

BOOK 1 OF 'THE DESIRES SERIES' TRILOGY



MUTUAL
DESIRES

NOMCEBO KHANYILE SITHEBE

Prologue

“Mr. Ngcobo, since you’re in such a talkative mood today, maybe you can refresh our memory.” I hear Miss Ntuli say in a rebuking tone. “You can start by defining scarcity, as well as provide an example of a scarce good.”

I raise my eyes contemptuously at her, meeting her expectant gaze. The challenge in her eyes. My mouth waters at the sight of her, her big breasts – barely covered in the black dress she’s wearing – command my full attention. Not that they need to. Everything about the voluptuous woman at the front of the class is enticing. From her plump cheeks to her thick legs. All of her is seductive as fuck.

“Scarcity, you say?” I ask, sounding a little bored, much to the amusement of my friends. I ignore them, my focus on the woman who is giving me a hard-on with just a simple stare. “Scarcity is the limited availability of a commodity, which may be in demand in the market. An example of a scarce good is—” I clear my throat, and point to the front of my school pants. “This qualifies as a scarce resource for you, Miss?”

The class hollers immediately. I laugh with them, slowly spinning around with my arms widespread for good measure. My best friend, Nhlakanipho, throws his hand out in an impressed fist-bump and I indulge him. It’s not that I love the attention but these classes, especially Economics, can be so fucking boring. I’m lucky if I leave without gaining a headache because nine times out of ten that’s what happens. I don’t think I’m meant for school. That or I’m doing the wrong subjects. My grades attest my inability in the classroom. Well, they used to. I’ve failed twice in my high school career. When I was in Grade 9 and then again when I was doing Grade 10. The only reason I’m excelling academically now is because I excel in other areas—extracurricular activities, if you will. Teachers like Miss Ntuli make it easy for me. It doesn’t hurt that most of them are such easy targets. A little polite chatter, a few friendly touches and complimenting a new hairstyle or new earrings that their husbands never notice and they become putty in your hands.

“Order, class!” Miss Ntuli’s voice brings me out of my musing. Her stern glare finds me and she shakes her head. My dick jerks in appreciation as she folds her arms across her chest, pushing up her thick tits for me to properly appreciate. “Nqobizitha, your shenanigans are disrupting the class. You’re the oldest one here. I expect better from you. Or are you looking to fail matric?”

Ouch. I hold back a flinch, “Awukahle ulaka, Miss. You asked, I answered.” I tell her, trying to play it cool. Truth is, I hate it when they bring up my academics. I’m not like most of these kids here. Where they’d

rather hear about Macroeconomics and General Ledgers, I'd rather focus on a newly discovered planet or the latest news about the possibility of colonizing Mars in a few years. I'd rather learn about building my own space ship. That's where my fascination lies. Physics. Space. Rocket science. I don't think anyone really knows though. Nhlakanipho has an idea but he doesn't know how obsessive I am. I could spend an entire day indoors, watching videos on the possibility of multiverses and about different planets.

"Mr. Ngcobo!" that seductive voice calls out to me again. I lift my gaze to meet the teacher's and raise my eyebrows expectantly. "I told you to sit down. You're distracted today, I need you to focus."

How can I, when all I want to do is bend you over the nearest surface and fuck your brains out?! I don't voice my thoughts and bow dramatically before taking my seat again. The class guffaws and I shake my head, peering over at Nhlakanipho who is laughing with the others. "Bafo, you need to stop giving this woman a hard time. Look at her, on the verge of tears because of you." The laughter found in his eyes contradicts the seriousness found in his voice. Nhlakanipho is very mature for an eighteen year old. He's always so serious, so focused, and so very different from my laidback demeanour. I think that's why we click—we balance each other. My nonchalant persona compliments his uptight demeanour and vice versa.

"What, bafo, do you want me to bring her to tears by giving her a different hard time?" I wiggle my eyebrows, easing into my seat more comfortably. Just thirty more minutes until lunch time. I'm famished – maybe for more than just food. I wonder if I can...

"Uyazi ukuthi you could get her in serious trouble with this bullshit that you have with her, angithi?" Nhlakanipho says, his eyes are on me – stern like a parent's. "Come on, man. She's twice our age...well, my age kodwa you know what I mean. Ubonani kuye lomama?"

I roll my eyes. He wouldn't understand. Nhlaka plays with these hyperactive kids that always want to jump him up and down whenever they see him. The immature ones who confuse fucking with love. Maybe this is the reason I put a stop to their fuckery when I turned sixteen. Maybe this is why I prefer older women. They're mature – in more ways than one. They're fun in the bedroom too, always willing to try out new things that they don't get from their old ass, conservative husbands. They've also taught me so much about sex and the art of pleasuring women. Besides, they're just attractive as hell and I'm drawn to them. I can't really explain it but it's almost like my dick is one end of a magnet, consistently drawn to the other end – mature pussy. I like them fat – cellulite thighs and wiggling ass. I like them big-boobed and stretch-marked. I like them big-boned, with meat on them. A fat woman's pussy is the best pussy on earth. There's no competition there, it's just facts.

“You wouldn’t understand, Nhlaka mfethu,” I finally tell my best friend, adjusting the hard-on in my pants. For the rest of the class, I keep my eyes glued on Miss Ntuli, following her every movement. I drink in the sight of her ass cheeks lifting up and down as she sidles up to help Sinenhlanhla who appears to be having a little trouble with her classwork. I groan as she bends forward just a little bit, lifting her dress so that her yellow thighs are showing. An image pops in my head—those thick legs wrapped around me while I plow her like a snow drift blocking an emergency room. My thoughts continue like this for most of the period until finally the bell rings, signalling break time.

“Bafo, are you coming?” Nhlaka captures my attention. He’s packed his books, and looks at me expectantly.

“I will be soon.” His rebuking glare tells me he hasn’t missed the innuendo I was making. “Here, take this. I’ll meet you at Mchunu’s. I just need ten to fifteen minutes.” I fish inside my jacket and hand him a hundred rand note.

His eyes waver, and I can practically feel him grow hot with shame as he clears his throat. “Nqobizitha...”

“Awume mfethu,” I cut him short. I don’t like when he turns embarrassed about receiving money from me. I know for a fact that this is probably his first meal for the day. It’s the middle of the month, I know he doesn’t have money. His grandmother’s pension can only take them so far. His little brother had a school trip to Durban not too long ago. Then there’s the issue of his sisters. They have to buy girl stuff to take care of themselves – pads and shit like that. And with him turning eighteen soon, Nhlaka will no longer qualify for any grant – that will be one less income than they were receiving a few months ago. They don’t have to pay rent of course, and thankfully government built them an RDP house, but they still have expenses. Like transport money, that Nhlakanipho’s grandmother spends a lot on so that Nhlakanipho and his siblings can make it to school from eMphundumane to eNdayini. Sometimes, when things are really bad, he has to walk for close to two hours to make it to school. And I can’t even help him and his siblings out because I live closer to our school, which means I don’t have a valid excuse to use one of the cars weekdays. “Take the cash. Buy whatever. I’ll see you now now.”

With reluctance in his eyes, Nhlakanipho finally takes the cash. “Ngyabonga, mfethu.”

I give him a small smile. “Buy a lollipop or two for ugo. I know how much she loves them.”

He shakes his head but there’s a small smile stretching his chapped lips this time. “Sho, bafo. Let me find Siya first. The girls must be annoying him by now.” Siyabonga is our other friend. He’s doing Sciences though, and probably the smartest boy in our school. Just sixteen and he’s already ahead of most of us,

even the teachers sometimes, when it comes to academics. He's closer to Nhlaka than he is to me, but in Mbongolwane, everyone knows each other and as boys we all gang up together. He's a cool kid, quiet, and funny. Funny because of he's scared of chicks. They flirt with him all the time and call him the pretty brainiac. I think they dig him because of his shyness and quietness, but that doesn't mean he can't hold his own in a physical fight. He and Nhlaka have fought like cats and dogs in the past, which is funny because they're also close.

With the class empty, I decide to make my move on the thick beauty at the front desk. "Mama..." My voice is a smooth drawl. "Have you been told that you're gorgeous today?"

Miss Ntuli – Fundiswa, we're alone now – nails me with a flat stare. "Nqoba, this isn't the right time to do this...nor the right place. I'm your teacher for fuck's sake!"

Like that has ever stopped us before. I shrug coolly. "It's just an innocent question, mama. Futhi uyazi nawe ukuth ungifundisa kamnandi. You're beautiful today, MaNtuli, this dress compliments your exquisite frame. It makes me want to hide you from the world. You're gorgeous, truly."

A sigh. But she's smitten, I can tell. "Thank you, Nqoba. Maybe now you can go join the other students for lunch? To reenergize and stimulate your brain. You need to eat."

"I'd rather eat something else," I tell her, getting into her personal space. Fundiswa backtracks, until eventually, she's trapped between her table and me. Her scent is driving me wild and the way her chest is rising and falling rapidly draws my attention to her breasts. My right hand draws forward and I cup it before I can really think about it. "Your boobs are practically spilling out of this dress. If I didn't know better I'd say you wore it to tease me. Tell me I am lying."

A breathless moan. It's response enough for me. Besides, Fundiswa's seductive lip bite is the most telling. There's a sizzling moment of silence between us, a dare of sorts. To see who will surrender first. Any other day, and I would've made her beg for it—a thirty-six year old woman begging for the dick of a boy nearly half her age. Today, today I'm steel hard and aching inside my pants. Today, my boner is raging. The quick gratification will have to do. Just for today. "I'm dying to sink inside you." I murmur huskily, grabbing her by her waist and slamming my erection into her.

She moans and shudders against me, wrapping one of her legs around me, and her arms around my neck. "Just this one time, Nqobizitha. This can't be a daily thing."

That's what she said the last time. Mentally rolling my eyes, I nod in confirmation and grip her hair to smash my lips with hers. It's wild and desperate, there's no gentleness about the way we're both going at it. Quickly moving my hand to her thighs, it slithers in between them, to find her hot and wet treasure. She's soaking wet already, and the knowledge turns me on. I push apart her lace panty and teasingly rub on her clit. Her fingers dig into my shoulders. A myriad of expletives trespassing her quivering lips. "Get inside me. Right now!"

I live to serve. With a devilish grin, I nod. "Yes, ma'am." Quickly scanning her drawers, I find one condom hidden beneath a stack of papers. She's already sitting on her desk, her tight dress drawn up to her waist, and her black lacy panty teasing the heaven that lies within. I remove my school jacket, deciding to leave my shirt on – this will be a quick fuck. She's struggling the zipper of my pants, and swearing in frustration as she goes unsuccessful. Taking matters into my own hands, I hiss in pain when the cool air hits my pulsing erection. The cockiness is there, though, as her eyes widen with her mouth hanging open when my length is in her view. "Like what you see?"

"Wabuza ibhasi libhaliwe," she snorts, gently slapping herself to show me how wet she is. She plays with it and starts to rub on it. "It's itchy, Nqoba. So itchy. How can you help me?" I don't reply verbally, but as soon I have wrapped the condom around me, I bring her closer and slide into her in one rough slam. She makes a weird noise of pain and pleasure, her trembling legs squeezing around my waist. "Shit, wait! Let me adjust first," her voice is a cracked whimper, she's pushing me back with her hands on my chest.

Waiting for her until she's ready, I fight to remain in control. Her pussy is gripping me to the point of pain, she's unbelievably hot and wet, the sensations are out of this freaking world. I could sing hallelujah when she finally nods her head, slowly fucking herself on my painful arousal. Holding her down to the table, I start to give it to her the way she likes it. Rough and fast. Her boobs are jiggling hard, and they spill out of her bra, nearly slapping her face as I shove into her—in and out. I grab one of them, spurred on by her breathless scream, and fondle it. Her breast is soft in my hand, thicker than even my big hand, and when I squeeze her nipple, her pussy contracts around me. An animalistic groan rumbles from deep within my throat. "Damn, mama. You feel so good."

I receive a gasped moan in response. Then she starts to talk dirty. I laugh through my breathlessness. This woman is the only one I know who has no self-preservation when it comes to sex. "Ngigubhe, Nqobizitha. Bhebha, Nqoba, ngibhebhe," she tells me as I ram into her. "Hold nothing back, fuck me hard!" she screams. I can only give it to her the way she asks. Plowing into her over and over again, I bury my face in her breasts and starts to bite, suck and fondle on them. Her pussy is gripping me to the point of strangulation but that heightens my pleasure and I can feel a tingle slithering across my spine, my balls locking up as a familiar sensation builds in my belly. I tell her I'm close and start to furiously rub on her clit while fucking her hot pussy. We soar higher and higher together until she falls first, tensing beneath me. Fundiswa is beautiful when she falls apart. Her eyes roll to the back of her head, she grips her breasts tightly, and swears colorfully. I pound her until I lock up too, my hand finding it's way to her

neck to squeeze gently as my load shoots inside the condom. Her eyes turn completely white as my hand wraps tighter around her throat, and her pussy practically ululates around my spurting length, her bottom lip bitten to the point of swelling.

“Holy fuck, Fundiswa!” I pant harshly as I collapse on top of her when my limbs feel like jelly and she embraces me tightly, kissing my neck. For a while, I languidly suck on her juicy breasts, letting her ride out her orgasm until she’s a whimpering mess. She grabs my face to kiss me slow, unhurried—like lovers or shit. It should make me panic...but I don’t. We both know what this is. Ain’t no way in hell I’m falling in love with a married woman with three kids. My mom would probably kill Fundiswa and then beat me to a pulp...with my dad staring helplessly. “You’re going to kill me one of these days, mama.”

Fundiswa’s chuckle is heaved. She kisses my forehead, my heart flutters. “That is if you don’t kill me first with that impressive tool of yours.”

“I’m a Ngcobo. What can I say? Cock runs in our family.”

Fundiswa’s chuckles spread over the otherwise quiet classroom. “Your army of sisters would probably disagree with you on that one.”

Perhaps she’s right. I keep silent, and enjoy the feel of her warm body embracing me. I’m still balls deep inside of her, it’s a little uncomfortable because of the condom.

“You make me so proud,” her voice is a harsh whisper.

For some reason, her words cause my heart to swell with pride. I smile against her neck and fold my arms tighter around her waist. My dick is hardening at the smell of her, at the scent of sex reeking in the classroom. I hold her close and dig my fingers into her delicious thighs. There’s a change in her breathing pattern, as if she can sense how ravenous I still am for her delectable body. “Awungiphinde phela, MaNtuli,” I whisper against her ear, nuzzling on her pulse point that’s going wild.

“I don’t think it’s possible right now, Nqoba. Lunchtime is almost over.”

“Good, don’t think,” I murmur, penetrating her wetness in slow hard thrusts. She moans and throws her head back while I rejoice over the small victory by caressing her lovely pussy to heighten her pleasure.

“Allow me to do all the work and just lie back.” I say softly before changing the pace and pound into her like a ragdoll meant for nothing else but to be used.

Mutual Desires: One

Nqobizitha

MaNxumalo reminds me of uphuthu neskobho. When I have her, I always leave satiated to the core. She's a real woman, meaty in every part of her body, and homely too. I never leave her house unsatisfied, because as soon as we've satisfied each other in the bedroom, a different satisfaction takes place in the kitchen. I love her food, almost as much as I love having sex with her, almost as much as I love my mom's food. The mouthwatering smell of her famous scones drifts over the kitchen, mingling with the seductive scent of our bodies working together to reach yet another orgasm.

She's messed me up with flour, her hands touching every inch of my back – imploring, needing. Drawing me further in. I've fallen in love with how vocal she is. I've fallen in love with the lascivious sounds I can wrench from her lips with a teasing touch to her wetness, a bruising hold to her waist and with my lips feasting on her neck. Her thighs lock me in tightly, and I cup one of her breasts while tending to the other one thoroughly. We're both breathing heavily, our heartbeats accelerating. I have no intention of stopping though, not until we've both satisfied the hunger preying on both of us.

"That's it, Nqobizitha. Fuck me like you own me," I hear her moan into my ear, her breath sending shivers down my spine.

"I thought your husband owned you," I breathe out, looking her in the eyes. Her pupils darken when I say that, her movements growing frantic and wild. "Good, mama. Fuck me back," I edge her on, meeting her thrust for thrust and pushing her up against the sink. "We both know you're my bitch anyway, because Richard never knows what he's doing. Only I can make you feel this good. I wish you could see yourself now, mama. So needy, a bitch begging for dick. But you're my bitch, aren't you?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" her moans are reaching a crescendo, it's music to my ears. Our eyes are locked on each other, our movements uncivilized. Her boobs are bouncing up and down at a frantic pace and they almost make me spill right then. Damn! Something about big boobs turn me on, and MaNxumalo's are no exception. They're not firm like a young girls. They're thick and have a sag about them, with lines of stretch marks marring them but that's what makes them beautiful. And if I had the courage, I'd probably spend the rest of my life dedicated to sketching them.

Leaning forward again, I bury my face inside them, as she holds my head in place. The next few minutes are rough and fast. I slam into her repeatedly, not worried about breaking her, she's a big woman – and loves the pain. We work in tandem, her pussy vibrating deliciously against my dick, her warm walls

further sucking me in. In. Out. A swivel. I aim for her g-spot. Over and over again. Persistently. Her screams echo in the kitchen as she starts to shudder as if she were touching electricity. She's a curser. Multiple swear words leave the usually reserved woman as she climaxes, her juices streaming rapidly around my bulging length. A few more rough, uncoordinated thrusts and I spill inside the condom. "Fuck, you're always so hot," I pant against her lips.

"And you're still so skilled. I don't think I could ever get enough of you."

I kiss her lips tenderly. "I'm not going anywhere, mama. I'm always at your service."

"You better be," she grins and with a small tap on my pelvis, I pull out of her. She grips the nearest surface for anchor, she looks so weak, her thighs are literally trembling. "I can't feel a bone in my body."

"Well, you did say you want it hard."

We both laugh and then she instructs me to go take a shower. The scones will be ready by the time I am finished. Readily obliging, I trail back to the bedroom she shares with her husband. Her family pictures on the bedside table don't bother me anymore. It's not my fault that Bab' Nxumalo isn't satisfying his woman in bed. Besides, I've heard rumours of the misdeeds he gets up to in Johannesburg. But stories like that are so frequent here. The men leave their wives for Johannesburg and then they allow the abominable city to corrupt them. The next thing, they're not taking care of their wives and kids, too caught up with the immoral prostitutes of Johannesburg.

I'm glad my father stayed here, at home, and acquired all of his wealth in our inconspicuous town. He's inspired a lot of men around Mbongolwane, and a lot of shops around here are owned by our family. He's built a petrol station, there's a cellular repairs shop that I regularly visit to help out, and he dabbles in the taxi industry as well as property. Most of the teachers whose homes are far from Mbongolwane reside in the hostels that my father built. I'd say we're one of the richest families in all of Eshowe. Probably in the top ten list. But my father is still so humble, he's a man of the community at heart, and he creates employment for most of the people here. He still drives an old Toyota Camry from '79 that he bought in the late eighties. It was the first car he bought when his businesses really started taking off. My mom has always been by his side though, and my dad credits her for his success. She was a hustler – and still is – that pushed him forward to work hard for their future. It paid off because they're both successful as fuck and continue to work hard to this day.

As soon as I'm out of the shower, I get dressed, and grab my phone off the bedside table. My eyes widen as I notice the missed calls and three messages. Shit! They're from my mother. Inwardly, I flinch as I unlock the phone and check the messages.

Pick up your phone. I want you home.

Nqoba, call me as soon as you get this.

NQOBIZITHA!

Fuck. Fuck! That last message definitely signals trouble. I don't know if it's a good idea to call her right now. The last message was sent about thirty minutes ago...as I was plowing into Bab' Nxumalo's wife in the kitchen. My mom is easily the scariest woman I know—a no-nonsense, alpha female who doesn't take shit from anyone. I love her for it but I prefer not being on the end of her wrath. She's an iron woman. Sitting on the bed, I decide to call her and get it over and done with. The phone barely rings before she answers her phone. Shit! "MaKhathide wam," my voice is quiet, respectful.

"Ukuphi? I have been calling you but you weren't answering your phone. What is wrong with you, Mapholoba?!" I tune her voice out, remaining mute as she shouts her head off. In situations like these, it's always best to let my mom scream her lungs out. And I never try to explain myself, because that makes things worse somehow. I don't know what it is about women but most of my sisters are like that too. I think they pick on me because I'm the only boy in the family. It doesn't help matters that I'm the youngest one too. Thirteen girls and one boy – they worked really hard to get me. "Nqobizitha, are you listening to me? Get your ass in this house right now."

"I hear you, MaKhathide wami. I'm sorry."

There's a second's silence. Her breathing is ragged and rapid. She sighs loudly and I smirk at the defeat found in her voice. "Thirty minutes, Nqoba. I need you to watch over the maids while I go to the hospital to fetch your sister."

My sister. Which one? I frown because I wasn't aware that any of my sisters are in hospital. My mind immediately goes to Ndoni first. She's pregnant. Six months, maybe? I'm not sure. "Mama, is it—"

"No time to talk, ndodana. Come home. Watch over Thandeka, she's the laziest. I'm expecting to come to a spotless house. Not a speckle on the coffee table or the windows," with that she hangs up.

“Fuck!” I whisper, sliding on my Converse. Ambling toward the kitchen, I find MaNxumalo in the kitchen, with the scones she baked on the table. “I can’t stay,” I tell her, as she retrieves the glasses in the cabinets.

She turns around to face me, her face crestfallen. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” I stand in front of her, cupping her cheeks. Her arms enwrap around my waist. “My mom just called. One of my sisters is in hospital. I need to go home.”

“Oh...I see,” she tilts her head up and getting the message I lean down to swiftly kiss her lips. “Let me pack you a lunchbox with the scones then. You can return it tomorrow.”

I smirk. “I’ll do more than that. I’ll fuck you to sleep, MaNxumalo.”

“Then it better be at night because it’s my turn to host the ladies’ meeting. The church women will be here after the service.”

“I’ll make a plan. Sneak out or whatever. Ngizobona.” With one final possessive kiss placed on her lips. I grab my keys beside her and leave. I have to be careful when leaving her house though, because people never mind their own affairs here. I trek the five minute journey to where I parked my car and drive off. MaNxumalo stays about fifteen minutes away from where I live so the drive isn’t that long. In fact, I reach home about five minutes early. The home already reeks of cleaning products. I greet mam’ Mdletshe who is busy in the kitchen and make my way into the living room. Thandeka is dusting the flat screen TV. I keep silent, observing for a while. She’s gorgeous – thirty and single. Lazy as fuck though, and the only reason my mom keeps her around is because I keep vouching for her. She may be lazy when it comes to her work responsibilities but she makes up for it in the bedroom. Yes, I fuck her too. I’m not even doing it on purpose but it’s that magnetic pull that I can’t explain. I click with these women, all of them.

“Thandeka,” I call out when she bends over, my dick is reacting. “Did Ma tell you anything?”

She jumps, clearly I scared her. “Nqoba, don’t fucking do that! You scared me.” I roll my eyes at her dramatics and fold my arms, leaning on the nearest wall. “I don’t know, *Madam*—” I don’t miss the attitude in her voice when she calls my mom that. These two keep beefing but I know better than to meddle in the issues of women. “She didn’t tell me anything. But she sounded urgent and angry.”

Hmm. I wonder what's going on. Placing a kiss on Thandeka's cheek, I nod okay and then perch myself on one of the leather couches. I'd go to my house, which is situated outside the family home, but I fear my mom's wrath. If she comes back to find the helpers alone, god knows I won't hear the end of it. Grabbing my phone from my pocket, I check my WhatsApp messages. There's too many of them. I focus on the ones from my friends first because bros before hoes all the time. There's a house party that one of my friend's cousins is hosting the next weekend. But it's going to be eMlalazi and the guys need a lift. I reply with a confirmation that the car will be available next weekend even though I know the leeches won't chip out to help with the petrol money. I don't need it of course, my dad owns a freaking petrol station but it would be nice of them to be a little considerate sometimes.

This is what I hate about wealth. People take advantage of you. You never know if they like you for you or if they like you for your money. I've had too many friends who weren't there when I needed them. Not financially because I'm sorted but emotionally. I feel like they think I don't have a right to feel down or be upset because I have money. Because people think that money makes everything better. That may be so, I have no idea what it's like to go to bed hungry but I do know what it's like to lose the people you care about. I lost my grandmother when I was thirteen and I couldn't even mourn her properly because everyone kept preaching about how lucky we were that we could afford to give her an honourable funeral. I know what heartbreak feels like. I know how badly dismissal hurts. I know anxiety. I know all these things and yet I don't think anyone understands me...not completely.

Nhlakanipho tries his best, he's the one friend who I truly believe likes me for me. He's my day one. Which is why I don't like to see him suffering. I hate that his stubborn ass rarely accepts help. We've been friends for a really long time, even though I am two years older than him. He's the closest person I know who tries to understand me. Like I try to understand him too. But Nhlakanipho's like a difficult Sudoku puzzle – easily intimidating to those who don't know him and difficult to please. He's not easily swayed by a lot of things. I shoot him a message asking about his whereabouts. He's busy with Siyabonga, something about Maths tutoring, I decide it's best not to disturb him.

I don't know when I fall asleep but I'm awoken by someone's hand repeatedly tapping on my arm. I open my eyes and am met with my mother's brown eyes that are made of stone. How someone manages to make the warmest color look so cold I'll never know. "Vuka, your sister's here."

I sit up and notice Ndoniyamanzi sitting on the opposite couch. She's pale and looks sickly if I am being honest. Worry quickly envelopes me and I jump from where I am sitting to where she is. Crouching down in front of her, I gaze into her red-rimmed eyes inquiringly. "Ndoni...are you okay?"

She remains silent for so long that I don't think she's going to answer. I'm worried. Did something happen with her husband again? Is he cheating again? Did he get violent? Or is it another...no, no. My eyes trail down to her belly. She's wearing a big black sweater so I can't really see what's hiding beneath it but I can't help thinking her belly is less bigger than I last saw her. Well, her pictures. Ndoni and her husband live in Durban. She visits from time to time and I don't know much about her life in Durban. We're not the closest, mostly because my mom told me that her new family was her husband. I do know that they have problems in their marriage though. Eight years of suspected infidelities, domestic abuse and infertility issues. I've never really been allowed to sit in on family meetings. Too young my mom would tell me I am. But it's apparent that Ndoni is unhappy – about one thing or the other – she's not as bubbly as I remember her to be. She's not talkative. She lost weight, a lot of it.

My eyes find her belly again, and before I can help myself, I reach forward to touch her. She stiffens and behind me I can hear my mother shouting my name. I don't pay attention to her as I watch my sister breathe heavily, her face starting to crumple. The loud sobs comes as a surprise and I quickly scurry backward, freaked out by the sight in front of me. I stare in shock for a minute too long before I'm beside her on the couch and embracing her tightly. I don't like it when people cry and I don't know which words of comfort to offer her. I settle for a silent, "I'm sorry," over and over again.

I hold her until she falls asleep. MaKhathide comes back with a blanket and I take it from her to cover my sister's trembling form. I then follow our mother to the kitchen where she instructs Thandeka to give us privacy. "What's wrong with my sister, Ma?" I ask as soon as we're alone.

MaKhathide sighs, her body sagging against the kitchen sink, she looks like she's aged overnight. Her makeup is not as beautiful as the other days. "Your sister left her husband."

Okay. My eyes widen but when I really think about it, this was expected. Even I could see that she wasn't happy. "Well, I think it was a long time coming."

"I guess but I don't understand her foolishness. To leave your marriage?" a grim look swipes across her face. "Does she know how many women pray for that gold ring on her finger?"

Why is she like this? My mom's very old fashioned. She's the 'Bekezela' type, at least that's what I've heard her preach for the longest time. I don't think she gets that marriage isn't the world. Her definition of success has to include marriage. You could have all the money in the world and still be useless in her eyes because you're not married. My other sisters deal with her crap on the daily. Out of the thirteen, ten are married, while my mom is expecting the other three to follow suit. I'm only getting a pass because I'm still in high school but she makes it known from time to time that she'll find me a brilliant

woman to settle down and build a family with. I try to avoid thinking about said topic as much as possible.

“Well, what’s the point of marriage if you’re unhappy, MaKhathide?” I ask respectfully, shaking my head. “I, eh, when I was touching her...belly. Did she have her baby already?”

There’s an awkward pause in the kitchen. Tense. My mom’s lips are pressed into a thin line, clearly displeased. “She lost that baby. It was stillborn.”

“What?” it comes out as a whisper, disbelieving. “That’s the fourth one now.”

“Three miscarriages and a stillborn,” my mom shakes her head, voice trembling. “Sometimes I wonder if we’ve wronged the ancestors somehow.”

“No,” I shake my head, rubbing my face frustratedly. “It’s that husband of hers. It has to be. All of her pregnancy issues stem from the stress she goes through because of that, that...bastard!”

“Nqobizitha!”

“IT’S TRUE!” I roar and then step back at my mother’s cold stare down. “Ngyaxolisa, MaKhathide. But it’s true and you know it. What did he do this time? Lay his hands on her? Cheat? What, what did he do?”

“Nothing they couldn’t have worked out. I always tell your sister to stop stressing so much about the things she cannot change. How many times have I told her? Look, now it’s cost her the chance of being a mother! Seven months in and she’s lost my grandson. All because she found a suspicious message on Mkhize’s phone! How many times have I told her—”

“Cha. Fuck that!” I interject, shaking my head furiously. My hands are trembling now, anger spreading all over me like a wildfire. The audacity of this woman to pin this on my sister. Her daughter. Fuck her! “This is not on her, Mama. If Mkhize didn’t think with his dick all the time then Ndoni wouldn’t be suspicious every fucking time—”

“Language!”

“Awume, MaKhathide!” I ignore the way her face hardens, daring me to continue. “My sister is slowly dying at the hands of that man and all you can do is blame her for that son of a bitch’s promiscuity! That man’s a whore and Ndoni should’ve left a long time ago. Fucking good for her for finally having the courage this time. I know Baba will be proud of her.”

“First off,” MaKhathide steps forward, her short self looking up at me. I have no idea how she manages to be so intimidating. Instinctively, I take a step back. “Don’t ever talk to me the way you did again. I will personally kill you with my own hands and get rid of you and never go to jail for it. I am your mother. You will respect me. You will talk to me accordingly. Are we clear?”

I nod hesitantly, clenching my jaw. “Crystal.”

“Good,” her hands go to her waist. “Now, I am perfectly aware of the problems that Ndoniyamanzi has been having in her marriage. Am I happy to see her sad and lost? Of course not, she is my daughter. But you don’t leave when the going gets tough, Mapholoba. If everyone did that then we wouldn’t have any marriages left in the world. Black marriages specifically because most of you have been blinded into thinking marriage is not important. That’s not true. Everyone needs someone, companionship. She was supposed to pray about this. She shouldn’t have allowed Mkhize to drive her into leaving their union. Who will want to marry her now?”

“Yazini, Ma, because I heard you the first time and don’t want to disrespect you, I’ll just leave. We’re seeing things differently here and I don’t want to upset you.” I don’t wait for her reply. I’m out of here. My car keys are still in my pocket, as is my phone. I’ll go to the cellphone repairs shop. Maybe I could help out where needed as long as I am not around my mom. She pisses me off sometimes. I love her but she can be heartless. Sometimes, I don’t even get what attracted my dad to her. They were teenagers when they met. My dad nineteen and her fifteen. Their families brought them together apparently and by sixteen my mom was a wife to the Ngcobos. She also became a first time mom at sixteen, giving birth to my oldest sister, Sibusisiwe – who is twenty-four years older than me.

I find Xolani at the repair shop and act as his assistant. He tells me about Bab’ Xulu’s wife, MaMbatha, from Newcastle, who passed away just last night under mysterious circumstances. I can’t say I’m genuinely shocked, that woman had a foul mouth on her and caused problems wherever she went. It wouldn’t surprise me if she was bewitched somehow and it would be so simple to do that because she also couldn’t stay away from people’s houses for free food. Maybe this is why Bab’ Xulu found himself another wife in Johannesburg. I’ve heard that the woman isn’t even South African, coming from another African country. Maybe this is why he never brings her this side. I know a lot of people who’d ridicule him for marrying a foreign national but I could care less to be honest. Besides, Bab’ Xulu has beautiful

daughters. The youngest one, I don't bother with. She's twenty-three, only three years older than me. I've tried flirting with the thirty-five year old, Zemvelo, but she wasn't interested. I have slept with thirty year old Zenande Xulu though and she's pretty darn perfect in the bedroom.

After spending close to two hours with Xolani, I decide to go back home. It's 17:30pm, about half an hour before dinner. My dad should also be home and I am hoping he knocked some damn sense into that devilish woman he calls his wife. On the street, I meet Nhlakanipho's sister, carrying a few plastic bags. She blushes and tries to hide when she spots me. "Uyaphi Thandolwenkosi?" I shout and she freezes.

"Nqoba!"

"Where are you coming from?"

"My boyfriend."

"Lwandle?"

She nods her head.

Great. She was out with the prick. I'm friends with Lwandle but I don't really like him. The guy's problematic around here and like to start a fight with most people. The only reason he doesn't touch me is because he knows I could knock him out with one punch. I've inherited my father and grandfather's gigantic heights but thank god I'm not lanky like my father. It must be all the time I spend in the gym, it pays off. I work out almost every morning, we're blessed to have a small gym at home. It's all my father's wealth.

"Come, I'll drive you home," I tell her, placing my hand at the small of her back. It's still light outside, summer ensures that the skies don't darken quickly, but I still don't like seeing women walk alone. Sometimes, I offer to walk them home, as weird as it is. If I'm driving, then I'll give them a lift. Shit happens in the world, women and kids die every hour of every day. I try to do my bid to help. It's how my father raised me. At home, we'd wake up to walk my sisters to their boyfriends, friends, wherever. My dad says it's a man's duty to look after the woman. "So how's school going?"

Thandolwenkosi rolls her eyes and I laugh. No one likes discussing the boring topic of school so I get her. "I'm being promoted to prefect," she tells me. "Zinhle was told to step down after they found out she's pregnant."

"Damn," I mutter in complete disbelief. "The quiet ones are always the naughtiest."

"Tell me about it."

We both look at each other and laugh. Thandolwenkosi and I have a lighthearted conversation the rest of the drive to her home. She's interesting when she wants to be, revealing what hides beneath her shallowness. I'm surprised to learn that she enjoys learning about space like me and for a while we converse about the possibility of extraterrestrial beings in the universe. We reach her house earlier than what I expected. I step out of the car, deciding to greet granny and her siblings. The kids rush to hug me and I lift the youngest ones and sway them back and forth playfully. We head to the rondavel where gogo is cooking.

"Gogo uMaMzimela," I greet, smiling as gogo's eyes light up as soon as she sees me. She's fresh for her age, and my mom usually talks about how strong she is for raising eight grandkids all on her own. Their parents all dump them here. And some of them even keep the kids' grant money for themselves which means that all the responsibility falls on MaMamzimela's strong but heavy shoulders. "Sawubona, salukazi sami esihle."

"Hawu, hawu!" she grabs my face in her small hands and kisses both my cheeks. "Mfana wami. I've missed seeing your gorgeous face around my house."

"Life, gogo. What can I say?" I tell her, going to stand with her near the pots. The rondavel smells good and I tell her that, to which she smiles and tells me she'll dish me up a plate. I can't stay unfortunately. My mom will be pissed off and I don't want to argue. She could take away my phone or car. "Anyway, is Nhlaka here?"

"Check his house," she points to the small stone house that Nhlakanipho built himself. "He was cooped in there with Shandu's boy."

I nod my head. "I remember he told me they're studying." Kissing gogo's forehead, I then leave for Nhlakanipho's small house. I just want to greet him and then I'll be on my way. I knock twice on the door

and I hear a small commotion on the other side before the door opens. My eyes take in the sight of my best friend. His eyes are shifty but he gives me his subtle smile. "Sup, bafo."

"Nqobizitha!" he rubs the back of his neck. "I didn't know you were coming."

"I've never needed a reason to tell you," I raise my eyebrow and then try to look over his shoulder to the interior of the house. "What, are you and Siya hiding some girls in there?"

Nhlakanipho laughs and shakes his head. "No, of course not. You just caught me by surprise is all." He looks over his shoulder and calls Siya. "Hey, mfethu. Nqoba's here. If you leave now, he'll be able to drive you home."

"Can I come in?" I ask because I don't even know why I'm being imprisoned outside. Nhlakanipho's nod appears nervous but he allows me in. Something strange hits me about the atmosphere in the room but I can't put my finger on it. Spotting a half-naked Siya on the bed, I nod my head to him. "Sho, Siya."

"Nqobizitha. You good?"

His voice sounds a little strange to my ears and he looks sick, with the way he's gripping his belly, but I pay him no mind. "Awesome, mpintsh' yami. Ready to leave?"

Siya replies by donning his t-shirt, and lifts off the bed. Again, I notice how sick he looks. He's wincing, chest heaving as if it hurts to breathe. I hope he wasn't fighting with Nhlakanipho again because he's smaller, though not by much, and Nhlaka doesn't play when it comes to fighting. Siya once had some bad blue eyes, caused by a physical fight. It doesn't help that Nhlakanipho easily overpowers him.

We step outside and I bring Nhlaka in for a manly hug, patting his back a little too hard. "We should do something together tomorrow."

He laughs and eyes me disbelievingly, "Don't you have a date with one of your women?"

"MaNxumalo. Only at night though and the others...they have their husbands to cater to."

“You’re impossible,” Nhlakanipho shakes his head as we pull apart. “Fine. You decide though because I don’t even know what we could do.”

“Bozza yami,” I smile at him.

He looks at Siya next and he smiles. His eyes are soft and I can’t say I blame him. Everything about Siya makes you want to protect him like a little brother. “Shandu...”

“Mzimela,” Siya returns, he’s also grinning. It makes me notice how swollen his lips are and now I really hope he and Nhlaka were not fighting but it doesn’t look like it with their silly grins.

“I’ll see you around. Ulale kahle, bafoza.”

Siya chuckles and nods. “I’ll, uh, see you at school on Monday, Nhlakanipho.”

I nail him with a confused stare, “Aren’t you joining us tomorrow?”

Siya looks between me and Nhlakanipho, his eye lingering on my best friend. They appear to be having a silent conversation to which Siya finally looks away and shakes his head. “I’m good, mfethu. Can we leave now?”

“Of course.” I hug Nhlakanipho one final time before getting inside the car. Siya follows suit and wheezes as he sits down. I ask him if he’s okay and he says yes. It’s a bit awkward in the car. I’m not really close to this boy but we talk about his academics and I keep glancing at him, fascinated by how talkative he becomes when talking about school. He tells me he got kicked out of his classroom for correcting Miss Magwaza the other day and I can’t help breaking into a laughing fit. I drop him off at home and then arrive at my own home about five minutes later.

It’s 07:00pm. I find everyone at the dinner table, including my sister. It’s tense, the clinking sound of silverware is the only thing that spreads over the dining room. Suddenly, I’m not so sure that I want to be here. Maybe I should’ve spent the night at Nhlakanipho’s. It’s happened a few times, plus his family is way more fun than ours. There are kids there. Here, I’m the only person who qualifies to be called a child...and that’s because I’m living with my parents. MaKhathide doesn’t believe in taking care of her

grandchildren, she says they have their parents for a reason. I can agree with her on that, especially seeing how tough Nhlakanipho has it with his siblings.

“Sanibona ekhaya,” my voice penetrates the thick silence but it doesn’t defeat the tension.

“Awu Mapholoba, usubuyile,” my dad greets, his smile doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Yebo, Baba.” I look at the dinner table. We’re eating uphuthu and mutton curry, one of my favourites. The food smells good and just as I am about to sit down next to my sister, my mother shakes her head.

“Go to bed, Nqobizitha.”

I lift my eyes at her and clear my throat. “I wasn’t late on purpose, MaKhathide. It was—”

“I don’t care. Rules are there for a reason. You were supposed to be home in time for supper thirty minutes ago. If you’re not here to give thanks with us to the Lord for the food we have on our table then you don’t eat with us.”

The table is silent, she looks at me expectantly. I’d expect my dad to try and talk to her but she overpowers him easily. My dad is a soft-spoken man, he avoids conflict at all costs. Today, I’ll be like him. I’ve already argued once with my mother, I am not going to do it again. I respect her.

“Mama, forgive him. He’s—”

“Keep out of this, Ndoniyamanzi. These are my home’s affairs. If you wanted to dictate, you should’ve stayed in your own home, in Durban.”

“Zengcebo!” Baba comes to my sister’s aid. Ndoni’s eyes have a disbelieving wetness in them, as if she can’t quite believe what my mom said. I have to admit that I am shocked too, hurt on her behalf. But I say nothing and watch silently as Baba rebukes MaKhathide quietly. “Both of you go to bed. Your mom and I will clear this mess.”

I don't need to be told twice. But instead of going to my house, I stand outside and scroll through my contacts. I wonder if Zenande needs a shoulder to cry on. Her mom did pass away and all and maybe she needs good dick to remedy her heartache. She answers immediately when I call her phone. I smile to myself when she tells me to come through. She's alone as Zemvelo and Ziqhenye will only be joining her tomorrow. Heading for the car, I check to see that I have the necessary equipment to ensure that I'm protecting myself and Zenande and then drive off, my dick already growing hard at the thought of having her writhing in ecstasy beneath me.

Mutual Desires : Two

Christophe

I love watching him sleep. The innocence found on his face always takes my breath away, and sometimes, it's hard to believe that this beautiful man is actually mine. I guess I could call myself one of the few lucky ones. Not a lot of men can openly admit that they prefer other men. Not a lot of them can openly be in a relationship with another man. Hugo is different though. Maybe it's because he's older and therefore knows with certainty what he wants. Maybe he doesn't have the time to play around. Maybe he finds pretending daunting, just like me. Either way, we're here and I think I...love him. Like love, love. Not the childish infatuation I'd have for the boys in my high school.

These feelings are more...intense, real. The butterflies, the warmth in my cheeks, the goosebumps that spread over my skin whenever he touches me. I really think that it's love. It's a scary thought to process, because we haven't even been dating that long but I don't think feelings have a time frame. My parents married a mere three months after meeting. I've known Hugo for four—and we were friends before we became lovers. We've been dating for two months and I can confidently say he ignites feelings in me that the boys in school couldn't.

Shifting in bed, I wince as my lower back protests the tiny movement, but remind myself that it's a good pain. I think I'm used to it now, whenever I spend the night here, being ass-drilled isn't exactly the easiest task in the world. Natural bottom or not. I press my lips onto Hugo's and then scoot away from the bed, making sure not to wake him up.

His apartment is of the spacious kind, elegant and expensive. I'm never not in awe when I come here. It's proof that hard work pays off, at least in Hugo's case. At twenty-eight, he's already driving one of the more expensive Mercedes Benz vehicles, and he's renting an apartment in Greenstone. He's an engineer, and has started his own business as a side hustle. It's doing well, according to him, and this year he's thinking about branching out to Cape Town, since there is a demand for his services that side. I still have no idea what exactly his business deals with and I probably don't care enough to.

In the kitchen, I scan the contents of his cabinets, deciding to make breakfast. After last night, Hugo definitely deserves a reward. He's a considerate lover and when I think back to the sweet nothings he whispered into my ear while making love to me, my heart flutters with love. Hugo's damn near perfect and I can only hope that what we share will last forever. I mentally scoff at my train of thought, at how pathetic I sound. Tomorrow's never guaranteed after all...but it's also important to live in the moment. And right now, all I know is that Hugo makes me stupidly happy.

I'm going to make us some omelets and bacon so I retrieve all the ingredients and place them on the counter. I realize that I should've probably brought my phone when I start cooking. It wouldn't feel like such a drudgery task but I'm too lazy to go back into the bedroom. The kitchen smells exquisite and the bacon is sizzling when I feel two large arms enfolded around my middle and Hugo's chin rest on my shoulder. "Morning, mon chou." His French accent is always so thick in the morning.

"Morning, hot stuff," I return, spinning in his arms and leaning forward to press a kiss on his lips. "How did you sleep?"

His hands trail to my uncovered ass. "Is that a trick question?" The hunger in his eyes fills me with desire, I bite my lip and return his hungry stare. "What is it you're making?"

"Omelets and bacon."

He nods his head, "I am hungry."

The suggestion found in his voice turns me on. I place my hands on his chest, running them down the tempting dark skin. "Me too."

"Well," he lifts me onto the counter, next to the griddle that he switches off, and runs his hands in between my thighs, "we ought to do something about that. Don't you think?"

"Is that a trick question?" I ask his question from a while ago, grinning widely at him.

He doesn't respond verbally, and positions us so that my ass is hanging off the counter with his hips balancing me. He uses his saliva for lube and normally it's always been such a turnoff for me but it's different with Hugo. His eyes are on mine as he slides in me, my inner walls readily stretching to accommodate him. The burn and pain is there but it's dull. It doesn't compare to the pleasure of feeling him pulsing wildly inside me. We kiss passionately as he starts to move inside me. In. Out. Gently, taking his time. I shudder at the feel of him, he's possessing every inch of my body. I pull him in deeper, gripping his firm ass and moan into his neck. Tingles flood my body and together we give and take until we can't hold back anymore. Warmth floods my insides just as I shoot my load into his hand. We're heaving, bodies wet, and our foreheads touching as we both come down from our high.

“Goddamit, Christophe, you’re amazing,” Hugo whispers huskily into my ear.

I can only smile in response, wincing as he pulls out. We then eat breakfast together and then do the dishes. He tells me that he’s going to skip work today, just for me, and I can’t help leaping into his arms. It’s because of things like this that make it so easy for me to fall in love with him. My cellphone rings as we’re heading for the bathroom to shower and get ready for the day. Telling Hugo to go ahead without me, I look around for it and find it on one of the chairs in the room. I’m not even sure how it got there. Answering, I put the phone to my ear. “Hello, Baba?” I wonder why he’s calling.

“You’re not at home.”

Okay. So no greeting. I roll my eyes and reply, “Yes. I spent the night at Simthandile’s house,” the lie falls off easily and I seriously hope he won’t be calling my best friend’s parents to confirm. Or maybe he has? I hope not, but he sounds tense.

“Come back home. We need to have a serious discussion.”

I wonder what about. I want to ask him but he sounds nonnegotiable, the Zulu man in him shining through. I won’t be able to ask anything when he’s like this. “Okay, Baba. Could you give me thirty minutes?”

“Twenty,” he says before hanging up.

I glare at the phone disbelievingly, the audacity of him to do this. Torn between showering and just wearing last night’s clothes, I decide to go with the latter because I only have twenty minutes to reach home and I’ll have to fetch Simi since I lied about being at her house. Hugo comes back dripping wet, naked as the day he was born and I salivate at the sight of him. He’s gorgeous. He scrutinizes me from top to bottom and then quirks an eyebrow. “My dad’s home. He called to let me know I’m needed.”

“I thought you said he wasn’t going to be home for at least another week.”

“That’s what I thought too,” I reply honestly. My dad’s in the logistics industry, a truck driver to be more specific, and he’s always travelling long distance from one province to another. Sometimes, he goes to

other counties as well. He's rarely home but the same goes for my mother. I don't even know what she does exactly but I know she sells beauty products and has to travel as well sometimes to meet with business acquaintances and discuss business. She has a beauty store in Randburg Square and spends most of her days there. This means that I'm home alone most of the time but I've grown used to it so much that it's weird to have my parents in the house with me. "Can we reschedule our date? I'm really sorry but he's in his Zulu control freak mode."

Hugo chuckles his deep laughter and nods in understanding. "Fine. You'll call me when they leave. I do not want to make them uncomfortable with the knowledge that their baby boy is dating an old cat like me."

I roll my eyes and shake my head. "Ten years isn't that much Hugo."

"It is when you're a twenty-eight year old fucking a kid who ought to be in high school."

We get into the car and begin the drive to Simi's. "Well, lucky for you, I am officially a matriculant. Besides, I'm turning eighteen soon, and I'm super mature. You know that."

Hugo grips my hand and kisses my knuckles. "I guess." We have a lighthearted talk the rest of the drive to Simi's and she rolls her eyes as soon we pick her up.

"You guys are disgusting, chomz!" she fake gags. "Kissing in the car and shit. Do you ever stop touching each other?"

"Nope," I giggle, meeting her brown eyes on the rearview mirror, "Thank you for pulling through, sis."

"Oh, please. Like you don't do the same for me." She smiles kindly and tells me about varsity life. I admit that I'm a bit envious when she tells me about the new friends she's made. Sometimes, I am curious about varsity but I wanted to take a gap year. It was a stalling tactic on my end, because my parents don't seem to think being a model is an actual career and would rather I ventured into something more 'stable'. The medical field or something similar. My matric results are excellent, I could go to any university I want to and yet, I just prefer posing in front of the camera. I prefer channeling my inner Baba Diop or Malick Bodian. I have the looks to match it too. Many times in high school, I'd be teased mercilessly for my 'too dark' skin and quirky facial features. Big-eyed, thick lipped, with a sharp jawline. My mother's strong Gabonese genes prevail and I've had people tell me I bought my father's surname

because I don't look like a Zulu...even though I am pretty fluent in it. I don't dress like one. Don't walk like one. I've been told I'm not masculine enough to be considered a Zulu man. By strangers. By my dad. He thinks I'm too soft but this is who I am...and I don't know how to be anyone else but myself.

Hugo's car comes to a halt a few streets away from my house. I kiss him passionately, much to the annoyance of Simi, but we ignore her as I straddle his lap and kiss him again and again. *I love you*, my heart tells him but I don't have the courage to voice it out. "Drive safely, please." I say instead.

"I'll call you every five minutes to let you know." It sounds teasing and serious at the same time.

"No," I shake my head, "that means you'll be using your phone while you're driving. Call me when you get home." Another deep kiss and I let him go. Simthandile teases me the entire walk home. I roll my eyes and bear her childish skips and singing. I enter the code to the front gate and then walk inside. I can hear my mom's voice as we enter the house. When did she get home? "Mommy. Baba. Sanibonani."

"Christophe, finally, you're home," my mom says, sitting next to my father. They both look tense as fuck to me. I hope nothing's wrong. "Hello, Simi. It's good to see you."

"Likewise, Ma." Simthandile returns, and she greets my father as well but his reply is absentminded.

"Please tell me you're not getting a divorce," I beg them as Simi and I take the opposite couch. I'm not trying to go through the burden of deciding which parent to stay with. I don't want to be caught in emotional guilt trips over who did what for me and who was there for me. "That's not what this is, right mommy?"

"No, of course not." My mother chuckles, and I sigh in relief. "But this is equally serious if not more. We're going to Eshowe. We leave tonight."

What?

I blink my eyes at both my parents disbelievingly. "How, mommy? When was this decided? And why are we going there anyway? We've never been there before."

“Your other mother has passed away. Our presence is needed.” My mom is still the one talking, my dad has turned into a mute. I can’t say I blame him because I know that he loved his first wife. Every December, he’d go to KwaZulu-Natal to spend the holidays with his other family. I have three sisters that he got with his first wife. I’ve never met them, have rarely talked with them on phone calls, and I’ve never been to Eshowe. I’ve never questioned why, because Joburg is all I know, it’s been my home for the past seventeen years.

“But why? It’s not like they know us. What if they don’t want us there?”

My mother looks at my dad with a look that says that the same questions ran through her mind. We’re all quiet and looking at my father expectantly. He appears to be deep in thought and after a long awkward silence, he finally lifts his eyes to address all of us. “We’re going because she’s your family. We will honor her and that’s final. Pack your bags, we’re leaving at 05:00 pm, and not a second later.” His voice is firm and hard, again telling us that we have no say. “I suggest you tell your friend to go home. There won’t be any time for hangouts today.”

I want to scream in frustration as he stands and leaves the living room. What the fuck? Damn my mom for falling in love with the most stubborn of bastards. This man is Hitler reincarnated. Nothing shakes him, he’s a cold bastard. “You heard your father,” my mother also stands and I hate her for being so damn submissive all the time.

Simthandile is sympathetic and even suggests that we run away together but even she knows that won’t work. Lord knows what havoc my dad would unleash on me if I actually ran away. As I walk her out, I think about Hugo and I start to panic. I’m not going to lie, I feel like crying. That happens when he calls to let me know that he’s reached home. I try to explain what’s wrong but there are fucking lumps in my throat that stomp on my words. Simi grabs my phone and tells him what’s wrong. I want him to come back so I can say goodbye but my dad would kill me if I attempted to go out after this. I’m not even supposed to be seeing Simi out but I persisted. I just hope I don’t have a black belt waiting for me at home.

As soon as Simi’s Uber arrives, I walk back inside the house. The rest of the day is spent packing my clothing. We’re going to spend about five days there my mother tells me. But she still insists that I pack more clothes which makes me suspicious but I am too emotionally drained to call her out. Five o’clock comes to soon and before I know it, we’re leaving my safe place for a foreign place where my mom and I probably won’t even be accepted. The drive is long and I fall asleep in between the trip. I don’t eat much nor do I make an effort in conversing with my parents. Dad plays maskandi music, appearing lighter than when he was at the house.

By the time we reach the dusty town of Eshowe, it's very late into the night. We're not even in Eshowe, the name of this town is Mbongolwane. There are no streetlights and most of the lighting comes from the houses that have lamps outside. I frown as I look at some of the strange houses, the rondavels. Great, we'll be stuck in a third world town. Are places like these even hygienic? I hope our house has a toilet and a bathroom. I hope I have my own bathroom and hot water.

My dad stops the car outside a large gate and I shift my eyes to take in the sight ahead of me. There's one large house and three rondavel houses around it. The house is beautiful, but I can't see it housing more than four people. "Madodakazi ami!" Baba's voice grabs my attention and I turn toward it, spotting three women at the front door. The first two have a beautiful frame – tall and thin. The other one is just as gorgeous, she reminds me of Simi, with her chubby frame – she's tall and fat with the roundest cheeks I've ever seen. She's the one who looks welcoming, beaming so widely that I can't help returning her grin. Dad introduces us and I learn that the first two are Zemvelo and Ziqhenye. Zemvelo is his oldest, and lives in KwaMashu. Ziqhenye is the youngest, recently graduated, and lives in East London. The chubby one is Zenande, she lives here in Mbongolwane, and works at Mbongolwane hospital. I greet them all but I can't help noticing again that the only person who's truly welcoming is Zenande. These other two look at me like I've been keeping their father from them. I want to laugh because if they knew that I hardly see him even though I live him then they'd realize how lucky they are that they at least get visits during the holidays.

"Chris," my dad says as we enter the house. It's more impressive inside, top class furniture resides within its walls, and there's a homely feel about it that soothes me. "Zenande will show you to your room. Get enough rest, we're preparing for umkami's funeral in the morning."

I just nod my head and struggle with my bags through the wide hallway. "So you're Zithobile, huh?" Zenande asks casually as we pass three doors before stopping at the one furthest from all the others.

"I prefer Christophe...or Chris is fine," I tell her.

"I like Zithobile," the way she says it tells me that I can give up on hopes of her calling me by the name that I've used my entire life. "I've waited a long time to meet you, bhuti. It's unfortunate that we're meeting under these sad circumstances but I'm glad you're here. Me and you will be the best of friends I tell you."

Okay. She's definitely the warmest one. I return her beautiful smile. "Thank you, Zenny." If she's not going to call me by my actual name then I'll gladly return the favor. I'm pretty sure her wide grin means she doesn't mind at all. "My condolences as well. Can't begin to imagine how you must be feeling."

“Thank you. These things happen, sthandwa sami. I’m just thankful that she got to see the success of her children before God took her. We spent so much time with her. That’s what matters.”

I nod in understanding, not sure what else to say.

“Ulale kahle ke bhutiza wami,” she says when the silence starts to transition into awkwardness. “We usually prepare breakfast at 09:00 but we’ll have abaduduzi from Ma’s church paying a visit. Please try to be awake by 07:00.”

“Okay, thanks for the heads up.”

Zenande nods her head, and I turn around to look for my PJs when the door opens unexpectedly. “Awusho uyistabane, angithi?”

The question, asked so casually, catches me off guard. I narrow my eyes at her, trying to explore my options. This one doesn’t look like a homophobe but you never know. I’ve had some of the people I thought were my friends say the most homophobic things about me. I’ve been tricked by some of my girl friends into thinking a straight guy was into me. That hadn’t ended well for me and I’d had to spend close to a week in hospital. Being gay is tough, having to fight for your basic human right to live freely like everyone else can be so daunting. It’s bad in Johannesburg but I can’t imagine how worse it must be in a traditional place like this. These people would probably kill me like Shaka Zulu killed his enemies in the olden days. I’m too young to die. I still need to marry Hugo.

“Why are you asking?” I raise my eyebrow at my new sister.

“Because I want you to know that I wouldn’t judge. I think it’s beautiful to love whomever you want. But some of the people here may not get you – be discreet, we have lots of assholes around here.”

I don’t know why but my gaze wavers and I feel like crying. “Thank you,” I say to her with a nervous smile forming on my lips. I don’t know what else to say. When Zenande nods her head and leaves, I change into something light and get beneath the covers. My suitcases lie next to the closet and I will put them in there in the morning. I’m too tired now, sleepy, so I close my eyes and try to drift off.

I couldn't sleep at all last night, not that I didn't make an effort, but I was nervous. A feeling I haven't had since the first time I shot my shot with Hugo. It's 05:00am, and I wonder if the others are awake yet. The house is too silent but I can hear some dogs barking in the distance. I hope this family doesn't house any pets, I'm not the biggest fan, and the enthusiasm of the furry creatures weirds me out. It has to do with something that happened back when I was in primary school but that's a story for another day.

Lying in bed for a while, I realize that I don't even know where the bathroom in this place is, which means I'll have to wait until someone fetches me or go out there to check if anyone's awake yet. I'm not in the mood to see the celery stick siblings so I stay where I am. Perhaps Zenande will come and fetch me. My thoughts keep me company anyway, as I think about one thing or the other but mostly about my boyfriend. He's probably preparing for work right now or maybe he's gone jogging. He's not the biggest person in the world but he works out and his lean body is beautifully muscled. I would love to have a body like his but I'm assuming the stick thing runs in our family. Zenande is the only meaty one I've seen. The other two are thin but I hear it's flattering for women, the same can't be said for a thin short guy though. I've heard people say this all my life as well.

A knock on my door cuts my musings. It opens before I can give permission and I hold back a scowl. What if I was beating my meat? Ziqhenye, who is peering through the door, would've seen what she's not supposed to. "Morning. Baba says take a shower. The church people will arrive shortly." She leaves before I can thank her or ask her where the bathroom is. And the way she was eyeballing me...wow, is all I gotta say.

I leave the room and I'm lucky enough to meet my mother in the hallway. She shows me where the bathroom is and it pains me to the core to learn that the four of us are sharing this one small bathroom. There's a flushing toilet and a bathtub with a shower tap. All in all the place is nice and clean but god it's cramped. The water is barely hot, just warm enough for me to take a quick shower. I leave the bathroom and hear some voices in the hallway. On my way back to my room, I spot my father standing with a tall boy who can't be older than twenty in the living room. Our eyes clash and I don't know why I freeze momentarily. Perhaps it has to do with his scrutiny of me – curious and guarded. There's something intimidating about him so I look away and continue to my room.

"Chris, this is Nhlakanipho," my father says as soon as I join everyone in the living room. He's talking about the boy with the serious face. This Nhlakanipho is still in high school, judging by his school uniform that has probably seen better days. Sithola Imfundo Secondary School, the badge on his jacket says. But it's barely noticeable with how tattered it is. Okay. Despite his good looks, this boy looks like the poster child for poverty in rural areas and it makes me want to donate a few of my clothes to him but they wouldn't even fit him. He's way bigger than me – plus he doesn't look like the type that would be into my stylish clothing. "I called him this morning because your sister suggested that we hire him to help

around the house in preparation for your mother's funeral. He's only going to be helping around after school though but I wanted you to meet him."

"Sawubona," I greet, unable to meet his eye for longer than five seconds.

"Yebo, unjani?" he grips my hand firmly, unwavering.

"Ngyaphila. It's nice to meet you."

He doesn't reply and I get the feeling that he's the standoffish type so I leave him be. He's already turned his attention to my father anyway. They're talking about prices and the list of places that my father could contact to begin with funeral arrangements. I don't pay them much attention, I haven't the slightest idea on what goes into funeral arrangement preparations. But most of my day is spent following my father to this place and then the other. We use the car and sometimes we walk on foot. It's tiring, my Converse gets fucking dirty with all the dust gathering at my feet. People look at us strangely, well me to be quite honest. I feel like an alien amongst these people, I hear the murmurs when we walk past a group of women. They're hushed and predatory.

The rest of the week goes by the same. I am emotionally drained by the time Friday comes. I've always thought that funeral drama took place on TV but nope. My other mom's family came all the way from Newcastle, asking about wills and her belongings. They've been causing trouble every day that they've been here, and they eat a lot as well. The issue of her will has been swept under the carpet for a while, until MaMbatha is buried first. And then there were rumors that she used muthi on a lot of people around Mbongolwane and maybe she finally found someone who was her match. I've been silent, watching the drama unfold.

Today is the night of umlindelo. Her coffin came in a few hours ago, it's in one of the rondavels. There's singing in one of the tents and I don't know, the entire process just seems to eat at my soul. This is my first funeral but I can safely say that I never want to go through this process again. My father has struck one of the cows in her honor and I was so traumatized at the heifer's cry of despair. I haven't recovered since but I'm still required to help slaughter it with the other men so that it will be prepared for the guests. It's a gory process, I've been staring at the others go at it like this is usual for them, with me shaking beside one of the young men. I don't even remember his name.

"Your father asked me to check on how you're doing." A deep, hoarse voice murmurs from behind me.

I turn around and find Nhlakanipho looking at me curiously. "I'm sorry. I keep thinking back to how the cow struggled and cried. I feel bad." I make sure my voice is quiet, the others already look at me like I'm a wimp. They've been snickering and making snide remarks about me the whole day.

Nhlakanipho laughs, it's a weird sound from a boy who always seems so serious. "Musa ukutefa, ndoda. One day, the responsibility will fall on your shoulders."

"I dread that day," I tell him. "Do you think it's too late for my father to try for another son?" the small smile on his face edges me on. I want to hear his laugh again.

"Angazi, bafoza." He shrugs his shoulders, looking over my shoulder. "Siya?"

I follow his line of sight and find the pretty boy that Zenande has told me about. His father owns a liquor store a distance away from our house. He's the most intelligent boy in Mbongolwane apparently and I'd love to pick his brains some time but he doesn't seem to like me. Yesterday, he came here to help Nhlakanipho and when Nhlakanipho introduced us, the boy had barely paid me any mind. I don't know what I've done to wrong him though, I don't even know him.

"I'm going home," the pretty boy says, I can detect the stinking attitude in his voice.

"It's 01:30am. You can't go back now."

"Awukahle Nhlakanipho, I'm not fragile. Nothing's going to happen to me."

This Siya is unnecessarily rude and he's starting to get on my nerves if I'm being honest. I walk away from their situation, trailing closer to the animal butchering situation. The cow murderers are talking in deep Zulu, so unbothered as they cut into the poor animal. I'm nauseous but I try to hide the expression on my face. I grab one of the knives and pray that I'll go undetected as I pretend to help them slaughter the cow. Nhlakanipho comes back and one of his friends must notice his sour expression because they ask him what the matter is.

"I'll come back soon. Ngiyophelezela uSiya, he's going back home."

The same guy laughs, I'm not sure of his name but he's very talkative. "What, he can't walk home on his own? Noma sewaphenduka umfazi wakho uSiya?"

If looks could kill then the fat guy would be one with his ancestors by now. The way that Nhlakanipho is glaring at him scares even me. I've heard stories about how violent the guy can get. Zenande says he's quiet but you shouldn't mess with him. He's beat and embarrassed older men who thought they could talk anyhow with him. The only reason he wasn't shunned is because everyone knows that Nhlakanipho is a guy who keeps to himself. Zenande seems to have a crush on him, which is weird because he's only 18 while she's so much older at 30.

"I don't have time for this rubbish wena Njabulo. Are you trying to tell me and the gents something?" Nhlakanipho says coolly. "So when you look at other men you see your potential wife?"

I don't really like his joke but the others laugh while Nhlakanipho walks away. The talkative Njabulo keeps silent and I start to feel sorry for him as the others tease him mercilessly. Their chatter is turning homophobic as they make fun of Njabulo. He's agitated, trying very hard to protect his masculinity and I just decide to take a walk back inside the house. Maybe I'll call Hugo and tell him about the Zulu idiots I am surrounded with. We've been talking almost everyday and I miss him like crazy. I'm at the front door when I hear a tiny commotion to the side of the house. My first thought is maybe people are trying to break in but then I dismiss the thought. No one would try a thing with all the people in our home. I am still curious though, and creep closer to where the noise is.

"Don't...stop it, Nhlakanipho! I told you, you're staying right here. Angiyindawo nawe! Go back to that...grasshopper looking thing that you were flirting with. I'm not going anywhere with you."

My eyes widen and I don't think I am quite registering what is happening at the moment. But the grasshopper this boy's talking about can't be me, can it? My mind is racing and the more I look at these two, the more I notice how familiar they are with each other. No straight guy allows another guy to pin him to the wall the way Siya is allowing Nhlakanipho to do it to him. Nhlakanipho's arms are above Siya's shoulders, trapping him against the wall, he looks threatening more than anything.

"Siya, usuyasangana manje. Why would I want other people when I'm with you?"

"I don't know!" the pretty boy shouts and I roll my eyes at his dramatics. "You're just...you were even laughing with him, Nhlakanipho. You don't even do that with my friends. They always go on and on about how they're scared of you and now you do this..."

“Musa uk’banga umsindo,” Nhlakanipho doesn’t shout but his voice is filled with an authority that makes my breathing stutter for a second. “So what, you think I want Christophe because I was laughing with him? Where’s the crime in trying to welcome the boy? He’s new here and he’s the boss’s son. You know I have to be nice to him. I need the money for my family, Siya. Some of us don’t have rich fathers like you. Some of us don’t have fathers at all, just sperm donors but I don’t expect you to understand.”

Siya doesn’t respond for so long that I think he’s not going to but eventually he sighs and shakes his head. “That’s not fair.”

“What’s not fair is the way you keep nagging me when you know how hard I have it. I know you’re only sixteen and your position in life meant that you didn’t have to grow up quickly but some of us had to. Maybe this is why you expect me to entertain your childish shenanigans but I don’t have time for this.” Nhlakanipho shifts his body and he’s not trapping Siya anymore. I think he’s walking away but he stands a distance away from Siya, looking skyward, hands in his pocket. The other one, with his dramatic ass, falls ass first onto the ground and hugs his legs. Their silence is deafening and I feel guilty for eavesdropping but this is some delicious tea. All along I’ve been admiring Nhlakanipho’s rugged good looks but the thought didn’t cross my mind that he might be into other guys. Never in my wildest dreams did I think people like me exist in a third world town such as this. I’m tempted to walk away but Siya prevents me from doing that by apologizing.

“I...maybe I was overreacting.”

Nhlakanipho walks away. I would too with that weak ass ‘apology’.

“Nhlakanipho, ngyaxolisa!” his voice is cracking. “I’m really sorry. I just...do you have any idea how hard this is? I can’t even hold your hand in public. I have to smile through the pain of seeing you with girls—”

“I do too,” Nhlakanipho sounds done, cold.

“I know. I just...it’s not fair. I want to talk about you, to tell everyone I meet about you so badly. I want to refute my friends’ claims when they say you’re cold. Because I know you. Remember the first time we admitted our feelings for each other and you bought those sweets that had plastic rings. And you told me to keep it because you’re marrying me. It was all you could afford but it’s still my favorite gift from you. Or all the times you come to my house to give me amadumbe kagogo because you know they’re my

favourite. I want to tell everyone about that Nhlakanipho. The one who loves me so much. I'm pissed off that I can't. I hate that everything we do is in secret, engathi singcolile. I hate it!"

Nhlakanipho goes back to where Siya is still on the ground. And I think I can see the tenderness that Siya was talking about. It's in the way he puts his fingers underneath Siya's chin, tilting his head back so that they're looking into each other's eyes. "I hate it too, Shandu. But you know why we're doing it. Remember what happened to uMhlongo? Do you want us to suffer the same fate?"

Siya shakes his head.

I watch them with something breaking inside for them as they embrace each other. I watch Nhlakanipho bring Siya onto his lap. I watch their noses nudging together gently. I admire the beauty they create together and again wonder why people wouldn't want other people to have this? I watch Siya join his hands with Nhlakanipho's. I watch their lips joining in a kiss that Venus herself would be jealous of. I smile at the connection that's so easy to sense even with the distance. I wish I could record them and keep this moment for them forever. For the day they get married.

With one final kiss, Nhlakanipho grips Siya's face again, looking into his eyes. The only reason I spot the tenderness in his eyes is because of the dim light from the wall's lamp. "Ngyakuthanda, yezwa?"

Siya nods his head. "The feeling is mutual, bafoza."

They both chuckle and Nhlakanipho is embracing Siya like a prized gift again. He kisses the younger boy's temple and I have to strain my ears to hear his whispered, "Shandu..."

Siya's sigh is like a calm hurricane. "Mzimela..." he returns.

They're silent after that for what feels like forever. I'm too reluctant to join the others, the murderers, where they were busy. But I'm also scared that someone might come this side and I feel the need to protect these two. For the rest of the night, I stay close to the house and keep watch until I hear them leaving. I smile the entire time.

The funeral is relatively drama free. Or maybe I feel that way because the entire time my thoughts are on Nhlakanipho and Siya. Every time I see them, a smile automatically spreads over my face. I think Siya starts to get a little freaked out but I can't help it. I view them in a different light and the more I study their body language, the more I keep wondering how people don't notice how these two gravitate toward each other. Why can't they see the lingering touches? A five second touch on Siya's shoulder. Another one, too quick, on the small of his back. They even stand too close when they're talking. But maybe I'm noticing all these things because I've seen them last night.

We have to go to a river after we've buried MaMbatha for reasons unknown to me to have a quick wash in the cold water. The women are on their own as are the men. I'm horrified and blushing horribly while trying my damn hardest to not look at anyone than what would be socially acceptable for men to look at other men. One of Nhlakanipho's friends captures my attention though. He's ridiculously tall – he stands taller than everyone around him – with a very impressive build, I wouldn't be surprised if Michaelangelo carved the man himself. I kept sneaking glances at him during the service and we made eye contact a few times. He then smiled at me kindly and he appears to be very different from his serious friend. There's a playfulness about him...an intimidating one. Almost flirty. It has the ability to trick anyone into an illusion of being wanted by him. But he looks straight as a ruler and even if he weren't, I wouldn't cheat on Hugo with someone I've just met.

I've escaped the house for a bit of a breather. Zemvelo's cries were getting to me and the look of pure dejection on my father's face wasn't helping any. I've never seen him look so utterly broken or hopeless. It makes me wonder if he loved his first wife more than he does my mom. It's something uncomfortable to think about but part of me hopes not. I'd rather he loved them for different reasons than have him love one more than the other. My mind is a little dazed from all the mqombothi that we've been drinking. I think this is the only time my parents have allowed me to indulge on alcohol.

I think back to the chickens I saw this morning, how the male one seemed horny for every hen it came across. It was a funny and horrifying sight. I'd rushed back inside the house to record a video for Hugo and Simthandile. They both found the entire situation funny as fuck and Simi told me that it's worse with dogs but I told her not to send me any videos. I can only imagine the trauma I'd go through. The voices in the distance capture my attention and I decide that maybe it's time to go back. I'm a little woozy though and stumble on my feet, colliding with a solid wall.

"Whoa, easy mfethu," a smooth voice whispers in my ear. I feel something big enwrap on my shoulders, steadying me. When I look up, I'm met with brown eyes that appear almost caramel in the sun. "Oh, it hit you good. Didn't it?"

What?

It's Nhlakanipho's friend. Damn. He is even more impressive up close. His face is so gorgeous – from his thick eyebrows to his sculpted jawline. He's stunning features and marbled body. I don't even know why I'm staring at his lips so hard but I notice that they're moving and I blink repeatedly, hoping the fog in my brain will clear. "You're the first guy that I've come across who looks good in this Zulu taxi driver attire," I struggle to get my words out, and chuckle, it sounds too giggly to my ears. And I'm finding it hard to stand on both my feet so I sag my body against him. "Ugqoke i-Brentwood. It's kinda nice, like that Big Zulu guy."

"Angazi noma kmele ngibonge," tall guy chuckles, it's rumbling like lightning, fitting for a big guy like him. I'm like a toothpick in the boy's arms. His capable arms, I'm not sure why he's still holding me. "You sound tipsy. More than tipsy actually. How much did you drink?"

"Maybe two cups, could be three. I don't know," I giggle again.

"Such a lightweight," Mr. Brentwood-wearing, Tall Deliciousness mutters. "Maybe you should go to bed."

My mind immediately goes to the gutter, filled with thoughts of him easily overpowering me in bed and I shake my head because then Hugo walks in on us. "I have a boyfriend," I find myself confessing.

Mr. Deliciousness pauses, and then his arms are moving from around me. "Don't you mean girlfriend?"

"Ew!" I gag, and I'm not sure if it's because the thought of being with a girl still makes me sick or if my body's now rejecting the alcohol.

"You're...gay?"

I turn – stumble, really – to look at him. The fog in my brain means that I'm overly confident today. It means that I'm confessing to the things my dad warned me about revealing. "Yes, so what? Do you hear me judging you about the people you sleep with? Do I tell you who to love? No. So who do you think you are judging me for loving other men. It's my life, not yours."

“Ai cha mfethu, ngathi usudakwe kakhulu manje,” his voice sounds just like his friend last night. Calm but reprimanding. “Where are your sisters? I don’t deal with drama.”

“Oh, so now I’m dramatic?” my mind is practically begging me to shut up at this point but my mouth has a mind of it’s own. “Let me go then. I’m sure I can find my way back to my room.” His right arm is balancing me again – firm and certain.

“Inhlobo yabafana abanjengawe bagcwele lenyongo onayo wena?” he’s looking down at me like I’m made from spare parts or something. I don’t know why. He came at me first. *No, he didn’t*, my brain scoffs at me but I just ignore. I’m just spewing as he walks me back inside the house. I pray that I’m not revealing dangerous secrets as we walk past the people sitting inside one of the large tents. I don’t spot any of my family members on our way inside the house. I point to my bedroom but not without insulting him about his fragile masculinity.

The door shuts behind us, and the palm on the top of my back urges me further into the room, toward the bed. I turn around, the backs of my knees touching the edge of the bed, and *Holy Fuck*, this guy is breathtaking. I don’t know why but I move to lean into him, and yelp instead when large hands push me back and I land flat on my back on the mattress, legs over the side, with Mr. Brentwood standing above me. My stomach, flipping uneasily at the sudden movements, takes a few seconds to settle. “Rude,” I slur as I push myself up to sit.

Tally only hums and kneels in front of me, an arm’s length away, helping to remove my Converse. His scent is heady, almost...seductive. Like him. *Careful*, my hazy brain reminds me, filling me with thoughts of the boyfriend waiting for me in Johannesburg. Right, I must not cheat on Hugo. That would practically be impossible with this one though. Falling back on the bed, I stare at the ceiling as I teeter on the edge of sleep and consciousness. The former wins the battle, knocking me out like a light.

Mutual Desires : Three

Christophe

I didn't expect the leeches to resume their attack a mere day after their 'daughter's' funeral but aside from a persistent migraine I have, this is what I woke up to. I can hear the noise from my room, the voices. It sounds like mam' Ntombenhle – the scrawny woman who suffers from terrible mouth diarrhea. She's the one who had been the most aggressive when it came to MaMbatha's will and possessions. For the past few days, I have been tempted to laugh at her naivety because who even owns a damn will in such a place? I'm pretty sure these people focus more on pleasing their husbands and having babies than they do about the day they die.

It's 06:57am, far too early for me to be awake, but it's something that I've found myself doing consistently since we arrived here. That's still too late for the rest of my family though, for them 06:00am is like the afternoon. Even my mother has shocked me by falling into the routine of waking up far too early, to the alarm of the roosters crowing in the morning. I think back to the events of yesterday, rubbing my temples as the fragment memories of me embarrassing myself in front of Nhlakanipho's friend come crashing like the repetition of a bad sitcom. Shit! I told the guy I have a boyfriend. He knows I'm gay. *They've been suspecting*, my brain scoffs at me and inwardly, I flinch. Of course they have. What straight guy dresses the way I do? Platform shoes and pastel-coloured flare pants. Sheer blouse shirts and floral jean jackets. Oversized sweaters and palazzo pants. Tie-die shirts. Romper shorts. Nail polish. You name it. I buy most of my clothes in second-hand stores to fit my vintage aesthetic, also, if I'm going to capture the eye of a potential agent then I need more than just my quirky facial features to stand out.

I remember Tally's expression when I revealed my sexuality. A laugh bubbles from deep within me – both amused and worried. The boy had acted like I had a contagious disease or something. Does he even know that one of his friends kisses other boys? I don't think so. Nothing about Nhlakanipho screams queer. What you get instead are 'back off' vibes, like he couldn't care less about anything or anyone. Of course he proved me wrong by revealing his tenderness for Siya but still, my gaydar hadn't even caught on. The increasingly loud voices outside peak my interest and I finally decide to leave my bed. I remember waking up in the middle of the night to find that someone had undressed me. I'm praying to every god out there that Nhlakanipho's friend hadn't done it because if he did I'm going to have a meltdown. He can't have seen my silly cartoonish underwear. He can't have seen how nonexistent my ass is. And my skinny matches legs. My pride won't be able to handle the embarrassment.

I refuse to wear something clean when I haven't bathed yet so I put on yesterday's clothes and follow the noise to the living room, momentarily freezing when I take in the picture in front of me. My father is

standing in one corner of the room, his mouth pressed into a thin line, a telltale sign that he's holding back on his anger. My mother is nowhere in sight but Zemvelo and Ziqhenye are sitting on one of the couches with their aunt mam' Ntombenhle. Zenande is sitting on her own and inspecting her nails in a bored manner. The front door is open and I can see a large truck parked outside. What the fuck is going on here?

"Sanibonani," I greet as soon as Zemvelo catches my eye. Everyone turns their attention to me and they return the greeting almost as if they don't want to. I go to sit where Zenande is.

"Ufunani lo la?" Ziqhenye snipes, the way she curls her eyelids brings attention to her gorgeous pink eyeshadow. She's so beautiful but has a foulness about her. "These are family matters we're discussing. He's not welcome here, like his mother. Can't he go guy-shopping or something, usis' bhuti wasekhaya?"

"Kodwa vele kwakuzo lunga kuphi uBab' wenu ethandana namaShangane?" mam' Ntombenhle pipes in, her nose upturned in clear superiority. "This is his punishment from amadlozi ethu. He just dumped his family for Johannesburg prostitutes...and even then, he wasn't wise enough to at least find a Zulu woman. He has disappointed not only our ancestors but abakwaXulu as well."

What happens next takes place too fast. A loud thwack fills the room, followed by all our shocked screams. Mam' Ntombenhle is cupping her cheek, standing to meet my father's stare. "Listen to me carefully. This is not your house. Just because I was married to your sister, doesn't mean that you're going to climb over my head. I am not scared to put a woman in her place, the same goes for all of you," his eyes are on everyone in the room, including me. "And you can go to the police to report me if you want to. Go right now."

"But she did nothing wrong!" Zemvelo shouts. "What's she's saying is the truth and you know it, Baba. You abandoned us for a foreigner and even had a child with her. But look at your son, he is defected. Uyistabane, Baba! He's a waste of sperm."

"I am warning you, Zemvelo," Baba's eyes narrow, and my sister actually shrinks. Mam' Ntombenhle is still holding her cheek, a look of pure disbelief on her face. "You have no idea what you're talking about. If you don't know what to say, keep your mouth shut. I will not be disrespected by kids. That will never happen under my roof! My wife is not for you to talk about. Not even my marriage. That also means what I've gained in my marriage – and that is my son. Christophe isn't for you to deal with. He's my son."

Deal with...? What does he mean by deal with? I know my sexuality makes my father uncomfortable, and though I've never outright come out to both my parents, they've always known. With some of us,

it's easy to tell from the get go. I think he's avoided addressing this all his life that he gets agitated when someone has to remind him. I remember when we were coming here, the only thing he'd told me was, "Masifika ekhaya, uyeke lomsangano wakho waseGoli. Don't embarrass me, siyezwana?"

I had nodded because my dad is not someone you argue with. Over the years, I've learned to force down my flamboyancy around him. I never want to irritate him enough to drive him into turning me into his punching bag. If he's going to beat me, I'd rather he beat me because I forgot to polish his favourite shoes or something.

"Do you see how readily he protects his other family?" mam' Ntombenhle's slimy voice captures my attention. "You're going to have it tough, my daughters. Since my sister's unfortunate passing, you're going to have it tough with this man in your lives."

"We will conveniently forget all the money I was sending to your mother to take care of you. We will forget the phone calls. And the December holidays."

"It's not the same, Baba!" Ziqhenye says, "Mam'khulu is right. You were never there for us. Not really. Talking on the phone isn't communication, Baba. You talk but you don't listen. This is why I've decided to go back to East London. We've done what we came here for and I believe my mother is at peace. Regarding my mother's belongings, ai bandla, I will not fight anyone. A dresser and flat screen TV? Give it to umamkhulu or keep fighting for it with her. Mina ngyagoduka ntambama."

"I will not fight your aunt on your mother's possessions. Earthly possessions can be rebought but she clearly came prepared. Not a full day that we laid your mother to her final resting place and she's already bringing in trucks to seize her possessions for herself."

"Because my sister spent her whole life building this home while you were having the time of your life in Johannesburg. Now that she's gone, what is hers will go to her real home. My daughters are always welcome to live in Newcastle with the rest of the family. Phela, they will be like orphans if they remain here with you."

"Count me out," Zenande says, she has been looking bored the whole time. "My whole life is here. This is my family home, I'm not going anywhere. I don't remember my mother's family being there for us."

The tension in this room is thick. I don't think the conflict will be resolved easily. It's better for me to leave. I'm hungry and I really need a bath. When I ask to be excused, Zenande stands with me and follows me to the kitchen. "Wow..." I say as soon as we're hidden.

"Welcome to the Xulu family," she says, shaking her head. "I promise our siblings are not usually this bitchy kodwa it's tough on us. When you're growing up and all your peers talk about their fathers but you can't talk about yours. It's even worse because uBaba isn't dead. I also used to blame you and your mother for keeping him away from us. Until one day, I overheard uBaba talking to your mother, and she was telling him to communicate with us because money didn't buy everything. Of course uBaba doesn't listen but she'd tried and I don't know...I saw her in a different light. Sometimes he'd come back home unexpectedly and I think your mom had something to do with it. I'm just grateful for the time I have with every member of my family. Nginithanda nonke mina."

"I get where you're coming from." I keep it at that. I'm not going to tell her that him living with us doesn't mean he's not an absent father. I'm not even going to think about who had it better than the other. "I love you too by the way. The others, meh, I need to warm up to them kancane."

"Just like they need time to warm up to you," Zenande nods her head. "Why don't you go bath and join me in less than thirty minutes. Ngizokukhipha, for a little breather – my treat."

Hell yeah! I squeal and hug Zenny, she returns my embrace while laughing loudly. "Awume...how did you know I haven't bathed?"

"The little dry drool on the corner of your mouth and iimbici in your eyes. You're still a cute mini crayon though. Those expensive ones we find at Woolworths."

Ugh, the things that come out of her mouth! I chuckle nonetheless and rush into my room to change before going to the bathroom. To my dismay, the water is cold, and I'm not about to submerge myself in it. Using the small bucket here, I wash only the essential parts and make my escape. Back in my room, I pick out an outfit for the day. Old Levi's jeans I got for R70.00 in Newtown. A grey sweater and my pair of second-hand platform sneakers. It's neutral enough that it hopefully won't bring me any unnecessary attention, unless someone focuses on my nails and spots the glittery gold nail polish colouring them.

Zenande shares her room with her sisters. I knock on the door and release a breath I didn't know I was holding when she opens the door and not one of the two nasty ones. "Ses'ngahamba."

She eyes me from head to toe and smirks. "Look at you looking like a nik nak. We'll have to hide you from the all the boys. Aside from protecting your innocence, I'll look damn near look invisible around you."

If she only knew I am not as innocent as she assumes. As for looking invisible, I think it will be the other way around. Zenande is an elegant dresser, always dressed to impress, occasion or not. And she knows how to dress for her beautiful thick frame. Besides, I don't think there are many guys like me here...and I have Hugo waiting for me in Johannesburg. We'd talked a few hours before I embarrassed myself with the mqombothi. "Ngyabonga, sisi. You're giving me a run for my money, I gotta keep up with you."

When we enter the kitchen to inform Baba of our departure, it's to find a number of men helping each other to carry the TV stand. The TV is no more. The flower pots as well. I am disbelieving, but I feel like laughing. It's the wrong time of course but wow...the pettiness of taking even the weird plastic sculptures on the coffee table. Those things can't cost more than R30.00! Outside, there's a Polo waiting for us. Zenande tells me the guy's just a friend who is dreaming if he thinks they'll ever be more than friends. I ask her if the guy knows that and she shrugs. "None of my business. I told him the first time we met that I'm not interested."

"And he's trying to buy his way into your heart?"

"Myeke, he wants to learn the hard way." We get in the car. "Jabulani, lova wami, unjani? This is my brother, Zithobile." She introduces us and then continues, "I want us away from here so we're going to Richard's Bay. There's so much we can do there. We'll come back once that clever one is gone from our house."

I laugh and nod my head, although I have a feeling that Zenande's words were meant for this Jabulani guy and not me. Gqom music is banging loudly in the car and I won't lie, I only pretend to be enjoying it because I think Zenny loves it. But as soon as she tells Jabulani to change his rubbish music, I could sing 'Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika' and even twerk my nonexistent ass to it. He asks her what she'd rather hear then and she tells him Johnny Gill. Thank god. Old school music is like food for the soul. I love it too and I try to listen to some of the lyrics so that I can download the songs later on.

I've never been to Richard's Bay before but I have to say, it's heaven compared to Eshowe. It's better than Mbongolwane. Zenande and I spend time at Broadwalk Mall. She spends her money on me, well Jabulani's money, allowing me to buy some pretty cool clothes at Mr. Price. Yes, I am inexpensive as fuck because I've learned that good style isn't necessarily expensive. I get some new nail polish and some bucket hats for the scorching KZN sun. I also get new underwear because Zenande confirmed that

she didn't undress me which means that Nhlakanipho's friend actually did it. I'm not going to have a meltdown but my pride is bruised and this is the only way I can appease it.

It's almost 06:00pm when we begin the drive back home. "So tell me more about this boyfriend of yours," Zenande says after my call with Hugo ends.

"Hugo? He's Congolese but grew up in Belgium for most of his life. He came here about five years ago and we met through a mutual friend at a party. Not long, just four months. It's only been two months of dating but I...don't know, his voice gives me butterflies. I think I love him."

"Can I see his picture?"

I unlock my phone and go to the gallery. "Here," I give her the phone, trusting that she won't go scrolling through it and find things she's not supposed to.

"Fuck, he's hot! Why is his tool so big, is he an underwear model?" She defies me by doing just that and I notice that she's looking at a picture of his dick and even zooming in.

"Zenny!" I try to snatch my phone from her, choking on my saliva. "You were not supposed to see that. Buyisa!"

"I won't tell," she rolls her eyes, and gives me back the phone. "Try hiding a few of your albums then, to prevent us from seeing gorgeous things like this." I look at her and then Jabulani who is deceptively quiet. Shame, poor guy. His confidence must be taking a knock and even worse, he just spent his money on Zenande. "Also, what the fuck?! Here I was, thinking you're an innocent virgin kanti ubusy wena. How old is this guy? He looks way older than you."

"28," I mutter with a nervous chuckle, turning away to look on the road. We're in Mbongolwane now, near that tuck-shop that belongs to Mchunu. "But I'll be turning 18 soon so I don't see any problem."

"Does Baba know?"

I turn my head to look at her like she's crazy.

“Right,” she laughs to herself, “He’d probably cut your lover’s dick off and then feed it to him.”

“Or me because I’m the dick lover. To teach me a lesson,” I sigh, looking out to see that we’re passing the shebeen that belongs to the Shandus. I can see Siya sitting on a crate with a few guys that look older than him. Even Nhlakanipho is there. And they’re sitting next to each other, their knees brushing. “Nhlakanipho and Siya are really good friends, neh?” I find myself asking.

“Oh, those ones! Beauty and the beast. With Nhlakanipho being the beast, uhlina kakhulu loya. I don’t know whether he thinks we have a crush on him.” Okay. To be honest, I thought she did have a crush on him. “I don’t know why he can’t be well-mannered like Siya.”

I beg to differ but I won’t tell her that. That boy was rude to me a few times but now I know that it’s because he thought I wanted his boyfriend...which I don’t.

“Out of the three of them, Nqobizitha is the most laid back though. The charmer boy of Mbongolwane since Siya doesn’t seem to want a long term relationship with any of the girls.” *Because he has a boyfriend*, I want to tell her. I don’t. “Nqobizitha’s the one that helped your drunk ass yesterday.”

Nqobizitha. I taste his name internally and my stomach churns. I think it’s because I’m nervous about the way I behaved in front of him yesterday. “Yeah, about that. I wish I could apologize to him.”

She rolls her eyes, “Siyabonga, Jabulani.” We exit the car and she doesn’t even spare him a single glance. “Nqobizitha’s fine, don’t worry about him.”

I wish I could but my mind won’t let me live this down.

Baba has called a family meeting. I’m hoping it’s to announce that we’re finally going back to Johannesburg. We’ve been here for ten days and I just want to go back to the normality I am used to. I miss Simthandile. I miss my boyfriend. I miss being on my own. I miss my bedroom. I miss not get dirtied with sand whenever I’m walking. I miss the city lights and the easiness of being around familiar surroundings. I don’t think I’m liked much here. No words need to be said, I can feel it in Zemvelo’s actions. I feel it in the whispers of the community people whenever I walk past them. I can feel it in the stares. I’m too strange for most of these people. I stand out like a sore thumb. If it weren’t for Zenande’s bubblyness I think I would be drowning in sorrow and despair.

“Is everyone here, Chris, where is your mother?”

“Right here,” mom’s voice echoes from the hallway, and then she appears, going to join Baba on the couches that somehow managed to survive mam’ Ntombenhle’s looting hands.

“Good,” Baba looks at us. He’s stern and intimidating, his hands rubbing together. “My wife and I have an announcement to make. We’re going back to Johannesburg soon.”

Hell yeah! I dance around in my head, to an original song about finally leaving the dusty Mbongolwane. I’ll miss Zenande but maybe she can visit us in Kensington when she’s not working at the hospital. I’m already thinking about Simthandile. I’m thinking about Hugo and the naughty stuff we can get up to.

“I spoke to Shange the other day and he opened my eyes to a lot of things that I have been doing wrong with you kids. I...erhm,” he clears his throat, looking nervous. This is new. I’ve never seen my father not look sure of himself. I’ve never seen him not look aggressive and confident. “Ngyaxolisa for a lot of things. But mostly for not being there for you the way you need me to. I don’t know how else to show my love. I also realized I erred in keeping you apart from each other. We’re all a family and we need each other. One day, I will not be of this world anymore and you’re going to need each other. Which is why I’ve decided that Chris will stay here with you. For this year, at least, until he decides to go back to school. I want you all to get to know each other.”

Shock smacks me in the face, rendering me immobile for a while. It feels like the world is crashing down on me and my life in Joburg flashes right in my eyes. No. No. No. They can’t do this to me. This has got to be some form of joke. I keep waiting for some cameras to jump me and one of the cameramen to scream, “SIKE!” but it never comes. I manage to hear Zenande and how excited she sounds. I wish I could return her enthusiasm but nothing’s exciting about being trapped in a place like this.

“So what, you’re punishing me for refusing to go university? Is that it, Baba?” I snap, surprising even myself with the bravery. “How come this wasn’t discussed with me first?”

“We’re discussing it now, Christophe.” He’s so calm and collected.

“No, fuck that!” I shout, ignoring my mother’s horrified plea for me to calm down. “You cannot keep dictating what I can or cannot do with my life. Is it not enough that you’re embarrassed of me? I’m not

going to stay here, Baba. This isn't my home." Zenande meets my eye and I can tell that I have hurt her but I can't help it. I don't want to stay here.

Baba stands and the others are pin drop silent. He starts to walk toward me, predatory and I stand too. I don't know what I'm going to do because the man's bigger than me but I'm not going to allow him to do this to me. He looks me in the eyes, brown eyes a charcoal color, and burning into me with a cold fury. "Understand what I'm trying to do here, ndo—"

"No, Baba," I cut in, my voice shaky and angry, "This is not my—"

His punch sends me flying back to the couch. "Samson!" my mother is suddenly next me, shielding me from my father. "Laisse mon enfant! Leave my child, leave my child! You're not going to touch him." She is trembling, looking ready to protect me. This isn't how it's supposed to be, she's not supposed to be protecting me from my own father. The tears start falling down my cheeks – heavy and fast – and Zenande's beside me, comforting me. It's embarrassing. I shrug her off and walk out of the house. Zenande and my mom call after me and I start to run, as fast as my feet can carry me. I don't know where I am going. It's 07:30pm. The streets are still busy but it's dark outside.

I find myself outside Shandu Liquor store. It's a fifteen minute drive and I can only imagine how long I must've been running to finally reach here. My chest hurts, my throat feels hoarse and my left eye is throbbing. I don't greet on my way inside the shebeen and I ignore the curious eyes on me. I don't even have the money to buy anything inside this place. My functioning eye scans the interior, this shebeen is impressive. I'm reminded of Lucy's shebeen from Generations except in this tavern they have red and blue flashing lights. The place is loud and packed like sardines even though it's a Wednesday. I don't know where to sit and I'm trying to avoid all prying eyes.

I spot a familiar face and shout above the loud music, "Siya!" he looks around for a while, carrying a tray with some dumpies on it. He looks perplexed by the sight of me and I think he's mildly annoyed. "Hi." This is awkward. He has given the rowdy men at the corner their beers.

"Do I know you?"

Ouch! He's doing this on purpose. This kid knows who I am, he called me a grasshopper a few days ago. "Christophe. Remember you came to help around our house with Nhlakanipho. With funeral arrangements."

“Oh...you.” His honey-coloured eyes drag down my frame. He really doesn’t seem to like me. “What are you doing here? Are you even legal?”

“Yes,” I lie through my teeth. “I’m just trying to make new friends,” I add, body heating up at how he’s unashamedly looking at my swelling eye. “I hit the door on my way out of the house.”

“Didn’t ask,” he shrugs but I can tell he knows I’m lying. “Who are you looking for?”

I don’t know. I still don’t even know what I’m doing here. Maybe I should go back home. But I don’t want to see my dad. I’d like to get drunk until I can’t feel my face. I remember how freeing it felt the last time. “Company. Anywhere I can find it, please...”

An eye roll. “I don’t know anyone who goes by that name here.”

Gah!!! This boy is so difficult. What does Nhlakanipho even see in him? “Look,” I reply, maybe a little to aggressively, “I’m not going to steal your boyfriend so chill the fuck out. I’ve just heard some bad news and I’m going to lose my own boyfriend. I’m asking for your company, from one gay—”

“Shut up!” Siya hisses, shifty eyes looking around, and then at me. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. Are you fucking insane? Do you want me dead?”

“N-No!” I stammer, taken aback by the genuine fear on his face. I shouldn’t have fucking said anything. Me and my big mouth. I was just, just frustrated and angry and I spoke before thinking. “Look, forget I said—” Siya grips my wrist and we’re working our way through the sea of bodies toward the counter and then through a brown door to a back exit. It’s completely dark now, the stars shining down on us.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Siya demands, he’s looking around again even though we’re alone here. I think we are. “Angithandani namanye amadoda mina. Angiphisan’ ngezinqe. Ugcwele umbhedo nje wena. Do you think all of us are sick bastards like you?”

His words hurt, they’re like a dagger. I shake my head and look at him, how pinched his face, as if he’s hurt by his own words as well. “Do you feel that way when you’re with Nhlakanipho?”

Siya's mouth hangs open, a second, before he's pushing me, causing me to stumble backwards.
"Awuthule, man! Nhlakanipho and I are just friends. He's my best friend."

"My boyfriend's my best friend, too."

"Stop this!" Siya implores, he turns his head toward me, eyes wavering. "I'll be your damn friend but you don't need to make these unfounded accusations. You could get me in serious trouble."

"I'm sorry," I tell him, "I didn't know where to go and then I found myself here and I just need some company. I don't know where else to go. My father is a tyrant, I needed to be away from him."

"He gave you that black eye, huh?"

I nod. Both of us are silent for a while. He's staring straight ahead into the infinite darkness and I am looking at him. I don't know why. "With me, I don't think my parents would mind. They're the most open minded people I know. Mama has told Baba about you, she knows you're gay and saw you walking around with your father one time. But they both haven't told anyone because things like this could get you beat up around here. They could get you killed."

"My dad told me to behave manlier."

Siya laughs. I've never heard him laugh before but there's a light about it. "I don't think you could look or behave manly if you tried. You're not extremely feminine but you don't exude a masculine aura either."

"Oh, wow..." I laugh with him. "I'll actually take that as a compliment. Nothing wrong with being a little effeminate. Before I saw you and Nhlakanipho the other day, I wouldn't have thought you're gay." I don't know why I'm pressing this issue.

"I didn't even know..." Siya is clearly reluctant, voice so quiet I have to stop breathing for a while to hear him clearly. "I guess you can call him my gay awakening. So why did you need to get away from your pops?"

“Fucking long story!” I say, “But to cut it short, I’m gonna be here for longer than I anticipated.”

“That’s why you’re mad?” Siya rolls his eyes. “Mbongolwane isn’t even bad. Have you been to places around here? Rural, rural places. You’re lucky you have a flushing toilet and hot water.”

“I wouldn’t call that water hot, it’s barely lukewarm.”

“Still, mfethu. Where Nhlakanipho stays, they don’t even have a bathroom and itoilet labo elom’godi. Some people have it really bad.”

“Don’t guilt trip me,” I say because my concerns are still valid. Joburg’s all I know and now I’m being compelled to stay here and adjust to it. I was completely blindsided by my parents. “It’s not wrong for me to miss my life in Jozi. I have friends there, a boyfriend. I wasn’t prepared to come here for good.”

“Dude, stop being so dramatic. Anyone who really loves you will find a way to be with you. Tell your boyfriend to visit you during the school holidays or something. Tell your friends to do the same. Maybe new surroundings will do them good.”

“I thought you were the dramatic one,” I quip thoughtlessly. “And my boyfriend is not in high school.”

“Good for you.”

It’s silent again, the two of us growing awkward that I decide to break the silence by asking, “If I ask you to supply me with booze and I promise to pay you tomorrow, will you give it to me?”

“Only cause your black eye is gaining my sympathy.” Siya smiles at me. “Let’s go back inside.”

Thank god. Tonight, I plan to swim in the alcohol. That’s how I’m going to solve my problems. I’m not sure where I’ll get the money to pay back Siya’s booze but that’s tomorrow’s problem.

I'm in my room, hidden away from my parents. They're leaving today, in a few minutes, maybe seconds. I'm pissed, my heartache causing some lumps in my throat. I feel like crying, I'm angry, so angry. Brave me wants to hightail it out of this room to go and fuck up my father real bad. I probably wouldn't even get in a decent slap though, my father is of the thick built kind and much taller than me. There are two knocks on my door before it opens without me giving permission. It's my mother.

"Christophe..."

I grab my phone, plug in my earphones and play the first song on my phone, volume high as hell. I don't want to see her face so I lie down and turn my back to her. She pats my thigh but I can ignore when I want to. It happens until eventually I feel her weight lift off the bed. I think she's finally given up but nope, she comes to the other side of the bed and looks down at me. Her brown eyes are imploring me until I can't ignore her anymore. "I'm so mad at you, mommy." I confess with the pain in my voice.

"I know you are, sweetheart. Je suis désolé," she apologizes. "I'm really sorry. But don't you think your father has a point? You're going to need your family, Bebe. Baba and I won't be around forever."

"Kodwa I could've, I could've...it would've been better if I visited during the holidays. Now y'all had to go and ruin my life. What will I do here? My life is in Joburg."

"This is not permanent, Christophe." Her hand caresses my afro. "And you don't know, you could end up loving this place so much that maybe you won't even want to leave."

"That would be the day I decide to be a nun," I snort with a frown. "But right now, I'm in love and want to be with my boyfriend." My stomach flips nervously as someone else comes to mind. Be gone, Satan!

"I figured you have someone in your life." The bright smile she offers me makes my heart flutter. "I'm dying to know about him. Maybe we can talk about him over the phone?"

"Whatever." I say, I'm still mad at her for not even trying to change my father's mind. Yes, he's a stubborn man and probably would've said no but she could've tried.

"I love you," she hugs me tightly, kissing my temple.

Home, my heart sings as soon as her scent hits my nose. I'll miss her so much. She did a much better job at raising me than my father ever could. I miss her right now. "I wish you would take me with you, mommy."

"I love you." She's very good at deflecting. "I'll call when we arrive home. I love you, okay?"

I don't reply, don't care much for her sigh. She leaves me be, closing the door silently. I'm angry that they're going through with this. But I can't help rushing outside when I hear the engine roaring to life. I wave at her and make heart signs with my fingers. I love my mom. I don't hold grudges for long, especially against her. She grins a watery smile and waves back. I watch the car until it disappears. Zenande steers me back inside the house, Zemvelo left for who knows where last night so it's just the two of us. "Okay. Now that they're gone. What should we do that will cheer you up, sthandwa sami?"

"It's the weekend. What do you usually do?"

"There's a football tournament happening eMphundumane today. Are you interested? We'll grab some camp chairs, pass Shandu's shebeen to buy a few drinks and then go there. I'll contact Nqobizitha, he has a car. I'm sure he'll be fetching Siya on his way there."

I nod my head. "That's cool, sisi." My stomach is flipping again though and I'm nervous all of a sudden. I haven't seen Nqobizitha since the day of the funeral but I've been hearing a lot about him and his sexcapades. He's unapologetic about his love for thick women apparently and the rumours swirling around are that he even fucks married women. Nothing's ever been confirmed, just rumours. I wonder if he'll remember me and how I'd embarrassed myself. I wonder if he'll still remember my childish underwear. My stomach flips again when I think back to him pushing me on the bed. It's something my brain has persistently refused to let go off for the past week and a half and I don't know why. He visits my mind unwelcomed, and I find myself remembering all his minutiae – the humility of his walk, the sharp crease of his Brentwood, the freckles on his nose. My mind recreates his touch at the top of my back. I don't want to think about him. I'd rather focus my thoughts on Hugo, and I try very hard to, but I'm also getting lonely here and I miss him...the phone calls aren't even enough. I need to feel him, to touch him. But I can't. So Nqobizitha comes through like a thief in the night, stealing away memories of Hugo and replacing them with futile fantasies, making me wish there was a button somewhere I could push to force me to stop thinking about him.

Mutual Desires : Four

Nqobizitha

I've had a shitty week. Between my family aggressively fighting for the body of my sister's stillborn daughter and an Accounting test that I flunked so badly Mr. Nsibande notified my mother, I'm just grateful for the weekend. There's a football tournament in Mphundumane that everyone has been looking forward to for weeks now. MaKhathide didn't want me to go, because she'd rather I buried my nose in an Accounting textbook but Baba knows how to soften her. He's the reason that I'm finally going to get a breather from all the bullshit that's been happening.

Ndoniyamanzi is still at home, she was very serious about leaving her husband. I'm proud of her. I try to tell her as much as I can when she's feeling a little talkative. That happens very rarely and though I may not fully understand what she's going through, I am there for her. We talk like we used to. Well not really. The roles are reversed this time and it's me who's checking in on her and taking care of her as best I can. Mama is too focused on trying to bring the body of Ntombiyezulu – that is the name that the Mkhizes have chosen for the little girl – because she doesn't see the need for her paternal family to bury her. It would've been a beautiful gesture were she not doing it because she believes our family can do the burial better because of our wealth.

Speaking of my mother, I need to ask her for the petrol card to fill up the Quantum. She deals with our home's finances, with a firm and stingy hand but again, I'm going to hope that Baba talked to her about the issue of transport. I'm going to be fetching a number of kids today to take to the football tournament. For free, of course, because we give back to the community in this house. My phone is ringing and I have to pause the task of tying my Converse and grab it from the bedside table. It's Zenande. I hope this is not a booty call. As tempting as she is, she comes in second to a lot of things. "Sphalaphala senhliziyo yami," I greet and she giggles loudly making me chuckle also.

"I wonder how many we are inside your heart, Nqobizitha. Anyway, you're going to eMphundumane today, angithi?"

"Yeah. Why are you asking?"

"Save two seats in your car then. Zithobile will be joining us."

She doesn't ask this one. Just instructs. I find it sexy as hell, and naturally, my dick twitches a little. "Your wish is my command, nkosazana. Two seats for you and the Sponge Bob underwear wearing boy, I got you."

"Shut up!" there's a little laugh in her voice. "Don't you dare come for my brother. I will chop you into pieces and then make a stew out of you to give to your family."

Weeee! This one would actually do it. She's the psychotic type that is sweet as honey until you mess with her or her family. Especially her family. "Kahle uchuku, weZenande. It's not my fault he still buys from the children's section. Unjani yena ubhut' wakho, has he been staying away from umqombothi?" I ask recalling the day of the funeral. The boy had told me he's gay. I don't know if I'm stupid for not having realized it myself. No straight boy behaves like him here in Mbongolwane. We don't have gays here. I'm certain of it. The men here love pussy too much to trade it for something that they already have. And no, I am not homophobic but I also don't understand why anyone would choose to be with another man when women are so much more appetizing – from their tantalizing breasts to their thick waists. Who wouldn't want to feel the soft delicacy of a woman's thighs locked around you as you're driving into her delicious warmth? People like Zenande's brother apparently. I still don't get it.

Zenande is cussing my head off, in the charming way only she can manage, and my dick is practically salivating but I can't do much right now. Maybe after the game, we can work something out. I exit my house for the family home, where I find my father in the living room, playing Umfaz' Omnyama. Not that I expected anything less. When he sees me though, a huge smile pulls at his mouth. "Mapholoba! Mbele! Maguya! Nyuswa kaDingila. KaNgcobo kaVumezitha. Ngcob' omhlophe. Ozal' uNgongoma." My father's honour of our ancestors and heritage will never not fill me with pride. My chin is lifted, head held high and my shoulders squared as I return his proud smile. "Awu, Mapholoba! Mashiy' amahle! Kokhal' iintombi namhlanje," he compliments, brushing the imaginary lint off of my shoulders. "Uyigcokama, ndodana!"

My smile is hurting my cheeks. "Thank you, Baba. We're the Ngcobos, we dress to impress." Like most Zulu men, I love Brentwood. I can even say wearing it has become a cultural thing for most of us. It's about style and confidence and the feeling of empowerment. The same way businessmen have power suits, we Zulus have our Brentwood to elevate our confidence. I am in no way ibhinca though, and prefer my clothes formfitting and stylish. "Sengiyagoduka. Where is MaKhathide? I need the petrol card."

"She left a few minutes ago. A stokvel meeting with the women," he says and I frown because she has those a lot lately but Baba doesn't even seem bothered. "Here. She left the card."

I take the card from him with a grateful nod and go to Ndoniyamanzi's room. I can't leave without saying goodbye. She didn't want to join me, crowded spaces make her uncomfortable. "Ndoni..." I say as I open the door. She's buried beneath the covers but she's not sleeping. "I'm leaving now."

For a while, Ndoni doesn't look at me, staring straight ahead. I don't judge her for it or get angry. Baba told me to be patient with her. She's been through a lot of trauma that she needs to process. "I, uh..." she clears her throat and looks up at me with lifeless eyes. "Uhambe kahle, bhutiza."

I nod, brushing her hair back, quiet for a while before I confess softly, "Ngyakuthanda mntakaMa. I'm always so proud of you and I love you."

What Ndoni does next surprises even me. She sits up and hugs me. Since she came home, she hasn't been doing well with physical touch. But now she's squeezing me tightly, her face buried in my neck. I hold her just as tight, enveloping her now devastatingly small frame. "It hurts, Nqoba." Her words are muffled but she's not crying. She hasn't cried since that day MaKhathide brought her back from the hospital. "I don't know how to make it stop."

I don't know how as well. I'm barely twenty and still a kid living with my parents. But I want to help her any way I can. "Cry if you need to, my shoulders are available. Talk if you need to, my ears are open."

She replies by hugging me tighter, almost suffocating me, and I rest my chin on top of her head. We stay like this for a very long time and I know I'm running late for my other commitments but fuck them. My sister comes first. Her wellbeing is so important to me. "Thank you...Gundi wami."

I groan at the childhood nickname and she laughs her ass off. I used to hate it when people called me Gundi, I still do, but my sisters don't care. In the past, I've tried insults, fist fighting and even scaring people with weapons but the name would remain. Right now, I'll let Ndoni call me Gundi if it means cheering her up. If it will bring a smile to her face. "Ngyakuthanda, sisi." I tell her again as we pull apart. She returns it and with her permission, I am leaving her room, and the house.

I'm going to fill up the petrol first and then fulfill my responsibility as designated taxi driver for the day. "Bafo!" I fist bump one of the petrol attendants as soon as he comes to my aid. "Umnandi, nkabi yami? Full tank, ndoda. Ngisathi shwi ngaphakathi." I point to the convenient store. I need to buy some ice, I have a cooler box in the Quantum, we'll be buying some booze at Bab' Shandu's shebeen but I won't be drinking to ensure everyone's safety. I grab some snacks for the kids and I buy three two litres of Coca Cola for Nhlakanipho. He doesn't drink alcohol. He's so uptight for an 18 year old. I'm looking at the different sweets when my attention is stolen by two beautiful women who have entered the store.

The first one is thin, like those celebrities you see on the TV and her friend is on the fat side. My eyes follow them and I notice the thin one returning my interest. Too bad she's not my type. I'm more interested in her friend, her lovely thighs are on display in that skirt she's wearing. She's beautiful from her round cheeks to her wide hips. My interest is peaked. I've never seen these two before. Just as I'm paying, I notice them leaving the store. "Ngyabuya, mfethu." I don't give the cashier the chance to respond and rush outside. "Yimani, bo! Hawu, nagijima kangaka. Where are you rushing to?"

"Um, nowhere." The skinny one replies, smiling. Her friend looks shy, averting her gaze, and looking anywhere but me as if she can feel my eyes on her. Damn, she's beautiful! I need to get her number.

"You're both beautiful," I say and the skinny one replies again. "Could I talk to your friend for a little bit?" I ask her. They both seem shocked that it's not her that I want to talk to. The chubby one more so. I don't like the way she's fidgeting. "What's your name?" I ask her.

"Mpilonhle," she can't seem to look at me for longer than three seconds.

"Lovely name for a lovely woman," I tell her, "One of my sisters is Mpilonhle as well. Can I let you in on a little secret?" she's confused but she nods her head. "As soon as I saw your beautiful face, I knew I had to talk to you. But I couldn't do that without buying some confidence pills from Mxolisi inside the store. I'm not sure if they're 100% effective though, the back instructions say they're only successful if you agree to go on a date with me sometime. If not, Mxolisi will have to explain himself."

She laughs and rolls her eyes. She doesn't look older than thirty but doesn't look like she's in high school either and I'm really hoping I'm right. I don't deal with school kids. "I'd agree, if only I was looking for a relationship but I'm not."

I'm not looking for one either. Just a casual thing. I don't tell her that. "Wait here," I say instead and rush back inside the store before I come back again. "That's okay. My friend there says the pills work wonders for casual hookups. Look, I've already guessed one of the digits of your cellphone number. How about you add the other nine?"

Her laugh is shooting straight to my groin. "Oh come on, everyone can guess zero."

“Okay, then. 27, add the other nine numbers,” I give her my phone. “When can I call you?” I ask her after she’s saved her cellphone number and called it on my phone.

“Anytime.”

I say a few sweet nothings and enjoy her blush before letting her go back to her friend. My next destination is the Xulu homestead. I find Zenande and her brother sitting outside the gate on camp chairs and roll my eyes. This is just like her. “Sphalaphala,” I smile at her, bowing my head dramatically at her. The brother chuckles, it’s not manly, more like a giggle. Strangely, it suits him. “Sponge Bob,” I turn my attention to him and a little smirk forms on my mouth.

The boy – and fuck he’s so tiny – looks up at me. When I smile, he turns away and clears his throat. He seems restless, with the way one of his legs is bouncing up and down. “Gosh, I’m so embarrassed. Can we please act like that day never happened?”

“Fine by me,” I place my hand on his shoulder and frown when he jumps out of my reach like I’ve just poured hot water on him or something. “Konke k’hamba kahle, mfethu?”

“Yeah. That was just...static. You shocked me.” This boy is too soft, the way he squealed amuses me and I’m looking down at him with my eyebrow raised. “Your Brentwood looks nice by the way. Like—”

“Big Zulu, sengiyazi,” my chuckle is genuine. Even Zenande laughs...while her brother hides his face in his hands. I notice the gold nail polish on his fingernails and the smiley faces on them. “Are you guys ready to leave?”

They nod, with Zenande gripping my wrist and dragging me back to the Quantum. She takes the front seat and I laugh at her boldness. On our way to the shebeen, I ask the boy – Zithobile, Zenande reminds me but her brother doesn’t seem to like that name and tells me to call him Christophe – about the black bruising on his left eye. He and Zenande look at each other on the rearview mirror before Christophe looks away and says he had an accident with one of the doors in their house. Somehow, it feels like he’s lying but whatever. We arrive at Bab’ Shandu’s and I ask them if they will join me but Zenande just hands over a list of the alcohol she wants but no cash. I roll my eyes but grab it, wondering if her brother is even old enough to drink alcohol. He doesn’t look a day over sixteen. When I express my concerns, Zenande tells me he’s turning eighteen in a month.

“Kodwa ntombemhlophe, mawusufana nale nhlobo kapende engiwuthandayo, kwenziwe njani?” I say to the lady walking out of the shebeen with two bottles of Black Label in her hands. She bursts into laughter and shakes her head.

“One of these days, all these women you’re sleeping with will form a group chat to plan a manhunt to plan your beheading. Ngeke phela, you change them like you change your underwear.” Siya captures my attention, he’s coming from behind the house, smiling and limping.

“That will be the day I hear you talk like you don’t have a cold in summer. It’s becoming a frequent thing now. Ukahle kodwa?” I notice the long sleeve hoodie he’s wearing.

“Yeah,” he nods his head, playing with the ends of his hoodie. “Let’s go inside. Nhlakanipho is here and he’ll help us to carry the booze.” He limps in the direction of the front entrance. I follow silently, and find my best friend looking hard at work, fixing a microwave. So this is why he came here. Bab’ Shandu must’ve hired him to fix it. “Nhlakanipho, your friend’s here.”

Nhlaka lifts his eyes and nods at me. “Sho, Nqoba. We’re leaving now?”

We’re going to be late if we don’t. “If you’re not done, we can wait.”

Nhlaka shakes his head. “No. Bab’ Shandu said to take my time with this. He bought a new one, this one I’m taking home with me.” There’s that embarrassed look in his eyes again...like he hates receiving handouts. “Ugogo will be over the moon, although I’m not sure she’ll be able to use it.”

“She has grandkids for a reason,” I tease, trying to lighten the mood. Even Siya looks sad now. “Let’s grab the booze and bounce. Siya, you’re not tasting any of it.”

“Like I don’t know, dimwit!” Siya punches my arm playfully. We grab a couple of crates. I add Zenande’s ciders to the list and then we’re leaving. Zenande joins her brother at the back as soon as she sees Nhlakanipho. Good. She knows bros before hoes. After we’ve collected some of the neighbourhood kids, we begin the drive to Mphundumane, and Nhlaka is in charge of the music. He plays maskandi songs until Zenande snaps and asks for something more ‘sophisticated’. Nhlakanipho rarely allows himself to fight with women, so that’s how we end up listening to the soul music my dad blasts loudly around the house every Sunday morning. Rick James. He’s bearable but I refuse to acknowledge that I know any of his songs.

Football tournaments can be rowdy around here, but in the best ways possible. Kids from all our neighbouring villages come to have fun. I cruise through the crowd, entertaining a few of the women, and spot Thandolwenkosi at the far back of the crowd with Lwandle. She's supposed to be helping Gogo with the washing today. If Nhlakanipho sees her, then he'll...I don't even know what he'll do. He can unpredictable when he wants to. I go to greet her and tell her Nhlaka is somewhere around here. She tells me she's leaving soon, she just wanted to see Lwandle. I greet her douchebag boyfriend and go back to where my squad is.

Zinhle has occupied my chair, she is now visibly pregnant, and I feel sorry for her poor mother who makes ends meet on her grant. But I won't judge her, shit happens. Our team scores a goal and while the others cheer like normal human beings, Zenande celebrates by twerking her scrumptious ass off. I watch it jiggle through the jean shorts she's wearing and Nqobizitha Jr. reacts accordingly. I'm tempted to go and slam my erection against her ass but shit like that is taboo around here. I'm sure some of these people are horrified enough by the sexy display that is Zenande.

The feeling of being stared at nags me until I can't ignore it. My eyes scan around until they land on familiar brown ones. As soon as our eyes clash, Christophe's own widen and then he looks away. I shake my head, a niggling feeling tugging at me and forcing me to continue looking at him. Maybe he thinks I've looked away because he steals a glance again and looks away when he notices that I'm still looking at him. He's leaning into talk to Zenande now and I can bet my life on it that he's telling her nothing but gibberish. I've been checked out by enough girls to know when they're interested. Christophe is not a girl but he's certainly behaving like one. So the kid seems to be having some sort of crush on me. Something weird twists my insides but it's not disgust. Like I said, I'm not homophobic but I also don't have the slightest desire to fuck other dudes. I prefer them delicate and big-boned with beautiful breasts and soft facial features. I'm not going to get mad at the kid for having a crush on me either because that's stupid and besides, his attraction toward me confirms that I'm one handsome motherfucker. It doesn't get better than being desired by both genders.

One of the players from eNgudwini purposely pushes one of our own players resulting in a red card for him and a penalty for our team. The guy is pissed, and pushing at Siya – who is the referee – so violently that he has to be physically removed by some of his teammates from the grounds. The game continues smoothly until the same player comes back again, he's running toward Siya, with something in his hand. As soon as the people realize what's going on, they start to scream. The guy has a pocket knife in his hand. I don't even know where he got it from. I remove my jersey and throw it at Zenande, before speeding onto the field to assist. Nhlakanipho is already there, I think he was the first one to get on the field. "Bafo!" I shout, fighting to push through the crowd. It's been less than a minute but the blood is already there, created by his fist. I'd do the same to be honest. But this isn't a normal beat down, Nhlakanipho will badly injure this boy if he doesn't let up. "Myeke, Nhlakanipho. He's had enough!"

Nhlakanipho's undeterred, punching and punching, pushing away those who try to grab him and pull him away. Even Siya who tries to assist is pushed away and lands ass first on the ground, groaning from the force in which he was pushed. Most of these guys aren't big enough to match Nhlakanipho's strength so I take matters into my own hands, sliding my hands under his arms and pinning them behind his head. "Awume, mfethu! The guy's had enough, you're going to go to jail."

Nhlaka doesn't reply for a while, his chest is heaving. Blood is trailing down his right hand. There's a wound that clearly shows he was stabbed, maybe on his wrist. "I'm going to clear my head. Do not follow me."

"Nhlaka—"

"I mean it, Nqobizitha. Stay here, go home. Keep him away from me," his eyes point to Siyabonga who looks sick. "Don't follow me."

I don't argue with him. One of the women comes to my aid with a cloth to help me wipe off the blood that smeared on my chest and hands. The silence on the sports ground seems to last forever before the older members of the village decide that maybe the final game should be postponed to another day. The boy from eNgudwini has been rushed to the hospital and I'm hoping his injuries are not too bad. But this wasn't Nhlaka's fault. I would've done the same. I would've done the same to protect Siya. The crowd clears slowly but Zenande suggests we stay behind and wait for Nhlakanipho to come back. By 05:30pm, he's still not back. We've been waiting for close to two hours. Nhlaka lives here so we decide to go back to Zenande's. I'm sure he went to eMasimbeni, that's where he goes to clear his mind.

Christophe

Zenande immediately ushers me into the kitchen when we reach home. "We're going to cook for our guests," she tells me. I wonder how she can look so unperturbed by what happened a few hours ago. I'm still trembling, still processing everything that transpired and shook up by the entire incident.

"I'll join you now. You didn't give me a chance to give this to Nqobizitha," I say, showing her the maroon jersey in my arms. I'm trying not to think back to how he handled the entire situation. When the others were struggling with Nhlakanipho, he'd looked calm and collected and removed his friend from a dangerous situation steadily. It did things to my body I don't want to admit to. It's bad enough that I can smell his cologne right now, and that his mere scent is causing my dick to purr. I've already memorized his scent and things are looking bad for me because the mere mention of his name and my heartrate quickens, and I forget how to breathe. It's not fair.

I'm at the doorway when Zenande calls my name.

"Yebo, sisi?" I turn to face her.

"I know you have this mini crush on Nqoba." My jaw drops and I look at her stupidly, shocked by her bluntness...not really. But how did she know? "I don't blame you. He's very attractive, isn't he?"

I don't reply, my eyes go to my dirtied Converse. Nqobizitha seems to be a big fan of it as well, and he wears his beautifully with those formfitting Brentwood outfits of his.

"Don't bother denying it!" Zenny adds as if she can read my mind but she has a motherly smile kissing her lips. "The way you were looking at him today...it's the same way half of these girls around here look at him. But Nqoba's a manwhore – a straight one. You're only setting yourself up for heartbreak if you're going to entertain what you're feeling. Stick to Hugo, he sounds like a nice guy."

"This entire speech wasn't needed but thanks anyway, sis." I grin at her. She's behaving like I said I want a relationship with Nqobizitha, like I'm going to fall in love with him. He's attractive yes, and makes me feel funny but I chalk that up to my loneliness. I'm sure if Hugo were here then I wouldn't have even spared a second glance at Nqobizitha. "What are we going to make?"

"Uphuthu and beef stew. Those ones don't eat rice. Amaqaba, I tell you."

I laugh and walk back to the living room. Nqobizitha is typing away on his phone, still shirtless, and I try not to drool at the sight of him. Siya is sitting on the other side with his face in his hands. I want to comfort him but I'm lost. I don't know what to say. Nqoba's eyes lift to meet mine as soon as he's aware of my presence. My heartrate goes from 0 to 100 in seconds, my dick bowing in submission at the attention. This is not healthy. My body can't handle all this craziness. I can't even breathe right.

"Hi, you're still here," I say stupidly and then shake my head when he raises an eyebrow amusedly. "I mean I know we invited you, well not me, Zenande did. No, that doesn't sound right, I do want you here, but not in a romantic way. Not that you're not appealing because you're extremely hot, like breathtakingly gorgeous but you probably don't want to hear that coming from another guy because you're straight as a ruler so please don't beat me up because I can't fight to save my life, this one time I ended up in hospital because—"

Siya's light chuckle interrupts my rambling and thank god because I was finding it hard to shut the fuck up. Nqobizitha is looking at me but he's inscrutable and I can't read him. My stomach has been attending gymnastics classes lately with all the jumping around and flipping. "Your—jersey." It comes out as an embarrassing squeak, I hold it out to Nqobizitha.

Our fingers touch as he accepts it and I feel a wave of delicious heat course through me, sending taunting shivers down my spine. I hold my breath by biting on my bottom lip. If Nqobizitha felt something, he doesn't show it. After he's given me a polite, "Thank you," he goes back to scrolling away on his phone without sparing me another glance. My bruised ego cowers at the cold disposition. My eyes briefly clash with Siya's, who is already observing me with newfound interest. I rush back to the kitchen to help Zenande. We discuss Zemvelo's AWOL status and I end up sitting on one of the counters while watching Zenny do all the work because she claims I am too distracted. It's the knowledge that Nqoba is right outside this room that is affecting me deeply.

I'm tempted to tell Zenande to go and open the door when we both hear a knock on the front door. She sends me and I have to pass Nqoba and Siya on my way there. I tell myself I'm not going to spare Nqobizitha a single glance on my way to the front but the little voice in my head implores me to sneak a peek. I do. I find him looking back with a cocked eyebrow and quickly look away, rushing to the front door. As soon as I open, I'm met with a calmer looking Nhlakanipho. "Sawubona."

"Nhlakanipho, hi!" I grip the door handle. "Uzolanda uSiya?" my untrained mouth vomits before I can stop myself. "I mean or maybe you're just here for Nqobizitha. I mean he's your best friend and—"

"I know you know. I appreciate that you haven't spread the word around here," Nhlakanipho interjects, lifting his hand. "Uphi yena uSiya?"

"Inside. He was going insane without you," I divulge because Siya really was. He became really quiet, refused to talk to anyone, too lost in his own mind. I close the door and guide Nhlakanipho to the living room. As soon as they spot each other, Siya's eyes visibly brighten. Nqobizitha's too caught up on his phone to notice what's going on.

"Mzimela!" I can tell that Siyabonga is trying to keep his excitement at bay. If they were alone, I'm sure he'd be launching himself into Nhlakanipho's arms by now. "You're back."

Nqobizitha finally notices and he spots the same excitement as Siya. I go back to the kitchen and Zenande is dishing up the food. I help her out and we go back to join the others. Nhlakanipho's sitting next to Siya, not that it's a surprise – at least to me. Zenny sits with Nqobizitha and I'm on my own. The light has been switched off and we're watching Isibaya. It feels like I'm fifth wheeling here and I find it increasingly getting to me. Nhlakanipho and Siya's thighs and knees are brushing like usual. Zenande has her head resting on Nqobizitha's shoulder with him wrapping his capable arms around her and I'm the one left out, unashamedly staring at the two because the room is dark enough that I hope they won't notice.

"I have to call Hugo," I say after a while because I can't do this. Something nasty twists my gut when Nqobizitha says something stupid that makes Zenny laugh. This is not me. I don't get jealous over things this silly. In my room, I change and call Hugo. "I miss you," I tell him without even greeting first.

"Mon chou," his voice still gives me butterflies, it's a relief to know. "I miss you, too. How is it there in Mbongolwane?"

I giggle at the way he pronounces Mbongolwane. It's funny. "Boring as hell. A boy nearly got stabbed today and another one got badly beaten he had to be taken to the hospital." We talk for close to an hour, and for that liberating period, I am able to drive thoughts of Nqoba away. My mind even scolds me for even thinking I had a crush on the boy in the first place. Hugo is a great boyfriend. Some quiet voices outside force me to leave the bed. I don't know if I should roll my eyes or smile stupidly when I spot Siya and Nhlakanipho in the hallway. Siya is trapped to the wall again, but it's not threatening like it was the last time, and their foreheads are touching. Siya has his arms locked loosely around Nhlakanipho's neck.

"You frustrate me so much," I hear him tell Nhlakanipho. "Ugcwele udlame and I fear the day it gets you in serious trouble."

"Do you blame me, Siyabonga?" Nhlakanipho is equally quiet. "That boy was charging toward you with a knife. I would've killed him if Nqobizitha didn't grab me."

"And that is exactly what I am—scared of," Siya cracks out, there is a desperation I can see in his eyes. "Violence doesn't solve everything, Nhlakanipho. Think about the day someone takes you to jail."

There's a second's silence before Nhlakanipho is sighing. "Phephisa ke Shandu." His lips are brushing Siya's. I'm going to assume Siya likes being begged or not giving in too easily because he turns his face away. He's looking at my room and for a second I think he's looking directly at me but he's not. "It won't happen again, I promise you."

Siya isn't budging.

Nhlakanipho grips his face, so that they're making eye contact. "Phakade lami..." his lips are on Siya's face, his eyebrows, eyelids, cheeks, nose and then finally his lips. "Nxese, Shandu." I shake my head as Siya finally gives in but I would've too, in his situation, there's something sensual about the way Nhlakanipho begs him.

"You're lucky you're getting away scot-free this time, Nhlakanipho. Because everyone saw ukuthi Melisizwe was the instigator. He's been doing woonga lately and he's spiralling out of control. My mom sent me a message that his family is coming home tomorrow to apologize. You're lucky they're not pressing charges against you. Angifuni uk'thandana nes'boshwa mina."

"Ngyakuthanda, Shandu."

Siya is defeated, you can tell by the disbelieving but smitten grin on his face. "I love you too...but I also hate you right now. We should head back, if those two come back from the store and find us missing they're going to start suspecting something. Especially Zenande, she's too observant for her own good."

Nhlakanipho doesn't budge, his hands move down to Siya's ass and he squeezes hard, judging by the younger boy's whimpered moan. "What a pity. And here I was, thinking we could sneak in a quickie."

"You'll get more than a quickie if you spend the night at my house. Baba knows we're best friends, he doesn't suspect a single thing."

"You've got yourself a deal."

I watch them walk away, and shake my head. They got me grinning like a goddamn lunatic while simultaneously making me miss the feeling of being loved. I really wish Hugo were here with me. Or even better, I wish I was in Joburg. I stay in my room for about fifteen minutes before going to join them. They're watching the TV, both drinking coke, and sitting next to each other without an inch separating them. "You guys are disgustingly in love," I tell them, going to plop on the couch opposite from them.

They don't respond but Siya is smiling. "How long have you been together?" I ask.

"Two years," Nhlakanipho speaks in a manner that says no more questions. Okay, so he's the type that doesn't want people to know about his relationship. I force myself to look at the TV so that I'm not ogling them. When I ask about Nqoba and Zenny's whereabouts, I am told that they've left for the convenient store but they don't tell me why and that Nqoba is going to switch cars. My sister comes back with Nqobizitha about ten minutes later. They're laughing and talking loudly. They seem familiar with each other and it makes me uncomfortable. My heart is clenching something nasty.

We watch movies and talk and play cards but I'm terrible so I lose. Siya, Nhlakanipho and Nqobizitha leave in the early hours of the morning. I help to clear the mess in the living room with Zenande and we go to sleep around 03:00am. As soon as I fall in bed, I drift off.

A cry wakes me up sometime later – maybe an hour later or two. I grab my phone and check the time. It's 04:30am. The room is silent and I think I could've been imagining that crying sound when I hear it again. It sounds like Zenande. Slipping out of the bed, I follow the noise, noticing some of the clothes littered on the floor in the hallway. One of her shoes. The shorts she was wearing. My feet stop when I notice Nqobizitha's Brentwood jersey. That sound again! A moan. My breathing quickens and my eyes avert to the room that belongs to Baba because that is where the noise is coming from. The room is open with just the slightest crack that ensures I see what's going on the other side.

The sight of my sister's naked body horrifies me because no one wants to see a family member naked and yet I don't rush to cover my eyes or quickly walk away because of the guy behind her. With their movements, it's easy to tell what is going on. Zenande is on her knees. Nqobizitha is taking her from behind, one of his thick biceps wrapped around her throat, his other arm embracing her breasts, and moving with such a slow precision that it's hard to tell why Zenande is crying. I can see her juices flowing down her thighs, one of her hands rubbing at her womanhood. It's the strangest sight ever. She looks wrecked and her strangled curse causes my pulse to jump. I don't care about Zenny, just the boy who is clearly making her feel so good.

My eyes are too focused on Nqobizitha, the sweat trickling down his face, how pinched tightly his face is. It's obvious to tell that he's in sensual ecstasy. Part of me is so jealous that Zenande is making him feel like this. Part of me thinks back to the many times I've pictured myself in a similar predicament. I wonder if he'd allow it if I just walked in and demanded he do to me what he's doing to Zenande. Probably not. I'd end up in hospital for longer than a week this time. I decide to go back to my room but not before grabbing Nqobizitha's jersey for myself.

I'm sure I've started going insane because as soon as I lock the door behind me, I hug the jersey tightly and then close my eyes, sagging against the door. I rub my face on it, my neck as well, to get in more of scent, to smell like him. My body is vibrating, humming helplessly at the intoxicating scent. But it's still not enough, so I slip it on, hoping that maybe I'll understand my fascination with him. It's big on me but it immediately feels Nqobizitha is the one embracing me, like he's surrounding me and possessing every inch of my body.

I walk to the bed and lie on my back. My eyes close, as one of my hands slips inside my underwear. My breathing quickens, legs spreading of their own accord. I touch myself and then quickly jerk my hand away as I meet Nqobizitha's eyes and not Hugo's. But his scent, his scent still overwhelms me – so clean, masculine and subtle. I want to drown in it forever. My bottom lip is trapped between my teeth as I begin to hump into my hand. My mind recreates Nqobizitha's voice, the calm baritone. He's whispering into my ear. Telling me I'm so good for him, that I feel out of this world, that I was made to be on my knees for him. He's gentle but murmuring the filthiest words into my ear. They edge me on, making me stroke myself in earnest. My body has a mind of its own as I arch from the bed, shudders starting to wrack my body, making me lose my coordination. My mind is in a pleading state. *Please, please, please, Nqobizitha*, rings over and over again, my body trembling with need.

It takes putting my hand – that is fisting on the ends of his jersey tightly – to my nose and getting a stronger whiff of his scent for me to fall apart. My body locks up as I come, and I have to bite into the back of my forearm so I won't cry out and startle Nqoba or Zenny. My climax hits so hard that my vision goes white and fuzzy. It takes me a long while before I can even think about cleaning up, and by then I feel like I never want to move again.

As I'm wiping off my cum with my discarded underwear, I feel the chill of guilt creeping through my veins. That was a violation, wasn't it? Nqoba and Zenny were having sex, and I overheard them, and instead of stepping away and giving them privacy, I actually eavesdropped and even stuck around to watch. To make matters worse, I used what I saw to do this. And wearing Nqobizitha's jersey no less. What about Hugo? I sigh, this is too much for me to think about. Maybe I should push everything away for now. I'm tired and going back to sleep seems like a good idea.

"Christophe Xulu, you're a dramatic mess of a human being," I whisper to myself, slapping my hand over my forehead.

Bonus Insert

Siyabonga

Today is one of those cold summer days. Where the skies are a dull grey color that spreads over to your surroundings as well, making everything seem dreary and lifeless. The cold licks at my face and creeps under my clothes, making me curl my numb fingers around my jacket tighter. Today's a really good day to be hidden beneath the thick blankets that are only reserved for winter, with a cup of coffee and a good read – any other day and I would be doing just that but Nhlakanipho has to work today. Nduduzo called in sick, something about a sore stomach – his bullshit excuse to avoid herding the cattle today.

Nhlakanipho is going to fill in for him, he got the call from his uncle this morning. He's going to be paid R100, it's not much, and I think his greedy uncle could do better but he consistently proves that sometimes blood isn't thicker than water. Not unless he stands to benefit something. I can picture him now, coming to gogo's house, pretending he cares, two fifty rand notes in his wrinkly hands, promising to come back and assist with any shortages they may have in the house. He never does. But his song remains the same.

My eyes find gogo uMaMzimela who is busy building a fire inside the rondavel where all the food is prepared. Nhlakanipho built it himself a few months ago, with the grant money his granny had been putting aside. He's very creative with his hands, I think it's a calling of his, because he can take something that was completely damaged and make it useful again. "Sanibona ekhaya," I say, capturing gogo's attention.

"Siyabonga!" she is always so excited to see me. Her smile is huge, and when she wraps her small arms around me, I return her hug, my stomach fluttering. "Unjani, mfana wami?"

"I'm good, Gogo." We pull apart and I help her carry a large pot filled with water to the fire that is now burning a fierce orange color. "Baphi abanye? You shouldn't be working so hard."

She laughs and nods towards the main house. "Sleeping. Even 08:30am seems to be too early for them," she confides, shaking her head, her hands on her slim waist. "Thandolwenkosi has taken Mnelisi to Mbongolwane hospital though, he has some nasty sores on his back. Are you here for Nhlakanipho?"

“Yebo.” My voice trembles, nervous knots building in the pit of my stomach. Two years later and I’m still as affected as I was when I first started liking him. Any time someone mentions Nhlakanipho’s name, I quiver – all of me helplessly reacting to just his name. My ears perk up, my pulse accelerates, and I forget how to think. Sometimes, I think people can see right through me, and how bad I have it. Which is worrying because we’d get into so much trouble but I don’t know how to be anything else than responsive where Nhlakanipho is concerned.

“Well, when you get in there, tell him to hurry it up. His uncle said he must be leaving with the cows no later than 09:00am.”

I nod with a small smile pulling on my lips and part with gogo after a few polite words. Nhlakanipho is standing outside his house, I don’t even know when he came out, but he has a hint of smile on his face. The closer I get to him, the harder it becomes for me to not launch myself at him, my body is already buzzing, excitement rushing inside my veins. I don’t stop until we’re a foot apart. We’re both silent for a while, looking at each other, the look of desire in his eyes forces me to close my eyes and take a step back. I’d give anything to kiss him. But it’s not a good idea, not in the open.

My eyes are still closed but I can feel him take a step forward, the smell of him travelling to my belly – giving me delicious butterflies, to my groin – my dick twitching as it realizes it’s owner almost instantly, to every inch of my body – it feels like his scent is caressing every inch of my skin, possessing me. “Mzimela,” I whisper, finally opening my eyes, and shake my head to clear my daze.

“Phakade lami,” he returns. He’s serious, I can see it in his eyes, the tenderness. “I’ve missed you.”

We’ve only been apart for thirteen hours but I’ve missed him too. Like crazy. I miss him right now, standing in front of him. He seems to read my mind because he beckons me toward his house and I follow silently. As soon as the door is open, he pulls me in, and pins me against the wall. He brings his face so close to mine that I can feel his breath tickle my skin. But he doesn’t touch me. His breath touches my lips gently, and the sensation is enough to make every nerve ending in my body come alive. “Don’t make me beg,” I plead, because I know him. His patience is infuriating when it comes to this.

“I love you desperate and begging,” his fingers cradle my face and his thumb presses against my lower lip, forcing my mouth to part. “You become unbelievably beautiful. And I always want to capture those moments, to keep them for myself when we’re apart.” His gentle rub makes me shudder. “I’m going to kiss you now, siyezwana?”

My nod is too enthusiastic, my fingers curling around the front of his t-shirt. Nhlakanipho grabs me by the nape of my neck, looking intently at me as if he desires to devour me. He leans in closely until I close my eyes and then brushes his lips against mine softly. He takes his time, grabbing my wrists and pinning them above my head. One of his knees spreads my legs, his thigh pressing into my pulsing dick. I whimper into the kiss, aching to feel more of him, to pull him in even closer, and he replies by biting on my lower lip. The stinging shoots to my groin and I hump into his thigh. I can barely breathe, his lips refuse to detach from mine, my body is in a frenzy. He doesn't stop until he's snatched my every breath away, until my skin is tingling with delicious current, until I'm drunk and dazed.

"I love you," I say once it doesn't feel like my chest will explode. "I love you so much."

His forehead touches mine, he caresses my cheek, and then lifts my chin with his fingers until our eyes meet. "Nhliziyo yami, wena ophila ngaphakathi kimina. Ngikuthanda ukufa, Shandu."

A smile spreads my lips wide, I wrap my arms around his neck, and pull him down to kiss him. I pour all of me into it, letting him know just how deeply my love runs. I'm too reluctant to pull away after that but we'll be late if he doesn't finish getting ready. I grab my backpack that I had dropped on the floor and go to sit on the bed while I wait for him. But my thoughts still revolve around him, he's constantly on my mind, my desire for him, for his touch. He's my favourite thought. I watch him retrieve some raincoats from his wardrobe and I go to him when he calls my name. "Gqoka," he instructs, helping me into the coat that is still brand new. He then grabs one of his beanies and puts it on me, fixing it until it's hiding my ears. "There, you're perfect now." He smiles before putting on the other coat. It's his old one – ragged, torn here and there. I feel guilty for wearing his new one.

"Nhlakanipho..."

"I don't want to hear it." He always reads my mind. "I want you warm. You're not getting a cold on my watch."

"What about you?" I whisper.

"You'll find other ways to warm me up." His voice is suggestive.

I roll my eyes but there's a smile on my face. "I should've known there was something in it for you." I stand aside and wait for him to unlock the door. Two of his sisters, Mbalenhle and Noxolo, rush to hug

me. I chuckle and return their eagerness, looking at their older brother who is giving me that subtle smile of his.

“Aibo, qedani phela. He’s not here for you.”

“Bhuti Siya, Nhlakanipho hit Nomzamo with the belt yesterday.” They both say at the same time, they’re glaring at an unbothered Nhlakanipho. “We told him we’d tell you as soon as we saw you.”

I don’t know why they do this. They seem to think I have some effect on their brother – and they rat him out any opportunity they can get. To me or sometimes to Nqobizitha. “I’ll sort him out. Don’t worry, we’ll see if he enjoys being beaten as much as he likes to beat others.” I joke but I think it’s a bad one...we’ve fought before too.

“She came home late last night,” Nhlakanipho seems to have taken my joke in stride. “How many times must Gogo talk to her? She needed a good hiding. Come, let’s go.”

We leave for malume uMzimela’s house located five minutes away from Nhlakanipho’s home. He ushers us inside the house and gives my boyfriend a list of instructions. We’re to come back around one so that he can milk the cows and for Nhlakanipho to recharge. And then we’ll go back to the veld again. We keep distant for a while as we guide the cows further into the veld until we’re sure that no one will see us. “Maw’suhambela ek’deni kangaka. What, are you scared of me?” Nhlakanipho pulls me to his side and wraps his arm around my shoulders. He kisses my temple and breathes me in. “Shandu wami.”

I melt and my arm goes around his waist. We continue walking until the cattle decide that they’ve had enough and have found the perfect spot to graze in, near the meadows. We sit down, he puts me in between his thighs, and my back rests against his chest. His chin is on my shoulder, our hands coming together so that our fingers are linking, he kisses the inside of my neck. I sigh and close my eyes. All of me is peaceful, and I’d give anything to keep us like this forever.

“I’ve been thinking about starting a chicken farming business to help uGogo,” I hear him say quietly against my ear. “Bab’ Khanyile came asking for his money again yesterday. He added interest.”

“That is a great idea!” I tilt my head, looking into his eyes, and press a kiss to his lips before continuing, “How much do you need? Maybe I can ask uBaba for a loan and then pay him back by helping—”

“Cha, khohlwa. That will never happen.” His tone is firm and hard, a finality found in it.

“Then how will you get the startup capital, Nhlakanipho?” I ask quietly, maybe a little annoyed too. Why does he always think accepting help is a form of weakness? I love him. Am I not allowed to support his dreams? What’s the point of him confiding in me when he’s not going to listen to me?

“Ngizobona. I’ll save some cash. I’ll give Gogo R50 and then save the other one toward my business.”

“But how long will that take, Nhlakanipho? Gogo’s debt will keep piling up. Why don’t you ever want my help? What’s the point of this if we’re not helping each other out?”

“I’m not with you for your money.”

“Ngiyazi!” I shout, and then shake my head. “But we’re partners, in every sense of the word for me. Maybe you don’t feel the same way?”

“Usuyasangana ke manje.” He wraps his arms around my waist. “Just because we’re partners, doesn’t mean we have to share financial burdens...at least I don’t see it that way. You know how much I hate handouts, or accepting any form of help. People are strange creatures, Shandu. They help you today, they tell everyone about it the next morning. Lento yok’bukisa ngenhlupheko yasekhaya. This isn’t about you, it’s about my pride.”

“It sounds like it’s about me if you’re going to compare with the others, Nhlakanipho.” I pull out of his arms and stand up. I don’t even know where I’m walking to but I can feel him behind me. He’s calling my name but I don’t want to talk to him. Sometimes, I think he doesn’t think before he talks. That or he thinks with his ego. He grips my wrist and spins me around me with so much force I collide with his chest. I cough but the egotistical bastard doesn’t look at all shook up by the impact.

“Why do you do this?” his arm is firm around the small of my back. “Create unnecessary arguments. I told you this isn’t about you, I just don’t like accepting things from people. You’ve known this about me even before we began a relationship. I really don’t understand what the problem is.”

“The problem is that you never accept my help.”

“But I have, remember—no,” he shakes his head. “I don’t like seeing you upset. How about this? I...ey inzima lento ongicela yona kodwa, Shandu.”

I don’t budge.

He looks into my eyes and bites the inside of his cheek. The silence seems to last forever, he walks away, standing a distance away from me. He faces skyward, hands in his raincoat pockets. And then he looks over his shoulder, at me. He turns around and comes back. My face is in his hands and he kisses me deeply, making my heart jump wildly, and the shivers spread over my entire body. It’s a punishing kiss, one of his hands holding me in place by the back of my neck. We’re both heaving as soon he lets me free but still holding my waist. “A loan,” he says and it takes me a few good seconds to realize that he’s accepting my help. “We’re going to discuss repayments.”

“As soon as you start making profits and kancane kancane,” I say because I know him. He’ll want to pay the full amount back without even waiting for his business to stabilize first.

“With interest.” He’s nonnegotiable.

“Kulungile.”

We’re silent again, and I’m getting tired of standing, especially with how cold it is in this area we’re standing. We’ve moved a little distance away from the cattle. “Seliphelile iconsi?” he asks, with his deadpan smile, one of his eyebrows raised.

“I’m cold,” I say.

“Well,” his hands are curious, they move from above my back to my ass. “I did say we’d find other ways to warm each other up.”

My dick – this goddamn traitor – swells in interest. I don’t stop him when he kisses me. We’re moving and moving until I find myself falling down but he spins us around so that it’s him who lands with a soft thud on the squishy grass. He groans into my lips and then he spins again so that I’m beneath him. He grabs my wrists, pinning them above my head, and wrenches his lips from my own. I suck in a huge

intake of air and then arch into him, rubbing my erection against his thigh. I'm leaking inside my jeans, like a faulty tap, aching – needing so much of him. "Please, Nhlakanipho," I beg.

"What do you need?"

"You," I whisper, bite my lip in hesitance, and then continue quietly, "I need you inside me." It's strange how I'm slowly getting used to having him inside me. We hadn't done this until only recently but nothing quite compares to it. The closeness, the intimacy, our bodies becoming one.

Nhlakanipho never allows me to undress myself, he always wants to do it. Slowly. One item after the other. His eyes are always on me as he does that. It makes everything more intimate, it makes me feel funny and I'm never able to maintain eye contact for long. The cold gives me goosebumps and I shiver, my teeth chattering. Nhlakanipho soothes me by pressing kisses to my lips. I don't know where he got the Vaseline from but he's still kissing me as he slips one of his fingers inside me. I wrench my lips away from his and gasp as my eyes widen. "Shit!" I groan, my fingers digging into his shoulder.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm okay, continue." I whisper against his ear, caressing every inch of his back, and enjoying the feel of his muscles contracting. He adds another finger and the burn starts but I focus on his lips at my neck and how warm he feels against me, how right his weight feels above me. He adds the third finger and works them around my entrance. One of his fingers find my prostate and I tense up, releasing a strangled moan. "Hawe ma!" I can feel his smirk against my neck. He knows that he has me right where he wants me. His other hand travels, touching my pulsating dick, and I start to feel dizzy. He's using my wetness as slick, stroking me hard and fast and then slow, teasing. I know what he wants. I don't want to beg again but I think I'll have to. He takes me to the brink and keeps there. "Nhlakanipho..." I gasp, I want to feel all of him, not just his tempting touches.

"Relax," his voice is thick with arousal, I can feel him teasing my entrance – hot and heavy. "Let me drive you insane." I can't. He already is driving me insane. My breathing is heavy and every time he touches a new patch of skin, shivers wreck my body. "Look at me," he demands softly. "Siyabonga, look at me."

I do. As soon as I do that, he breaches my entrance. I scream – partly pleased but in pain. It hurts, I'm not going to lie. Taking dick down there feels like being split in half. He's kissing my temple and whispering words of comfort. They manage to distract me until he's sheathed inside me. He grabs my hands and kisses my fingertips before he starts moving in slow, gentle thrusts. I close my eyes and bite

my lip. It still hurts and I can hardly breathe but the more he moves, the more the pain transitions into something else. It's especially delicious with my dick rubbing against his pelvis.

Nhlakanipho takes my wrists with both his hands. After another messy kiss, he cocks his hips back and snaps them forward, a greedy, hot pleasure spreading when my eyes widen. "Baby, it feels so good," I moan and I inhale sharply. Nhlakanipho does it again, and again, altering the angle slightly, until a hiccuping gasp breaks free from me. White spots dance in my eyes but I manage to see Nhlakanipho's smirk as he leans down to fasten his mouth over my own, drinking in my sounds as he pulls my wrists to the sides of my head, gripping so tightly that I know he wants to leave bruises. To mark my body.

His hips pick up the pace, thrusting into my overheated, slick body. My wrists slide, shifting, as I find it increasingly hard to remain in place, but Nhlakanipho is still persistently holding me down. The only thing I can only do is rock my hips up and hook my ankles behind him, to have him deeper in me, the pain be damned.

Nhlakanipho leans down to kiss me again and again, tasting my lips as if he can't get enough of me. I can't get enough of him. His love is like a drug to me. The way he feels inside me – moving, pulsing, makes my body scream in rapturous pleasure. I can feel his thrusts grow uncoordinated, even the way he's stroking me. I decide to help him and wrap my hands on top of his bigger one. His eyes are on me and he makes me feel fragile and helpless. Like he can see right through me. I love it. I love him. "Nhlakanipho..." I whisper again, I don't know what else to say. My heart is going to explode.

"Phakade lami," Nhlakanipho presses tender kisses over my eyelids, my nose, against my lips. "Nhliziyo yami. K'sasa lami. Ngyakuthanda, Shandu." He keeps repeating, praise and prayer and hymn, over and over again.

"Nhlakanipho," I whisper again, panting hard, almost sobbing, "I'm so close."

"Good," Nhlakanipho replies, his tongue thick and clumsy. He kisses me again. "Keep touching yourself," he orders, unwilling to look away from my eyes. "Do it for me, Phakade lami, look at me, keep your eyes on me, don't look away--"

It's hard but I find the strength to obey, my tongue swiping over my upper lip, my chest heaving, my hand continuing to help Nhlakanipho jerk me off. I'm gazing helplessly at my boyfriend, my lips feel swollen and they're trembling, the rest of my body searing hot with volcanic fire. Nhlakanipho keeps thrusting harder and deeper, his hips flexing, as I choke out his name, my voice a throaty, breathless moan, and my eyelashes fluttering as I try to keep my eyes open as commanded.

My body locks up before Nhlakanipho, and I arch into him, clinging to him tightly as I shoot my load in between our chests. I can't breathe, I have to hold Nhlakanipho tightly to prevent my soul from soaring out of my body. I don't know why but sex with him makes me cry. It's embarrassing but that's what's happening. My cry mingles with a gasp as I feel Nhlakanipho's orgasm explode into the deepest parts of me, claiming me. Nhlakanipho grips my face to press one deep kiss on my lips before burying his face in the crook of my neck. It's completely quiet, save for the cattle eating around us, and it feels right. I close my eyes and embrace the boy I love tighter, wishing we could keep this moment forever.

Mutual Desires: Five

Christophe

I wake up in the worst of moods. Zenande has been persistently knocking outside my door for the past thirty minutes. I have a mild throbbing on one side of my head that I think stems from sleeping too few hours. My eyelids still feel heavy but I can't bring myself to sleep. And the guilt I was hoping would be gone is still there. I haven't removed Nqobizitha's jersey and I wonder if he's still out there. My heart skips a nervous beat at the possibility. What if Zenande is knocking at my door because they know I took it? *Not possible*, my mind sneers, finding me dumb for even panicking. *They didn't see you*. No they didn't. But I saw them. And I...I...

"Jeez, let it go, Chris!" I whisper, smacking my forehead to get myself to snap out of it. Leaving the bed, I remove the jersey and put it to my nose again and inhale deeply. Clearly, I didn't learn my lesson from last night. I can smell him and my eyes close. His scent sends me into an intense euphoria. My legs wobble, growing weak that I have to sit on the bed again. I don't even know why I am doing this at this point, I stand to gain nothing from it. Nothing but more confusion. Nqoba's a manwhore, Zenande said. I saw it myself, him flirting with multiple women yesterday. There's also the fact that he's freaking straight and seems indifferent about me. Then there's Hugo, my boyfriend. He cares about me. I should probably call so that I can make it through the day. Maybe his voice will sustain me long enough to keep Nqobizitha from invading my thoughts.

"I miss you," I say as soon as he answers. Saying that is becoming a habit of mine lately. His chuckles make my insides twist but not deliciously, maybe because of the guilt clawing me. I realize it was a mistake calling him because the longer we talk, the more nervous I become, the more I'm taunted by my actions. I don't know what overcomes me but I hang up as he's saying something and put my phone on airplane mode. I need to regain my wits first and only then will I call him. I think about calling Simthandile but she will immediately know something's up. But maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea calling her, she'd help me snap out of it by handing me the cold truth. Something along the lines of not wasting my time with straight dudes because it never ends well anyway.

When I finally escape my room – after I've hidden Nqobizitha's jersey in one of my rarely used backpacks – and head for the kitchen, my heart is jumping far too wildly. I enter the kitchen and my heart sinks when I notice that Zenny's alone. "Morning," I can't look her in the eyes for longer than five seconds.

"Sthandwa sami!" she's in an awfully good mood today. I roll my eyes. "Morning. I was getting ready to call the Hawks to come break down your door. Cha, uyalala bo!"

I manage a small smile. "Sorry." I don't explain myself. We eat in silence. I am restless, and keep stealing glances until she finally catches on.

"Okay, spit it out. Why do you keep stealing glances?"

"No reason," I say and grab our plates to take to the sink. She hasn't mentioned Nqobizitha's missing jersey so I won't say a word either. "Konje you're going back to work tomorrow?"

"Yeah." She sighs dramatically and helps me to rinse the dishes. "At least it's the nightshift, I haven't recovered at all from all the craziness that's been happening."

Does that craziness include fucking someone years younger than you in our father's bedroom?! I want to snap but remain silent. I'm mad at her, not that I hadn't suspected that she and Nqobizitha were fuck buddies. "What about Zemvelo? Is she finally going to come back home?"

"Weeee, lowo! She's giving me excuses but her life is in KwaMashu. I'm beginning to think that she went back there and I'm going to skin her alive and then use that skin to sew her a dress for her funeral!" my jaw drops as Zenny says that...but I'm slowly getting used to her creative torture methods. I think it's a kink of hers and she'd make a scary serial killer. "What do you want to do today?"

"Don't you attend church?" I ask because surely rural people attend church every Sunday. Last week, I saw many women and their children in different church uniforms.

Zenny looks at me as if I've grown two heads. "Musa ukudlala ngami wena!" She proceeds to laugh as if I've told her the funniest joke ever. "Is it Easter already?"

"So you only go during Easter?"

"Yes. Who wouldn't want to die and wake up with Jesus?" she shakes her head. "Kodwa he's phenomenal ke yena. The dates afa ngazo always keep changing, sithule sibhekile. We have a chillas here, about twenty minutes away, I can call my girls and we'll have ourselves a braai and play some pool unless you prefer staying in to watch some bad TV. We've upgraded phela," she points to the large plasma TV that our father bought before his departure. "So what will it be?"

I need some fresh air. "Let me go bath. I'll join you soon." The water is hot, thankfully, and I take my time. Images of Nqobizitha flood my mind, unwelcomed, but I still entertain them. It takes me imagining myself in Zenny's position for me to spill into my hand. My body is still aching, even as I come down from my high, trembling with aftershocks. "One messy bitch, the messiest!" I whisper to myself as I finally leave the bathroom. Zenande's loud singing nearly breaks my ear canals and I rush into my room for cover.

Today's outfit. Some romper shorts and a pink sweater with watermelon designs on it. For shoes, I wear my Converse. They really need a good wash. Combing my hair is a struggle, I've run out of hair moisturizer to keep the knots out of my afro. I'll have to look into my savings account. Zenande says there are salons here, maybe I will find something to help alleviate the hell my hair is putting me through. I twirl around in front of the mirror and then strike the most dramatic pose I can think of. "Hey, bitch!" I smile at my reflection. "Can I get your number?" I shake my head. "Sorry, we're both bottoms!" and then I laugh and grab my phone as I walk out of my room. Sometimes, I talk to myself, but I'm sure I'm not the only weird one on this earth. "Zenny..." I say to my sister, who is on her phone.

"Nqobizitha and co are joining us," she announces as she stands. She's changed, I wonder if she did that because she found out the guy whose dick she hops on will be there. I force a smile to my lips and shrug. "You look really cute in this," she nods at my outfit.

"Thank you. Nawe." Her jeans are worshipping her large frame and she's wearing a boob tube. Her stretch marks are on full display but I've learned that my sister is one confident woman. Her braids are done into a weird hairstyle I can't even describe. She's daring today. "Are we leaving now, noma?"

"If you prefer to walk in that scorching sun for twenty minutes then yes. If you prefer to wait for about fifteen minutes for Nqoba to fetch us then I'll love you forever because a bitch may look good but she's unfit as fuck, bhutiza."

I laugh loudly and tell her that we can go with the latter. My phone is in normal mode again and I WhatsApp some of my friends. I look at their statuses. One of my friends, Jacques, has posted some glamorous pictures about a party he was attending last night. That one is like the male version of a slay queen, with the way he's always attending one stylish party after the other. He's way out of my league – in every manner – but we've been best buddies since primary school. We met when I was doing Grade 5 and him Grade 7. He protected me from a lot of homophobes, because he was gay himself, but one who could stand his own in a fight and could throw a punch.

There's a knock on the front door but Zenande isn't in the living room anymore which means I have to open the door. His scent hits me first, making me bite my lip. I take in his outfit, not really surprised that it's his usual Brentwood attire. He's seriously the only guy I know around here that makes it look so gorgeous, almost...desirable. He doesn't go for the loose pants and hideous shirts and hats. He goes for long-sleeved golf shirts and jerseys that hug his muscular body. He goes for formfitting Oxford-styled pants. Matching them with his Converse or one formal shoe or the other. Today he's wearing a white bomber jacket on top of his preferred jerseys. He looks really good.

"Nqobizitha," I say, trying and failing to sound disinterested.

"Sponge Bob," he grins stupidly at me and my heart stutters. I may even forgive him for calling me by that stupid name. "Unjani, mfethu? Is your sister ready?"

Before I can reply, I feel Zenande's presence behind me. "Asambeni. We're not buying liquor today. I'm going back to work tomorrow." She sashays past us, sliding on her sunglasses. Nqoba and I look at each other and then laugh. I lock the door and rush after them. Zenny's sitting at the front, so I take the backseat. Siya and Nhlakanipho are already at the shisa nyama apparently, along with Zenande's friends. *KwaNyama Ayipheli*, I read the name written over the wide front garage door that is opened, revealing the ruckus inside. There's loud music, that reverberates in my chest even though we haven't left the car yet, and there are people scattered over different sections of the spacious place. Some are talking animatedly, others are dancing, there's people grilling some meat and others are sitting on the benches outside. "Oh, there's Nombuso that side."

Her friends seem to like me. They're just like her though as they expect Nqobizitha to pay for all the meat. Siya offers to pay half of the expenses but Nqoba shakes his head. There's so much meat that I'm pretty sure it costs more than an average person's monthly grocery expenses or even their salary. I remember Zenande told me that Nqoba's parents are practically gods in this place, with how wealthy they are. It makes sense why people would flock and take advantage of him. *Relax, child*, I hear a voice murmur in my head, *maybe sharing with others is his personality trait. He already has a community dick.* I choke on my spit and quickly avert my gaze when he finds me looking at him.

"Don't just sit there, Sponge Bob. We'll need your help in manning the grill."

"Enough with the Sponge Bob crap." I snap, trying to keep the attitude out of my voice. This guy is way bigger than me, his hand alone could crush me, and I'm not trying to die at the tender age of 17. "I told you, my name is Christophe. If it's hard for you to pronounce—"

“Why would it be hard for me to pronounce?” we’re walking side by side now. The place is packed which means I keep as close to him as possible...but not enough to make him uncomfortable. His scent is seducing me, he always smells so good.

“I...don’t—”

“You don’t think we’re stereotypical Zulus, do you?” it’s easy to detect the scolding in his voice but it’s still a calm, smooth drawl that is directly connected to my fluttering belly. “Because then I’ll have to behave like one and beat some respect into you.”

“You don’t seem like the violent type,” I return, looking up at him. “You appear intimidating yes, because you’re built like a brick shithouse. But you don’t look like you’d hurt a fly.”

He smiles, his brown eyes are glinting with mischief, and he puts his hands in his pockets. We continue walking, we’re a few meters away from where Nhlakanipho and Siya are. “Maybe not hurt...if it isn’t consensual. But you’re right. Essentially, the only fighting I do takes place between the bedsheets.” I want to ask more but some beautiful women on the other side of where we’re grilling our meat have captured his attention. He walks away without sparing me another glance.

I frown as I watch him take off. And then I turn my attention to Nhlakanipho and Siya. “He told me to come and help out,” I say with a small frown, “but he just bailed when he saw those women.”

“That’s why I wouldn’t waste my energy trying to hop on his dick if I were you,” Siya says, blunt like usual, but sounding kind. I forget that he’s still an asshole sometimes. “Guys like him can’t be turned.”

“Are you trying to say that you changed Nhlakanipho?”

Nhlakanipho snorts but he’s quiet, too focused on the meat that he’s grilling to perfection. “Our relationship is not up for discussion. Futhi you can’t say things like that around here.” Siya says, sounding stern. “Grab that dish so we can put the meat.”

I do as he says without hesitance. We spend too much time at the grill, talking and even joking. Well, me and Siya. Nhlakanipho pipes in here and there but he’s one of the quiet ones. My eyes will drift back to Nqobizitha from time to time but he has back on me, and he’s already hugging one of those women

tightly. He clearly doesn't waste time. Zenande looks unbothered, she's one of the loudest ones here, chatting animatedly with her friends. I wish I was like her. Hugo calls as we're braaing the final batch of meat. I excuse myself and go to talk to him in the distance.

I manage to make an excuse about why our call cut. These are technically the rural areas and network can get bad here. Our conversation is stale, I suspect it has something to do with me giving half-focused replies, but the noise in this place is distracting me. Okay, I'm lying. Nqobizitha distracts me. How many times can someone run through your mind before they finally drive you insane? This isn't healthy. My sanity is on the line here. "I miss you. Yes, I'll send you a video," I tell Hugo before cutting the call. I'll have to lock my room again tonight. I can only imagine the trauma my sister would go through, finding me pleasuring myself for my boyfriend.

"Oh...sorry," I apologize as I collide with someone's shoulder before walking on. But the person grips my arm. The touch isn't gentle, their fingers are digging into my arm and I struggle.

"Kwangathi unobutabane nyana wena." This guy in front me is tall, not really surprising because it seems I'm like a midget compared to most of these people. "Who talks like you do here?"

I don't know what he means. My voice doesn't even sound feminine. Besides, he'd barely heard two words from me. So what is he on about? "I don't want trouble," I tell him, looking around. Zenande is too engrossed in gossip. Nhlakanipho and Siya are standing too close, talking to each other. They look more suspicious than me. Why didn't he target them?

"I don't want trouble," the guy mimics me, in a baby voice, meant to ridicule me clearly. "Fusek, man! Khuluma njenge ndoda. We don't entertain boys like you here!"

"Ngyeke," my insides are trembling but I'm going to stand my ground. It will hurt when he lays that first punch but I've done nothing to him. I don't even know him. "Asazani. Leave me alone."

"Oh, so you do have some balls." His grip tightens, I try to pry him off with my other hand but grabs it and twists it painfully. I'm not going to scream. He won't get that satisfaction from me. "Then show me how much of a man you really are." He's dragging me away, the one or two eyes who catch us don't even bother. How can they just stand there? I'm still struggling against him but he's too strong and he's pulling me toward the shisa nyama's exit. I notice another guy following us and begin to panic. I'm not going to be able to fight them off it's two of them. With this one, even though he would overpower me in the end, I would've made sure to put up a fight first.

“Lwandle!” I hear someone shout above the ruckus. “Lwandle!” the guy holding my arm looks over his shoulder. I realize the voice belongs to Nqoba. This Lwandle guy stops but he doesn’t let go of my arm. Nqoba doesn’t stop until he’s in front of us. *Don’t let him see your panic. Don’t let him see you weak*, I lecture myself mentally over and over again. The fearful boy in me is internally cowering though, crying in a corner somewhere. “Unjani kodwa, nkabi yami?”

“Nqoba! Hey, I’m good, mfethu. I didn’t know you were coming here today.” Lwandle’s grip is lessening, I think I can start breathing easier.

“Yeah, I wasn’t sure as well but Christophe’s sister called and you know I can’t say no to that lovely woman.” His eyes move from Lwandle’s to my own. I hold the eye contact even though my irises are shifty. I refuse to show him any other version of me but the confident one. “Uyaphi, Sponge Bob? Those ladies in there are going to eat without you. They don’t play when it comes to food. Woza, so that you don’t complain to your sister that I starved you.” He grips my other hand, and no lie, it gets swallowed immediately. His hand is big and warm and reassuring. I can’t explain how my heart settles all of a sudden. “We’ll see you around, Lwandle.” There’s a challenge in his calm voice, his eyes are too dark.

The tension is thick. Lwandle doesn’t seem to be ready to yield just like that but when Nqobizitha cocks his eyebrow, Lwandle sighs and removes his filthy hand from around my arm. I pretend to shake the dirt off with my other hand that Nqoba is still holding. Lwandle frowns, looking ready to attack, but Nqoba leads us away before that can happen. “You need to be careful around here,” he says calmly, he’s still holding my hand. I don’t want him to let go, there’s a delicious electricity travelling to the tips of my fingers that is spreading to my groin as well as my back. “That guy could’ve injured you badly.”

“Because it’s always the victim’s fault,” I snap, glaring up at him.

He stops walking, forcing me to as well since he’s still holding my hand. “Usuyaqala ngale drama yakho. I did not say it’s your fault. I said be careful around here. Many people are close-minded.”

“And you’re not?”

He rolls his eyes. “I’ll leave that up to you to decide.” When we reenter the shisa nyama, he immediately lets go of my hand. I’m only briefly disappointed as I then feel it settle on my shoulders, protecting me from the crowd while guiding us to where the others are. The two empty spaces are next to each other and Nqoba sits beside me. The benches are not big enough, and we’re all squashed together, with two

big tables around us with the food. On one side, I can feel Sonto's – one of Zenande's friends – thigh press into mine. On the other side, is Nqobizitha's thigh.

My body is teeming with desire at the knowledge, as a rush of current travels straight to my groin. I cross my legs in an attempt to clamp down on my raging boner and scoot closer to him. Only Siya seems to be focused on me, the others are chatting away and eating. My skin heats up and I look down, focusing on my trembling hand as I grab another piece of the wors. My heart is going insane, making it hard for me to even take a regular breath. His scent again, right next to me, clouds my senses. I find myself being the thief I am lately and sneak glances at him. What I wouldn't give to touch his face with my hands, to trace it – every facet and to learn the secret behind that scar next to his eyebrow.

"You staring me down real hard," I hear him say, making my eyes quickly snap to his. They're too inviting. He raises his eyebrows a lot and it makes me flush as I turn my head away.

"That was a mistake. I'm really sorry."

"It's no longer a mistake if it keeps happening," he says, there's a lighthearted smile on his face. "But you wanna look so look."

I feel my cheeks flushing and shake my head, looking at my food. If I stare any longer then I will somehow telepath all my impure thoughts to him and he'll push me away...or beat me up. But how can he be so casual about this? Don't straight guys feel uncomfortable about receiving male attention or something? I'm confused. I don't do confused. But then I don't do pining either – and he's got me pining after him like a lovesick puppy.

Nqobizitha

We buried my sister's stillborn daughter yesterday. After numerous fights, where it actually didn't look like our family would receive the opportunity, the Mkhizes just decided that we were allowed to her body out of the blue. I don't know what my mom said to them but she clearly has an impact wherever she goes. Aside from Ndoni, five of my other sisters were able to make it to the funeral. The other seven all had excuses about why they couldn't come. I suspect that MaKhathide told them to stay away because they have children and maybe Ndoni would've been triggered somehow.

The funeral was lavish, far too lavish actually, for the burial of a baby. MaKhathide hired a helicopter to drop off Sinomcebo and Kwandile – two of my older sisters – who arrived late to the funeral even after the whole chopper situation. Then there was the violinist and a hired choir. I did say that the only reason she'd wanted Ndoniyamanzi's daughter's body was to show off. And show off she did. An article appeared this morning on the front pages of Isolezwe. She got what she wanted, while my sister cried her lungs out. She had Sibusisiwe to comfort her but it's clear as daylight that she's still going through so much pain. She won't be okay for a very long time and the only thing I can try to do is to be there for her.

"Mr. Ngcobo, your new and improved results." Mr. Nsibande captures my attention. He's glaring down at me, displeased. I grab my test paper and check my score. *39 out of 100*. Fuck, that's worse than the last time! Not by much, just two marks but it was still better. I should've known the balding bastard was being sarcastic. "Don't mind the rest of the class. I'm sure your family's wealth is enough to ensure you live comfortably that you won't need to work a day in your life. Just order people around."

He continues on without another word while I do everything in my power to not rush to him and bash his Samsung charger-looking head against the nearest surface. I show Nhlakanipho my results and sigh. I won't hear the end of this from my mother. She will skin me alive. "You need to find a tutor manje, bafo. Otherwise you're going to fail this subject come final exams."

"Ngiyazi, ndoda." I nod my head, discarding of the test papers inside my bag. "Maybe you can come help me out. Iyang'shaya lento, sbali."

"Uyazi nje ukuthi nami iyang'shaya. Fifty percent is a pass but not a good pass. It means I still don't know the other fifty percent."

"It would be better if Siya was doing Accounting."

Nhlakanipho gains a soft proud smile. "Ungasho uphinde, bafo."

I try really hard to concentrate in Mr. Nsibande's class but Accounting was a foreign language to me in Grade 10 and it still is now in Matric. I find myself drifting off. We're attending Miss Ntuli's class after this but she's absent so that's a free period. I'll use the time to catch up on a conspiracy theory video I was watching about Area 57. That crap is interesting as fuck – possible human testing experiments, possible UFO housing area, the list goes on and on. My mind visits Zenande, and I think about the money she asked me to loan her. The woman's a freaking nurse and I want to say I don't know where all her

money goes to but I think back to the many outfits that fill her closet. I honestly think she doesn't wear the same outfit twice.

Anyway, she sent me a message, asking for R100 for her brother to get a haircut as well as buy moisturizer for his hair. Christophe has beautiful hair, I'm surprised it's giving him a hard time with how that little afro of his is always on point. He's a strange one, that boy, defends himself fiercely even when it's not a good idea. Sometimes, I think his tenacity will get him in serious trouble. Aside from Lwandle, two of his other goons have tried bullying Christophe, and both times I was available to put a stop to it. The last incident was just three days ago. I think back to how Christophe had pushed me away right after, his toothpick body clearly more powerful than it looked...all because I'd told him not to cry. There were bloody tears dancing in his eyes. What else did he expect me to do, pretend I didn't see them?!

Or does he also subscribe to the belief that men don't cry? Not that I'd blame him. If he does cry, then chances are he wouldn't survive in a place like this. Zulu men take their masculinity very seriously, they protect it with everything in them, it's like a pearl to them – too rare and invaluable. I've been raised the same way too. All my life, my mom trained me to be a strong, independent boy. I remember this one time, I fell from one of the backyard trees and landed on my arm. It broke, naturally, but I still got a good hiding on top of that. Not for being naughty, no. I got a serious hiding for crying. 'Indoda ayikhali' – an African proverb that every young boy is raised by.

Classes are always long on Monday. It's even worse because Miss Ntuli wasn't there to help brighten the day. I saw Miss Biyela but that one's stern about not fucking during school hours. She's less exciting but I got a job to do if I'm going to pass my Business Studies classes. And yes, they both don't know that they're sharing me. I don't think it's such a big deal since they're both married anyway. Nhlakanipho, Siya and I go to Mchunu's tuck-shop during break time. Siya and I split the bill 50/50, it's not even that much anyway. Uphuthu neskobho is very inexpensive around here. After break, we have four more periods before we're leaving for home.

I reach home fifteen minutes later and it is law at home that I can't go into my house first without going to the main house to greet my family. When I open the door, I am met with a commotion that startles me. Even with the distance, I can hear my mother shouting in the living room. I can hear Ndoni's sobs. My feet quickly carry me to where the noise is. "Sanibonani." My voice penetrates the tension. "What's going on here?"

"Usisi wakho!" my mother is pacing up and down. She looks colder than usual. "Ngimtshele okanye uzosho wena, Ndoniyamanzi?"

Ndoni says nothing, just continues sobbing.

“I found her holding these in her hands when I went to her room!” MaKhathide picks up something from the coffee table. It’s a bottle of sleeping pills. “She had a handful of them closed around her fist! Is she stupid?! So now she wants to kill herself? She wants to follow her dead child?!”

“Ma! Khawula phela,” I say, taking the pills from her to inspect. I know Ndoni hasn’t been sleeping well lately so maybe that’s why she got them. “You say found them in her hand. She didn’t use them. Nakhona, I don’t think you should be this insensitive. uBaba said Ndoni’s dealing with a lot of crap. She doesn’t need this from us. She needs love and support.”

“How can we give her that when she insists on being difficult? How?!” MaKhathide pauses and looks at me. “Uyasihlambalaza usisi wakho. What will people say when they find out that she’s acting out?”

“Khuzeka njalo, Mama wami.” I don’t want to shout, I keep my voice respectful. “This is your daughter and with the things she’s been through, how dare you say she’s acting out.”

“Angizwanga?!” she takes a step back, shock evident on her face. “Know your place, Nqobizitha. I am still your mother. And you will respect me!”

“Of course, I respect you. But you’re wrong here, MaKhathide. Even you have to see that—”

“No. Keep quiet. I’m not going to argue with a child. What do you know anyway? This is life, Nqobizitha, you haven’t even experienced anything. All you know is to spend the money your father and I—”

“Sengikhathele,” Ndoni cuts in, voice so quiet, it’s a surprise we hear her. “Ngaphakathi ngikhathele and when I came here, I thought for once my mom would comfort me and tell me that everything will be okay. I know I’ve disappointed you, Mama wam. I couldn’t keep my marriage. I’m not you or my other sisters. But I also expected that you would be understanding of my situation. How long should I have stayed with uMandla? What haven’t I stayed through? His cheating, I stayed...even when he did it with one of my colleagues. His emotional abuse, I still stayed, engibiza ngenyumba. He must’ve forgotten that my miscarriages were almost always caused by his actions. He put his hands on me once, and I still stayed because we had that stupid family meeting where he promised to change but he didn’t. So enlighten me – what haven’t I stayed through?”

“Kodwa we warned you about marrying that boy. When we told you to go for loya mfana wakwaShange, you didn’t listen. What had you expected from someone who comes from poverty? That boy’s mind was clearly impoverished. Look at your sisters, they’re prospering in their marriages. Buka wena...”

“MaKhathide!” I rub my nose, irritated. Maybe I should leave. This home isn’t the same anymore. “Listen to your daughter and stop being so bloody stubborn. Iyakhala ingane yakho, Mama wami.”

“If I were you, Nqobizitha, I’d stay out of this. You can’t even afford your own damn underwear and here you are, acting like some form of mediator. Usafunani la? You should be in your room, focusing on your schoolwork, where you’re clearly struggling. And keep out of the affairs of adults. Ayikho intanga yakho lana.”

Ouch! I nod my head and then go to hug my sister before walking out of the house with the most rebuking glare nailed on my mother. She’s fucking insane if she thinks I’m going to stick around here when she’s being a heartless devil in that house. I need a good fuck, something rough and I have just the person in mind. After I’ve changed out of my school uniform, I grab my phone and scroll through my contacts before finding Miss Ntuli’s number. I’m not going to call her incase she’s with the husband. So I send her a message instead.

Ngize nini lapho? – me.

She doesn’t reply for a few good minutes but my phone buzzes just as I’m exiting the house.

Nine, maybe. Ntuli’s taking the kids back to his mother around six. Kodwa come at least two hours later just to be safe. I miss you.

A smile spreads across my lips.

I can’t wait to see how much when I join you. I’ll leave you to enjoy the husband and kids – me.

I’ve grabbed my wallet so I can get that money Zenande wanted me to give her baby brother. She’s not home but Christophe should be apparently. Their house is a bit of a long walk but I couldn’t risk taking the car with the mood MaKhathide’s in. I knock on the Xulus’ door about three times before the door opens. His big eyes appear first and they widen to the point of looking like lightbulbs. This kid is funny.

The way he always seems flustered around me. It makes my insides twist but never in a way that actually makes me feel sick or bad about myself. Like I said before, the attention is almost...welcomed. Not in that gay way that would make want to do things I'm not supposed to do with him but in a way that boosts my already too big head. My confidence. Sometimes, I'll find myself looking at him just so that I can catch him trying to steal one of his glances. Or I'll touch him to see how readily he responds to my touches. It doesn't feel weird at all, if anything it fascinates me that a dude can even respond so eagerly to another dude's touches. I don't get his nervous little squeals or the way he plays with his fingers when he's around me. I don't get some of his actions but he still fascinates me.

"Toffee," I greet, watching his face transform from confusion to realization. "Unjani?"

"You really don't like using my name, do you?" he rolls his eyes as a smile plays at his lips. "Are you looking for Zenny?"

"No. I'm here for you."

I watch his eyes widen. The pure look of disbelief on his face shouldn't be so endearing but it is. I don't think this kid realizes how...befitting his skittish tendencies are. He's the only boy I know who makes a squeak sound appealing. "Are you—sure? I don't have a vagina. Oh crap!" he shakes his head and holds his hands out. "I don't mean it that way. You're obviously not here for sex."

My mind tries to create that scenario and I just can't see it happening. How the fuck does gay sex even work? I don't even care. "Are you going to allow me inside, bafo? Or won't I be allowed today because the one with the vagina is not here."

"No!" Christophe rubs the back of his neck. "Of course not. Ngena, you just caught me off guard. I've never had anyone come here for me specifically before. I don't really get visitors." He giggles like a child when he laughs.

"Well, I'm visiting you now. We're spending the day together," the words escape before my mind can process them. What the fuck? Maybe his little kicked puppy expression was getting to me. I can only imagine how he feels having had to relocate to a place he's never been to before. He left his life in Johannesburg. "Here, your sister said I should give you this. The first one's for your hair. The other one you can buy whatever you need with." Another 'what the fuck' moment. Zenny said one hundred bucks and here I am freely giving him an extra one. I think I just feel sorry for the little guy.

“Thank you,” he takes the money but he looks reluctant. I hope he’s not like Nhlakanipho and weird about handouts. “This should be enough to go eMlalazi, right? I think I want to cut my hair and dye it blue.”

I look at him like he’s crazy but he seems serious. Maybe it will look good on him. This Shembe hairdo he has going on already suits him, with his quirky features. “Yeah. It should be enough,” I fish out a fifty in my pocket. “You’ll use this to buy your food.”

He looks at me, I look back at him, there seems to be a little competition happening right now. Naturally, I don’t back down. It’s getting a bit weird here because this boy doesn’t yield easily. His Bambi eyes seem to be swimming with a lot of different emotions, I can’t read them, but it irks me. We’re quiet for so long that I start to notice a few things I’m sure I’m not supposed to. Like how his chest is lifting and falling – fast, too fast. Just like his breathing. It feels like a windstorm, and I can detect a watermelon scent. His brown eyes appear desperate, too damn wide – almost innocently – and I don’t know what the fuck he’s asking for so I grab his hand, my grip tightening when he tries to pull away. “Thatha imali, ndoda.” I command him, a little impatiently.

“You don’t need to be rude about it,” he frowns, and wriggles his hand. When I realize that I’m still gripping his wrist, I immediately let go. “Are you hungry?”

I didn’t get a chance to eat at home because I was escaping uMaKhatide. “Yes. Do you have amasi?” that’s what I’m craving. That’s my favourite food in the world.

“We have leftover uphuthu but I don’t think we have amasi. No one eats that in this house.”

“Uhlazo!” I put my hands in my pockets and regard him with fake horror.

“Ihaba,” he returns, and I smile at him, impressed once again by his Zulu. He grins back at me, all glimmering white teeth and crinkling eyes. He’s beautiful. I think I’m comfortable enough with my sexuality to admit that he looks beautiful right now. “So what should we do? If you want I can make you toast or a quick sishebo to go with uphuthu.”

“We’re going to buy amasi. You’re close to Mchunu’s tuck-shop.” When he nods, we walk out. Christophe is very talkative, especially about fashion, I’ve never seen a guy talk about clothes the way he does. He tells me he wants to be a model but that his parents would prefer he chose something more

stable. Join the club, I want to tell him but remain silent. He doesn't allow me to anyway, with the way he's talking. I don't mind it at all, there are times where even I prefer to remain silent. I don't even notice that we've reached our destination until he nudges my arm and points to the store. They don't have any one liters here so I buy the two liter and we walk back to his house.

We get to his house and he runs in the direction of the kitchen. He comes back with a bowl filled to the brim with uphuthu and places it in front of me. He rushes back to the kitchen again and comes back with another bowl. I raise my eyebrow and he laughs nervously. "In case you think it's too much. Oh shit, let me get you something to drink!" he's rushing out again before I can stop him. "Is this okay?" he comes with a two liter bottle of Coca Cola. I nod my head and thank him. "I promise I'll be a better host next time, if you tell me you're coming. What do you want to watch?"

I don't really watch the TV unless there's an interesting documentary about space or something so I shrug and allow him to choose whatever. He chooses a channel broadcasting a modeling competition and I can tell that this is what he was watching before. He looks at me and I think he's expecting me to laugh at him but I don't. Sure, his love for the fashion industry is a little weird to me but we all love what we love. The TV serves as background noise for me. I dig into my food and groan as the flavour explodes in my mouth. I can feel Christophe's eyes on me. They burn into my skull, making me shift uncomfortably. "Take a picture, it'll last longer." My voice is confident, teasing. I shift my eyes to him.

He bites his bottom lip and my eyes follow the action. He's going to draw blood if he doesn't ease up. "Stop that, don't bite your lip." I scold him and watch him release it almost immediately. It's become thick and swollen. I look into his eyes and find him looking back.

"Sorry!" the squeak is back. It makes me shake my head. I wonder how he manages to transition from confident toothpick to skittish cat in 0.01 seconds.

"You're good," I say, my eyes going back to his swollen lip. I'm curious about it, the deep burgundy color. "Your lip is really red. Had you bitten yourself any harder and you were going to make your lip bleed," I scold him softly and my arm draws forward before I can completely register it. My thumb press on the soft meat and I watch his eyes widen for the umpteenth time. "Bambi," I hear my voice, sounding too fond to my ears. He shuffles closer, I don't stop him. Our knees are brushing, he's breathing too hard again. And then he tries to look away but my hand moves to grip his chin. "I know you want to look manje wangishalazela." That bottom lip of his captures my attention again, and my thumb tenderly brushes it. He's exhibiting that eagerness again as he leans into my touch, and he is suddenly too close to me. I should push him away but I don't. I'm not even uncomfortable. Maybe I encourage him by cradling his cheek, curious about what he will do. He scoots closer again, so close that I can feel the heat of his body. He smells flowery. The scent is intoxicating. Closer and closer he leans in while I stare, in a trancelike state. He's breathing directly in my mouth when my phone startles us. We pull apart and look

anywhere but each other. My heart is jumping too fast, my hands are shaking. *Fuck, Nqobizitha!* my mind shouts and I tell it to shut up. There's a message from Miss Ntuli. My dick is already pulsing wildly and rock hard so the sight of her naked body doesn't help. Her message is simple.

It's time for those extracurricular classes, Nqoba.

My eyes find Christophe, he's putting in so much of an effort into not looking at me. "I'll see you around," I tell him, trying to sound unperturbed.

"I'll walk—"

"It's cool, man. Ngiyayazi indlela," my voice is too polite. I don't wait for his reply and make my escape. I sag outside the front door and close my eyes. The memory of what almost transpired there taunts me and I have to repeatedly punch my temple to drive everything away. Sometimes, shit like this happens. I remember when I was eight, I kissed seven year old Zenzele during a trip my parents and I had taken to Empangeni. We were curious about the kissing we always saw on TV, and because we thought kissing girls was disgusting, we'd decided to experiment on each other. The kiss wasn't bad but I hadn't enjoyed it either. I grew up without feeling the slightest attraction towards boys after that encounter with Zenzele, my passion is still women. So what the fuck was that with Christophe?

Mutual Desires : Six

Nqobizitha

“Goddamn, Mama.” My eyes widen and then travel, greedily drinking in the enticingly sexy sight of Miss Ntuli. Damn, this woman is sexy as fuck but she never ceases to snatch my breath away. I’m already hard but she’s threatening to turn me into solid rock. Lately, she has taken a liking to wearing those bras that push her breasts up and bring attention to how deliciously big they are. This one she’s wearing tonight is sheer black, I can see her elongated nipples calling to me behind the bra. I lick my lips and let my eyes explore more of her, to her soft belly decorated with fragments of stretch marks – they are an artwork – and then further down my eyes travel to the addictive treasure that is her pussy. My dick jerks in interest and I palm myself, forcing my eyes back to her. “You’re too fucking sexy. I’m going to eat you alive tonight.”

She smiles and grabs one of my hands, guiding it to her pussy. “Do you feel what you do to me, Nqobizitha?”

She’s hot and wet, I teasingly rub around her clit and she moans, gripping my hand. “Today we’re going to cover an entire section on Business Cycles. Are you ready, Mr. Ngcobo? Think you’ll be able to keep up?”

“I prefer my actions to speak for me, Mama.” I bring her close to me, my eager hands going to dig on her jiggling ass. I smack the meatiest part of her ass, very close to her wetness, and her fingers dig into my shoulders. “So I suggest we get to that class because I’m looking forward to passing with flying colours.”

She drags me to the bedroom, where she sleeps with her husband, I don’t care. My erection is a grenade looking to blow off. I want her now, to have her writhing beneath me, I want to feel her convulse with pleasure. My hunger is indescribable, I’m ravenous. As soon as we’re in her bedroom, I pin her to the wall roughly and press my thigh up against her wetness tightly. Her whimpers are connected to my dick. One of my hands finds its way to her neck, grabbing the front of her throat and squeezing just enough to draw a whimper out of her. “I have a multiple choice question, Mama.” I drawl, pressing my lips against her parted ones slightly. “Rough and hard. Slow and gentle. Slow and hard. A, B or C?”

I ease my hold from around her throat just slightly, just enough to hear her breathless. “A. A all the way.”

“Good,” I murmur before invading her mouth. We’re rarely gentle. Our kisses are wild and violent, our hands are everywhere. We’re moving, my clothes dropping off one by one on our way to the bed. I spin us around and have her on her back, her legs spread wide. Hot, pink and glistening. Miss Ntuli is sex personified. Too damn sexy and enticing. I lean down to kiss her wetness and manage to hear her sharp intake of air. Rubbing on her clit with my tongue, my eyes find her. She’s looking at me intently, clamping down on her bottom lip. “This smells good, Mama. Clean. I’m going to worship it until you can focus on nothing else but the pleasure I’m giving you.”

She moans and attempts to hump into my tongue. I press her down by her hips and look at her with a look that tells her to stop it. “Where is the textbook? You’re supposed to read to me.”

Her moan is laced with frustration but she scans her drawer and retrieves an Economics textbook. “I’d almost—forgotten.” Her voice cracks, she’s breathing too fast and her boobs are enticing. I guide her on her back again, kissing down her and burying my face inside her breasts to feel their softness against my skin. I bite on one of her nipples that are peaking out and continue my exploration, pinning her down because she keeps squirming and thrusting into the air.

When I get to her wetness, I rub around her folds, pressing my thumb on her clit and tapping on it just slightly. “Fuck! Do something, Nqobizitha. Put your fingers in, your tongue. Just fucking do something, please!” Miss Ntuli’s voice is laced with arousal, the fire in her eyes shouldn’t be legal. She could destroy the whole world with it. My skin burns an intense flame just looking at her.

“The textbook,” I growl, stroking my own painful erection with my other hand. I’m dying to sink inside her and fuck her into oblivion but she has to read to me first. I want to turn her into an intelligible mess. “Otherwise I’ll find myself someone else to fuck.”

She makes a wounded sound and glares at me but grabs the textbook and opens its pages. “B-Business Cycles. This topic discusses—fuck...c-cycles,” she starts to read to me, with me resting in between her legs, rubbing her clit, watching her intently, listening to her words transition into moans that speak intelligence. I continue rubbing and then use my tongue, slurping the hell out of her, milking her of her juices. She pants, and then moans until eventually, her lewd screams echo all over the room. “I’m close, Nqobizitha! That’s it, tickle my clit for me, you’re so good. Push that tongue in.”

I live to serve with this voluptuous woman. My tongue swirls around her clit, my fingers joining in to play with her wetness. She tries to squeeze her thighs around me and I hold them in place, burying my face deeper in between them, and driving my tongue deep in her. Her shattering moan is music to my ears and I continue probing and probing, drawing every intense and filthy reaction to the surface. I press one of my fingers inside her, going straight for that spot that makes her thighs quiver and her moans to turn

high-pitched. She shudders on the bed, fucking herself on my tongue and finger, I let her. We go at this, each touch bringing her closer to that brink until finally...multiple incomprehensible words escape her. I don't ease up until her moans are whimpered. She has a wild look in her eyes, her skin tinged an erotic shade of red. I want to take her now. "I'm going to fuck you like I hate you now, Mama." I say, my voice roughened with lust.

I love the way she spreads her legs wider, going to play with her self, shuddering and all, while keeping her dilated pupils on me. She's rubbing on it as if it's problematically itchy. Lucky for her, I have the perfect weapon to assist her with. I continue to stroke my pulsing dick with one hand and rip into the condom with the other. She uses one of her hands to help me put it on. As soon as we're done with that, I drag her to the edge of the bed, and tease her with the tip. Her eyes close, she bites her bottom lip, one of her hands going to caress her busty breasts that have spilled out of her bra. Our eyes are on each other as I sink in slowly, wrapping my hand around her throat with my other gripping her breasts to keep her in place. That little lip bite she does is sexy as fuck.

I lean down to capture her lips and kiss her hard. And then I start to move inside her, feeling her walls part to let me through like the Red sea parted for Moses. It's slow at first, to allow her the opportunity to adjust, but the more I pump into her, the more I find myself growing frustrated, my dick expanding. I did say I wasn't in the mood for slowness. So I close my eyes and take everything out on her by fucking her hard. She screams and they edge me on, I dig my fingers into her delicate skin, decorating it with new marks. My hips rotate, nailing the spot that makes her release a wounded scream. "Marry my pussy!" she screams, her scorching walls grappling my throbbing dick. "Fuck, Nqoba! Harder, that's it."

Her pussy is twitching deliciously, wetness overflowing around us. Her legs flex around my back, edging me closer, I oblige. My thumb plays with her clit, rubbing and circling. In and out I slam into her, rolling my hips and absorbing every sensation. She's wet and hot and tight. I can barely breathe with how sweet her pussy feels but I keep going and going. I open my eyes, surprised to find that she's climaxing, squeezing her tits tightly. I'm not sure when it happened, but I store the memory of her falling apart, of her eyes rolling to the back of her head.

The room reeks of sex, the obscenely loud noises bounce off the walls of the room, the pictures of her family watch me pleasure her. I want to fuck her brains out. I'm not going to stop until she's begging me to. I grip her by her face, pressing her into the mattress, and keep her there while slamming into her. She wraps an arm around my wrist when I press her down by her neck and squeeze but she's fucking me back, lifting her hips to allow her greedily suck in more of me – a succubus. Her breasts are bouncing, rocking up and down with every rough thrust I make into her. Leaning down to capture one of them in my mouth, I feel her hands move to the back of my head to keep me in place. I suck on them, worshipping them as they deserve to be, while continuing to thrust wildly. The tension between us is belligerent, not gentle at all, just primal – two beasts in the jungle, going at it, with no self-preservation whatsoever.

“You’re going to make me come again!” her hoarse voice whispers in my ear. It doesn’t take too long before she’s falling again, shuddering like someone experiencing a seizure, one of her hands tapping at my pelvis. I wrap my hands around her throat again, my fingers teasingly digging into the delicate skin just enough that her eyes turn white, her pussy clenching around my stiff length. I’m so hard it hurts but my insatiable appetite craves to consume her whole. To devour every inch of her raw. I dick her down, and grab her shoulders when she starts to squirm in oversensitivity beneath me.

“Uyaphi, MaNtuli?” I look down at her pinched face, cupping her inflamed cheek as I pull out and then ram her again. She screams and grabs my wrist. “This is what you wanted, mama. For me to fuck you hard. Now take it, mama. Take all of it.”

Her wild eyes are unfocused but she bites her bottom lip and nods frantically. My dick is greedy and invasive, finding every corner of her until she’s practically sobbing beneath me. I lick at her neck and bite down her shoulder. Faster and harder I thrust until she’s begging me to come already. She says it’s starting to hurt. But dick is just as sore. I want to come. Closing my eyes, I’m not even sure what I focus on but my dick finally spurts my orgasm. I groan, gripping her hair in a white-knuckled grip, and devour her lips until my famished appetite is satiated. Pulling out the condom, I roll onto my back beside her and stare at the ceiling, breathing hard.

“You almost fucking killed me,” Fundiswa’s warm breath tickles my sensitive skin, she rests her head on my shoulder, and doodles on my too heated skin. “What’s gotten into you?”

“I think it’s the other way round. I got into you, Mama.” I say, turning my head to look at her. My lips find her forehead, the smell of her skin is inviting, one of my hands travels to the golden treasure I was sheathed in not too long ago. I watch her eyes flutter closed, and massage her sweet spot teasingly. My lips mouth at the inside of her neck. “Did I hurt you?” I ask softly, her voice is too hoarse.

“I’ll be weeping in the morning,” she says but it’s lighthearted, to my relief. “Kodwa you haven’t answered my question. Where is all this passion coming from?”

I cock my eyebrows. “I’m always like this.”

“I know but,” she shakes her head, “there was something about tonight. Like you were already armed and ready for battle. I’m going to blame it on the picture I sent you.”

My heartbeat accelerates as another picture taunts me instead – someone’s bottom lip, bruised and swollen. My dick twitches but I chalk that up to Fundiswa stroking it lazily, teasingly. Turning on my side, I grab one of her breasts and suck on it softly before pressing a soft kiss on her nipple. “You’re right. Who in their right mind would be able to resist all this?” my eyes drag down her naked frame. “Uyashisa, MaNtuli. You got some A-grade pussy on you.”

“You’re crazy,” she sighs softly and caresses my cheek. “I don’t think I’ll be able to go for another round tonight. I still need to recover from all that battering I just received.”

I laugh loudly, recovering with quiet breaths before leaning into kiss her – our lips collide and our tongues twist together in a soft embrace. It always feel too intimate with this woman even though my feelings for her don’t go beyond sexual. She strokes my cheek again and whispers, “You made me so proud tonight, Nqoba. Your dick made me proud.”

My heart melts and my silly grin broadens. “Ngincoma wena, Mama. If I was into poetry, I’d spend my whole life writing poetry in honour of your delectable body.” My hands travels lightly down her back, fondling her ass firmly. “I think I’ll leave now. It’s a school night.”

A disappointed expression sweeps over her features, gone too fast for me to address. “I’ll see you k’sasa ke. I’ll think about how good you felt inside me – wrecking shit up in there.”

My dick jerks at her words, and I bring her in for a deep kiss. She ends up pinned beneath me, my lips travel down her body, kissing, teasing, worshipping, praying. One final kiss to her delicious warmth and I go back to her lips, kissing her softly, before climbing off the bed. I find my boxer-briefs, slide them on, along with every piece of clothing I have. I wouldn’t want to lose something in her house, like I lost my jersey at Zenande’s, but it would be worse with Fundiswa – she’s a married woman. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” I tell her at the door, looking down at her gorgeous face – she’s glowing. I smirk.

“I’ll wear your favourite dress for you – a reward for your outstanding performance tonight.”

“That will get you fucked in that classroom, Mama,” I warn her, my hands never want to be away from her body for too long, I push her short relaxed hair back, but it can’t be tamed. “K’sasa MaNtuli.”

She stands on her tiptoes, and getting the message, I lean down to plant one final kiss to her lips. The street are dark and clear. I'm surprised I make it to right house, with how absentminded I am. The lights are still on which means my parents are still awake. I decide to go to my house. Now that I've left Fundiswa's house, I realize how tired I am. I need sleep. I need to clear my head. I stop and turn around when I hear someone call my name. It's my mother. Mentally, I sigh. What the fuck does she want? It's 10:00pm for fuck's sake. "Mama wami."

"Ubuyaphi?"

"I was with Nhlakanipho, he's helping me with Accounting tutorials. You know how bad I am at it."

"And where is the study material?"

Oh fuck! I rack my brains, trying to find some sort of plausible response. "Oh, come on, Mama wam. You know how far Nhlakanipho stays, imagine having to walk all the way back home carrying heavy textbooks and two quire notebooks. And also because I respect you, I decided not to use the car after our little argument. But I also understand ukuthi education is very important so I walked that two hour distance, and focused on picking my grades up as you suggested. I'm back now, and very tired, if you don't mind, I'd like to go to bed. Please, MaKhathide wami."

My mom scrutinizes me, her stony eyes looking suspicious, but she can't do a thing about it. Even if she calls Nhlakanipho, he won't answer. He never answers his phone after 08:00pm. Doesn't matter who you are. "Fine. Go to bed and don't make this a daily thing. Not on school nights, Mapholoba."

"Ngiyezwa, Mama wam. Have a great night, I love you."

She nods. "Uqaphele. The local news announced a shooting here in Mbongolwane. A failed robbery. The man was rushed to hospital but they didn't announce his name because his family hasn't been notified yet."

Sheesh. I nod my head and continue on to my house. I remove my clothes, headed to the bathroom for a much needed wash. My thoughts are all over the place but Fundiswa's words ring in my mind, like a broken record. Armed and ready for battle, she'd said I was. I remember that I was already walking around with a painful erection as I went to her place. The problem is I don't even remember if her picture's what got my dick pulsing in the first place. But it's a relief to know that I am still attracted to

her. The toothpick somehow manages to make his way into my thoughts while I'm in the shower and I groan. I can see his smile – that glint found in his eyes when his mirth is genuine. My mind recreates his squeaks. The tenacity. When I think about how stubborn he can be...things happen in my body. Feelings arise. I'm not sure what he did to me in that house but I turn on the cold water as soon as my dick jerks in excitement. I refuse to beat my meat while thinking about another guy. That shit will never happen.

Escaping the shower, I towel myself dry, and go to bed. That night, I dream of toffee-coloured skin, obscenely wide brown eyes and swollen, burgundy lips.

News of the shooting have spread like wildfire. It's the first thing I hear about when I enter the school gates. The shocking part isn't that the man who got shot was well known – at least for me. The shock is that someone whose wife I had fucked just last night is no more. Mr. Ntuli, Fundiswa's husband, was the victim of a robbery last night. The worst part is that their children were in the car with him. How they were spared is everyone's guess but it's a relief to know that they survived.

Fundiswa is not at school as expected and part of me feels guilty about last night. I'm restless the entire morning, thinking back to last night. Maybe I shouldn't have slept with her my conscious tells me but my mind says something else because fuck it, how should I have known that she was going to be a widow? As much as I sympathize with her, I wasn't the one doing the killing. I tell myself this for most of the morning but the guilt is on the verge of overpowering me. I don't even know what to do.

Nhlakanipho knows something's up by lunchtime and asks me what the matter is. I don't remember what excuse I come up with. I'm distracted, my eyes are on Siya who isn't sitting with us today and hangs out with a girl whose name I don't know. She's in Grade 10, doing the same subjects as him. "Looks like Siya finally found himself a girlfriend." I nod to the tables near the taps.

Nhlakanipho's jaw clenches and he looks over his shoulder. "I don't think so, bafo." He isn't looking at me as he says the words. And Siya must be sensing someone's eyes on him because he lifts his eyes and they connect with Nhlaka's. His mouth stretches into a soft smile. He waves his hand, almost...shyly and I wave back together with Nhlakanipho. "That girl asked him to tutor her."

"She looks like she wants to smash though," I chuckle, observing her body language, "That way she keeps touching the back of her neck. It's cause she's bald but that thing she's doing is the equivalent of that hair twirl thing the girls do when they're flirting. And notice the way she's leaning into—"

“Awume, bafo.” Something about the way Nhlakanipho says those words forces me to turn my attention away from the funny sight I was looking at. “He’s uncomfortable. Can’t you see? Ngyabuya.” He stands up, and goes to where Siya is sitting. I don’t know what he says but the girl looks embarrassed and Siya looks angry. He stands and walks away with Nhlaka following behind him. I shake my head at their dramatics because Siya does this as well sometimes and if they won’t both guys, I’d say they look like those ex-lovers who sabotage each other’s dates because they’re not over each other. My phone vibrates and I grab it from inside my jacket. There’s a WhatsApp message from a number I don’t recognize.

Last night didn’t happen.

Okay. I don’t even know who it comes from but I have an idea. Where did he get my number? *Zenande*, obviously my brain scoffs. My mouth is dry all of a sudden and I don’t know why I’m glaring at my phone. Another message comes through. And it’s like the gates of WhatsApp heaven have been opened because he starts sending one after the other.

Sorry. This is Chris.

Just wanted to say last night didn’t happen. – Chris

Maybe you imagined it?

Does that sound stupid? I mean you touched my lip.

I got your numbers from Zenny.

Please say something otherwise I won’t be able to stop myself from sending these.

I get a momentary pause before another message comes though.

Maybe my profile picture didn’t give me away but I’ve changed it now. It’s really me. Haha. – Chris

My stomach twists weirdly and I smile without meaning to. I can hear his messages, they talk to me in his voice. And I can see them as well, him wringing his fingers and unable to look at me for longer than three seconds. Chris is...fascinating, and I've never said that about another boy but he's the exception. I can't explain why I find the weird things he does amusing and maybe even...adorable – and god forbid if anyone ever found out my thoughts – but annoying when another guy does them. It doesn't help my case that I find myself wanting to learn more about the kid, every piece of information – even the smallest, most insignificant one. I don't understand a lot of things when I'm around him, just that he's fascinating. So fucking fascinating that we almost...

No. Nothing would've happened. Chris just confirmed it himself. He's outright denied that fucking weird moment we shared. A twinge of...something twists my gut. I refuse to address it. Being brought back to the present by the constant beeping of my phone, I check my messages again.

Nqobizitha! – Chris

I can see you're online. You're receiving my messages.

This is me 🙏 begging you to talk to me please. And that should say something. I've never sent that face to anyone before. Not even Hugo.

Nqoba?

Okay so you're not going to talk to me forever? I wasn't the one brushing another guy's lip. And that wasn't gay at all, you straight men just have fragile masculinities. I never said you were gay and I was trying to be polite by pretending that nothing happened. It's not like we were going to have sex, Nqoba. I have a boyfriend. He's Congolese and he speaks French when making love to me. Why would I wanna trade that down with someone who'd probably say petula ngibone instead?

My face grows sour and I am offended. I've warned him about the stereotyping bullshit. Who the hell does he think he is? I wish I could see him face to face. Have him say this to my face. Have him try. Because then I'd...fucking prove him wrong. Who says speaking French automatically qualifies you to sexpert? The kid's seventeen. He probably got deflowered by the same guy he's praising so much. He's never had to compare this French guy's dick to something else. If he were here, I'd make him eat his own words. I don't know how but I wouldn't stop until every inch of his body felt me – all of me. As soon as I feel my dick expand in interest, I immediately try to dispel my thoughts and rub my temples to rid

myself of the lascivious thoughts. “The fuck’s wrong with you?!” I whisper-yell, saying the words to myself. “You’re getting boners by thinking about other dudes now?”

I look around, Nhlakanipho and Siya are still not back. I try to think about both of them in compromising positions and I can’t even begin to stomach the thought. Even with Siya, who is famously known around the school for being a pretty boy. I continue to discreetly ogle the boys around my school and...nothing. When I think about some of the women I’ve had flings with then my body reacts again. Okay. I’m relieved to note that I’m still very much attracted to women. But what was that with Chris yesterday? What were those thoughts I had not too long ago? And these stupid...waves inside my stomach. I have no idea what it all means but I want it all gone. Another message comes through.

Be that way then. Ugh, I can’t believe I convinced myself to buy new underwear because my ego got bruised by a Brentwood wearing boy. You’re a jerk, Nqobizitha. – Chris

I roll my eyes at how dramatic he is as my mind briefly travels to the past, to the first time he and I talked. He was this dramatic as well, making a big deal about me questioning his sexuality. Feeling spontaneous, my hands work quicker than I can process as they type away.

Your problem is you think romantic words do the trick. I’m more of an action man, Sponge Bob. And how’s this for someone who says petula ngibone – ngizok’bhebha ubone amazulu evuleka mina. – me

The message is sent before I can change my mind. Chris reads the message immediately and I quickly switch off my data, the regret smacking me in the face. What the fuck did I just do? No. He was provoking me so I provoked him back. *By threatening to fuck him into oblivion*, my mind is practically accusing me here, causing me to flinch. It wasn’t a threat, just something to show him that Zulus can talk dirty too – and deliver on their promises. But I won’t deliver on mine because I wouldn’t fuck Chris. My dick jerks in my pants, as if protesting my decision. I don’t care. I decide who we sleep with and the toothpick is off limits, no matter how beautiful he is.

Christophe

“Hey, chomz! How are you enjoying living with the coconuts?”

Normally, I'd be giggling my ass off but she caught me at a bad time. My heart's working overdrive right now, beating far too fast – as always, where that Brentwood wearing bastard is concerned. "Simi! Not bad," I answer, trying for a laugh that ends up being too awkward.

There's silence, I can hear her breathing in my ear. I bite my bottom lip anxiously and fold my legs so that they're touching my chest. "Okay. Spit it out what did Hugo do?" she sounds ready to murder a bitch. My heart melts at her loyalty.

"Nothing," I sigh and close my eyes. The past few days have been so crazy. "What about you, found a girlfriend yet?"

It's her turn to sigh, but it's less dramatic than mine. "Girlfriend? No. Fuck buddy? Hell yeah." She proceeds to tell me about the girl she met at a house party not long ago. I entertain her, she talks more than me and that's saying something because I'm an excessive talker. My eyes drift to the front door when I hear it open – and in walks my sister with her fuck buddy. Zenande greets me silently when she notices I'm on my phone. Nqobizitha seems to freeze momentarily before recovering with his confident strides. He's acting strange lately, not just around me, but his aura as well. He's not the laidback guy I'm used to. And he's been coming to our house very late into the night, even on school nights, to have sex with Zenande. I know they're having sex because it's always loud – headboards creaking and moans and screams. I am not jealous. I do not wish to be in her position. I do not get turned on and I do not proceed to pleasure myself by picturing Nqobizitha's face in the throes of passion. Yes, I'm lying. But he's not fair. What straight guy sends messages like 'ngizok'bhebha ubone amazulu evuleka'? And then proceeds to ignore your all your messages. Because I check his WhatsApp, I know he's online but he won't talk to me. He'll have the time to post statuses about weird space science facts but not time to reply to me. Heck, the bastard even views my statuses and I don't know where he gets the liver from but I'm on the verge of asking him so that I can buy myself a new one as well. "Oh and Chris, whatever guy you met there, don't fucking cheat on Hugo. Break up with him first then get that piper pipe!"

"Simi!" I quickly avert my gaze from Nqoba. He's just come back inside the house again, I don't know what he was going to get outside. "I have not...I haven't met anyone new. Stop it. These are the rural areas for fuck's sake."

"Tell that to those Brokeback mountain guys. And you've watched Inxeba, haven't you?"

It was still fiction. And I loved Brokeback mountain more. But I won't tell her that because then we'll argue about this. "The guy has a community dick that caters to my sister's needs as well. I'm not trying to get infected or ruin a good thing for something that wouldn't even last beyond thirty minutes of good sex." I tell her and my subconscious is sneering at me for my hypocrisy.

“So there is *someone!*” her screams are going to damage my ears. Is she not going to fight for Hugo?
“Also, hey. Hey! How would you know that the sex is good?”

Those old women wouldn't flock him if they didn't receive great sex from him. Also, Zenny's really vocal, I try not to think back to the compliments she's paid Nqobizitha's dick. He also said he's a man of action and I guess he enjoys proving it time and time again. I tell Simi about his women and she giggles loudly. She even manages to pull me out of my funk. We only part ways because her new friends have arrived, they're going to Braamfontein. I'm a little jealous because she's my best friend and I hope those new varsity friends of hers won't replace me.

My footsteps falter as I enter the kitchen and I find him there, looking intimidatingly tall in front of our kitchen cabinets. He has his back turned to me so I can't see what he's doing but it looks like he's staring into space. He's so weird lately. It feels like forever before I can finally get my feet to work again. I think about escaping back into the living room until he's gone but then decide that this my father's house and I can do whatever the fuck I want here. He's the guest not me. My heart is thrashing violently as I walk further in, headed for the fridge. My footsteps must capture his attention because he looks over his shoulder and our eyes clash. I freeze, my mind stops working for a few good seconds – anxiety gripping me in its clutches and forcing me to bite my lip.

He turns so that he's facing me completely, I notice how his jaw tightens. The staring competition seems to last forever and I think he's giving up when his eyes travel but they fixate on my lips instead before he's looking back at me again. The dark intensity found in his eyes causes my dick to shudder in submission. I take a step back, not sure why. There's this...electrical surge flowing between us. Or maybe I'm just imagining things because I am pathetically attracted to him.

He clears his throat, my eyes haven't left him the entire time – almost as if they were compelled to keep looking at him. “You really need to stop this bad habit of biting your lip,” he chides, shifting a little – as if uncomfortable. I immediately stop biting my lip. He breathes out – a deep breath that looks like it was hurting his lungs. It's a hurricane of a breath, taking me back to that time I'd felt him breathing against me, his minty breath. Heat unfurls in my belly, extending to my dick. *Please don't. Please don't*, I beg my body because it would be embarrassing to get a full-on boner with him right here. “Your hair looks good by the way.”

I managed to get a haircut and to dye it the color I wanted. I'm surprised it's taken him this long to notice...not really. If he hadn't been ignoring me then he would've noticed. I decide to return the favour because I can be petty as fuck. Without thanking him, I forcefully shift my attention from him, getting my wobbly legs to cooperate and head for the fridge. I don't even remember what I wanted but I just

grab the juice carton. I'm going to pour myself a glass. A shiver runs down the back of my spine as I sense a presence behind me. Too close. His scent seduces me, sending me into that intense state of euphoria. I grip the edge of the door fridge for anchor and lecture myself to calm the fuck down. I'm not sure it's working but as soon as I close the fridge – a little too harshly – I spin around too quickly and collide with his brick wall of a body.

“Shit!” my eyes widen, his arms are around me, like that day I embarrassed myself with umqomboti. “What the fuck is wrong with you?! Weren't you fucking taught about fucking personal space or fucking something? Fucking hell!”

He lifts an eyebrow, one corner of his mouth pulling into an amused smirk. My legs grow weak, I'm forced to sag against him to avoid embarrassing myself. His grip tightens around my back – firm and certain. “Those were a lot of fucks you dropped.”

“Because you're annoying!” I snap, trying to keep the hurt out of my voice. The bastard wasn't talking to me and now, and now... “Let me go. We're not friends,” I sound petulant.

“Phephisa,” he says, with his arms still around me. “I've had the worst week in my entire life and I wasn't ghosting you.”

“I don't care.” I'm lying. He turned me into a lunatic. Because I'd check my WhatsApp just to see if maybe he sent me messages. I even tried posting maskandi music videos just to see if that would capture his attention. I posted my new hairstyle and Hugo complimented it but of course I couldn't fully be happy because Nqobizitha is ruining everything. I don't even know why I'm so hurt because if we're being honest, Nqoba isn't really my friend. He's an acquaintance. He only responded to me once and kept silent after. Any other person and I would've gotten the message, blocked their ass and moved on with my life. I don't like that he has an effect on me. “So leave me alone.”

“Awukahle ulaka.” I want him to stop talking in that quiet voice, with that pleading smile, and that caressing touch at the small of my back. “Ngyaxolisa nje. My teacher's husband died and it's fucking with me. They haven't caught the killer. But they're suspecting he's from eNgudwini. An elderly man who owns a spaza shop that side recently lost his gun.”

I know about the shooting, Zenande told me about it. It's scary to think that things like that happen here and that the killer is on the loose. I'm home alone most of the time and I worry about someone breaking in. But I also worry about Zenny because women are an endangered species. When I told her that, she said Nqobizitha is with her most of the time so she feels safe. I'm not even going to get into how I felt

about that. My eyes are searching Nqoba's to check the truth of his words. He makes me nervous so I shift my eyes to my hands that are fisting on the front of his jersey. My heart is racing far too wildly, I fear he can feel it against his chest. I can't think straight with him so close to me.

"Please let me go."

"Chris..."

My eyes snap to him, this is the first time he's calling me by my actual name. I...hate it. I don't want to be Chris. I want to be Sponge Bob. I want to be Toffee. To be Bambi. I'm pathetic. I try to shift out of his embrace, wondering where the hell Zenande is and what she would say if she walked in on us. What would Nqoba do? Why the hell is he still holding me?

"Ngiyeke!"

"I can't, you're kind of helping me keep upright." He has a stupid smile on his face. "So tell me what will get you to forgive me, Sponge Bob?"

My heart skips too many beats at that godforsaken nickname. A grin runs to my lips before I can stop it. I'm supposed to be annoyed by him. I am. I'm still angry and hurt. But I'm smiling too. "Don't call me that."

"Sponge Bob. Toffee. Bambi. Tetemane. Shwaphana saseMbongolwane. Take your pick. I can keep going if you want." I'm offended by the other names he has for me but I can't bring myself to be really angry. Not with that soft look in his eyes...that I'm probably imagining.

"I think I've heard enough, Tarzan."

He cocks an eyebrow, I don't think he gets the reference. I remember he told me he doesn't watch much TV unless it's something space-related. "Am I forgiven?"

"No."

He rolls his eyes. "Okay. You're going to forgive me under one condition. We're standing right here, having a staring contest. You blink and I'm forgiven."

"How rude of you to assume that I would do anything that you tell me to." I don't move. I obey. I'm enjoying this too much to pull away. Maybe he notices because his arms disappear from around me. He takes a step back but is still so close that his breath is hovering above me. He's doing this on purpose, there's a subtle mischievous glint found in his eyes, it forces me to part my lips for air.

He inhales sharply, jaw clenching, but his eyes are still glued on me. And this time, I try to move away – my breath driven out of me as if I've just been struck by a physical blow. Nqobizitha's eyes seem frigid but they still burn and maybe I'm imagining the dark, furious hunger and want. He's getting into my personal space, his fingers under my chin, forcing me to look up. I don't even know when I averted my gaze. He's so close, his breath kissing my lips. "You blinked. I'm forgiven."

What?

I blink my eyes repeatedly but he's not close to me anymore. He has his back on me, walking away. Fuck! My knees buckle and I fall ass first on the cold tiles. My back hits the fridge. My hands are shaking. My lips are dry. My heart is beating far too loud. And the boner in my pants is raging. I whimper as I try to alleviate the tension there. What has he done to me? That Brentwood wearing bastard!

Mutual Desires : Seven

Nqobizitha

I need you to brainstorm with me. What should your name be saved as on my phone? – Chris

I look at the message in confusion. Dude's been blowing up my phone for close to a week and he hasn't saved my number? I am offended.

Kahle bo. So you never saved my number? – me

I see that he's typing and I wait for his reply. Since Chris forgave me – my brain sneers at me because of how I got him to in the first place – I decided to text him first last night. It was my way of showing him that I really was apologetic for the way I'd treated him. These past few days I've found myself trapped in purgatory. Fundiswa was all I could think about – her and everything that revolves around her. I was having a hard time sleeping because I'd meet her dead husband in my dreams – memories of him and his wife. I think they were being caused by the guilt eating at me, I fucked his wife on the night he died. Zenande helped to bring me out of my hell, in a way, she's like Fundiswa – at least when it comes to sex – and she helped me to vent out. All the tension within me went out on her, each and every night, until I started feeling some semblance of sanity again. I think the old Nqobizitha is back, the one who lives in the moment, and likes to have a good time. I've missed him. I've missed really talking to my friends and family. I've missed talking to the toothpick and his dramatic ass but I had to ignore him for a while to avoid adding to the crap my mind had imprisoned me to. He still confuses me, the way I find myself gravitating toward him, it all makes no sense. But I've decided to go with the flow and what happens, happens. I check my phone and see that he's sent me two messages.

I had saved your number but you were ignoring me so I deleted your number. – Chris

But I know it by heart now so I saved it again and I put this 🍌 as your name because I was mad at you. – Chris

His second message makes me frown and chuckle at the same time. I notice Nhlakanipho scrutinizing me and tame down my laughter. I want to tell him about how weird Chris makes me feel but I'm not sure if he'll get where I'm coming from. Who feels weird about other dudes? *You do apparently*, my mind states, matter-of-factly. *But it's not every dude, just Chris*, I defend myself. Chris is different, fascinating,

and I'm not going to pretend I don't enjoy spending time with him. Because I do. His habits draw me in, making me want to learn more. He just has this bad habit of biting his lip though, making my dick excited. I wonder what Nhlakanipho would say if he could read my thoughts. Maybe he'd be understanding, he's my best friend, which means he's supposed to support me. Another message disrupts my staring contest with my best friend and I look down to see another message from the toothpick.

Nqoba? See, this is why your name's still saved as 🍑 on my phone. – Chris

I snort out a laugh and shake my head.

Some of us are still students weTetemane. We have classes to attend. – me

He reads it immediately. He's typing.

I asked nje and you said you're having a free period. Were you lying to me? What else are you lying to me about? I think 🍑 will remain because you're acting shady.

What? My eyes widen at the message and I shake my head. Does he do this to everyone or am I the exception? Does he do this with that French boyfriend of his as well? My stomach twists something nasty at the possibility and I find myself glaring at the message.

"So you really think you can break that phone, huh?"

My eyes snap to Nhlakanipho who is eyeing me in amusement. He points at the phone in my hand. I look down and fuck! "Ngiyacabanga nje, bafo," I tell him, lessening my grip on the phone.

"It must've been something bad that you were thinking about. The way you were holding your phone like a Coca Cola can you wanted to crush. Kwenze njani?"

"I met someone," I blurt out and mentally punch my big ass mouth. "A beautiful girl, bafoza."

He cocks an eyebrow. "You meet girls all the time. What's so special about this one?"

She has a dick – and is a he. I don't voice my thoughts and shake my head. "I don't know, bafo. I mean she's flat boobs and flat ass. She's shaped like a toothpick but I...cha angazi nami."

He laughs, in that collected way of his, and then looks at me. "You mean to tell me that you're enamoured with a skinny chick? I never thought I'd see the day. You should tell Siya about this."

"Tell him yourself." I roll my eyes and rub my forehead in frustration.

"I don't talk about people's names," he scoffs and checks the time, "pack your books. It'll be break time in five minutes."

I nod my head but not before replying to Chris.

Use this 🍆 instead. I'd rather be known as a dickhead than that other thing you saved me as.

I don't wait for his reply and switch off my data. The bell is ringing already, signalling break time. I follow Nhlakanipho out of the class. We meet Siya near the school gates. His eyes brighten and he hugs me in greeting, before giving Nhlakanipho one as well. "How was class?" he asks both of us.

"Free period, bafo." Nhlakanipho wraps an arm around Siya's shoulder, brotherly, and drags him outside the gates. "What are we eating?"

"What do you want to eat?" Siya asks.

Nhlakanipho doesn't reply but there's this mysterious grin on his face, almost childish, which is rare for him. I don't observe them for long because I notice Mpilonhle – the girl from a few weeks ago – and she looks beautiful in a short dress that proudly shows off her frame. We fucked once and decided to go our separate ways but she looks too tempting for me to let her go just like that. "Siyaphi konje?" I ask Nhlakanipho and Siya who're rude to have just left me like that. They're a distance away from me now.

“The usual – Mchunu’s.” Nhlakanipho says before walking on.

Assholes.

My eyes go back to Mpilonhle. She’s standing with another woman but when she notices me, she says a few words to the other woman and then comes to me. “Ya, wesfebe somfana.”

I chortle, only mildly offended, and place my hand on her shoulder. She smiles up at me. “Wawungasho lokho when I was plowing into you from behind weMpilonhle. Should I reenact those glorious moans from that night?” I tease, leaning down to brush her lips.

She pokes my chest and rolls her eyes. “Awusho ke, ufunani?”

“Wena embhedeni wami.”

“I thought we’d both agreed that it was a once-off thing.”

“Ayike,” I say with a smile, walking away while continuing, “it’s a pity I won’t be driving into your beautiful body again. And here I was, thinking I could do that thing with my tongue again. Do you remember, when I was teasing it just slightly with the tip of my tongue before—”

“Ave unescefe, Nqobizitha!” she shouts after me. “Shoot me a message. When and where. And don’t be smug about this. It’s your dick I’m after not your whorish ass.”

“Good enough for me!” I shout back without turning. Nhlakanipho and Siya are already eating. Fried chips, russians and bread. My stomach growls in anticipation. I sit down on the bench opposite from them and dig in. They laugh at my moans but I don’t care. I’m starving. We talk about classes and Siya tells us about a man who nearly got stabbed by his girlfriend at the shebeen. He was drinking the money that should’ve been feeding their family. The bastard wasn’t even spending it on women but he was buying his broke friends beers. I laugh until my lungs hurt. “WeSiya,” I say, looking at his neck intently. “Usunentombi wena?”

He freezes, eyes snapping up to me. And then Nhlakanipho. Then back at me. “Intombi yani, Nqobizitha? My priority is my school work. Do you think I have time for girlfriends?”

I eye him suspiciously, noting how he bites his nails – this is what he does when he’s nervous. “Pho what is that bruise on your neck?” my eyes point to the love bite on his neck. The bruise is not overtly prominent but it’s not hard to miss as well.

His right hand snaps to his neck, he covers it. Nhlakanipho clears his throat and focuses on the food on his plate. Not that I’d expected anything less, he minds his own business most of the time.

“I – uh,” Siya shakes his head and squirms in his seat. “Mosquito bite.”

“Is that mosquito’s name Amanda?” I say, referring to the girl I saw him studying with yesterday. I finally managed to get her name.

Siya’s eyes widen comically and he starts to cough. Nhlakanipho helps to soothe him by rubbing his back, in that affectionate brotherly way that everyone feels for Siyabonga. He’s probably the most liked boy in school – with his perfect manners and shy tendencies. “Phefumula, Shandu.” Nhlakanipho instructs Siya softly. “Don’t die on me, I...we need you with us still.”

“I knew you couldn’t live without me,” Siya has recovered and looks at Nhlakanipho, I can’t explain the look in his eyes but it’s tinged with smugness. “I don’t like Amanda, Nqoba. Not all of us are attracted to every skirt that passes us.”

“Siyabonga.” Nhlakanipho says sternly.

I laugh because I’m not even offended. “Not every skirt, mpintsh’ yami. Size 38 kuyaphezulu, but I guess you’re right.”

We spend the rest of break time talking and laughing. At one point, I just leave Siya and Nhlakanipho to talk to themselves – too caught up in my conversation with Chris. He wants to hang out afterschool and has promised me amasi if I do show up. He sent me a picture of the uphuthu he was making. It turned out well, very fine, the way I like it. After I’ve sent him a message saying I’ll be there, I put my phone

back in my pocket and begin the walk back to school with Siya and Nhlakanipho. We get there a few minutes before the break is over.

Classes always feel like they go by faster after break but today, they seem to have passed by too quickly. It could be that I've been in a really great mood. It may or may not have to do with Chris. I don't even wait for Nhlakanipho to finish packing his schoolbooks after school. As soon as I've gathered my shit, I tell him I am leaving. He doesn't seem to mind at all and says he'll just wait for Siya to finish tutoring the Grade 10 Geography class. Good. I don't have to feel bad then. I bounce and arrive home less than fifteen minutes later. The main house first, that's where I have to go. Thandeka is in the kitchen, complaining to herself. I kiss her cheek and then continue on to the living room.

The scent hits me first. The one that reminds me of sherbet. And then the voices. One super loud one, and Ndoni's giggles. She doesn't laugh much lately but right now, her giggles sound genuine. I enter the living room and find her chilling next to Ndoni, smoking from a hookah pipe and looking unbothered. I wonder when she got here and why didn't she say anything?

"Nontethelelo!" I call out, a big smile forming on my lips.

"Bhutiza!" she stands but doesn't rush to me so I have to walk to her. I hug her before she can protest and then spin her around just to piss her off. "Awukahle, Nqobizitha!" she screams but it's lighthearted. "Put me down! You know I hate hugs, I hate them."

Ndoni giggles and I shake my head but put my sister down. "What are you doing here? Why didn't you call? Our parents didn't tell me you were coming."

"Abazi," she tells me, fixing her pants. "They're in for one hell of a surprise when they get back." She says, sitting back down. "Go change, I want us to go to our favourite shisa nyama. I've missed Bab' Mavuso's meat. I don't know what they make in Scotland but it is not meat."

"Ngyabuya." I tell them. Leaving the main house, I head in the direction of my house. I've changed out of my uniform and pulling my pants up when I remember that I had something planned with Chris. Shit! As much as it pains me, I'll have to reschedule. Nontethelelo doesn't take no for an answer so I can't cancel with her. There's also the fact that I don't know how long she'll be staying home this time before leaving for yet another province or country. She's the drifter type, and always seeking adventure in one place or the other. She's also unpredictable and my mom has unsuccessfully tried to get her to behave more 'womanly' but it never works. Nontethelelo is a tom-boyish lady, curious and stubborn. We all love her

like that but my mom thinks she's problematic. A frown sweeps over my face when I notice that Chris has read my message but hasn't replied. He just checked it and went offline.

Okay. He's angry. I bite the inside of my cheek and think about calling him but Nontethelelo knocks at my door and opens without me giving permission. "Shesha, shesha! We don't have the whole day," she says, throwing my jersey at me. I roll my eyes but follow her instruction. We are leaving the house five minutes later. She's playing amapiano and I swear I feel myself gaining a headache. I don't know how people enjoy this kind of music but it's not my type, the same goes for Gqom music. I'd rather listen to my dad's soul music everyday for the rest of my life. At the shisa nyama, we place our orders and then wait for the meat. "So how's Zenande?" Nontethelelo asks casually, playing with the menu on our table. I can tell that she's trying to play it cool but her curious eyes give her away.

"Don't tell me you still want to fuck her." I smirk. She's bisexual but our parents don't know that. The only reason I know is because I once read her diary that entailed fantasies about her and Zenande.

"Haha," she rolls her eyes, "I can smell your cockiness you son of a bitch. So you fucked her first...who cares? I'll smash too and nab her for life maybe."

"Hmm..." Ndoni speaks softly. "uMa and Baba would never agree to that. Mama would probably say you want to embarrass her emphakathini. And I guess you'll kiss any inheritance you have bye-bye."

Nontethelelo snorts, "It's all the same, sisi. Most of it will go to this one here," she points at me and smiles. "He's the beloved heir, the only boy child."

"Awukahle Ntethe," I shake my head. "Baba wouldn't ever allow that. He loves us the same even naye uMama. They don't subscribe to the olden ways – well, at least our father."

They both roll their eyes but say nothing else. We play catch up with Ntethe while Ndoni goes to collect our order. She's taking too much time and I look over my shoulder to see my sister talking with Bab' Mchunu's son. I don't remember his name but I've seen him a few times. He doesn't live around here and I'm sure he's visiting. Ntethe and I tease her mercilessly when she comes back and she's blushing. I'm glad that she's like this. It's been too long since I last saw her display any kind of liveliness. She's beautiful. I'm glad that she's smiling again.

Later that night, after a lively dinner with my parents, I find myself in bed. Chris visits my thoughts, he's always messing with my mind lately. I decide to call him, to apologize. His phone rings a few times before he finally answers. "The boy who bailed on me," he says softly.

My heart skips a beat at the sound of his voice. *I missed you*, I want to say but those words are swallowed down before they can escape. "Bambi," it's just as quiet. "How was your day?"

"The liver you have to ask me that after you ditched me, Nqobizitha. Zenny wasn't here so I was bored out of my mind. The TV wasn't interesting. I was—lonely."

"You missed me?" I mean to say the words matter-of-factly but they come out as a quiet question instead. One that has clearly caught him off guard, with the way he's quietly breathing into the phone. A delicious shiver spreads from ear to my whole body. I remain silent, enjoying his silent breaths, and shift around so that I'm lying on my back, staring at the ceiling, with my arm as my pillowcase.

"So what if I did?"

"Then you tell me so that I can make your day tomorrow." I say, knowing it's the other way around. Seeing him will make my day. I paint his picture in my mind, entertaining the waves in my belly.

"I beg your pardon?" He can't keep the sassiness out of his voice. I picture him with his arms crossed, rolling his eyes.

"Beg."

His loud sigh makes me laugh to myself loudly. "You're a prick, Nqoba."

"I'm your prick," the words escape before I can stop them. "Speaking of pricks, I hope you've acted accordingly and changed my name to the eggplant thing."

"It's called an emoji. And I already used that next to Hugo's name."

Something nasty twists my insides. I will not address but I'm beginning to think this boy loves rubbing his relationship with that French idiot of his in my face. I don't know why. Maybe he just likes provoking me. "What's the point of telling me this?" I ask, I'm too calm, but my hands are shaking.

"I, uh—" he stammers, his words are all over the place. I don't even get what he says to be honest. He's doing that nonstop talking thing of his – at one point telling me I have the emotional capacity of a brick. I don't even know what that has to do with anything. I don't know the point of his rambling. But I let him. "That's what I wanted to say so don't judge me."

Judge him? Judge him for what?

I don't tell him that I didn't catch most of that rant he went on. A stupid smile is on my face though because I love hearing his voice. I love that he's talkative but he's dramatic as fuck. "You know, you might just be the most dramatic person I know."

His gasp is in my ear – dramatic as fuck like usual. "Might be? What do you mean *might be*? There is someone else?"

I don't know what I was expecting him to say but definitely not that. My laughs rumble in my bedroom and I shake my head in disbelief. He's laughing with me and my heart falters, my hand tightening around my phone. I can almost see him now, his beautiful features scrunching up mirthfully, his white teeth gleaming. "Send me your picture." My mind controls my mouth. His laughs stop immediately and I wonder what he's thinking. Part of me thinks of ending the call but my fingers refuse to cooperate.

"I didn't know that you're one of those 'ngithumele is'thombe sakho' guys as well. I expected better from you, Nqoba." His chuckle is nervous, I can hear it. It's in the way he's breathing too rapidly in my ear. I don't reply and close my eyes, listening to the beautiful sound. "I've just sent you three of my best ones. Get back to me and tell me if they're portfolio worthy. You know, for my modelling career."

"They'd be blind not to notice how beautiful you are." *Really?* my mind is screeching but I have no control over my mouth tonight. I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me.

"Nqobizitha, are you feeling okay?"

Great. Even he knows something's up. "Ngi-grand mina, mfethu. Why are you asking?"

"It's just..." the line is silent a second. "You're acting really strange lately," he says softly.

"What, I can't compliment another dude's good looks? I'm trying here, you always go on and on about my fragile male masculinity. Kanti ufunani?" I get agitated, feeling like he's trying to accuse me of something.

"For you to drop your attitude first—please. I was just, sometimes I think you enjoy confusing me."

"Join the club," I say, rubbing my forehead. He's confusing me right now. I don't do this with guys. I don't even understand this pull between us. I don't understand the fascination and how suddenly being beautiful extends to dudes...to him. "Do you want to hang out tomorrow?" Being away from him today was bad enough, I need to see him tomorrow. Otherwise I'll be spending my time fucking MaNxumalo.

"I'm going to Eshowe mall tomorrow. My dad's sent me money and I want to buy some groceries and a few essentials."

"I'll fetch you at 08:00am."

He's silent a second. "How nice of you to just instruct, your dictatorship. Fine. But make it 08:30am. I need my beauty sleep and I discovered a new scrub for my face. The instructions say I should leave it on for twenty minutes."

A victorious smile spreads my lips. "Looking forward to it, Sponge Bob."

"Me too. Ulale kahle, Nqobizitha."

I couldn't really sleep last night. My impending outing with Chris taunted me the whole night and so I woke up really early to use the gym. Then I joined my family for breakfast but I couldn't eat. Ntethe started bombarding me with questions and I had to make my escape. This is how I find myself at the Xulu homestead an hour and thirty minutes early. It's 07:00am and to say Zenande was surprised by my

'visit' is an understatement. She thought I came here for her and I wondered why her brother didn't tell her until I remembered that we spoke till close to midnight so he couldn't exactly go knocking in her room that late.

She's prepared me tea and scones. I don't like this look that she's giving me – as if she's trying to figure me out but I've been evading her gaze a thousand times since I came here. I lean back on my chair, trying to get comfortable and smile flirtatiously at her. "Khona oshoda ngakho, Sphalaphala?"

She narrows her eyes at me. "I hope you know what you're doing weNqobizitha. My brother has a crush on you and wena you're straight as a ruler. You need to set boundaries so that he doesn't get his heart broken. Otherwise I'll have to set rats on you that will chow your dick and then I'll kill those rats and make stew for your parents at your funeral."

My eyes widen. "You're a lunatic wena."

"Don't try me or him then."

"Relax," I say coolly, although my heart's jumping far too wildly. "I won't hurt your brother. I wouldn't dream of it. We're really good friends who enjoy each other's company. He's new here, I'm just trying to welcome him."

"He better know that you're just friends. You have this tendency of flirting with everyone, Nqoba. Even when that's not what you're aiming for. I don't know if it's your personality trait or what but I don't want to see Zithobile hurt."

"Relax." I end there and eat the food she gave me. I still don't have an appetite but the way Zenande nails me with a serious stare forces me to eat. I breathe easier as soon as Chris appears. My breath is knocked away and I am beholding the gorgeous sight of him. For a toothpick, he really makes baggy jeans look good – he's paired them with a hugging light purple top. He's colourful, especially with his blue hair, but he looks gorgeous. I try not to fixate on his lips. I stand and move to him, not stopping until I'm directly in front of him. He takes a step back, appearing nervous. "Ready to go?" I ask him.

He nods his head and grabs my hand, pulling me toward the door while screaming, "Bye, Zenny!" I laugh and grip his hand firmly. I enjoy holding his hand, touching him, whatever part I can get to. I tell him to stand aside as soon as we get to my car. I get his door for him and help him with his seatbelt. He seems

surprised and we look at each other for longer than should be allowed. I can feel his breath touching my skin. He seems dazed as he leans forward and I pull away, closing the door and going to the driver's side.

"You're in charge of the music," I tell him, starting the car. I look at him and he smiles, it makes me soft. I shake my head to clear my daze and start our drive. "Johnny Gill?" I smile in amusement as 'There You Go' starts playing. He's dancing around, singing along, and doing this adorable thing with his fingers that makes me want to grab them and kiss them softly.

He nods and continues mellifluously, "Baby you know. You need only touch me, girl, and I'm a slave for you, yeah. And I lose all self control. And I do what I do cause I'm so into you. I can't let go. There you go again..." He's got a beautiful voice and our trip feels short. It was too short. I tell him to stay where he is and get out of the car to go get his door for him. My hand enwraps around the small of his shoulders, pinning him to the car. "Thank you," his voice is a silent whisper.

"Don't ever say I wasn't a gentleman," I tease him, shifting away so I can dramatically bow at him. He smiles and wraps his hands around my arm, squealing like a lunatic, jumping up and down. "The fuck is wrong with you?" I'm amused, looking down at him.

"Baba sent me R1000. I've got plenty reasons to behave like an idiot. Come on, I'll buy you something nice."

I appreciate the gesture so I let him lead me to the mall's entrance. We spend the time navigating our way through the different shops until finally he tells me that he wants to check out some pretty shorts he saw at Mr Price. He asks me to help him choose but I don't shop at stores like these. All these clothes are not even ten percent of the money I spend on my own clothes. And his tastes are far too colourful than I'm used to. "I'm going to buy you some shorts. I've never seen you wear shorts before and I know they would suit you."

"Uyasangana ke manje. I don't need shorts mina."

"Yes, you do!" he pulls my hand, I allow it. People are looking at us weirdly, his excitement is that of a child. I have to take his clothes from him so that he doesn't drop them. "Woza! Since you like Oxford pants, maybe you can go with...these." he grabs some plain navy shorts and fits them against my body. "I'll buy you this. R129.00. It's not that bad."

This kid only has a thousand bucks to spend and I'm sure he's gone over his budget. When I protest, he gets that kicked puppy expression and I hate how I'm not immune to it. "Kulungile. Sengenzela wena," my eyes are shifty. I look away, rubbing my neck.

He hugs me, I return it. I don't know what he's high on today – and where he bought these confidence pills that he clearly overdosed on. He's the one initiating the touches and I'm not complaining but he's making my body react and that shouldn't be happening in such a public area. The queue to the fitting rooms is packed, and I suspect that the only reason the guy in charge allows both of us to use the fitting room at the same time is for that very reason. It's a little cramped, because even though Chris is a toothpick, I'm still big and my body takes up most of the space.

It's awkward fumbling and mistaken touches. I decide to just wait until he's done and then I'll try on these shorts he chose for me. My curious eyes wander Chris' nonexistent ass as he takes off his pants. He really did ditch the cartoonish underwear and I can't help smirking. His eyes meet mine and he raises an eyebrow. "You're not silently making jokes about my ass, are you?"

"It literally looks like the top of a desk," I tease him, watching his face scrunch up in distaste. He turns away from me and removes his shirt. A lump forms in my throat, my eyes drag down his dark back. He has too many freckles on his back, they look like they're forming a map of some sort. Intrigued, my hand draws forward, my curious fingers tracing the pattern. I meet his eyes on the mirror, notice his breathing pattern change all of a sudden, and he's doing that cursed lip bite thing. His eyes are imploring and I'm not sure if I correctly read him because my touch travels until it's touching the lowest part of his back, just a few centimetres short of me touching his ass.

He makes a sound – a strange whimper that shoots to my dick, making me wrap my arms around him firmly so that we're flush together. "I swear you bite that lip of yours because you know it drives me crazy," I whisper in his ear. "Uyangilinga wena." Before I can talk myself out of this, I press my nose into the juncture of his neck and inhale him deeply. He shudders against me and grips my wrist, my hold on him tightens. He's releasing sounds that shouldn't be legal. They edge me on and I find myself pressing wet kisses to the expanse of his neck. He arches his back, brushing up against my growing boner. The sensation makes me groan deep inside my throat. "I need to—" I don't know what I want to say, I try to pull away but he turns quickly and wraps his arms around my neck, his feet dangling in the air, as he forces my face down until a few inches are separating us. "Chris..." I groan.

"Don't call me that," our lips are practically touching, it's not weird, it's not enough. I want more. Again, he's taking initiative because he leans up before I can protest and joins his lips with mine. I think he's scared, with how light the kiss – it's sweet but I'm not looking for delicate brushes. I want to devour him, to drink all of him in. If this is really happening then I want to remember it. Perhaps I'll regret it later but right now I crave him. My lips mash against his, as if trying to flatten and destroy his mouth. I bite down

on his bottom lip, my dick salivating as Chris hungrily pushes back, his mouth open, tongue pushing past my clenched teeth to the moist space within. He grips the back of my head firmly, as if to keep me from escaping, working his mouth against mine. He ruts into me and I press my thigh in between his legs, pressing down on the erection I feel against me. His lips detach from mine with a gasp, "More. Give me more please. Ngyak'cela, Nqoba." His eyes are wild.

I don't know what he wants exactly but my pants quickly drop to the floor, he's already in his underwear, I pick him up like he weighs nothing and pin him to the nearest wall. In response, Chris wraps his arms around me, capturing my lips once more. Never in my life did I think I'd be humping on another guy but this feels too good. Our arousals align through our underwear and Chris keeps grinding against me. "Nqobizitha, I'm so—close," the way he says my name, in that croaky desperate voice, as if his orgasm depends on me. It turns me on more than I'd like to admit. I'm going out of my mind with pleasure. I pull my face away from his neck and wrap my hand around his throat instead. My hips are pinning him to the wall, my forehead pressing onto his. We're both breathing heavily. I can feel how hot he is through the underwear he's wearing and it's my insatiable need that forces me to press more firmly into him, I'm rubbing harder and occasionally thrusting, causing him to bounce up and down against the wall. Chris is gasping and goes to bury his face in my neck as his hips undulate against me. We work at it together, trying to be quiet, rubbing and grinding until I feel Chris dig his fingers into my back, he bites down on my shoulder as he comes. I grip his ass, digging my fingers into the lean globes and thrust a few more times before I'm coming with a barely contained groan. I breathe hard against his neck, he's still holding me tightly – as if I am anchoring him. It feels like forever before I can breathe normally again, my legs are trembling and it's a miracle that I'm still keeping both of us upright.

"Do you regret it?" I hear him ask after light years of silence.

No. I don't. Maybe the guilt will still kick in but I'm strangely calm. I'm not disgusted. I want to do this again. He feels good against me. I let my actions speak for me. My lips brush his. Not innocently, like a tease, but hot, fiery, passionate and demanding. He tries to pull away but he's pinned in place and I don't let go until I'm fully certain he knows what I'm saying through the kiss. He's breathing too hard as we pull apart, his lips are too wet and swollen. I like him like this.

"Allez au diable!" He has this big grin on his face.

I caress his cheek, he looks beautiful like this. "I hope you're not swearing me in that language of yours."

"I was," he's confident again, kissing my lips. "Damn you, I said."

I want to reply but someone's knocking at our door. We've been trapped in here for too long apparently. We look at each other and then burst out laughing. The guilt is still not there and that relieves me. Maybe it's senseless to question the pull that Chris and I share. It's just there – and why fight it when I don't even want to be away from him? And now that I've had a taste of him, I find myself wanting...more. So much more. Consequences be damned.

Bonus Insert

Nhlakanipho

Mnelisi tore his school shoes. His third pair in six months. I gave him a good hiding because of it and he ran away, crying, to one of his friend's houses. Let him stay there, he shouldn't even come home around lunch time because I don't think I am done with him. I know boys are known to be naturally naughty but he takes it to the extreme. I don't remember being that problematic as a child, I was never naughty at all, because Gogo deserved better than that. I've never felt the need to act out because it just never made sense to me. Especially with the long list of problems that Gogo has. She didn't need me adding on her stress. I don't think Mnelisi shares my sentiments though, with how much of a rascal he is. The way he stresses Gogo isn't normal, I'm beginning to think that something is not right with him in the head. No normal human being behaves the way he does. And to make matters worse, corporal punishment on him isn't as effective as it used to be.

Malume has suggested I trade the belt for something more intense. He owns a few rods in his house that he keeps to straighten anyone who attempts to steal his livestock. He offered to sell one of them to me and I don't know if he's forgotten all of a sudden that I can barely afford something as simple as deodorant. I told him I'd think about it but if I do get some money, I'd rather give it to Gogo so that she can work her magic to ensure that none of us sleep on empty stomachs at night. Not that she doesn't hustle hard to ensure that we go to bed with a meal in our stomachs, because she does. I don't know anyone who works as hard as she does to take care of her family, and always expecting nothing in return – even from those useless donors who brought my siblings and I to this world.

My anger is on the verge of reigniting as the large needle in my hand pokes into my index finger for what feels like the thousandth time in the past thirty minutes. I have the mind to quit this nonsense I'm doing and see what Mnelisi will do with his damaged school shoes come Monday. I would do it, just to teach him a lesson and make an example out of him, but Gogo spoke to me and begged me to fix his shoes. "Uvale uhlazo lika bhuti wakho," she had begged me before she left home this morning. I didn't have a choice but to listen. I love that woman. Her selflessness. I would do anything in the world for her. Anything within my powers. Because she deserves the world and more for the invaluable love she gives me and my siblings. There's a knock on my door that forces me to stop what I'm doing. The door doesn't open though, my sisters know not to enter unless they're given permission by me.

"Ngena!" I shout, loud enough for whoever is at the door to hear.

"Bhuti! Bhuti! Siza, Nomzamo is bleeding, bhuti!" Mbalenhle and Noxolo appear, looking so terrified that I jump from the bed to go to them.

“Kwenze njani?”

“Do you think she’s going to die, bhuti? Nomzamo’s bleeding. Too much blood!”

I don’t reply. I stand to my feet and speed past them faster than even I can process. Why the fuck would Nomzamo be bleeding? Was she playing on that tree near the thorns again? No. I shake my head. She knows what will happen if she does that. I’ve warned her. I find her, sitting still as a statue, in the room she shares with the girls. “Nomzamo,” I say, scrutinizing her from top to bottom. She spots the same terrified look the others were spotting. My other sister, Kuhlekonke, sits behind her, doodling on a terrified Nomzamo’s bald head. “They say you’re bleeding. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t—know,” her voice cracks. “I just woke up and I was going outside to use the toilet but Noxolo saw the blood and it was trickling down my thigh, bhuti. Not small blood. A lot of it.”

The words catch me off guard. For a few tense seconds, I am confused. My eyes drag my sister from head to toe as I try to process the meaning behind her words. “Are you injured anywhere?”

“No.” Her voice is a whisper.

“Then how the hell are you bleeding with—” I pause, unable to continue, as my mind quickly completes the puzzle. No. My eyes close and I rub my nose – in frustration, in disbelief, in confusion. Surely Nomzamo isn’t trying to say that— “Where is Thandolwenkosi?” I ask because since Gogo is not here, she has to deal with this. My sister is having her first period. She needs another woman to explain to her about the changes taking place in her body.

“She went out, we don’t know where to.” Noxolo speaks up and I notice how Mbalenhle glares at her for reporting the news to me.

“Go to her room,” I instruct, looking at Mbalenhle. “Thatha lama nab’keni awafakayo usisi wenu.” I don’t know much about pads but I know that Nomzamo needs them. But now there’s also the big issue of discussing the changes taking place in her body. I’m not the right person for this. These are women’s issues. She needs another woman to guide her through this. This is the one time I will not be able to be there for her. Mbalenhle comes back with the packet and I am disappointed to find that only one pad is

remaining. How many times a day do girls use these things? I look at the instructions. 6 – 8 hours protection, the packet says. She'll need to change this again. "Is this the only one?"

Mbalenhle nods, moving to join the others on the bed. "She also created a mess on the sheets."

"Shut up!" Nomzamo snaps, it's easy to tell that she's embarrassed.

"Don't fight," I tell both of them sternly and they instantly shut up. My eyes find Nomzamo but she evades my scrutiny and looks down at her hands. I don't know why she's embarrassed. "It's okay, Zamo. No need to be embarrassed, this is nature's way of telling you you're slowly becoming a woman," I say awkwardly. I don't even know what the hell to say to her, to reassure her. Part of me feels lost and I hate it. "Noxolo, go to the rondavel. Prepare hot water for your sister to bath in. Mbali remove the sheets and soak them in one of the washing dishes. Then get your sister some fresh clothes. Make sure she doesn't move around too much today. I have to go somewhere. I'll come back soon."

They all nod dutifully and scamper off to their different duties. I look at Nomzamo again who looks terrified. It's just the two of us now. The silence between us is stifling. I struggle against shuffling my feet nervously. We both can't afford to look fearful and clueless, I'm the older one, I have to figure out what to do. Starting with buying a new packet of pads. "Don't be scared," I tell her, sitting down beside her, and wrapping my stiff arm around her shoulders. "When Thandolwenkosi comes back, she will tell you everything about what your body is going through."

"I think I know what's happening, bhuti. It's just a little...embarrassing."

"Why?"

"You're a guy, you're not supposed to see this. Maybe if Gogo was here or Thando."

"Nothing embarrassing about this, Zamo. I'm your brother, nothing you could do will embarrass me. But if you think your periods automatically grant you the permission to mess around with any boys in this place, I will use the belt on you. You're still so young. Wait until you're at least 21." I ignore my conscious calling me out on my hypocrisy. "Rest, I'm not sure if you're supposed to be working hard if you're losing blood."

Her eyes brighten, she's clearly relieved about not having to cook today. "I'm going to sleep in, bhuti. I promise you. I'm not going anywhere today."

"This is the first time I'm seeing you look so excited about staying home. I have to go now." I caress her hairless head fondly before leaving. The sun immediately hits my face, blinding me, making me dread the road ahead of me. Mbongolwane always seems even farther when the weather is like this. But I don't have a choice. Nomzamo needs pads. I don't have any cash in the house. I refuse to make a mockery out of us by asking MaMdlalose, we would never hear the end of it. My chicken business hasn't yet taken off the way I had hoped it would. The only option I have is to go to Mbongolwane to collect the R50 that Phakeme owes me for repairing a minor issue with his laptop the other day. I'm heaving by the time I reach Phakeme's home, nearly two hours later, and I need some water. "Sanibona ekhaya." I greet as soon as his sister opens the door. "I'm looking for Phakeme. Is he here?"

Nokukhanya shakes her head. "No. He went out with a some friends a few hours ago. Is it urgent?"

I nod my head.

"Come in," she stands aside and I get in, looking around awkwardly. "You look parched. Is Coke okay? Or do you prefer water instead?"

Both sound appealing. "Water," I say, I'd rather I didn't look like the starving boy who came to finish all their food. I follow her to the living room and sit down as instructed, completely still, I fear messing their house with my dusty shoes. "Ngyabonga," I tell her when she places the glass of water in front of me. Nokukhanya smiles kindly at me and sits on the couch across from me. She makes light conversation that I honestly couldn't care about. I keep glancing at the clock on the wall to check the time. I don't want to be too late, in case the stores close – they close early on Sundays. I'm sure she can sense my impatience because eventually she leaves me and I continue waiting on my own until nearly an hour later, Phakeme appears. "Ndoda, I've been waiting forever." I say impatiently.

"I didn't know you were coming, sorry."

I wave off his apology and get down to business. "I need the money that you owe me. Something came up and it can't wait."

Phakeme shakes his head. “What happened to month end? That’s what we agreed on, mfethu. I don’t have any cash right now.”

“No. No. No.” I shake my head and stand. “This can’t wait, Phakeme. Any other time and I would wait it out but I walked all the way from my house to come get this money from you. That should tell you something.” I am desperate, but the words won’t leave my mouth.

“Hhayi, Nhlaka. Then where am I supposed—”

“Make a plan.” I don’t wait for him to finish. “I need that money and quickly. Before the Pakistanis close. Go ask your sister, borrow it. I don’t care but give me that money.” My voice is deceptively calm but I’m sure he can see the threat in my eyes. I’ll beat him into giving me the money if I have to. He lives with his parents, they have bloody plasma TVs and fancy couches and tile floors. He can’t tell me he can’t afford to pay me a lousy R50 note. “Right now, Phakeme.”

“Nhlakanipho, look, why don’t you wait until tomorrow—”

“No. No. No. Bafo,” I grip the front of his t-shirt. He’s making me angry, igniting something sadistic within me. “Not tomorrow. Right now. You’re going to give it to me right now, my family needs it.”

“R50, Nhlakanipho?” he speaks in a tone that I don’t like. As if he doesn’t quite believe that some of us have to support our families with that kind of money. “You’re really crying for—” something shifts inside me and my right hand connects with his mouth. As soon as I land that punch, I lose all rationale. My fist connects with his face over and over again, he lands against one of the walls and screams. I don’t care. Nomzamo is on my mind. She needs me. I can’t fail her. I can hear someone else screaming in the distance, it sounds like his sister, urging me not to kill her brother. I blink my eyes, they’re too wet, and look down to find Phakeme’s badly injured face. I jump away from him, my chest heaving, flexing my sore hand.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” Nokukhanya goes to kneel in front of a groaning Phakeme. “Ufuna ukubulala ubhuti wami?” There are tears flowing down her cheeks. I wish I could say I sympathize with her but it’s hard to when all I can think about is getting my money and rushing to the store to buy Zamo’s pads.

“He owes me money.” I tell her, my voice is too cold – detached. My chest is heaving and I think I’m gaining a headache. “R50. He thinks he’s clever. I told him to come ask you and he wouldn’t. Maybe it’s too little money that he doesn’t see why I’d want it so desperately but it’s my money. I didn’t fix his laptop for free. I’m going to finish him if that money doesn’t come, Khanyo. Right in front of you.”

“Then be prepared to go to jail! Umshayela i-R50.00? Usuyasangana wena, Nhlakanipho?” she screams, I don’t care. I remain silent. I watch her fish inside her jeans and she throws the money at me. It’s squashed – three fifty rand notes. “Ithathe. Ithathe yonke!”

I take what I was owed and leave the rest. Thanking both of them, I turn to leave. I barely just make it to the Pakistani shop. I can feel the eyes on me, focused on my injured hand, I don’t care. My eyes scan the different brands of pads as well as the prices. Things are also expensive around here because the shop owners know that customers don’t have a choice but to buy from them. It’s either that or spend even more money to go to Eshowe mall to buy at your PicknPay or Boxer. The pads cost R22 and I decide to buy two packets. With the way my sisters had described Nomzamo’s bleeding, I’m not sure if one packet will be enough. I’m not even sure how long this bleeding of hers will last. The Pakistani looks at me funny when I go to pay. I don’t have time for his nonsense. With the remaining R6.00, I buy the smallest packet of Knorrox cubes. I think we’re running out and Thandolwenkosi always complains about how the food tastes bland without proper seasoning. I have to agree with her.

The sun is still blazing, and I think about passing by Siya’s home to see him before continuing on back home but he told me he was studying for a test today and he doesn’t budge when it comes to his schoolwork. I don’t mind it at all, in fact, it’s because of him that I’ve also started taking school so seriously. He grows me for the better – in every way possible.

It’s well into the afternoon when I’m finally home again. I’m exhausted, half-naked, with my t-shirt on my shoulder, and my stomach is growling loudly. I am not hungry, I’m ravenous. I spot Thandolwenkosi sitting outside with Kuhlekonke and send a cold glare her way. She averts her gaze and pretends to be doing something on Kuhlekonke’s coarse hair. “Ngizok’thela is’bhaxu wena,” I warn her in passing, as I make my way to Gogo’s house. She thinks she’s an adult now just because she’s 16. Nomzamo’s no longer in the bedroom, in fact, not a single child is here. “Baphi abanye?” I ask Thandolwenkosi and she points in the direction of my house.

“Siyabonga is in there with them.”

My face remains in a deadpan but on the inside, my heart is racing too fast. What is Siya doing here? I don’t know. I don’t care either. It doesn’t matter anyway. I’ve missed him. My every step is too collected, I’m always worried about being too apparent in the way I feel for him. I’d rather I didn’t risk

his and my own wellbeing like that. Sometimes, I want to show him off to the world, to tell everyone that the intelligent, pretty boy belongs to me. Especially the girls at school who feel the need flirt with him. But I can't. This place isn't accepting of people like me and him. The first time I noticed this, I was ten years old, with the two women who were living together. Then again with uMhlongo. It was worse with uMhlongo because Siya and I saw his mutilated body for ourselves. I still have bad nightmares because of that cursed Tuesday morning. They're always so vivid – realistic enough that sometimes I feel like I can still smell his rotting flesh. I'm always so scared but I never show it – to protect my masculinity, to prove that I am not him.

"Phumani." I say as soon as I enter my room to find the kids sitting in a circle on the ground around Siyabonga who is sitting on the bed and talking to them. Our eyes meet and my heart falters, there's something about the way Siya's eyes light up when he sees me that makes me feel funny. He looks beautiful as ever, like usual, and I quickly have to chase away the feeling of shame that overcomes me when I think about how I probably can't even afford to buy the shoelaces of the sneakers he's wearing. On their way out, I grip Nomzamo's wrist and give her the plastic bag with the pads. "Don't waste this."

I go to stand in front of Siya and he looks up at me. He seems upset now and the change has taken place so fast that I blink down at him in confusion. Siya grips my injured hand and shakes his head. "What happened here, Nhlakanipho?" he asks softly.

"I can explain," I tell him, sitting beside him, and when I try to pull him close, he pulls away. "Siya..."

"I'm going to—get water to clean your hand." His voice cracks. At the door, he gives me a disappointed expression and closes the door. My hands are in my face when the door opens again. Kuhlekonke is walking behind him with a plate of food. Then there's little Milisuthando, struggling with the two liter bottle of water. She smiles when she sees me and wants me to pick her up. I obey and kiss her forehead before instructing her to follow Kuhlekonke outside the house. Siyabonga locks the door as soon as we're alone again. He takes the only chair in the room and places it in front of me, setting the bowl with water on top of it.

"I'll do it myself," I instruct him as he grabs my hand.

He ignores me, kissing my knuckles, before using my towel to clean my hand. "Explain," he says quietly.

"Zamo had her first period."

“And did that blood somehow make it to your hand, Nhlakanipho?” his eyes are rebuking, I struggle against squirming like a little child. “Or did you put your fist on someone again?”

I don't reply. Siya knows the answer. He must think I do this on purpose but I don't. I don't think he understands that we're not all the same. I've had to fight physically my entire life for a lot of things, that's the only way people pay attention to you. It's the only way they listen. The only way people like me can be respected – in a world where money gives you dignity. “It was the only way, Siyabonga. Phakeme was being stubborn with MY money. Talking wasn't helping so—”

“You put your hands on him.” Siya nods, more to himself than me, and his eyes are shifty. “I don't know why I expected different.”

There's a moment's silence. I don't really know what to say. He seems upset, but he has to understand where I'm coming from. “I bought pads with the money, Siya. My sister needed me.”

He says nothing, and grabs the plate of food that Kuhlekonke brought in with him. I look at what was made – is'gwaqana. He gives me one of the spoons and we both dig in. My belly flutters, I love when he eats with me – never matters the kind of food we're having. *Don't be ashamed*, his actions always seem to say. He understands me, my background. “Did you make this?” I ask after a few minutes of silence.

“What gave me away?”

“The cooking oil,” I tell him. “No one here makes is'gwaqana with oil except you. But it's still good,” I assure him.

“Thank you.” It's silent again for a while. “You said you wouldn't put your hands on people anymore.”

“I lied.”

“And if Phakeme's family press charges, what happens then?”

I don't reply again. I'm not prepared to.

Siyabonga sighs, shifting to straddle my lap. “What happens to uGogo and your siblings? Uthini ngeskole, your career? Uzosebenzaphi with a criminal record? You don’t think about these things when you lay your hands on people. What about—me, Nhlakanipho?”

“We’re not the same, Siyabonga. I don’t know of any other way to talk but with my fists. Otherwise people will climb on top of my head. Otherwise I wouldn’t have gotten that money.”

“Rather not get it and still be here—with us!” he’s shouting, my fingers dig into his waist. I don’t like being yelled at. But I’m not going to touch him violently. We moved past that stage long ago. “You don’t think, you just act. I don’t like that.”

“Don’t raise your voice, Phakade lami.” My lips brush lightly against his, I grip his face, keeping him in place. “Look, the truth is you and I will forever see differently on this. We communicate differently. My way of communicating has proved effective and I—”

“What if they press charges?” Siya cuts in, stern, hazel eyes narrowing in on me inquisitively.

“They wouldn’t.” I shake my head.

“How do you know?”

I don’t. But the sister saw how problematic her brother was being. What else was I supposed to do? I’d already sacrificed my pride and told Phakeme that I needed the money for my family. He was making excuses. His family must understand that. “Because, they just wouldn’t.” I sound stupid to my own ears.

Siya bites his lower lip, looking ready to concede, and shakes his head. “You need to speak to the school counselor or something. Otherwise this will be a generational thing and our children will be the same way.”

His words catch me off guard. But my heart smiles nonetheless and it affects my lips that pull into a wide grin. “Children?” I nuzzle his cheek, breathing him in.

“Four of them. Two boys and two girls. And I want them to love like you but I don’t want them to have your volatility.” He’s smiling now – sparkling hazel eyes and glowing skin. Sometimes, I don’t think he’s mine. Not a guy like me. I don’t have much to offer. “But we need to finish high school first. We’re going to Wits together and renting an apartment. I hear being gay in Johannesburg is not as taboo as it is here. We will hold hands and I will kiss you whenever I want to. We will have all the sex in the world. Then we’ll get awesome jobs and you can finally marry me. Then we’re adopting or getting a surrogate. We will have enough money to live with Gogo and your siblings.”

I...don’t know what to say. The only thing I know is I love him too much. So fucking much. I love him like Nqobizitha loves his Brentwood. “Shandu wami,” I murmur, caressing his cheek. “Ngikuthanda ukufa.”

“I’ll get to tell everyone that I love you and that we’re married!” Siya’s soft excitement is endearing. I sit silently, my arms wrapping at the small of his back, and listen to him plan our future. My lips are stretched into the biggest grin. I don’t even protest when he pulls me down so that I’m lying fully on the bed, one of his legs climbing over my waist, his head on my shoulder, his little breaths against the inside of my neck and his hand resting on my chest, feeling my heartbeat. “I want all this and more, Nhlakanipho. Maybe I’m naïve because I’m only 16 but the idea of forever with you would be my dream come true. It won’t be possible if you don’t stop beating up these different people. One wrong move in a moment of anger and it could ruin so much. Awume ngodlame, ngyakucela—for me.”

“We’ll see, Shandu,” I say silently, pressing a kiss to his forehead. I feel him shiver against me and it does things to me, knowing that he’s still so responsive to my touches. “If it makes you feel better, I actually lasted close to three weeks this time.”

His eyes lift to meet mine, incredulity found in them, but a small smile pulls at his lips. “Try aiming for a full month this time and I’ll let you use my dad’s favourite tie on me again.”

My mind immediately revisits that one memory and my dick reacts. I groan, feeling his hand move to palm the front of my growing erection. I’m half-hard and I shift us so that he’s pinned beneath me. My hands pin both his arms above his head. He thrusts up and licks his lips, making me grind down on him. I capture his mouth in a fiery kiss, swallowing all his moans before they can escape. “One month?” I ask, going to nibble at his neck. I bite down, marking him, claiming him for myself – today, tomorrow, forever.

His, “Yes!” is a strangled moan. He wraps his arms around my neck and hugs me tightly. His touches shoot to my soul – calming me, soothing me. He’s my refuge. “I really don’t want to lose you, Mzimela.”

“Nami, Phakade lami,” I kiss his forehead. “You’re not going to lose me,” my lips press against his closed eyes, kissing away the slight wetness there. “I’ll try harder...for you.” I nuzzle his nose and then press a light kiss there. “One full month. Watch me do it for you, Phakade lami. Watch me make you proud, Nhliziyo yami. All for you, Siyabonga. One month.” I emphasize and rub against him again, as his legs hook around my back.

“And then you’ll aim for two...” Siya’s lips are parted in a moan, eyes half lidded and framed by long eyelashes. I want to memorize every detail about how he looks right now, maybe sketch him so this moment is immortalized on paper forever. I can barely breathe because God, he’s so beautiful – and mine. All mine. I’d hide him from the world if I could.

“Then two,” I confirm, kissing down his jaw. “Two becomes three. Three will turn to four.”

I attempt to kiss him but he pulls away, and looks up at me. He smiles beautifully and moves his fingers to trace my lips. “I love you, baby.”

I roll my eyes. He knows I hate it when he calls me baby. “Soxabana njalo. Who’s a baby?”

“You,” he grins his seductive grin, “You’re my baby. And you let me call you that because you’re soft for me.”

I could deny it, to wipe that silly self-satisfied grin off of his face but in this moment, he looks too ethereal for me to not worship him like he deserves to be. So I nod my head and say, “I am.”

He hates crying but I don’t think anyone makes it beautiful like he does. His tears are silent, too few of them, and he has the brightest smile on his face. “Ngyakuthanda, baby.”

I lean down to kiss his lips – soft and tender. “Nami ngyakuthanda...kakhulu futhi.” And then I proceed to undress him so I can show him how much.

Mutual Desires : Eight

Christophe

We had to buy new underwear after that hot as fuck situation in the fitting rooms. I think the guy in charge of the fitting rooms was a bit suspicious but we didn't look anything out of the ordinary. The only problem I had was walking when my legs felt like jelly so I clung to Nqoba's arm for anchor and let him lead the rest of the way. The money Baba sent me wasn't enough, I think sometimes I forget that R1000 only buys ten items – if you're spending R100 on each piece of clothing. Men's clothes are expensive, and I would've been embarrassed had Nqobizitha not been there with me. He covered the remaining R300 and even went as far as asking if there was anything else that caught my eye that I wanted him to buy for me. I told him that he caught my eye and he smiled and called me cheesy.

I don't think all of me has accepted that something is happening between us, even when we went to the bathrooms and entered one of the cubicles together and I'd found myself pinned against him again – his ragged breaths in my ear and his arousal against mine. I keep waiting to wake up from yet another arousing dream. I don't know how many times I've pinched my arm just to ensure that I wasn't dreaming. At one point, I'd even asked him to pinch me a couple of times, because this has to be a dream. It has to be.

"I can hear your dirty thoughts from here."

My eyes lift to meet Nqoba's. He has this soft smile on his face that compels me to trust him. I shake my head, trying to clear my daze, he's beguiling sometimes. "Have you decided on what you're eating?"

His smile transitions into a bashful one that makes me want to reach across and kiss him silly but I remain where I am. "I want to choose the steak but there's no pap. Hhayi ke, as for most of the things on this menu, I don't eat this mina."

I look at him like he's grown two heads and laugh loudly. "This is not Mchunu's, Nqoba. Or the shisa nyama. This is where black people with medium money like to come to show off that they were eating at a restaurant. And from what I've heard, you and your family rank higher than most middleclass families. You're the bourgeoisie of Mbongolwane."

Nqoba rolls his eyes and shifts closer to the table. Our knees are brushing, one of my legs trapped in between his bigger ones, and the sensation – even through the layers of fabric – makes me dizzy with need. My fingers crawl to his hand, to tickle his palm, and he grabs my hand pinning it to the table while looking at me. His eyes are intense, sexual...and he blames me for biting my lip when almost everything about him is too sexual. “We’re not the bourgeoisie,” his voice is a smooth drawl, like dark chocolate melting on silk sheets. “And just because we have money doesn’t mean we spend it at fancy places. I don’t know why people confuse luxury with money. I have plenty of friends who compare themselves with me even though they come from humble backgrounds. I don’t even buy some of the things they do, I don’t eat at fancy places. I’m a simple man. Give me amasi and I’ll love you forever.”

My heart skips a beat. The longer he looks me in the eyes, the longer I feel like squirming, like looking away. The crush I have on him is bad, like really bad. Like ‘give me attention, I’m your dog’ bad. Like ‘all you need to do is blink and my ass is yours on a silver platter’ bad. Like ‘I’d give you all the babies you want if I could’ bad. Like ‘you could destroy my insides and I’d still thank you’ bad. Like ‘please smash my skull with your massive thighs’ bad. Like ‘choke me with your dick all you want’ bad. I suppress a groan when I feel his knee pressing into me beneath the table. My eyes find him. He looks innocent. Too innocent. Yet that mischievous glint, it burns ardently in his eyes.

“Wenzani?” I manage to ask him, my hands are shaking.

“Browsing through this useless menu.” His eyes are glued on me. “Any suggestions?”

“I’d go with the—meat!” I squeak as his knee rubs up against me. I can feel a bead of sweat forming on my forehead, it’s getting too hot all of a sudden. “It’s pity that it’s too late into the day now. I would’ve liked to see you go at it with the sausage.” I smile innocently.

His eyes widen but then a smirk appears on his handsome face. “Is that so?”

He doesn’t give me the chance to reply and presses firmly into me while lifting his hand to the call the lady that was helping us. The lady smiles and looks between the two of us. “Are you guys ready to order?”

“Bambi, why don’t you go first?” he’s still pressing into me, rolling his knee and adding so much pressure that I have to grip the edge of the table. I’m breathing too hard. Panting. Like a hungry dog. “You love meat, don’t you?”

“It’s my, mmm, favourite.” I glare at the Brentwood wearing bastard. God, he looks cool as a cucumber. A thick and long cucumber – I’ve felt him twice now and I want more. “Sometimes I love it raw.” The words spill to my mouth, I watch his eyes darken. He’s still pressing into me and I’ll spill again if he doesn’t ease up. “Any suggestions?” my blurry eyes turn to the waitress who looks lost.

“Um, the...steak?”

I shake my head and place my order. One of their combos. Nqobizitha needs help, he doesn’t eat meat on its own. He chooses the steak and pairs it with two double beef burgers. “You’re a dick!” I hiss as soon as the waitress gives us space. I can’t breathe with his knee pressing into my groin. It’s painfully hard and I’m trying to alleviate the pressure by pressing into him. He doesn’t reply and stops teasing me. I whimper, I didn’t mean that he should stop what he was doing. “Nqobizitha, please...” I don’t know what I’m begging for.

“Our food’s here.” He says nothing else. I think he has stopped completely when he starts again. It happens throughout our lunch. He’ll press teasing touches to my arousal only to stop suddenly. It drives me insane to the point that tears start to burn behind my eyes, my throat dry. I don’t know how many glasses of water I ask for. While he looks laidback, casually making conversation in a voice that should narrate porn, and licks his lips in a way that fascinates me to the core. “Ready to head back?”

I can no longer speak. I nod my head.

He calls for the waitress, we pay, and he leads me out with his hand at the small of my back. At the parking lot, we find our car, and he traps me against it, spreading my thighs with his leg. He helps with the pressure a little before he’s leaving me empty again after he’s opened the passenger door for me. I get in shakily and cross one of my legs over the other. I don’t know if I’m imagining his gaze lingering on a woman who parks beside us and exits the car. She’s exactly his type – thick and beautiful. I don’t like the way my insides twist or how my heart folds in on itself. I switch the music on and look out the window.

“Hey,” he calls out, forcing me to peer over at him. There’s that smile again – the one that can deceive the stars into leaving the skies for him. I love it. I hate it.

“What?” I bite my lip.

“Don’t do that,” his voice is soft. His thumb separates my lip from my teeth. He caresses the aching meat and leans forward to press his mouth to it. I am dumbfounded for a split second before I am returning his soft kiss. “God, your mouth is addictive.”

I smile. My voice seems stuck in my throat.

He begins the drive back to Mbongolwane. We’re both silent but I will occasionally catch him frowning. I think it has to do with the songs I have chosen. No one wants to hear Jon B singing ‘Someone To Love’ while trapped in a confined space with someone they’re not in love with – at least that’s what I think. My thoughts are running away with me. I don’t know what Nqoba and I are doing. What we were doing. Where do we go from here? I doubt that this means the start of a loving, prosperous relationship. I doubt it means the start of something beautiful, like what Nhlakanipho and Siya share. Do I even want something similar to what Siya and Nhlakanipho share? Yes. Maybe I’m pathetic but I believe everyone needs love. But my mind’s telling me not with someone like Nqobizitha. He’s a manwhore. He can’t keep his eye focused on one person for even a second because he always discovers someone better, thicker, more delicate. I’d be an idiot to think that he wants more than sex.

We have insane sexual chemistry. And back in the fitting room, the cubicle and the restaurant – that was most likely us releasing the sexual tension that has been between us for quite a while now. I don’t think it goes anything beyond that. I don’t know. I want to ask Nqobizitha but my mind tells me not to lest I push him away by making him think I’m catching feelings. That would be impossible anyway. I just have this huge crush on him but it’s mostly sexual. I don’t think I can relate with him on an emotional and romantic level. This is why I’d told him he has the emotional capacity of a brick. I’m going to take the sex and enjoy it. That’s what I’ll do. Everything else, I’ll push aside.

It’s around 05:30pm when we make it to my house. He offers to help me carry my plastic bags inside the house. Zenande has left for her shift so I’m all alone. The teasing starts again. His fingers will brush against mine as he gives me one item or the other. His front is flush against my back as he opens the upper cabinets to help me put the canned food there. I can feel his arousal, it forces me to grip the counter for anchor. This goes on and on until I have no choice but to give in. As soon as I’m done placing the meat inside the freezer, I spin around to capture his lips with mine. He picks me up, with just his one arm, like I weigh nothing at all and kisses me deeply.

We’re moving through the house, occasionally slamming against walls until we find the living room. I wrap my legs around him as soon as he has me pinned beneath his large body on the couch. “Sheshisa!” I murmur frustratedly in between hot kisses as he removes both our pants again. My mind is silent, thoughts of him consuming me wholly at the forefront. As soon as we’re in our underwear, I piston my hips up, trying to feel his erection against mine. My breaths are rapid, I can barely breathe. He soothes me by breathing air into me and then snatching it away again with his demanding kisses – they’re

hungry, devouring all of me. I grab the back of his neck, welcoming every sensation, never wanting it to end. Our erections are touching, he grips my waist and pins me down, setting a vicious pace. Each touch sets my veins on fire, I can't be contained, my body arches into him – aching. He is ravishing me, every inch, forcing me open in unbearable pleasure and dragging me into a world of intense euphoria. "I can't breathe," I gasp in his ear, my fingernails raking down his back, shudders wracking my body.

There's a fire in his dark pools, burning into me. He kisses me roughly again and then breathes against my lips. "I don't want you to breathe." He starts moving faster, humping me so hard that we may as well be fucking. The tension builds within me until I can't hold on anymore. My body convulses into an orgasm that tilts my whole world on its axis. I moan his name deeply and relish the feel of his teeth breaking into the skin on my neck as he explodes his own orgasm, accompanied by a deep moan, one of his hands moving to grip my throat tighter than anything I've ever experienced. He's going to leave bruises. "Kodwa nganeyakwethu..." I can feel him dripping through his underwear, onto my trembling thigh. My dick twitches weakly in excitement.

It takes me longer to recover this time, my lips are swollen, my chest is heaving, I can barely take a breath that isn't painful. He's limp above me, breathing into my neck. He's heavy but I love his weight on top of mine. I wrap my arms around him and close my eyes. "Do you have a choking kink or something?" I ask after a long silence, my throat is sore.

"Do you hate it?"

"I've never been choked before," I whisper, staring into his eyes as he moves out of hiding. "I like it."

"Just wait for the day I have you defenceless beneath me, while pounding you through the mattress with my hand grasping your throat firmly to keep you from escaping."

I whimper and lick my lips. "You want to do this again?" I hate how unsure I sound. Like a little virgin whose just discovered this new sexual world.

"Again and again."

His words make me smile, I squeal excitedly and lean up to kiss him firmly. I can feel him chuckle against my lips and it brings a smile to my own lips. "I'm still waiting for you to freak out."

“You and me both,” he groans as he maneuvers around me so that he can make his escape. He kisses me and then looks around for his pants. “Before I leave, you want me to help you cook?”

“Can you cook?” I raise my eyebrow in disbelief.

“No.”

“Then why are you offering?”

“To be domestic, Dali.” He winks and drags me up, to the kitchen. “Futhi ngilambile. You need to feed me.”

“What do you want to eat?”

“Surprise me,” he murmurs, pulling me into his arms and kissing down my neck. “You smell heavenly.”

I thank him and then make us sandwiches but this one and his friends consider this light food. He eats twelve slices of bread on his own. I don't complain, I'm a light eater. We sit together, with me straddling his lap, and watch TV. I don't know why but we don't discuss what this is between us. Aside from the fact that we are engaging in sexual activity, I think we're still the same as we were before. I want to ask but my words are caught in my throat and my mind seems vehemently opposed to the idea. There's a knock on my door as I'm kissing him. “Mxoshe lowo. We're busy here.” He complains when I beg him to set me free. I chuckle and shake my head. He seems to have forgotten that he said he was leaving.

As soon as I open the door, I am met with three men. Two of them are wearing police uniforms and the other one wears a hideous suit that he should've left behind when Velaphi ended. “Sanibonani.” I greet them. I hope there's no issue with my sister.

“Ya mfana,” the one with the hideous suit greets. “We were told that Nqobizitha is here.”

I nod my head. “Did something happen with his family?”

“No. We just need to ask him a few questions,” Velaphi 2.0 says. “Call him please.”

My mind seems to be working slower now but I manage a nod. I find Nqoba putting on his Converse. He looks over his shoulder and smiles when he sees me. “My mom sent me a message to come back home. One of my sister’s children arrived and wants to see me.”

“The police are at the door for you,” I tell him, my eyes narrowing in on him. “Are you involved in illegal activities, Nqoba?”

“Uyang’jwayela ke manje.” He scoffs, nailing me with a glare from hell. I don’t know why he’s defensive when giving me a yes or no answer would be simpler. “Do I look like a thug to you?”

“You can’t exactly tell that by just looking at a person. This is why I’m asking.”

He doesn’t reply but he’s offended, I can tell. After he’s grabbed his keys, he heads toward the front door, I follow him, out of curiosity. “Awu, Bab’ Ntanzi, unjani? Do you need any help, baba?” Nqobizitha is smiling too damn brightly for someone who is in trouble with the police. *We don’t know that*, my mind reminds me but I have to disagree. This Bab’ Ntanzi said his visit didn’t have to do with Nqoba’s family so it must have something to do with him personally.

“Nqobizitha. I’ve been trying to find you for most of the afternoon. We need to talk mfana wami. We can’t do this here though. I’ll need you to follow me to the station.”

“Is something the matter, Baba?” Nqoba asks but he’s already leaving. I don’t know why my feet won’t stay where they’re supposed to because I find myself following them outside the door, out of the gate and inside the silver-grey Corolla parked outside. Nqoba doesn’t even seem to notice my presence. I’m not sure why the others don’t order me to stay behind. Bab’ Ntanzi explains that a boy from eNgudwini was ambushed earlier. Melisizwe – the boy that tried to stab Siya a few weeks ago – was killed today. Mob justice. The rumours were floating around that he stole a gun from some spaza shop owner in Ngudwini and that he was behind the botched robbery that took the life of that man who was married to Nqoba’s teacher. But before Melisizwe died, he said he had been hired by Nqoba’s teacher. And now Nqoba is involved because he was having sex with her.

As delicious as the tea is, I’m also angry at Nqobizitha for associating with old women. Now he’s in trouble. I don’t think he’s involved. I’m sitting on one of the benches and waiting for him when a group

of people – led by a cold-looking short woman – enter the police station. I stare in fascination as eyes widen and people make way for them. “Uphi uNtanzzi?!” she’s barking orders, clearly a no-nonsense woman. “Tell him to bring my son to me. I will personally deal with him. He’s not going to do it.”

My eyes widen. Nqoba’s mother! I’m not going to allow myself to feel guilty for not having realized it the first time, she looks nothing like him. “Yehlisa umoya, nkosikazi.” And the tall, scrawny man, I’m going to assume is his father. I wonder if it’s possible to introduce myself. My eyes clash with Nqoba’s mother’s and no, it is not a good idea. Something about her seems unfriendly, her eyes alone could kill you. I watch from my corner as Bab’ Ntanzzi comes back. And I watch his confidence crumble, watch him apologize for bringing Nqoba in for questioning in the first place. It’s almost hard to believe but then I remember Zenande said Nqoba’s family are like gods here. It’s probably five minutes later that Nqoba comes out from wherever they’d taken him, with Bab’ Ntanzzi – who is still apologizing profusely – in tow.

“MaKhathide wam—” a loud thwack echoes, one that stings my ears. Nqoba shuts up, doesn’t blink or even move a muscle as he looks down at his mother.

“Is this how you embarrass us wena? You’re sleeping with women old enough to be your mother?” she’s shouting, the others are silent. One of the girls – short with dreadlocks – rolls her eyes and mimics her mother’s shouting. I giggle, I can’t help it. She spots me and winks at me. I wave back. “How many times must I talk to you, Nqoba? Maybe I shouldn’t have asked for a son because you’re a disappointment! You don’t appreciate all the things we do for you. Do you need to get your dick wet that desperately?”

Nqoba doesn’t reply. His shoulders are slumped, head bowed, eyes blank. I wonder if he’s even listening or if he’s tuned her out. I’d tune her out. The way she’s cursing her son, calling him a disappointment, telling him that he’s useless, it would get to me. I get that she’s angry but she’s also extreme about it. I didn’t even know that he’s failed twice but thanks to her, I know. I’ve heard enough, and want to defend him, but one of his sisters – the one with the dreadlocks – comes to his aid and drags him away from the entire situation. His mom is still shouting but they’re leaving. I rush after them. “Nqobizitha!” I shout outside, just before they can get into one of the cars. Our eyes meet. I don’t know what else I want to say.

His eyes are still blank. He gets in the car and they drive off with his sister. I don’t know why I’m disappointed but I decide to go back home. The walk is long and I’m not even in the mood for food once I get there. I head straight for my bed and collapse on it. When I grab my phone, I notice that I have a few missed calls. It’s my boyfriend. My stomach twists nastily. I bite my lip and look at the screen with wet eyes. I don’t think I can call him back right now. I’m not in the right headspace. Nqoba is interfering without doing a single thing like usual. I’m not sure when I fall asleep but the next time I wake up, it’s because of the noise at my window. Like someone is trying to break in.

My breathing quickens, I sit up quickly, and I try to listen again. The noise is still there. I don't have any useful weapons here so I rush to the kitchen to grab the butcher knife. I'm just going to scare them with it. But I was stupid to leave my phone back in my room. I should be calling the cops. My mind sneers at me because the cops here are clearly useless. I try not to think back to what happened earlier but I can't help it. Nqoba dominates my mind. All the freaking time. I recall his eyes and how he got in the car without saying a word. My heart clenches tightly, I rub my chest to lessen the pain. Great, even when I'm on the verge of being robbed, he's still my number one priority.

The noise is no longer there as I get closer to my room but I'm still careful. I have to be ready for anything. The knife is held in front of me as I forcefully push my door open. There's a large figure lying on my bed that causes me to scream. "Nqoba!" I snap as my eyes meet familiar ones, he's even switched on my damn lamp. "What the fuck is wrong with you?! You can't just trespass people's homes like this. What if I stabbed you? I thought I was being robbed for fuck's sake."

"Are you going to shut up and join me or do you want me to go somewhere else? I don't need your bullshit right now, Chris." His voice is too quiet, cold, it makes me shiver.

"You don't need to be so rude."

He doesn't reply.

After a few seconds of awkwardly standing near the doorway with a butcher knife in front of me, I decide to go and join him. My body is still shaky, I haven't recovered from my earlier scare. I open one of the drawers and store the knife in there. Then I join him in bed, he's taking up most of the space with his large frame. I check the time – 01:30am. I wonder what he's doing here so late into the evening. One of his arms wraps around my belly, drawing me close so that we're flush together. His fingers skim beneath my t-shirt and he taps against the skin softly. I think I get what he's saying. I spin around, the scent of alcohol assaulting my nostrils. "You've been—" my words die in my throat as I notice the gash just above his left eye. "Nqoba..." I whisper, reaching forward to touch the bruise.

"Don't." He grips my wrist. "I got pity from MaNxumalo, I don't need it from you."

What does he mean pity? And how did he get it? Now that I think of it, he smells strange, like...sex. The knowledge angers me. My heart feels like it has shattered into a thousand tiny shards and fallen into the pit of my stomach. "I see..." I whisper. "Did your mom do this to you?"

"I earned it." He's wheezing, clutching his belly. "Maybe this is Ntuli's punishment for me from his grave, huh? I was—fucking his wife."

"Don't say that."

"It's true."

I don't know. Personally, I don't believe in things like that. I don't believe in anything at all. The man's dead, I doubt he has any power from the grave. But part of me can't help hoping that this means Nqoba will be staying from people's wives from now on. That is wishful thinking though, he just came back from fucking yet another man's wife right now. I know this MaNxumalo, I've seen her around a couple of times – a quiet lovely church woman who isn't as holy as she appears. "You smell like Bab' Shandu's shebeen," I frown as his lips brush lightly against me.

"I also smell like MaNxumalo's pussy but it's all the same, right?"

I don't want to laugh because I'm angry but I do. "I should tell you to leave my bed. This is pure disrespect. My bed's never smelled like straight sex before."

"I'm sorry for cheating on you."

I think he's drunk. "What?" his eyes are closing. "Nqoba?" I try again, nudging his shoulder. He hisses in pain but doesn't open his eyes. He's asleep. His breath smells bad with all that alcohol tinged with sex. I'm curious about the extent of his bruising so I lift his jersey. There are marks scattered all over his body, created by a rod maybe. I touch the darkened skin softly and it feels tender beneath my touch. No wonder he's breathing the way he is. I wonder what the hell is wrong with parents like ours, the ones who think violence is the solution to everything. I'm trapped deep in my thoughts when I feel something heavy around my legs. Nqoba's fast asleep. His large frame curled into a ball as he hugs my legs and one would think it looks awkward but instead it's...adorable. A little heart-breaking.

My fingers move of their own accord, gently running through his short hair. I get a loud snore in response and I giggle. I feel like I watch him forever before my phone interrupts me. I check and find that it's a message from Hugo. I don't read it. I switch my phone off – and decide to go back to sleep, one of my hands still caressing Nqoba's head, soothing the occasional tremors wracking his body.

Mutual Desires : Nine

Christophe

I'm not sure of the time when I wake up but Nqoba isn't beside me. The light is still muted outside, not at all the blinding one that usually pours through my window as early as seven in the morning. I'm guessing it's the early hours of 06:00am. I need to use the bathroom – urgently. Last night, I couldn't do it with the way Nqoba had been embracing my legs. I didn't want to disturb him and eventually I fell asleep as well. The bathroom is empty when I enter and my belly drops slightly in disappointment. Clearly Nqoba left. I wonder if he went back home or back to MaNxumalo to continue the pity party with her. It doesn't matter. I shouldn't care. We're not an item. A few dry-humps and hot kisses don't suddenly give me the right into deciding who he should and shouldn't sleep with. I have no right to be jealous or to act heartbroken. Shit's overrated anyway. My heart sneers at me accusingly but fuck it.

After I've relieved myself, I wash my hands and brush my teeth before using that scrub Zenny got me for my face. I realize how pathetic I'm becoming when I'm too reluctant to make the bed because Nqoba's shape is on my sheets and they smell like him. Well, him, alcohol and that sleazy woman. But the point is that they smell like him also – his aftershave or cologne and him. My body teems with desire. But I'm not going to act on it because I've been doing a lot of pathetic shit lately and I need to snap out of it. I make the bed and then make my way to the kitchen. I'm not really hungry but breakfast is supposedly the most important meal of the day.

My footsteps falter a little and my eyes widen as I behold the sight in the kitchen. It's not as clean as it was last night but it's not dirty either. There's a pot on one of the stoves. There's a two litre bottle of amasi on the kitchen table. I get closer and notice the money trapped underneath the bottle. A R50 note. I'm going to assume it's to pay for the opened bottle of amasi, which is stupid really, considering I only bought them because Nqoba loves amasi. I was serious when I told him that they're not exactly a family favourite in this household. Nearing the stove, I check the pot and can't decide whether I'm smiling because I'm silly or because the sight in front of me makes me angry. Nqobizitha burned the pot. The Brentwood wearing bastard. What the fuck was he doing? He did say he can't cook and that much is very clear with this yellow, lumpy uphuthu. It doesn't look edible at all. I'm not even going to taste this. He may've tried to kill himself with this but I'm not going to do it. I'm only 17.

Sighing and shaking my head in disbelief, I decide to clear this mess. Zenny finds me hard at work, scouring the burnt pot. "Weeeh, I leave you with Nqobizitha for a few hours and suddenly you can't cook. Ushisa amabhodwe." Her hands are on her waist, she has a smile on her face.

"Morning sisi," I give her the biggest beam. "How was your shift?"

“A kid from Nhlakanipho’s area was scared of using the bathroom.” She rolls her eyes as I giggle. “That little girl served as my entertainment the entire shift, I tell you. Usudlile?”

“No.” I shake my head and point to the pot with my eyes. “I was going to make something after I finished with this.”

“It’s fine, I’ll make something.” She places her handbag on one of the chairs and scans the cabinets. “How did your outing with Nqobizitha go? I hear he got a hot slap from his mother at the police station.”

“It went...good.” I don’t think I can divulge the other things to her. Maybe it won’t sit well with her that I know how her toy boy’s lips feel like against my own, how his weight feels on top of my body, how sinister his hands are and how he made come multiple times yesterday. Maybe it won’t sit well with her that Nqobizitha can’t seem to get enough of me. I bite my lip and evade her curious stare. “He helped me cover some money I owed at Mr Price. But he doesn’t seem to like eating at Spurs very much.”

“Why am I not surprised?” her chuckles spread over the kitchen, they’re infectious. I laugh with her. “And then the police station, what’s the story there? Ngizwe indaba kancane. MaNtuli really killed her husband for a boy nearly twice her junior, huh? She never had the best morals that one, nxa! Divorcing him would’ve been much simpler. Now her children are fatherless, she’s going to go to jail. They may as well be orphans. Relatives disappear in situations like this.”

I nod my head, thinking back to mam’ Ntombenhle and how she practically looted our entire home. From what I heard, this MaNtuli’s kids are between ages 6 and 15. What if the relatives take advantage of them? They’ll no doubt suffer without both their parents. That woman didn’t think of this as she’d plotted her husband’s murder. “She behaved foolishly, sisi.” I agree with her. The pot is shining. I help Zenny with the rest of the food. Her thoughts are on Nqoba and MaNtuli. She shares my sentiments about him having to stay away from married women from now on. “I’m sure he’s learned his lesson now,” she says and I bite the inside of my cheek to avoid telling her how she couldn’t be further from the truth. It’s like he lives for nothing else but the sex and the nice time.

“I’m going to change and shower,” I say, getting up. “Since you were working last night and will probably spend the day sleeping in, I’m going to Bab’ Shandu’s shebeen. Maybe Siya needs someone to keep him company.” She waves me off and nods her head. In my room, I finally decide to switch my phone on. Maybe Nqoba sent a message, explaining why he disappeared just like that. Nope. Nothing from him but Hugo messaged me this morning again.

Est-ce que j'ai fait quelque chose de mal? – Hugo

I bite my lip and shake my head even though he's not here with me. Why would he ask if he's done something wrong when I'm the one ghosting him? Because I've allowed thoughts of Nqobizitha to constantly consume me. I've been forgetting that I have a boyfriend. I'm not even sure if I still love him at this point. If I ever did. What if it was infatuation? Because if you love someone then you're not supposed to develop feelings for another person, right? It just doesn't work that way. But I'm not going to break up with Hugo either. Not for a guy like Nqoba. Simi advised me to, so that I wouldn't cheat on Hugo, but I've already gotten half-naked with the Brentwood wearing boy and I can't go back and erase what has happened. I don't even regret it if I'm being honest. But I'm still not going to break up with Hugo. Let me call him and salvage our sinking relationship. The phone rings twice.

"Mon chou!" he sounds disbelieving, relieved. "Chérie, is that really you?" his accent is always stronger in the mornings. It still makes me feel funny. I can see him now, a slight smile on his face.

"Je suis désolé," I apologize, rubbing my forehead in frustration. "I didn't mean to ignore you...daddy," he groans and I shake my head and laugh. "You're too easy, Hugo."

"You know it drives me crazy when you call me 'Daddy'. But you never answered my question, mon chou. Did I do something wrong? Maybe I missed a call I wasn't aware of and now you're angry. I just don't understand why you're ignoring my calls and messages."

"No. Nothing like that. It's all me, Hugo. It's hard being away from you and I'm finding it hard to adjust here. Sometimes, I ignore you because I'm scared that I'll miss you even more. Like, the pain will be unbearable so I'd rather not hear from you at all. That's all it was." I think I'm being honest here, maybe a smidgen, but it's partly true.

Hugo chuckles in my ear – it's deep but not rumbling like Nqobizitha's. *What the fuck, Chris?! my mind screams and I flinch.* Right. I'm not going to think about Nqoba. Not going to. Not going to. "That kind of makes sense, mon chou. If it's any consolation, I'm struggling just like you. Every night, I look at your beautiful pictures just to help me sleep."

And I fascinate about being overpowered by Nqoba in bed. *Chris! my mind's mad at me right now.* "Do you watch the videos I've sent you?"

“I need some new ones. With that new hairstyle of yours, I’m sure you’re irresistible, baby.”

I nod, although he can’t see me. “I’ll make one tonight and send it to you.” *Here’s to hoping you won’t call the Zulu moron’s name.* My mind won’t shut up today. I hate it! “And I promise we’ll talk over the phone before I go to bed. It’s going to be everyday now – at least once a day.”

“Good. That is what I want to hear.” There’s a bit of noise in the background. I hear him murmur a few words to someone before he’s with me again. “I have to go, mon chou. Be good for me in Mbongolwane.”

“I will...daddy.”

He groans again and I break into a laughing fit. The phone call ends a few seconds later and I let out a deep breath. The chemistry is still there, I could sense it. But I think the distance has dulled it a little bit. Maybe this is why I’m so hung up on Nqoba. I’m not sure. I don’t even know what I’m doing at this point. I may as well be a paper, flying in whatever direction the wind takes me. But my resolve about Hugo remains, there is no way in hell I am breaking up with him. For a guy whose dick serves an entire community? Hell no, I’d go down in history as dumbest of dumb idiots in the world.

The water is always hot lately, because it’s just me and Zenny. I take my time and let it rain down my body while swaying my hips to Toni Braxton and Babyface’s ‘Rollercoaster’. I’m always sappy lately and this song is me as much as I am it. Back in my room, I browse my wardrobe for today’s outfit. Beige shorts and an earthy brown t-shirt that I tuck in. White socks and my platform sneakers. I revive the curls in my hair and shape my brows to perfection. “You’re a beauty!” I smile at my appearance and nod in satisfaction. “I’d totally fuck you...if we weren’t both bottoms!” my reflection seems to agree with me with a beautiful grin. “See you later, gorgeous.” I murmur as I step away from the mirror. My phone in hand, I go to tell Zenny that I’m leaving, she just waves me off sleepily.

Mbongolwane is hot as a motherfucker but I’m slowly getting used to it. I think I’d be able to go out to a couple of places on my own now as well. People still look at me strangely, and sometimes, I’ll receive those snide remarks. A couple of teenage boys threw sand at me this one time but I just ignore. They weren’t even worth my energy. It’s the older people that I’m always worried about. Men and women alike. They haven’t outright done anything but I’d be lying if I said it isn’t uncomfortable walking around and being watched like a hawk, like there’s something wrong with you. No wonder Nhlakanipho and Siya refuse to come out. People here are too conservative, too traditional – and people like me tend to be an inconvenience for them. Never mind that we’re usually living our lives and minding our own business.

“Hi mam’ Thoko,” I greet as I meet Siya’s mother at the shebeen entrance. Her eyes light up, looking identical to her son’s. I love how she accepts me fully. She must be one of the few open minded people around here, along with her husband, and I briefly wonder why Siya hasn’t told his parents about his relationship with Nhlakanipho. “Is Siya here?”

“Christopher!” she doesn’t seem to get that there are men with names like mine and says it’s not complete. So she calls me Christopher instead. I hate it but I won’t tell her that. “How are you, my boy? You’re on your own today.”

“Zenande was working the nightshift.”

She nods and makes polite talk for a few minutes, catching up. “Siya is going to Nhlakanipho’s village today. But he’ll pass Mbongolwane hospital to collect some items for the Mzimela family before going there. He’s in his room. You know where it is?”

I think I remember from that night I ran away from home. Nodding my head, I enter the shebeen, avoid the derogatory stares aimed at me, and hurry to the door that opens up to the rooms beyond the shebeen. Siyabonga’s room is the furthest from all the other rooms. I think it’s that way to prevent him from being affected by the noise that happens in this place. I knock twice on his door and he opens it, half-naked. His eyes widen and then he rolls them. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Yeah!” I smile at him. “Can I come in?”

“You’re already at my door so...” he leaves the door open. Jerk!

“You don’t still think I want Nhlakanipho, do you?” I ask as I enter and follow his silent instruction, occupying the chair at his study table.

“No. I know you’d rather hop on Nqobizitha’s dick instead,” he says bluntly, making me choke on my saliva. “That is if you haven’t already, with the way you two hang out a lot together lately.”

I keep silent and meet his eyes on the mirror. He seems to see right through me.

“You’re going to get your heart broken with Nqobizitha,” his voice is laced with warning, “That boy fucks and leaves. Sex addiction and him are like this...” he middle finger and index finger join together. “Women and sex are what he really lives for.”

“Maybe he just hasn’t met the right person,” the words spill out of me without consent.

Siya pauses his task of pulling his pants up and looks over his shoulder, at me, and then shakes his head while laughing. “Hehe, uyadlala wena. Don’t come crying to us when he’s done experimenting with you and decides that he still prefers mature pussy.”

This conversation is going to depress me. I am no longer able to meet Siya’s eye and focus on the décor around his room. He’s very minimalistic – a bed on one corner, a TV and sound system on the other side of the wall and then his wardrobe – it’s built in – that is ridiculously huge it makes me jealous. His study area is near the windows. It’s not hard to tell that his family is moneyed. Not like Nqobizitha but he certainly doesn’t look like someone who wouldn’t afford to buy himself a R10 000 phone cash if he wanted to. I’d probably have to wait for like three to four months.

“Those jeans are fine. Nhlakanipho will eat you alive,” I say, a little begrudgingly, as he observes himself on the mirror, looking conflicted. “Just wear a t-shirt that hugs your upper body. Ume kahle. You need to show off your body more.”

“So those girls can hound me even more? No, thanks.” He slides on a grey sweater. He’s checking the area on his neck too much. “Anything weird you see around here?”

I rub my own neck, thinking back to Nqoba’s hand around my throat. My dick jerks in interest, I swallow down a whimper, and meet Siya’s expectant gaze on the mirror. “No. You’re good. What, does your boyfriend have a choking kink like his friend?” my mouth just vomits. I slap my hand over it and groan. Siya is flabbergasted, nailing me with an inquisitive stare. “Forget I said anything,” I whisper as soon as I find my voice.

“No wonder you’re talking like you have a sore throat.” He doesn’t look like he’s going to let this go. “When did this happen? What the fuck have you done? Please don’t tell me that you’ve slept with—”

“Awume, Siyabonga!” he’s starting to sound like my parents – and even they don’t behave like this. “Jeez! What is this? You know nothing about me, what I’ve been through. You think some fuck boy from

the villages could break my heart? A guy from the villages? A Brentwood wearing bastard? Ai man, ngishayise ngomoya. I've got my reputation to protect. This isn't going to turn into love. It's called lust, Siyabonga. Don't confuse it with what you and Nhlakanipho have. No one's going to break anyone's heart because we both know what we're doing."

"Shame, ukhuluma kangaka ngothando olungekho?" I don't like the way he thinks he knows me. "Fine. You know what you're doing. You're not going to fall for the charming, sweet talker who knows what to say to have you fall in bed with him. You're not going to be heartbroken. You're a strong gay guy and power to you for not falling into an illusion the Brentwood wearing bastard creates for his partners."

"Fuck your sarcasm," I say softly. I'm offended and angry. I won't address why. Not now. "Can we drop this please?"

"Fine by me." Siyabonga shrugs. "Did uMa tell you that I'm going to the hospital first? I need to fetch some things for Nhlakanipho's gogo."

I nod my head. He puts on his sneakers and grabs his keys. We talk about school on the way to the hospital, to my relief, and I see what they mean when they say he's an intelligent boy. He makes me feel dumb and I have to keep reminding myself that he's a Science student. That wasn't what I was doing at school and I did pass my matric with distinctions – four of them. He tells me about a telescope that Nhlakanipho surprised him for their anniversary this year. He built it with Nqobizitha – clueless Tarzan who didn't question Nhlakanipho twice when he said he was building it for Mnelisi for a Science project – because Nqoba loves space and aeronautics too much and has a lot of theoretical knowledge on the subject. He'd make a fine astronaut apparently, if only he pursued Sciences instead of Commercial subjects, Siya says. We make it to the hospital fifteen minutes later and I'm surprised to learn that we're collecting baby products. Milk. Nappies. Baby lotion. A few other items as well. I wonder if we're going to carry this all the way to Nhlakanipho's place because apparently he lives far.

"Do they have a new baby?" I ask Siya as we exit the hospital. He organized a cab, thankfully, but it's a van and we're squashed with about five women at the back. It's uncomfortable, and my head occasionally bumps against the metal roof when the stupid driver hits the brakes a little too harshly.

"Nhlakanipho's sister, Nonkazimulo, gave birth to a baby girl about two weeks ago. They didn't know until she came with the baby. Then a few days ago, she left and didn't return. She just dumped Gogo with the baby. Left a few nappies and baby clothes and milk."

"Wow," I mutter in disbelief. "Gogo shouldn't have allowed it mos."

Siya rolls his eyes. “They never say when they’re going to dump the babies with Gogo, Chris. Besides, Gogo is too kind. She doesn’t turn away her blood.”

“Please tell me they at least give her grant money.”

“Not all of them.” The van stops. Siyabonga tells me that this is our stop. I climb out of the van and scan my surroundings. Wow. Talk about rural. There are a few beautiful houses but I can tell that Mbongolwane is better than this place. Some kids are running at us excitedly. Maybe four of them. No, it’s five of them. “Oh, here are his siblings.”

“Bhuti Siyabonga!” they hug him and help us with some of the plastic bags. “Bhuti said we should meet you halfway. He’s busy with Olwenkosi’s hair. She was crying, bhuti Siya, she doesn’t want to be shaved bald.” The girl, around thirteen maybe, says.

“Nomzamo!” Siya laughs, “Why are you so smug about this? I suspect you planted the thought in your brother’s mind.”

“She lied and said the school said Olwenkosi’s hair is problematic,” another girl of about nine says. Her name is Noxolo. “Just because she can’t grow her own hair.”

“Shut up!”

It goes on like that for most of our walk. Siyabonga has introduced us and I am enjoying their company. But I’m also looking around and trying to soak all of my surroundings in. I do squeal in disgust as I step on cow dung. The fools around me laugh like they find something funny. We reach Nhlakanipho’s homestead and this time I don’t openly ogle. Something about Nhlakanipho is intensely intimidating, with his fuck off vibes. There are four houses. Only one of them looks like a modern house. The rest are rondavels that are made of stone. Strangely, they all look beautiful, and when I ask, Siya tells me that Nhlakanipho built all the houses himself. He’s gifted with his hands apparently. We spot Nhlakanipho sitting on a bench near one of the rondavels, a young girl sits in between his thighs, on those Zulu mats, with tears rolling down her cheeks. He’s almost done with chopping off her hair. I notice his eyes light up and a subtle smile pulling at his lips as soon as he sees us or more accurately, Siyabonga.

“Bafo.” I don’t know who Siyabonga is trying to fool with that silly grin on his face. “What is this I hear about you shaving Olwenkosi’s hair. Jealousy isn’t a good look on you. Just because she had beautiful hair and you don’t...”

“It’s n-not him, bhuti Siya.” The little girl whose hair is being shaved off snuffles. She points at Nomzamo and frowns. “B-Blame that lollipop-shaped man who can’t grow her own hair!”

I chortle loudly, I can’t help it. I hadn’t expected that and Siya is laughing with me but Nhlakanipho has a hint of a smile. He’s too serious. “Uphi uGogo, Nhlakanipho?” Siya shows him the items we got from the hospital.

“With the new alien in the main house.”

“Don’t call your siblings aliens, Nhlakanipho.” Siyabonga says. I help him to carry the bags again and roll my eyes when Nhlakanipho tells Siyabonga to hurry back. I hope I’m not going to be third wheeling here. I remember how terrible it was the last time. Nhlakanipho’s gogo looks really good, despite the lines of wrinkles marring her face, and seems like a tough old woman. Siyabonga introduces us and awkwardly takes the baby as Gogo hugs me. I return her hug, surprised by her kindness. The little one’s name is Kuhlekimi and she’s the sister of another girl Kuhlekonke. It’s a beautiful name. I get to hold her. For three seconds because maybe Nhlakanipho was right about babies being aliens. She’s so tiny and fragile that I give her back to Siyabonga who also gives her to Gogo.

“Nomzamo, prepare something light for our guests.” Gogo instructs as we’re leaving to join Nhlakanipho outside.

“We’re fine, Gogo. We ate before we came here,” Siya says with a smile on his face. I suspect he doesn’t want to finish their food and I have to agree with him. Nhlakanipho is done with Olwenkosi as we step outside. We go to his house and okay...we’ll just pretend like I don’t exist then. Seriously, the first thing he does is pin Siya against the wall to devour him. The pretty boy gives as good as he gets, with his arms wrapping around Nhlakanipho’s neck, drawing him down for kisses I shouldn’t even be witnessing. They’re both heaving by the time they’re done.

“Shame on both of you!” I snap, a little jealous. Even in Joburg, I’ve never been around two people who’re into each other as much as these two are. Simi would be disgusted by their love – it’s too much. I’m disgusted and jealous. “Showing off and shit when you know that my boyfriend is so far from me.”

Siya snorts, he says nothing, but his eyes are accusing. I bite my lip and struggle against looking away. He locks the door and we all sit down. I'm on the chair. Siya goes to join Nhlakanipho in bed and straddles him. I'm surprised they're being so openly intimate and when I tell them, Siya says he's not going to stop loving on his boyfriend just because I'm here. I already know they're in a relationship anyway. Most of the first hour is spent watching them loving on each other with me occasionally glancing at my phone. I check my WhatsApp messages and there's nothing from Nqoba. He didn't even post any status, granted, he doesn't do that a lot. He didn't even view my own statuses. His last seen was 07:00am. It's 14:00pm now. I wonder where is, what he's doing...maybe it's a who.

"Did you see Nqoba today?" I tried to keep myself from asking but I can't help it. I'm really curious and Nhlakanipho is his best friend.

Siya rolls his eyes, the judgment is so visible in his eyes. I don't care. Nqobizitha is my friend too and I have every right to ask, to know.

"He went to church with his mother."

"Church?" My eyes widen in disbelief. "Since when does he go to church?"

"You'll have to ask him that." Nhlakanipho speaks in that final way of his. Then his eyes find Siya and I know to not even bother.

Nqobizitha

"You'll have helped me a lot, Mfundisi uMagwaza. If you give him this position, just something to have him occupy his weekends. I think he has too much free time in his hands. Yingakho eziphatha kabi. This boy has no shame I tell you. Imagine the embarrassment he is bringing to our family. I already have my plate full with one of his sisters who left her marriage and now he goes and does things like this – seeking attention. Sleeping with old women. One of them is my first born daughter's age. A full forty-four years – a grown woman with a decaying vagina—"

"Kahle, kahle MaKhathide. Please mind your language, this is still—"

“I know, Mfundisi, ngyaxolisa. Its just this boy frustrates me so much! For so long I asked God for a son and this is what He gives me instead? Kufana nokuthi ngibole amathumbu ngaye lo!”

I flinch and continue staring at Mfundisi uMagwaza. My posture screams relaxed, maybe even arrogant, but Makhathide’s words are getting to me. I’m tempted to leave, right now, and deal with her when she gets home. But disrespecting my mother is something I prefer not to do, especially in public. I wonder how much she’s paid Mfundisi uMagwaza to give me this position of youth leader. Because I know she paid him some money. You don’t gain positions in this church unless you’re a registered and dedicated member. I haven’t been here in years, I know many other people who qualify for the position.

“Do you know that he’s failed twice now? At twenty years old and he’s sitting in class with children younger than him when he should be doing his second year in varsity! My husband and I – we’re building an empire that we want him to take over one day but he’s so incompetent. He’ll run our businesses to the ground. All of our hard work for nothing! Cha, uyehlula uNqobizitha. Ngenelela mfundisi because I might just kill him with my bare hands.”

“No, it won’t reach that stage, MaKhathide. I will talk to the boy. Calm down, as the new youth leader, God will use him. He’ll be a testimony. Yehlisa umoya.”

“You better talk to him, mfundisi. Ngizom’gqema ingozi mina! This bruise you see on his eye is just a teaser. He’s my son, I’m not afraid to beat him to a pulp if I have to. He’s not going to embarrass our family like this. Even Ndoniyamanzi is better than this senseless mess he’s created for us. And now induna wants to see us. Next week Sunday, we’re going to yet another meeting. That woman is out on bail. But she’s denying everything. I don’t know if she wants to pin this on my son or what but if that’s the case I will kill her with my bare hands and dump her body in front of her family home.”

“I don’t think it will reach that stage, MaKhathide. Let the law run its course. You just focus on your son and keeping him away from that immoral woman as far as possible. I’m glad you came to me. You’re an example of a great—”

A cellphone rings. It’s my mother’s. Thank god. It means this idiot in front of us will stop the ass kissing. I watch my mom answer and walk away. Maybe it’s a business call. With her gone, I narrow my eyes on Mfundisi uMagwaza. He opens his mouth to say something but I beat him to it. “Lalela, bab’ uMfundisi,” my tone is quiet, respectful. “I would love more than anything to be a part of your lovely church. But most of these women who’re my type are in this church. You see Baba, sometimes, I don’t even mean to bed them but we’re drawn to each other. Now imagine this, all of these women, right here in your church, fighting for me. Who knows maybe your wife might be part of that group as well. I just don’t see this ending well, Baba. People like me aren’t meant for church. We’re the ones the devil plants in the

church to create chaos. Imagine the embarrassment your church will go through, once people find out that the women of this church are fighting over a twenty year old boy. That will tarnish all you've worked hard for. You heard my mom. Guys like me are disappointments. Do you really think I have anything to lose? Personally, I think you should do what's best for your church. I'm not worth the effort."

MaKhathide comes back with my eyes still on Mfundisi uMagwaza. He has said nothing but I can sense the victory on my end, I can taste it. I may be manipulating him a little but my words are mostly true. Inevitably, this is what will happen. I don't even have to seek out some of the women I sleep with – there's a pull. That I still can't accurately describe. "Mfundisi, I have commitments elsewhere that cannot wait. Do you need more time with Nqobizitha? To explain to him his duty as youth leader."

"I think you should look for another church, MaKhathide. Umoya wami awuvumi. Mnotho will remain the youth leader. I also have commitments of my own. Now if you'll excuse me..."

A befuddled expression sweeps over my mom's features. I mimic it and shrug my shoulders as we watch Mfundisi Magwaza walk away. "What was that about?"

"Cha ibhadi leli. Even God is giving up on you, Nqobizitha. If uMfundisi uMagwaza is walking just like that. You need to re-evaluate your life and what you're doing with it. You're a disappointment."

I smile through the pain. "MaKhathide wami." I say her clan names and wrap my arms around her small frame. I repeat her clan names over and over again until she hugs me back. My heart settles and smiles. "Ngyakuthanda, Mama wami."

"Just...go home. Focus on your books."

I kiss her cheek and nod. I get into my car and drive off. My phone is at home and I was trapped inside that church with MaKhathide since this morning. This is why I escaped Chris' home this morning. I wonder if he's home and if it's okay to visit. Probably not. I think Zenande is still home and I am not in the mood to see her. She'll start giving me her curious glances and I...don't know. Maybe she'll notice that something's happening between me and her brother. This something that is still nameless. Labels ruin shit. All I know is that I love being around him and spending time together. I can even survive not having sex when I'm with him. Maybe because we were started hanging out as friends – or is it acquaintances? – first or maybe it's the gravitational pull. Of course my dick still gets excited around him but it doesn't just end there. I love hearing him talk, I love seeing him get excited about things, I love him clingy and dramatic. I think this is why I went to his house right after MaNxumalo's. The entire time

my drunk ass was sloppily fucking that woman and he was on my mind. Or had she chased me out because I called her Sponge Bob? My mind just keeps teasing fragments of last night so I can't be sure.

As soon as I'm home, I go to greet my sisters. One of Ndalwenhle's – an older sister of mine who lives in Ulundi – daughters is here. She's sitting with another girl I go to school with. They gossip and giggle as I pass them but I just ignore them. I don't have time for kids. Nontethelelo teases me about the marriage thing again and I roll my eyes. My mom has threatened me with finding me a wife as soon as I finish matric if I continue with these 'old women'. I hadn't replied and I've been avoiding to think about this since she made her threat.

I grab my phone first as soon as I enter my room. There are new messages from a couple of friends. Most of them are asking me about this MaNtuli drama and I'm not in the mood to discuss it. I don't think the woman killed her husband, it just doesn't seem possible. Melisizwe was a known woonga addict. Who in their right mind would take anything he says seriously? My guilt remains for fucking MaNtuli while her husband was dying and part of me may even regret it. But I still don't think she's a killer. The law will decide on this one and I'm just going to stay away – as far away from her as possible.

My fingers work against me as I go to Chris' name. He was last online at 15:12pm. That's nearly an hour ago. But I don't have any messages from him. It irks me for some reason. So I decide to text him first.

Sorry about last night. And any crap I may've said in my drunken state.

I get one tick. Maybe he's switched off his data. I check his status next. New pictures that he's taken outside...where Nhlakanipho stays. My eyes widen. When did he go there? He's beautiful, with the kids posing with him. I don't know half the poses he does but he manages to make them look gorgeous.

You're gorgeous. – me

I throw my phone beside me and then stare at the ceiling right after. The silence in my head doesn't last for long – as soon as I close my eyes, I am met with my mother's cold fury. Right. She told me to study. For once, let me listen to her and maybe I'll actually gain some knowledge. The Accounting textbook. I find it in one of my drawers. I google some previous matric question papers and memorandums. I don't understand half the shit I'm reading but MaKhathide's voice is in my head. I must make her proud. I must make her proud. I must make her proud. My phone distracts me a second later. It's Chris.

You forgot to apologize for that poison you burnt in one of our pots this morning 🤔. Yellow uphuthu? You never cease to amaze me, Nqoba 😊. – Chris

How were you this morning? I missed you 😊. – Chris

Not miss, miss you but like I woke up and you were gone. – Chris

I shake my head and chuckle because he's doing that thing again where he blows up my phone. I wish I could see him now.

I was being tortured in church. But if it makes you feel better, I was thinking about you the entire time I was there. – me

I really was. Chris has no idea how many times a day he runs through my mind. Being with him makes me feel good. He's like Nhlakanipho, someone whose company I genuinely enjoy, but different because he makes me feel funny. My stomach flips anytime I'm around him. I don't know how long we spend talking, but we click, and he makes my mind silent.

Christophe

I don't panic when I hear the noise outside my window this time. This has been happening for nearly a week now. Come morning, I know he will be gone but the time spent together at night is something I'm slowly getting used to that I've started leaving the window slightly open to make it easier for him. I can hear him remove every piece of clothing. The bed dips behind me. The shivers race down my spine. His aura overwhelms in the best way possible. He's breathing heavily behind me as if he were running. I bite my lip and rest my arm on top of one of his arm that is around my belly. His lips touch the back of my neck. "I've been waiting all day to do this."

Slowly, I turn around, and meet his eyes in the darkness. They're bright and he has a beautiful smile stretching his lips. "You don't smell like sex." I say. He hasn't smelled like that since that day he came here drunk.

"Not the best smell compared to you."

He says things like this so simply. I don't know why he's not having a gay freak out yet. We don't even have a label for this thing between us. We're always floating between lovers and friends. His hand caresses down my spine, to my nonexistent ass. His eyes glint with mischief and I have to kiss him to prevent him from making fun of it. "Ngizokuphoxa njalo."

"Phephisa, dali." His lips are on my forehead. "Talk to me, Bambi."

"About what?"

"Anything."

I rack my brains and think. "I'll tell you about...that one time these girls in my first year of high school lied and told me that my crush returned my feelings." I look at him and he smiles – the look in his eyes tells me he's listening. That he's observing all of me. Sometime into my chatter, I can see his eyes get droopy, and then suddenly he's fast asleep. He's curled into a ball again, his arms around my waist, and his face buried in my hip. My heart melts and a beam splays on my lips. It stays where it is as I drift off to sleep.

Mutual Desires : Ten

Nqobizitha

“Your latest test results, Nqobizitha Ngcobo.” Mr. Nsibande slaps the test paper on my desk. I check the results and then play it cool as I sense his annoying presence still at my side. What does he expect, a thank you? It’s his job to educate me. My eyes meet his blankly and I can see his suspicion through those ugly ass round, plastic glasses he wears. He takes them off, as if he’ll see something that he hadn’t seen when he was wearing them. “Maybe your mom should keep it up with those hot claps she gave you in the police station. This is a first for you.” His eyes point to the test paper in my hands. “Look at you, achieving for once.”

I could mess with him and make some stupid comment about how I achieve all the time with his wife but I’m in a good mood – at least since I’ve received these results. So I just nod my head and smile politely. “Bab’ Nsibande, it’s not just my mother. You’re an excellent teacher – indoda emadodeni. Sibonga wena, thisha wami.” He rolls his eyes and puts on his glasses, moving on. I don’t care. With him gone, I pass my test paper to Nhlakanipho. He’s unpredictable so of course I don’t get the widening of the eyes I was expecting. Instead, a proud expression sweeps over his features.

“Wow, Bafo...” we fist-bump and I take my paper from him. “Fifty percent. You did really good compared to the last time. I’m proud of you.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I wave him off, he’s starting to sound like my father. It’s embarrassing, he’s younger than me. “Sinabantu la. Khawula nawe.”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “I feel you, Bafo. Here’s to hoping you’ll breathe easier around MaKhathide now. She will lose her mind when she sees this.”

I smile and place my test paper in between the pages of my textbook. My heart is beaming at me. I’ve never received more than forty-five percent in an Accounting test before. It’s always worse with exams because I’m lucky if I leave with forty percent. It’s not that I don’t study, I do...I used to. But I gave up because I realized that this shit wasn’t meant for me. Sometimes, I really don’t think I’m meant for school. When I tell Nhlakanipho this, he usually disagrees with me because I bury their asses in Mathematics. I’m almost as good as Siyabonga. I excel in IsiZulu, English and Life Orientation but then I get to these Commercial subjects and there’s a blank. Accounting is worse because I have Mr. Nsibande as my teacher. Perhaps if it were a female teacher, I would’ve worked my magic and I’d be passing with flying colours. But with MaNtuli gone as well, because the South African law is useless and doesn’t

realize that some of us choose to fuck our teachers and dismisses them instead, I'm sure I'll be flunking Economics like I used to before I met her. They haven't found a replacement for her yet, she was the best Economics teacher we had. I'm not sure anyone they find will compare to her.

The bell rings, signalling afterschool, and I pack my shit. "Mpintsh' yami, I'll see you tomorrow. You know I have to go home immediately school is over. MaKhathide is like a mosquito that I can't get rid off," I tell Nhlakanipho.

"It's fine, Bafo. Until tomorrow." He never seems to mind and he tells me that he's going to wait for Siyabonga who will be tutoring again today. Their closeness makes me a little jealous but at the end of the day we're all friends who get along really well and connect for different reasons.

My footsteps slow down a little when I notice a familiar car approaching. I scan my surroundings, too open, and some of these self-appointed community hawks are already observing the situation at hand curiously, probably to see how it will play out. "Mama..." my voice is a little breathless, my dick is still attracted to her beautiful body – adorned by those body hugging dresses that she loves so much. I'm not going to look at her breasts and aim for her face instead. "Long time no see."

She snorts and rolls her eyes, not that it wasn't expected, playing with her car keys. "How are you, Nqobizitha?"

"The same old, MaNtuli." I keep the distance. Aside from these vultures who know nothing but to mind the affairs of others, I also don't want to give into the pull. My dick is stirring wildly in my pants and it's not helping that my mind creates scenarios of me fucking her over this car, in front of everyone here. It's such a bad thought. I've had many sleepless nights feeling guilty about fucking her while her husband died. There's also the issue of her arrest and this Sunday, we're supposed to meet with induna. She may be tempting but I'm staying the fuck away from her. "It was nice catching up. I'll see you around."

"So this is how you behave now, Nqoba?" her question forces me to freeze and look back at her.

"I don't want trouble for both of us, MaNtuli. Look at how these people are looking at us. I don't think this will help with your case."

"Screw that case. My brother is on it. He will prove my innocence," she says it dismissively as she nears me. She tries to touch me and I move, adjusting my bag while looking around. She frowns, I want to

comfort her with my dick deep inside her being but it will never happen again. “What is wrong with you? Or do you think I’m guilty as well? Come on, Nqobizitha, you know me. Does uJerry look like someone I’d have wasted my time on trying to get rid off? He may’ve been an excellent father but he was a useless husband. So useless that I wouldn’t have wasted a dime of my money to have him killed.”

I believe her but still... “Do you see this?” I point to the healing bruise on my eye. “I don’t want MaKhathide to give me this again. Not over another woman.”

“She’s just jealous.” MaNtuli is in front of me in an instant. I try to pull away but her touch is familiar. Soft. Tender. Caring. “She wants to keep all your love for herself. But she doesn’t deserve it. If she did, she wouldn’t be putting her hands on you, Nqobizitha. What kind of mother corrects that way? I’m not your mother but uyazi nawe that I care for you. Don’t I tell you all the time? How proud I am of you. You’re an exceptional young man.”

I can sense the intimacy between us, she has a way of making me feel vulnerable. I don’t know why because I am not romantically attracted to her but she’s different from the others. There’s a level of foreign intimacy with her. Before I can help myself, I’m leaning down and aiming for her lips but she pulls away and I suddenly remember that we’re in the open. “Mama...”

“Not in public.” She caresses the bruise on my eye softly, and then creates some distance between us. “If you can sneak out tonight and then we’ll work something out.”

I’d ask her about mourning her husband were she doing that. She didn’t even do that and goes about life like usual. She must’ve really disliked uNtuli. “Not possible, Mama,” I tell her because there’s Chris. I sleep better with him around me. He talks and talks until eventually, I drift off. I don’t even have to have sex with him. “Maybe another day.”

“Oh...” she wears a disappointed look and nods her head. “We’ll...discuss the way forward through messages then. I got a new number though. I’ll text you, okay?”

“Mama...” I nod my head and bow in reverence, making way for her so that she can enter her car. “See you around.” I close her door and we make eye contact once before she’s driving off. I’m a little late when I finally make it home. MaKhathide is waiting outside the gate, looking impatient as fuck. Mentally, I roll my eyes, but a charming smile pulls at my lips. “I must be the luckiest guy on earth. To have my beautiful mother waiting outside for me. It’s almost as if my beautiful mother is a prophet, she knew I had some good news that I couldn’t wait to tell her.”

MaKhathide's frown drops a little and she eyes me suspiciously. "You're late. And what good news are you talking about?"

I embrace her first and inhale her expensive scent in deeply. She doesn't return it but I don't care. "Come, let's enter the house first, Mama wami." I guide her back to the main house with my arm wrapped around her. "Sanibona ekhaya." I greet my sisters and mam' Mdletshe.

"Bhutiza!" Nontethelelo is sitting with her feet on the coffee table. MaKhathide's frown reappears but she bites her tongue. "How was school?"

"I passed an Accounting test," I tell her with a small smile on my face. Her eyes light up and she reminds me of Nhlakanipho with that proud glint. It's embarrassing, I don't want them to look so impressed. Fishing inside my bag, I retrieve my textbook and grab my test paper. "Zibonele ngawakho amehlo."

Her proud smile remains, "Not too shabby, my guy. Thatha Ndoni, look at this. Better than his last test, huh?" she gives my test paper to Ndoniyamanzi.

"If you keep this up, you may even find yourself getting a distinction, bhuti. It's still the first term so you have plenty of time to turn that into a reality."

I nod and show my impatient mother what the others are on about. "Next time, you should aim for at least eighty percent," she says. "You're not going to get into UCT with this. That is where Usilondile is studying, angithi?" she refers to one of my older sister's daughters. "Only seventeen and already in tertiary. I'm not going to say this is good because you need to do better but you're not failing either which is a start. Eat and then go to work on where you went wrong, ndodana."

"MaKhathide wami," I bow my head, kiss the cheeks of everyone in the living room and then leave the house. In my own house, I change and then go back to the family home to get lunch. Mam' Mdletshe has prepared ujeqe and oxtail. She wants me to fall asleep in the afternoon with this filling food. As soon as I'm done eating, I try to follow my mother's advice. I still don't understand shit and to be honest, I was lucky I even got fifty percent in that test. Mr. Nsibande makes us write class tests every Friday to recap everything we learned during the week so I'm going to assume that I crammed particularly well this time. Nearly an hour into my fruitless studying, I hear MaKhathide's voice outside. She's leaving. I think I might just follow her. But first, let me talk to Bambi.

Ukuphi? – me.

He's online but he doesn't answer for a while. I wonder if he's having an important conversation with someone. Maybe that French idiot of his. I don't like the way something dark twists inside me. Since when do I grow jealous? *Not jealous*, my mind scoffs and right, that's not what this is. Besides, Chris and I aren't romantic or anything. We're...something, that is not romantic. Sexual, yes. And other weird layers that I am not sure of. That I'd rather not address. Because labels come with major responsibility. My phone chirps with a message. Five minutes later. Okay.

At home. Don't text me in Zulu next time. I'm bad at reading it 😞. – Chris

I laugh out loud and shake my head. Lately, it's becoming really easy to forget that he's a city boy. He speaks isiZulu really well, considering he's also half...something. I don't remember what but he speaks French also, like that idiot he calls his boyfriend. *Not jealous*, my mind reminds me. Right. I'm not jealous. Completely not jealous.

I want to see you. – me

He reads the message immediately this time and I see that he's typing. Good. I always want all of his attention for myself. Maybe that makes me a selfish bastard but I don't care. I don't.

You always ask so politely. Zenny's home. – Chris

Okay. I hesitate this time, not sure how I should reply. Zenande is cool and all but I dig her brother more. He is the most dramatic person I know but he makes me comfortable. I find myself wanting to talk to him about the things that many people don't know about me. I find myself interested in hearing him talk more about his personal life, how it was like for him Johannesburg, and any information – no matter how small – that he deems me worthy of knowing. I'm interested in him. My phone beeps again.

I'm judging by your silence that you've changed your mind. – Chris

And that's fine and all but you could've just said that instead of the silence. – Chris

Anyway, have a nice life ke. – Chris

I blink at the messages in confusion. Chris' sassiness is in my ear. I can hear it. I don't even know what the hell I've done wrong. Dude didn't respond to my messages for like five minutes but I didn't have a meltdown over it. What the hell is wrong with him?

Aliphele iconsi, dali. I wasn't ignoring you. Why would I do that? – me

He reads it immediately again and then he's typing.

I told you I don't understand isiZulu. Anyway, it's fine. I don't even know why we're discussing this because I told you to go have yourself a nice life 🙌. – Chris

I should go have myself a nice life? – me

That's what I said 😏 – Chris

Okay. – me

I return my books inside my bag and shut my laptop. Any other stationary is stored inside the desk drawers. I'll try to study when I come back, maybe I won't suffer a headache this time. My phone is chirping with new messages and I have a suspicion that it's Chris. I switch off my data and head for the family home. My father is back. I guess I was too distracted with Chris that I didn't hear his car come in. "Baba, sawubona munt' omdala." I greet him respectfully and smile as he claps my back in pride.

"Mapholoba! Mbele! Maguya! Nyuswa kaDingila. KaNgcobo kaVumezitha. Ngcob' omhlophe. Oza! uNgongoma." I can hear the girls giggling but they don't understand. I love it when my father greets me like this, when he sees the pride of our ancestors in me. It makes me want to make him proud. "Are you done studying, ndodana?"

"I need a break, Baba. I was gaining a bad headache."

“That’s fine, just remember that your education is really important. It will lead you to a successful path. Your mother and I are proud of you.”

I smile. I’m not used to the sappiness. “Ngyabonga, Baba. Let me just go out for a little breather and then I’ll come back to study. I promise you.” He nods and gives me his permission. Good. MaKhathide will argue with him, not me. The sun is blazing outside and I’m starting to regret wearing something long instead of a short-sleeved golf shirt. And those shorts Chris chose for me, I should wear them one of these days, just to see his reaction. At least my destination isn’t that far. It takes me less than ten minutes to get there. I knock on the door twice and I’m met with the sister’s gorgeous face. “Sphalaphala...” my smile is innocent. “Looking beautiful as ever.”

She rolls her eyes but her lips stretch into a flustered smile. “Really, Nqobizitha? You came all the way from your house to tell me this?”

“No, of course not. I missed your beautiful face and I figured let me visit you.” I smile through my lie and put my hands in my pockets for added measure. “Are you working today?”

“Unfortunately for you, yes. I’m here for another hour before I leave.”

“What a pity,” I say as she allows me inside the house, into the living room. “Where is your brother?” I ask, looking around.

“In his room, freaking out about something.” She says dismissively. “Water or juice?”

“Beer, ice cold.” I turn the TV on, not that I even watch it. It’s just background noise. Zenande comes back but she’s really busy and moves around a lot. She’s preparing for work. I spot Chris in passing, he freezes as he sees me and then continues on. My eyes are on him the entire time, he’s a beauty. A breath I didn’t even know I was holding seeps out of me as soon as Zenande leaves. Chris was seeing her out. I wait for the door to close before springing into action. “Bambi.” My arms wrap around him, drawing him close. He smells so good, looks beautiful as ever, shining brighter than the sun. His light intoxicates me, I am drawn to it.

“Nqoba...” his voice is a whisper. My lips kiss down his neck, as my arms draw him close, I want to feel more of him. A surge of hunger is rushing in my veins, making me want to devour the boy in my arms.

His strangled moans are not helping my case, my dick is throbbing wildly, begging to be set free. Chris gasps as I bite down on his neck and pulls back slightly. "What are you doing here?"

"Having myself a nice life," I murmur before smashing my lips on his. He returns my kisses eagerly as I lift him in my arms. We're moving and moving until we collapse on his family couch. With our desperation, I am surprised we even manage to pull down our pants. But as soon as that's done, I can feel Chris' erection against mine and it still doesn't freak me out. It makes me hungrier, fills me with a ravenous hunger that only he can satiate. Our tongues come together and collide in a war of dominance. I like how this boy gives as good as he gets and so I yield this time. My hands are all over his body, his back, squeezing down his ass with ferocious force as his body arches into mine. I grind down on him, pleasure flowing through me at light speed, making me dizzy. He makes the most obscene noises and they are music to my ears. I have to keep myself from forcefully ripping his underwear and plunging into him wildly. I'm not even sure how exactly gay sex works. I wouldn't want to hurt him. We consume each other with our kisses, our touches, the way our bodies converse. I bury my face in his neck as the euphoria teases my spine. I love how he moans my name. How he cries it out. I love how he embraces me as if never wanting to let go. My own orgasm is upon me, my body jerks against him, as I cream my underwear. I get the urge to join his lips with mine. To kiss him. I do. It's softer than I usually go for but his hands are caressing my face and I don't have the desire to be rougher. "Nganeyakwethu..." I pant against his lips, my wet forehead touching his. My body is limp on top of him.

"What a nice life you're living," he whispers softly with a little smile.

"All thanks to you."

Christophe

Even though Zenny and I have known each other for just over a month, I love her like I love my parents. Out of all our sisters, she's the one that really welcomed me and for that I will forever be grateful. With that said, lately she seems to enjoy pissing me the fuck off. Seriously, I can't deal. I'm unable to can and all that trendy shit that people write on social media. I don't know if she doesn't have enough drama in her life or if she's suffering from dick-withdrawals because Nqoba hasn't been fucking her lately but her mood swings are annoying. The other day, she asked me about her missing underwear that she hangs in the bathroom. I told her I don't know where she put it. Just because I'm the gay kid, doesn't mean that I'll steal her underwear. It's not like it would fit me anyway. Then again yesterday, she misplaced her charger and blamed me for it. She came with it this morning, apologizing profusely. But her angelic side didn't last for long because she started accusing me of using her flip-flops. Me. A poor midget that she usually makes fun of being a mini crayon. Her flip-flops don't even fit me.

Anyway, I'm glad that Siyabonga spoke with his principal about offering me a position as an afterschool tutor for grades 10 – 12. I'll be teaching Economics, Accounting and Business Studies. Well, I haven't gotten the position yet, but I'm sure I will. I don't know of any internet cafes around here so Nqobizitha offered to do my CV. He really came through for me and even helped to print a copy of my matric certificate. I was lucky that I had it saved on my phone as well because when I found out about this position, I'd asked Simthandile to go to our house to collect it from my parents so that she could scan it and email it to me, but she hadn't found them home. Mommy has gone to Gabon to visit her family. I'm used to it, my father was always so reluctant about me leaving South Africa for mommy's country so she'd always leave me behind on my own. I am angry that she didn't have the decency to tell me that she was leaving though but what's new? They never include me in any important family decisions.

"If you drift off this much during a mock interview, I'm scared that you'll do the same with the principal, chomz! What are you thinking so hard about?"

"Nothing." I shake my head and look at her. "What was your question again?" Simthandile is helping me with possible interview questions that might come up. I look at her and return her silly grin. So close yet so far away. I wish I could just reach out and pull her out of my phone.

"What are your weaknesses?"

"I tend to overwork myself," I say, remembering how many times I've practiced this with Nqobizitha. Every time he came here every night, and he'd help me – searching potential questions and stuff – before he'd ask me to talk to him and then fall asleep at my side. I don't know why he's helping me the way he is but I am appreciative. "But that can be a strength because it means I get the job done. It will be especially advantageous when I'm teaching the kids because maybe I'll be able to extensively cover any areas that they're struggling with that maybe their teachers haven't been able to fully tackle."

"Hmm..." Simthandile nods her head and then continues with the questions. I ace all of them. I'm really competitive and tend to be an overachiever. What we're doing makes me miss school a little but maybe teaching a bunch of teenagers – some of them, older than me – is just the challenge I need. Of course this could also go wrong and I could end up being bullied because I'm short and thin and I only know how to fight with my mouth and not my fists. Nqobizitha said he'd be my personal bodyguard but I don't want to accept in case these village kids think I can't hold my own in a fight. I can't. But I don't want them to know that. "And what are you wearing?" Simi asks me as soon as we're done with our mock interview.

"Oh..." I jump off my bed and rush to my wardrobe, retrieving my suit. "This. It's totally rad, right?" I show her the pastel pink suit. "I'm still undecided on what I should pair it with though."

“Platform sneakers?”

“The pink ones or maybe those one with the cartoon characters?” I show both pairs.

“Pink, doll.”

“Okay.” I grab the ones with the cartoon characters. I laugh when she calls me an asshole. “I love you and I’ll call you later to tell you how it went. I’m going to run late. It’s almost afterschool now.” My interview’s at 15:15pm. Just fifteen minutes after school ends. The principal is busy during school hours apparently and that was the only time he had for me. It’s fine. As long as I get the job and make an income and as long as I’m away from Zenny for a while. I showered in the morning but I decide to do it again. Then I take care of my skin and put on the clothes I chose. My phone beeps with a message, making me pause my task of fixing the curls in my hair. I find it under my pillows.

I want to say good luck but I know you don’t need it. You’re going to dazzle that pensioner. – Nqoba

My lips stretch into a wide grin. I can’t help it. He remembered that my interview’s today. Well, he was with me, helping me with the questions last night, but still... he can’t do coupley things like this and expect me not to, to... I don’t even have the courage to say how he really makes me feel.

You should be in that room with me, to boost my ego. – me

He doesn’t read the message for a while and I have to hold back, my anxiety that’s telling me to text him again. I’m just always anxious for him to talk me. He drives me insane.

I already have your gift with me. But you’re not getting it until later tonight. – Nqoba

He got me a gift? I’m going to cry.

Silly old me? A gift? Ncaaawww Nqobizitha ☐ – me

Stop it. I'm with my friends here. You can't send me that face in public. – Nqoba

I break into a loud guffaw. I can't help it. Typical Zulu man tendencies. After I tell him that we'll talk later, I finish getting ready for my interview. Zenande is asleep but she knows I have an interview. I won't wake her, because I don't need her chopping my head off, especially with my interview. I scroll through my phone and choose my 'feel good' playlist. Jodeci's *'Forever My Lady'* blasts in my ears. Yes, I'm the sap who plays love songs to get pumped for an interview. But it's seriously a good song and I am even able to pretend not to see the condescending glares sent my way. To my disappointment, I don't meet Nqoba outside his school – don't even know why I'd expected him – but Siya is here.

"Try walking like you're excited," Siya says, raising his eyebrows at me.

"Sorry, your highness." I adjust my handbag and sway my hips side to side. "Would you prefer I shake my ass while walking?"

Siya snorts and shakes his head. "Uyabheda wena. Which ass are you talking about?"

"Hey!" I smack his arm. "Only Nqobizitha is allowed to make fun of my ass. Stop it."

"We're still obsessed with Nqoba," Siya sighs but thankfully he says nothing else. We walk silently inside the school gates and through an entrance near the parking lot. We enter the building I'm assuming belongs to the teachers. "I'll wait outside." Siya says as we stop outside the door that says headmaster's office. "Good luck!"

"I don't need it," I murmur, thinking back to Nqoba's WhatsApp message. Knocking twice on the door, an elderly thin man opens the door. He has the biggest mole on his nose and I try my best not to be distracted by it. "Sawubona, Baba. My name's Christophe Xulu. I'm here for the interview."

"Gxabashe!" the man stands aside, and I get in. He shakes my hand – firmly but I'm not sure if I imagine how his touch is lingering. "Ah, Siyabonga Shandu has told me about you. An intelligent young man you are apparently." Wow. I'm surprised that Siya even put in a good word for me already. "Have a seat and let's get right into it." I do as he says. His questions are relatively easy and he seems impressed by my matric results but something about him makes me feel uncomfortable, and the fact that we're in an enclosed space. I don't like the way he looks at me and I just can't accurately describe it but he makes

my skin crawl. A weird weight falls off my shoulders as soon as he tells me we're done. "How soon can you start?"

"Even tomorrow, Baba. I'm always free," I tell him.

"Good. Good." He leads me outside, with his hand on my shoulder, and pauses at the door. "K'sasa mfana wami. You're very smart and I will enjoy working with you."

I flash a fake smile. "Thank you, sir." I'm leaving immediately the door closes, my feet working faster than usual. Siya is waiting outside but my focus isn't on him. Nqoba's with him, changed and in his Brentwood. I leap into his arms and he catches me easily. But he's a little tense and puts me on my feet. "Sorry," I whisper because he's looking around and I am reminded that we're in public. "That was foolish of me."

"Tell me about it," Siya is glaring. "It's like you just have a death wish."

I don't reply. He won't understand. I was just trying to shake off that weird feeling I had when I was in Mr. Biyela's office. "Don't scare him, Siyabonga. He's done nothing wrong, just a normal hug," Nqoba takes my bag from me and wraps an arm around my shoulders.

"That wasn't innocent!" Siya is hissing. "He had his bloody legs wrapped around your waist and guys don't do that to each other, Nqobizitha. Sue me for trying to protect both of you."

I think it has more to do with him than it has to do with me and his own fears but I'm still not saying anything. I'm trying to focus on the way Nqoba's scent is intoxicating me. He's slowly chasing the creepy crawly feeling away. I wish we were naked so that he could intoxicate me properly. "Uya nami ekhaya?" I ask him, hoping he'll say yes.

"No." Nqobizitha shakes his head and I swallow down my disappointment. "I have to get your gift. I'll see you later on...Mr. Xulu. It'll be fun having you as my teacher."

"Don't expect to get a free pass," I say as we reach my house. His fingers play with the skin on my palm and we're looking at each other silently. It hurts to look at him, he's like this blinding light, but I still can't look away, trapped by the desire found in his eyes. The electricity is there, pulsing between us, it takes

everything in me to not give in and smash my lips against his. I bite my lip and accept my bag from him with trembling hands.

“Don’t do that,” he whispers, his eyes are dark, intense. “I don’t want to bring us both some trouble.”

“Sorry,” I whisper and hope the erratic beating of my heart will slow down. I’m struggling to breathe right. He’s too close. I can’t think. “Space, Nqoba...” I say softly, even the heat of him is clouding my senses.

“Right,” he clears his throat and gives us some much needed space. Siya is looking at us knowingly but he says nothing. “I’ll be back. Maybe around eight. Latest nine.”

“Looking forward to it,” I tell him honestly.

I watch him walk away and I’m beyond pathetic because I feel like crying. I want to run and cling to him and tell him to come back. Or to have him take me with him. Zenande is in a good mood all of a sudden. We chat until she has to leave. I’m on my own by 06:00pm. I decide to call Hugo a little early so that he won’t disturb my time with Nqoba. He reminds about my upcoming birthday, this coming week, and tells me he’ll see if he can get off work to come visit me. I want him to. I don’t want him to. I’m confused. But the confusion becomes a distant concept as soon as Nqoba enters my room through the window. He really doesn’t like knocking. Even when he knows Zenny isn’t here.

As soon as he’s on my bed, I tackle him and kiss him with everything in me. He invades my mouth back and flips us so that I’m under him. “I missed you too,” he’ll whisper every so often before crushing my lips in passionate kisses once more. I believe him. It may be foolish but I’m beginning to think he likes me back. “Your gift,” he murmurs softly as soon as we pull apart. I’m on his lap, his hands are underneath my t-shirt, his fingers dancing along the skin on my belly and back.

In my hands is a beautifully wrapped box, that I open carefully, fearfully. My eyes find a beautiful pen, it’s a little heavy and screams extravagance. Christophe Xulu is written across it in calligraphy. It’s glinting in the warm lighting in my room and I eye Nqoba curiously. “Wait...are these like real diamonds that are encrusted on the pen. I don’t think the pen is supposed to glint.”

“I don’t know,” he shrugs. “Kodwa ke leyandoda yomlungu ithe diamonds are the best way to brighten someone’s day. Ngabona ukuthi k’shuthi imali yasekhaya izophela la.” He’s talking in that teasing voice, with that stupid grin on his face, and this soft look in his eyes. He’s not fair. I can barely breathe with all

his attention on me. With him this close to me. With his fingers gently brushing my skin. "And then I imagined this smile you're giving me now and I told him iqede imali yasekhaya, bafo."

"You're an idiot," I press my lips against his softly. "What if I hadn't gotten the position?"

He gives me this disbelieving, bewildered expression. "Impossible! Uhlazo."

"Ihaba!" I return and then kiss him softly. Things are getting heated, he's devouring me, as I find myself on my back, with him in between my legs. I wrap my arms around him as he grinds down on me. His hands are squeezing the hell out of my ass, I moan and look into his eyes. The desire found in them makes me breathless and I can't quite believe that a guy like him is really into me. Tonight, I want more. All of him. I want his fingers on me, my naked body, to expose all of me to him fully. To feel the connection between us. Even deeper. "I want you," I whisper, caressing the back of his neck as his lips press into the skin on my throat.

He pulls back, eyes wild, and looks down at me. "What?" he doesn't seem to understand.

I bite my lip, not sure if I can voice my thoughts again, and use my hands instead. I guide him to my underwear, silently telling him to undress me. "Oh..." immediately he understands, I see a hint of fear showing in his eyes. "Are you sure? I-I don't know the slightest thing about this."

"I'll guide you," I whisper and kiss him again. "I want you."

He seems ready to say no but maybe my seriousness is showing because he kisses me, pressing me deeper into the mattress, swallowing the sounds that trespass my lips. "Okay." He murmurs as he tugs off my underwear. He lifts my shirt and kisses my belly, up and up he goes and he kisses my nipples. He takes one into his mouth and the sensation shoots to my throbbing dick. I moan.

"Please," I whisper again.

Our lips connect desperately as he moves to fulfill my wish.

His lips disconnect from mine after what feels like a lifetime of kissing but still feels too darn short for me. My chest is heaving, I can't breathe right, but I want him to kiss me again. Maybe he's a mind reader, because his lips press lightly against mine. Not really touching. His fingers are drawing patterns on my waist, and the blood is pumping throughout my body. "Teach me all about pleasuring you," he breathes the words into my mouth. Dark desire swirls in my belly and I wrap my legs around his waist.

"Everything you do turns me on," I whisper, trailing wet kisses down his temple, to his ear, down and down until I'm kissing the corner of his mouth. I lick it and kiss him softly. "Do you...want to remove my shirt?" He replies by shifting off a little, to take off my shirt. My underwear is already off and he's still dressed. It makes me feel bare. Too bare. I get the urge to cover myself but he's regarding me with this awed expression I've never seen before. It's so silent and the longer he stares, the more nervous I become. "Please say something," I whisper, now my hands are covering my dick.

"Don't," he pulls my hands away and eyes me intensely. "This is a compliment." He leans down to kiss me again and I help him to remove his clothes. We don't rush it. Not all how I imagined this would go. We're never slow. This feels too intimate but I don't want it any other way than this. As soon as he's naked, he's pressing his body to mine again and my body goes insane. I almost shoot my load. This is too much. The sensation of skin on skin is out of this world. My hands caress down his back but not his ass because maybe he'll be uncomfortable. We're grinding on each other, our erections creating sweet friction. The fact that he's already hard and leaking does something to me. I press my lips to his again and he returns my kiss eagerly – his lips firm and demanding. Just how I like it. "Tell me more," he says as I gasp. "What else should I do? I want to pleasure you." He says all this with his feather light touches driving me insane. His fingers are pinching my nipple, his other hand trailing down my side. I'm a squirming mess beneath him.

I would love a blow job but I'm not sure if some straight Brentwood wearing Zulu boy will give me that. I'll give it to him first and then maybe one day, he'll be able to return the favour. "I want to suck your dick," I say seductively against his lips. I love sucking dick anyway. He seems surprised but I manage to maneuver beneath his large body and then kiss my way down it until I reach his length. He's big. The veins on his length are throbbing beautifully. I'm a professional at this, I've been doing it for a while now but I'm still nervous. Nqoba is usually pleased by women twice his age and what if he doesn't enjoy this? He's looking at me intensely, with a clenched jaw. I decide to get to it. Dabbing my tongue on the bead of precum, I hear him suck in some air and groan quietly. His fingers are twitching, I can feel them caress my head. Swiping my tongue over and around the top of his cock, I make sure to wet it so that I can make my job easier.

I stroke him a few times, feeling him throb ardently beneath my touch, and then with my eyes still on him, open my jaw wide and take in as much of him as I can. My lips barely tighten around his girth and I watch him throw his head back while releasing a moan that comes from deep inside his throat. "SHIT!" it's a good thing Zenny is working. He's responsive. Sucking tightly around him, I hum in pride as he pats

my head tenderly. What I can't fit into my mouth, I use my hand to stroke. My other hand teases his balls, giving them soft tugs while I bob my head up and down, and hum around his cock. Sucking dick has always been something I enjoyed but with Nqobizitha's shaft throbbing in my mouth, I am close to shooting my load. Maybe it's the intense sexual chemistry. Maybe it's the way he seems to be thoroughly enjoying what I am doing to him. But a feeling of contentment overcomes me and my eyes close as I focus on nothing but worshipping his dick.

"*Christ!*" Nqoba is growing uncoordinated and I know that he's close but I'd rather have him spill in a different hole. He curses loudly as I let him go with a wet pop. "Nganeyabantu...w-what the fuck—"

"You wanted to pleasure me. I want you inside me." I tell him, my voice is hoarse – the effects of a sore throat. "You're going to need to open me up first." My body is on top of his. I kiss his lips passionately and guide his hands to my ass. "Lucky for you, I douche almost everyday. So no nasty surprises." He doesn't seem to get what I'm on about but then again straight sex is all he knows. "I want you to find my prostate. The bundle of nerves there will make lose my shit." With my guidance, we work at it. At first, he's just pressing my perineum. Then he's using his fingers, rubbing, pressing and stroking. I don't know where he gets the confidence from but his other hand strokes my aching dick and he will occasionally squeeze my balls. It goes on and on with needy whimpers pathetically leaving my lips. I pinch my nipples and arch into him, my inflamed body overwhelmed by the different sensations he's coaxing out of me. He finds my prostate again and my body jolts, making me squeal like a teenage girl.

"I like this," he's so smug. He presses into my prostate again and I have to grip the bedsheets to keep from soaring to the roof.

"Oh fuck...please, Nqoba."

I flick my tongue out to lick my dry lips and bite on the skin softly. My thighs are trembling now and I feel the lust in his touches, they shoot to every bone in my body. "I need to be inside you now." He says it so confidently, authoritatively, that I shudder as I nod my head frantically. I'm practically begging him to do it. I even help him with the baby oil, spreading it over his length. He groans and feasts on my lips like a hungry man. I'm on my back again, my legs readily spreading for him, like they know he belongs there. My eyes flutter closed as the tip teases me slowly. "We'll take it real slow."

"*AHH!*" I wrench my lips from his as I feel something significantly larger than his fingers slowly penetrate me. My body is trembling beneath him. It hurts. The sensation is overwhelming, maybe because it's been a while but I still hadn't expected it to be this bad. "Shit, kub'hlungu Nqoba!"

He's groaning very loudly above me as if he is enjoying every sensation, how I feel. He probably is, this face he's making, I remember it from all those weeks ago with Zenny. His eyes are squeezed tightly, jaw clenched even tighter. I'm struggling to regulate my breathing, to ease the pain. My trembling hands run down his muscles body, feeling him contract beneath my touch. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he finally finds his voice. It's laced with lust, sounds like he's wounded. He's kissing my temple, soothing me with words of comfort. "I really need to move. Or I'll die. Baby, I need to—"

"Do it," I whisper shakily, nodding my head.

He withdraws a little and then snaps back into me with gentle consideration. I cry out and dig my blunt nails into his shoulders. "So tight...n-never felt anything like this before." He's wheezing, pulling out and then thrusting into me again. He doesn't stop and with each thrust, he slowly fills me with every inch of his dick. I think he's searching for my prostate with the way he snaps his hips. I scream as he finds it. "Right there?" his voice is ragged, heated breath burning into me.

"Yes. Yes. Yes." I can't stop repeating. The way he's thrusting into me – with slow but forceful thrusts that threaten to milk the cum right out of me – sets my body on fire. I never want him to stop. My hands are all over him, desperate, wanting to touch every part I can get to. He's possessed me, intoxicated me with a drug so deep I literally crave to have him crawl inside me. "I want this forever." I don't know what I'm whispering. I'm moaning into his ear, clinging to him, feeling his heartbeat against mine.

"You feel so good," he returns, looking down at me. His eyes are too dark, almost obsidian, and so erotic. I want him to stop looking at me lest I trick myself into an illusion. So my lips meet his, my desire for him colliding with my confusion. With each press of his dick, it feels like he's snatching my soul—claiming ownership of me. I can't help making small helpless sounds, clawing into his back—silently begging. *Deeper. Give me all of you.*

Maybe Nqoba lives to serve because he pounds into me, making my body quiver as his dick plunges deep into the depths of my soul. I arch my back, presenting myself to him. I'm a moaning mess, my trembling hands flailing everywhere. "Oh fuck...god!" I scream, high-pitched, wanton, breathing harshly, glistening in sweat.

"Xulu, Makhathini, Xabashe, Donda wasEnkweleni." He grips my face, touching my forehead with his, staring into my glossy eyes. My heart stutters, my chest clenching tightly—there's that chemistry again.

My fingers trace Nqobizitha's lips. "Kiss me..." it's stolen from a harsh breath.

Nqoba leans down and joins his lips with mine, capturing my soul. I'm so close and I go to stroke myself, his hand joins mine. I'm breathing heavily, my body wet, I'm not even sure if I'm crying or if the bead of sweat has extended to my eyes. Nqoba takes me to the skies, letting me fly until I can't hold on anymore. My orgasm comes crashing down on me—in screaming, clawing, crying, earthshaking waves. My essence shoots between us. My eyes roll to the back of my head and I black out but I can feel his eyes on me. Maybe that's the reason he comes with a loud groan, owning parts of me that he shouldn't have the right to. "Nqoba!" I gasp his name, hugging him very tight. Perhaps he'd been right about me seeing the heavens, it feels like my soul is being sucked out of my body.

"Best I ever had," I hear him breathe against my forehead before he's pressing a kiss to my lips and then gently pulling out. My fingers dig into his biceps to keep from crying out in pain. He rolls onto his side of the bed and then brings me onto his chest. I can feel his heartbeat against my ear, it helps my exhausted self drift to sleep, with him embracing me tightly.

Mutual Desires : Eleven

Nqobizitha

“Nqobizitha!”

My ears perk up at the sound of Mama’s voice. This can only mean one thing. My favourite toy car is quickly forgotten as I look over my shoulder to find her kind eyes on me. Mama has a smile on her face. It makes me return it as I patiently wait for her instruction. She doesn’t like it when I am impatient because she says my other Mama – my real one – may find her loving me better and grow jealous and then chase her away. I don’t want that to happen so I behave now and continue playing freeze until she gives me the permission to move.

“Isikhathi sok’ncela,” she says as she lifts me into her arms and carries me to the room I share with Engimphiwe. “You’ve been very patient today, mfana wami. Mama is proud of you.”

I let out a proud giggle as soon as she is done kissing me on the lips. Her hand is very large in my small one but I like it, it’s different from my real Mama’s hard one – this one is soft and warm as she guides my hand to her bra so that I can pull out one of her breasts. It’s big and thick and droopy, not at all small like my real Mama’s, and she helps my small hand carry it as she guides it into my mouth. She kisses my forehead like my real Mama does and squeezes my shoulder as I suck on her breast. She readjusts me and rubs the inside of my thighs before her hand guides one of my legs in between her own thighs until my foot is touching her...there. Mama seems to like it very much when my feet touch her there, and she will make sounds like cries but she always tells me I’m making her feel good.

“You’re such a good boy, Nqobizitha. Mama loves you for this.” Her words are in my ear. She cries loudly again and then I feel her wet my toes. Her plastic nails are digging into my thigh, it hurts but Mama’s words are comforting. “Such a good boy. Such a good boy. Such a good boy,” she repeats over and over again until her touch doesn’t hurt anymore.

“Nqoba? Nqobizitha! Wake up!”

My body jolts awake as I feel someone’s hand nudging my shoulder gently. “Mama?” the word falls off my lips as I realize that I’m hugging someone’s waist, my nose pressed against the same person’s hip. The scent is familiar, soothing. As soon as I realize who it belongs to, my eyes lift up from beneath the

blanket, and meet familiar ones looking down at me. For a second, I am confused, wondering just what the hell I am doing in Bambi's room until I remember what transpired between us. A slow smile spreads across my lips. Chris returns it and it's absolutely breathtaking.

"Hey," he breaks the silence but our eyes are still locked on each other.

"Hey," I return.

"Are you okay?" his voice is a whisper. He's shuffling down the bed until we're face to face. My arm immediately enwraps at the small of his back, pulling him close. He winces and lets out a pained moan. I observe him curiously, worried. "My back is on fire, my ass is swollen and I feel constipated," he confides, sighing softly. "Nothing I can't handle so don't worry about me. You were doing that trembling thing again as if you're shivering. It was a little worse this time. What's wrong, Tarzan wami?"

"Nothing's wrong," I shake my head, "I just had a dream...revisiting the past."

"About your mom? You kept saying Mama and this is the first time I've heard you talk in your sleep."

"I just...miss my other Mama," the words spill out of me without permission. My chest tightens in pain, I really do, but she's not coming back.

"Hey," his lips press to mine and I reciprocate eagerly, trapping him under me. He lets out a soft cry, his hands on my chest, pressing me up. I get the message and try not to crush his toothpick body. "Usually I love your weight on top of mine but please don't kill me. I can barely breathe as it is. Also, what do you mean your other mom? Was your mom also part of the umnakwethu club?"

I chuckle and shake my head. "No. My other Mama, she took care of me from age 4 – 11. My Teacher. My Heart. My Mama."

He seems confused for a second before he smiles and I watch the realization show on his beautiful features. "Oh...a nanny!" he rolls his eyes and cups my cheeks. "Could've just said that."

Except she was more than a nanny to me but I'm not in the mood to discuss her right now. The pain will be close to unbearable. "This is the first time you've ever woken up before me. What's the time?" I ask him, my fingers trace the contours of his smooth body, his waist. I enjoy the little puffs of air he releases that fan my face, as he squirms beneath me, his own fingers lightly tracing my lips.

"04:35am," he replies, his fingers are curious. I have to close my eyes as he traces every inch of my face—as if trying to discover every facet in my skin. His touches light me on fire and it burns where he leaves his traces on my skin, making it hard for me to breathe. And yet, I want him to keep touching me. My eyes open to find him looking up at me and even with the darkness in his room, I can see the tenderness in his eyes, the glow on his features that makes him look ethereal. I lower myself on him so that our faces are lightly touching, so that our noses and lips are brushing against each other. He sighs quietly and wraps his arms around me. It's too...cozy but it doesn't make me uncomfortable. I capture his lips again and feel the fireworks explode in my belly and behind my eyes. I love how receptive he is. "I really enjoyed last night. Thank you," he whispers as soon as the need for air forces our lips to part.

"If I had known that dicking you down would turn you into this...quiet, almost shy creature, I would've done it long ago." I tease, kissing him again. His lips are addictive, they're like a drug to me.

He rolls his eyes but says nothing as he lifts up to kiss me, almost shyly, and then confidently when I reciprocate with fervour. My hands are all over him, touching any patch of skin I can get to, his moans are shooting to my dick and I want to take him again. And again. And again. I've never really felt the way I had last night, when I was sheathed deep inside him. Even with MaNtuli, the passion hadn't come close to this. The pleasure. The intensity. Part of me wonders how I'll ever get what's happening between us out of my system. Because Chris has managed to get under my skin, without him even realizing it.

"Awungipha phela ukudla kwasekseni, Xulu." I drawl against his lips, enjoying the feel of him squirming beneath me, I can feel his heart pulsating for me, his breathing growing erratic. I want more, I want to feel his body vibrate down to his toes – all for me. "Kancane nje."

"I wonder what type of b-breakfast you're—fuck!" He moans and holds my head in place as I capture one of his nipples and suck on it earnestly. My fingers play with the other one, gently rubbing and tugging on it. His thighs splay wider and I feel him hot against me, pushing his hips up to mine, searching for that tantalizing friction. I grip both of our shafts in my hand and groan as I watch him throw his head back in pleasure. I don't think there's anything sexier than hearing him pleading. Than hearing the desperation in that one word, floating from his tender lips, shooting straight to my dick, to my being and heightening all my sense at once. "Please..."

I'm still nervous about screwing things up and making it hurt for him but he's kissing me deeply, passionately, almost as if he's drowning and I am his air. He's eager and so I return his eagerness, leaving no corner of him untouched. We're kissing and moving our bodies and soon, he's on his hands and knees. Like last night, he's patient, guiding me through it. I kiss down his spine, marking his body, claiming my territory.

"I don't want you to go," he murmurs outside the door, with a kicked puppy expression, before looking away as if he can't quite believe that the words left him.

I don't want to go either, maybe it's because we've had sex, but I want to spend the whole day in with him. We don't even have to have sex – maybe a few fucks here and there – I just want to spend some time, tucked away from the world. My mind sneers at me for how sappy I'm becoming but I can't help it. The longer we stare at each other, the more I find myself close to risking it all. School. MaKhathide. But I don't want to gain more bruises on my body. Leaning down to kiss him softly, I wrap my arms around him and bring him closer so that we're flush together. My belly quivers and the air around us isn't just sexual. There's...more to it. An intense chemistry. "I'll think about you all day."

"You'll prove it to me by texting me."

"No delays today, no sir." I grin and caress his face, he leans into my touch and kisses the inside of my hand. "I'm looking forward to these afterschool classes we'll be having."

Chris smiles and rolls his eyes knowingly. "Nope. Not happening. We're not going to have sex in your school. I refuse. I refuse a million times."

"Spoilsport." I pinch his cheek and ready myself to leave. My feet are reluctant, I'm still frozen where I was. His fingers are playing with my jersey. "Sengihembe, dali."

He nods his head but he doesn't let go of my jersey. I lean down to kiss him, mercilessly, and crush his body to mine. He whimpers and returns the kiss. As soon as we pull apart, I kiss his forehead and then leave without another word. I'm not trying to bed him again. He mentioned something about me crippling him when I suggested we shower together. I don't know how he can blame me when he's such an irresistible creature. I don't know if it's because I'm in a really good mood that I find myself reaching home five minutes early. I jump the back gate and look around to check for any family members. Nothing. I use the back window to jump into my bathroom and then I flush the toilet and wash my hands before exiting the bathroom. "Ntethe, fuck!" I shout as I spot my sister chilling comfortably on my bed with her phone in hand. "Wenzani la? This is my house for fuck's sake!"

Her eyes raise to meet mine. "You didn't sleep home last night."

"Uyasangana ke manje sisi wami. I just went to the toilet – morning wood. I don't expect you to understand unless you suddenly grew a dick and joined the BBC club when you were in Scotland."

She chokes on her saliva and I smirk as I move to retrieve my backpack so that I can sort out my books for the day. "You're lucky our parents seem oblivious to these nightly escapades you embark on. Awusho ke...who was last night's unfortunate girl?"

"None of your business," I say and begin to undress so that I can wear my school uniform. Just because Nontethelelo is bisexual, doesn't mean that we're now going to bond over preferring both genders. I don't even think I'm attracted to dudes anyway. Chris is just...he's the exception. He puts anyone I've ever slept with to shame. At the same time, it's not even about sex. I can't explain what it is about him but I'm pretty sure I'd be as drawn to him as I am now were he female. It's him as a person. Not just his gender. I dig him. "You never did answer me about why you're here. This is not your escape room."

"I was sent to fetch you for breakfast. You're running late namhlanje and you're lucky that Mam' Mdletshe isn't here today. Uyazi uMa ubezothuma yena."

"You're not going to say anything, right?" our eyes lock on the mirror.

"Just don't make this a habit," Ntethe shakes her head and wraps her thin arm around me as we make an exit, headed for the main house. "There's more to life than pussy."

There's Chris. I keep the words to myself and kiss my sister's temple, getting the front door for her. She hates it but she doesn't complain. "Ngyabingelela ekhaya. Baze babahle abantu ekseni kangaka kwenzenjani?" I go around kissing my mother on the cheek and then Ndoniyamanzi. I shake my father's hand firmly and smile as he starts to honour our ancestors.

"You're awfully happy today," Ndoni narrows her eyes at me. "So unlike you."

"Awu ihaba dadewethu," I'm momentarily distracted by Thandeka's beauty, she stands beside me and pours me a glass of juice. I don't know when this became her duty all of a sudden but I thank her. It

seems everyone's in a good mood today, even MaKhathide, but she leaves us halfway into breakfast. A business meeting in Empangeni apparently. Baba takes it in stride, she manages his businesses anyway and hustles hard to bring in most of the wealth. At 06:45am, I meet Nhlakanipho outside my house and we begin the walk to school. I don't know why I suddenly become nervous around him but part of me fears that he can see right through me. It's not helping my case that I keep thinking back to last night and this morning. I still remember how heavenly it felt being sucked in by Chris. The sensations. I don't know what I can compare his warmth to but my dick's twitching at the mere thought of having him again. I clear my throat and attempt to adjust the boner in my pants. "So how was your night?"

Nhlakanipho looks at me and smiles too damn wide. Like he got laid as well. But I wonder which of the girls is responsible for it. "The same old," his words contradict that grin on his face. "Are you ready for today's extra classes? Siyabonga tells me Chris is really intelligent."

I stifle a groan at the mention of Chris' name and nod my head. "Maybe I'll actually learn something this time, Bafo."

Classes are a drag, like usual, and we still don't have a replacement for MaNtuli. That's a free period that I use to text back and forth with Chris. He tells me about how his day is going and what he's doing at home. He has a meeting with the principal just before the final bell, just to ease him into his new position as tutor. Mr. Biyela called to let him know that he'll actually start tutoring the following week because it's already Wednesday. But he needs to communicate with our teachers to find out how far we are into the first term curriculum. He can also attend some classes with them to find out how to accurately do the job. It's good for me, means I'll be able to see him throughout the day as well.

Siyabonga joins us at lunchtime. He's limping again, it's really bad this time, and he is wheezing. He looks sleep deprived but as soon as he spots us, a bright smile pulls at his lips. "Magents, how was class?" his eyes are lingering on Nhlakanipho, very soft.

"Don't ask," Nhlakanipho wraps an arm around him and maybe I am projecting what I have with Chris onto both of them because I am seeing them in a different light...somehow. Like how Siya is leaning into Nhlakanipho's embrace and how my best friend's lips brush against Siya's ear to tell him about one thing or the other. And this look in their eyes, I can't quite put my finger on it. "Did you gargle with salt water like I told you to?" I hear Nhlakanipho ask Siya. I spaced out a little but I'm sure he's referring to the sore throat that Siyabonga seems to be having.

"It didn't work," Siya is glaring, a pout on his lips, and the intimidating look he's going for isn't working. I want to repeatedly rub my knuckles on his head. "I'm mad at you. Hhuwe wonke lo, Nhlakanipho."

“Kahle, I didn’t make the suggestion, Shandu.”

“I wonder what the two of you are being so cryptic about,” I tell them as our food arrives at our table. Both of them startle lightly as if they had forgotten I was with them. Now I am really suspicious but I bite my tongue. “Your birthday is less than two weeks away, Bafo. Do you know what you want for your birthday?” I ask Nhlakanipho.

“We talk about this every year. Nothing, bafo. I’m good, you know that.”

He always says this. It’s his nature to never ask for help from anyone. It can get really annoying, especially around times like this, when he deserves a break and to be celebrated. I’m still going to get him something. A new phone maybe since he walks around with a Samsung that should’ve stayed in 2013. I’ll have to find a way to convince him to take the new phone though. Maybe get Siya to talk to him because Nhlakanipho likes to make the kid happy. It’s weird and I feel like I’m missing something but again, this may be me projecting onto them. So I ignore the niggling feeling that something is amiss and pretend not to notice the lingering touches and soft glances.

Christophe

“This is where you went wrong,” I tell Sthelosethu, showing him his error on the calculations for Income Tax paid in the Cash Flow Statement. My voice is trembling a little, maybe it’s because this is my second day or it could have to do with the intensity of Nqobizitha’s staring. The shivers are taunting my spine and I have to apologize to the boy I’m talking to as I drop my pen when I continue to circle some of the mistakes he’s made. Perhaps it hadn’t been a good idea to accept tutoring Nqoba’s class as well, his presence is intimidating, overwhelming – and it would be in the best way were we not in class.

Another girl calls me and I go to her. She giggles and calls me ‘girlfriend’. I’m a little offended because I’m not flamboyant that much to be upgraded to the gay best friend position. I don’t even want it. Girls tend to have drama, I know from high school. This is why Simthandile was the only girl I hung out with especially after I was tricked by them back in Grade 8. “Khona okunye?” I ask her, I think her name is Nozipho.

“Ngicela i-number yakho.” She hands me her phone, fluttering her eyebrows. Her aura is intimidating, like she doesn’t take no for an answer. She looks real ghetto. Like some of those Soweto kids who attended model C schools and could beat some of our pampered asses with just their pinky fingers.

“That’s against the school’s policy. I’m your teacher—”

“Tutor,” she says with a little attitude. “And I know you’re into guys so relax, I’m not after your dick. I just want us to be friends. I’ve never personally known a gay guy before – except GC on the TV.”

“Sorry. That’s still a no from me,” I say handing her back her phone. Maybe that’s a little rude of me but this girl has a forceful aura and I do need friends outside of Nqoba and his friends but not someone like her. Not a student that I’m teaching anyway. We need to have boundaries. I check the time and only three minutes remain until we’re done so I decide to dismiss the class a little early. “You’re free to leave, guys! Thank you so much for joining me.”

The class slowly disperses and some of the students say a few polite words to me. It’s mostly the girls, I don’t know what fascinates them so much about gay men but at least they’re not rude. I think the boys are trying to warm up to me. Most of them wouldn’t even accept my help, and would jump away as if I would infect them or something when I tried showing them their errors. The snickers weren’t so bad in this class and I’m hoping the other class I will be teaching tomorrow will be like this one. “Do you need me to help you carry that?”

Nqoba is beside me, too close, one of his hands trailing close to my ass. It’s funny how he used to make fun of it but has nothing but compliments for it now. It’s funny how he can barely keep his hands to himself. He’s...different. Behaves too much like a boyfriend that it confuses me. I don’t know if it’s because we’ve had sex now and maybe that just made our bond more intense. But I love that he cannot spend a day without talking to me or seeing me. He still comes home to sleep with me in my room. And we have sex a lot. *A lot*. I think Siya was right about him being a sex addict. It’s an inconvenience for me because I walk funny nine times out of ten – and I think Zenny is suspicious. She’s still moody so I keep out of her way as much as possible.

“Thank you,” I stand on my tiptoes to give him a quick peck on the lips. He’s getting a little carried away so I gently push him away with my palms on his chest. “Anyone could walk in, Nqobizitha.”

“Right.” He clears his throat and grabs my bag. The electricity is deliciously flowing between us and I have to stick close to him as we walk out. We meet Mr. Biyela outside the class. He observes both of us but his eye is lingering on me. I don’t like it. Before I can help myself, I grip Nqobizitha’s hand and hold onto it. Nqoba doesn’t pull away. He’s the only guy I know who’s comfortable with holding another guy’s hand in public – especially around here. “Bab’ Biyela, kunjani? Are you here to lock the class?”

“Awu Mapholoba,” the old man’s smile is creepy. He nods his head. “You know I prefer to do it myself. I don’t trust these janitors.” His eyes find me again, they drag my physique and he licks his lips. I shudder and press firmly into Nqobizitha’s side. “Mfana wami. How was your second day?”

“It went well, Baba.” His eyes darken as I say that. “We’ll see you around.” Pulling on Nqobizitha’s hand, I drag him away from that creep. “That man really makes me uncomfortable.” I tell Nqoba as soon as we’re out of his sight, at the school gates.

Nqoba looks down at me, confused. “Who? Bab’ Biyela? He’s the coolest employee here in Sithola Imfundo. The most laidback.”

“Still...” I whisper. “Is he...gay?”

Nqobizitha chuckles loudly as if I’ve told him the funniest joke ever. “The pensioner? Gay?” his laughs are travelling to my belly, calming me. “Married for forty-five years with children waaay older than you and me. He’s not gay.”

“Okay...” I decide to take Nqoba’s word for it. Maybe I’m just imagining things. Maybe it has to do with that distracting mole of his. I sigh and allow Nqobizitha’s aura to intoxicate me instead. He has a way of chasing the bad feelings away, of making me feel safe – and happy. He makes me happy.

“So...why was Nosiphiwe giving you her phone?”

What?

My brain quickly go on a searching spree until I remember that girl in his class. Her name’s Nosiphiwe not Nozipho like I thought. Anyway, why is Nqoba asking? He knows I’m gay and that the idea of even being romantically involved with girls makes me sick. I can’t stomach it. “Don’t tell me you’re jealous,” I tease as we reach my house. I guess he’s coming in with me today.

He scoffs but I swear he looks offended. “We’d have to be dating for me to be jealous. I’m not your Congolese boyfriend who makes love to you in French. Ngyak’bhebha mina.”

Lately, he always does this. I don't know if he starts talking like this for us to engage in petty arguments so he can fuck me into forgiving him or if he enjoys breaking my heart. Maybe he wants me to cry like those protagonists in romantic films. I never give him the satisfaction, no matter how badly I want to. "And I'd have to want to date you first before you can even talk about dating, Nqoba. But I'd rather be old and single than to date your man-whorish ass."

"Funny, you never say that when I'm balls deep inside you. All you do is moan and say you're dying. Funny how you compliment me and it's always 'Aah...Mmh Nqobizitha. Fuck me hard. Mhm...ungibhebha kamnandi.'" He's moaning dramatically and usually, I laugh when he does this but not this time. He's making me angry and depressed at the same time.

"Awume," my voice is a whisper. We've entered the house, and Zenny isn't here, I don't know where she is but maybe she's already left for work.

"Are you sure? Because I was about to get to that part where you cry when it's too intense. On some 'I'm all yours. Yours to fuck. To bite. To choke. It hurts so good, Nqoba. Don't stop...don't ever—"

"Stop it!" I push him, but he pulls my arm and we're suddenly face-to-face, glaring at each other until something snaps.

I'm not sure who makes the first move, but somehow, we come together. A groan spills from Nqoba's lips as my body presses against him, he hooks his hand in my belt loop and pulls me close. I'm just as eager, fisting Nqoba's jacket while licking into his mouth. My entire body flares to life, and the fire is burning my veins. My hold on his jacket tightens and an aching sound of frustration leaves my lips as Nqoba grips both my wrists in a vice grip and abruptly spins us, resulting in me being pinned to the wall, arms above my head.

"You need a good fucking," Nqoba murmurs so innocently, lips teasingly brushing against mine, his breath sending shivers down my spine. "I'm going to give you what you need and you're going to thank me for it."

Like hell I will.

"Good luck with that," I spit out, face burning at how turned on I am by the entire thing. I don't have the time to fully admit it as Nqoba's lips are crashing down on me once more – and what's happening next is

that we're colliding and crashing into every surface, clothes falling too quickly, lips barely separating, our desperate hands roaming over heated skin.

I'm fucked to the point of tears, thanking him, like he said I would.

My birthday is tonight. Well, it actually was on Tuesday, February 18th but I found out that Zenande had an entire birthday party planned out for today – Saturday, February 22nd. I'm looking forward to it and right now, Nqoba is escorting me to fetch Simthandile at Eshowe Taxi Rank. I'm looking forward to seeing her again. I've missed her so much and it's unfortunate that she'll only be staying for two days before she's going back to Joburg again. Hugo isn't coming anymore. He couldn't get off work but he did promise to try and visit next month. He told me that Simi would be coming with my gift.

"I can hear your dirty thoughts above this R Kelly song you're playing." I turn away from the window and my eyes find Nqoba. He grabs my hand and kisses my knuckles before focusing on the road again. "What are you thinking so hard about?"

I don't think it would sit well with him to know that I was just thinking about Hugo. He seems to genuinely detest him and I always end up paying with my ass for it. He's still obsessed with having sex with me and I take it as a compliment. Sometimes, I give it to him so that he won't try to find it with those old women of his. I don't know. I just don't want to share him. I always want his attention and I...maybe I'm in love with him. I don't know. I don't know. All I know is that he makes me happy in a way I can't begin to describe and that spending time with him makes my day. "It's private," I finally answer his question with a small grin. "So you're not allowed to know."

He rolls his eyes and kisses my knuckles again. "Sing to me."

I should really delete this Jon B song because he pitches up at the wrong time. Now it will sound like I'm declaring my love for him or something. I love him, yes. But he doesn't need to know that. "Don't even like to think about it. I don't know what I would do without it. I only know I live and breath for your love. Baby you came to me in my time of need. When I needed you, you were there for me. Baby, the love from you is what you got me through. It's because of you I was able to. Give my heart again, you gave me..." I'm embarrassed just singing this but occasionally, his gaze will sweep over to me and he'll look at me intently and smile. The butterflies are raging inside my belly. I have no idea what that look he's sporting means.

I'm sure his feelings for me are more than sexual as well. Last night or this morning or whatever – depends on how you view midnight. He came through my window again and he surprised me with a gift. He'd already gotten me a bracelet on Tuesday. But he saw a post I made yesterday on Facebook about a camera I wanted. He's not even on Facebook but he still saw it because he 'checks up' on me through his sister's Facebook – and she doesn't know he knows her password – to see that I am 'behaving' myself. It's gestures like that that aren't helping my case. He's only making me fall harder – and the worst part is he's not even trying.

I call Simi as soon as we're at the rank and ask her what she's wearing and where she's standing so that it will be easier to spot her. My heart threatens to jump right out of my throat when I spot her but she's not near a taxi as she had said. Instead, she's next to an all too familiar car with someone I wasn't expecting to see. Out of instinct, I run to them and jump in the man's arms. "Hugo!" my heart is beating too fast and there are lumps in my throat. "What are you doing here?"

"Mon chou!" his arms tighten around me. "Surprise! I wanted to see your lovely face when you finally saw me." I can tell that he wants to kiss me but we're surrounded by hard-core Zulu taxi drivers here. We both don't want to die.

"Chomz, hot guy alert!" I hear Simi scream beside us. "OMG, he's looking at us. Damn, his eyes are intense. He's coming, he's coming..."

"My brother," Hugo places me on my feet and I do everything in my power to evade those eyes that are burning into me. "Can we help you?"

"Ungazong'bhedela wena." Nqoba snorts and I can hear the anger in his voice. "Bayahamba labantu bakho noma nizong'gqolozela usuku lonke?"

"Mon chou..." Hugo squeezes my hand. "Do you know this boy?"

"Don't call me that, I'm not your boy."

"Mon chou—"

“He’s a friend. He drove me here because I thought we were only fetching Simthandile. I didn’t know that you were coming. Why don’t I go in the car with you and Simi will ride with Nqoba?”

“Fine by me!” Simi has no boundaries so she squeezes Nqoba’s arm and squeals. Sometimes, she loves boys just as much as she loves girls. It’s annoying. My heart is clenching tightly as I watch Nqoba glare down at me before walking away with my best friend. I try to ignore the anger that flashes through me as I watch my best friend throw herself at the Brentwood wearing bastard. It’s like she’s forgotten all I said about him having a community dick.

The ride to Mbongolwane is tense. I’m stiff as a rod, even when Hugo attempts making chatter. I find myself growing increasingly mad at him for not telling me that he was coming. Look at this mess now! Nqoba is angry and I don’t even know why when he only fucks but it was starting to feel like something...more was brewing between us. I...don’t even know what I’m on about. As soon as we’re in Mbongolwane, Nqoba says he’s leaving. He has to go to the shisa nyama – where my party will be held – and check if everything is going according to plan. I follow him to his car. “Ung’jwayela amasimba wena,” is all he says before he’s getting in the car and driving off.

I show Hugo to the bathroom, he needs to freshen up, before joining Simi in my room. “You’re getting pipe from that guy!” she says as soon as I enter.

“Simi!” I squeak and rush to cover her mouth. “No. Just no! What the fuck’s wrong with you?”

“Oh please,” she rolls her eyes. “Hugo’s blind if he can’t see it. That guy’s too jealous and then you’re also jealous. Plus, the way you were leaning into him as you led him to his car.”

“He’s just a good friend,” I tell her but she isn’t buying my bullshit story.

“A good friend you’re fucking.”

“Simi, quiet!” my eyes are shifty, my heart beating too hard. Hugo could walk in and I don’t want him to see things that aren’t there. “Look. I’ll tell you everything but please be quiet...I am begging you. Just keep your mouth shut!”

“Fine,” she sighs and pushes me lightly. “He’s hot though, way taller than Hugo and his body is to die for. He doesn’t look like the pampered type.”

“He’s not,” I tell her and close the topic. When Zenny comes back, she’s with Nqoba, who is really touchy with her. My heart is on the verge of failing me, I don’t know how many times I have to blink to push the tears back. This is not me. I don’t cry over guys. Zenny says Nhlakanipho and Siya will find us at the shisa nyama. We all leave at 05:00pm. We’re in separate cars again and I find myself trapped with Hugo yet again. His presence is greatly annoying but Nqoba’s antics even more. I can tell that he wants to make me jealous with all these women he’s talking with.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough?” I hear Siya’s voice from afar as he comes to stand with me at the hidden corner I managed to find, to hide from Hugo, from Simi, from Nqobizitha. “You know you’re a lightweight.”

I chuckle but it’s humourless. “That’s w-what um...Nqoba said to me the first time we talked. He looked really gorgeous.”

Siya snorts, “Let me guess, he’s the reason you’re drowning in alcohol.”

“I love him,” I say but it’s giggled. The alcohol has really gone to my brain.

“You can’t love him. You guys haven’t been fucking that long.”

“I love him,” I repeat. It’s like I didn’t hear Siyabonga at all.

“He’s going to break your heart.”

“Isn’t a little too late for the warning?” I giggle as I start seeing double vision. I’m not even sure which one’s the real him. “You’re lucky – you and Nhlakanipho. He returns your feelings for him.”

“Your French boyfriend returns yours too,” Siya says and then he’s walking away. My eyes follow him and they lead me to the dance floor. My heart drops – with a heavy thud, my stomach knotting.

Nqoba's holding a big-boned woman, I've never seen before, to him, appears to be whispering something in her ear with the way she squirms and bites her lip. They're dancing, if I can call it that, and we make eye contact, Nqoba and I – and the Brentwood wearing bastard cocks an eyebrow, looking half amused, half challenging. *What are you going to do?* He appears to be asking, all hot moves and brooding eyes.

I can feel my throat constricting, only worsened by the way I notice how Nqobizitha and the woman's bodies are gelling together, moving as if there are no clothes between them. It's embarrassing to admit that with each second I spend looking at them, the more I find myself picturing me in the woman's position – like it's me who's being touched so filthily. I'm angry, captivated and turned on. So much so that my cock stands at attention, abruptly and painfully hard.

"Fuck this!" before I can stop myself, my feet are moving toward them, and I don't know what I'm doing but Nqoba's hand is in mine and I am dragging him away – stumbling and all. "You're an asshole!" I scream, pushing him away as soon as we're secluded, some distance away from the shisa nyama. He groans as he collides with the tree behind him.

"Touch me like that again and see what happens," he grips my arm, the hold is too tight and it hurts but he's also keeping me upright.

"What will you do?!" I am heaving, so angry. "Ngishaye ke."

He blinks as if confused and shakes his head. "I'd never put my hands on you."

"Because you'd rather put them on that sleazy bitch, right? R-Right in front of me? You're nothing, Nqoba. Don't bother trying to make me jealous because I'm not. When I leave here, I'll go home with Hugo and I'll...I'll—"

"Hey wena!" He cuts me off by spinning us so that I'm colliding with the tree and presses his hand around my throat, squeezing but not to make it hurt. I manage a small whimper that transitions into a moan. "Yawubona lomsangano wakho wok'dakwa. I don't like you like this."

"Good. Don't like me because I'm in love with H-Hugo and I'll never break up with him for you."

I'm too drowsy but I swear the moon reflects his jaw clench. His hold around my throat loosens a little. "Is that so?"

"I don't date manwhores," the words keep spilling out of me. I don't register everything I am saying but I know it's mostly trashing him. I don't know how leaving and starting over finds its way into that conversation. But there's accusations and I know that I tell him I am dumping him at some point. "I'm staying with Hugo so that you won't break my heart."

He smiles but there's something melancholic about it. "So we're going to gamble with my heart instead?" I don't reply but my eyes say everything. "Fair enough," his voice is too blank. His lips are pressing lightly into mine, he grasps my throat and I'm sure he can feel my pulse going insane. My body is arching into him as he covers his lips with mine and devours me. "Just do me a favour. Try not to imagine that I'm the one fucking you when he's driving into you later on. We both know he won't be able to make you feel like this, with just one finger. He doesn't know what you like." Nqoba presses into my throat harder, and my breath hitches. "He doesn't know your body. Or you. But I do."

A gasp escapes my lips as my eyes go blank. Nqoba waits for some more seconds before pulling his hand back. I blink once, then twice, before my breathing slowly returns back to normal. My head is spinning and for a few good seconds, my voice seems to have gotten lost somewhere. Nqoba is already a distance away when I finally find it. "You just make sure that you fuck whatever bitch you fuck tonight like they're not me." Nqoba freezes and then he walks on. My legs fail me – and I don't know why I'm hiccupping. I chalk my stupid tears up to being too drunk. I don't cry over men. Certainly not Nqobizitha.

Bonus Insert

Siyabonga

It's Nhlakanipho's birthday today. He's finally legal and can do all the crazy stuff adults do. Like drink alcohol or smoke and he can even apply for his driver's licence. He's not a big fan of alcohol and cigarettes though but he can drive. Most kids around here learn how to drive at very young ages and Nhlakanipho learned from my dad when he was 13 years old. That was long before we started dating but I already felt funny around him then. He was my gay awakening, at the tender age of 11, and where everyone was going crazy about this girl in our village, I only had eyes for him. The quiet but dangerous boy who only talked when talked to. The one who was feared by the kids at school. The one who only hung out with Nqobizitha. He was a puzzle I wanted to solve – at least in the beginning. And so I couldn't stay away, until eventually, he warmed up to me and we became really good friends. For the first three years, it was all platonic...maybe for him, I'd been crushing on him for the better part of those three years.

It was one of the most confusing things I went through, the most draining. Staying up late at night and wondering what the hell was wrong with me. Acting funny around him because maybe if I acted too friendly then he'd figure me out. Having to turn away from his stares because maybe he'd see right through me. Choosing my words carefully so that I wouldn't give myself away. Shying away from his touches because they blazed my insides, and made it hard for me to breathe around him. Having wet dreams about him and avoiding him because of the guilt. Then one day, nearly three years later, things fell into place and suddenly the only boy I ever loved returned my feelings. Then things fell into place...they did. And it's still as intense and beautiful. I don't think anyone could love me better than Nhlakanipho does. I don't even want anyone else. He's like...my soul. My better half. My mirror. And I love him, across a million stars, in every alternate universe and in every lifetime. He's my soulmate and I love him...till death do us part.

Anyway, today is his birthday. My boyfriend's birthday. My baby's birthday. He doesn't really love surprises but I went ahead and planned a surprise party for him anyway. You only turn eighteen once and I want to make it special for him. I've been planning this for almost a year, have worked hard at the shebeen, helping my father so that I could earn extra cash. I hope he won't get angry and exaggerate because that could happen. Nhlakanipho's the worst person you can do something nice for. He cares too much about protecting his pride. And I get why he'd feel the need but at the same time we're partners and I think that if I have the means then there's no crime in doing something nice for him. Sometimes, he needs to be spoiled and to be eased of the burden on his shoulders. I'm hoping that he'll relax today and enjoy his birthday without worrying about baby milk for Kuhlekimi or something new that naughty Mnelisi has done.

A tiny giggle on the right side of me captures my attention and I follow the noise, smiling a little as I notice Chris lifting little Milisuthando who is trying to stick the balloons to the wall using the glue dot that Chris managed to get somehow. He smiles as the little girl claps her hands in excitement but it's not the same bright smile I'm used to. I feel sorry for him but I've decided to stop interfering in whatever he has with Nqobizitha. I don't want to come across as jealous. It's just...I know Nqoba. Before he started fucking old women, he'd break every high school girl's heart. They would all trick themselves into this illusion that Chris finds himself trapped in. All thinking that if they gave him sex, then he'd love them somehow. Of course it never worked and the idiots would end up fighting each other while Nqoba moved on to his next target. I'm not really going to say I blame him because as far as I know, he would never keep it from them that he only wanted sex but feelings are caught sometimes and it sucks when they're unrequited. This time though, I think that maybe Nqoba caught feelings too. I don't know. He's just different and spots the same sour expression that Chris has lately.

"Chris!" I call out as I check the time. He looks over his shoulder and raises an eyebrow. "Nqobizitha says they're five minutes away. Let me fetch Gogo. Please clear this mess, I'll join you soon."

A pained expression sweeps over Chris' features but he nods. "Fine. Should I get the camera ready?" he gestures to the camera that Nqoba bought him.

"Yeah," I even flash him a small warm smile. Exiting the main house, my feet carry me to the rondavel where Gogo is cooking up a storm with Thandolwenkosi. I clear my throat to capture their attention and the smile Gogo graces me with warms up my heart. "Gogo, they're on their way."

"Kulungile. Thandolwenkosi will continue with this fancy meat she is making. Let's go, mfana wami." I nod my head but make an excuse to use the girls' room where the mirror is. I need to check that I still look perfect. I finally took Chris' advice and have paired my skinny jeans with an uncomfortably tight t-shirt I bought the other day. I hope Nhlakanipho will like it. I don't think I look too shabby. The grey makes my hazel eyes pop out more and I got a haircut as well. I spin around and then look at my back. Those damn squats I do every morning aren't for nothing. A pleased smile plays at my lips and I exit just as I hear the sound of Nqoba's car driving in.

The others are already at the doorway, silent as night, but it's clearly a struggle to keep the younger kids quiet. I stand beside Chris with the giant foil number balloons in my hand. I can hear them laughing outside, but my ears perk up at the sound of Nhlakanipho's laugh. My ears are tuned to him and I would easily pick him out in a sea of voices. He's like this...beautiful song that only I can hear. My heartbeat picks up as they near the door and my hands tremble a little. The door opens just as the others scream, "SURPRISE!!!" loudly, cheerfully.

Nhlakanipho frowns, looking confused as he eyes me, and then Nqobizitha and then he's shaking his head and covering his eyes. He's not crying, he doesn't cry but he's overwhelmed. I can tell with that tiny jaw clench thing he does. His hands uncover his eyes and then they travel to everyone in the room again before he's shaking his head and leaving the house. I run after him and I have to tell Nqoba not to follow me because that's what he was doing. He raises an eyebrow but he nods. I find Nhlakanipho crouching outside, behind his house, and looking at the vast green ahead. I crouch beside him and it's silent for a long time – but comfortable – before he speaks quietly. "I am not mad, just...surprised. I hate surprises."

"I know."

He looks at me blankly and tugs on my hand. I end up straddling his lap, with him sitting on the ground. I cradle his face and press my lips to his softly. His hands are caressing down my back, my ass. "All of that was you?"

I kiss his lips again as I breathe a quiet, "Yes," against them.

"Why?" the genuine confusion in his voice will make me cry.

"B-Because I love you, Phakade lami." My voice cracks and he dabs at the wetness in my eyes. Dammit. He always does this. I'm the crybaby in this relationship. "And you deserve the world. For the way you love your family. For the way you love me. You deserve this."

He still looks so disbelieving, and his arms are tight around my waist, he's hugging the hell out of me. I return it and bury my face in his neck. I breathe him and soak in his volatile aura. He's my therapy. My favourite person to be vulnerable with. My lips press into his neck and it's like we're in this bubble – where nothing else exists outside of this, of us. I wish we could stay like this forever.

"Ngyabonga, Nhliziyo yami." His words coax me out of hiding. Our souls meet as our lips crash into each other. One of his hands grips my face, pinning me in place as I am ravished. I whimper into the kiss and give him all of me, I only know how to be vulnerable with him. I love the way we fit together – me and him. Like neighbouring puzzles that come together to create a bigger, more beautiful picture. I don't fit with anyone else the way I do with him. We breathe into each other's lips as soon as the need for air separates us. "Ngyabonga, Shandu."

“Good,” I laugh and shake my head. “I was worried that you’d hate it and then I...don’t know. I’m happy that you’re not mad.”

“Had it been any other person than you,” he says, I bite my lip as he fondles my ass, squeezing the meat in his hands. “You’re the only exception, Phakade lami.”

“As it should be.” I’m smug about this. I’ll never not be. I kiss him again, passionately, and he’s trying to unbutton my jeans so I pull away. “Not now. Later. Right now, we need to celebrate with your family.”

“But I want you.”

“You’ll have me,” I promise him, pulling him up with me. “Maybe with the belt again if that’s what you want.”

His eyes darken as does his aura. It’s intense, and I have to put some space between us for me to function. My hands are trembling. “The belt?” his voice is a little ragged.

“The belt,” I confirm. “It’s in my bag.”

“Let’s go and do the entertaining then.” I chuckle as he practically drags me back inside the house. He lets go of my hand before we can enter and opens the door. His little sisters rush to him, wanting to be in his arms. He picks all three of the youngest ones in his arms and I have no idea how he does it. They’re between the ages 2 – 5. Gogo starts singing Happy Birthday and you can tell how bashful Nhlakanipho is about the whole thing. He will occasionally hide his face in Olwenkosi’s neck before revealing himself again. The party finally starts but we have to bear the Gqom music because the kids seem to love it. I’m annoyed but I don’t voice it out. Everyone’s having too much of a great time anyway. Well, everyone except Chris. And Nqoba. A few of the older kids from around the village are here. I’m pretty sure that Nqobizitha organized the booze.

Chris is drowning in it and I am tempted to go and ask him if everything’s okay but like I said...andizi. I’m too focused on my boyfriend anyway. He’s standing with uGogo, his arm wrapped around her tiny frame. Some spaza shop owner from around his village gave him R100 as a birthday gift. And Nhlakanipho, being who he is, has given it to uGogo. He’s so selfless and sometimes it’s hard to believe that he’s the same person who beats others into a pulp. He’s trying though, after that whole altercation

with Phakeme, he hasn't put his hands on other people. I think it's because he really was dying to use my dad's tie on me.

We make eye contact a few times and I don't think I'll ever get over his desire for me. The fire in his eyes sets my veins on fire. I smile and wave at him and he waves back. I need to pee so as much as I was enjoying this staring competition between us, I need to use the toilet. I wash my hands at the outdoor tap and wipe my hands on my jeans before heading back in the direction of the house. I'm momentarily distracted by the noises coming from behind Nhlakanipho's house – where me and him were hidden. It's not hard to tell that it's Chris' dramatic ass and I'm going to assume he's with Nqobizitha. Those two are funny. They've been ignoring each other the whole day but Chris was limping the same way I limp after a rough night with Nhlakanipho's dick ramming into me. The French guy is gone so there's only one person who is responsible for this.

I don't make myself obvious as I peek in to see what the fuss is about. Nqobizitha is leaning against the wall, looking bored. Chris is standing a few feet away from him, hugging his waist in a manner that's clearly meant to bring himself self-comfort, with tears rolling down his cheeks. I've never seen him cry before. Probably not the right time to observe how beautiful he makes it. I should try teasing him into crying so that I can witness this beauty again.

“Pho ukhalelani?” Nqobizitha asks and I have to agree with him because I didn't even understand a word Chris was saying with the way he is crying. “Angithi we made our choices.”

“Y-Yeah and I—”

“Then spare me. Angazi uthi ngenzeni mina mawukhala kangaka ngento engekho.”

Chris' features scrunch up, he looks mad. “Fuck you!” he starts yelling, but he's still crying. The dramatic thing. He's talking about too many things at once. How he doesn't love Nqoba. How he wishes he was with Hugo instead. Then it transitions to how Nqoba will never find another person that compares to him in bed. Then it's about how he's over Nqobizitha. Then he's asking Nqoba if he wants to fuck. But it somehow becomes about his French lover again. And then he's back to trashing Nqoba. He's an emotional mess.

“Usho mawusuqedile.” Nqoba's calmness is infuriating. I see it in the way Chris' eyes widen in disbelief and then he's smacking an unmoving Nqoba on the cheek and walking away. Nqoba is unmoving for what feels like forever before he's sitting on the ground and burying his face in between his legs. I'm weird about comforting people and so I walk away and go to find Nhlakanipho. I want to tell him but he

doesn't like discussing other people's names. He prefers that you come to him. So I bite my tongue and tell him that we should escape, just to get a little breather.

We find ourselves next to eMasimbeni. There's a big tree that creates the perfect shade and hides us well from the world. "How did you like your birthday?" I ask. We're laying side by side, our faces touching lightly, our noses nudging.

"It was perfect. I'm just looking forward to my other present," he tells me, kissing my lips.

"Sex addict." I roll my eyes and press a kiss to his lips. "But you're happy with your presents?" I got him a new toolbox because he fixes things a lot. It's how he makes most of his income.

"Yebo, Phakade lami."

His eyes are soft and I find myself drowning in them. I caress his cheek, feeling his light stubble. "I love you so much," I tell him quietly. "I love your soul. I love your selflessness. I love how you love your family so much. I love how—"

"Wenzani, Nhliziyo yami?" Nhlakanipho eyes me curiously.

"Counting eighteen reasons why I love you," I whisper, making sure our eyes are on each other to keep the connection. "So shush and let me boost your ego."

He chuckles, says nothing.

"Good." I peck his nose. "Where was I? Oh yes. I love you for your dark mind." He rolls his eyes but a mischievous grin pulls at his lips. "I love that you love me so much. I love that you see your future with me. I love the way you stand by my side. I love that you're weak when you're sick. I love that you make sure I have everything I need. I love when you attempt to open up to me. I love how you earned my trust. I love when you're considerate of me – in every situation. I love how you insist that we're making love even when you're blowing my back out. It's all done in love, you'll say. I love that you're my lover and best friend at the same time. I love that you see right through me, I can't hide anything from you. I love you when you're jealous. I love that you can be vulnerable with me because I'm always here. But mostly, I love that you let me call you 'baby'."

“You’re a sucker for punishment,” Nhlakanipho says as he shifts so that he’s pinning me beneath him. I fold my legs around him and cup his cheeks. He’s smiling too damn wide. My heart settles and I wish he could reach inside and see how deep my love runs for him. “Uyathandwa, Shandu. Iyakuthanda lendoda.”

“Ngiyazi,” I grin up at him. He leans down to kiss me passionately and I reciprocate. He’s whispering his sweet nothings and kissing me all over my face. I love it when he does this. It makes me feel treasured. “Nami ngyakuthanda, baby.”

“Tonight,” he goes to gently nibble on the top of my ear. His hot breath sends shivers down my spine and I arch into him, a wave of heat flashing through me and moan as he rubs his erection against mine. I really want him. I always want him. He captures my lips and kisses me hard and firm, gripping my wrists firmly to keep me from moving. It’s getting harder to breathe and I am fully hard and aching when he finally wrenches his lips from mine. The fire in his eyes burns into me. I tremble at its intensity. “Tonight, I want you to remember that I love you. You’ll need to remember for when I fuck you like I hate you.”

I shudder at the authority found in his voice and nod eagerly. “I’m all yours, muntu wami.”

He grins but there’s still that dark aura about him and the intensity in his eyes... my entrance instinctively twitches in hunger. I’m looking forward to tonight. He shifts us so that I’m laying on top of him, with my head on his shoulder. His arms are tight around me. My eyes close as I bask in our love. It’s genuine. I pray it won’t fade. Nothing compares to it. And when I think about people like Chris, I realize how lucky I am. I’ve found the one who loves me back. How many people can say that?

“Ngyakuthanda, baby.” I whisper again, softly.

Nhlakanipho kisses my forehead, possessively, lovingly. “Phakade lami.”

Bonus Insert : Explicit

Siyabonga

“Before we go any further,” Nhlakanipho murmurs, hot breath in my ear, driving me insane, “I want you to know that if you want to stop at any point, just say so, okay? I want both of us to enjoy this.”

A warm feeling, like hot water being poured down my back, tingles up my spine, and I’m taken to the first time we had sex. How nervous I was, Nhlakanipho was gentle as ever and it was one of the best experiences – the memory has been imprinted into my mind forever, in my heart. I love him so much. My eyes find him again and the soft look in his eyes has me trembling with longing. “I don’t—um. I’m—” I have to take a minute, my forehead pressing firmly to Nhlakanipho’s shoulder. “Why would I want to stop?” my eyes are closed, my lips parted, and I can feel my love’s hand, the one that isn’t gripping my waist, smoothing up and down my back, feather lightly.

Nhlakanipho pulls back and waits until I have enough willpower to look at him again. “For any reason, Phakade lami,” he says. The term of endearment makes my breath catch a little. “Maybe you feel uncomfortable and have changed your mind. Maybe I’m going too fast for you. Maybe you need to fart. Any reason.”

His hand on my back doesn’t stop and the caressing is slowly and steadily driving me wild. “We’ve done this before but I got you. Now fuck me like you hate me as you promised.” I pause a little and notice his quirked eyebrow. “Please…” I beg because then he won’t go through with it. He’s too demanding.

He nods and then his lips press to mine. I kiss him hungrily and wrap my legs around his waist, so that our erections are pressing together. I’m helpless against stopping the sounds of pleasure coming from deep inside my throat. Nhlakanipho’s room is too heated, our passion setting everything on fire. I’m losing myself in him and I never want the feelings to stop. Sometimes, it gets so intense that it scares me but he’s always ready to catch me. His hands are the devil, they tease my responsive body, he strokes my aching length and then squeezes the head as soon as I’m on the verge of coming. I moan and arch into him. “Are you ready?” he has the belt in one hand.

I nod eagerly and gasp as he spins me around so that I’m on my stomach. My dripping cock is rubbing onto the bedsheets. He smacks my ass cheek with his hand and cups it in his hand as it jiggles. I bite into the bedsheets and moan, my hands trembling. He smacks my ass again – once, twice. Each smack draws a strangled moan from me. The stinging sensation directly connected to my pulsing dick. I’m rutting into the bedsheets but it’s not enough. I don’t know if I’ll be able to go all the way this time. Between

Nhlakanipho ramming his fingers inside me and smacking my butt with his other hand, I'm slowly going insane. Even my nipples are too sensitive, standing at attention and brushing against the sheets. I jolt and scream into the pillow as Nhlakanipho pokes my prostate again.

"Phakade lami?"

I hear his voice from afar. My mind too focused on the sensations he's drawing out of me. My thighs are trembling a little. Lifting my head, I take a deep breath before answering, "Baby?"

"Ngyakuthanda yezwa?"

"Nami ngyakuthanda."

The belt connects with my ass and I scream but he pushes my head back into the pillow. My trembling fingers grip the pillow as I cry in pleasure. I arch my back more so that my ass is elevated and rock it back so that he can do with it as he sees fit. It's all his, my offering. The belt connects with another patch of skin and my whimper is soft. Another hit lands right next to my perineum and I let out a loud moan as the pleasure spreads over to every inch of my body. Sweat forms on my forehead. The belt hits me again and again, making me drip onto the bedsheets. And then without so much as a warning, Nhlakanipho slams into me. My head comes out of hiding. "Aaaahhh!" I scream and he covers my mouth with one of his hands. His cock is literally so thick that it feels like I'm choking on it, even though Nhlakanipho is fucking my ass and not my throat. He's stretching me so wide that I can't even clench down on him properly, my toes curl helplessly in the bedsheets as I struggle to find something to hold onto.

The belt is wrapped around my throat and tightened as Nhlakanipho begins to pound into me with reckless abandon. One of his hands is gripping hold of my short hair and jerking my head back, sending shocks of painful pleasure down my body. "Ngyakuthanda, Shandu," Nhlakanipho groans in my ear, his words contradicting the manner in which he slams into my ass-cheeks, and his tightening of the belt around my throat. The leather bites into my skin and I whimper as he spreads my legs even more, making me clench down on him even more. It burns but he's pounding away and biting my ear, the shock of it nearly shoves me over the edge – but Nhlakanipho grips my length again, preventing me from coming. I struggle to grab the belt, to alleviate the grip around my throat. He's moving too fast and vigorously that my eyes are rolling to the back of my head.

He corrects my arch and my eyes widen as his thickness drags along my walls so deliciously that my vision blurs and my ears start ringing. "Nhlakanipho!" I cry out, tears raining down my cheeks. I'm too inflamed and sweaty, I can barely breathe.

“Take it, Phakade lami.” He says, voice emotionless. “You’re so beautiful like this. Take it all for me, Nhliziyo yami. Do it for me. You’re beautiful like this.”

I’m being fucked hard here and the bed, strong as it is, starts to creak ever so lightly from the brutal force with which Nhlakanipho is going. He denies me, gripping my painful dick to prevent me any orgasm. He takes the pleasure for himself instead, using my body over and over again.

I start to claw at the bedsheets, gasping as I find myself pinned on my stomach. I hold onto the edge of the bed, vision blurry with tears. It really does feel like Nhlakanipho hates me right now. This feels like a punishment. One that’s so pleasurable but still so painful. A brutal battering to my prostate forces me to cry out, my vision blacking out. “M-Mzimela...” I whimper, I don’t even know what I want to say, my toes are tingling from oversensitivity, I’m slick with sweat, voice hoarse from all the screaming I’ve been doing. “Khawula kancane, baby.”

Nhlakanipho’s response is to scrape his teeth along my sensitive neck, and I moan, tapping on his belly. When that happens, it seems to turn him into a wild beast. He pounds into me vigorously, almost causing me to fly face first into the wall, were it not for the bruising hold he has on me to keep me in place. My eyes roll to the back of my head, the pace too rough than I can keep up. It’s sweet intensity. I cry out an incoherent wail, feeling far too much. Nhlakanipho keeps slamming into me, thrusting so deep and with such precision that I feel an all too familiar sensation building again. God no, I dread it. He’s going to deny me—again. “Nhlakanipho, ngyakucela...” I whimper brokenly. An intense jolt flashes through me with each forceful pounding to my prostate. And with the abominably hard and fast way that Nhlakanipho is plowing into me, I wheeze, fighting to get some air into my lungs. I’m drenched, completely soaked, snotty and leaking. I am completely helpless, belonging to Nhlakanipho and no one else. In this moment, he owns me—all of me. “Ngyakucela, Mzimela.”

“Ufunani?”

To cum? I have no idea. I’m so terrified that I’ll pass out should I request that. My body has been pushed past it’s limits. So what then, mercy? Yes, I want that too. But I have no idea how Nhlakanipho will grant me that mercy. So I just whisper, “I—don’t know. Just please...”

The decision is made for me. Nhlakanipho’s cock, slams into me, repeatedly punching my overstimulated prostate. And his hand is stroking my aching dick. Tears escape me, I’m crying, gripping the thick bicep around my neck to anchor me. It’s too intense, ferocious, dark. I’m falling into dark, hedonistic magic. I whimper in rapturous pain when my orgasm rips through him. It sets everything around me on fire, a wildfire that consumes me entirely. I’m a wrung out, screaming, laughing, crazed, crying mess.

Dear god!

I'm shaking, afraid to touch my skin in case I have a seizure. My vision blacks out for a full minute. It hurts when Nhlakanipho pulls out, the tears fall again—that wasn't fucking. That was brutal BDSM shit that nearly caused my death. Heaven and hell at the same time.

"I-I hate you," I whisper tearfully, looking at Nhlakanipho.

"Nxese, Phakade lami." He kisses my forehead and I'm helpless against falling into his embrace. His heartbeat soothes me, but my hole is on fire. "Ngyakuthanda, Nhliziyo yami."

"It didn't feel like it a while ago."

"I promised you," he tells me. "Did you hate it?"

"No. But I hated you," my lips press to his. I'm too exhausted for any chatter. I can feel myself drowsing off. "Ngyakuthanda, baby," is my final whisper. I fall asleep with his arms tightening around me.

Mutual Desires : Twelve

Christophe

I can't be sure how much time I spend away from that godforsaken party but I do know that it was long enough that I managed to cry myself to sleep. I know that because I am awakened by a persistent nudge on my shoulder. I know who it is even before I can become fully conscious. My bloody body is betraying me – there's a heat unfurling in my belly and a familiar overwhelming sensation spreading throughout my body. Then there's his scent that intoxicates me in the most delicious way. Blinking my eyes, I raise them to see him looking down at me. "Ufunani?" I snap, and have to clear my throat. It's too dry.

"Phakama," he holds his hand out.

I look at it and then him. Fuck him and his stupid manners! I try to stand on my own and a funny sensation builds in my belly. "Shit!" I groan and close my eyes. He's still looking at me, I can feel the intensity of his staring – it burns. Or maybe the alcohol has still not left my system. My head is swimming and looking at him hurts. He's too beautiful for my eyes and it's hard to look at him. It's even harder to look away. My very own Eros. "Uzongigqolozela ub'suku bonke or are you actually going to be useful and help me up?" I ignore my hazy mind reminding me that he did offer the first time.

"Lento yakho yok'phuza angiy'thandi. You're unnecessarily rude when you're drunk and then you think you can say whatever to me. Khuzeka nganeyomuntu." He's helping me up and holding me firmly to his side. I don't know who he thinks he is chiding me though. He's not my dad. And he's not my...other daddy. That's Hugo's position. I want to tell him that but I'm becoming increasingly sick and my stomach is rolling around uncomfortably. My head is still swimming and I feel weak in his arms. I try to push him away before anything bad can happen but he's a brick wall and I'm not really registering his words but he's still chiding me calmly and asking me what's wrong. I try to explain what I'm feeling but my stomach twists and turns again, making me heave before the queasy sensation disappears. *What the fuck?* It happens again, and this time something bad is really going to happen because I can feel a bead of sweat forming on my— "Chris! Yawubona lomsangano wakho. What fuck is wrong with you?!"

I want to tell Nqobizitha to stop shouting at me but I can't stop vomiting. I've messed up his expensive motherfucking Brentwood jersey and I'm not done. I'm on the ground now, on my hands and knees. The taste is nasty and my eyes water. I think alcohol makes me cry because the tears are fucking overflowing. I feel that familiar overwhelming sensation on my shoulders again. A sigh close to my ear. "It's okay, dali. Let it all out." Nqoba's voice is patient, too soft. I love it. I hate it. A strangled cry leaves me as I gag again. Just when I think I'm done expelling all the liquor then I start vomiting again. Nqoba is rubbing my back in soothing circles, kissing the nape of my neck. My eyes temporarily squeeze shut as I

focus on his whispered words of comfort. They're getting to me—Nqoba's words are getting to me. My whole body is reacting to his words, his touch, his scent—everything that is him, my body reacts to. And I'm really not thinking straight as I turn to crush our lips together, my hands cupping his cheeks tightly.

Nqoba's words are swallowed by my mouth but I heard his surprised groan when I joined our lips together. The kiss comforts me and it feels like everything has ended all too soon when Nqoba pulls away from me. "Did you just share your vomit with me?" he's frowning as he asks the question.

"Yes," I whisper. His frown tickles me and a tiny giggle escapes me before I zip my mouth. Nqoba still has that frown knitting his eyebrows.

"You're disgusting." I would be offended were it not for the subtle grin playing at his lips. "Let's go. Your French idiot has been looking for you."

And the good feelings disappear just like that. I bite my lip and look at Nqoba blankly. He's turned sour all of a sudden. His eyes drift to my lips and then darken as he shuffles closer. The air shifts around us, my fingers are itching, dying to reach out to grab a hold of him and kiss him silly. To...confess. *I love you.* The air hits me suddenly and I have to blink as I notice that he's pulled away and on his feet. "Get up." He's back to being cold again. I don't care. He's not special anyway.

"Fuck you!" I sneer at him as I wobble past him. It's too dark here, there are no streetlights like in Joburg. I cut my eyes to see the path ahead of me. I can distantly see the lights of the shisa nyama and the noise of the music. Good. I'm a self-contained 17 – now 18 year old – who is fiercely independent and never needed anyone to begin with. If I could survive raising myself, I can survive anything. These small nyana feelings for Nqobizitha mean nothing. I don't know why I'm crying though. I'm close to the shisa nyama – really, really close – when I stumble. And like something out of a cheesy romance book, my knight in shining armour comes to my rescue. It's annoying how he looks straight like something out of those silly books as well. With his stupid large and tall frame. Nqoba's arm is around my shoulders, he's drawing me to his chest. "My hero!" I say sarcastically. "Oh, how will I ever repay you?"

He snorts and says nothing. Stupid Brentwood wearing bastard. Siya is the first person my eyes connect with as we're entering the shisa nyama premises. He's sitting dangerously close to Nhlakanipho and whispering something in his ear. It'll be obvious that something is happening between them if he continues like this. We weave our way through the crowd and I have to force down the queasiness as my eyes find Hugo next. It's not hard to tell that he doesn't fit in a place like this. He's used to the city life and luxury. He looks out of place, standing on his own. I wonder where Simi is. As soon as he spots me, his eyes light up and I feel sicker than I had before. This is not fair on him. I've been so selfish that I haven't thought that he might be suffering.

“Mthathe musekhaya.” Nqobizitha – the rude bastard – pushes me and I land on Hugo’s chest. “You can see for yourself. He doesn’t know how to handle his alcohol.”

Hugo’s arms are around me but not fond enough to arouse suspicion. “Thank you, my brother. His eyes are red. Was he crying?”

“Vomiting. I’ll see you around. You can’t be the only one having someone warming your bed tonight,” Nqoba says. He’s looking at me with an unbothered smile. It’s a punch to the gut. I bite back an affected gasp and bat my eyes to force the tears away.

“Doubt they’ll compare to what I’m going to get from my daddy tonight.” I put on a brave smile, it turns sultry as I caress Hugo’s chest. “Ready to go home, babe? I want you.”

Hugo is looking at Nqoba. Nqoba is looking at Hugo. His eyes are that infinitely dark colour I’m used to when he’s buried deep inside me. A shudder wracks my body and I look away briefly, annoyed at myself. The tension here is reaching uncomfortable heights. Even with the noise around us. I don’t know how to deal with this. Their glares and this sizing up thing they seem to have going on. So I walk away, out of the shisa nyama, and to the parking area. I wait next to Hugo’s car and sigh loudly. God since when did my life become such a mess? I was supposed to come here and survive life with the primitives and then go back to Joburg and possibly find a way to jumpstart my modelling career. I was supposed to be crazy in love with my boyfriend and sulky that we were forced apart like Romeo and Juliet. Okay, maybe it wasn’t that dramatic but still... I’m supposed to be in love with Hugo. And now I find myself doubting if I ever loved him to begin with. Nqoba is ruining everything for me! My mind scoffs at me, reminding of things I haven’t the desire to remember. Even if he didn’t force me but it’s still his fault for making me catch feelings. If he’d had a gay freakout maybe things wouldn’t have reached this point. Perhaps I’d be pining over him but no so bad. I’m so mad at him!

“Mon chou, you’re crying again?”

I blink the blurriness away and wipe my face with my hands. I didn’t even realize that I was being a cry-baby all over again. “I’m not crying, I just had something in my eyes!” I snap and flinch as Hugo raises an eyebrow at me. Right. He hasn’t done anything wrong. I’m just being a little shithead. “I’m sorry. Today was just so long and I was overwhelmed because I wasn’t expecting you but you’re here. And I’m so...happy.”

Hugo stands in front of me and cups my face, making me look up at him. He may be shorter than Nqobizitha but he's still taller than me. I've always had a thing for guys bigger than me. A quiet sigh sneaks past my lips as Hugo leans down until his breath is ghosting my lips. I stand on my tiptoes and force our lips together. He's still such a great kisser and I do have butterflies in my belly. I don't know if I'm shivering because he still gives me goosebumps or because it's Nqobizitha's dark eyes I am met with behind my closed eyes. "Je t'aime," I say softly as we separate.

"Non." Hugo shakes his head. "You don't love me." I'm blinking, trying to figure out what the hell he's on about but Hugo is already moving toward the other side of the car. He unlocks it and getting the message, I open the door and get in. I have to instruct him on the way back home. That's as far as our conversation goes. We say nothing else and I'm looking outside the window, with my arms folded on my chest. I wish I could play some music to lessen the tension but I'm not sure how Hugo will react.

We get home and he collects some of the birthday presents I got. I'm surprised that people even got me birthday gifts. Even my sister's friends who I don't talk to that much. The house is dark and silent. I turn the lights on and look around. "I'm going to bed." The alcohol hasn't fully left my system and I just want to sleep. Maybe I'll wake up from this nightmare I find myself trapped in.

"Sleep?" Hugo sends a confused expression my way. "Je veux qu'on parle."

"We'll talk in the morning," I say, walking into the hallway. My heart is going to jump out of my throat as my mind creates all these possible scenarios. He knows. Simi was right. Hugo is not stupid, he's not blind. I can barely contain myself when it comes to that Brentwood wearing bastard. Now, now Hugo knows. And he's going to break up with me. I'm lying in bed, naked, when he finally joins me. We're looking at each other and he caresses my cheek. "Don't break up with me," I beg him.

He kisses my forehead. "Maybe you should sleep."

I nod my head blindly and close my eyes. Just a few minutes ago he wanted to talk and now he's telling me to sleep. That has to be a bad sign. I'm scared but I don't show it. If Hugo leaves me then I'll be alone and then Nqobizitha will really have an advantage over me. Because I won't have anyone to taunt him with while he'll taunt me with his women. I shuffle closer to Hugo and hug him close to...I don't know. Maybe he'll be tricked into thinking I love him. Maybe he'll feel sorry for me and won't dump me just like that. My mind is a confused mess and I keep drifting in and out of sleep. The next time I wake up, my ears catch Hugo's quiet breaths. I take a minute to observe his chiselled features. He's still that drop dead gorgeous guy from two months ago so why the hell aren't my feelings for him as intense as before?

I need to take a leak. Quietly, I leave the bed. Manoeuvring my way in the darkness, I rely on the moon to guide me, as I make my way to the closet. I'm a stupid idiot who makes foolish decisions and is pathetically attracted to Nqoba because I choose to wear his jersey. The one I kept for myself that day I heard the sounds he and Zenny were making. His scent has long faded but it still feels like his arms are surrounding me when I put it on. It's stupid to say that it feels like he owns me somehow because of this piece of clothing but I like it. I want to be his. I'm an idiot. I wonder if Zenny and Simi came back. The house is quiet but they may've returned when I was deep in sleep.

Exiting my room, I pad barefoot in the hallway. The bathroom door is closed, not anything out of the ordinary, but I still knock in case someone is in there. I hear the sound of a flush and water before the door opens. My eyes widen. I probably look like I've just seen a ghost, and I'm shaking and finding it hard to breathe. Nqoba's eyes sweep down my entire frame and I get the urge to run away as his eyes darken with recognition. His stupid jersey. He still doesn't know I took it. Well, he does now. I open my mouth to explain but incoherent mumbling reaches my ears instead. So I reach out and try to touch him but he moves a step back. "Don't." His voice is dangerously restrained.

"Why not?" I challenge, stepping forward, getting so close to him I can feel his scent seducing me. His aura envelopes me, making me yearn for more.

"I will not be held accountable for my actions if you take another step closer." I can hear the dark warning in his words.

I swallow as I think of the many reasons why I should probably take heed to his warning and walk away. But I've missed him and I am starving for his touch. Holding his gaze, I step closer and then stand on my tiptoes. I can't even reach him until he leans down. My lips only press lightly against his before he's spinning us and pushing me up against the wall. I groan and pull his head down to get closer. His arms are on my shoulders, pulling me in until we're flush together. But it's still not enough. I crave to be as close to him as possible. And I jump into his arms and wrap my legs around him, tightening them. He bites my bottom lip and wraps a hand around my throat. "Why are you doing this to me?" He asks, voice surprisingly soft, compared to the way he suddenly slams inside me. With no warning or prepping. A pained scream leaves me and my fingers dig into his shoulder blades. It stings and it feels like I am being split in two. Tears fill my eyes as he starts to move – hard and fast.

Nqoba's fingers are digging into the globes of my ass, his hot breath rushing over my mouth as our foreheads touch, the tips of our noses nudging together and it feels...intimate. It feels intimate and I don't know why but it makes me panic, I'm breathing too fast and ready to call everything off, but then

Nqoba is tightening his grip around my throat. "Did he fuck you?" he asks and puts pressure on my windpipe, cutting off my air.

I manage to make a small garbled sound that should tell him to go fuck himself with his stupid question. Nqoba's hand around my throat is preventing me from opening my mouth, but I give him a soft glare.

"He did." The Brentwood wearing bastard makes the decision for himself. I let him believe it. He probably fucked some bitch anyway. So what better way to hurt him than making him believe that I slept with Hugo? His hand moves from around my throat and I am left gasping. He is holding my ass cheeks again, spreading them even further apart and drawing his hips back, his pulsating length dragging slowly against my inner walls until he's nearly completely out, and then he's fucking back in, forceful and fast, hips slapping loudly against mine, shoving me back roughly up and down the wall with every thrust. I can't catch my breath, can't do anything but whine and moan and whimper and try to roll my hips against Nqoba's. My own erection is being stimulated by his flexing abs, but I need something more, so I manage to release one of my arms to reach for my erection, but Nqoba supports me with one hand, his hips still working and his other hand wrenching mine away and returning it to his shoulder before he presses his hand back to my throat and I can't breathe, can't do anything but take what Nqoba is giving me once again and my vision is greying at the edges, lights dancing in patterns that shouldn't be possible, and then I'm tensing and coming, warmth spurting sporadically between our chests and bellies, with Nqobizitha's name falling off my lips in a breathless moan.

"I hate you," Nqoba whispers, his eyes are too dark and lifeless. Tears fall down my cheeks as he shakes his head. "Don't look at me." He buries his face inside my neck and lets out a guttural groan, hips slamming against me for a handful more thrusts before he finally stills and he claims me from the inside. His hand lifts from my throat and I frantically take in as much air as I can.

Nqoba remains standing, face still buried in the curve of my neck, hands supporting me once more, before he picks his head up and keeps me up as he shifts his hips so his softening cock slips out of my well-used entrance. He helps to steady me on my own two feet before he turns away to deal with the mess on his dick while I struggle to keep my eyes open and get enough air for a full breath. Finally giving in and closing my eyes, just for a second, and sliding down to sit on the cold floor, I'm surprised by the sound of a knock on the door. Nqoba isn't with me anymore and it hurts that he just left like that.

"OMG Chris!" Simi's voice is in my ear. "This is not what I need to see for fuck's sake! Not at four in the morning. Why didn't you say that you were in here?"

I try to speak but I don't know what to say. It feels like I'll cry again if I speak up. So I say nothing and stand on my feet, groaning in pain. I clutch my lower back and ignore Simthandile as I open the tap and submerge myself in hot water. She's looking at me. I don't give her my attention. I just want to sleep.

Nqobizitha

"Mama wami, I brought you some flowers." I whisper, kneeling in front of my Mama's tombstone. The polished stone is sparkling, like always. Her family comes to clean it every week—and sometimes, I sneak from home to take care of it too. I place the flowers on the granite, mindlessly running my fingers down the golden text. I can almost hear her accusing voice in my ear so I laugh and admit. "Yes, I stole them from MaKhanyile's garden." There's so much I want to say but I don't even know where to begin. I lie on the grass, next to her tombstone, and look at the dark skies. Part of me wishes I was at Chris' but I had to leave. I couldn't stomach the thought that his boyfriend was in his house. They slept on the same bed and had sex. I couldn't even get it on with his sister because all I could fucking think about was him and he...for him it was so simple.

I know I have no right to be jealous but I...

"I met someone, Mama wami," my arms go beneath my head to serve as my pillow. "I don't know, I just have these feelings for him. You know like when I would show you a science project I was really proud of. That's kinda how I feel...but it's different. More intense, like drowning but you don't wanna come up for air. That's how I feel, Mama." I remain silent for a while, rubbing my eyes tiredly. I'd give anything to be in bed with Chris right now, he doesn't know how being in bed with him helped me sleep a great deal better. I didn't have to have these irrational fears that came back after Mama died.

"You're not mad at me right, Mama wami?" I ask her quietly, respectfully. "Remember you told me that one day I will grow up and forget all about you and find some younger woman to replace you? That hasn't happened. Even in your death, it's just that I can't find you in any of the other women. They don't grow me like you did. Remember how you taught me how not to be afraid of the dark? Now, I'm scared of it again. I sleep with the light on. But you see...with this one that I met, I'm not scared. He's too bubbly. I feel good with him. Like I felt good when I was with you. Loved. He doesn't love me of course. No one will ever love me like you did. But I thought he liked me...he has a boyfriend, Mama wami. So what should I do now?"

No answer.

I sit up and look at her tombstone. "Should I—cry?" I clear my throat as my voice cracks. "You'd let me cry on your shoulder. Remember? Or maybe I should just let it go. He's a boy. My real Mama wouldn't accept it. This is why I miss you, Mama wami. You—opened my mind. You're my Heart. So tell me what to do. Anything you say and I will do. I'm always obedient for you."

There's still no reply and I can feel myself grow agitated by the minute. I didn't drive all this way to not get answers. Chris is slowly driving me insane but I think I could...maybe I could just...why is she not saying anything? "You know I'm actually more honest than you, Mama wami. I don't mean to disrespect you but you lied to me." A silent tear breaks free and I wipe it away impatiently. "You lied to me and told me that one day, you and me would live together. I didn't break my promise. I love you, Mama wami. But you lied, you lied. You weren't supposed to leave me all alone in this world! Look at me now. Do you think I enjoy disappointing MaKhathide, huh? Do you think I enjoy chasing after those women? I can't find you, Mama wami. I search everywhere and I can't find you! Now I have feelings for that boy. He has a boyfriend. MaKhathide will never accept him. And what if he makes me forget you? This is all a mess. So you owe it to me to tell me what to do. You always said that you'd hold my hand and be there for me. Don't break your promise now. I need you."

Silence.

"You know what, FUCK YOU!" I scream as tears stream down my face. "YOU DON'T FUCKING CARE ABOUT ME! YOU'RE A LIAR!" I stand and storm away but I don't get far before I'm walking back to her and kneeling in front of her tombstone. "Ngyaxolisa. I respect you, Mama wami. I love you. I'm sorry. I just really miss you and I'm confused. Maybe if you were here you would enlighten me."

I sit down again and remain silent before I'm lying down again. My eyes close and it's Mama's eyes I meet this time. She has a smile on her face, and bringing my naked body to her side. I curl into her and listen to her voice as I drift off.

Christophe

Simi seems to have found a new friend in my sister. We had breakfast together this morning before they decided that they were going to Eshowe mall for a girls' outing. I would've loved to go with them but Hugo wanted to stay in and I didn't have a choice but to stay behind. I've been doing my best to not limp around in front of him but the way he's been looking at me...

He knows something, I just know.

We're in the living room right now and watching TV but not really watching it. The air is tense and there's this big elephant in the room. I keep checking my phone to see if Nqobizitha has messaged me but there's nothing and it's just adding to my depression. Yes, I'm the most pathetic person ever. Even with Hugo beside me, I don't have my priorities straight. Well, I am thinking about him...just really worried. I really don't want him to break up with me. But it's just the same because maybe if Nqoba walked in through the front door and told me he loves me then I'd choose him in a second without thinking twice. On top of being pathetic, it turns out I am selfish as well. I sigh and lock my phone again.

"Are you expecting a call from someone?"

"Huh?" I jump a little and wince in pain.

"Your phone, mon chou. You're checking it a lot. Do you have to meet someone?"

"Um...no," I clear my throat and force myself to maintain the eye contact.

Hugo nods his head but there's something I don't like about his aura today. I really think he's onto me. "Tell me, how are you feeling?" he runs his hand down my arm. The goosebumps that spread over aren't the beautiful kind.

"Je vais bien," I lie. I'm not fine at all. "Why are you asking?"

"No reason," Hugo shrugs, his eyes stay on me. "Just that you're exhibiting flu symptoms. A raspy throat. Those bruises around your neck. This limp you're trying so hard to hide. I remember it well. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that boy infected you."

"Hugo..." my heart threatens to jump out of my throat. "Don't say that."

"It's an observation, mon chou."

"I can explain," my eyes are on him and my hands are trembling. I'm not going to cry though. I have a really bad migraine from all the crying I did last night. "I...it happened once."

“Don’t lie to me.” He’s too calm.

“Okay. M-Maybe it was just a senseless attraction and I don’t know...I was stupid. It meant nothing. I promise you.”

Hugo’s features scrunch up and he groans into his hands. “What about last night?”

I don’t reply. He finds his answer in my silence.

“You know I really see my future with you. From the first day I saw you.” His words make my eyes water and I have to rub my chest to alleviate the pain rapidly building there. “I know I was older and maybe this is my fault for approaching a child—”

“Don’t say that. I’m not a child, you know that. I’m really mature, Hugo.” I say, turning to face him. To grip his hand. To form some sort of relation. Connection. Anything. “A-And I love you.”

“No. You don’t love me. You’re not mature.” He’s still so damn calm and I wonder why he hasn’t done anything yet. He should be lashing out or beating the shit out of me. He’s not supposed to be looking at me this calmly. “If you love someone you don’t hurt them. If you were mature you would’ve thought to end things with me first.”

“I can’t do that because I love you,” I lie through my teeth.

“Stop saying that!” Finally. A hint of frustration. I wonder if I should keep prying his real feelings out of him. The guilt will be unbearable otherwise. “Respect me enough to be honest with me.”

“I do love you. Maybe I’m not in love with you but I love you, Hugo.”

“Good. At least you’re honest for once.” Hugo rubs his face repeatedly and I think he’s thinking hard about something. I sit through the silence, hugging my waist, and keep my eyes on him. He finally sighs and looks at me once more. “Do you...love this boy?”

“No!” I say too quickly. I’m shaking my head frantically, hoping with everything in me that he believes me. “We haven’t been fucking that long. I can’t be in love with him.” I use Siya’s words from last night.

Hugo scrutinizes me for such a long time and I can’t be sure if he finds what he’s looking for. “I really want to give you another chance, mon chou—”

“Then give it to me,” I quickly move to sit on his lap and wheeze as the pain shoots through me. “What happened was a mistake.”

“The trust was still broken.” He runs his hand down my cheek. I lean into it. “I know you’re not going to stop with this boy but I really do care for you. Just...the day you fall in love with him, tell me. So that we can end things.”

I blink repeatedly, not understanding. Is he...giving me permission to cheat on him?

“I don’t mind sharing you.” He cups my face and forces the eye contact. “All you needed to do was be honest with me.”

I can hardly believe what I am hearing with my own ears. I open my mouth but no words come out so I hug Hugo real tight. I keep thanking him and his hold tightens around me. He kisses me as soon as we pull apart. I ignore how he’s digging into my neck, on the patch of skin where Nqoba marked me.

Mutual Desires : Thirteen

Christophe

“I’m gonna miss you so badly,” I tell Simi as we embrace tightly. Nothing quite compares to her cuddles and the way her body feels against me, it’s like being squeezed by a really fresh smelling pillow. I breathe her in and memorize her scent for later when I’m all alone. “Don’t forget about me.”

“Forget about you? Chomz, get real!” Her arms tighten around me, she’s almost picking me up with how much she is squeezing me. The disadvantages of having friends who’re way taller and thicker than you. “We talk almost every day so that would be impossible. But if you do find yourself missing me, crying in the arms of Nqoba wouldn’t be a bad idea...I mean Hugo gave you the go-ahead.” Her words are whispered in my ear.

I tense in her arms. “Don’t remind me,” I return just as quietly. I still can’t quite believe that Hugo gave me permission to continue with Nqoba just like that. As grateful as I am, part of me is still suspicious about his simple surrender. I know that polyamorous relationships are a thing, heck, I know three women who’re happily involved with each other and make their arrangement look pure and beautiful but I...since when is Hugo even comfortable with sharing? Granted, we’ve only been together for three months and there are a lot of things I don’t know about him – like any family member outside of his small group of friends and where he works – but there’s a lot he doesn’t know about me as well. We were – we are – still in the process of learning each other. But he’ll have to learn with me because there are things I’m still learning about myself as well. Like how I cheated on him with ease and didn’t think twice about him until his face showed up at the taxi rank – that makes me selfish. And how I was quick to fall out of love with him – if I was in love – that makes me...something. I don’t know yet. All I know is that I don’t deserve a guy like Hugo but I’m not brave enough to let him go just like that for someone like Nqobizitha – a known sex addict and manwhore, who probably doesn’t even feel about me the way I do about him. To protect my heart, I choose selfishness.

“Mon chou, aren’t you going to say goodbye to me? I’m getting a little jealous here.”

I look over my shoulder, at Hugo, but not for long because I just can’t. Reluctantly, I pull out of Simthandile’s embrace and she sparks a lively conversation with my sister. “Hey,” I fiddle with my sweater and force myself to look at Hugo.

He caresses my cheek and smiles softly. He is confusing me. “Mon chou, tu me manqueras.”

He says he'll miss me. How can he miss a cheater? "I'll miss you too," I tell him and fold my arms around his neck as he hugs me. "And I also want to say that I won't get mad if you find someone in Joburg. It wouldn't be fair on you to just have me while I..."

"Fuck that boy. It's okay to tell me," Hugo finishes for me, he probably could sense my reluctance. "I'm not sure if anyone will compare to you. I knew you had to be mine from the first time I saw you but thank you for your thoughtfulness, mon chou."

He's being sarcastic. He has to be. I don't get how he can be so nice about this. "I...don't know what to say, Hugo. I messed up, wasn't supposed to come here and do this. Now we're in this shitty situation because of me. I know it doesn't make things better but maybe you should also—"

"I heard you the first time." He kisses my temple and runs his hand down my back, squeezing my nonexistent ass softly. I shudder in pain. Nqoba really did a number on me last night. "We'll see if I find someone like you in Joburg. Right now, I'll remain single but in a relationship with you," he chuckles to himself and shakes his head. "I guess this is the reason some people say their relationship status is complicated. Now I know."

I can't bring myself to laugh at his little joke. He checks the time and sighs. They have to leave now so that they'll both make it early enough in Joburg to allow them a few hours of rest before Simi goes back to school and Hugo, work. He leans down to press a kiss to my lips and I reciprocate and the butterflies are there yes, but it's not the same. It's not. My mind takes me back to the time Nqoba apologized for cheating on me and I wonder if he felt the same way I'm feeling now when he was with MaNxumalo. Part of me wants to wrench my lips away from Hugo's, to tell him that I'm in love with Nqoba, but I don't. "Take care of yourself," he murmurs as we pull apart.

"You too." I hug him with everything in me and then let go. Zenny and I see them out and watch as they both enter the car. Simi is on the verge of crying with her lame ass. She's making me tear up as well.

Zenny wraps an arm around my shoulder and leads me back inside the house. "I can make you some comfort food to help you feel better."

I smile and shake my head. I'm not hungry, don't really have an appetite. "Ngyabonga, sisi. I'm good." She was kind all of last night and this morning. No mood swings or anything. And there's this...aura

about her that I don't really get. The happiness. And how it feels like she's hiding something from me. Maybe she got a promotion at work. I don't know. I'm just happy I am not the object of her wrath.

"You don't eat enough wena," she narrows her eyes at me, making me flinch a little. "No wonder you're stick and bones."

"Aspiring model." I remind her since she seems to have forgotten. "Do you want us to do something together? It's only two o'clock, maybe go to the shisa nyama." There isn't much to do around here, and maybe part of me misses Joburg, the city life and literally having so many things to do and very little time.

"I wish I could. But I'm meeting Jabulani in less than an hour." She shouts as she heads into the kitchen. "I need him to take me to KwaMashu to see Zemvelo. She called to say she misses me."

"Oh..." I hope the pain of being excluded isn't showing on my face. It's not like I don't know that the other two sticks don't like me. In their eyes, I'm the gay bastard who stole their father from them. "When are you coming back?" I ask as she reappears, with a plateful of leftover cake.

"I have to work the nightshift tomorrow," she eats another mouthful of cake and drinks her cider before continuing, "I think Jabu and I will drive back here tonight. But don't wait up for me."

"No problem. I left my phone in my room, I'll go grab it quickly." With a tiny nod from her, I leave the living room. I find my phone beneath one of my pillows. There's a message I have from a friend of mine, Ntokozo, about some gorgeous outfits he got in Newtown the other day. He says he misses me because we would've gone shopping together. I smile and reply to his message. I have a few other messages from friends, just catching up, and I reply to them all as well. There's nothing from Nqoba and I don't know how to take his silence. Usually, he's the first one messaging me in the morning, after he leaves my house. A charming good morning text or a silly science fact that includes something sappy. I'd grown used to it. Like I said, he was starting to behave more and more like a boyfriend.

I go to check a few WhatsApp stories but he didn't post today. He rarely even does it anyway and he only changed his profile picture recently – to a picture of his mother. Before it was a picture showing the galaxy and it wasn't surprising. I've been trying to learn all I can about him. He really loves Science, and all that space stuff. His brilliant mind shines through when you coax him into opening up. So sometimes, I'd switch the channel to a Science station just so I could watch the childlike fascination on his face. He really absorbs information, I'd see it in the way he'd fully observe me as well, paying attention to the

insignificant things someone else wouldn't notice. I miss him and I want to see him. My heart is racing and my fingers are trembling as I decide to text him first.

Hi. – me

I get one tick, clearly he's offline.

Can we please meet? – me

Just to talk. – me

You're not compelled to though, maybe you're busy. – me

Hugo is gone. – me

I bite my lip and contemplate deleting everything but then he'll see that I deleted the messages. My fingers are still itching to send him more messages. To talk about anything. Not talking to him makes me anxious and I wish he would check his bloody messages already. Zenny knocks on my door a few minutes later and tells me she's leaving. I compliment her outfit. She's changed into a short jean skirt and a crop top t-shirt that says 'Stop staring at my tits'. I silently giggle because that brings the unwanted attention you're trying to escape. Or maybe that's the aim. "I love you too, sisi." I say as I walk her to the front door and kiss her cheek before closing the door. I check my messages again and finally.

I'm at KwaNyama Ayipheli. – Nqoba

That's all the message says. Does this mean I need to go there? The sun is still scorching outside and it's a twenty minute walk. Sighing, I slip on my sneakers and grab my phone and keys. I put on my bucket hat and sunglasses and begin the tedious walk. I ignore the blatant staring aimed at me, not that I'm wearing anything colourful today, but it's like some of these people just never get used to me. I ignore the sis bhuti slurs from a few boys I recognize from my Grade 10 Economics class. They're the same ones who think they can bully me but they've been unsuccessful so far because I don't take their bullshit. I'm about five minutes away from the shisa nyama when I spot a familiar face. Nhlakanipho's sister! What's her name...she's in my Economics class as well. Thandolwenkosi! That's her name. She's inside some guy's car looking all dolled up. I wonder if Nhlakanipho knows about this. Something tells me he's the

type that would tell his siblings to only start dating at 50 years or die virgins. So I'm going to assume that he doesn't know about this relationship his sister has. Thandolwenkosi's eyes widen and she waves at me shyly. I wave back and turn away from her boyfriend's intimidating glare.

The shisa nyama isn't as packed as I thought it would be. Maybe some people went to church today. I'm welcomed by loud deep house music and the smell of grilling meat. I enter and almost immediately, I spot Nqoba. Maybe I'm in tune to him, I don't know. He's sitting at a table packed with women – about four of them. The first two I recognize from that day at the police station. I'm going to assume they're his sisters. The other two I don't recognize but they don't look like his type since he only goes for fat women. That doesn't stop my chest from clenching though. He hasn't noticed me but his sister – the short one with dreadlocks – lifts her eyes and I can see her confusion at first and then recognition. She smiles warmly and waves at me. I wave back and watch her nudge Nqoba's side.

Familiar eyes find mine and the smile that had been previously occupying his lips is gone. He doesn't look angry but he's not exhibiting his earlier mirth either. My belly twirls around to the point of nausea as a trembling breath leaves me. He's on his feet suddenly, and walking toward me, while I struggle to look away from him. I'm a deer caught in the headlights. His scent hits me first and I feel my knees grow weak. He's in front of me now, looking down at me – a familiar delicious current flowing between us. We both say nothing, but I am barely breathing with him so close to me, my mind seems to be working particularly slow as well.

"You're here." He lifts his hand as if meaning to touch me and I am leaning to his touch but it never comes. I blink as he clears his throat and steps back. Right. We're in public. But that's never stopped him from touching me before – at the small of my back. My hand. An arm around my shoulder.

"Sawubona," I struggle not to fidget as I look up at him. "Can we talk?"

Nqoba says nothing but his hand settles on my shoulders. He's guiding me out of the shisa nyama and toward his car. An enclosed space. My feet are kind of reluctant and my heartrate is accelerating. He gets my door for me and I thank him. He gives me a small nod before going to the other side. We sit quietly and I want to say something but I don't know what. Nqoba's gaze is on me, burning into me. I return his stare but can't read the emotions in his eyes. I am beginning to think he's a master at hiding his emotions well. But it sparks the connection again, the electricity. It's palpable. I can feel it all around us. It has my breath quickening, with my heart rate spiking to the point of madness. Delicious warmth pools throughout my body, my groin foolishly reacting.

Nqobizitha clears his throat and I'm not sure if it's because he can sense the tension between us as well. "How are you feeling?" he's the second person asking me this question. Earlier, it was Hugo.

"I'm fine." I don't know why he's so serious. His face is a deadpan. "Ubuze lani?"

"Just confirming that I didn't hurt you earlier."

You did.

"I enjoyed it," I confess and watch his eyes darken. His fingers are tapping against his thigh and I think he's fighting the urge to touch me. This really wasn't a good idea. Being close like this in such a contained space. There's a hazardous tension between us. "It hurt but it hurt good."

He laughs, his first laughter since we've been together. It shoots to my belly and I realize that it's slowly becoming one of my favourite sounds. "My sister, Nontethelelo, told me to tell you that she loves your vintage style."

"Oh..." I blink, dumbfounded, not sure what to say. I don't think he's told them about us but the one with the dreadlocks was observing me in interest. "Do they—"

"No," he cuts me off, clearly knowing what I was going to ask. "They know nothing and I prefer it that way. Actually, I have something on my mind. Something I've thought real hard about and wanted to tell you. It's a good thing you sent me that message."

"Okay. What about?"

"You see I was thinking. Well, I did that but also I went to seek advice you see and I didn't really get the answers but I think I did—" he's rambling right now, looking uncharacteristically nervous, like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar and trying to explain himself. It's adorable but at the same time he's making me nervous. I try to touch his hand but he pulls it away, making me frown because no one's in the parking area with us. "You see, I love someone else. But I can't be with them because they're not here. That doesn't matter anyway. What I'm trying to say is that this thing between us isn't working. Curiosity got the best of me and I fucked around for a while. I may've even convinced myself I had feelings for you which is not possible. Seeing you with that...him, it put things into perspective for me. I'm not the right guy for you, dali. My goals in life do not include marriage. I don't want that with women...and if I don't want that with someone my parents would accept, do you really think I'd want it with someone who won't bear them an heir? UMaH uzothi ngihlekisa ngaye kwizitha zakhe. No.

MaKhathide has nothing to do with this. If I allow this to continue then I'll be the source of your wet pillows. I don't need that on my conscience. Do you get what I'm trying to say?"

"Bold of you to assume that my tears would have anything to do with you," I say the first thing that comes to mind. I think part of me has gone numb and is slowly processing his words. There's a voice at the back of my mind taunting me though, calling me stupid idiot over and over again. "It's just the same because this is why I'd asked you to meet up in the first place, Nqoba. Hugo found out about us and I had to make up my mind on who to choose. I went with the guy that I see myself having a future with. And that guy is Hugo. I did tell you that I'd stay with him, didn't I?"

"Yes." Our gazes hold briefly, my eyes widened, mouth hanging open. Tension sucks at the air, claiming all the oxygen. "It's settled then."

I nod dutifully, willing my heart to stop shrinking in on itself.

"So this is it."

Another nod from me.

"And because this was...because it shouldn't have happened, I don't think it's necessary for people to know. It could cause—"

"I'm not stupid, Nqobizitha. I wouldn't tell anyone that a straight guy like yourself fucks other guys. Well me. I'd be embarrassed to anyway." A bitter tone betrays me, and I'm forced to rectify it with a smile. "I...maybe it's time for me to go home. I need to prepare for tomorrow's lesson with your class." I tear away from Nqoba's scrutiny, staring out the window. I just really want to leave this car, but my entire body is rooted to the bloody car seat, tremors rippling through me—like some of addict. *More*. My heart whines.

"Thank you, Chris."

God, I hate it when he calls me that. I nod again, only frantic this time. Gripping the handle, I ready myself to leave the car when Nqoba grips my wrist. No, no, no. My eyes widen, heart thundering inside his ribcage. Why is he touching me? I try really hard to not be drawn to the touch, to not revel in how

deliciously it burns me. I'm trying to discourage this pull—drawing me to the Brentwood wearing bastard. “Nqoba,” I croak, uncaring that I sound desperate, anxious even. Nqoba can't do this, he can't keep...touching me like this. It's only reigniting the fire that hasn't really died down. A combustion. “Please let me go. I promised I wouldn't tell now let me go,” it's more urgent now, begging.

“Could you look at me? I need to apologize too.”

I remain turned away from him, counting slowly, and willing the tremors to stop. “What for?” regret follows as soon as I abide Nqoba's instruction. Those blank brown eyes swallow me whole, they cause my heart to curl up in fear—so intoxicating. “What for, Nqobizitha?” I repeat, body trembling under an unwavering scrutiny.

Silence.

Nqoba shakes his head.

I attempt to pull my hand away, and the grip only becomes firmer. Nqoba's intoxicating, brown eyes find me again—arresting every inch, every nuance, every particle that is me. *Danger*, my mind warns. Biting my lip, I can only stare as Nqoba's gaze pins me in place.

My breath is caught in my throat as Nqoba's hand travels to my face, stroking my cheek. I'm helpless against closing my eyes, losing himself to sensations, when that hand finds its way to the back of my neck, gripping gently and then clasping my short tendrils—hard enough a pain shoots through me. “It's over, Chris.”

I hear the words from afar, and again nod dutifully, dick stirring inside my jeans as the grip to my hair tightens harder than before, drawing me close to the boy sitting beside me. “It's over,” I whisper, trembling against the feel of Nqoba's breath fanning my parted lips.

A beat, two beats.

Our lips collide into each other, naturally, as if this is something we've been doing out entire lives. Nqoba's kisses are unlike anything I've ever experienced—so much confidence oozes from them, a certainty in them that drives me delirious. They lure me in, demanding all my attention, all of me. And

perhaps I'm naïve and reckless, but I give in , completely submitting. I climb onto Nqoba's lap, hugging his neck tightly while giving as good as I get. Kissing has never felt like this. So intense. Like the other person is crawling under your skin. Like their lips alone undress your soul. Kissing hasn't ever felt like an entire sensual conversation to me. It's never seared my insides, burning me from the inside out. But it's what I feels now as Nqoba grips my ass, nibbling on my bottom lip. From this kiss alone, it feels like our souls are entwining, aligning so perfectly—like we belong.

The only thing that has our lips separating is the need for air, but we are still a breath apart. I cradle Nqoba's face, finding my place in his arms. In our shared breathing. I'm being consumed completely, all of me on fire...but it's strange how the other part of me is so calm, perfectly content in the arms that belong to another.

The vicious twist returns.

I bite my bottom lip, discouraging any tears, and dispel any negative thoughts.

"Spend the day with me."

There are so many reasons why I should decline this request. The most obvious being that this bastard just told me that he has someone else that he loves. He doesn't feel for me like I feel for him. Doing this again would be the worst form of betrayal to myself. I'll only be breaking my heart here.

"I...okay."

I nod my head. I return to my seat and fix my rumpled clothes before looking out the window. There isn't anyone here. We're driving off and sometime into the road trip, he grips my hand and kisses my knuckles and the inside of my hand before holding onto it for the rest of the drive.

Nqobizitha

I've had the worst morning ever and when the bell rings, signalling break time, I've already packed my books and was the first one to leave the classroom. I ignore Mr. Nsibandé's glare and wait outside the classroom impatiently. I don't know what the hell is taking Nhlakanipho so long. *Relax*, my mind instructs me – and I sigh, releasing a deep breath. Right. It's not Nhlakanipho's fault that I'm so sour. I

just woke up on the wrong side of bed. Or more accurately, in the wrong bed. For four fucking nights in a row. I've been struggling to sleep, even with the lights on, so I spend most of my time reading an Accounting textbook. Not that whatever I'm reading registers but it's the only way I can prevent myself from giving into temptation and making an escape to MaNtuli or MaNxumalo's houses. I use my hand to keep me company but it's not enough, I need more, to vent.

"Bafo, ready to go?"

I shake my head to break out of my musings and nod at Nhlakanipho. We begin our walk and meet Siya waiting for us at the gates as always. I greet him absentmindedly and walk behind them like usual. We have another class with Chris this afternoon and I am not in the mood. I've been trying to stay away from him and I don't know why it's so fucking hard. I can hardly concentrate in class with him around all the damn time and I don't know if he's trying to capture my attention with all these tight jeans he's always wearing lately. I don't know if I'm imagining the way he always seems to bend right next to me when helping Simphiwe. Maybe he's trying to show me what I'm missing and I'd probably give a fuck did I not love someone else.

He's stupid to think he could ever come close to uMama wami. He wouldn't know how to help me when it comes to the dark. He wouldn't be able to teach me how to not fear my thoughts. Mama taught me all these things and more. And sure, I've lost the skills she gave me now but I still don't think I can love him like I love her. Mama didn't have another person to love. She gave me all her love and took care of me. I miss her. I don't want to think about her right now. Not in such a public place. My chest is already clenching, making it hard for me to breathe. I blink my eyes and my vision clears to find that our food has arrived. Nhlakanipho and Siya are eating from the same plate and it shocks me a little. I don't remember if I've ever seen them eating together before.

"Since when do you guys eat together?"

Nhlakanipho's jaw clenches a little and I can tell that he's trying to come off unperturbed but he's trying too hard. Siya's eyes are a little shifty. "What do you mean?" it's Siya who asks the question.

"I've never seen you eat together before."

"Then you're really blind," Nhlakanipho snorts and looks at me blankly. "We've done this forever, bafo. Has it suddenly become a problem now?"

“No,” I shake my head. “I’m just jealous. How come you’ve never done this with me before, bafoza?”

“Siya is...different,” Nhlakanipho clears his throat and tilts his head to one side as if considering something. “The same way Chris is different to you.”

I choke on my saliva. “W-What do you mean, Nhlaka?”

“That they’re...different.” He pokes into his sliced russian and eats it. Siya is biting his lip, looking nervous but...happy. I don’t know why he has tears in his eyes though. He’s a cry-baby. “Did you hear about the girl who was raped and shot yesterday?”

Okay. We’ve changed the subject it seems. I don’t mind at all. Chris is a topic I’d like to avoid for the rest of my life if possible. The pain is like a punch to the gut. I don’t even know why I’m affected. I don’t think I was in love with him. Maybe I had feelings but they weren’t love. I’m sure of it. “Yeah, bafo. It’s a shame. She was only fourteen years old. They haven’t found the killer.”

“The police are incompetent. Sometimes, it’s better to take matters into your own hands. Like the community did with Melisizwe.”

“But it looks like he wasn’t guilty, Nhlakanipho.” Siya pipes in and he’s glaring at my best friend. “The police can’t find a connection between him and MaNtuli. Her brother went to the papers. No phone records or sightings. It’s like Melisizwe just chose her to save himself.”

Why don’t I know about this? Actually, it’s my fault. I’ve been avoiding MaNtuli as I was too preoccupied with the toothpick. I don’t know when I’ll be ready to play the field again but it has to be soon. I’m tired of feeling hollow and empty inside. I need something to remind me that I am alive. Sex is fulfilling. It’s wrong but I’m close to giving into the temptation.

“This is why it’s important to let the—law d-decide. If MaNtuli is really innocent and Melisizwe was killed for nothing...those convicted guys will really go to jail. As angry as I am about that girl, you need to think about things like this.”

“Yehlisa umoya,” Nhlakanipho wraps an arm around Siya and rubs down his arm lightly. He pulls away just as quickly. They look too cozy but I don’t comment on it. My mind’s rushing back to Nhlakanipho’s

words though, when he said that Siya is different for him like Chris is different for me. What does he mean? Maybe he knows that I had something with Chris. Maybe he has something with Siya as well. It's too unbelievable an idea to fathom...but I remember their lingering stares and touches from all those days ago. I remember the times when I'd go to Nhlakanipho's and he'd have the door locked when Siya was with him. It could explain why Siya is always walking funny...the same way that Chris does.

"How long has this whole thing been going on?" I point with my eyes between the two of them.

Nhlakanipho stands and looks down at me. "Two years." He clears the table and I check the time. Shit! We're five minutes late.

For most of the day, I observe Nhlakanipho with newfound interest. I find myself wondering if he's completely gay like Chris or if he's like me and is just attracted to Siyabonga. Part of me is going with the former, there's nothing he hates like girls jumping him and although they wouldn't stop and continuously push his buttons, he wouldn't reciprocate their feelings. I remember now. All the times he'd smile politely and turn them down. He doesn't have a wandering eye for girls like I do. Then there's Siyabonga. He's always been scared of girls, for as long as I remember. I guess I know why now. I wonder why Nhlakanipho never bothered to tell me. Did he think I'd judge him? I would've never done that, he's my best friend. I also have a freaking bisexual sister that he knows about. But I still understand his fear. I didn't tell him about Chris because I was scared as well.

We'll need to have a long talk about this. Maybe later. We're going to Chris' class now and my stomach is churning nervously. I pause a second as our eyes collide and I take in the sight of his face. His eyes – one of them that isn't shut closed – widen and his mouth opens and closes silently. What the fuck happened? The bruising is extending to his cheek. I can hear my classmates' quiet murmurs and Nhlakanipho seems to be frozen right beside me. I get the urge to walk to Chris and ask what the fuck happened. I do but as soon as we're in close proximity, he takes steps back. "Please..." he whispers, his eye is shifty as it scans the entire class. Right. Public.

"Don't you dare think I'm leaving you alone after this," I tell him. He glares at me like I'm the one at fault but nods his head. As soon as he acknowledges my request, I go to join Nhlakanipho at the back.

"You guys are back, I see. Let's hope you did that activity I gave you," Chris starts and the class groans. He releases those giggles of his and fold his arms on his chest as he shakes his head. "No excuses today. I gave you an extension." I try really hard to focus but between marvelling at his beauty and noticing that bruising on his face that causes something nasty to twist in my stomach, I am really distracted. I'm too inflamed today and I suspect it has something to do with seeing Chris like this, I can feel my temperature rising—angry fire simmering in my veins. Someone put their hands on him. They roughed him up,

knowing very well that he's a toothpick that would try to hold his own in a fight but still fail because village kids don't play when it comes to fighting.

I've already packed my shit by the time he dismisses us. The class is empty when I finally go to him. I try to touch him and he shifts again. A trembling breath leaves him. "Don't. Don't touch—me." He cracks out. "What do you want, Nqoba?"

"Who did this to you?" I ask, trying to keep my emotions in check.

"None of your concern."

"And does this none of your concern go to this school? If yes, what grade?"

His functioning eye widens in disbelief. And then he giggles. I ache to reach out and wrap my arm around him but maybe he has a point. The closer we get, the more touches we entertain, the harder it becomes for us to not end up in bed together. We've done well so far. "You're an idiot," Chris murmurs quietly, packing his things.

"I'm your idiot," I say absently. "Now tell me who did this to you?"

"I'm not some damsel in distress, Nqoba. I've got this. I can handle my own battles. Don't do this."

I clench my jaw and nod. "That's still fine but tell me who put their hands on you."

"It was nothing. Just a stupid argument and that kid thought he could get away with undermining my authority because he doesn't listen to confused men who don't know whether they want to have penises or vaginas. I put him in his place and he punched me so I hit him back. It was unprofessional. I was lucky Mr. Biyela took my side but Sandile has been suspended."

"Sandile?" my mind does a quick scan. "Sandile Nala?"

"There are plenty of Sandiles, Nqoba."

“But only one who is a bully,” I grit out. “In Grade 10. Thandolwenkosi has told me about him. Ngizoxoxisana naye khululeka.”

“Talk with him how, Nqoba? Don’t cause problems for me, please. I’m already stressed with—do you have any idea what I’m going through?”

His question seems really personal. It has to do with me somehow, I just know it. “I can’t sleep without you next to me,” I move to invade his space. His features scrunch up and he bites his bottom lip. His arms are folded on his chest. He’s defensive.

“Tough luck!” It’s whispered, a little attitude found in his voice.

“I’m coming over tonight.”

“Nice of you to ask,” another quip, a tear slides down his cheek. My arms wrap around his waist and I hug his unmoving body. It takes a bit of coaxing, with me kissing down his neck, for him to finally give in. He folds his arms around my back, his hands fisting on my jacket. I can feel him become lethargic in my embrace but he’s shaking a little. No sounds signal any cries from him so I don’t know if he’s crying with the way his face is buried in my chest. “Why don’t you go to this person you love for your comfort?” he asks after a long silence.

“I—can’t,” my own voice cracks. She’s dead. “I need you.”

He’s silent for forever before he sighs. “I—need you too. But I’m still with Hugo.”

My heart clenches tightly and my hold tightens around him just a little. “We’re over,” I remind him.

He looks up at me, eyes searching. I’m not sure he finds what he’s looking for but he nods his head. “We’re over.”

I lean down to kiss him softly. He doesn’t stop me.

Mutual Desires : Fourteen

Nqobizitha

“Awusho, where are you going?”

This is the first question I am met with as soon as I exit the bathroom. I would've startled lightly had a part of me not expected this. Nontethelelo doesn't seem to understand that waltzing in my house uninvited is trespassing, an invasion of privacy. Mama and Baba moved me out of the main house so that I'd gain independence, and have the girls respect me. Nontethelelo does whatever the fuck she wants and defies their instruction and still comes to chill here...but they all do. “Uthanda iindaba wena,” I scowl at her. “Who told you I'm going out?”

She rolls her eyes. “Sewulala ngempahla ye R4000 wena?” she points to my clothes and smirks knowingly. “And do you also put on cologne when you go to bed?”

“Uyabheda wena,” I snort and then grab my gold watch from the table. After I put it on, I grab the package I'm taking with me to Chris' and look over my shoulder as I head for the bathroom. “I'm going out. Cover for me.” A self-satisfied chuckle rumbles from deep inside my throat as Nontethelelo's voice follows me all the way there. I'm not in the mood to explain now...maybe later. Maybe never. I manage to escape the house with the package in one hand. It's dark outside but I'm used to it. I have to be careful when I pass the Sibiya household though. They house a few naughty dogs and I'll be forced to dump the package should they come after me. It seems that being untrained is a thing in that family. I make it to the toothpick's place in record time. Jumping their fence is a breeze and his window is slightly open. Being tall can be problematic, especially when it comes to these miniature doll house windows at Chris' house. His giggles are the first thing I hear as soon as I'm inside, they shoot to my belly. A smile automatically pulls at my lips. “Uhlekani?”

“It's just...” he shakes his head and plays with the ends of the jersey he's wearing. My jersey. My heart falters a little and I momentarily freeze, beholding his beauty. “You're so big that it's funny seeing you breaking into my room every night. These windows weren't created for you, Tarzan wami. They're for portable folk like myself. Angazi why ungakokoti.”

“This is more romantic, dali.” I say absently and hand him the package I brought for him. “Bheka lapho loshuni ow'thandayo ongacacanga. I don't want you to starve on my watch. Kunangcono kuphele imali yasekhaya, nganeyakwethu.” I tell him while moving to his closet to find a hanger. He's thinner now, much worse than I'm used to, and I would have a talk with Zenande about feeding him if possible. But I

don't want to open a can of worms. I'm removing my jersey when I feel his thin arms hug me tightly. Then he's trying to climb me and I'm forced to wrap one of my arms around him to keep him from falling butt first on the floor. He has the biggest grin on his face, it shouldn't be this enchanting. "Awukahle, Sponge Bob. Waw'suyangicwayizela manje." He's making me feel funny.

He giggles and then he shakes his head. "Thank you, Tarzan wami." I still don't get this Tarzan thing he goes on about but it makes my belly flutter. One of my hands is cupping his nonexistent ass, the other one at the back of his neck as I return his eager hug. I've missed this. I won't tell him. "I can't believe you remembered what I ordered that day."

I make it a point to remember all his minutiae. "That was the only time I've ever seen you eat large amounts of food. Looks like the food went straight to the toilet afterwards though. And now it looks like you're losing weight. I'm not sure if you're going for the needle look kodwa you were better as a toothpick."

He punches my arm and smiles but his eyes are wet. "I don't eat that much vele but I guess I haven't been having much of an appetite lately."

"Akube ugcinile ke 'ngalo-I don't have an appetite wakho'." I kiss his temple and put him on his feet. He wraps his small hand around my bigger one and drags me to the bed. I just nod my head when he asks if it's okay to play music. He plays his sappy music and gets this shy smile. I roll my eyes and return his smile. It's silent for a while, I watch as he eats and he's really going at it. He's not shy about it, the sounds he's making are proof of that. My dick is reacting to his moans, it's been too long since I last had him beneath me – writhing and trembling, releasing obscene sounds that were always music to my ears. I clear my throat and adjust the boner in my underwear. If he's noticed, he doesn't show it. He's so beautiful – with the sauce on one corner of his mouth and on his hands. His eyes find mine when I laugh at him. He's all soft facial features and insistent eyes. Breathtaking.

I grab my phone on the bed and take a picture of him. Where I'm expecting him to go all shy on me, he surprises me by doing that pouting thing people do. I take another picture and then another one. He smiles and shifts his body this way and that way. He removes my jersey, remaining in just his underwear and poses dramatically. I laugh and shake my head but continue to snap pictures of him. He will kill it as a model. He's photogenic with his beautiful quirky features and his dark skin. He's sensual, like dark chocolate. He wraps the white bedsheets around himself next and the contrast it creates is indescribable. I'm staring at an ethereal creature. Chris is enchantingly beautiful. "Let me see," he pleads as soon as we're done and he's redressed again. I give him my phone, trusting that he won't go searching around for things he's not supposed to. "These are beautiful, Nqoba."

"I agree," a sound of surprise leaves me as he launches himself into my arms. I hug him back and bury my face inside his neck. He smells familiar, like watermelon, I inhale deeply, wanting to drown in his scent. The hug seems to last forever before we're rearranging ourselves on the bed. He's flat on his back and I'm in between his thighs, laying my head on his belly, with his legs wrapped around my back. He runs his fingers through my hair and I'm like a cat purring. All the exhaustion from the past few days comes crashing down on me and I find myself on the verge of drifting off. In him, I find my calm again.

"So this is what you missed? Crushing me like this?" he asks softly, his fingers brushing my scalp gently.

I missed his light and being enveloped by it. I missed how he filled my mind with silence. I missed being with him and hearing him talk and talk. That is what I missed. "Maybe," I bury my face in his pelvis and wrap my arms around his waist.

He giggles and runs his hand down the side of my face. "Such a child..." I can feel his lips pressing on my temple. They settle me, making me sleepier. He's humming softly, to a song I don't recognize, and continuously brushing my scalp, lulling me to sleep. "So lock the door, and throw out the key. Can't fight this no more, it's just you and me. And there's nothin' I, nothin' I, I can do..."

"Hmm?" I murmur sleepily, half hearing him.

"Oh nothing, just singing about how my poor self seems to be stuck with a Brentwood wearing boy."

I manage a quiet chuckle, "Is that so?"

"Very much so, Tarzan."

"Talk to me, Bambi." My hold tightens on him and his scent is all around me, enveloping me. His voice reaches my ears, soft and quiet. The darkness I meet as my eyes close doesn't seem as intimidating. Chris' light penetrates through it.

"Yah, Zamo. Uphi ubhuti wenu?" I ask as she and her siblings crowd me. It's the day after Nhlakanipho's birthday and he requested to see me. I'm hoping he doesn't want to return the cellphone I got him as a gift. Siyabonga was able to convince him to take it and this time I know why. Part of me still can't believe

that he's been in a two year relationship that I never knew about. Part of me is scoffing at myself for being so damn blind that I didn't notice that something was going on between him and Siya. I'm still not mad though. It's not like I told him about Chris when we started messing around. I had my reasons and I'm sure he also had his own reasons for not telling me about his relationship.

I pick up the little kids and tickle them playfully and laugh as they try to squirm away. Nomzamo smiles up at me and bounces on the balls of her feet. "Bhut' Nqoba!" she giggles and points to Nhlakanipho's house. "He's in there with bhut' Siya."

I hope they're not having sex. "Where is Gogo? Let me greet her first." I allow them to drag me to the main house and knock twice before entering as Gogo gives her permission. "Gogo MaMzimela kunjani?"

"Mfana wami, I didn't expect to see you today." She hugs me and then gives me a once over. "Indlela okade uphuze ngayo. I really hope it's not going to happen again."

I rub the back of my neck and nod bashfully. "Ewu, ngyaxolisa munt' omdala." Getting drunk is not something I do often but yesterday, I decided to follow Chris' suit. Sometimes, I think he enjoys riling me up just so that he can see how far I can go before exploding. It wasn't my fault this time. The other times, he blames me but this time it wasn't my fault. I just simply asked him to get rid of his bed. Every time we fuck – yes, we gave into the temptation – I can't help thinking that I'm fucking him on the same bed that he got fucked on by that French idiot of his. And maybe, I allow my emotions to get the best of me on those nights, going harder and rougher – taking out all of my belligerent emotions on him. Chris takes it all – the biting, bruising, the choking. He responds with his own bites, and scratches down my back. It's like were trapped in this place where we stress each other out, killing each other and dragging the other down but no one relents and so we continue – pulling each other to the ground, screaming and fighting and we both don't know how to make it stop.

"I understand, mfana wami. You young people are too liberated these days. But don't make it a habit. Alcohol can be very addictive and I don't want you to waste away your future."

I nod my head and bow reverentially. "Ngibonga wena, salukazi sami. I'll go to Nhlaka's now...if you don't need any assistance?"

"Cha, mfana wami." She pats my back. "Ungahamba. He's been trapped there with Shandu's boy since the morning. Maybe you can convince both of them to soak in the sun for a few minutes."

“We’ll see, Gogo.” I smile and then head for Nhlakanipho’s house. Knocking on the door, I wait patiently for the door to open. Nhlakanipho is half-naked, in a pair of worn-out jeans only. He runs his hand at the back of his neck and smiles. I peer over his shoulder, to the house. Siya is sitting on the bed. He’s even worse than Nhlakanipho and wears just his boxers. “Benibhebhana nina,” I say with a sly smirk as I push past my best friend. “Sho, Siya.”

“Nqobizitha,” he smiles. This feels like *déjà vu* as I notice just how hoarse his voice is. I feel like face palming for how blind I am. But I don’t think I can blame myself on this one. Before Chris came here, I wouldn’t have even thought twice about homosexual people. Yes, my sister likes girls too but still. It’s only as I started growing ridiculously attracted to Chris that I learned that it’s possible to be attracted to someone of the same gender. It’s only after I had sex with him that I started seeing things I should’ve noticed long ago. “Where is Chris?”

“Don’t know, don’t care.” I try for an unperturbed shrug but I can feel my jaw locking. “So this is why you’re always speaking like you are? Bafo isn’t going easy on you, huh?”

Siya’s cheeks heat up, the disadvantages of having light skin, although he’s not a yellow bone. He’s like black coffee mixed with two spoons of milk. I notice the bruising around his neck and wrists. At least Chris and I are not the only perverted ones. Siya looks at Nhlakanipho, they appear to be having a silent conversation again before Nhlakanipho nods and Siya’s eyes light up and he nods. His excitement is that of a child. “Sometimes. But we didn’t do anything today. I’m not feeling well.”

“With how wrecked you look, is it really a surprise?” I thank Nhlakanipho who gives me a chair and goes to sit next to Siya. I watch Siya shift slowly as if it hurts to move and go to straddle Nhlakanipho’s lap. He rests his head on Nhlakanipho’s shoulder and my best friend wraps his arms around the younger boy’s waist. Siya whimpers as if it hurts and I notice the bruising on his back. “Benilwa na?”

Nhlakanipho gets his subtle smile, a mysteriousness found in his eyes. “Cha.” He doesn’t elaborate.

“Pho what are these bruises on Siyabonga?”

“None of your business,” Nhlakanipho says in a manner that is final. “All you need to know is that it was consensual. I’m not abusing him.”

“It’s true,” Siya looks at me and then looks away shyly. “We both enjoy this. Kind of like...the way you and Chris have your wild sex and you choke him while fucking him until he blacks out.”

“Siyabonga!”

“It’s okay, bafo.” I raise my hand and observe Siyabonga in interest. “So you and Chris bond over who between me and your boyfriend is the kinkiest, huh?”

“Before, maybe. But I decided to keep out of your affairs. You’re both confusing as fuck and I don’t want to appear jealous. Chris never bothered to listen to me when I warned him about you and now he’s heartbroken and—”

“Siyabonga,” Nhlakanipho is gripping Siyabonga’s face so that they’re looking at each other. “Watch your mouth. I don’t remember Nqobizitha asking for your opinion on his personal affairs with Chris. You don’t even know everything. This is why I always tell you to mind your own business. Awuyeke uk’phapha.”

The silence is a little suffocating so I clear my throat and say, “It’s okay, bafo. Clearly Chris is the one who’s getting hurt here. I’m the bastard messing with him never mind that I wasn’t the one calling him someone else’s name in bed. But because he knows how to cry and some of us don’t then of course we’re going to take his side. Anyway, I’m not here to discuss him. You invited me, bafo.”

Nhlakanipho nods and shifts a groaning Siya off his lap. “Nxese, Shandu.” He kisses Siya’s head and the way the self-appointed gossip columnist leans into his touch. They look...breathtaking. There’s something about their body language and how intimate they are that makes me uncomfortable and forces me to look away. I don’t even have that with Chris. Maybe I had with someone else when I was younger but it’s gone for good now. “Let’s go outside, bafo. Siya will stay in bed. He needs to rest.”

I nod my head and follow Nhlakanipho silently outside. There’s a bench that’s always outside the main house. Nhlakanipho takes it and ambles toward the empty kraal. We sit down and it’s silent between us for a while. I bury my face in my hands and sigh loudly. You see what I mean when I say that Chris likes to press my buttons to see how far I can go before exploding, I mean he starts shit like the nonsense he did two days ago. He called me Hugo as he was nearing his orgasm. I’m sure he did it to rile me up but I don’t even know what I had done wrong this time. So I dealt with him the only way I know how and he was crying uncontrollably by the time I was done with him. The same tears that he kept shedding here when we were attending Nhlakanipho’s party. I haven’t tried to get in touch with him today. He could be fucking other guys and I wouldn’t care. He’s not worth the chest pains I get when thinking about him.

“How are you, bafo? You look terrible.” Nhlakanipho breaks the silence.

“Ey, siyazama bafo. Sothini?” I chuckle but there’s no humour in it. My hands rub together and I turn my head to look at him. “You’re clearly doing far better than me.”

“I was like you once,” he regards me with a serious look. “Siya and I were like you. Some relationships just work...the first time and people got their shit together. Then there’s kids like us who know nothing about love and try to love our partners as best we can but we’re stumbling and doing things wrong. Siya and I...the first time I stole a kiss from him I was 15 – a few days before my birthday – and he was this beautifully clumsy 13 year old kid. He punched me in the face and ran away before I could retaliate. The next time I saw him, I beat the living daylight out of him. Remember?”

“Yeah,” I wasn’t exactly present during the fight. But I did see Siyabonga when he returned to school and I remember how his father wanted to personally deal with Nhlakanipho. The only reason he didn’t was because the teachers mediated for both of them. They knew that Nhlakanipho could beat Bab’ Shandu just as badly as he had Siyabonga. I remember that Siya stayed away from us for close to six months that time. I think maybe his father had instructed him to. Then one day, after school, Nhlakanipho is carrying his bag for him. And then we were back to being friends again. I never questioned them or wondered how they solved their crap.

“I don’t regret a lot of things or putting hands on a lot of people because most of them deserve it but with Siya it’s different. Hitting him was like hitting myself. Every punch is like a punch to myself. A kick is like a kick to myself. So I spoke to uGogo. I was vague about it but part of me knows that she knows. She’s just waiting for me to confess. Anyway, I don’t know where I am going with this, bafo. I’m a person of few words and I don’t like advising. What I’m trying to say is it took a very long time for Siyabonga and I to be where we are. And that we’ve had many stumbling blocks but I live for him. Everyday, I wake up and one of my goals is to be the best version of me for him. Because he gives me his best. You have no idea how long he’s waited for me to tell you about us.”

“Why didn’t you?” I ask him. “I wouldn’t have judged you.”

“At first, I was...scared.” His voice is emotionless, like a robot speaking, and his face is his signature deadpan. “You’re the first person I was comfortable with around here. Your carefree nature complimented my—”

“Cold demeanour,” I say because he’s clearly struggling to find the right word. “Your fuck off vibes.”

He laughs and nods once. “I suppose you could say that. But you were the first person I really felt good around. There’s a lot you know about me, my upbringing. You don’t judge me. You love me. You’re my brother. I was scared to lose you.”

“I wouldn’t have judged you, bafo. At least I don’t think I would’ve. Maybe I would’ve failed to fully understand because before Chris, I didn’t get why you’d want someone with the same body parts as you. Dick on dick. Beards. Although we don’t have them yet. Chris kinda made me see things differently. He proved that sometimes we don’t choose who we’re attracted to.”

“So what, you’re into guys now as well? Should I be cautious around you?” he says teasingly.

“Khohlwa,” I punch his arm and shove him away slightly. “I’m not into dudes. I don’t think I am. I’m into Chris. I’m Chrissexual.”

“Chrissexual?” Nhlakanipho laughs his contained laugh. “Uyasangana wena.”

“What else am I supposed to say, bafo?” I shrug and then eye him carefully. “What about you? Are you completely gay or maybe you’re bisexual?”

“No part of me has ever desired a female,” he says with a small frown. “That boy, Siyabonga, I wanted him from the first time I laid my eyes on him. But he was only 11 years old and I thought maybe he was too young. I was planning to wait until he was 16 but I couldn’t wait any longer.”

“How did you two admit your feelings, bafo? You see, I think what I feel for Chris is more than sexual but he frustrates me. Just when I think I’ll be able to tell him, he does shit that makes me change my mind.”

“I mean I stayed away from Siyabonga after we fought. To respect him. His father’s wishes. Then one day, at the soccer tournaments in Mphundumane, he slipped a paper in my bag. I don’t know how he managed to do it without the others noticing. Anyway, I came home and found a 250 word essay about a host of things. He was mad that his first kiss with me wasn’t as perfect as he always thought it would be. He was mad that I tricked him into the kiss. He was mad at himself for enjoying it. He freaked out

when he punched me. But essentially, he wanted to meet up and talk. He wanted another apology. And I had to do something to prove I was sorry for hitting him. Something heartfelt.”

“What did you do?” I ask him.

Nhlakanipho rubs the back of his neck. He’s bashful, perhaps a little embarrassed as well.

“Ngiyaz’hluphekela mina, bafo. I asked Nomzamo to bring me those sweets with the plastic rings they sell at her school. We met on a Friday night near eMasimbeni and I gave him the ring. I told him I’d marry him one day. We’re already married in my eyes. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

“Lucky you, bafo.” I try to keep envy out of my voice. I don’t think I’ll ever find this love he has with Siyabonga. Maybe if Mama was still alive. Maybe we would be living together like she promised. I’m grown now, there wouldn’t have been anyone trying to keep me away from her. A lancing pain stabs at my heart and I force it away.

“I know I’m lucky, bafoza. Siyabonga is my calm. The same way that Chris is yours. We’re too alike and yet so different, you and I. Like I fight my demons with my fists, your fight yours through sex. I’m just not sure if Chris is on the receiving end for the right reasons. You can’t be using him to fight your demons but maybe he can hold your hand. Like Siya holds mine.”

“I had someone to hold my hand...long ago,” I whisper and clear my throat. “Sometimes, I don’t even think that boy likes me back. Or the way I do. I refuse to be the one who’s at his mercy.”

“You’re blind if you can’t see how much that boy loves you,” Nhlakanipho snorts. “The way he looks at you – his sun sets and rises in your eyes. I swear nothing else matters to him than when you’re together or in the same vicinity. He wouldn’t have dodged his own birthday party in the presence of his boyfriend if he didn’t. Sometimes, the two of you act like fools. You’re like opposite magnets who can’t keep away from each other and I’m always worried that we’ll have another case of uMhlongo in our hands.”

I still for few seconds, not sure what to say. My heartbeat is accelerating a little and I’m looking into Nhlakanipho’s eyes to be sure that he’s not fucking with me. But he’s the most serious person I know and when he says something, I generally tend to believe him. “Kodwa isn’t it futile, bafo? Ungcono wena ngoGogo. Mina, I have too much responsibility on my shoulders. Nqobizitha Mkhonto Ngcobo. Last born child. The son my parents desperately prayed for. Born seven years after my mom had given up. Igama liyakhuluma, ndoda. Through my birth, my mom was able to defeat her enemies. Imagine what will happen when she discovers that the same son she prayed for sleeps with other boys? I know it’s just

Chris but you know what I mean. MaKhathide will never accept that boy. Won't I be shaming her? I'm tired of disappointing that woman, bafo."

Nhlakanipho remains silent as well. Like he also doesn't know how to proceed from here. And this is why part of me ends up angry at myself for even getting jealous or angry at Chris for the relationship he has with that man. There's so much I will never be able to give him. Marriage. Kids. A family. Anyone can tell how much he aspires to have his own family. I see it in the way he's quickly grown to adore Nhlakanipho's siblings. He's always posting pictures of them from when he comes to visit with Siya. Marriage is not on the cards for me. I'm not sure about kids. I don't think I can give them any pure love. I already have a family, I don't need another one. When discussing the future, I can't even see beyond what I want for dinner this evening. At least with the French idiot, he's got his shit together. It's just a matter of time before Chris will realize that he's wasting his time with me. Maybe shame and guilt will someday get the better of him and he'll leave. But I won't make it easy for him to, nor will I make that decision for him. A better person would do the right thing and let him go.

I am not that person.

Christophe

"Ready to go?"

I blink my eyes and see Siya standing in front of me. He has his keys and phone in hand. "Um...sure," I leave the chair and follow him out of his room. We're going to Richard's Bay today. It was all his idea. He's pathetically happy lately. It has to do with being able to show his affection for his boyfriend in front of his boyfriend's best friend. He's waited so long apparently and he's so happy. I'm also happy for him but nothing sucks like being stuck with people who're unnecessarily happy when your own love life is in shambles.

Nqoba's not speaking to me.

It has to do with an incident that took place a few days ago. It was my fault. I'll admit. I called him Hugo in bed. I did it on purpose. To get back at him. What happened was I saw him talking to that MaNtuli woman who still hasn't gone back to jail and I just let my emotions get the best of me. I was insecure and I thought maybe they were having sex. I don't trust Nqobizitha around women. I, especially, don't trust him around fat women. So we were having sex and all I could think about was how he probably still fucks those women and I called him Hugo to spite him. It was fucked up and childish I know but I can't take it back. I paid for it with my body anyway and I couldn't leave the bed the following morning. I

couldn't walk. For close to half a day. I wasn't doing any better when I attended Nhlakanipho's birthday party. I'm guessing we're really over this time. Perhaps he'd been right about him being the source of my wet pillows. I'll be damned if I admit that to his face though.

My legs grow weak a little as I spot a familiar car parked outside the Shandus' home. He's not driving and sits in the back seat and it's Nhlakanipho who is driving. Siya goes to occupy the front seat – and great it means I have to sit with him. My heart jumps a little as he steps out of the car. He's going to the other side. He gets my door for me. I'm going to cry. He always does this. He'd never allow me to get my own door. "Sanibonani," I greet as Nhlakanipho starts to drive away. He's the only who responds. Nqoba is looking outside, as if he couldn't be bothered with my presence. I swallow down the lumps and look the other way while folding my arms to my chest.

Siya is in charge of the music. He has similar music tastes to his boyfriend. Maskandi. '*Aenzele bona*' is blasting in the car. I bear it, it's better than Gqom and amapiano. Immediately we reach our spot, I jump out of the car to steal some air. I couldn't breathe with Nqoba so close to me. I could barely think. Every bone in my body ached to reach out and touch him. It's even worse because he's wearing those shorts I bought him. This is the first time. I'm not sure if he's fucking with me to get back at me for that Hugo incident. He makes them look so gorgeous and they're worshipping him. I can see it in the way everyone turns to do a double-take when they eye him. That Brentwood golf shirt he's wearing is doing a poor job of hiding the muscles that lie beneath it. I want to step in front of him and hide him from the world. I want to jump him and cling to him like a little monkey and tell everyone to back off. *He's mine!* I don't.

I watch Siya and Nhlakanipho comfortably flaunt their love for once. We're at the same mall that I came to with Zenny and that Jabulani guy the last time. Nhlakanipho has his arm around Siyabonga and the younger boy has his own arm wrapped around the other boy's waist. Siya is giddy and happiness is a beautiful look on him. Of course we're met with disapproving glares but the tolerance isn't bad either. Nqobizitha and I walk behind them awkwardly. Siya is mostly like me, a bit modernized. We scout a few shopping stores first and buy some clothes. Nhlakanipho is really reluctant to pick out a few clothes but Siyabonga has his arm wrapped around his pinky finger.

I catch Nqoba looking at me as we enter a Mr Price and I wonder if he remembers the last time we entered a Mr Price like I'm remembering. I want to ask him but he still looks so cold. So I don't. While waiting for Siya to return from the changing rooms, I use the opportunity to see what cool items they have around here. The nail polish is pretty cool so I grab it. I check the sunglasses next and I'm undecided between two colours of the same design.

"Go with the red."

I look over my shoulder and notice a guy smiling at me. He's tall – and I say this because most people are taller than me – and thin. He's Indian with long wavy hair and gorgeous skin tone. "Okay." I put the red ones back and go with black instead. He shakes his head and laughs. I join him. I always do this.

"My name's Zayn."

"Christophe," I say accepting his hand. "Do you go around giving strangers advice on their fashion choices?"

"Not really," he smiles impishly. "Just really gorgeous one who're exactly my type."

"Oh..." I blink taken aback by his straightforwardness. "And what is your type?"

"Dark skin, big eyes and those pink lips of yours."

I roll my eyes. "Let's hope you're not fetishizing me because of my skin tone."

"No!" he says quickly and tries to touch my shoulder but I pull back slightly. "That's not me at all. I'm sorry if I gave you that impression. I'm just really interested in getting to know you better. You caught my eye when you walked in but I was scared to approach you."

"You should be," an overwhelming sensation on my shoulders. A shiver runs down my spine. "This guy right here's the type of guy to call you his boyfriend's name in bed. I think he cheats so much that he ends up confusing us. Don't waste your time, my brother."

I blink in horror, shock sluicing through me, almost as if a bucket of ice cold water has been thrown at me. I notice the guy look between me and Nqoba and so I turn my attention to him as well. He's glowering at the Indian guy, hands in his pockets. There's a tension in here, a tension so thick, one can slice through it with a knife. I don't think, just jump up to slap Nqobizitha's cheek and ignore the shocked gasps around us. Whatever items I had chosen are dumped in his arms. I'm storming out of the store. I don't where I'm going but I'm so angry. I don't even know this mall, its packed. I hear his voice calling after me and I don't stop.

“Hey, hey!” he grips my wrist and forcefully spins me around. “Awume phela nawe.”

“Fuck you!” I roar and swallow down the hurt. “How could you do that, Nqoba?”

“Ngisiza wena la. You’re in a relationship!” he snaps. He’s angry. I don’t know why. He has no right. My hand is gripped tightly, giving away his volatile feelings. “Unendoda wena. Yekela lomsangano owenzayo.”

I chuckle, its humourless. “Funny how you never notice that when you’re balls deep inside me. How you go as far as telling me that you own me.”

His jaw tightens. “Ngisiza wena.”

“Awusizi mina ngalutho, Nqobizitha!” I struggle to push him away. He’s too big. He’s a solid wall. “You really think I’d cheat again after this?” I point between us with my one hand. “What’s the point when all I’ll be thinking about is you? This is what you wanted, right? You told me that night.”

“I haven’t touched anyone since you.”

He knows what to say to get to me. My arms are around him before I can help it. He’s hugging me just as tight. We can’t keep doing this back and forth. I’m so tired of it. I want him more than he knows. “You can’t keep doing this to me.”

“You can’t keep doing this to me too.”

I look in his eyes and I think I will be brave. To just utter the words and tell him I love him. But I take too long and the moment passes as soon as Nhlakanipho and Siya join us. I stand on my tiptoes and he leans down and wraps an arm around me as he lifts me to kiss me softly. My feet are in the air and I’m cupping his cheeks, returning his kiss just as passionately but softly. The others look at us as he sets me on my feet. Siya gives me a perplexed look. I return it. I wish I knew just what the fuck this thing was between us.

Mutual Desires : Fifteen

Christophe

“Why don’t they want you to join them?”

“Because...” Siya regards me with a small smile, a smug one, “They both know they don’t stand a chance against me when it comes to stick fighting. They may be bigger and more intimidating but I’m a Life Sciences student. I know where to hit to make it hurt.”

I shake my head and laugh in disbelief, shifting my gaze to where Nqobizitha and Nhlakanipho are involved in a playful yet competitive stick fighting match. We left the mall about two hours ago, made a pit stop at a shisa nyama to get food because I was outnumbered by these Zulu bullies who refuse to eat at Spur, they wouldn’t even try Panarotti’s and when I suggested a seafood shop, Nqoba was vehemently opposed to my suggestion because he doesn’t eat fish. He said it reminds him of something but wouldn’t tell us what. Anyway, we’re in the middle of nowhere now. Well, I don’t know where we are but again, I was outnumbered as the others decided that they needed a bit of air. So they stopped the car at an empty veld and decided we should camp here for a bit.

Siya helped Nhlakanipho to build a fire. They’re playing Maskandi songs with the volume blasting really loud and we’re observing the two besties/brothers/hyper masculine creatures go at it from our sleek seat that is the hood of Nqoba’s car. Despite the maskandi music and the sight in front of me that looks something straight out of a Zulu warrior documentary, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t having a good time. All of me is at peace at the moment and it has nothing to do with being surrounded by nature. I’m with nature all the time lately, especially when I visit Nhlakanipho’s family.

The peace stems from...the company I’m surrounded by. Siya can be bitchy but he’s still a great friend – although he’d deny that we’re friends – and he looks out for me, I still can’t believe that I have a job because of him. Nhlakanipho is...Nhlakanipho. I never have the words to correctly describe him because he’s so standoffish but he’s never rude. Then there’s Nqobizitha. My Brentwood wearing bastard. My Tarzan. My Zulu romanticist. My Eros. My smile keeper. My smile breaker. My clarity. My confusion. He’s a lot of things and more and in my head, he’s all mine. I’m mostly at peace because we’re speaking again. I don’t know how we survived all those days apart but it was torture on my end – a purgatory. And I never want to experience the pain again. It hurt worse than that stupid punishment he gave me in bed – and that’s saying something because my body still shudders in ice cold fear whenever I recall the memories.

“You’re staring again,” I hear Siya murmur beside me. “Stare any longer and you’ll telepath all your feelings for him into his brain and maybe both of you will finally have your shit together and make your minds up.”

“I thought you said you were removing yourself from our personal issues.” I still can’t take my eyes off Nqoba. He’s taken his jersey off and I have it with me on my lap. His godly body is on full display and through the fierce orange glow of the fire, I watch his muscles move and contract. He moves with enviable grace for a tall giant. And I’m dying to run my hands all across his chest and maybe ride him while I’m doing that. He loves it when I ride him. I love watching his face contort when I tighten myself around him and move my body in ways that I’m sure all those women cannot. “What’s changed?”

“Nothing, I still stand by what I said.” Siya punches my arm but its playful. “It’s just...when I dreamed about the day that Nhlakanipho and I would be able to love freely in front of his best friend, I never thought it would be like this.”

“This?”

“You know...” he turns to face me. He’s so happy, I’ve never seen him look this gorgeous before. I’ve never seen this glow. It tugs at my heartstrings. “This...it almost feels like a double date, doesn’t it?”

Oh... I hadn’t thought about that. For most of our trip, I was pathetically pining after Nqoba’s attention, and sad that we weren’t speaking. Then we had that kiss at the mall and I’m all giddy again. I don’t know how many times Siya and Nhlakanipho complained about us kissing in the backseat but we couldn’t stop touching each other and we were making up for the time spent apart. Not properly. We’ll do it properly tonight. Nodding my head, I give Siyabonga a little grin. “I guess you could say that. What are the chances, right?”

“Usually, it doesn’t go as well.” Siyabonga bites his bottom lip and shifts his gaze to where Nqoba and Nhlaka are still play fighting. “Being gay is one of the hardest things in the world. There are so many things that straight people take advantage of. Like the liberty to love who they love freely without fear of losing family or being killed. I’m happy that Nqoba knows now and that he’s so accepting, you have no idea how long I waited...and part of me was giving up because whenever I brought it up then Nhlakanipho would just...he’d be dismissive. I don’t blame him. Nqobizitha is a brother to him. They grew up together and were close long before I came into the picture. They have this...special bond and sometimes it’s hard to not get a little jealous so I understood his reluctance. But I still know how this could’ve gone so differently. If Nqoba had reacted differently maybe we’d be in so much trouble now. Maybe we would be dead.”

I rub his knee and try to comfort him as best I can. There's a distant look in his eyes and I remember that time when I first visited his father's shebeen. He told me I was trying to get him killed.

"There was this man, uMhlongo, istabane njengathi. He was almost like you but more flamboyant, you know like the ones we see on TV, having too much feminine energy and all that. He even dressed different. I'd never seen anyone proudly stay true to himself like he did and then now recently you. Anyway, it wasn't easy for him, people would make his life really hard. His house would be vandalized, he couldn't go to certain spazas because they wouldn't serve him. I remember abakwaNtanzu didn't invite him to their daughter's wedding because they used to call him cursed. But he lived, far more bravely than I ever could, until they saw that because they couldn't break him mentally, then they were going to break him physically and really finish him. He was found beaten to death near this river next to Nhlakanipho's village. We saw his body for ourselves. Nhlakanipho still has nightmares about that morning. I can sometimes see his mutilated body as well, they cut off his penis and put it in his mouth. They sexually assaulted him with a bottle down his anus. His face was badly bruised and he smelled badly. But no one was ever arrested. His killers walk freely even today. The cops never bothered. His mom didn't fight, the only thing she said was she always warned him about his girly tendencies. That's it."

"Oh...wow," I have no idea what to say. Siya still looks so terrified, but so defiant, and it's admirable. I used to read about homophobia all the time until I just couldn't. Because it still doesn't make much sense to me, and it was a topic that always weighed down heavily on me. Just like when you watch the news and all you're seeing is negativity. The older I grow, the more I try to shift away from that negativity. I surround myself with people who accept me for me and share the same values and beliefs I do. I'm not blind to the trauma we face on the daily but nothing takes away a loud person's power than your silence. They could make all the noise in the world about the bible and repentance and I'd reply by pitching up with a t-shirt that says 'I love dick' and make a statement without uttering a word. There are so many ways to piss the self-righteous homophobes off. I never bother to teach them about homosexuality and the fluidity of sexuality because most of them already have their minds made up anyway. And besides, it's not my duty to educate anyone about acceptance and tolerance.

"But I still wouldn't trade being gay for anything in the world though," Siya breaks through my musings. His voice is soft but insistent and filled with conviction. It's so beautiful. "Being straight would mean loving someone else who isn't my boyfriend. I can't imagine loving some girl over Nhlakanipho. I can't even imagine loving any other guy but him. It doesn't make sense to me. He's like this one missing puzzle that completes my picture. This one specific missing puzzle that you can't find anywhere else. Do you get me?"

I smile and nod, a little enviously. "Totally." With great difficulty, I shift my gaze from Nqoba to look at Siyabonga whose stare was burning holes into my skull. "What is it?"

"Just..." he tilts his head to one side. "You're the only person he can share a bed with and not think entirely about sex."

"What?" I shake my head.

"That's what your boyfriend," Siya points to where Nhlakanipho and Nqobizitha are with his eyes and my heart skips a beat. "That's what he told Nhlakanipho the other day. The first time he laid in your bed and you guys hadn't slept together. He said it's not all about sex with you. You're the only one."

"Siyabonga," I shake my head and look at my knotting fingers. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I don't know. Just thought you should know."

I don't reply and it's silent between us for a while. It feels good to know that this connection we share isn't just sexual for Nqoba as well. That maybe he's feeling what I'm feeling. I always want to say something, like earlier at the mall. Or sometimes when he's looking into my eyes and I find myself drowning in him. I find myself wanting to confess when he's giving me his undivided attention. He's the only human I know who genuinely doesn't mind me blabbing nonstop. Even Simi grows tired sometimes but he doesn't. He genuinely listens and he makes me laugh. He makes me laugh until my stomach hurts. And he's like my favourite song. A song that I can't help but want to dance to. Even with Hugo, I never felt so intensely. What I felt for him pales in comparison to these feelings I have for Nqoba.

"I really do love him, Siya." I confess and it's as if my eyes want to prove that by travelling to Nqoba. They've stopped stick fighting, him and Siya, they're talking now. He looks so serious with the way his brows are knitting together. I ache to go and smoothen them. I always want to touch him. "Maybe we're not at that level that you and Nhlakanipho have reached but he makes me really happy. I hate when we're arguing and nine times out of ten, I piss him off but he pisses me off too. He's really jealous but I don't like to see him with women too. He buys me food and I like cooking for him. He bears my music. I bear his Science shows, I even play them to make him happy. He slow dances with me to make me happy and I love when he touches me. Being with him is like...being on some teen romance novel. Only better. I can't accurately describe my feelings for him. Ngyam'thanda uNqobizitha, ngyaz'fela ngaye."

"What about your French guy?"

“I’d leave him in a split second if Nqoba—”

“He’s never sought relationship advice before. Now you’re in the picture and...that should tell you something.”

I shake my head and look at Siyabonga. “He told me he loves someone else and that he’d be with them if he could. But he can’t. That’s what he said when we broke up.”

“Break up?” Siya chuckles and rolls his eyes. “Benithandana kanti?”

“I don’t know,” I shrug. “I don’t even know what we are.”

“Aibo, khulumani!” He shakes my shoulders repeatedly. “Did he tell you who this person he loves and can’t be with is? Maybe it’s you. Maybe he’s scared. Do you know his mom is a Godzilla? But you’ll need to communicate so that you’re not suffering in silence. Talk shit out and find out what works best for both of you. All I know is you shouldn’t deny yourselves the chance of loving each other. The opportunity is there, it’s up to both of you to grab it.”

His insistence is really beautiful today but it makes me laugh as well. “I thought you said I shouldn’t waste my time on him. He’s a manwhore and will break my heart and blah, blah, blah...”

“I’m slowly changing my mind about him. I saw how miserable he was at Nhlakanipho’s birthday party. I think that...he genuinely cares for you. Besides, it’s so clear ukuthi you guys can’t keep away from each other. I think you need to communicate better though, not everything is about sex.”

“Says the guy who’s limping,” I tease, pushing up against him. “You even had a hard time sitting right today.”

“Oh, please. Like you’re not going to be walking funny tomorrow as well,” Siya eyes me knowingly and I don’t bother to deny it. “Tell me about Johannesburg?”

His question catches me off guard and I blink a second. He's regarding me with this soft, childlike look and I smile and push him back with me so that we're both lying fully on the car. We're flat on our backs and looking at the starry sky. I take his hand and play with his fingers. His hands are bigger than mine but it's no surprise. "Joburg, Joburg...what do I say about it?"

"They call it the city of gold."

"If you really hustle," I tell him, thinking back to my life there. "Joburg's always so fast-paced. Everyone's always rushing somewhere. The New York of South Africa. I live in Kensington, away from the real chaos found in Joburg central. You always need to be careful there because the robbery is real. You can't walk around with your phone like I can here because someone could literally come up to you and demand it and no one will help you. I was mugged when I was in a taxi this one time. The other time, I saw someone else being mugged by four guys. My best friend, Simi, she kept yelling at them like a lunatic. She's crazy and she was talking about putting curses on them and stuff. The guys got scared and returned the guy's belongings but it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes, things can go really wrong."

"Wow...and for people like us? I hear it's so much better there."

I nod my head and shift to lay on my side so that I'm looking at Siyabonga. "Yeah," I give him a small encouraging smile. "It's not so bad. Braamfontein is full of kids like myself and you and your boyfriend. In universities, they don't hide who they are. I've been to three gay clubs. There's a whole community. You don't feel suffocated and weird. But we have our shit as well. And I've proved that we cheat as well. We're ordinary humans who make mistakes but want to live our lives without being judged for it. Do you plan on moving to Joburg?"

Siyabonga's eyes water. "Yeah. I have a plan and everything. This is why I push Nhlakanipho to work hard at school. If we excel the way we are at the moment, we both can get bursaries, and we'll go to Wits together. I'm studying medicine. Nhlakanipho hasn't really decided but Economics could be just for him. We're so close...less than a year now."

I give Siya the biggest beam. "I'm rooting for you with everything in me."

"Do you ever miss Joburg, your life there?"

I sit up and fold my legs to my chest. My eyes find Nqoba and I think really hard about my answer. "I do," I admit. "Maybe I'd be attending a cool fashion show right now. Maybe I'd be at a club in Braam. If my mom was home, then maybe I'd be doing my nails or something. But I love it here too, strange considering I don't usually converse with cow murderers but you're alright. Besides, I don't want to leave him..." my eyes point to Nqobizitha. "I'm stupidly in love with him."

Siya wraps an arm around me, I rest my head on his shoulder. "We need to go on a little road trip one day. I'd love to go to Joburg."

"Anytime," I tell him.

We remain silent for a while until Siya asks me about my plans for the future. I tell him about my aspirations of becoming a model. He asks if I'm not too short. I'm 5'5. "No wonder you're like a matches stick compared to your boyfriend. Nqoba's 6'6."

If he calls Nqoba my boyfriend one more time, I swear I'm going to die of a heart attack. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. He can still lift me with one arm, just like that. And it's totally hot. Also, short guys can't be discriminated against. I have every right to be a model, ever seen someone look this gorgeous before?"

Siya laughs and shakes his head. "Dark beauty. I see what you mean. Sometimes, I forget that you're only half Zulu. Have you ever been to...where does your mom come from?"

"Gabon and no, I've never been there. My dad wouldn't allow it. His only son, go where? It doesn't matter anyway because he wasn't there. My mom tried her best but she has her own business and she always needed to ensure that it was running smoothly. I'm so independent but I still want a big family because it was lonely growing up."

"I want four kids. Two girls and two boys."

"Does Nhlakanipho know this?" I smirk.

"Uyadlala wena. Of course he knows. We have our whole future planned out. Marriage, a house and kids. His family as well. We're all going to live together."

“Wow...how old are you again?” I tease him. Siya really has his shit together and he’s only 16.

“Old enough. Maturity isn’t defined by age. If that were the case, these adults wouldn’t be behaving the way they are. The world wouldn’t be in so much ruin. We wouldn’t have cases of abuse and rape. Sometimes, we kids behave better than them. I may be naïve because I haven’t fully experienced the problems life comes with but I’ve experienced things I shouldn’t have – indirectly. Think of uMhlongo and the shit we’re exposed to through these adults. I’m old enough to know I have my shit together and that Nhlakanipho is my forever.”

I’m about to reply but my heartbeat picks up as I notice Nqoba and Nhlakanipho walk back to us. I become tongue-tied and bite my lip. My lips part of their own accord, and a gasp almost escapes him at the sight of him, almost. Nqoba really has a beautiful build – strong and well-defined with muscles. His eyes are always so mesmerizing, it’s worse with the glow of orange between us, they regard me with no reservation whatsoever, causing heat to grow at my cheeks, but I refuse to look away and admit defeat. “Tarzan wami,” I whisper when he’s close enough. My fingers are restless, I want to pull him close and touch him all over. My love. My Brentwood wearing charmer boy.

The others laugh beside us and I’m about to make a jab at them but my dashing Nqoba beats me to it. “Bafo, you’re the last one who should be laughing. Siyabonga calls you baby. Baby? Cha. Nami, I’ve never been called that.”

“He can call me whatever he wants,” Nhlakanipho rolls his eyes. Siyabonga is hugging him and has a smug grin on his face. “I’ll kill anyone who laughs at him for calling me that.”

“Bring it on then. My Tarzan will protect me,” I say, wrapping my arms around Nqoba’s neck and my legs around his waist. He picks me with one hand caresses my face with the other one. Siyabonga says something. I can’t be sure what. Nqoba is pressing his forehead to mine suddenly and then he’s kissing me and the world is falling away. It’s slow and soft, comforting in ways that words will never be. His hand rests below my ear, his thumb caressing my cheek as our breaths mingle. My arms tightens around his neck, pulling him closer until there’s no space left between us and I can feel the beating of his heart against my chest. *Je t’aime*. The words repeat over and over again in my mind, like a broken record. I imagine him reciprocating my love.

Ngyakuthanda nganeyakwethu.

I've just had a meeting with creepy Mr. Biyela about a teachers' conference that's two weeks away. I honestly didn't understand his reason for telling me this until he announced that I would be coming with. I'm not even a fucking real teacher just an afterschool tutor. It's going to be in Empangeni and we'll be staying at a BnB booked by the school secretary apparently. Again, I don't know why I'm supposed to attend this thing especially since Siya isn't going to be attending it and he's also a tutor. I stopped questioning Mr. Biyela when he started giving me the nasty face that made his mole look even more menacing. I was getting uncomfortable anyway. I swear to every deity in the universe that that man is secretly gay or something. The way he looks at me makes me uncomfortable. I've told Nqoba about this but I don't think he believes me. He did say that the man is married for over forty years...like that makes a difference.

I spot Nqoba waiting outside for me and it takes everything within me to not launch myself into his arms. Ever since Siya told me that story about that Mhlongo man, I've been doing what I can to not bring unwanted attention to myself as well as this thing between Nqoba and me. I want to protect us both. I want to protect Siya and Nhlakanipho as well.

"Dali," he gains a smile. He takes my bag from me.

"Thank you." The hand holding hasn't stopped. He insists on holding my hand and says this is what he's always done so I don't fight him on it. I look over my shoulder when I feel someone burning holes into us and notice Mr. Biyela. I shudder and bury myself firmly into Nqoba's side. "That man really makes me uncomfortable, Tarzan wami. I mean it. He's looking at us now, mbheke."

Nqoba looks over his shoulder and frowns. "There's no one there, sthandwa sami. Are you sure your mind's not playing tricks on you?"

"Cha, Nqoba. I just...can't place how weird I always feel around him. I don't like him." Him calling me *sthandwa sami* is nearly enough to chase the bad feelings away. I think he does it without notice, the same way he acts like a boyfriend without notice. It's instinctual to him and I...I love it more than I can say. He gets my door for me and I thank him as soon as he enters the car. We didn't have any afternoon classes today so I asked him to take me somewhere. I didn't tell him because I want to see the look of surprise on his face but I did ask him to drive his dad's bakkie instead. I think he's suspecting but he doesn't want to get his hopes up. We talk about Mr. Biyela a few times and he tells me that if he ever tries something funny then I should tell him and I will. But doesn't that make me seem like some damsel in distress?

It takes us longer than usual to reach Richard's Bay but we get there and I can see him concealing his excitement as we enter the furniture shop. "Hi, my name's Christophe. I called in earlier about getting a new bed?" I tell the lady who meets us at the furniture store's doors.

"Yes, I—"

"Nqoba, what?! Put me down!" I squeal as this stupid idiot lifts me in the air and spins me around. I bury my face in his neck when I realize that he's not going to let me go just yet. He's behaving like he just won the goddamn lottery. He's going to make me cry. I had no idea just how badly he wanted this. We talked two days ago and even though I've finally admitted that I never actually had sex with Hugo on my bed, he still wants it gone because Hugo slept on it. He's an idiot. But he's my idiot and I love him. "You made me sick," I groan, wrapping my legs around his waist as soon as he stops behaving like a child.

"Let me kiss it better," he doesn't even ask. I'm used to it by now.

His kiss steals the words I don't need to say. In that silence all of our secrets are laid bare, all of our passions and the spark of love that exists between us. In this moment, in his love, I am strong. One kiss and I have the courage to say what had to be said. "Je t'aime. Je t'aimerai toujours."

"Usuyangithuka ke manje." He grins and brushes my bottom lip softly. "What are you saying?"

"That you make me weak." I lie and have to hold onto his arm to steady myself because my legs are buckling and he's responsible for this. It's the effect he has on me. The lady is looking at us, surprised, but she doesn't look mad. This is why I chose to come here instead of Eshowe. I knew Nqoba would behave like this. We follow the lady assisting and try out some beds. By try out, I mean the childish boy with me makes me bend over the bed and pretends to hump me to test the bed's durability. There's only few people here anyway. I want to buy the bed that costs R2000 since that's the budget I have but Nqoba offers to pay for the one that costs R5000. He covers the remaining balance with a bright smile on his face. God. He really wanted to get rid of my bed.

We're helped to load the bed inside the van and then Nqoba and I are driving back to Mbongolwane. He's playing this maskandi song by Ntencane, *Njengempukane*, and it makes me feel funny because he shouldn't be playing romantic Zulu songs when we're together. He's not supposed to make me fall any harder. He isn't. We manage to get home around 07:00pm and when I ask him if he's not going to be shouted at by his parents, he tells me that his sister is covering for him. He's been talking about his sisters a lot lately, especially the dreadlocked one, and hinting at the possibility of her knowing. I don't

know how since he refuses to give straight answers but with the way he's so chilled, I'm assuming she didn't have a problem with us.

"Ulambile?" I ask him after he's helped to fix my bed. The old one went to Thandolwenkosi, Nhlakanipho's younger sister. "I can make you..." I pretend to be deep in thought. I know what foods he loves.

"Make me love you," he's trapping me to the counter and giving me a soft look.

"I, uh..." the words have caught me off guard. His eyes are too deep for my liking, they penetrate through me and shatter my defences. My heart is pounding too hard and I'm leaning into his touch before I can stop myself. His lips are on mine, brushing so lightly, I ache to get closer. When I try, he pulls away – teasing me. My fingers curl around his jersey. "Nqoba," I whisper.

"Make me love you," he says again.

I have no idea what he means. It has to be obvious that I love him. I'm so pathetic for him. I find myself doing things I never thought I would do. "Amasi?" I ask him.

He grins satisfactorily and nods. I swallow down the disappointment. I tell him to make himself comfortable and that I'll get to it. He doesn't leave the kitchen and helps to wash the dishes that Zenny left behind while I make uphuthu. I look at him and how comfortable he is in our house. We're so domestic that I start entertaining the idea of us, living together, coming back from our different jobs to this. I'm becoming Siya. I lean into him and bare my neck for him to kiss down the sensitive skin. I can feel his erection pressing into my back. He wraps an arm around me to keep in place and removes our pants with his other hand. I'm not sure what he uses to quickly prepare me but my hands tighten on the counter as he teases me with the tip.

I gasp as the lust hits me hard, blood rushing to my groin. Craning my head to kiss Nqoba, a disappointed whimper leaves me as he deflects his lips and goes to kiss my ear instead. It drives me crazy. And it's far from enough but Nqoba's cock is now sliding in between my ass cheeks, so wet from whatever lubrication he used. I whine and involuntarily clench my ass, evoking a thick groan from the boy behind me. "Fuck," he curses, tightening his arm around my stomach, and teasing my entrance again. "I fucking want you."

I reach around behind me to grab any part of him that I can touch. “Take me...” I want him to take me in every manner. Whatever makes him happy. “I am all yours,” and there’s a part of me that’s snorting. I can’t even blame Nqoba for saying he owns me. I always give him all the permission he needs.

I can feel Nqoba’s hesitation, just a second, as a wave of disappointment sweeps my chest, so strong that I’m choking out a sob. I want this—more than anything. Anything in the world. After a moment, he kisses my temple. “Istoko sami.”

The words sound like heaven to my ear, better than every Christmas morning combined. I breathe out and turn to kiss Nqoba, slipping my tongue into his mouth. I’m still a bit loose from last night, which means the sting isn’t so bad and Nqoba’s dick is met with just a little bit of resistance. We both moan when he’s fully in. My eyes close as a shudder spreads over the entirety of my body, all of me coming alive, my body conversing beautifully with Nqobizitha’s.

“Awu kodwa, mntakwethu,” I hear Nqoba groan against my ear, making me shiver. Steadying myself on the counter, I arch my back and squeeze weakly around Nqoba’s length, panting when his fingers wrap around my pulsing dick and his other hand wraps around my neck. His fingers are splayed on the base of my neck, rubbing against my collarbones. It’s not tight enough to make me breathless. But the weird, hot sensation I always feel in my stomach is back, even more overwhelming than before.

What is this...?

Nqoba’s thrusts are getting more frantic, and uncharacteristically messier, which means he is close. But he doesn’t make a move to pull back. And I don’t want him to either. I grab his arm with my free hand and hold it tight, not gonna let it go. No. This is more than just sex. My eyes squeeze shut, and my grasp tightens on his arm. I want Nqoba, all of him... and I can’t think of being with anybody else but him. Behind me he is hitting my prostate dead-on, and I whimper as I come, with his name on my lips and some damning words on the verge of spilling out. My eyes close but the tears slip past regardless. A couple more thrusts and Nqobizitha follows me over the edge, still buried deep inside me.

He moans my name, holding me tight.

I fell in love with him, Hugo. – me

My heart is beating too goddamn hard. It's done. I've sent the message and we can finally break up and Hugo can find someone else in Joburg. I'm not heartbroken or sad but I am mourning the time we spent together. But it doesn't compare to the memories I'm creating with Nqobizitha. I know Hugo will be surprised to see that I sent him the message at bloody 02:00am but I couldn't sleep. I tried to. It didn't work. That whole kitchen sex scenario was on my mind. The way we touched and the energy that was flowing between us. It's always so intense but I think I got my confirmation today. Something that helped me be courageous. It's funny because I didn't have to look Nqoba in the eyes to know I love him and now I didn't have to look him in the eyes again to feel...to feel that he...

I think Nqoba loves me too.

I felt it. Back there in the kitchen, I felt it as well. I felt it throughout the day. When he sat beside me and enjoyed amasi and complimented the uphuthu I made. He always says I make the best uphuthu. I saw it in his eyes when I was telling him about a new blesser that Jacques found himself. I heard it in his voice as he asked me if Jacques ever did end up moving to Midrand like he'd wanted to. I felt it in his touches as he held me in his arms when we watched Isibaya together. I felt it in his stolen kisses during commercial breaks. His love embraced me as we went to bed together with me in his arms until he shifted to sleep the way he usually sleeps, with his face buried in my pelvis. I can still hear his love in the soft snores and occasional incoherent mumbling.

I know he loves me.

Now that I've ended things with Hugo, I hope I will be brave enough to tell him. Hopefully, he won't bruise my ego. But I'm also a risk taker. Being gay around a place like this is taking risks already so why not throw caution to the wind again. If I die, I die. If not, then I can finally confess my love for this boy curled into a ball and hugging my waist very tightly every night. *Je t'aime. Ngyakuthanda. I love you.* I'll get to tell him everyday. I'll get to whisper it in between kisses. I'll get to show it in my actions. Every single day. For as long as he'll have me.

Bonus Insert

Siyabonga

Fridays are what most students look forward to at Sithola Imfundo. The hours spent in classrooms are shorter and by the time the clock hits two o'clock, the excitement is buzzing, everyone already looking forward to the start of the weekend. Today, I wasn't so lucky. My Life Sciences teacher, Miss Mzimela, begged me to stay behind and help on some test papers that needed marking. I wouldn't have agreed but she's like an in-law to me – even though her and Nhlakanipho aren't related – and I'm weak concerning anything that could have to do – directly or indirectly – with my boyfriend. Yes, I am the biggest sap in the world. Even fictional characters who share my boyfriend's name make me smile like a goddamn idiot. That's how pathetically in love I am.

Anyway, Miss Mzimela and I were done in less than an hour but Nhlakanipho still left me. He said he had something to do back home but told me to come through later. I won't be able to stay for long because my dad has been complaining about how little time I spend with them. He and Mama miss me sometimes. I feel guilty, I'm not going lie. Being an only child isn't easy. My parents have doted on me all their lives and sometimes, I think they forget that I'm not their little baby anymore. I'm 16, I'll be leaving and going to university next year. They'll need to get used to the idea of not having me around. I'm growing, and one day, I'll have my own husband and house and kids. The same things that they have now. But I still promised to spend more time together and tomorrow, we're going to Eshowe mall.

Sometimes, I think the reason I love so hard is because I have the perfect example in my parents. People talk about men being unable to remain faithful all the time but my dad consistently proves them wrong. They talk about abusive spouses but I've never heard my mom cry tears of pain – whether emotional or physical – and I've never heard them shouting. They made me aspire to find a love like theirs, and to think I've found it with Nhlakanipho...many people usually aren't this lucky.

"Baba, sengihembe." I announce to my father who is wiping the tables and preparing for yet another rowdy night at the shebeen.

He whirls around and gives me a proud smile. I want to love my kids the way he loves me. "Ukhumbule, you're not spending the night at that boy's house tonight," his eyes sweep up my body and I can't miss the quiet command in his voice. "I want you home by 10:00pm – and that's being generous."

He's being very generous. I nod my head and force myself to maintain the eye contact. Baba seems to see right through me sometimes, with the way he gives me a pass where Nhlakanipho is concerned. He

loves him like a son which is a relief for me because on the day I tell my parents the truth, I won't need to worry about my parents hating my boyfriend. I think I won't. "I won't disappoint you, Baba. Ngizobuya ngeskhathi ngiyethembisa."

He gives me a disbelieving look and rolls his eyes. "Ubingelele lapha kwaMzimela. Ask that boy, Nhlakanipho, if we're fighting and I don't know about it. I haven't seen him around this house in forever."

A beam spreads my lips and the butterflies swim connivingly in my belly. I wrap an arm around myself and hope my stupid face isn't revealing anything. He can't see how bad I have it. He can't. "Heard and noted, Baba. But he's busy with school and his studies."

"The same way you're also busy with your schooling. Or maybe he fears that I'll knock him out ngesagila sami. Until he tells me why my son always seems to be sporting back problems when he comes back from visiting him."

"Baba!" I choke on my spit as my eyes widen. Why does he look so laidback? I scrutinize him and try to figure him out. I don't think he knows anything. He's gone back to his whistling and cleaning of the tables. "I'll, uh, see you w-when I come back. Usale kahle."

"Sesobona ngawe, ndodana."

I have to pass Nqobizitha's house before finding a ride that will take me to Mphundumane. He said he has some things for uGogo and the kids so I don't have a choice. The sun is scorching hot outside but I don't have to be in it for long because I don't stay that far from the Ngcobos' luxurious homestead. Their fancy houses scream wealth, along with the many cars hidden behind their iron gates. I think the only reason they're not robbed around here is because uBab' Ngcobo is responsible for Mbongolwane's economy. They've done a lot for many poor individuals around here and continue to offer help where help is needed. Nontethelelo opens the front gate and regards me with a gorgeous smile. "Yah, muhleza. You're here for the tall idiot?" she has a cigarette in her hand.

I swallow down a cough and nod, my eyes are getting watery. Cigarettes smell good but the smoke still makes me cough. "He wants me to collect a few items for abakwaMzimela," I say.

“Oh, visiting the boyfriend,” she gives me a wicked grin and ushers me inside. The first time she said this, I honestly had breathing problems and almost fainted. But she was cool about it and told me that she’s bisexual herself. “The tall idiot would be joining you and visiting that skinny chipmunk of his but he’s under house arrest for spending R10 000 in one day. Ubheja ngemali kaMaKhathide.”

I chuckle and nod to myself. Chris told me about how he hasn’t been seeing Nqoba as much as he’d like to. Well, he didn’t tell me, he was whining and almost sobbing like a cry-baby. He’s more pathetic than me. But Nqoba’s always been a spender. Aside from sex, forking out money is what he does best. This is why Nhlakanipho had been reluctant to accept that R5000 phone that Nqoba bought him. “What did he buy?”

“He won’t say, only told us it was important. The money was paid to some lady who runs a modelling agency in Durban.”

“Oh...” my mind works a mile a minute. Maybe he’s doing something for Chris. The short thing wants to be a model, I remember he told me this. I wonder if Chris knows about this. I don’t think he does. He wouldn’t have shut up about it. “We’ll talk later. Thank you,” I tell her once we’re at Nqobizitha’s door. She gives me a small smile and bangs on Nqoba’s door like a policeman before running away. My eyes follow her fast sprints and I shake my head, laughing in disbelief. I’m forced to defend myself as soon as the door opens. “Usisi wakho, don’t look at me like that.”

Nqoba rolls his eyes and stands aside. I enter and I have to keep my composure because he has the coolest house I know. No one would know he’s such a nerd until you enter his house. It’s every astronaut’s dream room. From telescopic lights and equipment to the spacey theme of his bedroom. I look at his miniature astronaut collection on his study desk. “I got these for Gogo and the kids. The chocolate is for the toothpick. He loves this chocolate. Tell him I’ll see him tonight and that I miss him.”

My eyes drag a half-naked Nqoba from head to toe and a silly smile pulls at my lips. He rubs the back of his neck in response, appearing bashful. “Whoever thought we’d see the day?”

“Uyabheda wena,” he shakes his head and goes to lie on his bed. He grabs his phone and a subtle grin pulls at his lips. I’m assuming Chris is responsible for it. “See yourself out.”

Bastard...

I roll my eyes and go to punch his arm before leaving as instructed. Getting transport from Mbongolwane to Mphundumane is always a hassle, believe it or not. We don't have the luxury of taxis here and cabs operate during specific hours. This is why Nhlakanipho usually walks me home some nights but I always have him leave me halfway because I refuse to have him walk for close to four hours taking me home and then walking back to his house again. I manage to get a van and I'm lucky because I'm told to sit at the front. The back is being occupied by some girls from my school I know. One of them has a crush on me and I can literally feel her gaze burning into my skull. You have no idea what a deep breath I let out as soon I reach my destination. Girls are weird, so weird.

"Bhut' Siyabonga." I'm almost halfway to Nhlakanipho's home when his sister, Nomzamo, comes sprinting towards me excitedly. She hugs me and helps carry the plastics I have. They're not many just three. "Bhut' Nhlakanipho sent me to fetch you."

I roll my eyes and smile. He always does this. My uptight boyfriend. Like I don't know the way to his home. I'd find that place in my sleep. "Ngyabonga, Zamo. What is he doing back home?"

"Pacing around and barking out orders," she giggles and grabs my hand to hold. This one loves me too much. I swear she thinks we're best friends or something. "Mnelisi, clean your room! Olwenkosi stop hitting Sgalokuhle. Mbalenhle, why is Noxolo complaining about a dress you stole from her? Milisuthando stop eating mud, it is not cake! Kuhlekonke don't do this. Why is the baby crying? Tell her to keep quiet, I'm thinking."

My stomach is hurting from the laughing I am doing, I can picture him now, his deep voice. His authority. It sends shivers down my spine. I'm still smiling as we enter their homestead. My eyes land on Chris' blue hair first. He's sitting outside main house, on a bench, with Thandolwenkosi in between his legs, sitting on icansi. He's plaiting her hair, braids to be specific. The way they're talking, you'd swear they're besties or something. I roll my eyes but know that this just like Chris. The kid's a pain in the ass but he makes it very easy for you to quickly have a soft spot for him. He will bother you until you accept defeat and that you've gained a new friend. He's so kind and talkative. I'll never admit just how much I enjoy his company lest he think it's an invitation for him to bother me nonstop. His eyes light up as soon as he spots me.

"Sanibona. Cha uyaluka boh," I compliment his handiwork. "But it looks painful."

"It is," Thandolwenkosi chimes in. "Let me go to the toilet for a breather, Chris. I'll come back now-now."

“Fine,” Chris huffs and finishes one of the braids he was working on. “You’re such a cry-baby. I’m not even pulling that hard. My mom wouldn’t have time for you, just know.”

Thandolwenkosi laughs and rolls her eyes but she’s clearly relieved. It looks like the pain is worth it though with how neat her braids are. Grabbing the plastic bag Nomzamo was carrying, I thank her and allow her to go join her siblings while I grab a seat next to Chris. “You just left me,” I complain.

“Yeah,” he gives me a bashful smile. “I got a text from Thando and she was waiting outside for me. I caught a lift with her.”

“Let me guess...Lwandle?”

Chris nods his head.

I sigh and shake my head. “Uyahlupha lomntwana. If Nhlakanipho finds out, I’m afraid to think about the way he’ll deal with her.”

“I don’t like her boyfriend either but come on, she’s a teenager now. Teen girls have relationships, boyfriends...or girlfriends.”

“She’s 16!”

Chris raises an eyebrow. “You’re also sixteen.”

“Yeah but I—” the look he gives me makes me want to pout like a child. I fold my arms on my chest and decide to concede. “Fine. But she couldn’t have gone for someone younger, better? I don’t trust Lwandle. What twenty-four year old dates kids in uniform?”

“Maybe you can talk to her but don’t be like her big brother. Be nicer and more approachable.” Chris pushes up against me and smiles.

“Maybe,” I sigh and dig inside the plastic bags. “Thatha. Your boyfriend said I should give you this and told me to tell you that you’re missed.”

Chris cheeses hard. Like really hard. His beauty really shines through and he’s going to split his mouth with how hard he’s smiling. I think he is going to go all cry-baby on me. “Thank you!” he puts the chocolate packet against his heart and closes his eyes. I wish I could take his picture to send to Nqobizitha. Boy looks like an ethereal being right now. All glowing dark brown skin and beautiful features. His big almond eyes open and I can see why Nqoba calls him Bambi. Chris has an innocence about him, like a little child that you want to protect from the world. I hope Nqoba doesn’t screw up with him. He can’t be willing to let this go. “I miss him too. Really, really bad.”

“He was blowing up my phone during the test marking and I eventually had to put it on silent. I think he forgets that I have a really good memory. He wanted me to fetch these and especially wanted you to get your chocolate. He told me it’s your favourite.”

Chris chuckles, he still has the chocolate held tightly to his chest. “It is. I can’t believe he remembers stupid answers to that stupid couple’s questionnaire thing I made him take.”

“Couple...” I cock an eyebrow and regard Chris with interest. “Have you told him that you—”

“No,” Chris shakes his head frantically, looking adorable as he does it. “Not yet. I was thinking of making it special. Like candlelight dinner or something. Hopefully, he won’t bruise my ego.”

“He’d be the most idiotic of idiots,” I say fiercely, looking at Chris. The midget returns my smile and nods. “Anyway, have you seen my boyfriend?” it feels good to say the words to someone else. To not hide them. And Chris is happy for me, his beautiful smile tells me that.

“With Gogo.” He nods toward the house. “I think they were talking about something serious.”

“Oh...” I hope nothing’s wrong. “Uyazi ngani?”

“Nope,” Chris says, shaking his head. We talk for a while, as I wait for Nhlakanipho to return. I don’t want to disturb him with Gogo. Maybe it’s serious with the way all the kids are outside the house. I hope they don’t have yet another financial burden to add on their heavy shoulders. I hope none of his aunts

have gone and gotten pregnant. Kuhlekimi is only three weeks old. Chris talks about Nqoba. Nqoba. Nqoba. Poor thing is so in love and it's strangely beautiful to see. He complains about Thandolwenkosi taking too long at the toilet. He wants to go home and cook dinner for Nqobizitha. I chuckle loudly and tease him about how bad he has it. He shoves at me and returns my accusation. He talks about Nqoba and I talk about Nhlakanipho. We're doing that bonding thing that Nqobizitha told me about. It feels really good to have someone to talk about my boyfriend with and this is all I've ever wanted. We talk and laugh and talk some more. Until... Desire pools in my belly as soon as my eyes meet my boyfriend.

Finally. *Finally.*

A smile forms on my lips automatically. My toes are twitching and I want to rush to him but Nhlakanipho's taught me so much about obedience and waiting. His eyes are on mine as he says some words to Gogo before patting her shoulder and walking past us with a hint of a smile aimed at me. I grab the plastic bags and follow silently behind him. "Baby," I say as soon as I enter. He doesn't respond verbally but presses me up against the wall to kiss me deeply. I moan into the kiss and reciprocate eagerly. His hands are on my back, and moving to my ass, he grabs it firmly and squeezes possessively. My hand moves from around his neck to palm the bulge in his pants. I'm trying to unzip his pants but he grips my wrist.

"Phakade lami," he's so calm and collected. I am heaving and desperate for more of him. "You look beautiful."

"I'll look more beautiful with your dick in me," I try to be seductive and I get a chuckle from him. His eyes do darken though. And he's pulling me closer and worming his hand inside my jeans, under my underwear, to my right butt cheek. He squeezes again and a moan escapes me.

"Tempting but we have important things to do right now. Are you staying the night?"

"Cha," I shake my head, thinking back to my conversation with my father. "Baba wants me home by ten."

"Your father is killing me here."

I lean up to kiss him softly. "Funny he says the same thing about you. I'm always with you apparently."

“What does he expect? You’re mine, you’re supposed to spend your time with me.”

I roll my eyes, and say a quick sorry when he cocks that damned eyebrow of his. “Always so possessive. This is why I fell in love with you, baby.”

He runs a hand down my cheek. I lean into his touch and embrace the good feelings surrounding me. The energy around us. I find peace in our love. He presses a kiss to my forehead and then my lips. My arms fold around him. “Ngyakuthanda, Shandu.” I hear him murmur.

My eyes open and my soul smiles with me. “Nami ngyakuthanda, baby.”

“Phakade lami, Nhliziyo yami, Ksasa lami,” he’s pressing kisses all over my face and my hands fold on top of his large ones that are cupping my face. “Come, I want my actions to show you how much I love you.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me outside, the kids are too caught up in their games, but Nomzamo is giggling and Thandolwenkosi observes us in interest. Nhlakanipho says nothing and walks past them to the main house. My heart is jumping too damn fast right now and I want to say something, anything but I’m tongue-tied. Soon, I’m face to face with Gogo who is sitting on icansi and holding Kuhlekimi to her. She smiles brightly when we make eye contact and I wish I could return her smile but Nhlakanipho’s arm is wrapping at the small of my back and he’s pulling close to his side, firmly. I blink repeatedly, not quite registering what the fuck is happening. My legs are weak. Something is in my eyes and it’s making them watery. I try to breathe but it’s hard.

“Salukazi sami,” Nhlakanipho is looking at Gogo, unwavering. “I love you with everything in me. You’re my everything, my inspiration, my role model. Nangu...kade sikhuluma ngaye. I know you know Gogo, maybe you’ve known from the beginning. I love this boy. UyiPhakade lami. I’ll marry him one day. Here he is, your future son-in-law.”

“Not, grandson-in-law?” Gogo chuckles and I don’t know what I’m expecting but it’s not for her to stand suddenly and hug me as best she can with the baby in her arms. “Siyabonga. You’ve always been so perfect for my boy. Mfana wami...”

I want to smile and scream and cry and faint all at the same time. I’m angry at Nhlakanipho though, he should’ve told me that this is what he was planning so that I could choose something more appropriate to wear. These skinny jeans are ten months old! And I won’t even get started on my t-shirt. I hate him! I

love him so much. As soon as Gogo sets me free, I fling myself into the arms of the boy I love. A sound of surprise leaves him but he catches me. He always does. "I h-hate you," I whisper shakily. "Ngyakuthanda, Mzimela." I kiss him and again, it feels so good. Nothing compares to being able to show him I love him. I know he feels it too. "I love you so much!"

"The feeling's mutual," he says and sets me on my feet. "Uyay'bona into ebengiyisho, salukazi sami. Uyatetema lo. He cries over everything."

"Talk to him, Gogo." I say with a small smile, enjoying the genuine smile on Gogo's face. "We'll be divorcing even before we can get married with the way he's behaving."

"I'll drag you to Home Affairs, with all your crying and kicking and screaming. You're going to be officially mine whether you like it or not."

"You're a bully," I kiss him on the lips and then face Gogo. "Is this a dream?"

"Cha." She laughs and shakes her head. I join her ecansini and grab the baby from her. Nhlakanipho is standing near the window and looking at us with a small smile. "I knew long before you two got together that something was going to happen between you two. Nhlakanipho is close to Nqobizitha but there's this...intimacy in the way he behaves with you. I'm not sure how to describe it but I've always known. I wasn't surprised when he came seeking advice because he'd lost you. I wasn't surprised when you started coming around here again. It's easy to tell that you and my grandson are in love. Sometimes, people just choose not to see it. But you both look at each other the way my husband and I looked at each other. Maybe more intensely. The love is there. I've been seeing it for a long time."

I bite my lip and look at Nhlakanipho and then Gogo. "We're both boys, Gogo."

"Love is love. Many people don't get to experience it. If you find it then you hold onto it with both hands. My greatest sin would be refusing to acknowledge something this beautiful because of ignorance. I don't care that you're a boy, Siyabonga. I care that you love my grandson. I care that you're so good for him. I care that you impact his life so positively. He's found the perfect person in you."

"Thank you, Gogo." I'm crying and smiling too damn wide. It's embarrassing. "I love him."

“Does he treat you well?” I nod. “Are you happy with him?” I nod again. “Do you feel loved when you’re with him?” another nod. “Good,” she pats my shoulder gently. “Then you have my blessing.”

I think I’m dreaming. I really do. Gogo laughs when I ask her to pinch me and calls me silly before taking Kuhlekimi from me. With her permission, we leave the main house for Nhlakanipho’s smaller house. I lock the door and slam him against it immediately. Then I’m on my knees and quickly pulling his dick out. He groans and folds his hand at the back of my head. I take him in my mouth and bob my head. He’s rough and pistoning into my throat. I choke and gag a few times but what matters is that I’m driving him insane. He comes and I swallow everything and lick him clean before tucking him back in again.

“Phakade lami...” he kisses me and lifts me in his arms, headed for the bed. “Ungifuna ngifile.”

“Cha, don’t play like that.” I lean down to kiss him. “I don’t even want to think about death and your name in the same sentence. I love you too much.”

“Your mouth had me seeing my life flashing in my eyes. Ithalente, Phakade lami. Bengifa ngempela njalo.”

“Soxabana,” I whisper and lay beside him, hugging him tightly. His arms embrace me and I feel so cherished...so loved. “Ngyabonga. For back there with Gogo. Thank you for never making me question whether or not you love me. Ngyakuthanda, Mzimela.”

As if proving my words, Nhlakanipho runs his hand down my back, and the touch burns beautifully. My heart jumps erratically, and yet all of me is content. He sighs and presses his lips to my forehead. It feels like our souls are touching with just that slight contact. No one but him. I’ll never love like I love him. My soul mate. “Shandu wami,” his arms tighten around me and I grin. I’m his. Always.

Mutual Desires : Sixteen

Christophe

Ake ungiphelezele khona la engifuna siye khona. – Mon amour ❤️

Literally, this is the first message I woke up to this morning. Sent by Nqobizitha. I changed his contact name to Mon amour. It means 'my love' in French. Yes, I have it so bad that I'm becoming the sappiest of saps but I couldn't help myself. I can never help myself when it comes to him. Just his name turns me into a pile of goo and I am honestly fine with it. Anyway, he called not a second later to translate the message because I'm not the greatest Zulu reader and told me that he wants me to accompany him somewhere. Wouldn't say where but I jumped at the opportunity. It's Thursday today and technically, he's supposed to be at school but kids were told to return the following week. There's a problem with the school's water supply and they're working hard to have it fixed.

I give myself one final glance on the mirror and beam satisfactorily. You can never go wrong with the perfect 90s jeans and a good sweater. I have on my signature platform sneakers and I am carrying my bucket hat with me to protect my skin from the sun. I grab my phone and a breath that I don't even know I was holding leaves me when I notice I have no new messages or missed calls. Hugo called me the other day and I let the phone go to voicemail. I'm nervous about speaking to him. It's been almost a week since I sent that message and he called me that same morning to confirm if I was sure about my decision to which I'd responded and said yes. He told me he was happy for me and that was it. But he called again a few days later and when I didn't answer, he sent me a message, telling me that he was wondering what to do with a few of my clothes that got left at his apartment. I told him to get rid of them. We haven't talked since. I'm fine with it...more than fine, actually.

There are voices coming from the kitchen and I know that it's Zenny speaking to Nqobizitha. She still doesn't know that I'm sleeping with her former fuck buddy. That I've fallen in love with him. I don't know what she'll do the day she finds out but I try not to think about it. Zenny is always sleeping late and the exhaustion found on her face is a little alarming. I try not to get in her way so that she can rest as much as possible. But it doesn't matter the hours of sleep she gets, she never looks better. And sometimes, I'll catch her huffing to herself and cursing someone out – on the phone. I can barely ask her if she's fine without her snapping at me and then apologizing a few hours later. I didn't know that PMS lasts so long for women.

My footsteps falter a little and I pause when I hear Nqobizitha's voice. "Awu, khululeka sibukubuku. Have you forgotten who I am? You have my word."

“Whatever you say, silver tongue.” I can hear the sassiness in Zenny’s voice. “Uyakhohlwa ukuth ngyakwazi mina. From the time you were still in your diaper. Anyway, let me go to bed. I have someone to torture in my sleep.” I walk into the kitchen just as she’s walking out. “Muntuza.” She kisses my temple and walks on without saying another word.

It’s just me and Nqoba in the kitchen now. He is looking at me, arms folded across his impeccable chest, unashamed – and I bite my bottom lip, mimicking him. My heartrate is accelerating. Nqoba always does this – watch me with this unwavering, intense and unapologetic stare. He sure has a way of undressing someone with his eyes. It always makes me feel more naked than should be possible. “Sawubona,” my voice is a soft whisper.

He smiles and it blinds me and snatches my breath. I part my lips for air. I’m like a deer caught in the headlights as Nqoba trails closer to me – always so confident. He always carries himself with such poise and confidence, even the air around him seems to worship him. He’s an inch apart from me, intoxicating me with his scent and my fingers are trembling, aching to reach out to him but my sister’s here and I can’t take that risk. We’re always so reckless lately. “Sawubona, dali.” He hooks his finger under my chin and forces me to look up at him. When did I even look away? “Washalazela, awungibheke emehlweni khona into esenhlizweni yami engifisa ivele obala.” He gives me a look that makes my knees weak. His index finger is brushing along the smooth skin on my cheek, caressing. “Waze wamuhle, nganeyomuntu.”

His words do me in and I jump in his arms to kiss him. He catches me easily, like he always does and reciprocates just as passionately. Our tongues dance together sensually and it doesn’t take long for my back to be pinned against the wall. Nqoba skillfully dominates my mouth and I whimper into the kiss and cup his cheeks tightly while brushing up against him. I can feel his huge erection right on my crotch and I’m forced to pull back and moan when he grinds into me. He uses that opportunity to attach his lips onto my neck. I can barely breathe and my body is on fire, sweat forming on my forehead and maybe we need to stop before Zenny comes back. “We need to stop,” I whimper but hold him tightly as he continues to grind down on me. “Please...please. I...ngyakucela ke, Nqobizitha.”

My knees give out and I fall ass first on the floor when he lets go of me after one deep kiss. I look up at him, chest heaving, and vision blurry. He helps me up and I have to take a minute. I fix myself and then I fix him as well, while complimenting him on what he’s wearing. It’s the usual Brentwood but he looks really formal today. And I love his bomber jackets. I should take one for myself. I have a few of his jerseys, the last one I took that day he fucked me to tears because of Hugo. My body trembles as I try to chase the memories away. We manage to make it out of the house and my eyes find Sandile Nala as Nqoba is coming to my side to get my door for me. The boy’s eyes widen and he changes his course of direction. “What did you do to Sandile?” I ask Nqoba as he enters the car. I remember the boy didn’t

even wait until his suspension was over before coming to me to apologize for behaving like a dick. He's always so respectful now – and I'm not complaining but I never bothered to ask Nqoba how he dealt with him.

"Nothing any older brother wouldn't do," he replies cryptically.

I ignore his small frown and turn the volume up as Joe starts singing about '*All The Things Your Man Won't Do*'. It's a fitting song anyway, he fucks me like I've never been fucked before. I'm addicted to him – all of him. "What do you mean by that?" I ask him because his response was a little cryptic.

"I talked to him, dali. Just talked."

I wonder what he said because Zenny was right about him being a silver tongue. Too often I'd see it, especially with those women of his. I wonder if they try to get in touch with him and try to bed him. MaNxumalo always looks sour lately and then MaNtuli is still busy with her case. Word on the street is that she was innocent after all, they found the gun, and it is the same one that was used in the rape and killing of a fourteen year old girl. Since Melisizwe is dead, it's not possible that he used the gun. Someone else used it. The police don't want to let go of the case just like that though, they don't want to seem incompetent. Anyway, once this is all over, it looks like MaNtuli will be smiling all the way to the bank because of her husband's insurance policy. He was a supervisor at a reputable mining company. "Manje what were you and my sister talking about?"

"The usual. I must take care of you and keep you safe from the big bad wolves. If they touch even a strand of your precious hair, my family jewels are on the line. Like I would actually allow anyone to mess with you. Angifuni lutho ngawe, dali, kungafa umuntu."

My lips stretch into a smitten smile and we're at a red light so I quickly reach over to kiss him on the lips. He grabs my hand and holds onto it. I fall asleep with the silliest grin on my lips. And the next time I wake up, its to feel him pressing into me softly. My eyes flutter open and I realize that he's unbuckling my seatbelt. My heart beams brightly. I have the biggest grin on my face as we look at each for longer than should be allowed. His lips crash against mine softly and I cradle the back of his head. He traces my lips as soon as we're done and holds his hand out. I grab it and hold onto him. My love. We're in Durban. I'm not sure where because I've been a Joburg baby all my life but this place is breathtaking and I have to discreetly observe my surroundings so that I don't look like a newbie.

He's a fast walker and sometimes, I think he forgets that I'm really short and can't keep up with his long strides. I have to run to him and hold his hand and he looks down at me – confused. "Uyangishiya," I

whine. He shakes his head and chuckles and gives me a piggyback ride. I'm not even complaining. I weigh close to nothing anyway. He sets me on my feet when he stops at a robot after ten minutes of walking. My eyes widen as I behold the sight in front of us. A building, low-rise, that can't have more than four levels. It's contemporary in its design, palatial, painted a soft, barely there grey color. But there so many windows too, beautiful tall windows. They tease the life going inside the building. At the front is a small queue lining the sliding glass doors. About four insanely big men occupy either side of the doors, allowing everyone inside. My legs get wobbly as I read the name standing proudly at attention. *Reign Model Management*. My heart pounds against my chest – really, really hard. I grip Nqoba's hand, preventing him from taking another step. "T-Tarzan wami..." my eyes search his.

His eyes are mysterious but a ghost of a smile touches his lips. "Woza, the robot is green." He pulls my hand before I can protest. We skip the small queue and I catch a few glares but the boy holding my hand walks with his usual confidence like he couldn't give two fucks. The men in front act like they're in the presence of royalty and allow him inside.

The first person to welcome us is a tall, thin white woman. She has the brightest smile and looks too happy. "This is him?" she looks at Nqoba and then me. "Ugh, he's more gorgeous in real life." The lady grips my chin and moves my face side to side. "His eyebrows, I love his eyes. Beautiful, quirky face. He has the appeal. Very short though but that's still fine, I'm sure Nonhlanhla will find him the perfect fit somewhere."

"Yeah, that's enough touching, nkosazana. Don't touch him." My eyes find Nqoba, he has a smile on his face but his eyes are glaring. He's an idiot. My idiot. "Help him with that profile thing you were telling me about. Ngizom'linda la. Sheshisani iskhathi bakwethu."

I think he's trying to downplay this, with the way he refuses to meet my eyes, and looks bashful. I can't believe he's doing this for me. I know all about Reign Model Management, they have offices in Joburg as well and are expensive as fuck. I wonder how much he spent to make this possible. I want to cry. My arms wrap around him and I try to climb him. He assists me and lifts me all the while complaining about me showing him affection in front of people. I don't care. I love him. And he's soft for me, I know that now. "You shouldn't have done this, Tarzan wami. Iyadura lendawo. This is too big a gift."

"Maybe. Kodwa I was thinking about this gorgeous smile you're giving me when I called lomfazi womlungu." He is still downplaying this but it's a big deal for me. I think back to all the times he'd watch me intently as I focused on a fashion show on TV. I remember all the times he'd give me his undivided attention when I told him about my hopes and dreams. Sometimes, I'd ask him to help me choose what to wear to which he'd roll his eyes and say, "Angazi lutho mina ngalamaphinifa wenu eniwagqokayo," while throwing my romper shorts at me. I remember he told me he doesn't want me to be a model

because he doesn't want to share my beauty with the world. And then he goes and does this... My parents wouldn't even do this. They've never ever supported my dream like this.

I kiss him with everything in me. He groans and wraps his arms around me, his hands travelling lower and lower until he's gripping my ass firmly. *I love you!* the entirety of me is yelling. I hope he feels it. We only pull apart because someone is clearing their throat. I'm a heaving mess, Nqoba lets out a deep breath and looks seemingly fine. His eyes have a fire in them though, ready to devour. My breath hitches and I'm leaning in for another kiss but the throat clearing returns. I turn my attention to the voice and hold back a silly smile as the white lady observes with shock but she doesn't look angry.

"We don't do casting for porn, boys. Down! Down!" she isn't rude about it, just a little funny. I allow her to rip me away from Nqoba. "It's going to be a long day. Follow me, let's get started. My name's Katrina by the way. You boyfriend should stop calling me mlungu. He says my name's hard to pronounce."

I just nod, and swallow down the laughter that threatens to bubble from deep inside my throat. Nqoba always does this. I remember he did it in Richard's Bay with another white man. He says he doesn't want to conform, especially for white people, and he refuses to call them by name if they can't say his name as well. Because they can say Tchaikovsky and Ratajkowski with ease but won't learn how to correctly pronounce African names. I remember one celebrity said the same thing. He has a point so I always zip my mouth and watch them get irritated when he calls them 'umlungu' or some obscure name that couldn't be further from their actual names. The lady, Katrina, was definitely right about today being really long. I'm surrounded by other people whose dreams are the same as mine. All of them are really gorgeous but I'm confident myself. Today is more of an orientation. We'll still need to do a dermatology visit as well take some classes. Those are done during the weekends. It's a relief for me, means I won't have to quit my job at the school. The day goes on and on until finally at 16:00pm, we're set free. I'm not hungry, I'm starving. Nqoba is now occupying the luxurious but comfy looking couch at the reception area. He was on his phone but his eyes find mine almost immediately as if he can sense my presence.

I perch myself on his lap and rest my head on his chest. "Today was one of the worst yet best days of my life." He kisses my forehead, making me release a sigh while snuggling into him. "Ngyabonga, Tarzan wami. Wish you could open up my heart so you could see how much. Thank you so much."

"Anything for you, dali." He kisses my forehead again. "Asambe, ngilambile mina."

Me and him both. He grabs the package I got from Katrina and holds my hand as we walk out. We spot a guy selling hotdogs and I fish out a fifty from my pocket to buy them for us. They're R10 each, I use all of the money. This boy with me eats four while I make do with one. He tells me he's still hungry and drags me to a fast food outlet. I'm half-full now but I still eat to indulge him. Pap with grilled beef and wors

with some salads and two, two litre Coca Colas. He eats like his life depends on it, making it look adorable. I snap some pictures and kiss his round cheek when he sends me a glare. I take some with him, he's really photogenic but he hates pictures. But he still indulges me and I capture some really good ones. Maybe I'll make one of them my screensaver. My lock screen won't change though because I wouldn't want Zenny to see what she's not supposed to.

We find ourselves at Pavilion mall next and it's breathtaking. Part of me still loves Africa mall more but this one is just as gorgeous. I wanted to come here so that I can do some grocery shopping. For the candlelight dinner that I've been planning. We need wine and I look at the meat. I was thinking of making mutton curry. It's one of his favourites as well. After I've grabbed the meat we continue on, I am pushing the cart and Nqoba has his arm wrapped firmly around my shoulders. Some curious eyes are on us, watchful like hawks – and I can see hints of envy. They make me smug because yes Eros is with me. No, he doesn't like tacos. He only likes me, beautiful, irresistible Christophe Xulu.

"Wait here. We forgot amasi," he tells me, pulling away and walking before I can reply.

I scan the different chips while he's gone and grab two packets of Lay's chips for Zenny. They're her favourite. Nqoba doesn't like chips or chocolates or candy. He prefers real food. I check the packet of marshmallows for Gogo and Nhlakanipho's siblings. I'm grabbing the ones coated in toasted coconut when I sense someone literally ogling me. My eyes find a tall guy – all people are taller than me at this point – with short hair and a great build. He has those brackets most girls drool over. I smile and he takes that as his cue to approach. "Hi."

I give him a once over. He's gorgeous, with his Braamfontein look but I'm not interested. "Hi and bye. I'm not interested. My boyfriend's here with me." Why isn't Nqoba coming back? Now, I'm stuck with bottoms like myself who think they're my type.

"I'm versatile actually."

What?

My eyes snap to the guy. He's smiling, revealing his dimples. "Did I say that out loud?" His nod tells me all I need to know. "Sorry," the tips of my ears heat up. "But I'm truly not interested. I have a boyfriend."

“You heard him, my brother. Goduka, ungacithi iskhathi sakho.” Nqobizitha’s scent hits me first, then I feel his arm around my shoulders. He’s pulling me close to him – possessive. Too possessive. His fingers are digging into my collarbone. Shivers wrack the entirety of my body and I feel my knees grow weak. The guy is looking at Nqoba, a second as if trying to figure him out, and then he’s nodding and walking away. A breath I didn’t know I was holding leaves me. “Angiw’funi lomsangano owenzayo lana. I didn’t bring you here to flirt with other guys.”

My eyes snap to this Brentwood wearing bastard in disbelief. He’s returning my stare, glaring, lips thinner than I’ve seen them. Anger. What’s his problem? Didn’t he hear me tell that guy I have a boyfriend? “I don’t even have the energy, Nqobizitha.” I tell him, shaking my head.

“Awume!” he grips my wrist, tightens his hold, and prevents me from leaving. “Don’t you get it? That guy wasn’t supposed to be talking to you at all. You’re taken, act accordingly.” His eyes are blazing.

I shake my head and try to clear my daze. I hate that he has such an effect on me. I want to kiss him and show him that I’m all his but I’m also mad at him. His jealousy is infuriating. “And who, pray tell, has taken me? You, Nqoba?”

“So what if I have?!” he snaps and cocks an eyebrow.

“I...” I don’t know. I stand on my tiptoes and he lifts me as I squeeze his cheeks and kiss him hard, finally getting the chance to show him. My anger towards him collides with my need for him, my desire. The kiss is not soft – it’s rough and ardent and blazes my insides. We’re breathing heavily as we pull apart. I have to grip the trolley’s handles to anchor myself. I ignore the eyes on us and focus on Nqoba. “You’re—mine too. I also own you, Nqobizitha.”

He replies by kissing me softly and then he’s smiling against my lips, keeping me in place while placing tiny pecks to my lips. “Let’s go.” He grips my hand and pulls me towards the pay tills. We pay and bump into that dimpled guy on our way out. Nqoba’s arm tightens around my shoulders.

“I don’t even like that guy,” I tell him as we head towards the escalators. “I don’t want anyone who isn’t you. Besides, that guy’s a bottom...well he’s verse but I don’t—”

“What are you talking about?”

“Positions in bed. That guy’s verse. He likes to top and bottom.”

“I don’t understand.” Nqoba shakes his head.

“When it comes to fucking,” I don’t know why he’s so slow. “He likes to give and receive. I’m not like that. I receive, I always want to receive.” I give him a nervous glance. “Do you ever wonder about bottoming?”

He gives me a flat look. I have no idea what it means. “No. It has never crossed my mind. Should it? When I watch that gay porn of yours, I’m always focused on the receiver. What strokes draw moans out of him. What touches make him cry. The guy getting fucked turns me on. Not the guy doing the fucking.”

I choke on my saliva but a very big part of me is relieved as well. Good. This means he’s happy with our dynamic. He’s a natural top and I won’t have to do what I don’t want to. But...since when does he watch gay porn? “You watch gay porn?”

“Only recently,” he reveals casually. I don’t think anything freaks him out. “I wanted to learn more about pleasuring you.”

His words make my heart flutter. “Oh, Tarzan wami. You’re doing an excellent job,” I reveal honestly and watch that big head of his grow bigger. “So gay porn turns you on? Guys now turn you on?” maybe, he’s bisexual. I just hope he won’t start pursuing fat men because I won’t be able to deal.

“Cha. Just watching that white guy with the glasses. His moans and cries remind me of you. I only watch the porn that he acts in.”

I nail him with unimpressed frown. I’m getting a little jealous here because he used to be turned on by me, just me. Although, maybe he still is. He continuously watches the porn with this white guy he’s talking about because he reminds him of me. I ask him about some of the things we did to find out if he learned from watching gay porn. He tells me yes but the rimming he learned long ago. He says it’s almost like muffing and tells me about his kinks. I’ve been subjected to the choking and spanking and orgasm denial and he’s tied me to my bed and fucked me hard. For a guy who’s never fucked guys, he really knows his way around the bedroom. I am curious when he pulls me into a lingerie store and tells me to go in first so that he can slap my butt. The shop assistants eye us curiously and I just look at Nqoba as well because I don’t know what we’re doing here.

“Dali, look...an entire section dedicated to you,” he points to a sign that says bottoms. I shake my head and punch his arm. He’s an idiot. “Can I buy you this?” my eyes widen as I notice what he has in his hands. It’s just, this is...lingerie. Like a gorgeous looking red lace panty that could be a thong. It is a thong. Lacy, and nice to touch. I have never worn something like this before.

“Do you want me to wear it?”

“Yes.” Nqobizitha’s eyes sparkle an erotic shade of dark brown. “But only if you’re comfortable with it. Wouldn’t dare dream of making you do anything you’re uncomfortable with,” is added, his tone deceptively neutral, expression indifferent as ever. “I can still buy it and we can just donate it to charity or an old age home—it doesn’t matter.”

I shake my head and can’t help laughing at the ‘donate to charity or old age home bit’. “Please tell me that this is just another one of your kinks and that you’re not trying to turn me into a woman.”

I groan as he discreetly palms the front of my jeans. My dick jerks in interest. “I know you’re not a woman, dali. Trust me, this has nothing to do with me trying to feminize you. This is just me being your usual perverted idiot. I want to fuck you in these.”

The idea shouldn’t be turning me on this much. I find myself nodding, perhaps a little too eagerly, and even encourage Nqoba to take more. The cashier slightly narrows her eyes in suspicion. I am squirming like a skittish cat while Nqoba looks unaffected by the attention, as if he’s used to buying lingerie for people. Maybe he is. The thought depresses me and I quickly drive it away. The drive back to Mbongolwane is...tense. The air is thick with lust and our bodies are saying so much without us uttering any words. I can feel Nqoba’s intense gaze on me, penetrating me, his hand travelling in between my thighs and rubbing gently. My breathing quickens and he makes me so ravenous for him. His hand moves until it settles at the back of my neck, pulling me down. I unzip his pants and stroke him. Opening my mouth as wide I can, I eagerly feed myself inch after inch of his fat dick, taking in my mouth what I can. My hand closes around what I can’t and I stroke him while sucking him off. He pistons his hips up, his erection big and invasive, making me choke on it. My eyes water and I attempt to breathe around him. Relaxing my jaw, I surrender to the overwhelming sensations. His moans are loud in the car – and all I can think of is how I’ll never get enough of him. I always want him.

Nqobizitha

I'm so fucking tired. Not physically. Just emotionally. I had to leave Chris at school today because I had to go to eMadidima to talk with a boy who was threatening my sister's daughter. They had a December fling when Khoselihle came to visit with her parents. The relationship was pathetically sappy and I remember Khosi cried when she had to go back to Free State with her parents. Then three months later, Khosi had moved on like teenagers do when they realize that they weren't really in love. Anyway, to cut the long story short, the guy got angry when he found out and threatened to post some semi-nude pictures of my sister's daughter online.

Khoselihle begged me to speak with the guy on her behalf since she's so far from him and can't exactly leave Welkom to try and negotiate with the manipulative bastard who was trying to take advantage of her. I went there and had a talk with that boy – man to man. I may've used my impeccable communication skills just to convince him a little but everything worked out in the end. He wouldn't want to ruin his future and risk being suspended and dropped by his local football club. He dreams of being a soccer player, and like me, realizes that there's more to life than making hasty decisions. I told him to learn from guys like myself, I don't go around sharing his older sister's nudes and they do say izandla ziyagezana. I've never even fucked his sister just saw her half-naked body this one time at a wedding. She has a distinct birth mark on her top thigh. And I used to dream about her big boobs for a long time but she valued her boyfriend too much.

Ndoniyamanzi went out with Nontethelelo today. And that guy from Mchunu's tuck-shop. I think they have this little thing going on between them. MaKhathide will lose her shit the day she finds out. Marriages are political in our family. You marry from a wealthy family, to build good relations, and build an even more powerful empire. Most of my sisters' marriages are arranged but they make it work somehow. It's Ndoni who was unfortunate enough to choose the guy of her dreams only for him to turn on her and be a douchebag. I'm glad she's divorcing the bastard. She wasted a good 17 years of her life with that bastard and has nothing but scars to show for it.

Thandeka is in the kitchen as I enter the main house. I greet her and kiss her cheek and shift away as she aims for my mouth. I like what I have with Chris. And I don't want to mess around behind his back. He may still be with that French idiot of his but I don't feel good when I'm with those women. Most of them. I'm avoiding MaNtuli because she's too great a temptation. She knows how to worm her way inside my heart and sometimes, she reminds me of...her. uMama wami. There are quiet noises coming from the living room. It's MaKhathide and uBaba. I wonder what he's doing home so early. And wasn't MaKhathide going to spend the entire day in Durban?

"No! Khohlwa Ngcobo, it won't happen. She must go elsewhere. I've sent her money, what more does she want?"

“Umndeni, nkosikazi,” my father never raises his voice. “You’re one of the few family she has. You know what a small family you come from. It must’ve been very lonely for Nomthandazo to have grown up the way she did. All alone with no—”

“She had her father!”

“Noma kunjalo, nkosikazi. It doesn’t erase the part of her that desires to connect with her other family.”

“Don’t call her that. That little girl is not part of this family. She’s not. Do you know who her mother is? If she thinks she can come here to disturb the peace in this house, I will strangle her with my bare hands. Akangazi, I will kill her like the rat—”

“Cha, ulaka kodwa mkami. That child is blameless, she needs us. Ntombikayise was your only sis—”

Thwack!

I’m revealing myself and standing in front of my mother before she can put her hands on my father again. Her eyes are blazing, small frame trembling. “Kahle MaKhathide, this is your husband.”

“Nqobizitha! When did you get here? What did you—”

“Just now. I come in and find you assaulting my father. Kwenzenjani?” I’m not going to let her know I heard most of her conversation. The look on her face shows her extreme dislike of my other Mama. Like she hadn’t brought that woman here to take care of me and love me better. Love me better than her own daughter. I don’t know why MaKhathide wants nothing to do with Nomthandazo.

“Awungene ndawo, Nqobizitha.” Her breathing is erratic and she starts to pace. “Go to your room. These matters don’t concern you. I’m sorry you had to see that. I didn’t mean to hit your father.”

“How do I know you won’t hit him again?”

Baba laughs and shifts me out of the way. “Khululeka, Mapholoba. It’s just a little misunderstanding between me and your mother. She let her temper get the best of her. It won’t happen again, right mkami?”

MaKhathide is still displaying those volatile emotions but slowly she nods her head. “Focus on your books, Nqoba. You’re not going to be a competent heir with how badly you’re doing right now. Inkinga yakho is that you poke your nose where you shouldn’t. Leave us!”

A smile spreads my lips. “MaKhathide wami. What would I do without your wonderful advice?” I get the words out through gritted teeth and bow my head reverently before leaving as instructed. Outside the house, I rub on my chest to ease the lancing pain there. My eyes close and her smile greets me. I’m five years all over again and I’ve stubbed my toe against the door. She soothes me by feeding me her breast while caressing my penis. My phone is in my hand and I’m scrolling through my contacts. My fingers hesitate on Fundiswa’s name – and my mind fills me with thoughts of our bodies conversing animalistically, and her taking all of it while murmuring soft whispers of how proud she is of me. I rub my eyes and dial the number I know by heart.

“Tarzan wami?” he giggles in my ear.

“Ngiyeza lapho.” I hang up and adjust the bag on my shoulders and get in the car, driving away from this godforsaken house. MaKhathide will beat me all she wants tomorrow but I’m not returning to this house tonight.

Christophe

“So what do you think?” I face Nqoba, a little shy all of a sudden, like the first time we had sex. The thong is the perfect fit, a little tight, but nothing uncomfortable. Nqoba says nothing and motions me to the mirror, and I flush red hot with...embarrassment? Arousal? I don’t know. I’m not sure. The skimpy item barely covers my private parts, my aroused dick and balls visible through the pretty fabric. But I still feel really...desirable, and so, so beautiful. Unconsciously, I turn around, admiring myself from every angle, caressing my hips, my thighs, and my butt cheeks. “I love it,” I tell Nqobizitha, our gazes meeting on the mirror. There’s a small smile on his lips that steals my breath away. “You said you’d fuck me in this?”

Nqoba appears to be rendered speechless—and I don’t dare think it’s because of me. It can’t be. But the way that Nqoba is looking at me. At every inch of my body. Maybe it is me that’s making him so speechless. I watch him move slowly, running his fingers through my short hair, with me waiting,

breathlessly, to be kissed. One of his hands slide, possessively, down into my thong. His lips are on my shoulder, with his other hand moving up to caress the back of my neck. Then he takes a firmer grip and makes a noise deep down his throat. At the sound of it, my heart starts to pound hard against my chest as if fighting to crawl to Nqoba. A gasp from me. In one swift movement, I'm off my feet, and in Nqoba's capable arms. I'm not sure if we'll make it to the bed with how we're grinding against each other like wild animals—rough biting, teeth clashing, bruising kisses—we are both consumed.

We make it to the bed somehow, with me giving into Nqoba's gentle press to my chest, pushing me back. I land with a thud on the soft bed, exposed for him to see. It makes me feel strangely vulnerable, and I would do anything to cover myself were it not for the authoritative burn in Nqoba's dark pools, blatantly instructing me to do no such thing. Slowly, he climbs onto the bed, hovering above me. Pushing me further up on the sheets, and nudging my legs apart, he settles between them. The feel of his erection pressing into my barely covered one is almost too much to take. I almost shoot my load, and clamp my thighs around Nqoba's waist to anchor myself. He takes my wrists, holding my arms down to the bed and then leans over and kisses me again, hard—and I eagerly reciprocate until Nqoba pulls back. A low whine leaves me, as I hump up into the boy whose entire body weight is pinning me to the bed. "Please..." I croaks, looking up into Nqoba's eyes. I want more. So much more.

"I want to try something today," Nqoba's thumb touches my bruised, lower lip—caressing. Each stroke tempts the fire beneath my skin. He opens the drawer that has officially become his and takes out a bottle of...whiskey? When did he put it in there? "Ever drank this before?"

I shake my head and pant. The fire in his eyes tempting me. He smirks and puts the bottle to my lips. "Here, try it. This is the only time I will ever allow you to drink alcohol. Siyezwana?" I'm not about to disagree with him. Not with my painful erection. I nod quickly and taste the alcohol. I cough and wrench my lips from the bottle.

Nqoba lets out a soft chuckle as I wince. "How was it?"

"Not a fan of the aftertaste," I say honestly, blinking a few times.

A smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. "But that's the best part. It's something you won't notice while the liquid is still on your tongue. But as soon as it goes down your throat, your mouth is filled with a distinct, lingering taste that nothing can quite describe." His voice gets deeper as his smile slowly fades, making my heart beat faster. The way he said it sounds rather... erotic. We lock eyes for a moment. I can feel some warmth on my face that might have something to do with the whiskey—and the intensity of Nqoba's gaze on me. My hand slightly trembles as my fingers wrap around the bottle again. I close my eyes and drink the liquid again, keeping my eyes closed to savour the aftertaste, now that I know what

to expect. It's strong, smoky, and seemingly infinite. But not as unpleasant as I initially thought. When I open my eyes again Nqoba is still watching me.

I inhale deeply, shifting slightly to adjust my hardened cock. Something that Nqoba's fervent gaze doesn't miss. "It's not that bad, is it?" he murmurs, never taking his eyes off me. "You look more relaxed."

Yeah... The knot in my stomach has eased off, replaced by a flush under my skin. If the way Nqoba looks at me is any indication, he's definitely turned on. We look at each other in silence as my skin gradually gets warmer. I can't even look away when I reach for another sip, I notice Nqoba's gaze go lower, taking in my mouth and instinctively, I lick my lips, even though they don't feel dry. His eyes darken and he clears his throat. "There's an even better way to enjoy this."

"How?"

Nqoba grabs the bottle from me. "I'll show you."

Feeling more intrigued than anything, I lie completely on my back as instructed. He never takes his gaze off me as he edges closer. The intensity in his eyes renders me breathless. "First, remember to relax and trust me." His fingers lightly touch my nipples and an electricity flashes through me, goosebumps remaining behind. "You trust me, right?"

I don't just trust him, I love him with everything in me. "Yeah, I—trust you."

"Good, because I'm going to drink the whiskey off your skin." The mental image of him licking the dripping whiskey off my body is too... tempting. Like having a mind of its own, my hand reaches down to rub my pulsing cock that's aching under the confines of this thong. Nqoba holds the bottle in front of me, a sinful smile tugging at his lips. Then slowly, and carefully, he tips the bottle over my shoulder. It feels cold on my flushed skin. But I don't have time to mull it over, because the next thing I know, he leans forward and licks the liquid off my skin. A gasp escapes my mouth, sounding too loud in the stillness of the room.

Oh god.

It trickles down my shoulder and Nqoba's tongue chases it to my chest, lapping up every drop. *Fuck...* His tongue flicks over a hard nipple before he puts it in his mouth. I can't suppress a moan as my hands rush to keep him in place. Nqoba sucks my nipples as if his life depends on it and when the sensation is too much, I grab the back of his head and kiss him, tasting a hint of whiskey on my tongue.

Intoxicating.

He works his way down with the whiskey, finding a new patch of skin and gradually driving me insane. I'm a moaning, panting mess by the time he spreads my legs open. The foreign sensation of the whiskey touching my dick through the lacy fabric has me screaming and squirming. Nqoba licks and teases me until finally, he gets to my hole, he pulls the string of the thong aside and kisses around it—fondling my ass cheeks, biting them, and marking them. He torments me with his slowness, pinning my flailing body to the bed. My eyes are squeezed shut, my skin flushed and my body trembling. "Please...I-I, please Nqoba."

He ignores my plea, working my body slowly until I'm shaking, my quivering hands guide him to my hole. Nqoba obeys this time, slowly working me. A kiss. Lips. Tongue. Stubble brushing against my smooth thighs. Prickly. Sharp gasps from me. Urgent moans. Quivering thighs. Nqoba spreads my thighs wider, digging into them. His tongue probing. Invasive. Having a whole sensual conversation with my hole. Another gasp from me, and Nqoba has to hold me firmly when I attempt to clamp my thighs together. "Oh fuck...Nqoba, I-I, something's happening. Ngizochama. Get in me – please...please!"

Nqoba kisses up my thighs, working his way up to the rest of his my body. I'm spun around so that I'm on my hands and knees. My body is buzzing with an exhilarating electricity and my trembling fingers clutch the bedsheets. I close my eyes and wait impatiently. When Nqoba finally sinks in behind me, the need that was vibrating through my body seems to still for a moment. Then as he sinks in further, all breath leaves me. It feels like his dick is sinking in somewhere deep, penetrating every part of me, even my throat—and snatching my breath. "This good?" he asks, sounding like he's in heaven.

"Yes...yes." I breathe shakily, my eyes tightly shut. My hands seek a handhold on the soft sheets. "Now fuck me." I whisper, arching my back to allow my thong-clad ass to serve as an offering to him. "Give it to me—hard."

Nqoba always lives to serve because he delivers. Give it to me he does—as hard as I had requested. The headboard is banging, bed moving—there's sheet clenching, my legs are shaking, he grips a fistful of my short hair, his other hand positioning my arch. This isn't lovemaking. It's pure animalistic, rough fucking—and I am gasping, in heaven with no intention of coming down. He is completely controlling my position. With the piston of his hips against my ass, and the viciousness of his cock ramming into me, so

hard that my ass starts to jiggle. My eyes water after a particularly violent nudge but all I can do is take it. My fingers dig into my palms as I seek something to steady me, because my prostate is receiving a head-on vicious pounding that my vision blurs. I grit my teeth, and blink away the rapturous tears.

“Ushisa kamnandi, dali,” Nqoba growls, before his hand leaves my waist to grip my thigh. He lifts my leg which forces my body to tighten around him even more. I reach up, planting my hand against the headboard to get a balance. “Rock those hips, Bambi. Fuck me back,” he demands and I push back against him. I can feel an adrenaline whirling through my body. I can feel every slick, hard inch of Nqoba’s cock as it slides deep inside me and then withdraws. Part of me wishes I could see – but I know I’m dripping all over the bedsheets. I crane my neck to the side to find his gaze —and the intense, sheer unadulterated lust in his heavy-lidded eyes bruises my lungs, and snatches all my air.

I am burning from inside out, fighting to keep sane, and caught in a rush of desire that can’t ever end. Nqoba drags me up by my hair, embracing me from behind, breathing on the my heated senses. “Aaah...fuck!” I gasp, stunned, as my orgasm crashes through me out of nowhere. A breathless cry leaves me as my body convulses with the intensity of my orgasm. “Please...please...please.”

I have no idea what I’m begging for but I’m grateful and terrified when Nqoba fucks me through my orgasm. He’s going for the kill—ramming that spot inside me that has the ability to make me forget my own name. The same spot that is currently sending intense shockwaves through me, it’s absolutely terrifying. We go at it like animals and I can’t get enough. I want as much of Nqoba inside me as possible. To have him – all of him – inside me. To never allow his escape. And I’d do it, too, were it possible. All of me feels possessed, claimed and wholly dominated.

Nqoba is pounding away. “You’re creaming on my fucking dick, Xabhashe. Ngik’bhebha kamnandi.” He groans, voice raspy with desire. “I’m making you feel so good.”

It’s not a lie. I can hardly breathe with how sweetly I am being fucked into. Nqoba’s pushing in me even deeper, plunging hard into my soul. My eyes widen, all of me falling apart beneath him with ridiculous ease. It literally feels like he’s penetrating every crevice, leaving no place unturned, no space for me at all within my own body. “Nnha! Oh god, oh god, oh god...” is my broken chant against. It feels like my spirit wants to leave my body. “Nqoba, I-I can’t—too intense. It hurts. Kubhlungu.” I manage to heave out, eyes swelling with tears. I can’t black out again. Not again.

He must hear my desperation because he kisses down my back, “Phephisa, sengiyaqeda.” And he lets go—his own orgasm exploding inside me. The warmth shoots to my depths, hiding in every corner of my body. My eyes roll to the back of my head, a strange mixture of hoarse crying and laughing escaping my trembling lips. It ends with a sweet kiss to the forehead, before Nqoba collapses on top of me, our sweat

mingling and his weight pushing me downward. I remain completely still, blurrily looking up the ceiling. My body is completely useless and sore. We do not speak. The only sounds coming from the dogs barking in the distance. It's comforting how it feels like we're disconnected from the outside world somehow, how it feels like nothing matters besides what we just did. I release a shaky sigh as Nqoba's lips press against the inside of my neck. I embrace him tightly, not even sure why I'm crying.

"Are you okay? Hurt...?"

I would be lying if I said it didn't hurt. I can feel my hole gaping around Nqoba's dick, how loose it is—and how raw it feels. It does hurt. But a good pain, one that I can only hope will stay with me forever. "I'll survive," I say eventually. "That was amazing. Thank you."

I have no idea, but it feels like Nqoba's laughing inside my neck, with the way he's shaking on top of me. My suspicions are proved correct when he comes out of hiding, to reveal the mirth in his eyes. "Your body damn near killed me. Couldn't even take a breath with all that sweetness—and all you can say is thank you?"

"Well," I croak, my voice is wrecked, "I think that would be a pretty sweet way to go, don't you?"

"I concur."

I smile and readily kiss him. He's still deep inside me as we both drift to sleep.

I've been preparing for this day like crazy and now that it's here, I'm nervous as hell. Zenny was off Wednesday, Thursday and Friday but she's finally returned to work and if things go well then Nqoba and I will make love all over this house in between confident whispers of affection. I've daydreamed about this for a long time now and sometimes, dreams become a reality. I never dreamed a guy like Nqobizitha would be interested in a guy like me yet we're here. He is in the living room now while I add the finishing touches to everything in the kitchen. Maskandi music. He seems to prefer it over my sappy love songs. I've decorated the floor with some rose petals and I got some lanterns to set a romantic atmosphere in the kitchen. For dinner, I finally decided on making uphuthu because Nqoba always says he'll love whoever gives him amasi forever. I have no idea how I'll tell him I love him though. I didn't think that far.

Maybe I'll just send him a message declaring my undying love for him and tell him to read it. I don't know. I don't know. I'm nervous as hell.

I go to the living room and find him watching some Science channel. "Tarzan wami..." I call out and shift nervously as his attention shifts to me. "I'm done. Want to join me?"

He stands and comes to give me a deep kiss and squeezes my ass. I wince and hold back a whimper. He came here a few days ago and fucked me harder than I've ever been fucked in my life. Four days later and I haven't quite recovered. He told me that he'd missed me but I know there was more to it, I just didn't ask. "Dali..." there's so much awe in his voice. "What is all this?"

"Just wanted to spoil you," I squeak and quickly shy away from his inquisitive stare. I tell him to sit down as I grab the wine. Yes, we'll be eating amasi with wine. He eats whatever I make him. And drinks whatever I give him. Nqoba's looking around with a small smile as I dish our food.

"I love you for this," he says softly, making me blush, as I place the bowl of amasi in front of him. I go to the other side and silently tell him to dig in with a kind smile and then look anywhere but him. That quickly changes when Nqoba begins coughing – really, really coughing. Like someone who'd been inhaling smoke – with his brown eyes turning watery. "Fuck! Are you trying to kill me with this?"

My eyes widen. Hell fucking no. No I am not! "What no? I love you. I wouldn't dare try to kill you."

He mimics me with the widened gaze and seems at a loss for a few seconds before he shakes his head. "What?"

"What?" I echo him and laugh nervously. His eyes are losing all the warmth, making me worried.

"What you said."

"Nothing," I shake my head. He's making me scared with how detached he seems to be growing. "I said nothing."

The tension here... Lord, please kill me. This was a bad idea, this boy isn't even responding, just looking at me. The silence lasts forever before Nqoba grabs the wine I hadn't yet poured and downs it. He doesn't stop and continues drinking without pause. He finishes an entire bottle in less than five minutes and then looks at me, nodding. "I have to go. Iskole ksasa, uyamazi uMaKhatide."

It's Saturday, there's no school on Sundays. I find myself nodding absently but a big part of me is panicking and I'm standing on my trembling feet and rushing after him and passing him to block the front door. He looks down at me, confused, and I shake my head frantically. "No. You're not going to do this. You know I would never try to kill you because I love you. That is why I made you this. It's your favourite. You said to make you love me this is what I'm doing. I love you so much and I wouldn't try to kill you," I can't stop blabbing, and I'm begging myself to keep quiet but the words won't stop spilling. I'm like a broken record. "Why would I, you're becoming my best friend. And I'm so glad you never had any gay freakout when we first started this. Because it gave us this, what we have between us. I-I don't know where I'm going with this but I want you to know that I really like talking with you and sharing my bed with you and watching TV with you and cooking for you. And doing all these mundane things that would normally seem really boring, but I enjoy doing them with you a-and being away from you makes the world seem really dull and boring. You're my favourite color, my favourite song, my favourite movie, favourite food, favourite everything. And I really wish I could stop talking right now because I sound too sappy when all I really want to say is I love you and beg of you to not bruise my ego. M-Maybe you'd be willing to give us a chance and love me back...please?" I hate the desperation in my voice, the anxiety.

Nqoba's face changes—the confusion has disappeared. So much is flashing in his dark gemstones and I am trying my best to keep up with every new emotion. Shock. Panic. Fear. "I don't think I understand, Chris." He whispers, there's a strain in his voice, his eyes searching.

"I love you," I blurt out.

"Awungazi nje."

"But I want to know you!" I grip the front of his jersey tightly and I'm shaking him. I want him to understand me completely. To get it through his thick skull because he can be slow sometimes. "I love you."

"Who gave you that right? To fall in love with me without my permission?"

What?

I think he's being purposely difficult right now. "I gave myself that right. Just like you took ownership of me without my permission. I-I broke up with him because I...love you. And I know you feel the same way, Nqoba. I feel it all the time. You show me all the time. I want to be able to say it to you. Please let me...please tell me you love me back."

"This is...you're a great deal too good for me, man. Do you have any idea what lies on my shoulders? All around me, I have these expectations, I am too damaged. Let's say I love you too...I don't think I can be what you need. Not fully. You deserve to be shown off to the world, Bambi. Do you think a guy like me will be able to give you that? I'm a bad idea."

"We don't even need to overthink this, Nqoba. We're not Nhlaka and Siya. Maybe marriage is not on the cards for us. Maybe you're a bad idea...but I love bad ideas. At least when it comes to you. Let's not overthink, let's just...just...I'm not asking you to marry me," my heart twinges, I swallow down the hurt and I have to remember...we're not Nhlaka and Siya but I love him. And maybe we'll grow. We'll grow. "You love me, Nqobizitha. You know it and I-I know—it too." My voice cracks but it is insistent and full of conviction. I'm close to him and his scent drives me wild. I press my palm to his chest. "I own this—and you own mine. Tell me I'm lying."

He replies by kissing me – with determination and ardency. The kiss is violent, passionate, he's giving me all of him. I return the favour and match his fervour. We're moving and we're too slow so he carries me into his arms and we manage to make it to the couch and I grunt beneath the weight of him. He pulls back just slightly, traces my lips and whispers, "Say it again."

"I love you," I tell him and smile with him. "I love you. I love you. I love you."

"Kodwa nganeyakwethu," he groans and smiles and then he kisses me again. Again and again. "Uyathandwa Xabhashe." He will murmur in between passionate kisses. "Ngyakuthanda yezwa?"

Then we're undressing each other in a methodical movement and Nqobizitha is removing his black boxers. My gaze is fixed on his cock as he strokes himself carefully; long and thick... and perfect—like the rest of him. Nqoba is on top of me again, pinning me down on the sofa. I reach up to caress his face, down to his neck, until I finally stop on his sculpted chest. The hard muscles feel fantastic under my palm. Nqoba keeps watching me, locking our eyes together. I inhale sharply when long, slippery fingers probe at my entrance, in a careful but persistent motion. I didn't even notice Nqoba opening the lube bottle and generously coating his fingers.

“Fuck,” I pant, bucking my hips up when his fingers brush my super sensitive prostate. “Come on... come on, Nqoba, please.” I don’t even care that we haven’t made it to the bed. I want us to do it here on the sofa, in the kitchen, even on the floor. Fucking anywhere, for all I care. As long as that cock is inside me. “Ngyakucela, lifake. I’m all yours. All yours.”

Nqoba says nothing at my breathless plea, but he stops. He gives my throbbing length a few strokes and then straightens up. I frown when he moves. Does he want me to turn over? Nqoba seems to make up his mind and settles on the couch, pulling me up onto his lap. A groan slips out of me when Nqoba’s cock nudges my slick rim. “I want to see your face when you’re riding me.” He says the demand against my lips. The words make me shiver, or maybe it’s the way Nqoba said them. He holds his hips still for a few seconds that feel way too long for my frenzied brain. The somewhat rational part of me knows that Nqoba is just being thoughtful to not just impale me on his dick, as it might hurt me. I’m still recovering from that rough fuck from a few days ago after all. But right now I’m not thinking with my head.

Reaching behind me, I take a hold of Nqoba’s cock and slowly attempt to sink down on it. “Oh God—” my breath is caught in my throat. There’s pain, and I have to retract as I choke on a sob. I try again and go slower this time and bear the pain because it doesn’t compare to the pleasure of being stretched by something so solid and big. The air around us smells like sweat, and pure sex.

I cling to Nqoba’s shoulders, unable to look away despite the urge to close my eyes. “I love you,” I murmur as Nqoba grips my hips tightly as he lifts me up and pulls me back down, slamming his cock into me—but not everything. I know when he gives me everything. He’s being considerate and it makes my eyes water. “I love you so much, Tarzan wami.”

He embraces me tightly, “Nawe uyathandwa, Xulu. Ngyakuthanda nganeyakwethu,” Nqoba rasps, eyes blazing like dark fire. He slows down for a second before thrusting up again. “You feel out of this world, nganeyakwethu.”

I moan out loud when he hits my prostate again. Pressing my head against Nqobizitha’s shoulder, I finally give in and squeeze my eyes shut. My fingers wrap behind his neck, and I breathe onto his heated skin. We’re moving purely by instinct now, our bodies know each other so well now. Nqoba thrusts harder, and I can only rock my hips to match him. One of my hands slides down between our bodies to grab my leaking dick. I’m so close. Nqoba shoves his cock deep inside me over and over, his movement getting more feral, more erratic.

Oh god...

I let out a cry as I come, feeling my warmth on my fingers, and all over Nqoba's stomach. My breathing is still coming in short gasps when I pull back and meet Nqoba's eyes. He looks at me for a second before taking my hand, putting two of my coated fingers in his mouth. The sensation of my fingers in Nqoba's hot mouth and him sucking the come off them is almost too much. I involuntarily clench my ass with his cock still inside me. His jaw is clenching tightly and I allow him to pull me in for a deep kiss as he comes. I taste myself on his tongue. The whole thing is so dirty and erotic but I love it. I love him. We're embracing tightly and breathing hard, so lost in each other that we both startle when a familiar voice sounds behind us.

"What the fuck is happening lana?!"

Mutual Desires : Seventeen

Christophe

I look over my shoulder and my body goes rigid. Completely stiff like the world that seems frozen around me. Then my eyes slowly widen as I become aware of my rapid heartbeat as realization sets in. I open my mouth to say something but nothing. I lick my suddenly dry lips and try again but still nothing. She's standing in front of us, looking just as shocked, but I can see it making way for something else. More sinister. Anger. A sudden sense of dread takes over and I'm practically jumping to dislodge Nqobizitha's dick off me. "It's not w-what—no. Just please don't tell—anyone," my voice cracks. Tears fill my eyes and I'm a little disoriented, seeing two of her. "Zemvelo, I—"

She's in front of me faster than I can process. And then even faster, white burning heat explodes across my face as something solid strikes my cheek. The sound resonates in my ears, making everything spin around me. Too slow to register what's happening, the wind is knocked out of me as I find myself landing with a harsh, resounding thud on the floor. My ass makes the first collision, and I scream out in pain, clutching my lower back. The voices are next. "Zemvelo, listen—"

"No! No. No." Nqoba is in front of me, shielding me. I can't see Zemvelo but I can hear the anger in her voice. She's shaking with it. "Not this abomination in my father's house! Nawe Nqobizitha? You've allowed this filthy faggot to—"

"Watch your mouth," Nqoba interrupts her. He's closing in on her, still naked. "Ziphathe kahle (Behave yourself). You have no idea what you're talking about, you've just come here. Actually, this is your fault. Have you never heard of warnings? Why didn't you say you're coming?" he's so calm about this. I'm scrambling to my feet and grabbing whatever piece of clothing I can find first. It's his jersey. I put it on and it covers me, reaching my knees, I feel somewhat safer now that I'm wearing something. A little calmer and I think I can breathe again. I try to join Nqoba, to stand by his side, but he pushes me aside again and blocks me from Zemvelo. He's naked, body still, not hinting at any panic and stands squarely.

Zemvelo is laughing and I peek my head around Nqoba's arm to find her shaking her head in clear disbelief. Like she can't believe what she's hearing. "Usuyasangana wena Nqobizitha. My father's house. His house! And you dare tell me that I should've given you before coming here. Just who do you think you are?"

"Someone more rational than you. Awuyeke ledrama oyenzayo. I'm sure you watch porn, this can't be the first time that you're seeing two people have sex. Stop this nonsense and let's all sit down and have

a rational conversation. Alternatively, we're all going to bed and we'll talk about this in the morning...when you're level-headed."

"He he he! Ngiyalingwa lana (I am being tempted here)!" she doesn't move. I don't move either. Like her, I'm not sure if Nqoba is alright in the head. Who reacts this way? I want to go on my knees and beg for her forgiveness – even though I've done nothing wrong – and then beg her to not tell Zenny. This is all my fault, I should've insisted we go to my room. At least there, I have a door that locks. She wouldn't have seen this. I would've lied and pretended I was watching porn. Now she's just seen it in the flesh and she already hates me. I can see the look of disgust on her face. It makes my heart clench tightly. "Awusho, since when did you turn gay wena? Do your parents know about this? Usuyangcola wena njengaye lo (You've become filthy like him)?" her eyes cut at me.

Nqoba tenses, so subtly, and I look up at him to see his jaw clench. "Do I look gay to you?"

"Wabuza mina, you're busy fucking this abomination. This is why Sodom and Gomorrah perished. How could you allow this, this...lesqalekiso somfana to turn you into what you're not? I warned Baba about bringing this boy here. Look at what he's doing." She regards Nqoba with great pity as if he didn't know what he was doing. I'm the nasty temptation here. The sin that he gave into. I want to laugh at her and cuss her out but I'm scared as well. She's grabbing her phone and putting it to her ear. "Where was Zenny? Did she allow this rubbish?"

"Wenzani, Zemvelo?" Nqoba is still so calm, still so naked. "If you're calling your sister then it's pointless because she told me to take care of your brother. And calling your father is also pointless because he knows his son is gay. What will be the shock here, that he's having sex with me? Sex is sex, nkosazana. Just our bodies exploring different parts of the human body. It is not that deep. Now are you going to sit down and let me explain or are you going to continue being dramatic?"

The silence is suffocating. Zemvelo isn't responding, she has the phone in her ear.

"Come," Nqoba grabs my hand and pulls me away. I allow him to, not sure what else I should do. "By the way," he stops as we're nearing the hallway. "You and your family stand to lose more than I do – and it will be a pity because you're already so notorious. Remember those rumours that were swirling around about your mother? Now, you want to add in the fact that your gay brother is seducing straight men around here? I don't see this ending well for the Xulus. You see my parents own this place, all of it. One word and Zenny could use her job – something worse may happen, like being banished from this place. Thread carefully, mntakwethu, my parents don't know about this. If they find out, I won't get more than a few punches and bruises. You and your family, I pity what MaKhathide will do to you. In her eyes, your brother here, will be responsible for 'turning me' like you said. I'm not making decisions for you but if I

were you, I'd think really hard about my next move." He smiles widely, politely – and then he bows dramatically. "Now, if you'll excuse us...I'm going to finish what I'd started with your brother. Don't bother making me breakfast in the morning. I'll be long gone by then."

We get to my room and I push his chest. He looks at me, confused, but I don't care. "How could you say that, Nqobizitha? So what, this is just a game to you? You think I turned you, Nqoba? When you look at me you just see a boy who goes around seducing straight men? Do you think so little of me? You don't care about me, you don't!"

"Awukahle," he grabs my wrists and prevents me from hitting his chest any further. "Listen to me. Your sister is very poisonous. I had to think of something fast. We'd be in a lot of trouble otherwise. Being gay is taboo around here. I'm protecting you more than I'm protecting myself."

I laugh and shake my head. "Protecting me how, you bastard?! You, you just threatened her back there, our family. Me. You ain't shit, Nqoba!" my eyes well with tears.

"Keep your voice down!" he hisses and forcefully wraps an arm around my waist. "Don't you see? It was the only way. Do you really think she'll tell your father? She knows my parents could destroy your family without lifting a finger. I'm sorry but its true, dali. She won't dare say this to anyone because she needs to protect your family's reputation. I don't think you're imperfect or that there's something wrong with you but not everyone is like me, dali. I had to think like them, to say what they say."

Even if he is being truthful, his words hurt. He reduced me to nothing but a gay whore who's only here to seduce guys like him. He was feeding her ignorance and encouraging it. He was. I blink my eyes repeatedly to prevent the tears but the burn behind my eyelids is getting worse. My hands are trembling and I'm finding it hard to breathe. "You hurt me, N-Nqobizitha," my voice is small and shaky. "You made me feel worthless. Like the only thing I know is to seduce guys like you and sleep with them. Why— would you do that?"

"I just explained nje," he grips my cheeks and forces me to look at him as I attempt to shift my gaze away from him. "I said a lot of shit I shouldn't have but believe me, not one part of me thinks like that. And—"

"No, Nqobizitha! These are exactly the kind of problems I face on the daily. Just because I'm gay, it doesn't mean that I want every person with a dick. You were encouraging her ignorance and now she'll hate me even more because I'm the abomination that seduces other men. She'll hate me m-more and

she won't bring her boyfriend around me and I won't get to attend her wedding and I won't be an uncle to her kids and you just ruined my life."

"Listen to me," he presses his forehead onto mine and I hate how my body reacts. He's seducing me with his aura. He is seducing me. My body is teeming with longing, my arms are folding around him before I can help myself. He kisses me – hard, insistent and I don't move my lips until I am. Damn him! He lifts me and he's carrying me to the bed. "No person changes unless they want to. Nothing you could ever say will make your sister love you unless she chooses to. I'm protecting you, dali." He murmurs before kissing me softly. I can feel him removing his boxers. "Maybe I went about it the wrong way but I don't want my mom to get to you." The jersey I have on is lifted a little. Air hits my thighs before he's settling in between them again. "Uyathandwa, Xabhashe. I'll do anything to protect you...even if it means hurting you in the process. I think so highly of you, you have no idea." One of his fingers presses into me. Then two. His fingers are pressing into my prostate, coaxing deeper and deeper. I whine and splay my thighs wider – giving him all of me. I'm all his. "What would you have had me do, Bambi?"

I close my eyes real tight as he presses into my entrance. My body is being wracked by vicious shudders and he's moaning, his heated breath assaulting my ear. I'm fighting to keep sane as he starts to move inside me. He's going real slow, like lovemaking, grasping my face to have me look in his eyes. "What would you have me do?" he repeats and a tingle starts from the top of my head right to my toes, making me curl into him. "Ngyakuthanda nganeyakwethu, wenza engathi awazi." A kiss inside my neck. His arms fold around my waist, he lifts me and draws further into the bed. His thrusts are slow and gentle, penetrating all of me. "Tell me what you'd have me do."

I whimper and shake my head, burying my face in his neck. "You hurt me."

"To protect you," still so insistent. "I'd do it again, to prevent that hairless rat you call your sister from opening her big mouth. Does this feel wrong to you? It doesn't to me, Bambi." His breath drives me insane, I dig my fingers into his shoulder blades and moan he presses his forehead onto mine and moves faster. "Do you really think I'd let your sister destroy this? I just confessed my feelings for you for fuck's sake! That was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. I want you with everything in me – and I'd do that shit I did back there again, to keep this. We're keeping this. We are. Watch."

"Zenande..."

He pulls the back of my neck and I'm forced to look at him. "I'll talk to her...we've done enough sneaking around. We're not in love, your sister and I. She's not in love with me."

“And...” Nqoba doesn’t allow me to finish what I want to say as he brings his lips down on mine while fucking me in the middle of the bed. His sweat is dripping onto my brows, and his hard thrusts are rendering me boneless. My head falls back, as I let Nqoba control my movements while I overdose on pleasure. Nqoba holds me close, his thrusts are now hard, pounding motions that have me ready to cum right then and there, but I wait. I wait until Nqoba is ready as well. He give me ardent kisses him, all over my lips, neck, and shoulders, as he strokes me in time with his thrusts. I whimper out, the pleasure too overwhelming for me to keep going, “I’m gonna cum!” I warn Nqoba right before spurting all over his hand. He smiles against my lips, just as his splatters inside my walls. Our bodies are locked tightly and he’s still holding me protectively as I shudder against him. It ends with a kiss on my forehead as I heave out a tired breath. “I’m still so mad at you,” I tell him.

“Be mad, I still don’t regret what I did. I’m sorry for hurting you, yes, but it was necessary. I don’t know how many times you want me to say this. Zenande works twenty minutes away from here. If your sister had said something, that crazy one would be here by now. Trust me.”

He makes a valid point. Knowing Zenny, she would’ve dropped everything at work – patients be damned – and made her way here to, to...I don’t even know how she’ll react. “Maybe we shouldn’t tell her,” I whisper as he shifts me to lay on his chest. I hug him real tight and sigh. “If Zemvelo hasn’t—”

“No,” the authority in his voice isn’t hard to miss. “No more hiding. I’m tired of sneaking around.”

I look at him – my eyes huge and my mouth agape. My heart is frantically jumping against my ribcage and I lick my lips before asking. “What do you mean no more hiding? You s-said your mother—”

I can feel him tense beneath me, as his arms tighten on me. “MaKhathide will never know about this.” His words are a punch to the gut, I part my lips and fight for air. It’s not like I hadn’t expected this...nearly an hour ago, I told him that we’d do this our own way. That we wouldn’t overthink it. I need to stand by word.

“Oh...” my voice drifts off. I don’t know what else to say.

He shifts in bed and leans back so that he’s looking me. “Have you...changed your mind?” his voice is strained. I can detect the worry in his voice.

“Cha, of course not.” I manage to get out. “Its just going to be hard to having to live with the fact that this is going to be us for the rest of our lives. But I made my bed, I should lay in it, right?” I’m getting myself worked up and I don’t like it. I’ve always known that I won’t have him fully, not the way I want to. He told me about his mom that day we broke up. He told me earlier about having too many responsibilities. Thirteen girls – all older than him to prove that his parents worked really hard to get their beloved son. He’s told me about his sisters and how they all treat him like a kid. He loves them all with their high and mighty attitude. His oldest is the same age as my mother. “Anyway, forget it. You love me back. That’s all that matters.”

He doesn’t fight me or disagree with me. I think he’s doing it on purpose, to avoid talking about things he doesn’t want to address. My fingers dig into his skin as he kisses my forehead. *I love you* my heart whispers fiercely. *I love you so much I hate it.*

I don’t bother to argue with it. It’s true anyway.

Nqobizitha isn’t with me in the morning. The only reason I managed to fall asleep last night is because he was with me. He was so unbothered about Zemvelo that I started relaxing myself. That nonchalance has flown out of the window though now that he isn’t with me. He sent me a WhatsApp message telling me that he’d be coming around the house around 14:00pm. He’s going to church with his mother. The fourth one in almost a month. He always scares the pastors and they’re all not welcoming of him into their churches. He always has a mysterious smile on his face as he relays his encounters with the pastors – but he refuses to tell me how he convinces them to not allow him inside their churches.

I inhale one deep breath and let it out slowly as I finally make the decision to go and face my sisters...wherever they are. I’ve been trapped in my room long enough. It’s 09:00am now. I’m usually long awake and showered around this time. Usually, I meet Zenny in the kitchen at 07:00am. She came knocking on my door and I pretended to be asleep. I’d woken up some hours earlier to sneak in a good soak as well as to take care of my hygiene. There are voice that seem to be coming from the living room. Zenny’s loud laughter grates my ears and I panic, halting momentarily as I gather up the courage to face them. Zemvelo is who my eyes connect with first and she glares as she spots me. I quickly look to Zenny but find I can’t hold the eye contact for longer than a second so I shift my attention to the TV. It’s on a cooking show that I’m sure is serving as background noise.

“Sanibonani,” my voice is a little raspy.

“Zithobile!” Zenny is sunny in her greeting but it makes me flinch. The one time where I’d rather she were in a bad mood and she’s greeting me so enthusiastically. I swallow down the bile in my throat. “I hope uZemvelo didn’t scare you when she came home last night. This bitch just pitches up out of the blue. No forewarning or anything.”

Zemvelo snorts but says nothing – and I’m sure she’s thinking back to Nqoba’s words last night. Like I am. An awkward chuckle falls off my lips and I hug my waist. “Tell me about it.”

“Wahamba engathi uboshile lomntwana, sisi? Ngyezwa phela k’thiwa abakwazi ukuy’bamba. Iy’qalekiso nje. UBaba uletha amanyala lay’khaya. (Why is he walking like he shit himself? I’ve heard that these ones can’t hold it in. Nothing but curses. Baba has brought disgrace upon us.)” Zemvelo spits out and I don’t know why her words affect me this much. I’m biting my lip to keep from lashing out. Nqoba told me to be calm around her and to not give into her goading. It’s like he knew that she’d behave this way.

“Stop it, sisi!” my eyes find Zenande who is firm in her rebuking. She is glaring daggers into our sister’s eyes and I see Zemvelo’s eyes waver a little. “This boy is our brother, your family! Baba brought him here so that we could build relations. Our only brother, sisi. We’re supposed to be standing together as oXulu. We have no else but each other. Baba will die one day and I don’t want my only brother to suffer while we’re here. At the end of the day, we have no one else but each other. Respect him, even if its just as a human being. He’s gay...big deal! Get over it. Imagine hating someone because of who they’re attracted to. Keep up with the times, sisi. Leave that attitude in the eighties. I’m proud of Zithobile.”

“If you only knew...” she chuckles and my heart is on the verge of bursting.

“Have you eaten?” I ask quickly, squeaking. Zenny raises her eyebrow at me but I don’t say anything else.

“Yah sidlile but I don’t mind going for thirds,” she smiles kindly at me. “What about you, Zeze?”

“What about you, Zeze?” the condescending manner in which she mimics Zenny is a little funny and I find myself laughing before I can stop myself. Huge mistake. Her cold glare finds me. “Awusho uhlekani? (What are you laughing at?)”

“Lutho,” I don’t know why I’m smiling.

I receive a snort in reply. “Whatever, mbobonkulu. Lento ehlala ngesinqa esisodwa sengath iyatayela kanti kufutha umdidi.”

I don’t have time for this. I walk away and find myself walking out of the house completely. My phone is with me. I call Siyabonga to find out if he’s home. He confirms with a clipped yes. I think we have a love-hate relationship, me and him. It takes me a bit longer to reach his house, I think I’m too absentminded. He’s with Nhlakanipho, limping and smiling now as he spots me like he wasn’t giving me an attitude when I was asking about his whereabouts. “You look like hell,” he tells me and places a half-bottle of Coke in front of me. “Konke kuhambe kahle izolo?”

“Yeah. Hi, Nhlaka,” I say to the boy eyeing me blankly. He returns my greeting with a small nod. “Something bad happened. Zemvelo came in the house and Nqobizitha was balls deep inside me.”

“Shit!” Siyabonga’s eyes widen. “How the hell did that happen? You see what I’m always talking about? You were careless. I always told you to be careful and you wouldn’t listen to me. Look at the mess you’ve created. If people find out...”

“Kahle, Shandu.” Nhlakanipho wraps his hand behind Siya’s neck and squeezes. I want to tell Siya to follow his own advice as he leans into Nhlakanipho’s touch immediately. “I doubt it will get to that. Zemvelo is Chris’ sister. She wouldn’t dare endanger her brother’s life like that.”

“Think again,” I whisper miserably. “She hates people like us. I had to bear her slurs all of last night and this morning. The only reason she hasn’t told Zenny is because Nqobizitha threatened her.”

Nhlakanipho lifts an eyebrow and releases a low groan. “Maybe it wouldn’t have been a bad idea to be more vigilant. Kodwa ke, I trust uBafo. He knows how to handle his affairs. I’m here if you need help.”

“What kind of help would they need from you?” Siya narrows his eyes on his unaffected boyfriend. “I don’t want you putting your hands on people, baby. Not women.”

“I don’t mean violence but maybe they’ll need help. A reputable person who could deny Zemvelo’s claims. For your sake, I hope she won’t tell the community. You’ll have been better in Joburg if that happens. Homophobic attacks aren’t given any attention around here.”

I swallow down the lumps in my throat and nod stiffly. “Nqoba said she wouldn’t dare. We stand to lose more than them. His mom is a savage.”

“Good.” Nhlakanipho nods once. “He’ll protect you.”

Our conversation is interrupted by my phone ringing. It’s my mother. I accept it nervously, praying to every deity in the universe that my stupid sister hasn’t opened her big mouth and told my dad who would’ve obviously told my mom. “Mommy?”

“I miss you.” Her first words. They make my heart smile and I feel like crying. I think I will. I ask the two lovebirds to be excused and head to the back of Siya’s house for privacy. She can sense that I’m not completely fine but I still lie and say I am. We talk about her family in Gabon. She’s shown them my pictures and they’d really love for me to visit. I’m eighteen now which means I am an adult and can make decisions for myself. She doesn’t know when she’s coming back but will call me again later in the evening.

“Tu me manques,” I tell her honestly. I really miss her and the too far in-between hugs I’d receive from her. “I miss you and I wish you were here, mommy.”

“Maybe when I come back, I can come to visit you, Bebe. If your sisters will allow it.”

“I’m only with Zenny. Now the hairless rat is here as—”

“Bebe!” my mom’s chuckles are loud and I laugh with her. She even makes me forget about my depression. “Respect your sisters! Does this call know what you call her?”

It’s not me, Nqobizitha called her that last night.”

“New boyfriend?”

I hate how she knows me so well. She sees right through me – even with so much distance. “I think, I’m not sure. I love him and he loves me as well.”

“That’s all that matters then. You’re young, enjoy life and falling in love. But I want you to be careful. Remember that place isn’t welcoming of people like you, Bebe.”

“Je sais, mommy. Trust me, I know. I’m not going to behave stupid, I’m older now.” My mind scoffs at me because I couldn’t be further from the truth.

We talk some more before I hear some voices in the background. She shouts in French and then gives me her attention again. “I have to go, Bebe. We’re going to the market with my sisters. Are you eating, Bebe?”

My stomach knots nervously. “Of course, mommy.” I haven’t touched any food this morning.

“You’re lying. Eat please, you’re thin enough as it is. I don’t need you losing more weight, my child.”

“I’ll eat. Bye, mommy. Je t’aime.”

“I love you too.”

We cut the call and I go back inside the shebeen. Nqoba’s here. I don’t think, just rush to him and leap into his arms. He catches me although he seems surprised. He catches me without fail. I peck his lips and hug him with everything in me. I’m not mad at him anymore. I think I get where he was coming from with all those words he told Zemvelo. “Tarzan wami...I’m so glad you’re here.”

He cradles the back of my head and crushes my small body. “Nganeyakwethu, you smell so good. Like me.”

“I brushed your jersey on my skin,” I admit in embarrassment. “Otherwise I was going to go crazy and my anxiety was spiking. Your scent calms me.”

I receive a kiss near my jaw as my feet sway in the air.

“And this is why you two got caught,” I hear Siya’s voice. “You couldn’t even make it past two months. Ngapha me and Nhlakanipho have been keeping this a secret for over two years now.”

“I think that’s a little unfair, Shandu.” Nhlakanipho is amused. “Ugogo has known since the beginning. And quite frankly, your parents are seeing it too. Perhaps they’ve always known.”

“You’re supposed to support me,” Siya huffs but he’s smiling.

I turn my attention to Nqobizitha. “Ufunani la? I’m really happy to see you but I thought you were in church with your mother.”

“She got a business call during the service. I followed her out about ten minutes later.” There’s more to this story, I can see it in his eyes but I won’t ask him more. He won’t tell me anyway.

“Do you want to go home now...and deal with that mess? Or do you want to hide here some more instead?”

“Asambe.” He looks over to his friends. “Ngisayothetha amacala madoda. Wish me luck!”

“Like you’ll need it,” Siya snorts as Nhlakanipho smirks.

The walk home is reluctant – at least on my end. We take even longer to reach there but in the end, we do. We do. I want to spin on my heels and go the other way but Nqoba’s hand is gripping me firmly as he pushes the front door open. It’s quiet and I briefly hope that those two have left but no such luck. Zenny is sleeping on the couch but her eyes open not a second later. I’m assuming the noise of my platform boots gave us away. “Sphalaphala,” Nqobizitha speaks first, sounding confident. “Beautiful as ever. Sleeping during the day is doing wonders for your skin. Are those new nails you’ve done? Gorgeous, Sphalapha...njengawe.”

“Ufunani?” she looks at our hands that haven’t separated. “Don’t tell me you’ve gone and made my brother pregnant.”

Her poor joke makes me choke on my saliva. “Maybe if I could, I would. But alas, we’re both very much boys, sibukubuku.” He says all this charmingly, unperturbed – and drags me to one of the couches in the living room. I sit down beside him and get nervous as soon as Zemvelo materializes in front of us. She grabs a seat next to Zenny and smiles while folding her arms on her chest. “Awu, Zeze...” Nqoba shifts his attention to her. The idiot is still grinning his charming smile. “How did you sleep, nkosanzana?”

“It could’ve been better...maybe if I hadn’t had nightmares about some people fucking right on this couch that you’re both sitting on.”

“Sometimes, it’s nice to throw caution to the wind, Mama. In your thirty-five years of living, have you tried living a little? Like your gorgeous sister here.”

Zemvelo’s eyes narrow. “Udelela kabi njalo wena. (You’re very rude)”

Nqoba’s hands lift in surrender. “Must you always be so defensive? A beautiful woman like yourself? Not every man is out to hurt you, nkosazana.”

What the fuck is he talking about? I can tell that Zemvelo is confused as well. “What the hell are you on about?”

“Sphalaphala, kunjani?” I’m going to assume he’s done with Zemvelo. “I couldn’t sleep all of last night, thinking about you and how lucky your brother is to have a sister like yourself. You see the world is tough out there, especially for individuals like your brother, I mean look at how your siblings treat him. Anyway, I was thinking about you and how understanding you are. This is why you’re my favourite person around here. Remember all...never mind, your brother is here and I love him so I won’t revisit our sexual encounters out of respect for him. Uyaphila kodwa, sibukubuku?”

Zenny blinks a couple of times and then bursts out laughing. I’m not sure what’s funny and the others are mimicking my confused expression.

“Nice try, Nqobizitha.” She says in between laughs. “Don’t you dare think you will soften me. I know you and all your silver tongue tendencies.” She stands up and comes to us and starts attacking my boyfriend. Not viciously like I’m expecting but little slaps and punches. I try to protect Nqoba but he stands and hugs Zenny tightly. I bite back the jealousy and watch the confusion on Zemvelo’s face.

“Kodwa Zenande. MaXulu...” he says our clan names and Zenande is rolling her eyes but hugging him back. “Maybe you can teach your sisters a thing or two about loosening their vaginas a little. They’re too tight and it turns them into this...”

Zenande pinches Nqoba’s butt. “And maybe you can stop thinking you’re so sleek by sneaking into our house very late at night and fucking my poor brother so hard that he struggles walking in the morning.”

“Zenny!” I squeak.

Nqoba is unperturbed, judging by his laughs. “He’s the best I’ve ever had, Sphalaphala. Ngenze njani? Your brother is like a drug.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. But remember my warning, if you hurt him, this is what will happen...”

Nqoba makes a sound like a wounded animal and doubles over in pain. I rush to him, without thinking, placing my hand on his back. Zenny has gone back to the couch, unbothered. Nqoba is cupping the front of his pants. I’m going to assume she pulled on his balls. “Zenny, you’re—ruining my life!” the words leave me before I can stop them.

“Fuck you wena!” she’s loud and unperturbed. “I’m trying to protect you here. And how dare you have sex on our couch, I sleep here! Did you even clean it? I’m still going to have a long talk with you about fucking men I’ve slept with. Sies! You couldn’t find anyone better than this manwhore?”

“Maybe I wanted to see what was driving you so insane.” I snipe back before I can stop myself. “A-And I fell in love with him.”

“Weeee, uhlazo. Men falling in love with men!” Zemvelo snorts, an air of superiority around her.

“Deal with it, sisi.” I say condescendingly because Zenny isn’t angry. And if she accepts this then fuck this hairless rat. “Or maybe you can start with that crisis you’re hiding under that weave.”

Zenny laughs and I think Nqobizitha is too, but he's still wheezing. I help him back to the couch. I'm not going to caress his dick better...not in front of these two. "Chris, this woman is nearly twice your age. Respect her. Anyway, I want to know when this happened."

"Are you mad?" I ask first.

"Yes. I'm mad that you fell in love with Nqobizitha! Nhlakanipho would've been a better choice. With all his coldness and unwelcoming attitude."

He's taken and I don't want him.

"I'm mad that you felt you had to go behind my back. Ngibusisi wakho. You should be able to come to me regarding anything, muntuza. This bastard is blowing your back out and I couldn't even advise you on which positions make anal sex better!" I choke on my saliva and Nqoba rubs my back, telling me to breathe. "Yes, I've butt-fucked before but not with this bastard because he never deserved it. Anyway, you should've come to me. I wouldn't have gotten mad."

"I was scared," I confide. "Maybe you would've told me that he's yours. And I wasn't sure that he liked me back or if he was experimenting. I wasn't going to lose you over something I wasn't certain of. Why aren't you mad, sisi?"

"What's done is done. It won't change the fact that both of you went behind my back and fucked around and even...hehe. Wonders shall never end. Nqobizitha in love? Anyway, this boy is not my boyfriend. I've never seen a future with him. We were just messing around. He's young and fun. That's all it was. I still need to find someone to trap, muntuza."

I chuckle and nod my head – relieved. "I hear you, sisi. But I'm still sorry."

"Don't be. I just want you to be careful with him. For a long time, I thought he was incapable of loving. Don't give him your all or pour all of your energy into this relationship you have. A leopard's spots never changes."

"Ouch!" Nqoba looks genuinely hurt by her words. I'm worried.

“But he’s never been in a relationship, sisi. He won’t cheat.”

“He’s never been in a relationship because he doesn’t know how to love...or maybe he’s learning with you. Wena Nqobizitha, I will castrate you with a rusty spoon if you hurt my brother. I will fuck you up so badly. I should be doing that and I’m not sure why I’m not but I’m going to blame this damn pregnancy!”

“You’re pregnant?” my eyes widen.

“Nine weeks,” Zenny confirms and I rush to hug her. “It explains all the exhaustion and nonstop vomiting.”

“But these are great news!” I squeal and giggle. “I’m going to be an uncle, Tarzan wami...” Zenny laughs loudly at the nickname but I ignore her as my eyes find Nqoba. “Exciting, right?”

Nqoba is smiling until he isn’t. He gets up a little too quickly and looks spooked. “I have to go.” He leaves without another word. I want to rush after him but I’m shocked.

What the fuck is his problem?

Mutual Desires : Eighteen

Nqobizitha

“Was that her again?”

My unfocused gaze finds MaNtuli...well, it's actually two of her. I rub my eyes repeatedly and attempt to focus. It feels like my head is floating uncomfortably and I groan as I lie back and stare at ceiling. The couch dips beside me and she runs her hand on my thigh. “I don't want to answer, Mama. I don't know what to say to...her. I just ran out like that.”

“Don't rush it. Ignore her if you must. Besides, you're so young, Nqobizitha. You shouldn't have to worry about Pampers and baby food. School is your priority...maybe a little fun with the girls. If the child is yours, there are options to consider. Abortion is legal—”

“Hell no!” my eyes bulge in disbelief and I frantically shake my head – it makes the dizzying sensation worse so I stop and clutch my head, moaning. “Murder an innocent soul? I can't have that on my conscience, Mama. I may be a lot of things but a killer is not one of them.”

“I don't think it's murder but I won't get into that, Nqobizitha.” Her hand is running down my back – soothing. “My point is you don't have to be a father to a child that you're not ready for. There are plenty of options available to you, baby. Abortion. Adoption.”

“My parents are wealthy. They have enough money to feed all of Mbongolwane, even the whole of Eshowe – maybe the whole of KZN.”

“Money may buy them clothes and secure their future kodwa there are so many things a baby needs, Nqobizitha. Things your money can't buy. Things you can't give to a child you're not ready for.”

I blink, confused, and maybe my confusion is showing because MaNtuli laughs and shakes her head. “I'm not getting you, Mama.”

“Love, Nqobizitha. Time. Attention. Support. So many things. Do you see why an abortion would be better? You were only focused on materialistic things but there’s so much more. I don’t blame you with the way you were raised...this is why I try to give you everything that you were missing. You don’t realize that children need love because you never got any love yourself. But I’m here now and I am still angry that you’ve been avoiding me because of this little girl who has been stealing all your attention but you’re here now. It shows that you trust me, and I hope that you also know I’m always here for you...” her hand slips in between my thighs, trailing further and further up, to my crotch.

“Mama...” I grip her wrist and shake my head. My dick is jerking in interest but I don’t think I can do this. Even with this...air between us – a familiar one. That sends tingles down my spine. “I’m not in the mood. I just came here to talk to you – for guidance. You’re the only one I could think of...I’m not looking for sex.”

“And I gave it to you, Nqobizitha. If your little girlfriend’s sister is pregnant and you don’t want a child – which is really clear – then tell her to get an abortion. Give her some money. No woman will force you to raise a child you’re not ready for. That will be unfair. There. That’s my advice. Now let’s get to the other things. Ngyakukhumbula, Nqobizitha. I’ve been so lonely without you and I know you want this as well. Remember how we’d go at it for hours. How daring we used to be. You’ve changed lately and become this...boring person I no longer recognize. What happened to my Nqobizitha? Awume ngalabantwana abancane (Stop it with these young girls). They will never compare to me and what I give you. Tell me I am wrong.”

I lift my head as she works on my pants and try to grip her hand but my head is spinning worse than before. I’m not even hearing most of what she’s saying, barely even remember the colour of the walls in her house. “Mama, wait...” I reach for her but she disappears into thin air and I feel tugging on my jersey instead. She makes a frustrated sound when my upper limbs refuse to cooperate. “I’m not in the mood. I just want to sleep. Please, MaNtuli...” her lips are on my neck and then she’s on top of me. My body reacts – utter fire and warmth spreading all over my body.

“This bad boy seems to disagree with you.” I can feel her hand on my dick, stroking me. A weird sensation builds in my stomach and I open my mouth to tell her to stop but I’m not sure she hears me. I’m sure she hasn’t heard me with how she suddenly sinks down on me. My head falls back and I groan. She feels good around me, yes, my dick is growing hard inside her but... a crushing feeling of panic is suffocating me as the woman on top of me starts to move and guides one of my hands to her breasts. “Make me feel good, Nqobizitha...like you used to. Like I’m making you feel. Does this little girl do this for you?”

I can’t hear much of what she’s saying. There’s a weird sense of revulsion coiling inside me as she continues moving, pleasuring herself, touching me, kissing me, stroking my cheek. I can hear my voice

but she isn't hearing me. Not like I can hear myself – and so she continues moving while I try to push her off. Chris is on my mind, and I start to apologize because this shouldn't be happening. This is cheating. I don't feel good about this – on the inside, it feels wrong. My dick is rock hard inside her but it doesn't feel good. Doesn't feel good. "MaNtuli, stop this. Stop it, Mama wami." My stomach is clenching as I try to push her off again. My body isn't mine tonight, it feels too limp and my head is swimming. MaNtuli is moving faster and faster – and then she's tensing above me and moaning loudly. She lifts her body and strokes my dick. I can hear her laughing, can't be sure what she says because I'm groaning as I come into her hand. "Look what you made me do," I slur, a foreign feeling of shame overcoming me. "He won't forgive me for this. He won't."

"Ntuli is dead. He has no power, Nqobizitha." She kisses my cheek and lays down beside me on the couch. "Now, sleep. I can tell that you're tired. I'm here and proud of you." Her words make my heart flutter but my mind is still taunting me. *You fucked up. You fucked up. You fucked up.* I try to push the grating voice away but it's persistent. So I curl into MaNtuli's side and bury my face in her soft body and close my eyes – escaping it all.

Chris has been blowing up my phone for the past three days and I don't have the courage to respond to him. I don't have the courage to face him at all. I fucked up. I fucked up really badly and I don't know how I'll get out of this one. I've been telling myself to meet up with him and confess but then I don't think he's going to be forgiving. He left his boyfriend for me and I responded by...cheating on him. I shouldn't have gone to MaNtuli's house. She's always been too great a temptation and now I messed up. We hadn't made it past a week – after confessing our feelings for each other – and I've already screwed up. But I still don't think I'll be able to tell him about this. Not when I might be losing him anyway.

Zenande is pregnant.

She is pregnant and I thought those were good news at first until I remembered that I've fucked her as well. I make it a point to use protection with the women I fuck but I remember a few occasions where I'd forget with Zenny. I'll blame this one on the alcohol, like what happened with MaNtuli a few days ago. I'm not sure if this kid she's carrying is mine, I hadn't stayed around to find out but I'm still so fucking terrified. If the kid is mine, then what do I do with it? I'm a child myself. I live with my parents and I'm not the most motivated of people. I'm not even sure what I want to do after matric and I never want to discuss my future because I tend to fly where the wind takes me.

How will I take care of a whole kid? MaNtuli had mentioned time, love and affection for this kid. I barely have time for my family. I don't know what kind of love kids need. The only affection I'm used to giving

happens in the bedroom. I'm not cut out to be a father. Zenny said I didn't know how to love and she's right. I don't. But I wouldn't want her to have an abortion either. That's murdering an innocent baby. That's killing my seed. I'm confused and I'd hoped MaNtuli would guide me but I hadn't gotten more than a fuck with her. A fuck that I didn't want. That I regret.

"Bafo, are you coming?"

My attention shifts to Nhlakanipho who is towering above me and considers me with an arched brow. I look around the class and notice that it's empty. Is it break time already? I grab my phone from my blazer and check the time. 12:33pm. A full three minutes has passed. I sigh. "Yeah, bafo. I'm just thinking," I say as I pack my books and slide my bag over my shoulder.

"You're always thinking lately," he tells me as we exit the class. "Kwenzenjani? You're not even attending afternoon classes with Chris. He's worried but you're refusing to talk to him apparently."

"I—" my mouth opens but the rest of the words won't come out. How do I explain to him in a way that'll make him understand? Nhlakanipho will be disappointed in me – for a lot of things. I can't have that. He's my best friend. At the same time, he's Chris' friend too and what if he tells Chris? Or what if he gives up on me and chooses Chris instead? Maybe this is why I should come clean to Chris...about everything. But I don't trust Zenande as well. Who knows if she's really pregnant? What if this is a ploy to keep me away from her brother? What if she got pregnant to trap me? What if she's already told Chris that the baby is mine? I'll lose him...maybe this was her plan all along. Maybe she's just as poisonous as her stupid sisters. "Let's just go, bafo."

Nhlakanipho observes me – carefully, like a parent. I force myself to give him an unbothered smile but there's this little boy inside me that wants to hide inside a closet like I used to. Maybe I'll come out and find that I was dreaming, that these past few days have been nothing but my irrational fears acting up again. "If you say so but just...I'm always here for you. Just know."

"Thanks, bafo." We meet Siya at the gate, like usual, he glares at me. He hasn't been talking to me lately and when he does, it's only to spit venom. He's always hinting at how he warned Chris about messing around with a guy like me. He seems to have his mind made up about me – and I don't bother to argue with him. I've got more serious issues to deal with. Issues that I've been running away from. That I want to continue running away from. "Sho, Siya." I say to the boy in front of me.

"What do you want to eat?" he asks Nhlakanipho and blatantly ignores me.

“Siyabonga...” Nhlakanipho wraps an arm around the younger boy. “Nqobizitha was greeting you. What do you say to him?”

“Oh, sorry...I forgot,” it sounds too sarcastic. “Fuck you, you trash.”

“Siyabonga...”

“Bafo, bafoza...” I give my best friend a strained smile. “Awukahle. Clearly our self-appointed gossip columnist has the latest and knows what’s happening between me and his friend better than anyone. Leave him be, let him cuss me out all he wants.” Maybe Siya will even reveal if Chris has said anything about Zenande’s pregnancy and whether or not that life inside of her is mine or not.

“Sorry. I don’t talk to douchebags,” Siya sneers and sits down across from me as Nhlakanipho goes to order our food. “Chris should’ve just gone with his French lover instead. You don’t deserve him.”

“Is that so?” a smile spreads my lips but I can feel the rage rapidly building inside my veins. My smile remains as I grit my teeth.

“Vele!” Siya’s voice is raising and I am tempted to...do something. I don’t know what. But he’s forgotten his place. He forgets that we’re just acquaintances and that the only reason we speak is because of Nhlakanipho. “Don’t act like you don’t know, Nqobizitha. You’re ignoring him – his texts, his calls, classes. He’s stressing out and thinks he’s done something wrong when he hasn’t and—”

“How would you know?” I cut in because my heart is clenching and I don’t need someone else telling me about how badly I’m fucking up. I already know.

“What?”

“That he’s done nothing wrong,” I say and narrow my eyes in on Siya.

“Because!” he shouts and then looks around as all eyes focus on him. “I-I know you, Nqobizitha. You break hearts because you don’t have one. How you’re behaving attests to that. You wouldn’t be treating

him this way if you loved him. If you did nothing wrong then you wouldn't be ignoring him. What, are you done experimenting and decided that no, pussy is actually better?"

My mind immediately visits MaNtuli and I close my eyes as a groan rumbles from deep inside my throat. I didn't want to but my body wanted it. Siya won't believe me and I don't understand myself. Part of me feels weird myself. I can still smell her and I can still feel her warmth as she was sinking down on me. How her juices spilled down on me, her nails digging into the skin on my thighs and her lips leaving hickeys and bruises on my neck that will never go away. It feels like she's buried all of her within me, so deep that I'll never be able to get away. My body...my body liked what she was doing but I didn't want to. I didn't mean to grow hard or to spill but it happened. It happened and I cheated on Chris.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," I finally tell him and ease into my seat as Nhlakanipho comes back to join us. "What are we having today, bafo?" I ask coolly and evade Siya's glare.

"You don't eat fish. Siya wants hake. I got you russians and chips. I think I'm going with the hake today, bafo." Nhlakanipho eyes me apologetically.

"It's okay, bafoza."

We mostly eat in silence but when I do make conversation, Siya will jump in and ask Nhlakanipho something silly to prevent him from talking to me. He's so childish and I raise my eyebrow at him. Nhlakanipho sees through his bullshit and I commend him for being able to keep his little puppy on a leash. I'm not in the mood. I can barely eat without wanting to retch whatever I'm eating. My stomach is always in knots lately and I think something is wrong with me. Maybe I need to see a doctor or something. The family doctor.

"Bafo?"

I lift my eyes and find Nhlakanipho looking at me. He's standing, along with his puppy. Is break time over? "Is it time?"

"Yes." He nods his head and regards me with that inquisitive stare from earlier. "You've barely touched your food. Something is wrong. We need to talk."

I just nod my head and grab my bag. We're walking back to the school and I spot MaNtuli's car. I quickly avert my gaze and clear my throat. The gossip columnist is observing me curiously. I have no choice but to stop as MaNtuli shouts after me. I ignore Siya's disappointed face. He's so fucking annoying with how he thinks he knows everything. "Mama wami..." I give MaNtuli a charming smile, her scent is nauseating.

"You're ignoring me."

"Cha, MaNtuli..." my dick is still so attracted to her. I keep the distance to not bring any unnecessary attention on us. "I've been studying hard for an Economics test. Since you're no longer a teacher, I've been a little lost. We just recently got a new teacher. She's not like you."

"No one is like me." She says confidently and lifts her hand to caress my cheek. I flinch but a grin kisses my lips nonetheless. "If you want, you can come over later tonight. I'll help you with your studies."

"Very tempting, Mama," I lie through my teeth. "But I've got things to do with MaKhathide today. You know that woman, she will kill me if I disappoint her."

"Not so innocent mommy dearest," she says, confusing me in the process. I'm still frozen as she kisses me on the lips – in front of everyone. I can't even push her away. She makes me vulnerable, I'm just a boy with her – in her presence. "Fine. So not today but make it soon. I really do miss you, Nqobizitha."

"Mama wami..." I bow reverently and part ways with her. The others have left me but I can see them and like usual, Siya is so fucking focused on me. "I don't want to hear it." I say as I walk past them. Maybe I'll need to talk to Chris. To clear this mess before the self-appointed columnist gets to him first and says shit he knows nothing about.

"Nqobizitha?"

I can hear the surprise in his voice – as if he'd given up on me ever talking to him. Not that I blame him, I've made it seem like that. But I think I'm ready to talk now. I'm not. I'm just tired of running. "Bam— Chris," I groan inwardly as his little gasp reaches my ear. "Can I come over?"

“Since when do you ask for permission?” I can hear the attitude in his voice.

“I don’t.” I tell him before hanging up. I’m outside his window and I use the knife in pocket to break in. He gives me a surprised glance...like he doesn’t know this is how I usually enter his room. “Chris...”

“Fuck you!” he’s charging toward me, looking a little intimidating that I actually take a step back. “Leave my house. I don’t want to see you!”

“I want to see you,” I tell him and unsuccessfully reach out for him. “Ngyaxolisa, dali. (I’m sorry)”

“No, don’t give me that.” His face scrunches up and he folds his arms on his chest. I notice that he’s wearing one of my jerseys and my heart falters. I ache to touch him but he’s mad...and I won’t touch him when he doesn’t want me to. “You don’t get to say that. I’ve been calling and calling, Nqobizitha. You just left like that and then proceeded to ghost me. No explanations, nothing! At school, you’re ditching my classes. If you don’t want me anymore then I expect you to be more of a man and—”

“But I do want you, dali,” I interrupt him and this time I step forward and he shifts so that he’s out of reach. “That hasn’t changed, Bambi. I want—”

“THEN WHAT DID I DO WRONG?” He roars and I want to ask him to keep it down because maybe his siblings are here and I don’t want to deal with them but he looks too upset. I won’t be surprised if he throws something at me. “That you’d ignore me, Nqoba. I’m not talking to Hugo, you always take my phone. You check it all the time. I’m not hiding anything from you. What did I do this time?”

“Nothing,” I say honestly. “It’s all me and—”

“You’ve changed your mind? That’s fine, I know about MaNtuli.” He’s breathing hard, shaking his head. “That you kissed her. All you had to do was tell me. I can take it and I was g-going to keep away. Not this, Nqoba. Not the way you handled this. Making me question myself, driving me insane with your silence. You didn’t have to punish me like this.”

“I was scared,” I blurt out and bury my face in my hands as a groan climbs to my throat. Chris is looking at me as I open my eyes. “Your sister is...pregnant, Bambi.”

“And so what?” his voice is quiet, face confused.

“I-I’m just...you see sometimes, I would...I use protection. Before you, I used condoms with the women but sometimes...things happen.”

I watch him go through a myriad of emotions until finally...understanding dawns on him. “No, Nqobizitha...” he shakes his head and paces up and down. “That isn’t possible. M-My sister would’ve said if the baby was yours. She just told me that the father is someone from eNgudwini. I think it’s Jabulani. Y-You can’t be the father.”

A heavy weight lifts off my shoulders and I find myself nodding in relief. I’m walking to Chris and I don’t know what I’m expecting but it’s not the vicious punch to my belly. Then the other punches and kicks follow all across my chest because he can’t reach my face. An edge of anger flows through my veins and I find myself slamming him against the nearest wall, one of my forearms going across his neck to pin him there. He starts to squirm, and kick, and he’s fighting, and struggling. An odd sort of satisfaction courses through me. Good. Let him feel what he was—

“Nqoba, stop. You’re hurting me, please stop!” He shouts, eyes wide and frightened.

The words are an ice-cold slap in the face. Memories of MaNtuli flood me. Immediately, I let go, and take a few steps back, chest heaving, a sick feeling crawling up the back of my throat. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I am so sorry. Bambi, I didn’t mean to... I would never- sthandwa sami, please. I’m sorry.”

Chris has his arms wrapped around himself, and he is visibly shaken. He takes many deep breaths before the tension in his shoulders fades and he stops trembling. “I, u-um, I hit you first.” There are tears rolling down his cheeks – and I hate everything about myself right at this moment, that I even touched him like that, with negative emotions clouding my judgement. “You j-just—I couldn’t breathe and...” he shakes his head and bites his bottom lip. “The least you could’ve done with me was use protection. You’ve just put me at a risk, Nqoba and I—”

“It was your responsibility too.”

“Yeah well, I wasn’t sticking my dick in every hole offered to me on a silver platter, Nqobizitha!” he screams and he’s getting closer again. He stands in front of me and looks up, eyes cold. “I’m not the manwhore here. I can’t infect you with any nasty diseases. You just – you disgust me so much! What the

fuck is wrong with you? How sick in the head are you? Sleeping with women old enough to be your mother and then now you just thought that you were going to have a baby with one. You're not right in the head and you—"

"Count your words!" I grip his arm, a little too roughly. His words are cutting into me. He has no idea what he's talking about. We have sex and he suddenly thinks he knows me. That he can say whatever to me. I'll fuck him up. "You don't know anything about me, Chris. Nothing."

"I know that you're a sicko who only thinks with his dick and I can't believe I gave myself to you. What if I'm sick now because of you? Do you ever use your brain instead of your dick, Nqobizitha?!"

"Chris..."

"I should've stayed with Hugo instead. You're too much trouble than you're worth," he won't let me get in a word and the coldness in his eyes...I don't think I can get through to him. "Now you were scared that you could've impregnated my sister. If that had happened...no. You're too much of an effort for me, Nqobizitha. This isn't what I signed up for. Always worrying about you and your women and now you're putting my life at risk. Maybe—"

"I fucked her also," I cut him off because I know where he's going. Since we're ending things, we may as well lay everything out there. "A few days ago. I told her no but she continued. We didn't use protection...maybe I'll really be a father this time. And then I won't be twisted as you put it. As for the other things, go to the hospital to get tested. I'm clean by the way, if you're wondering. But maybe Hugo wasn't...unless you always used protection with him?"

His silence tells me all I need to know.

"Right, so I suppose I should get tested too then. If he infected you, then you would've infected me. But it's Nqobizitha's fault, right?" I chuckle humourlessly when he doesn't reply. "I'll see you around, nganeyakwethu."

Christophe

I always thought people were overreacting about breakups. Simi was fifteen when she first got her heart broken by a girl she really, really liked. It turned out that the girl was only experimenting and had only chosen Simi because she was the only available bisexual who'd kiss other girls. My best friend mourned that relationship for close to two months and too many times I'd tell her to get over it. Now that I'm in the same boat, I have no idea what to do. My insides feel too heavy and empty at the same time. I can't sleep well at night. Eating is a daunting task. And lately, I always have lumps in my throat. As for crying, I'm so sick and tired of it. As well as looking at my phone – he never calls.

Zenny noticed that something's wrong, she's been threatening to go to Nqobizitha's house and I've had to really beg her not to. Zemvelo is gone. I didn't have to deal with her thankfully. I also went to the hospital for testing like Nqobizitha had suggested. I'm clean – thankfully but I think I was justified in my anger. First that bastard was worried that he'd impregnated my sister and I don't want to think of what a mess that would've been had it actually happened. Then he admitted to sometimes having unprotected sex with his women. I feel he should've told me. He should've used protection. It doesn't matter anyway because we're really over this time. I saw him speaking to MaNtuli yesterday and it was all the confirmation I needed. I really wish I was in Joburg because then I'd moving on like he has.

“Mfana wami?”

Nasty shivers spread over my body at the sound of that voice. Mr. Biyela. We're going to the teachers' conference. All the teachers and for some reason, he decided to sit beside me. Empangeni isn't that far apparently but to me it feels like it. I'm tired of feeling Mr. Biyela's thigh pressed firmly against mine. I'm tired of pretending not to notice the way his hand will occasionally brush my knee. I'm tired of pretending not to be sickened by his scent. I miss Nqobizitha. I wish I was beside him instead. “Yes, Baba?” I turn my attention to him, can't really see him clearly.

“Is everything alright?” he presses his hand on my shoulder. I shrink away from it. He frowns and I pretend not to notice again. “What are these tears on your face?”

My hands snap to my face and sure enough...tears. I wipe them away and clear my throat. “I just lost someone, Baba.” I keep it at that and turn my attention away from him. He was making me uncomfortable with his staring. “How much longer till we get there?”

“Half an hour,” again his hand brushes against my knee. I can't even move. We're in a Quantum and I chose the seat next to the window. I'm trapped. My skin is crawling and I don't want to be here. I've been talking to Siya and telling him about this man and I don't think he quite believes me as well but he told me to tell him should this man try something funny. Does his inappropriate touches count as

funny...or am I reaching? I don't even know. I'm so tired. I want to sleep and never wake up. "Vuka, mfana wami."

I startle awake and cringe as I feel him touching me really close to my thigh. "What is it?!" I don't care that I sound rude.

"We're here."

I look outside. We're at a BnB. We're spending the night here and having those meetings that I still know nothing about in the morning and then spending the night again before we'll be returning to Mbongolwane on Sunday. The BnB isn't that impressive but I really want to sleep again. A cold dread overcomes me as I find out that we're sharing rooms to save money. Most of the teachers at Sithola Imfundo are female and then there's Mr. Nsibande...but he's married to Miss Magwaza so they're staying in one room. I have to share with the one with the mole who makes me uncomfortable.

"Ungakhathazeki, I'll take care of you." He says as he guides me to our room. There are two beds but that doesn't lessen my fear or make me feel better. I'm panicking about being in an enclosed space with just him. "Our room," he says as he silently closes the door behind him. I place my things on the bed next to the window...in case I need to escape at night. "Do you want to change and go shower?"

"What?" I raise my eyebrow.

"Alone. I won't join you." He mutters something under his breath. I don't catch it with my ears. I tell him to go first – and he uses that as an opportunity to undress in front of me.

"Why don't you go to the bathroom, Baba?" I ask him, my body shuddering. "I don't think I'm supposed to see you naked. You're like my father."

"I'm the furthest thing from your father," he chuckles and removes his boxers. I avert my gaze. "Besides, we're both men. Unless...are you trying to tell me something?"

"Like what?"

“I don’t know, mfana wami. Maybe there are things you like...” his voice is filled with suggestion.

“Are you sure I can’t get another room? I’ll afford it,” I lie because I don’t think I’m safe here. I don’t want to be here.

“You heard the receptionist, they’re all booked out. We’re not the only ones attending the conference,” he says and goes to shower. I WhatsApp Siyabonga but he’s offline. I go to Nqoba next. I write a message and then delete it. I type again and delete it.

Hi. – me

It goes through. He’s online. I get a read receipt but no reply. He’s gone offline. I bite my lip and blink my eyes rapidly. The tears come regardless. I still have the phone gripped tightly in my hand when Mr. Biyela comes back. I don’t know how much time has passed but he took a while in there. He has a towel wrapped around his waist, hanging dangerously low. I can see a hint of his pubic hairs. I hold back a gag. “Crying again?” he asks and comes to stand in front of me. “Tell me, maybe I’ll—”

There’s a knock on the door.

I see the confusion on his face. He grabs my phone from my hands and checks the time. “11:25pm. It’s almost midnight. I wonder who could that be.” He heads for the door. My heart starts to jump wildly in my chest as my lips grow dry. I know that voice.

“Kunjani, munt’ omdala?” I can hear the nonchalance in his voice, the charm. I’ve missed it. “I’m here for Christophe.”

“Mapholoba!” Mr. Biyela sounds surprised. “I’m afraid we were about to go to sleep now. What are you doing here anyway? Students weren’t invited to the teachers’ conference.”

“This is my family’s BnB, Baba. Anyway, I heard that you were coming here and I talked to MaKhathide about refunding the school. You do so much for our community, Baba. The way you run the school with such excellence. MaKhathide was impressed when I showed her my Accounting results – an outstanding 95%. I told her about your lovely wife who deserves to be recognized as well because you know how we men rely on the women to steer us in the direction of success like MaKhathide is doing with me. I’m

rambling now, Baba. Please forgive me...what I'm trying to say is your lovely wife and I took this long drive to surprise you and thank you for being such a role model in our community. She's in the hallway, waiting for her lovely husband. As for me, I'll take Chris with me. I have a lovely suite within this BnB. He'll be spending the following nights with me."

"I—uh," the ugly bastard seems to be rendered speechless.

"Coming!" I call out and grab my bags, making a run for it. I push past Mr. Biyela and leap into Nqobizitha's arms. He readily catches me. I close my eyes and breathe him in. His scent hits me and I think I'm going to cry again. He sets me on my feet and grabs my bag.

"Baba wami..." he smiles at Mr. Biyela and then wraps a hand around my small one. We make an escape. I don't say anything as we go to the room he owns. Its huge and elegant but the details are lost on me. I'm focused on Nqoba. He says nothing and starts changing out of his clothes. I do as he does. We climb in bed and he turns his back to me.

"Nqobizitha..." I call out, trying to touch him but he shrugs me off.

"Ubanga umsindo (You're making noise)" he says nothing else.

I freeze and bite my lip. Then I'm nodding, even though he can't see me. Covering myself with the bedsheets, I lie down so that my back is touching his. My fingers curl into the bedsheets. My eyes burn but the tears don't come. I think I've run out of them.

Mutual Desires : Nineteen

Nqobizitha

I wake up to a baby koala attached to me...well, not a baby koala exactly but it sure feels like it. There's an entanglement of legs around my waist and short, thin arms around my chest. Quiet little breaths tickle the back of my neck and I can feel the tiniest touch of lips on the area there. Turning around is a little problematic because the boy behind me is really clinging to me, showing no signs of letting go. Where I should feel suffocated and trapped, I find myself feeling calm and grounded instead. My body is soaking and trembling, I can hear the hard pounding of my heartbeat – the effects of a bad dream. I don't remember much about it but the smells are there and they make my head dizzy. The sick feeling is back but not prominent enough that I have to vomit.

I've successfully turned around, coming face to face with Chris. He looks even younger when he's asleep – and I'm not sure if I should be making that observation because it's uncomfortable. But his beauty remains the same, it never leaves him...even in sleep. He's all long eyelashes and plump lips. He's glowing brown skin and innocent features that I don't think I can be blamed as I reach out to caress his cheek. He leans into my touch and mumbles something in his sleep but I swear I hear him mutter something about a Brentwood. It brings a tiny smile to my lips. On nights where my dreams don't consist of Mama wami, they revolve around Bambi. And it makes me wonder if I've said Chris' name while deep in sleep...I think maybe it's possible.

The longer I look at him, the more grateful I am that I came here. And by what I'd seen there back with uBiyela, I think I'd come at the right time. The scrawny pensioner had a towel wrapped around his waist and I hadn't missed the annoyance in his eyes as he'd opened the door. Clearly he was angry about being interrupted. I wonder just what his plans were. If they're as dark as I'm assuming them to be then I'd probably be in jail right now. I was going to kill that man with my bare hands – and no one was going to stop me. I wouldn't have regretted it. He's sixty years old...how dare he look at a child so much younger than him that way! I didn't believe Chris at first but tonight was all the confirmation I needed. He deliberately booked too few rooms so that he could share with Chris and then proceeded to make an excuse about the school not having enough funds to house them in separate rooms.

The only reason I know this is because MaSibiya (the school's treasurer and secretary) can hardly keep her mouth shut. She gave him enough money to pay for the trip but he turned it down and said they needed to save money. As if my ancestors were on our side, they booked into my family's BnB. Devising a little plan was simple enough...even if I did to have to break my parents' bank balance a little bit. You see, a guy like myself can never just score 95% on an Accounting test. Not overnight. But Mr. Biyela wouldn't know that. The refund is coming out of my own pocket, MaKhathide doesn't know about this. She thinks I'm spending the night at Nhlakanipho's house. Chris and I may've not ended on the best

terms but I'd go to the end of the earth for him. I always want to see him secure and happy and unbothered. Like the first time I met him. But he always sports a sour expression lately and he's looking thinner. This time he really will look like a needle but I've been trying to stay away from him. For his sake. For my sake. To get Siyabonga off my back.

That boy is like a thorn poking my fingers. He has a vicious bite and I am not sure how Nhlakanipho handles him. He's worse than Chris. I am always tempted to...I never know what to do with him but he gets under my skin and irritates the fuck out of me. Yesterday, he gave me a hard time for speaking to MaNtuli. Just speaking. And trashed me about being a psychopath who only wanted to experiment with Chris...like I hadn't confessed my love for boy not even a week ago. Like I wanted to break up with him when it was Chris who'd been planning to do it to me. I just beat him to it and came clean about MaNtuli in process. He trashed me and admitted that he regretted starting a relationship with me. He said he should've gone with Hugo instead. All along I thought that we were on the same page but no, he was thinking about his French idiot. I don't care though. I don't think I do. Part of me doesn't even know what the hell I was doing thinking that dudes like me are meant for relationships. Nhlakanipho, yes. But for me, I just fuck and leave. There are no strings, no feelings. I don't know how I managed to trick myself with Chris.

Detaching from him is problematic, the toothpick has a really good grip – despite his nonexistent body. As soon as I am successful, I make my way to the bathroom. There's a weird humming that is in my ears, that is making it hard for me to hear anything around me. Then it goes under my skin, making me feel like my entire body is vibrating. I was trying to ignore it back there with Chris, but I can no longer. This has been happening a lot lately – if it's not the vibrating sensation then it's a creepy crawly sensation. I hate the second one because when I feel like that I can never get rid of it – never matters the number of showers I take. With the vibrating sensation, I just need to...I pull my dick out of my boxers and lean against the wall with my forearm. I'm not even hard but anything to get rid of the weird sensation. My thoughts are all over the place as I stroke and stroke until I'm spilling inside the toilet. A quiet breath leaves me and I go to rinse my hands before washing my face and I meet myself on the mirror as I look up.

My eyes look tired, I haven't been really sleeping well lately. Back there, with Chris, that was the longest I've slept in days. I grip the edge of the sink and try for a smile. It works and I look gorgeous as a motherfucker. But my body is still buzzing. The scent is coming back – a little stronger this time. MaNtuli's. I don't know why it makes me feel sick lately. My stomach is rolling as I force myself to keep looking at the mirror. Turning the tap on at the sink again, I lean down and splash my face with cold water, breathing out a little shakily. Then I turn to leave. The door opens just as I'm gripping the door handle. Big brown eyes meet mine and then widen. I would find it funny were I not feeling off. So I attempt to maneuver past Chris but he grips my wrist. His eyes are still so wide but they're searching also. I'm not sure what the fuck he's looking for but he's poking at parts of me that make me uncomfortable.

“Ufunani? (What do you want?)” I ask him gruffly.

“For you to drop your attitude first...please,” he replies, still not letting go of my wrist. “I just – you don’t sleep well at night and I was checking up on you.”

His words cause me to tense up a little before I’m pulling out of his touch – a little too harshly. “Wazini wena? (What do you know?)” I can’t stop thinking back to his words from that night. He regrets what we shared. Hugo. My mind refuses to let his words go. “You’re my psychologist now?”

“N-No...but you don’t need to be so rude, Nqobizitha. I don’t understand why you came here if you’re just going to treat me like this.”

“Would you rather I let that bastard hurt you?!” I hiss quietly, getting into his personal space. “I’m here because I...because you—fuck this!” I walk out of the bathroom. I’m not in the mood to do this. I can feel his quiet footsteps behind me. He gets in bed beside me and then pulls on my wrist. I persist until I give in and lay in between his legs. My head is on his belly and I can feel my heart lulling. His fingers are brushing my scalp gently and I can hear his little sigh as my arms fold around his waist.

“You know you’re not being fair—Nqobizitha,” his voice cracks quietly. “I’m not the one who tortured you with the silence. I wasn’t the one avoiding you. I didn’t claim to love you and then behaved otherwise. I-I didn’t cheat, Nq-Nqobizitha. You do all this and then break up with me and still remain angry at me. Me. Like I did something wrong. You’re not being fair.”

I want to reply. I don’t know how to.

“A-And now, you’re doing it again. On top of being sad that we’re broken up, now I have to deal with the fact that you can barely talk to me without snapping. I—haven’t done anything wrong. I’m not busy with other people. You’ve gone back to your old women and I should be mad. I am mad. You have no idea what I’m going through. You’re hurting me...but I’m talking to you. I want the best for you. I’m worried about you. Maybe it’s easy for you to not give a fuck suddenly but I do.”

“Grab my phone.”

He's silent for a while. "What?" I can hear the surprise in his voice.

"Thatha, dali." I can feel him moving around, and his silent acknowledgement that he got it. "My password's Pluto22." I tell him and I can hear the little sound of surprise that leaves him. I'm not sure if it's because my screensaver has surprised him – it's a picture of him, naked, from some pictures I took of him a while back. He's a nudist and I love that about him...when I am not jealous that he did this with his French idiot before he could do it with me. Or maybe he's surprised that I'm giving the password to my phone. He always complained about that but there are damning pictures that I'd rather he didn't see. Besides, he didn't just give his password to me – I fucked him into giving it to me.

"Now what?"

"Dlala uMjikjelwa 'Manginawe' (Play Mjikjelwa 'Manginawe')" I tell him. He huffs and says something about me being random. I say nothing and let the song speak for me. I don't think I will ever have the courage to say the words again.

I have to go back to Mbongolwane. Nontethelelo called when I was in the bathroom and Chris took a message. The only reason he answered is because he knows she loves him. Anyway, she told me that there's drama at home and didn't want me to miss it. I'd rather be here to ensure Chris' safety but when I called Nontethelelo, she spoke with a sense of urgency. I watch Chris get dressed and discreetly adjust the raging boner in my pants. He notices and raises an eyebrow. I am unashamed in my staring and eventually, he concedes by looking away.

"Take this...in case that bastard tries something." I watch his eyes widen.

"This is a gun," his voice is trembling. He hasn't taken the gun from me. "W-Where would you get a gun from, Nqobizitha?"

"It's MaKhathide's," I explain and grab his hands, forcefully putting the gun in his hands. "We're a wealthy family. If we were robbed one day then we'd need to protect ourselves."

"Are you involved in some shady shit?"

I give him a flat stare – offended. “I’ll fuck you up with your stupid questions. Because we’re black and wealthy, we’re shady?”

“I—this wasn’t about race, Nqobizitha. I just I don’t think I can take this. A gun? No. No. No.” he shakes his head frantically. “I don’t know how to use this. I don’t think I’d be able to use it on someone.”

“I would,” I say firmly, taking the gun back with a sigh. “If that pensioner tries something or even touches a strand of your hair, I’ll blow his brains out.” He holds my gaze for a second and then looks away. I do the same. The silence says something but I don’t want to address it. Reaching inside my pocket, I grab another weapon that Chris could use. “Take this then, less dangerous but still effective.” I grab his hand and do my best to ignore his little breaths. The electricity between us. How he feels too close – and that damn lip bite he does. “Don’t do this,” I reach out and forcefully pull his bottom lip from between his teeth.

He releases a little whimper that goes straight to my dick. I step away and inhale sharply as he exhales loudly. “Thank—you,” he says quietly and wraps his hand around the pepper spray.

I nod my head and then say, “Uthenge amagwinya ngalemali (Buy fatcakes with this money), you’re looking more and more like a needle lately.” I open his hand again and give him the money before turning away to grab my phone and keys. He grips my wrist and gives me a curious glance. “What is it?”

“Since when do amagwinya cost R500, Nqoba?”

I don’t reply and pull out of his touch. He says nothing and follows me outside after I’ve grabbed my keys. Then he’s telling me to open the door because he forgot something inside. I have no choice so I do as he says. A few of my teachers pass me in the hallway and I can see the surprise on their faces and give them polite greetings instead. Chris comes back and he’s...my eyes drag down his frame. “Maybe it’ll be c-cold,” he bites his lip and looks away.

He looks ridiculous. Like he always does in my clothes. My jerseys. It’s my favourite black one. And where it usually clings to my muscled body, Chris looks like a kid wearing his parent’s jersey. It touches his knees and he’s rolled the sleeves up. He’s ridiculous. He’s...breathtaking. I don’t think I can be blamed really as I press him up against the door. He blinks innocently, too innocently. He knows what he’s doing. Opening the door to our room, I push him up against it as soon as we enter. “I, uh...” is the extent of my conversation with him before I’m pinning him to the door to plunder his lips. Those thick rosy lips part immediately, letting me in. Finally. Current rushes through my veins, setting me alight. My hands grope Chris’ ass, prompting him to jump into my arms. Our lips refuse to detach—needy,

deprived. I stumble with him in my arms back to the bed and we fall on it with me pulling back just slightly to look at him panting beneath me. Chris' big brown eyes are blown too wide—sinfully dilated, puffs of delicious air emit his glistening lips. His flushed face. And he's blinking, bringing attention to his long lashes. And his gorgeous dark skin. He's perfect. "You're breathtaking, man." I can't keep the awe out of my voice.

"I...thank you," his voice is a breathless whisper.

I don't stop Chris as he pulls me down for another soul binding kiss. I go to work on his jeans instead, impatiently tugging them off. He's working on my pants too, a frustrated moan slipping past his lips when they don't cooperate. I decide to help him, just as knock sounds at our door. Chris freezes and then looks at me – eyes displaying a ferocious hunger. I decide to fuck it and continue working on my pants as he helps me. My dick is on his and it's the best feeling ever. I groan into his lips and start rutting against him. He wraps his arms around me and meets my fast and hard thrusts. That knock is persistent but not as persistent as us. Faster and faster we move until we're spilling – almost together. Chris hugs me tight and breathes against my ear. I lift my face to give him a possessive kiss.

We pull apart and then clean ourselves silently. There's an awkward tension between us that we both don't address. He's still wearing my jersey as we finally leave again. Miss Magwaza was knocking at our door. They're running late apparently. I let Chris go but not without reminding him to be careful. The pepper spray is in his backpack that he's carrying. I begin the drive to Mbongolwane and arrive home around noon. I leave MaKhathide's gun in the glove compartment because I may still need it.

"Ngyabingelela ekhaya," I greet as soon as I enter the living room where everyone is sitting. I notice the young woman sitting next to Nontethelelo and recognition immediately hits me. "Nomthandazo!" I say, a little surprised, and make my way to her to give her a hug. "How are you?" my arms enwrap around her but she doesn't return my hug.

"Nqobizitha!"

"You stay away from my son, sihlupheki ndini!" I hear MaKhathide's voice from behind me and Nomthandazo jumps immediately – scared. "Mapholoba, what are you doing here? I thought you were with Nhlakanipho? Why don't you go out and spoil yourself with your friends? There's no limit today."

I know what she's trying to do and it won't work with me. "When did Nomthandazo arrive?" I ask my mother.

“This morning,” Ntethe says, chilling with her legs on the coffee table. “Baba fetched her from Eshowe Taxi Rank.”

I nod my head and observe Nomthandazo. She’s become more beautiful, far more beautiful than I remember. She’s gained weight over the years – and looks womanly. The short haircut she has going on really suits her. The longer I look at her, the more I feel uncomfortable...down there. I clear my throat and go to sit beside my father. Nomthandazo grabs a seat next to Ntethe. MaKhathide is still standing, red with anger. I feel sorry for the poor girl with us.

“Cha, usukhulile Nqobizitha. (You’re grown now, Nqobizitha)” she says with a small smile.

MaKhathide surprises all of us by slapping her in the face before I can reply. Nontethelelo responds by getting up and standing in front of her. “Mama, what the fuck—”

“Watch your mouth or you will be next!” MaKhathide screams, looking intimidating. “I want this predator to watch her words around my son. I’ll kill her with my bare hands.”

“Predator? What do you mean predator? She’s done nothing wrong!” Nontethelelo screams, and I am sure I look as confused as she does. What the fuck is MaKhathide on about?

“You know nothing,” my mother says and rubs her temples. “Yazi, Ngcobo this is your fault. How dare you bring this filth into our home! I told you I don’t want this child here. She’s just a curse, like her mother. She’ll die like trash as her mother did!”

“MaKhathide, watch your words.” I don’t know where I get the courage from. I’m in front of her, my hands curled into fists. My heart is clenching and a lancing pain steals my breath away. How dare she disrespect...*her*! She could never love better than that woman. She knows nothing but to scream and shout. She’s useless. “Ngyaxolisa, Mama wami. I didn’t mean to disrespect you. I just mean, we’re not supposed to speak ill of the dead. You taught me that, remember MaKhathide wami. Perhaps it’s time to show us what a good mother you are by adhering to your teachings. Personally, I’m eternally grateful for them and I would be so disappointed if my mother didn’t live up to her lovely teachings.” I give her a smile and hug her close.

She doesn't hug me back for a while but she finally sighs and gives in. "Kulungile. I'm sorry, ndodana. But your father better remove this girl from our home. I have a meeting to attend in Durban. When I come back, I don't want to see her."

She always has business meetings lately and I don't want to be suspicious but MaNtuli's words are coming back to me. She said my mother isn't as innocent as she appears to be. Could MaKhathide be...no. I shake my head. My mother loves my father too much. Well, I'm not sure but she always his back. She didn't build such a successful empire with him just to screw him over by fucking other men. Besides, she's always hustling – if she says she has a business meeting then she has a business meeting.

For most of the day, I keep my sisters and Nomthandazo company. She'll sneak glances at me and then look away. Part of me thinks maybe she's interested in me. And though my dick is onboard with the idea...the rest of me isn't as excited. We talk and watch TV but I keep getting WhatsApp messages from Chris that I respond to. He says Mr. Biyela is sitting next to him at the conference meeting and keeps brushing up against him in a way that makes him uncomfortable. I tell him to squarely tell the bastard to back off. He's scared to. I don't know why. I wish I was with him so I could tell Mr. Biyela myself. But I'll need to come up with another plan to get him to back off completely.

At 02:00pm, I decide to leave so that I can get back to Empangeni and maybe have enough time to wait for Chris in the breakfast room. "Nqobizitha..."

I look over my shoulder and find Nomthandazo. She's followed me to the front door and is walking me out. I lean against my car and give her a small smile. "Nkosazana..."

"Kunjani?"

"Always fine, nkosazana." I fold my arms on my chest. "I'm a laidback dude mina."

She chuckles and shakes her head. "It's hard to believe that this is the same boy who was so scared of the world because it was big and intimidating. Remember you used to call adults giants?"

"Any four year old would," I tell her and rub the back of my neck bashfully.

“Yeah. Sometimes I, uh...” she shakes her head and looks over her shoulder to the house before looking back at me. “I mostly came here for you, bhutiza. You see I’ve been seeing a therapist and there’s some shit I’m dealing with that I can’t forgive myself for because I need forgiveness from you.”

“Ukhuluma ngani?” I ask her.

“I’m talking about...when we were young.” She bites her lip. “That one time when my mother—no. That evil witch is not my mother...”

“Nomthandazo!” I snap. “You as well? Your mother was amazing. How can you disrespect—”

“She turned me into a monster!” Nomthandazo cuts in and there are tears in her eyes that make me feel awkward. I want to leave. I have no idea how to handle her. “Look. We really need to talk, bhutiza. That woman nearly destroyed us. I’m not sure how we can because your mother doesn’t want me around you. She—”

My phone rings and it's Chris. I answer. “Bambi?”

“I made an—excuse to go to the bathroom, Nq-Nqobizitha. All the chairs are taken and...someone’s just entered the bathroom,” he whispers. His panic is palpable.

I give Nomthandazo a little nod and then get in the car. “Stay there. Don’t you dare leave that stall...unless he tries something. Do you have your pepper spray on you?”

“N-No.”

“Shit, Chris!” I shout. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Don’t s-shout at me, Nqobizitha...” his voice is still so quiet, cracking. “I’ll hang up and I...please don’t shout at me.”

“I’m sorry. It will take me a while to get where you’re at, sthandwa sami.” The term of endearment falls off my lips before I can stop it. “Is he still there?”

“The door just opened and closed. Maybe it was one of the other teachers but I still don’t want to go back there. I...want you.”

There’s a moment’s silence from me before I’m replying. “Are you sure? I’m not Hugo.”

I can hear his breathing change, can practically feel his anger through the phone. “You know what, fuck you!” he’s cussing me out, trashing me like the last time. I’m tempted to hang up because some of his words are getting to me but I don’t want to because he needs to keep calm while I drive like a lunatic to reach that damn hall that they’re having the conference at. It takes me close to three hours but I get there. He ran out of airtime thirty minutes into his trash talking and I had to buy him some minutes so that he could trash talk me for longer. The meeting has ended. I meet Mr. Nsibande at the entrance. He glares and tells me I should be home studying. I give him a mischievous grin as I tell him that his wife was just helping me. His eyes widen in anger...even though Miss Magwaza was with him all along.

I make my way into the large hall where Chris has seemingly escaped to. He’s with Miss Mzimela. I greet them both and then politely drag Chris away. He’s not talking to me. He’s angry about the whole Hugo situation. I don’t even have time for this. My thoughts are on Nomthandazo. We get to the BnB and he’s still angry. I reach for his arm and he pushes me away. I reach for it again and wrap an arm firmly around him. “Kwenzenjani?”

“Let me go.”

“You know, I don’t get why you’re angry. I’m not the one who uses your mistakes against you any chance I can get whenever we’re fighting.”

“And I don’t go around risking my lover’s health and keep important information from them. You are such an asshole. And then you have the audacity to blame me for saying I should’ve gone with—”

I don’t give him the chance to finish what he was going to say. My lips are on his – wild and harsh. He returns my kiss just as fervently. We’re stumbling and crashing on every surface. Our clothes are falling even quicker. Chris is on his hands and knees. I don’t want to look at him. He doesn’t want to look at me. There’s no love here. Just us feeding off our anger. He screams as I slam inside him. The sound is music

to my ears. I have to take a minute and close my eyes, a deep sound coming from inside my throat because he feels out of this world. Chris' hole grips me so snugly, his heat unreal. I drive more and more of my cock into his body, stretching and filling him. Chris is gasping and trembling under me, sounding so indecent. As I start my gentle pounding, I have to pray for control because dear god all I want is to do is ram into his tight heat without restriction. But I don't want to hurt him, so I keep it slow, easily finding that spot that will drive him delirious with pleasure. With every poke and prod to that spot, he mewls deliciously, incoherent words falling off his lips. Confident that Chris has gotten used to the feeling of having my dick inside him, I pick up my pace with each moan and groan. Chris is slapping his ass on my dick, gyrating and bouncing his enticing ass so deliciously, I start smacking the round mounds while bludgeoning into him roughly.

I fuck him hard, showing no mercy, plunging deeper, unforgiving and belligerent. Our anger is palpable, it feeds off of both us, breaking and fixing us at the same time. Chris tries to grip the edge of the headboard, as I drive into his wet heat, looking at my dick slide in and out of him – at his ass cheeks. One of my hands squeezing the soft meat in a death grip, marks imprinting into the dark skin. A deep groan is emanating from deep inside my chest. Chris is still the best thing I've ever tasted. "Is this what you wanted, Chris? You wanted me to fuck you. Tell me, is this what you wanted?"

I watch him crane his head to the side. He has tears in his eyes and glares. "Fuck you!" he grits out and he's pushing back on me, throwing his ass back.

"Like this?" I draw my hips back and then piston back roughly as he flies face first to the headboard and squirms before his whole body locks up. His first orgasm. He moans my name. I fuck him through it, keeping my vicious pace and drag him up. My arm wraps around his throat. "Does Hugo make you feel like this?" I mean to taunt him but it comes out insecure and quiet. "Answer me."

"N-No," Chris chokes out and then he's crying, really crying, and struggling against me. I panic and dislodge my dick out of him.

"Chris..." I whisper.

"Don't call me that!" he's pushing me away. He's crawling to the very top of the bed and folds his legs to his chest, his arms around himself, shielding himself from me. I raise my hands in surrender. I'm gonna be honest, I have no idea what I've done wrong. "Is this a game to you?"

"I...no. I don't know what you're talking about."

“All you have to do is apologize and I...maybe I would t-take you back. Because I love you a little more than I should but you’re still so stuck up on Hugo like he wronged you. Me. This isn’t about him. This is about us. And how you endangered me. How you cheated even though you claimed to love me.”

“I do love you,” the words rush to my mouth. “MaNtuli...I don’t know how to explain it to you in a way that will make you understand. I don’t understand myself, Bambi. I didn’t mean to cheat on you. It didn’t feel good. I told that woman to stop but she wasn’t hearing me.”

“Typical,” Chris rolls his eyes. He’s lifting off the bed and limping to the wardrobe. “I—maybe, I just need some air. You’re overwhelming me and I—maybe this was a mistake.”

“I...” the rest of my words are stolen. What the fuck is the point anyway? He doesn’t believe me. I verbally told that woman to stop. My dick wanted her but I didn’t. “Suit yourself, man.”

He closes the wardrobe with a loud bang and then shifts his attention to me. His eyes are wide and his face is pinched tightly. He looks hurt. He should join the club. When he walks out, I don’t try to stop him.

Bonus Insert

Nhlakanipho

“Morning, bhuti.”

“Yah, Sqalokuhle.” I give my little brother a small smile. He makes me want to laugh with the way he’s always shaking in his tiny boots around me. It should be like that – to maintain that level of respect. Mnelisi is so different from him, he thinks he’s clever now because he’s thirteen years old. The belt and the way he always runs away from home – with his tail in between his long legs – proves otherwise. “Kwenze njani?”

“G-Gogo,” he stammers and runs away. This time I do laugh and shake my head as I finish getting ready. I wonder if Gogo wants me to bring her some things from Eshowe. Siyabonga and I are going there today. It’s time to begin the apparently dreary task of applying to universities. We’re going to do it online because Siya is intent on going to Johannesburg but we still need to make payments for applications to the universities. I was able to save enough money to apply but I’ll still need to save a bit more for the National Benchmark Tests. I’m just a R100 short and I promised to herd Malume’s livestock tomorrow – maybe I’ll be paid a little more this time.

“Salukazi sami,” I greet as I enter the main house. Gogo is sitting on icansi with Kuhlekimi in her arms and Kuhlekonke sitting right next to her with a fascinated expression on her little face. Sometimes, I want to find Nonkazimulo and bash her empty head against the wall for adding onto our list of problems. Kuhlekonke is only three years old and now she has another sibling. Her foolish mother doesn’t even send uGogo grant money nor does she ever wonder about what her kids are eating or wearing. People always go on and on about children being blessings but I don’t see it that way – not for moneyless folk like my family. But they’re here and I love all love all of them fiercely and protect them with my life. I chuckle and carry Kuhlekonke as she jumps in my arms. My lips tickle her little cheek and the little one squirms, attempting to get away. Keeping her in place firmly, I turn my to my lovely grandmother. “What do you need?”

“You’re going to Eshowe with Shandu’s boy, angithi?”

I nod my head and pat my jean pockets to check that I still have the money I need. “Yebo, Gogo. Why, do you need me to bring you anything?”

“Not really, but maybe I can give you some little money to buy sweets for your siblings. Fetch my purse in my room, my child.”

I obey and enter her room. It's always clean and I go to check for her purse under the bed. It's tattered now but she loves it because I bought it for her with my first ever salary...if I can call it that. I'd made R50 for tending to Malume's cows and the purse cost R20. The remaining balance I'd used to buy my siblings some sweets and then used it again on Siya. He appreciates all those Cadbury sweets and Chappies bubblegum I get him. “Thatha, Gogo.” I give her the purse and watch as she retrieves some money from it.

“I hope this will be enough,” she gives me some money.

It's R300. What sweets cost R300? “Do you need something else, Gogo?” I ask, confused. “Is there anything short around the house? I wasn't aware that—”

“You'll get old very quickly,” she cuts in softly and laughs as she adjusts the baby in her arms. “Always stressing about one thing or the other. Hhayi, mfana wami.” She gives me a reprimanding look that makes me feel like a child. “I want you to act your age. Have fun sometimes. Anyway, that money is meant for your education. I don't know how these university things of yours work but I am sure it needs money. Use it for that today.”

“Gogo...” I struggle to find the words. I can't take this money.

“If it is not enough—”

“Cha, salukazi sami.” I shake my head and crouch in front of her again. “I cannot take this money. Maybe we can use it around the house. The girls, maybe they need deodorant...or those silly things they use on their faces. Or...Kuhlekimi – does she have enough milk? What about—”

Gogo cuts me short by laughing and I am not sure what's funny. There's always something we're short of around the house. “I talked about this not even a minute ago and you're doing it again. Take that money, Nhlakanipho. Use it for your education. Maybe it's not enough, tell me so that I can—”

“Kodwa Gogo...I don't need this money. I have some money with me...to apply. You don't need to stress yourself. Tell me what we can buy around the house.”

“How much do you have?”

“What?” I shake my head.

“You said you have money so how much?”

“R100.” I don't know why she's asking.

“R100? Will it be enough?”

I nod my head. I'm not sure. Siya wants us to apply at Wits. I checked online and found out that it only costs R100 to apply. I don't think we need to apply to other places. My Grade 11 results are excellent – thanks to Siyabonga's words of encouragement. I am sure that we will both be accepted into the university. “Iyenela, Gogo. (It is enough)”

“Then use the money to spoil yourself with Siyabonga. He must get tired of being trapped in Mbongolwane all the time. Have some fun with him, show him you love him.”

I rub the back of my head and nod before I can help myself. Gogo says her words lightly – with no ill intentions meant – but for me, they cut deep. If there's one thing I hate about being poor it's being unable to provide for my family. But then there's also Siyabonga and sometimes I think he gets tired. I can't even spend on him at Mchunu's. Buying there, even something as simple as fried chips, is a luxury for someone like me. I saw how excited Siyabonga was when we went to the mall all those days ago, the happiness on his face...and even then I didn't even have any money to spend. It was all his. Its embarrassing and tiring and depressing. I'm sure Siya gets tired.

My eyes open – and I'm not sure when I closed them – and find Gogo. My smile is a little strained. “Thank you so much for this, salukazi sami.”

She hands me another note. R50. “Use this to bring your siblings some sweets.”

Reluctantly, I grab the cash from her and kiss her cheek before making my way out. “Stop hitting your sister with mud,” I warn Noxolo who is playing with Mbalenhle. “Where is Nomzamo?”

“Fetching bhuti Siya,” the kids say at the same time.

“Why didn’t she ask me if he needed to be met halfway?” I raise my eyebrow and they both shrug before running away to play inside the kraal. I shake my head and pause my walking as the sound of a car in the near distance captures my ears. A smile forms on my lips of its own accord. I put my hands in my pockets and lean against the main house’s walls as I wait for Siya to drive in. He’s such a slow driver, so very bad at it. My feet walk faster than he drives. “Wena...” I say to Nomzamo who gets out of the car with Siyabonga. It’s a 2010 Mazda 3 that his father bought as replacement for a Toyota that should’ve remained in the 80s.

“Ngyaxolisa bhuti. I didn’t know that he was driving,” Nomzamo points to Siyabonga as if it’s his fault that she went out seeking him.

“It is my fault,” Siyabonga can read my mind sometimes. He’s smiling, his hazel eyes sparkling under the scorching sun. I want to have my way with him. He’s too tempting. “Do you want to...go to your room?”

I nod absently and move towards my house. Siyabonga follows behind me silently. I have him pinned against the door as soon we’re both inside. “Phakade lami,” I watch his eyes light up. He grabs the back of my neck and brings me close so that our lips are reuniting. I plunder his mouth. I’ve missed him – sixteen hours away from him is too long. I devour every moan, groan and whimper. My hands are on his ass – squeezing. Siya works hard to maintain his lovely frame. He works even harder on his ass. I appreciate it. I’m an unapologetic ass man and he knows it. “Gorgeous as ever,” I say calmly as he breathes like he has been running a mile a minute.

“How do you always do this?” his voice is shaking, eyes glossy. “I’m trembling hard because of you and you’re here so...calm. Like I don’t drive you insane enough.”

If he only knew...

“I don’t know, Phakade lami.” I say and then press another kiss to his lips – softer. “This is me. I am always like this.” He once accused me of being a standoffish bastard, long ago when we were just boys,

but the truth is I am just like this. I don't like people. I don't like conversations – especially ones that waste my time. I prefer to keep to myself. I like my circle small. I don't have any friends outside of Nqobizitha – and maybe Siyabonga...but he's more than a friend. People think they can say anything to you once they get used to you, they start to get comfortable and take advantage of you. I stay away from people to avoid fights. I'm not really a talker. "And you affect me more than you know."

"I know," he sighs and gives me a childish grin. "But you should pretend to be breathless sometimes. I can't afford to be the only one who looks unfit just from a kiss alone. For me, baby."

I pretend to dry heave for a second but it feels stupid so I stop. But Siya's beautiful laughs are worth all the stupidity in the world. My arms wrap firmly around his ass and he grips my shoulders. "Was that good enough for you?" I ask him.

"Perfect..." a teasing smile forms on his lips. His eyes are soft, they call out for my soul. "Phakade lami."

I lean down to kiss him and then bite his bottom lip gently. "Copy cat." He laughs softly and nods. I grab my bag as he unlocks the door. "And this?" I ask him as he gives me the keys to his father's car.

"Baba told me to give the keys to you and let you drive," he pouts and blinks his eyes at me. "I'm a really bad driver and he trusts you more with his car than he does me."

"Kodwa, Shandu." I chuckle and pull out of my family's joke of a driveway. "Do you blame him?"

"Careful, I just might not spend the night if you continue like this," he says and then starts playing music. Maskandi. Our favourite. I don't understand how anyone can be umZulu and not enjoy maskandi music. This is our heritage. It's part of who we are. "Chris' song," Siya grabs my attention.

"He listens to maskandi?" it's hard to imagine him listening to Mjikjelwa. I am laughing.

"He only loves it because that douchebag—"

"Siyabonga," I warn, peering over at him with an unimpressed frown. "Yeka lomsangano wakho (Stop this rubbish). You're not badmouthing my best friend in this car with me. Stop it."

He looks ready to argue and does this frustrated shoulder thing with his shoulders before turning his attention away from me. He's angry. "Chris is my best friend too, you know?"

I didn't. His sassiness comes out a lot around that boy. Sometimes, I think Chris brings out Siya's suppressed flamboyancy. It's hard being gay in a place like this. There are mistakes you can't afford to make. Mistakes that Chris does on the daily. He stays true to himself like no one I've met. It's admirable and stupid at the same time. "Let's not...we're not going to argue because of other people, Phakade lami. You and I have nothing to do with Nqobizitha and Chris' relationship. Keep out of it."

"You said you were going to talk to Nqoba. He's hurting Chris and I am mad at him."

Okay. So we're having one of those rare days where he purposely defies me. I sigh and park the car before giving him a discreet kiss on the forehead. He melts, if his bright beam gives any indication. "He's at Empangeni, Phakade lami. With this Chris you're claiming he's hurting. I'll have to wait until he comes back." I say. We're supposed to talk, Nqoba and I. He's acting strange lately, doesn't look like he's sleeping well. I think his demons are catching up with him. Anyone can see it in his eyes and how he wears this lost look. I've been trying to talk to him but he's evasive. He's like me in some ways – too scared to show any vulnerability. What makes him different from me is that he has self-destructive tendencies. Alcohol. Sex. Women. Too damn stubborn for his own good. I wonder if he even took my advice when I told him that Chris could hold his hand. I don't think he did. He fucked another woman while in a relationship with Chris. I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt but he admitted it to me.

"Look," I am brought out of my thoughts by Siyabonga pulling on my arm gently. "That's Nqobizitha's mom." He says like I don't know who MaKhathide is. She's walking with a boy around our age. Maybe a little older. Her eyes widen as she spots us. I eye her blankly but Siyabonga is raising his eyebrows – and I can see the theories forming in his beautiful brain. "Hey Ma!" he greets as MaKhathide nears us. The boy greets as well. He's pushing a trolley filled with groceries...maybe he is assisting her with grocery shopping.

"Boys!" MaKhathide gives us a warm smile but her eyes remain stone-cold. Even her aura. "Nhlakanipho, I thought my son was with you."

It's Sunday. Nqobizitha is still with Chris in Empangeni. They're driving back later today. "I am here to pay for application fees to universities, Mama. He stayed at home to help uGogo with the kids," I lie easily. MaKhathide trusts me...maybe more than her son.

“Oh, applications are open already?” her surprise is evident. “Nqobizitha didn’t tell me. You know that boy isn’t serious about school. Not as serious as you. I’m going to have a long talk with him as soon as he comes back home. I know for a fact that he hasn’t applied to any institutions.” She shakes her head and then fumbles with her fancy bag. Siya once told me she carries Gucci bags. “Here. Buy yourself something nice. You’re good for my son.”

I am reluctant and look at her curiously. Siya grabs the money. “Thank you, Ma!”

Makhathide’s stone face finds him and she smiles. It’s fake and a little dangerous. I smile politely and exchange fake pleasantries with her before walking on with Siyabonga. “Ave uphapha kodwa, Siyabonga.”

“She gave us a thousand bucks!” Siya skips happily. “We can do so much with this.”

“You know how I feel about taking people’s money.”

“Oh come on, Nhlakanipho. It’s just simple money – to spoil ourselves. Don’t you get tired—”

“Siyabonga,” I narrow my eyes, thinking back to Gogo’s words. “Use that money for yourself. I don’t want it.”

Siya’s eyes widen. He bites his bottom lip and says nothing. He’s angry again, I don’t like it when he’s angry. I want to grab his hand but it’s not safe around here. We make our payments and are done in less than thirty minutes. I wrap my arm around him and then drag him to a Debonair’s. He loves pizza. I don’t see the use for it. I’d rather eat KFC. I buy him one of the more expensive ones just to make it up to him. We sit down and I can notice his curiosity as he eats. “Gogo gave me the money to spoil you,” I say.

“What about your siblings? Maybe you could’ve—”

“We’ll go to Cambridge after this,” I say with a small smile. It assures me how he always thinks about my family. He doesn’t just love me. He loves my siblings as well. My family. He’s everything and more. “So shut up and let this poor kid treat you for once. Like you said, it gets tiring...” I trail off and give him a blank stare.

“Maybe it does,” his eyes are glossy and I hope he’s not going to cry in this very public place. “But I love you and I don’t grow tired of loving you. One day, we’ll look back and wonder if this ever happened. We’ll tell our children all about it. How we loved beyond our financial status.”

“You always know what to say,” I give him a small smile. As soon as he’s done eating, we drive to Cambridge. I get the sweets and a birthday cake. It’s no one’s birthday but the kids love cake and there was leftover change from that R300. Siyabonga defies me again and uses Makhathide’s money to buy groceries for my family. I tell him I’m not going to accept any of it. He gives me a look that tells me he knows he’s won already. He knows I can’t deny him a lot of things. We drive back to Mbongolwane. And we’re going to his house first to finalize our applications. We find Bab’ Shandu inside the shebeen. He’s storing the beer inside the fridge.

“WeMzimela, come here and help me.”

Siya observes me and I shrug as I go to join his father. “Kunjani, Baba?”

“My son was limping again when he sneaked inside the house in the early hours of this morning.” He eyes me from head to toe. I keep my calm and return his stare. “Now, I don’t know how gay sex works but—”

“Trust me, you don’t want to know, Baba.” I say respectfully, hoping he’ll drop it. Siya and I didn’t do anything outside of normal sex last night. The limp will come regardless...if you know what you’re doing. “Just know that it’s always consensual.” I would never do anything that Siyabonga doesn’t want me to. I think he’s the kinkiest out of both of us. He suggests the bondage but I love the belt. Sex is a way of connecting for us, we use it to discover parts of each other that we haven’t yet been introduced to. I think that’s very important. People make sex this taboo topic and then die on the inside because they cannot connect with their partners in a way that is fulfilling – emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually. I connect with Siyabonga. When he’s tied up, I connect with him. When the belt is around his throat, I connect with him. When I am going slow, I connect with him. We fulfill each other in ways that are incomparable.

“Whatever you say. Just...go easy on my son,” Bab’ Shandu brings me back to the present. “And take care of him. I love the way he’s happy with you. I hope it’ll never change.”

I bow my head this time and nod reverently. “Nakanjani, Baba. I’ll always take care of your son. I love him more than life itself. I am committed to being the best partner for him.”

Bab' Shandu pats my shoulder. "Good. You can leave, I'm sure he's driving himself insane in his room."

I laugh and turn to him as I am leaving. "Is it possible to confess now, Baba? He keeps telling me that he suspects that you know something."

"Hell no!" Bab' Shandu chuckles loudly. He's clearly enjoying this. "Let him suspect until he gives in and comes to me. Besides, I enjoy teasing him about his throat and back problems. His mother and I have a good laugh every night. Just don't have sex in my house, I'll have to kill you with my bare hands."

"Of course not," I say and raise my hands in surrender. I came to Bab' Shandu to confess about my relationship with his son nearly a year ago. It was pointless not to after his wife had confronted me. I keep trying to subtly hint to Siyabonga that his parents know but he's only intelligent at school and when it comes to minding the affairs of other people. "Phakade lami," I go to perch myself on his bed and then bring him onto my lap. He has his laptop and was typing away.

"Baby," he kisses my cheek and then gives me an inquisitive look. "What did Baba say?"

"The usual threats." I say blankly. "You have back problems apparently."

"The new cream is working better this time," he says softly, referring to the cream I used for his entrance earlier this morning before he left. "I think we should buy that one from now on."

I nod and kiss the back of his neck.

"I've already applied at Wits for us." He points to the laptop screen. "Bachelor of Economic Science and BCom (LAW) for you. Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery and a Bachelor of Pharmacy for me. And here..." he bites his lip and looks away. He's done something I won't like. I can tell.

"Tell me," I say, gripping his face and forcing the eye contact.

"UJ was free to apply at. When you're doing it online. Don't be mad," he whispers and then types on his laptop again before showing me the screen. "I applied to the University of Pretoria as well."

“Was it free as well?”

He shakes his head too quickly. “R300 per application. But I...please understand, baby. Just in case we don’t—”

“Our results are excellent,” I tell him calmly, not as angry as I am supposed to be.

“Yeah...but we have to apply everywhere. I want us to have backup. I really want us out of here.”

I smile but it’s not the truthful one he deserves. I worry about my family. Johannesburg is so far and who is going to watch after uGogo and my siblings? What if people take advantage of her? The truth is I’m only going to Johannesburg because Siyabonga wants it so badly. I’d rather I went to look for a job immediately after matric. Even at PicknPay or Boxer but uGogo is just like Siyabonga and seems to think education is really important. I live to make her happy and proud. I’m the first one in my family who will obtain a matric certificate. I’m the first one to even reach matric. I need to continue setting an example for my siblings. But I am still anxious about leaving my family. My life. Sometimes, I am not eager about leaving this place – as hellish as it is.

Siyabonga’s little optimistic beam forces a little smile from my own lips. “You’re really in this for the long haul, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” his eyes are a little shifty. I’m guessing he’s guilty about this University of Pretoria thing. “Aren’t you?”

“I am in it for infinity, Phakade lami.” I assure him, allowing him to turn in my arms. He presses a kiss to my lips and relief sweeps over his soft features.

“You’re not mad?”

“That you went behind my back, yes.” I pinch his ass and grip it firmly. “But what’s done is done – and I am...I am grateful that you did this for me.”

“I love you,” he says as if I should know why he did it. “I love you with everything in me. This is nothing.”

“It’s a lot to me,” I hug him tightly and feel the good feelings envelope us. He makes me believe in me and I love who I am with him. “Ngyakuthanda, Shandu.”

“I love you too, baby. My Batman,” he’s chuckling. I laugh too and shake my head. He makes me feel like a superhero. A good person. “Do you...want to make love to me?”

I shift us so that he’s under me and enjoy his little gasp. His long legs fold around my waist and he arches into me. I lean down to kiss his lips. My forehead is touching his and we’re...connecting. Our souls are conversing and enjoying the quality time. His hand lifts up to stroke my cheek gently. The way this boy looks at me will never not steal my breath away. “Your father will kill me,” I breathe into his parted lips.

“And I will follow you to the afterlife.” He says. Despite his childish grin, I can’t help feeling like he’s serious.

“Uyathandwa, Shandu.” My lips are on his softly.

“Uyathandwa, munt’ wami.” He returns and then guides my hand to the front of his jeans. I don’t argue with him – and begin to undress him. I’m going to worship him like the ethereal god he is.

I lick my lips, looking at Siya’s tawny, cum-spattered chest as it heaves with the aftershock of his fourth orgasm. His ass is clenching down too tightly around my cock. I remove the blindfold from around his eyes and decide to give him a couple of seconds, my hard cock patiently waiting for him to ride out his orgasm. “Easy, easy...phefumula, Shandu.” I breathe against his forehead, and rub his wrists as they struggle weakly against the restraints. I untie the rope and kiss down the intricate marks left behind. His heartbeat is too loud, my favourite sound in the world. He mumbles something, too soft for me to hear. “What was that?”

“I—” His hazel eyes flutter open to meet mine, they’re hazy and red. I run my hand down his inflamed chest, satisfaction curling around my heart as he moans and arches into me. “I-I can’t r-really think with you, mmm – baby, it’s too much...” I laugh, probably not the best time to do so. My cock brushes against his prostate and he yelps. He reaches one hand out, gently pushing at my chest. I lean down to kiss his

swollen lips and rub on his wet, warm slit. “M-Mzimela,” his body shakes uncontrollably. “I don’t think I can t-take anymore.”

“Yes you can, Phakade lami. Remember you wanted this? You’re going to do it for me, you’re going to take it again. I was just giving you a little breather,” I murmur as my painful dick drives ever so slowly into him. He’s trembling and biting his lower lip. “We’re not done. I know your body, I’ll tell you when we’re done,” I lean down to kiss him and rub on his glistening dick, feeling him throb weakly.

He humps into me and wrenches his lips from mine to throw his head back. “Fuck...fuck...fuck. S-so good.” He moans and my hips piston faster. His fingers rush to his lips as he wets them to perfection and then he’s pulling at his nipples, biting his lower lip and rubbing on them, and coating them with the cum on his chest to suck on them again.

“Kahle, Shandu. I don’t want to completely cripple you. Keep doing that and you will require a wheelchair after this.” I make my point known by slamming into his ass again, feeling the juices of my previous orgasm drizzle out. He screams and shouts my name. He licks the cum on his chest again and...it’s not my fault that I lose it. My dick slams inside him as I begin to thrust hard and fast, pinning him to the bed by his waist while stimulating his mushroomed head that’s now spilling weakly at the same time. He shudders and grips hold of my hand as it wraps around his throat. Liquid forms in his hazel eyes, his lips thick and swollen from all the biting he has been doing, face wet with sweat and tears, with his cum-coated chest heaving up and down. He’s a mess, a beautiful one.

“P-please,” he forces the word out, tapping on my arm and my grip loosens. My arms reach under his back to pull him on top of me so that he’s sitting on my lap. I hug him tight and piston into him hard. He’s bouncing up and down on my dick, moaning and groaning. One of my hands go to his thick ass to spank on. The sound echoes in the room as my dick jerks inside him, aroused by the jiggling sensation. I spank him again, and again, and again. “Its all yours, b-baby. Yours to tear apart, just like this. No one can make y-you feel like this, just me. Feel it,” he guides both my hands to his ass and I squeeze tightly.

His moan touches my temple, it’s warm in my ear, but there’s a sweetness to it. The scent wafts my nostrils—making my mouth water. “Kodwa, Shandu.” I groan as all of him tightens around me.

“What?” it’s hoarse, whispered seductively. “A-Am I too much for you, b-baby?” He feels on my chest and blinks at me. “What am I doing? I-I can feel it, h-how hard your dick is. Can feel it pulsing so deep inside me. I love it, Nhlakanipho. I love all of it – you – deep inside me, thick, pulsing—hungry for me. And how you just devour me—my body loves it too. Feel it, baby—feel how my body yearns for you. Only you. And how it just...” he trails off, allowing his body to do all the talking.

An agitated groan leaves me, my head falling back as the entirety of Siya clenches around me. *So fucking tight.* I open my eyes, looking at his sweat-caked face. Those brown eyes have a glossiness in them. So beautiful. Going to grip the back of his neck, I bring him in for a kiss—soft, reverential and gentle. And then I flip us, having Siya on his back. “You’re right, Siyabonga. You feel out of this world and all I want is to consume you. All I want is to fuck you—” I roughen his prostate, smirking as he screams—thrashing beneath me as if wanting to escape but pulling me in closer. “Senseless. It’s what you want too, isn’t?”

Siyabonga nods frantically, his hoarse moans are loud in the room. They’re music to my ears. My eyes narrow in on his ass, how greasy his ass-cheeks are with my milky liquid seeping out of him. My eyes turn to slits as I focus on nothing but the pleasure. *In, out. Harder and deeper.* Siya has a death grip on the sheets, with his dick smacking roughly against his thighs, the sound almost causes me to shoot my load. Not yet. I drag him up and wrap my arm around him to keep him in place as I fuck into his warmth with vigour. “Shit, shit, shit. I-I can’t breathe, b-baby.”

I bite on his earlobe and chuckle. “I know,” my dick nails for his prostate – over and over again. His warm walls choke my dick as I grip him tightly and thrust deeper and deeper, digging into his insides.

“Shiiiiit! K-Khawula, Mzimela. Kancane, ngyakucela.”

“No!” I growl, watching with pride as he begins creaming on my dick. “I’m not going to slow down, take it for me, Phakade lami. You’re so beautiful,” I murmur, not stopping my brutal thrusts for even a second.

He cranes his head to meet my eyes. “I-I need to cum.” He sobs, probably from the feeling of his oversensitive hole being slammed into by my still hard cock.

“Do it for me, Phakade lami. Show me why we feel so right, you and I.” I snap my hips back in, going at an aggressive rate, pleased to hear Siya’s little sweet moans filling up the entire room. He falls to the wet bed and breathes hard as soon as his orgasm wears him out. I press him down and pump faster, kissing down his back while doing that, my orgasm comes at me viciously. A deep moan rumbles from inside my chest, my cock jerking inside him and my orgasm rushing out to hide in the walls clenching tightly around me. “Fuck!” I grunt out, taking a second, before dislodging my dick out of him.

Siya whimpers and buries his face inside the pillows. My eyes zone in on his wrecked asshole, it is bubbling, the cum that I have stuffed inside him for extended hours rushing out. “Phakade lami?” I call

out, not really surprised that he's passed out. One of his fingers twitches weakly, one of the few indicators that he's still alive. I press a kiss to his back, and his body jerks off, a soft moan tugged out of his lips. It's an aftershock. "Sleep. Let me take care of you."

"I love you," he sounds like Chris when he's had too many beers.

"Phakade lami," I kiss his back again before leaving the bed to properly take care of him.

Mutual Desires : Twenty

Christophe

“Mfana wami, is everything okay?”

My face moves from hiding in between my legs at the sound of that sickening voice. The creepy pervert is standing in front me, staring at me, making my skin crawl. I suddenly wish I hadn't escaped to this place. I should've left the BnB all together but I didn't want to get lost, I don't know Empangeni. So I ran to the courtyard to enjoy the garden, to think. I cringe as Mr. Biyela invites himself beside me, his thigh touching mine. Why isn't he with his wife? I don't even know what the time is. I left my phone back in that stupidly elegant room. “You should be with your wife, Baba.” My voice is quiet.

“I was,” he's silent for a while, “but she claimed to see you looking upset in the hallway and insisted I come to check up on you.”

I can't be sure if he's lying. I did pass a few people in the hallway but my eyes were wet and I couldn't really see clearly. Maybe I passed his wife, I don't remember her that well. “Well, I'm fine,” I say and sneak a glance at him. He's looking back, unashamed, and it makes me uncomfortable but I don't make a move to shift, to go back to my room. Nqoba's room. He confuses me. He says he loves me – I feel it in his actions. The good ones. But then there's the other things. Things that he should've told me. And lately, he can barely say one word to me without snapping. He's angry at me – and I still have no idea what I've done wrong.

I blink my eyes as I feel a hand squeeze my left foot. My eyes find Mr. Biyela, he has this small smile on his face that I don't want to see. “It doesn't look that way, mfana wami. You've been this way since yesterday. You're not crying now but I can tell that you're not okay. Talk to me.”

“My boyfriend broke up with me,” the words rush to my mouth. I slap my hand over my mouth in shock. Hell no. I don't speak with this man for a reason. He makes me uncomfortable – and yesterday, who knows what he would've done? “And he's m-mad at me. But I'm not the one who screwed things up,” the words spill again. For the first time in a long ass time, I feel so fucking lonely – the feeling crawls to my throat and escapes my mouth in a bitter laugh. “I still love him though, Baba. I'm still so drawn to him and he supports me. He takes care of me. But he's also a jerk that toyed with me.”

“Relationships are hard, mfana wami.”

I laugh humourlessly and shift my attention to him. “Aren’t you supposed to be homophobic or something?” This is a dumb question, especially with the way this man behaves around me.

“You’re very lucky, you youngins. To live in a time that is more tolerant, to be so persistent about wanting to remain true to yourselves. Your generation is so insistent, more forceful than any generation that ever came before you. You’re lucky.”

“We also couldn’t keep a relationship for longer than three months if you paid us to,” I say, my gaze upturning to the darkened skies. They’re starless tonight and infinitely dark – like how I feel. “Relationships do not work nowadays, Baba. Not for kids like myself. We’re scared of being vulnerable, of investing so much of yourself into something just to be played for a fool in the end. This is why my sister told me to not give too much of myself in this relationship...but it was too late. I love him, Baba. More than anyone I’ve ever loved before.”

“This boy is very lucky then. To be loved by such a lovely young man like yourself, I know I wouldn’t mess it up.” Mr. Biyela is regarding me with a familiar flame in his eyes. There’s a question in his eyes. One that I can’t quite read, and so I shift my eyes away from him. My entire body literally freezes and the whole world falls away as I settle on a familiar face. Leaving just me and the boy whose eyes burn with anger—even with the distance between us, I can see it, I can feel it. The look on Nqobizitha’s face causes my heart to tremble in fear for some reason. My heart is beating so hard it feels like it might explode any minute. My hands shake, and I want to look away. I don’t like the look on Nqoba’s face, and I really want to turn away. But I can’t, not when Nqoba trails his powerful strides towards us. I stand on my feet, not sure what I am expecting him to say or do but the last thing I expect from him is to grab Mr. Biyela by his jacket. I’m not expecting him to punch the elderly man. I am pushed away, two bodies land with a deafening thud to the ground. A pained groan, the sickening sound of something cracking. I blink my eyes as my heart leaps to my throat. I’m going to throw up.

Nqoba has Mr. Biyela pinned beneath him, brown eyes burning with a fury like nothing I’ve ever seen before. He’s landing sickening blows to the elderly man. Destructive punch after destructive punch. I look at the blood in horror. “Stop! Nqobizitha, stop it!” I bolt forward, adrenaline coursing through me, leaving me no room to register the agony stabbing in my own body – from that nasty fall. “Nqoba—Nqobizitha, look at me.” My voice trembles, I try to grip his arm. It’s hard as rock. “Please, Nqobizitha ...” my words are accompanied by my hand running down his arm. “Tarzan wami...” I whisper in panic.

He shifts his cold glare to me and I can feel every particle within me turn ice-cold. “He had his arm around you.” He looks even bigger, more intimidating and his aura – it’s dangerously dark. “Now, my

question is if he makes you so uncomfortable, why were you sitting here with him? Allowing him to touch you. Or maybe you want me to lose my control. Do you want me to do this?" he emphasizes his question by landing another punch on the groaning man beneath him.

"N-No!" I gasp, shocked that he'd even think that. I hadn't noticed Mr. Biyela's arm was around me. I hadn't. I wouldn't have allowed it otherwise. "W-We were just talking, Nqobizitha. I – please let him go. I don't want you to be in trouble. Anyone could come here and what if they call the police?"

He chuckles darkly and shakes his head. His eyes are droopy – hinting at his insomnia – and they're lifeless, revealing a bottomless pit. I've never seen him like this before, this volatile. I want to grab his arm and drag him away but I am scared as well. He can easily crush me with just his pinky finger. He's on his feet suddenly, and then he's walking away. I don't need to be a genius to know that I have to follow after him. I struggle to my feet and leave Mr. Biyela groaning on the ground as I rush after Nqoba.

"Your husband was playing superhero back in the courtyard. Those boys got him good...I think he wanted to impress one of them. Phuthuma, Mah wami uyolekelela (Hurry, go and help)." I hear him tell Mr. Biyela's wife in the hallway. She was speaking to Miss Magwaza. He walks on before they can probe him. I make an effort to not look at them as I pass them as well and enter our room after Nqoba. He immediately removes his jersey and throws it on the bed before going to lock himself inside the bathroom.

An exhausted sigh leaves me as I start to undress. I want to take a hot bath, to get rid of Mr. Biyela's touches. I really hadn't noticed he was touching me as I was only focused on how good it felt to be able to spill. I was pouring my heart out. And he was taking advantage of my vulnerability. Never again. I'm staying away from him, henceforth, now that I have more than enough confirmation that he's secretly gay...or bisexual. I recall his words and how he said he wouldn't have messed up had it been him who was with me. Disgusting. I hold back a gag and hesitate a second before deciding to don Nqoba's jersey. The one he threw on the bed. It smells familiar. Like him. My favourite scent. The feeling of safety envelopes me immediately and the bad feelings are being quickly driven away. I put the collar to my nose and inhale deeply. My eyes snap open as the bathroom door opens. I've been caught. Thank god for my dark skin. My body would be resembling a tomato at the moment.

He's still half-naked with the fly of his pants open, revealing his Calvin Klein underwear. He looks too tempting but I don't want to have sex – it's never just sex with him. He crawls inside me and possesses parts of me that I don't even own myself. I hold my breath as he nails me with a blank expression and then he's walking past me without a word and goes to sit at the foot of the bed. His back is hunched over, as he buries his face in his hands. I can see his split knuckles, he did a poor job of cleaning them up. Shakily, I go to sit beside him...and my fingers crawl to his thigh, up and up they go until they're

entwining with one of his hands. “Remember what I said the first time I ever spoke to you?” I ask him quietly.

He remains silent but after a while, he clears his throat. He says nothing.

“The first time I ever saw you I thought you were carved by Michaelangelo. Do you know him?” no reply but I can feel his tension seeping out a little. “Anyway, he’s a really famous artist. I thought you were really gorgeous. You’re still the only guy I know who makes Brentwood clothes look hella sexy. But everything about you is really sexy.”

I get a snort this time. Another clearing of the throat. “You called my clothes taxi driver attire – and then proceeded to insult me by saying I dress like Big Zulu. I dress like no one but myself.”

His complaint is lighthearted. It takes me giggling for him to laugh as well. Finally. I move slowly and straddle his lap. My arms are around his neck and he’s hugging my waist. He’s really hugging me, there’s no detachment. The good feelings envelope me – love, happiness, security, relief – so much...I’m clinging tightly to him, with my face buried in his neck. “Feels like so long ago that we first met,” I say softly as my eyes connect with his. “In reality it’s close to three months, right? So much has happened since then. I got you – when I never even thought it was possible – and then I lost you again.”

“You haven’t lost me. I’m right here...for as long as you need me.”

“I’ve missed you,” I say shakily as he regards me with this...I can’t decipher the look in his eyes. The lifelessness found in them – an unsettling lifelessness. “A-And I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. You really hurt me, Nqobizitha. And I hurt you too—but I wouldn’t have if you’d been honest with me from the start. If only you’d used protection then you wouldn’t have had to worry about Zenny carrying your baby. You wouldn’t have gone to that woman. Not even a day after you told me you love me and then you cheated.”

He releases a strange sound and rubs his face – almost like he’s scrubbing it. He says nothing.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?”

“I’m sorry,” the words come after a long pregnant pause. “I still think you should’ve insisted on using protection as well. I wasn’t—anyway, it happened again.”

“Maybe we should go testing together,” I suggest and he nods his head. “And maybe we should...maybe we shouldn’t be having sex at all, you and I.”

“It won’t happen again.”

We look at each other and I can tell that he knows we’re bullshitting each other here. The thing is even when we’re having sex, it doesn’t feel like just sex. It’s like tantric sex...an out of body experience. The attraction isn’t just physical – at least for me – Nqoba penetrates my mind, body and soul. He’s the only person who can reduce me to tears during sex. The only one who makes it intense. The only who makes the energy feel genuine. So genuine that he reduces me to tears. I love him. He doesn’t realize how much. This is why he drives me so insane. “I thought about what you said...” I say, searching his eyes. “About MaNtuli. And I really want to understand. Please make me understand.”

He remains silent but there are goosebumps breaking all over his skin. I run my hands down the hard muscle of his abs and press my lips lightly against his. Just because we’re over, doesn’t mean I can’t kiss him anymore. He’s still mine even though he doesn’t know it. “MaNtuli...” his smooth voice startles me lightly. I look into his eyes and nod my head. “That day I left your sister’s place, I went to her house. She kinda gets me – all these thoughts in my head. So I figured I’d talk to her. We were alone so she made me food and then we drank. She loves good whiskey. I got drunk really quickly but I still talked to her about the situation with your sister. She gave me advice and after that she wanted to fuck. I—didn’t mean to, Bambi. I tried to tell her no but my dick was hard. She took it as cue to go ahead. I couldn’t push her off but the entire time I was thinking about you. I told her no because I didn’t want to cheat on you. I told her you wouldn’t forgive me.”

My mind works quickly because it’s the third time he’s saying this. The night he broke up with me, he said he didn’t want to have sex with her. He told me he told her no. Then again earlier, before I left. He said he’d told her to stop. I hadn’t believed him. I’ll admit that it’s hard to trust him – especially when he’s around older women. He has this weird fixation on them. I don’t trust him. “And MaNtuli continued?” I ask him.

“Yes!” he’s getting a little agitated.

A sick feeling develops in my stomach, crawling right to my throat. “Nqoba...” I whisper, speechless. He eyes me – blank. “You have to go and report this to the police.”

Nqoba shakes his head and starts to laugh. It's not sarcastic or condescending. It's his genuine laugh that I love with everything in me but not at this moment. I'm not sure what's funny. He was...he was...raped and he thinks it's funny? "And say what? Usuyasangana wena. (You're crazy)" he's still laughing.

"No, I'm not!" I don't realize I am hyperventilating and silently crying until Nqoba stirs, wiping at the tears on my face. "You really need to go to report that woman. She...she raped you!"

I watch him tense almost immediately and then he's shaking his head. "No, that's not possible. You don't understand how rape works wena. Men can't be raped. This isn't prison where you're not supposed to drop the soap. How can she rape me?"

"You were drunk, Nqoba. That's the first offence – you were not in the right headspace to give consent. And even after you said no, she continued. She raped you."

He sets me aside and lifts off the bed. How can he be so calm about this? I'm angry on his behalf. So mad! I want to find MaNtuli and kill her slowly and very painfully. He's speaking to himself, but so quietly that I can't hear a single thing. Then he focuses his attention on me, eyeing me warily. "I don't understand this thing you're saying," the confusion shows clearly on his face. "I didn't mean to cheat on you, Bambi. But my body reacted to that woman. I even came. My body enjoyed that so it can't be rape."

"N-No, Tarzan wami!" I leave the bed as well and move to stand in front of him. My tears are making it hard for me to see him clearly. "That doesn't matter. Sometimes, our bodies react – that's just basic biology. What matters is whether or not you wanted it. You said no. You told her no. She had to respect your wishes and leave you be – especially because you were drunk. It's rape."

"Stop saying that word!" he snaps, giving me a wary look. "Maybe you don't like MaNtuli but it wasn't rape. Men can't be raped by women."

I want to smack him in the head for being so stupid but part of me doesn't blame him. Many people think like that. I read about something similar on Facebook once – and the guy who was writing about the rape was made fun of instead and made to feel weak. Because who denies women sex? They even accused the guy of being gay because of it. But Nqobizitha can't allow MaNtuli to get away with forcing herself on him. "They can, Nqobizitha. It's not a weakness to admit it and it doesn't make you any less of a man. MaNtuli was in the wrong here and—"

“Can we drop this?” his tone is firm and hard, leaving no room for argument. I want to tell him to shut the fuck up and listen to me but forcing him to listen won’t help. I’ll need to conduct research and give it to him on paper. I’ll do it. MaNtuli needs to be punished. She can’t get away with this. I won’t allow her to. “I just want to sleep. This is why I fetched you.” He says and brings me to the present.

I look at his chest and then up at him. “No. No tears, Bambi.” He says and wipes away my tears. I can’t stop and he’s lifting me in his arms and carrying me back to the bed. My head is on his chest, he’s running his hand down my back, murmuring words of comfort. I don’t know how he can do this when it’s me who should be comforting him. I’m crying for him. “Don’t cry,” his voice is strained.

“We n-need to report her.”

“She didn’t rape me,” he keeps on insisting. “Don’t cry, sthandwa sami. I hate it when you cry.” He’s murmuring all these words of comfort. Each word breaks me a little more. He’s not safe and he doesn’t even realize it. As long as that woman is free, he won’t be safe. She’ll just use him again. I try to speak, to tell him that but he keeps soothing me. Soothing me until I fall asleep.

I wake up later that night. He’s not beside me. I can hear him throwing up in the bathroom. My feet carry me to the bathroom. I enter without knocking. He’s flushing the toilet and sitting with his back on the wall. I’m sure he senses my presence because his eyes open. He smiles, it doesn’t reach his eyes. I walk to him – and perch myself on his lap. “Knock Knock!” I say with a small smile.

He gives me a curious glance and shakes his head. “Are you serious right now?”

“Humour me,” I lay my head on his shoulder. His arms embrace me. I’ve never been calmer, I hope it intoxicates him as well.

He gives me a sigh that tells me he’s relenting. “Who’s there?”

“Candice!”

“Candice Who?”

“Candice be love I’m feeling right now?” I say looking into his eyes and then giggle at the stupidity of it all. I’m sure he knows how much I love him. He’s giving me a soft look and then he’s leaning forward to give me a deep kiss. I can taste his vomit on my tongue. “Ew!” I punch his arm. “You just shared your vomit with me.”

He laughs, clearly unapologetic. I think my light is touching him as well. “Just returning the favour, dali.”

I love it when he calls me dali. Sponge Bob. Bambi. Sthandwa sami. “Call me Dali again.”

“Dali.” He runs his hand down my cheek and then gives me a foreign expression. “You’ve never driven my car before.”

“Because I can’t drive,” I say.

“Let me teach you,” he stands with me in his arms. I allow him to and call him out on his randomness. We still have so much to talk about. But we’re not fighting – and I’ll take that.

Nqobizitha

I have been avoiding been avoiding a lot of people lately. Especially MaNtuli. I don’t feel good when I think about her. It began even before Chris could give out his unfounded theory about her raping me. I dream about her a lot and wake up in a cold sweat. Her scent makes me sick. Sometimes the thought of her touch makes my skin crawl. I don’t feel like myself. With each passing day, I can’t help feeling heavier but so empty at the same time. I can’t place what’s changed but I mostly chalk it up to my break up with Chris. We’re talking. But we’re not together. I don’t think I can give him what he needs at the moment. But I still don’t want to see him entertaining any guys. I don’t want him talking to Hugo. That makes me selfish but I don’t care.

We went for testing at a clinic in Empangeni just before we could leave. We did it together. We’re both clean and so far, haven’t given into the temptation of having sex. It’s been three gruelling days but I think we’re doing good. Right now, we’re trying to learn more about each other. We talk and talk.

Mostly about him and his life in Joburg. I don't have lots of things to say about myself. I prefer to hear Chris talk anyway.

"This is the best you've looked in a long time."

I shift my attention away from Chris who is dancing with Nhlakanipho's siblings and Siyabonga a distance away and look at my best friend. "I'm sleeping better, bafo." I tell him. Chris has his window open again and I go to him. Nontethelelo has been hinting that she knows about my nightly escapades but I don't give a fuck. The dreams aren't so bad with Chris around.

"How are you feeling?"

This question is too complex. Sometimes, I don't understand how I'm feeling. "Depends on the day, bafoza. Right now, I am calm."

"You and Chris talked things out?" he is giving me a stern but inquiring look. Sometimes, it feels like Nhlakanipho is older than me. Like he's my father. With his seriousness.

"I mean we tackle one topic per conversation. Last night, we were talking about the dangers of unprotected sex and something about spiritual transfer...Chris was telling me all about it but I was falling asleep."

Nhlakanipho laughs and shakes his head. "I don't wish to be you but I get why a conversation like that would be important. You behaved so irresponsibly, Nqobizitha. I hope you learned your lesson."

"I haven't had sex in four days," I say. I don't think masturbation counts as sex. That's all I do now.

I'm expecting Nhlakanipho to display some sort of surprise but instead he looks...proud. I close my eyes and groan. He's making me feel funny. "I'm so proud of you, bafo. Anyway, I wanted us to talk because...Chris told me about MaNtuli."

“It wasn’t rape,” I tell him. I don’t know why I’m getting agitated. “Men can’t be raped.” Chris came to me with a number of statistics and research he conducted that I wasn’t interested in. I just wanted his forgiveness for cheating on him and the mistreatment. The other things, I don’t need him to tell me.

“Anyone can be raped, bafo.” Nhlakanipho cuts through my thoughts. “It doesn’t matter whether or not your body enjoyed what was happening. The point of the matter is you did not want to sleep with that woman and she blatantly ignored you. You said no and she continued. That is rape.”

“I don’t fully understand this,” the words leave me before I can stop them. “I’m always nervous around her lately and I can smell her, bafo. Even in my dreams, I can’t escape her.”

“I think your subconscious is trying to tell you something. Maybe even your body. Listen to it. I don’t want to force you. I want you to take your time. Listen to your body, your subconscious. But don’t let her get away with it. She could do it to other kids as well, some even younger than you.”

I tense and my body shivers. I get this sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach. Someone younger than me. Younger than me. Like my other Mama? “You mean she could love someone else?” the question leaves me before I can prevent it.

“That’s not love.” He searches my eyes. I keep my expression neutral. “Predatory behaviour isn’t love. Paedophilia isn’t love. These people ruin lives. It is not normal, bafo.”

I shake my head. “Its different with me, bafo. I was loved.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head and look at my hands again. I heard the judgement clearly in Nhlakanipho’s voice. He wouldn’t understand. This is why Mama wami always told me to keep us a secret. Others are not lucky to receive a love like we did. It was love. Even if Nomthandazo says it’s not. She’s been trying to get in touch with me again but MaKhathide won’t even allow it. She makes sure that girl doesn’t get to me. I get the feeling that she’s hiding something from me. Maybe she knows about my other Mama. The thought makes me nervous. I don’t want her to hate me for loving someone else.

“Nqobizitha, what’s wrong?”

I turn my attention to Nhlakanipho. The sickening feeling is returning, stronger. I open my mouth to say something but the buzzing sound is in my ears again. Louder. My breath is stuttering and I try to focus but there's a blinding light in my eyes – brief – then the world goes completely dark.

Christophe

Nqobizitha hadn't passed out for more than a few seconds but it was still real scary. At least for me. Nhlakanipho was calm as ever, helping him as soon as he started showing signs of consciousness. I had to give Nqobizitha's phone to Siyabonga so that he could call one of his sisters because Nhlakanipho was vehemently opposed to contacting his mother...she's an iron woman and he didn't want her blaming Nqoba for passing out. Anyway, I left with him and his sister, Nontethelelo, who drove here to collect him. They decided that they'd come back later to collect his car. It's safe at Nhlakanipho's anyway.

"Don't crowd him. This is why he removed his jersey," I say to their helper. What is her name again? Thandi. Thando. No. Thandeka. She annoys me, rubs me the wrong way really. The way she forcefully caters to Nqobizitha, hovering over him, with her breasts barely contained in the vest she's wearing. The way she's touching him hints at someone who's had sexual relations with him before. Knowing Nqobizitha, he probably has, this woman is exactly his type. I don't want to be mad at him but I can't help my glare as he gives me a wary look and pushes Thandeka away with a squeeze to her hand. The helper gives him a sultry beam and then me a look of superiority before huffing and walking away. "You just had to sleep with the help too, Nqoba?" I am unsuccessful at not sounding affected.

He sighs and eases more comfortably in the long sofa. "Awume, sthandwa sami." He says quietly, he sounds tired. I feel sorry for him and before I can help myself, I'm getting too close to him and running a comforting hand down his back. He doesn't push me away thankfully. His parents aren't here – just his sisters. This is the first time I've ever been inside their house and it's just as elegant as the exterior. It's a micro-mansion – surrounded by about five other smaller, but equally luxurious, houses – and looks something out of a House and Leisure magazine. Its beautiful. Breathtakingly modern and even more intimidating inside. I've barely moved much since we entered. I'm scared of messing up the sparkling marble floors or staining the elegant glass table. My eyes find Nqobizitha when I feel his hand brushing along my thigh. Despite his clear exhaustion, there's a consuming fire in his eyes. My mouth is dry as I try to look away and ignore the familiar intense pull between us. My hands are trembling. I want to touch him some more.

"That's some heavy eye fucking the both of you have going on." We both startle as another person joins us. It's Nontethelelo, giving both of us a mischievous grin. My eyes avert to their ridiculously large flat screen TV and they stay there but I can feel moving around. The smell of cigarettes hits me and I cough a little. Nqoba runs his hand down my back soothingly. His sister is laughing. "You're like Siyabonga, huh? You can't stand the smell of ugwayi."

“N-No,” I shake my head and give her a small grin. “It smells good, just that it makes me choke and cough. I don’t smoke.”

“I’d be worried if you did.” Her feet are on the coffee table. “That’s basically a death sentence, inhaling cancer sticks.”

I give her a confused look. “Then why are you smoking?”

“Because I can.” She chuckles and shifts her gaze to her brother while I stare in awe at her beauty. Her dreadlocks are styled to a hairstyle I can’t accurately describe but it suits her. She’s also a rad dresser. Vintagey...like me. No wonder she’d told Nqoba to compliment my sense of style. “Enzeni uThandeka? (What should Thandeka make?)” My ears catch her asking. They’re talking about food.

“I can make you uphuthu, then you’ll have amasi.” I offer, looking at him. “Unless...do you have them in your house?”

A subtle grin pulls at Nqoba’s lips – pulling and pulling until it’s a Cheshire cat grin. It makes my cheeks heat up and I look away but his sister is giving me an equally unsettling look. What is it with these two?

“Uyabona, weNtethe? (Do you see, Ntethe?)” He looks at sister and pulls me to his side to press a kiss inside my neck. He’s so open about it, unapologetic. “Ukuthi kunjani ukuthandwa? (What it’s like to be loved?)”

Nontethelelo rolls her eyes but she’s returning his grin. They have identical smiles – both beautiful. “So this is what he does when you visit him? He makes you work hard cooking for him when he should’ve learned himself. But I blame his mother on this one – men don’t belong in the kitchen, she likes to say.”

“I, um, a-actually enjoy cooking for him,” I confess, feeling stupidly shy. She makes me nervous, like her brother does sometimes. “I’m a really good cook.”

“Yabona ntombi emnyama, ngim’lethelwe okhokho bami lona. (See, he was sent to me by our ancestors.)” His voice is returning to it’s usual charming drawl, he’s becoming more and more of himself again. “Nontethelelo will show you to the kitchen, dali.”

“We’re back to being an arrogant prick, I see.” Nontethelelo doesn’t sound at all offended as she stands to her feet. I mimic her and kiss Nqobizitha’s cheek before I can stop myself. She does the same – but she’s also kissing his forehead many times and he’s groaning and attempting to push her away. Or he pretends to. You can see the love between these two. I saw it with that other sister of his as well. Ndoniyamanzi. They’re close-knit siblings that’s easy to tell. “So Chris…” Nontethelelo says after she gives me those expensive non-stick pots to cook the uphuthu in. “How are you?”

“Fine. You?” I’m awkward about talking with her.

“Also fine,” she’s leaning against the counter, hands cupping her face as she looks at me with no shame whatsoever. “So you’re the one my brother always sneaks out to go and see?”

“He sleeps better with me.” The words rush to my mouth.

She tilts her head to one side and blinks at me. “Is that so?”

“That’s what he told me.”

“And are you sure that wasn’t some ploy to fuck you? My brother has raging hormones, I doubt he thinks about much besides sex.”

“Well, you’re wrong.” I can’t keep the attitude out of my voice. I can’t help it. She clearly doesn’t know her brother well. *You were the same*, my mind butts in, reminding me that I am not completely innocent either. And okay, I tend to think that the only thing Nqoba thinks about is sex as well. “It’s not just about sex. We haven’t done anything in four days anyway. Besides, your brother doesn’t look like the type that actually begs for sex. It’s women who throw themselves at him.”

“Because he has a smooth tongue,” Ntethe chuckles. She gives me the mealie meal and fork. I prefer to use the fork when making uphuthu – that’s how you make it very fine. “Anyway, I’m not judging him. Lord knows I ain’t a perfect bitch either. I am glad that you’re with him. You’re a good change from all those old women he used to shag. He seems to be really into you.”

A smitten grin forms on my lips. “I am really into him too. I love him,” the bottom one is bitten on softly.

“He loves you as well,” she says so simply, risking me a heart attack. “The other day he told me. But you guys broke up, right?”

My heart clinches as I part my lips for air. “Yeah, he told me he cheated and he broke up with me. But he didn’t cheat, when he explained that’s how I knew, MaNtuli raped him.”

I watch the sister’s eyebrows furrow as she searches my eyes. My heart is beating fast but I’m not going to go back on what I said and maybe she can tell their parents so that MaNtuli will be locked in prison where she deserves to be. The Ngcobos are practically gods in this place, now they have to protect one of their own. “Christophe...” her mouth opens and closes. I can slowly see the rage in her eyes building. “What the fuck do you mean?”

I know that maybe I shouldn’t but I still spill. I tell her about the day Zenny told us about the pregnancy. I tell her what Nqoba told me. How he went to that woman’s house and how she took advantage of him. I’m hyperventilating as I explain. “He still won’t go to the police. He thinks she’s innocent, thinks I hate her. But-But she raped him and deserves to be put to jail.”

Nontethelelo jumps off the stool she was sitting on and begins to pace up and down. “If this is true—”

“He wouldn’t lie!” I snap. What is wrong with these people? No wonder Nqoba thinks he wasn’t raped. “This can’t be taken lightly. Can’t you see that he’s not o-okay?! He wakes up at night in a cold sweat. It never used to be this bad before. He says her name in his dreams and sometimes, last night...h-he was crying in his sleep and he kept saying no. Then he was apologizing to me in his sleep. He’s not okay. Don’t let his natural charm fool you. Why do you think he passed out? Something is wrong with him.”

“But I don’t understand...why wouldn’t he come to us about this?” she pauses and regards me with an inquisitive glance.

“I don’t think he would’ve told me had I not asked him to make me understand. I admit that I was also at fault because I wasn’t really listening to him. But your brother...he has poor communication skills. Like me in some ways – and maybe that’s why we fight the way we do.”

“I...” she has a pensive look on her face but the rage in his eyes is terrifying. Her small body is trembling and I can see some goosebumps on her skin. “I know what you mean. But it’s not his fault, this is how he was raised. He has to be really tough if he’s going to take over the Ngcobo empire one day. I think that’s

why MaKhathide pushes him so hard. Harder than the rest of us. Then there's also the fact that men suck at communication. Like you said, you fight a lot because of this."

"So what will you do?" I ask her, grabbing the wide dish that she gives me to cool uphuthu. She says I can put in the fridge to quicken the process.

"I'm not sure. If I approach him directly about this then he'll get mad at you. I don't think I can tell MaKhathide about this. She will probably pin it on him. If he hadn't slept with older women. If he hadn't gone to her house. If he'd done this or that and blah, blah, blah." She shakes her head and makes a small sound of frustration. "That's the annoying thing about situations like this. People always fault the victim and lecture them on preventative measures they should've taken and rarely do they focus on the perpetrator. I'll need to think hard about this. I won't ask him about this until I have a solution. But I'll watch over him and his—" she cuts herself short just as a heavy sensation builds on my shoulders and a delicious shiver runs all across my back.

Large arms fold around me, tightening at my front. I squirm as I feel Nqoba's breath on my ear and his lips trailing to my neck. We're still over, he didn't want to get back together. He's guilty, he says. I had to respect his wishes – with my aching heart and all – and now we're back to that floating between lovers and friends situation we had before. We're not having sex. We came close last night after he woke up from his bad dream but I insisted on talking to him instead – and he fell asleep. I kind of like us the way we are at the moment. We talk more. Things that we hadn't ever talked about while we were having sex. We're slowly getting to know each other. But I talk more than him and sometimes, I think I'm boring him but he's always so engrossed and looks so serious.

"Themba lami," he says softly. This is a new name, he's never called me that before. I love it. Warmth spreads over my body and I place my arms on top of the ones that are hugging me. "I'm hungry."

"You need to wait for uphuthu to be cold first, you baby. Otherwise, it will absorb amasi and you'll be eating dry uphuthu."

"When's the wedding? When are we adopting the kids?"

My attention shifts to Nqoba's sister. She has this mischievous energy about her, a 'no fucks given' attitude. I wonder how their mother handles her. Personally, I really like her. She looks fun to be around. "You mean surrogacy," I hear Nqobizitha murmur. "And he'd take my surname. No discussions. Zithobile Ngcobo does have a nice ring to it." His arms have left me. He's walking away. I watch after him in shock. My legs are weak, I grip the edge of the counter for anchor.

Something bad happened to MaNtuli a few days ago. Something really bad. I keep thinking that it's all my fault. It was on the news last night and there were reporters. This generally overlooked town was famous for some depressing days. The news reported of a brutal attack that took place in her house as she was coming home from visiting her children that live with her late husband's parents. The suspects ambushed her as soon as she entered her home. She was gang-raped by four unknown men who then drugged her and dumped her in her car before setting her house on fire. I passed by her house to check for myself and nothing but debris is left.

I'm not going to lie, I've been struggling with guilt because...because I told Nontethelelo. I'm not sure if she told her mother. I'm not sure if she took matters into her own hands. I'm not even sure if this is just some sort of twisted karma. I'm scared and the guilt is eating away at me. Nqobizitha is taking it really badly. Last night, he came to my room and curled into my body like he usually does. He was shaking. I'm not sure if he was crying or if it was the anger. He wants to visit MaNtuli but she's in hospital and will only be seen by her family members. I've been stalling at getting in touch with his sister to see if she told her mom. To find out if this is how they deal with anyone who wrongs them. I'm scared.

"Chris..."

My gaze finds Nqobizitha first, out of pure instinct, and then land on the boy who actually needs my help. Nqoba is back in my classes, but he's left behind so we remain in class whenever I dismiss the others so that I can help him catch up. But you can just tell...Commercial subjects aren't his passion. He should be doing Sciences. I saw that the day I went to his house. He loves it so much. The only reason he's studying Commercial subjects is to make his parents happy – at least that's what I gathered, since he is an heir to their empire. "Mzwandile, how should I help?" I ask the boy giving me a lost look.

"Stupid thing won't balance," he points to his notebook. I chuckle and shake my head, grabbing his book to see where he went wrong.

"How did you calculate this amount of accumulated depreciation?"

He grabs another paper that he was scribbling on. I force myself to concentrate, I can feel Nqoba's hot gaze burning into me, and I stutter like usual. My fingers are vibrating as I help Mzwandile calculate the accumulated depreciation amount. He gives me a boyish grin and says he'll practice some more. Then Nosiphiwe calls me and I can feel a sliver of annoyance prickling at my skin. She calls me 'gal' like we're pals or something. She's a stereotypical bitch. "What is it?" I give her a fake smile.

“Schools are closing this Friday. My friends and I are attending a party in Eshowe, and I wanted to take my gay bestie along. It’ll be so much fun and I could hook you—”

“Thanks but no thanks, sweetheart.” I pat her shoulder gently and look at the time. “Only five minutes until we’re done so you guys may as well leave. Please do that activity I gave you, you’re writing on Thursday and I don’t want to disappoint Mr. Nsibande.”

They make excited sounds and cheer as I roll my eyes. Slowly, they disperse until it’s just me and Nqobizitha in the class. My heart is jumping against my ribcage as my eyes fixate on him. He looks gorgeous – a little tired maybe. “Dali,” he looks up at me and remains sitting.

“Bhubesi lami,” I giggle as he rolls his eyes.

“Woza la,” he gestures with his finger and a knee-weakening smile. I obey easily and sit on his lap. This is dangerous because anyone could walk in but I want to be in his arms and to chase the guilt about MaNtuli away. My head rests on his shoulder as his arms lock me in. “Stoko sami.”

I am still his even though we’re no longer together. “Tarzan wami.”

“Themba lami.”

“Qhawe lami.” My nose nudges his and I caress his cheeks.

He grins and shakes his head. “Muntuza.”

“Muntu wami,”

“Nganeyakwethu, kodwa ungenzani?” he says it in this sexy as fuck roughened manner that I can feel myself grow increasingly excited. I kiss him deeply as the butterflies erupt in my belly. I love him so much. He doesn’t know.

“Engiyikho,” I say as soon as our kiss ends. I return his warm embrace and close my eyes, soaking in his heavenly scent, his aura. “Ngyakuthanda, Nqobizitha.” I find myself confessing.

He’s silent for a while but hugging me tighter. Then he clears his throat and kisses the inside of my neck. “Njengoba nami ngikuthanda, mntakwethu.” He does love me back. I can feel it.

Giving him one final kiss, I move to grab a chair and sit across from him so that we’re looking at each other. My eyes search his but he gives nothing away. “Unjani, ndoda yami?”

His eyes widen childishly and then his head falls back in a rumbling laugh. I watch him, looking so carefree and laidback. The Nqobizitha I am used to. I wish I could keep him like this forever. “I’m okay as can be, Bambi. How are you?”

“Fine. Now that I’m with you. We need to catch up on your schoolwork, I don’t want you to fail come Thursday, sthandwa sami.”

He groans and looks at the mess of books and papers on his desk. “I wasn’t meant for this shit.”

“What do you mean?” I ask him.

“Just this—”

My phone rings, forcing him to pause. He’s looking at me curiously as I retrieve it from my pocket. “It’s Simi,” I show him the screen so that he doesn’t start assuming shit. He nods and I answer. “Hello?”

“Hello? HELLO?!” Simi screams into the phone and I remove the phone from my ear. She’s a crazy bitch this one – always so dramatic. “Babe. This is how you greet me now?”

“Stop,” I whine and make a gun sign with my fingers as Nqobizitha chuckles. “Stop, you’re so loud. Even Nqoba is laughing at you. He can hear you and my phone isn’t even on speaker.”

“Tell him I said ‘HI, SEXY!’” she nearly damages my ear canal again. “I hope he’s treating you like that lovely smooshie smoosh you are.” I never bothered to tell her about what has been happening between us. I was too sad. “Anyway, Bebe. My Gabonese lover. How is Mbongolwane??? I miss you!”

“Me too,” I tell her.

“Then Imma come over to visit. We’re having a mini break soon, be on the look out.”

My heart skids with joy and I’m nodding my head enthusiastically. “Please. Please. Please.” Nqoba is giving me a weird look I can’t decipher. It still makes me nervous and I look away, focusing on Simthandile. We talk for close to fifteen minutes before she has to leave. She’s going to Ghandi Square with some friends. I’m jealous.

“You’re really close to her, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, we’re like siblings.” I place my phone on the table. Nqoba grabs it, he knows the password. He’s not checking my messages or call log this time. He’s looking at the calendar. I am not even nervous about it. I have nothing to hide. “It’s almost like you and Nhlakanipho.”

“Do you ever wish you could go back to Joburg?”

I watch him carefully, trying to see what he’s trying to do or say. “Life is so much easier there. Everything is within reach. I can go to Eastgate mall or I can play tennis at the local park. I can go to Newtown or Braam or any other cool places. I miss shopping for these really cool clothes. So ... I, maybe I want to visit sometimes. Maybe I wouldn’t mind spending just the weekend there. Maybe I...” I look at him and bite my lip. My eyes go to my knotted fingers. Christ, this boy makes me feel so vulnerable. Bare. And yet, I never want him to have anything short of all of me. I want him to discover all my facets with me. “I... only if you would go with me as well. Maybe I’d want to go with you.”

He reaches over and grabs my hand, kissing my knuckles. “Maybe I’d want to go with you too.”

Warmth envelopes me like a heater on a cold winter’s night. I want to cry. My cheeks are hurting from smiling too damn wide. I lean over to give him a quick peck on the lips. “Out of you and Nhlakanipho, I think you would fit in better. But you’d still hate it and fuck everyone up,” I say, thinking back to how he

nearly beat Mr. Biyela to a pulp. He's lucky that man never pressed charges but they had a talk and I have a feeling that Nqoba threatened him somehow. He keeps away from me now. He behaves like Sandile and will change his course of direction whenever he sees me. I am more than happy about the development. I can breathe easier around the school. "And I'd be the sassy little shit talking crap at everyone because my sexy, Brentwood wearing boyf—"

We look at each other.

"We'll try again. You're mine, Bambi." He says with conviction.

"You're mine too," I tell him and place my hand on his chest, feeling his heartbeat. "This is mine too, I need it." He doesn't stop me as I reach for him again. He returns my soft kiss. Then we're focusing on his schoolwork. He's really trying his best but Accounting isn't for him. He'll interrupt me and tell me about a planet that was discovered that seems to be filled with glass. Not glass exactly, he explains but I don't understand...kinda like how he doesn't understand what I'm teaching him. I tell him to consider applying for a Science-related degree because his Maths results are always excellent. He's always second, only because Siyabonga is ridiculously intelligent. "I'll even help you, Tarzan wami."

"We'll see, dali." He packs his bags and we walk out of the class. "I'm spending the whole day with you today."

I thank him as he gets my door for me. "What about your mom?" I ask as soon as he's in the driver's seat.

"She's in Durban for the next two days." He puts his arm around me as he is reversing the car while looking back...and it's one of the sexiest things ever about him. He makes it look intensely sexual, I can't describe the look on his face but my dick reacts and I bite my lip and look outside. "After you've fed me, we're resuming those driving lessons I am giving you."

I huff and roll my eyes. He still doesn't like asking.

The last time I attended such a large function was on the day of Zenny's mom's funeral. This one I am attending is a reunion party. A Ngcobo family reunion party. All of Nqobizitha's family members have come to join the family matriarch and patriarch in a reunion party. They host this every year apparently

and I was invited by Nqobizitha two days ago. It's so packed that now I understand why their main house resembles something out of an American celebrity's expensive home. I've met some of his sisters. Some married, some not. Sibusisiwe is the eldest at forty-four years old and is married to a taxi owner from Dundee. Then Zandile who is married to a councilor from Newcastle. There's a Qondisile – the third born. I can't remember most of the others names but there were triplets whose names all begin with 'S'. Then there are two sets of twins. Most of them do have high and mighty attitudes but it's mostly the older ones. I spend time with the younger twins – Kwandile and Lwandile.

Oh, and Nqobizitha's family are also cow murderers. Him as well. I saw him do it and the only reason I've forgiven him is because he looked really sexy doing it. He was half-naked, wearing those shorts I bought him. Nhlakanipho and Siyabonga are here as well, along with friends I didn't even know Nqobizitha had. This is a proper Zulu party. I've seen girls walking around half-naked and dancing traditional Zulu songs. The men have been stick fighting. The girls have been chasing after Siya, Nhlakanipho but mostly Nqobizitha. I look hella gay apparently and so these girls have subjected me to the unwanted position of 'gay bestie' like Nosiphiwe would as well. I hate it but they're Nqoba's family and I'm trying to earn points because Nqoba hinted at marriage that day with his sister. Yeah, I'm pathetic.

"That little girl is pissing me off!" Siya huffs, standing beside me. He's referring to a girl that has been persistent in her pursuit of his boyfriend. "Can't she tell that he's not interested?"

"What's her name again?" I giggle.

"Lesego, she's only fourteen. Mam' Qondisile's bitchy daughter." Another huff. "Don't they have men in North West or wherever she comes from?"

"Maybe she prefers Zulu guys."

"Yeah well it's annoying. Tswana men are just as appealing," he sounds like he's going to cry any minute. I squeeze his shoulder to comfort him.

"And how would you know that?"

He does this thing with his shoulders that's really cute and folds his arms on his chest. "I don't but I just know. She needs to stop behaving so bitchy with my boyfriend."

“Go tell her.”

He gives me a frustrated look that makes me shrink a little. I can't fight. Siya is bigger than me. “Let me go drag him away. I want to kill him!”

I chortle and watch him walk to where Nhlakanipho and the girl are. This reminds me of the time he was behaving immaturely because Nhlakanipho was laughing with me. He's so easy. My eyes find Nqobizitha who is talking to one of his sisters. The charm, the attitude and confidence...it's all back. He has everyone eating out of the palm of his hands. It's hard to believe that this is the same guy who passed out nearly a week ago. Maybe he's really good at pretending because he was sick all of last night – shivering and vomiting. He said something smelled bad but he wouldn't tell me what. Then he was gone this morning but I got a message from him reminding me about this party. Our eyes connect and I can see his little smile that he gives me. I wave and he waves back.

I go to talk to Nontethelelo and Ndoniyamanzi. I haven't yet been introduced to Nqobizitha's mother and I am not in a rush honestly. She's so cold. She was snapping at one of the hired help because her drink had too much ice. I don't want to associate with her. She scares the fuck out of me. Ntethe has to go to the loo and so I turn my attention back to Nqobizitha and he's walking toward his house with a thick woman with short hair. The look on his face makes me suspicious.

My heart drops.

I blink my eyes rapidly to force the burn behind my eyelids away. Surely he doesn't want to have sex with her, does he? We haven't been doing anything, yes, but that's to help both of us. He agreed. I am walking on shaky feet, tracking their movement. I have to wait for a few minutes and check that I'm not being watched before opening the door silently. I hear some noises coming in the direction of his bedroom. Not moans. I can hear his groan and a frustrated, “Stop!” my heart starts to beat faster as I walk on closer. The door is slightly ajar. Nqoba is sitting on the bed, rocking back and forth with his face in his hands. “She helped me!” I hear him snap, there's a desperation in his eyes.

“By locking you inside your wardrobe for hours so what? That wasn't help!” the female voice sounds equally frustrated.

“B-Because I was scared of the dark and my irrational thoughts,” he is stammering and it's so uncharacteristic. He looks lost. I want to burst in and tell the girl to stop. I don't. “So she made me face my fears.”

“No, she’d torture you and then call it love. Remember that time you cried and cried until you fainted.”

“No.” Nqoba shakes his head and rubs his face repeatedly. “Don’t lie, Nomthandazo. Now you’re fabricating things about your mother and—”

“She’s not my mother, don’t call her that. Bheka, I shouldn’t be rushing you like this. Kodwa you really need therapy and I was hoping to talk to your parents about it but your mom doesn’t even want to see me. I’m lucky I could sneak in today. We need to really talk, Nqobizitha. I don’t want to scare you or offload all these heavy stuff on you all at once. I don’t want to add more damage.”

“I’m not damaged.”

“I’ve seen how you behave around women and it says otherwise. We’ll talk bhutiza, I still need your forgiveness. Just please know that I love you.” The girl kisses his forehead and then she startles lightly as she spots me. I couldn’t move. I was frozen where I was. “Hi. You must be the boyfriend.” She walks on.

I enter the room and Nqobizitha looks up at me. “Dali...” his eyes search mine, I can see a little fear in his eyes. “I wasn’t—”

“I know,” I say, sitting on his lap. My forehead touches his. “I’m sorry because that’s the first thing that crossed my mind and I really need to have better faith in you. What was that lady talking about?”

A pained expression sweeps Nqobizitha’s features and he shakes his head. “Uyabheda loya. Don’t mind her.” It’s kinda hard not to. Some woman was locking him in a wardrobe and telling him to face his fears. “There you go, getting all teary eyed again.”

“Did MaKhathide—”

“Drop this, Bambi.” He says firmly and then he’s kissing me. He’s shutting me up. Things are getting heated and a surprised moan leaves me as I find myself on my back. He’s gripping me too hard, his hands fiddling with my pants. I think I get what this is. I gasp as I inch away from him – there’s a fire in his eyes, ready to devour.

I could think of a million reasons why this is a bad idea and yet, as he runs his hand down my cheek, all of them become nothing more than stupid excuses. I press my lips to his again and help him remove my pants. My thighs readily welcome him again. He pushes me deeper into the bed, his hand wrapping around my throat, squeezing. I manage a garbled moan. The darkness in his eyes is infinite, frustrated. "Take it out on me," I whisper. "Take it out on me, Nqobizitha."

He presses a bruising kiss to my lips and I think he's going to obey. But his weight disappears from above me and then he's standing, and walking away.

Mutual Desires : Twenty-two

Nqobizitha

It's the noises that wake me up. Thumps and clawing at my door that make me panic and sit up too fast. Chris is still fast asleep beside me and I am going to assume that last night really took a lot of energy out of him because usually the slightest noise catches his sharp ears. No, we didn't have sex but MaKhathide's party dragged on till the early hours of the morning. People always refuse to leave our family home, drawn to the luxury. The noise captures my ears again and I quickly propel into action. "Bambi, wake up." I make sure to whisper, I don't want the scamps breaking into my house. They're capable. They've done it before. The noises are really loud this time, growing impatient with each thump. "Vuka, wenganeyomuntu. Yehheni!" I slap my forehead. Since when is he such a deep sleeper? I nudge him more insistently, removing the covers from his body. He's only wearing my jersey and looks tempting like usual. He's stirring. Good. Another thud startles him and he leaps into my arms – as if he knows that I'll always protect him. My heart falters as I give him a quick kiss on the forehead. "Finally awake! Leave the bed. I need to take you home."

Another thump makes him jump again. "Nqobizitha, what's going on?" he's still disoriented – little dry drool on one corner of his mouth and his eyes are swollen. He's too beautiful. But there's no time for morning kisses, the devilish scamps are persistent in trying to break into my house.

"No time to explain," I say, dragging him up and walking fast towards my closet. "I need you to remain here while I sort them out." I try to gently push him inside but he looks back at me with wide eyes.

"Uthini?"

"My sisters' kids are at the door and they're this close to breaking in so I really need you to hide in here while I deal with them, sthandwa sami." I say calmly, giving him my best smile to ease his fears.

"Nqobizitha! How dare you?!" he folds his arms on his chest and looks breathtakingly beautiful as he does it. I get the urge to lift him into my arms and to pin him against the wall so that I can show him how truly enchanting he is but I hear my door being forcefully broken into with what sounds like a sharp object. "You're not doing this to me. Nuh-uh. Like some side piece?"

The door is being pushed open. I attempt to close the closet but Chris grasps it with his small hand that has impossible strength. "Lalela, dali. I'll get you out, I promise. I just really need to take care of this."

He does something with his entire body that looks like a frustrate shrug and I can hear his mental scream as he closes his eyes. "Gods of fashion, why me? I had to fall in love with him. Can't you see he frustrates me? I want to kill him!" he opens his eyes and glares at me.

Gods of fashion? I've never heard that one before. I chuckle, I can't help it. "Phephisa, sthandwa sami." I apologize, smiling against his lips. He is refusing my kisses. I'd coax him into giving in but now's not the time. "I'll make it up to you."

The pitter-patters are rushing inside the hallway. I can hear the first loud thump. "Bhuti Nqoba, wake up. Wake up! It's us, your favourite kids."

My eyes widen.

"Dali—"

"Don't you talk to me!" Chris whisper-yells and does that weird frustrated thing with his body again. "Nqobizitha, don't you dare shut this stupid—"

"It's a walk-in closet, dali. Large enough to fit two beds in and look at the carpet, it's comfortable. You'll be more than comfortable, Bambi." The look on Chris' face is comical. I want to laugh but now is not the time. The naughty scamps are trying to break into my room now. If they spot Chris then they'll rush to inform their parents and I don't want to think of the disaster that will soon follow. "I'm going to slide this closed now. Phephisa uyezwa, muntuza."

"Oh I never...!" Chris huffs and walks with an attitude in his step to occupy one of the two small chairs in the closet. "Stupid boy keeping me in the closet. The irony!"

I shake my head and shut the closet just as the first signs of the scoundrels being successful in their break in reaches my ears. I quickly move to stand near the door and watch it burst open. "ROAR!" I grab their little leader. The little girl squirms and giggles loudly as I launch my tickle assault. "You're back at it

again?" I ask and try to rid myself of the other scamps who're attempting to jump me. "Yah wena Nkanyezi." I say to the giggling girl. "Who sent you here, hmm? You're behind this."

"N-No, bhuti!" she's breathless in her giggles. "Gogo says you must take us to the mall." The other hooligans agree with her and I have to laugh. Nkanyezi was probably the one who told the others to go to the mall. At eight years old and she pulls the others by their nose. Like they know that she's their queen. I love it. I only hope that she'll grow to be this fierce as well – and never entertain any man...or woman who isn't worthy of her. But even in all other areas of her life.

"You want to go to the mall?" I ask her. I'm supposed to drive Chris to Durban to that modelling agency. He has classes today. Until 11:00am because it's Sunday today. "It's only 06:30am now. Too early, Ndlovukazi yami." She giggles at the nickname and cups my cheeks. It makes me a bit uncomfortable and I place her on her feet. "Will you guys give me an opportunity to actually smell good and then have breakfast first before we leave?"

"Its funny you say that," one of the twins, Philasande – and I only know it's him because his eyebrows are a little different from his identical twin's Hlelolwenkosi – says with a smug grin on his face. "Because we came to fetch you for breakfast. Mama prepared a full English breakfast. Not this crap you village people eat here on the daily." You wouldn't believe me if I told you he's only ten years old. His mom, Sinomnotho, is a triplet. "Let's get him people!" he tells the other scoundrels. I can't even complain as I am dragged out of my room, in just my boxers, which I guess is better than being completely naked. Had I given into temptation and had sex with Chris, we'd be speaking an entirely different story.

"Awu, ngabusiseka mina ngibona umndeni wami! (I am blessed to be seeing my family!)" I exclaim and ignore the groans coming from my sisters about what I am wearing. They just had to go and give birth to these devil spawns. I go around, placing a kiss on all their cheeks. MaKhathide is the last one. "Mama wami, you look really beautiful this morning."

"Thank you, Mapholoba. Why don't you sit down and eat breakfast?"

I'm not going to say no. I grab a seat beside Lwandile and I have to wait until one of the girls dishes my food for me. It's not my rule, it's my mother's. "Ngyabonga, Lesedi." I tell sis Qondisile's daughter.

She blinks her eyes at me like she doesn't understand isiZulu and continues with her breakfast. I can see MaKhathide's little frown. Qondisile married a Tswana man and her kids mostly speak English much to my mother's dismay. She thinks they don't know much about their heritage – and has spoken to Qondisile countless times about sending them to a boarding school here in KZN but nothing. Qondisile

stands her ground on raising her children the way she wants to. It's a bit of a pity that they're so westernized. My eyes follow the little babbles of two year old Ingihlelele. She's Nokulunga's son.

"Is that nail polish on his fingers?" MaKhathide asks, she's looking at my sister.

Nokulunga giggles and nods her head. "Cute, right? It's all Nkanyezi's handiwork."

"He's a boy." MaKhathide shakes her head in clear disapproval. "I know that you're trying to be more like those modern parents, maybe this is why you had the audacity to get pregnant before marriage, but you're taking things too far. And what if this boy turns out gay?"

The dining room goes dead silent – at least at the adults' table. The kids' table – a distance away from us – is filled with laughter and carelessness. I'd give anything to go and join them.

"He's just a kid, Mama." Nokulunga tries to defend her son. "Besides, what's wrong with being gay?"

"Nothing," MaKhathide chews on her food methodically, her cold glare is on my sister. "I have lots of gay acquaintances. We get along really well but...no family member of mine is going to be gay, I refuse it. Especially not your bastard son, rather send him to his Nigerian family. You don't even have a passport so I don't know how you're going to get there. But you've embarrassed me enough, your son is not going to do it too."

Nontethelelo meets my eyes from across the table and I adjust my position in my seat, trying to go unnoticed while giving my sister a blank stare. I don't know if the troubled look is meant for herself or for me – either way we're both screwed to hell and back. I can feel a weight on my shoulders. I clear my throat and look at my food. I'm not sure what Nokulunga says to defend herself but MaKhathide comes up with her own biting response. It reduces my sister to tears and she excuses herself.

"What did I say?"

"What else if you're not being a bitch like usual?" Nontethelelo snaps and stands on her feet.

“Yewena, Nontethelelo!” My mom stands to her feet but Ntethe is already walking out. “The audacity of that unguided child! What else was I expecting? She’s just like Nokulunga, and goes wherever the wind takes her. Trying to fit in wherever. I guess being gay is the new cool – but not in my house.”

“Kodwa, mkami,” Baba is soft like usual. “Did you have to hurt your daughter like—”

“Hhayi suka, Ngcobo. These kids are too sensitive these days! No wonder you have men wanting to be women and vice versa. The world is in shambles because of this. This is not normal. Cha, ngiyala.”

“Akening’xolele, bakwethu.” I stand and give everyone a smile. “If I’m going to be spending time with my favourite people, I need to get ready right now. I’m thinking of taking them to Durban.”

“Spoil them,” MaKhathide says absently. “And yourself.”

“MaKhathide wami,” I bow my head reverently. “Now you’re talking. I love you all.”

My back sags against the door as soon as I enter my house. Shit! Shit! Shit! That back there was...it was all the confirmation, MaKhathide will never accept Chris. She won’t. People around here think being gay is a curse – a waste of sperm. I can already picture MaKhathide with the whip in her hand, dragging it all along my skin, telling me I am making a mockery out of her. That I want to embarrass her in front of her enemies. I don’t think I can do that.

“Nqoba?” I hear someone whisper.

I blink my eyes and notice Chris looking up at me. “I told you to remain in the closet,” I chide him softly.

“But I sensed it was you.” He has this blinding smile kissing his pink lips. I press my thumb on it as his eyes darken with a familiar lust. He’s truly the most gorgeous creature I’ve ever laid my eyes on. “I can sense you now,” he continues in a soft whisper. He grabs my hand and guides it down his arm and he inhales shakily as if my touch is burning him. “You don’t even need to be in the same room with me. Maybe in the bathroom. But I can still sense you – the shivers down my spine. The goosebumps. The heavy weight on my shoulders. My heart jumps wildly. I can sense you.”

“Is that so?” I run a lone finger down his cheek and caress the smooth skin.

“Yeah,” he’s so close to me – and I can sense him too. The connection between us. It’s intense. A big ball of fire that refuses to die down. His pulse is going wild and his breathing is choppy with his eyes sinfully dilated. “You feel it too, don’t you?” his voice is quiet. The atmosphere between us is charged with a tempting electricity, so strong that I can feel the hairs on my skin raising, I’m getting the goosebumps he was talking about. He bites his bottom lip and I lose it. My mouth crashes down on his.

Chris moans and jumps into my arms. I grip his ass and squeeze firmly. He moans into the kiss, one of his hands coming down to grip my dick. “Bambi...” I groan, holding him tighter. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“We really shouldn’t.”

“So stop,” I murmur in between breathtaking kisses. I’m moving with him in my arms, headed for the bathroom. I open the tap behind us as the water rains down on us. I grip both of his hands in one of my own in a deathly grip and pin them above his head. “I said...” I lean into him completely, trapping his cock between our bellies. “Stop.”

Chris bites his bottom lip. “Do y-you really mean it? I don’t want us to do—”

I take Chris’ lips in a rough kiss, telling him all he needs to know. My boxers are quickly falling off as his lips detach from mine so that he can remove my jersey. “Keep it on,” I say and then prepare him as best I can with my aching dick growing impatient. He swears and clings to me with his head falling back as I find his prostate. I tease and tease until...he screams my name. “Beg me. Beg me for more.”

“Nqoba!” he glares and I’m not sure if those are tears that are merging with the water raining down on us.

“Ngincenge, dali.” My fingers curl and nudge on his prostate again. He releases a loud moan and closes his eyes with his chest lifting and falling rapidly. “Part your pretty lips and ask nicely.”

“K-Kodwa Nqoba,” he’s breathless.

“You don’t beg anymore?”

“Yes! I-I mean no. I m-mean ngyakucela ke – lifake.”

I chuckle and nod my head, I was dying too – but there’s something about the way Chris begs. He does it so beautifully. “Hold tight,” is all the warning I tell him, before pulling my fingers out of him, leaving him gasping, and then I’m spreading Chris’ ass cheeks even further apart and drawing my hips back. I attempt to put the head in but there is resistance. “Relax for me,” I kiss his temple and he nods frantically. Carefully applying the pressure again, I clench my jaw as I slowly fight through the resistance. Chris is screaming into my neck, and although trying to muffle his cries, they still echo in the bathroom. Hoarse screams of undisguised anguish. “Chris...” I struggle to get the word out. Guilt washes over me, I’m in pure bliss. Chris’ hole grips me so snugly, his heat unreal. But I am bringing the boy trapped against me pain, Chris still hasn’t removed his head from my neck and his cries are still there. They’ve transitioned, into pained whimpers and sobs. “Say the word and I’ll stop. We don’t have to do this.”

“N-No!” Chris comes out of hiding, voice roughened. “It’s just...we haven’t done this in a while a-and I, fuck it hurts because you’re not exactly...never mind. I don’t want your head to grow bigger. Just be gentle. Gentle.”

“I can do gentle.” I kiss his neck, almost ferociously and begin thrusting into him gently. His head falls back as he whispers my name. Ripples of pleasure spread throughout my body. Our breaths are coming out short and hard, and Chris is gripping my shoulders tight but it doesn’t matter. Everything drops away except for the water rushing in my ears and Chris’ short breaths, quick and desperate as my hand joins his to get him off. My dick repeatedly hits that spot that drives Chris delirious with pleasure. With every poke and prod to that spot, he mewls deliciously, incoherent words falling off his lips. I look at him, his writhing body, Chris’ rhythmic tightening on my cock is threatening to kill me. Harder I move until Chris is tensing against me and then screaming my name. His juices spill in our entwined hands and I thrust a few more times before I’m spilling deep inside him. His lips are pressing into my neck and he’s crying softly as my forehead presses on the wall. I’m breathing hard as I continue to embrace him. “You okay?”

“I love y-you.”

“Nami ngyakuthanda, dali.”

He comes out of hiding and he’s sniffing. “W-We didn’t use protection.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him honestly. “It won’t make things better but I haven’t done anything with anyone. I am still clean.”

“I believe you.”

“So...” I set him on his feet and help him to remove my jersey. Its dumped on the wet floor. “We said this wouldn’t happen again.”

“It was just this once,” he says.

We look at each other – silently calling each other out on our bullshit.

“Just this once,” I agree.

“Why are we here, bhuti Nqoba?” one of the devil spawns asks me. I meet Onalenna’s curious gaze on the rearview mirror. She’s Qondisile’s last born – at six years old.

“I’m fetching someone, ngane. Now sit in the car with your siblings and behave yourselves. Lesego watch your siblings.”

I had to help Chris escape through my bathroom window after he was dressed. He obeyed while cussing me out and cursing his gods of fashion for allowing him to fall in love with me. It was funny but I was guilty about it as well. I won’t even get to introduce him to my family. “Sphalaphala,” I greet Zenande at the door.

She looks over my shoulder. “And then, what’s with the Quantum?”

“Those devil spawns want to be taken to Durban.” I say as she allows me inside the house. I look her up and down. She isn’t showing yet but she looks beautiful. “Where is your brother?”

“Getting ready for you,” she tells me and tilts her head. Her scrutiny of me makes me nervous. “I take it that the two of you are back together. He never did tell me why you were fighting.”

“Because it was none of your business, sibukubuku.” I give her a charming smile. “We’re both trying to figure this love thing out and siyantengantenga but I love your brother.”

“He loves you too.”

“That’s a relief to know,” I kiss her cheek and continue on. “Think I’ll head to his room so that I can hear those lovely words come from him.” I knock twice on Chris’ door before opening it. He hasn’t heard and is looking at himself on the mirror. He’s giggling and talking to himself. He’s adorable. I watch him twirl around and come face to face with me. “Sponge Bob,” I grace him with a grin.

“The boy who made me do the walk of shame.” He rolls his eyes and limps his way over to me. “Ugh, I hate you.”

“Ngeshwa, you’re stuck with me.” I lean down to kiss him. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah, but we’re a bit early, right?”

“Rather safe than sorry.” I place my hand on his shoulders. We bid his sister farewell and then make our way out. The kids love Chris, they greet him as soon we are in the Quantum. I notice that I have a new message before I can drive so I check it. Its MaNtuli. My heartbeat accelerates as I open it. The last time I tried to call her and she’d snapped and told me to stay away from her.

I need to see you.

That’s all the message says.

Now? – me

Even now. I’m at the hospital. – MaNtuli

“I need to start at the hospital first,” I tell Chris after I’ve confirmed with MaNtuli that I will be seeing her soon. “I think it’s a little urgent.”

“Oh?” Chris gives me a curious glance.

I only explain by giving him my phone. Lately, I’ve been trying to be open with him. The same way that I have access to his phone, I want him to have access to mine. It wasn’t easy, especially getting rid some of the damning pictures and videos on my phone but I had to. I do love him – and actions speak louder than words. I’m trying to be more open with him. To show him that he can trust me.

“What does she want?” I can detect the bitterness in Chris’ voice.

“I’m not sure but we’re going to start at the hospital.”

“It’s not like I have a say anyway.” He turns the volume up. It’s hideous Gqom music but my sisters’ kids love it. “I don’t mean to sound insensitive because of her situation that she definitely did not deserve but I wish she’d stay away from you. She’s still a rap—”

“If you have nothing to say then keep quiet.” I tell him sternly.

Chris shifts his attention to me and frowns. “Suit yourself then, you asshole.”

“Juicy!” Lesego’s voice sounds in my ears. She’s finally talking. For close to an hour she was mad at me for not having fetched Nhlakanipho to join us. She has this useless crush on him and doesn’t seem to understand that he’s way too old for her. She’s only in Grade 8 and he’s going to varsity next year. Anyway, Nhlakanipho called to say he’d be busy with Siyabonga today. I think that’s code for they’ll be fucking. “Do you like my uncle, Chris?”

Chris chokes on his saliva. I want to laugh but we’re at the hospital. I grab my phone to tell MaNtuli that I have arrived. She sends a message back, claiming that her brother will fetch me. “Ngyabuya,” I tell the others as soon I spot a man who is wearing the clothes MaNtuli described. “Unjani, bafo?”

“Nqobizitha?” He shakes my hand.

“The one and only.” We make small talk as we head back inside the hospital. My heart drops as I spot MaNtuli in her hospital bed. She looks well enough but I am sure she’s dying on the inside. I can’t imagine how she must be feeling – rape is a different form of torture. “Mama wami...” her brother has left us.

“Ngobizitha...” tears are raining down her cheeks. I attempt to touch her but she seems frightened. “Don’t sit, I don’t want you to stay.”

“Mama?” I am blindsided by the coldness of her voice.

“Just...your mother won’t get away with this! Tell her. Tell her I said that. She takes me for a f-fool. She sent men to...to—” a sob breaks free and I desperately want to comfort her but I’m getting knots in my belly and her scent is making me sick. I try to wrap my head around what she’s saying but I’m not understanding a single thing.

“Talk to me, MaNtuli...” I implore.

“One of those men...I’ve seen her with that boy before. I remember him, his face. She’s not going to get away with this. So she sends her boyfriends to rape me? She couldn’t tell me herself to stay away from you?”

“No, that’s not true.” I shake my head and grab the nearest chair to sit down on. “MaKhathide wouldn’t do that. And what boyfriends are you talking about? I’m sorry about what happened to you but blaming my mother won’t find you the perpetrators. I can still help to—”

“SHUT UP!” She screams and I groan, discreetly looking around us to the other patients here. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. Your mother is a whore! On multiple occasions, I’ve seen her with different boys from all the neighbouring villages. And now she sent four of them—”

“Cha!” I shake my head and get up, feeling increasingly suffocated. “Uyabheda manje, MaNtuli. A sixty old woman with multiple partners? You need therapy. I can’t believe my mom even wanted to come here and offer to rebuild your home. If she knew that you were going to hurl accusations against her.”

“Believe what you want!” I’ve never seen her this broken and cold before. “But she’s not going to get away with this. She thinks she’s the only one with a powerful family? I will tear her apart. You give her that message. Tell her she can’t break me.”

I shake my head. “Why would my mother even target you, Fundiswa? She wouldn’t.”

“Because she’s jealous, can’t you see?!” Her voice lifts again. “I’ve always told you that she’s jealous of the love I give you and now she’s proving it. She was trying to keep me away from you and she succeeded there. I want nothing to do with you, Nqobizitha! But your mother, tell her that I said her day is coming.”

I don’t know how to reply so I stand and leave without another word. My mind is racing and maybe Chris can sense my foul mood because he grips my wrist as we’re at a red light. “Are you okay?”

I pull out of his touch and look at the rearview mirror. Lesego is on her phone and the younger kids are playing together. “We’ll talk later,” I say and switch this stupid Gqom music to maskandi instead. It will make me feel better. The drive feels longer and halfway there, Chris pinches my arm as *Manginawe* comes on. I briefly give him my attention and notice the gorgeous smile that he’s giving me.

“I love you,” I can see him mouthing.

I don’t reply verbally but my small smile tells him all he needs to know.

After we’ve dropped him off at the modelling agency, I take the kids out as promised. MaKhathide said there’s no budget so I indulge them and I have to tell Lesego to keep a close eye on them because I am absentminded. So that day, when MaNtuli said my mother wasn’t innocent, she meant that she hung out with other men. I don’t know what to believe – not yet. MaKhathide has never given us reason to believe that she’s cheating. None whatsoever. She does go to different parts of KZN a lot but that’s because of business. I think she’s in love with my father. They have their shit like most couples but I don’t think it’s bad enough that she’d want to cheat.

But why would MaNtuli choose her?

I still don't have the answers as Chris calls me to come and pick him up. The kids are still watching a movie but Lesego is mature enough and I trust her to take care of them. We're only twenty minutes away from Chris anyway. The drive is quick and I get there in record time. He gives me a bright grin and jumps into my arms as soon as he spots me. "I had the best class ever!" his aura grounds me.

I bury my face in his neck and hug him real tight. "Bambi," I mumble against his neck.

"What's the matter?" he pulls back and looks into my eyes.

"I—" the words refuse to come out.

"Let's go." He cups my face and kisses my lips. "We can talk about it at the mall. You said you left the kids there and I don't want anything bad to happen to them."

I just nod my head and allow him to drag me out. I get him some food before we go to the food courts closest to the cinema. We sit down and I watch him eat for a while. He pushes my face away and gives me a shy look. The rare one. "What is it?"

"You're just so beautiful," I tell him.

"Thank you," he leans into kiss my lips. I ignore the homophobic slurs behind us and focus on him. His features are downcast a second before he's smiling brightly again. "I love you, I don't care about those idiots. Anyway what did MaNtuli say? You came back looking sad."

"She just said something that has been affecting me," I rub my face and groan into my hands. Chris is squeezing my arm and when I open my eyes, he's giving me an emphatic look. "She said MaKhathide sent the rapists to her house."

Chris' eyes widen. "So it wasn't your sister?"

"What are you talking about?"

He puts his hand over his mouth and shakes his head.

“No, no. You’re not going anywhere.” I hiss quietly and grip his wrist, forcefully making him sit down. “Tell me what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t be mad,” he whispers, giving me a shifty but desperate look. “I-I didn’t know who else to tell or what to do. You wouldn’t listen to me, Nqobizitha. So I... so I—”

“You told my sisters?” my blood boils and I try to keep my rage at bay.

“Just Nontethelelo!” He says too quickly. “M-Maybe we should do this at home.”

I give him a look.

“Talk,” I say quietly.

“You have no right to be mad at me. I feel guilty as well and I didn’t know your sister would do this. I’m sorry that MaNtuli was raped. No one deserves that cruelty but she did it to you first and—”

“Shut up,” I whisper, looking around. The way he says this makes me feel ashamed and is rapidly igniting the anger within me. “If my family did this, do you have any idea how badly you’ve screwed up? What about me, huh? Do you think I want to have it on my conscience that that woman was raped because of me?”

He shakes his head, eyes glossy. “I wanted to get you help a-and I didn’t know, Nqobizitha.”

“I—” his soft hiccups capture my attention and I am still so angry but I don’t like it when he cries. He does it a lot lately. I pull him onto my lap and do my best again to ignore the two homophobes behind us. “It’s not your fault.” I murmur through the strain in my voice. “Don’t blame yourself. I’m the fuck up here. I fucked up and now MaNtuli got in trouble because of me. I’m sorry, sthandwa sami.”

“N-No, you didn’t.”

I wish I could believe him but it's hard to. On top of feeling weird around MaNtuli, now I have to deal with the issue of her rape. It will weigh heavily on me. I just know it. I always want to protect women – that's just in my nature. I couldn't protect MaNtuli. I failed her. My body is trembling a little, alongside Chris'. Maybe he can read my thoughts because I can hear his words. *Not your fault. Not your fault. Not your fault.* They echo over and over in my brain and slowly pull me out of the darkness – until there aren't any lumps in my throat, until my eyelids don't feel heavy, until my trembling ceases.

"I love you," he says softly. He shifts and then he's looking into my eyes. I allow his lips to press onto mine, for him to breathe his weightless air into me, to fill me with his light. "Nqobizitha, I love you." So much insistence, the conviction. My soul believes him.

"Njengoba nami ngikuthanda," I say honestly. He kisses me again and then folds his arms tightly around me. The only thing that keeps registering is that I love him more...more...more.

More than... *her*.

I close my eyes and bury my face in neck – chasing the inevitable guilt away.

Bonus Insert

Nhlakanipho

“Not fair, you cheated!” Chris scream-giggles as Nqobizitha wraps his arms around him and lifts him in his arms, throwing him in the air like he weighs nothing and then catching him just as easily, spinning around with him. I sigh and shake my head, amusement pulling one corner of my mouth. “You made me sick and that wasn’t fair, Tarzan.”

I will never not find it funny that they have all these pet names for each other. Siyabonga is already laughing beside me, I look at him and then our surroundings. We’ve moved the cattle deep enough into the pasture that all the houses seem like tiny ants. I let myself relax a little and wrap my arm around Siyabonga who shifts his attention and regards me with a soul snatching beam. “Ave umuhle kodwa, Shandu. (You’re beautiful.)” I lean down to kiss him.

He maneuvers his body until he’s in front of me and bringing me down to properly kiss him. I smile against his lips, his eagerness is endearing and sends the desire to my semi-hard dick. He’s kissing me with everything in him – his tongue hot and wet and aggressive. My senses are reeling and I am close to losing control but the sound of Chris’ sassy voice reaches my ears and I reluctantly pry Siyabonga away with a quiet sigh. My heart is racing but it never shows on the outside. We both look at each other as I wipe the wetness off of Siya’s swollen lips. “You’re not breathless,” Siya pouts, he’s heaving.

“Oh...sorry,” I say and then heave pretentiously. “How am I doing?”

“You’re an—” he bites his bottom lip as I cock an eyebrow. “You don’t even know what I was going to say. I wanted to say that you’re an amazing boyfriend. My lovely future husband.”

I kiss his temple and then wrap my arm around him as we continue walking. “Smart ass.” He chuckles as we focus on Chris who is going on and on about Nqobizitha being a cheat.

“You still cheated, Nqoba. You left your jersey at Nhlakanipho’s on purpose, knowing very well I wouldn’t be able to concentrate with you half-naked. You cheated.”

Nqobizitha still has Chris in his arms, walking with him. “How the hell is that cheating? I even gave you a head start, nganeyakwethu.”

“Still, ndoda yami...” I am a little taken aback by the new pet name – if I can call it that. “You...you distracted me!”

I watch my best friend’s amused features morph into disbelief before he’s laughing again. “Fine, I’ll give you another chance but I’ll still catch you just as easily. I have long legs and you don’t run fast enough.”

“Oh, it’s on mon amour!” Chris pecks Nqobizitha’s lips a couple of times before he’s on his feet and taking off in a rush. “Catch me if you can!” he shouts, making it past a few cattle. I shake my head as a quiet chuckle bubbles from inside me. I don’t really know what’s going on with these two. Chris says they’re together but not really together. They’re each others apparently. But I’ve been quietly observe them grow together in little ways. I’ve seen Chris impact Nqobizitha in the small things – he’s wearing another pair of shorts today. Different from the navy one Chris bought him. And Chris, you can tell that he’s not the same boy from a few months ago when he steps on cow dung and momentarily squeals before his face transitions and reveals hints of mischief. He picks a handful of cow dung and throws it Nqobizitha’s way. Even I have never done that. He giggles manically and takes off in a rush again.

Nqobizitha isn’t even affected as he closes in on him. I’m beginning to think that they share the same brain cell. I saw it in my room before we went to my uncle’s to fetch the cattle. As I was entering my room, I found Nqobizitha – large as he is – attempting to enter my wardrobe to hide from Chris. I left him there and went to uGogo and then as I was going back to my room, I found Chris trying to hide inside my trunk to scare Nqobizitha. They were thinking the exact same thing – as if they’re one person. Maybe they are.

“Akenime, madoda!” I call out as the cattle decide that they’ve found the perfect place to graze on. “We’ll continue a bit later on but this spot is perfect.”

“Let me wash this off,” Nqoba refers to the cow dung on his chest. There’s a stream nearby and Chris volunteers to go with him but Siya sees right through him and tells him to stay behind. I find a tree and place our bags down before protecting myself from the sun. Chris is throwing a little temper tantrum and it’s amusing to see him giving in with a soft glare sent my boyfriend’s way. I laugh and then close my eyes, letting out a silent breath. The exhaustion seeps out of me slowly and I can feel myself drifting off. Gogo had to take Kuhlekonke to the hospital last night because she had difficulty breathing and couldn’t swallow her food. It’s an issue that she’s been having for some days now but all of us hadn’t thought it would get out of hand. She has croup and Gogo says it’s common with children under the age of five but

Konke began crying around dinner time and we were forced to fork out R300 to get transport from my uncle just to take her to the hospital.

He's a greedy man, always has been, but he's basically the only family we have. Aside from Gogo, he's the only elder I can call family. The others are having way too much fun in different parts of South Africa and can't be relied on. I'm tired because I had to help Thandolwenkosi with the kids. Olwenkosi was really fussy and wanted to sleep with me because she doesn't sleep with the others and Gogo is usually with her. Then Kuhlekimi was crying her lungs out that Siyabonga and I could hear her from my room. I woke up many times to check up on her – and maybe she likes me better than Thando because her shrill cries were reduced to occasional soft whimpers when I held her. So we decided that we'd move her to my room as well. It was the strangest experience of my life – caring for the little alien. Not as bad as I thought it would be but I was glad when Gogo returned this morning.

"Kunjani, bafo?" I ask with my eyes still closed.

A little smile forms on my lips as Nqobizitha punches my arm. It hurts – even his playful punches feel like being hit with a strong brick. Maybe he should look into boxing, his fists are capable of causing so much damage. But Nqobizitha doesn't resort to violence first – he's the gentlemanly type. I can't even begin to imagine what it's like to be like that... I don't want to. I don't believe it's the way respect is earned. But we're brothers him and I – different blood but one in spirit. He understands me better than most people, he's almost as good as Siyabonga.

"How did you know it was me?"

"Aside from you smelling like expensive cow shit, I can feel you – your aura. You're my brother," I tell him, only briefly opening my eyes to blink at him. "Sit down, you're blocking my view."

He snorts and I feel him sit beside me. "Its not like you were watching anything anyway."

"I was watching my husband awkwardly dancing with your future husband."

Nqobizitha makes a choking sound and then coughs. I open my eyes and turn my head toward him as a laugh breaks free from me. "Whoa...easy, bafo. Marriage isn't going to kill you. It's not some life-threatening disease. Believe me."

He regards me with complete disbelief and shakes his head while chuckling. He shifts his attention and stares in the direction of the apple of his eye. His eyes are soft and I can see his little smile. The way he has it so bad is pathetic levels of bad. Siyabonga is my whole world but I don't look sappy like Nqobizitha does...I hope I don't – at least not in front of people.

“Do you really think that's possible, bafo?” Nqoba shifts his attention to me.

“It's in both your hands,” I sit up, a tiny smirk pulling at my lips as Siya sways his hips side to side with his burning gaze on me. If he keeps this up, he won't be walking come tomorrow. “Uthando lumnandi uma kunemvisiswano, nithandana futhi ningakhohlisani. (Love is beautiful when there is understanding, when you love honestly.) Kuze ngathi banomona abaseceleni ngothando lwenu (That those around you even seem jealous of your love). Uyezwa, bafo?”

“Njengawe noSiyabonga.”

My soul reacts to those words, not just my heart. “We're each other's missing puzzles, Siya and I. Like those soul recognition things people go on and on about. There is no me without him and vice versa. But just because we're soul mates, it doesn't mean we don't work hard to maintain the peace in our relationship. We struggle but you won't ever see it because...previously, it was just better to hide. Kodwa uGogo is great with advising. And no matter how angry we are at each other, we don't treat each other like strangers. All relationships require hard work, bafo.”

“I don't think I can even look at Chris when I'm angry at him.”

“But you still care enough to protect him when he needs you,” I say, thinking back to the Empangeni incident. Chris told Siya about it and Siya can barely keep his mouth shut around me and for the days following that, I'd had to bear listening to him come up with an entire thesis on why Nqobizitha and Chris are soul mates – just like me and him. Like he wasn't cussing out my best friend just days prior. This is why I prefer to mind my own business most of the time. People change futhi ke ezababili azingenwa. “You love him.”

“Njengoba usho, bafo (as you've said) but I feel off since we came back from Durban yesterday. You see I didn't plan to fall in love with him but I did. With him, everything is effortless, he doesn't even rush me. Maybe it's why I fell in love with him – and now, I want him to take my surname...someday. Kodwa weehh bafo, MaKhathide will skin me alive. Then also what do I do about—Ntombikayise?” he looks sick and I hope he's not going to pass out on me again.

“Who is that?”

“She’s...never mind.” He shakes his head and faces Chris. A little smile pulls at his lips and I can’t say I blame him. The short being is weird...he’s stroking one of the calves and looks like he’s saying something to it. Its father must’ve been bribed by him because that bull usually doesn’t allow anyone get close to its kids. “Do my parents look in love to you?”

“What?” I give him an inquisitive glance, taken aback by his randomness.

“Do they look in love? Do you think one of them would ever cheat? Say...MaKhathide for example.” His eyes are shifty.

“Cha,” I say the first thing that comes to mind. I wonder if he’s seen her with that boy as well. Maybe I can’t read body language well but that boy had look like her helper more than anything. She doesn’t look like the type to meddle with young boys – and that boy was maybe a few years older than us. I don’t think her pride would allow her to but I don’t know. I pushed them out of my mind immediately she had left us. I don’t pay attention to a lot of things. “Ubuze lani?”

“Just something MaNtuli said.” He says nothing else. I don’t pry further.

Siya and Chris are talking and then occasionally glancing at me with this one I’m in love with scrunching his face up in that way he always does when he’s thinking hard about something. But with that blinking thing he’s doing with his eyes, I know that he’s about to make me agree to something that I probably won’t want to do. My suspicions are proved correct as Chris skips happily around him and then drags him to where Nqobizitha and I are sitting.

“What is it, Phakade lami?” I ask as soon as he’s within earshot.

Siwabonga freezes momentarily and then does that wiggling thing with his shoulders as he folds his arms on his chest. “Nooo!” his lips squeeze into a pout. “You’re not fair!”

“He’s not psychic, right?” Chris sports a ghosted look as he goes to confidently perch himself in Nqobizitha’s arms as if he belongs there – and perhaps he does, with the way my best friend readily embraces him, kissing the skin along his neck.

“No, he’s not.” Siyabonga sighs and mimics him by sitting in between my legs with his back resting comfortably on my chest. I wrap my arms around him and breathe him in. He shivers against me and rests his arms on top of mine, entwining our fingers. “He just has this bad tendency of reading me. I’m an open book to him, I couldn’t hide if I tried.”

Chris nods but you can tell it’s hard for him to concentrate on anything other than Nqobizitha’s lips mouthing at his ear. He is squirming and seems a little breathless. “But he doesn’t know what we discussed, right?”

“Chris and I were thinking,” Siya says instead and shifts a little so that he’s looking into my eyes. “Ngyakuthanda, baby uyezwa?”

“Just spit it out,” I kiss the corner of his mouth.

“This was my suggestion,” he has this nervous smile kissing his beautiful lips. “Remember that time we all went to Richard’s Bay?”

“Yes.” I nod my head slowly.

“Remember how good it felt to flaunt our love for once. Well not flaunt but... I was happy that everyone could see that you’re mine and I am yours. That we didn’t have to hide for once. It meant the world to me, baby. Because I want everyone to know about you, you have no idea. Like all these straight people go on and on about their partners, I want that as well. I should be able to do it. I can’t. Not here. And it frustrates me so much. I hate it. Chris says it’s better in Johannesburg – and he wants to go there with Nqobizitha. But then he remembered that I wanted to go as well. Now’s the perfect opportunity, to get away from it all. Today’s Monday, we could leave on...”

“Wednesday,” Chris pipes in but he’s not really meeting my eye. I think he’s scared of me somehow. “So you’d have the whole of tomorrow to prepare. Then we can return either late Friday or Saturday morning. That will give you guys enough time to rest before schools open again on Tuesday.”

“Please say yes, Mzimela. Please, Phakade lami...” Siya is looking at me with wide eyes.

Like I ever have a choice where he’s concerned.

“I’ll have to make sure that uGogo won’t need me,” I say because Kuhlekonke is still in hospital. Then there’s also the issue of cash. Where are we going to stay? How will I make sure that Siya and I are having fun when I don’t even have fifty cents in my pocket? I don’t want this trip to be—

“Hey...” he pierces through my thoughts and straddles my lap. I look into his eyes as he cups my face. “You know me by now. I love you with everything in me. It’s not about money, Mzimela. It’s never been about money. It’s about you as a person, your soul and the magic we create together. Our souls don’t recognize financial status – just that we’re supposed to be together and that we make sense. It’s not about money. You make me happy without even trying. Don’t—please don’t feel sorry for yourself. Don’t put yourself down, Nhliziyo yami. We’ll get there one day but right now it doesn’t matter. I just know that I love you.”

“My love won’t take you to Joburg, it won’t buy you what you need.”

“That doesn’t matter. It fulfils all parts of me that no one else will ever be able to and that’s enough for me. Besides, Nqobizitha’s parents didn’t buy him that Mercedes GLC 63 for him to not have it step foot out of KZN grounds. He needs to show those city kids that we village kids have style as well.”

“Gold-digger tendencies.” Nqobizitha laughs but he’s nodding his head. “I’m game mina, bafoza. I don’t know about you.”

“You better say yes or I’m not spending the night at your house and you can tell that bitch Lesego to come over instead.”

“So dramatic!” Chris rolls his eyes and I have to agree with him. “And petty.”

“I didn’t call my boyfriend Hugo in bed.”

Chris' eyes widen and he looks at Nqobizitha. "You told them? Ugh, I can't believe you did that, you asshole. Wasn't it enough that you crippled me for close to a day? Did he tell you how he forced my orgasms as well, hmm? That I blacked out and he—what an asshole! This is what I'm stuck with."

"So dramatic!" Siya echoes Chris' words from not too long ago. "And petty."

Chris giggles and rolls his eyes. "Bitch!"

"Slut!" Siya returns.

"Dick sucker!"

"Cum swallower!"

Nqobizitha moves his face from inside Chris' neck and finds my amused stare. We're twins sometimes, he seems to read my mind as I silently tell him to keep out of it.

"Wait, he put the belt around your neck?" Chris' jaw is slack.

"No different from when your boyfriend wraps his hand around your throat. Only difference is I'm not a sissy. I don't pass out."

"Ha ha ha," Chris licks his lips and looks at Nqobizitha. "Do you want to choke me with one of your belts?"

"I'd tell you to drink whiskey off of me but you don't drink and it doesn't sound as appealing with non-alcoholic drinks."

"Good." I kiss Siya's forehead. "Because I wouldn't do it."

“You haven’t answered me about going to Joburg, Nhlakanipho. Please, I really want this for us. Accommodation is sorted. Chris says we can stay where he stays. We’ll save cash that way and our other expenses, I can—”

“If it will make you happy, Phakade lami.” My hands travel to his ass to squeeze firmly. “I always want to see a smile on your beautiful face, Nhliziyo yami. If it will make you happy...”

A sound of surprise me when he hugs me so tight, I am sent back first onto the grass. I don’t have the opportunity to react as Siya kisses me next – grateful and passionate. The world becomes a mere dust particle then, our souls crawling out to meet each other. I smile into the kiss as my hands replant themselves on the delectable ass of the boy above. Siya smiles right back and rubs up against me.

“Ngyabonga, baby. This is why I love you.” He says breathlessly as soon as the need for air separates us.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...” I sit up with him and give him a knowing look. “You just love that I can barely say no to you.”

“And I will never not be smug about it. Ngikuthanda ukufa, baby wami.”

I pinch his ass and gesture to the other two. “Stop calling me baby in public. Soxabana, yezwa.”

“You can punish me all you want when we go back home.” It does something to me how he always refers to my home as his home as well. I don’t know how I ever got so lucky with him but maybe my dead mother sent him to me. Maybe she knew that I’d need an angel on my side. Siyabonga isn’t an ordinary human being, he’s a guiding light sent to me by my ancestors. He grows me in ways that are incomparable. I don’t know who I am without him. “And I’ll cry but still take it.”

“You guys are disgusting,” Chris fake-gags, there is no malice in his voice. He’s smiling. I’m not sure when he removed his t-shirt but he’s half-naked now, and is straddling Nqobizitha. I raise my eyebrow as I notice that my best friend’s hands have slithered their way inside Chris’ jeans, to grip his ass. They’re dry-humping a little and I don’t know whether to laugh or look away. Chris moans and wraps his arms around Nqobizitha’s neck. “T-Tarzan wait...”

“Not wait. Stop. Sies man, phambi kwethu!” Siya smirks and then adds, “You guys are disgusting!”

“Tramp!”

“Floozy!”

“And you’re a harlot!”

“Well you’re a whore,” Siya returns.

“I am a whore,” Chris gets a little smile. “Nqoba’s whore. Ask him.”

“Mxm, you’re crazy.” Siya laughs and then they’re back to talking about our sex lives again.

I watch in silence, amused, and bask in the good feelings that surround us. Of all the things that I could’ve imagined would happen to me and Nqobizitha when we were growing up, this wasn’t one of them. Even when I started developing feelings for Siyabonga. I was scared to lose my brother, one of the few constants in my life. But here we are – both of us...like this. Nqobizitha may not see it but I can see the intensity in which he loves Chris, how it seems deep. Not like me and Siyabonga. We’re not the same and comparing us serves no use. It’s different – their connection. Different but deep and intense. Similar yet different to the connection I have with Siyabonga. Everlasting it looks like.

He doesn’t know it yet. But one day, we’ll both bond about this day. Maybe on a Saturday, with little kids running around one of our houses and silver bands on our ring fingers.

Mutual Desires : Twenty-three

Nqobizitha

“Hey...”

My eyes shift from my bag and find Lesego who is standing at the doorway of my bedroom with a bored look on her face. It’s hard to believe that we used to get along really well once – but she’s ‘too cool’ for a village kid like me now...until she’s begging me to hook her up with Nhlaka which will never happen. “Lesego, ufunani?”

“Ew! English, please...” the snob huffs and folds her arms on her chest. “My grandmother – your mommy—” she giggles and I roll my eyes. I used to be really uncomfortable about the fact that my mother had me at such an old age, even her oldest daughter’s first born child is older than me and it was just...for a long time I was insecure. My mom’s small body and money means she manages to take care of herself so that she doesn’t age quickly but many people know her age and the older I am growing, the more I realize that she’s still my mother and that her age means nothing. Many people are without mothers and wish they could know what it’s like to have one – MaKhathide is not perfect but I’m one of the lucky ones. “She said to hurry up because breakfast is ready and you’ve been missing the morning prayer a lot lately. If this happens then you won’t be having breakfast and you’ll go to Joburg hungry.”

“Heard and noted,” I focus on my bag again, zipping it up. “See yourself out, ngane.”

“The audacity!” she makes a frustrated sound and I can hear footsteps. I shake my head and laugh before grabbing my phone to check the time. It’s 06:35am. Chris, Nhlakanipho along with his boyfriend, and I are leaving around 09:00am. Chris said it will take us around seven hours to reach Johannesburg. My stomach is knots, part of me can’t believe that I’m actually doing this. For a long time, I thought that people who went there eventually lose themselves. That they become immoral eventually. I’ve heard stories about men who abandon their families for the women there – and witnessed it with my own eyes. But the way Chris describes it, it doesn’t really sound too bad. Like some people lose themselves when they go to that city, some of them find their freedom. For the next three days, I plan to find my freedom. I want Siya and Nhlakanipho to find theirs even more. It’s easy to tell that Siyabonga desperately craves to be there with Nhlakanipho, that he wants change, and the opportunity to not have to hide. He’s going to Johannesburg to find his freedom.

My phone rings just as I am leaving for the main house. A smile pulls at my lips automatically and I pause outside and answer. “Dali...”

His giggles reach my ear – it's one of my favourite sounds. "I miss you," he sounds a little breathless.

"I left your house an hour ago."

"You did," he's silent a while and his breaths are sent to my belly, giving me welcomed flutters. I grip my phone a little tighter and silently signal to one of my sisters that I'll be joining the family soon. "But I still miss you – or maybe I'm just really excited for our trip. I want to show you my favourite hangout spots and introduce you to my friends. You're going to love them."

Maybe...maybe not.

"Are you wearing any underwear?" I ask him.

"What?" I can almost see him shaking his head, I want to laugh but my lips remain pursed. "You're so random. Why are you asking?"

"Easy access, dali. This is a long trip we'll be making."

"Hell no!" his infectious laughs reach my ears, I join him. "I love you but I am not that adventurous, sthandwa sami. Anyway, I thought we said we were going to abstain from sex."

"We lied." Lesego opens the front door, looking irritated so I decide to wrap things up with Chris. "I have to go. Kodwa ngyakuthanda uyezwa?"

"Njengoba nami ngikuthanda, Bhubesi lami."

"Istoko sami, madoda." I chuckle.

"Muntu wami."

“Weeeh, awuthi ngihambe, Themba lami. Lesego is glaring daggers at me. I’ll see you soon.”

“Ngyakuthanda.”

“Nami dali.” I hang up and then go to join my family. They’re all at the dining room – around the large table with the kids at their own table. The devilish scamps didn’t break into my house today, because they didn’t want to be chauffeured around the whole of KZN. “Sanibonani,” I greet everyone.

They return my greeting. I sit next to Sinomnotho and wait until my plate is dished up. I’ve missed the morning prayer apparently and I can see my siblings glaring at me because MaKhathide is going on a rant about how we could be better children – at least me and the other unmarried ones. Over the years, I’ve mastered the art of tuning out MaKhathide. So I look at my food and get lost in my thoughts instead. My thoughts mostly revolve around Chris and then...Ntombikayise. My stomach twists nervously at the mention of her name – even if it is internal. I was thinking of visiting her grave one of these days...maybe when I return from Johannesburg. I want to tell her about how my relationship with Chris is developing. Maybe I want her to meet him. I want her to meet him.

“Nqobizitha, woza. I need to talk to you.”

I meet Nontethelelo’s eyes as MaKhathide says that. I shrug my shoulders at the question in her eyes, I’m not sure what our mother wants from me. “Yebo, MaKhathide.” I stand and follow her outside the dining room. She has a study in this house – not the ones that look intimidating, just a small room with clutter everywhere. MaKhathide can’t function in a clean room. She loves her clutter so the helpers know to stay away from this room. I sit down with her permission and give her my best grin. “How can I brighten up your day, my lovely mother?”

“That smile you’re giving me is enough,” she gives me a stern look. “How are you feeling, mfana wami?”

I blink, taken aback by the question. I hope this isn’t some form of trick. My mother and I don’t do heart to hearts and this is a weird question. “Always fine, MaKhathide.” I ease more comfortably into my seat, trying to reiterate that through my body language. “What about you?”

“Fine,” her voice is cold. She slides on her glasses and grabs some papers off her desk. “I called you here because I never got the opportunity to ask about how your trip went with your nieces and nephews on Saturday.” She doesn’t look at me.

“We all had a great time, Mama wam.” I try to read her facial expression but she is giving nothing away. “We spent some time at the mall and then went to a nearby park.” My heart jumps nervously, I hope no one we know saw us on that day – especially at the mall. Chris was on my lap for a really long time.

“I see. Did you happen to see MaNtuli on that day as well?”

Oh... so this is why I am here. “Are you a seer now, MaKhathide?” I try for a relaxed laugh but my stomach is churning to the point of sickness. “Yes, I went to see her. To empathize with her and remind her that I will keep her in my prayers. Or did my mother perhaps have a message that she would’ve loved me to give to her? Maybe about house renovations.”

“Oh yes, I was going to assist her with that but not anymore I am afraid. One of the nurses saw you with her and reported back to me about her treatment of you. No one shouts at my son and makes a mockery out of him in public. Is it not enough that she entangled you in that mess with her dead husband? I want you to stay away from her.”

“MaKhathide. Who is this nurse that told you this?” I don’t remember if there were any nurses around us that day. There is a possibility and maybe I hadn’t paid attention. “You waited three days to tell me this?”

“It slipped my mind,” she says but somehow I don’t believe that. She’s anything but forgetful – the way she continuously reminds us of past mistakes attests to that. “Anyway, the only reason I wanted to find out about her is so that I can tell you to stay away from her. That woman isn’t good, my son. Stop this nonsense of sleeping with older women, it’s tasteless and embarrassing. Women with large vaginas that millions of boys have swam in? Cha mfana wami, raise your standards a little.”

“Like you raise your standards with small boys?” the words leave me before I can stop them. The hot clap that I get right after is even faster and I go deaf in one ear for a few seconds. “MaKhathide—”

“Don’t you mess with me. You’re not going to like the woman I become.” Her voice is deathly quiet, face made of stone. “Do you know what you’re talking about?”

“MaNtuli saw you on multiple occasions,” I am getting agitated. My eyes narrow in on her as I sit up and clear my throat. “Maybe you should practice what you preach. Or maybe I should tell my father about

this. First you put your hands on him and now you're chasing after young boys? Practice what you preach, MaKhathide."

I get a cold laugh in response. With her, I can't distinguish the real ones from the fake ones. "MaNtuli saw me with young boys? Which boys? Does she mean the same boys I've rescued from her clutches? The ones that she'd pay for sex? The ones that are now employed because of me. I gave those boys jobs – to help out in their communities. Ever heard of logistics, Mapholoba?"

"No," I shake my head. "That's not what she told me, MaKhathide. She said...she said that you, that you sent those men to rape her."

"Oh please," she snorts and rolls her eyes, removing her glasses. "It's called revenge, mfana wami. Those boys realized that she was taking advantage of them and gave her what was due to her. I had nothing to do with it. She's not worth the time or effort. That woman is nothing but bad news, and filled with bad luck. Awungisize uhlukane naye. (Please help me and stay away from her). Why can't you be like Nhlakanipho?"

"Because I'm not him," I say respectfully, pushing down the hurt. "Maybe you and my father should try for another son, huh?" a bitter chuckle escapes me.

"Or you could just stop being such a disappointment. A good start would be you staying away from that overcooked spaghetti called MaNtuli. Awuzithande. If you're going to drown in pussy make sure it doesn't resemble a dirty river where rituals are performed. Stay away from decaying vaginas."

"I shall do as you have said, my lovely mother." I stand up and bow my head respectfully, pausing at the door to add, "Watch your back also. A message from the woman with a decaying vagina," and then shut the door after me. That was one weird ass conversation. My heart is clenching a little at the knowledge that I wasn't the only one MaNtuli was fucking. All those words and the way she...fuck it. I shake my head and put the thoughts away in a mental storage container, I'm not going to deal with this crap. "What is it?" I ask Ntethe who immediately pulls me into her room.

"What was that? You look tense, your mother doesn't know about your cute boyfriend. Tell me she doesn't."

"She doesn't know about Chris."

I watch her facial muscles loosen. “Hooey! I was nervous for you, you’d probably get sent to some place similar to a Nazi concentration camp. They’d torture your brain and stuff. Maybe conduct experiments on you to see if you’re abnormal in—”

“That’s quite enough, Ms. Ngcobo.” I grip her shoulders and snap her out of her rambling. She does this a lot when she’s nervous. “Relax, she won’t find out. I know what I’m doing.”

“If you say so.” We collapse on her bed and she crawls onto my lap and rests her head on my shoulder. Its funny how the roles are reversed and how it’s me who can carry her small body like this now. “Tell Chris to take you to a club called Pryde. It’s there in Randburg. It’s a gay bar – if the name gave nothing away.”

“Tell him yourself.”

Ntethe punches my arm and giggles. “Thank god you’re leaving. Now maybe I can make my move on Zenande while you’re gone.”

I push her off me and get up. “You’re acting like we’re still fucking. She’s a beauty but she has nothing on her brother. Marry her, at least you won’t have to bear the burden of giving MaKhathide a grandchild – with Zenande pregnant.”

“You make a valid point. If only she weren’t so caught up in that Jabulani guy. If only she knew that women make better lovers.”

“That is debatable,” I snort and push her off of me as she tries to climb me. She’ll mess up my clothes and I don’t want to change into something else. I like what I am wearing. “I’ll see you around sisi. I have to fetch Chris and then Siya but he slept at Nhlakanipho’s which means I have to drive there.”

“Oooh, the lovebirds. Rub it in my face that all of you are in love and shit. Fuck you!” she throws her pillow at me, I catch it and then toss it back at her with light force. “Be safe, please. I love you.”

She’s been telling me to be safe a lot lately and asking about my feelings like MaKhathide. It made me suspicious that perhaps Chris had been right about her sending men after MaNtuli. I did confront her the

same day we returned from the mall but nothing. She denied everything and even chided me for not telling her about 'the rape'. It still angers me that they think I was raped, that they don't seem to understand that there's no such possibility. Women don't have dicks or strength, they can't rape. I was too out of it that night and MaNtuli wasn't hearing me. But her scent still makes me sick and sometimes I dream about her. Its embarrassing when Chris wakes me and I am soaking wet and have tears in my eyes. I always shut myself in the bathroom when that happens but Chris is an insistent force and I can never hide for too long. We talk about the dream and he'll insist that it's my subconscious reacting to the trauma I went through. I always laugh because trauma? What trauma?

I just feel nauseatingly sick sometimes – it's really frequent lately, but it's always oddly distant. Like I know it logically, but the feeling is so far removed that it doesn't fully register. After I've grabbed my duffle bag and have bid my farewell to the others, I begin the short drive to Chris' home. He's waiting outside, looking excited. I exit the car and as I get closer, he decides to rush back inside the house. I am offended. This is the same person who told me he misses me not too long ago. "Zenande," I greet his sister who is at home with a man I'm going to assume is Jabulani. "Kunjani, bafo?"

"Kuyaphileka, unjani ndoda?"

"Hhayi, nami ngyaphila." I give them both a smile. Zenande looks exhausted more than anything. This is the first time I'm seeing her look so quiet. Maybe she should get pregnant more often. That way she won't make those blood-curdling threats of hers about feeding my dick to my family. I find Chris looking at himself on the mirror. He looks gorgeous in simple jeans and a white t-shirt. He's also wearing those dramatic sneakers of his. I notice the bracelet I got him on his left wrist. My arms fold around him and my lips press on his pulse point. He squirms and laughs – our eyes meet on the mirror. He smiles, eyes bright and carefree, his teeth gleaming.

I love the way he looks at me – the admiration, yearning and love. Its exactly how I feel about him as well. "Dali," my arms squeeze tighter around him. "You say you miss me and run away immediately you see me. Is this the way you treat the boy of your dreams?"

"Cocky, cocky." Chris whirls around in my arms and stands on his tiptoes. I lift him and lean down to kiss him with his feet dangling. "I forgot to put on my lip balm and I didn't want you to kiss me with chapped lips."

"You taste like watermelon." I kiss him again as his arms fold around my neck. "Uyang'phandla kodwa ngobuhle bakho, sthandwa sami. (You're blinding me with your beauty)"

“Good. That’s how it should be.” He giggles, kisses me playfully a few times and then pulls back. I set him on his feet and take his bag from him. It’s one large suitcase and I don’t even know how many clothes he’s packed with how heavy it is. I stand aside and watch him bid his sister goodbye. It doesn’t take too long and then we’re driving to Nhlakanipho’s. It would’ve much easier had Nhlakanipho slept at Siyabonga’s but Nhlaka can never sleep at Bab’ Shandu’s home. To respect him.

“Thandolwenkosi!” Chris waves enthusiastically as he spots Nhlakanipho’s sister. They’ve become really good friends these last couple of weeks.

“Hey, Chris! Nice outfit you have going on.” I leave them there and go to greet uGogo first and play with the kids for a couple of minutes before allowing Nomzamo to drag me out of the main house for Nhlakanipho’s room. He’s already outside with Siyabonga.

“Ready to leave?” I ask them.

“Do you even have to ask?” Siyabonga regards me with childish excitement. I think he’d jump up and down if he could. He does surprise me by giving me a suffocating hug though. “Thank you so much for doing this, Nqobizitha. You’re a good friend even if you do have a bad tendency of making me fucking angry sometimes. Thank you, okay?” he says the words against my ear.

I push him away gently. “I don’t need you breathing down my neck, ngane. Only Chris is allowed to do that.”

He rolls his eyes and grabs his bag from Nhlakanipho.

“Siya!” Chris jumps up and down, clearly unbothered by how childish he appears. “Are you excited?”

“Calm down, jeez. You’d swear we’re the ones taking you on a tour to this place.” His voice is deadpan.

“My bestie!” Chris says sarcastically, rolling his eyes. I laugh and get his door for him, moving to the other side as soon as I’ve assisted him with his seatbelt. “I call dibs on the music!”

“Hell no.” Siya glares as I pull out of Nhlakanipho’s driveway with the kids giving us excited goodbyes. “I don’t want to fall asleep so soon into our trip. Forget it. We’re playing my music – starting with Ntencane.” He takes his phone out.

“I hate you!” Chris wiggles his small body.

“Go ahead, look like a toddler even more. Its just too bad we didn’t think to bring your car seat with so that you could really throw that temper tantrum.”

A rumbling laugh bubbles out of me unexpectedly. Nhlakanipho is shaking his head and easing into his seat so that he’s sitting with the back of his head resting on his seat. He has his eyes closed and looks exhausted. He didn’t get rest, he was working for his uncle again yesterday. Sometimes, I want to help him but I know better than anyone how much he hates receiving help – almost as bad as he hates asking for it. Siya and Chris go at it a couple of times before Chris accepts defeat. *‘Isgqila Sothando’* drifts over the car. I smile and purse my lips. Siya is resting his head on Nhlakanipho’s shoulder, his eyes closing as well. I wouldn’t be surprised if he kept Nhlakanipho company yesterday when my best friend was working for his uncle. He’s the most supportive person I know. The way he loves my best friend is admirable. Their whole relationship is something that most people dream to have. That too many people spend their lives searching for and still go unsuccessful.

I think I’m getting there with Chris. I like who I am when I am with him. People always go on and on about how you can’t change a person – and maybe that’s true. But I still think I’m different when I’m with Chris. I’m not the manwhore or the alcoholic. I’m more. We talk Science. We talk dreams. We talk music. We talk sex. We talk and talk and talk. I am different when I am with him. Different and fulfilled. He’s changing me – in little, unhurried ways. I have decided to apply for Bachelor of Science in the field of Geological Sciences as per his suggestion because this is my passion. MaKhathide still doesn’t know and I won’t tell her. I still need to fabricate some documents. Don’t ask.

Its silent in the car – save for the occasional areas of interest that will pique Chris’ attention that he will force me to look at. I don’t like looking at the time when I’m driving because then the drive seems longer but I am relieved when we make our first pitstop. I have to stretch my legs and my stomach is growling. Chris climbs on my back and I am forced to give him a piggyback ride as we enter a Steers. I’ve only eaten here once – an avocado burger that I hadn’t enjoyed. I was about ten years old but that burger put me off avocados for life. And I don’t trust people who genuinely enjoy avocados. Or bananas. Or strawberries. Or pork. Sies!

“What do you want, muntu wami?” Chris stands beside me with his hand finding mine.

“Excuse me.”

We all look over our shoulders to find a young couple with two children. The lady has a fake smile stretching her lips but the guy looks impatient.

“Singanisiza?” I ask first.

“Oh its just, maybe you guys could tone it down on the PDA. This is a family friendly place and we don’t want our kids to be confused. Maybe you can reserve this for the bedroom.”

I frown at this and look at the woman up and down but her husband stands in front of her. Nhlakanipho makes a move to stand in front of us as well, sizing him up. “Where is the confusion?” he asks.

“Haibo wendoda,” the man speaks in a deeper voice, squaring his shoulders like we’re supposed to be intimidated. “We’re trying to be polite here. You’re the children of Sodom and Gomorrah but you can’t try to impose your beliefs upon us. This gay agenda—”

“Yabona, bafo.” Nhlakanipho cuts him off. Siya is trying to pull his arm to diffuse the situation but he should know by now that his boyfriend is ikhanda limtshela okwakhe. “I’d count my next words very carefully if I were you. I don’t want to embarrass you in front of your wife and kids.”

The man gulps but he’s not moving. “All I’m saying is stop this nonsense of touching each other and behaving inappropriately in front of us. You can be gay in private. No one is going to judge you.”

“Hand holding is inappropriate? So you don’t hold your wife’s hand in public?”

“Its different. This is how it’s always been then boys like—”

“Nhlakanipho just leave him,” Chris speaks up. “I mean he’s pushing his straight agenda on us but fuck him. He’s not even lowkey homosexual this one. He’s an ignorant jerk that thinks he’s doing society a favour by dictating what we can and cannot do. He’s not worth it, leave him.”

“Listen to Chris,” Siya is standing in front of Nhlakanipho, cupping his cheeks. He pulls my best friend down to kiss him and that somehow angers the man who attempts to separate them or to do something. I don’t think, just act. He groans and stumbles backwards with his wife screaming.

“Nqobizitha!” I manage to hear Chris’ voice above the shocked gasps and loud murmurs. “Are you—why did you hit him?”

“Self-defence,” I say as I drag him out of the restaurant, walking past the security guard who was coming at us. Nhlaka and Siya are following behind us silently. “I’d do it again if I could.”

“I still think violence doesn’t solve everything,” Siya speaks out shakily. “You may’ve hit him but his views on us won’t change.”

“Yeah,” I snort and rub my forehead tiredly. “But next time he’ll think twice before putting his nose where he shouldn’t. That fucking asshole!”

“I feel sorry for their kids, imagine growing up with such hateful parents. They’ll develop the same mentality. I feel sorry for any queer person that they will come in contact with.” Chris says, looking a little sad, we’re going to a KFC instead.

“But there’s hope with this generation, there’s a lot of things we’re unlearning. If they really want to understand sexuality and gender then they’ll put in the effort. They won’t hide behind the excuse of their parents. I mean look at your boyfriend,” Siya points at me as we enter KFC.

Chris bites his bottom lip and smiles. “Have you ever wondered about gay people? Like have you ever looked at someone who’s one of us and just...I don’t know. Thought what the fuck?”

I sit down with him as Siya and Nhlakanipho go to place our order. “I don’t know...we’re not really exposed to gay people around here. I remember we used to laugh at uMhlongo when we were younger. I’m guilty of calling him sis bhuti because everyone around me did it.” I clear my throat and try to grab Chris’ hand but he pulls it away. “I was young – ten, eleven. I didn’t know any better. But you came along and there’s so much I’m learning from you, that I still want to learn. Ntethe is bi and I don’t hate her for it. I accept her.”

"I hope you're not expecting a medal or anything," he sounds so upset. "This is what irks me so much about straight people. When they pat their backs because they have gay friends or are tolerant. Like bitch fuck you, I'm not going to congratulate you for being a decent human being. It's your responsibility to be that way. Shut the fuck up about how you're better than the homophobes and just continue being kind. Gay people don't give themselves gold stars on their foreheads just because we treat you straight people like human beings. Fuck you."

"I'll take that," I tell him. "Maybe you want to vent and I'm here so that's fine. Just don't blame a guy for trying. Remember you taught me why it's derogatory to call someone a faggot? Now I've learned why it's derogatory to call you sis bhuti as well. Just as we black people take offense to being called kaffirs because it dehumanizes and ridicules us, the same way gay men feel about that sis bhuti term. It's a slur. I learn everyday, Chris. I lie in your bed and I listen to you talk."

"Good." He gets up and I look over my shoulder to notice that the others have collected our order. "Maybe you should apologize to Mhlongo for the hurtful things you said to him."

He looks dead serious and upset. I sigh and nod my head. "I know where his grave is."

He doesn't reply.

The rest of the drive is a little tense. Chris is silent and will only talk to Siyabonga. I focus on the lady giving me instructions on the GPS. I get why Chris is upset but I also think he should understand where I, as a person who's been straight my entire life, am coming from. No one teaches you about the gay community. Not in the rural areas. If they do tell you about them then it's nothing but negativity. 'Balahlwe iithunywa (they've been abandoned by guardian angels)' or 'Angeke balibone izulu (they will never see heaven) or 'ikhehla lesistabane asoze ulibone, bayazenzisa laba (you'll never find an old gay man, they are doing this on purpose). This is what some of us have known all our lives, what I have known. I take the blame but I'm trying.

Chris is still not talking to me as we reach his house. Its beautiful, modest, much like his family home in Mbongolwane. Its around 06:00pm but everyone is tired and wants to retire early. After Chris has shown the others to their room, I follow him to ours. I look around his room. A Roman Reigns poster on the wall with heart eyes. I am not jealous. His bed spread is pink with cupcakes on it. I'm not sure if we'll fit in this bed together.

“Uh...” I clear my throat. “Nice room.”

“Thanks,” still the attitude. I sigh. He points to his closet. “Put our bags in there.”

I silently follow his instruction and then suggest we refresh. He has a bathroom in his room. He agrees and we find ourselves submerged in hot water not too long after. I wrap my arms around him and kiss the back of his neck. He draws his legs to his chest, his toes digging into the skin of my thighs. “Chris, I’m sorry.” I tell him quietly.

“I know,” he peers over at me a second and then looks away again. “Its just...you straights piss the hell out of me. It’s so easy for you to apologize because you don’t know what its like. I’ve read articles about queer people committing suicide because of the bullying they suffered at the hands of homophobes. Maybe I’ve never been suicidal but I know what it’s like. To have bad anxiety about going to school because you’re terrified of having your face shoved down the toilet bowl again. To not have access to the locker rooms because you’re the pervert who’ll ogle the boys. As if being the new kid at school isn’t hard enough, then you have to deal with homophobic bullies.”

My heart aches for him. I want to say something but I don’t know what. I don’t know what it’s like to live the way he does. “You’re so brave,” I find myself saying.

“But that’s the thing. I don’t want to be brave, I just want to live. I don’t want this bravery if it comes at the sake of me losing my peace. I don’t want it because it means accepting that it comes with so much brutality and ridicule. I don’t want to be brave. I just want to live freely. And sure, Joburg’s better but I hate that there are people that can easily come up to me and hurt me.”

“I’m sorry, dali.”

“Its not your fault,” he sighs and shifts around until he’s facing me. “I still want you to apologize to that dead man. But I have to be fair, you’re learning and unlearning. I love that about you. I love how open-minded you are. I’ve never felt judged by you. Even when we weren’t together, you wouldn’t freak out around me. And I’m not going to applaud you for that. I’m going to applaud you for falling in love with me instead. Because I’m the best thing that’s ever happened to you.”

I wrap my arms around him and nod my head with a small grin pulling at my lips. “Njengoba usho, Dali. I’m proud of myself for being with such an amazing human being. I don’t even remember what life was like before you and I don’t want to know. You have my heart just as I have yours.”

He smiles, the first genuine one he’s giving me. “Engiyikho.”

“Ngyakuthanda nganeyakwethu.”

His smile broadens. “Say that again.”

I nudge his nose and nuzzle his cheek, my lips pressing at the corner of his mouth. “Ngyakuthanda nganeyakwethu.”

“Nami ngyakuthanda, Nqobizitha.”

I kiss him softly and tell him all he needs to know in the kiss. He sighs as soon as we’re separated and hugs me tightly. “I’m looking forward to spending all this time with you, away from it all.”

“Me too,” he kisses my ear. “You’re going to learn everything about me.”

I can detect a hint of worry in his voice. My arms fold around him tighter. “I love all your facets.”

Silence...then a quiet sigh. “And I love yours.”

Bonus Insert

Siyabonga

“Are they still going at it?”

Nhlakanipho lifts his eyes and gifts me with his subtle smile. “The headboard—” a strangled moan disturbs whatever he was going to say. Then there’s that rhythmic thud of the headboard again. “Well, you can hear for yourself.”

Moving to perch myself on his lap, I look into his eyes as laughter tickles my insides. “I should tell Chris to have more morals in the morning. We haven’t even been in his house for a full day and this is how he and his boyfriend welcome us? Sies!” I pretend to gag as Nhlakanipho pinches my side.

“Like we won’t give them a run for their own money in a few minutes,” he says – with his usual deadpan tone – and I blink, taken aback because I hadn’t expected him to say that. He’s the most serious person I know, even more than my parents. But this is part of why I love him. His seriousness and how everyone around him seems to fear him because he doesn’t laugh with them. I love that he’s different with me – serious, yes, but with hints of playfulness and his soft spot for me. “You smell great.” His nose skims the expanse of my neck, his lips pressing against my pulse point lightly.

“I smell like you,” I remind him with a silent chuckle. We bathed together not too long ago and I am ready to sleep. Johannesburg is really far but I enjoyed our trip coming here. Well, the first half. I don’t know what happened between Chis and Nqobizitha but things were a little tense after we left KFC. I wanted to ask but Nhlakanipho’s eyes told me to keep out of it. Maybe he was right. Every time I meddle with those two then they make up somehow – and I end up looking like a fool for hating on Nqobizitha in the first place. I think I’m going to keep out of this one. My ears catch my boyfriend’s soft exhale and all of my attention focuses on him. His smile doesn’t reach his eyes, there are bags under his eyes, and I can feel his exhaustion.

We had to herd the cattle again yesterday, then Nhlakanipho had to fix MaDlamini’s microwave but he’d had to walk to Mbongolwane to buy some missing parts to make her microwave look brand-new again. It was 10:00 pm by the time he was done and I had to accompany him on that half an hour walk to the talkative woman’s home. She paid him R50 – too little but beggars can’t be choosers. Then we walked back home again and Nhlakanipho barely slept. He was tossing and turning, nervous about this trip – but not verbally voicing it out like usual.

I wrap my arms around him and raise my hands to gently massage his head. His hair has grown from that German haircut he did a while back. He needs another haircut but he refuses for me to cut his hair. I kiss the top of his head as he lays on my chest and wraps his arms loosely around me. "Ukhathele? (Are you tired?)" I ask him.

He sighs, and says nothing.

"I hope you'll be better come morning," I say softly, my fingers still massaging his head. "I want us to really enjoy this trip. Maybe we can actually see what Wits looks like. And maybe we can start searching for apartments – like just flat shop for next year."

"Maybe," he sounds sleepy.

"Did you enjoy your trip, coming here?"

"I was asleep for most of the trip," he snorts out a tired laugh. His fingers dance along my lower back and then he's pinching my ass and caressing it. "But everything seems so big and intimidating. I don't like that."

"Because we're not used to it," I remind him with a kiss to his forehead. "But we'll get used to it, baby. We can't allow fear to hold us back."

"Ngiyezwa, Phakade lami."

"Good." A relieved breath pushes past my lips. "You haven't changed your mind, right?" this journey that we'll both embark on comes with lots of sacrifices. With me, I'll miss my parents and it will hurt me to leave them but not as much as it hurts me to not be able to love him the way I want to. It won't hurt as much as it hurts not being able to fully express myself. For me, the sacrifice of leaving my parents is a small one compared to what I will have with him here. With my boyfriend...with him, its different. He's a father figure to his siblings. He's taken the responsibility of being the man of the house. And with him leaving in less than a year, how will Gogo manage?

“Of course not,” Nhlakanipho’s voice draws me out of my miserable thoughts. “We’re not just doing this for us. I’m also doing it to secure my family’s future. The sacrifice is excruciating but the rewards will be worth it. I haven’t changed my mind, Phakade lami.”

My arms squeeze him in a tight hug. I can feel his chest rising and falling against me – the beautiful beat of his heart against mine. How I love him. “Let me take care of you, baby.” I whisper, kissing the tip of his ear before pulling out of his arms to climb the bed. I stand on my knees behind him and run my hands down his chest. His muscles ripple beneath my touch and I smile. “Let me take care of you,” I tell him again, kissing the back of his neck before grabbing the baby oil on the bed. “You’re such an amazing grandson and brother. You deserve to be taken care of so allow me...” I drizzle the heavenly smelling liquid on my hand and then rub my palms. He groans as soon as my hands find the first knot on his shoulders. “You’re so tense.”

“Tired,” another deep groan.

“Well, I’m here to take care of you.”

“You’re making me sleepier if anything,” his voice is quiet.

“You’re allowed to fall asleep on me,” I assure him with a smitten grin. My fingers dig into his dark skin, loving him, supporting him, taking care of him. “I hope you know that you can be vulnerable with me. You don’t have to be so strong all the time. Even you need a break sometimes.”

“Where is this coming from?”

“Just a reminder.” I kiss his temple and continue to my ministrations. “Does this feel good?” he is lethargic against me.

“Do you have to ask?”

I laugh and have my response ready but my phone rings, interrupting us. My hands are oily and slippery so he grabs it and answers. Maybe it’s weird for other couples but we answer each other’s phones all the time – we’re open like that but everyone is different.

“Thandolwenkosi? Why so late?”

His sister’s calling again, I wonder what she wants. Thando called in earlier to check in with us and to confirm that we’d arrived safely in Johannesburg. I don’t know why she never calls her brother’s phone but we spoke and I confirmed that everything was fine before she hung up. Now she’s calling again. I hope nothing’s wrong back home. I shift so that I’m sitting beside my boyfriend. He has this little frown on his devastatingly handsome face. I reach out to wipe the crookedness on one of his brows away and lightly kiss the corner of his mouth. He shakes his head, giving me his signature grin, and hands the phone to me. “Thando?”

“Siyabonga!” her voice is quiet, almost a whisper, but desperate. My interest is piqued and I square my shoulders as I wait for her to continue. “Move away from my brother.”

“Really, this is why you’re calling me at this ungodly hour? It’s close to midnight, Thando. We have to go to bed.”

“Haibo wenja, you and my brother can resume the fucking session after I’ve talked to you. This is urgent. I’m your sister-in-law, treat me with respect.”

I choke on my saliva and move the phone from my ear to look at it in disbelief. Nhlakanipho is giving me a curious glance but I keep my face blank and kiss him on the lips before getting up to go and lock myself in Chris’ guest-bathroom. “Don’t think you’ll get away with disrespecting me next time, Thandolwenkosi. We may be the same age and I’m in love with your brother but me and you aren’t friends.”

“Oh god, you’re turning into him!”

What?

I break into a loud, belly-clutching laugh this time. I can’t help it. The way she’d sounded dramatic. What does she mean I’m turning into Nhlakanipho? He’s the serious and quiet one but me, I can’t keep my mouth for shit. I’m only docile around him because I can’t match his dark intensity. But that’s not always the case and sometimes we argue. Usually, about other people because I hear news and want to report to him but he’s not like that.

“Ufunani?” I admire my physique on the mirror.

“I was going to call Chris for this but he’s not answering his phone.”

I sigh. “That isn’t what I asked, Thando. Besides, Chris is a little preoccupied at the moment.” I’m sure the last thing on his mind is his phone with all that moaning and whimpering he’s been doing. Close to two hours now that they’ve been at it – him and Nqobizitha. They’ll rest a while and then go back to it. I’ll credit them for trying to be quiet but the lewd noises can’t be disguised. The headboard banging is the worst.

“Anyway, I have some questions for you.”

“Well ask then.” I say with a little attitude.

“Must you always be such a bitch?” she huffs and mumbles something I can’t make sense of. “Tell me, you lost your virginity a few months ago, right?”

What the...

I cough as my eyes bulge. I’m forced to tell Nhlakanipho I’m fine when he knocks at the door. “Hey wena!” I release an embarrassing squeak that turns my cheeks hot. “That is a personal question!”

“Oh please...” I can practically see her rolling her eyes. “I remember back in January, you were walking around like a handicapped tortoise and said you had hurt your leg. And it’s been becoming frequent. My theory is my brother tapped that back in January.”

“I hate you!” I don’t know what else to say.

“Guess what? I don’t care. Kodwa ke, I was thinking of maybe doing it with Lwandle. Maybe on Friday before you guys can return...”

“You’re too young!” the thought makes me uncomfortable.

“And this is why I’d wanted to contact Chris first,” her sigh rings in my ear, “he wouldn’t have judged me. Besides, don’t be a hypocrite here wengane. You’re sixteen as well and having sex.”

“Its different,” I fold my vacant arm on my chest. With me and Nhlakanipho its different, we didn’t just get here. Even when I was ready to have sex, I had to wait for him to be ready. He didn’t want to hurt me. And with us, I wasn’t worried about him using me for sex because we’re in love. I don’t trust Lwandle. He’s a twenty-four year old man chasing after high school kids. It seems a little perverted to me, his actions. “Your brother and I are in love.”

“Lwandle loves me as well and futhi ke...almost every girl in my class is no longer a virgin. I’m worried that he’ll get tired of waiting. And what if he stops supporting me?”

“Then he wouldn’t have been deserving of you in the first place. Jeez, the guy’s too old for you anyway...what if he takes advantage of you, Thando? Why not date guys your age?”

“They don’t drive a vrrr pha and they don’t buy me Chicken Licken or hygiene products.” She says in a ‘duh’ manner like I should’ve known this.

“Nhlakanipho tries his best and Gogo as well.” I am getting agitated, surely she must realize that she’s coming across as ungrateful. I’ve had times where Nhlakanipho would be really stressed for cash because he doesn’t want his siblings to be made a mockery of. Times where he’d sacrifice taking care of his own hygienic needs to provide for his sisters – pads, perfume, roll-on. Times where we’d argue when I bought him those products out of my own pocket because he detests receiving help. He sacrifices so much for them. “If you’ve run out of roll-on then—”

“Sadie isn’t roll-on that a self-loving girl like myself is proud to put on. I have my own Avon products but I just have to hide them because Nomzamo has a big mouth. So now, I need to show Lwandle that I appreciate him. I don’t want him to run away.”

The way she’s speaking...

“Thando,” I shake my head. “Is this guy asking for sex?”

“He’s sent me these pictures and video of him masturbating. Sesethu told me that this means he’s growing tired of waiting. Now, let me ask about dicks. Are they supposed to look like the Lunch Bar chocolate?”

“What?” I grip my belly as I break into another guffaw. “Haibo wena. Lunch Bar?”

“Maybe I should send you a picture so that you can see for yourself,” she suggests.

“Hell no!” I say too quickly with a frantic head shake. “Do you want your brother to kill me? How will I explain having pictures of Lunch Bar dicks on my phone?”

She’s silent a second and then breathing into the phone. “Actually, you’re right. He’d probably find my Lwandle and beat him to death before shifting his focus to you.”

“He wouldn’t actually hurt me but don’t send me any dick pics please. It will make me uncomfortable and I don’t want to see a dick that doesn’t belong to your brother. But I can tell you now that I’ve never heard of dicks looking like Lunch Bars. Maybe you should ask someone else about this. Also, please don’t have sex with Lwandle if you’re uncomfortable or not ready. It doesn’t matter what your friends say. Sex is fun and beautiful if you’re doing it with someone special and that you’re ready to take that next level with. And there’s so much to consider here, especially with you girls. You don’t want to find yourself with an unwanted pregnancy.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...daddy dearest. Will you give me tips on sucking dick?”

“Okay, that’s it. Bye, Thando. But please, please, please...don’t allow this guy to pressurize you into doing something you’re not comfortable with. Take your time.”

“Just don’t tell my brother about this or I swear to god I’ll kill you.” She hangs up before I can say anything else.

Staring at the phone in bewilderment, I grab on the edge of the bathtub for a little breather. I’m already hiding the fact that Thandolwenkosi has a boyfriend, now I have to hide this? I want to but I’m also worried. For Thando. For what her brother will do once he finds out that she’s dating a guy eight years

older than him. I exit the bathroom to find Nhlakanipho sitting at the foot of the bed, his fingers are entwined and he's looking at the ground. He's deep in thought, I can tell.

"Baby..." I call out and then move to sit on his lap again. I wrap my arms around him and kiss his temple, resting my head on his shoulder.

"You should know better than to hide things from me," he says quietly.

He's right...he sees right through me. "I don't mean to," I nibble on my upper lip nervously. "It's just hard to tell you certain things sometimes – especially where your family is involved. I'm torn between giving my loyalty to you and honouring my promise to your sister."

"I always want her to be safe."

"You have to admit that she's growing," I reply as I caress his cheek. "And she's not that little girl that would always run away from the boys to report them to her superhero. Now she runs to them with the hope that her superhero will still protect her fiercely like he used to – if needed. But she's growing into her own woman and you need to ease your grip a little."

"Who is this boy?" the way he asks this question, like a threat... Lord help me. I fear for Lwandle.

"I, um," words fail me and I find myself shaking my head. Nhlakanipho grips my face to keep me from shifting around nervously. "Just...he's older than us. Lwandle."

I watch his face transition from confusion to rage in 0.01 seconds. "What?" he's too quiet. He's more dangerous when his rage is silent.

"Don't you dare think about putting your hands on him," I warn him, hoping my face reflects my seriousness. "Don't you dare, Nhlakanipho. This is why your siblings never—" I don't continue. It hurts him when I talk like this. It's not that he doesn't try to be more welcoming but this is who he is. "I'm trying to talk her back to her senses. It's going to be hard because teens don't listen. Not everyone is mature like you. Chris and I are trying to talk to her. Besides, you'll approach her and say what?"

He gives me a look that makes me feel dumb. I punch his arm lightly and nail him with a mild glare. He kisses my lips and runs his hand down my spine. "She's only sixteen, too young to date."

This is what I said to Chris the other day. Then he called me out on my hypocrisy. "I'm also sixteen and the things we do are way more extreme. But we have the assurance of our deep love. With her, she's just behaving like how everyone our age behaves. I will try to discourage her relationship but I'll need you to stay away. We don't talk the same, you and I. Also, I don't want you to use the belt on her."

He observes me for a long time – looking torn. Nhlakanipho doesn't like to give up control much, he feels like life spirals out of control when you don't control it. Also, this is his sister we're talking about. Nothing good can come out of that relationship she has with Lwandle. He's using her. He has to be. Who in their right mind dates kids in uniform anyway? He's a predator, that one. But I'll still prefer to try and sort this out instead of Nhlakanipho. This barbaric boy I love will end up in jail otherwise. I don't want that. Not when it could ruin our entire plans for the future.

Fine..." my heart settles as he gives in. But he still looks so torn. "Talk to her but I'll give it a couple of weeks and if nothing's changed then my belt and I will have our own discourse with her."

"Deal. Thank you."

He returns my eager hug and touches my soul with his volatile aura. I breathe him in just as I hear him say, "That child, Thandolwenkosi, will send me to my grave early."

I have to laugh, I can't help it – although I hate him as well for hinting about death. He knows I hate when he does this. I never want to think about his death, I can't bear the thought. I'd probably die myself. I've heard of people who die of a broken heart. I'd probably die not even a few minutes after his death, just to follow him into the afterlife. My soul knows no one else but him. It's weird to explain but to me it makes sense – just like we make sense. "Stop talking like an old man, baby." I tease him and allow him to shift us so that he's pinning me beneath him. "And what do I always tell you about joking about death? Are you trying to kill me?"

"Between these bedsheets, Phakade lami." He removes my boxers while pressing kisses to every patch of skin on my face. I moan and arch to him as he firmly grips my dick. His lips press into my temple, his breath hot and seductive. "Let me show you how, Nhliziyo yami. I want you to feel the angels welcome us into paradise."

I can never say no. Not when he talks like this, with his lifeless voice affecting me like nothing else can.
“Yes, yes.” I say breathlessly and then lean up to bind my soul to his.

Mutual Desires : Twenty-four

Christophe

My phone ringing wakes me up in the morning. Nqobizitha is groaning beside me, throwing the offending gadget at me. "Ow!" I cry out in pain as it connects with my cheek. "I fucking hate you," I whimper as I blink the exhaustion out of my eyes. It's my mom calling. "Mommy. Est-ce que tout va bien?"

Her chuckles make my ear happy and my heart jumps in joy. I miss her so much. "Yes, everything is okay. I'm just checking up on you this morning. Are you and your friends sorted at home? Maybe I should send Mohammed to buy you some groceries and—"

"No, mommy. You don't need to do that." It takes everything within in me to not howl out in pain as I slowly sit up. Everything twinges – every limb, every muscle, every part of me – and I can't deny that it's mostly in a good way but there's an ache, a deep ache, and I let out a gasp that's soon followed by a soft whimper that, thankfully, does not wake my source of agony right beside me. The Brentwood wearing bastard has gone back to his peaceful sleep, snoring quietly. I hate him! "Remember you asked Baba to send me money? We're going to use it today to buy groceries and necessities."

"And get medicine for your cold please, don't strain your throat Bebe." Her accent is strong today. "Your voice is too hoarse. Unless...no, Vivienne you will not think about this. Don't have sex in your father's house, Bebe. Respect. Anyway, how is the boyfriend?"

"He's sleeping," I manage to say through a laboured breath. This Zulu son of an asshole did a number on me! "How is everything there, mommy? Coming back home anytime soon?"

"Really soon, Bebe. My business is taking off nicely in Libreville. Why, do you miss me?"

"Yeah. I want to tell you all about Mbongolwane."

She laughs. I can almost see her shaking her head. "Is Mbongolwane code for...how is it you say your boyfriend's name? All those clicks, too difficult!"

I roll my eyes but totally get where she's coming from. Simi is Xhosa and sometimes, she will speak deep Xhosa to tease me and I won't hear a word she's saying. "C'est simple comme bonjour!" I still say just to tease her.

"Lie. Ncobha – that's his name, I remember now – I'm getting the pronunciation wrong, Bebe. So it's not simple like hello. Anyway, I hope he's treating you right. Remember also to have fun but not too much fun. Don't have sex in your father's house."

I giggle and nod my head. "It won't happen again. I'm sorry."

"Alright. Have you thought about what you're going to study next year?"

This conversation I hate. I never bothered to tell my parents about the modelling school because they would've tried to discourage me. She's only asking this question with the expectation that I'll tell her that I'm finally giving in and giving up on my dream. Maybe I would. But Nqobizitha believes in me, he wouldn't have paid so much to Reign Model Management were that not the case. He supports me more than my own parents – and he's just known me for a couple of months. "I don't want to have this conversation right now, mommy. I was just going to make breakfast."

"Oh! Good, good. Eat please, you're looking healthier in those pictures you sent me but I want you so big that you're bouncing like a ball when you fall on the ground."

"Well then I can kiss my dreams of being a supermodel goodbye," I protest, keeping my pained chuckles quiet. It's pointless, Nqoba is awake now. He has his face buried in the fluffy pillows with one of his eyes blinking up at me, ogling. The pervert. I extend my hand to massage his scalp. "I have to go, mommy. We'll talk on WhatsApp later. Je t'aime."

"I love you too, Bebe."

I pretend to throw my phone at him and this asshole I fell in love with doesn't even startle – ever the unperturbed one. My thighs burn when Nqoba lifts his hand to let his fingers crawl on the bruised skin. He had pushed them back, folded me in half and fucked me that way, shoving into me hard and fast and rough before abruptly pulling out and forcing me onto my stomach. He'd pinned me down in that position and pounded away – making me come untouched. I had never thought that was possible but it

happens with him. I'm glad he's open-minded about the gay porn because he satiates me like no one else can. Past lovers don't hold a burning candle next to him.

"I'm hungry," his voice is quiet, brows bunched up in a gorgeous frown – and there's an intensity in his eyes that I don't want to see. Oh no, no. He's not touching me with that big shlong of his anytime soon. No time soon. No matter how tempting. I'm swollen and it still feels like he's moving inside me. It hasn't hurt this bad in a long ass time.

"I-I can't – 'm not feeling well," I tell him and decide to make my escape. "I need to pee," my lips press against his quickly and then I leave the bed. A distressed scream leaves me as I fall to the floor. Shit! I can't feel my legs and everything feels broken. "This is your fault!" I snap as Nqoba comes to my aid, helping me to the bathroom. He says nothing and balances me because my back is on fire and I can't stand. I can't. "Ow!" I whine again when he grips my dick to help me relieve myself. I'm tender and sore, there's a burning sensation and I remember one of the times where this Brentwood wearing bastard was torturing me by stroking me to mind-numbingly pleasurable heights, while pounding into me fast and hard, and then squeezing the head when I was ready to fall. The torture went on forever and ever, Nqoba making me wait, whispering tenderly in my ear – quiet praises about how good I felt; how good I was – while brutalizing me, and teaching me to wait. The memories are making me angry now, and I'm fucking berating myself for being so wanton.

How could I be so stupid?

It hurts like a motherfucker now.

"Ngyaxolisa, sthandwa sami." Nqoba kisses the back of my ear and maybe I can forgive him. "Do you want me to run you a hot bath with those bath salts you love so much?"

"I'm hungry," I echo his words from earlier. "For food. Do you think the others are awake now?"

"Siyabonga maybe. Nhlakanipho isn't an early bird." He helps me back to the bedroom and throws my underwear at me. That skimpy black thong he tore into pieces while fucking me. I remove the thing from my face and give him as glare. "And then? I hope you're not expecting me to walk around the house wearing this."

“Now there’s an idea. But not around the others. I don’t want anyone who isn’t me to see you naked. Your body belongs to me.”

I don’t even get surprised anymore. This is the same person who says he owns me. To be fair, I am possessive and just as jealous. I can’t stomach the thought of him with other people. I’m glad he can’t stomach the thought of me being with someone who isn’t him as well. He’s an arrogant, possessive idiot but he’s mine. “You don’t own me,” I say to rile him up as I find his jersey on the ground. This is what I’ll wear.

He’s in front of me – a mischievous glint found in his eyes that tells me he knows I’m messing with him. “Is that so?” he doesn’t give me the opportunity to reply before he’s kissing me – hard and possessive. His tongue twisting and turning, consuming me. He kisses me until there isn’t question that we’re both each others. “Gqoka...I’m hungry.” He’s already put on his pants – commando – and briefly looks over his shoulder toward me before he’s leaving my room.

Why this Brentwood wearing bastard...

I huff and then try to put on my jeans but they’re unkind on my sensitive skin so I go with one of my knitted shorts instead. There are voices coming from the kitchen – two. I’m going to assume its Nqoba and Siya because he said Nhlakanipho isn’t an early bird. “Hi, bestie!” I say as soon as my eyes find Siyabonga. He looks showered and he’s wearing some skinny jeans with a black t-shirt and Bomber jacket. He looks good, really good. “You’re gorgeous this morning.”

“Thanks. How does it feel to not be able to relate?”

Nqobizitha’s laugh – loud and rumbling – irks me. I send him a glare that only fractionally shuts him up. “I don’t know, Siya. Maybe you should ask your ego.”

“You two should consider having your own...ibizwani lento ya loya sisi wama hips?” Nqobizitha is still laughing and looking between me and Siyabonga.

“Shut up!” I limp my way over to him to punch his arm playfully. “You said you’re hungry, what do you want to eat?”

“Even you, dali. As long as my appetite is satiated.”

“Stop with the eye-fucking in front of me!” Siya says and I jump away Nqobizitha and then cry out in pain, clutching my back. “Don’t you look at me. It’s your fault that you allowed this idiot to dickmatize for most of the night. I would’ve helped to make porridge but it always turns out lumpy. Do you want to do it, Chris?”

“Fine. Please grab the largest pot,” I point to the H&H pots that aren’t shining like they usually do. I’ll have to wash everything and spring clean the house. Maybe when we come back later tonight. The house has clearly gathered dust from having no one to look after it. If I can, I’ll try to come back here regularly just to clean it – without my parents’ knowledge of course because Baba wants me stuck in Mbongolwane. The only reason he gave me money to survive while we’re here is because mommy talked to him. “How do you like your porridge?” I ask curiously, just as Nhlakanipho enters. He kisses Siyabonga on the forehead and the pretty boy stands to give him a tight hug before he’s instructing him to sit down next to him.

“With salt and sugar – like my boyfriend,” Siya says with a smitten beam. “But Nhlakanipho mixes it better than me and he’ll do it for us. Right, baby?”

Nhlakanipho sighs, the corner of his mouth upturning. “Sure. I spoke to Gogo. The kids say hi.”

“Nomzamo told me to bring her something nice,” I tell them as I turn the stove off. Nqoba helps me to wash the porridge bowls and then sits down next to the others as I dish our breakfast. “We don’t have any vinegar in the house,” I give him an apologetic look. This is how he likes his porridge. “We have tartaric and if you don’t focus on the extremely sour taste then it will taste just like vinegar.”

He rolls his eyes but goes with my suggestion. “Weekdays can be pretty boring around here but there’s still a bunch of stuff we can do,” I say as I look at them. “Since it’s so early, maybe we could go to Eastgate to buy groceries first. It’s not far from here – about a twenty minute walk. But the car is advisable because we can’t afford to have the meat defrosting on our way back. Then we can go to Maboneng for lunch. There’s this place – Uncle Merv’s. We can also rent some bikes there to explore the inner city.”

“I actually, um, my boyfriend and I want to see Wits. It doesn’t have to be inside – just like pass the place, maybe get a couple of pictures as well.”

I love how Siyabonga confidently claims Nhlakanipho, calling him his boyfriend. He doesn't get to say it enough and how much it makes him happy to be able to say that. "Alright, we can go there as well. But we need to be quick ke. Meaning my sexy lover and I have to bath and look gorgeous like you guys. You don't have to wash the dishes, I can do them later." Siya insists that they'll take care of it so Nqoba and I leave them there. I can't even sneak in a quick soak in the bathtub because Nqoba is like a kid as he talks to me about wanting to learn more about the place I grew up in. We're dressed and leaving less than an hour later. My next door neighbours are white – an old woman who should be in a nursing home because it'll keep her busier than minding other people's business.

"Christophe..."

I wince at the fake French accent and give her a small smile. "Mrs. Jacobsen, long time no see. It was nice catching up, these are my friends. Greet your husband for me. Okay, bye."

"Not so fast," her stupid dog and her bark after me. I have to slide down the window and I patiently wait for her to say something. "I've never seen these friends of yours before. Do your parents know about them?"

I can hear Nqoba snorting beside me. "Ngathi ng'zophathwa ikhanda yilo mfazi wakho womlungu. Sheshisa, ndoda...iskhathi. (I'm going to gain a headache because of this white woman of yours. Hurry up...)"

"Yes, they do. Now, if there's nothing else..." I press the window button and watch it slide up. "She's nosy by nature," I tell the others and frown as maskandi music comes on. Oh hell no. Not today. I tell Siya to disconnect his Bluetooth so that I can play my music as well. "Relax. We're going to listen to skrrr skrrr music. I love Travis Scott!" I stop wiggling around my seat because it's still so uncomfortable to move around. We get to the mall and I immediately grab Nqoba's arm to wrap it around my shoulders. He smiles, looks down at me, and gives me a kiss.

"Okay, this place is huge!" Siyabonga is the first to exclaim with a childishness that makes me laugh. "But it's not packed like I expected it to be." He has his hand holding firmly to Nhlakanipho's.

"It's only 09:00am and it is a weekday," I remind him. "We're going to Checkers. That's where I'd usually buy my groceries."

“Konje you raised yourself,” Siya murmurs.

I nod my head and grab one of the trolleys. Nqoba takes another one. Clearly Siya and Nhlakanipho aren't ready to unlink their hands any time soon. “Hake?”

“Hell no!” My silly boyf—the boy I love says. “I can bear it if you're going to eat those things but to cook them and have the smell spread over the entire house? For hours? Usuyabheda, Dali.”

The others are chuckling as I return the hake where I found it. We continue on, picking this and that. Nhlakanipho is his usual apathetic self. Nqobizitha, you can never shock him, no matter what you do. I guess it's really not a surprise that he walks around like he's still in Mbongolwane. He fits right in. Siyabonga is like a kid at a carnival – eyes curious and wide, looking at this or that.

“Christophe, is that you?”

We all look over our shoulders. Oh god...the last person I want to see. Of course this would happen to me, the first time that I am with these people I love and I have to meet him. “Hey, Henri.” He gives me a once over and I instinctively curl into Nqoba's side, I can't help it. Sometimes it's easy to forget that we live in a such a small world that our pasts can revisit us again uninvited. Maybe I knew it would happen when we came here but I hadn't expected it'd be so soon. “Small world, huh?” I can't keep the misery out of my voice.

“Sure is,” he gives me his crooked grin. He looks healthier now, like me, but he was never a junkie. His line of business got to him. Ruining the lives of lost people can't be an easy job. “When last did you go to the bakery?”

“Long ago,” I eye the others nervously, I can't meet Nqobizitha's gaze. He's glaring daggers into me, I can feel it. “Didn't Jen tell you that I went to the hospital for a few weeks?”

“No. But I just got out last year as well. Saved enough money to start a shoe business. Here's my card, maybe you can support my business.”

I try to grab it but Nqobizitha grabs it first. “Bafo, kunjani?” he extends his hand. The Brentwood wearing bastard is taller than everyone around him – and bigger too. He's intimidating poor Henri.

“He doesn’t understand Zulu, Nqoba. He’s Namibian,” I can’t keep the attitude out of my voice. He’s making me angry. Why does he always do this?

“Kunjani?” he asks again.

“Fine,” Henri answers, with a little gulp. Siya has this secret grin pulling at his lips and I want to smack him silly for enjoying this. “I’ll, er, see you guys around. Christophe, use that card. Maybe we can catch up for drinks one of these days.”

He walks away and the others are looking at me. By others, I mean Siyabonga and Nqobizitha. Nhlakanipho minds his own business. “He’s just a friend,” I say even though they didn’t ask. I just don’t like these judging looks they’re giving me. Nqobizitha especially. He still has Henri’s card in his grasp, squashing it. I haven’t done anything wrong, I’m not sure why he’s giving me this look.

“Sewaba nabangani ababukeka njengama khehla wena? (You now have friends who look like old men?) That guy must at least be sixty-five years old.”

“Now you’re exaggerating. Henri is thirty years old.”

“And you’re eighteen.” He counters with a glare. I don’t want to do this now. He has his mind made up already and I don’t want to leave this place sulking. I do what’s best for me at the time and push the trolley towards the queues. I ignore his orders for me to not walk away from him. Who the hell does he think he is? He’s not my father. I am not his damn submissive or those old women of his. Speaking of old women, how dare he remind me of my age like he wasn’t fucking women twice his age. The audacity!

“Can you guys just sort your shit out?” Siya says before I can enter the car. “You made things hella awkward when we were coming here yesterday and I’ll be damned if we’re going back and there’s this tension between both of you. Khulumani, angeke phela.”

“Kodwa Siyabonga...” Nhlakanipho shakes his head and grabs his hand, pulling him inside the car.

"I despise your jealousy," I tell Nqobizitha. The look he's giving me makes me want to hide but I stand my ground. He's not going to bully me into not talking with my friends now. Henri isn't exactly a friend and I wasn't excited to meet him but still...

"I'm not jealous, I'm territorial. There's a difference. You're already mine but sometimes I have to remind those around you. I have to claim what's mine."

"Gods of fashion..." I mutter under my breath, praying for patience. If he's this way now then I dread to find out what he'll do around the touchy ones. "That guy was just a friend, Nqoba. Not even that – an acquaintance. A-And I will tell you more about him but you can't go around intimidating the people who know me. I had a life before you and—"

"I don't care," he snaps, his eyes reveal his hurt.

I wiggle my body in frustration and walk petulantly to the other side of the car but he follows me and traps me against it. Lifting his hand, he presses a thumb on the side of my neck, feeling my pulse quicken under his touch. "I hate you." I tell him as he presses harder, causing my breath to hitch. His eyes have a dark fire in them – intense and arrogant.

"Except when I'm fucking you like an animal." His lips are against mine, pressing lightly, his knee pressing into my thighs, pushing them apart. My hands are trembling as he presses into my hardening dick. "Hate me all you want but you're still mine. You belong here, with me...and I love you."

He's a son of an asshole. I'm drawing him down to kiss me before I can stop myself. The kiss is explosive, burning every part of my body. It's getting really heated and the only reason we pull apart is because Siya is knocking on the window. "I love you too," I reply to his earlier words. "And I hate that you're so...territorial."

"It's who I am, dali. I admit that that's my flaw but it's not going to change. Not when it comes to you. I don't like to see men talking to you. I hate seeing them touching you even more."

"I feel the same about you and your old women."

“Because we’re each others.” He gets my door for me and then we’re driving back home. We spend an hour there – as the others help me to clean the house a little bit. Then at 11:00am, we decide to drive to Maboneng. It’s not packed and I have to remind the others that this is only because today is a weekday and most people are at work. Nqobizitha is sceptical about getting some smoothies because most of them have bananas and strawberries. He’s an idiot because the menu says what each smoothie is made of. “You know this doesn’t taste as bad.”

I roll my eyes. “I told you.” He’s having a Blanche Brown – and it has mixed berries, yogurt honey and cranberry. “I just got a message from Simi. She officially finished writing her last test today and wants to go out. Maybe we can go to Braam together later?”

“Like a club?” Nhlakanipho says something for the first time. He was really quiet for a long time.

“Yeah. It shouldn’t be a problem getting in. These clubs aren’t really strict on age restrictions, I used to go there all the time.” I am unable to look at him a second longer. I’m not sure what his little frown means.

“We’ll go, right baby?” Siya looks at Nhlakanipho with a threat in his eyes.

Nhlakanipho takes a breath, sighs and nods but he looks so reluctant. “What time?”

“08:00pm but the real fun starts around 10:00. There’s strippers!” I giggle.

“Whatever as long as we get to see how you Joburg kids have fun.” See. This is why I always trust my Brentwood wearing charmer. He’s always so open-minded. I love him for it.

“Thank you, sthandwa sami.” I kiss his cheek and rest my head on his shoulder. Some guy comes up to us and offers to take group pictures of us. I am beyond onboard with the idea. We’ve been documenting our trip on the camera Nqobizitha bought me. I give it to him and we smile for the camera. We thank him and he compliments our love before going to join his girl friend.

“I can’t wait to move here!” Siya says with a wide beam.

“Its definitely better than Mbongolwane,” I tell him. “Look at these, they’re gorgeous.”

“Can you take pictures of me and my boyfriend?”

“Sure.” I grab his phone and shoo Nqobizitha away so I can get proper shots of the lovebirds. Nhlakanipho is...Nhlakanipho. But the way he humours Siyabonga is everything. Their pictures are breathtaking. Siya on top of Nhlakanipho, with his arms around the other boy’s shoulders, a gorgeous smile on his lips. Then he’s forcing Nhlakanipho’s head to his chest and kissing his forehead. We take a few more before we’re leaving for our next destination. Wits. Now this place is always busy.

“Less than a year now!” Siya is so excited. “Its so big.”

“That’s what she said,” Nhlakanipho smirks. He’s funny when he wants to be.

Nqobizitha is hollering. This stupid innuendo is too funny to him apparently. Again, I have to take pictures. I don’t mind. I even take my own with the boy I love. But he just looks at me like I’ve grown two heads when I start posing like Alton Mason. I’m too dramatic apparently. But the kid’s like my supermodel idol. At twenty-two and he’s accomplished so much for himself. He was the first black male model to walk for Chanel and last year, he was crowned male model of the year. I want to be like him.

“Did you talk her out of it?”

“Let go of my wrist first,” I complain because Siya’s grip is really tight. He dragged me away from our boyfriends and locked me in the bathroom so that we can discuss Thandolwenkosi. He huffs but lets go. “Thank you. Yes, I talked to her and I think she’s going to listen but I’m not sure. Look, just because you’re telling someone not to have sex, doesn’t mean that they’re not going to – especially teenagers. I know this guy is really old but at the end of the day it’s her body. We can’t decide for her.”

“Okay, Mr. Liberal. But I’m just looking out for her here. And this Lunch Bar dick that she’s—”

“It’s a procedure men undertake. Apparently sex is more intense when you have these little round beads inside your dick. It’s to heighten the pleasure during sex but it also ruins the girl for other men apparently.”

“Whaaat?” Siya’s eyes widen. “Haibo wena. Thani uyadlala.”

“I’m not joking, bheka, here’s what it looks—”

“Don’t bother.” He jumps back like I was going to show him something disgusting – like hetero porn. “I don’t want to see any nasty dick pics. I thought only women did these things. Like that snuff shandis.”

“Snuff?”

“It’s a long story but they put it in their vagina or something. Or they bath with it and then say whatever they want to happen in their relationships. The girls in my class go on and on about it. I heard one of them tried to use that nonsense on me. Unfortunately for her, I still love dick.”

“I’ll show Nqobizitha this picture. Let me see what he’ll say if I ask him to undertake this procedure.”

“You’re going to be walking way worse than you are now.” Siya snorts, we exit the bathroom. “That is if you don’t end up in the ER.”

His words take me back to the Hugo situation, the punishment. Nope. I’m not going to do this. Nhlakanipho is alone in the living room and he tells me that Nqoba went to my room. I find him there, looking around my room – like a curious child. “Don’t touch that album.” I say and he peers over his shoulders.

“Why, you’re afraid I’ll make fun of you?”

Yes...

“I was really ugly growing up,” I hate to confess this. “It took me a really long time to get to this person I am now. Those pictures, I’d get rid of them if I could but my mom wants me to keep them.” I go to him and grab the album, protecting it by clutching it to my chest. Memories of Henri and me vomiting blur together and the trembles wrack my body. “Do you want to bath again? We’re leaving soon.”

He says nothing and leans down to kiss me. Perhaps he can sense my dark mood and wants to fill me with his light. I don't complain as he undresses me. Not even as he lifts me in his arms and carries me to the bathroom. I stand aside with my arms wrapped around my waist as he fills the tub with water. He puts in the scented salts and drags me inside. I am in his arms. He kisses the back of my neck and I sigh. "Its hard to imagine you ugly. You're just so beautiful. I'm sure you were an adorable kid."

"Haha, you have no idea."

"No kid's ugly. There's no such thing. Only idiots would think a kid is ugly."

"Okay, Dr. Phil." He kisses my shoulder and I lean firmly against him. "That guy, Henri, I used to get weight loss pills from him. I suffered from bad anorexia growing up and it didn't help that because of my skin tone, kids would always make fun of me. Their words cut me deep and I—growing up was hard, Nqoba. There are bad pictures that you don't want to see. You'd be disgusted at me if you did."

"I doubt it," he speaks with so much conviction. "Your body turns me on sure and I love it but I love who it houses even more. Your soul, nganeyakwethu. You're everything I'm not used to but you're perfect. Its not just about your body."

"That's a relief," I tell him and allow him to wash my body. "But I'm still glad I got better. My mom stayed a lot with me when I was thirteen to ensure that I got better. I still don't eat a lot but now I'm better. Food disorders are a different type of torture."

"I'm glad you got through that, sthandwa sami."

"Me too," I turn in his arms and kiss him with everything in me. Then I'm washing his body too, and taking care of him. We're redressed and waiting for Simi by 07:30pm. Siya is pouting, looking angry, apparently Nhlakanipho didn't want him wearing any skinny jeans for tonight's outing. I laugh because I would tell Nqobizitha to go fuck himself if he ever did that.

"Chomz!" This is the first thing Simi says as soon as I open the door. "I missed you much. Ugh, gimme a kiss!" she squishes my cheeks and then kisses me all over my face. I hate it and I groan, silently thanking Nqobizitha as he grabs me from her.

“Nkosazana, that’s quite enough.” His voice is polite. “You’re looking beautiful tonight.”

Simi is wearing a denim miniskirt and white t-shirt with the pride flag. “Thank you, baby.” She leans up to kiss Nqoba’s cheek. “Hey, you guys!” she greets the other two.

“Hello.” Nhlakanipho replies. Siya is still sulking.

We reach Club Bastion just after eight. Now it’s really packed. Nqobizitha has his arm on my shoulders, protecting me from the crowd. The other kids are looking at him, mostly these skrrr skrrr boys. It’s like they’ve never seen anyone wearing Brentwood before. It’s mostly compliments from the girls. My man – yes, he’s mine – looks dapper. “Is it always full of these childish brats?” Nqobizitha murmurs in my ear, his breath hot and welcomed.

“This is Braamfontein, munt’ wami.” I giggle and lead him to the VIP area that I’m sure Jacques secured. He’s the rich slay king here. “Hey guys!” I go around greeting my friends.

“Look at you!” Jacques gets up to hug me. He’s rad, wearing small shorts that may as well be booty shorts and a see-through shirt. He’s the most effeminate one, with his weave and nails. I can see the rural ones are a little stunned but I hope they’re not going to offend my friends. “Who is this?”

“Nqobizitha. My boyfriend,” I have to add that because I know Jacques. He’s a slut and he’s taken men from his friends before. I don’t have his curvy body or his thickness and his big ass and I’m no competition here. He can easily take Nqoba from me. “And this is Nhlakanipho and his boyfriend Siyabonga.”

“Don’t look so nervous!” Jacques says sassily and the others laugh. “Sit down, drinks are on me.”

I roll my eyes and sit on Nqobizitha’s lap. Look, I really have to claim my territory here. “I wonder which rich man’s money you’re spending tonight, babes.” I look around – the music is so loud and reverberates in my chest. Most kids are already dancing lewdly under the blue and red lights.

“Donovan’s – he’s a prosecutor. Anyway, he told me to have fun and this is me doing it.”

I nod my head and we talk about one thing or the other. Just mostly catching up. “Chris, will you go with me to the bathroom? Just to freshen up.” I nod my head and follow one of my other friends, Xolani, to the loo...or I attempt to. Nqoba’s grabbing my arm, cocking an eyebrow. The question is clear. But I don’t want him to accompany me. He’s doing this because of his jealousy. I rip my arm away and follow Xolani to the bathroom. “Manje wena, you’re fucking straight dudes again?” he’s pissed.

“Its none of your business.”

“Awu? Then if he breaks your heart like that Michael character? You’re going to fall into depression again and—”

“He won’t do that,” I shake my head. Someone enters the bathroom and I’m forced to remain silent a second until he’s leaving. “Look I appreciate that you’re looking out for me kodwa as I’ve grown older, I’m ashamed that I ever cried for Michael. He wasn’t worth it. Nqobizitha is...different. He’s talked about marriage, Xolly. I mean I know we’re kids but some people just know.”

“When you think you’ve heard it all,” Xolani sighs. “Go on and betray the community by bouncing on straight dicks. The same people who kill our brothers and sisters. Uyehlula wena.”

His words affect me deeply but he doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Where has he been? All these three months and I’ve felt loved with Nqobizitha than I have in my entire life. We may not be each other’s forever but I’ll take what I have with him now. I love him. He’s different...different. “That’s your opinion, sweetheart. Too bad you didn’t have it when you slept with that woman’s husband. He never did marry you in the end, did he? He chose to fix things with his wife instead.”

Xolani eyes me in disbelief. His little slap that he tries to give me is quickly blocked. I walk away before he can do anything else. Nqoba is waiting for me outside the bathroom. “Manje wena?”

“Let’s dance,” I say, dragging him to the dancefloor. Nqoba’s arms embrace me from behind. I lean into the touch, ears perking up as Burna Boy’s ‘*Gbona*’ reaches my ears. My heart accelerates as Nqoba keeps me in place as we move to the song—there’s a sensual beat to it.

“Follow my lead,” He breathes into my ear, his rugged voice sounding like sex.

“You know this song?” I ask, trying to clear the wanton thoughts clouding my judgement. I can’t help grinding my ass into Nqoba’s crotch, and guiding his hands beneath my shirt to my erect nipples.

“Yes,” the rush of air escaping Nqoba’s lips shoots to my groin. “You didn’t know?”

I shake my head no. Nqoba’s hands are the devil, exploring every inch of my body. His firm hold of my hips infused with sensual passion. The claim is silent, unnervingly calm. “This is Burna Boy – Gbona.” Then he proceeds to say what the artist is singing about. I try, but my mind is going to the gutter, because of the way Nqoba is talking is so obscene. He’s explaining in that smooth and innocent but nasty way again. It shouldn’t come as a surprise when I whirl around, to press up against him firmly.

“You are so sexy,” I tell him, hypnotized by the power of his dark stare. I can feel some eyes on eyes but my focus is only on him. How our bodies mould together without word, as if we’ve been connecting our entire lives. We move in synchronization, as if there are no clothes between us. We’re practically fucking on the dancefloor—slow, unhurried, like the night won’t ever end. As soon as the song ends, I’m pulling Nqoba with me in the direction of the toilets. It takes less than ten minutes for both of us to release our pent up tension. Nqoba leaves first, while I remain behind to buy some time. Not that anyone unlucky enough to have entered the bathroom after us didn’t hear the lewd noises.

I stumble out of the toilets feeling an elation, can’t exactly pinpoint where it comes from. And then I’m looking around for Nqoba and I know something is wrong when I hear the screams and cheering. I struggle pushing through the crowd, with all these stupid people having their phones out and recording. What the fuck is going on? I know it has to do with Nhlakanipho when I hear Siya’s panicked, “Nhlakanipho, yima. She’s y-your sister!”

I reach the front and Nhlakanipho looks angry. He has some rope in his hand and is gripping the arm of a half-naked woman tightly. My eyes widen as he hits her with the rope. The people around us laugh.

Shit! The sister’s a stripper.

Mutual Desires : Twenty-five

Nqobizitha

The owner of the club called the cops on us – and this is after Nhlakanipho had punched one of the security men who had attempted to drag Nonkazimulo away from him. He was taken in a police van, along with Siyabonga, because he refused to be separated from the boyfriend. Chris and I followed after them in my car. Right now, we're sitting on this long bench, watching the police bring in rowdy teenagers and a man who supposedly smashed his girl's windows because she cheated on him. With his feminine behaviour, is it a surprise really?

The cop who took charge back in the club is nowhere to be seen. I'm going to assume that he's with Nhlakanipho and Siya. I haven't seen them since we arrived and we tried to find out about their whereabouts from the policewoman but she gave us an eye-roll and continued chewing her gum like we weren't worth her energy. Chris is finally quiet and sitting on my lap. His dramatics had returned for a while as he went on and on about the germs in this place and how this was probably a punishment because we had sex in his father's house. I was getting irritated when his friend what's his name again? John? Jack? It's a weird name – told him to sit the fuck down. I don't know what he's doing here, this guy, but he's far kinder than the other tall one who kept plotting my death with his eyes. Xolani, that was his name.

"They won't do anything to him," I hear someone murmur beside me. "One of my sponsors is a prosecutor, I've messaged him and he's getting in touch with that cop's superior. Your friend is a diamond in the rough, shem. I always thought these hard-core Zulu men stories were just that but yhuuu never shem. He just—"

"Jacques, can you calm down please?" Chris interrupts the loud mouth.

"Fiiinnne...its just that the way he took control was hella sexy but freaky too because that's like abuse. That still won't deter me from letting him have his way with me if he wants though."

I look at Chris, who looks too exhausted for words, and then his friend. He's a little taller compared to Chris, about Siyabonga's height but too feminine looking. The last time I came across someone like him was with uMhlongo but even he had masculine physical features that gave him away. With this one, he's womanly – literally, his face is smooth and round. His body is shaped like a woman's and he has fake hair on his head. But he's a man, his voice gives him away. I kept looking at him back at the club – intrigued, but he seemed to think I want him and I had to shut him down pretty quickly. He moved onto

Nhlakanipho next and hasn't stopped raving about him. I'm still surprised that these are the kind of friends Chris keeps.

"Tarzan, look..." the toothpick on my lap nudges my arm and points into the hallway. It's that cop that arrested my best friend, he's materialized from behind a door with Nonkazimulo in tow and another female cop. The ones in uniform laugh together and because of the distance, we can't be sure what they're saying. But the male cop disappears with Nonkazimulo – who is now wearing her brother's t-shirt that covers her thighs – as the female one nears us. "Excuse me!" Chris speaks up.

"What is it?" her squeaky voice makes the attitude found in it even more unbearable. She's short and pudgy – looks like a bunch of vetkoeks stacked upon each other more than anything.

"We're, um, o-our friends... where are they?"

Vetkoek stacked upon vetkoek rolls her eyes as her mouth down turns in a nasty frown. "They're in the holding cell where they belong. Maybe next time, your friend will think twice before putting his hands on women. What, do you boys think this is Nkandla? We deal with women-bashers here. Tell him he can be Shaka Zulu there by your barbaric province. Sanus'qhela!"

"Kodwa, Mama wami—"

The vetkoek walks away before I can finish, with an attitude in her step. I sigh and place my forehead on Chris' chest. He wraps his arms around me and I can feel a little kiss on top of my head. The police station – Chris said it's John Vorster – is really busy. There are noises left, right and centre. There are weird sounds...sex sounds. Manly sounds. It goes on forever until...silence. All our eyes are rooted down the passage when a door opens again. It's Nonkazimulo and the male cop. Chris and I look at each other – we don't need to speak up but we both know what happened. My heart sinks because it seems the cops here are as corrupt as the ones in Mbongolwane. I hope Nhlakanipho didn't hear any of this, it will break him. The thought of his sister...

"I'm cold," Chris whispers, and snuggles into my body.

I push him back gently to remove my jersey. "Take this," I say and help him into it. "No, I'm not cold..." I add when he opens his mouth. I'm too worried about Nhlakanipho – and those stupid videos those immature brats took...I hope this isn't going to come back and bite us in the ass. If that man decides that

Nhlakanipho is guilty then I'll have to break MaKhathide's bank account a little. There's no way in hell that I'm going to let anything bad happen to him. He's my brother and I'd protect him with my own life readily. Chris has gone back to his singing and no one is updating us about Nhlakanipho and Siya. Chris' friend tells me that his prosecutor sponsor – I'm guessing that's code for sugar daddy – has talked to the superiors around this place and that Nhlakanipho should...he doesn't even finish before I'm catching Siya's panicky words. I turn my attention away from the beautiful boy and follow Siya's voice.

Chris is already standing on his feet and rushing toward Siyabonga. "They didn't hurt you, did they? Jacques called his boyfriend and if they touched even a strand of your hair..." his voice is trembling and he's pulling away from the hug to carefully observe Siya from head to toe.

"Bafo..." I say when Nhlakanipho appears as well. He's walking in tow with his sister. His eyes are red and swollen – features impassive. I've known him for a long time, that little jaw clench thing he's doing gives him away. I engulf him in a hug, one of my hands gripping the back of his neck to anchor him. He returns my hug – just as tight with his face resting on my shoulder. I want to offer him words of comfort but I don't know what to say. We don't usually do this him and I – indoda ayikhali, that's what we're used to. Even our heart to hearts are never this...I don't know what this is. He's emotionally drained, I can feel the heaviness of the world that weighs on his shoulders coming off of him. He pulls back after a while and looks over his shoulder. I'm not sure if he's looking at Siya, Chris or Nonkazimulo. But he opens his arms and Siya is the one who steps forward. They hug tightly before Siya leans up to kiss Nhlakanipho on the lips. Nonkazimulo's eyes widen. She says nothing.

"Let's go."

Nhlakanipho's voice is unusual, not the emotionless one I'm used to. He's really drained. It shows in the way he's walking as well. I have to pay this hobo that Chris suggested I pay to watch my car an additional R100 to thank him for his honesty. The Mercedes is untouched and MaKhathide would kill me if anything happened to it. The car is in her name, it belongs to her. We make travelling arrangements and decide that Nonkazimulo will be travelling with Jacques. Nhlakanipho doesn't want her touching him, talking to him, looking at him. He's still so pissed.

"I'll play some music," Chris announces as soon as I start the engine. "Sthandwa sami, do you want your jersey back?" he nods his head when I shake my mine. "I'm going to play your horrendous maskandi music – just for today. Don't get used to it!" he's trying to lighten the mood, that's easy to tell. Inkosi Yamagcokama – *Asenzela Bona*, their song. We've stopped at a red light, I look at the rearview mirror – notice the little smile on Siya's face. He has one of his legs trapped in between Nhlakanipho's legs and cradles my best friend's head. Nhlakanipho has his eyes closed but he's not asleep.

“Everything’s going to be okay, bafo. And I am always here for you – always...” I eject the words unintentionally. But somehow, I mean them, they come from my heart. Sometimes, we don’t need long drawn out conversations to express our support. The words may be flowery but they mean nothing if they’re not from the heart. With Nhlakanipho, I can never be dishonest – it shall be well, as I have told him.

“Maybe I should leave, babes.” Jacques announces as soon as we’re all at Chris’ house. He looks awkward suddenly, nothing at all like that flirtatious creature from a while ago. “Lubabalo wants to see me. Maybe we can hang out tomorrow? My treat.”

The way this kid splurges money like its nothing. He’s only twenty years old apparently but has all these men that cater to his every financial need. I’d pull a Nhlakanipho and beat his ass were he my brother. But he seems to know exactly what he’s doing, with the way he talks about these sponsors of his. He is the epitome of hoe is life. Chris tells him that they’ll talk later to confirm whether or not it will be possible before the boy’s kissing Chris’ cheek and leaving.

“Bafo,” I call Nhlakanipho who is sitting on the couch beside Siyabonga. “Chris and I will give you and your family some space. Call me if you need anything.”

Chris gives me a hellfire stare-down that tells me I’ve made the wrong call. I cock my left brow and he huffs before grabbing my arm and stomping away from his family’s tiny living room. We get to our room and he sighs, slouching against the door. “This is why mommy told me to not have sex. This. My dad’s spirit could sense this from Mozambique and so he cursed me. Now the others are in trouble.”

First, I will never get over how he calls his mother ‘mommy’. Its funny as fuck! Deep laughter rumbles from deep within me as I shake my head and look at him. He’s dramatic, this one. His father’s spirit, leaving Mozambique to punish us for having sex? His imagination is also wild. I step closer to him and lean down to kiss him – soft, unhurried. He sighs and runs his hands down my chest. “I smell like sweat and sex and alcohol. Do you want to join me in the bathroom, I need to relax my mind.”

Getting naked with him is an opportunity I never let pass me by. Silently, we undress and then find ourselves submerged in hot water. I’m dozing off because I’m tired. We spent hours in that police station because we were being given the run-around. That male cop clearly got what he wanted because after Nonkazimulo gave him sex he let us go...or was Jacques’ boyfriend responsible? I don’t know. I don’t care. I just want to put this whole mess behind us.

“What are you thinking so hard about?” Chris is looking at me with a beautiful grin kissing his thick lips.

“Nhlakanipho – and how quickly this could’ve all gone wrong. Had he laid his hands on the wrong person, he’d be in prison now. That’s his entire future down the drain.”

“He’s too angry,” Chris murmurs, his fingers crawling on my thigh playfully.

“I know what it’s like, to be angry at the world.” My head falls back on the edge of the bathtub as my eyes slip shut and I go down memory lane. “To feel like it owes you a lot of things. I felt like that when Mama, when Ntombikayise died. Nhlakanipho lost his mother when he was thirteen but even then, the world had already dealt him bad cards. He was the man of that house before he could fully enjoy his childhood. They’re short on something in the house then he has to hustle. One of the girls is hurt then he has to step in. Then he also has to raise good men in his brothers. He has to ascertain his place as a man in this world and command respect in unconventional ways because this world associates respect with money. He has the entire world on his shoulders nangapha oNonkazimulo are problematic.”

“He has to try and control his temper – maybe through exercise or something. Something to relax him and take his mind off his problems. I thought this trip would do that but...”

“Fun doesn’t exactly exist in his vocabulary. All he’s used to is stressing out and working, Bambi. But he tried today, with Siya. He talked and he...tried.”

“I really hate him and his sister right now. Him, because he shouldn’t have put his hands on a woman. She didn’t look like she was fighting back. Her, because she’s the one with the newborn right? Siya told me that she doesn’t even send money at home. I, personally, respect her hustle but the least she could’ve done was send money to Gogo. Imagine the long walks Nhlakanipho has to make to Mbongolwane hospital just to get supplies for Kuhlekimi. It’s not fair.”

I understand why he’s angry at Nonkazimulo but he’s a bit unfair when he extends that anger to Nhlakanipho. He was rightfully acting in his position as her brother to correct her. Maybe even a parent – because although Nonkazimulo is three years older than him she behaves so immaturely that you wouldn’t even notice. He had every right to spank her, just because these Joburg kids believe in ‘communicating’ and all that crap, it doesn’t mean we rural kids have to play by their rules. “I’d have dragged her home first and then disciplined her as well.”

“Nqoba!” Chris’ eyes are wide. “That is...its abuse.”

“That’s your opinion,” I snort as I lift him out of the bathtub and walk back to the bedroom with him. He throws one of his towels at me for me to dry up. “Some of us were raised ngoswazi. Its life, nganeyakwethu.”

“I just think it’s point—” Chris jumps as we both hear a loud thumping sound. Then there’s shouting that we hadn’t heard when we were in the bathroom. “I really hope he’s not beating her up again. Just because she didn’t press charges, doesn’t mean that—ugh, this is your fault. I wanted to hear all the tea for myself. Now I’ll be forced to ask Siyabonga. Or maybe I should—”

“Awuyi lapho,” I tell him sternly and drag him back to the bed. I force him to lie down and drape my arm around him to prevent him from moving. “Stop complaining and sleep.”

Christophe

I find myself in the kitchen earlier than usual, much earlier. Like 04:00am early. I couldn’t go back to sleep after Nqoba’s squirming woke me up. He was bargaining with someone in his dream this time, and asking for that person’s forgiveness. ‘Mama wami’ he kept on saying. It makes me wonder if this is not the same woman that locked him in the closet to help him with his fear of the darkness. Anyway, I tried to talk to him about it but he went and locked himself in the bathroom. Maybe he fell asleep in there because he hasn’t opened the door. It’s been thirty minutes. I don’t even have a spare key to my bathroom. I’ll wait for another thirty minutes and if he’s still not out then I’ll have to break the lock but repairs will really injure my pocket. I haven’t even gotten paid by the school yet. I’m supposed to collect the money from Mr. Biyela after the schools open. I’m not looking forward to it.

“Aaahhh!” I release an embarrassing scream as my eyes adjust in the darkness to find someone else moving around my father’s kitchen. The person screams right back. It’s a feminine voice and it takes me a while before I realize. “Nonkazimulo?” I whisper. “Why didn’t you switch on the light?”

“I was j-just,” I notice how nervous she looks as I turn on the light. She’s a beautiful ebony-skinned young woman, with her nose pierced on both sides. I don’t blame her for being a stripper with her

blinding beauty and banging body, she was just using her natural assets to score an extra buck. I do lift my eyebrow when I notice she's wearing men's clothes – most likely her brother's. "Look, okay. No bullshit, I have to go."

"What?"

"I got a call from someone and sengihembe. Please tell my brother—"

"No. No. No!" I hiss quietly, shaking my head. I'm growing angry, maybe Nqoba was right about her deserving a spanking. "You tell him your damn self. Who is this person you have to meet so early in the morning?"

She doesn't answer.

I want to scream in frustration, the anger is growing rapidly. "So you enjoy this, huh? Torturing your brother like this? Kanti wasn't yesterday enough? Look, sweetheart I don't care what you're doing to earn yourself some cash. I'm not going to judge you for it. But now you're attempting to sneak out? No. Go wake Nhlakanipho and tell him your damn self. I'm not going to do your dirty work for you."

Siyabonga comes in, fortunately. "What's going on?" he's rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. I'm going to guess the noises woke him. His eyes land on Nonkazimulo and he scrutinizes her as well. "Uyaphi?"

"Nowhere," she says too quickly.

"Unamanga!" he snaps, he's getting angry as well. Good. "You promised, you promised that you'd stop this nonsense and that we're going back to KZN together. This isn't life, Nonkah...what you're doing here. What the fuck is wrong with you? You broke your brother last night and now you want to do it again? Do you have any idea how he'll feel when he wakes up to find you gone? Don't do this."

"Lalela, impilo yasekhaya isn't for me. I worked really hard to get away from there and I'm not trying to go back – not until I make a success of myself."

Siyabonga laughs cynically and shakes his head. “Which success is that? Showing your pussy to these boys that are younger than you? Or are you talking about your two kids that you left at home, that you aren’t supporting? You’re a failure—”

“Siya!” I move to stand where he is and grip his arm. He’s emotional and using his words to hurt her in an act of desperation. “Awume, this is not the way you deal with this. She’s still human and just because—”

“Weeehhh, myeke lo!” Nonkazimulo interrupts me with her arms folded on her chest. “Since he’s become a lady-boy with hopes of being my brother’s wife he thinks that his opinions matter. Uyehluleka njalo ukumela ezakhe iindaba. First, he must go and confess to everyone back home that he’s a sissy boy and then he can come and disrespect me. Until he does that, he must learn to keep his mouth shut.”

“The slurs weren’t necessary,” I tell her with a frown. “If you truly love your brother then you will welcome who he’s in love with as well. You won’t disrespect him.”

Nonkazimulo rolls her eyes. “Can you open your gate please? I was going to jump it but there’s no need since you’re awake. I have places to go to. Tell my brother I love him.”

I look at her and then Siyabonga. His face is pinched tightly, revealing his pain. I don’t know what to do, I am torn. But then I remember that this is a grown woman and if she wants to leave then I can’t deny her. Siya doesn’t stop me as I grab the remote to front gate. I follow Nonkazimulo to the door and open the gate as I bid her farewell. As soon as she’s gone, I join Siya in the kitchen again. He’s sitting at the table with his face in his hands. He’s crying, I think, and when I try to comfort him, he rejects my touch. Ouch!

“Let me make us coffee,” I suggest as I stand and start to get busy. I leave him there to go and check on Nqobizitha. The bedside lamp is on now and he’s in bed, asleep I think. I leave him there and go back to Siya. “I’m so sorry,” I say as I set down a cup of steaming coffee in front of him. “You all don’t deserve this.”

“H-He’s going to be so upset,” Siya removes his hands from his face and looks at me. “After he tried so hard to convince her to go back home with us. You know she swore at him most of last night...even after he threatened to tell Gogo about what she’s up to here. I guess it didn’t work. She’s gone again. I want to kill her on his behalf. I’m so tired on his behalf. H-He can’t catch a break! We were supposed to be having fun here – a getaway. An escape from it all.”

I scoot closer to him and run a comforting hand down his back. He's trembling badly, I've never seen him like this before. "We can all still have fun. One of my friends, Jacques, he was with us last night – he suggested we do something today. I'm onboard with the idea mina. I'm even willing to find a maskandi club just to cheer him up. I want both of you to have fun – to be able to love each other and be immersed in nothing but each other. You guys are my OTP and I truly hate seeing you sad. I've never shipped anyone harder than I ship both of you."

He's confused, I can tell.

"Don't mind me," I kiss his cheek and wrap my arms around him to give him all my love and support. He's a bitch but my bitch and I love him with all his bitchiness. My best friend. Simi would be so jealous right now. "Go back to bed and comfort your man. Talk to him. I'll make us breakfast. What's his favourite food?"

"Ox tripe, why?"

"I was going to make it for breakfast but yoh tripe takes forever to cook. Manje what should I make?"

"Nhlakanipho eats anything, he's not a picky eater. He doesn't have the luxury to anyway." Siya stands up and squeezes my shoulder. "Maybe I should go back to him – just to take care of him as you suggested. WhatsApp me if you need any help."

I nod my head and allow Siya his escape. Before I can make us breakfast, I need to grab my phone just to confirm with Jacques that we can do something today. Nqoba's face is pressed tightly into my pillow and I won't lie, it's the most endearing sight. I tiptoe to the bed stand and grab my phone. I snap some of his pictures and then lean down to kiss him. Any area of him I can get to. Then I'm going back to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. I'm going to make pizza breads. Then I'm going to fry some chicken KFC style. Yes, I know this food doesn't qualify as breakfast but I just want to make sure everyone feels better.

My body teems with a familiar longing as I sense Nqobizitha behind me. I bare my neck as his arms unfold around me. "Morning, dali."

"Hi!" I turn in his arms to give him a proper hug. He lifts me as I tilt my head up to kiss him. "Are you hungry?"

“Everything looks delicious,” he murmurs, moving to wash his hands. “Where are the others?”

I take a deep breath and then spill everything. “Now she’s gone but we don’t know where to and I feel sorry for Nhlakanipho. But at the same time, she’s an adult and—”

“Fuck that!” Nqoba says fiercely. “She made her promise and now she’s going back on her word? I don’t care much for her career either but its different with other families. This is an embarrassment to Nhlakanipho and I won’t even get started on uGogo. Many kids back home are disowned because of things like this. Showing off your body to the whole world...now even old men will know what she looks like under those clothes. Maybe she should’ve chosen a better career kodwa as I said, I don’t care much about what she does with her life. It’s a problem when it now affects those around her.”

“Tell me about it,” I whisper and give him my phone. “A video was put out on social media. I hadn’t noticed that she was fighting back. They look like a couple fighting – at least that’s what most people think. Sides are split. Others think Nhlakanipho was right to hit her and others are condemning it – this is GBV they say.”

“Bullshit!” again that fierceness. “He was a brother here, exercising his right. The same people saying that wouldn’t hesitate to do the same were it their siblings. We all want to protect the ones we love. That’s what Nhlaka was doing. He doesn’t just go around bashing women.”

These topics are always so sensitive. Because there’s the old-fashioned traditional type like this one who view corporal punishment as necessary to raise kids to be moral in a society full of shenanigans. For them corporal punishment isn’t GBV...but then again, Nonkazimulo is no longer a child to be beaten like one. For me, I am still learning about these things so I don’t have a solid conclusion. Maybe I’m part of the problem but I do believe that a little spank here and there helps. I don’t know. Maybe my views will change with time.

“Morning,” I look over my shoulder to find Siya and Nhlakanipho standing at the doorway. They’re both freshly showered and dressed already. Nqoba and I are the slow ones like usual.

“Take a seat guys, breakfast will be served in a few.” I add the finishing touches to the pizza breads and with Nqobizitha’s assistance, dish up for everyone. Turning on the speaker that permanently resides in the kitchen, on top of the fridge, I tell Siyabonga to go ahead and play his music. Maybe the mood won’t

be this draining. “How did you sleep?” I slap my hand over my mouth as soon as the question leaves me. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. “I-I mean—”

“Kulungile ndoda,” Nhlakanipho gives me a small smile. “I’ve had better nights but it’s not the end of the world. I’ll still have better ones. Siya says you want to go out...”

“Well, Jacques thought we could go ice skating later on. There’s an ice skate rink in Northgate. We can even hire an Uber this time just to give you guys that tourist-y feel. Right now, maybe Siya and Nqoba want to go to Newtown. We can check out Sci-Bono for Science freaks like you guys but I suspect that Nqoba will enjoy it more than you Siya. Then I can show you guys around that area and the places where I buy my clothes from—”

“You mean those grandpa clothes,” Nqoba snorts.

“Hey!” I punch his arm, causing him to choke on his juice. The others laugh. Yes, Nhlakanipho is laughing as well. Hallelujah! I punch Nqobizitha again just to make his best friend laugh. “I love you,” I tell him.

“Sinabantu la. Behave yourself.”

They laugh again, the others. I have a feeling that Nqoba said that just to make them laugh as well. And breakfast is lighthearted just like that. Nqoba and I are quick to shower before we’re leaving. I remember Siya and Nhlakanipho don’t have Facebook accounts which is honestly a good thing, it means they won’t see that video. I’ve been keeping track of its popularity and it is nothing out of hand for now. Just the usual Facebook debates and squabbles. Others even admit to disciplining their siblings. All genders so it’s not just the men guilty. But they’re too clever this gender of mine – and jump onto ask the feminists if GBV is only restricted to women. I unfollow the entire thing. Social media is draining for this reason, the unending debates that turn malicious.

Siya is curious about Carlton Centre and it requires us to deviate from our plans a little. We make our payments and then take the elevator, riding fifty floors up to see the Joburg view. The others gasp and aww and ahh but nothing is impressive about it to me. Nqobizitha and I take pictures together. I kiss him and kiss him and kiss him. I’m in his arms and I’m in love. I’m high on his love. I take unsuspecting pictures of the other two lovebirds and they’re breathtaking. I don’t think I’ll ever get over the intimacy that Nhlakanipho and Siya share. Too few people possess it. Even the simplest touch fills you with a fear that makes you want to look away because...wow.

“Phakade lami...” I hear Nhlakanipho whisper and then lean down to capture Siya’s lips. I snap another picture. An award-winning artistic picture because they’re kissing with the view of Johannesburg as the background. “Mlekeleli wami. Who am I without you?”

“Who am I without you?” Siya returns, he has a beam painting his lips. “Ngyakuthanda, baby.”

“Nhliziyo yami.”

I don’t know what they were talking about before but they’re very affectionate. We move to Sci-Bono next. Nqobizitha is a kid at a candy store. His excitement is beautiful. I snap away on the camera he bought me. The rest of the day goes like that – a new spot, pictures and some fun. Until finally, we head to the ice rink spot in Northgate. It’s around 08:00 pm – we had dinner at Spurs while we waited for the others. This stupid boy I love complained the entire time. He hates eating at fancy places. He hates using forks and knives even worse. He says his mom tried to teach him but he just never got it. Siya and Nhlakanipho don’t even bother. They dig in with their hands.

“Hey guys, sorry for the delay.”

I hear the voice from behind me. My Brentwood lover and I along with the other couple with us have already paid for our tickets. We were just waiting for—

“Jacques!” my eyes widen and I swallow as I feel Nqobizitha suddenly come to stand next to me. His arm goes around my shoulders. His grip is tight and I can sense a change in his aura. I don’t blame him. “Hugo, what are you doing here?” I can’t help noticing that he’s holding my best friend the same way that Nqoba is holding me. My eyes widen. No. No. No. Are these two—

“Mon—Christophe, we meet again. I was invited by Jacques.”

“But why?” I shake my head.

“I was going to tell you,” Jacques gives me an apologetic smile. I can’t be sure if he’s really sorry. “Hugo and I are trying to figure this dating thing out. I mean it’s new. Just two weeks old and so we’re still seeing other people but he likes me and I like him. Do you mind?”

I'm fucking pissed.

"No!" my voice lifts a little. "Of course not. I have a boyfriend anyway."

At the mention of my boyfriend...that is not my boyfriend, Hugo shifts his attention to Nqoba. "My brother, how are you?" they shake hands but the tension is really thick. Siya is giving me his curious glance. I look away and notice the dark look in Nqoba's eyes. He's angry. I hope not at me.

"Ngyaphila, bafo. Unjan wena?" of course, he's being a douchebag right now.

"I'm fine..." Hugo seems amused. "How about we all have fun?"

We all nod our heads. I don't know if Hugo wants to make me jealous with the way he touches my friend but it's a little too provocative for the dance floor. I shake my head and focus on Nqoba. "Thank you for trying to behave back there," I tell him as I help to balance him because this skating thing is not his given gift. He has been keeping me close to his eye, not even knowing that I couldn't care less about what Hugo and Jacques are doing. I don't think I do. But my heart is still clenching. "I love you," I tell him.

He kisses me and returns my declaration. Then he's asking me about the bathroom. I offer to go with him but Siyabonga needs to go too so I remain behind with Nhlakanipho. Oh no no. I frown as Hugo leaves Jacques and skates toward me. "Bonjour."

He's still so gorgeous – dark skin and beautiful dark eyes. "Hugo."

"Everything okay?"

Why wouldn't it be? I roll my eyes and nod yes. "As you can see for yourself."

"You're glowing," he smiles as if nodding in approval. "How's it going with your new boyfriend? You're his first guy love interest, right? I imagine it's not easy?"

“He’s really open-minded actually,” I give him a smug grin. “He never even had a gay freakout. I love him for it. He’s amazing.”

“And jealous apparently. He’s coming back and glaring daggers at me. It was nice catching up. I’d like to talk again on the phone. Do you mind?”

I shake my head. “Not at all. But please text me first. I kinda deleted your number,” I confess and shy away from his look.

“No problem. See you around.” He takes my hand and kisses my knuckles while winking at me before walking away.

“Don’t start,” I warn Nqoba as soon as he’s within earshot. I don’t like the look on his face and I don’t want to argue. “That was nothing. We were just talking.”

“The same way I’ll talk to MaNxumalo,” he says simply and nearly gives me a heart attack. He kisses my forehead. “It’s nothing, nothing at all.” The way he grips my waist says otherwise.

Mutual Desires : Twenty-six

Christophe

We're going back home today. Mbongolwane. I never thought I'd feel relieved to be going back there but I am. This whole trip was nothing but a disaster and I just really want to go back to the simplicity of it all. The problems I had back there were nothing compared to what I experienced these past few hours. We got bored in Northgate around 09:00pm and I persuaded the others – under Jacques' influence – to attend a house party that was starting at 11:00pm in Pretoria. By the time we got there it was already rowdy because that's how teenagers roll and it was really, really packed. Things were alright for maybe the first hour – although maybe alright isn't the right word to describe the beginnings of a tense fire that was building between Nqobizitha and I – but we were managing to have a good time. Then I had to use the bathroom and although he followed me there, he was gone by the time I came out, and I got lost looking around for him until I literally bumped into another one of my exes. Michael. The stupid experimentalist who broke my heart in Grade 10. I get angry thinking about how I gave him my virginity. Yes, I'm mad at myself for giving myself to him. I should've given it to Sello instead – but he possessed too much bottom energy and look, I just have a thing for dominant guys. Naturally dominant guys like the idiot that broke my heart back in Grade 10.

Anyway, I had to pause and catch up because the idiot wouldn't let me go just like that. He's in his third year of varsity. Then I asked him to help me find the others and just as I had found Siya and Nhlakanipho at the patio, looking hella intimate, I sensed Nqobizitha behind me. Things just went downhill from there. When I introduced them, Michael just had to emphasize that we had something between us. Then Hugo walked past us, but not without stopping to ask if we were still enjoying the party. He put his arm on my shoulder to squeeze softly before walking on. I was ignored for most of the night when that boy I'm embarrassed to call my ex finally walked away – without Nqoba pulling his usual intimidating antics this time. He looked done – but not in his usual pissed off way. It was a resigned look. I didn't know how to take it. His anger I can take but when he goes silent, it drives me insane like nothing else. It's a different form of torture. A torture that I couldn't stand any longer so I demanded we go back home.

Siya and Nhlakanipho followed behind us in another Uber. The real argument started here, in my room, when I asked Nqobizitha if he was okay and his reply was, "Yeah. I was just overreacting. I mean, given the kinds of friends you keep around you. Is it a surprise that every Tom, Dick and Harry is an ex of yours – at least we're not bonding over what you did with all of us."

The last bit he made sound like a joke but it wasn't funny. Not to me. So we argued and fought. It was a bad fight, a nasty, dirty one that I am not proud of. I put my hands on him again – two slaps. He didn't hit me back like he said he never would but I was pinned to the wall by my shoulders when Siya barged

in. It was embarrassing to have the others see the extent of how imperfect our...relationship is. Anyway, Siya tried to mediate but it was futile and we all ended up going to bed – after I confirmed with him that I was safe. Nqobizitha and I slept in opposite directions last night. Maybe he slept but for most of the night, I didn't. I'm angry at him but I'm also angry at myself for hitting him. For fighting dirty again – I used his fear of the darkness against him and told him that it was just like him to behave like a child because no grown man is afraid of the dark. He should've hit me then, I would've done it. He wanted to leave so I slapped him to...to get his attention.

It's all his fault though, if he weren't so freaking jealous all the time...if he weren't always so suspicious then there wouldn't have been any fights. It's not like we're still together anyway. I tried to get back together but he said no. But he hasn't let me go...just like I haven't him. I sigh quietly and blink the tears away. I have a bad headache from last night's silent tears. I never ever cried over guys until him – not even for Michael. Nqobizitha just has a way of...making me vulnerable like no one else. Of making me feel really, really small – unintentionally sometimes. And half the time, that's a good thing but sometimes it's not. When we're fighting it's not.

I should wake up and make him breakfast to apologize. That's what I'll do – and then maybe we can talk before we go home. I'm not as angry as I was last night. Quietly, I move to sit up and throw my feet over the bed. It's still so early – with how dark it is in my room – and the digital clock on my bedside table tells me that it's just gone after 05:00am. This is far too early for me but I wasn't sleeping anyway. I look over my shoulder as I sense him behind me. I should've known that he wasn't asleep but the way he's sitting on the bed – with his face buried in between his legs. There's silent whispering. I can hear him...counting?

"Nqoba...?" I whisper.

He doesn't respond.

"Nqobizitha?" I try again.

"Not now," his voice is...I've never heard it sound so quiet. I want to ask what he means but he'll just push me away. Like the other nights. But this time it feels different. He's even sitting in the darkness. He's afraid of the dark. Why is he...?

"Nqobizitha, I'm sorry." I try to touch him but he jerks away from my touch. "I didn't mean what I said last night. I was angry because you...and so I...please, I'm sorry." My apology was whack, I know. He doesn't reply verbally but pulls me to him. His raises his eyes to look at me – they're too dark...like

bottomless pits. His heartbeat is far too erratic, I can feel it in his fast but quiet breaths. I ache to touch his chest and lull it. He pulls my arm again and I almost stumble face first onto his crotch but he pulls me up in time and I'm in his face all of a sudden. There's tension all around him that makes my own breathing pick up. His touch is burning me. "Nqoba..."

"The only reason I haven't fucked your brains out yet is because I remember that conversation you had with your mother and I actually respect her." Shivers run down my spine at his words, but I force myself to hold his gaze – no matter how dark it is. "You don't want to be close to me at the moment so get out."

"I—do want to be close to you," my voice is pathetically small. I don't know what I'm doing but I try to tug at his boxers to, to...I don't even know. I'm still sore and sex doesn't solve everything – not in our case. It just delays everything. But still...he can, he can punish me with sex again. "Punish me then – if it will make you feel better."

He gives me a look I can't read but it's not a positive one and then he's gripping my hand and gently shifting it off of him. He leaves the bed. I can hear the bathroom door click closed after he's entered. I bite my lower lip and rub my eyes frustratedly. This love thing isn't for me. It's just not. I still decide to make him breakfast before we'll actually leave because I meant what I said that day I told his sister that I enjoy cooking for him. It's not even about receiving his unending compliments – but the way his eyes light up and the way he digs in until he looks like a chipmunk and his sincere gratitude. It's about the satisfied sigh afterward and the little smile that pulls at his lips. I always want to make him happy.

There are voices coming from the direction of the kitchen – hushed and intimate. I find Nhlakanipho softly caressing Siya's cheek. It's too intimate and I want to look away for that very reason but also because I am not ready to face either of them after last night. "Sanibonani," I briefly steal a glance. They look like they've bathed already – and look good in these black clothes they're wearing. I wonder if they planned it because then that's really corny.

"Kunjani?" they say at the same time. It's cute but I still roll my eyes. Then Nhlakanipho scratches the back of his head and he looks bashful – a foreign expression on someone usually so serious. "You're not obliged to answer that actually. Uphi ubafo?"

"In the bathroom," I clear my throat and shift awkwardly. I may as well address last night and get it over with. "I, um, sorry you guys had to see that. Izolo. I'm so embarrassed."

“Don’t be,” Nhlakanipho, surprisingly, says the words. “All relationships go through crap, ndoda. But you guys must remember that’s it’s not one against the other but rather the two of you against the problem. It’s the only way you’ll resolve your issues. Also, no violence – it’s not recommended.”

Ironic that little piece of advice, isn’t?

Nhlakanipho is laughing with his eyes but his face is its usual deadpan. It makes me want to laugh so badly and all it takes is for me to look at Siyabonga before we’re both bursting into melodious laughter. Nhlakanipho looks between the two of us and shakes his head. He folds an arm around Siya’s waist and pulls him to his side. I hear him murmur something about spanking Siya’s ass before he kisses the other boy’s temple. Siya leans into his touch – practically melting. These two right here, are the picture I’d show everyone when they ask about love – straight, gay...it doesn’t matter. They are love. And love is them. I don’t know why Nqobizitha and I struggle to get where they are...just when it seems like we have our shit together then something happens and I just...I don’t even know. Maybe we’re too immature. I don’t know. I don’t know.

“Chris.” Siya is too close to me now – and I shake my head to clear my thoughts. I didn’t even notice him move, also, Nhlakanipho is nowhere to be seen. Where the hell did he go? “Wait...” Siya grips my wrist.

“I want to make him breakfast,” I say even though Siya didn’t ask for explanations. He gives me a look that makes me feel naked and I shift my attention to the broken microwave on the countertop. The plate fell and my father never bothered to replace it because its expensive as fuck apparently.

“You’ll get to that,” Siya pulls me toward the round table and forces me to grab a chair beside him. “You and that Nqobizitha are so frustrating. Why can’t you be normal for once?”

I want to laugh because if we’re talking statistics, me and Nqobizitha are the normal ones. Well maybe not. But how many young couples make it nowadays? We’re plagued with scandals and faults that you’re lucky if you reach the third month mark with no drama of physical, emotional or psychological abuse. We cheat, we lie and mess everything up. My generation wasn’t meant for love. It’s hard to find someone who is really into you – not just for your looks or pocket or brain or clothes or food. The list is endless. We use each other for stupid shit and bail once we’ve gotten what we wanted. My generation is not Nhlakanipho and Siyabonga.

“Do you want to talk about this?”

I blink at Siyabonga, he's giving me this serious look – attentive. He's always there for me...kinda like Simi. When I really need him, he's available. And too many times he takes my side – cursing his boyfriend's best friend to hell and back. "I just really want to make this breakfast."

He nods, looking mildly relieved, and stands up. "Good. My boyfriend and I are going out for an hour or so. Just the two of us. Maybe we can talk when I come back."

Then why did he offer? The bitch!

"Oh and Chris," I pause my task of looking for the fork and turn to face Siya. He's at the doorway, leaning against it with a little smile on his face. "You do love my boyfriend's brother. I see it all the time, the way you look at him – like nothing else matters in the world or ever will again. He loves you too. But he's an idiot and I can't believe that you chose him of all people. You should read that book : Call Me By Your Name. That Elio kid reminds of the way you love that idiot Nqobizitha. But at least with him, Oliver wasn't an idiot. We'll plan our own little date to watch the movie together but right now I have a date with the love of my life. We'll be back before 08:00am."

He's said a mouthful and I nod at him dumbfoundedly. "Thank—" the rude idiot is gone before I can finish. Whatever. I left my phone back in my bedroom but I'm sure I can whip up uphuthu quickly and rush to the Somalian shop to buy amasi. Hopefully, Nqobizitha has gone back to bed and is actually sleeping. And yes, I know he should be having proper breakfast in the morning but I'm certain he'd have amasi for breakfast, lunch and supper if he could.

The uphuthu is done and cooling when I go back to my bedroom. Nqobizitha is in bed but I'm not sure if he's sleeping. His back is turned away from me. I grab my wallet but leave my phone. The clock says it's 05:50am so I'm sure the Somalians will be opening soon. Just ten more minutes. I have to wait outside in the morning cold until one of them finally lights the room where they run their spaza. They're not obvious about their business because we have snobby folk who don't want any disturbance in their community but still buy from these low-key spazas when they're desperate. I pay my money and grab what I want before walking back the five minute walk to my house. I place the amasi in the fridge and decide that I'll wait for another half hour before I can give this to Nqobizitha.

He's awake and sitting with his legs drawn over the edge of the bed. My footsteps falter as our eyes clash. I want to speak but anxiety snatches my voice, forcing me to clear my throat. Suddenly I wish that the others hadn't left us all alone here. What do I say to him? I'm not sure if I should sit beside him or go to my side of the bed. My phone makes the decision for me. Its ringing. I quickly rush to answer it but it's too late. The number I don't recognize – and it says three missed calls. I look over my shoulder. Why

didn't Nqobizitha answer it? Probably to get back at me. I think about calling this person back but no. I'm not going to waste my airtime. Then it rings again but this time it's a message.

Are you still asleep? I'm sorry. I just wanted to check that you're not dying of a hangover. This is Hugo.

"Who is that?"

Really? He's going to ask me this question after he failed to answer my phone. You know what on second thought, it's a good thing that he didn't answer. I can feel his gaze burning into the back of my skull. I struggle against squirming as I continue looking at the message, unsure how to reply. "Nobody."

"Okay. And what does he want?"

I look over my shoulder in disbelief. I want to laugh but the expression on his face is serious. I'm not sure what Hugo wants. So I shrug my shoulders.

"Maybe you should let me see for myself since you can't answer."

Oh no no. Not happening. My focus is back on my phone in an attempt to delete the messages quickly because I can feel him standing. I think he's coming to my side but he's on his phone also. Okay...what the fuck is he doing?

"MaNxumalo, kunjani?"

I don't know what happens in the next few seconds but I'm already grabbing for his phone, trying to snatch it away. Dammit! He's too tall. My heart is thudding violently against my ribcage and I just know that Nqobizitha is doing this on purpose. He has to be. Why would he want to kill me like this? "Give me your phone, Nqobizitha. I wasn't talking to him. What the hell is wrong with you?!" I'm screaming, my hands are trembling. Maybe he wants me to cry. He enjoys my tears. This is why he's doing this. "Fine! You want me to cry then you have my tears. Just, please stop this! I wasn't talking to him."

"Who?"

What?

I shake my head. “Why are you always so fucking jealous? You just have to ruin ever—”

“Hey!” Nqobizitha murmurs, smacking me against wall. His dark gaze takes me in, from my eyes down to my lips, and lingers there for a very long second. Before I can do anything, he reaches out and grips my face, making me gasp. “Watch your tongue. I wasn’t the one flirting with people I claimed to dump weeks ago.” His fingers stroke my cheek, painfully slow. “Ungjwayela amasimba wena.”

I can only stare at him wide-eyed, too taken aback to move. The blazing brown eyes stare back at me with undisguised hunger and anger, making me shiver. “I’m s-sorry,” I can hear the words leave my mouth. “I love you.”

That seems to set him off as he pries his hand off me and stalks away back to the bed. Then he’s walking back to me and giving me a questioning look. I don’t know what he’s asking. He nods his head as if his mind is made up about something. “Just a few weeks ago you were madly in love with your French boyfriend who makes love to you in French. Then you’re lonely in Mbongolwane so what better way to spend time than seducing the—”

“Are you really going to finish that?” I gasp and rub my chest to lessen the pain. Every breath sears my lungs and my knees are growing weak. “So this is what you think this is? That I just seduced you because I was lonely?”

“What else am I supposed to say? You’re making a fool out of me wena. Allowing that French idiot to kiss you. Allowing him to talk to you. I saw the look on that boy’s face – he wants you. Lalela ke, mntakwethu. Stay here with him. The others and I – we will go back home. Maybe you made a mistake and weren’t thinking right when you thought you loved me. Confusion happens, trust me. Now that you’re here, that boy will be happy. Fix things. As for me, the only thing stopping me from fucking you up is my promise to you. Leave me in peace now.”

I’d call him out on this liver of his for kicking me out of my own room, did my heart not feel like it was being broken into by a thousand tiny shards. I keep blinking, hoping that I’ll see him better but my vision is really blurred. Another breakup. How many must we have till we make it? Because I refuse to think that we’re just not compatible. I can’t even recall all the moments that truly mattered when I was with Hugo. With Nqobizitha, it doesn’t matter that we’ve known each other for a short period of time but I have so many lasting memories with him. Memories that will stay with me forever. The first time we

met. The late nights spent in my room. Our conversations. I refuse to think that this isn't love – we're just...stumbling a lot. But we'll get it right. We will.

I shake my head and get in his space defiantly. "I can't, Nqobizitha. I don't know much about our future and I hate that we fight so much. But the truth of the matter is I love you. I'm only 18 and I don't know a lot of things but I know that I love you."

Maybe he's just like me sometimes – and all he needs are my words for him to fall. I don't stop him when he leans down to kiss me. It's not rough like I expected it would be, but soft and tender and passionate and I moan into the kiss. I wrap my legs around him as he continues to kiss me. Over and over again.

"Nganeyakwethu..." he says my name and the world stops. I hold onto him tighter and want to feel him all over me. With every swirl and slide, my heart proclaims louder – *I love you. I love you until my dying day.*

We're on the bed next. Not having sex, no. He wouldn't go through with it because he remembers what my mother said. I don't know when he's become so moral conscious all of a sudden. "I'll delete the messages and block everything," I break the silence. "I am not in love with him, Nqoba. I was shocked when I saw Hugo yesterday and with Jacques of all people. I was angry because I didn't expect my friend to bring my ex on a date with us. That's the only reason because I wouldn't date his exes as I wouldn't want him to feel awkward. Now he went and did that. Hugo's my past. I love you."

He says nothing.

My eye shoot up to find his and he's already giving me an intense stare. "I'm sorry I told him to text me. I don't know why I did that – maybe to show him that he didn't have any effect on me whatsoever. Hugo's a good man and an ideal partner but he's not you. You're...god, Nqobizitha you have no idea what you do to me. What you mean. And maybe, you need to hear too..." like he played that Mjikjelwa song, I have my own song to describe how he makes me feel. I grab my phone and lay on his chest as the song starts. Daniel Cesar – Best Part (featuring H.E.R)

He has this little smile kissing his beautiful lips when the song is done. "Your sunshine in the rain when it's pouring, huh?"

“The sunshine on my life,” I say, making crawly fingers on his chest. “You’re this specific art that I can’t find anywhere else, that makes my world beautiful. My favourite colour. I can’t find you anywhere else. I don’t want to.”

His lips touch my forehead in a soft kiss. “Tell me more...” there’s hints of his stupid arrogance hidden in his soft plea.

I laugh and continue. He is really smug by the time I am done. His fingers are dancing along the skin on my back. I shudder and sigh. “Now for the bad parts. Just this one big thing – I hate your jealousy.”

“Its not jealousy, it’s—”

“Being territorial, I know.” I interrupt him. “And I’m the same way too, because the thought of you with anyone else hurts like a bitch. But you’re worse, Nqobizitha. So much worse. I don’t like that. Because it could turn unhealthy and land you in bad situations. You don’t want to see me talking to any guy who isn’t you, Siyabonga or Nhlakanipho. That isn’t normal. It’s just not. I only get worried when I see you around old women but I don’t act the way you do. And your words about my exes last night, they really hurt me. You made it sound like I date every guy I meet because my friends seem to have multiple partners. To disrespect them as well?”

“Those aren’t the friends you keep around you,” he says with a snort. Is he even apologetic? I don’t think so. “That boy shaped like a woman pursued my friend even after he found out that Nhlakanipho has a boyfriend. Then he was acting touchy-touchy with me.”

He makes a valid point about Jacques. But what about the other things?

“I...ngyaxolisa, dali. For the other stuff. Of course, I don’t think you date every guy you meet. I was already angry about that French idiot then we’re meeting another one of your exes and I just...I lost it. I reacted poorly to knowing that you were once with those guys. Then my mind started taunting me about how they’ve fucked you too. And that thought just – it pissed me off. They know all these different parts of you a-and I...”

“They know nothing important about me,” I say, looking into his eyes. “I’ve never talked to any of them about vulnerable parts of me that you know about, Nqobizitha. They don’t know about my insecurities, my past, my fears, my hopes for the future. Ask Hugo about those girls who fooled me in Grade 8 and he

won't be able to tell you anything. Ask Michael about my dreams of being a model and he won't be able to tell you a single thing. I don't hate them. I wish them nothing but the best. I love them yes. But I am in love with you," I emphasize my point by taking his hand to put to my chest. "This beats for you."

Nqobizitha is grinning too damn wide. Like a child. Then he's hugging me real right and I'm getting crushed but I don't mind. "When we get home, you'll need to teach me more about loving you the way you need."

"You're trying your best. That's enough for me."

Silence. For a while. So very comfortable. I think I'm drifting off when I hear his voice again. "Sometimes, I don't want to share you because kids don't want to share their favourite toy. You're shiny and beautiful and new and I want to hide you so that I'm the only one who plays with you."

What the ever loving fuck?!

My eyes shoot to him and boy oh boy he's serious. I tried being poetic and shit as I explained how he makes me feel and this is what I get in return? I'm insulted. This Brentwood wearing bastard...

"This is what you get for falling in love with this Zulu idiot, Chris. This is what you get. Mxm. I shouldn't have made you uphuthu. Let me get up and go feed it to Mrs. Bezuidenhout's dogs next door." I say getting up.

His arms are around me quickly. "Sthandwa sami, wait." He traps me against the door with a charming but childish smile on his face. He makes my knees weak. I want to stop looking at him with his stupid ass. "You made me uphuthu."

"To apologize to you." I nod and my smile disappears as I think back to how I insulted him as well last night. I put my hands on him again. I really need to think before I act. "Ngyaxolisa nami. I shouldn't have made fun of your fears. You come to me because you trust me. And I love that you feel safe with me, that you can be...vulnerable – in your own way. I was angry and hurt you because of it. I'm sorry for putting my hands on you. That's now how I should've reacted at all."

I can see his own smile disappearing. "Its okay, dali. Maybe I'll think before I talk next time." He's so calm and his smile is returning a little – too melancholic for my liking. "And I was being a baby. Today, I counted to 1100 without being scared. I'll do better next time, Mama wami."

What?

He's still smiling. I don't think he realizes what he's just said. He's already walking out.

"Sqalo, you're back, man?" the cashier at the petrol station gives Nqobizitha a big grin. "Or is it Sbani? Weeehhh, I just hope Thatego doesn't know about this boy. Kahle kahle, why are you cheating vele?"

This boy I love makes a confused face and then he laughs. They wanted to check out Mandela's former home in Vilakazi street before we can drive back to Mbongolwane. But we went to a few places before that as well and it's really late now which means we're going to be arriving at Mbongolwane very late into the night but we've all informed our guardians and that's all that matters. We're still in Soweto, filling up petrol before we can actually leave this time but this cashier – his name is...Kabelo. I don't know why he's giving Nqobizitha this look – as if they know each other or something.

"Are you cheating on me with some dude called Thatego, Bhubesi lami?" I waggle my eyebrows and giggle as Nqoba rolls his eyes.

"Uyasiphambanisa, bhuti wami." He tells the cashier and pays for our drinks and the numerous sweets I took. "I'm Nqobizitha."

"Okay, you're their triplet then," the guy says jokingly but I think he thinks that Nqoba's messing with him. My suspicions are proved right when we're almost outside and the guy suddenly shouts, "Greet uma-oledi for me there, Mzimela. Don't forget, house party. But leave that dramatic Thatego at home tonight. Just this once – it won't kill you."

Nqoba and I look at each other and then burst out laughing. "You know I know about this," I say as he holds my hand even though the distance to our car is short. He opens the door to the backseat and I get in first as he follows after me. Nhlakanipho is driving today. I'm more than okay with it. It means I get to

cuddle with the boy I love and be clingy as fuck with him. “I read somewhere that there about seven people in the world who look exactly like us – doppelgangers, they call them.”

“What are you talking about?” Siya grabs his biltong and hands some energy drinks to Nhlakanipho. The other boy thanks him with a kiss. These two are too in love.

“This guy at the store called Nqoba ‘Sqalo’ and then ‘Sbani’,” I say with a sigh and offer Nqoba some Skittles. He frowns. He dislikes sugary foods – except for cold drinks. “The Sbani guy has a boyfriend and I guess the cashier thought Nqoba is cheating on him with me.”

The others laugh.

“Guess what their surname is...” Nqoba sounds too amused by this. He’s looking at the rearview mirror – at Nhlakanipho in particular.

“What?” it’s Siya who asks the question.

“Mzimela,” Nqoba and I say at the same time.

“Spooky!” Siya shakes his head. We’re all still laughing. “No wonder you two get along so well. You’re brothers!”

“Fraternal twins with a very deep connection,” I pipe in and look at Nqoba. “So tell me, sthandwa sami...when I pinch you for example, can Nhlakanipho feel it as well?”

Nqoba rolls his eyes. “We even think the same things. Didn’t you know? Right now, Nhlakanipho is thinking about...Siyabonga.”

“I am.” Nhlakanipho confirms with his subtle grin.

“Aww, baby wam.” Siyabonga coos.

“Like that wasn’t obvious,” I huff but my smile is there as I look into Nqoba’s eyes. They’re a beautiful shade of brown – the colour of the rich soil. Too deep and earthy and warm and invaluable. His hand finds mine, one of his fingers crawling to my ring finger, there’s a tattoo there that I just got a few hours ago. It was on impulse, after I told him about that MTV show where you’re blindfolded and the person you’re with decides what tattoo they want you to get and you can’t see until its done. He chose mine for me. It’s on my ring finger as I said – two stick people on a field. One of them on his knees – proposing. I asked him what it meant – though it was obvious but I don’t want to make assumptions but I’ve been grinning like a fool since – and he wouldn’t tell me.

I was scared to allow him to get tattooed as well because his mother is the she-devil herself. But he insisted. I requested that they do it on his chest but nothing big. Its right next to his heart. My one was inspired by the red string fate. Our pinky fingers are linked and our wrists are bound together by this thread. The thread that binds us together says, ‘Love you until my dying day’ but it’s in French. Maybe it was a little extreme but love makes you do crazy things. Nhlakanipho and Siya warned us about this but we went ahead anyway.

I’m only 18 and I don’t know a lot of things but the only thing I do know, that I am certain of is that I love Nqobizitha. The rest, it doesn’t matter – at least to me.

Mutual Desires : Twenty-seven

Christophe

He's not sleeping well lately, I can tell. Nqobizitha. It's been six days since we returned from Joburg and not once has he come to my house at night. The late night break-ins are a thing of the past. Each night, I wait and wait but...nothing. This is my fault, and I don't know how to rectify it. He won't talk to me, like really talk to me. He's always polite, yes, charming and he still makes me laugh but there is a disconnect. Like he hasn't fully forgiven me for that night. I tried to talk to Zenny but she has her pregnancy to deal with and argues with Jabulani a lot – she says it's the hormones. Then I tried to speak to Simi but she's as clueless as they come – relationships show her flames as well. Siya was my last resort because I didn't want him cussing Nqobizitha out because well, Siya tends to take my side a lot.

This time though, I had no such luck. I'll give him credit and say that he didn't pick any sides because Nqoba was still wrong as well – considering the fact that he used to fuck multiple women – but I hit him where it hurts the most. I targeted his fears, and made fun of them. Lord knows I'd flip if he ever mocked me for my anorexia. Not even Simi knows about it but I told him because I trust him. When I said he makes me vulnerable like no one else, I meant that I love talking to him. There are a lot of things I cannot say to people. Things that I can say only to him. That I feel I can say to just him. Because he doesn't judge me, he doesn't make fun of my insecurities or my fears. Never once did he do that. But we argue and I use his fears against him. Siya didn't talk to me for three days after he learned the truth. He only began speaking to me yesterday and told me to give Nqoba some time. I don't know if I can stand waiting through the hours of the night any longer because it's really driving me insane. Especially because he sends morning texts, and talks to me throughout the day but when it comes to the night time...nothing.

I am brought out of my thoughts when some of the students come up to me to say goodbye. When did the final bell even ring? We're not resuming extra classes until next week but this entire week, I had to fill in for Mr. Nsibande. He's sick but he'll be back on Monday. The only reason I agreed was to earn myself some more bucks, I just hated that I had to communicate with Mr. Biyela directly for that. He's not trying anything funny but the lingering stares are back. I didn't tell Nqobizitha because I...I've insulted him and now I need his help? No. Besides, I'm no damsel in distress. I can't fight but I'd go down trying. My eyes find him still seated at his desk, too focused on his textbook. I think he's sleeping but with his eyes open. I check the time and really hope that that kid I spoke to during break time will hurry up with the gift I got him.

"Hi," I grab the nearest chair and sit down in front of him. My hand finds one of his own and I squeeze softly. "How are you feeling?"

He smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes, they're too red with darkness around them. "Dali..." he looks like Nhlakanipho that time he was released from the holding cells in John Vorster – too drained, physically, emotionally and mentally. "I'm always good mina. How about you?"

I'm about to answer but there's a knock on the door and I quickly snatch my hand from Nqoba's as the door opens and in walks Mpendulo. "Mr. Chris..." the Grade 10s call me that and I don't even get offended anymore – are least they're respectful. "Bhuti Nqoba. I have both your orders." I give him and Nqobizitha a curious look. The boy I love has a subtle smile on his face but he says nothing. "This is for you." He places a Spurs bag in front of me. "And this here...for you," he places a half-litre bottle of Coca Cola and lunch bag in front of Nqoba. "Pay up..." he looks at both of us.

I give him the R10 I promised him and watch Nqobizitha retrieve a R50 note. Mpendulo throws his fist in the air and takes off running. We both watch him with quiet laughs falling off our lips. "And this..." I look at Nqobizitha, pointing to the plastic bag.

"You're turning into a needle again," he says and shrugs. "This...?" he points to his own items.

"I wanted to surprise you with your favourite," I say and lean over to quickly peck him on the lips for the food he got me. He's right about me looking like a needle. I haven't been having much of an appetite lately. And I never force myself to eat when I don't want to because then I end up retching. "I'm sorry for the cold drink though. That was a last minute thing. Maybe I should've gotten water instead."

He laughs and grips my hand briefly. "You have never given me amasi with water. It's always cold drink or wine. You're weird like that. Relax."

We eat in silence for a while, and he won't meet my eye often which causes the disconnect to be there even more. I want to apologize again about what I said to him, for hitting him. I'm scared, I don't want to add to this tension between us. Maybe I'm causing it but he looks tired and its eating away at my soul. "Do you want to go back home with me?" I already know what the answer will be.

"No."

I knew it but my heart still drops. “Oh...” I clear my throat and look at the tattoo on my finger. It turned out really gorgeous and every time I look at it, hope blossoms. We’ll be alright. I love him and he loves me.

“Yeah. MaKhathide needs me to help her with something.”

He’s lying. Last he told me, his mom went to Joburg. I remember because he was suspecting her of cheating again. She’s never gone to Joburg before, just different parts of KZN so why there this time? He never mentioned anything about her returning but he doesn’t need to. Maybe I’m just overreacting because of the guilt riddling me. “Another time then?”

He nods his head. Then he tugs on my wrist and I get the message. Leaving my chair, I go to join him and sit on his lap. My heart settles. *There, there* it comforts me. I rest my head on his shoulder as he kisses my forehead. I think he’s reaching that stage where he doesn’t care anymore – whether or not we’re seen. But he’s always been like this – in a way. Even when it was platonic between us, he’d hold my hand without a care in the world. I remember that time with that jerk Thandolwenkosi calls her boyfriend, he had his arm around my shoulders after he got me out of that nasty situation. It feels like so long ago now. I remember the simplicity of it all. I want us to go back to that place again.

I’ll take Siyabonga’s advice. From now on, my pride stays at the door.

“Ow!” I moan quietly as my knee collides with something metal. Some part of the window. I don’t know how Nqobizitha makes this look so simple but I’ve already torn my pants from when I was jumping their gate. Now I’m colliding with things even though his windows are super large. *Doesn’t matter, Chris. You’re here now*, my mind reminds me. I desperately tried to follow through with Siya’s advice about giving Nqobizitha some space but I couldn’t stand to wait for him another night. He’s not going to come, I just know it. So I’m here and we’re going to share the same bed.

I quickly attempt to fix myself before I can show my face. I’m surprised he hasn’t come to investigate the sounds in his bathroom because I was loud as fuck. I rinse my face and use his face towel to dry up. Then I’m leaving the bathroom to go find him. He’s sitting at his study desk with his face buried in a textbook. His mouth opens silently but I have no idea what he’s saying. He hasn’t even noticed my presence which is uncharacteristic of him. Usually, he senses me in an instant – just like I do him. “Nqoba...” I call out and stand in place nervously as he finally notices me.

His eyes are wild but still so exhausted. “What are you doing here?” he stands up and is in front of me with startling quickness.

I take a step back, caught off guard. He takes another one, getting close. We continue like this until my back hits the wall. Now, I have nowhere to run. His scent hits me and my body goes insane. I can feel him burning holes throughout the entirety of me. There it is – the intensity, the connection, our chemistry. I place my hands on his chest and keep my eyes there as well. I don’t struggle as he grips my face and makes me look up at him. I don’t deny him the right to my lips. It’s soft, reverential and gentle. I never want it to stop – and my emotions are barely contained. He’s consuming me – all of me. So simply. I’ve missed him so much. I miss right now, in his arms. “I tried to give you space like Siya suggested but I can’t anymore, Nqoba. I know it was selfish of—”

“Shh...” he cuts me off by pressing his thumb on my lips, parting them. “What are you talking about?”

“You don’t come to my house anymore. We don’t share the same bed – and you’re not sleeping well. You need me...like I need you. I don’t deserve your forgiveness and I really wish you’d hit—” Nqoba steps closer, and the rest of my words simply disappear. My heart is pounding in my chest as he stares at me, unapologetically, with no reservation. The way he always does. He lifts a hand and touches my face, slowly leaning down, and his intention couldn’t be clearer. “I’m so sorry. Please forgive me.” I breathe the words quickly, against his lips.

He brushes my lower lip with his thumb and keeps his eyes on me and I wish I could read this expression on his face but I can’t. The staring continues for the longest second with my heart pounding violently against my ribcage. Then he removes his finger and replaces it with his lips, warm and soft as they move over my own – unhurried. “Take off your clothes.” His voice is soft and coaxing, but with authority lacing through it.

A cold wave of air hits me as he shifts away from me an inch or two. And this is really not a good idea, the sex. But we never learn – and my body... my body is such a fool when it comes to Nqobizitha, always so...dangerously weak. So I go against my better judgment and nod. He folds his arms on his chest and waits. His eyes are dark and intense – unmoving. I start with this jersey I have on. His jersey...mine – ours. Then my t-shirt is next. My hands are trembling as I work on my pants next. I can feel his eyes on me the entire time. My underwear is last and it falls in a pool of soft white around my feet, and then I hear it, that familiar sexually frustrated groan of Nqoba’s as he regards me as if I’m the most beautiful star he has ever seen in his life.

He grabs my hand and leads me to the bed and I am not sure what position he wants me in so I let him guide me. I'm on my back, he spreads my legs. He doesn't remove his boxer-briefs and confuses me as he climbs the bed, getting in between my legs. Lower and lower he goes until his head is on my stomach. "Talk to me, Bambi."

I'm going to cry. I really will. My legs enfold at the small of his back and I lean down to embrace his upper body. "I love you so much, like you do me. But we're doing it wrong, aren't we?"

He doesn't reply.

I lean down again to kiss his temple and my lips pull up in sheer joy as his arms enwrap around me. "I'll need you to teach me all about loving you the way you need as well."

Again, no reply. I don't think he knows what to say. I'm his first romantic relationship. Well, he mentioned someone once but I don't know what happened to them. Anyway, I'm glad they're gone. I love him and I'll do my best to love him right. The way he deserves. "I promise to never hit you again, it was wrong. I'll walk around naked and deny you sex instead. Because you're obsessed with my body." I can hear his quiet laughs and his breath tickling my navel. My hands massage his scalp and I kiss his head again before continuing, "I promise to never use your past, your fears or insecurities against you. I'll wiggle my body in that way that makes you laugh instead and because I get mad when you do that, I promise to take my mad ass into my room to cry about it because when I'm done crying I wouldn't have hurt you with my words – and we'll be able to sit down and talk about it. I promise to work on myself as well and my own fears so that I don't project on you. I love you and I'm ashamed to admit that the worst thing I ever did was hurt you. Ngyaxolisa, Nqobizitha."

"Nomthandazo, she did something to me. I've been having these dreams – evil dreams – not like the good ones I used to. I was in a suffocating square and it was really dark and silent. I couldn't see – there was no light at all. It was too dark and I couldn't see..."

I quickly search my brain and try to place the name. The thick woman with short hair comes to mind and I remember she was here in his room, accusing her own mother of doing horrible things to Nqobizitha. I tried to ask him about it that same day but he shut me down. Sometimes, I feel like there's a lot he's not telling me. Like that time he called me 'Mama wami' this same person that he calls in his dreams. He always tells me that she's walking away from him and that no matter how hard he runs after her, he can never catch up. I wonder if maybe he's adopted. Maybe this is why that cashier had told him that he looks some twin guys from Soweto. Maybe he really is a triplet. What if he doesn't know?

“Nqobizitha, who is ‘Mama wami’?” my voice is too quiet but judging by the way his body briefly locks up, he heard me.

“Ntombikayise,” he says quietly. “Nomthandazo’s mother. My mother’s sister. My aunt. She’s dead – long time ago. Heart problems. Do you want to meet her? I told her about you.”

What?

I shake my head, surprised that he’s offering. Yes, I want to meet her because it sounds like she had this huge impact on him. But wait...Nomthandazo’s mother? His mother’s sister, and his aunt. Is this the same woman who’d lock him inside some wardrobe for hours while he cried? Cry to the point of fainting. My stomach twists nastily as I feel myself grow increasingly sick. Why would she do this? Where was his mother when she did this? Where were the sisters? The maids. Family. “Nqoba...” I whisper, my hands pause their task of massaging his head. “This is the woman who locked you in the wardrobe? This is the woman who’d make you count?”

“Yes,” his voice isn’t even strained. This is not disturbing to him. “But she made me know the numbers. When I was four, I’d stand there and count to 1000. Then I learned how to count to 2000. Then 3000. It was hard but I learned – then she’d reward me. But I don’t think I am allowed to say. She never wanted me to tell people but after that reward I’d get another reward and another one and another one. She loved me though. And I loved her too. This is why I want you to meet her so that she knows you but also...it doesn’t matter. Never mind.”

“I want to know more,” I plead and then remember that I have no right. None whatsoever. Especially after our last fight. I need to work on re-earning his trust. “But you don’t have to tell me, sthandwa sami. We can talk about anything in the world. It doesn’t have to be about this.”

He keeps quiet for so long that I think he’s fallen asleep. His lips touch my thigh repeatedly and I know that he’s still awake. “You’re not wearing clothes around me again. I like sleeping on your naked body.”

He doesn’t ask. I hate it. I love it.

I lean down and press the softest kiss next to his ear. “Whatever makes you happy, Tarzan.”

Silence again but its comfortable. “Your love is different from hers – confusing. It’s like sunny clouds, sometimes it’s dark clouds but they clear again. I don’t really have to work for it. Maybe this is why I love you more.”

I bite my lower lip and try to make sense of what he’s saying. I’m uncomfortable for some reason, I think it has to do with the way he said it. Comparing romantic love to motherly love. My mind is creating all these scenarios and I’m trying very hard not to go there. This can’t be another MaNtuli. It just can’t. “She was like your mother, yes?” I have to confirm.

He says nothing.

“Siya says our love is gentle but not always. He says he can compare it to teeth because sometimes it’s gritty and dirty and possessive. I don’t know whether that’s a good thing or not.”

“Perhaps sometimes it’s not supposed to be careful or soft at all. Sometimes it has to feel like teeth.” He says quietly. “You were right about a few things though. The next time you’re mad at me – we’re talking it out when we’ve both calmed down. We’re fucking it out. Or you’re taking your nonexistent ass back to your room to cry. You’re not going to put your hands on me because I wouldn’t do that to you. About the...darkness, that was the first and last time you mentioned that. It won’t happen again, trust me.” His voice is quiet but the authority is there – laced with dark promise.

I’m nodding my head quickly, gratefully, even though he can’t see me. “I love you s-so much.”

“Talk to me, Bambi.”

My heart falters and I nod again. “I read this book that Siya suggested. He says it reminds him of the way I love you. I relate to the way Elio loves Oliver. It’s how I love you. But I think its about him and Nhlakanipho as well. So this American student, Oliver, goes to Italy...”

Nqobizitha

MaKhathide had a hijacking scare a couple of days ago. She didn't give us the full details but it was when she was coming back from Johannesburg. The incident took place just as she was entering Mbongolwane and it didn't help her case that it was late at night. But she always carries her gun and I don't know how she took on two big men but it was them who lost their lives and not her. It was a scary situation, especially for the family, because nothing like this has ever happened to us. Mbongolwane isn't known for a high crime rate. The crimes that take place here are mostly petty ones that are initiated by these young boys who're addicted to woonga. So it was strange that she was targeted, even more so because our family has never been targeted before. We're like gods in this place.

It all didn't make sense until it did. A few weeks ago, I went to visit Fundiswa in her hospital bed and she told me to warn my mother. She told me to warn my mother because our family wasn't the only powerful family. I don't want to think that it's her but it's possible. This was too much of a coincidence. I had to go and remind MaKhathide because I want her safe. She is still my mother and I love her. I wouldn't want anything bad happening to her. But it was a waste of time with the way she dismissed me. She doesn't think MaNtuli had anything to do with the hijacking. Apparently, she's too much of a woman to do that. And my mother, being a man, has no time to entertain silly women who think with their decaying vaginas – those were her words.

Anyway, nothing bad has happened since then. The police took her in for questioning but she was released that same day and life has been going on like normal. Well, as normal as it can be. My sisters are always so scared to go out. Ndoniyamanzi to be exact. She's thinking of taking a trip to Mozambique for a little breather. She deserves it, with everything that she's been through already. As for me, today I'm spending the day with my father. We don't spend much time together because he also helps MaKhathide to build their empire but I'd like to think that he was always there when I needed him. Especially after Ntombikayise passed on. He started spending even more time with me, talking to me, we hung out. Until I grew older and decided it needed to stop – when I reached high school. I didn't want to be the embarrassing boy who spent time with his old timer instead of chasing girls with his friends. Right now, I think he is lonely and I need to spend some time with him. I don't want to wait until it's too late.

“Kodwa Baba,” I shake my head as I step into the sunlight. “We're using this old thing?”

“Get in and stop complaining.” He throws the keys at me. Great. I'll look out of style driving this car. It's his '79 Toyota Camry. “Awufake uWhitney Huston lapho, Mapholoba.”

I chuckle and do as he says. This is the kind of music he enjoys. Maskandi rarely. He's a typical Zulu man but not too typical. In fact by Zulu men standards, he's probably too much of a softie. “You're really intent on embarrassing me in front of the chicks, huh?” I ask him as he starts singing.

“Girls over your old man?”

“Of course not but limits, munt’ omdala.” I peer over at him briefly. “You didn’t even say where we’re going. I’m driving aimlessly.”

“Empangeni. To the BnB. Just a little inspection. Someone complained about being given a dirty room on the Facebook page. They wouldn’t give him another room and the receptionist was rude about it.”

“Wow...” I say and shake my head. I remember the last time I went there, I was going to help Chris. Looks like Bab’ Biyela is back to his shenanigans. I’ll have to threaten him with the pictures I got of him and some young thing the other day. He buys male prostitutes in Durban. How I found about this is...well, its obvious that a guy like him isn’t getting what he wants at home so he was bound to go look for it elsewhere. I had to follow him around fruitlessly for a couple of days until...finally. Finding out what he does with the boys he picks up and takes to hotels was simple enough. Everyone has a price. He hasn’t touched Chris though but I see his lingering gazes. I don’t know why Chris keeps quiet about it when he knows that he can come to me about anything. Anything in the world.

It’s 06:00pm when we finally reach the BnB. I grab my phone to answer to the numerous messages that Chris sent me. He’s checking in to confirm if I’ll make it to his house tonight. Of course I will. I can’t sleep without him around me. But I had to stay away for a while – after he said all those words. The hits I can take, they don’t have much of an impact on me anyway. I think he hurts his hand more than he does me when he’s hitting me. Words on the other hand cut deep. They have the ability to do more damage than any punch could ever do. This is why I stayed away – for all those days. I didn’t want him to see me weak and then use that against me. Because if he could say shit like that to my face what would stop him from saying it to other people as well?

I stayed away for so many other reasons. The nights spent apart hurt like a bitch but I had no other choice. I stayed away because I was guilty as well. The shit I said to him on the night of our argument wasn’t right. It’s not like I didn’t have sexual relations with multiple women before him. But I just, knowing he’s had all these boyfriends and had sex with them is a tough pill to swallow. That’s why I reacted badly that night. Seeing him talk with other men is even worse. I’m always highly suspicious that everyone who sees him wants him. That they’ll take him away from me. He doesn’t understand. Its been too long since I had someone who really, really loves me. I feel good around him and I don’t want it to stop. I don’t want to have to go back to MaNxumalo or Mpilonhle or Nonsikelelo or Miss Biyela. He doesn’t get it.

The receptionist's eyes widen as my father and I walk in. "MaFuze," she's a Ngcobo as well but we're not related. "How are you this evening?"

"Mapholoba," she bows her head a little. "I wasn't expecting you, Baba."

"Yes, we're surprising you." My father replies, looking around. The place looks rather unkempt. Multiple papers on her desk, there's a banana peel on the floor next to her desk as well. But when we came in here she was on her phone and chewing that chappie like she was being paid to. "Why is the place like this? How are we going to get business like this?"

"Phiwe called in sick, Baba." Her voice is trembling, she's already on her feet.

"Where's the other worker? What is his name? We've hired four people to be on nightshift duty."

"I, um, cut down the number to two. To save money, Baba." Her eyes dart around to every corner but they won't meet my father for some reason.

"Why wasn't I notified about this?" my father asks softly. He never even raises his voice. This is why opportunists like Yolanda take advantage of him. MaKhathide should've come here instead.

"I, uh-uh..." she runs her hand on the back of her neck. No reply. She doesn't have one.

My father shakes his head and sighs. "Rehire those workers. You have no authority to hire and dismiss workers, MaFuze. We have Kwandile for a reason," he says, referring to one of my sisters. "I am sure she doesn't even know about this. For now, I expect you to make this place spotless because the workers were dismissed by you. I'm also going to check all the empty rooms. Any messiness and you're to take care of it as well. And no, MaFuze, you're not going to be paid extra for this. Let this be a lesson for next time. Maybe, we'll hire someone else to take over the BnB's accounts as well."

Go old timer. I have this silly smile on my face as Yolanda's features morph into a sour expression. Following my father to the other rooms, we discover that the complainant's claims were true. My father takes pictures to show to my mother – although she doesn't know that he's here. She's probably on her way home now. He has an office here as well and he tells me that we can talk in there. I don't know what about but I follow him. "Drink?" he grabs two tumblers and pours some whiskey. "Ice?"

“Cha.” I shake my head and accept the glass from him. “What’s the special occasion? You’re allowing me to drink now?”

“You’re already drinking anyway. But I’m allowing you just this once – your mother will kill me otherwise.” He chugs the whiskey down and grabs a bottle of water to drink. “So how are you, mfana wami?”

We haven’t really talked in a while. I raise my eyebrow, wondering what this is about.

“Good, Baba. School’s keeping me busy. What else can I say?”

“How is that strange boy?”

My heartrate picks up a little and I shift in my seat, narrowing my eyes to figure him out. I’m sure he’s asking about Chris...but why?

“Which one, Baba? I have a lot of strange friends.” I try for a relaxed chuckle but it’s too stiff. When I make a grab for the bottle of whiskey, he pulls it away.

“The short boy. Dark skin and strange features. The one who looks at you like his sun sets and rises in your eyes.”

What?

I choke on my saliva as he chuckles. What the fuck is wrong with him? Is this why he brought me here? This is a trap. A trap I tell you. I’m not fucking say anything. Maybe MaKhathide is in on this too. “I wouldn’t know. Have you asked his sister, remember gorgeous Zenande? With the full figure and tempting lips? She’s more interesting than—”

He cuts me off with a laugh. “Awukahle. Who do you think you’re playing, ndodana? The way that boy looks at you is the same way you look at him. Also, it’s nice to be adventurous but having sex in your mother’s car?”

"Its my car," I say without thinking. Then I start to cough again as my eyes widen.

"Just be careful next time," he says and gives me a look I can't decipher. "Are you okay, Mapholoba? You're not with that boy because that woman messed with your head, are you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You were so young," he continues – more to himself than me, it seems. "First it was the older women and now it's other boys. Are you gay? Is this a stage? Maybe you need therapy because we never—"

"Munt' omdala awuphole umoya." He's making my head dizzy with all these theories and I still don't know fully what he's talking about. "No. I am not gay. I don't know what I am – because I'm only into Chris." Even when I saw those gay friends of his, and that one shaped like a woman. "I'm Chrisexual."

My father laughs, like Nhlakanipho did.

"Are you sure? I wish we'd taken you to therapy when you were younger. Your mother insisted that you wouldn't remember a single thing. That we'd rescued you and that that was enough. But I see you sometimes, and how lost you look. You're old enough now, if you want, you could see a therapist. I will be with you all the way."

"You're confusing me," I tell him with a shake of the head. "Did that girl Nomthandazo put you up to this? She's accusing her mother of heinous acts, Baba. I don't remember Ntombikayise like that."

"You were not supposed to remember her at all. I really think you—" his phone rings. It's my mother. I can hear her from where I'm sitting. She needs us to come home. Since that hijacking scare, she always wants her family close – where she can see us. As usual, my father is overpowered and he tells her we're on our way. "I married a crazy woman," there's love found in his voice. "I'm not sure what this thing is between you and that boy but I am not going to judge you, ndodana. I can feel the intensity of your connection when you're together. I've tried to observe from a distance. I love your mother dearly but our marriage was arranged. You know how it went in the old times. I had this boy when I was fourteen years old, I consider him my soulmate. But it wasn't ever going to work out. My younger brother found out and warned me against the dangers of continuing what we had. We went our separate ways after

that. But men have always loved each other – the world just wants to hide things to exercise its oppression better. If this is a stage—”

“You know better than anyone that there’s no such thing, munt’ omdala.” I don’t know why I’m not freaking out about my father having some man out there in the world that he loved more than my mother. Instead I find myself wondering...wanting to know more. Were they like Chris and me? Or did they have their shit together like Nhlakanipho and Siyabonga? “I love that boy. I want to marry him one day. But we’re stumbling a lot.”

“Young love,” my father sighs. The look in his eyes, he’s drifted off. Reminiscing. “Don’t tell your mother yet about this. Give it time – until you’re completely sure about that boy. Let’s go home.”

I follow him to the car and I’m really curious about something. “Tell me something – were you the one receiving from this soulmate of yours, Baba?”

He chokes on his saliva. I smirk but I’m curious. Maybe he can tell me more about this man. Maybe I’ll learn a thing or two from him. “That is none of your business! Inhlonipho, ndodana.”

“The bottom then.” I conclude with a mischievous grin. “What was his name?”

He peers over at me and gives me another indecipherable look. He is a bit reluctant. “Harrison Xulu – that boy’s deceased grandfather.”

Well shit... I don’t know how to reply. This is fucking weird. “These weird English names must a thing in that family. What kind of a name is Harrison?” we both look at each other and laugh.

Mutual Desires : Twenty-eight

Christophe

It's the weekend of Jesus – where all the part-time Christians go to church to die, rest and then wake up with him. Even Zenny is going to church but I do remember her saying she only goes to church on Good Friday. I'm not exactly a religious person, neither are my parents, but today I'll be attending church. I was compelled to by my pregnant, hormonal sister. My evil half-sisters aka Drizella and Anastasia aka Zemvelo and Ziqhenye are here for the weekend. I don't know how I'll survive this entire weekend with them. The older one, with twelve hairs, has been giving me nasty glances since last night. I don't give a fuck. She's still mad that Zenny was okay with me dating Nqobizitha.

Anyway, I'm not ecstatic about going to church but I suspect it won't be so bad because Nqoba's family is going to the same church as us. I'm going to wear this pastel teal suit that he bought me. Yes, the Brentwood wearing bastard bought me a suit. He knows me really well because the suit is me – all of it, along with its accessories. He saw it on Ntethe's Instagram – that he somehow has access to – and had one made for me. That's what Nontethelelo told me. I'm pretty sure it was expensive but he doesn't like it when I turn him down so I just accepted the gift with a nervous smile. He knows my size. He knows my shoe size. He knows my underwear size. He observes, a lot.

I try to keep up. I don't exactly come from a rich family but I'm doing my best to learn his little habits. He seems to like the shorts I buy him so when Baba sends me money, I put some aside so I can get him something as well. The money I earn at the school isn't enough but amasi don't cost an arm and a leg so I pick and choose days that I surprise him with them. For someone who comes from a wealthy family, he's such a simple guy – well except for his expensive clothes and cologne that I'd have to save for at least six months to buy – and his face lights up like nothing else over the simple things. Amasi. Shorts. Crushing me with his weight and listening to me talk to him. I watched soccer with him the other day and even bought chips and that nasty beer he likes. He was childishly happy about it. And I...I love to see it. Seeing him happy makes me happy.

"I hope you put on that sexy underwear my brother wanted."

What in the world – sigh. I forgot that she's in my room. She can be real silent when she wants to, like Nqoba, but with him, I can always sense him and I'm not weirded out by his ogling. I always tell him his staring hints at psycho tendencies but then he'll say he likes looking at my face. And really, how do you respond to that?

“That is personal info, I won’t breathe a word to you.” I did, but she doesn’t need to know that. Its embarrassing enough that I was tricked into wearing a skimpy thong to a church service. Fixing the fanny pack on my shoulder, I finally meet Ntethe’s stare on the mirror. “We’re going to church, behave yourself.”

“Manje awusho, how is my brother expected to concentrate when you’re looking this gorgeous?”

My blush is unpreventable. I moan melodramatically in my hands and shake my head. “I think I’m ready. We can leave.”

Nontethelelo has her car here. She came to fetch me and my sisters. I think she only came because she wanted to see Zenny. I think she has some kind of crush on her. Too bad Zenny’s attention is on the baby and Jabulani. She’s not really showing yet. I think she’s just hit 13 weeks. My phone has a couple of messages. Simi sent me a voice note, screaming her lungs out over my outfit. I told her the boy I love bought it for me and she lost her shit even more. She says she’s volunteering to be our surrogate and that she wants to officiate our wedding. She’s crazy. She also sent me a screenshot of what she saved my name as on her phone. Zithobile Ngcobo. Its embarrassing, the least she could’ve done was use the name I go by but she said I’m marrying into a traditional Zulu family who resides in Kwa-Zulu Natal and my in-laws will probably call me ‘Khilis’ instead of Chris. She has head problems. It’s not her fault. Anyway, let me just send the boy I love a message.

We’re leaving with your sister – me

We’re in the car. I had to sit at the back with Ziqhenye and Zemvelo because Zenny wanted to get comfortable in the front seat. I think it’s because she wanted to be in charge of the music. Joyous Celebration. Someone kill me. I hate when she plays this music – even at home. But there’s this one fast-paced Shona song I like. They sound like they’re toyi-toying or something. It’s quite good. I look at my phone. Nqoba’s finally online. But he doesn’t immediately reply to my message. I don’t think Siya will go to church. His parents run a shebeen and the pastors around here judge them a lot. He told me Nhlakanipho is going with uGogo and the kids. Nqobizitha will fetch them.

You didn’t send me a picture of you in the sexy underwear 🙄 – Mon amour

Disbelieving laughter bubbles from deep within me and I try to tone it down when the bitches beside me mumble something under their foul breaths. It’s just, I will never not laugh when Nqobizitha uses emojis. This is the one thing that is unlike him and most of the time he uses the wrong ones.

I'm wearing it. That should be enough, you're going to be take it off me anyway 🍆 🦋 – me

I don't understand the pictures – Mon amour

He's serious. This is why he rarely uses emojis. He can't even dirty talk with them but he understands the eggplant and peach emoji perfectly.

You will when I spread my legs later on and you see me dripping for you 😏 – me

I'm not sure this kind of talk is appropriate for someone going to church but I've sent the message already and he's already seen it. He's typing.

You're on. No tapping out? – Mon amour

I bite my lower lip.

Of course. What do you take me for? – me

He doesn't reply for a while and I take that time to answer some messages I have from other people. I called my mom to wish her a good one but my dad's cell was unavailable. He's still trapped in some part of Africa. I sent him an SMS and I'm not sure if he'll reply. With my dad, you can never tell. My phone beeps just as Ntethe is parking the car in a vast veld packed with cars already. Great. We're having a service in a tent. This grass and sand will not be kind to my outfit. I can see the others looking at me because I'm clearly overdressed but I don't care. The boy I love is going to see how good I look in this.

I love you – Mon amour

Three simple words but heat unfurls as I turn into a pile of goo. I want to reply but Zenny is already linking her arm with mine and dragging me toward the tent. She's in a good mood today, a really good mood. But I'm happy too so I don't mind. Ntethe comes to tell us that we'll see each other after the service. They have a special place reserved for them right at the front. Talk about connections in high

places. I'm sure they'll negotiate their way into heaven as well. The service isn't going to start for another twenty minutes. I don't even know I was made to wake up early.

"You should go to the front, the service will start any minute." I say as soon as his scent greets me. I keep my eyes straight ahead.

"I'm sitting here with you." I can feel his arm extend to rest around my shoulders. My eyes quickly sweep over the entire place but everyone is minding their own business. Everyone except Zemvelo, with that little glare she's giving me. I'm tainting her precious Nqoba and leading him down a very dark path apparently. That is what she said to me last night. "I have to keep you where my eyes can see you. You're getting this dick, Bambi. All of it."

I choke on my saliva and nail Nqobizitha with a glare from hell. "You can't say things like that at a church, sthandwa sami. What if—"

"Awukahle. This isn't a church. Besides, I'm already thinking it." He adjusts himself with his other hand and my eyes only move to his face when I feel him burning my forehead with his stare. He nods toward the front and right...the service is already starting. We have to stand up as the pastor comes in. The choir is singing at the front. I greet Nhlakanipho subtly, he looks really good – wearing an all black suit. It suits his dark and serious aura. All his siblings are here as well, looking like crayons – blue dresses, green jackets, brown pants, red pants, black shirts, grey shirts. It's a mix masala. You can just tell that these clothes are only ever worn on special occasions. I'm always reminded that I was lucky growing up – whenever I visit uGogo and the kids, I'm always reminded. They have it tough.

The church service isn't that bad, if you can look past the number of times we have to stand whenever a new speaker takes the altar, and the songs are not sappy romance-themed church songs. I'm not going to lie and say I am not happy when the service ends though. I'm hungry as fuck and we just had a four hour service with no break so I'm not in the mood. The Ngcobos don't eat church lunch apparently because hey, they're wealthy and would rather the community ate. I think that's a bullshit excuse to hide the fact that most of them are snobby. Most of them have returned to KZN for the Good Friday weekend. Even that Lesego girl...but I'm sure Siya doesn't know otherwise he'd be here.

I still have to go with Zenny and the others when driving back. But I'm being dropped off at the Ngcobos' stunning homestead. Then Ntethe will drive Zenny and the others back home. They were invited but they seem to think that they're better than everyone and Zenny is only going back home because she

needs to rest. My eyes widen as soon I reach the large gates. I quickly leave the car without so much as a proper goodbye. "Hey you, what are you doing here?" I give Siya a dazzling smile.

He shrugs and pulls me inside, there's already some loud music. Not gospel now. Gqom. I shake my head and giggle as I notice the men coming out with cooler boxes. I know exactly what is in there. Talk about weirdos. They've just come back from mourning Jesus and now they do this? I shake my head.

"Nhlakanipho and Nqobizitha will be here soon. They're going to drop off Gogo and the kids. In the meantime, we can ogle Nqoba's room. You have his key, don't you?"

Yes, Nqoba gave me the key to his house. I don't know why because I can't exactly walk through the front gate and to his house like I live here. His parents will flip. Those two boys that are paid to be security would kick my ass. But I appreciate the gesture so I made him his own copy to the keys to our house as well. I'll give them to him in a small gift box later tonight. Before he cripples me because I know I will be too comatose by the time we're done having sex.

"Let's wait for them outside," I suggest. I don't want to go messing around in Nqoba's room, invading his privacy. His father is looking at us anyway. His eye makes me nervous, like he can see right through me, and I have to look away. "These jeans are gorgeous on you by the way." I tell Siya.

"Thanks. Nhlakanipho thought..." he trails off as he sees Lesego. "Why didn't you tell me that that skank who looks like the Yellow pages is back? If she even looks my boyfriend's way, I'll fuck her up."

"You don't hit girls," I remind him and he wiggles his shoulders in frustration. "You don't hit anyone at all, you're not the violent type."

"I know I just...she better stay away from him. He doesn't want her, why does she refuse to acknowledge that? Girls are so weird. This forceful approach is just cringe."

I know what he means. Too many girls at his school are attracted to him and I don't blame them, Siya is a pretty boy after all – with his supermodel-worthy cheekbones and long lashes and not to mention his hazel eyes. He's every teenage girl's wet dream but he's gay as fuck and will legit switch the channel if straight people are kissing. I think it's funny that he finds it so disgusting. This is why he spends most of his time looking for gay literature and films. I enjoyed reading that book he suggested but now we have

to watch the film and I'm not sure if my heart will be able to deal...too much was happening in that book. But I still enjoyed it.

Finally, Nqoba and his best friend/brother arrive and Nhlakanipho has changed into jeans and a t-shirt. They both smile as they spot us – and it's the craziest thing. When I came here, I didn't think I'd meet anyone like the company I have around me. I never thought I'd find gay men here – and maybe Nqoba isn't but I am still happy that I have a confidante in Siya and a friend in Nhlakanipho. I won't even get started on Nqobizitha, he's everything and more.

"I got you this," I say handing him his favourite beer. Heineken. I have no idea how he drinks this. I don't like the taste of beer. And I'm not about that sexist crap that says I'm too feminine because I drink ciders. I like my drinks sweet. That's what I prefer. This is why I indulge on Bernini and Brutal Fruit.

"Thank you," Nqoba's fingers dance over mine as he accepts his beer. "I missed you."

"You weren't apart for more than an hour," Siya snorts beside us. I turn my attention to him and he's already regarding Nhlakanipho with the brightest smile. "Baby. I missed you." That reverential intimacy again. I can tell that Siya is doing everything in his power to not jump in the other boy's arms. "Do you want anything to drink? Food?"

Nqoba and I look at each other – and then burst out laughing. "You guys are pathetic," I stick my tongue out at them. I don't think they've heard us, with the way they're so focused on each other. I shake my head and give Nqoba a curious look as he pulls me to his side. He looks down at me, smiles, and then turns his attention to the chaos in front of us. There are so many people here and I'm not sure who's family and who isn't. That Lesego girl is coming at us. Somebody shoot me now, please!

"Hey, lovebirds!" she gives me a hug and a once over. "Gal, you look GORGEOUS! Where'd you buy this?"

"Wafika ngok'chwensa wenja, inhlonipho akak'fundisanga unyoko? (You're coming here and being so disrespectful. Didn't your mother teach you respect?" Nqoba is annoyed on my behalf but Lesego looks hella confused.

I roll my eyes. "Don't call me 'gal', Lesego. I don't like that. You know my name now, use it."

“And if I want to call you something else? Is ‘babes’ okay?”

“Lesego...”

“Its fine...babes.” I give her a small smile. “Do you need help with anything?”

Her eyes are on Nhlakanipho now. Siya looks ready to...I don’t know what he’s going to do. He really doesn’t believe in violence. “Hey, Siya. Hey, Nhlaka...you look really, really hot. Nice jeans.”

Silence.

Siya is looking at Nhlakanipho expectedly. I don’t know what he wants the poor guy to say. It’s not his fault that this brat seems disgustingly infatuated with him.

“Eh...” the boy I love speaks up, looking between all of us. “Bafo, woza. Khona esinakho la noSiyabonga. Uzok’thatha uthanda ungathandi. (Bafo, come. Siyabonga and I have something for you. You’re going to accept it whether you like it or not.)”

“Oh cool, we’ll just leave poor Lesego here. She can’t be part of the gay squad because she has no dick.”

We are all a distance away when that nasally voice reaches our ears again. “Lesego!” Nqoba shouts quietly. Siya’s eyes are darting around and Nhlakanipho...the only thing that gives him away is that little jaw clench. “This is not Free State. You’re going to get fucked up here. Watch your fucking mouth!”

The idiot rolls her eyes, maybe she doesn’t understand the implication of her words. Siya is storming back to her and I don’t know what he wants to do but Nhlakanipho is beside him in an instant, pulling his arm and dragging him away. Lesego is a little shaken. I can tell by the way her eyes are wide and her trembling form gives her away as well. “Was that bitch going to hit me? Why, don’t tell me he’s gay as well! Grrr! Is he Nhlakanipho’s boyfriend?”

“That is none of your business.” Nqoba hisses, dragging her toward his house. The adults are too high on alcohol and weed – they smoke it like they’re being paid to – to notice anything. I’m not sure whether to run after Siya and his boyfriend because Siya was really upset or to follow Nqobizitha. The look he gives

me tells me to follow him so I do. “I want you to listen to me, every word. Nhlakanipho is too old for you and there are things that he wants that you won’t be able to give him. Will you give him a blowjob, huh? Can you do woman-on-top? Do you know why you need lubricant during sex? Are you willing to get on your knees and—”

“Whoa...” I grip Nqoba’s arm and shake my head. What the fuck is wrong with him? This girl is fourteen years old and I don’t think she’s ready to—

“Ew, an actual blowjob?” okay...so she knows about blowjobs. I’m just awkwardly observing this now. “Miss me on that. Leona told me about that but I didn’t believe her. He’ll have to miss—”

“He’s not going to miss you on anything, Lesego.” Nqoba cuts in sternly, gripping her shoulders and looking into her eyes with that pissed off expression of his where his jaw ticks. I’m hot and bothered – squirming. “You’re not going after my best friend. Otherwise, I’ll just have to get my hands dirty and you won’t like that. Remember your mother is my sister and she trusts me – whatever I say. Stay away from Nhlakanipho and stop spewing this gay rubbish around...do you want to kill him?”

“Oh please, they wouldn’t kill him for being gay. They would’ve started with him.” She points at me with her eyes.

They would’ve. But I think I’m an exception for a lot of reasons. People around here really like Zenny and she laughs with everyone but she’s crazy as well. Her threats are really scary – and I’m not sure if people really believe that she can go bat-shit crazy which would mean they are terrified of her. Then there’s the fact that I hang out with Nqoba and Co. a lot. But I still get the slurs and the disgusted looks. The adults are the worst – and you wonder why kids grow up to be so hateful. I just ignore. I’ve always ignored. I don’t remember a time where I was ever ‘in the closet’. I’ve always lived my truth and whoever doesn’t like it can fuck off.

“You’re right, they wouldn’t...because he’s not gay. And unless you can prove it, fuck off. This is the last time we’re having this conversation. The next time and I will be speaking to your mother about that guy who took your virginity during December—”

“What are you talking about?” She blinks, confused, and shakes her head.

“Stay away from my friends. Play with kids your age – there’s plenty of boys around here.” He gives her a look and then pulls my arm. “Woza.”

“Nqoba...you weren’t really going to do that were you?” I ask.

“Of course not but that brat has a big mouth and she can’t take no for an answer. If she thinks she has all the power then all of us will be in deep shit. You guys more than me because I, remember what I said that day to your sister? MaKhathide will deal with me, yes, but it won’t compare to the trouble that the community will give you. I want to protect you. Then there’s Siya and Nhlakanipho – they’ve kept their relationship a secret for too long for that brat to swoop in and destroy everything. I’ll deal with her if I have to. To protect you – all of you.”

“You were really sexy back there,” I tell him as we maneuver around the sea of bodies. Siya and Nhlakanipho are leaning against a car I’ve seen before. Nqoba says it’s his father’s but he doesn’t use it often because he prefers the Camry. It’s a Toyota Hilux. “Will you speak to me the same way later?”

He shakes his head and chuckles. We get to the others and Siya still looks really pissed but I hope he’s not blaming Nhlakanipho for that girl’s drama. “Bafo...” Nqoba shifts from one foot to the other, hands in his pockets. “I did a lot of thinking about something and before I could talk to my father, I spoke to Siyabonga here because as much as I hate to admit it, he knows you better than anyone. Even me. You’re 18 now.”

Nhlakanipho laughs his contained laugh and nods. “I’ve been 18 for two months now, bafo.”

“Yeah. So I spoke to my father and he agreed with me that you deserve this...” Nqoba pauses and gives Nhlakanipho a mysterious look but I can detect a little smile. “My father preferred me to do this because you’re my best friend and he’s weird as you know. Kodwa ke, thatha bafo. Iskhiye semoto.”

My eyes widen. Nhlakanipho looks at the key and then Nqobizitha. He’s always so calm but this time his eyes blink rapidly. He seems taken aback, shaken. “I can’t take this.”

“You have to,” Nqoba says calmly. “Or we’re going to get you a new car. One of the two. There’s no other option.”

“I don’t even have a licence.”

“I saved money, baby. I’ve been saving it for a while. You can attend classes or we can just bribe...joking,” Siya says. Nhlakanipho has a disapproving stare. “KuseMbongolwane la. You’ve been driving for a long time. No one cares whether or not you have a licence around here. But I’ll still assist—”

Nhlakanipho shakes his head. Always so damn stubborn. I don’t know what it is that makes him hate receiving help so much. I swear he wouldn’t even speak up if he were drowning and there was someone within earshot to help. He’d rather die.

“Okay. My father suspected that you’d say this so that’s why he decided that you’d be working for him every weekend – transporting people to and from Eshowe. Whatever money you make, you’re keeping for you and your family. This will be your business. The only payment my father expects from you is that you to take care of the car. Petrol will always be sorted.”

“Please, baby. Think about your family,” Siya chimes in with a coaxing smile. So he’s not mad anymore. He touches Nhlakanipho’s shoulder.

“Fine.” Nhlakanipho sighs, accepting defeat.

The way Siya’s eyes light up as his boyfriend agrees...you can tell that he desperately wants to hug Nhlakanipho but no such luck. Well, they have those ‘manly hugs’ but it’s not the same. We join the others after that and Lesego keeps stealing angry glances at an unbothered Nqobizitha. This boy I love is too concerned about his beer. I watch him talk to different members of his family. I think he’s getting a bit drunk with the way he’s acting touchy as he introduces me to the last born twins – Nokubonga and Nokulunga, they’re both seven years older than him. His parents had to wait seven years to get their last born child and a boy that they didn’t have. Wow! No wonder everyone treats him like a baby.

“Come, sthandwa sami...I want you to meet my father.” I have to grip his hand to prevent him from groping my ass around his Sotho brother-in-law. I didn’t know he could be this clingy when drunk.

“Your father does know me and I don’t think it’s a good idea—”

“Shh,” he wraps his arm around me and leans down to kiss my head. My cheeks heat up and I can feel some eyes on us. Ntethe looks really disapproving. I don’t blame her but it’s her brother not me. “I want you to hear something real cool. Why you and me are so in love. Now I know why you tattooed that red string shit on my chest. We’re soulmates, Dali. Come, my father will tell you.”

We enter the house and meet his mother on her way out. He seems to sober up a little as he pulls his arm from around me and greets her respectfully. She doesn’t spare me a single glance, barely pays Nqoba any mind as she walks out. She’s on her phone. She’s always on one phone call or the other. “I hope you’re not going to turn that cold when I marry you,” he slurs, pulling me to his side and pushing me up against the nearest wall to devour my lips.

“What did y-you say?” I’m heaving by the time he releases my lips.

“By the time you’re a famous model all around the world, you’ll already be a Ngcobo so that everyone knows you’re taken.”

How can say things like this so simply?

I don’t have the chance to ask him as he pulls me inside the hallway and we stop outside a shiny black door. He knocks twice and then enters without being given permission to. His father is sitting alone in the office with a glass of whiskey in hand. He looks so lonely and the atmosphere in here is sad but his eyes light up as he spots his son. “Ndodana! What are you doing here? Everyone is outside, having the time of their lives.”

“Tell him, Baba.” Nqoba ignores his father’s question and pushes me forward. “This is Harrison Xulu’s grandson. Tell him what you told me.”

Harrison...Harrison. Are they talking about my dad’s father? I remember he came to live with us for a brief period of time when I was about five or six years old. He had leukaemia and they wanted him closer to take care of him. He passed on about three months later but I don’t remember going to his funeral. Mommy and I stayed behind while my dad left. Of course Nqobizitha’s father would know him because this is the rurals and everyone knows each other around here. We even greet each other on the street, something that you’ll never see in Johannesburg.

I am curious as Nqoba's father moves from his chair to the tall painting on the other side of the room. He removes the picture and...wow. Okay. This is like the movies then, where safes are hidden behind large paintings. He grabs a few items and then places them on the table. Nqoba grabs the framed picture and squints his eyes. I think the alcohol is really hitting him now. Sigh. We definitely won't be having any sex tonight. "Baba, is this you?" it's a black and white picture. There are two boys here. One lanky and awkward looking, the other one looks a bit older – maybe eighteen – he has an impressive build with a Shembe afro. I've seen him before.

Snatching the picture away from Nqoba, I regard it curiously. This is my...grandfather. I know because Baba is so proud of him. He'd show me his father's pictures any chance he got. The way he talked about him and what a great father he was, I'd always find myself wondering if he left often like my dad does. My attention is stolen by another item that Nqoba is skimming through – an album. I'm not even thinking as I go to stand next to him. He sits down. I perch myself on his lap. His father clears his throat and I jump, wanting to—

"Its okay, mfana wami. Nothing's going to happen, relax." He doesn't look shook up or surprised at all. He knows. But how long?

"This is disgusting!" Nqoba's voice calls for me.

Oh wow! My heart is pounding, again I snatch yet another item from him. Its just...maybe my eyes are deceiving me. This can't be! "That was just before we'd break up. I'm fourteen there. Your grandfather is seventeen. Do you see how better you kids have it? We didn't have beds growing up. Not even mattresses. We'd use icansi and then heaps of blankets. Imagine how rough winter was."

I don't think I care much about the way they slept at the moment. Not with this picture of him laying on top of my grandfather so simply and with those arms embracing him. They have their eyes closed and they look so serene. I'm not sure if they were really sleeping here. There are other pictures. They're half-naked and playing. They're swimming. They're smiling. They're carefree. They look so in love. But how?

"What happened, Baba?" I ask him.

"Life. We don't always get what we want out of life. Sometimes, sacrifices need to be made. They're not easy but they're made. I had to marry someone. Your grandfather had to marry someone else. We had to grow our families. I had to do it, he was so angry at me. Your grandfather. He threatened to go and tell my parents the truth. I promised to never talk to him again. He was a stubborn man and knew what

he wanted. I wasn't brave like him. Honouring my parents' wishes was important to me. We didn't talk until the day before my wedding. We spent that night together."

"Oh, I can just imagine what the two of you were doing." Nqoba frowns but it transitions into a chuckle and he looks at his father. "Tell him about that other thing."

"What other thing?"

"That," he makes this weird sign with his hands that hints at sex. And no, no I don't want to know. It's weird enough knowing that Nqoba's dad was once a teenager but one who was in love with my grandfather and even had sex with him? Hell no. Besides, his dad has bottom energy...now that I think about it. "And he trapped me with this." I hear Nqoba say. He's topless now, showing his father the tattoo. "This is a trap, munt' omdala."

"Like he trapped me with this," I say with an eye roll, gesturing to the tattoo on my ring finger. "Now I'm stuck with him forever, Baba."

Nqoba's dad chuckles – a look of longing and joy on his face. "Before he'd stop talking to me, your grandfather came to me with this whole plan of us running away. He told me that my house was haunted and had bad spirits so we had to run away together and I wouldn't have to hide in the closet anymore. He wanted us to go somewhere to start over. I didn't agree, of course, it was all absurd."

"Oh...wow," this makes me emotional. I don't know why. When I first came here, I was so certain that there was no one like me here. I wasn't sure if someone like me would even survive in a place like this. Then I met guys like Siya and now Nqoba's dad and I think I can learn so much from them. I'm already learning from Siya – on loving better, he's teaching me. Then Nqoba, I love talking to him and I think I have a bigger heart now because of him. He's the most selfless person I know. "I-I don't know if I should be happy because you guys look so in love or sad because you never got the chance to be together forever. But that would mean I wouldn't be here and your son as well. We love each other and—"

"Your grandfather is always here, with me." Nqoba's dad pats his chest but you can feel his pain. I wouldn't be surprised if part of him holds any resentment toward the world. "And when I die, I'll join him also, but the only difference is it will be a forever thing in the afterlife. Everything happens for a reason. Maybe we had to sacrifice to make way for a greater love." His eyes point to me and his son.

My heart falters at his words. I'm an emotional duck and I can't be blamed as I jump up to give him a tight hug. He laughs and pats the back of my neck. He's thin and tall but not as tall as his son. Nqoba is 6'6, the only giant around this place. "Well, I'm glad you had your time with him."

"Me too," he claps my back softly and then we pull apart. "You can stay hidden here. I'll cover for you. You can look through that album but please return it in the safe afterwards. Nqobizitha knows the code to the safe." The door silently closes after that.

"Sthandwa sami! How cool is this?" I exclaim in shock, excitedly. I'm in his arms again and he's sobering up a little. We're still not going to have sex though. I like it when we're both sober and fully consenting. "Your dad...my grandfather? Wow!"

"Now we can explain this intense connection between us."

"It's like a big ball of fire." I agree. I am distracted by the pictures in this office. Family pictures. There on the mantel are pictures of him. I stand up and edge closer for a good look. He's so cute – with those buck teeth of his. There's another picture of him – black and white. I giggle at the Shembe hairdo. And the vintage clothes. It's not like him at all. "Was this some costume party?" I grab the picture to show him.

"That's Kwazikwenkosi – my deceased grandfather. He was sixteen there."

"Then he was reincarnated and you were born," I say because the similarity is eerie. Everything from his body to the smile – everything. "Do you remember anything from your past life?" I joke.

"That I had to come back and fuck your brains out," he pulls on my arm and I am on his lap. I can feel his erection as he shifts me around until he's satisfied. It's right on my ass.

"No sex tonight. You're drunk," I tell him. I'm serious. "But I am stealing a few of your pictures though. You were so cute."

"I have your entire album with me," he snorts and kisses the inside of my neck. "Took it when we were in Johannesburg. Let's go to my room."

“I’m still not having sex with you.” I grab the pictures and that one of his grandfather. I have to show Zenny this. It’s too funny.

Mutual Desires : Twenty-nine

Nqobizitha

It's been a crazy month. For one, MaNtuli has passed on, not too long ago – just last week. Heart problems. I was shocked because, although chubby, she took great care of herself. The magic she created in the bedroom attests that. Her death is messing with me, I don't know, it feels like something is missing. Like someone ripped me open and stole a chunk of...something. But I don't know what. When I fall asleep, my dreams no longer consist of her though, but sometimes I wake up shivering. Then there's also the fact that Ndoniyamanzi's relationship with Bab' Mchunu's son seems to be going really strong. He wants to marry her but MaKhathide is being her usual self and worried about her image. Ndoni's divorce with her husband hasn't yet been finalized because he's a bitter son of a bitch and he's fighting for sole ownership of everything they acquired in their marriage. I don't know if they signed a prenuptial agreement or what because 'iindaba zabantu abadala' and I can't join in on the family meetings and blah...blah...blah.

I don't know what's the point of MaKhathide attempting to groom me for the family business if she's not going to groom me in other areas of life as well. I'm kidding, I don't need grooming, especially from her – I'd never catch a break. A couple of weeks ago, Nontethelelo also went through an attempted hijacking, one that she narrowly escaped. The perpetrators were caught pretty quickly – on the same day – and were arrested. Then they died in their holding cell on the same day. It was suspicious but apparently both men were blaming each other for the hijacking going wrong and beat each other to death. They were known boys, at least by me, because I've frequented Ntumeni quite a lot and I used to drink with those boys at a low-budget shebeen there.

The bathroom door opens and with it comes the mist as the satisfying scent of my body-wash wafts into my nostrils. I look up from my phone and give Chris a once over. "We're running a little late." I'm taking him to Durban to attend his modelling class.

He limps his way over to me and kisses my lips. "I had to sneak in a good soak. And no, it's not your fault. I was just really competitive last night," his voice is hoarse but I, thankfully, don't have to feel guilty for going so hard. "I am mad now but I wasn't last night."

"You were angry and high and sad and—"

"All your fault," he interrupts me by kissing me on the lips. "Let me quickly get dressed."

I nod my head and watch him carefully. He calls me a pervert but he's putting on a show and I can't be blamed really. My eyes take in every little detail about him – and I attempt to count the freckles on his back but there's always a new one I discover. I learn new things about him everyday just like he does me. I'd like to think I'm an open book but he always seems to disagree with me and says I hide behind the arrogance. He calls it my 'subtle arrogance' and says it's sexy as hell but still a cover-up for my other facets. I just humour him but he'd make a really lousy psychologist. He's the only sanity in my life at the moment since Nhlakanipho has his own family drama. It started two weeks ago when his father came to the Mzimela homestead. He says he wants to have a relationship with his son and demanded to perform a traditional ritual where Nhlakanipho will be introduced to his paternal ancestors abakwaNgubane.

Nhlakanipho will have none of it. He had a tough upbringing, always looking up to Siya's father, and his useless uncle, for guidance. He had to be a man when he was really young, and there's so much he went through on his own that his father wasn't available for that he thinks it's a waste for him to pitch up now. He hit that man, messed his face up real badly, and I had to try and intervene when Siyabonga called me. He couldn't get through to Nhlakanipho, no matter how hard he tried. It was messy, the kids were crying, Siya was really upset, Nhlaka's eyes were so full of emotion. He never shows too much emotion but two weeks ago, he broke. He's staying at Siya's for a while. That boy is his calm.

Chris is silently calling for my attention, I can feel it with the way his eyes are on me. I wrap my arms around him and squeeze. He releases a distressed cry, I have to lessen my grip. "Phephisa, dali." I stand and soothe him with kisses along his jaw.

He sighs and grabs his backpack. I take it from him and carry it, but give him our phones. "Did you see the message that Siya sent? They won't be able to join us anymore. Nhlakanipho wants to work today. Nomzamo says they're running short on pads and deodorant. I was thinking maybe I can buy her some when we're done at the school."

I open my front door and let him out first. The only reason I'm being so confident about it is because MaKhathide is attending some women's stokvel today. They're planning Fundiswa's funeral but MaKhathide seems to want to cover all the costs. I think it's to remind the community that we have money...like she did that time we buried Ndoni's daughter. I won't be surprised if one of the reporters of Isolezwe are invited again. My father is coming out of the house and he smiles as he sees us. We shake hands and mutter a few polite words. "Uyaphi, munt' omdala?" I ask him.

"Empangeni. MaFuze is starting with her rubbish again. I'll see you later, ndodana."

I give him a man hug and then get Chris' door for him. "Thank you." His voice is still so hoarse, we're going to have to get him something for his throat. I quickly kiss his forehead and move to the other side.

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask because he's holding my phone and he's recording himself. He's singing too. He sings brilliantly.

"Shh..." he gives me a look that I'm going to assume is meant to make me feel threatened but I don't. This is the same person who calls his mom 'mommy' and he isn't threatening at all. "I want to make this my WhatsApp status." A little bitter note betrays him. We're not exactly together but we're each other's. And we've been having this thing between us for over two months now. But it's different. He can't exactly flaunt us on social media – with everything that's at stake. I let him post on WhatsApp but he still has to hide my face so he takes his videos strategically. He said I've turned him into Dr. Mthombeni because of it. I don't know who that is and I don't care. As long as we're both compromising, then it's fine. He posts me as much as he wants to but my face, my face is a big no.

"Maskandi?" I chuckle and peer over at him.

"Shh..." he gives me that look again and bites his lower lip to hide his smile. "This is one of the first songs you ever played for me. Well I'm not sure if you did that on purpose but I remember. This is my song for you. My Zulu song for you. Then the other one is our song."

Ntencane – *Njengempukane*. I snort and nod my head. "Ngyakuzwa, bafo. Cha, asbonge ukuth ng'thathe inhliziyi yakho njengoba nawe uyithathile eyami." I wink at him.

We're at a red light. He leans over to give me a quick peck and then he's back to doing this recording crap he was doing. I focus on the road and we're in Durban quicker than usual. He always complains that I walk too fast, especially when we're in busy places like this, and he's slower than usual today with his limp. He gives me a sunny smile when I offer to give him a piggyback ride. I think the Katrina woman is used to us being touchy by now. She smiles as we enter the modelling school's doors and gently pushes me away as she drags Chris away from me. I shake my head and go to sit down on the couch in the reception area. The lady smiles and greets me.

My phone keeps me company until it starts ringing. Its Siyabonga. "Yah, ufunani?" I hope nothing's wrong with Nhlakanipho and his family. His father hasn't tried returning but I hear he's a stubborn man – much like his son.

“Konje uyedelela wena. Anyway...when are you guys coming back again?”

I check the watch on my wrist. “Around two maybe. Three if we’re held up. We’re still going to check out a couple of places.” Chris wants to go to the mall.

“Call me when you’ve left Durban. We’ll meet at Eshowe mall. Then we can watch a movie or something but my boyfriend urgently needs a breather. He’s going to be done collecting people around 13:00.”

“Sho, bafoza.” I say teasingly. “I’ll let you know when we’re done.” A few more pleasantries and I hang up. I make myself comfortable and wait for Chris. I’m not sure when I fall asleep but the next time I wake up, he’s on my lap and patting my arm. I look around and notice how everyone seems to be leaving. “Dali...” I run my hand down his cheek.

“Hey,” he leans into my touch but his smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “Ready to go?”

“What happened?” I grip his face and look into his eyes, trying to figure him out. “Who hurt you, sthandwa sami?”

His eyes widen. “Are you reading my mind right now? Stop it!” it would be funny were he not a little snippy and I don’t appreciate this attitude he’s giving me. “I’m sorry.” He exhales then tries for a smile that dies away when a tall and thin light-skinned girl walks past us. Their eyes lock and he looks away, frowning a little as he gives me his attention. “I didn’t mean to shout at you. I’m just tired, today was really intense.”

“What did you do?”

“Lots of things,” I stand with him still in my arms and continue to carry him as we walk out of the building. “What kinds of models we want to be. We worked on our signature walks. I came in first – for the walk thing. Katrina and Nhlanhla were really impressed.”

“Do you blame them? You’re so perfect, sthandwa sami.” I trap him against our car and lean down to capture his lips softly. He hugs me tightly as soon as we’re done. I think he wants to feed off of my energy. I hug him back, my chin resting on his head, and allow him to drive away whatever it is that’s messed with him. I get his door after giving him another kiss. “Awusho, kwenzenjani?”

“Nothing.” I’m forced to drive with one hand as he grabs my other one and holds onto it. “Just that – it’s nothing. I’ll handle this. It’s fine.”

“Hey,” I call out and try to figure him out. “I’m always here for you. Don’t forget that. Khuluma kwenzenjani...was it that girl you were giving the stinking eye?”

“Which girl...Lucy?” he shakes his head. “I don’t care about her. She’s just jealous. So what if I’m dark and short. Dark is the new big thing. Does she know of the latest male models? Alton Mason. Kofi Siriboe. Broderick Hunter. Do I look like I gained weight?”

His cheeks are a little fuller but this is what his mom wants. When they’re talking on the phone, I always hear her joy over his recent pictures. I think he looks good as well. He could literally resemble a vetkoek and I’d still be attracted to him. “You’re beautiful all the time. You’re breathtaking now. I didn’t know that the skeletal bones could be hidden,” I try to poke his rib.

He giggles and smack my hand away before grabbing it again as we enter the mall. “Is that a yes?”

“It’s a you look gorgeous, doesn’t matter whether or not you’re gaining weight.”

He nods his head and leans into my side firmly. “I suppose so. Did Nomzamo get back to you on the kinds of pads she uses?”

“Any,” I shrug and look around. These people are giving us weird looks for scanning the different pads women use. I hear someone say something about Chris and periods. He grips my arm and prevents me from going to the son of a bitch. I sigh and shake my head. “Where do these go?” I show him what’s in my hand.

“They call them tampons. I think they stick them inside their vaginas. But I’m not sure how they get them out. It’s scary right?”

“You take dick all the time and you think this is scary? I thought it was for the nose.” A smile pulls at my lips as I visit memory lane. “When I was younger, I’d steal them from...Ntombikayise’s room all the time. Sometimes just so she could punish me. Her punishments could be fun sometimes. Sometimes they

were really bad – her sharp nails could really hurt. But when they were fun, they were really fun. We'd bath together and she'd tickle me and then my...it doesn't matter." Chris' frown discourages me from divulging further.

"How old were you, when you'd bath with this woman?"

There's something about his voice I don't like but his imprisoning stare forces me to spill out, "Four...four until she died. I was with Ntethe when she died."

"You said heart problems?" the cashier gives us both sunny smiles. Then she says something about loving gays as we're on our way out. Chris and I look at each other and roll our eyes but laugh as well.

"Yeah. She was young when she died. Maybe forty years old, I don't remember because when you're young you—"

"Mfethu, thanks for coming back!" some guy comes rushing at us, and I push Chris behind me. We're at a PEP cell. There are some mint sweets here that Gogo MaMzimela really loves. I've never seen them anywhere else besides PEP stores. "I made a mistake, my brother. That's R55 Vodacom I gave you. You said you wanted R29, right?"

I look behind me, at Chris, who seems just as confused. "Is this some kind of joke?" I ask the guy, he's wearing a blue shirt. Okay, so he works here. "What's wrong with you?"

"Don't do this, man!" the guy is getting a little agitated and he's pissing me the fuck off as well. "This is my second month on this job. Are you trying to get that devil to fire me? Either you pay the remaining balance or...actually, you can't return it because I won't be sure if you used it or not. Pay the R26, mpintsh' yami. I'm sure it won't be much to a guy like you namaBrentwood akho. Khokha, bafo."

"Busa!" the girl at the counter calls out. The short boy looks over his shoulder. "That's not him. His Brentwood was khaki and he had on a stripe golf shirt with orange and red and black. It was short-sleeved. This one is wearing a jersey and look at the colour of his Brentwood." She gestures to my mahogany-coloured pants. "Unless he went to the toilets to change quickly. Remember he mentioned a twin brother?"

“But he said he was on his own here,” the kid, Busa, argues. I still have no idea what the fuck is going on here. “This must be him. He went to change and now he thinks he can play games. Listen, I’ll call security if you don’t want to pay up, mfethu. I don’t want to do it but I’ll be forced to.”

I shake my head. “Arrest me then and be ready to lose your job. I come here to buy sweets for my grandmother and this is how you treat me? Who buys airtime at a store these days? Cha, bafo. Just say that you’re short with R26 and I will easily give you the money. I didn’t buy any airtime.”

“He didn’t,” Chris chimes in and comes up from behind me. He appears to be thinking too hard. “You said the other guy is a twin, right?” the boy nods his head. “Tarzan, don’t you remember?” Chris gives me this look that is urging me but I’m not sure what he wants me to say. Remember? Remember what? He sighs and looks at the boy again. “Look, he just has some doppelgangers, okay? This one time we were in Soweto and—”

“I’m not interested,” this Busa says with an attitude. I’m two seconds away from fucking him up. “Please just pay back the money, my man.”

“Jacob Zuma.” Chris giggles like an idiot. He seems to be taking this boy’s rudeness in stride. I still want to fuck him up on his behalf.

“I want to see this guy first.” I demand with an expectant gaze. “I’m not paying for something I didn’t buy. Not that that’s a problem but your attitude reeks of garbage, my man. Even after your colleague here told you that I’m not the one you’re looking for.”

“Just show him!” the girl snaps. Good. “Please follow him...Sirs.”

We’re led to the camera room with the boy cashier and the security guard. It doesn’t take them that long to find the footage. I can feel my eyes widening and my mouth growing dry. I...don’t know what to say. Do you ever wonder about seeing yourself face to face? Not on the mirror, where you know that you’re looking back at your reflection. Just looking at yourself but it’s not you? You know this person is not you but you also know that this person is you? Chris’, “OH MY GOD!” reaches my ears and then it’s followed by his constant giggling. “Tarzan! This is really you.”

He's right. The walk, the little that I can see of his face, the clothes. This boy is wearing Brentwood from head to toe. He's me. His physique – this boy is me. "This has to be some sort of fucked up mistake," I say, unblinking. "I'll ask you one final time – are you playing some sick joke on me?"

"Don't waste our time," the middle-aged guard says, bored now. "Phakama, ndoda. Go and pay your brother's remaining bill. He was smart enough to not come back and pay back the remaining balance but stupid to not call you and tell you that you shouldn't come here?"

I...my mind seems to be working slower. Chris is snapping pictures beside me and saying something about wanting the others to see this. We pay for the sweets and that stupid remaining airtime balance before we're leaving. "So your doppelgangers don't just look like you but they dress like you as well? What was he doing in Durban anyway?"

"Cha angazi, nganeyakwethu." I shake my head, waiting for Chris to put our grocery in the backseat. He thanks me as I get his door for him again. "Does that boy really look like me? The angle wasn't the best one."

"When he came in, you could see his face." Chris gives me a small beam. He has a childlike fascinated expression on his face that makes me really uncomfortable. "And I would've thought it was you as well. With no context, it really looks like you just went in there. He carries himself with that smug motherfucker thing you have going on. He even dresses like you and your cropped hair. He's you, sthandwa sami. Problem is I don't remember what those twins' names were. I'd like maybe search them on Facebook so that you guys can connect. Oh oh! Maybe I can post your—"

"Khohlwa ke, soxabana njalo." These social media things of theirs, I'm not into that crap. The only reason I have WhatsApp is because it connects me with my family. "I don't want to see my face on any site."

He wiggles his body and gives me a little glare. "You wouldn't know."

"Yes, I wouldn't. But I trust you to respect my wishes, nganeyakwethu. I have these boys who look like me so what? You said this is something that's there, right? I'm not the only one."

"But what if they're your family members or something? Don't you watch Khumbul' Ekhaya? Missing family members and stuff..."

I shake my head, that's not possible. "MaKhathide and my father don't come from big families. They literally built our family up to be as big as it is now. Both their siblings have died. Ntombikayise – and my father's brother. I think he died before I was born. That boy looked around my age so he can't be my uncle's son."

"Maybe they're your grandfather's. You're his photocopy – literally."

I nod absently but I am ruling out the possibility. "Maybe I'll ask my parents but my grandfather is also deceased now. Besides, weren't those boys Mzimela?"

"Oh...yeah."

I park the car and wrap an arm around Chris' shoulders, guiding him into the entrance of Eshowe mall. We're meeting with Nhlaka and Siya outside Pick n Pay. Chris spots them first – and does his best to run to Siyabonga but he stops when the other boy starts laughing at him. "Nice limp."

"Shut up." Chris says and snatches his phone from me. "Boy do I have news for you! We finally met one of my boyfriend's doppelgangers." He's like a little kid sometimes.

"Bafo," I give Nhlakanipho a man hug. He looks tired, he's still not fine. "Mehlo madala." I'm just messing with him. I saw him yesterday at school.

I get the chuckle I desired from him. "Ey, work and responsibilities. What else can I do, bafo?" we enter the store. "How are you?"

"Always fine," I shrug and look over my shoulder to Chris showing Siya the pictures he took of that video footage. "Chris got a few items for Nomzamo. Those things women use."

"I'll add some more," Nhlakanipho replies, surprising me by not turning down what Chris did. "I don't know how many times women bleed a month. This roll-on, I hope she likes this one. That other one she said was too manly."

I chuckle and snatch the Shield roll-on from him. "Its flowery," I tell him and dump it in the basket he's carrying. "Manje...your father?"

"He better stay away." Nhlakanipho frowns and gives me a look. "Victor is not my father. Maybe he's a father to all those other children he has with that woman but he's not my father. I've survived eighteen birthdays without him and I'll continue to survive more. Ang'bhenywa mina. Just because he volunteered with his sperms, he thinks I will not beat him up? He'll regret the day he ever spilled inside my dead mother by the time I am finished with him."

He's angry. The myriad of emotions are there in his eyes, giving him away. He's hurt too, the way his face is pinched reveals that. I place my hand on his shoulder to give him some silent support. "Kuzolunga mfethu. You're so close – just a few more months. Then you can leave this place, go to make something of yourself and make uGogo proud."

He gives me his subtle grin. "Njengoba usho, bafo."

For the rest of the day, we're at Nhlakanipho's house. The kids were happy with the gifts that we got them. They're low maintenance at least. Nomzamo's hair looks fine to me, Siya and Nhlakanipho but Chris calls it disastrous. He asks if she has relaxer somewhere because he wants to fix it for her. Sometimes, I forget that his mom has a beauty shop where he easily learned things like this. He's not the overtly flamboyant type that I always see on the TV in hair salons so sometimes I forget. We chill outside and discuss different things. Thandolwenkosi isn't at home. Two days in a row. One of the kids blows her cover. Nhlakanipho is pissed but he's not going to beat her. I have to remind him that he's with Siya who is the same age as her and that she'll want to date as well.

"So she's still with that boy?" he asks Siyabonga.

"Maybe you should ask her," Siya replies with a nervous eye. "Its none of my business and I don't want her to hate me. Don't include me, please baby."

I think back to the number of times I've seen Thandolwenkosi with Lwandle. That guy is nothing but trouble. He's suspected of being a woonga dealer but no one knows for sure. The way he walks around Mbongolwane, taking advantage of young girls because he has money. Thandolwenkosi seems to have fallen into his trap as well but I didn't think it was serious. Siya and Chris have tried talking to Thando but the money is too good apparently. That's what she always tells them.

“Not bad, right?”

We all shift our attention to Chris and Nomzamo. Her hair is still short but he’s done something with it that makes it look really good.

“I put gel on it,” he continues. “Next time, I’ll come with some wool and maybe Thando can plait her hair. I can’t do the wool styles. But I’ll learn so that I can do it, okay?”

Nomzamo nods and hugs him tightly. “Thank you, bhuti Khilis.”

Chris is horrified. The look on his face says so. “Maybe we can just stick to Zithobile. And don’t call me bhuti...gosh, it makes me feel old.”

We chuckle as Nomzamo nods and then takes off running to join the others. Chris sits beside me and runs his hand in between my thigh. “I love you.”

He’s random. “I love you too, Dali.”

“Manje are y’all back together?” Siya is giving us a curious glance.

We both shake our heads but Chris is giggling. “I don’t mind us like this. He’s mine and I am his. He’s my boyfriend...that is not my boyfriend.”

“I’m your husband,” I say and nibble on his ear and then pull away because Siya is clearing his throat and we’re in the open. “Chris Ngcobo...Zithobile Ngcobo.” I remember he told me about his best friend.

“You’d take his surname?” Siya asks.

“Yeah. You’d take Nhlakanipho’s, wouldn’t you?”

The two lovebirds look at each other with smiles that hint at them knowing something we don't. I don't bother trying to figure them out. Chris and I have to go back. MaKhathide will be home any time soon and I need to sneak Chris inside my house before she can come home. After we've said our goodbyes to the others and Gogo, we begin the drive back to my house. "My mom's coming back soon. Hopefully next week. Then I can plan something special for Mother's day."

I nod my head.

"How do you usually celebrate your mother?"

"I'm not allowed to. Only the girls have to do something for her."

Chris looks at me with wide eyes. "Whaaat? Why?"

I shrug. "They don't do anything for my father on Father's day. Only I have to do something for him. It's always been like that... since I was young."

"You come from a weird family."

I grab his knuckles to kiss gently. He smiles. "Tell me about it." We're silent for a while, listening to his music now. It's not the sappy old school shit I'm used to. He says its UMI. I don't know who she is. "Answer it," I instruct him when my phone rings. I watch him do it and watch his face change from carefree to worried by the time he cuts the call. "What is it?" I ask.

"Your f-father says your sister was just arrested. He needs you to come back while he goes to the police station because your mother isn't answering her phone."

"Nontethelelo?" I ask, my heart pounding. "Why?"

We're silent for a while. But I can tell that we're both thinking the same thing. Chris clears his throat. "Do you think—"

“No!” my voice is a little irritated. It’s not aimed at him so I apologize. “That woman died because she had heart problems and—” my mind visits my earlier words to Chris. He’s also looking at me with wide eyes. “No. My mother is not responsible for this!” I refuse the possibility because that would mean that...it would mean that Ntombikayise...that Mama wami was...no. I shake my head. “Maybe it was Nontethelelo,” I find the words leaving my mouth.

“Sthandwa sami—”

“Let me think!” again the irritation, the impatience. I don’t have the energy to apologize again.

The car is silent for a while before his sigh reaches my ears. “I’m spending the night at my house tonight.” His voice is nonnegotiable. I don’t fight him. He’ll end up in my bed anyway.

Mutual Desires : Thirty

Christophe

Nqobizitha didn't drive home and went to the police station instead. We've been here for ten minutes, maybe, I'm not sure. Its like he's forgotten that I told him to take me home. I won't raise the issue now because he appears worried for his sister and I am worried as well. My mind is racing with possibilities but I really hope that she isn't responsible for MaNtuli's death. Can you even cause someone to die of a heart attack? I'm not sure but I am thinking back to that time I told her about the rape. She was really, really angry and I still remember that rage in her eyes. It's not a coincidence that MaNtuli was gang raped not even a week after I'd divulged to Ntethe.

As much as it makes me feel guilty, I can't deny the possibility that Nontethelelo wanted to avenge the rape of her brother. But what I can't fathom now is why she'd want to kill that woman, it makes no sense to me. That's someone's mother that she would've... no. I am not doing this – otherwise my head will explode. She's innocent until proven guilty. Innocent until proven guilty. Nqoba keeps groaning into his hands beside me and I want to comfort him but he was an asshole back there and I don't think he really knows how to properly accept comfort. He's usually an asshole about it and I am still mad at him so I stare straight ahead, to the policewoman giving me the nasty eye. I am so sick of these adults looking at me like I am defected anytime they see me. I don't yield as we look at each other. Fuck her! She doesn't know me.

The sound of heels clicking against the cold cement captures everyone's attention. I watch eyes widen and you can detect the change in the atmosphere as she steps inside. Her cold gaze sweeps over everyone here and I shrink myself as much as possible. This woman will probably have her own high chair next to the devil to rule beside him when she dies. Nothing about her is warm. Not even these bright clothes that she likes to wear. A sky blue dress and white sandal-like heels. Her cold gaze finds me first and she frowns. My hands are trembling. Am I too close to her son? Do we look suspicious? I try to scoot away but Nqobizitha is already standing as she nears us with her controlled footsteps.

"Have you seen your father?" her voice is made of stone – strong and cold.

Nqoba shakes his head. "These ones refused to say anything," he sounds like a child ratting out his naughty siblings right now. There's undertones of smugness in his voice – like he knows that shit is about to go down. "Its like they've forgotten all the good we do for our community, MaKhathide wam. They wouldn't even tell me the whereabouts of my own sister."

I watch MaKhathide's frown deepen as her eyes lock with mine briefly before they're on her son and then on the lady at the front. Poor thing is shaking in her boots no matter how tough she's trying to appear. Good. She deserves it. I make sure that she can see my little smirk. That's what she gets for being a bitch. "Ntombazane." the way MaKhathide calls her – like a beggar that isn't worth her time. "You're busy standing there and looking at me. Do I have to pull you by your clit for you to come here and assist me? Make yourself useful and find my husband or your useless captain. One of the two but you're not returning here alone, siyezwana?"

The girl nods quickly as another male cop enters and then turns away again when he sees the iron-woman at the front desk. "Do you know what's going on, Mama wami?" Nqobizitha asks his mother, he's standing with her at the ugly tall desk. "Your husband just told me—"

"What else if it isn't that useless Sfundo Ntuli who thinks he's a bigshot lawyer now that he made it out of Mbongolwane. A small boy with a big head—" her cackle sends shivers down my spine. She doesn't even look worried, just genuinely amused – as if she doesn't quite believe the audacity of this...Sfundo. "I guess I should commend him...between him and his sister, he was always the one with a borehole vagina – too loose and weak. The sister – may her soul rest in peace – was always tougher." I think she says this as a mockery, something about the way she says it makes me uncomfortable.

"What does Sfundo have to do with this?" Nqoba shakes his head. He's as confused as I am.

"He's suspecting that foul play was involved. When his sister died, he suspects that...nx! Didn't they get an autopsy report? Wasn't it determined that she suffered a heart attack? What does my daughter—" her eyes are lifeless stones as the captain finally appears, they contradict that vicious smile on her lips. "There you are. I have a big bone to pick with you, Ntanzi." Bab' Ntanzi actually backtracks a little as the woman half his size trails closer to him. "Release my daughter right now. Who do you think you are, keeping her in there like some cheap criminal? Do you think anyone would try to kill that woman? That they'd waste their resources on that ant with... he he! No one touches my children ngaphandle kwami. No one! Do you have proof—"

"Calm down, MaKhathide," Bab' Ntanzi interjects, nervous smile playing on his lips. "She hasn't been arrested. But we had to look into the accusation the brother made and bring her in for—"

"I don't care. Take me to her and if I hear that she was made uncomfortable in any manner...cha you really don't know who I am. I have to leave everything I am busy with to attend to this unnecessary nonsense you and your incompetent colleagues have created. Take me to my daughter." She demands with an authority that is nonnegotiable. Bab' Ntanzi nods once and they're walking but then she pauses and looks over her shoulder – cold gaze on me first and then Nqobizitha. "Hamba endlin' wena! Do you

see what I was talking about when I said stay away from pensioners with decaying vaginas? Look at the trouble your sister is going through. I hope you've learned your lesson."

"MaKhathide wam." Nqoba bows his head and then straightens up again. His smile is too damn wide – fake. "As always, your advice grows me to be a better person. No disappointment will come from this boy any longer. Wait and see."

"Take this boy home," her eyes find me and I am shrinking again. "I don't know why you brought him here. He's not family. You're spending way too much time with him. What, is he recruiting for something?"

My eyes widen and I shake my head. Its stupid because I wasn't the one who the question was aimed at but I still feel compelled to reply. Nqoba appears speechless, his mouth is set in a thin line. "Recruit me for what, MaKhathide? Unless...do you want him to recruit me?"

What happens next takes places in the blink of an eye – at least that's what it feels like. It feels like déjà vu all over again as a loud 'thwack' resounds in the entire room. Nqoba doesn't move, doesn't blink. He looks down at his mother blankly. The police seem to be just as speechless. "Respect me, I am still your mother. I won't hesitate to embarrass you in front of him. Ayigubhe, endlini!"

"Let's go," Nqoba says as soon as his mother is out of view. Maybe I am too slow to comply because he grabs me by the arm and leads me towards the exit. He's walking so fast I can barely keep up. "Get in the car," his voice is clipped and filled with a dark edge.

I comply, shakily, it feels like I'm experiencing a seizure – and look anywhere but Nqobizitha, holding onto my waist tightly, desperately seeking an anchor. What does his mother mean by recruiting? Does she suspect something? I know I am always around him but so are the others. Why am I the exception because I am openly gay? I don't know if I can stay away from her son though. She'll just have to get over it. He's mine and I love him. Maybe she'll kill me like MaNtuli...or was it Nontethelelo? The more I think of MaKhathide the more I think that she's capable. There's something dangerously cold about her that makes me shiver uncomfortably.

I'm too lost in my thoughts to notice that we've arrived home until my side of the door opens. I accept Nqoba's extended hand and look around with a frown. This isn't my house. Now more than ever I want to go home. To think. For a breather. To get over thoughts of his mother. To sulk. He's already at his door. I shake my head and rush after him. "This isn't my house," I say as soon as I enter his house. "I told you I'm not spending the night here tonight. I don't want even want to look at you. Take me home." I

mean every word, he's not going to shout at me like he did back there. It's not my fault that his sister got arrested. I didn't tell him to be born into a sketchy family. Also, his mom specifically told him to take me home, I don't want her to find me here. What if she...I don't know. She makes me uneasy.

Nqobizitha doesn't reply verbally, and gives me a dark look before leaving his bedroom, I can hear him locking his front door from here. "You're not going anywhere," his voice is firm. "Go shower and sleep your mood swings away. We'll talk in the morning."

Mood swings? What does he mean by mood swings?

"Fuck you," I snort, folding my arms across my chest. "I wasn't the one giving you an attitude in that car. Just because I bottom in this relationship, it doesn't mean that you have some type of authority over me. Besides, you heard what your mother said – so hurry it up before I can really recruit you into the darkness. Take me home or I'll walk there...your choice."

I get a head shake, impatience colouring Nqoba's gorgeous face. "Don't start with your shit, Chris. It's been a long day and – don't make me put you back in your place."

"Oh please, what can you do?" I am still angry at him and I'm angry at his mom. "You can't control me, Nqobizitha. You'll have to find another person – a submissive woman that will make your mother happy."

He laughs as he walks away from to his walk-in closet. I stand where I am, furious. He's so dismissive, like he couldn't be bothered. It's not a surprise really, I can see where his gets his stupid arrogance comes from. The thick-headed, Eros-like son of a— my jaw drops. "If you want a fight we're taking it to that bed. Take off your clothes, you have five seconds." He's removed his jersey, leaving him half-naked and looking every bit like a sex god with his delectable body. I shake my head to break free from my reverie – the fire in his eyes makes me take a step back, as my lips part for air. My body is already buzzing with anticipation, longing. I'll be damned if I give in. I just want to go home.

"Who the hell do you think you are, telling me what to do?" I ask him, standing my ground, raising my eyes to look at him. He already has his eyes on me, and there's something intense about his expression – a faint smile on his lips. I have no idea what he's smiling about but...slowly, I move to work on the buttons of my shirt. I keep the shirt on, fully open now and look at him. "You're not my daddy," the words slip silently, as a sudden heat rises along my cheeks and begins to spread.

“Take it off,” he replies, cocking one of his eyebrows.

I know how he wants me to do this. He’s obsessed with my back and the many dark freckles that reside there. They used to make me uncomfortable but now I love them...because of him. Turning away from him, and fiddling with the shirt, my belly unfurls with delicious heat as I sense him behind me – touching me but not really. Teasing me. My breathing has already quickened. I bare my neck as his lips begin floating along the sensitive part there. Nqoba pulls my shirt aside to expose some skin, then softly nips at the dark flesh. A gasp leaves me as one of my hands clasp on the wall, and he entwines it with his own, while the other one pulls my body into him. Our tongues find each other, breaths escaping, while they entangle gently as Nqoba squeezed my sides. We stop kissing long enough for Nqoba to instruct me again, “Take off your clothes. Five seconds.”

I nod my head. We both watch the white item fall off my shoulders and drop to my feet. Our joined hands work on tugging my dark jeans lower. Nqoba kneels on one knee behind me once the jeans have fallen to the ground and I have stepped out of them. My pert – nonexistent – ass is covered in tight grey briefs. His lips touch my rear as I release a shaky exhale when his hands tug my underwear lower and lower until they join the rest of my clothing on the floor. “Is this what you want?” the question is accompanied by a long finger drawing feather light patterns on my skin.

“Y-Yes,” he grips my butt-cheek at my shaky response. Then he parts it and blows air into my winking hole, eliciting a tiny whimper from me. “Please,” its breathless this time.

“Good boy.” A whisper, another light touch, to my back this time. I yelp, feeling a large hand connect with my bare ass—hard. The round mounds jiggle, and my cry transitions into a moan as Nqoba soothes the pain with massaging circles. He leans down to capture my lips in a kiss—it’s deceptively soft, not at all what I was expecting. And I shiver, and moan with delight, carnal desire crashing through me, making me needy with desire. *Please take me.* It’s a silent plea, one I beg for through the soft kiss. And maybe I will be granted, with the way Nqoba’s cock is hard inside his pants. We pull back, as I look up at my love, Nqobizitha’s eyes burn with a hunger so sadistic that I backtrack slightly—afraid, but with a fascination unlike anything else I’ve ever experienced before. I’m going to combust today, I will.

Being easily lifted into a large body, I wrap my arms around Nqoba while being guided to the bouncy bed. My erection presses against Nqoba’s belly and I groan at friction. Holy fuck. He sets me on the bed, on my back, with my thin thighs splayed wide open. It causes me to whimper as the cool air whips my very bare private parts. I’m wet with desire, drenched and dripping, for the boy I love. The same boy who enjoys torturing me with his slowness apparently. I stare, transfixed, as Nqoba’s large hands get to work. He starts with the belt buckle, working in that precise manner. The eye contact is forged forcefully, through his silent commands. The belt off. And then his pants. His snug boxers are next. And

then... oh god, it's so gorgeous. I licks my lips, starting to pant as I look at his cock—long, thick, veiny, pulsing. It's so gorgeous. This, this is a gentleman's cock.

“What do you want to do with it? It's all yours.”

“Suck it...daddy.” I whisper thoughtlessly, looking up at the boy towering above me.

“Go ahead, taste it.”

I comply, keeping my eyes locked on Nqoba as I lick my way up his cock. It throbs beneath my tongue, causing me to moan out in pleasure. Above me, I can hear his low intake of air, and the way his hand goes to grip my short hair, not yet rough but not gentle either. I close my eyes and pleasure him skillfully, with nothing but my mouth. Nqoba's groans grow louder, the grip to my hair tightening—and I decide to work that special spot. I curls my tongue around the thick head of Nqoba's cock, twisting and turning his tongue on that spot – and his slit.

It takes less than three seconds for Nqoba to lose self-control. My eyes widen, and then water with tears as I am kept in place by my hair and my mouth starts getting fucked. To be really fucked — roughly . Saliva drips out of my mouth, I gag, choking on the thick meat penetrating my mouth. My hair is gripped to the point of pain, and I'm inflamed, lips swollen but Nqoba's praising me, telling me how pretty I look with a dick in his mouth—and how much he loves me. There's a contrast though—with how he is using me as if he hates me. I love it, my moans are proof of that. My tongue swirls around him, as I suck his dick as if it were his favourite lollipop. It is. What I can't fit into my mouth, I stroke, heightening Nqoba's pleasure. He comes with a shout, spilling deep down my throat it sends shivers down my own spine. I feel myself writhing with pleasure and my own orgasm comes crashing down on me without warning. Fuck! I shiver as I collapse on the bed.

“Hands and knees.”

I'm too slow and Nqoba flips me on my belly himself. I can feel him pressing his face behind me and instinctively push back against him, my dick slowly jerking to life again in interest. My hands are trembling as they grip the bedsheets tightly. He blows on my hole again and presses his thumb against it and pleasure rocks through me. More, I want to beg but he'll punish me by taking all the pleasure for himself. My body tenses at the first hint of his tongue on my balls trailing down to the underside of my dick. “Mmm...” my hips buck almost immediately at the sensual touch, my body anxious, aching for more.

“What do you want?” he’s pulled away completely, agonizing me.

“You, please. All of you.”

His first response is to smack my ass over and over again. I throw it back and allow the ecstasy to take over as my eyes water and I release a whimpered moan. He’s kissing me, all over my ass – biting and kissing and owning. I can do nothing but whine and take it and beg for more. My feet are curling to the point of pain. He teases me, his fingers on my entrance, his tongue circling my mushroomed head. His heated breath stimulating me at the same time. I try to hold on but he’s setting a vicious pace, sucking and penetrating and coaxing – all of me – and I can hold on no longer. “Oh shit...N-Nqoba!” I cry out as a familiar electricity rushes along my back and all the muscles in my body bunch up. I attempt to clamp my thighs together but he spreads them and continues licking and penetrating. I can’t...I can’t hold on. I can’t hold on. “Mmm—fuck!” I don’t know the next words that leave me but I’m coming again, and it’s more intense than my previous one.

“My turn.” There’s a dark laughter. I’m turned so that I’m on my back.

“Argh, Nq-Nqobizitha, aaah!” I can feel the drag of a fat dick pushing agonizingly slow inside me, before leaving me completely. I open my eyes, my mouth slack as the process is repeated again, slower, so slow that it drives me insane. Please, please. “Nq-Nqoba, please. I-I n-need you.”

A breathless chuckle, “Oh, do you? I thought you wanted to go home. In fact, I remember you not wanting to take your clothes off at all.” The words are accompanied by another slow penetration, fractional, I bite my lip and arch into the body holding me down. Feeling every pulse of Nqoba’s dick drives me completely delirious. I’m like a crazed animal, writhing with ecstasy. It turns to pain as Nqoba pulls out again—ever so slowly, in and out.

“I-I, shit! Ngyakucela ke.” I cry out, my hands rushing to grip the back of his head. The stimulation to my nipples feels out of this world, I want to keep Nqoba exactly where he is. A whine. Stop it. Nqoba’s pulling out again, stopping completely. It’s torture. “Ngyancenga ke, Nq-Nqobizitha. Ngibhebhe.”

“Oh, I will. You’re just not allowed to touch me. If you do that again, I will stop and not continue.”

He means it, I can see it in the dark burn of his eyes. But I'm not sure if I'll be able to abide that instruction. Given to me less than a second ago, and I'm already longing to touch him. A rough ram inside me makes me lose all my thoughts. I scream, throwing my head back in pleasure. I am about to grip Nqoba's shoulders to anchor myself but remember his instruction so I settle for grasping the bedsheets, arching into the boy above. When he finally stops teasing me, he's not gentle. Nqoba pins me down by my waist, fucking me hard.

The bed starts to creak ever so lightly from the pounding force with my back taking a strain as well. All of my body literally starts trembling as an oncoming orgasm makes itself known. I can't hold on again, my dick is rubbing viciously against Nqoba's hard muscle and he's pounding into my prostate too hard and fast. Then he slows down as I'm about to fall. I blink my eyes, looking up at him. "P-Please..." my voice cracks. "I-I need to—AAH!" I don't know what he does to my perineum and balls but the sensation is enough to make me tumble into my orgasm. My stomach is in vicious knots as I come into his hand – deliriously – over and over again.

Tears rain down my cheeks as I overdose on the pleasure. Heaven. This is the only way I can describe this. A moan or gasp escapes me as he leans down to suck on my nipples while continuously driving into me. He's fervent and sucks them like his life depends on it. It's too much. The sucking, stroking, thrusting. I come again as his fingers play along my dying erection – not giving it a chance to. Sweat rolls down my face as he forces me onto my stomach. I grip the edge of the headboard. "Nq-Nqobizitha..." drool pools onto the pillowcase as he slams inside with no warning. "Oh god...oh god. AAH!" He's relentless, pounding away without a care in the world.

No. No. Enough. He's parting my asscheeks and drawing in and out forcefully. "You're creaming on my dick again," he groans as my dick jerks weakly. My chest is heaving, head pounding as he moves faster and faster until...climax again. My face screws up in pleasurable pain, I cry out my orgasm. It comes just seconds after that last one. I push my body up with whatever energy I have remaining. I can't do this anymore, the bed is wet beneath me with all this cum I've been releasing. My body can't take more. "Oh...fucking shit. SHIT!" I scream, trying to crawl toward the headboard because it's too much, too intense—so unbelievably intense that my mind can't even begin to fathom how a man's dick is able to reduce me to this. I'll never be able to fathom this.

I can't breathe, my mind in complete disbelief, with my body soaking wet and the disgusting mucus dripping onto my saliva drenched jaw. Nqoba just chuckles, grips my hips, and without warning, slams into me again...and again...and again. "Nqobizitha..." I can't breathe. My vision keeps blacking out with one of his fast nudges.

"You feel that...you like it huh? I'll beat it up till you can't walk, dali. Be a good boy and take it. Take all of it. Now talk all that nonsense you were spewing earlier."

My eyes water, as I turn into a blubbering mess. Nqoba leans forward, presses an erotic kiss to the nape of my neck, one of his large hands cupping my butt-cheek. He smacks it, and then cups it again as it jiggles in his hand. And then he grips me by my waist again, gripping tightly while pounding into my quivering hole like a wild animal. Another rapacious nudge and I scream, struggling again, as another orgasm makes me so dizzy I want to fall on my stomach. I want this as much as I don't want it. I don't know how much more I can take. Nqoba's fucking into me enough to make it hurt. It's the most intense, most fulfilling sensation in the world. I'm heaving, fighting for air while praying to reach the headboard again – struggling to crawl away.

"There, there, Bambi. Don't run from it. Let me make you feel good. This is what you wanted, right?" Nqoba says, there's something sadistic about the way his soft voice contradicts the force in which he's plunging into me. So much force that my knees give out and I fall flat on the bed. "Isn't this what you wanted? For us to fight. For me to fuck you hard. Is this hard enough for you? No? I think we can do better don't you?"

"Yesss," I hiss, voice higher than usual. I lay limply on the bed, my dick aching under the bed but I don't get the chance to touch myself as Nqoba grips my hand, pulling it to my back. I let out a sob this time. "P-please, daddy please. Ngyaxolisa. Ngyaxolisa."

"Awusafuni?" he groans loudly, pounding harder, literally fucks me into the mattress. It's loud, it's hard, it's erotically primal. "Awusafuni?"

A gasp, each snap of Nqoba's hips drives me closer to completion. "Ngyaxolisa." I am able to choke out, drool leaking onto the sheets as my head swims with pleasure.

"Again!" He is growling into my ear.

"D-daddy. I-I'm sorry!" Nqobizitha is spreading my legs, causing me to tighten even more around his boisterous cock, the burn edging me on closer to completion – one that I don't want but it inevitable. He is pounding harder, without restraint, like a wild animal let loose. Each kiss is overwhelming, snatching my breath just a little bit more. Each touch is a fire, ravishing every inch of my skin. Each thrust is a welcomed robber, snatching my soul unapologetically.

Before I can realize it, I am falling again. For the thousandth time, it may as well be. My release is painful. My dick is pulsing as ropes of weak, white cum bursts free. Tears spill down my inflamed cheeks

as I grip the sheets in a white-knuckled grip. My balls are drawing up again as he prolongs my orgasm. I can only manage a terrified whimper as Nqoba's release shoots into my soul. I have to squeeze my eyes to center himself, it feels like his spirit will escape my body – like usual. I do. The world goes dark for some long seconds before a comforting kiss touches the back of my head.

“I hate you,” my tremulous voice whispers when finally it doesn't feel like he has to fight for air inside his lungs. But my throat is still throbbing, and it actually hurts to breathe. I'm crying. “I was dying back there.”

Nqoba pulls out slowly and...I bite my lower lip to full on ugly wail. He brings me to his chest and embraces me tightly. “What a way to go then.”

This Brentwood wearing bastard...

I fell in love with a stupid sadist!

I wake up unable to move. My legs are heavy which means that he's hugging them tightly like usual. It's still dark outside but with hints of the sun coming out soon. I need to pee but I'm not sure if I can escape Nqoba's clutches without hurting myself in the process. My back is on fire and each breath I take is ragged. This Brentwood wearing bastard really killed me last night – all through the hours of this morning. My body is sore and drained. Even my mind seems to be working slow because I don't even remember why I woke up until I hear the feminine voice outside. Right. Someone was fiddling with the front door. Someone was...shit!

“Ouch!” I groan as I land knees first on the floor and the pain extends to my entire body, to my sore back that I clutch. Nqoba is stirring and shifts to my side to give me a tired look with one of his eyes. “Someone's at your door!” I hiss silently and drag myself up but it hurts.

That propels his stupid ass into action as he leaves the bed to assist me. I can't walk, not yet, not properly. I need a good soak. “Did you hear who it was?” his eyes are wide and inquisitive.

I shake my head.

“I’ll come back, phephisa muntuza.” I don’t even have the energy to fight as I am once again hidden in the closet. I hate this! But I’m not going to blame him for this one. Aside from the gay issue, I don’t think his parents would appreciate seeing him in bed with anyone even a woman. It’s about respect here and they have different opinions and beliefs from me. If I’m being honest, I’d freak out too if I saw my future kid in bed with her future partner. I do miserably express my hate for this Brentwood wearing bastard I am in love with when he throws my clothes in my face and shuts his closet again. I am trying to relax here, to find a comfortable position to sit in, to ignore this agony I am in.

I can hear the voices a little more now. It’s his mother. I think she’s alone because I can only hear her and Nqoba occasionally. Her expensive cologne wafts my nose and...great. The closet isn’t closed properly, just the slightest crack makes it possible for me to see her black strapless heels. She’s already dressed and ready to go out. Maybe she’s going to church. I wonder if she’s fetching Nqobizitha...that will be a disaster because it means I’ll be stuck here the whole day.

“How are you, ndodana?” her voice is always so cold.

“Great, MaKhathide. I had a superb night,” those undertones of smugness. This Brentwood wearing bastard... “What about you? My sister and father, are they back?”

“Yes, yes.” Dismissive. I can picture her doing that thing with her hands, a shooing gesture. “You’re coming to church with me today.” She confirms my worst fears. “You’ve been spending a lot of time with that Xulu boy lately and I, well frankly, I don’t like it. It’s like you’ve forgotten how notorious that family is around here. Those people are bad influences, I mean look at that fat girl – she barely dresses and is so loud. The younger one seems to be better kodwa hhayi akazalanga uXabhashe. This gay thing, Mapholoba, its contagious – like a disease. These people are doing the devil’s work, recruiting innocent souls like you to join them in hell. I’ve been quiet because I’m always busy but last night I saw that I need to put a stop to this rubbish. You’re even bringing that boy around your family. What are you trying to do? Turn everyone here gay?”

Nqoba doesn’t reply even though I’m dying to hear his views. As for me, I don’t care. I don’t think I do. How long do you have to hear something before it no longer has any effect on you? The ‘contagious’ part is getting to me a little though. When someone calls me a disease, it hurts. I don’t care about all that other crap about hell. I’m not religious, I believe in nothing. I doubt a God I don’t believe in has the power to harm me. My heart is clenching though, really badly. I don’t even catch what Nqoba says at first just something like, “Just wait until I give you lots of grandkids running around this place. Then you’ll eat your words, MaKhathide. I’m not gay.”

“They all say that until they’re caught in the act,” his mother is unfazed. “Maybe you’re good at hiding your tracks—”

“Cha, cha. Uyabonake MaKhathide...” Nqobizitha sounds genuinely upset. “You’ve known me since I was a young boy. Did I ever give you reason to doubt my masculinity? My sexuality? I love pussy mina and remember you told me to go for fresher one so that is what I am doing.”

“Asazi, Mapholoba. That boy comes waltzing in this place and all of a sudden things are changing. You’re always with him. Your friends too and it’s a little suspicious. Now it’s your father and its nostalgia all—hhayi suka mahn! That boy is doing the devil’s work. Stay away from him...you’re not going to embarrass this family. I’ve sacrificed too much for this spotless image and I will kill you with my bare hands before I allow you to taint our reputation. I hope you’re hearing me.”

Silence.

“I only spend time with him because he scores me some girls. They seem to like boys like him and I get to them through him. Don’t make a big deal out of this, MaKhathide. Trust me. I want you to eat your words the day I come with a lovely bride and who knows? Maybe I’ll get her pregnant before I can marry her.”

“Uyanya!” the mother is clearly relieved. I can hear her heels again, maybe she’s leaving. “You have half an hour, ndodana. We’re still going to church...in case this evil spirit of homosexuality was tempting you as well. We’re going to nip this in the bud. Get ready. 06:30 on the dot we’re leaving.” The heels click with precision against the tiles, she’s leaving.

“Did my grandfather have other children outside of his marriage to my grandmother?”

The clicking stops. “What?”

“It’s just...yesterday I was in Durban. There are twin boys out there who look exactly like me and I was made to pay a R26 bill for one of them. In Johannesburg, the same thing happened at a garage.”

“Yes, mkhulu had a younger daughter. Me and her talk from time to time and I know her children but they’re not twins. A girl and boy. They’re much older than you and look nothing like you. Uphenya ubala, Mapholoba. People look alike all over the world. You’re not special.”

Ouch!

“It was an innocent question. Let me get ready for today’s blessed service. See yourself out...MaKhathide wami.”

The click. She’s walking away. I decide to continue waiting until Nqobizitha comes to open the closet. We look at each other. Its tense and I can tell that he’s trying to gauge my feelings. I don’t really know how I’m feeling. So much for that Zithobile Ngcobo crap. “You need to take me home.” I am nonnegotiable this time. I’m sticky with cum and I need a quick shower then I’m leaving. I think I’m going to spend the day with my sisters today – no matter how much they dislike me. I manage to maneuver past him, ignoring him as he quietly calls my name. Standing in the shower, I open the tap and the hot water drizzles onto my body—not really helping with how heavy my heart feels suddenly but a welcome semi-distraction. I’m too lost in thought, thinking about one thing or the other until I feel a heavy feeling on my shoulders, and an overwhelming presence behind me. I despise the shiver of my body, the way it reacts frenzily—instantly.

A large arm folds around my middle, keeping me in place while the other one reaches around me, turning off the shower. Nqobizitha is dropping kisses along the back of my neck and I have my bottom lip bitten hard enough to draw blood. I am conflicted, sad, and disbelieving that this Brentwood wearing bastard has the audacity to demand sex from me after, after...his mother. “Stop!” my voice is wobbly.

Nqoba obeys immediately, I don’t have the courage to look him in the eyes.

“W-What was happening back there with your mother?” I query. “All those things you said.”

Nqoba’s sigh reaches my ears, he’s still pressing his erect cock into my ass—teasing. “I didn’t mean a word I said back there. Ngyakuthanda, dali...you should know that by now.” Another kiss to that sensitive spot on my neck, his long fingers stimulate my nipple. “Come on, Bambi...”

“Here.” I whisper. “Like this.” I don’t want to face him. I am already pissed at myself for not denying him. I’m never going to have him fully – not the way I want to.

Nqobizitha

He's more terrible at this than I am. I don't know but he's really loud and I can hear him struggling but I don't move from my desk. I am too focused on trying to stay awake. Sleep is really, really torturous lately. Sometimes I think MaNtuli wants to take me to the grave with her. I know it's the guilt. The 'what ifs'. Because a couple of days ago I was certain that she died a natural death but now I can't be so sure. I remember with Mama—Ntombikayise, she died of heart problems as well. I was only eleven years old when that happened and I think I hadn't freaked out because she'd looked asleep so that is what I assumed. That is what Nontethelelo told me. She was twenty years old at the time. I'd taken her word for it but now...I don't know.

My head is going to explode soon. I am always thinking about one thing or the other. Ngapha MaKhathide is on my neck about Chris and homosexuality. I think she really suspects me and I don't know how else to show her that I'm straight. I am straight, lately heteroflexible. Chrissexual. Whatever the fuck you want to call it. I thought about bringing some girls over to my house but the thought of entertaining any of those girls intensifies my migraine. They're childish and most of them will go around lying about shit I will not even do with them and that could damage what I have with Chris. I can't take that risk.

"Hey..."

I blink my sore eyes and shift my attention from the textbook in my hands. "You're a sight for sore eyes – literally." I tell him as he laughs. He is gorgeous.

"I'm still mad at you but I came," he appears nervous. "Let's go to bed."

I don't fight him. I'm already changing out of my clothes and going to lie in bed. He sighs as I drape an arm around his belly and shift him so that he's flush against me. "Dali..." I kiss the back of his neck.

"Have the cops returned to your family about the independent autopsy report?"

“No,” I shake my head. Sfundo has requested to do an independent autopsy to confirm the cause of his late sister’s death. MaKhathide has offered to pay whoever he finds to perform the autopsy. The way she’s so supportive of Mantuli’s family I don’t know if she’s doing it out of guilt that her daughter was involved in some nasty shit or if she’s being the usual show-off that she is. I want to go with the latter. I really don’t want to believe that my sister is a murderer, that she murdered innocent women. “Sfundo is still looking for a competent Medical examiner.”

Chris nods his head. “I don’t think she did it but I wouldn’t blame her. As sad as I am that MaNtuli died, people protect the ones they love. If your sister did it then she did—”

“Nonsense!” I disagree quietly. My heart still feels so hollow and endlessly dark. I don’t want that woman’s death on my conscience. “Fundiswa didn’t deserve to die. She has three kids that are now orphans—”

“A rapist for a parent?” he turns to face me and his features are scrunched up in anger. “The world is better off without rapists, Nqobizitha. It doesn’t matter the gender – if you’re a rapist then you don’t deserve to live. That woman damaged you and now you’re—”

“Uyaqala ngalomsangano wakho. Do I look damaged to you?” Chris’ words are making me agitated, making something nasty twist my insides. “Are you my psychologist now? I’m fine. I don’t know who taught you this crap that women can rape but you need to stop bringing this shit up. You brought it up once and look at the damage you caused.”

“Oh,” one of brows raises and he’s pushing me away. “Now it’s my fault. I was worried about you and trying to get it through your thick skull that that woman did something bad to you and you weren’t listening so I went to your sister hoping she’d help. But everyone of your family is so fucking arrogant that she didn’t bother trying to get you a therapist but retaliated violently instead.”

“I thought you said it was okay for Fundiswa to die!” I snap, and lift off the bed as well. Chris grabs his pants, I snatch them from him and grip his wrist. “Sit your ass down, you’re not walking out into that darkness. We’re talking this out. Remember we said that?”

He’s silent a second, glaring – with glassy eyes. “We fight a lot.”

“Not all love is gentle – sometimes it feels like teeth,” I quote his words from all those weeks ago. “But mainly its because you’re a pain in the ass.”

“I think that’s your position,” he snorts and looks away as I sit in front of him. “I’m not the top here. I don’t want to be. And you’re an asshole nine times out of ten.”

“Your asshole, all yours, Bambi.” I wipe away his lone tear and lean into kiss his forehead. “I’m sorry, okay?”

“Me too,” he bites his bottom lip, doe eyes searching. “Did you confront your sister about your suspicions because I think that’s the only way you’ll stop dreaming about her and that woman.”

Our minds target our worst fears. I’ve been having recurring dreams about Fundiswa and Ntethe. I’m going to blame myself for constantly thinking about this that it’s now targeting my dreams. I don’t even help her in my dreams – Fundiswa. My sister beats her to a pulp and I just watch. I think this is why the guilt is so much. I’m just glad her children live with their paternal grandparents because I’m not sure I’d be able to withstand the guilt of seeing them everyday with the suspicion that my sister is responsible for their mother’s death.

“I want the autopsy results to come out first. What if she’s innocent and then I will feel guilty for even suspecting her in the first place.” This is a lie. Part of me would rather not know to be honest. Call me selfish but I’m trying my hardest to put this behind me because it can open a can of worms that I am not ready to deal with.

“Do you know why she’d kill...what was her name again? Ntombikayise.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.” I shake my head. “Drop it.”

“But why? That Nomthandazo chick is trying to get a hold of you again. I saw it on your phone, Nqobizitha.” He’s always so forceful about this and wants me to divulge more than I want to about Ntombikayise. Maybe I should just get it over with. I haven’t visited her grave in a while and I want her to meet him. She knows about him but he doesn’t know about her.

“Before there was you, there was someone else I loved.” I clear my throat and rub my face. My heart is clenching, like it usually does at the mention of that woman. “Someone who took care of me and loved me. But I love you more than her so you don’t have to worry.”

He gives me this look...like he’s going to be sick. “Ntombikayise?”

“Get dressed, we’re going out.” I tell him. MaKhathide will kill me when I get back.

“Where are we?”

I roll my eyes as Chris leans into my side, almost clinging to me like a monkey. I hadn’t missed that tremble in his voice. He’s scared. I don’t know why people are so terrified of cemeteries. It’s like they forget all of a sudden that these are merely resting places for their loved ones and that they’ll one day join them as well. I can feel laughter threatening to burst free though. I allow it to when Chris jumps into my arms and attempts to hide his face in my neck.

“Not a word, Mapholoba. I’ll murder you, I swear I will.” He mumbles against me. Again I chortle, unable to help myself. I keep walking with him in my arms until my legs start to get heavy as I find it. Her grave. “Why’d we stop?” I don’t respond and place Chris on his feet. He comes out of hiding reluctantly. His attention only goes to the tombstone in front of him when I kneel down, running my hand down the golden text.

Rest In Eternal Peace

Ntombikayise Khathide

January 1967 – October 2011

“Nqoba...” Chris is beside me – and part of me hears him from afar. I’m too inflamed and part of me wonders if I did the right thing by just bringing him here. Maybe I should’ve told him to wait a distance

away from here so that I could speak to her first. “Sthandwa sami...” he touches my shoulder and I shrug him off for some space. I can’t breathe right.

The silence seems to last forever before I can try to speak. “Mama wami...” it’s still so hard to breathe right. “I missed you. It’s been a while, I’m sorry, please forgive me. I don’t mean to disrespect you but lots of things have been happening, Mama wami. I try my best to not forget you but sometimes it’s hard. Your daughter is back and remember I told you about what she said...sometimes I get dreams because of it.” It’s too hot so I remove my jersey and give it to Chris who is biting his lower lip, holding the eyes contact— with a fearful look that I don’t understand.

I take his hand, kissing his knuckles, watching a lone tear trespass his eyes. “You cry so much.” I whisper, chiding him a little but teasing him as well.

“Only around you.”

I nod and shift my attention to the sparkling headstone again. “Mama wami, this is Chris. Bambi. I— brought him here because I...I...want you to meet him. I also...I’m thankful for the time that we shared together, for what we had. But things have changed, Mama wami. Bambi is here...I brought him to you so that you—that you know that I love him. But I still love you, it’s just that with Bambi...I love him more.”

I look at Chris again, and I don’t know what I’m expecting but it’s not the strong look of hatred I find on his face. “Nqobizitha, this isn’t funny. I – I, what kind of love is this?”

I want to reply but he’s dry heaving, eyes watery again, and vomits on Ntombikayise’s tombstone.

Mutual Desires : Thirty-one

Christophe

I can feel his hand rubbing my back in comfort as I continue retching. I'm not doing this on purpose but the mere thought of him and this woman – another powerful shudder wracks my body as I expel onto her tombstone. I don't know why Nqoba isn't pushing me away but I'm glad because I'd love more than anything for this woman to wake from her grave so I can vomit on her like the trash she is but this will have to do. "You're okay...okay." I don't know how Nqobizitha constantly does this – comfort me when it's me who should be telling him that things will work out. "I'll appreciate if you try to stop vomiting, Bambi. Are you sick? Use your words and tell me what's wrong."

I briefly spare him a disbelieving look and then gag again.

"Let it all out, Dali." He sighs and rubs my back in soothing circles. "Next time give a guy some sort of warning so that I can carry a bottle of water. Maybe some serviettes to clean the tombstone. Now I'll have to use my jersey."

Like hell he will. I shake my head and take an exhausted breath as my lungs fight for fresh air. It's not here – in this place – maybe because this is a bloody cemetery or maybe it's because of that revelation Nqobizitha made. So simply. This is MaNtuli all over again. The calm look he's giving me makes me want to cry. Just how many people have taken advantage of him? My stomach is still in knots and my chest is heaving but I don't think there's any more bile left to excrete. I don't have much of an appetite lately. "How old were you when this woman first started taking care of you?" I ask him.

He sets me on his lap and wraps his arms around me. It's silent for a while as we both look at the tombstone in front of us. The longer I stare, the angrier I become – at the world, this woman, his mom, dad, sisters. Where the hell were they when he was being abused? Why didn't any of them notice anything? Maybe Ntethe did...it's no coincidence that this woman died like MaNtuli. I wish she'd had a harsher death if I'm being honest. I wish Zenny had gotten her hands on this bitch. I would've helped her bury the evidence too.

"Ntombikayise..." his voice is quiet, has a bit of straining in it. "She's my mother's sister. I've known her all my life and I grew up around her. But she started to take care of me when I was four years old. MaKhathide let me keep her because I was more talkative around her. I know it's hard to believe but I was really scared of people growing up. It wasn't normal and my sisters would tease me about it all the time. Ntombikayise helped me."

“How?”

He doesn't reply but I can feel all of this tension, all around him. His heartbeat is too loud against my back. I shift around in his arms to face him. “How, Nqobizitha?” I repeat.

A nervous chuckle this time, he shakes his head. “Even if I tell you, you won't understand. No one can understand, this is why I was never allowed to tell.”

“Try me,” I insist, trying my best not to be pushy. I'll only push him away and what if he shuts down? I don't want that. I want to understand... everything.

“Why do you want me to say, Bambi?” he nuzzles my nose and breathes on my heated senses. “I have nothing but good memories about that woman. I am who I am today because of her. The confidence – it's all her. Everything about her was bright – like a cloudless sunny day. Too warm and gentle. She was different from MaKhathide, a good different, and her love was different. It was like...amasi. Satisfying. I wanted to stay with her forever. I loved her. And she loved me too and took care of me.”

He's not being direct here. I want to know more, not these ambiguous words he's using. My stomach is still churning nastily and my eyelids are heavy but I won't cry. Nqoba needs me – even if he doesn't know it. “Took care of you?” I rest my head on his shoulder and enfold my arms around him. “She was amazing, right? Tell me more. I'm curious about this woman who stole your heart.” I can't approach this like I did that issue with MaNtuli. It didn't help the first time, it won't help now.

“Well, like Nomthandazo said...sometimes I'd stand in the closet and learn to count the numbers. I could probably count to a million without fail. But it wouldn't feel like a punishment because my mind would be on the reward. Amasi. Sometimes she'd touch me in a way that felt nice...my body would react. It was my reward for being a good boy. Soon, I'd earn points to be touched like that in different ways. If I made an effort to speak a full sentence without trembling or hiding behind her. She taught me how to tie my shoes and rewarded me with a big kiss on the lips the day I managed completely without help from her. She introduced me to the planets and science. Then she taught me how to concentrate while distracting me – in different ways – a caress on my thighs, soft strokes on my dick. I don't remember how old I was the first time I came but she was happy and told me that she was proud of me. So I wanted to make her proud again and again – to thank her for helping.”

“I – uh, wow...” my voice is a whisper. I don’t know what to say. I want to dig this grave and drag the rapist out of it so that she can pay for her sins. “Where was everyone else when this was happening?”

“I mean we’d be secretive about it but Mama – I mean Ntombikayise made it fun. Imagine keeping top secrets like those men in black in the sci-fi films. It meant a greater reward for me and so we kept it to ourselves. But also, I was scared to lose her and she said that’s what would happen if it got out. I didn’t want her to go.”

“I see...so you were always alone with her?”

“Pretty much,” I can feel him shrugging and then kissing my temple. “I was lost without her – empty. I looked all around Mbongolwane but I couldn’t find her. The hole is still there but it’s not the same. I’m better now.”

I look at him, he has this little smile, looking so serious. “You’re a sex addict,” the words escape without permission.

He chuckles in response, thankfully, and seems to take my accusation in stride. “Only because you’re too tempting and no man in their rational mind would deny you. You’ve got one powerful ass, Dali.”

He really doesn’t realize how fucked up he behaves sometimes. He doesn’t mess around with old women now but he’s still a sex addict. To admit this makes me feel guilty somehow because I rarely deny him. I hear him in the bathroom sometimes, after he’s had a bad dream, I hear him grunting as he masturbates. If he’s not doing that then he’s vomiting. Sometimes he’s doing both. Sometimes, he takes it out on me but its nothing I can’t handle. “Is that so?” my chest tightens so badly I can barely breathe but I still need to tread carefully here. I don’t want him to shut down and push me away.

“I told her about you the first time when that French idiot was here. You’d really pissed me off and I didn’t know what to do so I came here and asked Mama — Ntombikayise for guidance. I think she helped me and lit the way for me. You’re here in my arms.”

Is he – oh god! The bile is fighting to spill out of my throat again. I clutch my belly and close my eyes. Don’t cry. Don’t cry. Don’t cry. “This woman was thirty-seven when she first took care of you. You were only four years old. Wow...” I am speechless again, fighting for air. My body is trembling. I don’t know

what to do but I feel like hurting something, someone. I have to come back here. Without him. I'll come back here again. I'll make sure of it.

"Do you want to go back?"

I nod my head absently.

He kisses my temple. "Let me say goodbye first. Can you...give us some space?"

What else am I supposed to say? I nod my head and stand on shaky feet. My legs wobble and I don't know if its because of everything that he's just revealed or if I'm acting up because of my fear of places like this. I move to stand a few feet away. My ears don't catch much of what is being said but I can hear the low rumbling and sniffing. I've never seen him cry before. I always break but he doesn't. Even when he's genuinely hurt, he doesn't cry. My vision clears as he presses his fingers against his lips and then onto the granite stone. He says something again and then bows his head in that respectful manner he gives to every female adult he encounters. "Ngyakuthanda, Mama wami..." of all the words I didn't want to hear...sigh. I swallow down the lumps and look away, kicking at small stones.

"Asigoduke," he's beside me now. I nod my head and allow him to lead the way as his arm rests at the small of my back. He traps me against the car and tilts my face up by gripping my chin. His eyes are searching but I don't know if he finds what he's looking. "Kodwa nganeyakwethu..." the hint of a smile, the tenderness. My body melts as my soul beams brightly. "Ngyakuthanda yezwa?"

I nod my head.

His breath ghosts over mine – a second and then he's kissing me. An explosion takes place in my belly, making me return Nqoba's kiss with the same ardency. The sexual tension is strong, almost unbearable, and burns me deliciously. It pains me as I grip his hands and prevent him from working on the fly of my jeans. Hell no. I refuse to be fucked in a goddamn cemetery. He looks disappointed but gives me one final deep kiss before getting my door for me. "Thank you," I whisper as soon as he's helped me with my seatbelt. Its 02:30am. It was around midnight when we left his house and I don't know how long it took us to get here – wherever we are – as I fell asleep sometime during the trip. I want to sleep again but not without some music.

Jon B – *Someone To Love*.

It feels like so long ago that this song first played in the car with him. His chuckles force me to peer over at him in interest. "I remember the first time you sang this song for me. Awungiphinde phela, Xabhashe."

My belly flutters deliciously. I don't get embarrassed about singing for him anymore. Most of the time, I have to do that so that he can sleep – that is when I've ran out of interesting things to tell him about. "Don't even like to think about it..." I start, smiling pathetically as he grips my hand to kiss my knuckles softly. The mood lightens a little, becoming less...tense. I still have to think, figure out how to help him. He thinks he's fine but he's not. The way he praises that woman is proof of that. For now...I continue singing to him. We'll be fine, him and I.

Nqobizitha

Today is one of those days where I couldn't wait for the final bell to ring. I got my mood ruined very early today by who else if not that self-important Mr. Nsibande. I flunked an Accounting test. It's not my fault. I thought the Income Statement works the same way as the Trial Balance. It turns out that I hadn't heard Chris right during those extra lessons which resulted in me scoring less than 50% on that test. It wasn't bad, an improvement from my last results but I have that sex-deprived idiot called Nsibande for a teacher and he made some stupid comments about my 46%. I didn't even attend Chris' afternoon classes today, I wasn't in the mood. He'll ask and I'll reply later.

MaKhathide isn't waiting for me outside like usual. I'm early today so she didn't have the opportunity to. Thandeka barely pays me any mind as I enter our homestead. She tried coaxing me into messing around until she finally gave up. I'm really into the toothpick and I don't want to ruin what I have with him. I fuck up sometimes but I don't want to find myself in a situation where that fucking up means sticking my dick inside someone else. I've learned from MaNtuli and that entire situation was so fucking horrible that I don't want to ever experience it again. I respect Chris and what we have between us – even if we're not exactly together.

In my room, I quickly change out of my uniform and then go inside the main house. Only Nontethelelo is here. Ndoni is always busy with Bab' Mchunu's son. I'm happy for her. I hope her divorce will be finalized soon but if Mkhize is giving her problems then maybe she can enlist Ntethe for help. I don't mean that. My mind makes fucked up jokes sometimes. "Yah, sisi." I greet and give her a half-hug.

“Bhutiza,” she smiles. Its tense. There’s always a tension around her lately. I wonder if it has anything to do with Sfuno. He’s found a Medical examiner that he is pleased with and now we’re awaiting the results. I heard that his parents are putting him under pressure to have their daughter buried. They don’t understand these scientific things and felt like he was being very disrespectful to the dead. I have to agree with them – its like he’s forgotten our cultural beliefs all of a sudden. “How are you?”

“Ngyaphila,” I thank Mam’ Mdletshe for my food – samp with beef stew – and dig in. “How was your day?” I ask her.

“Different from yesterday.” She says nothing else but her eyes are sparkling all of a sudden.

“Oh...what did you do?”

She raises an eyebrow. “What’s with the 1001 questions, Mr. Detective? Are you trying to accuse me of something?”

“No.” I shake my head and give her a small smile. “I saw you with Zenande during break time today. How far along is she now?”

“Eighteen weeks,” Ntethe pauses and then shakes her head as she chuckles about something. “She told me she feels so big she fears that she’s carrying twins or something.”

“Whoa...” my eyes widen. “Is that possible, women can carry more than one baby?”

“Who birthed you?” she smacks my head and I mentally smack my forehead as well. I know this of course but it would be my first time being around a woman pregnant with twins. I haven’t been around a lot of pregnant women actually, all my sisters are far away and they come home once the babies are born to introduce them to my parents.

“Hey!” I chuckle with a reserved head shake. “Don’t blame a guy for being blown away by this knowledge, okay? Anyway, kanti don’t they tell you these things at those appointments all pregnant women go to? Imagine being surprised with a child you weren’t expecting.” I shake my head.

“She’s gone to a gynae – and it’s one baby but she just feels so big and is scared because Jabulani’s family has been cursed with an abundance of twins – her words not mine. Shit happens and you never know, bhutiza.”

“I’ll never have to know thankfully.” I say and check my phone. There’s a message from Chris. They cancelled today’s afternoon classes and he wants to meet up. “Iyobuye ibonane, Ntethe.” I say, drinking what’s remaining of my juice and going to dump my bowl in the sink. “I have to be somewhere.”

“The chipmunk,” she gives me a wicked grin. “I’ll cover for you...MaKhathide’s expecting you to be at school anyway and lucky for you, she’s not here. Don’t take too long ke nawe. Three hours max.”

“You’ve always been my favourite sister,” I kiss her cheek and head for the exit.

“I’d do anything for you, bhutiza.” I’m almost fully out of the kitchen when she says those words softly. I believe her. My mind travels to MaNtuli and my heart sinks a little. That woman didn’t deserve to die at all. But somehow...part of me is relieved that I will never have to deal with her again. I remember her scent – only faintly now.

MaKhathide

“We got the name, Mah...” Sbonelo captures my attention, respectful as usual. “Dr. Khoza – a pathologist based in Durban. Here is her number.”

“Set up an appointment,” I tell him, quickly browsing through the contents inside the manila folder he gives to me. “I want to see her tomorrow. Whatever it takes, Sbonelo. Threaten her if you need to, women are weak when you mention their children. How old is this woman?”

“Around your age.”

“Good. Mention the grandkids instead. You’re dismissed.” As soon as the door closes, I rub my temples to ease the oncoming migraine. I have lot of things to do today, withdrawals to make. This Khoza will

need to be paid off to keep her mouth shut. I don't have to do it but I will. I know all about being an independent woman and building your legacy from the bottom. I'm a firm believer of women supporting other women so I'll do this. On top of the money that that small boy is paying her, I'll have to compensate her for her services as well. Besides, maybe we can work together in the future. With these women that keep on crawling at Nqobizitha's feet, there's clearly a lot of damage control I'll have to do in the near future.

Nqobizitha...he frustrates me so much. I don't know if he behaves the way he does because he's the last born or because he was born out of an – no. It doesn't matter how he was born. He's my son. My only male offspring. His father and I got him after so much difficulty. AbakwaNgcobo answered our prayers, they went about it the wrong way but they still ensured that I was victorious in the face of my enemies. Years and years of whispers only to get the one thing the pathetic women around here said I wouldn't have. I was killing them with a victorious smile and a son in my arms. The same son who is turning out to be like every disgraceful male that has ever been in this family. I should've stood my ground and given him my surname instead. He'd be strong, in every manner, righteous and a victor. He'd be taking after his name...but I haven't lost hope. On all my children, I'll never lose hope.

There's a knock on my door and then it opens. "Mkami..."

I roll my eyes and stand up, grabbing my purse. "You're late, Ngcobo."

"I know," his sigh is too soft, like the rest of him. It briefly brings back my deep hatred towards my parents. Of all the men they could've chosen for me and they went with the feminine one with a missing vagina. I'll never forgive them for how they betrayed me. "I was busy."

"Who were you bending over for this time?" I snort.

"I've only loved one man in my life, Ntombizengcebo – and he has been dead for a long time now. My loyalty belongs to no one else but you and our children now. Uyakwazi lokho, you don't get to suspect me of cheating. I'm not the one spending time with Mchunu."

My footsteps falter a little at the mention of Richard. "It will do you good to keep him out of this, Ngcobo. Your partner in sin died long ago, yes, don't blame me for it. You know our agreement."

“As you’ve said then. You know very well I haven’t been with anyone for the past thirteen years mkami. I am now waiting to meet Harrison—”

“Weeehhh, kungcono uthule.” I don’t want to smack him across his mouth but he’ll force me to with this rubbish he’s spewing. “Save that nonsense for the day you visit Xulu to cry about how much you miss him. I won’t comfort a nagging man, Ngcobo. I’m not your mother, I wasn’t forced into this marriage just to baby you. Grow a pair, man! He died, so what?” thinking about that abomination of a relationship he had with Xulu still angers me. They may as well have lived like animals. “Let’s go, Ntwenhle is waiting.”

Life is spiralling out of control lately. I no longer have it in the palm of my hand, not the way I want to. Things I’ve worked so hard to keep hidden are peeking out of the closet like a sock that wasn’t stored properly. Sbanisezwe with his nonstop travelling is causing problems for my own son. He’s here one minute and then elsewhere the next. Soon, we’ll hear that he’s here in Mbongolwane and that will destroy Nqobizitha. I don’t want that. How many blows can my son take before he breaks completely? Before he becomes completely weak in the face of our enemies? I refuse to allow that to happen – not while I am still alive. I will do whatever it takes to protect him.

We find her sitting comfortably in a corner booth of this fancy restaurant she chose. Hungry people will always go for the expensive places, forgetting that they wouldn’t even be able to afford salt in places like this. I humour this woman because she is the mother of my son. Because she’s his link to his brothers. I don’t have a choice anyway, death has refused to visit her over the years. “Ntwenhle...” Sakhile sits beside me. “How long have you been avoiding us?”

She rolls her eyes and my eyelids twitch. I want to hit her across the face and maybe Ngcobo can sense it with the way he places his hand over mine. “Kunjani, Ntwenhle? How are the boys?”

The sagging thing smiles at Ngcobo, typical, she always did have the nastiest kinks. “Fine. Growing as you know, just like their brother. Sbani was in Durban not too long—”

“You mean he caused Nqobizitha some trouble. My son had to pay an outstanding balance that your unruly son didn’t pay. Just how are you raising these boys, weZimZim? Maybe we should’ve taken all three.”

“Uyanya, not my children.” I smile at the panic found in her eyes. She’s still so terrified of me – good. “It’s bad enough that I have to live with the guilt of knowing that their brother isn’t with them like he should be, whenever I look at them. That he’s here with you and—”

“Well taken care of,” I interject dismissively. “We helped him. We helped you – and your boys. You would be the ridicule of Mbongolwane. Your sons wouldn’t know peace. But it seems they’re eager to ruin all that. If they keep moving around like this then they’ll end up meeting my son and I can’t have that. He’s been through a lot and I won’t allow your sons to further destroy him.”

“He’s my son actually,” she always has to rub this in my face. “I love him and I want him safe and loved and—”

“He has all that and more at home. Look, the reason you’re here is because I wanted to tell you face to face – tame your boys. I don’t want trouble. Move to another province if you have to.”

“We’re tired of moving around. Sqaalosenkosi is in Newcastle, with his grandmother. Sbani was in Durban to meet a friend. They don’t even travel a lot. We’re going back to Joburg soon but my mother was sick and they’re close to that woman. They love her and—”

“I don’t care.” This sob story isn’t doing it for me. These boys being in KZN will cause unnecessary complications. “Ayigubhe...eGoli. KZN is too small for all of us. Remember our agreement – don’t go back on your word now.”

She looks at me a second and then Ngcobo, I don’t know why. He has no say. If it weren’t for his immoral family we wouldn’t even be here. “Would you like to see their pictures?”

“Yebo, ZimZim.” My foolish husband can’t keep the excitement out of his voice. “This is like looking at my son – with his favourite Brentwood. I’m sure if I took this picture to him he’d think it’s him.” He chuckles.

“Sengihembe,” I leave them there, having no desire to fawn over children that don’t belong to me. They’re not my emotional responsibility, I owe them no love.

Bonus Insert

Nhlakanipho

Gogo wants to see me today. I know why, and though I dread any conversation that has to do with Victor, I have to respect her wishes. She's not just my elder but my mother too. Also, I miss my siblings and spending time with them – no matter how much of a headache they cause me. Some noise on my left captures my ears and I shift my attention from Siya's wardrobe to find him lifting the basin I was bathing in. "Yeka, bafo. I was going to do that once I looked decent."

His eyes raise to meet mine and he looks unrealistically beautiful as he rolls them and smiles. "I don't mind doing this, bafo. Don't you know, I love doing things for you."

We look at each other a second then he laughs. My arms are already wide open as he occupies the space that belongs to him. "Shandu wami," I murmur, kissing his forehead. He has his arms tight around me as he beholds me like his morning star. "Ave umuhle kodwa."

"Ngyabonga," the smile broadens. "Ngyabonga, myeni wami. You're beautiful as well."

"Ufuna isbhaxu wena. Beautiful?" I pinch his ass and embrace his hearty laughter. "A man like me beautiful? Usuyasangana, weSiyabonga."

"You're gorgeous. A rugged gorgeous – inconspicuous and brooding."

"I didn't know," I give him a small smile and grab his left hand to kiss his fingers, his ring finger in particular, the silver band there. I used the money Gogo gave me to spend in Johannesburg to buy him this ring. It wasn't expensive – only R300 – for most people but for me, that's the most I've ever spent on anything. The way his face lights up every time he looks at it makes the holes in my pockets worth it. Everything is worth it with him. "Uyathandwa yezwa?"

"Nami ngyakuthanda, baby." He leans up to kiss me and then pulls out of my embrace to go and take care of the basin.

I grab my new jeans and a black shirt that I bought a few weeks ago. If I am meeting that man again, I have to be decent looking. Eighteen years of my life I've done fine without him, he's not going to think he can waltz into my life and disrespect me – because of my family, my financial status. Siya is back by the time I am done dressing up. I pull him to me and kiss him again, and pinch his butt when he laughs – no doubt because he can feel the boner in my pants. We're not having sex like usual, not in his parents' home. The father begged me to keep it my pants during my stay here and tough as it is, I am honouring his wishes.

“Mah, Baba – sanibona.” Siya greets, sunny like usual, his hand in mine. This makes him happy, the simplicity of hand holding, it's a pleasure he doesn't get often. “How did you sleep?”

“Fine,” his father replies first, eyeing Siyabonga from top to bottom – and breathing a relieved breath. I hold back my chuckle, he always expects to see his son sporting limps and bruises – like I don't respect his wishes. Sometimes I don't but most of the time I do. “You look exceptionally happy this morning.”

“We're seeing Gogo and the kids,” Siya shrugs with a brilliant smile. “Mah, should I make breakfast?”

“Yes,” his mother, mam' Thokozile, replies with her kind smile. “Your father and I have eaten. There's bread and eggs in the kitchen. The water in the kettle was still hot but you can boil it again to make umkhwenyana some tea.” My eyes narrow in on her respectfully as Siya coughs beside me. I watch the mother and father cackle as they high-five each other. They're the only parents I know who enjoy teasing their son like this...I find it funny and weird. But then again, I don't really know what its like to have parents. Not biological ones. Maybe these dynamics are not unusual.

“This is why I'm taking his surname,” Siya whines like a child and pulls me away, with his parents still laughing together. “You don't like eggs so should I make you russians instead?”

“Yes...please.” I sit down and unsuccessfully try to make myself comfortable. This is not me at all; living in someone else's house, invading their space, using their things – and free of charge to top it all off. It makes me uncomfortable. But Siya is always so happy about it and has managed to convince me to stay here longer...I can't deny him. When he's happy, I am ecstatic. “Thank you, Phakade lami.”

“I love you.” His replies are always so random. “Chris woke me up at 04:00 this morning. Being his dramatic self as he told me that Nqobizitha wants to attend Miss Ntuli's funeral. He's mad at him.”

I make sure to swallow my food before chuckling. “They’re always fighting.”

“Tell me about it. You know he said that—”

“Phakade lami,” I interrupt him because I can see the look in his eyes, he’s about to go on his gossiping sprees and I am not interested. I’m cold like that but I don’t like having people’s names in my mouth. I’ve been like that for as long as I can remember and it will never change. “You know I’m not interested in this.”

He wiggles his shoulders and rolls his eyes. “This is why I like to do this with Chris but this tea is about him and I can’t gossip to him about him. You’re frustrating yazi, baby?”

“How does it feel to feel what I feel when you’re coming to me about people’s names?”

“Mxm...” he rolls his eyes and grabs our dirty plates. He takes care of the mess in the kitchen quickly and then we’re driving off to see the most important woman in my life. I must admit that Bab’ Ngcobo has made my life easier with the car. We don’t have to walk for close to two hours and in the mornings, I can even fetch my siblings to take them to school. He’s changed our lives for the better. “Look at Milisuthando.” Siya laughs and points to the little girl. “Is she eating mud?”

“What’s new?” I ask as we leave the car. “Milisuthando! What are you doing?” she looks over her shoulder and giggles and starts running towards me. I catch her easily and walk with her toward the main house. The yard is empty. Where are the others and why was she here on her own? Siya knocks on the door and opens it. “Sanibona...” I trail off and look at Gogo sitting on icansi. There are people I don’t recognize sitting on the bench. Three boys and two girls. I ignore their sunny faces and eye Gogo. “Salukazi sami, where are the others?”

“I sent them to MaKhuzwayo’s tuck-shop to buy cold drinks and biscuits for our guests. Ufike kahle, Nhlakanipho. Go to the rondavel to prepare some food. Mnelisi has already chosen two chickens from your livestock to cook. I was waiting for Thandolwenkosi to come and work her magic but she hasn’t been back since this morning, she is visiting a friend. Ujeqe is already cooking in one of the pots.” Her eyes find Siyabonga. “Kunjani mfana wami?”

“Gogo,” Siyabonga goes to hug her. They have a special bond that makes me happy. “I’ll help, Nhlakanipho. Sanibonani.” He greets the guests, his smile is wide. “I’m Siyabonga.”

“My name is Busanathi,” the boy sitting closest to Gogo says. He’s around my age, maybe a little older. “These are my siblings. Sbongakonke and Mthobisi.” He gestures to the boys who wave nervously. “The girls are Thingolwenkosazane and Onikakonke.” They also wave but there’s something mischievous about the younger girl’s grin – the one whose name is Onikakonke. “Sawubona, Nhlakanipho.”

“Kunjani, bafo?” I nod my head at the oldest.

He smiles wide. “Saze sajabula ukubona wena.”

I just look at him, not sure how to reply. I’m not happy to meet them, I don’t even know them. I don’t know what these kids are doing here...but I have an idea and it angers me. “Woza, Nhlakanipho...” Siya breaks the tense staring contest between me and the oldest. “We’re going to cook like you asked Gogo. Maybe Milisuthando should stay where you can see her, she was eating mud when we came here.”

“Kodwa lengane,” Gogo shakes her head as I set Milisuthando on her feet and instruct her to join her grandmother. “Hambani niyopheka.”

“Those are your siblings,” Siya declares as we enter the rondavel. The smoke rises above us, coming from the big pot that is cooking ujeqe. I shake my head, Gogo never uses the electrical stove – or any electrical appliances for that matter, never mind that they make life easier. “I think this is almost done. It looks tasty,” he continues, closing the pot. “The boys look like you. Your dark brown skin and your ruggedness. This must mean that you’re your father’s child more than you are your mother’s.”

“I was disappointed too,” I tell him and thank him as he hands me a bowl filled with water to wash my hands. I stand at the doorway to get rid of it and then go to help him with the chicken – at least Mnelisi has already cleaned it. Grabbing one of the pots on the table, I fill it up with water and then place the chicken inside to boil. They’re going to eat it like that. I’m not going to waste my struggling family’s resources to please kids who’ve lived on milk and honey all their lives. “What are they doing here?”

“Maybe your father thought it was a good idea for you guys to know each other. I think it is too, they look like a respectful bunch. And won’t it be nice that you’ll have siblings around your age to talk to? Mnelisi must get tiring and Sgalokuhle is so scared of you.”

I don't think Sqaalokuhle is scared of me. He's just still very much a child that respects me as his elder. Mnelisi thinks he's a man now because he's reached puberty. That's the difference here. "Those kids are not my family." I am serious. Maybe Victor thinks sending his children here will soften me and convince me to do that stupid welcoming ceremony but I will not do it. I have no obligation to, I owe the Ngubanes nothing.

"They're not your dad, baby."

"I'm not their brother, Phakade lami." I sigh, hearing the sounds of my siblings rushing into our yard. "You hear that? Those people are my family, they're the ones I struggle with. They're the ones I am going to school for. I want to better their lives. Not some pampered children from Msinga."

"How do you know that they're pampered, Nhlakanipho? You didn't grow up with them and you know nothing about their lives. I saw how they were excited to see you but you were rude about it. You were really rude, especially when the brother confessed that they were happy to meet you."

"Awu, the perks of being an only child whose parents are together, madoda. It must be nice."

"Nhlakanipho!" Siya gasps, I don't like that hurt look on his face. I try to touch him but he shifts so that he's out of reach. "You're not—don't say that. I understand where—"

"No, you understand nothing." I interrupt him. "Nothing at all, Siyabonga. Awazi lutho. You're lucky that you had it all. I would've taken the suffering to the extent of homelessness if it meant that that man had stayed with my mother and I. He didn't and I still took the suffering with my mother. I had to learn how to be a man from strangers. I hate that man and I hate those children. Yes, I do. What are they doing here? In fact, let me—"

"Wait," Siya grips my arm. "Where are you going? Baby, please don't do this."

"They shouldn't be here," I hiss and attempt to free my wrist. My grandmother is spending whatever little money she makes on those strangers and she'll regret it when times get rough. We'll remember the money we spent on those children who'll still have their father to support them. "I won't touch them, I promise. I just want to talk to Gogo so that she can send them back to wherever they came from."

“Why, Mzimela? Just like—that?” His voice cracks, eyes looking urgent. “They came here for you and this is what you do to them.”

He doesn't understand. He was never the black sheep whose father wouldn't accept him. He's never had to stay up wondering why? He's never had to become an orphan with one of his parents still alive. He's never had to question himself, his self-worth. He doesn't understand. “Siyabonga,” I warn him and grip his arm. He winces, eyes getting glassy as they look at me. I'm angry, there's a darkness wanting to take over. The same one that takes over when I feel disrespected, the one that encourages me to deal with people the only way I know how. “If you know what is good for you, you're going to keep out of this.”

Its silent between us for a long time.

“You're hurting me.”

I almost don't catch the words. His voice sounds too far away as it makes way for other memories I was certain I'd gotten rid of. But they're back again, taunting me as they had when Victor came here some weeks ago, demanding that nonsense he was demanding. I'm feeling too many things, they are all attacking me at once, from every direction.

“Nhlakanipho, you're—hurting me!”

I can see it, the images, flashing so vividly in my eyes. The disappointed look in my mother's eyes. I want to scream, to hurt something...him. Everything is taunting me, everything I've been trying to run away from is attacking me viciously and I don't know what to do.

“N-Nhlakanipho,” again that voice.

I blink the blurriness out of my eyes. “Stay away from me.” Not waiting for Siya's response, my hold on him lessens, until I'm not touching him at all. I walk away, I don't where I am going but I can't breathe right and I need some air. The voices are still in my head – the pleas, false promises, the lies. I was eight years old when I first heard my mother beg that man to visit me. Ten when I first heard her offer to pay all his expenses just so he could come to see me but he couldn't even do that. I have so many bad memories of that man. I hate him. He never chose me. He could never choose me. Now I'm supposed to choose him? To be welcoming to his children just like that?

“Nhlakanipho...”

I whirl around quickly to find Siya behind me. What is he doing here? I look around and I'm at Masimbeni. I should've known, this where I always come to breathe. Sometimes, it feels like I can't even breathe. Like there are shards in my throat, stabbing my esophagus. Sometimes, I can't breathe. “I told you to stay away from me.” My voice is too quiet.

“I don't have to listen to you all the time,” he's just as silent. “Don't you know? I don't like to be where you're not.”

I shake my head and rub my face then I turn away from, storming off. There are multiple lumps in my throat, blocking my airway. I want to scream out in frustration. To curse the world to hell and back. I settle for screaming, ripping my shirt off of me – it's too hot. I can't breathe. “Why did you leave me, Qhakaza?” I haven't asked that question in years. I miss my mother. I want to cry and curl into her side. I want to ask her questions about my father. I want her to reassure me that he loves me – like all those times she used to. I want her to buy me presents and pretend that they come from him instead. I want to pretend like I don't know that she's the one who'd write all those birthday cards and pretend they were from him. I want a lot of things. I want to kill my father.

“Nhlaka...” Siya calls me, he rarely calls me that. Nqobizitha is the only one who calls me Nhlaka – before him, it was my mother. “I'm right here. Talk to me.”

I don't want to talk. If I talk, I will...I don't know what will happen. Siya is in front of me now, cupping my cheeks. He's studying me, his eyes quivering, and I don't know why. He leans up to kiss me and I reciprocate eagerly. The closeness brings me a sense of comfort, it's not enough but at least my heart doesn't feel like it's being shred into pieces. He works on the zip of my jeans and I don't fight him, spinning him around as soon as my pants are undone. His face touches the tree in front of us as I use my saliva as lubricant. He screams as I attempt to breach him. “Shhh...”

He bites his fist and nods his head. I don't know what happens but we're working together and moving – my hand gripping the back of his neck to pin him to the tree. My eyes close as I work on chasing everything away. “P-Please slow down,” I hear the whimpered words from afar. Siya is tapping on my front. “Please, b-baby.” My thrusts are slower, gentle. I grunt as soon as I come and pull my dick out – it's still half-hard. He's breathing raggedly and turns to face me with wet eyes. I lean down to kiss him deeply, devouring him. “We should go back.”

I nod my head and entwine our hands. His limp makes me feel guilty, I've never felt that way before but now I do. He says he's fine when I ask. Thandolwenkosi is back home. The car I don't want to see is parked outside our home. It's Victor's car. I hope he's here to fetch his children and go back home. Siya says he's going to wash his hands because they're sticky. I go back to the main house and find that man talking to Gogo. He has never suffered a day in his life, judging by how good he looks. That suit he's wearing costs maybe three months worth of groceries for me and my family.

"Nhlakanipho," Gogo smiles, she has Kuhlekimi in her arms. "Where have you been? Your father has been here for a while."

"With all due respect, salukazi sami, I don't have a father. Will you need help around the house? If not then maybe Siyabonga and I should be going back home."

"Awu Somahhashi, leaving so soon?" I will always hate his voice. "I was hoping that we'd spend time together. Your siblings have been dying to meet you."

"My siblings know me. I fetch them every morning when they have to go to school. Besides that, I don't have any other siblings. Sorry to break to you old man."

"Kodwa Nhlakanipho—"

"Cha Gogo!" my voice raises without my permission. "Ebengekho lo. How many years have I been on this earth? Ungjwayela amasimba nje lo. He thinks I need him now? Now? I don't need him Gogo. I taught myself so many things without him, I learned how to be a man without him. I learned how to be a father to my siblings. I don't need him. Ngij'ndoda mina Gogo. Look at me, look at me! You're looking at a man, not this small boy who—"

"Kahle, bafo. You're not going to disrespect my father like that."

"What will you do?" I look at the oldest boy, Busanathi, with a dark smile forming on my lips. It's been too long since I've made someone bleed with my fist. Maybe this boy wants me to teach him a lesson like his father. "Ask your small boy who is trapped in a grown man's—"

He stands up and sizes me up. The others are grabbing him, and trying to pull him away. “Leave us, maybe we should see who between us is a man.” He tells his siblings.

“If you want me to make you regret the day that useless boy you call your father—”

He lands the first punch. I let him, that’s how I prefer it. So that I won’t be blamed for causing damage. The belligerent darkness overtakes me again as I punch him back. I use all my force and land blow after blow. No boy with the same parts as me will ever get the satisfaction of victory over me – not physically. He’s on the ground but I am not deterred. I punch and punch until my hand starts to hurt. The sound of something cracking fuses with the cries in the room but with the blood rushing to my ears, its almost impossible to hear. All I feel is pain as I punch the boy under me. The pain is welcomed, it lessens the storm going on in my head. And then I hear the voices – louder – and a hoarse voice begging beneath me. I look over my shoulder and attempt to blink the blurriness away, meeting my crying siblings. Siya is beside me, gripping my arm. His eyes are too wet. I stiffen, cement blocking my breathing channel. No, no, no. “He started it and I wasn’t hurting him.”

Its futile, he’s already walking away. Victor, I don’t even know what he’s saying. He’s angry and taking his son’s side. My heart clenches tightly at the look of pain on his face. He’s worried for his son. I have no idea what that feels like. “Ngyaxolisa Gogo,” I murmur before stumbling out of the house in a fast run.

I find Siya outside, behind my house, he’s crouching with his face buried in his hands. He’s crying silently. Our eyes meet as my footsteps capture his attention. I want to comfort him but I can feel something in me shutting down, the pained look on his face is getting to me. I don’t want to see him like this, it makes me feel guiltier. My feet move away from him of their own accord. I don’t know what I want to do or where I am going. But I can’t be around here. The air is too stifling, it’s too dead. It’s hurting my lungs. My feet start walking faster – until I’m running at full speed. Again. I just want to get away. I’m too suffocated.

Mutual Desires : Thirty-two

Christophe

Siya has this bad tendency of accusing me of being dramatic and maybe, most of the time I am but this time I feel like I have every right. Would you allow the person that you're in love with to attend their rapist's funeral? Would you let them go to see the grave of someone who is responsible for his nightmares, where he wakes up shuddering and drenched with sweat? The same person who is responsible for your breakup? No, right? So then I can't be blamed for being mad at him for wanting to honour that woman. She's just like Ntombikayise. She's no different and she further ruined him. I feel sorry that her kids lost their mother but she's a rapist. A rapist. She took advantage of him and he's blind, so freaking blind that he doesn't even see it that way.

We spoke this morning before he went back home because he has to prepare for school. I'll be spending the day with my mother. Yes, she's finally back from Gabon and we spent Mother's day together. She won't be going to Joburg any time soon because she's waiting for Baba. He's going to come back any day now according to her and well, it makes no difference to me if I'm being honest. Baba and I aren't really close. We talk but there's no damage done if we go weeks without talking. I don't even mind. "Perfect," I whisper in approval as I shift away from the floor-length mirror. Mommy and I are going to Durban and we'll visit a massage parlour or something. But we're doing all these girly things that humans generally think men shouldn't do. I'm not most men and I do whatever the fuck I want so I shall be pampered and pampered properly. I deserve it.

"Morning family!" I grin brightly as I find my mother and fabulous sister in the kitchen. Well, Zenny looks horrible and is every bit the monster she looks like. I feel like my chirpy greeting was testing her patience with the way she breathes in and out slowly. "How did you guys sleep?"

"Bebe," my mother returns my sunny greeting. "Like a baby. I was just telling your sister to sit down so that I can make breakfast. She shouldn't be moving around a lot in her condition. Look at her feet!"

Zenande sighs and awkwardly grabs the chair closest to the stove. "Awukhuze umama wakho, Zithobile. Ngizosangana phela mina. (Talk to your mother otherwise I'll go crazy)" at least she doesn't look genuinely mad, just tired of being fussed after.

Mommy looks between me and Zenny, then starts to laugh as she turns her attention on the frying pan. The smell of bacon teases my nostrils. "Qu'est-ce qu'elle dit?"

“She says that...” I look between the two of them and giggle. “She says that she enjoys you fussing after her and she never wants you to leave, mommy.”

“Oh, that’s sweet.” My mother chuckles and moves to smooch Zenny’s cheek. “Maybe I’ll visit again when you’re closer to your due date so that I can help when the baby arrives.”

“You’re such an angel.” Zenny gives me a cold glare from hell but smiles at my mother. “Thank you for this.” She gestures to the plate filled with unhealthy, fatty foods in front of her.

“Thank you,” I echo her and look at my plate. Bacon. Sausages. Eggs and sliced tomatoes. Baked beans. Toast. I won’t be able to finish this – aside from the fact that I’m trying to watch my weight, this is too much. “This looks delicious.”

“Finish all of it,” mommy gives me a look. It’s like she can see right through me. I look down and pick at my food, I bite into the pork sausage. It’s good. “So how is your boyfriend?”

I nearly spit out the food in my mouth. “Mommy?”

“He’s not this shy creature he’s pretending to be,” Zenny says before I can reply. “You know nothing mamakhe. That sausage looks to thin, baby. Maybe you should’ve gone for something longer and thicker – that’s what you usually go for, angithi?”

It happens again. I choke on the sausage.

“Oh no, you silly thing.” She grabs the cloth on the table and gives it to me. “You’re supposed to swallow not spit out. Anyway, isn’t this meat tasty?”

What the actual hell? My mom is here with us for fuck’s sake. She’s punishing me for something, I just know it. I don’t know but she looks so mischievous and I am not in the mood for this. I don’t think I can eat any longer. “It’s good, right?” all that innuendo went over my mom’s head. I hope so. Her English isn’t as good as her French. “I bought it at this butcher in Eshowe. Really cheap. Maybe we’ll pass there when we’re coming back and add on the grocery.”

“That’s a brilliant idea,” Zenny still looks so mischievous. “I’d like some cream pie too. Zithobile knows where they sell it. He could have it all day, this one time, I came home and wow...all that cream wena mamakhe. I’m telling you—”

“That's enough, Zenny,” I mumble, wanting this conversation to be over with. Yes, one time she came into the house and found me folded in half on the couch with an arm around my throat but that never happened again after I apologized. “Maybe we should go now, mommy. Zenny needs her beauty sleep, working the nightshift seems to be taking a toll on her.”

My mother looks between Zenande and I, then nods softly. “Do you want us to bring you anything, lovely?”

“Just that cream pie,” again the smugness. I am tempted to smack that smug grin off of her face but I was taught not to hit women and besides, Zenny can easily crush me. The toothpick thing Nqoba goes on about is not an exaggeration. “Enjoy for me and my child lapho.”

“We will,” I roll my eyes and then exit the house. We’re using Jabulani’s car, he left it here last night and he’s supposedly staying with a friend two houses away but funny enough his shoes and a few male clothes are in our house. I have no idea what’s going on with Zenny and him but they look...in love. She laughs a lot when she’s around him but she swears and shouts as well...a lot. “Os de troia?”

“I know its Angolan music but it’s good music, Bebe.” She sighs and looks at the rearview mirror and then behind us. “I’m always so nervous about driving people’s cars like this.”

I second that. I don’t really know how to drive yet but Nqoba’s still teaching me and sometimes, he allows me to drive a short distance. I am always trembling and terrified but he’s patient and he guides me. “I’m thinking of shaving all my hair off.”

“What, why?”

“Change,” I shrug, I woke up feeling like this and the blue has got to go. It was fun when I had it but I need something else. I just hope Nqoba won’t think I’m ugly. “I’m tired of the blue and maybe I just don’t want to comb my hair for a while, mommy.”

“Have you decided what you’re going to study next year?”

Oh god...this conversation again. I don’t want to be a damn lawyer or accountant or economist. I want to walk the Givenchy runway and have my face on billboards. Like Gigi Hadid and Kendall Jenner. Like Lucky Blue Smith. “No,” I shake my head and peer over at her. “I am tired of this question all the time. You can’t keep pressuring me to go to school. These is why kids make it to varsity and then fail, mommy. All those funds supporting their education down the drain and—”

“You have brilliant results. You’ll easily get a bursary,” she says dismissively but with so much insistence I can feel myself growing increasingly irritated.

“You’re joking, right? Do you have any idea how many intelligent kids are out there, in this country?” my mind takes me to Siyabonga. He’s so much more book smart than me. “I’m not the only one who gets distinctions, mommy, dozens of other kids do. I don’t want to qualify for a bursary that I won’t be grateful for. I’m telling you right now that I’d dread going to school. I want to be a famous model.”

“Modelling is not a career!” she snaps, clearly irritated herself. “Look at you, you’re stick and bones. That is not a career that you want to get into, Bebe. Those kids look like they survive on water only. That isn’t healthy. The modelling industry is filled with people suffering from eating disorders. I watched this documentary the other day—”

“That will not be me,” I say, maybe a little defensively. “I moved past that, you were there. I’m not going to relapse. You just need to stop being so damn suspicious all the time. I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“I wasn’t suspecting you and I didn’t say you’re doing something wrong.” She looks at me.

I know but this conversation about weight is unnecessary. It took a lot for me to move past that stage in my life but it’s always there. The voices aren’t loud enough into dragging me into the dark pits again, even with that girl at the modelling school. They’re not loud enough. “I love that you worry about me so much and regularly check in on me, mommy. You have no reason to worry here. I am eating, I’m not going to force myself to eat more than my stomach can take because then I get sick. I get really sick. It should make you happy that I’m eating.”

“As long as you know that I’m always here, Bebe.” She sighs. It’s weird how I have to unbuckle my own seatbelt and leave the car without anyone getting my door for me. I’m so used to Nqoba doing this that I don’t know...it feels nice. I love it when he takes care of me. Maybe I’ll text him and profess my undying love for him. I am still mad about the whole MaNtuli drama though. “Where do you want to start?”

“Are you kidding me?” I skip happily and laugh as she rolls her eyes. “The massage parlour of course. Mbongolwane is nice but sometimes there’s so much drama and I need to de-stress. I want it all. Then we’re going to do our nails. Then I’m taking care of my hair and then we’ll watch a movie and I have to go to the school later. I have an afternoon class.”

“Then let’s get into it and not waste time, yeah?”

I haven’t bonded with my mom in a long ass time but today, we do just that. I realize just how much I’ve missed her. Siya texts me around lunch break and tells me I’ll look like a matches stick if I shave my hair. He says that brown part is my head and the rest is my body. Mxm. What does he know? I’m worried about him lately, the way he and Nhlakanipho seem to be awkward around each other. I mean they talk and you always kind of wanna keep looking at them being in love but they are awkward. I’ve asked Siya but he says nothing. I’ve decided to keep out of it until he’s ready to divulge.

“Today was really fun,” I say to my mother as we begin the drive back home. The window is open and the air is hitting my bald head...it’s a weird sensation.

“We’ll do it again soon, maybe before your father comes back.”

I nod my head and turn the volume up. “I love this song,” I giggle. It reminds of the times where Nqoba says he’d rather we fight in bed instead of arguing. I won’t have time to go back home so my bag is in the car. We reach Mbongolwane just as the final bell is ringing. “I’ll see you at home. Thanks for the ride. Je t’aime, mama.”

My mother blows me a kiss and nods her head.

The students’ eyes widen as soon as they spot me. Some are giggling but I don’t care. It’s the girls that mostly compliment me. I look weird but a good weird. ‘A beautiful alien’ some girl I recognize calls me. I roll my eyes and quickly rush to the teachers’ room to fill in the timesheet. I find Siya there. “Hey bestie.”

“You!” his voice is hoarse, he whirls around too quickly and winces. “Bambi!” his eyes are wide as saucers, he’s speechless.

Now, he makes me nervous. Don’t I look good? It was different with strangers but with my friends, I care about their opinions. I care about his opinion. If he likes this look then chances are Nqobizitha will like it as well. “Only my boyfriend is allowed to call me that.”

“You have big eyes!” he blinks once, twice. “You’re beautiful. Nqoba will—”

“What about me?” the devil comes in and I quickly turn to face him. “Whoa...” his footsteps falter a little. His eyes are as wide as Siya’s were. I don’t know why I’m like a deer caught in the headlights as Nqoba starts walking toward me. My eyes fall to the ground. “You look...” he trails off and lifts my chin so that our eyes are connected. “Wow. Just wow...Bambi.”

That’s what Siya called me. I hug him so tight that a sound of surprise leaves him. His chuckles reverberate against my ear and I want to climb him but someone clears their throat. It’s Nhlakanipho, and he has this indecipherable look on his face. “Bafo. Kunjani, Chris? Looking good,” he walks past us.

We pull apart but I still stand beside him because I love being where he is. I decide to wait for Siyabonga to be done with Nhlakanipho so that we can walk together to our different classes. He’s busy talking with Nhlakanipho, hushed from where me and the boy I love are standing, his eyes are wide and his face is pinched. I hope they’re not arguing.

Nhlakanipho rubs the back of his neck with his bandaged hand. Thandolwenkosi told me he got into a fight with his paternal siblings a few days ago. “Yes...no.” the voice is quiet. It’s Siya’s. “I know that, maybe you should start believing it as well. Look, I have to go.”

“Siyabonga...” Nhlakanipho grabs Siya’s arm. They look at each other, I don’t even know what they’re discussing so silently but you can feel the tension. It’s a melancholic one. “Ngyakuthanda.”

Siya’s eyes are glossy. “Nami...baby.”

“Maybe we should give them some space,” Nqobizitha suggests and I want to stomp my feet like a petulant child. I want to know more. Why they’re so sad all of a sudden but I’m being pulled away without permission. We get to his class and some of the students groan, I gave them homework to do and I’m assuming they haven’t done it judging by their reaction to me being present today.

“Looking like a snack, Chris!” one of the girls, Zinhle, shouts loudly.

“You have big eyes!” it’s a boy who shouts that, Sthelosethu. “They’re even bigger when you roll them.”

He’s an idiot. “I want my homework!” I announce, giggling when almost everyone groans again. We’ve covered a lot of things by the final bell rings. Nqoba’s class is mostly polite, they’re still complimenting my new look as they leave class. “Give me your phone, sthandwa sami?” I beg, while he starts the engine. “I need to update it with some new pictures of me.” Nqoba rolls his eyes but complies. “There’s a new message,” I tell him as I open it. “Nomthandazo wants to know if you guys can do coffee some time.”

“I don’t do coffee.”

He rarely drinks it. He says it’s unhealthy and it’s too sugary. “Then maybe you guys can do lunch at KwaNyama Ayipheli,” I suggest. Something crosses my mind and I am mentally smacking myself upside the head for not having thought of it earlier. I don’t think he’ll want to attend therapy, for his dark childhood. He thinks he’s fine. Nomthandazo knows about it. I don’t know why I haven’t thought about approaching her. Maybe she could help. Because I don’t think his family will. They left him with that woman all the time and after she died, it doesn’t look like they bothered with therapy. Even now, when I told Nontethelelo about MaNtuli, she never mentioned therapy.

“That’s fine but not this weekend, I’m going to Ladysmith for the funeral.”

Those words punch me in the gut and I want to snap but I don’t like it when we fight. Even a light one can turn serious in an instant. I just need to make peace with the fact that he wants to attend that woman’s funeral. Maybe he’ll get his closure and we can close that chapter. Not completely because I have to find a way to convince him to attend therapy. Nomthandazo’s number. I send it to myself using my phone and then delete that message. Now, let me take some pictures and then send them to myself and then delete a few as well so that he’s not suspicious.

“Stop that, you’re distracting. I’ll end up crashing MaKhathide’s car.”

I giggle and nod my head. “Is your dad home? I’d like to see more pictures of him and my grandfather.”

“Cha. He’s with my mother. I’m still taking you to my house though. It’s been too long since I fucked you unconscious.”

He doesn’t ask. “You did that yesterday,” I roll my eyes. My body is already tingling with longing.

“Nomthandazo!” I call out, standing up to wave at her.

She looks around, spots me – and looks momentarily confused, before recognition registers. “You’re Chris? I’m sorry stupid question.” She laughs and then takes the seat across from me. “How are you?”

“Good, good.” I say and then pick up the menu. “Should we order first?”

“Why not?”

A waitress comes over and takes our orders. “So how are you?” I’m nervous.

“Fine. You?”

“Also fine.” She nods her head and we both look at each other silently. It’s getting little awkward but our drinks arrive thankfully. “So I was wondering...I mean I want us to talk about my—boyfriend.”

She keeps silent, her brow raised.

I clear my throat. "I don't know if I'm going about this the right way but I really need your help. This is about him and your mother."

"Oh..." she tenses but nods for me to continue.

"I remember that day you told him that your mother would trap him in some closet and he'd cry for hours until he fainted. I didn't mean to eavesdrop but I just heard you say that. Now, about a week ago he took me to your mother's grave and he revealed some disturbing things. The way he talks about her, like he was in a relationship with her. What f-four year old has a romantic and sexual relationship with a thirty-seven year old woman, miss? I'm failing to understand." My heart hurts just thinking about it, I can feel an oncoming headache.

"So he goes to her grave?" Nomthandazo widens her eyes. "He thinks its love?"

"He talks like that and it's not normal, Nomthandazo. It really isn't. Sometimes, he calls this woman in his sleep. He'll say he misses her and that he loves her. He says he loves me more than her but I don't get how that's supposed to make me happy. I'm worried for him."

"Me too," she pauses as our food is brought to us. "He's in denial. But my therapist said I shouldn't force him to remember. Because of his childhood trauma, he's repressed some of his memories. When you think about it, he was a child and some of the shit he went through wasn't supposed to happen. My therapist thinks his brain is keeping certain memories from him because he's not ready to process them."

"So what d-do we do then? What happens if he's never ready?"

"He needs therapy, Chris." At least she agrees with me on that. "Situations like this are tricky because what happens the day he is triggered and the memories come rushing in? And trust me, that's the worst thing that can happen to you. I became an alcoholic and suffered depression for years because of that. I was at work one day and my colleague made some stupid comment about giving her boyfriend a blowjob. There's something about the way she said it that got to me. It felt like I was young all over again and doing things to Nqobizitha that I am ashamed to mention. I felt dirty for years, at one point, I even stopped giving kids compliments because I felt weird about it. Like I was paedophilic for saying a toddler is beautiful or has on a lovely dress. Once it all comes crashing down on you..." she shakes her head and sighs. "It's a long ass process. He needs therapy."

“Then how do I convince him?” I am desperate now. The glossiness found in her eyes makes me worried, scared.

“Don’t be forceful about it. Don’t point out his faults that show that something is not right because then he’ll justify himself and maybe even shut you out. Ask him about the simple every day things. For me, I asked myself about love and it was twisted what my mind came up with. He’ll see it in his own responses.”

I bite my lower lip and nod my head.

“He seems to have blocked the bad memories about that woman. All of them. I think he was desperately seeking love that his mind started convincing him that Ntombikayise loved him. She traumatized him really badly and disguised it as helping him to break out of his shell. Nqoba was always a timid kid. His mind is protecting him, that woman didn’t love him. She’d hurt and make him cry just so she could piece him back together under the guise of loving him.”

“You wouldn’t say with the way he talks about her...” my eyes water.

“Because the devil always has numerous tricks,” Nomthandazo gives me a sympathetic look. “I only stayed there for a while but the damage was already done. This one time we were both forced into icy water and we had to see who’d stay there the longest without crying. We were competing for her love...”

Nqobizitha

I don’t like funerals for how sad they are but I wanted to come and honour MaNtuli one final time. MaKhathide and Ntethe are here with me as well as my father. Ndoni stayed behind because she was busy with Mchunu’s son. Fundiswa is finally being laid to rest but there was so much drama that took place before this could be possible. Sfundo is a stupid idiot who still insists that his sister’s death was a homicide even after the Medical examiner he chose himself confirmed otherwise. He wanted to get another person to examine his sister but his parents finally put their feet down, they have been wanting to bury their daughter and put this trauma behind them for a while now.

My mother is the guest speaker here. She looks like those corrupt politicians and dresses like one as well. But she has a good heart. A cold one yes, but it's still good. Fundiswa would be proud if she could see how beautiful everything is. Her parents were flown in by a helicopter. There are pictures being taken as if this is the death of a celebrity. I'm sitting with Ntethe and my father, hoping with everything in me that this ceremony will go by quicker. I hate it when people cry and the mother just keeps on spilling every few seconds.

MaKhathide announces that she will be sponsoring Fundiswa's children's education. Even when they're in university. The look of gratitude on their grandparents' faces...its heart-warming. "That was so generous of you, MaKhathide." I say as soon as she is able to join us. This is after the entire funeral is over. People were calling her here and there. Its disturbing how wealth elevates your social standing in society. "The Ntulis looked really thankful."

"I am a woman first and foremost. Sometimes we have to stick together," she has a smile on her face but her eyes and voice are cold. "Then I am a mother. I would want you and your siblings to be well taken care of. That is what I am doing with MaNtuli. I am certain that she would do the same for me. I'm sure her soul is finally at peace. If only she'd lived longer to see the success of her children but never mind, her children are my children. From her grave, she will see how I will take care of them."

A smile forms on my lips and I kiss her cheek. "My mother the philanthropist. A woman of many talents. How lucky am I to have you as my mother?"

"Very lucky, Mapholoba. Don't you forget it. You're my pride and joy, ndodana."

"I need to pee," I tell them.

"Shesha, ndodana. We have to drive back home."

I kiss my mother's cheek again and maneuver past the sea of bodies around us. We're using some of those hired toilets and I have to join a queue. Its quite long but I use that time to catch up with Chris. He tells me that Simthandile is visiting for the weekend and that she came with someone else. I have an idea but I don't want him to call me out on my anger issues. He calls me and I answer immediately.

"Don't be mad, I asked Simi what he's doing here and she said she needed a lift and he saw her WhatsApp status so—"

"I'm on my way back," I tell him. "Don't let him touch you."

"We can find him a BnB tomorrow."

I'm already nodding my head. "I need to pee, Bambi."

"I love you," his voice is urgent, insistent.

"I love you too." We cut the call and I quickly use the bathroom. I rinse my hands and then exit.
"Ngyaxolisa..." I murmur to the small body I bump into, grabbing the person by the shoulders.

"What are you doing here?" the lady seems surprised. "Where is your bother?"

Not this again. I shake my head, about to reply but MaKhathide is beside me. "Ntwenhle, is that you?"

Mutual Desires : Thirty-three

Nqobizitha

“Ntwenhle?” MaKhathide repeats, sounding impatient.

This Ntwenhle – she’s really short, like MaKhathide, with a medium build, looking like a typical rural woman in the inexpensive clothes she’s wearing – seems to be dumbfounded. Her eyes are on me the entire time and it’s getting uncomfortable. I don’t know why I don’t look away. I watch her mouth open and close silently, observe those eyes that seem familiar but are not. They look like they’re drowning, emotional. I clear my throat. “Mama wami, konke k’hamba kahle?”

“You look so much like your father,” the awe is there. “Like your—”

“Ntwenhle!” MaKhathide interrupts the weird moment. “I asked you a question. What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be in Johannesburg?” her voice is cold, forceful.

“I-I was...I’m here because, because...” the woman, Ntwenhle, trails off, shaking her head. “Cha. Cha. Cha. I’m sorry, Siqiniseko, I wasn’t r-ready. I can’t do this.” She’s emotional and before we can ask further, she rushes off. Something about her is a little frail and I am worried. I get the urge to rush after her.

“Yey wena, uyaphi?”

I don’t realize that I was actually rushing after that woman until my mother calls out for me. My feet freeze and I look over my shoulder before turning around to go back to her. “MaKhathide, ngyaxolisa...” I bow my head respectfully. “I am just worried about that woman. Did you see how bad she looked? She was on the verge of crying and she called me Siqiniseko...maybe she’s confusing me with one of her sons? You see what I talking about, MaKhathide?”

“Don’t mind that woman,” MaKhathide waves her hand dismissively and entwines our hands. I am a little freaked out by it but the touch feels...good. This woman is my mother, I worship the ground she walks on. “I recognize her from long ago. She used to live in Mbongolwane but she was always trouble, a very loose woman, it’s no surprise that her rubbish eventually caught up with her. Udoti wento loya.

Don't feel sorry for her. There's a good reason that she left Mbongolwane. We're a traditional people thina, there's no room for promiscuity and taboo nonsense that side. Yingakho ngisasho namanje, Mapholoba, hlukana nalesastabane somfana. Uyokukhokela ebumnyameni, kuphele nya ngawe. (This is why I tell you to stay away from that gay boy. He'll only lead you to your demise.)"

"Ngenza njengoba usho, MaKhathide." I lie through my teeth and get her door for her. She's driving because she's a control-freak. "I have a study session with Nhlakanipho so don't expect me home for dinner. I'll take the car so that I can drive back."

"It's a pity that your results don't corroborate all these study sessions you're having. Your Accounting results especially. I don't know what it is you're studying ndodana."

"Give him a break, Mah..." Nontethelelo says softly. "He's showing a little bit of improvement. Maybe if you'd allowed him to study Sciences instead of—"

"Nonsense," again the dismissiveness. "How will he take over the legacy we're grooming him for if he studies Sciences? Will that Science prevent people from stealing inside the family's accounts? Like that useless MaFuze...be smart Ntethe. Look at you, you studied the subject as well kodwa unethezekile lapha endlini yami. Ugoduka nini?"

"Mkami, that's a bit harsh," soft as usual, my father gives my mother a look but MaKhathide isn't intimidated by anyone, let alone a man. "You know better than anyone how tough it is to be young and trying to find your feet. Remember we went through the same thing? We were young once, cut your children some slack."

MaKhathide laughs. "It's this kind of talk that encourages laziness. This kind of thinking. You cut them some slack now and you'll be doing it until they're well into their forties. Hhayi, Nontethelelo is 29 years old now, akakhule. The same goes for Ndoni. Nqobizitha is still in the house because he's doing matric. Waqeda, uyothatha amasakana akhe ayibone indlela. (He'll leave as soon as he's done)"

Ntethe and I look at each other. MaKhathide's words make me uneasy a little bit. I'm not exactly a person who likes change, the idea of leaving home isn't one I like to think about. At the same time, I've already applied into universities for Science subjects but part of me is hoping I'll be turned down. I embrace the change once its there and learn to survive it but I still don't like it. "Maybe Chris can tutor him, Mah..."

The vicious glare I give Nontethelelo...she isn't intimidated.

"The gay boy?" MaKhathide frowns.

"Don't reduce him to that. He's more than his sexuality," I don't know why she's bothering, the words will clearly fall on deaf ears. "Chris is really intelligent, he tutors at the school ubhutiza is attending. Maybe they can have one on one sessions where he can sit down with Nqobizitha and give him personal assistance. Where's the harm if it will help his grades?"

MaKhathide shakes her head. "No, no. I don't want any gay nonsense around my son. Weak boys who are attracted to femininity, make up, dresses, and have missing vaginas? Weeehhh, you're not bringing that kind of nonsense around my son. That boy needs conversion camp and therapy – he's publicly doing this nonsense and that's a cry for help."

Baba is coughing, along with me. Ntethe is pissed off, I can feel her anger from here. "Weren't you the one who said you're not homophobic not too long ago?"

"Yes, I am not. As long as that nonsense is kept away from my son."

"Whatever, MaKhathide..." Ntethe finally gives up and collapses back on her seat. I don't even know what she was attempting to do. Part of me is irritated at her for bringing this up. There goes the light-heartedness in the car. I grab my earphones and put some music on.

"You're back," Chris murmurs as soon as I wrap my arm around him to draw him close to me. I came here to have dinner with his family, and to see that French idiot for myself. Simthandile was happy to see me, along with that feminine boy – yes he's here as well – and the French idiot...he said it was good to see me again but I don't trust him. He's like a persistent mosquito that you just can't kill, no matter how hard you try.

"You smell good," I murmur, burying my face into Chris' neck. He rolls around to face me and looks breathtaking in the muted light. His soft smile makes my belly flutter. "Nganeyakwethu, maw' muhle kangaka kwenziwe njani?"

He giggles and shuffles closer. "What happens is 1 – I lose my morals. 2 – uyang'bhebha, ungangiyeki ngize ngibone amazulu."

A smile forms on my lips. It's as if he was reading my mind, my dick is always onboard with ideas of being buried deep inside him. "Awenze phela, lose your morals for me." Another soft giggle, then he's really close that our faces are touching, our noses nudging. He looks into my eyes and my heart jumps, he's mine, all mine. I run my hand along his soft back and allow him to kiss me. As soon as he does, I adjust us so that he's on his back and devour him. He's always so responsive, so eager. It turns my half-hard dick into a steel pole. He's naked already, I remove my boxers and position him onto his stomach. "Uyathandwa, Xabhashe." I kiss the skin along his spine.

"I love you, too." His hands clench on the sheets.

I nibble on his ear before breathing a question against it. "Do you promise you'll remember that I love you?"

"I promise."

"Good," I bite into his neck and caress his supple ass. "Because I'm about to fuck you like I don't."

He moans.

"I want your mind, body and soul to never forget the things I am about to do to you. Every. Single. Inch. Of. You is going to feel me."

I prepare him as best I can but we're both impatient and soon, I find my way into his delicate warmth. He whimpers and I have to wait until he adjusts before moving at his approval. I pin him to the bed by his waist and pound him through the mattress. This isn't a tender lovemaking session, I don't want him to walk straight for a week. He no longer has hair for me to hold onto so I press him down by the back of his neck and fuck his brains out, hard. He can't really move, with the way he's trapped under me. The only sounds in the room are him sob-screaming, and my quiet breaths as well as the bed hitting against the wall. I stroke him viciously and he cries out his orgasm. I pull out of him, and have him sit on my lap before slamming him down my dick again. He screams and buries his face in my neck, my hands smack on his ass a few times before my arms hug him tight as I quickly piston into him, over and over again.

He's breathing hard and releasing strangled moans of frustration but takes my dick. He always does it so beautifully. I bite into his collarbone as I shoot my orgasm deep into his depths. He screams and drags his blunt nails on my back. I collapse on top of him and he hugs my neck, breathing shakily against me.

I don't know when we fall asleep but the next time I wake up, I want him again. He whimpers, allowing me to have him. It's slow and gentle this time. I press into him over and over again, swallowing his pleas and breathless moans. His fingers dig into my back for a handhold as our tongues meet reverently – our souls breathing life into one another...all-consuming, hot molten liquid melting our insides. "Phephisa sengiyaqeda," I kiss the tip of his ear, comforting him, responding to his sobbed pleas for me to finish. I collapse beside him this time and then leave the bed to use the bathroom. I nod my head when he asks me to bring him water.

"Hello, we meet again." I lift my eyes to find an elderly woman whose face I recognize but not really, looking up at me. She must see that my memory isn't all together because she continues, "My name is Ntwenhle. We meet about a week ago, at Fundiswa's funeral."

Oh...yes. The frail woman. I quickly stand and move to the other side to get her chair for her. I'm waiting for Chris to join me here at KwaNyama Ayipheli but he's running a bit late. He said Nhlakanipho and Siyabonga would be joining us but they're a little awkward those two. "Kunjani, Mah?" I ask the woman, she doesn't really look old – maybe she's in her 40s. Early 40s it seems.

"Ngyaphila," Ntwenhle – it makes me uncomfortable to call her that – gives me a small smile. I call Nkosiyezwe so that I can at least get her something to drink. "Thank you for this, you're so kind."

"Kahle, Mama wami," I chuckle, shaking my head. "This is nothing. What are you doing here?"

"I was around the place and I was here to buy food then I remembered that I know you from somewhere so I had to come and say hi. Well, I'd recognize you anywhere. You look exactly like your father."

"My father looks nothing like my grandfather. He says I came back to this world as my grandfather, because we look eerily alike."

“Oh yes, you’ve never seen pictures of your...uncle? Your father’s brother? He’s the one who looked like your grandfather first. That is what I meant to say, but you know how it is KwaZulu, your uncle is also your father so that is why I said that.”

I eye her with a small smile, taken aback. “MaKhathide did say that you grew up around here.”

“Yes. I knew your grandparents and your...uncle. How are you, ndodana?”

“Fine, Mah. How are you, your kids? Are they the ones who look like me?”

“No,” she frowns and is silent a second. “I-I just confused you with our neighbours’ kids, back in Johannesburg. Those boys really look like you. Their names are Sqalosenkosi and Sbanisezwe. I bet you guys would be really good friends if you met, maybe even...brothers.”

“You know how it is with boys,” I smile and nod my head. “Maybe you can tell them to come to Mbongolwane some time.”

“Yes, yes. Maybe I can organize—”

“Tarzan wami,” Chris comes sweeping in and sits beside me. Nhlakanipho and Siya join us, looking at the woman and then me. “Sawubona, Mah.”

Ntwenhle eyes Chris from top to bottom. She smiles but it doesn’t reach her eyes, I think she’s confused. “Mfana wami, it’s good to meet you.”

“She’s the woman I bumped into at Fundiswa’s funeral. She knows the twin boys who look like me.”

“No way!” Chris squeals and widens his eyes. “Where are they? We’d like to meet them some time. Maybe he’s adopted, this one here. Is he, is he?”

There’s that sad look I saw on her face that day at the funeral. A burdened look that I can’t accurately pinpoint but just know that I don’t want to see on her face. It makes me want to comfort her, to hug

her. "There's no adoption. Maybe they have family members from the same clan. A long lost relative, who knows? Anyway, let me leave you youngsters."

"Take my number," I tell her before she can leave. The others around me are a little surprised but I don't know, there's just a pull I feel where Ntwenhle is concerned. Maybe it's the look of sorrow in her eyes or maybe I'm being weird for having a soft spot for some strange woman I don't know. "We can talk, Mah. Maybe you can arrange that meeting with those doppelgangers of mine."

"Will do," she smiles and then looks at everyone. "Enjoy boys."

...

For most of the week, I talk to that woman. Mam' Ntwenhle she allows me to call her. I don't know what it is about her but we connect and talk. Once or twice, we find ourselves in the same place at the same time. She says she's visiting some relatives here in Mbongolwane – some family members. In a way, she reminds me of my mother – a kinder version of my mother. Maybe this is the reason for the connection and why we talk a lot. Anyway, the others and I are going to Eshowe today. Nhlakanipho needs to buy some essentials for his family. He's made enough money to make a difference in their lives.

"How do these jeans look?" Chris asks me, spinning away from the mirror to give me his attention.

They're the baggy kind that he loves so much. He tells me that they're vintage and huge in Joburg but I am not sold on the style. It suits him though, and they worship him. "Umuhle, Xabhashe."

My words garner the desired response. Chris smiles and leaps into my arms. "I love you."

"Nami, dali..." I set him on his feet and kiss his knuckles before walking out of the door with him. "Bestie!" he giggles as he spots Siya.

The other boy rolls his eyes but has a small smile on him. I think he and Nhlakanipho are finally fine. They're back to being pathetically in love but I'm not sure what caused the initial rift but they've reconnected and it's good to see. "Bafo," I give Nhlakanipho a manly hug and we do our handshake.

“Nqobizitha, kunjani?”

We get in the car and drive off. Siya is holding onto Nhlakanipho’s hand for most of the drive. I don’t think Chris and I can be blamed when we make out in the backseat. He’s hot and I can barely keep my hands off of him. We have to visit numerous stores. All Chris of course. Siya wants to watch a movie so that’s what where we go after we’ve bought everything Nhlakanipho needed. I’m not a fan of movies or more accurately, I don’t like going to the cinema – only because I’m not used to. Growing up, these weren’t really the things I indulged on.

Not long into the movie, something happens in it, a kid comes running into the kitchen. His mother is behind him and looks exhausted. “Matthew, get back here now, don’t touch anything!” she shouts. It’s too late. There’s crashing, glass breaking, as it breaks into his skin. The kid cries loudly, too loudly. The mother rushes to assist him. “Matthew, I told you: don’t touch things without permission. You end up breaking them now I’ll have to punish you.”

The kid keeps crying and crying and crying. Something coils tight and ugly in my chest. I swallow down the feeling, but still feel unnaturally cold, and for some reason I can smell something. Camphor cream. I don’t know where the scent comes from but it hits me strong, making me want to gag. Between the woman’s words about punishment echoing ominously in my head and the harsh notes of the boy crying, I’m finding it hard to breathe.

“—Nqoba, sthandwa sami?” With a start, I blink and inhale sharply. Chris is studying me, a slight frown between his eyes. “You don’t look too good,” he says, in his low voice, and grabs my hand.

I want to say I’m fine but the words are stuck in my throat and I can feel an oncoming migraine. Fragments of weird pictures flash in front of me, harsh whispered words in my ears, the cries, and that strong smell of camphor. I can’t get them out of my head. *If you love me, you don’t get to say no, don’t ever question my decisions, I know what’s best for you...be obedient.* A voice whispers in my ears. I recognize it but it makes my heart cold.

RUN! the voice of a little boy screams at me and I don’t question, just act. I can hear some distant voices calling after me but my body is telling me to get away. I pause at the parking lot and take a deep breath before letting it out slowly. There’s numerous voices in my head and I’m trying to make it stop while looking around for the car. There it is. I walk on shaky legs towards it, my vision blurry. Now where is the fucking key again?

“Nqobizitha?”

I look over my shoulder, finding the others standing behind me. My feet carry me to Chris and I lean down to kiss him deeply. I can hear Siya cursing but I have no idea what about. They pull us apart and I enter the car after Chris, feeling far too hot. The jersey on me is tugged at harshly, my hands trembling. I'm still feeling far too hot so I take it off and throw it on my lap. The voices are still loud, disorganized like the pictures flashing before me. This must be Nomthandazo and Chris' fault. Its that therapy garbage they were spewing a few days ago. Even if they hadn't been forceful about it but now something is happening and I have a headache.

I close my eyes and try to drive them away. My hands are trembling, my heart beating too fast. Chris rests his head on my shoulder and hugs me tight. The storm settles a little, the voices becoming persistent whispers. Nhlakanipho offers to stay with us to make sure that I am fine but I am. I think I am. Chris' mother has gone back to Joburg, she finally decided to leave with that French idiot and Simthandile and Jacques. The husband was here for two days before he followed after his wife.

"I'm going to grab us something to drink." Chris' voice is a whisper, it barely reaches my ears. Now that we're in the silence, alone, the loudness returns. It is accompanied by pieced pictures again. I can feel a deep pain on my left thigh, caused by something really sharp digging into it. There's that loud cry in my ears, similar to the cry of that boy in the cinema.

"Nqoba?"

I look up to find Chris standing in front of me. I tilt my head in question.

"Tell me what's wrong, you've been like this since we were at that cinema."

"I uh—" Air. I need air. Why is everything so fucking hot ? Why is the air so stale? I manage to rise to my feet and shift to open Chris' windows, desperately fighting for more oxygen. I stare into the distance, at the deep green of trees in the distance but I am not able to receive the chill I so desperately crave.

A hand touching my spine has me recoiling, the touch burns my already feverish body. "Talk to me. What's wrong?" Chris' voice sounds too small to my ears, it's next to inaudible.

"I—" *I'm not sure.* The words refuse to leave my mouth. I'm finding it hard to conjure up sensible words. How can I when breathing itself feels painful? It feels like I'm dying from sucking in intakes of air.

“Is it...N-Ntombikayise?”

Something dark stabs my heart when Chris says that name. It feels like a dagger going through my heart, twisting and turning torturously to agonize me. My body is shaking, my blood boiling. “Don’t want. I— don’t know. She...what did you do to me?” I try to keep the anger out of my voice. But I can’t, it feels like there’s a lot weighing down on me.

His sigh reaches my ears, it sounds like a hurricane to me. “You see what Nomthandazo was talking about? This is why I was trying to talk you into seeing someone. You’re too tense, too angry. You’re scaring me.”

I turn to face Chris, “I am calm,” the words leave me through clenched teeth. In a futile attempt at trying to keep my emotions at bay, I straighten my posture, inhaling deeply before exhaling. “See...calm,” a strained smile accompanies my words.

Chris studies me, his eyes twitching, and looks down. I cups his cheeks, forcing eye contact. “I’m fine, dali. I just, I want to go to bed,” I kiss his forehead. It’s still the afternoon outside but I need a nap, to rest. I lean down to kiss him ardently, hear his surprised moan as I lift him in my arms and carry him back to the bed. We make quick work of undressing each other as our clothes fall to the floor. I pin him beneath me, carelessly working him open. My jaw clenches tightly as I breach him. There’s some movement under me but it doesn’t really register. My only focus is to kill the waves of darkness drowning me.

“Nqobizitha, I want you to meet someone.” I hide behind mommy’s leg and shake my head. Baba is trying to encourage me to talk to him but my body is shaking. I’ll die if I move. I can’t move. I can’t move. I can’t move. Mommy laughs and says sorry to the person I can’t see. “Do you see what I was talking about Ntombikayise? He’s really, really scared of people. The last nanny said he creeps her out because of how silent he can be. Maybe with you and your daughter, he’ll break out of his shell. He just needs someone around his age to keep him company.

“Nqobizitha,” the voice is warm like a heater. Different from mommy’s strange one. “Don’t be scared, baby. Let me see you.”

Slowly, I peek an eye out, clinging to mommy who keeps trying to push me to the front. The woman is big, very big. Like a giant. I am scared of her but her smile is like Baba's. "Look at you, such a big boy. Let me see you properly."

"Remember your aunt Ntombikayise? Say hello, auntie." Baba says.

The big woman shakes her head. "Call me Mama, I'm your Mama too..."

I nod my head quickly and then hide behind mommy.

"Come back...oh come back. I want to see you."

Mommy pushes me forward, I can't say no. She has her hand offered – it's big and soft. "H-Hello," my voice is small and trembling.

"He's not used to people, Ntombikayise. I want you to be considerate of him, don't be too fanatic around him, please." Mommy says.

The big woman nods her head. "Mama. I'm your mama, okay?" my eyes are wide, I'm shaking in my boots. "Trust me," the woman says, giving me her brightest smile. "Can you...shake my hand?" I look at Baba, facing the woman when he smiles reassuringly. Timidly, I reach out, placing my hand in the woman's. It's so big, and swallows my small one. The woman kisses my knuckles repeatedly. "Trust me," she whispers again, looking into my shifty eyes.

I groan, chest constricting at the memory. There are tears in my eyes, as my body drives into Chris. I can feel myself falling, falling with no way of pulling myself out of the black hole I am slipping into. There are too many memories attacking me, viciously ripping into my soul.

"What are you doing?"

I quickly crush the paper I was working on and look over my shoulder to her...Ntombikayise. "N-Nothing."

“That didn’t look like nothing, were you drawing something?”

I shrug and shrink away from her big body when she comes to sit with me. She grabs the paper from me and I don’t stop her. “Maybe mommy will like this one?” I’m so tired of drawing pictures and finding them dumped in the bin.

“Wow...” Ntombikayise touches my thigh and my small leg jerks. She wraps an arm around it and holds it in place. This doesn’t feel good but she is smiling. Her smiles are different from mommy’s. “Do you think you can draw some more? I love these. I’ll put them all in my room.”

My eyes light up. “Yes. Yes.”

“Follow me so that you can draw me too then.” She picks me up and kisses my cheek. We’re in her room, I’ve never been to her room before. “I want you to draw me. But let me look beautiful for you first my boy.” Her lips kiss mine and I blink back in shock. She laughs and rubs my cheek. “Your real mommy doesn’t love you like this?”

I shake my head no.

“Oh no!” she gasps and I think she wants to cry. “This is because she has her favourites. You know girls don’t like boys but I’m here to be your other mommy and I’ll love you, okay?”

I nod my head and watch her take off her clothes.

A guttural rasp comes from deep inside my throat, the memories are too many. I don’t know which one is real and which one is not but I feel sick, really sick. My skin is crawling and I have to be out of my head. Have to. Have to. So I pump faster and harder. There are sounds echoing in the room and they merge with the noise going on in my head, making me groan in frustration. I have no idea how to stop the noise in my head. It’s too loud.

“Do you remember how the man in the TV did it?”

I nod my head and fidget nervously. "I do, Mama wami." My heart jumps in joy when she smiles broadly. She loves it when I call her Mama wami.

"Good," she kisses my lips and sits on the chair. "On your knees, good boy. Bring your face forward, that's it. Use your fingers and tongue." Her thighs are big as they squash my head. I can't breathe. I try to tell her but she crushes me harder. My stomach is flipping. "Look at the nonsense that you've just done! Now I have to punish you."

My voice is caught in my throat as I taste the vomit in my mouth. "I'm s-sorry," I whimper, dreading the darkness. I can hear the boogeyman when I'm in there. "S-Sorry, Mama wami."

"Get in there and count to 1000."

Thousand. I can make it to thousand, she taught me this. The numbers disappear as soon as I am trapped in the dark. My skin is itchy and I don't know how to count right. I start to cry and cry and cry until my head explodes like a bomb.

The cold seeps in, sneakily, making me shivering cold. I'm in some cold water and I am drowning, I can't escape. The warmth wants to creep in too but it's not as prominent. It's being overpowered by the cold, the cold of the water. The cold of my body. Ragged gasps leave me, my lungs clenching painfully. I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I can't breathe. **FIGHT BACK!** the boy whispers in my ear. **USE YOUR HANDS, GET OUT! GET OUT!**

I try to use my hands. I think it's working, there's someone. Someone. They're begging. I open my eyes and groan. "Nq-Nqobizitha, listen to me!" Chris' voice is hoarse, pained. He's wet with tears, his fear showing clearly. By the time I am pulling away, he's shoving at me, drawing his knees up to his chest and crying.

"Chris..." I whisper, I don't know what to say. "I-I am—"

"Get out!" he cries, yanking the blankets to cover himself, almost as though he doesn't want me to see him, which makes me frown possessively. "This is why I said you need a therapist but you're so goddamn stubborn and now look at w-what you're doing." he wipes his tears "I couldn't see your face and the emotional detachment of you fucking me like that, pressing me down to s-strangle me. I am not Ntombikayise, y-you can't punish me for her fuckups! I-I couldn't think and I couldn't breathe."

“I’m sorry, Bambi.” I apologize, feeling completely winded, and I try to reach out but Chris shoves at me again and starts swearing in a manner that clearly means leave me alone in the most primal way.

I scramble off from the bed, and as soon as I’m out of the door, I hear Chris crying, and I don’t know what to do. I have my phone in hand. I’m not sure who to call so I scroll down my contact list for a while and finally decide.

“Mam’ Ntwenhle, I screwed up big time.”

Mutual Desires : Thirty-four

Christophe

He's out there. I know because I can hear his voice and the occasional sound of him bumping into something and cursing loudly. My breathing is a little ragged, pained, and I can feel a deep ache gradually spreading all over my body. I feel like it takes me forever to lay on my side, facing the empty space beside me, and I hate the way my hand immediately goes to touch the space where Nqobizitha would usually be sleeping. An image pops in my head, playing vividly in front of me. Nqobizitha looking back at me with a soft tired gaze, his left eyebrow arched high as he makes one of his stupid comments. The sheets smell like him, they're warm, and I want to drown in his scent but I am so mad at him.

He doesn't listen, I took Nomthandazo's advice and I tried to convince him that maybe he needs to see a therapist but he wouldn't listen. The way he spoke, like admitting to the possibility of being abused as a child was something shameful, even going to the extent of saying that what happened to him with Ntombikayise was consensual because he didn't stop her. That he agreed to it. I wanted to scream into the void so that he'd get it but Nomthandazo preached patience. I don't think patience will work now, because something happened at that cinema. Something happened and he was triggered. Then, then...he was taking it out on me. No matter how hard I try, my mind keeps going back to what happened. Nqoba's hands were vicious and it felt like there'd been a knife stuck in my windpipe. I couldn't breathe, with his fingers clawing into my skin. I couldn't seem to get through to him, no matter how hard I tried. I don't want to think back to how wild his eyes were, I don't.

A knock on my door disrupts my miserable thoughts. I don't know whether I should be relieved, angry or scared. I don't want to see him, not yet. I need to think. "Chris..." he knows I hate it so much when he calls me that. "I'm not going to enter without your permission."

"No!" my voice is shaky. "Go away."

"Chris..." there's a desperation in his voice I don't want to hear. He hurt me, it wouldn't have happened were he not so damn stubborn.

"I don't want to see y-you, Nqobizitha." Tears fall down my cheeks all over again, and I wipe them away impatiently. Let me leave this bed, Zenny will be home soon. She started doing the day shift recently and I need to cook. Every bone in my body protests any form of movement and I grip my back, biting my lips to keep from crying out in pain, my legs are so weak. There's spots of blood from when his nails were digging into my waist. I need to soak this before it dries up.

“Bambi, I am sorry. I’m so sorry.”

I don’t reply, I put on my underwear and find something baggy that will be kind on my bruised skin. The sheets are in my hands and I know he’s still outside the door. I wait with an agonized breath, wait until he decides that he’s apologized enough and walks away. The front door opens and closes. I can hear it from here. Good. I really just need to think, because part of me isn’t even sure what happened not too long ago. It felt good in the beginning but then it started to feel really, really bad, it hurt, and not a good pain that I’m used to. Part of me was really scared but I understand. I think I do. He wasn’t his usual self so he didn’t realize that he was hurting me. He wouldn’t ever do that were he in the right headspace and the detachment is proof of that. Usually, no matter how intense it gets, it’s still good because our hearts are in the right place, our minds. I will talk to him later but I just need a bit of time.

Zenny comes back as I am stirring the chicken stew. She kisses my cheek and calls me her life saver. She’s showing now and the folk around here are judging her for getting pregnant without a silver band on her ring finger. Its like they’ve forgotten that their daughters do the same thing. At least Zenny seems stable with Jabulani. He comes around the house often. “So what’s wrong?” she gives me a curious look.

“What do you mean?” my giggle is nervous. I rub my neck and can’t seem to look at her for longer than three seconds. “Nothing’s wrong. You’re imagining things.” I shake my head.

“Spit it out, what did that boy do?”

“Nothing. What is wrong with you today?” It’s a struggle to leave my chair, and I don’t know why Zenny looks suspicious. No one said being fucked in the ass is for the faint-hearted. “I’m going to my room.”

“Mmm,” her eyes are still on me and I have to mentally lecture myself to not fidget like a child. “I’ll be waiting for you to tell me what happened. My baby may be distracting me a lot these days but I am still very much observant wengane!”

Later that night, after I’ve had a good soak in the bathroom, I decide to call it a night. I had to switch my phone off because of Nqobizitha’s persistent calling. I was angry at him, I still am. He hurt me. I understand why but I’m so mad at him and I don’t think I can talk tonight. Not when I was at the receiving end of his demons just hours ago. So I decide to leave it off and switch off the bedside lamp and try to sleep. But sleep doesn’t come. I guess this is why I am able to hear him breaking in at 01:08am. He’s taking off his clothes, I can hear him, then he climbs in bed. My back remains on him and

my heart is beating so fast. I wait and wait but he does nothing, doesn't touch me and keeps some little bit of distance between us. He's waiting for me to make the first move.

Damn him.

My body is still sore and shuffling backwards hurts but I crave the closeness. I know he wants it too and I want to give it to him. "You can touch me," I whisper, blindly reaching for his arm behind me to wrap it around my waist. He takes it as cue to bury his face at the back of my neck.

"Nondumiso," a little smile forms on my lips as the plump girl returns it but its nervous. I get her concern, for a while now, she has been receiving the lowest results in Accounting. It's not that she's not trying. The improvement is always there but the other learners still manage to beat her...until now. "I'm so proud of you," I say, giving her test paper to her. "Well done!"

"Wait...90%—"

"You're the third highest!" I grin, before moving on to the others. "We're going to do corrections, you guys!" I shout when I'm done giving everyone their test paper. "Who's going to do number one?"

"Me!" Gugulethu raises her hand and I nod my head in permission. The class is a little noisy and I have a headache to be honest but these kids are still kids. Grade 10s are the noisiest. I don't know how many times I have to tell them to keep it down and it's not a surprise that we haven't covered all the corrections when the bell signalling home time rings.

"We'll continue tomorrow," I say as they pack their bags without my permission. These rude brats. "Your only homework is to try and determine where you guys went wrong." I roll my eyes at their loud cheering, and pack my things. There's a knock on the door before it opens. My eyes instinctively lift up and my stomach clenches. My eyes widen then, forcing me to quickly look back to my packed stationary. I probably look like I've just seen a ghost, and I honestly feel like I have. He was gone when I woke up and I was fine with it. We didn't talk the whole day and now this... I'm shaking and can't really breathe right.

He is beside me, silent as fuck, like a statue.

“Hi,” I concede, my eyes meeting his briefly, and tell myself to calm down. “Do you need help?”

He clears his throat, and I look up at him again. He fidgets and adjusts the bag on his shoulder. “Do I need a reason to see you now?”

“I don’t know...” I shrug, wanting to say so much but not sure how to begin. He’s still looking at me, observing, this hot polo-neck I’m wearing. I have dark skin yes, but I’m not sure if there are any hand imprints behind my neck so I wore this for safety. I saw my waist and there was too much going on with it.

“Chris...” he groans.

“Don’t call me that!” it’s a little snapped, I want to shout at him for disregarding my advice, its because of him that we’re here. “I am not Chris, not to you.”

“Bambi,” my heart settles, just a little. “I’m sorry for yesterday. I fucked up big time and I—did I...fuck! Was that...was it—rape?”

My heart jumps and I quickly shake my head. I’m not sure, it was good in the beginning, I can’t deny that. And sometimes, I’d let him use sex to deal with his nightmares but it was never as bad as it was yesterday. I was panicking and scared yesterday. I still get why he was like that – but he crossed a line and by the time he realized it, the damage was done. “I didn’t say no.” isn’t this pathetic? I would be internally frustrated at him right about now. But he’s not Ntombikayise. He’s the most harmless person I know and I trust him with my most vulnerable parts.

“But you were scared and I couldn’t hear you. Not really. My mind wasn’t on you, I was just—”

“You were not in the right headspace to realize what you were doing I know.”

“I don’t know how else to show you how sorry I am,” he looks and sounds sincere. He’s even keeping some distance to not crowd me. I appreciate his efforts.

"I know you're sorry," I whisper, my shifty eyes lifting to find his. "I know you and that you wouldn't hurt me, not on purpose. This is why I am choosing to forgive you. You hurt me yesterday and I was scared, you're so much bigger than me. Your hand alone is able to pin me in place, Nq-Nqobizitha. But I know what happened last night won't happen again because you're going to see a therapist. You love me so much that you'd do anything for me. I'm glad you're finally going to give therapy a try." my voice is too quiet but I make sure its nonnegotiable.

We look at each other, his face gives nothing away, and the hand curled around one of the straps of his bag is twitching a little. "I wanted to speak to Mam' Ntwenhle. She said she wasn't back from Johannesburg but she's coming today. I didn't know who else to call. MaKhathide won't understand."

He has this connection with that woman that makes me a little envious. He says he doesn't see her like that, she's not his type anyway, and that she reminds him of his mother. A softer version of her. He says her eyes are familiar and welcoming. That he loves talking to her because she seems to understand him. Two days ago, he told me that he told her about us. She wasn't a bigot about it and wants to meet sometime. He seems to really like her. I think it's because he's missing a proper maternal figure in his life. "Thank you for agreeing to the therapy," I won't let this go. Not this time.

"Chris..." he rubs the back of his neck.

"Thank you," I insist, a little louder this time. "Thank you for loving me and valuing our relationship enough to do this. I promise to stick by you, every step of the way. I love you and I'll go with you if I have to. Thank you for doing this, ndoda yam."

The war is there in his eyes but as he looks away briefly, I pat myself on the shoulder for the little victory. "Ngyaxolisa, Xabhashe. Ngyaxolisa, nganeyakwethu." I nod my head.

"I love you," the words leave me. I mean them. I'm still mad at him but it doesn't take away the love. He returns my affection but still looks so nervous that I find myself nodding my head. "You can touch me."

His scent hits me stronger – familiar, desired. His arms are tight around me, his chin touching the top of my bald head. I'm not yet used to the sensation and I fidget a little. "Nomthandazo was telling the truth. I cried until my head felt like it was exploding and then I...and I, uh, I p-passed out."

There is so much strain in his voice that it takes a while for the words to register in my own confused mind. As soon as they do, I'm tensing in his arms. I...am lost. I don't have the proper words to comfort him, now that he's admitting something like this for the first time. He's always sang that woman praises.

"Even MaKhathide has never done that."

The pain is there, he's not concealing it. I think he's going to cry but he doesn't. I wait and wait but he's silent. But he's clinging to me, trembling, face buried in my neck. I can't hear a word he's saying, maybe right now it doesn't matter. I just want to comfort him as best I can. Maybe that's all he needs right this moment, to know that someone is there for him – always – and that he doesn't have to hide anymore. He can be scared, and anxious, and vulnerable. That no one will take advantage of his vulnerability.

I think back to that time in Joburg, when I mocked his fear of the dark, I don't think I'll ever fully forgive myself for that. He trusted me and I acted no different from the ones who've hurt him before. "I love you so much," I mumble against his chest, my arms folding tightly around his back. "I love you and I'm sorry for ever hurting you. Please forgive me."

He doesn't reply but he's still holding me firmly. He's not going to let go anytime soon and I'm getting tired of standing but I wait it out. I'd do anything for him.

Nqobizitha

Engimphiwe's body is strange, not yet big but not small like mine. I am sitting on the bed and trying not to look at her small breasts. But it's hard not to, they're so different from Mama wami's big ones. I get the urge to touch them to see if she will love it like Mama wami but I'm scared to, and my stomach doesn't feel too good because of it. Is it wrong? No, I shake my head. It's not wrong. Mama wami removes her clothes in front of me all the time. It's not wrong. I giggle as Engimphiwe removes her towel and quickly rush to her to touch her front part. "Igqe!" I poke it and giggle nonstop when she screams. I think she's laughing with me until she smacks me so hard I fall on the floor.

"Mama, mama!" she calls for our mommy while I'm sitting on the floor and crying. My tiny legs draw up to my chest and I look up at her, not understanding what I did wrong. I can hear mommy shouting and

opening the door. Engimphiwe has the towel covering her body again. "This stupid child of yours just touched my goddamn vagina!" her voice is loud, angry.

I whimper and curl into mommy's body, my eyes wide and confused. What did I do wrong?

"Musa uk'mosha iskhathi sami, Phiwe. This is the rubbish you called me for! Your brother is only five years old, maybe he was curious because your private parts don't look the same. Kids are curious like that."

"No, no, no!" Engimphiwe shakes her head. "He's not normal. He's sick in the head, you don't see the way he looks at me. Like—"

"Like what?" mommy cuts in, my other Mama is here now and I quickly rush to her. My small arms struggle to wrap around her but she's rubbing my back and uses one of her hands to shift my arm to her breast. I touch it and rest my head on her shoulder, crying. "Like what, Phiwe? You're only 12 years old so I'm interested to know how he looks at you that makes you uncomfortable."

"We're taught these things at school, Ma. Keep your creep son away from me. Why the hell was he touching my vagina?"

"He's just a kid," Mama wami says and rocks me up and down. "Mxolele, they know no better. He's discovering these parts of his body and noticing how you're different."

"That is what I said," mommy explains.

"But to make her feel better, I don't think it will be a problem if he stays in my room. I already look after him and he's like a son to me. We can move his bed there since the room is big enough."

"I don't know...are you sure that won't be a hassle?" mommy asks.

"Yes. He's already breaking out of his shell a little around me. Futhi ke your daughter is becoming a teenager and she needs her space. I don't think she enjoys being around her little brother much."

Mommy nods her head. "If you're sure."

"I am," Mama wami smooches my cheek. "Do you want to stay with me, my boy?"

I nod my head and smile.

"Its settled then," mommy says and walks out of the room.

Mama wami carries me to her room, and sets me on the chair, and kisses my forehead. "I'm still going to punish you for touching your sister like that. I don't want you to do that to anyone who isn't me. They're not going to love it because they don't understand our love, okay?"

My stomach is already falling. I nod my head and cry. She pulls me onto her lap and tells me she loves me.

I wake up with a start, my throat tight, and my body trembling. My eyes adjust to the darkness in the room, and I can feel my throat constricting even more. It's too dark and my heart is pounding hard against my chest. Breathing doesn't seem to be coming easy as I fight and gasp for air – a sense of panic enveloping me. Someone is stirring beside me and I realize it's Chris. My eyes dart around the walls and it feels like the shadows are closing in on me. I can't breathe, I can't. My body leaves the bed in an escape and I shut the bathroom door closed behind me. My hand is wrapped around my dick, not even hard, but I have to get rid of everything. I stroke and stroke.

The door opens quietly behind me and a foreign feeling of shame overwhelms me. I close my eyes and focus on the task at hand. My body jerks after what feels like forever and I release into the toilet. I flush it and go to wash my face before attempting to maneuver past Chris. He grips my wrist and we look at each other. That stupid hand job didn't help anything. There's a strong smell of female orgasm juices taunting my nose, the taste is on my tongue. Maybe it would be good had I not had to work for an hour lapping it up as my punishment. I can feel her hands on my head, pinning my five-year old self in place. I cried that day. No one was home and I cried. But she comforted me, like usual.

Lately, I...feel sick. I don't know why but something is not right with me on the inside. There's an infinite darkness and hole that seems to be growing with each passing day. I don't know how to bring the light back. Since that day at the cinema. Its only getting worse but I'm meeting Mam' Ntwenhle today. I think

she can help bring the light back. I don't know. I'm just drawn to her. I'm so tired. So I sit down on the floor and bury my face in between my legs.

He crouches in front of me and touches my knee. I don't want to look up but I feel compelled to. He's trying hard not to cry, I can tell. There's a shaky smile on his beautiful face. I spread my arms and he shifts so that he's sitting on my lap and he hugs me close. His little breaths are tickling my ear. "I love you so much." His words are shaky.

"I love you too."

"Do you want to go back to bed?" I nod my head. He entwines our hands and guides me back to the bed. He lies on it and I get in between his legs, burying my face in his belly. He cradles my head and leans down to kiss me. The light peeks out just a little, my heart settles. "Did you know that 1 in every 6 men will be sexually abused before the age of 18?" his voice is quiet, empathetic. "And I know it's hard to hear or to believe when I say it's not your fault but it is not your fault..."

I listen silently, hear him go on and on. Some of those memories I am having don't make me feel good. They make me question everything I ever shared with...Ntombikayise. So much so that I feel betrayed. I want to go to her and cry. To have her tell me that I'm just imagining things. I must be. She loved me. She...love – lately I'm not so sure. All I know is that I dream about her and the dreams are bad. All I know is that I feel like peeling my soul out of my skin at the moment. That's how sick I feel. But I want her to make me better. Like she used to. I don't know what's happening to me.

I had to bunk school today. You see I'm doing this for Chris as well because I don't feel good about how I hurt him two days ago. I'm lucky he forgave me so easily – even if he did behave like he was terrified me the day after I...the words refuse to leave my mouth. I don't want to feel like a monster. And these polo-necks he wears to hide the bruising don't help my case. My eyes shift to him when I feel him squeezing my hand just a tiny bit. He wanted to come with me to Mam' Ntwenhle's house and I couldn't say no. "Are you okay?" he has a little smile on his face.

I lift our joined hands and kiss his knuckles. "Fine."

The front door opens and Mam' Ntwenhle graces us with a beautiful smile. "Ngenani, I was just putting on the kettle to make us tea. Or do you prefer something cold? It is hot outside after all." She appears so nervous. It shouldn't be this endearing.

"He loves Coke, Mah..." Chris gives her a warm smile. "I don't mind tea or water."

The house is small, it's actually an RDP house that the government built for people around Mphundumane. This is where she stays and not Mbongolwane exactly. Well, this is not her house. It's a relative's but they only come here once in a while as they live in Durban. That's what she tells us as she guides us to the room where there is one old brown couch. Its torn and stitched together here and there. "Let me get you refreshments and something to eat."

We sit down and Chris snuggles into my side. I wrap an arm around him and kiss his forehead. His sigh is breathless and happy. I still can't believe that he's still mine and that he forgave me. Our eyes connect as he shifts his head to look up at me. "I love you," he smiles.

I kiss his forehead again. I love him too.

Mam' Ntwenhle is back with a tray carrying a plate of biscuits and some refreshments. We thank her and Chris doesn't waste anytime and digs in. I grab the cold drink bottle and pour myself a refreshing glass. Mam' Ntwenhle looks at us with a smile. "This is the boy you're always talking about?"

I look between her and Chris a second then nod my head.

"He loves you, I saw it that day at the shisa nyama. Your bro—what am I saying?" she shakes her head and gives us another smile. "Sorry, old age is making me lose my mind."

"You don't even look 40, Mah." Chris giggles.

"I'm 38," she confirms his suspicions. I guess I was wrong for assuming her to be in her early 40s. "Anyway, you called me Nqobizitha. It sounded urgent."

I clear my throat and look at Chris. Maybe I brought him here to be my strength for the moment I'd gain cold feet. I have them now. "I messed up two days ago, Mah. I didn't know who to call and I felt like calling you. I don't know why, maybe you're someone I look up to. We haven't known each other for long but I feel like I can say anything to you."

Her eyes water. I hope she's not going to cry. "That is true, Mapholoba."

My heart smiles. MaKhathide calls me Mapholoba. "When I said I messed up, I meant to say I messed up with him. You see I was at the cinema and we were watching a movie..." I relay everything, pause in some parts because she looks horrified, but not judgmental. "I'm...it makes no sense to me why the memories are coming back now. What if it's all a lie?"

"I, um, please e-excuse me." She quickly leaves us and goes to the other room and closes the door. I groan into my hands when her cries reach our ears. They're loud wails that widows make when they've lost their husbands. Chris is trembling beside me. I'm too hot. I decide to remove my jersey and hand it to Chris for him to hold it for me. I stand, looking around the room. There are old family pictures all over. My eyes widen when I spot a picture of my grandfather. Or is it him? He can't have been this young in the 90s. I'm sure it's Baba's brother. I see what she meant when she said he looks exactly like my grandfather. The resemblance is uncanny.

I look over my shoulder as I hear the door open. She's back. Her eyes are red and she looks more frail than usual. I instruct Chris to get her a glass of water while I help her to the couch. "I-I'm so sorry," she says and look at me with a guilty expression. She's done nothing wrong for her to feel this way. "I was just shocked. This wasn't what I expected at all. But the small boy is right, ndodana. You need therapy. I may not know how these things work but talking to a professional will help you."

"I've already agreed, Mah." I tell her as Chris comes back with a glass of water. "This one didn't give me a choice to say no. Now, I don't know how to tell my mother about this. What if she doesn't believe me? Ntombikayise was her sister. And I am also still so confused. Maybe my mind is lying—"

"You'll determine that in therapy," Chris cuts in softly. "We just need your help to speak with his mother, Mah. Nqoba will give you her number."

"Leave it all to me."

MaKhathide

“I’ve been waiting forever, Ntombizengcebo.”

“And you’ll continue waiting,” I say, closing the door behind me. I’ve had a long day, one of the boys we’ve hired as taxi driver caused a bad accident that resulted in two deaths. He survived but I found out that he was drunk during the time of this accident. I’m going to deal with him slowly, by the time I am finished with him, he’ll wish he had died along with the two passengers. “You’re becoming really relaxed Ntwenhle. What are you doing in Mbongolwane?”

“I know what happened,” her eyes are red and she’s whimpering. This is annoying. What am I supposed to do with a crying woman?

“I don’t have time for your stupidity today. Either you talk or leave my office. What rubbish is this, you came all the way from Johannesburg to cry like some infant? Did your mother not baby you enough?”

“She did. Maybe this is why I am able to be empathetic. You, I give you my son and this is how you treat him?” I don’t like the way her voice is raising. Annoyance prickles my skin and makes my hand twitch. “It would’ve been better for me to suffer with all three of them. I trusted you to care for him and this is how you damaged him? I know you don’t like me, Zengcebo but I expected you to at least have a heart where my child is concerned.”

“Get to the point. You’re working yourself up just to spew a load of nothing.”

“I’M TALKING ABOUT YOUR SISTER!” her chest heaves and I watch her tears roll down her cheeks. “You wanted me to give you my child just so you could hand him to your sister to damage? To rape? H-How could you, Zengcebo? He was so y-young. At four years old and he knew that taste of an old woman’s juices? Four years old? H-How could you do this to me? You went on and on about what an abomination Simiso and I created and how our ancestors would punish us but you see nothing wrong with that old woman abusing him like that? Where were you? Why didn’t y-you protect my son? You failed him.”

I don't let her see it on the outside but her words cut me deep. She doesn't know how long I've lived with that guilt. I'm not a failure but I failed him. By the time I discovered what was happening it was too late. I stand up and move to her side. She looks up at me. My hand connects with her cheek in a hard slap. "Don't ever talk to me like that again. You don't raise your voice at me."

"I-I don't think I can do this anymore. Angik'sabi, Zengcebo. Maybe it's time Nqobizitha knew the truth, maybe its time he felt love from his real family. You don't love him. Even after you discovered what your sister did, you never bothered with therapy."

"He was young, he didn't need it." I say, as a thought crosses my mind. "Awusho, how do you know all these things?"

"It doesn't matter how I know! What matters is that maybe it's time that the truth finally came—"

"What truth is that? Amanyala? That you slept with your own brother and that resulted in his creation? A Ngcobo sleeping with another Ngcobo? Do you want him to learn that our ancestors were so angry that they had to be appeased? Will you forget to include how his father died like a pig playing in mud? What will happen after you've told him? What will happen to him and his brothers? This will destroy them."

She shakes her head frantically and dry heaves. "N-No, they will understand."

"What about your cancer? If you die what will happen? So you're willing to let him find all of this out and lose you in the process? Awuhlakaniphe." I am hitting her where it hurts but I also want to protect my son. I hoped that he wouldn't remember Kayise but I can tell with the way he behaves that some part of him remembers her. I just don't know how to help him properly. He's a man and these things are supposed to have toughened him for the better. He won't survive as a weakling.

"Please have him see a therapist. That's the least you can do. I know you hate me but do this for my son. He's a ticking time bomb and you're too blind to see it. I saw it for myself. He needs help, talk to him."

"I'll think about it now leave my office."

She gasps, with tears in her eyes, and nods her head. "I'll keep in touch. If you don't do this then I'll be forced to really take matters into my own hands. He'll hate me but I'll try to make him understand. It's you I'll be worried for."

"I don't entertain petty threats. Phuma! Leave my office right now."

"I'll give you two days, Zengcebo. Just two."

I move shakily and go to occupy my chair. My trembling hand finds the drawer and I retrieve the numerous drawings in there. All so vulgar. Of that devil bitch I was unfortunate enough to call my sister. Sometimes I feel like she had an easy death. Had it gone my way, the last thing I would've done is to cause her a heart attack. I would've tortured her for days, I would've made her pray for death. I would've taken her to that brink and then brought her back just to repeat the process over and over again. One of my son's last drawings of that woman is a picture of her unhealthy naked body. It's so raw, unfiltered. He was always such an excellent drawer. He never touched a drawing board again when she died.

Mutual Desires : Thirty-five

MaKhathide

“Its about damn time you got here, Ngcobo.” I say without looking up from my laptop. Nontethelelo’s stare is boring into my skull and my eyes lift to meet hers, my eyebrows raising in question.

“You didn’t have to be rude about it,” she is unwavering in her judgment of me and I love that about her. Most of the time. Not many people climb on top of her head because of the firm young woman she is. I love to see it – a woman with balls, just like her mother. “Why did you call us here anyway?”

Sakhile takes a seat beside our daughter as I stand to my feet to go and sit down at the edge of the large desk in front of them. “I’ve been thinking a lot lately. Ngicabanga ukuth indodana yami, ubhut’ wakho kuyomsiza kakhulu uk’bonana nodokotela wengqondo. We’ve all turned a blind eye for too long and we can’t deny—”

“Cha, cha. Don’t include Baba and me in this. We’ve preached therapy for a long time, Mah, and it was you who thought Nqobizitha wouldn’t need it. Sonke siyazi ukuth its either your way or the highway so don’t try to pin this on us.”

“With that big mouth you always have on you, I’m disappointed in you for not trying harder. You’re at fault as much as I am. Your father, maybe not so much, he was always a weakling,” I argue, as my features scrunch up in distaste. “You’re bossy at everything and you couldn’t stand your ground and be bossy about your brother needing therapy? Hhayi uyehlula, Ntethe.”

“Mkami,” Sakhile speaks up, notes of impatience found in his voice. “Yes, I agree that my son needs therapy. So we need to join our heads together and figure out how we’re going to approach him about this matter. I’m happy that you’ve finally come to your senses about him needing therapy.”

He’s right, for once, and shifting the blame on one another will not accomplish anything. There’s so much at risk here, Ntwenhle could ruin everything, after so many years and she can easily destroy so many things just like that. “Maybe you’re going to need to talk to him, Babakhe.” I could try but tears make me uncomfortable. Maybe because I come from a family whose entire foundation is built on emotional detachment. Logic never makes way for feelings. Maybe this is why I’ve always thought it seemed logical to keep my son from seeing a therapist. Maybe it has to do with how he seemed so

young to remember anything. He hadn't looked damaged then and hardships are only supposed to make you stronger. I was married away to a man who I was not and couldn't ever be in love with. To add insult to injury, he was no different from a woman, too weak and emotional. But all of this strengthened me for the better, I go to the same bed as this man, I've bore him thirteen daughters. If opening your body up to a weakling of a man isn't strength then I'm not sure what is.

"There are some issues that need to be ironed out, Mah..." Ntethe brings me back to the land of the living. "But are we telling him everything, including what caused that woman's death? If no, then how do we justify the therapy?"

"That woman infected him with an STD. Remember he came to you, Ngcobo, when he had genital warts on his penis. Maybe it will be better to tell him that we knew but were trying to protect him. This subject is still so touchy and what that witch did to my son – it's a shameful thing. Boys don't go through this kind of thing. Maybe this is why it was overlooked for so long. I'm just not sure what he will do once the truth comes out."

"He'll hate us," Sakhile says with a tremor, eyes watering. I mentally roll my eyes as he starts to become emotional. This is not what we need at the moment.

"Pull yourself together and be a man," I tell him, rubbing my ears. "We're his family, I'm sure he'll understand why we kept quiet for so long. At the time, it seemed like our job was done after we got rid of that filthy witch – that I would've loved to torture for days on end."

"She was pregnant, Mah. I hate her too and I would've helped you to torture her so badly that she would've wished death upon herself kodwa taking her out like that while pregnant would've been a little too heartless. The syringe worked better, her death was still painful, and she was out of our lives. But look at this mess now, had therapy been done then we wouldn't be here, trying to find ways to approach my brother about this. He's not going to take this well. All along we knew and turned a blind eye to his lone suffering. We failed him."

"We did," it takes a lot for me to admit to the words. They've always been there, at the back of my mind, and I've tried to be sterner with him, to raise him into this strong, young man who conquers in the face of challenges. I was always hoping that he'd conquered where Kayise is concerned. I was hoping that the experience would've taught him to be a man. Men don't cry. They're supposed to be the protectors, the strong ones, they're not supposed to feel like women. That experience wasn't supposed to make him less of a man. He should've been strengthened but maybe I didn't do much of a good job. I should've tried harder, taught him about how worse it can be, emotional men have no place in a world such as ours.

“Ngcobo, you’re going to speak to your son and convince him to do this. I have meetings to attend to the whole day tomorrow. I propose we do this tomorrow.”

“I’ll be with Baba,” Ntethe announces, nonnegotiable – with that forceful expression of hers.

“Kulungile. Phuma, I need to talk to your father.” She rolls her eyes, but readily obliges, I wait until the door is closed. “How did Ntwenhle find out about Kayise? I warned you about revealing this to that woman, Ngcobo, and now she’s a thorn on my ass. Do you know that she came here earlier to threaten me? That decomposing whore came here and threatened me to find Nqobizitha, my son, a suitable therapist. I was threatened and it’s clear that she thinks she can come here and attempt to steal my child away from me. Was this you, Ngcobo?”

He shakes his head. “Of course not, mkami. Kodwa iqiniso linok’vela ekukhanyeni. This is why uBlose advised against separating the boys, remember? He said they’re three pieces of the same puzzle and that they’d need the other piece to complete the puzzle. The truth is going to come out and maybe it’s time we started to accept that. Those boys are one person, one spirit. They dress alike, they have the same voice, their mannerisms are identical. Even Ntwenhle has a hard time telling them apart.”

“Don’t tell me about that lousy sangoma. Wazini uBlose? I will have to have one of the boys track that woman’s every step. She’s becoming a danger. I won’t let her destroy this family like this, I’ve laboured too hard for her to sweep in and destroy all that.”

“One of these days our ancestors will have to remind you that you’re not god, you’re not going to play people’s lives like this. Maybe the time has come.”

My hand twitches as this weakling of a man gazes at me. I think he’s expecting me to do something, to lose my control, like I always do when he tempts me like this but I don’t have time to entertain his nasty kinks today. There are more pressing issues at hand. Ntwenhle is becoming really problematic, she seems to have forgotten all the agreements we made all of a sudden. I dread the possibility of finding out that she speaks to my son but I can’t deny the possibility. How else would she know about Kayise and him? I need to be sure. Then I’ll find a way to deal with her.

Nqobizitha is my son. Yes, he’s my flesh and blood. He may’ve come from that loose vagina but he was raised by a King. He has all he needs with me.

Christophe

Do you ever find yourself waking up in the middle of the night as a realization crosses your mind? Something that registers later than it should've and you're left feeling stupid for not having realized it earlier? This is how I felt for most of the night as I remembered that picture of Nqobizitha's uncle at Mam' Ntwenhle's house. I remember he told me that she knows the twins that look like him and...and for most of the night, I tried to connect the pieces.

I think Nqobizitha is adopted.

I think he's adopted and it makes sense. What was that picture doing there? My theory is that Mam' Ntwenhle had a love affair with the uncle or maybe MaKhathide did. The second theory I find a bit cringe because she would've been over the uncle's age if she had a relationship with him but I can't rule it out because her sister seemed to have a thing for children as well. With MaKhathide, I'd give her credit because the guy would've been twenty years of age. But my money's still on Mam' Ntwenhle. She likes to say Nqoba looks like his father and will then downplay it by saying the uncle was still his father as Baba means so much more than just a blood father.

What makes me even more suspicious is the fact that she knows these boys. What are the chances? What are the chances of having a picture of this man who looks like these boys that you just randomly know from Joburg? She was bullshitting and I was a little slow for not having realized that earlier. I won't blame Nqobizitha because he's going through a lot right now but I should've known. Now, I want to confront Mam' Ntwenhle to find out the truth. Maybe this is me being too forward but I have to know. My mind didn't wake me up at 02:03am for nothing, I just know it.

The sun is scorching outside as I make it to a familiar house. We were here yesterday and she welcomed us beautifully, I hope it won't change now that Nqobizitha isn't with me. My knuckles rap on the wooden door softly and I wait nervously. I have to be at the school after this but I am hoping that the lovely woman and I can talk first. I can see her surprise as she opens the door. "Christophe!"

"Mam' Ntwenhle," I smile and wave awkwardly. "How are you?"

“Ngyaphila, boy. Come in, come in.” she ushers me inside and closes the door behind me.
“Kwenzenjani? Is Nqobizitha in trouble? His mother agreed that they would be speaking to him tonight.”

Oh...I didn't know that.

“Does Nqoba know?”

“No,” she shakes her head. “Zengcebo said his father would explain after they've had dinner as a family. Sit down, let me get you some food.”

“Something light, please. Even water is fine,” I suggest respectfully. She nods her head and disappears into the kitchen. I try to get comfortable and my mind tries to make up for yesterday's flop by alerting me that Mam' Ntwenhle called Nqoba's mom 'Zengcebo'. There was a familiarity in her voice, something that hinted at...more. Or I could be reaching and failing dismally at this Nancy Drew shit. I don't know. “Thank you,” my stomach churns at the sight of the scones and juice. This is too much. I won't be able to finish this.

“What brings you here today?”

I want to laugh because that's something a therapist would say. Nqoba and I spent most of last night browsing through videos on YouTube and he's so nervous. There's a lot that that dead woman stole from him and one of those things include his childhood. Where he should've been playing around with his peers and living without a care in the world, he was catering to the needs of a paedophile. He's having a hard time understanding all of this but there's a change, he's scared, I can tell. This is why we agreed that I'd be attending therapy as well. I'm not sure if I'll be allowed in there with him but I decided that I'd see one as well – to deal with my own past issues. I want us both healthy and happy and watching all those videos last night makes me want to be a better version of me for him. Plus, I just want to encourage him. What better way to do that than leading by example?

Mam' Ntwenhle is looking at me suspiciously as I skirt around the issue of why I am here. “The uncle is his father and I'm suspecting that you're the mother!” I end up blurting out before slapping my hand to my mouth worriedly. Gods of fashion, please don't let her take this the wrong way.

She blinks her eyes at me, then understanding dawns on her. “Where are you getting this theory from?”

Okay...she's not denying it. That's...I don't know whether or not it's good. "I just woke up and the thought crossed my mind and it felt like I was right."

"Did you tell Nqobizitha this?"

"No," I shake my head. "Am I right? You can't possibly know those twin boys and have a picture of a man who look like them and my boyfriend in your house and claim to have no ties to them. Was he your husband? Please shed some light for me, Mah. I'm not forcing you but I think there's more to this story than you're giving us."

Her quiet chuckles spread over the entire room. "I, uh—" she shakes her head and looks at her hands. "I really shouldn't be telling you this but I've kept it hidden for so long that maybe it will good to just...exhale. That boy that you know as Nqobizitha, your boyfriend, a brother to his sisters and a son to Bab' Ngcobo and Zengcebo, I named him Siginiseko. When I gave birth to him, I decided that that would be his name. Because even after he was taken from me, and he calls another woman 'Mama', that doesn't change the fact that he's my son. The certainty. He came from me, my womb, I carried him."

"Whoa..." my eyes widen. I don't know what I was expecting. Just because the wild theory was there, part of me was hoping that Mam' Ntwenhle would refute my claims. That she'd have some logical explanation that would've made me face palm for being such a theorist. Alas, I have no such luck! I don't know why part of me is happy that she's his mother though. I want to get up and dance my ass off in celebration. Finally, someone he connects with so beautifully and this person is his mother. My eyes water and I scrunch up my nose. Out of impulse, I leave my seat and rush to crush her in a hug. "This is why he feels so connected to you. You're his mother! I'm happy, really happy. Mah, this is great!"

"I didn't expect this overwhelming response," her hearty laughter reverberates in my chest. She returns my hug, just as tight, and it's so warm. Motherly. I want her to hug Nqoba this way and to help me shield him from all the evil in the world. "An approval from my future son-in-law, this is great."

My cheeks heat up and I smile. I sit next to her, holding her hand. "Your son chose this tattoo for me," I show her my ring finger. "He says I'll be Zithobile Ngcobo one day."

"A worthy one," she squeezes my hand and then sighs softly. "I was eighteen the first time I met his father. He was the most desirable boy in our village and he knew it. I hated him for his cockiness but we grew to be really good friends. Around here, being friends with the opposite gender is frowned upon but the boys' father, he was so charming. I didn't listen to my mom when she told me to stay away from him. I didn't listen that I found myself regularly having sex with him in some sugarcane field not far from

here. Anyway, I got pregnant and my mother was furious. She only came clean about the identity of my father when she found out that Simiso had made me pregnant. Whispers were already floating around and it was embarrassing. I got shamed for it more than Simiso did. I was shamed even more when he denied being a participant that resulted in my pregnancy. My mother and I were forced to move to my grandparents' place in Newcastle after that. I couldn't deal with the shame, the taboo."

Wow....wow.

I shake my head, trying to wrap it around this whole issue. An incestuous affair. Half-brother and half-sister entangled in...no wonder they thought it was taboo. "But how did Nqoba end up with his parents then? I mean...you know what I mean."

"They needed a son, I birthed three of them. We're from poor background and I couldn't afford to take care of all three. They managed to convince me to give them one and told me they'd support me and the others. It was hard but I consoled myself with the knowledge that my son was being raised by his uncle and auntie. He was still being raised by his blood family. Also, my sons were being taken care of. We moved around a lot to avoid the possibility of meeting because then everyone would know that my sons were abomination children, they would remember. But they were going to the best schools and they have lived very comfortable lives."

"That R55 bill one of them owes says otherwise," I giggle.

"That would be Sbanisezwe," Mam' Ntwenhle shakes her head. "He's the naughty one."

My mind travels back to that time in Soweto. That guy had called Nqoba by that name. "Is he the gay one, with the boyfriend?" I ask.

"What?" she laughs but it's not malicious. "Sbani? A stable partner? No no. He has no boyfriend and he's not gay. None of the others are gay."

Oh...shit. Did I just rat him out? The way that cashier had spoke—

"I know this boy you're talking about. Small Tswana boy like you, everyone seems to think he's dating Sbani because he goes around saying that. They're just good friends but it doesn't go beyond that. I

wouldn't mind having him as son-in-law but my son doesn't play for that team. Maybe things will change one day but at the moment, he was dating five girls I know of. I don't approve of course but you youngsters don't listen."

"Oh..." I'm a little bummed out all of a sudden. "That kinda sucks, I mean maybe that Tswana kid and I would've bonded. It would've been fun."

"I'm sorry," she gives me an apologetic smile and claps my shoulder gently. "So how does this work? Between you and Nqobizitha? You're the...woman?"

"Why, because I'm short and thin?" I tease, a little offended by her question, but she looks genuinely curious. She wasn't rude about her question. "There's no woman in the relationship, Mah. I'd like to think that I'm not...I'm not feminine. I very much identify as a man. Maybe a bit flamboyant but that doesn't necessarily mean I am the woman. I also enjoy...not sure if I should say this, I'm embarrassed. Just know that I'm not a woman. We're equals, even if he likes to act all macho and expects me to be on my knees for him most of the time."

"I see..." she nods her head. "We learn everyday."

"May I see their pictures? The pictures of his brothers."

"Sure," her smile is bright. "As long as you show me pictures of Nqobizitha as well." I have to move some risqué pictures to another album and hide it before handing my phone over to her. My eyes widen as I scroll down her photo album and observe the different pictures of her sons. This is like looking at my boyfriend. I wonder if I'd be able to tell them apart if all three of them were here. Most of these pictures were taken when they weren't looking and I have to wonder if they despise taking pictures like their brother. I wouldn't be surprised. They all seem to share the same brain.

"Please tell me more about them. Can you tell them apart?"

"Not really," Mam' Ntwenhle looks at me with this gorgeous light in her eyes. "One of them has to open their mouth to say something for me to do that. Sbanisezwe is the outspoken one. Young, vibrant and charming. He's also so naughty and has been the cause of my many headaches. He's very inquisitive and I think he loves to live on the edge. I guess this why Sqalosenkosi feels such a huge sense of responsibility over him. He's the loyal, selfless and trustworthy one. The deep and sensitive one. I see it

in the way he loves every girl that comes into his life. They never stay for long, you know what they say about good guys.”

“They finish last.”

She laughs and agrees with me. “His brother always tells him this. He’s the bad boy everywhere he goes. Too problematic. I swear you’d think he’s the last born child. Or maybe he acts out because he’s the middle one.”

“Wow!” I giggle like a child, fascinated. My mind starts creating all these scenarios of Nqoba meeting his brothers. This would be so awesome, I’d love to see how they interact together. “Do they love amasi?”

“With sugar,” she looks at me.

I shake my head. “The boy I love detests anything sugary. He only indulges in Coke but that’s it. He’d probably cuss them out for eating amasi with sugar.”

“But its their favourite meal.”

“I saw they love Brentwood like my Nqoba.”

She gives me a look that makes me blush. “They do. Sqaalosenkosi especially, he’s a typical Zulu man. Stubborn but quiet.”

“I think Nqoba is more like Sbani then. He’s a charmer and loves talking with people. But he’s also selfless like Sqaalo and loves to see others happy. You should see the reverential bond he shares with Nhlakanipho. They’re like brothers. He is attentive, caring and a great lover. He’s the most open-minded person I know. I don’t think anything can freak him out. I’m still waiting for him to realize that he’s in love with another boy and for him to freak out but he doesn’t. He’s never freaked out.”

She’s still giving me that look that makes me want to bury my face in my hands. “You’re so cute,” I half-expect her to squeeze my cheeks. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

“You look a bit younger than that.”

“That’s because I’m a toothpick,” I giggle with her. “That’s what Nqobizitha calls me sometimes. He can call me anything but Chris. I hate him when he does that. Anyway, Mah, when will we get to meet his brothers – me and him?”

“Oh no, I can’t do that.” She shakes her head frantically. “We made a deal, abakwaNgcobo and I. They’re not supposed to know about each other. So much will be unearthed and I can’t bear the thought of hurting them. Its even worse now because I am sick and—”

“Sick? What’s wrong?”

“Cancer but I’m going for treatment. Zengebo is paying for treatment and I believe I will beat it again. But I just, his brothers don’t even know about it and I’m scared to turn all their lives upside down.”

I don’t know, maybe I’m selfish but I don’t see it that way. Nqoba already feels connected to her and the way he talks about her is evidence enough. Maybe he’d be mad in the beginning but he is rooted in the idea of family. I see it in the way he loves his family, the way he talks about them. When he shows me pictures of one family member or the other and the fondness that’s always found in his voice when he talks about them. He needs someone gentler to show him motherly love. “I don’t think it’s fair on them for you to decide for them like this. They’re going to meet sooner or later. I’d rather they meet because you introduced them. Otherwise they’ll be angry at you guys for real when they discover the truth. Sometimes our idea of protecting is really just hurting.”

“Ngiyezwa, boy. This is a difficult predicament we’re in. I’ll have to think long and hard about this ... as well as discuss it with his parents.”

“I know that he would be over the moon at finding out he has brothers,” I say.

The look in her eyes, I just know that this is her one wish as well.

Nqobizitha

MaKhathide told me that there would be a family meeting after dinner. I know what it is about but I still feel nervous. Part of me is always so nervous lately, helpless. It's a weird way to feel. The vulnerability is not something I am used to. It makes me feel like a scared, little boy. I'm not going to lie and say I enjoy feeling this way. I wish I could go back to the old me but I always feel like I'm drowning. Like I'm being dragged beneath murky waters with no way of escaping. It's worse at night, the dreams. I am lucky that Chris seems to understand what's going on with my mind. How fucked up it is.

"Ndodana," Baba sits beside me and Ntethe across from me, appearing nervous. "Kunjani, Mapholoba?"

"Impilo impilo, munt' omdala. Uyaphila wena?"

He nods his head.

"Before I get into what I want to say, let me start by saying we as your family love you so much, ndodana. Our actions may've not proved it over the years and for that I am deeply sorry. I'm not going to make any excuses but admit that we failed you."

His words make me feel guilty as I shake my head to refute his claims. All they've ever done is love me. I was stupidly blinded by...her. I don't understand a lot of things, just that I feel really betrayed and small...so small. Like a dust speckle but one that holds so much weight that its drowning. I know that's not possible but I feel like that too many times lately. There is no light. "Don't say that, Baba. I'm guessing Mam' Ntwenhle spoke to MaKhathide. I'm sorry for giving her her number but I didn't—"

"You did the right thing. And talking to that woman made us realize that there's so much we could've done better than, ndodana. You need therapy, yes, but we need forgiveness from you for not acknowledging that earlier. I'm telling you this because I don't want you to think that it's your fault for not telling us about Kayise. We're at fault here for not having sought you a therapist after everything we discovered. After Kayise died—"

“Ngenhlonipho, Mapholoba, you didn’t know about this because I kept it from you. It’s not your fault, its mine.”

“We discovered the day Ntethe had to accompany you to the hospital for the sores on your penis. Do you remember, you’d just turned eleven years old. Your sister had her suspicions, she discovered your drawings in the Kayise’s room and told us everything.”

I don’t know how to react but laughter bubbles out of me. I’m not sure if its instinctual or what but I can’t stop. Ntethe stands and I find myself standing as well. Then some strong lumps are forming in my throat that give me the urgent need to scream so I do. I pace back and forth, looking at both my family members. I don’t even know why I’m hurt. For the longest time, I thought that woman loved me and if I’m being honest, part of me still does. Maybe I have no right to be mad at them. They didn’t know that I’d stand in the closet. They didn’t know about the punishments. They didn’t know.

“Ngiyezwa,” I force a smile to my lips. My heart feels like it’s being snatched out of my chest. “Baba, sisi...sengihembe.” I bow my head respectfully and walk out, they try to stop but I keep on walking. When I’m outside, I get the urge to run. It’s already dark outside and for someone who isn’t used to a place with no streetlights like this, they’d be scared but this has been my home for as long as I can remember. As soon as I’ve jumped the gate, I start to run. I run for what feels like forever until I’m at Chris’ house. I’m not in the mood for breaking in. My fist bangs on his door.

It opens wide and I meet his frightened eyes. “Nqobizitha!” he has a knife in front of him. “Don’t bang like that on people’s doors. I thought it was a thug or something.”

I want to say something but my voice seems stuck in my throat. I clench my jaw and look at him.

He returns my stare and then sighs. His arms snake around my waist and he squeezes tight. I hug him back just as tight. “Its going to be okay,” he keeps repeating.

I wish I could agree but how can I? I’m sitting at the very front of the cinema, helplessly watching my life fall apart.

Bonus Insert

Nhlakanipho

“Nhlakanipho!”

I raise my gaze to find Khanyisa looking at me with an indecipherable expression on her face. Why is she smiling at me? We’re not friends. My eyes find Nqobizitha, who is packing his things beside me, he seems to be lost in his own world. He knows the female species better than I do but he’s different lately. I won’t rush him to talk to me, I’ll patiently wait until he’s ready. “Ntokazi, how can I help you?”

She giggles and plays with her braids. Her friends are smiling at her and touching each other. I’m not sure if I am allowed to grow impatient but I feel like I’m missing something and I don’t have time for this. I have to go back to Siya’s and then go to my home to meet with my siblings and my lovely grandmother. “School’s are closed...”

I nod my head slowly.

“So I was thinking that we could go out to celebrate. Minenhle’s parents have a house in Eshowe and well, they’ve come here for a while manje we could all go there. She’s planning a house party.”

I don’t like house parties for how loud they are. It’s too much of an inconvenience for someone who holds a great dislike for people. I rub the back of my neck and try for a smile that I hope is friendly. It must’ve taken great guts for this girl to have come up to me, to have attempted to be kind. But parties are not my thing. “That’s very considerate of you, Minenhle. It’s just unfortunate that I have plans for the evening. Perhaps another time...” the lie slips easily through my teeth.

I watch her and Khanyisa’s faces fall. I’m not even guilty and my eyes light up when they follow Siya’s voice. He is talking to one of the boys in my class, briefly, before moving onto where I am standing with Minenhle. “Hi,” he looks between me and my classmate. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I wrap an arm around him in a platonic hug and then nod my head toward the girl nervously gazing at us. “This is Minenhle.”

“Oh, I know you.” His voice is impolite, the opposite of that smile on his face. “How’s your baby?”

“Growing. He’s almost a year old now.”

“Greet him for me. Bafo, I’m sorry to disturb this lovers’ moment but I have to go home.”

My hand twitches from the urge to bend him over and spank his meaty ass red. Surprisingly, jealousy is a good look on him, but its unnecessary. I gaze at Siyabonga with a little frown and cock my eyebrows. He clears his throat but stands firm, with that accusing, unwavering stare. I shake my head, looking over his shoulder to Nqobizitha who is already leaving without so much as a goodbye. I’m not going to hold it against him. Like I said, it’s easy to tell that something’s wrong lately but I hope these June holidays will do him some good. I should volunteer to herd Malume’s cattle, and then get him to accompany me. It will just be the two of us, maybe he’ll be encouraged to talk then. But I also don’t blame him, vulnerability doesn’t come easy for folk like us. I told him to let Chris hold his hand. I hope he’s taking that advice.

“I’ll see you around, Minenhle,” I tell the girl still looking at me.

“You’re in our class’s group chat, angithi? I can get your number there and we can talk about meeting up some other time. It doesn’t have to be tonight.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. Your baby daddy is a notorious thug and I don’t think Nhlakanipho wants that kind of drama in his life. We have to go, Minnie. I’m sorry but I need a ride.” Siya walks away and I hear the silent command in his actions.

I’m going to humour him, it doesn’t happen often, but I do. He’s waiting next to the car with an impatient look on his face. I unlock the car and get in the driver’s side as he joins me in the passenger seat. “Phakade lami, beautiful as ever.” I say as I start the car.

He’s silent a second. “That girl is really beautiful, right?”

I know where this is going. I don’t think its necessary but I have to admit that I have moments where I also overreact sometimes. Mostly around other boys, because I have illogical fears sometimes, irrational jealousy. But Siya is a little worse than me. What the hell would I do with pussy? Probably traumatize my

dick for eternity. I would need to visit the men's clinic after that. Maybe a therapist. I'm not attracted to women. It's weird how they look like flowers in my eyes – beautiful to look at but unnecessary, at least for me. "I don't notice things like that, Phakade lami." This is a mistake, entertaining him like this.

"Psh," he snorts and I peer over at him in time to see him fold his arms across his chest. "Oh please, don't lie. You have eyes and you can't tell me that you haven't noticed that that girl is beautiful."

"She's beautiful," I say to make him happy.

"Oh so you've noticed? The next thing you'll be growing curious and noticing other things, like her boobs or her ass. You're an ass man and that girl's ass is fat. I bet you would hit it because of that."

My hands tighten on the steering wheel and I clear my throat. "Don't be that person, Shandu," I warn him, shaking my head.

"You didn't even bother to deny it!" his voice lifts a little.

Irritation prickles my skin, causing my eyelids to twitch. "Don't raise your voice at me, know your place." I tell him, watching as he wiggles his shoulders and turns away. "You're not going to start unnecessary arguments because you're feeling a little moody. Not over girls I don't care about and don't even think about even when they're in my presence. Have I suddenly become attracted to women and don't know about it? Are you some sort of seer who knows my internal thoughts and feelings?"

"No," it's too quiet. "I-I'm sorry. I can't help it. Sometimes I feel like everyone who sees you wants you, you're too darn perfect and your dick game is my sleeping tablet. I don't want anyone to take you from me."

I chuckle, I can't help it. "Don't think that jealousy nonsense is cute. I don't entertain useless fights, Shandu, you know this. If you want me to fuck you hard, you should say so. No need for the drama."

"Mxm," he gets out of the car and grabs our bags. I follow him inside his parents' house. "Sanibona, Mah...Baba." they're cleaning the shebeen.

“Bafana, you’re back!” the father is always so ecstatic. He’s too cheery, a bit much for someone like me but I enjoy his company. We exchange a few pleasantries before continuing onto Siya’s room. I’ve waited a long time for the schools to close. I have been putting some money aside to take my siblings out. Thandolwenkosi turned 17 about two weeks ago but I wanted her to focus on her exams so I couldn’t do something nice for her but now, I think we can celebrate her.

I unbutton my shirt and stare with a boner in my pants as Siyabonga removes his school pants. He has his back on me and I’m sure he’s doing this on purpose. His ass looks too tempting in the boxer-briefs he’s wearing. He regularly exercises and the squats he does have paid off big time...at least for me. I’m not to be blamed as I walk over to where he is to keep him in place with one hand and drag down his underwear just a little with my other hand. The prep is done a little sloppily, my aching dick is impatient. I have to cover his mouth with my hand when he screams as I guide my dick inside his warmth. He shudders against me and crosses his legs together while still standing to heighten my pleasure. I press him to the closet and pound him hard until he comes into my hand. As I near my own orgasm, I quickly pull out to stroke myself but Siya is already on his knees. He opens his jaw wide and sucks my frantically throbbing dick. I come with a quiet shout.

“Are you okay?” I ask as he stands to his feet.

“Choke me with your dick, daddy.” He jokes as he fixes himself, his voice is a little hoarse. “I need to go and brush my teeth. What will your family say about my cum breath?”

I chuckle and kiss his forehead. We quickly get dressed and then I have to wait for Siya to brush his teeth before we’re leaving to see my family. I know my siblings are probably waiting for me excitedly outside the house. Siya tells me that Chris cancelled on him because he’s going somewhere with Nqoba. I nod my head and chuckle as I prove myself correct when the loud cheers of my siblings reach my ears as I park the car. We are bombarded with hugs and my heart falters at the genuine look of joy on Siya’s face. The love he has for my siblings is unlike anything I can describe. This is how I know that he was sent to me by my mother, my ancestors. They knew I’d need someone like him to complete me. My missing puzzle.

“Salukazi sami,” I go to crouch in front of Gogo and kiss her knuckles. “Kunjani kodwa? I miss you everyday.” It’s true. I still struggle at Siyabonga’s house but I stay because it makes him happy that we’re together. He says his soul can’t bear to be away from its soulmate and the time spent apart hurts it. I have to agree with him. Even some mere minutes without him can drive me insane sometimes.

“We miss you too but Mnelisi is enjoying your room a little too much,” she laughs and shifts her attention to Siya. “Mfana wami, looking good.”

“Thank you, Gogo. Its because of your grandson here, he takes such great care of me,” Siya’s smile is amused. I hope he’s not hinting at some sexual innuendo because of what happened earlier. We sit down on the bench and Siya holds my hand and rests his head on my shoulder. “Where is Thando? We have to leave soon.”

“She was helping one of the boys to find his shoes. These kids are too irresponsible, I tell you.” Gogo shakes her head and sighs. “I’m glad you’re here, Nhlakanipho. We need to—” Kuhlekimi interrupts her with a loud wail. “I wonder what woke her. Let me go to check on her. Maybe its hunger.”

“I’ll do it,” Siya lifts up and kisses my cheek before disappearing off into the room where the noise is coming from.

“He is such a good boy,” Gogo smiles at me and I nod my head. “My son, about this issue with your father. I know how hard it is on you but have you thought about what you want to do?”

I knew that topic would come up. Gogo seems intent on helping that small boy resolve his problems but I am not eager to be honest. Even after Siya begged and begged and used sex. I don’t think anything can convince me. He finally admitted that his ancestors want him to acknowledge me and that he’s not doing well career-wise. Yes, Victor admitted that the only reason he’s here is to essentially help himself. The disappointment was there, and it felt like I was five years old all over again. I knew that he wouldn’t choose me just like that. The one thing I hate is that I never get used to the pain – no matter how hard I try. This is why I don’t like to talk about my sperm donor. I hate him with a passion that surpasses so many things. Sometimes, I think I’ll never have peace until he’s six feet under. This is why it’s better that we stay away from each other because I am always tempted to kill him. I’ve daydreamed about beating him up too death, I’ve entertained those thoughts and came up with ideas on how I’d lure him in. I loathe him, detest every fibre of his being, and hate that his DNA is in me.

“I’m not going to do it, salukazi sami.” I say, just as Siyabonga comes back, carrying Kuhlekimi in his arms and smiling down at the little girl. She doesn’t look weird now, a little grown. I’m not sure how many months she is. I don’t pay attention to things like that. “Let him suffer. Let him suffer so bad that he loses everything. I hope he won’t even have the luxury of buying chappies as soon as his ancestors are done with him.”

“Mzimela!” Siya gives me a horrified look. “All this hate you harbour isn’t good, baby. Please just calm down and give it time. That man is your father and he’s trying to build a relationship with you.”

“I beg to differ,” my mind refuses the possibility. I know that useless bastard, I know how selfish he is. “He wants to use me to appease his ancestors. His obese ass wouldn’t have come here were he not desperate. Ngyaxolisa, salukazi sami, ukukhuluma kanje ukhona kodwa uyazi nawe.”

“People deserve second chances, Nhlakanipho.” Gogo gives me a sad look.

“I gave him plenty and now I’ve run out of more to give. I’ve been doing fine all along without him, and I will continue to do fine. He must just return to his beloved family and leave me alone. But I hope his ancestors come for everything he owns, even his last underwear. His suffering will be my joy.”

“Hhayi, inzima lendaba. I’ll speak to your uncle so that —”

Thandolwenkosi comes rushing inside the house. She looks gorgeous, like our deceased mother – but we don’t share the same father. After a few polite exchanges with uGogo, Siya gives the baby to her and we’re all on our way out. I’m taking them to KFC, the kids love it and I would always daydream about it when the hunger got really bad at home. It’s not really a crime to indulge now, is it? It’s a little chaotic as we reach Richards Bay. Siya, Thando and I hold the kids by their hands to keep them from attempting to do anything dangerous, like crossing these streets on their own.

“I want the thigh!” Nomzamo announces as soon as we enter. People look at us in wonder but some smile. I ignore and go to pay for two buckets and some rolls and three two litter bottles of Coke. My heart jumps a little too loudly as I check the balance, almost the same amount we use to buy groceries at home. Maybe I should’ve used the money on that instead. The happy smiles on my siblings’ faces says otherwise. “Can I have some more?”

“Sure,” I nod my head and notice Thandolwenkosi busy on her phone. “Aren’t you going to eat your food?” I ask her.

“I am, bhuti.” She gives me a small smile and then goes back to her phone. I wonder who it is she’s talking to but I sincerely hope it’s not that Lwandle character. Siya told me that he and Chris spoke to her and that she told them that they broke up but I’m not sure. That man is a bad influence.

Siya pinches my side to capture my attention and I shift my attention to him. “Ngyakuthanda,” he mouths at me and then runs his hand on my thigh. “My mom is going to Johannesburg next weekend. She wants to visit her sister that side. In Soweto.”

"That's great," I tell him.

He nods his head, nibbling softly on his lower lip and drops his eyes before lifting them again. "I, um, I—" this nervous look means he did something I won't like. "I told her that we'd go with her."

"No," I say immediately, recalling how disastrous most of that trip had been. I don't want to run into my sister. What if I see her acting like some immoral floozy all over again? I can't lie and say I won't beat her ass again. I still can't get over the day I saw her stripping for boys much younger than her. The rage bubbles deep within me just thinking about it.

"Maybe I'll just have to go on my own then," his voice has a little attitude.

"Angizwanga?"

He remains silent and stares at his food.

"Excuse me," he stands and heads for the toilets. I wait for about five minutes before deciding to follow him. I'm sure I was meant to anyway. I find him standing in front of the sinks, looking at his reflection on the long mirrors. I stand behind him and fold my arms around him, tightening, and kiss his pulse point. He moans and places his hands on top of mine. Our eyes lock on the mirror. "I hate you."

"Ngyakuthanda, Shandu."

"I want to go and you can't deny me this. I want us to be free again and it felt great to hold your hand in public. Why are you always so damn stubborn and strict about controlling everything?"

"Because its who I am. Life is easier when I can control it, I don't have to see things that I don't want to. Things like my sister taking her clothes off for a living."

"That was in Braamfontein, we'll be in Soweto. Think about our last day there, how we spent our morning together at that park then at the mall. Think about those two Coloured men we met and how

we ended up having a double date with people we didn't know but felt so comfortable with because they were one of us. How can you be so comfortable with denying me this?"

It was nice. Those few hours we spent together before coming back home. I gave him the ring at that park. I don't remember its name. But I hate that place too, how fast-paced it is, and how people don't greet. Everything is large and intimidating and I am not used to feeling that small. That place lacks warmth and it's so cold. I don't like it. "We can go," I find myself saying. "If it will make you happy."

"I think you just like it when I beg you," Siya turns around in my arms and leans up to give me a quick kiss. "You have some weird kinks and me being at your mercy turns you on, admit it."

"I'll let my dick answer that tonight," I plant a kiss to his forehead. "Let's go back."

Our table is still so noisy. Thandolwenkosi is clearly not bothered with that phone in her hand. She's barely touched her food. I don't know why. This is for her after all. "Here," I fish out my last R200 note and give it to her. "Happy birthday."

"But this will only be enough for one jean, bhuti!" the light in her eyes deems out.

"Oh..." I clear my throat. "Remind me tomorrow after I've collected some customers."

"That means I'll have to wait for another week to come here."

"How much more do you need?" Siyabonga asks her as a feeling of inferiority slaps me across the cheek. I keep my face blank as I watch him retrieve R400 from his pocket to give to her. She screams, hugs him, and then tells us that she's going to Mr. Price. His eyes find me next and I watch his smile disappear a little. He reads my mind better than anyone else. His hands cup my cheeks as he presses our foreheads together. The kids giggle as he presses his lips to mine. "You're a brilliant brother," he whispers the words against my lips. "So brilliant. And these ones are so proud of you, my Batman. You're their hero. Your bank balance doesn't matter. They love you for you."

He restores my confidence like no one else. I hug him back, just as tight, until I am grounded. "I'm still paying you back tomorrow."

He doesn't argue.

Mutual Desires : Thirty-six

Christophe

I wake up to the feeling of a cool breeze whipping my skin, my body is shivering, and in my still drowsy state, I can hear what sounds like birds chirping. My bed is a little squishy and uncomfortable to sleep on. The heaviness around my legs is welcomed, I open my eyes again, blinking away the fogginess blinding me and attempt to quickly sit up as I realize where I am. Shit! I tap on Nqobizitha's shoulder, trying to free myself from his clutches. He stirs and opens an eye, glaring daggers. "I-I can't believe you made me sleep in a bloody cemetery!" I squeal, goosebumps breaking over my skin, and the hairs raising at the back of my neck. What if something happened while we were sleeping? What if the ghosts attacked for trespassing or shit like that?

I nudge Nqobizitha's shoulder more persistently and quickly inspect my body for any weird bruising but there's nothing except remnants of flour that dirtied me last night. The boy I love is groaning beside me and glancing at Ntombikayise's messy tombstone. I can't decipher this expression on his face but he shifts to where I am and adjusts us so that I'm sitting in between his legs with my back to his chest. My skin is still crawling though, I hate places like this but the small kiss he plants on my pulse point grounds me. I sigh, and rest my arms on top of the ones that are enfolded around my waist. "How are you feeling?" I ask him quietly.

"Guilty," he lifts one of our entwined hands and gestures to the granite tombstone. "I have to clean this mess I created."

"You don't have to," I tell him sternly, this woman ruined his life and he had every right to vent. Last night, I suggested we come here so that he could vent, and I carried some few items that he could use. He wasn't ready to fully destroy Ntombikayise's tombstone – part of me had hoped he would be – but he still threw the bag of flour on the granite and some eggs as well. He screamed and told her he hated her, while somehow confessing his undying love, and though it hurt, I understand. He's still got a long ass road ahead of him, but the good thing is that his parents have agreed that he needs a therapist.

"I don't," he pauses a second, "I won't."

I'm proud, this is a small improvement, but so very important. My lips kiss his cheek softly, embracing the prickly sensation that touches them. "You're doing so good, sthandwa sami. One step at a time and you'll get there. Right now, I think we should go back home. We've overstayed our welcome and the ghosts need their space back. Boundaries, Tarzan, boundaries."

His laughter is always so deep, rumbling, like a lion. “Just say that you’re scared, no need for the dramatics.” He stands to his feet, with me in his arms, and starts walking back to where we left his car. “What do you want to do today?”

“I, um, have to be in Durban,” I remind him. He always drives me there for my classes and maybe I’ve become a bit of a mooch because I am expecting him to drive me there. In my defence, he’s always done it and I didn’t expect him to forget but I understand. “But I can get a lift if you’re busy.”

“Nhlakanipho wanted to spend time together before he leaves,” I thank him with a kiss to his cheek as he helps me into the car and with my seatbelt. He nods his head and goes to the other side. “I can cancel with him and I’ll drive you to Durban.”

“No, it’s fine, sthandwa sami. He’s your best friend and Siya and I keep you guys apart for so many days a week that you don’t get to bond much outside of school. I’ll take the bus.”

He shakes his head and looks at the rearview mirror before shifting his focused gaze on me. My body reacts, he makes driving sexy like nothing else, and I bite my lip. “Don’t do that,” he uses his thumb to separate my bottom lip from in between my teeth and then wipes it softly before kissing his thumb that was rubbing me. Heat spreads along my cheeks and neck. I giggle and look away. “I’ll drive you to the taxi rank and then help you find a taxi to Durban. Call me when you’re done and I’ll fetch you.”

“So considerate,” I lean over and peck his cheek and turn the volume up a little bit – Inkosi Yamagcokama : *Amaphutha Akho*. Yes, I listen to his songs a lot lately. “We should visit Mam’ Ntwenhle before she leaves for Joburg. On Wednesday right?” we saw her yesterday and I think she was trying to determine whether or not I’d told Nqobizitha anything. I didn’t but it’s a little hard. It was especially hard when he told me that his parents knew about Ntombikayise, that they found out and kept it hidden from him. He feels betrayed, he doesn’t know why but he does, that’s what he told me. But he still loves them and feels compelled to forgive them. It’s one of those things where you respect and honour your parents no matter what. They’re his world and he’s angry but he doesn’t want to act out. He’s not that person. Parents will repeatedly screw you over and fail to own up to their shit...I know this with my dad.

He confirms a day and then drops me off at my house. I can feel him following behind me and look over my shoulder, raising my brow in question. I thought he was going to go home and quickly freshen up but that’s clearly not the case. “I’m hungry,” he gives me a boyish smile that makes my knees grow weak.

“What do you want to eat?”

He traps me against the door as soon as we're inside and kisses down my neck. I moan and arch into him but his large body pins me to the door. “You,” his breath fans my lips. The hand around my throat squeezes gently and then it's not around me anymore. “But amasi are a big necessity at the moment.”

I stand on my tiptoes and he gets the message and lifts me to kiss him softly. “I dread the day they have you pick between me and your favourite meal.” I tell him as he carries me to the kitchen. Zenny will wake up any minute now. Its already 05:00am.

“I'll choose you any day, dali. Who's going to warm my bed at night?”

“A bed warmer, really? Really?!” I take the dishcloth and hit his face with it. He grabs it from me and hits me back. I try to snatch from him but he raises his hand and I have to stand on my tiptoes to try and get it from him even though he's sitting. 6'6 is no joke. “Give it back. I have to wash the dishes then prepare your food.”

“Say please daddy.”

“Nqobizitha!” my skin heats up but I'm not going to say that. He can't make me do it when we're not in bed. “No. Bad boy. I'm not going to say that. Are you insane?”

“Oh well,” he keeps the dishcloth with him. I try to grab it again and then somehow find myself trapped against the counter with him pressing into me. His hands are on my ass, gripping firmly. My breathing picks up as he stares at me with a fire in his eyes. “Prettiest thing I've ever seen, nganeyakwethu.”

“Daddy,” the word slips past easily but I can't be blamed. His scent, voice and aura are seducing me, I'd do anything he wanted me to right this moment. “Let me get your food.” He leans down to devour my lips and sparks fly in my belly. I take a minute to calm down before finding the uphuthu that was left over from yesterday. It's in the fridge with amasi. I grab the bottle and place it in front of him, then grab a dish and fill it with uphuthu. Its not my fault that I place it on a tray and give it to him with another small bowel so that he can wash his hands. I give him back the dishcloth that he'd stolen so that he can wipe his hands. This Brentwood wearing bastard is smug as a motherfucker right now. I roll my eyes but still gift him with a soft kiss. “Ungajwayeli,” I tell him.

“Themba lami,” another tender smile.

My legs grow weak. I want to buy Mam’ Ntwenhle a beautiful mansion with a view for giving birth to this idiot of mine.

“Congratulations on making their shortlist, sweetheart.” Katrina embraces me in a suffocating hug. It’s a little annoying but I think I’m still so shocked to show her that I don’t appreciate this affection she’s giving me. “Now try gaining a couple more followers for the other client. You have gorgeous skin and they really want to work with you.”

“You made my day, Katrina.” I beam brightly and nod my head. “I can’t wait to tell my boyfriend this! He’s going to be so happy for me. As you know he made all of this to be possible.”

She nods and folds her arms on her chest. “Our clients rave about your quirky features, you know how it is. I love that you’re not letting your height get in the way of you achieving your dreams.”

“Like we don’t know that they want him to model some kids’ clothes!” a feminine voice says. I’m not sure who it is but it came from the back and the others are laughing. Whoever it is I don’t care. Jealousy showcases itself so viciously in the face of someone else’s success. So I’m the shortest person here but who cares? Really, who cares? I’m also the best performing student they have. I’m glad my hard work is being realized.

“I’m not sure how I’m going to gain a following on Instagram but I’ll do my best. Thank you again, Katrina.”

I’m graced with a small smile and then she peers out to the back. “Zanele, you keep this bullying up and you’re not attending future classes. Are we clear?”

“I paid to attend these classes, you won’t chase me out just like that.” Zanele says. She’s a tall girl, dark in complexion, and scarred on the left side of her face – caused by an accident that happened when she was only ten years old. She’s nice when she’s not mean. When she’s not jealous.

I don't listen much to her argument with Katrina. I'm just happy to share some good news with Nqobizitha and as soon as we're dismissed, I rush out of the classroom. I find him sitting on his favourite couch with a bored look on his face. But I watch his eyes light up as he spots me and it makes me feel really good. That I have an effect on him, it makes me happy more than I can explain. "Guess what!"

He grabs my bag from me and snakes his arm around my shoulders, leading me to the exit. "What?"

"I got shortlisted for a modelling gig with this reputable retailer. There's ten of us and they're going to pick three. Then I also have another skincare company that wants to work with me but I need to gain a following on Instagram. I'm not sure how I'm going to do that, I'm only on 200 followers there and they want at least 500 followers."

"Talk to Nontethelelo, she knows about these things. Well done, I'm proud."

"It's all you, Nqobizitha." I grip his hand and make him stand in the middle of this busy street. My eyes burn with unshed tears and I think they will escape with this soft expression this tree of mine is giving me. We must look so weird in the eyes of all these people that are passing us. "Thank you for believing in me when no one else would. Thank you for supporting my dream. You're an amazing boyfriend...that is not my boyfriend."

"Because I've promoted myself to your husband," he pinches my cheek. I push his hand away but readily accept his consuming kiss. *I love you. I love you.* My heart sings and I want to continue kissing him but he's pulled away and it feels like everything's ended so soon. I ask him what's wrong when he starts chuckling to himself. "It's just...whoever thought I'd be here? Me, in a relationship. With a guy no less. You're my only and longest relationship."

"You're my longest relationship too," I squeeze his hand as we cross the street. I don't think I can eat with the excited bubbles in my belly so I already know I'm not eating, plus he loves grilled meat and pap so we're going to a shisha nyama. "Hugo was two months but we've passed the three month mark, you and I. I'm not sure why we didn't celebrate that. I don't care. I just want us to be a forever kind of thing." He considers me with a subtle grin. A thought crosses my mind. "This is why I told Mam' Ntwenhle that you're just like—I mean different from Nhlakanipho. He's had one stable partner for so long."

"He's the man," Nqoba is looking at the menu even though he always orders the same thing when he comes here. He seems to have missed that little mistake I almost made. This is not easy. I want to tell him so much about his brothers but I'm scared of revealing things that I have no right to. Mam' Ntwenhle warned me to keep my mouth shut. It's a little hard because my mouth has a mind of its own

sometimes and I can't really control what comes out of it. I can feel him looking at me and I can no longer ignore it. I grip his left hand and entwine it with mine.

"Kwenzenjani?" its hard not to worry about him lately.

He's silent for so long, looking pensive. I'm worried now. The food arrives and he starts eating without saying a word. "Iyakuthanda lensizwa kodwa, Xabhashe."

I almost don't catch what he's saying because he's looking down at his food but the butterflies! I grip my belly with the hand that isn't holding onto his to ease the wild flapping. He is still eating without a care in the world. Damn him!

I've changed my mind, when we finally get the land back, Mam' Ntwenhle can keep my father's.

MaKhathide

I firmly believe that nothing in this world can't be dealt with. It doesn't matter how bad the situation may seem but there's always a solution, staring at you right in the face, waiting for you to notice it. That is what I believe. I've dealt with many adversities this way, have looked the enemy in the face and taunted them to poke harder for the victory to be sweeter for me. I did that when Fundiswa's stupid brother thought he could take me on. Where is he now? Licking his wounds in a corner somewhere, as I stand taller than a tree. Hardships are not supposed to make you weaker, they're supposed to make you beg for more, beg for more because the victory is sweeter.

Normally, challenges are a good thing but right now, with Ntwenhle I find myself at a crossroads. I never thought that I'd have to think about getting rid of her but she is tempting me. Where my son is concerned, I'd kill god himself to make sure that he is still the Nqobizitha I know. To ensure that his world doesn't come crashing down on him. His father and I have already agreed to the therapy so I am not sure what more Ntwenhle wants from us. All of a sudden she's spending all this time with him. She's still here in Mbongolwane, playing mommy to my one and only son. I suspect that she's applying for a position that's already been filled. In the twenty years that Nqobizitha has been living and now she wants to come back?

The boys are following her around, they've seen her welcoming my son and that gay boy into that pathetic box her aunt calls her house. It's like she just has a death wish, it's not enough that cancer is already trying to finish her debilitating vagina off. And the gay boy, I thought I told Nqobizitha to stay away from him. But that's the least of my concerns right now. Ntwenhle is the biggest one. She's a hot thorn on my backside. I don't want to be pushed into doing something drastic because I am a mother myself, I know how devastated my kids would be without me. I know how lost they'd feel. They need my firm hand to guide them to success, to the better versions of themselves.

Those boys need their mother as well – useless as she may be.

With Ntwenhle, there's a soft spot I harbour. Maybe this is why I hadn't taken all three boys from her because it should've happened that way. But she's becoming ungrateful lately. This is what Jesus meant when he talks about pigs going back to their bile. This is why he talks about sacrifice. But he was too kind and look at what Judas did to him. I'll be damned if Ntwenhle does that to me. "Where are you?" I ask as soon as the wife I sleep in the same bed with answers his phone.

"Mkami, do you need anything?"

"Your ass in my office. I will kill that girl with my bare hands, Ngcobo. She's testing me, I don't need these complications in my life. I'm trying to repair my son and this is what she does to me?"

The line is silent a second. "I'm coming. You're at the office?"

I nod my head and then remember that he can't see me. "Sheshisa, Ngcobo. The thoughts going through my mind...she's going to die a painful death. I can no longer entertain her rubbish." The line is silent for so long and I look at my phone and realize that he hung up. He dropped the call on me. The audacity!

Throwing the gadget on my desk, I go through my emails on the laptop in front of me. There's one from Fundiswa's father. Yes, he knows all about technology – his useless children were good for something at least. He's thanking me for paying his grandchildren's school fees. I sigh, deciding that I'll reply later. What I am doing is what any good, God-fearing woman would do. From one Christian to another. The bible preaches kindness. The same kindness that was extended to his daughter, she died a peaceful death at least. Nothing at all compared to the pain she caused my son, like...Kayise.

I can feel myself growing angry as I think about her. Maybe the pain would lessen if I avenged myself properly on her daughter. Maybe my soul would be at peace if she paid for her mother's sins. I think I would. Ngcobo comes in and pauses my dark thoughts. "You're here."

"Khuluma, mkami. Kwenzenjani, kune nkinga?"

"Yes, a huge problem. Awusho, what is your precious Ntwenhle still doing in Mbongolwane? She's even meeting with my son. My son! Do you have idea how dangerous that is? Umphakathi wona? What if they put two and two together and then start whispering? What will happen if those whispers reach Nqobizitha? This will kill him! The disgrace here will not only be that his parents were siblings but if they start talking about his father? Uhlazo nje, babakhe! Ngiyomgqema ingozi mina uZimZim. Khuluma naye, Ngcobo!"

"Awu ihaba, Zengcebo. It will not reach that stage. Yehlisa umoya, ngizokhuluma naye kodwa nawe awukhathali iimfihlo? Secrets have a way of coming out, mkami. Remember the sangoma said—"

"Spare me, Ngcobo. I called you here because I want you to talk to that loose woman. Just because she's dying she thinks now she can come here and try to spend what little time she has with my son? To try and be a mother for a few months while I mothered him for twenty full years?! Enganya kimina! Uyohlangana namadlozi enu agcwele amanyala."

"Keep my ancestors out of this!" he has the balls to raise his voice at me. It's still too soft. I snort and level him with a challenging stare. "Bayahlonishwa abaphansi, Zengcebo. I told you I'd talk to ZimZim now calm down and let me deal with it...unless you want to do it?"

"If you're okay with her ending up in a body-bag before her time kulungile."

"That is one thing I will never allow, Zengcebo. You've taken too many lives but not that woman's, not hers. She's done what you couldn't do and given the Ngcobos three heirs. And even gave you one of them, a gift of a life. You're not going to kill her. Not her."

Something about the way he says this irks me. I love a challenge, yes, but this is a threat. I wonder if I am supposed to feel threatened of a man with a vagina all of a sudden. My hand is twitching, begging me to remind him of his place. I may not have given birth to Nqobizitha but he is mine – in every sense of the

word. I'll kill people before I let them get in the way of what I have with him. Before they claim positions that never belonged to them in the first place.

"I've heard enough of this rubbish," I tell Ngcobo, moving from my desk to stand in front of him. He meets my intimidating stare. A rare occurrence, sometimes he grows a pair of infant balls. I smile but not kindly. "I'll see you at home...my husband."

"Make sure you go to Mchunu first. Let him wet the flaking vagina and then come back once you've returned to your senses." He smiles and then bows his head a little, like Nqobizitha. "Mkami."

I want to smack that pathetic smile off of his face. He's already walking away.

Nqobizitha

"Hey,"

My vision clears a little at the sound of that voice, familiar – Chris'. He has a little smile pulling at his lips but his eyes look worried, I can tell, with the way they're searching. Maybe I should've told him to remain in the car because I don't really need him fussing after me at the moment. Sure, my stomach has been churning nastily, and my inside is riddled with guilt that makes me want to damn this whole thing to hell, but the pictures that were playing in my head also make me feel betrayed and my body is forcing me to stay rooted in this comfortable couch and there's a lot going on with me so maybe Chris shouldn't go anywhere because I'll gain cold feet and run away.

"What is it?"

"Guess what I'm thinking."

I don't have the energy for this. Not now.

“Angazi, dali.”

“That I love you and am super proud of you.”

My heart shouldn't beam the way it does, his words penetrate the darkness a little. I lift our joined hands and kiss his knuckles. He helped me to find a suitable therapist around Eshowe that I would most likely feel comfortable with. I prefer someone who looks like me and comes from a background like mine. We got Dr. Langa and MaKhathide spoke to him first to find out if he's competent. I'm having my first session with him today. I told my parents I'd go on my own. Well, I told my father that Chris was going to come with me and that he didn't need to come with me. MaKhathide is busy all the time.

“Mr. Ngcobo,” the black lady with that nauseating accent of hers calls me. I look at her and she tells me to get ready. I check the time on my watch – 11:58am. Just two more minutes. My leg starts to bounce up and down nervously. I feel sick, my head starts to hurt, and I really can't do this. I don't want to do this. I don't want to talk. I don't want to do anything. Or say anything. To anyone. “Mr. Ngcobo, Dr. Langa is ready for you now.”

My vision comes back again just in time to see a white man bidding the receptionist goodbye. Chris squeezes my hand and, right. I stand up and walk on shaky feet toward the intimidating brown door. It's already ajar a little. I still knock and enter upon permission. Dr. Langa is a short man. Well, most people are short compared to me. He has a trust me expression on his face and we shake hands before he instructs me and Chris to sit on one of the couches.

“Hello,” his voice is warm.

“Hi!” Chris replies, a little nervous it seems. “My name's Chris.”

Dr. Langa smiles and gives him a once over. “Its nice to meet you, Chris. I'm taking that this is Nqobizitha Ngcobo?” his eyes find mine.

I shift in my seat and clear my throat. “That's me.”

“Yes, I spoke to your mother. I'm glad that I can finally put a face to the name. How are you feeling today?”

Has this session started already? Is he going to psychoanalyze me?

“Ngyaphila, bafo.” He’s young, around Ntethe’s age.

I get a chuckle from him. “Konje ekhaya kuseMbongolwane. I love your jersey.”

“It cost R2500, I’m sure you can afford it.” I don’t know why I feel the need to say that.

Chris and him laugh again as a small smile plays on my lips as well. I can feel my body relaxing a little. I am not sure what I’d expected but I thought he would just get into it and ask me about my reason for being here today, like Chris and I saw in those therapy videos we watched together. “Don’t let my profession fool you, I’m broke. I can’t afford chappies.”

“We’ll get you some next time,” I say.

He laughs but nods his head. “We’re going to start, nothing hectic. I just want to know more about you. Today, we’re going to be learning about each other. Before we continue, I want to know if you’d like to attend your therapy session with him? I don’t mind but I don’t want anything to distract you.”

I wanted Chris here but maybe he has a point.

“I can wait outside then,” Chris offers. He’s already standing to his feet. “I tend to have a big mouth sometimes and I don’t want to disturb anything. Maybe I can find out about how much I would have to pay you for a 15 minute session for myself because I’m also broke.”

Dr. Langa agrees with a chuckle.

Chris leans down to kiss my lips softly. “Ngyakuthanda,” he whispers.

“Nami, dali.” I watch him make his way to the door, until he isn’t in the room anymore. I turn my attention to the Dr. Langa. “We can continue.”

“Young love,” he smiles and shakes his head. “Right. I want you to tell me about yourself.”

Without Chris here, I find myself feeling a bit suffocated. With Dr. Langa’s permission, I remove my jersey and remain in just my pants. Right. He asked me to tell him about myself. I force myself to try and relax before opening my mouth. “I am Nqobizitha Ngcobo...”

Mutual Desires : Thirty-seven

MaKhathide

“What did he say?” Mchunu chuckles and kisses down my neck, taking off my bra as he continues seducing me with his fingers. I’ve missed him and perhaps Ngcobo had been right about me needing to blow off some steam. “If he didn’t spend half his life spreading his legs for that man he’d have learned to properly appreciate your velvet cake. Thirteen kids later and it’s still so tight and warm.”

Kegel exercises do that. I smile and return Mchunu’s hot kiss. It never feels awkward to be vulnerable around him like this. To have him see all of me naked. I’ve done my best to take care of my body over the years and its paid off. People think old people no longer have stamina, that they can’t keep up in bed. In actual fact we’re the most experienced, we know where to touch and how. I allow myself to relax as Mchunu’s head finds its way in between my legs.

“Mmm...” I moan as his nose presses against my bean. “Don’t tease tonight, Bhekabelungu. It’s been a long day and I came here for you to take me away from it—uhh!” Incomprehensible words leave me after that. His mouth was always heaven. He is sucking my clit into his mouth and blowing against it gently before circling his tongue around my nub, tasting my delicious honeypot. I squeeze him in and drag my hands to my nipples to play with as his tongue delves into my slit, lapping up the juices that have been there since I came here. “Suck harder, mmm, that’s it there. There.”

My hands keep him exactly where he is as he sucks harder and faster. He’s using his fingers and tongue, teasing and playing with my clit until my body is trembling. My hips keep bucking up automatically until I lock up. I close my eyes as my climax comes crashing down on me. Mchunu sucks a couple more times before crawling up my body to cover it with his large one. His potbelly rests on my small frame. “You’re so beautiful, mkami.”

“I don’t want to be crass, Mchunu. I need you right now.” I am still so soaked, aching and ready for more. His arm slides under my waist, as he pulls me closer to him, making our naked bodies come together. I can feel his erect penis right against my clit. He moved his hips slightly, grinding against me and forces a moan from my lips. “Don’t make me beg!” I growl.

“Why?” his hand strokes my small breast and his fingers will occasionally pull on my nipple. “I love you when you beg, mkami. A powerful like yourself begging lousy old me, a mere spaza shop owner.”

Those words don't sit well with me. "I loved you before it all, Bhekabelungu. I love you despite it all. I will continue to love you until my dying day."

A smile plays at his lips and I hold my breath as he slides it in. He is moaning above me as he slides farther inside until he is balls deep. My arms fold around his chest as he starts to thrust into me, his erection hitting me perfectly and causing me to moan. He brings his lips to mine and kisses me as he starts to pump faster. I break free from the kiss with a gasp and hook my legs around his waist to pull him in deeper. "Harder! Go harder!" I moan-scream the instruction as he pumps into me with his hand stimulating my clit.

I moan in his mouth as I feel my body locking up deliciously. My juices drench his penis as he pumps a few more times before he is releasing inside me. He collapses on top of me and kisses my cheek. "Zengcebo..."

"You have two minutes to recover. I want to go another round," I say, nonnegotiable.

"Have you talked to your son?" I ask Mchunu as I sloppily button up my blouse, my hands are still trembling in a way that hasn't felt this good in weeks. Perhaps Ngcobo had been right about me needing proper servicing, I feel really good right now. "I'll shoot him if he thinks he can come to my house to seek my daughter's hand in marriage. Uhlazo nje, Mchunu."

His arms snake around my waist, our eyes meet on the mirror. My heart jumps, like it always does when I'm with him. I'm taken back, back to when I was just a little girl, insanely attracted to the young Bhekabelungu Mchunu. He was a charmer – still is – and all of the girls around Ntamoyenkunzi were attracted to him, there would always be whispers – about one girl or the other that he was dating. I never cared back then, I was determined to make him mine. Every day, I'd prepare food for my parents and hide some of it to take to him in the green hills where he always herded John Biyela's livestock. It didn't take long for us to begin a relationship, I'd caught his eye the first time he laid eyes on me. We were in love, intensely so. I remember the numerous days spent under the sun, tucked away from the world, back then I hadn't needed anything else. Just him.

"Remember the first time we made love?" his hoarse voice kisses my right ear.

“You mean when you tricked me,” the memory brings a smile to my lips. “When you told me that we’d have to do it every day so that I wouldn’t lose more blood.”

His response is to kiss the corner of my mouth, one of his hands trailing down to hitch my dress up. He taps on my honeypot. “If I remember correctly, you became addicted to it. Suddenly, you were the one coming up with any excuse you could think of to keep doing it.” My body shudders as dampness spreads the fabric of my underwear. My breathing grows deeper as his other hand cups my breast. I don’t think I can do this again. “Kusebusuku, Mchunu. I don’t think I can stay for another round.”

He’s disappointed, I can hear it in his little sigh. This is not like the old times, when we were so young that nothing else in the world mattered but the love we shared. “I remember thinking I had you...forever.” his words are full of nostalgia, and it reminds me of the unfairness of it all. There’s never enough time, never enough.

My smile dies painfully. “You always did love better than anyone. Remember you used to give me all your nights and...we were foolishly in love. Just foolish. To proclaim our love and make plans for the future was all we needed. Back then, it was all we needed. I miss the simplicity of it all.”

“Me too,” Mchunu kisses the back of my neck. “Kodwa ngyakuthanda MaKhathide. Akusoze kwashintsha lokho, wakhethwa yinhliziyoyami wena. (I love you. That will never change, my heart chose you)”

“You’re 61 years now, you’re not supposed to say things like this,” I whisper, turning in his arms. The years have been kind to him, he hasn’t changed much from the desirable boy I remember back then. He’s aged like fine wine and I’ve had the pleasure of growing with him – with more ease when his wife died thirty years ago. “I need you to be firm with your son, sthandwa sami. Imagine this abomination of my daughter marrying the son of my lover, my soulmate.”

“Yehlisa umoya. Why do you like to stress about things that you have no control over? Ziyeke iingane, Zengcebo. They’re not related, me and you will never have a chance at marriage, let them love freely. Don’t force them apart like we were done. Better than anyone else, you’re supposed to be understanding of their love.”

He’s right, I know he is. It’s just with Ndoniyamanzi, she stood her ground on marrying the person she loved and not someone we chose – unlike her sisters – and still went ahead and got burnt. This is what happens when I allow these children to do whatever they want. This is what happens when I do not exercise my authority. Lives become a mess and I have to damage control. Aside from that, it irks me

that Ndoni would date the son of the man I am in love with. Akwehli kahle. I'm put off by the entire relationship she has with Mchunu's son.

"Just try and talk to him first. This thing irks me, Bhekabelungu."

He sighs and cups my hands in his cheeks. "I'll do it, mkami. Just know that I will not try and persuade my son to change his mind on your daughter. If he loves her then it's my duty as his father to welcome the woman he's fallen in love with."

"I—" he cuts me off with a kiss to my lips. The memories come rushing in and suddenly I'm young again, eager to make him happy. He stills every tempest and I am calm. "Fine," I am heaving by the time he separates our lips. "Lobola will not be cheap, Mchunu. If your boy is persistent about this then he should know that my daughters are my pride and joy. Ndoni is an intelligent young woman, educated, make sure he knows that."

"Iyakuthanda indoda, MaKhathide."

Sigh. I hate it when he does this. "Udina kabi wena, Bhekabelungu." Why am I returning his stupid smile? This is the same smile he gave me after he tricked me into having sex with him. I was mad then and naively happy. These butterflies I am feeling in my belly, I feel young again. "Sengihembe."

"I don't want you to go."

What is this? Is he an infant that suddenly can't cope without his mother nearby?

He presses his forehead to mine and holds my waist firmly, his eyes trained on mine. "Spend the night with me, Zengcebo. I haven't seen you all week, let's make up for lost time, ngike ngifudumeze umamba kancane, Ngcengce wami." I can feel my biscuit reacting to his begging, his words reawaken the fire. And I want be irritated by the audacity of a grown man to beg me for sex but I am not. I find myself returning Mchunu's kiss, it's full of tongue and teeth but I don't mind. There is a sensuality to it that I cannot get over. "Bhekabelungu..."

"Don't go," he repeats firmly.

His begging tugs at parts of me that only he can reach, where the warmth is hidden, he coaxes it out without trying to hard. I let him kiss me to his heart's content and look up at the eyes I have loved for more than four decades. "Show me why," after I've whispered the words, I give Mchunu a small smile – accepting defeat. His fingers work on unbuttoning my blouse.

Christophe

My head lifts up to meet his lips in a passionate kiss. I can feel his fingers greedily pressing into me a couple more times before they're leaving me for something much thicker and bigger. My voice cracks quietly as his erection presses into me, we haven't done this in a while, since that afternoon. I think we've both been scared since – and he'd turn me down. This time though, he woke me up in the middle of the night and it's how I find myself on my back with my legs readily accommodating him in between them. I arch into the strong body holding me down as Nqobizitha fills me, little by little, hard and thick. My voice cracks again, my body shaking uncontrollably. Nqoba's almost too much for me to take. Too thick, too wide, too big. But I think this is why it's perfect. He is gripping me, pressing into my body and burying himself into me, groaning as if savouring the warmth of my skin, the feeling of the scorching, velvety heat that he's buried himself in. He gives me some time to adjust to the full sensation, as I attempt to breathe through the pain, wiggling my body to silently tell him to move.

A moan tumbles from deep inside my throat as he thrusts into me – slow and gentle. Okay, we're making love tonight. My fingers dig into his skin as I arch into his muscular body, my erect nipples touching his inflamed chest, as he holds me by my waist and continues thrusting into me. It's too sweet, so sweet that I want him to stop and continue at the same time. My mind is delirious, can't really comprehend how he can reduce me to a sobbing mess. He understands now, and holds me to him, rolling his hips and pushing all the way in and then out again. I'm breathing heavily into his ear, one of my arms around his back, my fingers digging deeper into him with each thrust and my other hand stroking my dick in time with his thrusts.

It's slow and sensual, he's connecting with my body and having a deep conversation with it. The submission comes naturally as I become increasingly wet for him. "I love you," my whispered words touch his lips. Our foreheads touch and he breathes into me with every thrust. He's silent as night, his dark eyes momentarily shifting to where our bodies are joined. My hole is creaming on his dick – thick and buttery. It's only ever happened with him, only he can pleasure me like this. I can feel my orgasm gradually building – scorching and intense, like a wildfire – and my arms wrap around his shoulders as my toes curl together very tight. I am shuddering, my belly tightening in knots, and the rhythmic sound of his dick connecting with my ass is going to be the death of me. "God..."

“Stay with me,” he whispers, one of his hands finding its way to my throat. He squeezes tight and my eyes snap open. He pounds deeper, harder – but slow and still so sensual. “Please stay with me.” There’s pain in his voice. I can’t say a word with his hand around my throat. I grip his shoulders and rock back into him, my hole taking in as much of him as possible. “Mama wami...” he groans, his pumping growing agitated, as I tense beneath him. My dick is deflating at the same rate that my heart is breaking. I gasp as his orgasm hits me hard and without notice. He collapses on top of me and buries his face in my neck. I catch something about betrayal but most of his words are mumbled gibberish, pained gibberish. I hug him tight and allow him to vent it all out.

I couldn’t sleep after that issue with ‘Mama wami’. I just couldn’t. His words hurt me, I know they’re not on purpose but they still hurt. I don’t know if I should be mad at him or Dr. Langa. What is he doing in therapy with Nqobizitha? Granted, Nqoba’s only attended two sessions and will have another one this Thursday so maybe they haven’t even covered Ntombikayise yet. But he’s remembering things about her. He’ll find himself remembering a tiny detail about her randomly. Certain notes in her voice that would help him determine her mood. That way he’d know how to handle her so that he wouldn’t be at her mercy. He didn’t remember it before but two days ago, he told me.

Maybe I should be relieved that he’s comfortable enough to reveal all these things to me but I won’t be able to stand it if this ‘Mama wami’ thing will be recurring. Its disturbing to think about. I don’t want to become her. I don’t want him to use me like that. I want him to work through his past issues and put her behind him. I learned somewhere that healing has no timeframe, it’s a lifetime thing. But I hope we won’t be stuck with Ntombikayise for the rest of our lives. Maybe I’ll ask him, when he wakes up maybe I’ll ask him what was going through his mind when he said that. I know he didn’t do it on purpose.

Zenny is off today, I’m not sure what’s on her agenda but I’ll make her breakfast because pregnant women shouldn’t be allowed to move around a lot. That’s what Nqobizitha told me the other day. It’s 06:00am now and she usually wakes up around 06:30 – 07:00am. I can hear some noise as I pass her room and conclude that she’s already awake. Let me quickly make breakfast then. I place the pan on the stove and then grab some eggs from the fridge. I grab some russians and bacon and viennas also. She loves meat a lot. “It smells good in here!” her voice is loud like usual. I jump and my eyes lift from my phone. “Who are you talking so early in the morning?”

Jacques. He sent me some pictures of a party he hosted the other day, funded by one of his ‘sponsors’. I just find it funny that Hugo was in attendance as well. Jacques’ sugardaddies give him money to splash

on his boyfriends. I think he was trying to make me jealous when he sent those pictures but I am not. I'm not sure why they're both trying so hard when I couldn't be bothered. "Sit down, sisi. I made breakfast."

"Weeehhh, I hope you're not cheating on Nqobizitha. I will chop off your penis if it starts to have a wandering eye. At least break up with him first."

I'm supposed to feel threatened by her words but I find myself giving her a silly smile. Her fairness is what I live for. She doesn't pick sides. I should come to her when Nqobizitha and I go through our shit sometimes. I just can't come to her about this 'Mama wami' issue because not many people know about it. Not even Nhlakanipho. I don't think Nqoba is ready for him to know. "I'm not cheating on him, sisi. He's my boyfriend, I love him. I wouldn't cheat," I assure her.

She just yawns and eyes the food on the tray predatorily. Hell no, she's not going to eat yet. I'm not done. I decide to play music and then place my phone on the counter and continue cooking. Nqobizitha ambles into the kitchen later on, I can always sense him. I hear him mumble a greeting to Zenny as a familiar heavy feeling settles behind me. He wraps his arms around me and kisses the top of my head. "Morning, dali."

"Hey," I don't turn to look at him. I still have to muster up the courage to pretend nothing happened last night...at least until we're alone. I don't want Zenny to think we're having any troubles. "How did you sleep?"

"Fine," he says simply. "What are we eating?"

"Greasy fat," I mutter and turn the stove off. He helps me with the plates and gets himself the cold-drink in the fridge. He walks around this house like he lives here. Honestly, I'm fine with it. I'm glad that he's so comfortable around here. "Don't forget that we need to visit Mam' Ntwenhle today. Uyahamba k'sasa. (She's leaving tomorrow)"

Nqoba nods his head, mouth stuffed so full he looks like a chipmunk. I forget he never talks when eating. I shake my head and giggle, finding the sight in front of me so amusing. I pick at my food, it's not much but I don't have much of an appetite. My mind is all over the place. Maybe Nqoba notices, with the way he grips my hand to kiss my knuckles.

“Ntwenhle...Ntwenhle... you’re talking about Ntwenhle Mzimela?” Zenny snaps her fingers. So this is why her face had been scrunched up for so long, she was trying to place the name.

“Do you know her?” Nqoba looks at her.

“She is Zemvelo’s friend...” Zenny shakes her head. “Well, she was. Long time ago, I was younger than them but I’d follow them around a lot. She lived there by the poor side of Mbongolwane. A small house but she had dreams and then one day she just disappeared. Not long after Simiso Ngcobo, your uncle, passed on,” she points at Nqobizitha. “People suspected her of witchcraft, they did have a brief fling after all. And get this, word around the town is that they were re—”

“Did you hear that Nhloshhle stole Gogo MaNzuza’s bank card and withdrew her grant money. The elders are looking for him and he’s in big trouble. Bafuna ukum’thela induku. (They want to beat him up)”

“INI?!” Zenny laughs like a lunatic and shakes her head in disbelief. I let out a small breath, shifting my attention to Nqobizitha who seems amused by her antics. I want him to find out the truth but not this way. What if he puts two and two together? I can’t have that. This is why Mam’ Ntwenhle should just tell him the truth. What if there’s this invisible pull that is steering him towards his brothers? What if they find out about each other all on their own one day? What if they discover that the lives they know and live are just lies upon lies? That secrets were kept from them?

I can no longer hear everything Zenny is saying but she is cussing out Nhloshhle. He’s just like Lwandle apparently and she blames it on the drugs. I am taken to when Nqoba and I bumped into Thandolwenkosi with Lwandle in Durban just a few days ago. I’d raised my brows in question because she said they broke up but I think she was lying. I’m not even going to blame her for this. It’s Lwandle’s fault for having such predatory behaviour. Why the hell does he continuously insist on dating a child?

After we’ve eaten and taken care of the dishes, we make our way to Mam’ Ntwenhle’s. “Sthandwa sami...” I briefly peer over at Nqobizitha who is focused on the road. He’s always such a careful driver. “How are you feeling?”

“What, are you my therapist now?” he teases and considers me a second before shifting his focus to the road again. “I’m fine, Bambi. How about you?”

“Not really fine, not completely. Something happened last night and its affecting me. I, um, y-you. When we were having sex you called me ‘Mama wami’. You asked me to stay with you and you called me her. I don’t know why you did that but I-I know it wasn’t on purpose. It just—I love you but it hurt. A lot.”

The car is silent, I don’t know what I am expecting him to say. He remains silent for so long that his quiet, “I’m sorry,” startles me a little. “I am not going to lie, I don’t really remember. In the beginning I was having sex with you but then things got blurred and it was her face under me. I don’t understand a lot of things at the moment, Bambi. I want to hate her yes, I do. When I recall some bad memories then I do hate her. I’m confused because there are good times and I don’t know if I should completely hate her. She’s been a part of me for so long.”

“Ngiyezwa,” I nod my head. Frustration grabs me by the balls but I don’t voice it out. My eyes are trained outside the window, to the little kids playing in the grass and running around. I really want him to hate her. Right now, I don’t think he views that woman as his rapist. She’s just the woman who hurt him but not a paedophile, a rapist. I think he considers her an ex...and it’s so fucking frustrating.

“Uthuk’thele,” still so quiet.

No, I’m not angry. I’m hurt and frustrated.

“Bambi?”

I swallow the lumps in my throat and blink my eyes rapidly.

“Usho masel’phelile iconsi.”

I fucking hate him.

Nqobizitha

“Ungang’khohlwa, bafo. Don’t let those Johannesburg brats steal you away from me,” I mutter as I give Nhlakanipho a man hug. “I don’t want to say I’ll miss you kodwa ngizok’khumbula, mpintsh’ yami.”

We’re at Eshowe taxi rank. Mam’ Thokozile and the others are going to Johannesburg. Right now, they’re waiting for the taxi to fill up. It’s the last one that will load passengers going to that side apparently but they’re short with three more people before they can leave. It’s 10:00am now and Mam’ Thoko has been huffing under her breath about how they’ll be arriving in Johannesburg late into the night. She fears the thugs in a place called Park Station. The crime is very bad there apparently, and the hobos have no mercy and will take all your belongings. I don’t know why they didn’t take Nhlakanipho’s car instead or even Bab’ Shandu’s car. It would’ve been easier that way.

Nhlakanipho punches my arm and looks at Siyabonga whose ears are being talked off by Chris because he wants them to visit this place and that place. Nhlakanipho shakes his head. “I doubt I’ll be missed much with him in your company,” he nods toward Chris.

“Uyadlala wena, you’re irreplaceable in my books. Manje nibuya nini ekhaya?”

“When Lesego leaves,” Siya answers, he’s beside us now. “No offense but I’m so happy that we won’t be around your extended family, especially that girl, for once. Ithanda abafana leyangane, ayincane ngaleso skhathi. Talk to her, Nqobizitha. She must date boys her own age. Boys our age will just take advantage of her and make her pregnant then dump her with a child that she doesn’t need. Let her be with the immature ones that play soccer all day.”

Nhlakanipho is looking at me, amused. I laugh with him. Yes, because it’s the holidays most of my mother’s grandkids are here. I’ve been trying to spend time with them but they’re too hyperactive. I can’t keep up with a toddler’s energy. I don’t have time for that rubbish. Around 11:00am, the final person to fill up the taxi appears and we’re forced to bid our final goodbyes to Nhlakanipho and company before Chris and I drive off to Dr. Langa’s offices. All my appointments with him are at noon and I meet him every Thursday and Friday. We didn’t cover much yesterday because I didn’t feel like talking so I didn’t. Today, I’ll do my best.

“Nqobizitha Ngcobo,” Dr. Langa gives me a warm welcome as I enter his office. Chris is waiting outside like usual. “Kunjani, bhut’ wami?”

“I’m doing really good,” I say and sit down as instructed. “How about you doctor?”

“Also fine,” he gives me a look that makes me nervous. “I’ve been thinking about our last session and how it went. I’d like to think that you’ve thought about it as well. I have feedback from it but I just want to gather your feedback first. How did you feel about it, and why? Just things like that.”

I rack my brains for something to say. I don’t have much to say about that therapy session. “I mean I didn’t speak much, doctor. I don’t know if I have feedback about it.”

“Will you tell me why you didn’t feel the need to talk?”

I am silent a second, trying to find the words to explain. Some days, the world seems to weigh down on me. Some days it feels like I can’t breathe. I’ve spent most of my life looking for Ntombikayise in all these different women and then it turns out that everything I thought was good is actually bad. I want to hate her, I truly do. I recall some of things she did to me in my sleep sometimes and it hurts. There’s a very deep hole that feels like someone woke up one morning and dug it. The hole is dark and hollow. Sometimes I can’t get the light to penetrate it. Sometimes it gets so bad that I think the solution would be to die. It’s strange because I don’t want to die but sometimes I just feel like that would be the solution. Because there’s a lot of things I can’t make sense of. Too many of them.

“I’m not used to all this...” I point around his office. “Black people don’t do this, doctor. They don’t pay someone to talk to them and hear them out. I’m not used to this and it feels a little funny. It brings up emotions I don’t understand or like.”

“What emotions?”

“Fear, vulnerability. I don’t want to feel small.”

“Don’t you think it’s good to be small sometimes? To be vulnerable?”

I shake my head. Maybe back then it was a good thing, maybe back with Ntombikayise...but she, she took advantage of me. I thought she loved me but now I’m not so sure. She’d break me just to be the one to comfort me. I remember, I remember a bad headache. Maybe this is why I can’t cry anymore. Sobbing gives you headaches. I remember bad headaches and how she’d be the one to carry me in her arms and comfort me. Comfort me with French kisses and her vagina buried inside my dick. She’d proclaim her love while doing that. She’d remind me that she’s the only one who cares. I believed her then. Part of me still believes her now. A whole lot of me is disgusted at myself for even feeling like that.

That same part of me reminds me everyday how the whole thing was consensual. Because why can't I really hate her if it wasn't? Sometimes I think my head will explode – and I don't know what to do with the pain. Sometimes, I feel like there's too much expectation and that Chris hates me every time I find myself unable to hate Ntombikayise. Sometimes I feel like he thinks I don't appreciate all he's doing enough. That maybe I should be onboard with him. On the same memo. Which is to hate Ntombikayise.

“Nqobizitha?”

I shake my head and quickly remove my jersey. Why is it so hot all of a sudden? I need a little bit of air. There are too many voices talking in my head. Memories attacking. Accusations being hurled at me. Why can't I hate her? I'm trying so hard but I can't. I feel betrayed and used but I can't hate her. I feel bad for that part of me that still admires her. For the memories I remember. I'm not even sure if they're real or not now. Chris told me that sometimes our brains creates these happy memories for us as a defence mechanism for all the trauma that we go through. Maybe I'd imagine the love because she was hurting me real bad.

“I really want to help you, Nqobizitha.” Someone says, its Dr. Langa. “But I can't do that if you don't talk to me.”

I fidget, feeling like a germ under a telescope. I know he's right, it's just that keeping my mouth shut is easier, and I don't want to reawaken anything, or talk about it. I am scared of finding out other things. It's bad enough that I'm recalling things that repeatedly bruise my gut day in day out. I already meet these images in my sleep and it feels like there's no escape. A simple smell and I remember what I don't want to. A certain laugh or touch.

“Therapy is not to make you uncomfortable,” he adds, “it's so you can speak to someone who you feel has no relation to you. So you can get things off your chest and talk to neutral party who is simply there to listen.”

Some part of me feels relieved at his words. “You see...” I clear my throat. “I don't like to talk – especially now. I don't want to say the wrong thing. You see Chris, that boy, he's trying to help me so much and I feel like I'm not on the same page as him. He hates her, he hates all of them and I don't. Now I'm not sure if there's anything wrong with me. Maybe I'm ungrateful, huh?”

“Is that how you feel? That you're ungrateful?”

I chuckle and try to get more comfortable in the couch I'm sitting on. "What else am I supposed to say doctor? I can't hate that woman, I'm trying but I don't know. I'm confused."

"Do you think it's possible to not like something and not hate the person? Do you think those two things can be possible at the same time?"

I shrug.

"Alright," he nods his head. "I want you to please think about that and we can discuss it next week. Let's move on a little, is there anything that you want to discuss with me?"

"The other day, I-I fucked up big time."

An hour goes by and then I'm leaving Dr. Langa's office. This session went better than the one we had yesterday. It wasn't much but it was better. I think it was. My heart feels heavy though, but there's some lightness on my shoulders. Chris smiles wide as soon as he spots me and runs into my arms. I catch him easily and hug him tight as his legs fold around my waist. He is kissing the inside of my neck. "Hey," he cups my cheeks and searches my eyes. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"How did it go?"

"Fine," I shrug my shoulders. "He gave me some homework." I think back to his question. It's too complex for me to answer. I remember in the beginning, I used to feel really bad about what that woman was doing to me. It felt wrong. I don't know when I started to enjoy it. When it turned from ugly to good. I don't remember when it became love.

"Oh..." Chris raises an eyebrow.

"There are a few things I have to be honest with you about," I say because I was also encouraged to tell Chris how I truly feel about Ntombikayise. But this one, Dr. Langa said he'll prefer I confess with him there to guide both me and Chris through it. "But we'll do it in the presence of Dr. Langa."

“Okay,” Chris smiles a bright smile. “I’m proud of you and I love you.”

I halt his movements and trap him against the wall to give him a deep kiss, expressing my gratitude. His little whimpers are forever sexy. I entwine our hands and notice the missed calls as I’m checking my phone. One from MaKhathide. Two from Mam’ Ntwenhle. I decide to start with the woman who is slowly and inexplicably snatching my heart. The phone rings twice. “Hello?” I look at the phone to make sure I’ve dialled the right number. Who is this man answering her phone? He sounds young though, but with a deep voice. “Aibo wendoda, wawusuya thula. Khuluma ufunani?”

“Uphi uMah?” I find myself asking, Chris is giving me a curious glance.

“Ukhuluma ngoMah wami? Who am I talking to?” this person is like a detective. His voice is authoritative, stern, and I feel compelled to answer like a younger brother answering to his older brother.

“Ehhe. You’re speaking to Nqobizitha, she called my phone.”

“Ngeshwa usaphumile uyolanda iindaba lapha kwaMoloi. Uyophinde ufone, nkabi yami.”

“So she has a son?” I ask, trying to think back to our conversations. I don’t remember her mentioning children. I’m jealous, I don’t know why. “Uyindodana yakhe?”

“Yebo. uSqalosenkosi igama.” There’s something proud yet humble about the way he says his name. Overall this guy sounds well-mannered, and commands an odd sort of respect even though he’s kilometers away and I can’t even see him. “Ngyaxolisa, nkabi yami. Uyophinde ufone, usale kahle.”

I guess I take too long to reply because the guy hangs up.

“What did she say?” Chris brings me to the present world.

“She has a son,” I blink my eyes, a little confused. “Weird.”

Bonus Insert

Siyabonga

He's sitting on the bed when I enter our room, looking at his phone with a frown. I hope nothing happened back home, he didn't even sense my presence. I am mildly offended, I am his sun after all, and his world revolves around me. "Mzimela," I call out, closing the door behind me, as his eyes finally lift up to meet mine. "You're finally awake," I sit on his lap and fold my arms around his neck to give him his first morning kiss. "I missed you so much," I tell him. "In my dreams, I didn't meet you. Well I didn't dream at all last night."

I get his subtle smile in return, as his wandering hands move to grip my ass. I shift around to give him more access. "You were missed too." The frown returns and I get the urge to iron out the crease on his forehead. I do, and brush one of his brows with my thumb. "You have a message on your phone."

"Oh...did you read it?"

"Yes," he nods his head. "I thought you said that Thandolwenkosi broke up with Lwandle. What is this message from Chris?" he gives me my phone as my lower lip hides in between my teeth anxiously.

I grab my phone and my eyes quickly scan the message. Chris says he's spotting them together more frequently and he doesn't know what to do because she won't listen. He's scared of Lwandle because the guy is homophobic and the few times that Chris has encountered him have been unfriendly. The message is long and a little dramatic – just like the matches stick himself. He's thinking about telling Thando to at least use protection with the guy, so that she won't get pregnant and potentially inconvenience herself. At least he was smart to think that. Clearly this girl thinks she's an adult now which means that she'll have to be responsible like one.

"Baby..."

I don't get to finish what I want to say – which is nothing because I am speechless and this husband of mine looks really upset – before Nhlakanipho is setting me on the bed and standing. I stare at the phone and wonder how to respond to Chris. I can feel myself getting a little irritated that he sent me this message when he knows damn well that Nhlakanipho has access to my phone, now our trip is going to be ruined because of this. Damn Thandolwenkosi! Why does she have to make everything so damn

difficult? She acts like she comes from riches when it couldn't be further from the truth. Nhlakanipho's pacing is making me a little dizzy but I don't think I can voice it out at the moment. He needs to calm down. So my eyes remain on my phone as I do my best to not let the silence get to me.

"When are we going back home?"

We've only been here for a week, we're supposed to stay for another one. Then we'll spend the final week back home in Mbongolwane. "Not any time soon," I make sure my voice is stern. He's not going to do this, he doesn't have to take care of everything all the damn time. Sometimes people need to get burned to learn from their mistakes. Thandolwenkosi is intent on dating Lwandle, nothing we say will make a difference. "I'll tell Chris to talk to her."

He stops and our eyes lock, and I hate how his facial expressions are a mystery even to me sometimes. I can't read the look on his face, I know he's holding back on his anger because of the calm aura surrounding him. It makes me glad that we're not at home now because I just know that he would've been five seconds away from hitting his sister with the belt. "He's talked to her before. Has it made a difference, Phakade lami?"

I chew the inside of my cheek and shake my head.

"Tsk, tsk..." he shakes his head and rubs his face a few times before peering over at me. His handsome face still so mysterious. "When I get my hands on Lwandle Gcwensa," his voice is cold and threatening, "not even his ancestors will save him from what I will do to him. No one touches my siblings, Siyabonga. Thandolwenkosi is too young to have sex! Let alone be in a relationship with a man that old."

Sigh. We've discussed this so many times. This ogre of mine. I don't condone her having sex with an adult but she's the same age as me, actually, I'm even younger than her by a year. I don't think she should be sleeping with Lwandle of course but its normal for teenagers to have sex now. We have sex and enjoy it. Why should we condemn Thando for doing the same? The only problem I have with this is that she's dating someone way older. "If you feel so strongly about teenagers having sex then maybe we should stop as well."

"Watch how you speak to me," he narrows his eyes.

"I'm just saying, baby. I don't like the way he's dating her as well but try 'talking' to the other party because your sister is persistent," I emphasize the word 'talking' because I don't want him to talk with his fists but his mouth. Unfortunately, he's not much of a talker. "Don't cause problems by putting your hands on him, please. Lwandle is dangerous, a woonga dealer and what if he has a gun or something? Talk with your mouth not your hands."

He is unfazed by my words. Trust his stubborn ass to not be threatened by someone who is a thug and nuisance within the community. Well, Lwandle usually minds his own business and has fun with those he considers friends, so he doesn't really bother anyone but still...he's a drug dealer. Drug dealers carry guns to protect themselves. That's what I see on those crime films. "A man faces another man without the other things, Phakade lami. You step up to me with confidence in yourself that your fists alone can prove your manhood. He's not too much of a man if he has to rely on weapons."

"You're hopeless, Nhlakanipho." I move to stand in front of him. "But please don't beat that man up, for my and your family's sake. We need you with us all the time, not in a prison cell. linyanga zihamba ngok'shesha manje. We're so close to our freedom, don't let your impulsive behaviour snatch that from us."

"Sometimes I think it would be better to just stay at home to keep an eye on everyone. To help Gogo." The conflict is there in his eyes, his hands wander to my ass again. I bite my bottom lip as he squeezes it to his heart's content.

"Gogo wouldn't allow it, you know that. You're the first one in your family who will matriculate, the first one who will be going to university. You're inspiring your siblings so much. You're making Gogo so proud. You're making me, your husband, very, very proud. You're going to make our future children super proud because they'll always remember how Baba came from nothing but strived to fight for their comfortable future. So no, you're not going to be in Mbongolwane next year. We'll have our own apartment and I'll be annoying you so much because I'll finally be affectionate with you. Imagine all the handholding and kissing and sex. Plenty of sex. You love sex."

"You sure know how to persuade a man," again those naughty hands, they maneuver inside my sweatpants and under my underwear. My heartbeat accelerates. Skin to skin. "Bend over for me and convince me some more." It's an instruction. One I have no problem abiding to.

I have to take another bath after we're done. His seed is leaking out of my ass and its uncomfortable to walk. There are voices coming from the kitchen, I think. My mother's sister has a large family here – almost like Nqobizitha and his family. She lives in Diepkloof and I have to admit that this place isn't so bad. Most of the people are so friendly and her children have made us feel so welcome. I love little kids so I enjoy being around her youngest son a lot. His name is Okuhle and he's the smartest bean. He's not even two years old but his ability to learn about the world around him is fascinating. Nhlakanipho feels weird around any child who isn't his sibling. He never knows what to do with Okuhle and it's even worse because my cousin seems to love my handsome boyfriend, love of my life, husband, soulmate, to the moon and back.

We're spending our day outdoors again today. Yesterday, we went to Maboneng and it was nice. We had a beautiful lunch with one of my cousins. She's fifteen years old and the excitement on her face when she realized that Nhlakanipho and I are together, together. It makes me laugh just thinking about it. I'm just glad she didn't stereotype and starting calling us ghyel or crap like that. She did admit that she's never met gays like me and Nhlakanipho before. Okay, Nhlakanipho. His level of testosterone is off the charts apparently. I try to keep up but I prefer to use my emotional intelligence a lot.

Nhlakanipho comes into the room as I am looking for something presentable to wear. He has a towel wrapped around his waist and I drool. I don't act on it because Okuhle is clinging to his leg and calling the love of my life 'Nipho, Nipho'. This gorgeous husband of mine does roll his eyes and sighs though. "Let me pick something out for you to wear," I tell him because Okuhle isn't letting go of him easily.

He primarily likes to wear black. There's truly not much variety in his wardrobe so I grab a pair of black formfitting jeans and a short-sleeved black shirt. His socks have a bit of colour though and that's only because I buy him a pair every time my mother and I go to Eshowe mall for shopping. I grab the grey pair and the belt that was around my throat just last night. I grab my cousin as soon as I'm dressed and kiss Nhlakanipho on the lips. "Ngyakuthanda, baby." I whisper.

"Nhliziyo yami," his smile makes all of me weak.

I clear my daze and make the decision to leave this room. Okuhle is mumbling something and pointing at something on my phone. Its pictures from the time we went to Richard's Bay with Chris and Nqobizitha. Our first ever double date, it feels like so long ago, and so many things have happened since then. I find myself appreciating Chris for waltzing into our lives unexpected. Before him, I felt I was drowning keeping my relationship with Nhlakanipho to myself. I felt trapped because I couldn't talk about it. It sucks that I can't really do that even now but Chris is here and talking to him helps me breathe. I love talking about love with him. I guess this is why he's become a best friend. Bestie he likes to say. He's an idiot. A very loveable one.

“Sengibuyile,” I announce as I enter the kitchen – and then pause momentarily as my eyes find a new person in the kitchen. Oh. Who is this? “Sawubona,” I greet the boy. He’s really light in complexion with pouty pink lips, a small frame, and girly looking. He’s giving me gay vibes. I don’t like the way he eyes me from head to toe and then quickly looks away. Is he...blushing?

My mother and aunt both look over to me. “Did you wake umkhwenyana?” since my cousin spilled the beans to her mother about my sexuality, they’ve been calling Nhlakanipho ‘umkhwenyana’ like crazy. They’ve been teasing nonstop and I, I hate to see it. Okay, that’s a lie. I realize how blessed I am. I’ve yet to encounter a homophobe in my family. Their support means the world to me. “His food will grow cold and it’s not as appetizing once you warm it up, there’s always a difference. Maybe you should take—”

“Awu, ihaba auntie,” I chuckle and sit down across from Nomzulu – my cousin. It’s a little uncomfortable, and I shift around to find a comfortable position to sit in. Nomzulu giggles like she knows something, I hope not. Her room is right next to ours though and I...let me not even think about this. “He’s coming, he was just getting dressed.”

“Alright. I don’t know where Nomzulu left her manners this morning. She seems to have forgotten to introduce you to one of her friends.”

“I’m Thatego,” the boy gives me a friendly smile. Jesus, he’s so pretty – to the point of surrealism. He’s like a doll actually and his skin is glowing. I wonder if I can ask him for his skincare routine. “It’s really nice to meet you. Zulu told me a lot about you.”

I arch my brow and look between Nomzulu and this boy. “Oh really?”

“That you’re gay. But she’s an asshole,” he huffs and gently elbows my cousin’s side. “She didn’t bother to tell me that you’re taken. I wouldn’t have wasted my time.”

“I said I was suspecting,” Nomzulu giggles and points behind me. “I just didn’t know for sure until they confirmed it yesterday. Anyway, that’s his boyfriend, Nhlakanipho.”

I don’t know how Nhlakanipho reacts to her words but I do see him greet my mother and aunt and then he sits down beside me. He extends his hand to the thin boy. “Sawubona, I’m Nhlakanipho.”

Thatego blinks a few seconds then fans himself. "Wiybo, so you two gorgeous creatures are together and we're supposed to be okay with it. Aowa, this isn't fair bathong. Maybe I should go back to KZN with you so that I can find me a hunky boyfriend as well."

"I thought you had a crush on some Zulu guy who lives in Orlando, Thatego. What's changed?"

The boy rolls his eyes and laughs but I think he wants to cry, with the way his eyes water all of a sudden. He leans his cheek against his hand and sighs. "Mxm, osa mpotsa ka motho oo. He texted me last night and got me all excited for nothing. He just wanted me to talk to Melody and convince her to go on a date with him. I'm like his chick-scorer."

"Shem, nana. Unrequited feelings are the worst neh?" she claps the boy's back gently but he shrugs her off and sighs. Nomzulu kisses his cheek and squeezes him in a hug. "When am I meeting him kanti?"

Thatego looks over his shoulder, to my mother and her sister. "Are they okay with you going to Orlando tonight? There's a house party at a friend's place. You can meet him there but he's a manwhore and I don't want him to seduce you."

"Ew!" her nose scrunches up in distaste. "He's so much older than me, chomie. Mama would skin me alive. Futhi ke, I trust Nhlakanipho to scare the opportunists off. Mama singahamba angithi?"

Nhlakanipho looks at me and he's actually smiling. I can tell that he really likes my cousin. "Why isn't Thandolwenkosi like her?" he asks me quietly.

"Don't compare, baby." I chide him and then lean into press a kiss to his lips. Our lips detach as a flash hits our closed eyes.

"Couldn't resist!" Nomzulu is screaming. "This is great content. I need to interview you guys before nibuyele ekhaya. I'm going to write fanfiction based on you two. What shall I call you? Any ideas, Thatego?"

“Keep me out of this,” the boy is amused. His nails are long and manicured. I admire the light blue colour as he clicks them against his cheek. “Girls around here either do this or accuse you of wanting to snatch their men. You’ll get used to it.”

“I got it!” Nomzulu is in her own world. “SiyaNipho. We’re joining both your names, my loves.”

“Sibadala kunawe wena, sihloniphe.” I attempt to sound as serious as I can. “Please delete that picture, its invasion of privacy and could get us into a lot of trouble.”

“Lalela ubhuti wakho wena, mahn!” my aunt comes to our aid and Nomzulu wiggles her shoulders but readily obliges. “Kanti niphuma nini lay’ndlini vele? We’ll lock you inside this house and leave thina.”

“Nhlakanipho was still finishing his food, Mah,” Nomzulu says.

Gorgeous husband shakes his head and stands with his hand in mine, forcing me up as well. “I am finished. We don’t need to delay. Singahamba.”

Thatego is our guide for the day. He knows all these hidden spots all around Johannesburg that are not crowded but still fun. We take some pictures and I think we’re going to be good friends, me and him. He shows us different res areas for Wits students. He’s eighteen years old and goes to the university himself. He’s studying the arts and loves it there. He’s sweet but confident. I like the way he unapologetically carries himself like the gal he knows he is. Yes, he calls himself a gal. He says he doesn’t find it offensive at all.

“One day when I’m brave I want to come here,” he giggles and points to a classy club as we cross a fairly empty street. We’re in Sandton now and this is a white people place apparently. He says only rich black folk dare to come here – unless you’re an employee in one of the offices or something. You can sense it though, that this place is where big shots spend their time. Even Baba with his shebeen money wouldn’t fit in a place like this. Maybe Nqobizitha and his parents because they’re really moneyed. But even they are grounded, especially Nqobizitha...he’s too simplistic.

“A BDSM club?” Nomzulu exclaims loudly. “Ew! Do you know how extreme that is?”

Nhlakanipho and I look at each other. He’s so amused, I can tell.

“How do you know?” accusation coats Thatego’s voice. “You’re only fifteen, you’re not supposed to know these things. I’ll tell your mother.”

“Mxm, nana please. I read and read and read. It’s the only way to open your mind to the knowledge that is out there. I don’t know much about this BDSM crap mara whuuu never shem. Imagine nje.”

“You’re a virgin,” Thatego rolls his eyes. “Shut your damn mouth and let’s continue.”

Nhlakanipho’s hand tightens around mine just a little as he eyes the club. We don’t know much about this BDSM thing but I’ve read about recently. We don’t practice it but I noted that sometimes our sex lives infuses BDSM play. I don’t know if I’d ever want the entire thing but its interesting. All that submission and dominance stuff. I wonder what the club looks like inside. Do big orgies happen in there or what? I’m not comfortable with the idea of orgies. I just, I don’t know. I’m also too young for this.

Thatego’s phone rings as we’re having lunch at a McDonald’s in Sandton mall. I don’t know who he’s speaking to but he gets up suddenly and says he’s on his way. “I have to go,” he gives us an apologetic smile and drops some cash on the table. “This was my treat and I really hope that you guys will be able to make it to the party.”

“Uyaphi?” Nomzulu asks him.

He bites his lower lip, looks hesitant a second, and then replies, “Sbani needs me to help him with something. Tell me you’re coming to the party later tonight?”

Nomzulu looks at me and I look at Nhlakanipho. We’re having a silent conversation. His eyes tell me yes so I nod my head at my cousin. “Yes!” she punches the air as Thatego rolls his eyes and smooches her cheeks. “Count us in, nana.”

“I’ll send you the address, gal. We’ll meet later, I love you vha?”

“Sharp gal.”

We decide to go home after lunch. I enjoyed today and I find myself growing impatient. I wish it was next year already. Wish Nhlakanipho and I could have this every day for the rest of our lives. Its 04:00pm and we're exhausted. Nomzulu offers to cook as Nhlakanipho and I go to nap. His chest is my comfy pillow and his arms around me are my heaven. I close my eyes and meet him in my dreams.

Nomzulu wakes up nearly two hours later. We freshen up and then leave by 07:30pm. My mother gives us a list of instructions but we don't have curfew. I think it's because she trusts Nhlakanipho. Just his presence is intimidating and he'll take care of us. But I can take care of myself. "Umuhle, Shandu." He tells me and I grin. We're in the backseat of an Uber, making our way to Orlando.

"Thank you, baby. Just make sure that no one tries to steal you away from me with how hot you look."

He rolls his eyes.

"You guys are pathetically in love," Nomzulu says as we exit the car outside a very nice looking house. There are boys and girls dancing on the street and its crowded. This is so weird, children dancing on the street. It's so loud. Some kids are kissing wildly in the distance. Nhlakanipho frowns and holds me firmly to his side. I don't protest and cling to his arm. "Okay, how am I going to call Thatego in this noise?"

"Use WhatsApp wengane!" I snap under my breath. These girls are giving me and Nhlakanipho looks and they're bold about it. Too bad we're not interested.

"He's inside, let's force our way through the crowd."

Oh god, its even worse inside. Sweaty bodies and different smells. This is so wild. Are there no parents in this place? What about the neighbours? "This is worse than that time in Braamfontein," Nhlakanipho tells me and he must really hate this because I didn't think anything could beat him discovering his sister is a stripper at some shady club. "Keep to me, I don't want you out of my sight."

"Heard and noted, hubby." I chuckle. "Maybe we should find the kitchen and get ourselves water to drink. I'm thirsty."

He nods his head. I tell Nomzulu but she's so hardheaded about finding Thatego that she actually ignores us and insists that she'll be back before disappearing on us. I shake my head and hold onto my

hubby's hand as we weave through the crowd and finally find the kitchen. The noise isn't here but there are voices. I pause and...freeze. Nhlakanipho has stopped moving beside me as well. I don't know if he's confused or shocked like I am. There seems to be a staring contest going on. The tension is undeniable between the girl and boy. The silence remains for so long that I'm a bit startled when one person sighs.

"Can you stop staring at me?"

"Why? You're a pleasure to look at," the boy replies in a light tone, he has a familiar mischievous smile on his lips.

"Because it's weird, alright?" the girl rolls her eyes but she's returning the guy's smile. "No one ever told you that?"

The way the boy shrugs is characteristic, familiar to the shrug of a former womanizer I know. "No."

Somehow, I don't doubt it. This guy looks like a person who's never gotten a rejection in his entire life. Like Nqobizitha. The confidence that sometimes borders on arrogance, it's there. The smile that makes all those old women drop their panties. This guy even folds his arms on his chest and stands like the boy I thought we left in Mbongolwane. What's going on? Nhlakanipho clears his throat.

Familiar brown eyes find us, unperturbed. "Can we help you?"

Bastard doesn't even greet. But now I know it's a Johannesburg thing.

"Nqobizitha," Nhlakanipho pulls me inside the kitchen and eyes the boy from head to toe. He shakes his head. "You're not him. Who are you?"

"Sbanisezwe," again the charming smile – all gleaming teeth and boyish expression. This is Nqobizitha, I don't think my eyes are deceiving me. "Whatever your woman said is a lie, my brother. Do you know that women sometimes make up stories to get you to get your shit together. It's not her, it's you actually. But as I've said, don't believe everything she says."

Nhlakanipho's frown deepens. "Which woman?"

“Err,” this Sbani blinks and I can almost hear the wheels turning in his head. “Your woman. Now you want me to guess her name?”

I chuckle without meaning to, especially as the girl here smacks his cheek and walks away. He deserves it, he’s clearly a womanizer. “I’m sorry about that. You just look eerily similar to someone I know from back home in Mbongolwane.”

“Oh crap, I didn’t think Tshepo was serious about that.”

So he knows about Nqobizitha. “I would show you his picture but I left my phone back home. I am Nhlakanipho and this is Siyabonga. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I’d say the same but you just cost me that sexy thing,” he nods towards the exit. The smile on his face contradicts his words. “I’m just kidding. You’ll tell me more about this Nqobizitha but first let me find my brother.”

“We’ll wait here,” Nhlakanipho says. “Its too loud in there.”

Sbanisezwe smiles and bows his head. Its just like Nqobizitha! I don’t know whether to laugh or be freaked out. And the fact that he’s wearing Brentwood as well... what are the chances? “This is freaky!” I tell Nhlakanipho as soon as we’re alone. “Do you think we should tell Nqobizitha to come here and see this for himself? It’s going to be so cool!”

“I don’t know yet,” Nhlakanipho appears thoughtful. “Let’s wait for him to get back here with the brother.”

We wait and wait and wait. Until we get tired. I suggest that we go back there to find him or my cousin at least. She sent me a WhatsApp message claiming she was in one of the rooms watching The Avengers. So that is where we’ll start. People are having sex in these rooms. There are two more doors remaining. I open one of them and it’s a bathroom. Great, they’re having sex as well. They’re so loud that I guess they can’t hear a thing but the sounds of themselves pleasuring each other. I am about to close the door until I notice that the long nails that look familiar. As soon as I notice that, I start to notice the other things. Thatego is trapped to the wall with his legs folded around a tall and muscular body.

I notice the jersey and the familiar pants. My eyes widen. "I-I hate you," Thatego moans, his eyes are clenched too tight. I want to shut the door and pretend I've seen nothing but this is live porn, my kind of porn. I'm not sure what the boy fucking into him says but Thatego throws his head back and moans even louder. "Y-yes, I mean no. Yes, just like that. Mmm...no. N-No! I hate you, Sbani." His face is scrunched up in euphoria but those emotions are there – the conflict. "P-please don't stop. Don't ever stop!"

"Phakade lami?"

I jump and look over my shoulder. I close the door a little too loudly and with a pounding heart, grab Nhlakanipho's hand and rush away with him. "D-Did you find my cousin?"

"She's in that room. Did you find Sbanisezwe?"

Yes, he was fucking Thatego in the bathroom. "N-No," I shake my head. "Let's go and wait for him with Nomzulu. We're not going to leave until we see both of them."

Mutual Desires : Thirty-eight

Nqobizitha

“You’re having a hard time speaking today,” Dr. Langa says this with a light air of casual conversation, but it doesn’t stop my stomach from flipping. I want to groan into my face but then I remember the bandages on my hands and the uncomfortable sensation it creates. “What happened?”

I don’t answer for a long moment, and eventually just mumble, “I was brushing my teeth last night and I guess it felt like my teeth weren’t bright enough for my liking.”

Dr. Langa rolls his eyes, friendly, and humours me with a laugh. “How did that happen?”

I sigh and remove my jersey, trying to get comfortable on this wide couch. “I...I don’t know. I didn’t feel good so I went into the bathroom and—” my brows furrow as I attempt to piece the puzzle pieces of lost time together, “—I guess I was brushing my mouth for a long time.”

“How long?”

“Chris said that I was in there for almost an hour.”

“Hmm,” Dr. Langa hums, nodding, “You said you didn’t feel good. Can you elaborate?”

I don’t answer for a while, trying to find the words to explain without sounding like a lunatic, “I tasted like her. And I...was having sensory flashbacks.”

“Ah,” he nods, looking at me carefully, “I know that this is difficult to talk about and I can see you getting uncomfortable, which is not my intention. These questions are just so I know how bad it is, alright? Just...try to answer honestly.”

I nod my head.

“So you’re tasting her, sometimes?” He asks, “Traces of her – Ntombikayise?”

My body clams up, making me want to shrink into the couch. I open my mouth to say something and the taste hits me something strong. I clutch my belly and close my eyes—

Khamisa, boy. That’s it, get in between my thighs.

I tense up so suddenly that my muscles start to hurt almost immediately because of how tight I am wound—

I nod my head.

“It’s okay, Nqobizitha. You’re safe.” Dr. Langa says, looking me in the eye, “Its just me. You’re safe.”

I take a breath through my nose and nod again, though I find myself looking away.

“Okay, can you feel her now? Touching you?”

I nod.

It’s easier to do this if I don’t have to look at him. Or anyone.

“Do you feel multiple attacks at the same time?”

Another nod.

“Do you feel like you carry some sign of what’s happened? Like people can see?”

I nod.

“Can you smell her sometimes?”

Another nod.

“And you can hear sometimes?”

Nod.

“Do you know what she did was wrong?”

I hesitate this time, lately, I feel like I know. Chris helped with this, and I think I can admit that what Ntombikayise did was wrong. I’ve been having nightmares about younger me, I didn’t feel good about everything in the beginning, then I started to accept it. She...she made me sick. Ntethe took me to Mbongolwane hospital for my sores. If she loved me, she wouldn’t have made me so sick.

My eyes find Dr. Langa, briefly, and then drop to the floor. I nod my head again.

“Do you know that it wasn’t your fault?”

The hesitation again. My brows furrow because that doesn’t...make sense. If I had only—

“Nqobizitha?” he asks gently, “Do you know that it wasn’t your fault?”

I...I don’t know what to say so I shrug.

“Nqobizitha,” Dr. Langa says, trying to get my full attention, “Asibhekane phela, bafo.” I take a second, and then meet his eyes squarely. “What happened is not your fault.” He says firmly, “There is nothing you could have done to prevent it. This isn’t on you. This is on Ntombikayise. She was not supposed to take advantage of your vulnerability, you were just a child. You are not an accomplice in this, it’s not your fault. It is not your fault.”

I find myself blinking at him and nod my head.

“None of this is your fault.”

That’s not...that’s not true. If I would have fought harder—

“I know what you’re thinking because it’s what everyone thinks.” He cuts through my thoughts. “That if you would have been smarter or stronger or quicker, that this wouldn’t have happened. You’re not the first one to think that, Nqobizitha. Everyone thinks that, and it’s not your fault. You are not to blame for anything that happened, do you understand?”

I think this over for a moment, part of me believes him. A few nights ago, I got the courage to admit it in my head, that I was...raped. It was hard but I’d lain in bed tossing and turning until I could finally admit, then I punched some walls, it made me feel better but the damage was bad. There was blood everywhere and Chris was crying. Zenande shouted the entire night. I didn’t have the energy for her. She’s starting to doubt if I’m good for her brother. I think about Dr. Langa’s words again, and I find myself nodding because I guess his words are true. Some part of me believes him.

“I have another challenge for you,” Dr. Langa says, smiling lightly, “I want you to continue being conscious of your body, like I told you last Friday. But in addition I want you to do this one thing: every day, at twenty minute intervals, I want you to take maybe two seconds to tell yourself that it wasn’t your fault. I just want you to say it, or think it. Anything that makes you feel comfortable.”

My mouth is cut pretty badly and talking a lot is quite uncomfortable. Nodding my head seems easier so I do that and think about something. “I—was this close to drawing something last night. I wanted to but I got cold feet.”

“What were you going to draw?”

“Things...Chris. He looks good naked,” the words slip out of my mouth without permission.

Dr. Langa appears shocked a second, and then he just laughs like he expected something like this from me. Maybe. This lack of filter thing that Chris has going on is rubbing off on me. “Don’t rush it. The first

step was you being courageous enough to buy your art supplies. You took that step all on your own. This will come to you when you're ready too."

I sigh, looking at my watch. "Ngyabonga, bafo. I didn't think you'd be able to see me on short notice." I'm not going to be able to attend Thursday and Friday's sessions. I'm going to Johannesburg tomorrow. Nhlakanipho told me to come that side but he wouldn't tell me why. I was supposed to go on Monday but MaKhathide wanted me to spend a little bit of time with her grandkids. I've been with them since and I'm going to that busy place tomorrow, it will be a Wednesday. The only good thing that came out of this is that I was able to meet up with Dr. Langa for two days.

He stands with me and shakes my hand. "Pleasure's all mine. I'll see you next week and don't forget the homework. Also have fun in Joburg but not so much fun that you no longer want to come back."

"Johannesburg is the last place where I'd want to end up, dokotela, trust me. I'll see you next week, thank you for your time." I bow my head.

Chris is gossiping with the receptionist. He makes friends too easily because he's a people person. I'd like to think I am too but not enthusiastically like him. My body traps him against the desk as my arms encircle his waist. He leans into me and sighs. "You're back?"

I nod my head but he can't see me. He whirls around in my arms and smiles up at me. My stomach twists something nasty as that cut on his left eye captures my attention. This is why Zenande is starting to doubt me. You see what happened is I was asleep and then I was having a bad dream and Chris says he tried to wake me but I was thrashing in the bed and he fell over and collided with his bedside table. The cut isn't so bad, I just hate that I hurt him. He seems to understand that it wasn't on purpose but I'm reluctant to share the same bed with him now. What if I hurt him really bad next time before I wake up? He's so much smaller than me and I can easily crush him with just my hand. He was vehemently opposed to sleeping separately. I get where he's coming from but at the same time, I can't keep living in fear.

"You were asleep," he whispers, eyes searching mine. "Sikhulumile ngalokhu, Nqobizitha. I've forgiven you so you need to forgive yourself as well. I'm not even hurt that bad. It's just a little black eye."

"It's still a black eye," I tell him.

“You were having a nightmare! Remember, you promised you’d never put your hands on me? You’ve kept that promise until now. What we’re not going to do is sleep apart. I don’t want it. I know now that I have to leave the bed and wait for you to be awake. That’s what I’ll do.”

“You’re so damn stubborn.”

“I’m half Zulu, being stubborn comes with the territory,” he giggles and stands on his tiptoes. I lift him with my one arm and lean down to give him a kiss. It lasts for a few seconds. “Asigoduke. We’re going to the mall first, remember? Siya wants me to buy him something at the boutique.”

“What?”

“Nuh-uh,” Chris zips his lips. I get his door for him and help him with his seatbelt. “Thank you,” he kisses my cheek and I nod my head, going to the other side. “How was therapy?”

“Good...”

“My mom is asking how far along we are.” Chris peers over at me and shows me his phone but I can’t really look at it to avoid causing any accidents.

“We left really late, Bambi.” I tell him. “We have another three hours to go.”

“Let me tell her that. I wonder how my dad is going to react to seeing you with me. Mommy didn’t tell him that you’re coming and he still doesn’t know that we’re together.”

“Do you think he should know?” part of me hopes not. I wouldn’t put it past that man to tell my parents and though I now know that my father would be okay with it, MaKhathide not so much. I’m not gay but that’s what she’ll think. Liking other guys is taboo in her eyes and I know that she won’t understand if I tell her that I’m not even into dudes like that, just Chris. Through everything that’s happened over the months, that’s the one thing that has remained constant. I don’t see other guys like that – not even those feminine ones, like his friend Jacques.

“We don’t have to say anything,” Chris eyes me and gives me a reassuring smile. “I love what we have and I’m not in a rush to reveal to everyone that we’re each others. I know it and you know it as well. Our best friends know it so who cares? We can keep this to ourselves a little while longer.”

“Xabhashe,” I take one of his hands and kiss his knuckles. “I still can’t believe that I have to forgo sex with you for close to a week. This is the only reason I am not eager to be with your parents.”

“My dad would Mike Tyson you, Bhubesi lami.” At least he gives me an empathetic look. “If it makes you feel better, we can sneak out at night and book into one of the cheap hotels in Jozi then you can pound me through the mattress until I can’t walk.”

“Then your mother will hold me accountable for crippling you. Uyadlala wena,” I shake my head. “I respect your parents. We’re not going to have sex until we’re back in Mbongolwane. Then I’ll really cripple you.” He gives me a look and my heart falters. Damn, this boy is breathtaking. I don’t think I ever stood a chance here, not with all this beauty. It borders on surrealism, on hypnotism, and I’m the luckiest dude on earth. “Nganeyakwethu...”

We’re at a red light, our eyes meet. He smiles too damn wide, and says, “I love you too.”

“Bienvenue. Welcome, welcome!” Chris’ mother attempts to grab our bags from me but I politely decline. I may be a guest but she’s a woman and I was taught to never allow them to carry any luggage in the presence of a man. It may be chivalrous but I think that’s a good trait. Besides, this woman is old enough to be my mother. I can’t expect her to do anything like this in the presence of kids. “What happened to your eye, Bebe?”

“I hit my face on the table, mommy.”

“Were you being clumsy again?” his mother kisses his temple and assesses the damage. “The cut is not so bad but you need to be more careful. How was your drive?”

“Long,” Chris replies, sticking close to me. Its dark outside, we made it to his house at 09:00pm. Siya and Nhlakanipho are in Soweto, we’ve planned a trip to meet up tomorrow. There’s a small party that they’re hosting in a place called Diepkloof. “Where is Baba?”

“Zithobile,” a voice calls out, its Bab’ Xulu. “Your mother told me you were coming with a friend but she didn’t say who.” I can see the little bit of confusion as our gazes clash. “Nqobizitha, it’s you ndodana. Kunjani? How was your trip?”

I respectfully shake his hand and bow a little. “Baba wami. It was a long trip but we thank God to have made it safe and sound.” Last I remember he was a Christian. I hope nothing’s changed. Well, Chris told me his parents aren’t religious but I have to take my chances.

“Oh yes, the blood of Jesus protected you. Muhle uJehova.” See? Black people and religion, they go together like peanut butter and jam. “I didn’t know that you’re good friends with my son.”

“Actually, we got close because he’s my tutor at Sithola Imfundo. He’s very intelligent and helping me with my studies, Baba wami.”

Bab’ Xulu gives me a smile, its strange coming from a man like him, it looks like a vicious pitbull smiling. He may be thin but he’s intimidating – unlike my father. “That’s my boy, it’s a Xulu thing, ndodana. Zithobile will be studying Accounting next year. He’s very gifted in his studies.”

“Baba you’re embarrassing me,” Chris murmurs but I can see the anxiety in his eyes, he grabs my hand and starts to drag me away. “We’ve had a long day so can we do this in the morning? Nilale kahle.”

We enter his room and I go to place our luggage in the closet. “I want that gone,” I point to his Roman Reigns poster. I’m joking...just a little.

“Oh, that’s not mine,” he is amused, “Its Simi’s poster and she commanded me to put it there for when she comes to visit me. She has a crush on this guy. I have no idea who he is.”

I chuckle, can’t really help it. “Let me tell my parents that I made it here safely.” They know that I’m visiting Siya and Nhlakanipho. MaKhathide doesn’t know that I came with Chris.

“I’ll change and then we can bath together?”

“I don’t want to be tempted. Go ahead, I’ll bath after you.”

Chris kisses my lips and nods his head.

I don’t think I’d be able to differentiate one part of Soweto from the other. This Diepkloof looks the same as Orlando to me. The atmosphere is the same. There’s a chillness to it that makes it better than areas like Park Station and Kensington. Park Station is too busy and there are street vendors everywhere that you can hardly walk without bumping into someone. Kensington is too quiet for my liking and you hardly ever see people walking down the street. There are white people and I’m not racist but I like to go out and see people who look like me when I go out.

Soweto is busy as well, but in a good way, sometimes these people greet. It reminds me of Mbongolwane in a way, but not really, because we’re in the rurals that side. I stop my car outside a medium-sized cream-colored house. Chris texts Siya who then comes to open the large black gate for us. Chris is ecstatic and jumps into the other boy’s arms. “Bestie!”

My eye clash with Siya’s, who rolls his but returns Chris’ enthusiastic hug. “Down boy,” he pats the toothpick’s back and looks at him. “You look miserable. What, you didn’t get some last night?”

“Ooh, you got jokes? Ngizok’phoxa, usho ngok’phapha.” He entwines his hand with Siya’s. “This house is beautiful. Are your family members here? What about the girl, what’s her name?”

“What’s with the bruise on your eye?”

Its silent a second, and then Chris shrugs his shoulders. “I fell and the side of my face connected with my bedside desk.”

Siya looks at him, disbelieving, then shifts his burning gaze to me. “Did you hit him? Usuyashayana wena, Nqobizitha?”

“Chris told you what happened. I wouldn’t put my hands on him,” it’s true. What happened was a mistake and it will never happen again. I didn’t push him on purpose.

“I hope for your sake that you wouldn’t.” Siya gives me a chiding glare. I nod my head at him as he guides us inside with Chris clinging to him and bouncing happily in the direction that Siya is taking us. There are voices coming from inside, a girl and boy. “They’re here, you guys.”

We make it out of a short hallway and into a living room. Nhlakanipho is sitting on the couch with a little boy in his arms. There’s a teenage girl with a medium build and relaxed hair that is tied into a small bun. Then there’s another person, a pretty light-skinned boy with a small frame. The boy’s eyes widen as he looks at me. He regards with me a look of familiarity and I quirk my eyebrow. He only stops staring when Chris wounds his arm around mine and hugs it. I don’t need to be a genius to see that the toothpick is claiming his territory. It’s funny and I let out a brief chuckle.

“Awu, bafo.” Nhlakanipho stands to clap my shoulder. “Mehlo madala.”

“All on you, Nhlaka,” I tease him. “It’s you who left us because Siya has you wrapped around his pinky finger.”

“The unfortunate truth,” Nhlakanipho rubs at his neck. “Chris, kunjani?”

The toothpick finally lets go of me to hug Nhlakanipho. “Mbongolwane’s not the same without you guys.”

Nhlakanipho lets out a low chuckle and then peers over at me with a stern look. “We need to talk. It’s important.”

I get an anxious feeling but I still nod my head. After saying a few pleasantries to the girl, Nhlakanipho tells me to follow him. I pass the light-skinned boy and greet him. His face is pale, but he returns my greeting, appearing a little nervous. “I can explain,” I say as soon as we enter a small bedroom. “I’d never put my hands on him. I was having a bad dream and pushed him away and he fell. He hit his face on the table and cut his eye. I do feel guilty, bafo—”

“That wasn’t what I called you for but I’ll confirm with Chris as well. Don’t be me, violence doesn’t solve everything.” He searches my eyes, maybe he can tell that I’m telling the truth because he nods his head. “The reason I called you is because we finally found your doppelgangers.”

I blink – once, twice – and then find myself chortling. “Are you serious?” I don’t know why this is so funny to me but I can’t stop laughing. Nhlakanipho is giving me a weird look. I’m too amused to try and figure out what it means.

“Yeah. They live in Orlando, that’s why that cashier at the garage mistook you for one of the brothers. We met them at a party in Orlando. That boy you saw is one of the boy’s friends.”

“Well, where are—”

Someone knocks once and then the door opens. Whoa! The boy walks inside with an unperturbed smile, my smile. I find myself returning it. He stands in front of me and distantly, I can register that the others are in the room with us – observing. I only have eyes for the boy looking at me. His eyes are my eyes. My eyes are his eyes. My lips, nose, eyebrows – everything. I feel the world fading away, leaving just me and him. I blink. He blinks back. I tilt my head at the same time he tilts his. It’s like doing something and watching the mirror reflect it. He does everything I do. I open my mouth, not knowing what I want to say, and the words, “Finally, someone tall like me!” leave my mouth.

“We’re going to score a lot of chicks, my brother!” the mischief in his eyes is familiar. “Wait until you meet Sgalosenkosi. We’ll be unstoppable I tell you.” His voice is my voice.

“Not everything is about women,” another voice joins us – familiar. This is unbelievable! I blink my eyes as I see myself leaning against the door, hands in my pockets. This me is stern and serious. He is different from the me standing in front of me. I watch myself edge closer. I look at myself give myself a once over – studying. That mirror reflection thing happens again. I tilt my head and watch the two mes tilt their heads. I fold my arms and they do the same. I shake my head and laugh and the first me laughs with me. “Nqobizitha...” the serious me says with a frown. “I remember you from somewhere.”

Chris quickly comes to join me. He bites his bottom lip and I think he wants to cry. Instinctively, I lift him into my arms as he wraps his legs around my waist. Briefly, I notice the light-skinned boy looking at the first me with something like pain and accusation in his eyes. I am soon distracted by Chris who hugs me tight and apologizes. He pulls his face out of my neck and I wipe away his tears. “What’s wrong?”

“I-I’m so sorry,” he whispers. “T-This is why I told her that—”

“Nqobizitha,” serious me gives me a look of recognition, “You called my mother the other day. Ntwenhle Mzimela. I’m Sqalosenkosi.”

“You know her?” the question leaves my lips first. Something keeps nagging me but Chris is trembling in my arms and I want to comfort him as well. I remember the voice now, it’s a little different from mine and first me. Too commanding – like a bigger brother’s. “She’s your mother?”

“Our mother,” first me says. “I’m Sbanisezwe. I don’t know, Sqalosenkosi, but I think our lovely mother has some explaining to do. Look at me, look at you – he’s looking back at us.” He bows his head toward serious me – Sqalosenkosi. “You look good by the way, my brother. Clearly style runs in our blood.”

I chuckle and nod my head. A thought is running through my brain though. Too many questions are floating inside my head and I can feel myself growing uneasy. Even if this doppelganger crap is true, what are the chances of meeting people who look exactly like me? What if Mam’ Ntwenhle—

“I think we should surprise your mother, to see how she’ll react to this,” I say and feel Chris tensing in my arms. He’s crying a little louder now but I’m too focused on my reflections for now.

“Uqinisile,” Sqalosenkosi nods his head. He smiles, his first smile, and it’s exactly mine. I return it, feeling a connection between all three of us I can’t explain. It feels like...the world falls into place somehow. I don’t know how or why. “Welcome home, bafo.”

He looks just as confused by his words. But as all three of us look at each other, the world fades away once more. The world is a mere dust particle again. And nothing else matters, nothing but the three of us.

Mutual Desires : Thirty-nine

Nqobizitha

Chris and I were told that we would be travelling to Mam' Ntwenhle's house in Orlando. Now that I think back, it makes sense why that cashier thought I was one of the brothers. The first me – he's the one that the light-skinned boy had been giving looks back at Siya's house. There's a familiarity between the two of them that makes me wonder if they're more than friends. Thatego is the boy's name. He's currently sitting at the front seat, beside Sbanisezwe, who offered to drive. I easily obliged because Chris is emotional for some reason, he won't say what's wrong but he looks terrified. Siya, Nhlakanipho and Sgalosenkosi are following behind us in an Uber.

"So where are you from, bafo?" Sbanisezwe meets my eyes on the rearview mirror.

"Err," I readjust Chris on my lap and kiss his temple, hugging him tight. "Mbongolwane. That's where I grew up. How about you?"

"Newcastle. But we've moved around a lot with my mother. Just last year we came to live here in Soweto, it's different from KZN but things worked out for the best," his voice is casual, and his attention momentarily flickers to Thatego, but the other boy is on his phone. I don't think I can get over how we seem to have the same behavioural cues. Sbanisezwe raises his left brow in a way I just know is a subtle frown. He clears his throat. "Who is that?"

Its silent a second, "Kumkani," the boy's eyes remain on his phone.

"Are you two together?" my mind rushes to my mouth.

Sbanisezwe laughs, it's rumbling like mine, as he shakes his head. "Hell no! No offense but I'm not gay, marrying a beautiful woman is very much in my future plans. Not now though because these women can tie you down until you feel suffocated. I'm just playing the field right now. What about you? I don't mind if you're gay, like this one here," he has a smile on his face as he nods his head at Thatego.

"I'm not gay, just...Chrisexual. I don't see other dudes like that."

“Ngiyezwa,” he says as he parks the car outside a decent looking house. It reminds me of the RDP houses back home but a little bigger. Thatego is out of the car before all of us, he bangs the door loudly and starts stomping away. “Don’t mind him.” Sbani shakes his head and throws my keys at me. I catch them easily. “He takes this acting thing he studies a bit too seriously. Watch, he’ll be smiling when we enter the house.”

I just nod my head. Chris is trembling, looking reluctant the closer we get to the brown door. He grips my hand, forcing me to stop and look down at me. “I-I’m sorry,” his voice is a whisper, “just whatever happens, remember that connection with Mam’ Ntwenhle. It’s real, isn’t? You can’t explain it but you love being around her. Please...remember that.”

I lean down to peck his forehead, to calm his anxiety. I’m worried too if I’m being honest. So many questions have been running through my mind that I had to shut down my brain for a while. We’re here now and Sqalosenkosi comes to join us with a blank expression. “We’re going to go into the living room one by one. I want to see something.”

“You read my mind, big brother.” Sbanisezwe rubs his hands together. The mischief in his eyes makes me laugh. “She’ll faint, I tell you.”

With the agreement that Chris and the others will remain in the kitchen, we enter the house. Sqalosenkosi goes first. I can hear him greeting Mam’ Ntwenhle from here. Sbani goes next and I can again hear him greeting his mother – more like sweet-talking her. My legs are a little shaky but I get them to move. I do that and Chris grips my arm. He looks even more terrified now. “Let me go with you? Please, Nqobizitha, p-please?”

I peer over at the others, Nhlakanipho’s features are scrunched up, he seems deep in thought. Shaking my head, I concede and allow Chris to grip my hand as we walk through the short hallway. I can hear Mam’ Ntwenhle’s voice – soft and conversational. Chris and I appear. “Mama wami...” I say as soon as I spot her sitting on one of the couches with the boys sat across from her. Bowing my head a little, surprise affects my left brow as I watch her eyes widen. She blinks a few times and then shakes her head frantically – like a woman about to lose her mind.

“No! No, this can’t be.” These words are muttered over and over again by her. “There’s...S-Sbani?”

“Right here,” the charming smile, Sbanisezwe raises his hand like a child marking the register in class.

“Sqalosenkosi...”

“Also present,” he has a deadpan voice – even his humour appears to be just as dry. “With all due respect, MaMzimela, but who is this boy? Why are my brother and I looking at ourselves? Look at him. Look at me, look at Sbanisezwe. What is going on?”

“Excuse me.” Mam’ Ntwenhle stands suddenly, disappearing into the hallway. I am taken back to that Chris and I first went to her. She’s crying again, we can hear her from here. The others must’ve been startled by the noise because they come to join us.

“What’s going on?” Siya looks at all of us with a worried expression.

“Don’t concern yourself about it,” Sqalosenkosi blinks his eyes, his tone is calm and kind but Siya still shrinks into Nhlakanipho’s side and hugs him close. “I thought we agreed that you’d stay in the kitchen until we talked to my mother – on our own. This is a family matter.”

The room goes pin-drop silent. It’s more awkward because Mam’ Ntwenhle is still crying in one of the rooms. “I’ll make her tea for when she comes back,” Thatego is the first one to stand up. The others slowly join him. Chris remains where he is. For some reason, Sqalosenkosi doesn’t question his presence.

“What matter is that, bafo?” Sbani asks, getting comfortable on the couch. He’s always smiling, even when Sqalosenkosi seems tense. “We just found ourselves a brand-new brother. I don’t think a lot of things matter at the moment. Well, our lovely mother still has to explain herself but look at us, bafo. Look at us!” he points to me.

“Yes we did,” the smile that looks like mine returns. I think Sqalosenkosi’s charming face – that only looks that way because he is me and Sbani – can easily trick anyone into thinking he’s a laidback dude. But he is stern and serious. He is serious me. “That means double the trouble and now I have to watch after two Sbanis. Our ancestors never loved me, they did always test me.” He smiles.

My heart swells, I can’t explain it. The connection is so strong, I get the urge to do something but I don’t know what. I am restless, my left foot bounces up and down anxiously. We keep looking at each other – all three of us – and I wait for the awkwardness to arrive but it never does. Sbani starts to make plans about hanging out, he knows all the hottest party places around Soweto apparently. He knows how to

score free drinks from the women. Hell, he can even score free airtime. Its not even about being poor but scoring freebies. I laugh because that makes him a cheapskate. He offers to show me some expensive sneakers that some lady from Mamelodi bought him the other day but his mother is back. She is carrying a shoe box and looks frail.

I'm worried and stand up at the same time as the others. We all go to her and surround her to help her. Mam' Ntwenhle sighs and shakes her head. "I think I need tea."

Maybe this Thatego kid is a mind-reader because he materializes into the room with a tray in hand. There's a teapot and one of those fancy cups that black people reserve for important visitors. Mam' Ntwenhle smiles and thanks him, telling him that he knows her too well. Thatego offers to get us water. He walks around the house with a familiarity, like he's used to coming here and helping around. Sgalosenkosi and I seem to love Coke. Sbanisezwe only drinks water and beer apparently. Thatego comes back with our drinks and then disappears again.

Mam' Ntwenhle sips her tea a second and then looks at me and the others – pure disbelief on her face. She blinks and sighs, placing the teacup on the tired table. "H-How...how did you find each other?"

"Nhlakanipho attended the same party as us," Sbani is the one who replies, signature smile on his face. "This is why you should allow us to attend them more often. He called me Nqobizitha but he really knows his friend because he realized it wasn't him. Then he told me that I looked like him. I fetched my brother to tell him the news. We exchanged numbers and got pictures of ourselves sent to us. Sgalosenkosi and Nhlakanipho said to keep it a secret, I have to respect my brother's wishes, he's older. But here we are now, my mother. Do you have something to tell us?"

Mam' Ntwenhle keeps silent and looks at her hands. I'm worried for her but at the same time suspicious. What if these two are my brothers? What if Mam' Ntwenhle took them from my mother? Why else wouldn't she tell me that she has children? Why else would she have denied knowing them that day? My mind scoffs at me for my ridiculous theory. If that were the case then MaKhathide would've made sure to get them back. She's a powerful woman, very resourceful. And besides, they saw each other at MaNtuli's funeral and MaKhathide said nothing. What if they're my deceased uncle's children? That's possible right? Or my grandfather's.

"Kuyok'siza uhlambuluke, Ndlovukazi yami. (It will do you good to come clean, my queen)" Sgalosenkosi is looking at his mother with an enquiring. "What's going on, donda kamlimandlela?"

“This is why I told them that this wasn’t a good idea,” Mam’ Ntwenhle speaks in a soft tone, her eyes are on Chris for a long time before she sighs and looks at the shoebox. “You cannot hide the truth forever, it has a way of peeking out like a clothing item that wasn’t properly stored away. The sangoma saw this, he saw it from the beginning. The bond you share was bound to bring you together, the invisible string that ties all three of you to each other.”

“Not that I don’t appreciate your refreshing attempt at poetry, my mother, but you need to dumb it down for me and tell me exactly what you’re trying to say,” Sbani is sitting up now and looks worried. “Are you saying this is actually our brother? Why don’t we know about him?”

Silence.

I get an uneasy feeling as Sgalosenkosi grabs the shoebox from his mother. She’s crying again, silent now, and seems immobile. I get the urge to comfort her but Sbanisezwe beats me to it and sits beside her. “Ndlovukazi yami,” the whisper falling off Sgalosenkosi’s lips is shocked. “This is really our brother? We don’t just look alike, he’s really our brother.” He has some pictures in his hands that I wish I could see. “This man is our father? I thought you said you don’t own pictures of him.”

My stomach drops. It feels like everything is happening so fast that I can’t even decide what to process first. I’ve just met my doppelgangers and though I’d known about them, it’s different meeting them in the flesh, its overwhelming feeling so connected to them and now finding out that they’re actually my brothers. I woke up this morning the only male child in my family and now I’m finding out that there’s two of me that are actually my blood. What...happened?

Sbanisezwe extends the pictures to me and I have a look. Mam’ Ntwenhle as a young woman, a teenager really, in a hospital bed somewhere – carrying three babies in her arms with tears in her eyes. She’s smiling too damn wide. There are a lot of pictures taken at the hospital. Another one with my father. Then another one with MaKhathide. But she’s not the one in a hospital gown...instead its Mam’ Ntwenhle. I blink my eyes and although my mind knows what’s happening, part of me is refusing to acknowledge that. Even as I look at another picture of my deceased uncle with Mam’ Ntwenhle, they look in love – in some sugarcane field.

This is turning out to be deeper than I initially thought. I’m confused, don’t know exactly what I am feeling. Tears burn behind my eyes as my heart jumps to my throat but I don’t cry. I keep blinking, thinking that maybe the pictures will change somehow or that I’ll wake up from a bad dream. Is this a bad dream? I feel connected to my brothers. My brothers. It’s strange, I’m not mad at them. I feel like I’ve known them my whole life. I can’t explain it, not one word can explain what happens within me when I look at them. But still, how true is this?

“Mah...” my eyes find Mam’ Ntwenhle, imploring. “I think we all know what’s going on here. I just need to hear the words come from your mouth. You know that I consider you my mother, this is why I came to you with my problems. I felt...connected to you. Is it because you’re my—”

“Yes, these are your blood brothers. I was only eighteen when I gave birth to you and I-I was easily swayed. I love you so much, Siqiniseko, but she promised to take care of you. Bab’ Ngcobo promised me and I trusted them because they’re your blood. Your father is your uncle, he’s your uncle. You’re his son, they promised to—”

My world comes crashing down on me – at full speed. I can no longer hear what she is saying...my biological mother. Who am I? Twenty years of my life...a lie. My chest is clenching and my throat is tight. My mother is not my real mother. My father is not my real father. The more I blink and realize that this is not a dream the harder it is for me to keep my emotions at bay. I can hear Chris but he sounds too far. She...left me and allowed me to live a lie. At least with my brothers, there was some fragment of truth but with me...I got a cold mother. That woman’s sister used me because I was missing the warmth of a mother. The same mother who raised my brothers and left me out in the cold.

“Nqobizitha...?”

Something cold and vicious slices into my heart when Chris says that name. It feels like a dagger going through my heart, I can feel my body shaking. “Don’t—call me that!” my voice growls, I don’t know how I find myself too close to him. He shrinks away as I edge closer to apologize. “Bambi—”

“You’re angry,” he bites his lower lip, clearly holding back his tears. “I know why but you can’t keep doing this. You need to calm down.”

“What do you know?” I eye him up and down. “You’re not the one who’s just discovered that their entire existence is a lie. Nqobizitha Ngcobo, who is that? It’s not me.”

“It...it is you, Nqobizitha. You’re still a Ngcobo. Ask her, your father’s brother is your real father. That changes nothing, Bab’ Ngcobo is your father.”

I shake my head. “You know what I mean, don’t patronize me!”

“Whoa easy, bafo.” Sbanisezwe comes to grip my arm. “Only Sqalo behaves like a lunatic when he’s angry. I don’t need another grizzly brother. Calm down and let’s talk about this with our mother. I’m just happy that I have another brother. We may not know each other but you’re me, bafo. Now represent me properly and be a gentleman. Sqalo has the angry rights – he’s the old one. I’m just not sure who’s the youngest between me and you.”

“Its him,” Chris points to me. “You’re the middle brother and he’s the youngest. Even with his sisters, he was the youngest. I guess he was just meant to be the baby,” he explains and giggles with a tear cascading down his cheek. Sqalosenkosi is smiling, he comes to me. I return his warm hug and cling to him. I feel like I can cry on his shoulder. The tears are silent, I groan low in my throat.

“Sbanisezwe is an idiot sometimes, but he’s our idiot. He’s right when he says that what matters is that we’re together. There’s plenty to talk about, bafo. Too much. Perhaps for now, it can wait. Emotions are high and things are tense. You’re angry at our mother, you have every right. I am angry at her too, for the lost time. Who was looking after you? Who was protecting you? I’m the oldest, I should’ve been there. Imagine being stuck with all those women! Never again, bafo. Just don’t be troublesome like Sbani. I know you’re the youngest but still... welcome home, my brother.”

We pull apart and I bury my eyes in my hands, rubbing at them tiredly. Maybe he’s right about doing this another time. There’s too much to process and I don’t think I can hear anymore. I’m angry at her...my mother. I’m still not sure what to do about my parents in Mbongolwane. My heart feels like it’s being ripped apart and there’s a knife stuck in my windpipe. “When should I come back?” I ask them.

Mam’ Ntwenhle doesn’t reply. She’s too busy crying on her own. Sbani and Sqalo are in front of me again, giving me identical welcoming expressions. “I’d say spend the night if I could,” they both say at the same time. Then they laugh. “It doesn’t happen often but it does,” Sbanisezwe contradicts himself with a wide grin. Aside from the different clothes, I know that I’d still be able to tell them apart. “But I don’t want you to feel suffocated. Maybe you can come here again tomorrow. We don’t have to talk about this yet, just hang out. I’ll organize some girls—”

“Like hell you will!” Chris interrupts him, clinging to my left arm. “He’s mine, my boyfriend. I’m his boyfriend as well. Have you suddenly forgotten? He’s Chrisexual.”

“I thought that meant he’s still attracted to women,” Sbani bows his head and offers an apologetic smile. “Anyway, I’m sure you’ve misunderstood me. The girls I’m organizing are not for him, just me and Sqalosenkosi. You interrupted me and spoke too soon.” He lies through his teeth, I know.

“Nice try,” Chris rolls his eyes, “I know all about this behaviour. You’re really like him so your words ain’t going to cut it with me. I don’t mind you hanging out, I don’t have a say anyway. But he’s my boyfriend, please don’t organize girls for him.”

“He won’t,” Sgalosenkosi pipes in with a tone that is final, “I will make sure of it. All of us can spend some time together. There’s no rush, no pressure. As I said, we all need to be levelheaded. Our mother needs to get over the shock of horrifically discovering that they couldn’t outsmart idlozi. Maybe next time they’ll think twice before keeping things from us – and I say this with all due respect, Ndlovukazi.” He peers over to her...our mother, and bows his head respectfully. “My love and respect for you is unchanging but I admit that I am upset.”

She...our mother removes her hands from her face and looks at us with sorrow in her eyes. “Ngyaxolisa. My children, I am so sorry. Siqiniseko, for what you went through ndodana. I failed you and I am sorry. I—I—” she stands up and rushes away again. A door closes loudly. Her cries are loud like a widow’s. My heart folds in on itself in sadness. I want to comfort her but I am angry. I’m feeling too many things at once that it’s still so hard to focus on one emotion.

“She’ll be fine,” Sqalo gives me a sympathetic look and puts his hands in his pockets. “Don’t worry about her. Let the guilt eat her for now. Their actions have consequences, it won’t be different just because they’re adults.”

“Always so serious!” Sbani rolls his eyes. “Aren’t you glad you took after me more than him? You are like me more than him, right? Don’t answer that, I don’t want to be disappointed. Let’s go to Bra Zakes’ tavern. We can bond nicely over some cold beers.”

“Nqo...sthandwa sami?”

He’s been nervous about calling me Nqobizitha the whole day. The same goes for the others. I don’t blame them. I love my name, yes, but I still feel betrayed. Like I received the short hand of the stick. I grew up with Ntombikayise. I can barely sleep without that woman torturing my dreams, playing with my emotions – like she used to do when she was alive – making me love her one minute and then despise her the next. Chris is nudging on my arm so I turn around to face him. Even with the muted light, I can tell that he’s trying to gauge my emotions. They’re still all over the place.

“I love you,” his voice is a whisper, he cups my cheek. “Please don’t hate me...don’t overreact.”

I wait for him to continue but he’s silent. I think he’s waiting for me to say something but I have no words. I’m not in the mood.

“I, uh—” he nibbles on his bottom lip. I use my thumb to pull it out and then kiss my thumb. “You s-see a while ago, I thought about something. We were in my room and sleeping and the thought crossed my mind...b-but I wasn’t sure about it so I went to...I-I... what happened is I went to Mam’ Ntwenhle to confirm—”

And just like that my body locks up.

“—she told me that you’re her son. And she told me why but told me she couldn’t tell you the truth because she has an agreement with your parents. I wanted desperately to tell you but I couldn’t do it. It wasn’t my truth to tell. I...knew.”

“You knew?”

He nods his head.

“And if Nhlakanipho never attended that party? If they never found out, would you have kept quiet?”

His eyes are reluctant, he bites his bottom lip again. “I-I...”

“You wouldn’t have told me the truth?”

“I...don’t know. This question is hard. Your mother begged me not to tell you and I promised her—”

“Your loyalties should lie with me!” I hiss quietly, wrapping my arm at the small of his back to keep him in place. “You owed it to me to tell me the truth as soon as you found out. How I would’ve dealt with it

wouldn't have been your concern but you should've told me. If the others found out then it means that you would've left me to continue living a lie. Living with an identity that isn't mine."

"It's still yours, Nqobizitha! Just because your adoptive parents aren't your biological parents, it doesn't mean that you're not a Ngcobo. Your father is a Ngcobo!"

"My parents are not my parents."

"MaKhathide is a crappy mother anyway," he snorts, searching my eyes. "You deserve someone like the mother you've just learned is your biological mother. Mam' Ntwenhle is a better mother than MaKhathide could ever be."

"She lied to me like MaKhathide. To me, they're no different. It's worse with her because she didn't choose me. Twenty years of my life and not once has she ever chosen me."

"Nqo—Tarzan, that isn't true and you know it!" his voice is urgent. "She's risked so much keeping in contact with you even though MaKhathide didn't want it. They made an agreement to stay away from you because—please don't make me do this. Your mother will tell you this as soon as you're ready. I just wanted you to know that I knew. I don't like it when we keep things from each other."

His words make me angrier somehow. I nod my head for the sake of replying. He kisses me and I reciprocate eagerly. I have him on his belly, promises of not having sex in parents' house long forgotten, and prepare him blurrily. I fuck him hard – punishing.

I've been ignoring most of MaKhathide's calls. They don't occur often but the few times that she's called, I haven't bothered to answer. Then my father called me and I had no choice but to reply. I felt compelled to answer to him. He's a kind man – always on my side. But I still love my mother...the one who isn't my mother. I can't imagine my life without her. I think I'd be lost. Yes, at the moment I want nothing to do with her but I still love her. I'll talk to her later. We've been in this place for four days now. We're supposed to leave for Mbongolwane tomorrow but Chris has been asking for an extension. He wants us to leave with the others. I'm still thinking about it.

I've avoided my biological mother for too long and I think I'm finally ready to hear what more she has to say. My brothers and I...my brothers. I have brothers who look and behave like me. We're getting along like a house on fire. It's like we've known each other our whole lives. I'm learning new things about them everyday, just like they're learning about me. I think Sbanisezwe is bisexual – there's something going on between him and that Thatego kid. He's said nothing but I can see it. I saw it at the party when they were arguing about something. It felt a little too familiar to the way I argue with Chris sometimes. They both left with different people that night. Thatego with a guy called Kumkani and Sbani with a thin girl. Apparently me and him are the same...but not our taste in women.

Sqalosenkosi is a little harder to figure out. He has that natural command to him, intimidating in every way a big brother is, but still kind and protective. He seems to really like spending time with Nhlakanipho. I think its because they're almost the same, it's just that Sqalosenkosi seems to be a people person. Nhlakanipho isn't like that. He doesn't have a girlfriend at the moment. Apparently he broke up with a girl from Diepkloof because he wasn't interested anymore. As much as the girls leave him sometimes, he leaves too – when the relation is no longer there.

"I don't think I need to stay today," Chris captures my attention. "I'll join the others outside? I need the sun."

I nod my head and watch him limp away until he's out of sight completely. Someone whistles and I know its Sbanisezwe. My eyes reluctantly move to him. "You need to go easy on the poor kid. He's walking around like he should be queuing at SASSA for a pensioner grant."

I grab the pillow next to me and fling at him. "Fuck you!"

He throws it back and shakes his head. "You good, bafo?"

"Always good, I can tell it's the same for you as well."

He gives me satisfied smirk and leans back on the couch. "Life is good, Mzimela. What can I say?"

"I don't know, Ngcobo." I return, smiling.

Sqalosenkosi appears with...our mother. He sits down next to her. "Gentlemen, our mother is ready to explain herself."

My...our mother nods her head and clears her throat. She looks at me. "I'm so sorry," her voice is soft. "I've failed you terribly..."

Christophe

"Will it be bad if I pour myself another cup?" I look at Thatego and gesture to the empty glass.

"No, Mama won't mind. Come, I'll go with you. Do you need refills as well?" he looks at Nhlakanipho and Siyabonga who're sitting on the same bench – without an inch of space separating them.

"Baby?" Siya looks at Nhlakanipho who shakes his head. "Just water!" and then the teasing laughs start again as I limp my way back into the house with Thatego. I hate him! He's so childish when he wants to be.

Thatego is looking at me as I rinse the glasses and then accept the Coke bottle from him. I start to become uncharacteristically shy, wondering if I have something on my face. "You're so gorgeous," he tells me with a small smile.

"You too," I return because he is. He's really, really pretty – with his aesthetic features and those bouncy curls. I thought he was coloured the first time I saw him. He told me he has relatives in the Northern Cape and that most people have those genes that side. But he suspects that there's a hint of Khoi blood in him. "And your eyebrows are rad!"

His smile broadens. "So you and Ncoba are in a relationship?"

"Yeah," I nod my head. "Just like Siya and Nhlakanipho."

“Maybe I should go over that side. Boys there seem to commit better.”

“If you’re one of the lucky ones!” I chuckle, a little awkward about the childlike look in his eyes. I don’t have all the answers. “I didn’t think Nqobizitha and I would ever date but he has this tendency of surprising me a lot. He didn’t even have a gay freakout.”

“You’re his gay awakening?”

The way he asks this question, I giggle and nod my head.

He bites his pouty lips, appears hesitant, before saying, “Sbani was like that too. But he freaked out on me for days after we had sex. The bloody asshole took my virginity and then got cold feet and ghosted me for an entire week.”

“Ouch!” I squeeze his hand. I don’t even know what I would’ve done if Nqobizitha did that. “Sorry, babes.”

“Its okay, gal. I’m over it,” he clears his throat. “Anyway, I just want to know...do you...” he shakes his head. “M-Maybe I’m stupid for asking this and I am. I’m an idiot sometimes. But do you...since they’re alike, you know, they’re similar – Ncoba and Sbani. If Ncoba could fall in love with you, do you...m-maybe it’s possible for Sbani to fall in love with me as well?”

“Thatego...” I don’t know what to say.

“I’m just tired of waiting and waiting.”

I really don’t know what to say so I hug him close.

Bonus Insert

Siyabonga

I didn't expect to be this turned on by this, but like the last time, my dick is embarrassingly hard and submissive – leaking like a faulty faucet and throbbing fervently. My eyes are glued to the floor but my body is buzzing. It's a struggle to keep from moving even the tiniest bit, like the last time this is testing my patience but I'm determined to last longer this time. My fingers are twitching on my thighs, the silence that was once filling the room is disrupted by the soft sound of the door closing. I know it's him, Nhlakanipho, he did this the last time as well. He wants me to know that he's back. I wonder how much time has passed. I care but not really. I care more about finding out where we're taking this next. He walks until his sneakers stop in front of me. I almost give into the instinct to look up until I remember – no permission was given. Shit! This thing seems so much harder than the last time. I'm dying here, the anticipation hurts so badly.

Two long fingers hook underneath my chin. He forces me to look at him. There's that subtle smile of his. It sends shivers down my spine, I am tempted to launch myself into his arms. I don't. I wait instead. Wait and wait and wait. "Ten minutes, fifteen seconds..." he says in his emotionless voice. "That's two minutes and five seconds better than the last time."

"I wanted to make you proud," I murmur, embarrassment coating my cheeks as his focus shifts to my painful erection. "Also—this kind of turns me on," my voice is a whisper. I get the urge to cover my dick but Nhlakanipho beats me to it by gripping it firmly with one of his hands. My breathing quickens and I moan as a deep flush spreads over my entire body. "I remember the book said something about rewards," I hint. I'd give anything to feel him moving deep inside me – thick and pulsing – invading parts of me that have only ever been accessed by him.

"Is that so?" he humours me with a subtle smirk.

I nod my head frantically. "Please, baby."

"You want me to fuck you hard, Phakade lami?" he asks while running his fingers across my cheek. I lean into the touch and moan.

"Yes," the words are stolen from a desperate breath.

His hand moves to my throat, tightening just a little. "Then let me give you what you need," he replies with a smirk and forces me to my feet by that grip on my throat. I let him guide me to the bed. "You're going to touch yourself for me," his voice commands me. We hardly ever do this but I'm onboard with this idea. I adjust myself on the bed as he sits in front of me and spreads my legs so that all of me is exposed to him. "You really liked waiting there like that? It wasn't uncomfortable?"

"A little," I reply, "but it turned me on even more. Having to be obedient for you like that...I don't know what it says about me. But I really like it."

He nods his head and looks at my red body. "You're going to put on a show for me, Phakade lami. And remind why you love me watching you when you're desperate. Touch yourself now, do it for me. I want your hands in between your legs, touch your dick for me – it belongs to me."

Shit! His words shouldn't turn me on like this, his emotionless voice... my pulse quickens, as my breath comes out sharp and fast. My fingers tighten around my warm, throbbing dick. I curse softly as my eyes close as I move my hand, whining a little at the dry friction, hurriedly releasing myself and spitting into my palm. My head falls back into the pillow behind me, as I now force myself to focus on Nhlakanipho's voice. "It feels good, doesn't it?" his voice sends vicious shudders throughout my body and I buck into my hand while nodding frantically. I imagine Nhlakanipho removing his clothes, in that teasing methodical manner of his, I picture his hands as he works on undressing himself. I imagine his dark stare – filled with promises of what's to come.

"M-more!" I moan, circling my nipple, and licking my dry lips. It feels good but part of me isn't really used to this. I like it better when he's actually moving inside me.

"You look so lovely like this, Nhliziyo yami," I hear him murmur. A noise escapes me, somewhere between a whine and a sob, and I squeeze my eyes shut tightly, lips parting as I slowly drag my hand up, then back down my cock.

"Nhlakanipho," I hear myself saying, my voice harsh and desperate, "Please...please, I-I need more. Need you to fuck me hard." My eyes are still shut, as I groan, using my precum to add to the slipperiness of my grip, rubbing my thumb over the head and along my shaft, my hand moving faster, and my knees spreading a little wider. "Tell me what else you want me to do."

“Fuck yourself for me.” A moan tumbles from inside my chest. My hips are moving all on their own, as my fingers push deeper into my entrance. Another shudder wracks my body as I wiggle my fingers in deeper, in my head its Nhlakanipho’s who is preparing me. It’s his calloused fingers gliding against the soft flesh inside my anus. He praises me, telling me how good I am doing, how well I am fucking myself. His words affect me and my leaking cock twitches, begging for attention. Nhlakanipho takes mercy on me and strokes me as I continue to fuck myself. Faster and faster I move until my body locks up. I want to cum but he tells me to wait. “Look at me.”

Immediately I open my eyes, he slams inside me and I scream bloody murder. He covers my mouth with his hand and starts pounding into me. His thrusts are skilled and powerful. It’s getting harder to keep my eyes open, I can feel them rolling to the back. I tap on his hand and grip his wrist as he moves it from my mouth. “S-Slow down,” he’s repeatedly nailing my prostate and I’m overloading on the pleasure. My stomach is knots and I can’t breathe. Tears of pleasure cascade down my cheeks as tingles flood my complaint body. Nhlakanipho’s response is to fold me in half. I cling to him and give in. Unintelligent words spill from my lips as my confused mind tries to figure out which pleasure to focus on. The rough but sensual drilling that my ass is receiving...or the sweet friction of my knees brushing against my dick. My climax hits me something intense. My body jolts viciously as I shake like someone experiencing a seizure but Nhlakanipho holds me in place. I want to escape but he’s holding me tight. I’m comatose and drifting off by the time he’s done with me.

“Wake up,” he’s looking down at me – already bathed and dressed. He smells fresh. “Your cousin says we should go to Orlando and I won’t object. We’ll see Nqobizitha and Chris that way.”

Sigh. I nod my head, and shift in bed to sit up. I’m still a little disoriented. “What time is it?”

“12:00pm.”

Great, that means I’ve been sleeping for close to two hours. “Okay, at least get me my towel.” My aunt has a bathroom in this place but she has no geyser, we boil water all the time. I wrap the towel around my waist and slide on my flip-flops.

“Do you feel good about what we did? Not the sex, well that as well, but that BDSM crap...how did it make you feel?”

I’m at the door as he asks me this question. But I’m grateful for it, this means that he’s studying that manual and those videos really hard. Communication is really important in these dynamics apparently. We don’t know much about the lifestyle but we’re dipping our toes in the dark but magical waters. It’s

weird how the thought of submitting to him isn't really offputting. I don't know, the trust is too strong. "It was really good. I felt good, baby. The wait was torture but I improved from the last time and these relationships are supposed to grow you aren't they? I'm learning that I can be real patient when I want to. You enjoyed it as well?"

"Having you at my mercy is always a pleasure, Shandu," he says dryly and I roll my eyes. "Hurry up, I'll take care of this." He points to the messy bedding.

"Ngyakuthanda," I murmur before closing the door behind me.

Chris has been trying to convince Nqobizitha to stay a little while longer here and I think maybe he succeeded because they're still in Johannesburg. We all meet outside Mam' Ntwenhle's house and I immediately hug him. Sometimes he needs to remember that I appreciate him...so that he won't replace me with the boy whose eyebrows are to die for. "Your ass looks big in these jeans. Is big bad Gauteng corrupting you, hmm? Real tight skinny jeans?"

"Uyasangana wena," I punch his arm playfully and then shift my attention to Nqobizitha, "Hey skobo somfana."

"Ufuna uswazi wena," he rolls his eyes but he's smiling. I'm relieved. Being around him has been a pain in the ass lately – for Chris more than me with his limps – and I don't know the full details of what's going down. I just know that his biological mother is Mam' Ntwenhle and that Sbanisezwe and Sqalosenkosi are his brothers. He's actually a triplet. I don't know how he's going to confront his parents about this because its apparent that he didn't know.

"Bafana bami," Mam' Ntwenhle opens the door for us. Her eyes are shifty, especially as she observes Nqobizitha. The tall boy clenches his jaw and then he's smiling. I don't think it's his real smile. "Siqiniseko—"

"Its Nqobizitha," she is corrected politely. "That's my name...Mama wami. If it's too much for you then Tarzan is fine. This one here likes calling me Tarzan. Actually, that's what I prefer because I don't really know who I am."

Chris clears his throat. "I have lots of pet names for him, Mah. Bhubesi lam. Munt' wam. Too many of them but I don't think they'd be appropriate for you to use so maybe Tarzan is fine," he giggles, clearly trying to lighten the mood. "Where are the others?"

Mam' Ntwenhle is silent a second, her and Nqobizitha seem to be talking silently, she clears her throat and nods inside the house. "They're out in the back. Sbani is busy with the grill, to braai the meat."

"Oh goody!" Chris squeals like a child. I roll my eyes and we enter the house on Mam' Ntwenhle's permission. She won't be spending the day with us. She works in the white suburbs as a maid and they asked her to come in tonight because they're hosting a party. She'll spend the night there and then return in the morning. "This is still so freaky!" Chris exclaims as we enter into a modest backyard that is really clean. Sbanisezwe and Sqalosenkosi are talking to themselves.

Their eyes find us because of all that excitement that Chris was exhibiting. Both their eyes light up as they spot us – or more accurately their brother. Its endearing to see how close they've become and how quickly that happened. They never had an awkward phase. I still can't tell them apart unless they open their mouths. Sbanisezwe is the one with a few loose screws in the head. He smiles the most and is nice to be around. Sqalosenkosi is the quiet but intimidating one. He is kind...in his own weird way.

"Where's Thatego?" Chris asks.

"Fucking around, who knows?" I'm going to assume that its Sbani who replies. His jaw clenches briefly as he takes a swig of his beer and looks at me. "Howzit, pretty boy?"

A blush colours my cheeks red. "Fine," I move to join Nhlakanipho who was looking at us the entire time. It feels good to be able to love him freely around here, I'm on his lap as he embraces me and pinches my butt. "You're not jealous?"

"Of the truth? What difference will it make, you're clearly a pretty boy," Nhlakanipho murmurs calmly, I can tell that he's actually amused by this. "Besides, no one can steal you away from me. You wouldn't allow it, I own not just your heart, Shandu. All of you belongs to me. It's not going to change all of a sudden."

His confidence isn't arrogant like most people. Its calm and appealing and subtle and so fucking sexy. Like he knows who he is and trusts that he's loving me so right that I don't see anyone else but him. I

don't. No one loves me perfectly like he does. I have everything I need in him. "You're full of cock, baby. Too cocky."

He chuckles and grips my face so that I'm looking into his eyes. "Facts are facts, Shandu. You're mine, you're not going anywhere."

"Possessive, possessive." I nudge his nose and brush my lips against his. "I love you and your flaws."

We're interrupted by the sound of the backdoor closing. I shift my attention toward it and my eyes widen as Thatego appears. "Hey guys! Looks like I'm the last one to arrive." In the blink of an eye, one of the triplets is in front of him – shielding I think. Damn, this light-skinned kid is confident. He's wearing the shortest skirt I've ever seen on another human – and has paired it with a short t-shirt that is revealing his navel. I think I'm slowly getting used to the idea that there are plenty of gays like Mhlongo around here. "Sbani, what are you doing?"

"Ugqokeni?" he's still shielding the poor kid from us. "Amaphara atheni nje ubhushuzela ngezinqa emgaqweni? Usuyasangana wena?"

I can't see Thatego's face anymore but I take his silence as confusion. Maybe his IsiZulu isn't there yet but he speaks it well for a Tswana kid. Chris is giggling to himself and Sqalosenkosi seems unbothered along with Nqobizitha, they're busy at the grill. Sbani removes his jersey, leaving him half-naked as he throws it at Thatego. "And this?" I can hear the other boy asking.

"Wear that. This is my mother's house, you abide to our rules. Are you fucking out of your mind? You thought leaving your house looking like this was fine? Athini amaphara ugcaluza ngedidi ngaphandle?"

"Don't start with this rubbish, not today." Thatego throws the jersey back at Sbani. A frown crosses the giant's face but he can do nothing as he Thatego comes to sit with us. "Hey gal," he greets Nomzulu. She squeals like a child also, I think Chris is rubbing off on her. "Sanibonani," he greets the rest of us.

"Babes," Chris waves with an air of shyness. "You look gorgeous. Where did you buy these?"

"Are you into crossdressing as well?" I find myself asking Chris. It's not his style but he's very stylish and brave with his choices of clothing.

“Not really, but you have to admit that he looks good...namathanga amhlophe,” his eyes point to the pleated miniskirt that Thatego is wearing. “Your nails are also stunning.”

“Thanks, I’m thinking about changing them soon,” Thatego graces us with a beautiful grin. “I bought the clothes at H&M. The sneakers I got as a gift from...him,” he nods toward Sbani who is with his brothers and looking in our direction with a glare. He’s going to break that beer bottle with his bare hands. I enjoy watching them look at each other when the other is no longer looking. We have to go and buy non-alcoholic drinks for me, Nhlakanipho and my cousin. For Nqobizitha too because he’s driving.

There’s a Somalian store a few houses away from here apparently and because this is Thatego’s hood, he offers to go with us. Sbani offers to accompany us but it’s obvious why, he keeps looking at Thatego’s clothes. The others and I wait in the hallway as we hear the voices in the living room before a loud sigh. Thatego comes back wearing a jersey that touches his knees. He looks...ridiculous. All of us laugh – this is too funny. “Funny enough I don’t complain when he’s wearing those tight Brentwood of his that show off his dick print, mxm!” he gives us a look.

“You just get used to it because it’s all yours anyway,” Chris pipes in, he wraps an arm around the other boy’s shoulders. It’s a little awkward because Thatego is taller than him. Chris is a matchstick in a world full of toothpicks. He doesn’t even qualify to be called a toothpick.

“It’s not mine, gal,” Thatego sighs and pulls out of Chris’ embrace. He removes the jersey he was wearing and places it on his arm. That’s when we start receiving the looks left, right and centre. Part of me is uncomfortable, I don’t want any trouble and maybe Sbani had a point that Thatego should’ve dressed more decently. A teenage girl stops us along the way and compliments Thatego’s outfit.

“Ketswa kwa lona ebe mamago a re haoyo.” The girl says, I don’t understand a single word, but I do gather that her name is Lesedi.

“Hmm! Ne ko lata di chomee tsa ka,” Thatego points to us and smiles. “They’re new around here. Chris, Siya and you know Nomzulu.”

“Hey,” we smile and greet the girl.

She waves back and gives Thatego an inquisitive look. “Ke utlwa bare monnago o rekile koloi... some nice car, nana. Boma BMW something-something.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear, Lesedi. Sbani didn’t buy a car, it’s his brother’s. He’s a triplet.”

“WHAT?” the girl’s eyes widen. “How? Tell me more.”

“Later, gal. If Sbani allows me to. Why were you at my house?”

“Month end is coming soon and I’m short on that stock. I was hoping you could assist me...” she looks embarrassed all of a sudden.

“Do you need it now?”

“No. I’m just worried because any day is teatime. I can come later tonight?”

Thatego nods his head. “Or when I’m done this side I’ll come to you.”

“You’re a darling, nana. Kea leboga, I’ll be waiting at home.”

“What was that?” Chris asks as soon as the girl is gone. We’re waiting outside because they’re still delivering the cold-drinks. The original brand. Thatego doesn’t drink Kingsley for health reasons he says. I don’t mind anything, I’m too thirsty.

“Her mom refuses to buy her pads because fifteen is too young to have periods apparently. She had her periods at nineteen and doesn’t seem to realize that bodies are different. I save her some from my sisters’ packs. They have too many of them.”

“That’s so kind of you,” Chris is smiling too damn wide. He fixes his jeans and looks around, probably a little uncomfortable because of the boys sitting along the road. They’re drinking pretty heavily and the slurs they’d shouted as we came here...they were mostly aimed at Thatego. “How many sisters do you have?”

“Two and one brother. There’s four of us back home.”

“How did they react to you being gay?” I find myself curious. He’s too flamboyant, literally like a woman, and he’d probably be dead by now if he lived in Mbongolwane. Maybe.

“They’re confused, trying to be accepting but sometimes they say homophobic shit. My brother is accepting until his friends say some crap that affects him and will cause him to lash out at me.” His eyes point to the boys sat across the street. “This is why I’m happy to be living in civilised areas like Braam. I couldn’t take his abuse any longer...anyway, if he only knew just how many of those friends of his have approached me for sex. That’s what boys around here do. The same lips that talk smack in the day are the same lips that are ass kissing at night. I have gay friends, they tell me.”

“Wow.... But I’m sure this place is better than Mbongolwane. Do you know how rough it is to be gay in the rural areas? I’ve had to hide my relationship with Nhlakanipho for years. Until Chris came around, now I feel like I can breathe.”

“Ncooh,” Chris giggles and crushes me into a hug. I humour him and return it. “I love you too.”

“You guys are so lucky,” Thatego pays for our cold-drinks and we begin the walk back to Mam’ Ntwenhle’s house. Some boy makes a snide remark about his ass-cheeks peeking out. “That’s Sammy. I wonder what his friends would say if they knew that he wanted a blowjob from me the other day. I want to visit Mbongolwane one day. Maybe my future husband is there and I’m wasting my time in Joburg.”

“So you’re no longer marrying Sbani?” Nomzulu asks.

“I...” he clears his throat and gives us a bright smile. “I love him but he doesn’t love me, gal. Not unless he’s splitting me in half with his dick. Anyway, what’s that newest trend? We move...that’s what I’ll do.”

“And here I was thinking you and me would be family because of the boys we love,” Chris sighs. We’re back at the house, they’re playing loud maskandi music. I don’t know if I should roll my eyes or not when I notice that the sticks in their hands. I wonder where they got them from. They’re stick fighting. It’s good vibes. Really good vibes. I think I’ll cry by the time I have to leave this place. I may’ve encountered a few homophobes but I can’t help but cherish this. New friends. The music. Everything is so peaceful that part of me is selfishly hoping for this day not to end.

“We’re still surprising our other mother in Mbongolwane, right bafo?” because of the smile, I will assume that this is Sbanisezwe speaking. “I can’t believe I’ve lived poor all my life with all these riches right under my nose.”

Nqobizitha manages a laugh. “Not everything is about money. There are things it can’t buy – like your peace, your sanity, your happiness.” He knows better than anyone else. Chris snuggles into him and kisses his cheek. I’m not sure what he whispers to the other boy but Nqobizitha sighs and nods his head.

“You’re right, bafo.” The other triplet says, poking at his meat. “Don’t mind Sbani and his exaggeration. We never lived poor. Our mother made sure we had everything we need. Besides, a mother’s love surpasses any materialistic thing.”

Nqobizitha clears his throat, face scrunching up. “Usho kanje, bafo?”

Sqalosenkosi must realize that he’s fucked up because he smacks his face. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable or sad. I’m an idiot sometimes.”

“Its fine, bafo. The people who need to be held accountable will be held accountable. Soon, all of us are going home. I want my mother to explain herself to me.”

“Enough with the serious shit! I don’t want us to be sad. We’ll have plenty of time to sulk when we’re in Mbongolwane. Right now, we’re just bonding as a family. I hope I’ve made myself clear.”

Its hard not to laugh at the way Sbani says this. I wonder if he has a serious bone in his body. But his words seem to lighten the mood once more and everyone is able to relax. Chris is straddling Nqobizitha and grinding down on him. They’re heavily making it out and it’s both embarrassing and arousing. Sbani looks drunk enough that he has no problem touching Thatego so provocatively. They disappear back into the house. I frown as I watch Sqalosenkosi on his phone. It’s not hard to tell that he isn’t really focused on it. Maybe he’s embarrassed that he’s the only one without a partner here.

“What’s wrong?” Nhlakanipho’s voice is warm in my ear. Butterflies erupt in my belly.

“Nothing,” I nibble on my lower lip a second, “I’m just impatient about starting our new life together. January seems so far.” My arms rest on top of the ones that are around me.

“Less than six months now,” he reminds me, “then I’m all yours to love as you please. Forever and ever.”

“Forever and ever,” I confirm, my heart exploding with love for him – its undying and unchanging, always.

Mutual Desires : Forty

Christophe

“Gal, what do you think of this outfit?”

I lift my eyes and through the mirror, find Thatego looking at me with a shy smile. Sigh. I don't even have the privilege of using the bathroom anymore. He thinks we're best friends and I don't mind at all but it can get a little suffocating. What if I was pooping or something? Only Nqobizitha is allowed to be inside the bathroom with me. Not some pretty coloured-looking boy with naturally shaped brows that make me envious. And this gal thing...I've given up trying to convince him to not call me that. He doesn't call Siya that though and I'm a little offended. We're not gal-friends.

I wipe my hands on my sweatpants and turn to carefully observe his outfit. Camouflage pants and a tattered long-sleeved crop top. It reveals his flat yellow belly. He's paired his outfit with tall stilettos. I couldn't possibly wear these shoes he's wearing for longer than a minute. This is not my style but he looks good, really good. “Maybe remove the makeup and shoes?” I ask him nicely, smiling.

His face falls, I think I've hurt his feelings. He's a Cancer – too sensitive. Sbanisezwe told me this yesterday, he wanted me to go with him to the mall to buy Thatego a birthday present. Yes, we get along real well with Nqobizitha's siblings and I'm called 'umuntu kabhuti'. I pretend to hate it but deep down I be feeling myself. My man did once say that Zithobile Ngcobo has a nice ring to it and you know what, I agree. Thatego is giving me a defeated look. “Why?”

“Mbongolwane is very different from Soweto, babes. Here you can walk around wearing whatever but its different there, those people live in the stone ages – well not exactly but they're conservative. You even have to kneel down when you're giving them food. And you start with the men first, they're very patriarchal, even the women. They'll judge you from the onset if you rock up dressed like this,” I hate that I have to discourage him from expressing himself the way he sees fit but they'll skin him alive in Mbongolwane. I'm slowly learning that Thatego's feelings are hurt easily, and I don't want his visit to that place to be a sour one. “Gay isn't really welcome that side. Especially not this gay,” my eyes drag down his frame.

“But you wear whatever you want mos. I saw your pictures – the ones where you wearing that pink suit. Did they shit on you for it?”

I shake my head. “I still encounter homophobes back there, Thatego. I’m like really famous there but not for the right reasons, if you think it’s bad here then you’ve seen nothing in the rurals. I just have really thick skin and I’m around Nqobizitha most of the time. People don’t touch me because of him.”

“Maybe I should tell Sbani that I’ve changed my mind,” he licks his lips and folds his arms, appearing contemplative. I wonder if Sbani will take his change of mind well...initially, he hadn’t wanted Thatego to tag along but I guess the other boy convinced him into giving in. Now he no longer wants to go. Just thirty minutes before we go back home. “Or maybe not. I have a feeling my soulmate comes from that side. I’m going, let me go find my cleanser but I’m not removing my shoes. I bought them at Rage and I’ve always been saving them for a special occasion – this is it.”

I giggle and watch him sashay out of the bathroom. My mom sent me a text, telling to me to have a safe trip to Mbongolwane. Her husband wasn’t home but we spoke last night and he gave me some grocery money. I think he’s so surprised that I’m enjoying being that side but it has a lot to do with Nqobizitha. I don’t even know what will happen when he’s done with high school and has to go to university. There’s also my modelling career and I’m doing really well. Yesterday, the boyfriend helped me with a mock interview for that modelling gig with one of South Africa’s biggest retailers. He helps me with the videos for the skincare company. They’re doing well on Instagram. Ntethe helped me a lot with some followers.

“Sthandwa sami,” I call out as I enter the living room. We’re at Mam’ Ntwenhle’s. Siya, his mother, Nhlakanipho and Mam’ Ntwenhle left about an hour ago. They’re using a taxi and will be collected by Bab’ Shandu at Eshowe rank. It’s not that Nqobizitha didn’t offer drive the adults but him and Mam’ Ntwenhle aren’t on the best terms. He’s angry at her but his situation is tricky because he can’t even hold grudges. He talks to her but it’s not the same. He feels betrayed and unwanted. It wasn’t him that she chose and he paid for it. I am there for him, like usual, but his brothers are so welcoming that he tells me that the hole within him shrinks daily. He loves being around them.

“Where’s the fashionista? We’re supposed to have left with the others.” He kisses my lips and then looks at his watch. “Its 08:30am now.”

“I’ll fetch him,” Sbani materializes from thin air, together with Sqalosenkosi who is on his phone. “I told him to take off these murderous things he’s wearing but he refuses. What if he twists his ankle or something? Or worse, has a misstep that causes him to fall head first then he dies. You two seem to get along better, talk to him.” Sbani is pissed, walking out of the door.

Thatego folds his arms and follows after him. Nqoba and I look at each other. “Our relationship isn’t that dramatic, is it?”

“Hell no!” he glances at his other brother who is still on his phone and then throws the house keys at him. “Its all the sexual tension, trust me. They need to fuck it out but they’re resorting to petty arguments. Are you ready to leave?”

It’s not like we have a choice. I nod my head and link our hands together as we leave the house. The others will be staying with Mam’ Ntwenhle – at the RDP house. I offered my place but without Zenny’s permission, they couldn’t really accept. I’ll talk to her tonight and if she agrees they’ll come tomorrow.

“You’re lucky, he even gets your door for you,” Thatego says as Nqobizitha goes to the driver’s side. Now we’re just waiting for Sqalo and then we’ll be on our way. “This one isn’t even a gentleman.”

“Am I your boyfriend?”

And Thatego’s mood is ruined just like that. Too bad he can’t change his mind about remaining behind because we’re already driving off. I am in charge of the music. Rihanna seems to be good – at least Thatego seems to come out of his feelings a bit. I’m bad company and fall asleep sometime into our drive. Nqobizitha wakes me up and tells me we’re getting food. Now that I’m awake, I really need to use the bathroom. “Not KFC,” I beg because it seems like that’s where we’re headed. He tells the others that we’re going to Debonairs but they want their KFC so we separate. I use the bathroom as he orders for us. We wait for about ten more minutes before our order arrives.

He wraps an arm around my shoulders and leads me outside. Our food arrived at the right time because the others are leaving KFC with their own food. Sbanisezwe is giving Thatego a piggyback ride and they’re laughing about something. Talk about bipolar vibes. They weren’t talking just a few hours ago.

“Do you need a break, bafo?” Sqalosenkosi asks Nqobizitha as soon as we’re within earshot.

“Not yet, but I’ll tell you,” my boyfriend gives his brother an appreciative smile, “Thank you for the offer.”

“Mapholoba,” Sqalo bows his head and joins the others at the back.

I thank Nqoba with a kiss on his cheek as soon as he's helped me with my seatbelt. He gets in the car and then we're driving off. Thatego's whimpers fill the car. "Ouch, kubhlungu."

His Zulu isn't all that bad, it's just that it has a Joburg accent like mine. It's not in that sexy pure Zulu accent that Nqobizitha and them seem to have. My nosy ass shifts in my seat to see what the fuss is all about. It turns out that Sbani had been right about these heels being murderous. Thatego hurt his foot but it's not bad, just a little sprain. The heels are now on his lap and Sbani is massaging his feet as the other boy chows away and complains about the pain on his ankle.

"Ulayekile, maybe next time you'll actually listen to me and stop being so damn stubborn."

They start arguing but it's light. I shake my head and focus on my food. I wonder what Sqaalosenkosi thinks about this relationship that Sbani seems to have with Thatego. Has he actually asked his brother about his sexuality? I don't really think that it should matter. No one goes around asking straight folk if they're straight for fucking each other. They don't need to disclose anything so why should we? I just wonder if he knows that Thatego is in love with Sbanisezwe and I wonder if he's talked to his brother about this. I don't see this ending well for Thatego.

I am brought out of my thoughts by a familiar hand gripping mine. I peer over at the boy I love and give him my brightest smile. His eyes are on me – penetrating. My belly churns nervously and I get the urge to look away but his eyes tell me not to. "No more hiding," he whispers the words to me and kisses my knuckles.

I think I know what he's saying but the mere thought is too overwhelming and I don't know whether to be happy or not. I don't think his mom likes me much. I didn't mind keeping this a secret a little while longer – but he appears firm in his resolve. So I nod my head and then grab a pizza slice, feeding it to him and then help him with his drink as well. Thatego says our love is disgusting. He's right. It's disgustingly beautiful.

MaKhathide

Thandeka comes stumbling inside the living room like a crazed woman. My daughters jump as I rush to her to find out what is wrong. "Kwenzenjani?" I smack her cheek repeatedly as she opens and closes her

mouth like a bloody mute. My patience is wearing thin with each second and the next smack is harsher than all the others. "Open your mouth and speak or get out of my sight!"

"T-They're at the door," finally something intelligible. I pull her up to sit on the couch as Nontethelelo rushes outside. Ndoni appears scared, she's always been too much of a weakling. "There's three of them, Mah! It's like seeing one person."

I'm failing to understand what she's trying to say. "Go fetch my gun," I tell Ndoni but she remains on the couch like a bloody fool. Why me? I worked so hard to raise them strong. "Go fetch that gun wena, mahn! You're brave enough to defy us and marry useless boys but you're not brave to hold a gun and look at the enemy in the eye. I'm not going to ask twice!"

She shakes her head and shakily stumbles into action – but still so damn slow. My eyes snap in the direction of the wide opening as I hear footsteps. Nontethelelo appears first, giving me a look I can't describe. Then Ntwenhle. I'm processing that shock when my eyes almost bulge out of my sockets. This can't be... I shake my head. What is going on? Is this some kind of sick joke?

"What's going on here?" my voice is calm. Never allow the enemy to detect your fear. I am uneasy and my eyes briefly travel to Ntwenhle as a boiling rage slowly builds within me. "Ntwenhle what is this rubbish? You're in my house for this rubbish?"

"I told you the truth would come out eventually!" That nerve of hers to raise her voice at me. I get the urge to put her in her place. How dare she come into my house and disrespect me like this! This ungrateful twat. "L-Look at this mess now, Mah. Zengcebo you should've known that we couldn't keep them apart."

"Rubbish!" I scoff and trail my controlled footsteps toward her. I will not look at these boys, no I refuse. This is the worst betrayal. Even my own son is in on this. "You did this. You ungrateful slut—"

"Not my mother. With all due respect, salukazi saseMbongolwane, but don't disrespect my mother in my presence. We're hoping to sit down and have a rational conversation. My mother couldn't tell us everything and this is why we're here."

"Please...Mkabayi," one of the boys bows his head. I look at him and that smile is too much like Nqobizitha's. Has he become so disrespectful suddenly? "Lovely house by the way. I didn't think a place

named donkey would have impressive houses like this. I'm looking forward to having another mother in you – so long as you respect my first mother of course."

So this is not Nqobizitha. My boy is the one who has been silently staring at me with a blank expression. That small gay boy, Xulu's son, has his arm wrapped around my son's. I frown in distaste. "Nqobizitha—"

"Don't call me that, MaKhathide," he cuts me off. His voice is cold, I don't recognize it. It causes a wave of fear to curl around my heart. Not my beloved son. Not him. "So this is what you do to me? You took me from my mother for what? To gloat over your enemies about a boy child that you didn't even bear."

My hand connects with his cheek before I can help myself. It's a weak slap with how tall he is. Then I receive a slap myself. I stumble back in shock, realizing that it's Ntwenhle. "You don't put your hands on my child. I am so sick and tired of your bullying and you thinking that you're god. The truth has come out finally and I—"

I punch the attitude right out of her big mouth. "Mkami!" someone's arms fold around my waist as I struggle with this little girl pulling on my straight-back. "Stop it. Don't touch her. Stop it!" I am separated from Ntwenhle but I am fuming. I ignore the blood coming from my chipped nail. The audacity of her to do this, after everything I've done for her this is how she repays me. I'm going to deal with her, I'm going to—

"This is all your fault, Ngcobo!" I shout and then count in my head, calming myself down. "All of you, I want you to leave this house. Only my son is staying. The rest of you...see yourselves out of my house!"

"No, no! No more hiding," Ntwenhle is fixing herself, a little bruised up. She undermines me for being an old woman. I've been beating ratchets up since before she was born. "The truth is out already. You took my child from me. You don't love him, you never took care of him. I trusted you Zengecebo. You and Bab' Ngcobo promised that he'd be taken care of but look at him! You've hurt my son."

"And you're innocent in all this?" I snort, my eyes briefly finding Nqobizitha, his facial expression is blank. "Uyasangana wena? This is how you thank me for caring for you, Nqobizitha. Ungibonga ngeplate lamasimba?" the betrayal cuts deep, I want to fetch my rod. I will deal with him once I get these pests to leave my house. How dare they do this!

“You lied to me,” he says quietly. He’s hurt and I want to know why. Can’t see that this is all his fault, why did he go around digging for secrets that were better left buried? Did this gay boy put him up to it? “Twenty years of my life was a lie. You’re not my mother and he’s not my father.”

Distantly, the shocked gasps from the others capture my ears.

“That’s not true, ndodana—”

“Don’t do that, Baba. Stop lying to me. This is my mother, my father is no more. Why didn’t you tell me from the beginning? Maybe I would’ve understood. Why did you pick me? Why couldn’t you pick the others? I wasn’t special. I got hurt with you. My head is messed up.”

“Thank you, ndodana.” I nod my head and look at him. “This stubborn woman whose saggy vagina you came from thought she was too clever. I wanted all three of you. We have all the resources, they wouldn’t have suffered. I wanted to raise all of you. Three sons, me, but your mother was a fool.”

“You’re not listening to him,” the gay boy says. Now I’m noticing that there’s two of them, another one – a lighter one, is hiding behind the playful Nqobizitha. God, don’t tell me that— “He is not thanking you for raising him, stop acting like you did him a favour. He suffered because of you and now he’s confused. He didn’t want to be picked. That’s what he’s saying.”

“And who do you think you are?” my eyes narrow in on Xulu’s boy. “Ngiyokoroba ngawe mfana wami, usemncane kabi. (I’ll mop the floor with you, you’re still so young.) What are you doing here anyway? Shouldn’t you be with your loose sister at home?”

“He’s here because he was invited by me. He’s been more present in my life in a few months than you ever have in my twenty years of living. Now my question remains, what were your intentions with me?”

“Don’t ask me stupid questions!” I snap, nearing him. “I took you from this fool because you deserved a better life. You’re not going to be ungrateful like her, Nqobizitha. Do you know what I saved you from...or did she taint my name without giving me the chance to explain myself? She’s not an angel, this loose thing! What kind of woman sleeps with her own brother? What kind of abomination is that, getting pregnant for your own blood? Amanyala nje, uyaphithizela uzenza ngcwele ngobala. Is that what you want to hear? Or that your father was just as useless, a dirty pig who died in mud like he deserved to. He was busy fucking married women and it caught up with him. Go to his grave, mhlampe asabolile

namanje amasende akhe! There's a lot I've saved your from, your father would've brought more disgrace into this family. I'd worked too hard. You're supposed to be thanking me for handling issues...like I always do. Because when things go wrong, this weakling of a man I married becomes useless. To undo all of my hard work..." my eyes find Ntwenhle, I can't breathe right. The anger is blinding me. "Ntwenhle, to go back on our agreement..."

"Saved me? Saved me how, MaKhathide?!" Nqobizitha gets in my space, tears swimming in his eyes. "You couldn't even save me from your own sister! You were never there. That woman is haunting me and the darkness that she left me with wants to drown me sometimes. I want to let it win sometimes because maybe I won't taste her or smell her or feel her touch me any longer. You did not save me, you ruined my life!"

"Then I suppose we'll blame your mother for giving birth to you in the first place," I say the first words that come to mind. Nqobizitha blinks, the hurt flashing in his face does something to me but it's too late to take back my words. I'm losing my son. She's going to win him from me. I won't go down without a fight, whatever it takes to have him with me.

"Zengcebo, what's gotten into you? Our only son..." Ngcobo grips my shoulders, shaking me but my eyes are on Nqobizitha and the gay boy. How he grips my son's arm tight and whispers something to him. There's a familiarity there that is making me angrier. I can't have another gay Ngcobo on my hands, I refuse. He's not going to disappoint me like this!

"Why don't I do you a favour and get out of your life? Then you'll get your wish and it will be as if I never existed. Maybe I'll go to the people who actually love me," I notice how his arm tightens around Xulu's boy.

"And don't you dare come back until you fix that gay nonsense you're on about," I am not going to yield to a child. He's going to think he has some form of power and advantage over me. He needs to learn his place. "I know these disgusting animalistic urges are part and parcel with the Ngcobo name kodwa not on my watch. Your father is a disgrace of a man enough, I will not entertain another gay animal in this house. As a matter of fact, wait here..."

My feet carry me to my office. I put my broken feelings aside, store them in a compartment, as I prepare to deal with that boy. There it is. The fools are still standing in my house. "This is how you repay me?" my rod makes a loud sound as it connects with Nqobizitha's chest. Xulu's boy screams in pain as I turn my attention to him. "Ngyekeleni, mahn!" I shout, aiming for Xulu's son. He's corrupting my son and defiling him. "This is how you repay me, Nqobizitha? I saved you from that witch, saved you from being

a child dad. Do you know the things I've shielded you from to ensure that you had a carefree childhood?"

"W-What do you mean child dad?"

"Now, you're slow. What forty-four year old rapes an eleven year old boy and gets pregnant? Is that what you want to hear? Or should I tell you about how I had to get rid of her and that cursed seed she called her baby to protect you? Don't you come to my house and disrespect me like I haven't been protecting you your entire life, Nqobizitha. Where was Ntwenhle?"

I don't mean to hurt him, he's my son, but he has to know that his ungratefulness won't cut it with me. There is so much I do for Nqobizitha to ensure that his life is normal like other children. There's so much Nontethelelo helps me with. Fundiswa died so that he would feel safe around here, so that she wouldn't ever have the power to force herself on him. I'd kill every female sent to harm him to protect him. I've done so much for him and it hurts that he's forgetting all that. It hurts that he brought this woman here to disrespect me like this. I may not have birthed him but he's my son. His loyalties should lie with me.

"What are you saying, MaKhathide?"

He brings me out of my thoughts. The rest of the house is silent. My eyes shift to Ngcobo who is giving me a disapproving look. Ndoni is back, carrying the gun. I snatch it from her and look at all of them, pointing it from one person to the next. "All of you, leave my house!"

Nqobizitha is the first one, he's dragging Xulu's boy with him.

"By the way," he stops at the door and looks at me, "you're dead to me."

"AAAAHHH!" I scream as soon as I am on my own. The sound of the door reaches my ears. Ngcobo comes into view. I look at him a second and then fall to the ground. For the first time in so long I feel like crying. "N-Not my son, Ngcobo," I murmur harshly. He embraces me and I struggle in his arms.

"We all need to calm down, Zengcebo."

“Ntwenhle is going to pay for this,” I murmur through my tears. They’re overflowing now and I can’t stop them. I am angry, so angry, desperately trying to cling on to the little bit of sanity I have left. “M-My only son, Ngcobo. Why would he hurt me this way?”

“This isn’t about you, Zengcebo. He’s hurting, we’ve hurt him. We failed our child,” I can feel his tears soaking my blouse. “But I have hope that things are going to be fine. Things will be fine.”

I want to scream, to shout at Sakhile that nothing’s going to be fine. I’ve just lost my son, my pride and joy. My enemies are going to rejoice in the wake of my downfall. My heart is breaking apart into a million pieces. I’ll have to make this right again, I have to. We’re going to be the happy family we once were. There’s no time for weakness. Ntwenhle is going to be the reason why everyone know to never cross me. She came into my life to remind me of the strong woman I am. This is a challenge and the only victor will be me.

Christophe

I don’t think I can take anymore. My chest is heaving and my lower body has become numb. He hasn’t come, he’s just moving in and out of me expecting the pain to go away but its here to stay. I feel it with him – deep and excruciating. His mind is in a state of purgatory. He blames himself, I know because of the nonsensical gibberish he is mumbling to himself. “Its not your fault,” I find myself whispering.

How do I deal with this?

What woman rapes a kid and allows herself to get pregnant for him? What mother sees a grown man in a boy? What carer finds it okay to infect a child with STDs? My heart aches for him. I am mad at the world on his behalf. It’s like he tries to get over one thing then gets hit with the other. I don’t know about his future plans where kids are concerned but its eating at him. His mother killed his child. That’s what he kept saying as we were coming back, like any of it was his fault. Like he would’ve been able to raise a child when he was a child himself.

He buries his face inside my neck and breathes against me. My voice cracks as a forceful nudge pokes my insides. “It’s not your fault,” I whisper again. “I’m here and we’ll deal with it together. I love you, I

love you so much.” My arms fold around him tight and I wish I could take his pain away and store it inside of me. I want to carry it all for him so that he can be that Nqobizitha I met in the beginning.

He groans into my drenched neck and my eyes close tightly as I finally feel him shooting deep inside me. My body is where he’s buried his pain. I hold back a whimper as he pulls out. He collapses beside me and curls into a foetal position. I want to hold him but I really need water. Leaving the bed is a bit of a struggle, my legs are broken. I put on the first item on the floor. It’s his jersey then I head into the kitchen. Zenny’s there, scoping for food in the fridge. “Hi,” I mumble, moving to get a glass.

“Has the ogre finally calmed down?”

He was punching walls before we ended up on the bed. “He’s sleeping,” I say.

She looks at me with a plate in both her hands. I don’t like how her eyes seem to be judging me. “I never thought I’d be the one to say this because I love you with that boy but maybe you should break up with him for some time. He’s not himself lately and I’m worried for you. He’s too much effort, baby wam.”

“No!” her words make me angry somehow. I mean I know that he has baggage but she’s not the one helping him carry it. I am doing it and it’s not heavy for me. I’m not going anywhere. “This is why people die out there. You adults claim to love one another but run when the going gets tough. You’re not there for each other like you claim to be. I’m with him every step of the way. I’m not going to leave him, Zenny.”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t support him but I just mean that you should love him from a distance. He’s going through the most and what if—”

“No, Zenny. I’m not going to listen to this. No offense but you know nothing about love, this is why you don’t even know where you stand with Jabulani. You’re not going to advise me on love – focus on your own love life first.”

“Haibo wenja!” she looks at me with a gawk. “What did you say to me?”

I’ve drunk my water so I leave. Maybe I was out of line but what does she know? She’s not going to grow tired on my behalf. I find Nqobizitha with my father’s hair clipper. He’s sitting on a chair and looking at

the mirror while chopping his hair off. "Let me..." I whisper and take the hair clipper from him. I'm not good at this but I'm doing a much better job. I'm crying as I'm doing it, he's looking at the mirror – no emotion, nothing. I sit on his lap as soon as I'm done and hug him tight. He hugs me close as if not wanting to let go. I close my eyes and pray that the love I feel for him consumes him whole, that it keeps him safe and fills him with light. Perhaps Zenny was right. Maybe Nqobizitha comes with too much baggage—so much of it that I should be running for the hills. But I can't. Not when I'm in love with him. Not when I promised I wouldn't leave.

I'd rather be nowhere else but here.

Mutual Desires : Forty-one

Christophe

He enjoys crushing me with his body just as much as I enjoy it too. His head is on my belly and his arms are loosely wrapped around my waist. My back is straining a bit, we've been like this for hours but I don't mind. When we're like this, it feels like nothing can penetrate this invisible bubble that shields us both from the world. There is no tension in his body but I know that he's drained, I can feel it in the way all of him is pressing down on me tiredly, the weight on his shoulders – I can feel it. I sigh and caress his bald head, I'm no barber but I think I did a pretty good job. He's like a big child with a bald head.

Leaning down to kiss his temple, a smile cracks my dehydrated lips as his arms tighten around me just a little. "We should go out with your brothers, show them around the place you grew up in. Some fresh air will do you good so maybe we can visit Nhlakanipho's? That place has a serene vibe and we can all relax."

He doesn't reply for so long that I'm not sure if he's heard me or not. Maybe he just doesn't have the energy to do anything. He's depressed, I can tell, but staying home won't help him. I know because I've suffered from depression before, back when my anorexia was bad, and my mom was there for me. Staying home means that you're in your head a lot but at the same time, I know it's not his fault, he can't help feeling the way he's feeling. Maybe we can watch one of his Science shows then and I'll make him his favourite food and stuff him with it until he hates amasi.

"You have to be in Durban today," he finally says, voice so quiet I almost didn't catch it.

Durban. I'd forgotten about it. Its Saturday and my classes are on weekends after all. "I'm not going in today," I say with a finality because he has it in him to disagree with me. "We can stay here," aside from him needing some air, I really think we should go out because Zenny is here and she dislikes him lately, "or we can meet up with your brothers. Then we can go to your best friend's place and it can be like Joburg all over again. All of us can just relax and not think."

"Not thinking seems like a good idea."

A giggle bursts free and my heart flutters as I am graced with his soft chuckles. "So we can go, sthandwa sami?" my mind pleads with him to say yes.

“If it will make you happy.”

“I’d rather do what makes you happy,” I tell him, gently nuzzling his head and kissing the prickly skin. “Ngyakuthanda, Nqobizitha...Siqiniseko wami,” I add because I do – through it all.

The others come knocking outside my father’s house as Nqobizitha and I are getting dressed. Well, I’m done, Nqoba is undecided on what to wear. Some of his clothes are here – washed and ironed and hung neatly in my wardrobe because you don’t fold Brentwood it’s too expensive to be treated like Mr Price clothes. That’s what this arrogant boy I’m in love with likes to say. He talks smack a lot for someone who can’t even wash or iron his own clothes. I do everything for him, this is why he likes to think there’s no equality in this relationship. Well, he likes to say we’re equals and then will go on to quote Animal Farm on how some folk are more equal than others. He’s an idiot but I love him to the moon and Saturn.

I am relieved to not see Zenny on my way to the door. I’m met with two gigantic clones first. The first one is smiling and the other one is blankly looking at me. Is it weird that I can tell them apart from Nqobizitha? Especially with Sbani because he’s just Nqobizitha 2.0. But I can still tell them apart. Sgalosenkosi makes it easy with his indifferent demeanour. “Sanibonani,” I open the door wide to invite them inside.

“Munt’ kabhuti,” Sbani bows his head, “Did you take care of my baby brother? He was really upset last night. Sex is the best therapy, trust me I know.”

His smile... does this mean he got laid as well? I can’t imagine Thatego agreeing to having sex with him in his mother’s house. For as confident as that boy is, it’s still not hard to tell that he’s only been having sex for a short time. He is always flustered when Sbani goes on his touchy-touchy spree when he’s drunk. “That’s none of your business but I think he’s fine.”

Sbani’s smile broadens. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

I roll my eyes as they get in. Thatego was hidden behind the giants. My jaw drops at how simplistic he looks. Baggy sweatpants and a long-sleeved black shirt. His gorgeous hair is tied back into a neat bun. “Hey, gal. How did you sleep?”

I didn't sleep at all actually. I'm not tired though and just need some air. "Fine, babes. You look...different."

"Like a boy, boy." He seems upset by the whole thing. His eyes are on an unbothered Sbani, glaring. "Look at this fashion crisis, gal. This outfit belongs in the dumpster, it should be illegal to step out in public looking like this – especially for boys like me. I didn't steal my mom's makeup for so many years to be oppressed like this. I couldn't even wear my skinny jeans or put on any lip gloss."

"Stop jutting out your bottom lip like that. I'll kiss that attitude right out of you," Sbani puts his hands in his pockets and maintains his unbothered stance.

I giggle as Thatego's jaw falls to the ground. "You look beautiful like usual Thatego," I tell him as Nqobizitha finally makes his appearance. "The clothes look good on you and you're still the same...gal that I'm used to. Anyway, we're just trying to protect you. Mbongolwane ain't kind to no gay kids."

"Awu ndoda, besime ngawe." Sqalosenkosi stands in front of Nqoba, then hugs him. My boyfriend returns it and it seems to last for a long time before they're separating. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't know," Nqobizitha clears his throat and pulls me to his side. I want to climb him like a tree but perhaps it's not really appropriate. "I'm just grateful for the silence in my brain. How about you, bafo?"

"Overwhelmed. Our mother thought we would talk today but I think we all need a breather, I was relieved when your boyfriend here sent that message. Today and tomorrow we rest for the sake of our inner peace. Just know that in all this, we're together – all of us, all the way."

Nqobizitha nods his head. I love how he seems calmer around his brothers, Sbanisezwe makes him laugh and laugh. He has the energy of a child, and is the reason why parents don't give their children too much sugar. There's a spontaneity about him. "Where do you hide your beautiful women around this place, bafo? I'm dying to see what the town named donkey has to offer," he's driving but I've seen his eye wandering whenever someone catches his eye.

"Look who's talking, like you haven't just discovered that you're from around here as well," Nqobizitha throws his head back on the seat as I lay on his shoulder. He kisses my forehead and sighs. "You and I have different tastes in women. The girls around here are exactly that – girls. Immature and foolish. You're not allowed to dump them, trust me I know."

“Weeehhh, kanti? Miss me on that,” Sbani’s fingers tap against the steering wheel. “The clingy ones are not my type.”

Sqalosenkosi scoffs beside me, he’s in the backseat with us. “You don’t have a type. You fuck everything walking on two legs – as long as it gets your dick wet.”

“Something that you cannot relate to, bafo.” Sbani’s smile is mischievous, his eyes are glinting with mirth. “Your right hand is always hard at work, doing the job that few women can do.”

“Fuck off, not everything is about women.”

“You’re right, sometimes it’s about men too...” his eyes are on Thatego as he says that. He’s confusing, and I wonder how Thatego manages with him. Straight one minute then bisexual the next. This is why it’s not advisable for gay men to date bisexual men – from what I’ve heard. These guys only experiment with you then go on to marry women. They never pick other men, they’re ashamed. Bisexual men will turn your heart into mincemeat that you buy at Noord butchery. It won’t even be the expensive one. That’s how bad they are to date.

The kids are playing in the mud outside. Thatego is being dramatic about insects hopping around with every step he takes. He’s scared of grasshoppers. Then he complains about the sun and how he should’ve brought his water bottle along to keep himself hydrated. Like there isn’t any water in the rurals. “Those goats are creepy as fuck! Do you know that they’re used in satanic rituals? Have you ever watched Drag Me To Hell? That goat was possessed—”

“Musa uk’banga umsindo, Cikicane. These goats aren’t possessed, the farmer goes to church every Sunday so that is impossible,” Sbanisezwe steers Thatego toward Nhlakanipho’s home, “they pray for the grass and they drink holy water. Ask my brother.”

“Mxm, don’t take me for an idiot.”

I shake my head, a smile forming on my lips as we spot Siya and Nhlakanipho sitting together on a bench. They’re talking quietly and looking intimate as fuck. I get the urge to look away, like I always do, but I don’t. “Hey guys!” my voice is too loud.

They both return my greeting but the look on Siya's face reveals his mild annoyance. I forget he's such a bitch sometimes. Something about Nhlakanipho is a bit off but I can't read him properly – like usual. He offers to introduce the brothers to uGogo. His siblings are looking at them like they're watching some magic trick. They're in awe and they're giggling. Thatego tells us that the reaction was the same when they were coming to my house. People were stopping them to ask questions and though Sqalo was more than annoyed, Sbani revelled in the attention. Siya comes back with Kuhlekimi in his arms. She's grown so much – nearly four months old now.

“So what's going on with your boyfriend?” I ask him.

Siya gives the baby to Thatego who was practically begging him for a chance to hold her. I'm given another annoyed glance before Siya sighs heavily and rests his cheek on his palm. The sun is blazing today and in the distance, I can see MaMlambo hard at work, ploughing into her field. “His father is putting pressure on him to do umsebenzi wamadlozi. He called this morning, Gogo told us that he's losing his livestock. The cows are dying all of a sudden.”

“Serves him right. Nhlakanipho suffered for so long without him and now the favour is being returned.”

Siya shakes his head, “I just want them to get along. Maybe I don't know where Nhlakanipho is coming from but this thing is getting to him. I don't want him to regret not having a relationship with his father.”

“No offense but your father was present, Siya. You have no idea the crap kids with absent father go through – the second-guessing, questioning of self-worth, there's a lot of things and it sucks. My dad was in the house with me but he wasn't there for me, he's emotionally unavailable. That crap can affect how you view relationships. It's a good thing that Nhlakanipho hasn't let it affect him, he's a good guy. He's super dedicated to you and your love is too beautiful. Its what most people dream to have.”

“Tell me about it,” Thatego sighs. I didn't think he was listening to us. He looked quite preoccupied with Kuhlekimi. Then there's Nhlakanipho's siblings who keep asking him why he looks strange – unlike any other people they've encountered around here. “One day, I want to have a relationship like you and your boyfriend's. It's...I don't have the words but goosebumps.” His face reveals that awe again, like a kid looking up to their hero. “I don't know, so far this love thing is disappointing for me. Like it's not the same one I read about in the books. Maybe I'm a little naïve but I kinda thought that...it doesn't even matter what I thought.”

“What you need to is to fuck around,” I tell Thatego, “Have you even slept with someone who isn’t Sbani?”

“This is bad advice,” Siya shakes his head, “Don’t let him fool you with that hoe is life crap. He’s not a hoe, ask him if he sleeps with any guy who isn’t Nqobizitha.”

“He got me from someone,” I say, although I’m not proud that I once cheated on Hugo, “and I’ve slept with more than one guy. Have you Thatego?”

The poor thing’s skin turns beet-red. Aha! I was right about him having recently deflowered virgin tendencies. Not that I blame him. “I tried with this guy...Kumkani. You guys saw him at the party, remember? Anyway, I chickened out. It felt like I was cheating on Sbani.”

I laugh hard although maybe I shouldn’t. This was me with Nqobizitha once, not knowing where I stood, until I confessed my feelings for him. I’ll give him credit for never having his freakout or lashing out at me for my sexuality. I’ll credit him for not freaking out the morning after we had sex. He made things easier for me. “Then ask him where you guys stand, Thatego. Don’t let him play you like that. You’re in love with him and you deserve someone who’ll reciprocate your feelings. Bisexual guys are jerks. I heard it’s the same with bisexual women. Those people will never go for same sex relationships in the end.”

“I’ll think about it, gal. I don’t want to complain and push him away.”

He’s not going to listen to reason. Anyway sometimes we crash, burn and learn. I hope it doesn’t have to reach that point with him but something about Sbani is too careless. He says all the time that he’s not ready for commitment, and when he does talk about marriage, it’s always with a woman. I think it’s obvious that Thatego isn’t in his future plans. He’s a fucking idiot, a selfish prick. And part of me is angry at him as I watch him reappear with the others.

We spend most of the afternoon at Nhlakanipho’s house. It’s small, yes, and that makes it an inconvenience when the weather is hot like today but the company is great. We can’t sit on Nhlakanipho’s bed though and have to bear Siya acting all lovey dovey with him. Sbani seems to be doing the same with Thatego, and the other boy is soaking up all the attention. The look in Sbani’s eyes almost deceives me into thinking that he might reciprocate Thatego’s feelings but things change with him – from what I’ve learned so far. Sgalosenkosi is on his phone, typing away, brows furrowed and face serious. He looks a bit awkward to me. Siya asks him about how his business is doing, and I’m reminded that he’s into forex trading.

Nqobizitha kisses the back of my neck and brings my attention to him. I tilt my head to the side to look at him. His eyes are still so blank. "How are you feeling?" I can feel how hard his heart is beating, his body is tense behind me. I wrap his arms around me to try and ground him.

"Fine...with you."

The smile that spreads my lips is too wide. "I love you too."

MaKhathide

The door opens and my heartbeat accelerates. Ngcobo appears and I feel my heart sinking, it doesn't show on the outside but the disappointment wants to drown me. I didn't think that Nqobizitha would stay away from home for longer than 24 hours. Part of me had been hoping that he would've come to his senses by now. That he would've realized that all I've ever done, that I've ever wanted was to be the best possible parent for him. Instead he keeps breaking me, hurting me like this.

"Mkami," Ngcobo kisses my cheek. I recoil from the touch and watch him get comfortable on the couch across from me. "Let's hope you've had enough time to rest. The boys miss you around the office."

How can he be so calm? Our son is being corrupted by some idiots he thinks love him and hasn't been home in over 24 hours. He's staying with that loose girl Zenande and her gay brother. Who knows what nonsense has been fed to him in the time that he is away? What about Ntwenhle and those useless boys she calls her sons? They're probably trying to replace me right this instant. I can't allow it to happen.

"Where is my boy, Ngcobo?"

"You know where he is, Zengcebo. Didn't you tell him to stay away until he sorted out his affairs? He's not going to come home any time soon. Not with your unapologetic attitude, we wronged our boy but you're refusing to acknowledge that. You're going to lose him to Ntwenhle, slowly but surely, if you don't self-introspect and see the err of your ways."

“And who are you, my god?” I scoff and fold my arms. “I’m not going to yield to a child, Ngcobo. Nqobizitha needs to learn that he will respect me. I am his mother, the positions won’t change suddenly. This is why the world is in so much ruin nowadays. Kids think they can pull their parents by their noses. Well I’m not going to stand for it! Did we disobey our parents, Ngcobo, did we? I’m still here with your pathetic ass, honouring their wishes even after their death. Who does Nqobizitha think he is?”

“Times have changed, Ngcengece. This thing of dictating to our children isn’t working now. Pride aside, you have to admit that we’ve wronged our son. I feel like we should be apologizing to him and trying to mend the broken relationship.”

“Easy for you to say, you’re not the one being cast stones at. Now I feel the pain Jesus went through with the Jews. You try to pick someone up and make something better of him and this is how they thank you. Ngibongwa ngeplate leskhwehela. What took you so long with Ntwenhle?”

“Her cancer is getting vicious.”

“How selfish of her. A dying dog was selfish enough to betray me like this, knowing her days are numbered. Was she trying to hurt my son in all this? I need to do something about her, Ngcobo. I’m not patient enough to wait any longer, each day without my son is a punch to the gut. What will people say? What are they saying now? I can’t even show my face in public. I’m hurt deeply, Ngcobo.”

He comes to me to hug me, I don’t want to return it. I’m dying slowly on the inside. Ntwenhle has killed me here. Nqobizitha has killed me. The betrayal cuts deep. But my son is still my son, I can’t live without him. I’ve worked hard to get him. I need to win him back. It needs to be done...no matter what it takes.

Nqobizitha

I need to use the bathroom, I’ve ignored it for long enough that I can’t any longer. My attempts at leaving the bed are being blocked by Chris who is clinging to me. I try again and place my pillow in his arms in place of my body. The cozy orange lighting means I don’t have to be afraid of the dark. My heart still feels heavy though. The exhaustion in my body is draining, a whole lot more because it’s not just

physical but mental and emotional as well. I'm trying to swim my way up so that I can breathe but it's like I'm stuck in filthy waters with a rope tied around my ankle, pulling me down, down, down.

I reach the bathroom just as I hear a flush on the other side of the door. I freeze, I don't really know why. My body traps me there and instructs me not to move so I don't. I'm trying to remember something, but there are fragments, me waiting for...her – Ntombikayise – until she's done. I can see her wiping herself. The stench of urine assaults my nostrils.

"Nqobizitha? What the fuck are you doing?!" Zenande's voice is loud, it causes me to startle lightly. I blink my eyes to find her looking at me with impatience. "You don't stand in our house like some creep goddammit! Suka endleleni, ngiyavivinywa yini Somandla?"

I ignore her and use the bathroom. Then I wash my face with cold water. It makes me feel better, a little grounded. Zenande is still outside as I leave the bathroom. "We need to talk." Her voice is nonnegotiable. I follow her to the kitchen. She sits down and I do the same. I'm not sure why she didn't turn the light on but I count in my head to keep from panicking. "I need you to break up with my brother."

What?

I shake my head, maybe I haven't heard right. My heartbeat is picking up – faster and faster it beats. I lick my lips and level Zenande with an inquiring stare. "Ntokazi, I – uh, angikuzwa kahle."

"Musa uk'dlala ngami, Nqobizitha!" Her voice lifts up again. "What's so hard to understand? I want you to break up with him. You're not yourself lately and I don't think he needs any negative energy around him. I know how you deal with your pain, I see how you vent. Next time you won't be punching walls but him, just like you're hurting him with all these rough fucks you give him. Angiyona impumputhe...I see everything!"

My jaw tightens at her words. "That's not—true." A harsh breath leaves me as my body starts trembling. It's too hot in here. I can feel a bead of sweat forming on my forehead. And why is it getting harder to breathe?

"Yes it is. And you're a coward for not admitting it!" Zenande's screaming now, her accusing eyes are quivering. "Do you know what you're putting him through, Nqobizitha? Do you get that you're toxic?"

You're not ready for a relationship, not with Zithobile. He's too young to have to deal with this crap from you. He's only eighteen, he doesn't deserve this."

I bite the inside of my cheek. The rhythm of my heartbeat changes again, taking on unsteady beats. And I can't breathe right, it feels like there's a knife stuck in my windpipe. "I—uh," I push away from the table slightly and rub my face repeatedly.

"You know it's true," Zenande continues softly. I wish she would shut up and leave. If she continues taunting me like this...

"I—I'm just dealing with some things right now but I wouldn't hurt Chris, Zenande. Come on you know I'm better than that. I admit I was wrong for using his body as my escape but it's not done on purpose. I'd never hurt him, I'd rather die before I do that." I plead my case, maintaining the eye contact to ensure that she sees how serious I am.

"Ngyakuzwa, I truly do. And I don't know what crap you're dealing with exactly but I empathize with you. My problem here is that my brother has to hold your hand throughout this healing process you're going through. These things take time, Nqobizitha, and it's not fair on Chris to have to be with someone who is clearly broken. You need to sort yourself out before continuing anything with my brother. Mncane, he's supposed to be having fun and doing all these things that kids his age do. He's not supposed to be caring after a grown dude who has issues. Mangabe uyamthanda then you'll compromise, be unselfish as he has been and choose him, just like he chose you. Let him go. Zilungise wena k'qala."

No. No. No.

Shuddered breaths leave me, my eyes widening, as my body begins shaking violently. I'm panicking, my throat constricting. Zenande's asking too much from me. Chris is my lifeline. If he goes away then I will be left with nothing. My life, it won't have a purpose—again. "I-I can't do—that, Zenande."

"Because you're selfish. You'd rather you dragged him into the darkness with you!"

"N-No, you don't understand, I-I'm getting h-help. A—therapist. I-I want to be—better for him. And myself. I promise you."

Zenande rolls her eyes, as if she could hardly be interested. "Therapy doesn't magically make you better, Nqobizitha. And it takes time to fix someone as...damaged as you. You're like one of those wrecked, old cars that are almost beyond repair. It will require some hard work to bring all your broken pieces together. I bet they're dusty too. So you require twice the effort. Even then, who can guarantee that you will be fully repaired? It's not fair on Chris, don't you think? That he should have to put up with you while you 'fix' yourself. He deserves better, Nqobizitha. Someone who can love him better, so much better."

"I, uh..."

"Look, I loved you with him but not this. He should be having fun, he can't be stressing about things that he had nothing to do with in the first place. I don't know what happened to you but I do feel your pain. Kodwa I still need my brother away from all this, the drama and baggage, don't be selfish."

I don't think I can take anymore. So I leave her there, going to join Chris back in his room. I get in bed beside him and he curls into me almost immediately. His eyes flutter open. They're worried and I can't miss the exhaustion written all over his face. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," I whisper and then kiss his forehead, "I love you."

His smile is genuine, but there's that exhaustion again. "I love you too."

Christophe

Something's been on his mind the entire day. I saw it in the way he wasn't interacting like usual with his brothers. Days are different and maybe today was an off one. Maybe he's nervous about having to talk to his mother again tomorrow. He's not going to the home that he grew up in and I don't mind staying here with him. It's just that Zenny's a horrible human being lately. This morning she was glaring at him. I think it's because he was eating our food but I contribute from my salary at the school so she has no final say. Besides, I don't complain when she's feeding Jabulani.

"Bambi, we need to talk."

Really? I come out of the bathroom and these are the first words I'm greeted with? I limp my way over to him and sit down beside him on the couch. "Are you finally ready to discuss what's bothering you?"

He gives me a surprised look.

"I know you by now, Nqobizitha. Your little habits, I know everything about you."

"I think we should break up."

I blink my eyes and then shake my head, unsure if I've heard him correctly. Then I start laughing, this is not a funny prank. "What?"

He shakes his head and puts his closed hand to his mouth and starts rocking back and forth.

"Joke better next time," the words leave my trembling lips, I don't know why I feel uneasy.

Its silent for a long time before he speaks again, "I, uh, mean it. You see I've been thinking hard about something and I'm not quite okay in my head. Many times I feel like I'm sinking in dark waters with no way out, Bambi. It takes a lot out of me to leave the bed lately, to laugh and smile...I don't want you caught up in that. You're young, man. You should be having fun, not stressing about—"

"No, no, Nqobizitha!" my head starts to swim as my mind tries to process whether or not this is truly happening. "Are you serious right now? You're breaking up with me?"

Silence...and then a small nod.

"W-Why, did I do something wrong?" I don't understand this, I'm trying to make sense of what he said before but it's too confusing for me. I don't need to have fun without him. I like us the way we are.

"I have too much baggage. Look, the truth is I'm messed up and I don't know how long it will take for me to be well. So I have to let you go so that I don't drag you to the darkness as well. I'm drowning in it but I can save you. Do you—"

I shake my head furiously, getting into Nqobizitha's personal space, hitting his chest. "NO, SHUT THE FUCK UP! YOU DO NOT GET TO SAY THAT. YOU DON'T GET TO TELL ME THAT YOU'RE 'SAVING ME'! AFTER EVERYTHING, NQ-NQOBIZITHA?" I hiccup, my face contorting in pain. "So this what you're doing to me? You're going to leave me? When all I've ever done was try to be there for you and love you the way you deserve."

Nqobizitha groans, releases no words. He removes his jersey, the navy items falls to the ground, while he rubs his face tiredly. Emotional red eyes meet mine squarely, "This is what's best for you, Bambi. I—am trying here. Give me some credit please, I'm putting you first. You once told me, you once told me love is about sacrifice. That's all I'm trying to do."

"Sacrifice for who?" I bite my lip, and rub at my eyes. "You are so selfish, Nqobizitha."

"I'll take that," he nods his head.

I have no response for that. All I can do is stare and cry. His face is still so blank, emotionless, like he has no heart at all. Like these past few months meant nothing to him at all. I left Hugo for him. This very same boy is the reason I broke up with someone more deserving of my love. "You're the worst, you know what you've done to me," I whisper.

"I know," another head nod, defeated this time. Nqobizitha gives me a once over, dark eyes unreadable. "I—am sorry, for everything. You don't deserve this, Bambi. You deserve someone light and good, who won't stress you and fill you with darkness. I'm sorry for the outbursts. I'm sorry for using your body as an escape. Forgive me, please?"

"Nq-Nqobizitha," my trembling hands cup his cheeks, he groans as I force him to look into my eyes. "Please don't do this. Think about me, please."

"I. Am." He considers me with a soft look. "This is the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life, Bambi. But I have to do what's best for you, man. I'm not doing well mentally and I don't want to hurt you. I'm putting you first."

“Where is this coming from, Nq-Nqobizitha?” I search his eyes. “I don’t mind—”

“I won’t be convinced, Chris. I wasn’t asking for your permission to break up with you I was telling you. It’s over and I spoke to your sister before this. You’re going back to Johannesburg. This life isn’t for you, go back to the life you know. You’ll find love there.”

What?

Shock squeezes my lungs and burns my cheeks with acidic water. He’s getting up and I panic, gripping his arm to prevent him from moving but he’s too strong. Shock seeps into my bones as I fall ass first on the floor. My heart thuds violently while I struggle not to break down. “You don’t get to break up with me—I’m the one doing it. Because you don’t deserve my love. I can’t believe I downgraded from Hugo for you. You don’t deserve love, Nq-Nqobizitha.” That gives him a brief, tense pause before he shakily walks on. “I hope you’re bitter and alone all the days of your life. Men like you deserve to be alone.” The words hurt to utter. But I’m so angry, desperately trying to cling on to the little bit of sanity I have left. But I can’t, because anger is vulnerable after all. And I’m not thinking, just spewing out whatever venom my mouth wants to let out in an act of desperation.

I break down when the front door shuts closed with a click. My body trembles, and I’m finding it hard to breathe. Two large arms enwrap me. “Zenny...” I cry out as she adjusts me so that I’m on her lap.

“I’m so sorry, baby wami.”

“W-Why?” I shake my head. “I-I don’t understand, I thought he—loved me.”

“He does,” Zenny coos gently. “But he’s hurting you too, Zithobile. He doesn’t mean to but he is. Right now, Nqobizitha can’t love you right. There’s crap he needs to deal with, so he’s putting you first, protecting you from himself. He wants you to be happy.”

I don’t know how to respond. I’m feeling so much, in so much pain, with my mind conjuring up so many thoughts. But I can’t help but disagree with Zenande on Nqobizitha wanting me to be happy. If he wanted me to be happy he wouldn’t be doing this. Because he is my happiness. Despite the storms, he is still my happiness. “I-I, he doesn’t how deep my love runs for him. He doesn’t know the depth of my love for him. He—wouldn’t do this if he did, Zenande. He wouldn’t break me this way if he did...”

My sister sighs, kissing my bald head. I cut my hair again that day Nqobizitha shaved his off, to match him, I wanted him to see that I'm always there for him. "It's going to be okay, Baby wami..."

I can't help shaking my head furiously, wretchedly. Nothing's going to be okay. I'm ...alone. And my heart is breaking apart into a million pieces. I bite my lip, feeling Zenny's fingers stroking my head. I can feel my eyelids growing heavy, exhaustion crashing through me. I'm hiccuping with the tears still raining down my cheeks. Resting on Zenny's chest more firmly, I give into the exhaustion, hoping this will all be a terrible nightmare that I'll wake up from.

Mutual Desires : Forty-two

Christophe

“Bebe?” my mother’s soft voice calls out as she gently nudges my shoulder. “Do you think you can leave the bed for a little while? Vous devez manger.”

I frown, blinking my eyes rapidly to stop the tears, they’re focused on the Roman Reigns picture on the wall. I remember Nqobizitha told me who he is, not that he watches wrestling, but Mnelisi is a big fan and would reenact the wrestler’s moves. A trembling breath leaves me as my mom kisses my temple. I hug my pillow tighter, clinging to it, and shake my head. “M not—hungry, mommy.”

My stomach growls just as she releases a quiet sigh. “Your stomach says different, Bebe. Its growling. Come, I’ll take you to Spurs and we can get your favourite meal.”

Like Nqobizitha would randomly do to surprise me? The tears fall again – rapidly. “No,” my eyes squeeze shut. I don’t want to go out. I don’t even want to be here. I want to be home – not this home. I miss home, I miss Nqobizitha, that’s where home is.

“You need to eat, Bebe,” my mom strokes my head, the touch is welcomed but not enough, “I promise you you’ll feel better after you’ve eaten. Just a few bites, it’s been 24 hours, Je suis inquiet.”

Why is she worried?

“You don’t have to be worried about me, mommy. I just really don’t have an appetite, the only thing I want to do is sleep. That’s all I want to do.” *Since we can’t go back to KZN*, my mind adds silently. I tried everything to convince Zenny on staying there but she wouldn’t have it. Then my dad came to fetch me and I can’t say no to him. He would’ve beat my ass up. I don’t know what Zenny told him but I don’t think I’ll be going back to Mbongolwane any time soon – or ever again.

“Christophe, s’il vous plaît manger,” my mom pleads but I shake my head.

“No, I don’t want to eat. I’m going to sleep,” my hand fists on the blanket and I drape it over me completely, hiding myself from my mom, from the world.

“Don’t block me out, I’m your mother and I am here for you – always.” She caresses my shoulder through the sheets. “Let me in, tell me what’s wrong.” I can feel moving around, she draws the blanket up and gets in bed with me. My tears are blinding me but I can make out her worried features. “Talk to me. What is wrong, Bebe?”

“I, uh—mommy,” there’s a hitch in my breath, my throat closing temporarily as I attempt to find my words. “I—” I try again, swallowing hard. “I’m – it hurts,” I finally get out, miserable and lost. “I can’t – I don’t want to be here. I miss him, mommy. It hurts badly.” My voice is small, my words childish, tears overflowing.

A hand tenderly brushes my cheek, a kiss touches my forehead. “I’m really sorry. This is has to do with Ncobha?”

I try to talk again but the pain is squeezing my throat. It hurts. It hurts so badly. The longing hits me again – strong and desperate. M-Maybe I should grab my phone and... and – *bad idea*, my mind rebukes me. I can’t help it though, the yearning is so strong, and telling myself not to do it physically hurts me.

Do withdrawal symptoms feel this bad?

Like the entirety of you is falling apart. With your body shuddering so badly it feels like you’re having a seizure? Does it feel like a ton of bricks have been stuffed down your throat and you can barely breathe? Or like you’re going to explode because you just don’t know what to do with the pain? I bury my face in my mom’s chest in frustration, the pain is too much for me to bear. It feels like I am dying, slowly, painfully. “He doesn’t want me, mommy. I love him but he doesn’t feel the same way.”

“Oh, Bebe. Did he say that?”

He said a whole lot of crap. He said things I don’t understand. Why would he think that he’s putting me first by pushing me away? The only thing he’s succeeded in doing is to break me. I don’t understand why he’d think us being apart makes sense. We’re supposed to be together, facing the storms side by side because that’s what couples do. Because that’s what people who are in love do.

“N-No,” I finally manage to choke the words out, sniffing, “it just, the pain is bad. I want to be with him. I miss him, I-I don’t want to be here...please, mommy.”

“Cry it out, you’ll talk when you’re ready.”

I nod my head blindly, clinging to her as I let out my pain. *Please be a dream. Please be a dream. Please be a dream*, my mind still hopes and I wish it was just that. Maybe I’d wake up caked in sweat with Nqobizitha’s weight pressing me down, his arms folded tight around me – never wanting to let me go.

Nqobizitha

There’s a knock on the door before it opens, revealing Zenande. My hand grips the knot on my towel as she enters. I notice her eyes widen momentarily and if I had the energy to roll my eyes I would – like she hasn’t seen me naked a thousand times. What’s a little towel around my waist going to do?

“Breakfast’s ready,” she clears her throat, “I just wanted to let you know. I’m going to work now but it’s in microwave.”

I nod awkwardly. “Ngyabonga.” The door closes with a small smile from her. My mother – my biological mother, she offered to have me stay in that RDP house that belongs to her aunt. I declined because she already has three boys she’s living with. I know how small those houses are. There wouldn’t have been any space for me that side. So I’m staying with Zenande a little while longer. It was kind of hard to have to swallow my pride and admit that I don’t have anywhere else to go. My family’s home is all I’ve ever known but I can’t go back there. That woman doesn’t want me there and she ruined me. I try not to think about her and my family problems but that only means my thoughts are stuck on Chris.

His cries haunt me – all through the hours of the day. I didn’t want to break up with him but maybe Zenande was right. I don’t want him to hate me one day and maybe it would’ve happened. Maybe he would’ve grown tired. If anything Zenande helped me by making see the light, this way Chris will move on with his life peacefully. He’s only eighteen and he doesn’t deserve the baggage I come with. Maybe he’ll go back to Hugo, maybe he’ll find someone else. Whatever he does, it will be an upgrade from a dude like me. I don’t even hold those words against him, they were true. He deserves better and I am not it.

The house is empty as I enter the kitchen. Zenande is gone. I am relieved, things are still tense between us – despite her kindness. She hates me for messing with her brother. I don't blame her. I'm not hungry but throwing away the food that she took the time to prepare out of the goodness of her heart seems rude. I open her fridge and notice the beer in there. It belongs to Jabulani but I'll drink it and then rebuy it at Bab' Shandu's shebeen.

I sit down and fill my stomach with what I can, which is not much. My phone is in my hand and I contemplate calling Chris. I've deleted his number but I kinda know it by heart. It's been two days and I'm assuming the pain is so fresh because it's still so early. He called twice last night and then quickly hung up. I wanted to call him back but stopped because I wasn't sure if he was going to rub it in my face about having potentially moved on. Nothing's stopping him with his French idiot that side. As for me, I don't know what the fuck I had been thinking when I allowed myself to fall in love. Shit like that messes with your head and heart. I wasn't meant for it and part of me hates myself for even allowing myself to let things get this out of hand.

Never again!

I'm more like Sbani, I do well without the commitment. No commitments means I don't have to worry about breaking hearts. It means no emotional attachment. There's no complications about being who you're not for your partner and having to think about them all the time. I'm not ready to do anything with anyone yet but the day I am, it's going to be without these complications of entangling yourself in serious relationships that require so much. I tried, crashed and burned. Relationships aren't for me, I've learned.

By the time I am done with my breakfast, my vision is a little hazy from the alcohol. I'm not sure how many cans I've drunk but they weren't a lot. I groan as the room spins around. Shit! Leaving the chair is a bit of a struggle. I take about two steps – or is it three? – before the floor tilts, causing me to trip and fall. "Fuck!" my voice sounds strange to my ears. The room is still spinning and everything is becoming blurry all of a sudden.

"Was that good?" Chris asks, looking at me with a nervous look in his eyes, "I mean it must be. We're not dead. I tried my best."

"You did really well," I pull him to me so that he's joining me in the passenger seat. "Maybe now you can start chauffeuring me around."

His giggles fill the car – quiet and intimate. My stomach churns nervously – a feeling I’m not really used to but embrace with Chris. I can feel soft cold lips touch my neck before they move to my cheek. “I love you so much,” his eyes are on mine. “And I really like the way you make me feel funny here – nervous...” he pulls back, patting his stomach while looking at me.

Chris is a sight to behold, he’s so beautiful. I see it as the dim light of my car focuses on him, on his flawless skin. His eyes look inviting, I always finds myself drowning in them. “You make me feel funny too, Dali.” I return, carefully closing the distance between me and him. My nose nuzzles his as our lips teasingly brush together. “The feeling’s more than mutual.”

“We have these mutual desires?”

“They’ve been mutual for a while now, Bambi.”

“I—erhm,” he bites his bottom lip and considers me with a soft look, “you’re my best friend.”

I know what he’s saying. I can hear it between the lines. “You’re my best friend too, Bambi.”

“Our whole thing is mutual isn’t?”

“Since February 2020 – and it hasn’t changed since,” I tease, wrapping my hand at the back of his neck.

He smiles brightly as his fingers go to work on his shirt. “Make love to me?”

I love how he asks so beautifully. My hands move to grip his ass firmly. I kiss him with everything in me. “With pleasure.”

...

...

"Baby?" I groan as the pain in my head seems to be getting worse. My arms encircle Chris from behind as I cling to him. He squirms when I kiss down his neck. "Baby?" the words leave me again.

He turns in my arms as my hands travel under his sweatshirt. "You're really drunk. You're even calling me baby – so unlike you."

"My head hurts," another groan.

"Poor baby," he shakes his head, "let me kiss it better."

...

...

"What are you reading?" I snatch the book before Chris can do anything, holding it up high. I dodge his advances, laughing as he buries his face in his hands. "Ooh, erotica, Bambi?"

"Bring it back right now, Nqobizitha! I'm not playing."

"Or what?" I jump across the couch, scanning the raunchy content found inside the pages.

"Or...or, I-I...just g-give it back!"

"No, maybe I want to read what's happening between Malcom and Jason. Maybe I want Jason to teach me a few things...if you know what I mean," I waggle my eyebrows, still evading an agitated Chris.

"You're a...a pest! I hate you."

"Oh, but I love you. So much so, that I'm going to read this. Get a few pointers from the mysterious, dashing Jason," I cackle loudly, making a dash out of the room faster than the toothpick can blink.

...

...

"Bend over," I ask Chris.

Immediately he nods okay, I backtrack a bit, giving him the space to lay his upper body on the counter. I kiss the back of his head, guiltily kissing down his neck, his shoulders. I go down and down, kissing him through the jersey he's wearing. Getting down on one knee, I carefully lift the jersey on his body up, holding it to his waist. The marks on his waist can't be evaded, no matter how hard I try to look away. But still I try and focus my attention on the one area I really want to tend to. My right hand spreads Chris' ass cheek to expose his entrance. I try not to groan too loudly at the sight before me but I can't help it. Nor can I help the way my jaw ticks, frustration in myself for causing this.

Chris' hole is raw, quivering in its swollen state. His whimper reaches my ears as I run my thumb along the sensitive skin. "Can you hold your jersey up?" I speak through clenched teeth, anger directed toward myself.

The response is a wordless head nod, Chris holding the jersey up to his waist. I reach inside my pocket, grabbing the ointment I usually use to soothe his ass. I pour some on my fingers, kissing his ass cheek before spreading it again. Chris tenses as I gently rub my oil slicked fingers over his trembling entrance. I can tell that he's in pain. No matter how hard he tries, he can't stifle his sobs. His ass muscles clamp down on my index finger tensely. But there's no other way, otherwise Chris will be limping around in pain for close to a week. I try to be gentler, coaxing the him into loosening his sphincter. It takes quite a while but slowly his muscles relax, and I apply the oil twice more and then retract my fingers. I rub on his swollen entrance in circular motions, massaging it for a few minutes before kissing the area softly and standing up.

"Thank you," it's all he ever says once I've done this. And on days where I'm doing it because we'd been having too much sex, I smile at his gratitude. But on this day, where I—

"Why—?" the rest of the words are strangled by my throat before they can come out. Meeting Chris' eye is challenging, it causes me to feel unworthy. "Why?" I ask again, jaw clenched, my eyebrows touching in blatant confusion.

Soft hands touch my cheeks, stroking me. I know Chris is attempting to persuade me into opening my eyes. But I can't do it. I can't look in the eyes of the boy I've hurt. The guilt will overpower me, it'll only make things worse. When Chris' arms fold around my neck, I tense, my body becoming more rigid. "Because I love you, and I'd do anything for you. For you, I would ruin myself."

I'm not sure for how long the memories keep playing in my mind. Some are good but most are taunting. *Monster* a voice whispers in my head. It reminds me that I'm just like her. I've hurt him too. And he'd take it just like I used to. The voices taunt me until I can't take it anymore. I try to stand up and stagger a few times until I finally get the hang of it. My fist connects with the closest wall. The pain has me screaming but its not enough. It's far from enough. I punch harder and harder and harder- until the voices disappear.

I find myself trapped in a black hole, much too deep to escape from. I have no idea how to escape. There is no light, no sound, no feeling. Just...emptiness. I can feel the absence seeping into my bones, into the entirety of my soul. Consuming me. I growl, falling to the messy floor when my head connects with the wall, a bead of something wet trails down next to the corner of my left eye. That won't deter me. My hands and head start to hurt. My vision is shifting out of focus. It happens a few times before I can feel my legs fail me again. A throbbing pain is on the side of my head – and the world goes dark.

MaKhathide

The first people I am met with as we're directed by the nurse are the last people I want to see. People around the hospital are surprised, it's not hard to tell. There's supposed to be one Nqobizitha around here and now we have two more because of Ntwenhle's selfishness. I get the urge to smack her dying self to the grave where she can join her pathetic ancestors and that useless lover of hers. I don't. We're in public and I have an image to maintain. But the whispers have started and it's hard. How do I recover from this? I have been shamed and I wouldn't have left home had it not been for Nqobizitha.

"You all barge into my son's life and problems arise," I glower at all three of them. Ntwenhle looks like she's been crying. She has. Her eyes are red and swollen. The serious one who looks is also Nqobizitha is comforting her. The other one is sitting restlessly, his eyes darting from one place to the other like a child – as if bored and searching for something to do. "What did you do to him?!"

"Keep your voice down, Zengcebo," Ngcobo says and shakes his head.

I ignore him and focus on Ntwenhle. “Talk you witch—”

“With all due respect, please respect my mother,” the serious one says quietly. He has an authority about him that I would’ve liked. Maybe he’d run our empire better than Nqobizitha, were he not an outsider.

“Don’t tell me rubbish wena, mahn!” I hiss quietly and look around, “Mbongolwane hospital? You just had to bring him here? You couldn’t organize transport and send him to a better hospital? A private one.”

“It’s the service that matters, Zengcebo.” Ngcobo reminds me. “Our son was well taken care of. I just need to find Zenande so that she can explain what happened to him.”

“We found him in a small pool of blood. It was on the walls and there was a cut from his eye, he injured himself badly. I blame the beers, he had too many of them.”

“Stress can do that to you,” I explain to the playful Nqobizitha, “he’s missing home and realizing just how stupid he was to have left and now he wants to come back but he’s too proud to admit it. Did he think it was going to be easy to stay away from home for so long? He may be your blood but we’re his bond.”

“Assumptions, assumptions salukazi saseMbongolwane,” playful Nqobizitha – what’s his name? – responds with a small smile. “Your bond should’ve told you that something was wrong then. It’s why we went to Zenande’s house to check on him. My brother and I felt that something was wrong with our baby brother. I don’t think it’s a good idea for him to see you now.”

“Hehe,” disbelieving laughter rumbles from inside my chest, “who do you think you are? I’m going to see that boy and I pray he’s come to his senses. That’s the only way he’ll come back home.”

The gay boy’s loose sister comes to join us. Nqobizitha suffered a concussion – it’s really bad and they’re going to keep him at the hospital for a few days. There’s something guilty about this girl’s expression, a worry that hints at her only giving us a half-story. I want to force the truth out of her but I don’t have time. Nqobizitha is allowed to have visitors. I’ll be damned if Ntwenhle and her brats get to see my son before me. I force my way past them and ignore the voices that are telling me to come back.

Christophe

I didn't want to do this. It's weird, how I feel like I don't fit it at all. Mommy forced me to follow Simi out for a breather. I'd been cooped in my bedroom for five days straight. She says she doesn't want me to grow depressed...if only she knew. I don't have the energy for anything. I feel like dropping dead right now, looking at all these writhing bodies move to the beat of an amapiano song.

Yes, I'm attending a party.

The only person I know here is Simi and she's been trying to get me out of my funk. She knows about him...Nqobizitha. She seems to agree with me that he's a jerk but only because I didn't tell her everything, just that he dumped me. Every time I think I'm ready to talk about him then I just find myself bursting into tears. I want to go back to Mbongolwane so badly. So, so badly. I'm always anxious and restless, my heartbeat too fast – part of me thinks I'm growing insane with each passing day. This breakup thing is hard, much harder than the previous ones I've encountered.

This one is different. Its affecting my physical wellbeing. I seriously find it hard to breathe sometimes, I can't sleep – not like usual, my hands are constantly trembling, my heart is constantly beating too fast. I'm really restless. My headaches are terrible and bordering on painful migraines. It could be because I torture myself with videos of Nqobizitha and I...when we were happy. I miss him like crazy and I've called him a few times, but am never brave enough to wait long enough for him to answer, I think something's wrong back home. I don't know it's a feeling I have. Maybe its my excessive worry over him.

Is he sleeping well? I hope his brothers know that he doesn't like to sleep in the darkness. Does anyone talk to him so that he'll fall asleep faster? I hope they don't make triggering jokes. Lately he dislikes the smell of camphor. And sometimes you have to follow him to the bathroom to make sure that he's fine. Otherwise he'll peel his skin off trying to wash away the smell of female sex juices off of his hands. Or hurt his mouth brushing his teeth trying to get rid of the taste.

Maybe it's none of my concern anymore. Maybe I need to move on.

"It gets better around midnight, I promise you."

My eyes shift from the dancing crowd to a guy standing beside me. I'm not sure who he is or where he came from. He's only tall because I'm pathetically short. His smile is wide and reveals his dimples. I'm not sure if I'm meant to return it because I'm not in the mood. I shake my head and tighten my hand around my cold-drink cup.

"My name's Mashudu by the way."

I don't care.

"I've never seen you around here before."

Does this guy not give up? Can't he see I'm not in the mood? I'm not even dressed like I wanna get laid for fuck's sake! Who wears sweatpants and someone's Brentwood jersey to a party? It smells like Nqobizitha and that's why I put it on. I wanted to have him here with me. It feels like he's embracing me. "Don't touch me!" I recoil as the guy grips my shoulder.

"Whoa, relax. Everything's okay."

No it's not. The tears fall fast and heavy. Its embarrassing, and I am hiccupping. "Don't touch me I said," I repeat because he's grabbing my hand, pulling me away and into a hallway. We enter a room and the details are lost on me. I allow him to lead me to the bed and collapse on it – I just want to fall asleep. I'm tired, I'm really tired. "I'm so exhausted," I whisper.

The guy – I forgot his name – caresses my cheek. "I could tell. Can I hold you?"

I bite my bottom lip and don't reply.

This guy's clearly not discouraged easily, he tips my head back with a small hand cupping my jaw. "What do you need?"

Love, safety, happiness – Nqobizitha.

“Him,” I whisper, my tears are unstoppable, I can’t breathe again. My words are clogged up in my throat but I know that I’m saying something to this guy, just not sure what.

He brings my head to his chest, wrapping his arms around me and holds me close. I don’t protest.

Mutual Desires : Forty-three

Nqobizitha

Schools have opened for close to a week now. All things considered, I'm just grateful for the distraction. Not that my brothers weren't doing a good job but teasing Mr. Nsibande seems to take my mind off my own problems. I guess it's true what they say about bullying – you do it to another person to escape your own painful reality. Maybe this makes me a bad person but Mr. Nsibande has had it coming for a long time now, with the way he seems to think his little certificate in Accounting means he's made it in life. If that were the case he'd be teaching in some fancy private school in Durban or Johannesburg – not in a rural village where plenty of kids can easily outsmart him.

“Did you get the answer for 4B?”

I glance at Nhlakanipho and then my book to see if I've gotten that far yet. No. The second question is making me dizzy. “Cha, bafo,” I shake my head.

“Do you want me to explain it to you?”

Lately, he always does this – offers to help me with my books. I know he's trying to fill in Chris' position and I appreciate the gesture but I don't give a single fuck about Accounting, just making my teacher's life miserable so that he can really complain about something. Not his stupid nonsense about my results in class. “Sure,” I nod my head as Nhlakanipho scoots closer to explain. My mind zones out but not deliberately. I just don't enjoy Commercial subjects, I really don't. Relief seeps into my bones as the bell rings, signalling lunchtime. I pack my things and follow Nhlakanipho to the door. Siya is waiting at the gate like usual. He's back to hating me for breaking his best friend's heart, doesn't really talk to me – not that I give a fuck.

I fish out a fifty and hand it to Nhlakanipho. He reluctantly accepts it but we're going to be eating together. It's busy at Mchunu's and I go to sit down as the others decide what we're going to eat. I'm not really hungry. I press my cheek to my palm and internally groan as Siya comes to the table while Nhlakanipho deals with the spices at the front. He sits down and looks at me for a long time and then shakes his head. “You are such an asshole!” his voice is quiet.

I ease more comfortably into my seat and cock my left brow, trying to appear nonchalant. “Tell me something I don’t already know.”

“Chris is still crying in Joburg and I hope you’re pleased with yourself. Congratulations on fucking up the best thing that’s ever happened to you. Congrats on ripping me apart from my best friend. Maybe you didn’t need him but I still did.”

“Don’t forget to thank his sister...and father.” I ignore the pain that twists my heart, and clear my throat, watching Siya squarely – his eyes are watering. “If you’re going to cast stones, make sure to cast them at all the culprits. Don’t pick and choose.”

“What do you mean?”

“You mean you don’t have the whole story?” I feign shock, “This is a first for Mbongolwane’s resident Isolezwe.”

“Fuck you!”

“I don’t think that would sit well with Nhlakanipho. Besides, I don’t do boys with buckets for mouths – ngathi umfazi owasha nendlu.” I don’t mean to be rude but people like Siya and Mr. Nsibande force me into situations like this. With the way he’s so focused on my past relationship like he played a role in it somehow. Is he stupid enough to think I’d willingly let Chris go just like that? Sometimes, sacrifices need to be made.

Thankfully, Nhlakanipho comes to save me from his nagging idiot. I look at the large plate of chips and though my stomach is rumbling, the appetite isn’t really there. My eyes scan over the entire eatery and it’s so busy and lively that I should probably be feeling something and yet I feel absolutely empty. I’m not bored per se, just there, existing, having absolutely no purpose. Lethuk’thula enters, and our eyes lock, she gives me a gorgeous grin. Briefly, I entertain the thought of going up to her to...I don’t know. I need something to defeat the emptiness. I clear my throat and frown as Siya regards me with a vicious glare. No doubt he saw that silent interaction between me and the girl upfront. Whatever. He has no right to judge me.

“Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to tell Chris to rebound with Hugo. I mean what’s the point in him crying when you’re doing this?”

“Phakade lami...” Nhlakanipho starts, looking between me and his lover, “Awuyeke lomsangano owukhulumayo. You know nothing about what went down between Chris and Nqobizitha.”

“Chris isn’t here, I know enough. He’s not even sorry, look at him, he’s back to his old ways again. It won’t be long before he starts bedding them. Chris should’ve never wasted his time on you!”

“What makes you think that he isn’t fucking around in Johannesburg? What makes you think that he wasn’t the one playing me from the beginning? I’m not the one calling him a downgrade from his previous partners. What makes you think he was the only one hurt, hmm?”

Siya shakes his head, he’s really angry, and if he continues this way he’ll bring us unnecessary attention. “Because I know you, Nqobizitha. You’re not capable of love!”

“Is that so?”

He snorts, “Obviously.”

There’s a tense staring contest sparked between us, only broken by my phone buzzing. I don’t bother looking at the number as I answer, “Ngcobo.”

“Uh... H-Hey.”

I nearly bolt to my feet, my heart racing. “Chris?”

“U-Um...don’t call me that,” he sounds hesitant. “Is it, uh, is it a good time? I-I can call back.”

“It’s a good time, it’s a- It’s good.” I have to cover my mouth, catch my breath. It’s just a phone call. It is just – and he’s called dozen of times just to hang up. But this time he’s held on long enough for me to answer. He has – “Chr—Bambi. Hey. Hi.”

“Hey,” says Chris again, and now he sounds like he’s smiling. “I just wanted to, um, I-I just wanted to remind you about therapy tomorrow. I...um, I’m really sorry – for Hugo. My words shoot to kill w-when I’m mad and I, um, I...I-I really miss you. Bye.” And the line goes dead instantly, as if Chris didn’t expect those last three words to escape him and is scared to know how I will react.

“I miss you too, Dali,” I say to the dead connection, squeezing my eyes shut as something tightens around my heart.

“Uthini?” I hear Ntethe’s voice as soon as I enter Bab’ Xulu’s house. Her and Ndoni visit quite a lot lately. Maybe I was born with a heart that is too forgiving because I can’t hate my sisters. I can’t hate my father. My family. Deep down I know that I am angry at them – resentful even – because they failed me, I know it. But I can’t hate them. Just like I can’t bring myself to fully hate Ntombikayise. I can curse her to hell and back but the hate is never there. Dr. Langa seems to think it’s a good thing. “Hate is too great a burden to bear. It injures the hater more than it injures the hated.” He likes to say, quoting Coretta Scott King. I get what he means, I already have this fucking load on my shoulders, I don’t need the extra weight. Forgiving them is a little harder. We talk but I haven’t forgiven and forgotten.

It’s worse with MaKhathide, I want nothing to do with that woman. I love her with everything in me and something deep but she’s got me fucked up. She hurt me and my brothers. She’s not accountable and fails to see how being with her ruined me. She puts the blame on everyone but herself. This is why I refused to go back home when I was discharged from the hospital. I need to look for a room around here that I can move into. I want to show her that I don’t need her. Part of me still does but I don’t want her to think that – she’s too proud, narcissistic, with a hero complex. Yet she’s never saved anyone, just destroyed and destroyed.

My father isn’t forgiven as well but I appreciate him making the effort. He visits and he sends me money to ensure that I don’t look like iphara hungry for their next fix. We talk, and the other day we spoke about Chris...he seems to think I made the right call. “Its not that you don’t love each other,” he’d said, “it’s the way you sometimes treat each other that isn’t necessarily love. Hurting someone isn’t love – even if you love them. Maybe the time apart will do both of you some good.”

Maybe he has a point but I’m doing a good job not thinking about Chris. I was...until he called earlier. Now he’s been on my mind since...nothing negative. The noises are louder as I get closer to the living room. Zenande and Nontethelelo are in each others faces, looking tense. “Sanibonani ekhaya. Nabukana engathi nibanga amaphara aseMbongolwane kwenzenjani?”

Its silent a second, they don't look ready to break this tense staring competition between them. I don't know if I should try to intervene. I don't even know what the fuck's twisted their panties. One of them finally surrenders, Nontethelelo shifts her dangerous attention to me. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"That she fucking convinced you to do crap, Nqobizitha!" she shouts, her hands raising, with the dark fire still there in her eyes. Hopefully, she's not planning to murder Zenande. I now know that her and my mother are capable. But I wouldn't allow it to happen. "What good did she think she was doing you when she told you to break up with her brother?"

Oh...this.

I look between her and a heavily pregnant Zenande. "She was right, sisi. It's called being protective of your siblings, your family – the same way you MaKhathide would—"

"Don't give me that crap!" her feet carry her away from Zenande to stand in the middle – this way she's looking at both me and the pregnant lady. "What good did she do? What good? What could possibly be good about breaking the two of you up? You're better with her brother! You're a different version of Nqobizitha, a brilliant one. Is she mad that you weren't sleeping around anymore? Or that you weren't spending our parents' money sponsoring her and her loose friends with free alcohol? She just wants to satisfy her vagina and I don't know what I ever saw in this straat-meisie with a community vagina. A borehole of a vagina. Chris did what we couldn't do for YEARS! You said it yourself, bhutiza, he's been here for you in a way that we haven't. Chris...Chris loves you. It's so easy to tell, you both love each other. You love each other so much – and I don't understand how this bitch can justify breaking you guys up!"

"My brother's no rehabilitation centre, you fool!" its Zenande's turn to shout and she's just as loud about it, shaking with anger. "Love isn't enough, you're an idiot if you believe in those fairytales. Your brother was a danger to my brother and I did what you would've done – I protected my blood! Nqobizitha walks around here, angry at the world, punching walls and taking it out on my brother's body. His rough fucks weren't going to cut it here. I could hear Zithobile's cries from my room."

"So what? Noma it was fine when only you were crying over his dick!? Nakhona unjani, sleeping with a kid that's nearly half your age. If we're going to talk about rotten apples then we should start with you!"

“You’re an idiot, I’m not talking about cries of pleasure here. Should I have turned a blind eye to the limps and that blue eye he once gave Zithobile? He was hurting my brother and I am glad they’re apart. Your brother’s a loose cannon. I’d rather he stay as far away from Zithobile as possible!”

I cover my mouth with one of my hands at her words and a groan breaks free as Nontethelelo regards me inquisitively. “Hhayi ngamabomu, dadewethu. Amaphutha, ngyethembisa.”

“Still, you had no right, Zenande. No right at all.” She licks her lips and focuses her attention to Zenande. “Your brother calls me in tears, he misses my brother. Now he’s asked me to try and convince you to allow him to come back here. Unesbindi, Zenande. You’re not all innocent and if we’re discussing toxic traits, you tick all the boxes. No one’s judging you for them kodwa siyezwa amahlebezi la ngaphandle.”

Zenande opens her mouth to reply and I can tell that this argument isn’t ending anytime soon. As long as they’re not aiming fists at each other. I walk away because I’ve been taught better than to meddle in the affairs of women...never mind that it has to do with me and Chris. I’m not in the mood. In Chris’ room, I get changed and respond to Sbani’s message about meeting up. We’re close and spend time a lot – but its weird that we’re stopped on the streets. There are rumours and whispers about my biological parents and the only reason I stand tall is because I’m not going through the identity crisis crap alone. Sqalosenkosi and Sbanisezwe are right there with me.

There’s a lot that Mam’ Ntwenhle wants to do traditionally. They went to a sangoma years ago to appease our ancestors for the way that my brothers and I were conceived. I guess this is also why I’m a Ngcobo – and technically, Sbani and Sqalo should be using that surname as well but MaKhathide the bully got her way as usual and convinced my biological mother to let my brothers use her surname. She also wants me to use the birth name that she chose but I don’t know. I don’t know who I am or who I’m supposed to be. Nqobizitha Ngcobo is who I’ve been my whole life but I’d be lying if I said I understand him right now. This is why I feel like I’m just existing, an identity-less human just existing in a big world.

Zenande and Ntethe are still arguing, I leave them there.

Someone is nudging my inflamed body, I sit up with a start and draw in a deep, searing breath. The room seems too dark to me and I panic...until my vision clears and I notice the dim orange lighting. Zenande is

looking at me with a worried expression. I rub my face tiredly and then glance at her again. “Ngyaxolisa, sibukubuku.”

“Another one?”

I know what she’s asking. I haven’t yet mastered the art of controlling my dreams. Is it even possible? I don’t know, I’ll have to ask Dr. Langa. “Yes,” I clear my throat and thank her as she gives me a glass of water.

“Kanti what are these dreams about, Nqobizitha? I don’t know you like this, konakelephi?”

It’s a long story. How do I tell her that they used to be good?

“I’m not in the mood, Zembe. Let me sleep, I have an early morning tomorrow.”

“Sleep then.”

She doesn’t leave my room, I feel her adjusting herself on the bed, joining me. It’s awkward for a few minutes, for the two of us – two fully-grown, adults – to adjust to each other, our limbs to shift and re-adjust to each of our comforts. When we finally settle, Zenande’s back to my front, my arm beneath her head, the hand of my other resting on her hip until she draws it around herself, tucks it to her chest, pressing back against my body, tangling our fingers together. Eventually, we relax, our breaths evening out, our eyes closing once again.

I don’t wake up until morning.

Christophe

Thatego is back, on his own, and is quite disappointed that Sbani had to stay in Mbongolwane. He understands but he’s scared that he’ll be replaced that side. I don’t know how to tell him that you can’t

replace a man who doesn't want to be replaced without sounding jealous. He has to go back to university and resume his studies. Simi has also gone back to uni. This leaves me trapped in my own thoughts for days on end and I hate it. The only respite I have is when I have to go to modelling school. I did say that there's a Reign Model Management in Joburg as well. Its much more gorgeous than the one in Durban but the people here are so rude compared to the ones in KZN. They seem to have taken the supermodel thing to their heads. Mommy finally knows about my modelling career and I had to come clean that Nqobizitha helped fund my dreams. He's still doing it, even with the distance, I know because there's a monthly deduction on his account.

I messaged him last night to tell him that he can ask for a reversal. He didn't reply. I still don't know how to take the silence. Maybe he's moving on? Siya says he has a wandering eye. I asked him if Nqobizitha's initiated anything with his old women and he told me no... but he does speak to them on the streets. Siya describes him as an unbothered man and its confusing. Two weeks later and the pain is still so fresh for me. I can't get over him and the last thing on my mind is initiating anything with anyone. Because I don't want anyone else who isn't him. I love him but maybe he didn't love me deep enough?

There's a message on my phone. It's that Mashudu guy from that godforsaken party where I embarrassed myself by breaking down. He wants to meet up, if I have the time. Sigh. This guy has only met me once and he thinks because I broke down in his arms and we had some sort of heart to heart we're now friends. I wasn't even in the right headspace when I gave him my number. I regret it now but I'm scared to block his number, I don't know...I feel guilty about it.

When do you want to meet up? – me

He reads my message almost immediately. He's typing.

Finally! He answers 🍷 – Mashudu

I roll my eyes and ignore him. If he's going to be childish about this then I am not in the mood. I go to check my statuses, not really surprised – but still disappointed – that Nqobizitha hasn't updated. Since he has no other socials, I stalk his WhatsApp like crazy. It hurts when I see that he's online at the same time as me but won't think to talk to me. Sometimes, I'll see that he's typing but the message never comes. His profile picture remains the same though – it's my hand in his, with that tattoo on my ring finger appearing. It sort of gives me hope somehow...if only the information Siya sometimes gives me wasn't confusing as fuck. My phone vibrates.

Is this Saturday okay for you? – Mashudu

I have modelling school on Saturday.

Sure. As long as its after 03:00 – me

Great! – Mashudu

I look at the message for a long time, there's nothing great about this at all.

On Friday, Thatego meet up after his classes. He's wearing a skinny jean with a crop top and sneakers, heads turn and I can't say I blame them – the boy is ridiculously pretty. He smiles big as he spots me waiting for him near Rosebank College in Braamfontein. We're going to a McDonald's for lunch. "Hey, gal!" he gives me a big hug.

"Thatego, looking gorgeous."

"Thank you," he grins and gives me a once over, "we're still wearing the boyfriend's clothes, huh? This jersey looks like a long dress on you and the sleeves are too long. You look ridiculous."

"Thank you, I try really hard."

He rolls his eyes at my sarcasm and drags me to the eatery. After we've ordered, and received our food, we find an empty table and sit down. "Sbani posted some pictures today. Look..." he hands me his phone and I look at the other boy's WhatsApp status. They're in Mlalazi – from what I can tell they were attending a party. Mostly its pictures of him and his brothers. My stomach churns nervously as I look at Nqobizitha – even through the phone, I can easily pick him out. His smiles are a little sour. But most of these pictures are taken when they were looking away or preoccupied with something, they hate pictures. The last picture is of some girl sitting on Sbani's lap.

“Thatego...” I look up to find him smiling at me – its melancholic.

“I think I’m finally going to take your advice. I’m not going to keep hurting myself like this, he’s not the only guy in the world. His dick may be amazing but his personality isn’t. He knows I can see this and he posts it anyway. What about me?”

“Return the favour,” I say, pushing my food away. I just wasted my money on a McFeast meal that I couldn’t even finish. “He continuously does this because he knows you have no one to fall back on. If he sees you messing around with other guys as well maybe that’s going to be his wakeup call.”

Thatego nods his head, “This is why I was thinking about going out. Chesa Nyama in Gandhi Square. That place is always a vibe. Or Buffalo Bills inside Park Station – I can meet gay guys easily there. But it closes early. But we’d still find casual hookups – you and I.”

“I...don’t know about a hookup for me, Thatego,” I say, fear curling around my heart. I don’t have it in me to move on...not yet. “I’m not ready.”

“We can still go though, right?”

I nod my head.

He sighs and rests his cheek on his hand, long eyebrows fluttering gently on his blushing cheeks. “These boys are showing us flames.”

A giggle bursts free, genuine, though I can’t help but agree with him.

Mommy was happy when I left the house again, for yet another night out, forgetting that she usually chides me about things like this. I think for her it’s about me getting better and out of my funk. Simi came to help me find something suitable to wear. I was still stubborn enough to pair my skinny jeans with one of Nqobizitha’s jerseys. Thatego is wearing a miniskirt and a cropped hoodie jacket with Doc Martens. He looks gorgeous like usual and people have been looking at him in this crowded club – some admirably and others judging. He doesn’t care. We’re at Chesa Nyama and I am currently looking at Simi sing her ass off with some drunkards.

I have my Bernini and Brutal Fruit with me. Thatego enjoys bitter beer as well, he's a little tipsy, and is giving away his bedroom secrets with Sbani. Nqoba's brother likes it when Thatego is riding him – that woman on top thing that people love so much. I only rarely did that with Nqobizitha, he prefers controlling everything and doing most of the work. Sigh. The point of us being here was to get over our exes but we're comparing notes and sulking. It's all the alcohol.

"Let's dance," he pulls my arm and forces me to my feet, he's taller than me and rests his arms around my shoulders. We awkwardly move to the amapiano beat for a few seconds, gazing into each others eyes. "You're very beautiful, almost...innocent." He caresses my cheek.

He is too. I lick my lips and clear my throat. "So are you."

"We're both very pretty," his smile is gorgeous, "those boys should be treating us better than this."

"Tell me about it."

"We can kiss and ask Simi to record it. Then we'll post it on WhatsApp and get back at them."

"This would be like kissing my brother or friend – it's going to be awkward. You're a bottom as well," this is something I can't help. I am not attracted to anything with bottom energy, I can't help it. Thatego is pretty in a way that I want to squeeze his cheeks and cuddle with him while we bond over hot tops but not this. "Let's do it," but maybe my mind's too clouded by now that I find myself agreeing. Simi giggles and is more than eager so I open my mouth willingly, my hands reach under Thatego's jersey to his warm back. I allow myself to get lost in the kiss until we are both out of breath, our legs tangling and hips grinding lightly against each other.

By the time we pull apart, we are breathing heavily and recovering our composure. Thatego tilts his head and smiles brightly at me. "You look like an alien with this hairdo by the way."

"Shut up." I grin, there's nothing angry about my tone at all.

MaKhathide

“Mkami, what’s wrong?”

I throw my purse on the couch and head straight for my study. The anger I am feeling makes my hands tremble as I punch the code to my safe. I am tired of this. Patience was never my strongest suit and today was the final draw. After I take care of Ntwenhle, Nqobizitha is coming back home – whether he likes it or not.

“Zengcebo, usenzani isbhamu?”

“I’m tired, Sakhile!” I scream, thinking back to the meeting with the women. It’s been close to three weeks, I thought they would’ve gossiped enough and gotten it out of the way but no! These useless baby-manufacturers of Mbongolwane have nothing else to do but make a mockery out of my situation. Like they haven’t seen what a great mother I’ve been to Nqobizitha over the years.

Yes the truth is out.

It couldn’t be hidden, even if my own family said nothing, with those stupid boys that belong to Ntwenhle, people were bound to put one and two together. I couldn’t get past three minutes of the meeting because the whispers were there between them, their eyes were mocking. I saw it all. I saw them all. I remember their faces and I shall deal with them one by one but right now I have more pressing issues. Ntwenhle and then Nqobizitha.

“Ntwenhle is taking me for a fool!” I scream, putting the gun in my purse. “I’ve just been HUMILIATED in that women’s meeting. They were talking, Ngcobo. They were calling me inyumba – me! Because that boy isn’t my biological son. Because they have blood sons and I don’t. The ungrateful dogs have even forgotten all I’ve done for them and their starving families. Those poster families of poverty think they can mock me? Tsk...tsk,” I shake my head, “allow me to deal with Ntwenhle first. This is her fault. If only she’d listened and stayed away like I—”

“Now where are you going with the gun?”

“I am sick and tired of her! This ends today, Ngcobo. I’ve been patient, its enough. We’re going back to the family we once were. After I deal with her, I’m going to fetch my son. He’s coming back home.”

“Zengcebo, don’t be ridiculous. Put your bag down and try to get some rest, don’t do anything hasty, you’re angry.”

“Try and stop me,” I snort, trying to push past him, “You’re just a weakling of a man.”

We fight for my purse and as quickly as I had it, he snatches from me with forcefully, my grip loosens and I fall colliding with the edge of the glass table before falling on it with extreme force. A loud crack wrenches a pained scream from my lips. “Zengcebo!” Ngcobo tries to touch me but I push him away. The pain is extreme, is enough to make me scream again. I try to get up but its unbearable. It feels like something’s wrong but I can’t explain what. Distantly, I can hear Sakhile on the phone, he’s calling for an ambulance – and notice the blood and broken glass around me.

Mutual Desires : Forty-four

Nqobizitha

Ndoniyamanzi called me crying about MaKhathide being taken to hospital. Something happened, something bad, but she was too distraught to release coherent words. I tried to call my father to find out what the issue was but his phone went unanswered until I gave up. I managed to find out through a WhatsApp message that MaKhathide was taken to a private hospital in Empangeni. She wouldn't touch a public hospital with a ten foot pole, not even if you'd pay her to. She has an air of superiority, and you'd never believe that she actually grew up in a small village in Mbongolwane. The harder she worked to build the Ngcobo empire, the bigger her head became.

"Munt' omdala," I bow my head respectfully as I spot my father, "Ndoni, Ntethe..." I greet my sisters. Nontethelelo returns it but Ndoni has always been too emotional, she's crying in Ntethe's arms. "What happened? Where is my mother?" we're not on speaking terms, or the best for that matter, but she's still my mother. The love I have for her hasn't vanished suddenly, it's still there and deep.

My brothers greet the others as my father stands to his feet. He looks distraught, emotional. I place my hands on his shoulders as he rubs his face tiredly. He looks at me again and it's not hard to tell that he was crying. I've never seen him cry, I hope whatever the issue is, it's not serious. "Your mother had a bad accident. She fell and collided with the coffee table."

I nod my head. "How did this happen? I can't see a woman like MaKhathide just slipping and falling, she's always so careful. Not even the devil dares to cause her such a mistake."

I get a quiet chuckle from the old man, as he shakes his head, before sniffing and folding his arms to his chest. "Maybe I was at fault, we were fighting for her bag, my grip was firmer and I...it's a long story, ndodana. Maybe I'll explain—"

Someone clears their throat and interrupts my father. It's a doctor – a short man with round glasses that are too big for his face. "Mr. Ngcobo, thank you for your patience," the way he speaks hints at someone who isn't from around here – maybe from another African country, "I've had the chance to briefly examine your wife and the signs point to a spinal cord injury. Because of her age, falls cause more injuries to the body. We're about to perform an x-ray to determine whether or not that is true, and the extent of injury."

“Don’t tell me she’s going to be a cripple,” my father covers his mouth, letting out a small groan, “I can’t bear the thought of that happening.”

“Like I said, we’re going to examine her further to determine how bad the damage is. I was just stopping by to let you know – excuse me.” He walks away and then pauses again to look at us, “Oh, she sent a message to ask for Mchunu.”

“This is bullshit, why would she want to see another man when you’re here, Baba?” I look at him with confusion on my face. “Don’t tell me she’s cheating on you with—”

“Nqobizitha!” Baba’s voice raises a little, “please, ndodana. There is so much you don’t know about. These are the affairs of adults, my marriage to your mother has nothing to do with you. Respect us – siphelawo yethu njengabazali bakho.”

I could remind him that he’s not my father, his seed was not involved in the process of manufacturing me and my brothers. The only reason we’re blood-related is because he’s my dead father’s brother – but I respect him too much. I’ve been learning through my therapist that it’s possible to dislike someone and still respect them – case in point, MaKhathide, the devil’s favourite daughter. “Njengoba usho munt’ omdala,” I bow my head and force a smile to my lips, before shifting my attention to my brothers who’ve occupied the empty seats next to my sisters.

Sbanisezwe is restless, like usual, he can’t stay still for shit, but his face is also sour. It’s been sour since last night, he’s tense and angry – like a volcano waiting to erupt. “Are you sure you don’t want to come with me to Joburg, bafo? Angeke ngikwazi uk’qondisa igwegwe lomunt’ wakho, I respect you enough to keep out of your private issues with that boy. Kodwa uThateho uzofunda ukuth angbhenywa mina.”

I shake my head, adjusting myself more comfortably in my seat. “Cha, bafo. I’m not in the mood to entertain Chris’ childish antics. He’s doing this shit to rile me up, maybe hoping that I’ll come running after him, uNqobizitha wak’dala lowo. Uwajwayele lamasimba akhe – why’d you think he sent all those videos? He behaves like a petulant child and acts out whenever things don’t go his way. He’s paying me back for breaking up with him.”

Maybe I’m being a little unfair, it’s not like I’m taking this breakup thing good as well. I’ve just been really good at avoiding temptation, there’s too much on my plate right now, I’m writing my preliminary exams in a few weeks and I can’t afford to flunk them. There’s therapy and now MaKhathide just had a bad accident. It’s like one thing happens after the other, and at such a rapid pace I can barely keep up. In addition to the videos, Chris sent a few voice notes – trash talking the best way he does. Nothing about

Hugo this time, just tears and slurred reminders that he broke up with me and not the other way round, accusations of me having planned to break his heart from the beginning, revelations about him meeting up with some guy the following day.

The last piece of information had me tempted to go to Joburg to deal with him. To remind him that although we're broken up he still belongs to me. The only reason I'm not doing that is because I realized that I'd be walking right into his nonsense and indulging him in his fuckery. I'm not going to do that. The only way to fuck him over is to block his number and that's what I did. Let the silence drive him insane, maybe it'll force him to rethink his thinking process – and his childishness.

"I'm proud of you, bafo. Sbani here, could learn a thing or two from you about relationships and letting go sometimes. It is not a weakness, your mental health comes first, imagine being with someone who causes you headaches all the time."

"Weeeh," Sbani rolls his eyes, "spare the lecture for someone who cares, Dr. Phil. I'm not looking for relationship advice, this is why I'm not in a relationship. You and me are the same, you can't keep women if your life depended on it. You're the last person to speak on these matters."

Sqalosenkosi's frown briefly morphs into a polite smile as a lovely nurse walks past us. It's not hard to tell the woman with her heavy makeup on is gobsmacked – she's looking at three photocopies. Her smile turns flirtatious and I think Sbani was right about this triplet thing working to our advantage – women seem to have a thing for plagiarized men. I saw it at Nonhle's party that we attended in Mlalazi, the girls were flocking us but Sqalosenkosi and I weren't interested.

"How does this thing of yours with Thatego work?" thinking back to that party reminds me of the number of chicks that Sbani smashed in one night. It must've been three of them. "You're not dating, you're fucking. Do you even have the right to be jealous of what or who he does when he's not with you?"

Sbani sends a glare my way, I'm not really intimidated by a playful version of me, and cock my eyebrow waiting for him to reply. He sighs, rubbing his face in his hands, silent for a while. What is he gay and struggling with his sexuality? Is he scared of Mam' Ntwenhle? I find it hard to believe that he's scared of anyone, he does whatever the fuck he wants.

"I...don't know. Those women have nothing on that boy. They're just something to do when there's nothing to do."

“Then what’s holding you back?”

He shakes his head, eyes squinted and face passive, “It’s a little complicated – like Trigonometry.”

Sqalosenkosi and I look at each other, then burst out laughing, my eyes briefly travel to my other family – they observe us in interest, smiling, but it appears melancholic and I try to swallow down the guilt and the voice accusing me of having turned my back on them, on having replaced them. That’s not the case. I still love them but the connection is different with my brothers – more intense and overwhelming. It’s like I’ve known them my whole life, and in finding them, I am finding myself. We complete each other.

“Maths wasn’t his strongest subject in high school. He got 35% and ran with it. It was an achievement for someone who’d usually get 29 or very rarely 30%.”

“Not all of us are academically gifted. We excel in other areas, women particularly. Do you ever stop to ask yourself why these professional women have affairs with gents from ekasi? Too much intelligence makes you stupid, especially in the bedroom, you’re busy thinking about cos and sin and tan when some of us sit your woman on our laps, and look them in the eyes as we finger them. All that knowledge and you don’t know your woman’s erogenous zones. Some of us get paid for just laying down the pipe.”

“Awu, izinja zegame, madoda.” I fist bump him and look at the time. “Maybe we should bounce, bafwethu. I’ll see MaKhathide in the morning.”

They agree with me, and my father seems to understand, he tells Nontethelelo and Ndoni to come with us but they’re too worried about their mother. I am too, but I’m not going to lose my sleep over her.

I drove Sbanisezwe to Eshowe rank for a taxi that will take him to Joburg. Sqalosenkosi remained behind to be with Mam’ Ntwenhle, who came with us to the hospital today. She looks frail and I am worried about her. Despite the resentment I hold against her for not choosing me, she’s still my mother. A better mother than MaKhathide could ever be. We talk, a lot lately, I can appreciate her presence in my life. It’s a positive one.

“Mr. Ngcobo...” someone calls out, another doctor – female this time, “we have with us the results from the tests taken on your wife. She requested that you be with her.”

“Oh!” Baba clears his throat, looking a little relaxed than he was last night, “After you, my lady.”

We all watch him follow after the Indian doctor until they disappear off into a wide hallway. “Do you think it’s anything bad?” Ntethe looks at me.

“Relax,” I hug her and kiss her temple, and laugh as she pushes me away and shudders, “that woman is Chuck Norris. People like her don’t have near death experiences – rather it’s the other way round.”

They all burst into laughter. “Now you’re just hyping her up, bafo.”

“Weeeh, awazi lutho wena.” I tell Sgalosenkosi, “I grew up around that woman. She’s the type to wrestle an elephant with just her pinky finger. I doubt a little fall can do bad damage to her.”

“Let’s hope you’re right,” Ndoni replies, eyes hopeful.

I know I’m right. MaKhathide is the most badass woman I know.

Christophe

I’m trying really hard to not be annoyed by the way she’s eating but the sound is grating my ears, only worsened by the sound of her voice. “Why do your eyes look sunken in? I know you’re an aspiring model but surely you can’t live on carrot and water!”

Calm down, Chris, my mind gently reminds me.

Deep steady breaths...gods of fashion, I don't have the patience. Even her breathing is doing things to me.

"What are you doing here, Simi? Shouldn't you be at school or something?"

She blinks her small eyes at me, as if she can't quite believe that I've asked her that, but it's a valid question. This is why people shouldn't pitch up in people's houses uninvited. "Calm your nipples down, I'm older than you and won't hesitate to fuck you up. What's with the PMS behaviour?"

What's with the interrogation? Can't I just be annoyed by her existence for no reason?

I grab my phone, dialling this stupid number I know by heart, it doesn't go through – no surprises there but it hurts like a bitch. My breath hitches, it feels like a dagger is stabbing into my heart, I blink my eyes rapidly. "Do tattoo parlours remove tattoos or where am I supposed to go?"

She's surprised by the subject change, I can tell.

"Where is this coming from?"

I don't want to talk about it but I'm so damn tired of keeping things bottled in. Nqobizitha is ruining everything for me, I couldn't even meet up with Mashudu because the boy that I'm in love with – who doesn't love me enough – ruined everything with two simple words : *Grow up*.

The audacity of him to send me this message before blocking me. He didn't even give me a chance to explain myself. That kiss with Thatego meant nothing. I don't even see him like that. I didn't mean to bash him in those voice notes, I was drunk and it wouldn't have happened had I been sober. Mashudu is worse, I don't even like him, I've only ever met him once.

"I hate his silence!" I don't know why I'm shouting at Simi, she looks a little freaked out by me. "He lied to me, Simi. I was just an experiment to him. If he can just block me on every platform like I never meant anything at all to him. He didn't love me, he didn't."

"Nqobizitha?"

I nod my head.

“Kanti what happened with this guy, chomz? You’re busy acting out but you won’t tell me or your mother what happened. How are we even supposed to help you if we don’t know what the issue is?”

The issue is Nqobizitha, he felt it fit to decide what’s best for me. He lied to me and cloaked it under the guise of putting me first and looking out for me. He lied to me. Simthandile is still gazing at me expectantly and I have no choice. I spill everything, it feels good to let it out, it’s frustrating that I’m crying in the process, the pain is still deep and fresh. “I—don’t know why he’s mad at me when it was him who broke up with me. I’m n-not even entertaining anyone around here, that kiss meant nothing.”

“He’s protecting his peace, Chris, surely you’re not holding that against him.”

Oh...wow. I should’ve known she’d take his side, she’s loved him from the first time she saw him. Why is she even my best friend?

“I should’ve known you wouldn’t see things my way,” I accept her empty plate and place it on my table. She’s going to have to wash it before she leaves. I’m tired of playing maid to people who don’t deserve it. I did it with Nqobizitha and got paid with a breakup in the end.

“Which way is that?”

“I can’t be explicit about his past, Simi. Its not mine to tell but I’ve been there for him through the worst of it all. There’s so much I did for him, I’ve sacrificed my body for him, I’ve been there for him in a way that no one else has. Then when its convenient for him, he breaks up with me. How is that not selfish? How is it not unfair?”

“So you decide to get back at him by fucking around and sending him those videos?” Whoa, can we talk about hypocrites? This is the same girl that took those videos for me. Granted, she didn’t know that I’d send them to Nqobizitha but still... Simi grabs my arm and adjusts me so that I’m laying on her boobs. I sigh and bury my face in Nqobizitha’s jersey, only leaving my eyes and head peeking out, the scent is fading now and I’ll die on the day that completely happens.

“I was drunk,” I attempt to defend myself, “I wouldn’t have done it were I sober.”

Simi looks into my eyes and arches her eyebrows. It makes me feel uncomfortable, she knows me better than anyone. “I find that hard to believe, chomz – and hear me out. I know you, I’ve known you since you were thirteen. You have a poisonous mouth, one that’s capable of causing death if not remedied. I think I know why. The issue wasn’t your relationship here. The issue is with you – as individuals. Just like you helped him realize that he had his issues, you have to realize that you have some of your own as well. I don’t know but personally, kudos to Nqobizitha for realizing that he’d have to work on himself so that he can be a better version of himself in the relationship. Nawe you need to do the same.”

“Are you saying I’m toxic?”

“Some behaviours, yes. I think it has a lot to do with your childhood – which is the case for most of us, isn’t? We walk around with all these broken pieces, not knowing that we can mend them to create a more beautiful, stronger version of ourselves. Like the art of Kintsugi.”

“I’ve hurt him too many times with my words,” I whisper, clinging to her, “I don’t do it on purpose but when I’m angry, I just want to hit where it hurts. I don’t want him to get away with hurting me. I always regret it afterward but the damage has already been done by then.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure, I just don’t want any guy to feel like they can trample on my head. That’s why...”

“Maybe its daddy issues,” she pinches my side when I chuckle, “shut up! I really mean it, chomz. Black people don’t like to think about these things, we don’t talk about how broken our family dynamics are. You can have your parents there, but not present. I...think, you’re fighting your dad through Nqobizitha. I’m not sure but you need to introspect – and the first step is to realize that you may’ve been toxic as well. Don’t hold it against him that he let you go. This is the best thing that he could’ve done, it gives you both the chance to work on yourselves. If its really love, and you’re both emotionally stable, then you can try again. Just stop being so petulant, you’re only driving him farther away.”

I get what she’s saying, truly I do, and maybe she has a point. Her truth doesn’t make the pain I’m in hurt any less. My heartache is like a wolf eating at my chest, tearing its way to my trembling heart. Its

threatening to devour me, to eat me whole and leave nothing but scraps behind. “The pain is unbearable, S-Simi,” I whisper, pain strangling my words, “I-I love him.”

“He loves you too. I know because he cared enough to let you go. As much as he’s putting himself and his mental health first, he’s also doing the same with you and your mental health. Choose him as well, fix yourself for the day you guys have an epic cheesy romantic movie-like reunion. Like when Bucky Barnes and Sam Wilson first encountered each other.”

“Captain America is not a romantic film,” I sniffle, then sigh tiredly.

“True, but that’s where the love began for Sam and Bucky.”

I shake my head, this shipping fictional characters thing of hers is going to drive her insane. First it was Derek and Stiles from Teen Wolf. Then it was Derek Morgan and Dr. Spencer Reid from Criminal Minds – she even wrote fanfiction on these two. Now its Sam and Bucky – she creates their art and posts it on Tumblr, it’s all very beautiful but sometimes provocative.

“Oh, and stop being so damn entitled!”

I give her a look. What the hell is she talking about now?

“Just because you helped your boyfriend realize all these things about himself, doesn’t mean that he owes you anything. If you were doing it because you were expecting something in return then you weren’t doing it out of the goodness of your heart. It’s wrong to help someone and expect something in return. No one owes you anything, especially loyalty, you owe it to yourself only. It’s a tough pill to swallow but it’s true. Loyalty means the world to us as humans but we’re not always going to get it. Learn to help without expecting anything in return. Your boyfriend’s not your possession.”

“Then he must’ve been lying to me when he said he’s mine and I am his.”

Simi gives me a ‘who birthed you?’ expression. I giggle because really, how the hell does she put up with me? “Thank you for always being there for me,” I mumble, feeling gooey inside, “I love you.”

“Love you too, smoochie.” She kisses my forehead tenderly.

I’ve never plaited hair like Thatego’s before. The texture is different from usual African hair. He really does have some coloured genes in him – like Pearl Thusi. But he prefers to acknowledge possible Khoi roots than the other possibility. I thought coloureds and the Khoi were one and the same thing but maybe I’m dumb? He’s plaiting his hair for Sbani, that’s what he told me, they’re going out today. Sbani returned from Mbongolwane on his own yesterday. It hurts that Nqobizitha isn’t with him but I know he’s at school and his education comes first.

I’ve thought long and hard about what Simthandile said and she’s right. I’ve decided to let things be, for my sake and sanity – but for the boy I’m in love with as well. We’ve hurt each other, me more than him, and the time apart may be a good thing. I know he’s attending therapy back home, Zenande updates me, she’s taken to sometimes sharing the bed with him when he has bad dreams. As hard as it was to accept, I agreed to it because sometimes he needs someone there with him. Recently, he’s been turning her down though, that’s what Zenny told me. He seems calmer she says. As long as he’s getting better then I’m fine with it.

Anyway, I have decided that it wouldn’t be bad to work on myself as well. I’m taking Simi’s advice and Dr. Langa spoke to a therapist this side so that they can charge me the same rate I was paying Dr. Langa for those few fifteen minutes sessions I used to do in Eshowe. I haven’t begun yet, but I’m meeting the woman tomorrow, my session is at noon.

“Ouch, don’t pull so hard!” Thatego moves again, and destroys the neatness of this braid I’m working on.

“Babes,” I exhale loudly, “you’re ruining it again. Your hair is very slippery and I have to have a really good grip to be able to do this. Quit complaining or look like a monster for when your boyfriend gets here. It’s your choice.”

“Don’t be so rude,” our eyes meet on the mirror, Thatego’s perfectly shaped brows knit together in a frown. Our staring contest is broken by the sound of someone knocking at the door. “Now look. You’re not even done and Sbani is here, wang bora shem.”

“I will castrate you with this comb!” I smack him with it and laugh as he snatches it from me and walks toward the door. Before he goes on this date of his with Sbani, he’ll need to show me where I can get taxis back to Jozi.

There are footsteps in the hallway. I don’t know what I’m expecting but the air is snatched from me as Thatego reappears with Sbani. Everything about him, right down to his shoes, reminds me of the boy I fell in love with back in Mbongolwane. Only it’s strange because Sbani isn’t smiling today, it’s a look that forces me to look down at my feet in fear. Surely he’s not holding that kissing thing against me, is he? It was once-off and—

“Awu, umunt’ kabhuti...” okay, talk about weather changes. As he rises from that signature bow he and his brothers do, I’m surprised to see a smile plastered on his face. “Ngeshwa, kuyomele usishiye kancane nje noThateho.” He never calls this boy by his name the way he’s supposed to. “We have pressing matters to attend to. Here, something small for your troubles.” A two hundred note is placed on my palm, something forces me to stand. “We’ll see you around,” his voice is charming but threatening.

“But we weren’t done,” Thatego speaks up, “maybe another hour. I still have to bath and pick out what to wear.”

“That won’t be necessary. Thank you for your time, Chris.” Sbani’s placing his hand around my shoulders, leading me to the front door. It shuts in my face with a quiet bang. I blink my eyes rapidly. What the fuck just happened?

hey gal can i take a rain check 4 tmrw? m not feeling well. – a WhatsApp message I receive from Thatego later that night.

I wonder if it has anything to do with Sbani. I try calling Thatego but it goes unanswered.

Sure, babes. Be safe ❤️ – me

always 😊 – Thatego

I really hope so, I remember Sbani's dangerous aura. It was unlike anything I've ever sensed from him before. I sigh, deciding to call Zenande next, just before I sleep, to get an update on Nqobizitha. "Zenny, how is he?"

"Drinking beer instead of studying. He found a room next to the school, he's moving out tomorrow," she sounds so relieved. Was he a pain in the ass that much?

"Oh, so akabuyeli ekhaya."

"He has a new family now. I don't think he feels there's anything left for him kwaNgcobo."

That can't be right, he's still a Ngcobo. Mam' Ntwenhle said they did a ceremony to appease their ancestors back when Nqobizitha and his brothers were babies. That's where the sangoma said it was futile separating them because they'd find each other in the end. It happened when everyone least expected it – but this is the way the world works. It finds sly ways to turn your whole life upside down.

"You have to tell him he can't turn his back away from his family, Zenny."

"Calm down, child. I have no right to tell him how to deal with his pain, I can make suggestions, but ultimately...the decision lies with him. Anyway, I'm stressed enough as it is. I want this monster inside me out already. I'm this close to ripping it out."

"You're only six months pregnant, Zenny."

She pauses a second, clears her throat, and sighs. "Don't remind me. How are you holding up in Joburg?"

"It's bad," a chuckle breaks free, and even more embarrassing – tears, "but I don't think I'm angry anymore. He loved me enough to have put me first."

"Finally, you see the light..."

MaKhathide

I was diagnosed with incomplete spinal cord injury. According to the specialists here, in the world of spinal cord injury, incomplete tells them a lot and very little at the same time. It tells them that I do not have total paralysis or loss of sensation, that my spinal cord was not totally damaged or disrupted. But that's about it – because spinal cord injuries can be so mild that they cause almost no muscle weakness or visible signs that a spinal cord injury ever even happened.

They can also be so severe that they leave the individual looking and feeling not very different from someone who has a complete injury. Typically, they fall somewhere in between. I am one of those ones whose injuries fall in between. They've ran a number of tests and got back to me. My world has come crashing down and I've never felt so helpless in my entire life and its frustrating, so very frustrating. Ngcobo has been an annoying pest, checking in and doing his very best to be helpful, he feels guilty and I am pissed off. I can't bring myself to have him arrested, it won't be good for our image. More than that it will make me look weak, a man like Ngcobo abuse who?

My pride is at stake here, I've heard to bear the whispers of useless women around Mbongolwane tainting my name and speculating about Nqobizitha. "Careful, don't be so rough!" I snap at the young woman adjusting me on the bed.

"Yes, ma'am!" she is a skittish cat that I don't want to entertain at the moment, I've been in a lot of pain lately, pain that has damn near caused me to lose my mind. I'm not sure if it's the medication this hospital is giving me. Maybe it's the emergency surgeries I've undergone. I've undergone urgent surgical intervention and then just days later it was discovered that I had appendicitis – a rupturing of the appendix. The devil is testing me but I am a strong woman. Dr. Kumar comes walking in with Ngcobo.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Fantastic!" I roll my eyes, fixing the hospital sheets. "What do your results say?" she continued to perform a number of unnecessary tests on me. I suppose anything that will make me walk quicker will do. These so called professionals couldn't determine when exactly that would happen but there's hope. Fourteen days later and I have feeling on my feet. It's a positive sign.

“I just want you to remember that this is not a death sentence,” she looks at me with sympathy in her eyes, like I even need it. My heart pounds hard in my chest as Ngcobo comes to stand beside me. “Our tests have revealed a colon cancer. Stage two colon cancer but this isn’t the end of the world...”

I hear her words, but they sound so far, that one deadly word keeps repeating in my mind. *Cancer. Cancer. Cancer.* Laughter rumbles out of my throat, I don’t know why. Ngcobo and the doctor eye me with confusion but I can’t stop. Something is wetting my cheeks, not tears no, but a foreign substance. Ngcobo’s arms are around me. “Everything is going to be fine.”

“This is some sort of joke!” I scream into his chest.

He continues rocking me, making me feel so trapped – weak, but I can no longer speak. The only sound that keep spilling out of me is the disbelieving laughter. Cancer? Not me. Anyone but me.

Mutual Desires : Forty-five

MaKhathide

“I don’t understand how I can get colon cancer, doctor. This must be some sort of mistake. Have you seen me move around? Before this stupid spinal cord injury, I could compete in a running competition with Usain Bolt himself. I don’t understand how these things can happen to me in just a span of days. Ngiyalingwa yini?”

“You’re not getting any younger, Mrs. Ngcobo,” the Indian doctor adjusts her round glasses and gives me a small smile, it’s the last thing I want to see at the moment. Does she rejoice over this, my downfall. “Your age played a huge factor in your spinal cord injury. With colon cancer, your age had something to do with it as well. At times, symptoms of colorectal cancer may not show up until the cancer has advanced. Because symptoms can go unnoticed during the early stages of the disease, guidelines recommend colon cancer screenings begin at age 50.”

“Why has no one ever told me this?!”

“She’s trying to help, Zengcebo, it won’t help you to take out your frustrations on her,” Ngcobo brushes my back, the touch eases me a little but I’m still so angry. Its unlike me to get cancer. Part of me is still so disbelieving.

“Thank you,” she smiles, I hate to see it. “As I was saying, symptoms can go unnoticed for such a long time that by the time you discover this the damage has been done. But colon cancer is more common than you think – it is the third most common type of cancer in men and women. This can cause the warning signs to be overlooked. The signs and symptoms of colorectal cancer depend on the location of the cancer, how advanced it is and how it affects the organs and tissue. One sign or symptom alone may not be enough to determine the cause, but if several symptoms are present, we can get a better idea of the potential cause.”

“You’re not saying much of anything!” I snap, “I’ve just told you that I am the healthiest person in the world, the healthiest. I exercise, I keep a clean diet. As a matter of fact, my age shouldn’t be a concern here. How did we get here? To me needing a wheelchair and being diagnosed with bloody cancer.”

“Your age.” Am I imagining the condescending tone? “Age. The risk of colorectal cancer increases as people get older. Colorectal cancer can occur in young adults and teenagers, but the majority of colorectal cancers occur in people older than 50.”

Why, I never... of all the enemies I’ve acquired over the years, I never thought my age would be one of them. Of course no one likes to grow old but you do whatever it takes to ensure you age gracefully, this is what I’ve done, I’ve always made sure to take care of my body. This still makes no sense to me.

“Your cancer has—”

“Do not call it mine, Miss. It is anything but mine, I’ll get you fired next time.”

The audacity...

“Don’t mind her, dokotela. Please proceed, where do we go from here?”

“The cancers have grown through the wall of the colon, and into nearby tissue, but they have not spread to the lymph nodes. Surgery to remove the section of the colon containing the cancer – we call this partial colectomy – along with nearby lymph nodes may be the only treatment needed. That’s what it looks like at the moment. But we’re going to test your tumour for specific gene changes, called MSI or MMR, to help decide if adjuvant chemotherapy would be helpful.”

“What about her spinal cord injury?”

“Physiotherapists are going to be helping her with the way forward. Dr. Mwari is going to be working closely with them. She hasn’t lost all sensation on the lower part of her body so that is promising.”

Ngcobo nods his head. “I have a visitor for you, mkami. Let me fetch her while Dr. Kumar assists you with any questions you may have.”

Absently, I agree to his request. I don’t have questions for the short, pudgy woman. Part of me is still so disbelieving that I’m hoping this is a horrible dream that I’ll wake up from. It’s not a dream though, the

woman is looking at me awkwardly with that godforsaken smile. “You’re dismissed,” I tell her just as the door opens and in walks Ngcobo with Ntwenhle.

What the hell is going on?

“Sakhile, what the hell is this?” I can feel my temper rising.

“Ngcengce,” Ntwenhle smiles. Jesus of Nazareth, what is wrong with these people and these disgusting beams plastered on their faces!? “I heard what happened, ngyaxolisa.”

“You told her?” the betrayal stings, I can’t move my legs fast enough to smack his cheek. I am confined to this bloody bed. “You just couldn’t wait, could you? This pleases you, that I’m weak like this.”

“This is not a weakness, Zengcebo,” Ngcobo folds his arms on his chest, expression soft and unsure, “It just shows that you’re human and that you’re vulnerable like the rest of us – and that its Okay. Please don’t ever—”

“Why are you here?” I ask Ntwenhle.

“Well, I have cancer too. It may be a little more advanced than yours but I know what its like. Bab’ Ngcobo and I thought maybe I could talk to you. Sixoxisane, Mah. I’m here to be your support system.”

“You mean to make fun of my situation? Phuma!” I shake my head, I don’t need support. Support for what. I’ve built myself up from the ground as a child. Too many times life has tried to bury me but I’d rise victoriously, dusting myself up. I don’t need sympathy from the one woman ruined me – it was her that I was going to deal with when I had that cursed accident that would lead to other issues. “Phuma, Ntwenhle. And if you ever bring her here again, I will rise from this bed to show you who I am, Ngcobo.” I tell Sakhile, annoyed by his presence. “Call Mchunu, tell him he’s needed.”

He shakes his head, “Things are going to be different now, MaKhathide. You’re going to eat some humble pie and learn to respect those around you. Those who will have to support you through this. We’re not your enemies. For now, I’m not going to call Mchunu, I’m going to leave you here so that you can think about your treatment of those who care about you. I expect an apology when I come back.” I don’t think he’s serious about this but he’s already walking off. “We’ve all been dealt with shitty cards –

you, me, Harrison, Bhekabelungu – all of us were victims. We had to respect their wishes and bring honour to our family names. You're 60 years old now, holding onto so much anger for so many years is not healthy. Maybe this is the way our ancestors are trying to humble you."

"For your mistakes. The only thing I've ever done was protect this family. Things only spiralled out of control when you and that devil of a woman felt it best to turn back on our agreement. I can't wait for the day I start walking again, the fire I will bestow upon all of you traitors—"

"That is if the cancer doesn't take you first, you never know. abakwaNgcobo must be tired of being called useless ancestors. Let's see if the Khathides will step in to rescue you. You're so hopeless, Ntombizengcebo." He shakes his head. "And no, I am not calling Mchunu." With that he walks out.

Christophe

I've been worried about Thatego so I decided to maybe pay him a surprise visit. I don't know that whole incident with Sbani three days ago seemed weird. His angry aura, it was like a volcano about to erupt, I don't care that he gave me his charming smiles, the rage had been suppressed, I saw it. Two knocks on the door and it opens. "Keep the – oh!" Thatego's eyes widen, "Gal, what are you doing here?"

"Am I no longer allowed to visit?" I ask him, cocking an eyebrow. A quick inspection reveals nothing amiss about him – at least the little bit of skin that he's showing.

"You are, I just wasn't expecting you."

The accusation in his voice... I'm a little bashful because I know how irritating it is to have visitors show up outside your door uninvited. It's so impolite to assume that the person hadn't any plans before you. But Thatego doesn't look like he's going out. I get in as he invites me inside. "What happened to your hand?" I ask him, his right hand is bandaged.

We sit down in the living room, there's his sister's kid with us – she's two years old. Peppa Pig is playing on the plasma TV. "I don't think I can say in front of my sister's baby."

She's only twenty-four months old, what the hell can she do?

“Did Sbani put his hands on you?”

His eyes widen, “We’re just jumping right into it, aren’t we?” he adjusts himself on the couch, wincing like it hurts to move a single muscle, and blinks at the TV. “I shouldn’t have kissed you. It wasn’t exactly respectful to Ncoba. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not answering my question.”

There’s a knock on the door that forces him to get up slowly. He’s limping. “That’s my kota order, please make sure she doesn’t eat the remote,” he’s already disappearing off into the hallway.

“I’m good thanks,” I say when he offers to cut the kota in half for both of us. I managed to eat some toast in the morning and I’m still full from that. “You didn’t answer my question. And how were you disrespecting Nqobizitha? It’s not like we’re still together. He broke up with me.” Just because I am attending therapy, doesn’t mean that I’m not still bitter about us being apart. I miss him – a lot.

“He would’ve done it regardless of the person, gal,” Thatego says, rubbing his face, “It doesn’t matter that it was me. If we were at a party and he saw someone who isn’t his brother kissing you, he would’ve dealt with that person. He’s not mad at me for messing around, he’s mad that it was *you* I did it with.”

I chuckle, can’t really believe what he’s saying. This is absurd. “So what, he fought his brother’s battles? Does Nqobizitha know about this? He wouldn’t condone it, Sbani was wrong.” I can feel myself getting angry on Thatego’s behalf. There is no justifiable explanation for Sbani’s behaviour. “Is this why you’re limping? How bad is it?” there are no visible bruises on his face.

“Sbani doesn’t just hit you. He wants you to hit him first, encourages you to, roots for you so that he can create greater damage. I’ve seen it happen at parties, I just – he doesn’t like me enough. He doesn’t love me, love is not supposed to hurt.”

I feel sorry for him, the way he bites his bottom lip, and appears lost back in that place that Sbanisezwe hurt him. The unshed tears in his eyes, the way he swallows his food as if it hurts to, I feel so sorry for him. “What did your mother say? Did you go to the police station?”

He laughs, with no amusement at all found in his voice, “Gal, be serious. We’re both boys, I go to the police station then I’ll be laughed at. You don’t know how complicated these things are with same sex relationships. Ours isn’t even a relationship. And my mom? She believes that that’s how boys grow up. My brother grew up being beaten up by his peers too.”

“Then what are you going to do?” I ask him.

“He’s been calling nonstop. He says he’s sorry now.”

As if proving his point, his phone starts ringing.

Thatego looks at me and then the phone that is on the small table. He places his barely eaten kota on the table and backs away like somehow Sbani is looking at him and calling him out for not answering. “I don’t know what to do,” he looks at me like I hold all the answers.

“Nothing you don’t want to,” I say as he nods his head, and sits back down. I could tell him to cut Sbani off because he clearly doesn’t respect him if he’s beating him up. I know because I used to be disrespectful as fuck with those weak slaps that would barely even touch Nqobizitha’s cheek. Damn, that makes me think about how Nqoba never got me arrested for putting my hands on him as well. Granted, I’m not exactly strong. With Sbani its different, him and his brothers are so tall – probably the biggest giants around South Africa – so for him to put his hands on Thatego, who is significantly smaller compared to him isn’t fair. He had all the advantage. “Did you at least hit him back?”

He nods his head and chuckles, a little self-satisfied this time. “I punched his chest, it’s how I got broke my hand. Then I tried biting his arm...” his smile falls again, “but it’s like I said. He wants you to do that so that he can really dish it out to you. I regretted it afterward, it’s nothing compared to your fresh braids being pulled at. Nothing like his punches. He’s an aspiring boxer, he knows where to hit.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Yeah, I’m even more sorry,” he snorts and folds his arms to his chest, “I’m even more sorry for giving him sex right after he gave me the beating of my life – and that in turn, he gave me the best orgasms of my life.”

“Just don’t let the sex blind you. Toxicity is the worst thing in relationships, I’m slowly learning that, communication is more important. Rough fucking ain’t going to cut it.”

“It wasn’t rough, it was the slow and sensual kind that he knows gets to me. The one that makes me feel like we’re connecting on a spiritual level, the one where I’m angry at him but still can’t say no. The stupid one that makes me feel weak for not denying him and makes me cry.” He grabs the remote from his niece and hides it behind him. “Its embarrassing now and I don’t want to see him. He hurt me.”

“I wish I could talk with his brother for you but I’m still blocked.”

“Ouch!” he gives me a sympathetic look and it will make me cry. “I’m sorry. It’s fine, you don’t need to say anything. I can fight my own battles, gal. He’s not going to get away with it.”

“What will you do?” I ask curiously.

“His Brentwood is too long, it could do with some trimming,” he grins wickedly, revealing his naughtiness, “Oh, and his jerseys are too tight – nothing that hot water can’t remedy.”

“Thatego!” my eyes widen, I am motherfucking speechless. “Those clothes are expensive as fuck, he’ll kill you and hide your body.”

“Then I’ll haunt him for the rest of his life.” His smile turns serious, “I don’t like what he did, gal. Maybe I’m psycho but he can do it to those other guys, not me. I like violence – this is why I go to his boxing matches – but it’s not fair that he should direct it at me. The only reason I hit him first was because he was going to beat me regardless. I never thought he’d do that to me.”

“Maybe cutting things off would be a more logical solution,” I blurt out and then cup my mouth.

“Maybe.”

Something tells me that he was hearing me but not listening – at least carefully.

Nqobizitha

I find her on the ground, trying to drag herself up. Its been a month now and everyday she does this, attempts to heal herself faster, and disregards the advices of physiotherapists. I sigh, the only reason I'm here is because my biological mother wants me to salvage what's left of my relationship with this woman. "MaKhathide," I call out, looking around. She is too much stress that everyone prefers to leave her to her own miserable devices. "Where is Thandeka?"

"Don't ask me stupid questions and come help me up."

Ah, lovely like usual.

She's still my mother, I don't take joy in her suffering. The only payback for us is the fact that she has to ask for help lately. It's something she would've never done before. I place my arms under her armpits and drag her up. The pain gets to her as she moans in agony. I place the blanket over her legs and look at the time. I'm meeting with Sqalosenkosi and we're going to Nhlakanipho's soon. "Where is Thandeka?" I ask again.

"Wetting someone's dick obviously. It's like everyone has forgotten their place since I've become sick. Awusho, ufunani la? You're Mr. Independent wena, angithi? You have your own place and everything. Or are you missing home and realizing how you're nothing without me?"

"We're still delusional, I see..." the words escape me quickly, making me ashamed. This woman is my mother, I respect her with everything in me. "Its not you, MaKhathide wami," I try to rectify things with a smile. "I just mean that those pills they're giving you may be doing more harm than good. Look now they're putting unfounded ideas in your head."

"What are you talking about?" her voice is impatient.

"Exactly this, you." I rub her shoulder. "You're a former version of yourself, these pills are messing with your brain. Do you understand what I'm saying here?"

"No!"

“The old MaKhathide would’ve,” I say and kiss her cheek, “Let me love and leave you.”

She’s confused as I walk away, I can tell. I don’t even know what the fuck I was on about but it’s nice to tease her lately. The mighty have fallen and everyone’s come out to play. This is karma for all the people she’s wronged. I do admire her tenacity though, through all this, she’s still fighting hard to be the cold-hearted MaKhathide we know. Cancer hasn’t brought her down, not really. The spinal cord injury seems to be affecting her the most, she hates feeling trapped. But she’s still tenacious as ever, even from the wheelchair. Then Baba will humble her once in a while by reminding her that she no longer holds all the power.

The drive to Mam’ Ntwenhle’s home is only fifteen minutes. Sqalosenkosi opens the door for me and smiles but its tired. “Kwenzenjani?”

“Lutho, I was just bathing our mother. Let’s wait a few minutes, Zinhle will be back.”

Zinhle is our mother’s relative – an aunt. She takes care of Mam’ Ntwenhle who has lost weight over the past few weeks. It’s nothing overly prominent but you can see it. I feel like her and my brothers know something I don’t about what’s affecting her. I feel like she’s seriously sick and I’d be lying if I said I’m not worried for her. MaKhathide’s sudden health problems have brought us even more closer. Life is too short and I don’t want to hold grudges when I can use that time bonding and building a relationship with her. “Mah,” she’s sitting on the couch in her nightgown, I kiss her cheek. “Kunjani?”

“Siqiniseko,” her smile is bright, “siyazama, ngane yami sothini. How is school going?”

She always asks me about school, like the concerned mother she is. “I got fifty percent on my Accounting test the other day.”

“That’s what I’m talking about!” her excitement is palpable, she claps her hands together. Sqalosenkosi is patting my back. I can feel the genuineness of their happiness for me. “Well done, I’m proud of you. If you keep this up, you can even get a higher percentage. Never sell yourself short. What about therapy?”

“I drew something else again last night.”

“Let me guess...that boy?”

They laugh as I rub at my neck bashfully. “He’s my source of inspiration, Mah. Just like he inspired me to begin therapy, he’s also doing the same with my art. I never thought I’d touch a pencil again after Ntombikayise kodwa buka, Mah wami. Dr. Langa doesn’t see any problem with it. Therapy is going really good. Last night, I didn’t have any bad dreams at all. I think I’m improving.”

“That’s really good. I’m proud of you.”

I just smile and accept the baby oil from Sqaalosenkosi to massage our mother’s feet. They’re always swollen lately and need to be rubbed regularly. “Allow me to take care of you,” I say.

Nhlakanipho is herding his uncle’s cattle. He’s doing it out of the kindness of his heart and has bypassed working today to do this. He’s not even going to get paid for it. I say this because I know malum’ uMzimela. He’s the type to request that you do a job for him and will swear on his ancestors that he will pay you for your services but you’ll wait for it longer than you’re waiting for Jesus’ arrival. I don’t trust people who generally call others ‘mkhaya’. They only use that word when they stand to benefit something from you.

“How is your brother?” Siya asks the question, looking at Sqaalosenkosi. The cattle have found the perfect spot for grazing and we’re all enjoying the sun. I’ve removed my jersey to place on my shoulders. Phuzekhemisi is playing on the Bluetooth speaker that Siya brought with him.

“Fine, probably chasing after a girl as we speak.”

Siya chuckles, “At least he’s smart about it. He even gets paid for it. I can’t the same about this one here.” He points at me.

“Zokwehla iinyembezi ngoba uyazithanda,” I warn him, “It was free pussy, why the hell would I wanna get paid for it?”

“Because its having your cake and eating it, duh!” he rolls his eyes, “how’s therapy going?”

Why does he want to know? We’re not exactly close me and him.

“Awesome,” I give a silent Nhlakanipho my attention, “Bafo. What’s the latest with your father?”

“His farming business is slowly dying,” my best friend doesn’t even look at all affected. In fact, there’s a subtle sadistic smile. “He called Gogo begging. He hasn’t had enough, I want him flat on his stomach, struggling to even crawl.”

Siya bites his bottom lip and climbs onto Nhlakanipho’s lap. Sqalo and I look at each other – awkward, but hold back on laughing at each other. “Its like you’ve forgotten all he’s said. This is going to affect you as well, baby. Don’t leave it out that he said the sangoma said—”

“All lies and desperate attempts,” Nhlakanipho wraps a hand around Siya’s throat and caresses his pulse point, “nothing will happen to me. His ancestors don’t know me, they can’t hurt me. I want him on his stomach, Phakade lami. I want him when the pot belly is gone and he’s crawling on a stomach that shows the outline of his ribs. We’ll talk then. If he dare visits my family home uninvited again, ngyomfaka isbhakela esbheke eMsinga. Angiyona insango mina.”

“That’s the spirit, mfwethu.” Sqalosenkosi smiles widely as Siya gives him a glare.

“Talk to your brother, he’s getting on my nerves,” Siya directs the iciness to me.

I shrug, lying on my back, and close my eyes as the sun hits me. A while later, I feel Sqalosenkosi do the same beside me. His sigh touches my ear. “Are they always so pathetically in love? It’s weird, I don’t think I should be looking at this. It’s too...”

“Ethereal,” I finish for him, “Sacred, intimate – not for your eyes.”

“Exactly,” he’s grinning, I can hear it in his voice, “how long have they been together?”

“Two years,” I say, “but I only found out this year.”

“I see...they even make guys like me sort of believe in love – impractical as it is.”

I turn my head to look at him, he’s still facing skyward. “How so?”

“Just, I don’t know how to explain it to you. What about you, ever think you’ll get back with Chris?”

“I don’t know, maybe. I don’t like to think about him.”

He chuckles, “Yet you carry his drawing around in your pocket.”

“He’s the first thing I ever drew in years,” I defend myself, “futhi ke it’s a good thing I carry that paper around with me. It reminds me to not cheat on him.”

Christophe

The call came around midnight. From Zenny herself. She was crying and speaking incoherently that for a few tense seconds I’d been scared that something had happened to the baby. I guess the emotions were overwhelming her and the joy was responsible for her ugly crying. My sister has given birth to her first child. A lovely daughter. 24 August 2020, a baby weighing 4.2kgs was delivered at Mbongolwane hospital. She arrived a little early, I wasn’t expecting her until late September to early October.

My footsteps are a bit dizzy, resemble those of a newborn giraffe’s, as I follow after Zemvelo to the labour and delivery ward. We got here last night with my mother but it was too late to visit. I am restless, couldn’t sleep all of last night thinking about being back here again. It would’ve been so simple to escape my house and run off into the darkness of the night to Nqobizitha’s home. I didn’t. I wasn’t blocked by him for me to not get that he wants his space so I’ll respect that. Besides, he moved out – and is renting a room at the Sibiyas. Their dogs would be an obstacle when trying to break in.

But being here brings all the memories again, and the pain is more vicious somehow. You'd think that the month, three weeks and two days that we've spent apart would make things better but it hasn't. Therapy's going great of course but it doesn't suddenly make me miss Nqobizitha less. It's worse now because I'm here. All I can think about is him and the time we spent together.

The dinner dates, the late night break-ins, the singing, his spanking, the smell of him in my room – some of his things are still in there. I miss him like crazy. "Attention à la marche, Bebe."

I nearly trip as my mom gives me the instruction. Funny, her telling me to watch my step causes my body to do the exact opposite. She laughs, holding me to her side and kisses my temple. Because the baby arrived early, Zenande was unable to give birth at Life Empangeni Private Hospital like she'd planned to. There are a couple of other women in this ward with her. But her bed is isolated from the others and her baby's cot is right next to it. Talk about the perks of being a patient in the hospital you work in.

"Zenny!" Her eyes light up as she spots me, she has the baby in her arms. "How's it going? I can't believe I'm an uncle. This is so cool. What's her name, what's her name? Where's Jabulani? Can I hold her please? I won't drop her, I promise I won't drop her!" my excitement is that of a child.

The others chuckle. "Slow down, child," Zenande shakes her head, "sit down first."

I do as she says while my mother greets her. Zemvelo excuses herself and I don't mind at all. We're not besties or anything but she wasn't a bitch last night and that's a good thing. "Careful, Bebe," my mom says as Zenny slowly places the baby in my arms.

"What's her name?" I ask again, swaying the baby in my arms. She looks strange with those scrunched up features and eyes that are barely opened. Newborns resemble aliens, Nhlakanipho was right.

"Lisakhanya Nonkazimulo Xulu," Zenande replies with a small smile.

"Oh," my eyes snap to her, "not, what's Jabulani's surname? Mkhize?"

"We're not married, no damages have been paid. Kanti futhi we broke up recently, he was too annoying and I couldn't deal anymore." I think she wants to cry. Her expression is emotional and her eyes are red.

Maybe it's hormones, I heard they don't disappear for a while after you've given birth. "Its not like I need a man in my life ke. That was his problem, he thought I'd need him. I'll raise this baby on my own, I don't give two fucks mina!"

"Are you supposed to curse in front of your baby?" I giggle, covering one of my niece's ears with my hand. She squirms like a cute kitten in my arms and whimpers. "You see, Lisa is even complaining. When are you being released?"

"Tomorrow," she smiles.

"Its very rare for babies born at seven months to be released so early. Is she 100% healthy, have the doctors checked that all is right with her?" my mother asks.

"More than okay, don't worry yourself about it." Zenande looks at my mom and beams – it seems sarcastic or condescending. "You know how they calculate these things wrong sometimes. She's actually 37 weeks old. That's considered a full term pregnancy actually – a 37+ weeks gestation. She's just excited to be in the world with her family."

"And you said she's 4kgs? Quite big, eh?"

"Like her Mama," the fake smile widens, "The only thing that matters is that she's healthy."

"That is true," mommy takes the baby from me and observes her. I don't know what her frown means and I don't try to decipher it either. Zenny has all my attention anyway.

Mutual Desires : Forty-six

Nqobizitha

“Time’s up, pens down!” Principal Biyela’s voice spreads over the wide exam hall as I discreetly go back to the questions of topics I am hundred percent sure we’ve never touched in Economics. I answer whatever crap comes to mind and by the time Miss Magwaza comes to collect my page, I only have one question that I haven’t answered. We sit down patiently until we’re dismissed by him.

“How was it?” Nhlakanipho carelessly throws his pens inside his bag and throws it over his right shoulder.

I hate this question. You say the exam was easy you jinx yourself, you say the opposite and it’s still the same shit. “So-so,” I emphasize my words with my hand. “Awusho, wenzani manje?”

“Siya’s waiting for me at home,” he gives me a small smile, eyes mysterious – a little mischievous, “we have training to do.”

Training? Training for what?

“What are you talking about?”

“Yekela, bafo.” He shakes his head, putting his hands in his pockets, as we exit the school gates. Its 04:30pm now. We had a late exam. We’re writing our preliminary exams and so far shit has been good, really good. Mathematics, English and IsiZulu have been a breeze. Tomorrow its Business Studies and I know I’m capable of walking away with at least 80%. Its always been easier than Economics and that thorn on my backside called Accounting. Though this first paper of Economics was a little better than expected. “Point is I have Siyabonga waiting for me back home and I do not want to get on his bad side.”

“The only thing you’re worried about is him denying you sex,” I say.

“Of course, I’d die.” He opens the door to his bakkie and looks at me. “Need a lift?”

I'm five minutes away from MaSibiya's house. "I prefer to walk, gotta keep fit."

"Siyokhuluma," he nods his head.

As I'm walking, Mpilonhle captures my attention, and our eyes lock. My dick is still very much attracted to women – the chubby ones. Dr. Langa says it's normal, I don't have to feel awkward about it, he says I am making progress and it's no longer about Ntombikayise. I believe him, before I used to look for her everywhere, now it's not like that. Part of me shies away from women who remind me of her. I still like thick women but not the older ones. There's this limit that I've unconsciously set. Women like Mpilonhle still turn me on though, like they always have, it's just that they're not Chris.

"Nkosazana," I bow my head and give her my best smile.

"Oh, now he remembers me," she rolls her eyes.

"Like I'd ever forget you," I wrap an arm around her, "Life has been hectic, Mpiloh. I haven't forgotten you, how can I?"

"Mmm, if you say so." Her arm folds around my waist as I propel her forward. "I've heard, you've got clones and everything. I've seen one of them around here, he's cold unokuziqhenya. Khuluma naye, it's not good for your reputation to have a clone who doesn't stop to make small talk with umphakathi, not even a greeting. Cha, uyechwensa ubhuth' wakho."

"That doesn't sound like him," I frown, "maybe your manner of approach wasn't respectful. He doesn't like loud people, uyambona nawe ukuth he's a calm dude."

"Sue me, I thought it was you kanti cha. He should've told me politely ukuth I have your identities swapped, hhayi lomsangano wakhe wokung'ziba ngangim'jabulele kangaka."

Her definition of being happy to see him means she tried to hug him and Sgalosenkosi turned her down. It makes sense, you don't just invade someone's personal space like that. Granted, she thought it was me and that's why she'd wanted to hug him. "Ngyamoxolisela, nkosazana. I'll talk to him for you and ensure that—"

I can feel someone looking at me, burning into holes into my forehead. I clash with big brown eyes so beautiful, familiar—they leave me completely enchanted. My heart stops beating for a good second, as I try to figure out if I'm losing my mind all of a sudden. "Why did you stop?" Mpilonhle's voice sounds too far away. So this is not a dream, and those eyes are still looking at me – changed from wide and frightened to wide and questioning.

It takes me another good second to recover. I kiss Mpilonhle's cheek and give her a parting embrace. "I'll see you around, nkosazana. My phone is still working, don't be a stranger."

"Wait, what? I thought that we could—"

I'm already walking away, towards the boy frozen in one spot, sticking out like a sore thumb with this light pink outfit he has on. Then there's also the fact that he's just standing next to MaKhuzwayo's house – like a statue. I don't stop until I'm in front of him. His eyes drop immediately, as he wiggles his body, one of his legs moving impatiently. I take the time to carefully observe him, he is still so thin, like a needle. The sight makes me frown.

"Chris..." I start.

He looks up but remains quiet.

I return his stare, wanting to ask so many questions but unsure where or how to begin. What the fuck is he doing here? The question keeps swirling in my mind, I thought Zenande said he wouldn't be coming back, that it was for the best that way. Why the sudden change? A quiet exhale reaches my ears as the watermelon smell travels to my nose and then my groin. I clear my throat, looking at the person responsible and surprised to see Chris' eyes quivering all of a sudden.

What the...?

What's changed all of a sudden?

Instinctively, I reach out and try to touch him but he takes a step back. The small rejection is like a punch to the gut. My frown deepens and I have to suppress the illogical part of me that takes this as disrespect and wants to remind him that nothing's changed – he's still mine. I want to confine him. His doe eyes

are accusing, they speak words of fiery anger, and utter wretchedness. I clear my throat, adjusting the bag on my shoulder.

“Bambi.” I try again.

“You’re busy with other people now?”

The way he asks this question makes me irritated. Like he wasn’t kissing Thatego in Joburg a couple of weeks ago. Sbani called a few days after he’d arrived in Joburg, wanting to pick my brain on things he could do to apologize to Thatego. He beat the crap out of that boy apparently. I told him to apologize and stay away from him. He didn’t take my advice obviously, said something about love but he wasn’t making sense – the way he explained. It’s a month later and Thatego still isn’t talking to him. Fuck it, he deserves it, maybe he’ll think before acting next time.

“Aku doko olugayelwe wena lelo,” I tell him, watching his eyes widen, “Nawe umatasatasa eGoli, angithi?”

“I don’t want to fight.”

I don’t want to either but things have changed. We’ve been apart for nearly two months and shit’s changed since then. I am Nqobizitha Siqiniseko Mkhonto Ngcobo. I don’t bear the shit I put up with all those months ago. He’s not going to climb on top of my head like he’s used to. There is no space for comparison about me and his past lovers. I’m learning all this new shit about me and I don’t entertain the kind of drama Chris brings with him.

“Ngyaxolisa,” I was messed up too and he suffered shit at my hands.

“What for?”

I shrug. We are completely still for a long time, looking at each other, both of us trying to figure out some things. My fingers are restless, aching to touch him, his bottom lip – soft, tempting. “Don’t bite your lip,” I remind him.

He makes a nervous giggle, taking me back to a time where things were different, and folds his arms to his chest but abides. "Sorry. How are you?"

"I've never been better." Pain flashes his eyes, he clears his throat and nods his head. "How about you?"

"The honest truth?" he's reluctant.

"Yes," I nod my head.

"Better than before but I guess you were right about that wet with tears pillow thing you were on about all those months ago. Remember, when you tried to warn me?"

I don't reply.

"I'm not trying to emotionally blackmail you or make you feel guilty," he reads my mind and blinks his eyes rapidly. "I just mean that it wasn't this bad with my previous breakups, not even with Hugo."

There it is. I don't think he realizes how much it irritates me when he compares me to that French idiot. The time apart has taught him nothing. Soon, he'll be calling me a downgrade. It's never been about respect with him, he doesn't see me as his man, as man enough compared to Hugo. "What's the point of telling me this?"

He blinks again. "What?" I don't know why he sounds confused, he does this crap all the time.

"About how bad you're taking this. What's the point of comparing your breakups? Me and your former men are different people. Why are you comparing us?"

"I'm not, I just mean—"

"That you're surprised breaking up with Hugo's downgrade hurts more than it did with him? He's the pinnacle of ideal boyfriends, right? Anyone who comes into your life should try aiming for his level if not higher? Otherwise they're not good enough and will have to be reminded of how they could never be

him." I thought I was over this, actually, I don't think it has ever affected me at all. But right now, thinking back to it, it angers me. This boy never respected me, not once. I wouldn't allow any of my family to stay with any guy who behaves like Chris does. I'd punch their faces before they'd try their luck on my siblings again. "It was nice talking to you, man." I pat his shoulder.

"Nqobizitha, please!"

I look over my shoulder, walk back to him again, a fire in my veins that makes my hands shake – a voice at the back of my head begs me to do something. To fuck his brains out – like all those other times. My groin is always in support of this option. It wants inside him. It wants to split him in half, to pound away until Chris is struggling to get away, until he's crying and apologizing. I want to fuck him into the nearest wheelchair. Our bodies are close, almost touching. But not quite.

He's staring back at me, breathing hard and fast. A gasp escapes him when I lift a hand, so fast that he has barely registered it until my fingers are pressing into throat, feeling his pulse point. My thumb travels up and presses against his lower lip, forcing his mouth to part. "Don't look at me like that, Bambi. It's not my dick you'll be getting." I let out a smirk, and feel his body shudder. "You're high maintenance. Surely a downgrade like myself doesn't qualify. I'm not Hugo, remember?"

His lips tremble slightly. "No," it's barely above a whisper.

"Thought so," The words seem to knock the air out of him, sending a violent shudder to his body. He places both his hands on my chest, trying to push me away.

My grip tightens just a little. He moans. "I love you," the words spill from him as I caress his pulse point.

I take a step back, though not because of the strength of Chris' desperate push. A cruel smile grazes my lips as I lower my hand from his face. "Happy for you."

The sound of my footsteps are silent on the dusty road. I'd almost forgotten that there are people around us. I find Mpilonhle a distance away from where I was standing with Chris. My arm wraps around her again, as I drag her away from it all. "Spend the day with me."

"I'm not falling in bed with you," she's stern.

“Poor you.”

Christophe

“Don’t place it there, what if it falls on her?!” Zemvelo shouts and I swear to every deity on this planet that I’m this close to losing my shit.

“Its not like the baby will be sleeping here so soon,” I remind her with a soft glare, but remove the baby bed bell anyway, with a quiet huff. “This thing is meant to be here. It wasn’t invented by mistake, Zemvelo, it soothes the baby and has 4 musical modes that you can choose from so them—”

“I don’t give a damn, wengane. These things are not good for babies, what if they carry spirits? We didn’t grow up needing nonsensical toy rubbish that we wouldn’t even remember. Khipha! Khipha lomsangano njengamanje.”

“Do it your own damn self!” I snap, stomping out of the room. The audacity! God, I am trying to help and this is how I am thanked? The door slams behind me as I enter my room, I sag against it and suppress the urge to scream. That just causes the tears to fall fast, I rush to my bed and collapse on it, hugging my pillow close. It’s like everyone is out to ruin my mood today. Nqobizitha just had to do it first. I knew it was going to be weird seeing each other after so long but I hadn’t thought it’d be so soon. I hadn’t even thought about how our meeting would be like. All I know is that it wasn’t as epic as Simi said it would be.

I don’t know what I was expecting but it wasn’t the contemptuousness. It wasn’t the way he... he’s angry at me now. Like he wasn’t the one who let me go. Like I haven’t apologized for Hugo. Like he didn’t block me. I get it, I wasn’t the best in that relationship but I’m learning. I think I am. I wasn’t comparing him to Hugo. I was just trying to tell him that it’s bad, that it’s really bad. And that I’ve been in hell without him.

There’s a knock on my door. It opens without permission.

“Bebe,” my mother sits next to me. “What’s wrong?”

I don't want to talk. I've been trying to control these damn tears.

"Your sister is here. You don't want to see your niece again?"

I want to but I'm in a bad mood, I don't want any negativity around her. I want to be left alone, to sulk in peace. I saw him walking away with that lady. I remember that he's slept with her a few times, and he had his arms wrapped around her, he was kissing her cheek. Maybe he's realized that he wasn't attracted to boys in the first place. That he wasn't attracted to me. *Its not about you!* My mind snaps at me. *Its about him and how you always do this.*

It wasn't coming from a place meant to ridicule, I silently defend myself.

"Bebe?" my mom caresses my cheek.

"He's angry at me for all those times," I whisper, peeking an eye out, "the bad times. I'm sorry, mommy. I wasn't hurting him on purpose."

"Give him time, the same one that you need. Just because you're back, it doesn't automatically mean that things will go back to the way they were. People grow on the regular, maybe he's not the same boy that you left a few months ago."

He wasn't. I saw it – he's...happy. It sucks to know that he was perfectly fine without me while I was going insane in Joburg. I've cried myself to sleep because of him but he's happy. Part of me, deep down, is relieved. It means that he's at a good place – emotionally, physically and mentally. I'm happy that he's happy but it sucks at the same time. It sucks for me. "I—want him to be happy."

"Even it means it's not with you?"

I hesitate a second here, the thought is too painful to bear. Again, there's part of me that had been hoping that we'd work things out. Silly as it may sound but he makes me forget that there's another option out there. I don't want anyone who isn't him. Maybe for him it's different. "Its not like I'd have a say, mommy."

She kisses my temple and sighs. “Tout ira bien. (All will be well).”

Somehow, I doubt it.

I have been unable to show my face in public for days now. Call me a coward but I'd rather I didn't bump into Nqobizitha. I don't know why I was foolish enough to think that because we've seen each other he would've unblocked me because he hasn't. I stopped making an attempt and I tried deleting his numbers today but I can't. Siya visited yesterday, spotting a weird collar around his neck. Mommy was right about people changing because he's different as well. Something about his aura is different – and strangely...beautiful. Nhlakanipho was writing his final exam paper. It was Economics paper two – I hope Nqobizitha did well.

“Can you feed her her bottle, I need a break!” Zenny shouts from the hallway.

I shake my head and grab the whimpering baby from the bassinet. Lisakhanya is a really needy baby that cries a lot. No one holds her but her mother, I don't know why she's turned on us all of a sudden, and Zenny knows this but still insists that we hold her. “You're not exactly beautiful when you cry,” I whisper and hold her to my chest, grabbing her bottle with my other hand. She refuses to suck and cries a loud wail. This makes me wish my mom was back from Eshowe mall but she went to buy some home necessities with Zemvelo.

“Stop it,” I murmur to the little one.

From here, I can hear Zenande watching the TV. I want to blame her and be angry at her for leaving me with her headache-inducing baby. Lisakhanya suckles the tit of her bottle for a few seconds then starts wailing again. I stand up and walk around, swaying her in my arms. I think it's working. My phone chirps with a message. It's from the Grade 10s WhatsApp group chat I created when I was still a tutor at Sithola Imfundo. I never bothered to delete it because they'd ask for my help on it and I was still assisting where I could. The beeps of new messages comes every few seconds now and my interest is peaked.

Kodwa Thando, lamanyala uwafundephi? – Thokozile

Ujwayele lo, yisdwedwe zentombazane 🤔👤 – Nokuzola

Kanti unje mjondovu? – Ndumiso

Asinamona febani 😂😂😂 – Zamaswazi

The messages keep piling up – one on top of the other, I’ve never been so confused in my life. I scroll up until I reach a recent video that was sent by Sandile. I know this is not good because this boy has always been such a bully. I want to open the video but Lisakhanya starts wailing again. Its louder this time and I’m seriously not patient enough for this. I’m about to call Zenny but there are voices out there. They get closer and the door opens.

I nearly drop the baby.

Our eyes clash. How can he look so relaxed?

My heart is jumping so hard, and with each pounce, it gets closer and closer to my throat. I bite my lower lip and bounce the baby up and down, trying to get her to keep quiet. She is not pleased and screams her lungs out. “This Casanova came to visit my daughter,” Zenny breaks the staring contest sparked between me and...him.

“Hi,” I ignore her and greet him.

He clears his throat, removing his hands from his pockets. “Chris, kunjani?”

That name – a vicious punch lands directly on my throat. I find it hard to swallow or to produce a coherent sentence. Zenny takes the baby from me and gives it to Nqobizitha. Through the veil of unshed tears blinding my vision, I can see his fear. Maybe Lisakhanya’s screams are scaring him. “She—really detests people,” I croak, releasing a shaky exhale, and attempting to make conversation. “She cries and—oh, look at that. Quiet all of a sudden, the traitor.”

Zenande has a small smile on her face, peering over Nqobizitha's arms, to the baby in his arms. She's quiet all of a sudden, making cute little sniffling sounds. "Crap, this is weird! I've never held a newborn baby ever in my life."

Zenny's laughter is loud. "You seem to be doing well so far. Zithobile, come and see."

My legs are wobbling as I get closer. She stands aside and I take her place, he's too tall and I can only see my niece's head. "She seems to like you better than me," I whisper.

"I wonder why..." he says flatly.

I blink rapidly, swallowing the lumps in my throat. Zenny gives me a look I haven't the energy to read.

"Let me get you something to drink," she tells Nqobizitha.

Great, she's leaving me all alone with him, knowing very well that he hates me.

"You didn't answer my question," he occupies the nursing chair and holds the baby in his big hands. If I didn't know that he's gentle, I'd be scared that he was going to crush her. "Kunjani?"

"Fine." I'm not fine at all. "You?"

"Fine," he echoes me.

I sit down on Zenande's bed and observe how comfortable the baby seems with him. "You're so good at this," I compliment him.

"Maybe I'll be a great father one day."

It goes silent after that. He is looking at me, I can't bring myself to look away from him. His blank eyes consume me, they reel me in. I clear my throat and shift once. Has it always been this awkward between

us? Has it always been this tense? He's with me here but it doesn't feel like he is. It's like I am all alone – and so lonely. I am panicking, trying to find our connection again. He is still looking at me.

"I'm sorry, please forgive me," I whisper again, desperate. "Please...tell me what to do."

"I—"

The door opens and in walks mommy. Her eyes light up as she spots Nqobizitha. "Ncobha? Why wasn't I told you're here? I would've bought amasi. Zenny is busy drinking Bernini in the living room."

Nqobizitha and I look at each other – shaking our heads.

"I'll get you something to drink," I offer.

"I'd like that very much," he replies.

"Are you hungry? I can make you some food."

Our eyes lock at this, the subtle smile, I can see it.

At his tiny head nod, I dash into the kitchen. Simi would laugh at me for behaving like this, I told her that I wasn't going to play maid for anyone anymore. I kept that promise. But I like doing things for Nqobizitha – the cooking, sometimes washing and ironing...it used to make me happy. It's the little things with him, he appreciates those things. I'm back from Mchunu's spaza with amasi. The uphuthu is done as well. I put in the freezer to try and get it to cool faster. I check the fridge and grab some beers that I'm sure belonged to Jabulani. Then I find Baba's bowl and fill it up with warm water.

Zenande laughs like a lunatic as I rush past her with a tray carrying the bowl of water, a dishcloth and the beers. I enter the room just as mommy is saying, "The little darling seems to be fond of you. She's a monster to everyone else. What juju did you give her?"

I place the tray down and grab the sleeping baby from him but she stirs and starts whimpering. "I'll do it," Nqobizitha offers and goes to place the baby in the bassinet. She stirs a millisecond and then settles. "Thank you," he says and washes his hands.

I nod my head and quickly dash back to the kitchen with an empty tray. The uphuthu is not super cool but its manageable. I grab the amasi and place them beside the bowl of uphuthu then I'm dashing back to Zenny's room again. "Here you go."

"Heineken with amasi, what a treat!"

"This is how I roll, you know by now."

We both look at each other and burst out laughing. Mommy is confused but she doesn't need to understand a single thing. The mood seems to lighten after that. Mommy even leaves me alone with Nqobizitha. We talk about anything but our relationship – that is nonexistent. He asks me about Joburg. There isn't much I get up to when I'm there. Mostly I visit different people – or go to modelling school.

"Did Sbani tell you about Thatego?" I ask him.

He shifts in his chair and nods yes.

"I know you wouldn't condone it and I hope you told him to apologize."

"It was the right thing to do," he says and folds his hands together, "it's a good thing that Thatego isn't talking to him."

"I agree."

We're silent again, I don't know what to say. He's eating, looking enthusiastic, with the whole chipmunk thing going on. I can only look at him. The plate is empty and he washes down the food with the remaining beer. He's going to leave now. I don't want him to. He stands and pats his belly. "Thank you, Chris."

I hate it so much when I'm Chris.

"It's a pleasure."

He's at the door when I grip his arm. He peers over his shoulder and looks down at me. The tall giant and his little toothpick. His brows are arched in question but I don't know what to say to him. I just awkwardly wrap my arms around him and squeeze tight. It takes a really long time but he returns it eventually. My body is buzzing – aching for more, more, more...

I can feel his lips touch the top of my head.

"See you around, Chris."

"I love you," I whisper.

I know he's heard me, he walks out.

Later that night, I manage to check my phone. I'm still blocked. It hurts like a bitch. I decide to not dwell on it and focus on the group chat I created. There's over 200 hundred messages now and this is alarming. What did Thandolwenkosi do? I click on one of the responses to the video and it takes me back to it. My phone quickly downloads it and starts to play it. The first thing that captures my ears are the different voices laughing. This was some sort of party. It plays on and I don't finish it, feeling my skin crawling. Siya has been offline for most of the day. I wonder if he and Nhlakanipho know about this.

Either way, Nhlakanipho is going to kill someone.

Nqobizitha

I get the call around midnight. For a second, I think about not answering because its Siyabonga and that boy has a bucket for a mouth. I'm not sure what he wants. He hangs up and almost immediately calls again. "Shandu, ufunani?" I ask him, sitting up and stretching. His sniffles reach my ears. Even with the distance, I can sense that something is wrong. "Kwenzenjani?"

"I-I need your h-help, Nqobizitha. Maybe I don't deserve it but he's your best friend. I tried talking to him but he won't listen. He took his bakkie, I don't know which house he's going to. He can't do this, he's going to lose so much. P-Please talk to him for me."

"What happened?" I ask.

"The video! It was sent to him and he's so mad. Gogo's going to get a stroke if she sees this, please help me."

I'm already getting up. "You said he took his bakkie. Why? You're not making much sense."

"I think he went to Lwandle's house. If he went there then he'll—" I can hear some noise in the background and he takes a deep breath, "please fetch me. Let's find him together. I'm outside your old h-house. Ngyakucela..."

"Stand there. I'm on my way."

Mutual Desires : Forty-seven

Nqobizitha

Nhlakanipho wasn't available at Lwandle's house, only because Lwandle himself wasn't at home, but his struggling mother told us that he's close with Sandile Nala. I can't say I'm surprised, young boys around here are easily influenced by men like Lwandle – who glamorize crime and make it seem like it is the only option to a better future. Siya is quiet beside me, looking out the window, with his arms folded to his chest. We're driving to Sandile's. "Have you tried his cellphone?" I ask him.

"He left it at—home," his voice cracks. "I told you this."

Well, it's kinda hard to concentrate on anything else with the issue at hand. He may've told me but I don't remember. "About three more minutes and then we'll get there," I glance at him.

"I just hope he hasn't done anything stupid!" He's never looked so emotional, I've never seen him like this – with his puffy eyes and swollen lips from all that lip biting. "You guys just wrote your final prelim paper yesterday. We're so close, Nqobizitha, so close that I can taste the freedom. Why would he undo all that?"

"He has a lot of responsibility as the oldest kid in the house," I remind him regretfully. It's not fair that Nhlakanipho should have all this weight on his shoulders but Gogo is old, all the responsibility lies with him, as the man of the house, young as he is. It's his duty to play the role of a parent that his sisters and their baby daddies never bothered to assume. It's sad. I've seen him struggling with the most basic things, I've seen him bend over backwards to make sure that his siblings are safe and happy.

"Thandolwenkosi looks really drunk in that video. Or maybe drugged. She was unresponsive and I don't know, it's hard to blame her here. All those boys knew what they were doing, this qualifies as rape."

"I thought so too."

Siya showed me the video, reluctantly, so that I could see for myself just what the issue was. I'm not going to lie, I hadn't expected that it would be this bad. In the video, a room is revealed – where a party was clearly going on – and there has to be about eight if not nine boys inside with a barely conscious Thandolwenkosi on a mattress, half-naked. One of the guys kisses her and she returns the kiss but she's not in the right headspace, it's easy to see. The guy has sex with her and then another one and another

one – until all of them are satiated. Lwandle can be heard telling them to not be rough on her but that’s just about it. This underage girl, his supposed girlfriend, and he did nothing to protect her.

The dogs are barking viciously as we near the Nala’s humble home – at least they have a barbed gate. The headlights show a half-naked Nhlakanipho chugging a bloody t-shirt at a direction away from the front gates and that causes the dogs to run after it. His left hand is red with blood and it isn’t hard to tell that he probably cut himself with the barbed wire. Siya is already rushing outside as Nhlakanipho turns his attention the where the light is.

I quickly do the same, leaving the car running. Siya is hugging him tightly and it’s strange to hear him cry, I’ve never heard him do it before. “Bafo,” I say when I’m within earshot, “are you crazy? We’ve been worried sick about you. Whatever you’re thinking, don’t do it. It’s not worth it.”

“No, no!” he pushes Siyabonga away from him and turns his attention back to the house that now has the lights on. “Nine boys, nine of them! Yet none of them stopped to think that what they were doing is wrong. Lwandle – what was she doing with him? I warned him to stay away from sister, he agreed, and then turned on his word. I’m going to kill everyone of them slowly, Nqobizitha. I don’t care, bayofana namapentshisi apicikile meng’qeda ngabo. No one messes with my family and gets away with it. Okhokho bangavuka beme ngama khanda!”

“Y-You see what I mean,” Siya looks at me with tears in his eyes, “he doesn’t think. The only thing he wants is revenge – and I want it too. But not this way, jail is the solution. They’ve sent out the video, it will be easier to get them prosecuted. We have all the—proof. Please, b-baby, ungayenzi lento. Don’t ruin your future like this, your siblings need you, Gogo does too, I also do. Let’s go back home and I promise you that we’ll go to the police station first thing in the morning. We can even do it now if that’s what you prefer but please—”

Mam’ Sinqobile shows up, a ragged nightgown around her, looking confused and fearful. “Bafana bami kodwa yini ebusuku kangaka ningithusa?”

“Siyaxolisa, Mah,” I bow my head, giving her a reassuring smile, “My best friend here is drunk and lost his way. Ungathuki, sesiyahamba.”

“Ngenelela, Msinidisi...what is it with you children and alcohol? Do you know that you’re ruining your lives, your future. Take it from me – disrespecting your parents is not the way. My son is not home at the moment, at this time of the night. C-Can you imagine that?” she snuffles, about to cry clearly, and I

get the urge to comfort her but I've never really interacted with this woman. "Maybe you'll meet him on your way back home. Sandile Nala. Tell him to come home – please."

"As you've told us, Mah." I nod my head. "Nhlakanipho let's go back home. Tomorrow we will do what is right, the law will protect her."

Nhlakanipho doesn't budge, looking at me, Siya keeps tugging on his arm. I think he's sizing me up, we've never been seriously physical with each other – just the usual stick fighting that boys around here engage in. I don't budge too, arching my brow in question. We stand still for so long, looking at each other, until finally, he concedes with a sigh. "I'm spending the night at home, my home."

"No problem," I say, shifting my attention to Siyabonga, "you're going to drive him."

He nods like it should be obvious, it should. "I'll take care of your hand. Let's go."

I look over my shoulder when Siya calls my name.

"Thank you," I can see a hint of a smile, his puffy eyes relieved, "you're a good friend."

"He's not my friend, he's my brother."

I've bathed and am out of the house before 07:00am. Arriving at Gogo MaMzimela's home happens quicker than I anticipated. The sun is already out and scorching around this time of the day believe it or not. My eyes find Mnelisi carrying a bathing basin, headed for Nhlakanipho's house. "Yah, Mnelisi." I greet, clapping his back. "Your brother in there?"

"Yebo, bhuti." His voice is getting deeper, he's growing. "I was taking his water to him."

"I'll do it," I attempt to grab the basin from him but he steps back and shakes his head.

“Its okay, I don’t want him to kill me for giving my brother a tedious job when I’m here. You can assist me by opening the door.”

I knock once and then open the door. Nhlakanipho is in his boxers, and making the bed, Siya is already dressed. He smiles when he spots me, and it freaks me out a little – for so long, he’s been having this little attitude and now we’re good all of a sudden. “Bafwethu, how did you sleep?”

“Is that a trick question?” Siya, obviously, asks the question. Nhlakanipho is miserable.

Mnelisi leaves as I occupy one of the chairs. Nhlakanipho baths quickly, and then we’re heading for umxhaso where Gogo and the kids are. She has a smile on her face, and is chiding Milisuthando for dirtying herself with porridge. They’ve bathed already and she’s messed up her dress. We claim the long bench as Nhlakanipho asks Gogo for Thandolwenkosi. She appears from one of the rooms, looking unperturbed at all, and I wonder if she’s seen the video yet.

“Salukazi sami, sinenkinga la,” Nhlakanipho starts, rubbing his face before focusing his attention on his sister, “Lengane uThandolwenkosi ubenebhadi elimehlele, angazi noma usuyazi... (Thandolwenkosi had something bad befall her and I don’t know if you know about it yet).”

Gogo’s smile disappears a little, she adjusts Kuhlekimi in her arms and looks at Thandolwenkosi in question. “Ungasho ukuth ulwe nengane ka MaMbonani futhi, Thando. Awusho, nibangani engaka? (Don’t tell me you’ve been fighting MaMbonani’s daughter again. What is it that you’re fighting for anyway?)”

“Cha, Gogo. Angazi lutho mina. (No, Gogo. I know nothing.” Thandolwenkosi glares, folding her arms to her chest.

This response blindsides me, I thought she’d come clean and tell Gogo about what happened to her at the party. Yet here she is, looking so calm, like there isn’t a video of her being raped by those men circulating around. Why hasn’t she told Nhlakanipho about this? He’s her brother, maybe he would’ve gone about doing things the wrong way, but he would’ve tried to protect her. Or Chris, she’s really good friends with Chris. I wonder if he even knows about this. *You blocked him*, my mind reminds me. I should probably unblock him, he’s suffered enough – and I’m the furthest thing from perfect. There’s a lot of shit I did to hurt him – unintentionally...like he also claims.

“Are you sure about what you’re saying?” Nhlakanipho asks, voice stern, eyes boring into her.

“I, um...” we watch her squirm and look at her hands, “yebo, bhuti. I don’t know what this is about. Did I do something wrong?”

“Where were you last night?”

Silence.

Gogo looks at her, eyes small and curious, and then shifts her attention back to Nhlakanipho. “She was here, at home, with us. I didn’t hear her attempting to sneak out like she usually does. You’re worrying me, mfana wami, kwenzenjani? What is this bad thing that happened to your sister? She came home in the morning four days ago, looking like a mess and reeking of alcohol. She went and collapsed on the bed, only waking up later to eat and then go out again.”

“Baby, don’t!” Siya grips Nhlakanipho’s arm who looked ready to launch himself on his sister. Thandolwenkosi is already standing, looking frightened in a corner, fidgeting with the ends of her old shirt. “She’s the victim in all this, I need you to remember that.”

“Ngangimkhuza njalo, Siyabonga. Akakhuzeki lo, buka manje lamanyala enzekile!” He gets up and paces around, hands on his waist.

The kids are getting scared, Gogo must see it because she instructs Mnelisi to take them to the rondavel. Nhlakanipho’s closing in on Thandolwenkosi and I get up, gripping his arm. “Listen to Siyabonga, Nhlakanipho. She messed up, yes, but she’s just a kid. It’s a bit unfair to expect maturity from her at such a young age. Lwandle was at fault here, for taking advantage of her inexperience and vulnerability.”

“They f-forced themselves on her,” Nhlakanipho looks at Gogo, “one of those—boys sent me a video, Salukazi sami. Ngathi ubedakiwe lo, emanzi te, bezenzela phezu kwakhe. (She was completely wasted, as they helped themselves to her). I don’t want you to see this video, Gogo, but you’re going to hear about this eventually and I cannot hide it from you. Your granddaughter had about nine men helping themselves to her comatose body.”

“Ingane yengane yami?” I watch Gogo’s face go through several emotions in mere seconds, she gets up shakily and Siyabonga quickly grabs the baby from her. “Thandolwenkosi?” she looks at her granddaughter – a tense second goes by and then it starts. Her wails are loud and heart-wrenching. Nhlakanipho is groaning into his hands and I’m not sure who to offer comfort to first, my feet carry me to Gogo. She clings to me as her cries grow louder. “Kodwa yini? Sonephi? L-Look at this shame you’ve brought to our family, Thando. Why don’t you ever listen? Is this true?”

Thandolwenkosi bites her bottom lip, folding her arms. “I don’t know, Gogo. I don’t remember anything.”

“What do you mean you don’t remember?” Gogo snuffles, giving her disappointed expression. “You’re no longer a child, you forfeited that right when you started behaving like the woman of this house – coming in and going out as you please. Nine boys sleep with you and you’re telling me that you felt nothing at all? No burn or irritation? What are you saying?”

“I-I don’t remember!” Thandolwenkosi is getting teary eyed. “I just remember drinking with them and some of my girl friends. The next thing I remember is Lwandle driving me back here in the morning.”

“Maybe they really did drug her,” Siya chimes in, Kuhlekimi is sleeping in his arms – far away from the troubles that have just befallen her family. “Different drugs like GHB and Rohypnol are popular date rape drugs. Both give you amnesia so you can’t really remember the details of the assault. What if they slipped something in her drink?”

“If we take her to the hospital now, will they be able to detect it?” I ask.

“Tests can be conducted until up to 72 hours,” he replies.

“Too late then, even if that were true then doctors won’t be able to detect it now.” Maybe I am imagining the relief found in her voice. It’s still amazing how she doesn’t look at all affected by this. I’m not sure what is happening here. “I’ll stay home from now on, bhuti. I-I’m sorry for disappointing you.”

Nhlakanipho sighs, rubbing his forehead. “I would’ve liked to deal with every one of those animals myself, Salukazi sami. Nqobizitha and Siyabonga had to remind me of what’s important. Less than three months from now I will be in Johannesburg with Siyabonga, working hard at the university to better all

our lives. The right thing to do is to go to the police station. You'll have to excuse us and Thandolwenkosi, its important that she come with us to open a rape case."

Gogo is still recovering, but she nods her head as Siyabonga takes the baby to the bedroom.

Thandolwenkosi is taken away from us as soon as we're at the police station. The attention was on us as soon as we'd entered. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that some of these people here have seen that video. There were hushed whispers and giggles, people pointing fingers, and their eyes accusing. I feel sorry for Nhlakanipho who I've had to hold back quite a few times from going to wreak havoc on these nosy people. We're sitting at the bench, Siya so close to Nhlakanipho that not an inch is separating them – his discreet manner of silent support.

I'm a little surprised when Chris appears. He's carrying a plastic bag and gives us a small smile as he edges closer. "I brought some snacks," he stands in front of us, "I heard these things can take a while."

"Thank you," Siya grabs the plastic bag from him, "Nhlakanipho, here's some water."

My best friend merely adjusts himself so that his head is touching the wall behind him. He closes his eyes, jaw clenching from the anger that he is clearly concealing. I notice his temple throbbing, his hands clenched into fists. Chris comes to sit beside me but leaves some space between us. "Hey," he greets me.

"Chris..."

His face falls, he blinks his eyes and clears his throat. "Where is your brother?"

"Taking care of our mother."

It goes silent between us after that – an awkward tension forming between us. I get the urge to pull Chris closer so I do, with my hand in between his thighs. He freezes and then slowly relaxes as I wrap an arm around his shoulders. "Is this safe?" he asks me.

“I don’t give a shit.”

It feels like we sit for hours, waiting for Thandolwenkosi to come back and update us. She’s wet with tears by the time she comes back. Nhlakanipho stands up too quickly, looking at the policewoman with her. “MaDlodlo, wakhala umntaka’Mah kwenzenjani? (Why is she crying?)”

“We had to ask her some tough questions, Mzimela. Important questions that your sister will be asked on the day of trial.”

“What questions when we showed you the video?”

She shakes her head, “You’ll have to excuse me. Iyophinde ibonane.”

“Babes...” Chris hugs her, she returns it and clings to him. Before he left, they’d grown to be really good friends. “You’re okay, you’re okay.”

“They asked me why I walked into a room with so many boys, she asked me what it was I expecting to happen. I told her that it wasn’t just me, the last thing I remember Avethandwa and Oyintando were there with us. I really don’t remember much.”

“Typical cop shop behaviour – the victim is always to blame,” Siya says with a huff. “Ngyaxolisa, Thando. I think we should go to the hospital as well, just to confirm if they won’t be able to detect any drugs in your system - and testing.”

She nods her head, holding onto Chris’ hand as we go out.

I offer to escort Chris home after we’re done at the hospital. Well, we were turned away actually – the queue was too long and I guess testing a rape victim for potential drug and health issues in their system doesn’t take first necessity. Nhlakanipho is pissed off, damning every deity in the world, and Siya keeps trying to calm him down. Thandolwenkosi has become quiet, the nonchalant expression gone, replaced with what looks like embarrassment and shame. People seem to be mocking her with their eyes, with their silent whispers and pointed fingers.

“I’ll call you, bafo.” I tell Nhlakanipho just before he can drive off in his bakkie. “Stay strong.”

“Nqobizitha, I love you.”

We rarely say this to each other. I move from my car to go and give him a supportive hug. “You’re my brother, Mzimela. I’m always here for you, through thick and thin. Don’t ever think you’re alone. We’ll go through this together, the law will take its course – we’re going to make sure of that.”

“It won’t be better than the way I would’ve dealt with those boys,” he’s joking but delivers it in his deadpan voice, or maybe he’s serious, his eyes are sadistic. “Unfortunately, there’s too much at risk. I can’t risk it all when I have my whole life ahead in front of me – with him,” his suddenly soft eyes point to Siyabonga who is in the car, talking to Thandolwenkosi. “And my family. The first one to matriculate and go to university, my dead mother will be so proud.”

“She may be gone...but she lives here, with you,” I pat his chest. “Siyokhuluma, Dondo ka Mlimandlela.”

“Mashiya Amahle,” he bows his head and then gets in the car.

Chris is waiting for me outside my car. Unlocking it, I grip his hand when he tries to get the door himself. I always did this. It’s not going to suddenly change. He looks at me with wide eyes as I get his door for him, his scent is too tempting as I help him with his seatbelt. We make eye contact, I can feel how hard he’s breathing through his rapid exhales. “Thank you,” he smiles.

Something nervous twists my belly. I kiss his forehead and then close the door, going to the other side of the car. The radio is on – Ukhozi fm. I’m not really listening to it and tell Chris to switch the channel or play his music if he wants to. He doesn’t. I don’t bother trying to make small talk. I notice that he’s sitting as if he doesn’t want to take up too much space. He’s looking anywhere but me and has his phone in his hand. It lights up with a message. He looks at it and sighs.

Something nasty punches my belly as all the possibilities travel to my brain. “Who is that?”

He glances at me, big eyes searching, probably heard the attitude in my voice as well. I can’t help it, my grip tightens on the steering wheel. He clears his throat and licks his lips. “Mashudu.” His hands are

shaking as he lifts his phone to show me the message. I quickly steal a glance. Too many heart emojis that this guy's sent him. I arch my brow. "We met at a party," he whispers. "Never again."

"His constant messaging says otherwise. You're entertaining him?"

"No!" he shakes his head frantically, "I don't want to be rude and just ghost him. But we've only ever met once and never again, I promise you."

My unfounded jealousy recedes, my heart settling. "I shouldn't have been so forceful, it's not like we're still together. Ngyaxolisa."

His eyes are on me but I can't bring myself to look at him. I can hear him move around, and from my peripheral view, see him shift his attention to the window, arms folded on his chest. Tshath' Ugodo plays some maskandi music. It's Mjikjelwa's 'Manginawe'.

Christophe

I am worried about Siyabonga lately, the way he seems to be under a lot of stress. It's this unfortunate incident that took place. Lwandle wasn't happy to learn that he and several of his friends have been charged with rape. The sad part is that the parents of these kids are defending their children, and there's an entire smear campaign against Thandolwenkosi.

What was she doing in a room full of boys to begin with?

Where have you ever seen a girl hanging out with the opposite gender? Lamanyala uwafunde ekhaya.

This girl is destroying the lives of boys with a bright future ahead of them. You can tell that she's used to this kind of thing for not having reported it in the first place.

Ujwayele, isende uyalithanda (she's used to this, she loves dick)

These are some of the things I've heard. In just a week since she reported this and its spread to the nearest villages that there's a 16 year old whore in Mbongolwane who slept with nine boys – their words not mine. It's so bad that Nhlakanipho has decided to move back home. The intimidation is getting worse, they slaughtered his chicken – thus killing his farming business. They've woken up to find faeces thrown in their yard. Thandolwenkosi is getting death threats. The police say they're investigating but say it's hard to pinpoint the perpetrators because many people have turned against the Mzimelas.

Everyone is against rape until their child is a suspect.

I've been visiting Gogo and the kids on a near daily basis to keep them company. She's losing weight, it's bad enough that she injects herself for her diabetes but now this? It's a miracle that she hasn't suffered a heart attack or something with the heavy stress that everyone is under. I feel for Nhlakanipho and Siyabonga. I feel deeply sorry for them because they're going to be writing their final exams soon and this is the last thing they need. How are they supposed to focus at school when this happening?

I feel for Thandolwenkosi. She spends her days trapped at home, the day she tried going to school, kids threw sand at her and called her isifebe. Because little whimpers and moans when you're getting raped while incapacitated mean that you were enjoying whatever was being done to you. I don't get how she's to blame in all this. Lwandle preyed on her from the beginning, he knew his plans with her. He used her. I hope justice is served in the end.

"Earth to Chris," that smooth drawl, it sends tingles down my spine. He's waving his hand at me, doing his best to draw me to the present. "You okay, man?"

I bite the inside of my cheek and nod my head.

"What the hell were you thinking so hard about?" a frown appears that only he can make look so sexy.

"Our friends," I blinks my eyes at him, "Siya wants to ask his parents for a little bit of money for a trip he's planning to Durban. He feels that Nhlakanipho needs a breather from it all."

"Tell him not to bother," Nqobizitha replies matter-of-factly, playing with the pen in his hand, "Nhlakanipho will not go anywhere – especially when his family is under threat."

“Maybe you can spend the nights there and look after everyone,” I suggest, “they need a breather. They’re too stressed – all of them.”

“We can try that but Nhlakanipho will still say no.”

I have a feeling that he’s right but I don’t want to dwell on it. I grab his notebook from him and check his answers to Question 2. I mark it and show him the results with a pleased smile. “Not bad, not bad at all.” He got four out of thirteen questions wrong. That’s nine out of thirteen. It wasn’t so bad. “See what happens when you give it your best shot.”

“I still get shit wrong?” he cocks an eyebrow.

“No, smartass,” I tease and throw a ball of paper at him, “you improve. This is four marks better than the first time you did it this morning.”

“Maybe you’re just a good teacher,” his eyes are on me, unmoving, unblinking, content.

What is this?

My belly has heavy elephants stomping around in there, I am trying to discourage my dick from reacting but it knows its owner. I clear my throat and look at the mess of papers and books on my table. I’m tutoring him again, preparing him for his final exams.

“You should eat more,” he says.

My eyes snap to him, searching. “You’re not my daddy,” I make a soft giggle.

“Oh yeah?” he’s getting up and coming to my side. I know this, I remember it. He’d do it when he either wanted to fuck me into calling him daddy or tickling me until I gave in. I’m already on my feet, making a dash for it but he captures me in two steps and folds his arms around me, before throwing me on the bed like I weigh nothing and then pinning me there while tickling me.

I burst into uncontrollable laughter as I try to squirm away from him. But he grips my hips and keeps me there and I can feel his sizable length against my belly. My breath quickens as I shift around trying to get away, only to brush into him. A moan involuntarily leaves my parted lips. "P-Please stop," I beg, breathless, my eyes squinted.

"Say please Daddy,"

I don't want to but I might fart or release my pee with his vicious tickling. "Please..." another giggle escapes my lips, "D-Daddy, please."

He finally grants me mercy but does not tear himself away from me – and seems overly confident with crushing me. I'm trying to regulate my breathing but it literally feels like he's snatching it out of my body with his ardent gaze. One of his hands has my wrists bound above my head, his other one gripping my hip. I try to maneuver my way out of this hold but only result in brushing my dick against his thigh. He groans as I lick my lips.

"Don't bite your lip," his eyes shift from my lips to my eyes. "I don't want to..." he trails off while I wait for him to finish but he never does.

I lean into his touch as he caresses my cheek.

"Bambi."

My eyes snap open, I don't know when I'd closed them. He's already pulling away and I notice him adjust his boner. It's no use, it's still so visible. It would be so easy to reach out and get on my knees, to help him with it. I don't. I fold my legs to my chest and wrap my arms around them as I try to shake off the feeling of awkwardness. "M-Maybe you should work on Question 3," I croak.

He bows dramatically but regards me with a soft smile as he rises. "Your highness..."

Nqobizitha

Nhlakanipho had to spend the night at Bab' Shandu's last night. He had no choice but to because Kuhlekimi had bad diarrhoea out of nowhere. Gogo told him that it would be easier to do that because the Shandus are closer to Mbongolwane hospital, which means that their chances of getting help early would be better. He had reluctantly agreed and though I offered to spend the night with Gogo and the kids, he said it was unnecessary because his uncle had decided that he would be spending the night there.

The one night that he spends away and his ancestors turn their backs on him...

They've killed my best friend, my brother, and I don't think he will ever be able to recover from this. I watch Siyabonga collapse on the ground with him – debris all around us, symbolizing the hell that they've imprisoned him to. Gogo MaMzimela is...no more. Thandolwenkosi's naked body has been covered with a lightly burnt sheet in order to give her a semblance of dignity. The smaller ones are still in the RDP house – their charred bodies stuck together like some sort of burnt paste.

I don't think I'll ever be able to get the image out of my mind. My best friend's cries slice deeper into my heart. He's never cried before, not like this, even when life spat in his face and told him that he'd never make it. He always had a reason to hold on because of his family. A family that is no more. I watch him cling tightly to Siyabonga, features growing lifeless by the second – like a man with nothing else to live for. Its dangerous when a man feels like this, because he's got nothing to lose, but Siya is all he has left in this case. Siya and Kuhlekimi in hospital.

If he's not going to live for himself then at least them. Kuhlekimi will need him now more than ever. My eyes travel to the broken windows from where the bullets were flying in. The yard is soiled with blood. Blood of the innocent. My throat constricts again, as I think back to the bloody message that was left on Nhlakanipho's door. Lwandle and his cronies are not done. *Nine down, one more to go*, their message had said. This is probably the last thing on Nhlakanipho's mind, but we have to protect him, to shield him. He's had to use his fists all his life – and the one time he doesn't, the one time that he decides to be good, life shows him why its only ever favoured bad people.

Mutual Desires : Forty-eight

Nqobizitha

Getting Nhlakanipho to leave the hospital after the tragedy that took place in the morning was like pouring water in a broken bucket and expecting it to fill up – impossible beyond measure. One of the male nurses got some nasty punches, trying to get him to leave the hospital. It's like he's damned everything and everyone to hell. He has no fucks left to give, screw the consequences. This is how we found ourselves spending the night on uncomfortable chairs in Mbongolwane, looking after his young niece.

The forensics team took their time coming to collect the bodies, as did the police – who clearly don't know how to do their jobs right. The community seemed sorry all of a sudden, showing their remorseful faces, wanting to help where they could. I think the only reason they were able to is because Nhlakanipho wasn't in his right state of mind, this is not something you get over. The pain of not only losing his grandmother but his young siblings, aged between 2 – 16. It's not easy.

I can still see Milisuthando outside the house, near the tap, playing with water and eating mud – she always did love it. I can see Nomzamo crying her lungs out about having to shave her entire hair off. My mind won't let go off how Mbalenhle and Noxolo would always be fighting about their clothes. Sqalosethu with his respectfulness. Kuhlekonke and holding her baby sister. Mnelisi with his deep voice and mischievousness. Thandolwenkosi's brains and stubborn nature. I can see Gogo on icansi, gossiping with MaBiyela about one thing or the other.

I'll never get to experience this again.

My heart is heavy but I can't imagine the hell my best friend, my brother, is going through. His eyes are red, he hasn't slept at all. I watch him listen to one of the nurses helping him with Kuhlekimi, the little one has miraculously recovered from her diarrhoea and it's safe to take her home. The question is which home? The only home he's ever known is gone – no more. His family was his home, with them gone, I don't know for sure what will happen.

“Can you help me with this?” his emotionless voice captures my attention, he wants the nurse to assist him with the baby thing that mothers tie around themselves to secure the baby. The nurse giggles and nods okay, showing him where the legs of the baby should go and where the arms are supposed to be as well. “Thank you,” he tells her, grabbing the baby bag.

"Its my pleasure," she gives him a small smile.

He doesn't return it, and walks past Siyabonga and then me. The talkative boy with hazel eyes looks at me with worry, I shake my head, we can't expect him to be okay. The wound is fresh, just yesterday he found he found his entire family massacred so ruthlessly. The police are as useless as they were when Thandolwenkosi went to report her rape case. There's talks about investigations but I have a feeling that nothing fruitful will come of it. The justice system wasn't designed to protect the victims, it protects the criminals more than it does the people who suffer at their hands. It's so fucking useless.

"Just give him time," Chris murmurs as we walk out with Siyabonga, "this is a hard time for him. I don't think he'll ever recover from this. It's too much trauma, he just lost his entire family."

"I—you're right," Siyabonga sighs, we're outside and the two hug, "I'll...I don't know what we're going to do. His older siblings are scared to come here in case something happens – or maybe they're just bullshiting us. They've never cared, Chris, from the beginning they didn't care."

His tears on the verge of spilling, I don't know how much more of the sorrow I can take without falling into a deep depression. He's clinging to Chris now, crying his lungs out. Nhlakanipho is in his bakkie, in the passenger seat, with his head thrown back and eyes closed. The anguish is written in his twitching eyelids, in the way that he's sitting – they've really killed him. "I'll call you," Chris gives him another suffocating hug. "I love you, Siya."

"You're my best friend," Siya returns. "I'll see you around."

I give him a small smile and then throw Nhlakanipho's keys at him. I watch the bakkie disappear before turning my attention to Chris. He was crying, like Siyabonga, and he's not okay. I get his door for him and then help him with his seatbelt. I go to the driver's side and get in. The silence is depressing, and I silently thank him as he turns the radio on. I don't think I can spend the day alone in that rented room today so I follow him to his father's house.

"How is he?" is the first question Zenande asks as soon as we make our presence known.

"Bad," I clear my throat, putting my hands in my pockets, "really bad. I've never seen him look so lifeless, hollow. I'm afraid to find out what they've awakened in him."

“A cold-blooded killer,” she says as the baby in her arms starts whimpering, “oh...oh, she’s heard your voice and you know she has this big crush on you.” Zenande chuckles.

I don’t find her joke funny, people joking about adults being married to young children makes me uncomfortable. I don’t know, maybe it has to do with how Ntombikayise would call me ‘umkhwenyana’ as a young boy. I don’t words like ‘usekhulile’ even when they’re said innocently, they make me...weird. “Don’t say that,” I tell her, grabbing her baby from her. The little Lisakhanya settles almost immediately and I shake my head at the strangeness of it all. “Nothing’s cute about this kind of joking around – Lisakhanya is just a baby. She doesn’t have a crush on me.”

“Calm down, Tarzan.” Zenande rolls her eyes and stands up, “Just watch after her while I go to the kitchen. I’ll prepare you and my brother something to eat.” She kisses Chris’ forehead and then sashays out of the living room.

I look around Bab’ Xulu’s house a second and then occupy the couch next to Chris. One of my arms folds around him, and I pull him closer, he lays his head on my shoulder. “I wish this was some kind of sick dream that we’d all wake up from. I didn’t even get the chance to buy Milisuthando the sweets that she was asking for.”

“They all didn’t get a chance to lots of things,” I say, clearing my throat off the lumps forming there, “there’s so much they had ahead of them. Maybe I should ask MaKhathide about enquiring with her connections in the police station about why Thandolwenkosi’s case was never taken seriously to begin with. Had those bastards been behind bars, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“I—” he’s momentarily interrupted by Lisakhanya’s soft gargling sound and her squeamish movements. We both look at each other and chuckle, it feels good to do so – for just that second. “She really loves you and I’m jealous. I’m her uncle.”

“I’m also her uncle,” I tell him, “around here everyone is your uncle.”

“Jabulani hasn’t come to see her. Can you imagine that? She’s about three weeks old and some days yet not once has he come around here to see his own baby.”

“What’s new, Chris?” I ask with a sigh, noticing just how cozy this seems. Chris’ hand is on my thigh, rubbing up and down gently. I don’t think he’s noticing what he’s doing but part of me wants him to stop. I don’t want to gain a damn boner while carrying an infant. “These are black family setups. Most black people come from single-parent households. I don’t think Zenande even cares that Jabulani is not around. She looks like she’s enjoying motherhood.”

“Mommy said so too, but I’d never want a baby just to raise it alone.”

“Lucky for you, it’s all in your control – mostly. Women usually don’t have the liberty of deciding that, the baby daddy does a Usain Bolt and she has no choice but to raise the baby on her own.”

He turns his head to look at me, and smiles – his eyes are puffy and beady, face a little drained of colour and exhaustion written all over his face. He’s a beautiful mess. I can’t be blamed as I lean forward to press a kiss to his forehead. He blinks with surprise in his eyes but smiles again, too damn wide. “Look at you, playing happy family with my daughter!” Zenande whirls in, so loud that Chris and I are startled.

“Don’t say that,” his eyes dart between me and Zenande, as he makes a nervous giggle, “Nqobizitha doesn’t see me like that. Not anymore.”

“I didn’t say that he sees you like that, just that you’re playing happy family,” she cocks her brows and appears amused. “Anyway, I hope you don’t mind eating chicken curry and rice.”

“As long as its not grilled meat,” I tell her, my stomach churning nastily. I’ve tried to get the images out of my mind but they’re still there and the smell of burning meat also. It will be a long time before I get over what I saw yesterday. “I’d prefer if I just ate soup and rice to be quite honest with you.”

“You all need to see some therapists who will magically give you amnesia or something. Angeke phela, you’re kids, you were not supposed to see that tragedy.”

“Imagine being Nhlakanipho – he has to live with it.”

“Um...some of y-your boxers are still in the third drawer,” he points with his hand and shifts his eyes back to me. “I...um, you just never packed all of your things. Not that I mind, I don’t. My room is yours as well...and I’m just going to shut up now.”

I chuckle silently and retrieve my underwear as instructed and then slide them on from under my towel before hanging it on the chair. We get beneath the covers and Chris switches the light off. He’s tense, making himself as small as possible in bed. It’s a little ridiculous, I wrap my arm around him and pull him closer. He freezes a second, and then whirls around to face me. Our faces are close, breaths touching each other so intimately. Through the moon reflecting his face, I can see him blinking back at me. “Do you think you’ll be able to sleep?”

“No,” I whisper, shaking my head, “I already have a hard time with that.”

“Zenny told me you’re doing better. Before you moved out, you were trying to sleep on your own.”

That was a weird time. A really weird time. Zenande...she cares like her brother. It may not seem like it but she does – in her own weird way. She wouldn’t be awkward about us sharing the same bed in the mornings. Most times I’d find the house empty, a bowl of food in the microwave waiting for me, and a note on the table – reminding me to lock the house before I left. Her hospitality was the best. “I was, it’s working well for me. The light may be on but I’m alone and sleeping.”

“Okay...” I can detect a question in that ‘okay’.

“No,” I sigh, rolling my eyes, “I wasn’t fucking your sister.”

“I didn’t ask,” he’s catching a little attitude with me.

“Your silence did,” I reply, gripping his chin, “have a great night, Bambi.”

We sleep shortly after, but I must wake up less than thirty minutes later. Their burnt bodies haunt me, the smell of roasting flesh so thick. My stomach twists viciously but the bile doesn’t rise up. I put my palms to my eyes and rub frantically as if it will rid me of the images.

“Nqobizitha...Nqoba?” someone shakes my arm persistently.

When I remove my hands from my eyes, Bambi eyes are the first thing I am met with. “What is it?” my voice is hoarse, I am parched and need some water.

Chris knows me better than most people. I give him a grateful smile as he gives me a glass of water. “Remember I’d have to leave the bed when you’d start thrashing on it? Then I’d greet you with water once you were a semblance of yourself.”

I remember...I remember a lot of things.

“Ngyabonga.”

“It’s a pleasure. Were you dreaming about Ntombikayise?”

I shake my head. “Them.”

“Oh...” he clears his throat and straddles me. “I’m glad I didn’t have to see the smaller ones’ bodies. I wouldn’t have been able to bear it.”

He waits for me to reply, truth is I don’t want to talk. I just want the images out of my head, to forget – even for a little while. Don’t ask me what I’m thinking as I grip his chin to pull his face close. His eyes widen and then soon, my lips are on his. A tense second, then he wraps his arms behind my neck and pulls me closer. I flip him so that he’s under me and grip his hips in a bruising hold, keeping him in place. My lips hover above his as I adjust myself so that my dick is pressing to his. His back arches as he tries to thrust up, moaning, eyes widening as his pupils dilate.

I lean down to kiss him, letting him control the kiss a second while tearing off his underwear. As soon as that is done, I wrench my mouth from his sweet lips and flip him on his stomach. One of my hands pins him down to get him to stop moving around so much, I remove my boxers, and then kiss down his back. My dick is on his ass, tracing down his crack. I lick my lips and...I can’t do this. I’m pulling back and then collapsing beside him. He shifts, curious finding me – soft and disappointed. “Did I do—something wrong?”

And this is always Chris lately, assuming that any small issue is his fault, that he's the one who needs to change and make amends. I take a deep breath and shake my head. "Cha, Dali...it's me. Its just – lately, I've been learning some things. Dr. Langa doesn't think its advisable for me to have sex yet. He calls it my coping mechanism. He's right. I know myself. If I take you now, with these images in my mind, I'll lose control and hurt you. If I take you now, you'll be stuck in bed the whole of tomorrow."

There's fear this time, and he looks trapped in the past. "I see...thank you for telling me. I mean I've known about your sex addiction for a while. I was at fault for not denying you."

"I'm irresistible, Bambi."

His eyes light up, his smile broadens. "That you are. So what do you do when you're frustrated? What did Dr. Langa suggest you do?"

Some of my art equipment is still somewhere here. I find it on the last drawer. "Let me show you," I say, my pencil and sketchbook in hand. "Be my model, Bambi." He nods his head, too enthusiastically, and drops the sheet from around his body. I turn the light on, marvelling at his beautiful body.

"How do you want me?"

"On your back, with your thighs splayed wide open – I want you to reveal yourself to me."

He swallows. "Is that an appropriate sketch?"

"I don't care."

A nod. He gets into position, I spend most of the night sketching him, until we're interrupted by my cellphone. Its 03:08am. I know who's calling, I feel it in my blood. Chris gives me a worried look as he hands over my phone to me. "Bafo," I say.

"Ukuphi?"

“Chris’ house.”

“Asihlangane, ndoda. I’ll be there in twenty.” He hangs up.

“What did he want?” Chris looks at me.

“To meet up.”

“At three?” he shakes his head, gripping my arm. “Please don’t go out there. Uyamazi uNhlakanipho, he probably wants to get his revenge on those kids and I’m not against it but he needs to do it the legal way. If you go out there and he asks you to—”

“He’s my brother, I’d have to help him. Besides, the law failed him. What would you have him do, Chris? He just lost his family, his whole world. Even after we went to the cops, they were still failed. Is it wrong for him to seek justice?”

“No, it’s not!” His voice raises, the tug on my arm becoming more forceful. “I just – if it’s something shady, promise me you’re going to discourage him. I don’t want anything to happen to you. Maybe you’ve depleted your feelings for me but I still love you. I don’t want to lose you. We don’t even have to get back together, just don’t do anything stupid that will make me lose you forever.”

“Hey,” I cradle his cheeks, forcing eye contact, “I’m right here – with you. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good. Let’s just go back to sleep.”

He’s not understanding me. “I’m here, Bambi...” I press my hand to his heart, “How could I ever leave you? Right now, my brother needs me but I’m always with you... even when we were apart.”

“I-I don’t like this, Nqobizitha. Does Siya know about this? I bet he doesn’t, let me call him and find out. Let me—”

“You’re going to do no such thing!” I grab his phone from him and leave the bed. He leaves it as well, jumps up trying to get it back but he’s too short. He’s still struggling with me as I attempt to put on my clothes. I don’t want to do this but he forces my hand. Throwing the phone on the bed, I wrap an arm around his waist and move with him struggling in my arms. As soon as I have him out of his room, I turn the lock and focus on getting dressed. He starts banging on the door, screaming and begging for me to open, I don’t. Dressed, I grab my phone and make my escape through his window.

The front door opens as I’m driving out of the gate. Nhlakanipho is in his car, he must be a mind-reader because he gets the silent message to follow me. We park our cars a distance away from Chris’ house. In the middle of nowhere really, we’ve driven quite far away from Mbongolwane. “Bafo,” I eye him up and down. There are bags under his eyes, he’s not sleeping.

“I found this,” he throws me a dagga-design keychain, “it belongs to that boy Lwandle. I found it on the morning that I found my family slaughtered like animals. What do you think should happen, Bafo? I lose in every angle. I saw their threat, they’re coming for me. I’d like to see them try – but I’m no coward. I don’t have time to wait around for them to come to me. I want to do them like they did my family. I need your help.”

“You can’t go after innocent people, Nhlaka.” My eyes widen. “Its impractical. They have nothing to do with this. Go after Lwandle and his squad. Kill them all,” the words tumble out of my mouth. I can’t believe that I’m condoning this but if it were me, with my family, I’d do the same. “I’ll even help you – as long as innocent blood isn’t shed.”

He’s silent for a long time, then storms away from me. I watch him futilely kick the sand and punch the nearest tree. He collapses on the ground, screaming his lungs out. Again, the cries that resemble a wounded or dying animal – loud and wretched. I close in on him and wrap my arms around him, allow him to release all the pain. He’ll never be completely rid of it, it will always be there.

“I’m so sorry, mfwethu. Nxese, Mzimela. Nxese, Dondo ka Mlimandlela.”

“They will not get away with this – all of them. They will feel my wrath, everyone one of them right to the ants that scatter in their homes.” The lifelessness... its terrifying. What does... surely he doesn’t mean—

“Nhlakanipho, you’re going to spare the innocent. Tell me that.”

“Who are the innocent?” his eyes are cold, the more he speaks, the more he seems set in his resolve. He stands up, and dusts himself. “Before they attacked my family, do you think they stopped to think about the innocent? Or did they have their minds set on eliminating all the evidence, all their problems. Have you not heard? Strike an enemy once and for all. Let him cease to exist as a tribe or he will live to fly in your throat again.”

“Don’t reason like Shaka, look at his demise...” he’s quoting from a paragraph we read back in Grade 10. It stuck with him, and now with all this hate within him...I think I am about to witness him bring it to life. “You’re not a killer, Nhlakanipho. You don’t shed innocent blood.”

“Are you going to help me or not?”

“What would Siyabonga say?” I ask him, shaking his shoulders, hoping to get him to snap out of it. “I’ve never shed blood before but I’m willing to avenge uGogo and the kids’ lives. They were my own family. Just don’t make the mistake of killing innocent people in all of this...”

“I have the weapons with me. Let’s go, your brother is waiting for us outside Sandile Nala’s house.”

My brother... surprise morphs my face but I do as he says. I’m not going to lie, something nasty twists my stomach as I follow behind his bakkie to Sandile's house. It feels like we’ve reached their house too soon. We’ve parked the cars a distance away to not bring the attention to ourselves. Nhlakanipho whistles a few times before an image appears from the shadows. My brother is wearing all black, and black gloves. He and Nhlakanipho fist-bump each other. His eyes turn to me, he gives me a once over. “Bafo, you should’ve kept my brother out of this. He’s not a killer, look at him.”

“Damn right, he’s not.” Sbanisezwe appears from nowhere. “As soon as we get this boy, I don’t want him involved in other shit that happens after.” He starts bouncing up and down like a child, like a man preparing for the best night of his life. “Let’s do this.”

“When did you get here?”

“This evening,” he says and looks around before grabbing something from the satchel that was on his back, it’s a barbed wire cutter. “Are you sure the dogs are napping?”

“You saw them run after the meat like their lives depended on it – its unfortunate that you thought to kill them too.” Sqalosenkosi whispers, working with Sbani. I stand beside Nhlakanipho, knowing what’s happening but unable to fully process it. Soon, they quietly push down the fence and we sneak inside, to an open window. Its spring, people sleep with windows slightly open around this time of the year. Nhlakanipho offers to fetch Sandile, they’ve taken the time to find out which room he sleeps in. There’s a muffled moan and a thud. Then Sqalosenkosi is helping to pull out the boy’s body. “You made him faint? How...?”

“Pressure points,” Nhlakanipho replies, “Siya babbles about this all the time – and it came in handy.” I shake my head and follow after them, just as the crackling sound of thunder rings out of nowhere. “Looks like it’s going to rain,” he continues, standing momentarily with a passed out Sandile Nala on his shoulder. “Okhokho bavumile.”

Lightning slices through the darkness and thunder rumbles; the trees rustle, as if agitated by the violence that is going to be unleashed tonight. Our feet carry us to the location where the cars were left, my legs feeling heavy all of a sudden. Beside me, Sqalosenkosi is just a pensive. Sbanisezwe couldn’t be serious if you paid him to, he’s the type that would find it funny to torture someone – a Joker of sorts. “Nilungile, madoda?”

Sbanisezwe and Nhlakanipho nod their heads. I do too, as Sbani claps my back. “You’re not getting your hands dirty, bafo. As for me, I’ve always wondered about taking a life. If I go insane, I go insane.”

The way he says this is funny. I find myself chuckling lightly as we get in separate cars. Nhlakanipho and I in the bakkie. Sqalosenkosi and Sbanisezwe in mine – before all of us begin to drive off. The rain begins to fall, a steady, unrelenting downpour.

Christophe

He came back home around 06:00am, sporting Brentwood I’ve never seen on him before. Maybe its creepy but I know all of his clothes, including the ones that are left at my house. I don’t know what I expected from him but he spoke of exhaustion and went to sleep. I called Siyabonga, he told me that Nhlakanipho was home by 05:45am. He looked...blank. Siya couldn’t read a single expression on his face but he also went to sleep.

I'm worried because I know they did something bad. There's something cold and vindictive about Nhlakanipho, like a mamba waiting to strike. Those boys gave him the perfect opportunity by killing his family. I'm worried about Nqobizitha because he's not Nhlakanipho. He's...different. I don't think he has in him to kill. Not because of fear, his heart is different – more... compassionate. Even when people don't deserve it. I see it all the time. How he can't seem to hate Ntombikayise, no matter how hard he tries. He doesn't have a heart made of stone. Killing someone could ruin him – mentally, emotionally. I think he'd go insane.

Zenny calls me and tells me to go and buy some chilli russians at Mchunu's tuck-shop. I have to beg her to at least make uphuthu because that's what I wanted to make for Nqobizitha. I ignore her eye roll and her shout about lobola and shit. I wouldn't expect it from Nqoba's family – that's just a weird thought. She's stereotyping because his dick used to get shoved down my ass a lot. Besides, Nqobizitha has never mentioned anything about getting back together. The people are talking at the spaza shop today, looking horrified for some reason. I spot a familiar face and go to her. "Lerato!" she's the only Lerato in such a Zulu place. "How's it going?"

"Rumour has it that Nhlakanipho is coming for everyone who has wronged him," she says, eyes darting everywhere. It's hard not to look at her weird teeth with the irritating way that she's chewing her chappies. "Have you seen their bodies? He impaled them – everyone one of them – like they used to do in the olden days. Their dicks were chopped off and shoved inside their mouths."

I swallow, growing nauseous all of a sudden. "What? Nhlakanipho wouldn't do that."

"If not him then who, huh?" am I hearing that attitude in her voice right? I look around me and it's as if I'm seeing things differently all of a sudden. This isn't fear on these people's face – it's anger. They're blaming Nhlakanipho for the murders. "Thandolwenkosi was a whore anyway, everyone at school knew this. She always acted bitchy with her bloody Avon products and looked down on everyone because she was spreading her legs for a drug lord all of a sudden."

"That's not true," I whisper, wanting to smack the nasty glare off of her face, "Lwandle shouldn't have been with her to begin with. He should've put a stop—"

"Ey, awume nawe uzenza ungcwelengcwele. She was a bitch – period! And now her stupid brother wanted to avenge her death by killing innocent people. The community is coming for him. They're planning a meeting later this afternoon to discuss the way forward. If things go well, come this time tomorrow, he may be a dead man."

“What?”

“We’re not going to live with terrorists. This is not a Shaka Zulu era. We can’t live with a bully. Our brothers’ lives are not safe. I still have your number, babes. I’ll update you on when the community meeting is. We can go together.”

Get it together, Chris!, my mind screams at me. I find myself nodding my head absently, leaving the store in a rush. Tears burn my eyes as nausea cools my stomach. It hurts to breathe and I’m trying to get my feet to carry me back home faster. It’s a miracle I make it, Nqobizitha is in the kitchen with a glass of water in his hand. He sees me and places the glass on the counter, I crash into his chest. I want to speak but my words are clogged up in my mind. *Please be a dream*, I pray to God, to Allah, to Mvelinqangi – and to every deity that has ever existed.

Mutual Desires : Forty-nine

MaKhathide

There's a familiar satisfaction curling around my heart as I watch him explain his story with such humility. Gone is the air of superiority he had, the same one that chased him out of this house. I have to credit him for staying away for as long as he did though, he hadn't immediately crumbled like I'd expected him to. He hadn't immediately rushed home at the first sign of trouble. His friend's troubles. They're his also. He and Nhlakanipho are one person. The Mzimela blood runs in both of them. They're brothers, from the moment that they'd first met.

My expression remains neutral as the boy I raised finishes narrating his story. He's with the other two – his brothers. One of them looks serious, like my boy when he'd be watching his science shows. The other one has a way of getting on my nerves – a refreshing way. He's lying with his entire body on the couch, staring at the ceiling, his attention span is very short – yet somehow still longer than the number of seconds Sakhile can keep an erection. Yes, I said what I said. The playful Nqobizitha is too playful, he mentioned something about the grapes he's eating reminding him of the tiny balls of the boys they torturously killed – and then ate them like he couldn't be bothered. I think he has a loose screw in his head.

Ntwenhle is here, she's been tearing up every few seconds. Like those boys were the first ones to be killed so horrifically. Like they'd be the last ones. I may not show it but a proud smile forms on my lips as my gaze travels to Nhlakanipho. It's a pity I hadn't raised him, I'm proud of the man he's becoming. A vindictive man who doesn't cower in the face of his enemies. He stood tall in front of them, smelling the sweet fear off of them, their weakness – the helplessness.

"You've done well, Nhlakanipho," I praise him, keeping my voice neutral, "you never leave the enemy standing. It's a pity you didn't think to destroy everything in your path – everything. From those who wronged you right down to the crops that give them life. Its unfortunate that these pathetic villagers want to create an enemy out of you and I'd tell you to fight back but you have deeper problems."

I watch my son blink in confusion. His serious version – Sqalosenkosi – keeps his eyes on me, the other one is humming silently to himself. "Kanjani, MaKhathide? You won't be exercise your power around this place? Your word goes, whatever you say is law around here."

"That may be true but you didn't just kill any simple boy, Nqobizitha. You killed a drug dealer, the best one around here. I know that boy's boss – a tall Congolese man. My boys and I have been working to

remove him from this place but he's too powerful, maybe more than me. Those police are on his payroll. The Induna included. Why do you think he didn't bother to help Nhlakanipho? Stop being so naïve bafana. Do you think they'd arrest their boss's number one employee – the best drug dealer around this place. Lwandle was his source of income, woonga sells like hot cakes around here. Even if the community doesn't come for you, one of his henchmen will."

"You can't do anything about this man?"

"I haven't fully figured out how to deal with him!" I snap, sending a glare his way. "Had I not been so focused on your selfish mother ruining everything and going back on our agreement maybe I'd have made progress by now. Her turning back on her word has resulted in all this," I point to the wheelchair I have been forced to use. "The cancer, everything! She wants to take me to an early grave with her!"

Silence.

Nqobizitha's eyes widen. "What do you mean?"

I shift my attention to Ntwenhle, glancing at her curiously – in a new light. She still hasn't told him? What is she waiting for, Jesus' return? She'll be nothing but dust when that finally happens. "You mean she hasn't said anything?"

"Zengcebo, not now!" Sakhile has the balls to raise his voice at me. "We need to get this boy and Shandu's family out of here. If they're going to attack tonight then you know how they will do it. No one will be spared, Siyabonga's family will face the community's wrath for housing a criminal."

For the first time since they came here, I detect some emotion on Nhlakanipho's face, I can't tell what's going through his mind exactly but something ticks on his face. "Ang'zwanga?"

"You're leaving this place...tonight. Go back to that boy's family and tell them to grab what they can. When darkness comes, you're leaving. These people will try to ambush you around midnight when they're certain that everyone is sleeping. They'll ambush an empty house. I will take care of them, all of them personally – no woman or child will be spared. Go now and speak to Shandu. Leave Nhlakanipho here with me, I have serious matters to discuss with him."

Nqobizitha

Sbanisezwe and I take what we can, shoving everything in the duffel bag that Siyabonga gave us. His father tried putting on a brave face in the beginning, showing us the gun that he had with him but weapons like this become useless in the face of an angry mob. He wasn't going to shoot them all. Besides, there are plenty of men with guns around here, his one gun would've been useless against twenty or even two firing back. We can't have them massacred like they did the Mzimelas.

Siyabonga's mother has been crying for a long time. Nothing will console her, this place has been her home her entire life, a happy home, and in the blink of an eye, things have changed. The same people that used to feel welcome here, drinking alcohol – sometimes even asking for free beers – are turning their backs on them. My phone chirps with a new message, its Chris. "He says four boys have been chosen to keep watch. They're going home to freshen up and are expected out here around 09:30pm."

"You know our mother should've told us to stay behind and deal with the fuckers!" Sbani says, a smile pulling at his lips, "I'll kill them all for my brother – not this nonsense. We're not cowards."

My mind seems stuck on the part where he addresses MaKhathide as his mother. He and Sqalosenkosi fit right in, and with their hostility – that they do a good job of concealing – they may as well be her children too. I close the duffel bag just as Siya appears from the other side of the door. His face reveals the heavy stress that everyone is experiencing – he and Nhlakanipho more than anyone – and his usually light brown eyes are a dull colour, he looks sickly. "We're almost done," I tell him, moving to the drawers where he said Nhlakanipho's socks are stored, I want him to have enough clothing as possible.

"Thank you," Siya gets inside and looks around, "I can't believe its ending like this. The victim is further victimized and bullied to the point that he has to leave the home of his ancestors. I don't really care much about me, but Nhlakanipho..." he doesn't hide his tears, Sqalosenkosi gets to him before I can – and awkwardly embraces him, his face impassive. "Maybe you really should've damned it all to hell. Maybe you should've spared no lives. How can they do this? What is wrong with them, what's going on inside their heads, their hearts? Why do they loathe him so much...I-I don't get it."

I don't either.

I have to rub my eyes to prevent my own tears. Jesus, they're so close. The world continuously works against my best friend, it continuously deals him bad cards, and spits at him. Each time he rises and it finds other ways to break him down again. It must envy his forceful spirit, it must be jealous of his pride, it must loathe how he refuses to surrender. Maybe this time it has finally won the war, it has broken him beyond measure. In proving that there is no place for the good-hearted in this world, it has turned him into a vengeful killer. I saw it with my own eyes last night, the hatred that had fuelled him to brutalize those who wronged him. Sbanisezwe had no issues with raping them – an eye for an eye. Those he didn't penetrate himself, he sodomized with different objects.

"Give me your all, scream as loud as you can," had been my brother's words as he raped Lwandle. The torture was worse with him – blood-curdling things I cannot bring myself to think of again. I think it surprised them that I even helped carry out whatever sadistic plans they had but anger is a powerful emotion – turn it into rage and fear ceases to exist. Granted, I didn't stay around for the impaling but it will be a long time before my mind can forget the torture it subjected itself to.

"Look to the future, you can't do much now," I give him an encouraging smile.

He removes his face from Sqaolosenkosi's chest, somehow managing that strained smile on his face. "You're too good, Nqobizitha. I don't tell you and I've made your life hell so many times yet you remain good. There's not a lot of people like you in this world. Thank you—for e-everything. For being my boyfriend's brother and his peace. He's never felt unworthy in your presence, you've always made him feel welcome."

"Just like he found a friend in me for not judging his situation, I found a friend in him for not judging me based on financial status. He's never been about my money. I've never been about his background. We are brothers, till our dying days."

"I'm worried about the burials – for Gogo and the kids. What should happen? I have a feeling Nhlakanipho will not want to leave without burying the most important people in his life. He's not. I-I just really have a bad feeling about this."

"He has no choice," Sqaolosenkosi delivers the bitter truth, rubbing his face as Siyabonga pulls out of his embrace. "It's no longer a matter about the dead here, they will bury themselves. That is if our mother doesn't see it fit to give them proper burials. Our main concern are the living. Are your parents done? We need to leave in less than twenty minutes."

"Mah was dressing Kuhlekimi, I'll check on her."

We nod our heads and grab the bags. All their essentials are in a smaller bag that's in the duffel bag. Although Nhlakanipho had moved back home, his ID was still here because the last time he wrote his exams he'd been staying with Siyabonga. Bab' Shandu appears with a heavy looking bag that Sbani offers to carry for him. It's like he's forgotten that we're aiming for discretion. I suppose it doesn't matter – my car is parked in the back so the village cowards won't see what they shouldn't.

“You'll have to excuse my wife's tardiness, this is all so hard on us. Angiy'kholelwa yonke lento enzekayo, ngathi ngiyaphupha. Okhokho basijikele, ngabe soneni engaka! (I don't believe that this is happening, it feels like a dream. The ancestors have turned their backs on us, I wonder where we went wrong!)”

“That's the underground gang for you, Baba. You need them, they're not there but somehow they all have the balls to ask for ceremonies they know perfectly well our families can't afford. It must be nice being bored in the spirit world, and torturing your own blood,” Sbanisezwe tells him, unamused, a little annoyed it appears. “I can't wait to meet them all so I can teach them to use their brains. Ukuthi bawumoya akusho ukuth namakhanda agcwale umoya phela. The day I become an ancestor, I'm hooking up my descendants with the nice life. I'm hooking my boys up with all the hottest women, think Halle Berry, Nia Long, Vivica A Fox...”

Everyone but Squalosenkosi and Sbanisezwe are confused. Maybe I don't watch too many movies because I have no idea who these women are. Sqalo seems impressed with the choices that our brother has made...which happens rarely. It's a bit of a struggle squashing ourselves in my car. It's big enough but for normal humans like Bab' Shandu and his family, not me and my giant brothers. Sbani is driving, with Squalosenkosi sitting beside him. I'm at the back with the Shandus and little Kuhlekimi in Siya's arms, they had to leave their car behind to not bring attention to themselves.

“Please tell me you packed the little one's birth certificate,” Mam' Thoko looks at Siyabonga. She has to nudge her son's arm a few times.

“Huh?” Siyabonga blinks rapidly.

“Beka ithemba kuJehova, ndodana. It will all work out in the end, maybe this is all a test, a test on our faith. Maybe I'm wrong. There's light at the end of the tunnel, that is what I want you to remember.”

“That’s the thing, Mah...” Siya adjusts the baby, swaying her side to side – she’s a little restless. “I don’t want to be trapped in tunnels I know nothing about, I didn’t go there willingly, all of us are not doing this out of free will. My only home, the good memories I’ve built in this place, the love I-I found... I’ll never forgive them for this, Mah.”

“Its okay to feel that way. I feel the same way too, Siyabonga. Hate them, scream, be frustrated and then eventually, maybe you’ll find it in your heart to let go.”

Siyabonga shakes his head. “I can’t believe these words are your own. A community that has sided with the criminals to the point that we’re being forced out of our home but you preach forgiveness? Ngiyala, Mah! Ngeke kwenzeke lokho.”

“It just doesn’t make sense why the chief didn’t try to speak some sense into his people. Kanti is’hlalo sobunduna esani?” Bab’ Shandu asks the question, a deep frown on his mature features, he looks nothing like Siyabonga who doesn’t even look like his mother. He took after his ancestors apparently. “Don’t you think it’s a good idea for me to try and talk to him before we completely surrender? Maybe he can paint the picture better, show our people the true victims in all of this. Maybe he’d be able to put a stop to the unjustified mob justice these people want to inflict upon us.”

“Too late, taima. The bourgeoisie have already claimed him.” Sbanisezwe looks at the rearview mirror, giving Bab’ Shandu his charming smile. “Our mother’s money couldn’t afford him so he went with the high rollers.”

Bab’ Shandu shakes his head, I don’t think he understands Sbani really well. I don’t blame him, I was shocked myself when MaKhathide made the revelation. It makes sense though, when I really think about it. There’s crime around this place, not bad, but the drug addiction is becoming problematic. This old man, who knows very well that this is a prevalent problem amongst the youth, and not once has he ever organized a campaign that fights against drug abuse. Why would he when he is benefitting as Lwandle and his goons were?

“I mean,” Sbani goes slower, “that he went for more moneyed people, taima. He’s no longer in the league of normal people. The way he dresses, talks and eats. Even the way he shits – David Beckham perfume probably fills the bathroom after he’s taken a shit. Not even David Beckham, that expensive one comes from fashion labels, that perfume.”

“Where is he getting the money from?” Mam’ Thoko seems to have caught on, judging by the suspicious eye that she’s giving Sbanisezwe.

“A tall nameless Congolese.”

“I should’ve known, with the poverty around here, is it a surprise?”

“There’s no excuse for being a shitty human being, Mah.” Siya looks at her, shaking his head. “Induna should’ve been the one to protect us. He should’ve protected my boyfriend’s family from the beginning. Had he had a firmer hand...akusasizi. What about school, Nqobizitha?”

“You’re going to write at a private college in Johannesburg, MaKhathide has organized everything,” I explain. Everyone has a price, like chief Mbuyisa – he turned his back on his own people, and continues leading them astray. “She didn’t say much but she’s working out the logistics with Nhlakanipho, everything will be fine.”

Siya says nothing, not that I’d expected him to say anything. Nothing is fine, nothing will be fine – for a very, very long time. The gates close as soon as the car enters into my family’s driveway. Ntethe is beside us in an instant, embracing Siya tightly, with his mother now holding a fussy Kuhlekimi. My best friend’s boyfriend pulls back and looks around. The skies have darkened, the salmon colour barely visible now, and the crickets are chirping in the distance. There are three other cars that hadn’t been here when I left. They’re black, with tinted windows on all of them.

“Nsindiso,” I engage in a playful handshake with the boy who works for my mother, “impilo injani, mfethu? Mehlo madala, heh?”

“Ispani, nawe uyazi,” he chuckles.

I do kinda know. Nsindiso is a lot like Nhlakanipho, and was struggling with his mother and siblings before MaKhathide ‘adopted’ him. She calls all these boys that work for her her sons. We find her with my father in the living room. “It took you long enough.” Her voice is cold.

“Mam’ Zengebo,” Mam’ Thoko curtsies my mother, “siyaxolisa. This wasn’t expected at all and we were caught off guard when Nqobizitha came to us with word that we’re leaving.”

“Always be ready,” MaKhathide says dismissively, she has no time for excuses. Even in her wheelchair, she is intimidating – that is what I am reading on Mam’ Thoko’s face. “Why don’t you take a seat, and let’s get everything out of the way. Time is of the essence.”

“Before you say anything, we’d just like to thank you, Mrs. Ngcobo.” Bab’ Shandu says, with an air of humility, as he sits beside his wife. “May God bless you.”

This is bigger than you,” my mother replies, her face growing colder, “I’m going to burn this town down. For myself, against those who’ve wronged me. I will burn it down for MaMzimela, my lovely friend. I’m burning it down for her grandson, he’s like a son to me. I love his spirit.”

Siya perks up at that and looks around. “I, um, where is he, Mah? Nhlakanipho. You’re here on your own and Nqobizitha said you told him to stay behind to discuss the logistics of our departure.”

“He left before you could get here, you’ll meet him in Johannesburg.”

What?

I look at my mother, taken aback by the revelation. Why didn’t she bother to tell us this before we could go to Siyabonga’s? I watch hazel eyes widen, a little head shake, he opens his mouth and closes it. “Mah...w-what do you mean?”

“Are you sure about this boy’s intelligence?” MaKhathide frowns, observing me with a look of a disapproval. What the hell have I done wrong? “Yes, boy! He had to leave ahead of you, we couldn’t take the risk of waiting around. You’ll meet him in Johannesburg. What’s wrong, don’t tell me you’re also a faggot!”

“Please excuse her language,” Baba chimes in, annoyance written all over his face. “Thandeka take her away, to the bedroom, the exhaustion is getting to her. I’ll finish up here, it shouldn’t take long, maybe five more minutes.”

“I need some cold beer, I miss Thateho.” Sbani announces, lifting off the couch. He’s random. Also, I thought he and Thatego weren’t on speaking terms. Maybe the other boy’s finally forgiven him. He

disappears off in the direction of the kitchen, he walks around here like he owns the place. Maybe he does.

“I could use something cold too,” Sgalosenkosi follows after him.

I could too, and I need to see Chris. My body stays where it is, I have to hear what Baba wants to say to the Shandus. My heart is bummed out that Nhlakanipho left before I could say goodbye to him, before I could offer words of support and remind him of my undying love. He’s my brother. I miss him already. Part of me wonders what MaKhathide said to him to get him to leave, he’s the most stubborn person I know and to have left behind Siyabonga and his niece... MaKhathide must’ve worked hard doing the convincing. Or was Nhlakanipho intimidated by her? Somehow, I doubt it.

“There’s a flat waiting for you in Parktown while we find a house in a place called Soweto—”

“We know Soweto,” Mam’ Thoko interrupts my father, nodding profusely, “my sister lives in a place called Diepkloof. If you move us to that place, please make it nearer to her house.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Baba responds, looking at Kuhlekimi in her arms. He heaves a sigh and rubs his face. “You’ll have to excuse me, I don’t quite believe that this nightmare is actually real. Ngyaxolisa, to you and your son-in-law...”

The shocked expressions on the Shandu seniors’ faces.

“I’m not against their love, believe me. I want to thank you for accepting them, for supporting them – in a world so selective of its definition of love and you saw that it was them. Anyway, Siyabonga will be attending a college in Johannesburg, a place on Eloff street. My wife pulled some strings, his education will continue.”

“Nhlakanipho as well, right? We’re going to Wits next year.”

Baba nods his head, he smiles – it’s not his genuine smile. “Yes, of course. I think it’s time to leave now, before the community block roads. In under thirty minutes, those boys will be arriving to keep watch at your house, Shandu.”

“As you’ve advised,” Bab’ Shandu stands, shaking hands with my father, “sibonge, Mapholoba. I will miss this place.”

“You will be back, once my wife and I uproot all the corrupt ones. This home is yours also, you shall return, Shandu. That is a promise.”

I walk them outside, bidding Bab’ Shandu and Mam’ Thoko farewell. I spend a few seconds with Kuhlekimi, kissing her and promising to visit. She babbles and squirms as I hand her over to Mam’ Thoko. The door shuts quietly. It’s just me and Siya outside. He looks at me and shakes his head. “I, erhm, I don’t know how to thank you and your family. I’m sorry for all those times I—”

“You have bitchy tendencies, Shandu. I know that now, and I may dislike you often, but I love you for the love you give my brother. You’re the best thing that has ever happened to him, iThemba lakhe. I’m proud that he’s found everything he ever needed in you...Phakade lakhe.”

The hug Siya gives me comes unexpected. “I’ll miss you, Nqobizitha. Don’t be a stranger, visit as soon as possible. I don’t want to drive your brother insane that side, he’ll need you sometimes. It’s a pity I didn’t get to say goodbye to Chris.”

“He had to be our ears and eyes. I’m sure he’ll understand why you left without saying goodbye, just like my brother did not say goodbye to me. Take care of him, please. It’s a heavy task, I know, but you’re his peace. No one else but you.”

“Do you ever think you’ll get back with Chris?”

“What?” this question has caught me off guard. I rub the back of my neck and sigh. “Why are you asking?”

“Just... I’ll miss us – all of us, when we used to be happy. Those memories I’ll keep with me.”

I’ll miss those times too, when things were easier somehow. So much has happened from the time that we first went to Richard’s Bay together. “Take care of my brother.”

“Your brother, my soulmate. I’ll take care of him, you know that.”

He’s right, I do know. A lot of things may not be guaranteed but Siya’s unchanging, undying and unadulterated love for Nhlakanipho is. His love for my best friend remains the same, constant, guaranteed – natural and unforced, like you don’t have to remind your body how to function, his love for Nhlakanipho is the same. This is why their moments always seem so intimate, too deep. I watch Sgalosenkosi bid him goodbye. They’ve developed a sort of chilled friendship, better than the one Sbani could ever have with him.

“Don’t be too much nawe, wehlise uk’phapha,” are the words Sqalo and I hear as we enter the kitchen. Sbani is leaning against the counter, beer can in his hand – his third one. “Wait a few days before visiting, siyezwana? Good. I...when are you coming over this side?”

He’s talking to Thatego, that’s easy to tell. There’s a creepy smile on his face, and a distant look in his eyes. The only thing I’m not sure of is if he’s in love with him.

“Tell me,” his voice is demanding, his smile widens. “I’ll call you later,” and with that he tucks his phone back in his pocket and then looks at us. “Nang’gqolozela madoda kwenze njani?”

“When did this thing between you and Thatego reignite?” Sgalosenkosi asks him.

“None of your business, Dr. Phil,” Sbani snorts and moves to check the fridge, grabbing the bottle of amasi. I join him at the table. “I’m not going to allow you to psychoanalyze my relationship with him.”

“Usho ukuthi there’s an actual relationship?” Sgalosenkosi delivers his sarcastic question in a deadpan manner. “I thought he was just another dick-wetter.”

“Relax, I didn’t mention marriage.” Sbani says, mixing amasi. “I’m not ending—yazin’, khohlwa. You wouldn’t understand.”

“How can I, when you don’t understand yourself?” Sgalosenkosi quips.

Sbani looks at him, and then eases more comfortably into his chair. “Its better than being in a committed relationship with your hand because you don’t know what’s your type.”

“Fuck off,” Sgalosenkosi growls.

“As you wish...Dr. Phil,” Sbani stands with his bowl in hand, “I’m going to keep our lovely mother some company. See you bad boys around.”

The call came around noon. I was with Chris, studying like usual, when I answered my phone to hear a distraught Siyabonga on the other end. He was too nonsensical in the beginning, with how hard he was crying, but I heard threats of suicide. For a few scary seconds, I’d been scared that something really bad happened to Nhlakanipho. A bad accident. An ambush. That MaKhathide had set him up – on this matter I have no confirmation yet. It wasn’t until Mam’ Thoko spoke to me that I understood that they haven’t seen him since they arrived in Johannesburg. Its been long enough and he should be with them like MaKhathide had said.

This is how I find myself back home again, looking at my mother who doesn’t even appear bothered by the fact that I came in here shouting, seeking answers. Siyabonga’s cries are weighing down on my soul, he shouldn’t have sounded like he was dying and yet, that is exactly what was happening. I called again and his mother told me that he’s sleeping. He cried so hard, he passed out. He hasn’t woken up since. She’s begged me to seek the answers from my mother.

“MaKhathide wami,” I grace her with a smile – fake, urgent, “where is Nhlakanipho? He didn’t go to Johannesburg like you said, did he?”

“Cha.” I’m expecting more but she remains silent.

“Where is he?” I ask for the thousandth time, growing impatient.

“On his way to Zimbabwe.” My heart stumbles at the revelation, it wasn’t what I was expecting. “He’s not staying there. Uhambo lude, Nqobizitha. The only way to ensure that Pierre won’t get to him is to send him off very far away.”

“I don’t understand, MaKhathide.”

“You don’t need to,” the dismissiveness creeps in again, “just know that this is for the best. He’s going to have a new family, a new life...education, you name it. I don’t usually do this but that boy is like my son, he’s a good boy. This is why I’d agreed that Ngcobo give him our old bakkie to start his business. He’ll prosper – wherever he goes.”

She’s proud of herself, I can see it. I want to be grateful to her for what she’s done but I can’t help thinking back to Siyabonga. This will shatter him. He mentioned suicide. “You’ve killed him,” I whisper.

Mutual Desires : Fifty

Nqobizitha

“Its time for you to go out into the real world and prosper. It’s been a pleasure knowing you all, you’ve been headaches...the good kind – if there’s such a thing!” Mr. Biyela says, as the students erupt in laughter, the sound spreading over the hall. “Class of 2020, you’re dismissed!”

Finally.

I grab my pens and chuck them in the front pocket of my school shirt. A few classmates crowd me, and I humour the girls asking for hugs, and fist-bump some of my male peers. We’ve just written our final paper, and though it feels good, I have to admit that I hadn’t expected that it would be this way. When this school year began, I foresaw ending matric on a high note, with Nhlakanipho and Siyabonga. I foresaw the proud, almost...paternal glint in his eyes, because it took me a whole lot to even reach matric. I expected laughter and joy, maybe a party at Mlalazi, some hot chicks and lots of sex and booze. In the beginning of the year, this is all I thought about.

The joy is all around me, the excitement, I can feel it. It doesn’t spread over to me, my soul, like I’m expecting it too. There’s an emptiness instead, that has been there for a while now. I’m not sure how to get rid of it, now more than ever. So much has happened these past few months. I haven’t heard from my best friend, my brother, in over two months. Siyabonga didn’t take it well, as expected, and had a mental breakdown. Something inside him just...broke. His mother found him in his own blood, he slit his wrists, trying to get rid of the pain. They’ve sent him to a mental institution, they weren’t really getting through to him, and one of the doctors had made the suggestion.

Chris, he went back to Johannesburg soon after that happened, he wants to be closer to Siyabonga – to be his support system. I get it, so I hadn’t had much of a choice in asking him to stay behind. He cares about Siyabonga, deeply.

As for me, I’m trying to find my feet in a place that no longer gives me joy. Mbongolwane is different, at least for me. MaKhathide kept to her word and sought justice for Nhlakanipho, those involved in the mob justice were dealt with by her boys. The police couldn’t do anything about it because they claimed self-defence since the angry community attacked first. Then about a month ago, induna uMbuyisa mysteriously died – autopsy results pointed to a heart attack. He was an obese man so I guess it was expected. Yes, I know what happened but it’s hard to care at this point. They’ve chosen a temporary

replacement. He appears to be better than Bab' Mbuyisa – the first thing he did was to talk to the community about their treatment of the Mzimela family.

People are remorseful, although it's unclear now who exactly was feeding their hate and toxicity. Don't get me wrong, the rotten potatoes are still there, some have vowed to deal with Nhlakanipho or the Shandus should they ever return to Mbongolwane. I don't think Bab' Shandu and his wife are coming here any time soon, not with their son trapped in some mental institution – fighting an internal battle. He never got any closure, no forewarning, nothing. I understand where he's coming from to be honest. Now that I'm done with matric, maybe I'll be able to visit him, to find out how he's doing.

“Nqobizitha, mfethu, ziyawa eNtumeni namhlanje. We've organized the booze and DJ, there are some hot chicks coming over. Your type...” Mhlabelo, one of my classmates, says with a hopeful look on his face.

I have to see my mother, not MaKhathide, my other mother. She's sick – breast cancer. It's bad and I found out through Sqalosenkosi, he sat me down and explained, only did it because Mam' Ntwenhle was getting worse. I cried, it's embarrassing to think about now but it happened, I haven't known her that long. We're supposed to be getting to know each other better – for years and years to come. The time isn't supposed to be limited, I was supposed to get the time that my brothers had with her...but we live in an unfair world.

“Maybe next time, mfethu.” I give Mhlabelo an unapologetic smile.

His smile tells me he's disappointed, more than disappointed. I'm suspecting that he thought I was going to be their alcohol sponsor. These boys around here never miss the chance to try and milk me dry. Never matters the number of times I turn them down. The old Nqobizitha would've taken bait, not this one. I get in my car and begin the drive home. My real home – kwaNgcobo. The independence was nice while it lasted but not the loneliness and the feeling that I was drowning. Dr. Langa said it was normal, with the trauma that I've seen and indirectly experienced, it was bound to happen. There's also the fact that MaKhathide's paranoia refused to let me stay in that room any longer. She's my mother, she wants to always ensure that I am safe – even if she does go about the wrong way.

Her boys had threatened the MaSibiya into letting them into my room. They moved my things back home, and somehow Sbani has ended up at home. He gets along better with MaKhathide than any other member of the family, he loves her, it's easy to tell. My mother cherishes him too, she may not show it like a normal human being, but she does it in her own special way. She'll snap at him for no reason just to get him to say something funny to her. They have a special relationship. Sqalosenkosi preferred to stay with our other mother, even though she has a helper, because he wants to take care of her.

“Thandeka,” I greet as I enter the house, my lips touch her cheek, as my arm drapes over her shoulders, “what’s for lunch? Ngiyafa indlala.”

“What do you want to eat?” she smiles at me.

I ignore the suggestion in her voice. “Amasi?”

“Uphuthu is cooling in the bowl. You’ll help yourself to amasi,” she says and walks out, more like sashays with an attitude. I ignore her and then go to greet my mother. She’s in the living room with Mchunu, I don’t know what the fuck is going on between the two of them but I hate it. Ndoniyamanzi is here as well, a smile on her face.

“Sanibona ekhaya,” I go to kiss my mother’s cheek, “where is my brother?”

“He went to visit the ancestor,” MaKhathide says with a sweet smile on her lips. If she didn’t have this bad tendency of calling my mother an ancestor, I would’ve freaked out. I don’t even bother with her lately. My eyes are glued to Ndoni who looks happy. “I spoke to Mchunu and we’ve decided that maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to begin lobola negotiations for your sister. He managed to convince me.”

I don’t like the thoughts my mind tortures me with as I think about her and Mchunu’s methods of ‘convincing’. Its still not my place to say or do anything because my father seems to be okay with this. After I’ve changed in my room, I go back to the main house to eat lunch. There’s a WhatsApp from Chris, asking how my final exams went. It wasn’t sent too long ago. I decide to call him. It rings once. “Nqobizitha?”

“Chris.”

Silence.

“I mean...Bambi.”

His sigh touches my ear. “You’re not obliged to call me that. We’re just – friends, right?”

Yeah, I kind of fucked up there. “Yeah, man.”

“How did your exams go?”

“English? A breeze.” I take my empty bowl to the sink and the empty glass. “How was your photoshoot?” that job with the reputable retailer, he got it, and went in for a photoshoot today.

“A little overwhelming, it wasn’t at all what I expected. The photographers are mean, nothing at all like you, this is why you’ll always be my favourite photographer. Are you sure you don’t want to look into making it a career?”

I chuckle, closing the front door behind me. “Nah, its not my thing. Those things are for fancy boys like you, who talk like they’re having sinus problems. Me, I’m a science kid, but not the snobby ones.”

He’s silent a second. “I visited Siya today.”

“How is he?”

“Bad,” he makes a weird sound, a snuffle-giggle, “its like he’s given up on life itself. I tried to encourage him, told him that you wrote your final paper today, hoping that maybe he’d be inspired to try next year kodwa lutho. Your mom isn’t saying anything about Nhlakanipho?”

“The less I know the better, for his safety she says,” I lean against the car and peer off into the distance, staring at everything and nothing all at once. “She doesn’t even talk to him unless it’s really necessary, that’s what she told me.”

“But can’t you get her to have him call Siya at least?”

His desperation makes me sigh, I wish. “You know I can’t do that,” I tell him, shifting side to side on my feet. “That woman is against homosexuality, she doesn’t fully understand it. Telling her about Siya and Nhlakanipho might just cause more damage. She may even have him killed in Zimbabwe or wherever he

is now. She said he wouldn't be staying but passing through, mentioned something about a long journey."

"Passing through to where? Would a drug lord really care so much about one of his boys being killed, Nqobizitha? To the extent that he'd be searching high and low for Nhlakanipho. It makes no sense to me, I'd focus on finding his replacement."

"That's the thing, the admin of finding a replacement, someone trustworthy – not only to you but to your clients as well is too much. Lwandle had already built a rapport with these junkies. This Congolese was hit where it hurt, I understand why he'd do this. But then again, MaKhathide is MaKhathide, and sometimes I don't trust my mother. She rules beside the devil."

"Tell me about it," Chris sighs. "How is your family that side? What about Zenny and my niece? I called them the other day and Lisa is turning out to be so big."

"Maybe you should come down here and ask them yourself," my voice remains a calculated casual, like one discussing the weather, as I wait for his reply.

"Do you want me to come?"

"No," the word slips past my lips faster than I can process, "I mean, I don't want you to do anything you don't want to. This isn't about me. It's about you and your family, if you miss them then you get your ass here, not complain about it like you don't know the way to Mbongolwane." *Defensive*, my mind scoffs at me, and I could entertain it but I'm not in the mood.

"You don't have to be so rude, you know."

"Just stating facts," comes my terse reply.

The silence again...awkward. I am overreacting I know, but there's just about admitting that I wish he were here that irks me. It leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, gives me a weird feeling of...helplessness. I'm an idiot I know but my pride won't let me surrender here.

“How’s therapy going?”

“It has its days – some good, some bad. You?”

“Same...I, uh, have to go. I have to meet someone in less than thirty.”

My ears perk up at that, my phone tightening around my hand, as another wave of panic envelopes me, making me want to crawl inside this phone to lock him inside his room and never allow his escape. I have no right, I reiterated that we’d make better friends. Before he left, this is what I told him, even after he admitted that he still loved me. I’ve never doubted this, but something’s holding me back – too many things. “Oh...” I clear my throat and kick at a tiny stone in front of me, “Mashudu?”

“No!” I can almost see him shaking his head frantically. “It’s—no. You have no right to do this, Nqobizitha. Questioning me like this. That demand in your voice, you have no right at all.”

Was I really demanding? I hadn’t heard it at all. “It was a simple question, Bambi. It needed a yes or no answer. It’s fine, I found it in your defensiveness. Have a nice date.”

“It is not a date, I’m meeting Thatego, there’s a party in—”

“Should’ve said that from the beginning. Don’t corrupt him, you know how Sbani is.”

“Something’s wrong with you today, I didn’t call for this – to fight. Maybe I should go, before we say things we don’t mean.”

“You mean YOU,” I scoff.

“I still love you, that hasn’t changed.” He hangs up.

I stare at the dark screen of my phone a few times, and then smack it against my head a few times. It’s too late to call him back and apologize for being a douchebag. Maybe I’ll do it later, I need to see my mother at the moment.

Christophe

I don't know when parties began making me uncomfortable but that is how I feel as I look at the sea of gyrating parties. Thatego dragged me to Chesa Nyama, Ghandi Square – the same place we went to when he kissed me and then got his ass kicked days later. I shift my chair and dodge a lady who thinks she's Dr. Malinga with her fly-kicks. Those tiny shorts she's wearing will tear soon with how dramatic she's being. The music is very loud, and I'll be truthful and admit that the DJ has great music taste. The excitement of the dance crowd is proof enough, but I find myself looking stupidly bored and lonely.

It's this thing with Nqobizitha. I don't want to force him into anything but he confuses the fuck out of me. Truth is I don't know how he feels about me, just when I think that we're making progress then he does things like he did this afternoon. The attitude, the mood swings – lovely one minute and then cold the next. I think I'm close to giving up, maybe a no strings attached would do me good. Someone to fuck the confusion out of me. To make me feel good, and help me convince myself that I'm moving on – even for just a day. The mere thought makes me nauseous, that Brentwood wearing bastard did something to me and ruined all the others for me. I hate the way I love him, verging on foolishness but I can't help it. Maybe I'm a fool for him but a proud one.

He sent me a WhatsApp message, apologizing and claiming that he's just under a lot of stress. Mbongolwane is not the same and the place depresses him. He said all that and still turned me down when I offered that he come here for a while, to de-stress and escape everything. I think he wants me to go that side, I'd heard it in his voice, but I'm not sure...I'm scared of rejection. I already sacrifice enough of my pride by continuously admitting my love for him. He never returns it, just says thank you. I don't even know what that means.

A loud, joyful shout jolts me out of my thoughts and my eyes travel to Thatego. He's sandwiched between a girl and another guy. He's having the time of his life, as he turns around and kisses the guy – way taller than him – and begins dancing lewdly. He's wearing his gorgeous but provocative clothing again – a skimpy t-shirt dress that he bought earlier at Small street. His heels are too tall for my liking and he has his hair in two neat buns. He's beautiful. The guy drags him to a quiet corner, and they begin this heavy makeout session. The guy's hands are everywhere, and I watch them head for the bathrooms. I shake my head and hope that they're going to at least use protection.

I look at my drink and wait for his return. I think I'm going to tell him that I want to go home. He'll be mad of course because he's sleeping over at my house but I'm not in the mood. The last time I indulged on the club scene, I ended up crying my lungs out in the arms of a stranger. There's a commotion that grabs my attention. It's in the direction of the toilets and I have a sinking feeling. Did that guy give off gay vibes? I don't remember. But surely he knew Thatego is a dude. He isn't even shaped like a woman.

I push through the crowd and let out a sigh of relief. Thatego was in the toilet queue with the guy, it looks like they never got their fuck session because there's another person in there. I look at the blood, whoever beat this lady up did too much damage. I can hear some shouts, in a foreign language, a language I recognize. French! "Laissez-la partir!" Someone snaps, and a closer look shows that he's trying to get the other man – way bigger than him – to let go of the woman who isn't even fighting back.

"Don't call this...this piece of scum a woman, Thierry! This animal deceived me, he is not a woman. Look at this, look at it!" he drags her skirt up, pulling on her underwear, revealing her private parts. Everyone laughs, most people are recording, the woman is embarrassed. "This piece of shit!" he kicks her face. No one helps, just the loud laughter.

"Pierre! Pierre!" Thierry says, nothing will deter his friend. The security gets here and I've seen enough, I drag Thatego by his arm until we're outside.

"I want to go home," I announce, "right now."

He's shaken too, not more than me. He keeps glancing back at the club. "I couldn't even say goodbye to Shepherd."

Shepherd, really? That's the name that his parents went with?

"I don't care!" my voice is too unkind, I just...there was so much blood and the shame that that person went through, it doesn't sit well with me. Tears well in my eyes. "Let's go home, please. That could've been you," my eyes point to his outfit.

"Gal, come on... I don't look like a woman," he giggles, and we cross the street as we wait for our Uber. "That man should've told that other guy from the beginning."

“And if he’s a transwoman?”

“I don’t really get that,” Thatego rolls his eyes, “I’m a boy that just likes dressing up girly sometimes. I like feeling feminine but I don’t want to be a girl. I don’t understand transgender people.” He’s bashful.

To be honest, I don’t get them either. The desire to be another gender, or to feel that you’re in the wrong body. I remember this girl/boy in high school, she’d always tell us to call her ‘Mbutho’ even though her name was Mbali. She tried using male bathrooms for a while but the bullies would have none of it. I wonder where she/he is and if they still identify as male. Whatever the case may be, that Pierre guy had no right whatsoever beating that lady like that. The best thing would’ve been walking away but men and their fragile masculinity.

We reach home around 11:00pm. Mommy isn’t home, not that I am surprised. We change and go to my bed. Thatego tries to kiss my cheek but I shift my face. My mind is still on Sbani, and then there’s Nqobizitha as well. I sleep only to wake up less than an hour later. This pervert of a kid is masturbating next to me, talking on the phone with someone. There’s heavy breathing and catlike mewls. I catch Sbani’s name being moaned. I roll my eyes, they have the weirdest relationship.

I’ve finally decided to go back home, just a visit then I’ll be coming back to Joburg. Thatego leaving for the North West played a huge factor into my decision. There’s also the fact that Simi went to the Eastern Cape for the holidays. Usually, I’d stay home and be bored out of my mind. That was before I discovered Mbongolwane, and was made to feel welcome there by Zenny. Mommy seems pleased by my decision. Baba was even happier, he loves it when I go home, and we’re travelling together. Its awkward as fuck, I’m not used to this man. He’s my father but he didn’t raise me. I don’t know what to say to him so I’ve taken to plugging my earphones in and listening to my music.

I wake up to the feeling of someone nudging my arm. When did I close my eyes? Baba is giving me an impatient look, eyebrows knitted into a frown. “What are you going to eat?”

“Anything that you’re ordering,” I murmur quietly. I watch him leave the car and look around to try and place our whereabouts but nothing. I don’t know the road to Mbongolwane and would probably get lost were I travelling alone. Even mommy knows the place better than me. I spot Baba coming back with some chips and vetkoeks and internally sigh. He couldn’t even buy KFC? *You didn’t tell him*, my mind reminds me. I didn’t. I didn’t know how to ask, it seemed like too much effort. “Thank you, Baba.”

He nods, then drives off again.

I grab my phone, and check my messages. Zenande told me that Nqobizitha is still in Mbongolwane and had visited just last night. He's going on vacation, his mother forced him to, and will be in Cape Town three days from now. First, he has to attend Nontethelelo's birthday party. I didn't know about it, not that I should care, it's not like Nontethelelo is my sister-in-law or anything. There are no messages from Nqobizitha, we last spoke last night, and he never returned my good morning message. I don't want to hold it against him, his WhatsApp last seen is 05:12am and I was still sleeping around that time.

It's too late into the night by the time we arrive in Mbongolwane. I just want to sleep but Zenande wants to catch up. It's 01:00 am for crying out loud! I have a suspicion that she just wants me to help her with Lisakhanya who is fussy. "I swear I'm this close to calling that boy!" she releases an exasperated breath. "He gave my daughter some sort of juju. Where have you ever seen this rubbish?"

"Maybe she's in love with his voice too," I murmur, secretly hoping that she does call, I am desperate to hear his voice. My heart leaps to my throat when she does, it rings a couple of times before he answers. There's background noises and female voices. It sounds like he's at a party. I hadn't expected this, my heart drops to my stomach. Like a fool, I let the revelation ruin my mood, and stomp to my room like a petulant child to sulk in peace.

Through Zenande, Nontethelelo finds out that I am back here. I'm not sure when their friendship reignited but I have a strange feeling about them – like something happened that should or shouldn't have happened. It's in the manner that my big sister had been smiling to herself right after their conversation. Whatever is going on between the two of them is none of my business. I have more serious issues at hand, like the fact that I find myself at the Ngcobo homestead for the first time in so long. I haven't seen Nqobizitha. Maybe it's cowardice of me but I've been avoiding him since that phone call Zenande made to him. I don't want to disrupt the nice time he's having.

The party is in full swing and I try my best to enjoy it but it's hard. It's not easy when I'm also constantly searching for Nqobizitha. In order to stay out of his way. But my eyes find Ndoniyamanzi dancing foolishly with Bab' Mchunu's son and they look so beautiful that I find myself letting my guard down a little, a genuine smile on my face. Bab' Mchunu's son doesn't stop smiling, and Ndoni looks the happiest I've ever seen her since I've known her. They kind of remind me of Siya and Nhlakanipho but not really. I don't think anyone could come close to the love those two shared. It sucks to admit but when I think

back to their love, part of me is more than a little envious. Why can't I have a love like that? Why couldn't Nqobizitha and I be like that?

Maybe it's my own fault. I shouldn't have entered that relationship with all of my heart. Now it's hard to get over him. Our relationship was too perfect and imperfect at the same time. I think maybe it's time I finally acknowledged that we're done. When I go back to Joburg, I really need to find someone causal.

"They look so pathetic."

Even now that voice still makes my stomach flutter.

Speaking of the devil. Before I can really think about it, I turn around, meeting dark brown eyes that never fail to mesmerize me. And his voice makes my heart beat faster, as always. It's unfair how much he still affects me; how easily he breaks my resolve with one look. Nqobizitha's in his usual Brentwood, the jersey and pants hugging him in all the right places. He looks... nothing short of breathtaking. Brentwood was definitely created with him in mind.

"You look fantastic," he says, taking in my black clothing – my failed attempt at going unnoticed.

I rack my brain for something to say, but can't find anything. It's stupid; I knew we'd meet here at the party. But the moment we do, all I can think of are Nqobizitha's lips on my shoulder, fingers splayed on the base of my neck, and endless, and his body crushing into my smaller one. Like it was just yesterday.

"When did you get back? Are you here by yourself?" Nqobizitha asks again, since he clearly won't get a reply from me.

"Two days now. I'm o-on my own," the words slip out of my mouth this time. "Are you?" my insides clench at the thought of Nqobizitha having brought someone here. What if he's gone back—

His chuckles cut my thoughts short. "Who else would I be with?"

"Don't know," I shrug, "maybe you're moving on."

“Can you come with me for a second?”

His demand is posed as a question but I’d heard the command clearly. He wasn’t asking, with the way his hand gently folds around my arm and pulls me toward his house. My feet are a little clumsy and I stumble a few times. My head is spinning and I have no idea what is happening, I can’t see straight, I can’t breath, and I know it is because him. The door closes silently behind us and we look at each other.

His hand draws forward, I look at it – how big it is, the veins. My mind shouldn’t travel to a time it would be wrapped around by throat. I swallow hard and lick my lips. I think he wants to shake hands. It’s confusing. “My name is Nqobizitha Siqiniseko Mkhonto Ngcobo. I prefer you use Nqobizitha.”

What is this?

I decide to play along. “Christophe Zithobile Xulu. My friends call me Chris. I prefer Bambi, or Toothpick, or Sponge Bob, or Toffee, or Shwaphana saseMbongolwane – take your pick.” My mind travels back in time, my belly fluttering. “I really, really love Bambi though.”

“Nice to meet you...Bambi. I would really like to get to know you better – step by step, to see where the journey takes us.” His face is so serious, eyes a little mischievous, and I think I’m going to suffer a heart attack. He shouldn’t be able to still affect me like this.

“Does this mean—”

“Step by step,” he says again, brushing my lower lip with his thumb. “What do you say?”

I-I...don’t know. For so long, I thought I’d lost him for good, that he was content with the friendship. He wouldn’t even return my declarations of love. My heart is pounding on my ribcage. “Nqobizitha...” I don’t quite believe this change of heart, if he’s playing me...

We stare at each other for the longest second. Then Nqobizitha removes his finger and replaces it with his lips, warm and soft as they move over mine, unhurried. “If you want me, I’m here,” he says against my lips when we slightly pull away. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I close my eyes, feeling the words spilling out of my mouth before I can stop them. “I really want you.”

When I open my eyes, Nqobizitha is watching me, and the emotions in his eyes couldn't be clearer. “I'm yours.”

MaKhathide

“That car has been following us for a while now,” I tell Mchunu, just as I see another car approaching, “I don't feel good about this.”

“What's wrong?” there's no urgency in his voice and it pisses me off.

“Give me my gun,” he's too slow, I do it myself just as the approaching car comes to a halt, blocking our way. MaDlodlo steps out, looking nothing out of the ordinary but I know better. The gun is ready next to my thigh as I roll down the window. “Sabusiseka sibona wena. How may we be of help, MaDlodlo?”

“Zengcebo, its good—”

One of her arms reaches behind her back, I don't wait for her to finish and pull the trigger. The sound blinds my ears and I am shocked by another penetrating sound. Mchunu makes a shocked sound and I don't get the chance to react as another penetrating sound rings in my ear. Something connects with my neck – quick, searing. I touch my neck, shocked as my hand comes back with blood, and the struggle to breathe comes quickly. I try to concentrate, as the world quickly fades into darkness before me.

Mutual Desires : Epilogue

THREE YEARS LATER

Christophe

I can sense his increasing annoyance as I scan the wardrobe for something presentable to wear. I ignore that exasperated sigh he makes, probably his hundredth one in five minutes – no, I am not exaggerating. It's just that today's a big day, Siya got his matric results this morning and as expected, the genius breezed through his exams. It's taken a lot for him to get here, to get out of that dark hole he had been trapped in for close to two years. He only went back to school last year, the same college that MaKhathide – may her soul rule peacefully with the devil – organized for him years before.

He's not there yet, but he's trying, he even goes out now. His doctors kept him under careful watch until they were confident that he was ready to face the real world again, that was almost a year and a half ago, and he's been back with his parents since. They live in Diepkloof, an adjustment that they're still struggling with, but I suppose it's better that they're living closer to Mam' Thoko's sister. Bab' Shandu opened a shebeen near Joubert Park, it's doing well, and with the profits, he was able to pay back Nqobizitha's father.

The same Nqobizitha who relocated to Joburg, we live together – believe it or not. Things are good, really good, and we're in a place where we continuously choose each other. We've been living together for close to two years now, a decision that we made after we consulted with Dr. Langston – my therapist, this side – and she found no problem with it. Nqobizitha's a student, his second year at Wits, after he rewrote his matric and studied Sciences – he didn't do well in Accounting and Economics, so he went to a private FET college to complete his studies.

He changed his mind about doing aeronautics studies and chose psychology because he's hoping to work with kids. Particularly kids who're victims of sexual abuse, like he was. He loves kids, I see it with my niece and Kuhlekimi. Dr. Langa works together with him on an online blog that raises awareness on the abuse of boy children. They engage with victims as well, and with Dr. Langa's help, Nqobizitha managed to begin a support group tailored specifically for male sexual abuse survivors. I accompany him sometimes, when I'm not jetting off to different parts of the world because my hard work – and Nqobizitha's persistent belief in me – paid off.

Maybe I'm not as big as Alton Mason or Kofi Siriboe or Broderick Hunter but I'm big enough and I appear on billboards. Baba was disappointed, wouldn't stop talking down on me for my career choice that I

ended up moving out of home. I was making enough money to do it, then months later, Nqobizitha and I got a better apartment in Hyde Park. Yes, we're living on the classier side of Joburg – between my pay from modelling gigs and Bab' Ngcobo's generosity with money, we could afford to. The last three years have been good to us, I won't lie, and our relationship is blissful. There's no perfection of course but communication makes things better, there's also the fact that both of us have had to unlearn a couple of things.

"How long until you're done?" Nqobizitha asks me as I fix my belt in front of the floor-length mirror. Our eyes meet and I can see his little jaw tick. He's cute. I strut over to him and sit on his lap. He rolls his eyes but places his hands on my waist, one of his fingers gently brushing the skin there. "The person we're surprising will end up getting to the location before us and we'll look like bad friends – arriving late to a surprise party."

"Perfection takes time, Tarzan." I kiss his lips and run my hand down his cheek, feeling his light beard prickle my skin. He has this beard thing going on, he's 23 now and kmele kucace ukuthi uyindoda. His words, not mine. "Five more minutes then I promise we're leaving, besides Thatego would've told me if they were on their way."

"How can he when he's probably hopping on my brother's dick wherever he is?" Nqobizitha states the obvious with a snort.

I roll my eyes and grab any t-shirt in the wardrobe, it's a white one that belongs to him. Sliding it on, I tuck it inside my jeans and then fold the short sleeves to make it more stylish. I grab the bracelet that he got me for my birthday last year and smile as he stands to his feet and helps me put it on. He presses a kiss to the inside of my wrist and grabs my hand, dragging me out of the door. "You think you're clever," I tell him as we head to the elevators.

"Ngeke sihambe phela, ngena." He drags me inside the lift. "Cofa uground lapho."

I do as he says. "Control freak!" I punch his arm, but my body readily leans into his side as he throws an arm over my shoulders. The butterflies erupt like crazy, a creepy smile pulling at my lips as I look up at him. He's so very tall, too tall that people around us freak out when they find out that we're together - especially when they unnecessarily ask us about our sex life.

The lift dings and then stops on the second floor. My daze vanishes as Mrs. Arendse enters, she's an old white woman whose life seems trapped in the 50s when people of her skin colour could walk all over our heads and our great-grandparents had to take it like good boys and girls. There's also the fact that

she thinks imposing her beliefs on us and preaching repentance makes her better than anyone else in this building. She belongs to the looney house honestly – or even better, she should be an ancestor by now. Her rambling starts as soon as she spots us. Nqobizitha frowns, adjusts us so that he’s pushing me up against one corner of the lift. I suck in a breath when his fingers brush against my mouth softly, then assertively – his thumb pulling my lips apart. “I’ll give her something to really complain about,” he says and presses his lips on mine. My feet dangle in the air as I squeeze his cheeks tightly, reciprocating eagerly.

“You really shouldn’t have done all this,” Siya says for the thousandth time, looking around the hall that I organized for the surprise party. It’s not big, just enough for about thirty people. Only his closest friends are here and his parents. That means less than twenty people but I know he wouldn’t have wanted anything big, but also, the air of intimacy makes everything better. Thatego took care of the décor, he dragged Sbanisezwe to Oriental Plaza about two weeks ago to buy everything. The theme is white and gold – simplistic yet so gorgeous. “I’m not the first one to fail and then proceed to pass matric.”

He wouldn’t have failed it to begin with, had life been kinder to him, and kept him with the love of his life. “We’re celebrating more than that,” I tell him, a smile tugging at my lips as a three year old Kuhlekimi waddles to where my boyfriend is, drawing her arms up, demanding his attention. “It’s taken so much for you to get here, Siya. We’re all very proud of you, it wasn’t easy but you made it.”

He bites the inside of his cheek and continues staring at the dancefloor where the others are having the time of their lives. I wonder if I’ve made a bad call by saying what I said. I wasn’t blunt about his pain but still, he doesn’t like to talk about Nhlakanipho. He pretends that the other boy doesn’t exist at all but in the beginning, when he came back from the mental institution, his parents asked me to stay over for a few days. We slept in the same bed. I’d catch his cries at night, then I’d hug him and hold him through the pain, but we wouldn’t discuss it in the morning. It’s his coping mechanism, an unhealthy one but what can he do?

It’s been three years.

Forty months, thirteen days and seven hours. Yes, I count with him, he sends WhatsApp messages everyday detailing how long it’s been but he won’t say anything else – just detail the time. I feel for him, I feel for him so much that sometimes I wish we’d get more info, that we’d find a way to contact Nhlakanipho but nothing. The answers died with MaKhathide.

“Thank you for this, it was unnecessary, but you’re a good friend.”

I give him a big hug. “I love you so much, Siyabonga, you’re my best friend. You have no idea how proud I am of you, I love you so much.”

“I—” he clears his throat, and we pull apart with a quiet, “thank you,” from him. He can never say ‘I love you’...not even to his parents, not even Kuhlekimi – who has become his sister. Nonkazimulo wouldn’t take her daughter, admitted that she’s better off with the Shandus. She rarely calls, let alone visit. She may’ve given birth to the little one but she’s not her mother. “Can I ask for a favour?”

“Sure,” I nod my head.

“I don’t like this song.”

I’m a little confused, he loves maskandi. Back when things were simple and carefree, it’s all he and Nhlakanipho would listen to. Then as the words register, I know why. Only Mjikjelwa can break his heart like this with a song, I remember the title – its *‘Kufanele ngihambe’*. “I’m on it,” I murmur and sprint to where Tshiamo, one of his good friends, is playing DJ. “Change that song.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask me silly questions and do it!” Maybe I sound a little harsher than intended but my best friend’s wellbeing is on the line. He can’t afford to have another mental breakdown.

“Dali...” Nqobizitha grabs my arm, and prevents me from making my way back to Siya, “I miss you.” He’s drunk, I can see it with that hazy look in his eyes and the pathetic smile. “Dance with me.”

“You don’t dance,” I remind him.

“Baby...baby,” he slurs his words, his hands are curious – like they were when we started liking each other. It makes my heart smile, when he’s like this I become a pile of goo. He makes my knees weak, I guess this is why we stumble a few times, much to the amusement of Sbani and Thatego. This thing between the two of them is still undefined, a little toxic if I’m being honest, and I see myself and

Nqobizitha in them – but there was hardly violence between us. Nothing like the scratches that Sbani will have on his arms and hands, nothing like the blue eyes Thatego will spot sometimes. They won't let each other go though – and Thatego's mother sees nothing wrong, they're both men after all.

Maybe if Mam' Ntwenhle were still alive...

She died two years back, still longer than MaKhathide, who would apparently call her an ancestor. Nqobizitha took it surprisingly well, much better than he took MaKhathide's death, that one destroyed him. He loved her, he loved her so much. Again, it's that good in him that he can't help. He has the best heart, the most forgiving, and he's so selfless. I see it all the time at home, how considerate he is. Everyday I wake up and aspire to be more like him. I'm not there yet but I will get there.

Sqalosenkosi is now talking to Siyabonga, with his girlfriend standing awkwardly with them. They've been dating for close to a year, his first long-term relationship ever. He seems to really love her. I don't blame him, the girl is beauty and brains. He's her type, well he doesn't have a type but they must be doing something right if they're together for almost a year now. Her name is Khensani, they met when Sqalosenkosi was holding a forex class in Tzaneen. She moved to Joburg early last year, and is in her first year at UJ.

"Bhubesi lami, stop..." I grab his hands that have wormed their way inside my pants, we have kids here. Siya's parents are here. I doubt this is respectful, dirty dancing on the dancefloor like this. He plants a kiss inside my neck and then walks away. I hope he won't fall in the toilet, that's where he's going. "Looks like you have a gift," I say when I arrive just in time to find some mysterious man handing over a neatly wrapped box to Siyabonga.

His surprise is evident, along with Sqalosenkosi and Khensani. "Is this a bomb?" he asks the guy who makes him sign a document, shakes his head, and then walks away.

"There's a little note on top of it. What does it say?" I give him an impatient look. He grabs the note, scans it a second, then gives it to me.

Dr. Siyabonga Ndaloyezulu Shandu.

Sincerely,

K.M

That's all the note says, and for a hopeful second I think its him – Nhlakanipho, but the confusion on Siyabonga's face says otherwise. He has handed the wrapping package to poor Khensani who had no choice but to take it. There's a doctor's coat in there – with Siyabonga's name embroidered on it. There's an elegant stethoscope and an expensive-looking leather medical bag with Siyabonga's name embroidered on it as well. "Maybe one of your former classmates bought it?" I ask him.

"They don't know I'll be studying medicine," he replies, the confusion still there.

Its awkwardly silent a few seconds before I clap my hands. "It doesn't matter, right? All those kids at Tukkies will be so jealous." He's decided to go to the University of Pretoria. Wits was his plan with Nhlakanipho and since he's not here... "Whoever sent this was really thoughtful, this is a beautiful gift." I give him a small smile.

He nods his head, "I guess."

"Let's just get back on the fun. We're celebrating you," my smile broadens and I skip over to Nqobizitha when he nods his head. "I love you," I tell my boyfriend.

"Bambi," he brushes my cheek, "let's go back home. I want to fuck you."

He has a way with words, doesn't he?

Still, I nod my head, he's asked so nicely.

Does sex always feel better when it's raining?

More...intense.

I'm half-naked, with Nqobizitha's dick buried deep into my being, his hands trailing to my ass—gripping hard enough to leave bruises. Despite the confinement of the car, he manages to change his angle slightly—nailing my prostate viciously slow, causing me to whimper. I can barely breathe, there isn't enough air in the car that we are steaming up with our languid coupling. It's a good thing that it's begun raining, icy liquid pummels Nqobizitha's Mercedes—it merges with the roaring thunder, disguising our pleasurable groans and moans. Another sob escapes me when Nqobizitha strokes my neglected dick, large hand twisting it teasingly while his big thumb wickedly rubs my dripping slit. Harsh pants escape me, my eyes watering, as I bite my bottom lip.

"Bambi..." Nqobizitha growls, gripping my jaw. I can see the lust in his eyes, the fire – I'm turning him into an insatiable bastard. "Don't make me break your legs."

I nod my head and twist my nipples through my t-shirt. "I—love you," my voice cracks.

"Bambi..." he repeats, as he strokes my rigid cock, precum dribbling down the sides. Slowly so slowly, his hot palm twists and pulls at me, that devilish thumb lingering on the sensitive head until I want to scream, to cry.

"There," I whimper in pleasure, focused on nothing but the thick cock stretching my insides, curving to peg my prostate. "Right th - there...NO!"

I cry out when Nqobizitha stops moving, he leans forward to press a kiss to my nipple, and then moves again. "Am I allowed to ask for your hand in marriage? To pay lobola, or will your fragile masculinity prevent you from accepting because you're not a woman?"

I hear the words, but they sound too near and far at the same time. My heart is pounding too hard, I can barely catch my breath. "What?" I hold still, the muscles in my thighs straining, my knees digging into the car seat. Sweat trickles down my spine meeting Nqobizitha's hands where they cup my ass firmly.

"When should I organize the actors to be my uncles?" Commanding brown eyes collide with mine, my harsh panting still filling the car, my thin chest rising and falling in sync with Nqobizitha's. My hands fumble for purchase, digging into the soft leather of the carseat as I teeter on the brink. Devilish fingers are plucking at my erect nipples, rubbing the nubs. My dick jerks with each pluck, coming close to the edge, as I try to make sense of his words.

Is he saying what I think he's saying?

His teeth scrap my collarbone, teasing me with the promise of the bite to come. My neck is probably a mess already, stinging from where he had feasted on me earlier, his rough stubble scratching at the recent bites. "Don't play with me," I gasp, my lips brushing lightly against his. "You don't believe in marriage." His views changed overtime, I remember we discussed this once. It hurt but I was fine with it.

"I believe in us."

"Am I then, fuck!" a moan leaves me as another thrust causes me to see stars. My fingers dig into his shoulders. "What—about me? Are my uncles—"

"No," he interrupts me firmly, "my fragile masculinity refuses to allow it. Not that I think you're a woman, it's just – all animals are equal but..."

"You're an asshole!" I slap his shoulder but quickly nod my head. "When do you want to do this? Are you sure? I don't want you to hate me."

"I'm yet to hate you for snatching all the blankets at night, trust me, it could never happen."

"Then I-I guess we're engaged," my throat clogs up.

He kisses my lips and nods yes, "Zithobile Ngcobo," then he starts to pound into me with reckless abandon. That rock hard cock punches through my clenching hole, splitting me open. Shuddering and wheezing, I hold on to Nqobizitha's shoulders, gasping every time his massive log bottoms out.

"Uuuhhh!" I moan as I spiral, falling into hedonistic darkness. "Ohhh god!" It burns so, so good.

Nqobizitha hammers inside of me, strong arms holding me in place; I can only take what he's giving me, my face buried in his neck. But he grips my face to forcefully plunder my lips and it's enough. I blow my load splattering his shirt with my seed. My voice cracks in arousal as he thrusts a few more times and then follows after me, shooting into my depths. It ends with his lips pressing into my neck. And it's happening, I'm so embarrassed. My cries are ugly, but I can't help it. I'm feeling so emotional, feeling so

much—so passionately, so fervently, strongly. It's all so strong and I have no idea what to do except cry. Cry because Nqobizitha will never know, never know just how fiercely I feel.

“Are you okay?” a whisper in my ear, worried.

“I just, I—love you so much.” I snifle, kissing his cheek. “And you will never know just how much.”

Nqobizitha pulls away just enough to look at me. He kisses my tears away. “Maybe I won't, Bambi. But I have an idea—and I love you, so much.”

“It's all mutual?” I look into his eyes, breathing hard, needing the confirmation – like I sometimes do. Guys like this one never go for boys like me. He's the hottest thing since volcanoes.

“It's all Mutual Desires, Bambi,” he says, kissing my lips, “Mutual Desires.”

THE END.