

A crime scene in a kitchen. A chef's hat with blood splatters is on a table. A knife with a bloodied blade lies on the table. A large white plastic bag is draped over the table. The floor is tiled and has a large bloodstain. The title 'IQUNGA' is written in large, white, bold letters across the middle of the image.

IQUNGA

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Prelude

TWO YEARS AGO I stood on a hill and watched two little white coffins go down to the ground. Two little boys who never opened their eyes or let out a cry. I didn't get to see their faces, but I know exactly what they looked like.

I didn't cry, for the first time since I got in that Sprinter, I didn't cry for these people. My son stood next to me, too tall for me to brush his head and comfort him.

I watched him weep with his fists clenched and I thought to myself: "You've been through worse, you'll be fine my boy".

Strange isn't it? That anyone would live life like that?

And so I believed my own lie and I let him be, but he isn't like me or the rest of us. He probably would be like the rest of us if I hadn't come into his life when he was nine-years-old and trained him to be a weak man.

He has crumbled into pieces in the past two years and I have done nothing to fix him, not because I don't want to, but because it is beyond me.

I have done everything I could do, but four months ago, those that own them came to claim them back and for the first time in years I

understand why they keep going back to where I found them.

In a few hours everything will change, we will be normal people and maybe our children will never know who their fathers really are.

But no, I lie, not when I'm sitting here hoping Mqhele and Mqoqi don't kill each other.

My father taught me when I was a little girl to bite my hand when I have spasms. I still don't know if it really does work but I have to bite it numerous times before it feels like a tickle and fades away.

I've been pressing my hands to the edge of the bath-tub for too long, that's how I ended up with a spasm.

This is me, after years of building and fixing and enduring. Years of loss and love and sacrifice, this is me, sitting in the bathroom with my husband and his brother, hoping they won't kill each other, or me.

I should have told Mqhele the moment it happened because maybe he would have understood. He loves me, I'm his beginning and his end, he's said that time and time again. I've forgiven him for many things haven't I? So why wouldn't he forgive me for one mistake?

Mqoqi is sitting on the floor, me at the edge of the bathtub and Mqhele standing in the middle.

I knew something was wrong when Mqhele said "let's take a drive".

I thought he needed to talk, but when he was still quiet an hour into the drive I knew we were at a dark place.

I don't know where we are exactly and whose house this is but I remember seeing a sign pointing us to Kranskop and I remember us driving on a gravel road to a lodge.

He left me here without saying a word and it's funny because experience should have made me paranoid. I should have called someone or ran somewhere.

He came back with Mqoqi. They found me in the bathroom. Mqhele locked the door.

I've been looking at Mqoqi for answers, he's been looking down at his feet.

"Mqoqi, I just want to know one thing, why did you go to see him?"

It would be easier if I knew who 'him' is.

"Like I told you bafo, he never touched her," he answers.

Mqhele looks at me briefly and walks to lean on the closed door. I will not be joining in on this conversation until I know what it is about.

"Who exactly were you trying to protect bafo? Me or her?" Mqhele, he is pointing at me with his head.

Mqoqi has protected me from many things, it is his duty, it is their duty, all of them.

But I don't know what it is exactly that he supposedly protected me from this time.

"He is as good as dead Mqhele, there is no reason for this,"

"No reason! He fucked my wife and you are telling me there is no reason?"

"I told you! He didn't touch her!" Mqoqi fires back.

Could this be about Sandile? This is about Sandile! Stupid pubic hairs of satan that just won't get out of my life, no matter how hard I try to get rid of him.

It's time for me to speak.

"Mqhele,"

"I know Hlomu, I know everything but you know what? I let it go, I let it all go because I understood it was my fault,"

It wasn't his fault. How could he even think that?

I look at Mqoqi, not because I want him to say something, but because I know he won't let his brother hurt me. I don't love him, not like that, but he loves me and if he had to choose, a large part of me believes he'd choose me over his own brother.

"Mqoqi, leave us..." Mqhele.

It's time for me to cry, that works sometimes, I've learned that men like

them are scared of only two things, a woman's tears and a baby coming out of a vagina.

"He isn't worth it bafo," Mqoqi.

He's right, Sandile isn't worth it, not my marriage, not this family and not this, whatever it is.

"I know, but I want to talk to my wife,"

I wish I was the one being told to leave, because then I'd get in the car and drive as far away as I can.

"I won't hurt her,"

"Think about your children Mqhele,"

"I said I won't hurt her!"

Mqoqi sits still. He knows what I know, when Mqhele tightens his jaw and paces to and from it means he will finish what he started, and with Mqhele there are no happy endings.

But this is my battle, not Mqoqi's.

"Mqoqi, leave us," I say.

He looks up at me, our eyes meet the same way they did the day I found Nkosana banging his head on walls all those years ago in Naturena.

The truth is, I don't want him to go, because I know Mqhele and how he has broken his promises before. For this, he will kill me, I have always known that, I knew it the moment I left that hotel room with the smell of Sandile still thick on my skin.

"Mqoqi, please leave," I beg.

He sits still.

"I want to talk to my husband! Leave!" I snap.

He stands up, whispers something to Mqhele before he opens the door and he's gone.

Now here we are, me and the love of my life, the father of my children, the man who has given me my happiest moments and my most painful. He has loved and protected and healed and made me the happiest woman alive,

and when he wasn't doing all that, he battered and humiliated and reduced me to nothing.

I love him, even at this moment of uncertainty and danger, I love him.

"Mahlomu," he says, sitting on the floor in front of me.

The full name, I'm in shit.

I look at him and think about his smile or smirk or whatever that beautiful thing of his that he does that makes me feel like nothing else matters in his world except me. But it isn't here, not today.

"Mqhele,"

His name has always fitted him perfectly. It's like it's his and nobody else's, like even if there was another person with the same name, it wouldn't sound as beautifully as it does when their wives say it.

"I love you," he says.

I know, and this is why I refuse to hurt him.

"I didn't sleep with him Mqhele," I lie.

I'd deny it even if Sandile were here, because this is my life, my marriage and my husband and I'd be damned if I let a random man who means nothing to me destroy it.

He takes a deep sigh and folds his arms across his chest.

"When did this start Mahlomu? The lying to me, when did it start? You've always been the good one, the honest one in this marriage. I've fucked up, I know that sthandwa sami, I've fucked up many times and it eats me up every day,"

"And I'm still here Mqhele, because despite everything..."

He raises his hand to stop me and says: "I know, the part I don't understand is why you would want to be like me. Why couldn't you stay as you were? Was it me? Did I turn you into this?"

If I were to be truthful, I'd tell him that had he held me in his arms and asked me to speak about Mvelo, if he had not expected me to be strong and hold the family together, if he had not thought that them killing whoever was

responsible was enough, I would not have ended up in Sandile's arms. But my aunt told me once, she said men are not like us Hlomu, men are half human and half animal.

She said: "If you ever cheat on Mqhele, and I know you won't because... why would you? But if you ever find yourself in that situation, never ever admit to it. Let him have that doubt because if anything, that doubt will be what keeps him alive, protect him, do that because if you give him certainty it will destroy him, the picture of you and another man will play in his head every time he looks at you, for the rest of his life.

I wanted to ask my aunt about me, about all the things that happen to me every time I see Linda on TV, about how every time a female petrol attendant stands at my window I wonder if it isn't the woman Mqhele fucked. But I didn't ask her, because at the time she told me this I was pregnant with Niya and I didn't know if she'd come out with Mqhele's big eyes or Sandile's nose and light skin.

So I carried the child and I made a plan. I loved her even when she was in my womb, she kicked only for me, unlike the twins. But I was willing to sacrifice her because she was just a little thing who could do without ever experiencing life. I was going to kill her. I was going to smother her and spare her the life she would have had had she come looking nothing like her father.

That was how far I was prepared to go for this man sitting in front of me because really, maybe I love him more than I love myself, and that's fucked up.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks.

I went away for a while.

"I'm not lying to you Mqhele. Yes I went to the hotel room, but only because my dress was messed up and he promised to give me a clean T-shirt," I say, and sigh.

"He tried to kiss me, but that was all. I was hurting Mqhele, I was going through a lot," I half-lie.

"That's not what he told me,"

What the fuck?

"I spoke to him. Actually he called me, said he wanted to come clean before he dies,"

Yeyi yeyi yeyi what rubbish is this? Who does that?

Honestly, I don't understand what it is that Sandile wants from me, he never even loved me. My aunt was right when she said men are half-animal because really, why would he want to destroy me like that?

"I never slept with him Mqhele, I wouldn't do that to you,"

"Why Mahlomu? Why wouldn't you?"

He's still calling me by my full name? I haven't achieved anything here.

"Because I know who you are and where you come from. I know what we've been through and how we got here. Why would you believe him over me? Haven't I proven myself to you over and over again?"

I have, haven't I? The Sandile thing was a mistake and I'd like to think I'm allowed to make those. The fact of the matter is, I love Mqhele, and as long I do, I will protect him with everything I have, including lies.

"He is dying," he says, but I know he doesn't feel sorry for him.

"And that means he has nothing to lose," I say.

We sit quietly, me wondering if he truly believes me and him just there, looking broken and defeated.

Sandile ain't shit, he really is nothing and I'm sitting here wondering how he could be the one thing that ends my marriage, and technically, me.

"Thando?" he asks.

Oh shit!

In take a deep sigh.

"I didn't want another Amanda," I say.

"Did you know about the kids?"

"No, I didn't. I only found out last week,"

I'm not lying this time but if that little bitch even opens her mouth about

the Ntsika thing, I'm going to burn her alive.

I have done what I have had to do, all these years, it is my responsibility. I am the concrete, the backbone, the one who always makes a plan.

"Can we go home now? They are probably wondering where we are,"

He doesn't look as Mqhele-ish as he looked when he entered this bathroom so I'm thinking we are at a better place. But it's weird that I freak out when he stands up. I have a thing about bathrooms, I was kicked and battered in a bathroom once, and I lost a baby while at it.

He reaches out his hand and I get up, but I slip and fall and scream before he catches me.

"Mqoqi!"

I didn't see the door open, and why is Mqoqi pointing a gun at his brother?

"We're fine Mqoqi," I say.

But nobody is paying attention to me.

I tried to fix these men, and now here they are pointing guns at each other, because of me.

"Ntwana," Mqhele says.

Seriously?

"Hlomu, get out, get in the car and leave,"

I'm not going to do that.

"He didn't hit me Mqoqi," I say.

Now, I know Mqhele, Mqoqi knows him too, which is why I don't understand why he thinks he can point a gun at him.

"Would you shoot me?" Mqhele.

Errrrr... he's pointing a gun at you broer.

"Yes, for Msebe and Langa and Niya I'd shoot you, you raised me remember? This is how you raised me..."

I'd choose my children over Mqhele any time, he knows this, it's what he'd want me to do.

I grab the car keys from his hand and run out of the bathroom.

It's about a 30-minute drive from here to Mbuba. They have bones to bury and I have a lot of explaining to do.

So I leave them, guns and all, because sometimes in life you have to make hard choices.

We weren't here four months ago, we were half-good and half-bad, and it all started with Phakeme...or was it Sbopho and Nyanda? Sbani's twins or Thando or Mhlaba?

I'd tell you all about it, but it's not my story to tell.

This is where it all started...way before there was a Hlomu and a Mqhele, way way before...

Thulula

IN A VILLAGE where witches were torched and cripples were a curse, the news of Mthaniya's fourth set of twins dying was met with panic.

The first set lived for only two days. The second and the rest that followed were stillbirths but the last, according to the man who scattered bones and saw her future when she was pregnant the fifth time, were going to die too and they were going to take her with them.

Her family had always been outcasts in Nsikeni but Thulula loved her anyway.

He was a tall, dark man with bug eyes and a voice so hoarse you'd swear his chest was in flames.

Mthaniya took the bone thrower's prediction to heart and so for the three weeks that were left before her full term, she sat belly bulging behind the kraal and waited, next to the four graves of her dead children.

But Thulula, who always had a justification for why his children were dying, whether it was the bad weather or an incompetent midwife, was not going to let that happen.

People spoke of curses, of atrocities committed by his own father who died on the night he was born, and of his stupidity for marrying a woman

whose father was a cripple. But Thulula didn't care about that. His sister had been a cripple too, born with legs that dangled like useless rubber bands. She died before she grew breasts.

He watched his wife, already drained to the core by the repeated loss and unspoken judgment, sitting next to those graves every day, and he made a decision.

Nsikeni was mountains and a forest away from Mbazwana and if he were to leave immediately, he'd be back at least two days before his children were born, that is if Mthaniya did not die from sitting and weeping before he came back.

What took him to Mbazwana was what he had heard from the men who went there to fix their issues, whether it was their multiple wives hating each other and making their lives difficult, or curing strange diseases that even the most powerful healers could not understand.

He started the journey early one morning in a windy month in 1955, oblivious and ignorant to what was happening beyond Nsikeni.

It took him four days, by foot and by train, and at one point near Eshowe, a horse cart.

When he asked around, only one name kept coming up.

"He will help you," they said.

"He has never failed before," they would insist.

And when he reached the homestead, big and clean and flooded with healthy, happy children, he sat comfortably in front of the fat man wearing leopard skin.

"Your wife will die in two weeks, along with your unborn children. You've already buried eight of them," the man said.

He knew not to ask the man how he knew that so he sat and listened.

"It is not you, it is those who came before you but you can stop it," the man said.

Thulula chose to stop it.

And when he returned home a week and two days later to find Mthaniya still sitting and moping near the graves with her feet swollen

and her nose two times bigger, he sat down next to her and told her: "The children will live."

He was a different man and she noticed.

She wanted to ask him where he had been and what he had done but she desperately wanted her children to live, by all means necessary.

"I will make you food," she said, dragging herself to the house.

"No, cook me some meat. I will slaughter a sheep, make some dumplings," he said when he caught up with her in the kitchen blowing dust off the almost wrinkled sweet potatoes.

Slaughtering sheep was for special occasions, they did it every September, the month Thulula said his ancestors visited their home.

They lived alone, just the two of them, which is why his request sounded strange but she adhered anyway.

That night he ate in silence while she watched.

"What are we going to do with the rest of this meat? I can't give it away to people, they won't eat it. They already think..."

"Eat what you can and throw it away when it gets rotten," he said.

"It will still be good tomorrow and the day after. I'll serve you in the morning," she said.

He nodded and went to rest.

There was a bad feeling she couldn't shake, but a bad feeling was nothing compared to her desperation for her children to live so she chose to ignore it and lie down next to her husband, expecting sleep not to come as always.

It came, but a sharp pain and wetness on the bed came and disrupted it. She knew very well.

"Thulula!" she patted him.

She had not made arrangements for a midwife. None of them would have agreed to come anyway, they had seen enough death.

"Thulula, it's time," she whispered.

He lay still, his eyes open and staring up at the roof as she struggled to sit up.

"Are you going to help me?"

He said nothing.

"Thulula!"

He only got up when she shouted his name a fourth time.

He had never witnessed a woman giving birth but he did not really have an option now so he followed her instructions, placed a bowl of water next to her open legs, a knife next to it and a blanket.

He knew from past experience that it took hours of her moaning and groaning and screaming before anything happened. He had heard all of it before when he was standing outside the room while the midwife shouted for her to push.

"It won't be long, I can feel them now," she said.

He didn't speak, just held his hands out below her vagina and waited.

It took 15 minutes of her pushing for a head to appear and three more pushes for a small human to pop out.

"Cut the cord," she said.

He didn't know where to cut but he cut anyway.

It wasn't long before the next one appeared, wailing and twitching like the first one.

They were alive, it had worked, he thought as he wrapped both of them with one blanket.

They looked exactly like him, like his father and his father's brothers. One even screamed in a voice like his.

He placed the blanket on his wife's chest and said, "Sbopho and Nyanda."

Except for the first two, he had not named the six other children who had died in that same room.

"I will bury these in the kraal," he said and left the room.

Mthaniya was not interested in knowing where her husband was going to bury the placenta. In fact, she was not interested in him and whatever was going on in his mind. She had two infants suckling on her breasts and that was enough.

The next morning, she found him curled next to the four graves, cold and lifeless. It bothered her that she was more happy about her children being alive and less sad about her husband being dead.

She lived with the guilt silently for a while but eventually the presence of the two boys, one loud and restless with a temper and the other quiet and polite, surpassed all of it.

The big-eyed Zulu twins blended, played and went to school with other children and with time, the whispers and suspicions faded.

Until they turned 14...

Thabitha

HERE THEY CALL him Professor.

At first, when he would come in once or twice a week for a few beers and a chat, they would sit around and challenge him to a debate about politics.

They thought he was humble, that he, a young man from a family such as his, would sit and engage with them at a shebeen could only mean he did not look down on them.

They started calling him Professor out of respect because they knew how educated and intelligent he is but now, two years later, they say it to mock him.

He still engages in those political debates, which always center around what is wrong with the current government and why the DA should never be allowed to rule beyond Cape Town. But now they don't take him that seriously. Instead they go as far as betting on how long it will take before he passes out.

Sometimes he disappoints them and voluntarily staggers out of the place into the street, but then they follow him out to make sure nobody steals his shoes and beats him up if he resists.

"Zulu, wake up, we're closing," Mashaba says.

This has become his job almost every night, waking him up and sometimes driving him home if none of his family members agree to pick him up.

He called Lwandle today because he can't drive him. His wife has put her foot down.

"We are running a shebeen, not a free Uber service," she said this morning, still angry about last night.

The men he had been drinking with have all gone home. They left him passed out on the floor, face down with a bottle of Hansa still in his hand. It is the same men he used to buy expensive bottles of whiskey for when he first came here, until his bank account ran dry and his family resolved to never give him money.

They buy him beer now, as a sign of loyalty but it isn't such a big deal because he is so deep in it that it takes only two quarts to knock him out.

He staggers to his feet and pats his pocket as if searching for something.

"They didn't rob me today?" he asks, a burp reaching his mouth before he can finish talking.

"Rob you of what? You don't have shit. Your brother is coming to pick you up. Now get away from that table! I don't want you vomiting all over here," the wife says.

She lost patience with him a long time ago and not because he is a drunk. No, without those she would not have a business to run, but because really, what could be so bad that a young man who could be anything he wanted to be would throw his life away like this?

People can be functional drunks but this one is beyond help and the only thing that can save him is death. That's what she always tells her husband.

Mashaba, too, tried his best at first and he can't deny that his presence brought in more customers. It even got his shebeen some

media coverage, although he wished the stories had been more positive.

By the time Lwandle parks in front of the shebeen, they are all waiting outside, with Mashaba holding Sbani up to make sure he doesn't fall on the veranda and pass out again.

They exchange looks and say nothing to each other. They know the drill. Pick him up and carry him to the car, put him on the back seat and turn him to lie on his stomach so he doesn't choke.

It's not a long drive, just 10 minutes from the Golden Highway to Glenvista. It's not a hassle really, except Lwandle still has to carry him alone from the car to the pool house and try to do it without his father hearing him. That's the tough part.

He, too, has tried to help him.

He took out his own savings and booked him in a rehab far away from Joburg but that didn't last. He was back home within four days, sober and promising never to touch alcohol again.

He believed him, even though nobody else in the family did. But he did because this is his brother, the one who protected him from many things when they were little boys and the one he had always looked up to.

As he drives Sbani home, who was once named one of the most influential under 25s in the country, he remembers the look of helplessness on his face as they stood watching the little white coffins being carried from the house to the graveyard, with a handful of people humming something they couldn't make out.

Their fathers could have fought harder. In fact, they were ready to fight dirty and they would have won had Sbani not told them to let it go.

"Allow my children to be buried in peace, please," he told them.

He was tired and all he wanted was to go somewhere and be alone. He was aware of his own fault in this and wondered if the result would have been different had he done things right.

He watched Thabitha from the top of the hill wailing and falling to her knees as her mother failed dismally to comfort her. He wished he

could hold her and lie that everything would be fine. If only he had been allowed to the funeral. His whole family, his fathers and mothers and siblings stood on the hill and watched with him.

Before the funeral, it had been a long week of shock and anger and confusion and tears.

Qhawe tried to negotiate with Thabitha's family to at least allow Sbani to throw soil in the grave but that plea fell on deaf ears because history was repeating itself. The Zulu family had again wronged the Ngqulungas in the worst way possible.

Lwandle was the only person Sbani told about Thabitha being pregnant. Together they tried many times to come up with a plan to break the news to the family but there was never a perfect time or place.

It was their decision, Sbani and Thabitha's, to wait until she was far along to avoid her having to deal with the stress from their families.

They had everything planned, where she would give birth and what their next step would be when they were parents. They spoke about taking Mvelo in to live with them. They were selling the townhouse and had started viewing houses with yards big enough for three children to play.

Ultrasound pictures were pasted on the fridge, in their bedroom, one was in his office and Thabitha had already bought "Babies on board" stickers for two of their cars.

She wanted the nursery to be painted white because she thought the twins could be girls, but one afternoon she came back from work to find the room painted blue with two little cots and superhero posters on the walls.

Her hormones weren't at their peak that afternoon so she let it go and lay down on the couch.

He knew that meant she wanted a foot massage and she wanted it immediately.

"People at work keep asking when I'm going on maternity leave," she said.

He raised his eyebrows but didn't say anything.

She did that thing of wrinkling her forehead that she did every time she was about to go off.

"I'm pregnant, not ill. Women get pregnant all the time and they don't lie around doing nothing. Women in Mbuba plough fields until their waters break."

He looked at her and shook his head.

"That can't be right," he said.

"Yeah, because you grew up in a mansion with 20 maids," she retorted.

He'd never liked the 'rich boy' comments but Thabitha threw them around occasionally when she wanted to make a point.

He could have told her that they never had maids because his father didn't want people in his house, but the family conversation was often avoided in case it took them to why they were secretly cohabiting in the Eastern Cape.

"Have you thought about the names?" she asked him one night.

It reminded him of how he broke the family rule by naming his first son himself. The only thing that saved him was that he named him after his late little brother.

"Baba names all the children in the family," he said, prepared for an onslaught.

"I think I prefer naming my own children," she said.

He didn't argue. He'd never been the confrontational type but he knew where the names of his children were going to come from and that was it.

Thabitha moved to the Eastern Cape a few months after her uncle almost killed Sbani. She had secured an internship at the local municipality and planned to study further.

She was clear from the beginning that marriage wasn't her thing, at least not until she was in her late 30s and had achieved everything she wanted to achieve professionally.

"I'm not about to become a Zulu wife," she'd say.

Sbani himself wasn't really sure at first if he was ready to be a family man. He had big plans for himself and felt he was too young to be called

someone's husband. But then the pregnancy happened. It wasn't planned but it happened and they were happy and they were going to make it work.

They would joke about how this was easier for Sbani because it wasn't his first time pulling the same stunt. The first time was out of fear but this time, it was about protecting the woman he loved, the girl he was going to stick with and start a family with away from Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal and away from the hatred between their families.

They had both decided that whatever it was that their families were fighting about had nothing to do with them. Thabitha stopped speaking to her uncle when he accused her of spitting on her father's grave by being with the son of the man who killed him.

She was in love and love made enemy lines invisible. That's what her mother told her when she encouraged her to go to the Eastern Cape.

"It has to end. At some point it must end and if it is you who will end it, then so be it," her mother said.

On the day Sbani left for Qhawe and Naledi's wedding, they agreed that he would tell Hlomu everything, but only after both ceremonies were done because he didn't want to cause tension when the whole family was excited.

He was going to tell her on Sunday after the traditional wedding, but by then some woman had come and rattled everyone with a book she was writing about his fathers.

Hlomu was angry, and he learned a long time ago to read her face and know when not to mess with her.

He thought about staying a few more days and letting things cool off before breaking the news but he had left a heavily pregnant woman behind with only two weeks left before her due date, so he left.

Telling Hlomu before the babies were born was still on the cards. They would deal with his family first and then Thabitha's later, after Nkosana had decided on the date they'd go to Mbuba to pay damages.

They had only one week left before the babies came and they were

going to go through the experience together. Sbani was going to hold her hand and rub her shoulders as she pushed. He'd already ordered five bouquets of flowers that were going to be in her hospital ward with a giant "Thank you" card.

Everything was in place and perfect but when she woke up one morning with her left leg double its size, there was no time for flowers or giant cards.

The twins were born silent.

The call he made to Hlomu in the middle of that night was brief, just a simple, "Thabitha was pregnant, the babies died. I need to take her to Mbuba, with the bodies."

He left the rest to her. Nothing else mattered to him after that, neither his family nor Thabitha's family. He wasn't even interested in what went wrong. He was going to bury his children next to Mvelo. Beyond that he could see nothing.

What followed was everything they had tried to stay away from, a feud that started before they were born, one that no one could explain. But they both knew it was over when afterwards their phone conversations were filled with more awkward silence than words. There was no laughter and no crying over their loss. Each of them grieved in their own space, dealing with their own unspoken guilt and unanswered questions.

They had to accept and let each other go because everyone knows that these things either bring you closer or tear you apart. Their story was the latter.

Thabitha never went back to the Eastern Cape and it wasn't her uncle who stopped her. It was her decision.

Eventually, Sbani packed his bags and went back to Gauteng too.

He blamed everyone for everything. His mother was the source of everything. He looked his father straight in the eye and told him he was a killer. Hlomu too wasn't spared. Her crime was allowing things to happen when she had the power to stop them.

And when the blame game didn't help with the pain, he thought

forgetting, even for just for a few hours, would help.

He found solace in the bottle and the same bottle stripped him of all the respect he had worked his whole life to earn.

A spoiled brat who thinks the world owes him something, that's what Nkosana called him the last time Mashaba dropped him off at his doorstep.

At first he was patient with him and only because Zandile begged him to be. But his stance, as his father had always stressed, was that he didn't raise him to be weak. That's why he can't stand the sight of him lying on his own vomit.

"I gave this boy everything. Does he even know what I had to do to give him the life he has? Who hasn't lost a child Lwandle? I held my 12-year-old boy's dead body in my arms, ravaged by bullets and bleeding all over me. If Sbani can't pick himself up and deal with the shit then he doesn't belong in this family," he once said to Lwandle.

But Lwandle could never give up on his brother. He decided to do his Masters degree at Wits University for exactly that reason, to be there, watching over a grown man who was once his hero and hoping that one day he isn't woken by a call telling him he was lying in a gutter somewhere, dead.

"I want to speak to my mother," he says.

"No, it's Iam, Sbani. Mami is sleeping. Don't do this."

He always does this, drunk calls her in the middle of the night and speaks no sense. Sometimes he just cries, and then he falls asleep in the middle of the conversation.

"Give me the phone, Lwandle, or do you want me to wake up your father?"

Lwandle knows, and it has happened before, that if Nkosana wakes up to find Sbani like this, he will drag him out into the street and lock the gate behind him. Zandile will cry and beg, Sbani will say something about how she never stands up for him and Zandile will try even harder because of the guilt she carries with her every day, and then it will be one

of those terrible nights.

So he dials Hlomu's number and hands him the phone.

"Lwandle," she answers.

"No, it's the other one."

She sighs deeply and asks him if he is okay. Hers is a feeling of defeat because no matter how hard she tries, she knows that the decision to fix himself lies with himself and nobody else.

"Thank you for loving me. You are the only person who loves me here."

That's his line, always, and so she stays on the phone and listens and hopes he falls asleep before Mqhele grabs the phone and starts swearing at him.

"They will kill you, Mami, one day they will kill you and they will take your children..."

Lwandle snatches the phone away from him and hangs up. He expects him to put up a fight but he can barely lift himself up from the couch.

"Do you know that they have a house in Muldersdrift?" he mutters between burps.

"Who?" Lwandle asks.

"Baba, and nobody except them knows about it, not even Mami. It has the same chair."

Lwandle knows exactly which chair his brother is talking about but he doesn't know about the Muldersdrift house and he knows better than to investigate.

He locks the door behind him, because the worst thing would be for Sbani to stagger out and end up at the bottom of the pool.

Nandi

HE WAVES AT him and carries on walking.

Their paths haven't crossed in a while.

Nkangala spends a lot of time here and even has his own keys. Sometimes he takes one of the cars in the garage out for a spin and when the security guard at the gate gives him a funny look, he always lies and says it's an instruction from the bosses. That he has to drive the cars now and again so the engines don't become rusty.

It's a silly theory and Nkosana knows it, but he lets him get away with it because he's always had a soft spot for him. He even defended him from his own brothers after that thing with Naledi, the thing where he gave her R30 instead of being discreet like he was supposed to.

Tonight Nkangala is based in the yard. He knows not to go in, not when they are here.

"Madoda," Nqobizitha greets as he walks in. He is the last to arrive.

His presence is acknowledged with nods as he joins in.

They come to this house for specific reasons, to fight, to hide something or to plot something.

They talk about Sbani sometimes but never the thing about Thabitha

and the twins and never about the thing Mzimela said just before he died.

Their stance is that Sbani needs to be a man and get over it.

Mqhele allowed Hlomu to be patient with him for a while, until he almost burnt his house down. Qhawe allowed him to come to his house whenever Nkosana kicked him out, until he took one of his cars and drove to the nearest liquor shop with Mathongo on the backseat. They found them at the police station, Sbani so drunk he couldn't even say his own name.

This house has existed for years. Before Nkangala earned their trust and was rewarded with access to things and places those before him never got close to, nobody lived here.

The longest anyone ever stayed here, before Nkangala, of course, was the two days Mqhele could not go home to face his wife.

They bought the plot for a specific reason, but then after Mandisa did what she did, they had a valid reason to build a house to conceal what they had buried under it.

"And then? Iphi lentwana?" Mqhele asks.

"He left early in the morning. I told him to be here by 6am," Nqobizitha says.

Ntsika is known for being the last to arrive, everywhere. Today is no different.

Nqoba was against this. He said there was no need for Ntsika to know things, at least not now. He tried to talk them out of it but they all agreed that he needed to be a grown man, that the time for him to be sheltered was over, especially now that he had decided to come back home and insists on joining the family business.

It's not that Ntsika didn't know who his brothers were. It's just that, especially after Hlomu came and turned him into a blue-eyed black boy, they had never involved him in anything they wouldn't do in public.

He went back to London after the twins' funeral but there was just something different about being there. He came back two months later

on a one-way ticket.

He didn't immediately tell everyone he wasn't going back but he kept popping in at Sbopho Logistics almost daily.

"He's here. How far are you willing to go with this?" Nqoba asks Qhawe.

He doesn't answer, probably because he too isn't sure. But this is a good start and it will soon come out anyway so they might as well.

They all watch him as he walks in, and he knows it's coming.

"I got lost," he says in his defense as he stands in front of them, before the swearing starts.

"Fokof, let's go," Mqhele says.

"Go where? And whose house is this? Where are we going?" he asks again as he follows them out of the house.

"Siyokqinisa isende," Qhawe says.

... ☺ ...

Certain rules govern the dark world.

Some are able to stick to them while others crumble and fall at the first test.

There are sacrifices to be made and they all, technically, involve sacrificing yourself.

You see, the thing about being a criminal is that when you go out to commit crime, you are well aware that your chances of succeeding are equal to the chances of you not making it out alive.

It's the risk, the adrenalin, the ability to beat the system that pushes some deeper and deeper into the fascinating world of doing everything they are not supposed to do.

But this here, these people here, there is more to who they are than just that. One would argue that they are here because they didn't have many choices available to them. Others would believe that their fate was shaped by what they experienced as children.

There are many possible explanations really and for each and every one of these men, there was an explanation.

They know he is near.

In here you can hear everything, even the sound of a coin dropping is clean and clear.

But footsteps, never! Not even when they are five steps away from you.

It's a skill people here acquire with time.

They walk with their heels barely touching the ground, as if in fear of what might happen or who might do what to them from behind.

They have a habit of bowing their heads too, as if they want to feel your presence rather than see it.

He comes in, head first, and scans the room with his eyes before his whole body is inside.

He's seen, counted and made eye contact with all of them in just a second.

He stands leaning behind the door with his hands behind his back.

"When did you grow up?" he asks, looking at Ntsika.

It's strange that he can easily identify him. They've never met.

But there's an endearing look on this man's face and Ntsika immediately knows who he is, but not who he is to him and why they are here.

He looks at Mqhele for an answer, but he gets nothing.

The man pulls up a chair and sits down. There are only four chairs and nine people in this room. There's also one table, and that's all. And so some sit on the floor while others stay on their feet.

"They want to kick me out of here," the man says, laughing.

Everyone laughs except Ntsika, simply because he doesn't know what's going on and he's not about to ask.

He learnt a long time ago to not ask too many questions, especially when he knows the answers aren't what he wants to hear.

It's not that he has a problem with who his brothers are. It's that he's understood from the beginning how important it is to them to protect

him.

There has to be at least one thing good and pure about them, right? There has to be someone, at least one in them, who is nothing like Sbopho.

"Shouldn't you be celebrating?" Sambulo asks.

They already know. That is why they came here.

They have everything ready for him outside. He will have a good life when he gets out of here, as they promised.

It was supposed to be five years, only five years, but now it's been 12.

He kept accumulating the years himself and they never understood why.

First he stabbed someone just months before he was due to be released. Five more years were added.

And then a few years later he deliberately, they believe, got himself caught for running a drug ring inside prison.

To say Nkosana was angry is an understatement.

They need to move on from this. It's holding them back. It's the last remaining link.

And this man is the string connecting them to that time, a long time ago.

"You have to get out of here, Zulu," Mqhele says.

The man laughs.

He does this every time.

"It's strange how all of you have changed since the first time we met," he says.

"And you, when are you getting married?" he says, pointing at Mpande with his head.

Mpande doesn't answer. He doesn't want to talk about it.

The smile on the man's face has never left.

He seems comfortable, more at home than incarcerated.

Ntsika is lost.

"I was slightly older than you when I came in here," the man says to him.

His hair is very short but grey strands are visible.

If he didn't have the two scars on either side of his forehead, he could easily be mistaken for Sambulo, but he has Nqobizitha's voice and Mqhele's intensity.

The rest of them are too quiet. The man notices and looks Mqhele square in the eye.

Mqhele responds with a low sigh and shakes his head.

The man nods.

"You're not going to pull some stupid shit again, are you? This has to end. You have to get out of here," Nqobizitha says.

He laughs.

Now they know he is up to his tricks again.

"What about Nandi?" Mqoqi says.

The man's face changes immediately.

It always does at the mention of her name.

It was the main thing he asked for, that they find and take good care of her in return for what he was doing for them.

"How is she?" he asks.

"She's good. And a grown woman now," Mqoqi replies.

They've always thought she'd be the one reason he decided to get out of here.

"She'll never be a grown woman. I can't have that," the man muttered.

There are some things they omit to tell him about Nandi. Like that boyfriend from eSkhawini who they found out had slapped her around. They had to deal with him and Qhawe almost missed the birth of his first child while dealing with the damn idiot.

Nandi doesn't know why the guy suddenly wanted nothing to do with her but she's moved on.

She met Nkosana by chance those years ago back in Swaziland, she believes.

She was supposed to be off duty that night but the lodge owner had asked her for a favour. They had important guests sleeping over and they

needed their best chef to perform her magic. She couldn't say no to that. The important guest turned out to be the then most eligible bachelor of Gauteng.

As fascinating as it was to meet Nkosana Zulu, she didn't moon over him the way the rest of her colleagues did because culturally they were related.

She spent pretty much half of that Thursday in the kitchen. First, it was lunch and later all those men who had been discussing business in the private boardroom all afternoon came out to the dining room.

She knew she had put her best foot forward with that steak tartare but still felt a little nervous when they, actually Nkosana, specifically asked to meet the chef.

She's not shy. She never has been but those men were intimidating. She stood with her hands behind her back and smiled as she received compliment after compliment.

"What's your surname?" Nkosana asked.

"Zulu. I'm Nandi Zulu," she said confidently.

She'd always been proud of her name. She was named after the most famous queen of her nation.

She saw a smile on his face.

"Mageba," he said, reaching out for a handshake.

She was impressed with herself that night. It wasn't every day that an important guest loved your food so much that they shook your hand to thank you.

The men were supposed to leave the next morning and she was supposed to spend all day sleeping in her bachelor flat at the lodge's staff accommodation.

She loved that place. She understood that having it depended on her keeping her job, but it felt so much like her real home.

A knock woke her and as she opened the door already prepared to spit venom at whoever was disturbing her peace, there stood Nkosana Zulu in shorts and flip-flops.

"You're not working today? What am I going to eat?" he asked.

No greeting. Nothing.

To her surprise, she didn't panic or feel uncomfortable in his presence. But it was still strange that he was standing on her doorstep, talking to her.

"It's my day off," she said.

"No, actually yesterday was my day off but I had to work because you were here and so today I..." she stopped when she noticed the look on his face.

She had seen him a couple of times on TV and in those appearances she had never seen him smile.

In fact, the first time she saw or heard of him was on that video of a pregnant woman who was hijacked. After that, it was on the news and then there were those taxi stories.

Now that he was standing in front of her, he seemed totally different.

He looked over her head, managing to catch a glimpse of the inside of her flat.

She felt a slight flash of embarrassment. Cleaning had never been her favourite thing.

"I'm not going in. Put your shoes on, we're taking a walk," he said.

Again, she couldn't say no. Somehow she felt close to him, like they'd known each other for a while.

She generally hated entertaining guests and there was nothing she hated more than overseas tourists who took pictures of people without asking. That was why she rarely took walks along the river. In fact, that was why she rarely left the lodge premises.

"We're not going mountain hiking, are we? Because I'm not about that life," she said.

"No, I'm not about that life either. I'd rather be sitting in a convertible, breathing the air conditioner," he said.

Normally she would have frowned upon that statement but as arrogant as it was, he said it with such a humble tone and that puzzled

her, until she realised she had no business judging a stranger.

She followed him all the way to the river bank, which wasn't more than a kilometre away.

"How long have you been working here?" he asked.

She started counting back in her head.

"Umm, it's been four years. I came here straight from culinary school," she replied.

He nodded.

"Do you speak Zulu at all?"

She shrugged.

"Zulu, Swati... is it not the same thing? If you can speak one, you can automatically speak the other," she answered.

It was an interesting question, one she had been asked numerous times in her life.

Whenever she told people her name, they immediately assumed she was from somewhere in KwaZulu-Natal.

Well, technically she was, it's just that she wasn't sure where exactly.

The one thing her mother insisted on was for her to be able to pronounce her surname right.

"Zulu, not Tulu," her mother would say to her.

Nkosana had been speaking to her in Zulu. Not the kind of Zulu you hear people speaking on TV and radio, his was deeper and made his tone sound firm even when he was being polite.

He crouched, picked up a few small stones and started throwing them in the river one after the other.

He'd quietly watch the stone from the time it left his hand until it reached the water, and then he'd wait until the water was calm again before throwing the next one.

His silence in between was a little creepy.

She stood next to him and watched. It was strange, even to her, that she wasn't that curious about why he wanted to take a walk with her. He didn't even know her. But some people just generally embrace folk with

the same surname as theirs, especially Zulu people, her people, whom she knew nothing about.

"You grew up here?" he asked.

"Yes, in Manzini."

"I see," he said.

This time he crouched and dipped his hands in the water to wash them.

It was still early in the day but canoes and boats were already starting to disturb the peaceful water.

"Urgh," she said.

She didn't mean to say it out loud but he heard her. The look on her face was an even bigger give-away because her face always betrayed her. No matter how hard she tried to hide how she felt about something, her facial expressions would tell the truth.

"What?" he asked.

She shook her head briefly.

"Tourists? I don't like them either," he said.

They both laughed.

"It's not that I don't like them. It's just that sometimes they have no respect. They think Africa is Mars or something. If you were to hear the comments they make in the dining room when they come back from their 'adventure', you'd be shocked," she said.

He was listening attentively.

"Some of them seem shocked that we wear clothes and have beds and electricity."

She stopped when he started laughing.

"They make you angry, don't they?"

She blushed and smiled, a little embarrassed too.

She had the habit of getting carried away when speaking on something she felt strongly about.

"What are you? An introvert?"

She shrugged.

"Yeah, me too," he said.

If she ever got to experience a father-daughter moment, she imagined it would be something like this.

They had a lot in common.

But she was not prepared for what he said next.

"Since you hate tourists so much and you still have to cook for them every day, how about I give you a better job?" he asked.

She didn't answer immediately because it was a strange question, especially coming from a man she didn't know.

Her life was here, in Swaziland, at this lodge and the job she loved so much. Or at least she thought.

"A job where? Doing what?"

As her mind processed what was happening, she started feeling uncomfortable. Who was this man anyway?

She knew he was wealthy but she didn't know much about what he did for a living except that he was in the taxi business. And from what she had read, the taxi business in South Africa wasn't exactly a modest profession.

"Anything you want," he said.

When she looked him in the eye, she realised he was serious. But he'd be crazy if he thought she'd just pack up and leave her life for something as small as a promise of a job.

He looked at his watch and immediately threw all the little stones still in his hand in the river.

"Think about it. I'm serious," he said.

From there, he walked straight to the parking lot, got in his car and left.

Had he not shared a surname, she would have thought he was trying to get it on with her. But that would have been impossible. The vibe she got from him was that of a father.

She went back to her life after he left. Leaving Swaziland was not an option. She loved it there.

It took years before she saw him again, and at that time taking his job offer was no longer negotiable.

However, Nkosana and his brothers had made a promise. They had to keep their end of the bargain and she was that end.

And so as Mqhele, Nqobizitha and the rest of them sit here with her brother right now, they know that taking care of Nandi is the least they could have done.

If her brother hadn't done this for them, one of them would be in here.

He found them two years after he started serving his sentence, just weeks before that video that made them famous.

It was a phone call that changed everything.

Hlomu was pregnant after five years of trying and Mqhele was not going to let anything stress her. Sambulo was in the process of getting married. Things were looking up for them and they were going do whatever it took to protect that.

They were going to kill him, they decided before they entered those prison gates. But when he entered the visitors' hall, they knew it would be impossible.

By the time he sat on the bench opposite them, they weren't going to kill him. They were going to get him out of here.

He wasn't an enemy standing in their way. He was blood. Sbopho's blood. Their blood.

He was a little overwhelmed too but he had to man up. And to their disbelief, he had an offer to make.

At first they weren't sure.

He was a natural joker. With him, it was hard to know when he was serious or joking. But he was straight forward with them from the onset.

He was here because of them. The crime he had committed was to look like them.

"From what I've heard, my father's name was Nyanda Zulu. My mother told me he died before I was born but she met another man after

that and his surname was also Zulu, luckily for me," he said.

They had never heard of a Nyanda Zulu before. In fact, they didn't know anyone from their father's side or where he came from. But it was clear that this man was one of them.

"I have a sister. She doesn't remember me. She was two years old when I left Swaziland. I need you to find her," he said.

"A sister?" Qhawe asked.

"Yes, from a different father. Find her," the man said.

They still didn't know how he found them and what he planned to do next.

Nkosana was furiously rubbing the palms of his hands together, a habit they had already noticed they all shared with this man.

"I know it was one of you," he said looking at each of them.

They kept quiet.

"But don't worry, that's not why I contacted you. I had a good lawyer and a good inyanga so I got five years," he stopped.

They knew all of this. They had researched before coming here. And now it was starting to be clear to them where he was going with this, and they were relieved more than anything.

He had three years to go.

He had a half-sister he left behind who needed to be looked after and he was going to need them when he got out of here.

They struck a deal.

Nkosana has never understood why a man would voluntarily stay in prison for something he didn't do, especially after he found out who did it.

But he's been in the dark world all his life, long enough to know that you can't put anything past a broken man.

They could have left him alone and paid him after three years, but that's not who they are.

They had to find out who Nyanda was but where were they going to start?

His own son knew nothing about him except that, according to his mother, he was a priest and he died and the church had to bury him because nobody knew his roots.

Mqhele went back.

He felt a strong connection to this man whom they were all certain was a brother they never knew.

He asked a lot of questions but the important one was why this man was willing to do this. It couldn't have been just about the money.

"I got into some trouble. I'm safer here than I would be outside. Besides, I've been on my own since I was 14. I know how to survive," the man said with a smirk.

Still, it sounded a little strange. Anywhere is safer and better than prison.

Mqhele explained that they could get him out. They had connections. They knew the right people.

But the man was not interested. The strangest part was that he laughed it off.

Now Mqhele needed to know.

"How did you find us?" he asked.

The man rubbed his hands together and looked at him.

"Mahlubi found me," he said.

Their eyes locked for a moment.

The man didn't say anything after that but Mqhele knew. He could see it in his eyes.

Suddenly he understood that this man wasn't just sacrificing his freedom. He had turned down a deal with the devil. Perhaps because he longed for a family, an identity. Or maybe because Sbopho's spirit was more alive than they thought.

Who Nyanda was, remained a mystery. A burden they chose to carry on their own.

Mhlaba may look and sound exactly like them but his life growing up was totally different from theirs.

He went to church and sang in a choir. His father may have been dead but his mother, according to how he remembered her, was a radical believer who prayed like a mad woman and used religion for anything from threats to punishment.

She had been the wife of a priest and the one thing she wasn't going to do was kill her husband's legacy, forgetting that the same husband had lied to her about who he was and where he came from.

Mhlaba endured it until he was 14, two years after his sister was born and his mother had remarried.

He left Swaziland but years later he ended up in jail for an armed robbery that happened at a place whose name he couldn't even pronounce and had never been to.

He asked, soon after he found the Zulu brothers, to be moved to Waterval in Newcastle, a prison in the middle of nowhere just to avoid drawing attention to himself.

Although he knows about all the wives and all the kids and who dies and who lives, none of them know about him.

"Is anyone going to explain to me this Mhlaba situation?" Ntsika asks.

"No!" they say in unison.

Nobody has time to break things down to him, not when they have just left a prison and are trying to make sense of why Mhlaba wants to stay there when they could easily get him out.

Nqobizitha still believes it is a bad idea to involve Ntsika in anything, particularly because he can't lie to Hlomu and Hlomu knows that. She would go crazy if she knew they were doing this, the same way she freaked out when she found out who Ndoni's father was.

She already knew him as one of the family drivers who was always present during family functions and random soccer Sundays that involved meat and alcohol and scathamiya singing if it wasn't traditional dancing.

She was okay with that, with his daughter being one of them, although she could sense some intensity whenever the subject of marriage was

mentioned.

The day things changed was the day they met at her house, and it was Ngcobo who called the meeting. Mzimela was fetched from Mbuba and Ndoni's father came alone.

Hlomu would have excused herself but Nkosana asked her to stay, probably because he did not expect Ndoni's father to say what he said.

They were already gathered in the dining room when he arrived, looking anxious and worried and as always, fresh iziphandla lining his wrists.

Ndoni says about him that if there was nothing wrong with other people being extremely devoted to their gods, there was nothing wrong with her father being so devoted to his ancestors.

But Ndoni knows nothing about her father except what he wants her to know.

He greeted everyone and sat at the other end of the table, a change of dynamics because his job had always been to take instructions from them.

"I had spoken to Ngcobo about this, but unfortunately what happened," he said. It was soon after the twins were buried and everything was put on hold, including Mpande's plans.

"None of us knew that we'd end up being..."

He was disturbed by Mqoqi walking in looking like he hadn't taken a bath in years, with a beard covering his face and his hair unkempt.

"We are listening, Mzizi," Mqhele said.

"As I was saying, none of us knew that this boy would bring us together like this," he said, linking his index and middle fingers together.

The boy in question would be Mpande.

"I have never had a problem with you, boMageba, you know that, we have worked well together. We have done so many things. I have done so many things for you and you have..."

"Khuluma Mzizi, we don't have all day," Mqhele said.

He took a deep sigh.

"I have no problem with lomfana taking my daughter. It is what they both want," he continues.

"But?" Qhawe asked.

He looked at Mpade and then at his hand.

"I will not send my daughter to a slaughterhouse, like a sheep. I will not do that."

"Get to the point, ndoda," Mqhele said irritably.

"You and I, we are the same. But me, I cleanse myself, I explain myself and I ask for protection. You, on the other hand, you behave like lost people, like you don't know how this world operates, like everything you have was a gift."

They could hear him but they were lost.

"People won't tell you this but I will..."

He cleared his throat before he spoke again.

"Us, we do this because it is a job, to make a living. But you, you do it because you can, because it is who you are, because you have this power that you too do not understand. Where do you think it comes from?"

He stopped and looked at all of them.

"There is something wrong with who you are, and eventually life will turn against you. It always does," he said.

He was about to continue when Mqhele cleared his throat and asked Hlomu to come with him. She wanted to stay but he touched her shoulder and asked her again to come with him.

He came back to the dining room alone.

Mzizi was still going everywhere except where he really wanted to go with his speech.

"What is it exactly that you want?" Mqoqi asked.

Mzizi leaned back on the chair and breathed another deep sigh.

"Gezani iqunga madoda. Fix it because I will not allow your gall to touch my daughter. I'm not going to have grandchildren born into this."

And with that he stood up and left.

They all sat in silence.

It wasn't something they had not heard before. Sometimes it was said as a joke, especially when they were younger and spent more time at Bree. Other taxi owners would tease them, saying "Ninequnga nina bafana bakwaZulu."

It wasn't something they took seriously, especially because everything they did they believed was justified. They handled things the only way they know how.

"We are not going to be dictated to by Mzizi," Nkosana said, stood up and left.

However, Ndoni had already said she was not ready for marriage. She too had her doubts about Mpande, about his lack of affection and his detached nature. He could make passionate love without kissing and saw nothing wrong with taking a shower immediately after.

He never told Ndoni about that meeting and they never spoke about marriage after that. Whenever she mentions her father and what a good man he is, Mpande nods and wonders how she would react if she ever found out that her father is a well-respected inkabi, that he took her through school and gave her a comfortable life with money made from killing three rival taxi owners. He wonders how she'd feel if she knew that they were the ones who paid him to do so.

Hlomu knows all of this. She got it out of Mqhele on the same night and she swore she wasn't prepared to deal with another Amanda. However, he didn't tell her about what Mzizi really wanted, more so because he too had no plans of pursuing it.

"Shit!" Nqobizitha says, startling everyone in the car.

"Gugu is in Soweto," he says.

Ntombi

CLIPPED ON IT with a rusty pin is a picture of a baby.

A baby of about two months old.

She had never seen this photograph until the day her mother died and she found this envelope hidden under the mattress. She doesn't know when it was hidden there but she suspects her mother slipped it underneath when she knew her death was near.

The thoughts of whether she did that hoping she'd find it, or whether she hoped for the secret to die and be buried with her, have been grappling with each other in her mind since that night.

She's lost and confused. Lost because she's not sure what finding the truth would do to her, confused because she knew her mother to stand for truth and everything that's right.

"Maybe there's a good explanation. Maybe I was given to her and not stolen."

She's talking to herself again. She does that a lot.

It started two months after her mother's funeral when, after putting up a fight, she decided to let all of it go.

The house went to her brother despite the fact that her mother had

left it to both of them.

"But you are not a Myeza. He is," her uncle said when she threatened to go to court.

Had she gone ahead with the legal fight she would have won, but things were already complicated and sour after Nqoba promised to wipe out the whole family if they dared mess with his wife.

That did not stop them, they went for the easiest target, her brother. It didn't take him long to turn against her too.

With Gugu's uncle, it wasn't exactly the fact that she wasn't family that made him suddenly resent her. It was the fact that her mother had lied to her brother for all those years. That he too had been fooled into loving a child that wasn't his blood by a wicked, lying woman.

She hasn't been to Ulundi since the funeral and after the depression, the near suicide and two miscarriages, she woke up last week and decided since Nqoba had failed dismally to use his contacts to find out who she was, she would do it herself.

She started at church last Sunday and all she got was an address from a random woman. That address and the envelope in her hand are all she has.

She knows everything that's in this envelope. She opened it and read the birth certificate, vaccination card, baptism certificate and her first school report again this morning, soon after Nqoba left the house at 5am to go wherever he was going.

It says here on the birth certificate that she was born at Nkonjeni Hospital. The birth date is correct, it's the one she's always known to be her birthday. The parent name is also her mother's name, which makes everything even more confusing.

She has only one lead, just one, and really it could be nothing, but it is worth a try.

She lied to Nqobizitha about her plans for today because he told her to let it go. He keeps saying that some truths are better left unknown because most of the time they turn out to be more painful than the lies.

But, she thinks, he doesn't understand how it is to not know who you are. He never will.

Chiawelo, that's what the address on the paper says. It's deep in Soweto.

Nqobizitha would kill her if he knew she risked going to Soweto alone with their child on the back seat. But she thought about that and so she took the smallest car they own so she wouldn't attract attention to herself.

She turns left on to Netshitanga Street. She's close. They told her it was two stop signs away from the school.

"Nhluvuko Primary School," she reads the name out loud.

She looks at the banner mounted on the school's gate again, and then at the piece of paper in her hand, and nods.

The look on her face says she's starting to get nervous. This could change everything. That's if it's anything at all.

Number 781. She's at the right house.

It's been a long time since she's been in a house this small. The gate is locked but there's a man in the yard, a young man sitting on a brick.

She's already pressed the hooter before she remembers that it's a rude thing to do. You don't hoot at people's gates, not in the township and not at black people's houses.

You humble yourself.

The young man doesn't move. He's looking at her, at the car parked outside the gate but he doesn't move.

She sighs deeply and checks on Shlangu. He's still sleeping. She gets out.

"Hi," she shouts and waves.

"Sisi," the man says, lazily, still sitting.

"Yes, I'm looking for someone, a woman who lives here," she shouts back.

He stands up and walks towards the gate. He has a limp.

"What woman?" he asks when he's standing in front of her, the locked

gate separating them.

She hands him the piece of paper.

He still has that mean look on his face

"Ntombi Mkhize?" he asks, looking at the piece of paper and then at her again.

She nods.

"How do you know her?"

"I don't. I mean... I met her only once, at church years ago. They gave me this address and said she lives here," she says.

You'd expect him to ask her what she wants from the woman but instead he opens the gate.

"Come in," he says, already walking back to the yard.

She takes one step further and immediately rushes back to the car.

He stops and watches her.

"No, leave it there," he says when she starts the car.

She obeys.

"But is it safe to leave the car outside?"

He waves his hand dismissively.

"Sisi, it's an Audi. Nobody can steal a parked Audi. It has to be hijacked," he says, sounding a little annoyed.

She frowns and wipes Shlangu's face with her hand. He's awake and is looking around him frantically, his eyes wide.

It's a four-roomed house, two bedrooms, a kitchen and a lounge. From where she's sitting, she can see outbuildings through the kitchen window.

"Mashego!" the man shouts.

She's shocked. The house is so quiet, she didn't think there was someone inside.

He calls Mashego's name three times before someone appears. He looks like he's just woken up from deep sleep.

"This lady here is looking for a woman who lives here. She has a name," he says and disappears somewhere.

Mashego is a character himself. He's wearing only boxer shorts and looks like he couldn't care less about the woman and child sitting on the sofa in front of him. His eyes are looking at the car parked outside the gate.

"I'm looking for Ntombi Mkhize," she says. She's very uncomfortable being here.

He doesn't respond.

"Mama, whose home is this?"

It's Shlangu, and once he starts talking, he doesn't stop. She ignores him and hopes to get a response from Mashego. But he immediately walks out and leaves them sitting.

She is already regretting this and is now thinking that maybe she should have asked for Nqobizitha's help instead of trying to do this on her own.

She thinks he's become so loving and caring. He's the total opposite of the man he used to be. When that whole thing happened with her family, she saw a side of him she'd always known existed but had never witnessed.

It's not every day that your husband pulls a gun on your aunts and uncles and threatens to kill each and every one of them if he ever sees them again. Needless to say, it did more damage to her family relations than it solved anything.

The door closes, someone pulled it closed and locked it from outside.

She stands up to see Mashego standing in front of her. He is dressed now.

"No, sit," he says.

He's wearing a friendly face now but it's still a bit unsettling.

"You are looking for who?" he asks.

"Ntombi Mkhize."

She still has the piece of paper in her hand.

"Who said she lives here?"

A deep sigh.

"At church, I met her at a Catholic church in Orlando a few years ago. I went back there on Sunday but she wasn't at church and some woman gave me this address. She said I'd find her here."

"Why are you looking for her?"

That question!

She clears her throat.

"I have questions to ask her. It's personal," she says.

"I think I've seen you somewhere," he says.

Of course he's seen her somewhere. Everybody has. She doesn't respond but things have become creepy very quickly in here.

Shlangu is getting restless, soon he'll start acting up.

"Is she here?"

"No, she used to rent one of the rooms here. She moved out."

There's a look of disappointment on her face.

"What do you want from her?"

There's silence.

The limping man is back. They're both waiting for an answer.

"She said I looked like her daughter," Gugu says.

She catches the two men looking at each other. Her instinct tells her that coming here alone was a mistake, especially since no one knows where she is. She left her phone in the car charging too.

"I heard she moved to Zola," Mashego says.

The two men look at each other again and she's trying to read their body language, hoping it will tell her that they are harmless.

"Are you talking about a woman with grey hair, short and slim?" asks the guy with the limp.

She nods. Yes, that's her, short and tiny, just like Gugu, but there was no resemblance other than that. They look totally different.

"We can go to Zola with you," Mashego says.

She's tempted but also skeptical. She's not about to get into her car with men she doesn't know but this is the only lead she has, the only hope of ever finding out who her mother is.

"Can I at least have her cell number?" she asks. She notices the irritation on their faces. There's a knock on the front door. The two men don't move. Now she's frantically looking around her. The knock gets more aggressive as they ignore it.

"What?" Mashego shouts.

"I need to buy," a voice says from outside.

"Go to the back!" yells the limping man

He keeps knocking.

"Shit! These people!" Mashego is annoyed.

"Do you have some on you?" he asks the limping man.

He nods and pulls out a small square-shaped thing wrapped in a piece of newspaper from his pocket.

The door is opened and a young man wearing a cap and sunglasses walks in. She looks at him briefly but he doesn't look at her.

An alarm goes off. It's Gugu's car.

"I'll be back in a week," she says, standing up.

"No," Mashego says. But she's already out the door.

She probably knows what's wrapped in that newspaper. Gugu may be a famous tycoon's wife now but she knows the streets.

She moved to Durban after high school to study at what used to be called ML Sultan Technikon. She became too excited and got caught up in the life. The parties, the nightclubs, the flashy men and clothes, the fast life and the consequences of it.

It took her five years to finish her three-year diploma in between a well-known government official and a criminal from Chesterville.

When she finished studying, she packed and went to Joburg with no plan whatsoever. All she wanted was to start on a clean slate where nobody knew her.

She ended up in flight cabin aisles, asking people if they wanted chicken or beef, and that was where she met Nqoba.

She walks around the car trying to figure out what triggered the

alarm but finds nothing.

It's already afternoon and the Soweto traffic is hectic at this time of the day. Taxis and buses and people are all over the place. As she tries to weave her way through the overcrowded township, all that's on her mind is what just happened.

She's more confused and hopeless than she was when she arrived here. Maybe she'll come back, maybe she won't.

"Mama, was that malume's home?" Shlangu asks.

He's not his usual hyperactive self today, probably because he has no idea where he is and why.

"No, there was no malume there," she says dismissively.

He leans back in the chair.

"But malume was there. I saw him. He was buying something from that man," he says.

Oh well, kids call every man who is not their father "uncle".

It's a cultural thing. They are taught that when they are young because it's not right to call an adult person by name. But Zulu children only use the term malume with people they know, and Nkangala is always careful.

Mqoqi

"I'VE FOUND THE girl I'm going to marry."

He remembers saying that and everybody laughing at him, particularly because he couldn't hold down a relationship for more than a month.

On top of that, they all told him he was too young.

A lot of people see him as an unapologetic playboy, a heartbreaker who has a problem committing to one woman.

He was once asked in a media interview what kind of woman it would take to "pin him down". They expected him to laugh when answering that question but shockingly, he became intense.

"I don't think she exists," he said.

He pulls the drawstring together, so hard that the hoodie tightens around his head and wrinkles his face. It's the first thing he put on when he got home at 12am.

He is the type that enjoys being alone and he's been alone a lot lately. His brothers know that and they give him his space when he needs it.

He takes one sip from the mug and frowns. His coffee is cold.

He stands up, walks to the kitchen and switches on the kettle.

This is his third cup in the past two hours.

Nobody understands his love for expensive raw coffee, when it started and where it came from but it's been there for years.

He has the smallest house compared to all of them. It's a single-storey, four-bedroomed house.

He hates double-storeys. Contrary to his die-hard adrenalin junkie personality, he is afraid of heights.

The only reason he didn't follow her inside that bus on that day was because it was a double-decker and she went to sit at the top.

He did try, he put one foot in but pulled back.

He had seen her three times before, so he was sure he'd see her again. That must be why he didn't try harder, he thought he'd get another chance at it.

He could still see her through the bus window from where he was standing as it drove off. She sat down, leaned with her shoulder on the window and opened a book.

She was his kind of woman. If only she knew that, or knew him.

He's having his coffee black with two drops of honey and a sprinkle of fine cinnamon. He makes up these recipes as he goes along. The smell fills up the whole house. It smells better than any perfume.

He walks back to his desk and adjusts the lamp before sitting down.

He got this desk from Amanda for his birthday years ago, custom made to accommodate his height.

He placed it right next to the bookshelf.

The last time she was here Mahlomu left with three of his books, two he hadn't even started reading. It's always been like that. He buys books, she steals them and then comes back to complain about how bad they are.

His answers are always along the lines of, "It can't be that bad if you read and finished it."

He slams the laptop shut and leans back on the chair, with his hands behind his head.

He closes his eyes and a picture of her from years ago appears again.

She walked alone, every day. He found it attractive that she never walked past those women selling fruit on the pavement without greeting. Sometimes she'd buy an apple or a banana, but she never ate them immediately. She'd toss them in her bag, smile and walk on.

Three of those women have since died. He wonders if she remembers them. He thought once about asking her about them but changed his mind because really, what was he going to say?

He has watched her change over the years and he doesn't know if she changed for the better or worse. He believes he could have done things differently, he could have protected her from a lot, kept her away from all of it and made her life easier.

It is the burden that he hates the most, the whole load of it that she carries on her shoulders and knowing it is them who put it there, the things they have forced her to do to keep this family together.

Maybe he could have saved her from all of it had he not agreed to take that emergency trip to Port Shepstone, the greatest regret of his life.

He was away for four days trying to negotiate space on that route. It had been long since he had spent time outside noisy, chaotic Joburg so being in Mkhholombe gave him peace and quiet, and time to think.

The whole time, all he could think about was how he was going to just walk up to her and ask her to be his woman. It had always been easy for him, his naturally smooth tongue could always get him whatever he wanted. But this one, she read books and greeted strangers and bought fruit from street vendors she didn't know. She seemed comfortable with herself, she walked like she was.

She was simple and reserved. She was what he wanted to know and love.

By the time he had packed to come back to Joburg, he had thought about it thoroughly and decided it was now or never.

But she didn't show up the next day nor the next nor the next... not even at the bus stop where he had seen her once before on that day when taxi drivers were on strike.

He was stationed at Faraday taxi rank but he knew she didn't live on that side of town.

He waited, every day hoping she'd find her way to him, but she didn't. Instead she found her way to his brother, and of all of them, the one who was the most incapable of loving.

Before that night at that hospital, the first time she met all of them, he had listened to Mqhele talk about his new girl he couldn't go a day without seeing.

There'd be jokes about how the first thing she bought when she arrived at his house in Naturena was a microwave. It was a funny one because his ex, whom he had put through the most in the two years they were together, took the microwave with her when she got tired and left him.

And when he finally met the microwave girl, he was angry. He was angry at his brother for even meeting her and talking to her and choosing her to be one of his casualties.

And then when he stopped being angry he started resenting her for coming between them. For making him feel the way he felt towards the brother who raised him, the one who taught him how to tie his shoelaces and how to fold a slice of bread without smudging the peanut butter on his hand.

He loved them both in different ways, yet their love, as beautiful and strong as it was, was the source of his bitterness. But it was pointless entertaining all those feelings, it was pointless because even if his brother had turned her into one of his casualties, there was no way he could pick her up and fix her and make her his after that. He would have had to let her go anyway.

He accepted she wasn't going anywhere when Nkosana decided to trust her with his children.

Many years later, he finally made the mistake he had fought the hardest to avoid making. He shouldn't have told her the truth because now here he is, fighting again, trying to find what he can't have in random places.

He's been avoiding the calls for the past few days because he thought things would get better, but she's here now, trying to find something in him that he can never give her.

She stands at the door for a few seconds and looks at him before she walks in, slowly. She throws her handbag on the small table and walks to the bar. This is not how they usually behave.

Normally she would have found him at the door already waiting with a glass of wine. She'd have snatched it from his hand and walked past him straight to the bar while teasing him about reading yet another boring book.

She is bubbly, unpredictable and edgy. She says what she wants to say and goes where she wants to go. That's the side of her he loves.

He loves that he can't control her. He can't tame her and he can't tell anyone about her, and that's why they work so well together. She is the shield that protects him from being found out.

With her, he can be everything he is not.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"I could be better," he says.

They try not to go into conversations about feelings and empathy.

She spins the bar stool around so she's facing him and he knows it's coming.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asks.

No, but he closes his eyes and pulls her to his chest.

"You can talk to me, Mqoqi."

He can't, not this time.

They are close, despite their decision to keep feelings out of whatever it is they are doing. But family is a sensitive subject. What is happening is a sensitive subject. They try not to go there when they are together, as if in denial about the real world around them.

He takes her hand and places it on his sweatpants.

"This is the conversation you want us to have?" she asks, grabbing his erect penis.

"I need it."

It's always different when one of them needs it compared to when they want it. She was here last week, in tears and in need. Today it is him who is in need.

"It's too hot for that, don't you think?" she asks.

He knows that statement could possibly be followed by her rejecting him, which she does sometimes and he respects that.

"I'd pick you up and carry you all the way there but I'm not that young anymore..." he says, pulling her by arm to the door leading to the indoor pool.

He stands behind her at the edge of the pool and pulls her oversized top over her head.

She's so beautiful, so perfect with those long braids and perfectly carved shoulders. She knows he always goes for her hair first, and she waits for him. They are thin but heavy. He unhooks her bra and throws it to the floor next to the top.

She waits for it. She knows the routine. Her back is his other obsession. He always starts from the shoulders down and by the time he takes off whatever she is wearing on her lower body, he is on his knees.

"You own bum shorts?"

She turns around and looks down at him behind her. She knows that was a sarcastic question.

"They come out of the closet now and again, especially when I have to leave my house at 1am to attend to people's needs," she says and laughs.

"Alter ego?"

"You know her better than anyone," she says.

There's nothing else to take off after the shorts.

"You drove all the way here with no panties on?"

"Are you complaining?"

No, he is not, not with that scent pulling him to her shoulders. He wants to kiss her all the way down her back to the back of her thighs again but his body is far past that, it wants what it wants and it wants it now. He

tries to turn her to face him but she grabs his hand and places it on her left breast. It is warm, full and tender in his hand. How is it that women have so many things on their body that can drive a man crazy with just a simple touch? Why do they smell so good and why is their skin always so soft and tender?

He wants to fuck her and he wants to do it now, but she won't let him until she's ready. So he runs a hand up her inner thigh. It is warm and moist and wakes up every feeling in him.

"Uh uh, not yet..." she whispers when he pushes her thighs apart and tries to slip in from behind.

"When? Let me feel it."

She doesn't speak but pushes his hand deeper and places his finger on her clit.

"Touch it first," she says.

Why is she trying to give him a heart attack?

"You have to make me come before I let you in," she murmurs.

She can't do this!

"Please, I'm begging!" he says.

She is satisfied with herself, seeing him beg.

"I'll let you in if you fuck me the way I want."

She turns around to face him.

"What do you want?"

"I want the daredevil biker, not the book reader," she whispers in his ear.

Her braids are the first to land on the pool table followed by her back and wide-open legs. She thinks he's about to fuck her, but he first gives her what she asked for.

"Look at me, look into my eyes," he says, pushing two fingers deep inside her.

He pulls the braids when she doesn't, she squirms and opens her legs wider.

"I said look at me."

She does, briefly, before he pulls her up and places her against the wall. She grabs his penis but he's not there yet. He pushes her up against the wall and places her thighs on his shoulders, vagina in his face with her inner thighs rubbing on his cheeks. Now he's going to make her come, with his tongue.

He lets go when her grip gets tighter around his neck and pulls her to her feet.

"Trying to kill me, are you?" he whispers in her ear.

She doesn't speak, just turns around with her back on him and opens her legs wide. She wants him now and he's about to fuck her like there's no tomorrow.

... (♥) ...

They are both lying on their backs on the floor.

She's using his hoodie as a pillow.

"I think I'll stick with the book-reading guy next time," she says.

"I gave you what you asked for."

"You're an animal, Mqoqi, with four legs and a tail. That's what you are."

He wouldn't call what they are doing cuddling but he likes the smell of her after sex, her perfume mixed with his sweat. Her braids are messy and tickling his chest.

She's comfortable around him. She walks around naked so comfortably you'd swear he is the only man she's with.

"New perfume," he asks.

"New business venture," she says, her face beaming with pride.

She's a risk taker, naturally.

He raises his eyebrows.

She knows what he wants to say, so she rolls her eyes and throws her lace bra at him. She likes going into new ventures when she's bored or worried about not doing anything for herself. But he doesn't understand

why. He thinks she's done pretty well for herself.

But then, they've been doing this for years. One would have expected it to develop into something more with time but that would change everything, wouldn't it?

They are so in control of it that they have no problem staying away from each other when needs be.

He ran to her after the Amanda thing and she didn't hesitate to remind him that she had told him so. She never trusted that girl from the onset. There was just something about her that she found to be missing.

There was something missing in their relationship too and she did tell him that.

She said: "I think you are lying to yourself. You don't love that girl."

He never gave her a straight answer but he was determined to settle. Amanda was everything he wanted in a substitute for the woman he really loves because she was the total opposite of her.

He never tried to turn her into that woman. In fact, he loved that she was the opposite of her. She fed his hunger for adrenalin in the bedroom in a way he couldn't understand.

Most of the time, when they were inside each other, he felt like her wildness was fueled by something. It turned him on. It woke up the animal in him.

And when she revealed who she really was, all pieces of the puzzle started coming together quickly.

He came to understand that their sex wasn't about pleasure or love at all, that he was fighting with the devil who could have easily killed him in his sleep.

She's the only woman he's ever given keys to his house and allowed her to drive his cars whenever she wanted. She had become part of the family. He was sure she'd own his surname one day.

That night, when he sat in front of her with a gun in his hand was the hardest thing he's ever had to deal with.

She never begged or gave in, not even a single tear came out of her

eyes. She looked at him in the eye, as if daring him to do something. He kept asking, "Why me?" She kept saying, "Go ahead. Kill me like your brother did my sister." He felt he owed it to his brother to get rid of her for good. But also, they made a pact in the beginning. There were rules they vowed to abide by, whatever the circumstances.

She was also the girl he once tried very hard to love. She picks up the torn condom wrapper and tosses it in the bin. "I have to go back to KZN tomorrow. I don't understand why he hates the Joburg house so much," she says, pulling up her shorts. He's standing in front of her with his arms folded. He's still naked. "I'll see you next Saturday," she says, grabbing her car keys. He frowns.

"Hlomu is my friend, Mqoqi. Of course I'm coming to her mother's party."

"I know but..." he says and shrugs.

She never sleeps over, just as they never go to lunches, dinners or social events together. They don't do that kind of stuff because... what would her man say?

"Call me if you need me. I'll probably arrive in KwaMashu on Friday and don't worry, I'll be well-behaved little me throughout," she says.

As soon as the door closes behind her, he changes into a tracksuit and sneakers. It's 3am. He has to be in Muldersdrift by 4am and this trash of a man is still knocked out in the other room, blindfolded with his hands tied behind his back. He pulls up a chair, sits and looks down at the man lying on the floor. Not even the cold tiles have brought his bloody ass back to consciousness.

He knows men like him. He's met a lot of them and they disgust the shit out of him.

That they had to go all the way to Mpumalanga, with Nkangala driving like a bloody snail, to fetch this shitface and bring him here instead of

dealing with him there and then is what annoyed him the most, a waste of his afternoon and evening.

He waits, nothing happens, so he goes to the kitchen and comes back with a jug of cold water. He doesn't immediately pour it over his face. He watches him and tries to imagine what his face will look like when he opens his eyes and sees him here.

He decides to remove the blindfolds first and untie the rope around his wrists.

He lights a cigarette, counts to three and empties the jug over the man's head. He watches him gulp and try to jump to his feet.

"You're not dead yet?" he says, as calm as can be.

"Where am I?" the man asks, looking around the room for a door or window or a hole to escape.

The pain on his back and face sends him back to the floor. Mqoqi roughed him up before throwing him in the Jeep and sticking chloroform up his nose. Drugging him was Nkangala's idea. Mqoqi could have just beaten him unconscious and driven with him on the backseat, and if he woke up on the way, he'd have beaten him unconscious again and continued driving. But he had to bring him here alive. That's what his brother told him to do.

"Get up, let's go," Mqoqi says, standing up and throwing the stump of cigarette out the small window.

The man stays put, completely awake but wondering how he ended up here and where he is. His hands are untied, so he decides to try to fight his way out but a single punch lands him back on the floor.

"Ngithe asambe wena nja! Get yourself up, I don't have all day."

The man staggers up and follows, assuming there is a gun somewhere and realising that he has been kidnapped for a reason he does not know.

It must be one of the teachers at his school trying to get rid of him, he thinks. It happens, maybe someone he got fired or someone who wants his position, probably that damn woman who looks down on everyone because she has two Masters degrees. She could get any job she wants, but

she insists on undermining him at his own school.

He has nothing on him, not his cellphone, not his wallet. The only thing he remembers was getting out of his car to pee on the side of the road and somebody choking him.

It's already 3.30am. Mqoqi has only 30 minutes to drive from Bedfordview to Muldersdrift.

"Okay, we're late so this is our ride," he says, pointing to the bike and putting on his helmet.

The man looks at him and then at the bike. For a moment it looks like he's going to run, but that would be pointless and he knows it.

"Hop on and hold on to me. You let go, you die. And no helmet for you."

Mqoqi's phone beeps. It's an SMS.

"Don't put him on the bike."

"Why not?" he replies.

"Mqoqi!"

Irritated, he puts his phone in his jacket pocket, takes off his helmet and tells the man to get in the car.

"Do you want some ice cream?" he asks the man.

As shocked as he is by this strange question, the man shakes his head.

"Chicken?"

The man shakes his head again.

Mqoqi shrugs and says, "Okay."

Nonjiko

THIS THATCH CHAIR has been a subject of debate for the longest time.

Qhawe argues it is a garden chair and therefore should be kept outside on the balcony. Nkosana doesn't care. Mqhele says a chair is a chair, they don't come with names and Sambulo sits on it when he smokes his weed because it has wide, flat armrests where he can put his Rizla and lighter and relax.

It's one of the many items of furniture that were randomly bought because they had to sit somewhere when they were here.

There's a couch from Xolie's old house, which she believes is still in the storeroom, and a fridge they used to keep in the office. Mpande brought some of his stuff here, including a bed when he had to move houses because of Gwen, and Nqoba arrived with a pool table one day. The rest of the stuff, they don't remember when and where it came from.

He grabs the thatch chair from the far corner in the dining room, drags it across the passage and all the way to the last door on the left.

The key is placed on the small square table just next to the door.

He feels his presence the moment he walks in, a man breathing hard,

obviously terrified and confused, probably already shat in his pants and has said every prayer he could come up with.

He doesn't immediately switch on the light but he knows this room by heart. He doesn't see the man but he knows exactly where he is.

"Mkhabela," he says.

There's no response except the sound of a chain rattling and a groan.

He drags the thatch chair across the floor until it is placed directly in front of the man.

He walks back to the door, locks it and turns on the light.

"Mkhabela," he says again.

The man raises his eyes and watches as he walks towards him, his hands behind his back. The chain rattles again when he moves his feet.

He tried to put up a struggle when Mqoqi cuffed his ankles to the chair and when that didn't work, he cried and begged and asked questions but got no answers.

He's been sitting here for an hour, tied to a chair, alone in the dark and he doesn't even know why.

"Did he put you on the bike?" he says, inspecting his face and body.

The man doesn't answer.

"Nah, he didn't. You found him in a good mood."

There's complete silence as Qhawe rubs his hands together, leans back on the chair, leans forward to look Mkhabela in the eye and leans back again.

He's not carrying any weapon, just a bottle of beer and a small packet of peanuts that he keeps popping in his mouth. He takes a deep breath and places the peanuts and beer on the floor before he speaks.

"Where were you going, Mkhabela?"

Mkhabela moves his feet again and the chain rattles.

They found him on the N12. He had already passed Nelspruit and was approaching Machadodorp when he stopped to take a piss. They had been following him and knew he was driving to Rustenburg somewhere to meet with his kind.

Mkhabela hasn't answered any of the questions, probably because he knows they are rhetoric.

He has done many dodgy things in his life and he still isn't sure which one of them has landed him here.

"Where did you tell your wife you were going? Huh? Do you know what I told my wife?"

Mkhabela shakes his head.

"I left my house at 4am. I said I was going to a meeting in Bloemfontein and it's a Saturday, imagine. I put on this shirt, a white fucking shirt with buttons and a blazer and smart shoes to come here. I left my two children sleeping. I can't even have breakfast with them on a Saturday morning because you are here, testing me. My wife has been out there in the North West for two days because her father is sick. Now, Mkhabela, can you understand my frustration?"

Mkhabela is lost. All he can think about is why this is happening to him.

"Why are you doing this? What did I do to you?" he asks. The fear in his voice doesn't deter Qhawe as he unbuttons his cuffs and rolls up his sleeves.

"How am I supposed to talk to you, answer your questions, while I'm tied to a chair?" Mkhabela asks sullenly.

Qhawe raises his eyes and stares at him.

"I can untie you. I don't have a problem with that, Mkhabela. All I want is for you to die with honour, seated on a chair instead of on the floor. I can untie you and we can fight like men but I don't want your blood on my shirt. How will I explain that to my wife?"

Mkhabela must have heard the words "die in with honour" and lost it because now he is screaming like a mad man and rattling that chain like crazy.

Qhawe watches and waits and when it doesn't stop, he taps his knee and tells him to shut up.

"I asked you where you were going, Mkhabela. Where? The teachers'

conference? For the whole weekend?" he asks.

It's only now, after this question that it dawns on Mkhabela who he is dealing with. He had been confused, cracking his head trying to figure out who this person was, and now it's all clear.

"I know who you are. I know you."

"Yes, you do. So what?" Qhawe says.

They met on the day he went to do a talk with the boys. He seemed like a great man, which is why Qhawe is even more pissed off.

"Did she set you up to this? She sent you to kill me?"

Qhawe looks at him and frowns. He is already irritated by this man and it suddenly feels like letting Mqoqi deal with him would have been better.

"No, nobody sent me to kill you. Nobody sends me anywhere. You brought yourself here by taking those pictures. Is this something you do? How? Do you target the kids who don't have parents? The ones that are poor or do you randomly call girls to your office and ask them to pick up something from the floor while taking pictures of their thighs and butts?"

Well, actually that's how it started, but then it escalated to him showing up at young girls' homes with a bag of this and that and convincing whoever he found there that he came because he was worried and wanted to help.

Initially Nonjiko wasn't one of his targets. She was too much of a late bloomer, a smart child, yes, always top of her class but downright boring with that flat chest and clueless face. All the girls her age were already ripe and round at the bottom while she still walked like a bloody boy with that long skirt. It was even more annoying to him that she was always being smothered by that pompous woman who keeps selling children false hope, telling them they could go off and do bigger things and be better than him.

But Noni, as everyone calls her, came back to school this year looking nothing like she did last year, curves everywhere, thick thighs, plump cheeks and a shorter skirt. She's now over 16 too so maybe if he had

asked nicely, she would have said yes to him. That's what he thought. She wouldn't be the first.

He'd find her with his eyes among the hundreds of kids at morning assembly. When he walked past the Grade 11A class, he'd peep through the window and pretend to be checking if the kids were behaving, just so he could get a glimpse of her pretty face.

He held on for a while but then Miss Montsho or whatever her married surname is, asked for two days off, something about her father being sick.

He grabbed the opportunity and drove straight to Noni's home after school. He found her in the kitchen opening a tin of fish, her grandmother slouched on the sofa looking like she was never going to get up. He greeted her and sat on a chair facing the TV.

Noni was obviously not planning to leave the house that evening because she was already in her pyjamas although it wasn't yet dark outside. He stared at her and only spoke when her grandmother asked him to what did they owe his visit.

"I do this with all my students, particularly the ones that I know are vulnerable. The department wants us to keep records of all the children who are living on social grant so that it can intervene if any help is needed. As you know, we are a no-fee school," he said.

Noni found it strange that she had struggled through her first two years of high school and the principal had never showed up, but now that her father, who she has never met or spoken to, sends more than enough money through Shoprite every month, the principal decides to show up.

"We are fine, thank you. My father gives us money. We have everything we need," Noni said politely.

The response was not what he expected and their hostility didn't make things easy for him so he thanked them and left. But he wasn't going to let it go. He had pictures of many girls but Noni was the one he thought about all the time.

He offered her a lift home once but she said she was going to Miss

Montsho's house to look after her daughter.

He followed her to the clinic on another occasion but she didn't see him. He parked outside her house at night sometimes, hoping that maybe she'd come outside so he could catch a glimpse of her. And yesterday, just before those men grabbed him, he had been thinking about her the whole drive.

And now he is here, all because of her and he didn't even get to take her picture. He believes it was Miss Montsho who set these people on him, he knows they are related.

"I will resign. I will leave the school on Monday. I will send the letter to the department on Monday."

That's all he can come up with. He is trying to bargain because explaining himself would be fruitless. He has figured that this man sitting in front of him is obviously crazy.

"No, let's talk about you stalking a 16-year-old girl. What were you going to do? Rape her?"

He rattles the chain again, out of panic this time.

"I've never touched her!" he says.

Qhawe shakes his head and rubs the palms of his hands together.

"Don't tell me about leaving the school, Mkhabela, because I know it won't stop you. So I can't let you go back out there and continue because then I'm going to have to go through the trouble of finding you again and bringing you here."

He pauses and leans back on the chair again.

"And I don't like killing old men. They die too quickly. You press a pillow over their faces and count to six and they are gone. Mkhabela, I don't have time for that. I'm tired of that shit. I have kids and a crazy wife."

He stops talking and sighs.

"There was Zandile's father, there was Carol, and now it is you...?"

"I have children too," Mkhabela says. He is pleading now. He is trying to negotiate for his life to be spared so he can go back home and destroy everything, all the pictures and WhatsApp messages he's been sending

to girls. How he explains his sudden decision to resign to his wife is something he will come up with later on.

"No. You don't have children. If you did, you wouldn't be messing with other people's children."

The crying and pleading starts again but all Qhawe does is watch, picks up his beer, takes a sip and puts it back on the floor.

"Would you like something to eat?" he asks when Mkhabela finally stops crying.

"Please let me go home. People will be looking for me. The police will look for me and what do you think is going to happen? Let me go. I'll never speak to her again. I will leave Nkomazi."

Now he is trying to negotiate again but Qhawe stands up and leaves the room. He comes back carrying a long, black sock in one hand and a golf ball in the other.

He sits down on the thatch chair, puts the ball inside the sock and waves it in the air three times before it lands between Mkhabela's eyes. The 'helicopter' is always the last step. Normally it kills you immediately if it lands in the right place. He opens the sock, takes out the golf ball, looks at it carefully and puts it back in. The 'helicopter' takes off again and lands on Mkhabela's forehead this time.

Complete silence.

He picks up his beer and the empty packet of nuts and leaves the room. He nods when he bumps into Nkangala at the door.

He had left his phone in the car, on purpose. There are numerous missed calls but an SMS from Naledi is the first thing he opens.

We have a problem, it reads.

Maradona

SIBLINGS WILL TEST the shit out of you.

These are people you love. No matter how bad they are, the blood that connects you will never allow you to hate them. You think, well, my sister is a mess and I don't want to deal with her. You believe that, until someone puts their hands on her and you find yourself brawling and throwing things at that person. That's how siblings are. You'll find them chasing each other down the street with bricks and if you dare try to take a side, they both turn against you and end up chasing you with bricks, together.

It's always been like that with the Montsho sisters.

Qhawe once told Mqhele that Tshedi is his biggest fan and she loves his money but if he dared hurt Naledi and she found out, she'd burn him alive.

Naledi, Tshedi, Omphi and Lesedi may fight often and be estranged from each other, but they have been united through and through in their resentment for Sello. He is family by virtue of co-creating those two girls, but if he disappeared one day, they wouldn't report him missing.

"Pour me another glass," Tshedi says. She's been pacing up and down

this room, mad as hell, talking to herself although there are three other people here.

Omphig grabs the half-empty bottle of Viceroy from the floor and pours a large scale in a coffee mug. She throws in some ice and water and hands it to her.

"I'm done. This is it," she says, takes a sip and looks at all of them.

They've resorted to just letting her be because they have no idea what to say to her now. It seems to them that she's made up her mind, but the drama that led to this moment is something they wish could be erased from history.

"But Tshedi, I think you should go out there and you know..."

"No, Naledi, she's not going out there like this. She must calm down a little," Lesedi says.

When Tshedi barged in here at 5am, none of them were prepared for what they were about to hear.

It's been a month since Sello's father died. It was sudden and unexpected because he wasn't even that old.

By the time the day of the funeral arrived, Tshedi had shed a few kilograms, in just that week. The day she had dreaded and feared since she married her husband had come, and it ambushed her.

She blamed her procrastinating nature. That 'now is not the right time' thing that she always uses as an excuse.

She knew from the beginning that she wasn't cut out for this, that she didn't want it but she went ahead with the belief that she would get out eventually, when the time was right.

But then she got comfortable. Her life was great. Sello's infidelity and inability to respect his vows allowed her the opportunity to also be unfaithful.

She had the best of both worlds, a man who provided security but no love and a man who had love to offer and nothing else.

Maradona was her first love. He wasn't exactly what her family would want for her but he was what she wanted.

They met when she was in matric during one of the few times they came to the village.

She had grown up in Mafikeng and he in the village. He was nicknamed Maradona because of his outstanding soccer skills. He was a celebrity in his own right, which is perhaps why he had enough confidence to approach a Montsho girl and declare his love for her.

It was a rare thing to randomly run into any member of the royal family, particularly the girls, in the village.

They stayed behind the high walls whenever they visited the village, understandably so because they had everything in there and didn't need to go out to get stuff or make a living like normal people.

But Tshedi wasn't going to allow herself to be hidden from the world, and so now and again she would be spotted at a local hair salon or supermarket and the Maradonas of this world were able to grab the opportunity.

He was that boy who worked at the local general dealer and knew everyone in the village. Whenever Tshedi came to buy something, he'd give it to her for free and offer to walk her to wherever she was going, leaving the store in the care of his friends who would steal whatever they could before he came back.

His desperation was also abused by Tshedi's cousins. They'd come to the store and demand free stuff, promising to soften up Tshedi for him.

When the store owner found out, he chased him down the street with a sjambok and it so happened that Tshedi was at the salon next door, watching all of it.

There's a knock. It's Mmenkwe.

"Are they still here?" Lesedi asks.

"Yes and I don't think they are leaving any time soon. Tshedi, why are you doing this? Do you have any idea what this will do to your father's image? Do you have any idea?"

She pours what's left of her drink down her throat and furiously storms out of the room, pushing Mmenkwe out of the way while at it.

They all look at each other, unsure of what to do until she starts screaming at the top of her voice.

"I said I'm not going there! Did I not say that, Sello? Did I not tell you that? Why are you here?"

She's the only one standing. There are about 10 men in the lounge, including Qhawe who drove like a maniac from Gauteng, thinking something bad had happened. He was the first person Ntate called when he realised things were about to get even more hectic, but he had a murder to commit so he missed his calls.

They have a father-son relationship. It didn't start well but that's where they are now, at a place where Ntate trusts him with his daughters and involves him in family matters.

"Tshedi, sit down please..."

"No, Ntate, I'm not giving up my life to move to the village to be Sello's trophy! That's what I've always been to him. He married me for this!" she shouts.

Her sisters are now standing in the kitchen, unsure of what is expected of them.

"But... you've known all along that you were going to have to do this. I don't understand why we are having this drama now," Sello's uncle says.

They've always adored Tshedi, the whole family. In fact, she was chosen for him by them. They did all the groundwork and all Sello had to do was impress her father so he could give him his blessing.

Well, neither Tshedi nor Ntate were aware of this in the beginning but by the time Tshedi figured it out, she was in too deep.

"You know, Sello, I always thought you were going to be man enough to leave me for your mistress one day, before all of this. But no, instead you're here asking me to give up everything for you? No, Sello, not after the way you treated me all these years."

Sello is sitting quietly next to Qhawe, with his arms folded.

He arrived here two hours after Tshedi, looking like the world had just crashed down on him.

At the end of this week he will be ordained as chief, replacing his father.

As far as he knew, all he had to do was tell Tshedi the date and she'd start packing. Although he did not discuss it with her, he had started talking to a few estate agents about selling their house in Bloemfontein. He felt that it wasn't something that needed to be discussed, that it was obvious anyway.

Two private schools back in Polokwane have already accepted the girls. All they have to do is show up next Monday.

So when he came back home yesterday after a business trip that had more to do with pleasure than business, he was shocked to find his wife relaxed on the sofa, sipping coffee.

He checked every room in their house and found everything to be exactly as he left it.

"Tshedi, the trucks will be here early in the morning. Why haven't you started packing?" he asked.

No answer.

"Where are my kids?" he asked.

He always uses the term 'my kids' when referring to their girls. Tshedi finds it funny that he says it with such confidence.

"At school," she said.

"I thought yesterday was their last day at that school," Sello said.

He received no response to that.

"Where exactly are we going, Sello?"

He looked shocked.

"We're going home. What kind of question is that? You know the time has come. What is wrong with you?"

It was that tone, that question that set her off high up to the roof.

He's always known her to be outspoken, sometimes too much for his comfort but he's never known her as one with a fiery temper. He finds her sense of humour attractive, but deep down he's always known that somewhere under was a coal slowly turning into a flame.

When she was done with him, she packed her children in the car and drove home to the North West.

The situation right now is there is no queen and that's not good because he had his life planned out. He's worked really hard to secure this family, his image to the people he is supposed to lead.

But he also had to remain true to his heart.

It was never his intention to hurt Tshedi. He loves her too.

"What am I supposed to say to my family now? What are people going to say?" he asks.

"I don't give a shit!" she shouts.

"Tshedi!"

"No, Ntate! No! It ends here and now! I want a divorce and I want it now!"

Sello stands up and goes outside.

The men follow him.

Tshedi disappears somewhere.

Now it's just Qhawe, Ntate and the sisters.

All along Naledi thought this was about Maradona, but now it's clear that it's something that has been brewing for a long time. She's only ever seen Tshedi behaving like this twice and she knows there's no going back from here.

Maradona graduated recently. It was a big thing in the community. Ntate raved about it, telling everyone that this young man was a true example of what it meant to be ambitious. Little did he know what awaits him, because eventually this is going to come out.

The men are back, with Sello.

They look like they've been discussing something.

"We've decided that if she doesn't want to go with us, it's fine, but we are taking our children. It's her choice," one man says.

Silence.

Qhawe clears his throat.

"I don't think involving the children in this is the right thing. You

can't take them away from their mother," Qhawe says.

He's a natural mediator but he's torn between being loyal to his father-in-law and sympathising with Sello because he knows that if he was in his shoes, he'd do the same thing.

"She wants to leave me Qhawe," Sello says.

It sounds painful – the way he says it paints a picture of a pained man. They've never been close, just a few encounters that had everything to do with the Montshos. But right now, he feels for him.

"Don't make it more unpleasant by taking the kids," Qhawe says.

"Yes, don't make this even uglier!" Tshedi shouts.

She's back, with a cup in her hand.

The fact that she's not sober makes it more difficult to reason with her.

"You want to take my kids? Well, guess what? They are not even yours, Sello," she says.

"What?" Sello asks, looking shocked.

Omphi is the first to jump and pull Tshedi by hand.

"I said they are not yours! What the fuck do you think I was doing when you were going around sticking your penis everywhere?"

She's shouting as her sisters drag her down the passage.

The tension in the room would need a sharp spear to cut it.

The confusion on Sello's face is even worse.

"She's just saying that, son, it's not true," his uncle says, patting his back.

"I know, Tshedi would never cheat on me, but what do I do now?" Sello says.

Ntate stands up.

"Let me go talk to her. She'll come around. She's just overwhelmed and scared of the responsibility that this comes with. But I don't think she'll hear me out with you still here. Zulu, please see them out," Ntate says.

... (V) ...

"Are they really gone?"

"Yes, they're gone. I need a strong drink after all this," Qhawe says. She quickly hands him a cup.

He gobbles it down his throat without looking.

"Urgh! What the hell is this? It tastes cheap."

"I don't know."

She picks up the bottle on the floor and hands it to him.

"Viceroy? Where the heck did you get this thing?"

She shrugs. "Tshedi came with it."

He throws it on the bed and rubs his forehead. She knows this is a sign of frustration.

"I didn't mean to disturb your plans. I know you had an important meeting."

"Don't worry about it. I was already on my way there but I called and cancelled," he lies and rubs the palms of his hands together.

There's a lot Naledi wants to say to him, but she knows he isn't in a good mood and she thinks it must be all the drama.

"So how long has Tshedi been cheating on her husband?"

Silence. This is a question she was not expecting.

"I asked you a question, Naledi."

"I don't know," she says and folds her arms.

She knows it's been a while but she doesn't know exactly when it started or if they ever broke up when Sello came into the picture. But she thinks Qhawe is overreacting because Tshedi is an adult and...

"So is this what you all do? Cheat on..."

"What? Qhawe, I am not Tshedi. What does this have to do with me?"

"You knew and you kept quiet, Naledi."

She raises her arms.

"What was I supposed to do? Sello was also cheating and we all knew that."

"So?"

"What do you mean, 'so'?"

The bedroom door opens and the three sisters walk in. Tshedi looks around the room for her bottle of Viceroy and finds it still on the bed, empty. She rolls her eyes and sits next to Qhawe, arms folded. Qhawe stands up and tells all of them he has to go.

"Lesedi, how are things at the school?" he asks.
"Good, the kids are behaving. The principal went on a course this weekend. Hopefully he will come back with something useful," she says.

He nods and walks to the door.

"I'll see you ladies in Durban next weekend. Hlomu said you were all coming," he says and leaves the room.

Naledi follows him.

"Tshedi, are they really not Sello's kids?" Lesedi asks.

Gaba

AFTER A SQUABBLE over who should drive and what route would make more sense, Mpande lost the fight and took the wheel. It had everything to do with the fact that Mqoqi emerged from his house carrying a large cooler box.

Now, five hours later and about six episodes of stopping and urinating on the side of the road, they take the turnoff to Nandi Drive.

Everyone, the kids and the wives are already here in KwaMashu preparing for the big day tomorrow.

Hlomu and Langa had wanted to do this for the longest time, celebrating their mother just for being herself and being everyone's pillar. It had been months of planning, arguing over petty details and disagreeing on where the party should be held.

Lethu was adamant that a posh venue outside the township was the best option, to avoid "randoms" showing up and neighbourhood drunks embarrassing them in front of important guests. But knowing their mother's deep connection to the community, the twins insisted on a big marquee in the middle of the street so that is where the party will be.

The brothers had planned to fly in on Friday morning but someone

mentioned church members coming to the house during the day, and the plan changed immediately.

They decided, probably to escape something again, that they would go straight to Gaba's house and only show up at Gogo's house in the evening when all that was left was to slaughter the cows.

Gaba's house is in B-Section, somewhere between a Lutheran church and a shisanyama he owns. It stands out from a distance. It's the only double-storey on this street with bright lights, aluminium gates and a balcony. On either side of his mansion by township standards, are two four-roomed houses.

He bought a four-roomed house here and turned it into a five-bedroom house, something most men in his line of work do because going to a bank to apply for a home loan to buy a house in the suburbs is not an available option to them. They start their businesses from the ground too, with cash and demeanour, and that's it.

Gaba is one of those people who will never leave the township because he is so rooted in the place and culture and the people that he could never survive anywhere else. Here, everybody knows who he is and what he did to get to where he is. It's no secret and it's somewhat acceptable.

As long as whatever it is that he did to get here was done in Umhlanga Rocks or Ballito or Hillcrest, and the people it was done to weren't draped in melanin, it is acceptable here. It's an unspoken truth that people like Gaba are heroes. That's how people view them. They take from people who took. The people who wake up two hours after their children have been bathed and taken to school. The people whose children are bathed and fed and cradled by women who never see their own children get ready for school because they have to leave their matchbox houses at the crack of dawn to wipe floors in mansions. Gaba takes from those people, sometimes by brutal force, because something's got to give, right? There's the word *iphanta*; it doesn't mean a bad thing. It is used to refer to a man who works very hard to succeed, by all means necessary. Gaba is one of those.

He parks his Golf 7 GTI just metres away from the driveway to make way for them to park inside. He gets out of his car to stand next to the massive Defender they're driving.

"Why are you all squashed in this car? You could have used a Quantum. You are omageza anyway," he says, peeping through the window.

The response is a couple of swear words and laughter. They are already coming out of the car.

"Come inside," he says.

It's not negotiable. They know going inside and getting comfortable is a bad idea because it might just turn into a party, but they follow him in anyway.

They are met at the door by a teenage boy who appears a little shy. He greets them but goes straight to Mqhele for a handshake.

"When did you grow so tall?" Nqobizitha says, softly hitting the boy's head.

He gives him a shy smile and walks out the door.

"I gave him a few slaps this morning. He's starting to think with his penis," Gaba says.

"And guess who he takes after?" Mqoqi jokes.

Nobody is really interested in knowing further details about the child abuse as they all follow him to the backyard. They've all been here many times. This is where they sleep when there's a family function at the Dladlas.

All the trips to Durban somehow end up here, in this backyard, whether they are for a good reason or a bad one.

Gaba warmed to the Zulu brothers on the first day he met them and his relationship with them has grown beyond him being just a brother-in-law. Some of the things he does with them are done without Hlomu's knowledge.

"Good evening," she says.

They turn around to see her standing behind them.

There's a collective yebo.

"How is Hlomu?"

She's looking at Mqhele.

He tells her she's fine and asks how she is.

After she has a brief chat with Gaba, she disappears back inside the house and they know she's about to make them feel at home.

They last saw her at Qhawe's wedding two years ago, which means she has stayed long enough without any drama. When they were dressing up on the morning of the wedding, Qhawe made a joke that Omphi wasn't going to be impressed.

They weren't supposed to know about the Omphi/Gaba escapades, that's what Omphi had hoped for. But someone put two and two together and the usual idiotic boy talk started. The shocking part though was that this woman was nothing like his previous girlfriends.

The smell coming from inside the house means they might as well sit and relax. They will get to Hlomu's mother's house when they get there.

Gaba is telling a story of how one of his friends was shot dead by the police recently and how none of the local priests wanted to perform the burial.

"Someone advised us to go to Phoenix and look for a place with Hare Krishna people. He said their faith does not allow them to say no when they are asked for help and so we thought problem solved. We even had money prepared."

"Hare Krishna?" Mqoqi asks, laughing.

"Yes, Hare Krishna, ndoda. We got there to find men with chiskops walking silently around the place. When someone finally spoke to us they looked at us like we were insulting them. Things got worse when we offered to pay them."

He's serious but they are laughing hard.

"So they said no?" Mqhele asks.

"It didn't get to that but we knew from the start that it wasn't going to work out. This old guy asked us if we had firewood and asked in which river we planned to throw his ashes after we burn him. We said thank you

and left.”

Gaba did not understand how stupid they were for even thinking monks would agree to bury a criminal from Ntuzuma who had no clue who they were and what they stood for.

Mqoqi explains to them the Hare Krishna religion, which leads to idiotic remarks about him knowing all this stuff in the first place.

“So in the end did you just throw him in the grave?” Mpande asks.

“No, we found this conman pastor from Rivers of Jordan Flowing Waters Church of What What. He took all the money.”

They’re still laughing.

“To be honest, the priest thing was for his mother because even her own church refused to bury her son. The whole church service funeral thing was for her but we all know that dog went straight to hell.”

They are disturbed by the teenage boy who has just turned the radio volume very high.

“Luyanda!” Gaba shouts.

The boy peeps around the sliding door.

“Switch that shit off. This is not a nightclub! Here, go buy us some ice,” he says, throwing him car keys.

“Ungasheli ngemot’yami!” he shouts after him.

Luyanda is the second eldest of his nine children. He’s the only one who has lived with him since he was five years old. It wasn’t planned. It’s just that after his mother got married, Gaba tormented her and her husband until one day they dumped the poor boy on Hlomu’s mother’s doorstep and left. Nobody could blame them because the township thug would show up at their gate any time he wished and demand his child.

He’s raised him with tough love but they share a strong bond and as much as Gaba hates to admit it, he has a very soft spot for this child.

“Where’s Baksteen?” Nqoba

They laugh.

Baksteen is the mother of Gaba’s sixth child. She once smashed all his car windows with a brick. That’s why they call her Baksteen.

"She's around. She hates me," he says.

He then tells them about how his aunt – yes, that one – once warned him about getting women pregnant and leaving them just because he could get any woman he wanted.

"She said, 'Wait until you are almost 40 and tired of being a player. That is the time you will want to be with only one woman and start a family with her. That's when these women you are playing around with will show you flames. They'll be over you by that time. They'll be at a point where they've moved on with their lives and don't give a shit about you. That's when you will regret this. They will make your life a living hell.'"

It turns out his aunt was right. The possible soon-to-be Mrs here is dealing with all kinds of drama and it has nothing to do with the exes wanting her man back.

"Nombuso, she married a Nigerian man without even telling me. And then she went and changed my son's surname along with hers. Now I have a child called Nqubeko Odubekun," he says.

That is his eighth child.

Odubekun refuses to be bullied.

Gaba doesn't even know where they live.

Luyanda returns with ice and places the bucket in front of them. He asks to go to Gogo's house and for petrol money, which Gaba flatly refuses to give him.

"Follow me, ntwana. I'll give you money," Mqhele says.

The boy follows him to the car and when he walks back to the house, he meets Gaba at the door coming out.

"Skuif?" Gaba asks.

They lean on one of the cars and light up smokes.

Gaba is closer to Nqobizitha than he is to Mqhele, probably because a certain line has to be drawn between the two of them. Hlomu has done a good job trying to prevent a fallout between the two, which could be caused by anything from "he beats me" to "he scares me".

From where they are standing, they can hear a group of boys talking to Luyanda in hushed tones. They hear car doors closing and the radio volume being turned up. The car takes off with a screech. Gaba shakes his head.

"Ci, ci, ci, this boy," he says.

"It's normal behavior," Mqhele says.

Gaba ashes the cigarette to the ground, pulls and puffs and shakes his head.

"No, it's this thing of growing up getting anything you want. These kids don't know how we got these things. They don't know how many times we could have died, siphanta," he says.

"But that was the whole point, wasn't it? To give them a different life to ours," Mqhele says.

Gaba throws the cigarette stub to the ground and presses it with his shoe.

"I just want him to get educated, have one of those office jobs and get married to a girl from the suburbs and have kids that speak only English and call me KwaMashu Grandpa. That's all I want," he says.

Mqhele laughs but he knows what he means. Criminals would rather die than see their own children become like them.

"Besides, the cops are cleaning up here. You put one foot wrong and they shoot. They've made enough money off us and now they are preparing for their retirement," Gaba.

Every group of criminals has a cop or two on their payroll, it's a known fact.

There's silence between them. They may laugh about who they are, but they know it's deep and maybe even sad.

"I told baba," Gaba says.

Mqhele knows what he told baba, and he knew that this is what he really wanted them to talk about when he followed him outside and suggested a skuif.

They were divided about whether or not they should tell him given

his history of having no filter when he is drunk. But the girl is family and eventually she's going to have to be known, by both Hlomu and her mother.

Gaba took on the responsibility of sending her money every month, but if and when the grandmother dies, sending money will not be the only thing he needs to do.

"What did he say?" Mqhele asks.

"He said I must go get the child and bring her home."

"And Mah?"

"Mam"Thembeka won't have a problem with the child, as long as we stick with the story that she is her husband's grandchild," Gaba replies.

There's a call from Hlomu. She wants to know where they.

"My wife has cooked. You can't leave without eating," Gaba says.

"Your wife? That woman's family has never received even a chicken from you," Mqhele says as they follow each other back in the house.

Thembeke

TWENTY-THREE YEARS, FOUR months, three weeks and two days, that's how long she endured it.

Every breath she inhaled she hoped would turn into a fist in her throat and shove it all the way down to her bowel, keep it there to rot, and eventually excrete it with all the other things her soul and her body did not want.

She wanted to be free from the anger, resentment and regret that haunted her every night she lay next to him, processing all the things he had just said before he closed his eyes and snored.

There was a time where she left him, kicked him out of their house and shipped the twins off to boarding school. She changed the locks, disconnected the landline phone and kept the toddler close to her at all times.

Those days she slept with her legs spread out on the bed. She hugged the pillows and inhaled the scent of the flowery Sta-Soft and sharp Jik. She could walk down the passage to the kitchen without holding her breath hoping he won't slip and say out loud the things he said in the bedroom when they were alone, lest the children heard and discovered

her life.

He was a good father, that he was, and he made it seen and known by everyone. He provided without reservation. He laughed and hugged and encouraged and complimented. He bragged to anyone who cared to listen about how the womb of his wife bred nothing but the best.

He loved his 'Nomandla' more than all of them. She was a spitting image of him, they both were, but he looked at her more and saw her more clearly than the extra clone of him she arrived on earth with.

Every time the twins both ran to him with their arms open, he picked her up first. Langa was faster so he'd get to him first but Dladla would move aside an inch and grab Hlomu first. The little boy, too soft and fragile, would turn around to see his mother right behind him, her arms open and he would jump into them.

It wasn't always like that though. When he was still a baby, he'd pick him up first, put him on his chest, pat his back and call him by his clan names.

He'd tell him that boys didn't cry, especially oMgabadel, oMagale'agoqe njengeshongololo!

"Uyindoda wena, indoda ayikhali" he'd say.

Nothing was said but they knew by the time he turned five that he wasn't going to be shooting birds with slingshots or building string cars and getting scars from fighting with the neighbourhood boys.

He behaved exactly like his sister, played with the same toys and spoke with the same attitude. They were joined at the hip. Sometimes they said the same things at the same time or finished each other's sentences. When one was sick, if they weren't both sick at the same time, the other's eyes would hollow.

It took some time, and a little bit of resistance and denial, but it happened. Dladla detached physically first and eventually emotionally from his own son.

Langa moved towards his mother, an angry frustrated woman, while Hlomu flourished in her father's, a wolf in sheep's clothing, glory.

The first time she asked him for a divorce was the day she found out he had gone out and got his colleague pregnant. The twins were still young and he had been asking her for another baby for a while.

"I want a boy," he'd say as he entered the bedroom every night. When she frowned, he'd widen his eyes and tell her to not patronise him.

"That's not a boy. It's a waste of my surname. I want a boy who will carry on the family name, not that..." he'd say and throw his arms up in the air.

He was never physical, but his words could as well have been sharp knives and fists.

When she told him she wanted a divorce one Saturday morning, he laughed and told the children to get in the car. They came back hours later with new bicycles and plastic bags full of new toys and chocolates.

They spent all afternoon talking about all the nice places he took them to and the things he bought them.

She had decided but every time she raised the subject, he would focus on the children. The child was born, a boy he had always wanted, but still he would not leave. She stayed, but all she thought about every time he snored next to her was the day she would pack all her belongings and leave that bed for good.

And then twenty-three years, four months, three weeks and two days of endurance later, she was woken by a heavily breathing husband, sweating and pressing his hand on his chest trying to tell her something. She knew very well what was happening. His hand was stretched out trying to touch her but somehow she could not move. The anger and resentment had paralysed her so she just lay there and watched until it was over.

She would relate that whole story to all these people here, in this nice big white tent with crystal chairs and gigantic flower centre-pieces on the tables, but now is not the time or place.

She wouldn't want to shock all these speakers who have spoken

passionately about how happy her husband would be if he was here. About how much he loved and cherished her and how all three of his children were his pride and joy.

Everyone is here, her colleagues and the church and the stokvel and the rich people and the gays and lawyers and needy patients and... everyone.

The speakers are right though. Dladla would have been very happy. He'd be sitting next to her at this table with his arm around her shoulders. At some point, he was going to stand up and ask to say a few words. The first thing he'd say is how beautiful his wife looks today, and then he'd tell everyone how they met and how he immediately knew that she was the love of his life. He'd look at her and smile, just to make every woman in the tent envious. He'd call their children to come to the front and he'd hug all three of them and tell everyone they turned out the way they have because of his amazing wife. She'd smile too and try hard to look at him the same way she did on their wedding day when he was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

She looks at her sister-in-law delivering a speech and wonders how she would have reacted if she had told her the truth about her brother.

"Without Thembeke, this family would be nothing. None of us would be here today. I remember when I came back home, I had been in Joburg for a long time working as a nurse and when I came back I found this beautiful woman had taken over completely," she stops and looks at her with a smile.

I looked at my brother and said, "What did she see in you?"

She catches herself smiling because if anyone could make her laugh in those difficult times, it was her sister-in-law.

She once asked her when the twins were still in boarding school if things were what they seemed between her and her husband.

"Because I'm on your side. You must always know that, Thembeke. Men are shit, they all are. That this one is my brother doesn't matter. He is shit, just like my father was shit. Even Jesus was..."

Thembeke raised her arms and told her to not even go there.

"All I'm saying, Thembeke, is men are shit," she said, and that was the end of their conversation.

Mqhele gives a vote of thanks just as the caterers walk in with chafing dishes. It was the uncle who was supposed to thank the guests and tell them to feast, but he was drunk by the time everyone woke up and had been shouting "Asiphelele, some family members are missing" since the morning.

They learned a long time ago to ignore him.

As soon as the guests are asked to stand up and queue at the buffet, her friends from church join her at the main table and Hlomu has to squeeze herself between them to get her attention but she fails dismally and decides to find her husband instead.

"I hope you didn't buy her an extravagant present without telling me," she says, giving him a threatening look.

"No, Niya said we should buy her Dubai. Don't ask, I don't know. She's eight years old," he says.

Lethu appears and complains about something. Hlomu leaves them standing there and goes to the house. She bumps into Ntsika behind the cold room.

"MaMtshali was asking about you, she's in mah's bedroom," she says and leaves him standing there.

MaMtshali came with MaMbizana, her husband Ngcobo's second wife. They've been sitting in the bedroom eating scones and drinking tea and Tab all day. They didn't go to the tent because "their knees". But they did dress up for the occasion, cocktail hats and all.

"Gogo?"

She looks at him and tilts her head. She hasn't seen him in a long time.

"My boy. Come here," she says.

She wraps one arm, which is massive, around his neck and presses her lips to his cheek.

"I haven't seen you for a long time. How are you? How is life over

there across the oceans? You live with white people now?" she says.

He's still a little disturbed by that wet kiss on his cheek.

She used to do this when he was a boy, which means she still sees him as a little boy.

"It's fine. You look great, Gogo. Your hat is very nice," he says.

Ntsika has never seen MaMtshali without a doek on her head. He's never seen her sitting on a bed sipping tea.

Whenever he was at her house as a little boy, she would be busy cleaning or cooking something. She was always busy. Sometimes, soon after Zandile left, she would do all the house stuff with Lwandle strapped on her back and he'd have to look after Sbani. They spent a lot of time at her house in those days.

He didn't fully understand what was going on but being at Gogo's house was always fun for him because there were other kids, although they were all girls. It was warmer and felt safer than Carol's flat.

He realised as he grew older that it was what made him love going to MaMtshali's house, the fact that there were females there, something that didn't exist in his family, or at least not permanently.

He doesn't remember much about when Mandisa came in to the picture but he knows he never liked her. He'd lived with Nqoba most of his life growing up and that meant living with Mandisa.

She wasn't a devil's fork-wielding wizard or anything like that but she didn't have that warmth that came with MaMtshali's wet kisses on the cheek or Hlomu's look that said, "You are important. I believe in you."

When he went to the cold room, he was going to get himself a beer but he had to abandon that plan.

"Have tea with us," MaMtshali says.

He wants to say no but she's already added the sugar and thrown in a teabag. He doesn't like tea or any other hot drink.

He sits across them.

MaMbizana hasn't said anything. She smiles at everything MaMtshali says.

It starts feeling a bit awkward when they are both sitting with their arms folded, looking at him enduring the torture of holding a saucer with one hand and a teacup with the other.

"When are you bringing a makoti?" MaMtshali wants to know. Running out of here would be a great idea right now.

"Huh?"

"A makoti. You're a grown man now. I don't want to die before seeing grandchildren from you."

He flashes an awkward smile but their eyes are on him.

"What's wrong? Are you one of those men who love other men?" MaMbizana asks. This is the first time she's said something.

MaMtshali gives her a side-look.

She shrugs and says, "You never know. People from overseas are strange. Do you remember that boy? The one who went overseas to study to be a priest but..."

"Sbongile!" MaMtshali says sharply.

She realises she's being handled and stops talking.

The makoti subject is raised often to Mqoqi and Mpande, and Ntsika had thought he was still safe until now. In fact, that had always been his excuse for not settling down, the fact that Mqoqi and Mpande hadn't.

"I'll wait for you to come and introduce a respectable woman to me one day. You have been living there overseas for a long time now, but you must come home if you want a good wife. How long have you been living there anyway?" Mamtshali asks.

"About nine years," he says, placing the teacup on the pedestal.

He decides to not mention that he has come back permanently because then the makoti expectations might just be raised higher.

"Oh, nine years? When did you leave? Before or after that one, what was her name again? The one who came after Nqobile?" MaMtshali says.

Ntsika looks lost.

"The one who killed herself," she says.

"Mandisa," he says.

"Yes, that one," MaMtshali says and nods.

"Before," he says.

MaMbizana stands up and starts clearing away the cups and saucers.

"Gogo," Ntsika says.

She looks up at him.

"Who is Nqobile?" he asks.

At first she's confused and then worried.

"You don't know?" she asks.

"I don't know what?" he says.

Her jaw drops just as Xolie walks in and tells them to join the other women in the dining room for some tripe.

MaMtshali stands up quickly, grabs a scone and leaves the room.

"Where is Nqoba?" Ntsika asks Xolie.

"I'm not sure. The last time I saw him, he was asking Luyanda to drive uncle to Gaba's house because he had started swearing at people. Oh, and Gumbi too because he was sleeping on the chair. And the kids, most of them are at Gaba's," Xolie says.

Ntika needs someone to tell him who Nqobile is.

... (♥) ...

Lethu is a qualified advocate with her own house but her boyfriend still has to park two houses away and send someone to fetch her from the house.

He managed to go unnoticed all day with the help of two friends he was forced to bring with him just so he didn't spend all day sitting alone quietly like a weird man. He's been complaining about that the whole time they've been sitting in this car.

"Look, I'm fine. You can introduce yourself but don't blame me when they grill you," she says.

But that's just an excuse. The real reason she's hiding him is because she doesn't want him to get comfortable. Things are great between them

but she has no intention of committing to their relationship. The guy is great but she's not about to make him an official boyfriend who hangs out with her family.

"Oh, I forgot we're in the township, vrrrrr pha and all," the guy says when a GTI drives past them at high speed. It parks right in front of the tent that's still blocking the street.

"It's my cousin," Lethu says.

"No, actually it's my nephew. What's going on?" she says when Luyanda speeds out of the car with all the other kids running after him. Someone is screaming. They are all screaming.

"What happened??"

"What happened? Phakeme? Luyanda?"

The smaller kids are all running inside the house screaming for their mothers. Xolie is already outside.

"What happened?"

Through all this chaos, Phakeme stands still, silent, bloodshot eyes, clenched jaw, blood all over his T-shirt and shorts.

"Where is Gaba?" Qhawe asks.

"Poly Clinic. He had to take him there. He wasn't moving," Luyanda replies.

Xolie has her hands all over Phakeme. She's trying to find where he is injured but he's just standing still.

Gaba isn't answering his phone.

"Mamiza, we were playing and then Luyanda's friend tripped Niya because she wanted to play with us and then Phakeme beat him and then he fell and Phakeme pressed him down with his knee and punched him and punched him and..." Mabutho rambles on. He is demonstrating with his hands as he speaks.

"Mabutho! Go inside the house, all of you. Get him cleaned up," Mqhele says, pushing Phakeme to his mother.

They haven't stopped asking what happened and now all the kids are trying to explain. Niya has a scratch on her forehead. She fell face down

when she was tripped.

The chaos moves inside the house, Sambulo along with it, and the brothers are left alone outside trying to make sense of what is happening.

"What do they mean he wasn't moving?" Mpande asks.

Nobody has the answer.

When Gaba appears, he is surrounded before he even reaches the door.

"It's bad," that's the first thing he says.

They wait.

"They've taken the boy to Ethekwini Hospital. I don't understand what happened there bafo, I don't."

He's pacing up and down the yard as he speaks.

"One minute they were playing outside and the next they were all screaming. By the time I got there, the boy was lying on the ground bleeding and Luyanda was trying to pull Phakeme off him."

He stops.

"He's bad, bafo. He's really bad. They put pipes in him and..."

He's the only one talking. He shakes his head before he speaks again.

"I don't understand. How can a... how old is Phakeme again?" he asks.

"Fourteen. He turned 14 a couple of weeks ago," Qhawe answers.

"I don't understand how a 14-year-old boy can beat up someone like that. So quickly? So brutally?" Gaba says.

Silence. No words are said but they all look at each other, and race to the cars.

Nyanda

THEY LEFT NTSIKA behind.

Besides his annoying questions about who Nqobile was and the sudden nightmares he has developed in the past five days, there are things they don't think he is ready to hear yet.

When they ran to their cars that afternoon, they drove straight to Gaba's house because they figured it was time to confront what they had been in denial about. They found Gumbi standing on the yard like a statue, looking at his feet and the blood drying on the grass.

All they wanted to know was what they needed to do next. Ngcobo said he knew someone. They wanted to go immediately but he said it didn't work like that. And so they left Gaba to deal with the injured boy situation.

"Offer them money," they said and trekked back to Gauteng with their wives and kids.

Phakeme has been intense and quiet, but that's for his mother and Dr Masetla to handle.

"Is there a specific reason why we have to see this person at midnight?" Mqoqi asks.

He's not sure about this, perhaps because he still doesn't believe that they need to do this. To him, these things do not exist. They are not possible. He is a realist.

They drive for exactly 40 minutes before they see a sign pointing Margate to the left. It takes them to a road lined with trees.

There has to be a reason why they came in one of their taxis. As they follow the road lined with high walls and tall trees, the GPS points them to Santorini where they are suddenly racing with the sea and are shadowed by tall buildings.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Sambulo asks when they park in front of a house.

"We are," Ngcobo says. He's been giving them lectures about how they should have stopped being hard-headed and listened to Mzizi.

Mpande is also skeptical, especially because Ngcobo brought them here to this house that is strangely standing in between buildings and now they are a little confused.

They park at the gate and wait. The gate only slides open when the clock strikes midnight. They drive in and it closes behind them.

"I didn't expect this," Nqobizitha says as they get out of the car.

One would have expected something totally different.

There is no sign of any people but the door opens suddenly and they follow each other in. It's a beautiful house. Nothing screams "home" about it but it's a beautiful house with a lack of warmth.

They look around but see nothing so they remain standing and wait.

When Mzimela told them about having to do this, they knew he was serious but he was an old man who could have easily been delusional.

He didn't know much about what they did after they left Mbuba but he knew who their father was. He convinced them it was the right thing to do.

He said they should do it for their own children, and their children's children. They didn't take him seriously then, and he's dead now.

They look up and there's a man standing in front of them. He doesn't

say anything, he just walks to the left with his hands behind his back. Nobody tells them anything, but they follow him all the way to an empty room.

He sits on the floor with his knees up.

They're not sure what to do, and he's just looking up at them.

Nqobizitha is the first to sit, with his knees up, facing the man.

The others do the same.

"You have twins?" the man asks, looking at Mqhele.

He nods.

"Sbopho and Nyanda," the man says.

There are gasps.

"Msebe and Langa," Mqhele says.

"Sbopho and Nyanda," the man insists.

Silence.

"My children's names are Msebe and..."

The man raises his hand. Silence.

"You came to me. I didn't ask you to come here. You walked in here and all I saw was blood, all over you, all over all of you. You do as you please. You don't even wash your hands afterwards," the man.

"Why are you bringing my children into this?"

"Bafo!" Nqoba says.

"No, Nqoba, not my children!" Mqhele.

The man shakes his head.

They came here thinking he was going to tell them how to cleanse themselves of whatever it is that they may have. He was supposed to say to them, "Slaughter a goat, at this place, and say this to your ancestors."

They know what they've done, and they know why, they've always had reasons, valid reasons. It had nothing to do with Sbopho.

But no, they are being interrogated here.

"Okay, yes, we have done things, but..."

"You came to me, remember that. I should have turned you back. I should have set dogs on you when you stepped in my yard. I don't want

blood. I don't touch blood. I don't want blood in my house. But you are here now."

It wasn't really explained to them who this man is and what his specialty is in this profession. They were told he could help them, that's all.

They were going to give him a brief background and he was supposed to understand why they are here. It's even more difficult because this is the first time they're doing this.

The Sisekelo thing shook them a little bit but they believed it passed after they did what Sbopho wanted.

"Are your twins 14 years old?" the man asks.

No, they are 11.

They all shake their heads at once.

"I see 14-year-old twins. They are identical but different. One is reserved, too reserved. They are never apart. They live under a mountain. I don't see anyone around them but I can see them clearly. It's not now though, it's a long time ago. I don't see them beyond 14. They disappear," the man says.

"And where exactly are you seeing these twins?" Mqoqi asks.

Nqobizitha nudges him so hard he lets out a loud "eyi". As strange as this man's rant sounds, they want to hear what he has to say.

He is obviously not talking about Msebe and Langa. Those are the only twins in the family and they believe the twin thing comes from MaHlomu's side of the family. So they sit and hope he keeps talking, and eventually makes sense.

"So what can I help you with?" he asks.

They assumed he'd know what they are here for. It's not that they want answers or explanations; they just want to know what to do next.

They all look at Nkosana.

"We need to be cleansed," he says vaguely, as if he wants to get this over and done with.

"Cleansed of what?"

"The blood on our hands," Nkosana says.

"The blood on your hands? Is that what you think this is? That you can just cleanse the blood on your hands and everything will be good?"

Now, Nkosana doesn't like being talked down to. He doesn't like people who aren't straight with him. They frustrate him. He also doesn't like being judged. He's never judged himself.

"Tell us what we have to do then," he snaps.

The man raises his eyebrows. It's more like a warning.

He has already said things, like, how does he know about Sbopho? How does he know about Nyanda? Even they don't know who Nyanda is.

"Where were you born?" the man asks.

"In Mbuba," Nqobizitha replies.

The man shakes his head.

"I know that, but where were you all born?"

"Greytown Hospital. Except for Mqhele, he was born at home," Nkosana says.

"I was born at home?" Mqhele asks. He looks shocked by this information.

"At home where?"

"In the bedroom."

"But... why? How...?"

"I don't know, Mqhele. I was six," Nkosana says.

His attitude seems to be that this is not a big deal. If he thought it was a big deal, he would have told him about it. Mqhele was 11 when their parents died so if it was important they would have told him themselves.

Nkosana himself doesn't think it's an issue, that's why it's never come up.

In fact, he's just remembered it now that this man is asking.

"Do you know why he was born at home?" the man says.

Nkosana shakes his head.

"I don't know. I think he came earlier than expected. I think that's what my father said when we were burying the placenta in the kraal. But

they went to hospital the same night. Mah came back after three days because Mqhele cried too much. That's what my father said."

As Nkosana explains this, Mqhele is looking at him with narrowed eyes. This is clearly something he didn't know.

"You buried the placenta on that same night?" the man asks.

"Yes, my father did. I just carried the paraffin lamp. All I remember is that it must have been torn into two because I remember him tying it together. They left immediately after that, with the baby."

"Did you see the baby?" the man says.

"No, but I heard the cry. I didn't see it," he says.

Nqobizitha was four. He can't possibly remember that night.

Besides, it was normal to give birth at home in those days. There were midwives who did it out of the goodness of their hearts. But there was no midwife in that house on that night.

"How is that significant? Where we were born? Why is it important to you?" Qhawe asks.

"Nothing here is important to me. It's all important to you," the man says.

There he goes again.

He looks at Nkosana.

"Do you remember anything, anything that happened when you were 14 years old?"

"No. I was in high school. Nothing happened. It was a normal year."

He looks at Nqobizitha.

"And you?" he asks.

"It was the year our parents were killed."

The man nods.

"You?" he's asking Mqhele.

Silence.

Mqhele is not talking but his eyes are fixed on this man's, jaw clenched. He's never talked about that incident to anyone except Nkosana, Nqobizitha and Qhawe. The younger ones didn't have to

know. They would not have understood anyway.

Sambulo found out later, soon after they left Ngudwini.

"It wasn't his fault. It was Mboni's," Qhawe says.

"I want him to tell me what he did."

"He didn't do anything. He was a kid," Nkosana says.

The truth is, Mboni lost his mind after that. When Mqhele left him standing over a dead body, he could have screamed for help or gone straight to the police. But no, he turned the dead body over to lie on its back and then he ran.

It wasn't the fact that the boy had killed a man that drove him mad. It was what the boy had said to him afterwards.

All he had ever done was make the boy kill a few little animals for him, and that was because his right arm was giving him problems. He didn't have the strength any more.

He never left his house after that.

The only few times he got out of the house was to bury his dogs and pour Jeyes Fluid over the graves to prevent a smell.

They died, one by one, sometimes two a day.

He lived for almost a year after that. Towards the end, he seemed to be getting back to normal. They even saw him passing by their grandmother's house once.

He didn't say anything or even looked in the direction of the house. But a message came that he wanted to come over and speak to their grandmother, with a priest.

On the first day of the 12th month, his house burned to ashes.

As for Mbongolwane, he was found on the same day Mqhele killed him.

He had epilepsy. They concluded that he must have had an episode and fell and hit his head on something.

That was the story given at the funeral.

The man's eyes are still on Mqhele. He wants an answer.

"Mboni knew it was his fault. That's why he didn't go to the police,"

Sambulo says.

The man gives up on Mqhele and looks at Qhawe.

"Is that true? Is that why Mboni never went to the police?" he asks.

Silence. Qhawe won't talk but the man won't leave him alone.

"We didn't come here for that. Can you help us or not?" Qhawe snaps!

The man takes a deep sigh, as if he's giving up. He's quiet. They're quiet.

The stillness lasts for five minutes.

"I have a gift. I didn't ask for it. I don't want it, but I have it. Your presence is overwhelming me. You are too heavy on my shoulders. You are not good for me. The pictures are too clear, far too clear," the man says. He's rambling on and confusing them even more.

"It would be nice if you shared those pictures with us because we are lost here," Mqoqi says. Mqoqi has been sarcastic from the moment they walked in here. The man has noticed.

"I see many pictures. The most clear is that of you lusting over someone's wife. She was never yours. She is exactly where she is supposed to be. Let her go," the man says.

Have you ever heard of someone sweating razor blades? That's the only way to describe Mqoqi right now. He wants to believe that the man is talking about someone else but he knows he's talking about Hlomu.

His brothers are looking at him.

He shrugs.

"Can you help us?" Qhawe again.

"If you tell the truth," the man says.

But where would they begin? And who is this man who wants to know things that don't concern him?

"Okay. Mboni wanted to tell our grandmother and the priest about what Mqhele did. I couldn't let that happen so I killed him. I burned his house down. Now can you help us?" Qhawe.

Gasps! The look on Mpande's and Mqoqi's faces says they are hearing this for the first time. Nobody thought they needed to know. It's all in the

past anyway.

"The man with the dogs?" Mpande asks.

He is ignored.

"You were 14 years old, weren't you?" the man says.

He was. In fact, it was on the day he turned 14. He had already been to jail by that time.

Him finding out about what Mqhele did was also by chance. He overheard a conversation between Nkosana, Mqhele and Nqobizitha.

They were discussing the guitar, how and where they were going to hide it.

It was also the first time Mqhele told his older brothers about what happened every time he went to Mboni's house.

They were no psychologists but they agreed that it was all Mboni's doing. That he had trained him, engineered him to be a killer. He was a child, a young troubled boy who had gone through a traumatic event and was forced into things by poverty.

That is all it was and Mqhele did not deserve to be punished for what an adult made him do.

They never believed Mboni was going to want to talk. If he was, he would have talked immediately. But Qhawe wasn't going to take the risk of trusting a man who was that evil.

For all he knew there could have been babies in that brown leather bag.

The message about Mboni wanting to see his grandmother, and the priest being part of it, was given to him to pass on to his grandmother.

He didn't tell anyone, not even Mqhele or the grandmother.

He knew what that meant and when night came, he took that walk.

It was easy, all the dogs had died. All he had to do was pour paraffin on the thatched roof, light up his T-shirt and throw it on the roof. And run.

By the time the fire reached the walls, smoke had already suffocated the old man to death. It's not like he was burnt alive.

And Qhawe had a reason, a good reason. He had to protect his

brother, to fix his mess, as he still does to this day.

"What does 14 have to do with all of this?" Sambulo asks.

Someone has finally figured it out.

The man looks at Sambulo, long and hard.

"It's strange how you are the cleanest, very strange," the man says.

Sambulo already knows where this is going.

He has never regretted that Houghton incident. That man's intention was to kill him.

He was too young to start driving taxis and too rebellious to be at school, so he took a job as a gardener somewhere in Houghton. But after working for a month, the man told him straight up that he wasn't going to pay him.

When he protested, he chased him down the street with a shotgun, shouting that he was a burglar. And so, in true suburban culture, gates opened and dogs were let out.

He got away but he was angry. Angry enough to sneak back to that man's garage a week later.

TELKOM BOARD CHAIR DIES IN ACCIDENT AFTER CAR BRAKES FAIL

That was the newspaper headline the next day.

"I don't know," the man says.

That is strange.

"I thought you had pictures," Nkosana says.

Mqoqi nudges him.

"I don't know. You have to find out," the man replies.

"What I know is with you, things always come full circle. Whatever you leave behind always finds itself back to you. You should know that by now. Don't you know that? Haven't you realised that yet?"

Nqobizitha clears his throat.

Chances are they had realised that. But who among them would have known what it meant? All their lives have been a struggle to survive, to be something and to own something.

They are quiet because they aren't sure what to do next. This is not what they expected.

"Find out what brought you here," the man says.

But...

"And next time, bring the one you've been hiding,"

He's speaking in codes again. And Mqhele is annoyed. He's the first to stand up.

"We didn't come here for this bullshit. Thank you for your time. I'm not coming back here," he says.

The man sits still as they stand up, one after the other, and follow each other to the door.

"But you will. You've already opened the lid. And what's inside will strike you where it hurts most," the man.

They stop when they realise Nqobizitha is not behind them.

He's still sitting, facing the man.

"Nqoba," Nkosana says.

He sits still.

"I don't have the answers you're looking for. Go and find what brought you here or your children will turn out like you," the man says.

Those last words stop them at the door. They want to go back and sit down, but the man tells them to leave his house.

Ngcobo had been sitting alone in the car. He wants to know how it went, but nobody is speaking.

"We're going back to Joburg. I'm going to drag Mhlaba out of that prison," Mqhele says.

Mhlaba

THE SMELL OF nicotine reaches her first, but it's blended with a perfume she doesn't recognise. She feels him getting heavier and heavier on her shoulders and she knows he is near but something is amiss. It doesn't feel like he is looking at her.

She doesn't turn around. She's waiting for him to touch her or to say something but he doesn't. She figures he is having one of his moments, the ones where he just stands there and watches her. They happen mostly when something is wrong, and a lot is wrong lately so she decides to continue with what she is doing until he says or does something.

She left him still sleeping this morning when she walked the kids to Mqoqi's car and then took her usual morning walk in the garden.

When she put the kids in the car she didn't say anything to Mqoqi except greet him, although he did look at her like he expected her to ask something. They speak now, not as much as they used to, but at least they can be in the same room and not be awkward around each other. After that outburst of his, he disappeared for two days. Hlomu was the one who found him and told him to come home, that there was a problem and they needed him.

He listened, but the drive back didn't take him to his own house. It took him to hers although he knew his brother was in the Eastern Cape.

They both knew things between them would never be the same. What they both weren't sure of is who Mqhele would blame if he ever found out about that night.

Mqoqi would be lying if he said he has let go of her, but he is committed to his family and his loyalty to his brother but whether that surpasses his feelings for Hlomu or not is another story.

On that day he came back to the Sbani and Thabitha chaos and mayhem, he stood outside the door for a few minutes and asked himself what it was exactly that he was going to say to her. And when he finally pushed the door open he knew there was no turning back.

He expected to find her downstairs, cooking something, holding a glass of wine or on the phone organising something, but he didn't.

He found her in her bedroom. He had only been inside that bedroom twice, two nights earlier and that day Mqhele almost shot himself years ago.

She was standing in front of the mirror, her back on him.

"Hlomu," he said.

She didn't turn around but she spoke.

"What happened to 'Mami'?" she asked.

There was a tone in the way she asked that made him cringe.

He kept quiet.

She didn't hear him come in and she didn't even know he was coming but she knew it was him the moment she felt a presence behind her.

It was just the two of them in this house. The kids had already left for school.

"Hlomu," he said again, with a firm tone, just as she turned around briefly to look at him, and then went back to doing what she was doing.

"Why are you here Mqoqi?" she asked.

He didn't have the answer to that, except that he wanted things to go back to the way they were, but he wasn't going to say that out loud.

because it was fine when he was loving her from afar. It was his problem and his alone.

"I didn't know Thabitha was pregnant," he said, totally off topic.

She didn't respond.

"At least talk to me Hlomu..."

She turned around right at that moment and his first instinct was to run, but he didn't because what he saw on her face was her, the Hlomu he loves, her right at that moment, in that state.

It's her fierce nature, the look on her face when she's pushed to the edge, how she doesn't talk much but you can feel the danger in her aura even when she's silent.

It was her.

She wanted to push him away and punish him for what he did but what she didn't know was by doing that, she was drawing him closer.

Mqhele loves the soft and innocent side of her more, the fragile and perfect.

Mqoqi is different.

He is the guy who would sell drugs at her flat and never apologise just to make her angry, to keep himself alive in her mind.

He loves the rebellious her. The Hlomu who gets drunk in the middle of the day. The Hlomu who orders the killing of people who dare mess with her family.

This was the Hlomu he was looking at right at that moment.

God forbid! He didn't go all the way there hoping for that.

"Listen, that shit you pulled the other night, I won't tolerate it! I don't care what you think you feel for me! If you pull that bullshit again, I will show you who I am," she said furiously.

She was angry. He should have left.

But no, he took a step closer.

She took a step back.

"We need to talk about this," he said.

He was calm. She was fuming.

"You crossed the line Mqoqi."

He knew that, and he should have left. But no. He took another step further. She had nowhere to go. Her back was almost against the wall.

"I didn't come here to fight," he said.

He was the only one speaking now. She was trying to control her breathing and stop her hands from shaking.

He took another step and it was met with a hard slap across his face. She shouldn't have! She shouldn't have done that!

This was the Hlomu he loves... the bad and daring one.

He grabbed her upper arms and looked her in the eye. She squirmed. The grip was too tight. He noticed and softened his hands.

He seemed to be coming back to his senses now. The look on his face said he'd just realised what he was doing, but he didn't let go.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She was still fuming.

"I came here to apologise for what I said that night. I was in a bad place and you were here... I didn't mean it," he said.

She didn't believe him. She wished he was telling the truth because if this ever came out, this whole family would fall to pieces. It would be the end of them, of everything she had built over the years.

She built this family, she can't be the one to destroy it.

She took a deep breath and folded her arms.

They were still looking at each other eye to eye.

"He'd take a bullet for you," she said.

"I know. I'm sorry," he said.

Until he dropped that bomb, she saw him as one of the kids.

Yes, they are closer, they have a connection and they are similar but for him to fall for her is wrong and dangerous.

"Mahlomu," someone said.

They both turned around.

She looked terrified.

"Yes, Mah."

"The driver wants to know what time you're leaving for Mbuba," she asked.

They didn't know how long MaMnguni had been standing there or how much she heard.

Hlomu left the room. MaMnguni followed her. He stood still, staring at the mirror in front of him and touched his cheek. There was a scratch. It was left by that large diamond on her finger when she slapped him.

... (S) ...

The walks that Hlomu takes every morning are more about getting time to think, alone, than they are about exercising.

She hasn't spoken to Mqhele, but she knows he is here because she felt him standing behind her, and when she felt the lightness on her shoulders, she knew he had moved, without speaking or touching her.

He rarely eats breakfast these days and she doesn't bother making it unless he comes to the kitchen and sits on the high chair with his elbows on the kitchen counter.

So much has happened in the past two years, good and bad. Ntsika and Sbani coming back home, Niya and Mvelo going to big school, the birth of Mathongo and Gugu's two miscarriages. Life has gone on but none of these things that happened freaked Mqhele out more than what Phakeme did.

She knows there is something he is not telling her, but she won't push, not this time because something about all of it makes her stomach turn.

One of her twins, surely Langa, left a half-eaten bowl of cereal on top of the stove. He doesn't drink milk and so he eats his cereal dry, like a packet of chips.

MaMnguni once made him eat it with water mixed with sugar but he threw up all day.

She empties the cereal in the bin, rinses the bowl and places it slowly

on the dish rack where the rest of the dishes are drying. She can feel him behind her and she knows he isn't moving.

"Did you sleep at all?" she asks, without turning around to face him.

He doesn't answer her. She knows this behavior and she immediately makes peace with that all the plans she had made for today will have to be cancelled.

She wipes her hands and turns around to face him. She blinks twice, rubs her eyes with her hands and looks at him again.

He doesn't speak, just looks at her straight in the eye.

She turns back to the sink again, trying to figure out if she was dreaming or seeing things. No, she isn't and she's certain. Her next feeling after confusion is fear. She presses her hands hard on the sink to stop them from trembling and swallows before she speaks.

"Where's my husband?"

He shrugs, the same way Mqhele shrugs when he sits on that high chair with his elbows resting on that counter.

"Where is my husband?" she asks again, pressing her hands harder on the enamel sink to try and conceal her fear.

He rubs the palms of his hands together. She screams.

Mqhele appears behind the man. The man immediately disappears into the house.

He stands in front of her with his hands on her shoulders and waits for her to compose herself.

"I can explain." That's all he says when she turns her back on him, her hands still pressed on the sink.

"Did he sleep here?" she asks, her voice trembling.

He wants to explain but he isn't sure where to start because he is still trying to figure out which one it is that is freaking her out so much, the strange man in her house or the realisation that he has another brother she doesn't know about.

"He did, but I can explain."

Mhlaba was supposed to stay in the room until Mqhele told Hlomu

everything. She and the kids were not supposed to see him at all, not until Mqhele had spoken to his wife. But he was woken by one of the twins, standing over him, in silence. And later, when he looked out the spare bedroom window and saw Hlomu walking in the garden, he assumed Mqhele must be awake and somewhere in the house too. When he heard movements in the kitchen he thought it was Mqhele, and so he came out to find him.

"Let's go to the bedroom," Mqhele suggests.

She shakes her head and heads for the door instead. He follows her outside, not sure where she is headed exactly until she presses the mobiliser.

"Where are you going, Hlomu?" He grabs her arm as she opens the car door.

"I need you to calm down and listen to me."

"No, Mqhele, I need to get out of here. You brought this person I don't know into our home without telling me?"

Now he knows what she's freaking out about but he thinks she's being petty and is overreacting.

"His name is Mhlaba. He is our brother, we think."

She looks at him, shakes her head and tries to forcefully free her arm from his grip but he grabs her by both shoulders and looks at her.

"I said I will explain everything. This is about our children. I need to do this."

"Whose children? My children, Mqhele? What did you do this time? What fucked-up criminal shit did you do this time?"

"Can you stop screaming, please?"

He knows she won't, not when her children are involved and definitely not when she knows she's being shut out, again.

"I want that man out of my house! Now Mqhele,"

"But he is my..."

"I don't care who he is, I want him gone," she says.

He lets her get in the car and leave because to be honest, he would

rather she doesn't know much about Mhlaba, not until they figure things out.

In the conversation they had on their way here, all he could get out of him was that his own parents had met at a church in Swaziland.

It's not a lot to go on considering it was something he had also heard from his mother when he was a child.

He finds him back in the kitchen, sitting on the same high stool with his elbows on the counter.

"I've obviously been in jail for too long because before I left women were nicer," Mhlaba says.

"And they actually offered food to guests," he says and laughs.

But Mqhele is frustrated, he has been since last night and all he wants is to get through this as quickly as possible.

"I don't have the time Mhlaba. We have to go."

He hasn't explained much to him, except that he got him out of prison because they needed to find out where Nyanda came from and how he ended up in Swaziland.

He said it was the first step to finding out who Sbopho was and where he came from.

"When I woke up, your son was standing next to the bed staring at me," Mhlaba says.

"Which one?" Mqhele asks.

"I don't know, one of them."

Langa wakes up at the crack of dawn every day. It has always been his thing but it's strange that he would go straight to the guest bedroom and worse, not say anything to his mother about seeing a stranger sleeping there.

"What did he say?"

"Nothing that made sense. How old are they?" Mhlaba asks.

"Eleven."

This was not how Mqhele had planned to introduce Mhlaba to his wife and children. He was supposed to hide in the guest room until they were

all gone and then he'd sneak him out and take him to the Muldersdrift house where they are all meeting to discuss their next move.

Hlomu's reaction was also not what he expected. When he envisioned it last night, he saw her going crazy, screaming even, and wanting to know the whole story about this man. But Hlomu, as much as he knows her inside and out, he finds her unpredictable and sometimes dangerous, which is why he hides some things from her.

She reminds him of his own mother with her commitment to sticking by him, as Nomafu did with Sbopho until the end.

Sbopho was a tyrant who would wipe out anything that lived as long as it wasn't his family. This was a known fact. Nomafu knew it very well but she never tried to tame the beast in him. If anything, she fuelled its fury.

They met when they were very young and whatever they or Sbopho became in their adult lives, she was as much responsible for it as he was.

Now Mqhele wonders what kind of a person Nyanda really was because it is hard to imagine anyone who shares blood with Sbopho being a good person, let alone a priest.

"I need new clothes, man. I can't be wearing tracksuits, it's not my thing."

"You've been wearing orange overalls for years. I doubt you have a thing."

They both laugh. But there was no time to turn Mhlaba into a proper-looking man, so he gave him three tracksuits he had forgotten existed.

"Did your father leave anything at all? Something to indicate where he came from and how he ended up in Swaziland?"

Mhlaba shakes his head. He never got to meet his father. The only thing he knows is what his mother told him, and she didn't even like talking about him.

"He was running from something, that I know," she would say every time he asked.

He only started asking questions about his father when he turned 14

and started feeling like he had to keep his fists clenched all the time to stop them from landing on his stepfather.

Sometimes he felt like strangling him, but he didn't know why because as much as he never bothered to pay attention to him, he had never laid a hand on him or his mother. He treated him like he did not exist, and that wasn't a big problem because it meant he couldn't reprimand him.

His mother, a short, skinny woman with a stutter, was too focused on the little baby, a girl she had prayed hard for, to notice the turmoil brewing between her son and her husband.

Mhlaba could not explain the sudden urge to harm his stepfather. He didn't understand it. The only thing that held him back from doing it was his little sister. His mother wasn't a factor.

The last time he saw his mother and sister was the night he got more than "he was running from something". He must have irritated his mother enough because she threw a shawl at him and said: "He wanted to name you Nsikeni, and then he decided to die. I wasn't going to be dictated to by a ghost."

It didn't solve his problem but at least it was something he could hold on to.

That same night, because his mother had decided to sleep with the baby, he entered his stepfather's bedroom and watched him sleep. He held his breath in and clenched his teeth. Nothing was trying to stop him, not even his own conscience.

The baby cried, that's what stopped him, and he ran.

He reached the Golela border the next afternoon at the back of a truck with his tall body squeezed between sacks of manure and two South African men who were being smuggled back home to bomb a nightclub in Durban.

He wasn't sure where he was going but he knew his roots were in this country that was in political turmoil.

His father was dead, he knew that, and finding his family was near impossible but at least he was home, and if people here were bombing

things then maybe that was what he was going to do too.

This is something he thinks about a lot, where he came from and the things he had to do to survive in a country where he knew no one.

"He was going to name me Nsikeneni," he says.

Mqhele frowns. He's been waiting for him to speak for a while but all he's been doing is staring out the window.

"Nsikeneni? Why would he name you after that place?"

"It's a place?"

"It's a place where people go for uk'gqigha."

Mhlaba knows what uk'gqigha is. His life has been colourful enough to take him to places where he's had to believe in such things.

But they arrive in Muldersdrift before Mqhele can explain further.

"You live large, hey?" he says when the automatic gate slides open and he is met by shiny cars parked in front of the house.

The plan is to get as much as they can out of him, and if they can't, the next step is to go back to Margate with him.

"This is not the welcome home I expected," he says when they enter the dining room to find everyone waiting.

They could laugh at his joke and share pleasantries like they always do, but not today, there is no time for that. Nkosana gets right to the point.

"We need to know where your father came from," he says.

The others keep quiet and look at Mhlaba. The quicker he sheds some light, the better because today is already fucked up. Sbani made sure of that this morning when he smashed all of the pool house's windows because Zandile refused to let him drive Mvelo to school.

"Why is it so important?" Mhlaba asks. Nobody has taken the time to explain to him why he was smuggled out of jail in the wee hours of the morning. He knows someone was paid for that favour and he has no plans of going back there, not after seeing how nice life is out here, even though it's been just hours.

"You're going to have to be open with me," he says.

Not that he has something to offer them. He is as clueless as they are but something in him says if he is going to be part of this, he has to be in it. He isn't that interested in finding out who his father was. Having these people in his life is enough for him because there is no denying that they are his blood.

Qhawe volunteers to take over.

"We went to see this man two days ago, somewhere on the South Coast and the most important thing that came out of it was that our father and your father were twins. Something must have happened when they were 14 years old because he said he couldn't see them beyond that." He stops and looks like he is thinking hard.

"Now look, bafo, I won't deny there are things that have happened in this family. People have been telling us that we can't carry on like this but you know, we technically have no roots, even if we do try to connect with them, we can't go anywhere beyond Sbopho. He died before he could tell us the important things. We've done shit, fucked-up shit, but we're still here, thriving..."

"Yes, you're thriving. Not even jail could find you. It found me instead," Mhlaba says.

They thought he wasn't mad about that anymore but Mhlaba's feelings are the least of their problems right now.

"My boy, Sambulo's boy, he's just turned 14 and he almost killed someone recently," Qhawe stops when he sees the look on Mhlaba's face.

"I almost strangled my stepfather when I was 14. That's why I ran from Swaziland."

"Now you do know what I'm talking about, Mqhele. Sambulo and I, we all killed someone when we were 14. Apparently it's iqunga. It was passed on to us by someone and we believe it has something to do with our fathers. They must have done something," Qhawe says.

They've discussed this and come to the conclusion that it is the only explanation. What they did when they were 14 is not important now. What they want is for their children to not do the same when they are

the same age.

"Look, all I know about my father is that he was a priest and he died and was buried by the church... and that he wanted to name me Nsikeni."

"Why Nsikeni?"

"I don't know. Mqhele said it's a place. Maybe he wanted me to find it." That's the furthest they have gone since they left that man's house.

"Mqhele said there is a child who can connect? Yours, Sambulo?" Sambulo raises one hand.

"He doesn't remember any of that happening and I'd like to keep it that way. Let's leave him out of this."

Sisekelo is 12 now and he doesn't remember anything about a mkhulu who spoke to him when he was six.

"He could be the key, that's all I'm saying. I know how these things work," Mhlaba says.

Perhaps getting him out of jail was what they needed to do but with Mhlaba, it's hard to tell what he will do next. They know that the most important thing to him is Nandi, and they haven't discussed the reunion, which could also change everything.

"I guess the only solution now is to go back to Margate, with him," Mqoqi says, looking at him.

They all agree. The man might just experience a major breakthrough with him there. But it will have to be next week. Lwandle is graduating on Friday and their wives will not allow them to not be there.

Mhlaba stands up, goes to the kitchen and comes back with a beer, which he opens with his teeth. He sits, leaning back on the couch.

"I can't remember the last time I tasted cold beer. That stuff you used to bring me, I had to drink it warm because those dogs wouldn't let me keep it in their fridge," he says to Mqhele.

The atmosphere here is less tense now that they know what their next step is.

They are expecting Mhlaba to raise the Nandi issue but instead he looks at all of them and sips his beer before he speaks.

"Now, which one of you shot that SBV security guard in Wolmaranstad? I've done serious shit in my life but I never went anywhere near a cash-in-transit heist."

They don't answer him. They don't talk about that at all but they all thought about it, among other things, when that man said, "Whatever you leave behind always finds itself back to you. You should know that by now."

Because really, what were the odds of Qhawe meeting Naledi?

"It was Mthunzi," Mpande says. He could have kept quiet but no.

"Oh, well, when Mahlubi came to me, he blamed you for everything, particularly you," he says, pointing at Mpande with his head.

Gugu

HE PATS HIS pants pockets a few times, looks behind him and puts one hand on his forehead. He's left his house keys in the car.

Oh, it's open.

"Gugu," he shouts as he walks in.

No response.

He noticed all their cars are here when he arrived so he is certain she's home.

The house is clean too, as usual, which is enough proof that she is somewhere in this house because she never leaves those "cleaner-on-call" people alone in her house.

Nqobizitha once joked to his brothers that if he ever saw Gugu doing so much as mopping the floor, he'd take her straight to a witchdoctor because that would mean someone had bewitched her.

He always says, "She's not lazy, she just knows how to appreciate her blessings."

He stops and leans on the wall separating the lounge and the dining room, and watches.

He does this a lot, watches her giggle along with those people who

laugh throughout these comedy shows that she loves so much.

He's not a TV person but she is, so sometimes he sits on this very same couch with her and pretends to be interested.

Most of the time, when she watches one comedy after another, he sits quietly and calculates the time in between the audience laughing intervals.

He figured it out early, that in the first eight minutes of the show, the laughs come every six seconds. The time in between keeps getting shorter and shorter as the episode progresses.

Gugu has probably never noticed this. She watches them for pure entertainment. But Nqobizitha, he is a numbers man, so with him everything is explained through an equation or graph in his head.

Sbani got his brain.

"Hey?" she says, startled.

He doesn't move.

"When did you come in? How long have you been standing there?" she asks as she stands up and walks to him.

It's typical of her, asking many questions at once and being a big bundle of energy.

"Are you okay? How was the trip? I couldn't get hold of you and I wanted to tell you something."

He pulls her into his arms, picks her up and kisses her.

Often this is what he does when he wants her to stop talking. But normally he puts her down after kissing her, which is not what he plans to do today seeing as her feet are still hanging in the air.

"I was worried about you," she says.

"There's nothing to worry about," he lies.

She tries to break free from his arms but he holds her tighter.

When he was talking to his brothers, early in their relationship, he would refer to her as "the portable".

She's short and tiny, so he gave her that nickname. And the next thing he knew, as small as she was, she had bulldozed each and everything that

stood in her way into his life.

The many women in his life had always been his escape. They kept him distracted from the realities of his life.

There had to be something, always, something to take him away from what happened.

That is one of the reasons he kept Mandisa in his life for so long. She was an excuse, the one thing he could point at and say, "But this is why."

"This is why I have not moved on. This is why I can't be a good person. I have a problem. Mandisa is that problem."

She was drama, and drama was what he needed. His life couldn't be still and stable because then that would open space for it to be real. He couldn't have that.

But then there was Gugu. She pushed, he fought her off, she pushed and pushed and pushed...

He remembers how, without him even noticing it, she threw him a surprise birthday party and managed to get everyone who is important to him to attend, even the taxi rank crew. No woman had ever done anything like that for him.

At first he was annoyed. "How dare she?" he thought.

But as the night progressed, his anger disappeared. The night was all about him. It was to celebrate him, his life, and had never thought of as worth celebrating.

Gugu, with all their problems and with all his faults, had been adamant that he was worth loving. She never said it, she just showed it. And the more he pushed her away, the stronger she came on.

His hostility towards her, or rather his heart's hostility towards her, was motivated by fear. Fear that he would end up loving what he saw when he looked at her, which was his dead wife, Nqobile.

Sometimes when they were making love, he would slip and call her Nqobile. She never asked, she just kept loving him.

He married her because he was at that age where it looked strange that he was still single. He also had too much baggage and Gugu looked

like a woman who could handle a man like him, a woman who never asked questions.

In the end he fell in love with her, with her energy, her ability to offend people as if she was not aware of it and her ability to be who she is, despite society's expectations of her.

It took him a while to realise he loved her. It was a foreign feeling to him, one he had not experienced in years.

The first time she slept over at his house, he expected her to behave like a typical woman trying to impress. He woke up, leaving her in bed, and went downstairs in his pyjamas.

He sat there watching TV and thinking she was going to come downstairs at any time, but she didn't.

He found her still sleeping at midday. When she finally woke up, she showered, got dressed and called a cab. Before she climbed in the car, she stood on her toes and kissed him on the lips. And then she stood with her hands on her hips.

"Pay the driver," she instructed, pointing at the driver with her head. And with that she was gone.

He noticed when he went upstairs that she had not made the bed, or even bothered picking up his pants and socks, which she had thrown around the bedroom when she undressed him and had her way with him.

He shook his head and threw himself on the bed. He was smiling and he found it strange that he wasn't grossed out by this uncultured woman.

That afternoon, she called. You know how women, especially if they sleeping over and sex happened too soon, would wait for the man to call first just to show that he is interested? No, not Gugu. She called and casually said, "I'm busy tomorrow but we'll do dinner on Monday night."

Even he, a man of many words, was lost for words at that moment.

A few months later she had moved in.

He didn't see it coming but it happened. It was weird for him because even after she moved in, he was still subjected to take-away food and lived like the bachelor he had been since Mandisa died.

Gugu wasn't domestic. No, she wasn't about that life, but she brought fun in to his life, much like Nqobile used to do.

She only started organising him food after he paid lobola but other than that, her wifely characteristics stretched only as far as emptying the take-away food on to a plate.

It was just months after Mandisa had killed herself.

Theirs wasn't much of a relationship but he had lived with her for years and they never stopped having sex and she didn't want other women near him.

As much as tiny Gugu had impressed him in a bizarre kind of way by being the opposite of what he had expected, he didn't believe their relationship would go anywhere.

He had a long list on his phone contacts. Women he had been with while Mandisa was still alive and women he had met soon after she died.

It was easy for him. He'd never had a problem flashing money to get what he wanted.

His wealth had always been his shield. He may be broken inside but his wallet is intact, and so it defines who he is to people he will never allow in.

He has allowed Gugu in, but his wallet still does much of the loving now and again.

"I have something for you," he says.

She looks excited. She's a material girl and she's not shy about it.

Nqobizitha likes it that way too because it compensates for a lot of things he'd rather not confront.

He lets her get whatever she wants and more so that he doesn't have to do stuff like "talking about feelings" and all that with her.

He's only ever allowed that stuff a few times, like the time she almost divorced him and when she was going through losing her mother and her family turned out to be a bunch of savages.

He puts her down and pulls her by her hand to the dining room table.

"Here," he says, picking up an envelope and handing it to her.

It's a big white envelope, plain on the outside.

"What is it?" she asks, frowning a little.

"Open it."

She opens it, slowly and carefully as if trying not to tear it. She pulls out a thin pile of papers. She keeps glancing at him as she does.

"Whoa! What...?" She looks more shocked than appreciative.

"I think you need it after everything you've been through," he says.

She looks at the papers in front of her again, and looks up at him again.

"But Nqoba, how?"

He's beginning to worry about her reaction now, but his face is not showing it yet.

"Am I going alone?" she asks.

"You can go with whoever you want to take with you," he says.

It sounds like he is begging her to go, but she's still too caught up in the moment to realise that. She looks tempted but her eyes say no.

She places the envelope on the table and looks up at him.

"The time is not right, Nqoba. I can't go away now, not with everything that's happening."

She's wanted to go to Italy for a long time, just for the fashion and the shopping, that's what she always says. But Nqobizitha, although he has promised her many times, never seemed to find the time.

"Go with your friends. I think you need a break," he says.

This is not the Nqoba she knows. The Nqoba she knows doesn't even like her friends. And also, Nqoba doesn't care about Italy. But he'd been wanting to make her wish come true, it's just that he kept forgetting about it.

"You need to get away, Gugu, even if it's just for a week."

He's begging, isn't he? Of all of them, he is the one who took what that man said harder to heart. He believes he's the one who has had to suffer the most misfortunes compared to all of his brothers. And for the longest time, he believed it had everything to do with Nqobile's spirit. The fact

that it is not resting in peace and the fact that he married Gugu for all the wrong reasons.

But he has never discussed this with anyone. If anyone had mentioned it, he knows he would have made some joke about it. In company, his voice is the loudest, but when alone his silence is loudest.

When he and his brothers were flying back from KwaZulu-Natal, not much was discussed about what their next step would be. All they wanted was to get home to their wives and children. Their sanity and their happiness.

Nqoba made the decision that whatever the truth is about who his wife really is, the best thing would be for him to find it first. Hence the random gift.

The depression and miscarriage derailed her but there is no guarantee that she won't go digging again. That is why he is trying to get rid of her.

She needs to be away, at least until he figures out how he is going to do this.

He's never been one to believe in life being a circle, that no matter where you go, in the end it will take you back to where you started, especially if you broke some mirrors as you went along.

But that is where he is now, back where he started, back to Nqobile.

Maybe now is the time to conclude that this is all her doing, that she's trying to send him a message that her spirit is not resting. I mean, how is it possible that in all the women he could have met that day, he met Gugu?

"Nqoba," she says, touching his elbow.

He rubs his forehead.

"Sorry, I was just thinking about..."

He's been lost in thought.

"I'll think about it," she says.

This is the first time in all the time he's known her that she hasn't screamed and jumped around with joy when he's given her a gift.

She appreciates everything he does for her and he loves her for that.

The idea of making someone happy makes him happy – he finds fulfilment in that.

He knows she's considering it and that in the end, she'll agree to go. He just hopes her decision is going to be made quickly.

"I'll bring you some food just now," she says.

He looks confused.

"You cooked?"

She rolls her eyes.

"No, Nom-Nom Kitchen. Your favourite, samp and tripe," she says.

He laughs.

"I should have given your family donkeys instead of all those cows," he says.

She looks up at him.

"Nqoba, I'm hot. I make you look good and I gave birth to that terrorist you call a child so please..." she says, raising her hand and walking away.

He laughs until he remembers that this, all of this, could end in a split second if he allows the truth to come out.

His battery is almost dead, but he needs to make one important call, outside where she can't hear him.

"Nkangala."

"Good," he says and hangs up.

When he goes back inside the house, she's dished up a plate of food for him. She puts the tray on the coffee table and sits with her legs crossed, on the couch facing him, with a bowl full of lettuce and tomatoes.

"Where's my child?" he asks.

She laughs out loud.

"What?" he asks.

"This is the first time you've entered this house and not asked where your son is. He's the first person you look for when you walk in," she replies.

The look on his face says he didn't realise this.

"Baba, look."

It's Hlangu.

He's just come in from playing outside and in his hands is a live frog.

His parents look at each other, lost for words.

"I'm going to cut it open. I want to see what's inside," he says.

Gugu laughs.

"Deal with your murderous child," she says, stands up and leaves the lounge.

Emaweleni

"THAT'S NOT HOW you do it, come here."

He's been battling with his tie for a while now. It's just not who he is. He didn't even own a tie until last week when his overzealous Uncle Lloyd walked in with a suit cover over his shoulder.

There was no agreement between them. In fact, Lwandle hadn't even thought about an outfit for his big day. But mami was there, and mami wanted him to wear a suit.

"I don't understand why all of you are forcing me to do this. I could wear shorts, you know," he says.

Nkosana shakes his head as he fixes his son's tie knot.

It's just the two of them in the room.

The poor boy had planned a mother of all parties in Pretoria behind their backs and he surely wasn't going to invite them. But now they are all here and he knows his mothers are going to smother the shit out of him.

They had already started last night with that dinner he didn't know about.

"You have to look proper and presentable, just this once," Nkosana says.

He thinks, this, he is doing it for his father. His father, on the other hand, is doing this for him. It's a big day for both of them, for the whole family.

Nkosana walked in just as he finished getting dressed and it looked like he wanted to say something important to him.

But now it seems he just wants to be in this one good moment, considering everything they are dealing with. He wants to be part of this.

With Sbani, it was expected, he had always been a proper child until now. Lwandle, on the other hand, kept everyone at the edge of their seats. They never knew what stunt he was going to pull next.

He's been trouble since he was young. Nkosana said it was like raising Mqhele all over again.

"See, this is how it's supposed to look," he says, patting his shoulders. He turns around to look at himself in the mirror.

They are both silent for a while.

"I remember you looking exactly like this when I was a kid," Lwandle says.

He's right. They are exactly the same height. Nkosana was the same size as Lwandle is now.

"You remember what I looked like?"

They are both standing in front of the mirror.

"Yes, I remember what you looked like. You were always there, remember? Even when we went to bed without seeing you, we always knew you were going to be there when we woke up the next morning."

Nkosana drops his eyes.

He's never been sure of himself when it came to being a good father. He knows they turned out well. That he knows and he has been proud of both his sons but he gave more credit to Hlomu than himself for that.

His goal was to make sure they didn't want for anything, that they didn't turn out to be criminals and that they stayed blind to the dark side of this family.

But what had always bothered him was what they said the first time

they met Zandile. He concluded on that day that maybe money wasn't that important after all. And Sbani's shenanigans have given him more proof of that.

For Lwandle, being here today was not a privilege or a dream. It was what was expected of him, and so he did it. But for his father, every time he has to do this with one of them, it is a confirmation that he has done well.

Despite all the bad things he had to do to get here, he did fairly well when it came to his sons.

"Thank you," Lwandle says.

It's an unexpected thank you. Nkosana doesn't understand.

"Thank you for everything," he says again.

He understands now but he's still shocked. It's not every day that the son who tested you in every possible way randomly thanks you.

He nods and pats his shoulder.

"It's fine. Let's go, I don't want us to be late," Nkosana says.

But Lwandle stands still.

"I wasn't that much of a disappointment, was I?"

The normal Lwandle wouldn't even be bothered by that, but with everything Sbani has put this family through, he's been forced to look into himself and at least be the one to give his father some pride and joy.

There's a brief smile on Nkosana's face. He thinks it's a joke.

The big mirror is still in front of them.

"No, you are a boy. I was once a boy too."

Lwandle laughs and shakes his head.

"That's hard to believe. I don't remember you ever putting one foot wrong. But also, I don't ever remember seeing you really happy until Mah came back," he says.

Nkosana rubs his hands together. He does this when he is put in an uncomfortable position.

"Oh, and when Niya was born," Lwandle adds.

His face softens. It always does when his precious daughter's name is

mentioned. She came at the perfect time.

Somehow Nkosana believes her arrival changed him. That something bad in him died when she was born.

He thinks that... that with her he didn't have to fight too much to protect her. She just came and there was this constant and guaranteed happiness.

With Sbani and Lwandle and Mvelo, it was different. It was a constant fight. A fight to raise them without their mothers. A fight to keep them safe from his enemies, from his life, from the business, from the truth...

That night, had they sat in that living room longer, had Hlomu not walked in and demanded they bring her child back, Lwandle would have died.

Gwaza was determined. He had been planning it for months and he was going to make it painful and gruesome.

The men in that house asked about the child and Gwaza lied about him being his nephew.

One of them seemed suspicious but he never said anything.

Gwaza had popped in to pick up a parcel and continue driving to wherever he was going. They didn't know him that well, but he was a good business associate. That's all he was to them.

He hadn't been in the house for more than 10 minutes when the door was kicked open. Before they knew it, they were in a war zone.

At first they thought they were being robbed. It happens a lot when you're in the gun business. But when the first thing the supposed robbers grabbed was the child sitting in the corner, they knew they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

They chose not to fight, to try and explain, because it was pointless.

At the end of it all, there were only two people left in that room, sitting on two chairs facing each other.

They had met under similar circumstances before.

Only this time, only one of them was going to leave that room alive.

"I'm going to kill you," Nkosana said, unbuttoning the cuffs of his

shirt.

"Today, here," he said, pushing each sleeve up his arm.

Nkosana is not a man of many words but when he speaks, he never lies.

Gwaza wasn't a saint. But compared to Nkosana, he could as well been one of Jesus's disciples.

The knife was on the table not far from them. Nkosana does not carry a weapon, ever, unless he is going to use it.

"You've been waiting for this moment all your life, haven't you?" Gwaza asked.

He knew it was the end but maybe having a long-overdue conversation with his arch-enemy was going to help him rest in peace.

They had been fighting like cat and dog since they were boys. There was always something between them, way before Zandile made her choice.

"No, I haven't. And don't think this is about Zandile. It's not. She was always mine," Nkosana said, rubbing his hands together.

All Gwaza could do was clench his jaw when he heard those words. He knew that but he didn't need to hear it.

Whenever he thought about Zandile, which was often, he pictured her on her knees begging for his forgiveness. Her admitting that she made a mistake, that she should have stayed and married him because then she wouldn't have had to kill her own mother. She wouldn't have ended up in jail. She would not have had to live in some backroom in Riverlea with a taxi driver.

Had she stayed with him, he would have made sure she had everything she desired. He was going to build her a house, a big one. His father had already given him a business to run and he was working really hard, just for her.

He didn't care anymore that she didn't love him enough. He had accepted that. All he wanted was for her to come to him and beg, and tell him he was the better man. That was a delusion he lived with all his life.

right until that moment on that chair. But it never turned into reality.

Why did Nkosana always have to win? Why?

"You took my child, Gwaza. My child. Don't you know me? Clearly you know nothing about me," he said picking the knife from the table.

"I know you. You are nothing but a low-life piece of shit like your father," Gwaza says.

He was trying to push him. He wanted to push him to a point where he snapped and made it quick. A single stab in the heart, that's all it was going to take if he pushed him hard enough.

But Nkosana disappointed him. Instead, he put the knife aside and sat with his arms folded.

"You have a daughter, don't you?"

Silence.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure she's taken care of," he said and picked up the knife again.

This time he held it in his hand, spinning it a few times and poking his index finger with its sharp end.

He was counting in his head.

"Look me in the eye, Ngqulunga."

He slashed the knife across his neck the moment their eyes met. One slash and blood was splattered all over his T-shirt. He put the knife back on the table and sat with his arms folded again.

The next few minutes were a battle to force the air in and out of the lungs through what was left of his throat. It was a horror movie Nkosana had no problem watching, because he had done many things more horrific than that.

He never wanted to kill Gwaza. To him, he was nothing but a nuisance who tried to force a woman to love him. And if he had to be honest, he didn't think he had it in him to take it as far as kidnapping his child.

That was something Bheki would do.

"Look me in the eye Ngqulunga," he said.

But Gwaza couldn't raise his head. It was half-torn from his neck.

He was still trying though.

He wanted to die like a man, with his head held up high. But the deep cut across his throat wasn't allowing him to die like a hero.

The more blood that poured out of his neck, the higher the sound of his attempt at breathing became. When the sound dropped, it was clear he had stopped fighting.

Nkosana was still sitting with his arms folded, watching.

It was like watching ice after being thrown into boiling water, a definite and quick deterioration.

"Nyanda'yemkhonto... Yeyesa...

Qengeba... Majola... Macingwane..."

With each clan name Nkosana uttered, Gwaza took another step closer to his death.

"Mphankomo."

Last breath.

Silence.

He stood up and kicked the chair. The body landed on the floor head first, but there was nothing left in the body tied to the chair to feel the fall.

Nkosana zipped up his jacket, switched off the light and left the room.

They were waiting for him outside.

He didn't speak. He went straight to the Quantum parked in the yard and sat next to Lwandle on the back seat.

The child had no idea what was going on.

He was grabbed before mayhem began.

"Do you want KFC boy?"

The boy nodded excitedly.

"Okay, let's go," he said.

It had been a long day and long night, but it was over now.

"You're going to be late."

It's Sbani.

He's standing at the door. He's wearing a suit, the one he wore at his

own graduation when he was still Nkosana's pride and joy.

He looks nothing like he did back then. A few scars on his face, red eyes and yellowing teeth are the evidence of two years of self-destruction.

He's been sober since Sunday. Lwandle begged him to clean himself up, for him.

Despite the fact that he came here to get them out of this room so they wouldn't be late, he walks in and closes the door.

He joins them in front of the mirror.

"I'm taller than both of you," he says.

Lwandle forces a laugh, Nkosana doesn't speak.

"Mah is panicking downstairs."

Sometimes he calls her mah, especially when he is sober, but most of the time he calls her Zandile, out of disrespect.

Lwandle leaves and the two of them are left alone. Their relationship has always been awkward. They both know how deep their love for each other is, but they are definitely not close. They don't talk.

Sbani communicates by being rebellious and Nkosana responds with his fists. It has always been like that, and they both hate it.

He hasn't been dumped at the gate by strangers in the past three days but he's only doing it for Lwandle because he begged him, and he is proud to be here, to see this.

"Was it at that time where Lwandle went missing?" Sbani asks.

They had been quiet for a while, just standing in front of the mirror with hands in their pockets. Nkosana nods. He doesn't know why but he nods. Perhaps because he is tired of everything.

"I understand. I'd do the same for my son," Sbani says.

Nkosana looks at him and leaves.

... (S) ...

"Baba, now that I have a Master's degree, are you going to give me a job?"

He looks at him and frowns.

"Give you a job?"

"Yes, I'm sure you have an empty office up there next to yours, chief financial officer or something."

There's still a frown on Nkosana's face.

"Chief...?"

Lwandle is a little too confident, as if this is something he is entitled to. His attitude seems to say, "You sent me to university for this."

"Yes, I'll give you a job. In fact, you are hired, right here and right now."

Lwandle's face lights up.

"You can start tomorrow."

"Really?"

"Yes. You see, from home you will get on the M1 north. From there, take the Carr Street off-ramp, which will take you to Miriam Makeba Street. Drive straight until you cross Gwigi Mrwebi Street and right across there will be your office. You can take along a camp chair if you want," Nkosana says.

Lwandle is lost.

"But the offices are in Braamfontein," he says, puzzled.

"Yes, my office is in Braamfontein," Nkosana says.

He looks confused. And then he looks shocked. He frowns.

"But baba, that's Bree,"

Ohhhhhh.

"Yes, congratulations. You are the new CQM," Nkosana says.

"CQM?"

"Yes, Chief Queue Marshall," he says, patting him on the shoulder.

They are here. They drove together from campus when the photograph-taking circus was over.

Lwandle wanted Sbani to drive with them but his father said no. That little moment in front of the mirror didn't change the fact that he is a drunk, a disappointment who can't be a man and face his problems like one.

Nkosana is done, he doesn't have the energy anymore and he is done trying. Zandile is a different story, she keeps trying and she keeps being pushed away and hurt.

Under normal circumstances, this would have been a big celebration but a small family dinner at Meat and Greet in Bryanston will do. Besides celebrating Lwandle's achievement, the main purpose of this gathering is to explain the Mhlaba situation, which is why none of the relatives were invited.

Hlomu already knows. Mqhele explained the whole story when he came back from Muldersdrift but she has made it clear she does not want him in her house.

A big tray of assorted meats is placed on the table. If it wasn't so well presented, it would be no different from a meal being served at a shisanyama in Soshanguve.

"No beer?" Mqoqi asks.

There's silence.

When he finally figures it out, he scratches his head and picks up a plate.

"I'll have soda water then," he says.

The decision to not have alcohol at this dinner was made this afternoon when it was clear that Sbani was coming too. Honestly, nobody thought he would show up at the graduation and when he did, nobody thought he was going to last until it was over. They expected him to disappear to the nearest drinking hole he could find.

"I'll have lime water, please," he says.

It's been a while since he'd been part of one of these things. Most of the time they don't even tell him. He just arrives home to find the house empty and figures they must be having dinner somewhere.

"Ntwana, congratulations. I'm going to be honest with you, you weren't very promising..." Ntsika says.

He's always the one to propose toasts in moments like these. They are taking him to Margate with them on Sunday because they aren't sure

who that man was referring to when he said "bring the one you have been hiding". Also, because maybe, just maybe, the man will save them the trouble by telling him who Nqobile is by just blurting it out.

"I'd like to propose a toast too," Sbani says and stands up.

His action is met with tension because...it's Sbani.

"Mfethu, there are so many things I could say about you but it would take the whole night. So I'm just going to cut it short and tell you that this is a big achievement. You've made your mother and father proud, achieved the things they never had the chance to achieve and again, you've polished the image of this family. People back in Mbuba will look at this and think, well, at least their children aren't bloodthirsty, low-life criminals who kill anything that pisses them off just because they can..."

"Sbani!"

"No, mami, I'm congratulating my brother," he says and rubs the palms of his hands together.

"You and I, we know what a grown man's fist feels like on our faces. We know abandonment and neglect and we know loss. The words 'silver spoon' have been thrown at us all our lives. We've seen the worst but the silver spoon is supposed to compensate for all of it. Our mistakes are never forgiven because we are not supposed to make any. The silver spoon is supposed to make us perfect. Our punishments are harsh. 'Be a man', 'don't be weak', how many times have you heard those words Lwandle?"

"Mfethu, this is my..."

"I know, I've had four of these before but guess what? I can still see Mvelo's face and you know what? I told him to go behind the house. He pissed me off and I chased him. He ran behind the house and I told him that if he came near me again, I was going to slap him. That's why he stayed there."

Nkosana stands up and walks out of the restaurant. Everyone expects Zandile to follow him, but she doesn't.

"What's your point? And who asked you?" Ntsika asks.

"There's no point, just like there was no point in you running to

England because the shit you left here is still here, waiting for you.”

Ntsika stands up.

“Ntsika!” Hlomu says sharply.

He sits down immediately.

The only reason none of his fathers have touched him yet is because this is a public place and they wouldn't do it in front of their wives.

“Unlike you, Ntsika, I'm not running anymore. Baba,” he says, looking at Mqhele.

“Go find a place called eMaweleni. It's in Nsikeni somewhere near Stranger. Ask them what they know about the place. Nobody who knows the story is still alive but someone might know the ‘urban legend’ ” he says, puts the glass of water on the table and walks away.

He stops midway and says, “Maybe after that we will all be less fucked up.”

Ma Sbisi

SHE DROVE GUGU to the airport.

She would not have volunteered had it not been that Hlangu will be staying at her house while Gugu is away, so it made sense that she be the one to see her off. Also, because she needed to get out of this house and she needed to talk to someone, and Gugu was that person.

She thought that of all of them she would be the one who understands where she is coming from. Hlomu was not on her side from the beginning. She knew this the moment she said, "I know Xolie but think about everyone, if Sisekelo is the only one who can help..."

That's when she put down the phone on her and they haven't spoken since.

There are 13 children in this family but hers are the ones who are being haunted by things that have nothing to do with them.

She had hoped that Gugu, with her having gone through the most in the past two years, would at least be sympathetic and not look at her like she was being selfish.

"You know how things work in this family, we sacrifice for each other," Gugu said, as if it was supposed to be that simple.

"They took my child, Gugu. Sambulo took my child. He didn't even fight for him, just like he didn't when Nkosana almost..."

"Nkosana was never going to hurt Sisekelo, you know that."

"I'm not sure what I know or don't know anymore. They took my child and I have no idea what they are going to make him do wherever they went," she said.

She thinks that maybe this was her fault. That maybe she should have held her own children closer and stopped this thing of "all the children are mine and my children are theirs too" because now it has stripped her of her power to fight for them.

She did put up a fight though, one she knew she wasn't going to win but she did let Sambulo know that she will never forgive him for using her child as bait.

"I told you not to touch the children. I told you many times," she said. She needed him to know that this was all his fault.

He tried to explain that things could not be left as they are. That Sbopho clearly chose Sisekelo for a reason and who knows what Phakeme could do next if they didn't fix this?

She still said no but he took him anyway.

Talking to Gugu didn't help with the anger she's been harbouring since yesterday afternoon, especially because she doesn't understand how she could just pack and go on a two-week holiday when things are falling apart here.

Sambulo tried to make her go away too but she said no because she could feel it. She could see by the way he was acting that something was going on and she wasn't going to let him get rid of her so he could do as he pleased.

The house is empty, just as she had hoped.

The happiest times of her married life have been these, walking into an empty home and inhaling the calmness, the silence and the freedom, even if it's just for a few hours.

She had two children in the first five years of the relationship, with

a man who would come home in the middle of the night, go straight to the guest bathroom and come to bed smelling like he had been swimming in detergent.

He always had some type of explanation when she asked, things like, "I was working in the warehouse all day. That place is dust and dirt from floor to roof."

It bothered her, but he came home every night and he loved her like he couldn't live without her, so she decided not to nag, because he did what a good husband is supposed to do.

And then she got married, and then there were other children born, the ones he found already there were becoming grown men. And then one of them died, and a woman who was soon to be one of them died.

And then there was a woman in jail whom nobody knew existed, and then her own son was talking to ghosts, and then there was Mabutho and...

Sometimes all she needs is a frozen moment. A moment where time stops and she is the only one who can move. A moment where she can control how fast or how slow her movements and her thoughts are.

She wants to be as gentle as she wants to be or as slow as she can be. She wants that.

She opens the bottom cupboard and pulls out a box hidden behind an unopened set of cutlery.

She places it on the kitchen counter and opens the cupboard next to the stove. Behind a pile of neatly packed Tupperware is another box, champagne flutes this time.

With a box under each arm, she takes that journey that the load on her shoulders pushes her to take every time she feels like she can't keep her head above the water.

She can feel the peace and quiet consuming her as she approaches the place.

It's clean. It's always clean.

She sits on the cement floor and rests the back of her head on the wall

behind her.

It's damn hot. There is no shelter or shade above her. This place, this spot here is the only place where she can be alone.

Nobody comes here. Nobody goes behind the house and she's pretty sure there are many people who have been in this house numerous times but have no clue that there is a place like this one.

The wall in front of her is a mystery. It is not connected to the house. It's just there, randomly built high enough to reach an average-height adult's shoulders.

At first she thought it was a storm water retainer but when they came here with Sambulo, he said it wasn't. He said maybe it was just a decoration "or whatever", he wasn't interested. But she was.

Her relationship with this place started not long after Mahlomu turned 30.

A lot of things changed after Mahlomu turned 30. A lot of things started to make sense. The long midnight showers and the new guns now and again.

Sambulo never hid the fact that he carried a gun with him all the time. He was shot and almost died once, so she understood his need to protect himself. Before they had kids she had no problem with him leaving it lying around for her to see, but as far as she was concerned he never used it.

That night at Hlomu's birthday where Mandisa went crazy, a lot of things started to make sense.

She held out for a few days, but the coming home late at night and long shower thing happened again. That's when she started asking questions, for the first time.

"Mandisa says you are a hitman," she said.

He thought it was a question, and even if it was it would have been a rhetorical one, but he answered anyway, with a question.

"What?"

"Mandisa, she says you are a hitman."

"Mandisa is unstable."

That's all he said. Sometimes she thinks he speaks slowly on purpose, just so he can carefully craft his lies.

But at that time she didn't know how talented he was in lying. Had the whole thing happened after the Mabutho saga, she would have pressed harder for answers or a confession because really, she believed Mandisa. She just hoped for the sake of her children and her sanity that it wasn't as bad as she made it sound.

But her female instincts weren't in denial, so the next time he came home smelling like he was trying to conceal something, she woke up the next morning and packed her children in the car. She dropped them off at Hlomu's house and came back home.

When he asked, she said they had asked to go there. And when he didn't believe her, she said it and she said it once, "Don't touch my children with blood on your hands."

He didn't say anything, picked up his car keys and left.

It was days after that and she was sitting alone drinking wine when the urge started growing stronger and stronger until she couldn't fight it anymore.

She tightened her hand around the thin stem of the wine glass, so hard that she felt her palms burning. But it wasn't enough. The urge was for something stronger than that.

The release followed by the sound of the wine glass hitting the wall, breaking into pieces and those pieces falling on the ground was the best thing she'd ever experienced. It felt like heaven. She felt like heaven.

She had been at her worst, her energy and her will deteriorating with every breath she took each day. But that afternoon, after that magical experience, her husband and children came home to a smiling and cuddling Xolile.

She checked her emails and made phone calls.

She had a long, bubbly phone conversation with her mother and later sang in the shower as the raspberry and lemon body scrub exfoliated all

her problems from her skin.

She felt new, as if she had got back her power and more.

In her mind, all hope was not lost.

She had done it, she had smashed a wine glass on the wall. Her own wine glass that was part of a set of six imported from France.

She did it and it felt good.

These two boxes here, she ordered them online and they were delivered three days ago. Twelve of them in each pack.

She wanted Riedels, she was very specific about that.

She opens each box slowly and carefully, picks one piece and caresses it in her hands. She breathes in, lets it go, closes her eyes and waits for that special moment where it breaks into pieces.

The first throw is always the most tender and most fulfilling.

By the time she gets to the 13th wine glass, her throw is firmer, her face intense and her teeth clenched.

She caresses the 24th one longer than the others.

Her throw is slow and tender again. She stands up and walks away the moment its pieces land on the ground. She's not interested in the pile of broken glass under the wall, so she doesn't look back to see MaSbisi approaching from the kitchen veranda with a broom.

But she knows she's there. They never talk about it.

She's in such a good mood having lunch with the wives doesn't sound like a bad idea at all.

And besides, they need to talk about things. She's forgiven them for not having her back, all of them, even Naledi who, instead of supporting her, blabbed on about how she agreed to name her own child Sbopho because "sometimes that's what you have to do", as if she ever asked them for their support.

Sambulo won't be back today or tomorrow and if she were to be honest, she's fine with him being gone. It's her child she's worried about.

"Xolile."

It's MaSbisi.

She's been here since Nsingizi was born almost three years ago and she's a strange woman, always has been but she loves the children, and that's the only reason she's still here.

"Yes, Auntie," Xolie says.

She calls her Auntie because she's not an old woman like MaMngani, just an annoying woman who finds pleasure in involving herself in everything that happens in this house. She does it in silence too.

"Where is mfananya?"

MaSbsi calls Sisekelo mfananya because maybe she thinks they have an exclusive relationship where they can call each other by exclusive names. But she has no right and it irritates Xolie.

"Why do you ask?"

"It's a school day and the child is not here," MaSbsi says.

"And you think that as his mother, I don't know that. Stop asking me questions about my children. And stop calling my husband mkhwenyana. He is not your son-in-law."

This has never been a problem before but MaSbsi knows when her madam is frustrated. She shoots and throws hand grenades and when it's all over, she never comes back to apologize.

In conversations MaSbsi has with her daughter Qhayiya whenever she's home in Orange Farm on weekends, she describes her madam as an angry woman who does not know what a good life she has.

"She breaks expensive glasses every time she's angry, crashes them against the wall like a mad woman. And do you know who has to clean up? Me! Because I don't want that good man to see how crazy his wife is, because he'll take her to Weskoppies and I don't want to lose my job. I know they'll never let me stay there and look after those children. They'll take them to Hlomu, I know that. She can fire me any time she wants, I know that because, umdlisile, there's no other explanation, no other. Such a good man."

Her daughter always laughs at that. She's never met Xolie and she doesn't want to. Not because she too thinks the woman is crazy but

because she can't get herself to warm up to the woman her mother cleans after.

MaSbsi knows the conversation with Xolie is over. It always ends quickly when she is in a mood like this.

So she goes back to Sisekelo's room and sits on the same chair she sat on this morning when she saw the bed was neatly made, meaning he did not sleep in it last night.

She thinks Xolie was probably lying on her back with that husband of hers humping her when she, Masbsi, first heard Sisekelo talking in the kitchen when she heard him.

She happened to be passing by his bedroom that night to get Nsingizi's feeding bottle from the kitchen when she heard him. She went in, sat on the chair and watched him toss and turn while he spoke things that didn't make sense. She left the room when it seemed the bad dream was over.

The next morning, she asked him what the dream was about but he didn't want to talk about it. It persisted and night after night, the child would talk in his sleep. Sometimes it was sweet dreams and he would be sleeping on his back with his eyes closed and a smile on his face. And other times he would be tossing and turning and pulling blankets and throwing pillows. She thought maybe she could help him. She asked him to write his dreams down, to describe the places he had seen and people he had spoken to. Her cousin, whom she has never taken seriously, had insisted since she was a child that she could read and interpret dreams.

She expected nothing of it but she had nothing to lose anyway so she gave her the exercise book and told her to read the whole thing.

"Whoa, Fisani, what kind of people are these you work for? You must take this child and run," the cousin said after reading just three pages.

MaSbsi snatched the exercise book from her cousin immediately and put it back in her handbag.

That whole thing was a mistake. Taking the child and running away with him? What kind of nonsense was that, she thought to herself.

The same exercise book is on the desk next to the chair. She's been

trying to stop herself from opening it, but the urge has been persisting. It's been a while since she's looked at it. She lost interest when her cousin couldn't help. It wouldn't hurt anyone, would it? Mfanyana is not here and his mother is probably thinking about breaking more things as she sits here. So she opens it.

"I saw Niya in the dream, she couldn't move. She was lying on the bed and she couldn't get up, she couldn't move her legs."

This is the latest entry. It was written two days ago.

Nsikeni

"HOW IS IT that you all grew up like wild animals, yet you can't make your own food?" Mhlaba asks.

He's been complaining about being hungry since they got here this morning and they keep pointing at the bucket of KFC on the kitchen table.

They told him they were going home, and he was looking forward to it because he thought it would feel like home, a warm meal cooked in this fancy kitchen at least, but no, nobody has bothered with that.

Mbuba to him means nothing. It's a huge house surrounded by rondavels and all that fancy shit but he really doesn't feel like he is home, the home he has longed for all his life.

He knows the whole story. How they left Mbuba and how Hlomu brought them back here. How their father, Sbopho, and their mother, Nomafu, burned to death here and they never got a proper burial because there was nothing to bury.

They told him about that rondavel too and how it burnt down.

This boy here, the one who has been sulking because he doesn't understand why he is the only child who had to be brought here instead

of going to school, has been asking questions all day.

He is 12 and they'd be wrong if they thought they could make him do whatever they wanted because he is a child, he thinks.

He's been asking to call his mamiza and when Nkosana said no, he went and locked himself in one of the bedrooms.

It is strange that the boy hasn't asked who Mhlaba is or where he came from, but their eyes have been meeting and each time they do, the boy stares right back at him.

Tomorrow morning they are going to Nsikeni. It's no more than two hours from Greytown but none of them have been there before. They know about it, it is famous in the taxi business but they have never thought it was a place they'd have to go to one day because what they do doesn't bother them.

They wanted to go today, but Ngcobo said he could only be here tonight and so they had to wait for him. With Mzimela gone, he is the only father they have now.

He's been there many times.

Ngcobo taught them things their father didn't get the chance to teach them. Survival was one of those things. But also, they shock him sometimes. He felt like they would have found their way even if he hadn't been there. He believed they'd still have taken the direction they took.

See, Ngcobo is a believer. A believer in all things super-natural except God who people go to church to pray to on Sundays.

He believes that those who once lived and later perished continue living on the other side, only with no bodies to carry them around. He believes they are gathered somewhere looking over those who are still alive.

His belief in ancestors is strong. He respects and honours them. He slaughters animals often. He burns imphepo and speaks to them when he needs guidance. He does the same when he needs protection and when he needs to offload his sins.

He firmly believes that it is thanks to them that he has lived so long.

But although his life has been filled with blood and darkness, they have sheltered him throughout.

He isn't a good man. He has never claimed or tried to be one. His life is about power and control. It is about having what he wants, when he wants it.

But he has a very soft spot for the Zulu boys. He is proud of them, of their fearlessness and boldness. He hasn't always agreed with some of their choices, especially the one Nkosana made to never commit to another woman while Zandile was in prison.

He tried to convince him many times to marry. He'd say, "You don't have to love a woman to make her your wife. She has to love you. All you have to do is provide so she can make a home for your children."

But Nkosana never listened. He knew what he felt and he was never going to betray it.

At first Ngcobo was fond of Mahlomu. In fact, he was the one who urged Mqhele to approach her when he feared she'd reject him. But at that time, he believed she was going to be just another girl, just another one of Mqhele's many women. And when they talk of making her a wife started, he wasn't sure.

He was worried that she wasn't going to be able to handle the life. She was too innocent, too clean.

He realised that when he saw her at the Bree Street taxi rank with Nkosana's children in tow years ago, when the brothers had gone to do a job that was supposed to take two days but ended up taking four days because something had gone wrong.

She had been given an instruction to stay in the house in Naturena with the kids until they came back. But no, she saw nothing wrong with defying her man by going to work and later demanding to go to her flat, even after he, a man old enough to be her father, told her to return to Naturena.

He raised this with Mqhele when they came back. The answer he gave was that she was naturally stubborn but there was nothing to worry about.

His worry grew when he met her family during lobola negotiations. He saw her father as a lazy man who had settled for a standard job and a standard house and family.

His perception of Dladla was that he was a man who had never got his hands dirty in life, the type who learned about life from books and worked for eight hours a day and was satisfied with what he had.

The worst part was that he allowed his only son to be "istabane", that's the part he never understood at all.

There was also the aunt who had the nerve to look him in the eye when addressing him. He felt she didn't know her place as a woman and for one of his 'sons', whom he had groomed to believe he was high above any woman to marry such, was a problem.

But over the years he has watched Mahlomu become something he had never imagined. He knew, as time went on that she was a powerful force, perhaps even more powerful than him.

Mahlomu has similar feelings of discomfort towards him.

She doesn't like Ngcobo, none of the wives do. They have never said it but they have always feared his influence over their men.

The polygamy, chauvinism and his objectifying of women could easily rub off on their husbands. But what they don't know is Ngcobo himself fears Hlomu. He is uncomfortable with her ability to control them, to change them and to make them see the world differently.

Their interactions are always brief and awkward. It is a power struggle they are both unaware of.

Ngcobo specifically asked that Hlomu must not be involved in this.

"This is no place for women. Bring Sambulo's boy," he said.

They brought Sbani too, and Ntsika who is still as confused about what is happening as the young boy haunted by dreams he does not understand.

"There's someone at the gate," Ntsika shouts.

They aren't expecting any guests, except Ngcobo who was leaving before the last time they spoke to him.

Nobody moves from under the tree where they have been sitting all afternoon. Ntsika walks to the gate when he realises they are expecting him to deal with it.

Since that incident that ended with Mvelo and Oleta dead, he has never trusted Mbuba and its people. He wasn't here but he still doesn't understand how such a thing could happen in broad daylight.

"It's Auntie," he says when he walks past them carrying three plastic bags. Nokthula fanning herself behind him with her handbag squashed under her arm.

She greets them but doesn't bother to stop and wait for them to respond.

"You should have called, Auntie. I would have come to fetch you instead of you walking all the way here," he says.

But she isn't interested, she's already unpacking the groceries on to the table and opening cupboard doors looking for pots. She looks up briefly and continues searching the kitchen when she sees two of them standing in the doorway.

"I'm here to cook for you." That's all she says, and they leave.

She hasn't been to Zandile's house in a while but she knows what's going on. Zandile confides in her.

She's run out of ways to comfort her and when this whole thing started, she believed herself when she told her things would be okay. But instead things have been getting worse. Every time her phone rings and Zandile's name flashes on the screen, she knows she's about to hear bad news and her cousin crying.

Sometimes she wants to be honest with her about what she thinks but Zandile can be defensive and that's always been a problem. When she spoke to her this morning, she could feel her nose twitching because really, what is wrong with these people?

She leaves the water to boil and the chicken marinating and makes

her way to the bedroom.

She didn't see him outside so she knows he must be in this house somewhere. She stops briefly in front of the bathroom door when she hears water running. It is probably him but maybe not, so she decides to continue searching the house.

She finds him in the third bedroom, the smallest one where the small kids usually sleep.

He is fast asleep. Her first thought is to slap him awake but he looks so peaceful yet nothing like the handsome young man who acted too seriously for his age. The one she was so happy to meet six years ago and was so proud of because despite everything her family had to go through to have him, he turned out great.

She used to tell her own son, Mqhe, that "this is someone you should look up to".

But now... her blood boils just at the sight of him.

They told him, and she personally told him, to stay away from that Ngqulunga girl but he wouldn't listen to her. Look at him now, looking twice his age with this beer sponge he calls a face.

She opens her handbag, takes out her sjambok and places it on the bed right next to his feet. And then she stands with her arms folded and looks down at him sleeping.

She loves him, she really does. She was the first person Zandile told when she arrived back home to announce she was pregnant.

She knew it was going to cause trouble but she had always been supportive of her cousin, and so she told her that everything would be fine, that a child was a blessing and that it didn't matter that she was only 19 years old. Nkosana loved her and they were going to raise the child together.

But the next day she was looking at her aunt's dead body lying on the bedroom floor. She had to clean the blood too while being interrogated by the whole family about where Zandile was and if she knew that she had come back here to kill her mother.

She looks at the sjambok lying there and decides her hand is better.

"Mamncane..."

"Hey, voetsek!" she screams, delivering another hard slap across his

face.

He tries to protect himself with the duvet but she pulls it away and aims for his face again, this time with her fist.

"Mamncane, what is...?"

She grabs the sjambok and that's when he stops asking questions and runs out of the bedroom. She's right behind him, the sjambok occasionally landing on his back and shoulders.

"You ungrateful bastard! Do you know what we had to go through? Do you know?" she shouts as she chases him out of the house and across the yard.

He is fast and all she can do is shout, with the sjambok still in her hand, as she tries to catch up with him. He runs everywhere except in the direction of the tree where his fathers are gathered. They haven't moved. They are just watching.

"Your mother doesn't beat you but I will!" She's still chasing him, waving the sjambok.

Ntsika is pulled back when he says he's going to intervene.

"This is not right. She's about to faint!" he says.

Qhawe tells him to stop with the nonsense.

It is only when Mhlaba comes out of the house with a bath towel wrapped around his waist and asks what is going on that Mqhele decides to act.

He runs to stand in front of Nokthula and tells her to stop.

She looks at him and furiously walks back to the house. Nobody knows where Sbani is hiding in this yard but nobody is concerned about him.

"I thought she came here to cook," Mqhele says when he joins them under the tree.

Nobody is shocked that this is the first thing he says, and calmly so.

They know him too well.

They expect Mhlaba to ask but he doesn't seem to care much about the violence.

"Who is that 'pakistan'?" he asks, with his hands on his hips. He has that smirk on his face that they all know too well.

"Zandile's cousin. Don't even try it," Mqoqi says.

They aren't interested in answering more of Mhlaba's questions about whether Nokthula is single or not and why she is chasing Nkosana's son all over the yard, so he gives up and walks back to the main house.

He finds her in the kitchen throwing rice in a pot of boiling water. Her face looks as angry as it was when he came out of the house and saw her with that sjambok. She raises her eyes once and goes back to her rice.

He stands still.

"I don't know why you are standing here, Sambulo. I don't know why you can all allow this to happen. Seriously? You can't handle a child? Your own child? You sit in your houses as if nothing is happening when you know this child is abusing my cousin? How much does Zandile have to go through Sambulo? How much?"

He raises his arms defensively but she's not done talking.

"You should have stopped this the moment it started. It is you, all of you. You treat these boys like you owe them something. Do they even know how you left this place?"

He'd say something if he understood what she's talking about.

"Oh, you're not going to answer me? Did you think I was going to sit around and watch while Zandile cries to me every day? Not me, Sambulo! I wasn't raised like that. I don't care how old he is, I will spill his intestines on this floor before I let him..."

She stops talking when she sees the real Sambulo standing behind her.

She thinks maybe the person she's been talking to is Mqoqi but the chicken in front of her won't chop itself so she goes back to it.

"We aren't related to her, are we?" Mhlaba whispers to Sambulo.

"Go put on some clothes, Mhlaba," Mqoqi says.

Nokthula looks up at him but she doesn't ask. He leaves the kitchen and comes back 30 minutes later wearing a Mercerise T-shirt and Brentwood pants.

When Nkangala took him to the mall to buy clothes, one of them should have gone with him because it's clear he has never left the '90s.

... (♥) ...

They aren't sure exactly where they are supposed to go but they know this is the right area.

Ngcobo suggested that they go to one of his persons and ask about the place, but Qhawe said no, they aren't going to complicate this any further by going to yet another person who might start telling them about their sins.

Besides, they have a clear lead. They know what place to ask for but they aren't sure who is safe to ask.

Sisekelo hasn't been visited by any ghosts since they got here so there is no new information.

Sbani on the other hand, is still sulking about yesterday's whipping and the fact that everyone acts like he deserved it.

He explained to them last night that he doesn't know where eMaweleni is exactly, but he knows what he knows because Thabitha told him what her uncle told her.

"It's not just about what happened between our fathers, my uncle said people in Mbuba, after your grandparents died, they went to look for your father and his brothers because they were afraid that they'd come back to cause more trouble. They did some digging and got information about where your grandfather came from. My uncle said when they came back, they said no wonder Sbopho was the way he was, and then let it go," she said.

Sbani has known this for years but he decided to not tell his father, not because he thought it wasn't important, but because he never spoke to him about his relationship with Thabitha.

They drive past a lodge with chalets, a few rural houses far apart from each other but barely any cars or livestock.

"This is Nsikeni, but if we go deeper we are going to end up ezigodlweni, and you said you didn't want to go there," Ngcobo says. They have been driving around this place forever.

"We must just ask people," Mpande.

"We haven't seen any people," Nqoba.

Mpande wanted to make this thing easy. He would have made a few calls and spoken to a few people and they would have found this place and told them exactly where to go. But Mqhele advised against it, he said this was not something they could involve other people in, especially not people they work with.

They stop and decide to ask when they see a lone old woman with a hoe across her shoulders walking slowly.

"Sawubona mama," one of them says.

The woman doesn't look at them in the car, but she stops anyway.

"We are lost. We're looking for a place called eMaweleni," Mqhele says.

The woman doesn't answer.

"She's deaf," Sisekelo says.

They aren't sure how he knew that but Nqoba presses on the accelerator and keeps on driving.

It's a while before they see another person, a young man carrying a stick and rushing somewhere. He recognises them, they know this by the way he opens his mouth and widens his eyes when they roll the window down.

"I've heard there was once a place like that. But it doesn't exist anymore, it was taken by amabhunu in the 70s, it's a farm now. Go down this road, leave the car near the river and cross by foot," the young man

says. They aren't prepared to leave the car anywhere, he knows by the way they are looking at him.

"Okay then you're going to have to go back to Stanger and use the other route. It will take you an hour with the tar road but..."

"Thanks mfwethu, we'll cross the river," Nqoba says starting the car again.

"Ask the people, it's private property, nobody is allowed to enter unless they work there," the young man says.

They drive off and leave him still speaking.

The river isn't wide and doesn't look deep. The problem is that they are going to have to take off their shoes and roll up their trousers if they want to cross and Nkosana is already annoyed.

They leave the Quantum parked under a tree not far from the river bank. That young man described it like it wasn't too far from the river so they'll probably be still able to see the car from across.

"Mhlaba," Mqhele says.

He's been too quiet, it's unusual.

"Bafo," Mhlaba responds.

They don't speak further. He was asking him if he is okay and his response meant he is.

It really isn't far from the river because they walk for about 10 minutes before they reach an iron gate written "Fourie and Sons. Private Property. No Trespassing". Between the gate and as far as they can see, there is just dry sugarcane, no people and no house.

"Nifunani madoda?"

They hear someone speak but they can't see him.

"Sifuna ukubuza," Nkosana says.

They hear his footsteps coming from the left-hand side of the sugarcane field and wait until he is visible.

He isn't a young man, just short. He carries a knobkirrie in his left hand and a stick of sugarcane in his right. He's wearing black gumboots

and blue overalls. He must work here.

"What do you want? Abelungu don't want anyone here," he says.

They all wait for one of them to answer because they aren't exactly sure what it is that they are here to do.

"Isn't this a farm?" Ntsika asks.

The man says yes but that sugarcane is all that is left, that the farmer fired everyone and decided to let the land go to waste.

"Why?" Qhawe asks.

"Because it is ours and we have claimed it. Once the claim is finalised, we will send him and his sons packing," the man says.

Interesting story but they didn't come here for that.

"We were told to come to this place. It's a long story. Have you heard of eMaweleni?" Mqhele asks.

He was always going to be the one to get straight to the point.

"What do you want from there?" the man asks.

There's no answer because they still don't know what they want from there.

"The graves," Sisekelo says.

Everyone turns to look at him. They don't know anything about graves.

"The graves?" the man asks.

"The graves," Sisekelo says again.

It seems the man knows exactly what the boy is talking about, but he doesn't like it. Those graves are their ticket to getting this land back. If anyone disturbs them or comes here with a conflicting story to the one they have used as the basis of their claim, things could fall apart.

"What graves Sisekelo?" Sambulo asks.

"He knows," the boy says, looking sideways at the man.

The man reaches in his overalls pocket and pulls out a key. They think he is opening to let them in but he comes out instead and hushes them back to the bank of the river.

"I don't know but my own father told me a story about what happened

here. About how this place got to be called eMaweleni, but he too wasn't sure if the story was true. He was still a child himself," the man says when they are all gathered at the bank of the river.

He is speaking in a hushed tone, as if this is not something he is not supposed to talk about.

"He said there were twins here, boys. He said their father died on the day they were born," he stops and squints as if trying to remember something.

"I'm not sure if I'm getting the story right, but there were other twins before them but they all died. The father must have done something because these two lived, only them, and then he died. They were good children, that's what my father said, but then one day, they must have been 14 years old..." He stops when he hears gasps.

"What happened? What did they do?" Qhawe asks.

"They killed a priest. He was one of those that were recruiting people to join a church, and most people here believed him and followed him. He built a school and stuff. The twins went to that school too. But he must have made them angry because..."

"How did they kill him?"

The man shrugs before he speaks.

"From what I was told, they slit his throat and left him sitting on a chair, bleeding to death."

There's silence.

The man is telling the story like it is an urban legend nobody believes, but they know, it is a familiar one.

"Is that what you wanted to know?" the man asks, looking at Sisekelo. But he isn't here. He is busy playing a game on his father's phone.

"So what happened to the twins' mother?" Qhawe asks.

The man sighs deeply.

"Apparently, the community was so angry, they burnt her house while she was inside."

Mqhele pulls out a pack of cigarettes and lights one. Nqoba and

Mqoqi pull out theirs too.

"The twins disappeared. Nobody knows what happened to them but some people claim their mother told them to run. She stayed in the house and burned to death. But I don't know, everybody who was there is long dead."

There is no looking at Sisekelo for answers now. He is disconnected from this. And it is a good thing because he is a child and shouldn't hear what this man is saying. But they want to know about the graves he mentioned and if they mean anything.

"You can't touch those graves. You can't say anything about them. We have a land claim here and those graves are our proof that this land was ours," the man says when Ngcobo asks.

They aren't sure whether to stay or go because this is not what they expected to hear, from a stranger who himself sounds like he doesn't believe the story he is telling them.

They could ask more questions but the man has to go back to work because he is the only security guard here.

"Nkosana," Mqhele calls.

He never calls him by name. He calls him bafo, they all call each other that.

"What did Sbofho bury under that tree?" he asks.

Nkosana gives him a confused look.

"On the night I was born, you said he buried something. That he tied something together and buried it," Mqhele says.

Everyone who was standing near him has moved away. They know this face and the aura it comes with.

Nkosana shakes his head.

"I was six years old Mqhele," he says.

They know what he is thinking, they are thinking it too, but they won't talk about it further, not with Sbani and Sisekelo here.

They watch the man disappear back into the sugarcane and then they all cross the river back to the Quantum.

"This is why I prefer prison. I wasn't related to anyone there and there were no crazy twin stories," Mhlaba says.
The only way forward now is to go back to Margate.

Tony

SHE USED TO be that girl with many friends. She was the glue who kept the friendships intact. She was always the one organising a party, a small get-together, a surprise birthday dinner for this friend or that.

Her flat in Killarney was the popular hangout. It was the place where they got drunk and slept over. It was the place where they gathered when one of them needed an intervention, or if one of them needed to vent about their life or whatever other things women discuss when they are ratchet.

But that was a long time ago.

She's not sure how but she kept losing them one by one.

It must have been at the time when she was a depressed newlywed and didn't want to talk or see anyone, or maybe it was because her life changed, her lifestyle changed.

It hadn't been a big deal to her that she wasn't as social or popular as she used to be until this trip came. There were no limitations. She could take as many of her friends as she wanted. They could spend as much money as they wished.

That was an instruction from her husband. He said go there and have

as much fun as you can, buy whatever you want and do whatever you want, as long as it will take your mind off things.

Normally it would make her happy, but this is different. She feels guilty being here, being away when she's needed most.

After going through the list of her once-close friends in her head, she realised she hadn't talked to most of them for a while. That's why she couldn't just ring them up and invite them on a long holiday as if they didn't have lives.

In the end, she was left with only Rato.

Rato kept in touch even when she was distant. She's that type, the attached type.

She met Rato in her previous life as a flight attendant. They became close friends, so much so that she feels comfortable talking to her about her problems.

Rato's advice to her was to let things be.

She said instead of looking for a mother she doesn't know, she should just accept that she was meant to be who she is.

But Gugu is stubborn. Gugu does what Gugu wants to do.

They talked about it extensively on the day they arrived here eight days ago.

After that they focused on being happy, on doing whatever they could for fun in this little island that has a population far less than that of Joburg alone.

The beach, the food, the booze and the comfort of walking around half naked with no shame because nobody knows you enough to judge you was heaven.

Their first stop was Tsarabanjina, which was great for the first two days as they were looking for peace and quiet. But then it got creepy because it had only one lodge and the only mode of transport was a boat.

On one drunken episode they started talking about what they'd do if there was a tsunami or a terrorist attack or something like that.

The picture wasn't a happy one and so the next morning they packed

and moved on to Anjavy. Their stay there lasted for three days. It wasn't about the place, it was about the fact that nobody spoke English. At least at their previous destination there was one man whose English was horrible, but at least he could pronounce mojito and gin and tonic.

After that, it was time to move to civilisation so Antana-narivo it was. They had hoped to find at least a Chicken Licken since looking at the map of Africa, one would believe they could actually swim from Durban to Madagascar but nope, not even a Nando's. It was still good though, they were still having fun until two days ago.

Now she doesn't know what to do with herself. Madagascar wasn't exactly on her list of desired places, but she likes testing Nqoba so she did exactly that, asked him to change the trip from Italy to here and he did exactly that. That was when she should have become suspicious about how desperate he wanted her to go away, and maybe she was, but what's money in the Zulu family? What are un-refundable flight tickets and a week-long five star hotel accommodation? Nothing really, especially to Nqoba.

She's here having lunch alone, which she had to guess because everything is written in French.

She thinks about calling home again but Hlangu isn't exactly missing her.

Her plan was to find a health spa and spend the whole afternoon being pampered. She needs to trim her eyebrows too. For her that's a must every week. When she was a young girl everybody teased her about the 'bush' on her face. Her eyebrows are so thick they meet in the middle.

Others said it was cute but some made fun of her. She thinks they make her look like a freak, an unusual creature of some sort. She doesn't like them.

Now that she thinks about it, that should have been the first sign that she wasn't one of the Myezas because something as unusual as joined eyebrows had to be genetic. It had to be a family thing.

But she had no reason to suspect she wasn't one of them. They loved

her. Even the aunt who turned against her adored her when she was a child. Something changed and she's not sure when and why.

After she pays for whatever it was that she was fed here, which tasted like fish and fruit in one bowl, she decides to make a stop in the ladies' room to powder her nose.

With Gugu, it's important to look good. She doesn't understand women who don't wear make-up or don't do their hair. Why be natural when you can be supernatural?

She thinks that's why she gets along so well with Zandile. Before her she felt like an outcast, like those two women Hlomu and Xolie were judging her for wanting to look her best all the time.

And besides, they had no idea what it was like being married to Nqoba at that time. She had to do whatever it took to keep him and since she doesn't do the domestic wife thing, the trophy thing was her strength.

If being the 'bright young thing' on his arm was what it was going to take to keep him, then that's what she was prepared to be.

When she looks back at it now, she realises she lost herself during that time.

Maybe that's why her friends shunned her, she had become someone they didn't recognise. She'd become a weakling, a powerless somebody.

She stops and looks. She might be in a foreign land but she's definitely sure she's seen this face before.

She waits, hoping he'll raise his head but he doesn't move, although she's sure he saw her. She thinks about walking past but changes her mind and goes to sit at his table. He's alone with just a glass of water in front of him.

"Hi," she says.

He looks very uncomfortable.

"I think I've seen you before," she says.

He's still looking down at the table.

"I'm Gugu. I'm from South Africa," she says, putting her handbag on the table.

She's not shy, naturally. She'll talk to anyone and everyone about anything, including a stranger in a foreign country who obviously has no interest in small talk, judging by how he hasn't said a word since she sat down in front of him.

She assumes he's shy, or that maybe he recognises her from the media. But she won't leave until she finds out where she knows him from.

"Hi," he says, finally.

She squints her eyes, as if trying to figure something out. She knows now that she's right about seeing him before because that 'Hi' has no French accent.

"You look familiar," she says.

"Oh, really?" he says.

He didn't mean to say that but he's in a difficult position right now. This is not supposed to be happening. This is a big deal. He's supposed to make sure it doesn't happen.

"Yes, I know you from somewhere. I'm Gugu," she says again.

He doesn't respond. But now that he's talking, she's even more curious about him.

"I'm here on holiday. I'm supposed to be with my friend but she's abandoned me," she says.

He's not sure if he should run out of here or try to keep calm. Running will make her suspicious. But also, taking this conversation any further is a risk. It's bad enough that he didn't want to come here in the first place. They were supposed to go to Italy but well... here they are.

"A glass of white wine, please," she says to the waiter.

This means she's not planning to leave this table any time soon.

The waiter stands still.

"*Un verre de vin, s'il vous plait,*" the man says.

The waiter nods and walks away.

She's smiling. She looks impressed.

"You speak French?" she asks.

He shakes his head and says: "A little."

She shrugs.

"So where are you from? I'm from Joburg. No, actually I'm from KwaZulu-Natal but I live in Joburg now."

He nods but doesn't say anything.

"Where are you from? I know you're from back home," she says.

The best thing right now would be to pretend he's from somewhere as long as it's not 'back home' but what the heck? This woman is hellbent on getting him talking.

"I'm from Mpumalanga," he says.

There's a wide smile on her face, as if she's just found water in a desert after being stranded for days.

"Wow! You have no idea how good this feels. Are you here alone? Because I could use a friend right now. I'm sooo bored," she says.

She's speaking Zulu now.

Being 'friends' with her is not an option. As soon as she lets him go, he will disappear. He's even thinking of taking the first flight back home.

"You haven't told me your name," she says.

That's another problem.

"I'm Tony," he says.

Tony is the last thing he'd want to be called. Hell, he doesn't even have an English name. He saw the name on the badge worn by a waiter who's just walked past their table.

"Nice," she says as the glass of white wine is placed in front of her.

He shakes his head when the same waiter asks him if he'd like something to drink. The sooner he gets out of here, the better.

He's never sat across her like this, not this close. He's never even talked to her before, but he knows she talks a lot and used to have a bubbly personality.

He also knows she won't let him get out of here, not when she's bored and needs a victim to cure her boredom. She's used to getting whatever she wants and right now what she wants is company.

"What brings you to Madagascar?" she asks.

He's been cooking up an answer to this question in his head since she sat here. He knew it was coming.

"I'm visiting. My brother works for the South African embassy here."

She nods and takes another sip from her glass. She's going to keep asking questions until this turns into a conversation.

She's seen him before, she's sure of that and he's just crossing fingers that she doesn't remember where and when.

"You said I looked familiar. That's because I know you," he says.

Suddenly she seems uncomfortable with what he just said.

"I used to work at the airport," he says.

She looks relieved now.

"I'm surprised you recognised me," he says.

She frowns.

"We weren't exactly on the same par. Flight attendants were... what can I say? Out of reach."

She smiles briefly and rolls her eyes.

"We felt small when you all walked past us in high heels and make-up and smelling all expensive..."

She laughs out loud.

He knows this is improper but he catches himself staring at her laughing. She looks happy. He hasn't seen her happy in a long time. Being here must be making her happy.

"Trust me, it wasn't like that. Do you still work there?" she says.

"No, I left a long time ago."

He gets a little worried when it strikes him that she might just ask him what he does for a living now. He's still torn between saying he is in some kind of business and whatever other lie will reach his mind first.

But she doesn't ask. Instead, she answers a call and rolls her eyes after a short conversation.

"It's my friend. We came here together to have fun and the next thing, her psycho girlfriend shows up. I don't even know where that broke-ass psycho got the money to come here..."

She stops and takes another sip.

"She's with a stalker, that crazy type who follows her everywhere, especially if she's with me because there is this crazy idea that..." she stops, only to catch him watching her with admiration.

He looks down at the half-empty glass of water in front of him. He's not sure what is happening to him because she is his least favourite. He's always found her a bit... shallow if that's the right word.

"Anyway, I was telling you about my friend, but it's all right. I don't want to bore you with my..."

"No, no, no, continue," he says.

Strange, not so long ago he wanted to run out of here.

"Her partner, the annoying one, has this idea that..." she stops, as if trying to find a perfect way to put this story.

"My husband has brothers and they are kind of like an obsession for many women. So the girl doesn't want her hanging out with me because she might just run off with one of them and..." she stops when he laughs out loud.

She's a little lost because she doesn't understand how a man can find this funny.

"I'm serious. You probably don't know my husband or his brothers but that's how it is. So she showed up here. I don't know why because it was meant to be just the two of us. Now I'm all alone on an island because they've turned this holiday into theirs and I'm the third wheel. And they are doing all of this with my husband's money," she says and rolls her eyes again.

He laughs.

She's noticed how he tries to hold back every time he laughs, as if it's wrong to find her funny.

"So your husband lets you spend money on your friends? Just like that?" he asks.

She waves her hand dismissively.

"He has more money than he knows what to do with. I can spend it

on whatever I want," she says.

He's listening to her and he wonders why she keeps referring to it as 'his money'.

"I see. How did you meet him? Your husband," he asks.

She laughs and flags the waiter to come to her.

"He was a passenger," she says.

He's shocked.

"Don't look at me like that," she says, raising one hand.

The waiter is standing next to her.

"Say that again, the thing you said earlier in French," she says.

He knows what she means and he can't help laughing at how unpredictable and free spirited she is right now.

The waiter leaves after he orders another white wine.

"You don't drink?" she asks.

He shakes his head. She frowns and looks at her watch.

"I always tell my friends, never, ever date a man who doesn't drink. You know why?"

"I don't but I know you're about to tell me."

He's now convinced that she's not as bad as he thought she was.

"Anyway, the problem with men who don't drink is that they are intense and too cautious. They basically don't have a life because they don't do the 'going out with the boys' thing and so their life revolves around you. You become their hobby. The worst thing about them is that they remember everything. I mean, what woman wants to be with a man who remembers when her period is every month?"

He has no idea what she's talking about but it's fascinating.

She raises one finger and says, "They are also too attached to their mothers."

He laughs. He can't help it.

"What's wrong with a man loving his mother?" He's still laughing.

"There's nothing wrong with a man loving his mother, but there's everything wrong with a man who lets his mother live her life through

him. I'm just saying," she says, raising both her arms in a somewhat defensive gesture.

Their conversation is flowing. They have chemistry. He would never have thought...

He gives in and orders a double shot of whiskey.

She folds her arms and looks at him.

"Since you've made me realise why I'm still single, I might as well start making amends," he says.

She's now well aware of his sarcastic nature but she decides to let him get away with it.

"Expensive alcohol?" she asks, raising her eyebrows.

He's not the expensive alcohol type but there is no proper beer here so what else can he do? He would tell her the truth about where he learned about expensive whisky but that's not an option. Or he could make up a story but he's tired of lying.

He throws in exactly three pieces of ice, lifts the glass, moves it around his hand three times and drinks it all up at once.

When he looks at her, she has a frown on her face. He freezes.

"You've just reminded me of someone," she says and flags the waiter again.

He's getting worried. Three glasses of wine in just over an hour is not good. He's relieved when she asks for iced water.

"Why are you still single? You're not bad looking."

That's a tough question. He thinks about saying work takes up all his time, but then he'll have to come up with another lie about what he does for a living.

"Because I didn't drink until now. Hopefully my luck is about to change after this drink," he says, placing the empty glass on the table.

"When are you going back home?" he asks.

He expects another long answer but all he sees is a hard face.

He immediately regrets asking this question, more so because he shouldn't even be talking to her.

"There's too much to deal with back home. It's like going back to pain. That pain is the reason I came here in the first place," she says and looks down at her hands.

He wants to tell her that everything will be all right. He wishes he could tell her what he knows but it's not his place. Being here having this conversation with her is not his place.

It could mean the end of him, he knows that. But she needs someone to talk to and he's here.

"I think that... I think whatever it is, you can handle it," he says.

She's startled. She met this man less than two hours ago and now he's telling her this? If only he knew how deep her problems are. If only he knew what was happening to her family.

"I'm just saying that you look like a strong woman, like someone who can rise above anything."

He means it. He believes it because he knows what she's been through, the worst being that giving birth in prison episode.

"I don't know about that," she says.

It would be good if she didn't go into detail because it looks like she has the upper hand in this conversation. It looks like she's able to reach all his corners.

"Is Tony your second name?" she asks.

He looks a little lost and then he remembers the lie he told.

"It's my main name."

She looks at him and then at the envelope just next to his cell phone on top of the table. He closes his eyes when he realises what just happened.

"It's a beautiful name. What does it mean?" she asks.

He knows she's not talking about 'Tony'. He thinks about turning the envelope over but what good would it do now? She has already read what's written on it.

Inside the envelope are his hotel keys. He's booked in a room across the passage from hers.

He's never been asked by anyone to explain his name before.

"It's... how do I explain this?" he asks and leans back on the chair.

But what harm would it do if he just tells her the truth? They'll probably never see each other again.

"Have you ever heard of an echo?" he asks

She looks at him like he's just asked her a dumb question before she nods.

"Back in the rural areas where the land is open and the air is fresh, that's where you can hear an echo without being indoors."

He's lost her there.

"Okay, if you stand outside, preferably on a hill and shout as loudly as you can, there'll be an echo. It sounds exactly like you but it's far. It's like hearing yourself speak outside yourself, like your soul speaking," he says.

Gugu is many things. She's smart but she's not deep, she never has been. That's why to her, this explanation is as disturbing as it is interesting.

"Inkangala is that place. It's that place where the echo comes from," he says.

"We used to do that when we were kids, face the forest and shout at the top of our lungs like it's some kind of competition to hear whose voice made the furthest echo."

"It's a beautiful name. Nkangala Mchunu," she says.

How could he forget to remove that envelope? How could he?

Her phone rings. She looks at it and smiles.

"It's my husband," she says, blushes and answers it.

This is his chance to get out of here, but the call is brief.

"We must hang out again. I'm still here for a few more days," she says.

His plan is to go to his room and pack, take the first flight out of here and go straight to Nqoba's house to explain himself. What just happened here is beyond crossing the line.

"There you are," someone says behind him.

He turns around to see a woman with long, thick dreadlocks. It's clear she's not planning to join them at this table judging by the way she's looking at him.

He knows Rato, he's been following them around since they got here.
"Where's your third breast?" Gugu asks. She's talking to the friend.
The 'third breast' would be the possessive lesbian. How do women
come up with these things?

"Sleeping."

She still has that mean look on her face.

Gugu stands up.

"I'll see you again. We're staying at the same hotel anyway," she says
and leaves.

It's that bloody envelope! It had the hotel's logo on it.

"And then?" Rato asks.

"What?"

"Who is that?" Rato wants to know.

"Tony from Mpumalanga. He's nice."

"You can't be entertaining Tonys from Mpumalanga. Your husband
hangs out in hostels and taxi ranks," Rato says.

"He's the one who told me to have fun and do whatever I want."

"Yes, he said go and have fun. He didn't say go be a ho," Rato says.

Where on earth is this conversation going? Where are they going?

"You left your other phone in my room. Someone called Ntombi
phoned," Rato says.

Hlomu

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT the way he looks into her eyes, something beautiful and warm and sincere about the depth of his eyes when he looks at her.

There's something, another thing, about the way he watches her sleep, something deep and intense and dangerously protective.

At first he thought it was her physical beauty that messed with his mind. Her simplicity and elegance on the outside that strangely fits so perfectly with the strong and fearless character she is inside.

He loves her. He has from the beginning and he's centred his whole being around her, so when he needs to hurt someone, he hurts her.

"Your problem is that when it comes to Hlomu, you hold back. You treat her like glass, like she isn't capable of making mistakes and hurting you like you hurt her. She does shit and you pull her to your chest and kiss her on the forehead, that's what you do. That's why you explode," Qhawe once said to him.

He also once told him to stop trying to make up for what he did early in their relationship.

"You beat her. She forgave you and came back. Stop trying to

overcompensate," he said.

That was the morning of the day he beat her into a miscarriage. He too didn't see it coming. He had sworn to himself that he'd never lay a finger on her as long as he lives. He wasn't going to beat her when he heard her and her brother coming in, chatting and laughing like they always do when they are together. But also, he wasn't going to ask her why she ignored his calls earlier that day when he was sitting with his knees shaking in Dr Masetla's office, waiting to hear what was wrong with his left arm and if it was going to kill him.

He hid that from her, the arm that would be so stiff sometimes that he wouldn't be able to hold a towel with his hand.

He'd spend more time in his sanctuary with his guitar next to him because he couldn't even play it. He'd sneak into bed when she was already sleeping and if she wanted, he'd make love to her and bear the pain.

He wanted to tell her at that moment because he was scared as he waited for Dr Masetla to come out and tell him something.

It wasn't anything bad, that's what the doctor said when he came out. It was just a troubled muscle that could be fixed with patches and pills.

He was relieved and all he wanted was to go home to his wife and kids.

He was going to hug and kiss her the moment she entered their bedroom, and then something came. He still doesn't know what it was but he knows it wasn't Hlomu who brought it.

He needed to act on it and she was there.

He was sure she was going to leave him when he placed her on their bed with a packet of painkillers next to it. He smoked, left the bedroom and came back when she was asleep to clean up the blood.

He knew she was going to leave, she told him that when she took him back those years ago after he beat her the first time, and he knew she meant it.

But he wasn't going to go crazy and drive across the country to beg her this time because he knew she had no place to run to. And so he did

the leaving, drove past three tollgates across Mpumalanga.

It wasn't that he had thought about her or that he still felt something for her. It was that he needed to get rid of the anger he harboured against her and the hatred he knew she had for him.

She didn't flinch when he banged on that door. She knew his wrath and could feel it coming from afar.

"You came in person? I thought you had left this to your brothers," she said.

Honestly, they could have just gone their separate ways and never seen each other again for the rest of their lives. That's what he thought when he met Hlomu but Nokzola wasn't just another girl. She had taken time to get to know him and knew where to poke him.

Their relationship wasn't always that bad. It was often great.

They lived together for two years and he also hoped that committing by moving in together would improve things between them, that maybe he needed to try harder and open himself up a little more.

He changed a little, cared a little more and tried to meet his end of the bargain.

He knew she wasn't a bad person but he believed he was the bad one. That's why he brought out the worst in her.

She was temperamental, very possessive and controlling by nature. And that was the biggest problem because Mqhele cannot be controlled.

He was unfaithful too and in return she attacked and vandalised and stalked.

When she left, he thought he'd give it a few days before going to get her back. He decided to enjoy being alone and free at least for a month before going to beg, which wasn't going to be too hard because he knew she'd take him back anyway.

But on the third week, just as he was enjoying what was left of his time by himself, a girl appeared at Bree and changed everything.

That was the end of Nokzola or whatever he thought he had with her. He decided there and then.

On that afternoon, when Hlomu invited him to her flat and cooked him a meal, an SMS came in just as he drove out of her gate.

It was Nokzola. She was telling him they were going to have a child. She wanted to see him the next morning. She had forgiven him. They had to work things out. She knew he wanted to be a father and she had decided she was ready too.

She was going to come back to his house and they would start over. All his faults from the past were forgiven.

He read the SMS twice but didn't respond.

He didn't sleep at all that night. It was a tough battle, one that had him tossing and turning and going out for cigarettes until his alarm went off the next morning.

When he drove out of his gate he wasn't sure where exactly he was going until he stopped at the traffic light on Nasrec Road. He was torn between two things: taking the M1 or N1. Going to Berea or Honeydew.

He turned right and took the M1 North.

She didn't resist when he kissed her.

And on that night, years later while his wife lay bruised and battered on their bed, he found himself standing on Nokzola's doorstep, the resentment and rage in her eyes still as visible as it was when he last saw her at that restaurant in Durban.

The old him would have slapped her for coming up to him and disrespecting his wife like that, but he thought he was done with that life. That the Mqhele who knew only one way of solving things was gone.

She did not let him in because she feared what he would do to her. But she had always been the type who would put up a fight with just her eyes and facial expressions.

"What are you doing here Mqhele?" she asked.

She already knew that he knew there was no child. His brothers had done enough digging and had reported back to him.

"Why didn't you tell me the truth?" he asked, still separated from her by the burglar guard.

The audacity of this man standing at her door, asking her for explanations, as if she owed him any, she thought to herself.

"Why? So you could mess up my life and go on to live your dream? Who humiliated me, Mqhele. You messed with my head, had me stalking some woman like I was crazy. It took me years! Years to let it go because I could not understand what she had that I didn't. Why you looked at her the way you never looked at me. Do you beat her too? Because that's who you are! I don't care about this image that you portray now, you and your brothers. I know exactly who you are!"

She was pushing him, she wanted to bring out the Mqhele she knew but he was still as he was when she opened that door and looked into his eyes.

"I had to live with the guilt Nokzola. All those years I had to live with the guilt of not knowing what the child I thought I had was eating, where he was sleeping and..."

"You chose Hlomu over that child Mqhele. It was your decision."

He raised his hand to stop her from speaking.

"There was a child? Was there ever a child?" he asked.

She laughed and narrowed her eyes at him.

"Yes, there was, for three months or so until I realised it wasn't going to bring you back. Me being excited about being pregnant wasn't even about me, it was about you. I didn't want a child. I realised that, that's why I had an abortion."

She raised her hand this time when he tried to speak.

"Before you start thinking I did it to get back at you, let me tell you something. You leaving me was the best thing that ever happened to me. I did it for myself. It was my body and I wasn't going to carry a child I didn't want, let alone one that could have turned out like you."

She knew she had gotten to him when he dropped his head and looked down at his feet. He did that all the time, seemingly vulnerable before the animal in him came out.

But she knew he couldn't do anything to her, not when there was

nothing between them. A man does not beat up a woman he loves doesn't love or want him.

"Go home to your wife, Mqhele. It's 3am," she said.

He didn't get what he went there for, whatever it was. But he did find closure. He did leave Mpumalanga feeling like he had achieved something, and that thing was the smile of satisfaction on her face. He said she had gotten her revenge, because that was what was going to free him, knowing that they were now even.

He looked into Nokzola's eyes one more time before he walked away. She wasn't Hlomu. Nobody could ever come close to Hlomu. Not loads, not the woman from the petrol garage he fucked in the car a few times and not even his own mother whose memory is a trigger.

He remembered her mother's eyes being tearful sometimes when she looked at him, how she'd take him, only him, to sit with her under that big tree and press his head on her bosom every time he fought with his brothers or became too quiet.

He has never told Hlomu about that visit to Nokzola. He never will. He didn't even when they sat in that cinema in their house where she forced him to reveal truths. And now, after all of that, the beatings, the miscarriage, the affairs and...

"Good morning," he says.

She rubs her eyes, looks up at him, pulls the duvet over her head and turns away from him.

He laughs.

"It's morning, Hlomu."

Normally he doesn't wake her. He lets her sleep until the sun comes out.

He teases her sometimes and says, "Don't worry about the end of the world. It will find you sleeping anyway."

He pulls the duvet but she holds it tighter.

"Leave me alone," she whines.

He rolls over to her side of the bed and pulls the duvet so he can see

her face. "Mqhele, it's still dark outside. Why are you waking me?" He puts his hand on his cheek and looks at her with a smile on his

face. "Because I can't sleep and you're snoring," he says. She rolls her eyes. She knows she doesn't snore but she knows he won't let her go back to sleep.

"What time is it?" she asks, trying to find her phone in the dark.

"It's 3am," he says, looking down at her face with his hand still on his cheek.

She wants to be mad at him but she knows it won't help. This is one of his moments. She gives up and pushes the duvet away.

"Okay, so what is it? What do you want to do?" He doesn't speak, just stares. She folds her arms across her chest and stares back.

"Nothing. I was just missing you," he says.

She doesn't say anything. She just looks at him like she's trying to read his mind. She's waiting for him to say something.

He doesn't. Instead he touches one of her braids and rolls it around his finger.

There was a time where he would sit and watch her sleep and wonder if he was going to kill her one day.

It wasn't that she infuriated him to a point where he'd lose control. No, it wasn't her. It was him fearing his own masculinity and the rage he had been in denial about all his life until the day she came and opened him up.

She doesn't know half the things but she knows his heart and that scares the shit out of him.

There was Mboni, there was Mahlubi, the Greek and all the other things that went over her head, and now there is this and his children's names are at the centre of it.

There are things he can overlook, secrets he can keep from her but he knows he has to choose them wisely because now it's not about protecting

her, it's about fixing what's broken.

Before he woke her, he watched her sleep with her cheek resting on her hand. It's always been like that if he isn't in bed and she can't rest her head on his chest.

He watched her and wondered what he would say to her when she opened her eyes and asked him where he had been for three whole days.

He's going to have to lie again, but it's not that easy this time, not when their children are involved and not when all he needs is for her to hold him and help him come up with a solution because if anyone could come up with a plan, it is Hlomu.

But he can't get her involved, not now, because all this is going to cause panic and they can't have that.

He thought about waking her and telling her everything, but then he thought about that look on her face that says you are complicating my life, again. So he slipped into bed and wrapped his arms around her from behind.

He has not said a word about what happened in Nsikeni or that they are leaving again on Monday morning to go to Margate. It's a little hard to explain because where do you start explaining to your wife that unless you go back to fix your father's mistakes, her children could be in danger.

Mqhele, as much as he's failed to avoid it sometimes, has always tried to keep Hlomu out of these things.

There was a point where being with her was the most normal place he had ever been to. But he dragged her down with him and he hates that.

Now he's here, in their bed in the house that she asked for, holding her and hoping that at least maybe the life he has been able to afford her is enough to make her stand by him through and through.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks, turning to lie on his side so he can face her.

"I'm just thinking about how far we've come and how much I like where we are now. It's great that we can walk around freely without anyone trying to kill us," she says.

He sighs.

He is not going to tell her that now it isn't the taxi industry or Mbuba's enemies who are chasing them. It is dead people and the fact that he has buried half of him is buried somewhere in the yard in Mbuba.

He'd like to tell her about the man from eMaweleni and all the things she said, but he knows his wife. She's going to want to get involved and she might just drive to the place herself and tell those people where to get off.

"I like where we are too," he lies. They are nowhere near where she thinks they are.

He wraps his one arm around her and she turns to lay her head on his chest.

"I still love you, like the way I did the first time you got naked in my shower," he says.

They sold the Naturena house to that boy she met at a petrol station in the middle of nowhere when she was running away from his cheating.

They sold it to him for next to nothing and only because he wanted to prove his mother from that informal settlement to a proper home.

The kid worked for them for about a year before moving on to another job. He never really liked Mqhele and he didn't hide it.

"I miss the Naturena house sometimes. I wish we had kept it, for our kids, just so they'd see where it all started. And the Berea flat too," she says.

He kisses her forehead.

"We had so little then," he says.

"No, we had so much. We had everything we needed, including that I saw you every day, a lot," she says.

She knows he wants to talk about something, just not the thing they are supposed to be talking about.

The last time they had a deep talk was when he explained the Mhlaba story to her. She should have been shocked but she wasn't, and she was honest about her feelings that she doesn't want him in her house. She may be the mother-hen of this family who accommodates all family strays but

with Mhlaba, she is not going to do it.

Mqhele understood but he knows there will come a time when Mhlaba and Nandi will have to be fully blended into this family.

"Gaba says that kid came out of hospital today," she says.

They know.

The worst thing that could have happened was if the boy had died. At least now they are just going to pay his family and hope they never hear anything about him again.

The problem is Phakeme. He refuses to go to therapy and he sees nothing wrong with what he did.

"Whatever you do, make sure you don't pass it on to the kids. Make sure they never find out who you are," she says

Her words cut deep but he doesn't say anything.

"I'm going to shower," she says, already jumping out of bed.

But he pulls her back to the bed and kneels over her.

His knees are on either side of her legs. He cups her face with both hands and looks down into her eyes.

"Don't ever force me to live without you, Hlomu," he says.

His tone is low but firm.

She doesn't answer, probably because she doesn't know where this is coming from, so suddenly.

He doesn't move his eyes. He bends over and wraps his arms around her. He kisses her neck, chest, breasts and all the way down until he pushes up her nightie and opens her legs wide. She makes the first sound when his lips touch her clit.

She finds his hand somewhere on the bed and holds it tight. It's warm. She says his hands are always warm.

He grips her thighs tighter when she can't stay still anymore. She can't stop moaning. She's trying to find his shoulders, she wants to pull him up.

"Mqhele."

He doesn't answer her. He only raises his head when she screams out loud.

"Yes, baby," he says.

His is in her face now.

She can't speak.

"What is it? Talk to me," he whispers.

She can feel him touching her but he's not coming in. She grabs his waist and tries to push him in but he fights her.

"Tell me what you want, Hlomu," he whispers.

"Please."

"Please what?" he asks. He won't take his eyes off hers.

"Please, Mqhele."

He wants her to beg and that's what she's doing.

"I love you," he whispers.

He's inside her before she can say it back.

She wraps her legs around his waist. He is doing her slowly, very slowly. He knows what this does to her. It kills all her strength and she comes up just lying there when every part of her body gives up, and then he does whatever he wants with her.

"Shhh," he whispers when she screams louder and louder. It's his breathing and his arms under her head and his eyes on hers that just kill her. He shuts her up with a kiss every time she screams.

Her toes are curling. It's coming.

Her stops and watches her. Her nails are digging in.

Her orgasm comes and takes over all of her body. She trembles and collapses.

He waits a few seconds and starts moving again when she opens her eyes.

He moves faster this time, faster and more aggressively. She feels his grip tightening on her hair and she holds him tighter. The moaning gets louder and louder. He presses his forehead on hers and clenches his teeth together just as she feels the warmth inside her.

I know what he just did. He made love to her the same way he did their first time.

He reaches for his phone on the pedestal. It rang three times but he wasn't going to answer it, not in the middle of making passionate love to his wife.

"It was Nqoba calling. I have to go," he says.

"Go where? It's 4am, Mqhele."

"He can't reach Gugu." That's all he says as he jumps out of bed.

Of course he can't reach her. It's the small hours of the morning and she's on an island, probably too drunk and having too much fun to be thinking about the husband who has caused her more pain than happiness.

Nqobile

"YOU CAME HOME? I thought you'd be on a flight across Africa by now."

He flicks the light quickly and looks around the room, eyes wide. This is not happening! He opens his mouth but closes it again without saying a word.

"I bet you've sent a whole army out to find me," she says.

Something about her, about the way she's speaking is creepy. The fact that she was sitting in the dark, alone in her own house, is making him uncomfortable.

"Gug..."

"Shut the fuck up!" she snaps.

Shock! She's sitting on top of the kitchen counter. He looks at her from head to toe before his eyes get stuck on her left hand. She's holding something and he's trying to figure out what it is.

"How did you...? When?"

She doesn't answer. Instead she reaches for something behind her.

"Gugu!"

"Stay where you are Nqoba!" she shouts.

He comes towards her anyway. She points it at him. He stops and raises his arms.

I have never, and I mean never, seen Nqoba fearful. This is the first time, ever.

She looks at the piece of paper in her hand and then looks at him. "Sit down," she says, pointing him to the floor with the gun she's holding.

He does as he's told.

Except for the light in the kitchen where Gugu is sitting on top of the counter, the house is dark and empty. She looks at him, at the piece of paper in her hand and then at him again. He wants to speak but the words are not coming out.

The Nqoba I know would have snatched that gun and beaten the crap out of whoever was pointing it at him. But this is his wife and Nqoba, whom he resented yet still fucked.

"You know, I always knew there was something. You said you had told me everything that night. I thought you had opened up fully but now I know you were still lying to me Nqobizitha."

He clears his throat.

"All this time! All this time Nqoba, you were playing with my mind, making me believe that I had no reason to go out and find out who I am. You discouraged me every time, acting like you were concerned, that you were trying to protect me when, in fact, you were trying to protect yourself," she says and looks at the paper again.

"What's that in your...?"

She points the gun at him.

"Shut up!" she screams.

He shuts up but his eyes are still on her left hand. He's more worried about the mysterious paper than the gun pointed at him.

"Where did you get the gun?"

"Jesus Nqobizitha!"

He's speaking softly.

It's clear Gugu is serious about wanting him to be quiet.

"I married a criminal, so you asking me where I got a gun is a stupid question," she says.

He doesn't speak.

Her feet are dangling in the air, just as they always do when he lifts her up.

She looks at him sitting down there, quietly, for a while. Now and then he looks like he's about to say something, but stops when their eyes meet.

"Tell me about Nqobile," she says.

There's fear in his eyes.

"Tell me about her. What did she look like? Did she have a sharp nose?" she asks.

He doesn't answer.

"Did she have thick eyebrows?" she asks.

And then she rolls her eyes and says, "Of course my eyebrows are always trimmed but how tall was she? Was she thin too? Because this picture here says she was short and thin and had thick eyebrows. She had a sharp nose too."

His eyes are on the floor. It is clear he has now realised what that piece of paper is.

"She said Nqobile looked like her grandfather, as in her mother's father. She said it was strange, really strange that a girl would look like her grandfather but that's how it always was in her family. It was almost like in your family, where everyone looks alike," she says and stops. She looks at the gun in her hand.

"It turns out you don't just look alike but you help each other too. All of you, your wives and every other person I've met through you. They all helped you destroy my life. They all helped you build this lie that I have been living."

"Leave them out of this Gugu."

She throws the piece of paper at him. It hits him on the face and lands on his lap.

"Open it," she says, pointing at it with her eyes.

He hesitates but she's staring. He picks it up slowly and looks at the picture.

It's Nqobile. She looks young, in her teens he thinks, because when he met her, she was older than this.

He stares at it for a while and for a moment his mind wanders. He doesn't have a picture of her, not even one. This is the first time he's seeing her, or a memory of her, since the day she died.

He comes back to his senses when Gugu clears her throat. He looks up at her.

"It's not what you think," he says.

But he is not convincing, probably because he's not sure what she's thinking right now.

"It's not what I think Nqobizitha?"

He's quiet.

"Do you love me? Have you ever loved me in all these years? Who am I to you, Baba'kaShlangu? Who am I?" she asks.

She sounds more pained than angry now.

"You're my wife."

She bites her lower lip, probably to contain her anger, or to stop herself from saying something.

"You are Gugu. You're my wife. You're Mama'kaShlangu."

Their eyes lock for a moment. She drops her eyes. Tears fall from them.

"Sit down!" she shouts when he attempts to stand up.

He puts the picture down on the floor.

"How did you meet her? Tell me how you met," she says.

He stares ahead of him, at the stove at the far end of the kitchen. It's a red gas stove. It cost an arm and a leg but Gugu wanted it. He knew she didn't want it for cooking and she was honest enough to tell him that it

would fit in well with the kitchen cupboards. The stove is the only thing she has ever purchased for this kitchen.

She gets whatever she wants, whenever she wants it.

He never had anything to offer Nqobile but she was happy. He was happy too. They were happy having nothing together.

He'd be lying if he said he wasn't looking for her in Gugu at first. He didn't find her, he found Gugu, and he loves her. But that would be hard

to explain now, not with a gun to his head.

"She worked at a house in Winchester Hills," he says and stops.

She stares.

"Is that why we live in the same area?" she asks. And then she remembers that it was she who chose this house.

Nqobizitha ignores that question and keeps talking.

"She was still young. She'd just turned 20 and came here to Joburg looking for work. So she met a lady who introduced her to this man, a

Greek man who lived alone in Winchester Hills, a rich man," he stops, as if thinking hard.

"The man needed a housekeeper so she took the job. She thought she'd work there while saving money to go to tertiary. She wanted to study..." he

stops and looks up as if trying to remember something.

"Biochemistry, I think that's what it was called," he says.

He looks at her feet, they are still dangling.

"I met her at a friend's house. No, actually it wasn't a friend. It was a man I worked for, a taxi owner. She knew someone there, that's why she

was at the house. So when she had to leave, my boss asked me to drive her home."

He stops and looks at her.

Her facial expression hasn't changed, making him wonder if telling this story won't set her off even more.

"I'm not sure if I was interested there and then but she was a woman and I was a man and it was just the two of us in that car so I asked her out. She said no."

He stops, pulls out a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, pulls out a small lighter from the pack and lights a cigarette.

"I let it go and didn't see her for weeks after that. I forgot about her. I had too much going on and chasing after a woman who obviously looked down on me, judging by the house I dropped her off at, was not among my priorities," he says and rubs off the ash that just landed on his pants.

He expects to hear a "continue" but she's not speaking, just sitting with her feet floating in the air, her ankles crossed.

"I forgot about her," he says and puffs out smoke.

He's silent. She's waiting. His phone rings. He switches it off and places it on the floor next to him. She looks a little shocked by this.

"I bumped into her again about three months later. But this time she needed me. She was stuck in town. I decided to give her a ride because I knew her and I wasn't going to leave a woman stranded. Anything could have happened to her.

"She was nicer that day. She even asked me about my surname and all that. But she never told me where she was from or why she came to Joburg. She avoided that subject and I thought it was because she didn't really know me. And besides, I figured she was being nice only because she needed something from me."

He looks at the cigarette butt in his hand and then looks up at her as if asking something. She doesn't flinch, so he aims and throws it to the kitchen sink. It goes in.

Normally Gugu would go mad. She hates cigarettes and the smell of nicotine, especially in the house.

"When we arrived at that house, where she worked, she invited me in. She said the owner was away on business. He was away most of the time.

"I accepted the invitation and when I walked in, I was stunned. The house was nothing like I had ever seen before. I thought it was impossible for anyone to own a house that big," he says and looks around him, at his own house.

"She noticed and I think... I think she was laughing at me.

"She said, 'I don't know where this old man gets his money but I know it's not legal.'"

"We both laughed at that. She took me on a tour and all the while I was worried that the man would walk in and find me there and call the cops or something. But she assured me that would not happen, that she always knew when he was coming back.

"There were paintings all over the walls. I know now that paintings are expensive and stuff. I didn't know that then. They were all meaningless to me.

"She poured me brandy and gave me a cigar to smoke. I thought it was funny that she was doing that to the poor old man. She was also laughing, like a naughty child." He stops and rubs his hands together.

Suddenly his face is hard.

"I think that's what drew me to her, the fact that she was daring and uncontrollable. She was naughty and impulsive. She loved testing limits and shocking people. She was addictive," he stops.

Gugu has put the gun down next to her on the counter. He's only realising that now and for a moment he thinks about standing up and grabbing it. But I see his eyes and body relaxing again.

He sits still. He wants to do this.

"I stayed longer than I should have in that house. We had sex on that very same day," he stops and smiles briefly.

He really wants to do this. He's never told this story to anyone, not after she died.

Gugu has been quiet throughout. The look on her face is not giving anything away about what she's thinking or how she feels.

"I had someone I was seeing at that time. Obviously, I mean, I was only 22 years old. Do you know what she did? She found her and terrorised the crap out of her.

"To be honest with you, I couldn't keep up with Nqobile. She was like a rocket. You never knew what to expect from her. We were married within two months. That was one of her episodes. She told me to accompany

her somewhere and the next thing I knew, we were at Home Affairs. She looked at me and said, 'Prove that you love me by marrying me now.'

He stops. He lights another cigarette. All the while, his eyes are on the red gas stove.

"She was just..." he stops and puts his hands over his head.

"She was just... her craziness was fascinating and consuming. I couldn't say no to her, not ever. I just pulled out my ID and we got married, just like that, without anyone knowing. When I asked her about lobola, she dismissed me, saying we could deal with that later."

Gugu looks a little disturbed by all this but she's not about to interact. She didn't come here for that.

"She still stayed at the Winchester Hills house but I had to find my own place and I had always been in small business. I had a trading stall at the rank but I still drove a taxi occasionally, when my boss needed me or when Nkosana needed me to stand in for him.

"So I moved to the township and I started a small tuck-shop. I had to live with Ntsika because he had to go to school and I was operating from home so it made sense."

He throws what's left of the cigarette in the sink again.

"Nqobile came to my place all the time but sometimes I'd be at Winchester Hills when the man was away. One day, out of the blue, she said, 'There's a lot of money in this house.'"

Gugu raises her eyes. Nqoba raises his hand.

"I was already a criminal. She just didn't know about it. I wasn't into anything serious though, just the usual boys will be boys kind of stuff. She showed me where the safe was," he says and looks to his left at his wedding picture hanging on the wall.

He specifically asked that the picture be hung there, just before they moved in.

Gugu loved this house before they even walked in for the viewing. She wanted it and it was not negotiable.

"I dismissed her and laughed it off. If I was going to steal something,

I wasn't going to involve my wife, let alone steal from her employer. She mentioned it twice after that and I dismissed her every time."

He looks at the watch on his wrist. Gugu bought it for him on their first-year anniversary. He was still limping from that Amanda ordeal at that time.

"It was fun. She was fun. She was full of life, but she could also be testing. She was one of those people you'd describe as moody. There were times where it would be difficult for her to even get out of bed. She would not talk to me or anyone for that matter. She'd be angry, really angry.

"It worried me. Actually, it hurt but I loved her. I think I wanted to fix her more than anything. I wanted to be her saviour but in the end I was responsible for her death.

"It took less than a year together before I got really frustrated with her and her behaviour. One minute she'd be too happy and the next she'd be extremely miserable and cold. That's when I found comfort in Mandisa..." he stops.

Soon the sun will come out.

"Mandisa wasn't really my girlfriend. She knew I was married. I was a regular client," he says.

Gugu looks confused. He looks into her eyes, as if trying to tell her something without uttering the words.

"What?"

He nods.

"You were already going to prostitutes at 22 years old Nqoba?" she asks, horrified.

There's a smirk on his face.

"Well, I had already turned 23 when I met her but it wasn't like that. I mean, it wasn't an official transaction kind of thing but..." he stops when he realises there is no explanation he can give that will make sense.

He's also just realised that they are now having a conversation, that she's started to ask questions.

"Anyway, Mandisa was nothing like Nqobile but at that time she was

my distraction, until that thing happened," he says.

His face is hard again.

Gugu looks down at her feet before she starts talking.

"I know what happened after that. But, Nqoba, you know that is not the reason we are here. Why? Why didn't you just walk away when you saw me? Why did you do this to me?" she asks.

He shakes his head.

"You have to believe that I love you Gugu."

She shakes her head in response.

"No, you love the person I remind you of. I had to force you to acknowledge me, Nqoba. Even after we were married, I had to beg you to love me. You don't know this but I got pregnant on purpose because I thought that would make you love me. But instead you hated me even more."

She's emotional again. He takes a deep breath.

"Thank you for that. Thank you for my son," he says.

They had made so much progress from that time but now it seems like they are back where they started. This conversation is almost like that one, the one that happened in their bedroom, in their old house a long time ago. Only this is one more intense and more honest.

"I left Madagascar last night. I took the last flight out. My former colleagues at SAA were able to find space for me at last minute. I left Rato there," she stops.

His face is blank.

It's already morning but they both haven't slept since yesterday so nobody cares to point out that it was actually two days ago.

"I got a WhatsApp message that she got my message that I was looking for her. She was specific that she doesn't have a daughter my age but if I still wanted to see her, we could meet somewhere.

"I thought about telling you but I knew you were going to discourage me. That's why I came back. I was here yesterday afternoon and from the airport, I went straight to Soweto. I didn't even call Zandile.

"When I arrived at Jabulani Mall, she was shocked. She gave me the same look she gave me when we met at that church, as if I was a ghost or something. She opened her handbag and showed me this," she says, pointing at the picture still lying on the floor.

"She said to me, 'This is what I was talking about, look at her. Her name is Nqobile.'

"I froze when I saw that picture and I knew exactly who I was looking at," she says and looks up.

"I told her the story about my mother but in the end it was clear that there was no connection between us. She was not specific about the details but she told me her daughter was about eight years older than me so there is no way that I could be hers. And besides, she disappeared after she passed matric. My mother raised me since I was born. She even had my birth certificate," she stops and sighs.

"I'm thinking that maybe my aunt was lying. Maybe they just wanted to get rid of me and my brother. I don't know but that sounds like a better explanation."

I expected him to jump in and tell her what he knows but he's quiet.

"Can you do two things for me?" she asks.

He nods.

"Anything," he says.

"Find out who I am," she says.

He opens his mouth to say something but stops himself. He rubs his hands together.

"The second thing?" he asks.

She looks him in the eye.

"Let me go Nqoba."

"What?" he says, shocked.

He stands up. She doesn't reach for the gun this time.

"Gugu! No! Anything but that."

She raises one hand to stop him from coming nearer.

"You know, I always thought I'd never leave you. I always thought it

would be difficult because maybe you'd kill me or take my child or... But you know what, Nqoba? I'm leaving you. I don't care what you do. If you decide to kill me, it's fine but that would be you taking your son's mother away from him."

He takes another step.

"You're not leaving me, Gugu."

"I am," she says.

I'm starting to see the dark Nqoba on his face but he's trying really hard to suppress him.

"Bafo," a voice says behind him.

It's Ntsika.

"Nandi has been calling everyone. She's trying to get you a flight to Madagascar. I got worried because your phone is off."

Neither of them saw him coming. He entered the house from the back.

"I got the spare keys from Qhawe," he says, realising that they are lost as to how he got in.

He spots the gun next to Gugu on the counter and looks at Nqoba. Gugu grabs it and places it on her lap.

Ntsika came here because as soon as that call from Nkangala came, Nqoba ran out of Mqoqi's house like a crazy man.

He didn't explain anything, just that Gugu had disappeared and that he was going to kill Nkangala for letting it happen.

Ntsika wants to ask what is going on but the gun on Gugu's lap and the look on Nqoba's face says he shouldn't interfere.

The cars start arriving, Mqhele after Qhawe, Nkosana and Sambulo right behind him.

"Tell them not to come in here or I'll shoot them," she says.

But they walk in anyway, one after the other. They all stop at the kitchen door when they see the gun pointed at them. The worst thing would be if she started firing.

"I gave birth in jail, in a cold prison cell because of you, all of you!"

she says, looking at Nkosana. He is the leader here, isn't he? And he had the audacity to go to her home and beg her to come back, to this.

"I know I'm not your favourite. If there is anyone this family can do without, it is me. But for you to..."

"No, Gugu, that's not true..."

"What is true Mqhele? You all lied to me. All of you!" she shouts and waves the gun. They all move except Nqoba. He stays still even though the gun is pointed at him now.

"You all knew her, right? And you didn't try to stop him when he decided to marry me. You were all there, negotiating lobola and standing beside him at our wedding and yet you knew!"

Nobody answers her. They would explain that they did the background checks and concluded there was no connection. But that itself might anger her even more, that while she was here putting up with the shit of this family, they were doing background checks on her.

That even after she decided to leave, they did everything in their power to bring her back to this mess.

"I know he doesn't know," she says, pointing at Ntsika with the gun.

"Gugu, please, not like this," Qhawe pleads.

"You are lying to him, like you have been lying to me," she says.

"He was just a kid. He doesn't have to know," Mqhele says.

Gugu is angry and may be telling Ntsika the truth is her revenge. Maybe hurting them like they hurt her will make her feel better.

She panics when she sees Nqoba walking towards her, as if the gun in her hand is meaningless.

"Nqoba!" Nkosana says.

"Don't worry, it's not loaded," Nqoba says.

He grabs the gun from Gugu and slips it on his waist, right next to another gun hanging there.

He knew all along that it wasn't loaded. He really wanted to do this. He's found his freedom but at what cost?

He turns and looks at his brothers.

"You can go. I have to take my wife somewhere."

... (b) ...

As they drive along Bram Fischer Drive, he can't help but think about how everything is falling apart. Everything he's worked so hard to keep together over the years is falling apart right in front of his eyes. Strangely though, he doesn't feel as bad as he thought he would when it finally happened.

He used to picture it all in his head. What it would be like when Gugu finally learned the truth. How she'd immediately regret the day she met him so much that she'd spit in his face and tell him he was the worst thing that had ever happened to her.

These thoughts, or pictures in his mind, always came right after they made love. When he was holding her in his arms, or when he watched her playing with their son or putting him to sleep.

He always tried to push the scene to the back of his mind and pretend it was nothing to worry about but his guilt was too strong.

He always thought he'd lose his mind, maybe even blow his own brains out with a gun, but it's nothing like that at all.

He feels lighter now that the truth is out. But he's still not letting her go. Never.

The first thing she said after his brothers left was that she wanted a divorce and he knew she meant it.

"Where are we going Nqoba?" she asks when the route starts to look familiar. He doesn't answer her.

He turns left into Ntshitanga Street. Nhluvuko Primary School is on the right. He parks right at the gate of number 781.

They've changed the paint colour but the gate is still rundown. It hasn't been long since she was here.

She looks at him.

"Come," he says opening the door.

"Nqobizitha," she says. She knows the look on his face. He expects her to do as he says and she asks questions because he's not willing to answer any.

He pushes the gate open. When she was here the first time, she had to open it with the limping man to open it for her. The front door is also opposite and with his hand on her back, he directs her to the same sofa she sits on that day.

It's quiet today, no limping man or that other one in boxer shorts. Nqombi comes out of the bedroom. She's meeting her for the third time now and every time their eyes meet, something happens, something she can't explain.

You two already know each other," Nqoba says matter of factly. You are both stunned.

He stands up and goes to sit on the sofa opposite Gugu. He instructs Nqombi to sit next to Gugu so they are both sitting side by side, facing him.

This is the last thing Gugu expected, that they were coming here. She won't even bother asking Nqoba how he knew about this house.

"I'm going start by telling you how you two are connected," he says. "You," he says, looking at Ntombi. "You had a child at Nkonjeni Hospital in KwaNongoma. There were two nurses. They had the same surname."

Ntombi nods. She knows about all of that. She's never forgotten how kind those two nurses were to her. One of them even accompanied her to see her dead baby in the mortuary.

"Your child was a stillborn," he says. She drops her eyes.

Nqoba takes a deep breath. "That's what you were told," he says and looks at both of them. It takes them a little while to follow.

"Except that boy you saw at the mortuary was not your baby. Your baby was stolen by those two nurses," he says and stops.

They look at each other.
 "That child is sitting here next to you. Right now," he says.
 They look at each other again.
 And then all hell breaks loose.
 He sits still through it all, quietly as Ntombi storms out screaming
 and Gugu curls herself on the sofa and cries her heart out.
 He sits still.

"What's going on here?"
 It's the limping man. He's just run in here.
 No answer.
 "Auntiy!" says the man. Ntombi has locked herself in the bedroom. All
 that can be heard are her cries.

"What's going on man?" the man asks.
 Nqoba raises his face, only to be met by a shocked face.
 "Are you...?" the man asks.
 "Please give us some privacy," Nqoba says.
 He leaves but they know he's still in the yard.
 It takes a while before Ntombi comes back and sits down again. Gugu
 is still curled next to her.

"How do you know all of this? How do you know it's true?" Ntombi
 asks, in between sniffs. She's been wiping her tears with a doek she had on
 her head when they arrived.

"I went and found out the truth. Gugu asked me to do that for her,"
 he says.

It's that statement that makes Gugu sit up immediately.
 "You're doing this for me? For me Nqobizitha?"
 She's screaming at him. She's obviously angry.
 "I'm doing this because you wanted to know the truth," he says.
 "How long have you known? How long have you been hiding this
 from me?"

This might just turn out worse than he expected. He decides not to
 answer her because she might start throwing things at him.

"This is not true! It's not true!" Ntombi wails.
 He is watching all of this but he is worried because the most difficult
 part is yet to come. The part that connects all three of them in this living
 room.

He decided that if he is going to tell the truth he might as well tell it all.
 What happens after that will have to sort itself out. He is tired of running,
 He is tired of worrying.

This woman will have to forgive him. At least, he hopes, knowing
 that her daughter is gone and will never return will give her some kind
 of closure.

He waits until they have both composed themselves before he
 prepares to start talking again. But he can't help noticing that the two of
 them, Gugu and Ntombi, have not looked each other in the eye since he
 broke the news.

"Ntombi, you had another daughter," he says.

Silence.

He studies both their faces. Ntombi is stunned, Gugu is numb. He
 waits for her to speak but she doesn't.

"I knew her too," he says.

This is dangerous. If his brothers were here, they'd talk him out of
 coming clean on this one. It could turn really bad, especially if he leaves
 nothing out.

Now they are just sitting here watching him. He looks at Gugu but
 she's just blank, lost somewhere.

"I met her here in Joburg."

Ntombi starts weeping again. He waits. Nothing.

"Her name was..."

"Nqobile," Ntombi says.

Silence, not even a slight reaction from Gugu.

"Yes. I never knew who she was exactly and where she came from. She
 never told me. Had I met her now, I would have made sure she did. But
 we were both very young then. We were reckless too. We lived life like we

were going to live forever." He stops and rubs his hands together.

They are waiting.

"She had big dreams. She came here because she wanted to make something of herself and I was going to help her do that. But it was difficult with her. She wasn't..."

He stops again. He's trying to find an easier and quicker way to get to the point. The sooner he gets this over and done with, the better for him. He has just broken two women at once, turned their worlds upside down in a short space of time.

He knows he can't help them pick up the pieces, even if he wanted to.

"We got married not long after we met."

"What?" Ntombi is stunned.

If only she knew what was yet to come, this wouldn't bother her much.

"Yes, it was a spontaneous thing. I'm sure you knew that about her. It was all good until..."

"Ngoba," Gugu says.

He stops talking and looks at her.

"Get me out of here," she says.

They are confused. She said she wanted the truth.

Ntombi looks at her.

"I've heard enough," Gugu says.

"This is not just about you. I want to know what happened to my daughter. Where is she?" Ntombi asks.

He's not sure what to do, listen to Gugu or continue telling the truth.

Gugu stands up. He follows her.

"We'll be back now," he says when Ntombi also stands up. She listens and stays in the house.

Not far from where they are standing in the yard is the limping man. He is looking at them suspiciously.

"Ngobizitha, whatever you do, do not tell her the truth about how Ngobile died," she says.

He is shocked. This is not what he expected.

"She will understand," he says.

She shakes her head.

"You've obviously never pushed a human being out of your own house. No woman will understand that you killed her child. Don't

provoke it," she says and walks back to the house.

He stands still for a few seconds, trying to fathom out what just happened.

Ntombi is sitting where they left her, still weeping.

He starts talking again the moment he sits.

"I didn't even tell my brothers. It was just the two of us and some

people we didn't know who signed as our witnesses. If it makes any

difference, I'd like you to know that I really loved her," he says.

I don't think it does.

"Where is she?" Ntombi asks.

He looks at Gugu. She raises her eyebrows. He sighs.

"I don't know. She left. I came home to find her gone one day and she's

never come back," he says.

"And you didn't bother to look for her?" Ntombi asks.

He looks at Gugu again.

"I did. But in the end I figured she didn't want to be found. I let her

go."

There's silence, long silence.

Ngoba can see the limping man through the open curtain. He's still

loitering in the yard.

"How was she? When she was with you. Was she well?" Ntombi says.

She was fine, just moody.

"She was fine," he says.

Now that he's been derailed from where he planned to go with this,

it's a little harder to flow.

He looks at Gugu before he answers every question, simply because

he doesn't know where to go with this now. He's already told the first lie,

which was not part of the plan when he arrived here.

There's a long silence.

Ntombi sighs.

"It's been too long. I had given up. Someone like her..." she stops and folds her arms, her eyes fixed on the blank TV screen on her left.

Nqoba is stuck on the 'someone like her' part.

"They said there were two possibilities, that she'd either live long or die young," she says.

The look on their faces says they are in the dark about what she's talking about.

Had she not died, Nqoba had always believed she'd be his wife and they would have a couple of children, grown kids, by now.

Her mood swings would have improved as she aged. He would have found out where she was from and they would have gone to her family to pay lobola.

This woman, Ntombi, would have been his mother-in-law. It would have been great. They would have had a good life together.

He doesn't believe in that 'not meant to be' theory. Not meant by who exactly?

But now he also knows that Nqobile was raised by her grandparents. Ntombi had her when she was 15 years old and she grew up knowing her grandmother as her mother. Ntombi left home and she left Nqobile behind.

But she did come back later on.

"When she left, everything was prepared for her to go to eSabuyaze," she says, with a blank look on her face.

They are lost.

"It was the last option. There was nothing more that could be done. We had to accept it. She was young but the calling was too strong. The signs were there from when she was a child."

"Signs of what?" Nqoba asks gently.

She looks up at him.

"Signs that she had a calling. She was supposed to go for her training.

We waited for her to finish school first, although she kept getting worse as she grew. She was a smart child, very smart at school and she had big dreams. But we woke up one day and she was gone. We thought she'd be back but it's been too long," she says.

Nqoba knew that Nqobile wasn't exactly normal, but a calling? No, that is not what he saw in her.

"You thought she was going to be a sangoma?" Gugu asks.

Ntombi nods.

"But the way Nqoba explained it to me, it sounded like she had bipolar disorder," Gugu says.

"That's what people say now. But my brother was the same. He behaved exactly like Nqobile and my grandfather and they both got better after they became sangomas. They were completely healed," Ntombi says.

It's the usual contrast between what's African and what's Western.

Nobody really knows which one heals, or what the real truth behind a calling and mental illness is. But whatever works, works.

Whether it is using man-made measures to control your body, which by the way was made to function naturally, or the belief that you are somewhat beyond what is meant to be human, whatever works, works.

... (S) ...

"I did that for my child, not you. And Ntsika," she says.

They've been quiet all the way. Nqoba, not knowing whether to speak or not, and Gugu just trying to take in everything that just happened.

There were no mother-daughter hugs between her and Ntombi.

It wasn't the kind of reunion you'd expect, perhaps because the poor woman didn't even know she had a daughter and Gugu, well, she was not looking for a mother. She had that all her life. She was just hungry for the truth, wanting to know exactly what happened. Maybe they will be close one day, maybe not.

"I'm not sure whether to be happy or sad," she says.

He doesn't respond, simply because he doesn't know what to say.
 "The two nurses, one of them was my mother?" she asks.
 He nods.

"I wonder who the second one was?" she says.

He clears his throat before he speaks.

"Your aunt."

She doesn't understand.

"That's how she knew. It was her idea," Nqoba says.

Silence.

"About Nqobile, did you keep anything of hers? Clothes or something?" she asks.

He shakes his head. She must be looking for something, some kind of connection.

"What about where she lived? That house you told me about, the one she used to work at? Is it still there?" she asks.

He gulps. She's waiting.

Don't do it! Don't do it Nqoba!

She insisted. He tried really hard to discourage her but she wanted it and when Gugu wants something, she doesn't stop until she gets it. The people who bought it must have removed all the safes except the one that is hidden by their wedding photo.

"You said you loved it. You insisted on it," he says.

He just did it!

"It's our home."

Lesedi

SHE KEEPS RAISING the issue of starting a practice, a small one, even if it's here in the south.

She's hoping that she can do that with two kids who are just over a year apart because this not how she planned to end up.

Maybe she could even go back to being the old Naledi, the woman who was independent and followed her own path.

This isn't something she discusses with her husband because she knows.

When they bought this house, he sat back and let her make all the decisions.

He said, "Whatever you want, it's your house. You are going to make it our home."

It sounded familiar. It had happened before. Mqhele did it when Mahlomu feared she would end up being just a wife and mother. He supported her when she started the restaurant but he made sure she was involved in name only.

Qhawe didn't want to leave the south so they had to find one in these parts of Gauteng. And so, after going through more than 10 potential

homes with brick walls and open yards, the Mrs finally said, "I like this one" one day in Bassonia.

His response was, "Anything you want."

They left the glass house but this new one was not something Qhawe would have gone for. He's always had good taste in houses. He likes them unique and spacious.

Naledi insisted on wide stairs and open plan. She went wild on furniture shopping and changing paint and decorating...

He sat back and watched, proud of himself that his hard work, bloody and dirty as it has been, was able to make the most important people in his life happy.

Life has changed so much since their days of being carefree, crazy people who fought about stupid things.

She has changed. She's taken her position in this family as the one married to the mediator, and that is why she packs and goes whenever she is needed and doesn't ask questions when her husband takes a call and leaves her in bed at the crack of dawn.

He always claims it's a family thing and she believes him because she herself has family things to deal with.

First it was that Lerato bullshit and the realisation that the woman had played her. Qhawe wasn't angry at her, even after she told him she had divulged information out of trust.

Maybe it was because she took it upon herself to fix things, to stop that nonsense Lerato was trying to do.

The old Naledi would have beaten the crap out of her but she sat down and spoke to her, with MaMenkwe and Ntate present.

Lerato had to choose between the family and her annoying obsession with the Zulu family. It didn't seem like a difficult choice until it became clear that her mother had to choose too.

And so just like that, it died. She chose to let it go. But the relationship was still not there. It will never be there without trust.

This is why they did not invite her to Mpumalanga for the family

reunion, when in fact they are supposed to celebrate Lesedi's appointment as principal. It's sad that the principal died in that horrific car accident but from what Lesedi

But what Naledi was really looking forward to this weekend was meeting the new man in Lesedi's life, who might or might not be there. He hadn't confirmed, she is hoping he is going to understand how important this was and show up.

Lesedi has been stingy with the details and all they know is that she is important this was and show up. Lesedi has been stingy with the details and all they know is that she is important this was and show up.

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Sometimes she feels guilty about this, about attending to her own family affairs when there was so much going on in this family. But with her father constantly sick and that Tshedi thing that has made the Montsho's a subject of gossip, she can't abandon her own family. And besides, there are things she knows are being kept from her. Things like why they have been going to and from KwaZulu-Natal so often without their wives and children in the past month.

Qhawe explained but he was a bit sketchy. He promised to tell her everything once it's all sorted.

"I don't want you to panic. This thing is hard to explain but it tells her do with us finding out where our father came from."

That's all he said. She half understood because she too has often wondered about their past, especially because her son will grow up and find out where his name came from.

She thinks about calling him because it's getting late and everyone is calling to ask how far they are. But she decides against it. She doesn't want to make it seem like she's rushing him with her own family things when he's obviously dealing with an emergency. And besides, as much she wants him to come to Mpumalanga with her, she's still a little uncomfortable about the Tshedi issue because he made it clear that as much as Sello is trash, it didn't give Tshedi the right to cheat on him.

Naledi had a problem with that sentiment.

She tried to argue her case until the "So you'd cheat on me if I happen to hurt you?" question came. She knew better than to answer that but her reasoning that her sister deserved happiness too remained, although it wasn't said out loud.

Her phone beeps. It's him.

"I've told the driver to take you to Mpumalanga. I'm caught up."

That's all the SMS says. She calls him back but he doesn't answer. If he wasn't such a good husband and if his family wasn't so dramatic, she would have concluded a long time ago that there was another woman.

At least she knows he's not a criminal anymore. That helps her sleep

at night because a cheating criminal would be too much to deal

with her, or maybe not.

As they drive out of the gate with her two children, one next to her and another on her lap, she can't help but wonder if she is doing everything

right. How Shani changed and how he blames the whole family for his

misadventures scares her. What Phakeme did to that child makes her look

at her own boys, who are no different from all the children in this family,

and wonder if she shouldn't push them more to the Montsho side than

the Zulu side.

There is also Mhlaba. All she knows is that he is a long-lost brother

who just rocked up a few months ago and they accepted him into their

lives.

She finds him a bit unsettling. They've met only once but she got a

feeling that he knows everything about them, including her children's

names, but how they warmed up to him, even though they did not know

him, made her even more uncomfortable.

"Mama, are we going to see Agape?" Spho asks.

She nods and brushes his head with her hand.

Had things been normal, the whole Zulu family would be driving

to Mpumalanga right now, because that's how they are. Marrying one of

them meant marrying all of them.

"And mkhulu?" Spho asks again.

She knows he's about to name them one by one so she looks at him

and says, "Yes, everyone."

He talks a lot. His talking wouldn't be such a big deal if he had a

normal voice, not that hoarse screech like Nqoba and Mabutho and

Moebe. Mhlaba has that same voice too. If he didn't, he'd be a double of

Sumbulo.

This trip reminds her of the first time she took it with Qhawe and how

he whined all the way about how hot Mpumalanga was. They stopped along this river and watched the women washing clothes. It was also the same week he asked her to marry him.

It was too soon, everything happened too quickly with them but she would marry him over and over again and love him like she loved him then and loves him now.

She still thinks it was fate that they met on that day in Kimberley, that everything happened exactly as it was supposed to happen because who knows what Tlhabane would have ended up doing to her had it not been for that moment. She even forgave Ntate because now she understands what a parent would do to protect her children. These two here, she would kill and torture for them, she's sure of that.

"That's Mme Oo's car!" Spho shouts.

Omphi was probably the first to arrive because she's like that, always punctual. Tshedi's car is there too, parked next to Lesedi's Corolla. The driver drops them off in the yard and drives out to park next to the gate.

"Not this Jeep again, is he going to park there all weekend?" It's Omphi, she says, as Spho jumps into her arms.

"Qhawe will be here tomorrow morning. He'll leave then," she says, not knowing for sure if that's the truth.

"What are you feeding this child?" Tshedi says, taking the sleeping Mathongo from her.

The house smells like home because it is after all Lesedi's house. She looks around and realises Ntate is not here but she can feel some tension, like there is something her sisters are not telling her.

"Where is Agape?" she asks.

Nobody answers her. They are too busy focusing on her kids.

She notices that Tshedi's girls are also not in the house but the scones on the coffee table are hard to resist.

"Who baked these? Because I know you three can't even turn on the oven," she asks.

Nobody is paying attention to her so she grabs a second scone and walks into her suitcase to one of the bedrooms. The three other bags are left on the dining room floor.

Qhawe makes her close the bedroom door and lie on the bed. He picks up a call from Qhawe. She wants to ask why but he doesn't give her the chance.

"Are you there? Is Ntate there? The last time I spoke to him, they were talking about my suitcase. I love you, wife. I miss you. I'm sorry I have to take care of things here but I'll see you..."

She answers the questions and agrees to statements. She doesn't get the chance to ask her own questions before they say goodbye.

She looks at the screen and wonders if she shouldn't push harder. She knows she lets things slide because Qhawe is so good, and the least she can do is let the small things slide because he makes up for them.

But then, is this how a marriage is supposed to be? She asks herself this question sometimes.

When she's done with the doubts, she picks herself up and sets to find her nieces, for whom she brought presents. She'll hand them out with everyone present so that her sisters won't have the opportunity to complain about how she always gets their children expensive stuff they, as their mothers, can't afford.

Agape's laugh leads her to the backyard and there with her are Tshedi's girls, hanging all over the one woman she decided she never wanted to see again in her entire life.

Their eyes meet, the woman smiles. Naledi storms back inside the house.

"What is she doing here?" she asks furiously. Her sisters, who have gathered in the kitchen, ignore her and pretend to be busy with something.

"Why didn't anyone tell me she was coming?" she asks.

"This is a family reunion, isn't it?" Lesedi mutters. She looks at Tshedi.

"I didn't know," Tshedi says, raising her arms in defence.

Her mother was the last person she expected to find here. They, or at least she and Omphi, decided on the day they found her in that squatter camp that they wanted nothing to do with her. More so because she showed no remorse for abandoning them.

"It's my house, Naledi," Lesedi says and goes on to open the fridge and grabs something.

"The least you could have done was tell me," she says.

"Would you have come if I had told you?"

"That's not the point," Naledi says angrily.

She's wondering if Qhawe knew about this, if this is why he decided to cancel on her at the last minute.

"Ntante is coming with MaMenkwe? Do you think they are going to be comfortable with this?"

"Like I said, Naledi, it's a family reunion."

This is not how she thought this was going to go. It was supposed to be a great weekend with her sisters and their kids. Now it feels like she escaped the Zulu family drama only to find herself in an even more awkward situation.

She decides she is not going back to the yard, not with that woman there and she sure as hell is not letting her children near her.

She peeps through the window and sees that the driver is still there. "Don't even think about it!" Omphi says. She knows what she's thinking.

"We are your family. Respect us enough to not run back to your mansion to escape us," Omphi says.

Naledi knows this could turn ugly if she packs her things, takes her children and leaves. She also knows that even Qhawe would judge her for it, so she sits down and helps herself to another scone.

"Don't just sit there. Peel those potatoes," Tshedi instructs.

She rolls her eyes. She can't even remember the last time she peeled dusty potatoes. She buys them already peeled from Woolworths.

They all put together money for this weekend's food and gave it to Omphi, and she went and bought some dusty potatoes, probably from some dodgy foreign-owned supermarket.

"How long has she been here?" she asks as she empties half the sack of potatoes into a big plastic basin.

No one answers. Now she knows it's worse than she thinks.

"She lives here," Tshedi says, with a sigh.

Naledi wants to scream but Ntate has just walked in, with MaMenkwe in tow, looking like she's just come from a magazine photoshoot. She always looks glamorous but today is a bit extreme.

She hugs all of them and is extra nice. Ntate, on the other hand, is already on the couch, holding the remote control and watching Animal Planet. He asks for some tea and takes a scone.

"Mmm, these are really nice," he says, but suddenly looks like he's just realised something and immediately puts the scone back on the plate.

They make him his tea.

He doesn't ask about the elephant in the room too but he knows, all of them know, that they are going to have to call her inside soon and deal with what has to be dealt with.

When Lesedi made the decision to go back and get her mother, she neither asked for Ntate's permission nor her sisters'.

She found her mother exactly where they left her, sober this time, but she still refused to come with her. She said she had nothing to offer her, that it was too late to fix things and she warned her before she even stated that she wasn't prepared to talk about who her father was.

"He loves you, doesn't he? I know he does. He wouldn't be Montsho if he didn't. That's his problem. It's always been his problem," her mother said.

Lesedi wanted to know what the 'problem' was but her mother had made it clear that she didn't want to discuss this further.

And then, three months ago, a woman carrying nothing but a plastic

bag showed up at her school. She found her sitting on the rundown sofa in the staff room wearing flip-flops and a skirt that looked like it was borrowed, judging by the safety pin on the waist.

It was on that Monday that the principal didn't return from attending the course in Rustenburg so it was hectic.

Lesedi looked at her mother once and didn't ask questions. She put her in her car and drove her to her house. Agape warmed up to her immediately and they have been inseparable ever since.

But they haven't talked. They haven't discussed how she ended up a drunk and why she left. All Lesedi told her was when she found the letter and how she couldn't face Ntate after that, she found a job as far away from home as possible and decided it was better to alienate herself.

The last of the serving bowls are put on the dining room table just as Matebello walks in. Naledi notices she looks cleaner and younger than she did the last time she saw her, but that still doesn't erase the picture of the broken woman she met two years ago.

She sits at the far end of the table, in between the children, and straightens the tablecloth with both her hands.

Nobody wants to speak first, not even Ntate.

"Are we going to eat or what?" Matebello says.

Everyone is shocked that she speaks first. They expected her to be withdrawn or show some kind of guilt, especially being here with Ntate who she has not seen since the day she left him to raise four children on his own.

"Children, go eat outside," she says.

They listen and leave, Agape pulling Mathongo by hand.

"I'm Matebello," she says, looking at MaMenkwe.

It is strange that MaMenkwe is the one looking down at the plate in front of her when she should be the one without shame. But Matebello has always been like this. Ntate knows that too and that's why he won't even try to test her.

"I'm the one with a story so I'm going to speak," she says and clears

her throat.

"I haven't touched alcohol in two years, not since my girls found me," is how she opens the conversation.

Ntate's nose is twitching.

"No, Montsho, you know me. You know I had never touched alcohol in my life before I left you," she says, her eyes fixed on him. He stares back at her but says nothing.

"I left, yes, I did because there are situations where a woman must leave a marriage. I hope you, my daughters, understand that. Sometimes you have to leave in the middle of the night with nothing but the clothes on your back. You leave your children behind not because you don't love them but because it is the selfless thing to do."

Naledi shakes her head. Omphi is already weeping.

"It wasn't easy. I swear it wasn't easy for me, leaving you behind. I carried you, all four of you. I pushed you out of my vagina and the pain was excruciating. I wiped your shit, fed you from my breasts and wiped your mucus with my own fingers, but I still had to leave you behind."

She looks at Ntate. He's still looking right into her eyes. But she is not here for him. The only people she believes she owes this conversation in this room to are her daughters.

"I wasn't happy, and Lesedi, yes, it was that fact that led me to another man's arms."

"Wow, mother, you!" Omphi says, shocked.

Matebello raises her hand to silence her.

"I had an affair for that reason and that reason only. Had it been your father who did it, would you be here judging him?" Silence.

"I came back. In fact, I never left. I came back and I was a good wife and then I had you two," she says, pointing at Omphi and Naledi.

"But that didn't change anything. In the end, I had to leave, and I wasn't going to take you. I wasn't going to do that to you."

"You left a man to raise four children on his own," MaMenkwe says.

It's shocking that she's even speaking.

"Did I make these children on my own? Is he not their father? What's the difference, sesi? What's the difference between me raising our children and him? They had one parent present and that happened to be their father."

The conversation would be easier if the girls weren't crying and Ntate's rage wasn't so visible.

"Don't be so angry, Montsho. I'm pouring my heart out here. I'm telling you my truth."

"Tell them who Lesedi's fath..." He stops and sighs. "Tell them who you had an affair with, Matt."

This is what Lesedi has wanted to know for the past two years but right now she isn't sure anymore because...

"I'm not a Montsho, so who am I?" she asks.

"No, you are a Montsho. You are a Montsho, like all of them," Matebello says firmly.

Tshedi stands up and leaves the table. Of them all, she is the one who resents her mother the most. She had to take over her role when all she wanted was to be a normal teenager.

She comes back with a bottle of wine, already opened, and a mug. She ignores the look Ntate gives her.

"It's Baboloki," Matebello says and picks up a dishing spoon.

"Mama, are you serious?" Tshedi asks, stunned.

She's serious. They know that because her face says so.

"Of all people, mama? That drunk? That man who made our family the laughing stock of the village?" Omphi says.

"Yes, that one. He made me happy when I wasn't."

Naledi remembers Ntate Baboloki, but only vaguely. She must have been about eight years old when he died.

Her memories are of him laughing and chasing her and Omphi around the yard. She remembers how he'd make them do mini music concerts for him and how he always wore a green beret.

He was Ntate's younger brother and the complete opposite of him. There aren't any pictures of him in Ntate's house and nobody ever speaks about him. But there is one picture of him at the oldest shebeen in the village. It is hung on the wall. He is wearing the same green beret with a harmonica pressed to his mouth.

Baboloki may have been from the royal family but he was for the people.

It happened only a few times, he and Matebello, and it wasn't he who went after her. She pursued him.

He knew the moment his brother brought her home that she wasn't going to last. She was too different. There was something eccentric about her and he believed his brother brought her home for that reason, that it was his way of rebelling.

He never was in love with her as a person but she curbed his curious nature and he couldn't stop himself. That's why he lay with her.

He never knew Lesedi was his. In fact, she was more like his brother than she was like him.

But Matebello always knew, and when she left knowing for sure that she was never coming back, she decided it was best to leave everything behind, including the secret she'd been carrying for years.

It was never her intention to hurt her husband but maybe knowing that one of his four precious girls wasn't really his would be the biggest and most interesting thing to ever happen to him.

She hated that about him, that he was that type of man who never took risks, one who toed the line and did what was expected of him, all the fucking time.

She left because she wanted more. She wanted to live more and not be served and pampered and worshipped.

Even when things didn't go well for her, when she didn't find that thing she was looking for and life dealt with her the worst way it could, she never wanted to go back.

She saw Naledi in a newspaper once and immediately knew that it

was her, the infant she left behind.

Maybe she owes Lesedi an apology, and maybe she doesn't, but she's here now and she will do the best she can with her grandchildren. And her biggest goal will be to get rid of that freckle-freckled-faced sedi is gaga over. He makes her uneasy.

Oh, speak of the devil.

He goes straight to Ntate and offers him a handshake. Ntate doesn't return it because what kind of disrespect is this?

Lesedi stands up and pulls him by arm to the kitchen, much to the amazement of everyone sitting around the table.

As to when this man got here, nobody knows. And to think he can just go to Ntate and shake his hand? Sigh.

Lunch continues in silence, with only the sounds of Lesedi and her man whispering something in the kitchen.

Naledi isn't one to clean up or do dishes but being in the same space as her mother is worse than being domestic, so she stands up and goes to the kitchen with three plates balancing on her arm. She was once a waitress at the Spur so she knows how to do these things. She also wants to take a closer look at this man whose expensive aftershave filled the dining room when he walked in.

"Yep, that's her," Lesedi says to the man the moment she walks in. Naledi frowns.

"He was asking about that creepy Jeep," Lesedi says.

Naledi nods and shrugs. If it was up to her, the driver would leave but she knows the drill by now.

"Mmm," the man says and goes back to looking into Lesedi's eyes.

They are so in love. Lesedi is so happy so maybe it shouldn't bother her that the 'mmm' the man said sounded like something she had heard before.

Nomafu

"WHERE'S SHE GOING?"

"She's not going anywhere," Mpande says.

She's dressed up, tight dress, stilettos and glossy make-up.

She was wearing a cream pencil dress and black camisole earlier when she was strutting around, making sure the meeting was going well. It took her a while to get used to this stuff.

Nkosana said to her, "You can have any job you like. I'll pay you what you need."

But Nkosana doesn't own a hotel or a restaurant so there really wasn't any job that she liked. She joined the communications department, although she wasn't really sure of her job description. That lasted only a couple of months, at least until she stopped living in a hotel and found her own place.

She didn't want to be perceived as a spy or teacher's pet, which is why she never told the brothers how badly her colleagues in communications were treating her.

At first, the staff didn't know her surname, so they assumed she was one of the brothers' girlfriends. And when they did find out her surname,

they undermined her even more. Not to her face but she could just see and feel it.

She was willing to learn but nobody gave her the chance to do that. Nkosana must have sensed that she was unhappy so he went straight to her desk and offered her a new position as his personal assistant.

He had never really had an official PA. People just did what they had to do to keep his professional life in order.

At first she was clumsy, messed up meeting dates and forgot to take minutes in some of them. Her job as Nkosana's PA lasted only a couple of weeks. Soon after that he unexpectedly announced he was going away for a while, if not for good. So then she became everybody's PA when Nkosana went on sabbatical with his wife.

"What did you do, Mpande?" Mqoqi asks.

What did he do?

They stood here, on this hotel balcony, watched the guy park the car, get out and walk all the way to the hotel entrance. They waited. And then he came out again, with her this time.

They watched them walk back to the parking lot, he opening the passenger door for her like a true gentleman.

They watched him getting into the car, turn the key and panicking when the car didn't start.

Mpande had a creepy smile on his face at that moment and Mqoqi caught it before it disappeared.

"Mpande, she's a grown woman," Ntsika says.

They do this all the time. Ntsika has never approved.

They sit and wait as the guy goes as far as opening the bonnet and fiddling with something. He raises his arms, a sign of defeat.

She's still sitting in the front seat, looking uncomfortable.

They watch the guy get back inside the car, sit in the driver's seat scratching his head. They wait.

Minutes later she gets out of the car, furious, and walks back to the hotel entrance.

Mpande laughs. His brothers are looking at him. Ntsika is the only one who is horrified. The others are here waiting to hear why 'we hate' this one.

"That's his girlfriend's car and she's pregnant," Mpande says.

"Ohhh," they all say at once.

Now they know why they hate him so they go back inside and continue drinking their alcohol.

Nkosana, Ngobizitha, Mqhele, Qhawe and Sambulo have been gone all afternoon, with Mhlaba. The meeting they came here for, which was useless anyway, ended hours ago but they are booked in this hotel for two more days.

Nandi is leaving tomorrow morning. She insisted on coming along, probably because she had plans of her own.

They sit still, quietly, when she barges in and throws herself on the couch between Mpande and Ntsika. She's changed into sweatpants and slippers.

"I thought you were sleeping," Mqoqi says.

She frowns and looks at the mess on the coffee table in front of her. And then she grabs an open bottle of whisky and drinks straight from the bottle.

"Easy now," Ntsika says, gently taking the bottle away from her.

They look very guilty and they're too quiet.

"I'm done with men," she says.

They're quiet.

"I was supposed to go out with this guy tonight and you know what happened? His car wouldn't start. Do you know why? He didn't have petrol. He drove all the way from Port Shepstone with no petrol and has the audacity to lie and say his tank was full when he arrived here. After that, do you know what he suggests?"

They shake their heads

"That we leave the car in the parking lot and go chill in my hotel room. Does he think I'm stupid? I mean, what happened to taking a girl out on a

date before trying to sleep with her? Who does that shit of coming to pick you up with a car that has no petrol? It was all planned! He planned this and he thinks I'm stupid."

They are nodding in agreement as she rants. She picks up the bottle again and they let her this time. Mqoqi hands her a slice of lemon when she frowns after taking a sip.

"For your throat," he says.

"Do you have a cigare...?"

"No!" they all say at once.

Whisky is fine but they aren't about to turn her into a nicotine addict. She doesn't even smoke.

"Why can't men be normal human beings? Why? Or is it just me! Am I a bad...?"

"Nooo."

"Okay, so why? Why do I always end up with dodgy idiots? Do you remember that guy I went out with? The one I met in Cape Town. He flew all the way here to take me out on a date. We connected, everything was great, and then the next thing, he avoids my calls and that was it."

Well, that one, he was in the closet and he targeted women with money. Let's just say his trip back to Cape Town was long and stressful.

"I'm getting old. That's why I can't find a man. I'm too old."

That 'nooo' sounds again. She's been ranting and they've been listening, particularly because they have no idea why she is so worked up. All these men she thinks have rejected her were not good for her so they protected her from them.

That's what her brother told them to do, protect her from the world, even if it meant overdoing it. But it's more than that. She's the sister they never had. They are overcompensating.

"Let's go out and have fun. A club or something," she says. She's serious. That big grin on her face means she's serious.

"Where? We are in Port Edward, for crying out loud," Ntsika says. They are. She leans back on the couch again when her bubble bursts.

Ntsika goes to the fridge and comes back with a half-empty bottle of wine.

"No more whisky for you," he says, opening the wine. She grabs the bottle and drinks. And then she holds it close to her chest and stares ahead.

"I'm ugly, that's why."

"Nooo."

They've been postponing her reunion with Mhlaba who, by the way, she doesn't even know exists.

When they decided to allow her to come on this trip, they thought they'd sit her down and tell her everything, with Mhlaba present, but the time just isn't right yet. So they decided that maybe it was best to go to Margate first and deal with what they had to deal with.

Nandi will be flying back to Joburg tomorrow and how they have managed to hide Mhlaba, who is in this same hotel, for the whole night and half a day is a mystery.

Nkosana and the others arrive back at the hotel just before 10pm and they don't even get out of the car. They summon the three to come downstairs and get moving.

Nobody has bothered to explain things to Ntsika but after the Nsiken incident and learning the truth about Nqobile, he knows his time of being treated like one of the children is over. Now he is here with his brothers trying to uncover the truth about a man whose voice and touch he doesn't even remember.

The only time he has ever felt like he was being touched by a mother is whenever Hlomu pats his back. He doesn't even remember what Nomafu smelled or sounded like.

They park outside the same gate. It still feels as strange as it did the first time that this house is situated here.

"Are they going to open?" Mhlaba asks.

"Yes, but at midnight," someone says.

They are 30 minutes early. They all use the time to call home and check on their wives and children, except for Nqoba. He let Gugu go.

They sat and talked and she decided it was too much for her. She wanted a divorce and it's not negotiable.

Nqoba said yes to her walking away but he's not planning on giving her a divorce. He'll let her go for now while they are sorting this thing out and when it is done, he will attend to her wish, the only thing she asked for, that he gives her Nqobile's bones.

He hasn't told his brothers this but he knows it will be almost impossible. With that woman buried underneath her, surely there'll be Nqobile has proven to be an unpleasant ghost who won't leave him in peace. That's why she led him to her sister and her mother at that church. Maybe all she wants is to rest in peace. Maybe Ntombi was right when she said she had a calling. Maybe that's why all these things happen.

The gate slides open and Nqoba feels his heart beating fast. He is not here for Sphofo and Nyanda and whatever it is that they passed on to him and his brothers. He is here about his own problems, about the fact that he can't find peace. He thinks all the bad things happen to him and none of his brothers realise that.

They stand in the same dining room and wait. It still looks and feels exactly the same, like a dungeon with no soul.

Mhlaba is about to ask again when the man appears. Again, he doesn't say anything. He just walks past them and they follow. Except for the leopard tail he has over his shoulders, everything about him is still the same, including the clothes. He sits on the floor, they sit in front of him, knees up.

"I thought you were better than using a child," he says.

Sambulo immediately knows that he is talking about Sisekelo. He has felt guilty about it since the moment he made the decision to take him with them to Mbuba.

But the man is past that. He is looking at Mhlaba and Ntsika and he is nodding.

"Good," he says.

"So what do we do now?" Mqhele wants to know.
He is asking this because they already know far more than they knew the last time they were here. Now he just wants this man to get to the point and tell them how many goats to slaughter and how many graves to dig so they can go back to their normal lives.

The man looks at him. He always has this look in his eyes when he is talking to him, like he is the cause of this, as if all of this is centred around him and he is the key.

"Do you remember your mother?" the man asks him.
He nods. Of course. How could he forget his own mother?

"You made her cry?" the man says.
He shakes his head. That he does not recall. He remembers how her eyes would be glassy sometimes but she never let the tears flow. And besides, even if she was crying, he is sure it wasn't his fault. He never did anything bad to her.

"What do you remember?" the man says.
"I remember sitting with her under the tree in Mbuba and how she'd brush my head and sometimes hold me close to her chest. She never said anything, she'd just hold me."

The man nods and looks at Mhlaba.

"And you?"

"I don't remember anything or anyone," he lies.

He may not have met his father but he knows exactly where he came from and why he ran. The man knows but he lets him off for now.

They have noticed his anxiety and how he seems like he wants them to get out of his house as soon as possible.

"It's too late for you but you can still do something for your children. Go back to Ntsikeni and dig up those graves. There's eight of them, four sets of twins."

He doesn't look up at them because he has no time to deal with their shock and confusion.

"Your grandfather is there too but don't dig him up. Leave him. Take

whatever you can find in those graves and bury it under that tree at your father's house, next to this one's twin," he says, pointing at Mqhele. He wants to continue but Mqhele is already walking out the door.

Nkosana stands up but Qhawe pats his arm and asks to be the one to go out and speak to him. He finds him outside, smoking.

"I saw this coming."

That's the first thing Mqhele says. Ever since Nkosana spoke about something being buried by his father and that Nsikeni thing, he's been suspecting this was the case.

He's not sure if he is angry or not. He just knows that this is not how one is supposed to find out about things like this. In fact, he thinks it was better not to know.

"Let's go back inside. We have to get this over and done with," Qhawe says.

He knows his brother too well and that's why he isn't sure if convincing him to go back to sit in front of that man is a good idea. He waits for him to finish smoking and together they walk back to the room to find their brothers sitting exactly as they were when they left them.

They sit quietly and wait for the man to continue.

"You," he says, looking at Mhlaba.

"Go get your father and take him to Mbuba. Isibopho nenyanda kuqaqekile, tie them back together. Your grand-father travelled a long way to make the tie. If he hadn't, none of you would be here."

They know this means going to Swaziland to get Nyanda's bones, wherever they are. But there are still many questions to ask, and one that is lingering in Mqhele's mind is whether his twin was a stillborn or if Spopho killed him.

He barely manages to get the words out of his mouth and ask the question while trying to suppress the rage that's making his hands shake.

"He did what he thought was right. Imagine if there was another one of you?"

It still doesn't make sense to them. Spopho loved his children, all of

them. He would have done anything to protect them and killing one of them was something he would never have done. And why did Nomafu let him?

It makes sense now. It all makes sense why she had those lone moments with Mqhele.

"Is that why Mqhele was the one who brought us back home? Back to Mbuba?" Mqoqi asks.

A lot of things are starting to make sense.

The man doesn't say anything. He expected them to figure that out from the start.

"And Hlomu?"

The man raises his hand to stop Mqoqi from going further.

"Leave that woman out of this. The same thing your father did to your mother is what you have done to her. Fix this because you know she will kill you all for her children," the man says.

All of the things he has said have made sense except for this one.

At least now they know what to do, dig up graves and bury everyone in one place.

"Are we supposed to dig up the graves and leave Nsikeni just like that?" Mpande says.

"Nsikeni is not your home. It's your grandfather's. This one," he says, pointing at Qhawe, "has made sure of that."

It must be all the goats he keeps slaughtering.

"Go get your father's brothers and bury them in one place. This is why he is coming for your kids. After that, go cleanse yourselves. I'm sure Mzimela told you that," he says and stands up. But he stops and looks at Nkosana, who has been silent throughout. He is angry and he has no plans of doing what this man is asking them to do. He is tired of Spopho's shit.

"Why are you so angry? You got the gift you wanted. She came and she healed you. So what are you angry for?"

Nkosana knows what and who she asked for. All those nights he lay

awake and dreamed about how it would be if he was granted that wish. How, when Xolie was pregnant the first and second time, he looked at her belly and hoped that was it. How when Hlomu finally got pregnant, he crossed his fingers that one of the babies she was carrying was it. And how he had given up when he saw her face glowing and her tummy growing the second time, only for his wildest dream to come true.

He is the only one who understands what the man is talking about. The others are lost so they stand up and get ready to leave, except Nqoba, again.

"And what do I do about Nqobile?" he asks.

The man stops, like this is something he has been waiting for since he entered this room. But he doesn't immediately address Nqoba. He looks at Ntsika and then back at Nqoba. He looks

"Cleanse this one. She won't rest until she knows him killing her won't come back to haunt him." With that the man leaves the room.

The drive back is mostly silent. There is so much to talk about, they know that, but they all agree that they aren't going back to Port Edward. They have their wallets and phones with them. The clothes will find their way home.

Mhlaba and Mqoqi will go straight to Swaziland. There was a tombstone. Hopefully they will still find it.

"Was Nqobile the one who always cut my hair?" Ntsika asks. They are about to reach Pietermaritzburg and nobody is prepared to answer him.

Nqoba remembers how she would cut Ntsika's hair and how he would reprimand her for it all the time because a woman shouldn't be touching a man's head, even if he is only nine years old.

"I'm going home," Mpande says.

They agreed that they are going back to Joburg. Mqhele was clear that all he wants is his wife and his house.

They all feel the same. They want to go where their peace is, where everything is normal and certain.

"It's fine. Drop me off here, I'll find my way there," Mpande says.

It's already morning.
On a normal day they would argue about this or simply ignore him but things have changed. Things are more complicated now. They are becoming individuals.

They drop him off at the taxi rank. Only two taxis are parked under the Mhuba aisle.

Ndoni

"MPANDE"

He sits still, with his hands knotted and his thumbs pressed to his mouth.

"How did you get in here?" she asks, sitting up and looking around her room. She knows Mpande, she loves him and she's used to his unusual way of doing things but this, no, this is new.

"I took a taxi."

"A taxi from where?"

"From Pietermaritzburg."

"Okay, but how? Why are you in my room? I thought you were on the South Coast?"

Ndoni asks too many questions. That's one of the things that annoys him about her sometimes. He is here in her room at her father's house. What does it matter how he got here?

How is it that she hasn't made peace with the fact that he can do anything, when he wants and how he wants? But he expected this reaction. He came here first, to her room, because he didn't want her being shocked and acting like this was the first time she's woken up to find him in the

room. He did it when they had that big fight about why he takes a shower every time after they've had sex. He didn't want to talk about it but she kept pushing and he got angry.

Why would she want him to explain that? Why would anyone want him to talk about the Carol issue? Nobody does, not his brothers and definitely not him. Carol is in the past.

Ndoni is his present and future and he thinks she must stick to that. She doesn't want to marry him and have his children and yet she is still in his life, trying to work him out like he's some kind of puzzle.

He noticed that on that Wednesday a year ago when he picked her up from the airport. When he took the Pretoria direction instead of Johannesburg, she didn't ask. They were not going to his house, that she knew, but she didn't ask where they were going.

"Where are we going?" she asked only when they took the Olifantsfontein off-ramp and drove across Tembisa. He cleared his throat but didn't speak.

She was starting to worry but thought maybe wherever they were going was a surprise, a good romantic surprise, which isn't something that happens often with Mpande. They had had a fight that weekend, one of his things that she didn't understand.

She had gone to Moyo with a friend. A friend he knows and has met because he insists on knowing each and every person in her circle.

Some of her friends say he makes them uneasy but she believes they are just imagining things. That they feel uncomfortable around him because he is, after all, Mpande Zulu.

However, she cannot deny that her life has changed since she's been with him. It worries her that he has this obsession with detail. He sees and knows everything... and everyone.

He's jealous too. So much that she fears talking to him about anything that involves her chatting to or even knowing a male person.

She had been single for three years before him. It was by choice. When

her boyfriend of four years died she took it hard. She never thought she could love another person again until she met this one. But he also had to work really hard to get her.

That mysterious trip past Tembisa ended behind a high fence hiding nothing but open land. He parked and told her to follow him out of the car.

She did as she was told, walking beside him until they were standing right at the centre. He put one arm around her shoulders and scratched his head. She folded her arms and waited for him to speak.

"Where do you think we should put the braai area?" he asked.

She was confused.

"I'm thinking a small park over there, for our kids and maybe a tennis court. What do you think?"

She shook her head.

"What are you talking about Mpande?"

Her worry was that he sounded too serious. He was telling her something but was not telling her anything.

"Our house. We'll build our house here," he said.

"We're already building a house? But you already have a house," she said.

She wants things to be discussed in this relationship, including the issue of children, which she knows she can never have but has not told him.

A lot of things worry her about him, especially the fact that most of the time when she says jump he asks how high, and then there are those moments when he won't even answer her calls.

Ndoni is not what you would usually expect from Mpande.

But then again, the truth about men is that they never marry the type you expect from them. They go for the one who makes their heart beat faster.

That's the difference between men and women. Men never look at the bigger picture. They want what they want and they want it now. They

want to be happy now.

A woman would easily marry a man she doesn't love wholeheartedly for the sake of a comfortable future. The bigger picture includes comfort and security and progress in life.

She wasn't sure but she felt a little bit of excitement. She decided that since she was already there, she may as well seize the moment.

She freed herself from his arm around her waist and rushed a few steps away from him. She stopped and spun around with her arms open and eyes closed, as if trying to breathe in all the air at once.

He stood and watched.

"I know! I know!" she said, jumping up and down.

He waited to hear it.

"I want a Japanese garden!" she exclaimed.

He was lost.

She put her hands on her hips and looked around, as if thinking hard.

"It will be a normal garden but with a Japanese theme... over there!" she pointed to the left.

"We'll have lots of water features! But no tall trees. I don't like them. They attract snakes. The house will be in the middle so that we have enough space at the back and in front. And can we have the garages at the top of the house? Like have a driveway that goes up? I know it can work."

She didn't give him a chance to answer or suggest anything before rushing off again to the right this time. He followed slowly.

"Do you want a bar in the house?" she asked, looked at him and laughed, as if she'd just remembered something.

"Okay, okay, we'll have a coffee shop for you here," she said.

She expected him to retaliate with a sarcastic comment but he just smiled and looked at her. She was still rushing and he was following slowly behind her. He was just looking forward to when she got tired and at least stood in one place.

"And over there... will be the pool! I want a big one, oval shaped with a lapa and a small bar."

He cleared his throat.

"What's wrong?" she asked when the look on his face showed he was uncomfortable. He looked like he wanted to say something but he didn't utter a single word.

"Okay, then the normal shape," she said dismissively.

"I've never swum in a pool before," she said, as if she also found it strange. "Not that I'm a fan of swimming but, you know, I had never seen the ocean until I went to Rhodes. There were no trips to Durban for us. Mzizi was always working."

She calls her father Mzizi, everybody does, unless she is addressing him directly. That's the only time she calls him 'baba'.

Something was still on his mind. He wanted to say it but she'd just taken him to that place. The place where he feels she deserves everything he can give her.

She was right. Their taxi drivers work the hardest in December when all other families, including his, are on holiday somewhere by the beach.

Sometimes the drivers end up working double shifts, driving through the night between provinces and end up having to sleep at the side of the road, inside the taxis. It's normal in the industry, it's the life.

It used to be their life, except Mpande's experience of that life was brief compared to his brothers.

She sat down on the ground, finally.

He stood and watched her, unsure whether he should sit too or just stand because really, the place was nothing but an open veld.

Oh, what the heck! He sat next to her as she lay on her back with her arms behind her head.

There was a small frown on his face, as if wondering why anyone would comfortably sleep on their back on the ground. And besides, his head was shaved and the stones and dry grass weren't having mercy on his scalp.

He crossed his arms behind his head to protect his scalp and lay on his back next to her. None of the women he used to be with would ever

have done that, lie on the ground like that. They had expensive weaves. But this one, she has a big afro. He asked her to comb her hair once but later regretted it when she started preaching about various forms of discrimination against black hair.

She closed her eyes and breathed in, as if trying to take a large quantity of oxygen again.

"In Mbuba, the sky is always clear and beautiful," she said, staring up at it.

"There's only one sky," he said.

It was typical of him to say this.

"I know but the world looks different to everyone, everywhere, depending on where they are. You know, I used to hate being stuck in Mbuba. I felt like I was... I don't know, destined for bigger things, better things, interesting things. Most of the girls I grew up with are now somebody's baby mama and I didn't want to end up like that."

He was quiet.

"But after I left Mbuba, I realised that it's better than anywhere I wanted to be. There may be nothing exciting there, nothing to do and no luxuries but the place is rich with people. That is its wealth, the people. The humility, the support system and the wisdom from people who have never set foot in school. I learned to appreciate that," she said.

Again, she took him to that place. A world he wished he had experienced.

His older brothers knew exactly who they were and what their responsibilities were growing up, as tough as they were. Nkosana was the father, Nqoba was the provider and Mqhele the nurturer. But he was floating somewhere. He was neither Nkosana the father nor Ntsika the baby.

As much as his older brothers accepted their lives and learnt to raise themselves, his was a different story.

He secretly longed for the family structure. The mother-father thing. The extended family thing with cousins and aunts. The sweet

grandmother and grumpy grandfather. Drunk uncles and scandalous aunts. He wished for that.

He longed for Mbuba too.

He was too young to clearly remember his mother's face or even his father's voice but when he was a young boy, he longed for that feeling of a woman brushing his head and placing bread with peanut butter and jam in front of him.

His memory wasn't vivid but he remembered the smell of their home in Mbuba. His mother made mahewu. There was always a bucket of mahewu brewing in the house.

Now and again that sour smell visits him. He remembers how she'd always make him put black vinegar in a bowl and put it next to the bucket to chase away flies.

He remembered her touch too because he was the one who got to feel it the longest.

All his brothers are two or three years apart but not him. He was already four years old when Nsika was born. He got to be the baby the were at school.

What he never understood though was why he never got to go out to play with other children. Even when he started going to school when he was five years old, Mqopi never let him out of his sight. Nkosana never let all of them out of his sight.

It's things he got to understand when he was older.

It's also the things Carol used against him. She knew he was emotionally desperate, that he may have been surrounded by protective brothers but he was still a lost boy.

He thinks all of them, the women who have come and gone, how they saw right through him.

Some of them try to push and others just leave, like he isn't worthy of their patience and endurance. He thinks that maybe he would have loved Gwen had she kept up the charade much longer instead of immediately

showing she was crazy.

He tried with Thando. She wanted things from him, the same things Carol made him do to her. Maybe if she had been patient and stayed a little while longer he would have gotten himself to open her thighs and lick her vagina like she wanted.

As he lay there on the grass with Ndoni next to him, he thought about Carol and how he believed a woman's breasts were supposed to feel exactly like hers until he touched a girl his age.

He remembered how Carol would whisper, "Say you love me," in between heavy breathing and sweat. He could not say it so afterwards she'd be as mad as hell. She'd shout and scream and call him stupid. But he kept going back although he never understood why.

There was something warm about Carol's touch. She was thick and tall. She was the best cook and her hair smelled nice. She always made sure he was fed.

He just couldn't stay away from her but he knew he didn't like seeing her naked. He didn't like hearing her moan and scream his name. He hated it and he never told anyone about it.

Carol did instruct him not to say a word to anyone but that's not why he kept quiet.

He kept quiet because he didn't understand if he was a victim or a willing participant. This was a woman. There was no way he could be a victim in this, it wouldn't make any sense. But still, he didn't like it, he didn't want to be part of it.

It took Mqhele walking in on them for it to end.

Carol could have crawled outside and called the police after he was done battering her but then she would have had to explain why she had a 14-year-old boy on top of her.

When Mqhele was done with Carol, he asked, "How long has she been doing this to you?"

It was then, right at that moment, that it dawned to him that he was allowed to cry about it. She was a grown woman, old enough to be his

mother.

It started with comments like, "You look older than your age" and "You're so tall" and "You're so mature compared to boys your age."

And then there was the staring and watching. It made him uncomfortable even then but he had to respect her. She was nice to them, a great nanny his brothers trusted to look after him and Ntsika when they were away.

She called them "abafana bami".

The first time he felt something was the day she shouted from the bathroom for him to bring her soap from the kitchen. He opened the bathroom door and put his arm around the door to hand her the soap.

"Come in," she shouted. He didn't move. The next thing he knew, the door was pulled open and Carol stood there, naked. He froze, his arm still stretched out and the soap in his hand.

When she took the soap from his hand, she ran her fingers along his palm while looking into his eyes before walking back to the shower, everything exposed.

He didn't know what he felt after that but he knew he wasn't supposed to feel it, not for Carol. He had never seen a naked girl before, in the flesh, let alone a grown woman.

Carol had a way of brushing his shoulder. Sometimes when she talked, she brought her face too close to his. He would feel things when she did that.

The first time, she did everything herself. When she was done, she told him, "You're a man now."

They don't talk about Carol, at all.

He's never thought about telling Ndoni about it because what good would it do? Where has one ever heard a man whining about a woman giving him sex? Whether it was wanted or not isn't a factor. That's the most important thing to men, isn't it? Sex, and they spend their lives trying to get into any vagina that's willing to let them in.

He watches Ndoni rummaging through her suitcase trying to find

something to wear. She never unpacks. Even when she is at his house, her suitcase lies on the floor and she gets dressed and undressed from it. She puts on a dress that clearly needs ironing and offers to sneak him out before her father wakes up and finds him in his yard. But he isn't moving.

"Where is your father?" he asks.

"In the big house," she says, like it should be obvious.

He stands up.

"Go back to bed. I'll sneak out the same way I snuck in."

She's not going to do that, not when he has woken her up and had her put on a dress at 6am. He knows this, which is why he pulls her into his arms and kisses her.

"I'd take you out of that dress but I respect your father's house. Go back to bed. I know you love your sleep. I'll come pick you up later," he says.

She knows this face and he uses it to soften her all the time. He leaves. She goes back to bed and hopes he makes it out of the yard alive.

Rural people are always assuming they are safe, he thinks as he unscrews the door handle. Why they think they can leave their doors like this, without security gates, puzzles him.

The kitchen is oak with a massive gas stove and double-door fridge. There's even a washing machine. He thinks and shakes his head at how well this man, whose house was once a dilapidated pile of mud, lives now.

He built this house with the money they paid him for that Mahlubi thing, which he failed to carry out anyway. He was one of the first people who came to them to ask for a job when they came back to Mbuba. They gave him one only because they were trying to make peace.

The walls in the passage are lined with pictures of Ndoni and her two brothers who don't even try to hide that they hate him.

The door at the end of the passage is clearly the main bedroom. He knows this because there is a veranda behind it.

He's sleeping. Waking people is not his style so he walks in slowly and

tries to find a place to sit. But men like Mzizi sleep with one eye open because they know.

"Zulu!" he says, quickly slipping his hand under the pillow. He remembers he hid his gun in the wardrobe last night because Ndoni is here and she doesn't even know that he carries a gun.

"Why would you want to pull a gun on me Mzizi?"

He's found a place to sit on a small wooden stool that was tucked under the dressing table.

"What do you want? What are you doing in my bedroom? Where is my daughter?"

If he had found him in the dining room, he wouldn't be panicking like this. But something is wrong, something is clearly wrong and he knows it because he knows these people.

"I'm here to talk," Mpande says.

"Let me get dressed."

"No! Stay away from the wardrobe Mzizi."

"Does Nkosana know you are here?"

Nkosana wouldn't let this boy come here and do this, he knows that. But he can't even call him because his phone is on the charger, next to where Mpande is sitting.

"I want to talk about the day you and your friends from here went to Nsikeni to look for us," Mpande says.

Mzizi looks everywhere except in his direction.

"That is all in the past. You know that. We all forgave each other."

"Forgave who Mzizi? We never wronged you. We were just kids. We had nothing to apologise for."

Mpande has always believed that. That people placed Spho's sins on their shoulders and that it was unfair and unjust.

But it's now become a problem, a big problem because now it is clear that they burning his mother alive wasn't enough. They had to go for her children too.

"What were you going to do if you had found us there? Were you

going to kill us?"

"Zulu, you can't live your life like this. You can't always be seeking revenge. Things happened and they weren't good for anyone. We've all moved on."

Mpande takes a deep sigh and switches off Mzizi's phone when the alarm goes off.

"I get that. It's the dishonesty that I have a problem with Mzizi. That speech you delivered at my brother's house, telling us we don't cleanse ourselves and all that nonsense. You knew where you got all that bullshit from, talking about how you weren't going to send your daughter to a slaughterhouse? The same daughter who knows nothing about you."

"My daughter is..."

"Your daughter is going straight to the slaughterhouse. I'm tired of this shit. She's going to have children that look exactly like this," he says, pointing at his own face.

"Baba," a voice says from outside the bedroom. They both know who it is.

"I'm on the phone," Mzizi says, before she asks who he is talking to. Mpande stands up, opens the balcony door and says, "Akunaqunga engizoligeza. Your daughter will breathe it and fuck it and give birth to it."

He leaves via the balcony.

Mzizi knows the time has come to make that call, because this is his daughter.

The Gift

HE REMEMBERS THE day she was born like it was yesterday.

He wanted to be the first to hold her, to look into her eyes and give her the name he had always had in mind. He felt that as much as it was his brother's seed that made her, she was his gift.

It was his grandmother's name. He knew that because his mother let it slip once, but not to him.

That story, that there hadn't been a girl born in their family in more than 100 years, was something he overheard when his father was talking to a strange man who had come to their house in the middle of the night to collect some guns. That man is a cabinet minister now.

The man said, "So many boys?"

His father replied, "I don't make girls. Neither did my father nor grandfather."

Nkosana was still a young boy then, just into his teens, and his father wasn't his friend so he wasn't going to go to him and ask for more details.

But he found that interesting. Not that he wanted a sister. No, he was fine with his brothers and besides, he found girls to be controlling. Zandile

was the perfect example of that. She controlled his mind and made him look stupid and desperate by constantly refusing to be his girlfriend.

His mother was the only female in his life and he knew that she controlled his father. Sphofo would do anything Nomafu asked him to do. It was like he lived for her.

Every time, whenever someone would come to the house, always after midnight, Nomafu and Sphofo would sit together and have a hushed conversation. But when the person was at the gate, Nomafu would go back herself in the bedroom and not come out until after the person had left.

It always happened like that and he heard everything because he's always been a light sleeper.

He was the one who ran to his parents' bedroom to wake them when the mob came. He saw it long before they reached the gate.

He told his parents, "Let's run."

But he could see in his mother's eyes that she wasn't going anywhere. It was there in his father's eyes too. It was as if they had been expecting it.

His father's last words to him were, "You are a man now. You are in charge of your brothers", which he said as he pushed him out of the house.

At first, because he was just a boy himself, those last words were the only thing that kept him going. The pride. The knowledge that his father trusted him with such a great task and the power that came with it. Those were the things that made him proud of being the eldest, the heir fittingly named Nkosana.

He knew when he ran out of the house with his youngest brother strapped on his back that when those people were done, there would be nothing left. Everything his parents had worked for would be gone and so would be their comfortable life that was better than any child's in Mbuba.

There was nothing valuable to inherit but he had his name and he had to live up to it.

It didn't take long before things got really tough and he started

resenting his father, hating him for not forcefully pushing Nomafa out of the house when he knew staying only meant death.

He should have said no. He should have dragged her by her hair and pushed her out the door to follow her children. That's what he thought.

But Shopho was a coward. It didn't take Nkosana long to realise that his own father, who was known and feared by everyone, was a coward who held his own wife's hand and died with her when he could have saved her.

He'd never do that to Zandile. He'd die before he let anyone harm her.

He wanted to be nothing like Shopho. He wanted to achieve all the things his father didn't. He wanted to be an honest man who made an honest living, a good man with no blood in his hands. He wanted to father a girl, a beautiful, soft-hearted human being who laughs when she's happy and cries when she's hurt. One who is incapable of physical harm. A person whose skin is soft and whose mind is strong.

He was going to love and protect her and never make her world revolve around him or any man. A person he would die for, but a person who wouldn't die for him because that's not how it's supposed to be. A woman should never have to die for a man.

And when she came, he wanted to be the first to hold her. That's why he insisted that all of them drive to Durban when the call came from Hlomu's sister. He wanted to be the first to look into her eyes but he also had to respect his brother.

When they all looked at him for a name, he didn't hesitate.

"Mthaniya. Her name is Mthaniya Zulu," he said as he held her in his arms.

Her eyes were exactly like his. She looked exactly like all of them and a large part of him wished she had come out looking like her mother, not Shopho.

With all that, his love for her can never be measured. It is infinite and uncapped. She reaches something in him that he never knew existed before she came.

It scares him sometimes that he'd love his brother's child more than he loves his own children. But his brother's children are his too and that makes it okay.

They share their love for scrambled egg with all three peppers. It's just that Zandile doesn't make it as well as Hlomu makes it. Maybe that's why Niya hasn't woken up and run down the stairs, straight into his arms.

They've been here, all the kids, for the past two nights. Mqhele wanted some alone time with Hlomu. He wanted to tell her everything. Xolie is angry and Gugu is gone. Naledi is happy to get a break from Shopho.

And so now he's sitting here at the table watching Zandile try to do her best with those scrambled eggs. He knows they'll come out tasting horrible and to be honest, he can fry his own eggs, but his wife's efforts count and so he eats whatever she feeds him. She knows she's a horrible cook but she still tries and he loves her for that.

"Please call the kids," she says.

They've been playing outside since they woke up. He stands up, opens the door slightly and whistles. They all come running in, Mabutho leading the pack.

They settle on the sitting room floor because Zandile has no time for children messing up her glass dining room table.

Two slices of burnt toast, scrambled eggs, bacon and mushrooms, that's what each plastic plate contains except for Phakeme's, who doesn't eat bacon.

By the way Mabutho is looking at his plate, Nkosana knows he is about to say something honest and offensive to Zandile.

"Mabutho, go wake Niya up," he tells him, just to get him out of the room.

The boy drops his plate quickly and races up the stairs.

By the time Zandile joins everyone in the sitting room, Sisekelo and the twins are already on their way to the kitchen to wash the dishes. They cleaned their plates because they are at that age where food is food, whether the mushrooms are floating in dodgy soup or not.

"Baba."

It's Mabutho. He is back, alone.

"Niya won't get up," he says.

Niya sleeps like her mother but there is no reason for her to not come downstairs and eat breakfast, especially when Nkosana is here.

Zandile puts her plate down and heads upstairs.

Nkosana goes back to his food and ignores the fact that Mabutho is still standing next to him with his eyes wide.

It is only when Zandile shouts his name that he realises that something is not right. He finds Zandile seated at the edge of the bed near Niya's feet.

He would ask if something is wrong if Zandile's face didn't already tell him that.

"Mthaniya, what's wrong?"

"She says she can't move her legs," Zandile says, looking very worried. How does a seven-year-old child who was perfectly fine when she went to sleep last night wake up not feeling her legs?

Nkosana doesn't believe it, not until he pinches her leg hard and she doesn't flinch.

He looks at Zandile, she's looking up at him.
Something is wrong, very wrong.

Mthaniya

DR MASETLA IS here with a team of specialists. Even Naledi is wearing scrubs, something she hasn't done in years.

When they arrived at the hospital, they didn't know how to explain it, except that there was something wrong with her. She couldn't walk and they didn't know how and why.

That the person at reception kept asking for the child's parents angered Nkosana even more. They've been here at this hospital many times before and surely they know them by now.

Mqhele and Hlomu arrived just when he was about to lose his temper and blow up. And then the rest of them. They all went inside the ward, looked at Niya, some touched her legs and then they were gone, all of them, including Mqhele.

Hlomu has been trying very hard to ignore her mother's question about where Mqhele is.

She would tell her if she wasn't so confused and shaken. She thought she knew this family. She thought it belonged to her and that she shaped who they have become. But last night, as Mqhele sat on the floor and she on that single chair, she realised she hasn't achieved much.

She may have gathered them and tied them together like a wet straw ties a pile of wood, but those who they really belong to have come back to claim them.

The call from Zandile came just as she was trying to process everything Mqhele told her last night. They had not slept at all. He came at midday and slept through the day. When he woke up in the afternoon, all he wanted was food.

He wasn't speaking or smiling. He just ate his food and told her, "I have things to tell you, a lot of things, but I need some time. We'll talk tonight."

After that, he went and locked himself in his sanctuary.

She thought that maybe he was playing his guitar. He does that to de-stress but no, he was sitting on the floor staring at it the whole time.

It is the only thing that belongs to Sphofo that they have. He wondered if he didn't make a mistake by bringing it here. Maybe he should have left it back in Ngudwini because if it wasn't for it, he wouldn't have become a murderer at only 14 years old.

He thought about many things, about his mother and about Hlomu and about how everything seemed to come back to being about him.

Why would Sphofo kill his own child? No, it's not possible, not his father. He knew him and he knows that his children were his weakness, just as their children are their weakness.

He tried to push away the thought about how it would be if his twin had lived, what his name would be and what he'd be like. But it kept coming and coming until he punched the wall so hard that his knuckles bled.

He's always found twins to be weird creatures.

Every time Langa is visiting, he can't stand the sight of him and Hlomu standing next to each other. When Langa and Msebe get sick at the same time or follow each other's sentences, it freaks him out, but they are his children so he tries as hard as he can to hide it.

He only left the sanctuary late at night and he knew he'd find Hlomu

waiting. He delayed their talk because he knew that she'd immediately come up with the next step. He wasn't sure if he was ready for that, to disturb this life that he had built, a life that is as close to normal as his eventful history can get.

He told her everything, from what people at the rank had been saying for years, to what Mzimela said, Mzizi's demands to the man on the South Coast and Nsikeneni and Mboni.

Some of it she wasn't hearing for the first time, but she got stuck on the part where the man said their children would turn out like them if they didn't fix what his grandfather did.

She pressed his head hard on her chest and told him to do what needed to be done.

"There's a reason, Mqhele. There's a reason why you are the one who took this family back to Mbuba."

He understood her.

"Remember how you didn't hesitate? You could have said no but you didn't," she said.

"I was doing it for you," he replied.

She wasn't going to argue with him. That would have been petty. So she brushed his head again and told him, "Go get your father's brothers, bury them where they should be buried and let's move on. I'm tired."

He knew what she meant by 'tired' and he didn't blame her.

Now she's sitting here looking at her daughter who, despite the fact that she has suddenly become a cripple, is playing with a cell phone like nothing is wrong.

Masetla has come back three times with no explanation except that her spine is intact.

"It must be a nerve somewhere," he keeps saying. But he isn't sure and they can see it in his eyes.

The last time he came, Hlomu's mother stood up again and led them in yet another prayer that sounded like a plea for a miracle.

Hlomu had to move her lips and pretend she was praying too lest

her mother caught her with her mouth closed and accuse her of being a heathen.

It was Zandile who paced up and down, with her mother screaming at the top of her voice and stopping a few times to lay her hands on Niya's legs.

When they were done, they went back to their seats and continued biting their nails.

Her mother announced that she had called mfundisi and that he was praying too. The same mfundisi who always asks when Hlomu's children are going to be baptised whenever they are visiting KwaMashu and their grandmother takes them to church.

"Langa says the driver is dropping him at the entrance," mother says. He's been pestering Hlomu to visit him in Ghana all year and she's been making excuses.

He got on the first flight he could. Hlomu is dreading his arrival because again, she's going to have to shrug when he asks what happened. She's going to be forced to open her mouth and speak, something she's been trying to avoid since she entered this ward in the morning.

"My love!" Niya screams, stretching her arms out.

Earlier the psychologist asked to speak with her alone but that didn't take even 15 minutes. Naledi came back to tell them that Niya isn't distressed or confused, and that was what puzzled the psychologist the most.

Langa goes for her legs too, as if something in the way they look can tell him whether they are working or not. He sits next to Zandile when the greetings and hugs are done. He wants to ask, Hlomu knows so she shrugs.

"Are they going to let us stay here all night? Because I'm not leaving you here," Langa says.

"You can stay here. This is my new room," Niya says.

It's still a basic hospital ward. Nobody has come with balloons or flowers because really...

They were told hours ago that normal visiting hours did not apply to them, and Hlomu has been insisting on everything being done to Niya by doctors to be explained thoroughly.

"It's bedtime," she whispers to Niya and kisses the top of her head.

"But this is not at home. There's no bedtime here," she argues.

"Niya!"

"But baba said he was coming..."

"He's not coming back. Just sleep!" Hlomu snaps.

She knows her mother and brother's eyes are on her so she doesn't look their direction. She focuses on getting Niya to sleep.

"What kind of a man leaves his wife and child in hospital and goes..."

"Mah, please stop, not now."

The last thing she needs is to explain herself, or Mqhele or this family and all the shit that it comes with.

"How is Gugu?" Langa asks, just to kill the tension.

That's another thing Hlomu doesn't want to talk about. The last thing Gugu said to her before she left was, "I can't anymore."

She didn't say anything in return but she thought about the many times she had said the same thing to herself, and yet she is still here.

She looks at Zandile for some kind of help.

"She's fine. She just needed to be away for a while," Zandile lies.

Gugu told her this was the end and she didn't even try to stop her because she too felt guilty about being part of the lie.

She didn't know anything about the Winchester Hills house being the same one that Nqobile worked at, or the woman from church being her real mother, but she knew why Nqoba married her and that is the one thing that hurt Gugu the most.

Nkosana walks in. He doesn't greet anyone or look around the room.

He goes straight to Hlomu and tells her he has to take Niya.

"To where?" Hlomu asks. She's already panicking.

"Mqhele spoke to you, didn't he?" Nkosana says.

He did but he didn't say anything about taking Niya or any of her

children anywhere.

"Where are you taking her Nkosana?"

"We're running out of time," he says, pulling the blankets off Niya.

It is only when he starts lifting her up that Hlomu sits up and grabs her. She doesn't speak and he doesn't either. They just look into each other's eyes for a while.

"No!" she says and holds Niya even tighter.

"Hlomu," Nkosana warns.

"I said no Nkosana!"

He walks around to her side of the bed. She shifts to the other side. Zandile stands up and grabs his arms.

"You're going to pull my child out of my arms Nkosana? I said no!"

Did you hear me? I said not my child!"

He ignores her and looks at Zandile.

"Zandile, get off me!" he snaps.

Langa gets up when a struggle ensues with Niya in the middle, Hlomu pulling half of her body and Nkosana the other.

Hlomu's mother is already standing behind the door, ready to block Nkosana from walking out with Niya.

"Where is Mqhele? Where is he?" Hlomu is screaming and fighting as hard as she can but it is clear she is going to lose. As she fights, she doesn't take her eyes off Nkosana's because she knows that as long as she's looking him in the eye, he will not get more aggressive.

In the end, he wins. He is carrying the crying Niya as he walks to the door.

"Mah, I respect you. Don't make me do something I'll regret," he says. Mother doesn't move.

"Where are you taking her?" she demands to know.

There's no answer, just a deep sigh and raging eyes.

She's pushed and almost falls on to the couch when the door is pushed open from outside. It's Qhawe.

"Let's go," he says.

The door is closed and they are gone. Langa would chase them down the hospital passage if Hlomu wasn't lying on the floor on her stomach wailing.

"Where is Mqhele? Someone call Mqhele!" she keeps saying.

Mqhele's phone has been off since noon.

Zandile follows them, shouting Nkosana's name.

"Hlomu, it's Xolie," Langa says, pressing the cell phone against her ear. She cries even louder and pushes Langa's hand away. She doesn't want to take the call.

Langa drops it but it rings again a second later. He thinks about answering but what will he say? She probably wants to ask about Niya.

"It's Xolie," he says, shoving the ringing phone in Zandile's face. She's just returned, breathing heavily as if she's been running.

"They took the children. They took all of them! They even went to Naledi's sister to take Mathongo!" she says.

She grabs the phone from Langa and goes into the corridor to answer it.

"Hlomu! Hlomu, get up! There's no time to be rolling on the floor when you don't know where your children are!"

"Mah, please," Langa says.

"No! It's time for her to be a woman, not this..." she says, pulling her up.

It takes a few minutes before she composes herself and tries to call Mqhele again. His phone is still off. She leaves a voice message in which she says nothing, except screaming.

She'd call Xolie because she's usually the first person she calls, but she knows.

Mbuba

THEY COULD HAVE gone back. Nomafulu wanted them to.

She said: "Why are we here, Sbobho? Why are we living in this tin? Like this, when you have a home?"

The tin was what she called the single room they were renting in Mkhumbane.

She hated it. She hated that there were too many people in that place, too many men who drowned in alcohol and thrived on violence because they had no dignity left. The white men had taken all of it and it was the women in the black men's lives who were at the receiving end of reclaiming that lost dignity.

Every morning, the men left before the sun came out and trekked to town to be treated like dogs. And when they came back in the evening, it was the women they returned to who were treated like dogs, by them.

Sbobho was never like that. He loved and respected his wife but she knew that part of him was slowly dying, and that the longer they stayed in Mkhumbane, the sooner he would turn out like the others. Like their neighbour who was once spotted by domestic workers hanging a white madam's bra and panties on the washing line in Glenwood.

Mkhize, the man living in the room next to theirs, was as tall as a streetlight, his skin as black as hair dye and before that other thing happened, he walked like there were diamonds on the soles of his feet.

But it happened. The white man came home to find his wife gyrating on top of him, moaning like she had never moaned for him before, and he didn't ask questions. He paraded him on the streets of the Westville suburbs, naked, at gunpoint.

The onlookers asked but the white man never dared to tell them the truth. He told them he was a thief. The gardener was a thief who stole his money and food and tried to organise a gang to rob his house.

That was the death of Mkhize as they knew him. He never looked for another job. He drank, fucked whoever was horny and said not a word to anyone about how he was a fetish to a brunette woman who got more punches than kisses from a husband who bought her expensive cars and gold necklaces.

Nomafulu didn't want such things to happen to her man, for his pride and honour to be taken away by people who, without the guns and their ability to unite through the hatred they possessed, were nothing but weak skins that could fry and burn under the Durban sky.

In fact, she would have personally walked to that building in Sherwood where Sbobho washed windows and mopped the floors if any of those green-eyed women tried anything with him. She would have gladly joined Nomthi in jail. Nomthi was the first friend she made when they arrived in Mkhumbane and was arrested in the middle of the night for almost strangling her madam's teenage son to death.

Nomafulu kept raising the issue of going back to Nsikeni and Sbobho kept ignoring her.

She said, "That is your home. They won't do anything to you. You will tell them why you did it, why you and your brother had to do it and they will understand."

But she didn't know the half of it. Sbobho without Nyanda was a ticking timebomb. Their mother knew. She may not have known what it

was exactly that Thulula did to make sure they lived but she knew he tied them together, buried them and planted a tree on top of them.

She told them on that day she pushed them out the door. She said, "Run but never, ever separate from each other."

But they did. Sopho swam across the river and waited at its bank. Nyanda never surfaced. He waited for hours and concluded he had drowned. It was the first time he had been alone in his life, and he had heard spend that life running and never looking back.

His landing in Ngudwini wasn't planned. It was the furthest he could run with a stolen guitar and a past he was trying to escape. He decided, and he had just turned 18, that in all his running and hiding, the one thing he wasn't going to do was change his name, lest he forgot who he was.

Ngudwini wasn't meant to be permanent. He was just passing by but Nomafu happened and for the first time, his roots were planted in another place.

She didn't hesitate when he asked her to run with him because she had been trying to get out too. That place was too small and too tame for a girl like her.

But as it turned out, a girl like her couldn't handle what was beyond Ngudwini either. The city lights and the demons that came with them would have either broken her or turned her into a monster. There was already one monster between them and as much as it fascinated her, it scared her too because she wanted it to live and a part of her wanted to fix it.

They arrived in Mbuba when she was 18 years old and six months' pregnant. Sopho had no choice. It was either they left that dreadful place or she left him and took the only thing he shared blood with.

The man with the mole over his left eye was a good friend. He was also from Mbuba and was all too happy to give them the land after his uncle had died and left it deserted.

Sopho had his own reservations about him. He didn't like the way he

looked at Nomafu and he didn't understand why they called each other *mizala* because his surname was Mzimela.

But he went ahead and took up the offer. He found comfort in knowing, certainly and completely, that if he ever found out that Mzimela was in any way after his wife's heart, he'd kill him without hesitation. It helped because Nomafu stopped nagging him about going back to Nsokeni and about his dead twin.

They named their first born Nkosana and laughed about how much he looked like his father. Life was good, humble but good and comfortable.

It wasn't long before they had Nqobizitha. He came with eyes bulging too, a voice exactly like his and a name directed at all the people who had tried to test Sopho, from Nsikeneni to Ngudwini.

He was still standing and he had conquered all his enemies.

It took three more years before Nomafu's belly started swelling again but it didn't make her skin glow and her breasts perky this time. It tortured her. It swelled her ankles and peeled her skin, hunched her back and blackened her tongue.

Sopho knew. He knew because it kept him awake at night. It kicked every time he entered the room and it brought many things, mostly his brother's presence and the smell of his mother's chest.

He told Nomafu, "I think there is two of them. That is why you are having so much difficulty."

Nomafu was decisive. She had always been.

"We can only keep one," she said.

"But we can't..."

"We can," she said firmly.

"This is our child, Nomafu. We can't just..."

"Unless you go and find out what your father did, we can only keep one," she said.

Sopho tried, he tried to fight and reason but he had already told Nomafu too much. The eight that died, how he and Nyanda got to live

and all the information that the people of Nsikeni volunteered to them as they were growing up. They told them about their crippled aunt who went to sleep one night and never woke up.

Nomafu wasn't going to take any risk. One had to go and that was that.

She chose the one that cried the loudest and with her eyes closed, she tightened her hands around the other one's throat herself.

Sbopho cried when he buried it, but it was raining hard so six-year-old Nkosana couldn't see the tears from the rain.

He tied the placentas together, dug and buried them, and planted the tree before taking his wife to hospital.

He named the chosen one Mqhele, a crown.

He looked no different from the other two but he was the one that reminded him of Nyanda the most. He smirked the way he did and his eyes moved like his used to do, and that scared Sbopho.

He loved him and he looked at him, but he could never get himself to hold him like he did with Nkosana and Nqobizitha. There was something about this baby that made the palms of his hands sweat. It gave him nightmares.

But he was the apple of his mother's eye. Nomafu loved the crown like he was her only child. She took him to that tree at every chance she got and she fed him from her breast longer than all their children.

Sbopho was only too happy when her belly started swelling again just three months later.

It wasn't that he got her pregnant on purpose but it was good that she was going to detach. She didn't. Soon after she popped Qhawe out, she went back to the one she loved the most.

... ☹ ...

"I should never have told you anything," the man says.

It's too late for that now. He should have run the moment they showed

up at his doorstep. In fact, he should have kept his mouth shut the first time he saw them.

The farm owners have not been here in weeks. Sometimes the oldest son comes by but it's only to give him his R500 salary for making sure these people who have claimed the farm don't go in and do as they please.

On the other hand, the claimants aren't even bothered because he is guarding their land, which will be returned to them anytime from now. He has the best of both worlds, but now these people who he thought were just random strangers are here to complicate things.

He thought they were good people when he met them but now, how they dragged him out of his house in the middle of the night, demanding that he takes them to the graves has completely changed his perception.

They weren't even carrying weapons. They were just aggressive even in the way they spoke.

"So what happens to us now? What happens to our claim?" he asks.

This is the most important thing to him. They can have their bones but only after he and his people get their land back.

"We just want what we want," Nqoba says.

"But there are trees over those graves," he says.

He knows this could backfire on him because they might hurt him when they get there and find no trees. The trees were there initially, for years, but they were all cut down when the white man wanted to use the space for a borehole. That was when they found the graves. They found the first set of bones, the second and the third before they decided to stop digging.

They didn't tell the white man what they had found. They would have had the deaf old woman not told them whose bones those were. She told them to put them back and rebury them. They did and then lied that they couldn't dig deeper.

It took years before the decision to claim the land back and every grave counted.

Nobody expected that these people would come back. Nobody knew they existed and even those who knew about them have never thought to connect them to Thulula. But the deaf old woman knew. She knew the first time she saw a face in the newspaper that the blood of the demons her mother had come home one morning and told her about was still out there.

"They died, again. I'm not going back there," her mother had said that night.

She was the midwife who had delivered many healthy, bouncing babies before and she was tired of putting corpses on Mthaniya's chest.

But the deaf woman knew they'd come back, and they did. They found her in a state of dementia but her mind cleared for a moment, and then went back to flying crocodiles who eat feathers and talk to goats.

It is Qhawe who picks up the first pick. Nobody told him where to start digging but he knows what lies underneath the pile of soil. It is calling him and he is digging fast because he is desperate to get to it.

"How many are here?" Nkosana asks the man.

"Nine. The father was also buried here. The mother was never buried."

They already know that, that thing about history repeating itself and to be honest, they find it more annoying than anything else.

If it wasn't for their children, they wouldn't bother.

"Oh, and the cripple, I heard her brother fetched her bones and reburied her here too. She was just a child though, nine or so," the man says.

His problem is that he likes volunteering information but also, he has spent his life thinking the whole thing was nothing but a tale the elders used to scare them.

They don't say anything. They dig and dig until the first skull surfaces. "It must be Sphoph's father. It's big," Qhawe says.

... ☺ ...

"Naledi, sit down."

"I'm not going to sit down, Naledi. Not when I don't know where they took my children."

"They went to dig up the graves. That's the only explanation," Hlomu says.

"Where?" Naledi asks.

"I don't know the place. It's somewhere near Stanger," Hlomu says.

"So why are we sitting here? Let's go there," Gugu says.

"We can't just drive to some place we don't know in the middle of the night..."

"It's easy for you to say, Zandile. Your children are grown men," Xolie says.

"They wouldn't hurt them, would they?" Naledi asks, looking at Hlomu.

Hlomu shakes her head but the uncertainty is written all over her face. The fact is she knows them and what their children mean to them, but she hasn't sat down and thought about how much they would sacrifice for them because really, who knows how far they would go?

They came to Mbuba straight from hospital.

First, it was Naledi who came running into the ward, looking like she was about to have an anxiety attack. She tried to call Qhawe but his phone was off. She tried calling all of them.

And then it was Gugu. Mqoqi arrived at the house she's renting in Ballito and asked to take Hlangu somewhere. She refused because first of all, how did he find her and why would he want to take her child anywhere when she clearly told them to leave her alone?

At first he sounded like he was begging and then his face turned to the one Nqoba always had when he was still trash of a husband. She knew there and then that this man had not come in peace. Hlangu was already in his arms and even Gugu's cries didn't stop Mqoqi from putting her child in the car and driving off with him.

She would have called the police but she learned a long time ago that

police are not exactly who you go to when shit hits the fan in this family. She called 'Tony,' the only person she can talk to these days, but he ignored her call, something he never does.

He listens to her and he always gives her sound advice, but he doesn't know half of it. Sometimes she wants to tell him everything but Nqoba is still the father of her child and she will always protect him.

The first call she made was to Hlomu because if anyone was going to know what was happening, it was her. But the phone was answered by Langa and she could hear Hlomu wailing in the background. She called Zandile and all she said was, "They took all the kids. We are going to Mbuba now."

She was the first to arrive. There was nobody in the yard and the house was dark so she decided to wait outside the gate. As to how she does not have the keys, she does not know. But honestly, she has never connected with this place. She detests the heaviness of it on her shoulders.

They found her parked outside and without asking, she could see by Xolie's intensity and Naledi's anxiety that whatever it was, it was bigger than she thought.

Hlomu was the one who sat them down and filled them in on this weird story about what their husbands have been doing for the past three months. Stories about dead twins and a man Gugu has never heard of.

"They are not going to hurt the kids, are they?" Naledi asked again.

Nobody answered her because as much as all of them know that those men would die for their children, they know the monsters they open their thighs for almost every night.

And so they wait because they know that whatever they do, they will end up here, under that tree where they sit and laugh and drink beer all day.

Xolie and Hlomu sat here, on this couch, like this on that day many years ago when they agreed that whoever shot and killed Oleta and Mvelo should be killed. They knew it was going to happen and they didn't care how it was going to be done.

Now they sit wondering if their own children will come back home. "So what happens after they bury everyone here?" Gugu asks. "We will move on. Hopefully we will be normal people," Zandile says. She knows none of them buy that, not after everything they have lived through.

The lights outside are what make all them rush to the door. They are about to run out when Sambulo pushes all of them inside, locks the door and puts the keys in his pockets.

He avoids looking at Xolie and walks to the kitchen, grabs something wrapped in a newspaper from the cupboard and walks back to the door. "Sambulo!"

He ignores whoever is calling his name.

They reach the door before he does.

"Move away," he says.

They don't.

"You are making this difficult. We just want to do what we have to do and it will all be over," he says.

They don't move.

"The kids are fine. They are outside," he says.

They don't move.

"Sambulo!" a voice says from outside. It is hoarse. It is Nqoba's.

It won't be long before the brothers figure out that something is wrong. Sambulo could easily walk out of this house but he wouldn't dare put his hands on any of these five women blocking the door in front of him. His brothers would kill him for that.

"If you do anything to the children, Sambulo, I will set this house on fire and I will kill you, all of you!" Xolie says angrily.

He shakes his head.

"We are going to bury the bones, that's all. We can't do it without them, all of them, otherwise it will be pointless," he says.

Hlomu is the first to slowly move away from the door. The other four don't budge.

She is looking down at her feet and if her hands weren't already shaking, she'd have enough strength to convince the others to move too.

"We don't have much time, Naledi. Please let me go. Let me do this," he says.

He has not once addressed or looked at his own wife because he knows that they are past that stage where he can soften her. There has been a lot, way too much in the past three months and maybe they will be able to fix it in future, but now he has to do this. And whatever mirrors he breaks while doing it, do not matter. What he can't and will never have is his children turning out like him.

"Sambulo."

It's Hlomu. She's still leaning against the wall, looking down at her feet.

"You can't do it, not tonight," she says.

Sambulo is tired of this. He will get out of this house through the window if he has to and frankly, he is getting annoyed.

"Bafo!" Mpande says. He came in through the kitchen door, which they all thought was locked. Sambulo shrugs helplessly.

"We don't have time ndoda," Mpande says urgently.

"You can't," Hlomu says in a low voice.

They would stand here and entertain her stubbornness, but they don't have time for that, not today. That's why they told Mqhele to stay far away from wherever she is because they know he gets stupid around her.

The fact that instead of staying in Joburg, these wives decided to drive all the way here to fight them is infuriating, as if they would ever harm their children in any way.

"Mpande, wait!" Hlomu says.

He stops but he doesn't plan on listening to whatever she has to say for more than two seconds.

"You can't do it, not tonight. You have to call Thando," she says.

He hasn't heard that name in a long time. In fact, he had forgotten about her.

"Thando?"

"Yes," Hlomu says.

"Why?"

"Call her," she says.

If she could, she would tell him everything right now but this isn't the right time, not when they are like this. Now all she can hope for is that Zandile will have her back when the time comes to face the consequences of what they did together.

Mpande and Nqoba leave the room but the wives know some of them, if not all of them, will walk back in here any time from now to ask why Thando is even a factor in this.

"Thando?" Naledi asks.

She met her briefly but she remembers her clearly.

"Hlomu, please don't tell me," Zandile says, with her hands over her head.

"She called three days ago. Twins. Is there wine in this house?" Hlomu asks, walking to the kitchen.

Thando

"I JUST WANT to know why. Why Mahlomu?"

He's been asking this damn question over and over again. It should be clear to him now that he won't get a straight answer, not when these five women have formed a united front and it is clear that nothing anybody can say will change that.

It wasn't really planned. Zandile and Hlomu knew they were in shit, Xolie was willing to be in shit with them, and Gugu and Naledi decided they were going to be in shit with them too when they looked at their faces and knew there was more to it than what it seemed like.

They've been sitting here, like this, on this four-seater couch for more than two hours with these men sitting across them, stunned.

Mqhele wants to know why. Qhawe cannot believe what he is hearing, and Nkosana, Mqoqi and Mpande got in the car and drove to Pretoria immediately after Hlomu gave them Thando's numbers and Mpande spoke to her.

Zandile has been explaining that they didn't know anything about Thando having Mpande's children, not until a few days ago. That being heard and understood, Mqhele still wants to know why they did what

they did.

They won't tell him. They will never tell anyone. But they didn't have enough time to come up with a solid lie so they have stuck to saying, "Her intentions were not good," and that's it.

When all the brothers walked in, eyes wide, they did not expect this. "Thando has children. They are twins." That was all Hlomu said, followed by a deep sigh.

It was in her mind but she didn't say it, she wouldn't dare. Whether the children are Mpande's or Ntsika's will be discussed between her and Zandile in future, far away from these people.

"Naledi," Qhawe says.

She would say something if she had a clue what was going on, except that Hlomu and Zandile paid Thando to disappear and now she's back with mysterious children, she doesn't know anything more. But she chose to sit on this side of the room because it was the right thing to do. She had to support the wives because in this family, sometimes there are sides and you have to be loyal to one.

"You couldn't tell me Hlomu? Not even me?" Mqhele asks.

"There was too much going on. I thought..."

He doesn't let her finish. He stands up and walks out the door with the pack of cigarettes already out of his pocket and in his hand.

It's a good thing Ntsika is not here. Hlomu ordered him to leave with the kids and he didn't protest, not after he heard the name Thando. But Hlomu told him to go because she knew he would want to protect her and that meant him confessing to what he did.

And so they are here, waiting to hear from Nkosana. Maybe they will come back with those children and maybe not, depending on why Thando kept quiet about it all these years.

"Did you know she was here this whole time?" Sambulo asks.

Hlomu and Zandile look at each other. They've been doing that since this interrogation started, looking at each other first before one of them answers.

"No, she only called three days ago, and only because one of the twins has been sick," Hlomu says.

He stands up and goes outside too, surely to smoke and try to make sense of how these women have managed to lie to them all these years.

Now the wives are alone in this room.

"Why?" Xolie asks. This is the only time she can try to at least get an idea of why she is sitting here at the crack of dawn, being interrogated about something she had nothing to do with.

"She wasn't here for Mpande. She didn't hesitate taking that money and leaving for a second."

"But Hlomu..."

"No, Xolie, you of all people should not be judging me."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means what you and I know, what we have known since we arrived in this family. We do whatever it takes to keep it together. That is why you smash glasses against walls. That is why I drink at 6am."

The moment she arrives back in Joburg, she's firing Ma-Sbisi, Xolie has just decided. That the boys love her is shit she doesn't care about anymore. The woman has no respect, going around telling people her business like she doesn't know where her job description begins and ends. "Go back to the lounge," Mqhele says when he meets Naledi in the passage.

They were both rushing to the bedroom where all the children have been placed. Mathongo is crying hysterically, which he does when he wakes up every morning.

"You're not allowed to be with them, not until we are done," he says.

"I'm not allowed to touch my own child Mqhele?"

He opens the bedroom door, rushes inside and locks it behind him. It takes a few seconds before Mathongo stops crying.

She knew when she said those vows two years ago that she was definitely going to experience challenges but she never imagined them to be this dark and weird.

She presses her back hard against the wall and slides down to the floor. With her hands on her cheeks, she remembers the Qhawe who bought her flowers and gave her a Maserati. The man who bought her a mansion and climbed over fences just so he could apologise for his stupidity. This man, as complicated as he is, is like a tattoo she can never erase. She loves him and it pains her that she knows, without a doubt, that nothing will ever change that.

There are things, a lot of things from cars to houses to millions to anything she has ever wished for, but none of them matter at this moment. This shit here is stuff no one can fix with money.

"MaMontsho," Mqhele says, looking down at her on the floor.

He locks the bedroom door before standing in front of her and reaching out his hand to help her up. She doesn't accept it, but she gets up anyway and goes back to the lounge.

Nkosana has not called and the sun is already out, so there will be no burying of bones today.

"Shouldn't we be making traditional beer?" Zandile asks.

This is something they have all thought about, but they are in no mood to be wifely when they are being treated like outsiders in their own family.

"After we are done," Mqhele says. They didn't see him come in.

"You were supposed to come here in three days, but here you are," he says, answers his ringing phone and leaves the lounge.

All of them look at Hlomu. She rolls her eyes. Mqhele's attitude is the least of her problems. All she wants to know is why Thando decided to come back now and if they are going to bring the children here or not.

About what she and Zandile did, surely these men can forgive them. They of all people know that they wouldn't do something like this without a valid reason.

"Hlomu, Mqoqi is at our house. Do you need anything?" he asks as he walks back in.

"More clothes for the kids." That's all she says.

"Ask MaMnguni to pack them. Thando will be staying at our house since she can't come here," he says.

Hlomu opens her mouth to say something but Xolie hushes her.

"She gave them the kids?" Naledi asks.

All the other wives look at her and she knows she's just asked a dumb question.

She has another question but she'll hold it for now because wow... this is a lot.

... ☺ ...

"Bafo."

He doesn't move his eyes away from them.

This is what he's been doing since they walked into that cheap lodge near Southgate, staring at these two children he didn't know he had until a few hours ago.

"Mpande, we have to leave now. Are we going to leave her like this?" Mqoqi says.

Taking the twins from her was never up for discussion. They were going to take them whether she agreed or not, but leaving her here weeping like this is too much.

"At least talk to her. Assure her that we will bring them back," Mqoqi says. He's been trying to reason with his brother since they got here, especially because Mpande has made it clear that he blames Thando for all of this.

"I went to her. I went all the way to Botswana to find her and beg her to come back, and she didn't tell me she was pregnant. How the fuck am I supposed to excuse her in all of this?"

They didn't have an answer, so they did what they came here to do, drove her to Mqhele's house and left two men outside to make sure she didn't leave.

They asked about why she accepted the money and all she said was

that she needed it. As much as she resents Hlomu for what she did, she knows she can never tell the truth.

She would never have come back here was it not for her child. Her life is good back where she comes from. She loves her children and she has managed to hide them, to keep her life private from outsiders.

It was easier when her mother was still alive, but now she's dead and Thando is all alone in a country she has never considered to be her home.

She could have held out for a while longer, with her mother's money and the house. She could have stayed there until the boys were older and continued with her baking business.

But Owi would not have survived, she knows that. He had always been a happy, active child until three months ago...

All she wanted was to get him proper healthcare, specialists and all that, and the only way she could do that was by asking Hlomu for more money. Mpande, or Ntsika for that matter, didn't have to find out. She was going to do what she came here to do and go back to Botswana quietly.

But now this...

"We'll be back in a few days. You should be fine here," Mqoqi says to her.

He is the last one to leave the house and as hectic as things are, he still feels sorry for this woman whose life, he knows, is about to be complicated.

The twins are on the backseat with Mpande, and he is still staring at them, the frail one and the healthy one.

"She named my children Owami and Olwami, yin'leyo mfethu?" Mpande says.

Under normal circumstances that would have been funny but not now. It is met by silence.

Mqoqi, while frantically looking for something in the cubbyhole, cannot help but worry about how Nkosana has been too quiet and insists on being the one driving since they left Mbuba.

He knows that there is more to why Thando was paid to disappear.

That is why he can't bring himself to be mad at Hlomu and Zandile.
 "Does this thing work?" Mqoqi asks, inspecting the charger cable he has just fished out of the cubbyhole.

"It does. Whose phone is that?" Nkosana asks.

"I found it in one of the kitchen drawers. It must be Hlomu's or Mqhele's old phone," he says, pressing it a few times to check if it is charging.

He dropped his only phone in the water when they were crossing to eMaweleni last night, and he isn't about to do that soaking it in rice thing.
 "I'll put my sim card in here and use this until I have time to buy a new phone," he says.

The twins are already sleeping and Mpande is sitting looking out the window.

"They need names," he says and continues looking out the window.

He wonders what he would have done had Thando told her about being pregnant. Maybe he would have committed to her, maybe not. He thinks about Ndoni and how he is going to tell her this, if she will accept it or if she will use it as her way out of their relationship, which has been dragging on and on.

He will deal with Thando later. He is sure of that. After what she did to him, he doesn't care what his brothers think. These kids are not going back to Botswana and that's that.

"Eyi Mqoqi? Are you selling nyaope now?" Nkosana says.

"No. I have people in my life, unlike you," he answers.

The phone has been beeping with incoming messages since he switched it on not more than a minute ago.

"This is Hlomu's old phone," he says. He knows this because the screensaver is a picture of her and Langa.

Everyone changes their phone every two or three years but not Hlomu. She keeps hers until they literally die on her, and she never changes her phone number.

The first two SMSs are notifying him about a voicemail from Thobi.

He's been avoiding her lately.

There's a couple of voicemails from numbers he doesn't recognise, a text from Nandi about one of the truck drivers being off sick, something about an event at the cigar lounge he frequents and another from a bookstore about a clearance sale.

The rest of the messages are old and he realises they aren't his as he goes through them.

He'd put the phone away right now, but there's nothing else to do in this car with two people who aren't interested in talking. They still have hours to drive, so he might as well.

The messages date back to four years ago when Hlomu was using this phone.

There's one from Langa gossiping about some family member. He skips to the next one. It's also from Langa complaining about Andy and his lack of romance.

There are more, conversations with Thobi, Zaba, Lethu... there isn't really anything in them, but it fascinates him how girls can make conversation about pretty much anything under the sun.

His eyes get stuck on the one that was not replied to, especially because there is a red dot right next to the number, showing that it was blocked.

"It's been a while. I found out today that your friend Thobi is dating the owner of that club, imagine, the odds :-)) I know for you it was a mistake but for me it will remain one of the best nights of my life. We will always have Ballito. PS. Your daughter is beautiful. A part of me was hoping that... anyway, all the best on your marriage. You really do love him. I understand and I'm letting you go."

He reads the message five times and he still can't believe any of it. Maybe it was sent to a wrong number. That's what he is thinking. But there's Thobi's name it, and Thobi is dating that old white businessman

who owns a couple of restaurants and clubs in Ballito.

But also, it doesn't make sense...

"Ndoda, kwenzenjani?" Nkosana says.

He looks at him, and then back at the SMS, and then at him.

"I'm fine bafo. I've just remembered. How are we going to get Sbani's children?" he lies.

Nkosana doesn't answer. Instead he stares ahead at the road in front of him because that is what has been bothering him all along. He has to get Sbani's children, that he has to do. It's just that he's tired of killing the Ngqulunga people, and they are always trying to get in his way.

Mqoqi is still holding the phone in his hand, the mysterious SMS still staring back at him. He unblocks the number and saves it as Msunu.

Sbani

WITH HIM, IT'S not so much about what he has gone through in this life but what he has seen.

He could have pulled Zakithi away from that dirty old man but he didn't. He stood there and watched. He didn't wait for her to finish because he didn't want that thing to be between them. He saw her, but she didn't see him.

He watched her press that pillow hard on that old shit's face and he couldn't understand the feeling he himself was feeling. It was wrong that he wanted to say to her, "Press harder." He knew that but it still didn't change the fact that it was what he wanted.

If he had to be honest, he went inside that house to kill his grandfather. It ate him up that he was the reason his mother ended up in jail, but it ate him up even more that he had accepted sweets from that man.

It was their secret, Zandile's father, he and Lwandle. Every time there was a function in Mbuba, he would come, and then when the yard was too crowded and their fathers were too busy to pay attention, the old man would call them to the back of the house and give them a packet of butterscotch sweets, a whole packet.

They were just little boys and the old man would look into their eyes and brush their heads with his coarse, wrinkled hands.

They didn't know who he was, not until their mother came back. He didn't talk much but the look in his eyes always said he was happy to see them. Sometimes they'd catch him staring at them, but he'd immediately look away.

The packet of sweets they would hide under the mattress and share it with Mvelo late at night when they were alone in their bedroom in the main house.

They never told mami or their father about their moments with the old man. He never told them to keep it a secret, but they just knew they shouldn't tell.

It was that anger and guilt and the feeling of being used that had Sbani storming out of Nokhthula's house that night and driving straight to the Ngcobo house. He heard what Nokhthula's mother said and he thought he owed it to his mother to get her justice.

The part about Nkosana kneeling for that man... sigh. That he didn't even want to think about. It had him sweating and grinding his teeth.

Lwandle stayed in the car. He was on his phone and didn't pay attention when Sbani said he'd left something there.

There were still drunkards in the yard, singing and drinking what was left of the day's alcohol.

He walked in unnoticed, not that he tried to hide from anyone.

When he heard the sounds down the passage, he thought the old man was snoring and it irritated him a bit that he'd have to end him in his sleep because he really did want to look him in the eye when he took his last breath.

But it wasn't snoring he found. It was Zakithi wearing a taffeta dress and flying doek. She wasn't even standing over him. She was sitting on the bed, pressing the pillow down over the old man's face with her elbow.

He was still alive because his arms were moving and he was trying hard to pull up his knees, as bony and crooked as they were.

Zakithi's eyes weren't looking anywhere in particular, maybe at the wall or mirror or maybe just nowhere, but they were open and aware. She was talking, to herself maybe or to the dying man twitching underneath her elbow.

Sbani was desperate to hear what she was saying, but he couldn't risk pushing the door open any wider lest she saw him and stopped.

The feet and knees stopped moving before the arms. All that was left were the sounds but he knew there was no life left in that dirty old man.

He walked out of the house, straight to the car and drove the opposite direction from home. They were going to look for Nkosana. They didn't know where but they knew they had to find him.

He thought he saw Zandile's car driving in the opposite direction but he doubted it was her in it. They did not expect her to leave home after everything that happened earlier that day.

He's never told anyone about that night, not even Lwandle or Thabitha. Sometimes he drinks to forget about things like Mvelo's dead face, things like the night he opened that room looking for his father only to be met by a dead man tied to a chair. He never told anyone about that, just as he never said a word about not wanting to go to boarding school at only 11 years old to again have to fend for himself when he had just found mami. Things that had him tossing and turning since then until now, like how mami's eyes sometimes look defeated but light up when she sees him, as if he is the only thing keeping her here. His father loves him wholeheartedly but ever since he was a little boy he knew. He could see it the moment he walked in that there was blood in his aura, his eyes would say it out loud. And so, as a motherless boy with two motherless boys look up to him, he'd put his arm around both of them and pull them close. They needed to be protected and protection was all he could offer.

He drinks because he wants to suppress all those things, but sometimes when he is drunk, he wants to talk about it to those men at the shebeen because with them, he isn't sitting on any pedestal. He is no genius, his education means nothing to them and he is no perfect young man. He

is trash, a failure who drinks himself into a stupor and passes out on the floor in his own vomit. He is just like them, all of them. But they never listen. They just hand him a beer and tell him uyahhema.

His children, maybe they would have healed him had they lived. He would have kept them away from his father's and Thabitha's family. He would have left the country if it was necessary.

Now he is here, carrying them in a plastic bag. He went and got them because he did what his father has been telling him to do for the past two years. Be a man.

He won't tell him or anyone what he did to get the bones but he did and he is going to rehab after this.

He sits under that same tree with his knees up and the black garbage bag at his feet. He hasn't eaten or drunk anything since last night.

He watches the car approaching and he knows the first thing his father will ask is what is in the bag, and maybe, just maybe, when he opens the bag and shows him the bones of his grandchildren, he will understand why he had to crumble into pieces before picking himself up and starting again.

Mqoqi is the first to climb out of the car and walk around to the backseat. He pulls out a child, about five years old or so. Mpande climbs out with another one.

Nkosana furiously walks straight to the tree. He must think he is drunk, again.

"What's in the bag?" he asks.

"My children," Sbani says.

He knows the frown on his father's face, and his father knows the frown on his son's face.

"I went and got them. Let's do this and move on with our lives."

With that, they follow each other to the rondavel where the sacks have been sitting since last night. They are all creamish-white, except the one with Nyanda's bones. It is yellow with a small print of the Swaziland flag and 'Maize Meal' written in bold, black letters.

It will be dark soon, then they can start digging.
The process of making traditional beer will start tomorrow and goats will be slaughtered as soon as it's brewed.
And then it will be all over.

Ballito

NOBODY QUESTIONED WHY he left today when the man has to be here only tomorrow afternoon.

He volunteered and he insisted on going alone because he needed to think, which wasn't entirely a lie because that's what he's been doing throughout this drive from Greytown to Durban.

They all think it will soon be over, once the man arrives in Mbuba and does what needs to be done. Then they will all go back to their houses and continue with their good lives.

That's what the man told them when they called him about Niya. He said, "You have to act quickly. Do what I told you to do and everything will be fine after that."

That is why they went crazy going around grabbing their children from their mothers. They decided there was no time to explain or negotiate with them, that they'd apologise later.

Niya stood up and walked the moment they entered the Mbuba house.

But Mqoqi has found himself in an even bigger problem because he knows his brother and how he operates.

They all hope that after this, they will have more conscience, more regard for human life and if anything, more peace.

But Mqoqi knows his brother, no reburying of bones or slaughtering of goats will stop him from skinning alive anyone who messes with Hlomu.

He'd slaughter Hlomu too, and most probably himself.

He parks on the pavement a few metres away from the gate and sends a text for her to come out.

"Drive in, the coast is clear," she replies.

This is low, even for him, but he drives in anyway because the gate is already sliding open.

He's only ever been here twice but this is the first time he has entered the yard of this man's house because he may be trash, and he has accepted that about himself, but he still has some respect for the poor guy.

He sees her standing upstairs on the balcony outside what he believes is the main bedroom.

She's wearing a short, black satin robe, probably with lingerie underneath because he can see her whole left thigh from here.

He doesn't want to come inside so he parks at the end of the driveway and waits in the car.

She gives up eventually and walks back inside the house.

"You can come in. He's overseas," she says, standing outside his car window.

But he unlocks the car instead and when she stands still, he gets out.

"What's going on?" she asks.

She can always tell by his body language.

He ignored her for a week and now he's here, he didn't even tell her he was coming until he was passing the Marianhill tollgate.

"What's going on? Is Hlomu okay?" she asks, because, apart from what is between them, Hlomu is their only connection.

He nods and lights a cigarette.

"We are not in a relationship Mqoqi. You can't just rock up," she says.

as if to warn him. They have an arrangement. It's always been like that. He likes it like that but this is important.

He thinks of her as a friend more than anything. It's the faults in her being that fascinate him. But love has never come. Not that he's never tried to find it in her. He has, as awkward as it would be to bring her home to his family. But it has never come.

She too is not trying to find it.

Their first one-night stand was at Hlomu's 30th birthday party all those years ago. He had just had a moment with Hlomu that confirmed to him that he still loved her like he did the first time he saw her in the Joburg CBD.

It wasn't planned. They just happened to lock eyes, share a joke and one thing led to another.

They had known each other for a long time but there wasn't anything, no attraction whatsoever. From the outset, Hlomu had made it clear to her friends that the Zulu brothers were off limits. She didn't want to have to be caught in between when things got sour.

"Why are you here Mqoqi?"

She knows now that this is serious because he hasn't tried to kiss her or spank her ass since they've been standing here. He's quiet. She sighs and pulls him by hand to sit on the ground, behind his car.

"You freak me out when you're like this. I like the 'in control' Mqoqi better."

It's meant to be a joke, but he doesn't laugh.

"So what's the story?" she asks.

"What happened in Ballito?"

She's confused. They are in Ballito right now, so what does he mean?

He throws the cigarette stub on the grass and folds his arms across his chest. All of a sudden this whole thing is making him angry, and Thobi has never seen him angry, just frustrated and annoyed sometimes.

She is one of the people who believe he wouldn't hurt a fly, as crazy as he is. It's always good to have someone who believes you are a good

person, an innocent, harmless human when in fact you are deadly. But he's not here for that, not tonight.

"What happened in Ballito Thobi? You took Hlomu to Ballito. What happened that night?" he asks.

Thobi remembers that night, more so because it was the only time she went out with her friend without scary men guarding them and without Mqhele calling every five minutes. They even drove in her car, a strange thing considering it was not bulletproof or all that shit she thought was petty.

"That was years ago Mqoqi. What is this about?"

"Tell me what happened."

She really thought they were going to have steamy sex. That's what she was hoping for, not this whining about her taking Hlomu to a restaurant years ago.

But she knows how stubborn he is.

"Okay, I picked her up from KwaMashu, we drove here, the restaurant is two streets away from here..."

"And then?"

"And then we had drinks and dinner and..."

"What happened after you bumped into Sandile?"

She looks at him and frowns.

"I'm listening..."

She'd forgotten that they had bumped into him.

"He came to us but Hlomu brushed him off and he left."

He's looking at her, and she knows he wants more details than that.

"Hlomu is... You know how she is," she says and shrugs.

"So I went to speak to this guy I know from way back and left her at the table. She was fine. She was just not as social as I was, as usual, but she had her glass of wine there and some biltong so..."

"Did she go anywhere while you were doing whatever you were doing?"

She looks ahead of her, as if thinking hard, and then she remembers.

"I'm not sure. She went to get ice cream but she spilled it on her dress and someone gave her a T-shirt."

She stops talking because she doesn't like where this is going. She looks at him and she knows she can't say anything more. She needs to call Hlomu. She should have thought of this the moment Sandile's name came up.

"The T-shirt was given to her by one of the waiters. I asked for it because her dress was white and the stain was big."

Mqoqi has stood up and is opening the car door.

She wants to convince him. She's lying but he doesn't know what happened so there is no reason for him to not believe her. He's already started the car by the time she's up on her feet.

"Mqoqi open the window!"

He doesn't. She has no choice but to open the gate when he starts hooting frantically.

"Don't call Hlomu," he texts her, as she throws herself on the bed. How could she not have suspected anything?

She's already tried calling Hlomu three times but her phone goes straight to voicemail.

... ☹ ...

If someone were to ask him why he's doing this, he'd not have an answer because he too doesn't know whether it is his loyalty to his brother or his love for Hlomu that led him here.

He wanted to put him on the bike across the highway, but he deserves the chair because this is personal. He touched his family and anyone who does that ends on that chair.

But this is complicated. This is not team work. It is something he has to deal with, alone.

What is disappointing though is that he found him here. He would have preferred a more colourful confrontation than to be staring at a man

being killed by his own testicles.

He went to find his house first and parked outside, but his wife's location history said she'd been coming here every day so he figured msunu must be sick or something.

It's not normal to be visiting someone in a hospice after midnight but MaZulu did a good job selling him to her 'clients', who made him and Mpande break into people's houses through windows at night and steal anything from TVs to meat in the freezer.

He didn't enter this hospice through the front door because he knows how seriously security guards take their jobs. It was through the fire escape and it led him straight to this room.

There are no pipes or machines or all those things that keep people whose soul is long dead alive. He's just lying here, breathing and scrawny and grey.

He's going to die, that Mqoqi knows, but he's come all the way here so he might as well do what he came for.

He waits, but still msunu doesn't wake up and Mqoqi doesn't have time because he has to be in Margate by morning. So he pinches him and when that doesn't help, he slaps him hard on the face.

His hand hurts. It landed on that sharp cheekbone.

Good, he's awake.

"Khabazela!" he greets.

Sandile coughs and looks around the room.

Mqoqi knows this is going to be harder than he anticipated because what's he going to do with a breathing corpse?

"Lale?" he says.

"No, she is at home with your daughter,"

For a moment Sandile looks like he is falling asleep again but a slap across his face brings him to life again.

He stopped chemotherapy a month ago. His wife, Nokwanda, begged him to try harder but he had decided that leaving this earth is better than living this life in pain.

He sent that message to Hlomu soon after he was diagnosed with prostate cancer because he wanted to tie up loose ends. It made sense that he'd want to do that with her, she is a reminder of his, of his heyday where he could do what he wanted, when he wanted.

He was always the type to test limits. When he heard that she was pregnant, he hoped that Niya was his, not because he wanted to be killed by some taxi-owner thug but because it would be interesting. That's if he had lived to see another day.

To him, Hlomu was always that girl he could place in all of his life stages. He was barely a man when they started dating and their paths kept crossing throughout his life, in his 20s and 30s, and now on his deathbed. Something always seemed to bring them together.

However, what he doesn't understand is why it is not Hlomu sitting here by his bedside instead of this man.

"Which one are you?" he asks, in between heavy breathing.

"I'm the one who's here. Did I not tell you to stay away from her?"

Now he knows which one it is. It's that bloody testosterone-crazy thug of a kid who caused a scene at Gateway Mall when he tried to hug Hlomu.

If it wasn't that he knew the kid had seven brothers, he would have taken him on.

"What do you want?" he asks.

This is a risky attitude for a defenseless man to have.

"Did they tell you how long you have...?" Mqoqi asks.

No normal person would ever ask this question.

"What do you want?" Sandile asks again, because he can maintain this attitude. He has nothing to lose except his life, the end of which could be any time between now and next week.

He has said his goodbyes, accepted his fate and made sure that his family will be taken care of financially.

"What happened in Ballito?" Mqoqi asks.

"What does it have to do with you? I know you are not Mqhele,"

"Did you fuck her?" Mqoqi asks.

He doesn't want to know the answer but that's why he came here, isn't it?

There's a slight smile on Sandile's face. His teeth are yellow.

"Hlomu is not a woman you fuck. She's the type of woman you take your time with, whisper sweet things in her ear as she comes and place her head on your chest when you're done. She's the type you want to run away with, the one you want to love and keep forever. Clearly your brother doesn't know this."

"I asked you if you fucked her Mkhize!"

"Have you asked her the same question Mageba?"

Where does a man who was half-dead 20 minutes ago find such confidence?

When he left Mbuba to 'deal' with this, Mqoqi never imagined it would go down this way. He was going to have the upper hand and maybe, just maybe, he would have put him on the bike. But this doesn't give him the kicks.

"I'll let you die in peace but you've pissed me off and I know Lale will need a shoulder to cry on when you're dead."

"Zulu, stay away from my..."

"You won't last a week," Mqoqi says and walks out of the room without looking back. Mqhele will never know about this and neither will Hlomu.

He opens the SMS again and deletes it this time, along with Msunu's numbers.

Now he has to drive to the South Coast to fetch that man who has promised to turn him into a good person, for once in his adult life.

He wants to stay away from Thobi, get over his feelings for Hlomu and tell everyone what he did with Amanda.

Three women are complicating his life and none of them is his.

As to how Hlomu, the woman everyone trusts and would lay down their lives for, could do all these things beats him. Paying Thando to go away? Cheating on Mqhele? How?

And what the fuck is wrong with him? Why does all this shit make

him love her even more?

He must get his life in order, that's what he's thinking as he lights a cigarette and make his way to the parking lot.

It's way past midnight and if he wants to make it to Mbuba by morning, he's gonna have to drive like a maniac to Margate.

"I raised you Mqoqi,"

He stops. He knows that voice, and that intense presence behind him. He'd turn around and face him, but instead he stands and waits until they are standing side by side.

"Bafu," he says.

He has never feared his brother, not even in his darkest moments.

"Skuif," Mqhele says.

"Last one," he says and offers the remaining half to him.

The car is parked in front of them, but they have not moved.

"This is what we used to do, remember? When we couldn't even afford a pack of cigarettes, do you remember those days?" Mqhele.

Normally this would be something they laugh about. But Mqhele is not laughing.

"Mqhele what is happening? Why are...?"

"I sent a driver to Margate, don't worry about that now,"

He takes three pulls and offers the cigarette back to him.

He watches him as he pulls and puffs and throws the stompie to the ground.

"Do you remember all those times I came home with food. All those times I went across the river and came back with bread or chicken and all those other things that you all enjoyed so much?"

Mqoqi turns to look at him. He's really not sure what he's talking about.

"You were still young. Maybe too young to remember. You used to follow me, crying asking where I was going. I'd chase you away and tell

you to go back home," he says.

Mqoqi doesn't remember any of that, he was still too young and so much happened to him between then and now.

"I was protecting you,"

"I was protecting all of you. I had a responsibility. I was a kid too but I knew me being older meant I had to look out for you. You needed me so I had to do whatever needed to be done to make sure you, all of you, were taken care of. I knew gogo wasn't going to live long."

He hears the word "gogo" and figures that this conversation is about Ngundwini. That's the only gogo they've ever had. The only grandparent they ever knew.

"I've watched you grow, and you remind me of me. We are so similar and yet so different. It's like we are one person, except you don't beat up women and you read books and you are always there when needed..." Mqhele says and stops.

"What's happening bafu?"

"Would you betray me Mqoqi? Given a chance would you betray me?" he asks.

"Betray you?"

"Yes, would you betray me?" he asks, looking him in the eye.

There's silence.

It's not that Mqoqi is not sure about his answer, it's that this is a question that doesn't need to be asked or answered.

Their trust and loyalty to each other can never be questioned. Never.

"I'd never betray you Mqhele. You're my brother,"

It would be easier for him if he knew what this was about.

"Would Hlomu betray me?" Mqhele asks.

Now he knows.

"Give me the car keys, I'm driving," Mqhele.

He gives him the keys.

IQUNGA

But if he knew this would end with him pointing a gun at his own brother, maybe he would protest.

Sandile can die, he deserves it.