

A man with a beard, wearing a red sweater, is sitting in a dark, leather-upholstered chair. He is looking down and to the left with a thoughtful expression. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of his sweater and the contours of his face.

The Grande Village

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[21 August 2018]

I love you. I love you from a distance, I love you behind the high walls of your home. The love I have for you is the only thing that keeps me going. I don't know if you will ever forgive me but I pray you do, one day. I miss you everyday.

[22 August 2018]

I have one wish, and that is to hold you in my arms again and close the wounds that my hands opened. I loved you but I didn't show it enough. I miss your voice, I hear it when I'm alone. You are all my heart would ever want.

[23 August 2018]

Today I fixed another amount for our future. It's crazy I know but if the chance of us being together again comes, I don't want you to ever worry. I've also made

some friends, not exactly friends but I hang out with them.

[24 August 2018]

Today you are not the only person I'm missing, I miss my mother too. Life is so hard without you guys....

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THANDEKA CHILI

Today I found myself unpacking my old suitcase and taking out my photo album. I don't know how it's possible to miss the person who hurt you more than anyone. The person who left your heart shattered in million pieces. The pain he caused physically was nothing compared to the emotional scars he left. He loved me, or so I thought. He was my first love, my everything. I was doing my matric when we met, he was a security guard. He was three years older than me, different backgrounds determined our different future. His parents died when he was eleven, he only had an

uncle. His uncle was a drunkard so he had to finish school and make a living. And that living was being a security guard. I loved him regardless of what everyone was saying.

"Thandeka he don't suit you," people said all kind of things. Some took a jab at his home and job. Everyone was praying that I find someone else in college but I didn't. I didn't love anyone but him. He was the air that I breathed. His voice was the melody I listened to.

Mthethowakhe Mkhize, *isthandzwa sami sase Mbo*.

"And then now?"

Urgh! I wipe the tears and look at her.

Her face drops as she catches a glimpse of the picture I'm holding in my hand.

"Mesuli will be here any minute now, you better get yourself together" she says.

"He's been on my mind lately," I tell her.

She narrows her eyes, "Four fuckin' years Thandeka! He moved on, I saw him with that Qwabe girl. You also moved on, your fiancée loves you."

"I just wonder if he is okay" I say.

"It's none of your business, the guy abused you."

I let out a sigh, she won't understand. Yes, he hurt me

but it doesn't mean I stopped caring. He bared his soul

to me. I've seen him smile, I've seen him cry. He was everything, bad and good, hardcore and vulnerable.

"He lost his uncle" I say.

She rolls her eyes, "We also lost our uncle mos. Uncle Jack, remember him?"

"It's different, we still have our parents. He has no one now."

"Okay stop with a 28year old orphan, I got you a decor guy. He is one of the best, Major must cancel that one."

I lie in bed and check my messenger. I'm not about to discuss weddings while in this condition. I hired a wedding planner for a reason, which is to plan everything. I don't know why they are claws-on and dictating him.

"Linda, I want Major, can you guys buzz off and let him do his job?"

"You are boring. If I were you I would be putting my make-up on and dressing up," she says.

I'm glad I'm not her and she's not me. She walks out and slams the door behind. This bitch doesn't care that I'm older than her. One year older, she should respect me.

She is right though, I should put my make-up on and dress up. Mesuli doesn't like waiting, I don't want to deal with his moody ass.

I dress up and go wait in the living room with everyone. All they talk about these days is Thandeka's wedding. My mother printed more invitation cards, without my consent or Mesuli's, and invited all her friends and their friends and friends of their friends. We will have more than 100 guests, family members excluded.

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My family worships Mesuli. This wedding means more to them than to me. Everyone's face lightens when he walks in the room. He's also a gentleman, he exchanges warm greetings with everyone before 'stealing me away'.

"Where are we going?" I ask.
He grins, "It's a surprise."

He loves surprises, I don't. I prefer knowing what to expect. He is into music, house music and noisy beats. I'm an introvert, hating noise comes with my personality, so I don't usually enjoy his 'day out'. They are filled with loud music, sweaty dancers and crowds. I have discussed his swag or whatever he calls it a number of times, he is into it and not changing. I think boring comes with age, I'm 25 years old and this thing of wearing jeans and sagging the waist really turns me off. People must dress presentably. Imagine hating all that and still choosing a man who dresses exactly like that? Yeezus swag they say. I hate it.

Okay where are we? From where I stand this look like a Shisanyama. I love grilled meat, just not in the crowd.

"What's the name of this place?" I ask.

"It's Shakes Grillers," he says.

"Shakes Grillers? Are you serious?"

He nods, "Yes. Shakes owns it."

Wow! I can't believe the young brother did this. I'm so proud of him.

"When did it open?" I ask.

"Last week Friday," he says.

"And you didn't invite me? Really Mes?"
He looks at me and laughs, "Were you going to come?"
"I would've decided," I say.
I probably wouldn't have come but an invite would've been nice. Shakes is like my young brother too. He comes after him, he is 24 this year. It's a common thing for his kind to open Shisanyamas. I will call him a pantsula because he has been dancing ever since I started knowing him. Even his nickname, Shakes, says a lot about him. He walks around with headphones, bouncing his head with straight cap on. They come from a financial stable home hence every Chili adores Mesuli; he will make a good husband yen-yen.

Yeer! I should've known, there is no shisanyama without a shebeen next to it. It opened last Friday but you wouldn't tell, it's already packed. Are we even going to find place to sit? Mesuli is pulling my hand, whistling to his friends and talking tsotsi taal. He is an educator, this is not how he should carry himself. What if one of his students see him? Kids are going to lose respect for him.

Great! We have space reserved for us. It's a bit distant from other tables. He must've told them about his introvert fiancé. Our meat comes within minutes.

"Welcome to Shakes Grillers baby," he says passing a napkin to my side.

"Thank you, where is the owner?"

"Out and about," he says.

"With girls?" I ask.

He smiles, "You know him very well"

"Linda wants to take over Major's job."

He stops cutting meat and laughs. He loves my sister's madness, they get along very well.

"I think she wants to be

the bride," he says.

I shrug, "She can take

over."

He stops laughing and

looks at me, clearly not

taking the joke.

I smile, "Take some chill pill, I'm the bride."

"You are my wife and mother of my children."

He is a sweetheart. Our love has been a smooth ride, I

didn't expect it from him, I thought he'd be a player.

You can't judge a book by its cover; a humble looking man showed me flames, and now the wild looking one is treating me like Mam' Chili's tupperware.

We stuff ourselves with meat then drive to the mall.

He wants to buy a few things, don't ask me what things. I accompany him to each store, we are looking for certain Nike sneakers he that he wants. He is undecided, he is now admiring every pair we come across. I don't do shopping often, maybe I can use this opportunity to get myself a pair as well. I leave the male section and go check out Ladies. As I turn the corner I feel a strong presence behind me and turn around.

Mthetho Mkhize?!

My eyes flutter a number of times. I'm in disbelief, he is grown but he still looks the same. It's been four years, I don't know whether to greet him or walk away. I was thinking about him a few hours ago, now he is here staring at me. Tall in his deep melanin skin, defined jaws and dark, unreadable eyes. The father of my baby who never got to reach this earth because of him. My

first of everything. I don't know how he dealt with it, the last time I saw him he was on his knees crying and begging me to stay. It feels like yesterday, I remember each day we spent together.

"Thandeka," he says.

My name coming out of his mouth sounds differently.

It feels like I can't breathe. I hold onto the shoe rail next to me, he takes a step closer.

"Don't!" I stop him.

He stops. A bit of life comes into his eyes.

Then Mesuli's voice comes behind me. "Baby look at this one."

Mthetho's eyes drop to my left hand, when he looks up an indescribable expression has surfaced. I have a ring.

Mesuli's arm sneaks around my waist.

"Have you found what you want?" he asks.

"No," I say, taking a deep breath.

Mthetho's eyes leave mine, he looks at Mesuli but doesn't say anything. Mesuli pulls me away, my back turns on him but I can still feel his eyes on me. They're tense, he's probably nibbling on his bottom lip to stay in control. That's Mthetho, I know him.

I can't think of anything but him. Mesuli has switched on the music in the car, he sees that I'm a useless company. He doesn't know who I saw and what he used to mean to me. It feels like it all happened yesterday.

[Memory]

He was panting, trying to push me back.
"Thandeka don't do this," he half-screamed.
I laughed and pushed the pillow on his face again. It was a mere game, I was teasing him because I thought he was too uptight. Pillow fights, every couple plays it. He didn't want to play, he warned me twice and then turned into a lion. That was the first time, he realized five minutes later what damage he had done and stopped. He apologized and explained what triggered his emotions. I was doing what his father did to his mother, so I understood.

No pillow games.

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BUHLE QWABE

I'm a bit surprised to receive Mthetho's call. It's late, almost 19h00. He knows that I'm not allowed outside the gate at this time. Being 24 years doesn't change anything. "You will remain a child until you build your own house," those are always my mother's words. She doesn't take nonsense, I have to make up an excuse every time I want to see Mthetho. She knows him and she doesn't like him that much. Most people don't, he doesn't like people either, so it's even. I change my clothes and brush my teeth and spray some perfume then go create an emergency lie. I can't wait to move out.

"I'm sure it's that Mkhize boy, ay bandla!" she says clapping her hands.

I secretly roll my eyes and walk out using my phone as flash light.

I can see him standing by the tuckshop. That's our usual spot. He's wearing a black hoodie jacket, leaning

against the container. There's a huge mystery around him, I always feel like I'm the only person who knows how to figure him out and that makes me feel special.

"Hey love," I say hugging him.

He gives me the tightest hug. There is a street light just opposite so I'm able to see his face. His eyes are bloody red. I could ask him who died but he doesn't have anyone he can cry for. He doesn't have a family, his father killed his mother then killed himself. It's all happened in front of him.

"I'm sorry Buhle," he says.

There is a big frown on my face. I'm confused. What's going on?

"Is everything alright?"

"No," he says.

He is getting me worried.

"Buhle..." He hold my hands.

"Baby?" I'm freaking out.

"I can't be with you anymore, I've wasted so much of your time, I don't want to waste more. You've been nothing but a good girlfriend. Whoever marries you is a lucky man."

He is kidding, right? He can't be serious.

"I'm sorry MaQwabe, life doesn't allow us to be together. There is life that I'm meant to live and life that you are meant to live. They are not joined together. You were a flower decorating a desert, someone better deserves you."

I search for a fraction of doubt in his eyes, there is none. He means it. A part of me foresaw this day coming but I got on my knees and prayed. It's clear God didn't hear those prayers. I was willing to accept half of his heart, it is better than nothing. It's better than not having him at all. I loved him the first day I saw him. It was crazy and scary at the same time. I was 20 years old, pure and innocent. I didn't know what was going on but I knew my heart desired him. My arms longed to embrace his hulky body and my fingers ached to run on his dark skin. I wanted to stare in his eyes until I saw the shape of his heart. He was handsome, in my eyes he will always be, even without a smile on his face. I was warned against him, everyone thought he was a cold hearted person, they

still do, but I know him better. I've peeled some layers off and seen the glimpse of a man he is.

I had dreams of attending Umkhosi Womhlanga till the age of 25 but if he wanted us to make love I was ready to do it. And I did, after six months of our relationship. He deflowered me, Mthethowakhe Mkhize. The same man standing in front of me today, telling me he cannot be with me anymore.

"Mthetho you can't do this, please," I beg.

"Forgive me Buhle, I cannot keep you knowing very well that my heart is...that it's not into this."

A sword stab through my heart. I gave his heart my all, how come it's not into this? I've dedicated four years of my life to him. I loved him, even when he was colder than ice. When he was down I cheered him up.

His uncle died, I wiped his tears. I've been there for him through it all. When he didn't want to open up I stood by his side and supported him without knowing what he was going through. I didn't even ask questions when it comes to me.

"Please don't cry, I want you to be happy and that can never happen if you're still stuck with me. You put your happiness on hold and make my happiness your priority. In this world Buhle no one has a priority of making another person happy, seek for your happiness, it comes first. It's your duty to make yourself happy, remove yourself from people who invest nothing to your life like me."

He puts his hands on my shoulders. "Goodbye and goodluck Buhle. I will never forget you."

I watch until his dark figure disappears. He doesn't look back, not even once. Why did God let me meet him? If we weren't supposed to be why did we start to be? How do I stop loving him when my soul is emptied by his absence?

A drunk girl once told me; "Unrequited love is hard and draining. It's like waiting for a chicken to pee, something that will never happen. He doesn't love you and it's killing him. He knows how much you love him, he is with you only because he is guilty of

the sacrifices you've made for him. He loves

Thandeka."

I don't know Thandeka. She live here in the Grande Village, kwaSokhulu, but our paths have never crossed. I don't know what she has, I don't know the story of Mthetho and her. But clearly she has something that I never had and never will have. His heart.

Insert 2

SAPHOKAZI NGCOBO

I'm late again, Buhle is going to kill me. Fuck this guy,
I told him to wake me up.

"Hey get up!" I say slamming his head with a pillow.

"Mmmmm!" he grunts and turns to the other side.

This is a test, Satan is testing my faith. What's his

name again? Jesus Christ, I should stop inviting every

Tom and Dick in my house. Look now he is sleeping

like a boss, changing sides like a king.

I smack his cheeks, "Bro you need to leave."

He opens his eyes slowly and brushes his face. Was he
this ugly last night? I hate Bernini.

He is smiling. Even his smile looks like a cry.

"Go please," I beg.

"Come here, I want to lock your clit."

Did he say lock? It's time I fold my blankets.

"I'm still sleeping," he contests.

I pull them off forcefully. "Go sleep in your house."

"Come on putsununu!"

Oh Jesus Christ! Do I have to pour water on him?

"You have five minutes bro, I'm late for work." I'm no
bloody putsununu.

He finally gets the message and gets off the bed. I
leave him dressing up and go to the kitchen and fix
my lunchtin.

"What are we eating?" someone asks.

I turn around with a frown on my face. He chowed me, slept comfortably on my bed, now I have to feed him?

"You will eat in your house," I say.

"Aw come on, I'm dying. Try at least R5 for igwinya so that I can chew on my way."

Wow, just wow! I quote from the Bible; Corinthians 5 verse 1 "A man is a provider, a woman is a receiver."

Who the fuck is this guy opposing Jesus? I can't provide amagwinya for him, he should be compensating me for my vagina and bed.

Men we pick from clubs, sigh! I have to chase him out with a broom before he realizes how serious I am.

I'm literally running all the way to the salon. I could catch a taxi but the whole R9 just to get around the corner. It can never be me, I'd rather feed that Tom I slept with amagwinya.

There are customers already waiting, I'm in deep shit. "Morning guys," I greet sheepishly.

Buhle keeps quiet, only Sindi returns the greeting. She is plaiting someone. There is another one on the waiting chair with uncombed, clustered hair.

"What are you doing sis?" I ask her.

I'm praying she says she is here to cut that hair.

"I want straight-back," she says.

"Why didn't you comb your hair?"

She gives me a look, "I was coming to the salon, duh!"

This is what we deal with everyday. Moody

customers, ever dissatisfied ones, and rude ones.

"Why are you late?" Buhle breathes her first words.

"My alarm didn't ring," I say.

"Sapho this is my salon, not yours."

Trust me, it's written in bold letters outside: BUHLE'S HAIR SALON. Sindi and I share a look. Why are her eyes red? Did she fight with Mthetho?

"I'm sorry, it won't happen again," I say.

We should have face masks now, this lady's hair is

going to give me infections. When did she last wash

it? Maybe five months ago. But I wouldn't dare

recommend a hair wash because she will take it as an

insult, I have already seen how her mood is.

"Did you hear Thandeka Chili is getting married?"

Sindi asks.

"No. Who is she marrying?" It's my first time hearing it.

"Mesuli," she says.

"The teacher?"

"One and only."

There goes my imaginary husband! I can't believe it but Thandeka is a good girl, she can take him.

No, wait a sec...this is good news.

"Girl, you are free at last," I tell Buhle.

No lies, we all know her relationship with Mthetho

wasn't safe as long as that girl was still walking

around with no ring on her finger. She holds a special

place in Mthetho's heart.

"This calls for celebration," I add.

She clicks her tongue and walks to the store room.

This is confusing, I thought she would be happy.

I look at Sindi, "Where is the joy?"

"She was dumped."

What???

"Get out!" I'm shocked to the core.

"She is broken beyond repairs," Sindi.

I'm shocked. How can Mthetho dump her after so

many years? She gave him her all. I doubt she has ever

kissed another man except him.

"You see this is why I date for money and sex, this

thing of dating for happiness is going to send lot of

girls to ICU."

"That's an opinion, there are good guys out there," Sindi says.

"You're right, Mthetho is one of them but look now." I have no faith in men whatsoever.

The girl is making cringing noises. I'm busy getting the scoop from Sindi, our Daily Sun.

She turns her head. "You're hurting me."

I'm sure men have hurt her way worse.

"Sorry doll." I turn to Sindi, "So + when did this tsunami happen?"

"Last night obviously," she says.

The woman in topic walks out looking ready to murder someone. We quickly change the topic to weather conditions.

"Ey, it's cold today" I say.

"Very cold chomie," Sindi.

I clear my throat, "When is Mesuli's wedding?"

"On the 20th this coming month."

What? That's too soon. What are we going to wear?

It's short notice.

"I guess Buhle will loan me some money because I will be broke. I already have tight budget," I say.

Sindi laughs, "You're not invited Sapho."

"Yes, I'm not but I know the direction to Mesuli's home. We should confirm the time and color of the day." This is a village, hearing about it on the street is an invitation.

"I will ask Thandeka's sister, Linda, on Facebook later."

That's my girl! I can't believe there is a wedding in the village and nobody told me until now.

The whole morning is busy, customers keep coming in. Buhle is not lifting a finger today, I don't know whether Mthetho broke her hands or heart. She is sitting behind her counter, crying internally. Today Sindi and I can't go for lunch at the same time. She goes first then I follow. I want to get a cold drink across the road.

Now whose car is this? I don't recognize it. I'm the type of girl who knows everyone; their cars and registration numbers, dirty secrets and skeletons.

Nobody can tell me anything around here.

The person hoots for me, I walk towards the car. Nx!

It's Shakes, Mesuli's brother. We went to the same school, he didn't know anything. I remember how English presentation cremated him. He would stutter from the introduction to the end. Unlike his brother,

the A-student of his time. This one only knows how to dance like Michael Jackson.

I was clever than him but look at me now. He is driving expensive cars and I'm doing people's hair in Buhle's salon. My boss is one year younger than me, life is really not fair.

"Skhokho sami," I say smiling.

That's how I refer to people with cars, in fact every black person does that. As soon as you get a car we become friends you never knew you had

"Hey Sapho, howzit?"

"I'm great, nice ride hey." I wish it was mine but my grandmother didn't own a baboon.

He smiles, "Thank you, do you need a lift?"

He is a gentleman, just like his brother. Their parents are not nice though, they think they are Mr and Mrs Motsepe of the village. I feel for Thandeka, she's too humble for such in-laws.

"No thanks, I'm going to the tuckshop," I say.

"Okay cool," he says.

I stretch a gold-digging grin. "You can give me R10 for cold drink though."

He laughs, "Sapho, you haven't changed one bit."

'Change for what? I'm not a weather," I say.

He gives me R50 and drives away. This is how beneficiary it is to be well-connected. I know people in high places.

As soon as I get money I become allergic to food packed in my lunchbox. Right now I can't even stand the thought of baked beans and rice in my lunchbox. I want a can of Stoney and cream-buns.

Let me add something to snack on.

"How much are Doritos?" I ask.

"R19," the lady says.

"You mean as in R10 plus R9 on top?" I ask.

"Precisely," she nods.

I laugh, "No thank you, give me peanuts with no raisins."

When I get back Sindi exclaims and asks me to give her a sip of the cold drink. She is a good girl, her bank account is just not as good as she is. She lives with her boyfriend, providing for his unemployed ass. She is always broke, this girl can go months without eating Magnum or doing anything to please herself.

"You need to febenza, your boyfriend won't do nothing for you," I tell her.

"Well, not all of us have the guts."

Yet she has the guts to drink my Stoney. Gulp after gulp without taking a break.

Buhle raises her head. "We need to lock up early today"

"Why?" Sindi asks.

"I'm not in a good space."

Now we are going to lose money because a man left her!

"You can go home, we will lock up at 5pm as usual," I say.

Sindi gawks at me." You're not the boss, Buhle wants us to knock off early, that's it."

"Rushing to cook for your Julius Malema? Don't bore me, we are staying and making money," I say.

If there is anything I love doing, it's making money.

This short-time means wage's cut, I can't have that.

Someone shouts my name outside the salon. It could be anyone, people know me. I shout for the person to get inside since I'm still busy.

"Ey mshana!"

I look up, it's my uncle. This person resides in

Mabanga with his girlfriend, she took him in three years ago. He is like a parent to me, even though we don't get along most of the times.

"Malume what are you doing here?" I ask.

"I'm going

home," he

says.

He must be

joking!

"Which home?" I ask.

"My sister's house," he says.

"What happened to your girlfriend's house?"

He dismisses me with a hand and grabs a chair. He

is wheeling a large 1955 suitcase, wearing oversized

brown suit and school Toughees. He is really

moving back home. This is goodbye freedom, no

more boys coming over.

Sindi smiles, "See, we have to knock off early."

I just sigh. She got what she wanted.

"Malum! Sotobe, what's outside the door?" Buhle asks.

"My chickens," he says.

"Live chickens?" I'm confused.

"Yeah, I'm a farmer now."

Whoah! He needs to hold his horses, owning a couple

of chickens doesn't make anyone a farmer.

"Where are they going to stay?" I ask.

"There are empty rooms in my sister's house," he says.

Oh, he is here to test me. My mother left that house on my name, it's mine now.

"Chickens will shit all over the yard and they're smelly."

"I'm their owner, I will clean after them," he says.

He shifts his attention to Buhle. "MaQwabe you should advertise my chickens for me."

"How Malume?" Buhle.

"Put up posters outside your salon and write cheap Giant Sotobe's Chickens then put Sapho's number for contact."

My number? No ways! I don't want people calling me for chickens.

"People will take my number and use it for other purposes and besides that I'm not your admin Malume."

"I will give you your cut," he says.

Now he's talking. "Okay we can discuss that."

I had no choice but to knock off early like Buhle and Sindi wanted. Sotobe is greeting everyone on the streets, he thinks people missed him.

"Sotobe is this you?" one of his old friend asks, thrilled.

"In flesh, Ngwenya," he says.

They shake hands and laugh. He tells Ngwenya that he is a successful farmer now.

The neighbor is outside, she stops and looks at us with her hands on the hips. This time I don't stop, I leave them talking.

My life begins again, with a drunkard uncle who calls himself a farmer. I have to cook everyday, report my whereabouts and add grocery. Am I going to enjoy this? I doubt.

Speaking of cooking, what's for supper?
"Malume there is no curry," I say walking to him watching TV. He is sitting like a boss. The volume is on max, he is going to block his ears.

"What are we going to eat?" He is 48, I'm 24 but he is asking me what we are going to eat.

Well...!

"Chicken" I say.

"Oh cook it then."

I walk out and go to the backroom where he put them.

I snatch one and go slaughter it by the gate. I'm a murderer, people need to thread careful around me.

I roast it and cook pap, I'm not really in the cooking mood.

"This is a warm welcome mshana," he says when I set the table.

"You deserve it," I say.

He takes a bite of the chicken and nods his head.

"You should have been a chef mshana," he says.

I smile, "I didn't even put much efforts malume, it's your chicken that is natural delicious."

He frowns, "What do you mean my chicken?"

"It's your chicken, you said I must cook it." Doesn't he remember?

He gets up on his feet, "What? You cooked my chicken."

He is confusing me. He said I must cook the chicken, why is he pacing up and down like a madman?

"Is everything alright? Your food is getting cold," I ask.

"Hey, hey Saphokuhle! Don't drive me crazy! You cooked my chicken?"

I lean back, still confused. "I did, with your consent."

He puts his hands above his head and walks out.

What just happened? I take his food to the fridge and continue with my delicious dinner.

Insert 3

Thandeka

There is no peace in this home. It's 6am for goodness' sake.

I pull the covers off my head. "What do you want Linda?"

"How did you know it's me?" she asks.

Like really? She is the only irritating person that I

know. When is she going back to varsity by the way?

I open for her and return back to bed. She is dressed and all glammed up. She looks for my perfume and sprays half of it on her body. I have to raise my head up and give a warning look before she puts it down.

"Your man is a teacher, mine is a student," she says.

"Where are you off to so early in the morning?" I ask.

"We are planning a surprise bachelorette party for you."

You know what, surprise parties are for white people.

They were not meant for us, black people have wet mouths. She was not supposed to tell me about it.

"Don't tell Mom and Mesuli that I told you, it's a surprise," she says.

"It's no longer a surprise, I know."

"Thandeka you have to unleash a Charlize Theron and fake it, otherwise I'm good as dead." Her phone rings, she looks at me with a smile. I know it's Mesuli. I don't get how he is involved in my bachelorette party. It's something that should be planned by my friends.

"Hey Mes," she answers.
Her pupils dilates, a smile stretches on her lips. It's funny I'm not even curious of what they are talking about.

"Oh my gosh! I won't tell her, trust me," she says.
She cracks a big laugh and end the call.
She looks at me, joy written all over her face.

"Guess what?"

I let out a sigh, "Just tell me."

"You are getting a car on your party."

"Really?"

She rolls her eyes. "Can't you jump up and down and scream like a normal girl"

I laugh, "I'm not normal Linda."

"With Mthetho you were normal, even R5 airtime from him made you jump," she says.

She is getting off the line, it's time she leaves.

"Thank you, bye," I say.

She takes coins on the dressing table and walks out. In her head I only use notes, coins are useless, I just decorate with them. Basically I'm her ATM. Actually

everyone is a money-vomiting machine to her. She is one year younger than me, still in university doing curriculum and instructional studies. She is not sure what exactly it is that she will be doing in future but she is enjoying university.

I cannot get my sleep back I might as well take a shower and get ready. I want to visit the salon today, my hairstyle is long overdue. If I get there before 8am I will finish and do my errands before the sun goes up. Mesuli and I have a dinner date later.

Wait, there is a salon here in the village. I doubt that one is busy. I heard Linda complimenting their service, she does her hair there sometimes.

I report to my mother before going out. She is a housewife, exploiting her husband's money. All she does is shop, host dinners and analyze people's lives.

"Are you sure you want to go to that salon?" she asks.

"Yes mama," I say.

"You're brave!"

What is that supposed to mean? It's a local salon, they don't kill people. Someone must get off her high horse.

"I will be back before 2o'clock," I say and walk out.

I get in my car and drive off. Did I tell you I have social anxiety? Well I do, I always feel like people are judging me and evaluating me when I'm in public. I get anxious, it's more than just shyness or occasional nerves. I go to lengths trying to avoid people. Linda is my only friend at the moment. She is the complete opposite of me, I bet everyone knows her here. As for me, some people don't even know that I exist. My parents have come to the style of introducing me as Linda's sister. Then people will be like, 'Oh we only know Linda.'

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BUHLE QWABE

You cannot stop life, it keeps moving. No matter how rough things are, the sun set and rise again. You have to keep going because time waits for no man. I'm

broken but I can't be broke. I get up and take a bath. I
texted the girls, today we are open for business.

My mother walks in as I dress up. Her face lightens up
immediately. "Where are you off to?"

I smile, "I have a salon, remember."

"That's my girl, the Qwabes never let anything stand
on their way of success. Especially not a thing called a
man, you came to this earth alone, you will die alone
too. Why must your life stop because of another
human being?"

I don't answer her. She has something against my
father, unfortunately my father's hatred has made her
hate all men. She sees no value in relationships. I will
tell you what, I'm going to have a husband and lot of
kids. I'm gonna have a family. The only sad part is
that I won't be having it with Mthetho. *No, you are
blocking him from your mind Buhle. Put your crown back
on.*

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And then???

That is Sapho standing by the salon. What happened to her?

She never comes early for work. Her earliest arrival has been ten minutes late. Today she is fifteen minutes early, something bad is going to happen in South Africa. Maybe earthquake or volcano.

"Good morning," I greet her. I'm checking if nothing is wrong with her. No, she looks fine.

"Hey boss lady, I sense money today. We are getting customers more than ever," she says.

I nod, "That's the spirit!"

"Trust me honey, by the end of the day we will have R5000."

Aw! Aren't we aiming a bit high? We only make that kind of money during Christmas holidays when everyone is home.

"Why are you early?" I ask.

"I'm avoiding feeding Sotobe's chickens, you know I've went from the administrator to caretaker," she says.

I laugh. This serves her right. On a serious note though, her uncle could make successful business out of this. People love meat and there aren't many chicken sellers in this area.

"You should help him out, maybe partner with him and make money together," I say.

She laughs out loud. "Me???"

SMH. She is so high for someone who is only

working as a hairdresser. I hope one day she sees the light. Every girl needs a side hustle.

It's normal for us to stay an hour or two in the morning with no customers. We are in a village, there aren't many girls. Most people are in big cities chasing their dreams. It's only us studied and stayed behind.

One of the reasons I stayed home was Mthetho. Yes, I sacrificed my dreams for him, the most stupid move a girl could ever make.

I plug a kettle, we might as well drink our tea. Sindi is the one who came late today. I can see myself in her.

She loves her man, all her dreams are placed on him.

He is the source of her happiness. Girls like us always end up with broken hearts. I don't know how many times I've dialed his number and fought the temptation of calling him.

"Buhleeeeeee!"

Damn! Can this girl ever keep her voice low? I don't know why she is screaming like I'm miles away.

"Sapho you are annoying" I say walking back from the storage room. They are peeping through the window. They are hairdressers, they address and analyze people walking on the street. This salon is more like a newsroom than it's about hair.

"Guess who is here?" She is suddenly whispering.

"Your crush or imaginary boyfriend," I say.

"Your sisterwife. No maarn, sistergirlfriend," she says stretching her neck further up.

Did someone forget that I'm single?

"She is coming here," Sindi whispers.

They both move away from the window and grab

chairs. Their eyes are glued to the door, they are

expecting something BIG. They are not even blinking.

A girl walks in, she has long, overgrown braids. I feel

like I've seen her before. She is dark skinned, tall and

beautiful. The nervous smile on her face makes her

even more beautiful. Her jewelry looks undoubtedly

expensive. She's holding her phone and car keys. I

don't know what she does but any back girl that looks

well organized like her makes me proud.

"Good morning," she greets.

"Heeeeey!"

Eish Saphokazi!

Sindi and I return the greeting like normal human beings.

The girl looks around, evidently nervous.

"I don't know what exactly is it that I want here," she says.

"You want to take those ugly braids out and do straight up."

Trust Sapho to tell a girl like her that her braids are ugly. She laughs it off and asks where she can sit.

I feel a pinch on my back. It's Sindi, I look at her, she makes signs with her eyes. I don't know what she is saying, what I know is we should not gossip about customers in their presence.

"This is the first, the whole Thandeka Chili in our Queen B salon," Sapho.

Oh fuck! It's the one and only Thandeka. A strange feeling kicks in, now I'm staring at her. She is talking to Sapho.

I guess she is the one who will be doing her hair.

"Taking these out will cost you R15.00," she tells her.

"R15?" she asks.

I clear my throat, "It's R5, she is pulling your leg."

"Are you guys kidding?"

We look at each other. Is she complaining or what?

She chuckles, "It's R35.00, don't undermine your work because you're in the village. Charge like other salons, kindness won't pay your bills."

Okay, I'm shocked. I thought she was complaining. Most of our customers complain, they want it to be free. I need more customers like her. She is different from what I imagined her to be. I thought she is a snob, not that she is not but she is better.

"We don't see a lot of you," Sindi says.

"You're trying to tell me I'm boring," she chuckles awkwardly.

Sindi shares a look with me. The thing is, I'm not a qualified gossip so I don't know what is that she is signaling.

"No, you're not boring, showing up your beautiful face in public could brighten our days. Dealing with Sapho's ugly face day in and..."

Wrong turn!

"Bitch don't you dare call me ugly, your man may be crushing on me as well as your father and uncles."

Sapho is always ready.

Sindi rolls her eyes, "I doubt any man I know wants you."

She sends an evil look then shifts her focus back to Thandeka.

"I heard about the wedding, congratulations!"

"Oh, thanks," she says flatly.

She doesn't look excited like a girl who is about to get married.

"Have you found a wedding planner? I'm on standby and charge insanely cheap," Sapho asks.

Sindi laughs, "You can't even plan a tea party."

"Mona! Thandeka you have found your wedding planner, she is right in front of you."

The girl laughs and tells her she will contact her if she needs any help. She is just being kind, wedding planning needs to be done by professionals and it's already late.

"Boss lady will do your hair," Salo says after combing her hair.

I frown, "You are putting me on duty?"

"You do better than us, it's her first time here so why not?"

This girl lives to test me. She takes her phone from the charger and glances at the screen. "Yoh, 9am! Sindi let's go and grab something in the tuckshop before other customers come."

I see what she is doing, she is trying to make my life a living hell. Now I have to do her hair, the same girl who absently destroyed my relationship.

They take their purses and walk out.

For a minute I'm glued on my chair, I don't know what to do.

Fuck me, this girl didn't do anything to me.

"What do you want to do?" I ask.

"Anything that will take less than two hours," she says.

It's awkward. I think she is also uncomfortable. Or not.

She didn't even know I existed until now.

"Rest your head backwards," I say.

I catch her staring at me through the mirrors.

She smiles, "So you're Buhle?"

"Yes," I say trying to distance my emotions from the conversation.

"Are you guys happy?"

"In the salon? Yes, we are happy."

She chuckles, "You and Mthetho."

I swallow a hot lump on my throat. Why did this moment come?

"Yes, we are happy," I say.

"Does he treat you right?"

I nod, "Yes"

"You're lucky."

A moment of silence passes. Thousand questions are trolling to my head. I feel like there is something behind her statement, what makes me lucky?

"I dated him, it was not the best period of my life.

Well, sometimes it was. It's just a mix of bad and good memories.

I worry about him but it makes me happy that you're there for him."

This is no use, I'm not a liar.

"Well, the truth is we broke up. He left me."

"Whaaat?" She looks genuinely shocked.

"He is in love with you," I say.

It takes everything in me to hold back tears and not break down. I have accepted it, he was never in love with me.

"We don't talk, we haven't talked since we broke up," she says.

"Why did you break up with him?" I ask.

This is the question I've been wanting to ask Mthetho but Thandeka was not a subject we touched. She was a no-go area.

"We lost a baby...he caused it," she says.

The pain in her voice is fresh, I catch a glimpse of her face, there's nothing but grief.

I remember finding a piece of paper with pencil-drawn sketch of a baby. I thought he wanted a baby, I asked if he wanted me to stop taking pills, he said no. Now it makes sense. Mthetho is not much of a talker, his mouth is pen and paper. There is a journal I never got to read, I feel like his life is written there.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't be, it's okay," she says.

"Can I ask a question?"

She exhales heavily, "Yeah"

"How did he cause it?"

"He attacked me, physically."

The same Mthetho I dated? The one who'd rather fake sleep than to argue?

"No!!" I can't believe it.

"That day I left and never looked back," she says.

"Maybe you should have looked back, to get closure. I feel like you guys need to talk things through. You

can't commit to marriage with unresolved issues from another relationship."

"I'm scared of being with him again in the same room."

My eyes widen, "You think he might beat you again?"

"I don't want to dig up those emotions," she says.

I knew it. She still loves him. Surprisingly I don't even

feel angry or jealous, rather I feel sorry for her fiancée.

She smiles, "You are a good person, I didn't expect you

to be this open. I always wanted to talk to you but I

was scared. I don't want to come across as a bitter or

nosy ex."

I laugh, "Well, I did lose him because of

you."

"Now I feel bad," she says.

"I'm kidding, what doesn't kill me will make me stronger."

Insert 4

THANDEKA CHILI

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He is home, alone obviously. My errands should include driving to him. I don't know if this is the best decision, but for my heart it is. I just want to see him and talk. There is a lot to talk about. This is the part of my life I have to confront, otherwise my future will forever be filled with hanging questions.

He renovated the house, it's bigger and better. But the sadness surrounding this home is forever lingering. The door is widely open. I knock a couple of times getting no answer. Eventually I let myself in. The house is totally different inside. The pictures on the wall are still the same though, except that his father's has been removed. My breath is held up as I walk inside the bedroom. He is lying flat in bed, snoring softly. Night shift did a number one on him, he is not a deep sleeper. I sit next to his feet and stare at him. I should be marrying him, not Mesuli. He is the one I had my dreams with. Our baby would be 4 this year. A lot would've happened, new memories and all. But he chose to kill our baby, he chose to destroy our future and everything we planned together. I was punished for things I didn't do. Sometimes the love I gave him wasn't enough, he needed more than I

could give. He needed his parents. Did he grow out of it? Did he deal with it? I don't know.

"Thandeka?" His voice nearly throws me off the bed. There is something running down my cheek. I send my hand, it comes back wet. I'm crying.

"Thandeka," he calls my name again.

"Hi Mthetho," I say, wiping my face.

There is a frown on his face, he is in disbelief.

"When did you get here?" He rubs his face and looks at me again. We stare at each, it seems like there is a lot going through his mind at the moment.

"How are you?" I ask.

"I am..." He struggles to find words and turns the question back to me." How are you?"

"I'm fine," I say.

"Congratulations, I heard

about the wedding." He is

faking it.

I stare at him until he looks

away.

"So you live alone now?" I ask.

"Yeah," he nods.

"I'm sorry about your uncle."

He shrugs, "It's fine."

Well, I didn't come here for his late uncle. I need closure, the last time we spoke he had killed our baby.

"Are you sorry Mthetho?" I ask.

Silence...

I stare at him. Did it affect him the way it did to me?

He lifts his t-shirt over his face. This is not how I thought things would go. I thought he'd answer me. "Four years later I still feel the pain you put me through. Why did you hurt me like that Mthetho? I loved you and loving you is all I did." I grab the t-shirt off his face, he needs to look at me and see the pain of the mother of his baby that he murdered.

"You killed me wena maarn!!" I scream. He blocks my hands until he gets tired. "You didn't beat Buhle, meaning I was your punching bag. You didn't care about me, you only wanted to hurt me. What did you gain Mthetho? What was your reward for breaking my heart?"

"Thandeka wait!" words rumble out of his mouth. I almost stop, it almost scares me off. But he killed my baby, what worse can he do to me now?

"I even worry about you, not knowing that you never gave a fuck." I feel so stupid and hurt all over again. At the drop of a hat, I'm down in bed, he has my hands pinned across my chest.

"I loved you, you know that. You know you are the only person I can ever love," he says.

"That's how you showed that you loved me?" I ask.

"I cannot make excuses for how I treated you. I'm sorry for everything." His words turn on a river of tears. His sorry won't bring back my baby.

"Do you know the pain you put me through? I still protected you from my parents, I acted as if nothing happened. I made the death of my baby a secret, do you know how painful that was? I couldn't reach out to anyone because I feared what was going to happen to you."

He lets go of my hands but I don't have that fighting energy anymore. I just want answers.

"I'm deeply sorry Thandeka," he says.

"I don't need that, I need explanations."

He rubs his nose and just stares at me. He doesn't have answers, he has tears.

I raise my eyebrow, "Mthetho???"

"I love you so much. I don't know if I will make it after you marry someone else. The only thing that kept me going was hope, if my hope dies I die."

My eyes widen, "That's emotional blackmail."

"The only future I see is where I'm with you, if you're not there then there is no need for me to get there."

I shut my eyes and digest everything he is saying. I open them and find him staring at me. This was my biggest fear, when all the feelings get dug up.

"I miss you everyday Thandeka," he says.

I whisper a 'no', I don't want us to be in this position.

"It's hard, and it gets harder every day," he says.
"But you are surviving, financially. I'm proud of you."
This is the same Thandeka who was throwing punches
a few minutes ago. Maybe I'm under some evil spell.
"I killed my baby, I lost the love of my life. My only
close relative died. I led a girl on, she loved me then I
broke her heart. I'm not surviving, not a little bit.
Everything haunts me, sometimes I long to hear your
voice. Just your voice saying sthandwa sami. I've
walked a long journey but I've lost everyone,
including myself."

I pull him to my chest and let his head rest on me. My
hands brush his back, feeling the skin I haven't felt in
four years.

"I think you lost treasure in Buhle," I say.
He looks at me, "I know but I love you."
My breath is taken away. The distance between our
faces closes. I start inhaling his breath, I missed him.
The moment our lips come in contact I close my eyes
and block everything out.

This changes my whole life. It revives everything. Him
moaning like this on top of me is what I've been....
Wait!

"Mthetho where is the
condom?"

He looks away and put his
hand on my cheek.

"We didn't use a condom!" I exclaim.
This is one fucked up mess. I need to go to town and
buy pills.

"I'm sorry," he says.

I sigh, "It's okay, I will get the pills."

Silence falls for the next few minutes. I enjoyed every
moment, this is what my body has been craving. It
makes me sweat; it makes me crazy. I love his sex,
more than anyone's.

He clears his throat, "Are you going to take a bath or I
should wipe you?"

"A bath is better but I'm scared of cold water."

"I know, there is a geyser."

"I will use your bath set."

He nods, "Okay"

I leave him lying on his stomach absorbed in deep
thoughts and go to the bathroom. I'm happy with the
changes he has made in this house. The bathroom
used to be outside, bathing outside would've attracted
unnecessary attention. People in this village talk.

When I come out of the bathroom he is dressed up, cooking something in the kitchen. He is not my man, I shouldn't be impressed.

I walk in, "Chef."

Well, he is only making eggs. There are plates with bread slices and icy cold Coke on the counter. Only Mthetho makes breakfast during the day. He lives alone, to him this is normal lunch.

"Don't you have food?" I ask.

He looks down. He is not giving me full eye contact. I don't know if it's regret and shame, but I've always liked his laid back personality.

"I'm doing grocery

tomorrow." He is

lying. He is living on

bread.

"I will wait for you in town," I say.

"Thandeka you have a fiancée." He kinda regrets what we did because we did it behind someone's back and he's not a sneaky person.

I exhale and sit on the chair. My fiancée must be worried where he is. I put my phone on silence, maybe he has been calling.

We eat in silence. His eyes keep running away from me.

"So you don't like my face anymore?"

He glances at me, "I do like it."

"Why all of a sudden you don't want to look at me?"

"I might never see you again."

I frown, "How?"

"It just feels like that."

I nod and carry on eating. I don't know what the future holds but I have to see him again. I need to see him again.

I clear the table and wash the plates. After rinsing glasses I join him in the bedroom. He is leaning against the headboard. There is a picture in his hand that has all his attention. I slide in next to him and look at it. It's a picture of me, so he'd rather stare at my old picture than to look at me.

"It was six years ago," he says.

"Yeah, look how thin I was," I laugh.

"I didn't know love and happiness existed until I met you. Nobody loves me except you."

I interject, "Buhle?"

"She loved me but she didn't know me."

I let out a chuckle, "You mean you didn't beat her?"

"She didn't know how scared I am of life. Everyone around here hates me. They hate the guy who is living alone. One night I woke up to voices around the house, I don't know what they were planning."

My brows furrow, I'm shocked. He shouldn't take that lightly, there has been multiple cases of people being murdered in this village.

He takes a deep breath and then says, "Buhle's mother didn't want me with her, she threatened me everyday. Saying she knows hitmen with high records, people who can switch me off in a minute. She told me I was born poor, I will die poor. I don't deserve her daughter, she wants me to die and rot in this house since I have no one to bury me."

I control my shattering voice and ask if that is the reason he broke up with her.

"Part of the real reason was you. It's hard getting you off my mind. I don't know if it's normal but you are the only woman I want to be with."

Now I'm curious to find out more about this woman threatening my man. Buhle looked like a good girl, she didn't speak ill of him despite of everything that happened. My biggest worry is that Mthetho has no one, he could get killed and rot in this house. His mother had siblings, they never looked at his direction after his parents died. Only his uncle, from the father's side stayed. He was not a useful person but his presence meant a lot to him. Now he's dead too.

He wraps me in his arms, "I'm safe Thandeka."

"No you are not." How can he say that?

"I am, but if anything happens to me know that I love you and I wish you all the best in life," he says.

"Nothing is going to happen, you left her daughter."

I don't know how the time flew. I'm lying on his chest for a few minutes then boom it's 17h30. Like really?

"Are you not going to work today?" I ask.

"I'm off," he says.

If I had a remote to make life stop I would be spending my day here with him.

"It's getting late, I have to go," I say.

He pulls me for a tight hug and ask for a kiss. It's intense, filled with emotions. It's like we are kissing for the last time in this world.

He grabs my face and plants a kiss on my forehead.

"Please don't forget me," he says.

As if that's possible. I smile and tell him to do the same.

"Shopping date tomorrow?" I ask, raising my eyebrow.

"I don't want trouble," he says.

I don't know a coward Mthetho.

"We will meet at 3pm by Checkers."

"Can I say no?" he asks.

I shake my head. He smiles and nods.

Leaving his house is the hardest thing to do. His hand

is squeezing mine, like he doesn't want to let go. Well,

here is the dumbest thing I did, I parked my car

outside. Everyone knows that I'm here. My car

registration sells me out as a Chili.

I peck his cheek, "I will see you tomorrow, 3pm."

"If not tomorrow, one day. If not one day, then in heaven."

My heart drops, "Tomorrow Mthethowakhe, you need groceries."

"Of course. I love you, always."

I feel light as I drive home, something huge has been

lifted off my shoulders. The anger I had for years is

substituted with joy. I didn't think I could do it but I have. He is forgiven. If God wanted me to have that baby I would've had it. His word is final, not Mthetho's. God could've saved my baby but he didn't because it was not meant to be.

Oh hell! Mesuli's car is here.

My father's too.

I check time, it's only 17h50. I smell trouble coming my way.

Everyone is sitting in the lounge in silence. Not even the TV is playing. Linda gives me a look I don't understand.

"Good evening," I greet and walk past.

"Thandeka sit down!" my father roars.

I walk back and sit next to my mother. Mesuli is looking at his phone, completely ignoring my presence.

"What time is it?" my father asks.

I confirm time on my wrist.

"It's 17:55," I say.

"I didn't ask time, I asked where you are coming from"

This is bullshit, I'm 26 years old.

"I was in town," I say.

"You left your car at the Mkhizes and went to town?"

I've been caught. I look at Linda, she is glaring at me too.

"Am I under certain supervision?" I ask.

"No, your fiancée here has been calling you all day. He paid for you and what do you do?"

Linda answers for me, "She goes and visits the same guy who was beating her to..."

Wtf!!!

"Linda" I warn.

She puts her hand up, "It's time everyone knows sis."

Her eyes turn to Mom and Dad. Mesuli's attention is on her.

"That Mthethowakhe asshole was beating her. Yes, he beat your daughter every chance he got, she even miscarried."

It's not her place. I can't believe her, she promised not to tell anyone.

"Is it true Thandeka?" Mom asks.

My eyes are fixed on this girl I considered my sister and my friend. The girl I opened up to because she is my blood sister. This is the greatest betrayal, I don't care how deep her hatred for Mthetho runs, she had no right. This is my business, I never put my claws in her life.

"I would like to go and rest," I say getting off the couch.

"Don't you dare walk out on us, Thandeka!"

At this moment nothing scares me. Even my father's roaring voice.

Well, maybe I should've been scared because a slap land right on my cheek.

"Bheki, no!" My mother screams.

She is too late, the man I call my father has slapped me twice.

"I told you to stay away from that boy!" he roars.

I stare at him then walk away. I hope Linda is happy. I

don't know why I'm being slapped. Is it for coming

late or being a victim of physical abuse or miscarriage?

I slam the door and lock it. My day ended on a bad

note. Now I have to answer Mesuli's questions, I'm

sure he has lot of them. I don't know where I'm going

to start explaining. How do I tell him that I'm still in

love with my ex? He don't deserve this.

"Thandeka open the door," his voice says gently outside.

The time comes faster than I anticipated, before I can

think clearly. I ignore him but he is persistent, I have

to open the door and face reality.

He asks as soon his foot set inside the room.

"Thandeka what's going on?"

I don't have an answer, I just look at him.

"Who is Mthethowakhe? What's going on?"

I sit on the bed. "We were together before I met you."

"And now what's going on?" He is going crazy, pacing up and down, rubbing his hands together.

"I don't know what's going on, I went to see him then I ended up staying longer than expected," I say.

He stands in front of me, "Why did you go to see him? What kept you longer?"

His questions keep flooding in, choking the life out of me.

"Did you have sex with him?" he asks.

My eyes pop out. This situation right here makes me feel like a north bitch.

His foot stomps on the floor, his voice rises.

"Thandeka did you have sex with him?"

"Yes," I confess.

He is not a violent person but I did expect a slap or fist. I open my eyes and look at him, he is just staring at me.

"I still have feelings for him Mes, I'm sorry," I say.

"What is that supposed to mean? You don't want me anymore?"

I open my mouth to answer him but words fail me. I can't break him more than I already have.

"Thandeka what's going on?" he asks again. He's in some kind of denial.

"Can I have some time? I just need to think, right now I'm a bag of emotions," I ask.

He walks out like a mindless person. I close the door behind him and take a deep sigh. How did things flip so fast?

Two hours later my mother walks in with a plate of food.

"I was coming to dinner table," I say.

"No stay here, your father is furious," she says.

My father exhausts me, seriously.

"Why is he angry at me? Mesuli should be angry, not him."

She hands me the plate and sits next to me.

"Why didn't you tell me about your miscarriage?" she asks.

I sigh, "Can we not talk about it? I'm fine now, that's what important."

"He told you to stay away from that boy, he was never good for you," she says.

"What did he do to you people? Is it a crime to be an orphan and live alone?" I'm over people judging

Mthetho for no reason. He's never bothered anyone.

"Why is he staying alone? He has no friends, he smiles to nobody. You should be scared of him Thandeka, there are people who get murdered in this village and nobody knows who murders them."

Wtt! Is she being for real right now?

"You are accusing him of murder because he has no family. You seriously think murderers have sour, empty lives? Mom you have to wake up and wind your neck into reality." I can't believe this.

She stands up, "I'm just saying, people are not happy with him."

She walks out with my appetite. I just eat two spoons and get full. Most villages have the same mentality, a person who lives alone is always accused of bad doings. I remember they burnt an old woman in another village,

accusing her of witchcraft because she lived alone. Is being alone such a sin?

I know Mthetho doesn't kill people. I mean what would he gain for killing them? Isn't it funny that most people who die in this area are political-associated and my father who is the ED chairperson keeps stepping up the ladder? Who said poor people are murderers? We need to watch out for those respected community members in shiny suits.

I take a long bath, replaying today's episodes in my head. When I walk out Linda is sitting on bed, reading my magazine.

"Guess where I'm going tomorrow night?" She is a special human being with rare brains. She thinks I have time for guessing her whereabouts! She thinks we are okay? She needs a mental evaluation.

"Please leave my room," I say.

She looks at me, eyes widely open.

"Is this about Mthetho? Gosh, the truth always has a way of coming out."

"And you are the way, right? Linda please get out before I lose it."

She sighs, "Fine."

Nx, she has the nerve to bring her skinny legs here.

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I wake up to a loud knock at the door. I check the time, it's 4am in the morning.

"Who is it?" I ask.

"Thandeka, it's me."

I should move out and leave her and her parents in peace. This is not life, but burning hell.

"I'm sleeping Linda," I say.

"They are burning Mthetho."

My ears receive the stimuli but my mind fails to record anything she said.

"Do you hear me?" she asks.

I put my gown on and open the door.

"What???" I'm shaking and confused.

"The mob outside the Mkhizes, yoh liyabhubha! The house is on fire as we speak."

I run past her to the main door. It's open, everyone is outside. From here I can see the fire and smoke dancing up to the sky.

"What is happening?" My brain seems to have frozen. Nobody answers me. I drag myself outside the gate.

It's too far, I don't know if I will make it.

Flames come closer and closer to my face until my vision turns blur. My knees get weaker, I try to find something I can hold onto with my hand but find nothing. The last thing I hear is someone screaming my name then it's lights out.

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BUHLE

It's a normal day, the sun is shining brightly in the far east. The birds are chirping in sweet melodies. The 6o'clock bus has passed. I'm late for work. This is the first, I'm always the first one, leading by example. I open the windows and head to the bathroom. I only need five minutes then I will be out, lotioned and ready.

My mother is in the kitchen, singing a Joyous Celebration song. She is not in her sleepwear as usual, no she is dressed up looking like a hot mama. I'm welcomed by fresh vetkoeks smell.

"Good morning," I greet.

"Hey my love," she's in a delightful mood.

If she had a man I would've said she is experiencing morning glory effects.

"I'm late for work," I say.

"Pack amagwinya and juice."

I smile, but with a slightly frown on my forehead.

"You look happy, did you win Lotto?"

She smiles, "It's something better than that."

I raise my eyebrows waiting for her to share the good news. She starts by sipping her water.

"The boy who broke your heart is gone," she says.

Confusion dawn to my face.

"I don't follow," I say.

"That Mkhize boy is gone. Go outside and look over the hill."

I head to the door and cast my eyes to Mthetho's

home. The house is roofless, there is smoke coming

inside the charcoal walls.

"Mama what happened?" I ask, alarmed.

"Why do you even care? They burnt him."

This cannot be happening! Who burnt his house? Was he inside? What did he do?

"Mama tell me he didn't die. Please tell me he escaped," I beg.

"Hey don't you dare weep for that monster."

He is a monster? What did he do?

One shoe slips off as I race on the road heading to what was Mthetho's home. Running with one shoe on and tears on my face. I push the other shoe off and run completely barefoot.

There is only one person in the yard. No community, no police officer. As I get closer I recognize the hair, I did it yesterday in the salon. It's Thandeka Chili. She is pacing up and down, picking things on the ground. I can take by the constant face wiping that she is crying.

"Thandeka," I call out of breath. She looks up with a puffy face. I walk closer and closer. My heart is beating heavily, like my chest is going to tear in two pieces.

"What's going on?" I ask in a shaky voice. She shakes her head and covers her face. I gaze inside the burnt house, everything is ashes. His furniture, the one he saved up for with his peanuts salary, it's burnt to ashes.

"Where is Mthetho?" I ask.
"I don't know Buhle."

"Was he inside?"

I can feel my joints getting weaker.

"I'm scared to check, the police are not coming."

Bloody South African police!

"He can't be dead Thandeka," I say.

She shakes her head, "No, he can't be. We are meeting at 3pm to do grocery"

"Really?" I'm in shock.

"I was with him yesterday."

It was my advice. I nod and walk towards the

doorway. I can't believe his house is burned down a

few months after he renovated it. How can people be

so cruel? He didn't bother anyone, he stayed alone and

on his lane.

"Buhle your feet will get burnt," Thandeka says.

My left foot is already hot.

"Take my shoes," she says and throws them to me.

She looks scared, her eyes are swollen and red. I

wonder when she got here.

My heart start pounding as I approach the skeleton of what was his bedroom.

Am I ready to see his burnt body?

Will it be body or just skeleton?

He can't leave like this. Yes we didn't have plans

together anymore but I care about him. I wanted him

to have a family, even if it's not with me. I wanted him

to know he is destined for happiness.

"Mthetho," I whisper.

Of course, there is no answer. I peep inside with my hand holding my chest. Everything inside is burnt. There is a breath of relief when I don't see a human skeleton anywhere, but questions start filling my head.

They could've killed him away from his house then came back to burn it. He could be somewhere lying in a pool of blood.

Moments like this make me question the presence of God. How can he let one person suffer so much under his watch? At which point did he put his foot down and said it's enough?

Thandeka's eyes are burning with hope when she sees me walking out.

"He is not inside," I say.

She takes a deep breath of relief. "Oh, thank God!"

We shouldn't thank him so fast.

"He doesn't have anywhere to go, where is he?"

The happiness and hope that was in her eyes vanish.

The reality is Mthetho's chances of being dead are

95%.

"Who did this?" I ask.

"They say there was a mob."

I'm confused. "A mob of justice? What did he do?"

She starts crying again. I have so many questions that I

want to ask, but there is no right person to ask. I don't

remember Mthetho bothering anyone. He went to

work in the mornings and came back straight home in

the evenings. I've never seen him arguing with a

neighbor, I doubt he even knew his neighbors' names.

Insert 5

MTHETHO MKHIZE

I had a feeling, it was there for the longest time. I broke up with Buhle but the feeling didn't fade away. I had dreams of dark water, in that water I fought to swim out. I always woke up before I could conquer the fight and that made me worry. How long did I have before the dark water flooded me out? Will I make it out alive?

My uncle built a goat shack for his three goats that died after three weeks of purchase. The shack is just outside the yard, it has made it through floods and strong winds. For the last couple of weeks that kraal has been my bedroom.

Beside the fact that I was planning to end things with Buhle, I kept some distance because I couldn't risk my life by sleeping inside the house. She wouldn't have understood, in her eyes the world is a perfect place. She is an angel, always putting others before herself.

She has high hopes in humanity. I hope she will be fine.

I had a beautiful day with the last person I expected on my doorstep. The person I longed to see but hadn't seen in years. The person who stayed in my heart, warming it up through cold winter and painful days. I call her nonokazi, because hell that woman doesn't want to see even a fly next to her.

She jumped right on my mother's footsteps, when I was with her I couldn't even risk wearing a vest twice.

It was the last time, I felt it in my bones. When the stars started brightening the sky I slipped to the goats' shack with my two blankets and a pillow. I was awake when I heard those voices again, I could recognize it was men voices. Something busted like a petrol bomb, then I saw the whole yard turning bright, flames licking the air.

I made one mistake, that was not to take my mother's pictures and my journal in the small metal box. My bank cards, Identity Book and Driver's license were all

inside. I can get all that if I reapply but I can't get my mother's pictures and my journey written in that journal.

I can't go to my workplace, something has been off with my bosses and colleagues lately. At this moment I don't trust anyone. The guys I got closer to raised my suspicions. They were trying too hard to befriend me as if they stood to gain something. I don't know who is who, that's why I chose to be alone. But my loneliness created enemies for me. I've questioned God so many times, but last night proved to me that I'm not on his list. I never was, it can't be possible that he sends ton of bad lucks only to me after taking all those who were my pillar of strength.

I don't know where I am. I don't know if I will ever see Thandeka again. If I ever return to the village I will end up in the body bag. I don't even know who my enemies are, I don't remember doing anyone wrong. It could be my parents' sins placed on my shoulders.

Even the coins I usually pocket today are nowhere to be found. My stomach is growling in protest, my joints are getting painful from walking.

I'm taking old deserted road because I don't want to be traced. My heart stops beating when a car hoots behind me. Death is following me!

I turn around, ready for anything to happen. My hand visits my waist where I tug my pocket knife, I won't die without a fight.

A guy rolls down the window. He could be my age or a little bit older.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

I don't answer him, I just stare. One, I don't know him, two I don't know where I'm going.

"Get in the car," he says.

Life has taught me to trust nobody. I turn on my heel and proceed with my infinite journey.

"Did you even see the weather today? You are going to turn grey," he calls after me then bursts into laughter.

I stop and look at him. He is laughing his lungs out.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"Ey ndoda, get in the car. Yini ipride engaka?" He's laughing, looking harmless and simply mocking me for turning down his help.

I swallow my pride and fears and turn to the other side of the car. I open it and hop inside. The car smell like booze but the guy looks sober.

"Thanks," I say.

He nods and starts the car.

"I'm Cebo," I falsely introduce myself.

I hope I won't forget this name.

"Nkosenhle Mlambo. What's up with you? Where are you going?" he asks.

I was hoping he won't ask my destination yet, I haven't thought about where I'm going.

When he doesn't get the answer he glances at me. I keep my eyes on the road ahead.

"Are you running?" he asks.

"Yes," I say.

He chuckles, "What did you do?"

"I'm not sure, I was attacked earlier."

"Are you serious? Did you call the police?"

He cannot understand, I don't understand myself.

"It's complicated mfethu. Can you drop me off at a church or shelter?" I ask.

He joins the freeway and ask why. I don't know why I don't trust him, everytime he speaks it's like he is mocking me.

"I need a place to stay while trying to get duplicates of my documents. My home was burned down, have nothing."

"That's bad. You can lurk in my place, I stay in Newlands."

"I'd appreciate that," I say.

The next few minutes are filled with silence. I have so many questions in my head. But the flaring one is, will I ever see Thandeka again?

We are in Durban, it's my fourth time here if I'm not mistaken. I don't like the city life, I've never dreamed of staying here. All I wanted was to marry Thandeka and renovate my mother's house. Obviously I wanted to have kids with her. I try, by all means to block the pregnancy I destroyed. My first baby. I ask myself everyday, why did I hurt her?

Nkosenhle's house is those fancy ones with furnished balconies. I can say I don't know who he is, I just know his name. I don't know where he is from, what his line of work is or who he stays with.

Insert 6

[The next conversation takes place in the dining room of Nkosenhle Mlambo's house, in Newlands East. He is sitting opposite his new guest, sipping his can of cold beer every second minute. Mthetho Mkhize, whose sneakers are dusty and has turned grey in color due to the long walk he embarked on foot, he is narrating his story, telling Nkosenhle about his life.]

Nkosenhle: I can tell you're going through the most, tell me what happened.

Mthetho: I don't know where to start.

Nkosenhle takes a gulp from his can, he has all the time in the world. He is self-employed, time is his brother from another mother.

Nkosenhle: Start from the beginning, who is Cebo?

What happened to you? Why are you running?

Ngibekele istory sakho ndoda.

A few minutes passes, filled with thick silence.

Mthetho is looking at his folded fist with his jaws clenched. Nkosenhle on the other hand is gawking at him, impatiently waiting to hear the story behind his mysterious guest.

Mthetho: Actually my name is Mthethowakhe, not Cebo. My surname is Mkhize, uKhabazela kaMavovo. I come from Sokhulu village, youngsters call it the Grande village. I was born there in 1990, born by a princess of the Manzinis, Jabulile Zungu. She was a good woman, always smiling and making sure everyone was okay. I was a happy child, living in a comfortable home with my married parents. They never argued or fought in front of me. They were always happy, so was I. Everything changed on the 14th of February 2002, at 4am in the morning. It was a habit for me to sleep with them in their room, I was the only child in the family. It was Valentine's day, my mother had our red and white clothes ironed the day

before. I expected to be awoken by alarm clock as usual, but my mother's screams woke me up. My father had a pillow pressed against her face, she was fighting to get him off but he was too strong. He pressed it until her legs stopped moving. I asked him to leave her, he told me to stay out of it. In my head she was asleep, like she fell asleep again because she was tired.

He breathes in sharply and repositions himself on the couch. Nkosenhle takes another sip from his can, his whole attention is on Cebo...Oh Mthetho.

Mthetho: There was a rope hanging on the ceiling. He climbed on the chair and hooked his head in the rope. He asked me to take the chair to the other house and come back with his grey socks. I took the chair and ran out. It took me almost five minutes to find the socks, they were mixed up in the washing basket. When I came back, his lifeless body was hanging on the rope, my mother was on bed lifeless too. I could've done

something to save them but I didn't because I was slow as a child. I could've fought for my mother but I didn't. I shouldn't have taken that chair below his feet. I was stupid.

Nkosenhle: That deep ndoda, you saw so much at a very young age.

Mthetho: I spent the next two days alone, neighbors were showing faces once in a while. I waited for their relatives to come and prepare for the funeral, most came a day before the funeral. I didn't go to school the next few weeks, I didn't know where to start in the mornings. I didn't know what I would come to in the afternoons. It was until my uncle came to live with me that I started living and returned back to school. He was a drunkard but his presence changed a lot in my life. He died two years ago from natural causes, I forgave his death.

Nkosenhle: So you have no family?

Mthetho: No, I don't have any family.

Another moment of silence passes. They are both in deep thoughts. Nkosenhle is still trying to imagine life through Mthetho's eyes. The silence is broken by Mthetho's chuckle.

Mthetho: In my late teen years I got the job as a security guard. A job that has sustained me to this day. I was 21 years, on the 14th of February, the same day that my parents died. I walked home from work, tired physically and emotionally. I passed by the local tuck-shop to get my uncle a few cigarettes. There was a queue of school girls buying snacks. My eyes quickly landed on a beautiful dark skinned angel with converging thin eyebrows and dimples. She looked at me and smiled, my heartbeat lost its pace. Then she told me to skip and buy before her. Did I say I was there to buy my uncle's cigarettes? Well I ended up buying 1 litre of milk.

Nkosenhle: What happened to the cigarettes?

Mthetho: I couldn't lose points at first sight. I don't even drink milk, it stayed until it turned into maas. Her name is Thandeka Chili, I love her more than life itself. I love that girl. The first day I hurt her was two years into our relationship, she had covered my face with a pillow. She is a cheerful person, she was just being playful. But I hurt her because I'm a monster like my father. I hurt her again and again, to an extent where she miscarried our baby. She left me and I didn't blame her. She loved me so much, she needed protection from me as her boyfriend, but she ended up needing protection against me. My baby's blood is in my hands. In simple terms, I'm a murderer.

Nkosenhle: I need another can.

He gets off the couch and walks to the kitchen then comes back and sits on his spot.

Mthetho: I stayed after she left, hoping she will come back but she didn't. I never heard from her since our

last day in the hospital. The only time I cried was when men lowered my parents' coffins down their graves. I was never a person that cried easily. But that record changed after that Thandeka's miscarriage. My pillow was always wet between 11pm and 2am. I cried and begged God to give us another chance. I cried for my father's cruel spirit to leave me alone. I would never hurt my nonokazi, I don't know what got over me. It haunted me day and night. I lost weight, I lost hope. I became a walking zombie.

He looks up at Nkosenhle, their eyes meet. There is no doubt, this story still haunts him even today.

Mthetho: I met another girl, Nobuhle Qwabe. She is an angel, everything a man wants in a woman. She loved me more than she loved herself. A part of me believes 40% of her love was sympathy. She wanted me to be happy, always. But there was no enough space in my heart for her, Thandeka left with my heart. I tried though, I became a better man through her. The problem was her mother.

Nkosenhle: What is magriza saying now?

Mthetho: She didn't approve of who I am. She didn't like that I'm poor and dating her daughter. She didn't like that I had no family. Basically she didn't like anything about me. She would come, usually when the street quieted and darkened. She didn't knock, she would walk in like a police officer and stand by the door, reciting me with all kinds of insults. She told me I won't make it to thirty years if I continue seeing her daughter. She is a psychopath but nobody knows. Sometimes she lifted her skirts up and showed me exactly where Buhle came from. Saying she didn't spend three days in labor to have her daughter dated by a security guard. She'd cross her fingers and swear to God that my body will rot and be fed to dogs. Eventually I decided to break up with Buhle, it was hard. Even though I didn't love her wholeheartedly, I cared about her. Breaking her heart was the last thing I wanted to do.

Nkosenhle: I understand, you had no choice.

Mthetho: After the longest, hardest time of my life without Thandeka, she came to see me yesterday. It felt like a goodbye. We did everything, it was like old times. My heart beats differently when I'm with her, I still swear there is no woman who will ever capture my heart like Thandeka.

Nkosenhle: Is it guilt or love?

Mthetho: It's love. I loved her the same way before I broke her. When I'm with her I feel complete, there is nothing wrong with the world. But when I'm not with her everything is wrong, I feel like I'm living in the wrong world.

Nkosenhle gulps the last drop of his beer with a smirk on his face. He didn't believe this love thing was real, he thought it ended with book characters Romeo and Juliet.

Mthetho: It was the last time, the very same night I was attacked by a crowd of men in my home. They set it on fire and left. They thought I was inside, they didn't know I turned the goats shack into my bedroom. That's how I survived, I don't know who I did wrong except Buhle's mother. But I thought breaking up with Buhle would get her off my back.

Nkosenhle: Did you open a case against her?

Mthetho: The law is for rich people Nkosenhle, she told me that she have connections in high places. Her father was a police captain, every police in the station knows her. My father died an ex-convict. You can see whose side the police would've taken, definitely not the convict's son.

Nkosenhle: The law is fucking us skoon, bruh. We should return the favour.

Mthetho: Yeah.

Nkosenhle: I'm a bachelor, there is no wife who is going to feed you here. You will find a bathroom on your left from this passage. I will get you a few clothes from my wardrobe then you will find your way to the kitchen.

Mthetho leaves the room and heads to the bathroom. Maybe God isn't such a bad god after all, here he is with a roof over his head. He didn't even pray for rescue, he prayed for survival. But here God has sent him rescue. Back in the dining room Nkosenhle is making calls.

Nkosenhle: Why do I have to call you twice?

Banzi: Imagine I could end your call anytime I like.

Nkosenhle: Mxm! What are you doing there?

Banzi: Are you that lonely that you have to call your brother and ask him what he is doing? Hey wena mfene, I'm not your girlfriend.

Nkosenhle: Get your ass here in two hours.

Banzi: You understand that I have a girlfriend, right?

Nkosenhle: Hey baba TWO HOURS!

Banzi: The subscriber you have dialed is not available at present, please try again later msunu.

The call drops. Nkosenhle is left shaking his head and laughing. He sends a short text telling Banzi that he is serious, in two hours he will be expecting him.

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MTHETHO MKHIZE

I don't like the clothes I'm wearing. Buhle used to wear jeans like this, I had to help her get them off. I never imagined myself wearing one. It's squeezing me from thighs to ankles. I feel girlish and gayish. I'm trying to walk normally, Nkosenhle's shoes are not making it easy either. Did I tell you that half of my ass is out? I told him it's not my size, but he insisted and told me it's my size and it fits me perfectly.

I don't know where he is around this house. I haven't gotten any handful information about who he is. I

don't want to push, we will know each other as time move on. I need one favor from him, tomorrow he needs to show me the nearest Home Affairs.

A voice breaks in, singing cheerfully.

"And then?" a guy says looking at me, surprised. He walks in and stops in front of me. He is wearing formal white shirt and same tight jeans. I guess they're a trend.

"NKOSENHLE!!" he yells.

In a minute Nkosenhle appears. There are two empty chairs, he takes the other one. The guy has no place to sit, he remains on his feet. He doesn't look pleased.

"So I'm standing?" he asks.

Nkosenhle glances at him, "You are asking? Look this is Cebo..."

I interject, "Mthetho, sorry for the wrong information."

"Cebo or Mthetho?" the guy asks.

"Mthetho," I say.

"Alright, it's Mthetho you've heard, ndoda this is my brother...ummm who are you again?" Nkosenhle asks him.

The guy clicks his tongue and looks me. "I'm Zwe." Nkosenhle's eyes widen then he bursts out laughing. I sense mockery in everything they do, I've never had a brother so I won't understand.

"You want us to call you Zweeee? What's that? Hey Mthetho this is Zwelibanzi, he is Banzi in short, not Zweee."

I nod, "Nice to meet you."

"Mthetho is coming from emakhulukuthu, he has no family, just the love of his life..."

Banzi interjects, "Same like me."

Nkosenhle sighs, "Listen, Mthetho is now living with me until he gets his shit together."

"Oh great! Do you drink?" Banzi.

"No," I say.

"We should beat that addiction."

I'm confused. "What addiction?"

"The non-drinking addiction, it's not good for your health."

The world is more twisted than I thought it was.

Nkosenhle glares at him, "Stop advocating for Satan on broad daylight. Here is the most interesting part, Mthetho has been failed by the law of South Africa.

What do you think we can do?"

Banzi looks at me, "You fail me, I fail you, simple!"

"I don't think I understand," I say.

He pushes Nkosenhle off the chair, Nkosenhle nearly falls to the floor. There is a mini wrestling going on now, it dawns to me I haven't heard their age. They could be 16year olds in adults bodies.

"Bring your fuckin' chair if you want to sit here," Nkosenhle says, walking away with the chair. Very childish.

"What I was saying Mthetho is that you don't have to follow your name, disobey umthetho. Our parents were killed by people wearing the police uniform, we returned the favour."

I'm confused more than ever. Nkosenhle is in the fridge grabbing another can of beer. I wonder where all this alcohol goes, he doesn't look drunk at all.

"We are traffic cops," Banzi says, smirking.

"That's great," I'm proud of them, black brothers. I'm impressed, I didn't know I was sitting with the officials.

"You can be one too, tomorrow night," he says. Maybe he didn't get the memo. I have no ID, no academic certificate, no money. I have nothing, not even clothes. How am I going to become a traffic cop overnight?

"You don't need a certificate, just uniform and gun then we will go on duty."

Oh hell no! I've seen that thing in the movies, this is real life. There is no way.

Nkosenhle comes back with his chair and sits. "No, he doesn't have to join the force tomorrow. He will come and observe then he can decide if he is in or not. At the end of the day you have nothing to lose Mthetho, this job can make you money. Money is power, when you have power you will go get Thandeka back and gain respect."

That part stuck in my head. I will go and get Thandeka. I'm sold but there are question marks remaining in the end.

Thandeka is getting married, her visit changed nothing. I could do all this for nothing. She was already gone but marriage means her and I will never be together again.

Insert 7

THANDEKA CHILI

He walks in my room and stands by the door. I haven't eaten anything, it's my heart that is hungry. Whether he is alive or dead, he is gone. I won't ever see him again. I have nothing that links me to him except one picture. Never undermine the time God gives you with your loved ones, in the blink of an eye he could take him away from you

"Umkhwenyana is here, get yourself together." With that said he walks out. He is my father, I'm who I am today because of him. How is it possible that I suspect him and hate him so much?

Umkhwenyana? Mesuli. I've broken him, why is he still here? I don't see the possible route we could take after this mess. I've proven to myself and everyone else that my heart was with Mthetho.

His cologne fills the room, my shoulders get uneasy. "Hi Thandeka," he greets standing by the door.

"You are here, why?" I ask.

"We can be together, that's why I'm here."

I nod but I cannot say I understand. One day has changed my whole life. At times like this I wish I had friends, this is too much to handle on my own. Linda and I are not on good terms.

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Our families are too involved in our relationship. It's not just Thandeka and Mesuli's wedding, it's the Chilis and the Mbathas wedding. Everyone thinks this is their wedding. I know I cannot do this anymore. I cannot live a lie, I'd rather die single. I've broken our promises, I've broken his heart, I've destroyed his confidence. What more can I do to him? I know for a fact that he is no longer into this, he is doing it for the families. We come from the village's most powerful families. The reputation matters more than happiness, hence we are booked into five stars hotel for the weekend to sort our issues out. Everything was paid for by Bheki Chili, my father.

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[The next conversation is held in the Kingsely Royal Hotel, inside the bedroom where Thandeka and Mesuli are sitting inches away from each other. Haven't breathed a word since they arrived. Thandeka is the first one to initiate the conversation.]

Thandeka: Sontshikazi, I will start by apologising for what I did. It wasn't a mistake, I'm not going to lie and excuse myself.

Mesuli: It wasn't a mistake Thandeka?

Thandeka: No, I went to Mthetho intentionally. I thought I could move on and forget about him. I waited four years thinking feelings will fade away but they didn't. I saw him, they resurfaced then we acted on them. We couldn't hold it any longer.

Mesuli: So you never loved me?

Thandeka: I love you, you are a great person. The years we've spent together have been amazing. I think

loving someone is influenced by actions, being in love with someone is natural. Life made me...

He cuts her short, this confession is heartbreaking.

Mesuli: What did I have to do to make you fall in love with me? Was I supposed to beat you, impregnate you and kill the baby? Do you want me to be violent?

Thandeka: No, I said it comes naturally.

His forehead furrows, his eyes gleam with agony.

Mesuli: What are you saying to me Thandeka?

Thandeka: I'm calling off the wedding, I cannot be with you after what I've done.

He gets up and paces around a few times. The wedding cannot be called off. It has to happen. His father is already doubting his masculinity. He cannot let a dead guy take away his woman.

Mesuli: It's not your decision to make. I'm the one who was wronged and I'm telling you I forgive you, I'm ready to move on.

Thandeka: Mes! I spent four years without him, trying to move on but it didn't happen. What makes you think I'm capable of moving on now?

Mesuli: He is dead now.

Thandeka: Who declared him dead?

Mesuli: There is no way a person could've survived that fire.

Thandeka: Even if he is dead, my love for him didn't die.

He looks at her and blinks rapidly in disbelief. It's her, she is breaking up with him.

Mesuli: Just tell me what I need to do, I will do it.

Tears roll down her cheeks. She didn't want things to turn out like this. This is not Mesuli talking, it's his bruised ego.

Thandeka: You are not wrong Mes, I am. Please don't beg me to stay, it will hurt you more.

Mesuli: I still love you, please don't leave me

She wipes the tears and take a deep breath.

Thandeka: The car is on the way, I will sleep in the BnB. I'm sorry Mes, I wish you all the best.

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MVIKELI SHAKES MBATHA

When I see my brother's car coming through the gate on a Saturday morning I know the worst has happened. They were supposed to spend the whole weekend away.

He gets out of the car still wearing the same clothes he left with yesterday. He looks shattered, I can tell from here that this person haven't bathed.

He chose this life. He wants to be everything our father wants. He studied teaching, the famous profession in the village. He found a girlfriend from a well-known family, that is another point. He got engaged, everyone in the family invested in the

wedding preparations. Today he is here, broken beyond repairs.

I will say this again and again, until it gets through everyone's big head. Never plan a future with someone, have your life planned out for yourself alone. If someone happen to be there in your future it would be bonus from God. When you plan your future with someone it collapses when he/she leaves you. My future doesn't depend on anyone. My happiness comes internally.

"And then? What is your brother doing here?" that's Mbatha Snr, our father.

I let out a chuckle, he is Mesuli's remote control. How come he doesn't know?

I shrug and watch as Mesuli walks toward us.

"What are you doing here?" Mbatha asks.

"She left me," he says.

I can already see the anger brewing on my father's face.

"What do you mean she left you?"

There is no answer to that. He leans by the wall and

looks at his feet like his world just ended. Mbatha

walks him and stands a few inches away from his face.

"Mesuli where is my daughter-in-law?"

Mesuli lifts his head up and look at him.

"She left me baba," he says.

It's about to go down!

"That's because you are a fool, you need

umvusankunzi. It can't be that another boy sleeps with

your fiance then she leaves you immediately after that.

Clearly something is wrong with you, your stick is not working."

I shouldn't be laughing but wooooah! Umvusankunzi, this shit sounds funny.

"Baba, I tried to..." His voice is starting to tremble.

That mvusankunzi took a deep cut.

"You tried nothing, you failed. Go get help, MaChili left you."

With that said Mbatha gets his jacket, jumps in his car and leaves

Yeses! I look at my brother, he is worse than before. If

he was a girl he would be crying right now. This is

one of the reasons I didn't want to be the favorite

child, it comes with crazy parents expectations. My

parents don't expect anything good from me and I

want it to stay that way.

"Don't take what he said to the heart, he is just

disappointed, you are his golden son," I say.

At this moment I doubt there is anything I can say to make him feel better. If we were sisters we would be hugging and cuddling each other to sleep. We are brothers, the only thing I can do is take him out for drinks.

"I have to mark schoolwork," he refuses.
I should get going too, the family drama is what made me move out.

"Hey are you leaving already?"
Where did she come from? The real housewife of Sokhulu. The one and only Mrs Mbatha.

"Yes, I will check you in the morning, if not late tomorrow," I say.

She looks the room and frowns.

"Where is my husband?"

Now I have to be the one breaking the news to her. Mesuli is about to feel Mrs Mbatha's wrath. Their golden daughter-in-law is gone.

"He drove out, he is mad at Mesuli because Thandeka left him," I say making my way to the door.

"She did what???"

She is about to faint.

"Bye Mrs Mbatha." I wave my hand goodbye and go to my car. I feel sorry for Mesuli, he will wish he never was perfect.

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MESULI MBATHA

There was a meeting of both families. Thandeka didn't come, they say she hasn't been home the last two weeks. She packed her bags and moved out Saturday evening. Nobody knows where she went. I know there must've been a fight between her and her no-nonsensical father. I sat in the meeting answering all the questions alone. They pointed fingers, on who failed who, most fingers pointed at me. They say I didn't try enough, but that's better compared to what my father said. He joked about it in the meeting, everyone laughed. The money he has wasted on the wedding preparations came close to R70k and he wants it back. I couldn't get refunds, I resold some of the things and got half the

price. I owe him R45k, he wants it by the end of next month.

I could've asked for sick leave at work but we are around mid-year examinations, I have to be there for my students. I sit in the staffroom with colleagues and listen to all the rumors surrounding the called-off wedding.

My life just took 360° turn unexpectedly. I've never seen anything like this where two people do you wrong and it completely flip on you, makes you a complete laughing stock.

Mvikeli took me out for drinks. I came because I didn't want to disappoint him. I know people are talking, the less I'm appearing in public the better.

"I called her last night," he says.

I look at him, "Who?"

"Thandeka, she is in Durban."

I nod and gulp down my drink.

"Life is like a taxi, some get off, some get in. You will get someone else, maybe it wasn't meant to be."

He doesn't understand, I didn't expect him to. He has never loved anyone, he decides the next day where his

life is going. This is my life, it's nothing compared to a taxi. A taxi has no feelings, I have. It's ridiculous to compare life to a vehicle, my feelings cannot be moved with litres of petrol.

"I don't want anyone, I'm good," I say.

"You mean you are done with love?"

I nod, "Yes."

"Washa! Let's get some chicks for the night."

What? He thinks I'm joining his reckless games.

"Mvi! Shakes! Stop right there."

He looks at me, slightly frowning.

"I don't want any girl, I'm done," I clarify.

"It's Mbatha, isn't?"

"No," I deny.

He stares at me as if he is contesting what I say,

he wants me to confess the truth.

"Bafo there is nothing wrong with you, Mbatha was just lashing out. Thandeka is a bitch...forgive me my brother for saying this. But she is the one who was at fault, not you. There is nothing you could've done to make someone who didn't want to stay, stay."

I can't do this here. I raise my hand for the bartender, I need another shot before I leave.

Mvikeli stays behind, he still wants to hook up with a girl and take her home.

At times like this I wish I moved out when he did.

They are sitting in the dining room, when I walk in their eyes glare at me. I wish I drank more, just to escape this

reality a little bit.

My father makes that undermining nc nc sound with his teeth. I'm a disappointment, they had to withdraw the wedding invitations. Reputation matters more than anything here. Thandeka didn't just break my heart, he killed me. I'm a dead man walking. The more people talk is the more the purpose of living fades away. Right now the only thing valuable about my life is my students. Taking my life would be selfish, they still need me.

Insert 8

1 Month Later

THANDEKA

Today I started on the new job. I'm away from home, away from everyone I know. My father kicked me out but I was ready. I had everything planned. I phoned my boss, he referred me to a friend. I sent my CV, did the interview last Thursday, today I started on the job.

The power of connection!

I'm Thandeka Jennifer Chili, the internal consultant at Seapoint Financial Services. In my new workplace they have no time to call me by my full name, it's TJ.

I've tried to reason with them, telling them the initials makes it sound like I'm a man but who cares! My colleagues are a bunch of crazy people. There are three females, I'm the only one who doesn't drink. Then there are two guys, Kagiso and Smanga.

Smanga is the cute one hence he thinks getting any girl he wants is easy. I'm new, in his mind I'm wooed

by his looks and cannot wait to jump to his bed. I've been returning his smile and friendliness. He doesn't know what lies behind my good character. I'm a broken, bleeding girl who wants nothing but her dead ex-boyfriend.

I'm residing in Westville, life is quiet. I miss the village but not my family. They've proven to me that their status matters more than me. Linda is the reason why Mthetho died. She is the reason why my baby will grow up without a father. Yes I'm pregnant, I didn't get the pills on time. A lot happened, it slipped out of my mind. When it dawned back to my mind it was too late, the pill was no longer effective.

Breaking up with Mesuli was the best decision, things would've turned out worse than they were. Beside heartbreaking updates about his well-being, I'm happy I left. The only thing troubling my soul is that I don't know where the remains of Mthetho are. I only have a picture, it's the only thing my baby will know of her father. I won't be able to point a grave and tell her your father is lying there. I would love to take

flowers and go kneel in front of his grave, maybe it would bring me closer to his spirit. I would tell him what he wanted to hear, sthandwa sami saseMbo.

~I will see you tomorrow, if not tomorrow one day, if not one day in heaven~ I should've known something bad was going to happen. I should've told him I love him. I hate Bheki Chili and his daughter, Linda Chili. My mother did nothing, she watched and allowed them tear my heart apart. I hate her too.

"Is it your first?" Ntebo asks, she is one of the colleagues.

I look at her, "First what?"

She looks at my tummy. I can't believe she is this nosy.

"No, it's my second, the first one didn't make it."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," she says.

"It's okay," I really don't need sympathy.

She pushes her chair backwards so that she can have a better view of me. "When are we meeting the daddy?"

Really? She is nothing but a colleague I just met.

When she gets no answer she turns to Olga and

initiates a conversation. I prefer Olga, she doesn't dig

in people's personal lives.

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Two weeks later I haven't made any friends in Durban. I don't even know my neighbors' nickname. I changed my cellphone number, hearing about Mesuli was becoming constant and pulling me back. I know Shakes is worried about his depressed brother but there is nothing I can do about it.

I invited Olga and Ntebo for tea tomorrow, which is Saturday. They laughed till they couldn't breathe properly. I had to promise them there will be some alcohol, then they promised to come. I doubt there is any girl living a boring life like me. I can't wait for my little one, we will make a beautiful little family.

I have crazy cravings. I like hot food, doughnuts and sour lemon juice. Today I didn't pass by KFC because I thought the hotwings I bought yesterday would last me the whole day. At 08:15pm I eat the last one. What am I going to eat at 4am when I wake up?

They close at 9pm,I better hurry up.

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MTHETHOWAKHE MKHIZE

Life has no manual. I had R14 000 savings in my account, today my balance has tripled twice. I never thought in my life I would be a criminal. I had never stolen a dime until now.

I've joined the Mlambo brothers, the car hijackers. I haven't met the dealer yet, but his name is Peter, from Ghana. There is a target every week, usually it's three specific cars. He is connected, we have traffic officers uniforms that we put on. Acting is not my good skill so I'm usually the officer sitting in the car scanning the surroundings. I've only pointed a gun once, to the temple of a white woman. This job doesn't need feelings, you have to be heartless.

Nkosenhle rolls a joint and takes a few puffs. He is friendly but there is a cold-hearted person behind the kind brother in him. He is 33years old, he has been living this life for 11years. Banzi is five years younger than me, he has been in the game for two years.

Nkosenhle sent him to college but fast life got better of him, he dropped out.

"Let me go find the location," he says dropping the butt of his joint on the ashtray. He has been arrested once, he got out after nine months of imprisonment. He swears he is never going in again. He has a map drawn on the big chart in his study. I think every street, every corner, every turn of Durban is there. He knows all the spots, records of crime on each street.

You know the higher the reports of crime on the street, the bigger chances of police patrolling around for no reason. We only hit quiet streets, so far nothing has been alarming.

Today is Friday, we need the last car. We've been waiting for him to choose the location. He is busy analyzing and making calls. He is an expert in what he does.

Finally, he walk back in.

"Westville Rd and Church Street, that's where we are. It's Friday, people want takeouts."

Banzi bangs the table excitedly. "Yizo baba!"

I'm never excited about the job, it's something I do for money. Unlike Banzi, he is passionate about hijacking people's cars. It's his dream job.

They take a couple of whisky shots, I haven't learnt to drink. I just watch, trying to ignore the strange feeling I have about today's job.

I'm travelling with Nkosenhle, Banzi is alone. We park at the side of the road. Banzi parks a few yards away from us. Banzi is on the lead. I'm the back up, should anything happen I will shoot.

An unlucky car comes, it's a blue Nissan Versa. I'm reminded of someone I know, she called hers Princess. Banzi stops it and walks to the driver's side. He is not like Nkosenhle, he doesn't take the car right away. He asks questions like an officer, requests driver's license and checks the car. After a minute the car window rolls up, he bangs on it shouting at the driver. The speeds away.

"Shoot the fucker!" Nkosenhle yells.

I fire two shots aiming at the right side of the car. It doesn't reach the corner, I must've shot him. The car loses control and crashes on the pole.

Westville is a dangerous place, we get in the cars immediately and speed off.

Failed mission.

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Nkosenhle needs to come up with something quick. Banzi chuckles, looking at the card

in his hands.

"Educated bitches, they think they know everything," he says.

What???

"It was a girl?" I ask in shock.

"A beautiful one, TJ Chili," he says reading the card.

No, it can't be! That cannot be Thandeka.

"Are you okay Mthetho?" Nkosenhle asks.

"It's nonokazi," I say.

"Who is...? Your village girlfriend?"

What was Thandeka doing there? I shot her, she is probably dead.

God you can't leave me again!

Insert 9

SAPHOKAZI

I got paid yesterday, today I'm off. I love spoiling myself, which is why I brought the Queen Elizabeth breakfast to our table. Malume is having a hard time with fork & knife, but it's the tradition; fork & knife or go home.

"Ay, this egg!"

I look at him, "It's half cooked, it's healthier."

"I want my eggs fully cooked and brown."

Can't he pretend to be civilized for 10 minutes? Mesuli is finally single, is this how he is going to act when he is his son-in-law?

"Raw tomatoes?" There is an expression on his face. I can't hold myself, I laugh. He eats raw tomatoes to cure his hangover, now that I've cut them in style it's a problem.

"Malume, we are eating like the Chilis," I say.

"Which means you are also going to run away like their daughter," he says.

That's a bit dramatic, Thandeka and I are different. I will never run away from a luxurious wedding. That girl shook the whole village. I was ready to take a loan

and buy an expensive dress that would drop everyone's mouth.

There is a knock at the door, we look at each other.

Who could it be? I'm not a stingy person, I just don't like people to walk in while I'm eating, more especially when I'm eating eggs and bacons.

"Let's put the food away, we will continue when this person is gone," I say.

I can see Satan turning on his chair with a smile on his face, I came to represent his kingdom on this earth.

Malume clicks his tongue, "Who is this so early in the morning?"

I shrug and hurry with the plates to the fridge. Who are these people?

They are wearing suits and ties.

"Mshana why didn't you tell me?"

I raise my eyebrows, what was I supposed to tell him?

I don't know who these people are.

"Ukuthula ekhaya," one of them says.

"Ay ay you don't greet like that, go stand in the gate," malume says.

I look at him, "What

for?" "This is not how

abakhongi behave."

What's the actual

fuck?

"Baba we are not abakhongi, we are..."

He doesn't let the guy finish, "I'm not speaking until you pay imvulamlo, wena Saphokazi tell your people to do things the right way."

"Woooah! You're making a mistake malume, guys

introduce yourselves and tell us how we can help

you," I say.

"Sorry sister, my name is Mbulelo and this is Themba

and Mduduzi. We are coming from the Kingdom of

God, we are Jehovah witnesses."

Oh Lord of bakhongi! Malume is irritated, he loudly

clicks his tongue. Did he really think the guys are here

to pay lobola for me? Gosh I don't even have a straight

man.

"God sent us here to deliver his word, we only need

you to give us five minutes of your time."

I let out a sigh, "Okay you can come in"

"Who did you say sent you?" malume.

I have a feeling this won't go well, my uncle's character is bad, whether he is drunk or not. God sent them to the wrong house.

"We are sent by Jesus Christ, the Blessor, the Healer and the Deliverer who died for us in Calvary."

They have pamphlets and bibles, I wonder how long they are going to preach.

Malume sighs, "My bread is turning dry in the fridge." What's the fuck? I send a murdering look, is he crazy now?

"Baba do you know God?" one of them asks.

Sotobe turns the question back to him, "Do you?"

"So much, I know him saving my life a thousand times. It's his mercy that got me here today. He says, 'by you I will stand, every day of your life'. And by his word he has stood."

"That doesn't mean you know him, you only hear about him. How did he send you here? Who did he say go to?"

My word! I'm not a church person but I feel like we should let them say what they want to say so that they can leave us to our breakfast.

I clear my throat, "Malume I'm sure he sent an angel or something. You said you need five minutes? Well it starts now."

They hand me a pamphlet and a magazine. Their focus has shifted to me, maybe I should've been an arse like my uncle. Now I'm the one answering all the questions and nodding my head like I understand a damn thing.

"Please open Isaiah 54 verse 10 in your book"

Eeeh....!

I turn to my uncle, "Can you help me find Isaiah 10?"

"It's 54 verse 10," they correct me.

I should've attended Wednesday bible study at school.

All I see is Matthew.

Matthew, where is Isaiah?

"Don't we have like content and page numbers here?" I ask.

One of them chuckles and reaches for the Bible in my hand. It takes him two seconds to find Isaiah, some people are going straight to heaven.

"Isaiah 54 verse 10 reads; For the mountains may depart, and the hills will be removed but my loving kindness will not depart from you, and my covenant

of peace will not be removed, says Yahweh who has mercy on you."

"Amen!" says my uncle louder than necessary. He just trapped himself, the guy in a green tie asks him what he can testify about the verse that was read.

Should he stand up to testify? Geez, can he even testify?

"The mountains will move, the rivers will stop flowing, the sea will be sat-less and the valleys will become mountains. But his love will never...I mean even the Mbatha double- storey will collapse and their boy who owns a shisanyama will order chickens from me, but his loving kindness will never change."

That was a bit overboard, thank God he is done. Umh, no he is not.

"See my boys, even Shezi's bank account will turn dry, the wife he stole from me will die, everything will come change. These are not my words but they're written there on the bible. Says Father God, not Sotobe. He says everything will change, his word is final."

I clear my throat and say a loud Amen. He is blowing things out of proportion, I don't even think he knows who Jesus' mother was. Let's not even go to cousins, he'd get zero out of ten.

"Amen Baba, I'm glad to hear you testify about the Almighty Lord. God doesn't want you to be shy about..."

He cuts the guy off, "God wants you to be proud of him my boy. Don't let the devil fool you. Stay on his word, pray and he will listen."

"Precisely Baba, the God we believe in listens and answers."

He shakes his head, "Do you know the secret my boy? God listens and watches before he answers. That is why we think his answers delay, he needs time before he can answer." "Amen Baba!" says one of them.

He finally sits down, the five minutes they asked for is almost over. Malume flipped the whole thing and preached to them instead.

"Go well my boys, remember God's word. Kilimanjaro will collapse, but not his love. Close the door behind."

I don't know whether to laugh or not, he just kicked God's people out. He is the first to get his breakfast back after they walk out the door.

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I decided to go check in Shakes' shisanyama. He is my friend, I doubt he knows that though. It's the weekend, the place is packed as expected. I don't like carrying cash, amaphara are dominating the country, so I'll look for a God-sent who is going to buy me a drink.

"Sapho?"

It's the owner himself. I smile and walk to him.

"Hey boss," I say.

He chuckles, "Hey unjani?"

"I'm good, any freebies for an old friend?"

"Meat or drink?"

"Both," I say.

I'm seeing faces I've never seen before here, I'm trying to weigh their looks to see which one I want to sit next to.

Oh gosh! There is my crush sitting alone on the table.

People fear the Mbathas and the Chilis. Well, not me.

I'm going to sit with him.

"Mvi, I'll be sitting with your brother."

He frowns, "Why?"

"I want to keep him company."

There is a weird expression on his face, like he doesn't approve. I wink at him and walk to his brother's table.

I'm not sure he knows me.

I greet making myself comfortable on the chair.

"Hey Mesuli."

"Hi sisi," he says.

"I'm Saphokazi Ngcobo, I live across the Thwala street.

I know your brother, he is my friend."

He nods, lack of interest evident in his eyes.

"I heard about the wedding, what a bad luck! You and Buhle same WhatsApp group. She was dumped like a hot potato for Thandeka. After 3 years, imagine!"

Mvi clears his throat next to me, my drink is ready.

But what the fuck? Fanta!

"Is this my drink?" I ask.

"Yes, your meat is coming."

"Mvikeli! Fanta on Sunday afternoon, are you serious?"

He smiles, "I'm giving you for free, you should be grateful instead of complaining."

I fake a sigh, "Thank you Mbatha omkhulu!"

"Don't trouble my brother," he says.

So I'm a trouble? I keep my silence.

"How is she doing?"

I look up, alcohol cravings made me forget about Mesuli.

"Who?" I ask.

"The girl you were talking about."

Oh Buhle...

"She is okay, I think she has made peace with in. You look cute by the way."

He frowns then smiles. "Okay thank you, you look great yourself."

Am I? Oh wow!

"So how long do you mourn a failed relationship? We are waiting for our chance too."

"Who is we?" he asks.

I roll my eyes, "Me specifically"

"Yoh!"

He is in disbelief.

"What? You don't date poor girls?"

"No I didn't say that," he says

I cock my head aside, "What do you mean 'yoh'?"

"I'm just surprised, I'm not used to girls approaching me," he says.

"Welcome to 2019 Mesuli Mbatha," I say.

He chuckles and looks away.

"So how long do I have to wait?" I ask.

He clear his throat, "I don't think you have to wait, I'm not looking for a girlfriend. Not now, not ever."

"You're a sour loser," I say.

"Maybe I am," he shrugs.

I take sip of my Fanta and cross my legs.

"Then I will be your friend and you're going to benefit for it."

His eyes widen, "Are you that desperate?"

"No I want you, it's not desperation."

"No..I don't think I want benefits."

"How do you know whether you want them or not before knowing what they are?"

He sighs.

I have him squeezed in my little corner.

"I'm not emotionally ready for any of that," he says.

"I need you physically, not emotionally."

Mvi disturbs us, he is bringing my meat and pap. He glances at his brother and then looks at me.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing, tell me when you're ready to go home."

What? I came here on my own, we are not even

friends, we just know each other. He looks angry

when he leaves the table.

I shift my focus back to Mesuli. "When are we chilling out, friend?"

"Ummm...I don't know, maybe tomorrow."

"Where?" I ask.

"We can hang out in my
brother's house."

This is good news.

I smile, "It's a date, bring your A game"
Uncomfortableness dwells on his face, maybe he is not
used to my type. I say exactly what I want, maybe
Thandeka had to draw sketches to signal that she
wanted sex, well not me.

"I have to go, nice meeting you Sapho."

He is well mannered, I like I like.

"Go well friend," I say.

He leaves me alone on a gigantic table stuffing myself
with free meat and pap. Don't I look sad? I look
around to see if I can't spot anyone I know.

Urgh! Only Mvi, what's up with his mood anyway.
He talks with the bartender and then makes his way to
me.

"What's up with you and my brother?" he asks.

"He is my crush, now he is single. Put one and two
together."

He stares at me, chewing on his lip. He has that
expression on his face again.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Are you ready to leave?"

What the heck? I'm a grown ass woman, I will leave when I want to.

"I want to close," he says.

"But you have customers here, it's not just me."

"Salo this is my property. Get up, I'm taking you home."

I'm giving him two stars, his service is kak. I pack my leftovers and go to his car. He is sour, I'm not bothered one bit.

"Does your brother have his own house?" I ask.

"I have my own house," he says.

"Congrats but it's not about you," I say.

"No, he lives with our parents but he may move in with me soon."

I nod, "That's good."

"He is not the one for you," he says.

"What?"

"He needs someone really special."

"I'm someone special," I say.

He chuckles, "You know you're not."

Is he trying to tell me I'm not special? Now I have to date his brother and prove him wrong.

I'm gawking at him, he eventually takes his eyes off the road and glances at me.

"Maybe you're special to me, not to him," he says.

God help us all.

"Yeah right, drop me off before the corner," I say.

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Today is important, I have a date. I don't know where my uncle has disappeared to, I have somewhere to be so his chickens will sell themselves. I put on my sexy underwear and dress casually and simple. I'm only a friend, no need to take out my Christmas clothes.

I'm ready with my handbag.

"Saphokazi!"

Who is that now? I walk out, already annoyed.

It's a woman I know from the tuckshop, I don't bother knowing old people.

"Where is Sotobe? I want a chicken, I will pay for it when the month ends."

They have started!

"I'm sorry we deal with cash only." I say.

"My children haven't eaten anything since morning,

I'm begging you ndodakazi."

I know she is lying, this what they all say. But I don't have time to argue with her I tell her to go and take the chicken.

It seems like there is a party going on here. There are several cars parked outside and bursting noise coming inside the house. I can't believe the guy I went to school with has his own house and car. Life is really unfair because, why not me?

Luckily, I bump into my specific other right outside the door. His eyes widen when they meet mine. He didn't think I was still coming.

"Hey sweetface," I greet.

"Hallo, unjani?"

I smile, "I'm great, thanks for asking."

"Let's get inside," he says.

There is no party, it's Mvi and his loud friends.

"Sapho!"

I don't know who he is but I've seen him around. I greet them with a grin and stand by Mesuli's side.

"Mmmm"- Mvi.

Mesuli clears his throat, "This is Sapho, my friend"

"We know her brother, majita asivaye."

I don't know where Mvi gets his attitude, it's stinking.

"Not on the couches." I don't know which fool said that.

Mesuli goes to the fridge and asks what I would like to drink. I see a pack cold Hunters and opt for it. Unlike his brother, he gets it without any hesitation.

"Mvikeli said you might be living with him soon," I say.

"Possibly," he says.

I frown, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he says.

He doesn't look okay to me. Do I look scary maybe?

"What's up?" I ask.

"I'm not who you think I am."

"Who do I think you are?"

He exhales heavily. "A cute loaded guy."

"You are cute, that's for sure. Are you not loaded?"

Whatever the answer is I don't care, I'm a working girl. I'm a hairdresser."

He chuckles, "That's awesome Sapho."

Why do I feel mocked?

"I don't want to use you," he says.

"I'm not an item, you can't possibly use me."

"You're so stubborn!" he sighs.

Am I? I pull the chair and sit like a queen that I am.

"Sex is the last thing on my mind," he says.

I burst out laughing, almost choking on my drink.

"Are you sure you're straight?" I ask.

"I'm positive, just fed up with the world and its demands."

I nod, sadly he is just not over Thandeka.

"I can do with a friend

though," he says.

I roll my eyes.

"Friendzoned, just
great!" He sighs and
grabs a seat. "So Sapho
what do women want in
life?"

The question is a bit difficult, we want so many things
in life.

"I'll say money and honesty," I say.

Woooah! How can I forget the backbone of a
relationship?

"And a good dick. That's actually what keeps or
destroys a relationship," I add.

He nods with a heavy sigh. "I hear you."

Insert 10

MTHETHO

"It's you or him," Nkosenhle says.

Banzi is chilled, he doesn't mind at all. He's on his phone, chewing gum.

"And then what's gonna happen when she sees Banzi one day?" I ask.

"We will turn against him," he says.

I'm in awe, he takes life so easy. I've never lied to Thandeka, I've hurt her so many times and owned up to my mistakes. As extreme as this is, I still believe the truth will set me free. She is alive, I'm grateful for that.

"Mthetho we're doing this for you, you love Thandeka right?"

He knows the answer, of course I love Thandeka.

"If you want to be with her you will keep the truth from her. You didn't shoot her, you were in hospital for some tests then you saw her being rushed in."

"Exactly" -Banzi.

I guess I have no choice, I will live with guilt for the rest of my life. She woke up yesterday morning, I got a call from the hospital nurse. She is Banzi's girlfriend I

think, she is the one who has been updating us. Going to see her freaks me out, I'm not strong enough.

Nkosenhle offered to come with me, he doesn't trust me, he thinks I will sell them out.

"I'm scared, I don't know how she is going to react when she sees me," I say.

He chuckles, "You need to relax, let her hold your heart, not your balls."

Relationship advice? He is the fine one to talk, I have never heard a woman calling.

"Who is your girlfriend again?" I ask.

"I'm gay," he says.

My eyes widen, I nearly lose control on the wheel. He is gay?

He laughs, "Even if I was you wouldn't be my type, let's not die for nothing."

He can be stupid when he likes.

I click my tongue and laugh.

"You not my type either," I say.

"You will meet her, her name is Latonia."

I ask the question any black would ask.

"Is she black?"

He chuckles, "Yes, she is Zulu."

That would be Lathoniya then. But what does that even mean?

"Do you love her?" I ask.

"Yes, but she is too much to handle."

I didn't think he had someone in his life, I've been here for weeks now, I must say they have a very weird relationship.

I'm not hospital friendly, the smell ticks me off and makes me sick. My palms are sweating as we approach the ward, Nkosenhle's dangling jewelry is pissing me off.

"Am I allowed to come in?"

I look at him, "You said you're coming with me."

"To the hospital, not to her," he says.

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THANDEKA CHILI

I block the pain, I've cried enough. I refuse to feel anymore pain. God can do however he likes with me now, it's okay. I screamed when the doctor told me I lost my baby, but my scream lasted only a minute. He asked more than ten times if I was okay, I told him I

was. He got female nurses and a psychologist to speak with me, I told them I was okay.

"Thandeka you have a visitor," the nurse says.
I nod my, expecting to see Ntebo or Olga walking in.

They are the only people I know here, they've been up and down checking on me.

"Nono,"

Wtf! I turn my eyes, I swear every part of my body freezes. He is dead, he can't be here!

"Sawubona," he greets in his voice.

I sit up, ignoring of my injuries. When I cry out in

pain, the nurse appears behind him. She has been

treating me like a queen, her name is Dudu. She

makes sure that I eat what I want, yesterday she came

with Spur ribs and yoghurt. She is a beautiful girl,

with curves in the right places. Her skin is flawless.

Fifty layers of make-up always on point and

making her even more gorgeous.

"Is everything okay?" she asks darting glances between Mthetho and I.

We don't answer her, instead we stare at each other.

I'm in disbelief, he is alive. How?

"You are alive?" I ask when I finally find my voice.

"It's a long story," he says.

Is that what he is going to give me? Just that it's a long story?

I've been depressed, crying myself to sleep because of him.

He stares at my pissed face, sympathy drawn all over his eyes.

He exhales heavily, "How are you?"

"Really Mthetho?"

Dudu dismisses herself, he walks closer to me. His

eyes are fixed on me, everything in me claps to the

warm feeling in my heart. I shouldn't be mad at him,

he made it out alive.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"No, I'm sorry."

He looks at the bondage around my shoulder and

looks down at my arm. He shakes his head and takes a

few steps backwards.

"Babe where are you going?" I ask.

He can't leave me, I just found him.

"I don't deserve you, please forgive me for everything I did to you," he says.

I'm confused, he resurfaced just to leave me? I have a

lot to tell him, we've lost our second baby, I need him

more than ever.

A man clears his throat behind him. He is tall, with goatee beard and bushy eyebrows. He looks at me briefly than turns his eyes to Mthetho.

"You forgot flowers in the car," he says.

Flowers???

He gives him a bunch of flowers, I think they are mine. Despite everything that has happened in my life flowers from Mthetho Mkhize brighten my day.

"How are you doing Thandeka?" the man I don't know asks.

He knows my name! I don't remember Mthetho having any relatives.

He reads my confusion and introduces himself as Nkosenhle Mlambo. He doesn't look bad, he just doesn't look friendly. Where did Mthetho meet this person? How did he even get here in Durban?

He has to tell me the 'long story.'

The man has a watch in his hand, he keeps playing with it.

"We heard about what happened, whoever did this to you will pay," he says.

I still remember the guy's face, he had a friendly smile but I could see right under that friendly face that a monster was hiding. I've heard stories about fake

police and traffic cops, Durban was not my choice but life chose it for me. I didn't think I'd fall a victim so soon.

"Are you a cop?" I ask.

"No," he says.

How the hell is he going ensure that the culprit is brought to justice then?

Mthetho puts the flowers over the small side cupboard and sits on the plastic chair.

"I stay with Nkosenhle, he saved me," he says.

I look at the guy, "Thank you."

"Why are you in Durban?"

I could ask him the same.

"Long story but I'm permanently here," I say.

"I don't know...this is not how I imagined our paths crossing but I'm happy to see you again," he says.

Nkosenhle chirps in, "Now we can discuss other topics, not Thandeka all the time."

I look at Mthetho, he doesn't look happy.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"No, I'll be okay when you've fully recovered."

I let out a faint chuckle, "I will never recover from what happened."

Nkosenhle stares at me, like he knows what

happened. When I catch his stare he looks away, my instincts refuse to trust him.

"Let me check someone, I'll bounce back," he taps

Mthetho's shoulder and walks out. I let out a long

breath I didn't know I was holding. Mthetho looks up, his eyes are red rimmed.

"I'm going to be okay," I say.

"I don't like the life I'm living Thandeka but I don't have a choice. I've lost everything that kept me breathing, they burned down my home and memories. I want to live only because of you but everything I do to you proves why people hate me. I'm bad for you, I excel in hurting you."

" We talked about this, I just want to move on now.

God has taken from me and he keeps taking, it's okay

I'll never mother any of your children but I can be with you since you're alive."

"What do you mean you'll never mother any of my children?"

"I was pregnant, again I've lost the baby. I cancelled the wedding, packed my bags and came here to start over with our baby. Friday night I went to get hot wings for my crazy cravings and that was the last time I felt my baby inside of me. I have no reason to live but I'll live for you."

He lifts his t-shirt up and buries his face. Even though I knew he was going to be shattered there is no perfect time for such news.

"I don't know why God is doing this but I'm sure we will be strong in a pair. I'm happy to see you," I say.

Dudu walks in that awkward situation and looks at me alarmed. She quickly walks out, then Nkosenhle walks in a couple minutes later. Mthetho is still crying, I can't comfort him as I'm injured and have difficulties walking.

Nkosenhle taps his shoulder, "Bafo asithi kancane." He helps him up and walks out with him. .As much as the guy doesn't give me any peace but what he just did warmed his way into my heart. Mthetho never had anyone offering him a shoulder to cry on, he never had a brother. That 'bafo' gives me hope.

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Mthetho didn't come back, only Nkosenhle came to tell me they're going home as he is having a mental breakdown. He came back with 6pieces of chicken and

rolls with 2litre of Coke. The Coke was taken away just after minutes by the nurse. I don't know who is supposed to eat so much food.

I have my eyes closed, thinking about everything that has been happening in my life. I hear two female voices approaching my bed and open my eyes. It's Dudu with another woman, doesn't she get a day off here? Most nurses do, just not her. She is always here, checking on me every hour.

"That's her," she tells the woman next to her. She is a full-figured woman with big afro tied into a huge knot, for a moment I thought it was a wig. She is beautiful, could be in her early thirties. She smiles and comes closer.

She has big round eyes, a smile that can brighten the whole South Africa and huge confidence in her strides.

"Big girl," she says in a greeting manner.

I glance at Dudu, she is smiling.

"Hello," I say, a bit reserved.

She puts a food container over the cupboard and makes herself comfortable on the chair. Her purse isn't

just a purse you get anywhere, the purse itself is money.

"I'm here to check on you, it's Latty. How are you doing?"

Dudu has disappeared again, she does as she likes here.

"I'm good," I say.

I'm unable to remove a frown on my face.

She smiles, "Well, Nkosenhle asked me to come check on you."

Relief!

"Oh is he your brother?" I ask.

She rolls her eyes, "Is there any resemblance? He is my man."

"Oh stupid me! My bad, did you see Mthetho?"

"No, we haven't met," she says.

I'm worried about him, I hardly slept last night. The state he was in was heartbreaking. I don't have a phone, even if I did I wouldn't have been able to contact them as I don't know their numbers.

"I heard you're an African beauty," she says smiling.

"From who?" I ask.

"Nkosenhle, he was complimenting you the whole morning."

And she is chilled like this? I would be mad as hell.

"That's weird," I say.

"Not at all, you're beautiful. I had to cook a storm for an African queen, I hope you like creamy pasta."

I like pasta but I don't understand this Mthetho's new family. She takes the responsibility of dishing up for me, it looks yummy.

"They say you're deeply loved by your guy," she says.

"Yeah, he loves me." I'm blushing a little bit.

"Lucky you!"

"Doesn't Nkosenhle love you?"

"He does but I want to be loveeeed, not loved and

showered with gifts and money. I want emotional and physical presence."

I totally get her point, but this is the conversation she should have with Nkosenhle.

"Communication is the key," I say.

She chuckles, "Not with him."

I have no interest in their relationship, my mind is on

Mthetho. How is he? I couldn't even hug him.

Dudu and her know each other, she joins us, there is a lit conversation about men. My lack of socializing with strangers cost me this moment, I'm only smiling where necessary.

Dudu has her Banzi, she speaks highly of him.

They are trying to fit me in by asking personal questions, I just can't be normal like that.

Visiting hour is way over when they leave. Latty leaves her food container saying she is coming back for it later.

It hasn't occurred to contact my family, I know they wouldn't care. They would rather rejoice on the death of Mthetho's baby. I'm okay without them, especially my father.

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He is here at last, my exaggerating self thinks he has lost a bit of weight. He brought me food and goodies. There is no joy lost in his eyes, he is empty.

"Khabazela," I say.

I'm stronger than him, I can see how badly this has hit him.

"Sawubona," he says.

I smile, "I'm happy to see you, I thought you were not coming."

"How are the injuries?"

To be honest I find physical pain bearable, I don't even mind if the nurse is late with the medication.

"I'm fine," I say.

He places his hand on my thigh and stares at me.

"Thandeka I love you, I've always doubted our future together because of the things I've done to you, and now the doubt is even worse. The tears you've cried because of me are a storm waiting to hit me hard, I'm..."

Sigh! We cannot do this everyday, I don't want to be reminded of the past.

"I forgive you, please get rid of those stupid doubts. I love you, I chose you even when I believed you were dead," I say.

He squeezes my thigh, "I live for you."

"I know, my heart knows you," I say.

He stares at me, searching for doubts, I smile and ask for a kiss. He leans over and kisses me.

The shock in my bones!!!

"You drink Mthetho???"

"I deserve that one hour break from reality."

I can't believe him. He's a drunk now.

"You solve problems with alcohol now? Is it Nkosenhle?"

"No, I'm sorry," he says.

We kiss again, despite the smell of alcohol I miss him.

"They are discharging you tomorrow, I'll take care of you until you're okay. Nkosenhle got me a house at an affordable price."

I frown, "A house? You can afford a house?"

"I saved every month, I wanted to be a man your father wanted. I spent some on renovations, but I have enough for lobola and cost of living for a few years."

"He will never accept your lobola," I say.

He nods, swallowing the bitter truth, then he asks about my place and work. My life is a lot to handle but with him by my side everything is possible.

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#The Next Day

Ntebo was ready to move in with me, she said she will be doing me a favor since I'm incapable of doing things myself. The disappointment in her eyes when she saw Mthetho and Nkosenhle fetching me! But it was soon replaced with curiosity, she is the type that relays message with her eyes. She asked questions, signally, and I couldn't answer.

I didn't expect a house this big, I thought it was a one room house.

"How many rooms are here?" I ask.

"Six, excluding bathrooms," he says.

Interesting!

He pulls me out of the car and holds my hand. Latty is in the house, moving around like she owns the place.

There is an aroma coming from the kitchen, the house doesn't feel new.

"Welcome home girl," she says.

I afford a smile, "Thanks."

"Your man got a nice house, you will flourish here."

"I'm only here temporarily, I have my own place."

"There is no need for you to rent a place whereas Mthetho has a big house like this" - Nkosenhle appears out of nowhere.

Latty looks at him, "You also have a big house but I'm renting."

"Thandeka and Mthetho are different," he says.

"Yeah, they love each other," Latty says that and walks away.

Nkosenhle shares a weird look with Mthetho then walks out.

I deserve a warm welcome, they shouldn't be here if they're here to fight.

"Welcome home sthandwa sami."

I smile, "Fresh start, I like this house."

He is still not okay, even his smile is forced.
Latty comes back after a while, I guess she has calmed
down. She carries on with her pots and asks if we
would like coffee.

"I brought movies to keep us entertained at night," she
says setting the table.

She is back at her usual self, smiling and chatting like
she is battery recharged.

I look at Mthetho, "We will go to bed early, I'm tired."

"Sthandwa I'm sorry, I have to go to work tonight."

I'm confused. "You work?"

He scratches his chin, "It's a temporary thing, I drive a
truck from Nkosenhle's work."

"You never told me, why?"

He gives an apologetic look, I don't understand the
new him.

"Don't worry I will be here, " says Latty.

I nod, "Thanks."

A hand squeezes my thigh, I look at him, he doesn't
say anything but I read the message in his eyes and
smile. I love him too.

Insert 11

THANDEKA

In the morning when I wake up he is beside me, asleep in his full clothes. I didn't hear him coming home, I expected him to come back at 6am or so. It's only 5:36am, I'm up because I'm pressed otherwise I would be fast asleep.

"Should I come with you?" his voice startles me. I thought he was asleep, he is looking at me like he wasn't snoring a few seconds ago.

"No I'm fine," I say.

I only use one arm, walking straight is a bit of a problem, I bend a little even though the doctor advised me against it. I slip outside the bathroom door and almost fall.

"Thandeka!"

He rushes over and pulls me to the bathroom. He doesn't walk out after walking me in, instead he lifts the seat lid.

"I'm okay now you can leave," I say.

He smiles, lifting his eyebrows flirtatious.

"Why, I know everything about you."

"No Mthetho, leave please."

He massages his chin, grinning with amusement. It's so early in the morning, I give up and do my business.

He watches me wiping myself. "What was hard?"

I roll my eyes and give him my arm to lift. He smells fresh, maybe he took a bath when he came home.

"When did you come home?" I ask.

"Early, I didn't want to disturb you," he says.

He doesn't sound convincing and he doesn't even want to dwell on the topic. He helps me get in bed and lies facing me.

"Is Latty still here?" I ask.

"Nkosenhle fetched her earlier."

Earlier? It's earlier now, do they sleep at all?

"Tell me about your job," I say.

He takes his eyes off me, "What about it?"

"Where do you drive to? What are you delivering?"

Everything you do, tell me about your bosses and all."

He plants a soft kiss on my hand, I'm still mourning and thinking less about sex but the contact of his lips on my skin does things to me.

"It's nothing serious, I drive around Durban delivering documents to their branches," he says.

"You deliver documents with a truck?"

"They're still arranging appropriate car for me."

"Oh that's great." I still haven't removed the frown on my face, I'm a confused a bit.

He stares at me, deeply penetrating me with his stare. It used to make me shy, not anymore. I've been through shit to be scared of a mere stare.

"What future are you hoping with me?"

His question is not something I expected it so early in the morning.

"I don't know, I just want to be with you. Bright future or dark future, I love you sthandwa sase Mbo."

He smiles, "There is no woman like you."

"I know, I have no twin," I laugh.

He pinches my cheek, "Not in the world, in my heart."

"Don't make me blush I'm injured," I say, already blushing.

"Seriously, I love you Thandeka wami," he says.

He puts his hand on my cheek and teases his lips on my nose.

I find myself giggling, it's such a relaxing feeling to be happy again.

"We will order breakfast, I want to be in bed with you the whole day," he says.

I raise my eyebrow, "Order it?"

He shrugs, "Nkosenhle's life, he rubbed it on me."

"You guys get along, where is his family?"

He clears his throat, his eyes run around the room. I know he is keeping something from me, everything about him and Nkosenhle doesn't add up.

"He only has a brother," he says.

"Oh, where does the brother live?"

"He is everywhere, he doesn't live a straight life."

I have a bad feeling about this but I push it aside

because I don't come from a perfect family either.

"As long as you're safe, I can't afford to lose you again."

He lifts his eyes and stares down at me.

"I have one dream," he says.

"What is your dream?" I ask, dying with curiosity.

"To never hurt you again. I don't know how to be

perfect but I'm going to give it my best, please don't

keep anything from me. Even if it's a word that I say,

do tell me I'm hurting you and I will stop

immediately."

I smile, "Okay, thank you."

He takes a long breath and rests on the pillow.

"I want to sleep, wake me up after thirty minutes."

I smile and nod. Anything for him, I will be his alarm

clock. His stare shuts down, smaller and smaller, still

to my face until he falls asleep and starts snoring softly.

Thirty minutes later he is peaceful asleep, I don't want to disturb him. I get off bed carefully and go to the bathroom and try to bath myself.

It's not easy, I have to use the sink and wipe only a few parts. I brush my teeth and wrap the towel on my lower body.

I hate doing nothing, the sun is coming up my kitchen is a mess, well Mthetho's kitchen. I use my one hand to clear the counter.

"Morning," the voice catches me off guard. I hit the corner of the table with my hip, the towel loosens and falls to my ankles.

"Oh God, I'm sorry." He doesn't know whether to help me or close his eyes. Eventually he rushes to me and takes the towel and wraps it around my waist. He keeps blinking and trying not to stare at my naked body.

"Umm..I'm sorry for just walking in. I will, eer I'm here to take the car," he stutters.

Embarrassment has buried me, I can't believe he just saw my nakedness. No underwear, no nothing.

"I'm really sorry," he adds.

I clear my throat, "It's okay Nkosenhle, Mthetho is still in bed."

"Ummm...I'll take the car and come back later."

I nod, "Yeah, do that."

He takes a few steps away and stops.

"Do you need anything?"

Yes, your disappearance.

"No I'm fine," I say.

He gives me a stare but doesn't say anything. I exhale and give myself a mental slap when he walks out. This was the most awkward moment of my life.

I take peanuts, they're too salty. I don't know who bought them. I know Mthetho wouldn't have bought all these things himself, he doesn't eat half of the things here.

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

Oh wakey, wakey!

I'm half way through the second movie, my stomach is growling.

"I didn't want to disturb you," I say.

He sighs with deep concern, "Do you need anything?"

"I'm hungry for food, any solid food," I say.

He takes out his phone and makes a phone call. How long are these people gonna take?

It could be hours Jesus Christ.

"Have some fruits and take your medication."

I nod. He walks away and comes back with one

orange and two bananas. I don't want oranges, not

now not ever.

He studies my face, I'm trying to cover the emotions but I'm transparent to him.

"Is everything okay?" he asks.

"I don't want orange," I say.

He frowns, "Why?"

"Luzalo loved them, I don't want them anymore. I just..."

I fail to explain further and swallow back tears threatening to burst their way out.

"Who is Luzalo?"

I hold back, "My baby, our baby."

He is silent for a moment then he asks what it means.

It's such a stupid question coming from him.

"It means Luzalo, nzalo kaSambela."

I forget to put a 'duh' at the end.

He smiles, although his smile doesn't reach his eyes but he is happy.

"Thank you, it means a lot to me," he says putting the orange aside.

Awkward silence swallows the room, I know I just triggered those emotions again. If God ever blesses me with a son he is still going to be Luzalo, the Mkhize praise name.

"I still remember the guy's face," I say.

He looks up, his eyes widen out of their sockets.

"You remember him?"

"Dark in skin with a mole over his upper lip. He had almond shaped eyes, he was playful in his furtive voice but I saw right under his beautiful smile that the devil laid beneath."

He pecks my cheek, "The police will get him my love, focus on recovering. "

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MTHETHO MKHIZE

Each day that passes without telling her the truth feels like a dig in a grave. I'm getting deeper and deeper in, my future with her is fading. I never thought one day I'd be in this situation, I killed my own baby and nearly killed the love of my life. These are the tears of people I make cry every night.

Nkosenhle finally picks up.

"Bafo," he answers.

It's how he calls me and Banzi. It always gives me that belonging feeling.

"She remembers Banzi, this secret is going to backfire," I say.

My heart is still pounding, the truth of the truth frightens me more than the truth itself.

I can hear him making a sigh.

"What do you want us to do Mthetho? The damage is already done," he says.

"I want to confess, maybe she will forgive me." He laughs, "She loves you, she would've forgiven you if you just shot her but you made her miscarry her baby. You are nuts to think she will forgive you, trust me you will lose her forever."

"I don't have a choice!" I nearly yell, she is just in the next room, I don't want her to hear this phone call.

"I will make a plan," he says.

"What...?"

He cuts me short, "Mthetho I will make a plan."

"Alright, cool."

She walks in after a while, wearing a smile on her face.

She hasn't changed, not even one bit. She is still a dark-skin barbie I fell in love with outside the tuck-shop. It was the first time I set my eyes on her, she

smiled at me and told me to pass and buy before her. I feel like that's what she has been doing her whole life, to put me first.

"Are you okay? You're staring."

I snap out, "Can you blame me? You're too beautiful."

"No, you were not drooling over my obvious beauty, you were lost in your thoughts and you're doing that a lot lately. What is bothering you?"

The question leaves me naked.

"I don't have stable working hours, sometimes I work from midnight to 3am," I say.

She frowns, "How is that so?"

"I'm on standby, not permanent. Sometimes I will be home, sometimes I will leave in short notice."

She lifts her eyebrows, "That's unfair but I will live."

"I love you Thandeka," I say.

"How many times have you said that today?" she asks laughing.

"I'm not counting, I love you," I say.

Her lips crack into a smile, it brightens my heart.

"Well, I love you too, my male nurse."

Yes, being her nurse is my part time job. Sometimes she refuses my help, stubborn patient!

The challenging part about it is bathing her is that I have to be at my strongest and not let male weakness take over.

I expected Nkosenhle to call and tell me what he came up with but he chose to come here with Latty. They are a great couple, only if Latty could minimize her expectations. Nkosenhle is not for settling down and being lovey dovey, she should let her hopes down and enjoy life.

"Hey Mthetho, where is Thandeka?"
She doesn't wait for an answer, she walks straight to the lounge. I find myself staring at her until she disappears, where does she pump her energy?

"Yoh!" I exclaim.

Nkosenhle chuckles, "You'll never get used to her, she still shocks me every second day."

"How long have you been together again?"

"Two years, eight months and four days."

I'm in awe, that's some fresh memory. I bet he even knows the hours and minutes.

"I wonder what is making her stay," I think out loud.

"She can't leave me, now let's dwell on serious matters."

He looks around and takes out a sachet from his jacket pocket. It's a white powder thing, I stare at him curiously.

"Put it in your pocket, make her tea before she goes to bed."

My confusion grows further, what is he up to now and what is this thing?

"I want an explanation," I say.

"Pour all that powder in her tea, she will forget everything."

Whaaat?!

"You're insane, I'm not going to wipe her memory. I've done her wrong and it's enough now. No, hhayi bo Nkosenhle."

He brushes my arm, there is an evil grin on his face. I didn't realize he had a tattoo behind his ear, it doesn't look pleasant.

"Mthetho wake up, this is life. You've been good but got nothing in return, nobody has ever fought for you. You are alone in this world, nobody is going to fight for your happiness but you. Sometimes you have to be selfish, do what's going to benefit you." He turns his burning eyes to me, "So Khabazela grow a thick skin and put your happiness before everything," he says.

I nod, God helps those who help themselves. At some point in life we have to ignore our morals, block humanity and make selfish decisions for our own benefits.

I know I want to be with her, love can defeat fear.

When the movie she was watching comes to an end I

go to the kitchen and boil water for tea.

She smiles, "I don't remember feeding you any love portion."

"Am I not naturally romantic?"

She grins, "Eish, do I really have to answer?"

"Girl you're spiteful," I laugh.

"Okay ke, you're romantic."

She takes the cup and starts drinking. Thick skin

doesn't grow, my heart is bleeding as I watch the

Thandeka I know slowly closing her eyes, she is

sleeping off everything she has ever known. In the

morning she will wake up to a new world, clueless

about all the pain I've put her through.

I kiss her forehead, "Goodnight my love."

It's not easy falling asleep, I'm neither who I was nor who I wanted to be.

Insert 12

BUHLE

I took myself to a weekend vacation, my life has been hectic I deserved some fresh air. I think I've made peace with everything that happened, I'm looking forward to the future. Relationships can wait, I want to grow my business, train more girls and renovate my mother's house.

Her phone has been off the whole day, she surely knows how to spoil someone's vacation. The time I spent thinking what might be wrong with her could've been used to explore the Shelly Beach. I shop around a bit before catching a meter taxi and heading to the rank. I'm going back home, feeling refreshed and ready to start my life over.

People are scarce today, I sat for almost an hour in a taxi. This motivates me to buy my own car, I can afford myself a second-hand. Speaking of cars, who is parked in our yard? This car is local, I've seen it a

number of times. Oh, it's Chili's car, it's written on the registration. But what is he doing here? He is not just an ordinary community member, the only time he associates himself with people is around election period.

He is very comfortable on the couch with a tray of colorful mea in front of him. This is a rare situation to walk in, the furniture is arranged differently.

"Sawubona Bab' Chili," I greet.

There is a little shock in his eyes, he returns the greeting and gives me a half smile.

"Your mother went out to the tuckshop," he says. Very strange. I make my way to to my room. What is this politician doing in my home? He is too damn comfortable.

After a while I hear the main door opening, I need to go hear from my mother. What happened to her phone, and what's the purpose of this guest.

I hear him saying, "MaMkhize is in her room."

"What? When did she come..."

Our eyes meet before she can finish the question, there is a faint look on her face. I turn my eyes to the man on the couch.

"Who is MaMkhize?" I ask.

"Ay Buhle! Come here, hurry."

She storms to the kitchen, I follow behind her. She stands by the counter and folds her arms, I cannot read her eyes clearly.

"You cannot bomb Mr Chili with questions like that," she says.

"I was not bombing him, I was asking. Who is MaMkhize vele?" I still want to know.

She swallows hard. "It's no one, look I'm discussing the sugarcane farm with Mr Chili. I can give them the land and share 25% of the profit made each month.

What do you think?"

I didn't know she had land, unless if she is talking about the two yards at the back of the house.

"Which land can you give them?" I ask.

"From emaweni to the road," she says.

My mom is crazy.

"That's not your land, it belongs to the Mkhizes," I say.

She smiles, "What would you say if I said it's mine? I bought it years before Mkhize died."

It's confusing how all that is coming up now. Even though he didn't do anything with it, Mthetho owned that land since his parents died.

"You don't believe me? I will show you the papers, signed by him," she says.

Interesting! She dishes for me, I take my food and return to my room. By the look of things that man is not leaving soon, he is too friendly with my mother, I didn't know they even knew each other.

It's almost dark when he leaves, I hear the car driving off, now I can have my home back.

"Buhle help me clean up," my mother says. I get sick in my stomach, the man had eaten with my set of plates I bought for my year-end function. I don't say anything, I take them to the sink and wash them

"Check this," she says behind me. She hands me a document that was a white document but due to years of storage it has turned brownish.

I cannot believe what I see. She really owns the Mkhize's land, but how? Why did Mthetho's father do this? He didn't even sell it to her, it automatically went to her when he died.

I look at her, "I don't understand."

"You don't need to, it happened when you were young, he died without meeting you."

I frown, "Who?"

Something strikes her face, she blanks out.

"Is there anything you should be telling me? Today you keep confusing me and why did that man called me MaMkhize?"

She grab the document, "Buhle I don't know what you want me to say, I'm simply happy that Bheki is helping me with this business idea."

"He never helps anyone, how did you get him to come here?"

"He is not a bad person," she says.

"Just because he is nice to you?"

She sighs. "Let's talk about something else, how was your trip?"

Had she kept her phone on she would've known. I'm having weird, strange feelings. I need to find out more about her secret documents in the drawers.

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THANDEKA CHILI

He has been with me the whole day, most of the times he is staring at me like a mindless person. His eyes are filled with sadness, I don't know if it's because of me. I cannot remember him or the journey we've had. He says I'm his first and only love, I believe him because I feel the connection. My arm is injured, he says I was hijacked and shot and I miscarried our baby. He is sad about it, he says it's our second baby. I have a family but I left home after my father tried to kill him and burned down his home down, I haven't seen any of my family so I believe him. If they cared they would've been here.

"Sthandwa sami," he says.

I turn my head and look at him. He is dressed up like he is going somewhere, he is even darker when he is wearing white.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"I'm picking a parcel from Banzi's place."

I frown, "Who?"

"Banzi, he was here earlier."

Oh, the guy with roaming eyes. He was restless the whole time, his brother is the only one who was talking, he sounded like a caring guy.

"Is his house far?" I ask.

"No, do you want to come with me?"

I smile and shake my head, "I want to sleep."

"Okay sleep Nono, I love you okay?"

"I love you too."

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BANZI'S HOUSE

[The conversation is heated, Mthetho is on his feet, his gun is on the coffee-table in front of Nkosenhle.]

Nkosenhle: This is not how we do things here

Mthetho, you don't quit when you say, you quit when I say.

Mthetho: I'm sorry but this is not the life I want to live, I want to be better for my woman.

Banzi: Better with what? Security certificate? Get really bafo, we are making money here, this is how you're going to be better for her.

Mthetho: I can't risk jail, I still want my own family.

Nkosenhle: NO!!!

Mthetho: You cannot force me, I'm done.

Nkosenhle: Well you agreed on this week's mission, don't feed me kak.

Mthetho: It will be my last week.

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THANDEKA

He said he is going to work nightshift and called a lady, Latty, to come sleep over. I cannot get over her beauty and how bubbly she is. I find myself smiling when she tells me how me and Mthetho have been her IT couple, she talks nonstop.

We are about to go to bed when Nkosenhle, her boyfriend, walks in and asks her to step outside with him. A few minutes later she walks in with a sad face and takes her bag.

"My brother is at it again, I have to leave," she says.

"Back at what?" I'm confused.

Tears fill in her eyes. "He smokes nyaope and comes home to abuse my mother. I'm tired Thandeka, why doesn't God just take him?"

"That's a lil bit drastic, isn't there a way he can stop smoking that thing?" I ask.

"I've tried everything, be fine girl, Nkosenhle will bring my helper," she says.

I waited for the helper until I dozed off. I don't hear him opening the door or switching the lights on. I just feel a hand on my face and open my eyes thinking it's Mthetho.

"Please don't panic," he says.

He is breathing heavily as if he has been running. He has a blue jacket and cap on. He has V-beard and hollowed big eyes with natural long eyelashes.

"Thandeka," his voice picks a new tone.

Well, I'm panicking. What's going on?

"Mthetho was shot," he says.

Am I asleep? No.

"You're lying." I refuse to believe this.

He takes a deep breath. "He was trying to hijack a car, unfortunately the person he was hijacking wasn't a girl like you, he fired back."

My heartbeat starts racing.

"What do you mean?"

"Mthetho is a thug, he hijacks cars for a living and he is the one who shot you."

He is crazy!

"Please go away," I say.

"Thandeka, I'm being serious, did he tell you why you miscarried your first baby and why your family wanted to kill him?"

My stomach starts turning. "Yes, they didn't like him." He chuckles, "No, he was abusing you physically.

Your family was trying to protect you and you chose him over them. Do you know how many of us wish to have parents and family that cares?"

"You're lying!" I scream at him.

"He washed your memory because he was scared you'll remember the night of hijacking. Thandeka you deserve better, you cannot keep getting hurt for love that doesn't exist."

I have tears rolling down, I hate being clueless like this, I don't know what's true and what's not.

"Why are you here?" I ask.

"I'm here to tell you that you need to go home to the woman who gave birth to you, they will forgive you. Most "persevering women" are in graves, if

nothing is a wake- up call enough only the coffin will be."

"Why do you care?" I ask.

"I don't know."

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THE CHILI'S RESIDENCE

I'm embarrassed to even stand before them and look them in the eyes. The woman, mother, is more disappointed than the man, my father. She says the day I left home I was furious and throwing harsh words, I left a man who wanted to marry me for Mthetho. They tried everything they could to stop me but I didn't listen.

"Did she loose memory during the hijacking?" the girl asks, she's my sister.

"No, he washed it a few days after she was discharged.

I was against it but I didn't want to find myself at the firing end."

She clicks her tongue, "But I told Thandeka, he didn't care about anyone but himself."

Mom shakes her head, "I can't believe he is even alive after everything he did to my daughter."

I look at Nkosenhle, "So you were not lying that he caused my first miscarriage?"

"I wouldn't lie about something so critical, I want what's best for you and that is being home with your family."

My father exhales, "Mlambo you're man amongst men, I'm glad my daughter's ways led her to someone like you."

"I care about women, izinzalabantu," he says.

He glances at me, "And I care about her, specifically."

"Lucky bitch," says my sister.

"Linda!!!" my mother.

She laughs and leaves the room.

"Welcome back home baby," mom says.

She's the happiest to see me home.

Nkosenhle stands up, "I have to go before it gets late, her medication is in her bag, please take care of her."

"We will ndodana, there are no right words to express our gratitude," my dad.

He smiles at me shortly, "Can I have visiting rights? I would like to see how she progresses and...."

Dad chuckles, "You're welcome anytime Mdineka."

It's not as smooth as I thought it would be, my sister is trying to accommodate me. I see less of my father, he leaves by dawn and comes back after dinner time.

Linda is not bothered by it, maybe I'm just a sucker.

"Nkosenhle is so fine," she says leaning over the pots. She is cooking in bum shorts, her braids reach over her ass. I'm different from her, too plain and boring. I cannot imagine showing my body like that, my confidence is too low.

"You said the same thing about Mesuli," says my mother out of nowhere.

Linda laughs, "Nkosenhle is super fine Ma. Did you see his eyes and that beard? Plus he cares for her 'specifically'."

"Don't even think about motivating your sister to him, she will break the poor boy's heart. Remember what

she did to Mesuli? You can never win with abused women, they are addicted to pain."

Linda looks at me a little disappointed. "Don't tell me you'll go back to Mthetho again sis, I don't want to bury you."

Sigh!

"I won't, I promise," I say.

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KING EDWARD MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

It's been two weeks with him lying in bed, the surgery was successful, the bullet was removed. Not even once had someone showed up to check on him except the police. They've been waiting for the day the doctor signs his release forms, and finally the day has come.

They're ready with cuffs and guns.

"Mthethowakhe Mkhize you're under arrest....."

He hears those words and knows immediately that his life is over. In less than two months he has completely

destroyed his life, he crushed his own dreams and ripped his heart into shreds. There is nothing as easy money and there is definitely nothing called a brother-from-another-mother.

The only person who will ever look out for him is him, Mthetho.

Insert 13

BUHLE

Early in the morning there was a car parked outside the yard, my mother who is a potential business-woman out of nowhere, walked in my room dressed up to kill and told me she is going to a meeting.

Well, before I get ready to go to the salon I need to check what's in the drawers, some things are not adding up.

The first drawer is full of underwear, not just any underwear, lacy thong and lingerie. It's confusing and so unlike her to have such. Thank God she doesn't have any sex toys because that would send me to a psychiatry.

I thought she hated men, men are useless, that's what she always teaches me. My heart is pointing at Mr Chili but my mind is protesting. No, my mother is all about women power, she wouldn't sleep with a married man.

Back to the real investigation, there is a pile of handwritten letters folded under her Bible. It looks like old love letters, I'm not interested in reading about her love life. My father broke her heart and left her, that's enough for me to know. The man never looked back, I have zero memories of him but my mother says I look like him.

I'm about to put them back in their places, bored by their handwriting, but a brown envelope steals my heart. It's folded nicely, like it hasn't been touched since it was sealed. Unlike others it's been kept with great care. It's signed by Delani Mkhize, and that's Mthetho's father. I check the time, it's 6:43am, I will be late for work but I open it anyway.

It reads:

Dear Hlengiwe

I hope this letter finds you in good health. I know I'm the last person you want to hear from, I apologize for the pain that I caused you. I heard Joseph left after

*finding out about the affair, again I'm sorry for
destroying your family.*

*I wanted to come see Nobuhle but Jabu found out, she
is threatening to leave. I don't have much but I hope
what I sent will be enough for basic necessities. I love
my daughter, and I will come see her soon.*

From Delani Mkhize

I read the letter over and over again. It was written on
the 9th of February, this man killed his wife and died
on the 14th of February. My chest turns dry, who am
I? Why is referring to me as his daughter? What made
Joseph Ngwane leave? He left and never looked back,
what kind of a father leaves his daughter for more
than two decades and never check on her?

I text Sindi to come get the keys, she will hold the
ropes today, I don't think I can manage being around
people.

"Buhle are you sure you're fine?" she confirms before
leaving.

"Yes I'm fine," I say.

I cannot vent to a hairdresser, that's like talking to Daily Sun. I drag myself to the kitchen and make cornflakes.

She comes back around 11h00, I've cried and dried my tears. I just want the truth, I will see how I handle it.

She is surprised to see me home. "Why are you not at work?"

"I want us to talk about this." I put the letter on the table and stare at her. Her first reaction is anger, it dissolves when she sees the rage in my eyes can't match her outburst.

"Ma, who is my father?" I ask.

"It's Ngwane," she says.

"I want to know the truth, who is my biological father?"

"Buhle I'm tired, can we do this some other time?"

Her nerve! I can't believe she thinks I owe her more time.

"Ma this is my life, why did you oppose my relationship with Mthetho so much? He gave you no reason to hate him? Do we share the same father?"

She pulls the chair and sits. "Why did you go through my room?"

"Does that even matter? Who is my father?"

"It's him," she says.

"Him who?"

"Delani Mkhize."

Tears revisit my cheeks, how can she destroy my life like this? She watched me fall in love with my brother, my own blood took my virginity.

"Why did you keep the truth away from me and watched me date Mthetho?"

She sighs. "I tried to keep you away from him, what Delani and I did was a secret. Him and Jabu died because of me, she wanted to leave after finding out about you and he wouldn't let her go."

I cry even harder. She is the root of Mthetho's pain.

No, I'm the root, his parents died because of my existence.

"I'm sorry Buhle, it was not easy telling the truth," she says.

"So Mthetho was my brother?" My whole world is crumbling down.

She nods, "Yes, that's why you cared so much and I know you still love him even though he broke your heart. It's not just love, it's blood."

I cannot take this, I go back to my room and throw myself in bed and weep like a widow.

My love, my brother!

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THANDEKA CHILI

I've been home for a month, my arm has recovered, I can function like a normal human being. I don't remember much about the past but I've adjusted to my family.

"Thandeka, Thandeka!"

She is running inside the house on stilettos.

"Ford Mustang V6," she says.

I blank out, "Huh?"

"Aybo mntase, Nkosenhle is here," she is beaming with joy.

Nkosenhle is here every Sunday, it's not a surprise.

Parents went out but he is welcome anytime of the

day. He is a great guy, always positive and

motivational. His constant phone calls and messages

have been my pillar of strength.

"Good afternoon," he greets with a smile.

Linda looks at me with a smile, "Hey Nkosenhle, you're here for your patient?"

He chuckles, "I'm here for both of you, Bab' Chili told me you're home alone and need a nanny."

We laugh, it's like he knew we are emptying his fridge. We are roasting anything we come across, I don't know who is going to clean the kitchen since Linda is dressed up to go somewhere.

"Are you guys okay?" he asks.

"Yep, we are fine," Linda replies.

He looks at me, his eyes soften, there is a pressed smile on his lips.

"Do I need to ask? You look healthy," he says.

I smile, "I'm healthy, just eating unhealthy."

He frowns, "Why?"

I roll my eyes, "It's a once-off thing, relax."

He laughs, "You want me to age, I see."

Linda hugs me. " Let me love you

and go guys."

"Are you leaving because of me?"

She laughs, "Yes, you just chased me out of my own home."

I've learnt how stupid she can be, she says whatever that comes to her mind. She has no age restriction,

even Mom and Dad knows her unfiltered mouth. She takes her bag and walks out, awkwardness surfaces after her. I've never been in a house with just him and nobody else.

"Do you like flowers?" he asks.

I frown, "Ummm...maybe"

"Oh sorry, I forgot."

I shrug, "It's okay."

" I brought you flowers,

they are in the car," he

says.

He looks shaken, it's a funny side of him.

"Why did you leave them?" I ask.

"I didn't want to be disappointed, do you want them?"

I smile and nod. He walks out and comes back with a bunch of flowers and a red gift bag.

"You said flowers..." I say.

He grins, "It was a buy-one get-one free sale."

Too good to be true, I wonder what's inside the bag.

The flowers smell lovely, I guess I love flowers.

"It's a necklace," he says.

"This is so sweet, thank you."

He take sit out, wow! It's not just a necklace, it's a

piece beaded with real diamonds and embodied with

my initials T.J.

"Can I see the price?" I ask.

I don't think I deserve such gifts, I mean what have I done for him?

"No," he refuses, laughing.

"Why? How much did it cost?"

"There is no price for a woman."

"Wow, okay."

"Are you hungry?"

"Don't tell me you brought food as well."

He laughs, "No I didn't, we can go out. Do you know restaurants nearby?"

"There is a Shisanyama and Kota & Chips."

"We can go to the Shisanyama," he says.

That won't be possible, Linda said the place is owned by my ex's brother who was my best friend for some years.

"I prefer Kota & Chips, I hate being in crowded places," I say.

"That's also fine." He gives me time to get dressed and fix my hair.

He is a perfectionist, I feel like I have to watch how I sit in his car, I don't want to leave any dirty mark.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say.

"Be comfortable," he says.

I take a deep breath and relax, at least he was able to see my discomfort. I direct him to the Khanyile's Kota & Chips.

I wait in the car while he buys, there is group of boys outside, he joins them as he waits for the order. He is full of surprises, he is chatting with them like he knows the village.

He finally comes back with our greasy food.

"I will need 4 hours of gym after this."

Being dramatic, are we?

"What were you talking about with strangers?" I ask.

He chuckles, "They are not strangers, omkhaya laba."

"You're not from here," I say.

"Any Zulu is my hommie, it's not about villages but the tribe."

Oh silly me!

We drive back and park a few yards away from home.

"Are you comfortable eating in the car?"

I nod, "Yeah"

The first few minutes are filled with chewing and silence.

"How is Latty?" I break the silence.

He clears his throat, "We broke up."

"Oh I'm sorry to hear that. "

"I'm not heartbroken,

it's okay." He wipe

his mouth and looks

at me.

"Where to from here?" he asks.

I shrug, "I want to get back to normal and go back to work."

"Do you think you'll ever give love another chance?"

The question throw me off-guard, I haven't thought about love. I don't feel love, it's like

Mthetho left with huge part of my heart.

"I haven't thought about it," I say.

He nods and keeps quiet for a few minutes.

"Ever since I saw you I haven't been normal, I've never

thought about future but meeting you have me

drawing my future and coloring it."

I'm confused. "How?"

"Knowing that someone like you exists has brought

life and direction to my life."

Do I have to ask how again? I'm not following.

"You make me feel alive and I'm happy we've met, there is a side your presence has discovered and it's a beautiful side. Thank you."

He sounds genuine, it's his stare I cannot hold.

"Why did you break up with Latty?" I ask.

"She was everything but not everything is for

everyone, I needed her and she needed me. Then she

needed more than I could give and I wanted less than

she gave. We were not on the same page."

I nod, "I understand."

"Mthetho will appear in court on the 15th, you can be one of the witnesses," he says.

I close my eyes, "No, I don't want to go to court."

"I understand, it's okay."

He stares at me, "You're beautiful, my wish is to experience love with you."

"Nkosenhle!"

"I won't put pressure on you, I'm a patient man."

A smile escapes from my face, "Right!"

"I will wait, no matter how long it takes, true feelings don't fade away," he says.

I laugh, "Your seriousness is killing my vibe."

"Really?"

I nod, "Very much."

He smirks, "Point taken, can I feed you?"

What? No ways.

He bursts out laughing, "You should see your face."

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NKOSENHLE'S HOUSE

Banzi has been waiting for his brother for more than three hours, he has ran out patience. At last, when Jesus is hitting a U-turn, Nkosenhle arrives playing music like he is the only living human in the neighborhood.

"Yey who gave you permission to be in my house while I'm not here?" he teases.

Banzi pushes his hands inside pockets. "You sold out Mthetho."

He chuckles, "What's that? I gave him a choice and he chose jail."

"You said you'll take him out, you're only teaching him a lesson. What changed? He has suffered enough, he could face lifetime imprisonment."

He opens the fridge and takes out a bottle of water.

"I'm fighting for my future, he needs to stand up and fight for his," he says.

"What if he rats on us?" Banzi asks.

"He won't, I will make sure of it, remember Thandeka is out with us."

Banzi shakes his head, "You broke up with Latty, why?"

"You know we were never meant to be."

"You think you're meant to be with Thandeka?"

He shrugs, "Who knows? What are you doing tomorrow?"

"Bafo you cannot build your future on someone's tears, you were okay with Mthetho before meeting his girl, everything changed after the day in hospital."

Nkosenhle lashes out, "I love her, I fell in love with her and I can't help it."

"Bafooo!" Banzi is shocked.

He brushes his head, "I think about her everyday, I've never felt this way about anyone. I want to start a legit business and live a normal life. I want to be love and be loved back, I want a family. And I want all that with her."

"Exactly what Mthetho wanted, good luck bafo!"

Banzi takes his jacket and walks to the door.

"Banzi don't tell me you don't understand, I have no control over my feelings, it's each for his own win. I love her too."

Banzi puts his hand up, "You cannot switch lives, Mthetho is not a thug, you are. You don't have a girl

who'd choose hell or heaven for you, he has. You cannot live his life, you'll be hurt and the thug you're molding in him into is going to be your downfall."

He laughs, "You think I'm jealous of him? Come on, I just love Thandeka."

"Whatever makes you sleep at night, I'm going home to fuck my girl and plan my next mission because that's who I am."

Banzi walks out and bangs the door.

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Insert 14

Thandeka

I wake up to a phone call from Nkosenhle. It's his routine to call every morning but today he wasn't carrying good news. Or are they good? Mthetho was sentenced to eight years in prison. He sounded happy for me, the man is finally out of my life. But I'm not, the whole morning is sour. I'm walking up and down fixing anything I bump into. Eight years is such a long-time!

Linda comes down wearing a skimpy skirt and black boots. She is always going somewhere. Funny how she comes home anytime she wants and nobody ever calls her out for it.

Aren't parents supposed to discipline such? What I've noticed is that her word is final here.

"Where are you off to?" I ask.

"Ummm...to friends," she says.

She doesn't sound too sure. Anyway it's none of my business, I carry on with my duties. The woman of

this house is still asleep. Her husband leaves in the wee hours of morning and comes back around dinner time or past it.

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I'm outside, open the gate please- Nkosenhle's text.

He was in Durban about two hours ago, he didn't mention that he'd be making his way here. I rush to my room and take out the robe and dress up decently.

I'm not sure who he is to me, but I always put pressure on myself to look good if he is around.

The first thing he does is pull me in for a warm embrace and kisses my cheek.

I look down, a bit embarrassed.

"You didn't sound okay over the phone and you've been offline the whole day," he says.

Don't tell me he is here for that!

"I'm okay. I was busy cleaning and doing other chores," I say.

He exhales in relief, "I was worried."

"That's a bit dramatic though."

He smiles, "It's my job to make sure you're always okay."

I definitely didn't know that. Anyway he look sizzling hot in black t-shirt and Denim short. I see him a lot but everytime he changes clothes his cuteness enhances.

I pull a chair for him in the kitchen.

"Are you hungry?" I ask.

"I'm hungry for your love."

For real now! I look at him, he is staring, no slight trace of playfulness.

"You cannot be courting me inside my father's house, that's disrespectful," I say.

"Let's leave the house then. I will call Mrs Chili and notify her," he says.

He doesn't wait for my opinion, he takes his phone and types a text. Within a minute his phone beeps, he smiles.

"She says leave a kettle of boiled water before you leave."

I sigh, "I never said I want to leave the house."

"Pleaseeee."

Urgh! I plug the kettle and go change to another outfit.

The weight is painful proof of my pregnancy. Linda

bought me a waist trainer to help me flatten the

tummy, I haven't used it till this day.

"You look beautiful but why did you change?"

I ignore the question and ask about our destination.

His answer is, we are going wherever our hearts lead us. I don't know when he finds the time to work, he is always available. He meant 'his heart', because we go to the restaurant of his choice. He loves avocado, he orders smoked salmon and baked eggs in avocado. It doesn't look appetizing at all, but it looks healthy.

"So you haven't decided?" he asks.

"Nope."

"Maybe we should do this without your decision."

I laugh, "How is that possible, mister?"

"Allow me to treat you as my woman, everything else will fall into place," he says.

"I'm not sure I've healed from my past relationship," I say.

He exhales and pushes his food around with a fork.

He looks disappointed, maybe I led him on with my actions. A part of me is left in the past I don't remember.

"We can try Thandeka, you can find your healing in my heart," his voice is almost begging. But he doesn't look like the genuinely begging type.

"What if I fail on the way? What if I want to leave?"

He blows out a sigh. "Thandeka I love you, with everything in me. I will never let you down or hurt you. I want to have something solid out of us; a future and family."

"I was about to say yes but you just scared me. A family?"

He chuckles, "Okay scratch that, I love you."

"Maybe if we take things slowly and not..."

He cuts in, "Whatever pace you want."

"Now you sound desperate."

His eyes lighten up, a smile crawls out on his face.

"Have you ever thought of someone everyday 24/7?"

You don't know the pain of loving someone who is not yours. I am desperate."

That's enough to make me smile and forget about the past I know nothing about. He leans over my seat and kisses my lips. The attention! He probably doesn't know how much I hate being the center of everyone's eye.

"They kiss their women as well," he says, smirking.

"Not in public!" I squirm.

"I'm not shy about you."

It's official, I'm dating again. He is re refreshing, his presence helps me forget about many things. I can say he is my place of sanity.

I don't know who told Linda, she just happens to know. She is more happy than me, it's like Nkosenhle is her boyfriend too.

I've asked her to keep the news to herself for now. I'm not ready to tell the parents.

She walks in with a number of bags and throws them on bed.

"Guess what I found on Sassy Secrets?"

"What is SassySecrets and what did you find?" I have no time for guessing.

She opens the bags and takes out a lingerie.

"Today is your lucky day," she is beaming with joy.

I crack up, "Are they bought for me?"

"Who else has a new boyfriend here? You're blessed to have a sister like me, I'm a classy bitch and I will always be there for you."

"Indeed, thank you my marshmallow."

In order to wear these things and for them to suit me I need to get into the gym and wear that waist trainer.

"While your intelligent sister is on observational mode please do something about your hair," she says.

I roll my eyes. My hair looks perfect, even Nkosenhle hasn't complained about it.

"I'm serious Thah, have you seen how Buhle makes faux locs? They will look good on you."

Saying no to her is like talking to a rock. She is pestering me about it the whole day, I end up giving in and preparing to go to the salon. There is money always reporting to my account from Mr Chili, he never says the purpose of it. Im too old to be living on allowance, I should make a call to my boss soon.

There is loud laughter cracking inside the salon. I get second thoughts about walking in, my socializing skills end inside the house with Linda.

Unfortunately one of them has seen me. She screams my name and gives me in a tight hug. I guess we used to know each other. She is beautiful.

"How are you doing?" she asks with her hands on hips.

"I'm good," I say.

She smiles, "What a graceful afternoon!"

Asking for her name may seem a bit rude, so I just smile and walk in after her.

"Is that T-ggom?" one girl asks from their store room.

"Ya!"

I'm T-ggom???

She comes running and looks at me with her eyes widened.

"I'm a little bit mad at you for cancelling the wedding, but I forgive you because you got shot."

Is this girl serious? I'm in disbelief.

"Okay," I say.

"Who is that guy driving luxurious cars around your home? I think we need to be BFF's now. Being Sindi's friend doesn't benefit me with anything. She is dating a boring, broke blood-sucking mosquito."

Okay I get it, she is bold and says whatever her mind tells her. There are three of them, I guess Sindi is the furious one.

"Well said, you are after her ex after all," she says.

The other one sighs, "Okay ladies, this is a customer!"

"We are about to close though."

At 3pm? I thought it was still early.

"You can leave guys, I will manage alone."

They don't waste time, they pack their bags and leave.

I can hear that girl talking loud on the street. She is a talking very loud and unstoppable.

"How are things?" the girl they left me with asks.

I'm not sure which things she is asking about.

"Good," I say.

"You took a bold decision, I'm sorry about the accident."

I shrug, "It's good, he was sentenced, at least I got justice."

"Wow! That was fast, how did they catch him so fast?"

"I slept with him in one bed, shared years of my life with him. You know what's funny? I want it to be a dream, the days I remember with him were the best." I say.

"Is it Mesuli?"

I let out a chuckle, "Mthetho."

Her movements unexpectedly stop. She stares at my reflection on the mirror in total shock.

"Mthethowakhe Mkhize???"

I nod, "Do you know him?"

"Thandeka you don't remember me? I'm Buhle, the girl Mthetho left for you"

Oh, I remember something like that.

"I'm sorry, are you okay?" I ask.

"Not really...did you say Mthetho is alive?"

"He is in jail," I say.

She grabs a seat and releases a huge sigh.

"Oh My God!"

It takes a few minutes for her to recover. I narrate the story of how he escaped the fire the way I was told.

Relief is all over her face.

"But how did he shoot you?" she asks.

"He hijacks cars in Durban."

Her eyes pop out, "He hijack cars?"

"Yep. He was trying to hijack me, I sped away trying to escape then he fired."

She frowns and shakes her head.

"That's not like Mthetho. How is he, emotionally?"

"I haven't checked on him, I have no reason to."

Her face drops, "That's not like you either. You love him Thandeka"

"He killed my first baby, now the second one. No, I don't love him."

She nods, "I understand, but wow!"

Curiosity kicks in.

"How was he like?" I ask.

"Quiet, caring and judged by everyone."

I frown, "Judged by everyone."

"When he was with you your family didn't like him.

When he got with me my mother didn't like him

either, but I got to the bottom of it. He cared about me,

but his heart wasn't complete with me."

I listen eagerly, she is not telling tales.

She looks up, "He loved you Thandeka. I'm talking

about someone who'd lose everything for you. For

some time I was convinced he was going to change, I tried my best to be his everything. But you know, the heart wants what it want. And his wanted you, it chose you."

I swallow hard. I don't know why this is making me emotional. This shouldn't be touching me, I hate the guy, our past don't matter.

"And you loved him too. It was the two of you against the world, I grew fond of you because the love he had for you is the same love you gave him. I guess external forces posed greater powers, love is forgotten, hatred is ruling."

I don't want her words to stay in my mind. I want to forget as fast as I can. She gulps down a glass of water and starts with with my hair.

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Mthetho Mkhize

It's a dark hole, there is no light, no ray of hope. The walls are high as my sorrows, the corridors are narrow. I'm in a place I never thought I would be in, wearing the uniform I never thought I'd fit in. The purpose of living is dead, oxygen is what keeps me alive. Life inside here is not easy. My bare existence pisses a lot of people off, even here I'm getting threatening looks. If it wasn't for that man with bushy beard maybe I would be dead by now. He comes to me and squats beside me. I don't know his name, he has been nice the moment I walked in here. He is the only nice person, but he is not so nice to other inmates.

"Khabazela!"

I didn't know he knows my surname.

"Yebo," I say.

"You look like a good boy, what brings you here?" he asks.

Most of them knows, some have asked about the incident and made jokes about it. Some gave me nicknames based on it.

I thought he knew as well, he never asked. The only thing he asks daily is if I'm alright, if there is anyone bothering me and if I have enough necessities.

"I hijacked a car," I say.

He furrows his brows as if he is finding it hard to believe it.

"Were you poor?" he asks.

"Yes, but I was okay with it, maybe I just needed a homely feeling."

He nods. "I hear you, so where are your friends?"

I'm puzzled, how did he know that I wasn't alone.

"Outside," I say, not giving in to the curiosity.

"How are you inside alone?"

I exhale, "I'm protecting someone I love."

He chuckles and bumps his head against the wall.

"You're still young mfana wami. Love is just a

fairytale, the girl you're protecting is already sleeping with someone else."

I shake my head. He is not talking about my love,

Thandeka loves me. My mind is running wild not

knowing how she is taking the news. She hasn't come

to see me, she is disappointed. But I know if I explain

she will understand. I was trapped because I wanted

out.

He clears his throat, "I've been here for a decade, my businesses are still running outside. The child I was working for wasn't mine. There and then I learnt a good lesson; never give a woman your heart. They don't hurt you to see tears on your face, they squash your heart and squeeze out every ounce of happiness you have. They leave you with a strong face and dead heart. I kill people, I break their souls apart from their bodies and send them to hell. Women don't do that, they kill every organ that produces happiness, destroy your manhood...they kill you and leave you breathing."

It sounds deep. His voice sounds familiar as he speaks, it's like I know him from somewhere.

"Do I know you Baba?" I ask.

"You're Delani's son, I'm Ngwane."

I was right, I know him. It's Buhle's biological father. I was still a kid when he left the village. He never looked back, not even to check on his only daughter.

"She needs you" I tell him.

"Who?"

"Buhle."

He is quiet for a moment then he raises his eyes.

"So she didn't tell her the truth!" he says.

"Who?" I'm confused.

"Her mother...she didn't tell her the truth."

I'm lost. What truth?

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Insert 15

Buhle Qwabe

I've never been to prison before, not even once had I thought I'd be setting my foot in there. I don't know what I should buy him. Cosmetics? Food? What I know is that no one has gone to visit him. The person who could be giving him strength hates him. But I understand her, Mthetho put her through unimaginable pain over and over again. The girl is fed up.

"You haven't told me where you're going," she says.
"I'm attending a workshop in Durban, mother."
She stares at me for a few seconds then walks out. All along she knew that Mthetho was alive, she is with Mr Chili everyday, yet she didn't bother letting me know. I get ready and leave. Saphokazi will be in charge in the salon, hopefully no customers will run away.

My knees are shaking, I'm seeing people in orange uniforms so close. They are sitting with their relatives,

the guard is watching them as if they're planning prison break. He appears followed by another guard.

He is thin but he still looks the same.

"No touching!" the annoyed guard says.

I nod and stare at him opposite me. I'm still trying to see him as my brother, not the one who got away.

"Buhle," he says.

For a minute I can't say anything, I'm just staring at him. What happened to him that he ended up hijacking cars? He is not a greedy person, he lived on bare minimum for years.

"How did you find me?" he asks.

I exhale, "Thandeka told me."

He nods and looks down.

"You shot her Mthetho! What happened to you?"

He looks up immediately, "Huh! How did...?"

"She told me everything. Yazi Mthetho she gave up everything for that baby, her home, her parents. She was a mess after your so-called death, the baby meant everything to her and you resurfaced and took that away from her."

Sadness swallows his face. I can't picture his sad face pulling a gun and shooting someone. He is a good person.

"I mixed up with wrong people, it was never my intention to hurt her. They played me, and because I'm a fool I fell for it. But they will pay Buhle, Nkosenhle will pay!!"

I frown, "Her boyfriend Nkosenhle?"

"Her what???"

"There is a famous guy by the name of Nkosenhle who is always with her, they say he is her boyfriend."

His eyes turn dark, I see the Mthetho I've never seen before. Maybe I shouldn't have brought that up, it's not the reason I'm here.

"I'm here to check on you and see how you're doing.

How is life inside?" I say changing the subject.

He shrugs and keeps quiet.

"There is something I need to tell you," I say.

He is not here, he is dissolved in anger. I want to

know the story of this Nkosenhle but now may be not the right time.

"My mother and Mr Chili took your father's land."

He looks at me flatly, "How?"

"There are papers that were signed by your father to her. She is the rightful owner of it they are starting a sugarcane farm on it."

"I don't understand, why would my father sign our land to someone not related to us?"

I take a deep breath, this is going to change his life. It's the truth he always wanted. The reason behind the death of his parents.

"I saw letters sent by your father, Delani Mkhize, to my mother. They had an affair, I'm a product of it hence your mother wanted to leave and got killed."

He is in shock. I see his nose flaring up in anger.

"That's crazy, not true at all!" He's in denial.

"There are letters in your parcel. I stole them from my mother's room, we are brother and sister Mthetho."

He looks thoughtful for a moment then nods as if something just clicked. "He said something like that. It doesn't make any sense though, my father loved mother."

"I'm sorry."

He shuts his eyes and shakes his head. He keeps whispering my name. The brother who broke my virginity and heart.

"Why didn't your mother say anything about us?"

"I don't know. I wish I knew, all along I thought

Ngwane was my father and that he turned his back on us."

"He is inside" he says.

"Here?"

He nods.

Oh, no!

"How long has he been here?" I'm shaking.

"10years," he says.

I don't even want to know what he did, I just want to see him.

"I want to see him," I say.

"Unfortunately you can't, it's not easy seeing him but I will tell him you were here and you're okay."

I frown, "How is it not easy?"

"You won't understand."

"Okay, please arrange for me to see him. Is there nothing you can do to prevent the farm?" I ask.

"Let them do what they want. I will be out in no time and sort it out."

In no time? He was sentenced to eight years, his calendar is dramatically wrong.

"Thank you for coming and for not hating me," he says.

Our time is up. He gets up and leaves.

My heart tears apart as I walk out of the prison gates.

There are so many stories about prison life, they are scary. He won't be the same when he comes out.

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MESULI MBATHA

It's been a long day, I had to stay behind and assist below-the-average learners. I wanted to go straight from school to the house. But the brother I have always have plans made for me without my acknowledgement. Car spinning isn't my thing but

here I am. The thing takes almost 2hours, I'm tired and hungry.

"Do we really have to eat here? I mean, I own a restaurant as well," he says.

The lady is waiting for our orders, maybe if he can stop talking and focus on the menu in front of him.

"Bro you own a shisanyama, not restaurant," I say.

"We both sell food, it's restaurants!"

I won't argue with him, I place my order. I cast my eyes on the table opposite ours, they land on this couple enjoying their meal. The lady looks up, our eyes meet. Everything in me turns. It's the one and only Thandeka Chili. The source of my pain. Her eyes stay on me for a few seconds then she looks at her companion. No acknowledgement, no nothing.

"Bafo I'm leaving," I tell Mvikeli.

He frowns, "You are the one who wanted to come here."

"Thandeka is here, I can't stay."

He looks around and finds her with his eyes.

"A new man? Wow!" he exclaims.

"We will eat in the car."

I just want to leave.

He stands, "Wait, I want to go say hello."

"No!"

He doesn't listen to anyone, he makes his way to their table.

I can't hear what is being said but the man with her looks furious. Their voices start rising, everyone is watching them. I have to get my brother and go.

I grab his arm, "Let's go."

He looks at them and clicks his tongue. I share a brief look with Thandeka, she is still beautiful. My heart takes a sharp stab. I'm going straight home from here. I send the principal a text cancelling tomorrow extra classes, I need to be home alone.

"So you're not going to eat because you bumped into your ex?"

I sigh, "I need to breath, eat your food and leave me alone."

"Then Mbatha was right, you are too weak."

I nod, "Okay."

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THANDEKA CHILI

We are heading to his house, he is angry. I couldn't even pack Linda's lingerie, this visit wasn't planned. I know today I met my ex fiancée, we didn't talk but his face said it all. Indeed I hurt him.

"Do you need anything in town?" Nkosenhle asks.

"No," I say.

"Are you sure?"

I keep quiet. He gets the message and drives straight to his house. It feels wrong, very wrong.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I nod, "Yes."

"This is our house, feel free."

Again, I nod. There is no homely feeling, I feel like

I'm just inside a building. No family pictures, no

vava-vroom. "How do you find it?"

I crack up, "Very

boring."

"What?" he exclaims.

"Big and boring," I say.

His laugh is the best.

"You're dissing my house?" he's in stitches.

"Maybe if you can change the color on the walls and put some drawings, and definitely change your curtains."

"I don't find it boring, whoever finds it boring must make changes," he says.

I smile, "One day you'll find everything changed."

I warm up and take a tour around. A memory of Latty flashes. A good, tall-standing woman. Big hearted and caring. Isn't this stabbing her in the back? Yes, she wasn't my friend, we only met through Mthetho, but taking her ex!

"Sthandwa sami," says the voice behind me.

I turn and look at him.

He comes closer and locks me in his arms. He always smells so good, I find my hand rubbing on his arm.

"I love you Thandeka," he says.

Deep breath!

"I love you too."

He closes his eyes and sniffs on my neck. I push his chest and stare at him.

"What is that for?" I ask.

"I'm learning you," he says.

He is a weird. He cups my face and sucks my lip. I get lost in him, his arms are pulling me tighter to his

chest. He catches his breath and looks at me with his eyelids half opened.

"Thandeka, I love you."

I smile, "Thank you."

He shakes his head and lifts my chin up.

"Look at me! I love you with everything in me. You are one thing I will fight to death before I lose."

"You always sound desperate," I say jokingly.

He inhales sharply, "I fell in love with you the first time my eyes set on you. You make me happy, very happy."

I stand on my toes and peck his lips. Maybe I'm blessed, he sounds genuine. All I need to do is to open my heart and let him in.

"You have a beautiful body" he says.

My eyes widen.

"How...?"

He smiles, "I saw you, remember."

My spirit drops. "Is that the reason why we are in love?"

"No! We can even do the 'no sex before marriage' conduct. I'm not in this for sexual benefits, I just want to have you by my side."

He is ten steps ahead, marriage?!

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BUHLE QWABE

Mthetho is the only thing on my mind. Is he okay there? Last night I couldn't get sleep, I kept seeing him coiled in a dark place, with no one to hold onto. His father was a cruel man...Our father I mean. How could he choose death instead of owning up to his infidelity?

"Aybo, I'm going to return to town, who didn't pay?" The taxi driver roars. People are shouting, urging whoever it is to pay up.

I didn't pay! My mind has been busy the minute I got in this taxi. I quickly open my bag for my purse.

"Nayi imali," a man behind my seat says, passing R20.

"I'm the one who forgot to pay," I say.

"It's okay, pass the money and let's go."

I'm not sure if this is luck, I put my money back and close the purse. I need to be attentive before I pass my stop. People start dropping off their stops, when we

enter the village it's almost empty. It's me, another passenger next to the driver and one woman in front of my seat.

"Salon!" Says the voice behind me.
I didn't realize there was someone behind me, the same man who paid for me. We share the same stop, I'm dropping a few things in the salon and then heading home.

I hate this moment, having many bags to take out and the driver looking at you like you're wasting his time. I try my best not to slam his door, drivers' moods are unstable.

"Do you need help?"
I look up and find a caramel skinned, muscular-built man wearing white golf shirt and Cutty shorts staring at me. He is wearing those super white sneakers. I don't know him, I've never seen him in this place before.

"Thanks, I will manage," I say.
He adjusts his big bag around his shoulder and picks two shopping bags.
"Where?" he asks.

I point in the salon and follow him behind. He waits at the side of the door and let me unlock. My stubbornness wasn't necessary,I needed help.

"Thank you," I say.

"You're welcome."

"Ummm..I owe you R20,right?" I fumble through my bag searching for the purse.

"No, you owe me your name."

I look at him, "Sorry?"

"I'm Bukhosini Zuma, this is my first time seeing you, who do they call you?"

He is so humble!

"Nobuhle Qwabe," I say.

He extends his hand for a handshake. A normal handshake last seconds, not this one. He doesn't let go of my hand.

"You are beautiful like your name. Where do you fetch water?"

I laugh, "In this year? I have a sink."

A smile creeps up on his face. He has a perfect set of teeth and well trimmed chin.

"I was born in the 80s, forgive me. How can I see you again? I was scared to approach you inside the taxi," he says.

"Maybe we will bump on each other again, thanks for your help Bukhosini."

He chuckles, "Maybe-won't make me sleep at night, can I have your number at least?"

"No, I don't give my number to people I have no business with."

He nods with a smirk on his face.

Damn! Buhle's contact details are written on the board attached next to the window. See why I need a separate phone for business.

He boldly types the number on his phone.

He looks up, "Thanks."

"I put it up for business purposes."

He grins, "I want to book, how much is bonding?"

Really now!

"I will come tomorrow at 12pm for my bonding, I'll make it my mission to remind you later and in the morning. Stay beautiful Nobuhle. He is a bully."

Insert 16

SAPHOKAZI

Oh stupid alarm! Why didn't it ring? Damn I should stop buying phones from China shops. I kick off the covers and rush to the kitchen to plug water. There is no space for the kettle!

"Malume what is the thing boiling here? I want to plug a kettle," I yell.

"That's imbiza, don't disturb it."

Hhayi-bo, I'm the breadwinner here, how would I bath with cold water?

"Two minutes only," I say unplugging the stove.

He walks in immediately. "It won't be effective if you don't wait for it to boil."

"Sorry, I'm rushing to work."

"I'm also rushing to Gloria, I need this concoction."

Gloria? Is this one of those sexual performance

enhancing things? I take a closer look, it's sticky water with roots inside.

"Who is Gloria now?" I ask.

"None of your business."

He is right, as long as Gloria is not coming to my

house. I grab my lunch tin and dish rice...Eh chicken

feet!

Sindi is going to laugh at this.

"Malume can you help me with R8 for ikota?" I ask

He frowns, "There is food, dish up."

"I can't carry chicken feet and rice. Sindi thinks we live a good life," I say.

"And what is wrong with chicken feet? Uyatefa wena, some people go days without proper food," he walks out.

I hide chicken feet under and sprinkle mayonnaise and tomato sauce on top of gravy. She won't notice.

I take a 5minute bath and dress up and leave.

Sindi is already busy with a customer, boss lady is wiping the windows. "You're late," she says.

"Stupid alarm How many customers do I have today?"

"Can't you look at the book instead of asking?" Sindi.

I roll my eyes, "Did you get morning glory madam?"

She glares at me, "Did you?"

"I don't live with a man" I say.

"You don't have one."

Rubbing salt! I gave up on Mesuli, he is not coming around. Who can I date now? All these village men are below my standards. I'm not sure which standard but it's high, not for broke ass niggas.

"Do you guys know Bukhosini Zuma?" Buhle asks.

"Asshole, why?" I say.

She looks at me curiously.

"You know him?" she asks.

"Ah lelo bhinca, where did you see him? He is full of himself that one." That guy thinks the world revolves around him, he is too 1954. He doesn't belong to this century, those who had his mindset are being called through impepho now.

"Awu!" she says, clearly disappointed.

"All of them, the Zumas, they are hotheaded. They think they are royalty, their homestead is fuckin' huge with lot of mad cows that eat people's crops."

Sindi laughs, "Just say you hate them."

"No I don't care about them."

I wonder what's up with Buhle and the Zumas. She won't fit in that family, she is a modern independent woman. Bukhosini works in Johannesburg, I don't see him boyfriending a businesswoman. Men like him lose their egos if a girl isn't dependent on them.

I decide to have my lunch early. I'm trying to cross Sindi. I take my chair outside and eat on the verandah.

Hoot!

"Hey!" It's Mvikeli.

I close my lunch tin and wave a hand. He decides to stop the car and come to me.

Ah God!

"How are you?" he asks.

"I'm okay wena?"

He looks at the lunchtin on my lap. "I'm hungry."

My eyes widen, he is here to shake my life.

"Go buy something from the shop," I say.

"No, I want something home cooked."

Aybo, his home is around the corner. I'm sure they have a helper who cook three times a day. I won't expose my lunch of chicken feet.

Before I know it the tin is in his hands, he is digging in with a spoon. My soul is slowly leaving my body.

"What is this?" he asks.

"Rice and curry," I say.

He digs another spoon and frowns as he comes across two toes pointing out of the rice.

I sigh, "Okay it's chicken feet, I hid them under because it's embarrassing."

"No, your dishing skills are embarrassing."

Really now? I watch him eats all my lunch, my stomach is empty as well.

"There is no wash down?" he asks.

I give him a bottle of juice. I'm not happy with the way he ate those feet, there is plenty of meat left. He didn't crush the bones either.

"This is my lucky day," he says after gulping down all my juice.

"You know I haven't eaten all day, right?"

He grins, "Let's go buy you food, how much time do you have?"

"Fifteen minutes."

I notify the girls and follow him to the car. It's always a pleasure to hold front seat, I like having my elbow out the window. We need passenger's hoots, like now I see my uncle on the road.

"That's my uncle!" I say reaching and hitting on the hoot.

He stops with his hand over his forehead blocking the sun. He doesn't know this car, I look out and shout 'malumeee'.

He sees me and waves his hand, stopping the car.

"Do you mind giving him a lift?" I ask.

He doesn't say anything, he reverses the car and stops for him.

"Get inside!" I say.

Why is he wearing his funeral suit? I mean he only wear suits to attend funerals.

"Are you not supposed to be in the salon?" he asks.

"I'm going out for lunch," I say.
He greets Mvikeli and struggles with the seatbelt. He is embarrassing me now. We drop him outside a certain RDP house, soon I will find out who lives inside it.

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We arrive at the shisanyama, he orders one of the guys to grill meat for me. I'm having icy cold drink while waiting for it to be done.

"So how are you celebrating your birthday next week?"

Whoohah! Next week it's my birthday? OMG!

"How do you know when it is?" I ask.

"We were in the same class Sapho."

Yeah but I don't know his birthday.

"I don't know, maybe I will eat out," I say.

"That's all?"

"Yes, Shakes."

Surely, he doesn't expect me to throw myself a birthday surprise party or take myself to a luxurious holiday.

He nods and keeps his stare at me.

I let out a chuckle, "Is my face that beautiful?"

"Yes."

I stick my tongue out, when are they contesting Miss

SA? I need to send my application.

"How is your obsession with my brother?" he asks.

"Dead, I don't want him anymore. He is hovering over

his ex, we wouldn't work out anyway."

He smiles, "Shame sorry."

"I'm not hurt, relax."

"That's good, maybe you will start noticing people who are interested in you," he says.

I want to ask, like who? But the answer is in his look.

Dear Lord!

"You're kidding, right?"

"No."

He is dead serious.

I crack up and laugh.

Damn!!!

"You like Saphokazi?" I ask.

"Yes, I do."

I fold my legs, "You went to school with me, you

know my bad sides. Why would you be interested in me?"

"You're unique, I don't like fake people. I know

everything about you, you've never pretended to be

someone you're not."

I'm blown away! But my heart is beating abnormally.

I'm a bit scared, this doesn't happen to me. I choose the guys I like, they don't choose me.

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BUHLE QWABE

Sapho is not back from her lunch, it's been an hour now. Sindi went to hers and came back, Sapho is negligent and inconsiderate. I send her another text threatening to cut her payment.

Eventually a car stops outside. I'm ready to bite her ears off but I realize it's only a taxi. It was dropping someone off.

"Good day," greets the person.

My heart skips a beat, what is he doing here? He called last night, I saved his number and added it to blacklist. He is standing next to the door, wearing

black track pants and another pair of sneakers. A shiny necklace is worn over the t-shirt.

"Hey bhuti, can we help you?" asks Sindi.

"I contacted Nobuhle and booked her for 12pm." Now he booked me? How do you book a human being? I'm not some room.

Sindi looks at me, "Your customer, I guess."

"I would like to have my hair done outside, under the tree shade," he says.

He has no full stop! He has a chiskop for crying out loud! I'm trying to come up with the right words for my response. He takes the chair and my cellphone from the charger and walks out.

I follow him gun blazing. My cellphone! Who gave him the right to take my phone?

He sits on the chair with my cellphone in his hand under the tree shade.

"Don't take me for granted," I say snatching it away. I check the screen, he didn't do anything. I click my tongue and attempt to leave, but he holds my hand.

"Why am I not able to call you?" he asks.

"I never gave you my number so I wouldn't know."

He smirks, "Very smart! However you cannot leave, I booked an hour for your services."

I'm being addressed like a prostitute here.

"You don't need any services," I say.

He raises his eyes, there is a little scar beneath his right eye.

"I need your heart," he says confidently.

Maybe Sapho was right, he is annoying.

"I have serious customers to attend Bukhosini," I say.

The fool smiles!

"You remember my name? Thank you, it sounds

even nice coming from your lips."

I shouldn't have said his name, I shouldn't have recognized him at all.

"You captured my heart the moment you entered the taxi. I'm single, I wash and cook on my own, my mother is too old."

Which century is this? 1400BC? There are washing machines and restaurants for goodness' sake.

"How can I help?" I ask.

"You can allow me to talk to your older sister," he says.

I frown, I don't have any sister.

"For what?" I ask.

"You need to send your girls to my home to bring ucu."

"You are full of jokes! +" I say.

"I'm not joking Buhle, I'd like to have a relationship with you. I won't beat around the bush, as much as I

don't know you I do know my feelings. You captured my heart." He is going on full speed. There is a stage called 'Getting To Know Each Other', I think we are skipping it here. I only know his name and that he is hotheaded, nothing else.

"Well, I don't know you," I say.

"Should I certify my ID copy and bring along with my CV?"

Oh yeah, he is stupid as well.

"If that's what you want," I say.

He chuckles, "You need to relax, I'm joking. What do you want to know about me?"

"I don't know, I was just saying."

"I'm Bukhosini Zuma, uNxamalala, dwala

elibushelelezi. I love soccer and animals, I'm a huge fan of Bahubhe. What else? I have six siblings, three sisters and three brothers. My life is simple, there is nothing much to tell."

"You forgot to mention that you're hotheaded and thinks the world revolves around you," I say.

He raises his eyebrow, "That's quite an observation,

but yes I make the world revolve around me because I

will never revolve around it. I won't say I'm

hotheaded, I just happen to know what I want and
strive to achieve it."

"What have you achieved so far?" I ask.

"Nobuhle, you're officially invited to my life,
welcome!"

Mxm! Why am I laughing?

"Are you going to attend ingoma on Saturday night?
I'd like to see you again."

I shake my head, "I don't attend those things, this is
another side of the village."

"Please come, I will take you home when it ends."

I chuckle, "No."

"Come with someone you trust, I only want to talk to
you."

I sigh, "I will see."

"Can I be unblocked? I want to call you later."

I will do it, only because he asked nicely.

Sapho is back, she looks surprised when she sees

Bukhosini behind me. He puts the chair back in its
position and places R200 note on the counter.

"Buy a drink ladies," he says.

Sapho smiles, "Wow, thanks."

He stands next to me and stares at my face.

Gawd! He is making me shy.

"I will call," he says.

I nod and look away.

The loud sigh I take when he walks out.

"I've changed my mind, he is a good guy. Did I say handsome as well? We are buying Bernini Blush," Sapho says.

Sindi rolls her eyes, "We don't drink it, and besides you're not the one to make rules over this money."

They fight like cat and mouse and they call themselves best friends.

"Shut up wena! Queen B what are we buying?"

"Drink I guess," I say.

He is on my mind the whole day. The way he is so confident and straight talking! I've never heard of the Zumas, I don't know everyone in the village anyway.

My phone beeps, I don't recognise the number. *-Please unblock me, Bukhosini-* it's a different number.

I unblock his number, it takes a few minutes before he calls. I step outside, their eyes are too much.

"Thanks for parole," he says.

"Why am I being called?"

"You're missed, when are you knocking off?" he asks.

His voice is different over the phone. There are deep voices talking in his background.

"It will depend on customers," I say.

"Can I come help you close up?"

"No, I will manage," I say.

"I will come either way."

Oh now he is being thee Bukhosini.

"What I'm trying to say is I don't have your time," I say.

Silence.

"I have to go," I say.

"Buhle..."

His voice has softened.

"Yes?"

"Pass my regards to your heart, I will see you later," he says.

But I just told him I don't want to see him! I check the screen, the call has been ended. He is the most challenging man to ever ask me out.

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Insert 17

THANDEKA

"What's going on?" I ask.

He has been quiet for some time, he looks troubled.

Today I'm going back home, my stay here has been great. I've been getting royal treatment, he is a true definition of gentleman. We are not engaging sexually as yet, he wants me to be comfortable and sure.

"I don't want you to go," he says.

"Come on, Nkosenhle!"

He takes a deep sigh and pulls me to his chest. Now he is being difficult, I've been here for three days.

"I will be lonely, I hate it."

But I wasn't moving in with him been together for what...few weeks? This attachment is not for beginners.

He takes another breath and squeezes my hand.

"Thandeka you understand that I love you, right?"

"I understand," I say.

"Your love made me do crazy things. My brother hates me, it's a mess. Right now you are the only thing that

makes me smile, nobody understands how I feel about you."

I look at him, "Is it because I was with Mthetho?"

"Yeah, he was like our brother from another mother.

Banzi says I betrayed him, he doesn't understand."

He sounds hurt. Now that I think about it I realize

Banzi hasn't come to this house, I haven't seen him

since the day I found out about Mthetho. They are

family of two, they have no one except each other. I

understand how Nkosenhle must be feeling.

"My intention is not to break your relationship with your brother," I say.

"I know babe, and I want us to prove that we are not

together to hurt anyone. If it needs to be done, we will

go to Mthetho and let him know."

My eyes widen, that's not happening! I don't want to see Mthetho, I'm not strong enough to face the man who killed my babies.

"No, I don't owe that one any explanation," I say.

"Babe I just don't want him to feel...."

I shift from his chest, "I don't care how he feels, don't bring him up, please."

He nods, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you angry."

"It's okay, can we cuddle and talk about you? The man that I love."

He smiles and pulls me back to his chest.

"I love being loved by you," he says.

"So tell me about your childhood, how was it like?"

All I know is that their parents were killed by police. I don't want details of why they were shot, he was too young to know.

"Life robbed me my childhood, I really have nothing to tell. At the age of 16 I was already a family leader. I had to hustle and take care of Banzi. I was once a boy with dreams, hoping to work as an accountant. It was just sweet dreams, really.

I sacrificed everything to reach grade 12 but it ended there. We lost our home on Christmas day, and that was the beginning of the Nkosenhle you see now."

"Tell me about this Nkosenhle," I say smiling.

He doesn't return the smile. There is a gloomy expression on his face, a tiny feeling nudges my heart.

Do I really know him?

"I'm heartless Thandeka, I hustled for my legacy and lost myself along the way. That's how I knew I love you, I felt sympathy when I saw you in a deathbed. I felt the need to protect you from Mthetho."

"You felt sorry for me, is that why you are with me?" I ask.

"You don't get it. My feelings took a sharp curve, I became someone I'm not because of you. It was different from any girl I've been with. I see you when I look at you, I see you even when my eyes are closed," he says.

"Wow!"

He plants a kiss on my cheek and stares at me.

"I can't explain it. I wish everyone understood, I had no control on who my heart fell in love with," he says in agony.

I like his beard, I massage it with my fingers until his face start melting into a gentle smile.

"We don't owe anyone explanation Nkosenhle, it make sense to us," I say.

"I'm going to marry you."

Huh!!!

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MESULI MBATHA

I'm trying to forget and not to be 'weak'. It's not easy putting a brave face when your manhood is constantly brought to question. Had it been others, men, they would've picked up their pieces and moved on. We are strong species, aren't we? We have hearts made out of concrete, we don't feel pain unless our body is shot with a bullets. The only way we feel pain is when there is blood oozing from our temple.

Otherwise, you are just weak and need to man up.

"Time is ticking Mesuli, am I really going to grave with no grandchildren?"-Mom.

I haven't healed, that I've said a number of times. The bar is set too high for me, and I'm not even crawling.

But she is civil about it, I can't say the same about my father. It's insults after insults, I wish I can say it doesn't get to me anymore but the truth is, it does. I can't explain why I bothered visiting them.

"He is forcing us to arrange a girl for him, that's the only way," he says.

I frown, arrange a girl?! I haven't looked for a girlfriend, it's not like I'm failing. I'm just not ready for a relationship.

"That's not happening," I say.

"Time is not on your side, you need to get married." Need? It's not on the list of my needs right now. They have no right policing my life, I'm an independent individual.

"I'm sorry to burst your bubble but I won't get married anytime soon," I say.

He raises his brows, the Mbatha way. The feared one! He is heartless, everyone knows that. Village people call him "Chief", that's what they call rich people who are capable of turning their lives around. It makes him think he is a real chief, he walks around like he is carrying Africa on his back.

He makes the rules and I never defied any of them, until now. I lived according to the rules. I finished school, obtained my degree and settled down with Thandeka. Even though it was what he expected from me I also wanted to do it. I loved Thandeka and beneath the pain lies the same feeling. Seeing her with

someone else broke the broken me. My future, our memories and feelings down the drain. Years of commitment and dreams, all thrown away.

"My businesses won't collapse because you're failing to get a wife!" he says.

"How is my life going to affect your businesses?" I ask. I'm lost, is there hidden agenda he is pushing without my acknowledgement?

He picks his glass of whisky and stands up.

"Don't just pick any Mbali with poor background, we don't need blood-sucking mosquitoes."

"Seconded, don't bring someone who will use us as her golden ticket," Mom.

"I'm not bringing anyone," I say.

"Then you will be brought someone, mama prepare me a bath."

Mom stands up and follows him.

My parents!

Mvikeli has been right all along, these people care about their "money" more than us. I drive back to the house with a sinking heart. They don't get tired of driving my life, even when I've done right by them my whole life. As a first son protecting our legacy is my

priority, I invest and promote T.M Traders. Not even once had anyone told me my relationship status affects business, if that's possible.

Mvikeli is finding all this funny.

"Why did you visit them? I only go there when I'm hungry and leave as soon as I can," he says.

"They are our parents, I had to check on them," I defend myself.

"Who have done everything to push you. You wouldn't be where you are if it wasn't for them, the backdoor applications and bribes they paid to open doors for you. They were investing on you, their obedient son. Play by the rules like you've always done, your name is shortlisted for the next CEO. That's why I'm hustling for my own empire, I will never let anyone dictate my life."

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THANDEKA CHILI

I finally escape Linda's hundred questions and go to bed. She wants to know every single detail. Did he treat me good? Am I going to take it further with him? And worse I have to describe how I find him, romantically. I told her about the waiting period, she became Nkosenhle's top fan, telling me how hard it is to find a man who doesn't want to rush you yen-yen.

"Thandeka!" She is outside my door again.

I ignore her and pretend to be asleep.

"Open it's urgent," she says.

Gosh! I open for her while mentally regretting coming back from Nkosenhle's house. I'd be lying warmly in his arms peacefully. "Mesuli is outside the gate, he is asking for you."

My eyes pop out.

"My ex fiancée?" I ask.

"Yep."

What is he doing here? We ended things on broad daylight. Before I left the village everything was cleared.

"Where is Mom and Dad?" I ask.

"Dining room, they know Mesuli."

I exhale and check my phone. Nkosenhle left a

'Goodnight' message, I respond to it as a person going to sleep. Shakes and him started on the wrong foot, I'm certain that he doesn't like my ex.

I put on my robe and walk out. A car is parked outside the gate, my nerves are getting short. What am I going to say to this person? I remember nothing about us. I open the front door and hop inside. His head is bowed down, I can't see his face but it's there in my mind. He is handsome.

"Hey," I say.

There is some silence before he raises his head and looks at me. He doesn't look okay.

"How are you?" he asks.

"I'm good wena?"

He shakes his head, "I'm not good Thandeka."

I look at him waiting for him to explain what's troubling him and why he is here. But he just stares at my face and keeps quiet.

"I lost my memory so I don't remember anything. I only know what I was told," I say.

He sighs, "I can't forgive, I can't make peace with it. I want to move on but I can't. I don't know where my pride went. You cheated on me, canceled our wedding and turned me into a laughing stock but I'm still not proud enough to discard you out of my heart."

Yoh! I don't know what to say, I thought we both accepted the situation.

"Uthando lwami olungaka Thandeka! I didn't do anything wrong, tell me that's correct?"

He sounds too emotional.

I nod, "From what I heard, that's correct."

"Kwenzakaleni pho? What is it that we couldn't work on? You wronged me, I forgave you. I was willing to overlook your flaws and...Kwenzakaleni?"

I feel bad about what happened, but there is nothing I can do. I cannot explain the past nor rewrite it.

"You left me for Mthetho but you're not with him now.

The guy I saw you with, who is he?"

I take a deep breath, "Nkosenhle."

"How is he different from me?"

This is getting more frustrating, he is my ex, I can't discuss my relationship with him. And I don't know how to answer his question.

"Or he is the next victim? You are going to give him hope and lead him on for years before you go back to Mthetho again?"

I give him a look, like who is he to predict my life!
"Firstly, I won't go back to Mthetho, he has damaged me enough. Secondly, you don't have any right to judge me," I say.

His eyes gleam with tears, he lets out a chuckle and shakes his head.

"Thandeka you really lost your memory? Mthetho can take both your eyes out, kill your babies ten times and beat you day in and out. You'd still choose him over a good man who loves and respects you."

"Okay," I say. I'm not up for an argument. He is entitled to his opinion, and I won't gain a dime from convincing him otherwise.

"So why am I here?" I ask.

"I wanted to see you." His voice has turned wobbly, he is no longer looking at me, I can't see his face.

"To tell me about my faults?" I ask.

"I wanted to tell you that things are not okay. Not that it's any of your business, I don't have anyone who

understands my pain. Baba wants me to get married, he doesn't get it. I'm stuck on you Thandeka, I lost all confidence, people are saying lot of things. Instead of healing I'm getting deeper and deeper in a dark hole."

My eyes are getting wet. "What can I do to help?"

"I don't want your help, I want you."

Whuuuh! I need to leave.

"I can't give you what you want, it won't be possible," I say.

He looks at me, "Why Thandeka?"

"Because my heart is with someone else."

He doesn't say anything. I don't think he even means what he said, he is emotional and doesn't look okay at all. Maybe I should reach out to his brother, it's not just our break up, he is battling with lot of things.

I open the car and leave. He is still outside when I walk inside the house. I get to my room and sit by the window. It takes him almost 10 minutes to drive off.

"What did Mes say?"-Linda.

She is in my room, she wouldn't get any sleep without knowing.

"I don't know, he said a lot of things. I think he is confused and stuck to the past, it's sad," I say.

She throws her head back, "It's been months, he should get over it."

That's insensitive, I thought she used to loved him, didn't she?

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BUHLE QWABE

I'm the last one to leave, as usual. These streets are my home, I walk with no fear at any time of the day. I lock up and recheck the windows. Bukhosini may have got the message, he didn't come. Earlier I spent my precious time thinking about him, his popping arrogance is what changes my opinion. I don't like men like him, they tend to think their voices matter more.

I'm lost in my thoughts, walking the empty, gravel road, I don't pay attention to a person squatting next to a billboard by the side of the road. I may be used to the streets and the village but the times we live in need you

to put on your inspector spectacles on if you see a weird person.

The person stands up when he notices that I'm staring at his direction. The height,damn!

I pick a pace and walk faster. I told him I don't have his time!

"Nobuhle." He is right behind me, there is no use to run. I walk slower while catching my breath. The fresh smell of nature and soil of Sokhulu is diluted with a sophisticated cologne.

"Are you running away from me?" he asks.

I take a huge breath, I'm not sure if I should reply or not.

"Can I carry the bag for you?"

"No," I say, less friendly.

He snatches something off my shoulders, I realize I had a sweater placed over my them. I stop and look at him. The moon is doing me justice since our street light have mood swings.

"Can I have my sweater back?" I ask, nicely.

"You will get it."

He sounds arrogant, exactly how Sapho described him before he gave us money for a drink.

"I want to go home," I say.

"You'll go, I only need five minutes."

Sigh!

"Tick tock!" I say.

He takes a step closer, my sweater is under his arm. I want to grab it and run but that would make me look like a madwoman.

"I'm here to check the progress of my application," he says.

He talked to me about it a few hours ago, now there must be progress? He is not patient at all.

"There is no progress and there will never be any," I say.

He clears his throat, "Why, if I may ask?"

I blatantly tell him I don't like him, he doesn't charm me in any shape or form. And for a moment I think he is disappointed until I realize the stupid grin on his face is mockery.

"I will put more effort Ndlunkulu," he says.

I frown, what did he just say? I'm not his Ndlunkulu and I'm definitely not in any sort of polygamy. But I can't help wondering,

"Are you a future polygamist?" I ask.

"UNdlunkulu of my heart. No, I'm not a future polygamist, you will be enough for me."

My sub-unconscious slams, this isn't amusing in any way. *Shut that smile Buhle!*

I clear my throat, "Well, your five minutes is over."
He gives the sweater back. I'm shocked! I expected
him to protest, hold my arm and all that Bukhosini
shit.

"Buhle I've fallen in love with you and I won't rest
until you become MaQwabe Zuma. I will call around
9pm to say goodnight, please don't ignore me."

I nod, "I won't."

"Must I walk you to the gate?"

"No, I'm fine here."

I don't say goodbye, we don't hug or shake hands, .I
just leave him standing there and take a small route to
my home.

Before I walk through the gate I turn and look back.

He is still standing there, on the same spot, watching
me.

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Insert 18

MTHETHO MKHIZE

There are inside activities, but they are not enough to keep my mind as occupied as I'd like it to be.

Questions manage to slide in and refresh pain, there is no escape. Now I regret escaping the fire, death would've been better than this life. I can't say which is worst between being inside and outside. But maybe the inside is better, Ngwane has my back. I just don't know for how long, people change, they only linger around for benefits. I don't know what reward he will demand for protecting me. I have no one outside, no family, no friends, no love.

He holds a deep conversation with the guard and walks back with a brown envelope. I don't know how to describe his familiarity with jail. He is just home.

"Mfanas!" That's how he calls me and all the inmates copies that.

I look at him, sometimes my tongue freezes, I fail to spit out words. One of the guys diagnosed me with a mental illness, he said he is studying Psychology. I

will never take a diagnosis from a jailbird. I know I'm not crazy, I'm just hurt.

"It's gonna take real lawyers to get you out of here."

"Out to where?" I'm shocked.

"Home."

I told him I don't have a home, they burned it. My home was Thandeka's heart, that too is gone.

"Which home Baba?" I ask.

"If you don't have one, you will make one. You are alone in this world, that's what you always say. Now you have to act like it, think for yourself, put yourself first. Kill if you have to, centralize yourself in this universe."

Kill? He looks damn serious.

"Nayo le ntwana i-weak," someone says behind him.

It's another old hag, he is from another cell, I don't know why he is here. He walks around and stand in front of us. There is a deep scar on his forehead, he is undoubtedly a criminal. One of the jail-comfortably ones.

"Are you sure he will manage?" he asks, directing to Ngwane.

"Baloyi give us a few minutes," Ngwane.

He glances at me one more time and walks away.

There is disapproval on his face, strays of doubt, like I'm a wrong choice. There is something being planned that I'm not aware of.

"Zithini Baba?" I ask Ngwane.

"I want you to protect my daughter."

"You have a daughter?" I ask.

"Nobuhle...I didn't stop considering her as my daughter. You are her brother by blood, now I know and I don't need to worry about leaving my legacy in the hands of a young girl. I know she is a bright girl, running a salon on her own but I don't trust women, they are vulnerable."

I'm confused.

"You see Mfanas I won't lie to you, I will make sure you get out of this place but there is something for me in return."

"You'll get me out???"

"That's what I said, and you'll pay me back."

There is nothing for mahhala, that I know for certain.

"How am I going to pay? I don't have a job. And how are you going to reverse the sentence?"

He scratches his beard, "You were wrongfully arrested, leave that to me. You will take care of Nobuhle, protect

her from Chili and make sure her mother is not sabotaging her life. I don't want her to be unhappy."

"How so? You haven't checked on her ever since you found out about her DNA," I say.

"It doesn't mean I stopped loving her. I didn't know what I was going to say to her, she loved me dearly."

I haven't been in his shoes so I can't judge.

"To be quite honest I'm not sure I want to get out," I say.

He shakes his head, "You're young, you can still turn your life around for the better. I'm going to give you the right resources and right people, you'll be fine."

"But I'm okay here, with you."

He chuckles, "You get attached. That is your problem, you cannot fill the void in your life, no matter how much you try. Accept the life God has given you, attach yourself to nobody and certainly trust nobody."

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BUHLE QWABE

I've never attended ingoma before, I'm not sure what to wear. I don't have beads or any traditional outfits.

After going in and out of my wardrobe I eventually settle for my navy jeans, sneakers and sweater.

"You're dressing up for bed?"

She is home at last. I haven't seen her since morning when I left for the salon. She is dressed like a politician's wife, she is a new version.

"No, I'm going to ingoma," I say.

She pushes the door and stands in the middle. I hardly go out, she is shocked.

"Who did you ask dear?" she asks.

"You weren't here, I had no one to ask."

"That's how you talk to your mother now?"

I sigh, "It's just ingoma Mom, it's right here in the village. I've cooked and cleaned the house, I don't even go out often."

"Who are you going with?" she asks.

I thought after my 21st I wouldn't be bothered with these type of questions. I'm a grown ass woman.

"Saphokazi," I lie.

"Okay, don't talk to those illiterate boys."

Did she just....Geez!

"Mah! They are traditional people, it doesn't mean they're illiterate," I snap at her.

"Amabhinca ayizidomu, end of the story." She says and walks away.

Why am I taking this so personal? I'm literally fuming.

How dare she judges people based on their lifestyle!

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It's getting dark, the gathering venue isn't that close. I

pick up the pace and take shortcut pathway. Phone vibrates!

Sms: *Are you still coming?*

I roll my eyes, I confirmed it thirty minutes ago. I push it back in my pocket and carry on. There are two shadows coming my way. This is my village but no safe is too safe. I should've taken the road, at least there are some lights and people there. They are getting closer, my instincts are pushing me out of the way.

"Hey!" One calls as I lurk behind the tree.

I hold my breath, my heart is beating like a drum. It's audible, surely they can hear it too. I didn't think they saw me.

Grass start moving nearer me.

"Who are you?" His torch is shining on my face. My sight is blocked, I cannot see him but he clearly can see me.

"I'm Buhle Qwabe, I live across the road," I say nervously.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm attending ingoma," I reply.

He looks at the one behind him. I get on my feet and adjust my sweater. I feel stupid right now.

He chuckles, "You're a man?"

Huh!

"No," I say.

"But you're wearing pants like a man."

The bullshit he just said is what my mother was talking about. They are so backward. The other one pops his face over his shoulder and looks at me like I'm an alien.

"This needs confirmation," he says.

I'm lost, what needs confirmation? Before I can take a second breath my sweater is being pulled by the first

guy. He is pulling me further behind the trees. For a moment my mind is frozen, why is he pulling me?

Then my voice automatically opens and scream.

"NOOOOO!!!"

He realizes that I'm screaming and places his hand over my mouth. He smells cow dung and sweat.

Someone holds my ankles...the other guy.

"Shhhhhh!!!"

This cannot be happening to me. My phone! The other guy is unbuttoning my jeans, the phone must've fell somewhere on the grass.

"I'm sorry," I mumble behind the hand. I have no idea what I'm apologizing for...For wearing a jean? For being a woman?

"Sheshisa," the other one whispers.

I'm powerless, unable to defend myself against two giant me. My mind is prepared for the worst, I cannot describe the fear. This could be my last day on earth. I should've stayed home. I've never attended ingoma before, this was a death call.

"What's happening here?" A strange voice asks.

The jean is stuck on my ankles, he is struggling to take it off.

"What's the fuck are you doing to a girl?" The voice again, it sounds closer now. Light of hope start burning. They let go of me and jump. I have no idea what happens next, there is a gun going off and swearing in the air. My mind shuts down.

"Are you alright?"

.....

"Are you okay?"

.....

"Hey!" This time he slap smy cheeks.

I look up, my senses come back. I'm still on the ground with a jean on my ankles.

"Sukuma," he says, pulling my arm up.

I lift the jean, my hands are trembling, it's quite a struggle.

"You're safe," he says.

Safe or not, I don't feel okay.

"Do you want to sit?"

I mindlessly nod, my body is trembling. He helps me

down and stands in front of me, there is an object in

his right hand. I'm scared of guns as well. He senses

that and pushes it behind his waist. I can't see his face

properly but I've never heard this voice before.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Buhle," I say, my voice is still shaking.

"Sorry Buhle, I'll make sure those bastards get punished. I will find them, trust me."

I exhale, "Thanks for saving me."

"I will walk you home, try to calm down."

I exercise breathing a few times and get up. He walks after me, using his phone as a torch. I cannot wait to get inside my room, shut the door and pour it all out.

"It's not safe out here, are you originally from here?" he asks.

"Yes," I say.

"This is the first time I see you, next time tag a brother if you want to walk through the bushes at night."

My brother is in jail but I wouldn't tell him that. It's such a sad world, we don't have to need protection.

Humans no longer hunt for bucks, they target each other.

"I'm Mzuzu Khathi," he says.

Mzuzu Khathi??? I've never heard of him.

"Your friends are calling you outside," she say sand walks away.

Earlier this morning I told her about last night. My mother is a lioness, I expected her to go out gun blazing and search for those bastards. I mean she didn't mind attacking Mthetho, but this time around it was different. She expressed her sympathy for two seconds and jumped on the 'farm' issue. I don't know what her priorities are right now, but I'm certain that I'm not one of them.

I don't know why Sindi is here, I told them there is no work today. We are closed this whole week.

"Are you okay?"

"No."

Her eyes drop, she gives me a brief shoulder hug.

"I'm not going to ask what happened, I know it's relationship problems. He is asking to see you, he can't get you on your phone."

Bukhosini! I haven't thought about him. All I've been thinking about is what if Mzuzu didn't come, what would've happened?

"I lost my phone, you should've told him," I say.

"Not my place, he is your man," she says.

I'm not in the mood to defend my relationship status. God knows what made them conclude that we are dating.

I don't walk outside the gate with a gown but today I don't care. He is standing a few yards away from the house.

He stares until I stop in front of him.

"Is everything okay Buhle?" he asks.

I don't know how to answer him.

"Yesterday I waited for you," he says.

I clear my throat, "On my way I met two guys, they held me and...."

Fuck! I don't want to cry.

"And what Buhle?" His voice sounds strange. He is not shouting but there is aggression. His fist is folded.

"They asked if I'm a man since I was wearing a jean and pulled me behind the trees wanting to confirm.

They smelled terrible, pulling me aggressively and taking off my jeans..."

He cuts in, "Don't say it!"

I look at him, his eyes are closed, his jaws are tightened together.

"No, they..."

He stops me again. He grabs my hand and squeezes it.

He opens his eyes, "Do you remember their faces?"

"No, can you listen to the whole story first?"

He exhale, "I'm scared because I'm responsible for it all."

"They didn't do it, someone came and rescued me."

The relief on his face only last a few second.

"You don't look like someone who was rescued."

Do I look that bad?

"I'm shuttered and scared. I won't open the salon until tomorrow and I'm definitely cutting working hours."

"Who is with you at home?" he asks.

"Mom is there but I'm alone," I say.

He nods, I don't know if he understands what I implied.

"I'm so sorry. I should've came to fetch you, I don't know how I'm going to live without finding those dogs first."

"I just need time to calm down and get over fear," I say.

"Do you need

anything else?"

I shake my head.

"Do you have a

spare SIM card?"

"I think so," I say nodding.

He pulls out his phone, opens its back and takes out his card.

"Please use this one for today."

It's a Samsung Galaxy, I feel like laughing for the first time. This is a nice gesture but does he know that I'm

going to dig out everything from this phone even if

the SIM card is not inside? This could destroy any chance we had to be together.

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"I'm the reason why you lost yours and beside that, I want to call you."

I smile, "Thank you."

"I'm in love with you Nobuhle. I was heartbroken last night, not even once did it occur to me that something might've happened on your way. I thought maybe you hate me for

real."

"I do hate you for real," I say.

"Because of what happened?"

I sigh, "I'm kidding, chill."

"So you love me?"

"Juice wena, of course no."

"But you just admitted that you don't hate me."

"Yes, I'm neutral."

He chuckles, "Loud and clear Ndlunkulu. Your neighbors are staring at us, I hate doing streets and hide & seeks. Make up your mind soon, give me what's mine and I will give you what's yours."

"What's yours and what's mine?" I ask.

"My love and your bride price."

For a moment I thought he has changed.

"We haven't gone to a single date!" I say.

He frowns, "A what???"

"Date, you're supposed to take me out first. Don't you watch TV?"

He laughs, "I'm not acting here, I want you to be Mrs Zuma."

I'm not even a girlfriend yet, he surely knows how to jump a gun.

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Insert 19

THANDEKA

After long discussions my parents eventually allowed me to go back to work. I'm starting in three days, for now I'm warming my apartment and trying to memorize the job.

There is a knock at the door. I know who it is, he texted an hour ago. We will be spending the night in my apartment for the first time.

He is carrying heavy shopping bags. I don't get shocked anymore, he spends his money on me. Linda doesn't know why I want to work, if it was up to her I'd be moving in with

Nkosenhle and living my life like my mother.

"Hey you," I say, watching him pack meat in the fridge.

He is well-built, tall with a bit of muscles. He also has a good taste in fashion, he always looks stunning.

"Babe yazi I forgot to buy something we're going to eat for dinner." He looks frustrated for

a moment, exhaling and glancing at his wrist watch.

"I will cook, don't worry," I say.

"No, today I want to look you in the eyes and cuddle." He dries his hands and takes his cellphone. He asks what I'd like to eat and text. We wait for our food on the couch, cuddling as he wanted.

"When did you last talk to Banzi?" I ask.

He tries to hide it but I can see the sadness in his eyes.

"A few days ago," he says.

They were close, I remember them. I don't understand why Banzi is taking Mthetho's side over his brother's.

"Don't worry about it, I raised Banzi, he will come around." It sounds more like he is convincing himself than me.

"How is Dudu?" I ask.

"She is fine, I hope."

He hopes? They were all close. His family is breaking apart, it could be why he is getting more attached to me. Sometimes he travels 2hours to my home just so he can eat dinner with me in the car.

He places his hand on my hip and massages me. We haven't gotten intimate, he insists on waiting.

"Have you thought about our future?" he asks.

"No I live in the moment, have you?"

He lifts my chin up and stares deeply in my eyes. I

had doubts before but now I know I love him. I don't

know much about true love but this one is for keeps.

"But I love you," I say.

He smiles, "I love you more and I want to marry you."

"Nkosenhle we just met a few months ago!"

"In those few months my heart has loved deeply, I

know what I want. And that is to marry you."

My face is heating up, the way he is looking at me!

"Marriage is a big step," I say.

"Not to me, it's a lifetime commitment and I'm already

committed to you. I will never love anyone else,

everything I do now is for you. I'm already married to

you, the wedding is for you to marry me back and for

the pastor to bless our union."

I exhale, "You are too good to be true."

"And so is your existence, I never thought someone

like you exist."

"Am I that special?" I ask smiling.

He takes my hand and places it across his chest. I feel

strong heartbeats, I won't rejoice, this could be how

his heart normally beats.

"I'm crazily in love with you. I love you with my heart, my body and soul."

I peck his lips. He is good with reciting his love, most of the times I don't know what to say. 'I love you' is enough for me.

"You smell good," I change the subject.

"So do you." He never stops, my cheeks are hurting from all this blushing.

"So...Ummmm I think I'm ready to get to know your body."

His eyes widen, I can't tell whether he is shocked or amused.

"Are you sure? I can wait babe, I don't want to hurt you."

"Hurt me???"

"The miscarriage...Are you healed?"

I wish he didn't bring that up.

"I'm okay," I say.

"Thandeka I'm not here for anything else, I'm here for love. My heart brought me here, not my dick."

I nod, "Okay."

I'm offended and embarrassed. Why did I request sex?

"But if you want to do it I will...."

I cut in, "No, you don't have to feel sorry. I need to take a shower."

He holds my arm and calls my name three times.

"Did I offend you?" he asks.

"No, you turned me down."

"Babe I didn't turn you down, I want to feel you but I want to do it right. I want you to be okay, taking advantage of you is the last thing I want to do."

I sigh, "I consented, how will you be taking advantage?"

He doesn't say anything, he just stares with a smile on his face.

"What?" I ask.

"We're going to eat first then we will make our day memorable. I don't want you to forget our first, ever." That smirk is scaring shit out of me. This will be my first sexual experience, I can't remember the rest. But I keep my head up,

"Let me take a bath before food arrives, refresh this body for memorable event," I say.

He chuckles, "You won't be able to walk later so walk baby girl."

Is it a threat? I get in the bathroom and soak myself in the bathtub. I've watched a few porn videos, I'll know what to do.

Food has arrived, the table is set. There is a bunch of flowers placed on my side. He is full of surprises!

"Must I cut the chicken for you?"

"I'm not a child Nkosenhle."

"I didn't mean to offend you, I like doing things for you."

I smile, "You're too much yazi, okay cut it."

Not only does he cut the chicken, he dishes the salad and pours me a drink and wipe my utensils. I love this treatment even though it feels like he is sucking up to me at times.

He is watching me eat half of the time, paying less attention to his own plate.

"You're making me uncomfortable." I say.

"I feel like that glass is heavy in your hand, I want to help you drink but I won't."

"Why not?" I ask.

"You'll be angry."

He is damn right, I'll be angry.

"I'll do anything you want as long as you love and commit to me."

I smile, "Thank you."

He is the one to clear the table when we're done. Now I'm about to have sex! The more it get closer the more I get excited. The way those porn stars scream in videos the deed must be mind-blowing.

He is shocked when he finds me half naked in the bed. He gazes at my body, my tummy

is not flat, insecurities are starting to kick in.

"You're hot babe," he says, stripping off his shirt like a lunatic.

Gosh his body! My hands are itching to touch his chest.

"That's a good view," I say.

He grins with pride and pushes his pant down. He is already erected, his boxers are filled up.

"I want to kiss every part of your body, that's been my long wish," he says getting on bed.

He lifts me up and places my head over pillow. Slowly he takes my panty off, keeping intense eye contact.

Something is gone from his eyes, the excitement. It has been replaced with fear. I can see deeply in him.

"I love you," he says bringing his face down to me and smashing on my lips. His body is warm, he is aroused, his rode keeps poking between my thighs.

He trail kisses down my neck all the way to my chest, then he tucks on my nipples. It unlocks all sensations, I'm whispering endless yeses. By the time he reaches my navel I'm dripping wet. He is aware of it, he keeps rubbing his finger on my clit.

"I will always love you, Thandeka," he says in an unrecognizable voice.

It keep repeating in my head, 'I will always love you Thandeka.' It doesn't come in his voice, it's a strange one but it's not that strange.

Voice: Please, at least allow me to do the ceremony to dress him up, ngiyakucela

Thandeka.

He cannot do that! What am I going to say to my parents? I scream but I cannot hear what I'm saying, all I hear is endless apologies.

Voice: Please don't leave me.

"Baby!!" Nkosenhle calls sternly next to me.

I look at him completely confused. Was that a dream? I'm not asleep though.

He smiles, "I thought you passed out."

Well, I don't know what I did, he is putting the condom on. My mind is detracted, I'm no longer focused on this moment.

"Babe are you still okay?" he asks.

Veins are pulsing on his temple, his eyes are smaller and red. He is really turned on, it's only fair to keep the game going.

"I'm okay," I say.

He grabs my face and kisses me hungrily. I need to lock out those hallucinations and give him my all. I hold his head and wrap my leg around him. Out of the blue he stops kissing me, his fingers are running over my scar.

"It doesn't hurt now," I say.

"I know." He is breathing heavily. I pull his head and kiss him again. He complies but doesn't make any other move. Shouldn't he be inserting his penis now?

"You're killing my mood," I whisper in his ear.

He shifts to the side and closes his eyes.

"I cannot do this baby."

My eyes pop, "What???"

He takes a deep breath, "I can muff...."

Rrrrrr!!!!!!!

"No Nkosenhle just leave it." I say getting off bed.

There is a gown, I put it on and walk to the bathroom.

"I'm scared Thandeka," he says behind me.

He is scared of sex? How old is he? I'm sure he can't

count how many times he has fucked in his life.

His hands grab my waist, my palms are sweating, I

want to SCREEEEAM at him. He keeps saying he

loves me, but he is the one who stands in my way of

experiencing womanhood.

"Something is blocking me, I want to but I can't." He is almost begging, he sounds too desperate.

"It's fine," I say.

"Mthetho did something to you."

I raise my eyebrows, "Excuse me???"

"There is a picture of an old man that keeps popping in my head, he look scary and old."

I study him for a moment. I don't have his medical records, he could have bad psychological history.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"I see things Thandeka, my father was a spiritual person. I inherited that, my mind sees hidden things."

"So what's the hidden thing you see?" I ask, unable to hide irritation.

He exhales heavily, "We will go insult a traditional person, I don't want this to break us up. I want to satisfy your needs, to give myself to you."

He means it! I don't know what to think, my anger is subsiding.

"I love you, okay?"

"Okay." I won't lie though, I'm confused.

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BUHLE QWABE

I'm still in fear, I don't walk five minutes without watching behind my back. But Sapho is blowing everything out of proportion. You'd swear she is the one who nearly got raped, right now she is complaining. She wants to leave before tidying up, apparently it's too late.

"Let's wipe the windows and go," I say.

She stops, "Huh, nope boss lady! Not my vagina, I'm leaving."

"Really now?" Sindi annoyed.

She scrolls down her cellphone, shaking her head. She is not going to do it. If something was to happen to them I'd be the one to blame, Malume Sibiyi would probably kill me with his bare hands for his lovely niece that put bread on the table.

"Fine you can go guys." I say.

"What about you?" - Sindi.

"I'm wiping the windows and locking up."

I hate leaving a dirty place, especially if I'm going to be the first person to be in that place. Imagine walking in a dusty room early in the morning!

Sindi is not convinced about leaving me behind but the Ngcobo diva drags her out. She says she is carrying a kitchen knife in her bag, whoever comes near her is gonna be fetched by hearse.

"Sisi," says the voice from the door. I jump, my heart is beating out of my chest. It's a young boy, I've never seen him before. He is staring right at me.

"Who are you?" I ask in fear.
"I'm Bhubesi," he says.
Whoah! You cannot come out of nowhere and stand in my salon with an unfriendly expression on your face and then tell me that your name is Bhubesi.

Am I supposed to faint?

"Can I help you?" I ask.
"No....My brother sent me here, are you done?"
"Who is your brother?"
I think he realizes that the frown on his face is

unnecessary, he pulls his t-shirt and looks around.

"My surname is Zuma," he says.
He could've told me who his brother is but he wants me to read between the lines. I breath out in relief, I was scared for a moment.

"I'm actually done, why did he send you?"

"To walk you home, he was busy," he says.
I didn't expect this, now that I'm looking at him
without fear I recognize the resemblance.

I close the windows and recheck if everything is okay.
"I'm ready to go," I say turning back to him.
When he turns around I see a gun poking out on his
waist. He is young, I doubt he is even eighteen years
old. Why would Bukhosini give a child access to gun?

The devil! He is calling.

"Bukhosini." I answer.

"Ndlunkulu you don't sound okay. Is my brother
there?"

I glance at his direction, he is walking on the other
side of the road. He is keeping distance but also
watching closely. I didn't know knowing him would
earn me bodyguards.

"Yes, why is he carrying a gun?" I ask in a lowered
voice.

"How did...Okay, he protects himself with it."

"How old is he?" I ask.

"He is 16years."

What's the fuck! What is he protecting himself against
from? Supastrikas.

"You give children guns? Do you understand the unnecessary power you're giving him, he could hurt other kids or himself."

"He is trained, he won't."

"Trained or not, you're exploiting a young boy's mind. Our youth is..."

He cuts in, "Make sure he leaves after you walked through the gate."

"Don't change the subject, adults like you are the ones....."

Call ended!!

You don't do that! You don't drop a call on South

African girl. He should've stayed on the phone and

listened to whatever I was saying until I finished.

I want to type him a lengthy text but he probably

won't read it till the end. I will take up the challenge

and drop his calls, I want to see who drop them better

between us.

Insert 20

BUHLE

"BUHLE!!!"

The person is screaming at the door. I force my eyes open and drag myself to the door. I don't know what time it is, but she shouldn't be here.

"Yes," I say.

These days I don't know where my respect is camping, I address her like she is my peer. But why would I respect my older room-mate? That's what we are now, just room-mates.

"There are people outside," she says.

I frown, "People???"

"They want you."

At this hour, who could that be?

"They look like the Zumas, when you come back you'll explain why such people are outside my gate."

Damn! I check the phone, I have thirty missed calls from Bukhosini. Yes I dropped his calls, fell asleep and all, but thirty missed calls? That's crazy, it's even crazier that he is here outside my home at night.

I put a gown on and walk out. There are cellphone torches and voices talking low just outside the gate.

He is tall so I recognize him easily against two others.

"Sanibonani," I greet, somehow feeling uncomfortable, they just went silent out of the blue.

The other two take few strides away and stop at the other side of the road. They are giving us space. Now I'm no longer angry about him dropping the call on me, rather I feel like a drama queen.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yes," I say.

He steps closer and stares at my face.

"I didn't expect you to come here, like this," I say.

"You are not answering my calls, what did you expect? What did I do wrong?"

I sigh, are we really arguing over this?

"You dropped my call, you shouldn't have."

"Then you should've answered and let me apologize."

I take a glance back at home to see if that woman isn't peeping, luckily she is not. She is not bothered by anything I do lately, her only interest is Mr Chili.

"I'm not supposed to be here," I say.

"Neither am I, we should be home."

I frown, "Home?"

"My home, Nobuhle please decide."

I feel like rolling my eyes,
"You haven't took me to a single date bro," I say.
"I don't know those things but I'll do it if you promise
me you'll be mine afterwards."

Well, we are already fighting like a couple, he is on my
mind every hour of the day, and I'm dying to
experience love from a different angle.

"I promise," I say.
"So what am I supposed to do? Book in a restaurant or
take you out to watch TV?" It's like he wants to do it
right now. I can't believe he said 'out to watch TV'
instead of

Cinema.
I grind my thoughts for a
second, "There is a
seafood restaurant in
town."

"Seafood?" He asks in a different tone.
I don't think he likes it.
"Yes," I say.
"Anything for you."
"When are we going then?" I ask.
"Tomorrow, Friday I want us to be official. My leave
ends Sunday."

My eyes drop, he is on leave, he is going back to JHB.
"So this is going to be a long distance relationship?" I ask.

"I come home every month end."

I nod, "Alright."

He grabs my hand, it catches me off guard. We have never stood so close, his cologne is swallowing me.

"Trust me, we will have a beautiful relationship. I will treat you like a queen, even when we are miles apart in my heart you'll be close."

I've never been in a long distance relationship, I don't know if I'll manage.

"I see," I say.

"I love you."

He is staring right at me, my knees are trembling.

He chuckles, "I know you love me too."

Now he is going over his head, I pull my hands away.

"Mom is awake," I say.

"I didn't mean to disrespect her, I was worried about you."

I glance at the guys he came with, they seem to be minding their own business. They are carrying sticks, like Bukhosini.

"I'll see you tomorrow then," I say.

"Can I get a hug?"

I want to hug him, but the girl in me is refusing. He should wait a little longer to get that hug.

"Bye Bukhosini."

He chuckles, "Kulungile, have a fantastic night."

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A Day Later

"Wear a short," Sapho says.

I look at her with my eyes popping out.

"I'm going out with Bukhosini Zuma."

She knows who that is mos.

"That's the whole point, you are testing him. His

reaction will tell how your future could look like."

She has a point there but I'm not a shorts-wearing person. There must be something else to test him with.

"What about red lipstick, I heard his kind don't like it," Sindi says.

His kind, really now?

I shake my head, "Nah, I had lipstick on the day we met."

"A short it is then," she says.

Gosh!

They pin me on the chair and do my face. I look like a Barbie when they finish.

"You think he knows how to use fork and knife?"- Sapho.

I don't know which alien she thinks Bukhosini is, she nearly fainted when I told her he has WhatsApp.

"He lives in JHB, of course he knows," I say.

"Don't be so sure, he lives in JHB but maybe in a hostel."

I laugh, "Leave my man alone."

They dramatically exclaim. "Your man???"

"Take care of my salon, don't knock off late."

I pack my bag and leave them gossiping about me right in my presence.

A usual my mother is not home. I take a bath, carefully not to touch my face and look for my black shorts. I only wore them once in a beach, maybe they won't even fit me now. He calls and tells me he is on his way. I don't know how we are going on a date by taxi, but it's not like I've ever dated a guy who owns a car. Mthetho used his work car to take me out, speaking of that soul I need to visit him this week.

Thinking about him no longer hurts me, he happened, everything is in the past now.

I dress up and check myself in the mirror. I have big thighs....should I go out really dressed like this?

He is standing by the road, he texts.

I take one last look, I can't change now. I take my bag and walk out.

He is nowhere in sight, didn't he say he was by the road? Let me call him.

Car hoot! I look at the micro-bus parked across the road and frown. It hoots again, now I realize it's calling me.

The window rolls down. He is driving a micro-bus???

"Must I open the door for you?"

He is asking? Of course he MUST open it, I'm a lady.

I know this micro-bus, it transports school learners. I

never pay attention to Nxamalala written on it, I bet it belongs to his family.

I sit comfortably and fasten the seatbelt. He is staring

at me, his eye carries a long message.

"How are you?" I ask.

"Good, I see you're good as well."

I'm not going to ask how he is able to see that.

"What's up with the dress code?" he asks.

Sapho is a genius, he is falling into the trap before this date even begins.

"What dress code?" I ask.

"It's not even a dress code, you're not dressed at all," he says.

I look at myself, am I not dressed?

"Oh, let's say I chose not to dress then."

He looks at me, his stare dwells on a little longer then he starts the engine. He turns

Maskandi on, the guitar buzzes through my ears.

I tap his shoulder, "Tone it down."

He smiles and switches it completely off.

"What?" he asks.

"You're making noise," I say.

"I don't know what to talk about, it's like I'm sitting with an Indian."

Wtf! I frown and laugh.

"Seriously, you're dressed like an Indian. Why did you choose to dress like this today?"

"To see how you would react," I blurt it out.

"Why?" he asks.

"Just to learn your mindset," I say.

He chuckles, "So this is a trap?"

I shrug my shoulders.

"You wanted me to judge so that you can dump me before we even begin?"

"You did judge," I say.

"If I was really judging I was going to say you look like umahosha and ask you to go back home and change."

I'm out of words, just staring at him.

"You have freedom Nobuhle but if we are going to be a couple there are some styles we have to leave behind. I cannot have my father staring at my woman's thighs, they are mine to look at. You can be anything if you're with me, you can even sit naked, but not in public."

"So basically you're telling me how to dress up?" I ask.

He sighs, "Nobuhle, I come from a traditional home. Dad, wives, sons, daughters. That I can't change. I don't want my woman to wear short pants."

"I'm not your woman dear," I say.

"I know that," he says.

"Then don't refer to me as your woman and don't express your policies to me." I'm pissed.

He slows down and parks at the side of the road. This is escalating really fast.

"What's going on? It seems like you wore this to fight me."

"No, I wore to cover my body."

"Is your body covered?"

Sigh!

"Are we driving back home?"

"So this is how you are?" he asks.

I frown, "What do you mean by that?"

"Modern woman, everything I say will be turned into an argument. A man expressing his feelings is a man policing women, I love you with all my heart but that doesn't mean I have to like everything you do. This...."

he says pointing at my legs. "Is not how I want my woman to look in public,"

"I'm not your woman!" I say.

"Yes you are my woman."

He is crazy, now I'm not his woman even more. We stare at each other in an odd way, holding battles with our

eyes. Then unexpectedly his hand grabs my arm. My heart skips a bit, there is no reaction on his face but he's getting closer to me.

Or I'm getting closer to his face?

His hand is strong yet gentle on my arm, the hand that was on the wheel is now behind my neck. Our lips fit like two puzzle pieces, both our breaths are shaking.

His smell is flooding my senses, he is kissing me like he is proving a point. He is fiery, demanding and passionate. I'm panting when he breaks the kiss.

"Yes, you're my woman Nobuhle," he says.

Do I have my voice? No.

"You belong to Bukhosini Zuma and we are going

to make that official." I don't say anything, I have

no objections. He starts the car and turns music on,

this time I don't complain. How am I going to

complain with thousand butterflies in my tummy?

I don't know if he actually requested this table, it's in

the corner, we have the whole view from here. I came

here specifically for buffalo prawns in spicy sauce and

Portuguese roll slices.

He is reading his menu, it's been five minutes now.

"Do you like anything?" I ask.

"No," he says.

"Try calamari tubes," I say.

He doesn't say anything, he shows no interest.

"I will drink white wine, and you?"

"Cold drink," he says.

"Which flavour?" I ask.

"Lemon twist."

He ends up not ordering anything to eat, he is sipping on his drink and watching me eat like I'm feasting on frogs.

"Do you want to taste?" I ask.

He laughs, "Hell no!"

We are here on a date, basically to know each other better but it seems like I'm out here to eat.

"Where did you go to school?" I ask.

"I went to local schools; Siyakhanya Primary and Buthanani High school. And then I went on to

Durban Institute of Technology." That's DUT right?

He can see the shock on my face.

"You assumed that I never went to school?"

"No, not at all. What did you study there?" I ask.

"Electronic and computer engineering, but that's not what I do now. I'm self-employed, I have computer training centre in Diepsloot and one here in town."

"Oh wow! Then why don't you have a car?" I ask.

He laughs, "Does it measure success? I have cars, they work for the community."

"You transport school children?"

"With micro-buses, then I have trucks working for Siwela Woods," he says.

"I know almost every businessman in the village, why didn't I know you?"

He chuckles, "Probably because I don't drive fancy cars, I herd my father's cows and live in a homestead."

"So you're not with any woman?" I ask.

"I'm with you," he says.

"Before me, were you single?"

He takes a sip on his drink and look at me. "Yes."

"Mmmmm!" I say.

"I love you, I will prove myself to you."

"You said you want us to do this the traditional way?" I ask.

He smiles, "Yes, you send your girls over with ucu and umqomboti for the elders to acknowledge us and we move on to other things."

"Other things?"

He inhales sharply, "I told you that I want you to be Mrs Zuma."

My eyes pop out, "You don't mean soon, right?"

"I can't date for 3years, as soon as we find the one we marry and build our own homes."

He is referring to his clan, I have a picture of a big homestead with lot of uncles and aunts. This picture instills fear in me, I come from a really small family.

"You've been with a man before?" he asks.

That's weird? Isn't it obvious, I'm a grown girl.

"Were you looking for a virgin?" I ask.

"So you're answering with a question? No I was not looking for a virgin, I was looking for someone to love."

"Well to answer your question, I've been with a man, we didn't end well."

"What happened?"

I don't want to be asked this question, as much as I have hated answering it is not my cup of tea.

"A lot," I say.

"Any chances of you going back?"

I shake my head.

"That's good, do you want more?"

He is looking at the empty plate in front of me.

"No, I'm full," I say.

"Is this the end of the date?"

I laugh, "Yes."

"Then tell me the truth."

I cock my head to the side and fake confusion.

"Tell you what?" I ask.

"Do you love me?"

Breath in. Out.

"We need a second date," I say.

"I'll buy you seafood and bring it to your house, just tell me."

He is staring at me, curious AF.

"Okay, I do want us to try," I say.

"Do you love me Buhle?"

"I do," I say.

He reaches to my arm and takes off my wristwatch.

"I will hold this until Friday night," he says.

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do, all I know is I

have to appoint a senior girl who'll put the whole

thing together.

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Insert 21

BUHLE

*****I'm outside*****-Bukhosini's text.

It's 9:46pm, how am I supposed to go outside?

He knows the woman I live with. Lately she is not

speaking to me, I have no idea what I did to her. She

asked if I'm really dating Bukhosini and I told her

yes, that was the last time she spoke to me.

I put my gown on and tiptoe to her room to check if

she is sleeping. The door is closed and her lights are

off, I take it she is asleep and walk out quiet as a cat.

The micro-bus is parked just outside the gate. I don't

know why I get nervous everytime I'm about to see

him.

We are dating but nothing is official, in two days I'll be

sending ucu as he requested, then everything will be

official.

"I didn't think you would come," he says.

I smile and shrug my shoulders. Did I have a choice?

He told me when he was already here.

"How are you?" he asks.

"I'm good, just sleepy," I say.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, I couldn't wait for tomorrow, it seems far," he says.

To me it seems closer, it feels like I'm about to take a very big step. It scares me because I don't know what it holds, I don't know him that much. This means a lot to him, it means future.

His phone rings, he glances at the screen and puts it away. It could be business related.

"So you're not going to give me even a hug?"

"You didn't ask for it," I say.

He chuckles and pulls me to his chest. He smells heavenly, something about his hug makes me feel safe.

His phone rings again, he takes it from the dashboard and looks at the screen. I get a glimpse of 'Zinhle calling' and untangle myself from him.

"It may be important, answer it," I say.

"It's no one important," he says.

The phone keeps ringing, now I'm getting a little annoyed, he keeps dropping it.

"I spoke to my father, he suggested that we send..."

The phone again!

I take a loud breath and look at him.

"Who is calling you?" I ask.

"It's not important."

My insecurities have kicked in. I don't want to have my heart broken again. When I love I love wholeheartedly, if he has other people in his life we better stop this now.

"How much are you going to need tomorrow for impahla?" H

"Am I not supposed to buy out of my own pocket?" I ask

"Not necessarily," he says.

"Well, I will buy everything myself if it's still happening."

"It is happening, we are expecting you," he says. I check time, it's 10pm. Tomorrow I'm working, I need some sleep.

"Thanks for coming to see me, I need to go now."

His hand grabs mine.

"Are we okay Buhle?"

"Why wouldn't we be?" I mean, nothing is wrong nje.

"You don't look happy to me."

I just stare at him, his phone is beeping with endless messages.

"Have a goodnight, I love you and I can't wait for tomorrow," he says.

I'm not sure about it anymore, something about those constant calls sets me off. "Drive safely," I say.

He pulls me back before I open the door. He grabs my face and smashes his lips on me.

“I really do love you Nobuhle and I'm going to prove it to you,” he says.
I flash a staged smile and nod my head.

“Buhle there is someone asking for you,” Sindi says walking through the door. I'm getting ready to leave, I'm meeting up with Hloni who is an appointed iqhikiza, we are going to town to buy things for impahla. I don't know her that much, Sindi hooked us up.

“Who is....”

“Nobuhle,” says the voice from the door.

Mzuzu! The guy who saved me, I didn't think I'd see him again.

“Oh my word, hello.” I can't contain the shock and joy in my voice. I didn't see his face well that day, he is very handsome. His arms are covered in tattoos, there is a star one on his neck. I don't think he is from here.

Even his style points him else where. Knee-ripped jean, white T-shirt and red blazer.

He smiles, revealing two silver teeth.

"You are good at hiding," he says.

I smile with a little frown.

"You've been looking for me?"

"Yes, for quite some time now. I wanted to check on you," he says.

"I've been good, thank you again."

He looks around with his hands tucked inside the pockets.

"So this is where you work?" he asks.

"Yes, I'm always here...Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Yes beer," he says.

Eer...we don't have beers here.

"I'm kidding, get me anything you like," he says chuckling.

I ask Sindi to rush to the tuckshop and get a litre of soft drink.

"You look very beautiful, it makes me even more angry that those two dogs tried to molest you. Did you seek professional help?"

"Professional help...No I'm doing fine, don't worry about me," I say.

"That's what they say, I'll believe it when the psychologist says so. Give me your number, I'll arrange someone for you."

Aybo! I have work to do, I don't have time to see psychologists and I don't have any problem.

"I really got over it Mzuzu, I'm doing fine," I say.

"Then you won't have a problem with this."

Sindi walks in and saves the moment.

"The car is outside Buhle," she says.

"What car?" I ask.

She narrows her

eyes. "Aren't you

going to town?"

Oh that!

"Where are you going to? Town?" - Mzuzu.

"Yes..." I say hesitantly.

I've been having back and forth thoughts about

Bukhosini. I'm not sure about sending ucu anymore, I

feel like he is not being 100% honest with me.

"I can give you a lift, I feel like I want to know you a little better," Mzuzu says.

"Oh..."

"Nothing deep, just..." He pauses and laughs.

"What's funny?" I ask.

"It's the way you're looking at me, let's go I'll buy you something nice."

"I'm going somewhere and I'll be with someone," I say.

"Nobuhle relax, take your bag and follow me to the car.

Oh and please redo your lips, your lipstick has faded.”

WTF! Sindi bursts into laughter.

He takes a glass and refills. He gulps it down and looks at me with a funny face.

“Let's go.”

“Mzuzu I'm meeting with someone, I have to hurry.”

He is very chatty and forward. We are somewhere in

Monzi, he says we are waiting for someone.

“She will be here in two seconds,” he says.

Does he know what seconds are? He said the same thing five minutes ago.

“Oh she is here...Betty!”

Betty is a white chick...His girlfriend I guess.

“Hey Mzuzh,” she says and looks at me with a smile.

“Is this Buhle?” she asks.

I frown and nod my head. How does she know my name?

“Yes,” Mzuzu says.

“Ummm...I forgot my bag in the office, mind walking me back?”

“She will go,” he says.

I look at him thrown back. What are they playing at?

But I trust him, I climb out of the car and walk Betty back in her office.

“Do you live around here?” I ask.

“Yes, it's safe.”

Weird answer.

“I feel safe inside high walls and fences, I've had my fair share on housebreakings, sexual harassment and physical abuse. I lived the life of looking over my shoulder on the streets, at least here I know I'm safe.”

I nod my head, a heavy blanket just covered my heart. “Mzuh has been my friend for years, when he told me your story I shed a tear. He was heartbroken when he couldn't reach you, he knows the trauma that comes with rape or attempts,” she says.

“I was not raped, he saved me,” I say.

“What if you were raped?”

I haven't thought that far, I don't want to. In fact I've forgotten everything.

“If you ever need to talk about your fears or whatever you feel don't hesitate to come to this office.”

I can't believe Mzuzu hooked me up with a shrink. I told him I'm fine. He is exaggerating this whole thing.

“Are you mad at me?” he asks.

“No, but you're dramatic,” I say.

He chuckles and starts the car.

"So where do you live?" I ask.

"Here in Monzi but my grandmother lives in Sokhulu so I'm always up and down."

"And your parents?" I ask

"I lost my mother when I was 16," he says.

"I'm sorry, where is your father?"

"I have never met him, he denied paternity."

That must hurt, his tone has changed instantly.

"Sorry...So what are you doing for a living?"

"I'm a...Don't laugh."

I raise my eyebrows, is he a clown?

"Tattoo artist, I'm still trying to finish my degree. It's something I do for income, my grandmother is old.

Geez!

"Mzuzu you're a tattoo artist and that's it. You don't have to explain yourself, I'm glad you found a way to make a living, times are tough."

"I'm trying, was able to buy a car and a house," he says.

That's a lot, I've had a salon for almost 2 years and I haven't achieved much.

"How much money do you make with just tattoos?"

"I have a side hustle, I sell drugs."

What the hell?

He laughs at my shocked face.

"I'm kidding, I put my IT skills on action and help people," he says.

"Oh you're an IT student?"

"Yeah I was and I took a little break."

"And how old are you?" I ask.

"I'm 28 years, you have a lot of questions. Where are you meeting your friend?"

"I don't know, I was supposed to call her."

He frowns and laughs. "Your memory is fucked up, you need to let loose a little bit. You're kind of absorbed and too serious for your age, you're going to die early."

We are in Sky Bar, I've never been into a bar before. It noisy but everyone is minding their own business.

"This one tastes like milkshake," he says passing me a bottle of Storm.

"I don't drink Mzuzu," I say.

"Just have a sip, I got you."

I take a sip, it does taste yummy. Before I know I'm opening the second bottle.

"When are you seeing Betty?" he asks.

"Never," I say and laugh.

"Stop being hard on yourself, I really want you to be okay."

I roll my eyes and gulp down my drink. The night is still young to have a boring partner, I need new friends.

"I'm going to the dance floor because you're boring," I say.

He laughs and shakes his head.

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The Zuma Homestead

“Bhuti!” Bhubesi calls the absent-minded Bukhosini.

“Baba is calling you,” he says.

Bukhosini takes a deep breath before he drags his heavy body out. It's almost 3am, his family haven't slept a wink, there is a commotion. His sister and aunts cooked a storm for izintombi zakwaQwabe, his cousins are still singing and dancing.

Sindi said Buhle went to town saying she is going to shop for impahla. They couldn't get hold of her since then, but they had hope, she didn't cancel anything.

“Bukhosini what is this?” his father asks.

He knows better than to piss his father off. He is clearly breathing fire and the better he can do right now is to stay calm and own up to his mistakes.

“Do you know how old I am?”

Am I a toy to you?”

He shakes his head, shame has buried him.

“Why are we up all night waiting for nothing?” his father.

“She told me she would send people, I don't know what happened,” he explains.

“So what now? Do we tell all these people to leave? How must I explain this noise to the ancestors, what must I say it was about?”

He swallows and meets his father's gaze.

“I'm sorry, I'll go find out what really happened.”
He walks out and call his brothers, Bhubesi and Sibani, they get in Sibani's car and head to the Qwabes.

“Do they sleep with the gate opened?” - Bhubesi asks.
They walk inside the premises and knock on the front door.

“Who is it?” Buhle's mother asks from inside.
They look at each other, confused whether to say who they are or lie.

“It's Thulani,” Bhubesi says.

“Who the fuck is Thulani?” Sibani asks.

“You can be him,” Bhubesi says.

They both burst into laughter, Bukhosini throws an icy stare at them, they stop laughing.

The door opens, Buhle's mother appears wearing only a tight and bra. Bhubesi exclaims, Sibani takes a few steps backwards and laughs.

"Morning Ma, we are looking for Nobuhle,"
Bukhosini says.

She frowns and looks at him from head to toe.

"She doesn't sell izimbadada," she says.

"We know, we want to see her," Bukhosini.

She chuckles and folds her arms. "She is not home,
stop following my daughter around, I don't want her
to date iziqhaza. Go find your type in your street,
Buhle is an inspiring business woman, stay away from
her."

Sibani steps forward and glares at her.

"You have to calm down, really calm down," he says.

"Really calm down," Bhubesi adds.

Buhle's mother raise her eyebrows.

"Is that a threat?" she asks.

"It's an advice, don't talk like that to people, the world
is an evil place to not calm down," Sibani says.

Bukhosini sighs loudly, he doesn't need this drama.

"Can I know where she is?" he asks.

"I don't know either, please stop parking outside my
house, you're disturbing my peace." She slams the

door on their faces.

"Oh she is so kind," Sibani says.

"And humble," Bhubesi adds.

Bukhosini brushes his head and blows out a heavy

sigh. He is trying to put on a brave face but his heart is
bleeding, inside he is breaking apart.

“So what are we going to tell Msholozzi?” Sibani asks.
“They must dish food for people and tell them that I'm sorry. I have to look for her, I'm not going home.”

“Maybe she changed her mind, you can't force her to do it if....” Bhubesi.

“She can't change her mind, I love her,” he says.
He stays inside the car until his brothers disappear. He has no idea where he is going to look for her. He keeps playing with her wristwatch, the promise she gave him. There is a car driving towards where he is, he reverses and parks next to the road. But it stops in front of Buhle's gate.

Isn't too early for visitors? And this car looks familiar. Buhle climbs out holding a cider and her bag. The car hoots and drives away.

He is in disbelief, he climbs out of his car and walks to her slowly.

“Nobuhle!” he calls.

Buhle turns around with a frown, she is a bit sober now.

“Nobuhle!” he calls again.

“Bukhosini what are you doing here?”

“Why are you doing this to me? Why Nobuhle? What have I done to deserve this kind of embarrassment?”

Buhle sighs and throws the bottle away.

“Did you answer Zinhle's call?”

"Is that the reason why...."

"I'm not sure about us and I don't understand this ucu thing. Carry on with your life, I'm sorry."

He lifts the wristwatch up and

shows it to her. "You gave me

this, you promised me

Nobuhle."

"I did but I'm not sure anymore," she says.

Bukhosini looks at her wondering what went wrong.

Did her feelings change? Were there even feelings in the first place?

"I'm sorry," Buhle says.

"Can I come back later? I want us to talk when you're alright."

Buhle shrugs her shoulders and walks away. He

stands and watches her leave with half of his heart. He

really loved her, it meant a lot to him and his family.

Today everyone lost the respect they had for him.

How is he going to face his parents? He kept them all night and promised them

MaQwabe was coming.

He swallows shame and disappointment and drives back home.

People are still here, now they are helping themselves with food and drinks that was prepared for izintombi.

He walks straight to his rondavel , he knows they have questions that he can't answer.

Sadly Sibani has already seen him, he is right on his heel.

“Did you find her?” he asks walking through the door.

“She is a drunkard Sibani, a car dropped her off, she was holding a bottle of alcohol and dirty.”

“Oh, that must've been the ancestors working overtime, it's a good thing that you found out sooner than later,” Sibani says.

“I know but my feelings for her haven't changed, I still love her,” he says.

Sibani’s forehead creases into furrowed lines.

“You want a drunkard wife?” he asks.

“I want Nobuhle Qwabe,” he says and takes something out of his pocket.

A wristwatch.

“She gave me this, she can't go back on her word,” he says.

“What do you mean bafo?”

“Sizomthwala,” he says.

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Chapter 22

Saphokazi

I'm late for work, Mvi couldn't take me to work today.

I hate being a pedestrian, it's not who I am. Next month I should register in a driving school, I need to have a license. If I had one Mvi would've gave me his car. Right?

Speaking of cars, whose car is parked in front of the salon?

I know everyone around here, I've never seen anyone driving this one. I walk faster and enter the salon.

Who is this? He is sitting comfortably on the chair enjoying a cup of tea.

"Ummm...Morning ladies and gentleman," I say.

"Hey Sapho you're late," Buhle says.

She is exaggerating, I'm only 10 minutes behind.

"We have a client early in the morning?" I ask.

"This is Mzuzu, he is not a client," she says.

Oh, now I see him, Mzuzu Khathi.

"The one whose mother died? Oh I remember your mother's funeral, we ate that day."

"Saphooo!!!"

What's her problem? I'm talking to Mzuzu, not her.

"I heard you renovated your grandmother's house, great job. What are you doing now?"

He clears his throat and looks at Buhle briefly.

"I'm hustling," he says.

"I see...So why are you here?"

"He is visiting me," Buhle replies.

Is this real? She was supposed to send ucu to

Bukhosini Zuma yesterday, I don't think she knows

him very well.

"Can we talk for a second?" I ask.

She sighs and follows me to the storeroom.

"What?" she asks with her arms folded.

"You played Bukhosini?" I ask.

She frowns.

"Played him how?" She's playing dumb.

"You promised him your heart and then dumped him like that? How do you know

Mzuzu?"

She makes a face and yawns.

"Mzuzu is just a friend, I'll talk to Bukhosini and iron

things out. I realized that I don't know him very well

to give him my heart just like that," she says.

She sounds and looks different.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"I'm hung over."

Whaaat?

"Since when do you drink Buhle?" I ask.

"It was a once-off thing but I really enjoyed myself."

"With Mzuzu?" I ask.

"Yeah."

God if you're too busy send Moses, your world is about to turn upside down.

"He will be in a big problem," I tell her.

She frowns slightly and chuckles.

"I'm a grown ass woman, I drank because I wanted to."

She has no idea, not a slight one.

"Just cut things off with Bukhosini as soon as possible, you're starting war," I tell her.

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MESULI MBATHA

I can't believe they're doing this. I didn't expect things to come to this. My mother knows how hurt I was after Thandeka, marriage is the last thing on my mind.

"She is a good girl, I've seen her salon, she is doing really well," my mother says.

"But I don't care about all that, I don't want to get married," I say.

As usual nobody listens to me. Nobuhle's mother is here, as well as Mr Chili. He is the one who came with the substitute of Thandeka.

I don't know this Nobuhle, I've never met her. No matter how much they glorify and cheer about her I won't develop feelings for her.

"No!" I say.

"It's not your decision Mesuli, you're marrying her. In two weeks we will be sending ilobola to the Qwabes," my father says.

Miss Qwabe shifts on her seat, she's been smiling from the minute I walked in. She is sitting very close to Mr Chili, his hand keep brushing her knee. This is strange because

Mr Chili is a married family man.

"Did she agree to all this?" I ask.

"Her opinion doesn't matter, I'm not going to watch any other dompkop take her," her mother replies.

I look at my father, he looks very happy.

"Why do you let Mvikeli lives his life the way he wants?"

"Oh, that one is a mess that can't be fixed," he says. That's a lame excuse.

"When are going to let me live my life?" I ask.

"After you've married you'll be your own man," he says.

I raise my eyebrow, hardly believing his word.

“After marriage everything will be signed off to your name, remember the farm I told you about?”

I remember the farm story but haven't paid attention to it.

“I want to move there for a year or two with your mother. I'm old now, I want to retire. It's not that I'm being hard on you but it's time for you to marry and take over,” he says.

I think I need time to think things through, I didn't know he was serious about moving to the farm.

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BUHLE QWABE

It's late when I finish the last client, braiding is not easy. Sindi and Sapho are already gone. I close up and walk home. I keep looking over my shoulders, being on the streets at night still scares me.

Car hoot!

It's a strange car, I pick my pace and walk faster. It drives past me and stops right in front of me. My heart beat is racing, I've seen stories of how girls get kidnapped.

"Nobuhle!"

I hear his voice and take a huge breath. I nearly fainted.

"Hey," I say looking at the two guys walking behind him.

Why are they dressed in similar clothes?

"You're not answering my calls," he says.

"I was busy, I intended to call you when I get home.

We have a few things to talk about."

His eyes are penetrating through me and they're fire.

Sapho's words start ringing in my mind.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"Yes, let's get inside the car."

Why are these guys staring at me like this? Something is not right here.

"What's going on Zuma?" I ask.

He blinks rapidly and then takes a deep breath.

"We are going home Buhle," he says.

"I'm going home, "I

say.

"Not that home, your
new home," he says.

I don't think I understand.
He pulls my hands and brings me to his chest. Today
he looks different, his chest feels different. He is not
the Bukhosini that I know.

He scoops me up and puts me against his shoulder
and walks to the car with me. My mind is frozen, I
haven't reacted to anything. The other guy closes the
door and gets at the front with the one who is driving.

"Bukhosini what's going on?" I ask.

"We are going home Nobuhle."

He is so calm, his arm is around my shoulders, his
cologne is filling my lungs.

"You're kidnapping me?" I ask.

"No, we will inform your family about where you are
in the morning," he says.

"I don't understand, just tell me what is going on."

"You promised to come to the Zumas and you didn't,
so the Zumas have come to get you."

He takes something out of his pocket and shows it to
me. My watch!

"This is what you promised me with," he says.

Okay he is crazy, some screws are loose in his head.

“You think I can't change my mind because of the watch I bought from Edgars?” I ask.

“This is not just a watch, it means everything to me.

You mean everything to me,” he says.

The car is taking the gravel route that cruises between the traditional homesteads I've never seen.

“I have to go to work tomorrow,” I say.

“Things will work out, just trust me.”

I open my bag and take my phone out. He doesn't stop me, he just looks at me. My mother won't be bothered, my only rescue is Mzuzu. I call him and put him on loudspeaker.

“Hey Mzuzu please come get me, Bukhosini Zuma is kidnapping me,” I say.

“Whaaat? Where are you now? Are you okay?”

“Yes I'm fine, please come,” I say.

“I'll be there in an hour, just hang on and fight to keep safe,” he says.

I end the call with tears pouring out.

“Who are you calling to the Nxamalalas?” he asks, very calmly.

I don't respond to his question.

“Text him and tell him to be very careful. He mustn't use the main gate to enter,” he says.

I frown and look at him. Why is he so calm?

The car stops outside a huge homestead. There are two micro-buses parked inside the yard so I know we are in his home.

“Sibani go call Qhamu,” he directs to the driver. Both guys climb out of the car and go inside. Now I'm crying uncontrollably, he hasn't taken his arms off me.

“I'm not going to hurt you, you will go back home, stop crying,” he says.

“No, I want to go home now,” I say.

“Why you stood me up Nobuhle?” he asks.

“I'm not sure about this...who is Zinhle?”

His arms tightens around me.

“She is...We were together for some time, but not anymore.”

“Why was she calling?” I ask.

“It's a long story, nothing to worry yourself about. I

love you and only you. I'm not that kind of a man, if I had someone I would've told you.”

“If you really love me you'll take me back home.”

“No, I can't.” He sighs loudly.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask.

“I wasn't playing games when I said I love you, my

family waited for you. This isn't just a watch, it's a

piece of your heart that you gave me. I'm not playing

games Nobuhle, if you have a problem you talk, if you're thirsty you talk, if you need a dick you talk. You don't leave me and parade with boys, you said you love me."

"So you're going force me to be with you?" I ask.

"Don't you want to be with me?" He raises his eyebrows.

I don't know what to say, he is not giving me time to process my thoughts.

"I don't want to rush things," I say.

"What is your definition of rushing things?"

"Marrying you and being here," I say.

"I was very clear about my intentions from the beginning, I want you to be my wife. I don't want to play games, that's not our style. You agreed to be with me and gave me your word knowing those terms very well. You are changing your mind because of this Mzuzu guy and that's not going to happen."

A young girl knocks on the window, he opens and steps out of the car.

"This is my sister Qhamkile, she will take you inside the house," he says looking at me.

"I said I don't want to be here," I say.

Did he hear me?

Damnit!

“Hey Nobuhle, my name is Qhamu, Bukhosini is my brother. Please wear this and come inside the house before you freeze.”

Long ugly dress, WTF!

“What is this? Am I supposed to wear this thing?” I ask.

She smiles shyly and nods her head.

“No, I'm not wearing this,” I say.

“Oh nkosyami! Please do it for me at least, my parents can't see you like this,” she says.

She has jokes for days. I'm not taking my leggings off.

“At least wrap your head with this scarf.”

This girl! Who does she think I am? I'm not covering my S-curl, not now, not ever. “If you don't

disapprove of how I look better get your brother to take me home.”

“Okay, fine let's go,” she says.

There are dogs here? I walk closer to her, I'm scared of dogs.

“They're not barking at you, this means you're welcome to be a Zuma makoti,” she says.

What the hell does that even mean?

Oh wow! I've never been inside such a huge,

magnificent rondavel. The floor has shiny tiles, there

is a small table and set of three chairs, and a huge bed at the side. It's a living room and bedroom in one.

Everything is perfectly organized.

"You're welcome to have a seat," she says.

I sit on the table and look at her. She looks very rural,

it's hard to tell that we live in the same village. She

could be my age or younger but she looks very

innocent.

"Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Yes Pinna Colada," I say.

She frowns.

"I don't know what that is, I'll get you a drink."

She's been gone for almost 20 minutes, maybe she is fetching that drink from town.

I'm orphaned inside this rondavel alone.

My phone rings.

It's Mzuzu.

"Hey we are almost there, are you okay?"

I'm not sure of what I want anymore.

"I'm safe, he didn't hurt me," I say.

"I'm coming to get you."

I take a deep breath.

"No, it's okay, I don't want you to get in trouble. I will be fine," I say.

"No Buhle, he can't take you like that." He says and ends the call.

This is about to get nasty, I don't know what Bukhosini meant when he said Mzuzu must be careful.

I call him his phone rings close by.

The door opens, he walks in followed by an old woman. His eyes nearly pop out when he sees me sitting on the table with my legs crossed.

"Ma you can't see her yet, she is not dressed properly," he says.

What does that mean? I'm not showing my butt or boobs.

"Hello Ma," I say, waving my hand at her.

Bukhosini gasps and looks at her with pleading eyes.

He wants her to leave, the poor woman is confused.

"Please have a seat Ma," I say pulling a chair for her.

"MaQwabe you can't meet my mother like...."

I smile and look at his mother, she looks like she could faint anytime. Have they never seen a woman wearing leggings before?

"My name is Nobuhle Qwabe, Bukhosini brought me here...Babe I'm thirsty, don't you have beers here?"

He folds his fist and blows out a sigh.

"You drink?" his mother asks.

"Yes," I say.

She turns to Bukhosini with her eyes narrowed.

"Mhlola muni lo Bukhosini?"

My heart is doing a little dance right now.

"She doesn't drink everyday," he says.

"No, I drink everyday," I say.

"Nobuhle stop this, please."

I sigh and sit back on the chair.

"I forgot my cigarettes!" I say.

He takes his mother's hand and leads her out. I

mentally give myself a mental high five.

He walks back followed by Qhamu who is holding a tray.

"I hope you drink pineapple juice," she says.

"Thank you," I say.

She nods and walks out.

"Why do you keep embarrassing me?"

Oh, it's Mr what-what.

"If I'm such an embarrassment take me back home," I say.

He sits opposite me and stares at me for a good while.

"What am I doing wrong?" he asks.

"You're forcing me to be here," I say.

"I love you Nobuhle, is that wrong? Is it wrong that I want to do things right?"

He sounds very frustrated.

"In the morning you'll go home but you will go with my uncles," he says.

"You're rushing things yet you have a long story with someone else," I say.

"I told you she is not a...."

Gunshots!!!

"Stay here," he rushes to the bed, takes something under the pillow and speeds out.

Is it Mzuzu? I told him not to come.
I pray that nobody get hurt.

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Chapter 23

BUHLE

It's just after 11pm when he walks in. The commotion has died out, I have no slight clue of what happened. I heard guns and cars speeding off then Qhamu came to sit with me. She didn't look as scared as she should've been. We just sat in silence until everything cooled down then she left.

"You are still up," he says.

He thought I'd sleep in this abnormal place with blazing guns?

"Is anyone hurt?" I ask.

I've been praying for everyone's safety, him, his family and Mzuzu.

"No," he says.

I don't trust his answer. It can't be that all those shots went on air.

"Are you sure?" I ask.

He takes his shirt off and changes into a T-shirt. He is not interested in filling me in, he takes his pant off and gets in bed.

"Is Mzuzu okay?" I ask.

"You can go check him, he is by the kraal."

What does that mean? He knows that I can't go out, there are dogs here.

"What is he doing there?" I ask.

"That's an explanation we are waiting from him, what is he doing here? And if his grandmother can't pay a cow to apologize to our ancestors for all the gunshots he fired here there will be hell to pay." This is absurd!

"You are kidnapping him too?" I ask.

"No, he came here with the aim to kill. Did you not tell him to be careful and use the other gate?" He asks, there is something in his voice, it sends shivers down my spine.

"Who are you? Why does it matter? He is my friend, he was trying to rescue me," I say.

"Nobody enters here uninvited, this is the Nxamalala homestead, akusilona i-ground lo tsotsi."

He is angry. Now I realize that Sapho was right, I have no idea who I've associated myself with.

"So where am I supposed to sleep?" I ask.

"Here in bed, unless if you want to be on that chair all night," he says.

He thinks I will share a bed with him? He is crazy.

"I'm not going to sleep with you on the same bed," I say.

"I never said I wanted to sleep with you, but if I want to I will sleep with you."

He is very arrogant, Sapho was right. I don't see any future between us.

"I will sit on the chair," I say.

He nods and switches the light off.

I can sit all night, there are only a few hours left before morning, I will manage.

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I'm woken up by the cattle lowing, where am I? We don't have cows at...Oh shucks, I'm at the Zumas.

I'm in bed???

I said I'll sleep on the chair, why did he take me to bed?

I look around hoping to see him but only his scent is here. It looks like he had a bath here before leaving.

I call his phone, his phone is here under the pillows. I don't have Qhamu's number, the bathroom must be outside.

Where am I going to pee?
I'm pressed, I can't hold it for more than five minutes.

I hope Qhamu comes in before I wet myself.

There is a plastic basin, it's the only thing I can use here. He will forgive me, I have no choice, I can't risk exposing myself to those dogs.

Toothbrush? Towel? Lotion?
How am I supposed to live? I can't believe he woke up and left me like this. I wonder if Mzuzu is still here, his phone is on voicemail. I'm worried, I know how much his grandmother means to him. This thing of the Zumas demanding a cow because of the gunshots is sick.

The door opens, he walks in wearing a formal shirt and black pants. Did he go to work? He can't be pushing his businesses while my salon is closed because of him.

"Good morning," he says.
There is nothing good about this morning.
"Your bath set is inside the little cupboard," he says.
I didn't check, that's very thoughtful and weird of him.
"Is the water inside the cupboard as well?" I ask.

He glances at me briefly and shows me the electric bucket. Oh, I didn't see it.

"I was pressed and used the basin," I say.

He laughs, the sound I haven't heard from him in a while, he is very cute when he is happy.

He takes the basin out and comes back with it rinsed.

"When am I leaving?" I ask.

"Leaving to where?"

He must not be stupid, he said I'll leave with his uncles in the morning.

"Home, you said I'll go," I say.

He takes his shoes off and gets in bed. Am I supposed to bath in front of him?

"No, you are not going home, we need to send

Bhubesi with the salon keys so that the girls can work."

What? No.

"Bukhosini you promised me that I'll go today," I say.

"And I changed my mind, we are a couple that change minds without informing each other, remember," he says.

I don't bother plugging the bucket, I pour cold water into the basin and strip my clothes off and bath. Oh

hell I'm freezing! These little tantrums don't help me with anything, he is stubborn as a mule.

He is staring at me the whole time. A part of me is a bit shy but there is a dominant one that tells me to keep my head up and bath. He can stare until his eyes pop out.

"Do you want me to wipe your back?"
Really now? I give him one-sec look and carry on. The ugly dress Qhamu gave me is still here, I have no choice but to wear it.

Ponds? Who still uses this? I bet his sister bought it. I stand in front of the mirror and apply it on my face. I look like a dead woman.

Arms sneak around my waist, he breathes next to my neck.

"You're so beautiful," he says.

I'm trying to breath normally.

He spanks my butt and grabs it.

"I'll pay all eleven cows at once, just to have this."

Did he....? Lord!

"What is it?" he asks frowning.

"Get out please," I say pointing him to the door.

"Why are you angry?"

Is he confused or plain stupid?

"You can't make such comment about my body. It's my body, not commodity," I'm almost yelling.

"But I will pay all your father's cows and I will chow this."

Okay, he is not confused but plain stupid.

"No you won't!" I say.

He laughs and walks back to bed. This is not funny, not even one bit.

"You need to learn how to talk to a woman, otherwise we won't get along," I say.

"Okay I won't chow you, I will just bang-bang that ass a little bit," he says, still amused.

I sigh and open the cosmetic bag to see what else Qhamu bought me. Magic-lipstick?

It's pink, I love the colour.

Eeh...my lips are turning blue instead, what on earth is this?

"What is this?" I ask him.

He glances up once.

"That's make up," he says.

Okay he won't know, I shouldn't have asked. I wipe the thing off and apply Vaseline.

"Did you let Mzuzu go?" I ask.

Silence.

"Bukhosini!"

"What?"

He is busy texting on his phone.

"Did you let Mzuzu go?"

"Who is that?"

Really now? He knows who Mzuzu is.

"Just so you know he is the guy who saved me the night I was nearly raped," I say.

"I'm grateful for that but he had no right to come here shooting guns. He disrespected the whole Zuma clan and we won't let that slide just like that."

"What about me?" I ask.

"My uncles are at your home as we speak, you'll go home but I want to be sure you belong to me before you go," he says.

Belong to him?

"Do you realise that I'm a human being, I breathe on my own and I was created by God? He is the only person I can ever belong to," I ask.

Unfunny things really amuse him, he is laughing at that like it's a joke of the century.

"I mean it Bukhosini," I say.

"I love the woman that you are. So what is going to happen to the salon? You know women aren't supposed to work."

Whaaat? He is crazy.

"I'm too hungry to have this conversation, in the meantime try to ignore the stupid voice that keeps telling you that men are superior."

Again I'm Trevor Noah, he is dead with laughter.

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LATER THAT DAY

Sibani walks in as his uncles walk out leaving

Bukhosini pinned against the wall wrapped in misery.

“Hey bafo I just heard that your mother-in-law is a mental case,” he says.

Bukhosini sighs and looks at him. He is defeated, his fears are just a step closer from becoming a reality.

“So there is nothing you can do?” Sibani asks.

“No, keeping her here is illegal. She only has a mother, if she says no it's the end of the road for me,” he says.

“But Nobuhle has the last word, she decides whether she wants to marry you or not,” Sibani says.

Bukhosini looks at him with a sorrowful face.

“I don't think she feels the same way, she didn't want to be here in the first place,” he says.

“That's bad, from what I hear her mother wants nothing to do with us. They say she chased them with

a bucket of pee, that's the craziest thing I've ever heard."

Bukhosini sighs and gathers himself up. He has to take her home before the police come, her being kept here is illegal.

He walks out and bumps into Qhamu. She knows how much his brother loves Nobuhle.

The pain on his face breaks her heart.

"Mdlovu," she says looking at him.

He stops and looks at her, he is trying not to look broken in front of her.

"I think you scared her, she looks humble. Try not to be hard on her," she says.

She always give him good advices, but today she doesn't make any sense.

"She is leaving Qhamkile, there are men lurking for her out there. Her mother will never accept my cows, they say she has a different man that she wants her to marry. I have no chance, even Buhle's feelings have changed."

Qhamu shakes her head and pats his arm a few times.

"You've seen how she is, there is no way she will

marry the guy arranged by her mother. Tone it down

a bit Mdlovu, let her lead the way. When you know

you've gained her heart and trust marry her, if you keep rushing her she will run and never look back," she says.

He inhales sharply and nods. Maybe letting her rule the relationship will soften her heart.

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BUHLE QWABE

He walks in and stands in the middle of the house. He looks a bit sad, I wonder what his uncles said. He's been waiting for them with great anticipation.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Your mother said she'll never give you to me, I don't know why I'm such a bad person to her."

He sounds bruised, pain is evident in his eyes.

"I should've warned you, she is a crazy woman," I say.

He sighs and sits next to me. "I really love you Buhle but it seems like nobody wants to see us together. Even you, you don't want us to be together. I don't

have a choice but to take you home where you want to be.”

It sounds like he is letting go.

“Forget about my mother, you are rushing things. This is not how I wanted our relationship to be,” I say.

“How did you want it to be? You didn't send ucu as you promised, I have no idea what you want me to do.”

“I want us to get to know each other, go out and enjoy time together,” I say.

“I'm not going to see you behind trees, if I want to be with you I want you to be here in this house and you can't do that without doing things properly.”

Doing things properly is sending ucu and having abakhongi sent in the morning, it's exactly what I'm standing against.

“Can we do it after 3 months at least?”

“We can but your mother won't accept me.”

My mother really scared him, I wonder what she did to his uncles.

“I will sort that out,” I say.

He pulls me to his chest and embraces me tightly.

“Okay we will do things your way, just promise me you won't change your mind when the time comes.”

"No, I won't," I say.

He smiles and plants a kiss on my lips.

"I really thought I'd get some vulva today but..."

I roll my eyes and untangle myself from his embrace.

"Now back to Zinhle, what is her story?" I ask.

He takes a deep breath and holds my hand tightly.

"I almost had a baby, unfortunately he died before he was born. There were a lot of complications, it ended with her undergoing 5 surgeries. Zinhle is his mother, we are not together anymore but I'm in charge of her medical expenses."

"So she calls you randomly, late at night?" I ask.

"There is nothing going on between us, it ended before we even lost the baby. It just that I haven't drawn the line so we talk randomly." It looks like I'm entering another complicated relationship.

"Okay I hear you," I say.

"Trust me Nobuhle you're the only woman in my life, I'm not that kind of a man."

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He takes one look behind and adjusts his necklace.

This is it, the new beginning, the new life, the new

HIM.

Muhammad Ali once said: **Only A Man Who Knows**

How It's Like To Be Defeated Can Reach Down To

The Bottom Of His Soul And Come Up With The

Extra Ounce Of Power

It Takes To Win When The Match Is Even.

"The car is parked that side, sir," – the driver says.

He nods and follows right after him. The SUV is

parked outside the gate, the world glitters are the last

thing on his mind. He only cares about one thing, he

came to win one battle, one mission.

"Go straight to Sunningdale," he says and fastens his seatbelt.

Defeat is a temporary detour, not a dead end. Life has

begun at what was called an end.

"Welcome back," – the driver says.

He would have smiled had he known how to, he only

acknowledges him with a nod hoping he sees him on

the rear mirror.

“You may trod me in the very dirt, but still like dust, I will rise again up,” he thinks out loud.

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Insert 24

BUHLE

He is walking me home and he's been quiet half of the journey. A part of me isn't so doubtful anymore but there are still those 'what-ifs'.

"Babe," I say.

He turns and looks at me. He is surprised, I've been a queen of drama throughout this time.

"There is a restaurant in town, I'm sure you've never been there. They sell your kind of food..."

"My kind of food?" he asks.

"Inhloko, pap and..."

"Where is it?"

The curiosity in his voice!

"I said town, I'll take you there later but you'll organize transport," I say.

"Take me there?"

"Yes, take you there Bukhosini," I say.

He lets out a chuckle and shakes his head. He must not start with his 'men lines'. I will take him out and pay his bill, he must get used to it.

He stops two houses away from my home, he still looks sad.

"Are you going to pick up if I call?"

"Bukhosini, I love you," I say.

He stares at me. He doesn't believe me.

"What scares me is your pace, trust me I'm willing to give us a try," I say.

"Okay, I'll try to play you and use you because it seems like that's what you want," he says.

Oh really? He doesn't have any player genes in him.

"Maybe," I say and wink.

"Don't wink at me." He is too serious for my liking.

I wink again.

"You're my beautiful headache," he says pulling me closer.

I stand against his chest and look up at his eyes. The hopelessness in them breaks my heart.

"What is wrong? Is it me?" I ask.

"I wish I didn't meet you, now it's going to kill me to watch you marry someone else." I don't understand him, I just told him that I love him.

"Where is this coming from? You know that I'm not ready for any marriage," I say.

"What if you're forced to? What if your family choose someone else for you?"

I burst into laughter, he is an overthinker.

"I'm not a movie character, nobody will do such thing to me. I decide who I want to be with, I'm a grown woman," I say.

He stares at me for a minute and then squeezes me in a tight hug.

"I hope your feelings are deep enough," he kisses my cheek and says goodbye.

I have planted a seed of doubt in his head. He looks broken and hopeless. I'm fucked up, maybe I should visit Mthetho and have a breather. I have no love around me, the woman who gave birth to me has turned her back on me. In life we have to receive love in order to give love, my soul is lacking and empty.

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Oh she is home today! I bet she didn't even realize that I wasn't home the last two days.

"You're home just on time, go to your room and change."

She looks too excited and it's so early in the morning I have a salon to open.

"Good morning Ma," I say.

"Shesha, you have to meet someone."

Oh? We hardly have guests here, except her boyfriend Mr Chili.

“That's nice but I'm kinda rushing to the salon, we've been closed for two days,” I say.

“Go and change into a dress and come to the living room Buhle,” she orders and walks away.

After everything she has done to me I shouldn't be respecting anything coming out of her mouth, but I'm a black child. I walk to my room and find an ugly dress placed on my bed, there is a scarf next to it as well.

I don't want to think these were put for me to wear, I'm not a fashion killer but I've never worn anything so ugly in my life.

“What is that?”

Oh hell no! Now she lets herself inside my room without knocking?

“I'm dressing up Ma,” I say, trying to be calm as I can.

“So your eyes are blind, can't you see the dress and scarf? Your husband may walk in any minute from.”

Are my ears okay? Did she say husband?

“I told him we can't marry yet, he'll be sending his uncles again after three months,” I say.

She frowns and pushes her lip up in a disgusted manner.

“Don't tell me about that fool, I'm talking about Mesuli Mbatha...Oh you should see how handsome and smart he looks. He will be taking over his father's businesses as soon as he marries.”

Maybe I'm dumb or slow. What the hell is she talking about?

“Ma you're confusing me, who is Mesuli?” I ask.

“Your.....”

There is someone at the door. He is fair few inches taller than me, and a perfect symmetrical face with trimmed mustache. He is handsome, his skin looks like a baby's. I don't judge people, that's not my style, but this one is a softee. Is he a guest?

“Hello can I come in?” he asks in a low, shaky voice.

“No I'm....”

“Don't even ask Mesuli come in,” says my roommate. I turn and look at her, she gives me a stern look and walks out. The guy walks in and stands near my bed mindlessly.

“Can I help you?” I ask buttoning my shirt up.

“My name is Mesuli...I trust your mother told you about me....about us.”

No man, I remember this guy. He is Thandeka's ex, he was trending after she called the wedding off.

"Hi Mesuli, what brings you here? My mother never told me anything," I say.

"That's strange, I was invited here."

He is a shy person, I don't know if I should be harsh or feel sorry for his confused face.

"I don't know why you were invited but this is my room and I don't like to have strangers in," I say calmly.

He scratches his head and looks at me, for the first time our eyes meet. There is something about him, I don't know if it's the pain caused by his engagement fall out.

He is intact, at least that's what his face portrays, but deep in his eyes he is broken.

"Why are you here?" I ask.

"Your mother must've told you."

"I just came home, she hasn't told me anything."

He takes something out of his pocket...a little black box. He doesn't open it, he hands it over to me.

"What is this?" I ask.

"Open it," he says.

A ring???

"Who is this for?" I ask.

"It's for you."

Heh! What in the world is going on?

"What must I do with it?"

"They arranged for us to be married."

Whaaat???

"Who is they?" I ask.

"Your mother and my parents."

Oh this is funny! My mother doesn't drink as far as I

know, what was she thinking? I'm not going to marry a stranger, another Thandeka's ex for that matter. All her ex's hearts belong to her.

No, they were crazy.

"I'm not doing that," I say.

"I know this is shocking, I reacted the same way when they told me. But I need this

Buhle, it's my only chance, my only ticket to freedom."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I know that you don't know me and this is none of

your business. But I need your help, I just want my

father to set me free, we can go our separate ways

after that. I promise I won't touch you, I just need you

to help me off these chains. I want freedom and this is

my only way," he says.

I feel the pain in his voice but I don't know his story

and I don't think I'm his Mandela.

“If that needs me to marry you then I'm sorry, I'm in a serious relationship and I normally don't have times for games,” I say.

“Please, I'm begging you. This...you won't understand, I'll pay you if I have to.”

Whoooah!!!

“Mesuli I won't marry you under any circumstances.

Please go find someone else, I'm happy to meet you, all the best,” I say.

He takes a deep breath and takes his ring back and walks out.

I cannot believe that my mother thought she'd set me up for marriage.

I haven't told her but she knows that I'm with

Bukhosini. If she wants me to be married why did she turn the Zumas away?

I bump into her halfway to the kitchen, she looks like a volcano waiting to explode.

“What is your problem?” she asks.

“My problem? I have a problem?”

“Why are you chasing Mesuli away?”

“I don't know him. Why do you go around hooking me up with strangers? I'm not looking for a husband, and when I do want one I'll find him myself,” I say.

"This guy comes from a wealthy family, he is a good man."

Lord! I don't care whether he comes from planet Mars or Jupiter, I don't CARE!

"I'm late for work," I say walking past her.

She blocks me with her arm and glares at me.

"Go to your room Nobuhle, listen to your husband-to-be and stop testing my evil side."

"You're selling me off Ma?"

"No, I'm marrying you to Mesuli, I know he'll take good care of you."

"I don't want to get married Ma," I say.

"My house, my rules! Unless if you're a woman enough to stand on your own."

She is going to kick me out? She is my mother, she should respect my choices!

"Are you kicking me out?" I ask.

"If you are a woman enough you'll disobey my rules and move out of my house...Oh and definitely move your salon somewhere else because that place belongs to me."

Wow! I look at her hoping she'd say she is joking. She knows how much that salon means to me, I started it in just a container, it's like my little baby.

"But I love Bukhosini," I say.

“You're not his type of woman, trust me marrying into that family will be your worst nightmare. I don't want you to live your life as a slave,” she says.

“I know how he is but he is willing to change, we talked things through. I can't marry someone I don't know, someone I have no feelings for,” I say.

“You'll learn to love him, go back to your room and listen to him.”

I walk back to my room fighting tears. I don't want to marry a stranger but I can't lose my salon. I need to think of something...I have to come up with a plan.

“Can I come in?”

It's him again.

I nod my head. He walks in and sits next to me.

“How are you feeling?” he asks.

He knows how I'm feeling, tears explain everything.

“I'm sorry Buhle, this is the last thing I'd want to do to

a woman but I'm desperate. Please don't cry, we will

divorce after a few months. The life you live here is

the life I live ten times at home. I want out and this is

the only way, please say yes,” he is begging and

trying to hold my hand.

“Aren't you a qualified teacher?”

"I am," he says.

"Move to another province and stand on your own."

He takes a loud breath and rubs his hands.

"He can stop my life Buhle, I'm not weak but to keep everything I have to listen to him," he says.

"Sometimes you have to lose to win, you're too old to be following orders like this," I say.

"Please help me, just four months of your life and I'll be free."

"No, I can't," I say taking my bag.

"Buhle please, I need this."

Gosh! I sigh and walk to the door.

"I'm leaving, please get out of my room."

"Please listen Buhle, I won't touch you, you'll be with your boyfriend any time you want.

Please just..."

"No Mesuli!" I say pulling the door wider.

He swallows and drags himself out.

I'm ready for the consequences.

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******LATER******

“Buhle,” it's a whisper from Sapho. She is still working with the first customer, it's been almost three hours now.

“What?” I ask.

“Mesuli.”

WTF!

He is here, he has changed into formal wear. He is carrying a basket, isn't he supposed to be at school?

“Sanibonani,” he greets with his eyes shyly glancing at Sapho.

“Did Shakes send you?” -Sapho.

He smiles shyly and shakes his head and looks at me.

“I brought you breakfast,” he says.

Sighs! He really doesn't get this.

“Excuse me guys,” I say to the girls and signal him to follow me out.

“What is this now?” I ask outside.

“Just breakfast,” he says.

“I carry my own food, please don't do this.”

“Buhle it's just food,” he says.

“What about these red roses?”

He exhales and looks away. It smells divine, I didn't bring any food today and I don't feel like kota & chips.

“Okay thanks, but this won't change my mind,” I say.

"I know, it just...."

Someone clears his throat next to us.

Bukhosini!!!

"Hey babe," I say conveying the message to Mesuli.

He glances at him and turns back to me. He must not pretend as if anything is going on between us.

"Am I disturbing something?" he asks.

The look on his face hasn't changed. I fear what his mind might be thinking.

"No, Mesuli was just passing by."

What am I saying? I'm holding red roses and a basket of breakfast delivered by a man who wants to marry me.

"You said you'll pick up my calls," he says in a strange voice.

I close my eyes and sigh. I don't even know where my phone is, I had a very bad morning.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Who is this Nobuhle?"

His voice is heavy, my throat turns dry immediately.

"I'm Mesuli Mbatha, I was just bringing her breakfast," he turns to me and smiles,

"Buhle I will see you later."

See me later? Bukhosini has his eyebrow lifted up. He stands and stares at me. He is angry, hurt and disappointed.

"He is nothing to me and I didn't ask him to bring me breakfast," I say.

"How do you know him?"

I don't know where to start, I planned to tell him about the marriage thing but I didn't want it to be this way.

"Can we talk somewhere? Inside the car maybe," I say.

He takes a few steps and glances back at me.

"Are you coming to my car with that thing?"

Oh the basket!

I walk back inside the salon and put it in the store room. If it was up to Sapho she'd be a fly and comes with me.

"Scream if he beats you," she says.

"He is not...he won't Sapho," I say and make my way out to the car. It's the same car that kidnapped me.

The first few minutes are awkward with him just staring outside the window.

"My mother is trying to force me into marrying Mesuli," I say breaking the silence.

"I know."

What? How does he know that?

He turns around and looks at me.

"My proposal was rejected because of that," he says.

My mother is unbelievable!

"I didn't know that," I say.

"What are the terms and conditions?" he asks.

"If I don't marry him I'll lose my home and salon, she wants to disown me," I say.

His eyes widen in shock.

"She can't do that!"

Well he doesn't know her, of course she can.

"Buhle you're not going to marry that boy."

Mesuli is almost his age, he can't call him 'that boy'.

"I'm not going to marry him, but I don't have a plan. I

don't mind being homeless but my salon Bukhosini!"

"I'll buy you another one," he says.

He doesn't get it, this salon is my baby, I don't want another one.

"No!" I say.

"So you'll marry him because you want to keep the salon whereas you'll lose me along the way? You said you love me Nobuhle!"

I lean back on the seat and sigh. What is happening in my life? Ever since I broke up with Mthetho things are not okay, it seems like everything is failing. I wonder how he is in jail.

"I do love you and I won't marry a stranger. But I need a plan of how I'm going to keep the salon," I say.

"Where are you going to live?" he asks.

"I will rent or something." I haven't thought about it, my only worry is the salon.

Are those my bags? I walk closer with a frown on my face.

"Ma!!!" I yell.

She walks out and stands on the door step.

"What is Nywaaa?"

"Why are my bags outside?"

She folds her arms and laughs.

"Buhle you're not dumb, two women can't live under one roof, you're not a child anymore," she says.

"Just because I don't want to marry Mesuli? If I'm a child why are you marrying me off?"

"Leave Buhle!"

"Ma?"

She walks in and shuts the door. Mr Chili is here, his car is parked just above the yard.

Where am I supposed to go at this time? She knows I was nearly raped just a while ago.

I can't ask Sindi for help, she lives with a man, I'd be overcrowding them.

Sapho is my only option. Luckily she answers.

"My mother kicked me
out," I say.

"What? OMG. where are
you going to stay?"

I sigh heavily.

"I need help for a few days then I'll make a plan," I
say.

"Buhle we don't have DSTV here, there is no..."

Lord! I don't care about all those things, I just need
shelter.

"It's okay, can I come?" I ask.

"Yes of course."

I pick my bags on the ground and leave.

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Insert 25

Thandeka

This is getting weird, every night he is doing the same thing. I'm starting to question his sanity.

"Do you have to do this everyday?" I ask, sitting on bed.

He sprinkles his holy water all over, the pillows are almost wet.

"Nkosenhle where are we going to sleep?" I ask.

"We are chasing away these Mkhize demons."

Sighs! He still believes that Mthetho bewitched me. If that was true Mesuli would've gone through the same thing.

Ten minutes later he is done, he takes his clothes off and comes to bed. We haven't done the exact deed, I don't know where the problem is. He always gives me pleasure with his hand or tongue.

"I have a surprise for you," he says.

I'm tired of gifts, what is it now? He has brought almost every kind of girly gift there is. I can create a garden with all the flowers I've gotten from him.

"I know that our bedroom life isn't up to standard so I thought of the alternatives since I can't give you what I should be giving you," he says.

"Maybe we should start on why you are not giving it to me. We are always together Nkosenhle, we know each other and have deep connection. What is the matter?" I ask.

"I'm still working on it, you know what happened the last time we tried. I don't want that to happen again, I want to make sure that I get rid of whatever it is that Mthetho did to you."

"We don't try Nkosenhle, there is no happiness if I'm the only one getting pleasure," I say.

He sighs and closes the drawer where his 'surprise' is. I hope it's not what I think he was implying to, I want no toys inside my vagina.

"Babe I don't want you to cheat on me," he says.

"This is tiring, your mind is full of this nonsense, you're imagining things."

He shifts closer and pulls me to his chest, he is about to get needy and emotional about it.

"You know how much I love you Thandeka, I don't want to be embarrassed in front of you. This cuts deep in my manhood, I don't..."

I grab him and kiss his lips. He responds to the kiss and wraps his arms around me. I don't know where things go wrong, he always wants me, lust is always there in his eyes. I guess fear overcomes everything, he is scared what happened that day might happen again.

"You need to relax and stop bringing Mthetho into our relationship. I should be holding on to him as his ex but I'm not, instead it's you who can't get over him," I say.

He takes a deep breath and squeezes my hand.

Something in his eyes has changed, he looks provoked and ready for action.

"Okay," he says.

I lift up my eyebrow.

"Okay?"

"We will have sex. Are you on the pill?"

"I took the injection," I say.

"Oh...how effective is it and how long does it work?"
I don't understand why that bothers him, I won't fall

pregnant for him. I don't want to have a child.

"You'll wear a condom, don't worry," I say.

"No...I...it's fine, you took the injection and we are both
clear of any diseases."

Oh I thought he was scared of pregnancy.

"Let's switch the lights off," he says.

"Why?" I ask.

"I want to be comfortable."

That's weird, he always gets naked in front of me. I

know his body, he knows mine, why are we having
sex in the dark?

His hands caress my boobs, he is getting on top of me.

"Tell me if I'm hurting you in any way," he says.

His shaft rubs between my thighs. It's hard, unlike the

last time. I feel his lips latching on my nipples and

moan in pleasure. My moans motivate him, he is

kissing me hungrily and pushing his fingers inside my

wet mound.

"TJ," he whispers.

It sounds sexy coming from his mouth.

"Babe," I say.

"I really love you, meeting you was a blessing. Even though I didn't get you fair and square but my feelings for you have never been anything but genuine. My intentions about you have been honest from the very first day. I'll never hurt you in any way, I'd rather hurt myself than to hurt you."

I pull his face and smooch his lips. I still don't understand how a human being can love another one the way he does. He loves even my fart, the grounds I walk on are his world.

"I love you too babe," I say.
He push my knees up and positions himself between them. I feel the tip of his shaft sliding in and scream in shock.

"Babe I love you," he repeats.

"This feels great, right there baby!"

He thrusts in following my instructions, he is sweating, my whole upper body is wet.

"Babe are you close?" he asks.

Is this even a real question? I don't know how to respond to it.

His hand grips on my neck tightly, his fingers are almost digging my skin. He has applied more force on his thrusts.

"Tha...nde..ka!" His voice is breaking, something wet is dropping to my face. I don't know if it's his sweat or what.

"Go harder baby," I say wrapping my legs around his waist.

He applies more force while letting out a deep groan. "Please cum Thandeka," he says in a suppressed voice. He thrusts harder and rubs my clit. I feel a wave

building up, my body shakes as my toes twirl.

"I'm cuming baby!!"

"Thank you,"

He pulls out while I'm still floating in a cloud of joy.

When I open my eyes the bathroom door is closing.

Did he really leave like that? I didn't hear him reaching his breaking point.

I catch my breath and turn the lights on. Maybe he is looking for a wipe, I wait a few minutes hoping he'll come back. I hear a low groan coming from the bathroom and gather myself up in confusion.

He is holding onto the sink, his other hand is on his front.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"Go Thandeka," he says and groans.

It looks like he is in pain, I walk closer to him. His shaft is wrapped with a wet cloth, his eyes are bloody red.

"What is wrong Nkosenhle?"

"I got hurt but I'll be fine."

He was hurt by me? I don't remember doing anything to him, how exactly did he gets hurt?

"Are you bleeding?" I ask, the cloth on his hand has blood stains.

"My skin peeled a little bit but don't worry about it go to bed I'm coming." His face doesn't show that it's just 'a little bit'. I remove the hand around his shaft.

OMG!!!

"What happened?" I ask shocked by the wound on his tip, it's even bleeding.

"I don't know, I felt it but couldn't stop before you had your moment. I'll see the doctor tomorrow, don't stress about it."

Was he right all this time? Did Mthetho do something to me? Maybe it's time I go see him, I need explanations.

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He can't walk properly. God knows how bad I feel, I forced him into sex and this is what happened.

I should've listened to him, maybe he knew something like this was going to happen.

"Don't be like this," he says forcing a smile.

"You're in pain and it's my fault," I say.

"Don't beat yourself, you wanted normalcy. I will sort it out my love, we will be happy."

I should be getting ready for work but leaving him like this is hard. At least I need the doctor's assurance that he is going to be fine.

"I'm going to the doctor with you," I say.

"Thandeka you can't stop your life because of me."

There is a knock at the door, he goes and opens for

whoever it is. I don't care what he says I'll be going to

the doctor with him, if there are blood tests to be ran

we'll run them together. "Hello Thandeka."

Banzi!

This is such a surprise, we haven't seen him in months.

"Morning," I say and cast my eyes to Nkosenhle. His face is closed up, I can't read his expression.

"Have you heard from Mthetho?" he asks. He is looking at me. Why would I hear from Mthetho?

He is in jail and we don't talk to each other.

"Heard in which way?" Nkosenhle asks.

"Mthetho was released."

Whaaaat!!!

"That can't be true, he is serving 8 years in prison," Nkosenhle says.

"Well he is out....We need to talk," he says and make his way to the balcony.

Nkosenhle follows behind him, he is trying to walk properly.

Mthethowakhe is back? He doesn't have anywhere to stay as far as I remember. Where did he go after his release? Is he okay where...Damn it's none of my business, I don't care where he is or how safe he is.

I hear the car driving off, it must be Banzi since

Nkosenhle is coming in alone. I can tell from his face that the news didn't settle well with him.

"Do you mind going home for
a few days?"

What? No!

"I have to go to work Nkosenhle," I say.

"It's not safe for you to be here, Mthetho is looking for
you and he might kill you if he finds you here."

My heartbeat escalates, my history with him validates
these allegations.

"He wants to kill me?" I ask in a shaky voice.

"Yes, I need you to go home for a few days. He is here
in Durban, I'll find him and sort everything out," he
says.

There is no time for questions, at this moment he
doesn't even care about his penis' injury, we are
packing. My life keeps turning for the worst and
Mthetho is always behind it.

"I will protect you, he has hurt you enough," he says.

I nod, fighting back burning tears.

He pulls me to his chest and wraps his arms around
me.

"No matter how hard it is I'll fight for you till the end.

I won't let him anywhere near you, he'll never touch
you again."

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BUHLE QWABE

"Breakfast is reeeeeady."
I'm still in bed, today is Sunday I was hoping for more hours of sleep. My mind needs a long break but this is not my room. The room owner woke up long time ago and she is very energetic today.

"What time is it?" I ask.
"7:36 wake up," she says.
I yawn and get off bed. I'm not up for the kettle plugging routine, I'll bath with cold water. I have a long journey ahead of me, I will be room hunting and later I need to go to the shops.

They're already on the table. Malum' Sotobe is wearing a brown suit and cowboy's hat.
Why is he dressed up so early in the morning?
"Do you want tea or juice?" Sapho asks.

"Juice is fine," I say uncovering my plate.
Errr...she said breakfast, who eats pap for breakfast?
"Mfakele isalad mshana," Malum' Sotobe.

Sapho passes a bowl with coleslaw to me. This is a whole Sunday lunch at 8:00!

"Why are we eating full meal?" I ask.

"It's what we always do,"- Sapho.

"No, it's my birthday,"-Malum' Sotobe.

Sapho is shocked, it looks like she also didn't know it was her uncle's birthday.

"Wow happy birthday Malume," I say.

He smiles and reaches for another piece of roasted chicken.

"Thank you Bubu," he says.

"Oh my God Malume I'm so sorry, I really didn't know," Sapho says remorsefully.

"Nobody ever cares so it's okay." I can see that Sapho feels bad, maybe I should help her organize a little surprise party for him.

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We have managed to call some of his friends over,

Sapho bought a R79 cake at Spar and some drinks. It's

a small celebration with just braai and cake.

"I feel like a bad niece," she says.

"That's good, how can you not know your uncle's birthday?"

She rolls her eyes and puts ciders inside the refrigerator.

"Has Bukhosini called?"

she asks.

"Yes he wants me to

stay at his home," I say.

"And you said no?" she asks.

"Obviously, there is no way I'm going to live in that huge homestead with strangers. And it's in the other side of the village, I don't know anyone that side."

"I see, hopefully he understands," she says.

Sotobe is playing cards with his friends, they're

making lot of noise. He is still wearing his suit, he

doesn't care about the heat.

We set the table and call them over. He is smiling like

a kid as he sits at the front.

"First of all I'd like to thank everyone for coming at

such notice. It's an honor to have you here to celebrate

my uncle's 56th birthday, I hope we all enjoy

ourselves," Sapho says.

She gives him the knife to cut the cake. I can see how

important Sotobe feels right now, he starts by giving a

5minutes speech of how hard he has worked to be where he is today.

"Where are you today?" One of his friends asks. This is such a rude question, we all know that Malum' Sotobe is a businessman, he owns a poultry farm and has worked hard to reach this level.

"Mtimande, I don't explain myself, my standard speaks for itself," he turns and looks at me and Sapho.

"Next time I'll hire professional event organizers, see you didn't tell these people how to dress up. Now my party looks like imbizo yamaNdebele. Zondi is wearing a blue overall, Khuzwayo is wearing a yellow shirt. There, Zikhali with a red old T-shirt. It's colorful, even the chameleon would be confused. Color of the day was brown hence I'm wearing this suit."

Really now? He didn't even know he was having a party, it was my idea.

"Sapho go take my perfume, I think it has faded," he says sniffing under his arms.

"People want the cake Malume,' Sapho says.

"Go wena, I don't like smelling like an ordinary person."

Okay this is going to be a long day, throwing him a party was a wrong idea.

Sapho comes back with his perfume, he sprays it all over his suit.

"Can we sing now?" I ask.

"Yeah go on," he says smiling.

We all sing Happy Birthday and watch him cut the cake with a huge grin on his face.

"Thank you bantabami, you may serve," he says.

Finally! I swear people were about to give up and leave.

"I have a question!"

That's Zondi if I'm not mistaken. He is on his feet

stuffing cake inside his mouth, the icing is all over his beard.

"Is it really Sotobe's birthday today? I'm asking

because last year it was in October, did it change?"

What on earth is going on? I look at Sapho, she looks as confused as me.

"Did you confirm on your ID Malume?" I ask.

"No, but I'm sure it's today," he says.

Sapho storms off and goes inside the rooms and comes back with a green ID book.

"12 October Malume, 12 October!"

What's the heck? October is still three months away!

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Insert 25

“Can I get you anything before I go?”
She's too old to be working. I did not need her, but Ngwane insisted that I get a helper, and she also needed a job. I don't know much about her, except that she comes from the village called Impofana and has ingratitude of children to take care of. I wouldn't question why the children are not working instead of her, obviously our government is still failing to create job opportunities.

“No, MaNgema, thank you,” I say.
She looks around, as if she is checking if everything is fine. She is extra careful, over working and the worse neat freak that I know. Oh, maybe she is better than Nonokazi.

That one can mop the floor just because she saw a fly on it.

“Take care mnumzane,”

“I'm Mthe.....Don't call me mnumzane,” I say.

“Uxolo, what can I call you?”

She cannot call me by my name, I don't know how big her circle is. I need to settle down and figure things

out before I make my return known. I have unfinished business with lot of people, back in the village and here in Durban.

"I'm Khanyamasi," I say.

She looks up and directs her eyes into mine. The corners of her eyes wrinkles as she cracks a smile. She is 52 years old, she could look younger just like other women. They use facial products that make their skin looks good, but she has let age and economic situation take course.

"You're a Mkhize?" she asks.

"Yes I am," I nod.

"Oh Khabazela, I will see you tomorrow morning."

"It doesn't have to be early, sleep enough I will manage breakfast on my own."

"But Bab' Ngwane said I must take care of you,"

"And I'm saying don't worry, you have to look after yourself as well."

She sighs and takes the apron off.

"I know the Mkhizes, they're all stubborn."

Nobody has ever accused me of being stubborn. She takes the cup that has the cold tea that she gave me earlier and leaves. I think she is the stubborn one, I

told her that I don't like tea but she still went on and made it.

I'm gonna close the Mthethowakhe chapter for a few months, if not years, and be Khanyamasi. It's time for a new version to take over, claim back what was taken from

Mthetho and destroy whatever comes on his way.

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NKOSENHLE MLAMBO

“They moved him, he is not out,” -Banzi
The best news I've been waiting for the whole day.
“We shouldn't celebrate as yet,” he says.
“What? This calls for a celebration, I can bring Thandeka back now.”
“Everything is about Thandeka now!” He sighs and grabs a seat. I didn't expect him to be happy, I know how much he hates my relationship.

“She makes me happy, so yeah everything is about her to me,” I say.

“Whatever! We have a new management, everything is about to change.”

Honestly I don't care about work right now, they can change whatever they want, I will stick to my job and live my life with Thandeka.

“We steal cars and take what is ours. Whatever happens with the shipping and exchanges is none of our business. So new management or not, our job remains unaffected.”

He chuckles and reaches for a bottle on the table. No glass, he drinks straight from the bottle and puts the cap back on.

“There are new rules, this Khanyamasi guy means business,” he says.

“Is he the new boss?” I ask.

“Fuck yes, and we have to report our weekly schedules.”

What? Are we his children now? We've been in this business for years and not even once have we done something wrong.

“That's not all, nobody is allowed to get married.”

Wtf! This is a lame joke. That guy must be smoking something illegal.

"I'm getting married," I say.

"Which wife will allow a husband to work four nights a week?"

"I work on my schedule and my locations, not by any rule."

"Not anymore, we'll receive schedules, locations and targets. Why do you think I said everything is about to change?"

Hhaybo! This is serious. These people are patronizing me, since when do we need all these rules?

"I need to see Peter," I say.

"He is the one who sent me the e-mail," he says. Peter needs to retire if he no longer enjoys his job.

"Oh, the uniforms are off as well," -Banzi.

"So we are being controlled? Now, all of a sudden?" I ask.

"It feels like losing independence." He sighs and grabs the bottle and drinks again. This is fucked up. If they insist on these rules I will have no choice but to quit.

Being with Thandeka is my first priority, I'm financial stable enough to start a decent life.

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KHANYAMASI

Knock!!!

I look up, it's Peter.

"Come in," I

say.

"We have a

problem,"

"We?" I ask.

He clears his throat and pulls the chair and sits.

Why did Ngwane hire this guy? He looks like a tired tourist, I can't get myself to like him no matter how warm he is.

"I have a problem," he says.

"How can I help?"

"Our best guy is pulling out. Don't you think you're being too harsh?"

"Harsh Peter?" I ask.

"He was about to get married, lives can't be put on hold because of the business." I heard that his type

loves whiskey, luckily this house is decorated with bottles. I pour a shot and give him.

“My rules stand, nobody is pulling out,” I say.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“If anyone wants to quit they'll provide a 6-months notice before they do.”

“Huh?”

I keep my face straight. New management, new rules.

“I don't want to pass this to Ngwane, control your dogs,” I say.

“Wow! I thought you were nice the first time I saw you, but I was wrong. You're just as heartless as your uncle.”

He really bought the 'uncle' story, he is not that smart after all.

“I was once nice Peter. It didn't benefit me with anything, instead it took everything from me. I hope we'll work well together, run your department smoothly and I'll sort the shipping and finances.”

“I'm sure we will work well,” he says.

I open the drawer and take the file that contains all the information they'll need on their next mission.

“We got the targets, locations and placements,” I say handing it over.

He takes the glasses out of his pocket and puts them on. He is a thug but he can't even read without glasses.

“Nkosenhle Mlambo, James Francos and Mathe Mgazi in the Sokhulu village, unit 9....” I'm glad he is a good reader, that's exactly what it says.

“Nkosenhle Mlambo to remain on the main road and clear any disturbances that might come on the way.

James and Mathe will do the job,” I say.

He nods, “And you're very specific on the targets,” “Mercedes Benz G63- NUF 46259. Nobody must get harmed,” I say.

He is staring at me. I raise my eyebrow, I hope he's not about to complain again.

“Is everything clear?” I ask.

“Yes boss, everything will go accordingly.”

“Good!”

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NKOSENHLE MLAMBO

“Shhhh!”

Geez! My brother can be annoying. Maybe he had a good night, after all his mission was easy. I had to camp on the road for hours, I need bed, it's almost 3am in the morning.

“Your girlfriend is here,” -him.

“What? Thandeka cannot....”

I see her sleepers and bag in the living room.

He turns around and laughs.

“Ubuya kuphi babe late so?” he says in a lady's voice.

I don't need his stupidity right now.

“Leave,” I say.

“I need a bottle for the road. Good luck with the interrogation,”

Wow! I don't even know where I'm going to start explaining myself, the last thing I need is her thinking that I was with another girl.

She is not asleep, she is folding clothes on bed. My two guns are placed on top of the pillows, there is a LOT of explaining to do.

“Hi babe,” I say.

She doesn't look up, she keeps folding the clothes.

"I didn't know that you were coming, I asked you to stay home for a few days."

She looks up, there is a war brewing.

"So who is she?"

I knew it!

"I was at work, trust me," I say.

"I see, work as usual. Your work must be draining, you are always on night shift. Sometimes I need to go home for 'a few days' so that you can sort your work matters out, and we don't have sex because your ancestors warned you about my ex. You have an illness....Oh no it's my illness that makes you bleed, I'm the one who got bewitched hence we can't make out as lovers. Nevertheless you still love me so much, care so much and can't wait to marry me."

"Thandeka....."

She puts her hands up.

"No I will shut up Nkosenhle, I don't want to get on your wrong side. There are two guns in this house, how safe!"

"I can explain," I say.

"No don't, just take decisions for me as you always do. Can I put these in the closet, Sir?"

Now I understand why they say never argue with a woman. She just said 100 words within two minutes.

Thanks God her phone starts ringing.
"Can I answer? It's my mother."

I don't say anything, I have never controlled her. She answers anyway. I exhale and take my shoes off. If she sees the gun on my waist hell will break loose. I hate fighting with her, her smile always warms my heart.

"What? Is he okay?" -her.

She sounds alarmed.

"Is he home now?" -her.

"No Ma it's fine, he can buy another car." -her.

This sounds serious, I tap her shoulder and ask what has happened.

"My father was hijacked a few hours ago but he is fine."

"Where?" I ask.

"There is a place called Cross, just after the main road.

I'm sure it was the local hijackers because it seems like his G63 was their target,"

Fuck!!!

This better be a coincidence.

Insert 26

BUHLE

I haven't been able to find a room to rent. It's like the whole world just turned on me. It can't be that every room in this place is occupied. The Mthembus had so many rooms for renting at the beginning of the year, it's midyear and I'm sure we have no new visitors in the village.

Please Nobuhle," -1st text.

He hasn't stopped begging. This will mean a lot to him and it's his only option.

This is a win-win situation, we get married, you get your salon and home back and I get off my father's chains. Just 2 months Buhle, then life will get back to normal,--2nd text.

I have to admit it, my mother has so much power over me. I can rent in town and open another salon but my salon here in the village is my everything. I can't lose it just like that. I have worked hard to be where I am. I

also have Sapho and Sindi who depend on me for their jobs, I can't just up and leave just like that.

"What's up?" -Sapho

She is dressed like a tomboy. Boots, camouflage pants and a hoodie jacket. I don't even want to know who her latest role model is. Yesterday it was Rihanna, she was wearing a skimpy dress and red lipstick.

"Just reading Mesuli's texts," I say.

I know she is about to roll her eyes and foresee danger coming my way.

"You haven't deleted them?" she asks.

"Obviously, how else would I read them?"

She laughs and throws herself on the couch.

"You're the biggest bitch, Bukhosini gave you the phone and now you're texting another man with it! How is he going to feel about all of this?"

"We'll find out later," I say.

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"I'm meeting him later," I say.

She blinks a couple of times in disbelief and chuckles.

"All because you don't want to let Bukhosini help you? What if Mesuli refuses to divorce after two months?"

“He is not in love with me, there'll be nothing to stay together for. I need time to sort things out, see Mthetho and get a lawyer to help me with the Mkhize land. I've seen how my mother is, in order to win this battle I have to be careful. She won't know what's coming to her.”

“I still don't see how you considered Bukhosini's feelings in all this,” she says.

You never know with her, one day she doesn't like Bukhonisini and next she is his spokesperson.

“Sapho, I don't need you to stress me right now,” I say.

“Fine, good luck!”

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BUKHOSINI ZUMA

The first time I fell in love it was with a woman I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with. I tried to give her my all. I couldn't be there physically everyday, but I kept in touch and reminded her that I loved her everyday. My father taught me that a man is always the provider, so I provided for her. Every month I sent her money. When she wanted money to build her house in her father's yard I helped her. I wanted her to be happy and it would've helped our visits be much easier. I was tired of sneaking into her older sister's two-room, with her in the next room screaming at her children. I didn't know that I was helping her build the house in order to sneak her other men inside. They slept on the same bed I had bought for her and spent the money I worked hard for. I wanted to hurt her, I thought about hunting her man and avenging myself. But it was my fault as well, I wasn't there when I should've been. I didn't claim her, I became modern and took time 'to get to know her'.

When I saw Nobuhle for the first time I knew that there is nothing as 'too early', the only thing that there is, it is 'too late. I didn't want to be too late, I wanted to have her before someone gets in my way. I had to tell Zinhle about her, she is a part of my life, and then my family. I had it all figured out until I met her mother.

She hates the air that I breathe, the grounds I walk on and the sky that I look at. She never tried to get to know me better, she heard where I come from and decided right away that I was not good enough for her daughter.

She gave birth to a diamond. I'd be jealous of her too if I was her. She deserves someone who'll treat her like a queen, all that I want is to have one shot. She is packing her 100 cosmetics inside the bag. She applied more than two lotions on her face, that was after she put jelly things on her face and walked up and down the room. I bought my towel, LUX soap, toothpaste and toothbrush. I didn't know that we were supposed

to bring the whole Clicks here. But what do I know,
hotels aren't my things.

"Who lives here?" I ask.

She looks at me and sighs.

I love how she exaggerates and thinks I'm clueless
about this life of hers.

"Really Khosi? This is a hotel, everyone lives here."

It sounds sexy when she shortens my name.

"I know, but this bed....."

"They changed it!"

She is a boss, the tone her voice carries is full of

authority, and that scares me. In a relationship there

are two positions, by the look of things she doesn't

know hers. "I don't understand why we need to book

expensive hotels whereas we have a good house and

bed bigger than this," I say.

"It's about being comfortable, not bed sizes."

Oh!

"What made you uncomfortable at my home?" I ask.

She sighs again.

I haven't sat on bed, deep down I'm really not

comfortable with this bed. I don't know how many

people have slept here.

"There are important things we can discuss than this,"
she says.

I did sense that something was going on, the way she wanted us to meet up and agreed so easily to spend the night with me.

"Important things?" I ask.

"I need to tell you something,"

Why am I uncomfortable with this?

"I'm going to marry Mesuli,"

I look at her, is it the 1st of April in her world? Is she talking about that Mbatha fool who wears skinny jeans?

"I need to get back home and get my life back. If I

marry Mesuli mother will put her guards down, and I will take everything, my brother's land and my salon.

On the other side Mesuli will gain his independence.

We only need two months and then everything will be back to normal. I will see my brother and make a plan on how you're going to pay lobola."

She doesn't drink, she doesn't smoke. I don't know

what has gotten into her head. This is bullshit, I can't believe she even put her head into it.

"Please say something," she says.

"Do you know what marriage is?"

"Fake marriage," she corrects me.

“Where are you going to get fake ancestors, fake incense and fake bile? Who are you fooling Nobuhle? What is fake marriage?”

“Bukhosini I...I...”

She can't answer me. I thought she was smart.

“Really Nobuhle? I had to beg you to allow my uncles to go to your home and now all of a sudden you're ready for marriage?”

“I'm not ready, I'm doing this for my salon and my brother.”

I have asked over and over again to help her. I'm not discrediting how hard-working or how intelligent she is. She can build another salon and leave her mother and boyfriend in peace.

“Nobuhle I can help you start over,” I say.

“It's about proving my mother and her boyfriend wrong. They can't just walk over me and take everything from me. I want to beat them on their own game.”

I didn't imagine this night to be like this, I thought we're here to spend the night as a happy couple for the first time.

“Do you support me in this?”

What!? Nobuhle needs a mental evaluation.

“You're not marrying that fool Nobuhle, over my dead body!”

“It's not a real marriage, we are doing this to.....”

Thank God there is a bottle of water nearby. I need to calm down, I don't want to lose control over my emotions.

“Maybe I've been begging you for too long Buhle. I've been running after you, begging you to say you love me and licking your ass. Maybe it's time I let you decide what you want. I've been here everytime you need me, offered to help you with your problems and declared my genuine love for you. I allowed you to have your own way in my home and disrespect my mother. I thought you'd realize how much I love you, but it seems like the feelings aren't mutual,”

“Bukhosini that's not true,” she says.

“I'm not going to date or marry a divorcee,”

I grab my jacket and put it on. After this conversation I don't think we can spend the night together.

“Have a good night Nobuhle.”

I can't believe this is happening. Is it one of those modern things, marrying for temporary benefits?

What am I supposed to do in those two months?

Ngikhamise nje, no!

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Phone rings.

Zinhle! What now?

Her: Baba kaLwazi

I pray that one day she lets go. It hurts to be called the father of the baby you never held, it revives the pain I felt on that horrible night.

Me: Zinhle

Her: Ummm are you with Nobuhle?

Sigh!

Me: No, we had a fight and I left. What do you want?

Her: Just letting you know that I'm feeling better.

Me: Good for you!

Her: So much bad energy! I'm sick because of you Bukhosini, if you cared about me you would've taken care of me and I wouldn't have lost my baby or womb. You fucked me, impregnated me and left me in the shacks to fend for myself.

Me: Don't start Zinhle! I'm not a sangoma I wouldn't have predicted that you were pregnant. Don't blame me for the things that I had no control over, I am taking care of you now.

Her: Oh really? Can you bring back my baby or womb? You have moved on Bukhosini, you have a healthy girlfriend who can bear children.

Fuck! I hate this.

Me: Call me when you've calm down

Her: Bukhosi.....

Nx!

I have taken care of her from the day she told me that she was pregnant. Losing the baby was not my fault, finding out that she was pregnant late was not my fault either.

I took responsibility the moment I found out. I've been nothing but supportive of her. Maybe I'm too nice to her, now she thinks we're something more than people who fucked once, impregnated each other and lost the baby.

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Everyone is asleep now, that's good because I don't want to explain myself to anyone. They told me that Nobuhle was not the one for me, that we're not compatible, and now she has proven them right. How can she think that she'll marry at the Mbathas, in front of the whole village, and then divorce and come marry into the Nxamalalas.

"I thought you were spending the night in the hotel,"
Oh hell no! Why is this man up at this time?

"Baba!"

"She chased you away, didn't she?"

"We just had an argument, " I say.

"You argue with women now Bukhosini? Do you see what I meant?"

I'm not up for this.

"I'm really tired Baba, have a good night."

He chuckles, "See that girl, she is not going to break your heart, she is going to grate it until it's finer than

salt. Go cry yourself to sleep Msholozzi, it serves you right.”

Says someone I clothe and feed! Parents are something else.

I'm not going to cry myself to sleep, there is hope in my heart. I know that she feels something for me, it might not be the “oceans swimming” kind of love but it's something worth holding onto. I hope she'll hold on to my love. I hope it's not replaceable, and it's deeper than the love she has for the salon and her brother's property.

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Insert 29

KHANYAMASI

MaNgema walks in with a cup of tea. I can't help the smile cracking on my face, we've been together for a month and she refuses to accept that there's someone on earth who doesn't like tea.

"It's Rooibos today, just take one sip and taste how it is."

I put the laptop aside and take it. Well, it's tea like any other tea. But she's watching me with a wide smile so I pretend to enjoy the taste.

"What did I say?" she asks.

"Nice, but can this be the last cup?"

"Hhayi lo mntwana bakithi!" She walks away

disappointed. As soon as she disappears I go to the sink and spill it all inside. My phone is flashing, when I get to it I have missed the call.

It's Ngwane. We haven't talked in a while, he said things are tense inside. I walk out to the balcony and call him back.

"Mthetho," he answers.

"It's Khanyamasi."

He lets out a brief chuckle.

"I like Khanyamasi, he's doing a great job but right now I need Mthetho."

"Is everything alright?" I ask.

"My daughter was here. She wanted to see you."

Nobuhle? My heartbeat escalates. Coming to terms with the fact that I slept with my sister has been hard, and I broke her heart so badly. I made her question herself as a woman after she had given me her all.

"What did you tell her?" I ask.

"That they moved you and she wanted details.

Something is not okay with her, she looked stressed out so whatever it is that she needed you for was urgent." He also sounds stressed out. He cares about Nobuhle, him not being her biological father didn't change his heart.

"Maybe I have to reach out," I say.

"Arrange for her to be brought in the house. I trust you to protect my daughter, if anyone is troubling her deal with them. And make sure that she keeps your whereabouts inside her chest."

"I will do so." I let out a sigh and end the call.

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BUHLE QWABE

Bukhosini is still not answering my calls. It's been weeks and I miss him. I have thought about going to his home but then I remember how it was the last time I was there. His mother already doesn't like me and I'm sure her husband feels the same way. This whole situation is proving whatever they thought of me right. I have hurt him.

Mesuli I'm sorry I cannot help you, I send the text I should've sent a longtime ago. Marrying him, fake or not, is going to cost me Bukhosini and I have realized that he's not someone I want to live without.

The call follows, I drop him and quickly block his number. He has to find a way out of his father's authority, or he can just give up everything and start from scratch as I'm about to do.

“Are you alright?” Sapho asks.

I've been thinking about how much she has carried me, we are both unemployed now but she always makes means for us to sleep with full tummies.

"I still can't get hold of Bukhosini," I say.

"Well it's Saturday, he must be home."

"Sapho I cannot go there," I say.

She snaps her brows together.

"Why? Obviously he wants you to show that you care and run after him."

"His mother didn't like me, I can't just show up."

Her eyes flick up in an amused realization. She makes herself comfortable beside me and stare into my eyes.

"I know exactly what you need to do."

Gosh, I don't like this at all. What has come into her cute mind?

"What?" I ask.

"You're going to send ucu, as he asked before. We don't have to make it fancy, just the basics."

Sigh! I knew something not well-thought was coming.

"I cannot waste money I don't have Sapho," I say.

"Gosh, where do you live? They will give us money, I don't know what it's called but it's the rule. We'll just buy cheap blankets for the parents, plates for the siblings and cosmetics for Bukhosini. That's it and we ask for R4000."

“Whaaaaaat?” That's daylight robbery.

“Yes! Our mothers were doing it in the past. It was cheap then, around R500 or so. Now the rate has increased, the economy is low and and and.”

“Okay. So I have to surprise him?”

“Obviously, angithi he is not answering your calls.”

I guess I'm finally doing this. Hopefully he would be able to forgive me. I don't know what I'm expected do, I trust Sapho to control everything.

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Sapho insisted on buying a crate of beer, she says it's a must as the crate belongs to the father. Of course I'm not buying the story given her history with alcohol.

Luckily Sindi tagged along, she's the one running from shop to shop comparing prices. I'm not sure who else is attending this thing, we might need more than just two people. Phone rings inside my bag. We are heading to the taxi rank, my hands are occupied I cannot answer it.

“What is all this?”

Fuck this woman. What is she doing here?

“Hi Ma,” Sindi greets her.

Sapho is just annoyed as I am.

"I hope this is not what I think it is." Her eyes are stuck on the trolley that's carrying sleeping blankets and a crate of beer.

"Let's go guys," I say walking past her. Oh, her boyfriend is around, his car is here. Why is Mrs Chili so slow? Her husband is obviously cheating in front of the whole community.

"Your Mom is so ghetto," -Sapho.

"Not really, she's selfish."

"Do you think she could be Mrs Chili JNR?"

Gosh, I'm trying not to think that far. That would make matters worse.

"I can't believe such an old woman is a side-chick," Sindi says and we all laugh.

I check who the caller was and it was a private number so I cannot call back.

Minutes turn into hours, the sun sets and we have to get ready to leave. Sapho managed to get two other girls and because I cannot afford to hire a car we will walk to the Zumas.

"Traditionally, you're not supposed to come," Sindi says.

"But I want to see Bukhosini." I mean that's the main reason I'm doing all this.

“Rather you'll wait for us outside and we'll let him know that you want to see him,”

Sapho says.

“What if you guys mess up?”

They roll their eyes. I can't help the paranoia, also I don't trust Sapho at all.

“Don't worry, we will behave,” Sindi says side-eyeing Sapho.

“Sure, we'll be on our best behavior.”

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BUKHOSINI ZUMA

The knock persists.

“Bhuti,” It's Bhubesi's voice. I can't seem to catch a break. Not even at night when I'm supposed to be sleeping.

“What do you want?” I ask.

“Open the door.”

I drag myself out of bed and go to the door. The outside lights are still on, there's some commotion outside, people are all over the yard.

“Did you know that Nobuhle was sending people?”
He walks in and turns the light on.

“What are you talking about?” I haven't talked to Nobuhle since the night at the hotel. I'm giving her space to decide what she wants to do with her life.

“Her friends are here, they have brought ucu and the elders want to see you immediately.”

I'm in disbelief. Nobuhle didn't even like the idea of ucu, she said it's outdated and nobody does it nowadays. Maybe staying away was what she needed in order to decide.

I change into decent clothes and head out with Bhubesi.

My mother doesn't look pleased, so is her husband.

“Did you know that the Qwabe girl was sending ucu?” Nxamalala asks. You can tell from the tone of his voice and how he addresses Nobuhle that she is not a girl of his taste.

“It's a surprise to me as well,” I say.

He briefly glances at my mother.

“So she does things her own way, on her own time?”

“They didn't even pay some respect to our ancestors, they didn't bring traditional beer. How are we supposed to explain this noise to them?” In my family

ancestors are treated with utmost respect. We believe that they're our mediators to God, if there's some kind of noise in the yard it's our duty to let them know what it was all about. Ancestors don't stay in a disorganized place.

"I don't think she knew it was important, remember Nobuhle is living modernly," Bhubesi comes into my rescue.

"Exactly my problem, she knows nothing about culture and traditions, yet Bukhosini wants to turn her into a Nxamalala wife."

Well, they will survive.

"I accept her, please tell Qhamkile to give them permission to go ahead," I say.

My mother exclaims while Nxamalala shakes his head in defeat. I'd like to think nobody is perfect and people learn as they go.

They give their gifts, fortunately my parents are not showing their feelings, they're pretending, my mother even ululated here and there. There's just four of them, which makes things easier in terms of refreshments.

My family was not prepared but Qhamkile did her magic in the kitchen and was able to give them proper food. I don't want to imagine what would've happened if they came in numbers, the shame around not being able to treat guests.

"Hi Bukhosini," the bubbly friend greets me. She was the one in charge of everything.

"Hey how are you?"

"Good. Why have you been ignoring my friend's calls?"

She's way too forward. She grins at my silence and leans over my shoulder.

"She's waiting for you outside," she whispers.

"Which outside?" I'm shocked.

"Not very far from where the yard ends."

Out in the cold? I cannot believe this. She has been standing in the cold for the past two hours. They could've told me earlier and I would've made a plan for her to sneak inside.

I have looked everywhere, there's no sign of her. I would like to think she returned back home but I cannot shake this weird feeling that something is not right. Her phone is off, which makes this even more suspicious.

"Can I talk to you?" I pull Saphokazi aside.

"Is everything alright?"

"I cannot find Nobuhle."

She frowns and takes out her cellphone. It takes her to voicemail just like me.

"This is strange, maybe she went back home." The fear in her eyes matches my own.

We have to end things immediately. I don't tell my family that something is wrong,

Bhubesi and few other gentlemen accompany them home. We wait outside for

Saphokazi to tell us if she did come home or our fears are true.

"Buhle didn't come here, something is wrong!" She's almost yelling. Fear is written all over her face.

I remember she almost got raped a while back. My heart pounds harder, I feel a drop of sweat rolling down my face. I'm turning this village upside down, everyone's life will be on hold until Nobuhle is found.

"Her mother saw us in town today but I doubt she'd go this far," Saphokazi says. For her sake, I hope she has nothing to do with this. I'd hate to hurt Nobuhle's parent, but if she did it I will be left with no choice.

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NOBUHLE QWABE

I know by the way he smells that this is the one who pinned me down. They must have followed us and seen others walking inside the Zuma premises leaving me behind. It was too late when I heard footsteps, the guy was already behind me, he pinned me down and covered my mouth with a cloth so I couldn't scream.

It's him again removing the blindfold.

"What did I do?" My voice is dry and just exhausted.

"Please follow me." He has no time, his left arm is covered in tattoos, he's a real thug just by looks.

"No, I'm not going anywhere."

The look he gives me sends a cold shiver down my spine.

"Nobuhle we were instructed not to hurt you, do us all a favour and comply." He sounds very annoyed.

"Who sent you?" I ask.

The door of the house we are parked in front of opens, a guy wearing a long black coat walks out. This has to be a prank!

"Mthetho???"

The tattoo-guy frowns and looks at him with his eyebrow raised.

“Mthetho?” he asks like there's something wrong with me calling him that way.

“Thank you Mboma.” He gives him a specific look and the guy walks back to the car without questioning further.

“I'm sorry about all this. I heard you wanted to see me and this was the only way to get you here.”

I hate him! How can he put me through such trauma. “Nobuhle please don't cry, I'm sorry okay?” He pulls me into his chest and wipes my tears. It's so strange, I push him off quickly and look away.

“You're my sister.”

“Yeah.”

Awkwardness!

He exhales deeply and asks that we get inside the house.

“I thought you were still inside,” I say as we sit on the couches. The kind of a house this is, the neighbourhood and this new Mthetho, bring me a lot of questions.

“They released me. It's all good, now I'm here running someone's business.”

“Does Thandeka know that you're out?”

He is uncomfortable.

“No and I’d appreciate it if you don't tell anyone that you have seen me.”

“You're hiding? Mthetho did you escape from jail?”

“No, I was released. Stop calling me Mthetho.”

What? Is he not Mthetho now

because he's been to jail?

“26 or 28?” I ask.

He chuckles.

“No, Khanyamasi. People don't know my real name, well around here, and I want to keep it that way for security reasons.”

“How did your life get this complicated?” I ask.

“I was desperate to have a family, that sense of belonging I guess, and I trusted the wrong people. I made wrong decisions and lost the love of my life.....sorry.”

“It's fine, you love her and I understand that now.” I don't care anymore, it's in the past.

“That's most of it and here I am now, getting ready to claim my life back.”

“Who are those inked guys? I hope you're not a thug.”

“No, I'm not. Why did you want to see me?”

Phewww! Where do I even start?

“Can I make a phone call first? Bukhosini must be worried sick where he is, your people kind of kidnapped me.”

“Who is that?” He lifts up his eyebrow.

“Someone special. We'll talk about everything.”

“Please use my phone.” He hands it over. I find everything about this new life of his strange. I can't help but feel like Mthetho.....I mean Khanyamasi is involved in some shady business and that's so unlike him.

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Insert 30

THANDEKA CHILI

He's leaving again. It's been three nights in a row, I may have lost my memory but I'm not stupid. Nkosenhle is involved in some shady business and whatever it is he's not enjoying it anymore. It's like he's being forced into it. He's slowly turning into a man I don't know. His mood is unpredictable, we're slowly losing connection and I keep asking myself if this relationship is really what I want. He comes out wearing a leather jacket and curved cap. My hands grip on the sink, my heart is swelling in agony, what kind of love is this? His arms wrap around me, his cold breath blows behind my neck as he exhales deeply.

"I don't have a choice Thandeka. We are under new management and they're controlling us like robots." His lips press against my neck. I draw a huge breath, my hands are still holding on the sink.

“What kind of a job is this Nkosenhle? What business are you involved in?” His body tenses up, the embrace tightens, his breath is held up. My worst fears are confirmed.

“Are you a criminal? I have to know who I'm sleeping with...well, figuratively,” I say.

Silence.

“Answer me.” My voice remains calm. If it was to match the flames of anger inside me this whole building would blow up.

“I'm not a criminal.” That's all he's going to give me? I want answers. Straight answers.

“Nkosenhle if you can't be honest with me what's the point of.....” I turn around furiously. My tantrum is short-lived, he throws the car keys on the counter and takes his jacket off.

“I thought you were.....” I'm shut by his lips, hungrily smooching on me, his hands running all over my back. His knee presses me against the sink, his breaths are growing heavy as the kiss gets more needy.

“Thandeka I love you,” he says breathlessly.

“Show it to me.” My body is screaming in foreign languages. His erection is pressed against my thigh. We haven't been intimate since our last attempt that ended with his manhood bleeding. I know he's scared to try again but I'm longing for him.

“What do you want me to do?” He links his forehead on mine. I lift my eyes to meet his gaze.

“I need you to be physically and emotionally with me. I want us to make love, I feel like you're not trying hard enough, we are adults Nkosenhle and we have needs.”

He leans over and kisses me again. It's not passionate as the first one, he's now distracted, probably stressed about what we are about to do.

“Thank you for sacrificing this night for us.” I break the kiss and pull his hand towards the bedroom. Our clothes fly out. He throws me on the bed, gets on top of me and almost swallows me in a kiss. He's attracted to me, I'm very sure of that, and that he loves me. He's a mystery in all departments except in his heart. I know with every heart beat that I hold a

special place in his heart and it's such a warm thing to know. I need that feeling, it makes everything feel better. He came at the right time, when I needed a shoulder to cry on.

I'm dripping wet, his hands are working magic on my body. I wrap my leg around him.

"Get a condom," I whisper.

He drops his head, buries himself on my neck and lets out a deep breath. "Sthandwa sami."

He looks up but his eyes are not directly on me. I place my hand behind his neck, hoping that he'd look at me and see how desperately I need him.

"Can I wear a penile sleeve?"

WTF!!!

"A toy???" I ask louder than intended. He's erected and his manhood is big enough, why does he need to extend with silicone?

"You know what happened the last time. Maybe if we do this differently.....like I won't be penetrating you directly."

"Yeah right, you're about to fuck me with a silicone sheath." I push him aside and face the other side. His

arms nervously reach out to me, his hand brushes my hip. This is frustrating to both of us.

“It's me Thandeka, regardless of these difficulties and shortcomings I'm still that man who fell in love with you. My feelings have not changed, allow me to explore alternatives with you, all I want is to make you happy.” His voice echoes into my heart. He's always genuine about his feelings, I always feel it when he says he loves me.

“So this is our life?” I turn and face him. The sight of his face breaks me. A huge part of his confidence is crushed.

He doesn't say anything. I grab his neck and kiss him. “Okay let's try,” I say. He rolls off bed and disappears in the bathroom. I'm not a sex freak or anything like that, but what the fuck are we doing? Now I'm interested in his past relationships. Had he always had these bedroom issues or the problem is me? What is it going to take for our life to be normal?

He's wrapped in a towel! Really? I sit up and stare as he makes his way in. He's hesitant about unwrapping the towel but he does anyway, I'm not going to stop staring.

“Are you kidding?” My mouth drops open. He's not boring my cookie with that long thing. It added more length to his already-big cock. And the color turns me off. Pink? Didn't they have dark colors in those freaky shops? Show me a girl who want to be fucked by a pink dick!

“I'll be gentle.” There's fear in his voice.

My subconscious nudges me, I wanted this and he's trying. Deep sigh! I stand up and wrap my arms around his waist.

“Let's try, just don't turn my cookie into a cave,” I say. His body relaxes, he lets out a chuckle and grabs my butt.

“It will be my special cave.” He plants a soft kiss on my cheek.

We are on the bed again. He latches on my nipple while his thumb rubs my clit. My body is getting warmer, his one finger slides inside me. I gasp and

call out his name. He looks up, satisfied with his finger performance, and lifts his head up to kiss me.

“Do you trust me Nono?” The tip of his sleeve presses on my opening. I close my eyes. Nono!

“Yes I trust you,” I whisper. It slides in, inch by inch, he's passionate and patient.

“Please don't leave me.” His voice is different. I nod my head and whisper something I can't make sense of.

The closed curtain, lifted at the corner to let in a little light is enough for me to see his face. Dark eyes staring into mine, filled with tears, and his lip pressed between his teeth. My heart beating rapidly and him thrusting in with just the right pace. I carry his pain with me. He releases himself, buries his head on my chest and calls me- Nono.

My chest is drenched in his tears. He seems very comfortable with me, I mean crying like this in front of a woman. There's a brown security-guard uniform on the hanger.....

“Thaaa-----” Nkosenhle drops on my chest. The pictures in my head blank out. Was I hallucinating?

About Mthetho out of all people, during a sexual intercourse with my boyfriend!

By the way he's panting and trembling on top of me. I cannot look at him in the eyes, I feel guilty about blanking out and he seems not to even notice. He's in high bubble, messaging my feet and telling me about Banzi's shenanigans. I'm not even present, my mind is running wild. Was I regaining a piece of my memory? Why did Mthetho cry like that? He seemed so comfortable with me, like I was his home and he was free to be any person with me.

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Banzi shows up early in the morning. We get more distant each day, he's no longer that comedian he once was, not even with his brother. I know he doesn't want me with Nkosenhle. Well I kind of jumped from one friend to another, but why should it matter?

Mthetho has broken my heart more than any person alive on this earth.

"Babe we have to talk," Nkosenhle says nervously.

This doesn't sound good. I follow him to the bedroom, he sits on bed with his head bowed down.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"I have to leave," he says.

Oh!

"The whole week, we have to be in Cape Town until Saturday," he says.

My heart sinks. I try not to show the sadness but my heart aching. I force out a smile.

"Alright, maybe I should go to my apartment, it needs to be warmed as well," I say.

He stands up, pulls me to his chest and wraps his arms around me. We stand like that, breathing against each other and swallowed in misery.

"I sent my resignation letter, it will be only three months then they'll find another candidate and let me go." He resigned???

"Because of me?" I ask.

"No, I wanted out," he says.

He's letting go of his job to make time for me. That's a huge sacrifice! I wrap my hands around his neck and deeply kiss his lips.

"I love you Mlambo."

He smiles, pain aligns his face.

“You're the reason I wake up everyday and thrive for a better life. I love you Thandeka, more than you can ever imagine.”

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KHANYAMASI

I forward the email containing all the information Ngwane needs about this Bukhosini person. Nothing seems fishy on his profile, he's just a man who's paved his way into the business world and he has left quite a mark. I don't know the deal between him and Nobuhle, she didn't look like someone who knew where she was heading. I hope he doesn't break her heart like I did. I can't believe Mesuli wanted to marry her. It's like he's obsessed with my ex's. Nobuhle's mother is another pain in the arse. Starting a farm on my father's land and partnering with Mr Chili. That man doesn't deserve to benefit anything from the Mkhizes.

Damn, this house is so empty without MaNgema. It was better while Nobuhle was still around, even though there were moments of awkwardness. We cannot just forget about the past.

Phone beeps! It's Peter, they just landed in Cape Town.

I pace around the house. She still doesn't remember us, what we had and how much we loved each other. I know I hurt her, killed our babies and betrayed her.

But she's a huge part of my life, to think she only knows the bad things I've done and not even a single good one! The cheap meaningful gifts I gave her, thousand nights I spent on bed crying over the pain I put her through, how we reconciled and how our feelings were still strong after years of separation.

Did we lose connection this time? If I could look into her eyes and tell her that it was never my intention, would she still hate me? If I were to hold her hand again, wouldn't she feel the electrical connection between us? Yes we are apart, she was manipulated into another relationship and I'm a bad guy. But what if we looked at each other again?

We used to speak million words by just staring at each other.

I get in the car, without giving it any second thought, and drive to her old apartment.

My hands are moist, each heartbeat is harder than the previous one.

It's late, almost 11pm. The security guard gives me a hard time before letting me in.

He walks me to her door and waits as I knock.

"See, she's already asleep."

"Help me, it's important that I see her."

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THANDEKA CHILI

I close my eyes and control my breaths. I'm scared if I move the person will realize that I'm awake and pull out a gun. I don't know what he wants, he's standing against the wall by the door looking at my bed. I should've stayed in Nkosenhle's house, it's safer than here. I don't even know where my phone is, there's no way to call the police or anyone.

Footsteps! My heart almost jumps out as they get closer. I release the pee I've been holding right there

on the bed and scream as much as my lungs can allow me.

"Nono, it's me."

No, it can't be!

The lights switch on and indeed, there he is in flesh.

"I didn't mean to scare you."

Too late, I'm soaked in a wet panty.

"How did you get in?" My voice is trembling. My heart is still racing.

Silence.

He stares at me. He looks different, he's grown a beard.

"Mthetho," His name slips out of my lips and he releases a breath in response.

"You should be in prison," I say.

"I was framed, but that's not why I'm here." He steps closer, my eyes widen. It's in the middle of a night, he's scaring me.

"What do you want?" I whisper and reverse to the corner of bed. His eyes travel down my wet legs, he releases another breath and slowly closes the distance between him and the bed.

He pulls my foot, I slide all the way to him and he scoops me up. He doesn't care about the pee on my legs nor about how wet my pyjama-short is.

"Please don't hurt me," I beg and he puts me on my feet. I stand just a few inches away from his face, his left arm holds my waist so I don't fall.

"Look in my eyes." It's an order, and I do as he says. We don't say anything, we just stare at each other, our heavy breaths collaborating in a tune. Tears well up in his eyes, he doesn't fight them or let them break the stare. They roll down his cheeks and he still stares.

"You were all that I had, one ride in the car of a strange man and I lost my whole world. We walked a mile worth a thousand years, me and you against the world. I hurt you so badly, I caused you to miscarry twice, and Thandeka the way you hate me is nothing compared to the hatred I have for myself." He lifts up his left arm and wipes his eyes that have been blinded by tears.

"I've never hurt anyone besides you. I grew up with an uncle, he died and I was left all alone. I didn't ask

anyone for sugar, I didn't bother anyone for salt, I found a way to live and raised myself. Nevertheless people still found a way to hate me, for loving you I guess and for breathing. Your parents and the whole community burned down my home. I ran away, I had no idea where I was going I just wanted to live.

Nkosenhle gave me a lift, I didn't know him but he seemed kind." His face darkens.

"You were a security guard?" I ask.

He nods. I remember how happy my father was to meet Nkosenhle and how they wouldn't stop raving about his cars and all the materialistic things he owns.

"So you got here and started hijacking cars?" I ask.

"It was the only choice I had. I had to make a living, the plan was to settle down and go back to Sokhulu to fetch you."

"And?" I ask.

"I shot you by mistake and made you lose the baby. I was so scared, I couldn't bear the thought of losing you again and I gave you a cup of.... tea, you lost your memory."

Fuck! I push him off and step away from him. I don't care if my pants are wet or that my legs are soaked in

pee. He scarred me and he should gracefully enjoy the damage he caused.

“Mthetho I don't know what it was that made me love you or what it was that made you hate me the way you did. Listening to you gushing over our past and comparing it to what you did does not make any sense. I have a scar, a permanent one, to remind me of Luzalo everyday.”

His footsteps follow behind me, he holds my arms and turns me around.

“Mama kaLuzalo.”

I take a deep breath and look at him.

“It may be that you are settled in another place. It may be that you are happy but the one who took your heart wields the final power,” he says.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I'm confused.

“We tried being apart for years and it didn't work.”

Oh, so he's being egotistical about it.

“It's working for me now, Nkosenhle makes me happy.” It doesn't rub on his face as I intended.

"You may want to change your clothes."

Fuck him!

"It's my clothes, my body, my pee, in my apartment.

Why do you care?" I'm pissed.

He grins. I want to die.

"Come here." He pulls me towards the bathroom. In

my heart I'm protesting but my legs are right there

behind him.

He fills the bathtub with warm water, comes to me

and strip my clothes off. I lean on the tub and let him

wash me.

"I miss you everyday," he says wrapping a bath towel

around my waist. His eyes don't instantly leave my

tummy. Honestly I haven't put much work into

maintaining a flat tummy. It's childish anyway. I'm

over the flat-stomach phase, I carried a baby and I

don't owe anyone a snatched waist.

"I'm a mother," I defend myself.

"A mother of my children." He touches my tummy

and lifts his head up to lock his eyes on me.

I clear my throat and look away. His fingers lift my chin and turn my face back to him.

"Nkosenhle makes you happy?" he asks.

So much hate in his voice!

"Sure he does, I'm happy," I say boldly.
He grabs the towel and throws it away leaving me completely naked. He pulls down his pant and his manhood springs out of the boxers.

"You're here to rape me?" I ask.
"No. I'm not going to force myself on you. You will go to bed and lie with your legs open."

"And if I don't?" I ask.
"Then I will leave."

Oh.....

"So?" He starts stroking his shaft up and down.
I don't understand all this. Mthetho was sentenced, he's in jail according to our knowledge. How come he is here and looking so different?

He walks in two minutes later. Yes I'm in bed with my legs wide open. I don't know why I'm submitting to his demands.

His knees are on either sides of my waist. He rubs the tip on my clit and I start bouncing up and down.

"He makes you happy Jennifer?"

Second name, really?

He presses more harder and slides through my folds.

"Answer me Jennifer." He pushes himself in. After that big silicone sleeve I'm grateful my cookie is still gripping.

"YES!" I'm screaming.

He pounds me very hard. I cannot even scream, my mouth is just wide open and not pronouncing a word.

"Do you love him?" He slows down, drops his head over my neck and attentively waits for an answer.

"Yes," I say.

He doesn't raise the pace as I expected. He goes even more sloppy.

"Are you sure?"

"No." That's the whole truth.

"I'm out of jail. I met a man inside, he had connections and they released me. It's not safe for me to be out yet, you may not believe it but your boyfriend wants me away so that he can have you." He has stopped. Not moving, just pulsating inside me. "I'm not asking you to get back with me. I'm asking you not to say anything, I was not supposed to come here I just couldn't take it anymore, I needed to look into your eyes and touch you again. Do you think you can do that for me?"

I don't give it a thought, I just nod and adjust myself beneath him.

"Stop that." He chuckles and raises his head up.

Our eyes lock, I wouldn't trade the helplessness in his eyes for anything.

"I need you to give me your word Thandeka."

"I won't say anything." I grip on him and feel his shaft pulsating inside.

"Lord!" He moans and starts moving again.

Nothing feels forced or rehearsed. Anything that's

happening in this moment is a part of this moment.

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Insert 31

THANDEKA

I'm confused, very confused. I knocked off work and drove straight home. I will be here for the weekend, I hope I get to see Buhle. I feel like she's the only person who can be honest with me. I feel a strong connection with Mthetho...I mean, Khanyamasi. But the things he's said to have done to me make me wonder how genuine his love is.

I come out of my room, I need a glass of milk. It's 11pm, I didn't expect to bump into anyone crying on the kitchen chair. It's my mom, I panic and tap on her shoulder.

"Mom, what's wrong?" I ask.

She's a bit embarrassed, she thought she was alone.

"Nothing, my baby."

She tries wiping her face but I've seen everything.

"Why are you crying?" I'm worried.

This is a queen, she gets everything that she wants.

She's the most expensive wife in the village. A queen herself.

"Your dad is not home," she says.

"So what?" I don't understand because that man is hardly ever home anyway.

"People are talking about me, Thandeka. He's not even doing what he's doing with shame. My marriage has turned into a laughing stock."

I'm confused. "Why? What is he doing?"

"Chili has another woman in the village."

Say what now?

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“He’s always at the Qwabes, parking outside her house on broad daylight, shopping heavily with her and holding her hand in public. She’s even making media appearances with him, ngikhona Thandeka!” She’s crying again.

“Wait mom, Qwabe as in Buhle’s house?” I can’t believe this.

“Her mom, she’s taken my husband,” she cries harder. I don’t know what to make of this. Why would he cheat on my mom, with someone living in the same village at that?

All along I thought he was working late hours, but no, he’s busy embarrassing my mom.

“Have you confronted him?” I ask.

“You know how your father is. This is going to destroy my family. I don’t want it to get there.”

“But he’s destroying the family himself.” I need to get Linda.

Our mom can’t be crying like this. If she can’t confront him, we will.

Linda comes down in her robe, looking exhausted and pissed. But as soon as she sees our mother crying her face changes. One thing about Linda, she’s just like our dad. I’m soft like my mom but on this matter I will show Chili the other side he’s never seen before.

“We have a mamncane, MaQwabe,” I tell her.

“I don’t understand. Why is mom crying?” She’s slow on this one.

“Dad has another woman, Buhle’s mom,” I say.

“That’s a lie!” She’s in denial.

But mom’s tears are enough to convince her, she stands still and starts hailing insults.

Just as we start strategizing how we are going to deal with the matter, there’s a car driving in. Moments later, the door opens.

He walks in, not even ashamed of himself.

“Why is everyone up?” he asks.

Linda gets up on her feet. “Where are you coming from dad?”

He frowns and looks at my mom.

“What is this MaZwide?” He’s already transferring aggression to her.

“We want to know what’s going on with you, Chili?

Why are you publicly embarrassing your wife?” I say.

“You and Lindokuhle are kids here. You hear me? You have no right to sit here and ask me questions. This is my house, I don’t need to report to anyone.”

“Our mom is crying, of course it’s our business,” Linda says.

I agree. If it makes our mom cry, it definitely concerns us.

He looks at mom, “Make me a cup of coffee and come to the bedroom.”

He’s not serious. He even smells of a foreign, cheap perfume

Mom gets up. What does she think she’s doing?

“Mom, you’re not making him coffee, are you?” I’m shocked.

He’s freely walking to their bedroom and she’s going to the kitchen to make him coffee. What nonsense is this?

We follow her to the kitchen.

“We will sort it out in the bedroom. He’s right, I shouldn’t be involving kids in our marriage affairs,” she says.

I can’t believe this. She’s seriously making him a cup of coffee. Thank you for fucking another woman?

“Get a divorce,” Linda says.

She looks at Linda, her lower lip trembling. “Don’t ever utter such words, there’s no divorce happening.”

“So you’re going to let him embarrass you and cry every night?”

“We will work on it,” she says, takes the cup of coffee she was instructed to make and leaves us with our big mouths.

I’m emotional, I just start crying. Why is he doing this to a woman who’s given him two beautiful daughters.

“Let’s go and eavesdrop,” says Linda.

“No. Are you mad?” We have no business hearing their bedroom talk. What if they are having sex? My mom is capable.

“What if he’s beating her?” she asks.

Maybe she’s right, we need to hear what’s going on in there.

We tiptoe all the way to their bedroom door and stand with our ears against it.

We can hear him interrogating her with questions as if she’s the one cheating.

“Why would you tell our kids? Are you trying to destroy this family?” he asks.

This is the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.

“I’m doing everything to provide for you. Every wife in this village would kill to live the life you’re living. And this is how you thank me?”

“But Chili everyone sees you with her. You’re there everyday, they were going to find out anyway,” she sounds apologetic.

“Hey, hey MaZwide. You’re here to build this family, if you’re tired say it and I will give you the divorce.”

“I’m not trying to destroy it Chili. I’m sorry myeni wami.”

There’s some silence...

Linda is seething with anger next to me.

“Please Chili,” she’s begging him for something.

“Get dressed MaZwide and get in bed, it’s late.”

“But you’re always coming home late,” she says.

“Because I have to work. You can’t be expecting me to stress over work and still deal with your lust. I will make time tomorrow, get in bed.”

I pull Linda back, we have to go before we hear more.

This is heartbreaking and embarrassing. I shouldn’t have been listening to their private conversation. My mom was literally begging him to have sex with her despite of everything he’s doing to her. And he had the nerve to turn her down?

“We should buy her a vibrator,” Linda says.

I’m half way to clapping her cheek, because what the fuck!

“Why are you angry at me? I’m saying she can’t be begging him for sex, he could be carrying diseases already.”

Maybe Chili was right, getting us involved is just a big mess.

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I was devastated going to bed. Nkosenhle woke me up with a phone call and I tried to be normal. But at this point I don't trust him. I also don't trust Khanyamasi. In fact, I trust no man, not even my own father.

I'm at the salon, disguising as a customer that needs a hair wash. But the truth is, I'm here to see Buhle. She also knows that my salon visits are for us to catch up. She offers to do my hair while her girls gossip at the corner.

"I want us to talk," I say after she's done.

"Let's take it outside, too many ears here."

I pay and get my bag, we make our way to my car.

Khanyamasi had a type. Buhle and I have way too many similarities. I love her calm nature, she always talks to people with respect and kindness. No wonder her salon is thriving, she has a beautiful character.

"I know you saw him," she says before I say anything.

"So you know that he's out of jail?" I ask.

"Yeah, I've met up with him," she says.

"Buhle, I'm confused. I don't know who's lying between Nkosenhle and him?"

"I don't know Nkosenhle, so I'm not going to speak on him. I know Mthetho... I mean, Khanyamasi. And one thing he's stood by his whole life is that he loves you. He has his own challenges, I don't think he's dealt with his childhood traumas. He was there when his father killed his mother. He removed the chair when his father

hung himself on the ceiling. He didn't know he was committing suicide. I don't think he received any proper counseling because his family wasn't really supportive. It didn't need to be professional counseling, we are black, we have aunts and uncles who allow us to bleed on them. He had no one. Once he goes back and deals with that part of his life, trust me you will have a good husband."

"Husband?" Why am I blushing?

"He's always wanted to have a family."

I let out a heavy sigh. "Then who is Nkosenhle? I'm with him but I don't even know where he comes from."

"Be careful Thandeka. Khanyamasi went to jail, they were working together. I don't know him but I know he also hijacks cars," she says.

I'm not stupid, I know Nkosenhle is involved in criminal activities. What I don't understand is his love for me. Is it genuine or he's fighting Khanyamasi through me? Which makes absolute sense.

"They fed you muthi, Nkosenhle gave it to him so that you'll forget that they tried to hijack you. I believe you were at the wrong place at the wrong time, they were trying to control the damage."

"I know, Nkosenhle is into some dark stuff. To think I've watched him do things to our living space saying he's protecting us against the Mkhize evil spirits!" I'm not smart as I thought I was. I need to consult my own traditional doctor and see if I can't find any help.

"All I can say is, be careful," Buhle say.

"Thank you, I honestly needed someone to talk to." I don't have people who understand my dilemma the way she does. She's such a blessing but her mom!

“You don’t live with your mom anymore, do you?”

She chuckles, “No. I’m even renting for this salon to be here on her property. We were closed for weeks because I refused to marry Mesuli, she was trying to get me in an arranged marriage.”

“At this age and time?” Her mother got jokes.

“Yeah, I guess she needed money because two days ago she called me and offered me a deal. Now I’m renting ke sisi. But I won’t move back home, even if she offered.

I’m okay where I am,” she says.

“I know this doesn’t concern you, but hey your mom.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” she says.

“You know?” I ask.

“Yeah, about her and your dad.”

This is indeed public news, everyone knows.

“How is your mom?” she asks.

“Devastated. But I don’t think she’s going to do anything about it. We tried to intervene and we ended up painted as bad children,” I say.

“I’m really sorry about that.”

A car pulls up hastily behind us while we are discussing our parents affairs. Urgh, it’s Mesuli’s brother.

This guy caused a scene at the restaurant, he’s such a headache.

He enters the salon, then comes out with one of the girls.

“I can’t deal with this family,” Buhle sighs.

I wonder why our worlds are so entwined. Now her family wants her to marry Mesuli?

He comes to the car, Buhle rolls down the window.

“Oh, you two are together?” This seems to piss him off.

"Hey Mvikeli," Buhle says calmly.

"My brother is dead because of you two and you're here gossiping," he says.

We are confused. Is it Mesuli who is dead?

"What do you mean?" Buhle asks.

"He took his life this morning. Congratulations to you and Thandeka," he says.

My chest turns dry. I may not remember Mesuli and I that much but this hurts.

"How did that happen?" I ask.

"It happened when you turned him into a laughing stock and Buhle turned down his proposal, adding salt to his wounds."

The girl comes out with her bag. It's Sapho, I think.

We have gotten out of the car. I'm holding back tears, Buhle still looks confused.

"Where are you going?" she asks her girl.

"To support Shakes, well done you two."

Not her as well! This is crazy.

"Are you kidding? Sapho?" Buhle can't believe it.

"Later!" She follows Mvikeli to the car and off they go.

What the heck did just happen?

"This is not fair. I wasn't anything to Mesuli. I asked him to move to another province and live his life. I'm with someone, I wasn't going to marry him to please his father."

This has nothing to do with us. I believe he was fighting other battles at home. But the guilt in my heart!

Insert 32

BUHLE

He's back in Johannesburg. I won't see him for the next four weeks. I have never been in a long distance relationship before, this is hard. I need him today. I need to talk to him while he's holding me on his chest. But I have a phone against my ear, crying my lungs out.

He waits until I'm done, then asks.

"Are you crying for another man, MaQwabe?"

"He killed himself because of me." I can't believe he doesn't understand this. Mesuli was dealing with his own demons but me turning down his proposal pushed him off the edge.

"You were nothing to him. We've all been rejected but we are still alive. What kind of rejection would make a grown man take his own life?"

Mxm, this is fruitless.

"I have to go, bye!"

"Wait...how is my cookie?"

Fuck him!

I get up and go to the lounge, joining Sapho who is the chief mourner of Mesuli's death. I don't know if she's dating Mvikeli or just having fun as she always does.

"I can't believe he's dead," she's hurting.

"Me too. I wonder how his father feels now."

"He's inconsolable," she says.

"I'm sure he's rejoicing, there's no way he's hurt because he's the reason why he's dead."

"No, you're the reason, Shakes said so."

“He’s crazy.” I don’t even care, if that makes him heal faster then he should hold on to it.

“We should go and see how we can help with the funeral preparations. Close the salon for a week.”

“We just got back to business. I’m not closing and you’re working tomorrow. You will attend the funeral if it opened for everyone, but we are not going to close the salon.”

“You’re so cruel.” She storms out.

I understand she had a crush on him and now she’s with his brother, but that doesn’t make her family.

Moments later she comes back with a handful of outfits.

She’s still crying but also choosing an outfit for the funeral. I don’t even think I will attend, but I hope he finds his rest.

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I don’t know if this is flexing or disrespect. Mr Chili just dropped my mom outside the salon. She’s coming with her purse, dressed to the tee.

I never thought I’d ever have so much hatred against my own mother. She gave birth to me but I’ve lost all the respect I had for her.

“Hello here,” she walks in.

“We are fully booked,” I say.

She takes her sunglasses off. “Hhayi-bo Nobuhle, is this how you treat your high profile clients. I want to wash

my wig. Make it curly and shiny, I'm attending an important function tonight."

"With someone's husband?" I ask.

"It's none of your business. Where is the boy you sent ucu to? In Johannesburg with other women. Yazi Nobuhle, I don't know who you took after with stupidity."

"Give me the wig," I say.

"I'm never going to accept anything from the Zumas. Know this and know peace." She sits on the chair and throws the wig to me.

"R80," I say.

"I gave birth to you."

"Yeah, but I'm running a business. I'm also paying you rent, so I can't be giving you free services."

"Chili will pay," she says.

Sindi almost chokes on her water. This is embarrassing, I can't believe my mother is destroying another woman's marriage.

"Did you hear about Mesuli?" I ask.

"Yes, I heard. Chili and I went to pay our condolences. I gave them R3 000 and apologized on your behalf."

"What did I do?" I ask.

"He's dead because you refused to marry. You chose leli gxaba lakwaZuma over him. An educated man Buhle, someone who was about to take over a million worthy business. You're really stupid."

"Mkhize was the ex-convict," I say.

She clears her throat, "Do the wig."

No, I'm sure Sapho would be happy to hear this and spread it around.

“Mkhize wasn’t educated but you had me with him. This thing of dating people’s husbands is not new. I even dated my own brother because of your secrets.”

“Buhle you were Mthetho’s sister?” Sapho can’t wait any longer.

“Hey wena, stick legs mind your own business!” She’s trying to intimidate Sapho.

“Yes, I’m a Mkhize, not a Ngwane. Ngwane wayeyijazi,” I say.

Sindi’s mouth drops open.

Sapho’s eyes pop out. “Jesus Christ!”

She gets up, grabs her wig and walks out. I hadn’t even started on it, this is a business lost.

“Buhle are you serious?” Sindi, she looks worried for me.

“Yeah, but we are over it,” I say.

“Who is we?” she asks.

Now my big mouth is going to put me in trouble.

“Me and Thandeka,” I say.

“Your life is a mess!” Sapho shakes her head.

We hear Chili’s car pulling up, he’s here for his side-chick.

I hope Mrs Chili is strong enough for this.

THANDEKA

I've had the roughest month. My parents' marriage, Mesuli dying and my relationship problems. Nkosenhle is back from Cape Town and coming to my apartment tonight. I haven't seen Khanyamasi since that day he showed up. I have no means of communicating with him. I have so many questions that I need to ask him. I'm feeling weird about my relationship with Nkosenhle, if it was up to me I'd just cut things off. But that would make him suspicious, I promised Khanyamasi to be calm.

I come from work and take a shower. I don't like cooking but I don't enjoy driving around this neighborhood since that incident. I make pasta and leave it, I will eat with Nkosenhle.

He arrives around 7pm, later than he promised. I notice that he has a fresh scar on his arm and he's losing weight. Something is eating him, guilty conscience maybe.

He kisses me. His lips feel cold.

It takes everything in me not to turn my face to the side.

I don't like him the way I thought I did before

Khanyamasi showed up in my life again.

"How have you been?" he asks.

"I've been okay, just missing you."

"I'm back now, everything is going to be okay."

"Should I dish up?" I ask.

"Yes please, I'm starving." He sits on the couch.

I go to the kitchen and dish for both of us. I wonder how he got the scar on his arm. He's likely to go to "work" tonight and come back tomorrow morning.

"This looks lovely, thank you," he says.

We sit and eat in silence. He's going through his own things, I also have my own problems outside this sham of a relationship.

"There is something I need to tell you, Thandeka."

Oh, I snap out of my thoughts and attentively look at him.

"I haven't been living an honest life," he says.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Mthetho and I were doing the same job."

I already knew, I can't even fake it. I'm not angry, he can do whatever he likes with his life.

"Why are you telling me now?" I ask.

"Because our lives are in danger, Mthetho is out and hiding somewhere plotting against me," he says.

"Are you serious?" I'm a truly bad actor.

"Yes, we have to move out of Durban and lay low for a while." He's running away from his past now and including me in it.

"I thought they moved him to a different prison. But it's okay, I will ask my dad to provide security for me."

"I don't think that's going to work. He's working with dangerous people," he says.

"My dad is also connected. Don't worry about me."

He stops eating, "We are going to Jozini."

"No, I'm not going. But I will help you pack. I have a life Nkosenhle, I didn't sign up for this." I want to break up with him but I'm scared to just say it. We have good

memories together, I just don't think he's genuine who I thought he was.

"This is not up for discussion Thandeka. I'm not going to lose you," he says.

"But you can't take me against my will."

He keeps quiet. I hope he's not planning to forcefully take me with him. My life is already upside down, I don't need more chaos.

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KHANYAMASI

One thing Ngwane emphasized to me was to never trust anyone. I don't trust anyone, especially a Mlambo. I know Banzi, he's his brother's keeper. I heard he's looking for me, I don't know what he wants. They know that I'm outside now, I'm sure that's why he's looking for me.

Nkosenhle wants out, he wants to settle down and start a family with Thandeka. The same thing I wanted and he refused. Instead he sold me off to the police and I spent months in prison.

I have agreed to meet with Banzi. I didn't let him come to my place, we are meeting in Ngwane's warehouse. I have security. It's a complicated life, I don't have the freedom I used to have but I have the benefits I never had. A car, house and income. It's not a life I want to live forever, as soon as I deal with Nkosenhle, get

Thandeka back and sort out Buhle's life, I will hand over the reigns to someone else.

I'm told he's arrived, I wait for him at the door. I've never had personal issues with Banzi. But I know he'd never turn his back on his brother.

He comes up, hopefully they disarmed him because I don't trust him one bit.

"Khabazela!"

"Mlambo!"

I lead him inside, we sit down.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"How did you get out?" he asks.

"How did I get in? You should be telling me that first because I don't know how the police caught me."

His eyes drop. Exactly, he can't answer my question, so I won't answer his as well. How I got out is my business, mine alone.

"I tried to talk to my brother but he wouldn't listen," he says.

"Banzi don't come here and act like you cared that I was sent to jail." He mustn't annoy me.

"I didn't care about you going to jail. I'm not a pretender, you can go to hell, I wouldn't care. The only thing I stood against was him dating Thandeka after you. I'm apologizing for that, that's what I talked to him against."

"Well, he did anyway, so why are you here?"

He takes a deep breath. "You made the rules, right?"

Peter answers to you."

"And?"

“We can’t work like this, just because you want revenge on one person. The whole syndicate is getting affected. As much as you’re a scorned man, you still have to run the business effectively. Remember, there are protection costs to pay. Without paying those fees we have no business.”

“So you came all the way here to give me business advice Banzi?” I ask.

“I know you have your mentors but just know we are not happy on the grounds.” He stands up.

I stand too.

He could’ve just texted Peter.

“I have nothing to do with your relationship issues and I’ve stayed away from Nkosenhle’s. But just know that he’s leaving with her tonight, he’s cutting his ties after what your people did to him in Cape Town.”

“Where is he going?” I ask.

“I don’t know, I don’t care. All I need from you is a set of new rules, not this rubbish you’re making us do. I have to go on a holiday with Dudu.” He turns and walks to the door.

I guess the time has finally come. One must die tonight. It’s either me or Nkosenhle, because I’m not letting him go with the love of my life.

Insert 33

THANDEKA

My worst fears came true. Nkosenhle is taking me to Jozini with him against my will. I've cried and begged, but he's a psycho. I shouldn't have fallen for his fake personality. He's not in love with me, he's obsessed. He's leaving everything behind, including his own brother.

Banzi came here earlier, they talked outside and I could hear they were not getting along. Now my phones and laptop are with him. He won't let me contact anyone. Basically I'm being kidnapped.

Our bags are packed, he's waiting for a hired van. He's leaving all his cars behind, he doesn't want anyone to trace us down.

There's a car arriving. I think it's the van.

"Nkosenhle please," I beg again.

"Thandeka we are going to be happy, stop crying." He goes to the door and looks outside.

Oh, it's Banzi.

"What do you want?" he asks.

Banzi walks in, he looks at me and sighs heavily.

"So you two are really leaving?" he asks.

"You refused to come with us, so why are you here?"

"I have someone special who'd like to say goodbye."

I'm confused. I hope this isn't about to turn ugly. Banzi has been offish lately.

Nkosenhle looks outside the door.

"Let's take a walk," Banzi grabs me off the chair and drags me away. I start screaming.

“Let me go!” I keep screaming until he gets me inside the bedroom and shuts the door.

He locks it and stands with his hands on his waist.

“Wena ntombazane, what’s wrong with you? You jump from one man to another, look what you have done now.”

I’m confused. “What have I done?”

“One person is going to die because of you. One brother, you have pitted men against each other. Are you proud of yourself?”

“What’s going on?” I don’t understand, I’m hearing Nkosenhle arguing with someone in the kitchen.

“Nkosenhle and Mthetho are in the kitchen right now.”

No, no, no!

“Banzi let me out of here.” I won’t let them kill each other over me.

I dash to the door but the key is in his hand. The first gunshot goes off, I feel my stomach turning. I can still hear Nkosenhle, this means it’s Mthetho who got shot. There’s a second one, the third one silences everything. I cover my ears and let out a scream.

He’s fought so hard to survive. He can’t die now.

Why did I let Nkosenhle play me?

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KHANYAMASI

Banzi had nothing to do with it. If it wasn't for him Thandeka would've left with this bastard tonight. But as useful as he's been, and honest as he has been, he's a loose end.

Thandeka is crying, I step over a pool of blood in the kitchen and go to the bedroom.

"Banzi open the door," I knock outside.

It takes a minute, he opens the door.

I pull Thandeka off the floor and put her over my shoulder and take her to the car outside. My security team takes off with her.

Banzi knew I was either going to kill Nkosenhle or get killed by him. I have killed him, we are cleaning his blood together.

We are going to give him a dignified cremation. Banzi is dangerous than Nkosenhle. Today proves that, he has nobody's back.

We burn his body to ashes and drive to Phoenix, a park in Longbury Drive. This is where his ashes will be buried. I was hoping Banzi would make a little prayer to send him off but he's in a hurry to go back to Dudu.

I hop at the back, he's on the wheel. It's around 3 am, I don't think I can go and look at Thandeka in the eyes. I will instruct for her to be sent home, she's better with her family than me at the moment. I just had my first kill, there's a lot that I need to do.

Oh well, first and second kill.

He realized what was happening too late.

"Khabazela what did I do?" His words ring in my ears.

I wake up to the news of a man who was found dead inside his car on the N2. It's a suspected hijack, no arrest have been made at the moment.

His picture won't leave my head, unlike Nkosenhle whom I just killed and forgot about as soon as he turned into ashes. We were once a good family, or something like that. They helped me because without them my life wouldn't have turned out this way. But I never thought I'd leave the village and come become a murderer in a different city. If I was a murderer I would've started in the village, I had every reason to.

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THANDEKA

It's been days, I know that Nkosenhle is dead. I wish I can say I don't feel sorry for him but I'm mourning, the same way I mourned Mesuli.

Khanyamasi hasn't reached out. I saw that Banzi was killed in an attempted hijack too, which doesn't really add up. I don't have anyone to talk to. This one is the secret I'm willing to take to the grave with me. I can't tell Linda, she will make it everyone's business and they will continue hating him.

I feel like him and I have to sit down, there's a lot to iron out. But first, I need to consult a trading healer and get cleansed. I no longer care about the past. I'm okay not remembering it vividly. I just want to get cleansed from

everything Nkosenhle did to me in the name of getting the Mkhize spirits off me.

I have done a little research, I know there's someone here in the village. Gog' Khathi, they say she deals with things like that.

I wake up early in the morning, get in the car and drive off. There's nothing warm about being home especially when Linda is not home. My mom is sinking into depression and I don't even know how to help her.

Finding the right house wasn't that difficult. I find a young tattooed gentleman washing his car outside.

"Can I find Gog' Khathi?" I ask.

"You're here to consult?" he asks.

"Yes, please."

He stops washing the car and takes me to a small hut below the yard. I take my shoes off at the door and get inside. He rolls out a reedmat for me to sit on and wait.

She keeps me waiting for a long time before coming in. She's not that old but there's an aura she carries. She kneels down and greets me.

I introduce myself and explain my sorry. Coincidentally, both men I've been with beside Khanyamasi are dead.

"Have you lost a baby before?" she asks while burning incense on a lid.

"Yes, twice," I say.

"Did you do any ceremony for them?"

"No, I haven't."

"I can give you a cleansing but you still need to acknowledge them and give them names. Did their father pay for the damages?"

"No, not yet," I say.

"Then you will do it in your father's house."

That's going to be a struggle, especially since my father is in a new relationship that's driving him crazy.

"Gogo there's another situation, I don't know if you can look into it," I say.

She claps her hands over the burning lid.

"I was with a man and he suspected that I was bewitched by my ex," I say.

"You're clean, your ancestors are communicating with me excellently." Hearing this is a relief.

I guess I will never know what happened to Nkosenhle's manhood.

"He could've been the one who had a problem from his previous relationship," she says.

I'm not sure Latty could've done something to him. She didn't look like that type of girl. But as long as it didn't affect me, I'm good.

Once again, Khanyamasi was innocent. I don't really blame him for being the person he's turned into. He's been pushed for way too long.

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BUHLE

My mom asked to see me. I have finally found a room to rent, I've moved out of the Ngcobos. I will never forget their hospitality.

I don't know what she wants, honestly. Tomorrow Bukhosini is coming, I hope he's going to make it worth

the wait. I have missed him so much. I don't know how long I can do this. I want to see my man every weekend. Some days are colder than others.

I'm going home, I want to know what this woman wants. My phone rings from my pocket. I don't know this number. I pick up and hear a man's voice.

"It's me," he says.

"Khanyamasi?"

"Yes, I need to see you."

"Send someone to pick me up tomorrow afternoon."

"Thank you," he drops the call.

He's not okay, I can hear from his voice. This is now clashing with my plans. Tomorrow I was supposed to spend the night with Bukhosini, however my brother comes first.

Chili is now a family member, he's always here.

I walk in, they're having supper. There's been some changes in our dining room.

"Oh, you're here at last." She offers me a sit.

They're sitting next to each other.

"Hi baba kaThandeka," I say.

"Hi MaMkhize, how are you?"

"I'm fine." I just want to hear what his side chick wants and leave.

"I want to introduce you to your father," she says.

"My father?" I'm lost.

"Chili wants to pay lobola."

"So you're getting into polygamy?"

“Yes, and he wants to pay lobola for me and also you. You will be introduced to the Chili ancestors, together with me.”

“Are you an upcoming comedian now?” I don’t know how she thinks this is funny.

“Your mom is right, I’m not going to marry her and leave you behind,” Chili says.

They need to listen to me and listen carefully.

“I’m not a commodity, you cannot buy me and I’m definitely not getting myself associated with anything that has to do with your relationship.” I wasted my time, had I known I was called for this bullshit I wasn’t going to bother coming.

Insert 34
SAPHO

Shakes and I are good friends with benefits. But we've gotten closer since Mesuli died. I feel like a member of the family, I've been invited to a few dinners. Mbatha seems to have taken Mesuli's death hard. Shakes hates him, no matter how hard he tries to be a better father. He only goes there for the sake of his mother.

Buhle has been living with us, now she's found her own place and moved out. I undermined how important her presence has been. I have felt like I have a sister for the last five weeks. Now she's gone, it's me and my uncle alone.

We are eating the last chicken of his stock. He said he's going to upgrade to goats, chickens weren't making him much business because dogs were eating his chickens' eggs. I'm part of the dogs by the way.

I invited Shakes over, he's accommodated me many times too. I want to introduce him to my uncle.

I just told him my best friend is coming over. I copied from the internet recipes and made mouth watering chicken stew and creamy samp.

"Mshana, I have a request here," he says, catching me off guard.

"Okay," I'm curious to know what this is.

"Gloria is moving in for a few weeks, she had a fight with her brother," he says.

"Gloria your girlfriend?" I ask.

"Yes, my wife," he says.

I don't think she's a wife.

"I don't have a problem, as long as you two are going to buy grocery and electricity."

"Don't worry about electricity, I will take care of it."

"Cool, I can't wait to meet her." I carry on with dinner preparations.

Shakes calls me, he's outside.

He was my class mate, I never thought him and I would ever exchange saliva. At times he even makes me blush. I haven't had a crush since I became close with him. I haven't slept with anyone, except him.

"You're wearing an apron?" he asks, laughing.

"I was cooking, bruh. Come, my uncle can't wait to meet you," I say.

"He knows me mos."

"Yeah, but he's not expecting you."

We make our way in, my uncle is patiently awaiting with his plate in front of him.

"Meet Mvikeli Mbatha, my best friend."

He looks up and frowns, "This boy?"

Shakes extends his hand, "Sawubona ankel."

"Mmmm, sit down," he doesn't shake his hand.

We settle down on the table.

"You said he's your best friend?" he asks.

"Yes," I nod.

"How are you best friends with someone who has a penis while you don't have it?"

Well, we are friends with benefits.

"Don't worry ankel, I'm harmless," Shakes says.

I burst out laughing at "harmless". I've seen a very harmful side of him in bed.

“If she falls pregnant I will send her to your father’s house. You, young boys, think you’re too smart. You’re here eating my niece and my chicken.”

I roll my eyes, Shakes apologizes while laughing.

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Buhle asked me to lock up as she had somewhere urgent to be. I walk Sindi home, wrapping up village updates. Then I go home, I will warm up leftovers from yesterday and go to bed. My uncle usually fixes his own food if I’m too tired.

Today might be one of those days where he feels like a responsible uncle. There’s an aroma coming from the kitchen as I make my way in.

I walk in to a big curved woman in the kitchen cooking a storm. I’m confused.

“Hello,” I greet.

She turns and looks at me. She’s very dark with red eyes, I can see her lips that she doesn’t dash Smirnoff.

“You’re Sapho, right?” she asks in a hoarse voice.

“Yes, I am,” I say.

“You’re so beautiful. Put your bag down and come wash these dishes so that I can dish up.”

Hold on a second...

“Who are you?” I ask.

Before she answers my uncle comes in.

“Oh, you’ve met my niece.”

She smiles, “Yebo Sotobe. I just asked her to wash dishes so that I can dish.”

He looks at me. "Didn't you hear your aunt? Wash dishes."

This is a joke. They can't be serious. Yes, they're elders but this is my mother's house.

"See, this is what I deal with everyday," he says.

"Sapho did you hear me?" she asks.

"You're a refugee here, I provided you with a roof over your head. What makes you think you're going to tell me what to do?"

"Sotobe!" she looks at him, hands over her hips.

My uncle can't do anything to me. He knows I make rules here, not him.

"This child has forgotten me!" He takes off his belt and chases me to my room with it.

What the fuck is going on here?

He gets in after me. "Why don't you listen? Huh?"

Then he closes the door and puts his finger over his lips, shushing me.

"Mshana help me, don't tell her this house doesn't belong to me," he says.

"Did you say it's your house? Why are you chasing me with a belt?" I'm so annoyed.

"I'm showing her that I'm a man, I have to gain her respect mshana," he says.

"This is crazy!"

"Look, one last favor. Make it sound like I'm beating you," he says.

"How? You won't beat me, you know that."

He hits the wall with belt.

"Cry," he says.

"No, I'm not going to cry."

"I will give you R30."

Now he's talking.

He hits the wall again, I scream.

She comes knocking to the door after a moment.

"Forgive her Sotobe, it's enough now."

He opens the door, putting his belt back on. "I will kill this child."

She pulls him out, "Please, my love."

He's still talking, very angry with me.

"Your uncle doesn't take nonsense, please behave. Don't worry, I will wash them for today."

Oh, this favored both of us.

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BUHLE

Khanyamasi called me here because he's going through a rough patch. He needed someone to talk to. But no, I need to vent, and that's what I've been doing for the last hour. He's a good listener, he's always been.

"Imagine them thinking they're going to change my surname into a Chili!" I've been angry since yesterday.

"I will sort it out," he says.

I stop pacing and look at him. "How? They could be arranging their wedding as we speak. Those two are evil, they don't even care about Thandeka's mom."

"I will pay for you on my father's behalf and you will be officially a Mkhize instead. Once I've done that, your lobola negotiations can be held at the Mkhizes."

"Can you do that?"

He nods, "Yeah."

I hug him, as weird as it feels.

I'd do anything to disown my mother.

I finally sit down, it's time I listen to him.

"So tell me what's wrong?" I ask.

"Yoh Buhle, it's a lot. But mostly I want to come back."

"To the village?" I can't say I'm surprised.

"Yeah, my life is there even though many people didn't like me," he says.

"Do you think it's safe?" I don't want anything bad to happen to him.

"Two people made it unsafe for me. Your mom and her boyfriend. Even though people didn't understand me, it wasn't to the extent where they'd want to hurt me.

Someone was behind it, between your mom and Chili."

"I'm sorry, I really didn't know this side of my mother. I have seen what she's capable of myself," I say.

"I want to meet with Thandeka's mom in private. I feel like if she gets on my side, my life will be easy.

Relationship wise."

"Don't tell me you want to turn her against her husband!" I don't know this person.

He laughs. I haven't seem him laugh in a long time.

"I'm not going to let them take our land, Buhle.

Whatever happens, happens now!"

Insert 34

KHANYAMASI

I'm going home today. What used to be my home, I know it's just walls. I don't plan on sleeping over anyway, I just want to go to my parents' graves. I have so much hatred against my father but I bought his favourite gin and bought flowers for my mother. I have two security cars with me. My heart is heavy, I remember how I left this place. My whole life has been sorrowful. I can't say I've ever been really, really happy. I hope I will be able to start a new chapter. After this I'm going to see Thandeka for the first time since I killed the Mlambos. I really don't know if she's going to take me back.

My eyes burn with tears as we arrive to broken, burnt walls. My hard work! I worked so hard to make my home a better place and they destroyed it, just like that. I take the bottle of gin and flowers and make way to the cemetery. There are people watching me but I don't care, I don't pay attention. If there's anything I don't owe this village, it's explaining myself.

I open the gin and pour it on my father's tombstone. "I'm home Khabazela," I say and look over my mother's own. I wonder how my life would've turned out if they lived longer.

"They burned down your home and you let them. What kind of a man are you, Khabazela? You just turned your back on me after everything you put me through."

It's my first time addressing him. I didn't visit his grave, I was too mad.

“You have to stand up Khabazela and fight with me. I can’t do this alone, you can’t side with my enemies.”
Growing up I always heard ancestors hear when you talk to them. I hope he’s hearing me. The nice Mthetho is dead now, I’m going to fight anything that comes my way. I put flowers on my queen’s tombstone. May her beautiful soul continue resting in peace.

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We pick Thandeka up on the way. I’m not sure her family knows that she’s still talking to me. I killed a man while she was in the next room. I’ve done a lot to this poor soul, I deserve this bombastic side eye she’s giving me.

“Why are you with these people?” she asks.

“They’re making sure that I’m safe,” I say.

“They make you look like a criminal.” She’s not comfortable with them.

“Don’t worry, soon my life will be back to normal.”

“What life are you living now Mthetho?”

She just called me with my original name.

“I’m working for someone who’s behind bars,” I say.

“Fuck! Get me out of this car.” She’s angry.

I expected it but I wasn’t going to lie. I want us to start on a clean slate.

We have a break at the Capers Restaurant. She’s still mad about the security and the fact that I’m working for Ngwane. Ngwane is a good man with bad records. I respect him a lot.

She stares at the menu but doesn't order.

"Please have something," I beg.

"Not until you tell me what kind of crime you're involved in," she says.

"You won't like hearing it, so what's the point?"

She takes a deep breath, "Did you kill Banzi?"

"I didn't have a choice Thandeka, otherwise I would've looked over my shoulder my whole life."

"So you have taken two lives?"

I don't like the way she's looking at me, I'm not a bad person, I just react differently.

"Are you mad at me?" I ask.

"After everything I've heard and seen about you, I shouldn't even be sitting here with you."

"Then why are you here?" I ask.

Silence...

"Nono?" I want her to say it.

"You know why," she can't look at me.

"No, I don't," I say.

"You're the father of my children."

It makes me happy to hear her acknowledging that.

"I love you, Thandeka," I say.

"You can't say that and do the total opposite. Support your words with actions, Mthetho."

I nod. "You're right, I need to earn your trust and prove how much I love you. I have messed up a lot. I'm grateful that you're still kind enough to have a word with me."

"At least you know that." She finally smiles.

"How is the situation at home?" I ask.

"Urgh, don't even ask." She picks the menu and skips to the dessert.

I love this woman, I don't think anyone can ever make me feel the way she makes me. Sitting with her like this gives me joy no money can buy me.

"I was advised to do a ceremony for the babies. I'm waiting for my dad to finally make time for his family and then ask his permission."

"Isn't he planning a wedding with Buhle's mom?"

"What???"

Oh, my mouth.

"I just heard, I don't know if it's lies."

"He's going too far!"

I just ruined our moment.

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THANDEKA

I called Linda to my apartment. Our father is planning to marry another woman. He's not even paying attention to how sick our mother looks. She's lost a ton of weight, she's always crying. This is not the first time Buhle's mom is destroying someone's marriage.

Linda arrives with a bottle of wine and a box of donuts. She thinks I'm still mourning Nkosenhle's death. I'm lucky I wasn't in a public relationship with him. A lot of people in his circle didn't know me, so I don't have anyone coming to ask me questions. Or is Mthetho behind that? I'm calling him Mthetho again, I feel like Khanyamasi is a mad character, I don't like him.

"Baby sis," I hug Linda.

“You’re only one year older. What’s up?”

“I have bad news,” I say.

“Dad or Mthetho?”

I can’t believe he thinks they’re cut from the same cloth.

Mthetho is way better than that man.

“Your dad is planning to marry MaQwabe,” I say.

“He’s mad, that’s not going to happen,” she says.

“What are we going to do?” Nothing. Mom is not doing anything about it either.

“You will see,” she says.

“Linda what are you planning?” I don’t trust her.

“Just wait and see! Must I get you a glass?”

I hope she’s not thinking of something crazy. All I want is for us to take our mother to therapy, have her see her worth and file for divorce. I’d rather have them apart than to see her hurting the way she is.

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I didn’t tell Mthetho that I’m with Linda because I didn’t think he’d be showing up to my door early in the morning. This is a disaster.

“I’ve brought you food,” he says.

“Umh, thank you. Why didn’t you call?”

He frowns and looks over my shoulder. I’m sure they’ve seen each other.

“Hey Lindokuhle,” he says.

“You’re still alive and gallivanting?”

“Very much,” he says.

She looks at me, disappointed.

I invite Mthetho in, I know there's a lot of tension but this is the father of my children whether she likes it or not.

"I heard you made a grand return to the village," she says.

"Oh," he raises his eyebrow.

Linda chuckles, "Here is the thing Mthetho, you're a monster. You beat my sister, killed her babies and bewitched her so that she'd forget your sins. So for that, I will never respect you or like you."

"Seriously Linda?" I'm so over this.

Who said she must like him?

"I'm sorry," he says.

"I don't care for your sorries, you're a dog wena." She gets up and walks away.

That didn't go very well.

"Sorry about that," I say.

"No, I deserve it." He takes a deep breath and looks at his phone. "Is there anyway I can talk to your mom privately? I'd like to discuss the damages with her."

"I will ask her. But are you sure you're ready for her? She will be two times worse than Linda."

"I don't mind," he says.

"Okay, I will tell you once we've spoken. You look really nice by the way."

He frowns, "Me?"

"Yes, you're very handsome."

He blushes, dropping his eyes. "Udlalelani ngami?"

Maybe it's my eyes, he's really handsome. I've never seen a more handsome man.

Insert 35

BUHLE

Bukhosini is a baby. Yes, he likes being in authority and calling himself a man, man that. But he's here, lying in bed and crying because yesterday I canceled him in order to see my brother.

He doesn't understand it. Apparently he sacrificed a lot of things thinking we'd be together. I'm not perfect, especially in this relationship. I challenge him a lot, that's why I decided not to argue and just listen to him ranting.

"You could've seen your people in the last four weeks that I wasn't here. You agreed that we'd be together yesterday." He's not done.

"I'm sorry babe," I say.

"I know you are not, Buhle."

I turn and kiss his lips. He looks so sexy when he's angry. I kiss him again, he finally smiles.

"If you knew what we are planning you'd actually be happy. Because if our plans work, you will be able to pay lobola for me without begging my mom."

"How?" he asks.

"I will change to my father's surname, Mkhize."

He smiles again. "So you will be MaMkhize Zuma, not MaQwabe."

"Yes," I nod.

He wraps his arms around me, starts kissing me and touching my body. He's always smelling so good. We kiss longer, my body is getting warm.

"You're very stubborn but it won't last long," he says, turning over me and kissing my lips again.

There's something hard rubbing against my thighs.
"I have been looking forward to spending time with you," he says in a low whisper.

"Me too. I really missed you."

He smiles, "Are you going to let me taste your velvet cake tonight?"

"Depends," I say.

"On what?" He drops his hand between my thighs and strokes my clit above my panty.

"Huh?"

I close my eyes and reply with a deep, "Mhhh!"

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THANDEKA

I received a call from home, my mom was hysterical. I knew something bad had happened but I couldn't have guessed it would be my dad dead in our dining room. I got home as his body was being taken away.

Our relatives are here. Family friends and some of the neighbors. My dad was a respected member of the community. An important political figure. There are tears everywhere.

I'm also crying. He was my dad. I walk inside the house, my mom is being consoled by two women. I look for Linda and find her in her room. Knees up, popcorn next to her and headphones covering her ears.

"Linda!" I'm shocked and confused.

Our father is dead and she's watching music videos?

She removes headphones. "You're here so fast!"

"Dad is no more," I say.

She smiles, "Ucleva aka-last."

"What do you mean?" I don't see any sorrow, she's just smiling.

"Food poisoning, I did it," she says.

"Whaaaat?" Oh no, this child is mad.

"It was either him or our mother follows in Mesuli's footsteps," she says.

"You understand that there will be an investigation and you will get arrested, right?"

"Anyone could've poisoned him."

Nope, hold it right there!

"You did it, you killed our father, your mother's husband. Nobody is going to take the fall, you knew what you were doing."

"Yen, yen, yen! You're just like him." She puts her headphones back on.

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KHANYAMASI

I don't think I've been this happy in a very long time. I just heard the most beautiful news. My enemies are fighting against each other now. I had plans about Mr Chili but they've already taken care of him. His own daughter is being investigated. Luckily, Thandeka wasn't home when he got poisoned, she's not involved in the chaos.

Linda has always been a mean, heartless girl since I knew her. But I didn't think she was capable of this. I'm proud of her though. She did a great job. One down, one more to go.

I'm here to see Ngwane, I can't stop smiling. I want to hug him but it's not allowed. He sits with a frown on his face.

"Did you win Lotto mfanas?" he asks.

I laugh, "Lutho Ngwane, I'm just happy for once. How are you?"

"I'm always fine, you know me. I only had a disturbing dream, dreaming about a woman I was seeing two and half decade ago."

"Maybe you will get married to her," I say.

"She's late, but she was pregnant in my dream. I don't know what it means," he says.

"Maybe she was pregnant when she passed."

"I don't think she was," he says.

This stresses him out.

"What was her name, I can look into it?"

"Maggie Khathi," he says.

"I will see if there's anything useful that I can find. But you don't need to be stressing over dreams."

"Okay, give me the good news," he says.

"Enemy number is down. I think my father listened when I talked to his grave. My enemies are fighting each other."

He smiles, "Did you do anything?"

"I was still planning, then I heard this morning that his daughter has taken care of the job."

“This is a sign, you need to go back and build your father’s house. You can live wherever you want in the world but have a place to call home.”

He’s right, I should start by confronting the village chief first. A lot happened under his watch. I want to know what he did after his people destroyed my home.

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BUHLE

Blood is thicker than water. Now I understand this saying, because what business do I have being here and comforting this woman?

She’s crying like it’s her who lost a husband, not Mrs Chili. It got to the point where neighbors had to come over and console her. I don’t care that much about his death, I only feel sorry for Thandeka because I’m closer to her.

“God hates me, Buhle,” she says.

I wouldn’t blame God, honestly.

“No, he doesn’t,” I console her.

“Why would he take the only person who loved me?

You left me, Ngwane left me and Mkhize left me.”

My mom is a comedian, she just doesn’t know it. When did I leave her? She kicked me out.

She begs me to accompany her to the Chilis. She’s carrying her own blanket. I’m going because she doesn’t have anyone else. But I know that we will be kicked out.

I heard that Linda is outside, they are still waiting for a full report

They have their relatives over. There's a maze of cars parked in the yard. We make our way inside the gate, when she sees his car she starts crying again.

Someone walks out, she stands with her hands on the hips. She looks like Mrs Chili a bit.

She's about to invite us in when Linda appears. I've never been so insulted in my life. But I knew this might happen.

I take her home and go to work. Sappho had to open and be in charge for a few hours. She's toned down it down with parties and men lately.

"How are you ladies?" I ask.

"Hungry. When is your stepfather's funeral? - Sindi.

"We were kicked out," I say.

She laughs, "Did you really think they'd welcome you?"

I look at Sapho. She's awkwardly quiet.

"What's up Wythe you?" I ask.

"My uncle and his girlfriend. Can you believe that I'm living like a guest in my own house?"

"They're just being adults, you're still the owner, right?"

She rolls her eyes and turns back to the head she's plaiting. I don't think they mean any harm, she's dramatic.

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Insert 36

KHANYAMASI

Well, I had to show up for the grandfather of my children. The funeral is beautiful, of course. They've given him the most beautiful funeral.

My arrival grabs a lot of attention. I minimized my security today, I was trying to run away from attention. Buhle finds me with her eyes and comes over.

"You made it!" she stands next to me.

I have so many people staring at me. I haven't seen Thandeka yet, we spoke on the phone and I could just hear that she wasn't okay.

"How is your mom?" I ask.

"She was denied the right to come, she's hurt. I don't think I've seen her this vulnerable before."

"She lost a partner, I'm sure it's a different pain." I raise my eyes to the guy standing next to her. I have to blink twice, at first glance I would've sworn it's Ngwane, he's aged back.

"This is Mzuzu Khathi, my friend."

Khathi? This is a bad coincidence.

"Is your mom Maggie?" I ask.

"Was, yes," he says, looking at me up and down.

Wait, this can't be true!

Buhle nudges me, "How do you know his mom?"

"We'll talk nkunzi. I have a few questions to ask you," I say.

He nods, there's a slight confusion on his face. Could it happen that Ngwane had a son and he didn't know?

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SAPHOKAZI

This is the best funeral, I swear to God. I've eaten twice, nobody complained. I look for my uncle with a full takeaway, but I don't see him. I hate what he's doing, we had an agreement.

"Mshana," says the voice behind me.

One day this man will make me faint.

"Have you eaten?" I ask.

"Nix! Please look for beers as well. I'm behind the tent with some friends, they also haven't eaten enough."

"I'm not in charge of the kitchen, I was just helping you." I'm not going to take care of grown men.

I need exclusive gossip, so I leave the tent and sit with family relatives in the kitchen. They're talking about Buhle's mom, something bigger happened. Maybe she's on his will, they don't sound happy at all.

Oh, Linda the food poisoner is here!

God, what if she poisoned all this food? We are all dead.

"Hey Sapho, I'm coming to the salon tomorrow," she says.

Tomorrow I will be sick or something. I don't trust her with my life. I'm still very young to just die.

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My uncle and I are, we are full. Gloria has overstayed her welcome, I don't know what she's cooked, I don't care.

We get home and find her busy cooking beans.

"I'm dying with headache, I'm going to lie down a bit," my uncle says.

"Wait for food first," she says.

"I have no appetite, don't worry about me."

She looks at, "Should I dish for you?"

"No auntie, I'm okay." I will go and buy igwinya if I get hungry. She's finished all the meat within a few weeks. I'm not going to do grocery, her man has no money this month. She will be eating this beans everyday.

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BUHLE

I'm tired of consoling my mom. I think she's forgotten that she actually kicked me out. I have friends, business and a very happy relationship to focus on.

I make her food and give her pain tablets. She's having a headache, she says.

"Mom can I ask you a question?" I ask.

She nods.

"Would you allow Mthetho to pay for me to change my surname? Bukhosini wants to send his uncles and you've made it clear that you won't be holding any discussions with his family."

“So you think I will let Mthetho take my money? I raised you up, single handedly. I’m entitled to your brother prize and he’s not going to get a cent.”

Okay, we’ve forgotten that we were crying.

“So you’d accept the Zumas now?” I ask.

“If they’re not here to be poor. I still don’t like that boy though.” She’s now desperate for money.

I’m relieved though.

“Give me more tissues,” she says.

“You want to cry more?” I ask.

“Why would I stop? Do you know how much Chili loved me?”

Weh, I’m going to leave. I can’t be consoling her the whole year. I have my own life to live.

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THANDEKA

The police came to take Linda this morning. This time I think she’s going behind bars. She knew they were going to come and she didn’t care. My mom is furtherly devastated. I don’t know what to do. We’ve literally lost two people in one week. Dad and Linda.

Sadly, I can’t even ask for a leave at work because I already took so much time away.

“I saw Mthetho, did you invite him?” she asks.

I wasn’t expecting this question at all.

“Was he not allowed to come?” I ask.

“Did you invite him? Yes or no Thandeka.”

Sigh!

"I said he could come. He wasn't here to cause any harm, he just wanted to support me."

"Or to plan how he's going to avenge himself."

"For what?" I'm confused.

"For what your father did to his father's house."

"Don't tell me he was behind that?"

She sighs deeply. "I shouldn't have been the one to judge you for loving him the way you did even after he hurt you. I did the same in my marriage."

"Mthetho is a good person. He just needs some counseling so that he deals with his past," I say

"Men are who they show you they are, mntanami.

Never be too blind, love doesn't need to be painful."

I agree with her, but love is also not always rosy. I believe in him giving people second chances. Or is it a third or fourth? I don't know

I want my mom and Mthetho to make peace. Dad is not around anymore, we can't be divided. If she accepts Mthetho we will be able to all move forward. We will do our babies ceremonies and then discuss how our relationship will be going forward. I really want him to get professional counseling before everything.

Insert 37

KHANYAMASI

I believe I met Ngwane's son, someone who's going to take over his father's businesses as I retire and go back to my old life. Thandeka has been through so much, I don't any complications to affect her life again.

I have arranged for Mzuzu and his grandmother to go and see Ngwane in prison. I strongly believe that's his son.

Anyway, today I have a dinner date with Thandeka. It was short notice but I'm always going to show up for my love. I dress up decently and head on to her apartment.

There's a mouth watering aroma from the door. I knock, she opens with a smile. I hug her and walk in. It looks like she's not done cooking yet.

She walks me to the lounge and who do I see? Her mom. I won't act like I'm a victim, I did their daughter wrong too many times. To some extent I deserved their anger.

"Sawubona Mam' Chili," I greet taking a seat.

"Mthetho," she says and sighs.

"I didn't know you'd be here," I say.

"Well, you were invited by me. I heard you want to pay for the damages," she says.

"Yebo Ma, I'd like to," I nod.

"You want to pay for making my daughter pregnant.

What about other damages you did to her? How are you ever going to pay?"

I don't know how to answer her.

"I will give you the list," she says.

“You will...?” I didn’t hear her well.

“I will allow you to come and pay. But just know that you did more damage to my daughter.”

“Thank you so much Ma.” I’m truly grateful. I know it doesn’t mean I’m forgiven but it’s the first step.

“I heard MaQwabe is starting a sugarcane farm on your father’s land,” she says.

I laugh, I can’t help it. “She was dreaming.”

She frowns, “She has people working with her already, they just haven’t started with the physical work.”

“I don’t care what documents she have. That land belongs to me and Buhle, not her.”

She smiles, “Well, if you need help legally, just shout and I will be there.”

I can’t believe this is Thandeka’s mom to me.

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Three Months Later

Khanyamasi

Buhle will remain a Qwabe, her mother finally agreed to accept the Zumas she didn’t like so much. But nothing

changes that she’s my father’s daughter. That’s why she’s here today. I have only built one rondavel so far.

She’s been very helpful since preparations started.

Today I’m sending over what Mrs Chili wanted, after this Thandeka and I can move on. I know there are lot of

improvements that I need to make before she opens her heart for me again.

I invited Mzuzu over, he's met with Ngwane, I was right about him. We get along. I can't say it's friendship because I'm still very careful of who I bring around me. But him and I have hung out a few times.

Buhle is still the only blood family that I have. As much as I hate her mom I'm grateful for her.

Mzuzu is going to represent me, he's going with Peter. Three cows and a goat is what was requested. Buhle helped with traditional beer. Her two salon friends are here. For the first time I really don't feel so alone. It feels like I have a family. There's laughter, arguments between her and her friends.

Mzuzu watches her as she walks across the yard with a bucket of water.

"I can't believe you once..."

I know what he wants to say and honestly, it doesn't bother me. We've both moved on.

"There's no need to bring that up," I say.

He laughs, "Why not? Does it make you feel embarrassed?"

"No, I'm okay with it. I just don't want her new partner to know, he won't trust me," I say.

"Ah, plus leyo mpungushe! He's such an idiot."

"How do you know him?" I ask.

"Him and I have gotten into it a few times. We've almost killed each other. At some point he wanted me to pay a fine because I shot a gun on his father's yard."

I laugh. "Why did you do that?"

"He had taken Buhle to his home by force. I don't know what he really sees in that man." He shakes his head, watching her disappear inside the rondavel.

"But I guess she's attracted to assholes," he says.

Now he's asking for me to kick his ass.

He laughs when he sees my face. "You can't be angry at your chief negotiator. You want me to go back there to pay lobola for Thandeka, right?"

He's such an idiot at times.

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Everything went well, Buhle left yesterday and came back this morning. It feels like a home even though it's only one rondavel built so far.

I walk outside, there's a phone call I need to make. My eyes travel down and I see a traitor and two men standing over my land.

So MaQwabe didn't stop, she's going ahead and using my land without informing me. Well, I'm not going to fight with her, just for Buhle's sake. I have someone who doesn't mind dealing with her for me.

Yes, my future mother-in-law.

I'm giving her a call.

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THANDEKA

My mom calls me to her bedroom. Yesterday was a success, now Mthetho and I will be able to move on.

He's paid his dues, respectfully so.

"Come inside baby," she says.

She's gaining back her weight and glowing.

“You look like you have good news,” I say.

“I want your sister to come home, I have evidence of someone else who used to feed your father things. He was coming from the very same person the day he died.”

“But Linda confessed to me Ma. It wasn’t anyone who did it, it was her,” I say.

“Who can prove that he was poisoned by the cup of tea Linda gave him and not what MaQwabe fed him?”

“But Ma.....”

“I don’t care what Linda said, you know your sister loses it at times. The police have been putting her under pressure as well. Nobody looked at all angles. Not to mention that the very same woman was talking to your father’s lawyers the week prior. What did she want?”

I honestly think she’s making something out of nothing, just to shift the blame to Buhle’s mom. I stand for the truth. I don’t like her but she can’t go to jail for something she didn’t do.

I know Linda did it, she said it with her own mouth.

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BUHLE

I was called home by a neighbor. My mom has been taken to the police station in connection with Mr Chili’s death. I knew that man was bad news, it wasn’t going to end good. But she was blinded by love and money. Look where she is now! She’s the new suspect.

We don't have lawyers. The Chilis have lawyers, they will get Linda out and she will be locked up. I can't even say she's innocent. I can't even be a witness because I wasn't living with her.

She doesn't deserve my kindness, but I'm on my way to the police station right now, leaving my work behind.

Bukhosini calls, he's back in Johannesburg.

"Sthandwa sami what's wrong?" he asks.

"My mom was taken by the police," I say.

"What did she do?" He's not going to be on her side. My mom pissed a lot people off.

"She's a suspect in Chili's death," I say.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" he asks.

I didn't expect him to offer his help.

"At the moment I just needed your voice. I miss you."

"I miss you too sthandwa sami, a lot. Do you think you'd ever move this side?"

Wait now, what?

"To Johannesburg?" I ask.

"Yes, you can have someone run your salon at home and open another one this side," he says.

"All that for a man?" I ask.

He laughs, "Your man. I promise you, there are many opportunities this side. You will grow, not saying you're not growing there because you've done well for yourself. But this side you can become even better."

"I don't know, maybe as time goes by. For now I enjoy working here in the village, the only thing I hate is that we are far apart."

"Must I come?" he asks.

"No, you're working too, aren't you?"

“I am but if you need me, there’s nothing that can stop me from coming to you,” he says.

“Please come,” I say.

“Okay sthandwa sami, I will be there tomorrow.”

I hold back tears as he drops the call. I’ve been on my own, I don’t know why I’m feeling lonely. My mom kicked me out, I’ve been fending for myself for months.

Insert 38

THANDEKA

My mom is doing everything in her power to get Linda out. In all this I just feel sorry for Buhle, the aunt of my babies. The man those two women are fighting over is dead. My mother didn't bother punishing him, now she wants to punish the other woman.

Linda is not innocent, I know how my sister moves.

And she's not a liar. My mom can hire psychologists to diagnose her but we all know the truth. But it all really none of my business, I'm not getting myself involved.

Mthetho and I have been talking. But we haven't defined where we stand, our relationship has been more about fixing our past.

Today I feel like we need to have a deeper conversation. That's why I knocked off and drove to his place, which I never feel comfortable in. He said he's returning to the village very soon, he's started rebuilding at home. I can't wait for him to stop living this life. I feel like I'm with a drug dealer with all the security guards that follow him. Nkosenhle is dead, I don't know which other enemy he needs to be protected against.

I walk in, he welcomes me with a hug.

"I hope you have cooked," I say.

"MaNgema did," he says.

I roll my eyes and grab a fruit before following to the bedroom. He wasn't expecting me, he knows I'm here for something.

I sit down, biting on my apple.

"I want us to talk about you," I say.

"Okay, I'm listening." His face is masked with curiosity.

“You have to get professional help,” I say.

“I’m confused,” he says.

“To deal with your past. I’m not the only one who thinks so, Buhle also believes that you need to talk to someone about the things that happened when you were young. I don’t want history to keep repeating itself on me.”

“You think I’m going to hit you?” He sounds hurt.

“No, but I don’t know when and how you’re going to get triggered. I’m not sure I can take it one more time. So if you’re serious about us working things out this is something you have to do.”

He sighs heavily. “I hear you.”

“Where is Mzuzu?” I ask.

“He said he has a gig or something like that.”

I’m happy to see him living. He’s making friends, opening up to people and showing them his side they never got to see in the past.

Buhle brew umqombothi and people actually went to drink it. He’s got village boys helping him with water and sand as he’s rebuilding. That alone is strengthening his relationships in the village.

“You look so beautiful,” he says.

I smile, “Thank you.”

“Can I have one kiss? Just one.”

“If I say no?” I ask.

“I will beg you. I really miss you and I’m going to do everything to become a better man for myself and you.”

He pulls me, lifts my chin up and links his forehead on mine.

“I love you,” he says.

As confusing as my life has been, there's been one thing I'm sure of, and that was my connection to him.

"I love you too," I say.

Our lips smash in a steamy kiss.

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BUHLE

It's 6pm, I get a call from Bukhosini saying he's outside. He really left everything and came. I fetch him outside to my room. I haven't moved back home, I think I like it more here in my rented space, I have freedom.

"I can't believe you really came!" I'm still in awe.

He's not empty handed, he gives me a Spar shopping bag and one Nike one. Then he takes his sneakers off and pulls me to sit down on his lap.

"How are you?" he asks.

"I'm feeling okay. Better than yesterday."

"Did they let go of mom?"

"No, they are keeping her in a holding cell." I have made peace with it. If she's innocent they will let her come back, if not she will face the music. It's unfortunate but everything has its consequences.

"I'm so sorry." He turns my face and kisses my lips.

I'm just happy he's here with me.

"You bought me sneakers? How did you know my size?" I ask.

"No, it's not sneakers, I wouldn't buy you shoes. I don't want you to leave. It's a top and leggings."

"I thought you didn't like leggings," I'm surprised.

He smiles, "What can I do? I chose who I chose."

A diamond, he chose very well. When I get too excited I'm like a child. I fit them right away, it's a gym set. I love it on me, leggings fit me perfectly.

"I think the leggings is too small," he says.

I look at myself, they're the way they're supposed to be. I spank my ass that's shaped out. "No, I feel amazing."

"I don't like how your ass is shaped out. I need to change to a bigger size," he says.

"No, I'm not taking it off. This is how it's supposed to be." I open the Spar shopping bag and find goodies inside. I love this relationship.

I open the tub of yogurt and get two spoons. He doesn't eat, he just watches me with a smile on his face.

"If your mother is found guilty what's going to happen to our plans?" he asks.

"I will contact her cousins and either continue with our plans or have my brother change my surname."

"I was hoping this would be sorted next month. My father has started asking me questions, we've dated for a long time."

"It's been just a couple of months," I say.

"Yeah, but we've shared so much of our bodies and souls. I want us to have a direction, my competitors out there must know that sengiyishayile le nyamazane."

"I'm not a nyamazane," I say.

He smiles, this is the reaction he wanted. He's always provoking the fierce woman in me.

"I always miss you when you shout at me." He's laughing and unbuckling his belt.

"Why are you taking it off?" I ask.

His pupils dilate with humor. "Must I sleep with a belt on?"

Never mind.

He goes on and takes his jeans and his top off. Well, I kinda like what I see.

He's looking at me with a smile on his face. Little things make him happy, I have never broken a sweat to make this human happy. My presence alone to him is enough.

"I love you, Nxamalala," I say.

"Mmmm, now that you've seen my private package. I feel unsafe," he says and gets under the blanket.

I roll my eyes and take out a pocket of chips. I will eat both his money and that private package he's trying to hide tonight.

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SAPHOKAZI

Gloria is still here, she doesn't want to move back home. I'm tired, she's taken over the house making it seem like she's a ruling queen. My uncle has been trying to get her to leave but she won't budge. Now he's more irritated than I am. It's like he's in marriage now. He can't spend much time with his friends as he likes. Whenever he buys alcohol she wants them to drink in the house, just the two of them.

As much as I want her out, I'm enjoying how the tables have turned. For the first few weeks Gloria was breathing down my neck acting like my mom. And he was cheering on her, saying I'm a disrespectful child. I

won't forget the day he gave her permission to come and fetch me from Shakes' house. I had planned to spend the whole weekend with him. I was chilling with him in the verandah, drinking. Then boom, I saw the iron lady coming with her skirts lifted up. She wanted to know why I'm disrespecting her man, visiting a boy who hasn't paid a cent to him. Yep, she talked about how loose it made me look to overstay in a boy's house. And she's been overstaying with us for months.

My uncle walks in to my room dressed up in baggy jeans and yellow shirts. I have never seen this swag before.

"And then?" I can see that he's not happy.

"Her friend from overseas is coming to see her."

Nah, it can't be!

"She doesn't have friends from overseas." I don't care that we didn't grow up together but Gloria doesn't know anyone overseas.

"She's from Limpopo," he says.

I almost fainted thinking Gloria has a friend from overseas. "Limpopo is not overseas."

"Yeah, but she says it's an important friend we must look good and behave," she says.

"Please count me out, I won't behave nix."

I'm not taking a bath, it's very cold. I will be in my pyjamas, I won't even greet that friend of hers.

I just woke up from a midday nap and I'm hearing voices. The friend must have arrived. My uncle is the

one laughing the loudest, I thought he wasn't happy about it.

I get out of my room because I need food. So I have no choice but to greet.

"Is this your niece Gloria?" she asks.

"Yes, this is Sapho," Gloria.

"Come here, see if these fit you."

Oh...I turn back and take the bag she's giving me. It's full of clothes, brand new clothes. I start smiling. I see my uncle is eating pizza. So this friend didn't come empty handed.

"You sell clothes?" I ask.

"No, my daughter got them during the looting. Put them on, let's see if I got your sizes correct."

Err, so I'm wearing shop owner's tears. She's not even shy to say her daughter was part of the looting.

I fit in most of them. They're brand new, straight from the looting daughter's hands.

I take them to my wardrobe and join them in the lounge. She's complimenting Gloria for having such a beautiful house and family.

Gloria is smiling, not mentioning that it's actually my house, not even her man's house. But I let the script play out, I'm benefiting from it.

My phone vibrates from my pocket. It's Shakes, he's sending me a naked picture of himself. Bad timing, I'm with the "parents" and a visitor from overseas.

"What's that you're zooming?" Gloria asks.

I roll my eyes and lock the phone's screen. She doesn't have peace, I was trying to see Shakes' dick properly.

"Makhadzi is my niece," says our guest, lying unprovoked.

“The singer?” my uncle already believes her.

“Yes, she wanted to come with me and see KZN but she got caught by work. Next time I will come with her though,” she says.

“Wow, I didn’t know you’re such an important guest.”

He turns to me, “Take R100 from my coat and go buy us some beers kwaSothole.”

He knows very well that I don’t do his alcohol errands.

But I don’t want to embarrass him, so I go to his bedroom and look for the coat.

I check the pockets, this man has a lot of money. I count it and it’s close to R700. I take the R100 and go to my room to change my clothes.

I’m going to buy only one beer and use the change for data. If they kill me, they kill me.

Insert 39

KHANYAMASI

I'm scared but this is what I have to do to be okay, for myself and for Thandeka. Mzuzu brought me to this woman and left. He says he's done this in the past.

I sit across her, not knowing what to say and where to start. Buhle's mom hasn't been released, instead Linda is out and admitted in a mental health clinic. I have to carry the duties of my late father and do right by Buhle. "I believe you are here because you acknowledge that you're struggling with something and you'd like to talk to someone about it in a safe space."

Well, I do acknowledge that I have a lot of anger.

"I hurt someone I love," I say.

"How did you hurt her?" she asks.

Where do I even begin? It's been a pattern, a recurring theme of our relationship. I fuck up, she loses a baby. I get a second chance and fuck up again.

"So you physically abused her?" she asks.

I nod, embarrassed with myself.

"What makes you angry and get you to that point of putting your hands on her?"

"It started with a pillow game..." It really started with something that was so silly and I don't know how I just turned into an animal. I couldn't even recognize myself at that time. I didn't see her, all I saw was my father doing the same thing to my mother on Valentines day. I have talked about that day but I have never went into details. Now it's easier because I have come to know the root of it all. My sister, Nobuhle. I know why they were fighting, my mother wanted to leave. My father hadn't

been faithful, he fathered another child outside their marriage.

If I continue holding a grudge against him, I will never be free. I have to let go. There's so much for me to focus on. My relationship, my sister, my friends, Mzuzu and Peter.

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Thandeka wouldn't approve of this. The whole point of seeing a shrink was to be a better man. I'm not a better man if I'm in a club drinking with half naked women all around me. Mzuzu didn't take no for an answer, he says I've been in a shell for way too long.

I got a lot off my chest today. I didn't get any medication but I feel so much better. I thought she was going to judge me, the things I've done are unspeakable. But she didn't, she allowed me to express my crazy feelings. I don't mind going back again next week. I will have to schedule.

I'm getting drunk because when have I ever danced? I'm between girls, throwing money in the air. My hard earned money, I'm just throwing it up. We are popping champagne bottles, I feel so much freedom.

So much freedom until someone grabs my shirt from behind. I turn around, it's Thandeka.

"Sthandwa sami?" I'm a bit freaked out because she looks mad as hell.

I look around, I can't spot Mzuzu.

She's pulling me out like Majazi from hostel. My new friends are not happy with her taking me away.

“What’s wrong baby?” I keep asking.

She’s not answering me.

She takes me to her car. As we get in Mzuzu comes running. He wants our car keys, so that he can drive himself back home

“Wena!” Thandeka points at him.

“It wasn’t my idea sistera, I swear.” He grabs the car keys from me and disappears.

I’m not sure whether I’m in trouble or not.

“Are you okay nono wami?” I ask.

“Shut up Mthetho!” She starts the car and drives off.
Can’t she play music at least?

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THANDEKA

I wanted a normal relationship, with normal problems. But this isn’t what I ever thought I’d have to deal with. I had plans with this man, we were going out for dinner after his session. I dressed up and waited for hours. He didn’t show up, then Buhle called me and told me about Mzuzu’s live stream on Facebook. This one, this idiot who has only built a rondavel at home, was busy making it rain on whores.

“Who do you think you are? Cassper Nyovest?”

“Who is that?” he asks.

I really don’t have energy to do this.

“Sthandwa sami where are you going?”

I walk out with my duvet and close the door. I'm not sharing a bed with someone who stinks of alcohol. I will sleep on the couch.

I'm woken up by him in the morning. He's sick, throwing up and crying about headache.

"Am I going to die?" he asks.

He's not the type that's often sick. Even common flue, Mthetho rarely get it.

"Maybe," I say.

"Ngeke sthandwa sami, you have to take me to the doctor." He's panicking.

Before I can reply, he runs to the bathroom and throws up again. I burst into laughter hearing him sounding like he's about to die.

He comes back, eyes red.

"Call Buhle, please," he says.

Now we are informing the family. He really thinks that he's sick and dying.

I call Buhle, I'm sure she's getting ready for work.

"Hey Buhle, your brother is throwing up here."

"Why? What happened?" She's freaked out as well.

"He was drinking champagnes last night and making it rain on whores in a club," I say.

"Ohho, I thought it was something serious." She drops the call.

I look at him, shame poor soul.

"I will take a bath and go out for breakfast with Ntebo," I say.

"You're leaving me alone? What if something happens to me?" he asks.

“Then something will happen to you, Mthetho. I’m not God, I cannot stop death.”

His eyes widen. Ewe, it’s what happens when you go out drinking with professional drunks like Mzuzu. His morning is normal where he is.

He must continue making it rain. Where are his whores at?

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A MONTH LATER

After everything that went down I still chose umfana wase Mbo. I’m in love with him and he’s in love with me. It took years for my mother to accept that. My father died without accepting it. Linda is still in a mental health clinic, she doesn’t care anymore. She said she won’t be fighting for anyone in this family anymore, which is okay because nobody asked her to in the first place. Buhle’s mom was released, there was no enough evidence to keep her behind bars. I heard she’s left the village. I guess she couldn’t face her demons anymore. Buhle is moving to Johannesburg after her lobola negotiations have been concluded. I don’t blame her, this village hasn’t been kind to most of us. She’s leaving the salon under Sapho’s management. I believe she could’ve gotten someone better but it was a matter of loyalty. Sapho has been there for her through everything.

Today I'm doing a ceremony for my babies. My mom came with me, she's getting along with Mthetho better now. Buhle is here for her aunt duties. I still haven't met anyone like her in this life. Mthetho is lucky to have her as a sister. Mzuzu is also here, I can't get rid of him. I wanted Mthetho to have friends, so here we are. We start with a small private ritual, giving them their names and clothing them. Then there's a party, I invited little children to come and celebrate with me.

I want everything to be perfect, I'm hands on. Mom wanted me to sit down, she says I'm not allowed inside the Mkhize kitchen yet. She doesn't know how many times I've cooked here. I even make dumplings for Mthetho, something everyone at home thinks I can't cook. Here I carry 20l bucket of water on my head. At home I'd rather sit and wait until they get a plumber if our sink is broken.

"I don't understand what's going on with you," she says, staring at me as I come out of the bathroom.

I also don't understand what's going on with her.

"When was the last time you went to see the doctor?"

"For what?" I'm confused.

"Lift up your T-shirt."

"In front of people?" Buhle is here, Mthetho is staring at me with big eyes.

He finally gets up and walks out of the house, joining Mzuzu and others outside. Buhle remains behind, she's also staring at me.

"Are you pregnant?" mom asks.

"What? That's ridiculous." I'm not in shock as much as I pretend to be. I didn't get my periods last night but I

convinced myself that it was inconsistency from God's side.

"You are, see how dark your navel looks," she says.

I pull down my T-shirt, I don't have to listen to her, mom was never a nurse, she was a housewife her whole life.

Buhle follows me to the kitchen. I know what she wants to ask.

"Is it true?"

"I haven't confirmed, but I did miss my periods."

"Can I say congratulations?"

I laugh, "No, mom will be mad. Plus I can still get my periods this month."

"You know that's a lie, you're pregnant. This is a blessing, you should be happy." She hugs me. My hand reaches down to my tummy.

Who are you? Why did you choose me to be your mommy?

We wrap everything up. It was successful, I sent home all the kids who attended with goodie bags. I'm happy, my soul is at peace. I walk Buhle and my mom out. I will be going home tomorrow, I have to sleep here today. Mom is giving Buhle a lift, she will drop her off at her mother's house and head home.

When I come back, Mthetho is waiting for me. His friends left earlier. He's smiling.

"It all went well, I can feel it in my heart," I say.

"Mhhhh," he says, staring at me.

I tilt my head back. "What's going on with you?"

"What did your mom say?"

"Nothing," I say.

He pulls me to his chest and kisses my forehead.

“Are you sure there’s nothing here?” He touches my tummy.

I can’t keep the poker face on any longer. “She thinks that I’m pregnant.”

“Are you?” he asks.

“Yes, I think I am.”

He shuts his eyes and wraps his arms tightly around me. On God, this time I will deliver and we will raise this baby together. He or she will be blessed to have us as parents because there’s nothing we are not going to do to protect him or her.

“I love you so much!” he says.

I kiss his lips, “I love you more, sthandwa sami sase Mbo.”

THE END