

WHERE THERE IS FEMALE, THERE IS MALE.

IMBOKODO

NEHAWU

ANELISA NGCODO

BOOK ONE OF IMBOKODO TRILOGY.

PROLOGUE

Getting up this early at this time of the year is daunting and nothing but torture. I rise up and sit upright, I pat the side table for the matches box – the room is pitch black and I can't see anything. I hate winter!

I found the matches box and quickly lit the small candle on the saucer. I exhaled softly as my eyes adjusted to the light.

I stood up and bent over to look for my sandals under my single bed. They are so worn out now, I will need another pair real soon but who am I kidding because I struggle to get money to buy a single packet of sanitary pads every month.

For a 26 year old, I still depend on my parents like a 13 year old – I have been unemployed all my life and the last time I went to school was when we were doing revision for our final year exams in Grade 6.

I have never been inside a classroom ever since and here I am living off my parents while my siblings are living their best life in the city.

I got out of my room with the candle in my hand. The house was quiet, I could hear my father's loud snores as I walked past their room – in an hour or so my mother will be up to prepare warm water for his bath. That's what she lives for – to take care of her husband's needs.

I got out of the main house and scrolled down to the rondavel not far from the house. I could hear the owl cooing in the trees on my left, it's still very much dark so it's awake but not for long.

I stepped inside the rondavel and placed the candle on the floor. I have to clean the fire place before I start a new fire. I get a small broom and a spade to use as a dust pan for the charcoals and the ashes. My mother taught me well, everything I know is because of her – some because I have to know them and some because there was no other option.

I had to quit school so I could look after my mother, she was too sick to take care of herself and my father couldn't help her alone – he needed a pair of extra hands and out of the seven children, I was the one who had to look after her while they all carried on with their lives and I remained stuck in this village.

The fire is slowly heating up the room, the fleece over my shoulders is helping to keep the cold away and I also have my hands over the fire to get more heat into my body while I wait for all the woods to catch fire.

My father renovated the rondavel two years ago, it was a bit smaller but now there's bigger room to fit an army. When my parents first came to this village, this rondavel was the only thing they had and then a few years later my father managed to build the 5 room house with his own hands. It has 3 bedrooms, a kitchen that we hardly use and has everything that a kitchen has to have besides a stove and a kettle because we don't have electricity in this area, and then there's a living room furnished with second hand couches. It's what they could afford.

I went over to emsamu to the 3 buckets we use to store water and only one of them has water and it's only half of it. I sigh and fill the pot with the water before I put it over the fire.

I add more wood and the fire rises up to the lid of the pot – the water will heat up fast-fast. I drag my father's small wooden bench closer to the fire place and sit down, if he were to see me sitting on his bench – hell would break loose and ngingawukhomba umuzi onotshwala, he is not one to be messed with that one.

I will go to fetch more water maybe 20 to 30 minutes from now, I'm still enjoying the fruits of my hard work while I wait for the sun to rise up. I'm not much of a coward but everyone is scared of the dark especially when you have to fetch water from a stream deep in the forest – and who knows which wild animal I would find sleeping on the bank on this particular morning? I'm not at the happiest stage of my life but I still love being alive – thank you very much.

When I got back from fetching the water, I found the door leading inside the rondavel open, I had a 20 litre bucket on my head and it was the only weapon I could think of that I'd use to murder whoever the intruder is.

I stepped inside only to find the kitchen empty, the candle was now blown off by the air coming in through the open door, I bent my knees a little and lifted the bucket off my head and placed it on the floor. I stretched my arms and back. I heard footsteps and quickly turned to look toward the door.

"Pshh you scared me mama." I say exhaling sharply.

"I had to fetch more wood. Go get your father's bathing basin, the water is hot enough now for his bath – hurry," she says with so much urgency.

Yes, the man has his own bench, bathing basin, spoon, tea spoon, plate, cup, glass, dishcloth, tray and a separate bowel for the water he uses to flush the toilet and dilute the hot water when preparing for his bath – crazy, I know.

"This is my water mama, why would I wake up so early to prepare water for your man while you can do that for him," I say with a light chuckle.

"Never let him hear you say that," she also laughs lightly and sits down on the reed mat.

She has been doing well in the last few years and months. She can do everything for herself now, too bad we never got to know why she was sick for that long – the doctors couldn't see anything, traditional healers also didn't see anything and prayer was the only thing we believed would help because we had no other option.

I took a 5 litre bucket and filled it with the hot water, and poured cold water into the pot for my father. Any moment from now he is going to come in and demand his water so I make sure to add more wood so it'd heat up faster.

"What time are you leaving?" my mother asks just as I am about to step out of the kitchen.

I turn my head back to look at her, "I will have to catch the first car out to kwaMaphumulo, so I will leave at 6:30," I tell her and she nods.

I exited the kitchen and headed to the bathroom behind the rondavel. My father was also creative and built this bathroom. His skills are wasted in this place, he should be an architecture or a plumber if you ask me. I poured the water into the basin and prepared myself for the bath.

I am leaving today, I'm going to Durban – KwaMashu to be exact. The time I leave this place has come and I will be joining my siblings. They live in a four room RDP house that my father got before he permanently relocated here so we are going to be living together.

I'm looking forward to starting a new life for myself but I'm also anxious as I don't know what kind of life the city holds for me – anything can go wrong in that place and I might lose myself in the process but I will give it a try. I won't give up before I even try.

“Look after yourself Zimile and don't forget to pray.” That's my father, ready to preach the whole Bible to me in the last five minutes I have with them – that's how it's like to have a pastor as your father, you eat the word of God at any time of the day and it's never enough until he says so.

“I will miss you my baby,” my mother is already tearing up. Goodbyes are the hardest but it's not like I'm leaving forever, I will be back to visit but I'm never coming back to live in a place like this. I have set new goals for myself and I will work hard to restore my lost childhood and the luxury I would have had growing up.

“I will miss you too – I love you both.” I hug my mother and handshake my father. He demands that kind of respect even from his children.

After bidding farewell to my parents, I took the huge bag filled with my belongings, I don't have much so everything fitted in one big bag. I started the long walk to the main road where I'm going to get a car that will take me to kwaMaphumulo. There's is not much transportation in this area, if you don't catch the first car out then you'd have to wait till noon for when it comes back from kwaMaphumulo, that's how bad it is.

I get to KwaMashu after an all day's trip and I'm tired and hungry I could eat a horse. I couldn't buy anything on the road because I had money for transport only and it's worse because I had to use the train from Stanger to get here.

“You took long enough, let me help you with that,” he says taking the bag from me and holds my hand. He leads me to the taxis going home, yes, my new home.

“How is mom and dad back home?” he hasn't asked how I am doing and how was my trip but he is already enquiring about his parents. I mentally rolled my eyes before opening my mouth to answer him.

“They are well, you should go and visit them – you all left and never looked back.”

“We get busy sisi, everyday is hard work and we never get time off. You will see when you start working as well.”

They have always used work as an excuse but will never send money to their parents, not even R200 or R10 for a loaf of bread.

I took a few steps behind him as the line moved forward. It is too long and my stomach hurts from not eating for the whole day.

“It's surprising that you are all working but we have never seen the fruits of your hard work.” He grunts and turns to look at me.

“Are we seriously going to argue about that?”

“I have been in that place for 26 years of my life Muzi. I was never meant for that kind of life, do you know what I had to use when I was on my periods and didn’t have pads? What we had to eat when the cupboards went dry and we had no means to buy food? Do you know Muzi or have you ever called to find out what we lacked of? I had to look after our mother all by myself nikhona nonke!”

“You weren’t alone Zimile ubaba ebekhona.”

Is that the only thing he heard? I looked at him in disbelief, I knew they were always like this but I never thought he’d show no empathy for his own sister – I sacrificed my whole life!

“And please shut that mouth of yours. Now is not the time nor the place to talk about this.” He says with a voice that says his word is final.

I’m so angry right now. Hunger could have an impact on it too because we all know how grumpy a person can be when they are hungry but I’m also hurt.

We board on the taxi and head home. It is a short drive and we could have walked if my bag wasn’t so huge and heavy.

“Everyone else is still at work, you can put your bag in that room you will share with your sisters and food is in the fridge – help yourself. I am going out.”

He says all of this while we are still standing in the middle of the living room. The house looks really small for 5 people, now 6 with me but I guess I have to squeeze myself in and get used to it.

“Thank you.” That is all that I say to him.

After how he acted earlier, there’s nothing more that I have to say to him and I don’t want to add fuel in an already burning fire so I will keep my mouth shut.

He leaves and I move my bag to the bedroom. There is only one double bed which I guess we will have to share and there is a small wardrobe which I doubt has space for me to put in my clothes.

I go to the kitchen to look for something to eat and I find two slices of bread in the cupboard, then margarine and polony in the fridge.

I fixed the sandwich and ate it with sugar water. It won’t be enough but it’s all that I have right now. The change I have left from the money my father gave me for this trip is only R7, I can get a half of bread loaf but I will need the money to go job hunting tomorrow. The sooner I start, the better.

In the afternoon, everyone is back from work and the house is filled with so much noise. They are all cheerful and happy that I am here. At least they don’t think I’m here to crowd their space and waste their food. In my plans this is all temporary, if everything works out then I will be able to move out soon.

“Since Zimile is here, I think it’s right that I move out just for you to have more space.” Mlungisi speaks up, he is the eldest in the room and the most educated in the bunch.

I wasn’t expecting what he said so it came as a shock and I think everyone else was shocked as I was.

“You don’t have to leave because of me, I think we can make it work, you lived here before me and you still can.”

“Where will you go?” that’s Muzi enquiring in a calm tone. He looks unbothered by this and I think he’d be happy to have that room all to himself.

“I found a place closer to work, you don’t have to worry yourselves – by the end of tomorrow I will be gone.”

Still that doesn’t make me feel better but he can do what he sees right.

“I will have to call uMa nobaba to tell them that I arrived safely.” I don’t have a phone so I looked at them hoping that at least one of them will lend me their phones.

“You can use mine,” Busi hands me her phone and I take it.

I dialled my father’s number, I don’t have a phone but I know it by heart – for emergency purposes. Network can be bad in that place so I hope it will go through. I dialled the number and the name 'Baba' flashes on the screen, the number is saved on her phone but...

“You have his number but you have never called?” I shot my eyes to Busi.

She shrugs her shoulders with her mouth pouted – what is wrong with these people?

“I have spent my whole life with those people and you never contacted them ever since you left home and came here. Do you hate them that much? You don’t really care about them – they are your parents but you’d swear they are strangers to you! You didn’t even call to check how umama was when she was sick, you didn’t bother to check if she was getting well or what she was eating during that time! Do you know how much I suffered? I sacrificed my whole life to take care of our mother but none of you ever came to me to say thank you.”

I was already tearing up and my heart was aching. I was more hurt than angry, they should have been there, if not for their parents then for me as their sister but no work has always been more important.

“I called ubaba not so long ago, one or two months back, I don’t quite remember.” That’s Lorna, she speaks like she did the most by just one call in a year when she should have called more often, not her alone but the rest of them. Yazi the way things are you’d swear I am their only child kanti they have 7, 7 children and the 6 never cared about them.

“And then what about the rest of you? Ngadela impilo yami to take care of our mother – what do you have to say about that?”

“We heard you the first time Zimile and to be honest no one asked or forced you to look after her!”

I blink with my mouth open and he stands to walk away. Tears have welled inside my eyes, they have blinded me and I could only see his figure disappearing outside the front door.

The room was silent, a moment later they stood up one by one until I was left alone. I blinked and the tears fell onto my cheeks. I have never felt so betrayed in my life. All I did was out of the goodness of my heart, I helped my mother because if I didn’t then who would have? But what’s the point when no one sees my hard work or appreciates it? Without a thank you – all my work amounts to nothing.

01.

I slept squashed in the middle, there's four of us sharing this one bed, none of us volunteered to sleep on the floor last night because it was too cold and thank God for the cold because I wouldn't have survived the night if it was summer.

I had to fight with Lorna's feet the whole night and I'm definitely going to consider sleeping on the floor tonight because my body is sore because of the kicks and punches I had to tolerate all night.

I have taken a bath and got dressed in decent clothes that make me look representable for today's job hunt.

I head over to the living room, leaving Lorna making the bed – Busi and Lungile have already left for work. Lungile is the eldest daughter who comes after Mlungisi, she is not much of a talker and rarely involves herself in people's business but she is the last person you would want to mess with. The quiet ones are always the most dangerous.

I find Mlungisi tying his shoe laces, probably getting ready for work as well and will be heading out really soon.

"Bhuti?"

He looks up and fastens the last knot before he sighs while stretching to sit upright.

"Zimile, how was your first night here?"

"It was okay but that single bed I left back at home was much better than receiving punches and kicks from Lorna the whole night," I scoff.

"I heard that!" she exclaims in the other room and I receive a chuckle from Mlungisi.

He is the coolest compared to Muzi, more understanding and if you look deep enough you will actually see that he is a softy.

"Bhuti, I need to look for a job but I don't have matric," I say fiddling with my hands, walking to sit on the couch opposite him.

He exhales and pulls his lips to a thin line. I don't know what that means but I wait for him to say something before I add anything or voice out my thoughts.

"What kind of a job are you looking for?"

Is that a trick question? Because if it is up to me then I'd be a doctor tomorrow, not that I have a desire to be one – just that it's a well paying job and I'd love to earn that much money.

"I'd take anything really."

He nods, "it's not like you would get anything better but trying is better than doing nothing."

I swallowed hard and built some courage for what I'm about to say next.

"I will need money to go to town and I was hoping you'd help me."

I dropped my eyes to my hands because I'm really embarrassed by this. At this age I should be able to afford everything that I want but I don't even have a cent to my name even that R7 is not mine because I didn't work for it.

He places a R100 note on the small coffee table and I shoot my eyes to him – this is too much money!

“You will use the change to buy something to eat and maybe go back tomorrow if things don’t work out today,” he says with a small smile on his face.

“Thank you, I promise I will pay you back.” I tell him and he shakes his head.

He opens his mouth to say something but Lorna comes in, “bhuti I need money to buy bread,” she says rubbing the sleep off her eyes.

“You are working nje Lorna where is your own money?” he asks putting his wallet back into his pocket.

“Aw it’s like that now? I bought the bread yesterday angisho and today it’s your turn!”

“Don’t lie Lungile is the only person who buys bread in this house. Go check in the cardboard, I think I saw two slices of bread left sometime yesterday.” He stands up to his feet and signals for Lorna to move along and check for the leftover bread.

He must be talking about the one I ate yesterday. Lorna is already talking about taking turns to buy food in the house and I have nothing to contribute with.

It suddenly feels so wrong to be here – I shouldn’t have came here in the first place. Lorna is two years younger than me and already has her own money. She doesn’t depend on anyone for anything, I should be the one she’s asking money from right now since the other two sisters have already left but I’m nothing but a waste of space.

“I ate it yesterday, I’m sorry I didn’t know that I had to replace it – I will go now and buy it since bhuti gave me too much money for transport.”

I stood up and Mlungisi stopped me.

“You don’t have to Zimile, Lorna will find a way to buy that bread, she is a working woman and if she is hungry – she will have to empty her pockets and buy her own food. Uyatefa lo.” He points to her with his index finger and walks into the room that he shares with Muzi.

I look over to Lorna and she is sulking with her arms folded to her chest.

“I –”

She sucks her teeth and leaves me standing there in the middle of the room, not knowing what to do with myself – if I buy the bread Mlungisi will have my head but if I do then I’d win Lorna over – it’s bad enough that I have crowded the bed and she doesn’t need me to eat her food as well with no means to replace it later.

This really proves that I need to find a job as soon as possible.

A car hoots outside and Mlungisi walks out of his room with a backpack strapped over his shoulder.

“Good luck with the job hunting. I really hope you find something sisi.”

I nod to him with a genuine smile on my face. He bids goodbye and rushes out of the house.

I took my bag and left the house. Lorna was still sulking when I went inside the bedroom and I saved whatever two cents I wanted to say – I couldn’t apologise because I don’t really know what I would be apologising for.

“Lord ngicela ubenami, whatever happens today kuzobe kuyintando yakho. Amen.”

The streets of Durban are full of people rushing to work, some rushing home after a long night shift and some like me are looking for work.

I held my bag to chest because I don't want to take any chances, it may be early in the morning but isela alilali.

I walk in the first shop and they say they are not hiring – I was expecting that so I moved along to the next shop.

“Good morning sir,” I greeted the Indian man who is standing in the front of his shop, looking annoyed – I don't know if it's me or what I'm wearing that made him pull that disgusted face as soon as I uttered those words.

“Who are you and what do you want?” he sounds rude as he looks. He focuses his attention to me as he folds his arms to his chest.

“Job sir, I can clean – anything.” My English is not really good so I said the first thing that sounded right in my head and it looks like he understands me.

“We are not hiring at the moment but you can leave your CV with us so we can call you should we need someone.”

“Sir?” I said clearly confused. I don't know what he is talking about – I was expecting him to say “no job” so I could leave or “come in” that will tell me I have the job.

“CV! Matric certificate!” he says with so much urgency.

“No, no CV, no matric certificate,” I shook my head and he frowns.

“Leave then you are wasting my time,” he says waving me off.

“Please sir, I'd take anything,” I pleaded with him. “Cleaning.”

“Even the toilets?” he asks with a smirk on his face and I nodded. He laughs, “you are too old not to have a matric certificate and to be this dumb – get out of my face!” he shouted and I jumped startled by his sudden outburst.

I reluctantly walked away from him, thinking why a person would be so angry and rude so early in the morning – he surely woke up on the wrong side of the bed.

I am even more scared to approach the other Indian people now, they all look angry, both the men and women – I don't know if they are angry at me or the world.

The white lady I last approached was even worse. I told her about my sick mother and that I had to look after her so that's why I didn't finish school, she replied and said,

“So what now, should I feel sorry for you?”

She was just as disgusted as the rest of them. I didn't say anything after that, I just walked away and didn't look back.

I didn't think looking for a job would be so hard, even a cleaner needs a matric certificate and experience!

I find an empty bench in the park next to the Workshop shopping centre and took out the pie I bought from Pie City out of my bag.

I need all the strength I can get to approach these people, it's so sad because most of these shops are owned by either Indian or white people – I haven't come across anyone who is civil, all of them look racist to me or maybe I'm overthinking this.

I finish the pie but there is still a lot of space left for another pie or two but I have to save the money for more important things.

I stood up and went back to going in and out the shops asking for work, still nothing.

I went back home when the sun had started setting. I wish I was at the village right now, that place was more peaceful, here there's too much noise and chaos.

I found Busi in the living room and she looked like she just came in.

"So how was it? Mlungisi told me you went to look for a job," she says looking up to me.

"It went really bad, no one wanted to look my way for more than two seconds and they were damn rude!" I huffed and threw myself on the couch.

"What were you expecting? That they'd hire you with a report from grade 5? Which era are you living in Zimile?" Lorna speaks up standing behind me, I didn't even know she was home.

I turned to look at her, she has uttered absolute nonsense and I guess she is still angry about what happened this morning.

"How can you say that to your sister Lorna? She is your older sister, show some respect!" Busi says shooting daggers at Lorna's direction.

"She needs to know her place, she doesn't belong here, she should just go back to the village and get back to herding chickens." She clicks her tongue.

"Really Lorna?" I am already hurt by how today turned out and she is not making it any better with what she is spewing right now.

"Yes really, this is not the farm where when you have two working hands and feet then you qualify to be a farmer, and earn a sack or two of corn for the work done – isethekwini la and it's not for people like you," she looks at me with the same disgust like those men and women did earlier on – maybe I am disgusting after all.

I blink my tears back, she has hurt me but I won't give her that satisfaction.

Busi has went quiet all of a sudden, I didn't expect her to say anything anyway because that's how she is and I know they were having fun, gossiping about me when I wasn't looking and what she said a moment ago was just an act. She is older than me but still acts like she is in Lorna's age group – too immature and childish.

While we remained seated in silence with Lorna standing over us, Lungile walked in with a plastic that has two loaves of bread – brown and white.

She greets and gives the plastic to Lorna.

"Are you alright?" she asks looking at me.

Afraid that my voice will betray me, I nodded instead but she wasn't convinced.

"Come," she says already walking to the bedroom.

I stood up and followed her.

"She always wants people to feel sorry for her like she was forced to quit school – that was her choice, now what is that got to do with us?"

"I don't know and I don't care really," Busi exhales sharply.

"Close the door and come in," Lungile's voice chirped in behind me and I obliged, and closed the door slowly.

I can't believe they are spitting on my face like after everything that I have done, I didn't quit school because I wanted to – I did it for mama, for all of us.

"Don't mind them. They don't understand and they don't want to understand so nothing you say or do will change how they are thinking," she says calmly.

"Was I wrong?"

She shakes her head no and takes my hands into hers.

I looked at her expecting her to speak up but instead she looked like she had been pulled back into a deep hole, away from the world of the living.

"Sisi?" I tilt my head to the side to get a better look of her face. Her mind is not here, she looks far away and like her body is here but her soul had left her body.

It's quiet for a moment then she gasps for air like I just a CPR on her and she was in a matter of life and death. I was startled because I wasn't expecting that.

"Sisi, are you alright? I can get you a glass of water," I say pulling my hands away from hers but she holds them tightly.

"Zimile," her voice was hoarse and shallow like when she would have those weird episodes when she was young. She would freak us out and we'd stay very far from her because we didn't understand what was going on with her – she was different. My father would pray for her and call whatever took over her a demon or an evil spirit, he casted it out more times then I can remember but it remained, it was always there and still is.

"I don't see anything," she says shaking her head lightly.

"What do you mean?" I am confused and suddenly uncomfortable.

"Your future, I can't see anything – it is blank."

My heart skips a beat and I yank my hands off hers.

"What does that mean? Am I going to die?" I stand up to my feet. This can't be happening, there is a lot that I want out of my life – I can't die, at least not now.

"Sisi?" I sat back down and shook her lightly. She is drifting away again.

"You have no future Zimile." She shoots her eyes to me and I look at her hoping she would say she is joking but she looks damn serious.

A trail of tears fell down to my cheeks, if I have no future then why am I here?

02.

“What I am trying to say is...”

The door cracks open and we turn to look at who is at the door, and it’s Mlungisi. His face falls and I remember that I have tears on my face so I quickly wiped them.

“Is everything okay in here?” He asks, looking between me and Lungile.

“We are fine bhuti,” I force a small smile on my face. He is not going to let this go, I can see by the way he is looking at me like he is looking for something.

“Can we talk?” He is still looking at me.

I nod and he disappears behind the door. He shuts it close and I exhale.

“Not everything is as it seems Zimile, I might have got the wrong end of the stick and the blankness doesn’t really mean anything.”

Was that suppose to make me feel better? Because if it is then she is doing a terrible job, her voice is shaking like the ground when there’s a deadly earthquake – she is not convincing at all but I will let this go.

I stood up and left her in there. I knocked on the closed door to Mlungisi’s room.

He tells me to come in, I walked in and closed the door behind me.

“Bhuti?”

He was busy looking for something in the wardrobe, he had his bare back on me and I couldn’t stop looking.

Each time he reached for something, it’d flex and damn he looked so good. He turns to me and I quickly look away.

A big bag is on top of the bed, there are clothes inside so I guess he is packing to leave and to be honest I don’t want him to leave.

“You are sure that you are okay?” he packs the few things that he has in his hands.

“Yeah,” I clear my throat. “I’m fine,” I smile as he glances over to me before going back to the wardrobe.

“And then, did you manage to get something?” he has his back on me again. Get a grip Zimile, my mind scolds me.

“No, no I didn’t get anything,” I clear my throat again. What is happening to me?

“Mmmh but something will come up, ungapeli umoya, it’s still early days.”

He goes back to his bag with a pile of folded jeans and packs them. He is so neat, if it was Muzi he would have stashed those things in and if it fitted then he wouldn’t care as long as he’d have everything packed. But it’s different with him and I wonder how he managed to share a room with someone like Muzi. They are a bad combination.

“Yeah I will go back tomorrow,” I scratch through my hair for distraction.

He wears a t-shirt and I exhale slowly, more in relief than naturally.

“Lets go sit in the living room, I will finish up here later.” He points to the almost full bag.

It’s already getting dark outside but I guess he has someone that will pick him up later because as far as I know he doesn’t have a car, yet.

“So you really won’t tell me what Lungile said that made you cry?”

I remain silent, I don’t want to say anything because I don’t understand what Lungile meant by what she said and I don’t think it’s something I want to talk about, at least not now.

“We were just talking, you know having a heart to heart conversation,” his arm tightens around me.

I have my head on his shoulder and it’s really comfortable.

“I know how she can get, she’d speak in riddles and you won’t understand a thing until it really happens then she would come back to tell you that ‘I told you so’. It is so annoying if you ask me, to me a warning from her is not really a warning because I don’t understand shit about a thing that she says,” he chuckles and I follow suit.

“She can hear you, you know?” I look up to him.

“I don’t care it’s not like what I said is a lie. For real though, don’t dwell on things you can’t change just go with the flow and life is too short for you to be worried about the future. Focus on the present and work on yourself sisi,” he has gone to being the big brother that is there to hold my hand when I am down. You wouldn’t miss the love and care in his voice.

It makes me wonder if he is like this with the rest of his sisters or any other woman out there, the thought of that makes my heart twitch – I don’t want to share him.

His hand caresses the side of my face, goes down to rubbing the tip of my ear and trails down to my chin. He has his eyes on me and I have mine on his.

He is too close, his breath is fanning my face and his thumb is tracing my bottom lip – is he feeling it too? The electrifying connection between us, it’s wrong but it feels right, the more I think about, the more intense it becomes.

“Bhuti!” Busi’s voice chirped in from the kitchen. She hasn’t appeared yet so I quickly got out of his hold and shifted to create a gap between us.

She walks in, “here is your change, I couldn’t find the yoghurt you said I should buy and oh I bought 4 litre of amasi and not 2 litre since we have an additional person in the house,” she says the last part looking at me.

“It’s fine, where is Lorna?” he says taking the change from her. I was wondering where they had gone to earlier on, I guess he sent them to the shops to buy additional food – it’s not month end so I doubt they were doing a proper grocery, if that’s what I can call it.

“She is coming,” the door opens and Lorna steps in. “Oh there she is.”

“You should start with the pots, I want to eat before I leave.”

“Aw bhuti I went all the way to the shops and still you want me to cook while there are people in this house who haven’t done anything, all they do is eat and sleep,” she sulks.

By ‘people’ she means me because that’s the direction she was looking at when she said that.

“I will go and cook, it’s fine.” I stood up and took the plastic from her hand.

“Don’t cook the whole braai pack, we still have to save for tomorrow!” she exclaims behind me and I don’t dare say anything back.

I emptied the things they bought and put them in their respective places.

I only came here yesterday and already there are complaints, I don’t know how I am going to survive my stay here, Mlungisi is leaving and Lungile is anti-social and withdrawal – they are the

only people I feel comfortable around. I'm glad I haven't encountered with Muzi since yesterday because I'm the least of his favourite people but the feeling is mutual – I hate him too!

"What are you making?"

I flinched, his hand is on my back and it's too warm like fire burning my skin.

"Chicken curry and pap," my voice is strained and it's a struggle to get the words up to my throat.

"I can't wait, the last time I remember you didn't know how to cook so I'm looking forward to this." He chuckles and I smile. His presence is suddenly heavy on me, I thought with the distance between us the feelings would wear off but no, they have come back.

"Trust me, you are not ready for this," I placed the knife down and moved to the boiling water in the pot that's on the stove. I managed to figure how the stove works so I am not that dumb after all. I put the mealie meal in the water and closed the pot to let it boil some more before I stir it.

"You haven't even started but my mouth is already watering," I laugh at his stupidity.

"Move from here you are disturbing me and my food might not be as good with you standing here." I push him away.

"Okay okay, I'm leaving, I have to continue packing anyway."

"Do you really have to leave?" I stopped chopping the onion and looked at him.

"Yes, I have to. I can't stay in my father's house forever. I need to get out of here so I will be able to build my own house," he says like he has been planning this for a long time, shuthi I'm not the reason he is moving out – it's part of the plan. "I am an old man now, I need to start a family soon and I'm not going to do it here." He dips his hands deep into his pockets.

"Does that mean you have a girlfriend?" I don't know why I asked that but I just wanted to know. He laughs, like really hard.

"No, not yet but I am looking," he has a wide smile on his face so I guess he already has his eyes on someone. I know I should be happy but I'm not.

I turned back to continue with chopping the veggies.

"Let me leave you to it then," he pats my shoulder before walking away.

I continue with cooking with my heart on my sleeves – I better get over these goddamn forbidden feelings – fast!

I took a taxi to town early in the morning, you know what they say about the early bird catching the fattest worm, right? Well that's exactly what happened because I was lucky to sit next to a lady who was kind enough to listen to me ramble about my story then she directed me to this place where she heard that they are hiring.

She didn't put me down when I told her that I don't have a matric certificate or any experience instead she was really optimistic and told me to go give it a try.

I am standing in front of a plain white building with brown tiles on the three steps leading inside. It looks like a restaurant, a very expensive one at that.

I walked in with my bag held tightly against my ribs. I am wearing a long skirt that keeps on stripping me as I climb up the three steps heading towards the door.

Inside, the place is empty, the only sound I could hear is that of the dishes clamping against each other. Then there were footsteps coming to where I was standing, my eyes stayed glued to the direction where the sounds were coming from and an old white man appeared. He was wearing a white coat, not the one that is worn by doctors but the one cooks wear.

“Good morning,” he greeted with a smile on his face and that made me relax.

“Good morning sir,” I bowed a little.

“We are still closed, do you need help with something?” he steps closer to me. He has a white beard with no trace of other colours that were there and his head is bald, it’s so shiny like unepopo or something.

“I need a job, cleaning, cooking – I can do it.”

He nods still with a smile, he hasn’t made me feel uncomfortable or put me down, and that’s a good thing, right?

“We need a few people to help us in the kitchen.”

“Okay,” I nod, doing a little prayer in my heart hoping that he won’t ask for something that I wouldn’t be able to give him.

“Can you do peeling, chopping and wash dishes?”

“Yes, all of it.” I nodded rapidly.

“Okay you can come through.” He pointed to the direction in which he came from and led the way down the hall. “This is a restaurant, we open at 11am every day and close at 6pm but you will leave at 3pm and some days later than that because you will be working on shifts. Then this is the kitchen, where you are going to be working alongside our brilliant chefs and the other staff that will help you with the dishes and the peeling.”

The kitchen looked really clean but that’s because they haven’t started cooking yet and there’s one or two chefs in there probably preparing for the long day ahead.

“We can only pay you R600 a week, and you get two weekends off every month. Do you have any questions?”

“When do I start?” he laughs at my question. It’s not an ideal job but I’d be stupid to let this opportunity go.

“I like you already, you look like a good girl and I can sure trust you. You can start today since you are here.”

“Thank you,” I covered my mouth with my hands to contain my excitement.

For the first time since forever, I have managed to do something on my own without anyone holding my hand. This has turned out to be the best day of my life.

“You can start over here,” he leads me to the other side of the kitchen. It looks like the back, it has about three large sinks and on the floor there is seven packets of onions.

“Those need peeling and there are potatoes that also need peeling at the back. When you are done with this batch, let me know and I will arrange the next batch, try to hurry up so that when the restaurant opens you won’t have to juggle washing the dishes and the peeling.” That is a lot of peeling that I have to do but I don’t show the terror on my face, I plaster a brave face and nod to the instructions.

He left me to start with my duties and I thank God I met someone like him. I know I don’t have to worry about any ill treatment around here. I take a bucket and sit on it with the first sack of onions in between my legs.

In the afternoon when I leave the restaurant, my eyes hurt from all the crying I did when I was peeling those onions, I’m glad I wasn’t the one doing the chopping because I would’ve dropped dead on the spot. One onion is enough, a sack is too much and seven sacks is a suicide mission. As I was walking to the road where I will get a taxi that will take me to the taxi rank, I walked past a group of rowdy police men, they were laughing so hard at whatever that they were talking about and I made sure to walk faster so I could disappear without them even catching a glimpse of my existence.

There is something about police men that creeps the hell out of me, I think I am phobic to them because my actions are not out of respect but out of fear. If one of them were to come to me, I’d run the opposite direction knowing very well that I am not guilty of anything.

I walked past without them saying anything to my direction – that was a great escape. Though I wonder what they are doing here when they should be out there arresting people and looking out for the vulnerable, and play hero. But no, they have gathered here and will be wanting their paychecks at the end of the month for doing absolute nothing. They are no different from bedbugs, bloody blood suckers wasting tax money when it could be used for something more important.

“I got a job!” I make the announcement.

“Where?”

“At some restaurant in Argae,” I sit down next to Lungile.

“That’s good, congratulations sisi.” She pulls me in for a side hug.

“What will you be doing there? I hope you won’t be cooking because no one wants to die of food poisoning,” she chuckles, looking up from her phone.

“I will be washing dishes and doing the peeling,” it’s not the best job but it’s a big thing to me.

“It’s a job that pays so don’t worry about it.” She gives me a reassuring smile. I wish Mlungisi was also here, I know he’d have been happy for me as well, not like the rest of them.

“You’re right Lungile, she must contribute to the grocery as well starting from next month and hopefully be able to send two cents to Mpilo. The poor child is so skinny it’s like he is suffering from nutrition deficiency or something – maybe it’s kwashiorkor who knows?” she says laughing and I gasp in shock.

“Lorna!” Lungile reprimands her.

“What? Yazi it’s shocking that you weren’t able to go to school while you were looking after your ‘sick’ mother but you were able to fall pregnant at 21, ey people will shock you out here.” She laughs again before going back to her phone.

Why is she against me so much? She manages to pick on me every chance she gets and it’s worse because everything she says gets to me.

“Didiza is busy splashing pictures of his son on Facebook. Do you ever get to see him kodwa Zimile?” she looks up to me for an answer but she doesn’t wait long before she continues. “Hayi koda nawe Zimile couldn’t you find a better looking guy phela Didiza is no different from umadluphuthu and maybe that’s why ubaba never accepted him or that bastard child of yours,” she throws her head back with laughter rumbling up to her mouth, Busi joins in and laughs with her.

“Imagine calling leya nunu usbari yoh I can not can.” She throws her hands up in the air still laughing her lungs out.

I could feel anger brewing inside me, and I don’t know when I picked up the vase from the coffee table and threw it in her direction.

“Zimile!”

Blood was gashing out of her forehead and she was screaming, horrified by the amount of blood in her hands, well she is lucky to be alive.

“What the hell is going on here?” I turned towards the door and Muzi was standing on the doorway. Busi and Lungile were attending to Lorna, his eyes locked with mine and then I knew shit has hit the fan.

03.

"I asked you a question Zimile, what is going on here?" He steps inside the house and looks at the bloody Lorna.

"She tried to kill me bhuti," she whines. The blood is still flowing on her face, it's not even a big wound, it's just a scratch but she is already bleeding to death.

"I was only trying to shut you up, isn't it you talk too much about things that don't concern you?!"

"So you mean she deserves this?" Muzi steps closer to me and I'm so scared, I could shit on my pants but I pulled a brave face and looked at him in the eye.

I shook my head, slowly taking a step back from him.

"We should take her to the hospital bhuti, the cut might be deep and she might need stitching." Busi speaks up with so much urgency.

Muzi rushes over to them and inspects the wound. And apparently he has been promoted to being a doctor because he says the wound is not too deep so she doesn't need stitches.

I look at them as they nurse their baby sister and took her to the bedroom because she needs rest.

"We need to talk wena," He points to me.

"We are talking now, aren't we?"

He chuckles, "I see it didn't take you long to grow a pair of wings. You haven't been here for at least a week, and already you are trying to kill your sister!" he shouts.

"I wasn't going to kill her if she learnt to shut her mouth and mind her own business!" I shout back and that seem to be fuelling him even more.

"Listen here Zimile, I'm not Mlungisi, I won't stand by and look at you disrupt our home like this – ever since you came here, there's nothing but chaos!"

"She started it!" I pointed towards the closed bedroom door. I know they are having a feast behind that closed door and are happy that Muzi is shouting at me for absolutely nothing.

"It doesn't matter, you are the oldest between you and her, you should know better and that violence doesn't solve anything and if you both are not going to make peace then one of you should move out."

"What are you saying Muzi? Are you kicking me out?" I pointed to my chest, titling my head to the side – I can't believe he said that. We both know that he won't let Lorna move out so the person who should move out is me.

"I didn't say you should move out, don't put words into my mouth and just so you know ubaba is going to know about this. And Mlungisi won't be able to defend you this time around," he looks at me from top to bottom and clicks his tongue before turning to walking away.

I looked at him as he disappeared into his own room. One would swear that we didn't come out of the same womb, we weren't fed from the same breast and didn't eat from the same bowl when we were still young enough to. I wonder what went wrong and what is it that I did wrong to them.

I went to the bedroom that Lorna and Busi are in, Lungile went out to see someone and I was quite surprised to learn that she goes out from time to time.

“Busi, your brother wants to talk to you.” I lie threw my teeth, Muzi never called her but I know they will find something to talk about as soon as she steps into that room.

“Why didn’t he tell me himself and told you instead?” aw how am I supposed to know that?

“Don’t shoot the messenger sisi,” I walked in further into the room to make space for her to walk past me.

She gets up from the bed, Lorna is still wide awake and I sit down where she was sitting when she goes out of the door.

“What do you want?”

“Now is not the time to act spoilt wena,” I poke her with my index finger on her forehead. “You know you started this and now I’m the only one taking the heat.”

“Because you deserve it, just leave me alone Zimile or the shouting won’t be the only thing you will get – Muzi will kick you out one of these days if don’t watch what you say to me,” she says with so much attitude in her voice.

I chuckle bitterly, “you don’t know me, I would’ve said ngizokugqema ingozi but I’ve already done that so baby girl you should be the one who should watch what you do and say to me because that scar won’t be the only thing you will get from me – ngizokubonisa izulu mina,” (I will show you heaven) I click my tongue and stood up from the bed.

She has gone silent, the cat has got her tongue I see, she should continue provoking me and we will see who is going to have the last laugh because I’m not scared to show her who I am. I didn’t spend 26 years in the village and didn’t learn anything about fist fighting.

Busi comes back and checks on her sister, they are busy whispering so I leave them there and went to start with the cooking. I know they won’t do it because one is injured, the other has to look after her, the other is too angry and it’d rain for the whole year should he touch the pots. I’m only doing this for my sake and Lungile’s.

It has been two weeks since the vase incident and to say things are better would be a lie. But at least Lorna is not on my case. Baba found out about what I did like Muzi promised and I got the lecture of my life. Mlungisi also said his part but he wasn’t angry with me, we had a decent conversation and he made me understand that such is bound to happen since we grew apart with the time spent apart.

I managed to get a phone as well, it’s not an expensive phone but it makes and receives calls so it is better than nothing.

I have been seeing a lot of those rowdy police men this week and they are always on the same spot. They greet me now and I greet back, then a loud cheer goes on behind my back as soon as I pass them – I don’t know what they are up and if they weren’t police men, the men of the law then I’d be really worried.

Work is really good, I'm getting used to the environment and I am adjusting really well. There's three of us that do the dishes and the peeling, we take shifts and rotate. I have not made friends yet but it is not like I am looking for one anyway.

I wipe the last big pot and put it on top of the shelves.

I am going home at three today but I won't allow myself to leave on the last minute, I have finished what I was meant to do so I am leaving now at ten to three. Mario, the old man, will have to forgive me.

I take my bag and head out of the restaurant, just as I step out, a text comes through on my phone and I take the phone out of my bag – it's Mlungisi. He wants me to do his washing before I go home.

He says his flat is close by to where I am working so it won't take me long to get there. He included his address in the text so I started walking to the street that will lead me there.

"You are out early today!" one of the police men shout out to me. I didn't see which one was it so I'm looking at all of them, I didn't know they were keeping tabs on me.

"It's my lucky day!" I shout back from the other side of the road.

"You should bring us some of the food from that workplace of yours!" They even know where I work? Why am I even walking slow and entertaining them?

I looked back and the other five is smiling widely but there's one of them that is not smiling, he is looking straight to me with a serious face, I wonder how he ended up with these immature creatures.

"You should come and get it yourselves!" I shout and carried on walking.

"Is that an invite?!"

I waved my hand, I'm done talking.

I arrive at Mlungisi's flat and he lives on the ground floor – very easy to find. I checked for the key in the flower pot right on the side of the doorstep.

I opened the door and stepped inside.

Mlungisi lives here, in a place like this? Kanti how much is he getting paid?

This place looks so modern and very spacious, he doesn't have much furniture so it still looks empty.

I walked around checking out the place, the kitchen has built-in cupboards so he didn't have to do anything there, the living room is an open plan so there is a space for a dining table – he has no couches so there are only plastic chairs in the living room and the flat has three bedrooms and only his had a bed which is neatly made, I didn't expect anything less from him.

I stepped inside, his scent was still there and the room was quite big, bigger than the other bedrooms. It had a huge built-in wardrobe – he is living the life.

I sat down on his bed and took his pillow, and hugged it. It smelled like him and I felt so close to him. I missed him, I hope he'd be back soon so we can spend some time together – I don't know why we had to be siblings and for me to have these kind of feelings for him.

Trust me, I have known that I love him more than as a brother before I even started my periods. In my eyes he has always been my hero, the knight in shining armour that every girl wishes for – I thought it was stupid and I still do, I shouldn't be feeling this way.

Yes, we are close and I know he'd swim in an ocean full of sharks just to be by my side – my God sent angel. He is amazing and is everything that I want in a boyfriend.

I tried replacing him with Didiza because he was away and the distance between us was depressing but that didn't turn out too well. I got pregnant and my world just scrambled down, it was supposed to be a distraction but now I am tied to Didiza forever!

Worse my father wants nothing to do with him, even his grandson and that's why Mpilo is staying with his father's parents instead of with me.

Baba accepted the money for the damages but not my baby.

It still hurts just thinking about it, he had to grow up seeing his mother at least once a year in the streets or in the corners where no one would see us because my father couldn't find out that I was seeing Didiza behind his back.

Mlungisi reacted surprisingly supportive, he disciplined me though but he was also there as a shoulder to cry on – like I said, he is amazing.

I have finished washing all the clothes he had in his washing basket and now they are on the line, they won't dry today so he will have to leave them overnight, that's if it is safe to do so. I know that I wouldn't, the village was much safer than this place.

I went to the kitchen to start with the cooking, he is not here yet so I might as well cook for him to pass time. I forgot to mention that he is good cook as well – he is goals!

The rice is boiling in the pot, the curry is also getting ready on the other side of the stove and then there is a knock on the door.

I closed the tap and wiped my hands on my skirt while walking to the front door.

"Hi," the beautiful lady greets with a wide smile on her face. I don't know her but her beauty is mesmerising. I blinked rapidly, looking at her and she tilted her head to the side. "Hello," she says waving her hand in my face.

"I'm sorry," I say embarrassed. "Hi."

"I looked for the key in the flowerpot but it wasn't there so I figured someone must be inside," she says still smiling.

"Oh yes, Mlungisi asked me to come over – please come in." I usher her inside and close the door once she is in.

I still don't know who she is but she wouldn't have looked for the key in the flowerpot if she didn't know Mlungisi that well.

"I will be in the kitchen," I tell her and I disappear before she could reply.

She is beautiful, alright. My gut tells me she is Mlungisi's girlfriend but he said he was still looking so she might be his colleague.

I stir the pot and the rice is cooked perfectly so I drain the water, and put the pot back on the stove.

Maybe I should get her something to drink, she is my guest until Mlungisi comes back. I pour the cold juice into a large glass and put it on the saucer.

She has made herself comfortable in one of the plastic chairs in the living room and she thanks me as I hand her the glass of juice.

The door opens as I turn back and Mlungisi steps in. He looks surprised to see me here and smiles nervously as his eyes land on the lady behind me.

“Zimile you are still here?” he says walking in.

“Yeah where else should I be?” I looked at him confused.

“Home. You are done with the washing angisho?” he raises his eyebrows.

“So you are not going to introduce us?” the lady’s voice chirps in behind me and it sounds annoying all of a sudden.

“Oh I’m sorry, Wandile this is my sister Zimile, and Zimile this is Wandile my girlfriend.”

The lady walks past me to stand next to Mlungisi with her arm linked with his, to be honest they look good together but I’m hurting, he wasn’t supposed to find a woman so soon – I have just moved here!

“Nice to meet you Zimile,” this woman’s smile is blinding and I’d stare at it the whole day. No wonder Mlungisi fell for her.

“Likewise,” I say forcing a smile on my face. “The food is ready, I should dish up for us.” I walked past them and Mlungisi called out to me.

“You shouldn’t worry yourself about that Wandile will dish up for us – thank you for cooking, I really appreciate it but you should leave before it gets late. I will call one of my friends to take you to the rank.” He says that and this Wandile woman clings on him even more.

“I will be back.” He untangled himself from her and disappeared down the passage.

I looked at Wandile and she was looking at his direction with a smile on her face, she has plans for them for tonight – I can see by the way she is looking at him. I don’t know why but I’m starting to hate her existence.

“Madoda is waiting for you outside,” Mlungisi says as he appears again.

“Thank you bhuti,” I went to take my bag from one of the chairs. “It was lovely to meet you Wandile,” I leaned over for a hug and she hugs me back.

I went to put the saucer in the kitchen and walked out.

“Oh and bhuti, I saw two or three rats coming out of your wardrobe. And there is quite a lot of cockroaches crawling out of the mattress, be careful Wandile and hold on tight to your weave you don’t want the rats to feast on it all night and don’t sleep naked – they might feast on your tits as a side. Have a good night!” I called out and closed the door behind me.

That horrified face I got from Wandile is enough to put me at ease and I will sure sleep well tonight.

04.

I felt a tap on my legs and I stirred under the blanket. The tap again!

“What?!” I say with my head still filled with sleep.

“Your phone,” she whispers back and only then I heard my phone vibrating over my head.

I took it and answered it without checking the caller ID.

“Hm?” I am too tired to speak, it’s probably in the middle of the night and this person is disturbing my sleep.

“Zimile are you there?” I was already drifting back to sleep.

“Who are you and why are you whispering?” I turn to sleep on the side and I came face to face with Lorna’s foot, I pushed it back and pulled the blanket to my neck.

“It’s Wandile, I got your number from your brother’s phone.”

“Okay,” I want to know why she is calling me at this time of the night.

“I can’t sleep, were you serious about the rats and the cockroaches?” I sense a bit of uneasiness mixed with fear from her.

“Yeah the other one had teeth, it was really scary, looking at it made my skin crawl,” I am getting good at this.

She takes a deep breath.

“Where is your weave?” I ask holding myself from laughing.

“It’s in the fridge, I couldn’t keep it anywhere else.”

That’s it, I burst out of laughter and earned myself another tap on my legs.

“You are laughing Zimile, this is serious – I’m allergic to rats.” Oh really, we have those kind of people as well and how would she know she is allergic to rats?

“Where is bhuti?”

“He is sleeping and snoring like nothing is going on. I can’t even close my eyes and I even denied him...you know what. Are you sure about the rats?” she asks again and I roll my eyes.

“Lalela girl go on and risk your life if you want to give him the kuku so bad but don’t say I didn’t warn you. What are you wearing now?”

She sighs and goes silent for a few seconds.

“A night dress,” she whispers.

“That won’t be enough to keep the rats away, there is a sub-zero jacket in bhuti’s wardrobe, take it and you will thank me in the morning.” I am fighting really hard not to laugh at this girl’s stupidity and she is too easy – eyi abo cheese girl.

“Wandile what are you doing here in the middle of the night?” I hear bhuti’s voice in the background. “Come to bed,” he adds.

I don’t stay on the line to hear the rest of their conversation but the rats story seems to be working though it won’t be for long – there are no rats so my story doesn’t check out but who cares!

I went back to sleep, I can’t lose my beauty sleep over other people and she is nothing to me so she is not worth it.

The workload seems to have doubled up today and I'm guessing I will be knocking off a little bit later than usual.

"Zimile there is someone looking for you. He gave me your description so I am pretty convinced that he is looking for you." My mind first went to thinking that Mlungisi is the one who is here for me but why would he give out my description instead of my name?

I thanked the chef and went to look for this person who is looking for me. We have only white chefs in this restaurant, Mario is the head chef and owner of this place. Even their customers are all white people, it's not discriminated so I guess other people choose not to come. I wish I could be the one served, sitting in one of these tables and sipping the most expensive and finest wine while dressed in a designer dress. A few weeks in Durban and I have seen and learnt a lot about expensive taste.

I walked across the tables to the man in blue, he turned to look towards my direction and it's the guy who is always with those rowdy police men – the serious and quiet one.

"Hi." I greet trying to hold back my uncertainty of his presence here. Maybe he took what I said yesterday seriously and he is here to get the food.

"You are under arrest, you have the right to remain silent, whatever you say now can and will be used against you in the court of law..." he grabs me by arm and my head is filled with confusion. I was still waiting to hear what exactly I am being arrested for and the last time I checked, I wasn't guilty of anything – whatever it is I was framed!

He drags me out of the restaurant and as soon as we step outside, his friends start cheering on him. It is the same group. They are clapping their hands while whistling and laughing.

Then it dawns to me, "how much is it?"

"What?" I feel him looking at me so I turned to look at him as well. He is a bit tall so I tilted my head up a bit.

"The bet," he corks his eyebrows and frowns. "How much are you going to get?" I asked turning back to look over to his friends, they look proud of their friend – bloody bullies.

"R600," he says hesitantly. That's a lot of my money and he'd get it just from...oh he has my hand in his now so that's what the cheering is about – he made it look like I came out here voluntarily when he just scared me to death saying I'm under arrest!

"Tell them you want a thousand Rand," I say low enough to be heard by him only.

"Why?" he asks clearly confused.

I turned to him, my hand went up to the back of his neck and I pulled him to my face. I didn't wait for him to object, I placed my lips on his – this wasn't part of the plan, I heard gasped from the crowd.

"I want my 50% share – don't cheat," I said after pulling away and the guy blinked rapidly trying to make sense of what just happened.

I left him there without saying another word. The boys, I won't call them men because they are too childish, started cheering again behind my back – with just a lousy kiss I have bagged R500!

When I knock off, I am dog tired and I need a lot of sleep as soon as I get home.

The sun is setting already and soon it will be dark, and the darker it is, the more dangerous these streets become.

I walked on the same street as usual and there is one van on the side of the road today. There is one of them in uniform, sitting on the side where I will walk past and it looks like he is waiting for someone.

When I am close enough, he raise his head and I see that it is Mr bet guy, the bet I sealed with a kiss.

“You should have told me you will be knocking off late, I have been sitting here for hours,” he says standing up to his feet and dusting off his butt.

“You never asked,” I say looking at him. He does look tired so I guess they got to do some work today unlike the other days where they just sit around and do nothing.

“Where is my money?” that’s the only thing I want to talk about right now and the reason why I stopped in the first place.

“You were serious about that?”

“Like death, letha.” I extend my open palm to him and he digs inside his pocket for his wallet.

“It was nice doing business with you.” I say taking the cash from him and folded it before stashing it in my bra – better safe than sorry.

“I didn’t even get your name.”

“You never asked.”

“Are you always like this?” he says like he is accusing me of something.

“Like what?” I come to a halt and looked at him.

“This stubborn,” he points to me and puts the hand back into his pocket.

“You don’t know me and already you say I’m stubborn?”

“I don’t really have to know a person to tell how they are.”

“Please stop psycho analysing me and save it for your convicts.” I don’t know why I’m getting all worked up already – being tired is getting to me now.

“Can I at least get your name?”

“Zimile.”

“I’m Bayede,” he says extending his hand for a handshake, how classic – please remind me, why am I still standing here?

“Good bye.” I turn and start walking away. He is following me, by foot really? Who is going to drive that van back to the station?

I don’t know why I’m even worried about that. He is silent, not a man of many words I see and by surprise I feel safe with him here. When I get to the stop, the taxi is already parked on the side of the road and I get in without looking back.

When I get home, Busi is in the kitchen finishing up cooking and everyone else is in the living room. I am surprised to see Mlungisi here as well, the atmosphere is intense though so something must be wrong.

“Is everything okay?” I ask still standing.

Mlungisi takes the remote and switches the tv off.

I get a sense that I need to sit down for whatever that is coming next.

“I got a call during the day, Nomthandazo's husband passed away.” I gasp in shock, no this can't be happening, not to Nomthi.

She is my older sister, in between Busi and Lungile, the most down to earth person I know, well she is much better than Mlungisi and Lungile combined.

I didn't even know her husband was sick but she has always been like that, she always wants to handle things on her own and I don't doubt that she can but everyone needs a helping hand from time to time.

“When is the funeral?” I ask.

“Saturday and we have to leave tomorrow before those people kill her.” He says with so much anger brewing inside of him.

Nomthi's in laws never liked her, they hated her since from the beginning but she got married to her sweetheart despite the death threats she got from her in laws.

I don't know how she survived living with those people all these years. Maybe they did it for their son but now with him gone there is nothing stopping them from killing her.

“They already want to kick her out of the house, she called me crying – that's why we need to get there as soon as possible.”

“What about work?”

“You will have to miss it Lorna, our sister needs us right now.” Lungile speaks up, finally.

At least tomorrow it is Friday so I don't think Mario will mind if I take the day off.

“I will ask my friend to borrow me his car, Muzi you will drive us there and I will drive when we come back.” Muzi nods in agreement.

“Do you think she will agree to come with us? I mean like you said, she can't be alone in that place,” I am really worried about her safety. I'm sure they are already plotting on how to kill her.

“I don't know. You know how stubborn she can be, she wasn't even supposed to be there in the first place but she wouldn't listen.” He huffs in frustration and Muzi pats him on the shoulder for comfort.

These news are affecting him more than it affects the rest of us. I feel really sorry for him, and Nomthandazo.

“I will dish up the food for us.” I stood up and went to the kitchen.

I washed my hands and started plating the food.

When I go back to the living room, everyone is sitting quietly – we have lost one of our own as well.

“Please close your eyes so we can pray.” My father taught me that prayer heals all wounds and now we need God to pull us through. We have to be strong so we will be able to be there for Nomthi.

“Amen.” They said at the same time and we started eating.

I looked over to Mlungisi and he is having a hard time eating his food. His mind is over the hills and immediately I get the urge to comfort him.

“Bhuti, I can get you something lighter if you want.” He nods without lifting his eyes up fully.

"I am going out, I promised a friend that I will meet up with them." Muzi speaks up and stands up with a plate in his hand.

He hands it to me because I was going to the kitchen anyway, he could have taken it there himself but no.

I took Mlungisi's plate as well and Lorna followed me with her sisters' plates. She dumped them in the sink and disappeared into the living room.

I made a two slices sandwich for Mlungisi with a cup of coffee on the side. When I enter in the living room, he is not there, Lorna and Busi are watching tv so I guess he is in the bedroom. I headed there and lowered the handle with my elbow because both my hands were full.

He is standing in the middle of the room with his hands resting on his waist.

"Bhuti here is your food," I say placing it on the small table. "Are you alright?"

He sighs and turns to look at me.

"No I'm not. I have never been so worried about anyone like this and I doubt I will get any sleep tonight."

"Come," I opened my arms as I walked towards him. I embraced him and rubbed his back lightly. "Everything will be fine, just be strong for her."

"I'm trying."

"Try harder." I pushed him back and looked at him. He is a mess.

There is it again, that spark and he doesn't hold himself back before his lips smashed onto mine. I kissed him back, it was rough like he was fighting and he wasn't getting enough. He pushed me until I had my back against the wall. The kiss was too sweet but that didn't last long, images started flashing in my head.

Faster and faster until I saw his face – Bayede!

I push Mlungisi back and guilt washes over his face, he thinks I might be mad that he kissed me but I'm not.

"I shouldn't have done, it shouldn't have happened."

"Good night." I said and yanked the door open. I stepped out, closed it and leaned on it.

What the fuck just happened? What is Bayede doing in my head?

I quickly reached for the R500 that was still in bra and looked at it – he definitely bewitched me, that bastard!

I raised my eyes and Lorna and Busi were looking at me.

"And then wena?" she enquires with her stinking attitude. I just looked at her and clicked my tongue before disappearing into our bedroom.

05.

It is going to be a long drive to kwaMaphumulo, yes Nomthandazo lives there just on the other side of the village and like all married black women, she couldn't visit home because she is no longer our parents' daughter – she has her own home now and that is what she had to focus on.

I don't know why Mlungisi had to get such a small car knowing very well that there's six of us that needed a ride.

The big brothers are occupying the front seats while the four of us are squashed in the back seat. At least I'm sitting by the window, I can get to breath.

No one has said a word and my mind is busy with thoughts of what happened last night, I don't think I will get over that anytime soon.

My phone vibrates and it's Wandile calling me, just because I entertained her the other day doesn't mean we are friends!

I cancel the call but she doesn't get the message.

"Bhuti, please block this number for me," I say handing him the phone. He is a guy so I doubt he knows her number by head and as expected he doesn't notice that he just blocked his girlfriend, which reminds me...

"How is Wandile doing?" I ask after taking my phone back from him.

"She is fine. She has been calling none stop, she doesn't understand why I had to leave in such a hurry – she says it's short notice."

Short notice for what? I guess that's why she was calling me, she can't get through her boyfriend and now she wants me to play the middle man, well she came to the wrong girl.

"She didn't sleep a wink last night," he chuckles. I thought he was going to be mad.

"Why?" nosy Lorna asks.

"Zimile said there are rats and cockroaches in my flat. Ah with just a slight touch she'd jump and scream out loud like she saw death coming for her," he laughs again.

It is not really funny but I'm glad he is laughing and letting loose unlike the mess he was last night.

"She said she is allergic to rats," I add and roll my eyes.

"How would you know?" Busi peeps her head to look at me.

I shrug, "How is it your business how I would know such?" she doesn't reply instead she sits back.

They are too nosy it's annoying, couldn't she take the news from me and not question my source, argh.

We enter the village after a long drive and head to Nomthandazo's household. It looks different from the last time I was here. Well the last time was when we gave her off to her in laws despite what we heard they were capable of, we just did what made Nomthi happy and that was to be with her husband.

Muzi parks the car just next to her house, she lives in the same yard with her in laws and that was the most stupidest thing her husband ever did for her.

Her kids rush to us and we share a few hugs. Poor kids, they probably don't understand what is going on and they might be thinking this is a social visit.

We take out the groceries that Mlungisi insisted we buy – we can't eat what is served by these people here if we value our lives that much – each one of us has a plastic in their hand as we head to the house.

Nomthandazo steps out of the house, wearing all black, she looks so sad and depressed. I can't imagine the pain she must be going through.

"Thank you for coming," she wipes her tears. Right now I wouldn't know if it's tears of joy or she is reflecting on her pain.

"Our condolences sisi," we hugged.

She nods and more tears flow from her eyes.

The in laws have come out to see who has come into their yard and why they don't know anything about the visitors – we have sure gave them something to talk about.

"Thank you for these, it's like you knew we didn't have any food in the house."

We are alone in her house now as the girls, the boys are outside, checking out the coast I hope – I still love my life and being alive.

"How are you feeling though?" that's Lungile. She is also emotional now.

"What can I say sisi? Kubuhlungu but I will survive."

"You are strong Nomthi, you will get through this and I don't doubt that for a second." I get a small smile from her.

"Busi and Lorna, please prepare the fire in the kitchen so we will be able to start preparing food for supper."

They both look at each other like Lungile has said that in a language they don't understand.

"Don't worry Lungi, I will do it." Nomthi says already standing up but Lungile stops her.

"We are here to help you sisi, Busi and Lorna will handle the cooking, I'm sure you are tired and need a break. Busi do I have to repeat myself?"

Lorna the boss is ready to throw a tantrum, I think she tends to forget that she is a 24 year old woman now and she is way too old to be pulling such stunts.

They stood up and disappeared outside. There is a small rondavel that is used to make fire in so that's where they are heading.

Lungile and Nomthi went on to catching up about her stay with these kind of people and I left them and stepped outside.

We now have a bodyguard that is looking our way, I don't know him and I don't think I have seen him before. He was probably told to watch our every move, like we would do anything here – they don't even have anything valuable that we could steal.

I head over to the boys who were standing just a few feet away from the main house, overlooking the deep forest below and they are having a quiet conversation.

“I am curious, how are we going to sleep?” I ask because Nomthi’s house is too small for all of us and there is no way that we could leave now and come back tomorrow again. We can’t even go home to our parents’ house and leave Nomthi alone when we came all this way for her.

“I don’t know but I’m sure we can make it work. And it’s not like we would get any sleep with these people around us.”

They could be plotting already. Even that old man looking our direction is creepy.

“What is going on there?” Muzi nods his head towards the small kitchen.

God, that is too much smoke for one fire, kanti what is Busi and Lorna doing?

I don’t say a word to the boys and just headed over to check what is going on in there.

When I reach the kitchen, they are sitting down next to the small fire place, looking into each other’s eyes – the conversation they are having is too interesting – there is no hope for the fire they were working on, I don’t see any flames there.

“Really Lorna? You are sitting there gossiping about your own sister? Wehlule mntaka baba you can’t even control yourself now, anyone’s news is big news neh?”

They look startled, their eyes are roaming around – I didn’t hear anything but that could be the only reason why they were whispering and even forgot why they are here in the first place.

“Mlungisi is definitely going to know about this,” I say already ready to step out of the rondavel.

“Zimile, please don’t.” She sounds guilty enough.

Knowing Mlungisi, he’d break anything to protect his sister’s feeling right now and Lorna is skating on thin ice.

“Carry on working on the fire. Busi woza so you can help me with the chopping.”

She stands up and comes to me. Lorna kneels in front of the fire place and starts blowing, she is not succeeding because she is doing more coughing than blowing.

I leave with Busi and we head to the main house so we can start with the cooking.

Mlungisi was right about the fact that we won’t be able to sleep here, I have been twisting and turning all night. Insomnia is real.

Everyone else is sleeping and snoring. The two brothers are sleeping in the small kitchen, it was the only option they had.

Just as I am thinking about that, the sound of the car alarm reached my ears and I sit upright.

The siren goes on and on, and heart is pumping – they are probably trying to steal it!

I shake Lungile to wake her up and the rest of them wake up. The alarm is still going on.

“What is going on?”

I rushed to the other side of the room to peep outside the window. There is no one on sight, the yellow car lights are flashing and then Mlungisi walks up to it – finally, what took him so long?

No one tells the other to get out of the door so we can find out what really happened.

“Did you see who did this?” I ask but that is just a dumb question, whoever it was is long gone now.

“These people are messing with me right now! What is it that they want from us kanti?” Mlungisi is fuming. I understand his anger, it’s not his car to start with and those people have no business to touch this car.

I wonder if it was tampered with because I don’t trust anyone around here.

“Where are you going Mlungisi? You can’t go there,” Nomthandazo tries to stop him but she fails.

He is long gone and has disappeared into the other side of the yard.

There are banging sounds so I guess he is banging on their doors instead of knocking – they have messed with the wrong person.

But they were wrong, aren’t they are ashamed of themselves? It is the day they bury their son but they have other plans in mind and what the hell were they hoping for because I doubt any of them can drive.

Mlungisi comes back breathing fire.

“We are leaving after the funeral, I don’t think I can stay here for a minute longer without killing someone.”

I’m glad he mentioned that because I have also had enough with this place.

Our parents came for the funeral and a lot of neighbours made their presence. It was a dignified send off though it was heartbreaking to watch Nomthandazo cry like that.

As we approach the yard, there are people who are busy removing things from Nomthi’s house – where did they get the key to get inside?

We rushed there and Nomthi’s father in law is in-charge of the removal of the furniture. The man is busy giving out orders for the things to be taken out of the house.

“What is going on baba?” she asks still confused and shocked by her father in-law’s actions.

“These were my son’s things, he bought it with his own money and now with him gone – they belong to me.” He says without even looking at her.

“I am his wife, I am still alive so these things are mine as much as they were his!” she argues but the man wasn’t listening.

Tears were already flowing on my sister’s face, how can these people be so heartless, if they can’t let her keep the things for herself then they should let her keep them for their grandchildren’s sake.

The bed is already outside, the wardrobe and even her husband’s clothes. Jesus, I have never seen something like this.

“Bhuti, do something.” Lungile says looking at Mlungisi. He is the eldest here and speaks for our parents since they are not here.

They can’t do this to her, next thing they will kick her out saying that the house belongs to them as well.

“Baba can we talk about this?” Mlungisi says calmly.

“There is nothing to talk about, you are not a Nzama so I have nothing to say to you.” I cover my mouth with my hand, looking at this old man.

“This is my sister so you will listen to me.” I can tell he is getting upset.

“Take these to my house, my wife will see what she will do with them.” He is passing orders and he is not giving a damn about us.

“Hey! Webaba touch those things and you won’t see daylight tomorrow, do you hear me?” he says looking at the men who were instructed to take the things away.

There was a back forth between Mlungisi and the father-in-law, and the men didn’t know what to do.

“Sisi you can’t stay here.” Lungile says quietly.

“This is my home Lungile, I swore to the Lord that I will stay throw thick and thin,” she can’t be serious.

She can already see that these people are doing their own thing and are not thinking about her feelings, she can’t be serious about staying here even the person she swore with to the Lord is dead – isn’t it death do us apart or I am the one who got the wrong end of the stick?

“We are leaving Nomthandazo, we can’t let you stay here.” Muzi jumps in.

Nomthi shakes her head, the stubbornness in her is out to play and no one will change her mind now.

The father-in-law is really not backing down, I don’t even know if they stayed long enough to see their son being buried because he had a lot of time to remove these things. And I am sure the plan was to move the things before we come back.

“I am not leaving, my husband died here and I will die here as well. Even the kids need to grow up close to home.”

I can’t believe this, what did that man do to my sister? She can’t honestly be thinking that this is the right environment to raise the kids or she has a death wish, that is the only explanation.

“Leave these things or someone will die, I’m not afraid to fight you madala, leave my sister’s house like you found it and we can put this thing behind us.” He negotiates but the old man is still not agreeing with him.

“This is not over,” he says looking at all of us.

He steps out of the house and leaves us standing there.

“Nomthandazo doesn’t want to leave with us bhuti.” I am the first one to speak up after that old man has left.

“Nomthandazo?”

“Angiyindawo Mlungisi,” (I am not going anywhere) she says lifting up a few things and takes them back inside the house.

It looks like it’s going to rain at any moment from now.

No one says anything after that, it is her wish to stay and we can’t force her to leave if she doesn’t want to.

We helped her put back everything in place then we say our goodbyes.

Saying goodbye left a bitter taste in my mouth, I don’t like this and I don’t think anyone of us is happy with this.

She has too much pride on top of that stubbornness of hers – she doesn’t want to be called ‘umabuya emendweni’ even when her husband is dead.

We leave Maphumulo with a heavy rain, it is quiet, Mlungisi is the one driving today and as we enter Durban, the sun is setting and the streets are dry-dry.

It's like we come from another planet since it was raining really hard that side.

We arrive at home and we get out of the car. The heavy hearts we left with, are twice as heavy when we come back – I think we should keep our phones really close because we will be receiving a call really soon saying that Nomthandazo is no more.

My heart breaks for her.

We enter through the kitchen door and there's a big pot on top of the stove. I don't remember anyone leaving the pot on the stove.

Lungile has my bag and they all disappear into different parts of the house.

Out of curiosity, I went to open the pot – I screamed on top of my lungs, putting the lid back on and moving away from the stove.

They rushed into the kitchen and looked at me for answers.

"There's a black snake in there." The image of that snake is stuck into my head. It was shiny like it had been swimming in oil and too big to a normal snake.

I was shaking to the bone as fear washed all over me, I even had goosebumps.

"Ahhh!" Lungile screamed from the other room.

I didn't even notice that she wasn't here. We all ran to the bedroom and she was on the floor, shaking really aggressively like she was having a fit, her eyes were turning white and she was making weird sounds.

What the hell is happening?

"Busi hurry and go call ugogo!"

Busi quickly disappears outside the room. The sight in front of me is horrifying, first it was a snake and now this – what is going on?

06.

While I'm still dealing with shock, Busi walks back in with an old woman behind her. I have never seen her before but they seem to know her that is why they called for her in the first place.

Mlungisi has Lungile's head on his lap, she hasn't calm down and still is shaking and making weird sounds.

Gogo doesn't waste time, she takes out incense out a plastic bag I didn't notice she had when she walked in and Busi hands her a lid that she can use to burn the incense.

She makes Lungile inhale its smoke, she mumbles something and by the look of things she appeasing to the ancestors for them to calm down.

After a few minutes, Lungile eventually calms down and we all relax a bit.

I don't know what I would have done if I was alone with her and something like that happened – I didn't even know they had a gogo who came to their rescue when something like this happened.

"What happened?" she asks looking at Mlungisi.

We should be asking her, how did she know that the ancestors were angry at the first place?

"I don't know, Zimile saw a snake in the pot earlier and then we heard Lungile screaming. We came in to find out what happened only to find her on the floor in the same state you found her in when you got here," he says looking at the old woman and back to Lungile who is taking in deep and shallow breaths.

She really scared me but now I am more interested in finding out what went wrong, why we have a snake in the pot, why Lungile was like that and what the hell made the ancestors angry?

"There is a lot of weight on my shoulders, I felt it the moment I stepped inside this house – the ancestors are really angry Mlungisi. There is a lot that is happening in this house which is making me uneasy."

I don't know what to call this woman – is she a traditional healer or a prophet – whatever she is and whatever she just said is really confusing, do all people like her speak in riddles or I am the one who is slow?

I wish she could just get to the point.

"What does the snake mean?" I ask. I am the one who saw it so I deserve to know.

"Like I said there's a lot that is happening here, your home has been tampered with – someone wants you dead – the snake was a warning, Lungile being like this is a sign from the ancestors that they are angry. The dark cloud over you didn't bring itself here, there is a person who you provoked, they are really angry and they won't rest until they have what they want and they can only get what they want when they are done with all of you."

Okay, I thought the snake was scary but this is on another level.

"So what can we do – do we have to apologise to this person?" the look I get from Mlungisi when I said that confirmed that he is thinking of the same person, he made Nomthi's father-in-law angry and he warned us that this is not over so it must be him who did this.

The woman shakes her head.

“We have to do a ritual yokuqinisa umuzi first and then we can deal with the person later. We don’t want to act impulsively and have him destroying everything you stand for – he is already in so we have to make sure that you are all strong enough to withstand what he has planned for you.”

“When can it be done?”

“We need the whole family to be there, your mother and father, close and distant relatives have to be there.”

I looked over to Mlungisi, he is thinking what I am thinking, there is no way our father will approve of this and it’d take a lot of convincing to get him to agree. As for the relatives, I wish to find out how that is going to work out.

“We have to do it as soon as possible or this will only get worse, you have been warned.”

She stands up and looks at all of us, one by one and her eyes stop as soon as they lock with mine. I hold my breath because I am not sure I am ready for whatever that she has to say.

These people can read your mind and your deepest infidelity, and I don’t wish to find out what she saw in me.

“Make sure your son is also there,” finally she speaks up and I exhale, nodding my head in agreement.

Busi walks her out and I help Mlungisi get Lungile into bed.

We get out the room and find Lorna and Muzi in the living room.

“This is your mess bhuti.” Lorna shoots daggers at him.

“This is not the time to point fingers at each other Lorna, we have to figure out how we are going to get out of this mess.” He moves to sit next to his brother who has been too quiet for my liking. I want to know what he thinks about this whole thing.

Busi comes back and sits down.

“First, how do we convince ubaba that this is important and has to be done like as in yesterday?”

“I don’t know, you guys know how he feels about the ancestors’ ordeal, he was even hard on Lungile because of who she is so I really don’t know how we’re going to do this,” I sigh, thinking about the whole thing.

“Where is the pot?” I don’t know why I jotted that back into my senses but the thought of having a snake in the house still makes my skin crawl.

“What pot?”

What is Busi saying to me? There was a pot on the stove a while ago and she just came in through the kitchen door so she must have seen the pot.

I don’t reply to her instead I went to find out for myself what really happened to it. When I get to the kitchen, there is no pot on the stove. I looked around and it’s where we left it before we left for the funeral – on top of the kitchen cupboard with the other pots.

This is insane, kanti this is what they call witchcraft?

I went back to the living room with my chest heaving, I’m not even sure it will be safe for us to sleep in this house, like the old woman had said there’s a lot that is going on in this house.

“I will speak to mama tomorrow morning maybe she will be able to get through him – this is a matter of life and death.”

“I agree with you.” Finally Muzi says something.

“How are we going to pay for it? I mean we surely need goats, chickens and food.” For the first time in forever Lorna points out something sensible.

It’s true, how are we going to finance a ritual that we didn’t plan for?

“We all have to contribute something to make it work and I will have to dig into my savings if I have to.” The big brother is stepping up to his big brother duties.

“I will ask gogo what exactly we are going to need so we can start budgeting.”

Hehe if I knew it’d take a snake and an angry mob of ancestors for people to grow up then I would have provoked that Nzama person a long time ago – I admire the work this whole thing has done to Busi and Lorna – the ancestors need to be promoted to something better, maybe move them upstairs because the underground is getting crowded, I am really impressed.

We all agree on everything and Mlungisi announces that he has to leave, he has work tomorrow so he needs to rest. I’d die if Mario said I should work on a Sunday to cover for the Friday I didn’t work.

“Do you think he’d agree?”

Mlungisi asks as I walk him out to the car parked on the side of the road.

“He is my son too so he has no choice but to agree.”

“I get worried about him you know, what if he forgets you? He is still young and doesn’t get to see you at all.”

“I know but that can change, I am working now and live here so he can visit me.” I say quietly. I haven’t thought that far but now that I have said with my own mouth it is not such a bad idea.

“You are his mother so you know what is good for him. But what about your father, you know he won’t approve of it.”

“I know bhuti but what can I do? It’s not like I can say ‘God I don’t want this child – take him back’, just because ubaba won’t accept him. It still hurt you know.” I can feel my heart breaking.

“I can only imagine how you must be feeling.” He pulls me in for a side hug and I sigh.

“But that won’t be long because Wandile is preg–“ I get out of his hold and look up to him.

Wasn’t it just a few weeks ago where he said that he was still looking for someone but here he is right now telling me...what was he going to say konje?

“She is what?” I look at him in disbelief. He has a smile on his face, it must be big news to him and he must be happy but how did things happen so fast?

“She is pregnant,” that silly smile on his face widens.

“Oh really?” I fake a smile, should I be happy about this or happy for him? “How long have you guys been dating anyway?”

“A month.” He scratches his head. “Well we have been intimate before we made things official so I guess that’s when it happened.”

He is really happy, the excitement on his face says it all.

“So you guys are serious now?”

“You can say that, she is going to be the mother of my child so we are tied for life now and maybe when I go to her home to pay for damages, I can also pay lobola for her.”

I literally choke on my own saliva. No this is not happening, not now, I must be dreaming – so she is going to take him away from me already?

I quickly recover and say, “I guess this was part of her plan, you knock her down and she gets everything that she wants. A very old technique to get a man to marry you, I can’t believe you are falling for it too bhuti.” I argue and the smile on his face vanishes.

“I love Wandile, Zimile and even if she wasn’t carrying my child I would marry her either way.” I can sense anger in his voice.

“How are you even sure that she is carrying your child? Maybe she was impregnated by another man and fooled you to believe that you are the father! And you are too dum–“ he grabs my arm roughly and I swallow the rest of what I wanted to say.

“I am what?!” he is fuming with anger and the few people in the streets turn to look in our direction. I remain silent, listening to my own heart pounding against my chest – he is too angry and I don’t trust myself so I keep my mouth shut.

“Say another word about Wandile, Zimile – I dare you to.” I shook my head, fearing the unknown, I have never seen him this angry when it comes to me – he has always been gentle towards me but I guess we are way past that point now. He has Wandile now so he has forgotten about Zimile.

“I wanted you to be the first person to know because I thought you were going to be happy for Wandile and I. I thought since we’re close you and I, then I could share my happiness with you but I thought wrong.” He lets go of my arm and then heads over to the car.

I don’t know if I should run after him and apologize or I should save my breath and let him be. He gets inside the car, brings the engine to life and drives off without even hooting goodbye. I watch the car as it disappeared down the road.

I walked back inside the house with a tail in between my legs. That was stupid, stupid I hit my head a countless times. I don’t know what I was thinking but that was uncalled for.

The house is quiet even the tv is off. I switch off all the lights and went to the bedroom.

Everyone is in bed already, it’s before nine and even Lorna is sleeping. Today was the longest day of my life and like that wasn’t enough – I also ruined it for myself.

I switch off the lights and get under the blanket after I have changed into my pyjamas.

I hope it is going to be a peaceful night – I looked around the dark room and it felt like someone is watching me. I did a cross on my chest and pulled the blanket over my head.

Why did I have to be the last one to fall asleep?

07.

“Are you running away from me?” He says rushing to catch up with me.

“No, why would I do that? I have no reason to, like you don’t have one for being here,” I steal a glance at him.

He left his friends behind and he is here walking me to the stop where I will get a taxi. Today I wish I never had to walk this far because that means I’d have to spend more time with him.

“Sadly there’s is nothing you can do about it?”

“Yeah it is really unfortunate,” I huff looking the other way.

“So what did you do with your money?”

“I haven’t used it, I am saving to use it to buy something nice for my son.” Mpilo has been on my mind a lot since gogo mentioned that he needs to be there for the ritual, not that I didn’t think of him but now he’s constantly on my mind and I want to do something really nice for him to make up for the birthdays I missed and for the lost time.

It will take more than money to make up for it but it is a start and I know he’d understand but one thing for sure is I don’t want him to grow up without me in his life.

“You have a son?” he doesn’t sound shock but he is curious.

“Yes, he’s five. He doesn’t live with me though, he lives with his father so that’s why I want to do something for him when I see him again.”

“You miss him, don’t you?” he says softly.

I looked at him for a few seconds and went back to looking ahead.

“Yeah, I feel like I am not a mother to him, the only thing that ties me to him is the fact that I carried him for nine months and gave birth to him. And that’s it – I never got to mother him.”

I feel myself tearing up then I chuckle at the thought of how easy it is to open up to him and he doesn’t seem to mind. But maybe he is tolerating me just so he can get me to the stop or it is another bet with his friends – maybe that’s why he is here.

“Why?” he asks more curious than before. “You don’t have to answer if you are not comfortable with it.”

I stop on my track and turn towards him.

“My father never accepted him nor his father, that’s why.” I couldn’t stop the tears this time around but I managed to wipe them away before I continued to walk forward.

He falls behind for a few seconds and catches up.

“I am sorry.” Well that is the only thing he can say, honestly there is nothing to say in situations like these and in my case, it is still hard to accept it.

We walk for the next few minutes in silence, I have managed to collect myself but I am walking slower than any other day, he must be the cause of that. Walking with him is not the same as when I walk alone.

“So why the police force?” I don’t look at him but I can feel his eyes on me.

“Love?”

I shoot my head to him.

“No, not like that. I meant I love this that’s why I am here.” He is walking like he is keeping stones, those boots must be heavy.

“But you spend more time at that robot than out there,” I point out to the space in front of us. It is still early, the sun is about to set so it’s getting a bit chilly – I can’t wait for summer.

“I’m paroling there, I watch the coast for anything suspicious.” He says like he is convincing himself than me.

I have never seen him or his friends working.

“Oh.”

“And you, what are you doing there?” He means at the restaurant, what can I say – the truth?

“Circumstances put me there, I wish I could say it’s love but it is very far from that.”

We are very close to the stop now and the taxi parks on the side of the road looking for people going further into town. That is my cue.

“I hope everything goes well for you and your son. Uhambe kahle Makhathini,” he says with a wave.

I looked at him in awe, the guy didn’t know my name a week ago and now he knows my surname?

There is no smile on his face, he is creepy and I don’t know if I should get used to it or enquire him about it – a normal person smiles once in a while.

I get inside the taxi and for the first time, I look at him walking away. Weird because it feels like he left with a part of me, ‘get yourself together Zimile’ my mind scolds – his muthi is really strong and I won’t get rid of that thought until I am proven otherwise.

Two weeks later and we are in this place again. Mama managed to convince her husband that we need to do the ritual, it wasn’t easy but he finally agreed.

The relatives even made time for it, those who live far couldn’t make it which is understandable since it was short notice so we won’t hold it against them.

Gogo will lead the ritual, the goat has been slaughtered alongside three chickens. I don’t know much about what is what and what is for what, the only thing I am looking forward to is for gogo to say that everything went smoothly and that we are protected.

The angry mob of ancestors better calm down for their own sake, we don’t want them to die again because of high blood pressure then we’d have to slaughter another goat or worse a cow to appease to them for absolute nothing.

I don’t know where I saw or heard this, but someone mentioned that they can’t wait to become an ancestor so they’d make their living relatives slaughter a lion because they are too much for him to handle – I think I’m going to join the cue because wow.

Wandile is here as well, the pregnancy landed her a ticket to meet her future in laws before the appropriate time. The parents seem to love her which I don’t doubt for a second, besides being annoying, she is kind-hearted and down to earth and a really good match for bhuti.

Just as I step outside the rondavel, heading to the main house, I see Didiza and Mpilo approaching at the corner of my eye.

My heart accelerates in excitement – I have missed him so much.

I rushed to them and picked Mpilo up. He has grown big and tall, luckily I get a smile from him instead of a confused face.

“How are you?” I don’t wait for him to answer before I continue, “I missed you so much, I am so happy that you are here.” My boy is smiling from ear to ear. This is the sight I should get to see every morning, every day and every time I go to sleep.

“Will you be staying?” I ask Didiza since I am not sure if he will be comfortable to stick around given our circumstances and his relationship with my father.

“I can leave if you want.”

“No, that is not what I meant. You can stay.” It’d take him long hours to walk back home and another long hours to come back when he has to get Mpilo.

“The other men are busy behind the house, doing I don’t know what, you can go there so long.” He nods and walks away.

I hold Mpilo tighter around my arms, he is really here.

“Let’s go greet everyone.”

I head to the main house and the family is there, I don’t know what to expect but I refuse to hide him like he was stolen and he is not a child, my child to be more specific.

“Look who is here,” Lungile says with a wide smile on her face as she approaches us.

“You look like an old man, you have grown big Mpilo, what is your father feeding you?” she asks, taking him from me.

Everyone greets him and the boy is not shy at all, he fits right in. Lungile still has him in her arms when she walks towards my father. I can’t read his face but I’m shocked to see him reaching out to take Mpilo from Lungile.

Lungile is just as shocked, his lips curl into a smile and he places Mpilo on his lap.

“Unjani mfana?”(how are you boy?) He focuses his attention on the little boy like there are no people around him.

Mpilo replies softly and Baba’s smile widens.

Lungile turns to look at me and I shrug.

“Do you know who I am?”

Mpilo shakes his head, baba is a bit disappointed but that is on him, he can’t blame the child for not knowing him.

“I am your mkhulu, your grandfather and that is your gogo.” He points to my mother who isn’t sitting far from them.

Introducing himself as umkhulu to Mpilo means he has accepted him, right? I am not dreaming, please Lord don’t make this a dream – my prayers are finally answered.

My cheeks hurt from all the smiling that I have been doing, my mother looks my way and she is just as happy. I have never got to find out if she ever felt the same way about Mpilo like my father did but now I couldn’t be happier.

He can accept Mpilo, I don't care about how he feels about Didiza because he is not a factor in my life.

They continue with their small talk and Lungile walks up to me but she stops a few steps away from me, looking over my shoulder.

I turned back only to find Nomthandazo standing on the doorway.

I don't know how to feel about my sister, she is a mess and is deeply confused. No one in their sane mind would stay in a place like that with those kind of people and we are here now because of them.

"Come in." Lungile rushes to usher her inside.

She may have acted like that the last time we saw each other but she still has our respect and if it was under different circumstances then I would have admired her strength and determination of not giving up on her home.

Lungile shows her a place to sit and Mlungisi walks in at that moment.

"We have everything ready and..." his eyes land on Nomthi. I don't know what that look means, "since we are all here, I think we can start."

Gogo agrees, she takes over and the ritual proceeds.

"Can you please show me the toilet?" she says crossing her legs like she'd just pee right there and then.

"There are a lot of people here and you chose me?"

"I prefer you," she has a small smile on her face which makes it hard for me to say no.

I will tolerate her annoyance since I am in a good mood and I would be dumb to allow anyone or anything to spoil my mood today.

I take her hand and lead her to the back of the rondavel. I was busy eating when she approached me but I have lost my appetite, I will save the food for later.

"Why didn't you tell me you have a child?" she asks behind the closed door.

I am standing by the door like a bodyguard, waiting for her to come out.

"You never asked." I fold my arms to my chest.

"I am glad I know someone who has given birth before, so you can give me pointers and the do's and don'ts."

"There is really nothing to tell, all pregnancies are different. What happened to me might not happen to you."

The door opens and she steps out.

"You know I didn't mean it like that. But anyway I will keep you close until I give birth." I scan her body and she is not showing yet.

"Goodluck with the labour pains." I walk away from her and she follows behind me.

"Is it that bad? I thought people exaggerated," she is such a scaredy-cat.

"Yes it is as bad as they said."

She walks back to the main house and I step inside the rondavel to wash the dishes. The downside of being a host, you do all the chores while the people who ate the most food are sitting back relaxing while the food digests in their stomachs.

I step out of the kitchen with a dish in my hands that has the dirty water I used to wash the dishes. I dispose the water and when I lift my eyes, Mlungisi has Wandile in his arms. They look really cosy and...happy. The smiles on their faces really shows that they love each other and whatever they are talking about is of common sense. I feel drawn to them more than I should, I can't make sense if it is jealousy or sadness that I am feeling but whatever it is, hurts. They look so good together and I wish, yearn for something just as beautiful. "It was never going to happen, you know that right?" I jump, startled by the voice that chirped behind me. "What are you talking about?" I act dumb still looking at the lovey dovey couple in front of me. "You and Mlungisi." I shoot my head to her with my mouth slightly open. "If you think you did a great job at hiding your crush for him then think again." She looks at the couple for a few seconds before she walks back inside the kitchen. If she knew about me having a crush on Mlungisi then why she never said anything? She can keep a secret, wow any sensible person would have reprimanded me but she kept quiet. I place the dish on my hip, walking back to the kitchen – hehe Lungile, what else do you know?

08.

I stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around my body. I walked out of the bathroom and tiptoed to the bedroom. I lotion my body and put on a night dress.

I walked out of the room, wrapping the towel around my waist and headed to the living room. When I heard that bhuti is working night shift, I just thought now it is my chance to have this place all to myself and unlike the other day – Wandile is not around to ruin my night by popping up out of nowhere.

He has bought a couch, it's one L shaped couched which looks comfy as it feels. There's no doubt that it is brand new as well, he has a good taste but I feel like Wandile had a hand in it. Just as I settle on the couch, there is a knock on the door maybe I spoke too soon about having a quiet evening with no disturbance.

I huff in frustration and walk to open the door.

I set my eyes on him and he looks surprised to see me here, I am more shocked than surprised – is he following me? And how the hell did he know that I'd be here tonight?

He takes a step back and I notice that he has a brown leather overnight bag in his hand, it gets worse, did he have plans to sleepover? He is fast, no doubt about that.

"Bayede?"

I can't seem to find anything else to say that is appropriate, how do I even ask him what he is doing here without coming across as rude and arrogant?

"Zimile?"

"Why are you here?" I ask raising my eyes from the bag to his face. He is still wearing the same expression he had when he first saw me as I opened the door for him.

"I – Mlungisi sent me to bring this bag here, he didn't tell me that someone would be here but when I saw the lights on and the key was not in the flowerpot that he directed me to, I thought I should knock." He is still unable to get over his shock, his voice says it all.

"Oh okay, please come in." I usher him inside and close the door when he has entered.

"I didn't know that you knew my brother," I say following behind him and he quickly turns at my statement.

"He's your brother?" he cocks his eyebrows.

"Yeah," I say like it is obvious. "Why else would I be here?" I give him the 'duh' tone again.

He shrugs, "I don't know."

"And how do you know him?"

We are still standing in the middle of the spacious room, bhuti needs to add a dining table in this space.

"He's my colleague, more like my superior."

The news come as a shock to me, I didn't know Mlungisi worked at the police station, if he is Bayede's superior then that explains why I have never seen him in a blue police uniform. I have never seen him with a gun either, he must be hiding it very well and now I understand how he can afford a flat like this and a girl like Wandile.

“Oh okay. Let me take that,” I reached for the bag in his hand. “I will put this in his room so long.”

I don't wait for him to reply, I head to bhuti's bedroom and threw the bag on top of the bed. It is Wandile's duty to look after her man now, I am no longer doing that since I know where I stand with Mlungisi so I'm done trying.

“I should leave, have a great night.”

“Are you running away from me now?” he is already at the door.

“No, I thought I shouldn't ruin your evening. I'm sure you have plans for the rest of the night.”

He sounds nervous for some reason maybe it might be that he is in his superior's house, forgetting that Mlungisi doesn't have superpowers – what he doesn't know, won't hurt him.

“Nonsense, what could I have planned in my big brother's house. He doesn't even know that I am here so I wouldn't do anything that would get me in trouble.”

“That gives me more reason to leave, I don't want to intrude.”

“So you are really turning me down? You are refusing my hospitality, or you have someone else that is waiting for you?”

I don't think I will like the answer for that but here goes nothing, he opens his mouth to say something but instead of words, a chuckle escapes his lips and his face lights up. I have never seen him laugh so I can't help it but stare at him.

“Is that your way of asking me if I'm taken or not?” he asks still with a smile on his face.

I scratch the side of my face, I am guilty as charged.

“No, but if you don't want to stay then I won't force you.”

I walked to sit on the couch and took the remote to change the channel, bhuti has DSTV so kusazobamnandi la.

Instead of hearing the door open and close, I hear footsteps approaching the couch and I look up to him.

“So you are staying?” I keep a straight face while he looks all nervous.

“You made it hard for me to say no for the third time.” His hands are buried deep inside his pockets and his shoulders are raised up like he is not comfortable.

“Okay, come sit down. I want to watch this movie – I have never seen it before.” I take the cushion that was resting on my side and put it on my lap.

He walks around the couch, goes past me and sits next to me, and he left a gap between us.

I look at him, “are you okay?” he looks tense, like he is forced to be here and I'm not sure he really wants to be here.

“Yeah.” He nods.

He looks too tense. The movie has started, his eyes are on the screen in front of us and I have mine on him.

“Are you fine?” he is asking me while he is still looking ahead.

“I am good.” I nod rapidly like he could see me.

This guy needs to relax. I bent over to his side and he jumps, startled by my actions and I look up to him, confused.

I bent over some more and reached for his shoe laces. I loosened both and took out his shoes, surprisingly his feet don't stink.

"Are you hungry? I can dish up for you if you are. I was in a good mood, I ended up cooking more food than necessary." I say sitting upright.

"Sure, I am not really hungry but I won't say no to food."

"Yeah right." He is smiling a lot tonight, I wonder what happened.

I went to the kitchen to dish up for him. When I come back, he is sitting comfortably on the couch unlike the first time he set his butt on it.

"Thank you," he says as I hand him the plate.

I turn to the screen to catch up with the movie that is playing. I missed out on a lot so I don't really know what is going on but I watch it just so I wouldn't watch him eat.

"Your food was really nice." He places the plate on the table and I look at him in disbelief.

"That was fast, did you chew?"

He throws his head back as he fills the room with laughter. He is really beautiful when he laughs, he should do it more often or maybe he knows that he turns this handsome when he does so he avoids it as much as he can.

"Of course I chew, but with rice I just swallow, it's much easier than chewing on each grain – which is tiring."

I have never heard anyone say such before, it sounds weird – chew on each grain? That would take forever, yes but one doesn't have to specifically chew each grain, they could just chew the whole thing – chewing some is better than none.

"And you don't suffer from indigestion?" I am really curious now, who is this guy?

"No." He shakes his head, focusing his eyes on the tv.

I take the plate and head to the kitchen to get him something to drink.

He takes the glass of juice and thanks me.

I sit back down on the couch, without realising it, the gap keeps closing in.

"I am bored, I spent more time giving you my attention and then I missed out on the important parts of the movie."

"It is a nice movie," he says absently.

Of course he'd say that, isn't it he was busy watching it while I was preparing his food and all.

"So where do you live?"

"I live here," he says like it's an obvious thing.

"I know but I meant like where is your family?" I turn to sit facing him.

"KwaDukuza, in a small village – Hlomendlini." His focus is still on the movie.

"That is nice," I have never been that far. I know Stanger but I have never been to that side of it.

"So what else can you tell me about yourself?" I am trying to get his attention but I am failing dismally. One thing that I am totally sure of now is that he likes watching movies – action movies, with a dash of thriller.

"Not much," he shrugs.

"You could have said something there instead of wasting your breath and say 'not much'," I roll my eyes.

“You could just ask the question of what you want to know then I’d answer you.” He says much to my annoyance. I am trying to make a conversation here without me having to question him on everything. Words should flow out of his mouth without me forcing them out of him. Maybe he should have left earlier. The screen gets dark and the movie is ending. He turns to look at me. The gap between us is closed by my knee, that I raised up to sit comfortably.

“I don’t like talking,” he says.

I have noticed that but I’m still surprised because he actually just told me so what are we supposed to do until he leaves?

“That kiss was amazing, I still remember it like it was yesterday.” I should be annoyed that he is speaking out of turn but I smile instead.

“Your face said it all,” I say laughing lightly, reminiscing the look he had when I placed my lips on his. He is such a non-romantic, his eyes were open the whole time. I know that because my own eyes were half closed.

“You took me by surprise, what did you expect me to do when you didn’t even give me a warning, even my colleagues and friends were there.” He laughs and I join in.

He said he doesn’t like talking but here he is talking like he didn’t mention that he is a mute, I guess it’s his family that he doesn’t like talking about.

“But I have to say that it felt good, right is the right word to describe it.”

“So you wouldn’t mind if we do it again, proper this time around.” He glares at me.

Zimile, you are too forward. My lips are in a thin line as I think of how I might have pushed him away, he is a reserved person and a man so he must do the hunting but here I am offering myself on a silver plate.

“Okay,” my heart skips a beat.

He shifts forward, looking at me, the nervous Bayede is out the window and another version of him has sprung out.

He pulls me to him with his hand behind my neck, tilts his head to the side and places his lips on mine.

He is in no rush, he is taking his sweet time and I don’t rush him either, I follow his lead and he grabs onto my waist. His fingers dig deeper into my flesh as we kissed some more.

I pulled away and looked at him. He is definitely feeling what I am feeling. I smashed my lips on his and helped him out of his shirt. He wasn’t wearing his uniform, just casual clothes that I didn’t notice he looked good in until now that he has flipped me over and is looking down on me.

My breathing is short and fast. He gets rid of the towel, next the nightdress while kissing me in between.

I spent a lot of time in my head, yearning for a part of him that I didn’t see when he took off his pants or my panty.

He sucked my lips again before he lowered himself to fill me with his shaft. It has been a long time since I had found myself in this position but the pleasure outweighs the pain.

He moves in and out, slowly like he is making love to me and I wrap my legs around his waist to get him to go deeper.

His wet kisses are driving me insane, he humps deeper and faster – I lose it. My moans hit all the corners of the room, I swear the neighbours can hear me right now.

He rams into me really hard and took me to nirvana within seconds.

He rode me through my orgasm and exploded inside me with a loud groan against my ear.

He is dripping in sweat and I think I like this Bayede than the one he was earlier.

He gets off me and slides to lay next to me while he is catching his breath.

I snuggled into his arms, I think I am getting clingy already but who can blame me, he just made me feel good phela Didiza is no match to him.

“Zimile,” he says my name breathlessly and my heart gets excited again.

“Hm?”

“I want us to try it out and see where this thing is going to take us.”

“Really?” I rose up, balancing on my elbow while the other hand was resting on his chest.

“Yes, and I am hoping it could be something serious.” He sounds serious as he looks. “I don’t think I can watch you on the sideline again after what just happened.”

Well I don’t know, I thought it would be a one time thing, that is what these city guys are famous for right? But then again, he mentioned earlier that he is from some village so I guess that sets him apart.

“Question is, will you give me a chance?”

He takes my hand into his and links our fingers. I look at our entwined hands then back at him.

I have never been in a relationship since Didiza which was a stupid, foolish relationship where I was still dealing with my demons and I was far from being in love with him.

I like Bayede but I am still not in love with him. But he looks harmless so...

“Yes, I will give us a chance.”

His lips curled into a wide smile. I leaned in to plant a kiss on his lips.

“How about another round for the road?”

I giggle as he flips me over so I’d lay on my back, “I really want to wife you.” He means it.

09.

I wish I had a time machine, the events from yesterday were truly the best and damn I have been thinking about him the whole day. He really did something to me, I won't let go of that thought until I am proven otherwise but I am glad that he didn't hit and run to the opposite direction – he actually wants to be with me.

If that's not a man then I don't know what is. Him saying he wants to wife me, scared me a little bit, I mean I am not there yet. Yes, the sex was good but we are still down here and he's already up there. I know I should be happy that he sees me in his future but for now, I will stick around for his dick only and then I will see as time goes on.

I won't lie he is a good guy, he is giving me the good vibes you know and there's nothing about him that puts me off. Now I get butterflies just thinking about him, it's the excitement, not love – I hate being misunderstood.

After work I came straight home, Mlungisi will be at his flat tonight so the freedom of hosting Bayede was a little bit short and it'd be a bad idea to invite him over here since this house is overcrowded, and I'm still sharing the double bed with my three sisters.

Anyway, it is my turn to cook tonight so I am in the kitchen, cooking the easiest meal I could come up with. I am really tired and not in the mood to stand on my feet for longer than an hour.

No one asked where I was yesterday, well that is because I haven't seen Muzi since I came back from work – he will be playing the big brother role since Mlungisi is MIA.

"Sanibonani ekhaya," there's a knock on the door.

I turn to it and Mlungisi is standing there.

"Hey, come in." I stir the pot some more and closed it with its lid.

"Where is everyone?" he asks walking in.

He didn't say anything about coming over, the food I cooked will be enough for just the five of us or I could share my plate with him but that was before Bayede and he has his own Wandile so...

"They are back, you will find them in the living room or the bedroom. Muzi is not back yet though."

"Oh okay, I will wait for him. Uh there is something I found in the couch, I was looking for my charger and I came across it..." he reaches into his pocket and retrieves a grey underwear.

"Wandile said it's not hers so I thought..." I yank it from him.

"Yeah it is mine, thanks." I say smiling nervously.

"But what would it be doing in my couch?" I understand his confusion.

"I came yesterday afternoon, thought I'd find you there but you weren't, this might have fallen out of my bag you know girls stuff, you never know when you'd need it. I watched the tv, I hope you don't mind."

He is not entirely convinced but he doesn't have any other different theory so he has to believe my story.

“No I don’t mind but be careful next time. Wandile bit my head off saying I am sleeping around, please don’t put me through that again.” He is damn serious, the argument with Wandile must have been really bad.

I nod to him and he leaves, heading to the living room and I heard him greet – Lorna must be there.

I look at the panty in my hand, I can’t believe I forgot about it, that was really close and at least it was clean when I left it there.

I stash it into my back pocket and turn to the pots on the stove.

Five minutes later, I dished up for us – rice and tinned fish – I know someone is going to complain and it’s even worse because I had to reduce their portions so I will be able to dish for Mlungisi as well.

I give them their food and then Muzi comes in.

“Mlu, I didn’t know you were coming,” he only saw Mlungisi and the rest of us are invisible, I roll my eyes, I guess no one knew that bhuti was coming.

“Do I need to announce before I come here, I mean this is my home too you know and I can come in whenever I want, even in the middle of the night.”

“You will end up seeing things you were not meant to see if you carry on like that,” our eyes shoot to Muzi, what does he mean by that?

Could it be that he is sneaking girls in while we are sleeping, that is the only explanation – I can’t believe this, in his father’s house pho?

“I will make the announcement for my sake, I am too young to go blind and there’s a lot I plan to see.” The brothers laugh at the joke that we sisters didn’t catch.

“So this is a social visit?” I ask.

“Not really, I was waiting for Muzi to come back before I tell you the reason why I am here.” He has our attention now.

“I want to send the uncles to Wandile’s home, the sooner the better.”

“You want to pay lobola before you pay for the damages? That is sneaky bhuti.” Lungile says shaking her head.

“It was her idea, and I don’t think it is such a bad idea. Anyway what can stop us from going ahead with it?”

“You can fool her family but you can’t fool the ancestors, they have seen the child already and you have to do right by them.” Here she goes again, I don’t know what to call what she is doing right now, is it preaching?

“I don’t think there is anything wrong with paying lobola for Wandile, he was going to marry her at the end of the day so see it as hitting two birds with one stone.” Muzi adds his comment.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you. But I am happy that you have found someone who you love and plan to grow old with.” Her happiness doesn’t reflect on her face. There’s something about her that I can’t get my fingers into it.

“So when is the wedding?”

We all laugh at Lorna, I mean we are still talking about bhuti ‘planning’ to pay lobola and yena she already wants to plan what to wear on their wedding day? Talk about being fast forward.

“We will talk about that after the lobola has been paid.”

She nods but she won't back down on the idea of going shopping for her outfit.

My phone rings, I left it in the kitchen so I rush there – it's Bayede, my first call from him!

“Hi,” I say slipping out of the house through the kitchen door.

It is really dark and cold outside but he is worth it.

“Hey, how are you?”

“I am good thanks and you?” my voice has changed, I swear I don't even recognise my own voice.

“I am good too,” I can hear by the way he is talking that he is smiling and me on the other hand, I am blushing like he is standing in front of me.

“Do you have plans for tonight?”

I check the coast before replying, “no, why?”

“Into emnandi iyaphindwa so I was wondering if I could come and pick you up.”

I chuckle nervously, it's not that I don't want to but sleeping out again tonight will attract unnecessary attention and Mlungisi is here.

“I don't know.”

“You really don't know or it's your way of saying no?” The smile is gone, I know it.

“Let me think about it.”

“But there's nothing to think about, it's already after seven.”

“Bayede please.”

“Fine, I will give you five minutes for you to get back to me but I am really hoping that you will say yes. My bed is cold without you.”

Back up a bit, I have never slept on his bed so I don't know what he is implying here or he really doesn't know what he is talking about. Maybe he thinks I am one of his floozies that he slept with in the past.

“How can you miss something you have never had?”

“I had you in my dreams, you really don't want to know the things I do to you in my sleep right here on this bed but if I were you I'd jump at the opportunity to found out,” he says and I am smiling from ear to ear reminiscing what happened last night. If he can do better than that then I definitely want to find out.

“Okay, I will text you in two minutes. I have to go.” I don't wait for him to say more before I hang up.

I put my phone into my back pocket and went inside the house.

“You are leaving?” I ask bhuti when I find him in the kitchen.

“Yeah but I am going out with Muzi before I head home.”

Muzi comes in and they both leave after Mlungisi has said his goodbyes.

God always has a plan and comes through for me all the time, I was still wondering how I was going to leave the house when the two brothers are in the house – that's a mission impossible but now with both of them gone amasango avulekile (the gates are open).

“Lungile, I am going out and I will come back in the morning.”

“Where are you going?” she asks, looking at me like she'd find the answer on my face.

“Ask no questions, hear no lies,” I say packing what I will wear to work tomorrow.

I have already texted Bayede that he can come to pick me up and I included my address on the text.

I don't know if he has been in this side of Durban before but he is a man so he will find a way to get here, right now I am convinced that it's his dick that's driving and not him so I am sure that he is going to come, come fire or high water – I will be the one warming his bed tonight.

“Cover for me when Muzi asks question.”

She doesn't say anything but nods.

I take my bag and leave the bedroom. Lorna and Busi are watching tv and I slip out without them seeing me.

I know Lorna has a big mouth and Muzi will know I am not in the house before he can even notice that I'm gone.

Bayede said he is parked a few houses away, right after turning left in that corner so I walked there and a police van is parked there.

When he said he is coming to fetch me, a police van is not what I had in mind but there is no turning back now.

I get inside the car, “you are using the government's resources for personal use?”

“I work tirelessly so I consider this my reward.”

“If you say so.”

“So I won't even get a ‘hey babe’ kiss?”

I smile, shaking my head, “drive Bayede.”

He looks at me for a few seconds and drives away.

He is driving towards the direction that I am very much familiar with because this is the route I take every day when I am going to work.

“Where are you going?” I ask as we head towards Mlungisi's flat.

I turn to look at him and he is looking ahead.

“My place.”

He doesn't drive to Mlungisi's flat but to a flat that is opposite his.

“You live here?”

I shift forward to have a look at the flat.

“Yes, come.” He opens his door and gets out of the car.

I follow suit and get out of the car.

“My brother lives right opposite you and you didn't see it right to tell me this?”

“I don't see anything wrong with it, it's not like we are roommates, me and your brother.”

I don't know how to feel about this, this place is too close, what if bhuti sees me when I leave in the morning and how will I explain being here first thing in the morning? He knows that I don't have friends here.

“Welcome,” he says ushering me inside.

It is a simple flat, not wow or dull, just simple. I can see the kitchen and a single sofa. I guess the other side is the bedroom or bedrooms and a bathroom.

“I have already eaten, what I need is some sleep.”

“Oh I see you can’t wait for this big guy, if you told me I would’ve given it to you, right there in the parking lot.” He holds me tighter around my waist.

The thought of that makes my skin crawl, there’s no way I would have allowed that to happen when I know that Mlungisi is just a few feet away – sleeping out is bad but him seeing me out there shagging his colleague would be hell.

“One round then I am sleeping.”

“I can’t promise you that, I mean I have you the whole night it will be hard to hold myself.”

He is already kissing my neck and I can feel myself getting excited.

In the dark, I reached for my vibrating phone that is on the small table besides the bed. I checked the call ID and it’s Didiza.

I decline his call, I mean it’s 00:47am and what could he be wanting to say in the middle of the night that can’t wait until morning?

It rings again before I could drift off to sleep. This guy, just because my father accepted Mpilo that doesn’t mean him and I stand a chance, he should just leave me alone.

I answer the phone just to get rid of him but it is not him.

Her voice is so unclear because she is crying in between and I can’t make out what exactly she wants to say.

Finally she calms down and repeats what she wanted to say. The phone slips out my hand and I pat Bayede to wake him up.

“What?” he sits up really fast because I think I hit him harder than I intended to.

“Didiza is gone.”

“Who?” he rubs his eyes and yawns.

“Mpilo’s father – he is dead.”

10.

He had been complaining about a stomach ache, it wasn't a running stomach, he said it felt like he was being stab a countless times.

His family tried traditional remedies but nothing helped, they were going to take him to the clinic the next day but unfortunately, he took his last breath in the late hours of the night before.

He couldn't hold on until the next day. They didn't tell me because they thought it was something that was passing and they didn't think I needed to know.

We laid him to rest just a day after he passed on, no coffin, just him wrapped in a white bedding sheet – his family didn't have a funeral cover even the people left without being served a mere glass of juice, that's just how bad things were.

I couldn't leave Mpilo behind so I took him with me, his family objected but I am his mother and he needs to be with me. He was going to feel lost with his father not around even now I don't think he clearly understands what is going on.

I place a red plastic bowl in front of him, in between his legs, I told him to sit on the floor so he wouldn't mess the couch.

When his eyes land on the bowl in front of him, he gives me a frown and glittery puppy eyes.

"What is wrong boy?" I ask crouching down to level with his height.

"I..." he points to the bowl. I am still confused at what is wrong because the food looks fine to me.

"What? You don't eat beans?"

He shakes his head, taking the collar of his t-shirt to his mouth and starts sucking it.

"Mpilo," I pull the t-shirt out of his mouth. "What else you don't eat?"

I am such a bad mother, I don't even know what my child doesn't eat and worse I know nothing about him.

"Just beans," he says quietly.

He is not comfortable around this house as yet, this is still new to him but I am hoping he will let his guard down soon.

"Okay, I will get you something else."

I take the bowl to the kitchen and Lungile comes in.

"Is that Mpilo?" she asks, closing the door behind her.

"Yeah, I decided to come back with him."

"And his grandparents, what did they say?" she looks over to Mpilo and back at me.

"You know how old people are, they had a mouthful to say about how disrespectful I am to just take the child while they are still mourning. You know I couldn't leave him there."

"I know, you did good by bringing him here. You are his mother after all so you get to decide what is right for him." Big sis is supportive much.

I continue making the two slices peanut butter sandwich for Mpilo and she leaves me there.

I pour him a glass of juice and took the food to him.

"What about school?" Lungile has him on her hip and I put the food down.

“I will see what I can do. It is going to be hard, with work and all, I can’t leave him alone in the house and there is no one I can leave him with.”

“Yeah, check out the preschool close by. You are such a good boy,” she rocks him back and forth before putting him down so he can eat.

I stay with him to guard him and he eats on his own, big boy – Lungile leaves us and goes to the bedroom.

I have been seeing less of Lorna these days, I don’t know what is happening with her, if she is not sleeping then she’d be at work but I am glad I don’t have to deal with her stinking attitude. Muzi walks in just as I head to the kitchen to place the dishes.

“Bhuti, I brought Mpilo with me and he is going to be staying with us.”

“Are you serious?”

I don’t know but I am not laughing so clearly I didn’t crack a joke.

“Yes I am serious, and I was wondering if he could sleep with you since our bed is full, he is a boy so I don’t think that would be a problem.”

“It is going to be a problem.”

He moves past me and walks to his room. I forgot that this one also has a stinking attitude.

“Why would it be a problem? You have a whole double bed to yourself, are you that selfish and stingy?” I argue before he could step inside his room.

“Watch your tone Zimile, is this what you want to teach your son, you want him to think that it is okay to talk to me like wehla emthini?”

I look over to Mpilo and he is looking directly at us.

“You won’t lose anything by just by allowing him to sleep on your bed. I will make sure he doesn’t wet himself or your mattress.” My voice is lower this time, I am fighting really hard to stay calm.

“No I won’t sleep with a child, plus he is not mine.” He turns to reach for the door handle.

“So you are really going to allow him to sleep on the floor on his first night here?”

He has his back on me so I can’t see his face.

“Just do what you need to do Zimile and leave me out of it.”

He steps inside his room and closes the door behind him.

I sigh, defeated. The Lord knows I tried being sincere to him but he managed to do me like that anyway.

Mpilo looks tired, it was a long trip and he sure needs the rest. I went to the bedroom to fix our place to sleep on the floor, Muzi will see karma and I will stand on the side and refuse to help him like he just did with me – it wouldn’t have costed him a cent but he said no anyway.

He was already yawning when I put him in between the blankets.

“Sleep tight,” I rub his bald head and kissed his forehead goodnight.

“So how long will he be staying?”

“What do you mean how long he’d be staying?” I look at him clearly confused by his question.

"I mean, you just came here and now-now you will have to leave and go back to him," he complains, pulling me close to his body.

"Are you jealous?" I smirk, raising my head to look at him.

"Yeah it feels like I am sharing you now," he pouts, he looks so cute with that face.

"Haha very funny, but no I don't have to leave just yet."

"But he is your son, you have to go back to him before he falls to sleep."

"Are you hearing yourself? Not so long ago you were complaining about me leaving early and now you want me gone? Uyahlekisa Bayede, and no Mpilo is too young to notice if I am there or not. Let him bond with his aunts." I say drawing invisible circles on his bare chest.

"If you say so," he says then plants a kiss on my forehead.

"Maybe I will leave in an hour or so," his mood as gone sour right after what I said. "But I want something before I leave," I sneak my hand under the duvet and got hold of his member.

"Don't start something you won't stand for."

"Is that so?" My grip tightens around him and he exhales sharply.

"Zimile..." my name falls sweetly out of his lips.

"Will you give it to me or should I take it myself?" I kiss him lightly on the side of his face.

His eyes are closed and his breathing is short and hard.

"Answer me," he has gone mute. He groans at my tight grip, he is hard as steel and my cookie jar is dripping wet, craving for him.

I get on top of him because I can see that he is taking things slow for me and I can't wait any longer.

I slid him in me before going up and down, filling myself as he groans under me, gripping my butt for dear life.

I moan louder when I pick up the pace, I have never done this before but I think I am going to do it more often.

This is what I love about Bayede, he allows me to be myself and doesn't force me to be a different version from who I am.

His grip tightens even more on my butt cheeks as he shoots his load inside me and I can feel him pulsing against my vagina walls.

I get off him and laid on his side. I breath in and out trying to recover.

"Fuck, where did you learn to do that?" he is also just as breathless.

"Do what?" I act dumb and got off the bed.

"You owe me an explanation, that was mind-blowing." He sounds serious but he still chuckles at the end of his statement.

"I am glad I made you feel good at my first time."

I slid my dress on and walked up to him so he could zip it for me.

"I will see you tomorrow," I say and kissed him on the lips.

When I get inside the house, Mpilo is in the living room watching cartoons, I have never seen those so I don't know what they are called.

I went over to him and kissed him on his forehead.

“Have you eaten?” I ask but his attention is on the screen in front of him.

“Mpilo?”

He nods without even looking at me and I sigh.

The house is quiet you’d swear there’s no one in the house. But there is shuffling in the bedroom so I went over to check who is there.

I open the door and Lorna is in her panties only, she is busy looking for something in the wardrobe.

“It’s good to see that you are alive and kicking,” I say and she jumps frightened, covering her upper body with the white shirt she just took out of the wardrobe.

“Zimile!” she scolds.

“Wait. What is that?” I say pointing to her and stepping inside the room.

“What?” she looks at herself but doesn’t remove the shirt covering her upper body.

I rushed to her and yanked the shirt away from her.

“That,” I point to her now visible baby bump.

That explains why she has been unavailable all this time and why she slept a lot.

“You are pregnant Lorna?” I ask the obvious and she looks more embarrassed than ever.

“As you can see for yourself,” that stinking attitude is still there I see.

I want to rephrase my question, what I really want to know is why she was hiding it?

The door opens and Lungile steps in.

“Lorna is pregnant.” I tell her.

She doesn’t look fazed by my statement and I chuckle.

“So you knew?”

“I have had a long day,” she says putting her bag on top of the bed. “Lorna get dressed, we have a child in the house and he could step in at any moment from now.”

That’s all she is going to say, she is freaking pregnant and “get dressed” is the only thing that she is going to say?

“Lungile?”

She looks at me, I nod towards the now getting dressed Lorna.

“When you got pregnant no one questioned you so return the favour and zip your mouth.”

My mouth hangs open and she leaves me with Lorna who is smirking looking right back at me.

Knowing Muzi, he also won’t say anything but he had a lot to say about me being pregnant back then.

“Unlike you, I am not 21 and I can take care of my baby.” She slid into the bed, I knew she was not done and she proved me right by opening her mouth again. “Even my baby daddy is not like that rotting corpse of yours.”

I take a step towards her but she is saved by the Mpilo who opened the door right at that moment.

“Mama I am hungry,” he says rubbing his eyes.

Didn’t he say he had eaten already when I asked him? I huff in frustration.

“Don’t deny the child food – kwashiorkor kills.” She smiles widely.

If it wasn't for Mpilo or that stupid baby she is carrying then I'd have strangled her to death already.

I clicked my tongue and pushed Mpilo out of the room, and to the kitchen.

She better pray to God so He can save her from me and sleep with one eye open. If I don't kill her then Didiza will surely punish her – no one speaks of the dead in that manner.

He was useless to me while alive so he better come through for me now that he is on the other side otherwise he will know me.

11.

When I step inside the restaurant, the tables and chairs are put on top of one another, there's about ten racks of plates on the floor and big brown boxes piled on top of one another – they must be spring cleaning.

I take one step forward but I stop at the sound of a truck driving in, it made a beeping sound as it reversed towards the door, what is going on here and where is Mario?

I hurried towards the kitchen and I bumped into him in the hallway before I could make it to the kitchen, he was probably heading out to attend to the truck but not until he explains to me what is going on.

“Mario, what is happening? We are opening in the next two hours and I find things like this.” I point to the mess in the restaurant floor.

The way I am talking you'd swear I am the owner and he is the employee.

Mario opens his mouth to speak but he is disturbed by the two other staff I do the peeling with, they come in followed by the men in blue overalls but they don't touch anything and wait for instructions.

“This all happened suddenly, I-I...the restaurant is closing and I am moving back to Europe,” he says, looking everywhere else but at the three of us.

The chefs and waiters are not here so I guess he has told them already and we are the last ones to find out.

“I'm so sorry for letting you know at such short notice.”

“But what about me?” I ask and I feel my arm being nudged, and I clear my throat. “I mean us, what about us?”

He shrugs, looking all sorry – oh Jehovah oyingcwele you know how much I need this job especially with Mpilo living with me now.

“The new owner of the restaurant will take you Zimile for the same work that you have been doing for us,” he says and I feel a heavy weight being lifted off my shoulders. I exhale deeply, I am so relieved.

The other two glare at him, waiting to be told where they will be going from here but Mario frowns even more deeper.

“I am sorry but he could only take one of you and that will be Zimile,” he points to me and I am smiling from ear to ear.

He can leave now I don't care.

He leaves us standing there and attends to the men who have come to take the things out of the restaurant.

They only take the racks of plates and the boxes, I guess Mario is leaving the chairs and tables for whoever is coming to own this place after him.

It will take a long time for the sad faces to wear off from the other two staff, and I don't wish to be them. What Mario did was cruel but at least he gave them their full pay for the month.

I will be meeting the new owner next week Monday. The pay has increased by a few hundred Rands but the hours are longer so it doesn't make much of a difference – when Mario informed

me, he asked if I'd take the job, the old man is crazy I don't think he knows how hard it is to find a job around here and of course I took the job.

I would have been crazy to decline that offer and it's better to work long hours than none.

"What are you going to eat?" I ask, throwing my bag on the couch.

"I don't know, check in the fridge!" he shouts from the other room.

He is working night shift today, I didn't know he does ever take nightshifts because I had always seen him by the robot close to where I work during the day, everyday.

I went to the fridge, opened it and found it empty with just a half sliced onion, that looked like it has been in there for the longest time and in the freezer, there's just a container of ice cubes.

'Breath Zimile, breath', I pep talk with myself to calm down.

"Bayede, we are only two weeks away from month end and you have no food in the fridge?"

I open the cupboards and they are just as empty.

"I didn't notice," he says finally appearing to look at me in the face.

"Wow so you mean to tell me you haven't been eating this whole time?" I fold my arms to my chest.

Before he replies, his phone rings and he checks it. I notice a frown and he cuts the call.

"I haven't been spending a lot of time in the house, that's what I am trying to say."

"Very nice, now I also don't have anything to eat." I throw myself next to the bag that is on the couch.

"I can get us something to eat at the tuckshop," he says dismissively.

I know I said I am here for what is between his legs but I can't have it on an empty stomach and I need to fed real food not amakip-kip.

I wanted to argue but his phone rings again. He cuts it off without checking who is calling this time around.

"Why don't you answer it, it might be something important." I say eyeing him closely.

"It's no one important."

Oh so he has talked to this person before and that's why he knows it is no one important but if it is not important then why have they called twice since I came here? Make it three now because they call again.

He grunts looking at the screen, judging by the look on his face – he does not want to hear from this person and I think he has switched off his phone because clearly the other person is not getting the message.

"I got a new job," I say, trying to lighten up the mood.

"Oh yeah?" he tries to sound cheerful but he fails.

"Well it's not really a new-new job. My previous employer sold the restaurant to another person so I will be working for a different person which makes it feel like a different job." I shrug.

"So you will be doing the same thing?" he is looking down at me with his hands resting on his waist.

"Yeah," I nod.

“But why don’t you go back to school so you will be able to get a better paying job.”

Yes, he knows about that because I had to explain why I am working in the kitchen, doing the peeling and washing dishes.

“I am too old to go back to school – what are the people going to say?”

To be honest I have never thought about going back to school and I don’t think I want to. I have a job that is paying me enough to survive for the whole month and I will be able to provide for Mpilo so I don’t need school.

“Does it matter?”

Of course it matters, what is this guy’s problem?

“I think this conversation is making me too hungry.” He sighs, defeated. “And please get us amagwinya, I am craving for that.”

“Where am I going to get amagwinya around this place? The only thing I can get that is close to that is samosas,” he folds his arms to his chest. I don’t have a choice, I will have to take what he has to offer.

I give in and he takes his car keys, I don’t know why he is taking them because he said there’s a tuckshop close by.

“Oh before I forget,” he says before he could reach the door. “I bought a few things for Mpilo,” he says excitedly.

So he could buy things for Mpilo but not the food, wow.

He rushes off to the bedroom and comes back with a plastic from Ackermans.

I open the plastic as soon as he hands it over to me.

“You said he is five, right?”

I nod absently, looking at the shorts and t-shirts that he bought. They look really nice, they are his size but some are sizes seven to eight, a bit too big for Mpilo but he is a child so he will grow in them and I am convinced that he had a bit of help. He couldn’t have possibly bought these things without any assistant and as far as I know he doesn’t have a child.

“They are really nice, thank you, he is going to love them.” I smile to him and he looks happy with himself.

“I am glad,” he takes my hand and kisses the back of it.

“How can I repay you for this?” I ask and he chuckles. I am not joking, he sees my face and he collects himself.

“I love you Zimile. Mpilo is your son so that makes him mine too and you don’t have to repay me for this.”

He is the best.

“I love you too,” I say without thinking about it.

When I get home, I find Mpilo watching TV again and he is alone.

“Hey, who picked you up from school?” I ask putting the bag and the plastic on the couch.

“Busi,” he says not paying attention to me.

“It’s mam'ncane Busi okay?” I pat him on the knee so I could get his attention.

He nods and says he has already eaten when I ask him.

Busi is a godsend, I had forgotten that I'd have to pick him up at four before they charge for aftercare.

"Look what I have for you," I show him the things Bayede bought for him.

He doesn't give me the excitement that I was expecting instead he keeps his eyes on the TV.

"Mpilo?" I try to get his attention.

"What kind of a mother forgets about their child, huh?" Busi's voice chirps in from behind.

"It was only for one day Busi," I say already annoyed by her attitude.

"That is not how it felt like for Mpilo. The child was hungry by the time I got there, you didn't even have the decency to pack him a lunchbox!" she shouts and I turn to look at her.

"They said they offer food at school, breakfast and lunch!" I shoot back.

"Oh really?" she scoffs. "And out of a hundred kids there, you think how much food he got to eat? It is common sense to pack extra food just in case Zimile and an extra pair of shorts and t-shirt."

For only one day, now she sees herself as the mother of the year and what does she know about being a mother? I am Mpilo's mother and she better not try to replace me or turn my child against me.

"Okay I heard you. I will pack everything for him tomorrow." I say to shut her up.

"The crèche is closed tomorrow, they said something about fumigating the classrooms." She waves her hand in the air.

"But I have plans for tomorrow, who am I going to leave him with?"

I have to go to town tomorrow, I got paid so I have money to spend and I have to see Bayede, he is not working tomorrow so I was hoping we could spend the day together.

"I can leave him with you." I say and she laughs.

"I am not the mother here, you are his mother and a mother makes sacrifices for her child.

Cancel your plans and bond with your child or take him with you." I look at her.

What am I going to do with Mpilo around? Town gets too busy during the day and with him there I won't get anything done. Worse I won't even get some loving from Bayede if he is there. Please remind me – why is he here again?

"You know I can't." I huff in frustration.

"So you are going to choose a dick over your child?" she gives me the 'are you for really look' and folds her arms to her chest.

I sigh, she won't understand that only now because I am here I got a chance to live my life. I lived in a closed shell all my life so I deserve to live a little and right now Mpilo is standing in my way. Maybe I should have listened to his grandparents when they said I should leave him behind then I wouldn't be stressing about where I am going to leave him tomorrow.

"I am working tomorrow but Lorna will be home so you can leave him with her."

I snort, rolling my eyes, I'd leave him anywhere with anyone but not with that witch.

12.

The mood went sour right after he checked his phone, I don't know what is happening with him and this phone of his that has been ringing and beeping for every second of the day.

He sits up and faces the other way, I can't see his face so I don't know where his mind is at.

I shift towards him, sitting up and wrap my arms around him from behind, and laid my head on his back.

He is breathing really deeply, like he is fighting to calm down, I don't like seeing him like this and today should be about us and not about whatever he saw on his phone that made his mind run off to the hills.

"What is wrong?" Finally I got the courage to voice out my concern.

He exhales sharply, I look up and he is rubbing his face furiously. Whatever it is, it is eating him up really bad.

"You are making me worried now," I say evidently so. He should just talk already.

"There's nothing to worry about." He doesn't sound convincing so I push him a bit.

"It doesn't look like nothing, or you are hiding something from me? Is there someone else Bayede?" I let go of him and he turns to look at me.

"No." His voice is stern and so I believe him.

"So what is it?" he drops his eyes, exhaling softly.

The phone rings again, he shoots his eyes to me and I jump to reach for it first but he beats me to it.

He looks at the screen for a second and answers it, I guess it's not the person who has been calling him endlessly and the conversation he is having with the person on the other end proves me right.

He ends the call and looks at me.

"I want to know what is going on." I am not changing my mind.

I can see that he wants us to let this go but he brought us here and I want to know who is this person that has been calling him. I don't have any secrets and neither should he.

"It is complicated," he says sitting back down. Now I want to know, he has just made it more interesting by mentioning the word 'complicated'.

"Spill." I command.

"I have a son," he says without looking at me.

What?

My jaw drops, it's not a bad thing that he has a child but why is he being so secretive about it? Unless the mother is still in his life!

"His grandmother has been calling me, his mother passed on so now they want me to take responsibility for the child."

Did he just say 'the child'? Isn't the boy HIS child, I am sure it wouldn't have killed him to say 'my son'.

"So what is stopping you from doing that?" he looks up to me. "And why did you hide this from me Bayede? How long have you known?"

I don't know why I am getting all worked up, the other woman is dead so the baby mama drama died with her and I have nothing to worry about but I am worried about this man keeping secrets from me.

"I just found out, I swear. She never said anything about her being pregnant with my child and I found out from the grandmother that I have a child but I'm not going to make up my mind about taking responsibility until I see that child – I mean it's possible that he is not mine." His mind is made up, he won't accept the child without seeing him to tell if he is his or not. If I didn't drive him to tell me about this, was he going to tell me in the first place? This confession or whatever has just made me realise that I don't know Bayede, the guy doesn't even want to talk about his family and right now I had to choke the fact that he has a son out of his throat.

"What else are you not telling me Bayede?"

He looks to the side, away from me and I get to a kneeling position on top of the bed.

"Huh?" I tilted my head to the side.

He doesn't look at me and now he looks worked up for some reason. I don't know what I did wrong because as far as I know I have the right to know about the person I am in a relationship with.

"I need some air. I am going out with a few friends of mine," he says getting up from the bed and putting on his pants. "Lock the door on your way out," he kisses me on the cheek.

His car keys, wallet and phone are in his pocket in seconds, and he walks out putting on his t-shirt. With that I am left in his bedroom – alone.

I don't know what to make out of this but he owes me an explanation. I can't believe he was planning to keep the fact that he has a child away from me. Damn you Zimile, look where his dick led you now you have to deal with this on top of everything, ayi man.

The door is closed and so are the windows so I guess the people are not back yet. Lorna should be home though.

I find the key under the mat and open the door.

"Mpilo!" I scream horrified by the scene in front of me.

He is standing in the middle of the kitchen, his pants are wet and there's a gross smell coming from him. Did he just...? I couldn't hold in – I vomited right there and then.

I looked up, disgusted by my own vomit and it looks like he has been standing there for a long time.

Even the tears he had on his face had dried up and now he has released fresh tears at the sight of me. I don't know what he is expecting from me but I don't shout at him.

I cuss under my breath as I move towards him. How could Lorna leave a child alone in the house and lock him in, knowing very well that the toilet is outside?

I push him out of the house through the kitchen door, he is walking like his legs are heavy and he is sobbing now.

I keep on breathing to keep my nerves calm but the smell is really bad, it goes straight to my gut and forces me to gag but I hold myself, I can't afford to vomit again.

I wash Mpilo, right there outside and he has calm down, he has only hiccups now. I picked him up and took him inside the house, I lotion him and dressed him in his pyjamas. "I told her that I don't eat beans but she..."

"She forced it down your throat," I say. I am really angry but I stay calm for his sake. I leave him in the living room where he was watching his cartoons and I went to the kitchen to mop the floor.

When I am done, I rinse the mop and the bucket I used. I hang the mop on the line and went back inside the house. The smell is still there but it will wear off soon.

It was like God knew that I was ready for her because she stepped inside the living room with her nose up in the air as I took a sit on the couch.

I found my feet and headed to her. The tight mustard dress looks good on her with that baby bump but I am not there. A part of me is glad I found Mpilo before she did because I don't know what she could have done to my child, maybe I would have found him sitting outside with his pants still wet and filled with his mess.

"If you didn't want to look after him, you should have just said so Lorna!" I shout and she waves me off.

"So that you can call me a bad person? I looked after him and then something came up," she throws herself on the couch and gets rid of the sandals that she was wearing.

I notice that she is angry about something, I am not sure if it has to do with me or whoever she just came from.

"And the beans? He told you he doesn't eat beans but you didn't listen, do you know what a mess he was when I got back?!" my voice is still very high, I am upset and regret trusting her with Mpilo, I should have trusted my instinct and asked the neighbours to look after him and not her!

"Kahle Zimile, he is not dead. Anyway I have better things to worry about." She still waves me off.

"Like what?" I try to sound concerned but I am far from that.

"I am married," she says quietly, resting her head on her palm like she has the whole world on her shoulders.

I gasp in shock, taking in the news, I was expecting anything else besides...Lorna is married? Busi walks in before I could ask for more information.

"What is going on here, did someone poop on themselves?" she asks, pulling a face and looking at all of us.

"Now that is not important, anyway you came at the right time – Lorna was just telling me that she is married," I say pointing to her dear sister. Lorna looks up to the both of us and Busi rushes to her side.

"Married to who?" she asks.

"Godfrey Ntambana," Lorna replies with a trembling voice.

"Who?!" Busi and I ask at the same time.

"Some Godfrey guy from Ethiopia," she says breaking into tears.

Busi pulls her in to comfort her and I break into a fit of laughter.

“Do you even know this person?” Busi asks, still comforting her.

Lorna shakes her head, “I don’t know him and we are even married in community of property – what is mine is his and vice versa. But I doubt he has anything next to his name,” she says and goes back to crying on her sister’s chest.

Godfrey who? Maybe he meant to say Ntambama because ntambama means afternoon in isiZulu. Then he thought having a Zulu word as his surname, it’d make him more South African.

“Why are you laughing Zimile? This is serious,” Busi says, looking at me with a straight face.

I know the seriousness of this situation but Lorna uyaphapha and the last I feel is sorry for her.

“What were you doing to find out that you are married?”

“Baby daddy and I went to the Home Affairs to get married on paper, then they told me I can’t get married because I am already married.” She cries out again.

I can’t stop thinking about this Godfrey Ntambana person, if he is capable of this then I wish to see him live just to thank him for putting Lorna in her place. Uyaphapha too much lo.

“Your big brother is paying lobola soon, so you thought it’s best to beat him and get married first without your parents’ contest?” I ask with my hand resting on my hip.

She looks up to me with teary eyes and I nearly feel sorry for her.

“It wasn’t like that, we just didn’t want the child to be born out of wedlock.” She justifies her actions but I am not convinced.

Lorna is still months away from giving birth so that wasn’t the only thing that drove her to the Home Affairs.

“So you were really going to go behind our backs and get married without us knowing?”

“I just told you why I wanted to get married nje! Kanti awuzwa yini!” she throws a fit and gets up from the couch. I watch her in awe as she heads to the bedroom.

“You just had to Zimile?” Busi looks at me. “Grow up.” She says, getting up and running after the spoilt brat.

I clap once, so I am the one who should grow up? She just pulled the biggest stunt today and still they will baby her, that’s why she never learns anything and as for Godfrey, I clap again.

“Mpilo boy, what do you want to eat?”

I refuse to stress myself about things that don’t concern me.

13.

His flat is empty, there are no dirty dishes in the sink and his bed is neatly made. For a second I get nervous thinking that he had packed his bags and left without a word.

When I open his wardrobe, his clothes are there and I sigh in relief. His heavy looking boots are on the side of his bed, that means he is not at work and I don't know where he is because when I call him, the call goes straight to voicemail.

Trust me, I have tried a hundred times without no luck. He left but I know he is coming back since he left his stuff here. Right now, I could use his friend's number or a relative's number just so I can get to know if he is okay wherever he is.

I am worried, I don't know why but I think I care about him or I am actually catching feelings for this guy. It won't do me any harm to, well not yet but there's a lot that I don't know about Bayede and he is not letting me in.

I exhale sharply as I walk back to the living room that has only one couch and a small tv on top of a small table, it doesn't look appealing or homely – it is a real bachelor's flat.

I have been waiting for him for two hours, thinking that he will come back but he hasn't. My patience for the day is running thin, he could just answer his phone and tell me he is okay! I throw the phone inside my bag after trying to reach him for the umpteenth time today and stashed the bag under my armpit, heading towards the door.

Before I could reach the door, I notice the three flowerpots just beside the doorframe on the floor, my legs led me to the kitchen where I got a cup of water and went back to pour the water in the three flowerpots – I don't know I care about these stupid flowers but the water has reached its roots so I can't really take it back.

I left the cup there on the floor and stepped out, locked the door and walked away. The decent thing he could've done is to tell me that he is going away, that I won't see him or that he won't be reachable on his cell phone and not just go missing out of action like this.

I walked out of the building and headed towards the road where I will get a taxi to town but before I do, a car hoots behind and I jump thinking it was going to hit me – I was so deep in my head that I didn't even hear it coming towards me.

"Hey Zimile!" I look back and Mlungisi is outside his flat.

He waves and I wave back – the car drives past me, at least the driver wasn't rude and I apologised so it is water under the bridge.

But now I have to deal with Mlungisi, I had forgotten that he lives just opposite Bayede's flat and how the hell am I going to explain why I am here, going the opposite direction of his flat since to him he is the only person I know around here.

"Bhuti," I put my hand up to shield the sun's rays from hitting straight into my eyes.

"Do you have a death wish? That car almost hit you, anyway what are you doing here?" he asks and he lifts up the cup to drink the water that was left from watering his flowers.

Shuthi having flowerpots is a trend around here.

"I came to check on a friend, she lives around here," I say, roughly pointing to the flat opposite us.

"Hm," he swallows hard. "Do you want to come in?" he disposes the remaining drops of water. "Okay," I would never say no to him, he knows that too but being here wasn't part of the plan. He ushers me inside and gets inside the kitchen while I walk straight to the lounge area and resort on the sofa.

He comes back with a glass of juice, hands it over to me and sits next to me.

"So everything is going well?" he asks.

I nod, "your side?" I ask returning the gesture.

"Very well, the uncles have finalised the date of amalobola. They will be going to Wandile's home next week," he sounds excited and I don't burst his bubble, I smile to him.

"You will be a married man soon hey," I sound cheerful enough.

"Yeah ngimdala manje I have to set things straight kwaziwe ukuthi ngithathiwe," he says running his fingers through that small beard on his chin.

"Wandile must be excited too." My voice fails me this time around and he shifts to lean forward with a serious look on his face.

"Listen Zimile, I know that there are things that have happened between us that shouldn't have happened and I want us to be honest with one another. As for me, I love Wandile, I am marrying her because she is the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with and you, you are my sister what I feel for you may feel right but it is wrong. I don't think I love you like that but maybe I am sexually attracted to you but no, I'd never pursue or do anything close to being sexually intimate with you."

When he is done with his speech, he turns to look at me probably to check my reaction to what he had just said. I am sad but he is right.

"I understand, I also wouldn't have went as far as having sex with you."

He relaxes, I don't know what he was expecting, it's not like I would've fought with him or anything like that – the feelings were mutual and if he wants to get rid of his feelings then who am I to stand in his way?

"I am glad we have come to an understand, that's why I love you so much – you're so understanding and mature," he says, placing his hand on my shoulder and I laugh nervously. Our relationship has always been different, growing up we were tight and inseparable, that's where I think it all started. With the distance between us when they all left home and came to the city, I thought that was the end of it but instead of growing apart we grew closer together and now that we are older the feelings are much stronger, we nearly went down the road that we wouldn't have been able to come back from.

His supportive self towards me never wore off and he is still as supportive as he was then. I hope this truce won't change him into acting differently and with Wandile in his life, his attention will be split amongst us and it is no lie that she and the baby will get the most of it. I was about to tell him about Bayede but there was a knock on the door and he quickly stood up to attend to whoever is at the door.

I heard the door opening and the, "Oh so it's you!" I jumped to my feet, alarmed.

I turn to the door and bhuti is holding the woman back from getting inside the house.

“Let me go Mlungisi!” she shouts again, trying to get out of his grip.

I have my hands on my chest, looking dumbfounded of what might be going on – who is she and why is she fighting to get to me? – oh unless...

“Wandile, just get out of my house, stop acting like a hoodrat!” bhuti shouted at her and I gasped in shock.

The woman in bhuti’s life – she is so beautiful and looks older than Wandile, probably in the same age group as Muzi.

Bhuti fights her and finally managed to kick her out.

“So you are...”

“I said leave!” he pointed the other way.

The woman is now tearfully looking at him, I am still shocked at the fact that he just called her Wandile, I can’t even move my feet from the ground.

We both watch her walking away, bhuti clicks his tongue, bangs the door close and hurries off down the passage maybe to his room.

Right there and then, I got my consciousness back and rushed to the door.

I opened it and the woman was not on sight – that was hectic! She thought I was Mlungisi’s girlfriend, then she went all crazy, I can only imagine what would have happened to me if she got her hands on me because the girl was fuming – it was like she was a woman scorned – I wonder who she is.

“Hey,” she snaps her fingers in my face with that beautiful smile of hers on her face.

I was lost in my thoughts, I didn’t even see her standing before me until she brought me back to the land of the living.

“Is your brother in?” she asks with her brow creased.

Not able to trust my own voice, I nodded to her and she walked past me, rubbing her now visible baby bump on my arm.

My mind runs back to that woman – that was close!

Bhuti uyisoka – so there is Wandile 1 and Wandile 2 – and now should I close the door or kukhona omunye ozayo?(or someone else is coming?). Yuh today I have seen the most, I took my handbag and headed out.

I am walking on the street that will lead me home, I am just a few houses away and I get the urge to look back – gogo is coming towards me. I quickly turned to look ahead again, it is that old woman who helped us calm Lungile when she had that episode the other day and it is no lie that this gogo freaks me out. There is just something about her.

“Aw ntokazi enhle, you are walking away without greeting ugogo,” for an old woman she walks really fast. I wanted to get away from her as far as possible and I hoped she didn’t see that it is me.

“Sawubona gogo,” I say, giving her a small smile.

She looks vibrant today, more relaxed and less creepy. Oh I spoke too soon – she is giving me that look again but it is different today because she has a smile on her face.

She reaches out to me, “uzobusa lomntwana,” she says with her hand on my lower belly.

I look at her, the hand and back at her.

“Your future looks bright, kuhle.” She removed her hand from me, leaving me more confused than ever – what is she talking about?

Last time, Lungile said that my future is blank and the next thing she said is that I have no future. Now this old woman comes to tell me that my future is bright, are these people conspiring to drive me nuts or what?

She still has the smile on her face when she turns back to walk away but I manage to stop her without being too rough or rude.

“Gogo but Lungile said...”

She raises her hand to stop me from saying another word.

“She wasn’t meant to know what your future holds so that’s why she couldn’t see it. You hold so much more than you think BUT tough times are coming, kusazobanzima ntombi you will wish your life would just end,” she reaches out for my hand, I am hoping that my face didn’t sell me out because what she just said to me horrified me. “I am not trying to scare you, what I am saying is never give up or lose hope.” She sounds more like a mother right now and less of a prophet or whatever that she is.

I nod to her since all the words are stuck up on my throat, it hurts.

Her grip tightens around my hand and she lets go. I watch her walking away but soon she turns to look back, I haven’t moved from where she left me.

When she turns, she says, “beware and do not trust anyone.”

Those words ring inside my head, the old woman continues to walk away and my mouth has gone dry. I look ahead and back – which way do I go?

14.

I get to work a few minutes early than the time I usually clocked in when this place was still owned by Mario, first impressions last, so that's my goal here even if the new owner doesn't like me at least he'd know that I want to be here.

There's a new group of chefs, mixed races and two other staff that I believe I will be working alongside.

The clock hits 8H00 and we head over to the restaurant for a meeting.

There's a black man standing in front of us who I believe is the new owner, Mario was good and treated his staff fairly, but with a black person owning this place – I am hoping for a more improved management and maybe a doubled bonus at the end of the year.

“To those who do not know me, I am Mr Xaba, the owner and head chef of this restaurant.

There is a lot that needs to be done, the customers will be unfamiliar with the new management so I am hoping that you will offer them the best food that will make them come back noma kanjani,” he says that and those of us who understood the last two words chuckled. I like the fact that he is chilled so I don't think I have anything to worry about. “Opening time is the same as usual, 11H00, so let's get into the kitchen and do the most – and please guys lets provide a good working environment for everyone and I promise you that I won't step on your toes unless you step on mine.” He smiles, clamping his hands together.

He dismisses us and we move to the kitchen. There is a new menu, they changed the name of the restaurant but the peeling is still the same and the pile of dirty dishes is still at the same height.

I should have really put those days I wasn't working into good use and slept the whole time because now my body is in knots like I was carrying rocks the whole day. It doesn't help that Lungile gave me a list of stuff that she wants me to buy at Pick 'n Pay, the downside of catching a taxi in town before going home – they all work in the further side of town so the burden of buying these things fell on my shoulders.

This is the second time we are buying food in one month, Lorna is eating for two now and I have three stomachs to feed. God knows that I am not ready for this but he just had to.

I pay for the things and walk out. My eyes land on a familiar face, people might look the same but I am sure and truly convinced that it is her – “Wandile!” I call out to her.

She turns to look at me and frowns, yeah in her eyes I am still the woman who stole her man from her not knowing that I am actually his sister and we may not look alike but we have the same blood running through our veins.

I walked up to her, she also came out of Pick 'n Pay, I can tell by the plastic in her hand and she looks just as gorgeous as I saw her the other day. I wonder what made Mlungisi choose the other Wandile.

“How are you?” I ask with a smile on my face, I am trying to come across as civil here and judging by the way she acted the other day she saw me I am convinced that this woman is capable of many things.

“What can I do for you?” She has recognised me, I can tell by her attitude.

“I just wanted to clear the air between us, what you saw the other day is not what you think,” she looks at her wristwatch and back at me. “I am his sister,” I quickly add.

She looks at me for a second then she laughs.

“I am serious,” I place the plastics down, looked around us before I showed her the birthmark on my chest, “if you know Mlungisi that well then you’d know that he has the same birth mark just below his left butt cheek.”

Her face falls and she slaps my hands for me to cover my chest, the people are now looking at us probably thinking I am ready to strip off which is crazy.

“A birthmark doesn’t mean anything,” she scoffs and walks away.

I picked up the plastics and followed her.

“But you have to believe me, I am not the woman in his life and actually I know the woman that is in his life – it’s not me.” I say, hurrying to catch up with her.

She is wearing high heels but is walking really fast, I can’t keep up, I really don’t know how she does it.

“The taxis are this side,” I point to the other exit door and she looks back at me like I have said the most craziest thing a living human being would utter.

She is heading over to the exit that leads to the parking lot and that one I pointed is much better.

“Move along then, mina I came with my car,” she waves the car keys.

I look at her with my mouth slightly open, I have not only been rude to her but I have just insulted her – if that’s what you can call it.

“Oh, sorry.” I say and smile briefly.

She just looks at me and so I turn to walk to the opposite direction; she looks like that and has a car! What the hell was Mlungisi thinking when he dumped her? She is obviously loaded than the Wandile he chose to keep and more beautiful.

“Hey!” I quickly turn back.

She hurries to me, “sorry I didn’t mean to be rude, it is just that I don’t know your name. Would you mind if I give you a lift?” she asks, looking nervous like I’d say no.

I smiled to her and nodded.

We walked side by side to the underground parking lot at the Workshop and then she led me to a blinding white Mercedes Benz.

“This one is yours?” I ask and she nods rapidly. “And what do you call it?” I am not really good with differentiating cars, with this one I just knew it is a Mercedes because of the sign.

“Mercedes Benz a-class,” she says unlocking it.

This woman is swimming in cash money I tell you and everything about her screams – independent!

The plastic bags are in the boot and right now I am occupying the leather covered seat. This car is a real deal – a dream.

“I don’t mean to pry but I am just curious – what really happened between you and Mlungisi?” I ask as she drives out of the parking lot.

She sighs and glares over to me.

“I was simply not the right woman for him,” she says softly.

“What do you mean you weren’t the right woman for him? I mean have you seen yourself? The car you are driving, and I am pretty sure you even have your own house,” I say and she laughs, not that it is funny but she is laughing because I got her check list correct. If I was Mlungisi, I’d choose her over any woman at any time of the day.

“It is not about the looks or money, love.”

“Was it the sex?” I ask, with a voice mixed with curiosity and confusion.

“What?” she laughs again.

It could have been the sex, I mean if the money and her looks couldn’t keep the man then her kuku should have done the work for her or is she that cold in bed?

“Sorry but it takes more than sex and looks to keep a man. After what happened, I learned that he was never mine to begin with. Yes, the times we had together were great but I wasn’t the wife for him and that is why he is marrying that girl he met just a few month ago.”

“How long have you two been together?” I ask.

“Six years of being on and off, you know how things can be but we always found our way to each other’s arms,” she shrugs.

“And he left you for her?” I am quite shocked, I thought people got married to those they know more and have spent most of their lives with.

“Yes. Believe it or not. She’d make a better wife than me.” She sounds really calm today, I guess she has decided to move on from what happened and focus on herself but there is no doubt that she loves him otherwise she wouldn’t have fought for him.

“I still find it hard to believe why he’d do that,” I lean on the window and look outside.

She knows where she is driving to, I told her where I stay and she said ‘oh’ that can only mean she has been there more times than I have been there.

“When a man wants to get married, he looks past the love, affection and sex – he looks for stability. A woman he can build a future with, be a good mother to his children and a woman who will give him a piece of mind, and so I guess I lacked stability,” she shrugs again.

“So the years just went down the drain just like that,” I leaned forward.

“As you saw with your own eyes girl. He left without looking back and I have chosen to move on,” she parks on the side of the road right opposite my house – I told you she has been here before. “And focus on my life,” she says and turns to look at me with a smile on her face.

“You are a good woman Wandile, I hope my brother realises that one day and you are no longer available – ashe!”

She laughs and says, “I only wish him the best.”

Look at her being the good Samaritan in this situation like it’d take her to heaven.

“If you say so,” she nods. “Thank you for the lift.”

I stepped out of the car, took my plastics out the boot and she drove away after hooting goodbye. I say it again, she is the number one woman I’d choose over any other woman out there.

I have never seen Bayede like this, I know I don't know him for that long but this is the last I expected from him. He stumbles inside and bangs the door behind him, I think he left his key on the other side of the door and I sigh.

I stand up and walk up to him, he stinks – I hold my breath because if I take any of this smell coming from him then I'd definitely throw up.

"Where are you coming from Bayede?" I ask and he stumbles back and forth.

He is so drunk and I don't think he'd be able to stand on one foot.

"Zimile!" he calls out my name cheerfully. "I have a son!" he raises his hands up like he is praising the good Lord above us.

He left for the whole week, I couldn't reach him on his phone and then now he comes back looking like this?

"Cashile made me a father!" he praises again. "She made me a man, I am so happy Zimile you don't understand – you won't understand!"

"Yeah I won't understand and I would never understand, I am a woman so no woman would make me a father," I say folding my arms to my chest.

"Heyi uyenzile indaba uCashile," he laughs, shaking me to get me to laugh with him and I slap his hands off me.

I walked past him and went to the door, in deed he left the key on the keyhole on the outside – I took it out and locked the door.

"Cashile my dali!" he says, disappearing down the passage.

I hear him talking to himself. So he is really going to praise a dead woman for giving a child in my presence and what happened to him not accepting the child until he has seen him? Unless... I hurried to the bedroom and found him sleeping across the bed with his shoes on. He is even snoring.

I don't know where he is coming from but his trip was surely an unplanned one because he didn't have a bag when he walked in.

He wakes up to find me awake, he rubs his face and sits up. Then he groans – the hangover must have him good.

"Bayede where are you coming from?"

He ignores me and gets off the bed.

"I am talking to you Bayede," I say, following behind him as he walks out of the bedroom.

He is still in the clothes that he was wearing yesterday even his belt is still on.

"Bayede?" I grab him by his arm to stop him from walking forward.

"What Zimile? Can't I catch a break before you start drilling me with the questions?" he has gone back to being his odd self.

"I just want to know –"

"I can stand here and answer your questions but I still want to live so I am going to drink water before I drop dead because of dehydration."

I scoff and roll my eyes at his exaggeration.

He walks to the kitchen to drink water and I wait for him to come back in the middle of his 'living room'.

I waited for him for the whole afternoon yesterday when I already had been waiting for him for the whole week and he better have a reason for leaving without saying anything – if that woman wasn't dead then I'd have been more worried.

"Are we really going to do this now?" he sounds tired and bored.

"I want to know where you were Bayede, you go away for a week and not say anything. Would it be okay with you if I was the one who left without telling you?" he looks up to me. "I thought as much, now tell me, where have you been?" my hands are resting on my hips and I know I look ugly as fuck because I didn't get any sleep with him snoring.

"I went to see him."

"And?"

He sighs and comes to sit on the couch.

"Cashile was really convinced that he is my son and the old woman said he is mine so," he sounds unsure, not convinced or he is fooling me. Just a few hours ago he was praising that Cashile woman – they probably even had a celebratory sex date in his dreams – reminiscing the old times where the boy was conceived.

"So what? You are going to take their word for it?" I look down at him but he doesn't look up to me.

"Yeah, he is mine – I felt the connection," he says leaning back on the couch.

I want to laugh, you can feel your DNA by a mere connection with the child now? He might be really the father, I don't care about that – there's more that I want to know about him.

"She named him Ndabezitha," he chuckles, covering his face with his hands.

Ndabezitha? But why?

"Bayede, what is it that you are not telling me?" I ask with a stern voice – I am not going to allow him to get away from this again like the last time.

He quickly removes his hands from his face and looks at me. I stand my ground.

"Talk."

He sighs and leans forward, balancing his elbows on his knees.

"I am of royalty," he says and exhales softly.

He has got all my attention and I think I am too far to catch the news fresh if I continue to stand over him so I went over to sit next to him.

"My father died two years ago and right now, my mother is holding the fort until I am ready to take over."

"What do you mean ready to take over, what is stopping you from being ready now?"

He exhales sharply and stands up. "Aren't you going to be late for work?" he asks – I guess we are done talking about him and his family.

"There's nothing else that you want to tell me?" I ask, ignoring his question and stand up as well.

He rubs his eyes, he has been doing a lot of that since he woke up and it must be the headache.

“I want us to get married,” he says, pulling a smile.

“Stop teasing Bayede I am serious here,” I say hitting him on the arm.

“I am serious too – I want us to get married,” he says those words more slowly and firmly.

“But that is too soon,” I say, taking a step back.

“I could pay half of the lobola and the remaining balance when you are ready,” he says like what he is saying is nothing.

He leaves me standing there and walks back to the bedroom. I quickly rushed to him,

“Bayede?”

He swiftly turns to look at me. “Why are you doing this?” I ask, there is a lot that is going through my head and I am hoping that he’d clear things up for me.

“Because I love you.” That is not the explanation I was looking for.

I don’t get to say another word because he smashes his lips on mine – “I missed you,” he says cupping my cookie jar and I gasp for air.

15.

I flushed the toilet and closed its lid before I sat on top of it. There's a horrible, bitter taste on the back of my throat and the heartburn is killing me – my chest feels like it's on fire. Now I truly believe that I am pregnant, the morning sickness has been showing me flames the last few days and it is by luck that Bayede hasn't questioned me but I can't keep this pregnancy a secret for long.

When I step inside the bedroom, he is facing the other way, buttoning his blue uniform shirt that I ironed for him. He is truly enjoying having me around and he doesn't set the alarm anymore because he knows I'd be awake before him.

"Bayede?"

"Are you okay?" he asks, turning to look at me.

I wrap my arms around my waist, like I am protecting myself from the cold – I know I have a big mouth when it comes to other things but right now I am stuttering and I don't know how to say it.

"I am pregnant," I finally say and he pauses, scanning my face like the next he is expecting is for me to say 'no it's just a prank'.

"We are having a baby?" He points between me and himself.

I nod rapidly, I don't know how and when he got to me because based on my measurements he was five steps away from me but I am in his arms within seconds and he is spinning me around, laughing and I guess that he is happy.

"Are you sure?"

I nod again, not able to voice out any words; I am very sure – I even have that old woman's prophet as evidence.

"God, Zimile I am so happy!" he rubs his face and covers his mouth.

His chuckles turn into laughter as he looks at me. I didn't expect him to act like this, I mean my baby is not his first nor mine.

"You see why we should get married," he takes my hands into his.

"So you are going to marry me because I am pregnant?"

He looks at me and slightly shakes his head.

"You were also going to marry Cashile since she had your child?"

He sighs and lets go of my hands.

"Why do you have to do that?"

"Do what?" I asks clearly confused and he walks past me, and sits on the bed so he can put on his shoes.

"Drag Cashile's name into our conversation," he is upset.

I don't say anything but isn't it obvious, judging by his reaction when he came back from seeing that child – he would have given her the whole world if he could.

"You know that the reason why I want to marry you is not because you are pregnant – I even proposed before you told me that you are carrying my child." He stands up when he is done tying his shoe laces and puts his hands on my shoulders.

“Stop being jealous of a dead woman,” he says without blinking.

If you too could just stop praising her every chance you get then maybe I wouldn't be like this, I want to say that to him but I keep it to myself.

“Look, now I can't even be purely happy about your pregnancy because you had to ruin the moment,” he says waving his hands in the air.

He walks past me again to the wardrobe, maybe I was a bit overdramatic but he had to be clear so I wouldn't jump to the wrong conclusion.

“I will be going home today,” I say quietly.

“Oh.” That is all he says. “Uhambe kahle and pass my regards to Mpilo,” he says, walking towards me and kisses me on the cheek before he heads out.

He hasn't even met Mpilo but he is in the centre of his life as well, I sit on the unmade bed, exhaling loudly – I am craving for cold fried chicken with plain rice or pap maybe add a bit of chilli sauce on the side but what about the heartburn because if I eat anything hot then it'd only get worse. I hate being pregnant! I throw myself back on the bed.

I get home and Lorna is outside with a man that I have never seen before. They're both laughing really hard at whatever they are talking about, they say opposite attracts but in this case we have a great match – I can tell by what the guy is wearing that those clothes were bought by Lorna and she picked them out for him to wear today so that he wouldn't 'embarrass' her in front of us.

I step closer to where they are standing, Lorna sees me and she clings on the poor guy even more.

“Zimile, meet the man in my life – the best and wonderful baby daddy in the world, Vangeli,” she says, patting his chest and the man's confidence builds up as he smiles widely to me. She is good with words, that I can tell you.

“Hi, I am her sister, nice to meet you.” I extend my hand for a handshake and he takes it.

Vangeli – mavula kuvaliwe – he looks really good like Lorna had said before.

“Why don't you guys come inside?”

I found them outside, Lorna even has her handbag so I guess they've just arrived or not...

“Oh no, we are on our way out. Daddy has plans for us,” she says cheerfully, looking up to her man.

I haven't heard a word from him, all that he has been doing is laugh ever since I approached them.

“Okay,” I say with a single nod.

They walk past me to the opposite direction and I step inside the house.

It is in the afternoon, everyone should be back but the house looks empty.

I am lucky to find Lungile in the bedroom, she is removing her shoes so I guess she just walked in or she was too busy entertaining Lorna's guest and now is the only time she got to relax after a long day.

“What was Lorna's man doing here?” I ask after I had greeted her.

She sighs, standing up and heading to the wardrobe.

“Lorna wanted to introduce him to us but none of you were here, she found me alone and she wanted to let us know that he will be buying a bed for her,” she says still looking for something in the wardrobe.

“A bed?”

“Yeah, she will be giving birth in the few months time so he wants her and the baby to be comfortable.”

Oh, but that has Lorna written all over it and it is no doubt that it wasn't Vangeli's idea in the first place but at least he was thoughtful – just in a few days or let's say weeks and Lorna has turned out to be big, when I saw her just a few minutes ago I thought she was going to pop right there on the doorstep.

“Are you staying?” she turns to look at me and strips off the dress she was wearing.

What does she mean by asking if I am staying? Of course, I am staying – I mean the last time I checked, I lived here.

“I don't understand your question,” I say with a voice that clearly indicates that I need clarification.

“You have not been sleeping at home for what...two weeks? So don't blame me for asking,” she scoffs and wraps her body with the towel. “Look at those chubby cheeks and love handles, it clearly shows that bakuphethe kahle wherever you have been and that boyfriend of yours must be giving it to you really good for you to forget your way home.”

I roll my eyes, I wish I could tell her that he is not just a boyfriend but a potential husband but I am not really sure I can trust her with that. And I am still surprised that she hasn't pointed out that I am pregnant, judging by the way she was looking at me I thought she saw something.

“I live here so you don't have to question me if I am staying or not,” I pouted and sat on top of the bed. “Where is Mpilo anyway?” I ask because I didn't see him when I came in and he is not on the bed, sleeping.

“Good, you still remember that you have a child,” she slips on her flip flops before continuing.

“Busi went out to fetch him from crèche,” she says.

“At this hour?”

“Hayibo Zimile, whose duty is it to fetch the child from school anyway? Busi is just doing you a favour, no actually she is just doing it for Mpilo's sake – I don't know where your head is at these days but hear it from me you are really slaking at your mothering duties.” She sounds upset.

“I am here now so I will take over,” I say under my breath.

“But that will be for how long, two, three days?” she asks sarcastically.

I plainly look at her, I don't know what she expects me to say – am I not here now?

Finally she gives up and walks out of the room. I sigh, maybe I should cook supper just as a peace offering – I am still new at this mothering thing so I won't get it all right at one go.

There is a banging sound on the roof, Busi leaps up and listens closely – it is no doubt that someone is on the roof.

She lays back on the bed and pulls the blanket up to her chest. The room is too dark so she can't see anything but she can hear Lungile mumbling something in her sleep. The sound of footsteps again on the roof reaches her ears, Lorna is sleeping peacefully besides her so she is the only one who can hear this.

She has watched many horror movies that could have prepared her for this but the real life experience is nothing compared to watching a horror on the TV screen.

It is like there are kids running around on the roof, it is so loud – a part of her doubts that she is the only one who can hear this, she leaps up again scared to leave the bed, her eyes scan through the darkness.

“Lorna,” she pats her on the shoulder lightly.

“Hm?” Lorna replies deep in her sleep.

“Can you hear that?” she asks and waits for her to reply but only soft snores reach her ears – she must have drifted off to sleep again!

A sound of the pot lid hitting the floor made her scream out loud and jump at the same time. It is no doubt that someone is in the house, she has never heard anything like this before, she might be a light sleeper but she has had more peaceful nights than none.

She contemplates between staying in bed and going to check if there is an intruder in the house – if she leaves the bed then she'd be putting herself in danger but if she doesn't then she is giving the burglar more freedom to get away.

Still battling with the thoughts flooding her mind, Mpilo cries on the floor, they let him sleep on the floor because he still wets himself at night so it is much better if he sleeps on the floor.

He cries out again like he is fighting, the 'children' continue to run on the roof and another pot lid hits the floor – there is a lot that is going on at the same time and Busi fails to understand each one of them.

“Mama,” Mpilo cries out faintly, Busi can tell that he is still in deep sleep and Lungile's mumbles got louder.

She couldn't stay put any more, she had to do something and she jumped out of the bed without thinking twice and went to where Mpilo was sleeping.

The poor boy was curled up, with both of hands covering his private area, he couldn't take the pain anymore. Busi reached him and he cried out again, she had to see what was going on so she flicked on the lights and yes, Mpilo was fighting with something or someone that she couldn't see.

She rushed to him and scooped him off the floor. He clanged on her while drifting in and out of sleep. She took him to bed with her, she wouldn't switch off the lights because it was much better than the alternative.

“Lungile?” she shook her so she'd wake up but she only stirred and faced the other way. Lorna was no help because she is a deep sleeper.

She could call Muzi but how would she explain something like this. She covered herself and the child in her arms with the blankets, and did a little prayer.

In the morning no one spoke of the events that took place the night before. Busi is in a never ending battle with her inner self – if Lorna and Lungile didn't hear anything then Muzi must have heard something but with Muzi you will never know.

She got Mpilo ready for school because again – Zimile slept out and left the responsibility to look after Mpilo in her hands.

“What happened last night?” she asks him calmly.

He hasn't said anything and she had to know what was going on because to her he looked really scared, the way he was clinging on her was enough evidence of that.

“Hey boy, tell mam'ncane Busi what happened last night? Did you see anything?”

Mpilo shakes his head.

“Then what is it? Why were you crying?” she asks, sounding really concerned.

“Bekukhona umuntu ongidonsa itoto.” (someone was pulling my penis.), the small boy says with a trembling voice. He has felt it before but he didn't say anything but last night it was more intense and maybe that's why he cried out loud.

“Did you see who it was?”

He shakes his head, it was dark so there is no way he could have seen anything and maybe there was nothing but how can she explain the sounds on the roof or the pots hitting the floor because she checked the doors in the morning and they were all locked.

“Has it happened before?”

He reluctantly nodded to her.

She exhales sharply and puts him down on the floor so they can get moving, she has to go to work and he needs to go to school.

After dropping off Mpilo at school, she heads to gogo's house – it has been ringing in her head and she knows it'd be futile to go to work with this thing in her head.

“Thokoza gogo,” she bows to the old woman.

“Busi, why are you here so early in the morning?”

“Something happened last night, I couldn't get any sleep after that.”

She narrates the events from the previous night to the old woman and exhales when she is done.

The old woman laughs lightly, she is not really laughing and something in Busi tells her the old woman knew about this or that it was going to happen.

“What does it mean gogo?” she asks, shifting towards her.

“Bafuna okungokwabo,” (they want what belongs to them.) she says without looking up to Busi.

“Your older sister took something that doesn't belong to her or should I say something that she shouldn't have taken in the first place.”

Gogo has to stop speaking in riddles and get to the point in a plain manner because Busi is getting further confused than when she came here.

“In everything, there's light and there is darkness, and in your family you had someone who used the darkness, the evil to get her way and when she died it died with her but she came

back to Lungile – wamnika iskhwama sakhe esingcolile,” gogo shakes her head and Busi shifts closer.

“I still don’t understand.”

“Your sister took it without cleansing it,” she says and makes the weird loud noise that shook Busi to the core. “The evil is alive ntombi yami and if this is not resolved then uzochitheka loya muzi,” she points down to the floor like the house is beneath her.

“Who are they?” she can’t really give it a name but there were people in the house.

“They will reveal themselves soon,” she shoots her eyes to Busi. The old woman has always been creepy.

“Mpilo, my sister’s son, says that his penis was being pulled when the whole thing happened,” she says clearly delivering the message to the old woman that she wants to understand every detail of what happened.

“They saw something they don’t have.”

“And the pots?”

“Balambile, your sister doesn’t feed them so they came to look for food. She is the one responsible for them now but she doesn’t know how to. My gut tells me, at first she knew what she was doing or it could be that she misunderstood the whole ordeal of the bag, probably she was misled and now that evil woman’s power has become stronger, it is something your sister wasn’t expecting so now the burden is too heavy for her to carry. Bayamhlupha akalali nasebusuku,” that explains why she was mumbling in her sleep last night.

The old woman sounds really calm like she doesn’t understand the depth of this situation.

Busi thought for a second and looked up, “otokoloshe?”

“Hey!” the old woman shouts and warns, “don’t call that unholy name in my house.”

Busi swallows hard, nodding, she wondered how long this thing has been going on and when exactly did Lungile accept the bag since a ceremony was supposed to be done for her or could it be when...

“You have to help us.”

16.

It is Saturday so it was easy to get to the meeting without any hustles, I still don't know why we are here but we are waiting on Busi so she can come and tell us what is it that was so urgent. Lorna is busy munching on Chicken Licken hot wings, the way she is stuffing her face it is the reason why her weight has tripled – I have had enough of those hot wings last night and early this morning, it's still early days but Bayede hasn't disappointed – I get anything that I want to feed on my cravings.

Busi comes into the living room and sits next to Lorna, "I am sorry to keep you all waiting I had to put Mpilo to sleep so he wouldn't disturb us."

"Why are we here?" Mlungisi asks.

"We have a problem," Busi says, looking at him and then at the rest of us.

"Where is Lungile?" she is the only one that is not here and as far as I know she is the person who always has solutions for every problem so it baffles me why she is not here.

"She is the problem," she replies breathlessly.

I look at her, clearly confused, everyone has the same expression and Lorna has paused on the eating and is looking at Busi as well – she better get into it because we need to know what it is that is going on. Lungile has always been a saint and now she is calling her a problem?

"There is a lot of evil stuff that has been happening inside these walls," she points to the walls around us but that doesn't explain anything – I want her to go deeper.

"Lungile did something and it has put our family in danger, each and everyone of us, there are no exceptions."

I thought it was the Nzamas that we had to be aware of and not one of our own.

"Busi just get to the point already," Muzi is getting impatient.

"Who knows Madongwe?" she looks at Mlungisi then at Muzi and both of them are clueless. She wouldn't look at Lorna and me because it is obvious that we don't know that person if the big brothers don't know her.

"Okay, so Madongwe is our great grandmother from our father's side of the family, when she was still alive she carried a lot of evil deeds and when she died it died with her but she came back in Lungile's dreams. She gave her her bag so Lungile can continue where she left off, Lungile wasn't supposed to accept the bag without cleansing it but she did so all those things Madongwe created are in this house," she pulls her lips into a thin line, waiting for us to react or say something about this.

Honestly I don't know what to say, how did this whole thing happen and we never saw anything, I mean Lungile is still the same Lungile and nothing about her shows that she is involved in something that she shouldn't be or maybe she is also gifted in hiding things.

"Are you sure about this?"

Busi nods, "I heard it all go on with my own ears, gogo said they will show themselves in due time," she looks spooked, I am also spooked in fact all of us are now uncomfortable – who is they?

"So you mean this thing has been going on right under our noses?" she nods again.

Lorna sinks into the sofa, no one can dispute this because we don't have anything to say to prove it otherwise and we just have to take her word for it.

"That explains the noise on the roof in the wee hours of the morning," we shoot our eyes to Muzi.

"You knew about that and didn't say anything?!" Busi looks and sounds upset now.

"What were you expecting me to do? I thought I was going crazy because none of you said anything so I thought maybe I am the only one who heard those things – hearing the pots being scraped was the worst part," he says, shivering like he could hear it at that moment.

I look over to Busi and she is fuming, if he wasn't her older brother or twice her size then she'd have jumped on him already.

"Do you know the trauma Mpilo had to go through because of this? We could've sought for help sooner if you had said something!" she shouts and storms out of the room, heading to the bedroom.

What is it that she said about Mpilo? No one seems to care about the fit she just pulled and they move on to talking amongst themselves.

"Maybe we should tell ubaba about this," Lorna speaks up first.

"Oh please ubaba noMa? They never get anything done those two. We can tell them about this but there is a hundred percent chance that they'd leave it hanging like they did with –"

What? We all look at him and he exchange looks with Muzi and they seem to have a conversation of their own, and Lorna and I are left on the side line – another thing this family is good at is keeping secrets.

Baba noMa probably know about this Madongwe person but they won't even touch on that topic unless someone has died because of it.

"What about my baby bhuti?" that is Lorna moving on and already whining about HER, everything should be about her all the time and I think she missed the part where Busi said this thing affects all of us and not just her – she annoys the hell out of me.

I leave them and went to the bedroom to fish more about what Busi said about Mpilo. When I step inside the bedroom, she is busy packing, I walk closer and it is by no doubt that she is packing Mpilo's clothes into that bag.

"What are you doing?" I am shocked, what could possibly drive her to packing my son's things in a bag without telling me first.

"Are you blind now, can't you see that I am packing?" she asks continuing with what she is doing.

I yank the t-shirt she was folding from her hands and finally I got her attention because she turns to look at me.

"You have no right to do what you doing."

"No right? So you have the right to dump your child with me while you go gallivanting out there and not bother to check on how he is doing?" she is trying really hard not to raise her voice for the sake of the child that is sleeping on the bed.

"You know I didn't dump him," I say and she scoffs.

"You could've fooled me," she turns to the bag to continue packing.

“Busi, I am not going to say it again – stop what you are doing!” I fight with her for the bag, I want to unpack it and she wants to pack the clothes back inside.

“Zimile just stop!” she pushes me straight to the wall. “Can’t you see that I am doing this for Mpilo, he is the one who matters here and I am not against you here.”

“Where are you taking him?” I ask, rubbing the back of my head – she pushed me really hard and it was so unnecessary.

“Our parents will look after him and do a better job at it than you have been doing,” she is done with packing now and she is zipping the bag.

“So you were going to take him there without telling me first?” she sighs and turns to look at me.

“You are obviously not ready to be a mother Zimile, you go on the whole day without even thinking about him and that is unfair on him, and on me. I don’t mind looking after him but I also have a life just like you,” she sounds calm now and I exhale so I can relax but she should’ve told me first.

“Do they know? Ubaba noMa?” I ask.

“No they don’t know but I doubt they’d say no when I have Mpilo with me, baba accepted him so I don’t think they’d have a problem and mama is fit enough to look after him. Mpilo is a good boy, he won’t trouble them,” she says scooping him off the bed.

“You are leaving now?” I step towards her, I don’t know how to feel about this, knowing that he is here puts me at ease but with him going away now is making me sad – he is still sleeping so he won’t even get to see me before he leaves.

“Yeah, I will be back tomorrow afternoon,” she replies, putting him on her back to piggyback him and throws a towel on top for support.

“You really don’t have to Busi, I could take him myself.” I say, helping her fasten the last knot.

“I want to do it and I need a break from all the nonsense that has been going on here,” she is really serious so I let her be.

I look at Mpilo as she is still busy fixing something in her handbag, I know I have been a bad mother but I am definitely going to miss him.

“Don’t be sad, this is the right thing to do.” When did she grow up to being this outthinking and mature?

I nod to her with a small smile.

“Oh before I forget – make sure to burn this before you sleep and please Zimile don’t leave until I come back, a day without sex won’t kill you,” she says and hands me something that is wrapped in a newspaper. “Use the plate we usually use to burn impepho,” she points to the bed and I know it stays under the bed.

When we step out of the room, Lorna has fallen asleep and the two brothers are nowhere to be seen.

I help Busi with the bag but she takes it from me before we reach the taxi stop and she said, “don’t worry I have someone who will help me with it.”

I looked over to the stop and there's a VW blue golf parked on the side of the road, that can only mean one thing – Busi has a boyfriend. I bid her farewell and she heads over to the car, I don't stay for long enough to see the boyfriend because I left the doors unlocked.

I have been tossing and turning for the past two hours and I haven't drifted off to sleep. Even that thing Busi said I must burn is making me nauseous, I don't know how Lorna managed to fall asleep because I am struggling to keep my food down.

Lungile has also been tossing, grunting and turning – I guess she is also having trouble falling asleep. I really want to know how she does it, I know she has a gift but now it has been tainted and probably that explains why she can't see other things, like my future for example. She has a lot going on but you wouldn't tell by the way she carries on like nothing is going on around her. She is in trouble but still she is not willing to say anything to anyone but maybe I should confront her, I mean we are the only ones awake so she won't feel cornered.

Like she has just read my mind, she wakes up, gets off the bed and walks out of the bedroom. Busi said that thing will keep the evil away so I guess it has started working already.

I woke up and followed after her to the living room. I find her curled up on the couch, the lights are on in the bedroom so I can see her face and she is looking into the space in front of her.

"Lungile?" she shoots her eyes to me like she wasn't expecting to see me there.

There's a lot going on with my sister, I see it now that Busi has brought us up to speed with what is happening with her and I wish she could just trust any one of us so we could know how to help her – or she doesn't want to be helped?

"Are you alright?" I tilt my head to the side.

She nods rapidly.

"Do you want any help with something?" I ask.

She shakes her head no, she is not one to speak with actions – if she wants to say something then she says it but maybe it is getting really bad and I don't really wish to see the worst of it – Busi should come back so I can leave.

She starts fanning herself and blowing into her nightdress, it is like she feels hot but I feel cold so I don't understand what is going on with her.

"Can you feel that?" those are the first words I get from her since this afternoon when she came in from work.

"What?"

"It is hot, maybe I should open the windows."

"No!" I say to stop her as she moved to open the windows.

I take a step forward and another one backwards, I really don't know what I am doing here but my body is working on its own.

I don't want her to open the windows, what if those things of hers get in here, I mean it took a lot to stay here knowing very well what is going on and actually seeing it go on will definitely put me on a hospital bed, that's if it doesn't kill me at first sight.

She continues to fan and blow herself and I leave her there. I went back to the bedroom and took my phone to dial Busi's number.

“You don’t sound like you are sleeping, what is going on?” I ask, worried that something might have happened to Mpilo or she is on her way back because ubaba went back to being himself and refused to take Mpilo in.

“Isn’t it your father who decided to start praying at this hour of the night,” she huffs, sounding frustrated.

Now that she has mentioned, I can hear him in the background plus knowing our father he can be really loud when he gets into the mood – he says that is when the spirit of the Lord takes over.

“I feel sorry for you because he can go on for hours,” I laugh and pause like I have just remembered something. “Lungile is acting strange, she can’t sleep and says she is feeling hot or something but trust me it is cold here.”

“Hey, maybe baba felt something – he is busy cursing out demons and whatever here.”

“Maybe we should just tell them and then we can confront her. This thing is scary Busi what if someone dies kanti we could’ve avoided it.”

“Mlungisi said he will handle it, he told me not to tell his parents so whatever goes on from now on will be on him,” she says and I nod like she could see me.

“How is Mpilo?” I ask, holding my breath.

“He is alright, he is sleeping with his grandparents in the other room but I doubt he is sleeping right now with baba praying so loud,” she says and we both laugh.

“Thank you Busi,” I mean it.

“Don’t mention it, listen I have to go back to sleep you know how your mother can get when she sees an opportunity to overwork a person.”

I know her very well, I bid her goodnight and hang up.

She blinks and they appear right in front of her. The room is too dark so she can’t see their faces but judging by the height of their shadows she could already tell who and what they were.

“You have been starving us for a long time now Ndlovukazi,” one of them speaks. His speech is not like that of a normal person.

“Go out there and look for something to eat then – feeding you wasn’t part of the plan.” She tries to suppress her fear but her trembling voice didn’t co-operate.

“You wanted power and we are here to give you that power, we are part of the package so we are your responsibility,” the voice sounds different from the one who spoke first.

There is too many of them, Madongwe only showed her one but in a couple of months down the line they were too many and she couldn’t take it anymore – this is not what they agreed on and she doesn’t want the power any more – she wants her life back.

“Sifuna inkomo,” (we want a cow) a different voice again. It is hard for her to keep up because she can’t even see who spoke up.

“Where am I going to get a cow?” she asks, careful not to raise her voice too loud to wake up the people in the house.

They laugh at her and she shifts on the couch, not sure which part she said was funny.

“Who said we want a cow with four legs?”

“We want your flesh and blood,” they speak up without giving her a chance to say anything back.

“Make sure she is a virgin.”

What?

She swallows hard before opening her mouth to ask, “are going to hurt her?”

Laughter erupts again, her heart skips a beat – not knowing what she is dealing is really scary – today it’s a virgin girl and then what will it be tomorrow? But one thing she knows is to never defy them because hell will break loose but Madongwe should have warned her and not let her walk down this path blindly.

“Just make it happen, make it fast because angeke uthande uma sizithathela.” (you won’t like it if we take it for ourselves.)

With another blink – they are gone like there were never there.

17.

Like I have mentioned before, Bayede has grown lazy since I have been spending a lot of time in his place as of right now I am busy preparing him food which he could prepare for himself but no, Zimile is here and I am already overworking before he pays lobola.

“Zimile.”

I turn back and there’s no one behind me. I step out of the kitchen to find Bayede busy on his phone.

“Did you call me?” I ask and he shakes his head – strange because I heard someone call my name.

I shrug it off and went back to the kitchen.

Busi came back yesterday and I left as soon as she stepped inside the house. I refused to sleep in that house again not knowing what the hell is going on there and I have a baby to protect – what if those things get too hungry and they rip me apart, and feed on my baby. Bayede would kill me.

“Zimile.”

I look over my shoulder and there’s no one at the doorway. The voice sounds too close for it to be Bayede calling me from the other room.

My heart starts pumping at the thought that maybe ‘they’ are here, they followed me all the way here but why and how the hell would they know my name? Lungile’s muthi must be strong if these things are capable of such.

I take Bayede’s food to the living room and he is still on his phone, unbothered by what is happening around him. I haven’t said anything to him about what I learned because I don’t know where I’d even start to explain when I don’t even understand it myself. I have to go see Busi again later today.

“You are sure you didn’t call me while I was...,” I point to the kitchen.

He shakes his head no, “I have been on my phone the entire time and I didn’t say a word. Thank you for the food,” he says, already digging in.

“Mpilo is no longer living with me,” he stops chewing and looks at me. “He will be staying with my parents,” I tell him and he continues to chew down his food.

“He will be good there? I mean will your parents be able to look after him, he is a boy and so boys can trouble?” he says, smiling like he is speaking from experience.

“I doubt Mpilo would give them any problems, if there’s anything good Didiza ever did then it was to raise that boy – he is so well-mannered.” I nod more to myself than to him.

I have to admit that he was a better parent than I’d ever be to Mpilo, yeah I lost five years of his life and I was given a chance to make up for it but I messed up.

I didn’t realise I had shed a tear until he wiped it off.

“If he is as good as you say then you have nothing to cry about. Come,” he says, putting his plate away and pulling me to sit on his lap.

“You didn’t finish your food, do you know how much I slaved making that for you?”

I am already on his lap with his hands on my waist.

“You will work on filling up the rest of my appetite,” he has a naughty smile on his face so I already know what he is talking about.

“Bayede...” I swallow the rest my words as I felt his fingers on my folds.

His fingers slid on my moist and he started working on my clit. The friction is driving me crazy – I want to cry out loud or better yet recite his clan names. It is crazy because this is nothing compared to what his member can do to me.

He pulls me in to kiss me, more like to shut me up as he finger fucks me and slides in a second finger. The kiss is so wet even if I get my saliva all over his face so be it I don’t care.

I moan, whimper, pant – all of it but he denies me one thing and I was so close – he stops and lifts me up only to pull me back down again so he could fill me. Maybe I should start wearing panties when he is around and not make things easy for him.

He helps me keep the rhythm going as I moved up and down on his shaft. I throw my head back as I moan in pleasure.

“Zimile?”

Please no, I don’t need that right now – whoever they are, they must just go away!

“Zimile.”

I look down and he is looking at me, I thought I was hearing things again.

“We are going home next weekend,” he says breathlessly.

I want to know who is ‘we’ but he pulls me down and meets me halfway to shove himself so deep, I groaned with my lips shaped into a big O...

I knelt down next to Busi and took out three white candles out of my bag – one candle is good, two is great but three is a nuclear bomb and those evil things won’t know what hit them. Busi has burnt that bad smelling thing she got from gogo and I am busy fixing the candles next to the plate so I can lit them, then Lorna comes to kneel next to me – I didn’t know she’d also be here.

She quickly takes out two black and red candles from her bag and she starts working on to putting them next to mine.

Busi and I look at her, “what are you doing?” I ask in disbelief.

“Fighting evil with evil – it is much more faster and effective,” she says not paying much attention to us but the candles she has in her hands.

I yank them from her and she fights to get them back, Busi jumps in and takes them from me.

“Zimile...” she starts with her scolding but the door opening stops her from saying another word and Lungile steps inside the bedroom.

We turn to look at her and she looks at us suspiciously.

“What are you doing?” she asks, putting her bag on top of the bed.

I thought Busi said she’d only be coming in later but here she is now.

“We are praying,” Lorna replies too quick and we shoot our eyes to her.

“– for the baby,” she quickly adds and Lungile nods.

We turn back to what we were busy with and Lorna goes back to fighting to get her candles back, I keep on slapping her hands away and whispering for her to stop.

Lungile clears her throat behind us and we pause.

“Nonsikelelo will be coming over to visit,” she speaks up behind us.

Nonsikelelo is Nomthandazo’s eldest daughter, the child is like 12 or 13 if I am not mistaken so what will happen with school if she’s here and why is she visiting now?

She doesn’t stay for long inside the bedroom because of what Busi had burnt earlier.

“Why is Nonsikelelo coming?” I ask, looking between the two of them. Maybe Nomthi said something about her daughter coming over or they might know what Lungile is up to but they both shrug, mumbling that they don’t know.

“Busi, letha ama candle wami,” Lorna is still fighting for those stupid candles.

I slap her hand again, “if you continue like this then the only thing that will be fast and effective is you delivering that baby before your due date. Stop this nonsense before you attract unnecessary attention, we have enough to deal with already.”

“I was only trying to help,” she says, getting up to her feet. She was ready to throw one of her famous fits but that stomach is too big for her to and if she were to attempt then she might have landed on the floor.

She leaves the room, Busi and I continue where we left off.

This place looks rural, I mean rural-rural like the village I spent my whole life in. I was expecting something more urban, modern you know and not – this.

They even have a kraal for cows but it is empty right now so maybe they’re in the veld being herded by two or three boys, they also have goats, dogs, chickens and what the hell is that? It comes towards us and I scream, hiding behind Bayede and he chuckles, there’s nothing funny about this.

I look over his shoulder – is it a duck? But ducks are much more friendlier than this, this thing is violent and it was ready to attack me just a few seconds ago. There is a lot that is going on around here – what more should I look out for?

Like he had just read my thoughts, he pulls me to him and whispers, “don’t eat any food that has been already prepared for you, ask to prepare your own food and if they refuse rather not eat anything they give you.” He turns to look at my face, straight into my eyes and I nod, holding my breath.

I thought I had seen it all but here he is warning me about his family, I thought this was his safe place you know where he gets to be himself and not worry about anything because he is with the people he loves and who love him but clearly that is not the case.

He pulls me to the gate of the Mabaso homestead and as we enter, an old man appears from nowhere and he doesn’t greet, he just gets into it...

“Mntungwa, mbulaz’omnyama, nina bakabhej’ eseNgome, nin’ enadl’umuntu nimyenga ngendaba, nin’ enadl’ izimf’ezimbili ikhambi laphuma lilinye, lobengula kaMzilikazi, mzilikazi kaMashobana, shobana noGasa, kaZikode, Zikode kaMkh...” the women get out of the houses and start ululating as the man continued to recite their clan names.

He is smiling really wide as this goes on, I don't know if I should be happy about being the centre of attention like this – I must have spoken too soon because they take him away from me and I am left standing there alone.

“Ndabezitha! Maqhaw' amakhulu!” I heard the man shout as they enter the house that looks bigger than the rest.

He is their heir and future king after all so I guess they have the right to do that. I look around, I thought all royal families had palaces like in the movies, with servants who would be running around, up and down doing this and that but there is nothing special about this place.

“Sawubona sisi,” she comes towards me with her head slightly bowed.

“Come with me, I am Bayede's younger sister and an aunt to these young ones,” she says pointing to the children who come running towards and past us at that moment.

I raise my eyes and I am met by a woman standing at the doorway of the house opposite the one Bayede was pulled into.

“And who is she?” I ask the woman who has got too comfortable with me and she has linked her arm with mine as she pulls me to one of the rondavels.

“Oh her, she is the older sister.”

“Older than Bayede?”

“Only by a year,” she says still with a smile on her face.

I look at the woman again and realised that she is the only person who doesn't look happy about our arrival or her brother's arrival for that matter.

If Bayede didn't warn me about them then I'd be best buddies with this woman right here but I have to keep myself in check just for my sake.

We reach the rondavel and she ushers me inside. She lays a reed mat that looks new on the floor and she tells me to sit down.

“I will bring you something to eat,” her smile is blinding. I can't even tell if it is genuine or she's doing it for Bayede's sake. Maybe she was appointed by him to look after me, he probably threatened her to make me feel welcome and comfortable – I know he is capable of such, every older sibling bullies their younger siblings.

I don't refuse her hospitality and she leaves me there, alone again. If Bayede had told me about this earlier I would have brought a skaftin' or Busi to keep me company.

The woman comes back with a tray that has a litre of Coke and a plate filled with choice assorted biscuits, and here I thought people eat these biscuits on Christmas day only but here they are serving it as a refreshment or better yet a starter instead of dessert.

“Bhuti should've told us that he was coming and he wasn't coming alone,” she says, putting the tray down in front of me.

“Thank you,” I look at the tray and back at her.

“If we had known then we would have prepared all the necessities. You don't mind if I leave you here, it's just that I have other things that I need to take care of,” she sounds apologetic and looks at me with pleading eyes like I'd force her to stay.

I pulled a small smile and said, “it is fine, thank you for this.” I point to the tray.

She nods and leaves me to eat what she had brought for me. I remember Bayede's words very well so I resort to drinking the cool drink only since it was still perfectly sealed.

I sat there for about two hours and I haven't seen Bayede since they took him away from me and disappeared into that house. Just as I think about that, a small boy comes running in but quickly collects himself and bows respectfully – village boys and respect.

"Gogo said I must call you to the main house," he says without looking up to me.

The only gogo in this place would be Bayede's mother, I wonder why she'd want to see me and Bayede should be the one who is here so he'd introduce me to his mother, that's why he brought me here isn't it?

I stood up and took the plate filled with biscuits, and gave it to the boy so he'd share it with his friends or siblings that he was playing with.

He runs out as fast as he came in and I find my way to the main house.

The door was open but I still knocked and someone shouted from the inside for me to come in. I removed my shoes and left them on the doorstep, something I wouldn't have done in other homes but here I feel compelled to.

I get inside the house and the living room is empty. The couches look really nice, they even have a TV, they are not one of those typical village people after all – they are keeping up with the times. The floor is not tiled though, it is polished with red polish, I look underneath my feet and yeah, they are red too now.

I am standing in the living room, not knowing if I should go further into the house but staying on that spot seemed like the best thing to do, I don't want to get lost in other people's houses and end up seeing things that I wasn't suppose to see.

I am so hungry too, my stomach is growling maybe Bayede forgot that I am pregnant and if I deny myself food for longer than I already have then I will end up eating anything I set my eyes on.

After a few minutes a middle-aged woman walks out of one the rooms, if she is Bayede's mother then she looks younger than I thought.

"Come," she points from me and into the room she just stepped out of – she didn't even greet. I reluctantly walk towards her, there is no one here so if she wants to kill me then she'd be able to get away with it, I don't think even Bayede knows about this.

I don't know if I should be this far inside her house when nothing has been done traditionally to introduce me to their ancestors but old people know best and I follow her lead.

She had a reed mat already laid on the floor so I sat on it. We are in her bedroom which looks modern like everything is new.

"So you are the woman in his life?"

I think she refers to Bayede so I nod. It was obvious though and I wouldn't be here if I was nothing to him.

"And you're pregnant?" I shoot my eyes to her and she is smiling.

I lower my head back to a bowing position and nodded again.

"I saw that when you stepped in the yard," I fight the urge to look up again, I am not even showing yet so how would she know that? "I prepared something that will help you with the morning sickness and the heartburn."

That urge to look up again – how did she know I had trouble with the morning sickness or the heartburn when even Bayede doesn't know about that yet?

She puts a one litre bottle of what looks like dirty water in front of me – imbiza, my mind interjects.

"But Ma I am a Christian," I look up to her. I live by prayer and not by handmade, traditional remedies.

"I am also a Christian," she says, pointing to a white and blue Zion uniform that is hanged up on the wall like an art portrait.

I swallowed and looked at the bottle in front of me.

"You will drink half a cup in the morning, another one in the afternoon and iyachatha. It'd even help you get rid of those weird cravings you young people have nowadays."

I nod and stand up to my feet because I think she is done but she is not, and before I could reach for the handle I hear her say, "I hope uziyimela lento osuyiqalile." (I hope you are going to stand by what you have started.)

We arrive in Durban at seven in the evening. We weren't going to sleepover Bayede was very clear about that and he has work tomorrow so that gave him more reason not to even think about it.

"Look at what your mother gave me," I say taking out the bottle of imbiza out of my bag once we have stepped inside his flat.

He walks towards me, eyeing the bottle with caution, "she said it'd help me with the morning sickness," I add and before I could feel the taste of my own words in my mouth, I feel the bottle being roughly yanked out of my hand.

He flies to the bathroom and I rush after him. When I get there he was already emptying it inside the toilet.

"Hayibo Bayede, what are you doing?" I ask, with terror – is all of this necessary?

He doesn't answer me and only turns to look at me when the bottle is empty.

"Why did you do that? It was going to help me –"

"I don't care Zimile!" his face has turned red with anger.

"But –"

"But nothing and you're not going to take anything from that woman and give it to my child. Read my lips Zimile because I won't repeat myself, you can take anything you want but not while my child is still in there." He points to my belly.

Did he just call his mother 'that woman'? I am still stuck on that and the banging sound of the door jerks me back to the present – and Bayede is gone.

18.

I am meeting up with Wandile – the ex, not the wife – we managed to exchange numbers on that fateful afternoon and she called saying we should meet up. She chose me instead of her posh, rich friends. She also mentioned something about me being real and not fake, she can talk to me about anything else besides the new shares on the market, which shoes this friend imported from Milan or which car that friend's husband is going to buy for her on her next birthday.

She picked me up and drove us to this expensive restaurant. I am looking around and I am really underdressed compared to these people here, she could've warned me or gave me a heads-up but I guess looking like this also counts as being real.

I let her order for us because I can't really make out what is on the menu.

"You should have told me, I would've gone with you," she says after I have narrated to her about how my weekend was – I am still living in a nightmare because Bayede is not over what happened yet.

"I'd have definitely called someone if I knew things would turn out like that," I huff and take a sip of my orange juice. I would have tried the wine that she is drinking if I wasn't pregnant.

"And how is marriage treating your brother?" she asks.

Mlungisi has paid lobola already and he couldn't be happier or wait until everything was done before he could move in with his other Wandile.

"He is fine," I shrug. It is been a long time since the last time I spoke to him. I may be staying just opposite his flat but he doesn't know that and I plan to keep it that way for as long as I can.

"Oh I forgot to tell you, so I am planning to build a house, I found this perfect plot in Amanzimtoti..."

"Zimile."

I turned back expectantly to see someone behind me but there was no one there. It is even worse because there is no table behind us or anyone that I know around here that would know my name besides Wandile who has been sitting in front of me the whole time.

I turn to look ahead and Wandile is looking at me with a frown.

"Are you okay?" she asks, sounding a bit concern.

That was really strange, and I can't even tell if it is a male or a female voice that called out my name.

"I am fine," I say, trying to pull a convincing smile.

The waiter comes with our food and Wandile continues to tell me about her plans of building a house for her mother, not only that, but she is also planning to move in with her – she says she has been unlucky in relationships and besides Mlungisi, whoever that wanted to be with her was because of her connections and money.

I am not even listening to her attentively because of what just happened a moment ago but the food is nice.

I get inside the kitchen and found Busi kneading a dough of flour in a bowl.

“Where is Nonsikelelo?” I was hoping to see her but she doesn’t seem to be here, actually there’s no trace that she has ever been here.

“Oh the poor child left on Sunday – crying.”

“Why would she be crying?” I put my hands on my waist, that is strange.

She shrugs, “I don’t know because when I asked she said it is nothing but I could tell something was wrong.” She is busy with the dough, she is not even looking at me as she continues to talk. I wanted to see Nonsikelelo since the last time I saw her was on the day we buried her father, my weekend was so busy I had to nurse Bayede’s moods and couldn’t even leave the house for a second to breathe.

“And wena, how are you?” I ask and for the first time since I got here she looks up. She has been sighing the whole time like she is fighting with her inner self or something.

“I am not alright, Zimile.” She wipes the sweat on her brow with the back of the other hand.

“Please pour more flour here, this dough is a bit too wet,” she says, pointing to the bucket we use to store flour.

“What is wrong?” I ask, working to get her the flour she needs.

“Everything is wrong, I don’t even know how to handle everything at once,” she sighs again. I put the flour in the bowl and she starts working on the dough again.

“What do you mean?” I don’t know why I have to dig her for her to say what she wants to say.

“That thing gogo said we must burn to keep those things away doesn’t work anymore, they are even doing more damage now – my life is messed up Zimile, at work they are threatening to retrench, my love life is a mess and look how my foot looks like,” she walks around the table and she shows me her foot.

It looks swollen and from where I am standing I can tell that it hurts.

“Busi this is bad,” I say, putting my hand on my chest still looking at her foot.

“Lorna on the other hand –” she sighs again.

“Is it still with the fact that she is married to that Godfree guy?”

“Godfrey,” she corrects me.

“Yeah him,” I wave dismissively.

“That too but it is worse, Vangeli wants nothing to do with her and all of the sudden the baby is not his.” I gasp in shock and she nods. “He even took the bed he was going to bring here for Lorna to his mother in the village.”

“You lie,” my jaw is on the floor. How can so much happen in such a short space of time?

“I am telling you, he even said something about Lorna knowing this Godfrey guy and now she’s pretending not to know him in order to hide her shenanigans that she has been dating foreign men before him,” she moves to wash her hands in a different bowl and I notice that she is limping.

“I don’t even want to start with the neighbours, they are on another level and they definitely want nothing to do with us.” She wipes her hands and covers the bowl with the dough with a dishcloth so it will rise.

I have nothing to say, I am speechless but this can’t be a coincidence – I am also refusing to think it has anything to do with Lungile but this can only be her.

“Where is Lungile?” I ask in a whisper.

“She is in the bedroom,” Busi speaks up with no care in the world.

“And Lorna how is she dealing with this?” I bent down to balance on the table with my elbows.

“She is a mess,” she says that and Lorna walks in looking like she has the whole world’s problems on her shoulders. “Speak of the devil,” she points to her. Trust Busi not to put it out there that you have been talking about a person in their absence.

“Zimile,” Lorna acknowledges me and I nod.

She looks really bad, her skin looks tanned, the pimples on her face are really bad, she has gained more weight too – damn I last saw her last week and today she looks like a different person – kanti what really happened during the weekend?

“Everything okay?” I ask. I want to hear it all from the horse’s mouth but Lorna can talk about other people’s problems with no worry or care though when it comes to her problems – you won’t get to hear a word coming from her.

“I am hungry,” she says and moves to the bread bin. See what I told you.

She takes out the bread and Lungile appears behind Busi.

I look at her and the two other sisters turn to look at her.

“Oh Zimile, you are here,” she says cheerfully. That is the only happy face that I have seen since I have come here now I wonder how Muzi must be doing wherever he is. He is another person that would rather die than talk about his problems.

“The more the merrier, come let’s pray,” she says, pointing us to the living room.

I am shocked but I suppress my gasp. Thee Lungile Makhathini wants us to go and pray with her? Didn’t Busi say she is into witchcraft now or witches have upgraded and they are no longer afraid of prayer now? And before we move on to anything I want to know who exactly are we going to be praying to.

I look at Busi, then at Lorna who has her eyes gobbling out and then back at Lungile who turned to go to the living room, to wait for us there I presume.

“Really?” I whisper.

Busi shrugs, shaking her head.

“Believe me, I love Lungile but can’t she just die already?” Lorna whines. If it was any other day I would’ve laughed but today we are dealing with something I have never seen before but I definitely want to see how it’d unfold.

I am the first one to walk into the lounge, Busi follows me and Lorna is the last one to come in. The privileges of being a last born, she even got an English name unlike the rest of us who were either named after our great grandmothers or great grandfathers.

Lungile takes my hand, I take Busi’s and she takes Lorna’s then we wait for Lorna to take Lungile’s hand. We all look at her and she holds her breath, taking her sister’s hand.

“Lets bow our heads and close our eyes,” she says, obliging to her own words.

A second later, I heard her say, “Oh heavenly father we thank you...”

I shoot my eyes open and found Busi and Lorna looking right back at me – are we being tested or what? She continues to pray with us looking at her like she has done the most craziest thing a person like HER would ever do.

She concludes her prayer and we all say, "Amen," at the same time. God works in mysterious ways but this is definitely not one of his work – I refuse to believe it because no one can be this happy while her siblings are so unhappy. I grew up knowing that Lungile is our pillar but now what do I call her?

~...this place is so earthly, it is like a world of greener pastures – the trees and grass are so green you'd swear they are not real – I even touched it to confirm if it is really there and it is. The veld is empty though, it is like there is no one living here but it is so peaceful and still beautiful. There are even high mountains on the edges of the earth and they look just as green as the grass on the ground.

What do they call this place?

I hear some shuffling on my right and a hissing sound on my left – could it be a snake?

I take a few steps back, I haven't seen anything but I don't wish to see it. The Lord can't be that heartless and kill me in such a beautiful place.

While looking to see what was shuffling or hissing, I hear a woman sobbing on my far left, the same side I heard the hissing of a snake and I looked up. In deed there is a woman, her head is bowed and she is facing the other way.

She is wearing black clothes even her head is cover with a black doek, her sobs are like those of someone who is in pain. Why would there be someone who is unhappy in a place like this?

I looked around before I attempted to walk towards her. The more steps I took, the further she moved away, I don't know how because she is sitting down. I picked up my pace and ran towards her but it was no use – I couldn't get to her.

I stopped and looked further to what was in front of her and there is a hut made out of mud, it was old and looked like it was going to fall at any moment from now. And before I could even blink again, it collapsed and the woman's cry became louder, it was so loud it was like she was crying in my head.

"Stop!" I shouted, holding onto my ears to block her cries from piercing through my eardrums but it was futile.

Her house has turned into dust and the more she cries the more I feel connected to her, I want to cry with her or better yet, help her with her pain – I feel like...~

My body jerks and I awake. My eyes are fully open and I can hear her crying, I thought I was dreaming but clearly not. I leaped up and looked around in dark room but I couldn't see anything. She continued to cry and it sounded like she was crying just at the end of our feet. Bayede is sleeping soundly next to me.

I got out of bed and went to flick the lights on, and there is no one on the floor or in the room – it is just me and Bayede. She has even stopped crying so I switch off the lights and went back to bed.

Just as I lay my head on the bed, she starts crying again and it is worse because her cries get to me, they pierce right through my heart and they make me feel sad.

I sit up and shake Bayede so he could wake up, my heart is racing because I don't know what this thing means.

"Bayede?" I whisper, I can still hear the woman crying and I won't switch on the lights because she'd stop before Bayede can hear her too.

"What?" he asks sitting up as well.

"Can you hear that?"

"What?" he asks again.

"There's a woman crying Bayede, can't you hear her?" I am getting frustrated even my sight is blurry because of the tears that have involuntarily filled my eyes.

"I can't hear anything," he collapses back on the bed and I get off so I can switch on the lights. This time she continues to cry with the lights still on. I am more even scared, if she is not on the floor then that means she is in the wardrobe. I walked up to it and yanked the two doors open – there is no one there. I pushed Bayede's shirts to the side and still, she is not there.

"What are you doing?" I hear him ask behind me.

I couldn't hold them back so I let them fall out and trail down my cheeks as I turned to look at him. His head is tilted up, balancing on his hands that he put behind his head and he is looking at me clearly confused.

It is in the middle of the night, I am supposed to be sleeping but no, I am on my feet right in front the wardrobe looking for a crying woman and she is still crying.

I don't answer him, instead I break down because clearly I have gone crazy, if he can't hear her then she must be in my head.

I feel his arms around me and he pulls me to bed. I lay on the bed and he crouches in front of me.

"Is it the hormones already?" he must be trying to be funny but right now I don't find it funny. I shook my head no, "she is still crying Bayede." I can hear her cries perfectly like she is in this room and it is the same sobs I heard from the dream.

He sighs and rubs his face.

"Did someone die here?" I ask and he shoots his head up to look at me.

"What?" He pauses for a second. "No, no one died here," he takes my hand and kisses my knuckles. He looks at me with concern now, I can't even stop the tears from flowing through the corners of my eyes.

Someone must have died here, I've watched movies about ghosts coming back so the living could help them to crossover to the other side – this woman must have been killed and she wants me to find her killer so she'd rest in peace.

"Please try getting some sleep, I can't hear anything so there's definitely no one here, please sthandwa sami I have work tomorrow too so I have to sleep." He doesn't wait for me to reply before he plants a kiss on my forehead.

"Don't switch off the lights," I pull him back because I know that is where he was heading. He doesn't argue with me and gets into bed. He pulls me to his chest, "good night," he says and just like that he dosed off.

19.

My baby bump is showing now and it'd be impossible to hide. My siblings still don't know about my pregnancy so that must tell you just how long I haven't been at home. The heartburn is only getting worse as the months progresses even the morning sickness is still showing me flames. Bayede sent the letter to ask for my hand in marriage to my parents last week, I haven't heard from my parents so I don't know if they have received it or they seriously don't have anything to say about me getting married or what exactly they are thinking.

I slid on a V-neck, body hugging dress that shows off my cleavage. Bayede is not here so I will get to wear what I want, he has already left for work and I am getting ready to go out. I have to see Wandile, she gave birth about two months ago to a girl and Mlungisi won't let her out of his sight. They are still waiting for Mlungisi's leave to be approved at work before they go home so the parents can see their granddaughter.

I will head out to the hospital after that, Lorna gave birth three weeks before her due date so I have to see her right after I've seen Wandile.

I take my handbag and stepped out of the flat.

I didn't know Mlungisi was home, he is the one who opened the door for me and he leads me to the bedroom that Wandile and the baby are in – aunty Zimile has bad timing, the baby is sleeping and I don't even get to hold her. She looks cute though.

"Zimile can we talk?" Mlungisi is already pulling me out of the bedroom.

"Okay," I say, glancing at the baby for one last time before I head out.

Wandile stayed with the baby, she said something about using that time to rest because when the baby wakes up she won't get anything done.

I sit on the couch in the lounge and he sits next to me.

"So you are really getting married?" he asks, looking at me.

I guess his parents called him as the big brother to let him know about the letter.

"Yeah," I nod.

"You love him?"

"Yes, why else would I agree to get married with him?"

"I don't know I was just asking. I only want what is best for you," he places his hand on my lap.

"So you're really doing this?"

I look at him and the hand on my lap before I slowly pushed it off.

"You also got married and I said nothing about it. Let me be and like you said I should, I got over whatever I felt for you and Bayede is the man that I want to be with," I tell him and I stand up to my feet, taking my handbag with me.

He pulls me back by my arm and I look up to him because he is also standing now.

"I didn't mean it like that Zimile."

"I know," I pulled my arm out of his grip and he sighed.

"Okay, you can tell your boyfriend...I mean fiancé that we got the letter, we will decide on the right date and get back to him," he says, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Thanks,” I say in a low tone and walk to the door.

I don’t know what he was trying to do but I am over him and I am focusing on Bayede.

I get to Lorna’s ward and Busi is there, the baby’s coat is right next to the mother’s bed and it’s a girl too. I am sure she is a bit disappointed because she wanted a boy.

“Congratulations sisi,” I tell her and we hug.

I don’t know if we are over that bad blood between us so I still tread carefully towards her.

I walked over to greet the baby and her too is sleeping – what is it with these babies not wanting to see me, if these two weren’t gobbling at me like that then I’d have pinched the baby so she’d wake up.

“You didn’t tell us you were pregnant,” their eyes are on my belly and I let out a sigh.

“Well now you know,” I say, pointing to the obvious baby bump.

“You sure can hide yourself, I am even surprised that you came,” that is Lorna, complaining.

“I had to see my niece. I heard you haven’t gone to see Wandile’s baby.” I look at the both of them and they shy away from my gaze.

I don’t know what they have against her but they don’t seem to like her at all. Maybe she is too sweet for their tastebuds.

“So how were the labour pains?” I ask, pinching her toe and she kicks me off.

“Don’t even ask, that thing is –“

She pauses and we turn to the door, Lungile is standing there and she has a gift bag in her hand with a million dollar smile on her face. My sister is beautiful and I still don’t understand how she found herself in that dark world or what exactly pushed her to it.

“Sanibonani,” she greets as she steps inside.

We greet back, I take the gift bag to pass it over to Lorna and she puts it on the floor without even checking what it is in there.

“Don’t you dare touch my baby!” Lorna warns and I turn to look towards the baby’s coat – Lungile was just an inch away from touching the small human being.

Lorna looks damn serious, I don’t think that was necessary I mean Lungile wouldn’t have done anything to the baby with us around but she steps back anyway with a face that says she is hurt and I nearly felt sorry for her.

Busi and I don’t say anything. Lorna’s outburst was a bit dramatic but she has her reasons.

“How are you doing though?” Lungile asks Lorna like a concerned sister. She could’ve really fooled us if we didn’t know about her shenanigans.

Busi pulls me out of the ward as Lorna and Lungile continue to converse.

“We can’t leave Lorna alone with her,” I point back to the ward.

“Lorna can take care of herself, you seem to forget how feisty she can be even those stitches wouldn’t stop her from fighting to protect her daughter if she has to.”

I don’t doubt that for a second, phela she was ready to jump out of that bed when Lungile wanted to touch the baby.

“So?” she nods to my belly and involuntarily rub it.

“Yeah.”

“You don’t sound or look happy though. Look at those eye bags Zimile, what is wrong? Are the nightmares still giving you a hard time?” she asks, sounding really worried she even stepped closer to me.

I exhale deeply. She knows about the dreams because I had to talk to someone. They came to a point where they were so daunting and I couldn’t sleep. That woman’s cries still get to me and each time I hear her cry, I cry with her. Bayede still thinks there’s nothing wrong in his flat, he has lived there for years and nothing like this has ever happened before.

“It is not getting any better Busi,” I say, leaning back on the wall.

“Maybe it’s time you spoke to gogo, she’d know what you need to do and the stress is not good for the baby. I can see that you’re not even sleeping enough, you’re jeopardizing your health,” she rubs my arm for comfort.

“I will go see her after this.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

I shook my head no, dropping my eyes to the floor. Busi has turned to be the sister Lungile was since we were young and it is so overwhelming, I can’t control my emotions – the hormones must be coming out to play now.

“It is fine, I don’t want to trouble you so I will go alone.” She nods in understanding. I also want to know what exactly this whole thing mean, why I hear someone call my name over my shoulder – at home, work and in public – the woman crying, I want to know what she wants and why I am the one who hears her painful sobs.

“When was the last time you spoke to Mpilo?” I ask.

“I went to see him last weekend since I bought a few clothes for him. That boy is growing really fast and the things that come out of his mouth now, you’d swear it is not the same Mpilo Didiza raised.” We both laugh lightly at that. “But he is good, you should make time so you can visit him but only after you have dealt with whatever it is that is going on with you,” she says, waving at me like she’s measuring my problems.

I nod to her and we go back to the ward. We find Lungile sitting quietly on the chair right by the door – I wonder what happened for her to end up there, and Lorna yawns as we walk in.

“Thank God you are here, now I can get some sleep,” she says already pulling the sheet up to her chest and closing her eyes.

She really doesn’t trust Lungile around her child and this stunt is the evidence of that.

Gogo tells me to sit on the reed mat that was already laid on the floor in front of her and I oblige.

“What is wrong, you don’t look good – is it your in-laws already?”

I am taken back by her question. Back-up gogo, how do you know about that? But no I am not here for that so I shook my head.

“I have been having weird dreams about a woman, she’s always wearing black and crying. Her cries are really sad and every time she cries, I feel the need to reach out to her, not only as a concerned individual but because I feel connected to her.”

I look up to gogo and her head is tilted facing the roof, her eyes are closed like she is sleeping.

“Go on,” she says and I swallow.

“Another thing is I always hear a person calling my name over my shoulder but when I turn back there is no one there. Oh and I have heard that woman cries at night when the room is dark, and it only happened once that she cried with the lights on.”

She remains quiet for a short while then she shuffles to sit facing towards me.

“Uyakhala umawakho ngawe Zimile.” (Your mother is crying about you Zimile.) she says and I shake my head lightly.

Why would my mother cry about me when she knows I am here, safe and only just a call away from her?

I shift towards her, “I don’t understand.”

“The woman you see in your dreams is your mother, she is crying because of you – your father wronged her and they took you away from her,” she says not once looking up to my face. She speaks like whatever she is saying with her mouth she is reading it from the floor.

I still don’t understand what she is talking about and shift closer to her like everything will be clear if I am closer to her.

“My mother is back at home with my father, why would she cry to me when she can cry to him?”

“That woman you grew up knowing as your mother is not your mother,” she says with no emotions attached to her statement.

I feel like something is pressing really hard on my chest and the tears filled my eyes threatening to come out.

How could she say something like that? I feel anger brewing inside of me, coming here was a mistake I should have dealt with this on my own, this woman is spewing nonsense right now.

“You don’t know what you are talking about and that woman is my mother! I even have a birthmark to prove it, she has it and I have it too even Mlungisi has one as well. That proves that I am her daughter and I won’t sit here to listen to your nonsense.”

I shuffle to stand up and when I am on my knees, she says, “let me see that birthmark.”

I exhale sharply through my nose, putting my handbag back down and revealing the birthmark on my chest to the old woman.

She looks at it and nods. I don’t know what she is doing but she turns back to mixing water with things that I don’t know by name.

I may not look like my mother but this birthmark is what connects me with her. Hers is behind her right knee but much darker and bigger than mine.

I haven’t heard anyone calling my name over my shoulder today so I guess that counts as something good that has happened today.

The old woman turns back to me and signals for me to come closer to her. I do and she smudges a black ointment on the birthmark that is on my chest.

“Ah!” I scream, shying away from her because whatever it is that she just put there stings and more like it is burning the area of my skin where she applied that thing.

“Don’t remove it!” she warns and I fight the urge of wiping it off or scratching on my chest.

A moment or two, she takes a cloth that I didn't even notice was there and she wipes the ointment off my chest.

I look down – the birthmark is gone! It is like it was never there but my skin is red to show that whatever that was there has been removed or wiped off, whichever one you see fit.

I am hurt, deep inside my liver – I am hurt. I feel a sharp pull deep inside my belly button and I fear for my baby. I held on to my belly and I sank back down on the reed mat.

The old woman is looking at me and she is not saying anything. I touched my chest and looked up to her.

“How?” a tear escapes from my eye.

“You are not your mother's daughter, your real mother is out there crying for you to come back to her and she is expectantly waiting for your father to apologize for what he did to her.”

I shook my head and more tears fell down to my cheeks – there has to be some mistake – a part of me still refuses to believe that all of this is true, that my whole life was a lie.

“You have to go back to her so she can see you, once she has seen you then she'd be at peace and let you be.”

I look at this old woman, I want this thing to be over yes but does she understand what kind of a nuclear bomb she has just dropped on me? I wipe my tears but it is no use because more tears fall out.

“Where do I find her?” I don't think it'd do me any good to be in denial for longer than I have and she is not the person I should be angry at.

“Right where your father left her, ask him and he will tell you.” She still sounds really calm but I doubt she'd tell me what exactly my father did to my 'mother'. I still can't believe I sacrificed my life for a woman that I don't even share a slight or drop of DNA with.

I stood up with my handbag in my hands, this is weighing me down and I can feel my knees shaking.

“Oh and Zimile,” I stopped on my tracks then slowly turned to her, and she said, “Just know that you won't find her alive.”

20.

I push the door open and there's no one in the kitchen. There is a rod right next to the doorframe so I took it. I am so angry right now and clearly not thinking straight – I feel hot and this baby in my tummy feels heavy all of a sudden but I don't focus on that.

I move to the living room, it is also empty, I know they are in the house because there is some shuffling in the bedroom and it's four in the afternoon so they are sure back from the hospital or wherever they had to be.

With one swing the vase reached the wall and crashes into a hundred pieces and I don't stop to catch my breath before I head to the TV that is now playing the clientele funeral cover commercial, I swing the rod and it drives into the TV screen creating sparks like fireworks.

A horrified scream jerks me to turn to look behind me and Lungile is standing there with Busi next to her. It doesn't take longer than a second for Muzi to come inside the house too. Judging by the smell of nicotine that filled the room when he came in, I could tell that he was out smoking and right now he has the same horrified expression as his sisters.

"What are you doing Zimile?" he asks, pointing to the TV.

I don't know what I was doing, maybe I was trying to switch off with the rod – isn't it clear to him what I am doing or is he only good at keeping secrets and hating me for being his half sister?

"Who are you people?" I look at them, one by one and their expression changes to being confused.

"How long have you known, huh? And wena Muzi that gave you more reason to hate me and treat me like trash because I was nothing since I am not your mother's child?"

I hear a gasp coming from Busi so I turn to look at her.

"Don't act like this is the first time you're hearing it because I know you already know why I was always treated unfairly," it hurts me to even say those words. It reminds me of a lot that they have said, they treated me like an outsider and I was never one of them because we didn't come out of the same womb!

The sisters look guilty but I doubt Muzi feels the same way.

"It was never like that," the witch in the family speaks up. If it wasn't for the times where she stood up for me when her siblings ganged up on me then I would've told her where to get off. It hurts me the most that even Lorna knew about this, that's is why she wanted nothing to do with me – I was, still am, a constant reminder of my father's infidelity.

"You have no right, absolutely no right to blame us for our father's sins and just so you know, you are going to buy another TV to replace that TV you just broke and that vase scattered on the floor because of your stupidity. Look at you, do you blame us for hating you?" he looks at me with a face filled with anger and disgust.

My chest is heaving, he still doesn't see anything wrong here and them – won't they even apologize for keeping this away from me for this long?

I don't answer him instead I throw the rod to his feet and headed to the door. Then I heard him say, "hamba la and make sure never to come back – you piece of rubbish!"

Lungile tried to stop him from saying anything more but the damage is already done. His words hurt more than finding out that my life was a lie, everything I believed was is not actually true.

But I won't cry, I refuse to cry and there's one more stop that I need to make.

The door is not locked so I make my way in. It is starting to get dark outside and I am glad I made it here without any glitches.

"Yeah wena," I say walking towards the lounge area.

They stand up and look towards me.

"And wena what are you doing here?" I ask, looking at Wandile the ex. It is very late for her to be here or are they talking about getting back to each other again?

"Hi Zimile," she says smiling but I don't return it and her face falls after realising that I am not in the mood to chit chat. She clears her throat and says, "I came to speak to your brother, to ask him if he could speak to your father about him building me the house – I have seen his work and he is really good," she looks at me and then to Mlungisi.

"Oh damn right he is good and he is also a professional liar – very good Wandile you'd wonder if he went to school to study for it. Him too," I point to Mlungisi, who is looking at me like he is searching for something.

"How could you do this to me Mlungisi? Huh?" the tears I have been holding back escaped from my eyes and trailed down to my cheeks. "Not only did you hide the truth from me but you also wanted to get into bed with me! I wasn't crazy by thinking I was in love with you now was I?" Wandile gasps in shock, covering her mouth with her hands and I feel myself getting more angry – I am tired of people gasping and why is she still here?

"Zimile what are you talking about?" He has his hands resting on his waist now and working really hard to pull a confused face.

"Don't you dare play dumb Mlungisi!" I shout and hear footsteps coming from the passage, and Wandile the wife appears.

"What is going on here? Zimile?"

This is getting more and more interesting. I can't believe this, so what lie did they tell Wandile when the ex showed up on their doorstep? And by the looks of things the wife doesn't even know that these two have a history.

"Oh how dumb can you be Wandile by leaving your husband with his ex girlfriend alone in the same room?"

"What?" she looks at me and then at them.

"These two," I point between the two ex lovers, "I found them making out of the couch and girl I don't know what would've happened if I didn't walk in at that time. He was all over her like chicken pox." I look at Mlungisi and he is fuming.

Wandile the ex takes her handbag and tries to walk towards the door but Wandile the wife blocks her way, "where the hell do you think you're going?" she asks.

Hehe so Wandile wanted to slip out of the house without even trying to defend herself – coward.

I turn to leave because I don't want to see what will that turn out to be like, there's too much cheese and I might lose my appetite.

"Zimile?" he calls out my name as soon as I step out of the house.

"Where are you going?"

"I am going to find out the truth from your father maybe he has grown a pair of balls to own up and tell the truth."

"But we can talk about this." He looks really empathetic but I am too angry to let my guard down – he didn't love me enough to tell me the truth. I know he doesn't owe it to me but it is a sensible thing he could've done, for me.

"There is nothing to talk about – you had your chance and you blew it. I can't believe I trusted you enough to even have feelings for you. I wonder what would've happened if I didn't push you away that night, bhuti."

I look at him for a second more then I turned to walk away. I don't care if he is still standing there to see me walking into the opposite flat, he knows about Bayede so he might as well learn that I have been living with him.

"What are you doing?" he asks, looking from the bag on top of the bed to me.

"I am going home," I take a few things from the wardrobe and stuff them inside the bag.

"You won't get a taxi to KwaMashu at this time."

"I am going to kwaMaphumulo," I say stepping out of the bedroom heading to the bathroom.

"What are you talking about?" he is following behind me.

I walk out of the bathroom, with my towels and toothbrush, and he follows me to the bedroom.

"I am not speaking Chinese Bayede, I am going home," I zip the bag and head to the door.

"Zimile, I thought you were joking," he says, pulling me back to stop me from walking out.

I sigh and turn to look at him.

"Where, I mean how are you going to get there – it's after seven already and I am damn sure you won't find a taxi that will go as far as Stanger at this time."

"I don't care Bayede, even if I walk there it's fine all I know is I am going there and I won't sleep here tonight. Now let me go, I am already late."

He looks at me like I have gone crazy, well maybe I have gone crazy but more than anything I want to know the truth. I won't be able to sleep not knowing who I am or why I am here in the first place.

"Okay I will take you there," he gives me an assuring look. "Give me a few minutes," he says, taking out his phone and dialling someone's number.

He speaks to the person and I gather that he is borrowing a friend's car. He shouldn't have, right now I'd opt for the police van with no worry.

I feel a sharp pain in my abdomen and I groan, suppressing my scream. I hold onto where the pain came from and the bag slips out of my hand.

Bayede looks at me and says, "you have to believe me she is giving birth right now."

Another sharp pain comes through and I scream this time around placing my other hand on the wall for balance.

He concludes his phone call and looks at me.

“Ah baby you should’ve done acting that was really convincing even my friend agreed to lend me his car,” I so wish I could slap that stupid grin off his face.

“I wasn’t acting you moron!” I take another deep breath. I need to calm down because I can’t afford to lose my baby.

“What?” he rushes to my side. “Is the baby coming?” I shoot a deadly stare at him.

“At five months?”

He shrugs, “I wouldn’t know sthandwa sami but are you okay?”

“I am fine,” another deep breath and I stand up straight.

“Are you sure?” he scans me with concern.

I nod, “can we go now?”

He is still worried but he decides to let it slide.

“Yeah the car should be here in two minutes,” he takes the bag from the floor and we head out of his flat.

“So are you going to tell me what happened,” he steals a glance at me and looks ahead on the road.

“I am angry Bayede.”

“I can tell but why are you angry?” he speaks slowly like I was too slow the first time to get what he meant by his question.

I heave a sigh and narrated to him what gogo told me.

“That is...bad. So the woman you heard crying was your mother?” he asks the obvious and I don’t answer him.

He thought I was going crazy when I first told him about it so that is on him for not believing me.

“I am really sorry baby for not believing you.” He sounds apologetic but it is not his sorry that will make me feel better right now.

“Can you drive any faster?” I ask clearly frustrated. He is driving so slow like an old man with an eye sight problem.

“You’re pregnant Zimile and you weren’t fine just a while ago so I have to be careful.”

Careful my foot, “step on that accelerator Bayede if you still wish to wake up alive tomorrow,” I glare at him and he doesn’t say another word.

Two hours later, we are on the gravel road leading home and my stomach growls – I am hungry and I didn’t pack anything to eat. It is late right now we wouldn’t find any stores open.

I reach for my handbag that was on my feet and looked for something that I could eat, even a piece of sweet will do and I found one.

I put my bag down and got ready to indulge on the sweet. When I lift my eyes up, I see a man walking on the side of the road, he is wearing an all-white Zion uniform and has a long thin stick that is much higher than his height in his hand. He must be coming from or going to those cross-night church services. The ones I have never and will never attend.

The drive is quiet and I have calm down completely but I can't be sure I will feel the same way when I see the people that I have been calling my parents all my life. I know I am my father's daughter but right now it is hard to regard him as my father since I feel so betrayed – I hate him, all of them!

"Isn't that the same guy we saw ten minutes ago?" Bayede asks, pointing out the window to the man we passed a while ago. It is the same man, wearing the same white uniform.

"It's him," I say quietly as my eyes follow the man that we just drove past for the second time. I have never seen it with my own eyes but I have heard the stories about such things happening when you drive late at night.

I turn to look ahead and he is in front of the car.

"Ah!" I scream, covering my face with my hands, thinking that Bayede will hit him but the car stops and I uncover my eyes – there is no one there.

"Where are you going?" I ask Bayede as he attempts to open his door.

"I am going to check if I had hit him or not."

Seriously?

"He is dead, he probably died a long time ago just drive and don't pay attention to him."

He looks spooked now, so it is only sinking in now that that was a ghost?

"So you mean..." he points out and I nod.

A second later, I look at him and he starts shuffling around looking for something in his pockets, seat and he finds it inside the dashboard – it is a rosary. He hangs it on the rearview mirror and crosses his chest while mumbling something.

"I didn't know you were a Roma," I point to the rosary and he starts the car.

His mother is a Zion so I thought all of them were.

"No I am not," he says sounding like that would be the worst thing he'd ever get himself into.

"It is not a bad thing but I am glad you are a believer," I say pulling a small smile.

"Only when I am scared do I let that side of me show itself, I can't believe I actually saw a ghost – he looked so real." It is like he can see him now as he says that. It was really scary but I am glad whoever he is didn't cause us any trouble or worse killed us like they killed him.

I wonder how long he has been roaming around these streets – may his soul rest in peace one day.

I give Bayede directions to my house and after a few minutes he parks right in front of the gate. I get out of the car, it is so dark and quiet. Bayede decided to leave the lights on as we made our way inside the gate and head to the main house.

I knock on the door and I can feel myself getting upset all over again. I knock again, louder this time and I hear some shuffling on the other side of the door.

Bayede is standing a few steps away behind me and his hands are buried deep inside his pockets.

The door opens and his face appears lit up by the candle in his hand.

"Zimile," he says in disbelief. It is very late so I understand his shock.

“Baba,” I inhale deeply. I wish I could unlearn what I learnt today or is it yesterday given the time of the night?

“We are very sorry to disturb you so late baba,” that is Bayede, sounding very apologetic and walks to stand besides me.

“And who are you?” baba asks clearly confused, they have never met, he only knows that I am getting married but he doesn’t know the man.

“Bayede Mabaso,” he introduces himself. We are still outside and it is damn cold but the man in front of us still doesn’t offer for us to come in.

“Hawu Ndabezitha,” baba brings the candle up to Bayede’s face so he can see him clearly and he chuckles shaking his head. I hope he is not thinking of praising him or reciting his clan names because we are not here for that.

“Baba we need to talk,” my voice is stern and it sends a message that I mean business. We are going to talk – now!

“Baby it is late,” he takes my hand, hopefully to calm me down but it fuels me even more.

“I don’t care Bayede, I want us to talk now!” baba is taken aback by my outburst.

“Zimile, just get some rest and you are going to talk in the morning when you have calmed down,” he says, placing his hand on my baby bump like he is reminding me that I have to think of the baby as well. I sigh, nodding my head.

“You can come in.”

Bayede takes the bag from the floor and hands it to me.

“I respect you very much sir and so I will sleep in the car.”

“Don’t be silly what will the people say if they saw you sleeping in the car and don’t forget your status boy so don’t get me in trouble.”

“No baba it is fine. I have already disrespected your house so I won’t do further damage.” Baba nods with a smile on his face, he must be impressed. “Take care of yourself, okay?” I nod and he kisses me on the cheek.

He walks away and baba ushers me inside the house. The woman I have known as my mother all my life, appears from their bedroom and I walk past her without saying anything. I will respect Bayede’s wishes for the sake of the baby but if it was up to me we’d have talked about this till the early hours of the next day.

I step inside the room I had used as my bedroom when I stayed here and it still looks the same but the cover has been changed.

I can hear baba talking with his wife, updating her about what happened right outside his doorstep. Well it is not everyday that a person from royalty wakes you up from your sleep in the middle of the night only to decline your hospitality.

I don’t even have the energy to change into something more comfortable so I only remove my shoes and got in between the cover and the sheets. I laid on my side then remembered that I am hungry. I know I wouldn’t be able to sleep so I woke up, we have a kitchen in this house but I doubt there is any real food.

I have a candle in my hand and I am silently praying that no one wakes up to disturb my hunt for food. I check the cupboards for anything that is edible, right now I’d eat anything just to get

rid of the hunger and I find a box of biscuits hidden behind the plates that are only used for special occasions and on Christmas day.

They were probably saved for my father, you know the king of his own castle, he gets everything and anything he wants. We walk on eggshells when it comes to him and if it was any other day I wouldn't have taken these biscuits but today is not that day.

I eat about four and I lose my appetite, at least I ate something and I don't know when I fell asleep but when I wake up the sun is up and the room is really bright – I overslept.

I sit upright with my legs hanging on the edge of the bed and I hear voices coming from outside, there are a lot of voices for just the parents alone so there must be visitors. Some people have no timing and why do I have to keep postponing this 'talk'?

I check my phone and there's a text from Bayede saying that he has already left and he tells me to take care of myself and the baby.

I throw the phone on the side and walked out of the bedroom. There are bags on the couch and I know that brown leather bag from somewhere – it is Mlungisi's.

I rush out through the front door and they are there. Who asked them to come here? Even Lorna is here, when was she discharged from hospital? She has the baby with her.

I take a deep breath for the umpteenth time and walked towards baba, "can we talk, now."

The way he is looking at me tells me that Mlungisi or one of his other children has told him the reason why I am here.

He doesn't waste time, he tells everyone to go to the rondavel – that is where we are going to talk. Mama is there already, sitting down on the reed mat and I lay another one where I will sit. I want to be far away from her as much as possible.

Baba sits on his bench but it is not where it usually sits, he is sitting next to his wife, the two brothers are on the other bench while we girls sat on the mat. I don't know why Muzi is here because he clearly doesn't want to be part of this and they probably dragged him here.

I don't go around the bush instead I go through it never minding if there are thorns or whatever, "are you my mother?" I ask, looking at her and she takes a deep breath. I want nothing but the truth no matter how much it hurts me.

"No," she shakes her head. I knew it but it still hurts.

"If you're not my mother then where is my mother?" they don't look shocked so Busi must have told them about my visit to gogo.

"She is dead," he says very convinced and that tells me that he has known for a long time. And he still lived up to his lie.

"The birthmark, I know it wasn't real and what I want to know is how did I end up having one?" The parents look at each other.

"Your mother –"

"We got help," she quickly cuts him off.

"You used muthi?" I ask in disbelief, that is the only help they could've got because there's no way they could've prayed to God for Him to put a birthmark that was identical to the one she and Mlungisi have.

“We did all we could so that you wouldn’t doubt that you are mine,” I don’t know who she is trying to convince more between me and her.

“I am not yours, never have and never will.”

I don’t know where the hatred I have for her comes from all of a sudden.

“But I have to give it to you, you did well for as long as your lie lasted.”

“I am sorry Zimile, you weren’t supposed to find out like this.”

“Lies, I was never meant to find out as long as I lived. This was a secret you all promised each other to take to the grave!” I shout and Lorna’s baby cries out loud, and she excuses herself by stepping outside.

“But now you have found out so what?” that is Muzi, he is so angry with me I wonder what I ever did to him.

“Ngakwenzani mtakababa for you to hate me so much?” I look at him and he looks away. I have tears in my eyes but I keep fighting them back.

We sit in silence for a while until I am ready to voice out my thoughts, “so I am nothing but a product of my father’s infidelity?”

“You are more than that,” she says and I lift my eyes to her.

The atmosphere has grown too thick already and I am having a difficulty in breathing.

“Your father raped your mother.”

Guilt washes over my father’s face, no one is looking at me now and my tears flow freely on my cheeks.

Lorna walks in and sits next to me then she asks, “what did I miss?”

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“And then?” I ask, after I had wiped my face dry and sniffled all the snot in my nostrils. They look at me for a second and I can see they don’t know where I am or what exactly I am asking.

“He rapes my mother then comes back with a bastard child and you still open your legs for him so you can make Lorna?!”

I hear gasps and I feel Lorna’s eyes burning the side of my face but I still don’t remove my eyes from her.

“Heyi wena Zimile don’t you have respect, that is my mother you’re talking to!”

“The same mother you couldn’t look after when she was on her deathbed, the same mother you couldn’t even check up on and didn’t care if she slept with a full stomach or not?” my voice is calm and I am breathing steadily. If it wasn’t for the fresh tears streaming down my cheeks then you wouldn’t be able to tell that I am upset.

He can’t look at me in the eye when I turn to look at him – iqiniso liyababa – but he is too quick to spew whatever nonsense that pops inside his head.

“So what is it? You forgave him just like that?”

She drops her eyes to her hands.

“It wasn’t like that,” my father speaks up.

“Then what was it like baba? You keep on saying it wasn’t like but you’re not telling me what it was like!” I raise my voice higher than necessary.

“Her parents died, she was all on her own so she wouldn’t have been able to take care of you so I took you to give you a warm home where you’d grow up amongst your siblings.”

I chuckle bitterly, nothing is funny or whatsoever but here is what I want to know now, “who exactly were you doing a favour – me or her?”

She remains quiet even her husband is not looking at me now.

“And what did you mean by ‘you took me’?”

I look between both the parents as they remained quiet and I lose my patience.

“What did you do to my mother?!” I scream and she jumps, startled by my outburst.

“I-I...” she looks at her husband and back at me. “I – your father told me about her being pregnant and how he got her pregnant,” she swallows before continuing, “months went by and I couldn’t get the thought of another woman being impregnated by my husband out of my head so I went to talk to her – woman to woman – because I didn’t want her coming back to claim her place in your father’s life. Despite what he did, he was still my husband and when I got there...” she takes a deep breath.

The more she talks the more I realise that I never knew this woman, though I called her my mother she is still not the woman who I thought she was.

“When I got there, she was in labour and there was no way we could get to the clinic in time so I helped her give birth. With the little knowledge I had and the resources, she gave birth to a beautiful healthy baby and you didn’t cry – you screamed out loud and I bet if you had bigger lungs the whole village would have heard you,” she says, trying to hide the smile on her face.

“Right when I held you in my hands, I knew that is where you belonged – you were mine Zimile and not hers,” a tear escapes from her eye as she looks up to me. “And without thinking twice, I took you with me right there and then, and I never looked back.”

“You left her to die?” the thought of my mother laying there helplessly breaks my heart into a million pieces, how can one be so selfish and heartless?!

“There was nothing I could do, she was going to bleed to death even if I had taken her to the clinic – do you know how far it is and how daunting it is to get transport?”

“You don’t know that, she could have lived – she had me to live for and she would have fought if you gave her the chance to,” I say in between sobs. To say I am broken would be an understatement, right now I feel like a huge part of me is dead – I know I should continue to feel upset but I feel numb even the baby in my tummy has stopped playing around.

“You were alive so that is all that mattered,” she says dismissively with no emotions attached to her voice.

I can’t believe this, I look up to my father and he still has guilt plastered on his face. If it was any other day I would have softened up but not today.

“She comes home and you don’t question her where she got the baby?”

He rubs his hands together and exhales sharply.

“No,” he shakes his head, “I knew who you were and there was no need to ask any questions.” My heart drops to my butt hole because that is the fastest way to get to the surface as I am sitting down.

“You both...you killed my mother!” they look at me shocked like they don’t know what the hell I am accusing them of – and that’s it!

“I hate you!”

I stand up to my feet and I feel my chest closing in, my tears are blinding me and my vision is suddenly blurry.

“All of you!” I point to everyone in the room and eyes drop to the floor one by one.

I don’t stand there for a second longer, I get out of the rondavel and head straight to the main house to get my phone.

I have never felt so betrayed in my whole life, I can’t believe this is me at this stage of my life right where I thought my life is changing for the better then something just keeps on pulling me back – even this network is kak! I went outside to get a spot where I will get better reception, my eyes feel like a waterfall I have no control over my own tears and my heart feels heavy.

“Zimile, hello can you hear me?” that’s how he answers his phone.

“Bayede,” I say with a trembling voice. If I stand for another minute I swear I am going to fall because of how weak my knees feel, I feel drained and wasted. My whole existence is a waste and if it wasn’t for him, the baby or Mpilo then I would’ve wished for death to take me already.

“Zimile are you okay?”

I shook my head no like he could see me and broke into more tears, sobbing and painting my face with more snot.

“Is everything okay, do you want me to come there?” there is shuffling like he just stood up, getting ready to leave whenever I say he must come.

“No,” I shook my head again and sniffled, “kubuhlungu Bayede,” I say holding onto my chest. “Where baby?” he sounds even more worried, concerned and panicked. I feel a tap on my shoulder before I could reply to him and I turn back to find my father standing behind me.

“Zimile?” Bayede’s voice echoes from the speaker.

My voice is choked up in my throat so I remain silent, I don’t say a word to him or the man who is now standing in front of me.

“Zim –“ I cut the call and exhale sharply.

“Zimile I am so sorry,” he begs for my forgiveness.

“I am not the one who you should be apologising to. There is a woman that you wronged twenty-seven years ago, I don’t know where she is but you know and she is the one who wants your apologies – not this woman here.” I point to myself and attempted to walk away but he grabs my arm to stop me from walking away.

“What do I have to do to make things right?” he asks, looking like he is the one who received bone-shaking news, like he is the one whose ‘parents’ dropped a nuclear bomb on and the one who has to mourn for his mother who he didn’t even get to know. I don’t even know how she looked like!

“Go to her and ask for forgiveness. And don’t worry you just have to say the words and all will be forgiven,” he sighs but he is not relieved, there’s more that is going on with him and from what I learnt today – it’d take more than just the word sorry for him to get forgiveness from me.

“Oh before I forget, you have to slaughter a goat to cleanse her household and burn impepho to appease to her ancestors, mfundisi.” I bow my head and walked straight into the house. For a second I am worried but when I lay on my back, the baby starts moving again and my body relaxes.

Only the walls remained and you wouldn’t tell that there was a house here. The grass is so tall and dry. With how far the neighbours are there is no doubt that they didn’t hear my mother’s cry that day and they didn’t even see anything suspicious.

“Where did it happen?” I ask, looking ahead but I know he heard me as he clears his throat to speak up.

“Right there,” he points to the grass after measuring the distance from the now dead rondavel to the spot.

It comes as a shock to me that he still remembers.

“It was all about a power struggle, she was feisty and stubborn just like you. I had come to help her with the harvesting, I don’t quite remember if it was for the beans or the mealies, we all knew that she was an orphan so everyone in the village did everything to help.”

And you helped her by bringing nothing but pain into her life – I fight the urge to roll my eyes.

“I thought she wanted it too but she –“

I walk away from him, I don't want to hear another word from him and he can't be seriously thinking that I want to hear a word about his filth – I don't want the whole truth.

Mlungisi and Muzi bring the goat to their father and a man we don't know appears, I don't even know where he came from. Baba excuses himself and walks up to the man.

They exchange a few words and baba signals for us to come to them. We oblige and the man leads the way to what looks like a grave. I hold my breath and hugged myself like I am suddenly feeling cold.

"This where we buried her," the man points to the grave. It is covered by grass and without a cross it looks more like a resting place for the herd-boys and not my mother's grave.

I drop to my knees as they couldn't carry me any longer than they have and I break into tears. I have cried so much and I feel like it is the thing that is draining me and not the events that are occurring around me.

I don't know what I was expecting but a grave is not what I was waiting to see. Judging by what the parents told me, I guess I was thinking that we'd see what had been left of her decomposed body after the years since she had died.

Baba invited his sister, Auntie Vumile, to help him with the process of this ritual because gogo couldn't make it and they went on with the necessities. I cried the whole time, comforting myself because I wouldn't let anyone touch me, not even Mlungisi.

"How are you feeling now?" she asks, eyeing me carefully.

I shrug, looking at the cup of tea in my hands.

"I am sorry you had to find out like that," she takes my hand and I look up.

Everyone, besides Muzi of course, has been looking at me with eyes filled with pity and to be honest it is making things worse because it is the thing that is chasing me away from here.

I feel a sharp pain on my abdomen, like the other night before I came here and I groaned suppressing any sound that is fighting to leave my lips.

"Are you okay?"

I nod, Nomthandazo is the only one I can bear to sit with for longer than a minute and trust me I also want to know why.

The pain is getting more intense with time and I don't know why because I have been calm since we concluded that ritual.

Lorna comes out of the house and sits next to Nomthi on the bench while I occupied a plastic chair in front of them. She heaves a long sigh as she settles down, the baby has been restless since from last night and it is by God's grace that she has fallen asleep for longer than a minute.

"I thought she'd never stop crying," she says with tearful eyes.

"She is alright, it must be the weather you know how babies get when the weather is gloomy," Nomthi comforts her.

"Well I wouldn't know that is my first child and it hurts to see her cry like that for absolutely nothing – it is like she is in pain but she can't tell me and I can't help her." She wipes the tears at the corner of her eyes.

“So how are you going to make it work – I mean with work and the baby – are you going to juggle both?” I ask, taking a sip of my tea.

“I need to get back to work so I’d be able to provide for her so I am going to leave her here with ma.”

“Is that wise though? That is a new born baby and ma is –”

“Mpilo is already living here so don’t be selfish Zimile and that woman is my mother, not yours,” she shoots back like I was fighting with her.

I sigh, relaxing back on the chair, I guess we are going to continue like this and it’d take more than just the truth coming out for her to let go of the hatred she has for me.

“Nonsikelelo started her periods last month,” Nomthi says with a proud smile on her face.

Nonsi is a big girl now and Nomthi should be proud just like she is now. It is sad that her husband won’t be able to see his children grow up to being men and women.

“She must have freaked out,” I say chuckling lightly.

“Worse, she cried. I thought she had a stomach ache you know since she had been complaining about the pain in her abdomen. She got worse as the time went by and I opted ukuthi ngimchathe. I got everything ready, she was willing to through it all just to get rid of the pain and when she lowered her panties it was stained with blood – ah she cried like she could see death coming for her,” she says the last part through light chuckles, shaking her head.

“The first is always –” the baby cries inside the house, cutting Lorna short and she sighs heavily facing up to the roof.

“I’m coming!” she shouts as she walks inside the house.

“Ah!” I scream out loud, no this one is too painful. The cup I had in my hand falls down as I feel a burning sensation on my lower back – I swear I am going into labour, that is just how intense the pain has grown to be.

“Zimile,” Nomthi rushes to me, “is it another contraction?”

I nod rapidly, while breathing in and out.

“Ah!” another one comes through and I feel sweat on my forehead. My hand is rubbing on my baby bump while the other is putting pressure on my burning back and I don’t know why I am doing all of this because it is not helping.

“No Zimile I think you should –”

“Uyathakatha Lungile?!” Busi’s voice chirps in from behind us and she sounds really angry.

I can’t see her because Nomthi is standing over and besides me, blocking the view.

“Lungile, uyathakatha na?!” she asks again, just as loud as she was a second ago.

Nomthi helps me to stand up and we walk out of the veranda. We walk past Aunty Vumile as she herds all the children inside the main house while Busi shouts out her question – I thought we weren’t going to confront her about her witchcraft.

The other siblings are now outside, together with the parents and Lorna is the only one who is not here.

“Busi what is this?” That is baba questioning her actions.

“Uyathakatha lo,” she points to Lungile who now looks like a wet, cold chicken.

“How can you accuse your sister of something like that?”

“Lungile would never do that!”

The parents are barking without understanding the whole thing and I see Lungile take a step back, another one.

“Uyabaleka!” I point to her and Mlungisi is behind her in seconds.

“What is this?” Busi lifts up a small bottle that is filled with something that is black inside, there is a red cloth that is under its lid like it was put there in order to stop whatever is inside from spewing out of the bottle.

I shoot my eyes to Lungile and she is slowly shaking her head while taking another step backwards but she has nowhere to go as her back clashes on Mlungisi’s chest with a just another step back.

“I saw her, I saw her digging behind the house and I wondered why but now I know. How could you do this Lungile?!”

Like we don’t have a lot to deal with already then she comes with her nonsense.

She is now crying with her hands on her chest, without her opening her mouth one would swear we are accusing an innocent person and we are burdening her with someone else’s sins.

“Did you do it Lungile?” Mlungisi asks behind her and her body tenses up.

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs tearfully.

The parents are shocked by the revelation and are looking at Lungile with their eyes gobbling out.

I feel hands around my waist and I see a colourful string there too, I turn my head back...

“It will protect the baby, relax,” she says tying a knot in the front while she is still behind me.

We turn our attention to Lungile and Busi.

“You have a roof over your head, a good paying job, a family that loves you and you can get any man you want if you can just say the right words so why are you doing this?!” Busi sounds hurt more than angry now.

Lungile is crying hysterically and her body is trembling but she wasn’t shaking when she was digging up that hole or planning her next move on how to make our lives more unbearable.

“What were you hoping to achieve?”

“I am sorry,” that is all that is flying out of her mouth.

I can see Busi getting impatient, we all are – it is now or never – it is either she speaks now or we beat the truth out of her.

Mlungisi pushes her forward like that will get her talking but she is still mute.

“Why Lungile?”

“What else have you done, huh? So you wanted to kill my baby?” that is what is flooding through my mind right now, the contractions – it was all her doings!

“I am sorry,” she mouths again.

“Stop saying sorry and tell us why!” Muzi shouts impatiently.

“They wanted me to do it,” she shakes her head and says, “I never wanted to do it but they forced me to.”

“Forced you to do what?” I ask.

“Who is they?” Nomthi asks but that is non-relevant right now.

“Speak!” that is Mlungisi pushing her again and she turns to him frightened, and then she turns back to us.

“They are hungry,” she says like it hurts to mouth those words.

We look at her clearly confused.

“And they are not hungry for food,” she swallows hard.

“Who is they?” that is Nomthi again – can she just shut up and save that question for later?!

When I lift my eyes up, Lungile is already pointing behind Busi and we follow to the direction she is pointing at but I can’t see anything.

“Is this some kind of a joke Lungile?”

“No look closely,” she says with a stern voice like she wasn’t crying a while ago.

I squint my eyes, zooming the space in front of us and...

“Ah!”

“The fuck!”

“In the name of the father, the son and the holy spirit.”

Is this even allowed? There should be a court of the evil because this is illegal, they are taking this thing of witchcraft too far now, I mean what is that?

They are looking directly at us, it is not only two or three but there’s whole lot of them – is this what they meant when they were talking about tokoloshes? These are grown men in small boys bodies, some even have beards and potbellies.

“Are you fucking crazy Lungile? Are you stupid or dumb?” he is heading towards her with a face that is fuming with anger – I have seen Muzi angry but this takes the cup – baba holds him back and he is fighting to get to Lungile.

“Bhuti stop!” that is Busi begging the hotheaded Muzi to calm his tits down.

“How can you bring those things here, in our home Lungile? How could you?!” he is so angry, he is even spitting saliva as he speaks.

“I am sorry,” Lungile has gone back to crying.

My chest is heaving, I have never seen anything like that before and I never wish to see it again. I remember Busi saying that gogo said they’d show themselves when the time is right but clearly these things don’t know anything about timing because today is the worst day they could choose.

“Lungile, Muzi please just calm down and let us sit down and –“

“There is nothing to sit down for Aunty, not for umthakathi, makashiswe!” he points to Lungile still very much angry.

I hold my breath while the others gasp in shock, I mean how can he suggest something like that against his sister? Yeah she did us and herself wrong but she is still family.

“Muzi!” baba warns as he pushes him back one last time.

“What are you waiting for, do you want her to kill us all before you do something about it?” he is looking at us like we are the ones who have lost their marbles when everything is pointing at him.

“Do you think I did it because it was fun?” we shoot our eyes to Lungile. “it was everything but fun – it was torture, I couldn’t sleep because they weren’t sleeping, I had no way out because

there is no way out besides death and I was nothing but a slave to them. I slaved and slaved and I still have to slave for as long as I live!" she points to her chest, looking drained and defeated. This sight should be softening our hearts, let us forget everything and just let this go but our minds and hearts are not there.

"You can do it bhuti – burn me alive, right here, right now because I am also tired – I don't want to do this anymore," she sinks down to the ground with her eyes still on Muzi.

I cover my mouth with one hand, I am shocked but most I am stunned.

"We can't kill you before you have confessed all your sins."

We shoot our eyes to Aunty Vumile, wasn't she the one who said we should all calm down and sit down so we could talk?

"Vuvu!" baba reprimands her but her words remain and she doesn't back down.

We turn to Lungile and she swallows hard. Her eyes lock with mine and I know she is coming for me.

"I have always envied you Zimile, I wanted everything that you had."

"What do you mean – I had and have nothing?"

"I mean exactly that, I wanted to be you – all that you had and that you didn't have it – I wanted it all and that is why I was there for you." I frown as she drops her eyes. "You were meant to lose that baby right on that moment when Busi –"

Now I am the one who they are holding back, "how could you do that to me Lungile?!" I fight to get to her but their grip is very firm to hold me back.

She doesn't back away and instead of saying sorry she says, "if I couldn't have it then neither should you."

The fuck!

I lose all my fighting spirit, looking at her as I feel pain engulfs me all over again.

When she looks up again, she is looking at Nomthi.

"They...I could've done it myself but I wasn't who they wanted," she sobs and Nomthi let's go of me, giving Lungile all her attention.

"They wanted a virgin, I had to do it and if I didn't do it then they would've..." she breaks into tears before she could continue.

Nomthandazo is taking one step at a time towards her, approaching with determination but with caution as well.

"Nonsikelelo –"

"What did you do to my child?" Nomthi asks just a few steps away from her.

"S-she was the only one I could offer to them."

"What did you do to her?" Nomthandazo is losing her patience and Mlungisi takes a step forward, getting ready to step in.

"She was a virgin..." what does she mean 'she was'? "...and they wanted a virgin so I –" she doesn't get to finish what she wanted to say as Nomthi jumps on her.

"How could you?" she is crying but still throwing punches and a few kicks at Lungile.

Mlungisi is trying to hold Nomthi back but he is failing. Her wails pierce through my heart and I feel her pain.

She is screaming and kicking when Mlungisi finally manages to pull her away. At this sight you'd swear someone dropped a bomb to say Nonsikelelo is no more, the way she is wailing it is like when we laid her husband to rest and her body just sinks to the ground like she has given up on life as a whole. I am torn just as much but how does Nonsikelelo feel?

"I am sorry," those are the last words I hear from Lungile before mama starts a gospel chorus and baba backs her up with a Bible in his hand that I didn't know he had with him.

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Lungile is still alive, thanks to her parents and she did a cleansing ritual, for the disrespect and the evil deeds she got herself into. It was easy for her since she didn't kill anyone...yet. But there is still a long way to go for her, she is not getting any forgiveness from me or any of her siblings.

Nomthandazo is the least of the people who would consider forgiving her, I am thankful to God for protecting my child and Lorna, her baby has been fine ever since the cleansing had been done. She was restless because of the things that were going on around her, she wasn't the target or anything like that – she was just being a baby – babies sense everything.

I haven't been at KwaMashu for months, I learnt that Lungile is still living there despite how her siblings feel about her – she is not allowed to cook though or touch anything that is not hers – they still don't trust her, me too and who can blame us? She was close to killing my baby and if it wasn't for the endless preaching baba gave us then I'd have already retaliated for myself like Lorna had said before – fight evil with evil.

Gogo said it is all over and the ancestors are at peace. I wonder why they have been quiet for this long, we had to find out things for ourselves while they are there but once things go wrong on their side, they will be demanding cows, chickens, goats, ducks and even anacondas but they refused to come through for us.

My mother is at peace as well, I haven't had any nightmares since my father apologised to her and I haven't heard anyone calling my name over my shoulder even her cries are an old thing now. I am relieved on her behalf, I may not know her but my heart knows where home is – we are connected even with death in between us.

And like he promised, Bayede went home to pay half of the lobola and believe it or not – I had to warn him about my family like he had warned me about his and I was the one who served his uncles. I watched closely at how everything was prepared and who was preparing the food – I had to be careful.

Bayede has his head laid on my tummy, I am so big now it's like I am carrying twins – he said he wants to be close to the baby and him laying his head on my tummy is as close as he can get. I am sitting on the edge of the bed and Mr is sitting on the floor, massaging my stomach and humming a song I have never heard of.

I run my fingers through his hair, it is so long I don't know why he doesn't like cutting it because it makes him look dirty. Right on the top of his head I feel something there so I went hunting for what might be there, he is peaceful like he is sleeping I know the baby is sleeping now because it has stopped moving – it had been kicking and playing for the longest time since Bayede laid on my stomach.

After parting his hair apart on top of his head, I see it – it's big, dark and shiny like a black pearl and if it was not what I think it is then I would've called it beautiful.

“Bayede you have izintwala?” I ask, shocked and push his head away from me lightly.

“Intwala,” (a louse.) He corrects me with a smirk on his face.

“So you’re proud?” I am confused, he has an insect in his hair and he is busy smiling here. If it was me, I would be worried.

“My father had them too,” he says laying back on my stomach – who said he must? I don’t want that thing close to me. “And my baby will have them too,” he pats the side of my belly and I push his away, roughly this time around.

“What?” he is laughing.

“This is not funny Bayede,” I say with a pout. He better say he is joking or I am going to be cutting this baby’s hair short and tight all the damn time.

“It is an honourable thing in our family and this little one here,” he kisses my tummy before continuing, “will have them as well whether you like it or not.”

I hate that smirk on his face. Why is my baby having these things and not that son of his, what’s his name again? It doesn’t matter but he should have them, not my baby, God can’t disown me and put me through that – what if they crawl out of his head and jump on my hair – what will they say at the salon when they plait my hair?

“Where are you going?” he asks as I stand up to walk away from him. I am very angry but as he said there’s nothing I can do about it.

“I am going to Wandile, she needs help with a few things,” I say dismissively with my back on him and my hands in the wardrobe, looking for something to wear.

“But I thought the party is only later,” his voice is getting closer so I know he is coming towards me.

Mlungisi and Wandile will be celebrating their union this afternoon, there’s no wedding – they went to the Home Affairs to make their marriage official – so today it’s some sort of reception, the same as what every guest would go to after the couple have exchanged their vows in front of the pastor in a church like in any other ‘normal’ weddings.

I feel his arms wrapping around my waist, he is so clingy it’s nice and frustrating at times like right now because I feel hot and he is suffocating me.

“Like I said Bayede she needs help with the preparations.”

“Have you seen yourself Zimile?” he asks, against my ear.

What does he mean if I have seen myself, I know I am eight months and one week pregnant but where is he going with his question?

“Are you implying something Mr Mabaso?”

“You’re pregnant, you should be in bed and not moving around. What if when you are still busy chopping your onions there my baby slips out and hits the floor – head first – can you imagine the trauma you will be putting my baby into?” he whines and I roll my eyes.

It has been my baby this, my baby that, is what you’re eating good for the baby? Zimile make sure the water is warm and not too hot – I don’t want you to burn my baby. My baby, my baby – all the damn time! What about me?

I push him away as I turn around, heading to the bed with a black dress in my hand. Durban weather is on another level, it is so hot but a black dress will make me look slimmer so I have to suck it up and make sure it fits.

"It will only be a few minutes, she knows I am almost due so I will spend most of the time sitting down." I strip off what I was wearing and tied my hair, preparing myself for a cold shower before I go.

"Just don't do anything that will harm the baby."

I heave a sigh and lazily turned to look at him.

"I know what is good for the baby Bayede, this is my second pregnancy or are you trying to tell me that I am a bad mother and I know nothing about what is good for my baby?" I ask, tearfully and sank on the bed with my hands hugging my belly.

He rushes to me within seconds of settling down on the bed.

"Hey," he cups my face and turns me to look at him. "That is not what I meant, you're a good mother, it's just that I want what is best for the baby," he says with an apologetic face.

"It's my baby too, you know?" I wipe my tears with the back of my hand.

"I know and I am sorry for saying that," he pulls me to him and plants a kiss on my forehead.

"Are you okay now? I am sorry sthandwa sami," he says looking straight into my eyes. Now I feel stupid for crying over that, these hormones are making me overanalyse everything with Mpilo it was nothing compared to this, physically it was easy but emotionally it was bad – I didn't have a Bayede back then.

"It's fine," I sniffle while wiping my face dry.

"Umuhle mawukhala yazi," he says, chuckling lightly and instead of blushing I hit him on the chest – I know he is fooling around, I know I look ugly when I am crying and my current state just makes it worse.

He pulls me closer and leans in to kiss me on my lips.

"I love you," he says against my lips.

"I love you too."

He kisses me again, slowly pushing me to lay on my back. Unlike other men, he is not afraid to sex me while I am pregnant, with him it is like he is on a mission to get me pregnant while I am pregnant. He says it is rude to let a king go to bed hungry, that is pure disrespect and Shaka Zulu wouldn't have hesitated to kill me for that, and I am glad he is Bayede Mabaso, not Mageba with a few screws loose.

He trails down to plant kisses on my neck leaving me breathing through my parted lips, I am horny as fuck maybe that's why I was crying – it is hard to ask a man to fuck you, pregnant or not I still don't have the guts to.

He cups my swollen breasts but he doesn't suck them instead he goes down to remove my panty it is like he knows that I am in a rush, I have over an inch of tissues that need scratching.

He comes up to my face again and gives me a wet kiss that got me arching my back in search for his shaft, I can't wait any longer.

Finally he fills me and starts thrusting in, the belly is too big for him to keep the rhythm so he pulls out and tells me to get on my knees. Like a horny slut, I oblige.

He slams into me mercilessly and rams me like there is no tomorrow. My moans are muffed by the pile of pillows under me and he is groaning, gripping my butt cheeks for dear life.

When he humps deeper and faster, I let my body relax and allow the waves of pleasure to take over me. He spans my left butt cheek and goes in even deeper to pump his seed inside me. He breaths in sharply and drops besides me, and I lay on my side.

“Now you can go help your friend,” he says breathlessly. To him that is equivalent as giving me a pass to go to China, I don’t know how I’d get there without a visa but I won’t waste this opportunity at least I won’t hear a ‘my baby, my baby’ for an hour or so.

The deco is very elegant and simple – that’s what a white and gold theme would always do – fool people to think you spent thousands on the deco when you didn’t even spend a cent. The parents couldn’t come, I don’t know what excuse they came up with this time but my guess is they don’t like coming to Durban, ever since they left – they have been grounded to that village for as long as forever.

I am on my second plate when the speeches begin. Bayede, as always, has been checking what I eat before I shove it down my mouth – he is annoying like that.

Lorna and the other sisters made it to the celebration. Fan of the wife or not, they had to come in support of their brother and I am still treated like the half-sister I have always been.

Wandile, the ex, comes to the front and I pause on the eating. I thought we were far from the stage where an ex objects for the wedding to continue and the last time I checked she was over Mlungisi.

“Greetings to everyone,” she has a smile on her face so I guess it can’t be that bad.

Wandile, the wife, looks calm but curious and Mlungisi just finished gulping his drink in one go and is looking around to get another one – who invited her?

“I just want to say congratulations to the lovely couple...” lovely? Girl is working overtime in applying for her seat in heaven. “...and I wish them nothing but the best and more babies,” that got the crowd laughing but I am not going to let my guard down until I know why she is there in the first place.

“From me to the newly weds, is a weekend away to the Magalies for their honeymoon!” the cheering goes on and I gulp down my water – I guess not all exes are bitter and spiteful.

There are small smiles on the ‘lovely’ couple’s faces, it is a great gift but coming from her it’s like a ticket to hell.

The speeches continue and I excuse myself, Bayede doesn’t want me to leave his sight but he needs to chill.

I followed Wandile as she walked out of the tent.

“Wandile?” she stops and turns to look at me – no smile.

“Zimile, hi, how are you doing?” she asks after dropping her eyes to my heavy looking belly.

“I am alright,” I swallow and force a small smile on my face. “Wandile I would like to apologize for what happened the other night. It was very wrong of me, unnecessary and I am sorry.”

She nods, “its all forgiven, I know you were going through a rough patch and I am over that.” I believe her.

“So can we continue to be friends? I miss you.”

For the first time since I stood in front of her, she smiles and I don’t doubt that it is genuine.

“Keep my number close, call me when you need me and that is where our relationship ends,” with that said she turned to walk away. Tears stream down my face as I watch her walking away from me. So it’s true, you never realise someone’s worth until they are gone.

That time has come, I have been in labour for eight hours straight and I feel like I am losing my marbles. Maybe my brain has turned up side down because of how I have been pulling my hair. I will say it again, this is the worst pregnancy I have ever had – can’t this baby come out already?!

I breathed out sharply and inhaled just as sharp.

I see a doctor coming in through the corner of my eye and I stop pacing up and down.

“I thought I told you to stay in bed, do you know how dangerous it is to have you on your feet right now,” he must not test me. He should make himself useful and pull this baby out, now! Bayede is not here because I couldn’t have him here, he is at work – I don’t know if they couldn’t go on without him but they clearly advised that he had to be there so I am here, in labour, alone and this doctor is getting on my damn nerves.

I don’t say anything to him but I breathe out through my nose like a bull to show him that I am angry, very angry.

He came to check on how far I am and after checking two nurses come in. They close the curtains and I know shit has hit the fan.

The doctor hits both my thighs and tells me to push, I have been in this position before but with this baby it is like my first time.

I push again and again, draining all the strength that ever existed in me but I am not getting anywhere. It’s the nurse who is hitting my thighs now – the downside of being at Addington Hospital instead of Netcare St Augustine’s Hospital – she keeps on hitting me while telling me to push.

Five more pushes and I hear a small wail coming from my parted legs. I lazily open my eyes with my chest heaving slowly as I feel myself drifting off to sleep.

When open my eyes again, I find Bayede looking at me – when did I fall asleep and where is my baby?

He lifts up my hand and kisses the back of it rapidly. His face is not telling me anything, now I am worried – what kind of a mother am I to fall asleep before holding my baby right after giving him life?

I don’t know the gender yet because I wanted it to be a surprise but gogo had said my baby will lead so I felt in my bones that it is a boy.

“Thank you Sonkophe, Sombizi,” he says kissing my hand again and squeezing it. There’s a smile on his face now and I feel relief washing over me but I am still tired even my pum-pum is in pain.

The door opens and a nurse comes in with her back on us, looks like she has something with her. Once she is fully in, she turns to us with a baby's coat – I tilt my head up and the baby is wrapped in a pink blanket.

My heart drops and I look at Bayede, he has a wide smile on his face and he looks excited.

"Congratulations mommy," the nurse says as she scoops the baby off the coat.

Bayede stands up, he wants to take the baby but the nurse is looking at me. I give her a slight nod and she hands the baby to him. He is holding the baby like it is a glass and he was told to be careful not to drop it because it will break.

The smile on his face has widen, it forces me to smile as well and the nurse excuses herself saying she'd come back to show me how to breastfeed. When I told her I can, she said something about it being compulsory and part of protocol.

"She is beautiful Zimile," he says looking at the baby in his arms. He is rocking her like she is crying.

"Can I see her?" I ask, trying to sit up.

"Are you fine there?" he steals a glance at me but his whole attention is on the special somebody in his arms.

I nod when he looks up again and he hands the baby over to me.

"Were you going to deny my baby Bayede?"

He chuckles as he settles on the chair that he was occupying before the nurse came in.

"Mabaso's genes are very strong," he says peeping on the baby.

She looks like him, I don't see anything of mine on this face but maybe she has my butt – that should count for something.

"So what are we going to name her?" he sounds excited.

"Mpiliso," I say without thinking or looking up to him.

"But that's a boy's name," he says.

I take out my breast, nudged her lips apart with the nipple and she opens her mouth in her sleep.

"I don't care, she is my Mpiliso." I say and my baby started sucking.

23.

TWO YEARS AND SIX MONTHS LATER.

I woke up and tilted my head up. The light coming in is so bright so I squinted my eyes waiting for them to adjust. He is sitting on the edge of the bed with his head bowed and I can only see his back. I crawl over to him, it is a miracle that he woke up before me but the sun is out now and that can only mean I overslept.

I hug him from behind with my chin on his shoulder but he doesn't move. He always goes robotic on me when something is wrong and I wonder what went wrong now so early in the morning.

"What is wrong?" he better not tell me there's nothing wrong when his body language has betrayed him before he could open his mouth.

He is silent for a while but quickly turns to look at me before I get out of bed so I can face him.

"The time has come," I look at him confused, what is he talking about? "Five years has passed so now I have to go back home."

I sink on the bed like someone pushed me to, forgive me for being shocked it is just that I didn't know his time here in Durban had an expiry date but what does that mean for us?

"I will have to go to your home to pay the remaining balance of the lobola and then we could go to the Home Affairs to legalise our marriage," he says like he has given it enough thought and it should make sense to me but it's not.

Now I have to leave my life and go back to the village with him? God has never favoured me, never.

"Bayede could you just slow down for a minute, why are we rushing into this?"

"Because there is no time, my mother can't stand in for me for the rest of my and her life – I have to step up and take on my responsibilities."

I sigh with my hand on my forehead. This is not how I imagined everything going down and he hasn't said anything about me.

Like he just heard my thought he says, "I will be submitting my resignation letter today and you better do the same."

What?

There is some shuffling on the door and I know who it is, that child has no timing – she could've knocked if she wants to come in but no, she will open the door herself not acknowledging that her height won't let her reach the door handle without help.

Bayede is heading to the door without hearing me out first – his word stands right now and I have to say yes sir – I hate my life!

The door opens and she stumbles inside while rubbing her one eye with the back of her hand, the other has a toothbrush which I can confidently say she slept with and lost it in the middle of the night but when she woke up it wasn't there. And yes, she looked for it until she found it, that is her everyday routine.

“Mama the baby is sleeping,” she says that like it is a major problem she had to face at the start of the day – why isn’t she sleeping too? The baby is sleeping because all babies should be sleeping at this time of the day.

“And you didn’t touch the baby did you?” I scold without realising it and I get a dead stare from her father – he says I am too strict while him on the other hand spoils them too rotten. Yes, them, I gave birth to another baby girl nine months ago and named her Lizalise.

Mpiliso is still the centre of everything, despite that there’s another one who deserves the same attention – she still gets the most, Mpilo too.

“Are you hungry princess?” that’s Bayede, making me look like the horrible person in the room for neglecting her needs. He should be asking her to go back to bed so we can continue with our talk instead of offering her food.

Princess nods her head, like her father, she doesn’t say much or laugh like any other child. You can make all the funny faces but you won’t even get a small smile from her, she took too much from Bayede and it is exhausting to deal with double of their kind.

He takes her hand and leads her to the door.

“You should check on the baby maybe she is also up,” he says at the doorway before shutting the door behind him.

I grunt, don’t babies cry in the morning when they wake up to let their mothers know that they are up? But Bayede is an award-winning parent – he knows best!

I am so upset, I can’t believe my life just changed so early in the morning – yesterday I slept planning that we will go to the beach on Saturday and have a small-nyana picnic but God had other plans for me.

My Liza is still sleeping well at least with her I know that she is mine because she looks like me even her complexion is exactly like oMakhathini. I get into the bed and laid next to her, the other two can enjoy their time together and I hope I won’t wake up to a burning house.

“Uthe ubhuti asizomlanda –
Umakoti,
Uthe ubhuti asizomlanda –
Umakoti,
Yi-hi sizomlanda, sizomlanda, sizomlanda umakoti.”

I had no choice but to give in – I have never had a say in what goes on in my life anyway so here I am again in the homestead of the Mabasos as their bride.

My family accompanied me and right now they are outside, enjoying whatever that is being served to them and I am in the rondavel that I once occupied when I first came here.

Mpilo is here with me, laying his head on my lap, he should be out there playing with the other kids but he chose to be here. I haven’t seen him in a long time so I guess he is here to make up for the lost time – I missed him too.

The girls are somewhere with their father, he said he wants to show them off and I bet they're both sitting on his lap, they're his treasure and hell will break loose if anyone touches them without his permission. I have seen it many times with his friends from work – he is so overprotective – they had to see the children from an arm's length and not one of them got to hold them.

There is a lot of food that I have been served with but I haven't touched anything besides the fruits and the cool drink – Bayede would have my head if he learnt that I ate any of the things I was served.

The Queen herself makes her way in, she is not alone, she is with another woman I have never met before. I bow my head down to show respect and they sit on the mat not far from where I am sitting.

Are they here to preach to me how I should carry myself as a married woman? Shuu I can't wait to hear what they have to say.

"Welcome makoti," says the woman Bayede's mother came in with.

"Thank you," I say without looking up.

"Who is this boy?"

I look up and she's looking at Mpilo.

"He is my son Ma," I say and she shoots her eyes to me, alarmed.

"Bayede's?" she asks, I hate the sound of her voice right now but I keep calm.

I shake my head no and drop my eyes to the boy on my lap.

I hear her chuckle, "iveza 'ndlebe alingeni emzini." (you can't bring a bastard child here.) I shoot my head up to look at her and she is very satisfied with herself at the sight of my face.

Oh fuck that! Why didn't anyone tell me about that and Bayede also didn't say anything.

Mpilo shifts to sit up like he understood what she said.

I don't know how to feel about this because I was hoping Mpilo would come to live with us – finally we were going to be a family and I wasn't worried that Bayede wouldn't take him in because he said it more than once that Mpilo is like a son to him.

The look on the other woman's face confirms what Ndlovukazi here has said.

"Good to see that you have it in you to bear children but you haven't bore an heir for my son, those girls..." she points outside, "...ukuzala amantombazane kufana nokuba inyumba la ebukhosini." (...giving birth to girls only doesn't make you any different from being a barren here in the royal family.)

Her words pierced right through my heart – if she was there with me at the labour ward then she won't be spewing that nonsense right now, and Bayede loves his children so that's all that matters but still her words cut deep.

"Tell your family to take him with them when they leave," she points to Mpilo and he turns to look at me. There's a lot of confusion in his face, how do I explain to him as to why he can't live with me when I can live with his other siblings? If anyone had told me that something like this would happen then I wouldn't have opened my legs for Didiza on that fateful afternoon.

She stands up and exits the rondavel, the woman she came with glares at me with eyes filled with pity before she follows after Bayede's mother.

I don't know why she had to be like that and once again she has won – she did say that 'kumele ngiy'mele lento esengiyiqalile' and this is only the beginning.

In the afternoon once my family has left, I took on my wife duties and helped with the dishes. They don't waste time – if it wasn't for the leftovers from the food that was prepared for my family then they would've told me to cook supper for them.

There are still a lot of people in the yard and there's this one woman that everyone is trying to keep away from me and they are keeping her away from me.

It is odd because they are not saying anything but when I turn I always find her looking at me. I sense that they know who she is but they don't want me to find out and they are making it impossible for me to get to her maybe she'd tell me herself who she is and why she is here.

They wouldn't go to such lengths if they weren't hiding something from me.

I see Bayede coming towards me, I wipe my hands on the pinafore that I am wearing and walked towards him to meet him halfway. I want to know where are my children since he doesn't have them with him.

"We have to leave it's getting late," he says when I have reached him.

"Where are my babies?"

"In the house," he points back to his mother's house and I take a step back. "They will be spending the night here."

Whoa, he must not do that to me I am still very young to cry over a dead baby – he just mustn't, wasn't he the one who warned me about his mother and the rest of his family, now what has changed? I don't like this and now there's a woman I have never seen before going around the yard like she owns this place, what if she holds something against me and harms my babies to get to me?

"No Bayede," I shake my head, I refuse to leave them here and they are coming with me wherever we are going.

Speak of the devil, his mother approaches us and she is beaming.

"Mama wami," he says returning her smile.

Brakes! My jaw is literally on the floor.

"We were going to come to you to bid farewell," he takes her right hand and holds it in his hands.

I look at him in complete disbelief – is he the same person? The same Bayede I first met and fell in love with? I refuse to believe this.

Something catches my eye and I turn to look up – she is waving for me to come to her and I have no choice but to go to her.

I leave Bayede and his mother, I don't know which game they are playing at but it is hell'a confusing, I mean what happened to him calling his mother 'that woman'?

She is smiling very brightly as I walk up to her, truth be told she has a beautiful smile and it feels much safer to be around her than it was the last time I came here.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here to welcome you when you arrived, I had some errands to run – welcome to the Mabaso family,” she says, tying a scarf across my chest. It’s not that I didn’t have one but hers looks more beautiful and expensive.

“Thank you,” I say with a smile on my face.

“You can call me Nkosazana, not that I am being cocky or anything but that’s what my father named me.”

I nod to her. She is not as bad as I thought she was.

“And don’t worry about your mother-in-law,” she says nodding to where Bayede and his mother are standing. “I know she can be a pain in the ass but she will come around and please don’t let her bully you around,” she places her hand on my shoulder.

“Zimile?” that’s Bayede calling me and I wave at him that I am coming.

“Let me not keep you, travel safe.”

I thanked her and she stepped inside her house. She is so warm, please remind me to bake scones so I can have a tea party with the princess there’s a lot that I need to learn about her and maybe it could brew up into a good friendship – who knows?

When I get to Bayede he is with someone else now and his mother is not on sight.

“Sthandwa sami, this is Khuzani,” he says, pointing to the boy in front of us.

“How old is he?” I ask before acknowledging him.

“He is old enough to be my sidekick, companion, partner and friend,” he says grabbing the boy, pulling him to himself.

He is taller than me but still shorter than Bayede and he looks young.

“It’s nice to finally meet you Ndlovukazi,” the Khuzani boy says looking at me and Bayede bursts out of laughter. I don’t know what he finds funny but I also don’t see why Khuzani had to address me like that.

I wonder if we have to reprimand him like his name states.

“Go get your bag so we can leave.” Bayede says to me after he has managed to compose himself. He has been saying we are leaving but he hasn’t told me where we are going.

Now that we are leaving in a hurry, I have to leave without seeing my kids – Bayede is such a bully how can he make such a decision about our kids on his own?

He is very close to Khuzani, they are having a conversation of their own and I am being sidelined. I have seen Bayede talking and laughing but it wasn’t this much – this boy has managed to do something that most of us have failed to do.

I am walking behind them and appreciating nature that is around us. I have met his sisters but not his brothers, they couldn’t make it because of work and that they live far. They are well-educated, I asked Bayede why he is the only odd one out and the answer I got is that he always knew that he’d take his father’s place so he didn’t bother furthering his studies because all that work would’ve amounted to nothing when he had to come back to this village and it has happened – we are here now.

We have been walking for the longest time and I can’t take it anymore.

“Come, we are almost there.” Trust me that’s what he said fifteen minutes ago.

I pull up my sleeves and continued to follow behind.

After a few minutes, he says “we have arrived.”

I look up, around and to him – he is beaming, what did they give him that made him like this?

“I asked Khuzani to cut the grass, clean the house and I am sure he even went an extra mile and washed the walls,” they laugh at that. “It’s beautiful.”

It’s beau-what? He better be kidding me because right now I feel like I am in the Wrong Turn movie.

“Bayede what is this?” I ask, clearly telling him that he should bring me up to speed – this is not what I signed up for.

“This your home, for now, it is only temporary baby.”

Is he even really of royalty or this whole thing is a scam?

There’s a rondavel that looks really old just a few feet away from me and the main house looks just as bad but at least it’s painted and has a roof.

“Come, let me show you around,” he says pulling me by my hand.

Khuzani has seen the horrified look on my face and he is avoiding to make eye contact with me. I feel robbed, I should be welcomed with red rose pedals from outside the gate leading inside a mansion or double storey house – not this.

“This is the house I grew up in, my grandfather lived here and once he died my father took it as his.” He is proud of this history but I am not interested.

“I don’t want to be here Bayede,” I whine after he has shown me inside the empty rondavel. I don’t know why it is here – he better not expect me to cook in the fire while his mother is cooking on a four-plate stove.

“Where do you want to be? Do you want to live with your mother-in-law?” I don’t trace any anger in his voice but he looks upset so I shut my mouth.

He leads me past the main house and points to what looks like a grave then said, “that is where my father is resting.”

He says it like the old man is sleeping comfortably in his bed in between a warm sheet and a fluffy blanket. This is normal to him but how can a person be buried so close to the house? Now I am more spooked – is this a home or the cemetery?

We get inside the house that was cleaned by Khuzani and I can tell that he worked hard to make it look how it looks now. This place must have been deserted for the longest time and we are the first people to live here ever since.

It’s a four room house, with a kitchen, living room and two bedrooms – there’s no bathroom and I didn’t see anything outside, I will ask him in the morning because I have seen enough to shock me today.

“This will be our room,” he says as we enter the bigger bedroom, at least there a bed with a blanket which I hope is clean.

I stand by the door and watch him move around the room. It is starting to be dark outside, I look up – great there’s no lightbulb that means we will be using candles. I thought I was levelling up but I guess again the Lord didn’t favour me in this department.

“Bayede,” he turns to look at me. I was ready to whine and complain but the look on his face makes me swallow whatever that I wanted to say.

He walks up to me and pulls me to sit on the bed while he crouches in front of me.

“Sthandwa sami, I know this is not what you were expecting and I promise you this is only temporary, I am a man and I can’t be living with my mother. So for now this is what I have to offer,” he says taking my hands into his.

I breathe in and out. What can I say, I can’t really go back home now so I have to suck it up and be a big girl.

“It’s okay I understand.” I exhale softly.

He looks relieved and stands up. He leaves the room, saying that he is going to look for a candle in the kitchen.

I take a deep breathe again and stand up to strip off the pinafore, and change into my nightdress. We don’t have everything here, most of our stuff is still in Durban in his flat but Bayede promised that he will get everything here by the end of the week.

“I will see if I can get someone to fix the electricity for us.” There’s nothing that needs fixing here, he just doesn’t want to call it exactly what it is.

He sets the candle on the side table and I feel his eyes on me. He better not be thinking of fucking me when his father is this close, dead or not, he deserves my respect and I will grant him that on a silver platter – I don’t think I will be able to survive an angry father-in-law who is within the underground gang – he can make my life miserable and I still have to deal with his wife, that is enough.

“Who is she?” I ask, tying the doek on my head.

“Who?” he asks absently.

“That woman.”

“What woman?” he is walking towards me.

“The one everyone was trying to keep away from me, she is dark in complexion, thick and walks around like a duck with a face that looks like she’s constipated. She was wearing a purple pinafore with a pink scarf on her head.”

He is silent, I know he knows who I have just described.

I turn to look at him and his face is not telling me anything.

“Who is she Bayede?” I feel myself getting upset, she better not be his first wife and I have gotten myself into a polygamous marriage without knowing.

“She is no one important,” he says after exhaling deeply.

She didn’t look like someone who is not important so he better tell me who she is.

“You’re going to look at me in the eye and lie to me Bayede?” I feel hurt, I haven’t heard the truth from him but my mind has ran the 42km comrades marathon and crossed the finish line with its own conclusion.

“Can we not talk about this, I am tired as it is.” He moves to the other side of the bed while removing his jacket.

“Like hell you are tired, Bayede you are not going to get out of this one, tell me who that woman is or I am leaving and trust me I am going to leave.”

“Just drop it!” he sounds frustrated. Why would he be fighting for us to let this go if that woman is nothing to him.

“Fuck that! If she was nothing to you then you won’t be so hell bent for us to leave this hanging. You know what, go fuck yourself!” I say, taking my bag and heading towards the door.

I don’t know when he moved from where he was standing and hurried to me because before I even reached the door my arm is roughly yanked back stopping me from taking another step. My bag falls on the floor and I turn to look at him.

“Don’t you ever speak to me like that,” he says directly to my face.

“Or what? I am not your mother Bayede, I won’t pretend everything is fine when it is not. Right now you owe me the truth but you won’t tell me anything instead you want to paint me as the bad guy. Which is fine because I am leaving anyway,” I get out of his grip and took my bag from the floor, the zip wasn’t closed so some of my things are scattered on the floor so now I am putting them back inside the bag.

He takes a step back, exhaling sharply and says, “she is the mother of my daughter.”

I feel like my ears are ringing, I stand up slowly with my jaw still on the floor – so this ‘nobody important’ is actually his baby mama.

“What the hell Bayede, another one?” I push him on the chest roughly and he steps back.

I am so angry, I feel tears burning the back of my eyes and my lungs are suffocated.

“How could you?” so he cheated on me?

He is shaking his head, “don’t touch me!” I scream as he attempts to touch me.

“It’s not what you think,” he says on a low tone.

Then what is it, didn’t he sleep with her and made her pregnant? I can’t even look at him right now, was he that drunk when he met her because that woman can be easily mistaken for a man!

“She is...I didn’t cheat on you, my daughter is 12 years old so what happened between us happened before you.”

There’s an ‘us’?

“Zimile?” he touches me on my shoulder, scanning my face.

“How many are there?” he is clueless. “How many more women are out there who will come forward claiming that you impregnated them?!” Lord I am so angry, my whole body is shaking, I feel betrayed even though it happened in the past – and unlike Cashile, she is alive so anything can happen.

“There’s no one else,” he sounds sure but I fail to believe him.

I shake my head, “you have to believe me Zimile there’s no one else.”

“If I didn’t ask or push you to tell me then when were you going to tell me? And what the hell was she doing there at your house today, on my day Bayede? I had to move around like I am one of your sidechicks – was all that necessary?”

He doesn’t say anything but he looks guilty.

“Please don’t tell me you slept with her,” I say signalling the depth of my statement.

“No.”

I look up to him, he is going to give me a simple no with no explanation? Fuck him and fuck her!

"I am not a child Bayede, don't lie to me." A thought to cheat on him has never come across my mind, I love him and I am faithful to him; and the thought of him with her...

"I am not lying to you!"

"You're a God damn liar, a hypocrite and I don't need this in my life!" the bag is in my hand once again.

"What do you mean Zimile?" I see a glimpse of fear in his eyes.

"I am leaving Bayede, keep your baby mama and if she doesn't take you back then go fuck yourself!" I feel the urge to spit on his face but he has transformed to a person I don't know. He doesn't say anything instead he reverses to the bed, and takes his jacket. I remain glued to the floor as he walks out of the bedroom.

I hear the door shut close and the key turning to lock the door. Well I wasn't going to leave anyway, that was my way to get him to beg me to stay by telling me the truth and then I would've left him if his truth confirmed my suspicions, but instead of me leaving he is the one who left – coward!

24.

When I open my eyes I find him looking at me.

"I slept at Khuzani's house last night," he says.

Great – now I am sure Khuzani's mother has ran her mouth telling the whole village that their king didn't sleep at home last night – what a way to start my day.

"Zimile," he pushes me down as I attempt to sit up. It's quite dark outside, it could be that the weather is gloomy or it's still very early in the morning and then I notice that he looks and smells fresh – he must be going somewhere.

"I am sorry about last night, I know I should have told you but I didn't. It's just that I am not used to voicing things out, in a way I expect life to play out on its own," he says still looking at me.

He can't be serious, how old is he and I bet he didn't get to where he is now because life played out on its own. He can fool everyone but he won't fool me.

"Zimile please." He pushes me back down again and I exhale softly. "Won't you say anything?" his voice is calm and soft, I can see that he wants us to talk but I am over that I wanted to talk last night and he didn't. He couldn't even tell me the whole truth instead he left.

"I'm sorry," his eyes soften, he is truly sorry.

"Did you sleep with her?" those are the first words to crawl out of throat, slip off my tongue and vibrate on my lips.

"I swear I didn't." I feel his hand on my bear thighs, my nightdress has shifted all the way to my waist – I am glad I didn't lose my sleep last night because of him and even his father is a kind ghost, he didn't disturb me at all.

"You need to start talking Bayede, I can't always grill you every time I want to know something about you."

"I promise I will do better from now on."

His hand moves up along my inner thigh to the tip of my panty.

"I am going to work today," I said then felt his hand slip into my panty, cupping my pum-pum and I held my breath with my heart literally on my throat.

"I thought you resigned," he breaths heavily against my ear.

I cleared my throat and swallowed before I opened my mouth to speak.

"I couldn't but I will be handing in my letter of resignation today."

His okay is faint, if I wasn't so close then I wouldn't have heard him. His hand hasn't moved, my heart is already excited so my patience will run thin soon.

"I will ask Khuzani to accompany you to show you where you are going to get the taxis to town," he says.

He means Stanger then from there I will take a taxi to Durban and by the time I get to work it'd be midday – I will say it again, I hate this life.

"Where are you going?" I ask because he should be the one accompanying me, I didn't get married to Khuzani so I am his responsibility.

"Council meeting."

Already? I thought we'd be going to our honeymoon but who am I kidding, I didn't even get to wear a wedding dress or host a few friends to celebrate my achievement of getting into wifehood.

"I said I am sorry Zimile," he says raising his head to look at me.

"I heard you."

"And do you forgive me?" he is looking straight into my eyes and then his hands starts moving against my now wet mound. I moan softly not removing my eyes from him.

"Do you forgive me Zimile?" he asks, leaning in to nibble on my earlobe.

I shouldn't be making things easy for him like this but damn, my body has already given in and it's hard to use my head at this point. He puts on more friction on my clit at my silence and I moan loud, gripping on his arm and on the sheets with the other hand.

"Yes...yes I forgive you," those words left my lips breathlessly with moans in between.

He kisses me on the side on my face still working on my clit and now legs are wide open, giving him more access. I want more than his hand at this point.

"Thank you," he nibbles on my ear again.

"Bayede..." I call out his name, gripping on him harder and arching my back up to his hand – I want more!

He stops and I breathe out heavily, panting. He shifts and gets on his knees, I can see the print of his hard shaft underneath his grey pants and I yearn for him even more.

"Please," I reach out to him as he reaches for panty and slid it off my legs.

I am so horny its like my vagina is on fire, mkhulu will have to forgive me but I need his son to take me to nirvana maybe we will meet there then I'd pass my apologies and regards.

He slides into my moist and I moan, stretching my legs wider to accommodate him. 1, 2 seconds he doesn't move so I open my eyes to find him looking at me.

"Please don't leave me," the same glimpse of fear that I saw in his eyes last night is back.

"Just fuck me Bayede." My patience is gone and I am getting frustrated.

He still doesn't move, "tell me you won't."

"Alright I won't leave, now fuck me."

He pulls all the way out and my heart skips a beat – did I say something wrong?

He slams in again deep and hard when I least expected him, I groaned throwing my head back. His thrusts are only getting deeper and harder, the whole village might as well call me a whore with how loud I am moaning.

He has my legs in his hands, pushing them to my chest when I feel myself getting near to nirvana – the gates are opening and with one more thrust – I am within!

"Fuck!" I scream gripping on the mattress, I don't know where the sheet has gone to.

He follows after me just in a few seconds and falls onto my chest. The clothes he was wearing need to be ironed again but he will have to do that for himself because I also need to get going. I push him off me, he's still out of it as he sinks on the bed with his face up and arms stretched out. I sit up and get out of the bed.

“I will be taking the kids to live with my parents while you sort out our permanent home and please get them to Durban before the end of the day,” I say after putting on the pinafore I was wearing yesterday and head to the door without waiting for him to say anything back.

I don’t have a good relationship with my parents still but I don’t have much of a choice right now. I can’t have my babies living here and they will be off with their grandparents.

I stepped out of the bedroom and found Khuzani in the living room, occupying a seat on the old looking sofa and he looks uncomfortable.

Why didn’t Bayede tell me he was here?

“Khuzani how long have you been here?”

“Long enough,” he says after clearing his throat – oh Lord now I am definitely going to hell.

I hear footsteps coming behind me and I turn back, it’s Bayede fully dressed but in different pants.

Khuzani stands up, “the car is here,” he says looking at Bayede.

Bayede is looking at me with an angry face and bloodshot eyes.

“You have to leave now otherwise you will be late,” there is a sense of urgency in Khuzani’s voice and I am glad he has to leave because what I said wasn’t up for discussion. If he can make decisions without me then I can do the same.

He takes the car keys from Khuzani and he glares at me for a few seconds before he heads to the door. Khuzani follows after him like some sick puppy but soon comes back, I guess Bayede told him about what we talked about earlier.

I walked to the kitchen to prepare water for my bath and there is a primus stove on top of the table – good, that makes things a lot more easier.

I get to the restaurant and Mr Xaba tells me to wait for him in his office while he deals with a few customers who requested his presence at their table.

I waited for him with the letter in my hand, God knows that I don’t want to resign I worked hard to find this job and keep it, and now I have to let go of it just like that. Even though it is not the most desirable jobs in the world, it is a good job for me because it is one of the things I got for myself without anyone holding my hand.

The door opens and Mr Xaba steps in, he is in his white chef’s coat and black heavy looking boots, almost the same as the ones Bayede wore to work.

“Zimile, I am glad you came in today and I hope you enjoyed your leave,” he says moving to sit on his chair opposite me.

Instead of resigning, I asked for a few days off.

“Yeah I had a great time, thank you.” This is so hard, I am even failing to pull a smile on my face.

“Good because I have even better news for you,” he clears his throat before continuing, “so we did an inspection, me and the chefs, we need more cooks and we want to grow the people we already have in the kitchen so we are going to be teaching you and the people you have been working with – in the house – the basic culinary skills and how to prepare the food on our menus.” He is beaming with excitement and I should be feeling the same.

“Uh...”

“It is a good opportunity for you Zimile, you have worked hard the past few years so see this as a reward for all your hard work,” he says.

I flip the resignation letter in my hand and look up to him.

“Thank you Mr Xaba...” I pull a smile on my face, “I will gladly accept your offer.”

“Great,” he clamps his hands together. “So what did you want to say?”

I slid the resignation letter into my bag and mouthed nothing then he moved on to filling me in with how things are going to work moving forward – Bayede is going to kill me for this.

He waited until midnight for Zimile to come back home but she didn't. He called her and it went straight to voicemail, that was after she sent a message to say that she has packed the babies' things and he will pack whatever that she couldn't pack.

This is upsetting because they could've talked about this like civil adults, it is not a bad thing because he wouldn't have let his children live with his mother anyway. This life is still new to him so he needs to find his feet first before he can take full responsibility as a parent and right now, Zimile should be on his side, supporting him but she is not.

He placed both the kids in the backseat, unlike white kids – they have no car seats so they have to work with what they have. He drives off to Durban while checking on the rearview mirror if they are still breathing.

Lizalise has fallen asleep next to her big sister who has her eyes on the window, she can't see much but she can see the clouds moving backwards as the car moves forward. Her face is stiff and her lips are pouted, God only knows what is going on in that head of hers. Liza's head falls on to her shoulder, she quickly turns to her and straightens her head to lay back on the seat. Her father is looking at her through the rearview mirror, seeing her take on her big sister duties puts a smile on Bayede's face and she was so serious so she knew exactly what she was doing. His mother put up a fight before they left, she wants the kids to stay with her but he wouldn't allow that, not when he won't be around most of the time – God knows he'd die for his children, that's just how much he loves them and he'd die protecting them from anything and everything.

“Are you hungry princess?” he asks as he stops at the red traffic light and turning back to look at those chubby cheeks and pouted lips.

She doesn't say a word but nods.

“Okay, we are close now, don't worry okay?” she nods again.

He prays that the other baby doesn't wake up before he reaches to where they are going, if she doesn't cry for milk then she'd definitely cry because of her sore neck.

After a few minutes he parks in front of Mlungisi's flat, they have been leaving Mpiliso with Wandile when they had to go work, Liza too when she came along – Wandile is a stay-at-home mum so she has all the time in her hands.

He knocks on the door with Liza in his arms and Mpiliso standing next to him. The door opens and Wandile appears with a wide smile on her face.

"I am sorry to trouble you but I need to leave them here while I go to my flat to get their things," he says with pleading eyes. He knows Wandile has never said no to them but he hates asking for help and when he does, it becomes more of a plea than just a simple request.

"Oh it's fine, come in Mpiliso and give her to me," she says reaching for the sleeping Liza. Mpiliso is already inside when Bayede turns to leave but he quickly turns back like he forgot something.

"Liza didn't have her milk and Mpiliso said she is hungry so..." he says sounding and looking embarrassed.

"Don't worry Bayede I know how to take care of my kids," she laughs lightly and he chuckles, thanking her.

He gets into the car and drives to park by the opposite flat. He sighs and dials Zimile's number before stepping out of the car – again it goes straight to voicemail.

Damn her for putting him in this situation but if this is what she wants then this is what she's going to get. He gets out of the car and enters the building.

He has no mercy on anything that he is shoving inside the bags, Zimile said she packed but nothing looks packed here. He grunts and there's a knock on the door – it better be her or else...

He opens the door and meets a face he wasn't expecting at all.

"Sawubona bhuti," she saying slightly bowing to him.

He clears his throat, "hi Busi, please come in." He ushers her in and closes the door once she has stepped inside.

"Zimile called me saying you might need help with packing."

Oh that explains why she is here when Zimile is not on sight, he does need a pair of extra hands because he doesn't know if he has to pack everything or a few things and if it's a few things then what exactly. These are his kids so he doesn't want to leave out anything important that they might need.

"Where are the little ones?" the smile on her face is blinding as she asks that question.

"They are with Wandile, I wanted to get everything done without them around so I can move faster." She nods in understanding.

"So where is everything?" she is looking around the living room that is filled with boxes.

"There are in their room," he says leading the way down the passage and into the girls' room.

Clothes are scattered every where and once again he is embarrassed – can't he at least have one thing together – everything seems to be everywhere and he doesn't even know where his wife is. She could be at work or anywhere else around town doing God knows what.

"How is Mpilo doing?" he asks her as she starts folding the children's clothes. He learnt that she is the one who looks after him and has been communicating with Mpilo through her, giving her money to buy things for him – but it has never been personal so this is their first encounter without Zimile or any of her siblings around.

“He is fine, you saw how he has grown tall – and I have to buy him new clothes almost every month,” she says with a smile on her face so she can’t be complaining. He couldn’t help but notice the glittery in her eyes as she said that statement, she truly loves him like he is her own and wishes Zimile would have that kind of love for her kids.

“You haven’t seen anything wena, wait until he reaches 13 then you’ll see that raising a boy is not pap ‘n vleis.”

He is sitting on top of the bed, watching her as she moves around getting the clothes from the wardrobe and packing them inside the suitcase.

“The last time I checked, Ndabezitha is what...five? And you are here telling me that it’s hard to raise a boy child?” he is taken aback by her statement so she pays attention but wait, how did she know that Ndabezitha is five?

“I am speaking from experience,” he grins as she lifts her eyes up to him. “But I wasn’t bad.”

“Are you trying to convince yourself, because I can tell from that smile on your face that you were the worst,” she says and he bursts out of laughter.

It’s like all the cables of electricity have been connected to him as he lights up with the sound of his laughter filling every corner of the room.

“Awazi lutho wena,” he says after he had managed to compose himself.

She shakes her head and moves to the wardrobe again. Bayede shifts to his sour mood at the thought of Zimile and when he looks up, Busi is struggling to reach for the box that is on the top shelf.

“Let me help you with that,” he stands up and walks up to where she is.

He reaches the box with no struggle but he underestimated it’s weight so as he pulled it, it slipped out of his hands and reached the floor within seconds. The shoes that were inside scattered on their feet and the box left a trail of dust on Bayede’s black pants.

“Oh I am sorry bhuti,” Busi says, crouching down to dust off the dust on the leg of his pants.

He bends down and takes her hand, she looks up and his face is just a few inches away from hers.

“Please don’t call me that,” he says and she slightly shakes her head, she called him bhuti before and he has never had a problem with it.

She stands up to her feet with his help and looks at him.

“Call me Bayede.”

He looks down to her and her breath hits his facial features as she breathes out through her parted lips. Her chest is heaving slowly, her eyes filled with curiosity and anticipation. He lowers himself and balances on his elbows. She breaths in sharply as he filled her, he hasn’t removed his eyes from her, he wants to see her blink, wince, breath – all of it. She digs her nails deeper into his back as he picks up the pace, he is hitting her walls just the way she wants him to and she is moaning in pleasure. She can’t keep her eyes open so she shuts them close and hisses as she feels the waves of pleasure curling on her toes. She has had sex before but it was nothing compared to this, he knows where and how to touch her. Her moan at the peak of pleasure

comes out as a scream and she clings on him as the electrifying feeling took over her, and he slams in harder to cum deep inside her.

His wife stirs in his arms and he looks down on her. They haven't spoken about where she was last night and today, and he didn't question her because of the guilt in his heart. God knows he loves his wife more than anything but now he loves her...too.

25.

I bought streetwise five from KFC for mamazala thinking that it'd soften her up but the bull is still standing on its four legs, she ran her big mouth saying that she didn't expect anything less from me and we, city girls, know nothing about real food. That's why her son is so thin it's because I have been feeding him amaphepha but she has been crushing and chewing on the bones like she's fighting.

This woman doesn't know me, I may have lived in the city for a few years but I am still the rural-makoya – as they have said – you can take a girl out of the village but you can never take the village out of the girl. I tried adjusting to the city life but I have always ended up being me. Now I am back in the village so this is nothing new to me.

"I can't eat all of this," she says, shuffling on the reedmat while I am standing over the fire stirring isijingi that she wanted me to cook. It is a maize meal porridge but mixed with mashed pumpkin and lots of sugar. I have never cooked it before so she is here to guide me and that made her have a lot to say about me.

"Bukhosenhle!" she calls out.

Bukhos-what? Is that what they name dogs in the royal families?

I am still in awe when I hear footsteps stomping towards the rondavel that we are in. The smoke of the fire is getting into my eyes and I am sniffing like I've just cried my lungs out.

"Hayibo ngathini ngokugijima endlini!" she shouts and I lift my eyes up.

My eyes gobbled out of their sockets and fell into my hands as I am met by a Mpiliso that has grown tall and thin with long legs. I breath in as I take in her presence – she looks exactly like Bayede and there is no way he could've denied her when he saw a replica of himself, there is no doubt that she is the daughter of that ugly woman who was here on my welcome ceremony.

"Sorry gogo," she says kneeling next to the old woman.

"Take this, and give these bones to Sgidi," she hands over the paperbag to the young girl.

Sgidi must be the dog but what is the point of giving him these bones when there's nothing left to crush, I doubt it even smells or taste like there was any meat on those bones.

The girl thanks her gogo and stands up to leave.

"And don't forget to not drink water after three, I don't want you wetting my bed!" the girl laughs at her gogo's comment, my eyes haven't left her, she lights up just like Bayede when she laughs.

"Haw gogo you know I don't wet myself anymore," she says with a light chuckle.

"Then what is that blanket doing on the line, you don't fool me – your mother spoiled you, I should have taken you away from her a long time ago."

Say what?

"Now leave, you know it's disrespectful to stand over your adults," the old woman says waving her off and the girl runs out just as fast as she came in.

My jaw is literally on the floor and I haven't put my eyeballs back into their designated place.

"Makoti!" I hear her call out and I snap out of it. "You better keep on stirring because I don't like my porridge lumpy."

Then you should've cooked it yourself, I say in my head. I drop my eyes to the pot and continued to stir.

So the Bukhosenhle girl lives here, eats her food and sleeps on her bed? I thought I have seen it all but this one takes the cup, can someone remind me what she said to me when she saw Mpilo?

I take the lid of the pot on the floor and close the pot that is now boiling.

A howling car hoot jerks me to stand up straight, it continues until it gets closer and louder. I rush to the door and stand on the doorway.

There are two cars approaching, I have never seen them before and they look expensive. If it wasn't for the dust on them then I'd have said they are totally new.

My feet carry me till I am standing in the middle of the yard as I watch the cars park besides each other.

The door of the white car opens and the driver gets out of the car almost in slow motion – does God still make them like this because wow, this brother is flames! But with the resemblance of a face I have seen more than a thousand time, I can confidently say that he is Bayede's brother. He is the one who looks more like my Bayede than the other siblings I have met.

He walks towards me with a straight face but smiles as he extends his hand to me.

"You must be the first makoti of the Mabaso's," that's the way he greets?

"Yes," I say in a low tone, taking his hand for a handshake – I must add, his palm is so soft like that of a baby.

"I am Bukhosi, little brother over there will introduce himself," he says, pointing back with his thumb to the guy who just got out of the black car.

I nod and he walks past me. "Oh and welcome to Hlomendlini," he says behind me and I turn to look at him.

I have been here for almost a month now, he is late to welcome me but I humour him and say thank you.

"I am Lindumbuso," the younger brother says, standing just a few steps away from me. He looks reserved but humble and I guess he is the egg of the family.

"Nice to meet you." Their mother is lighter in complexion so I guess he took after his father. I wish I had met the guy maybe he'd have been the coolest person to hang around with unlike that old goat I got for a mother-in-law.

"Finally Bayede took a wife, kunini silindile," he says almost chuckling. "Listen I have something for you, kade ngicoca with Bayede and I told my girlfriend about you. She insisted that we get you something." He smiles nervously.

I wonder how long he has been away from home but based on how his accent has changed, I bet it has been a long time.

He leads me to his car, opens the door and takes out a gift bag. You should've seen the smile on my face when he handed it to me.

"But you can't tell anyone who exactly you got it from, Kaugelo would have my head if anyone finds out about her before I formally introduce her to the family," he says after I have thanked him.

He is sweet and speaks a lot of English, I prefer Bukhosi than him – hihi look at me already picking my favourite a minute after meeting with them.

We walk over to Nkosazana's house, that is where Bukhosi is standing and it looks like there's no fire burning between the sister and brother because when we reach them they're silent as mutes. I thought they'd use that time to catch up.

Lindumbuso seems to be more attached to his sister and they are talking and laughing like we are not here.

"Zimile help me get the chairs," Nkosazana says.

"No it's fine, I will get them, I need the bathroom so I will come back with them."

"Okay, you will find them in the kitchen."

Bukhosi walks in and the two get back to talking about Lindumbuso's achievements over the years. He is a Mechanical Engineer and judging by the car he is driving, the clothes he is wearing and how expensive he smells, I can say that he is swimming in money. Bukhosi too, at the moment he is the most educated one in the family.

"Makoti singafi indlala ukhona, uphekeni?" that is Bukhosi.

I am tongue-tied for a few seconds. His mother made me cook isijingi and that is the only thing I can serve them but that would be like I am disrespecting them. These people look like they eat meat and not porridge in broad daylight. God if I had known they were coming then I wouldn't have wasted that KFC meat on mamazala.

Now that I have mentioned her, I have just realised that none of the brothers have asked where to find their mother.

"Your mother asked me to cook isijingi," I say, feeling and sounding embarrassed.

"You are the one who cooked it or was it her?" Bukhosi asks sounding a bit alarmed. I don't know what to make out of his question but why would it matter if it was me or her who prepared the food.

"It was me," I point to myself.

He relaxes back on the chair, putting his hands on his head and says, "kulungile, you can bring it."

I look at Lindumbuso and his eyes are roaming around.

"Is it okay with you too?" I ask.

"Yeah it is fine." He doesn't sound sure.

I got up and headed to the kitchen. I find the old woman sitting exactly where I had left her. The pot is off the fire and I see a dirty plate besides her – she is fast! But I guess ngilishayile since she cleaned her plate or is it that she was craving it that much but it doesn't matter.

"Ma your sons are here, aren't you going to see them?"

She is quiet for a while so I look up.

"They are the ones who came here, not the other way around and if they wanted to see me then they'd be here already," she says with minimal emotions attached to her voice.

I am shocked but I quickly got rid of the thought that wanted to creep into my head. I dish in two bowls and put them on the tray.

I walked back to Nkosazana's veranda and gave the brothers their food. I hope they don't find fault in the food I have prepared, they should've warned us then I would've taken one of their mother's chickens and prepared it with idombolo, that is much better than what I have just served them.

"You cooked it very nicely, now I regret why I didn't ask you to dish up for me as well," that is usis'omdala.

"I can dish up for you," I say getting ready to stand up but she pulls me back, stopping me from moving a muscle.

"No, no it's fine," she waves me off dismissively.

Bukhosi is eating his porridge with no care in the world and Lindumbuso is the spoilt one, he is stirring it more than he is shoving it inside his mouth.

"Your mother is in the kitchen," I say, hoping that they will catch the idea of where I am going with this.

"Oh let me go greet her, thank you for the porridge," Lindumbuso is quick to stand up and leave the porridge on the tray. I guess I have just given him a reason to get away, I don't know why he didn't just say that he doesn't want it, now my porridge is going to go to waste, I worked hard preparing it and had to tolerate being in that woman's presence so don't blame me for complaining.

Lindumbuso has left but Bukhosi hasn't moved from his seat. I look at him and at Nkosazana, they both look unbothered.

Bayede also wants nothing to do with his mother but I guess Bukhosi is nothing like him, he won't pretend to like her just because there are people watching.

"So when are you getting married?" I ask.

"We have been waiting for the older brother to get married first but now that you are here – we shall follow," he says placing the empty bowl next to Lindumbuso's barely touched porridge.

"That's great, and wena Nkosazana?"

"I am not in a hurry to leave home," she says.

I want to laugh, how old is she again? This woman is in her late thirties, that's if she hasn't turned forty already and what the hell does she mean by 'not ready to leave home'? Maybe she wants to grow old, sleeping in a cold bed and die alone, I thought Lindumbuso is the spoilt one kanti miss here is the worst case.

"I have prepared rooms for you to spend the night, I heard that you are leaving tomorrow," Nkosazana announces as Lindumbuso appears.

"Thank you sisi."

Bukhosi is looking at me, "I will sleep at your house Zimile, I hope you have an extra bed."

I open my mouth to say something but words fail to come out – is he trying to get me in trouble with his sister? She is the one who has extra rooms, already prepared for both of them.

"Don't worry, ngakhula ngilala es'bayeni so I won't mind sleeping on the floor," he is serious.

I look at Nkosazana and she is visibly disappointed but doesn't argue. There's something going on between her and Bukhosi, I don't know what it is but it is something and by the look of things, it is deep.

“Okay, I will let Bayede know.”

I don’t know where this is going to put me in terms of my relationship with Nkosazana but I couldn’t say no so I hope she will understand.

The door is open so I guess he is home. I step inside the house and placed my handbag and the gift bag on the sofa.

“Sthandwa sami!” I call out.

“In here,” his voice comes from our bedroom.

I am in a good mood and the smile on my face is evidence.

“You won’t believe –“ I come to a halt at the sight of him and the paperwork in his hand.

The bag I had hid my work is on top of the bed, the zip is open so it is obvious that he has seen it all – the cat is finally out of the bag.

“Baby I can explain,” I say taking a step towards him.

“Explain what, Zimile? That you have been lying to me this whole time!” okay he is upset.

“I was going to tell you.”

“Tell me what, that you didn’t resign, that you have been working this whole time behind my back?!” he shouts and the papers fly out of his hands.

“It is not that bad Bayede,” I bend down to pick up the papers from the floor.

I will need these on Monday, this job is important to me and I deserve to have a say in what I want to do with my life. I am using my own money to get to work so I don’t know what his problem is.

He roughly grabs my arm and forces me to stand up.

“Don’t you dare patronize me Zimile, didn’t we agree that you’re going to quit work and stay at home full-time?” he says that to my face.

“You are the one who agreed to it Bayede, you made that decision on your own,” I argue.

“What is wrong with you?!”

“What is wrong with you?” I get out of his grip, “When were you going to tell me that your daughter is staying with your mother?” I ask and he hisses.

“Don’t change the subject!”

“I am not changing any subject, I want you to explain to me how your daughter ended up staying with your mother when she was too eager to get rid of Mpilo. My son can’t live with us because he was born out of wedlock but what makes Bukhosenhle different from him?”

I am truly hurt, I feel betrayed once again – why is that child getting fair treatment when she was also born out of wedlock? Or she got a pass because she has royal blood running through her veins?

He inhales sharply and turns away from me – he is done talking but I am not.

“Bayede?”

“What, Zimile? Are you jealous?”

I scoff in disbelief, jealous of what? That his daughter sleeps with that old woman and inhales all her fart during the night? That’s the last thing I’d be jealous of.

"I am not jealous Bayede. Don't you understand that this is unfair, how come she is here when Mpilo couldn't be here?"

He is silent for a while with his head bowed down, he is facing the other way giving me his back and that infuriates me even more.

"If you have a problem with it Zimile then take it up with your mother-in-law, she is the one living with my daughter, right?"

I can't believe him. I watch him as he strips off the shirt he was wearing and put on a clean one. I am taking in deep breaths to calm my nerves. That woman has gone too far and it is worse because even Bayede doesn't want to fight for me and stand up for me. It's like there was never bad blood between them and he never called her 'that woman' – I loved that Bayede more than this one I am looking at.

"Take this, look at it and get back to me," he says handing me a big envelope.

"What is it?" I take it from him, he continues to button his shirt and I open the envelope.

It is a house plan!

"Get back to me if you want to make any changes before I go to the municipality to get approval," he puts on his jacket – really, in this heat?

If I wasn't so upset I would have jumped on him already, stripped off his clothes and rode him to heaven and back. I am so excited but I don't show him.

"Where are you going to build it?" I raise my eyes to look at him but he is not looking at me.

"Just a few feet from your mother-in-law's house."

What? Then we might have as well moved in with her.

"But Bayede..."

"But nothing Zimile, my work forces me to be close to family and right now I need you to look at that plan, think of a good explanation as to why you defied me and didn't resign at work."

He walks past me still fuming with anger and I follow behind him.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"To the council meeting," he says disappearing outside the front door.

Another one?

"God woman, what are you doing sitting in the dark?" that is Bukhosi with a candle in his hand. I couldn't tell Bayede about having him over but couldn't tell him not to come either since I had already agreed for him to sleepover.

"What are you doing?" I ask him in a low tone.

"I am on my way outside to pee."

"With a candle in your hand," I didn't know he is a scaredy-cat.

"I had to, I didn't want to bump into your precious plates and break them, I am already sleeping here for free so I don't want to get on your wrong side. I know how you women love your plates and cups," he says chuckling but I don't move a muscle and the smile on his face disappears.

"Why are you sitting in the dark?"

"I am waiting for your brother," I say.

He has been gone since this afternoon and his phone takes me straight to voicemail. He has never done this before so I am worried, what if something bad happened to him I mean he was so angry when he left so anything could've happened.

"He is –" the voices outside cut him short, I know he was about to defend his brother.

The voices are getting closer, these people are not talking but they're screaming. I stand up to my feet, alarmed, what if they are burglars but aren't they too loud to be burglars?

There's a knock, I look at Bukhosi and he is looking at me.

"Zimile baby?" he knocks again. It is Bayede but he sounds different.

I sprinted to the door, unlocked it and yanked it open.

"Oh sthandwa sami," he says, drunk as kak, he can't even stand still he is stumbling all over the doorstep.

There is a man that is with him and he is just as drunk. Bukhosi comes closer from behind my back and I get a better view of these people in front of me. I scan Bayede from head to toe and is that...?

"Mama," she says, stumbling towards me while rubbing her eyes.

I feel my blood boiling to a 100°C – what the hell is this?

I am pretty sure it is after midnight, how – fuck this!

I yank the sleeping Liza, that took me forever to realise was in Bayede's arms and pulled Mpiliso inside the house. When I turn Bukhosi is looking at me with a blank face, I have nothing to say neither does he – I can't believe I married such a stupid man!

"Bafo!" Bayede exclaims behind me, he is probably addressing his brother.

He is so drunk I doubt he could even drive on the road, how can one person be so stupid and heartless. He could've killed my children because of his stupid mind and rock-hard brains.

I place both the kids on the bed and laid next to them. If he knows what is good for him then he won't set his foot inside this room because I swear I won't hesitate to kill him with my bear hands.

When I wake up, the sun is not out yet and the man I left in the living room is in my bed, sucking on Mpiliso's toes. I can't deal with him now, I have a guest that I need to attend to – I check the time on my phone and it is quarter to five.

I headed to the kitchen after changing into something more representable and prepared hot water for Bukhosi. We don't have a fancy bathroom so he will have to work with what we have, he is the one who chose to come here instead of staying with his sister.

When the water is ready, I pour it in the bucket and filled the pot with cold water.

I knocked on his door and waited. They were very loud when Bayede came back, I didn't think they'd even sleep and I doubt he got any sleep. I knock again and the door opens. He looks really sleepy, he could do with more seven hours of sleep but he needs to get going.

"You will use this basin, there is more cold water in the kitchen if you need it. You can bath so long and I will prepare you something to eat," I say handing him the bucket of warm water and the basin.

"No you don't have to worry yourself about that and thank you for the water."

I nod and he closes the door.

I will have to prepare the porridge anyway. Those two will wake up hungry, I don't even have Liza's milk here – Bayede doesn't know what a mess he has created.

I leave the pot boiling on the stove and went back to the bedroom. They are all still sleeping. I don't know what was going on in Bayede's head when he went to pick up the kids, he has embarrassed me in front of my parents and his brother. I said I have been here for almost a month but look how things are – everything is just a mess.

"How can you do this Bayede?" I ask him after I have waken him up, we need to talk.

"I have a very bad headache and I need more sleep. Can we talk about this in the morning?"

God it is already morning, I pull him by his foot as he drifts off to sleep.

"Zimile weren't you the one complaining that Bukhosenhle is living with your mother-in-law? Here are kids now so you can take them to be raised by her maybe that will make you less of nuisance." He doesn't see his fault in all of this.

"Bayede you took the kids from my parents, late at night, without my consent and you drove all the way drunk, and that doesn't sound disrespectful or wrong to you?"

"I don't want to do this Zimile, you will end up waking up the kids."

"That's exactly what I want, I want them to wake up and see what a dumbass their father is!" I shout.

"I told you time and time again, don't talk to me like that Zimile," he says sternly, pointing his finger at me.

"There's no other way to talk to you because you don't ever listen anyway. You always want me to do what is best for you but what about me Bayede, when I finally talk about how I feel you say I am annoying or you overlook and make everything about yourself. Do you even care about how I feel?" I don't want to cry so I fight back the tears by blinking rapidly.

"Of course I do care."

"Then why are you doing this, why aren't you listening to me and consider my feelings when you make decisions. Is this your life or our lives?"

He sighs and buries his face inside his hands before getting out of the bed and walk towards me.

"No don't touch me. Do you know how much it hurt me to see your daughter roaming around your mother's yard with no care in the world, I know she's not the one at fault but Mpilo deserves that too. I want him to grow up with his siblings, is that too much to ask for?" well I can no longer hold back the tears, I just let them out.

"You know tradition –"

"So tradition gets overruled when it comes to your child, Mpilo has to have royal blood running through his veins to get a pass to be here with me, us?"

He takes a step back, he is slowly drifting to his 'I don't want to talk anymore' mode.

"When a person speaks they never get anywhere with you," he says waving me off.

He is really irritating me right now, I am always wrong and he is always right. When we need to talk, he doesn't want to that's why we argue all the damn time because we never finish talking about something and we always leave things hanging, like right now.

“Can we talk about why you didn’t tell me about you not resigning at work like I told you to?”
oh today he is getting it right by saying that he told me to and we never agreed about it.

“I was going to tell you.”

“When? Had you always knew that you won’t leave work Zimile, is that why you took the children and dumped them at your parents’ house?”

Dump who? Isn’t it him and Busi who took the kids home, I wasn’t there!

“You fooled me to think it was our living arrangement that made you take the kids away from me kanti no, you were going to work behind my back!”

When was working registered under the sins column in the Bible, Jesus owes me an explanation, how come I didn’t know about this.

“You told me Wandile was busy with renovations and needed help when Wandile isn’t even thinking of making changes in her house. Do you even love me Zimile?”

“What?”

“Don’t what me? You lie so good maybe this,” he points between me and him, “wasn’t even real from the beginning!” he shouts and Liza screams on top of her lungs – great.

I rush to her and Mpiliso also wakes up, I guess we are really done talking because with both of them up, we never get anything done. But I think he is still drunk, that nonsense he has been spewing doesn’t make any sense, why would I be here if I didn’t love him? – I am not crazy nor dumb.

There is a knock on our door and I went to open it. Oh God I had even forgotten about him.

“Sengiyindlela,” he says, I guess he has his own ways of greeting and saying goodbye.

“Bafo,” Bayede’s voice chirps in from behind me and I turn to him. He is in yesterday’s clothes with his shoes on now.

“Travel safe,” I say forcing a smile. Bayede didn’t only embarrass me, I also embarrassed myself – who talks about their marital problems so loud in the morning with a guest in the house which I had even forgot about.

Bayede walks past me and he leads his brother out.

“Bayede...” why do I even waste my breath on this person?

They both disappear outside the door and I hear the car driving out.

Bayede is still not back when I am done feeding the children, I guess he left with his brother.

Khuzani walks in as my mind had drifted to him – where was he last night? He could’ve talked some sense into his friend’s head because it seems like Bayede only listens to him and with the rest of us, whatever we say gets in one ear and gets out through the other before it even registers in his mind.

“Can you show me where I can get the water?” I ask him after he had greeted.

Yeah they don’t have any taps in this place, I heard that there’s Tugela river close by – I can see it when I am in the taxi but I can’t from here. Bayede promised to take me there but he hasn’t; he is too busy.

Khuzani leads the way to the river close by. I have Liza on my back and Mpiliso is walking on her own. She didn’t want to be carried – she is very bossy this one.

We get to the river and I fill my bucket while Khuzani filled his. I am someone's wife but I haven't been out here to fetch water, Khuzani did all that while I went to work. I had to leave at approximately five in the morning to get to work on time and in the afternoon I'd be back at six or seven if there had been traffic on the road.

"You will have to boil it first with a drop or two of Jik," he advises and I nod absently.

He hasn't tried making a conversation and I am grateful for the silence because it gave me time to make sense of a lot of things. I place the bucket on my head and we walked back home.

The house finally comes into view and there are bright yellow plastic bags on the doorstep.

Bayede is standing in a distance, smoking. I don't know what may be going on in his head but if he wants me to quit work then he'd have to quit drinking.

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He dragged me out of the house while I was busy peeling and chopping the veggies I wanted to cook for tonight's supper. He said whatever it is that he wants to show me can't wait.

Right now we are in the car, driving towards his mother's house – I think I know why we are going there.

We are in a good space right now, we talked things out and I managed to get him to agree for me to take the kids back home. He still complains about missing them but we are not arguing about their absence anymore.

"Are you okay?" I ask, glaring at him. His forehead is sweaty, he hasn't been okay – yesterday, the day before that and the other day before that. I am worried now because it's not even that hot, the sun is setting so the air is a bit chilly.

"Yeah I am fine," he says not removing his eyes from the road.

I am not entirely convinced but I expected him to say he is fine, he'd never admit that something is wrong, uyindoda yena.

I hope there are no guests where we are going, we left in such a hurry that I didn't even get to change into something decent – I am wearing a worn out pinafore because most of my clothes are on the line but Bayede didn't care how I looked and so we are here with me looking like a crazy woman, who doesn't know if she is coming or going.

The house comes in to view and wow it looks...better than I had imagined. The building of the house took longer than expected but now, thirteen months later, the walls are up, it has a roof and they even installed the windows already.

He parks the car and I get out before he could even pull up the handbrake. I can't believe I have a house, this is exciting but it still needs to be painted, tiled on the floor, the ceiling is not installed yet and of course – furniture!

He hugs me from behind and kisses me on the back of my ear.

"Is it the way you wanted it, do you like it?"

"I love it," I say with a squirreled voice.

I made a few changes on that plan he gave me, I am not a builder but I knew what I wanted and right here stands exactly what I wanted.

"We will paint it purple on the outside, green on the inside or maybe it could be orange, whatever you want," he says.

What? I heard that men are colour blind but I didn't think it was this bad.

"Excuse me, who are you? This is my house remember, so leave the rest to me I will choose the colour I want and the furniture as well."

"You don't trust me?" he says, chuckling.

"Whuu ha.a I don't want to live in a circus – I want my house to represent me and not look like some crèche gone wrong." I get out of his embrace and walk to the front door, he is following behind me with a key so I wait for him to open.

I push the door open and we enter the living room, it is not a mansion so don't go wild with your imagination but it is still spacious and it will look really good when I have furnished it.

We stroll around the house, it is not perfect, there is still cement on the floor and dust that needs to be swept out but all in all I am happy. It has three bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom that we all are going to share, a living room and dining area; I couldn't have asked for a better house in this village.

I already have an idea of how I want our bedroom to look like, I want built-in cupboards in the kitchen and a plasma TV in the living room – I gave him two kids so he better compensate but I don't think he is ready for me.

"Baby," I turn to him, "thank you," I say with a smile on my face.

He walks to me and wraps his arms around my waist, looking into my eyes – I love him.

"I'd do anything to make you happy," he says like he means it. He doesn't know me, I am Zimile Makhathini Mabaso, I will leave him bankrupt and he wouldn't know what hit him so he better take back what he said.

"Anything?"

"No," he says, letting me go and I cling on him.

"You said anything," I pout and he laughs.

"That was like...15 seconds ago – the offer is gone my love."

He is such a bully, I push him away and he is still laughing. I don't know what is funny because I didn't even managed to take out the list of the things that I want – with the house in my name or not, he still owes me.

"Now that the house is ready, we can get our kids back, you are not working anymore so it shouldn't be a problem," he says and I exhale.

Yes, I quit work and Mr Xaba wasn't happy to let me go. They said marriage comes with sacrifices so that was my sacrifice and we have been okay ever since so I don't regret it.

"I will let my father know," I say slowly nodding my head.

He smiles and I smile back.

"I will be back baby, I need to make a call; Wandile has to know about this." I mean Wandile, the wife, we are still friends but I am still not close to her husband like we used to be and she is not meddling into our business which I am really thankful for.

"Okay, I will close the windows so long and then we can leave," he says as I make my way out of our bedroom.

I take my phone out of the front pocket of the pinafore that I am wearing and scrolled down my contacts list for Wandile's number.

"You're speaking to Zimile Mabaso, a brand new homeowner," I say after she has answered the phone and she burst out of laughter. These people don't know how to take me seriously.

"What are you?" she asks, while still trying to compose herself.

"I am a homeowner honey, I have a house now so that makes me important so please behave yourself."

She laughs again, "you will never change Zimile. Is it done now?" she's referring to the house.

"Yeah the building is done, they just need to put the tiles on the floor, paint the walls and then we are moving in," I say excitedly.

“Without furniture?” why is that shocking to her, she also fucked a man in a unfurnished house so she should be more understanding than the rest of them.

“I am tired of living in that dead house, I want to move in as soon as they give me the go ahead and we will deal with the furniture after.”

“If you say so,” she doesn’t sound very hyped about the whole thing now. “Bona, I know you are in a good mood ne but something happened,” her tone is low like she is whispering, maybe Mlungisi is in the house and she doesn’t want him to hear what she’s going to say next.

“What happened?” my ears are sharp now, no female species doesn’t love gossip – if you don’t then there’s something wrong with you.

“It’s Lungile, she gave birth to a dead baby and now no one knows where she is,” she says and heaves a long sigh.

“What?! I didn’t even know she was pregnant!” I exclaim more than I intended then I turned to check the coast and Bayede is still not on sight. I thought he said he is just closing the windows, what is holding him back for so long now?

“I also didn’t know, actually no one knew so we think she was hiding the pregnancy ngokubopha isisu but then God had other plans because she couldn’t hide the contractions. They took her to the hospital on Friday night and she only gave birth on Saturday morning. Then on Sunday she was reported missing, she discharged herself before the doctor could dismiss her.”

I am still shocked, I can’t even think of the right thing to say right now, I know I hated her but I am a mother and I would never wish for another person to lose their baby especially at birth, not even on my worst enemy. Lungile was heartless and selfish, she wanted to kill my Mpiliso, I should be happy that karma has finally got to her but I am not.

“So where is she now?” I ask, in a low tone and she sighs again.

“Your brother opened a case of a missing person and they are looking for her. He is here now, looking drained and tired. I thought since all of you hated her then this would’ve been like a good riddance to rubbish but her disappearance is weighing on him.”

Me too.

“I hope they find her, I mean she needs to be around people right now so she can heal,” I say. I wonder where she ran off to and why she’d hide her pregnancy from us or maybe she was ashamed?

“You’re right. Listen girl, we are going to talk ne I need to prepare food for this husband of mine before he becomes more grumpier than he is.”

I also remember that I have a husband to feed and he will be complaining that he is hungry when he is the one who brought me here instead of leaving me to finish cooking first.

“Alright, keep me posted.”

She says her goodbyes and I hang up. I called her in a hype mood but now my mood has dropped to a minus zero. I don’t know if that number even exists – I didn’t finish school so don’t dare try to judge me.

Where is Bayede now because he is not in the room I left him in.

“Baby?” I call out making my way to the other room opposite the one I was in and he is not there.

“Bayede!”

The car is still outside and he had to use the front door to leave the house, I would’ve seen him leave so he is still inside.

“Bay–“ my heart leaps and starts beating fast at the sight before me.

I hold on tight to the door frame before I pushed my body forward, rushing to his lifeless body on the floor, his eyes are closed so I am already thinking of the worst.

“Bayede?” I call out again but he doesn’t move.

I hit him on both cheeks, still nothing.

“Sizani!” I screamed with my eyes already watering.

I lean in on his face and thank God he is still breathing.

“Help! Sizani!” I screamed again and my tears just gashed out of my eyes – he can’t die, not now, I still need him and his children need him.

There is stomping footsteps coming towards the room I am in so I look up to the door with anticipation.

Khuzani appears and I sigh in relief. He has a shocked expression on his face but I don’t have time to explain now. We need to get him to the hospital.

“Can you drive?” I ask him as he scoops Bayede off the floor. I am still in awe of how he just picked him up like he weighs nothing.

“I can but I don’t have a license,” he says and we step out of the house. I don’t think that is relevant or important right now, if he can take us to the hospital then I am good – we will deal with everything else if or when it happens.

“Umenzeni umtanami?” her voice is shallow almost silent. I wasn’t expecting her to be here as well, see why I didn’t want to have my house built around these people – they’d always see it right to poke their noses into our business.

I shoot my head towards her direction.

“Umbulele! I knew you were a good for nothing gold digger!” she screams and Nkosazana appears behind her, she has the same expression as that of Khuzani.

“What happened Zimile?” she asks taking a step towards me and past her mother who is now crying like Bayede has already been declared dead.

Khuzani gets in the car and I open the back door where he has placed the almost dead Bayede.

“Uyibulele ingane yami!” the old woman screams dramatically with her arms on top of her head before I could get into the car.

She is already painting as the bad guy who would kill her husband for money. Bayede is not even that wealthy so what the hell would I gain from killing him?

“Zimile get in the car we need to leave.” Khuzani says with so much urgency.

I get inside the car, with Nkosazana’s eyes still on me – she is waiting for me to answer her question but what will I say because I also don’t know what happened.

I have Bayede's head on my lap as Khuzani drives like a maniac to Stanger Hospital. He is still breathing but his heartbeat is very faint. I am praying that we reach the hospital while he is still alive and maybe the doctors will be able to save him.

I don't know why they had to live so far from town because the drive to Stanger feels like a year and a half.

We finally reach the hospital and Khuzani opens my door, I get out and he takes out Bayede. I follow behind him, holding up the pinafore so it won't trip me, and we are in the reception in seconds screaming for someone to help us.

The nurses come with a stretcher and they disappear with him down the passage.

I am literally losing my marbles right now, what will I tell my children if their father dies now and his mother will surely have my head if he dies.

Khuzani sits down while I remain standing, he is the one who filled the form at reception because I didn't have any energy left in me. The only thing I am willing to do right now is cry.

There's a phone ringing, I look at Khuzani, "it is Bayede's," he says handing it to me.

I take it and Busi's name is flashing on the screen, I answer it.

"Busi?"

I wait for her to reply but the line dies on me. I look at the screen, call ended.

I dial her number again but it rings unanswered. Now I am double worried, what if she called because something has happened to Mpilo or Mpiliso, oh my Liza. I search my pockets for my phone then I remember it fell on the floor when I walked in on Bayede on the floor.

The phone rings again but it is Nkosazana now, I don't answer, I just switched the phone off. I know she's calling to accuse me as well, who knows what her mother has fed her.

We wait for almost an hour, the people are looking at me like I shouldn't be here – it's the way I am dressed, wangilaya Bayede kodwa. A short female Indian doctor walks up to us. God bless the English I learnt from Mr Xaba at the restaurant.

"How is he doctor?" I ask, my heart is pumping hard and my mind is over the hills, thinking of the worst.

"Uyaphila," she replies in my mother's tongue and I sigh in relief – for her knowing isiZulu, I need to appease to Shaka Zulu for having a kind heart and allowing the white people into his home to teach them a thing or two about our language, Mandela also did his part but Shaka still takes the cup. I am also in relief because he is alive!

"What is wrong with him?"

"We don't know yet but at the moment we are suspecting food poisoning, we are still runn..."

I don't stick around to listen to the rest of what she wants to say. I left Khuzani to listen to her and I went to sit down on the chair for the first time since I got here.

My heart sinks as I settle down, food poisoning?

27.

It wasn't food poisoning, it is ulcers instead. Bayede loves exaggerating; he also loves drama and attention, couldn't he cry about a stomach ache or a running stomach like everyone else who has ulcers instead of fainting? It took fainting to get him to the hospital when he had a mouth to say that he is not alright and we would've gone to see a doctor.

I guess he was waiting for a sign, a sign that death is crawling around him and it is a matter of time before it snatches his soul from him because of his rock-hard brains.

He was still weak when he was discharged, the doctor said it is the side effects of the medication he is taking. I had to buy more healthy foods, his mother provided spinach, cabbage and other herbs, and imbiza that Bayede is refusing to take.

I also refused to go back to that dead house with him dying so I told him that we are moving into the new house, I had his balls in my hand and he had no choice but to agree to it because he didn't have the strength to fight with me.

It is still not finished but we have a roof over our heads so it is fine and it is better to be here around people instead of being there in the mountains – ngokhala kusabele bani when he faints again?

It has been the worst and rough two weeks of my life, just two days after being discharged, if he wasn't vomiting then he'd be letting 'it' go before we even get to the toilet and I had to clean and wash him. He was so weak, he was vomiting on the side of the bed if I wasn't around and because I vowed to be by his side through the bad and the worst times – I sucked it up and cleaned it like a big girl.

His mother hasn't showed her face around here, even Nkosazana is too busy to check on her brother – I know he is not dying but them showing that they care would make a big difference. "You're here and that's all that matters," he'd say every time I mention how unfair his mother and sister are acting.

Mamazala was crying not so long ago saying I killed her son but now that he is alive, she is nowhere to be found. But I am more than happy that he is alive, I couldn't even think of a story that I'd tell his children about his death or a way to break the news to them which shows that I am not ready for him to die.

"I will go prepare you something to eat," I tell him as I pull the blanket up to his chest.

He looks so much better now, he has lost weight – a lot in such a short space of time but he is good and I am confident that he will pull through.

"Not cabbage again, please," he whines.

"The doctor said you must eat healthy."

"Boiled meat won't kill me Zimile, I swear it is the cabbage that is sending me to the toilet more than it is the pills that I am taking," he complains and I chuckle.

"Boiled meat, it is then. Shout if you need anything," I say heading to the door.

I know it is a bad thing to wish for but it was much better then when he ate anything that I prepared for him and now he has grown to have a big mouth, the more he gets better, the more he becomes demanding.

Khuzani worked really hard in the past few weeks, transporting our things from that house to here but the villagers were also happy to help. We had to pick the more trusted people from the bunch, I couldn't have people with long fingers touching my things – who knows how petty they can get, I swear people even steal other people's underwears in the name of getting something instead of nothing.

As I am preparing Bayede's food, a knock comes through on the door. I closed the pot and went to open the door. Oh wow look who is here, I didn't know she had a conscience and would see the need to check on her son but she is a little bit too late. I wish she could've been the one mopping the vomit and wiping her son's ass for days so she'd know ukuthi kunjani ukuzala.

"I am here to see Bayede," she says. Well I wasn't expecting her to say she was here to see me, I am not related to her so she wouldn't care if I am alright or not and she wouldn't dare try to find out what hell I have been going through the last few weeks.

"He is in the bedroom, please come in."

She walks in and scans the kitchen. She hasn't been inside the house before, I was the one who went to her to get the cabbage and spinach, and it'd be Khuzani who comes with it on the other days.

"Sthandwa sami, your mother is here," I announce and he doesn't hide the annoyance on his face.

I let his mother in alone and I leave the door slightly open. I lean on the wall opposite the door, I can see her from where I am standing but I can't hear a word that she is saying. Bayede remains quiet the whole time, listening to the woman who suddenly cares now that he is doing a whole lot better.

The pot is boiling hard in the kitchen but I don't move, you can't blame me because I don't trust this woman. Maybe she stayed away thinking that he is going to die and now she is here to check if he is not dead yet, if not then she'd finish the job herself – I just don't trust her.

After a few minutes, I hear her praying and I lift my eyes up – God is amazing, he truly works in mysterious ways and please, someone must just fill me in as to what exactly is she praying for because Bayede doesn't need saving right now or is she thanking God for saving him? Wonders never ceases, I want to know where she was this whole time and what she was up to, I bet praying is the last thing she got up to. Even Bukhosenhle hasn't set her foot here to see her father and it has her written all over it.

She probably told the poor child that I am on a mission to kill her father and she doesn't want her to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. I shouldn't be laughing but I am amused.

She whispers an amen and lifts up her head while opening her eyes. Bayede's eyes were open the whole time, I don't think he has that much respect for his mother behind closed doors. He has proven it time and time again.

She leaves him and walks out of the bedroom, closing the door behind her. I move from the wall getting ready to walk her out but she stops me.

"Mntanami," oh my, the wait has been cut short, Jesus is on his way back to earth! I am shocked by what she said even my mind just went blank. "You did well by looking after him and he looks much better," she says. I don't know what she's talking about because she didn't see

him in his worst. “As a mother I am sure you know how I must be feeling to see my son well, breathing and full of life. I admit that I was wrong about you, if it was any other girl then they would’ve left at the first sign of struggle.” Now I am convinced that Khuzani must have filled her in, he’d also help me to bath Bayede when he didn’t feel like using his legs – I am more than glad he is fine now and can bath himself – he was more than a big baby, he is another spoilt brat.

“I was just fulfilling my duties as his wife and the mother of his children,” I say and she goes further, jumping over the fence and invade my personal space by taking my hand into hers. “Wenze kahle,” she says with a small smile on her face. Those are not the words I was expecting, I was actually expecting a thank you or I am sorry but I guess I won’t get anything close to that from her.

I just nod to her and she walks to the kitchen with me following behind her.

“I will get you another cabbage and a pumpkin that you can mash up for him,” she says heading to the open door.

I add nothing, I do my best to smile and thank her. She steps outside and I close the door then I remember that I was actually busy cooking.

“Your mother is going to get you another cabbage,” I say and he frowns.

I know he hates it more than he hates life right now.

“She will eat it, I am done with that thing.”

“Well it is not done with you,” I am watching him as he is eating his food which looks less appetizing without a bit of colour from the curry powder and the knorrox cubes or the soup.

“Don’t scare me like that, ever again.”

He looks up to me while chewing down his food and I take the bowl out of his hand. I want to take it back to the kitchen but he is holding my hand which is stopping me from getting up from the bed.

“It wasn’t my intention to scare you.”

“I know but if you had been honest about not feeling well then things wouldn’t have escalated to you fainting,” I say the honest truth.

“I thought I had it under control.” He never sees himself wrong, he’d fight tooth and nail just to have the upper hand in everything or be the one to have the last say. Right now, all he needs to say is ‘I am sorry, I won’t do it again’ but then again he took after his mother.

“Stop being stubborn, it’d actually make things much more easier for us.” I got up from the bed and went to the kitchen.

When I come back he is laying on his back, looking up to the roof like he is deep in his thoughts.

“I am sorry Zimile,” he says and I feel like dancing.

I help him take his medication and he lays back on the bed.

“Don’t you want to watch a movie?” I ask and he looks a bit surprised that I even suggested that. With him sick, I’d have to watch whatever he wants to watch just to make him feel better and I know the crap that he’d want to watch.

“Great, do we have popcorn?” Now he is pushing it, where are we supposed to get popcorn in this place?

I take the blanket and the pillow, and he leaves before me. I follow behind him and he is already going through the channels, looking for a movie. I pull him forward to place the pillow behind him to support his back and he is groaning, and complaining. This is for him to be comfortable but yet again I know I won't get a thank you. I sit down after I have placed the blanket on his lap.

“Kwaduma nje lapho Bayede,” I say looking at him and he turns to look at me too. “Am I missing something here? Which action is much better, the one we are watching on TV or the one that is happening in your behind?”

“Sorry, I am just so bloated, I can't hold it in.”

He drops another bomb.

“Please Bayede,” I say fanning my nose. “Imagine my death certificate written – cause of death: suffocated by fart; I would never forgive you for that.”

He is laughing.

“Keep on laughing but I know you won't be laughing when I die.”

I don't remember when I put these peanuts in my pocket but they came at the right time.

“They said God is female and I haven't seen anyone proving that prophecy so I guess they are still waiting for me. I might drop dead here but in heaven they are waiting for me. You don't know me wena, I am Zimile and by the time I walk through that gate Jesus will be mopping the floors that I will walk on, his mother Maria will be slaving in the kitchen preparing is'gwaqane namadumbe, his father Joseph will be polishing the throne and Peter and Moses will be...what I am trying to say is you will be praying to me and asking me for the fruits of life.”

“Like you are praying to Didiza?” he says with a light chuckle and I shoot my eyes to him.

“Don't joke like that, I don't even think he made it to heaven – Jesus is a very hard man to please,” I say, throwing the peanuts into my mouth.

He is cracking besides me; if he thinks I am being funny then I must be Trevor Noah's deputy.

The door opens and Khuzani walks in, he doesn't knock. This house is his as much as it is ours. It is getting late I must go and start with the cooking.

28.

FIVE YEARS LATER

I walk up to the mirror rubbing my now visible baby bump. We are expecting another bundle of joy, Mpiliso and Liza are living with us now and are attending at a school close by. It has been a fair journey, Bayede and I are in a good space but we had a huge fight about three years ago, he wanted to bring Bukhosenhle to live with us after her mother passed on.

But I was Zimile Makhathini before I became a Mabaso, I put my foot down and told him he will bring that child here over my dead body. If he wants her here, then I will also take Mpilo in – he was so mad and fuming. With the way we were screaming, I am glad the kids were not home to witness us in that state. I also thought there was no way we were going to get back from that, we said a lot of things that can never be unsaid.

Bukhosenhle's mother had taken her child back a year before she passed on so her family refused to bring the child back after she passed on and Bayede wanted to get his daughter back in the name that she will be staying with him, unfortunately he took me as his wife and after how his mother had treated me – I was not going to go down without a fight.

He came back after three days, saying he had to take time out to cool off which is something he wouldn't have allowed me to do but after that we talked and Bukhosenhle is still staying with her mother's family.

Since then we have been good and he hasn't felt the need to disappear on me because he needs some time off. I am happy with him by my side at all times and this baby on my tummy is evidence that we have been busy.

The door opens and he walks in. I look at him through the mirror as he approaches me and wrap his arms around my waist, resting his hands on my belly.

"The date has been set for the coronation," he says against my ear, looking at me in the mirror. "When is it?" my hands are on top of his. I am currently barefoot in my panty only, the coldness of the tiles feels really nice and if it wasn't for Bayede watching me like a hawk then I'd spend most of my time laying on the floor.

"It's in September," he says.

I am silent for a few seconds.

"But I will be eight months pregnant by then," I turn around to look at him. He can't do that to me, does he know how huge I will be at that time and can't they choose another date, they can do it after I have given birth but what am I saying, no one ever thinks about me in this place.

"We have to do it, it has been postponed for a long time and we can't anymore. I also want to get it done and get over it."

I guess I have no say in this, the royals have spoken and their word is law.

"Are you sure about doing it now? You know returning ulcers are not a good sign, that's what the doctor said." I try to make him reconsider, I know he doesn't think about himself sometimes.

“We are doing this.”

Mission failed.

“And um...Ndabezitha and Bukhosenhle will be here too,” he is looking at me, waiting for my reaction but who am I to say no to the children coming here to be with their father on his big day. They can come, at least it’d be like hitting two birds with one stone since we were already planning for the children to meet. “I don’t want my children to grow up not knowing each other,” those were his words.

“It is fine, I can’t wait to meet Ndabezitha and see how much Bukhosenhle has grown.” I say and he is smiling from ear to ear. The last time I saw her was when she was twelve so now she should be seventeen, shuu time flies hey.

“About the ceremony, you can speak to Nkosazana and your mother-in-law, to find out what will be needed from you,” he kisses my forehead, nose and lips.

I know I’d need a full traditional attire, with isicholo and all. Why didn’t anyone warn me about marrying into this family?

“How about a quickie before the kids get back?”

Oh I forgot to mention how horny he has become and won’t go to sleep without getting some, me on the other, I want nothing to do with sex especially today since it is so hot.

I hear the kitchen door opening and they run in. He exhales, cursing under his breath, well I am saved and I thank them for arriving just in time.

“Looks like they love their mother more,” I say, getting out of his arms.

“Well you are not getting away tonight,” he leaves and I get dressed.

The downside of having many mouths to feed is that I have to cook even if I don’t feel like it. Today I shouldn’t be cooking, I could cook uphuthu and we’d have amasi but knowing Bayede he’d cry foul and go eat at his mother’s house. Yeah he has said it before that if I don’t feed him then he’d go eat his mother’s poison. If I want him dead then I won’t cook but of course I don’t want him to die so I slave in the kitchen till my feet are swollen and at night he demands sex.

I head to the kitchen, there are voices in the living room I guess Khuzani is here – he is always here and always by Bayede’s side, where Bayede is that is where you will find Khuzani.

I boil the water while I am chopping the onions, I hate onions right now and I am gagging, if I continue standing here then I will definitely throw up. That is what I have been going through and it takes me approximately twenty minutes to finish chopping one onion because of the breaks I need to take in between.

“Ma can you help me with my Maths homework?” without turning back, I can tell that it is Mpiliso; she has never asked me to help her with her homework so what is it with her today?

“Go to your father Mpiliso, he is the one who is more educated here” I say heading to the kettle that has just boiled.

“But Ma –”

“But nothing Mpiliso, leave my sight as you can see I am busy – your father will help you,” I scold, turning my back on her and continue to chop the onion.

Her footsteps disappear down the passage, I gag again and I just leave the onion there, turning to the pot of rice that is boiling and spilling the water out – argh why?

They are here. I cooked lunch, yeah with my swollen belly and feet, I had to move around the kitchen and the house to make sure that his children have a nice stay. First impressions last forever so I had to make them feel welcome.

I am standing in the veranda with Mpiliso and Liza besides me. We told them about this meeting and none of them were actually excited about it, I don't know if they couldn't show it or not but to me they didn't look like people who were looking forward to meet their siblings for the first time.

They all step out of the car and Bukhosenhle looks taller, she definitely took after Bayede more than I thought and she is him. If she wasn't a girl then I'd have called her handsome, ah my husband is very handsome and I am not shy to tell him.

But Ndabezitha looks nothing like Bayede, even his complexion...there's nothing in him that screams 'I am a Mabaso and Bayede is my father', for a second there I am really worried but Bayede said he is his son so who am I to object.

"Sanibonani," that is Bukhosenhle with her bubbly personality.

We greet back and Bayede takes the stage, and he introduces the kids to each other. A minute or two things are a bit awkward but that doesn't last for long. As I am preparing the food in the kitchen, the living room is suddenly filled with laughter and they are talking over each other. I wonder what is going on but one thing for sure is that I don't want anyone breaking my things. "They get along like a house on fire," he says walking in. He sounds happy as much as he looks. That is what I love about kids, the awkward moment doesn't last for long they are quick to get along unlike us the old grannies of life – if I don't like you then I'd leave without even talking to you but with kids, they don't have to like each other in order to play with one another.

"I am really glad, I was a bit worried about Mpiliso and Liza." Even though they grew up with my parents, with Mpilo and Lorna's daughter also there, they got here and lived as the only kids in the house so I thought having Bukhosenhle and Ndabezitha here would be like they are here to invade their space.

"Please add one more plate, Khuzani is here."

Why am I not surprised?

"Oh and Nkosazana and her mother will be here to see the kids so I hope you have something prepared to serve them," he says heading to the direction he came from.

Great, I know Nkosazana never eats much from here, she'd always say she's not hungry – I don't know if she's looking down on me, I know I am not the best cook but her declining my food has to do with something else. But I have to offer her something, who knows when it will be the day where she decides she wants to eat my food.

I put his plate on the tray, which he could've taken with him but I am the wife here and I have to slave for him. He takes the food and thanks me, when I come back with Khuzani's plate, I tell Bukhosenhle to go get their food – ukuzala ukuzilula amathambo – for the time they're here, I will get to rest. Ndabezitha will also be washing the dishes, I know he lives with his

grandmother and I know how grannies are, they don't play when it comes to domestication so I am not worried that he doesn't know how to wash the dishes.

"Ma?" I hear someone call out.

There is a knock on the door and I tell whoever to come in. The door opens and Bukhosenhle walks in, yes she has just addressed me as 'ma'. My mother would be so proud of me right now. I am sitting in front of the mirror, moisturizing my hair as she walks further into the room.

"I have washed and dried the dishes," she says.

"Thank you, you can go join the others – I will be there in a few minutes." This baby makes me so tired, I am even lazy to comb my hair and I don't know what I am doing right now but one thing for sure is that I am not getting anywhere.

"Let me help you," she takes a huge step and takes the comb out of my hand before I can say anything. Uphaphile, her energy is very light; Bayede is not like that so I guess she took after her mother. She starts combing my hair and I actually like how patient she is.

"The downside of being the eldest is that I can't stay with the young ones without running out of things to talk about," she says, running the comb against my scalp if she continues to do that I am sure that I will fall asleep.

"You look really big, how far are you now?" she asks and I open my eyes to look at her through the mirror. So being with her siblings is a nightmare and instead of finding anything else to do she is here to chit-chat with me, that must be nice.

"I will be eight months in three days," I tell her.

I thought Bayede was joking when he said the coronation will be taking place this week, two days from today to be exact, I feel heavy already and I want nothing to do with that ceremony but I have to be there no matter what.

"I wonder how it feels to be pregnant," she says, with a voice filled with curiosity – are we slowly crawling to those mother and daughter kind of talks? Because if we are then I need to be armed – she can't be thinking of experimenting, Bayede would die!

"You better do yourself a favour and stay away from the species they call boys. It is for your own sake, sex is great but being pregnant is the last thing you need."

What are you saying Zimile – did you just tell the kid that sex is great – that is like telling her to go and do it in order to find out! This big mouth of mine though.

"I see."

"What grade are you doing now?"

"Grade 11, I failed Grade 10 so I had to repeat it – I should be in Grade 12 this year."

Good for you girl, I know nothing about any grade after Grade 6 though I didn't even get to taste how it is like to write the final exams in that grade.

"My mother would've killed me if she was there when I failed," there is a drop of pain in her voice as she says that statement. At least she knew her mother, mina I didn't get to know mine but we are now in the same boat, we both don't have mothers.

"I heard that she was a teacher."

"Yeah, the worst of them all but I guess her daughter didn't inherit her brains."

“Then where did you get those that you have now, I hope you are not about to insult my husband in my presence,” I say and she laughs.

“No I guess I got it from one of the uncles. I am done,” she says patting my head and I scan myself. She plaited my hair! Oh she’s such a godsend, it is like she knew how bad I wanted it to be plaited and I was ready to ask Bayede to cut it off, even with scissors I don’t think I’d have cared.

“Senhle!” Bayede calls out.

“I don’t remember my father so grumpy it’s like the more he gets old, the more he becomes grumpy – don’t forget ugly,” she whispers the last part.

“Don’t let him hear you say that,” I say laughing.

She leaves the room, laughing lightly and I turn to the mirror to look at myself again.

We woke up to a very bad weather, Bayede is also not feeling well but he said he will get through this come hell or high waters. I couldn’t even get through to him so I let him be, if he faints in front of his important guests then that would be on him and sadly, I won’t even have it in me to say ‘I told you so’.

Wandile, Mlungisi and Muzi managed to come. I know Muzi is here because of the important people that will be here and not because he is here to be on my side. Busi couldn’t come for reasons I could make sense of, Lorna too and Lungile is still missing. Five years later, she still hasn’t found her way home; I think the time for us to call Khumbul’ Ekhaya has come but no one will entertain that thought.

I look ridiculous in isdwaba with how big my stomach is and worse I had to put on the real one, that is so heavy and uncomfortable. I am the one who had sex and allowed my husband to make me pregnant so no one cares about my complaints – I am the one who put myself in this situation after all.

Bayede’s brothers are also here, Bukhosi got married two year ago to a girl named Yolani, a very humble soul I tell you and now we are waiting on Lindumbuso to bring his wife home.

I want this day to be over already, my yard looks different now with all these people here – I don’t even see my children around, all four of them. Mpilo is not here – it is Bayede’s day, not mine.

Wandile is by my side at all times, she knows the story that I can’t trust anyone in this family so she is looking out for me. I even told Bukhosenhle last night to be careful and not allow her sisters to wonder off without her or Ndabezitha around.

We enter the big tent and people came in numbers, you’d swear it is a concert but you know how black people love to invite themselves. Amakhosi from other places are here as well, dresses in their own attires – even in this crazy weather.

The day proceeds and after three hours, I tell Wandile that I can’t sit in this thing anymore. If I don’t get rid of it then I will give birth right here, right now. She tells the women around us that

I am not feeling well and they all help me sit up, attracting more attention to us. Who didn't know what was going on surely thought I was dying – I huffed and held onto Wandile as we made our way out.

“Indlovukazi yethu is not feeling well bakwethu, you know how pregnant people can get,” I hear the MC say as we step outside, who hired this guy ephapha nje?

I am so annoyed and hungry. Wandile leads me to the house and helps me to remove isdwaba, I wore it longer than I vouched to. Almost everything was done so Bayede wouldn't be upset, he is also responsible for this baby so he better not try me.

“Can you find my children, please and when you do, bring them here,” I say, sitting down on the bed and it feels like a dream to be so comfortable.

“You don't have to worry, you said Bukhosenhle will look after them.”

“Get all of them here Wandile, I don't want to argue with you right now.”

“I see someone is hungry,” she says, laughing and I join in I can't believe I am actually upset because the kids are not here but I won't relax until I know that they are in the house, safe. Wandile leaves, saying she will find the kids but she doesn't leave before giving me a plate filled with food and I dig as soon as I get my hands on the plate.

“Ma did you see that?” that's is Liza, looking astonished about something.

“Those people were dancing,” Mpiliso says sounding bored.

“Indlamu,” Liza says, giggling and I just know that it's her first time hearing that word.

“Where is Bukhosenhle and your brother?” I ask Mpiliso and she shrugs.

“They said they will be staying behind.”

I pull Liza to me because there's something on her eyelid that I am afraid would get into her eye and we won't sleep until we get it out.

“Are you hungry or you guys have already eaten?” I ask working on the thing of Liza's eyelid.

“Yeah we ate, sis Senhle dished up for us and the food was really nice,” Liza says jumping up and down.

“Stop moving,” I say hitting her arm lightly and she stands still. Got it.

“Why did we have to come back so early?”

“Mpiliso don't get into my nerves please, did you see the amount of people out there?” she nods. “You are here because it is much safer for you to be in here than out there.”

“But Senhle...”

“Yey that Senhle you are talking about can take care of herself and I am sure she was tired of babysitting you. Now leave and go change into your pyjamas. After that you can watch TV or whatever but don't leave the house,” I say and they heard me loud and clear.

They leave the room, following after each other and close the door.

Late at night, most people have already left and the ones who remained are the ones who are too drunk to even stand. You have to beg people to come and even beg them when they have to leave too ay.

“It was a great day,” he says walking in and I sit up.

“How are you feeling? I hope you didn’t drink Bayede.”

“I didn’t drink even if I wanted to I wouldn’t have had the time to sit down and indulge on anything.”

“You didn’t even eat?” I shift to sit on the edge of the bed. I can’t believe those people starved my man on his day, it is his money that bought that food well that is not entirely true, I am sure people sponsored but they were here because of him.

“I am fine Zimile don’t worry,” he is busy getting rid of the things that he was wearing.

“I can’t let you sleep on an empty stomach and you have to take your medication. Bukhosenhle is just in the other room, I can get her to make you something to eat,” I try to stand up so I can leave the room but he is in front of me in no time.

“I told you not to worry. You worry too much, I am actually concerned that you don’t get much time to worry about yourself,” isn’t he sweet? Ngakhetha kahle, there’s no doubt about that.

“I’m fine,” I exhale sitting back on the bed and he crouches in front of me.

“Are you sure?”

“Whoa!” I say, holding on to my belly.

“What, is there something wrong?” he asks sounding both concerned and worried. I take his hand and place it on where I felt the kick. “Oh wow that is a strong kick,” he says with a wide grin and I am chuckling.

He rubs the side of my stomach and lays his head on it.

“I love you Zimile,” he says and I brush his hair before planting a kiss on top of his head, yes right where he has intwala.

29.

He wakes up at the crack of dawn, he has to wake up the kids and prepare them for school. He knows that he has to start by preparing warm water for them to bath, then wake them up which will be a struggle because Mpiliso is a deep sleeper and then what follows after that? Zimile has always made it look easy, she had everything done before he even opened his eyes in the morning but now it is his turn to take the ropes.

Zimile is in hospital, her blood pressure was too high and the doctor suggested to put her on bed rest, knowing Zimile she wouldn't have rested if she came back home so the doctor admitted her. He will be seeing her later today but for now he has to prepare the kids for school.

"Mpiliso wake up," he shakes her to wake up but she only stirs to turn to the other side – this is as hard as he thought it would be.

"Wake up," he shook her again, more rougher this time around and she wakes up.

"The water is ready in the bathroom, go bath and when you are done, wake your sister up – I will be in the kitchen preparing your breakfast, now get moving I don't want you to be late," he says heading to the door and Mpiliso stumbles behind him, walking to the bathroom.

When she is done, she gets into her bedroom and finds her bed made with her uniform on top, cool. Her mother never does this, she'd make her bed before she leaves the room but things are different with only her father around. Liza is in the bathroom, bathing. At her age, she can bath herself but Zimile has to supervise her from time to time, well today mama is not here so she has to be a big girl. She also finds her bed made when she is done bathing with her ironed uniform on top of it.

After a few minutes, Mpiliso is all dressed in her uniform and she passes through the bathroom to check what mess Liza had created, at least she ran the water out of the tub but she didn't wash it. Argh now she has to do it.

When she gets into Liza's bedroom, she is all dressed as well and now it is time for breakfast. It looks like they're a bit early though.

They walk into the dining room following after each other, the table has been set but this is too much food. Zimile only fed them one thing in the morning, if it is not soft porridge then it'd be corn flakes.

"Sit down," their father instructs and they sit.

He places bowls of soft porridge in front of them and leaves them to eat while he runs to the kitchen to check on the toast.

The two kids look at each other before digging in, the porridge looks great it is not lumpy at all but something is missing – baba didn't put sugar in it. Liza looks at Mpiliso with her mouth full, she can't swallow this and she can't spit it out either, her father would have a fit.

"Idla," that's what Mpiliso tells her and she swallows hard. This is the worst porridge she has ever eaten in her life, her mother made it better.

Bayede comes back with a plate filled with toast, well the porridge was a starter – the corn flakes are the main meal and the toast with strawberry jam is dessert.

By the time they finish eating, Liza wants to throw up – Zimile would have a stroke if she saw her kids like this.

“Are you okay?” he asks the kids as they look uncomfortable for some reason.

Mpiliso nods while Liza shakes her head, now who does he believe between the two?

“I am leaving today to see your mother so Mpiliso you will take the spare keys with you to school. When you come back, you open the door and close it – don’t allow anyone else in and after you have changed your uniforms and eaten, you will go to aunt Nkosazana’s house that is where you will be spending night, okay?”

Mpiliso nods again and they both stand up while their father digs inside his pockets looking for his wallet, oh it’s on top of the table, he takes it and gives them R3 each. The spoiling never ends, their father is not as stingy as their mother, with Zimile R1 each is more than enough to get them through the day.

They leave the dining room with wide smiles on their faces; they mother can leave for the whole month, if they are going to be spoiled like this then they’d choose their father at any point in time.

Liza holds on to her tummy, “I am so full, I just want to die,” she cries and Mpiliso laughs, she is just as full but she’s not showing it.

After the kids have left, Bayede prepares himself to leave. The house is clean, he has washed the dishes so everything is in place. He locks the doors and gets in the car. He first has to attend a meeting in Stanger, those old men have been calling him since the coronation ceremony, some couldn’t attend it so now is the only time they’re going to meet with him officially as someone’s king or chief, whatever one you want to call it.

The cars parked in front of the building are nothing compared to the car he is driving; he plans to buy a new car but that will be after he has bought the couches that Zimile wants.

He enters the building and he is welcomed by a huge crowd of people cheering, clapping and even ululating. This is overwhelming. He has a smile on his face as he greets the men he came to see with handshakes, the staff is looking at him from afar – if you are a nobody then you don’t get touch someone who is in his status.

The greetings are over so they move to the board room. They continue to talk about the plans of how they are going to elevate each village that each man is in charge of.

Hours pass by and Bayede keeps on checking his phone and she hasn’t called yet. Another hour passes and it is quarter to two, still she hasn’t called. He excuses himself from the table and moves to the side while dialling her number.

“Nkosazana where are you?” he asks as soon as she answers the phone.

“I am at home, why?”

“I told you to call me when the kids get home,” his voice is higher than necessary. Nkosazana on the other side is taken aback by his outburst, what is wrong with him and when did he learn to speak to her like this? She is the older one here and she demands the respect that she deserves but it will be futile to reprimand him where his children are concerned.

“They will be out of school at two then they will have to walk back home so they should be here at half past two or the latest at three. Chill, it is still before two and not after nine at night. Everyone knows your children and nothing will happen to them,” she says sounding calmer than him and he sighs.

“How is Zimile doing?” she asks.

“I am still stuck in this meeting.”

“What? And you didn’t call her?” she is shocked, does this guy know the woman he married to? If she gives birth without him there then hell will break loose.

“No, listen Nkosazana don’t starve my kids,” he says much to her annoyance, “and don’t invite your men while my kids are still in your house,” he adds. Wow if she knew he’d be like this then she wouldn’t have agreed to babysit.

“Bayede just because I don’t have any kids that doesn’t mean I don’t know how to take care of them. I took care of you and you are still breathing.”

“Well that is not the same, I was your mother’s child and those are my children,” he says and she rolls her eyes, there isn’t a different or whatsoever in this situation, he just loves controlling things...and people.

There is a call coming through on Bayede’s phone, “call me when they get home – there is another call that I need to take.” He doesn’t wait for her to reply before he puts her on hold before answering the incoming call.

It is a call from hospital, saying that Zimile has been induced to labour. It is way too early, he thought she’d give birth tomorrow or the day after.

He hangs up and heads back to the table where the men resumed with the meeting in his absence. He will have to ask for the memorandum and go through the notes of what more was discussed because now he has to leave. When he mentions his pregnant wife, the men are more than happy to excuse him – children are a blessing.

The kitchen door opens and Liza runs in, disappearing down the passage and into her room. Mpiliso remains behind, she removes her shoes once she has stepped inside and closes the door. She strides down the passage to her bedroom in her white socks, she washes them with her own hands so no one can tell her anything even Zimile has grown tired of telling her that when she removes her shoes then she should remove her socks too but she never listens. Her relationship with her mother is not like the relationship her friends have with their mothers. Her friends say that they talk with their mothers about anything and everything, they even go as far as helping them with their homework – Mpiliso has tried that once but Zimile shoved her to her father. Zimile doesn’t talk to her children, she doesn’t even dig how their day was when they come back from school so Mpiliso thought if she didn’t want to talk then she wasn’t prepared to listen to her so she learnt to keep things to herself. Her father is just the same, if he is not talking about the importance of them going to school then he’d be telling them a summarised version of a movie he watched during the day while they were at school, if it is not between the two things she has mentioned already then he’d be having a good chat and laugh with Khuzani.

She changes into a black mini skirt with a white vest. It is Saturday tomorrow so they don't have to wash their uniforms today. She moves to the kitchen to make lunch for herself and her little sister. She opens the fridge and smiles to herself. Her mother is not here so they can eat whatever they want, this time it is much better than the last time her parents left. Their mother hired a nanny, well she wasn't exactly a nanny but someone's daughter from here in the village. That woman couldn't cook, yes she was nice and she never mistreated them but the amount of oil she put in the food was too much. They couldn't even taste the meat flavour in the food – it was just oil. They ended up not eating the food the nanny cooked, they are not snitches but aunt Nkosazana had to know about this and so she had a talk with the nanny. Their mother had chosen the best and the worst nanny in one person. After the nanny had a talk with Nkosazana, she was no longer happy to stay in the house and maybe that is why they will be at aunt Nkosazana's house tonight instead of here with that nanny.

"Look Mpiliso, I look just like mama," she says running in the kitchen with her bath towel stuffed under her uniform to make her stomach big like Zimile's.

"Lizalise!" Mpiliso shouts, placing the butter knife on the side and charges for the clueless Liza. "If you are not out of that uniform before I finish making food then..." Liza looks at her waiting for her to continue, she can't be exactly threatening her or is she? "Just go man Liza," she waves her sister off and Liza leaves.

Liza is still childish and Mpiliso has to baby her all the time, Mpiliso doesn't understand why she can't just grow up and be like her – be more matured. Liza may be childish but she knows when she is being robbed. Just a few days ago, Zimile had given Mpiliso a single R2 that she had to share with her sister. It was obvious that she'd have to take one Rand and give the change to Liza but that wasn't the case, Mpiliso was already fed up with being treated like a child when her friends carried more money in school so instead of buying chips enough for her share, she bought chips that costed more and gave Liza the fifty cents change.

"But Mpiliso Ma always gives me R1," the young Liza complained looking at the money in her hand.

"Today you will have to work with what you have, now run along – look your friends are leaving you behind." Liza looked behind her and her friends were still standing on the same spot when she turned to look ahead, her sister was already walking away. With teary eyes she went back to her friends.

Older siblings have always been bullies so there was no surprise in what Mpiliso had done and even before the day ended Liza had already forgotten about her sister's betrayal.

"Is mama going to have a baby?" she asks, taking a huge bite of the cheese and polony sandwich that her sister made for her. Her mother doesn't allow them to eat cheese at home well unless she is in a good mood, the toasted cheese sandwich tastes even much better.

"I don't know Liza, eat your food and leave the adults' stuff."

"But –"

"But nothing Liza!" she scolds. That is how her mother talks and she learnt from the best. The way she scolds it is like she passed first in her class and graduated with a Degree in scolding.

At her age, she has never seen her parents talk like have a decent conversation but maybe they do talk just not in their presence. And again, she is her own person so she will mind her own business – she takes the plates and goes to rinse them before they leave for Nkosazana’s house.

God is really working hard to put a drift between her and her mother-in-law. Another baby girl? She was sure that this time it’d be a boy, the way she kicked and played in her belly was proof enough that she’d be a boy but her genitals say that she is a girl. As much as she doesn’t want to believe it, having given birth to girls only is equivalent to being a barren. She hasn’t bore Bayede an heir, who will take over should anything happen to him?

“Are you okay?” he asks as he makes his way inside her room. She has the baby in her arms, breastfeeding and the view is picture perfect.

She looks up with teary eyes, “I am fine.”

He hurries to her side and kisses the side of her face.

“You did it again, thank you.” He looks at the baby, he couldn’t be happier, his family is growing.

“It is another girl Bayede,” she says like it is the worst thing that could ever happen.

“So what?” he looks confused.

“Your mother will call me a barren...again.” A tear escapes from her eye.

Bayede sits on the bed next to her and she hands him the baby.

“I have told you before that you shouldn’t worry about what that woman says. I am happy with a house filled with girls and you should be happy too.” He is looking at the baby in his arms and he is over the moon.

But he doesn’t understand what Zimile was trying to say, she has failed – a thousand girls won’t make them a boy – God shouldn’t continue to do her like this, she could make a son with Didiza and Bayede could make a son with Cashile so what is wrong now?

“Have you thought of the name yet?” he asks. He didn’t name any of his children, well maybe he is that bad with names.

“Onesiko,” she says lifting her eyes up.

Her mother-in-law will have another fit, if it was up to her then she’d have named the other girls Nombuso and Nobukhosi, any name that will say who they are but Zimile is nothing about that.

“It is a beautiful name.” The baby has fallen asleep already but yeah the time of sleepless nights and nappy changing has come once again.

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The baby has been crying hysterically for the past hour and it is like the walls are shaking as she continues to scream on top of her lungs. Bayede has been tossing and turning but it is not helping, he leaves the room and goes to Mpiliso’s room, that is where Zimile has been sleeping since their bed is too small for them to share with a new born baby.

“Zimile can you please, please make her stop crying?” he says evidently upset by the lack of sleep. It is close to midnight and the baby should be sleeping or is Zimile denying his baby milk?

"I am trying Bayede," she says hushing the baby and trying to feed her but she screams out again instead of sucking on her nipple.

"Try harder!" he shouts, frustrated. He has an important meeting tomorrow and he needs to sleep but this screaming baby is making it hard for him to get any sleep.

Zimile opens her mouth to shoot back but Mpiliso leaps up before she could get the words out. She swallows whatever she wanted to say and Bayede leaves the room, then he bangs the door of the other room. Sighs!

"Let me hold her," Mpiliso says getting out of bed. Zimile let's her take the baby, her breasts are swollen and they hurt. Onesiko refuses to feed on her breastmilk so she spends more time getting rid of the milk in the bucket instead of feeding her baby.

The baby continues to cry in Mpiliso arms as she paces up and down.

"Give her back to me," Zimile says putting her breast back into her nightdress and places the bucket on the floor.

Mpiliso walks up to her mother and hands the baby to her. She stands there looking at the screaming baby, her face has even turned pink and she looks nothing like the baby she first saw three days ago. Is she crying because she is feeling pain somewhere?

"Mpiliso!" she jumps, startled. "Go back to sleep, you have to go to school tomorrow," her mother tells her and she crawls back into bed. They had to bring Liza's bed into Mpiliso's room since they didn't want sleep away from the baby and Zimile is occupying the other bed.

"Kanti yini Onesiko," she says with teary eyes, nothing is working she is also tired and wants to sleep.

The baby only shuts it's eyes at 2am in the morning, it is by God's grace that she finally got the grip.

It is Christmas and Bukhosi with his wife and child came to visit. Their child is about Liza's age, they only got to know about her when Bukhosi brought his bride home for the traditional wedding. Liza and Mpiliso have made a friend, more like a sister in this case and Zimile is in the kitchen with Yolani, cooking up a storm while their men are in the living room, talking about soccer, business and more soccer.

The mood is really jolly and merry. The kids are playing outside and the little Onesiko is sleeping in the bedroom, at two months she got her first photoshoot in all the dresses and rompers she owns. It was Yolani's idea to get the little girl in front of the camera, she has grown to be chubby and much bigger than Mpiliso was at two months.

This is the best Christmas they have ever had in years, if they didn't eat at Nkosazana's house then Bayede and Khuzani would braai meat while Zimile prepared everything else but this year it feels different. It is much more fun, Zimile is much happier and the kids are also just as happy. The pots are boiling on the stoves as the women continue to converse and indulge on more gossip. Some things were done the night before so there isn't much that needs to be done today so their mouths are doing more work than their hands.

“Baby, we are going out but we will be back before lunch,” Bayede says entering the kitchen, followed by his younger brother Bukhosi.

Their wives look beautiful in their colourful pinafores, both are very domesticated so they are not surprised by the amount of food that they have prepared.

“Be back no later than one Bayede,” Zimile says, she knows him, if she doesn’t set the time then he can come back at four in the afternoon but she trusts Bukhosi to be the more responsible one between the two of them.

“Is he okay now?” Yolani asks as soon as the men step outside.

“Some days are better than the others so I guess I can say he is fine,” she says with a smile on her face. She knows that things are not as good as she has portrayed, Bayede’s ulcers have come back once again but he has been taking his medication – the doctor is not happy though so is Zimile.

“Daddy where are you going?” that is Asenathi, Yolani’s daughter, she is the most spoiled, and speaks English every chance she gets.

“I will come back now-now, go on and play with your sisters,” Bukhosi says opening the door of the car.

They can’t delay any longer, their wives will have a fit if they are not back in time and like that he drives out of the gate heading north.

In the house, Zimile and Yolani set the table. They have dished the food in the large glass bowls so everyone would serve themselves, something Zimile has never done before, she dishes from the pot and everyone eats whatever she decides to feed them, she never gives them options but Yolani is here so she guesses they can do something differently today.

“Mpiliso!” Yolani calls out.

“Ma?” she replies while they all run back inside the house.

“Go wash your hands, we are about to eat, okay?” she tells the kids and they run to the bathroom.

Zimile appears with baby Onesiko, she looks really cute in her red dress showing off those thick legs. Yolani takes the baby from Zimile and takes a sit in one of the chairs around the table. Bayede and Bukhosi walk in before Zimile could complain about them being late, it is fifteen minutes after one and she told them to be back before one.

“We are here,” they announce their arrival and when the women turn to look at them, they frown.

Whose idea was it for them to buy presents?

“What did you cook, I am starving.” Bukhosi is the first one to peek on the food but he gets a slap on the hand that sends him a foot away from the table.

“Go wash your hands first then we can eat,” Zimile tells him.

“Yes ma’am,” he raises his hand surrendering.

As they walk out of the dining room, the kids walk in and they giggle as their fathers tickle them.

Everyone gathers around the table and Zimile opts to pray before they eat.

“Heavenly father, we thank you for this day and the company we got today. I am confident to say that today I am at my happiest and so is everyone else that has gathered around this table. Please bless the food and the hands that prepared it. Today shall be the first day of many joyful Christmas lunches that we are yet to have in the future. I ask in this the name of your Holy spirit,”

“Amen,” all of them say at the same time.

“Whoever finishes first to eat will be the first one to open their presents,” Bukhosi announces and he receives a cheer from the kids but fierce stares from the wives. “I was just kidding,” he says with a shrug, “chew your food kids,” he adds pointing to each kid.

The day proceeded with everyone owning a smile on their faces. A blessed Christmas it was.

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Today marks the day Onesiko turning four months old. The child is still getting more chubbier with each day that passes but at least now she doesn't scream in the wee hours of the morning and she sleeps throughout the night. Zimile is back in her bedroom and Onesiko sleeps in the middle of her parents but during the night Zimile places her on the other side of the bed.

Bayede gets into bed and he groans in pain as he lies down.

“Are you okay?” Zimile asks with a voice laced with concern. She is busy changing Onesiko's nappy, getting her ready for bed.

“Yeah I am fine,” he says with his eyes shut close.

He doesn't look fine at all, he has lost weight again and he is so weak, he can't even hold Onesiko for longer than a minute. Zimile is worried but this man always says he is fine even when he is not.

She lets it slide and gets into bed with her daughter. As expected the mother-in-law from hell opened her mouth and spat venom. Zimile failed as a woman once again, she is a disgrace in the history of the Mabaso family and she should be ashamed. No matter how much her words pierced through Zimile, she still doesn't love her children any less than how much she has always loved them.

In the middle of the night, Onesiko's nappy needs to be changed so Zimile wakes up and changes the baby's nappy and she remains sleeping the whole time. Zimile goes up to the bed and pulls the covers to see if the baby didn't mess the sheets but she is met by something else. She covers her mouth to suppress her gasp, she quickly takes the baby to Mpiliso's room and places her next to Mpiliso, she will know what to do when the baby wakes up. It is not the first time she has left the baby with her.

She rushes back to her room and takes her phone.

“Nkosazana, it's Bayede,” she says as soon as Nkosazana answers the phone.

“What is wrong?” she sounds more awake.

“He is bleeding,” she says fighting back her tears, she can’t break down now.

Nkosazana hangs up after saying she is on her way. She is the one who knows how to drive and Zimile couldn’t think of calling anyone else.

She steps closer to the bed, he is still sleeping so she is sure that he doesn’t know that he is bleeding or he has fainted again. Nkosazana knocks on the door and Zimile hurries to open it.

“Where is he?” that’s the first thing she asks and Zimile leads her to their bedroom.

Well this is not what she was expecting, are people supposed to bleed that much in their behind?

“We have to take him to the hospital,” Zimile says still fighting back her tears – she is strong so she won’t cry.

Nkosazana snaps out of it and moves towards her brother to get him out of the bed. When they turn him on his back, he is making sounds like he is struggling to breath – his stubbornness nearly killed him, he should’ve agreed for the doctor to admit him on his last appointment but no, he said he is stronger than this but look where he is now.

They get him in the car and Zimile locks the doors. Things are not looking good but she won’t lose hope, this is Bayede and he will pull through – he has to.

They are at the hospital again to see Bayede during the midday visiting hours. His mother is here with the church women, Nkosazana is also here and Mlungisi made it too, he is here for his sister and he is Bayede’s former superior and brother-in-law, Wandile also couldn’t make it so he had to be here.

“Nkulunkul’ uthando lwakho,
Kithin’ abantu lukhulu,
Wanikela gendodana, hallelujah siyabonga.”

Zimile is sitting on the bed next to her husband with his hand in hers. The church women continue to sing, Bayede still looks weak, the doctor said they need to operate to remove the ulcers and he should be good after that.

After singing they move on to praying, they need God to intervene now more than ever. Zimile kisses his hand and forehead before walking out of the room. The church women together with his mother and Nkosazana follow after her.

“Take care of my wife and kids Mlungisi,” Bayede mouths before Mlungisi could make it to the door.

He stops on his tracks and turns back to Bayede, he has to repeat what he said because he is not sure if he heard him correctly.

“Promise me that you will take care of Zimile and the kids for me.”

Mlungisi steps closer to him, he can’t seriously be asking him that – he should be fighting to go back home, to his wife and kids.

“How can you ask me that sbari when you are going back home after the operation?” that’s what will happen right? He will have the operation and go back home; he has to.

“Promise me Mlungisi,” his voice is faint, he looks tired and weak.

He can’t put Mlungisi in this situation, he has to fight – Zimile needs him. He reaches out to his hand, he has tears on the corners of his eyes which quickly escape and fall on the pillow.

“I promise,” Mlungisi says, like the words left a bitter taste in his mouth and Bayede lets go of his hand.

Mlungisi walks to the door with his head hanging on his shoulders, the sight of his sister crying breaks his heart even more and it surprises him that she doesn’t fight with him as he pulls her into his arms. She cries in his chest and he hushes her, promising her that things are going to be alright.

He knows that anything can happen now but he will keep his promise, Wandile will be there to help him. He has failed his sister before and he won’t do it again.

30.

I take out a few of his things that I need to pack in his small bag, Nkosazana will be accompanying me to the hospital and once again I have to leave Onesiko with Mpiliso.

“How are you sisi?” Nkosazana asks as she makes her way inside my room and I smile looking up to her.

“I am fine, sorry about this – I just thought I should take more clothes for him so he can change you know.”

She doesn't say anything but still gives me a faint smile.

“I will also be taking the kids to see him during the weekend you know how your brother becomes when they miss school,” I say stuffing the things inside the bag.

“Yeah,” she says in a low voice that lacks enthusiasm.

I decide to add a pair of socks, I know he will need them – I just want him to be comfortable, Onesiko has been restless I guess she is sensing the stress that we are all in.

“You know that the doctor said...”

I turn to look at her and she shuts her mouth, if she knows what is good for her then she will shut her mouth; Bayede will come back home, I just know it.

“Maybe I should go check on the kids before we leave,” she says and leaves the room.

I sigh, zipping the bag and fix the doek on my head. My phone rings and I turn to take it from the bed.

“Am I speaking to Zimile Mabaso, wife of Bayede Mabaso?” she asks.

“Yes,” I reply with my hand on my chest for some reason, my heart is pumping harder than usual, my armpits are sweating and I don't think I am ready for what she is going to say next.

“I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news but...” she swallows before continuing, “your husband didn't make it.” I shake my head likely.

“What do you mean? You said the doctor will be doing the operation today so what do you mean he didn't make? I left him there so he should've made it to...”

“Your husband is dead ma'am.”

I swear I am crawling to having a cardiac arrest – what is this woman saying to me?

“No, no he can't die,” I say shaking my head and that triggers the tears to fall on my cheeks.

“He passed on before he could make it to theatre, I am so sorry.”

“No!” I scream. “No!” the phone falls on the floor and I sink down to the ground as well.

Nkosazana rushes in and she asks me what is going on but I don't have...my mind...no, not my Bayede; he can't leave me!

She pulls me to her chest and I cry as loud as I can, it hurts so bad I feel like I can't breath. I want to hit something, kill someone or better yet go to the hospital and see him. Maybe they are playing some sick game with me, Bayede wouldn't leave me knowing that we have a four months old baby that we need to raise – Mpiliso is not even ten yet!

“Zimile?” she's here too.

“Bayede didn't make it Ma,” Nkosazana tells her and she cries out just as dramatic as she had done the day Bayede fainted.

I can't believe this; I refuse to believe it.

"He is alive Nkosazana, he won't leave me," I tell her as I raise my head to look at her, she has teary eyes with one blink they could fall onto her cheeks, she can't be believing it too – I shake my head.

"He is not dead, he will come back. I know he will come back to me and the kids; he loves me Nkosazana. Ma please tell her, he will come back." I look up to Bayede's mother and she is a mess, I drop my eyes to Nkosazana.

"No," I say as it sinks again. "No, no, no..." I get out Nkosazana's embrace, shaking my head with the tears falling uncontrollable on my face.

"He is dead Zimile," she says, trying to reach out to me but I reverse back, not wanting her to get anywhere near me.

I reverse until I curl up in the far corner, breaking into tears again with my knees to my chest and my heart flying out of my chest. Even hearing about my mother's death didn't hurt like this, he said he'd always be here with me at all the time and that he will raise the kids much better than his mother raised him. He said he'd fight for us, that he will remain our pillar and now he has just broke his promise.

Nkosazana calls Khuzani inside the bedroom and he helps her take the mattress out of the room. Can't these people chill, my Bayede is not dead! I stand up and follow behind them. They are taking it to the dining room and they are not pausing for one second to let this sink in. The doctor must have made a mistake.

"Zimile stop!" she shouts as I try to pick up the mattress to take it back to our bedroom, that is where he is going to sleep when he comes back, not here.

I don't listen to her, I continue to do what I was doing and she grabs my arm turning me to look at her.

"Just stop denying it, he is dead – you knew there was a chance for him not to make it. The doctor told us so too. Pull yourself together, the kids are watching."

I look over her shoulder, Mpiliso has Onesiko in her arms and Liza is sitting on the floor leaning back on the sofa that Mpiliso is sitting on.

"He can't be dead," I say wiping my tears.

"Well he is sisi," she rubs my arms for comfort.

Her mother appears with blankets and there is a knock on the door which Khuzani attends to, and one of our neighbours appears. News travel fast around here.

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Nomthandazo appears and I sit up from the mattress.

"Sisi," I cry once again as I run into her arms.

"My condolences sisi," she says rubbing my back. If there was anyone who understands how I feel then that person would be her. Though I am too young to be burying my husband, I went to the hospital yesterday afternoon and it was really him – he laid so peaceful like he was sleeping. I was expecting him to wake up and say, "I am coming home my love," but he didn't – he is really dead and he is not coming back.

“How are you feeling?” she asks when I pull out of her embrace.

“I am a mess, I can’t believe he is really gone,” I sniffle and she wipes the tears on my face.

“It will get better with time for now just try to be strong, for the kids,” she says and I remember that I haven’t seen them since last night. The house has been so busy and I was stuck on that mattress, I can’t even breastfeed Onesiko because of this black dress I am wearing.

I nod while wiping my nose, “can you look after them and make sure that they are safe,” I plead with her and she nods.

Mlungisi appears behind her, she leaves and I walk up to Mlungisi.

“My condolences sisi wami,” he says with glittery eyes and I just can’t hold back my tears. He too pulls me to his chest and comforts me. “He asked me to take care of you and that is what I will do,” I pause with crying and sniffled.

“What are you talking about?” I raise my head up to look at him.

“The day we went to see him he asked me...”

“So you knew that he was going to leave me?” I step back from him, getting away from his embrace and him as a whole. I can’t believe him, how can –

“No, I promised him so he’d let the idea go but since he is really gone then I will keep my word and take care of you,” he says. I want to believe him but I can’t, I am hurt once again. Bayede left me just like that, under my brother’s care – if he knew that he was going to die then why didn’t he tell me so I’d say goodbye. Kiss him a thousand times more and sleep in his arms for the last time; that’s the least he could’ve done for me.

“I am sorry sisi.”

“It is fine,” I say waving him off dismissively, it is done and there is nothing that I can do or say that will change the past.

“How far are you with the funeral preparations?” he asks.

“I-I still need to call the Insurance company,” my mind has been all over the place in a space of just a few hours.

“I can call them for you, you don’t have to do everything – let me help.”

I nod wiping my face and I go to the bedroom to get the business card from his wallet, I can’t even stop my hands from shaking as I open it and it takes me longer to take out the card more than I’d have if it was a different day.

I walk back and Mlungisi is in the living room now, I give him the card and as he gets out of the door, he bumps into Bukhosenhle and Ndabezitha. We are really doing this.

“Ma,” Senhle hurries to me and we hug. Nomthandazo said I must be strong so I am done crying, I will let the kids do what they do best and be there for them.

“Come,” I tell Ndabezitha.

He steps closer and I hug him as well. He was holding back his tears but as soon as I hug him, he lets it out – fuck those people who said men don’t cry and he is still a boy so he can cry as much as he wants.

I only let them go soon after they have calmed down. Bukhosenhle rushes down the passage, looking for her sisters and Ndabezitha follows after her.

When I look up, Mlungisi is walking back inside the house and his face tells me that there is a problem so I rush to him and push him outside so we can talk in the veranda, away from the preying eyes and ears.

“Sisi are you sure this is the company sbari covered you and himself under?” he asks and I am confused.

“Yeah, why is there something wrong?”

“Yes, it appears that your husband cancelled the cover a year ago and they can’t pay out.”

He better be joking right now. Why would Bayede do something like that?

“There’s no other cover?” he asks.

I shake my head, I left everything in Bayede’s hands – he was the one who made sure we were taken care of so I thought he’d be more responsible but why would he cancel the cover without even telling me?

Nomthandazo approaches us and Nkosazana arrives just in time. They see our faces and ask what is wrong.

“There is no funeral cover and that means we have no money to cover the funeral expenses,” I tell them.

Bayede’s bank accounts have been frozen so I can’t get anything from there. This is such a mess.

“The funeral has to happen,” Nomthi says with so much urgency.

“How, when I don’t even have enough food to feed those people who have filled my house; tell me how am I going to bury him?” I ask breaking into tears.

“Not so loud Zimile, we don’t want the whole world to know. What can we do bhuti?”

Nkosazana says looking at Mlungisi. They are about the same age so I guess they will understand each other more.

“The only thing I can think of is for everyone to contribute, even R500 is fine – anything to make this funeral happen,” he says and it seems like everyone agrees.

“I will speak to Bukhosi and Lindumbuso, see if they can put something together and I will ask if the district can sponsor for the catering,” Nkosazana says sounding like she is on top of everything.

“I will also pitch in with something,” Nomthandazo says.

“I will make a few calls to close friends who might be willing to help cover a few things,” that’s Mlungisi.

How would I have made it through this day if it wasn’t for these people? I owe them my life.

“We will bury him and give him a dignified funeral. Leave everything to us,” he assures me and I can’t be thankful enough.

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As they had promised, everything came together and Bayede’s coffin looks expensive than I had expected, I wonder who covered the costs for it.

Bukhosi said his brother was a king and he deserves to be sent off like one so I guess this has him written all over it. When he came, he took over the funeral preparations and he has been calling people, arranging everything.

The kids are with Nomthandazo so I am not worried. The funeral took place on the Saturday of the following week and they even slaughtered a cow. The villagers came in numbers, just like they did for the coronation ceremony and their presence was overwhelming. Just a few months ago, we were together to celebrate him climbing up the ladder and officially becoming a leader of his people but then we met again under these unfortunate circumstances.

The district pulled through for us and they sponsored for catering. I was no longer worried because everyone who came would be fed.

The service was very short, we had already seen him but it was exclusive to family. Mpiliso refused to see her father, you should've seen how she was kicking and screaming, refusing to take another step to the coffin.

The others handled the situation much better but they cried a lot.

Soon he was laid to rest and everyone forgot that there was ever a funeral. They were eating and getting drunk – they were celebrating his life, they'd say if you'd ask them but I found it disrespectful.

In the afternoon, my hair was cut short and I remained bald – it was official – I am now a widow.

The family has called in a meeting and all the family members were invited. I have prepared juice and biscuits, they have food in their homes and so I won't waste mine.

We meet in the rondavel that Bayede had built for such meetings and everyone has gathered around. Women are sitting on the reedmat while the men are occupying the chairs and benches.

"As we all know, Bayede is no more and he left his wife and kids behind. Like in all royal families, the wife has to remarry to the brothers of the family," that's Bukhosi, he is the one who called this meeting and I am not surprised that he is the one talking instead of the elders. It is in his nature to take over everything but I don't think I understand what he is talking about.

"Lungwe here, our distant brother is willing to take Zimile as his wife so they can raise the children together," he says pointing to the forever drunk uncle. Bekadakiwe eny' amaphepha even on Bayede's funeral, this must be a joke – I can never get married to this low-life!

"We have to find out how Zimile feels about this, makoti?" an aunt I have never seen before the funeral asks looking at me.

I feel very disrespected, if they wanted me to remarry couldn't they find a better person? What does the name Lungwe mean anyway?

"No," I say shaking my head no, "I am not getting married to anyone; I have just buried my husband a week ago for heaven's sake!"

“There’s no need to raise your voice, we have elders here so you need to compose yourself,” Bukhosi says signalling me to calm down. I exhale sharply – I hate him right now.

“Since we are done with that, let’s move on to more important things...”

“But you haven’t said anything about the kids, how will they be taken care of?”

He looks at me and at everyone in the room.

“Zimile, we gave you Lungwe and you turned him down. Now ukuthi how you’re going to take care of children is up to you, I am sure Bayede left you something that should keep you going,” he says. He knows that Bayede didn’t leave me with anything except for that house!

“You know –“

“As I was saying,” he speaks over me and my jaw drops, who is this person? I look over to Nkosazana and her mother, they are not even looking at me in the eye – I have no one on my side here, I am all alone so no one has my back and I am forced to go with whatever that they are saying.

“Bayede left the throne open for his offspring. Zimile gave birth to girls only which is unfortunate because this village can not be led by a female,” he says looking at me.

“A female can lead, isn’t it your mother who took the ropes after your father died?” I shoot to him.

“So what Zimile?” he chuckles like I am being funny. “You want one of your children to take over and then what happens when she gets married?”

My heart leaps and I am more infuriated with anger.

“A girl can not lead, she knows it too,” mamazala finally finds her voice. “I told you this time will come but you thought you had it all figured out angisho?” she chuckles and I feel the tears burning the back of my eyes, one more trigger and they will fall onto my cheeks.

“Kodwa ke uBayede bekanayo indodana,” she says. I hope she is not talking about the same person who has just popped inside my head.

“Someone call Ndabezitha,” Bukhosi instructs. I feel my head spinning and my throat running dry.

Ndabezitha steps in and Bukhosi waves for him to come to the front.

“Bayede did have a son,” he says looking at the boy.

“But he was born out of wedlock,” I object.

“Do you have a better opponent Zimile because as far as I can remember no girl has ever led anyone and it won’t start with us.” He looks damn serious and he is done with being friendly. This is not the same Bukhosi that I had lunch with last year on Christmas day and he is definitely not the same person who was running around like a headless chicken to make sure that his brother had a respectful send off.

It is clear that I won’t win this one so I keep quiet.

“Ndabezitha is Bayede’s son and he will take over after his father but until he is older, someone has to hold the fort for him,” mamazala speaks. She is very determined to make me look and feel less of what I am.

“I can step in for my brother,” Bukhosi nominates himself.

“Lungwe can also hold the fort,” the aunt that spoke before says.

“Ma can do the honours, she has done it before so she can do it again,” Nkosazana says. I feel more and more betrayed as they continue to go back and forth about who should take over. No one has mentioned, to where am I going after this. After much debate, they vote that Bukhosi will be the one who will hold the fort for Ndabezitha until he is ready to take over. He is smiling from ear to ear and I bet this is exactly what he wanted. I am the first person to step out of the rondavel, they will have to see themselves out – I am definitely done with those people, I hate them! I lift my eyes up and they land on Bayede’s fresh grave – why did he leave me? I hurry inside the house, breathing in and out to calm down my nerves. My life has turned into another nightmare. Wasn’t I destined to be happy, even for a second? I get inside my bedroom and I just can’t hold back the tears. I feel a huge weight weighing on my shoulders and I just sink to the floor, breaking into more tears – it hurts, the pain is so bad I swear it has become physical and I can’t take it anymore. I want to say I am done with life but I have children that Bayede left me to raise and what will they be if I leave them too? I cry some more for a few seconds and I wipe my face dry. Time waits for no one and I have to cook supper for the kids, I slid in my flip flops and headed to the door.

“Liza wasantuza nje kwenzenjani!” I scold and she quickly closes her legs, pulling her dress to her knees. She is sitting on the floor again, I swear this child doesn’t like to sit on the couch. My eyes move to Mpiliso and she has Onesiko on her lap, my baby is on the bottle full-time now. I can’t breastfeed her, the elders say I will pass on bad luck to her since I am wearing all-black.

“Mpiliso, you can take the baby to bed now,” I say.

She is sleeping so peacefully and I hate that when Mpiliso puts her down, she will wake up.

“I will Ma, I want to hold her for little while longer,” she says not removing her eyes from Onesiko.

I exhale softly and a knock comes through. The yard has been quiet for a few minutes now and I had hoped everyone has left. Ndabezitha is with his gogo, he hasn’t been sleeping here since he came back and I don’t know what he will do with school since he has been here for close to a week now.

I walk to the door to open it and I am met by a familiar face.

“Busi?” she has a baby in her arms that is laying it’s head on her shoulder and it doesn’t look older than two years old. OBusi bayafihla, couldn’t she call and tell me she was pregnant?

“Zimile,” she says acknowledging me.

I look at her expecting her to say why she is here, I mean I haven’t seen her in years and I wasn’t expecting her but she remains quiet.

“Busi, Khuzani, what is going on?” I ask. Yes Khuzani is here too, he even has the baby’s bag in his hands. I look at him and he drops his eyes to the ground and I hear Busi inhaling sharply so I turn to her.

“She is Bayede’s daughter,” she says after drawing in some courage. I open my mouth to say something but I can’t find the right words to say. I don’t even know how I feel because I feel numb.

She takes a few steps towards me and hands the baby over to me. I don’t know why I took it but she is in my arms and I watch Busi as she turns to walk away.

My vision is blurry as I look down to the baby in my arms and up to the Khuzani who is drilling the floor with his eyes.

What the hell just happened?

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FOURTEEN YEARS LATER.

[Be on the look out for Book Two in the bookstores near you, nationwide – hihi I’m just pulling a leg but that is the end of Book One. Please leave a message for our admin/writer.]