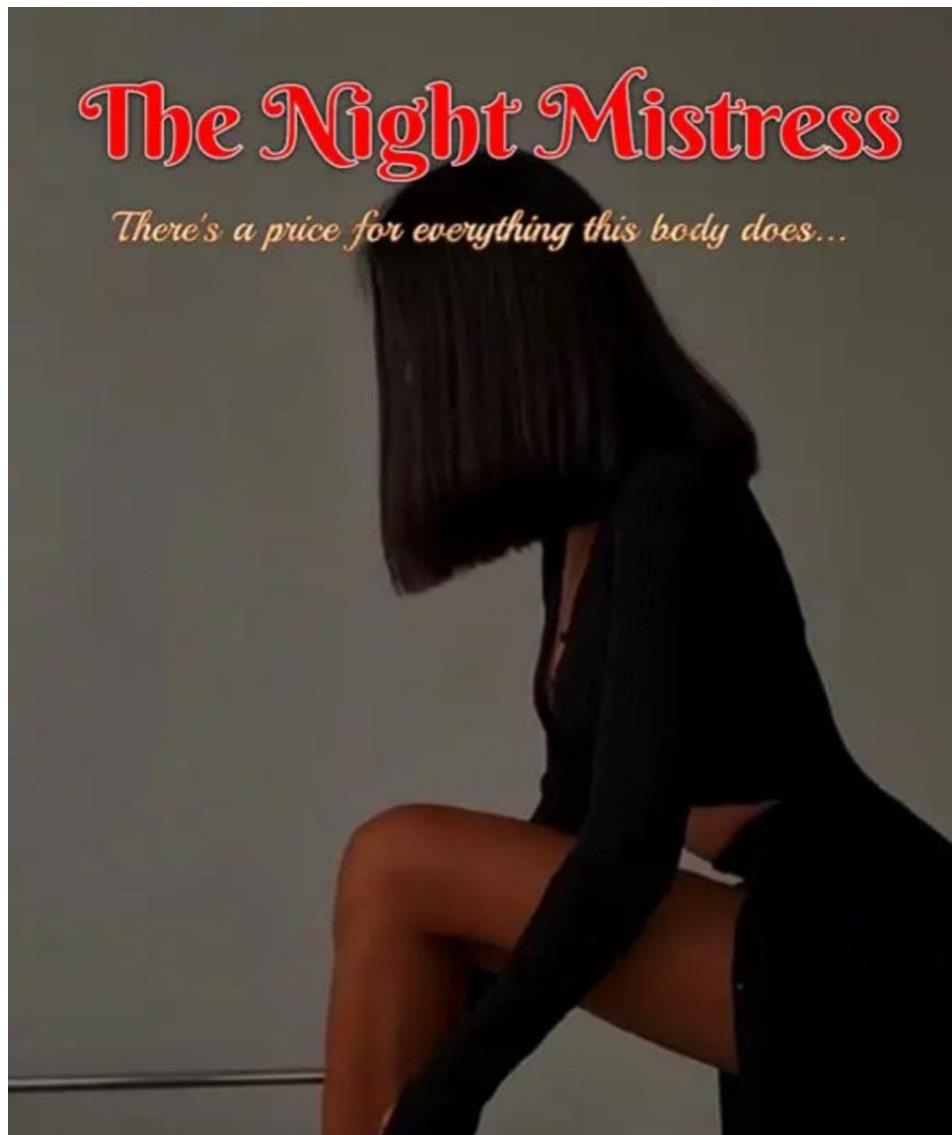


The Night Mistress

There's a price for everything this body does...



THE NIGHT MISTRESS
(Series I)

Brought to you by Stories by Nelly Page

CHAPTER 1

I don't tell sob stories because I don't have any. For me this is life, I have always used what I have to get what I don't have. There hasn't been a time in my life where I didn't hustle.

Everything I do is for me, I look out for me and make myself survive. I don't remember having parents, at no point in my life did I go to school and went back "home" to my mom. No, I never had any of that. After the aunt who took me in as a baby died, a neighbor became my guardian until I was 16, from there I was on the streets. Again, no sob stories, just life as I've always known it.

I came into this industry about 6 years ago, before Whatsapp bookings. Back then you had to belong to an agent,

someone who allocated a street corner for you, handled your finances and provided a room for business. I didn't make a lot of money but I was able to pay rent and put food on the table. Now the industry has progressed, most of us became independent and ran our businesses privately, we control everything. There are standard prices; R150- 1 round, R350- night and R80 for extra pleasuring activities. It's not a safe industry, you have to keep your eyes and ears open all the times. It's better to host than to travel. It's only under certain circumstances that I travel, like today. This client refused to reveal his identity but deposited R850, which is more than what I charge for the night. That convinced me I wasn't being lured in by a broke man who will fuck and run. It

happens to a lot of girls. This doesn't happen a lot, however there are people who go above and beyond for our services like this one. I chose the hotel that I wanted and sent him the details to make payment. The cab I'm in was sent by him; he's quite generous, I guess money is not a problem. Whenever you come across such a client, you just pray that they become your regular. However most of the times it's married men or big politicians who only request the service once-off, pay what can keep your mouth shut and delete your numbers.

He's already checked in, I have the room number. I have a cute lingerie under this dress, I aim to please. I get inside the lift, there's a big-sized

woman, if big-sized isn't an understatement, she's carrying food and she's half the size of this lift. We exchange polite smiles and keep our eyes on the lift doors.

Oh, she's also getting off on my floor. We are going through the same passage. Just when I think that's weird enough, we stop outside the same room. Was I booked for a threesome without my knowledge?

"Are you in the right room?" I ask.

"Yeah." She produces the key and unlocks the door.

I take out my phone to confirm the room number again. I'm at the right place. What the eff is going on here?

"Come in," she says, pointing her head in.

I step inside hesitantly. My eyes search for a man who booked me

anonymously but it looks like it's just me and her.

"Sorry, did you...?"

She doesn't let me finish, "I'm sorry, you thought I was a man."

Jehovah!

"I'm a sex worker," I say what she obviously knows, I'm just confused.

"I have some food," she says, putting down bags and containers of food on the side desk. She's big, possibly the biggest woman I've ever seen.

"You booked me?" I'm still trying to make sense of this.

"Yes," she sits down on the bed, it almost sinks down to the floor.

In my 6 years of working in this industry I have satisfied men's wildest fantasies and done quick jobs in the craziest places, but never have I ever been booked by a woman, solely to

please her. This could be someone's mother, or grandmother at that.

"Is there a problem, Namandla?" she asks.

I calm down my breaths and shake my head. I have done a lot of things in the past, I just need a bottle of dry red wine and I will be down to please.

"Can I go down to the liquor shop across the road?" I ask.

"I don't like how alcohol smells. I have some double-cheese burgers. My husband will be here soon, he's sorry to keep you waiting," Now it makes sense.

"He wants a threesome?" I ask.

"Cuckolding...I will sit here and watch," she says.

This is some deep mental twisted, freaky-wild-open couple shit. I fuck men who have left their wives at home

with kids, men who switch their phones off or ask me not to breathe if a call comes in. Never have I had a client that drags in wife to fuck in front of her.

Entlek, whose idea was it?

“Ice tea?” she asks.

I snap out of my thoughts and shake my head. She undresses, holy shit! Everything just slides down; boobs, stomach, ass.

She sits on the bed, with a black wash bag next to her.

I don't know what to do with myself until her husband arrives. A mid-aged, handsome looking man in a suit. A pastoral position suits him. His whole posture screams “man of God”. “Namandla, right?” Yeap, he shakes my hand. These hands hold the Bible every Sunday, I swear to God.

We exchange greetings then he goes over to his wife. They kiss...wet and loud. I cover my ears in the name of Jesus.

She pulls out her hand for me. I take off my dress, leave a lingerie underneath and walk over. She wants to squeeze my boobs.

They're kissing, I'm a third wheel with her hands pulling my nipples and tweaking them.

Before I know it, he steps aside. My face is grabbed by the wife, she sticks her tongue in my mouth. It doesn't feel arousing at all. I don't like kisses, let alone kiss leftovers from another woman.

I feel hands grabbing my waist, then a hard front rubbing against me. The wife's kiss gets tense, she wants to swallow me.

Her husband saves me; he pulls me back, turns me around and starts kissing me.

The wash bag opens behind us. A vibrating sound begins. This is a porn room, I wasn't prepared for anything like this. However my mind and body work differently. I hold my values in my head. Whatever happens on my body doesn't affect how I think of myself. My mind is programmed independently.

He shows me the condom, we put it on him together. Then he turns me around, I hold on to the bed, and he fucks me.

It's not sex, it has nothing to do with my pleasure. It's all his. His wife watches with a vibrator on her clit. She's aroused by her husband fucking in front of her. She tells him to go

harder. “Fuck the bitch.” She screams louder than me when he slams harder.

CHAPTER 2

“It doesn’t matter, I got paid.”
My mind lies to me, I’m in the bathroom scrubbing my body again. For the first time I feel dirty. Thoughts of quitting this industry have never

crossed my mind until now. I can live a normal life; rent in a township and get a 9-5 job like other people. I didn't go beyond Grade 11 but I know people with real jobs who didn't even set their foot in school.

I rinse my mouth with mouthwash, for the third time I think. I deserve a treat; a good meal and a glass of wine. Maybe my mind will reset.

I have a new bank notification, money in.

It's from my cuckolding clients. It's R1500 bonus, they had already paid me. I send a short text to the husband, thanking him. He replies with a heart emoji. My chest rolls drums. I have to dress up and go out for a dinner treat. Fishaways is just across my street.

I put on my trackpants and tank top, drag my push-on and walk out. I only

have my phone and bank card. I live in a safe neighborhood, 50% safer than a township. I'm renting an apartment, I have been living here for over two years. My Zimbabwean neighbor recently moved out, I get bored out of my mind when I'm home. I'm not that much of a social person, sometimes I can be extremely introverted, Tawanda understood me. Out of all male neighbors that I've had here, he's the only one who never tried taking his chances with me. Either trying to get me in bed with him for free or proposing a relationship thinking I can be fixed. Men do that, they leave women who align with their values and beliefs, and go for a woman living a life that goes against everything they stand for, hoping they will change her.

Anything can make me quit selling my body but a man.

I get a table and put my order. It's a week towards Easter weekend, restaurants are empty, people are saving up for various trips. For me holidays are just days like any other day. I don't get excited unless I have clients lined up. I once faked Christmas, cooked seven colours and bought the famous biscuits "Choice Assorted" and a small Christmas tree. It held no weight, I got bored and ended up in bed the whole day. "Can I sit with you?" a deep voice asks, snatching my attention away from the fish I'm busy enjoying. I lift my eyes to the blue uniform, my face flushes and every joint in my body trembles.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asks, his body hovering over my table.

The only thing I’m sure that I have in my hand is my phone. I bump into a couple of people, get yelled at, someone knows me and she’s calling me by my name. I run as fast as I can. I cross the road, run up to my apartment, open the door, get inside and lock it. Then I breathe.

I sit down on the floor, the phone slips out of my hand, I’m sweaty.

I have been scared of the police for as long as I can remember. I have gotten in trouble for it a few times, because no policeman would just let someone run from seeing them. They assume you did something wrong. I have been searched while crying my eyes out and trembling, shoved at the back of the van and forced to confess to crimes

nobody knows of. My last police encounter ended up with my apartment being raided, then later I received a whack apology. It was about a year ago, I haven't had any encounter with police officer until today.

It will take time for me to go to Fishaways again. I don't think I can stomach any food, I will just go straight to bed. My body is still shaking, my fear for the police is not normal. My heart is still beating abnormally fast.

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I haven't checked my Whatsapp and DMs. I'm likely to have people needing my services. I'm not traveling

today, I'm only hosting. I get up and start by cleaning and then make breakfast. Just as I sit down to eat, I remember that it's Wednesday and I have to take out trash.

I better get that done first, then eat and see how my schedule looks like. I empty my bins and take out the trash in a black bag. I'm wearing headsets, listening to a community radio station.

A hand taps on my shoulder, I hate this. I turn my head around to a dark-eyed man with a grin on his face. First of all, why he's so tall and broad shouldered. Secondly, who is he and why is his hand on my shoulder.

"Do you remember me from yesterday?" he asks. I know he's not here to beat me because of the grin on his face, otherwise his whole existence

screams beating people. I mean, why else would someone have muscles when he's already hovering over everyone.

"Not really. Are you sure it's yesterday because I only had one client yesterday and it wasn't you," I ask.

He frowns, "Client? No, we met at Fishaways. Not really met, you kind of ran out when you saw me. I still don't know how I offended you."

It's not there but I see it now. The blue uniform. I can just see it on him. I step away, moving backwards. His lips are moving but I don't hear a word he says. Not because I have a hearing impairment, I have blocked everything.

He follows me, his giant strides eating up the distance until I'm back against my door.

"Please stay away," I beg, barely whispering.

"I'm not going to arrest you, I'm not on duty," he says. Now there's confusion and desperation in his eyes. As dark as they are, I can see through them.

I'm not scared of prison. Nope, I can be arrested and I won't flinch, as long as it's not by someone wearing a police uniform.

"Hey, I'm your new neighbor. I moved in next door, I'm a police officer but I don't go around arresting people." He jokes and chuckles.

Nothing puts me at ease. I might be looking for a new apartment to rent from today, in a new neighborhood

where I won't be a police officer's neighbor.

"I don't want to see you," I say.

"Obviously, I can tell. Is it something I did? Or is there anything you're not comfortable with?" Now he's suspecting me.

"No, I just get extremely scared when I see the police," I say.

"Why?" he asks.

I shake my head, harder than necessary. I don't know, I can't say the reason, but hopefully he will have a heart and stay away.

"I picked your bank card yesterday," he hands it over. His eyes tensely on my flushed face.

I grab it and get inside the door, I don't know if he heard me thanking him before slamming the door.

CHAPTER 3

My grievances sound exaggerated when I talk to Sima and Lerato. I have known them for years, we talk about everything, especially concerning the type of work we do. We are each

other's therapist, financial advisors and drinking buddies.

"But where will you go?" Sima asks, rolling a joint by the window.

"I don't know, I will go anywhere there's no police neighbor," I say.

Lerato tosses a packet of chips to me.

"At some point you have to face this phobia of yours, it's not normal."

As if I don't know that already.

Nothing about getting panic attacks at the sight of the police is normal.

"I have fucked police officers, they are nothing but a bunch of horny-corrupted fat cows. I have never had any that fucks good," she says.

Sima laughs, "My type of clients. I don't want someone who's going to hump on me for hours like I'm his wife."

This reminds me of my night client, he's married. Married men use the chance to do every style they wouldn't dare try on their wives.

"Dollar is coming," I tell them. He's been my regular for over a year now.

"Wasn't he here last week?" Lerato asks.

"He was, I guess the wife isn't serving the velvet cake too well because he went home Monday." We laugh about it.

Dollar is approaching his 50s. He's a well-mannered, gentle man who just likes having his buttohole licked and fingered.

Sima and Lerato leave as the sun sets down. I walk them out, Lerato's man is picking them up. Ngcebo is a sweetheart, he waves at me before

driving off. Not every man would understand that their partners make income through laying on their backs for different men. But here is Ngcebo, a different breed, he even handles her social media.

I don't bother cooking because I know Dollar will come with food. He doesn't treat me like a sperm basket, he does everything with a good heart. After my last clients, I need him to take that picture off my mind.

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He comes with a KFC bucket and fruits. This is why sometimes I give him discounts. On top of his generosity, he's friendly.

"Namandla, I need a favor," he says.

I'm just unpacking, can't it wait? Can't he sit down first?

"What favor boss?" I ask.

"I have someone with me," he says.

"You know I charge double for a threesome, right?" I will gladly fuck both of them the whole night, as long as they make it worth my time and WOT.

"It's not that, I came with my son, he had nowhere to go," he says.

"Your son?" I'm confused, his children are grown and they have a mother.

"He's three years old, his mother passed away last year and the aunt he's been living with returned to Swatini."

Fuckin' hold the clock!

"So you have a 3 year old son? Does your wife know about him?" He's

literally a heartbeat away from 50,
how can he be making babies?

“She doesn’t know yet, that’s why I
came with him here,” he says.

I don’t even know what to say. If I was
in such a mess I wouldn’t be horny.

My apartment only has one bedroom.

Where is the child going to sleep?

He comes back from the car with the
boy. Poor thing, he’s so cute. He looks
nothing like his Mark Hendry dad
here.

“Hello, what’s your name?” I hold his
little hand. To be honest, I don’t like
kids very much. To me they’re just
entitled, little people with zero sense
of responsibility.

“Lungelo,” he says.

For his age he speaks very well.

“Okay Baby Luh, I’m aunty Namandla,” I say and try to pull my hand away. But he holds it. See, entitlement! I lift him up. “You’re so heavy, what do you eat?” “Chips,” he says. “Oh, wow! I have to start eating chips too, so that I can be big as you.” He giggles. Dollar releases a deep sigh of relief.

Now the thing is, Dollar came with this child here, I can’t provide any service in front of the child. I’m dirty, but I wouldn’t go that low. Our arrangement is that he sleeps on the couch, then Baby Luh and I sleep in bed.

We do so peacefully. Baby Luh is a very happy child, he's happy to be with his dad and watch cartoons.

As usual, in the morning Dollar doesn't disappoint, he pays my usual fee for the night.

I help Luh take a bath and put him fresh clothes.

"Namandla, can we talk for a second?" Dollar asks, I have finished packing Baby Luh's toiletries.

I step aside and give him an ear. He's beyond stressed, his red eyes are a sign of restlessness.

"I have to go home and figure out how I introduce Lungelo to my wife," he says.

"Good luck," I say.

"I'm going to need it." He sighs heavily.

“Can you look after Lungelo for me, just for a day or two? It will be worse if I just show up with him.”

Men are strange form of human beings. He had three years to come clean to his wife. Moreover when Baby Luh’s mother died, that was his chance. Yes, the wife would’ve been mad but not so much. Because let’s be honest, babies aren’t a problem, baby mamas are.

“You know I work from home most of the times,” I say.

“I will compensate, I have no where to go, you know my situation, everyone I’m close with is also close with my wife.”

He’s my regular client, one of the best at that. Two days won’t hurt my business, he’s also going to compensate for my time.

“Okay, but you need to make sure that you leave money for grocery, enough clothes and more money just in case there’s an emergency.”

“That’s nothing, thank you so much best friend.” He hugs me.

I hope I don’t regret this. Luh is a toddler, from what I’ve heard online this is the teenagehood of babies-chaotic as fuck.

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We do shopping together, all three of us. I’m sure people think he’s my sugardaddy and this is the sugarbabby we created together.

Dollar is originally from KwaMaphumulo, that’s where his family leaves. He’s here in Durban driving trucks and fucking, not just

prostitutes but Swatini mamas as well.
RIP.

We make a stop at McDonald's to get something to eat. While Baby Luh is busy playing I get a chance to ask.

"Were you dating his mother or it was a situation like my own?"

"I think we dated," he says.

"You think, Dollar?" Men never cease to amaze me.

"Yeah, we did, a little bit," he says.

"Why didn't you take Luh home right after she died?" I know his wife would've welcomed him by now, he'd be happy with his siblings.

"My wife is crazy, I was scared," he says.

"As crazy as she is, you still cheat on her." It doesn't make sense to me. It's like a regular groovist telling you how strict her parents are. If your parents

were so strict you wouldn't be grooving. Same as Dollar, if his wife was crazy he wouldn't even know my name.

"You don't understand, it's not simple as you think," he says.

"Okay, let's say she refuses to accept Luh, what will you do?" I ask.

He shrugs, "I don't know."

"Good luck ngempela, yeer!"

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CHAPTER 4

I didn't expect him to cry when his father leaves, I thought we get along. But he's only three years old. Luckily,

I have goodies to distract him with until he forgets.

He ends up dozing off on the couch. I put a fleece blanket over him and call Lerato. They have to know I've upgraded from Dollar's night mistress to a nanny.

"What do you know about babies Namandla?"

"I'm asking myself the very same question, surprisingly I'm just forging through," I say.

"But why do men even cheat?" She's forgotten that cheating men are the reason why we put food on the table.

"I just hope the wife won't be too hard because this man drives long distance logistic trucks. How will he raise a child by himself?"

"He will have to take isthembu and become a polygamist," she says.

Dollar is not struggling financially, he only has two kids beside Luh, hence he can afford whores like me regularly. But I don't think he is financial stable enough to take more than one wife.

"Forget about Dollar, where is the yummy police officer?" she asks. I'm confused. "Is it me who said he's yummy?"

I don't remember.

She laughs, "I just figured he is."

"I haven't seen him." I think he's a very considerate neighbor for limiting himself. His presence is a trigger to me.

"Next time you see him don't run," she says.

"Do you think I have control over it?"

I lose my sanity and my breath, I won't even risk it.

“Just once, see what’s going to happen.” She doesn’t understand, she never will.

“I don’t have time for all that. He needs to stay away from me and that’s it,” I say.

She’s laughing, that’s how lightly she takes this situation. There’s another call coming, it’s Dollar.

“I will call you back, there is a client I need you to take care of for me, let me answer Dollar.”

She drops from her side, I answer Dollar.

“Hey, is he okay?” he asks.

“Yeah, he fell asleep on the couch.”

“I’m about to pass the first tollgate, thank you so much for this. Words are not even enough to express my gratitude,” he says.

“No problem, I know you would do me a favor too if I needed one. Just buy something nice for wifey KwaDukuza, get her soft before breaking the news.”

He chuckles, “That’s a good idea, I will do so.”

“Okay, call me when you are home so that Baby Luh can hear your voice,” I say.

“No problem, keep well.” He drops the call.

I have to cook, I’m sure Luh will wake up hungry.

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It was yesterday when Dollar called me, he said he was passing the first tollgate and promised to call me once

he got home. He never did. Luckily Luh has been understanding, I just tell him his father is gone to get him an aeroplane. I figured he's very fond of aeroplanes, he was hyping them on TV.

I'm cleaning outside my door, he's playing. I don't know how other women do this, being a full time mom. I can't wake up everyday and cook for a little human that spills all over the floor and needs me to flush the toilet after him. I think two days will be enough. This is a confirmation I needed, I will never have children. Once Lerato or Sima have them, I will be an aunt and that's enough.

I turn my head, I swear I only had my eyes away for a minute, yep 60 seconds. Baby Luh is gone. I watch the

news everyday, my anxiety shoots up and I run around yelling his name. He's not inside my apartment, now I have to ask around or go out to the street. It's both relief and anxiety that I feel when I see him on a man's shoulder coming from the parking lot. It's the police neighbor in his full uniform. Only God knows why Luh decided to follow him. I don't even know that man's name.

"Oh, you're his aunt," he says with a smile.

I'm frozen, I can't move.

He puts Baby Luh down.

"A car, there!" he points at the parking lot.

"He was following me, I apologize," says the police neighbor. "I'm just here to grab lunch and return to work."

He pokes Baby Luh's tummy, making him giggle, and then leaves. Slowly my body relaxes. Luh is jumping on my leg wanting us to go inside as if he didn't give me a 5 minute depression just now.

I can't go anywhere with a toddler. I'm indoors until Dollar calls me. I don't want to call him because I don't know how close his crazy wife is. But at this point he's leaving me no choice. I hide my caller ID and call. His phone doesn't go through at all. Wtf! We had a deal, the least he could do is check how his son slept. He's making me regret this. I might never do him a favor again.

Now I'm pissed, Luh wants to have a conversation.

"Is my dad coming?" he asks.

Sigh!

“Yes, Luh,” I say.

“Aunt lies,” he says.

“He told me he is on his way.” I’m turning into a liar because of Dollar.

“But dad went up,” he says pointing at the ceiling.

I don’t understand every word in the toddler dictionary so I let him be.

I’m canceling clients because of Dollar.

The R2 000 he left me won’t make up for the money I’m losing. I don’t even want to tell Lerato about it because she thought this wasn’t a good idea from the start.

CHAPTER 5

It’s day three, which feels like five months when you have a toddler asking you for juice and food, then

demanding his dad before getting in bed.

It's midday, he's napping. My mind is hardly functioning at this point. I had some wine, I look for it and go sit outside, drinking straight from the bottle. Why the hell would Dollar complicate my life like this? He knows how I make a living, I thought he respected that.

I see the red Polo driving in. It's my police neighbor, I have to go. I seal my bottle and get up with my chair.

I steal a glance at him, he's in casual wear. He waves his hand, I disappear immediately. This is weird as fuck.

I sit in my kitchen and finish my wine. It's only a matter of time before my breathing robot wakes up and demands me to do everything for him.

I feel like a single mom. Not just single by choice, but a mom whose babydaddy went to buy bread and never came back.

There's a knock on my door. Please Dollar, let that be you surprising us. I fix my shirt dress and open.

No!

I thought he got the fuckin' point. He blocks the door with his foot, it doesn't close. I don't care that he's not in his uninform, he has no business being at my door knowing what he does to me.

"Please," he says, he's carrying a box of cookies.

My chest is rolling drums. But I swallow back and fold my trembling hands.

“What do you want?” I ask, my voice shaking.

“I understand you don’t like me because of my profession, but I’m not going to harm you. I’m your neighbor,” he says.

“It doesn’t matter, I’m scared.” I can’t shake off the picture of him in his work uniform no matter how hard I try.

“My name is Mhlengikhaya, I’m not a crazy cop, I swear. Can I give this to your nephew?”

I need to count from one to three, then breathe.

“He’s taking a nap but thank you, Mhlengi---?”

“Khaya, you can just say that, my name is a bit long,” he says.

“Thank you, Mhlengikhaya,” I take the biscuits.

He doesn't leave. Does he want an invite?

I hope not.

"I don't know anyone around," he says.

Count to three again and take another deep breath.

"Me neither, but I know you now." I flash a fake, nervous smile.

"And you are?" he asks.

"My bad, I'm Namandla Mthiyane," I say.

"Happy to finally have a conversation. Would you be okay shaking my hand?"

My heart starts beating fast again. I'm scared but I pull out my hand. He holds it firmly and shakes it.

Not too bad.

He smiles, "See, I don't bite. Did your brother come home?"

“My brother?” I’m confused.

“Lungelo’s dad,” he says.

“Oh, he’s just someone I know, not a brother. And no, he didn’t come back. I haven’t heard from him in two days, that’s why I’m drinking.”

His pupils dilate, he’s amused.

When did the fear go? I’m sure he’s asking himself the same now that I’m telling him my drinking problems.

“Maybe you should call other people he’s with. It could be that his battery died.”

“No, I don’t think so.” I feel strange about this whole thing. I know Dollar enough, he wouldn’t just abandon his son and never check up on him purposely.

“When was the last time you spoke to him?”

“It was Saturday around 3pm, he said he was about to pass the first tollgate-Tongaat.”

“Was he driving or using taxis?” he asks.

“Driving a white Nissan van,” I say.

“Mmmm.” He takes out his phone and scrolls through it. He’s zooming in a picture.

“There was an accident on R74 towards Blythedale Beach. I don’t know if you will recognize any of the vehicles that were involved.” He gives me his phone.

It’s heavy and I’m shaking.

The picture is zoomed, I see its registration before the whole body that is squashed at the side of the road.

“Unfortunately two people died.

Don’t you watch 1KZN news?” he asks.

“No, I watch national news. This is his car.” What the hell is God putting me through? If this happened on Saturday that means he never made it home, this happened after he talked to me. “Do you know the deceased age and gender?”

“A man about 48 years old who was driving a van and a 21 year old girl that was in a taxi,” he says.

“Fuck, no!” I close the door, I don’t want Luh to wake up and see me going crazy.

“I’m so sorry,” he holds me, not knowing what to do.

I have my mouth covered so that I don’t scream. Dollar can’t give in to death and leave me with a child. What am I going to do with a child?

“They’re probably looking for the child...his family,” he says.

“They don’t even know about the child. Oh my god, what am I going to do?” I need to move around, get some air and think.

“What do you mean? Is it his child?”
I stop and look at him. I think having a mountain of new problems helps me see him beyond the blue uniform.

“I don’t even know Dollar’s real name. This child’s mother was from Swatini, I don’t know who she was, she’s late. He asked me to look after Lungelo while he goes and informs his wife about his infidelity.”

“What? So you just took a stranger’s child in?”

“I was just his night mistress,” I say. His bats his eyes in disbelief. He’s an adult, of course he knows these things.

CHAPTER 6

I spent hours at the police station with Lerato. Mhlengikhaya advised me to report the matter to the authorities so that they can help me with Dollar's information. Lerato came with me for emotional support. I was shaking throughout but I had no other choice. The sun has set down, I was promised positive feedback before tomorrow

ends. Luh is to remain with me until he's reunited with his father's family. "I can't believe Dollar is gone with his itching asshole and big dick," Lerato. "Seriously?!" I can't believe she'd joke about me losing a client.

"Sorry friend. I just hope they won't abuse the poor child, you know how stepmothers are. It would've been better if she had a husband to confront."

Just thinking about that as a possibility breaks my heart. I have lived with people who were not my parents, I know how that shit feels like. Luh is a living tornado but I wouldn't want even his hair to be touched.

Lerato leaves, I have to fetch him from Mhlengikhaya's apartment. I just faced three police officers in uniforms,

I don't think him alone can still shake me.

He opens the door with no shoes on, his apartment looks like a mess. Luh is leaving his mark everywhere he goes.

"Did he give you any trouble?" I'm asking the obvious. I'd be lucky if I get him to babysit for me again.

"Not at all," he says.

We jump over spoons and shoes lying on the floor. When Luh sees me he gets up and runs towards me. I lift him up, he giggles and wraps his arms around my neck. I can't explain the feeling. It's magical, I have never felt it before.

"How is Baby Luh?" I ask.

"He's fine," he says.

Sometimes he talks about himself in third person and it's the cutest thing ever.

"Okay, we are going to take a bath with Baby Luh. Go and get your bag."

I put him down, he runs off.

"So how did it go?" Mhlengikhaya asks.

"They promised to contact me tomorrow, they will help, for now I just have to look after him," I say.

"It's an easy situation to find out who he really was and get his address. The real problem would be you going there with a child, telling them he's not yours but another dead sidechick."

"I wasn't a sidechick Mhlengimali." I don't want to be mistaken for that.

He frowns, "You said you were his mistress."

“Night mistress, I didn’t belong to him, it’s what I do for a living,” I say. He didn’t get it yesterday, it seems.

“You are....?”

“A prostitute, yes.” I’m telling him now because I don’t want him to be surprised and act harshly towards my clients. Some can look like criminals. Oh well, some are actual criminals. I don’t care how the money comes about, as long as I get umgeza.

“Why Namandla?” he asks.

I’m not sure how to answer this.

“Out of everything you could’ve done, why such thing? In the world like this.”

“It’s just what I do for a living,” I say and see disappointment flashing in his eyes. He probably has a family, he comes from somewhere and he’s got

parents to make proud. I know he can never relate.

Luh comes with his bag, not even properly zipped. I take it from him and hold his hand.

“Say goodbye to malume,” I say.

He waves his hand, “Bye mlume.”

I don’t know what I’m going to tell him if he happens to ask me about his dad again. I can’t tell a child that his only parent is no more. But then again, I’m not a good liar.

It hasn’t really sunk in. A client died and left me with a child? I have imagined every game-ending scenario but nothing like this. WTF!

I make him noodles, it’s the last packet. But they’re just a treat, he likes solid food more.

As if he knows my fear, he doesn't ask about his dad.

"Are we going to the beach?"

"The beach?" Where is this coming from?

"Yes, with big water." He measures the size with his arms. I don't think even a pool can be the size of his arms but I get the point.

"Soon," I say.

"Is soon tomorrow?"

"No, it's a day after tomorrow."

"Yes, dati dati!" he claps his hands.

I don't know what is dati dati but I can guess it goes with gratitude.

"Mwa-mwa?" he asks, pushing his lips.

I kiss them, he gives me a big smile.

I don't have a lot of moments that matter to me. I hardly want to live any moment, this is one of the special

moments in my life that I wish can last forever. His acceptance of me is something I admire. He adores me without questioning my past and presence.

Lerato's words lingers in my mind. I know I'd go to war if the wife hurts Baby Luh. Dollar wronged her, this boy is innocent. He deserves everything good that this world can give.

CHAPTER 7

I got a call from the police station, they had found Dollar's family and told them about the situation he left behind. Mdumiseni Jele, I wouldn't have guessed his real name. I just went with Dollar, he said he used to

play football, that's where he got the nickname.

Tomorrow Lerato and Sima are accompanying me to KwaMaphumulo. Luh will be meeting his family for the first time and finding out about his father's death. I wish I can say I'm ready but, phewww.

I see Mhlengikhaya's car pulling up. I don't move from my window. He lifts his eyes and sees me. I wave my hand down, he waves up and signals that he's coming up.

Last time we spoke I was telling him that I'm a prostitute and he was feeling like I could do better, according to his values and principles of life. I don't really care about how

I'm perceived, I know who I am and I need no one's approval to be myself. It doesn't take long before he knocks outside my door in his gym wear.

"You just came home, now you're going for a jog?" I ask.

"Wow!" he shakes his head.

"What? Are you not going for a jog?"

"No, this is the only clean thing I have right now," he says.

I laugh, "Why didn't you do laundry? I saw that you were off the last two days."

"Honestly I have no excuse, benginqena nje. And I didn't have any good-hearted neighbor to ask."

"Never!" We both laugh.

I invite him inside my apartment for the first time. Luh is in the bedroom unpacking and scattering everything around.

“There’s maintenance guy in the bedroom, don’t mind the noise,” I say. He chuckles, “I can hear, he’s busy.” Well, now that I have time. Lerato wasn’t wrong with her assumption. He is kind of cute, you just to understand melanin handsomeness and his dark eyes.

“Tomorrow we are going to KwaMaphumulo, we have the cousin’s number who will fetch us from town,” I say.

“And how do you feel?” he asks.

“Scared, not just for myself but mostly for Baby Luh. It’s going to be a bunch of strangers and a woman who’s angry at her dad for making him exist. He’s probably going to be confused when I leave him there.”

“He’s a sweet boy, they will fall in love with him, just like you did. You’re too good with him.”

“Really?” I wouldn’t think I’d nail the nanny role in one week.

“Yes, you are going to be a great mom one day to your kids,” he says.

“Thank you but that’s not a possibility for me. I just want to live my life and die peacefully.”

“Doesn’t your mom want grandkids?” he asks.

It’s an innocent question, he doesn’t know my story. It’s just that my mother’s subject is not something I like talking about because I hate being sympathized with.

“I don’t have parents,” I tell him.

“I’m sorry to hear that. My own mom too is late, my father remarried,” he says.

“That’s nice,” I don’t know what else to say.

“Are you originally from Durban? Did you grow up here?” he asks.

Again, I don’t like talking about my background. It sounds like a sob story.

“I grew up in different places.

Originally I’m from Mashoba but I don’t remember much about my life there. I lost my parents very young, I was barely a year old. I grew up in the neighboring village with an aunt who took me in. After she died I moved to Richard’s Bay. After I finished Grade 11 I moved out of that home and began the hustle. I’ve been to many places after that and this is where I ended up.”

“Wow, that’s quite a story. It sounds like your childhood wasn’t the kindest,” he says.

“Other kids had it worse, I’m not complaining,” I say.

“You are a strong, kind person. Maybe that’s why Luh had to spend this week with you, experiencing some genuine love before facing his new reality.”

I nod with a lump in my throat. I don’t want his reality to be harsh, I want it to be kind.

“So your parents both died around the same time?” he asks.

“Together, from the little knowledge that I have,” I say.

“Were they killed by the police?”

I look at him confused. Where is this coming from?

“Judging from how triggered you were that day, I thought maybe it’s because of that.”

“I don’t know how they died.” This has me thinking. Nobody actually told

me how my parents died, I was too young for such information. I left my birth village before I was even two years old. From there I lost contact with everyone from the village, I grew up with people who hardly knew me.

Luh finally got tired of fixing my bedroom and comes out, demanding juice and sitting on my lap. My mind is not here, I can't help but think of what Mhlengikhaya just said. Could it be that my triggers come from the death of my parents? I was 11 months old when they died, too little to understand guns and death. But it would make sense, wouldn't? In my adult life as I know it, I have no police traumas. Maybe I have to go back to my past.

I have to look for my roots; where I come from and if I have any relatives who knew my parents.

CHAPTER 8

I told Luh that we are going to see his father's family, in his mind he thought we are coming to see his father. The

cousin who fetched us from town to help with directions didn't even play with him.

I already had a picture about this family. Their welcome was cold. After sitting for about an hour, a girl comes in and serves us water. Tap water.

"Where are the elders?" I ask, Luh is becoming restless. I didn't buy him any food because I thought he was coming to his family.

"They're coming," she says and leaves.

I hear Sima's heavy sigh. We are sitting ass flat on the grass mats. We can't complain in front of the child but, wow.

Maybe they think I'm Luh's mom and lying out of shame.

Finally, there are people coming in. Three old women and one grey-hair

uncle. I understand they're mourning but they could've at least embraced Luh.

Greetings are exchanged. We tried to look presentable; long skirts and chest-covering blouses.

"We got a call from the police," says the uncle. He wants us to retell the story.

I start from the beginning where Dollar came and asked me to babysit for him. I don't explain the nature of my relationship with him.

"But this boy looks nothing like us," says one woman.

I wish I could've covered Luh's ears.

"What do you mean?" I'm confused.

"These ears don't belong to us. All Jele kids have small ears and they don't have bright skin," she says.

“Well, Dollar said he’s his son.” I don’t care about the ears. He’s been Dollar’s son for three years.

“Uthini wena MaZwide?” she asks the other woman.

The other one wants Luh to take his shoes off, then she inspects his toes. My ears are burning, that’s how mad I am about this.

“Ay lutho!” she says, shaking her head.

“You can’t just look at him and assume that he’s not Dollar’s son,” Lerato says.

“He is not, that’s why we know nothing about him. His father is not a Jele, you have to look for him.” They have no sympathy for the child.

I take him and put him on my lap. I doubt he understands anything to the

depths but he can feel their negative energy.

“There’s only one solution; DNA test,” Sima says. She looks at me, “What do you say?”

I shrug. If I open my mouth I will cry. Luh doesn’t deserve any of this.

“Would you be open to that as a family?”

They don’t give an answer right away. They ask for a moment to discuss it with the wife who’s on the mattress.

We run out of water before the other woman comes back and exchanges numbers with me. Dollar’s eldest child will come to Durban after the funeral then tests will be conducted. I’m responsible for the charges, they don’t care where I’m going to live with Luh, he’s not their problem.

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I haven't cried in a long time, but today I need an hour in the bathroom. Sima stays behind and looks after Luh while I gather my emotions privately. I couldn't explain to Luh why his father wasn't there and why those people undressed him and addressed him in the way they did.

I know I'm not fit to take care of a child. This week alone has been hard, I haven't been able to make any money. I have bills to pay at the end of the month.

We started at the police station to report what happened, again I was advised to take care of Luh while his relatives are being searched. Now they're searching for his maternal relatives using his late mother's

information on the birth certificate. If his mother was someone like me, alone and without family, then I'm doomed.

I can't hide myself forever, I moisturize my face and walk out. I find him asleep on the couch and kiss his forehead. I have been in his situation, I know child abandonment. Sima is in the kitchen cooking. Unlike me, Sima has a good background, she's in the industry because she likes fast cash, not because she had no other means. She went to private schools and dropped out of college, disappointed her former principal father and mother who owns multiple businesses. Whenever life doesn't pull up, she calls home and they send her money. So all in all, Sima doesn't

know struggle like Lerato and I. That's why she's making eggs, sausages and fries at the same time, like she's in a restaurant.

"Friend, I'm starving," she says, pouring mayonnaise over her egg. Cheese too?

"Aybo girl, are you finishing my grocery?" I ask.

She rolls her eyes, "Chill!"

"I can't chill, I have a mouth to feed until God knows when." I'm stressed, I can't starve a child, but also I can't work and leave him alone. Hosting is not an option, I can't bring men here while there's a child.

"I don't think they're going to find anyone from the mother's side. It would've been better if they had a picture to send to King Mswati, then

he would've sent his servants to look for the family."

"I don't think that's how it works," I laugh. It's a country, not a village where a king knows every family.

"What if they're right though?"

I raise my eyebrow, "About what?"

"His paternity. To be honest, he looks nothing like Dollar. His family is also dark and fat. Luh almost looks mixed race."

"No, he's fully black." I comb his hair every evening and my comb almost breaks. He's not mixed, he just have a bright skin.

"I'm saying they could be right. If they are then you will be forced to give him to social workers so that he can be placed in the orphanage or foster home."

I don't want to put that in my head.

Foster homes are kak.

"I don't think Dollar would've been that stupid, he said Luh was his son." I know I have to start thinking broadly but I can't. That's not the reality I want to be in, mentally.

CHAPTER 9

I'm almost through my savings, I just paid for Luh's DNA test with Dollar's eldest son. They don't look the same, not even close. But the God who changed water into wine is a God of miracle. I have high hopes, I would be happy if Luh lives with his father's family than strangers, even though I saw how cold that family is.

The boy takes a taxi, he lives in KwaMashu. I take Luh to Debonnairs, I have to explain to him what's happening. He's only 3, he won't understand but it's the right thing to do.

I wait until he has the pizza in front of him. He always makes a mess with drinks, he will have it when he's done eating.

"Is it good?" I ask.

He nods with a huge bite in his mouth.

“Okay, I want us to talk about daddy.”

“Is daddy coming to eat pizza with us?” he asks.

Oh Lord, how does people do this?

This needs an elder, someone who knows how to handle a grieving child.

“Daddy went to heaven. Do you know where heaven is?”

“Up,” he points.

It’s also what I think, heaven is above the sky. When there’s rain, it’s God opening a tap.

“Yes, that’s where daddy went,” I say.

“Are we also going to heaven?” God forbid.

How can I unhear this?

“We are in no hurry, baby,” I say.

“Then how am I going to see him?”

He stops eating. It looks like he’s about to cry.

“When you’re sleeping, daddy will visit you in your dreams,” I say.

“Mmmm, okay.” He eats fast.

I help him drink his juice then clean him mouth with a towel.

“I want to sleep so that I can see daddy.”

Oh, God!

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He’s asleep when I get off the taxi. I pray he will wake up not remembering the dream thing I promised him. I should’ve came up with something different.

I put him in bed and get myself a drink in the kitchen.

Knock?

I'm not expecting anyone today. I hide the drink and open.

Oh, it's just Mhlengikhaya.

"Hey, long time," he says.

"Hi," I still get nervous around police officers but Luh's situation left me with no choice but to interact with them occasionally.

"I'm just checking up. Is everything okay?" he asks.

"Far from okay. But I have my fingers crossed for the DNA results," I say.

"Don't worry, everything will be okay."

"Thanks," I say.

He stands still, staring at me. Did I not wash my face or something?

“You’re really beautiful,” he says.
I’m relieved. “Thanks for the
compliment.”

“How are you surviving?”

Oh, the compliment was to soften me
up for this question.

“I’m not working at the moment, if
that’s what you want to know.” I don’t
know why I’m getting pissed. He’s not
a social worker, he doesn’t work at the
police station handling my case, so
what’s his problem?

“They’re hiring cashiers and packers
at Spar,” he says.

“I’m not going to work at Spar, I’m
self-employed,” I say.

“Dick-employed,” he says.

It’s time I shut the door. I don’t like his
profession and now I don’t like him as
a person. I’m self-employed, I’m a
boss, I render services.

It's a few minutes after 8pm, Luh hasn't woken up since we got back. Now I'm a bit worried, he never sleeps so long.

I dish his food and leave it to cool down. Then head to the bedroom to wake him up.

Jesus Christ! He's covered in sweat, I put my hand on his temple and it's burning.

As soon as he opens his eyes, he's crying. Why did I wake him up?

"Where does it hurt?" I ask.

First, he points at his stomach. I have stomach-ache pills. But he goes on to point at his head, legs and ears.

Apparently he's got every sickness in his body, he points everywhere. I try to feed him but he only eats two spoons.

He's crying nonstop. I don't know anyone who's a mother. Sima sent hers back to God after a positive pregnancy test. So I take matters to Facebook, they tell me to take him to the doctor.

I have money to buy this week's grocery then after that I'm flat broke. If I take him to the doctor that means we won't have food this week.

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We hardly had any sleep last night. I thought he'd wake up feeling better but he's worse. I beg him to eat porridge, he eats a few spoons and then throws up.

I don't have a choice, I have to take him to the clinic. I don't have good experiences with our clinic. Those

nurses are lazy, rude and nosy. But I will persevere for the sake of a young life.

We dress up and take a taxi. My heart breaks when he's this inactive and weak. I miss the talkative Luh that makes me clean the house three. times a day.

Oh my goodness, the queue!
Are we even going to get help today?
I'm number 49, there are screaming kids and complaining mothers all around me.

"How old is he?" And nosy ones too.

"Three," I say.

"He's so cute. He reminds me of my brother, he was this cute as a baby, with sharp ears and all."

“That’s nice,” I’m not good with small talks, if I had money I would’ve gone to the GP in town.

“I never thought he’d grow and be so bossy. He’s younger than me but he wants to control me. Yesterday he was chasing away Bahle’s dad’s car.”

Bahle must be the one on her lap with a full diaper and dry skin.

“Really?” I’m not interested but I don’t want to come across as cold.

She chuckles, “You know how brothers are. He actually thought it was a different man because he came in a Mercedes-Benz. Angithi he usually drives a BMW.”

“Oh, he must be rich!”

“Not really, he just owns a petrol garage. His father was a CEO at Transnet, then he retired and bought a farm.”

She's a storyteller. There's no way her babydaddy owns a petrol garage and she's here wearing flat pumps with holes.

"If they see me here, I'm dead. Bahle has a medical aid but I prefer public spaces where I can meet ordinary people, like you."

Wow, this girl. I'm everything but ordinary. I'm wearing MK boots, she's wearing flat pumps from Power Factory and she's looking down on me.

Luh is awake, I take out the lunchbox I packed for him and try my luck again. He only eats one fish finger and then refuses to eat more.

I close the lunchbox. Just as I do, the rich Bahle pulls my dress. I don't care if his father owns a petrol garage or universe, I hate spoiled brats.

“Hold your child, girl,” I warn her.
Mine is on my lap, not touching
anyone because despite having no dad
that owns a petrol garage, he has
home training.

“He just wants fish,” she says, pulling
the child back.

“Then he must ask, he can talk, right?”
I’m annoyed but I give him the
lunchbox, at the end of the day he’s a
child, he won’t learn good behavior by
himself.

Am I seeing the mother chewing too? I
thought my fish fingers would be
ordinary like me.

CHAPTER 10

It took two days for him to recover. He's back to his usual routines, my small lounge has my shoes parked on the floor. According to him, all these shoes are cars and this lounge is a mall. I have to buy him toys when doing grocery. Lerato agreed to babysit while I go to town. I have shopping to do and two hours to spend with a client at the hotel.

I can walk to Lerato's place but the sun is scorching and I have Luh and his bag. I take a taxi, it's R9. We find her doing laundry, Luh grabs on my pants and refuses to sit down.

"I hope he won't cry because I have a bad headache already," she says.

“No, he won’t cry.” I say removing him from my leg and putting him on the chair. He just couldn’t wait to prove me wrong.

“Angeke Namandla!”

“He’s not going to cry for long, give him a toy he will be distracted,” I say.

“A toy?” She thinks for a minute and then disappears to her bedroom.

“I’m going to buy you noodles and a big truck. Do you want it?”

He shakes his head, tears rolling down. He wants me to lift him up.

This should be frustrating but for some reason, I have this deep feeling of satisfaction and validation from him refusing to let me go. I mean something to him.

Lerato comes back with a purple box. She has toys? This is not going to be hard.

“I swear it’s new, never been used.”

She unboxes a new dildo.

“A dick? What the fuck is wrong with you. This is a baby.” I’m so mad.

“But it’s a toy and he doesn’t know what it’s for,” she sees nothing wrong with it.

“No!” What the fuck.

I fetch a pair of shoes and put them on the floor. There’s no way my Luh is going to play with a dick toy.

“Those are my Gucci sleepers,” she says.

“Come on Rato, it’s not like they’re original.” I was there when she bought them, we were at the Pakistan shop.

“He’s going to play cars, I have to shift this couch for the parking lot to be open enough,” I say.

She sighs, “What else?”

“If you hear an aeroplane passing take him out to watch it,” I say.

“I’m glad I had my periods this month.”

She’s dramatic, I have been doing for weeks and I’m still standing.

He’s calm when I leave.

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I buy everything on the list and take bags to the taxi rank. I ask a woman selling veges to look after them.

They’re better parcel counters, she puts one plastic bag between her legs, right under her coochie.

“I leave by 5pm, make sure you come back on time,” she says.

“Don’t worry Ma, I will be back in just two hours, I have a meeting with a client.” It’s a new client, he’s here for business, flying back to Joburg in two

days. An old client of mine referred him to me.

I use the town bathrooms to change into a red bodycon dress and pencil heels. I have to look appealing. The expensive you look, the more high class clients you get. I have standard prices but with the right clients, I make more money.

He fetches me from town in a tinted, black Range Rover. He's a big fish, looks mean nothing, money talks.

"Wow, you look even more sexy in person," he says.

It's a wrinkled white grandpa with freckles all over his face. His eyes are sky blue, there's nothing to admire about his face or body structure. His body is built like a frog that was ran

over by a car. Stick legs, big sagging belly and small head.

“Do need anything on the way?” he asks.

“No, I have everything that I need.” I always come prepared.

He drives us to the hotel in Umhlanga.

I have been here before, with a different client of course. But it’s a different staff at the reception, so I don’t mind.

We go to his room, it’s a deluxe. I don’t know how long he’s been horny, as soon as he shuts the door he shoves his tongue down my throat. You have to moan even when you’re disgusted. His mouth smells like he ate some prawns and didn’t drink water.

“Oh, my chicken!” he takes out my boobs and sucks them. Not

romantically, he really sucks them like he's hoping milk will come out.

I won't lie though, his mouth is good on my nipples. My moans transition from fake to real.

I'm light weight, he picks me up and throws me in bed. Then laughs, real loud like tavern uncles who just discovered that beer is on special.

"Ooooh yes!" he laughs some more after taking his pants off.

I have seen small dicks before but this one is a discovery. His balls almost shrink it in, it's just the size of a thumb.

"Come here, daddy," I say.

"No!" he laughs again and starts running around.

Is he mentally okay?

"Daddy," I open my legs.

He sees my open coochie and laughs some more. His little thing starts standing up. It looks like a middle finger now, I guess this is how big it can get.

“Come here my chicken, choke on it.” He wants a blowjob, he’s lifted his saggy belly.

It won’t make me choke. Blowjob means extra money, I waste no time. It reaches only my tongue but if a client says choke on it, you better choke on it.

He’s very loud, I guess laughing is horniness coping mechanism. He laughs when it gets too good.

“You’re so good, my chicken.” There is a clapping sound.

It’s him spanking his belly while I’m sucking his small pip. As he slaps it harder, his sperms spill in my mouth.

Jeez, he came in my mouth.

“Don’t spit out, my chicken.” He says,
lying down on the floor and opening
his own mouth. The rest is history.

CHAPTER 11

I haven't gotten any call from the police, Lerato says if I don't go there myself they won't pay attention to the case. So I woke up today and got us ready for another trip to the police station. I have anxiety issues, both from the new role placed upon me by the universe and having to interact with the police.

We are a week away from getting the test results. I'm still hoping for positive news.

They know me, I've been here many times. I find them drinking tea, it's cold.

“He’s gaining weight,” the female one says, she’s sitting with the captain on his desk.

“He’s in good hands,” says the captain, smiling at me. Everyone thinks this is easy because they don’t know my financial stress.

“I was hoping to find Khuzwayo, I haven’t heard from him,” I say.

“He’s on leave, Ncube here is handling your case and so far there has been no new developments,” he says.

“I had a conversation with Mbambo, the social worker, and she promised to pay you a visit before the end of this week.”

“Okay, thank you.” In short, they haven’t done anything. Khuzwayo going on leave and not informing me

just proves how lightly they take this case.

We are getting ice-cream and going home.

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Mhlengikhaya is off, he's washing his car outside. He's Luh's favorite person after me. As soon as he sees him, he runs to the car.

"Hey, where were you?"

"I went to the ice-cream," Luh says.

"And you didn't bring your uncle any of it?" He pretends to be sad.

"Mommy will buy yours," he says.

My heart skips a few beats. Did he just call me mommy? Oh my goodness.

Mhlengikhaya looks at me as I gasp for air. Then he smiles, gently.

Him and I haven't been seeing eye to eye ever since he told me about Spar jobs.

"Mommy works and gets many goodies," Luh continues. I wish he can just shut up.

Mhlengikhaya's smile disappears. "Oh wow, she must be working really hard."

"Lungelo let's go," I'm not in the mood to discuss my job with a nosy neighbor.

"Just a minute, Namandla," he stops me.

Luh is distracted by the car, he's gotten inside.

"I'm a good neighbor, I'm just concerned about the boy's safety," he says.

"Well, he's my business to worry about. Not yours Mhlengikhaya." I

never ask him for help, he's just a nosy man I see around.

"How is the search going?" he asks.

"I doubt they're searching, SAPS is useless, all they know is corruption and working with drug dealers."

"Really? Which drug dealers? Who are they?" he asks.

I know a few but I won't mention names. It's his job to know them, not me. Him not knowing who they are proves what I just said about them.

Useless people.

"I will do this on my own, I will post on Facebook, in different Swatini groups. Facebook people are not lazy, they don't need money for cold drink in order to work." I call Luh, he's staring at me.

I pick my baby up and leave.

My apartment always looks like a mother's apartment. Technically speaking, it is. I fill his juice bottle and sit down. I hardly get a chance to watch what I like, I only do when he's asleep. He owns all the rooms, all my shoes, the food in the fridge and TV. And he also owns my heart. I enjoy him taking over, it gives me the kind of joy I have never felt before. I love how he appreciates the little things in life.

"Do you call me mommy now?" I ask.

"You're mommy," he says.

My heart overflows with joy.

"So if mommy sends you to Aunt Rato's house for a sleepover are you going to cry?"

"Yes, I will cry," he admits with no shame.

“That’s not fair,” I know Lerato will flood my phone with calls the whole night if he cries.

It’s a favor that I’m yet to ask her. My married cuckold couple want me for the night again on Saturday. I need money, I can’t say no. So I have to ask someone to babysit for me and Lerato is a better aunt than Sima, no offense.

CHAPTER 12

I'm getting ready for my night duties, Lerato calls me. I'm about to go and drop Luh at her place.

"Friend, my uncle has passed away."

"Oh, no. What happened?" Her uncle was useless but I'm shocked anyway. If it wasn't for him her life would've turned out way better.

"They say he just fell and died. I have to go home with Simphiwe, he's driving from Ntuzuma."

"Okay." This is a mess.

Where am I going to leave Luh now? Sima is out of town. Those are the only two people that Luh is used to.

"I'm sorry friend. Can't you ask your police neighbor to look after him?"

“Mhlengikhaya? I’d rather take him with me.” I will not be judged by Mhlengikhaya again.

“That doesn’t make sense, you refused for me to give him a dick toy because you want him to witness the real porn.”

Sigh!

What am I going to do?

“Humble yourself to Mhlengikhaya, at least he knows your story,” she says.

I drop the call, my head is cracking now. On the other hand I have received the deposit and transportation fee. I need this money, I can’t cancel.

Mhlengikhaya is home, his lights are on. I stand outside my door contemplating on what to do. I have a

huge pride, something a mother shouldn't have.

I leave Luh in front of the TV and make my way to his apartment.

I knock a few times before the door opens. It's not him, but a boy that looks like him but much younger.

"Can I see Mhlengikhaya?" I ask.

"Come inside," he says.

I walk in, there's another one sitting on the couch watching SABC Sport.

This one is almost Mhlengikhaya's size but they don't resemble each other that much. It's like walking in to a men's hostel.

He appears and breaks the awkwardness.

"This my Karen neighbor, Namandla Mthiyane," he says.

I don't see how I'm a Karen; I'm not white and I don't behave like one.

“Hello Karen Namandla.”

Whoever these are, they’re idiots.

He smiles, “What can I do for you?”

“Can we talk outside?” I should’ve listened to my instincts, not Lerato.

“Okay, this is Mfanafuthi and Mxolisi, my brothers,” he says.

I look at them and coldly say, “Happy to meet you.”

We step outside, he’s in a jolly mood.

Too jolly for my liking.

“I don’t know if you can since you have company, I need someone to babysit for me. The one I asked had a family emergency,” I say.

“I can, but I have to know where you’re going first.” He doesn’t disappoint, as expected his whole nose is in my business.

“I’m going to work,” I say.

He takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry,
no."

"Okay." I can't beg, it's not in my
veins. I just turn and leave. No hard
feelings but I won't greet him when I
see him again.

I find Luh at the door looking for me.
This child! I don't know what my plan
is now. It's either I take him with me
or cancel. Neither is easy.

I hug him, I always feel better when I
have him in my arms. My phone rings,
it's the husband- he wants to know
how far I am.

"Baby Luh, we got to go to mommy's
work. We'll see what happens when
we get there." I don't have a choice,
we need money to survive.

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I call him at the reception, he's paying me so I have to tell him my situation before we go.

He comes down, his forehead wrinkles when he sees the company I have with me.

"I will explain," I say.

"Okay." He seems freaked out a bit. We step to the side and I explain what happened to my babysitter, I say Luh is my nephew.

If it was a young, immature guy he would've been dramatic but this one goes to the reception and enquires about a room. And just like that, I'm sorted. Luh and I have been booked our own room, once he's asleep I will then sneak out and go render my services.

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We have a room service, my baby is uncomfortable in this strange room. We cuddle in bed until he falls asleep. I will keep coming to check on him. Fingers crossed, he won't wake up while I'm gone.

I take a shower and glam myself up, then call him to come and fetch me. He's still in his suit, I follow him to his room.

I lift my eyes as we walk in, hoping to see his SSBBW wife. But I'm seeing Lerato.

Bitch, what the fuck?!

Her eyes pop out. "Oh my god! What are you doing here?"

"No, what are you doing here? Is your uncle not dead anymore?" I can't

believe she ditched me last minute for a hook-up, with my client for that matter.

“I didn’t know what good excuse to make, you were going to hate me.”

“I hate you anyway. I can’t believe you’d lie about death,” I’m in disbelief.

“I didn’t know you two know each other, eitherway I had a long day,” says Mr Bhengu, the husband.

Why would I need enemies when I have friends like Lerato? I don’t believe this is just a coincidence. She’s after my clients.

We both undress him, he wants me behind and Lerato at the front. I wonder if the wife knows that he’s having a threesome without her. But they have a crazy sex life anyway.

Fortunately he washed his buttocks, I lick the hairy butthole with my eyes closed. Lerato is choking at the front. He's in the zone of his own.

We make two rounds then he releases me. He wastes no time, he sends the money right away.

Luh is still asleep. I call Sima, I have to tell her what Lerato has done.

"You know Lerato would do anything for money," she says, begging me not to take it personally.

"I just find it snakey," I say.

"I think you guys can make more money there. It's two against one, right?"

"No Sima, I want him to be my regular, I can't rob him," I say.

“There are many fishes in the sea, it’s not like if you lose him you will starve.”

I shouldn’t have called her. Now I don’t do things just for myself, I have to think about Luh’s safety first.

He said he’d fetch me early in the morning for the last one but he doesn’t. I guess Lerato is better than me. My money reported yesterday, so I just have to get us ready and drop the keys at the reception and leave.

CHAPTER 13

I don't hate Mhlengikhaya, I hold no grudge against him. But I walk past him without greeting. I have a heavy child sleeping on my shoulder and my bag.

"Wow, I've seen it all!" he murmurs behind me. He desperately wants my attention.

I ignore him and keep walking. I'm tired, I need a nap before Luh wakes up.

I just got inside the house and put Luh in bed, he knocks. I know it's him, most of my neighbors play far away from me, especially the ones living with their partners.

"What Mhlengikha...?" Oh, it's not him.

But Ncube and the social worker.

Fuck, why am I shaking?

“Miss Mthiyane, relax. This is a friendly visit,” Officer Ncube says.

I take a few deep breaths and let them in. My lounge is a mess, Luh scattered all the shoes on the floor and his toys.

I thought I’d clean up after today.

“Wow,” the lady with her chuckles.

“You already made this place a kid’s home. How are you coping?”

I think my eyes are proof that I’m barely coping. I just smile and offer them a seat while kicking everything away.

“Juice or tea?” I ask.

“Never mind, your neighbor told us that you worked nightshift,” Officer Ncube says.

“Really?”

“Yes, he only sang praises for you. Is Lungelo sleeping?”

“Yes, I picked him up from a friend’s house and he fell asleep right away.” I don’t know why Mhlengikhaya lied on my behalf.

“It must be sleeping in a different environment. Otherwise how are things going?” asks the social worker.

“It’s all good, he likes it here. He recently started calling me mommy. I think our souls connect. He makes life worth living.” My heart just lightens up when I speak about him.

“It does seem so, you have built a beautiful relationship.”

A moment of silence passes...

“The Jeles reached out to us,” Ncube.

“Oh?” I’m confused, they didn’t reach out to me, yet I gave them my number too.

“They’d like to meet the mother’s family before settling the matter.”

“We are waiting for the DNA test results.” I’m confused.

“There’s a long family story, even the alleged father didn’t fully belong to the family. After the funeral his wife left with her kids and right now the people there are not blood related to Lungelo. It’s not the blood relatives. So whether the results come back positive or negative, he still won’t be accepted.”

“Is that even legal?” There should be something binding them to take care of Luh. Any little clause.

“At this point we have to think for the best interest of the child. There are many families that don’t have children. They will be blessed to have a child to raise as their own.”

“Meaning?” I ask.

“I think the safest options right now is putting him in a foster home,” she says.

That means he’s going to strangers. I wasn’t sure I was going to allow him to go to the Jeles, given how they hated him the moment they set their eyes on him. The only people I trust with him are from Swatini, his mother’s family. But chances of getting them are slim.

“Would you like to be considered?”

“What would be required?” I’m not even thinking straight right now.

“You will have to be screened and undergo training,” she says.

“But I’ve been living with him, nobody told me to get trained, I was just a good Samaritan.” This pisses me off. Now they’re coming with big

books after weeks, telling me about screening and training.

“That will help you, you will be able to apply for social grant for him,” she says.

“You have to apply through the Department of Social Development. I will help you.”

“Thanks,” I feel weak.

I’m likely not to qualify because of the life that I live. I feel like this is God punishing me for my sins. I took this child in, went to the police and fed him from my own pockets. Now, all of a sudden, I have to get screened otherwise he will be given to another family.

CHAPTER 14

I had a bad week, today the test results have come back. Dollar's wife is here too. I think her sixth sense can tell her that I was messing with her husband. She doesn't like me, she can't even pretend. They made it clear where they stand when it comes to Luh. I feel like I know what those results say. I mentally prepared myself for it a long time ago.

They're indeed open and it's what I thought. My application is pending for foster care, now I'm waiting for the social worker appointed by the court to help me. I don't know how long it's going to take, I'm still staying with Luh but it's not legal yet. If a different social worker is appointed I know I won't make it. There's a lot that's

wrong with the kind of person I am and the environment I want to raise him in.

“Just a second,” the wife says, following me out. I can sense a galore of drama coming.

“My husband spent his last moments with you,” she says, very bitterly.

There’s a flame of anger in her eyes. I do understand, she’s mourning for him, wearing black, and she’s finding out all about his whoring ways at the same time.

“Yes,” I say.

“What does that tell you? He was married, he had children at home. Yet you stole him away from them.”

“I was not in that car. What do you mean I stole him?” I’m confused.

“If it wasn’t for you, he would’ve been home the day before and he wouldn’t have been involved in that accident.”

“I think you just want someone to blame. Have a great day.” I pick Luh and leave her ranting.

I understand she’s in pain but I’m not God. If I had power to stop death my own parents would be alive.

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I find Lerato outside my apartment. We haven’t talked since that night. I’m over it, to be honest. I have bigger problems to deal with. I’m a foster-mum to be, I have to get my shit straight.

“Hey friend, I got you flowers,” she says, lifting a cheap bunch up.

“Snake vibes, what do you want?” I open the door and put Luh down.

“I really didn’t know he was your guy. We talked through Buddies and he asked me if I’d be keen in a threesome. Obviously that’s big money, I said yes.”

“And lied to me about your uncle dying?”

“He is dead,” she says.

“What?” I’m shocked.

“Yeah. But money over family.”

“Exactly what snakes do. Thanks for the flowers.” I grab a chair and sit.

“I will babysit for you whenever you want, two days straight,” she says.

“I’m thinking of looking for a day job.”

“You’ve never had a day job, Namandla.”

“Yeah, but now I need one. I’m going to be screened and investigated by the department before registering me as Luh’s foster mom. The DNA results came back negative.”

“OMG!” She’s shocked, as if she didn’t tell me so. “I’m so sorry, friend.”

“No, it’s fine. At least now he will never see those people again.” I’m relieved they came back negative. I feel bad about the bond Dollar and Lungelo shared, but his mother lied.

“So you want to become a full guardian now? You want all the responsibilities?”

“I’ve been doing it anyway. It’s not like I’m applying for a role I know nothing about. I’m already used and loving the motherhood routine.”

“Yooh! So that’s why you want a day job?” she asks.

“Yeah, something the social worker can put down for the Children’s court. I don’t think I can let him go to strangers.”

“You’re so fuckin’ kind!” She pats my shoulder.

“So you and Bhengu, how did it end?”

“He’s a pastor,” she smugs.

Why does that look give me hopelessness?

“What did you do?” I ask.

“Just a little recording, for financial benefits, nothing hectic,” she says.

“How is it nothing hectic? You violated a client’s privacy. Do you know how scary his wife is?”

“I don’t care. I’m punishing him for turning us against each other.”

“But he also didn’t know that we are friends. The only thing that made me mad was that you lied and said you

were going home instead of being honest.”

“But you know I’m a liar, I didn’t want you to think I didn’t want to help you out. His offer was too good for me to refuse.”

“I’m over it, trust me.” I have known her for a long time, there’s no way we are going to be enemies because of a man who doesn’t belong to neither one of us.

“Just don’t try to be messy, that man has money. Don’t mess with him, you will be rich if you’re meant to.”

“I hear you, friend.”

I know she’s going to do what she wants anyway, but I will always warn my friends.

CHAPTER 15

Once again, I have to be humble and go knock on Mhlengikhaya's door. I need a job, maybe he knows something. I went down to Spar and they were no longer hiring. I'm still in the prostitution industry, I'm still the night mistress, but now I need to have a clean record somewhere.

"Oh, hi old friend." He's such a happy cop, shem.

"Hi, can we talk?" I ask.

"Of course, come in." He leads me to the couch and offers me a glass of juice.

"How is Lungelo?" he asks.

"He's fine, I left him playing with the kid from next door. I just wanted to know if you know any place that's hiring and doesn't need matric."

“You want to work now?”

“I do work, I just want a decent job.”

“I know someone who might have something. But it’s a domestic work.”

“That’s fine,” I say.

“What changed your heart, young lady?”

“I applied for foster care,” I say.

“For Lungelo?” he asks.

“Yeah, I want him to stay with me.

The test results came back negative, so it’s a dead end anyway. His mother’s family didn’t come forward for over a month.”

“Maybe she didn’t have a family,” he says.

“That’s possible, maybe that’s why the aunt who was left with him gave him to his “father”,” I say.

“Do you know what’s going to help your profile?” he asks.

My ears are sharpened. "What?"
"Repenting and settling down," he
says.

"You're a very wise man; profound
advices." I stand up, my business is
done here.

He stands up too, "I'm serious
Namandla. Why do you have to live
this life? I'm single and looking."

"Keep looking," I say.

He's one of those men who think sex
workers need love.

"Give me a chance, if I fail you will go
back," he says.

"Mhlengikhaya, I don't even find you
attractive," I say.

He laughs.

I'm dead serious. I have a type, in my
head, and he doesn't meet the
requirements.

“I’m inviting you and Lungelo for dinner tomorrow evening,” he says.

“I will come for free food. Please let me know what your friend says about the job,” I say.

“I’m a Mgenge, I’m undefeated.”

“And I’m a Smith, right?” He’s talking as if I’m not a proud Zulu too, I can’t brag with my clan. I’m also a fuckin’ Mthiyane and no man, especially a cop, is going to put me in a love cage.

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I take Luh to the park, we have a dinner to go to later. It’s funny how this boy came into my life and changed it in less than two months. I valued money, clothes and bags. Those are the things that made me happy. Or think I was.

Now little things fulfil me. I still have my deep wounds from the past but nothing can put me down. And by nothing, I mean nothing. Not even police officers in their uniform, I faced my fears and overcame. Yes, I still shake, but it's nothing like before.

I have him in my arm, he insisted on wearing my sun hat instead of his. There are a couple of kids with their parents.

"You have to drink your water first and then go play. No scratching other kids, no running," I say.

"No running," he repeats after me.

"Good boy!" I give him water and tie his laces, then release him.

"Hello,"

It was only a matter of time!

I turn my face towards the voice.

“Hey, how are you?”

“I’m good. You look so much like my grandmother,” she says.

I don’t know her, she’s here with the twins. I don’t know what to make of her comparing me to her grandmother.

“In her youth days, right?” I ask.

She bursts into laughter. “Of course, you just have her features, not her wrinkles.”

“Oh great. Is she related to Mthiyane?” I ask.

“Oh my god, she was married to the Mthiyanes,” she says.

“That’s my surname,” I say.

“From where?” She’s getting more interested.

“Mashoba,” I say.

“Are you in any way related to MaCebekhulu?”

“That would be my mother, she was a Cebekhulu,” I say.

“You are Namandla?”

Jesus Christ, this is so awkward.

“Yeah. Who are you?”

“I’m Mphile, I think we share a grandmother. Oh my god, you don’t know how many times I’ve tried to look for you.”

Should I stand up and hug her? I sit still, my feelings are in the freezer.

“I was 5 years old when babomdala died. I grew up with my mother’s family, so I never got a chance to meet you.”

Oh, that makes sense.

“I don’t know anyone, even if I did I wouldn’t remember,” I say.

“I understand. Can I give you a hug?

We are cousins,” she says.

I get up and hug her. There’s a ring on her finger, I guess she’s married or engaged.

“So where are you? How is life?”

“Everything is good, I’m hustling here in Durban,” I say.

“Is that your son?” she asks.

“Yes,” I nod.

“Wow, we really need to reconcile and get to know each other. I’m sure none of your aunts can recognize you.”

“I’m not interested in being recognized. I mean, nobody wanted me. I grew up in different strangers homes, so family to me was just my mom and dad. But I’m happy to meet you, we should exchange numbers.”

“We should. I saw you the moment you arrived and spotted your striking

resemblances to my late
grandmother.”

“Pity, I don’t know how she looked
like.”

“Just like you,” she laughs. “So you
haven’t been home ever since your
parents passed?”

“No,” I say.

“I’m really sorry about what you went
through. But it’s no longer that violent
in the village, they don’t have police
killing people for nothing.”

My chest turns dry. I’m struggling to
breathe. Did she say police???

CHAPTER 16

I canceled dinner with Mhlengikhaya. I don't think I can look at him. Yes, he didn't do anything to me. He wasn't even a police officer back then. But his presence will trigger me. He was right about it. I'm scared of the police because I witnessed them killing my parents.

So we are having spaghetti for dinner. I had to make it last minute.

"Mommy, when is Luh going to heaven?"

This question catches me off guard. But I understand where it comes from. Ever since I told him that Dollar went to heaven he's been obsessed with it.

"When you're 100 years old," I say.

"When is that?"

"In 97 years to come."

He nods.

“I will go with mommy,” he says.
I will be long dead by then, but I
promise him that indeed we will go
together.

A knock disturbs us. I did
communicate with Mhlengikhaya
about the canceling, so I don't know
who that is.

I open, guess who?

“Hello,” he says.

I count to three and then breathe.

“Help me, please.” He's here with
food Tupperware containers.

“I said I was busy,” I say.

“And I decided to bring dinner here.”

He shoves two containers in my
hands.

Peace is not something I can have for long. I let him in and take out dishes. We are having this dinner by force. Luh was already full but he won't say no to meat. I don't have a table, so we will be in the lounge eating on my L couch while Luh watches his cartoons.

He's a good cook, I won't lie. His roasted potatoes are everything.

"Why do you always look angry?"

I look up. Me?

I'm the nicest person on earth.

"Only to you," I say.

"Why to me?" he asks.

"Because you always do things to piss me off," I say.

"I think you just don't like honest people. I have never said anything to piss you off, I have said honest things to you," he says.

“I don’t need your opinions though, this is my life and only I know what it takes for Namandla to survive.”

“I also want to know what it takes, you have to let me in so that I don’t make uninformed opinions about you.”

“The problem Mhlengikhaya is that you want to be a hero, you want to save me. Not that you necessarily want a relationship with me because you’re in love.”

“You don’t know what my intentions are, you don’t give me a minute in a day. I liked you from day one.”

“Day one?” I laugh, he thinks this is a romantic movie.

“It wasn’t a mistake that I came to your table. I saw you the moment I walked in, my eyes just landed on

you. I was going to introduce myself that day but you ran out.”

“So manje uyashela?” I ask.

He chuckles, “I’m just asking for a chance. I don’t think you do what you do because it’s your dream, you’re just comfortable with easy money.”

“And you are going to change that, Mgenge omkhulu?” I ask.

“I want you to change that. How well you take care of Luh proves that you are a woman that can help me build my father’s house. Ng’bona umfazi waseMagengeni mina.”

I don’t know why the hell I’m blushing. I’m not a wife material, I have never wished to be seen as one.

“But it bothers you that I’m a sex worker,” I say.

“I won’t lie, it does.”

“Then how are you going to cope because that’s always going to be part of my story, even if I retire. And as the story owner, I’m not ashamed of it.”

“I don’t know Namandla, all I know is that I need you to give me a fair chance. And by fair I mean exclusivity.”

He is the bully he thinks he is, for real.

“How can you ask for exclusivity from a sex worker?” I ask.

“Because you’re going to retire. Ubeke phansi amathuluzi.” He chuckles.

“No, say what you wanted to say.”

“Ok, ubeke phansi amadilozi.”

It was a trap, he’s a fool.

“I’m kidding, don’t be mad.” He pokes my cheek, I mistakenly laugh.

“So what is your answer?” he asks.

“I’m going to think about it,” I say.

“I don’t think you would need to think if you were against the idea. It would’ve been an immediate no. So hello sthandwa sami.”

This man!

I shake my head, laughing.

Luh turns his head. He sees that Mhlengikhaya has shifted too close and comes to sit between us. I’m the king of boys.

I offer to wash his containers before he leaves. I had a great time, it was exactly what I needed after the encounter I had at the park.

Luh has already gone to bed. I dry his containers and then walk him out. It’s late, people are already in beds.

“The job I told you about is still open. It’s a 8am-5pm housekeeping job in Umhlanga,” he says.

“I will take it,” I say.

“Good, let me look for their email. Do you have an email?”

“No, but I can go to the Post Office and ask for it,” I say.

He smiles, “You didn’t have to be smart about it.”

“But clearly you think I’m dumb because I said I don’t have matric,” I say.

“I was just checking, relax.” He gives me the email address.

Another new page in my life is about to open. Having Luh has given me courage to do things I never thought I’d do.

“I meant every word, Namandla,” he says.

“No, don’t worry, I will take the job.”

“No, I’m talking about us. I’m a bachelor, you saw me. I think my

ancestors brought me here to find a wife.”

I fake a sigh. “Kuhlwile shem.”

“You can pretend but you can’t ignore me forever, izinyembezi zami aziweli phansi.”

I crack up, laughing. I think him and Luh are the only people who can get me laughing this hard.

“See you around, Mhlengikhaya.”

“See tomorrow, sthandwa saseMaGengeni.

He’s too forward. I said I will think about it, I’m not anything to the Mgenges yet.

CHAPTER 17

I'm having my first meeting with a social worker, I'm nervous but at this point I think Luh is my gift from God and nothing is going to come between us. I made sure that I clean the house, removed all the wine bottles and got rid of the sex toys. Yeap, I threw them away.

The questions are not tense as I thought. She thinks my apartment is too small and worries about the lack of space for him to play outdoors. But she assures me that it's not much of a problem.

It can take a few months for the court to make a decision. But I'm with him either way, I'm making the ends-meet regardless of the sudden change in my life.

We haven't seen Sima in a while, the richest aunt. After the social worker leaves we get ready to pay her a visit. It's a bit hot today. We take a taxi and drop across her street.

She's owns real Gucci, unlike Lerato. Lerato has mouths to feed back home, that's why she buys her Gucci from Pakistan shops.

"Oh my goodness!" She's more excited to see Luh than me. "I have been waiting for you all day."

I follow them inside the house. She bought a huge car toy for Luh. There's McDonald's on the counter.

"Your meeting took long, I thought you'd be here sooner, his chips are now dry."

“It wasn’t too long, she just arrived late.”

She gives Luh his burger and chips on a plate, then sits. “How did it go?”

“I think it went well, I was nervous for nothing,” I say.

“If there’s anyone we need to sleep with for it to happen give us names.”

I laugh, “Don’t include me, I’m now in an exclusive relationship.”

“A what?” She chokes down a laugh.

“I’m telling, my cop neighbor wants an exclusive relationship,” I say.

“And you told him where to get off, I trust you friend, you’ve done it before.”

“I tried...” She doesn’t let me finish.

“Tried or did?” she asks.

“I tried, he’s not the type that takes no for an answer,” I say.

“Everyone takes no for an answer, depending on how you say it. Do you like him?”

“No,” I deny.

“No but you’re blushing? Ay Namandla, you just became an illegal mother now you want to date a cop. How complicated do you want your life to be?”

“It’s just that I haven’t had anyone showing me affection. Even sex, I have never done it, it’s always business transactions. I want those little things in life.”

“If you put it that way I get it, but a cop?” She knows my issues with cops.

“It’s going to be a challenge because he’s a stubborn one at that. But Luh likes him, I also think he’s attractive.”

“Whatever you want, you know I will always support you. If you want me to

be an aunt, I will be one. If you want me to be a bridesmaid, I will be one.”

“Bridesmaid, it’s not that deep.”

She gets us snacks while I update her about the park incident. Now Mphile and I are Whatsapp friends. She wants us to visit home, she says my parents’ house is still there. I have never visited my parents’ graves.

“But did you remember how your parents died?”

“I don’t remember the event but obviously I remember the feeling. My brain can identify the source of its traumas, hence my anxiety problems and triggers from the sight of the police.”

“Maybe Mhlengikhaya is what’s going to take for you to heal, internally.”

“Yeah, but that’s not the intention. I’m not trying to heal through him, I just

want to give life a chance. Normal life.”

“Cops are stingy,” she says.

“I know, I’m not planning to depend on him.” I stood on my own from the age of 16. I’m not looking for a man to take care of me.

“Let’s judge him by his dick game then.”

“I’m not going to easily give it up for him.” I know he probably thinks that’s what going to happen because I sleep with men anyway.

“You are messed up these days, the way you think!” she shakes her head. Luh is done eating. He’s now playing his new car, paving the road anywhere in the room.

“He’s very cute, my ovaries are dancing.” Obviously she’s lying, she hates having children. Her brothers

are married and have a bunch that she can't even name correctly.

"So are you planning to adopt him in future?" she asks.

"Adoption is more complicated, that's why I need to get my shit together. I will never let him go." Luh is my world now.

I wake up everyday with purpose because of him.

"Maybe this is how God wanted your life to change," she says.

"Hopefully he will see me through it, now that I've taken the right direction." I don't know when was the last time I prayed, I should start again and teach Luh how to do it at this age.

CHAPTER 18

I have a job interview today, my first ever. It's a housekeeping job, not something I ever thought I'd do. But here I am in life, years later, with a child and new dreams.

Sima is the easily irritable aunt, I prefer Lerato over her but Lerato hasn't been around in three days. God knows what she's busy with, we just pray for her safety. Lerato is a baddie, a real one. That's why among us she's the only one with a boyfriend who understands that she has to lay on her back to make money. I never had any guy approaching me and being okay with what I do.

I'm dropping Luh at her place and as soon as his feet touch the floor he

drops his juice and spills it all over Sima's tiles.

"Don't shout at him, he cries," I say. She sighs heavily, "Okay, well done Baby Luh for spilling juice on my Armani Nero porcelain tiles."

Luh smiles, he knows nothing about sarcasm. Then he goes off to where the TV is playing.

"How long are you going to be gone? I have a client at 2pm," she asks.

"I will be back before 11am, what can delay a housekeeping interview? Do I know how to squeeze a mop, wipe windows, wash dishes?"

"And not sell sex to the father or son of the house?" She adds and we both crack up, laughing.

If the opportunity presents itself I think my prostituting side will come out. But that's not my intention at all, I

just want to have a decent job title on my profile.

“See you later friend, don’t spank my baby,” I say.

“He must be on good behavior.”

That’s a foreign word to Luh. Good behavior, what is that?

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I take Uber and arrive earlier than expected at the new workplace, hopefully. I don’t know why I expect a single man to be the owner. We haven’t had a voice chat, we only communicated via emails. I confirm that I’m at the right place and call the number attached below the last email. A man answers, I was right.

He lets me in, there's two puppies running around. I hate pets, this one is going to be a challenge.

It's mid-aged man with a shiny piece on his left hand. We exchange warm greetings, he introduces himself as Lwazi.

"I hope you're an early bird by nature, not that you were just impressing me."

"Trust me, I was opening the gate with a security guard at school," I say.

"Mmmm, I will take your word for it."

He leads me to a living room. It's spacious and scarcely furnished. I think he's a man of simple things.

"You haven't been a housekeeper before, right?" he asks.

"I have," I say.

"I called one of the numbers you used as a reference and the lady said no,

you only worked as a manager at Identity and she was your supervisor.”

That sounds like Lerato, Sima is smart. How will being a fake store manager help me secure a housekeeping job?

“Maybe you dialed a wrong number or I mixed up numbers,” I say.

“It’s not a big deal. I work at the harbor, I’m not home often. Maybe three times a month or two. But my wife pops in now and then with the kids.”

“That’s not a problem, she will find the house spotless everytime,” I say.

“I heard you have a kid,” he says.

“Yeah, he’s three, I’m a foster mom.”

“Is it?” He looks at me with new eyes, looking shocked and impressed.

“Yeah. I will put him in creche.”

“It’s fine if you want to come with him. You will be alone most of the times. As long as he doesn’t break my wife’s make-ups,” he smiles.

There’s something soft and kind about him. He loves his wife, from the way his eyes soften when he mentions her.

“Thank you. I was nervous, thinking you’re going to throw heavy interview questions. I’ve never been to...”

Ahem!

“An interview with a man, one on one,” I say.

“There’s a first time for everything. First time for an interview, first time for a housekeeping job.”

I’m not that smart, am I?

“Let me show you around,” he gets off the chair. I follow him.

Mhlengikhaya put this together. This job was mine from the word go. In my head I wasn't going to take this seriously, it's just for the record. But after meeting with Lwazi, I think I want to impress him and his wife. I want to be the best housekeeper anyone can ever ask for.

I will be mopping even the air outside. I doubt I will come with Luh, this house is too organized, he'd turn it upside down and break everything within two days.

CHAPTER 19

Luh is going to creche tomorrow and I'm going to work. The kind of work that doesn't need me to glam up and dress to kill. I have to pick the older outfits because I don't want to waste my good clothes. It feels like a new start, I'm doing something different. I don't have to give my body to anyone to earn money. I've always been sure that sex work is my place of eternity. I enjoyed it and convinced myself it defines who I am. But actually no, I'm more than that.

Luh can pick up on my mood, he's excited with me. He's singing along with me and he doesn't even know the lyrics, which cracks me up. He's a rare

form of human being. He's trying to imitate my dance moves while at it. Hands clap at the door.

I stop immediately, Mhlengikhaya has been watching us all this time. I thought I closed the door, nevertheless he's not supposed to "singsdrop" to my singing.

"I swear it felt like I was at a Taylor Swift concert. You and your backup singer, slash dancer."

I count to three and then breathe. I'm not going to be an angry neighbor and get called a Karen again. But he's wrong for doing this. He's disrespecting my privacy.

"Your nose will break, don't scratch it so hard, come and beat me instead."

He says walking in with two gift bags. He's smiling because he sees nothing wrong with this.

“How are you, muntu waseMaGengeni?” He hugs me, I don’t return the hug.

He bumps fists with Luh, not really bothered by my anger.

“You’re going to creche tomorrow,” he says to Luh.

“No, school,” Luh.

He slaps his forehead. “Silly me, you’re actually going to school. Look what I got you.”

Luh opens the gift bag and unwraps a puzzle board and a pack of multi colored pens. This takes him to cloud nine, now he’s convinced that he’s really going to school. And not just small children school, no he sees himself in high school right now.

“Mommy look, look.” He’s jumping up and down. It’s not even a registered creche, he’s going to

MaGumede's backroom creche. It's R250 per month, that's what I afford. MaGumede spansks children and makes them pick up dirt around her yard. She calls herself the principal and handwrites her reports. There's a lady that helps her, she's always shouting at her, accusing her of not knowing the job.

"The angry bird," Mhlengikhaya pokes my cheek, smiling. "Are you ready for tomorrow?"

He doesn't even see the need to apologize. SMH.

"I'm ready," I say.

"I got you something, just to say congratulations on your first job."

He's provoking me by saying it's a first job, I've been a boss lady for over 10 years.

I open the bag and find headset and a silver wrist watch. I'm not smiling, I promise.

"This will help you wake up," he says putting the watch around my wrist.

"And this will keep you company, I know women work better when they're listening to music."

"Thank you so much." I throw my arms around him, in a wave of joy. It turns out I'm hugging a madman, he holds me for dear life and doesn't let go.

I manage to fight my way off. "You're so boring kodwa yazi."

He smiles, "For what? You threw yourself at me. Let me kiss a little bit."

"Never!" I put back my gift.

I hope Luh is not writing on my wall with his pens.

“I’m so proud of you though. You’re the bravest person I know.”

“Says the cop, someone that sees the most everyday. How many dead people have you seen?”

He frowns. The topic changed too fast, didn’t?

“I don’t know,” he says.

“Okay, how many have you killed?”

“I arrest killers, I’m not a killer.”

Obviously he’s lying, their job goes beyond arresting criminals. They’re contributors to the bad society, not heros. If the police weren’t killers my parents wouldn’t be dead.

“MaMthiyane, I’m still waiting for your answer,” he says.

Can’t we talk about his job for longer?

“I’m still thinking,” I say.

“There’s a due date for everything and you’ve skipped yours. My answer, now.”

“Are you playing police officer on me now?” He mustn’t try me.

“Namandla, come on. We are adults, let’s try this thing and see how many children comes out of it.”

“I was about to say yes and you gave me a reason to change my mind. Do I just look like a babymaker to you?”

“Your breasts are big and soft, my children will be well fed,” he continues.

Sigh. God is this the person you want me to call my boyfriend?

“Leave Mhlengikhaya,” I say.

He smiles and blows me a kiss. “I will see you in the morning.”

“In the morning?” I ask.

“Don’t I have boyfriend duty to drop you off before heading to my station?”

“Did I say you’re my boyfriend?” I ask.

“Your smile said it,” he says.

I fail to keep a straight face. It’s time he leaves, for real. I chase him out of the door, wanting to close the door after him.

I don’t know how he turned and our faces got so close to each other. His lips are on me, my hand around the back of his neck pulling him down to me.

We are having our first kiss on broad daylight, outside the door where there’s a chance of someone seeing us.

I have turned down a lot of relationships but his was just too hard to resist. He said nothing new, many have said the things he said to me.

Many have asked me to change my life for them. He said the same things as others but he sounded different. I don't know if it's my traumas pushing me towards him. He challenges me, in more than one way. He makes me angry and laugh in one minute. He says things that make me hate him, only for me to reconsider later and do exactly what he said I must do. He is the man he thinks he is.

CHAPTER 20

It didn't feel like I was working, simply because what I did in the house Luh can make me do five times here. It felt natural, my only worry was Luh, I didn't know if he was settling in well at creche. But MaGumede told me he only cried after I left, then shortly mingled with other children. I'm a proud mom, he's getting a reward. Cookies and ice-cream. I have to reward good behavior to motivate him to become a good man in future.

Lerato and Sima are on their way. They're making a big deal out of my new relationship. It wasn't intentional to confirm the relationship just a day

before I start my new job. I don't know, my stars just aligned and great things came my way at the same time. I like Mhlengikhaya more than I thought I did.

"Is Luh going to behave in front of his aunts today?" I ask.

"No," he shakes his head.

I can't force him to lie, unfortunately.

Both of them think he's a brat but what do they know about children?

Google says all toddlers are like this.

Being naughty is part of growth.

"If he behaves I will give him more ice-cream," I say.

He pushes his lips, pretending like he's about to cry. It's what he does to make me feel guilty for not dancing to his tune.

"Are you going to run around?" I ask.

“No running,” he says.

“Good.” I give him one more chocolate cookie and then return the box to the kitchen.

The girls arrive looking jolly and glamorous. I haven’t seen Lerato in a bit, she’s glowing.

“Where are the headsets?” she asks.

“Yes, where are they?” Sima.

“It’s just headsets, nothing you two have never seen before.” I fetch them, my watch hasn’t left my wrist.

“So it was because of mere Volcano headset?” They’re laughing.

It was more than a headset gift, they know it, they just want to act like fools.

“You guys already had your first kiss and drove to work together?” Lerato.

“Yes, and he’s a good kisser,” I say.

“What about the package?” she asks.

“I didn’t weigh his package, we only kissed.” Jeez, these girls.

“I don’t trust cops, they have a weak D-game,” she says.

“But Ngcebo is not a cop.” Her boyfriend is not good in bed, she always complains to us.

“His grandfather was one, I think he took after him. But we have toys to boost our game. Do you think Mgenge will allow you to have a toy?”

“I doubt but it doesn’t matter anyway, he will be good.” I trust him.

“Why are we talking about sex. Let’s hear from you, where were you and how much did you make?”

“A lot, I’m probably the richest in this room right now,” she says.

“And I’m the brokest, I have R650 in my account,” I say.

“That’s the price of a “decent life”,” she says.

“I think it will get better once you receive grant from the government to help you with his needs,” Sima.

“Hopefully I will hear from the social worker again this week.” I have hope, I pray every night.

“So you’re officially no longer the night mistress?” Lerato asks.

“I think it's always going to be part of my story. I mean, I have a permanent gift from being Dollar’s night mistress. But now my main goal is Luh and focusing on the other things that make me happy.”

“Mhlengikhaya, for example.” Sima is being spicy. We laugh. Yes, Mhlengikhaya is part of the things that make me happy. I can’t wait for him to come back from work.

Luh gets tired of playing alone and joins us. He can sit on his own but I like putting him on my lap and carrying him in my arms when walking.

I forgot to wipe his hands, there's chocolate from the cookies all over them. He mistakenly touches Lerato's fake LV purse.

"I should've listened to my instincts and left it at home. Luh you're a troublesome baby, do you know how much this purse costs? Your mother would have to sell her whole furniture to lay-bye it."

I roll my eyes and get a soft paper to wipe it. I won't lie and say I'm big on discipline but Luh is better than other children, especially the ones you find at the clinic.

Lerato's eyes turn to her vibrating phone. It looks like she's getting bad news.

"Fuck!"

Cursing in front of Luh, really?!

"What happened?" Sima and I ask, simultaneously.

"It's Bhengu, your guy." She says to me.

I think she's talking about the cuckold Bhengu.

"Is it about the video?" I ask.

"Yeah, and it's not money he's sending." She shows us his text, it doesn't look good. He just told her to go ahead and post the video, then watch her back.

"Friend, I told you so. Just delete the video and forget about him," I say.

“Wait, what is this all about?” Sima looks lost, I guess Lerato never shared with her.

“It’s some stupid pastor from Newlands, he thinks I’m going to be scared. Ngiwumahosha mina, this is going to Twitter right now.”

Is she crazy? Ngcebo can’t protect her, even I can spinkick that guy to Limpopo. My arm is bigger than his. My own phone rings. It’s him, he knows that I’m friends with Lerato and I was with them that night.

“What must I say?” I’m now getting involved in their mess.

“Say we don’t stay together and you haven’t seen me since our fallout at the hotel.”

I take a deep breath and answer.

“Can we talk?” he asks.

“Yeah, we can.” They’re dead quiet next to me.

“Your friend from the other night. How much would you want to give me her information?”

My eyes pop out. “What? I’m confused.”

“I need her information, it’s urgent.”

“Oh Lerato, she lives in town now with her boyfriend. I don’t know much about her since we fell out. I don’t even have her number anymore.”

“But can you find out for him where she lives? I will compensate.”

“I would love to but I have a day job now and a child to take care of.”

“Even if I make you an offer of R5000.”

“No, I don’t want anything to do with her. But good luck, I hope you guys resolve whatever it is.”

By the time he ends the call my chest is dry like a Kalahari desert.

“He offered me R5000 to give him your location. You’re putting your life in danger, friend.”

“I have dealt with dangerous people. He’s going to fold, watch and learn. I will post one minute of the clip and hide his face, then wait for my money to come in. If not, I’m exposing his face.”

I look at Sima. Why is she so quiet? Yes, we’ve all messed with our clients in the past. Robbing them off their jewelry, wallets and offering insufficient services. But we watched who we messed with. Rich people can end your life within the drop of a hat.

CHAPTER 21

Love can make an idiot out of a sane person. He's back from work, we are exchanging texts and a huge stupid smile is stuck on my face.

"Luh wants the phone," says the little terrorist that I live with. In his mind we co-own this phone.

"Later, go and watch TV," I say.

He pulls a face. *Sigh.*

I text Mhlengikhaya; we will finish this conversation in person. I'm seeing him later, we are invited for dinner since the last one didn't happen.

Luh gets his phone and sits on cartoon videos. On TV there's also Spongebob playing. If I switch it off he will make a big deal out of it. So I watch his cute, little face, that's the only TV I have.

He looks up and smiles. "I'm going to buy you a phone mommy, okay?"

As if I don't have one already.

"Thank you, my love." I kiss his forehead and lie back on the couch.

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I make a snack for him, I don't want to be that person who shows up with a hungry child. I don't overfeed him but I make sure his tummy is not empty before we leave. I put him in jacket and carry a blanket, just in case he needs a nap.

The door opens, his smile pulls from the corners of his lips. I've been here, he's been to my apartment, but in most cases we had disagreements and our conversations ended with us on a bad note.

Now we can hug, I can smile back at him and let him hold my hand with Luh on his other arm.

“How are your brothers?” I ask.

“It was a brother and a cousin, they’re both fine. They will be here Saturday night, you and Luh should join us.

Let’s make it a family union.”

“You told them that I’m a Karen, I’m sure they’re scared of me,” I say.

He chuckles, “They know you’re not.”

“Do you come from a big family?”

“Kind of, but it’s big because of the uncles and aunts, and their kids. I only have two siblings,” he says.

“I don’t have any but I recently met Mphile, our fathers had the same mother.” I still haven’t decided if I want to get to know Mphile or not. She checks up on me regularly on Whatsapp.

“Do you want to go back and maybe get closure?” he asks.

“For now I want to focus on getting my papers right and get registered as Luh’s foster mom. Once that’s done then I will make a decision.” I know none of the relatives cared about me. If they did I wouldn’t have been saved by a neighbor and then grow up in different strangers’ homes.

“Guess what?”

I look at him.

“I will be by your side through it all,” he says.

“I’d really appreciate that.” I’ve never had anyone to emotionally support me. Yes, Lerato and Sima are good friends. But they don’t go to bed with me. They have their own ish to take care of.

“I just need one thing from you, MaMthiyane,” he says.

“What?” I feel like I know the direction he’s going to take.

“Change your phone number and delete social media,” he says.

“Why?” I ask.

“Because you have to focus on this new chapter of your life. I don’t think if you’re still in contact with your past it’s going to be easy to move on.”

“I have self control, I don’t have to erase my past, it will always be part of who I am. But if that’s going to make you comfortable then I will do it.”

“Thank you.” He kisses my cheek.

Luh looks at us. How do I explain this to a three year old?

He falls asleep right after dinner,

Mhlengikhaya takes him to bed. It’s

late, both of us have work tomorrow.

But we there's so much to know about each other.

"Why did you move here?" I ask.

"It wasn't my preference, I just happened to find an apartment here. I'm sure it was the way universe wanted us to meet."

"Is this how you met your ex-girlfriends too?" I ask.

He chuckles, "No."

"Do you have any that I should worry about?" I ask.

"No, this is my first time dating a dramatic queen," he says.

"I'm not dramatic." I say, my face turning to his. His lips welcome me. He gets more touchy and releases faint moans.

We are both gasping for air when I pull away. Looking into his eyes gives me butterflies in the stomach.

“Thank you for trusting me. I won’t disappoint you, I mean it when I say I see someone I can spend my life with in you.”

“If your family gets to know what I’ve been doing for a living, do you think they’d be accepting of me?”

“My uncle is a pastor but to be honest with you, everyone in my family has their own skeletons. They know better than to judge anyone.”

“If you say so.” I don’t like being with people who are not comfortable around me.

“I love you, that’s what matters, not what other people will think of you. I should be the second important person to you after Lungelo.”

“You are,” I say.

If my friends hear this, I’m dead.

CHAPTER 22

We have gotten used to our routines. Every week day I leave for work, Luh goes to creche. Today was my first pay day, it feels different from any other payment I've ever received. My Luh has been a good boy, he adapted to quickly. That's why I want to spoil him rotten. I have learned to live thinly- that's how Lerato describes it. I don't eat out, I buy groceries and only take Luh for ice-cream outings during weekends. I haven't bought new clothes in two months. Luckily I can do my own hair. I saved as much as I could. From my salary I'm paying rent, buying month grocery and MaGumede's school fees, then save for transport just in case Mhlengikhaya is not available one

day. Then I save the rest for medical emergencies and electricity. I'm lucky that I got to work for a decent family. Mr Lwazi didn't negotiate when it came to payment. I signed a contract and I earn for housekeeping and taking care of their pets.

I came with a new pair of sneakers, he wanted to take a bath right away. We are getting ready for McDonald's. My phone rings. Officer Ncube? It's been ages since she called me. "Namandla how are you?" "I'm good Officer, and you?" "I'm okay sis, I just received some exciting news for you," she says. "Am I approved?" Those are the exciting news I'm waiting for. "No, but we have received a call from the Mtsetfa family," she says.

My heart drops heavily. It's been over almost three months since they were looked for and begged to come forward. I have settled down, Luh calls me mommy and we have our lives planned together.

"Are you still there?" she asks.

I take a deep, shaky breath. "Yes."

"So they've reached out and they will be coming to get Lungelo. I have contacted the social worker handling the case, a meeting will be scheduled."

I can't breathe. It feels like I'm about to have anxiety attack again. Something I've rarely had ever since Luh came to my life.

"I will wait for your call," I say before she ends the call. My hands tremble, Luh picks the phone from the floor.

Is it possible? Can they take him away from me? I have already applied to become his foster mom.

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I called him but he was still on duty. As soon as he gets home he comes straight to me.

I have been holding back tears, I couldn't let Luh see that I'm broken. As soon as he wraps his arms around me, I break down.

"It doesn't mean they're going to take him away," he says.

"It's his maternal family, they have every right." I just know the court will favor them over me. I will lose Luh forever, they will take him to Swatini.

"Please calm down, you're a good mother. You're capable of taking care

of him better than anyone. We don't know how close they were to his mother. They're not going to get him simply because they are related to his mother. Remember he has a South African nationality."

"Do you think that's going to count?"

"Definitely sthandwa sami, you're not going to lose him."

That gives me a bit of hope. I don't want them not to have access to him. No, he has a Mtsetfa blood in him. I just want to raise him, God trusted me with him, he chose me.

"Thank you," I wipe the tears.

He continues to shield me until I'm put together. Luh can sense that something is wrong. He comes and sits between us. This is my family. This is what completes me. This is the reason why I changed my life. The

reason why I wake up everyday with purpose.

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This whole week I felt empty.

Mhlengikhaya spent more time with us. As much as I have tried to be positive, it feels like my happiness will be cut short anytime. I sent notice, letting Mr Lwazi about my meeting.

It's today, I'm going to find out whether I'm losing Luh or not. I wanted to dress up and glam my face, and look like I mean shit. But I lack energy, I just put on a shirt-dress and sandals. Luh is the only one I dress up smartly. He doesn't know where we are going. He's happy, he thinks we are going to town.

Lerato and Ngcebo pulls up to take us to the social development offices. My friends will always be there. I truly appreciate how neither one of them knew anything about taking care of a child but as soon as I brought one, they got their aunt'ing shit together. Mhlengikhaya couldn't be with me because of work.

They drop us outside the offices and then take a drive around while waiting for me.

I'm scared, I don't think I've ever been this scared in my life. I'm directed to the right office, as soon as we walk in, Luh spots an old woman and runs to her. They embrace and kiss. My heart breaks at the sight of it.

"You must be Namandla?" the woman smiles at me.

“Yes, I am.” I find an empty chair and sit.

Officer Ncube is here, ganging with the useless social worker and the Swati family against me.

“I’m so grateful to you, my child. God will bless you abundantly,” the woman says. “I’m Nomonde’s aunt who took Lungelo to his father. I’m a bit ill, that’s why I gave him to his father and returned home.”

She turns to the other lady. “This is Nothando, she’s Nomonde’s half sister. We had no idea that his father died, we just discovered about the DNA test results today. You must have gone through a lot.”

“I did and I love Baby Luh. It came from a place of love, a lot has happened since Dollar died.” I’m cold,

even though they look like kind people.

“We heard, it’s not that we ignored, we didn’t know anything until last week. And when Nothando saw it on Facebook, she made calls quickly.”

I look at Officer Ncube, “So they’re here to take him away?”

“I would like to raise my sister’s son. I know you’ve probably bonded with him, as I’ve heard you even applied for foster care. You’re an amazing person, that’s for sure. But I owe it to my sister, I hope you understand.”
No, she can’t. Mhlengikhaya said she can’t. Luh is my baby.

“For the court to continue with your application, we need Nothando’s consent written down,” says the useless social worker.

“There was a 1 month notice for them to come forward and they didn’t. Doesn’t that count?”

“In this case they were in a different country and they weren’t notified about the child’s father’s death and all that transpired after. I have to submit all these things to court now. It changes the case.”

“And who’s going to be favoured? I don’t get an answer.

CHAPTER 23

Nothando wants to take Luh from me. She doesn't care how far I've come with this boy. How many changes I've made to accommodate him in my life. I didn't need to but I did.

All she could've done is sign the damn papers and let me continue raising him.

I lost my cool in the meeting. I don't think I stand a chance again, I wanted to fight her for taking away something that's so precious to me. It didn't get any better when Lerato arrived, there was a huge scene outside the offices. I'm not even going to tell Mhlengikhaya about it. I don't blame Lerato, she saw how hard I worked turning my life around for Luh. She knows how much I love him.

Ngcebo says I must go back and apologize for insulting Officer Ncube. It's probably what I should do but it's not going to change anything.

"If she dies on her way home, you will get Luh," Lerato says.

All her solutions include killing, scamming and lying. I love her though.

"I hope she dies in a car accident," I say.

"Come on girls, she's just a loving aunt. It's way much better than losing custody to strangers or Dollar's family," Ngcebo says.

He's right but now I don't care, I'm the only right choice for Luh. Those two bitches are the reason why I'm not going home with my son. All of a sudden I'm a crazy woman.

Officer Ncube comes to the car and asks for a private moment with me.

She's on their side, I can see it.

"The way you behaved doesn't suit you. I understand that you're disappointed but that was not okay. If I didn't know you I would've put you in cuffs."

I take a deep breath. "I apologize."

"I'm so sorry about this. Do you need counseling?" she asks.

I laugh out loud. "So now I'm crazy? When I was asked to keep looking after him I wasn't crazy."

"You need to heal, right now you're a danger to him and to yourself. I actually thought you'd be happy for him. I thought all you cared about was him finding a loving family."

"It is what I care about," I say.

“It doesn’t look like it, my love. Get yourself together, Zanele will refer you to a counselor.”

Wow, just wow.

“Can I talk to him for a minute before I leave?” I ask.

She sighs, “Okay.”

We get back inside the office. I left everyone traumatized earlier, now I’m humble.

“Come here, baby.” I pull him off the aunt’s lap, he looks confused now.

“I love Luh, I always will. And I’m happy your grandmother and aunt are here. Are you happy?”

He smiles and nods.

“Today you will not come home with me because I have to get better, I’m not feeling well. But I will pack all

your toys so that you can play at aunt's place."

"Are you coming too?" he asks.

"No but soon I will visit." I don't think this is how it should go. I don't think he had to be uprooted so abruptly from the environment he's been in for months. It's unfair to both of us and I feel like the anger they're concerned about is just an excuse.

"Thank you," Nothando.

I don't talk to her, I only care for Lungelo. I'm only doing this because I want him to be okay. How I feel about her haven't changed.

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Lerato left a bottle of red wine. It's open and half empty on the floor. I keep pouring in a glass.

Mhlengikhaya walks in. It's empty; my apartment looks organized, everything is in its rightful place. I'm not shouting to anyone. There's a movie channel playing, not cartoons. He knows what's up. He picks the glass and takes the wine bottle and disappears to the kitchen. Then comes back and sits next to me.

"What happened?" he asks.

"They took him," I say.

"Why?" he asks.

"Because I showed signs of being crazy and dangerous to him."

He takes a deep sigh. "I should've been there with you, I'm so sorry sthandwa sami. But we will get him back."

“We won’t, his mother’s sister came with the aunt. Their signatures are needed for me to keep him and they refused.”

He buries his face in his hands and releases a deep sigh. I was sent my counseling session appointment details. It’s going to be free, that’s the only reward I’m getting.

“How was he? Did he cry?”

“No, he remembered them, he was happy to go.” It breaks my heart, I won’t lie. But I can’t hold anything against my Luh.

“How do you feel?”

“Broken, I don’t see what God is keeping me for if he’s going to take everything away from me.”

“Don’t talk like that.” He holds my hand and plants a soft kiss on it. “I’m begging you. Whether they take him

or not, you saved a child and gave him beautiful memories. Lungelo's presence left a mark in your life and maybe that's what God brought him for. You needed him as much as he needed you and your roles in each other's lives have come to an end."

"No!" I pull my hand back.

"Look at me, Namandla."

I'm not looking at him, there's no use, he's taken a side.

CHAPTER 24

I have no drive, I'm only here because the family I'm working for is kind.

Luh was the reason why I wanted a decent life. Now that he's gone, I don't know what I want in life anymore.

Mhlengikhaya checks up on me every hour. I appreciate his patience and understanding, but I don't think he understands how deep my love for that boy was. I feel so lost without him.

Sima suggests that I continue with the application and foster another child in need. But my heart is specific about Luh. I don't want another child.

She calls me, I hope she's not bringing that up again.

"Friend where are you?" She sounds breathless.

“Work, duh!”

“Ngcebo just called me, Lerato is in the hospital,” she says.

“What? What happened?” I was with her yesterday, she was fine.

“She was shot in town, coming out of the hotel,” she says.

My whole body freezes. Shot? A girl? Who shoots a girl?

“I don’t know if it was a client or enemy. I’m on my way there, she’s in Addington.”

“I’m still here for four more hours, please keep me updated.” Can I get a break?

I can’t lose my son and my friend at the same time. God, you don’t hate me like that, do you?

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By the grace of God, the hitman missed and only shot her arm. We've had our back and forth with other girls in the sex work. But nothing so extreme has ever happened. I haven't had a chance to visit her, my work hours clash with hospital visiting hours. But as soon as I see her, we need to reevaluate this life.

I'm coming home to an empty apartment. Coming home gives me anxiety, I hate my life so much right now. I take a shower and rest on the couch. I haven't cooked since Luh left, I eat sandwiches and cereals.

Someone knocks, I already know who it is. It's not locked, I yell for him to come in. He's carrying a lunchbox. I hope it's cooked food.

“Hello,” he walks in.

“Hey my good cop.” I sit up.

We share a kiss, he sits down.

“You look better today,” he says.

“My friend will be discharged soon,
that’s why,” I say.

“Any news from the social worker?”

“No, I’m not waiting for her call
anyway. Tomorrow I’m going to that
counselor thing they arranged, then I
will hit her up and find out where I
really stand.”

“You haven’t talked to Luh either?”

“No,” I shake my head.

“I’m really sorry, I wish I had power
to change this. I know how much you
loved him.” He kisses my lips and
wipes something from my cheek.

“You’re always so beautiful. Your skin
is milk and honey.”

I roll my eyes, "I wonder what you want. You're never kind for no reason."

"I just want you to come and say hi to my uncle, he's heard me talking about this beautiful woman in my life too many times. I want to shut down the "find a wife" talk," he says.

"When did he arrive?" I ask.

"About an hour ago, he's just passing by."

"Do I have to dress up?" I ask.

"No, just come as yourself." He helps me put my shoes on. I will eat when I come back.

I think him and my friends are the only reason why I'm still standing. He's holding my hand, telling me about how annoying his family has been about him not having a partner.

I would've loved to meet his uncle looking better and happier. But he's still going to see more of me. I mean, I was titled umfazi waseMaGengeni.

He opens the door, we get in. I'm a little nervous but he's holding my hand.

"Malume," he says.

The man lifts his eyes. I stand frozen next to him. Yes, the world is small, but not this small. This is witchcraft.

What the fuck?

How come Bhengu is his mother's brother? The Bhengu that I've had cuckold and threesome with.

CHAPTER 25

I sit in the office and stare at the certificates adorning her wall. I'm sure her parents are very proud of her. She looks younger than I thought. I'm not sure why I'm here. Isn't this a place people come to when they have depression and suicidal thoughts?

I shift my eyes from the wall and look at her. "Why am I here?"

She picks my file from her desk and reads what it says. "The patient has uncontrollable anger issues, problems with communicating her feelings and publicly begged a police official to run over her with a car- suicidal attempt."

"They took my son away, what do you expect?" I hate explaining myself but she can't sit here and make me sound like I'm crazy.

“Lungelo, the boy you applied to foster. What kind of a child is he?”

I take a deep breath. “He’s kind, clever and loving. He’s the sweetest little human being I’ve ever met.”

“He sounds like a good child. I understand why you’d be frustrated. Do you always resort to violence when angry?” she asks.

“Not really. I’m not too in touch with my emotions. It was just this one instance, I cared deeply for him.”

“Why are you not in touch with your emotions?” she asks.

“It’s just how I cope. I let shit slide. Sorry about language,” I say.

“Forgiven. Now tell me more about how life has been with him.”

Where do I even start? Life has been nothing short of amazing with Luh in my life. From a night mistress who

had nothing to live for, to a mommy with a day job and boyfriend. She's smiling as I take her through all the ups and downs before Luh, transitioning to this beautiful woman who's no man's night mistress.

"Your eyes have a spark everytime you mention your boyfriend," she notes with a smile.

I release a deep sigh. "That is also history. I slept with his uncle, it was business. But I don't see him forgiving me. So I have lost both of them."

"Break-ups are only the end of relationships. Just like separation. They mark an end to two people's journey. Some people just come into your life to play a seasonal role that will carry you through life without them. Lungelo was one of them. From everything you said, his presence in

your life turned your life around for the better. You might lose him but you won't lose the memories and all the lessons his presence taught you."

"I guess you are right," I sigh deeply. It's going to take time for me to accept it. But the reality is, he's found his family now, something I initially fought hard to. Those people received him better than Dollar's family. I can't deny that they love him.

I wish she can advise me about my relationship too. I told Mhlengikhaya the truth about how I know his uncle. He didn't handle it well. His uncle left, he walked me to my apartment and went back to his. We haven't spoken since then. I know he's hurt, any man would be.

My session has ended, I have to go back home to nothing. This is my life now, I'm living this decent life for no one. If I don't learn to do things for myself, to please me, I will never be happy.

I scroll down my phone while waiting for a taxi. I stop on Mphile's number. I want to know if she can accompany me to the village to see my parents' graves. Her phone is on voicemail, I leave a voice message.

Then raise my eyes, a red Polo is pulling up. Mhlengikhaya!

Is he sure about this?

I have a past. I have been a night mistress to many, not just his uncle and Dollar.

The window rolls down. "Let's go home," he says.

.....to be continued

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