At, what time is it now? 09:30?

I search for the email she has sent me, containing her forms and the employment contract. I take her cell number and dial it. Her phone rings until it goes on voicemail. I try

again and before I could hang up, it is answered.

“Mommy’s phone, hello,” an overly excited voice says. I smile. This is how my son is supposed to be.

“Put it on speaker, Mpho... put it on speaker and place it here,” Mrs Abigail’s voice comes to the phone. In a few seconds, Mrs Abigail greets, her voice loud enough.

“Mrs Abigail... good morning,” I say, scratching my head.

“Theo! Hi. Sorry I am busy mixing a dough... so I couldn’t answer the phone.”

“It’s okay.”

“Is everything okay? Do you need assistance?”

“Errr... my son was asking where we could buy the same scones as the ones you brought to work yesterday. He tasted and is craving for some.” I laugh nervously. This is embarrassing

but if it can make Alu's day, I would do it any day. "Maybe you know a restaurant we could go to...and..."

"They don't make them like I do," she says with a chuckle. I so believe her. "I am baking right now...so I can make some for you guys."

"Ahhh...Mrs. Abigail..."

"I don't mind. It gives me joy anyway..."

"Mommy loves baking," someone says.

"Mpho... stop that and go watch TV," Mrs Abigail reprimands. "That's my son...sorry. Look, I am taking Mpho to Menlyn Maine. If you are able to meet me there, I can have some for you. Say...around 11:30?"

I lift my eyes to Alu, who has his eyes on me, eagerly waiting for my colleague's answer.

"Okay, not a problem. Thank you," I answer.

"Great." We stay silent until she chuckles and

says, "Oh, my hands are tied up. I cannot hang up."

"Oh yes," I blurt out before hitting the end button, feeling like a fool.

When I give Alu the great news, he smiles sweetly. I place the phone back on the counter and continue to make us sandwiches. We will definitely feast on the scones during lunch.

At 11:30 I am parked at Menlyn Maine. When Mrs. Abigail tells me that she is ten minutes late, I tell her where our car is and roll down all the windows. Alu is sitting at the back, buried on the game on his phone.

As promised, in ten minutes I notice Mrs. Abigail walking towards the car with her son.

She has Nike gym gear on and so is his son. I quickly jump out of the car and wait for her to reach me.

“Sorry... I left the house a little late,” she says as she stops beside me. She is holding an even bigger container of scones. This is becoming too embarrassing. Very embarrassing.

“Did you invite my new friend to join me?” Mrs Abigail’s son asks when he notices Alu at the backseat. I turn, to find Alu staring back at the boy.

“Oh, is this your son?” Mrs Abigail says, handing me the container and walking to Alu’s window. She turns to me. “Are you guys in a hurry? He can join us at Bounce.”

I shift my eyes to my son. He is as quiet as he always is and I don’t even know what is in his mind.

“Mom can’t do the obstacle course,” the son

announces. I now remember his name is Mpho.

“I try,” Mrs Abigail laughs.

“What is his name?” Mpho asks. I can tell he is slightly younger than Alu but his confidence is appealing.

“Aluwani,” I respond. Alu still doesn’t say anything. This could be better than lying on the couch the whole day. So I open the door for him and tell him to come out so that he can join his new friend. Luckily my son is not rebellious. He is just unhappy. He slowly steps out of the car and hands me his phone. I place the container in the back seat, roll up all the windows and lock the doors.

As we walk into the mall, Mrs. Abigail does the introductions before Mpho grabs Alu’s hand and drags him to Bounce Inc. I haven’t been here before so, I don’t know the drift. Mrs. Abigail asks if I am jumping and when I tell her

'no', she steps to the counter and buy tickets. She returns to where I am standing with the boys and hands a pair of socks to Alu. Only now when she and her son takes their sneakers off do I notice they are wearing the same socks. Mpho drags Alu by the hand and they disappear to the trampolines.

Mrs. Abigail throws her items into the locker and shuts it. Before she takes the same direction as the boys, she shows me where to get drinks.

Making my way to get some drinks, I take this opportunity to scroll through my phone for any emails. Just a few I need to attend on Monday but nothing urgent. I also notice the background check on Mrs. Abigail. I still haven't gone through it yet... and getting down to it right now would be weird. Very weird. I'll go through it in the office. I only respond to one enquiry for service – another spouse investigation. I gladly

decline.

I order a cup of coffee for myself then three PowerAde and water for the jumpers. Receiving my order, I slide my phone into my pocket and grab the paper bag with the drinks.

I am not one to cry and I don't remember when last I did just that... but right now I am teary when my eyes land on my son. He and Mpho are teaching Mrs. Abigail to flip over and when she gets it wrong, they both laugh hysterically at her. I freeze in one spot watching Alu try to explain to her how it is done. I didn't even know he could do that. When Mrs. Abigail finally gives up, Mpho jumps off from the trampoline and runs towards another jumping section. Alu calls his name and joyfully sprints after him.

Monday morning, I am seated in my office with a cup of coffee. I am going through Mrs Abigail's background check. She is my employee but hell, it feels like I am invading her privacy. The report is long but I have done this so many times I know where to look and what to look for, instead of going through useless information.

Abigail Gumede.

Married to Mr Ndumiso Gumede.

Perfect credit score.

No criminal record.

Culinary Arts degree which was more than obtained seven years ago.

I frown when I get to the next page. There is no previous employment history and reference checks. I scroll to the next page and still, there is nothing. How come? There is no way the report is wrong, there is nothing this

background check cannot find.

The reception door opens and that is how I know she is in. It is either her or Mr Molepo's messenger dropping the file I am waiting for.

"Good morning Theo," she calls out from the reception before I hear her getting settled in her office. She normally does that to let me know she is in.

I close her report and move on the next email. I gladly decline another spouse investigation request. The only request that I find worth trying is of a missing young woman, aged 24, from Witbank. I move the email to my case folder before responding to the email. This I can do. While I wait for the client to respond back, I get on my feet and pick Mrs. Abigail's two containers. I have placed R500 inside just to refund her for Saturday's tickets. I cross the reception area to her office.

“Are you busy?” I ask, since her door is open. Today, she looks nothing like the woman who was jumping all over the arena on Saturday. She has changed her hair to a glossy expensive-looking weave or wig...whatever... but it is neatly styled. I cannot tell if the green top is a shirt or a part of a dress but whatever it is suits her.

“Not yet.”

“Oh, sorry I didn’t greet. Good morning,” I say while placing the containers on the table.

“Thank you for these. It wasn’t necessary but thank you.”

“It is no trouble,” she responds.

“And... I cannot thank you enough for Saturday. My son had a blast. He cannot stop talking about the experience.” I don’t bother telling her what is wrong with him.

“He looks troubled,” she sadly says. I guess we are touching that topic.

“Since his mother passed away.” This part of my life defeats me.

“Oh, I am sorry...”

“It’s okay. If only there was a way to keep him as happy as he was on Saturday,” I say with a sad chuckle.

“Maybe Mpho and I can help. Believe me... I have to keep up with my son and I’m taking this opportunity to make memories with him before he grows up. If Mpho manages to pull me out of my issues with these things he makes me do... he can surely do the same for his peer.”

“Mrs. Abigail...”

“It is no trouble. Believe me, I also need something therapeutic and my son gives me that. I need to put my focus on something else before I lose my mind,” she sadly says.

I am speechless.

I sigh deeply, ready to leave.

“Ah, tell me... did you work somewhere else before you came here?” she shakes her head and I continue, “The post needed someone with two years’ experience... where you just trying your luck?”

“No,” she quietly say, dropping her head.

“Oh...” I frown at her.

“Please don’t fire me.” She panics and quickly gets on her feet. She sighs deeply and continues, “I just think it was fate that I was here that day.”

Fate?

I cross my arms and wait for her to explain.

Heart of GOLD

#6

ABIGAIL

Theo stares at me, waiting for my answer and I am here losing my breath. The thing is, I was planning to tell him. I was just waiting for the right time.

“I wanted to be honest with you...” I swallow hard. “I say it was fate because I came here for something else and you concluded that I was here for the interview. I was meant to come here.”

“What were you here for?” Theo asks, narrowing his eyes at me. Does he think I am here to harm him and his company or to spy on him? He has mentioned how careful we should be about bringing people in. Some of the rules that are on the contract are that no personal visitors are allowed in this office without proper screening.

Also, should there be a need, he would require me to give him access to dig into my communication with my friends and family. The contract was very clear about transparency. I signed that employment contract, with all those rules and right now I feel bad for keeping things from him.

Theo doesn't move. He still has his hands folded to his chest and he is still staring down at me like I am a criminal. For the first time since I met him, I feel intimidated by him. He is a PI, I should have known that he will find the truth about me without even asking. And right now, the look on his face is unreadable.

"What were you here for?" he asks again, pulling me back from my thoughts.

"Spouse investigation," I whisper, and quickly drop my eyes to the floor because I am embarrassed about it.

“What were you here for? I can’t hear you,” his voice is loud now.

If this is how he interrogates people to get answers, then he is surely intimidating. He no longer looks like the Theo I know.

“I was here to request for spouse investigation,” I say, my voice audible enough. He stares at me for a while without saying a word. I stare back at him, pleading with my eyes and praying that he sees through me. This is my truth. I quietly say, not shifting my eyes from his, “I was here to ask that you investigate my husband. And right now, I give you the approval to go through my phone to check all my chats with my friends and sister.”

He stays quiet and my eyes are getting teary.

“So, you were here for spouse investigation... and I concluded that you were one of the interview candidates?” he finally asks, his face

no longer sour.

“And you offered the job... and I was looking for a job... and you didn’t give me a chance to explain because you were in a hurry,” I blurt out, praying that he doesn’t get pissed.

“But you could have told me when I came back from the office.” It is not helping that he is becoming softer. My tears are at the edge, ready to fall.

“I know I should have said something,” I say, still not moving my teary eyes from him. The only thing that I am hoping for is that the tears don’t fall in front of him.

Theo sighs deeply.

My heart is ready to fly out of my chest... and if he doesn’t say anything, I am going to lose my breath.

“Well...” He shrugs, before shoving his hands in his pockets. “I am the one who should have

followed the protocol before hiring you.”

“I am a fast learner. I promise I will do an outstanding job.”

“I don’t doubt that Mrs. Abigail,” he says. I had thought the next time he calls me Mrs. Abigail, I was going to correct him but right now, is not the right time. He can keep calling me that if I get to keep my job.

“I swear I was going to tell you.”

“I don’t doubt that either,” he says.

“So... do I get to keep the job?” I ask, lifting my trembling crossed fingers to the air where he could see them.

He stares at me for a little while before saying, “The job is yours. Anyway, if you are a spy, I’ll catch you.”

“I swear I am not.”

He nods before walking out of the room. The

minute I take a deep breath, my tears finally fall. I crash on the chair and quickly dig into my handbag for my mini make-up bag so that I could clean my face up. Before I could even unzip it, Theo walks back into my office.

“Is your husband cheating on you?” he asks, standing at the end of my desk.

“I believe so.”

“Then if you believe so, why did you need my services?” He slightly shakes his head as if he doesn’t get my logic. “You are probably right. If the signs are there, chances are it is happening.”

“The signs were not there,” I respond. Okay, this is a wrong timing. My tears are already falling and chances are I won’t be able to stop the flood.

“Then why... would you want your spouse to be investigated if there isn’t a reason?” He

genuinely looks confused.

“His company funded a bakery for a woman called Kim.” I swallow a lump that is stuck on my throat and continue, “He opened a bakery for her and as if that was not enough, they gave it a name I always had on my vision board. My husband knew the name very well... so he gave it to her.”

Theo stares at me, confused. Only when I repeat myself, does he get it. He widens his eyes, pulls a chair and sits, and thereafter says, “Mrs Abigail, tell me this isn’t true.”

“It is.”

“Why would he do that?”

“That’s what I wanted to find out.” When I say this, my tears stream down my cheeks. I haven’t recovered from this and as much as I try to be strong, this is eating me by the day. Mostly because I still have to deal with the bloody

bastard.

“What did he say when you confronted him?”

“I haven’t.”

“Mrs Abigail...”

“Stop calling me that,” I snap, but quickly lift my eyes to him to apologise. “I am sorry. Call me Abigail. Just Abigail.” He nods. I continue, “I am afraid that if I confront him, he will lie to me. He probably has a rehearsed story to tell me.”

“Yah, that’s right...”

“You know what I hate the most? He keeps making a fool of me. He still lies and tells me that his business is not well enough to fund my business. But... the launch was published in Lifestyle magazine. It was all over the magazine but he still lies about it. Do you think I am that stupid for him to believe I am?”

“He is just taking advantage of you,” he

responds, sadly.

“Right? That’s exactly what I think.”

By the way, my tears are streaming down my face, I am quite sure my face is a mess. I don’t bother trying to wipe the tears away. I am going to need a mirror to do that. And Theo doesn’t seem bothered by them. So, I just let them pour. Now that the collar of my dress is almost wet, I realise that these are all the tears I have been bottling for a while. I have been trying to be strong, but it is painful. The main thing that scares me the most is the divorce. I mean, there is no coming back from what he did. Even if I stay, his betrayal will never be like any other.

“Do you want me to dig up?” Theo asks, breaking the silence.

“You hate those.” I laugh, trying not to choke on my tears. I remember how his face looked when he told me how much he hates following

spouses around. And I know how delighted he is now that we are not taking them until further notice. If possible, never!

He nods and says, “but I can help if you need me to dig. This is different.”

“I don’t know what I want. I feel like I need a game plan. The damage is done. He already stole the idea. And it isn’t like when I confront him, he is going to give me money to fund my business. I tried asking and he tells me ... maybe in a year or two... imagine.” I sniff my nose. “I am working now. I’ll save up enough to open something small. I’ll figure something out. I can’t leave now, can I?”

“Can’t you?”

“My son? I need a plan.”

Theo doesn’t say anything for a few minutes until he gets on his feet. He clears his throat and says, “Whatever you do, don’t give up on

your dream. You are the best baker. Alu can attest to that.”

“Is that you wanting a lifetime supply of scones?” I joke.

He laughs and asks, “is it working?”

“It is.”

Mpho is at his greatest mood when I pick him up from school. I admire him. I admire being a kid who lives without the care in the world. But not Alu, though. When I first looked into the kid’s eye, all I saw was sorrow. I am glad Mpho and I were able to make his day on Saturday.

When we get home, Mpho drags his school bag to his room while I take a turn to the kitchen. Sis Martha has already started with the food but

now that I am here, I can just finish off before calling it a night. Just anything for my husband to not complain about my new job.

I shouldn't have bothered.

Ndumiso isn't home when it is time for dinner. I won't lie, it hurts so much because I know it isn't work that is keeping him away. Before I started giving him a cold shoulder, he never missed dinner. And right now as I dish for our son... he is possibly shagging Kim. Or probably tasting some of her new recipes for her bakery menu.

The sound of a wine glass falling onto a serving plate, startles me until I realise it fell from my hand.

"Mommy," Mpho calls out, jumping from his seat.

"Sorry baby." I jump to my feet and rush to get paper towels from the kitchen counter.

“The table cloth is messed up,” Mpho announces as I turn back to the table to clean the mess.

“Don’t touch the broken glasses,” I quickly say. “Take your plate and go watch TV.”

“Yes!” Mpho throws his fist into the air and picks his plate before running to the living room. No one is allowed to eat while watching television, so this is a treat for him. When sis Martha walks into the house with a basket of laundry, she notices me trying to dry the table cloth with the paper towels. She walks up to where I am and tells me she will handle it. I allow her because I am exhausted.

I am defeated.

That night, before I could jump to bed, Ndumiso sent me a message to inform me that there is an urgent matter he has to handle. He sent me

a picture of his boardroom flooded with files. I didn't bother responding to his text. He came home before dawn, telling me he has to fly to Durban for an urgent meeting. Again, before this whole saga, I trusted him when he told me about his unplanned trip. But now, I know there might be more to it. Kim probably wants to go shopping there. Or, maybe he wants to fuck her where I cannot reach them. Whatever it is...

It is a Wednesday and Ndumiso already called me, asking that we do dinner when he lands after six. It was not easy to find an excuse, so I told him I will be ready when he returns. When he hanged up, I couldn't resist to swear at the innocent phone.

Theo has been in the field since morning so the office has been quiet since I got here. When the reception door opens, I know it is him walking in. I can tell by his footsteps. He is forever in a rush.

“I am back,” he calls out before I hear footsteps leading to his office.

I continue working on the report he has given me this morning. We received a file from Mr Molepo on Monday and Theo has tasked me to dig into a man called Phineas Moraka. Now, when I am going through the background check report and personal detail report do I understand how Theo figured that I have never worked a day in my life. These reports undress you to your nakedness. They don't miss a thing. I have been analysing this guy and there are so many red flags about his life. I have highlighted almost the whole report. His job title and all the money that comes into his account do not match. Obviously, Theo will track all the links that connect him to the other members of the billionaires' club that we are hunting for.

This is actually fun.

My phone vibrates from the table. I check the

time first, before picking it up. It is almost three thirty, so I should be out of here in a few minutes. When I open the text message, it comes from my little sister, asking how I am doing. Right there and then, I get an idea for an excuse to skip the dinner date with my husband. I call her, instructing her to text me, requesting that I come see her after work since she isn't well and has no one to help with the baby. The minute the text message chips in, I screenshot it and forward it to my husband. I know he will catch my lies soon, but right now I'd do anything to avoid him. I plan to come strong when I confront him. I even told Theo to leave my spouse investigation to me. I'll dig him to the core.

There is nothing much I can do in the remaining five minutes, so I get up and park my items into my handbag. I log out of the laptop and lock it into the safe. I then pick my handbag and head

out of my office. Before leaving, I cross the reception to Theo's office so that I could bid him goodbye.

"Hey Theo?" I say, knocking softly on his door.

"Please come in," he orders. I walk in, finding him standing behind his desk. He looks somewhat nervous.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes. Just trying to google the closest place to buy flowers," he says, pacing around the room.

"What kind of flowers?" I ask.

He stops and says, "For my date. I have to meet my date in thirty minutes... and I just remembered I should have flowers."

"You are going on a date?" I ask but don't add, 'looking like that?'

Out of all the days he could choose to wear his now-fading-black formal shirt, it had to be today

when he has to impress a woman.

“What?” Is there something wrong?” he asks, staring down at himself.

I sigh, placing my handbag on his desk.

“Give me your tie,” I ask. The least I could do is to tighten the light gray tie he has hanging on his neck. Believe me, if we get rid of this tie, he is going to look worse than he already does. At least the fading colour of the shirt does match with the tie.

He unhooks the tie and hands it to me. I tie it neatly, just the way my husband taught me. When satisfied with the knot, I walk to him, stand on my toes so that I could hang it on his neck.

The cologne!

The cologne is perfect. So perfect that I find myself leaning closer to his chest to get more of it.

Theo clears his throat and I almost jump. I steady myself, look up, and fix the tie before moving further away from him.

“You might not have time to get a florist. Get flowers from Woolworths down the road,” I advise, slowly walking to the table to grab my handbag. He nods at me. I grab my bag and twirl towards the door.

What was that?

“Abigail,” Theo calls in his deep voice, startling me.

“Yes?” I turn to face him.

“Thank you.” He gestures to the tie. “For...fixing me.”

Heart of GOLD

#7

THEO (Unedited)

My hands are sweating as I follow the waiter into the restaurant. I picked the restaurant in Mall of Africa since the one Tshepiso wanted us to meet at is a bit far. I am glad that I made it before her.

“Would you like to order something so long?” the waiter asks, placing a menu in front of me while I settle on the chair. I appreciate him not placing the other menu, announcing to everyone that I am here to meet someone. What if she doesn’t show up?

I wish she doesn’t show up. But judging by the excitement over the phone yesterday when I confirm the time and venue, she will definitely be here.

“A cup of coffee will do,” I say, placing the flowers on the table. Immediately when Mrs

Abigail left the office, I rushed to Woolworths to grab a bouquet. It is funny how they have a whole section dedicated to flowers and I haven't noticed before. We don't eat flowers... do we? Also, my wife was not a fan so I could get away with it.

When I notice a woman walking into the restaurant, my heart skips a beat until I realise it isn't my date. I have no idea why I am nervous. I know I haven't been on a date since forever, but it is wrong for a grown ass man to be nervous like I am right now. I run my sweaty palm on the tie which is tightly fastened.

Mrs. Abigail.

She doesn't hide the fact that I frustrate her with how I look. Even when she doesn't voice her opinions, every other day she would give me a double take when she gets to the office. I would never lie to myself and say she is smitten by me. When she does the double take, her eyes

always land on what I have on. I get it, she is too neat for crying out loud but I still don't blame her. My wife used to do a great job taking care of me. Even though we have a nanny, she is old and her focus is on Alu. I also don't remember when last I have been to a shop to buy myself something to wear, other than vests and underwear I am forced to add. I have a perfect excuse – the clothes they sell nowadays are just not for me. It is either you get slim fits that tighten your body or you get colours that don't exist.

While driving here, I could not resist digesting the things Mrs Abigail told me a few days ago. Scratch the fact that she didn't tell me how she landed the job but her husband's infidelity. I look at her differently now. She quite a strong woman and I can only wonder how she does it. I don't know but I have this strong edge to investigate the bastard. I might be taking it too

far but I cannot resist this strong urge I have. I don't know if it my curiosity to know much about this man who is so intimidated by his own perfect wife. I say 'intimidated' because only a man who is definitely intimidated can try to keep down a woman like this dude is doing. I don't care about his side chicks and what he does for them, but for him to stand between his wife and her dreams is another story.

But who the fuck does that?

Who the fuck blocks his wife's dreams and spend on the side's chick dreams? Shouldn't there be a balance?

The minute I notice Tshepiso walking towards our table, I quickly get on my feet, almost knocking the table over.

What an embarrassment.

She smiles when she reaches me.

"Am I late?" she asks nervously, as I quickly pull

her chair.

“No. I was a bit early. Traffic was light,” I respond, turning back to my seat. Tshepiso looks very beautiful tonight. She has put an extra effort, and I am glad Mrs Abigail fixed my tie before I left the office.

I raise my hand for the waiter, who marches to our table with another menu. He places the menu in front of Tshepiso and introduces his name as Emmanuel.

“I’ll have a glass of red wine. I don’t know what you have but you can suggest a nice one,” Tshepiso says to Emmanuel. “I’ll give you my food order a little later.”

“You still owe me a cup of coffee,” I remind him since he is ready to take my drink order.

“Oh, my goodness... I apologise. Your coffee is coming right away,” he says, regretfully. He doesn’t need to worry about me, I am not too

fussy and he is probably exhausted by now. When he leaves the table, Tshepiso lifts her eyes from the menu and asks what I am having for supper. I would like something quick. Something that wouldn't take too much time to cook and keep us here all night.

"I'll have seafood."

"Are you a fan?" she asks with a small frown. She quickly turns her frown to a smile and continues to page the menu.

"I am not really. I am just not fussy at all."

"I feel like red meat," she says and thereafter closes the menu.

So, the time to engage is now.

"Oh, these are for you," I say, handing her the flowers I had forgotten about. She receives them with so much excitement, I am pleased with myself.

How do we do this thing again?

Thursday morning, the door flies open while I am standing in the middle of the reception, responding to a text message I got from one of my guys investigating the Witbank case. We don't waste time with the 'Missing Persons' and 'Kidnapping' cases because when it comes to those, every minute matters. Every second counts. There is a lead on this case and I am proud of how much the police are trying with this one. They were able to locate the man she was last seen with. The sad news is that he hasn't been seen in a few days and is believed to be in hiding since the police forced into his house. They didn't find anything disturbing in his house, however when they returned with my

guy, they found two handbags and one of them belongs to the woman we are in search of.

There is progress but what I am praying for is good news. The last thing I want is digging her body from the field somewhere.

“Good morning,” Mrs Abigail greets as she steps into the reception. She looks incredibly beautiful but her usual smile is not on her face. Now, I know the smile is always forced but today it is not there at all.

“How are you?” I ask, sliding my phone into my pocket.

“I am fine,” she responds, her voice high pitched. That’s how I know she isn’t fine at all but unfortunately, I don’t want to snoop.

“I am good.”

“How was your date?” she asks while walking towards her office. I follow her and stand by the door as she settles on her chair.

“It was okay, I guess. I don’t know if she was impressed or not,” I respond.

“Is there going to be a second date?”

“She suggested that we do meet again.”

“There! She was impressed.”

“Oh, that’s good to hear.” I cannot help but smile. It means I still have it in me. The last thing you want is people laughing at how much you sucked on a date. At least Tshepiso will have good news to tell to my ex-colleagues.

“You look happy,” Mrs Abigail laughs. There is a smile. I am tempted to tell her to keep it on because it suits her just perfect.

“Well, I thought I messed everything up. Sometimes I am all over the place and it gets to be too much for other people.”

“But that’s just how you are,” she responds like someone who knows me and likes me the way I

am.

I stand by the door, battling with myself. After a quick consideration, I tell her to have a great day and cross the reception to my office. We both know how things are in her household, so it is obvious that she isn't fine because of her issues at home. It is none of my business and I should keep it to myself.

We are professionals.

Shutting myself in my work, I scroll through the internet for every little detail recorded under Phineas Moraka. Information is lying all over the net and every little information is valuable to my job. Every tweet. Every social media post. Every picture, blurry or not, is very valuable. Talking about pictures, I come across one interesting picture from a blog. Opening the link, the picture is of an article about a private banquet which Phineas Moraka hosted in 2016. The banquet was to raise funds for university

bursaries.

I nod slowly.

This is impressive.

Zooming into a picture, I see Phineas with his wife, surrounded by four men. The next picture is of Phineas posing with about eight young men and reading from the caption, they are the beneficiaries. I close the blog and move to more search results.

Mrs Abigail meant it when she said she will tag Aluwani along to her fun dates with Mpho. I had forgotten about it but yesterday she asked that I bring Aluwani to some farm in Irene for breakfast and fun date. My tongue was twisted when she asked because I knew very well that I

have no plans for Aluwani and between spending a day on a couch or the farm, the latter made sense. Driving to the parking lot, I notice Mpho chasing after another boy while Mrs Abigail struggles with a huge picnic basket.

“Are you going to be okay without me?” I ask Alu as he steps out of the car. Aluwani nods at me while handing his phone to me.

I sigh! Hoping that he returns in a better mood.

Haw! All he needed was to see Mpho. When he notices him, Aluwani sprints towards Mpho’s direction. I lock the car and hurry to help Mrs Abigail with the basket.

“I’ll take this,” I say, taking the basket from her hand. She startles and if I wasn’t already holding it, it would have fallen.

“Jeez! You freaked me out,” she complains, throwing a punch on my shoulder.

“Sorry. I thought you saw me coming.”

“No, I didn’t,” she responds, taking off her sunglasses. I have noticed that she loves those. She leads the way to under a huge tree. On the other side are racing tracks and all sorts of activities. How does she know all these places? It only means I have been living under the rock. Alu should be doing these kinds of things during the weekend.

“What time should I pick him up?” I ask. I could stay and watch them but when she told me that she is meeting other soccer moms, I decided otherwise. Also, I trust her with my son. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have bothered.

“Three o’clock will do.”

I leave some money with her, and insists that she spends it unless she wants me to turn away with my son. She accepts the money and promises to keep in touch throughout the day.

I take this chance to do a little shopping for myself. I think I cannot ignore my wardrobe forever, so I force myself to go to Menlyn Mall. Had I known how big this damn mall is, I would have considered going to Pretoria CBD where I would only need to shop on Church street. I manage to shop around in about six stores until my phone pings with a message. I panic, thinking it is already past three o'clock. I wouldn't dare miss an time to pick my son up.

It is only just after one clock when I pull my phone from my pocket.

'Hey, the rain doesn't seem to be going away. We are leaving. I'll send you location to pick Aluwani up.'

What?

It is raining?

You see now.

I make a payment and hurry to my car. Scratch

'hurry' because it took me longer to get to where I parked. By the time I am throwing my bags into the boot, Mrs Abigail has sent the location to her house.

Driving out of the parking lot, I notice how the weather has randomly changed. It is still raining hard but I force to drive to the house. The last thing I want is for my son to overstay his visit.

Mrs Abigail's house is in Waterkloof. I refrain from questioning myself how much her husband makes in his business to own such a property.

It is very impressive.

I park at an empty drive-way and run to what seems like a patio. I do notice the main door but it doesn't have a shelter to protect me from the rain. Before I could knock on the glass door that leads to the house, I notice Aluwani happily playing playstation with his new friend. My heart

is full when I see how happy my son is. I cannot help but stare until my eyes lock with those of a man.

Shit!

I guess it is Mr Gumedede.

Narrowing his eyes, he walks towards the glass door. I cannot hear what he is saying but then I notice Mrs Abigail following behind him. He opens the door and I thereafter hear Mrs Abigail tell him that I am Aluwani's father, her colleague.

I wave at both of them, feeling guilty that he caught me staring like a damn spy.

He looks down at me. I stare back, studying him.

I know him but I cannot place where I have seen him from.

"Sorry I couldn't knock on the main door," I say, staring right at him, trying to figure out where I know him from. I am certain that I have seen

him before... but where? I try to crack my head but nothing comes.

“I’ll get Aluwani for you,” Mrs Abigail says and turns back inside.

“I am Theodore,” I introduce myself, putting up my hand which he shakes briefly. As Aluwani makes his way to the door, I try harder to locate Mr Gumede’s face.

Nothing!

Aluwani smiles at me and thereafter steps beside me. I unlock the car door and tell him to run to the car.

I turn to Mr Gumede and thank him for taking my son in. As he closes the door, I try harder to trace his face.

Still!

I get nothing!

Heart of GOLD

#8

ABIGAIL

I know why Ndumiso has been very quiet since Theo left. For the past years, many years that we have been together, no man has ever walked into our house looking for me. I don't even have male friends. So, when I told him a colleague of mine will be coming to pick Aluwani up, he concluded that the colleague is a woman.

Serves him right.

I open the oven and pull the casserole dish. I am already preparing supper.

"Daddy, do you want to challenge me on the next round?" Mpho asks from the living room. Ndumiso doesn't respond. He is blankly staring

at his glass of whiskey. Just like me, his golf tournament or whatever golf plans were interrupted by the rain. He came home wet and I guess it is the reason he is stuck with us. I don't even think he wants to be here. I don't even think I care right now.

"Daddy..." Mpho calls out. The old me would have interfered and told my husband to give our son attention, but right I don't bother. I place my dish on the counter and move to the stove to check on the rice.

"So, you have men coming into my house now," Ndumiso says. He is seated on the barstool, in the kitchen island.

"Daddy... come..." Mpho begs.

"Play your games alone or go to your room," Ndumiso snaps at him. I twirl to face him, my nose flaring. I don't say a damn thing because the fight is not mine. Mpho doesn't move. He

just stares at his father until I tell him that I'll join him when I am done cooking.

"You haven't answered me," Ndumiso says. I had chosen to ignore him but it isn't going to work.

"I couldn't drive to where he was when it was raining that hard."

"I don't understand something," Ndumiso says, lifting his blazing eyes to me. "Did this guy get you this job?"

"No."

"So, you just met last week at your new job and your children are already mingling?" He narrows his eyes at me.

"He had to take care of a work task and I offered to baby sit," I respond.

"Mpho..." Ndumiso turns to face our son. "How many times have you played with your new

friend?”

“Really Ndumiso?” I try to jump in.

“Which new friend?” Mpho asks, his eyes not shifting from his game.

“The one who was here,” Ndumiso says coldly.

“Oh, Aluwani? Twice. And mommy will take us to the zoo next week,” Mpho responds. His eyes still fixed on the game. He has no idea that I am in deep mess. As innocent as my gesture has been, there is no way Ndumiso is going to understand. What I am doing sounds so wrong.

“So, you just met last week...” he says.

I switch the stove off before washing my hands and taking off the apron. I throw the apron on the chair and march to our room without saying a word. His footsteps are loud behind me. He knows very well that I cannot argue in front of Mpho, whether I am drunk or sober. The door shuts the same minute I twirl around to face

him.

“Really, Gumedede?” I hiss.

“Are you fucking him?”

“What?” I shriek.

“Are you fucking that man? Is it why he can even look down at me like I am some piece of shit?”

“Theodore is my colleague,” I say. Calling him Theo like he prefers would sound like we know each other on a personal level.

“So?”

“Do you fuck your colleagues?” I pose the question to him.

“Ah... I... Ah...” he stumbles, shaking his head.

“No. But I don’t take their children in.”

“How can you blame me for having a good heart?” I ask, this time my tears falling. They are not falling because I am trying to win this

argument. I am just too exhausted and this is just putting a stamp on it.

“Oh, come on...”

“Don’t you and your sister call me a good Samaritan?” I snap, lifting my chin in defiance. “When they go on vacations for days and days, don’t they leave their off springs with me? And they do that without asking me... and because I am the stupid good Samaritan, I take them in without asking questions? And today...because I agree to help someone who was stranded, I am accused of sleeping with them?” My voice is shaking but firm enough to get my point across. He sighs regretfully and sits on the edge of the bed. He pulls my hand so that I could stand closer to him. I hate him right now because all he is very good at is pissing me off. All because of his own insecurities.

“I am sorry, he says. Of course, he is. I try to pull my hand away but he holds on to it. “Look, babe.

The thing is... I miss you. I don't know why you are so cold towards me. I miss my wife when I stay with her, right under the same house. Something shifted. I want my wife back." I sniff my nose and look away. He tugs my hand so that I could face him. I do and he continues, "Look... I want you to talk to me, okay? What is wrong?"

"I don't know what is wrong with me. I am just feeling unhappy lately."

"Why? What happened?"

"I don't know. I'll book with a therapist and try to figure out what could be a problem." This time when I pull my hand away, he lets me. I turn to the bathroom to clean my face up and tie my hair. Walking back into the bedroom, I find him staring at the floor. I don't bother saying anything. I head out, closing the door behind me.

My marriage is dead.

Last week Wednesday, upon my return from seeing my sister, I decided to go through Ndumiso's personal banking account to see what he does with his money – courtesy of Theo's investigation program. Kim is more than just a side chick. I scrolled through just six months and I got my answers. All the answers I needed.

Without a fail, Ndumiso sends her twenty grand and has a debit order of five thousand that goes to Bambino Kiddies Corner. Every month. So, he takes care of her and now he has given her a business to sustain herself. And this also means, there is a baby. There is a possibility that he has a baby that I do not know about.

I was gutted.

My marriage is over, whether I like it or not.

When I woke up today, Phindile sent me an SMS asking that we go out for lunch after church. I didn't have to think twice until now as she drags my hand into Miss Sweet Delectables. I had no idea this is what she had in mind. The only memo she gave me was that I dress to kill and my hair and make-up must be on point. I do look the way she suggested but I have no idea why she brought me here.

"I want to see this bitch," Phindile says before dragging me to a little corner table. I cannot fight back in heels. Also, I wouldn't want to embarrass myself. Before we could even settle down, a young girl in an all-white uniform walks to our table with two menus. She gives us a smile and asks us to call her when we are ready to order.

"Is the owner here?" Phindile asks.

“She is at the back,” the girl responds. “Should I call her?”

“No. No, don’t call her,” I respond, giving Phindile a stinky eye.

“Not now, sweetie,” Phindile tells the girl. She nods and walks away from our table.

“What is your plan?” I hiss at Phindile.

“I cannot continue to watch you kill yourself like this.”

“So, what’s your plan? You want me to fight with her?”

“Can you?” she asks, her eyes lighting up.

“Are you crazy?” I hiss at her.

“Can you please sit up straight and give her a bitchy look? We are here to see a woman who fucks your husband...” she starts, I give her another stinky eye. She clears her throat and continues, “Okay, your husband is fucking her.

So the least you can do is to be confident and show her you are not moved by her.”

“What if I am?”

“You would have confronted him by now. You my friend are enjoying this polygamy family.”

“I am not.”

I take a minute to take in the bakery. It is beautiful, the pictures on that magazine does not do justice to this place. It is exactly how I have always pictured it.

I chuckle out a laugh.

This cannot be true.

Am I in denial? With all the signs in front of me? My husband doesn't love me anymore. No, he doesn't.

I shake my head.

Wrong move because tears fall as I stare at Phindile. She quietly takes my hand and

squeeze it.

“I shouldn’t have, right?” Phindile sadly says.

“You shouldn’t have.” I take a tissue from her and tap my eyes. She shouldn’t have but I am grateful she did. I deserve better than to be treated like a piece of shit. I needed to see this to realise where I stand with him.

When I am done crying, I raise my hands for the girl who assisted us earlier. She comes rushing, a notebook in her hand. Firstly I ask for our drinks and thereafter order half of the menu. I ask that she prepares everything for take-away. She excitedly takes the order before disappearing to the kitchen.

“Okay, maybe I overstepped.”

“It’s okay,” I assure her. I mean it. I needed this.

A few minutes later, I see Phindile widening her eyes before I hear the stilettos digging on the floor. Next, a cup of coffee is placed in front of

me. I am sitting facing the window, so I cannot see who it is until they stand in my view.

“Ladies, this is on the house. I saw your order and we are packing it perfectly for you,” Kim says. I know it is her because she looks as flawless as she did in the magazine photos. She places a cup in front of Phindile and thereafter stands up straight. Only when she turns to look at me does she freeze.

She knows about me.

No, she knows me.

She knows I exist but still goes on to play happy family with my husband.

“How is the business doing?” I ask, placing a teaspoon into my mug of coffee.

She swallows hard and says, “Fine, thanks.”

Go on and play along.

“Congratulations. It is a beautiful

establishment,” I compliment.

“Thank you. Excuse me,” she says and rushes away.

I believe my eyes are glassy as I stare right at Phindile.

“She is beautiful,” I compliment.

“No, she is not. It is only make-up,” she responds, with a frown. I laugh because she is trying to make me feel better. It isn’t working. I reach for a tissue from my bag and try once again to dry my tears. It doesn’t take long before my husband starts blowing my phone with text messages.

‘Babe, where are you right now?’

‘Mpho is asking for you. Can you come home so that we go out for supper?’

‘Where are you?’

The text messages come in after another.

‘We need to talk.’

I switch my phone and throw it in my handbag.

The waitress walks to our table with a huge brown paper bag. She places it on the table and pulls a swiping machine from her apron’s pocket.

“My boss didn’t charge for the coffees,” she proudly announces, placing my slip in front of me. From my wallet I pull Ndumiso’s bank card. He wants to know where I am right? He will get an answer from the transaction notification after I swipe.

Both Phindile and I do not bother drinking our coffees. As we walk to the parking lot, Phindile continues to beg me to forgive her for the stunt she pulled. Instead of yelling at her, I thank her. For some reason, I needed that.

Ndumiso is pacing around the living room when I walk into the house. He freezes and drops his eyes to the brown paper bag that I am holding. He doesn't say a word when I place the bag on the kitchen island. The white and pink 'Miss Sweet Delectables' is loud enough to be missed. I drop my handbag to the floor, followed by my shoes. Without a word, I round the kitchen to get to where Ndumiso stashes his liquor. I pull open the door and scan the cabinet. There is nothing light enough for me to take. His whiskeys will knock me and I have work tomorrow. No matter how much Theo understands, I cannot take advantage of his kindness. Ndumiso still have no words. His filthy tongue is twisted. I close the cabinet door.

"Babe we need to talk," he says softly.

"Where is my son?"

“I asked Thando to take him for a few hours.”

He did me a great favour. I wouldn't have loved my son seeing me like this.

I pass him and head to our bedroom. I drag my dressing chair next to the closet and pull my empty luggage bag which I keep somewhere on the top. Ndumiso walks into the room when I am throwing my clothes into the bag. He grabs my hands and pulls me to him. I fight, with everything in me, I fight to push him away from me. He slips and falls on my dressing table, smashing a mirror which stood next to it.

I don't bother checking on him as he tries to stand. I continue throwing as much clothes as I can into my bag.

“Abby, what are you doing?” he asks, his right hand on his stomach. He seems to be in pain and I am not bothered. I don't answer. He continues, “I can explain... I was forced to fund

Kim and at that time, my business partners forced me to use the name I had initially submitted for funding. We were in some deep financial position and the only way to save this was that bakery. They did everything without my knowledge, I found out a few days ago. And... I swear I was trying to find a way to break the news to you.”

What did I say about the rehearsed lie?

Blood fool!

I march to the bathroom to get my make-up bag. He follows behind, trying to feed me more lies.

“Kim is Marvin’s girlfriend and...”

“Is it why you send her twenty grand every month?” I snap, startling him with my question. My nose flare as I wait for him to respond. He just stares at me, so I continue, “Is it why every month you pay for your child’s creche, huh?”

Tongue twisted.

He tries to reach for me but the bag I throw to the mirror stops him. He freezes.

“Don’t you fuck with me.”

Other books by Takalani M

Heart of GOLD

#9

ABIGAIL (Unedited)

This is my first time witnessing my husband speechless. It is also my very first time acting like this. For the past ten years that we have been together, he has never witness me like

that. That should give him an idea of how much he has hurt me.

I'm broken.

Trying to catch my breath, I stare at him. He cannot even look me in the eye. He knows very well that I have been nothing but a perfect and understanding wife. Who was a fool all this time?

Me!

Ndumiso tries to move closer to where I am picking my make-up bag from the floor. I don't say anything but give him an eye. He must dare me to throw him to the wall. It breaks my heart that Ms Martha will have to clean this mess up.

I pass him, throw my make-up bag into another bigger bag and thereafter go for my shoes. I pick a few pairs for work and thereafter zip up my bags while he watches.

"Can we talk?" he begs, standing far away from me.

“There is nothing to talk about.”

“You can’t leave, babe. You need me,” he says, sounding sincere, however I stumble as if a blow was thrown to my stomach. He did all this. All these years, he was training me to depend on him and only him.

“Watch me,” I hiss.

“I swear...”

Before he could continue projecting more lies, I pick the two bags and hurry down the stairs. He is still bravely following me.

“Where are you going?” he asks breathlessly as I pick my handbag and the shoes from the kitchen floor. Ms Martha might have heard the noise for her to be in the house. On Sundays, she takes a day off and stay in the staff quarter. She turns away, pretending that she didn’t just notice me dragging my bags with my husband in tow.

I am going to Phindile's apartment. He doesn't have to know that. I need space right now and I'll figure out the rest when I am in a right space of mind.

"Abby, what about our son?" he asks. The nerve of this man. He knows for a fact that I'll be moved by that. I love my son so much that I can literally do anything for him, but right now...he is better off here with his father. I'll come for him – that I am sure of.

I throw all my bags into the boot and jump into the car. I roll up the windows but Ndumiso doesn't stop begging me not to go. Nothing he is going to say will make me step out of this car. He keeps hanging on the window while I put my shoes on.

Driving out of the estate, tears start flooding down my cheeks like a waterfall. I have no idea what I am feeling.

Anger.

Heartbroken.

I'm overwhelmed.

I'm extremely scared.

I am really scared and have no idea how I am going to come out of this. All I know is that I have no choice but to come out stronger. My make-up is melting and my white dress is now almost brown. I drive, shaky hands and all until I turn towards The Heights Estate in Midrand. Since her divorce, Phindile has been staying here in a two-bedroom apartment. Just when she received the proceeds from the sale of the house she shared with her ex-husband, she bought an apartment cash and I really think that was a great move.

Phindile is standing under one of her two carports at the parking lot. With her hands on her hips, she directs me to the one I should park

my car under.

“Thank you for letting me in,” she says, walking towards the boot of the car. She is still in her blue tulip dress she was wearing earlier but she has abandoned the stilettos. She takes the bigger bag and leads the way to her apartment. She isn't neat like me so the first thing she does when we walk into the house is to pick some of her clothes from the couch and throws them into her room. I chuckle, shaking my head. She will never change. A bottle of champagne and a half-filled glass sit on the coffee table.

“You will my princess's room,” she says, opening the door which leads to her daughter's room. A very pink decorated room. I slump on the comfortable three-quarter bed and kick off my shoes.

“Should I bring a glass of champagne?” she asks, giving me puppy eyes.

“No. I just need to take a bath and take a nap.”

Yesterday when I took a nap, I ended up sleeping until midnight. I have been up since then. I tossed and turned until I decided to wake up at four thirty. I would have spent my early hours of the morning baking something fresh for us if Phindile had baking ingredients. Her cupboards are almost empty. She doesn't even have enough grocery to last her a week. She really lives a bachelorette's life. Worse, her daughter is in boarding school. At six o'clock, I am ready to leave the house. I don't know how bad traffic is from Midrand to Centurion.

I have gotten the guts to switch on my phone on but I haven't gone through all the messages. My phone pinged so many times, I almost switch it

off.

There wasn't too much traffic on my way, so I manage to make a stop at Woolworths Foodstop to grab breakfast and coffee. While I wait for my order, I make a withdrawal of five thousand rands, which is the daily limit on Ndumiso's bank card. I plan to do this until he blocks the card. I do have money for survival, however Ndumiso have so much money that he doesn't fail to send to his side chick every month. All this time when I thought his family is milking him, he was busy fending for his 'other' family. That time I am a very understanding wife.

If there was a way to increase the daily limit, I would until do so and empty this account in a matter of days.

What is five grand to him?

I pick my order from the till and head to the car.

Before driving away, I make sure to fill my tank. Theo is the first one to arrive at work, but since I am here at 06:45, the office is still unlocked. I know he isn't here because I always find the blinds opened. I switch off the engine and slide the chair backwards so that I could be comfortable. I finally open my messages, almost all coming from Ndumiso. Apologies after apologies. I don't give a damn about his apology – he did this to us. He is the one who destroyed our family. All his lies?

My mother sent me four please call requests, and I know he has called her to talk some sense to me. I already know that she is going to be on his side. Come on, she is old school. She and the rest of her peers have their ways of doing things. She will tell me to go back home to my family. Men will always be men.

My heart almost bleeds when I open a voice note from Sis Martha. Mpho is crying and

begging me to come back home. Before he mentions that 'Dad told him I left', I already knew it was Ndumiso's doing. He is going to do anything in his power to win. He is manipulative and is going to win everyone to his side.

I dial Sis Martha's phone but it goes unanswered twice. I was just trying my luck, I know she has started working and has no care where her phone is. I send her a Whatsapp message, asking that she lets me know when Mpho is home from school. I would like to talk to him and assure him that I did not leave, but had to go. I'll figure out what to say to rub off what my husband told him.

As I lift my eyes from my phone, I notice a gentleman walking towards our office door. He has an olive fitted suit and a white shirt. I stare and my eyes almost jump out of their sockets when I notice the gentleman unlocking our door.

Theo?

His signature haircut and the way he moves give me a confirmation that it is him. I pull my handbag and breakfast from the passenger seat and jump out of the car. I walk into the office, finding Theo opening the windows and the blinds.

“Good morning, you,” I say, scanning him from head to toe. He absolutely looks stunning. He is nothing like the Theo I saw just two days ago.

“Oh, good morning,” he responds. “You are in early.”

“Yes, there was no traffic on my way.”

“Ah, great...”

“This is how you should always look. You look good. We are keeping her forever. I give her a thousand Yes.”

“Who?” Theo asks, confused.

“What is her name again? The one you went to

the date with.”

“Tshepiso?”

“Yes. One evening you go to a date with her, you impress her and she asks for a second date... and the next thing you come looking like this... I love her.”

“Oh, thanks,” he says.

I turn to my office, dropping my handbag on the table and unlocking the storage safe for my work laptop. Before sitting down, Theo walks in and stands at the end of the table. I let out a chuckle because it is going to take a while before I get used to this new man who is standing in front of me. Don't blame me. On Saturday he had on this old golf shirt with colour fading pants. And now he looks like a model. We could literally put him on a runway right now.

“About Saturday.” He clears his throat. “Didn't I

get you in trouble?”

I sigh. He did. But he doesn't have to know.

“Not really,” I lie.

“Your husband didn't seem pleased.”

“He isn't much friendly sometimes.”

Theo nods, slides his hands into his pockets and says, “Thank you again for taking Aluwani in. He told me you are planning to take him with to Zoo.”

“It was just a thought.”

“I appreciate but I don't want to end up being a nuisance to you.”

“You can never be a nuisance to me.” I shake my head. “Your son can never be a nuisance.”

Theo stares at me. I stare back because his eyes are drawing me in. I know that last Wednesday I almost crossed the boundaries, and I don't want to cross them again, so I clear

my throat and sit down. Only when I drop my eyes to my laptop does Theo clear his throat.

“I’ll be in my office.”

The moment Sis Martha sent a text message to call, I am driving back to Phindile’s house. After work, I made sure to grab a few things for the apartment. I don’t know how long I need to stay but it won’t be for too long.

I call immediately.

“Mommy?” Mpho calls out. It breaks my heart that I am not with him to embrace him and tell him that everything will be alright. “When are you coming back?”

“Soon my baby. How was school?”

“It was fine but I didn’t enjoy my sports. When

are you coming back?" he repeats.

"Look, mommy will pick you up during the week and we will chat about this, okay? I am helping aunty Poppy with the new baby."

"Daddy said..."

"I know..." I quickly say, blocking him from repeating the things he cried about last night.

"Should I pick you soon so that you meet your baby cousin?"

"I want you home."

"I know, sweetie."

By the time I hang up, I am drained. This is not as easy for any us.

When I walk into the apartment, I notice a large box of pizza before Phindile appears from the corridor.

"I thought I could fix us something to eat," I say after our greeting, placing two large shopping

bags on the table.

“No one is fixing anything for anyone. We are having pizza and catching up. I’ll pour us wine,” Phindile responds, rounding the kitchen to the fridge. I am so used to slaving around, I am not used to this easy living. I unpack the groceries while Phindile takes the box of pizza and wine to the living room. She does have a dining table but she never uses it. Even when she has her friends over, we sit on the couch or outside by the patio. That is so not me.

Before throwing myself on the couch, I have changed out of my dress and got into sweat pants and a vest.

“Are you okay?” Phindile asks just when I take my first sip.

“How did you survive separation?” I ask. This is just so complicated. Mostly because Mpho is in the picture.

“When I found out he was cheating, I fell out of love. So I survived perfectly.”

“Come on Phindile, it must feel like shit. You were married.”

“Nope, it didn’t. It was a deal breaker,” she says.

“It is painful for me. My son. I feel betrayed. He wasted my time. And we were so perfect.”

“Those words come from a woman who wants to run back to her ex-husband.”

“No.” I sip the wine. “But I cannot pretend that I am fine with this break-up. I am only human.”

“We should get you a man. A distraction nyana so. You’ll forget about all your problems in a bit.”

“Oh, no, thank you very much,” I say. We stay silent until a thought creep up my mind. She has met Theo before, so this will be funny to her as well. “Guess who decided to have a make-

over?”

“Yeah?” Phindile grabs another slice of pizza from the box and turn her attention to me.

“Theodore Masindi!” I laugh, sitting up straight. “Brother man decided to change his looks I couldn’t even recognise him today. He had this olive green slim fit suit on and a white formal shirt. He looked great, shame.”

“Hmmm. Just the way you like them dressed,” she says, wiggling her eyebrows.

“What does that have to do with Theo?”

“Maybe you don’t have to look far for that distraction, huh?” She smirks at me.

“You have lost your mind,” I mumble and thereafter sip the fruity wine, regretting why I brought Theo up.

Exactly! Why did I bring him up?

Heart of GOLD

#10

THEO

I don't like starting a day on a bad note, but today I have no choice. I have a meeting with the Malelane family - the missing woman's family. I called them this morning, to check their availability. The mother and uncle are available for a meeting, therefore I promised to make a turn to their home for an update. I hate that I have to do this to them. With the money they paid, I don't mind driving for an hour to their home. Also, out of respect, some things are better off said in person than on the phone. My freelancer submitted their report last night. I won't lie. It affected me so much that I didn't get to sleep much.

I pull the keys from the ignition and make my way to my building. Abigail's car is parked by the door. For the past two weeks, she had been arriving earlier than the first two weeks when she started. I am very much curious to know the reason why she would choose to wait for me rather than to arrive at her usual time. I want to ask but I try to draw the line. I have been trying to draw the line with many things.

Mrs. Abigail steps out of the car when she notices me unlock the door. The container she has in her hands tells me she has some treats for us. This gesture never gets old. I don't even bother trying to discourage it. Last week when I walked into the office from the field, I found her setting up a coffee station just behind the receptionist's desk. Since we don't have a receptionist, we have so much open space to use. I told her to get some petty cash to brighten the place up and she chose to go for a

coffee station. So she has set a small espresso machine and some mugs. She has taught me how to make a perfect cup and I have been saving my coffee money ever since then.

“You are looking very much happy, ma’am,” I say jokingly as she walks to the door which I kept open for her. My heart is heavy but her smile is so bright - so much that I find my heart warming up.

“I got my first paycheck today,” she says, stepping into the reception, allowing me to let go of the door. “My very first paycheck.”

I want to be proud that I am the reason she is this happy. But, come on, we all know that I am being ridiculous. She is an employee, employed by me, so it is my duty to pay what is due to her.

“Oh, congratulation on your first paycheck Mrs. Gumede.” There goes that frown she gives me now and then whenever I mention her husband.

I always forget not to bring him up after learning about that betray. I succeeded in suppressing that edge to investigate her husband. I was neglecting my integrity. And I am a man of integrity.

“Thank you,” she responds, her mood shifted. I hate that I am the one to dim that smile of hers.

“We have to drive to eMalahleni today in the afternoon, for a meeting. As you know, I have to include you in every new task just in case you have to do it on your own.”

“Okay, I don’t mind. I am free.”

“We will leave here at 11:00,” I respond while crossing the floor to my office.

Before we leave, I just need to run some new data for the investigation that we are still busy with. Last week I took all the files from Mrs. Abigail so that I can assign her to the new task at hand. There is a new investigative show on

TV and we were approached to run some data for them. It is unfair how they are outsourcing some services from small companies like ours and using the data as theirs. We are still growing, so we do not hesitate to take the cases that would put us to greater heights. Given that Mrs. Abigail doesn't have any experience in private investigation and anything related to it, she is quite doing very well in her job. She is a perfectionist, so she doesn't fail to pay attention to detail. She has a way of doing things and I like it.

Stepping into the office, the first thing I do is take off my blazer and hang it on the coat just behind my door. When I got this coat hanger, it was for my guests. I never thought I would use it, but here we are. This is the new me. I must say, I am loving the make-over because of the confidence it gives me. Even when I go to meetings, I do feel some sort of confidence I

never thought I possessed.

Grabbing my chair, I open the file I left on my table yesterday. This Moraka case is damn watertight. Damn, the man ensured that no traces are there – I'll give him that. I have been getting links of minor loopholes which he is already punished for, but the main dealings, he made sure to tighten them hard. Even though his lifestyle audit is questionable, it is not giving me the information I need. Luckily when we get cases like this, the time frame is long. Hence it even takes years for a reputable entity like Hawks to finalize investigations. There is a lot to consider.

I circle the new name that I have picked up a few days ago. Paulo Dorcas. I haven't started looking at the man but he is next.

I hate defeat.

When I hear noise from Mrs. Abigail's office, I

check the time. It is almost eleven. I shut my laptop and slide it into its sleeve. Mrs. Abigail is by my door, telling me that we have five minutes before we leave. I grab my jacket but do not put it on since I am the one driving us. While I place my laptop bag into the boot, and my jacket in the backseat, Mrs. Abigail jumps into the front seat of my car.

We drive for over twenty minutes in silence since Mrs. Abigail seems to be in a fight with someone on her Whatsapp. Her fingers are flying on the screen and now and again she would hiss at the phone. I am playing the music slowly, pretending not to notice. When she finally throws her phone into her handbag, she turns to face outside the window. She looks like someone who doesn't want to be bothered, so I keep Metro FM on and focus on the road.

The Malelane family is waiting for us when we park outside the gate. The mood is somber. I

refused to break this over the phone and they already concluded the worst.

Unfortunately, this was one of those rape and murder horrible cases that we are facing in South Africa.

They paid us to do this. We found the body and we have run the DNA on it. The results pointed out that the body belonged to Leticia Malelane. The police department is to communicate with them after receiving the DNAs back from the lab – we just do things a little differently and very fast since we have all the resources and do not need to follow a list of cases. The accused raped her and murdered her thereafter, just like he did to another young woman. From the investigation that we did, the suspect has been in contact with her and they had been in some sort of a relationship – an online relationship. The day she disappeared, was the day they decided to meet for the first time. It simply

means he lured her to his place only to kill her.

The mother didn't take the news well and there is nothing we can do. I want to grab Mrs. Abigail so that we walk out of here and give the family some space to mourn, but she is giving Mrs. Malelane a shoulder to cry on and promises to wait with her until she feels better. If I haven't accepted that her heart is made of gold, I would have summoned her and we would have been out of this place the minute I placed the file, containing the pictures and evidence, on the coffee table. While Mrs. Abigail is busy mending the mother's heart, I make a phone call to my helper to nanny to get an Uber to go pick Aluwani up from school in two hours. I have taught her well for days like these when I get caught up far from home.

On our way back to Gauteng, Mrs. Abigail is quiet as if her heart is bleeding for the family. I really don't know what to do to make her feel better. She is going to learn not to attach her feelings to these cases or else she is going to end up in therapy.

"Are you alright?" I ask, stealing glances at her. She nods.

"We need a therapist for our clients. This is heavy," she suggests, turning to look at me. Her eyes are sad. I want to tell her that we are as good as the police services and they don't offer such. They just do their job and move to the next case. But this is Mrs. Gumede we are talking about.

"We do," I respond.

"How far are you with the Moraka case?" she questions. I am glad to tell her all about the

updates, just to lighten the mood.

“Watertight but I have a new name to look at. Paulo Dorcas.”

“Paulo Dorcas?” she asks. “Paulo Dorcas of Elite Investments?”

Yes, he has a company called Elite Investments.

“Do you know the guy?” I ask.

“Yes, he once invited us to a weekend getaway in his vacation house in Cape Town.”

I almost put the breaks on the speeding car so that I could turn to face her.

“Are you sure it is Paulo Dorcas?”

“There are not many Paulo Dorcas who owns Elite Investments. Yes, I am sure.”

“Who is ‘we’? Who did you go there with?” I ask, speeding the car now so that we could get to the office. We are thirty minutes away and I am no longer thinking of passing by Nandos to grab

a late lunch for us.

“My husband and a few of his business partners,” she says. What the fuck? She turns to look at me as if she is starting to realize what this might mean. Her husband. Business partners.

“Apart from Elite Investments, what else does he own?”

“I don’t know but his wife owns an exclusive spa. She hosted us there on a Saturday.”

“I want the name of that spa. I want the names of those business partners and their wives.”
She gasps. “What?”

“Ndumiso and the bakery? Do you think he is linked?”

Our eyes meet and she gets her answer.

You might think that they exaggerate when the investigating officers in movies have maps and

pictures glued on the walls when they are trying to solve criminal cases. No, they are not exaggerating. We do paste pictures on the walls and create maps and links to try to solve the mystery. This very task is what Mrs. Abigail and I have been busy with since we arrived from Emalahleni. For hours and hours, we have been doing this. The reception is a mess and the wall is full of pictures of Paulo Dorcas and his associates. It is funny how all Mrs. Abigail had to do was to log on to her Instagram and search the wives she was with at that Cape Town Vacation.

This is no longer fate.

She was godsent to me.

When I crack this case, damn, my name is going to be bigger than that of Hawks.

By the time I lock the office, it is 22h30 and we are both exhausted. We did order food but we

are both walking like zombies. Before driving home, I insisted on making sure she arrives home. I was surprised to follow her to Midrand instead of Waterkloof. Again, it is none of my business and I am not going to ask.

I couldn't sleep at all, so I am at the office at six o'clock. I am interested in this new direction and it all makes sense now.

Damn, now when I go back to the article link where I saw Moraka's picture, do I notice Gumede and Paulo amongst the men standing beside Moraka and his wife.

BINGO!

I huff out a laugh.

Damn, Moraka is fucking smart. He is the

mastermind of all this but he has distanced himself from the operation. But I know with all these links, I am going to catch him just as much.

The door opens at seven-thirty and in walks Mrs. Abigail. I didn't expect to see her this early but I guess she is also curious to crack more into this case. For the first time in the office, she is wearing a pair of jeans and sneakers.

I smile because I also ditched the blazer and tie today. We mean business. She drops her handbag to the floor and walks straight to the coffee station. She grabs the mugs and disappears to a little kitchenette next to her office and thereafter walks back to brew the coffee.

"Count me in please," I say, standing in front of our investigation board, my hands in my pocket. After a few minutes, Mrs Abigail stands next to

me and hands me one cup of coffee. She takes her first sip and stares at the map. We are both startled by the door opening without even a knock. Mr. Gumede flies in as if he was chasing a criminal.

“Ndumiso,” Mrs Abigail says, shocked.

“Now I have to track my wife’s car to get to where she is,” he says angrily. “I don’t have any idea why it took me so long to think of calling the bloody tracking company.”

“What are you doing here?”

“What am I doing here? How long have I been begging you to come home so that we talk? You are my wife for crying out loud,” he yells angrily. I don’t like his tone but to avoid worsening the situation, I keep my mouth shut.

“Well... I...” before Mrs. Abigail could finish her sentence, Mr Gumede’s eyes dart to the investigation board which is now behind us. He

narrows his eyes as he studies it. I see his eyes flash and then he takes a few steps backward, shifting his eyes between his wife and I.

“What the fuck is going on?” he asks, pointing his finger at his wife and then me. “What is this place?”

We both do not have answers to his questions, so we keep quiet. What am I to say? His picture and that of his girlfriend is there on the wall. And his picture is linked to Paulo and Moraka. His associate’s pictures are there too. It is an open book.

His eyes scan the place.

Damn, he had to come in here on the day we decided to do this.

“What the hell is this place?” he yells out again, spitting saliva all over the place, aiming this question to his wife. He hasn’t stopped taking more steps to the door. He quickly opens the

door and marches out as fast as he could.

“Shit!” I hiss.

Grab yourself a copy of my first baby

R290 total including courier to door or Paxi.

Whatsapp 066 223 0319

Heart of GOLD

#11

ABIGAIL

When the door closes, Theo quickly walks into his office and returns with a camera. In such freaky urgency, he snaps a million pictures of the investigation board.

“Come, quickly pack everything in boxes,” he orders. I am still frozen, freaked out by Ndumiso’s visit. When I don’t answer, Theo calls out loudly, “Mrs. Abigail!”

He tries to call me by my first name but sometimes he forgets to eliminate the Mrs – I am used to it. I snap out of my reverie and hurry to put away the cup of coffee I have been holding. I run to my office and pull two empty evidence boxes from the storage. I hurry to pack every piece of paper lying on the reception floor while Theo pulls the maps from the board. We haven’t addressed my husband’s visit but by the looks of things, we need to get out of here. And we need to get out right now. No questions asked.

It takes us a speed of light to gather everything into the boxes. Only now, when the boxes are on the table does Theo stand up straight, his forehead dripping wet, and says, "Our investigation is compromised." I nod. It is very obvious, even the blind could see. He continues, "I think you are going to need to tell me what is going on in your household. Last night I followed you to Midrand, instead of Waterkloof, and from what your husband said, he has been looking for you for a while."

I sigh deeply.

"Two weeks ago I walked out of my marriage. I haven't figured a plan but I am staying with a friend."

"Cases like these are very dangerous," he says, placing both his hands on his waist. I have never seen him this frustrated. "Dammit, I should have thought of this before splashing all these pictures on the walls."

“You can’t blame yourself. No one comes here... we thought it wasn’t a big deal. If there is anyone who should be blaming themselves... it should be me. I am sorry my private life interfered with my work.”

“You wouldn’t have known,” he breathes out.

“You cannot go home... and if things aren’t rosy at home, I cannot trust your husband not to get you harmed. This is too dangerous,” he says. I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand. I thought I knew my husband, but I definitely know shit about him. He is not the man I married. All these lies? I don’t trust him anymore. So, right now, I don’t even have an idea if he can harm me or not. Theo continues, “You cannot continue to use your car with that tracker on. And Mrs. Abigail, you cannot continue to live with your friend.”

I panic.

I got my friend in danger.

“Okay... I think I am scared,” I mumble.

“Look, he might be getting his crew right now. He saw everything. So if we need to act... we need to act now,” Theo says, walking into his office. He pulls another empty box from the shelf and throws everything from his safe. He tells me to do the same in my office. Without any questions, I run to my office and empty the safe as fast as I can. He comes to my office with strict instructions.

First – I need to give my friend a call, tell her I need to travel to work for a little while and drive straight to her apartment to get a few of my clothes. The tracker already picked her address and for the past two weeks, I had been driving to and from there. Should anyone go to her apartment to look for me, she’ll genuinely tell them I am traveling for work. Theo clearly tells me not to make it obvious to her that I am

running away, so I should pack as if I am returning soon.

Second – Driving from Midrand, I should make a stop at Big Bird petroport and put on petrol or make a purchase. That time, Theo will be taking my bags from my boot to his. Should they trace me, then they would think I stopped to make a purchase or refill petrol – so I have to make sure that I swipe my card.

Third – I need to let go of this Range Rover. I cannot abandon it at the side of the road but if I call the nanny and she tells me that my husband is home, then I'll have no choice but to leave it by the estate gate or something.

Fourth instruction – Get an Uber from my house to Menlyn mall. I'll find Theo waiting for me. I'll disconnect my phone from there.

Since the minute I called Phindile to tell her of

my unplanned trip, my hands have been trembling. It pains me that I cannot even confide in her. She won't even know. And I cannot even warn her. When I reach her apartment, I quickly step out of my car and run to the apartment. My heart has never beaten this fast before. Right now I thank God for making me a clean freak. Everything is where it is supposed to be. I pull open the closet and pick a handful of clothes, pick a few pairs of shoes and my make-up bag, before rushing to my car.

At Big Bird Petroport, Theo grabs my bags as promised while I put a quarter tank of fuel. For the first time in ages, I swipe my card. The last thing I want is for Ndumiso to get notified about my whereabouts. He hasn't noticed my daily transactions on his card, or he hasn't brought it up. I throw the card on the car cup holder – he'll find it there.

With my heart on my throat, I speed to get home as fast as I can. My helper confirmed that he left in the morning to drop Mpho off at school. This means he hasn't returned home since our encounter. He was dressed casually so I know he is not in the office. That only means one thing.

Parked at the driveway in my house, I request an Uber. I thank my lucky stars when my phone reports that the driver will be here in fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes is not bad – I have waited for way longer than that before during this time of day.

Our garden boy's eyes light up when he notices me jumping out of the car. I give him a wave. He walks towards the driveway, the same time that I am making my way to the main door. He wants to chat up, I know.

He jogs towards me, a smile still on his face. Just like Sis Martha, KK has been with us for so

many years. He is family now.

“How have you been ma’am?” he asks, stopping in front of me.

“I am good. How are you?” my smile matches his, but my heart doesn’t stop beating fast. I keep darting my eyes towards the gate. My husband cannot find me here.

“I am good... just missing your cookies.” He laughs. I laugh with him and thereafter request that I be excused. I hurry to the house, finding Sis Martha in the kitchen. It is around eleven o’clock, so she is still cleaning the house. Nothing has changed. My kitchen is still the same and it is as if I was here in the morning. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone so I pull one of the kitchen drawers and retrieve the recipe book I have been penning down for years. I might never use it, I don’t know, but I take it anyway. I take a chance to catch up, finding out how my son is really doing. He is trying. And

today his heart is going to break when he finds my car outside but not me.

I feel like crying because I miss him so much. We speak on the phone every day but it is not enough. And now, things are going to be worse.

There was no other choice but for me to come here. Theo's home is beautiful. It is in the old Centurion suburbs. A newly renovated free-standing house with a huge beautiful yard. While he unpacks the bags and boxes from the car, he tells me to go to the kitchen. His helper is busy in the scullery when I walk in. She is old and doesn't look so friendly. I give her a warm smile, introducing myself as Theo's cousin, just like he instructed. I help myself to a glass of water because I am thirsty and hungry. We

didn't get a chance to eat, and with all the adrenaline, I could not stomach anything.

"I'll show you to your room," Theo says from behind me, startling me in the process. "Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you."

"It's okay," I respond, turning to face him.

"Vho Muofhe, can you please prepare something for us to eat?" Theo asks. She agrees.

I step into a room, finding my bags on top of a well-made bed. Theo closes the door, leaving me standing in the middle of the room. The curtains and the bedding are old, but the room is neat. I carefully sit on the bed and finally let my tears roll down my face.

I am exhausted.

So, so exhausted.

I take my shoes off and climb onto the center of

the bed and curl myself into a ball.

The next time I open my eyes, I hear laughter from outside the windows. I stretch myself while sitting up. It isn't dark yet, but I can tell it is late. I probably slept the afternoon away.

I cannot help but stand by the window, spying on Theo and his son chasing after a fluffy puppy. They remind me of my family.

How I miss them.

"Ms. Abigail," Alu shrieks happily when he notices me by the window. I'm busted. So I lift my hand and give him a wave.

"Come meet my puppy," Alu says, pointing at the cute little fluffy dog which is not sitting on the glass. I let go of the curtains and walk out of the bedroom, scanning the corridor for a door that looks like it leads to the bathroom. One door on my left is slightly open, so I peek in. I got it right – it is a bathroom. I lock the door

and freshen up, trying my best to comb my wig with my fingers. Yoh, I wish I hadn't installed this long straight one this week. It needs so much maintenance and energy is what I don't have.

When I step out of the house, Theo almost runs over me. He spins me so hard, I yelp. Aluwani finds it funny so he laughs loudly while I try to steady my heart.

"I am sorry, I didn't see you coming," Theo apologizes.

"It's okay," I respond, making my way to where Alu is standing. I hug him before the nanny calls him for a bath. He leaves me standing helplessly, not knowing what to do. As much as I am comfortable with Theo in his office, this is a different setup.

"You must be starving. Come, I'll dish up for you," he says, leading the way inside. I love how

his backyard is so private, with high walls. No neighbour or anyone else can see inside his yard unless the gate is open. I wonder if this is part of his security features.

The helper cooked, so I cannot complain. She tried making mince and spaghetti, so I'll give her an A for effort. I clean the plate in a matter of minutes before Theo calls me to his home office. Walking into the room, I am shocked to see how many screens he has installed on the wall. He has his whole house surrounded by security cameras. He was right when he once told me that he is quite paranoid. He reaches for a cable and one small box on the screen goes black.

"That was the camera in the room you will be using," he announces. There are two more boxes which are black. I take it it is for his room and the nanny's because I can see a spiderman themed room on the screen.

He has another television screen which has cameras of the office – inside and out.

Theo turns and opens a drawer, pulling a phone.

“This is a black phone. It is untraceable and it cannot be hacked... so you are going to use it until we know that you are safe.”

“Can I call using it?”

“Yes.”

I am happy that I can be able to talk to my son.

“So, what happens now?”

“We will work from here to gather as much information as I can. I have organized security so there is always someone watching the house from outside. I am keeping Alu out of school for this week. He will return next week when I am sure that no one is following me. Unfortunately, you cannot leave the house unless you are with me. It is temporary until we see how things are.”

“No, I understand,” I sigh deeply.

Three days into this arrangement, I am getting used to it. I have noticed the nanny’s mood has also improved since I do the baking and cooking around here. What else can I do? I hate TV and there is no room for me to go out for nails or anything, so I bake and cook to pass time. I love how Aluwani is now. I am told Theo got him a puppy a week ago and he is loving it much. I see a responsible young man, because after he does his online classes, he takes care of that puppy like its life depends on him.

Well, it does depend on Alu...and Theo...and the nanny.

Wiping my hands with my apron, I pull my blackphone from the pocket and dial Sis Martha’s number. Right about now, she is usually helping Mpho take his evening bath and

getting into sleepwear, so I know they are in Mpho's room.

The phone rings once before it is answered. She doesn't say anything, so I start, "Hi Sis Martha."

"Don't you dare hang up," my husband's voice stills me. I freeze as if he is in the room with me. "I know that you are listening." My chest rises and falls. "What do you think you are doing, Abby?" he pauses for a little while before taking a deep sigh. He is too calm for my liking. He repeats, "What do you think you are doing?"

"I don't know what you talking about?"

"I don't love her. She was just there," he says. He is so calm, but I can sense his frustration. When I don't respond, he continues, "You need to come home. I am not even angry at you. We just need to talk."

"No," I blurt out.

“This is way bigger than you. You have no idea what you are getting yourself into Abigail Gumede, you need to come back home,” he begs, his voice slightly rising.

“Why?”

“You are not safe with him.”

“Him? Who?”

“Theodore Masindi,” he says, his voice begging.

Masindi?

My blood goes cold. I have never mentioned Theo’s surname to my husband before.

“Come home.”

Heart of GOLD

#12

THEO

Chicken stew!

Mrs. Abigail is preparing chicken stew – the aroma can reach my office. I have been stuck in here for hours, pulling reports after reports because, yes there is light in this case. We no longer have leisure of time, so I have to work day and night.

Circling some transactions on Miss Sweet Delectables, I shake my head at how these guys weren't very careful for scumbags. Or maybe they didn't see anyone sniffing a bakery. Going through the bank statements, something is starting to make sense. No, I am not talking about anything related to the investigation but what Ndumiso Gumede did to his wife.

I stop scanning the bank statement and sniff the air because I can smell something burning. Just two sniffs and I am up on my feet, rushing

to the kitchen. Mrs. Abigail is rooted in the middle of the kitchen, her phone clutched in her hand as she stares blankly into space. I rush to the kitchen drawers to get the oven mitts. The commotion in the kitchen startles Mrs. Abigail, who gasps loudly at me while I pull the pot from the stove. I carefully place it on a potholder and switch off the stove.

“Theo... I am so sorry,” she cries out in panic, her eyes teary as she stares down at the pot. I don’t dare open it because the smell will just get worse. While I open the windows wider, she is still apologizing.

“No, it is okay,” I say, worried at how I found her. Aluwani runs to the kitchen, a frown on his little face. “Stay right there.”

“What's burning?” he asks innocently.

“Chicken.”

“What are we going to eat?” he asks. His eyes

light up before he says, “Are you going to order pizza?”

“We cannot order pizza,” I respond. There is no way I am going to compromise our safety over pizza. It is almost late right now and even though we have some guys watching over us, I cannot risk our lives for food.

“Why not?” he whines.

“We can have noodles,” I respond.

“I can make us pizza,” Mrs. Abigail offers, a sad smile on her face. I shake my head. She needs to take some time off and rest. There are probably some leftovers in the fridge. When our nanny calls for Aluwani to come to the bathroom for a shower, he turns and runs to her. I like how strict she is with him.

When it is just Mrs. Abigail and me in the kitchen, I ask, “What happened?”

“Huh?” she asks. This is not the time to hide

anything from me.

“When I walked in here, you were staring blankly into space.”

She drops her eyes to the phone still clutched in her hand.

“I called the nanny, needing to talk to my son but my husband answered instead.” I clear my throat, cross my arms to my chest and lean on the kitchen island to hear all about this. “He said I am not safe with you and wants me to come home.”

I nod at her slowly before saying, “Well, he might be right. Or just scaring you so that you go back to him.”

“I am not safe with you?” she whispers.

“If he ran to his associates, the only thing that makes sense is to stop me from going ahead with the investigation... So, what is the best way to mute me?” I ask. She widens her eyes at me.

“Do you think they are after you?”

“I wouldn’t be shocked if they are.” I shrug my shoulders.

Her hands start to tremble. She panics easily.

“Oh, my God... I brought this to your family,” she says, dropping the phone on the counter and grabbing a seat. I understand her fear. I fear too – not for my life but that of my son. Her eyes start getting teary and as I watch, they fall down her cheeks like a fountain before she starts sobbing. Her sobs are loud. There isn’t much I can do but to comfort her. I force my legs towards her and open my arms in front of her. She lifts her eyes at me before enveloping me. I am tall and she is sitting down, so her head is resting just above my waist. I don’t care. I don’t care when she tightens her arms around me and shudders. As the seconds tick by, my t-shirt is getting wet, and again... I don’t care. I know she needs this. I don’t have words to make her

feel any better, so this is how I can help.

After what seems like forever, she pulls away and I move backward, giving her space to breathe. She quickly dries her tears with the apron, exposing her swollen eyes when she is done.

“My husband knows your surname but I didn’t tell him.”

“They are fast,” I respond, taking a deep breath.

“I am sorry.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“I don’t know what to do. I’ve put your family in so much danger and there is nothing I can do to fix this.”

“My job put me in danger,” I correct. I wasn’t careful enough. I brought this to us because I knew better.

“I guess I’ll just die here with you.” She shrugs.

I laugh, smitten by her words. Her words aren't anything romantic but it is nice to hear someone say they would rather die with you than run away from you to stay safe.

"If I find another plan to get you somewhere safe, I'll get you there."

"No. I cannot get you in trouble and then run away when..."

I almost reached for her hands but fortunately, my mind was quick to reprimand me. I squat down in front of her and stare into her eyes.

"Mrs. Abigail, I am going to need to get you to a safe place soon," I whisper. When she starts shaking her head vigorously, I continue, "I also need to get Alu to a safe place... so I need someone to take care of him." Only now does she stop shaking her head. "I am going to need you." She buries her head into her trembling hands. This time I reach for her hands because

I need her to look at me. When she does, I assure her, “I’ll do everything in my power to protect you.”

Last night was heavy and to be honest, I didn’t sleep a wink. I am outside, stretching after my morning workout. It is a beautiful morning, already sunny and the birds are chirping happily all over the yard.

I need a plan.

I need all the contacts I have been building all these years and I think I know a guy who can help me out with shelter – I just need Lorenzo to sort this out for me. I need to get Mrs. Abigail, Vho Masindi, and Aluwani out of this house, in case these men are planning to strike my house. I know too much to stay alive.

It is just after five-thirty and the house is quiet. I switch the geyser on but head to my bedroom for a quick cold shower. There is no going out, so I get into my decent shorts and a t-shirt before heading to my office to carry on where I left off last night. I pull the reports from my safe and start with my work.

At seven-thirty, there is a soft knock on my door. When I summon my guest in, Mrs. Abigail walks in with a tray. She places it on the table before taking an empty seat.

“Thank you,” I say, picking a mug of coffee. I take the first sip, almost tempted to groan, and close my eyes to appreciate the taste. It would be very inappropriate to do so in front of her, so I don’t. “You make the best coffee Mrs. Abigail.”

“Thank you,” she responds with a smile. A better smile than the one she gave me last night before she disappeared into her room. Her eyes dart around the reports which are all over

the table. "Are you winning?"

"Oh yes. And thank you for joining me because I have some questions regarding the bakery." I place my coffee mug on the table and reach for the bank statement with endless red marks on it. "Say the business is booming...how much do you think Miss Sweet Delectables make in a week? Go crazy. Go ridiculously crazy with the projections."

She takes a sip, licks her lips, and then bites her bottom lips trying to make up numbers in her head. I wait. I have already worked up my numbers. I remind her to go crazy with the projections.

"Business is booming and it just opened about a month ago, right?"

"Yes?"

"I don't know... but maybe in a week they can make between fifty to seventy thousand. I mean

big orders, crazy and ridiculous sales.”

“Exactly what I thought,” I say, placing the bank statements in front of her. “They make cash deposits weekly and look at how much they deposit as sales?” Her eyes widen. “Two hundred and twenty on the first week of the month. Three thirty on the second week.” I laugh because these people are either stupid or are sloppy and want to be caught. “Two hundred and ten thousand on the third week.”

“Not possible,” she says. “They sell cupcakes and cakes for crying out loud.”

“It is either they want to clean the money very fast since the bakery is still new or they have a lot of dirty money to clean up ASAP. I just got the bank statements for the spa. It has been operating for a while so I will get more patterns there.”

“Wow, this is crazy.”

It makes sense why the husband opened the bakery for the side chick. Mrs. Abigail was not going to allow this to happen. She was probably going to call her husband to order. I don't know her for long but her values and her integrity are not questionable.

"What I don't understand is why your husband is leaving tracks. Why would he publicly mention that Gumedede Enterprise invested in this establishment...knowing very well that it isn't a clean business?" I ask. Such things don't make sense. Unfortunately, there isn't any transfer from the bakery to any other establish for us to trace the relationship.

Something on the security screens grabs my attention. I quickly pull the remote to zoom into the screen which shows the feed from the video camera just outside my offices. A black car is parked just by the door and two men quickly jump out of the back seat and move closer to

the windows. One tries to scan inside, while the other tries to open the door. Mrs. Abigail gasps loudly when she notices what I am watching.

“They are already looking for us,” she says.

“Dammit!” I hiss, my eyes still glued on the screen. Mrs. Abigail shrieks, almost jumping out of her seat, when one guy breaks the window with a brick. I still watch as both men twirl around and thereafter sprint to the car. The car speeds off the same minute I notice two security guards running into the view.

Since that incident just a few days ago, it is confirmed that I am in danger. They are looking for us. Aluwani, the nanny and Mrs. Abigail are not safe with me. And the fucked-up part is how they can still use them to get to me. I haven't

slept a wink.

We need to separate.

It is a Monday evening, around nine in the evening and Mrs. Abigail is tucking Aluwani in bed – she has been doing so since she got here. My son is exhausted from being locked up in the house. Vho Masindi has been complaining about not seeing her grandchildren. I cannot risk anyone leaving the house before Lawrenzo gives me a clearance to do so. Lawrenzo's guys are watching over us from the outside.

“Can I use the internet?” Mrs. Abigail requests, standing by the office door. I nod at her while getting on my feet. Unfortunately, this is how she gets to see the outside world. No one can crack into my IP address so she uses my computer when she needs to browse the net or log onto social media – using ghost accounts of course.

“I’ll make myself coffee so long,” I announce, walking out of the room. I head to the kitchen for that steaming cup of coffee. Opening the cupboards, I realize how much we need to load some groceries. The fridge is already empty. We need to stock up. As I pull an almost empty carton of milk, it slips off my hand to the floor when I am startled by Mrs. Abigail screaming from the office. In a heartbeat I am by the office door, finding her standing far from the chair, covering her mouth with both her hands and her eyes glued on the security screens. I jump to where I can see what is on the screen. There, before my eyes, is my office going into flames.

“It just went up into flames,” she says, her voice breaking. “It went off like a bomb.”

Fuck!!

I grab my phone from the table and dial Lorenzo’s phone, wanting to tell him that we need to meet. I need to plan an escape for my

son and Mrs. Abigail.

I need to plan it now.

“Hello.”

“We need to talk. We need to meet, right now.”

“In twenty. Orange zone!” he says and thereafter hangs up.

I twirl on my heels, rushing to my room to change into something warm as fast as I can.

Mrs. Abigail is behind me in a second.

“I need to go meet this guy. I am getting you and Alu out of here.”

“Why is...”

“No questions Abigail. That was just a warning, nothing more. Next, they will be here,” I say.

“No, we need to go together,” she begs.

“I cannot compromise your safety. I need to stay here and keep them in the loop, I know they

are watching. If we all just disappear, they will continue to hunt for me.”

“Theo...”

Without a care that she is standing right in front of me, I take off the shorts I was wearing and put on black track pants. I pull a hoodie and throw it over my head. After tying my sneakers, I march to a safe in my closet, punch in the code and pull the cash I had stashed there. I grab Mrs. Abigail’s hand, and throw the cash into her hand.

“If I am not back by morning, I need you to run with my son. Find a way to get away from here and get as far away as you can.”

“Theo...” Mrs Abigail tries to talk.

“It is not time for questions... don’t you get it?” I yell. I want her to focus right now. “No questions, okay?” I pull a file from my closet and hand it to her. “This are all Aluwani’s

documents.”

“Why are you giving me this? You are coming back,” she says.

“If I don’t ... I want you to get out of here in the morning, do you hear me?” I ask, but she doesn’t respond. I grab her shoulders and shake her, “Do you hear me?”

“Yes...yes...,” she says, tears starting to fall.

“I’ll be back,” I say, running for the door.

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Heart of GOLD

#13

ABIGAIL

I regret the day I met Ndumiso Gumede. He gave me a beautiful life and a beautiful boy but if this is how it is going to end, I despise the day we met.

Who was I married to?

This is not the man I married. What did he get himself into?

It is 23:30 and I haven't heard anything from Theo since he ran out of the house. I shouldn't have agreed to stay here. I am so scared, I feel like peeing on myself. I know I shouldn't stand by the windows because bullets can come through anytime, but I cannot help pacing around the living room, scanning the driveway...praying that Theo drives in anytime.

Why did I agree to stay behind? I should have fought to jump into his car and at least hide under the seats.

I wasn't made for this. I wasn't. I wasn't made for this kind of life.

The whole house is dark so that I can easily see shadows from outside. It is dead quiet and I can hear myself breathe. Each time the clock ticks, my eyes land on my wrist to check what time it is.

23:50 – still no call. No nothing.

How long does it take to meet someone and arrange accommodation?

Why didn't Theo organize everything over the phone? I wouldn't be feeling like this if he did.

I bury my face in my trembling hands and throw myself on the couch. I move my hands to my hair which is now afro and uncared for. I am going to pass out any minute.

“You need to think, Abby. Think,” I whisper to myself while trying to breathe. I need to think.

Think what? I almost scream to myself because I don't have a plan. The police are not even an option. My friends and family are a no-go area. Talking about family, earlier when I was browsing the net, I landed on Phindile's Facebook wall. Before the bomb went off, I wanted to comment on her status. She is looking for me. She has boldly updated her status, asking people to help her look for me because since I left her apartment, my phone has been off. No one in my family knows where I am. It has been two weeks and she is worried sick. I was ready to tell her that God is watching over her friend, just to make her feel better. But I couldn't.

So, if I cannot go to them, where am I supposed to run to?

00:35 – okay, we are going to die. Theo is not

coming back.

I am still rooted in the middle of the living room. I am not going to sleep. I grab the phone from the couch and dial Theo's number. I throw it back on the couch when the phone goes on voicemail instead of ringing. It was ringing just two hours ago. What happened to it now?

I am dead.

We are dead.

"Think! Think! Think Abby," I hiss at myself.

I run to the office. For what? I have no idea but I run there either way. Before opening the drawers, I do a quick scan on the security screens. Nothing is amiss. No movements around the house. No movements around the office. I pull open the drawers and I find the keys to the Double Cab that Theo has in the garage. I cannot drive it, can I? I throw the keys back in the drawer and scan for something else.

Anything that can help me make a move. As I shuffle papers around, I come across an envelope with old pictures of Theo and his wife. I stand up straight, going through each picture. Theo was very happy with her. His smile is always wide when they are together. A light bulb lights up in my head when I come across a picture of Theo and his wife standing in front of a house in some village - I know a village when I see one. I was born and bred in Mafikeng so I haven't been to Venda, but I guess I can find my way there.

I rush to Theo's bedroom and return with a backpack I saw earlier when I followed him to his room. Inside it is the stash of cash he gave me and Alu's documents. I pack Theo's laptop, hard drives and all the chargers I am going to need. I quickly pack the thick file for this case including the new reports Theo was showing me just yesterday. I don't leave out the envelope

of the pictures – Aluwani might need these someday.

I shake the thought away.

I want to stay positive but where do I find my courage? Theo has been gone for more than four hours and his phone is off now.

03:15 – Theo's phone is still off and he isn't home yet. This is a confirmation –we are all going to die.

The sound of the kettle boiling water jerks me off from my slumber. I jump from the couch, and aim the knife towards the direction of the sound. When I notice the nanny going about her business in the kitchen, I throw the knife on the floor. The sound of it meeting the tile forces the

nanny to turn towards my direction.

“Sorry,” I apologise, rubbing my face with one hand.

I dozed off earlier, and now the time is... 06:45.

Oh, no!

Without a word, I run to Theo’s bedroom. He is still not here. No message or missed call on my phone.

“We need to get out of here,” I tell her before running to Aluwani’s room. Luckily I find him playing with his puppy – I don’t need to wake him up.

“Ms Abigail...”

I grab his schoolbag and shake all his books to the floor before throwing pieces of his clothes inside. Tracksuits. T-shirts. Underwear. I throw a huge jacket at him.

“Wear that,” I order.

“But it is hot. I feel...”

“Wear the jacket,” I yell at him. Now I know why I frustrate Theo so much when I panic during the time he needs me to focus. I sigh deeply and calmly say, “Please wear the jacket and your sneakers. We need to go far away for an adventure and we need to go now.”

“Can I come with my puppy?” He gives me his puppy eyes. I shift my eyes to the puppy and find it giving me puppy eyes... I mean its cute eyes too.

“No.”

“What?”

If I take this damn thing, it is going to delay us. We are going to need to use public transport, no taxi driver will allow a dog in his taxi.

“We can’t,” I sternly say, throwing another tracksuit and shirt into the schoolbag. When Alu softly cries, it breaks my heart. I sigh deeply,

turning to face him. In all honesty, he is going to need that dog. "Fine. We will take it."

I leave him putting his shoes on. I order the nanny to take her necessities.

07:20 – I am carrying the puppy while dragging Aluwani's hand by the side of the road, the nanny in tow. We are making our way to the main road to catch a taxi. Alu has been asking why his father is not here to drive us to our destination and I have no answer for him. I am tempted to cry but there is no room for tears anymore.

I only breathe when we jump into a taxi. Luckily we get into one that isn't full, so we take the whole row. I tell the nanny to go straight home, Theo will contact her when he returns. As much as we haven't mentioned anything to her, she can sense the danger. I am worried about her but to be honest, I cannot take her with me. I don't even know where I am going. All I know is

that we are going to stay here in Pretoria for just a few days. Maybe Theo will try to get hold of me.

I knew the dog was going to be a problem. We are at the third restaurant and the security is denying us access to get in. It doesn't help that it barks spontaneously, bringing attention to us. I take the dog into my arms and stand by the door at KFC, watching Aluwani buy something for us to eat. We are going to need to go to a park, so from here, I am getting us a maxi taxi to the Union Building.

Town is packed and my anxiety is at the roof, while Aluwani is enjoying the adventure. We have been locked up in the house for a while so this is fun for him. Luckily nothing much, except for the street names, have changed from my varsity days. I know all corners and can navigate easily.

Sitting under a huge tree at the Union building, I pull out my phone and search for guest houses we can go to for a few days. It doesn't have to be fancy. The fancier, the more they are going to need my identification before they can assist me.

I find a pet-friendly one, so I call and arrange for an early check-in. They have no choice but to buy that I am travelling from Durban and we arrived earlier than expected.

While taking a bite of my sweet chilli twister, I keep my gaze at Aluwani who is happily running around with his dog. They are both well fed and rested.

It is 10:50 and Theo's phone is still off. I know at some point I am going to need to make peace with it. I swallow the food in my mouth, wrap the twister and throw it into the take-away bag. I cannot down the food. I am worried sick. I miss my son. I don't have a proper plan. I am

refraining myself from calling my mother and sister because I don't trust myself not to cry and compromise the whole thing.

What would Theo do in a missing person case?

Aluwani runs towards me. He stops in front of me and asks if he could use the toilet. This is our queue to leave.

The guest house is quite cheap for a beautiful setup they have. You don't have to ask if the owner is an animal lover or not. They have a pet shop just by the entrance and every room has a mini garden, so Aluwani has a place to spend his time with his puppy in our private space. Their rooms are huge and neat for a three-star guest house.

“When is my dad coming?” Alu asks from outside, throwing a stick for his puppy to catch. I am seated on the bed, the sliding door wide open so that I can watch over him.

“He is quite busy,” I respond, almost choking on my words. How do I tell a child that he is possibly an orphan right now?

“He didn’t even say goodbye when he left this morning,” he whines. Oh God, this boy reminds me so much of my son. That is what my son would tell me if ever his father travels anywhere without bidding him farewell.

Mpho Gumede.

I miss my son so much. I am counting minutes before I know he is in the car with his father. The phone Theo gave me is untraceable so my husband will have to bear with me. I need to bid farewell to my son in case they kill me before I get to him.

15:40 – I dial my husband’s number. It doesn’t take even a second before he answers.

“Hello!”

“Hi Ndumiso...”

“Mommy...” I hear Mpho’s voice from afar. They are in a car and the phone is definitely connected to Bluetooth.

“Mpho?” I call out. “Hey baby.”

My son doesn’t respond. I keep calling his name until my husband hisses on the phone, “Fuck it Abigail. I thought you were in that car.”

“What car?” I ask. “What car?”

“Where the hell are you?” he hisses. I take it I am no longer on a loud speaker. In the background I hear Mpho cry his lungs out, crying for me.

“Let me talk to my son,” I beg. “Let me talk to my son, now.”

The line goes silent before Mpho's hoarse voice calls my name. "Mommy... please come home." I shut my eyes and try not to cry with him. "You said you were going to come home and take me."

"Shhhhhh!" I try to calm him.

"Please mommy. Mommy... please."

"Listen baby. Mommy loves you so much and mommy wants you to be strong, okay? I am just away for a little while but if you need anything, you can ask daddy... or Aunty Martha... or granny....okay?"

"No!"

"Please do this for me my boy..."

"No!"

"Please!"

"No, mommy..."

"I don't have a choice, Mpho," I snap at him,

causing him to cry his lungs out. I take a deep breath and try again. "I cannot come home, my boy."

I don't hear Mpho for a second before Ndumiso says, "Have you lost your mind?"

"You spoke about a car... What car?"

"His."

"What happened to his car?"

"I can't stay on the phone with you. I want you to come home before these people get to you."

"Did you kill him? Did they kill him?" I ask, holding back my tears because I cannot do tears with Aluwani here. "Who are you, Ndumiso?" We stay silent for a few seconds before he tells me to come home if I want his protection. "Ndumiso, if you loved me, you wouldn't have told your friends about what you saw the other day."

“And allow you and your boyfriend to ruin my life?” he hisses. “If you loved me, you wouldn’t have formed a team to bring me down.”

“He was just doing his job. I was at work and...”

“He should have known better than to mess with the wrong people. He shouldn’t have started something he wasn’t going to finish.”

“What did you do to him?” I beg.

“I am just a nobody in all this...and I am pleading with you right... come back so that we can sort things out. I’ll go and plead for your life but I cannot do that when they don’t know where you are. They don’t know who else you are working with and what your plans are.”

I swallow hard, staring at Aluwani giggling outside. The boy needs his father and it is my fault that all this is happening.

“I’ll come back in one condition.”

“What?”

“You tell your people to let Theo go... and once I have proof of life, I’ll willingly come home.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Why not?”

“There was a movement on his vehicle tracker last night, so a hit was ordered on him.” My blood goes cold. “You don't want to know what happened next. I am not kidding with you, babe, you need to come back home.”

While I try to digest what Ndumiso is saying, Aluwani runs towards me and stops in front of me.

“Is that my dad? Can I talk to him?” he asks so innocently and so happily.

I hang up and pull Alu into my arms.

Heart of GOLD

#14 (Unedited)

ABIGAIL

Four days and my phone has not gone off. No ping. No vibrations. Nothing. I pick the notebook which is in front of me and throw it against the wall. I shouldn't have done that. Aluwani, who is sitting on the floor, listening to his teacher on the laptop turns to face me. I wave at him, apologizing for my frustration. His puppy is seated next to him, as if giving him moral support. He is slowly returning to his black hole and the questions he has for me are difficult to answer. Questions like: Is my gone just like my mom? He was so sad when he asked this, as if he can feel something is wrong. Oh, who am I feeling. He has not been at school for weeks. He hasn't seen his father for almost

a week. We are staying in a guest house. Obviously, something is very wrong.

A part of me doesn't want to believe that Theo is gone. I have watched so many movies to know that there is a possibility of a kidnapping. Immediately when I woke up the following day, after that call with my husband, I remembered Theo's programme to track cars. I have no idea why I didn't think of tracing his movement the night he left. According to the history, he drove for 8 kilometers before he stopped at a scrap yard. I know it is a scrap yard because I googled the address where his car was parked for the whole night until the following the next morning. The next movement was on the following morning, and it looks like it was dumped on the R21 towards OR Tambo Airport. How, I have no idea. I believe the police or the metro police seized it because the last pin shows that it is parked in an impoundment lot.

I have waited enough and cannot do anything with Aluwani and the dog in tow.

Frustrated some more, I get up from the bed and pick the notebook from the floor. The reason I threw it away was because I had to scratch out the ninth hospital. I have been calling hospitals in Gauteng, just hoping for a miracle. I don't want to move to the mortuaries. I know I am going to need to move to the mortuaries soon.

I carefully place the notebook in the bag and try to focus on Aluwani's teacher. I need to help him with his exercises afterwards.

When the online class is done, Aluwani shuts the laptop and turn to face me.

"Can I talk to my dad now?" His eyes are sad. He doesn't cry and it kills me that he doesn't. I cry for the both of the us at night when he is asleep.

“He will call us when he can,” I respond. He nods at me and faces the other way. “Alu, do you by any chance know your nanny’s number?” He recites the number without turning to me. I am so grateful that he knows it. “Would you like to go visit your granny? Maybe we can go for an adventure.”

“This is not an adventure. An adventure is supposed to be fun.”

“It will be fun in Venda...don’t you think?” I ask. He shakes his head. I sigh, because I am defeated. “Why don’t you take your puppy for a walk outside?” Alu gets on in feet, and his puppy jumps up too. He walks out of the sliding door, leaving me dialing the nanny’s number. Luckily she answers. My next move is to move Aluwani and I to Venda. I don’t tell her that but ask for Theo’s mother’s number. I am told she is too old to own one. When I ask where she is situated, she tells me in Milaboni. She tries to

direct me and I am clueless when she is done. I noted most of the things. Bosman station for a taxi to Louis Trichardt. A drive from Louis Trichardt town to Silom Hospital in Nzhelele. Catch a local taxi and drive up to the end of the road until we get to the gravel. I have no pictures in my head because I have never set my foot in Limpopo except for a trip to Polokwane. This is going to be a journey and a half.

The following morning I am at Bosman station, begging the taxi drivers to allow us with the dog. All of them laugh and refuse to help me even when I offer more money. And damn this dog gets too excited when it is around people. Luckily one young driver gives me a number of

a guy travelling to Thohoyandou in a private car. I begged, almost kneeling on a dirty pavement for his friend to help me.

It took us longer to arrive to the end of the tar road according to the nanny's direction. It didn't help that our driver preferred to avoid the tollgates on the N1 and used some long ass road with potholes. With all the money I was offering, I couldn't say a thing. He was already doing more than enough for us. He agreed to drop me to where I wanted to go. And didn't mind when we had to make endless stops to stretch our legs and force the dog to take a piss.

By the time we get to the end of the tar road, it is almost dark.

Thank you to God, who has made this boy right here too bright. He shows me where he usually plays with his friends when he comes to visit

his grandmother. When I ask him to show me where the grandma house is, he takes my hand and leads me up the road. Our lives depend on this young man. I am not worried, my very own six year old can direct me to places familiar to him. Walking into the yard, we find an old woman seated outside on a mat. When Aluwani runs to where she is seated, I know that we are home. I am happy that I am not walking into family members running around the yard or anyone erupting a tent. This tells me they don't know about Theo's passing.

"Ndi Alu," Alu responds when the old lady asks who it is. The sun is already down, so she cannot see clearly. When Alu repeats his name, she remembers who he is. She asks where his father is, confirming what I was just thinking about.

I jump in, trying to explain how he is away for work and asked me to move here with Aluwani

for a short while. I have been cooking a lie since we left Gauteng. The problem is explaining what I am to Theo. I cannot be an investigating colleague, can I? I cannot be Aluwani's nanny, can I? I tell her I am a good friend. She stares at me, probably thinking that I am more than a friend. It is rare that an old men like Theo can bring a 'friend' to his mother's house.

I got away with the lie and Theo's mother welcomes us. I cannot believe that she stays here alone. It is a freshly renovated house with three bedrooms and two bathrooms. Alu and I will share a bed since the other guest room is empty. At nine thirty, just after she finishes watching Muvhango, I ask to b excused so that I go lay down. I am exhausted and I am still in a mission of finding answers.

I am losing all the hope I have.

Today marks exactly two weeks since Theo's disappearance. I no longer have lies to tell his mother. I have been dreading to make phone calls to mortuaries but right now, I have no choice. I lock the door and settle on the bed, calling the numbers I pulled from the internet. The fourth phone call I make it to Steve Biko Hospital. The mortuary number is not going through so I call the reception.

"Hi, I cannot get through to the mortuary department, can you please forward me there?"

"Ah... please hold on... I will need to look for the number," the lady at the end of the line says. She chuckles nervously. "Please bear with me, I started just a week ago and I'm asked to answer the calls today. I haven't mastered the phone yet."

“It’s okay. I’ll wait,” I respond. As I hear pages turning, I ask, “I called last week looking for a gentleman... haven’t you guys admitted a guy called Theodore? He is tall, short cut hair... okay maybe the hair now has grown... and his beard was clean shaven...”

“What is his name?” she asks.

“Theodore Masindi,” I say. Since my arrival in Venda, I have noticed that his surname is popular here, but most use it as a name.

“No... I am not aware of a Theodore Masindi... please hold on,” she says. I hear her converse with someone. The sound is muffled so I cannot make out what the other person is saying. She clears her throat and says, “My colleague says we have a guy but we don’t know who he is.” She pauses. “Okay, I got the mortuary number.”

“Wait! Wait!” I sit up straight. “The guy who is

there. How is he?”

“When I saw him he was bald,” she says. My heart is gutted. She continues, “If you give me a number, I can send you a picture of him?”

“Yes please,” I jump. Before going to the mortuaries to identify bodies, I can rather wait for the picture.

I wait!

And wait!

And wait some more!

When my phone pings for the first time since Theo left me in his house, I jump. My hands are trembling when I unlock the screen. Tears stream down my face, uncontrollably when I see the confused man staring at the camera. He is lying on the bed. I cover my mouth with my hand so that I don't dare cry out loud. I dial the number that sent me the picture.

“Hello.”

“It’s him,” I sob. “It is the guy I am looking for.”

“Oh...”

“Can I speak to him?” I ask.

“Hello.” Theo’s voice makes me tremble.

“I have been so sick and worried about you,” I cry out. The line goes quiet. “Theo? Theo?”

“Sorry. He gave me the phone back,” she say.

“Ma’am, I need to go back to the reception. I am just an intern and I shouldn’t be here.”

I ask for her name and beg her to connect me with someone who will be working rotating with her in tonight’s shift. It is going to take me more than seven hours to get to where he is, and when I get there, I need to see him.

A big Mac is my first meal of the day and it is already half past seven in the evening. I have lost so much weight since Theo's disappearance. I am dealing with a lot. During the week I managed to call my son. He is a mess and that made me a mess too. I just wish I could spend some time with him. Upon my arrival to Pretoria, I went straight to that guest house and checked in. The last thing I need is to be stranded. I am grateful that I am in Arcadia and this place is full of meter taxis. No need to use my phone for Uber.

I hand the money to the driver when he stops by Steve Biko hospital. I am trembling as I rush to the reception. I still don't know what awaits me in Gauteng. I felt a little better back in Venda. Here, everything is a mystery. I don't even know what I am walking into. Since that phone call with the nurse, I have been cracking my head why Theo

refused to talk to me.

“Can I see sis Nomvula?” I ask when I reach the reception. This is the name the intern gave me. The young guy behind the desk tells me to wait by the bench.

This has become my life.

I live to wait.

I take the cold bench and WAIT. And by the looks of things, I am going to wait for hours. It is late at night by the hospital is busy.

I am happy that I checked in first before coming here, or else I was going to be stranded.

When someone shakes me from my slumber, I almost jump to my feet. Opening my eyes, they meet a woman in white uniform. I dart my eyes around, noticing a number of people still seated in the reception area.

“You are looking for me,” she says.

I quickly jump to my feet.

I tell her my story. Luckily the intern already filled me in.

“He arrived a week ago. An ambulance dropped him and he has been with us since. He had an accident... the car he was in was torn into pieces. The police were here to get some answers since the eyewitnesses believe they were speeding away from a high jack when the tyres were shot at. I don't have much details of the accident but he was not alone when the ambulance got here. The driver did not make it.”

The driver might be the guy he was meeting.

“Who is he?” I ask. “the driver.”

“They both did not have anything to identify them. We are still looking for the deceased's family.” I am just grateful that the deceased is not Theo. I follow the sister as she takes me to a ward. At the corner is Theo's bed. He is

sleeping so peacefully. My tears come out to play. The relieve I have right now?

He has bruises on his face and his head. Now it makes sense why they shaved his head, he has stitches.

“He broke his left hand and...” She turns to look at me, “He has retrograde amnesia.”

I frown. “What is that?”

“He lost his past memory.”

I shake my head, not understanding. “I don’t understand. Is his brain damaged?”

“Not particularly.” She sighs. “He lost his past memory, so he doesn’t remember anything that happened before he was conscious just a few days ago.”

I laugh.

I laugh because this is insane.

She stares down at me, sympathising with me.

“What does that mean?” I gasp, so many things running in my head.

The money laundering case?

Me?

His son?

His house?

The freaking danger we are in right now?

He doesn't remember all these?

I lean on the bed, slowly reaching for the floor so that I could sit.

“Other than that, he is perfectly fine and is ready to be discharged,” she says.

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Heart of GOLD

#15

ABIGAIL

First it was the dog and the boy with me. Now it is a freaking man. I don't know what to do. I am so exhausted. I had no choice but to wake up this morning and head to the hospital to pick Theo up since he processed his discharge papers. When signing the documents, I figured this is a public hospital and they might do things differently. At some hospitals, they were going to send me from pillar to posts to prove that I am family. Here, they are just happy that he has somewhere to go and they have an empty bed to accommodate another patient. Last night, when the nurse told me about his amnesia, I was defeated. I was knocked to the floor. Right now, I am still at the same position. The medical reports confirmed that everything she told me was true. Before throwing myself to

bed last night, I prayed that this isn't true.

What am I going to do?

What is going to happen to me right now?

Right now, we are seated in the room I have booked at the guest house. He is seated on the bed while I stare at him from across the room.

This is not the Theo that I know.

"Would you like something to eat?" I ask, for the fourth time since we got here. He shakes his head. He doesn't speak much. What I am told is that he is fine, it will just take time for all of us to get used to this. I tossed and turned last night, spending hours on the internet trying to learn more about this condition. This is scary. He might or might not remember. EVER! Like, right now, Theo and I are just those two strangers who met at his office when I needed to book his services. He doesn't know who the hell I am. He completely forgot about his

precious son.

But, nah! This can't be true.

How the hell does it happen?

I need answers.

The accident? Who was chasing after him? It tells me that he abandoned his car to join the guy who was helping him before they were chased. Right now, I am grateful that he isn't the one who passed away – may the driver's soul rest in peace. Aluwani still needs his father.

Theo stares at me without saying a word. His face is friendly like it has always been. He is dressed in a black shirt that was pulled from the lost & found box at the hospital and a pair of blue jeans. His clothes were torn and he had always been in the hospital gown since his arrival at the hospital. Now, it means, I need to help him shop for clothes – starting from underwear.

He smiles at me slightly and I swear I get a hint of the old Theo.

The old Theo.

The new Theo.

How am I supposed to believe that the old Theo is gone? That there is an old and a new one?

“Theo... are you sure you don’t remember me?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at him.

“We have never met before,” he responds, not shifting his eyes from me. “But you are quite a beautiful woman.” I shake my head. This is so awkward. And maybe, just maybe, he is not acting – Theo would never say such a thing to me.

“I see.”

“How are we related? Are you my wife?” he asks.

There is that too. We have to start from the beginning. I had wished that telling him about

things from his past would make him remember, but NO. It doesn't work that way. There is nothing that can be done. We are dealing with the brain here – the most mysterious thing ever. And with us in danger, I cannot consult with specialists without submitting our identity details. Theo doesn't have his wallet or anything on him. The only belonging he has is his black phone which I am charging. Had the hospital had a charger for this model, they would have charged it and used his thumb to get access to his information. I need to access that phone. It might have some information I need.

“I am not your wife. I am... a friend...” I say.

“Theo, you can trust me. Please tell me you can remember me.”

“No, I don't.”

“Please don't do this. Your son needs you right now.”

“I have a son?” Oh my God, he sounds like ‘Theo’. I drop my head to my hands and try so hard not to cry. I don’t let the tears fall. I slowly lift my eyes to him.

“You do. His name is Aluwani. A sweet boy who loves you so much and he needs you right now.” By the time I am done saying this statement, I am in tears. I quickly get on my feet and rush to the bathroom to clean my face. When I return back to the bedroom, he is still seated on the bed. I need to get out of here and think or else I’ll lose my mind.

“Please stay here, I need to take care of something.” He nods quietly. “I’ll order you something to eat from the reception. When they bring the food, please eat and take your pain medication.” He nods once again. He has retrograde amnesia, so it could have been worse. It is worse already, but it could have been worse if he couldn’t even hold on to new

information.

As promised, I order food and ask that they send it to our room. Thereafter, I call the meter taxi guy to take me to Menlyn Mall. I do a little shopping before heading to Mpho's school. It helps that I had always been friendly with all the security guards at the school gate – most, if not all of them, have received paper bags of scones from me when I use to come for Mpho's sports. I wasn't bribing them. That was just me being me.

They don't make a fuss when I tell them that I need to go to see the principal. The only thing they did was give me a double-take when I took off my cap and greeted them. Life happens, man. I used to drive a Range Rover and my husband Mercedes-AMG GT on some good days – little did I know it was all dirty. Soccer mommy or not, you would hardly find me in my son's school wearing ballerina shoes. And here

I am, dressed in a black jean and, plain grey top and a pair of sneakers. My designer handbag is replaced with a black backpack. My new life doesn't allow me to be 'me'.

At the principal's office I beg for her to let me see my son for thirty minutes. I am aware of the school protocol but I need her to understand. This is life. Separations between parents can happen, so can she allow me this opportunity?

"I cannot just pull him out of class."

"Yes, you can and you will. Did my ex-husband put you to this? To refuse me access to my own son just because I want to divorce him?" I drop a blackmailing card on her.

"No..."

"Then please. Allow me just thirty minutes and I'll be out of here."

It takes a lot for me to throw tantrums but I do and only when she sees that I am not budging

does she ask someone to go call my son from class. I don't care if she will call my husband or not when I step out of this office. I just need to see my son.

When Mpho walks into his office, his eyes are on the floor. He looks so sad. I call his name and he snaps his head up and searches for me in the room. His shoulders sag as he throws himself into my arms. Only now does the principal give me teary eyes. My own eyes are blurry too. My world comes crumbling down when he clings on me, wetting my t-shirt. We are going to need more time here. I get up from the chair, allowing him to wrap his legs around my waist. He is a big boy, but I carry him outside, rubbing his back and telling him that everything will be fine. When he is at school, he is cautious of how he acts and all of that, but today he doesn't care. Only when I step outside the reception area, does he let me to put him

down. I take his hand and lead him to the sports arena. I brought his favourite chocolates and drinks for us. I also got him a little soldier toy to hold on to.

“How is school,” I ask after what seems like forever.

“I am kicked out of the soccer team,” he sadly says. “So that I attend Maths extra classes.”

“Everything will be fine.”

“Are you now back?” he asks, his teary big eyes staring at me.

“Not yet.” Before he could say anything else, I quickly slide in his friend’s situation after the parents divorced. How things changed for the family and how perfect everyone is now. I am sorry to use Ms Nicolet and her ex-husband as an example but it is the closest story that can bring my point across. His friend’s parents separated for a while before they finally

divorced and the friend was torn between the two parents. We all watched and Mpho knows what I am talking about. Kids these days know these things. Now, the parents are civil and are co-parenting and everyone is happy.

He tells me all about the parties he has been attending. How boring they are when I am not there to put together perfect costumes. How his father is always angry and on his phone even when he is supposed to help him with homework. How he misses my baking and how Woolworths' cakes don't do it for him. I laugh at this last part. He has always been very sweet. I take an opportunity to assure him that everything will be fine and when the time is right, I will be back to take him. I hate doing this but I beg him not to tell his father about this meeting so that he doesn't get the principal in trouble or anyone to stop me from coming here.

There was nothing left for us in Gauteng. I don't think we are safe to go to Theo's house, so I don't even make a turn there. I will sort the house later.

We are on our way to Venda, Theo and I sitting at the back of the meter taxi. I had to book one. After the smooth travel with Alu and the dog in that stranger's car, there was no way I was going back to the taxi rank. Since we left Pretoria, he has his head rested on the window. Sometimes he would stare out of the window for so long.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask.

"How my life was like... before the accident," he responds. I am glad that he isn't rude or unbearable. He is still thee Theo. Okay, I don't know if he is still the all over-the-place kind of a

guy like he was.

I chuckle at his question before attempting to answer a little I know about him. "You were quite friendly. A lovely friend. A perfect father...oh, a hard worker too." I turn to face him and giggle. "A man of integrity. Believe me, you were quite a man of integrity."

"What did I do? My job."

I still have my eyes on him. He really doesn't remember, does he? Or he is just good at acting? Each time he slightly smiles, I think he wants to shout, "Gotcha!!! This is prank." But those words never come and I am longing for them.

"You were a researcher," I respond. I cannot tell him the truth in front of this driver, can I? I am paranoid and I still have to be careful.

"What did I research?" he asks with a frown.

"Just things. I'll show you when we get home."

“You said you are not wife... where is my wife?”

“She passed away two years ago,” I sadly respond.

“What happened to her?” It breaks my heart that he doesn’t even sound touched, whereas I know how much she meant to him.

“Accident.”

“Looks like accidents follow me, huh,” he dryly says. I don’t like this dark humor, so I don’t respond. We stay quiet, while I google about recent accidents that happened in Gauteng. I am not getting the information I am looking for.

When we drive past Hendrik Verwoerd Tunnel, I know we are getting closer to our destination so I turn to face him. I need to prep him for when he meets Aluwani.

“I hate to do this but can you do me a favour?” I ask, he nods. “Can you please let your son hug you? Can you give him a long warm, satisfying

hug? I don't know... maybe play along to what he says? He misses you so much and hasn't seen you in a while."

"Okay."

"Thank you."

"He is adorable. You'll like him."

"Okay!"

When the driver pulls up by the gate, Alu stops playing and stares at the unfamiliar car. His grandmother is seated on a match, watching the car too. I jump out first, and Alu runs towards me. He didn't believe me when I told him I will be back. But here I am. Where would I go? Okay, I am here because my heart would never allow me to walk away from Alu and Theo – I am the only one who can help. I mean, I can disappear to the end of earth right now and pretend they never existed. I could choose to go back to my husband and beg for him to spare

my life or even die. I can turn myself to the police and lie about a crime I did not commit so that they apprehend me and I get a free roof over my head. I can find a man, right now and cling to him for dear life and start a new life. But my heart would never allow me to do that.

When Theo jumps out of the car, Alu gasps loudly and runs to him. Alu is not a crier like my son and I.

I watch them, waiting for Theo to mess up this whole amnesia bull of a story act. There is no way he won't slip up. I watch and wait. As Alu wraps his arms around his father's waist, Theo flinches. He swallows hard as if it hurts or as if he is disgusted. When his eyes lift to mine, he gives me a tight fake smile, and forces his hand to rub Aluwani's back.

This is the favour I asked for earlier.

He is hugging him back because I asked and he

is failing dismally. It is even so painful to watch. Right here, right now, it hits me. Theo Masindi is gone.

Heart of GOLD

#16 (Unedited)

THEO

My dreams have been weird since I arrived here. Sitting up from the bed, I slightly move away from Aluwani who is sleeping peacefully next to me. Since my arrival here about three weeks ago, he has been by my side, adding to my frustration and whenever I want to break apart from me, Abigail would give me just one look to stop me. He is warming up to me and I am trying to maintain the relationship that I am told

I had with him before the accident. I just wished I could remember much to make everyone happy. My mother doesn't care much. She seems to be lost and I cant blame her – this is hard for all of us.

I carefully get out of bed – making sure that I don't wake him up, and walk to the window. It is already morning but the sun has not risen. I slide my feet in the slippers which Abigail got for me. She took me shopping a few weeks ago and we almost bought the whole store. It is weird that my life depends on her and she is not even my wife.

It is frustrating to know anything about your life other than what everyone tells you. I know I am being hard on myself but it is so frustrating not to know little things like who all these people around me are.

The most frustrating thing is not understanding how the hell I remember how to do things. How

to eat, how to walk, how to talk, how to read and write. Yet, I don't remember the most important things in life. It hurts so much when I put efforts and nothing come up. The other day, Abigail forced me to take a walk, in the hopes of triggering my mind to remember something from my childhood, instead I met a number of people who expected to socialize with me. We had to turn because the looks I was getting when I pass people without catching up with them. I took it, I was people's man. I just wonder how I did it.

Anyway, despite all these challenges, I am grateful for a second chance in life. It is just not so easy to navigate.

Walking into the kitchen, I find Abigail seated in the little kitchen table, her eyes buried on a file which is in front of her. She is so focused on her task that she doesn't notice me. Watching her, I notice something that I have noticed from

the first day I met her. She is beautiful and she looks so peaceful. Even when she speaks, she looks so peaceful and forever calm. When I first met her, I thought she was my wife because I think she is my type.

I watch her careful as she brows frowns while she runs her finger on the paper. She picks a pencil from the table and make a mark.

“Working hard, huh...” I say. She startles so hard that I almost jump. I never get used to how jumpy she is.

“Oh, dammit. Don’t sneak up on me, Theo,” she gasps loudly, both her hands clutching her chest.

“What was that about?” I ask, walking further into the kitchen.

“I didn’t think anyone was up at this time.” She lets out a long breath as she tries to relax.

“I can’t go back to sleep.”

“Still getting weird dreams?” she asks, almost recovered.

“Yeah.” I pull a chair and sit. I scan the table which is full of reports. The other day she told me that we worked together but looking at all these papers, I don’t think I believe her.

“How is work?” I ask. When she lifts her eyes to me, I nod at the papers in front of her.

“Fine,” she responds.

“Would you like some tea or coffee?” I ask. She shakes her head. I don’t listen to her, but get on my feet and head to where the kettle is. I pull it and fill it with water before plugging it in. I pull two cups from the cupboard and put sugar and teabag.

“You chose not to listen to me,” she says.

“Yes, because you never want me to help me. All you do is help me every chance you get.”

“There is a reason for that. The doctor’s orders.”

“The doctors who can’t even help me remember my own child?”

She sighs deeply and says, “The memories might come back. You don’t have to beat yourself up.”

I lean on the wall and stare at her before asking, “Why is he always sad?”

Abigail doesn’t look at me. She drops her eyes to her hands.

“He is quite better now...because of the puppy.” She lifts her eyes. “When I first met you guys, you told me that he has been sad since his mother’s death.”

His mother. My wife. I only believe them because I saw the pictures of me and her. Pictures of me kissing this woman I have no memory of. I don’t even remember how we

were. But judging by the pictures, I loved my family.

“You are very close to him, aren’t you?” I ask. I have seen her with him. She is great with him.

“He doesn’t have much of a choice...does he?” she asks. The kettle goes off, so I turn towards to where it is. I fill our cups before sitting down and placing one cup in front of her.

“You are great with him. Don’t you want one of your own?” I ask. She huffs out a laugh before her face turns sad.

“I have one,” she responds, staring at me as if I am crazy. I take it I have asked her before.

“Where is your family?”

“Yoh! Where do I even begin?” she asks, giggling nervously. These past weeks, we have been getting closer and more comfortable around each other. Even though sometimes it feels weird. Sometimes it feels right.

She has been feeding bits and bits of information since I got here and only today, we are getting to the depth of how she ended up tangled in my life. I listen, trying to remember anything from what she is telling me but nothing comes up. I almost laugh when she tells me about some investigation we were working on before we compromised the case. I refuse to believe this part because things like these don't happen to normal people. Doesn't it happen in movies only? Like, I try to make sense of everything and each time I do, I want to burst out laughing. However, when I see panic in Abigail's eyes when she talks about how much in danger we are in, I am starting to get an unsettling feeling. She wouldn't make these things up, would she?

"Don't you dare mention this to anyone," she warns while pulling something from the laptop bag. She retrieves a black phone which I had at

the hospital. I had abandoned it because it looked useless and there was no one to contact. She hands it to me and asks me to unlock it with my thumb and the face recognition. I do as I am asked and hand it back to her. She scrolls through it and hands it back. On the screen is a text messages dated more than a month ago. When I went through this phone, I didn't see these message. The message APP was blank.

'Not safe. House is watched.'

'Danger.'

'Found the guys who burned the offices. Ray to question them.'

All the message look like some sort of updates. I read further down until I see where the number is asking about my whereabouts because our partner died in an accident and I cannot be traced.

"Do you believe me now?" she asks.

“Who the hell was I?”

ABIGAIL

I have limited resources to dig in to continue with the investigation but I haven't given up. Theo still doesn't remember and he sits with a lot of passwords to our systems. Everytime when I try to succeed, I am pulled two steps back. Today I didn't bother opening the files in an attempt to work. I am not in the mood. I have been off since I woke up. You can only imagine how horrible my day was if it is already seven o'clock in the morning, and my mood is still offish. I am finishing to prepare dinner for the family. In the mood or not, there is no one else to take over the pots. Theo's mother is old and I

don't want to bother Theo. Talking about Theo, he is physically fine and I still haven't made peace with the fact that we are a stranger to him. For days I baked his favourite scones, hoping that they would trigger something. Each time I do, I get disappointed because he doesn't remember anything. He compliments me like everyone else. I need more than just compliments.

"Are you okay?" Theo asks while walking into the kitchen. He likes sneaking on me so much.

"I am fine. Dinner will be ready in five," I respond. He doesn't talk much. No one in this house. We just go about our lives. Just a week ago, Theo's mother washed her hands in helping him in this dilemma – so now he is my responsibility. She wanted to take him to a traditional healer for assistance and Theo refused. I don't know why he refused but he did and it created a drift between them. I am just here putting everything

together. Each day, I am losing my patience. Come on, I am in a foreign land and I miss the life I had. Today, I should have been celebrating with my friends.

Theo pulls a chair while I place three plates on the table. I turn back to the stove to check on the spinach I have been preparing just the way Theo's mother prefers it.

"Your mood is off," Theo presses. This time I don't respond. I just pick the bowl with pap and dish it into the three plates. I dish the beef stew and finish off with spinach. Without saying a word, I pull a plastic bowl and fill it with water. I take it outside to Theo's mother to wash her hands. She spends her time sitting outside on a mat and only leaves when she is ready to bath and sleep. Her routine has been the same since I got here.

"Alu, your food is in the kitchen." Aluwani throws the ball away for the puppy to catch

before he runs to the kitchen. I find him washing his hands before he joins his father by the table. I pick the tray with food and take it outside to Alu's grandmother. Only now, do I make my way to 'my' room. I furiously grab my toiletry bag and a towel and thereafter march to the bathroom for a quick shower. It is forever hot here, so each time I shower it is a cold one. Before we know it, it is going to be Autumn but it is still hot. I don't take long before I change into my silk night dress. I got an opportunity to shop for Theo, Alu and I. I made sure to get a few things that define me. When I am done putting lotion, I sit on the bed and for the first time since morning, I breathe.

I take a long breath.

I don't drink much but right now I am craving for a glass of wine just to calm my nerves.

Staring at the ceiling, I try not to cry. I have been doing well these past weeks. I didn't cry but

now I need to release the steam. My sobs start quietly until I lose it. I quickly cover my face with my trembling hands. I always worry Alu when I cry.

Crying makes me feel better.

I gasp for air before I let out more sobs, releasing all the pain I am carrying on my shoulders.

A knock disturbs me and quickly pull a towel to clean my face. I don't respond to the knock but who ever is at the door is not willing to leave.

Another knock.

I wish to ignore but knowing it might be Theo's mother asking me to help her in her bedroom, I tell the person to come in. I try to clean my face to have it decent enough to face her. To my surprise, Theo walks into the room. When he eyes lands on me, he frowns and closes the door behind him.

“Hey... you are crying,” he says, walking further close to me. “What is wrong?” I drop the towel, giving up on trying to clean my tears. Theo asks again, “What is wrong?”

“Theo, I am exhausted,” I finally breathe out. “I will be fine. I just need to let the steam out. I am exhausted.” I breathe out, vulnerable in front of this stranger. “I am exhausted from everything.”

“I understand.”

“No, you wont understand.”

“I miss my family so much. I miss my son. I should have been having a great time with my friends. It is my birthday today,” I respond, pulling the towel so that I blow my nose.

“Why didn’t you say anything? Happy birthday. I would have done something,” he says. I shrug while putting the towel away again. He opens his arms wide and says, “Come here.”

I lift my eyes to him and he signals for me to

come in for a hug.

I miss a mere hug. I do.

I get to my feet and walk into his arms. He envelops me and I rest my head on his chest. Why can't he be like me? His scent reminds me of him. He rubs my back with his warm hand.

"Everything will be okay," he whispers to my ear.

I tighten my hands around him.

I miss this.

I miss being embraced.

I miss a human touch.

He breaks the hug and looks down at me and asks, "Do you feel any better?" I nod quietly. We stare at each other before Theo drops his head to mine. My hands tremble as they tighten the grip on his shirt. I slowly stand on my toes so that I could meet him half way. I gasp when our lips meet. He kisses me first and I receive it,

kissing him back with so much hunger. Dear God, I need this. I slowly close my eyes as he starts devouring my mouth.

He breaks the kiss and stares down at me.

“Please don’t stop,” I whisper.

He stares into my eyes and drops his lips to mine.

Deal of the day

Heart of GOLD

#17(Unedited)

ABIGAIL

My mind is trying to mess with me and for the first time, I am not going to listen to it. Things

wouldn't have been this heated if it was thee Theo that hired me. I won't lie, I was attracted to Theo but not enough to act on it then. It seemed wrong to even suggest a move then. But now, things are different. He is stranger now. He is a stranger and this is not me to make love to a person I am not in a relationship with.

But to be honest, I need this.

I need his touch so much.

I am nervous but my body wants him so much to put a stop to this. The kiss is passionate. We are both panting and gasping for air as we tighten our grips on each other's bodies.

Does he remember what to do?

Just like all the other things he has been doing without any of us teaching him how it is done, I don't think he would be needing any help. Plus, no one needs to be taught how to make love.

The mind knows what to do.

His lips are so soft and tender and his scent keeps intoxicating me. I groan loudly, parting my lips and giving him room to slide his tongue.

Oh, and he does.

He slides his tongue in and I am not shy to suck it for dear life. Pressed on his body, I feel his erection getting hard as our tongues twist in our mouths.

He pulls away and I feel the coldness between us. My eyes almost get teary when he walks to the door. I sit on the edge of the bed, embarrassed by what has just transpired. I hear the lock turn, and then notice Theo walking back to where I am seated.

Why didn't I think of that?

"Don't want anyone disturbing us," he mumbles, standing in front of me. I launch for jeans, fighting to unbutton it. I lift my eyes at him

while I pull the jeans down. He takes them off before pulling his t-shirt off. He is hot as hell.

This is a stranger but I am not shy to go all out tonight. It is my birthday after all. I get on my feet and take off my silk night dress, followed by my underwear. If there is something you need to know about me is that I like them voyeurs. Ndumiso knew and damn did it push him to the edge. I don't want to compare them but I don't think there is any man who doesn't enjoy watching. I sit on the bed and open my leg wide. I am already wet when my one finger slide inside my vagina. I gasp, and Theo's eyes light up with pleasure.

"Take that off," I order in a whisper, and he doesn't waste time doing as told. I haven't stopped rubbing my clit and inserting my fingers in and out for more juice, and continuing to rub myself. This way, Theo if he is a fast learner, will learn how I like it done. His penis is

strong and facing me, ready for action.

He needs this as much as I do.

He strokes his penis, hissing and trying not to lose himself as he watches me. We both pleasure ourselves, keeping our eyes at each other and breaking the eyes.

I shift on the bed, and he takes it as an invitation.

My fingers can wait.

I spread my legs, inviting Theo to go ahead and devour me. I am well aware he doesn't have a condom but luckily there are no chances of getting pregnant. He shifts closer, his eyes staring into my eyes. His smile is warm on his face and his eyes are so welcoming like the Theo I have known all along.

Just like I said, he knows exactly what to do – memory or no memory. First time or hundredth time, every boy knows what to do with open

legs.

Air almost leaves my lungs when he puts it in. I gasp for air, both my hands landing on his waist. I am so tight but I welcome him just fine. He grits his teeth, shifting and getting comfortable inside of me. I steady myself, ready for a ride. And he doesn't disappoint. By the time he spins me around so that I get on top, I am already heated and ready to show him what I am made of.

I ride, back and forth and sideways and aim for what I know I deserve.

I deserve an orgasm, and it doesn't take me too long to reach one.

When it rips me apart, I collapse on Theo's chest and let him chase after his very own. It doesn't take long before he groans.

I woke up to an empty bed. Swaying my eyes around the room, I figure Theo left already because the clothes which were on the floor are gone. Last night, our love making session, I slept like a baby. My shoulders are no longer as heavy as they were.

What a birthday gift!

The feeling is there – the feeling that, maybe I should regret last night. I shake it off, jumping out of bed and grabbing my night dress from the floor. I look around for my underwear and don't find it anywhere. I give up, wondering if maybe I didn't put it on before Theo came into the room.

I open the curtains and windows before making up my bed. Checking the time, I realise that I overslept. I cannot afford to oversleep when I need to assist Aluwani with his online classes.

The principal has been asking questions about his return to school and to be honest, I have no idea. We are still on the run and right now, I am on my very own. I put my night dress back in the closet and put on a dress. I rush out of my room, heading for Theo and Alu's room, but I stop on my tracks when I hear people giggling at the kitchen area. I hear Alu's voice, so I turn towards the kitchen. What I walk into melts my heart. Aluwani is standing beside his father buttering the bread while Theo fries something on the stove. This is how things should always be.

"Good morning," I greet, standing at the corner of the room. Both of them turn towards me. Aluwani waves at me while Theo gives me a smirk. This Theo seems like a charmer and it is freaking mind blowing how he is so different from the old one. I ask to be excused, so that I freshen up and get ready for the day. Looking

outside the window, I notice Aluwani's grandmother already seated outside on her mat. This is not how I want to grow old – husband or no husband. At her age, I want to be cruising the ship while my grandchildren beg me not to. I want to live life to the fullest. Well, that is what I used to dream about. My dreams were simple. Run the bakery until I get old enough to hand it over to my children and then travel the world with Ndumiso.

Now, all I dream about is to be safe. Just that. To be safe and be united with my son.

I shake away the sad thoughts as I wash my face. I don't need this right now. Things will be okay, soon. I pray and believe so. I just need a game plan and I am certain I am going to get one. And, isn't it that you feel like giving up when you are close to a breakthrough? I cannot, give up now. I am too close to winning.

"How did you sleep?" he asks, when I return

back to the kitchen.

“I slept well, thank you,” I respond, pulling a chair and sitting down. Alu is ready for the day so there is no need to run around the house, getting him ready. In thirty minutes or so, he should be sitting on the dining table with the laptop.

“Take that to the table and take the plates,” Theo directs his son. Aluwani picks the plate with the bread and places it in front of me.

“Do you need help?” I ask, not knowing what to do. I am used to being the one running around the kitchen.

“No. We should have done this yesterday but we didn’t know it was your birthday.”

“Oh!” I smile. Isn’t it sweet? I relax and watch as Theo runs the kitchen. It is fascinating to watch for someone who was so confused about life just a month ago. He is starting to accept this

new life we have before us and I think I should do the same. The only problem is that I cannot move on without my son. If he was here with me, it would have been a different story.

Aluwani places an empty plate in front of me and two more in front of two empty chairs. He asks me how many slices I want. I laugh. I am the one who gets to ask him this question almost every day. I tell him I need just two and he places them on the plate. Theo comes with the bacon, eggs and cheese. Before he sits on the chair facing mine, he puts a jar of juice in the center of the table.

“Thank you, for this special breakfast,” I say, taking my first bite. Had Theo known, he would have done something special, right? I lift my eyes at him, finding him staring back at me. The chemistry between us is so strong. I thought I wouldn’t be able to face him this morning, but here I am, melting at his stare.

“Please finish up and go get ready for class in the living room,” I say to Aluwani who nods at me.

“Are you going to bake a cake today?”

“Yes,” I respond, giving him a smile. I am in a better mood today.

I set the laptop for Aluwani in the dining room and head back to join Theo in the kitchen. He reaches for my hand, caressing it when I lift my eyes to his face.

“Last night was great,” he says.

I shift slightly, clearing my throat and hiding how smitten I am. He won't understand - this is Theo. I just hope that I don't make things weird for us. He lets go of my hand.

“What time did you leave?” I ask.

“When you were fast asleep. I didn't know if you preferred that I spend the night? I also didn't

know if Alu wasn't going to hunt for me... and I couldn't wake you up to ask."

"I understand."

This is so awkward.

But I don't regret.

"Do we have money?" Theo asks as I chop the veggies for supper. It is a week after our ... night... and we haven't repeated it. The sexual tension between us is so thick, when we lock ourselves in a room, we are going to reap each other's clothes apart.

"What money?"

"Don't I have money to start a new life or something?" he asks.

I stop chopping the carrot halfway and lean on the counter behind me.

“We do have money to start up but we are going to need jobs to sustain ourselves.”

“With my kind of expertise, would it be difficult to get one?”

“Just because you are wanted everywhere and if you use your ID anywhere, they’ll know where to find you.”

“What can stop them?”

“If we can prove that my husband and his gangs are laundering money,” I respond. I am hitting the wall finding the head company. The passwords sit in Theo’s head and I cannot tap into anything other than analyzing the reports he already had printed. I tell him about the passwords and he doesn’t remember anything, and he doesn’t remember any of his security codes to call the board to reset them, so as we

speak, the laptop is useless.

Alu's voice is loud, calling my name from the living area. Both Theo and I charges there to see what danger he is in for crying out my name like that. In the living room, we find him standing in front of the television and on the screen is a slideshow of my pictures. The pictures represent the 'old me' who always had everything figured out. Most of the pictures come from my Instagram page.

"... Her name is Abigail Gumede and she is wanted for the murder of Ms Kim Lehumo, the owner of a new bakery called Miss Sweet Delectables. We have constable Gama to give us more information about this case," the reporter on the TV says. Thereafter the slideshow stops, and on the TV screen is a man dressed in police uniform.

"We can confirm that, Ms. Kim Lehumo was murdered in her home and the main suspect to

this murder is Mrs. Abigail Gumede. We have thick evidence, including texts and videos, to support this but we cannot make an arrest since Mrs. Gumede is in hiding. We believe the suspect killed the victim after the suspect found out about the affair her husband had the deceased. Right now, she is in hiding and she is a danger to herself and to the community. If anyone has news about her whereabouts, please contact your nearest police station right now. An amount of R100 000 will be rewarded to anyone who comes out forth with the information.”

The reporter returns back to the screen and thereafter shifts the topic to another case. Theo stares at me before rushing to the kitchen. I follow him, finding him grabbing the knife I was using just a minute ago.

“Don’t come closer,” he hisses.

I sigh, shaking my head.

I don't blame him for his.

"Listen..." I try to say.

"What do you want from my family?" he asks.

What a blow, when I know why I am here. I am here for him, dammit! And this is the shit I don't need right now.

"I told you my husband and his friends will do anything to get me and you," I say calmly. "Why do you think I am here? I am here because you need me, you fool."

"How do I believe you?" he asks.

I try to turn but he yells for me to stop moving. You know what? I'll forgive him because he knows nothing about what is really happening. We need to be worried about who would recognize me from all these neighbors. R100 000 is a lot and people are not going to sit with the information if they recognize me.

"Alu! Bring my laptop," I yell out. When I hear

him move, I turn to Theo, "Put that knife away before you scare the kid. Don't you think I would have hurt you by now if I wanted?"

He lowers his hand before Alu places the laptop on the table. I tell him to go watch cartoons. I open the laptop and search for Kim Lehumo's murder. Damn! Every pop up I get from google has her pictures and mine. I open one article and turn the damn laptop screen to Theo. He leans closer.

"She was murdered last week, Thursday," I say. "I was here, cooking for you when it happened."

Theo runs his hand over his head.

Now he knows what we are dealing with.

"Why would they say you did it? You were here," he panics. Only now does he see the seriousness of this and probably this jerk him off from this amnesia we don't need right now.

"First, they wanted you dead, hence the

accident. Now they want me dead too,” I respond, unbothered. I saw this one coming and to be honest, I am damn exhausted from this nonsense.

“What are we going to do now?” he asks, his eyes wide.

I shrug.

I really don't know!

<https://www.storiesbytakalanim.co.za/e-commerce/combo-deals>

Heart of Gold

#18

Ndumiso (Unedited)

Immediately when my fist lands on the wall, I

regret tossing it there.

Fuck!

Groaning, I rub my right hand and stretch it to lessen the pain. I just landed an hour ago and just when I stepped out of my rental car and our informant just called me to freaking tell me that he has nothing to report on. What a waste of my time. This shit is frustrating and to be honest, I am fucking exhausted. Walking into the room, Kim shoots to her feet and rushes to where I am. I drop my bag to the floor, brazing myself for what comes next.

Only drama is coming next.

No hug.

No kiss.

No, good evening, babe, or something along those fucking lines.

No! Nothing like that. She is just ready to dish

me drama as if I am already through a lot.

“Ndumiso Gumede, it has been over two weeks now. Two freaking weeks now. I want to go see my baby,” she spits fire as I close the door. I raise my hand, to stop her from talking. I don’t need such a drama right now. My day has not been good. It hasn’t been good at all.

“Don’t start with me,” I mumble, walking further into the villa I booked for her in Durban, far away from everyone and everything since she is supposed to be dead.

“This is not the life I signed up for,” she spits, marching behind me.

I angrily twirl around to face her, almost bumping into her. She almost collides with my chest. “This is exactly the life you signed up for. All the money I made for you and fed you? What do you say about them?” I ask, fuming. “Didn’t you agree to open that stupid bakery I should

have given to my wife? Huh?" I gesture to from her head to feet. "All these labels you are dressed in... just sitting in my villa... where do you think it comes from, huh?" She swallows hard, not moving her perfect eyes on me. "All of these things... are part of the life you signed up for. You signed up for this life." Before she could open her mouth to say anything, I turn towards the kitchen to get something strong for myself to drink. I open the cupboard where she is supposed to keep alcohol but there isn't none.

"How did you think I am surviving here all by myself? No phone calls. No social media. No nothing?" she says, standing where I left her.

I sigh deeply, defeated.

I am forced to face my demons as sober as they come.

"How have you been?" I ask her. I haven't seen her since I brought her here. We haven't spoken

or video called. So she has every right to be angry.

“What do you think?” she asks. “You told me this will take just a few days before the police report that it was a mistake that my body was found. It has been two weeks now.”

“We miscalculated,” I admit. In fact, we undermined Abigail and her ability to disappear into thin air. We thought the reward money would speed up things but no! there is no news about her whereabouts.

“What is taking so long.”

“We haven’t found Abigail and we need to find her as soon as we can.”

“What if she is dead?” she asks. I haven’t thought of that possibility and right now when she mentions it, I am conflicted. She cannot die. She is my wife.

“There is no way she is dead.”

“How do you know?” Kim presses on. “Your partners are ruthless. What if they killed her and not tell you? She is a threat and they might think that you are protecting her.”

“No, they wouldn’t,” I say, not confident because anything is possible. I cross the room to the living room. I throw myself on the couch and lie on it thereafter. Kim walks to where I am and settles next to me. When she slowly takes her hand to my belt, I catch it, stopping her from what I know she wants to do. Any other time, it would have been appreciated but right now, Nah!

“For how long are we going to be like this?” she asks.

Since my wife left the house, my life has been hell. In fact, from that day when I walked into the office to find her with a private investigator, my life is turned upside down. My relationship with Kim is facing the rocks.

“I just have a lot in my mind.”

“What about me?” she asks.

“How did we get here, huh? Since when do you question me? You are not my wife.”

“I am your toy, aren't I?”

“You are what you have been all these past years. What changes now?”

“Your wife is no longer in the picture.” She shrugs.

“My wife is very much in the picture,” I hiss, sitting up straight. “I want you to stop talking about her right now. Are we clear?”

I shoot to my feet and head down to the bedroom. Throwing myself on the bed, I check my phone for any information. I need my wife back. I have gotten my family in shitty situations and I need her back to me. It frustrates me so much that I cannot even

protect her. Things would have been easier when she is here beside me. I fucked up but I can clean all this mess if she could just stop being stubborn and come home. I know I should have handled things better when I found her with that PI. Maybe I shouldn't have run to my partners because now everything is a mess.

The following morning, I leave the villa at nine thirty for a breakfast meeting with Cele, one of my business partners. I have run out of ideas on how to bring my wife home, I need help. Cele is seated with a young woman at a table by the balcony facing the beach. Before I could pull the chair, the woman turns to face me and thereafter gets on her feet. I like people who know what to do what is expected of them. She picks her bag and tells Cele to make a transfer for her shopping. Like a gentleman that he is, the man grabs his phone from the table and

gets busy on it while I settle down.

“You look like shit, Gumede,” Cele says.

I do feel like that too.

“You don’t have to mention it,” I respond, calling for the waiter to bring a menu. He scurries to where we are seated and drops a menu in front of me. I stop him before he could walk away and place my French omelet with a garden salad and coffee order.

Cele places his phone on the table and stares at me.

“How are things?” he asks.

“Still hitting the rock.”

“I underestimated your wife... but she is making men sweat. She has us in the palms of her hands.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?”

“You know we need to find her before she does

something stupid?" Cele asks. He clears his throat and leans closer to me and asks, "You are not hiding her, are you?"

"Why would I be here if I was? I would have been with my son right now. He is going through the most with his mother on the TV news almost every hour and the whole of Pretoria is full of her missing pictures."

"I am just making sure," he says, leaning back to get comfortable on the chair. I hate how he is looking at me now. All my partners are starting to doubt me and that is becoming a problem.

"What makes you think she is in hiding? Does she want to continue with the case all by herself or is she getting help from someone? Isn't that PI guy dead?" he asks.

"He is."

"Did you see the body?"

"They left him to die. The informant from the

hospital said he died when he got to the hospital.”

“Then who is helping your wife?” he asks, narrowing his eyes at me.

“I have no idea.”

“Maybe the other guys haven’t told you...but I am not willing to go down with the empire I have been building for years. If she gets any file pertaining our money laundering, we are going down. I am not fucking going down with you or anyone for that matter.”

How do I ask for help when this dude doesn’t believe me?

I rest my back on the chair and stare at him.

“Find her before they do.”

Mpho has been miserable for months now. His school work is deteriorating. He is kicked out of all his sports at school. He is a mess. As drive into my drive way, I notice Poppy's car parked in my yard. This is another drama I am not willing to face right now. I head straight to the house, finding Poppy and her mother seated in the living room while Mpho plays with Poppy's baby who is lying on the carry cot. Sis Martha sees me walk in and turn towards the pantry just to avoid talking to me. I have realized that she is scared of me since they day she wanted to submit a resignation letter. She is not going anywhere when I still need her services for my son. Imagine hiring a new nanny in the middle of all this mess. Won't work.

"Good afternoon," I greet my mother-in-law the same time Poppy jumps to her feet.

"Can I talk to you?" Poppy asks, leading the way to the patio.

I give my mother-in-law a small smile before following Poppy outside. I close the sliding door behind me.

“We are worried about my sister Ndumiso... and my mother is more worried about Mpho,” she says, hugging her self. All I see in her eyes is panic.

“I am also worried about her. We are all worried about her. And Mpho is my son, I am worried about him too.”

“The reason we are here is because he called me...telling me that he is scared of you,” she whispers. We both turn towards Mpho, and he is sitting on the mat, staring at us. We break eye contact with him at the same time.

“Why would he say he is scared of me?”

“That is why we are here to find out.”

“Your sister’s disappearance is doing a number on us. And now she is wanted for murder. I..

might have snapped at my son when he needed me...”

“Can I go with him until there is a solution to this?” Poppy asks.

“No.”

“She needs us,” Poppy says.

I cannot let him go. He is better off with me.

“What if Abigail get to him? You heard the police. She is unstable and is a danger to herself and the community.”

“That’s nonsense and you know it. She didn’t kill your side chick,” Poppy spits.

“Look... Mpho is not going anywhere. I’ll do better as his father and I am sorry he called you.”

When Poppy and my mother in law leave the house, I am tempted to ask Mpho what he

meant by 'he is scared of me.' I have snapped a few times but nothing to raise an alarm like that. Unless Sis Martha is feeding my son, bull shit!

I am in the shower when my phone rings. I cannot afford to miss a call so I jump out and run to answer it.

Shit!

My heart is on my sleeve when I notice the person calling me.

"Hey, Paulo," I answer, trying to sound as enthusiastic as I can to hear his voice.

"We need to talk. Send me the code to enter your home now," he says. No greetings. Nothing.

"We could meet at..." My phone beeps with the number from the main gate.

"The code," he repeats.

I put him on hold and switch to the security gate number. They tell me Paulo is at the code. I

unwillingly open for him. I am not ready to face the bastard. Not when my plans are failing since him and Moraka gave me a chance to handle this the best way I can. When I switch back to Paulo's call, he has already hanged up. As quick as I can, I jump back into the shower to rinse myself. Without even drying myself properly, I get into the closest pants and t-shirt I could get and run downstairs. My son is having dinner with the nanny.

"Welcome..." I call us as I rush to where Paulo and two of his body guards are standing. I hate how he is chatting up my son and asking him about school and all as if he cares. I give him a biggest smile I can master and ask, "Should I get you something to drink?"

"We are not staying for long," he says.

"Mpho, go finish your supper in Sis Martha's room. I need to have a meeting."

“I came to pick him up,” Paulo says.

I smile, dropping my hands to my waist.

“Ahhh...”

“My son needs a playmate when we go to Sun City for a week or so. I am quite sure Mpho won’t mind,” Paulo says loud enough for Mpho to hear. My son shifts his eyes to me.

“Ah, no...”

Paulo walks further away from the dining area. I follow him, my heart beating out of my chest.

“You are failing to bring your wife back. Or you are hiding her and playing us,” he hisses. “I’ll handle things my own way from now on.”

“But you can’t take my son...”

“Either you tell your son he is going on a little holiday with my family... or I drag him out of here while you watch... your choice.”

I stare at Paulo and Mpho who is stealing

glances at us.

“Please man...”

“Either way,” he repeats.

“Just give me more time.”

“Time is what we don’t have. And we don’t trust you anymore. You might not be playing for this team anymore.”

“What are you going to do to him?” I ask.

“He is just going to be a bait to bring your wife to us. A good mother will do anything for her child.”

I sigh deeply, frustrated.

Dammit, Abigail!

There is no wall to punch so I shove my hands to my pockets and pace around the room.

“Jack...” Paulo says to his body guard.

“Wait!” I hiss at him. Mpho is already

traumatized as it is.

“Yes?” Paulo turns back to face me.

I walk towards the dining table, “Buddy, you are going to Sun City with uncle Paulo for a little while, okay?”

Mpho panics and slightly shifts away from me when I move closer to him. Paulo walks closer to us and says, “Your mom might join us during the week.”

“My mom?” Mpho gasps.

“Yep! I spoke to her. She will be joining us there,” he adds.

Shit!

Grab all 5 books including courier for R990 total

Heart of Gold

#19

ABIGAIL

Know what I am craving for right now? I am craving for a glass of a well-chilled white wine with some fluffy friend crispy oysters for starters. A glass of strawberry daiquiri with a plate of Lamb shank korma served with mustard and parmesan mashed potato. And here I am standing in the middle of the kitchen cutting spinach and tomatoes to cook because it is all we can prepare from the garden. I understand this low living but damn, I miss some good food. I miss some good wine. I miss pampering myself and doing a little shoe and handbag shopping. I miss seeing colour on my nails. My hair? If I could have my hair washed like I always had it washed and trimmed.

“What is on your mind?” Theo asks from across the room. I didn’t even notice that he is done washing the dishes he was busy with since we started cooking.

“I miss some good food,” I respond with a smile, before dropping my eyes to the chopping board on the table. I continue cutting the spinach.

“What did you like the most?” Theo asks.

“Sea food mostly for starters. My ex-husband introduced me to it and I haven’t turned back ever since. I normally go for aged meat for main course. I am not too big on dessert,” I respond, moving the spinach from the chopping board to a colander. I hand it over to Theo to help wash the spinach while I check on the pap on the stove.

“Do you know what I liked?” Theo asks.

I laugh. I don’t really know. We didn’t get a chance to know about such. We never got a

chance to dine. That could be a conversation he had with Tshepiso when they went on their date. Do I even mention her or just pretend that she doesn't exist?

A hint of jealousy hits me. He was about to have a life with Tshepiso if it wasn't for all this mess. Theo and I have gotten very close since my birthday. There is no denying. And now that we asked Aluwani's grandmother to move away with Aluwani to stay with another family member, Theo and I have gotten close and comfortable around each other. For the past two weeks, it has been just us living like a couple.

"What did I like?" he ask. "And why did you laugh at me?"

"You loved scones," I respond, and he frowns at me. "I don't know what your favourite meals were."

“Didn’t we ever go on a date or something like they do on the movies?”

“Nope. We didn’t.”

“Was I slow?” he ask.

“Why?” I ask, laughing.

“How did I not want you before?”

I sigh deeply. Maybe it isn’t good to lie.

“You went on a date with some lady who used to be your colleague?” I respond, pulling the pot from the stove and setting it aside. I cross the room to get to where Theo is standing, not doing the task I asked him to do. I slightly push him away from the basin and start washing the spinach.

“How was she? This Tshepiso?”

“I don’t know. You only went out with her once.”

“Why did I ask you instead?” he asks.

It feels good to be wanted by a gentleman. It is just the timing with us. And I believe if the accident didn't happen, we wouldn't have crossed the line.

"My relationship with my ex-husband was complicated." I call Ndumiso just that since he is exactly that to me. There is no room for working things out or anything like that and I am content with this decision. I am just hoping that he is being a best father to our son just to make up for all this mess he has put me in.

You know it is so painful to have your world come crumbling down? Like everything is perfect and one day you wake only to realise that you were living in a bubble. It is painful. Right now, I am ready for anything that can come my way. I live in hiding. All I do is pray to survive the day. I live in fear that the meter taxi guy might remember me. If he does, he can bring these people who are looking for me here

at the gate. Imagine praying that a man who is in another province doesn't watch TV so that he doesn't recognize my face? It is hard. But I am ready for anything.

"I feels like I have known you all my life," Theo says, pulling me back from my thoughts. I am all he knows now – he is bound to feel that way.

Today, like any other day of my life now, I woke up missing my son. I am lying in bed, going through the news article. I had thought by now my pictures would be a thing of the past, but no! they are still all over. My name is on the top trending topics for a week. Tweepers are making challenges of what they would do with the R100 000 when they hand me to the police. Some are even giving wrong hints to people. Some guy

said he was sitting next to me on a plane to Dubai. Imagine! I would kill to fly there right now. I could for a short left right now. I have labels and it is so painful to stomach. Before these trends were about me, I used to laugh at these social media challenges but right now none of this funny. This is my life they are toying with. If only people knew the truth.

I dial my sister's number. I haven't spoken to her since my disappearance. I never wanted to get her and my mother in trouble – in case someone tapped in her phone. But I miss her so much and I know she would be so worried.

“Hello?” Poppy answers. I don't say anything – I don't know where to start. “Who is this? Who is calling me with a private number?”

“It's me,” I respond.

“Abby? Abigail?” she asks. I can hear her voice trembling. She thereafter yells for my mother.

When I realise that my mother is there with her, my tears cascade down my face. I miss her so much. “Abigail, don’t hang up, please. Mom is coming. We miss you so much. Where are you, sisi?”

“I can’t tell you,” I whisper.

“Please come back home. We know that you didn’t kill Kim, please.”

Oh, it is deeper than that and she doesn’t know. My mother comes to the phone and also begs me to come back home.

“I can’t come back, Mama.”

“I wish I didn’t tell you about Miss Sweet Delectables. I shouldn’t have told you about Kim.”

“I would have found out, Poppy. It isn’t any fault, believe me.”

“And this mess? I don’t know who killed Kim but

I know it is not you. I hate Ndumiso right now.”

“Can you please just get some time to take Mpho out? Just pick him up and spend a day with him. Take him to Bounce or something. If you can’t, can you just pass by and check on him?”

“We were there just yesterday.”

My heart skips a beat. “How is my baby?”

“No, he is not good at all,” Mom says, breaking my heart into pieces. Trust old people never to filter anything at all. She continues, “He called us telling us that he is scared of his father.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t want to say. We went there to try and take him but your husband insisted.”

“You should have taken him, Ma,” I shriek. If Mpho says he is scared, then he really is scared. And I swear it would take a lot for Mpho to be

scared of his father.

“He insisted.”

Now I am more worried about my son. He wouldn't just wake up and call my sister.

“Come back home. Hand yourself to the police and let them handle this accordingly. You are innocent so you won't go to jail,” Mom insists.

It isn't as easy as everyone makes it to be.

I am still trying to find a way to tell my mother and sister how I cannot come home when Theo yells for my name from the living room. I jump out of the bed, and run to the living room. When I enter the room, I find Theo increasing the volume to the television. On the screen is my son's face.

“... he has been abducted from his home last night. It is believed that his mother lured him from their home in Waterkloof. If you have any information about their whereabouts, please call

the police.”

“What is going on?” Poppy is yelling to my ear. I had been quiet since I got to this room.

“They say my son is missing,” I respond. “I need to go, Poppy.”

I hang up and call Sis Martha. I am not reaching for the couch as the phone rings. I didn’t care about Kim’s death because I knew it was just a way to get people to get to me. I don’t even believe she died. But my son? I can never play with my son’s safety.

“Hello,” Ndumiso’s voice comes to the phone.

“Where the hell is my son?” I yell.

“Listen Abigail, I am going to say this once and never again, Come back home right now.”

“Where is my son?”

“They took him.”

“I don’t trust anything that comes to your

mouth,” I spit.

“Why would I lie to you? I am fucking peeing my pants right now, praying that you stop. Being stubborn and come back home. We need you home!!” His trembling voice worries me.

“Put him on the phone, Ndumiso. Put my son on the phone,” I beg.

“He is not here,” Ndumiso yells. He only does that when he panics. I panic too.

“I need to talk to Sis Martha!” I order.

The phone goes silent and thereafter Sis Martha responds, “Hello!”

“Where is Mpho?” I ask.

“They took him last night.” Again, I am worried about how her voice is trembling.

“Who took my son?” I ask. When she tells me that a man called Paulo, I am knocked to the floor.

Ndumiso returns to the phone, “Abigail, Abigail.”

“You are useless,” I whisper. “You are so useless Ndumiso Gumede.” I clean the tears which are blinding me now. “I want you to get out of that house and go get my son from your people, do you hear me?”

“It is you they want,” he says before taking a deepest sigh. “I couldn’t get you home, so they took matters into their own hands.”

Stupid man!

I sniff the tears away and ask for Paulo’s number. I need to speak to my son. He recites the numbers and before he could say anything else, I hang up.

Stupid, useless man!

When Theo asks me what is going on, I raise my hand to him. Not right now. Not now. I dial the number and wait for the caller to answer.

“Speak,” the voice at the end of the line says.

“Put my son on the phone,” I hiss. I sniff the mucus away.

“Mrs Gumede, we have been waiting for so long to hear from you,” he says.

“Put my son on the phone,” I say. He laughs slightly and goes silent. My heart is on my throat as I wait. A shriek from the end of the line breaks my heart – that is definitely my son. In a few seconds, Mpho cries on the phone.

“Mpho!” I call out. “My baby... are you okay?”

“Mommy, please come and get me.”

“Baby where...”

“Your husband knows where to find me. He will bring you to me,” Paulo says. I sniffle, not knowing what to say. “You have what I need. Come see me. I’ll give you your son back.” I still have nothing to say. “Oh, and Mrs Gumede, I am

not quite a patient man.”

The phone goes dead.

Theo is instantly on my side when I start shaking, crying. This is the end of everything. He begs, and begs and begs for me to tell him what is going on. I still cannot get any word out of my mouth. I am numb. I am numb.

Theo shakes me hard, yelling for me to say something. I don't have words for him. He sits silently, holding me in his arms until I feel my eyes closing.

When I am conscious again, I find Theo sitting on the coffee table, staring down at me. He leans closer to me when I fully open my eyes. Everything comes back to me. I need to get out of here. I drag my feet to my room and search for backpack.

“What are you doing?” Theo asks.

“I need to go get my son.”

“Where?”

“They took him from our home so that I go back home. I need to go.”

“No, Abigail, you cannot go.”

“They have my son,” I say. Maybe he didn’t hear me.

“It isn’t safe.”

“Don’t you think I don’t know that?” I ask, taking my t-shirt off so that I put on something decent.

“You can’t go.” I give him a small smile. What makes him think I can throw my life away for him but fail to do the same for my son? My son is my everything. If I can give them my life to save his, let it be. “Okay, what I can do? There is something I can do to help, isn’t there?”

“All you need to do is get your memory back. You can’t, can you?” I spit, putting on my shoes.

He shakes his head. "Then you cannot help me with anything."

"I can't let you go when the whole world is looking for you. You can't go, Abby. Let me go on your behalf." He shifts and stands in front of me. "You said they wanted me dead, right? I am the man they want, right? They still think I know more than you do and I can bring them down. Why don't you teach me what to say when I get to these people? I can trade myself for his place. And that way you have your son. I have nothing to lose." I stare at him and it looks like he means it. "Think about it. I am the one the wanted the most because I am the private investigator. Call them and tell them that I am willing to bring the files in exchange for the son. We are dropping the case. You organize someone to bring your son to you and you can start over wherever you want."

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Heart of Gold

#20 (Unedited)

THEO

“All you need to do is get your memory back. You can’t, can you?” These words make me feel so useless. I am of no use to her. But I know I don’t remember much, however I am not going to all her to walk out of this house alone to face these demons. According to everything she has told me, I got her in all this mess. If there is

anyone who can get her out of it, it is me.

I am shit scared, of course. I have no idea what I am dealing with but it is easier to deal with the things you don't know, right? Abigail makes this thing so big but my fear won't be the same as hers. Don't get me wrong. I know the danger we in since everything is unfolding in front of me. The lies the media are reporting about Abigail's whereabouts and the things she is capable of doing – too much to stomach. I am always seated in front of the television, watching the news, and I have seen how the tell lies about her. They painted her as a villain and the woman I spend my days with is nothing close to that.

She is sleeping, softly snoring in my arms. She is exhausted from the fight we had just an hour ago. There is no way I am letting her go without a plan. I know how much she loves her son – from how she takes care of mine. So, I know

what she might be feeling.

About my son.

Sigh!

I felt bad when Abigail mentioned that I have him to live for. Ask me if I didn't feel like shit after hearing her say that. I am a father and I did not even consider my very own son in all of this.

I feel like shit, of course. But after I convinced her that I am trading places with her son to give her and our boys a chance to live their lives freely, she fell for it. I meant it. If I solve this mess, then they can have a normal life, even when I am not there.

Abigail shifts on the bed, and I rub her back to calm her from the dream she seems to be having. She sighs deeply, still deep in sleep. Once she is peacefully sleeping, I pull my phone from the pedestal where Abigail left it lying. It is so useless with me not knowing who is the

most important person to contact right now. Names and numbers are there but I cannot even call one and ask for help. Scrolling through it won't even help me remember anything significant from my past. I place the phone back on the pedestal and stare blankly to the ceiling.

Can I think of something, please?

Just anything?

Everything is bright in the room – so bright that I have to cover my eyes from the light. Only when my eyes adjust to the light do I notice a woman cooking. We are in the kitchen and a young boy is busy colouring in his art book. Looking down on the boy, he looks exactly like Aluwani on one of the pictures I have seen from

the albums. The woman cooking is ... my wife. I have seen pictures of her and she is as beautiful as each picture I have flipped.

“Are you done for the day?” she asks, stirring the gravy on the stove. I don’t know what to say. I have no idea what you talking about. When I don’t respond to her, she sighs deeply and puts the wooden spoon on top of the pot and walks to where I am standing. She reaches for my shoulders and rests her hands on them, staring into my eyes. Her smile is so angelic and sweet. Now that she is staring into my eyes, I can see how much Aluwani looks like her.

“I know you have doubts about quitting your job. I have your back. I know you are going to nail this. You are too smart, babe. Way too smart than you think.” I wish I have something to say. She lets go of my shoulders and without another word, she drifts away from me while I watch.

I know it is a dream before I even open my eyes because I have been having weird dreams since my days in the hospital. Since I am not getting my memory back, I feel like holding on to these pieces is better. These could be the memories I am patiently waiting for, however I without therapy, I don't know if I am not damaging my brain further more. I turn to my side, to find Abigail sitting on the edge of the bed.

I relax, knowing that she is still here. However, I know if I didn't keep all the keys to the doors, I was going to find her gone.

"Hey," I mumble, sitting up.

She turns to face me. I don't like how she looks right now. Her voice is hoarse when she greets back. She adds, "We cannot give them back the evidence we have picked."

"Why not?"

"I want them to go to jail."

“Not worth it.”

“The thing is we have come so far to just give up. But I don’t know how I am going to get my son back.”

“You have copies of these reports, don’t you?” I ask.

“Of course, everything is printed from the laptop.”

“I take every paper we have here and leave the laptop. I’ll say I lost it from the accident... they caused the accident, so it would be easy to convince them.”

“What if they kill you?” she asks, her eyes wet. I shrug because I don’t know. If they kill me, then I won’t be here to beat myself up for not standing up for her. I don’t know if this overwhelming feeling is because I ‘think’ I am in love with her – that’s if this is how love feels like – or if it because I know I owe her my life

for the things she has done for me and my son. Whatever it is, I want to do it. Again, I don't know if this is the kind a man I have always been or if the situations are just pushing me to the corner.

"Is there somewhere I can propose to do the exchange? Somewhere with security?" I ask.

"We can't go to the police."

"Think of something," I say.

Abigail gets on her feet and walks around the room. After pacing around for a little while, she twirls towards me, her eyes widened, "I think I know." I shift on the bed and nod at her. "We need to go back to Joburg. I have a safety deposit box rented under my name at Smith's Vaults in Sandton. We rented two when my ex-husband wanted to safely store away some company documents. It is secured."

After she explains in detail how the Safety

deposit box and Smith's vaults work, I don't waste time jumping out of bed.

My mother came in handy when Abigail called her and asked her to get us one of my trusted cousins to the house. Two hours later, a young tall man who was very happy to meet me was at the door. Apparently, our mothers are sisters and we grew up together. His name is Tshisikhawe. Fortunately, Tshisi was free to drive us to Joburg – even though I had to offer him enough money to tempt him to skip a few of his shifts at his job. He drove straight to Pretoria without making a stop anywhere. Right now, we are in some lodge in a booked stand-alone cottage. This was the only place to book and have Abigail in and out without a hustle. Tshisi is at the restaurant at the lodge's reception building. I seated here on a couch,

watching Abigail pacing around the room, waiting for her sister to walk into the room at any time. We made him call her, requesting for a meeting to discuss a proposal to have a bulk order for customized t-shirts for his foundation. This is a matter of life and death, we couldn't risk parking outside Poppy's house – in case they are watching her. Here, at the lodge, at least you enter the gate if your group is checking in or if you are visiting a guest. No one can easily follow her inside here.

The door opens, and in walks Tshisi with Poppy in tow. When Poppy notices her sister, she drops her handbag and runs to embrace her. The sisters weep in each other's arms.

"I didn't believe him until I saw the note with your handwriting," Poppy gasps for air, clinging on her sister.

"Thank you for coming, sisi," Abigail cries.

Tshisi and I give them space to catch up. We sit outside by the patio, just staring at bushes in front of us. I wish I could bring something up to talk about but there is nothing. He has made peace with the fact that I cannot don't remember every little detail he tries to bring up about our childhood. However, I enjoyed the stories as he told Abigail and I when we were driving here. Apparently, I loved playing soccer and have always wanted to be a professional player. Well, I wonder what changed when I grew up.

From where I am seated, I can see Abigail and her sister chatting up and I cannot help but be fascinated by Abigail's beauty. She is still as flawless in ragged clothes as she was in the pictures published on the television news. I smile at her when our eyes meet and she beacons for me to join them.

"She agreed to help," Abigail says before I could

sit down.

“What’s the plan?”

“She is going to go to my house to get my jewelry box which has my set of keys to the deposit box. We can only go there tomorrow morning. Tomorrow morning, we are going to the vaults to place the documents and you will have a chance to scrutinize the place. When I am certain that everything is in the safety box, we call Paulo and negotiate the exchange.”

“I am in.”

At nine forty, we are seated in the car at Smith’s Vaults. For the first time I am panicking about this plan because Abigail might be walking into the lion’s den right now. Someone might

recognize her since she cannot walk into the building disguising herself. There are rules to the building and one of those rules are no hats and anything that covers your face is allowed. Makes sense if they need to keep record of everyone who walks in and out of the building. Abigail looks decent enough to make public appearance but I am worried if anyone recognizes her.

She is brave though.

I have never seen a woman who is brave as her.

“Are you ready?” I ask from the front seat.

“Yes!” she nods before taking a deep breath.

“If you are not back in ten minutes, I am coming in to cause a scene.”

“Ten minutes and I’ll be back,” she says before jumping out of the car and making her way to the building.

My eyes are glued to the entrance of the building. My heart is beating out of my chest and right now, I don't understand how I used to do this kind of job. Like, how did I wake up every day to live this kind of life? It must be so exhausting.

I sway my eyes to the radio screen and the time hasn't moved but it already feels like hours.

"Are you in some kind of dodgy business or what?" Tshisi asks, both his hands gripping the stirring wheel tightly.

"Huh?"

"What business are you two in?" he asks. He had been patient with us, not asking questions about the requests we had been making to him. But I guess he can see how dangerous this mission seems.

"It is better you know less," I say, my eyes swaying between the watch and out of the

window.

“I am doing this for my aunt but if I get in trouble...”

“You won’t. You’ll be going back to Venda before by tomorrow.”

He sighs.

I sigh, too.

The lesser he knows, the better.

“I can trust you, can I?” I ask. I am quite sure by now he has picked up that I am forever glued to his hip. The only time I let him be by himself was yesterday when he went to pick Poppy from the restaurant. The rest of the time, I have been watching his moves. He is my trusted cousin but I don’t know... I mean I don’t remember him much.

I shift on my seat, almost jumping when I notice Abigail rushing to the car. I know her enough to

tell that something alarmed her and she is in a panic mode.

“Start the car,” I order Tshisi, who does exactly that.

Abigail jumps in the car and I tell my cousin to drive.

“What the hell happened in there?” I ask, my eyes on Abigail who is breathing heavily.

“No... I am fine... I am okay,” she breathes out.

“Then why do you look like that?” I ask.

She starts giggling to herself. Tshisi and I exchange a look. He shrugs and I do the same. Her giggles turn into laughter – like a belly twisting laughter. Tshisi laughs with her, and I don't.

What the hell is going on?

She wipes her tears and tries to control herself.

“Are you going to tell me what is going on?” I

ask, frusted. She hands me a folder. I page it, and from the first page I do recognize a few signatures I have seen before.

When she is sober enough, she says, “Every answer we ever needed was right under my nose. These were stashed years ago, I remember my ex asking that we deposit them in my box because he forgot his key. I am quite sure he forgot about them.” I page through the reports. “MOPG Global is the mother company we have been searching for,” she continues. I nod slowly. “I took the old documents out and placed our findings in my safety deposit box.” She hands me her phone. “Now tell Paulo I need my son back.”

Deal of the day (A burning Desire + A Royal Mistress = R480 total incl courier to door or Paxi)

Heart of Gold

#21 (Unedited)

ABIGAIL

It is almost noon and Paulo's phone is not going through. Ndumiso's phone as well is not going through. I am pissed to the core.

We parked at a McDonald, giving the phone a try every fifteen minutes.

"I need to stretch my legs," Tshisi says, while opening the driver's door. He doesn't wait for any of us to say anything. He just steps out of the car and makes a way to the entrance.

"Do you want more water or anything to drink?" Theo asks from the passenger seat. I have already finished almost three bottles of water

since we got here.

“No, I am fine,” I mumble.

“Everything is going to be fine,” Theo says, reaching for my hand all the way for the front seat. I let him be. It is unfair to take my moods out on him. My emotions are all over the place and right now, I feel like I am about to go crazy. I should be excited about the new findings of the case, but I am not. Not when the man who has my son is unreachable.

“Please call Alu and tell him how much you love him?” I say to him. He takes his hand away from me. I know this amnesia thing makes things complicated. He probably doesn’t remember how much he loved his son. But they have been growing closer again before we had to move him with his grandmother.

“I wish I had best memories of my son,” he says. A light bulb goes off in my head when he says

this. Crew this but what are the chances of getting caught while we make a turn at Theo's house? I mean, life is not guaranteed to anyone. We can be hit by a truck right now when we drive out of here.

"Let me take you to your old house," I say. He turns to face me. I don't know but I think his eyes lights up. Maybe he will have an idea of how his life once was. And this task will be better than just sitting here waiting for these men to switch their phones on. When Tshisi steps back into the car, I direct him to Centurion. The whole way here, Theo is staring out of the window. He is quiet and not making any comments, so I don't know what he is saying. I pull the school bag which is my companion since the day I ran with Aluwani in tow. I let Tshisi drive around the street twice so that we check if anyone is following us or not. It is around two o'clock so the street is not busy and

I am certain that there are no cars following us or anything. With the remote, I open the gate when we are two gates away.

“The third house on the right,” I tell Tshisi.

He drives in before I shut the gates. The yard is dirty like it is supposed to be for an abandoned house. Since his barriers are high wall, people cannot see anything in here. Luckily outside the gate is just municipal paving.

Without a word, Theo jumps out of the car and walks around the yard. It would have been nice if he found it well maintained like it was before the whole saga. Right now, the yard is dirty. His beautiful back yard is like a forest now.

“Please stay alert,” I tell the guys. Tshisi is standing beside me, watching as Theo walks around the yard as if he is inspecting. When he is fulfilled, he walks to where we are standing.

I lead the way to the door which leads to the

house. The lock is broken. It is not a shock, but I hope there isn't any threat inside or no homeless people are camping here.

"I'll go in first," Theo says, stopping me from stepping inside. Doesn't this warm my heart? I smile and step aside for him to make his way inside. I gasp softly when I notice the mess inside the house. The house is turned upside down as if someone was in search of something. They were probably here looking for evidence. I am certain they didn't find anything solid. I left with the most crucial documents then.

"What the hell?" Tshisi mumbles behind me. I jump the broken glasses from the coffee table to get to the other side of the room. The only thing that is keeping us here is the fact that this mess looks old. The dust that covers it says it all.

"They were chasing after me, huh?" Theo asks

softly, making his way further into the house. The house smells horrible, with all the food we left in the fridge. I take a turn towards the office where there is more evidence of the raid. The office drawers are pulled open and the papers are all over the floor.

What a mess.

Now, I don't know if it was a great idea to bring Theo here. This could be more traumatic to him.

When I walk to where he is, I find Theo staring at the portraits on the wall. They are portraits of his beautiful family. He is standing staring at the wall without a word. I make my way to Aluwani's room to grab more things. Luckily it is untouched. I open the closet and pull a luggage bag. I throw in as many clothes as I can. He might need this if we are not to return here anytime soon. Theo walks in while I am busy fitting more items into the bag with his toys and books.

“This was his room,” Theo says, walking further in to the pedestal which is on the side of the bed. On it is a picture of them at a cricket match. Alu is wearing his white uniform and Theo is happily giving him a high five.

“Give me that. You need it,” I say to Theo. He takes it, takes a minute scrutinizing it and thereafter hands it to me.

“Was it just Theo and I in this house since... his mother...”

“You had a nanny. I had to let her go when we had to leave for Venda.”

He nods slowly, looking around the room. There isn't much. While he leaves Alu's bedroom, I am left behind filling Alu's luggage up. When done, I drag it to the corridor and thereafter look for Theo in his bedroom. He is seated on the edge of his bed. The closet is a mess. I guess whoever was here in search of whatever

thought they could find somethings. I don't know if they took any of his documents but I am just happy that he gave me a file with valuable information before he walked out of the house that night.

Theo lifts his eyes to me and sadly says, "I don't remember anything."

I sigh deeply, making my way to where he is seated. I sit on the bed beside him.

"It is my turn to tell you that everything will be fine," I say to him with a smile. I have been telling me that almost every hour of the day.

He huffs a short laugh, dropping his eyes to the floor. "You are right."

We initially gave up on trying to call Paulo and

Ndumiso since we couldn't get hold of them the whole day. If I put two and two together, they might be in the same area – probably sharing whiskey and cigar while my son cries his lungs out for me. Ndumiso is so pathetic, it irritates me so much.

He was supposed to protect that boy with his life.

We are having dinner back at the lodge, chilling in the living room, a movie playing softly in the background. I have no appetite but I tries forcing in a garlic roll and a piece of chicken. Theo is staring at some of the portraits we pulled from the wall. I hate how he is beating himself up for not getting his memory back. It is unfair of him to expect much from himself when he is not even seeing the therapist to help him recover. He is doing this single handedly and just trying to take each day as it comes.

“What the fuck,” Tshisi says from where he is

lying. He quickly sits up, scrolling on his phone.

“What?”

“Tune into the news channel. ENews!”

I jump for the remote and tune there with trembling hands.

On the screen is Kim, walking into the building, trying to hide from the camera shots with her hands. I have seen her on the magazine and I have seen her at her bakery – it is her.

Unfortunately, before we could listen to what the news reader was saying about her story, another segment comes on. Some water crisis in the villages in Eastern Cape. I jump for my phone to google Kim’s breaking news.

I jump to the first article that pops up. Kim is well and healthy and while South Africa was mourning for her death and in search of me, she was on holiday in Durban. She was spotted by the hotel workers and police were informed.

And my charges are dropped.

Oh, wow!

This was exactly what I thought it was – a trap!

So they tarnished my name and now, they are just dropping the charges like nothing happened.

How freaking perfect.

“What the hell did you guys get yourself into?” Tshisi asks. “This is no longer a joke.”

“It’s better...” Theo and I start in unison. We don’t get to finish the sentence. All we do is laugh. I throw myself back on the couch and sigh deeply.

Yah neh!

“Minus one problem,” Theo says.

“I don’t care about that problem. I want my son with me.”

The first thing I do when I open my eyes is to try Paulo's phone. When it doesn't get through, I almost throw the phone to the wall but unfortunately, I cannot afford to do so. We need this little gadget. I almost jump to my feet when Ndumiso's phone goes through. I sit up straight, waiting for him to answer.

"Hello," he answers.

"Ndumiso!" I breathe out.

He sighs deeply before saying, "Abigail Gumede." The way he slurred the words tells me he isn't sober. It is not even seven A.M but he sounds drunk.

"I want my son," I plead.

"I want him too."

“Get your people to bring my son to me.”

“We need to talk,” he says. “In person.”

“I don’t ...”

“I am still your husband,” he says.

“Not after the day I found out about your little perfect family with Kim. Where you part of the plan to get me arrested for a murder I never committed? A murder which never happened?”

“Where are you?” Ndumiso asks.

“I am looking for my son,” I respond.

“You are not going to find Paulo,” he responds dryly. “When you are ready to talk, call me.” He hangs up. What does that mean? I dial his number and he doesn’t waste time responding.

“Ready to meet up?”

“No!”

He hangs up.

Jeez! Ndumiso!

I dial his number again.

“Yes?”

“Please...”

“I am sick and tired of you,” he yells. He contains himself and says, “Call me when you are ready to meet.”

He hangs up.

I want to pull my hair out.

I dial again.

“Fine, I’ll meet you,” I quickly say when he answers the phone. I cannot go to the house.

“Let’s meet at Checkers in Menlyn Mall at ten o’clock. I’ll be waiting for you at the bakery section.”

I still value my life. If we have to meet, we are going to do it in the midst of the people. If he is to pull a gun on me, he will do it surrounded by

a hundreds of people.

“I am doing this because I care,” he says and hangs up.

He is doing this because he cares?

I wake Theo first and tell him about the plan. Tshisi can take us to the mall. Theo can be watching me from far. I have no other choice.

At nine fifty-five, I am in Checkers Menlyn, roaming around the fruits section scanning the place for my husband. I pick a packet of tomatoes and put it in the trolley that I am pushing. I notice Ndumiso walking into the store, holding his gym bag and wearing his gym gear. He makes his way to the bakery section as promised. I scan the shop for anyone who might have their eyes on him and when I am certain that no one is, I push the trolley to where Ndumiso is standing.

“We are shopping,” I say to him. He turns to me.

“Hello to you too,” he says. He doesn’t look drunk, just way too exhausted. He places the gym bag in the trolley and takes it from me like he always did when we shopped together.

“What is going on?” I ask, picking a loaf of bread and a packet of rolls. I feel bad for the person who is going to offload this when we abandon this trolley.

“You need to get away from here... and you need to get away as soon as possible,” he says.

“I am here to meet Paulo. I need my son back.”

“Change of plans,” Ndumiso responds.

I pick a packet of cheese and place it in the trolley.

“You fucked with the wrong people,” he spits.

“Stop talking in parables.”

“I can’t tell you the details... but people have to

flee the country because we don't trust you and your boyfriend and anyone who has put a hit on us. I'll get Mpho when we get to a secret location."

My heart!

My heart is ripped apart!

Right now, I regret meeting Ndumiso here - I can't even throw a tantrum. My eyes are wet and tears ready to fall.

"He is fine. I'll get him back... but unfortunately, I have to get away from here before anything blows."

"Please Ndumiso... we are dropping the case. No, we already dropped the case." My voice is hoarse when I beg.

"I told you a million times to come home so we could fix this. No one will believe you... and because of that... no one believes anything that comes out of my mouth."

My hands tremble when I pick a bottle of wine and place it in the trolley. I am dragging my feet by now, trying not to fall to the floor.

“I came here to hand over the reports and get my son...” I tell him.

“Oh please. You probably have copies somewhere.” He sighs deeply and stops to stare into my eyes. “In the bag, there is money. Enough money for you to start a new life.”

“I don’t want a new life,” I hiss. “I want my son.”

“Send me an email in two days or so. I’ll have him by then but unfortunately, I cannot tell you where we are relocating to.” I shake my head vigorously. He looks around the shop and says, “I need to go. You too.”

“Ndumiso...” I beg, grabbing his hand and tightening my grip.

“Abigail, stop being stubborn. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t care about you.” He stares deep into

my eyes. "I fucked up. I got us in this mess. But it is now deeper than me. Take the damn money and start a new life. This is the best I can do for you right now. Email me in a few days and I'll give you my new number." He pulls his hand from my grip. "I failed you once. I won't fail you again. I'll get Mpho back and I will keep him safe."

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Heart of GOLD

#22

TWO YEARS LATER

ABIGAIL

Parking outside the school gate, I turn the ignition off and reach for my phone which is on the passenger seat. I scroll through the messages to check why my phone has been pinging a thousand times.

I scroll through the messages until the last one I need to respond to.

‘Dinner tonight? And no, you are not cooking. Schools are closing today and Christelle confirmed the boys’ sleepover at her place this weekend. I want to take you out.’

“Please say yes.”

I smile at the text messages. They are random and mostly unexpected.

‘How can I say no to a date? Oh, wait! Is it a date?’ My question is accompanied by smiley emojis. I press send and roll down my car windows. I am here a little earlier than I should

have been. If it wasn't for the cancelled meeting in town earlier, I wouldn't have been here thirty minutes before the school bell.

'Definitely a date.' His response makes me smile as I place my phone back on the passenger seat and snuggle on my very own. I take each day as it comes. From the day Ndumiso walked away from me, leaving a bag full of money as if he was buying my silence. He left me there in that bakery section at Menlyn Checkers and I have not set my eyes on him ever since. He left me a broken woman. A paranoid woman who almost fell into depression. Had I surrendered to depression, I don't think I was ever going to come back up. My life came crashing down that day. Everything he said felt like a dream. Him relocating with my son to God knows where. It really did feel like a dream. Immediately when Ndumiso turned his back on me, I felt myself

losing it right there in front of people. Luckily, Theo was watching me from the shop. I have no idea which direction he came from but he caught me before I could even hit the floor. Ndumiso left my limbs numb. How was I supposed to live when my son was miles away from me? How was I supposed to start a new life knowing that it is my fault that my son is millions of kilometres of miles away from me? Or even dead?

I had no choice but to learn to live without Mpho. That was the only way I could survive.

I almost jump when tiny hands reach to caress my cheek.

Jeez!

Naturally, I am jumpy but since two years ago, I am worse.

“Did I scare you?” Alu laughs while pulling his backpack from his back. I flash him a smile

while I sit up straight.

“You did. I am going to get you soon,” I respond, pretending that this is some sort of a game.

How else can I explain my paranoia to him? He is just a kid and I can always find a way to keep him away from the harm. It is just unfortunate that I cannot do the same with my own son.

Alu opens the backseat door and jumps in. I have noticed that I am one of a few parents who drop and pick up their kids daily. The rest of the kids either walk to school or use school transportation – something very different from the other suburbs I have lived in. I couldn't let myself get Alu a taxi to transport him to and from school. No matter how safe this place is deemed.

Alu is growing big now. I am happy that he is doing great. If there is one person who is happy about this permanent move, it is him.

New faces.

New lives.

New towns.

New everything.

You know when someone or a situation pushes you to a corner of a room, you have no other choice but to be stuck there until they move and make room for you to walk away. This is how I can explain my new life. Ndumiso cornered me and there is no escape until he makes a move – that's if he is ever going to make any. Any wrong move from my side, can make things explode and that is the last thing I want.

“Buckle up young man,” I advise while starting the car and shoving my thoughts away. He does as I say before I drive us home.

We stay in Free State now. It is not the furthest from Gauteng but at least, it is a new start for the three of us. A few days after an encounter

with Ndumiso, Theo and I decided not to return to Venda with Tshisi but to take a different route. Only after three months, when we were done settling and we were sure that no one was following us, did we get Mpho back from his grandmother – I wasn't going to let Theo lose his son like I did mine. At first, I was sceptical about taking Ndumiso's money to start over. It felt like I was giving up on my son and I was giving Ndumiso an upper hand. And what else was I supposed to do? I was cornered and Theo thought it was a better idea than trying to risk our lives some more.

The case? - you may ask. The file is sitting in my room, untouched. Maybe...just maybe... I will revisit it.

“Danny said his mother agreed to a sleep over this weekend. It is my turn at his house. Can I go...please?” Alu pleads, giving me puppy eyes and a sweetest smile. I can witness all of that

from the rear-view mirror.

“Let me see...,” I pretend like I am thinking. “Did you make your bed and pick all your dirty clothes from the floor?”

“I did! I did!” Alu chants happily. I know he did.

“Then you can go to the sleeper over,” I respond, earning a happy dance from him. He is happier. So much happier now in this place. Since the time we picked him from Venda and located him in a place where he needed not to hide, he became happier. I don’t know if my presence counts, but he is no longer that depressed boy who used to break my heart.

Theo is home when we arrive there. Usually Fridays he is home early unless he is preparing for a weekend soccer match. When there is none, he is home before three o’clock. He is an assistant soccer coach of a youth soccer club

in the area. He wants nothing to do with any detective tasks or anything like that. It is weird how he finds it unsafe and risky. So, yeah, he helps coach the soccer team every day during the week. I have seen how much he enjoys his new job. It isn't that we need money – he just needed to get up and do something. Same with me – I don't need the money but I need to get up and do something with my life. The money Ndumiso gave me can sustain us for long. The same dirty money I did not want to use. Also, the proceeds from the sale of Theo's house gave us a huge kick start. We took a leap of faith and just decided to live – whether we die or not. It was either that or I was going to lose my mind.

I had given up on my baking hustle, but a few months back, I woke up and headed to town to buy an apron and baking ingredients. That afternoon, when I picked Aluwani up from

school, I gave the goodies to his teachers. Just the twinkle in each and everyone's eyes when they took their first bite rekindled my love for baking. Right now, I am working on starting up something small in my kitchen. There is a coffee shop I have spotted which needs my expertise, but the owner seems to be uninterested to give me a shot. It is as if they have given up on it. Maybe I could buy them out. Maybe I could partner with them.

Maybe.

But I am willing to give it a shot.

"I am going to Danny's sleep over," Alu announces to his dad when he walks into the living.

"Behave when you get there," Theo says, pointing a finger at him.

"Because the last time Danny was here, you guys slept after midnight," I add.

“We’ll sleep early,” Alu calls out, running to his room.

Theo turns to me with a smile.

“How was your day?” he asks.

“My meeting was cancelled,” I respond, dropping a shopping bag on the kitchen counter. If he didn’t suggest us going out, I would have been preparing some fast food. “I’ll try them again on Monday.”

“Why don’t you freshen up for our date? I’ll help Alu pack. They need him early for a movie date and pizza.”

Theo and I, right?

Where do I begin?

We are friends. There is undisputed chemistry between the two of us but I have brought a block in between us to slow us down. I don’t know but I think I needed to digest my divorce

and move on from that past before jumping into a new 'official' relationship – even when that new relationship was with Theo. Also, I didn't want Theo to end up with me just because I am the only woman he is familiar with. I didn't want the relationship to feel like he has no other choice but to be with me because I am all he knows. I forced him to live a little. As crazy as it sounds, I forced him to meet people. It hurt when he leaves the house and comes home late, not knowing where he is. But it has to be done. I want him to want me because he likes me more than he does other women that he meets out there at work or shopping malls or whatever place he goes to. That has been happening for the past two years but it doesn't mean I haven't found myself in his arms one evening or two or too many to count. Sometimes my weakness and my loneliness get the best of me and our movie nights become more than what they are. The next morning, I would pick my clothes and

sneak out of his room to mine. The walk of shame – I am so used to it.

I jump into a shower, trying to make up my mind about what I want to wear. This is not the first time that we are going on a 'date', we do them often so it isn't like today is anything special. However, I always take this as an opportunity to look my finest.

At 17h30, I walk to the living room where Theo seats waiting for me. He quickly gets on his feet, his jaws on the floor from just admiring how I look. It took me hours to put this together, so I appreciate the reaction.

"You look... fancy," he says and we both giggle. I look fancy? Was there no other word to describe how perfect I look?

"Thank you. Are you ready to go?" I ask. He quickly picks up the car keys from the table and

leads the way outside.

He drives us to a restaurant just a few kilometres from our house. Something about Theo neh? The man is a gentleman. He pulls the chairs for me. He does those little things that would make one fall in love with him. Right now, he has my hand in his as we follow the waitress to our table.

As usual, he orders a steak meal while I try something fancy from the menu. I like recreating dishes when I get home so I always go for something new to me each time. Our conversation is light. To be honest, there isn't much to discuss. We live in the same house. Apart from Danny's mother, I have no friends. At least he tells me about the kids from the soccer club. We both happen to love kids.

In the middle of our dinner, Theo takes my hand and caresses it.

He wants to get to the serious stuff and I don't.

"Are you okay?" he asks, staring right into my soul.

"Yeah!"

"No. I mean, seriously," he adds, tilting his head.

You see, it is things like these that make me cry.

"I am fine," I respond.

"There is no one I know better than I do you.

Last week has been hard," Theo says, rubbing the back of my hand. I try to pull my hand from him but he doesn't let me. He shakes it slightly, so that I move my eyes to his.

"Fine." My voice is hoarse when I say this. "Last week has been very hard."

"It is going to take some time, okay?" he says. I shake my head because I know it is not going to take time for me to let go of my son's memories. Ndumiso lied to me. I tried

contacting him a million times since that day and still today, there is no word from him. No word at all. He left an empty house and last year it was sold. There is no trace of him or my son. Last week was hard because it was his birthday. I couldn't buy him a gift, or take him to a holiday like I used to, or even bake him a character cake...or to do just a simple thing as calling him and sing for him. I couldn't do anything at all. Last year was the hardest.

"What can I do to make things better?" he asks. Theo is one patient man. This is one question he asks almost every day. There is nothing he can do to make things better. I am living each day with guilt and there is nothing he can do to make things better. He cannot take away the regrets I have. It was I who put my son in danger. I just have to live with it.

"You know what? Let's just take each day as it comes," I say. My new motto. That is how I

survive. I take each day as it comes.

Theo stares into my eyes as if he wants to make promises to me. I shake my head.

I don't want him to make promises he cannot keep – because I will despise him forever.

Ndumiso did the same.

But I will be fine.

I am fine.

I will be stronger.

“Let's talk about fun things,” I say, clasping my hands together and flashing Theo a smile. He settles back comfortably on his chair. “I want you to help me shop around for a bakery. I am ready to take the world by storm.”

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Heart of GOLD

#23 (unedited)

THEO

She still blames herself and it breaks my heart that I have to watch her do that to herself. I am useless in this regard since I cannot even share her pain. No words can make things better. No words can bring back her son wherever he is. I

wish I remember her with her son. She is so great with mine.

“Those old white ladies could spend their entire time in my café. Believe me,” Abigail says, still explaining the plans she has for the bakery and café she wants to run. I am fascinated. She is fascinating and she is just so beautiful to watch.

“Go for it. I am behind this idea,” I say. My words are useless. I have realised that she doesn’t believe anything that comes out of my mouth. I have tried thousand times to tell her how much I care about her but she dismisses me like some piece of trash. I tell her I will do everything in my power to help her with whatever thing she needs and she looks at me like I am a clown. Her ex-husband did her bad but I am willing to pick up the pieces.

“I need to,” she says.

I watch her from my seat. How can I make

things better for her?

“Let’s go visit your sister tomorrow. I’ll drive you there... drop you at your sister’s house and I’ll go shopping for a little bit,” I suggest. Her eyes light up and a smile follows. We do drive to Pretoria now and then but not as often as she would like. I know that she misses everyone and even though we have built something for ourselves here, she still needs her people. And this time, I need to make another stop. I don’t know how things will go but if I need to be helpful, this I need to do. And I need to do this alone because I don’t want to give her hope where there might be no hope. I on the other hand must face my past – whether I like it or not. Because it seems like her happiness lies in my hands.

“I would love that.”

“Perfect!”

“Why are you being nice?” Abigail asks, leaning back on the chair and crossing her arms. A small smile on her face tells me that she is joking with me. But I take the opportunity to shoot the shot I have been trying to shoot for two years now.

“Maybe a drive to your sister’s is what you need. I can ask her to convince you to give me a chance. Maybe she can speak some sense into you.”

“Come on, Theo,” she shyly says.

“And she blushes,” I say, trying to dim the awkwardness around our table. “I’ll give you time.” Because time is all I have got.

The following morning, we head straight to Pretoria and by nine thirty, we are at Poppy’s house. Her husband insists that I stay for breakfast and he suggests that we go buy some drinks and braai for the ladies. That

sounds fun but I have plans made for the day. I promise him that I'll be back after a few hours and if there is still time, we can still do a braai like he suggests.

"Where are you going? I thought you were staying here with us," Abigail says while she squeezes her sister's baby into a hug. The baby loves her back, wrapping her tiny arms around Abigail's neck. Who doesn't? love Abby?

"Ahh... I just want to shop around."

"I can come with you and show you around," she offers. One thing about Abigail – she cares and she cares a lot. She might not be open for a relationship but I know she has my back before her very own. How do you not want that kind of person in your life?

"Oh no. I'll put a navigator to the mall," I respond. The eye she gives me tells me she is suspicious of something. I watch as she drops her head

before turning to her sister. I know what that look is. She gives it to me every time I tell her I am going out with the guys. She probably thinks I am here to meet someone. Maybe a lady friend or something. She is right but not like that.

“You guys are staying over, right?” Poppy asks.
“We already have a room prepared for you.”

“Rooms,” her husband adds, giving her an eye.

“Yes. We have guest roomS...” Poppy corrects, with an emphasis on the ‘s’...

“Alu is only coming home tomorrow noon. We can live in the morning,” Abigail says, batting her eyelashes at me.

“Anything for you.”

“Ncooo! You two are cute,” Poppy says, earning a head shake from her sister. When Poppy shrugs, I laugh. The mixed signals I get from Abigail are confusing as hell. But I guess, one

day, I'll get what I want.

'I am here. At the queue. Should I order you anything to drink?' – I send a text to Tshepiso. When I left Attridgeville, she was also on her way here.

'I am sitting by the door. You actually greeted me when you walked in.' – her text reads. I twirl around to the table by the door. A woman dressed in an orange sweater and black leggings gives me a wave, with an exaggerated smile on her face. I slide my phone in my pocket and walk to her.

"Sorry... I didn't recognise you," I say, rubbing my forehead.

"Where you really serious about the amnesia

thing?” she whispers while I sit down. She has a cup of coffee in front of her and a slice of cake – I take it she is sorted.

“I was.”

“I didn’t believe you but when you greeted me and passed me like a stranger, I knew something was up,” she says. She talks...freely. And a lot. And I remember Abigail told me she is the woman I almost dated. I don’t see how. No offense but she is too... ‘not Abigail.’ She is totally different.

“I am trying to pick up the pieces, hence I needed to see you.”

Tshepiso lifts her left hand and shows off a ring which is on her finger.

“I am married now,” she says. Well, I am not here to pick those kinds of pieces. But I congratulate her and allow her to tell me all about her husband and the new life she is living

now. I don't know the old life so I cannot picture all these changes she is talking about. She also adds how disappointed she was when I ghosted her and left without a trace.

"That is why I am here. To apologise and try to get some help."

"What help?" she asks.

"We used to work together, right? In the police force..."

"Intelligence Agency," she corrects.

"Yes there!" I still don't understand how I got myself into the intelligence agencies and police forces and things like that. But it is what it is. I shift on my chair and whisper, "I need help finding someone but I need it done secretly." She narrows her eyes at me and crosses her arms. "It is a missing child." I quickly pull my phone so that I could show her Mpho's picture. His smile and huge eyes will definitely melt her

heart. She takes the phone, frowns and stares at the picture. After a little while she places my phone down.

“Did you report him at the police? I have never seen his face.”

“It is complicated.”

She digs into her handbag and returns with a phone, followed by a receipt and a pen. She reads the contents on the receipt, and thereafter turn it around before writing a cellphone number.

“I know what complicated means. You need to talk to Mr Molepo. I have heard rumours that you were assigned a case before you went missing.”

She knows about the deadly case?

And this Mr Molepo is the man Abigail once mentioned. I just couldn't know how to get to him. For some reason, we never used to

communicate on the phone.

Before Tshepiso gets on her feet, I thank her for the numbers and promise to keep in touch when I can. As soon as she walks away, I dial the number and it is answered in no time.

“Molepo, hello,” a thick voice greets.

I didn’t rehearse what I needed to say when I answer, so I blurt out, “I need your help.”

“Who the hell is this?” The question comes out very cold.

“Theodore. Theodore Masindi,” I respond.

The line goes dead before Mr. Molepo says, “Where the hell are you?”

“Mall of Africa.”

“Meet me outside the mall...at Nandos... Sasol. Right now.” He hangs up after that.

Nandos Sasol?

I quickly type the same words on google and when I get the navigator button, I jump on my feet and head to my car so that I can drive there. I don't know but there is something scary and unsettling about this man. He sounds cold and unwelcoming. Or, is he how I was as well? Did I use to speak in codes and was I as unfriendly as this man?

The navigator drops me just around the corner from the mall. I park in front of the restaurant and wait.

Do I call him?

Do I wait?

It took me just five minutes to get here – there is no way he got here before me. I lean on the car and check the messages on the phone. Christelle has sent me a few pictures of the boys at the strawberry farm. Alu has a wide smile on his face, showing a small bucket full of

strawberries. I send back a countless emojis before texting Abigail and asking how she is.

'I am almost drunk. My sister is feeding me wine on an empty stomach.' I smile. She is already tipsy. I have picked up that she isn't a drinker so two glasses are normally enough for her.

"You better have a better explanation," a man says, walking into the restaurant.

Mr. Molepo?

I quickly rush after him and slide on the chair opposite his.

"Ahhh.. I don't know where to start." Am I even talking to the right man.

"Your man was buried two years ago, your offices were burnt down... and your house was just like a ghost house... and I heard fokol from you."

He is the right man. And Abigail once mentioned he is one of the few we can trust.

I shift on my chair and find the right words to explain my bizarre situation. I start from that accident which took the man's life and finish my story at Mall of Africa when Tshepiso gave me his number. He is what they say he is. The way he is staring into my eyes, I can tell that he is reading me and making his conclusion about everything that I am laying down on the table. He is quiet, just staring and listening.

“Now, I need help tracing Abigail's son.”

He sighs, crossing his arms.

Does he believe me?

“This is too much to take in. Amnesia??” he says, shaking his head.

“But you believe me, right?” I ask.

“I know the woman you are talking about... the

girl from your office... I remember her.”

I quickly scroll to my phone and send him Mpho’s picture. His name is Mpho Gumede. It is either he eloped with his father, Ndumiso Gumede or... they... he...

“Or he is killed,” he finishes the sentence for me. I nod, swallowing hard and praying that it is not the case. Mr. Molepo sighs deeply and says, “I’ll see what I can do.”

“So, what happened to the case?” I ask.

“Dead. Things were a mess here. I got demoted. Hell, we were dealing with filthy people. So, those guys paid off people to make it disappear. And there was nothing I could do with no single piece of evidence on them. It was like going to a war without a weapon so I lost everything since I couldn’t get hold of you. You just disappeared into thin air. After seeing your offices and learning about the death of your partner, I

concluded that they got you.” When I tell him we have been in hiding, both Abigail and I, he tells me that I taught her well because she covered all her tracks and didn’t make it easy for us to be caught.

By the time I drive to Poppy’s house, Mr. Molepo has fed me pieces of my life I never believed when Abigail told me. Poppy and Abigail are curled on an outdoor couch while Poppy’s husband is turning the meat from the braai stand. It is almost dark and a little cold since it was raining just a moment ago. When Abigail notices me, she opens her arms as if she is expecting a hug from me. Poppy jumps to her feet and I throw myself on the couch next to Abigail .

“Sometimes I miss you so much,” Abigail says, wrapping her arms around my neck. The wine has already gotten into her head and it is

always funny to watch. I am used to this – I let her loosen up when she needs to – she deserves some time out. I am tempted to drop kisses on her lips but I don't.

“Was I gone for long?” I ask, shifting closer to her so that I get comfortable. She unwraps her arms and rests her head on my shoulder.

“You were gone for long and I was starting to worry,” she mumbles. “I worry about you a lot.”

“You do?” I ask – the knowledge I have. She nods vigorously, making me smile.

She sighs deeply and says, “I miss Mpho so much. I miss my old life too...” she sits up straight and holds up her finger... “minus Ndumiso.” She rests her head back on my shoulder and continues “...but... I like my new life too because there is you and Alu in it.”

I cannot help but caress her arm with my right hand.

“I am happy you are in my life too.”

I wish to tell her about my today’s adventure but... I don’t want to give her hope and crush her heart later. Mr. Molepo told me that anything is possible, so until then, she is not going to know anything.

Her deep sigh tells me she is tired or sleepy.

“I’ll get her a throw,” Poppy says, confirming my thoughts about her being sleepy.

“I love you, Theo,” Abigail whispers.

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Heart of GOLD

#24 (unEdited)

ABIGAIL

The light beaming from under the curtains wakes me from a dream. Opening my eyes, I notice that I am not in my house. Scanning the room, I finally plant my eyes to a familiar portrait on the wall. I am at my sister's place. Turning to face the other side, I find Theo's eyes on me, a smile glued on his face. He is lying on the other side of the bed, shirtless. Since his assistant coach job, he has been keeping fit and to say he is sexy is an understatement.

"What are you smiling for?" I ask, smiling back at him. My 'situation-ship' with Theo is weird. Only us understand what and how we do things. For some reason, I am not shy to wake up in his

bed. I am not even shy to walk naked around him. My only problem has been labelling things. If we were to label this, this is definitely a 'friends with benefits' situation.

"You are just cute when you wake up," he responds, shifting so that he could stare up at the ceiling. He puts his hand behind his head and rest well on the pillow.

When a try to sit up, I am attacked by a splitting heading.

"Ouch!!!" I mumble, throwing my head back on the pillow.

"You had quite a lot to drink," Theo advised, his eyes glued on the ceiling.

"Didn't I make a fool out of myself?"

"Just a little." His giggle makes me smile. That is his way or saying I did.

I try again to sit up and this time I do it slow. I

search for my clothes from the floor and don't find any. I am in my sister's silk pajamas.

"Didn't we have drunk sex or something?" I ask.

"Craving for one?" Theo asks. "No, we behaved last night."

Scanning the room, I find my clothes neatly folded on a chair. I pull a gown which is placed on the dressing table and put it on. I need to use the bathroom and maybe try to freshen up. We probably need to head back to Bloem in no time. I excuse myself to the bathroom and on my way there, my sister notices me from down the corridor. She is chasing after her baby, trying to shove a spoon in her mouth.

"I placed clean guests towels for the two of you to shower," Poppy informs me before she returns to her task.

By the time Theo and I join Poppy and her husband in the kitchen, it is already nine thirty. If

it wasn't for the headache, I would be jumping into Poppy's space and fix us a fatty breakfast.

"Babe... show Theo your new project while Abigail and I prepare supper," Poppy says to her husband who picks up the baby from the floor and leads the way towards the garden.

Whatever project it is has to do with his carpentry passion. I am forever wowed by his creations. He made almost every furniture they have in their house.

Once the boys are out, I pull a glass from the cupboard and fill it with orange juice before gulping it down my throat. I don't know why I decided to have more than I could swallow last night.

"I see you and Theo have gotten pretty close," Poppy starts, batting her eyelashes at me.

"Don't waste your time. There is nothing to tell."

"That's not what I saw last night."

I sigh deeply and ask, "What did you see?"

"You were all over him. And I have lost count of how times you told him you love him."

I drop my eyes to my glass and not respond. I know I do love him but there is nothing I can do with all these feelings. I lift my eyes to my sister and say, "I was drunk."

"There is nothing wrong with moving on, Abby. In fact, it is time to do so."

"It doesn't feel right," I mumble. "It doesn't feel right when Mpho isn't part of all of this. And where do I begin? How do I love and trust again?"

"You just have to. You just force yourself to do so. The same way you are forced to live without Mpho." I stare at her, disappointed by what she just said. She has no idea how I feel right now.

"Abby, I am not saying that you must forget about your son. All I am saying is that you

deserve to be happy too. You deserve to be happy again. That is the least you can do for your son... wherever he is.”

“Dead or alive, you can say it...”

“Please, Abigail. I loved seeing you with Theo last night.” She stops frying the bacon and turns to face me, her smile so wide. “Oh, my goodness... he is so gentle with you. He loves you. That I am quite sure of.”

“He doesn’t...”

“Ohhh, please!” she says, returning back to her stove. “Who wouldn’t love a woman with a heart like yours?”

Since our drive back from Pretoria, I have been digesting what my sister has been telling me.

About Theo loving me and about me having to let my guard down when it comes to him. I don't know why I keep doubting the possibility of us being happy.

No, I know.

My relationship with Ndumiso had been a lie. I lived for so many years with a stranger. He told me he loved me almost every day. He promised me heaven and earth, and all was a lie. He promised to let me have my son back, but that did not happen. Instead he just disappeared as if he and Mpho never existed. I swear if I didn't have my sister to talk about Mpho and Ndumiso with her, people were going to think like these people were imaginary. I was going to start thinking that I am insane and these people lived in my head once upon my life.

"Miss Abigail, I can't find my clean pyjamas," Aluwani calls out from his bedroom, pulling me out of my thoughts.

This boy!

I always tell him to put his new set of clothes or pyjamas on the bed before he jumps into the bath-tub.

“I am coming,” I yell back, getting up from the couch and heading the laundry room to pull an onesie from the basket. Since I wasn’t home this morning, I didn’t get a chance to iron the laundry. I head to Alu’s room. I find him dancing in just an underwear. Someone is in a great mood.

“Someone is happy,” I say, handing him his onesie. I love seeing him this way.

“The pastor from Danny’s church said we must dance, stay happy and shame the devil,” he responds, putting on the onesie. I nod at him and he continues, “When we are sad, the devil makes us even sadder. And when we are happy, he doesn’t know what to do... so we shame him

and he leaves us alone.”

What a way of looking at life.

Aluwani zips his onesie, grabs both my hands and starts pulling me so I could dance. I am stiff at first but he is so determined to have me dance I end up giggling and joining him. He starts humming a song, still shaking my hands so I could join. I throw my head backward and start laughing. It does feel good to be happy. It does. When I think he is done with me, he is only starting. He spins me around until we both fall on his bed. His giggle is loud, followed by mine. We stay lying on the bed, catching our breath.

“Thank you for being my mommy,” Aluwani says.

I fight to frown. He has never said anything like that to me. And he has never hinted that I make him feel like my son.

“Why do you say that?” I ask.

“Because you take care of me and love me just like my mommy used to. She told me to take care of you because you are special.”

“Who told you?” I ask, this time, sitting up.

“My mom who is an angel,” he says. “I dream about her some time and that is what she told me when I last saw her in my dreams. I know she told me to take care of you because you are a great mother too.”

Aluwani is old. He knows what he is talking about.

“I miss my son,” I mumble, lying back on the bed.

“Maybe his new mother also takes care of him like you do me,” he responds.

What a way for a child to move on.

Monday morning, after dropping Aluwani at the school, I make my way to Daisy's coffee shop. I am determined to start living my life and I am determined to start living my life, NOW! The old lady at the front smiles at me when I walk in. I am dressed in a floral knee length dress to match my mood today. I am happy. I feel happy. So, I didn't go for my intimidating corporate look which probably turned off the owner last week when I came seeking for a meeting. She probably saw me as one of those women from Gauteng who are forever ready to take over. I am looking to partner. I am looking for a good start.

"Can I get you a table for one?" the old lady asks.

"Yes, please," I respond with a wide smile. She

is the same lady who welcomed me last week but it seems like she doesn't remember me.

I follow her to the corner of the room and take a seat. She places an old menu in front of me.

The small coffee shop doesn't smell divine or anything. Something that really needs to change for this time of the day. The aroma of coffee beans should be filling the whole place up. Fresh bakes from the back should be calling my name.

Just anything.

"I'll have a cappuccino and a scone."

"Coming right away."

It doesn't take her long to walk back with my order. When she walks away, I take my first bite of the scone. I am not impressed but what can I do, I am not easy to please. But when I take a sip of the cappuccino, I am quite disappointed for a coffee shop. No wonder there aren't any

people flooding into the place.

My phone pings from my bag. I carefully place the cup down and fish for my phone from my bag.

Of course, it is a text message from Theo. He knows that I am here to force that meeting and claim my life back.

‘Take the bull by its horn. All the best.’

It is just a simple ‘best wishes’ message but a light bulb goes off in my head.

‘You are a star,’ – I respond to him before throwing my phone into my bag and jumping to my feet.

“What time does Daisy come in?” I ask. Last time I came here, that is what they called the owner. The lady lifts her hand to check the time from an old silver watch hanging on her wrist.

“In an hour or so,” she responds.

“I think I am ready to start baking one tray before she gets here,” I say, confidently.

“What?”

“She asked me here for a baking trial. I am just going to make one tray and present to her when she arrives.”

“Ahhh... she didn’t say anything to me.”

“She probably forgot,” I laugh. “I am going to another bakery after this and time won’t be on my side if I wait for her.”

“But... we have been ordering the scones from the shops. We haven’t baked in months.”

“I’ll be right back,” I say, running out of the coffee shop, to a Checkers that is nearby. I pick a few items I am going to need to make this perfect tray. This is me grabbing the bull by its horns. That’s what I did at Theo’s work place, isn’t it? Something similar, of course. I don’t waste time. Even in my stilettos, I am cruising.

Back at the coffee shop, I find the waitress assisting two new customers. She places menus in front of them and thereafter walks back to me. She leads me to the back where a young lady is washing the dishes. I introduce myself and she tells me her name is Lumka. She pulls all the things I ask for and place them on a table in the corner of the room. The old lady was not lying. The kitchen hasn't been used much. Lumka hands me an apron and I get into my world. I get straight into this only thing that makes sense to me. Probably, the only thing I best at. I can have a fallen marriage, a broken family, or anything else in the world, but I never fail to pull a best tray of soft butter scones.

“Who did she say she is?” I hear voices coming towards the kitchen. Luckily, I am also pulling my tray from the stove. At the same second that I place my tray on the table, the old

waitress appears and behind her is Daisy.

“I am Abigail.”

“You were here the other day,”

“I was,” I responded. “I thought I should showcase what I can bring to the partnership I wanted to propose.”

Daisy stares down at the tray. Before she could even say anything, Lumka walks in and excitedly says, “Ma’am, the three customers are asking if we are serving fresh scones right now.”

Daisy darts her eyes between Lumka, I and the tray of scones. She picks one and quickly places it on a saucer before she tells Lumka that she serve them. I undo the apron while Daisy takes a bite.

She smiles, turns on her heels and says while walking away, “Come, let’s talk.”

I slide to the basin to wash my hands. My phone pings and I pull my phone from the bag. I am ready to share the great news with Theo when I realise it is not a text message from him but a reminder alarm.

‘See the gynecologist to remove Skyla IUD.’

I sigh, staring down at the phone.

It has been three years since Ndumiso's saga.

‘It is time to move on now,’ Poppy’s words ring as I slide my phone back into my bag and making my way to see Daisy.

<https://www.storiesbytakalanim.co.za/e-commerce/combo-deals>

Heart of GOLD

#25

ABIGAIL

Theo does not even wait for me to confirm any news about my partnership with Daisy, but goes ahead and tells me that he is going to prepare a celebratory dinner tonight when he gets home. Didn't that make me blush when I saw the text he sent me while I was still seated with Daisy? I blushed.

Well, my meeting with Daisy went super great, more than I expected. Everything felt like everything was meant to happen this way. If it wasn't that my son is not here with me, I would be starting to think this is what God had planned for me all along. I know we haven't signed and we are going to sit with the lawyers and all that, but the terms she gave me are ridiculous. Well, Daisy is old and since her husband died from cancer six years ago, she

has given up on life and is waiting to follow him. She has been holding on to this little shop for memories she shared with her husband in it. When she described how they opened this corner shop and were living their dreams together, I felt all the love she shared with her husband. The love I wish to have for infinity. Their son, who is an engineer and lives with his family in England wants nothing to do with the shop. So, Daisy was basically just holding on to it for the sake of keeping her husband's memories. She said she has been fighting to keep this place running like it used to, but nothing is giving. People walk in and out, putting down offers to buy her out but she never bent, because it felt like she was giving up on her husband. But I like what she said before we shook hands after our mutual agreement, the fresh smell of those butter scones reminded her of what this place is supposed to be. It is supposed to be the first

stop on everyone's way to work. It is supposed to be a drug. It is supposed to be a little haven for coffee lovers – and I gave her exactly that feeling. And also, to be honest, as much as you want to fight til forever, you get to a point where you accept defeat – that I know very well; and that is what she did.

It is okay to let go when you tried everything in your power to fight.

It is okay.

It is okay to try new things or start over, and that is what I will help her achieve.

At 15h15, I am sitting outside Aluwani's school waiting for him to finish his tennis practice. I am paging through the notes I made in my diary during our meeting this morning. I spent almost the whole day with Daisy - what a sweet old lady.

This was a God-given opportunity. I am going to partner with her. Oh, well, I am as good as

taking over. The building is standing and all I need is to perfect it. She is going to sleep on everything, and have a chat with a lawyer but she is ready to be a silent partner. There is nothing special she can contribute. She is old and things are different from how they were back in the days when the shop was buzzing. We are going to need to revamp the place, change the name, make it young – like give it both the Starbucks and Krispy Kreme Donuts feel but still accommodate the loyal royal-like tea lovers of hers. I know I am rumbling – it is the excitement.

I am willing to give it my all. I have nothing to lose. Nothing at all.

The two kids chasing each other towards the school gate pull me from my deep thoughts. I put my diary back on the passenger seat and start the car. It doesn't take Alu more than ten minutes to run towards the car. He waves at me

while opening the backseat door.

“You look happy,” I say while he buckles up.

“My teacher picked me to prepare a speech for the principal’s celebration day,” he proudly announces.

“That sounds great. Do you know what you are going to write?”

“No. You and daddy are going to help me,” he innocently says.

Of course. I laugh while reversing out of the car parking.

At home, Alu runs to greet his father in the kitchen before running to his room to change while I prepare a snack for the both of us. Theo has started cooking. The kitchen is a mess and a cookbook is spread on the middle of the table.

“Don’t you dare mention it,” he softly says, a

smile on his face.

He knows me too well.

I raise both my hands while laughing. I promise not to say a word or even ask to assist. He tells me to save all the great news for supper. So, I wash my hands and prepare sandwiches for Alu and I. While Alu eats his food while watching the TV, I am seated by the counter watching Theo cook.

My phone beeps, and I reach for it before I see the text message, 'Abby, can I call you?' My heart skips a beat because I do not expect anyone other than my sister or mother to have this number.

'Who is this?' I text back and quickly throw the phone on the table, my hands immediately trembling. I still have to work on my nerves. I cannot always be like this.

'Phindile.'

I let out a deep breathe, smiling down at my best friend's name. I had chosen to abandon her for her own safety but I know I owe her an explanation. I pick my side plate and dial her number while heading to my room. She almost cries when I say my first word to her. Luckily, she knows how complicated my life had been since I left her house. We had an hour of catching up, and she was calling to invite me to her wedding. She met a man she is ready to marry and she wants me to be part of her wedding in a few months. Trust Phindile to say, "he better not cheat like the others". Oh, how I miss my friend. I promise not to miss it to the world. I meant it when I said I am back at it. I am back at living my life to the fullest.

When I head back to the kitchen, Aluwani is setting the table with his father. When he notices me, Theo pulls a chair for me and

invites me to sit.

I update the boys about my new adventure and I include my ideas of the revamp. Theo proposes a toast 'to a successful adventure.'

"Daddy, am I ever going to have a baby brother or sister?" Aluwani asks, while placing his glass of juice on the table. Theo almost chokes on the sip of champagne he took and I... I am... just curious to hear what he says.

"Sorry," Theo mumbles, while rubbing his chest. He lifts his eyes to me. I don't have anything to say to save him – I am interested to know what his answer is. When he has fully recovered, he turns to Alu and asks, "Do you need a sibling?"

"Yes."

"I'll ... yes.. I... we... will have one... one day."

"You are going to be my brother or sister's mother?" Alu shifts his eyes to me. Talk about kids bringing up serious issues to talk about.

“I’d love to.” As difficult as the question was, I respond without thinking twice. Theo slowly turns to me. I shoot him a smile while Aluwani moves to the next unrelated question.

Now, I have something to look up to. Since my meeting with Daisy, I have been jotting down my recipes and making twists I want to try out for when we start working on menus and all. Too early, but I am already game on.

It is a Saturday morning and while Aluwani and Theo leave the house for a jog, I decide to perfect my butter scones recipe. Funny that I say, ‘to perfect’ but I do mean it. Each time I bake, I get better with each pan. I haven’t added chocolate chunks in my butter scones in ages. I open the snack drawer and pull a slab of dark

chocolate.

The door flies open when I am just pulling the last tray from the oven. Aluwani giggles while running in.

“I am first,” he says, lifting his hand for me to high-five it. I wipe my hand with my apron and give him what he wants.

“Grab some water, please,” I advise since he is almost out of breath.

Theo walks in too but instead of saying anything, he freezes like something frightened him. He stares at me and then at the tray which is in front of me.

“Daddy I still run faster than you,” Aluwani comments, sticking his tongue out in excitement. Theo is still frozen in one spot.

“Why don’t you go take a bath and come back here for breakfast,” I order, directing Alu towards the corridor. Once he is gone, I turn

back to Theo. "What's wrong?"

"Mrs. Abigail," he mumbles to himself. He then tilts his head to me and says, "I used to call you Mrs. Abigail."

"All the damn time." I smile but narrow my eyes at him. I think I have told him this a lot of times two years ago but the way he is questioning says... something else.

"These scones...were my favourite. These particular ones..." My eyes light up. Yes. I have told him this too but today's aroma might have triggered a memory.

"Yes, they were," I respond happily.

"I wish I remembered more."

"Do you want to remember?"

"I need to."

Need to?

What changed?

I thought he had given up on that part and I thought he was doing just great.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” I remind him while walking back to oven. I switch it off.

“I’m going to take a quick shower,” he says, already making his way down the corridor.

While the boys freshen up, I quickly clean up the kitchen. If I dare lazy around, I’ll regret when it is time to cook. After washing the dishes, I prepare breakfast and set it on the table.

Aluwani joins me but Theo is nowhere to be found. He has been gone for long.

“Can I go ride bicycle with my friends?” Alu asks. I dart my eyes to the wall where the clock is.

“No going out to the streets before lunch. Watch TV or play some games until lunch time,” I say, while getting up from my chair. There is no room for us to argue – it is a rule around this

house.

I pick a glass, put some ice and orange juice and thereafter make my way to Theo's room. Maybe he decided to take a nap. I tap on the door but there is no answer.

"Theo?" I call his name while slowly opening the door. Only when I walk in, do I hear him from the shower.

I walk to a little table at the end of the room and place the glass of juice on it. When I turn to leave, a printed picture of my son takes my attention. I slowly turn back, picking it up and inspecting it.

"Why the hell do you have Mpho's pic?" I mumble to myself, trying to remember if it came from me. If I ever had Mpho's picture, it wouldn't be on an A4 printing paper. I pick a folder which is on the table and open it. There are notes, which seems to have been scribbled

when someone was being addressed. Also, there are a few phone numbers which are scratched out. Scanning through the notes, I pick some pieces I could make out.

Ndumiso Gumede.

JFK Airport.

No available VISA information.

No data.

Kotoka International Airport, Accra.

Theo opens the door that leads him back to his bedroom. He freezes when he sees me.

“You were taking long so I brought you something to drink.”

“Yes, thank you,” he responds, walking further into the room.

“What is going on here?” I lift the picture and the file towards him.

“I am sorry...”

“What are you apologizing for?”

“I should have told you.”

“Told me what?”

“That I have been in contact with Mr Molepo and we have been trying to trace Mpho.”

“Oh...”

I am grateful. Staring in his eyes, I fall more deeply in love with him for this. For trying.

It breaks my heart when he explains to me how Mpho’s details cannot be traced anywhere but there was movement on Ndumiso’s ID – but that was until two years ago. His passport was last scanned in Accra and thereafter everything went dead. Since Molepo is demoted after the whole saga, he cannot easily pull strings to get more than what he has given Theo. So, in simple terms, he has hit the rock bottom.

The pain is still much but I have made peace with my fate.

“I didn’t want to tell you... in case we fail. I didn’t want to put your hopes up too high,” he says, walking towards me. His eyes are full of sadness. “I just want to see you happy, Abigail. You deserve all the happiness in the world and if I manage to give you that, I’ll feel better as a man. I have been useless for so long.”

“You haven’t been useless,” I mumble. He is standing right in front of me right now. He slowly takes the things in my hand and place them on the table.

“Of course, you’ll say that.”

“I wish to find my son... but I want you to know that I am fine. God has a reason for allowing all of this to happen to me. All is well with my soul,” I say. My tears are ready to fall right now but they won’t dare. I promised myself.

He runs the back of his fingers on right cheeks.

“Damn Abby, I am so in love with you... and all I want is to see you happy.”

Oh, damn, now the tears fall.

“Thank you for trying,” I mumble, standing on my toes so that I could reach his lips. When our lips touch, it feels like heaven.

It always does.

We go all in, him sucking my tongue and giving me a chance to do the same.

He pulls from the kiss and stares down at me.

“Can I make you, my wife? So that all I do is be the man to make you happy and make sure you live up to all your dreams? At least I am certain that I can do that without fail.”

I don't doubt him.

“Are you proposing to me, Mr Masindi?” I ask with a little giggle. Talk about jumping stages.

“Yes, I am, Mrs Abigail,” he responds... and damn, he sounds like thee Theo.

<https://www.storiesbytakalanim.co.za/e-commerce/deal-3>

Heart of GOLD

#26

THEO

This is exactly the place we have been searching for since the beginning of the week. The minute I park the car a few houses away, I kill the engine and switch off the lights before I pull my jacket off and throw it in the backseat. This guy, my partner, pulls his gun and cocks it.

Vu..yo.

Yes, Vuyo, is his name.

We are parked outside one of the quietest streets of Tembisa. It is just after 19h40 but you would swear it is after midnight. No movements of the cars. No street lights. No dogs barking. Nothing. Just a deserted street with neighborhood gates locked. It doesn't feel like the Tembisa we passed just a minute ago.

"Fasten your bulletproof," I advise Vuyo. I give him a smirk while tightening mine. A bullet once grazed his stomach when he didn't properly wear his bulletproof. I gladly remind him whenever I get a chance.

"Ha... ha... ha," he says, tightening the grips of his bulletproof.

"In and out, okay? The police are ambushing the main house while we turn that backroom upside down," I advise, my eyes scanning the rear-view

mirror. We are in search of two young girls who have been missing for a few days. They were on their way home from school when they disappeared. Their father paid an arm and a leg for their safe return and I intend to do just that.

In a minute, the police van parks behind us. I am here for my client's request, but of course, the police have to do the arresting.

"Let's go."

Vuyo and I jump out of the car and head to the van. We have already gone through this plan an hour ago. The police officers take the lead, while Vuyo and I follow behind, our guns pointed in front of us, ready to eliminate any danger that comes our way. While the police turn to the pathway which leads to the main door, Vuyo and I turn in the opposite direction. I had an informant come here this morning, to scan the yard around. There is a commotion at the main door, forcing Vuyo and I to increase

our pace towards the backyard. It is dark, so I pull a torch from my back pocket and flash it in front of me.

“Kick the door,” I order while scanning the whole backyard, aiming the torch to give us some light. The gun goes off from the main house, and I hear a muffled sound coming from the room we are attempting to open.

“They are in here.” Vuyo shoots the lock pad before kicking the door open with everything in him. The muffled sounds and heavy breathing usher us into a room with four young girls curled in a corner. I know we have our girls when two of the young girls are wearing the uniform described by our client. Their eyes are twinkling with tears as they stare back at where the torchlight is coming from. I turn to the wall behind me and search for the light switch. When I switch it on, the young girls shift further away to the corner of the room. Only now do I

notice I have the gun pointed at them.

“Sorry... sorry... we are the good guys. We are here to take you home,” I whisper, lowering the gun. Vuyo moves to the door to cover my back while I hurry to untie the girls’ hands and feet. I tell them not to make noise before I cut the napkins that were covering their mouths.

“Hey, man, are you alright?” a voice startles me from a reverie. I dart my eyes to Jonathan, our head coach. He is standing in front of me, his hands crossed on his chest.

“Sorry...” I clear my throat, trying to sit up straight.

“How are you daydreaming while staring right at me?” he asks, a frown on his face.

“Eish... I don’t know... just something...” I respond, trying not to make a big deal out of this.

“For the hundredth time, I’ll tell you to see Mercy. This has been happening quite a lot and to be honest, we have been working well together and I don’t want to get to a point of letting you go.”

“I’ll go see Mercy,” I promise. The last thing I want is to be cut off from the team. And the first step to healing would be to seek help – that is what we tell our boys every time they look out of place.

It is almost time to knock off, so I pick up my sweater from the coat rack and put it on. After locking my cupboard, I pick my car keys from the table and head out. Before getting out of the building, I stop by Mercy’s door. Her door is open and she is already packing her belongings into her shopper bag.

“Hey Theo,” Mercy greets upon noticing me. She stands up straight and smiles at me. Mercy is the team’s therapist. I don’t know much about what she does with the boys but

whatever she does with them works because once they leave this room, their performance improves. I should give it to the team managers for affording these kids such crucial services...and not just spend money on sports therapists only.

“I think I need to make an appointment.”

“I have an opening tomorrow? Should I squeeze you in?”

“Somewhere next week? Tomorrow I am not in.” Abigail and I are heading to Johannesburg for her friend’s wedding and she asked me to come as her date. We are leaving tomorrow morning since she is part of the bridal party. If she didn’t beg me to tag along, I was going to let her go have fun with her friend. But at the same time, I am glad she insisted that I tag along. I am starting to get paranoid all over again. For the past weeks, I have been bothered by these episodes that I keep getting. It is as if I am

reliving my life. I say this because Mr. Molepo got deep into what I used to do. Abigail told me too. And all these dream-like episodes I get match exactly what they said. Now, the question is, are these memories or dreams? I am scared to even confirm this to something solid that will confirm that it is the reality. But if these are dreams, then they are too vivid; they scare me.

“Tuesday noon,” she says.

Tuesday noon will definitely do.

I have been getting small pieces about things and what triggers some of the little useless memories is the smell of things around me. Just the other day Abigail asked me to stop at some Caltex for a cup of coffee. She came back sipping from her cup, but when she reached toward me for a kiss, I smelled the Butterscotch latte and tasted it on her lips. Right there, a picture of me snapping pictures of a couple

crossing the road pops into my head. I have no idea who the couple was, but I was snapping pictures of them before taking a few sips from a coffee cup.

Apart from the episode that happened in our kitchen, I haven't told Abigail about most of these other episodes but I stay awake most nights.

After dropping Alu off at school, we head straight to Joburg. He is doing a sleepover at Danny's for the weekend. He is like family to them now.

Abigail's mood is on the roof. She had been in and out of Joburg for dress fittings and rehearsals and other things that come before the big wedding day, but her excitement today

is over the roof.

“I believe in love, hey,” she says, smiling at me. She has stopped scrolling through her phone.

“That’s a good thing, right?” I ask. If it wasn’t, she wouldn’t have agreed to be my wife. My proposal was spontaneous but surprisingly, she agreed to make me the happiest man alive. Yes, I am the fucking happiest man right now. When I asked her if she wanted us to have a big wedding just like how her friend is doing it, she refused. She is looking for something very intimate. That is very fine by me. I wouldn’t even fill my guest table with more than ten names, so intimate is just perfectly fine. Also, we are going to inject a lot of our savings into her new business venture which is slowly coming to life. It is so beautiful to watch her do something she loves. And seeing her smile each morning when she leaves the house, makes me a happy man.

“It is a great thing,” she responds.

“Where is this coming from?”

“It just crossed my mind.”

I reach for her hand and squeeze it lightly. Abigail is one hell of a strong woman and the more she wants to be that, the more I want to protect her. I am just glad that I am going to live my life protecting her.

When we reach Johannesburg, I drop her off at her friend’s new house in North Riding before I check-in at a hotel not far from the wedding venue.

Once settled, I pull the diary I have been keeping for my records. Each and every episode I get, I jot it down so that I don’t forget it again. This could be my memory coming back or this could be things my mind is making up because I am obsessed with finding out ways to remember.

Also, in my diary, is every little detail about Mpho’s search. Nothing material but I haven’t

given up, yet. But since I cannot find Mpho's ID flagged anywhere, I have resorted to finding out any other news about him. Just anything to give Abby some closure – she deserves it. The sad part about this is that I cannot even share his picture publicly and request South Africa to help us search for him. I don't want people sniffing my and Abigail's lives. But each day, I try... hoping for something positive.

Phindile and her husband organized a very beautiful wedding. Everything, since we got here, has been breathtaking. I can only imagine how much they spent on just this event. Abigail looks very exquisite in her turquoise bridesmaid dress. I spent the whole day staring at her, noting each and every smile she shared.

"I cannot believe I am seeing you again, Mr. Masindi," Phindile says, standing hand-in-hand with her new husband.

“Yeah...” I smile at them, snuggling Abigail in my arm. It is after the reception and the bride and groom are going around greeting the guests.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” she asks. I shake my head. “Well, that is a thing of the past... but I would like to thank you for taking care of my girl here. She is glowing. Very much.”

“Stop it.” Abigail giggles.

“I am being honest. Whatever you are doing, keep it up,” Phindile says before dragging her husband to another group of guests.

“You caught her cheating ex-husband,” Abigail advises.

“Oh, one of those.” I pick two flutes of champagne from a waitress who was walking past us. I hand one to Abigail before leading her back to the table where I was seated. She takes the empty chair next to mine.

“What is bothering you?” she asks. I swear this woman can see through me.

“Nothing much. I just think I need to see Mr. Molepo before we return back to Bloem.”
Maybe he can help me with some answers.

“Is this about Mpho?” she asks, her face almost turning blue with worry.

“No. No. I am having some episodes... and I want him to help me with some things.” Only now does she relax a bit. With Mpho’s disappearance, any news could include a death announcement. I just hope that we don’t get to that.

Sunday noon, Mr. Molepo agreed to meet me at a car wash in Midrand. On my way here, I dropped Abigail off at Mall of Africa for some shopping and head straight to the car wash. The old man is already seated at an empty table,

with a bottle of whiskey on the table. If I wasn't driving to Bloem later, I was going to join him for a glass.

"Thank you for meeting me here," I take on the opposite bench. He nods at me while taking a sip from his glass.

"It sounded serious," he says.

"It isn't... but I could use some help." Where do I even begin? I start with the recent episode – the Tembisa girls. In my dream or episode, or whatever it is, I was part of the team that rescued four girls from what seems like human trafficking. I narrate the story how I saw it flash in front of me. However, I don't have an ending. When the coach disturbed me, I couldn't go back to where I stopped imagining the whole thing. Mr. Molepo is staring at me when I try to paint the vivid pictures which are stuck in my head. "The other day, I saw myself at a stage ... people applauding me for God knows what..."

and I remember shaking your hand in this dream... this thing.”

Mr. Molepo gives me a chance to tell him about more episodes. I have had a few but I ask him the ones that relate to my previous job. He listens quietly and when I ask, if he can recall any of that happening, he pulls his phone from his pocket and scroll through for a little while.

“When you were on stage and I was shaking your hand... it was when you were awarded the best employee when you were in my team,” he says, still scrolling through his phone. After what seems like forever, he hands me the phone.

There on the screen, in bold, is a title: Four human traffickers arrested in Tembisa. I scan through the article, and right there in black and white is my name and Vuyo Kunene’s. Reading through what happened, it matches what I saw flash before me.

“That was a big find,” he adds, receiving his phone from me. “I don’t know about every task you did but the man hunt in Hartees dam and the ambush in Sandton was under my supervision before you opened your practice.”

“So... this means...” I don’t get to finish my question before he nods.

“Yep!”

It is never too late to surprise someone with a Mother's Day gift 🥰

<https://www.storiesbytakalanim.co.za/e-commerce/combo-deals>

Heart of GOLD

#27

ABIGAIL

I don't want to push too much but Theo is not telling me everything about this meeting he has. As he drops me at the Mall of Africa, he kisses me and tells me that he will call me in an hour or so. I take the opportunity to window shop but when I walk past one boutique and see a short floral dress, I buy it without thinking twice. I am going to wear it in two weeks or so when I officially start at our shop. We are signing the paperwork on Thursday and I cannot wait to implement all the ideas I have.

It has been over an hour and Theo hasn't called. I don't check up on him because I know he must be tied up for him not to text me. It is taking a lot for me not to panic. But those days are gone. I don't panic easily.

I decided to round the floor and head to Tashas for lunch - I am too exhausted to walk around the mall after a busy night like the one I had. A waiter sees me before I could even reach the door. He offers me a table inside. I asked for a table of two just in case Theo finishes before I am done eating — he could join me. Before putting my phone on the table, I text him, telling him where I am, and which side I am sitting.

I study the menu for a short while, deciding on what small dish I could go for.

The waiter places a glass of ice tea which I ordered earlier, and I put an order for a bowl of pasta. After he gathers the menu from the table, he leaves while I pick up my phone from the table and scroll through the pictures we took yesterday. Phindile's wedding was so beautiful, I was almost in tears the whole time. She looked so happy and happiness looked good on her. We took a hundred pictures and they all

look so beautiful; I can only wonder how the professional photographs are going to look like. The happiness that glows on her face doesn't match what she says her reason for marrying her husband is. She jokingly tells everyone that he is in her life to take care of all her financial needs. I didn't buy it. I think she is just guarding her heart but I know my friend very well. She is in love and she is genuinely happy. She is a Mkwanzazi now and I love how the family seems to love her dearly. I am genuinely happy for her.

"Abigail?" A familiar voice calls my name.

Lifting my eyes towards the entrance, I find Bonolo and two of her friends walking towards the door. She is Ndumiso's cousin and we were quite cool once upon my marriage when Ndumiso and I were happy. While the two friends walk out of the door, Bonolo walks to my table. She gladly spreads her arms for a hug and I get on my feet to hug her. Am I not happy

about the wig I had installed and the facial we did prior to the wedding yesterday? I look very beautiful and if it wasn't for the wedding, I wouldn't match my past life. My hair is perfect and even though I skipped putting on make-up, my face is flawless.

"How have you been?" she asks, staring down at a dress I have on. In my previous life, it would have been branded with an expensive name and it would have been matching my bag. Right now, the one I have on is decent enough and it represents my now 'almost' perfect life. It is a red off-the-shoulder knee-length I bought from Zara.

"I have been surviving," I respond while taking a seat. I gestured for her to take a seat. Before she grabs the chair, she scans the door for her friends - they are gone.

"It doesn't look like you are surviving. You look great," she compliments. Well, I do look like I

have my life figured out but it hasn't always been the case. Things are just taking a great turn now. But I would admit, things could be better.

"How have you been?" I question, ready to pick her brain about what she knows about what happened between Ndumiso and I. Does she know where my son is? Did Ndumiso say anything before he went AWOL? Does he keep in touch with anyone? Does he call his mother and younger brother? Who is taking care of them if he isn't there?

"I am great. I am doing quite great, I wish we had more time for us to catch up," she responds. She isn't giving anything away and I don't know how to bring it up. And she is not the Bonolo I know; she is too reserved.

"When last did you see Ndumiso?" I no longer have the patience.

“Really, Abigail, I don’t want to talk about Ndumiso and ya’ll shenanigans.”

“For old time's sake.” I flash her a smile. She is not moved. “At least, tell me how Mpho’s granny is doing? I haven’t seen her in a while and I feel like I owe her an explanation of what happened between Ndumiso and I. I just haven’t gotten a chance to see her.” Bonolo’s shoulders sag when I ask this. I immediately know what it means before she mentions it. When she lifts her eyes to me, my heart breaks at her confirmation of what I think. “We buried her three months ago.”

Three months ago.

“I am so sorry Bonolo,” I offer my condolences. Mpho’s grandmother was her aunt and she loved her dearly. I know her death affected her. I stare sadly at her so that she could tell me more about what happened? She wasn’t too old for death to be deemed normal.

“It's okay. She became so sick that death was the only thing better.”

“How long was she sick?” I hate how this is me fishing for more information. I know that there isn't a way Ndumiso would be far away knowing that his mother isn't well - unless he didn't know. When she is about to answer, one of her friends stops next to our table and tells Bonolo that their Uber is waiting.

“Can we catch up? I'll drop you off wherever you need to go...” I say but right at that second, Theo comes into view and when our eyes meet, Bonolo figures that he is my guest. She immediately gets on her feet. Theo walks closer to the table and stops next to my chair.

“Good day ladies,” he greets.

“I should catch our Uber. I don't know exactly where we are going, so it would be best if I go,” she says, darting her eyes between Theo and I.

I jump to my feet and offer to walk her out. While we follow her friends toward the mall entrance, I ask for her cellphone number so that I could call her and catch up. She makes an excuse not to give me the number. Instead, she takes mine and promises to call me. I doubt that. I doubt that she will call me so I swallow my pride and ask, "Did Ndumiso and Mpho attend the funeral?" At least, if she could just answer that. However, I doubt she will say anything. The way she refuses to look at me as I bring this up tells me more than she is trying to hide. At least, I know that Ndumiso attended the funeral. Unfortunately, I don't care much about Ndumiso.

"It was nice seeing you," she says when we reach the escalators.

My tears are in my eyes when I turn to her and say, "I don't know what Ndumiso said to you...and to be honest, I don't care much. All I

want to know is whether my son was at the funeral or not. Right now, I don't know where he is... and I know for sure Ndumiso is keeping him away from me." If he is alive! I swallow hard at that thought because I pray it is not otherwise. I clear my throat and continue, "I just want to know if he is okay or not. I might not have him back but I want to know whether my baby is well or not."

"I don't know anything Abigail," she responds. People are pushing through us to get to the escalator, so Bonolo sadly stares at me before turning away. She jumps up the escalator and I watch as she runs away. Only when she is out of sight do I walk back to the restaurant. Theo is seated on a chair Bonolo had occupied. When he notices me, he jumps on his feet. Tears are streaming down my face now and I am unable to stop them. Some people are horrible. She could have just told me the truth.

Theo sits when I sit. He asks for a glass of water from the waiter and rubs my back until I am fine. He doesn't push me to tell him what was wrong but he does ask if we should go. I shake my head. I need to eat.

When my bowl of pasta is placed in front of me, I dig in silently while Theo tells me about his meeting. I am happy that he is regaining his memory - it is just that right now, I wish he could help with the news about Mpho. I am struggling to bury him when he might be alive.

Life goes on.

Whether we like it or not, life goes - mine included. It is a weekend after the wedding and today I am trying out a few recipes at the restaurant. Daisy invited a few of her customers

and I asked Theo to bring Alu over after the soccer match. This way, our customers will get a taste of the new beginning and hopefully spread the news about our store to their families and friends before we relaunch it.

Since walking into this kitchen at 5 am, I have been on my feet. Lumka has been running around the kitchen with me in preparation for our ten o'clock serving hour. We had to close the shop and customers are excited when they are told to return for a free cup of coffee and cake. Daisy is here, setting the tables with Mrs. Wilson. I have learnt that Mrs. Wilson is Daisy's right hand woman if I can call her that. They have been working together since this place was opened. Talk about loyalty.

"Are we ready?" Daisy asks, a smile so wide.

"More than ready, right Lumka?" Lumka smiles back at me. We both nod at Daisy to let the customers in. I pull my apron off and head to

the front at the serving station. We have lined out all sorts of cakes, cupcakes and treats. I outdid myself today and for me to see my work lined like this is a dream come true.

My eyes widen when I turn to the door, to find a long queue. How these people got the message for this little festivity, I have no idea. When Daisy opens the door to let people in, it doesn't take me a minute to know why we have a full house. Theo is not only with Aluwani. He has a whole soccer team with him.

"Oh my goodness, are we going to have enough chairs? Or serving plates? Or cups?" Daisy asks Mrs. Willson while she scans the full room excitedly. When Theo gets to where I wait for him, he drops a kiss on my lips and pulls me into a hug.

"I asked the boys to send the word to everyone around town. They have been campaigning for you since morning." I am overwhelmed by the

number of people walking into the store. “Did the boys overdid it?” he asks.

“The more the merrier.” I laugh. “Don’t you guys have a match?”

“This is the match.” I smile at him. He had told me about a very important match he had. Even though he promised to show his face, I didn’t think it would be with the whole soccer team. And I didn’t think he would send them to town to spread the word.

The boys are loud as they line up behind a group of old ladies who are probably here for Daisy. Theo turns to the boys and tells them to make room for the ladies and the important customers. A few of the guys mumble but they do so while making way for many more customers who are walking into the store.

“There is enough for everybody... I think...” I shrug at Theo when I notice more people

walking into the store. His soccer team and Aluwani are walking outside to make room for the crowd. “But I promise to personally bake for them tomorrow.”

“They’ll understand.”

“You think people are going to love the changes we are making?” I ask.

“Just look around,” when he says this, I turn to take a look around the now crowded room. Customers are picking pieces of cakes and the macarons that I made and Lumka is bringing in more trays. “Everyone loves the food and I don’t think you have enough.”

“Maybe the boys overdid it,” I say and we both laugh. I am disturbed by my phone vibrating in my pocket. Pulling it, I notice it is a number I don’t know. I hesitate to take the phone, but I swipe right to answer it. I gesture for Theo to wait for me before rushing towards the back to

avoid the noise.

“Can you talk?” The female voice at the end of the line asks.

“Who is calling?” I ask while closing the door which leads to Daisy’s office.

“Bonolo!”

“Hey... yes... yes I can talk. I am glad you called... thank you,” I respond breathlessly. She is the least person I expected to call me and I am grateful. “How are you?”

“You didn’t hear this from me.”

“Of course!” I quickly respond.

“Yes... Ndumiso was at the funeral,” she says.

“He ordered me not to say anything to you and I promised not to say a word... but after seeing you....”

I don't care about that right now.

“And Mpho? Was my son at the funeral?” I

breath out, my hands already trembling. I feel so hot and I feel like the room is spinning and closing me in as I wait for her response.

“He was there with him!”

I want to throw a thousand questions but I feel myself slowly falling to the floor. The next thing, I feel the cold tile before everything goes black.

<https://www.storiesbytakalanim.co.za/e-commerce/deal-3>

Heart of GOLD

#28

THEO

The smiles around the room are fulfilling. I think

sending the boys to fish for customers, worked tremendously. We have a full house here.

Abigail has been gone for a while so I am just standing here admiring her hard work. She left in the wee hours of the morning to make this happen. Squeezing through a number of customers, I make my way to where my soccer team is gathered just outside the shop. Aluwani is chasing JR while the rest of the boy are buried on their phones.

“You can take pics and tag the place on your timelines,” I say, sliding my hands inside the pocket. All the boys shake their heads. “Why not?”

“This is too girly,” one responds on behalf of the team.

“I beg to differ...” the boys groan when I want to start a lecture. I want to force my point across when Daisy comes rushing to me. I see panic before she could even reach me.

“Come... Abby is not well,” she says, reaching for my hand. I take it and twirl so I could drag her back inside the shop. She gasps, waving her free hand. “Go...go... she is the first door after the kitchen.”

I let go of her hand and charge towards the said room. I find one old lady trying to fan some air for Abigail. She is weakly lying on the floor.

“What happened here?” I ask, dropping to my knees so that I can help her up. Another younger woman dressed in a tailored suit storms into the room and instructs us to give her room to breathe.

“I am a doctor,” she says when she kneels next to me. She checks for Abigail’s breathing and there after positions her right on her back. I don’t want to panic and ask many questions so I pull my phone and move to the corner of the room to dial for an ambulance. “She is fine. She is regaining consciousness.” I twirl back to

them and watch as the doctor lady helps her sit up.

“What happened?” I ask Daisy who is by the door.

“I don’t know. I just found her on the floor.”

She came here for a phone call. I scan the floor for her cellphone. I find it just next to her.

Luckily it is not broken but it is off.

The doctor lady instructs her not to move fast. She advises her to stay lying on the floor while Daisy darts out of the room to get a glass of water. While I wait for the phone to switch on, I get on the floor next to Abigail. She turns her glassy eyes to me. I reach for her hand and caress it.

“What happened baby?” I ask. I fear for the worst because she cannot just decide to faint if the news she received were pleasant. Who was on that phone?

“Mpho,” she mumbles and licks her lips. “He is alive.”

I feel a weight on my shoulder lifting. I rub the back of her hand and kiss it. This is good news. I take it she fainted because of the shock.

“Okay, relax. We will get to the bottom of this,” I assure her. This is a good lead. It is going to be easy to trace him now that there is a positive lead. Questions are many in my head but I pack them at the back.

I receive a glass of water from Daisy and help Abigail drink up. The doctor tells her to see the doctor if she feels a need or if she suspects that she is pregnant because as I thought, it could be the shock from the news she received. Thereafter she and Daisy leave us in the office.

“Can I have my phone?” she asks. The way she begs for it tells me that I won’t win the argument if I want to keep it from her. The

phone is now switched on so I hand it to her. She dials the last number on her call log, and puts the phone on speaker. We both listen as the phone goes on voicemail.

“Are you feeling okay?” I ask.

“Yeah,”

I help her up before asking where her belongings are.

“We are going home,” I say. She lifts her eyes to me and wants to argue. “Not today, Abby. Not today.”

She picks her bag from the table and follows me outside. It is still buzzing at the front, with the waitress filling up the serving table with more goodies. I know Abigail wishes she could stay and work some more but it is not happening.

“Go home and rest; Lumka and I will take care of everything,” Daisy says after giving Abigail a brief hug. I rest my hand on the small of her

back and guide her towards the door. Aluwani runs to us when he sees me.

“Guys, we need to go,” I tell the boys.

“What about the food?”

“We need to go. I owe you guys one.” I order them into a mini bus and help Abigail into the front passenger seat. Luckily, I dropped her here in the morning - I couldn't let her drive here at that hour of the day. Aluwani is oblivious of Abigail's mood. He is on a seat just behind Abigail and is excitedly sharing about how he helped get customers to the store.

“Thank you, baby,” Abigail murmurs.

At home I don't allow Abigail to lift a finger. We spend the whole afternoon in her bed, binge watching some new shows on Netflix.

“I don't think she would want to talk,” Abigail

said.

“Who was on the call with you?”

“Ndumiso’s cousin.” I do remember the cousin from the mall. “She said Mpho was there at the funeral with Ndumiso. I was just so overwhelmed...I didn’t get a chance to ask many questions.”

“At least we have a lead. I’ll take some time and go hunt for him.” I pull her closer to me for a hug. “I will find him.”

“But what are we waiting for? We need to just drive back to Gauteng and ask her more questions about what she knows about Ndumiso’s disappearance.”

“Do you know where she stays?”

“I am not quite sure. I hadn’t seen for almost three years. It is possible that she has moved to a new place.”

“Why don’t you rest? I’ll figure something out,” I promise.

“Thank you.”

At about nine thirty, I run her a bath and spend another good hour in the bathroom with her while she soaks in. We both have a lot in our mind but I want her to rest before we tackle this. She has fallen asleep a few times in the bathtub and I know it is because of the exhaustion. When I finally see her to bed, I ask that she gives me Bonolo’s phone numbers for tracking because I am going to need to get to her. She is going to need to tell me everything about Ndumiso’s whereabouts. She forwards the number to me.

I watch her while she rests her head on the pillow to sleep. Before excusing myself, I ask her the question that has been burning me since the doctor mentioned its possibility. Throughout the afternoon I couldn’t bring

myself to ask it.

“Do you think you are pregnant?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I am still on the loop and I need to see a gynae to remove it first before I start trying.”

“Okay, get some rest,” I advise. I don’t mention my disappointment. And right now, I cannot overwhelm her with stupid questions but I am curious to know if making another baby is still in the picture someday. I know it not a possibility now with the store launch but I would like to know if she hasn’t changed her mind. When she finally closes her eyes, I kiss her on the forehead and walk out of the room, closing the door behind me.

When I am in the living room, I call Mr Molepo, give him Bonolo’s number and thereafter ask him to search her details for me. He does agree to assist me to get Bonolo’s address but when

he complains about bypassing the system for personal searches, I am reminded to work on trying to remember my password for the damn system I have in my laptop. I might be getting on his nerves and I shouldn't do so. I need Mr Molepo; I am still going to need him and as much as he is willing to help, I don't want him to feel used. Even though I am getting my memory back just bit by bit, I wish there were small things I could remember at a snap of a finger. Things like the PIN numbers and people names and phone numbers.

I receive an email from Mr Molepo and I don't waste time opening it. It has two of Bonolo's addresses. One is her residential address and the other is her workplace.

I take a picture of the addresses before putting it on Google. She stays in a complex in Midrand. I might need to go back to Gauteng and I might need to go there ASAP.

Before retiring to bed, I try Bonolo's number but it is still on voicemail. I can only wonder if she chickened out after telling Abigail about the news about her son.

Sunday morning I wake up an hour earlier than I normally wake up for a jog. I do a good ten kilometres before returning home. The reason I woke up earlier was that I can return home before Abigail and Alu wake up. Walking into the house, I find Aluwani lying on the couch watching television and Abigail is in the kitchen.

"What are you doing up so early?" I ask Abigail who is putting on an apron. I pick a bottle of water from the fridge and take a big sip before me checking my wrist watch for the time. It is just slightly six thirty.

“I promised Alu some baked goodies since he didn’t get to taste yesterday.”

“No, no, no; he will grab cereal. You need to rest,” I respond.

“I insist...”

“No. You cannot...”

“Stop it Theo,” she snaps and I freeze. She sighs deeply and thereafter says, “I need to bake or else I’ll lose my mind.”

“Okay.” I raise both my hands to the air. “Fine. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” she quietly says and thereafter continues to pull things from the pantry. I hate feeling helpless and right now, that is exactly how I feel. I grab a chair by the counter and watch as she measures ingredients into the bowl.

“Have you tried Bonolo’s number?” I question. If

I don't break this ice, no one will.

"Still on voicemail," she sadly responds, her eyes not meeting mine. Now that we know that Mpho is alive, I want to tell her not to worry but I know she will only be fine once she sees her son.

"I am thinking of going to Gauteng tomorrow. I got two of her addresses and I know it can not be easy to get to her residential address. She stays in a complex in Midrand."

She stops breaking an egg and lifts her eyes at me. "I want to go with you."

"I am going to need you to help with Aluwani. I'll handle this," I say. If I am going to drive out of town during the weekdays, I cannot do it with my son. The schools are not yet closed. "Trust me Abigail, I'll try my best."

On Monday morning, I embark on the journey to

Johannesburg to see Bonolo. Abigail managed to get hold of her last night but she did not want to share more than she has already shared. That didn't stop me for printing out pictures of Mpho and planning to travel further to KZN where Ndumiso grew up. As I have promised Abigail, I am going to travel to the ends of earth just to find the boy. Her happiness depends on him. And I am so eager and prepared for this. I have been trying to find him for so long, I ended up giving up. But this lead is somewhat solid.

Bonolo works at Nedbank head office in Sandton. I am at the reception after nine and I am unlucky because I am told that she is in a meeting until eleven. I take a chair at the waiting area until the receptionist signals for my attention at ten thirty. I hurry to the reception desk.

"She says she doesn't remember setting up a meeting with you... but she has ten minutes to

spare.”

‘I’ll take ten minutes.’”

I give the receptionist my ID for her to record my details in the Visitor’s register. Thereafter she turns the book toward me and asks me to sign. I sign in on a block after my ID number.

“Just go straight to the coffee area. She is sitting there,” the receptionist informs.

“Thank you.”

When she notices me walking to her table, panic flashes in her eyes. She remembers me from Tashas Mall of Africa.

“I won’t waste much of your time.”

“I already told Abigail that I have nothing more to say.”

“She really needs your help, Bonolo.” I grab a chair and lean closer to her. “All she wants is her baby. They have to be reunited.”

She tells me that she doesn't know Ndumiso's whereabouts. They attended a funeral and left thereafter. I don't know her but the look on her face tells me that she is not lying.

"How did Mpho look? Are there any changes?" I ask.

"He hasn't changed much."

"How was he?"

"Quiet?" she says.

I throw questions after questions and she responds hesitantly. I am just grateful for answers. Even though Abigail has given me direction to where Ndumiso from, I still ask Bonolo to direct me to her cousin's house in Nongoma. She refuses and jumps to her feet.

My next stop is Nongoma. She panicked so I am certain that my answers are there.

Before allowing her to go back to work, I thank

her for her time and promise her not to mention anything about our meeting.

Back at the reception, the receptionist asks that I sign out after handing back the visitor's tag. I put my signature down and before I put the pen down, something grabs my attention. My ID number grabs my attention. I grab the pen and pull a sticky note from the pile on the table. I scribble my ID number, scratch out the date of birth and underline the seven digits that come after it. I replace my birthdate with Aluwani's.

Bingo!

This is the password I have been freaking looking for.

Heart of GOLD

#29 (unedited)

THEO

With Abigail's direction, it didn't take long for me to get to Ndumiso's house. After meeting the cousin, I didn't even return back to Bloemfontein or waste any time. I drove straight here and arrived late at night. I parked outside the gate and watched the house attentively. There wasnt any movement until the gate was opened after midnight. A white Golf stopped outside the gate and in the yard, walked in two young men and two girls. It was dark, I couldn't see much but I am certain that one of the men is not Ndumiso. I might not remember much about him since I only saw him at Checkers in Menlyn before he dissapearred, but I am certain the two men are too young to be him.

On my way to here, I booked into a lodge just in town. And now, the following morning, I leave

the lodge very early to go back to watch the house. If Mpho lives here, I might catch him before he goes to school.

It is just after half past six when I park just one house away from theirs and watch. The house is one of the most decent ones in the area but it doesn't look well taken care of. It looks too dull for a family to live in.

The sun is already up and if it was back in town, the streets would be busy with scholars and workers leaving their houses. Here in the village it isn't the case. I get to see just a few people walk down the streets since there are just a few houses in one street. This place isn't much different from where Abigail and I were, back in Venda.

There isn't any movement around the yard and when it is after eight o'clock, I am certain that Mpho isn't here. And if Ndumiso stayed here, I would have seen a car in the yard, right? I sit up

straight from the car seat and reach for a coffee cup which... I thought was on the cup holder. I shake my head because for some reason, I saw myself sipping coffee while watching... Or is this a memory from my past life?

When I see someone in the yard, I throw the thoughts away as I follow their movement. It is one of the young men from last night. I watch as he sits on a chair in the veranda. After a few minutes, he is joined by a young woman who hands him something before she returns back to the house. I slowly drive up to the gate and stop near it. As I jump out of the car, the young man lifts his eyes to me. I catch the broken mirror he had earlier before he hides it behind him. Thereafter he cleans his nose with his fingers.

Drugs, huh?

"Eita," I greet, standing just further away from the veranda.

"Who the hell are you?" the young man asks, narrowing his eyes at me.

"A friend of Ndumiso," I say and then he relaxes his shoulders.

"Why would you look for him here?" he asks, his eyes still deep in mine as if he is reading each of my movements.

"Ah... I heard about your mother...my condolences," I say.

"Whatever, man!" He shrugs.

"She was a lovely woman. I am sorry for your loss."

"What do you want?"

"Look, I was out of the country for the past few years and I heard about your loss. So, I came here looking for Ndumiso."

"Why would you look for him here?"

"I am told he moved from Johannesburg to here."

We are great friends from varsity... and I lost his contacts."

"He never moved here. He can never move here. He doesn't fit here."

It is hard to dish for information. How did I use to do my job?

"Uhm... do you know where I can find him? Or do you have his new number."

"You can go to one of his expensive villas. Maybe you'll find him there."

"Where?"

"I don't know... man," he says, and sniffs his nose.

"Please. Any information will help."

"Entlek, who are you? Are you one of the people he is running away from?"

"He is running away from people?" I ask, acting suprised. Jeez, I used to have a difficult job.

"How much do you have?" he asks.

"How much do I have?" I ask. He nods. I quickly pull my wallet and take four hundred rand notes.

He opens his hand wide for me to place the money. It must be for the drugs. I shake my head and ask him for Ndumiso number. He pulls his phone from the pocket and gives me the number. I ask, "How do I know you are not messing with me?"

"You can call him while you stand right there," he responds.

I pull two more notes and hand the money over to him. While I do, I am asking myself what would the old Theodore do? He wouldn't tell this guy not to tell Ndumiso, would he?

"Thank you," I respond, while giving him the money. I decide not to tell him to keep this from Ndumiso, in case they are in communication.

Making my way back to the car, I send a text

message to Abigail, checking if she is home – she must be back from dropping Aluwani at school. Luckily she is taking my advice to skip work, take it easy and rest. When I jump into the car, I send her the number and ask her to use the tracking App on my laptop – I know there is one there since I tried using it once. When she tells me about the password, I give her the one I worked out yesterday – I hadn't told her about it.

I start the car, roll my window down and with a smile, wave at the young man in the yard.

“Theo, the password worked,” she gasps on the phone.

“I want you to track the number; it belongs to Ndumiso. Please don't call the number before we figure out where he is.”

“Okay...”

“Please figure out how the App works and track the number. Right now, I am driving back to the

lodge to check out since they said he doesn't stay here."

"Okay, let me see," she says.

I wait while I drive down a narrow road down the foothills. My heart is beating out of my chest as I wait for Abigail to say something about the number. Is this adrenaline? Is this how I use to feel when I was on the job?

"Okay... I got it," she says.

"Yes?"

"It shows that the number is active in Ballito," she says.

"Does it say where exactly?" I ask.

"Wait..." she says. "Yes, it is in Ballito. And I think I can trace it back to an hour ago."

"Give me the coordinates of the current location? I am sure they are there somewhere on the screen."

“I think I can zoom in,” she says.

“The coordinates Abby,” I say. She can figure out how the App works while I drive to where the phone is yet. I am just glad that it is here in Kwazulu Natal.

“I need to copy and paste the coordinates since they are coded.” She goes silent for a minute and there after says, “I am sending you an email now.”

My phone beeps after a minute. When I receive the email, I don't waste time opening it and copying the coordinates. I paste them on Google Maps.

“It is going to take me over an hour to get to the location,” I say.

“Are you going there?” Abigail asks breathlessly.

“Yes, I am. I am just checking out and then drive straight there.”

My heart is still raising as I drive into Dolphin Coast. I had been on the call with Abigail since three hours ago. She is panicking about what I am going to find. Is it really Ndumiso that I am going to find or his brother gave me random numbers? I pray so hard that he didn't play me. He wouldn't have taken my money and given me wrong numbers, right? I pray even harder when the navigator tells me to turn to a gated estate. Instead of turning towards the security boom gate, I drive further down the street. I dial Abigail's number.

"Did you find him?" she asks when she answers the phone. I bet it is taking so much for her not to dial the number and scream at her ex-husband.

“He is in a gated estate,” I respond.

“What are you going to do?”

“Maybe wait for him to move and thereafter follow him? I cannot risk asking the security guards if they know him.”

“He is still in the same position as this morning,” she says.

“Keep an eye on it and let me know if there are any changes.” The line goes silent for a little bit until I hear her sob. “Hey, are you crying?”

“I didn’t mean to cry,” she says and sniffs. She is such a soft bear. “I am just happy that there is little light. And thank you so much for doing this.”

“It is only my pleasure.”

“I don’t know how I am going to repay you,” she says.

“Repay me for what? Come on Abigail, you

know that I am doing this from the bottom of my heart. I am doing this for you.”

“Who has a heart of gold?” she asks and giggle.

“You are the one with a heart of gold,” I respond.

I can never repay her for what she has done for me and my son. This is nothing compared to what she has done. In fact, I wouldn't be here parked on the side of the road, tracking a number that might even belong to a drug dealer, if Abigail didn't give up her life to save mine.

Who has a gold heart between us? We need not to debate the obvious.

I ask her to stay on the line so that she could keep me company until she leaves the house to pick Aluwani from school.

“Which recipe are you perfecting today?” I ask.

She bakes to relax. She bakes when she is nervous. She bakes when she celebrates. She just bakes.

“The carrot cake,” she responds. Her voice is sweet when she says this, “You know me too well, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“I don’t know.. but I think I am freaking out.” I stay quiet for her to continue. “If it isn’t his number then I am going to be so disappointed.”

“I told you that I will find your son. If this is not him... then I’ll continue searching.”

“Thank you.”

Half past two, Abigail tells me that she is leaving the house to go pick Alu from school. I urge her to keep an eye on the tracking App whenever she gets a chance. Maybe, just maybe, there might be a movement.

I close my eyes and take a power nap, waiting for Abigail to return the phone call. I am super exhausted but I am eager to keep the search going. The only way Abigail is going to be alive

again, is when she is reconnected to her son.

At three thirty, my phone rings on the passenger's seat. Abigail's name flashes on the screen. Picking it up, she shrieks on the phone, telling me that there is a movement. I quickly sit up and start the engine. I quickly zoom on the google maps to check the name of the street that I am on.

Dammit, I should have brought my laptop.

"I don't know the street names here, so can you video call me and show me the screen?" I ask.

"Okay, okay. I need to park on the side of the road," she says. I keep my eyes on the gates that leads to where I was initially directed to by the navigator. Two cars are driving into the estate and a white Range Rover is approaching the security boom gate.

"Abigail... hurry please," I say, eyeing the car as it drives past me. I didn't clearly see the people

inside the car, but a driver is a man.

My line with Abigail goes dead before the phone rings again, showing a video call. On the screen, I see the red dot moving down towards Ballito Drive. I make a turn and drive towards the direction of the white Range Rover. There are many cars on the road but I am aiming that one. I am four cars behind it at the traffic lights and I am certain it is the right car when it takes left—the same direction as the dot on the screen.

“Okay, I got it. I am following one Range Rover...please take this registration number,” I inform Abigail and recite the number plate to her. It might come in very handy.

“Is it him inside? Did you see who is inside the car?”

“It is a male and a female,” I inform.

“No child?” The sadness in her voice is loud.

“No babe.”

By the time we turn into a less busy street, I notice that we are driving towards a school when I see a few students standing outside the gate. The Range Rover parks by the gate and I do the same behind them. I don't think they know that they are followed but I still don't make it obvious by staring inside their car. Instead, I scan the school grounds for the boy I might recognise from the pictures I have of him.

I wait.

And wait some more.

I only shift on my seat and let my gaze follow two children who are walking towards towards the Range Rover. One younger girl who is wearing a tennis uniform and an older boy wearing the soccer gear. The cap he has on makes it difficult for me to see his face. He is talking to the little girl who takes his hand as they across the street to where the cars are. I am right behind their car, so when they walk

towards the boot, I can easily see them. The boot flies open and the boy throws his bag inside the boot before he grabs the backpack from the younger girl and does the same. Before he closes the boot, he snatches the cap off and throws it in the boot. When he shuts the boot and turns to wave at a friend who is greeting him from across the street, do I see his face.

“Theo, you are too quiet,” Abigail says, jerking me back to the video call.

My eyes follow the boy who opens the door for the little girl before they both jump in.

“Babe, I found your son.”

Chapter 30 - Wednesday 20:00

Deal of the day: A burning desire + Into the sun

= R520 including courier to door or Paxi.

<https://www.storiesbytakalanim.co.za/e-commerce/deal-10>

Heart of GOLD

#30 (Unedited)

ABIGAIL

“Theo, I need to see my son,” I cry out after I have caught my breath. I didn’t believe him at first when he told me that he has found my son. He had to repeat it to me twice for it to sink in.

“Please... take photos.”

“I can’t,” he says. “I am right behind their car.”

“I need to see my son, please...”

“Abby. I am going to need you to relax...please,”
Theo urges. I breathing heavily. “Babe... please
relax.”

I breathe.

And breath again.

“I’m fine,” I say, lifting the phone to my face.
Theo offers me a weak smile.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” I nod.

“I couldn’t aim the camera at them.”

“Couldn’t? Are the gone yet?”

“Yes. And I can’t follow them without making it
obvious that I am following them.”

He is making sense. He tells me that we need
to come up with a plan. I cannot keep calm
when I know that my son is just a few miles
away from me. I need to see him. Even if I don’t
say a word to him, I just want to lay my eyes on

him.

Turning my gaze at the back seat of my car, Aluwani is watching video games on the phone.

“Can I leave Alu with my sister for a few days? I need to fly there right now,” I say. I know it is a Tuesday and ALuwani has school tomorrow, but I need to see my son. If I knew how long I will be gone, I was going to ask his friend’s mother for a sleepover just for tonight. Theo doesn’t respond right away but when he does, he tells me that it is fine that I drive to Gauteng to drop Alu to my sister’s house before catching a flight out to Kwazulu Natal. While I am on my way there, he will book a flight on my behalf. It is time that we get a nanny. Mostly now when I am going to be at the bakery almost every day.

I start the car and head to the house to fill my sleepover bag with clothes while Aluwani does the same. I don’t forget sending his teacher a message to know about a family emergency we

need to attend to. When we are set, I pack Theo's laptop into its bag and head straight to Gauteng.

Mpho is alive!

Since jumping into this car, I have been thanking God for answering my prayers. Now my next prayer is asking for wisdom to handle this situation. I have no idea how I am going to approach this situation. While we come with a plan, I am going to camp in that school and see my boy.

Ndumiso is cruel.

I ask Aluwani to put on his headsets before I call Theo to tell me exactly what he saw. Earlier, my heart was raising out of my chest, I might have missed some details.

"Are you there yet? I emailed you the ticket number," Theo says when he answers.

"I am still an hour away," I respond.

“Please be careful as you drive there. You got the last flight out... so you still have enough time. I’ll also check in for you.”

“Yes, I am not speeding.”

“Good.”

“Theo, can you tell me what you saw? Was it Ndumiso in the car? How does my boy look?” I thought I’d be patient until I see him tomorrow when Theo takes me camping by the school, but I cannot wait until then.

“Well... I believe it was him.” He sighs deeply.

“Mpho came from the school with a young girl.”

“A young girl?” I ask.

“A first grader maybe? She is not his age.”

Does Ndumiso have another child?

Is he living his life with Kim? All this time when I was searching for my son, he was right there in Kwazulu Natal with his sidechick and my son? I

am sick in the stomach when I realise how fucked up my ex-husband is.

Poppy and her husband are the ones to drive me to the OR Tambo International Airport. The minute I jump into the plane, I am super exhausted from the driving. Luckily the airport is as dead as a ghost city, so I make it to my flight on time. It is a random Tuesday evening after all. Our flight is not full so I am only sharing a row with just two ladies. I fasten the seatbelt and set my alarm to an hour and thereafter go in for a nap.

I shouldn't have bothered. I cannot get myself to rest. I want to see my son. Earlier when I was driving to drop off Aluwani, I was so tempted to dial Ndumiso's number to yell at him for putting me through hell. But I know better. If I am smart about my moves, I might not even get close to my son. I might complicate everything for everyone. I once complicated Mpho's life, I am

not willing to do it again.

Theo is waiting for me at the pick up point. When he notices me, he gives me a weak smile and opens his arms wide for me. I throw myself in his arms and allow myself into his embrace. He caress my back and wait until I am the one to break the hug.

“Are you alright?” Theo asks while grabbing my overnight bag and the backpack.

“Yeah.”

He takes my hand and leads the way to his car. It has been one hell of a day.

Theo drives us to the hotel. He tells me that it is not far from where Ndumiso stays with his family.

I am so angry at Ndumiso, I have no idea what I am going to say to him when I see him. He

didn't keep his promise and he betrayed me.

"I'll run you a bath," Theo says after placing my bag on the bed. I settle on the edge of the bed and take a deepest breath. The hotel room is so beautiful, with modern finishes.

"We should go on holiday sometime," I say when Theo walks back to the bedroom. We haven't been on holiday and I feel like we need one. We need a break.

"I'd love that."

I get on my feet and start taking off my clothes one by one while Theo pulls my lounge wear from the bag.

"Are you joining me?" I ask. Theo lifts his eyes to me. "Please join me." I need him to keep me in his arms. I feel safe in them.

Theo agrees. While he takes his clothes off, I continue to the bathroom and settle inside the bathtub. A minute later, Theo jumps in and

settles behind me, letting me sit between his legs. He slightly moves me to rest my back on his chest so that we could relax.

“What is the plan?” I ask. All I want to do is to see my son. I don’t know how but I want to see him.

“We will go park by the school tomorrow morning and watch them. But I don’t want you to confront the boy or him yet. It might blow on our faces.” I sigh deeply. “I think we should watch them tomorrow and maybe try to confront Mpho on Thursday.”

I nod at him. There is no other way.

Theo’s right hand lands on my breast before he starts caressing it. I inhale sharply, closing my head and resting the back of my head on his shoulder. I slightly tremble when the hand moves slowly from my breast, down to my core. I am exhausted but my body needs this. Theo’s

fingers starts playing on the lips on my vagina. I moan softly, closing my eyes and allowing my body to relax. Theo's lips are on my earlobe. My moans are louder when his hand starts circling my clit. When his left hand goes for my left boob, I know that I am going to see starts in a shortwhile. He does what he does best, strumming my clit and making me relax some more. It doesn't take long until I start shaking, welcoming an orgasm.

"Do you feel better?" he whispers before dropping a few kisses on my shoulder. I nod, before resting my back on his chest.

I didn't sleep much and now at 05h30, I am already up and staring at the screen. The red dot is blinking on the map and the estimated

time of arrival to it is just eight minutes. I am seated on the edge of the bed while I wait for Theo to finish getting ready. I don't know what time their school starts, but I believe at seven o'clock I should be at the school already.

"I would like some coffee," Theo announces as he walks into the bedroom. He picks his sneakers and takes a couch which is at the corner of the room.

"I saw a McD just around the corner," I respond, not lifting my eyes from the laptop.

"Put the laptop away and let us drive there," Theo says. When our eyes meet, he gives me a weak smile. I think I am already panicky. He slides his feet into the sneakers and tie them. Thereafter he walks up to me and helps me up. He pulls me into a hug and tells me that everything will be okay. Each time he tells me this, I believe him. There is something so calming about his words. He is one to keep his

promises.

I carefully place the laptop into each bag and follow Theo to the car. The minute we jump into the car, I pull the laptop and place it into my lap as Ndumiso drives us to McD. He gets us breakfast before we park at the parking lot.

“Let me see this thing,” Theo says. I hand the laptop to him and he starts typing away. Hey, there is progress now that his memory is coming back to him and I swear, as his brows furrows while he scrolls through something on the laptop, do I see a hint of the old Theo. He looks like that determined private investigator I once worked with.

“What are you looking for?” I ask, taking a sip from my coffee mug.

“I want to search for this address into the Deeds search.”

Haa! What didn't I think of that? See when I say I

saw a hint of the old Theo? The old Theo would know what to do to solve cases.

“Sindi Mahlangu,” Theo says.

“What about her?”

“The house on their address is registered under Sindi.”

“I thought the woman he was with is Kim,” I say.

“When was it registered?”

I wait while Theo searches for the information, thereafter he says, “Two years ago.”

I try to crack my head, searching for a Sindi Mahlangu. I don’t know any. Are they renting the place out, maybe?

Checking the time, it is 06h30. When Theo follows my gaze, he hands back the laptop and starts the car. It is better that we go wait by the school.

My heart is pacing as we wait by the side of the

road. My eyes are glued at the school gate where I am hoping to see any boy who looks like my son. It is going to be so difficult, since there are so many cars dropping the kids at the gate. The dot hasn't moved and it already past seven.

Is Ndumiso not dropping him? I am so disappointed when the time is seven thirty and I haven't seen my son. Did Ndumiso drop him before we got here? Maybe he left his phone at home and came drop our son.

I feel like crying when it is 07h40 and there is still no sign of my son. The cars at the drop off centre are just a few—making it obvious that the rest of the kids are just late.

“What should we do?” Ndumiso asks.

“We wait for after school,” I say. I am not interested on following Ndumiso around. I want to see my son.

At eight thirty, the dot on the laptop starts moving. I am conflicted between following it and waiting here until the school comes out. But following Ndumiso around might be a risk.

There is no point in sitting outside here but we stay by the school anyway. If I could, I would cross the road and force myself into the principal's office but I might be risking everything.

At one thirty when we hear the bell ring, I pull a cap from the backseat and put it on before jumping out of the car and crossing the road so that I could wait close to the gate. Even if Theo wanted, he wasn't going to stop me. I wait by the gate with a few of the nannies who are waiting to pick some children.

When school kids flood the gate, I stay rooted, scanning the area for my baby.

No sign of him.

No sign of any kid that looks like my son.

I feel like I am going crazy as I scan the whole area fully of kids in blue uniform. I feel like Theo sold me a dream.

By 14h15, I have a headache and I am not willing to give up. There is still hope since Theo saw him after his sports practise.

“Don’t let him see you,” Theo advise over the phone. I refuse to jump back to the car until I see my son.

After 15h10, I am standing by the pavement when I hear a voice that sounds like my son’s. I quickly dart my eyes towards the direction of the voice. He is walking towards the gate, hand-in-hand with a young girl. Beside him is three other boys dressed in sports uniform. My phone

vibrates. Without shifting my eyes towards him, I answer the phone.

“Yes?”

“Ndumiso is on the way to the school. Don’t let them see you. We need a plan first,” Theo says. Air leaves my lungs when Mpho walks past me. His giggle is loud when he jokes with his friend. When they reach the pick up spot, he waves to his friends.

My son.

He is so tall.

And so handsome.

“Do not let him see you today, Abigail. We need a plan,” Theo calls out on the phone.

I want to touch my son.

I want to hug him. And kiss him. And tell him that I need him. He is so close.

“Cross the road now, Ndumiso is close,” Theo

says on the phone.

"I want some chips," the little girl says.

"Mommy will make some for us," Mpho responds. I missed his voice so much. Tears gush down my eyes as I listen to their conversation.

"Come now, Abigail," Theo yells on the phone.

When I notice the Range Rover coming to view, I cross the road and jump into the car. My hands are trembling when I slide down my seat.

"He was so close to me," I mumble.

"I know. I know," Theo responds.

<https://www.storiesbytakalanim.co.za/e-commerce/after-dawn-series-book-2-3>

Heart of GOLD

#31 (Unedited)

THEO

When she cries and her body starts shaking, my heart breaks.

“I am sorry... I shouted at you,” I mumble, trying to rub her back. She shakes her head and lifts her glassy eyes to me.

“I want my son, Theo,” she mumbles.

“I know...” My shoulders sag. I know how bad she wants this but there is nothing we can do right now. My heart almost stops when Ndumiso steps out of the car.

Shit!

Did he see Abigail crossing the road?

I sit still and watch but only relax when he picks

up the little girl while Mpho throws the bags into the boot. Thereafter they all cross the road towards the school. I take it there is something they need from there and this is our chance to drive off.

Without discussing with Abigail, I start the car.

“Can you wait...”

“No Abby... we need to go.”

“No!” she fights back. I kill the engine. I don’t think it is a good idea for Ndumiso to still find us parked here. He might start noticing this car the next thing we follow him.

I turn to face Abigail.

“Babe... we need to leave before Ndumiso starts suspecting us. I followed him here yesterday. And if he took notice of this car, he might remember it the next time we follow him.

“I just want to see my son.”

“But you can’t see him right now.”

Abby and I have never argued, have we? This is so heavy on me right now. I start the car, without thinking twice and brace myself for a fight. As expected, she cries harder as I drive further away from the school. It is hard, I know, but we have to be smart about everything.

At a hotel, I allow her to sleep the whole afternoon until I am forced to wake her for supper. I sit on the edge of the bed and shake her lightly. She opens her eyes and stares at me for a little while before she closes them again. She is still angry at me for driving away from the school.

I try waking her again. “Babe, you need to wake up and have supper.”

“I am not hungry,” she mumbles.

“Come on Abigail, you skipped lunch as well.”

“I said I am not hungry.”

Taking a deep sigh, I stay rooted on the edge of the bed. "If I didn't move, he was going to be suspicious of the car. We were parked too close to where he was." Only now does she sit up. She drops her feet to the floor and drags them to the bathroom. I wait for her to return. When she walks back from the bathroom, she finds me waiting for her by the bathroom door.

Without asking, I pull her into my arms. I feel her body relax in mine. She knows for a fact that I didn't mean to hurt her in any way. I didn't mean to yell at her or drive away from her son.

"Everything will be alright," I mumble to her ear.

"How?"

"We will find a way."

When I let go of her, I take her hand and lead her to the corner, where I have set two boxes of food. One has ribs and chips, and the other is fish and a salad. She picks the ribs box while I

pull one chair towards the table.

“Thank you,” she says while settling on the chair. I move closer to the wall and lean against it.

“I haven’t gotten Ndumiso’s new names, so I can’t dig anything new about him,” I inform her. While she was sleeping, I did some digging and there is nothing. The man knows how to disappear into thin air. His details indicate that he is out of the country but he is right here under our nose. I watch as Abigail devours the ribs. She was just been stubborn—she needed the food.

“What did you get about the woman?”

“Sindi Mahlangu?” I ask. “Never married, she is thirty-four years old.”

“That’s all?” she asks as if disappointed. I know I am not the Theo she needs right now. When she realizes how offending her question might be, she continues, “I mean... does she own any

businesses? Anything to make her afford a house in Dolphin Coast?”

“Nothing attached to her apart from her job at Engen. She is an Accountant.”

“Can accountants afford such?” she asks. I shrug. I cannot be sure. “Give me her bank account.. maybe I can scrutinize it and get something that give us a lead.”

“Already did. She has two and none of them has ridiculous amounts of money. Her spending is normal and there is nothing alarming about it.”

“She is with Ndumiso... there must be something alarming about her,” she says. I agree. “I need to see Mpho. How can I do that happen?”

I sigh deeply because there is no easy way to do this. She could easy wait for him after school like she did today and approach her. But if Mpho retaliates, we might have a problem.

Ndumiso is always on time, so there is no way Abby can have a moment with Mpho by the school gate.

“You can only approach Mpho when you are ready to face Ndumiso. Are you ready to face him?” I ask. She keeps her eyes on mine while contemplating. “You should know the answer to that before Mpho sees you.”

“What if I don’t care about everything else? I just want to see my baby and it doesn’t matter what comes after.”

“Are you ready to have him taken away from you?” I ask.

“What do you suggest then?”

I shrug.

I feel shitty for not being smart enough to come up with a valid answer. When I don’t give her an answer, she clears her throat and says, “I did it once. I can go to the school and beg for the

teacher to let me see him.”

“And who are you to him?” I ask. “I mean when they ask how you are related. What are you going to tell them?”

“I am his mother.”

“You have nothing to prove that. Besides, he might be using different names and birth certificate. And you saw how that school is... you probably have to make an appointment before you show up at the school.”

She sighs deeply. There is no way around it.

“I can make an appointment to view the school... and after my appointment, I can wait take a turn to the sports grounds to watch my son. I could have a chat with him then.”

I nod, slowly.

This could work.

ABIGAIL

I couldn't sleep the whole night, thinking about the possibility of seeing my son. First thing at 07h30, I make a phone call to the school and request to view the school before I put my son in. I know, just like most schools, they wouldn't allow me to do that during school hours, so I inform the administrator that I will be coming after the school. When they tell me about the sports, I inform them that I would also like to have a look.

"I am sorry to bother you. I am very fussy. My husband is a famous politician, so we would like to be sure of the kinds of the school we put our schools in. We cannot wait for the open day."

"No problem, ma'am... come the school at

13h30.”

I give Theo thumbs up when I get out of the phone. Now, I need to dress up and look the part. I didn't think I will be needing to do this so I didn't bring anything flashy to match what I promised the woman on the phone.

Theo drives me to Ballito Junction after I told him that they have a Poetry store there. I could get a perfect outfit that would make me look decent. Also, my son will recognize his mother when he lies his eyes on me.

At 13h30, when school kids are jumping into the parents cars, I head to the administration centre, praying that Mpho has sports like the two past days. I am crossing my fingers as I sit and wait for someone to help me.

“What grade is your son?” a lady, who introduced herself as, Mmabatho asks.

“Four,” I respond with a smile. There is no room

to panic. She explains every little detail a parent would be interested to hear about the school. Unfortunately, I am not interested. All I want to do is to get to the sports grounds.

“You know... my husband is obsessed with sports and if there is one place he would like to put money into... is sports. Can you please take me through the sports ground? According to my husband, if the sports grounds are perfect and appealing, then we shouldn't be worried about the rest.”

Mmabatho laughs.

“We can start there and I will then take you towards the other school grounds.”

“Perfect,” I respond jumping up from my chair. My heart is on my throat when she leads the way out. I try not to panic. I try to breathe and smile and ask questions.

I don't beg her to start at the soccer grounds so

that I could see my son. I try to keep it cool. I walk beside me while she explains about the sports programme. By the time we reach the soccer grounds, I am not even listening. My eyes are scanning the ground for Mpho. I almost miss a step when my eyes find him running after a ball. My eyes follow him when he dribbles the other boy and runs with the ball. He does it with so much ease and he is so perfect to watch.

“He is one of our best primary school players,” she says.

“Huh?” I ask, picking my legs and increasing the pace so that I am beside her.

“The boy with the ball. He is one of our best boys.”

“He is good.” I am pleased to hear this. This can only mean that my son is doing good. I feel a little better. When we pass and cross the school

to the tennis coat, I am no longer interested in this. All I want to do is to watch my son.

“Until what time is practice?” I ask.

“Three o’clock.” When she says this, I try my best not check the time on my wrist watch. I walk beside her, listening to her sell me a dream. Only when she leads me to the classrooms do I pull my phone from my handbag and check the time.

14h15.

We still have forty five minutes.

I ask her questions after questions just to kill time. When I don’t finish asking my stupid questions, she is starting to get bored. At 15h45, she tells me that she needs to go.

“No worries. Do you have a waiting area where I can wait for my driver?” I ask after receiving an information file from her. She tells me I can wait by the reception, so I tell her that I don’t mind

waiting outside. She is not bothered by my request, so I make way outside. My heart hasn't stopped beating out of my chest. When I see the children making their way from the sports area, I iron my clothes with my palms and wait to face my son.

Is he going to be happy to see me?

Is he going to allow me to hug him? Oh, God, I pray he allows me to hug him.

When I notice Mpho walking towards my direction, I feel like air is leaving my lungs. He has the little girl's hand in his.

My sweet boy.

He is just as caring as he has always been.

"Mpho?" I mumble when he walks past me. I turn to face him just when he also turns to do the same. When our eyes meet, he gasps and moves the little girl behind him. This breaks my heart. Is he trying to protect her from me? A

tear doesn't stop from falling. What did Ndumiso tell my son?

"Mpho...baby..." I whisper, taking a step toward him. He takes a few backwards and the look on his face kills me. He is afraid of me. "Mpho..."

"My name is not... my name is not Mpho..." he stutters.

"What is your name?" I ask, taking another step.

"Don't come near me."

"Please don't be scared, baby. I won't do anything to you. It is mommy... it is me..." I beg for my dear life. There is no way he can be scared of me. "Please baby... please."

"We need to go," he says and turns away, dragging the girl with him.

"Mpho...please... please..." I say as quietly as possible. Only when I say, "I miss you," does he stop. "I miss you so much my baby and I know

you miss me too.”

“We need to go,” he says without turning to face me. I am praying so hard that the security officers or anyone is not watching this interaction.

“Do you have a phone?” I ask.

“No.” He still hasn’t turned to face me.

I quickly fish in my bag and pull a pen from my handbag. I quickly walk towards him and stop in front of him before I gently take his hand. He flinches when I start writing my number on his tiny hand. “Please, baby... I want you to call me, okay? Please my baby.”

He swallows hard and, says, “We need to go.”

I step aside and watch him walk away from me. Pulling my phone, Theo has texted me telling me that Ndumiso is standing by the gate. I watch as my son walks away from me. Before he turns towards the gate, he turns to look at

me. I give him a little wave.

What did Ndumiso tell my son for him to be that scared of me? I expected him to be angry at me instead.

‘Ndumiso is coming towards the school,’ –
Theo.

I quickly turn and look for somewhere to hide.
As I walk into the girls’ toilet, I make a little prayer that Mpho doesn’t say anything to his father.

I pray.

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Heart of GOLD

#32

ABIGAIL

By the time I lock myself into the toilet cubicle, I cannot breathe. I quickly shut the toilet and sit on top of the closed seat. I try to breathe. I try again. I try harder until I feel my heart starting to beat normally. When my phone rings I almost jump. It is Theo.

“Hello,” I whisper.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Yes. I am in hiding.”

“Look, I am driving out of here. I don’t want him to notice the car. I’ll come back when it is safe to do so.”

“Okay,” I breathe out, clutching my phone.

“Stay wherever you are until I tell you that he is gone,” he says.

“Please don’t hang up. Please,” I beg. Hearing

his voice is making me feel better.

“Okay... I won’t hang up,” he says, soothing me. I hear the engine starts. “Did you get to see him?”

“Yes,” I breathe out. “He is so grown and more beautiful.” I close my eyes, trying to calm myself and trying to breathe. I inhale slowly and thereafter exhale after a little while. “I watched him play soccer too.” I smile. “The lady I was with said he is one of the best players.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“Yeah.” I pause for a while and thereafter say, “I think I messed up.”

“What did you do?” His question comes in a heartbeat.

“I approached Mpho and he wasn’t pleased to see me. I am scared he or the little girl he was with might tell Ndumiso.” The little girl. It was like she didn’t exist to me, I didn’t get a chance to check her out. It takes me a little while to

notice that Theo hasn't commented. "I am sorry Theo... I'm sorry I wasn't patient enough to wait. I feel like I messed up."

"It's okay."

"No, it is not," I say. And I am going to blame myself when he takes my son again and packs away.

A bang on the door freaks me out. I clutch the phone and stay quiet. My heart is drumming. The bang goes away.

"Is there someone in there?" a lady's voice comes from behind the door.

"Yes," I whisper.

"I need to lock up... finish up," she says.

Thereafter, I hear her sweep the floor. She is probably the cleaner. Only now do I breathe.

I take the phone back to my ear and tell ask Theo if Ndumiso hasn't shifted according to the

tracker. The last thing I want is to walk out of here only to meet him outside.

“No. He hasn’t shifted.” I shouldn’t have kept the boy. I take it Ndumiso was worried about why he was taking long to head to the gate. When Theo tells me that Ndumiso is moving, I feel like crying. As Theo tells me that he is driving back to the gate, I jump to my feet and thereafter flash the toilet. Walking out of the toilet cubicle, the cleaner turns to me.

“Oh... I thought it was one of the leaners,” she says, probably feeling guilty at how unfriendly she sounded just a while ago. I don’t answer but just hurry out to the gate. As promised, Theo is waiting outside.

It is 20h30 and I am still waiting for Mpho to call

my phone. He hasn't. And now that is almost his bedtime – well, I believe it is still the same – I am losing hope. The whole day, I waited and waited. The whole afternoon I listened when Theo was on a call with Aluwani the whole afternoon. He was helping him with homework. My sister Poppy is helping with the online classes but today Theo asked if he could let her help him via video call. I felt bad that I am the reason for all of this. Instead of Mpho calling me, the only calls I received were coming from Daisy telling me of the bulk orders that people are making from the store. I am excited about the success of the shop but right now, I am on a mission.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” Theo asks from a couch which is at the corner of the room.

“No.”

He gets on his feet and walks to the coffee station to make himself some. I watch as he

pours water into a mug.

Maybe I should be happy that he hasn't called YET. It could be that he hasn't gotten a chance to. And I should be happy that Ndumiso hasn't called. It only means that he or the little girl didn't say anything.

I cannot live like this. I cannot allow Ndumiso to put me through this. I cannot live in fear for the rest of my life.

Fuck it!

I get on my feet and quietly pace around the room. I know this idea might be crazy but I am hitting the wall here.

"What's wrong?" Theo asks.

"I am taking my son with me," I announce.

Theo blows into a mug, takes a sip from the mug, and thereafter asks, "What do you mean?"

"I need to take him with me. That is the only

way. Ndumiso cannot put me through this for the rest of my life. I am taking my son with me and starting over somewhere else just like what Ndumiso did.”

Theo watches me. Right now, it is the only thing that makes sense to me.

“What about the boy’s education? How are you going to get him a school without any of the documentation?”

Shit!

There is that.

“Fine. I’ll take him for a week or so. I just need some time with my son.”

“Abigail...”

“It has been three years Theo,” I spit. “I need time with my son. If I cannot openly do it...then I’ll take him for just a little while and I’ll take him to his father once I am sure that he is on my

side.”

Theo shrugs. “If I had a better plan, I was going to stop you... but knowing you... you have made up your mind.”

“Tomorrow morning you can go back to Bloemfontein, I’ll follow after a little while.”

Theo stares at me as if I have given him a blow on his stomach. “I cannot put you in more mess.” He narrows his eyebrows at me.

“Is that what you want?”

“I want you to go back to Aluwani. I’ll do this.”

“How?”

“I’ll go book a car at Avis... book a hotel somewhere...”

“I’ll help you.”

“No, Theo.”

“You are kidnapping your son at the school, Abby. You won’t even reach the getaway car

before the securities are on you.” I sigh deeply, sitting back on the bed. I cover my face with my hands. “This is what we are going to do.” I lift my head to face Theo. “You are going to park your car a few streets away from the school. Jump in my car and take the wheels to the school. I’ll grab him and you’ll drive to your car. After that, we will take different directions. I’ll drive back to Bloem while you head to your direction.” I nod slowly, playing the whole plan in my head.

“Okay...”

“I hope it works or else we are in trouble.”

“I understand.”

“Make the bookings.”

I'm seated on the bed, Theo softly snoring beside me. I didn't sleep much. I kept tossing and turning. The call didn't come through, but I stayed up making bookings. I am picking up the car at the airport and I booked a chalet in a resort in Amanzimtoti. It is just an hour away from where he is. I picked a perfect resort with lots of activities that I can do with my son. Only if Mpho can give me a chance for us to reconnect. I'll give him my side of the story and get to hear what he knows. I'll reconnect with my son and by the time I return him to his father, he will have nothing to be scared about. I just pray that I don't traumatize my son with how I am planning to take him. If there was any other better way, I'd definitely go for it. If only I could give Ndumiso a call and ask that I have my son for a week or so.

If only!

I urge Theo to sleep while I get an Uber to the

airport to pick up a car. I was able to get a Toyota Yaris. I booked it for a week.

Driving back to where Theo is, I am praying that this plan works.

The minute I walk into the hotel room, Theo pulls me in his arms. We stay glued to each other for so long. If things go wrong, I might see him after a long while. If my ex-husband didn't betray me this much, I would be certain that he won't do anything to me. I have no idea what he is capable of.

Theo drops his lips to mine. I hungrily receive them and kiss him back. This might be our last. This might be a goodbye. Tears don't fail to gush down my cheeks. A kiss turns into passionate lovemaking. After we both gave each other countless orgasms, we stay in each other's arms, in bed.

Only at 13h00, do I drive to the filling station

which is four streets away from the school. I lock the car and jump into the driver's seat of Theo's car. Before leaving the hotel, Theo pulled both his license plates from the car. Whoever will witness the kidnapping won't have the registration number to submit.

This is it.

We are doing this.

And there is no turning back from this.

As I drive us to the school, Theo has his hand on mine. We are heading there in case there is no soccer practice today. There is no way he can do sports from Monday to Thursday, is there?

"You have to drive as fast as you can," Theo says. I nod at him. "You don't look behind... do you hear me? You are going to drive straight until we reach your car."

"Got it."

My hands are sweating on the steering wheel.

When we reach the school, I park closer to the picking-up zone. On the passenger seat sits the laptop tracking Ndumiso's movements. When the school bell rings at 13h30, Theo calls my phone and pops his EarPods into his ears. My heart is beating out of my chest.

I almost jump when I see the dot on the screen move.

"Ndumiso is moving," I inform Theo.

"Means he is out now," Theo says.

"Please find him," I beg. If we don't succeed, we are going to wait for another 24 hours. I am not too strong to wait until then. I dart my eyes between the laptop screen and Theo. When I notice Mpho in the crowd of kids, my heart almost stops. "Do you see him? He is walking with the girl and two other boys."

"I see him."

“Ndumiso is eight minutes away,” I inform Theo.
“Please be fast.”

My whole body sweats as I tighten the grip on the steering wheel. Unfortunately, there is no other way to take him than to grab him in front of people. Mpho is old, he cannot easily be lured into a stranger’s car. My heart leaps when Theo grabs him by hand and grabbing away from the other pupils. When he wants to start fighting, Theo picks him up fast and turns towards the car. When everyone around them starts screaming, Theo is throwing my son into the car and also jumping in. Thank goodness there was no parent nearby who could fight Theo.

I put my foot on the accelerator before Theo could even close his door.

“Mpho... it is mommy... please don’t be scared,” I call out while speeding off.

“Go, Abby...” Theo calls out.

I hate that Mpho is crying and fighting Theo. He is not listening when both Theo and I beg him to understand that we are not going to hurt him.

“Please Mpho!” I cry out, taking a turn.

Ndumiso’s dot has stopped. I have never driven like a manic before. My nerves make me skip two robots. My feet and hands are trembling when I park beside the car I hired.

Mpho hasn’t stopped when I jump out of the car. I run to my car, open the back passenger seat, and jump to the driver’s seat. Only when I buckle up and start the car, does Theo jump from the back. He carries Mpho from the backseat of his car and throws him into mine. When he shuts the door, I lock them. I already did child lock so there is no way Mpho can open the doors from inside. I don’t waste time before I speed away.

“Mpho... please stop crying... I am not going to hurt you,” I beg.

“Take me back to my dad,” he cries out.

“We are going on holiday.”

“I don’t want to go on holiday.”

From the passenger seat, I reach for a shopping bag. I pull one packet of Simba ghost pops, hoping he still love these chips. I ask if he wants some. From rear view mirror, I see him shake his head. I put them back on the seat and try to focus on the road ahead of us.

My phone rings. My heart jumps before I notice that it is Theo calling me.

“Hello,” I respond, praying that he is not in trouble.

“Are you alright?” he asks when I answer.

I give him a nervous chuckle, “I think so. Are you alright?”

“Yeah. I am going back to the hotel. I’ll put back the plates and thereafter drive out of here.”

“Where is he? Are you still tracking him?”

“He is not moving. Still at the school.” He is probably demanding answers from the security officers by the school gate. I think Theo and I were too quick for any armed response to catch us before we went our separate ways.

I have some time to get away. And by the time Ndumiso figures out that I am responsible and have managed to trace the car, I’ll be bonding with my son already.

“Theo!”

“Yes, babe?”

“Thank you,” I say. “For everything.”

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Heart of GOLD

#33

NDUMISO (unedited)

Children are gathered outside the school gate, sparking my curiosity when I am stuck in traffic at the pick-up zone. Is it a fight going on at the gate or what?

I hate picking the kids on Thursdays and Fridays when they are not coming out of their sports practice. It is this kind of traffic that I hate so much.

Why is Mpho taking long? Doesn't he see the car? He knows very well that I hate waiting. Yesterday he did the same and I had to walk into the school premises to search for him. When I pick him up, he should be on time just like I am always on time.

When two cars branded with the armed response logo stop by the gate, my attention is triggered. Three armed man hurry to where the security officer is standing. While I watch the commotion, and pissed at why Mpho is taking forever, I notice Nana crying hysterically in the stranger arms.

What the hell?

I put the hazards on, and jump out of the car without thinking twice. I hurry to where she is.

"Where did the car go?" one armed guy in all black uniform asks the two boys who are in the middle of the circle. One of the boys is

Zuma–Mpho’s friend and classmate.

“It went that way,” the other boy says, his trembling hands pointing towards the west.

When Nana notices me, she widens her arms to me, her face wet with tears. My child has never cried like this. And where is Mpho in all of this?

“What the hell happened?” I ask the woman who is handing Nana to me. I embrace her shaking little body, rubbing her back so that she could calm down.

“His brother was just kidnapped right here in front of her,” the woman says. I shake my head, not allowing myself to accept the news.

“Mr Gumede...they took Chris...” Zuma tries to explain. “We were just walking coming out of the school gate and then a man grabbed him.”

“What man?” I ask.

“He was... tall.

What the fuck? I am tall.

“What did he look like? What was he wearing?” I ask. This time the security officer is informing the principal. Questions are coming from all the corners, with parents starting to crowd the area.

“What the hell happened here? Are you not supposed to be looking after our children? We pay too much money for things like this to happen,” I say, my questions directed both to the principal and his security official.

“Yes Mr Ndawonde...” the principal says, trying to search for better words to address me. Of course, she knows me. I have been in her office for so many times, I have lost count. Mostly because of Mpho’s behaviour when we brought him to this school two years ago. He was one rebellious boy and the principal never got exhausted from summoning me to her office. It was just a matter of time before my son was kicked out of the school due to his bad

behaviour. Teachers and the sports coaches never understood why he was the way that he was. I was the only one who knew what was wrong with him. He was hurting. I forced him to lie a countless time to get us out of trouble. He had missed his mother. He was very rebellious. But now, things are a little better. He is cooperative. But it took us a lot to be at this point. And it was only when he realized that his mother is out of the picture. This past year, things are a bliss. He is an average student but a superb soccer star—one of the best player the school has. I wish for him to be that bright student that he was once.

“The police are informed and they are on their way here,” the principal, Mrs Kotze, jerks me off from my thoughts.

“That is not what I asked,” I spit back. Nana hasn’t stopped crying, and this only tells me that whatever happened here was traumatic.

“Tell me you have sent men out there to look for my son.”

“Our security team is after the car. We called more men for assistance.”

Who the hell has my son?

Was this person here yesterday? Because Mpho was delayed for some reason... and he slightly looked spooked. I thought it was because he was scared that I was going to shout at him. But now, I think otherwise.

Shit!

I am not a very honest man, anyone could have him to get my attention. Whoever it is, has my attention. I call Sindi to leave the pots and come pick Nana up before I get to the bottom of this.

While we wait for the police, I demand answers from the principal. How can a child disappear just outside the school? It is possible but that can only mean, the intruders could tell how

lame the security is. This should be a lesson to the school governing body. When Sindi arrives, I tell her to head back home, lock the doors and only open for Craig. Craig and his men provide security services for me and my family. I shouldn't have let them go.

No one has valid pointers to the kidnapers, apart for the fact that it was two men. One snatched my son, and the other one drove away. They must be very professional for them to kidnap a child in the middle of the day with so many witnesses. Apparently, both of them were wearing caps, so there is no way to identify him. Two hours later, the police promise to let me know if there is something positive to report to me after doing the search in the area. When they tell me to go home, I feel like they are kicking me in my gut. How do I leave here without my fucking kid?

"I am not leaving until you bring my son," I tell

Mrs Kotze while I dial my phone to get through to a man I suspect has my son. Before Mrs Kotze could respond, I put my phone to the ear and walk further away from a number of police and security guards who are still at the school.

“Hello!” Jay responds, sounding too relaxed for a man who probably has my child in his basement.

“Did you take him?” I loudly whisper, turning to see if anyone is watching me or listening to me.

“What are you talking about?” he asks.

“My son. Did you take him?” I hiss, making sure that no one hears me.

“I don’t take children.”

“If I find out that you took my son, I’ll kill you with both hands.”

“Come and try me.” There is silence on the other end of the line. After a little while, he says, “You

promised to pay me back before the end of the year. I am still counting the months. If you don't pay me back then... we can talk about taking one of your three children."

My blood boil.

Not my children.

I hang up without saying a thing. Jay and I don't see eye to eye but he was the only person who could help me start a new life as a Ndawonde. He did that at a price and I am a man of my word—I'll pay him every million he wants me to pay by the end of our agreement period. After the chaos that Abigail and her shitty boyfriend caused, I sold everything and invested every piece of money I had in a few properties before I relocated to Ghana for a few months before I return to the country with a different identity. I did not want any of my business partners to trace me here. Everyone disappeared to all parts of the world. I disappeared for a few

months before deciding to return here. I just don't want anyone to calculate my moves. And at the same time I can just give up on my business. I have someone running it for me.

Who on earth knows about my son's school? When I changed my identity, I changed his too. He is no longer Mpho Gumede but Chris Ndawonde.

"Mr Ndawonde, there is nothing we can help you with right now. We don't have a lead yet and there is nothing we can solve by standing here," one police officer says.

"You mean there is nothing you can ever solve," I spit, making my way to my car. I'll find my own child.

"We are trying to do our job... with the little resources that we have," he says and I nod. He walks a few steps away and thereafter walks back to me while opening his notebook. "I

forgot to ask if there is anyone in particular we should look into?”

“My child is kidnapped and that is the only question you want to ask me?”

“Is there anyone in particular?” he asks again. I smile slightly. He is very brave, I see.

“No, there is no one,” I respond.

“I saw you making a call over there. A call you didn’t want anyone to hear,” he says.

“I was making a call to my wife who is already grieving her son because we cannot put our faith in you.”

He looks deep into my eye. I don’t blink. I have face worst and he doesn’t move me at all.

“Tell your wife, we will find him. Just keep your phones on. If this is a kidnapping, they will try to contact you for ransom.”

So, if it is not kidnapping, what is it?

It is just after five thirty when I drive home. I nod at one of Craig's boys who is keeping an eye on my house. I park the car inside the garage and make my way inside. I check my phone for any phone calls from anyone ready to make demands. I am prepared to pay any money to get my son back. And whoever took him better bring him back before I find him myself. Sindi is not in the living area where I normally find her watching one of her shows. The cook tells me that she is upstairs in Nana's room. I head there straight to check up on my daughter. Hearing Sindi voice from inside Nana's room, I stop on my tracks so that I could listen. Could it be her selling my children away? She wouldn't dare, would she? Sindi has been my secret lover for over seven years now and a piece of me trust her with my life. If I didn't, I wouldn't be here. I listen in. Only when I hear her mention something about cancelling our attendance, do I relax. She was supposed to be taking the kids

on some adventure with her friends this coming Saturday. I open the door, and walk in before leaning on the door frame. I watch as she finishes up her phone call while on her feet, standing by the window. Our daughter is sleeping soundly on her bed. After hanging up, she places the phone on the couch which is set near the bookshelf filled with Nana's books.

She opens her arms widely to embrace me.

"How are you feeling?" she asks, closing her arms around me. She smells like flowers. It is the scent of the perfume I have been gifting her since I moved in here two years ago. Luckily, she fell in love with it, not knowing that whenever I hug, it reminds me of Abby.

Abby!

She wouldn't dare cross me and take my son without my approval, would she? And how would she know how to get to us?

By now she knows not to fuck with me.

“Can I massage you after a warm bath? You are stiff.” Sindi tightens her arms around me. I don’t tell her that my thoughts have drifted to my sweet wife.

Why did she have to mess up every by working with that bloody private investigator?

“Babe?” Sindi whispers. “Everything will be alright.”

“I know.”

“Did the police find any lead?”

“Nah!” I respond walking further into room to Nana’s bed. I drop a few kisses on her forehead before I lead Sindi out of the room. When I am sitting on the bed, I ask how she is. Did she say anything? Did this man say anything? Who are these men?

“She just the man took her brother away,” Sindi

responds. Knowing how my children are so close, that man had to pull him away from her. They always have their little hands glued wherever they are.

“I’ll find her,” I say, more to myself than her. “I’ll make sure.”

“I know,” she responds.

“Please give me a minute. I need to make a phone call.” One look at me with her dreamy eyes and thereafter she walks out of the room.

Once the door clicks, I dial Kim’s number. Walking towards the door that leads to the balcony, I listen as the phone rings. I hate it when she doesn’t answer the phone.

“Hello,” she responds when I was about to start swearing.

“Where is my baby?”

“Hello to you too,” she says. I am not in that

kind of a mood. But I am relieved that she wouldn't be this playful if he was taken.

Unless she doesn't know it yet.

"Where is my baby?"

"In a bathtub."

"Keep an eye on him," I order before hanging up.

Before making this next call, I grab a seat and light a cigarette. I wish I have something strong to drink.

The phone rings once before a hoarse voice answers.

"Gumede?"

"I need a favour."

"Yes?"

"My son is kidnapped from his school. I want him back." The phone goes silent. I clear my throat and continue, "I want you to bring your

man to sniff around this area.”

“Anyone specific we are looking for?”

“No one is supposed to be with my child.”

“Do you have a link at the police station?”

“None. Bypass them because I want the head of whoever is fucking with me.”

“Are we bringing them in for questioning?”

“No questions asked. Grab my son and shoot the dog,” I order.

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Heart of GOLD

#34

THEO

“Need a hand?” an old white man asks when he finds me struggling with the car registration plate. I look guilty as hell, with my black clothes and the cap covering my face.

“No, thank you. I’ve got this,” I respond, making sure not to look at him. Should anyone follow me here, I don’t want them to have a witness. I don’t want anyone to recognize me. When I drive out of this place in the next minute, I don’t want any traces back to me.

“You do know that you are not allowed to mess

with the registration plates, right?" he asks. I want to tell him to mind his freaking business but I bite my tongue not to. I still don't turn to face him but I can feel him standing behind me.

"I am aware. Hence, I am fixing it." I finally manage to paste the plate back in place and get on my feet, making my way to the front seat while the old man stays rooted where he was. We are going to have a big problem. When he finally walks away, I quickly take off the black sweater and cap I had on and leave them on the passenger seat. I make sure to hand the sweater to the first street person I find driving from the hotel. I could throw it away but I spent so much money on it and someone could do with its warmth.

Driving on the N1, I am praying that he doesn't give anything away. Three hours in my trip and I am tempted to call Abigail to find out how things are going but I stop myself. We have bid

each other goodbye and this is her chance to focus on her kid.

She is one hell of a woman with big balls.

My heart is still drumming from all that adrenaline. I can only imagine how she is doing right now. Is she ever going to sleep?

But whatever happens, she'll must be proud of her bravery. Not everyone can have the same guts as her. I guess any mother is capable of pulling that off for their child.

"Shit!" I hiss when I notice the cars stopping in front of me. I quickly put the hazards on and drive slowly. The traffic is caused by a road block in front of me. Any other day I wouldn't mind, but right now, when there are a number of police vans parked all over the place, I know it is not a normal road block.

Act normal, I urge myself.

They could be doing their random checks, or

maybe Abby and I are the reason for this roadblock. Whatever it is, I need to drive out of here in one piece.

When it is my turn to face the police, I pull my license from my wallet and hand it to one police officer who is by my window.

“I believe all my tickets are paid off,” I say, flashing a warm smile.

“Where from and where to?” he asks.

“I am coming from Durban south, heading back to Johannesburg,” I respond.

“What was the reason for your visit?” he asks.

“Vacation. Durban has the best summer weather,” I respond, trying not to be intimidated by how he keeps narrowing his eyes at me. It is as if he can see through me, but I know that he doesn't.

“Tell him to unlock the doors,” the other officer

says. I swallow hard, not confident that the backseat is clean. I didn't take a minute to make sure that there is no evidence there. I cannot even ask why they want to search my car. There is no way I can be a suspect. With my almost shaky hand, I press the unlock button, praying that I am not taking my ass straight to jail. I hear the door open, and then the boot follows. I try my best not to turn to check what is happening behind my back, but I keep praying.

"Your license is expiring in two months," the officer who is still standing by my window says.

"Oh yes, I'll be renewing it in a few weeks."

The doors behind me close.

"Travel safely," he says before walking away. I don't wait to be told twice before I drive the hell away from the queue.

That was close.

This time I don't care about wanting to give

Abigail space, I dial her number. I am worried when it doesn't go through.

It is nothing, right?

I need not to worry?

I try pushing negative thoughts behind me and head straight to Poppy's house to pick my own son. I informed her about my late arrival and they didn't mind. Upon my arrival, Poppy questions about my journey and I don't mind sharing the news with her. She has been part of it and there is no way she could sell her sister away.

"Don't you think Ndumiso will figure this whole plan?" Poppy asks, stirring a cup of coffee which is in front of them. I got here way past the kids' bedtime so she offered tea before waking Aluwani up.

I take a sip from my cup and shrug. Right now, I have no idea what is in Ndumiso's mind. While

Poppy heads to the bedroom to wake Aluwani up, I try Abigail's phone once again and it is still off.

I hate this.

ABIGAIL

"Theo?"

"Yes babe?"

"Thank you." I say. "For everything."

"I love you!" These are his last words before we both hang up.

Throwing my phone on the passenger, I check how Mpho is. Tears are still streaming down his cheeks. I want to yell at him to stop crying like I

used to do when he was just a baby. When I use to reprimand him for leaving his toys scattered around. Those days are gone. Now we are just strangers to each other. I cannot just yell at him without traumatizing him more or making him believe that I am just as worse as Ndumiso said I am.

“Would you like something to drink?” I ask and move my eyes to the rear-view mirror. I see Mpho shake his head. Tears are cascading down his cheeks but he is no longer fighting. That’s a good sign, right?

I have been driving for about fifty minutes when I see a filling station. We will be reaching our destination in the next thirty minutes and by the time we check in, Mpho and I should be on the same page.

I turn towards the filling station but instead of parking by the entrance, I pick the last parking spot so we can be as far away from the world

as possible. I kill the engine, pick the phone from the passenger's seat and relax on my driver's seat. I am doing what I use to do when he used to throw tantrums at me while we were driving. I would keep quiet and let him decide what he wanted to do with his little life. Nothing I say will make him relax, so I am ready to sit this one out until he is done crying.

On my phone I search for the things we will be doing upon our arrival. If he decides to give up his crying, we could get there early and relax so that we start our day fresh. We could choose to go horse riding tomorrow morning after breakfast and fishing during the day before we go swimming by the lake. There is a lot we need to do before we head back home.

Scrolling through my phone, I find a few text messages from Daisy. This is a really bad timing. Me disappearing after a successful store open. Clients are going crazy about all the

goddies I prepared that day and they cannot wait for the new menu. Daisy wants us to implement the new menu as soon as possible. I send her a text message explaining that I need to be excused for a week before I return and continue what I started. We might be losing so much money but what I am here for is more important than any task that awaits me.

I take a minute to also search for Sindi Mahlangu, the accountant, just to kill time. Okay, fine, I am not searching her just to kill time. I want to see the woman who took my place. The woman my son calls 'mommy.'

Who on earth is she?

I find a few on Instagram and the one with a profile closest to what Theo said, has made her Instagram to be private. Even if I wanted to send a request, I know I might be making things obvious and easy for Ndumiso to realize that I am the one who kidnapped our son. That is if

she knows me. Oh, if she didn't know, she was going to know who I am. Even though I deleted all pictures I took with Ndumiso, my son's pictures are still there.

Stealing a glance at Mpho, I find him staring at me, tears no longer visible on his face. I place my phone down and turn on my seat, so that we could have a little chat.

"What is your new name now?" I ask. He stares at me without saying a word. "I don't want to call Mpho if you want it anymore. But if you don't mind, I can call you Mpho." The name Mpho is very significant to me but I am not going to force it on him if he doesn't associate with it anymore. "Look! We can sit here the whole night if you want." Only now do I manage to make to make him sigh.

"Chris."

"Your new name is Chris." I nod my head, not

wanting to comment about the name.

“What did dad tell you about me?” I try to find out what could be the main reason he is so scared of me.

“You kill people.”

“I kill people?” it comes out as a shock.

“Daddy showed me the news,” he adds. We are in speaking terms now.

“I never killed anyone. It was all a lie.”

“The police don’t lie.”

“The bad ones do.”

“You left me with that man who took me away and showed me guns. Dad said you work with him and he was going to kill me...but dad saved me.”

Of course, daddy is the best.

For the next twenty minutes, I remind him of the

mother who used to bake for him every Saturday morning. Who used to take him to his sports games and spend time together with him and his friends each time he ever needed me to. I don't forget to remind him who hugged him to sleep when his rabbit died and what his father said. When he is quiet, I know he is replaying all those memories in his head. People can say all the want about me but I have been the best mother any child could ever pray for. I did my best as a parent and this boy knows it.

To put the cherry on top, I remind him of all the lies I knew he was telling me just to get out of trouble. That way, I can show him that not just kids but everyone lies to get out of trouble. He, himself, has lied so many times.

"But you chose to leave with Aluwani and his dad, and left me all alone," he says, piercing my heart with a dagger.

I sigh because it is the truth. Only, I was safer

with them than his father. I left Mpho so that I could be safe. It had nothing to do with me choosing Theo over him. But how do I explain this to make him understand?

There is no way that I am going to make him understand. Ndumiso has done a great job turning him against me. But these few days, he is going to experience my love once again and he is going to feel each and every single lie that was spoken to his ear.

“I am going to return you to daddy after a few days. I just want to have fun with you because I miss you so much. Can we have some fun this weekend?” I ask. He is silent. But at this point, silence is good. Silence means that he is considering it.

When I am certain that we are indeed in the same page, I start the car to the resort. The reception area is quiet when I take Mpho by hand and lead the way inside. I am holding his

hand so that he doesn't run away from me but the way his small hand is gentle in mine, I can tell that there is progress. This is great progress.

Upon checking in, we are given the best chalet since there aren't many bookings. I am told that the place is normally full during the school holidays and long weekends. It is a win for me.

In our executive three bedroomed chalet, I tell Mpho to pick the best room for himself. I earn a small smile when I remind him about the holidays with his cousins.

Okay, we are going somewhere.

Mpho walks down the corridor which leads to the bedrooms. I see him walk into the first one. After a few minutes, he walks out and heads further down to the next one.

Pulling my phone from my back pocket so that I could inform Theo about all these exciting news, I notice that there is no reception. What did I

expect? We are in the middle of the jungle here.

Putting the phone away, I smile. Maybe this is for the best. I need all the time in the world with my son without any other disturbance.

“I’ll take the first room. It has the view of the lake,” Mpho says.

“I’ll take the one next to it,” I respond, knowing very well that my son is sleeping in my arms tonight.

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Heart of GOLD!

#35 (Unedited)

NDUMISO

I feel sick in the stomach when it is after midnight and there is no information about my son's whereabouts. I have refrained from finding out how far they are with the clues. I hate to be in the dark. I want to know everything. Who are they calling? Did they get the footage from the street cameras if there are any? Did someone other than the school kids and Nala see something? Just any clue will do right now.

Making sure I don't wake Sindi up; I carefully get out of bed and pull my robe from the chair which is just beside the bed, put it on and I pull my phone from under the pillow. I slide my feet

in the comfy slippers that Sindi and Nana got for me for Father's Day and thereafter walk out of the bedroom. Even though I have someone watching the house, I don't feel safe. Not when someone is trying to mess with my freaking head. Someone wants to get to me and whatever they are doing is working.

I start at Nana room. She is sleeping once again after her mother kept her in her arms almost the whole evening. Just after Sindi and I sat down for supper—the supper we both didn't bother touching— Nana woke up and struggled to go back to sleep. It was just two hours ago when she managed to fall asleep. I find her duvet almost on the floor, indicating that she was restless earlier. I pull the duvet and cover her carefully before checking if we locked the sliding door which leads to the balcony. I did this two hours ago and I am doing it again. I don't feel safe.

When I am certain about the locked sliding door, I make my way to Mpho's room. It is still surreal that my son is not home yet and I don't know where on earth it is. There are no demands for a ransom that I am even ready to pay. To be sure of what I am talking about, I check for any messages from my phone and there is none. I already knew that there is none because I have my volumes high and I haven't heard a ping. I haven't slept at all so I am certain that I didn't miss any.

The room is empty and cold, with just his bed neatly made and his PJ set neatly folded on the bed. I have no idea why the nanny left his pyjama on the bed when I told her that I don't know where my son is. She might have been missing him like I already do.

I spend the rest of the night seated in the kitchen, waiting for a text message or a phone call. Not even the police have tried reaching out.

Not that I have faith in them. I just need information.

When the clock ticks five thirty, the nanny appears in the kitchen, followed by the chef. They both greet before the chef scurries to the pantry.

“Nana is skipping school today. Mpho is not home,” I announce to the nanny. She nods and tells me she will just get Nana cleaned up before she is ready for breakfast.

Breakfast.

“I’ll be skipping breakfast. Please prepare something when Sindi wakes up. I don’t know what she would prefer. Don’t count me in.”

How do I even dine when I don’t even know if my son has eaten or not?

Making my way back upstairs to the bedroom, I am welcomed by the noise that is coming from the television in the pyjama lounge. Nana is

curled on the couch, watching television. She normally does this if she wakes up earlier than everyone.

“Hey baby,” I greet while standing at the end of the couch. One look at me and she gets on her feet and makes her way to give me a hug. I cocoon her in my arms before I carry her and sit on the couch. I ask about her dreams and she tells me she keeps seeing bad men in her dreams. I hate it when she gets nightmares.

“Is it because someone took your brother?” I ask. She nods. “The police are going to find him and bring him back home.”

“Did you see the man who took your brother? Do you remember his face?” I ask. She shakes her head. “Did you see the one who was driving?”

“I only saw that she was scared...the one who was driving,” Nana said.

“He was scared?”

“She was scared.”

“You mean he,” I correct her.

“He is for men and she is for women. So, she was scared.”

“The one who was driving was a woman?” I ask and she nods.

What the hell?

Are they now sending women to do dirty jobs now?

Before I could ask more question, the nanny is standing by the stairs. She watches as I shift Nana back to the couch and make my way to the bedroom.

A woman driver. This is a new piece of evidence. Sending a text message to Craig and Norman who is running the search for me, my mind wanders to Abigail. She wouldn't dare step on

my toes, would she? After I gave her all that money to start a new life with her fucking boyfriend? If she needed my son so bad, she would have talked to me, right? It can't be her.

I am tempted to give her a phone call but I think she is better off without knowing that Mpho and I are in the country. It is the best for the both of us. I am not ready to face her after going against my promises. It is best that she thinks I went AWOL.

Before I jump to bed, I send Mpho's portrait to Craig with an instruction, "Get my son back to me."

ABIGAIL

My body shivers when I see Mpho running away from me. I thought he was sleeping in his room but from the window, I can see him running into the woods without turning back. I jerk up from my sleep and turn to Mpho who is deeply sleeping besides me. I immediately relax and lie back down next to my son. This is the third nightmare since I came to bed. The other one brought Ndumiso before me and the first one was just like the one I had now—Mpho slipping away from me. Yesterday after our little chat, I took us to a shopping centre just outside the resort to get a few things for the chalet. Luckily, the chalet has a fully equipped kitchen and what is the best way to spoil my son than to treat him to perfect meals? We shopped for the food supplies and also got a few sets of clothes for him. He was in a school uniform and I intend to keep him here for a few days.

After our supper last night, I allowed Mpho to

skip bath time and head straight to bed. Just when he fell asleep, I joined him in bed and pulled him closer to me so that I could breathe him in. So that I could watch him sleep. I watched him sleep until I feel asleep, only to be woken by these nightmares.

Checking the time on the phone, it is quarter past seven. I slowly get out of bed and thereafter dart out of the bedroom to mine. I jump into the shower and get ready to start the day. I make sure I do my tasks very fast before he wakes up. I want him to find me in the kitchen like he always did. But, also, I want to make sure that he doesn't walk out of here. On my way to the kitchen, I tip toe to his room to check that he is still sleeping. Indeed, he still is.

In the kitchen, I bake. I bake his favourite chocolate chip cookies and fill a bowl with them. I plan to let him have as many as he wants to eat. This is a 'yes' trip.

When I hear the water running, I know that he is in the bathroom getting ready to start the day. I am pleased to know that he still kept this morning routine. When he walks into the kitchen, he is changed into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. He is old now, I allowed him to pick his own clothes when we went shopping.

“You made chocolate chip cookies,” he says while pulling a chair. I nod at him with a smile. I shake my head so that I don’t get emotional from a smile he just gave me when he took the first bite. When he closes his eyes, I know that I am still the best. I don’t take this moment for granted when I know that a good smell and taste triggered some of Theo’s memory.

“Can I take a pictures of you?” I ask, hoping not dampen the mood. He nods and I jump for my phone. I take a hundred pictures—I have enough space on my phone.

While I prepare a proper breakfast for us, Mpho

is lying on the couch watching some Youtube Videos. At ten thirty we are done eating, bathing and we are standing at the Arcade. The plan is to start the activities inside before we head outside to sweat under the sun.

There is no game in the arcade that we don't play. I am glad that we started here because this is the best way to break the ice between us. The laughter and the screams make this experience even memorable. I have snapped a hundred of photos and Mpho also asked for my phone so that he could take pictures of me. We took a lot together, and I am certain I am going to print most of them.

After bowling, we go for horseback riding. Mpho is great at it. He no longer goes for the ponies. He goes for the bigger horses. It is so beautiful to watch him confidently showing off his stunts. He tells me how his other mother takes him and Nana out to ride almost every month. I don't let

the mention of this woman take my smile away. She is part of his life and there is nothing I can do about it. I couldn't resist asking how old Nana is. She is as old as my marriage, meaning, Ndumiso has been living a lie—once again. I thought it was just Kim but I am wrong. There is Kim and Sindi, and God-knows-who else.

“Let's go buy some ice cream on our way to change into swim wear,” I propose. He runs towards the ice cream shop and I follow behind. I notice the owner of the store on a landline phone. When he gets out of the phone, he walks to where we are standing.

“What can I get you two?”

“What would you like to have? You can have two scoops,” I say to my son.

“Chocolate and bubble-gum flavours,” he says. I go for the caramel one. When the guy hands the ice creams to us, I ask to use the landline to

make a phone call. He is hesitant until I show him my phone which does not have network bars.

“Cellphone reception is bad here,” he tells me while motioning for me to get into the kiosk. Mpho takes the bench while I go make the phone call.

I dial Theo’s number, praying that he is not busy to answer. It is a Friday and he might be in the field or something. I cross my fingers while I wait.

“Theo, hello,” he responds calmly.

I sigh deeply, relieved that he is still in one piece.

“Its me,” I say, my voice cracking.

“Hey babe, how are you?” I can sense the smile on his face.

“I am fine. You?”

“I am great.”

“How are things? How is Mpho?”

“Mpho is great. Things are great. He is starting to warm up to me. I’ll share the photos when I get the cell phone reception.” I share every little detail about what is going on and he tells me all about the trip to Johannesburg.

“Alu has been asking about you but I told him that you are out of town for work and will be returning soon,” he says.

“Give him a kiss for me. I miss him.”

“And Mrs Daisy is about to send a search party to our house. She told me that everyone is begging for your treats.”

“I’ll be home soon. And I promise to make it up to everyone.”

“I know.”

“Theo?”

“Yeah, babe?”

“I love you.”

“Not more than I do.”

When I am about to bid him farewell, Theo tells me to be careful. I know Theo very well, so I know there is more to that warning.

“What is going on?” I ask, lifting my eyes to my son. He is licking the ice cream which is almost dripping to his hands.

“The kidnapping is all over the news,” he says.

“They have Mpho’s picture all over the news. So, you might want to be careful.”

“Thank you for the heads up,” I tell him.

Nothing is going to stop me from having this moment with my son.

Not Ndumiso.

Not the news.

And not the police.

Stepping next to where Mpho is seated, I put out my hand for him to take it. He does take it.

“Let’s get into swimwear. We are going to have hotdogs and thereafter going swimming.”

“I saw the diving board. I am going to show you my new diving trick,” Mpho excitedly says.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!”

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Heart of GOLD!

#36

ABIGAIL

“They have the best slides, right Mama?” Mpho asks before running towards the queue that leads to the next slide. He leaves me smitten. We are once again at the pools. Since yesterday, we have been spending most of our time by the swimming pools. The resort has all sorts of slides and different pool sizes. Mpho’s favourite

is the huge snake slide while my favourite pool is the heated one.

From where I am seated, I watch as Mpho climbs the steps that takes him up the slide. I am glad I didn't chicken out when Theo told me about the news. No one has stopped us or given us any problem. Of course, I am not completely settled. My eyes are forever roaming around, searching for the threat. It seems as if there is no threat. Everyone is here to have fun and not to be stuck in front of the TV. I just made sure not make my way to the reception area, just in case. There is no way I can disguise when we have to be under water. Also, I don't want to stress my son with all the news. He deserves to have fun with him. I deserve to have fun with him. All I am doing is to pray that no one recognizes us and spoil our fun.

I pull my phone and start taking a video of

Mpho sliding into the pool. He is having fun and I am too. His smile is now wide on his face. This morning he gave me a warm hug after our little breakfast. I could have chosen to take us for breakfast but I am enjoying spending time with him in the kitchen. It both reminds us of home. It reminds us of the time we used to spend together on weekends. I would bake and he would help me with little chores. In all this mess, I am just happy that he is still a happy boy like he was many years ago. His father is a pain in the arse but I am grateful that he is raising him to be a happy boy. Last night when we were catching up on his favourite YouTube channel. I can never have enough of this but my heart is full.

My heart is really full.

When I return him home tomorrow, I'll beg Ndumiso to allow him back into my life. I am yet to face him. I am shit scared but I think when he

sees his happy son, he'll have to understand.

I stop the video when Mpho is inside the water. I am going to make sure that I save these videos. I am going to keep them for the future. I'll remind him of these moments when he is all grown up, with his own kids.

"Did you see that?" Mpho asks, throwing himself on my side. I quickly pass a towel to wipe himself.

"Aren't you scared of getting deep inside?" I ask. No matter what you promise me in return, I don't think I can ever go down the water slide. I can swim just to get by and not for any stunts. We are definitely not wasting money when taking these little angels to swimming lessons.

"How can I be scared of water?"

"Right?" I ask, laughing at myself. I am dead scared of water.

At one thirty, I drag my son back to the chalet

for lunch and to change into a clean set of clothes. After lunch I have booked us for quad biking.

While Mpho jumps into a quick shower, I prepare a burger and a fried egg, just the way he loved it then. If we were home I could add some skinny fries. When he is seated in the dining table eating, I rush to get into a quick shower and thereafter change into a pair of leggings and a t-shirt and sneakers.

“Do you still like to go to Bounce?” I ask as we follow the trail that takes us to the Quad bike station.

“Mommy... I mean...”

“Yes, mommy...” I urge him to continue.

“She takes Nana and I to The Jump Park. They have the same trampolines,” he responds.

“If Dad agrees, I could take you there before I head back to Bloemfontein,” I suggest and he

nods at me. I am taking Mpho back to his father tomorrow so that he can be able to make it to school on Monday. I am enjoying these little moments I am having with him but I am not selfish to keep him from school for too long. After taking him home, I can negotiate with Ndumiso on how I can spend more time with him before I leave for Bloem. I just pray that Ndumiso understands.

The quad biking takes an hour.

After the quad biking, we do the evening game drive which had us in stitches when everyone is the car was scared of the drive. It was fun.

At nine thirty, Mpho and I are curled in a couch watching more movies. We ordered chips and fish on our way back to the chalet. No cooking means more time to spend together.

“When you take me home, can you ask dad to allow me to visit you?” Mpho asks. My heart

jumps and tears almost fall down my cheeks.
This right here is the reason I did this.

“I’ll ask him if he could allow you. I want you to visit me.”

“Is it nice in Bloemfontein?” he asks.

“Yes. It is very nice. And you’ll help me bake at my shop.”

“You have a shop?”

“Well, something like that.”

“Wow!” He shifts closely to me and says, “That day, when you gave me your number at school, I wanted to call you. I was just scared.”

“I understand.”

“Weren’t you mad at me?”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“I missed you,” he confesses before I squeeze him into a very tight hug.

“I missed you too my baby.”

Last night before bed, our mood were at a hundred. Right now, when we are both throwing our items into my luggage bag and shopping bags, the mood is sombre. We are both not looking forward to this ride back to Ballito. I am not ready to take back my son but it needs to be done. I need to do the right thing.

“What would you like for your coming birthday?” I ask. His birthday is in three months, but I can always get him something in advance just in case Ndumiso come between us.

“A soccer ball.”

“Just a soccer ball?” I ask, frowning. There must be something more.

“Just a soccer ball. My old one is getting old.”

“Don’t you want a toy...”

“I no longer play with toys. I am not a kid anymore.”

Right? My baby is no longer a baby.

“Fine. I’ll get you a ball.”

As Mpho walks around the chalet searching for items we might be forgetting, I check my phone. I still don’t have network. I am going to need to buy a charger—the battery is about to die any minute. I slide the phone into my pocket.

We drive out of the resort in silence. I can only wonder what is going through his mind. This time he is seated with me in the front. As promised, we stop at a mall not very far from the resort. I put my cap on, take his hand and hurry to mall. We search for a Totalsports until we find it. I buy my son the best soccer ball they have on the shelf. Before heading back to the

parking lot, I buy a charger for my phone.

Walking back to the car, Mpho takes advantage of the empty parking lot. He throws a ball to the air and does a little trick before the ball slips from his foot. We both watch as it rolls to the other side of the parking lot.

“Let’s see who is going to get to the ball first,” Mpho says.

The chasing game.

I smile before he sprints towards the ball. I am not as fit as I used to be but I charge towards him with the aim of getting to the ball first. I almost reach Mpho before I feel a tingle on my thigh and then my shoulder. It feels like everything stops when I find myself falling to the ground.

Did I just slip and fall?

NDUMISO

“Can you at least eat something, Ndumiso?” Sindi asks from the dining table. Swaying my eyes to Mpho’s favourite chair, it is still empty. Nana occupies the one next to it, busy on her tablet.

“I am not hungry,” I say dryly. How does she want me to eat at a time like this? My phone is seated on the table, waiting for a call that might come in any minute now. It has been four days now and only this morning did I get a heads up from my guys. I am pissed at how slow they have been. It took them so long to get something for positive. Craig told me this morning that someone at the filing station not far from the school came with the news. He

told my guys that he saw a car at the parking lot. He witness a woman and man dragging a boy to the other car. He spent the whole of yesterday going through all the tapes from the filling station until he saw what the guy was talking about. The camera was not focusing on the exchange and the faces of the kidnappers were hidden. Only when the car carrying my son drove away, did Craig get the registration number. He didn't waste time getting the guys to track it. I am told it belongs to AVIS company. I need the names in which the car is booked under. Craig tells me it is impossible right now since it would trigger the company to call the police.

An hour ago they told me they can track the car at Amanzimtoti. Just an hour away from here.

Now, I am just sitting here. I am sitting here, waiting for more news.

I hate how sick I am right now as I sit and wait.

The thing is, I waited for days for the kidnappers to contact me for a ransom and they never did. I am fucking concerned why they are not interested in the money. Weren't they supposed to call me and make demands? If it not money they want, what more do they need from me. I just hope that none of my son's hair is missing, or else...

"It has been days and you haven't eaten anything.

"I am fine..."

"Please there is ..."

"Stop it!" I bang the table, startling my daughter from the other side of the table. She lifts her puppy eyes to me. Sindi gets on her feet without saying a thing.

I am a jerk, aren't I?

Nana follows her mother and only when they are gone do I run a face over my face. I am shit

scared. Putting my hand back down, I realise that I am trembling.

Shit!

I get on my feet and drag them to the kitchen where Sindi and Nana are. They both turn to me when I enter the room.

“Go to aunty,” Sindi instructs our daughter. Nana runs out of the kitchen without another word.

I lean on the fridge and watch as Sindi washes the cups in the sink.

“I am sorry!” I start. “I didn’t mean to get my frustration out on you.”

“But you still did,” she says without turning to face me. I walk to her and wrap my arms around her waist.

“Please forgive me. I am just scared that something might have happened to my son.” I

drop a kiss on her forehead and let her go. She continues her task at hand while I grab a kitchen chair. I sit and watch. When my phone vibrates, I almost jump.

“Yes?”

“Why the hell is your son calling this woman, Ma?” a voice from the phone asks.

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“We found your son. A woman was chasing him before we shot her... but your son is crying for her instead.”

“What the fuck?” I jump to my feet. “Send me a photo.”

The phone goes dead and thereafter a ping follows. Opening the photo, I see Abigail in a pool of blood.

With my trembling hands and my heart on my throat, I call back the number.

“Yes?”

“How the hell did you shoot her?”

“You said no questions asked.”

“But that’s her mother.”

“You said no questions asked. We found her chasing him and we shot.”

“Where the hell are you?”

“Shit! The securities are running towards the scene. We need to move. I am driving your son home right now.” The phone goes dead.

Trying it again, it keeps ringing.

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HEART of Gold

#37

NDUMISO (Unedited)

I am not one to panic but when I do, everyone around me is bound to do the same. Sindi's face says it all as she watches me pacing through the kitchen trying to figure out what to think.

What the hell was Abigail thinking?

Fuck!

Think! Think! Think!

“I’ll be right back,” I say, rushing up the stairs to get my car keys and wallet. I need to get to where she is. I dial the number back and wait for the phone to be picked up.

Dammit!

I stop the edge to throw the phone to wall- I still need it.

I pace around the room, dialling the number and swearing when it is not answer. I hate it when I am kept waiting. I hate it when I don’t get what I want. Finally, my phone rings and I don’t waste time answering it. My son is crying hysterically in the background.

“Where the hell are you?” I hiss. My head is throbbing from a headache.

“We just left Galeria mall.”

“Park there and wait for me,” I instruct.

“Your son is not going make it easy,” he

responds.

“Find a way, dammit! How the hell do you leave my wife bleeding to death?”

“Your wife? You told me to shoot. You didn’t tell me anything about a wife. You didn’t tell me to look out for your wife.”

He is right. I doubted Abigail’s balls to kidnap our son.

What the fuck was she thinking in the first place?

“Let me speak to my son,” I order. I wait for a second before Mpho cries on the phone. “Boy... this is dad.”

“He shot my mother,” he chokes. I cover my eyes with my hand, regretting ever instructing for the shots to be fired without a question. I thought who ever took my son was sending a warning message to me.

“She is going to be fine because I am on my

way there right now.” He chokes some more, begging that I help her. “Yes, boy, I am going to help her but I am going to need you to be calm while you wait for me, can you do that?”

“I want to go back to my mother,” he cries. “He shot my mother.”

“Shut up and I listen to me,” I spit and immediately he stops talking but the sobbing doesn’t. I hate to be insensitive right now, but we don’t have time to go back and forth. The more time we waste, the more Abigail might lose her life, if she is hasn’t already.

Shit!

The thought of it makes my head spin.

With a stern voice, I address my son, “He cannot take you back there right now.” His sobs increases. “I am coming right there to pick you up, understood?” The sobs are still hysterical. “I asked you a question.”

“Yes,” Mpho sobs.

“I’m coming there right now. Pass the phone back.”

“Yes.”

“Find somewhere to park and send me the location.”

“Copy that.”

The phone goes dead and I run out of my room. When I return downstairs, Sindi is waiting by the staircase.

“What is going on?”

“The boy was with Abigail. She is shot.” Her trembling hands flies to cover her mouth. I thought she overheard my phone conversation. Her small body shakes in panic. As she stares into my eyes, I see panic and worry. This is why I kept this woman for all these years. She gives a fuck.

“Where is he now?”

“They are in Amanzimtoti. I’m going there right now. I’ll bring him home.”

“Please.”

The minute I jump into the car, I make a phone call to get an ambulance dispatched as soon as possible. It might be done already but I call anyways. I know the place is a damn hour away, but I am not willing to drive that long. Putting the hazard lights on, I speed off as fast as I can.

Each time I am reminded why I am driving 180 kilometres, I swear out loudly.

Why the fuck would Abigail do this?

Why would she put my son in danger like that?

Then I figure out that the man who helped her is that fucking detective mother fucker who broke my marriage. I am tempted to hit the steering wheel but at the same time don’t want to lose

control because of the speed I am driving.

The location is just a few meters from the mall, so I make a turn towards the filling station.

Craig's man is parked by the ATMs which are stationed at the far end of the station. I jump out of the car and knock on his window. My son jumps when he notices me.

"Wipe your tears," I order. He does quickly before he opens the door and jumps out of the car.

"Do you need me to do anything else?" the guy asks.

"No. I'll take it from here. I'll call you." With that I lead Mpho to my car. He runs to my car, open the back passenger door and throw himself in. When I jump into the driver seat, I find him curled into a ball, weeping. I stop myself from commenting. Being hard on him right now won't makes anything better. If only his mother didn't

mess things up.

I reverse out of the parking lot and drive straight into Galleria Mall. Luckily I know my way to the mall—I am very familiar with most parts of Kwazulu Natal.

“He shot my mother. He killed her,” Mpho cries.

“She is not dead,” I respond but when he cries louder, my heart jumps. Was it that bad?

I driver up to the entrance, finding a security officer by the gate.

“Sorry sir, you cannot go in,” he says.

“Is this about the shooting?” I ask.

“Yes. We are closed for the day,” I respond.

“It is my wife who is shot,” I announce. “Is she still there?”

“The paramedics are busy with her,” he responds.

That's a good thing, right?

"Please open for me. I need to get to my wife," I say. He doesn't move. "Listen here ndoda, Suka endleleni yami, ngifuna ukuya kunkosikazi wami."

Does he think I would choose to be driving into a warzone instead of running away like the rest of the world?

He opens the boom gate after giving me the directions to where they are. I am very much not pleased by how the paramedics took. How the hell do they not attend to the patients urgently? What if she dies while waiting.

I speed up.

Driving into the parking lot, I move the rear-view mirror so that I could address my son.

"Look at me," I demand and our eyes lock instantly. I dart my eyes back to the road and thereafter back to him. "You are going to stop

crying and you are going to stay here.”

“I want to see my mother,” he cries.

“You cannot go to the police with me. Do you want me to go jail?”

“Yes.” I put on the dead breaks and we both almost fly out of the car. I shift my eyes to the rear-view mirror, finding his blazing eyes on mine.

“Excuse me?” I quietly say, not sure if I heard him right.

“Yes.”

“Yes what?” I ask. Our eyes haven’t shifted from each other. He has stopped crying now but tears are streaming down his tiny face.

“Yes, I want you to go to jail.”

What the fuck?

I turn to face him.

“I must never hear you say that ever again, do you hear me?” I spit, my eyes blazing back at him. I am not going to have my own son disrespect me like this. Why the hell would he want me to go to jail for helping him? “That man was protecting you because he thought you were in danger. I was protecting you, do you hear me?” I bark and he squirms on his seat. “I was protecting you and that man did not know that your mother kidnapped you. So, you are going to stay in the car.”

“No, I want to see my mother.”

“Oh, so you want her to go to jail then?” I ask. “If you tell anyone that you know about the shooting, they are going to arrest your mother for kidnapping you at school, is that what you want?” Only now does he shake his head. “Good. So, you must stay in the car.” When he stays quiet, I drive further up to the parking lot. The scene is not as bad as I have thought. There a

few police officers, the security guards and the paramedics are already loading her into the back of the ambulance. They should have been at the hospital already. To be honest, I am glad that these are the paramedics and not the forensic pathologist. Running to the ambulance, one police officer stops me before I could reach it.

“Sir, you cannot go there,” he says.

“That’s my wife. I want to see how she is doing,” I respond, trying to fight my way there. One paramedic shut the door and runs to the driver’s seat. Before I could get to them, he speeds off. Maybe it is for the best, they are rushing to save her life. “Where are they off to?”

When he tells me the hospital name, I want start rushing to my car but the police officer stops me.

“Yes?”

“Before your wife was shot, she was seen with a young boy but we believe that he was taken by the offender,” he says this while he is taking a notebook from his pocket and turning a page.

“What are you saying?” I clear my throat. “It wasn’t my son.”

“It wasn’t your son?”

“Yes. My son was home when this happened,” I respond. When he wants to ask more questions, I shake my head and tell him that I need to follow the ambulance to the hospital so that I could see my wife.

“I’ll ask you more questions there.”

“Huh? There, where?”

“The hospital?”

“Oh, yes, perfect!” I rush to the car. I find Mpho staring outside the window, his eyes following the ambulance. I start the car and speed after

the ambulance.

I couldn't catch the ambulance before they reach the hospital, so we haven't seen Abigail since we got here three hours ago. I am in the waiting area with the police who are coming up with hundred questions to try find out the reason for the incident. Earlier, before I came back here to check on the progress, I left Mpho is sleeping in the back seat of the car.

Unfortunately, I cannot risk having his face all over the hospital. His picture has been all over the news. Even right now, his name can pop up on the screens.

"So, do you have any idea who could have shot your wife?" the policeman asks. He hasn't given up and I hate how he is persistent. If I didn't

know who did this, I would be very appreciative but right now, he is annoying me.

“Are you sure your son is home, Sir?” he asks.

“I told you. My son was home when the shooting happened.”

“How did you know about the shooting? Your wife had her belongings and I believe her car is still at the shopping mall.”

Shit!

I didn't think this far.

“Uhm...well...” I swallow hard, trying to come up with a story. I cover my face and shake my head.

“I was supposed to meet her at the mall.” I uncover my face. “When she didn't answer her phone, I made my way to the mall... only to learn about the shooting all over social media...and when they mentioned what the woman was

wearing, I figured it was my wife.”

The police officer nods at me.

“Can you give me some space? I need to find the doctor to tell me what is going on.”

“Of course. I’ll leave the rest of the questions for when she is well enough to see us.”

I need to ensure that it doesn’t happen.

I don’t want anyone talking to Abigail, ever!

I give the police officer a nod. Sitting at the waiting area, I notice my son’s face on the news. The search is on-going and I hate that I cannot do anything to stop the media house from broadcasting right now. Should I inform them and the police that he is found, they are going to want a story to broadcast. The story must be good enough to keep the police away from us. I cannot do that until I have Mpho on my side again.

Speaking of my son, I head to the cafeteria to get him a pie and a juice drink. When I get to the car, I find him seated quietly. I jump to the back to sit with him. I hate how he flinched and shifted away from me.

“I am not going to hurt you,” I softly say, hating myself for being hard on him earlier. “I am sorry I shouted at you earlier. I didn’t mean to. I was just worried about Mom.” I hand him the pie and the juice. When he doesn’t take them from my hands, I place them on the seat between us.

“Look... you going to need to speak to me, okay?” He stares at me quietly. “Did Mom hurt you?”

“No, she didn’t,” he responds.

“So, when she was running after you at the mall?”

“She was playing soccer with me. She bought me a new ball and we were chasing after it,” he

responds.

“I’m sorry. That man thought he was going to hurt you,” I respond. “She is going to be fine.”

“Did the doctor say that?”

“Yes. She is going to be fine.”

He sighs deeply and rests his back on the seat.

“So, where did she take you?”

“On holiday,” he responds with a small smile.

“We had fun. She stopped at the mall to buy me a gift.”

Damn you, Abigail. You could have just asked for the boy.

Seated here, I am asking myself how she got to us.

The detective, huh?

HEART of Gold

#38

NDUMISO

Running the back of my fingers on her smooth face, Abigail doesn't flinch, confirming that she is sleeping. The machines which are connected to her beep loudly as she softly breathes.

Abigail.

She looks so fragile as she lies on the hospital bed.

Before they allowed me in, I am told that the surgeons managed to remove the two bullets, one on her shoulder and the other one on her thigh and none of them caused a serious damage. It is the loss of a lot of blood they are highly worried about. However, I am told that she will be perfectly fine when I gave the hospital permission for them to infuse her with more blood from their blood bank.

Her skin is still as soft as I remember it. Her lips

are dry and cracked from all the trouble she has been in since the afternoon.

I swiftly move to the corner of the room and watch her.

She is one damn tough woman, huh?

I huff out a laughter.

“Abigail Gumedede! You never cease to amaze me. All the freaking damn time,” I whisper, more to myself than her.

I need her to wake up for me so that she tells me how she got to me. I didn't think she...they... she and her detective were capable to do this. But once they find out where my children school, why didn't they ask to see me instead of snatching my son away and traumatise my children?

Abby takes a deep breath and I watch, hoping that she opens her eyes so that we could talk.

Moving back closer the bed, I softly shake her, wishing that she wakes up and face me before anyone gets to her. She doesn't move.

"Abigail," I add and she doesn't open her eyes or move them, but one machine starts beeping loudly, forcing me to jump away from her.

A nurse rushes in and gives me a brief smile before she presses the machine.

"This controls her heart rate," she offers and I give her a smile.

"Is she going to wake up anytime soon?"

"I don't think so. Depends on how much dose of anaesthesia she was given before they surgery... but it will wear off very soon."

When the nurse is ready to leave, I stop her. Without moving from where I am standing by now, I ask her what time her shift finishes and she tells me that she will be changing shifts at seven o'clock in the morning.

“I need you to do me a favour,” I say. “What is your name?”

“Lungi?”

“Lungi... I am very worried about my wife here.” She nods at me with her sympathetic eyes on me. “I don’t want her to be disturbed. I don’t want the police questioning her without me in this room, are we clear.” She gives me a little frown as if she doesn’t understand what I am trying to say.

“Well, if the police need to question her?”

“They shouldn’t do it without me. Tell them that.”

“Maybe I could call the floor manager or the doctor...”

“No, I am asking you,” I respond. “I need you Lungi to keep an eye on my wife for me until I return here tomorrow morning before your shift ends. Her shooter may be roaming around this

hospital and I don't want him...or her to get to her." She stays quiet and I flash her a smile to calm her. Maybe I am coming off strongly. "The thing is, I don't want her to stress or panic. I know for a fact, when she wakes up, the first person she would like to see will be me. She has a very weak heart and only I know how to calm her." This time she smiles at me and nods. I pull my wallet and pull a few notes.

"Oh, no Sir, I am doing my job... you don't need to do that."

"Just a little appreciation." I force the money into her hand. She blushes when she notices the amount of money I have given her. I also pull a business card and hand it to her. "If anyone tries to get to her, please contact me as soon as possible."

"Alright," she responds.

With that, she darts out of the room.

I shift closer to the bed and look down at Abigail. I take her in for a little while before I open the cupboard where they have put her belongings, and pull the car keys. The keyholder has Avis emblem. I slide the car keys into my pocket and thereafter go for her cellphone. Trying to switch on the phone, I find it dead. On a little shopping bag I find next to the handbag is the phone charger. I take it too before walking out of her room to the parking lot where Mpho is sleeping in the car. Before I start the engine, I inform Sindi that I am on my way home and I need her up to take care of Mpho for me. I instruct her to confiscate all his devices.

It is nine thirty when I drive out of the hospital, heading home. Mpho is sound asleep all the way until I wake him up. He sits up straight and stare out of the window.

“We left the hospital? Where is Ma?” he asks, tears threatening to fall.

“You’ll see her soon.”

He doesn’t wait for me to say anything else. He opens the door, jumps out and rushes inside the house.

I sigh deeply.

I don’t have energy for this.

Walking into the house, I find him in Sindi’s arms, crying his lungs out. I watch for a minute as he chokes, trying to tell her how I refused for him to see his mother. I told him that he cannot see her until I am sure that it is safe to do so.

“Get him to bed,” I tell Sindi while ascending the stairs to our bedroom.

When Sindi shows up to bed almost an hour later, she tells me that the boy is fast asleep.

“I am worried about this boy Ndumiso,” Sindi angrily says as she drops her satin gown on the chair. Instead of joining me in the blankets, she

stands in the middle of the room with her arms crossed.

I don't have energy for this, really.

"Come to bed."

"You are going to need to find a way for him to see his mother. This whole thing is a mess."

"He cannot see her when his face is all over the screens. I still need to find a story to tell that he is found."

"Find her way, Ndumiso. Find a way or else you'll lose that boy. You need him on your corner or else, you are digging a hole for yourself."

She is right.

He has seen it all.

"I'll make a plan."

I am a master of plans. Dressed in one of my tailored suits, I jump into my car after instruction Craig to go get Abigail's car from the mall. It is six thirty and Lungi, the nurse, hasn't called me. So I take it all is well. I drive straight to the hospital so that I get there sooner than the police.

After driving for forty minutes, I realise that I forgot Abigail's phone. I had wished the detective guy to call last night when I was still up but he didn't. Only when I woke up did I see the missed calls on the phone. I couldn't get through her phone to retrieve his number and now, I left the damn phone. I'll see it when I get home.

I grab coffee for myself before I demand that they let me into my wife's ward. I don't care about the damn visiting hours. They can call the police on me if they want to. Yesterday, after the surgery, I had instructed them to put her in

the private ward for reasons like this. I'll pay whatever freaking amount they want. Money is not a problem. And there is nothing that money cannot do.

Sitting on the chair just beside the bed, I wait for Abigail to wake up. I am told that she was up in the earlier hours of the morning. I am certain that no one was here to see her.

It is at ten thirty when her eyes open slowly. I give her time to adjust before I set the newspaper I have been reading down and clear my throat to announce my presence. She shifts her head towards me and her eyes widens. She winches a little bit to the pain she might be feeling. She shifts slightly but hurts her shoulder in the process. I get on my feet and move closer to her bed. As she tries to reach for an alarm which is on the side of her right hand, I jump to snatch it from her. We shall call the nurses in due course.

“You are awake,” I announce the obvious while putting the alarm away from her. “How are you feeling?” She doesn’t respond but keeps her gaze at me. “I asked you a question.”

“Where is my son?” she mumbles before clearing a lump stuck on her throat.

“I took him home.”

“You wanted me killed?” she asks without blinking. When she does blink, tears escape both her eyes. I watch as they fall from the corner of her eyes.

“I was protecting my son,” I say quietly.

A knock comes from the door and I shift my gaze there.

“Sorry sir, I am told that Dr Stephan will be in after two o’clock to look at your request. He is the only one that can approve such a request.”

“What request?” Abigail asks in a hoarse voice.

“To discharge you,” the nurse responds.

“I am not...”

“You’ll be safe at home. You are not safe here until we find out who the shooter is,” I raise my voice above that of Abigail. When she shuts her mouth, I turn to the nurse, “Please let me know when he is here.”

The nurse turns on her heels.

“I’m not going.”

“You have no choice. You are going with me. I need to clean up your mess, once again.”

THEO

Last night I wasn’t alarmed about Abigail’s

silence until twitter went abuzz with the shooting story at mall in Amanzimtoti. The whole afternoon, the most trending topic were #KZNshooting #Womenarenotsafe #CrimeinSA. Last night when I was browsing through twitter before bed, it didn't take me long to find an account that shared a picture of a woman lying on a pool of blood. That picture belonged to Abigail. My blood froze and my body became numb in the middle of the night. I haven't slept a wink ever since then.

I am yet again on my way to the Airport, flying back to KZN.

Luckily, a colleague of mine agreed to pick Aluwani from school for me while I get to Abigail in KZN. I made a few calls last night after finding out about the picture, and the receptionist at one of the hospitals confirmed they have a woman who was admitted there after the shooting. Unfortunately, they couldn't

give me her name. I just left a message for her—that I will be in the next flight out to see her.

The only nonstop flight I could get from Bloemfontein to Kwazulu Natal is now at 11h30. Before I put my phone on airplane mode, I finalise the car rental.

Letting out a long breath, I try to force myself to sleep on my way there. An hour sleep will be enough. But I struggle. The thoughts of losing Abigail freak me out. I cannot afford to lose her.

It is 14h40 when I arrive to the hospital. I have never driven as fast as I did to get here. I am only hopeful that she is fine because her phone can go through when I call it. She hasn't answered but at least it is not as dead as it was since we parted ways last week.

I hate the smell of hospitals.

I stop in the middle of the corridor when a certain smell triggered a memory. This one is a

sad memory of my late wife. I shake the thought away as I carry my feet to the third floor where I am directed to by the security officer at the door.

I cannot lose Abigail too. Not when I need her this much. Not when she just reconnected with her son. I want to hold her hand and listen to all the things she might have wanted to share with me about her holiday with her son.

I stop at a small reception at the third floor and ask if I can see Abigail. The nurse behind the counter picks the files which are on top of the counter and opens one.

“Oh, you are lucky.”

“Why is that?”

“The nurses are preparing to discharge her.”

“Wasn’t she shot?” I ask, hoping that maybe the blood I saw on that picture did not belong to her. If she was as badly hurt as the picture portrayed,

there is no way they can discharge her just after one night, can they?

“Well, what can we say?” the nurse says. Before she continues with her statement, I see the reason why Abigail is being discharge. Ndumiso is walking down the corridor with a male doctor and two nurses in two. Before he could notice me, I jump into a ward which is just by the reception booth and hide behind the curtain while the nurse calls for me.

Ndumiso cannot have her.

My published books are nice too 😊😊

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Heart of GOLD

#39

ABIGAIL (Unedited)

The pain on my shoulder shoots straight to my heart.

“I am sorry,” the nurse who is standing beside my bed says. She looks down at me and continues to change the pain IV.

How does Ndumiso want me out of hospital so soon? I am in so much pain right now.

“This will help with the pain,” the nurse says, lifting her eyes to the IV. She helps me into a gown which Ndumiso instructed to bring.

“Thank you,” I mumble. I stare quietly before I ask if I could use her phone.

“I don’t have one. My daughter dropped it on the floor,” she explains.

“Can you please get me a phone?” I ask.

“I will ask Elsie when she comes here.”

I close my eyes to block the pain is shooting

through my body. Didn't she say the drip is going to help with the pain? When she notices that I am in pain, she picks the tube and adjust it. Bit by bit, I feel the liquid enter my bed. It is cold as the medicine shoots into my vein.

I try to breathe as I feel my body relax and the pain subsiding.

"Do you know why your husband wants you home? There is better care here," she sadly asks.

"I am in danger and..." I respond, wanting to return back to asking that she gets me someone who can lend me a phone. Ndumiso just stepped outside and he is going to walk back into his room any minute.

"The police..." Her words hang in the air when he hears someone opening the door. I hear his voice first before he calls my name.

"Theo?" in an instant, he swiftly shifts to stand

in front of me. "Theo?" tears sting my eyes. I was worried about him not knowing that I am stuck here.

"I came here as fast as I could," he whispers. He stares down at me as if he wants to pull me into his arms and embrace me.

I catch the nurse watching us.

"Please excuse us?" I ask the nurse who raises her eyebrows at me. Everyone has met Ndumiso and he has barked orders to everyone around here as my loving husband, so seeing another man in here when my husband is just outside the room trying to get me help must be very questionable. "Please excuse us just for a minute."

"Fine," she says while letting go of the gown she was trying to help me with. When the door shuts, Theo almost jumps on me. Not knowing where to touch me, he keeps his hands on

either side of the bed and leans in to give me a kiss.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his eyes searching me all over.

“Ndumiso is here,” I mumble as I feel the pain sneaking in t attack. “He ordered that I am discharged.”

“He cannot do that,” Theo nervously says. There is no stopping Ndumiso. He is not going to rest until he cleans the mess that I have created like he says. He has pointed it out that it is my fault that I am shot and bed ridden.

“This is Ndumiso,” I dryly say. “Please help me with this.”

Theo stands in front of me and pulls the gown to my shoulder. Once done, he questions where I am hurt. With the black dress that I am wearing, he is unable to see the bandages. I am in so much pain, all I want to do is to sleep.

“My shoulder and thigh,” I respond. He doesn’t want to hurt me so he doesn’t touch.

“I need to get you out of here,” he says while darting around the room for God knows what. “I’ll get you to another hospital.” He notices a wheelchair at the corner of the room. He quickly pushes it next to the bed. Before he could even touch me, we hear Ndumusi barking an order to the nurse who was assisting me. Theo widens his eyes and thereafter rushes to the door which leads to the toilet. He quickly shuts it and locks the door.

“She had a guest,” the nurse says as she barges into the room, followed by Ndumiso and the other nurse.

Damnit! I swear under my breath.

“What guest?” Ndumiso asks while shifting his eyes between the nurse and I.

“The old woman who offered to pray me,” I say,

my eyes rooted to the nurse so that she doesn't say more than she is supposed to. She swallows hard and thereafter drops her eyes to the wheelchair which is just in front of me. She frowns a little, probably realising that she didn't leave it there. I clear my throat and she lifts her eyes up to me and I give a shake of my head.

Please!

If she dares say something, Ndumiso is going to turn this hospital upside down searching for Theo.

"Where are you taking me?" I mumble when I am now certain that she wouldn't say anything.

"Home. Where else would I take you?" Ndumiso asks. This is how he hid his shenanigans all these years when he was living a double life. He always has a perfect lie at the top of his head. His smile charms his way. He probably gets away with a lot of things.

It could be true that he is taking me to his home—I hope Theo got that. But what would his woman say?

“Please hurry,” Ndumiso orders the nurse.

“Of course.”

“Why is the wheelchair there?” Ndumiso asks.

“Isn’t that we are wheeling her out?” the nurse says.

“You are wheeling the bed; didn’t the doctor say just a minute ago?” Ndumiso asks.

“Oh, the gown...I thought...” she responds. I feel bad for watching as Ndumiso spits venom to her. She shifts to stand in front of me so that she could help back on the bed. Once settled, she covers me with linen. She places the IVs on my side before the other nurse helps her to wheel me out. I have been holding my breath until the two nurses wheel me into the elevator. I don’t want to think about what Ndumiso would

do if he knew that Theo is here.

Theo is here.

How did he find out? My phone was dead when I got shot. And when I woke up this morning and asked that one nurse charge it for me, it was gone. Together with my car keys. It has Ndumiso written all over it. He has my stuff.

The porters push my bed into an ambulance. It must be very nice to be Ndumiso Gumede.

While other patients are in need of an ambulance, he is here hiring one to drive me to his house. Well, I don't complain, sitting on a car seat wouldn't have been good for my thigh.

"I'll drive with you two," Ndumiso tells the nurses who are about to jump into the back with me.

"She cannot be by herself," one nurse says. I am yet to ask their names.

"I thought I made myself clear. I want to keep

my wife safe,” he says and the nurses frown. I would frown too if I didn’t know that he is avoiding that I might share more than I am allowed to, on our ride to the house.

I was definitely going to ask their help to call Theo.

As they shut the ambulance door, I close my eyes and let the pain IV do its job. I only wake up when I feel the bed moving. I dart my eyes to take in the surroundings. Before me is a huge house. Lifting eyes to a huge window, I see a woman staring down at us with a mug going to her lips.

Is that the wife?

Where is my son?

Ndumiso is immediately by my side as he directs the driver and nurse where to push the bed. They don’t push the bed towards the main house; they wheel it to the back.

“The guest house will be perfect babe, don’t you think?” Ndumiso asks, taking my hand in his as I am wheeled. I know better than to go against his word. My life is probably in his hands. If not my own, then Theo’s life is. If he ordered the man to shoot me, then he is capable of finishing me when he wants.

The guest house is very beautiful—way better than Theo and I’s house in Bloemfontein. I don’t miss any of these luxuries. Since the day I found out the truth about his shenanigans, I wished I was never part of it all. I don’t miss this fancy life no more.

“Just help her settle in, my private nurses are on their way. You’ll hand over when they get here,” he says. Where did he get these private nurses? If he is bringing in his own people, I know that I am not going anywhere. At least with these two ladies, I could have pleaded with them to help. The ones under Ndumiso’s payroll won’t be

moved.

He takes a chair next to my bed while the nurses administer my drips. He takes my hand and caress it while he punches away on his phone.

“Can I see my son?” I whisper.

“He is in school,” he responds. I doubt it. Is he going to keep me here as a prisoner while my baby is just a feet away? If the answer is yes, then I’ll wash my hands.

“When he comes back.”

“Of course,” he says and gives me a smile. This smile once stole my heart. The nurse, the one who was in the room when Theo walked in, lifts her eyes to me. I wish I could tell her what is going on so that she could get me help.

But how when Ndumiso has his hands on me?

“Babe, you would like to rest, right?”

“No, I am fine,” I quickly say, even in pain.

“Please increase her dose so that she gets a change to rest,” he says anyway. The nurses look at each other.

The other nurse does as requested and twenty minutes later, I feel myself drowsy. The more I try to keep my eyes open, the more my eyelids feel heavy. I am left alone in the room while Ndumiso is in the living area, hosting the nurses while we wait for his people. I cannot hear what they are discussing but I can hear laughter filling the guest house. I don't blame them. He is that charming.

Finally, my eyes shut. I feel tipsy as if I was drinking a good bottle of wine. In all this, I am grateful that Ndumiso thought of bringing the nurses along to administer my pain. I don't think I would have survived if he just forced me outside the hospital.

Is he going to kill me?

Could he nurse me back to my feet only to kill me?

The next time I open my eyes, I find an unfamiliar face staring down at me.

“There you are,” a white guy says with a smile. He lets go of the IV and drops the injection into a little bin stationed at the corner of the room.

“How are you feeling Mrs Gumede?”

I want to correct him but I don't. I just shake my head.

“Who are you?”

“Your doctor,” he says. Ndumiso's people.

“Oh, is she is awake?” a lady dressed in a white dress says as she walks into the room. She has a little basin in her hand and a toiletry bag. She smiles at me and introduces herself as Nomusa.

Unlike others, she has manners. "I am asked to help you freshen up before your son comes in to see you. I'll help you with supper when he is here."

I give her a smile.

I want to see my son before anything.

The doctor walks out of the room and she starts by removing the catheter and putting another one. She wets the face cloth and hands to me so that I could clean my face.

"Are you a private nurse?" I ask.

"We only speak when you ask me to help you with what I am here for," she says, her cold eyes on mine.

Ndumiso's people.

I quietly let her help me to freshen up. As I wait for Mpho to come, I down the juice that Nomusa gave me to at least drink so that I

control my sugar levels. I have no appetite at all but I drink the juice.

The door flies open and in walks Mpho. I watch as tears streams down his cheeks.

“I told you I’ll bring her home for you,” Ndumiso says to him. Mpho turn his big teary eyes and nods at his father. When he turns so that he could move closer to my bed, Ndumiso warns, “Be careful. She is hurt so you are going to need to be careful.”

Nomusa shifts a chair but Mpho asks to get to the bed with me. She helps me to shift so that he could carefully get next to me. He shows him where to not touch and Mpho nods at her. My tears are on the verge of falling. My son has been through so much. Ndumiso has traumatised him so much and I feel helpless that I cannot save him from his father. I don’t have the means.

“I thought you were dead,” Mpho says as he carefully drops his head on my good shoulder. This time, my tears fall.

“I am here,” I respond.

“Daddy keeps his promises, doesn’t he?” Ndumiso asks. When Mpho doesn’t answer, Ndumiso raises his voice and asks, “Doesn’t he?”

“He does,” Mpho chokes on his tears as he clings on me.

You can still pre-order Love Tangle & Wounded Hearts

R480 – Love Tangle & Wounded Hearts

R680 – Into the sun, Love Tangle & Wounded Hearts.

All my other titles are available.

HEART of gold.

#40

ABIGAIL (unedited)

Opening my eyes, I find the room dark with the machines attached to me making the beeping sound. When I fell asleep earlier, Mpho was in my arm. I watched him cling on me for dear life and we stayed like that for many hours. I felt his little heart beat in my ear. It felt good to have him in my arms.

Nomusa walks into the room and puts on more light. The machines might have signaled to her for her to slide in the room just when I fell asleep.

“Are you okay? Do you need something?” she asks while standing beside the bed. She knows her job and she knows it very well. I don’t feel any hint of pain, thanks to all the drugs she

keeps inserting into the IV.

“Can I have water?” I ask. She gives me a small nod and thereafter walks out of the room, only to return with a glass in hand. She sets it on a small table beside the bed and helps me sit up. Thereafter she hands me the glass. She waits until I am done.

“Is there anything else I can do for you before I head to bed?” she asks.

“What time is it?”

She drops her eyes to her wrist watch. “11H40.”

“Can I use your phone?”

“You are not allowed to use a phone Mrs Gumede,” she says.

“I am not Mrs Gumede. Call me Abigail,” I correct her.

“I’ll stick to Mrs Gumede, thank you,” she says and continues to walk towards the door.

“Please wait.” She turns to face me. “Do you know that he is keeping me against my will? That you are helping him kidnap me?” She takes another few steps and I call her name. She slowly turns to face me as if I have annoyed her.

“Please say all those things in front of Mr Gumede, please?” she says. “I am not here to be part of your drama.”

“I just need help...”

“I don’t want to inform Mr Gumede of these tantrums so I suggest that you sleep right now.”

“Please, Nomusa.”

She takes her phone and when I think she wants to hand it to me, she dials a number and puts her phone to her ear.

“I was informing you that she is up and needs your attention,” she says as she walks out of the room.

I swear under my breath. She closes the door behind her and leaves me alone.

I am worried about Theo wherever he is. A few minutes later, I hear noise from the other parts of the guest house and without a door, the door which leads to this room flies open. In walks Ndumiso dressed in his lounge wear, topped with a blue gown. How things have changed. Mpho and I use to buy him these on father's days.

"Why are you bothering Nomusa?"

"I am not bothering her," I respond.

"Then why is she calling me here?"

"I don't know."

"So, if I give you the phone, are you going to call your private investigator to come here?" he asks.

"I don't have to call him. He will come get me," I

spit out.

“I dare him to come near my house,” he response with a smirk on his face. I don’t show him that I am freaked by his response. If he ordered for me to be shot, he can easily order one for Theo. “I spared your life because my son cried for you. If it wasn’t for him, you would have been dead right now. So, I’ll tell you again, I dare him to come near my house.”

I stare at him without saying a word. Then he turns to leave, but when he reaches the door, he stops and turns.

“Mpho told me that it was the two of you at the resort.”

“It was.”

“Where is your detective boyfriend?” he questions.

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll wait for him to come knocking,” he says.

“Nomusa won’t help you so if you need any help, ask me.” I swallow hard and stare at him. “How can I help you?”

Isn’t his wife waiting for him when he is busy with his ex?

“I need my phone.”

“What for?”

“I need to ask to excused at work.”

He lifts an eyebrow. “You work now?”

“I do.” He doesn’t say a thing. He stares at me as if summoning me to continue. “I own a bakery.” His eyes shift from mine. He must be very embarrassed that I am doing exactly what he never wanted me to do. And I am doing it without his help. He walks out of the room without another room. I hear him discuss something with Nomusa and thereafter I hear another male voice coming from somewhere

around the house.

Security?

I keep my gaze at the door, waiting for Nomusa to return. Instead of her, a buffed-out man walks into the room. He doesn't say a word to me as he walks around to check the windows. When satisfied with whatever he was searching for, he turns and leaves the room.

I don't know how I fell asleep but the is bright in the room and I can smell a cup of good coffee. Opening my eyes, they land on Ndumiso who is rooted next to my bed. He gives me a smile before taking a seat right there next to the bed.

"How did you sleep?" he asks. I don't respond. Instead, I turn to face the other way. He asks again, his voice slightly raised.

"What time is it?"

“How did you sleep?”

“Fine,” I breathe out, hating that Ndumiso gets what he wants and there is no one to stop him.

“You must be grateful that I am cleaning up your mess. I am keeping you here so that I clean your mess.”

“There is no mess to clean up here.”

“The police want you.”

“I am not scared of the police,” I respond and he looks down at me with so much anger. I really am not scared of the police. When I kidnapped my son, I was ready to face whatever that follows. The only thing I am scared of is to die and leave my son with this man. He has suffered enough in his father’s hands. I should have taken my son with me when I ran away from my marriage. I never imagined Ndumiso to be this heartless. He thinks he loves our son. He doesn’t love our son. This, what he does, is

not love.

“You may not be scared. But what about Mpho?” he asks. I don’t bother asking him to elaborate because I know how manipulating he is. He is the master of it. He manipulated me for all these years and I was very stupid to take his word.

“Did my son go to school?” I ask.

“How could he go when we are still fixing your mess?”

This man. I roll my eyes inwardly.

“It is your mess,” I say.

“How is this my mess?”

“I was bringing him back to you.”

“How was I supposed to know that? Why didn’t you call... or something? You had my son, he knows my number. You could have called.”

“I didn’t call but I was bringing him back when

you shot me,” I respond.

“I didn’t shoot you.”

“Does your wife know that you are here with me while she is out at work?” he doesn’t respond. It is as if he doesn’t want to bring her up. I get the opportunity to ask the things I had been asking myself. “Was she always there when we were married?”

“I am not discussing...”

“Does she know the real Ndumiso or you have hidden yourself like you did with me?” I shake my head. “So, you have another baby who is younger than Mpho. How many more are there?” He stares at me without saying a word. For a second, I see the man who was once my husband. In a flash, the demon that I am dealing with returns.

“You lost your right to ask me any of those questions the day you decided to fuck me over

with your private investigator.”

My blood is boiling when I say, “I am happy I fucked up. I wouldn’t have known what is felt like to be loved whole heartedly.”

“Where is he now? Isn’t he a coward?”

“Give me my phone and you’ll find out.” I don’t back down to give him an upper hand. The only way to deal with this man is to bruise his ego.

The door is slightly opened and when I shift my gaze there, I notice Mpho standing by the door. I smile at him and ask if he would like to get in bed with me.

“No. You are not a baby anymore. Sit down,” Ndumiso orders.

Mpho walks in and gets on the couch which is in the corner of the room. I shift my gaze back at Ndumiso and ask if he could excuse us. He walks out of the room without another word and there after Nomusa walks in. When she

does, I ask Mpho to get on the bed next to me. Nomusa helps him like she did last night. Thereafter, she takes the couch which Mpho had occupied before.

“How are you?” I ask.

“I am fine. I just miss school.”

“When did daddy say you’ll go?”

He shrugs his little shoulder and tells me that the news still reports that he is still lost and dad doesn’t want people to know that he is found. And indeed, no one will found out. The walls that secures this house are tall enough to hide the family away. I bet you, no one noticed that a woman was wheeled into the guest house. In fact, even they knew, no one have time to mind. And, yes, Ndumiso still needs to cook up a story that he will leak to the media and whatever it is must not be linked to the shooting at the mall. Since we have a guests who is watching us, I

ask him about what he was watching on television. His eyes light up when he shares about the games he was watching. He also shares about school and how he misses his friends. I bet the reason he is not home schooling right now is because Ndumiso doesn't want the school to pick his username when he logs in.

"Where is your phone?" I ask.

Nomusa lifts her eyes at me. It is as if the word 'phone' is programmed in her head.

"Daddy took all my devices."

Nomusa drops her eyes, knowing that Mpho won't be getting me a phone.

I don't know how to get to Theo.

THEO

I have no other choice but to walk into the devil's trap. I slept in the car, contemplating how to solve this fucking mess. Ndumiso made the means to move Abigail from the hospital for a very good reason. He doesn't want anyone speaking to her. Not even the police who arrived just a minutes after she was wheeled out of the hospital. Yesterday I didn't want to make immature decisions without a plan but even now, many hours later I still don't have a plan.

As I stop at the security gate, I ask the guards to buzz me into the Ndawonde's household.

"Where is the code to enter? The owner of the house must give you the access code," the guard says.

"Oh, I don't have the code."

"Then we cannot let you in."

“Please buzz Sindi and tell her that the detective from Ballito police station is here to see her regarding her missing son, Chris Ndawonde,” I say, not shifting my eyes from those of the guard. He turns to pick the intercom and dials. The lady answers asking who is at the gate. The security guard tells her what I said.

“I am not expecting anyone from the police station,” she says on the intercom.

“Now you are, ma’am,” I call out, loud enough so that she hears me.

“My husband will be the right person to speak to.”

“Where is your husband?”

“Just out for a few minutes but he will be back just now.”

“I need to speak to you about the developments, ma’am,” I say, imitating the authority of the detectives.

“I... I... I don't think...”

“Is there something that you are hiding?”

“No. No. The thing is... Please, let me call you back.”

The security guard turns to me when the call is hanged. I tell him that I'll wait for her to call back because I am not leaving before I see her. After a minute or so, the security phone rings and one guard responds. Thereafter, the boom gate opens, followed by the tall gates. One guard directs me where to go. I start the engine and drive in, saluting a hand at the security guards.

I drive slowly, following the direction dished out by the security guard. I am in awe of all the houses I see as I drive down the road. The yards can occupy about more than five standard houses. These people must be filthy rich to stay in such houses.

When I reach the right end of the road, I turn into the driveway of a huge house. It doesn't take a second before the massive gates open. Biting my tongue, I drive in. I believe that Abigail is somewhere here. A huge coloured guy stands in front of the car, his eyes narrowing.

"Craig, you let him in, he is the detective," a lady dressed in a pink dress—I believe it is Sindi—says as she walks out of the door.

"Boss didn't tell me anything about a detective," he says.

"I spoke to him. He is aware of this visit."

The man, Craig, narrows his eyes at me. They just told him that I am a detective, but he is unbothered. He takes his phone as I step out of the car and makes a call. When done, he turns to Sindi and says, "Please go inside the house. I will see the detective in."

I swear under my breathe. A minute with Sindi

would have been appreciated.

“I am here to run some questions with...”

“You’ll direct your questions to Mr Ndawonde instead.”

“No... I am..”

“Right this way,” he offers. Are these men not afraid of the police of the law? I follow him into the house. He tells me to take a seat at the lounge and thereafter instructs someone to get me a drink. I don’t know where Sindi disappeared to. Someone walks into the lounge and places a tray of drinks. I dart my eyes around the house, hoping to hear Abigail’s voice coming from anywhere in the house. The house is quiet with no sign of children in the house.

I hear the footsteps striding towards where I am seated before I see Ndumiso appear in front of me. He freezes and narrows his eyes before he crosses his arms across his chest.

“The precious private investigator.” He huffs out a laughter.

There is no hiding anymore.

“What are you doing in my house.”

“I came to take Abigail home.”

“She did say you’ll come for her.”

“I don’t want to waste your time. Get her here and I’ll take her home.”

“My wife is not going anywhere.”

“She is not your wife,” I say this when I jump to my sit. A gun is cocked behind me; when I turn, I find Craig pointing a gun at me. He gestures for me to sit down. When I don’t respond, he takes a step and tells me to sit down. I do. The plan is not to die here unless it is the only way out.

“I’d think twice before I pull that trigger,” I say, aiming my eyes at Ndumiso. I don’t have a plan or a back-up but he doesn’t need to know. “I’d

think twice.”

“Check him for any wires,” Ndumiso demands his dog.

I have him where I want him to be.

HEART of gold

#41

THEO (unedited)

His angry gaze is still fixed on me as his puppet searches me for wires. I stare back, trying to challenge him. I am shitting my pants right now but he doesn't need to know.

“No gun. No wire,” Craig says. Where the hell was I going to get a gun in such a short period of time? I couldn't involve the KZN police, knowing that Abigail might end up in jail if things don't go according to plan.

“You must be stupid to walk into my house

without protection?”

“Do you really think I am that stupid?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at him. That is exactly what I thought before throwing the towel. This might be a very stupid move. He stares at me without saying a word. Craig lets me go.

Ndumiso peels his eyes from me, turns on his heels and walks to the drinks’ table. I watch as Ndumiso pours whiskey into a glass and throw in two ice cubes. He turns to me and asks if I want a glass like I am here on a friendly visit. I am not here to make friends. He shrugs at me while he makes a way back to where I am. I am still standing, as instructed by Craig. My heart is on my throat as I wait for his next step.

“What makes you think you can just walk into my house?”

“I already told you. I am here to take Abigail. “If you didn’t move her from the hospital, I wouldn’t

be in your house.”

“She is not going anywhere.”

“So am I,” I say, while sitting down. “But the sooner we do this, the better.” I check my wrist watch and Ndumiso narrows his eyes at me some more, as if my watch is more than what it is.

Ndumiso smirks at me, probably calculating me.

“Need to be somewhere?”

“If I don’t walk out of here with Abigail in two hours time, it might not be a good thing for you. The media is ready to broadcast the update on the missing of the Chris Ndawonde.”

“What update?”

“We have a dirt on you Mr Ndawonde... or must I call you Gumede? The world needs to know the truth about you and I bet you, if I don’t walk out of here, your laundry will be aired to the public

to see. How you launder money into the country and sell girls to buyers all around the world?" He doesn't move. He takes a sip from his glass as if he is not moved. Maybe he is not moved. Maybe he is. But I don't stop reaching for an upper hand in this situation. "Everybody is waiting to find out what happened at the KZN shooting. Come on, you know... it be a very interesting media story that the boy Chris Ndawonde was not kidnapped but taken to vacation by his mother, only for his mother to be shot by his criminal father." Ndumiso grits his teeth at me as I continue to press his buttons. "How did you think we found you Mr Ndawonde? It should tell you something."

"Craig, excuse us," he orders. He probably doesn't want to sweat in front of his employee. When Craig disappears, Ndumiso gets on his feet and walks back to the drink's table and refill his almost empty glass of neat whiskey, I

presume. I keep my eyes glued on his. When he returns to his seat he clears his throat and says, "There is nothing that money cannot buy. Are you aware of that saying... Mr...? he says and his last word is hanging so that I finish it for him. I don't. He smiles and continues, "Mr Pl... Are you aware that money can buy everything?"

"Not happiness. that's why you are miserable."

"Who said I am miserable?"

"You wouldn't be holding on to a woman who doesn't love you," I spit.

"You mean Abigail? She is not going anywhere," he says.

Shit!

I don't have a next move.

I stay quiet.

"This is what I need you to do," he says. "I need you to go back to where you come from and

come up with a better threat. I am not moved.”

“Like I said, I am not going anywhere without Abigail.”

“You will.” His eyes shift towards the staircase. I don’t want to seem intimidated so I don’t move mine from him. “Is there something you need?”

“Can I have a word with you?” Sindi says.

“I am in a middle of something,” she insists. He carefully places the glass on the side table and gets on his feet. He walks past me and only now do I look over my shoulder. Sindi leads the way upstairs and I am tempted to take a look around the house. When they disappear, I quickly jump on my feet and aim for the doors that are in front of me. I open the door, finding an empty guestroom. On its left is a children entertainment area. I take long strides down the corridor, but the house looks dead and empty.

“Abigail?” I loud whisper, opening doors that I find but none present her to me. As I turn on my left, I hear a cock of the gun and I freeze.

“What do you think you are doing?” Craig spits. I hate the gun because I cannot fight it. I try to turn but he hisses for me not to move. I raise my hands so that he doesn’t shoot. He reaches for my hands and the mistake I do is to try to fight him when he touches me. I feel the steel on my head and everything blacks out.

NDUMISO

“This better be very important,” I hiss at Sindi who is standing in the middle of our bedroom. She has her phone and is trying away on it. She

pulls a screen and turns towards me.

“What the hell is this?” I ask while I take the phone. It is a picture of me taken at the filling station when I was jumping into my car after picking Mpho. This is posted on twitter and the user mentioned that he saw an exchange done and the kid was taken by me. The post has a few retweet and a just a mere reaction. I send the link of the post to my phone so that I can send it to Musa to clean up this mess. I hate that these inconveniences keeps popping up. I forward the link and the instruction to my clean up guy. I want that account deleted on twitter before it gets to the wrong audience.

Does this PI has something to do with it?

What the hell is his name again?

The twitter handle seems to be a gossip account.

“Deal with this NOW.” – I text Musa. He sends

back a text with just a thumb up. Sliding my phone in my pocket

I hand back the phone to Sindi and thank her for looking out for me.

“I can’t keep doing this,” she says before I could step out of the room.

I turn to face her. “What was that?”

“I cannot do this. I can’t. I can’t be part of this whole mess.” She shrugs before she continues.

“How do you expect me to feel when your ex-wife is in the guest house and no one is allowed there?”

“You are not supposed to feel anything,” I respond.

“That’s the problem with you,” she says. What problem now? I watch as she marches to the closet and pulls it open before she pulls two luggage.

“What do you think you are doing?”

“I am going to my daughter,” she says. We had Nana go to Sindi’s friend for just a little while so that I handle everything.

“No, you are not,” I say.

“Watch me,” she says.

“Sindi!” I warn.

“What do you want Ndumiso?” she yells. “Do you think I don’t know how much you are still so obsessed with her? Why are you keeping her here? Why do you need her near you so much? You know that you wouldn’t have organised anything like this for me.”

“She is here because I don’t want her talking to anyone until I clean up the mess.”

“That is exactly what I am tired of. I don’t want to be part of this mess you are trying to clean up.”

She is being dramatic.

I have no time for this.

I leave her packing the clothes into the bags, knowing very well that she is not going to drive out of the yard. I head downstairs where the foolish PI awaits for me. My brow furrow when I find Craig standing over the man.

“What the hell happened here?” I ask, scanning the private investigator who is on the floor.

“You left him unattended. He was snooping around.”

“Fuck!” I swear, realising my wrong move. Take him to the guest house,” I say, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“I think we should finish him. He is going to be a problem.”

“No, you can’t kill him yet. He knows too much.”

“That’s the reason you must finish me.”

“Not before he tells me who else knows. He wouldn’t have know my house if he didn’t know more than he should. I should get the people he spoke about before you get rid of him.”

“But...”

“Can’t you see that this is some sort of trap? This is a trap. He wouldn’t have walked here unarmed if he was bluffing. Would you?”

“I am not stupid.”

“Do you think he was stupid? There is something he trust and I need to find out what that it.”

“But you cannot keep putting people in the guest house.”

“I can. And I won’t repeat myself,” I say. “Take him to the guest room and take care of Sindi upstairs.”

I walk out of the room while Craig drags the PI

to where I instructed him to. I also head to the guest house, so that Mpho doesn't have to see Craig. Walking into the guest house, I meet the Nomusa walking out of the bathroom door. I nod at her before walking into Abigail's room. I find Mpho in his mother's bed. When he notices me, his eyes widen and he tries to shift from the bed but his mother stops him. I narrow my eyes at Abigail.

"You are back," Abigail says.

"What is happening here?" I ask. Nomusa walks into the room and asks if I need some privacy. I nod at her and she leaves the room. I return my gaze back to Abigail. It is as if I walked into something happening here.

"What are you talking about?" she asks.

"Mpho, what is happening here?" I aim my question to my son.

"I was asking...if... I could go to play some

soccer in the back yard,” he murmurs.

“Why are you asking her?” I question.

“I was asking her if she thinks that you’ll let me go ... if I ask you.”

I sigh.

I hear commotion on the other side. It must be Craig and the private investigator. I walk out of the room to check and I do find Craig fighting the PI, who is no conscious. I turn back into Abigail’s room.

“Dad, can I? I can play soccer for just five minutes?” he asks.

I hate to be a jerk all the time.

“Just for five minutes when I talk to your mother,” I respond. I do need to talk to Abigail.

He gives me a small nod and thereafter jumps out of bed and hurry out. When the door closes, I move closer to the bed. Abigail angrily stares

at me. I hate how he has moved on.

“Who are you working with?” I question. She frowns a little, pretending not to know what I am talking about. “How did you find my house?”

She shrugs.

“It is either you talk or one... if not both of you will leave this house in a body bag,” I say.

“Both of us?”

“Your private investigator,” I respond. She smiles and I hate that her eyes lit up when I mentioned him.

“I told you he will come for me.”

“That was very stupid of him to come to my house,” I respond. “Now, who are you walking with?”

Abigail shrugs again.

I call Nomusa into the room and instruct her to stop giving Abigail any pain relief until she begs

for it. I'll get it out of her.

"Where is Theo?" Abigail hisses as Nomusa removes the drips from her wrist. She will be begging soon.

My phone rings from my pocket. Pulling it from my pocket, I see my neighbour's name flashing. I wouldn't have known his number if our children didn't beg us for sleep over parties. I walk out of the room, not wanting to risk Abigail screaming while I am on the call. I close the door and walk further into the kitchen area.

"Hey, Russel," I greet.

"Ndawonde," he butchers my name.

"How can I help you?"

"Is Chris found?"

"Unfortunately no, he isn't. We are still looking and the police promised to give us an update soon. Please keep our families in your prayers."

“Uhm...”

“What?”

“No... nothing,” he says. “I think I should go.”

“Russel...” I call his name, starting to worry about how he sounds.

“My kids were playing in the back yard when someone threw a ball from your house.”

Shit!

“Maybe...it was Nana,” I say. “She likes to...”

“No! I can see your son jumping on his trampoline right now... throwing stones at my yard.”

Shit!

“Ahh, that’s impossible,” I say while marching outside so that I head to the backyard. There on the trampoline is my son.”

“I have to go,” Russel says in urgency.

Dammit!

Heart of GOLD

#42

NDUMISO

Dammit!

Even if I want to throw a hot clap at my son, I cannot do so when my neighbours are possibly watching me. I rush to where he is, still jumping on the trampoline and throwing stones to grab the attention of the neighbours.

“Mpho?” I hiss and he turns to face me. He drops the stone which was in his hands and stares at me. “I need you to come to me right now.”

“No!” he says.

“Chris?” I call him with his new name and nose flares. He knows why I gave this name to him

and I am very disappointed that he is acting out like this. What kind of nonsense is this? His eyes are blazing and I hate that I cannot put him in his place when the neighbours are watching.

“Chris! Come here, right now,” I command him while taking a few steps towards me.

“I’ll yell,” he warns. I stop on my tracks and lift my eyes to Russel’s balcony, checking if he can see him right now. I don’t see anyone on his balcony, so I take long strides towards Mpho.

“Help! Help me! Help,” Mpho yells from the top of his lungs as I rush to him. He tries jumping away but I catch him before he runs away from me. I cover his mouth so that he stops yelling but he bites my palm in the process.

“Stop it, dammit!” I hiss at him while placing my hand back on his mouth and carrying him towards the guest house. He moans, trying to fight out of my hands. He is my son. He can

never be stronger than I am. He fights me as I make longer strides. I feel his tears on my hand as he tries to breathe and fight to be freed. Only in his mother room do I throw him inside and let him free.

“What the hell do you think you are doing?” I bark at him. He struggles from the floor and jumps to the other side of the bed where I cannot reach for him. “What the hell did you do?” Before I even attend to Abigail who is seated on the bed with a frown, which I believe comes from the pain she might be feeling at this moment, I pull my phone from my pocket and dial Russel’s number. It stays ringing.

Shit!

“What did you do Mpho,” I yell, throwing a punch on the wall just beside me. This is a fucking mess.

“Abigail,” the PI yells from the other room.

“Theo?” Abigail gasps loudly. She looks around the room, her eyes landing on mine when she raises her voice, “Theo? Theo? Are you alright?”

“Abby... babe...?”

“Why the hell didn’t you put a gag in his freaking mouth?” I yell, storming out of the room and standing by the corridor which leads to where the other guest room is. “Craig? Craig?” I yell, not wanting to go down the corridor while I haven’t locked Mpho. It is as if everyone wants to fucking mess with my head today.

“Babe... are you okay?” Theo yells, making my blood boil.

“Are you okay?” Abigail calls out in a breaking voice.

“Can you all shut up???” I yell out. “Can everybody shut up right now?”

“I’m fine, babe. But I am worried about you,” he says, not taking any of my damn instructions.

“I’ll be fine,” Abigail says in a faint voice.

I stop clutching my phone which is by now almost breaking from my tight fingers and dial Craig’s number.

“Boss?” he says.

“Where in the world are you?”

“You told me to take care of Sindi and stop here from leaving.”

“I need you here right now.”

“What about...”

“Right now!!!” I yell. I want to throw my phone to the wall but I freaking still need the damn thing. I march back to Abigail’s room and point at her, telling her to stop what she is doing. Mpho is in her good arm and now do I realise that she is the one who instructed her to go against me. She frowns at me, without saying a word. The pain is probably kicking in. Shifting my eyes to

Nomusa, I find her standing at the corner, her eyes fixed on me. She is the one who messed everything. That minute when she stepped outside the room for the bathroom was long enough for Abigail to poison my son. Mpho never went against me. He wouldn't dare.

"Abigail? Are you there?" Theo yells. Each time he does, I feel like strangling him. Craig appears by the door. When Theo yells for Abigail again, he grits his teeth, probably figuring out why I am so pissed right now. Theo is half of my problem though; my fucking son betrayed me.

"Why the hell didn't you gag him, huh?" I ask.

"I had knocked him out with a fist," Craig responds.

"Knock him out again and take him to the warehouse," I say, filling him on what happened with Mpho and Russel. If anybody comes to my house and tries to turn my house upside down,

they shouldn't find Theo as a hostage. I can explain the reason why my son and wife are here. I ask what is the progress with Sindi and he tells me that he locked her in my bedroom. Sindi is the least of my worries right now.

Craig walks out of the room and disappears and in a minute or two, I hear commotion down the corridor.

"Don't hurt him, please," Abigail pleads. "Let him go."

When we all hear a sound of a fist, we know what just happened and Abigail's tears cascade down her cheeks.

"It is not my fault," I say.

"You are a monster," Abigail's voice cracks. I hear Craig dragging the man out of the house. He is probably going to throw him in the boot of the car before transporting him far away from here. We will deal with him later. Right now I

have a mess my very own freaking ungrateful son created.

More mess.

I tell Nomusa to excuse us. When she walks out of the room, I walk closer to the bed where my son stay in his mother's arm as if he is very safe.

"Abigail, did you tell that boy to go against me?" I ask and she doesn't say a word. I try again, even though I fucking hate repeating myself. My voice is louder when I ask, "DID YOU?"

Mpho trembles but his mother tighten her hand around him and points a finger at me before she challenges me by saying, "Don't yell at me in front of my son." She grits her teeth, her tears still running down her cheeks. She swallows and repeats, "Don't you dare yell at me in front of my son."

Just this reminds me of many years ago when

we were a very perfect family. Look at us, now. Just look at the mess Abigail created with her fucking private investigator. I don't even know what she sees in him.

'Babe... are okay?' I mimic his fucking annoying words.

I stare down at Abigail as she flinches to the pain that she is feeling.

"Chris..."

"Mpho!" Abigail corrects.

I don't acknowledge her correction. Instead I continue, "If anyone shows up here, you are going to tell them that you were playing, am I clear?" I ask and Mpho shakes his head. I hate it when my own family undermines me. I was trying to be a nice person but they are turning me into what I am not. I pull my phone and call Craig who tells me that he is just leaving the gate. I tell him to come back. I don't say a word

to them until Craig walks into the door.

“Take the boy with you and only return here when I call you back,” I instruct. Craig gives me a double take but I nod. When he takes the steps towards the bed, Mpho starts crying. Abigail is too weak to fight him. One hand covering his mouth, Craig picks Mpho with the other. He struggles.

“Where are you taking my son?” Abigail asks when Craig leaves the guest house.

“Craig will keep him until it is safe for him to return,” I respond. I walk closer to her bed. “If anyone comes into this house asking what was happening, you are going to tell them that you do not know anything. If you dare open your mouth Abigail Gumede, I am going to ship that boy of yours in the next ship out of South Africa.” Abigail shuts her eyes and let her tears flow. “Don’t tempt me.”

I don't wait for her to respond because she wouldn't dare open her mouth at me right now. I head to the house to deal with my dramatic woman. Unlocking the door, I find Sindi standing by the window. She doesn't turn to face me so I walk into the room and stop beside her.

"You can go," I say quietly. She turns to look at me. I see trails of tears on her cheeks. "Wipe your face and go. You can come back when you are ready to be a wife."

With that, I leave the room. If only she knows, whatever she decides to do, I can work with. I head down to the kitchen and grab a bottle of water from the fridge and head down the corridor to the guest bathroom to retrieve painkillers for my headache. I open the bottle of painkillers and pop two out and throw them into my mouth before downing half of the bottle. Thereafter I instruct our helper to go clean the

guest house.

ABIGAIL

I have never felt a pain like this before. I grit my teeth and try to take it in. Opening my eyes, I land them to Nomusa who is sitting on the couch in the corner of the room. Her eyes are soft but she drops them, not wanting to see me in pain.

“Please,” I hiss but she doesn’t lift her eyes to me. “Please...even if it is a Panado.”

My body is sweating and itchy. I want to continue to beg but Ndumiso walks into the room with two gentlemen into the room. One of them is dressed in police uniform and the other

is not.

“You see?” Ndumiso says as he walks further in and making his way to the bed. “This is my sister and her nurse. She is bedridden since the accident.” Today I am the sister. I wish I wasn’t in so much pain—I would have rolled my eyes. The police and the other guy who I believe is a detective, look around the room as if they are searching for something that I don’t know.

“Is she not in pain?” the detective asks after just one look at me. I swallow hard and nod. He shifts to where the drip stand is and looks down at my wrist which does not have the drip connected. “Is she not in pain?”

“Ahhh... Nomusa?” Ndumiso says, ready to blame her for why I am in pain.

“I gave... I gave her the painkiller and she is not responding to them.. maybe...I don’t know why,” Nomusa responds, trying not to keep her eyes

on those of the detective.

“No, use the drip,” he says.

Ndumiso grits his teeth at me as I heavily breathe.

Nomusa jumps to her feet and starts administering the drip. I close my eyes, waiting for the medicine to keep in.

“So, your neighbour says he saw your son jumping on the trampoline outside,” the detective says to Ndumiso.

“If my son was home, the first people I would have called were going to be you and his school. The old Russel was seeing things; the last time I checked he was admitted in a psychiatric ward. And it breaks my heart that you guys are here...searching my house when you are supposed to be searching for my son. I need my son home,” Ndumiso says.

I tighten my eyes when I feel the liquid entering

my blood vessels. I grip the linen as it flows in so that it could start working. I open my eyes and find the detective staring down at me.

“Are you alright?” he asks.

I have a little energy in me so I shake my head.

“Abigail, you will be fine. I told you that you are...” Ndumiso tries to disturb.

I keep my eyes on the detective when I say, “He kidnapped me.” I don’t care if Ndumiso is going to succeed in his next move to ship my son out of the country, but I am not going to let him get away with this without trying to stop him. I allowed him the first time but I am not going to do the same right now.

At the same second, the detective reaches for his gun which was on his wrist at the same minute Ndumiso reaches for his weapon as well. A loud bang goes off before Nomusa shouts and hides under the bed. My eyes are

shut and I am afraid to see who is shot. I hear heavy breathing and then a loud thud as a gun falls to the floor and thereafter, Ndumiso curses, “Shit!”

“Don’t move,” the detective yells loudly. Only now do I open my eyes to find Ndumiso heavily breathing and leaning on the wall, his good hand covering his shoulder where blood is oozing out.

My body trembles as I watch Ndumiso breathing heavily. He lifts his eyes to me and I swallow hard at the threat his eyes are delivering.

“He kidnapped me and sent his bodyguard to take my son and boyfriend to some warehouse,” I dish out, staring right into his eyes.

Heart of GOLD

#43 (unedited)

NDUMISO

Dammit!

I hiss, why leaning on the wall to stop myself from falling straight to the floor. My body feels cold as blood keep gushing out of my shoulder.

“Nomusa,” I hiss, lifting my eyes to her. She is standing in the corner of the room, scared as shit.

“Don’t move now,” the detective spits, still aiming the gun at me. He orders the police to search the whole guest house. As I try to shift to get the right position, the detective continues to yell at me, telling me to stop moving. If I had back-up, the would have been here by now.

Craig won’t return here until it is safe to do so.

I lean against the wall and slowly slide down to the floor so that I could sit down. Abigail has not stopped blurting out things at the detective

who is now calling for back-up.

Shit!

Is this what Abigail is feeling after being shot on the shoulder. My eyelids are heavy but I not stupid enough to close my eyes. I don't want to fall into a coma or anything. I press hard against the wound, making sure that I stop the blood from gushing out. But this doesn't make me feel better. My body feels cold and hot as if I am catching a fever.

"Can the fucking nurse attend to me?" I hiss at the detective.

"I said don't move," he says instead.

My shoulder is in fucking pain.

"I am going to lose blood, dammit," I hiss at him. I growl, lifting my deadly eyes to him. He grits his teeth and thereafter tells Nomusa to attend to me. Her hands are trembling when she cuts my shirt. Lifting my eyes to Abigail, I find her

tears streaming down her cheeks as she talks to the detective who is also on the phone with someone. He walks up to me and orders me to tell him where the warehouse is situated.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” I hiss, swallowing hard as Nomusa nervously covers the wound. The blood has stopped but the pain stings.

“Ndumiso, please tell them where my son is,” Abigail cries. Again, for the hundred times, she keeps messing things up. I was trying to be a great father to allow our son to spend time with her only for her to betray me.

They betrayed me.

“Nomusa, give me something to kill this pain,” I hiss at her.

“Let her do her job or wait for us to take us to our government hospital.”

There is no way I am setting my foot to the

government hospital, so I keep my mouth shut and allow Nomusa to do her freaking job.

The detective has not stopped questioning me about the warehouse. I tell him that I do not know what Abigail is talking about. It is too soon to confess and I might need this detail to make a bargain later.

Seated on the floor, I hear endless sirens ringing outside. I know that they are here for me.

The detective walks out of the room and a few minutes later, he walks in with two paramedics and three more police men. They help me up the stretcher before they cuff my leg to it.

This is what I am subjected to now and it is all Abigail's fault.

Russel is very brave to set his foot in my yard. He is standing just outside the guest house when the wheel out of it. One look at him and he turns his gaze away. If I were him, I would have

stayed the fuck away from here.

As they wheel me away, I notice the helper standing by the kitchen door staring right at me. I tell her to call Sindi who left the house earlier. She is going to need to be a wife now. Once at the back of the ambulance, I allow myself to finally rest when the sharp pain has subsided. I close my eyes and allow the sound of sirens to sedate me.

Opening my eyes from a very long and deep sleep, I find myself in a small hospital room. The way the chair which is by the side of the bed is so old, I can tell I am not in a hospital of my choice. My throat is dry and I shoulder feel dislocated. Lifting my head, I scan the room for anybody who could be in. I only notice a huge boot which belongs to a guard seated just outside the wardroom.

I clear my throat so that I can summon him in. The guard turns towards the ward and his eyes land on me. He says something to someone standing right next to him and thereafter gets on his feet. He walks into the ward and stare down at me.

“Can I speak to someone?” I ask.

“You can speak to me.”

“Can I make a phone call?”

“You will do so when you are discharged and taken to the police station for questioning.”

Dammit, Abigail!

THEO

The sobs are loud to my ear. Opening my eyes, I search my surroundings as I try to fight to stretch. I am curled in a very limited space and someone is sobbing right next to me. The sobs are louder and I do not know where they come from. The muffled sound tells me that the person who is curled in here with me also has a tape over their mouth. When I feel myself slightly rolling, I realise that we are in motion. We are moving. The last thing I remember is communicating with Abigail until Ndumiso's guard threw a punch and knocked me off.

The headache confirms the blow.

I am in a boot of a car, right?

Now, where is he taking me.

And who is in here with me?

It cannot be Abigail, can it?

I panic. She must be in so much pain to be subjected to this. I listen carefully until I realise

that the faint sobs are coming from someone younger.

Mpho?

Is it possible that I am in the boot with Mpho?

How fucked up can a man be?

The car moves for what feels like thirty minutes before it comes to a halt. I try to listen carefully to my surroundings and I can hear voices between two people. The boy is still sobbing as I brace myself for what follows. I make a prayer. We cannot die here. I left my son with a friend and I don't even know how Abigail is right now. My heart is in my throat.

The light blinds my eyes when the boot flies open. Thank goodness they didn't blind fold us. I shut my eyes tightly before opening them after a little while, to find Craig looking down on us. I am indeed in a car with Mpho who has tears all over his face. He has a cloth tied around his

mouth, hence the sobs.

Craig's phone rings before he could grab any of us out of the boot. He pulls it from his back pocket and answers it, still looking down at us.

"What?" A frown paints his face. "What time was that?" He waits after swearing on the phone. "Fine. I will go find him. Stay put and do not allow anyone in the house, do you hear me?" He pulls the phone from his hand and scrolls on it and thereafter puts the phone back to his ear as he walks further away from the boot.

"Sindi, I need you to go back home and stay put. The police came to the house and took Ndumiso away." He grabs the two chairs which a guy brings from the back. "I am with the boy. Take Nana and take her home and do not talk to anyone. Not the media, not a friend, not the police, do you hear me." He frowns while he listens. "This is not the time for that, do you

hear me. We need to get your husband out. I will deal with everything. Do your part.” With that, he hangs up and slides his phone back into the pocket. Mpho darts his eyes around and when they land on me he doesn’t relax. My face looks so painful so I am quite sure that it is rearranged and it is not in good condition.

Craig reaches for Mpho first and the boy tries to scream with no success. He tries fighting Craig off but he is too strong for him. He throws him, not so carefully, on the chair and the other man ties his little hands to the chair.

Sick bastards!

Once they are done tying Mpho up, Craig walks to the boot and looks down at me.

“I don’t want to shoot you,” he says while corking his gun. He points it to my head. I tightly squeeze my eyes shut and pray that he doesn’t shoot me. I have given them enough

trouble for the day and he probably think the police were brought to the house by me. I have nothing to do with the police. I wait for my fate and when I feel the cold steel on my forehead, my body trembles.

“Please,” I groan while shaking my head.

Please!

Please!

But they would have shot me at the house, correct?

I slowly open my eyes and land them on Craig who has his eyes fixed on mine. I beg him with my eyes. He doesn't have to shoot.

“I fucking tired of you,” he spits and takes a deep sigh. “Look, I already have reasons to blow your head up right now and bury your body; don't give me more reasons. Are we clear?” I nod my head at his question. It wouldn't be wise of me to act clever right now. Mpho is also here,

I don't want him to be traumatized more than he already has been. He unties my feet and tells me to get out of the boot. Slowly, I get out of the boot. Taking our surrounding in, I notice that we are in a huge empty warehouse with just boxes lined by the wall. The warehouse does not have any windows so chances of dying here and only have your body retrieved after a decade are not very slim. It is not time to play a hero.

"Go and sit down over there," Craig says, pushing me to where Mpho is seated. I slowly sit down before the guy ties to my feet to the chair and thereafter cuff my hands to the chair too. Turning to Mpho, he hasn't stopped crying and Craig seems unbothered.

Only when the man steps away from me, does Craig stand in front of Mpho. He lifts Mpho's chin using a gun.

"Look at me," Craig says to Mpho who is struggling to breathe. He hasn't stopped crying

since we were in the car. I pray that Mpho listens. Luckily, he opens his big eyes and aim them at Craig. “Look, your dad is not very happy with you and right now he is taken by the police. If you scream, I am going to shoot you,” Craig says. Mpho nods at him. “If you cry out loud, I am going to shoot you both, do you hear me?” Mpho nods at him again.

I can only pray that Mpho means it.

I can only pray that the boy noticed that even if he cries or scream, no one is coming for us. We have no choice but to comply. I regret not telling anyone about my attempt to ambush NDUMISO’s home because right now, no one is looking for me other than Abigail.

I wish to know what happened when we were taken away.

Craig unties the tape that was put on Mpho’s mouth. The boy breathes out, gasping for air.

Luckily he complies. Only after a little while does Craig orders the guy next to him to give Mpho some water. The guy jumps as he opens the bottle and shift closer to Mpho before he helps him drink.

At least he is nice.

Craig turns to me and takes off the tape that was covering my mouth. He didn't do it gently so you can imagine the fucking pain.

I groan - not loud enough to piss him off.

"Are you ready to tell me who you are working with?" he asks.

"Let the boy and Abigail go."

I am not going to open my mouth until I know that Mpho and Abigail are free from Ndumiso's hands. After today, I don't think Mpho should stay in the hands of his father. The boy has seen it all and I, as a father, cannot allow him to suffer more than he has.

“Who are you working with?” He throws a punch which lands on my face.

Damn, this man can punch. Mpho cries while I spit the blood. It be lucky to walk out of here with all my teeth.

Craig’s phone rings and I get a chance to breathe. Thereafter Craig orders his partner to keep an eye on us while he marches to the car. Only now do I rest my back on the chair and try to catch a breath. We all watch as Craig drives away in urgency, making me wonder what the reasons might be.

“Hey, do you remember me?” I turn to Mpho who is still crying. He nods at me. “Do you remember Aluwani? You used to play together.”

“I remember him,” he says. At least the tears are no longer gushing down his face.

“You guys need to play with each other again, right?” I respond and he nods his head. This is

the only thing that will keep us positive. I swallow hard before asking, "How was your trip with your mom."

Fortunately, his eyes light up when I say this. I am yet to know about their little vacation before the shooting happened.

"I had fun," he says.

"Do you want to go on another vacation when we get out of here?" I ask and he nods his head.

"Yes."

"You must listen to these guys, okay? I'll try to get you out of here so that you can be with your mother."

"What about you?"

"I'll join you soon," I respond.

Abigail and Mpho have to get out of Kwazulu Natal and reunite with Aluwani before these motherfuckers put a bullet on my head for

wasting their time.

Episode 44 - Tomorrow 20h30

HEART of GOLD

#44

ABIGAIL

The machines beep loudly, jerking me off from my sleep. Slowly opening my eyes, I scan the room. I am in a hospital ward since yesterday when the police moved me from Ndumiso's house. He was fuming when they wheeled him out but I am proud that I spoke out. This is better than being stuck in his house.

I dart my eyes around the room, searching for the detective to give me any update about Theo and my son. I want my son with me. I want Theo beside me and I am not going to rest until

this happen.

I pick the remote attached to the bed and tune into the news channel, hoping to see something positive about my case in the news.

There is nothing.

I pull the other little remote and press the emergency button for the nurses to come. It doesn't take too long before a nurse walks into the room.

"How can I help you?" she asks, aiming for the IV which is attached to my hand.

"Where is the officer?" I ask. "I need to speak to him."

"I'll call him for you. He left a number and asked that we call you when you wake up."

"Thank you," I whisper as I watch her walk out of the room. I wish I had my phone with me so that I could check up on Theo to find out if he

and my son are safe.

I am losing my mind, here.

While I wait for the nurse to return, I try to sit up. Being bed ridden at a time like this is not good. My thigh stings as I try to sit up but I don't stop from trying.

"What are you doing? You are going to mess up your leg," the nurse says as she rushes into the room. She hurries to help me up until I am seated in a position that I need. Thereafter she positions the pillows behind me. I cannot always be sleeping as if everything is well with me.

"What did the detective say?" I ask. I need him here. I need to know that my son is well; Theo too. I want to know if my son has eaten and slept well.

"He is on his way," she informs. I hope he is on his way with good news.

The nurse gives me a glass juice and urges me to drink before I faint on them. I didn't want to eat last night. How was I to eat when my baby is kept captive like an animal. I take the juice and a take a few sips.

I am losing my mind.

It takes a good hour for the detective to walk into my room. I had my eyes to the door since the nurse walked out of the ward.

"Detective," I whisper as I shift slightly so that I could sit up.

"Mrs Gumede," he says.

"Abigail," I correct. I don't like the look he has on his face.

Is it my son?

Is it Theo?

What the hell is going on?

"Where is my son?" I question.

“We haven’t found him. We don’t have a lead.”

“How come?”

“We are still searching,” he says.

“What does Ndumiso say?” I ask but then add, “I mean Mr Ndawonde.”

“He still stands by the fact that everything is not true,” he says.

“He is lying,” I hiss. “Ndumiso is lying. He has my son and my boyfriend.”

“We are still investigating, ma’am,” he responds.

“No, you are wasting time. Please. Why didn’t you interrogate the wife and the nurse? And everyone in that house? They know everything.”

“Like I said, we are still investigating and it is too soon to have positive feedback,” he responds.

Useless!

Very useless!

I let the tears fall because I am on my own. No one is willing to help me.

“Where is Ndumiso? Mr Ndawonde?”

“On the third floor,” he says.

I nod at him. I am going to need to pay him a visit.

I watch as the detective slowly walks out of the room. I clean my face before pressing the remote again for the nurse to help me. They are going to be very irritated by me. When the nurse walks in, I ask that she helps onto the wheelchair. She hesitates but I tell her that it is a matter of life and death. She walks out of the room and returns with a wheelchair. She helps me on it after fixing the hospital gown I am wearing.

“Please show me the way to the third floor.”

She is nice because she wheels me to the elevator. Before she wheels me further in, she shows me how to push myself without anyone's help. She needs to head back to her workstation and I am not willing to wait for another nurse to wheel me around.

On the third floor, the corridor is empty as I wheel myself further down to where I see a police man seated outside a ward. It can only be Ndumiso's room. When I stop in front of him, the police officer frowns at me.

"I need to see him," I announce.

"No one is allowed in," he responds.

I hate how I have to beg for everyone.

"Mrs Gumede," the detective says as he walks out of the ward.

"Can I have a word with him?" I ask. I lift my teary eyes to him and he gives the police officer a nod. I don't say another word to them but

wheel myself further in.

Ndumiso is awake, just staring at the wall. I swallow hard before stopping the wheelchair just in front of him. I am here to plead for his mercy because he thinks he is the god of everything. When he shifts his eyes at me, he shakes his head and turn to the other side.

“Ndumiso, please?” I beg. I know that he is pissed at me but I have no other choice but to do this. “I need my son and I’ll be out of your life forever.” I wait for him to react but he doesn’t. He probably blames me from everything, including his decisions in life. “Look, I am sorry for what I did.” He still doesn’t say a word. “I have a life and I have no desire to complicate your life but I need my son because I know that he needs me. Please bring him back to me and I’ll drop the charges.” He turns to face me but his eyes flickers with anger.

I am talking to a brick wall.

What a good thirty minute of silent treatment, I take a deep sigh and wheel myself back to my floor. I need to leave this place. I don't bother returning to my ward. I ask the nurses to discharge me right way.

It is time that I speak to Sindi – woman to woman.

I don't take time signing myself out of the hospital. The detective agreed to drive me back to Ndumiso house where I need to search for my belongings.

The drive is silent as I pray that a miracle happens and I'll find my son and Theo there. Sindi does not have a choice but to open the gates and the door for us. Our eyes don't meet when I stand in front of her.

"You cannot search my house without a warrant," Sindi says when the detective tells her that he needs to search the house. How the

police failed to have a warrant by now spooks me.

“Can I have a word with you Sindi?” I ask. She shakes her head but I tell her I won’t waste any of her time. I turn to the detective and tell him to leave, promising that I’ll have my sister pick me up from the house. This must be very confusing for the detective. Just a day ago I wanted him to save me from this very same house but right now, I am ordering him to leave.

I am left with no choice but to bargain with the devil.

He agrees to leave me after promising Sindi that he will return with a warrant. The minute he closes the door, I drag my bad leg until I make it the couch which she shows me. When she offers me tea like this a casual visit, I tell her not to bother herself. I still play it cool, knowing that I still need to beg her for her help.

She doesn't sit but stands by the window, far away from the couch I am seated on. It is as if she doesn't want me to reach to her. Even if I wanted to, I cannot jump with my painful thigh. It stings. Very much. And I don't have painkillers. My handbag and phone are somewhere around this house.

"You are my last hope," I mumble. She licks her lips and crosses her arms. She swallows hard. "I need you to plead with your husband for me. Please."

It feels very weird to be saying this to a woman who was once a mistress in my marriage. I am not bother by any of that. Ndumiso has hurt me so much that finding out about his other family is the last thing I am concerned about. I have made peace with the fact that he never loved me. I shouldn't have been married to him.

"I can't ..."

“You can,” I jump in. “I just want my son and boyfriend and we will be out of your way.” She stares at me. “Please.”

“I can’t.”

“Please. Just imagine if this was happening to Nana?” I ask. She widens her eyes at the mention of her daughter. “My son is broken and I need to put him back together. He shouldn’t be your burden anymore. Please. I’ll be out of your way. And I’ll drop the charges so that they bring your husband home.”

She slowly pulls her phone from her pocket and walks out of the room. I take this minute to rest. I am so exhausted and in pain.

It is as if she knew because a lady dressed in black and white uniform walks to where I am seated and leaves a bottle of painkiller and water. I take four instead of two, thereafter I close my eyes and rest my head on the cushion.

THEO

The room where we slept in is dark and cold. Mpho is curled next to me.

“I am thirsty,” he whispers to me. I nod at him and promise to ask Craig when he returns. He didn’t come back after he left Mpho and I lied to the chair yesterday. Only when it become very dark and probably late did the man untied us and threw us into this room. We still awaits our fate.

I can only wonder how Abigail is right now.

I miss my son and I regret not bidding goodbye to her when I had a chance. I should have warned him to call the police if I did not show

up at home in a few days.

Mpho trembles beside me when the door is unlocked. I lift my eyes towards there and find Craig standing by the door. He looks pissed. He always looks pissed. I immediately feel a headache, knowing that his fists are not very light. I am not prepared for more fists but I am prepared to save Mpho and his mother.

“Get up,” he orders me and Mpho up. I wait for the boy to help himself up before I struggle too. It is not very easy to try to stand while your hands are tied. He pulls his gun from his back pocket and points it towards the door. I nod at Mpho and we both take steps outside the room. The boot of his car is open.

He picks Mpho and throw him inside before he tells me to get in.

I slowly do so.

“Keep your mouths shut if you want to live,” he

spits as Mpho curls himself like a ball next to him. I nod without saying a word to piss him off. He closes the boot. He hasn't said where we are going and why he is moving us. I urge Mpho not to say a word but just breathe. I need him home safe.

I listen as the car starts to move. The radio is softly playing and Craig has not said a word. It looks like he is alone.

We drive.

And drive.

And drive for so long, I feel my heavy eyes shutting from the exhaustion but there is no room for a good sleep. We get to metropolitan area because I can hear the taxi hooting and noise from people going about their lives outside. I still tell Mpho not to make noise.

After what seems like fifteen minutes, the car comes to a halt. I listen careful but I cannot

hear a thing.

“Don’t fight him, okay?” I urge Mpho who nods at me.

The boot flies open, the sun blinding our eyes. Looking up, I notice Ndumiso’s house. Ndumiso reaches for me and starts searching my pockets. He pulls my set of keys and hand them to some guy I haven’t seen before. In an instant, I hear the engine of the car.

My car.

“I want you to drive the fuck out of here and don’t look back,” Craig spits at me. I nod before I step out of the boot and walk to my car. The driver’s door is open so I jump into the driver’s seat. Before I could even turn to check what is happening to Mpho, I hear the door at the back seat open and thereafter I notice the strange man throw Mpho inside. I place both my hands on the steering wheel as they open the boot of

my car. I don't turn to look but it seems as if they are throwing luggage into the boot.

The front passenger door is open before someone forces Abigail inside. She winces in pain but I don't move. All I see tears streaming down her face as she grits her teeth to Craig who is standing beside the door. When he closes the door, the gate in front of me opens. I don't need to be told anything. I put my car on gear and foot on the accelerator quietly, the only noise coming from Mpho and Abigail's sobs.

None of us say a word as I drive out of the gate and up the street.

As if the security officers at the gate were warned, they open the gates when they notice my car. It is only now when I notice the gates close from the rearview mirror, and only now do I breathe.

“Are you guys okay?” Abigail finally asks.

“Yes,” Mpho whispers.

“Yes.” I respond.

I haven’t stopped driving and I will not be stopping until I feel safe to do so.

Heart of GOLD

#45 (unedited)

ABIGAIL

I was sleeping on the couch when I was shaken violently from my sleep. Opening my eyes and finding Ndumiso staring down at me, I was scared and I almost peed myself on his couch. I don’t know how long I had slept for him to be home. The last time I saw him was back at the hospital in the ward, when he didn’t want to talk to me. So, seeing him, in his house, it felt like a bad dream.

My heart sank and tears stung my eyes.

Darting my eyes around the room, I noticed Sindi leaning on the wall.

Did she sell me out? I had thought.

How did he get here?

My mouth was dry and I couldn't speak while Ndumiso was breathing down at me. He has bandages supporting his hand and he frowned at me as if he was in pain. I was in pain too and I needed a refill of the painkillers.

I gritted my teeth and ready to yell at Sindi when Ndumiso said, "So, you think you are smart, huh?"

"No," I responded, lifting my chin at him. I did not have the energy to fight him while I was still pleading for Mpho and Theo's lives.

"Why did you discharge yourself when you look like that?" he hissed as if he also didn't leave

the hospital looking like a mess.

“How did you get away from the police custody?” I asked, staring up at him and not ready to back down.

“You should know by now that I am untouchable. You have so much time in your hands to waste on getting me locked up,” he hissed.

“Can you please just....” Sindi tried to say but Ndumiso yelled at her to stop talking. His voice roared so loud, I also squirm in my seat. She didn’t respond to her husband but she ran up the stairs while I watched. Ndumiso dragged her feet up the stairs to get to her. I watched, waiting for the verdict. I could hear them fight upstairs but I couldn’t make up their words. After just a few minutes, Sindi ran down the stairs with what looked like Mpho’s two luggage bags.

“What the hell do you think you are doing?” he

had yelled at Sindi.

“I told you that Craig is bringing Mpho back here. They are leaving,” she said, fearlessly. I wonder what took her so long to have these balls. “Your flight to East London leaves in two hours.”

“I said I am not going,” he hissed as he jumped down the stairs.

“Donavan got you out of that fucking hospital on those terms. Don’t let me get you back there right now,” Sindi had said while pointing her finger at him. She walked past him and up the stairs again like a crazy woman, leaving Ndumiso cursing at me for messing everything. I wondered who Donavan is to make Ndumiso shake like that. I was marking these names because some day I was going to need them.

Sindi.

Craig.

East London.

Donovan.

When she returned to where she left the bags, she unzipped one and put some papers inside. She walked to me and hand me my handbag which Ndumiso kept all this time.

“Charles knows my phone numbers,” Sindi said while returned back to Mpho’s luggage to zip the bag she had open. “Ask him to give you and I will send you the transfer from the school.”

“Sindi,” Ndumiso hissed.

Sindi stood up straight, stared down at me and said with a stern face, “Don’t call the police. Just get your son out of here and never return.”

“Sindi,” Ndumiso called out her name loudly this time.

“I told you I was done. It took me everything to beg Don. Please don’t fuck this up,” Sindi said, staring up at her husband. They stare at each other for quite some time until Ndumiso

softened and pulled her into a hug while I watch.

“Take care of my daughter,” Ndumiso whispered at Sindi. Only when we hear the car driving in did Ndumiso let go of Sindi and marched outside. She gave me just one look and walked up the stairs before I could even thank her for what she did. I felt bad for judging her at first.

I whince in pain when a guy I don't know pulls up from the couch.

“I can walk on my own, dammit,” I hissed at him. He let go of my and snatched the two bags from the floor. I limped outside to get to my son and Theo. As I drag my bad leg out of the main door, I noticed Ndumiso searching Theo's pockets. He then passed the keys to the guy who is stood next to him.

I was praying that we drive out of this place alive – all three of us.

Dragging my legs to the car, I watched as Theo stepped out of the car before Mpho is thrown at the back seat. I wished I could run faster. For the first time I did not mind Craig dragging me to the car and throwing me to the front seat.

Now, as we continue to drive out of Dolphin Coast, it is still quiet in the car. I haven't looked at the mirrors to check if there is a car following us or not. I still don't believe everything that happened prior to us driving right here.

My heart is still beating out of my chest and I am in need of painkillers – all these pills don't work like the strong stuff they put in the IV.

Turning to Theo, my trembling fingers trace his cheek which is so swollen. His face is swollen and his eye too. He steals a glance at me and shift his eyes back to the road.

“You need painkillers,” he said.

“You too,” I quickly say while turning to Mpho

who is at the back. He is seated quietly with tears falling down his cheeks. "Baby, are you okay? Did they hurt you?" He shakes his head without moving his eyes to me. He shakes his head. "We are going home, alright?"

"I am stopping right there," Theo says when he notices a shopping centre. "We need to refill and painkillers."

I nod at him because he is right. He has to drive to Bloemfontein right now and it is going to take us a while to get there.

"Mpho pass me my jacket. I left it somewhere there at the back," Theo says. I turn back to Mpho is staring blankly at the space.

"Mpho," I call his name and only now he shifts his eyes to me.

"Theo's jacket next to you," I say. He drops his eyes to the jacket which sits next to him and pulls it before handing it me. Once parked at the

filling station, Theo quickly puts the jacket on to look a little decent.

“I’ll be right back,” he says as he jumps out of the car. First he stops at the boot to get his cap, puts it on and thereafter hurry to the shop. I dart my eyes around the parking lot, searching for any of Ndumiso’s people. When I feel like there is no one paying attention to our car, I jump out and get to the back. Once I close the door, I pull Mpho into my arms. He silently hugs me back, clinging on me but he doesn’t cry the way I expected him to. I don’t let him go for long, telling him that we are going home.

“We are going home,” I whisper to him while brushing his back. When I let go, I give him a weak smile but he doesn’t smile back. He just shifts closer to me and rest his head on my shoulder.

We will be fine.

I close my eyes while I rest my head on the car seat. I almost jump when Theo opens the driver door.

“Sorry,” he apologises when he realizes that he startled me. He takes a few packets of panado and a bottle of water from the shopping bag and pass it to the back. “They don’t have anything stronger.”

“This will do for now,” I say while taking three panado pills. I ask Mpho if he is feeling any pain and when he shakes his head, I don’t give him the pills. I only give him a Poweraid and a packet of chips to snack on but he shakes his head.

He is still shaken.

“Eat a pie,” Theo suggests and he slowly takes one from my hand and take a bite. Theo reaches for one and finish it in a matter of a minute. Thereafter he starts the car and drive to

the petrol pump to get the petrol before we speed off to the N1.

The linens are very soft and they smell so fresh, the way I prefer them. It is dark in the room when I open my eyes. Next to me Mpho mumbles in his sleep while tossing. I slightly shake him and he stops but he doesn't open his eyes.

My baby is troubled.

I struggle to get up easily, the pain coming from my shoulder and thigh. When we arrived home, I did get painkillers to help. Theo had stopped by the hospital, asking if I would like to check in but I refused. I don't want to be away from my son until I know that he is fine. Theo then got me painkillers to help with the pain.

With gritted teeth, I fight to get up until I manage to sit up but I still need help sitting up.

“Theo?” I call out. The door flies open before I could call again. Mpho shifts close to me when Theo switches the light on.

“Hey... are you alright?” Theo asks as he gets closer to me.

“I need help getting down,” I say. He helps me up and to the bathroom. Only when I am seated does he leave the room. I can hear voices from the bedroom but I cannot tell what they are talking about. When we arrived last night, Aluwani was so relieved to see us. We were bruised but he was still so happy to see us when Theo’s friend dropped him off. When he notices Mpho, he was so excited to see him again. Even though Mpho was not in a greatest mood, he tried catching up with his old friend. When we came to bed, I didn’t have to ask Theo twice if he could allow me to sleep with my son.

When I walk back into the bedroom, I find Aluwani seated on the bed next to Mpho and Theo standing at the end of the bed.

“Are you guys having a party in the middle of the night?” I ask with a giggle.

“Can I also sleep here?” Aluwani asks.

“Sure, come on in... but you must sleep right now because you have school tomorrow,” I say while Theo helps me back onto the bed.

“Is Mpho coming to my school?” Alu asks.

“Yes, he will go to your school,” I respond.

“Yay!”

Theo covers us with a blanket before he switches off the lights and walks out of the room.

I am woken by the giggles coming from the kitchen. I missed this kind of noise where Theo and Alu playfully got ready in the mornings. The only thing missing is me preparing breakfast for them or baking treats for me.

Mpho is still sleeping beside me. He must be very exhausted and very sleepy since nightmares kept waking him up. I also didn't sleep much as I had to wake him up every other hour, also making sure that he doesn't wake Alu up.

Before I could even open my mouth, Theo walks into the room. When he finds me seated, he smiles at me.

"I wanted to check if you are up. Can I bring you some breakfast?" he asks. His face is still swollen even though we tried rubbing it with warm water. He also didn't want to get checked

by the doctor.

“Yes please,” I mumble. I need to take the meds.

He stares at me and smiles at me. I smile back, shyly licking my lips.

“Don’t do that,” he whispers. I giggle. I miss as much as he missed me. But there is nothing that can be done about it with my bad shoulder and bad thigh. If it was any other day, he would be crawling in bed and give me a mind blowing morning glory.

“Alu is going to be late,” I warn. He turns on his heels to get me and Mpho a tray of food. He sets it on my pedestal. He helps me out of bed to wash my face and brush my feet and use the toilet before he rushes to take Mpho to school. Mpho only wakes up a few minutes later. When he opens his eyes and they land on me, he smiles at me.

“Good morning,” I say.

“Good morning,” he responds quietly. “Can I use the bathroom?”

“This is your home baby,” I say. He nods at me while he gets up from the bed. I watch as he disappears to the ensuite bathroom. I hope he doesn’t take time to adjust to our humble dwelling. He comes from riches since he was born but I believe I taught him well. When he walks back to the room I ask if he still wants to sleep. He shakes his head so I tell him to grab his toiletry bag from his luggage so that he could take a bath before he eats his breakfast. Last night I let him into bed without a shower. Before he walks back to the bathroom to shower, I call his name and he stops in his tracks.

“Are you okay?” I ask. He is not the Mpho I was with at our little vacation before this whole mess. He shakes his head. “Come here.” I open my arms for him and he fits in before I envelope

him. He shudders while I caress his back. “You are safe with me, okay?”

“I hate him,” he cries. I hate how his chest starts heaving. He is angry.

“He is never going to hurt you,” I mumble to his ear as I continue to rub his back. “You are safe with me.”

Heart of GOLD

#46 (unedited)

THEO

TWO MONTHS LATER

Parked on the side of the road at the school, I scroll through my phone for any texts from Abigail. I am picking up the boys and take them to the soccer field with me so that Abigail could have some time to rest. She is not yet back at

the coffee shop full time but she does the baking at home. This morning she had a huge order for an event and has been working since the early hours of the morning.

She is running the shop from home as she tries to recover. Very soon, she will be back on her feet and I cannot wait for that. Maybe things will change around the house.

The school bell rings and I put my phone down and watch as the kids run out of the school. Luckily we got space for Mpho at Aluwani's school. Aluwani is a grade ahead since he is older but when you take a look at the two boys, you would swear Mpho is the eldest. They are both tall for their ages but Mpho is too reserved, you would swear he is not in primary level. This boy is disturbed and he is no longer as bubbly as he once was. The boy I laid my eyes for the first time in KZN is not the same as the one who is here.

Starting the engine of the car, I notice my son who excitedly points at the car and thereafter run towards it. Mpho quietly follows him to where I am parked.

“I am taking the front today,” Aluwani announces while he jumps to the front. Unfortunately my son is on his own. Mpho is not bothered or moved.

When he started school here, Abigail booked him in with the school therapist but there is no progress as yet. We are all trying but nothing is working. He is just unhappy. Sometimes, I try to get into his head but he has shut everybody out except his mother.

I turn to the back when Mpho opens the back passenger door and jumps in.

“Hi,” he mumbles as he reaches for the seat belt. I remind Aluwani to buckle up as well.

“How was your day?” I ask.

“It was good. But Mpho doesn’t want to play with me at school. He doesn’t have friends but he doesn’t want to be my friend too,” Alusays while darting his eyes between Mpho and I. I don’t know how to tackle this. Aluwnai wants the boy he used to play with when they were young and Mpho wants to be left alone in his shell. I don’t know how to strike this balance.

“Mom is resting, so I thought we could go to the field to practice some soccer,” I announce. I need to head back to work and I don’t mind taking them with me until five o’clock when I knock off. There is a lot they can do there. Mpho gives me a little head shake while Aluwani throws a fist to the air in excitement. It is every difficult to deal with Mpho and his emotions when I don’t know what he is thinking. We once asked for the notes made by the school therapist during their meeting but there was nothing solid she could report because he

doesn't want to talk. For the whole hour, he would sit and stare at her without answering any of her questions. At home, he doesn't want to engage with any of us except his mother. I don't know if he doesn't want Aluwani to call Abigail 'mom' or if his problem is me. Or is it the trauma he is dealing with? Or is he unhappy with us? Aluwani is also not making things easy. One day when Mpho once asked what to call me, I was ready to tell him to call me Theo but Aluwani suggested that he calls me 'dad' and Abigail 'mom', and since then, I haven't heard Mpho call either of us.

"Can I skip soccer? I need to do homework," Mpho says as I start the car. This is the longest line he has said today since he woke up.

"Won't you like to practice?"

"No," he says.

"We could grab some McD on the way," I tempt

him.

“Yes,” Aluwani says excitedly.

“No thanks,” Mpho says.

“Come on, Mpho. Daddy is going to get us some ice cream.”

“I don’t have a dad. He is not my dad,” Mpho responds, breaking Aluwani’s heart. I want to take my son away and break down our new life to him, even though it would dim his light.

Before Mpho was back in the picture, he had been dying to have a sibling and when Mpho showed up, he thought Mpho was an answered prayer. Unfortunately, things are not the way he thinks they are.

Aluwani is wounded on my behalf.

“Its okay Mpho. I always tell you that it is fine to call me Theo,” I say.

“Lets go,” Mpho mumbles.

But when it is like this, what do you do? Force him to go to practice with us? Or do I take him home?

This is kind-of difficult.

“Fine,” I mumble as I drive into the main road. Since I promised the McD, I drive past there for lunch and grab some food before driving home. I call the coach to ask him to excuse me for just an hour or so.

At the house, before I even pull the handbrake up, Mpho jumps out of the car and drag the school bag into the house. This is not the first time this is happening and since I took the bedroom key, he always gets into the room and push a table to stop the door from opening.

“Is he going to lock me out of the room?” Alu sadly asks.

“Just give him time,” I say.

“Why is he always angry? Did I do something

wrong?”

“No, it is not you.”

“Then what is it?”

I wish I knew.

Walking into the room, I find Abigail standing by the door, knocking for Mpho to open. She is dressed in pyjamas, to show that she was interrupted by the commotion in the house.

“Mpho, open the door,” Abigail begs, her hand pressed on the door.

“I hate that school. I hate everything,” Mpho calls out and his voice is breaking as if he is crying.

“Open up so that you can tell me all about it,” Abigail says.

“Leave me alone,” he calls out.

“No baby... please open up for me,” Abigail begs.

“No!” he calls out. When Abigail turns to me, she shrugs and takes a deep breath. I don’t know what else to do to help the situation. It is too soon to have a tough hand on him. We are still searching for the root cause of all these outbursts.

“What happened?” Abigail asks as she walks into the kitchen where Aluwani is eating his burger. I tell her that he didn’t want to go to soccer practice with me. Abigail shakes her head. The bags under her eyes tells me that she is exhausted.

“Should I open?” I ask. She nods. I head down to their bedroom and stop by the door.

“Mpho, I am going to open the door now,” I announce before I push the door open. Even if he wants, he cannot close the door as tight as he wants. As always, I find him in his bed, a blanket covering his head.

Taking a deep sigh, I sit on Mpho bed.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask.

“No.”

“What can I do to make things better?” I ask.

“Nothing!”

Abigail walks into the room and sits on the bed beside me.

“Please talk to me baby; how can we help you to feel better?”

“Just leave me alone,” he says.

“Come eat some lunch,” she offers. He shakes his head. “I baked some cookies.” Only now does he lift his eyes to his mother. “I made the chocolate chip ones.” Abigail gets on her feet and crosses to his bed and sits on the edge. “I want you to change and join me in the kitchen, okay?” Mpho nods. While Abigail has a word with her son, I walk out of the room. Aluwani is almost

done with his burger. While I wait for Abigail to come into the kitchen, I pull a bottle of water from the fridge and down it. I hear giggle down the corridor until Mpho runs into the kitchen and hide from his mother who is trying to tickle him.

If only this could be our lives. When Abigail also reach for Aluwani who laughs from the tickle, I pick my keys from the table and walk out of the door, not wanting to disturb their fun.

Driving to work, I feel shitty for not having solutions as the man of the house. I feel useless when I cannot have everyone happy in my house. Mpho's behaviour is affecting Abigail's happiness so much and all this is bringing a crack in our relationship. All these changes are not very easy to navigate.

My phone pings with a text message from Abigail.

'I am sorry about earlier.' – Abigail. She knows that I try my best with him.

'It's okay. I understand.'

'I'll talk to him tonight.'

'No worries.'

I am not home until 22h20. Walking into the living room quietly, I find Abigail seated on the couch with Mpho curled beside her. I am sure Aluwani is already in bed because he doesn't miss his 20h00 bedtime. He wouldn't even stay up until 21h00 even on a weekend. Abigail looks up at me before she shifts and wakes Mpho up before she urges him to go to bed. He drags his feet down the corridor with Abigail in tow. She spends a few minutes in the boys bedroom

before she walks back to where I am.

She doesn't look very pleased with me.

It is not everyday that I come home after 22h00, but believe me, I needed some time off.

"Where you stuck in a meeting or something?" Abigail asks as she walks to the kitchen. She lights the kettle and opens a cupboard to get a cup. She is now healing well and can easily move and do things on her own but she is always careful not to strain herself.

"Went out for a drink or two," I respond. She stares at me without a word.

"Is there a reason for that?"

"I was giving you room to care for your son."

"My son?"

"You know what I mean. Mpho." I pinch the bridge of my nose.

"What do you mean?" she asks.

I sigh deeply, not wanting to discuss this when we should be going to bed. We have to wake up early to prepare for school.

“Mpho needs you and you need to focus on him,” I say but she is not pleased with my answer.

“Just say it as it is.”

“What do you want me to say? I don’t have anything to say.”

“You think my son is coming between us,” she blurts out.

“Is he?” I pose the question to her.

“I am trying my best to make everyone happy here. I am exhausted and you are not making things easier for me.”

“We are all trying.”

She sighs deeply and stares at me. The reason I came back at this time of the night is because I

had hoped to find everyone in bed. I am tired to feel like an intruder in my own house and it would be very unfair of me to be intimidated by a ten year old.

“He is sleeping in his room,” she says.

“For now,” I respond. Each night since he got here, we haven’t gotten a chance to spend time together. I am not competing with her son but if I need some time away from the family, I’d appreciate if I am afforded. I head to my room but Abigail still follows me into my room.

“How do you want to solve this?” she asks frustrated.

“Give it time,” I say.

“Aluwani was sad that I couldn’t spend time with him,” she says.

“Don’t worry about him. I’ll have a chat with him tomorrow.”

“What really happened today? Why did Aluwani tell me that he wants Mpho to leave?” she asks.

Yoh! I really have no energy for this right now.

This is what blended families have to go through unfortunately. I just don't have the energy to unpack it right now.

A soft knock comes from my door. I stare at Abigail to show her what I meant. I wouldn't want to be the one to reprimand a child who is going through a lot. Abigail doesn't waste time jumping to the door.

“Can I sleep with you? I cannot fall asleep on my own,” Mpho says.

Abigail turn to me and I nod at her; what else can I do? She walks out of the room with her son.

We are going to need to get used to these changes.

I peel off my jacket and throw it into the basket. I grab a chair on my study table and pull a file I have been studying for a month now, trying to connect the new names Abigail gave me. I have been trying to solve some equations, so that I can be useful around here but I don't know if it is worth it.

Heart of GOLD

#47

ABIGAIL

Sitting outside the porch, watching Aluwani playing soccer on his own, I take a deep sigh. I feel slightly exhausted from the lack of sleep. Mpho is the top of my worries and his behaviour is taking a toll on me. I hate that it is taking a toll on everyone around here. This is not what I wished for.

"Alu, can we play together?" the boy from next

door calls out of behind the fence. We have new neighbours and I haven't even gotten a chance to introduce ourselves. Alu turns to me, to check if I am fine to invite the new friend over. I slightly nod my head.

"Thank you, Miss Abigail," he says and runs to the fence to engage with the boy. Aluwani has resorted to calling me Miss Abigail and I don't want to ask him why it is so. And I don't want to ask Theo the reasons because I know it is all because of my son. Right now, Mpho is seated in the house, doing his homework after a little fight we just had. I love my son so much and I am over the moon that he is here with us. Even when he is failing to blend in, I still love him but we are going to continue to fight if he is not trying to be one with everyone. I hate that he is not even trying.

The giggles between Alu and his new friend pull me back to my thoughts. I get on my feet so

that I can start preparing supper.

“I need you in the house after an hour,” I say to Alu who gives me a very enthusiastic nod. I smile at him. Alu warms my heart with his sweetness. Walking past the living room where Mpho is seated, I find him just seated. Not writing. Not reading. But just seated.

“Mpho, are you done writing your homework?” I ask.

“No.”

“What are you struggling with?” I ask, pulling a chair so that I could sit. When I open his book, I realise that he hasn’t written anything on today’s worksheet. My shoulders sag before I ask him. I have decided to shove our fight to the back of my head. Sometimes I feel like I am too harsh on him. “Are you struggling with your schoolwork?” Mpho shakes his head. “Then what is wrong?”

“I don’t like it here.”

I take a deep breath, bracing myself from whatever he is going to tell me. I am glad that he seems to be eager to talk and I am not going to stop him, even if whatever he tells me might not be what I want to hear. I knew the first night he walked into our home that we might have a problem. Mpho doesn’t know any better and I haven’t been in his life in the past three years to channel him into the right direction of life. So, Ndumiso might have spoiled him like he used to when we were still a family. Mpho knows money. His father provided more than what was required. And I have a feeling that when I was gone, Ndumiso used money to raise him, to fill the void for my absence. I might be wrong but I have a very strong feeling...just from my observation and the kind of house Ndumiso owns with Sindi.

“What do you mean?” I finally ask, wanting to

find out what 'here' means. Is it the school or this house and family?

"Can we go back to where we used to live when I was young?" he asks.

"The house is sold, baby," I sadly respond. It also breaks my heart that we no longer have that home where we created all the happy memories. It would have been great to take him back there but unfortunately, that is how things are.

A soft knock comes from the kitchen door before it opens and in walks Theo with a KFC paper bag. Mpho drops his eyes to his books, ready to dismiss Theo. Theo greets us before announcing that he thought we could have some Kentucky chicken today. I give him a brief nod, grateful that I won't need to prepare supper today. He places the paper bag on the table and head to his room. Only when he is out of the room does Mpho lift his eyes back to me. I

narrow my eyes at my son, finally figuring out what the problem is.

“Mpho, why don’t you like it here?” I ask, wanting to return back to our initial topic before Theo walked into the room. Mpho stares at me without saying a word. I take this is how he does it with his therapist. We received the complaints that we need to take Mpho out of the program because he doesn’t bother to participate and they would rather give the slot to a student who needs it the most. I wanted to yell at the principal for suggesting such a hurtful thing other than trying to dig deeper to help him. I have no idea how to help my own son and I feel so bad.

“I am talking to you, Mpho,” I beg. I am in search of a new therapist, in the hopes of getting him help from the trauma he faced in the hands of his father. If I still get nightmares of just a few days I was in the hands of my ex-husband, I am

certain that my son is wounded and it might a lot to get him back.

If I cannot get the son I raised many years ago, can I at least get the boy I spent the weekend with at that weekend away at the resort?

A weekend away, huh?

Maybe we need this to reconnect.

Just the two of us like we did before I was shot on our way to his home. If we go away to a safe place like the one we went to previously, I could be able to get all the answers I want.

“There is a long weekend coming...what do you think about a weekend away?” I ask and Mpho shifts his eyes to me. “Just the two of us?”

“Really?” he asks.

“But you have to promise to do your school work and I’ll book us a weekend away in Johannesburg.”

“Really?” he asks excitedly and I proudly nod at him. “Yes, please.”

“Fine. But you have to promise to be a good boy at school,” I say and he nods while paging his homework sheets. I get on my feet and drag them down the corridor to Theo’s room. I knock softly and wait for him to summon me inside. I hate that our differences has created this distance.

“Come in,” Theo says. Walking into his room, I find him seated on the edge of the bed, his thumbs typing away on his phone. When he notices me, he sits up and stops typing. He places his phone on the bed, the screen hidden from me to see. I hate all these changes. I hate that I am angry at him for not working with me.

“Did I disturb anything?” I ask.

“Not really. Are you okay?”

“I am okay,” I say while leaning my back against

the wall. "Are you good?"

"Yeah!"

We stare at each other for long without saying a word. When his phone vibrates, Theo clears his throat, checks his phone and lifts his head to me.

"Ahhh, next weekend is a long holiday," he starts. "Pule offers me to use his farm home for the duration of the long weekend. I was thinking of taking Alu away so that you and Mpho could get a chance to reconnect without us intruding."

I don't know why this hurts me. Does my reaction make me selfish? I was in right here to tell him the exact thing but now that he beat me to it, I feel sad that my son and I are not part of his plans.

"Where is it?"

"Bainsvlei," he responds.

“But that is just thirty minutes away from here,” I say and he nods.

“I think you need some time with Mpho. Maybe if Alu and I excuse ourselves, he will be able to reconnect with you.”

“How do you excuse yourselves from your own home? Mpho and I will excuse ourselves,” I respond, my heart heaving because since my son got here, he has been nothing but a burden. I don’t want to raise my voice at Theo but I am so disappointed in him for making me feel all these things he is making me to feel. He was supposed to be by my side through everything that I have ever done for him. Or maybe, he has forgotten how we got to this point. I left my son to take care of him and his son and I bet you a million rand, Mpho has not forgiven me for that and that is what I think it is. I have been raising Aluwani as my own child while my OWN baby was raised like animal by a bull dog.

“You know this is your home as much as it is yours,” he responds with a flash of regret in his eyes. “I just want to take Aluwani to have some fun with the other boys at Pule’s farm, that is all. And while at it, you have some quiet time with Mpho.”

I shrug a shoulder. “I was thinking of going to Johannesburg for the long weekend.”

“Okay,” he responds before scrolling through his phone.

I can only wonder what is in his phone.

I don’t know why I didn’t think of this sooner.

Mpho drags the tube towards the swimming pool and immediately dive in without thinking twice. We are in a lodge in Muldesdrift and just

like the last time we were on holiday, I booked us a self catering chalet so that we could have all the privacy in the world and secluded from everyone and everything. It has been more than two months since we last saw Ndumiso and he hasn't bothered us so I believe that he is not hunting for us but that doesn't stop me from being paranoid. I am forever anxious and paranoid.

I watch as Mpho crosses the pool before he jumps out of the pool and runs to where I am seated alone.

I cannot afford to take him to holidays just to see his smile. Why can't he give me this smile when we are home?

"Did you see me?" Mpho asks while pulling his towel from my lap. He dries himself before picking a lollipop and shoving it into his mouth.

"That was great," I comment.

My son has been his happiest since we took a drive out of Bloemfontein. I need not to ask what he desires – it is just obvious. He desires a life where it is just the two of us. And it is up to me to decide what is best for our lives.

I get on my feet and ask him to pack his belongings to his backpack while I fold the towels and putting them into my beach bag. Before heading to our chalet, we order food from the restaurant so that I do not spend the evening cooking. In our chalet, we have supper over a movie which he falls asleep while watching. I shake him and tell him to sleep in the bedroom. He doesn't ask a thing but drags the fleece blanket to the bedroom he chose when we arrived here.

Still rooted on the couch, I check my phone for any text messages and I found none. This saddens me but I quickly shake my disappoints away because I also didn't send a text message

to Theo to check up on him.

Things are just different.

I send a text to Poppy, checking if she has room to catch up. I feel so lonely and could use some company. Not having the patience to wait for her to text back, I dial her number.

“Hey sis,” Poppy responds while giggling. I hear someone—I think it is her husband—say something and she burst into a laughter. How I miss to be this happy? Poppy tells her husband to stop making her laugh because she is on the phone. I wait a little longer until she says, “Sorry, Abby, how are you?”

She has now sobered up.

“Hey...”

“Let me get out of this room before he snatches me,” she says. I wait and when she is in a more quieter room, she asks me how I am.

“I don’t know, Poppy,” I mumble.

“Why? Are you okay?” Sighing deeply, I clean the tears that are silently falling and my voice starts to break when I apologise for disturbing her.

“Abby, are you crazy? You are not disturbing me. What is going on?”

“I am just sad, that’s all. But I will be fine.”

“Still Mpho?” she asks.

“I am so sad that things have shifted between Theo and I and...this is happening when I need him the most.” I clean my tears with the sleeve of my jersey and continue. “Is it wrong of me to expect Theo to understand my situation more than anyone in the world? I raised his son these past years, Poppy. I took care of him when he had no one but it feels like he cannot return a mere favour and I need him so badly.”

“Come on, sis, don’t cry,” Poppy says and her words just open a flood of tears.

“It is just unfair,” I mumble.

She takes a deep sigh. “Look sis... I understand where you are coming from.”

“But?” I ask... because there is always a but.

“Don’t lose heart,” she urges. “I think Theo is just helpless because he doesn’t know how to help you. And don’t forget that you are a special case, Abigail.”

“How am I special case?”

“Your heart is made of gold. No one can ever match how much you sacrifice yourself to help others. We can all try to match it but we can never do it the way you do it and I understand why you are mad at Theo. You are a giver. You are a nurturer. Your heart is so pure... and Theo... can never match your heart, sisi.” She knows how to make me feel better but this is not new to me. “Do you get me?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Everything will be okay. Why don’t you bring the boys to me one weekend and reconnect?”

“I think Mpho doesn’t want me with Theo and I am not ready to face this fact. I am not ready to choose. Shipping him to you will make him think I am getting rid of him or I’m choosing Theo again.”

I don’t want to choose.

Heart of GOLD

#48 (unedited)

THEO

“Daddy, we are going to plant some trees,” Alu calls out from the end of the veranda. A smile is wide on his face and he looks very excited. I give him a wave before he turns on his heels and runs to catch up with Pule’s two sons. I am glad I brought him here and he is having a great

time.

Pule walks out of the house with two bottles on beers. He hands one to me and I take it only to be polite. I don't feel like drinking. My mind is not here. My mind is in Johannesburg where Abigail is with her son. When she left I was not home and the whole of yesterday I didn't check up on her. I don't even have a reason why I didn't check up on her, knowing that she will be worried sick about us.

She worries about everyone.

I worry about her too.

That is what love is, right?

My mind is all over the place right now and I hate that I am failing to hide it.

Pule throws himself on a chair beside me and rests both his legs on the table in front of us. I carefully place the bottle of beer on the table and rest my back on the chair.

I feel a little exhausted.

I have not been resting well.

“Should I invite some babes over?”

“What about your boys?” I ask, shocked at how careless he is. I would never do that in front of Aluwani. And I am not here for the hunnies. I thought he knew me better than that.

“My boys need a new mother,” he responds with a naughty grin. I shake my head at him. I am not in the mood to entertain. I am here to unwind and to relax. He takes one look at me and continues, “Oh, you are sorted In that aspect, huh?”

“You know the answer to that.”

“I cannot be so sure when you came back to work with a swollen face and a broken rib. I still bet that you were knocked after fighting for a hunny.”

I shake my head at him.

When I return to work after that kidnap saga, I didn't tell anyone about the incident. I wish I could have confided in a friend since I don't have anyone else other than Abigail in my life. So, I didn't confide in anyone and when I showed up at work looking the way I did, everyone assumed it has everything to do with a woman. There were not wrong. It has everything to do with a woman. It has everything to do with Abigail.

My phone buzzes and I get on my feet to check the messages. I do not want anyone snooping on my phone to see what I am up to. Pule looks up at me as I walk further away from where he is seated. I scroll through a phone before sending my response. When I get a smiley face, I return back to where I was seated.

“Dude you are sneakier than I can ever be,” he says with a loud laughter.

“No one can be sneakier than you, man,” I respond while reaching for my drink. It is funny that I do not have memories about my favourite alcoholic drinks. Right now I do enjoy a bottle of beer now and again.

“I am not,” Pule pulls me back from my thoughts. I shake my head. Pule is that kind of a friend your partner despise because he can be bad influence when he wants. I am easily influenced but you do know those kinds of friends, right? The reason I tell him that no one can be sneakier than he is, it is because he has three office relationships with three different women and all of them do not know about each other. All of us didn't know until just a few weeks ago when one of the coaches found him in the changing room with a woman we didn't know he was in a relationship with. And right now, didn't he offer to call some hunnies? Apart from this side of him when it comes to women

and relationships, he is a great fella and I like how great he is with his sons as a single father. We work closely together and when he offered this weekend getaway, I didn't have to think twice. I wanted to do it for Aluwani. Even though Pule's sons are younger than Alu, I knew that he was going to enjoy himself. And he is. Aluwani easily blends in.

I take a bottle and sip on it before a woman walks to where we are seated. It is Kedi from work – one of his girlfriends.

"Here you are," she says as she settles on the armrest of a couch Pule is seated on. She is wearing a pink robe and is holding a cup of tea. I didn't know she was around, unless he sneaked her into the house when we went to bed last night. I greet her and thereafter get on my feet so that I could prepare some clothes for I before he baths. When I tell this to Pule and Kedi, they both tell me to relax because Kedi

will sort it out for me. I hesitantly take my seat while she heads back to the house.

"Do the boys know about you two?" I ask Pule who is glued on his woman's butt as she parades back to the house.

"No... they think she is my cousin."

For the first time in a very long while, I laugh. How fucked up, huh?

"Why a cousin?"

"I can't call her a nanny, can I?" He leans closer so that he could whisper, "They already know someone as my girlfriend."

I shake my head. Life is too short to be living it like that.

In just two hours, Kedi has bathed the boys and has prepared lunch for us. She is seated next to Pule as we watch the kids play with the bikes.

"Alu just told me that Miss Abby and her son

went on a vacation in Joburg," Kedi says, eyeing me and I already know where this is going and I am not in the mood to explain. "Are you guys alright?"

Everyone at work knows about Abigail but none of them know about the whole Ndumiso saga and I intend to keep it that way.

I like my privacy!

"Yeah...everything is fine." I think everything will be fine. It is just a matter of time.

"But were you not supposed to go as a family? Isn't it how it should work with a blended family?" she asks, turning her head to Pule who nods her head.

I sigh – not intentionally though.

"It is not easy there kwa blended family," Pule laughs. I groan at him. He is right! It is not easy at all.

"The boys are different and it is going to take some time to blend them." It is not my space to tell them about what my family is going through because if I start, I am going to need to start from the beginning.

"It is hell when you get a naughty child from your partner," Kedi says.

"Definitely. And in that case, are you suppose to reprimand the child the same way you reprimand yours?"

"You treat all children equally," Kedi says and I am here thinking that she wants to score points. All these coparenting issues are complex and we cannot unpack them in just a day.

Right now my relationship is in ICU and right now, my mind is all over the place. I am waiting for this damn important text message.

When my phone finally pings from the table, causing me to jump and demanding all my

attention, Pule turns his eyes to me and narrow them. I have been waiting for this text message since a week ago and seeing the name on the pop-up message bubble on my screen, I want to punch a fist in the air and claim my victory.

“Who the hell are you talking to?” he asks with a naughty smirk on his face.

“No one important,” I mumble while getting on my feet to attend to my phone. I step further away from Pule and Kedi so that I can finally make this phone call. This has to be kept a secret and I am willing to go to the grave with it. Before calling the number listed on the text message, I read the message that came with it.

‘I don’t think I like what you are trying to do but I understand where you are coming from. This case has been nothing but a pain. It has costed us a lot. So for that reason, here is a guy who can help you with a clean job. He owes me a big favour.’

Another text message follows.

‘Wipe these messages clean.’

My heart is drumming as I dial the number and listening to the ringer’s tone.

“Who is this?” the guy asks without even a greeting. I clear my throat and compose myself before speaking to the phone.

“PI Theodore Masindi,” I respond.

“Am I supposed to know who you are?”

“Not quite,” I respond.

“So what do you want? You have no business calling me,” he says, sounding unhappy to be bothered on a weekend—by a total stranger. Believe me, I have no other plan and I am sick and tired of Ndumiso Gumede. I am failing to be the starrng that saves the woman who needed me the most. Instead what I got was a bruised ego. I am prepared to hand over to the guy who

can do a dirtier job for me. This is me getting back at Ndumiso for laying his fucking hands on me like I am one of his puppets. I wish I had it in me to fuck him up but I cannot seem to find that part of me anywhere. And now that my family is broken, I even feel worse. Ndumiso has broken many people and if no one tries to stop him, he is going to continue to do more damage.

It is fine to accept defeat but not before you have exhausted all your resources. Right now, this is me exhausting more resources.

“I have a job for you,” I inform him.

He sighs deeply and says, “Look, I don’t take petty jobs.”

“Please...”

“No!” He hangs up the phone. I was kind of expecting this so I quickly dial the number again, hoping that he answers the phone. The phone

rings once and it makes a sound as if it is redirected to another number.

“Kings Security, how can I help you?” A lady answers the phone this time.

“Please transfer me to the guy I was just chatting to right now.”

“If the phone is transferred to me, I am supposed to take your message,” she says. This is not what I want. He did not even get a second to listen to my request. My request is not petty. I hang up and keep trying the phone, not bothered to hang up when it is answered by the professional woman. Pule has not stopped staring at me. Unfortunately he doesn't know about my previous life and what it contains. I don't think any of my colleagues would believe that I was once ranked the best private investigators of my generation. I am not that anymore, hence I failed a mere mission. I wanted to be a hero, only to be shoved into a

boot of a car with my girlfriend's son. He probably doesn't take me that serious, considering that I am just as helpless as he is.

I am trying to remedy that right now.

"What?" The man roars on the phone, annoyed by my persistence. I have all the patience in the world, unfortunately.

"I have a job for you."

"I said I don't do petty jobs. And where the hell did you get my number?" he asks.

"Molapo. He said you owe him a big favour and he gave that favour to me."

The phone goes silent and I know that I got his attention. He groans on the phone before he asks what I want. I lay my request to him and he tells me a very good amount of money that I need to pay. He probably thinks that I will back down but I don't. I tell him that I am game and this time he tells me that he is transferring me

to a guy who will take notes for my request. From where I am standing, as I set up a two o'clock meeting at Starbucks Rosebank mall for the following day, I turn my gaze to Aluwani who is now giggling with Pule and the little boys. As I confirm this exact meeting, I convince myself that I am doing it for him. I am doing it for myself. I am doing it for Abigail and Mpho. If I lose her and Mpho, we won't have anyone in our lives and I am not willing to go back to Venda to start afresh with people that I don't even remember.

When I take my seat back next to Pule, he winks at me without Kedi watching. And when she jumps to her feet and leads the children into the house to offer them snacks, Pule whispers, "You are fucking around, right?"

"Fucking around?" I raise an eyebrow at him.

"You have been secretive with that phone since you got here," he says, very much sure of his

predicts. I don't blame him for thinking otherwise, I have been keeping this from Abigail as well and I plan to keep it to myself for as long as we both live. "Theo my man, I didn't think you have it in you."

"Some situations can force you," I respond, very much aware that I am directing my response to my situation. A situation no one knows about.

I am going to fix everything.

I am going to fix my family.

Before I put my phone away, I fire a text message to Abigail.

'Babe, I think it is time to put Ndumiso behind us. I am burning all the files we have on him. He has taken so much from all us and I don't want to take some more. It is time to move on.'

My phone pings.

'I agree!' - Abigail.

PS: We are wrapping up HEART OF GOLD so that we can start HEART OF STEEL!

ANNOUNCEMENT: My preorder gang, I am awaiting WOUNDED HEARTS and then I'll be dispatching your orders!!!!!!! - I am still coming to your DMs and emails if you haven't heard from me these past days.

Heart of GOLD

#49

ABIGAIL

I won't lie. The text message from Theo made my day. I was seated on my bed, just moping and beating myself up for not initiating a chat between Theo and I. I was just a few minutes away from texting him, to check up on him and

Alu. My phone was clasped in my hand when his message pinged in.

I didn't have to scratch my head about what he wants us to do.

I agree.

I totally agree.

It is about time that we put Ndumiso behind us and not allow him to continue to take more from us. The damage is done. The damage will be fixed someday but I cannot continue to allow him to ruin our lives.

Enough is enough.

'I miss you so much and I wish I could spend some time with you without the boys. I have plans for you,' – Theo. I blush at his text message. It has been a while since we have been intimate. I miss him too.

'I miss you too.'

'I love you Abby.' – Theo. My eyes are teary when I read this. The feeling is mutual and I always wish that things were a little different for us. We deserve to be happy. For real.

'I love you too.'

'Where are you? Can I come pick see tomorrow?' – Theo.

'What? Are you planning to come see me when you could see me at home?' – I giggle while sending this text message.

'When are you home?' – Theo.

'Tomorrow late noon.'

'I'll wait for you here then.' – Theo.

'Thank you.'

My smile is wide when I put my phone away. Mpho's eyes are on me as he calculates me. I give him a brief smile.

My feelings for Theo are too strong. I cannot

lose him. I place my phone in my pocket and pick a platter of fruits from the table and make my way to the patio.

I am waiting for Phindile to join me for brunch here at my chalet. Before biting my tongue and making a call to request her visit, I didn't want to bother her, but then she is my friend and yes we do bother friends in times of need. Last night wasn't a good one for me. I cried myself to sleep after a conversation with my sister but I am glad that I made that call to her. I don't know where to start fixing my family. I cannot choose Theo over my son. And I don't want to choose my son over my happiness either, everything must just work. Right there when I was crying my eyes out, Phindile came to mind. She is the reason I met Theo in the first place. Knowing her and her, 'I don't give a damn about what people think' attitude, I know that she is going to know how to help me. Even though our

situations and families are not the same, she also has a blended family.

Mpho is lying on the couch when a knock comes from the door. I don't like how he panics, his eyes darting between me and the door.

"It is aunty Phindile," I announce and I see a hint of relief in his eyes.

He relaxes his shoulders when Phindile says, "Abby... ke Phindile."

I give Mpho a look that says, 'you see?'

The moment I open the door, Phindile happily pulls me into a hug, making sure that she doesn't let go of a champagne bottle in her hand.

"Can you stop being a stranger?" she asks when she finally releases me.

"I know... I know," I respond while showing her in. Mpho is standing in the middle of the living

room like a soldier. When Phindile notices him, she places the bottle of champagne on the table and calls Mpho into her arms. I watch as she has a moment with my son. He is not as inviting but she dismisses the awkwardness by dropping kisses on his neck while he fights out of her embrace. When she is done with him, she follows me outside to the patio where I prepared some brunch for the three of us.

“How have you been?” she asks while taking a seat next to mine. A deep sigh gives it away. I am not fine and this was not just a friendly call.

“We are going to need some wine, huh?”

“More than just wine,” I mumble.

“Is it Mr PI?” she asks. I lift my eyes and they land on my son who is sitting on a couch, watching television.

“Oh, it is the boy.”

“A lot has been happening. Fill your glass,” I

advise and she doesn't waste time filling her glass with champagne. Thereafter I take a minute to share everything that has been happening in the past few months, starting with the kidnapping. Her eyes almost popped out of their sockets when I tell her about the shooting and Theo and Mpho's kidnapping. Like it is a mess. And I am telling her all these so that she knows what I am going through and these way, she will know how to help me.

"Yoh," she says when I am done narrating my life to her. I swear it sounds like a part of a fiction story.

"And now... Mpho is having a tough time blending with my little family," I add, lifting my eyes to check if he is still watching TV. He is still curled on the couch, watching television.

"I never thought Ndumiso was this hardcore," she says. If I didn't experience this in his hands, I wouldn't have believed that a man who was

once my husband was capable of all these things.

“How did you manage to blend your family?” I ask. I know that I am dealing with an extreme case but I would really want to know how she handles all this. She has a daughter and is married to a man who brought an older son. There must be a formula to all this, right?

“Babes, we are just taking each day as it comes,” she says after a long sigh. She goes on to tell me how much hectic it was when they all moved under one roof. Her daughter is a sweetheart but her husband boy was a handful and because of that, her husband had to be the one to be the disciplinarian parent since he is the biological parent. She takes her sip of the champagne and says, “I am the soft parent and he is not. So what I am trying to say is that you are going to need to be the tough parent if Mpho is the problem. If Alu is, then Theo has to

be tougher one.”

“Our problem is my son,” I confess, also adding how last night I felt like he was pushing me to choose between him and Theo; and there is no way I can choose. Both of them make me whole.

“Then you have to be the tougher parent, babes,” she says.

What does it mean to be a tougher parent? I have lost so much time with my son, I am not prepared to lose him. I am not.

“I don’t know how to be tough on Mpho after all he has been through. He is my baby. I don’t want to see him hurt some more.”

“Get him therapy.”

“We are trying but instead of participating, he stares at the therapist and not participate.”

“Give him time, really. It takes time to adjust to time. Give him that.”

I sigh.

Time is what I don't have.

And I cannot be tough even when I want to be.
My heart doesn't allow me.

"But how are things with Mr PI?" she asks while giggling her eyebrows. Isn't it obvious that our relationship is disturbed by this whole chaos?

"Things are great," I respond, considering that he wanted to drive all the way from Bloemfontein to Gauteng just to see me.

How romantic can he be, right?

Before Phindile leaves, after so many hours of catching up, she advised me to toughen up my hand with my son and balance family with my partner. Before she left, I wanted to attack her with endless questions but I realised that she doesn't have all the answers. She also trying to figure things out with her new family and it would be unfair of me to expect her to have all

the answers to me.

Mpho is napping when Phindile left the chalet.

I got a chance to prepare something quick for us, hoping that we could catch up about our new family. If I am not ready to treat Mpho like a baby that I am supposed to discipline, I am going to need to treat him like any other person in my life. It is rare that I allow any other person to take advantage of me. I am not going to let my own child take advantage of me.

“Mommy, can we have some ice cream for dessert?” Mpho asks after our supper. When we got here, I promised him ice cream. There is a kiosk just a feet away from the chalet. Without a word, I pick a twenty rand note and send him to get himself a cone ice cream. While he runs out of the house, I get settled in the patio. It is already dark and the air is cool. It doesn't take Mpho long to return.

“Lock the door and come join me,” I call out from where I am seated. I am pleased when I hear the door close and the turn of the key. A minute later, Mpho jumps on the seat in front of me. He has a vanilla ice cream in his hand.

Where do I start? I didn't bring him here for the fun of it. I also want us to iron out some issues. I want us to fix things with Theo and Alu. I want us to try to be a family. I feel whole when I am with Theo.

Mpho licks his ice cream and smiles at me. I offer him a weak smile, wondering where to even begin. Just three years or so ago, this was my baby and I was teaching him to be a great gentleman. In the past I wanted him to be as gentle as his father but now that I know the truth, I don't want him to inherit anything from his father. Not his perfect white smile. Not his handsome features. I don't want to look at my son only to see his father.

Mpho licks his ice cream once again before he asks if I want to taste. Only now do I realise that I was staring blankly at him. I give him a small smile and stretch my hand so that he could give me.

“Don’t lick it. I don’t want germs,” he says, handing the ice cream to me while getting on his feet. My eyes follow him when he runs into the chalet. When he returns, he hands the spoon to me and tells me to scoop the ice cream with a spoon.

Why did he offer in the first place? I shake my head while following his orders. When I slide the spoon into my mouth, Mpho reaches to take his ice cream from my hand.

“I still want more. Sharing is carrying,” I say. This is some quality Woolworth type of a vanilla ice cream.

“Dad said I don’t have to share if I don’t want

to,” he says, snatching the ice cream from my hands.

This takes me by surprise.

“And what did I teach you, Mpho?” I ask, my voice breaking because I am consumed with anger right now. “What did I teach you about sharing?”

“I don’t remember.”

What a blow.

“You must share... all the time. Even before someone asks, you must offer to share, do you hear me?”

“Even when I don’t want?” His eyes are wide when he asks this.

“Yes! Even when you don’t want,” I respond sharply. “Didn’t you share things with your sister Nana?”

He shakes his head.

What the hell?

“Look... I don't like how dad raised you when I was not there. Did you forget all the things I taught you? I taught you to share with others and I expect you to... whether you like it or don't. Did you forget what I taught you?” He stares at me without a reaction. “Mpho, did you forget what I taught you?” He keeps starrng, and I end up raising my voice at him because I am losing my patience. “I am talking to you, dammit.”

“Don't shout at me,” he raises a voice at me, pointing his little finger at me.

“I'll shout at you when I want to. I am your mother.”

“Don't shout at me,” he yells while he angrily jumps to his feet. He marches into the house and I take long strides to get to him. Before he could open his bedroom door, I snatch his hand and twirl him around to face me. The ice cream

flies out of his right hand, to the floor just beside where we are standing, staring at each other.

Ndumiso messed my baby.

This angry child is not my baby.

And now I understand why he chooses not to answer when people talk to him. It must require a lot for him to turn into this lunatic standing right in front of me. His chest is heaving like that of a beast. I have never seen him this angry and to think that he is angry over sharing a mere ice cream???

A mere scoop of ice cream that doesn't even last more than fifteen minutes?

"Breathe," I urge as he fights to grab his hand from me. I wanted to yell at him for lying to me. He definitely remembers everything I taught him. He is just choosing to be unreasonable just like his father. He fights again while I edge him to

breathe. This is not normal. When he finally breathes, I say, "Go to that corner over there and wait for me to unground you."

"What?"

"Yes, you are grounded. Go to that corner over there until I call you," I hiss, my voice slightly raised as I point to the corner just next to my bedroom door.

"I am not a baby anymore," he yells.

"And I am not your father," I respond. He stops fighting and lifts his eyes to me. All I see is panic after what I have just said so I continue, "My house, my rules. My chalet my rules. If you don't want to follow, you can go to your father who allows you to act like a man."

He doesn't fight me anymore so I let him go.

Biggest mistake.

He snatches the handle to the bedroom door

and shut the door.

“I dare you to lock that door Mpho Gumede. I dare you,” I yell out before he could turn the key. “I dare you to lock that door and you will know me well.”

He is silent.

The key has not turned.

I move closer to the door and lean closer to it.

“I dare you to lock that door right now.”

I wait.

And wait.

And wait some more.

The key doesn't turn.

“I dare you,” I mumble this time.

I really fucking dare him.

Heart of GOLD

#50

THEO

Pacing around my living room, I am contemplating on this hand over. Should I or shouldn't I go on with this? It is a Sunday morning and I should be making my way to Rosebank to meet this guy. I left Pule's house in the early hours of this morning so that I can duplicate this file before I hand it over. I meant it when I said that I want us to burn this file, Abigail and I but I still need to make a duplicate because I don't want her to know about my plans about this. I don't think her heart is strong enough to hold grudges and I'll hold those grudges for her. If I don't put a stop to Ndumiso, he is just going to mess up a beautiful family.

I am doing a right thing, right?

Switching on the kettle for a cup of tea, I check

my phone for any text messages from this guy that I am meeting. Maybe if he cancels, I'll find this as a good excuse not to go ahead with it. But if he doesn't cancel then I'll know that this was meant to be.

The only text I find on my phone is from Abigail telling me that she is on her way back to Bloemfontein. I did tell her that I'll be home later with Aluwani so after telling her to drive safely, I walk around the house cleaning up so that she doesn't tell that I was here this morning. After a cup of tea and a sandwich, I put away the original file in my room and head out to start on my journey.

At nine thirty I am driving out of our yard, heading straight to Johannesburg. This is very important to me. I am not just travelling for four hours just for nothing.

I am done with Ndumiso Gumede.

The way Mr Molapo did not want to connect me to this guy, it left me wondering who he is and what makes him special. There must be something very special about him because I spent almost the whole night searching for Kings Security. What I found was just a basic website with the company details - details I already knew. since this guy told me that I will be dealing with someone who will be taking notes, I am curious about him.

If he doesn't take petty jobs, then why is his company's website live and why is his company operating?

So many questions but no answer.

Abigail calls me. After these past hectic months, it wouldn't be ideal for me to ignore her phone when o want us to work on our relationship. We didn't talk much last night, even though I felt like the phone call she made before bed was heavy, I didn't dwell much on the phone, fearing

that I might chicken out from my plans.

I don't want to chicken out.

So last night when she called to say goodnight, I didn't entertain her much. I hope she didn't pick up my mood.

"Hey babe," I answer the call. I am already cooking a lie about where I am headed to. One day, some day, she will understand.

"How are you?" she greets.

"I am great!" I feel nothing great today but she doesn't have know. "Are you feeling alright today?"

"Yeah!" she says. "Are you headed home?"

"Oh nooo. I am just driving to the shopping centre to grab some food items for Pule. We should be home after seven." I think il make it back to Bloemfontein around those times.

She pauses and I know what she is concerned

about - Aluwani's school preparations.

"Alu has school tomorrow."

"I know. I just need to take care of something and then we will be home. I promise not to tire him much," I say with a light laugh, trying to sound nonchalant.

She finally let me off the hook by telling me that she will be home in the next hour. When she hangs up the phone, I increase the volume of the radio and try to focus on what awaits me in Johannesburg.

Quarter to two I am seated at Starbucks with a cup of coffee. I am scanning the room for someone who looks like an employee of Kings Security - as if I have an idea of what they look like.

Staring down at my watch after a little while, I see it is just a minute after two. Lifting myself from the watch, I notice a young man walking

towards my table. He looks down at his phone and thereafter slide on the chair next to mine. I sent him a discription of what I am wearing.

“You must be Theodore Masindi,” he says while putting his phone away. “I am from Kings Security.”

Had I continued searching the room for someone who belonged to Kings Security, I would have failed dismally. The man seated in front of me has braces on and looks like a varsity student. I know he is just a messenger but he is nothing like what I expected him to be.

“Are you from Kings Security?” I ask.

“Yes. And you?”

“I am just a new client.”

From his backpack, he pulls out a small phone. I watch as he types on it and thereafter passes it to me and instruct me to put the thumb on the screen so that he can scan me.

Scan me?

“Scan me for what?”

“For security purposes,” he says. I do as I am told - I scan my thumb and thereafter pass the phone back at him.

We stay silent while he reads the data that shows on the screen. Each time he lifts his head to stare at me, he gives me a smile.

“Any reason you stopped practicing?” he asks.

“Practicing what?”

“Your job?”

It clicks. He picked up some data from his device.

“Amnesia,” I respond. Even though I have small pieces of my past, it is not much to give me confidence to carry on attempting to be the old me. I almost died in the hands of my woman’s ex-husband. It would be very stupid of me to

think that he is not going to come back for his son or even Abigail. I feel like the reasons he allowed us to leave was because he was wounded and is in trouble but soon, he will return for what is his.

I cannot allow him back into our lives.

“That suck,” the Kings Security guy says. He hasn’t even told me his name.

“What sucks?” I ask.

“Amnesia?” he responds in a question.

I wait for him to say something else regarding my case. Instead of asking why I am here and about my case, he dials on his phone and thereafter lifts the phone to his ear.

“All cleared,” he says to the phone. He listens in and from his backpack he retrieves a notebook and a pen and notes something down while he is still glued to the phone. When done, he slides his phone back to his pocket and pushes the

note to me. I pick the paper out and on it a address is engraved.

“What is this?”

“That is where Kings is. He asked that you see him himself. I was just here to clear you off.”

“Okay...” I study the paper. The address is in Sandton, so it mustn't be too far from here. I think this is better than telling all my worries to this boy. He doesn't say anything else. He jumps to his feet and disappears out of the busy coffee shop.

Checking the time and jumping on my feet too, I hurry to my car so that I could get to the address. I am definitely not going to make it home early, but I am not worried, I will cook a good lie for this one.

The address leads me to a very luxurious building in the heart of Sandton. At the gate, I tell the very friendly security officer that I am

visiting Mr Kings. He drops his eyes to a device in his hand and thereafter tells me to park at the visitors parking bay and head to the tenth floor, room 1016. I chant the apartment number as I drive towards an almost empty parking bay.

The reception area is like that of a very luxurious hotel. When I inform the other officer of my visit, he also checks for my name on his device before pressing the elevator for me.

Damn! Security here must be very tight.

The elevator doors open and I step into an empty cart. The security guard tags on the elevator and presses floor 10 for me. As soon as the door closes, I contemplate on sending my location to Abigail. Just in case I am at the wrong place and can find myself in trouble – she might have an idea of where to start looking for me. I decide against it. I don't want to mess this meeting. Mr Molapo knows about my visit to Kings Security today.

The door pings first and then opens. Before me is a very spacious corridor and a line of black doors on my left. I stroll down the corridor until I find the door I am looking for.

Room 1016.

I knock on the door and I hear the sound of an automatic lock and thereafter the door opens slightly. I swallow hard before I push the door open.

“Hello?” I say as I take small steps into the room. The room is well conditioned but too cold for my liking.

“Close the door,” the voice, which must belong to Mr Kings, says before I notice a man standing in the kitchen. I thought I was walking into a hotel room setting but this is nothing like it. I am in a huge and luxurious studio apartment. Everything in the room is slick black, including the bedding of a huge bed which is in

the end of the room.

I close the door as requested.

“I am Theodore,” I say.

“I know who you are,” he responds not lifting his head from the task at hand. He is mixing a drink. The only time he lifts his head is when he asks if I want one. I shake my head and tell him that I come from far and cannot drink.

Lame excuse. Or maybe not. I just don't enjoy drinking and I don't want to be rude.

He shows me the couch; which again, is a black leather couch. The only colour in the room comes from the four artworks on the wall. I don't know much about art but I am certain each piece costed a fortune.

I sit on the edge of the couch and try to take in the studio apartment. He must be a very single man without a family to own a place like this. It is very nice – don't get me wrong but it is

nothing I can fancy. I am big on family and not everyone is cut out like me.

My eyes follow him when he makes his way from the kitchen to a one-seater couch which is on my right. This man does look like he is part of a security company and comes very highly recommended. He is a well-built man, with good looks – I must give him that – and he looks more matured and older than the boy I just met thirty minutes ago. He must be in his mid-thirties.

I pull a file Abigail and I have been compiling for ages and put it on the table. His eyes follows it. He doesn't say a word before he reaches for the file and takes a few minutes studying it. I watch him as he studied the file.

“Molapo told me about your case,” he says and thereafter drops the file back on the table. “That is why I will take care of this myself.” I nod at him, urging to continue. “What do you want out

of this?”

He is warmer than he was on the phone, I am wondering if Mr Molapo put in a word for me.

“I want...”

“Him dead? Do you want him dead?”

“Can you do that?”

“I can do anything?” he responds.

I think for a minute. I have thought about this. I cannot kill this man without affecting Mpho and the kid’s lives. I hate him. I loathe him but his children might need him.

“I want you to strip him of his power. Destroy him in any way possible. I don’t know but something along those lines. I want him to pay for all the pain he has caused us.”

“And if all fails, we can just execute him,” he adds.

“Yes,” I whisper. “If all fails.”

“If all fails.”

Aluwani is sleeping when I park in the garage. The meeting took me longer than I anticipated but things looks promising. I was ready to transfer all my life savings when Kings—I forgot to ask him his first name—told me not to pay him until the job is done. I thought it was just going to be a matter of a few months or so but I was wrong. This is not an overnight job – mostly when I do not want this to come back to me. This must be a clean job. Kings didn’t keep it a secret that he is only doing this because of the favour he owed Mr Molapo. If it wasn’t for him and the fact that Ndumiso Gumede has ruined lives—according to what Molepo told him... and not just our lives only, he wasn’t

going to bother.

It is after nine when I walk into the house, to find Abigail seated on the couch. When she sees me, she smiles at me. I don't fail to notice the white silk night dress she has on. I scan the living room for Mpho but he is no where to be found.

“Let me put this heavy boy to bed,” I say while turning towards the boys bedroom. Opening the door, I find Mpho soundly sleeping on his bed. I carefully set Alu down in his bed, not bothered that he is in shorts and a t-shirt instead of his pyjamas. I cover him with the blanket before closing the door behind me and joining Abigail in the living room. I find her in her feet, her arms open so that I could give her a hug. I go all in, hugging her tightly. She smells divine and I even though I want to ask how she managed to get Mpho to bed, I put that thought away and drop kisses on her neck. I miss this woman.

I miss her so much.

She doesn't want to let go of me so I tightly embrace her.

"I love you," she whispers to my lips before she kisses me.

"I love you too."

"Today marks the day that we start over; are you ready?" she asks and only now does she let me free. I nod my head at her. She takes my hand to the kitchen where she has placed a lighter and Ndumiso Gumede's file. She is more than ready.

I don't hesitate to take the file and lead the way to our braai stand which is just outside by the patio. I drop the file there and light a piece of paper before the flames consume the whole file.

I pull Abigail closer to me just the same second a phone pings on my phone with a text message from an unknown number.

'We are on – Kings.'

We are on!!

Kings is taking over from here on Heart of STEEL!!! This is not the end of Abigail and Theo's journey - we will unpack it more on Heart of STEEL!!!