

Chapter 1

I'd like this place better if it wasn't so cold, if it wasn't so overcrowded and if taxi drivers weren't so rude.

They say every young professional should work in Joburg, at least at the start of their career, I never asked why but for me, this is not how I imagined my first year as a qualified Journalist.

I'm not complaining much though because I consider myself lucky. I work for one of the biggest daily newspapers in the country and I can confidently say that I'm doing pretty well.

It's the early morning trips from Berea to Auckland Park and the hectic trips back that I'm not sure about. Two taxi rides in the morning to Bree Taxi Rank where I have to endure long queues and deafening car hooters. In fact, you aren't a real taxi commuter if you've never witnessed a 'taxi fight' between a driver and a passenger, while inside the taxi.

I've witnessed many of those and they always start with the smallest things, like money that is short or someone banging the door and sometimes one taking too long to get off the taxi. Forget that they'd be jumping off in a dangerous spot anyway.

But this is Joburg, and everyone came here looking for something, some will find it, others will lose themselves trying to find it.

Me, today, all I'm looking forward to is a warm shower and my bed. I've had one heck of a day.

But first I have to take that dreadful daily trip back to my flat.

I could jump off 'after robot' and try to scout a taxi that will take me to Berea without having to go inside the rank, but I have no energy to wait so I jump off with all the others inside Bree.

The queue to Hillbrow is not that bad, just about 20 people. Whew! I'll get on the next one.

So I'm a journalist, and my six months on the job have taught me to always be interested in my surroundings. Sometimes I find myself staring at people or eavesdropping on conversations of strangers. I've been thinking that I should do a story on taxi queue marshals and their ability to intimidate anyone without speaking.

It would make a good read and maybe shed some light into why there is a need to be militant and arrogant for them to be successful in what they do.

"You can move now sisi"

Oh wow, the queue is moving, there's a huge space in front of me. But why didn't I see this very tall big-eyed man standing in front of me. He is probably a queue marshal or a driver. I've never seen him before.

I quickly move forward, partly embarrassed because, you know, you don't wanna be the psycho caught staring into space at a taxi rank like you're planning a mass murder or something.

He moves with me. Okay.

"You're late today, tell your boss I'll deal with him if he makes you work too hard," he says.

I don't know him, he doesn't know me, why is he talking to me? I don't have time for small talk. I blatantly ignore him.

I jump in the taxi that's now in front of me. He's the driver.

It's a 20 minute trip and I notice he keeps glancing at me in the rear-view mirror. It makes me uncomfortable.

“Short-right” I shout. I'm glad it's almost over.

He doesn't stop, instead drives in onto Buzeidenhout Street and parks right at my building gate, much to the irritation of six other passengers still left.

On a normal day I'd be annoyed, but today, urgh, he saved me about 100 meters of walking. I jump off. He looks at me and smiles. I don't smile back. He keeps smiling.

My flat, is cold as usual. It's pretty much one very big room divided into a kitchen on one corner, a lounge that can fit only one couch, a bedroom and en-suite bathroom with only a shower. It's small, but it's my space, mine alone, and it's my sanctuary, my messy sanctuary.

The fridge doesn't look appealing, so does the food I'd cooked yesterday so I settle for a bread roll and grated cheese and lettuce downed with green tea and head straight to bed hoping tomorrow will be less straining.

Oh yah, before I sleep I have to call Sandile, my boyfriend, that's if I can call him that. Our phone conversations have decreased to about two a day in the past two months. I knew things would change when I left him behind in Durban but when I look at it now; we never really had much of a relationship. I think he found me dull and different but held on to me because he hoped one day I'd let him in between my thighs.

That call was not worth even a minute of my time.

I'm surprised I was able to wake up before 7am. I'm the type that can sleep at 6pm and wake up at 6am the next morning. I'm such a deep sleeper that I'd never wake up even if I dreamt I was being chased by lions. I have to be at work by 8.30am but earlier would be great because well, I don't even have a story for today.

Bab'Gumbi, as always is already sitting on his chair outside the tiny security guard house at the gate. I don't know how he does it but he is always in high spirits. He once told me that he was from uMsinga and that if he had a son, he'd make sure I marry him, only he has four daughters.

I greet him and walk past as fast as I can. I like him, but his long ancient stories not much.

The taxi stop is a few meters from the building gate but I get there just as one is driving off. There's a car parked, a Corolla Sprinter with tinted windows. Creepy.

As I stand anxiously hoping another taxi will come soon, the car's window rolls down and I hear someone say “I'm waiting to take you to work”.

Oh hell, it's the bug-eyed dude again.

I look behind me to check if Bab'Gumbi is still at the gate. Good, he's still there but his face is buried in the newspaper. Atleast if I run back screaming he will hear me.

“No thanks,” I say, avoiding eye contact and hoping that a taxi will appear.

“I'm not a serial killer, I promise I'll be nice,” he says.

I look behind me again. This can't be happening to me. I've written many stories about women who get into cars and are later found dead in open velds.

I didn't come to Joburg for this.

Whew! a taxi in front of me, I jump in.

The driver seems to be waving at bug-eye but I don't have time to pay attention to that. Atleast now I know I'm safe. I don't know where the car disappears to. I don't care.

I make it to work 15 minutes before the diary meeting and luckily I get a call about some married musician killing another man over another woman. The things Joburg people do sometimes!

I'm set for the day and by midday I'm in Zola, Soweto, shooting questions to a weeping mother on

how she feels about her son being killed over someone's mistress. My mother would freak out if she understood the lack of conscience and morals my job comes with.

It turns out to be a good story, the singer has been arrested, the wife has disappeared and the neighbours are generous with information, although some of the things they say don't add up.

Word is the woman at the centre of this was using the musician for money which she spent with the now dead boyfriend. Not that anybody needs to go to school to know the basics of economics. Harvard for what?

I'm back at the office by noon and by 5pm I'm packed and ready to go. I walk out with a bunch of colleagues and we are chatting away when I notice the same car from the morning parked outside the gate. Now I'm not scared, I'm angry.

I furiously walk to the car before he opens the window.

"What do you want?"

"I want to take you home"

"No!"

"Please," he says with that annoying smile on his face.

"No," I say, looking him straight in the eye, too long for my comfort so eventually I give in and look away.

"Why?" he asks, still smiling.

I'm done talking.

I walk away, fuming.

I get to Bree when the queues are already long. Oh and yah, there he is chatting to other taxi drivers. He probably got here before me. I try by all means not to look his direction, 20 minutes later I get in a taxi.

Yes, he gets on the driver's seat, and I'm sitting on the front seat, next to him. He looks at me and smiles before starting the car. I look away, I won't even be collecting money. Seriously I didn't come all the way from KwaMashu to entertain taxi drivers, let alone date one, that's way below my level.

He puts on a CD and skips on to some maskandi song that goes like "*noma ungangichizela ntombi kodwa uyoze ungiqome*" (*You can snub me now but you'll love me eventually*).

He can't seriously be directing this song to me. WTF?

He drops me off at my gate again. I don't turn to look at him but I can feel his eyes on me, and I'm sure he is smiling. He waits until I'm inside the gate.

It's after 6pm and Bab'Gumbi is gone already. I don't know this night security guard but he sounds like he is from Malawi or that side of the world.

I've had a good day, except for bug-eye stalking me, so I'm in the mood to cook and watch some TV. I'm even in the mood for a long chat with Langa, not that I can go a day without talking to him but any interaction with him requires excessive energy to laugh, be shocked and just appreciate that he is who he is.

"I almost sent Khumbulekhaya to find you," his first words when he answers the phone. No hello.

"Because I didn't speak to you yesterday? Sorry I was busy having sex"

He doesn't believe me but he is grossed out anyway. He talks and I listen, laugh and love him even more than I did before I phoned him.

I forgot to tell him about the bug-eye stalker, which reminds me; I must call the boyfriend and have the usual brief meaningless conversation with him.

I hope bug-eye won't be waiting for me in the morning but by now I already know he doesn't give

up that easily. I don't even know his name but he's managed to be the last thing I think about before I go to sleep. He succeeded to change my reaction from being scared to being angry with him to being offended by that sleazy maskandi song on one day.

Oh and he completely defeated me in a staring contest. His eyes are deep I noticed, even under that cap he is always wearing, they are big and deep and piercing.

Wait! Why am I thinking about a taxi driver's eyes? Nx!

I see the car as I open my bathroom window, parked at the taxi stop.

I know I've been to church only twice since I came to Joburg but this? This? What about all the Sundays I went and actually paid attention to the priest? Oh and that time I paid R100 tithe, what about that one?

This morning I decide to stop and have a little chat with Bab'Gumbi, just so this pest sees that I have protection in case he wants to try and kidnap me. I walk past his car to stand very close to the road.

This time he gets out of the car and walks straight to me. I didn't realize he was this tall the first time I saw him. I look at him as he approaches, Nike track pants, Nike jacket, sneakers and that usual cap. It's taxi-rank couture.

"So you're going stomp on my ego again?" he says. The idiot doesn't even greet.

"No, I'm going to get in the taxi and go to work and leave you here because I don't know you and you are getting on my nerves," I say as I flag down the oncoming taxi.

It stops. The driver peeps over as I open the door.

"Mageba," he says. He is speaking to this idiot still standing at the taxi door.

The taxi drives off. I get to Bree and somehow something seems different. All of a sudden these taxi drivers are looking at me like they know me, random smiles and shit like that.

Luckily there's no queue to Auckland Park so I'm gone before things get even more weird. I'm dropped off at the gate of my office building instead of the road behind. I won't even ask.

First thing I do at work is call my mom. She's at work already, long enough to complain about patients who come to the clinic for useless things like, like tummy aches. Okay.

The day in the newsroom is as usual, insane. One colleague notices that I'm a bit distracted today but I'd rather not say much, I don't want them going full force journalism FBI on the annoying bug-eye.

Strange though, he keeps crossing my mind. I start wondering about who he is and why he is so persistent. And then I remember, he is a Nike tracksuit wearing, Sprinter driving, maskandi playing taxi driver. That's enough to get me back to concentrating on my work.

I leave at about 6pm today. It's already dark but luckily a colleague has offered to drop four of us off in town. Without realizing it, I peep through the car window as we drive out of the office gate, no Sprinter. He's given up, good.

At the rank I get the same feeling I got in the morning. Infact this time one of the queue marshals picks me from the crowd and leads me to the front. I am, amid begrudging looks from fellow commuters, placed on the front seat. Congratulate me; I'm officially a taxi queen. And yes, the bug is driving.

He puts on that stupid song again, really? A smile reaches my lips before I can stop it. I look away immediately. He saw it, he smiles and looks away too, says nothing.

"I'll see you in the morning," he says as he stops at my gate. I say nothing, but I can feel his stare as I walk away, he waits until I'm inside, and drives off.

My grandmother warned me about Joburg, she said it's not a place for an innocent girl like me. Look now, off all the men, and there are many very worthy men in this town, I am defeated and dis-empowered by a taxi driver. Oh I never!

Langa puts me on high spirits as usual. I know he senses that something is going on with me but he's probably waiting for the right moment to pounce.

"I can see through you, don't ever forget that. I got the penis, you got the vagina, but you are me and I am you," he always says.

It's funny how different we are.

I have to call the boyfriend. Come to think of it, he never calls me, I'm always the one calling him.

I make it to the morning alive, that's something to be taken seriously if you live in Berea.

The Sprinter, yes it is back. I walk out the gate with my feisty girl attitude. This guy doesn't know me, I'm not getting in that car, who does he think he is?

He comes out and walks around to the passenger door as I approach. Reebok this time. He leans on the car door, ankles crossed, hands folded across his chest. He looks at me, like I'm the only living thing in the world, like he has waited for this moment all his life. I am supposed to feel uncomfortable round about now. I'm not.

I walk straight to him and shoot: "How long are you going to follow me around?"

He smiles right after an expression that says "I'm rolling my eyes" without actually rolling the eyes.

"Until your surname is Zulu," he says.

The smile, again, runs to my lips without warning me.

He opens the car door. I want to protest, but he is looking at me, I'm defeated, I get in. The bloody bug!!!

The plan is to look out the window throughout the trip, no talking and no agreeing to anything. I'm not sure when I decided on this plan because when I left my flat five minutes ago I wasn't going to get in this car.

"So, Mahlomu, how long are you going to be mean to me?"

Huh?

"How do you know my name?"

"I know your surname too...and a lot more," he says with a smirk or a smile or a.....I don't know anymore with this guy.

"My name is Mqhele by the way," he says.

Whatever, bug-eyes, I think to myself.

The trip to work seems shorter today, could be because I didn't have to take two taxis or most probably the fact that I'm having a flowing conversation with a man I thought wanted to kidnap and kill me just three days ago.

His car is cleaner than I thought, not that cleanliness is an issue with me but I mean, it's a Sprinter, my uncle had it in the early 90s. I notice an empty cup of McDonalds McFlurry, really? Ice cream? It's 7.30 in the morning.

We didn't really get into deeper details about ourselves but we were talking, and we were laughing and we had eye-lock moments and we connected, really really connected.

I realize after he leaves that he didn't ask for my phone number. Oh good, now I want him to call me? What's next Hlomu? Hand him your vagina on a dessert bowl?

My office desk phone rings just as I sit, must be someone giving me a story.

“You looked beautiful this morning, as always. You’ll look even more beautiful in isidwaba,” he says.

“You have my office number too?”

“Yes and your cell number”

Why am I impressed by all this?

“Should I bring you lunch?” he asks

“I don’t think you’re the type that asks for permission to do anything, but no, I’ll probably be out of the office the whole day. And by the way, I’ll never wear isidwaba,” I say before a non-negotiable goodbye.

Three phone calls later it’s time to knock off and yes the Sprinter is parked outside.

I need to start asking this guy some questions.

“So, while you chase me all over Johannesburg, who is driving for you?”

For a moment he looks at me like he doesn’t understand what I’m talking about, and then, immediately says: “Nqoba is there”.

“Who is Nqoba?”

“My brother”

“Okay,” I say and move on to scanning my surroundings. This time there’s an empty KFC ice cream cup. Alrighty then, atleast it’s not cones.

There’s also a box of cigarettes, he smokes, I’ve never seen him smoke but I can tell he is deep in it.

“Can you drive?” he asks. Randomly.

“No”.

“You must learn. It’s important that you do,” he says.

Who is this now? My father?

The trip home is even better than the morning one. By the time he parks at my gate I know I will miss him the moment I step out of the car. But I can’t show him that. I’m from KwaZulu-Natal, KwaMashu that makes me a cross-breed between a hard-head and a manipulator.

With a simple ‘thanks’ I get out of the car, close the door and start walking away. To my surprise he sits still, watches me walk and only drives off after I switch on the light in the kitchen.

Good for him.

I have to catch up on some reading so no TV for tonight. “Five Quarters of An Orange” that’s the book I’ve been trying to manoeuvre for the past three weeks. If only I could figure out what this woman is on about because I can’t figure out if this is a cookbook or a horror tale about her creepy mother. Anyway, I have to write a review, so I have to finish it.

He calls me two times before I have to go to sleep at 10pm. And as I switch off the side-lamp, I realize I forgot to call the boyfriend. He’ll be strong.

I didn’t ask Mqhele if he’ll pick me up the next morning, but I know he’ll be there.

Yes, he isn’t bug-eye, or idiot or stalker or taxi driver anymore, his name is Mqhele Zulu.

He is there. As I approach the gate I notice he isn’t in the car, but inside the gate talking to Bab’Gumbi. He is not wearing his cap, wow! this is the first time I’ll see him without it. Okay, I’ve known him for about four days.

He has the cap in his hands and seems to be squashing it. He stands with his head bowed and his shoulder bent a bit. Bab’Gumbi seems to be doing all the talking, it doesn’t look like a friendly chat, more like someone threatening the other judging by the way the old man keeps pointing a finger at him. They stop talking when I reach them. Bab’Gumbi smiles at me, but his smile fades,

turns into what looks like a 'warning' face when he looks at him.

He opens the gate and leads me to the car, his hand on my back. This is the first time he's touched me. I get butterflies in my stomach.

"And then? Bab'Gumbi?" I ask.

"Looks like he is not just the building security guard, he's the women security guard too," I can't help laughing.

"What did he say?"

"He said he'll find me and shoot me if I do anything bad to you"

"Are you going to do anything bad to me?" I ask, I need to test waters here.

"Depends on what you see as bad,"he says.

The problem right now is that I don't know if he's serious or joking.

Not the answer I wanted, not an answer I'm comfortable with, not an answer I will forget about in future.

But I let it pass and move on to telling him about that musician who shot a man over a girl story. He finds it funny. He laughs, a lot, but I can't help worrying that I don't know anything about him, although I now own the front seat of the Sprinter these days.

My cellphone rings, it's Langa.

"You've found a man, I can feel it" he says. What is it with these people who don't greet, including this one next to me.

"Take your Ritalin and calm down please, it's too early in the morning," I say.

"Yeah right, call me when you get to the office, I miss you,"

"Will do, there's something I need to tell you anyway," I say before hanging up.

Mqhele is looking at me with a curious face. He wants to know who I was talking to, but he doesn't ask.

"Oh, that was Langa, he drives me crazy," I put him out of his misery.

"Langa? Friend or....." he asks.

"Twin"

"You are a twin?" he asks like it's some form of disability.

"Yes, I have a twin, a boy twin, we are almost identical,"

I'm not sure what this look on his face means.

"Yeah I know a lot about being identical, especially me and Qhawe, we're almost the same age" he says.

"Qhawe?"

"My brother," he says.

Oh. Okay. Two brothers so far.

During the day he brings me lunch at work. Nandos. Well atleast it's not Streetwise Two or pap and liver from the taxi rank. I'm happy about the lunch but I'm more happy about seeing him, I've missed him and his tracksuits. I'm gonna have to ask him at some point about his love for them.

Again, he just parks at my building gate and waits for me to get off the car, no attempt to kiss me at all.

Yah no, it's up to me now. I can't have another Sandile on my stoep. Speaking of that one, I'll dump him via sms, tonight.

"Do you love coffee?" I ask.

“No, I love you” he says.

The shock on my face!

He is looking at me, like he is piercing through my soul, that look....

But I’m a fighter....I get back up.

“Tea?” I ask.

He laughs and starts the car. I signal to the security guard to open the gate and we drive in. I’ve never had a man in my flat before, well, I’ve never had a man in my life except this deuchebag I’m yet to dump.

He walks behind me rather slowly, I assume he wants to finish his cigarette before we reach the door.

As we walk, I ask myself a few times if I am doing the right thing. Who is this man by the way?

He stands at the door and looks around the flat. I realize how small my place is by the time it takes him to look around the whole place, but then, he has gigantic bug-eyes, maybe they move faster.

I direct him to the only couch to sit. It’s just before 6pm, still early enough for me to cook.

“You can sit I’ll make you tea,” I say as I leave the living room for the kitchen.

“And dinner,” I say, peeping through from the kitchen. He says nothing but I sense some approval when he leans back on the couch.

I had left a tray of chicken thighs to defrost in the sink when I left for work in the morning. The plan was to boil just two and have them with green salad for dinner.

This one doesn’t seem like the boiled chicken and salad type so crap, it’s chopping and spicing time.

I found muffins I had forgotten about in the fridge. I warm two and serve him with tea. I wasn’t wrong about him being comfortable, he’s even holding the remote now and on some sports channel I didn’t know existed. The audacity!

Chicken is marinated and goes to the oven. A packet of mixed vegetables from in the microwave grill as I make savoury rice on the stove and some gravy on the side. I’ll still make that green salad when I’m done cooking.

I decide I’m going to stay in the kitchen until I’m done cooking, not sure why. I move around frantically trying to cook four things at once but within an hour I’m done.

I pour warm water in one of the bigger bowls, get a dishcloth and head for the lounge. He’s still watching sports. I bend next to him, put the basin in front of him, he reaches and washes his hands, takes the table cloth and wipes them dry. A part of me feels that he is shocked by all this but his face and body language doesn’t show. I leave for the kitchen. He is a tad quiet than usual.

I come back carrying a tray with a plate of all the food I’ve cooked, a glass of juice and some chillies, I don’t even know if he eats them, or any of the things I cooked.

I’m not sure whether I should join him or let him eat alone and have my dinner when he’s gone. But then again, this is my house, I’m gonna go sit next to him with my plate. He’s already eating when I settle next to him.

“So where do you live?” I ask.

“Naturena”

Oh good, I thought he was going to say Denver Hostel or something.

“With?”

“By myself,” he says.

“Sure?”

"I'm not married if that's what you're asking," he says.

"Okay, that's better,"

He laughs out loud.

"I hope you'll be cooking for me every day, I've never had food this good," he says.

I blush, and immediately remember that this guy is still trying to get me to be his girlfriend, he'll say anything to make me happy.

"I mean it," he says, as if he read my mind and discovered my doubts.

I want to know more about him.

"So when you're not at the rank your brother drives the taxi for you?"

"Sort of, but Sambulo is there most of the time as well,"

"Sambulo?"

"Yep, my brother," he says.

"Any sisters?" I ask.

"There hasn't been a female born in my family in over 100 years," he says.

Huh? Weird.

That's three brothers now.

"Well, I only have one brother, and a 14-year-old sister," I say.

"Where does your twin stay?" he asks.

"Cape Town, he's still at University,"

"How old are you?" he asks.

"22, good to know there's something you don't know about me for a change. And you?"

"27. You're beautiful," he says.

He is so random.

The next thing we know it's 10pm, he has to go and I have to clean up before I go to sleep. I walk him to the door. He walks out but turns and stands at the doorstep, me inside and him outside. He looks at me, his hands in his pockets and says "I'll see you in the morning," before turning and walking away.

Let me conclude that he is shy, let me just do that.

I hear him driving out the gate and an sms coming in. Where is my phone anyway? I still have to dump someone before I sleep.

"I miss you already," the sms reads.

I wish he'd come back, but I won't say it.

"I hope you enjoyed the food and yes, I can cook for you every day if you want," I respond.

"Goodnight. I don't love coffee, I love you".

I'm not responding to this one.

Now for that other sms I need to send, yeah, "it's over".

I put my phone on silent and go to sleep.

I'm woken by a knock on the door.

What? 5am? How did this person get through gate security?

I put on my robe and walk to the door but first I peep through the window, the Sprinter is outside.

“Hlomu it’s me” says a voice from outside.

Now I’m creeped out.

I open the door, then the burglar guard. He steps in and grabs me by the waist, pulls me towards him, and kisses me.....

Chapter 2

It's been a week since that kiss that was an official stamp on my 'taxi queen' status. But I haven't set foot at a taxi rank since the day I got in the Sprinter.

I have been driven to work and picked up and brought lunch and and I'm in love.

This afternoon as usual he is at my flat.

"When are you coming to Naturena?" he asks.

He is random like that, you just never know what he's going to ask next.

I hesitate a little. I had forgotten that I don't know where he lives.

"I could come this weekend?"

"Tomorrow after work?" he says.

It's Wednesday today by the way, I had forgotten.

"Yep that's fine with me, plus I'm off on Friday anyway," I say.

I still worry though about when he does his work. He told me he is at Bree by 4am every day so I shouldn't worry about his work, he gets lunch hours too. Since then I've heard of three more brothers, Ntsika, Mqoqi and Mpande. I've never met any of them but I know they're all in Joburg. There's been phone calls when I'm around and I've seen the fondness on his face when he speaks to them.

And I have been cooking ever since which has been followed by kissing and cuddling. I'm happy with that. But tomorrow could change everything.

Oh and I told Langa about my 'taxi-queen' escapades, he says I need a prayer, plus a sangoma plus Shembe Vaseline plus a psychologist. I'm ignoring him on that subject.

When he arrives to pick me up in the morning, he doesn't come in, I'm already late so I meet him at the gate. He's standing outside the car, smoking.

I walk out of the flat with two bags, my handbag and an overnight bag. It's a good thing Bab'Gumbi is on night shift this week otherwise I'd have been embarrassed walking past him with an overnight bag to a man I've known for only two weeks.

He is in his tracksuits again, I stopped checking the brand long ago. He puts my bigger bag in the boot but first, a hug and a kiss. He is always so warm, mostly his hands. I think he knows I get butterflies when he gets too close to me.

I can't say I'm looking forward to this evening, but I'd do anything to spend time with him, even if means going to his house or back-room or whatever it is that taxi drivers can afford.

Infact, I'm starting to think I've been unfair here. This guy probably earns half my salary but he transports me to work and buys me lunch everyday. No, this is wrong.

The day goes faster than I had hoped and by 5pm he is at the gate. Traffic to the south is usually bad but he knows all the back routes so we are there in no time.

We park outside a gate with a long fence, you can't really see the actual house from the outside but it is one of those typical low-cost subsidies. It's a two bedroom house with two bathrooms. I scan it with my eyes and then I look at him, he knows in my mind I'm asking how he can afford this house, but he knows I won't ask, and I know he won't tell me.

"This is your house, I live here," he says.

I noticed he said 'your' house, I've been saying, he is shady.

“Does that mean I can change the curtains?” I ask jokingly.

“You can change anything you want to change, except the person who lives in it,” he says with that “laughing but not joking” look that only he can pull off.

“It’s a nice house, I like it,”

He looks at me, seemingly impressed and relieved at the same time.

It is a nice house really, the only problem is colour coordination from the curtains to the floor tiles to the couches and pretty much everything else. It looks like ten different houses.

I notice a guitar leaning against the wall in the lounge.

A call comes in, sounds like a problem with a taxi somewhere. I see him panicking a bit.

“Dali, I have to go somewhere, I’ll be back as soon as I can there’s a problem I need to sort out,” he says.

Yes, he calls me dali, baby, love. I’d expected him to call me by my clan name but he disappointed.

Now, I don’t ask what the problem is because I’m the type that’s more comfortable with asking ‘what happened’ rather than ‘what’s happening’, partly to avoid being expected to contribute to a solution, rather I get involved when it’s come and gone.

I let him go after assuring him that I’ll make myself at home. The house is clean so I decide to go take a shower, it’s not that cold today.

No shower gel, nothing in this bathroom, just sunlight soap. I empty my toiletry bag and line my stuff on the space by the hand sink. If I’m going to be here the whole weekend I might as well unpack.

After taking a shower, I’m still undecided on what to wear for the night, good thing he isn’t here because now sexy lace boy-legs and top, long winter pyjamas and silk nightie are lined on his bed. Eventually I settle for the lace and a silk robe on top.

He’s still not back, I think about phoning but urgh, maybe not. I decide to make some tea even though I don’t really like it, just to pass time, but there are no tea bags, no sugar, infact the fridge has more alcohol than actual food. Geez, I’ve never really asked him if he drinks or not. There’s literally nothing to eat in this house.

The door opens. He goes to every room in the house first until he finds me in the kitchen, but he doesn’t come in, he stands at the entrance and stares.

Finally he says: “This is how I imagined it would be”.

I’m not sure what he is on about but I walk towards him to give him a hug. Good, he brought food.

“Problem sorted?” I ask.

“Yeah, nothing a few hundreds can’t solve where traffic cops are involved,” he says, and that’s all he’s going to say.

He draws me closer to him, starts unfastening my robe and I flinch. He notices.

“I want to see you....” He says, looking into my eyes but still unfastening.

My robe drops on the floor before I can gather strength to protest, I am now semi-naked with only two pieces of lace covering probably a quarter of my body.

He looks at me, like I’m a pot-plant or some sort of decoration. I’m not sure what to make of this. I keep thinking he’ll let me go and have dinner first but his hands are already running on my back, we are kissing before I know it and my arms are under his arms and hands at the back of his shoulders.

I should be cold standing in the kitchen with only sleepwear on, but I’m not. The kissing gets deeper as he picks me up and puts me on top of the kitchen counter. My legs are wide open and he’s standing in between them. I want to push him away, but I can’t because I want him to

continue, but I can't let him.

Hands are now running under the clothes, yeah, that's my cue.

"Mqhele, wait....." I say, defeated.

He looks at me, bug eyes a little smaller than usual, it's like I've woken him from deep sleep.

"What's wrong?"

"No wait I can't," I say

Now he is fully focused, he looks either scared or stressed by all this. I gently push him aside, jump off the counter, pick up my robe and walk to sit on the couch. I don't know what he is thinking but I'm thinking right now he's probably saying to himself: "this girl is starting to annoy me".

I read somewhere that a wasted erection causes a short temper.

But he's not, he's following me looking worried like I'm going to tell him I'm a man or something.

I sit on the far end of the three sitter couch, my arms wrapped around my waist and my hands clenching both ends of my robe. I do that when I'm nervous, I clench onto something.

"Did I do something wrong?" he asks, now standing in front of me.

I look up to his face, I can't read his expression. I don't know what to say so I say nothing.

He bends a bit forward, low enough to put his left hand between his legs and pull forward the coffee table behind him. He sits on it. He is facing me, his legs open and both his knees pressed on either side of where I'm sitting. I realize he has me completely closed in, I won't be able to run if I have to.

I've resorted to avoiding eye contact but he won't budge, his eyes follow mine wherever I turn them.

He's not asking any more questions, I know he is done with that, what I don't know is what he could do if I continue acting shady.

I get distracted and our eyes meet, it's for a second, but enough for me to see he's changed from concerned to "bitch speak up" expression.

I'm just really nervous, I clench on my robe tighter and let it out.

"I'm scared....."

"Of what?" His response comes too quick, like he was expecting me to say that and annoy him even more.

"Of...I don't know, of that I won't know what to do," I say, strength gathered, eye contact maintained.

He says nothing but I know he is saying 'continue'.

"I'm a virgin", my mind does it again, it shoots straight to my mouth without warning me. That's not what I was going to say, I was going to tell him but I was going to make it sound less weird like: "I haven't had sex so far".

I lost eye contact again when I broke the big news so I'm looking at his thighs and I still have no idea what his reaction is.

He strokes the underneath of my chin with his two fingers, pushing my face up to look at him. It's not a gentle stroke I must mention.

I expect him to say something, give me a reaction, a response. But he just stares at me instead, really it's not even a stare it's like he's asking himself questions in his head, questions he should be asking me.

Suddenly his eyes are all over the place, he's the one avoiding eye contact now.

"I'm sorry about everything," he says.

Now I'm confused. I don't ask.

"I'm sorry for, I don't know, getting pissed off," he says. An apology is the last thing I expected, or that he'd completely ignore the virgin situation.

He stands up and walks to the main bedroom, he doesn't close the door but I have no idea what he's doing in there.

He comes back, walks past me to the door and goes outside. I know he's going to smoke.

I sit still, waiting for my brain to start functioning again.

Within minutes he's back. He sits next to me and places a scatter cushion on the corner of the couch and leans back. His one arm goes around my shoulder, he pulls me towards his chest and I don't protest, instead I put my arm around his waist area as I rest my head comfortably on his chest. I pull my legs up to rest on the couch and he does the same with his other leg. My lower body is in between his legs and where our feet meet at the end of the couch, he puts his on top of mine.

This is cosy, I love the smell of nicotine on him, I know it's crazy but I do.

I still want a reaction though on that little bomb I dropped, or was he already expecting it?

"You're the first virgin I've ever met in my life," he says.

WTF? Bug-eyes!

His comment is just stupid.

"So you've waited all this time?"

More stupid.

"Yes," I say.

"For what?"

Ghosh! Someone shoot me now!

"For you," I say. That wasn't me again, it was my mind and mouth colluding against me.

He uses his hand, which has been running through my braids this entire time, to turn my head so that I'm looking at him.

He stares into my eyes, like the way he did outside my office building, and that time I invited him for tea and

He gently rests my head back on his shoulder, kiss my forehead and holds me tight.

Wow, I'm being kissed on the forehead now? I guess tomorrow morning I'll be driven home with bags of Shoprite groceries, Mr Price voucher and some pocket money.

I'm woken by my sixth sense. Someone is standing over me. My eyes are only half open but I know this ain't my house. I scan the room and oh, I remember where I am, but wait a minute this is not where I was, this is the bedroom.

"You're heavier than I thought, had to use a wheelbarrow to get you here" he says.

It's still dark outside and already he's being himself. And why is he dressed? in a Puma tracksuit, already?

"Where are you going?" I ask in a yawny-tone.

"Work. I'll come by to check on you later," he kisses me on the lips this time and leaves, switching the light off on his way out.

Yah, so this is what girlfriends of taxi drivers have to go through? They leave us in bed at 3.30am?

I go back to sleep, I don't have strange problems like insomnia and crap like that.

I wake up to three missed calls from him, it's already 8am and honestly, I could still sleep more. There's an sms too.

"I left something on the coffee-table, please make that house a home".

What's he talking about now?

It's money, a lot of money, more than my monthly salary. How much do taxi drivers earn again?

I call Langa and have a brief chat. He's already heading for class but I know he was partying all night. I don't tell him about the money I've been left with, the dude is a student. He may judge me for dating a taxi driver but he won't judge his money.

I'm up already so I might as well start doing something in this house. I went to sleep without eating last night so the first thing I go to is the fridge to look for yesterday's take-aways, Chicken Licken, amen.

It's all there, which means he left without eating, I just have to warm it. No microwave. He doesn't have a microwave. Who doesn't have a microwave?

I must add it to the list of things I should buy for my 'making this house a home' assignment.

I decide to call him back.

"You sleep like a baby, a cute baby," he says.

He doesn't greet, I'm used to it by now.

"Good morning Zulu," I say.

"It's midday already for me," he says.

Me: "You didn't eat, why?"

Him: "I ate here at the rank".

Me: "What did you eat?"

Him: "pap and liver".

Me: "pap and liver? You had pap and liver for breakfast?"

Him: "and Sprite and ice-cream"

Jizas!!!

"I saw the money you left, it's too much for groceries, and a microwave,"

He laughs, I sense he finds the microwave part funny. He laughs at the smallest things really this one.

"Buy everything that will make living in that house bearable for you," he says.

But I have no plans of coming to live in Naturena. I don't say that to him though. I'm still faced with the crime of having a locked vagina, can't be committing more offences now.

After breakfasting on cold chilli meat and dry fried chips, I start cleaning from the guest bedroom, lounge, bathrooms and in the main bedroom I only make the bed and leave the closets for later before heading to the kitchen.

My phone rings, it's freaking Sandile!!! What the heck does he want?

Oh remember that sms I dumped him with? His response was: *"I didn't know we were still together".*

"Hi"

"Baby", he says.

"huh?"

"I'm in Joburg, I'd like to see you, I can come sleep over at your place tonight," he says.

Now, I know this guy, he's one of those guys you'd call a 'mama's baby' but when it comes to me, he develops some sly tendencies. I'm pretty sure he's in Joburg and doesn't have a place to sleep.

"Uh no, I don't think so, I'm busy," I say.

"Baby please we need to sort things out," he says.

I'm 'baby' now?

"No, just stop calling me," I say and hang up. I turn around to get a dish cloth.

Here he is. I know, I just know he's been standing here for a while. He heard that whole conversation.

"Who is that?" he asks without raising his eyes.

I stutter. I know my cheeks are red right now. I'm not sure why, I mean it's not like I've been caught cheating, I dumped the guy before I kissed him (that's an important factor in my case).

"Just some friend from Durban wanting a place to crash," I lie. He doesn't believe me.

"But you're not at your flat this weekend so you can let her sleep there," he says.

I thought this guy didn't go to school, why is he being a lawyer all of a sudden? I'm sure going to lose this case so I might as well plead guilty now.

"I don't think you'll like th..."

"Why?," that too-soon response again.

"Well, it's this guy I used to sort of date but I dumped him and..." I say it with zero conviction.

"No, stop it's fine I don't want to hear it. Just delete his numbers. If he calls again tell me I'll shoot him," he says, calmly.

Yeah okay I get that he is jealous. What I don't get though is why I fully believe him when he says he would shoot him.

He walks past me and straight to the bedroom. I figure he does that when he's upset.

He comes back, stands at the centre of the kitchen, hands in his Puma pants pockets and looks at me.

"So you dated this guy when?" he asks.

"Before you. But I can't really say it was a relationship, I haven't seen him in months and he doesn't know where I live here in Joburg....." I'm explaining too much aren't I?

I stop talking, his face has softened, but I know if he ever meets him he won't be nice. He is over it.

"Delete that number,"

I do as he says.

Wait a minute, I'm being controlled here.

While he eats what's left of the Chicken Licken I take a shower. Things have been too dramatic, I must remind this guy why of all the women who take taxis from Bree every day, he chose to stalk me.

My long thick braids are usually just tied back in a high pony-tail. I haven't discovered the beauty in make-up yet so I look the same during the day as I do at night.

I'm not a thin girl, I'm not a big girl either, but I'm masculine even though I've never set foot in a gym all my life.

What to wear? What to wear? I think as I manoeuvre through my overnight bag. It is winter but it's still midday and the sun is out so I can get away with wearing a light-front button sweater over my pale yellow dress.

I love this dress, it's one of the first expensive things I bought when I started working, not that there are many. It has a vintage element to it, very simple with a square-neckline, tight on the upper body and pencil shaped at the bottom. It goes down to just under my knees, but it's close, too close to the skin.

I'm pretty sure I look good in it with pumps, braids tied back, silver thin hoop earrings and my oversized sunglasses.

I walk out of the bedroom ready to go. Good, he's done eating. He is downing a bottle of Castle Light like it's Oros or something. I can't deal! Seriously I can't! It's 11am!

He sees me coming through the passage, stops drinking and stares, mouth open. Yep! I'm here.

"I'm ready," I say as I pack up the money on the coffee table.

"I have a list of the things I need to buy but I think I can get a cab back so you can go back to work. And I want to come back early so I can cook," I say.

"No don't cook tonight I'm taking you out,"

Whoah! That's a first. Infact I had not realised that this man has never taken me out, and then I remember I've known him for two weeks.

He refuses to drop me and leave me at Makro, I assume it's about the tight dress, but then he doesn't go inside with me instead stands chatting to some taxi driver people at what looks like an unofficial taxi rank outside. He 'instructs' some young guy to go in with me and push my trolley around.

I don't mind that, besides, these taxi drivers be looking at me like I'm a Chinese shop mannequin.

I come out an hour and some minutes later with two overflowing trolleys, featuring the microwave, some bathroom mats, plates, utensils, and some groceries.

Three young guys run to pack the stuff in the Sprinter. I get in the car and sit while they do it. I check the till slip, R5200 spent in one hour, but it's just half of what I've been given.

He gets in the car and we drive off.

"Is that all you need?"

Me: "No I think I'll do more shopping tomorrow, plus I need to get curtains, those ones you have are not curtains,"

Him: "yeah my ex bought them".

Oh hell no!

My cheeks turn red immediately. What ex-girlfriend now?

Breathe in.....breathe out Hlomu.....

"Oh!" I say, without looking at him.

When I do turn to look at him, he has the stupid-est smile on his face. He knows I'm jealous and he's happy about it.

"She wasn't as hot as you though," he says.

"Yeah I can tell by her taste in curtains," .

He laughs.

"Do you know that it took me three weeks to gather the strength to come up and speak to you? The first time I saw you I literally froze, I just stood there watching you coming towards me, you walked right past me,"

"From then on I waited for you every day for two weeks, I'd just watch you. Everybody at the rank ended up knowing and they all thought I was aiming too high. They all teased me about it but this old guy Bab'Ngcobo, he is like a father to me, he kept encouraging me to go speak to you," he says.

My rage starts melting away, I'm blushing now and all is forgotten about the style-less ex. I will come back to that later when he makes me angry again.

"Well I'm glad you gathered some strength at last, shame," I say

He laughs.

I've learned two things today: that this man is going to control me and that he can easily charm me into forgiving him for things I had no business being angry about in the first place.

After he drops me off and helps me unpack the shopping he leaves, says he has to go back to work before pick hour.

I'm alone again, I don't have to cook tonight so what do I do now? Oh yes, let me be domestic and tidy up the main bedroom closets although they're full of tracksuits and sneakers mostly.

I still haven't asked him if he plays the guitar. Judging by his taste in music, which he subjects me to every time I'm in his car, he plays maskandi guitar.

We're going to have to talk about these condoms when he comes back and why there are two in the pack instead of four. I don't care that I've known him for only two weeks.

I'm going to have to hang the jackets on one side, pants on the other, tie pairs of socks together, just to create space. I see in the space where there is supposed to be cosmetics there's only Vaseline, some Aqueous Cream, deodorant and a perfume spray, spray! SMH.

There has to be about 20 pairs of sneakers in here, some I'm sure he doesn't wear anymore but one thing I know is that they're all very expensive.

Space is scarce so I'm going to have to come up with some new changes.

Good, a bag, it's huge and black, I'll empty whatever is in it and put clothes I'm sure he doesn't wear anymore.

It's heavy, I have to use both my hands to pull it out from the far corner of the closet and place it on top of the bed. I don't get why he had to put it so far back, If I hadn't removed the clothes that were on top of it I would never have known it was there.

I have to struggle with the zip at first, looks like the bag hasn't been opened in a while but eventually it opens, and nothing could ever have prepared me for this, nothing at all!

I've have so many questions that I know I need to ask this man, too many.

I feel like there's more to him than what he gives. And now, a bag full of money in his closet? no, I can't deal with this.

I think about calling him, but what am I going to say? That I found money in your closet?

What if he is into some criminal shit, cash-heists and stuff like that. What have I gotten myself into?

Maybe I should just put the bag in the closet and say nothing, pretend I didn't find the bag and act normal.

Naaah, I'm a journalist by profession, I will ask even if I don't want to and I will remain calm through it all.

It's already getting dark outside so I go room-by-room closing the curtains and switching on the lights and the TV.

I hear a car pulling up and immediately rush back to the bedroom. He calls my name when he enters the house, I don't answer.

I hear his footsteps and know he is heading for the bedroom.

He enters but freezes at the door step, opens his mouth but says nothing. He looks at me with what I believe is shock.

I'm sitting on the bed with the big black bag next to me, my elbow resting on it. I'm just going to sit here, like this, and look at him until he tells me what kind of crime he is involved in before I dump him and get a restraining order.

He walks in slowly, takes the bag and puts it back where I found it. He sits next to me, still quiet. I can't!

"Where did it come from?" I ask, looking straight ahead at the bathroom door in front of me.

"I wake up at 3am every morning, that's the last thing you can ask me," he answers.

"I need to know if I'll have to go and bail you out of jail at some point in my life," I say, knowing I'm taking a risk.

"You find money in my house and immediately you assume I'm a criminal?" he says, also not looking at me.

I make eye contact, I need to see through him, all the way to his soul for this one. I'm about to be honest, too honest with him.

"I'd love you even if you were one," I say as I stand up and leave the bedroom.

I'm a few steps away from the kitchen, as a matter of fact I'm not sure where in this house I'm going, when I feel him grab me from behind.

He holds on tight, his arms crossed around my waist. I can feel his chest pumping but I can't hear him breathing, his face is far from my head, he is very tall.

We stand there like that for a while, his phone rings but he ignores it.

"Did you mean it?" he asks. I know he is random but this can't be one of those moments.

"Do you really love me?" he asks.

"I did. I meant it," I say as I turn around to face him. "Can we sit now? I'm tired of standing," I say and pull him by one hand to sit on the couch.

Instead he goes to the kitchen and leaves me sitting there alone. He comes back with two forks and a bottle full of something.

Say what? It's a jar of olives, really?

He hands me one fork and keeps the other, opens the jar and pulls out one olive with the fork, tosses it in his mouth and chews. He then hands the jar to me indicating that I should do the same, I do, I've hated olives all my life, but I do as he says.

"The money is mine, I worked for it," he starts talking.

I decide I won't comment or ask questions, in case I say something offensive again.

"We're planning on going into the trucking business, maybe sell some of the taxis, it's getting dangerous with the new routes coming....." he says as he tosses his third olive in his mouth.

I'm still battling with the first one.

I am beyond confused here. I have absolutely no idea where I am right now and who this person talking next to me is and what he is talking about.

I keep quiet still, but I'm looking at him as he speaks, I need to ask.

"When you say we who.....?"

"Me and my brothers," that too-soon answer again.

"I don't drive taxis, I own them, we own them, all eight of us," he says.

I'm still confused.

"But I've seen you driving a taxi three times....."

"Not a taxi, three different taxis, and they were all mine," he says.

I stand up and walk, I'm not sure where I'm going in the house but I know I'm angry, though I'm also not sure why I'm angry.

He doesn't follow me this time, instead he goes outside.

I can smell cigarettes coming from outside.

This is not how I foresaw this weekend. The plan was to lose my virginity to a taxi driver who drives a Sprinter and smokes like a chimney and eats ice cream and wears tracksuits. That's the Mqhele Zulu I know.

Infact let me get out of this bathroom and go to deal with this.

He finds me standing in the middle of the living room when he comes back. Hands on my hips.

"Okay, I always knew something didn't add up here. It's fine, now I want to know why you're keeping money in the house and not in the bank," I ask, as calmly as I can.

He doesn't answer, he just stares at me instead.

Why am I even cracking myself here?

"You don't have a bank account do you?" I ask.

"No I don't,"

"Why? How did you buy a house? A car?" I ask.

"Cash," he says.

This world never loved me. Of all men, I had to fall inlove with this one.

I throw myself on the couch. I don't even know why I'm so worked up right now.

He is still standing, his hands in his pockets and he seems unfazed by my drama at all.

"I'm hungry," I say. I'm really hungry and it's already going to 8pm.

The jar of olives is almost half empty, I don't understand this part and I won't try to. He eats olives in awkward times, I'll leave it at that.

He suggests we go out to get some food, since he had planned to take me out anyway. I suggest we do take-aways instead, plus I don't even know what he understands by 'taking out' so I won't risk it, the guy doesn't even have a bank account.

I wake up at about 7am and he isn't in bed. It is Saturday morning and I know exactly what we are going to do today, we're going to the bank. I assume he is outside smoking.

I make the bed quickly and jump in the shower. It's a cold day so I end up taking a long one. If I was at my flat I'd be singing.

I feel a bit of chill coming in and then, heavy presence behind me drawing very close. A hand on my waist, it's a warm hand and I know I've felt this touch before. I feel his whole body meet mine from the back, I bend my head backwards, it lands on his chest, he is so tall.

He reaches over and turns the tap off, opens the shower door and pulls a bathing towel. He wraps it around me as I turn around to face him. This is the first time I've seen his bare chest although I've rested my head on it so many times.

He leads me out of the shower into the bedroom, unties the towel and stands to look at me for a second before I'm in his arms again.

I'm lying on my back, not sure what to do exactly as his lips go through every inch of me. My breasts, it's like they have a life of their own right now. He goes down...the belly button, the stomach, my inner thigh and that's it! I can't! I grab his shoulders and try to pull him up. He doesn't fight me. His heavy breathing in my ear is the death of me, I dig my fingers in his back, I have never ever felt anything like this before. He pushes one of his legs in between mines,

forcefully so opening them wide. His hand wanders somewhere on the bed before it disappears somewhere on our bodies, now one.

I get an uncomfortable light pain, I don't want it to stop though. It's gone in a second and then pressure, a very warm tingling but painful feeling of something pushing into me. It's almost unbearable and I almost push him away, he notices and starts to withdraw but I pull him back on top of me.

"It's going to hurt," he whispers in my ear and that on its own, sends tingles all over my body.

"I'll be fine," I whisper back, struggling to even get the words out.

He pushes more and looks me in the eye as he does. I can't look at him, not when I'm this powerless but I have nowhere else to look, my head is resting on his lower arms which he has wrapped around my neck and I am completely under his control. His eyes fixed on mine, he pushes harder and harder until the most excruciating pain sends me on a hysterical scream. He again attempts to pull out, I hold him tighter and open my legs wider, he starts to move...and move...and move.

Now, the only thing that has entered my body in my life is what goes in through my mouth, and it disappears after passing the throat so I've never really felt anything *inside* me.

Each time he moves my fingers dig deeper onto his back, his heavy breathing and moaning sends me into a world I never thought existed and the next push takes me to a level I cannot explain, my toes curl, my fingers are shaking as a wave of tingles flushes across my whole body. I close my eyes, I want to hold him tighter but I can't, my body is not mine at this moment, I can't control it.

I am brought back to this world by a sudden pain, I'm not sure where it is coming from and I try to move my neck, I can't, he is pulling my braids, his breathing and moaning louder and louder, he lets out a loud groan and shortly after lets his body loose on top of me.

I'm still holding him tight, after gaining his own strength he raises his head to look at me, a little smile on his face.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

All I do is smile. I'm not sure if this is a sincere or sarcastic question, but all I can do is smile at these bug-eyes staring at me at close range.

Chapter 3

Now that I'm a woman, let me introduce myself.

My name is Mahlomu Dladla. I was born and raised in KwaMashu township in Durban.

I have a twin brother that looks exactly like me but is nothing like me, he is my best friend. I have a 14-year-old sister with an identity crisis, she doesn't understand black people at all.

My mother, a staunch Christian, is a nurse. She is a no-nonsense kind of lady like all women in their late 40s.

My father is a court interpreter, the last time he went to church was for his wedding 23 years ago. Me and Langa, we look exactly like him.

We were never wealthy but we were never poor either, we were a comfortable family. My parents almost got divorced twice. On the second time they went all the way to court, that was also when they shipped me and Langa to boarding school without any warning.

I'm not sure what happened but my dad came back home and everything was normal again.

I'm a beautiful girl, that I know, but I'm also insecure and tend to be extra-careful in most of the things I do. Which brings us to why I only started dating when I was at tertiary and gave my time to a guy I saw about five times a year. Yes there were a lots of guys that wanted me, some I knew were serious and genuine but urgh, I've always feared being in a position where I'd have to let a stranger into my life with no reservations.

I have friends, my gals, most of whom I met in school. I haven't told them about my taxi-queen status yet but Nana has been calling me suspicious lately. I love my 'bhitshiz' but they can judge.

I studied Journalism in Durban, did my internship at a small community newspaper before I got my big break at a daily newspaper in Joburg.

I've only been working six months and I love my job, demanding as it is, it's what I've always wanted to do.

In the time I've been here I try to go home in Durban atleast once a month just to see my parents and little sister. Langa, however, rarely ever comes home. His excuse is that Cape Town is too far and he can only travel by flight, he'll go nowhere near a bus to Durban.

When we were in matric he worked his arse off so he could get a bursary and go to study Economics at UCT. But I know why he did it, he wanted to be far away from home.

He's been to my flat more times that he's been home since he started varsity.

Which reminds me, I have to fill him in on the past two days.

"You must answer your phone at the first ring, especially when your employed sister calls your student broke arse close to pay day," I say when he answers. No greeting, it's rubbing off.

"Especially if the sister is the love of my life and she knows I've been eating noodles for the past two weeks and she wants to give poor me money. Howzit?" he says.

"I'm good, can you talk?"

"What's wrong?" he asks, he worries too much.

"Nothing's wrong relax. I slept with the taxi driver, and I love him,"

"Oh Lord! It's worse than I thought!" he says.

I expected that but I know he's not saying it in a bad way, just in his crazy way.

I decide not to tell him about my graduation from being the girlfriend of a taxi driver to that of a taxi owner in two weeks. This we will have to do over wine.

Mqhele is out at the car wash, he said he had to go see one of his brothers before coming back. It's still early in the day and I'm tidying up the house which turned into a mess because we spent pretty much all of yesterday in bed, cuddling and talking and eating and sexing.

I'd really love to go back to my flat this afternoon though. I have work tomorrow and it's the last day of the month, after that I'm on night shift for the whole of next month. I'll miss him and this house.

I've been here for only three days but already it has a homely feel, and groceries and a microwave. I'll cook him a fine meal before I leave.

He arrives just as I start peeling and chopping.

He smiles and says: "I've missed your cooking, can't believe I haven't had your food in three days, atleast I got the other food".

He says this as he runs his hand under my skirt up my thigh and presses me on the cupboard.

Seriously, I've had enough sex in the past 24 hours, anything more his sperms will shoot past the condom and straight to my womb.

I manage to distract him with something and he ends up leaning on the cupboard watching me do all the labour.

"How's your brother?" I ask.

"He's good, he just can't handle his women and now we all have to suffer,"

"Women?" I ask.

"Yes, his girlfriends were fighting at his tavern and one of them broke his windows. With bricks".

He is shaking his head as he says this.

I'm looking at him, frowning but I find this all funny I must say.

"Which brother?" I ask.

He stops scrolling his phone, looks up at me and stares for a second.

"Nqoba, I don't know where he finds these women," he says and goes back to whatever he is doing on his phone.

"Well, I'll break your windows too when you start being cheeky," I say

He smiles and walks over to me, grabs me from behind and peeps at what I'm stirring in the pot.

"Or you can just pour some love portion in that pot and I'll be your lapdog forever," he says in the most ridiculous tone.

"It will take far more than a love portion to turn you into a lapdog. Anyway, what time are you going to be able to take me home today?"

He frowns.

"Take you home? Why?" he seems confused by this.

"Because I have to go to work tomorrow. And I need to do some things because I'm starting night shift on Tuesday,"

"Night shift? What are you? A security guard?" he says.

I guess they behave like this after they get what they want don't they? They get comfortable and start thinking they're funny.

My flat looks rather different. It feels like I've been gone for weeks. I feel different myself.

This man came in with me. The plan was that he'd drop me off but when we arrived he got out of

the car first and headed straight to my house. I don't think he's going to leave too, not that I mind, the sex is my new found happiness.

I don't know where he is from originally because nobody really comes from Joburg unless they're from Soweto.

His Zulu is also very deep so I know his umbilical chord is buried in a kraal in some village in KwaZulu-Natal.

I decide to bring up the subject.

"So where are you from, as in like your home?" I ask.

"Greytown, that's where I was born but I can't really call it home," he says.

"Why?"

"Long story. How's the twin?" he asks, obviously changing the subject.

"He's good. Oh and I have to deposit some money for him tomorrow, he's been living on noodles and bread for weeks. I might ask you to go do it for me in town tomorrow if I can't get off work," I say.

"But don't your parents take care of him?"

"They do but he shops and parties and he's broke within a week," I say.

He laughs at that. He assumes I haven't told Langa about him because you know, where we come from, your girl's brother starts talking to you or even seeing you as a human being after you pay lobola.

I had planned to go to sleep early but with him around it's impossible, we go to sleep after midnight. I noticed him sending an sms earlier, I hope he wasn't saying goodnight to some hoe.

I manage to wake up at 6am and prepare breakfast, full with bacon, eggs and the works.

I was planning to serve him breakfast in bed but he is already in the kitchen when I finish.

"I wish you'd wake up at this time every day, I don't like this 3am thing, it gets me worried," I say, expecting him to make some lousy joke about it but he disappoints.

"I'm used to it. We have to make sure the taxis are on the road by 5am,"

I dish up and leave his food on the coffee table while I go get ready to go to work.

It's a cold day so I settle for a black dress, thick black pantihose and a red trench coat with black pumps. I don't wear high heels, I just find them uncomfortable plus the nature of my work just doesn't accommodate them.

He didn't bring any clothes when we came here yesterday so I'm wondering what he is going to wear. He comes out in the same tracksuit he arrived wearing. Okay.

"That was the best breakfast. You could top it up with some dessert," he says grabbing me by the waist.

Oh ghosh!

"We have to go or I'll be late," I say heading for the door.

I ask to stop by the garage on our way to get some juice, I draw money from the ATM inside while he sits in the car. It's pay-day after all. The peanuts I'm earning though, sigh. I should have taken all that money left from the shopping.

I hand him a piece of paper with Langa's banking details before I get out of the car at work. I leave R500 in the car ashtray and ask him to go deposit it for me. He gives me an annoyed look and says nothing. I hope he knows how to deposit money. Which reminds me, I have to take him to open a bank account soon.

I have to go out again today, that musician who killed a man is in court in Soweto, that place is dusty even when it's cold. I'm out of the office by 9am and already we've spoken three times on the phone, we always have something to talk about.

I'm having my township lunch when Langa calls and sounds like he's in some loud hippie concert.

"Thank youuuuu.....you're a star! What happened? Did you get a raise or something?"

"What? No. what are you so happy about anyway?" I don't know what he's on about plus I'm being disrupted from my lunch by his madness.

"The R3000! Whoop! I promise I'll buy you something nice when I start working, if you keep this up," he laughs.

WTF?

"I'll call you back later, I have to go," I say as I hang up.

But why does Mqhele have to be so shady? Why?

I call him and he doesn't answer. Now he's pissing me off. I dial him again and he still doesn't answer. He's ignoring me on purpose, let's see how long he's going to last. I switch off my phone, let's see how that's gonna work for him.

I've decided I'm going to catch a lift from a colleague who'll drop me off in town where I'll take cab to my flat. I don't even want to go anywhere near Bree taxi rank, I don't want to see him! Nx!

I'm done with work early so I leave with my colleague 30 minutes before my normal knock-off time. Good! There is no Sprinter at the gate yet. Off I go.

I'm home in no time. I'll prepare a light meal and watch some TV, I don't have to wake up early tomorrow morning anyway because I'll start work at 3pm. My phone is still off by the way, honestly I miss him but I can't allow stuff like this to happen.

I also know he won't allow me to switch off my phone and not be there when he comes to pick me up from work. So I wait, I know he'll be banging on my door soon.

He's here, as to how and why the security guards just let him in, I don't know.

I know by the way he is knocking that it's going to be a long night. I think about not opening but I know he won't leave, besides I won't be that neighbour with a crazy boyfriend.

I open the door but the burglar guard is still locked so he's still outside and I'm in.

He doesn't say anything, just looks at me, eyes red and his face is like I've never seen, rage.

I still have the key in my hand and I won't unlock this burglar-guard, not with that look on his face.

Swiftly he reaches through a space on the burglar guard and grabs my arm, goes for my hand and snatches the keys. I let out a scream, rattled by the way he grabs me.

In no time he's unlocked it and is walking in. I move backwards towards the couch, I've never seen him like this.

He comes towards me, he still hasn't said a word but his face says it all.

The next thing I feel is a throbbing pain across my face, I fall on the couch and land on my side. This is not happening, not to me!

My first instinct is to get up and try to run to the bedroom but he is standing over me and sends me back on the couch with another slap. I'm crying now, my face is burning, I cover it with my arms, it's the only defence I have.

I try to move my body but something is pressing me down, he has his one knee pressing over my ribs as I lie on my side. I stay in that position, I'm scared of getting another slap if I move my arms from my face. My crying and screaming doesn't stop him from hitting me on the back and thighs with his open hand.

I know only one thing could save me from this.

"I'm sorry...I'm sorry.....I'm sorry" I keep screaming as he continues battering me.

It seems to be working. He grabs one of my arms, leaving my face exposed.

He looks me in the eye and says: "Don't ever do that nonsense again".

He storms out.

It takes about 10 minutes before I stand up and go lock the door. In my mind I don't believe what just happened but the pain I'm feeling is all the proof I need.

I should never have gotten in that Sprinter. I should never have.

Chapter 4

See, my father has never laid a hand on me, let alone a man I don't even know.

I know girls who get beaten up by their boyfriends and I know that the physical pain is nothing compared to the feeling of being degraded, exposed, unworthy that comes with it.

I've seen beautiful, smart and strong girls like me turning into bitter ticking time bombs not because of the hate they have for the men who beat them, but the hate they have for themselves for allowing it to happen.

That is exactly how I feel right now. I have given a man I hardly know every bit of me in just two weeks. There were signs, yes there were a lot of signs. They were all over, the way he kept coming back even after I was clear that I wasn't interested, the way he reacted on my first night at his house, that time I found that bag full of money.....maybe I should go to the police.

It's going to 3am and I haven't slept at all, I haven't moved and I haven't spoken to anyone. My phone is still off and if I even hear Langa's voice, I will break completely.

I'm scared to look in the mirror, what if I have a black eye or something. What really confuses me about this is that he didn't even ask me why my phone was off, why I didn't wait for him to pick me up and why I was angry with him.

So why did he hit me?

I've taken two pain killers, not that I think they can numb this pain, they'll help me sleep. I need to escape from this, even if it's just until the sun comes out, maybe then it will all make sense.

I'm woken by a knock on the door, I know it's him. Tears start pouring down my cheeks as everything that happened on my couch just hours ago starts coming back in wave speed.

I can't.

I get back under the blanket and I'm going to stay here until the knocking stops.

I have three hours left before I have to leave for work. Atleast by the time I get there everybody will be getting ready to knock off so I won't have to deal with "are you okay?"s that I'm too emotional and angry to deal with.

Langa and my parents must be worried about me now I mean my phone has been off since midday yesterday and that is so not like me.

Well, at some point I'm going to have to deal with reality, might as well start now.

I have 17 voicemails, most of them from this man(I can't even say his name), from yesterday. The first one is sweet: "dali, I got your missed calls I couldn't talk, call me back please".

The two after that are almost similar but on the fourth one, his voice and words used begin to be tense.

There's one from Langa blabbing about having drinks with his friends in some restaurant and some shit I don't even understand.

I listen to about 7 messages from this man, each said with more anger than the one before it. The last one, where I hear his voice, simply says: "Nx!"

There are about three more, the first one at 1am this morning, but the caller keeps quiet. I know it's him.

I send Langa and my mother one sms to say I'm okay, just that I didn't have electricity and my phone wasn't charged. I promise to call them later. I won't.

There's an SMS from him: "*Hlomu, please talk to me, please my love*".

I delete it.

I could sleep for another three hours but I decide to shower and get ready to go. My body is aching all over but I'm a little relieved when I see my face has no bruises. I stand in front of the mirror thinking 'is this really me?'

I've become that woman, that woman I never understood.

I manage to finish a bowl of cereal although it takes me forever, I don't know if it's because I hate cereals in general or if my body is so angry at me that it won't take anything I feed it.

I'm ready to go work by 12pm. But wait! I'll have to go outside to get there and I'll have to go past Bree.

I can't.

I call a cab instead. It will cost me a lot of money but what choice do I have.

I peep through the window just to check if the Sprinter is not parked outside before I go out and jump on the back seat of the cab.

I give Bab'Gumbi a reserved wave as the cab drives out the gate. I don't even open the window, he'll know something is wrong the moment I open my mouth.

I'll be too early for work and that can't be good for my mood right now but I tell the driver to take me there anyway. He tries to make small talk but all I can do is look out the closed tinted window and I see it, the Sprinter, driving in the opposite direction, going to my building.

Tears roll down my cheeks, it all seems so different, like is not the guy I knew yesterday morning, it's all so different now.

My colleagues seem surprised to see me walking in two hours before my clock-in time, I'm usually late for everything.

I'm just going to bury myself in work hopefully nothing that will require me to go out, I have new found fear for strangers.

I switch my cellphone off again as soon as I sit, he's been calling and I've been ignoring him. I disconnect my desk land-line phone from the back as well, careful that nobody sees me and I start writing, book reviews yes, I have been neglecting that part of my job lately.

The first day of night shift always seems too long and by the time I knock off at 11pm I'm yawning like a hippo. I didn't even do police checks so if I missed a big story that happened tonight, my boss will just have to deal.

It's better this time because I'm doing the shift with a decent driver, an old man not too far from retirement. The one I worked with last time would be drunk to the nines by this time.

My heart starts beating fast as I approach my building and realize that chances of finding him parked outside are very high. He is here, parked outside the gate. The security guard at the gate tonight just returned from leave so he doesn't know him, I assume he couldn't talk him into letting him in.

The work car is branded so there's no driving in without him noticing me. I don't want to see him. I don't want to talk to him.

The security guard opens the gate as soon as he sees the car, we drive in but he flags us and comes to my window.

"That car there has been waiting for you all night," he says pointing at the Sprinter behind us as its lights turn on and I could see he's ready to drive in.

"I don't know him, please don't let him in," I say and roll up the window.

The driver gives me an inquisitive look, he's seen this car picking and dropping me off at work. He waits for me to get inside my flat before he drives off. Mqhele is still at the gate, looking like he is pleading with the security guard.

I walk in and go straight to the bedroom, not even switching on the kitchen lights.

I'm not sure if and when he leaves.

The next day I call in sick at work, for the first time since I started working. The night news editor seems to understand, says he noticed I wasn't okay the previous day.

I want to go home. I want to see my dad, the one man I'm sure would never hurt me. He'd literally walk to Joburg to find Mqhele and beat him to a pulp if he ever found out what he did to me.

I'm going to leave tonight but going to Park Station to buy a bus ticket is out of the question, even Shoprite across the road is a problem.

Oh well! Langa, I'm going to have to talk to him at some point anyway.

"Hello half, what's going on? I have this bad feeling that won't go away....." he says.

"I'm fine, just period pains and I think I'm coming down with flue. Look, can you please go buy me a bus ticket to Durban for tonight, I wanna go home," I say.

"And work?"

"I'm off-sick. Please go buy it and send me the reference number," I say. This conversation must end right now or I'll burst into tears.

"Okay, I know there's something wrong with you though because I've been restless and edgy for the past two days," he says. I say goodbye quickly and hang up.

I'm not sure if this man has been here today at all. I don't care much to be honest. My body is still painful and I hate him.

The cab taking me to Park Station finds me already packed and waiting, atleast it's close so it won't set me back that much.

At the gate the security guard flags us again but I'm not interested, I tell the cab driver to drive on and ignore him. I don't want to know if this man was here or not.

As the bus leaves and I see the Joburg city lights behind me fade, I get this feeling of relief, like I'm leaving all my troubles behind, like I have an option of going and never coming back.

I wasn't going to wake my father at 4am so before I left Joburg I called my cousin and asked him to pick me up at Durban Station because I knew he'd still be awake and at some party or shebeen at that time.

He is one of those township celebrities, for what? I don't know, he's just famous, he doesn't even have a job but I've never heard him complain about being broke. Family!

I find him waiting already, his car blasting house music and an opened bottle of Castle Light in his car cup-holder. It reminds me of that man, my mood changes immediately.

I've never been this angry for this long in my life before. It's been three days already and I don't think I'll ever get myself to answer his calls at all.

My cousin has been blabbing on his phone the whole trip. Some girl questioning him about who he is picking up at this time and him explaining in a way that would make any woman suspicious.

I can never understand why men always sound like they are lying even when they're telling the truth. Maybe it's because they lie most of the time, that one lied that he loved me. Sandile lied about everything.

My parents have just woken up when I arrive, I hadn't told them I was coming so they're more surprised than happy to see me. I don't want to make much eye contact with my dad, he'll know something is wrong, he always does with his kids but never has a clue what my mother is always fighting with him about.

My sister. Sigh. I heard she doesn't talk to anyone in this house lately, she has her reasons, she

thinks we are all 'lame'.

I would like to sleep all day but there are so many things I need do like depositing rent and buying my monthly cosmetics. I can keep the braids for another month but maybe I need a bit of change. Yes, change, I'm gonna cut my hair.

I've been going up and down this mall all day my feet are starting to hurt but I'm happy to be walking around freely for a change. I realize I haven't done anything by myself since I started dating that man. I was driven to and from work and when I didn't want to see him anymore, I was scared to go out.

I'm back home before my mother comes back and early enough to cook supper.

I watch them as we all sit eating and trying to watch TV because really in this house, it's not easy with my mom wanting to watch the gospel channels, my dad wanting news all the time and my sister just sitting there, judging everyone.

Normally I'd be annoyed too but not this time, I'm looking at them with a smile on my face. I wouldn't trade them for anything.

I haven't had time to catch up with the little Rihanna-wanna-be so I follow her to the bedroom, our bedroom, when she decides she's had enough of these blacks and leaves.

She's on her cellphone the whole time, plus she speaks English, plus she thinks I'm lame so I retire on my single bed after realizing I'm not going to win.

It's Friday so everyone goes on with their lives as normal, the house is empty by 7am and I'm left alone again.

I'm gonna go back to sleep. That thought is disturbed by a knock on the door.

"Sisi, someone is asking for you outside," some snorty little brat at the door says before he runs off. I didn't even get a chance to ask him who that is. Could be one of the neighbours who heard I was home so I go out to check.

It's a car, a red GTI Golf 5 parked on the street two houses away from mine. I don't recognise it so turn around to go back to the house, but it drives towards me.

No!

It's him!

What the heck am I going to do now?

He gets out of the car very quickly and almost runs to stand in front of me.

I am shaking, terrified, the last time he stood in front of me he was bashing my face.

I already have tears rolling down my cheeks before he can say anything. I don't know what to say to him, I don't want to say anything to him at all.

"I'm sorry," he says.

The audacity!!

I want to tell him to fuck off but I can't speak. In my head I have the picture of myself curled on the couch with his knee on my rib and me screaming "I'm sorry....I'm sorry".

This is it! If I stand here any longer I'm going to let out a crazy scream.

"Can you atleast talk to me, atleast say something," he says.

Fuck off! That's what I want to say, but I don't.

"Why did you hit me?"

He panics, doesn't seem like he expected that question but I want an answer and I have my eyes fixed on his, I won't budge until I get it, he owes me that much.

"I didn't mean to....I mean I'm sorry I just..."

Jizas! This man must not test me! He must not! Not when I'm in my street and one crazy scream could end in a case of mob justice!

"I have no excuse, I don't know what got into me just please talk to me..."

"No!" I say as I walk away, he tries to grab my arms and I get the biggest fright. He notices and withdraws. I walk on and close the gate behind me.

Wow! I didn't see this one coming at all.

Wait! How did he get here and how did he know where my home is? I'm pretty sure I never gave him my home address.

He didn't tell me why he hit me, not that it matters, plus I get the feeling he also doesn't know, which makes it even worse.

I find myself pacing up and down the passage.

He's still parked outside and I know he won't leave, maybe I should go talk to him. No.

But also, I feel a bit restless with him parked there, am I being too hard?

No, not after what he did to me, it was inhumane.

I have all kinds of thoughts battling each other on my mind.

Oh fuck it! I'm going out to him, I need to give him a piece of my mind.

He's so startled he sits up and bumps his head on the car roof. He didn't see me coming, only when I knocked on the car window.

He quickly opens the door and jumps out of the car.

He looks different, gloomy and exhausted and nervous at the same time. I've seen him being many things but not this. He can't even look me in the eye.

"When did you get here?" I ask

"In the morning," he says.

I don't ask what time but I have a feeling it was in the wee hours.

"How did you know my house?"

"I asked people," he says. Whatever he means by that.

I'm asking questions and he keeps giving me these short answers, didn't he say he wanted us to talk?

"Did you sleep at all? Did you eat? Aren't you cold?" my mind goes to my mouth without warning me again. I don't know what's going on with me.

I can see he wants to say something but he's still on semi-mute button. I assume he'd want me to get in the car, so I do and he also jumps back in, quickly.

"You wanted to talk?" I say.

He looks away, like he doesn't want us to talk about it, like I should know that he's sorry.

"I'm sorry" he says.

"I hear that, but I still want to know why. You really hurt me do you know that? Why would you hit me Mqhele? Like I am nothing! Am I nothing to you?" I'm crying again and I hate it, I hate being this weak.

"You're everything," he says, with a bit of confidence and conviction, he is looking me in the eye again.

I suspect he is feeding from my weakness, that the more I fall apart here in front of him the more he gets stronger and in control, it is disturbing really.

I'm sobbing and right now, I'd die to be in his arms. I know there and then that I'm about to make either the biggest mistake of my life or, if I'm one of the lucky few, the bravest.

I'm not sure what I should make of this, that he followed me all the way to Durban to apologise but right now I'm just going to go wherever my mind and heart leads me.

He has to know though.

"If you ever hit me again, I will open a case with the police, I will tell my father and brother and I will leave you," I say.

He knows I'm serious, his eyes drop again. Geez! I've never seen him like this.

He says nothing. Not acceptable. I keep my eyes fixed on his, I need an answer.

"It shouldn't have happened the first time, it won't happen again," he says.

I still want to know why, what was going through his mind and what angered him so much about me switching my phone off. But I'm going to leave it for now.

"You can come in I'll make you breakfast," I say.

He looks at me like I've lost my mind. Infact, I think I have, inviting a man to my father's house? What's wrong with me?

"No, I'm not going inside your home, that would be disrespectful to your father," he says.

Yeah, it's like that I know. He's still parked two houses away from my house.

"You can go change and we'll go get food," he says.

Good idea, I'm still wearing the leggings I slept in. I need a shower too.

I brought limited clothes, I don't know what I was thinking but then again, it never crossed my mind that I'd be going out for breakfast with the man I thought I hated just days ago.

He is wearing the usual, track pants and a black t-shirt with sneakers. I could never understand, but one day I'll ask.

We end up at Gateway Mall, he's never been here and I get the feeling he doesn't like places like these, bourgeois society is not his thing.

"We're going to have proper breakfast, no pap and liver and ice cream at 10am," I say, I'm still traumatised by his eating habits really.

"Where?"

"Here," I say pointing to Circus Circus, we're already at its entrance and the waiter is already hounding us so I know there'll be no negotiating.

I go for something light and he, a full breakfast with baked beans and all. He cleans his plate out. And then he orders ice cream, and beer.

I have no energy for this.

"Did you drive the whole night?" I ask.

"Yep I got here at 5am", he says.

He looks a bit better now, he's even talking more.

There's a bread crumb on one side of his lips so I use my thumb to brush it off. He stops eating immediately and stares into my eyes as I do it. He takes my hand just as I'm about to remove it, holds on to it for a while and kisses my fingers.

"I'm really sorry Hlomu," he says, his eyes are deep, his face hard.

I don't know what to say, I won't lie and say I've forgiven and everything is okay now.

"I love you enough to believe you, right now I choose to trust you, it's up to you to make it worth it," I say.

He drops his eyes and pokes what's left of his ice-cream with a spoon.

How have I forgotten to ask this?

“Whose car is that?”

I’ve been going in and out of that red golf but I don’t know whose it is, perhaps because it’s nicer than the Sprinter.

“It’s Nkosana’s”

I give him a look that says explain.

“My brother, the eldest,” he says.

Okay, that completes the number, I’ve counted eight.

We’re already at the mall and I remember the project I had planned before he decided to be Mike Tyson. He protests for a while but I manage to convince him. When we walk out of the mall, he has a bank account.

Now I’ll have to figure out a way to make him get that bag out of his house to the bank.

We’re laughing again at silly things and after my parents come back from work, I say my goodbye, lying that there was an emergency at my flat and I had to go back to Joburg.

Chapter 5

It's my last day of night shift and boy I'm so glad. Things have gotten back to normal, I can even sit on that couch now without getting flashbacks.

I've seen him every day for the past four weeks even if it was just him dropping me off at work in the afternoon. I've also been to Bree taxi rank with him a couple of times and all I can say is, the comments about how he looks better and has even put on some weight since he met me were embarrassing.

But then, I bought him cosmetics, including face-wash and shower-gels and body lotions and I've been waking up with him at 3am and making him porridge and packing him proper breakfast. I've been cooking before I go to work to make sure he has supper.

It's called polishing, now I have to work on the dress code and maybe later the Sprinter. They say a woman shouldn't try to change a man but the situation right now is that this one needs to be changed.

I had planned to sail through tonight, I mean it's Thursday and normally everybody in the office is already thinking about the weekend, if they're not drunk already by the time we knock off.

I get a call just after 7pm about a service delivery protest on Main Reef road. Oh ghosh! That squatter-camp will be the death of me! If it's not teenage girls dumping babies it's a service delivery protest every second week. SMH

When we get there with my photographer colleague the place looks like war zone, tyres burning, police all over, people running all over the place.....

Okay, I've done these stories so many times that I already know what the quotes from the protesters and the police are going to be.

First step is to find a community leader who wasn't really elected by anyone, but automatically gained the title because he spoke more and sang louder.

So, I leave the police behind and go towards the squatter camp where the protesters are gathering. Notebook and pen in hand.

As I stand there listening to how they want water and electricity and the government this and that....suddenly I hear screaming and people start running in different directions.

Something is hitting me at the back, something burning, I don't know what it is but I run too. A man I don't know grabs my arm and runs with me to the squatter camp.

The back of my legs and thighs are burning, I've been shot, by police, with rubber bullets!

I need to get out of here!

I call the office, hysterical, amid the madness around me and people shouting "they shot the journalist".

I can't really walk, my colleague has to almost carry me out of there. One of the policemen phoned me to say I can come out. I assume my bosses have made calls to the powers that be, that's how he got my numbers.

Luckily the hospital is close by. I'm not sure how badly I'm hurt but I know I won't be able to sleep with this pain, I need to be checked out.

"I've been shot. It's not that bad, I'm at Garden City for pain," SMS sent.

My phone rings immediately.

"Shot? Are you okay? Shot where? By who? What....." He asks all these questions at once and really I can't answer them, not with the tone he is using. He sounds like a crazy man right now.

“I’ll be fine.....” he hangs up before I can continue

The doctor confirms what I already know, that I have multiple bruises but they will all go away after a few days. He makes me wait at the emergency room anyway just to get over the shock and trauma.

The emergency room is close to the reception area, which was quiet when I walked in but suddenly sounds like there is commotion.

“No, you can’t go in wait for the doctor,” I hear the woman at reception shouting.

“Call that doctor now,” a man responds. OMG! I know that voice. Lord help me!!

I have no choice but to get out of the room and walk to reception before taxi rank tendencies start happening in this hospital.

I find men walking up and down, a lot of men, and they all look alike. Like freakishly identical! WTF???

I’m in total shock! Everybody here seems to be throwing a tantrum and in that madness, I have to find my man amongst these people who look exactly like him.

He finds me first, grabs me and squeezes me in a hug that’s rather painful than comforting.

“Who shot you?” he asks, I don’t like the look on his face right now.

I’m immediately surrounded by all of them, probably six bug-eyes all staring at me at once. I’m freaked out!

“I’m fine, it was just rubber bullets, I was working at a protest,” I manage to utter.

They don’t care, they want to know who shot me. I have to be smart about this.

“The police were shooting at protesters with rubber bullets, they didn’t know I was amongst them, they stopped shooting when they realised I was there,” I say.

“Where are those policemen?” one with a hoarse voice says.

Infact, if Mqhele wasn’t standing next to me with his arm around my waist, right now I’d find it difficult to identify him among this group.

My colleague, who’d been standing at the far corner watching this madness with shock, decides to intervene.

“She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, but the police have apologised,” he says.

Good, he also sees the need to lie, like police ever apologise to journalists interfering with their work.

The reaction he gets though I don’t think he anticipated.

“And where were you when she was being shot?” the hoarse-voice bug-eye again.

Ghosh!!

I catch glimpse of my colleague and see the fear on his face. Poor thing, nothing is as scary to a tiny Tswana person than a group of angry tall dark Zulu men.

He goes back to his corner. I pull away from Mqhele’s grip on my waist and walk towards my colleague, he follows me.

“I’ll be fine thanks, I’ll see you at work tomorrow,” I say, not going too close to him.

“You’re not going back there,” Mqhele jumps in. He’s about to irritate me seriously.

My colleague walks away, looking only too happy to get away from this circus. He comes back and gives my jacket, covered in dust, to one of these men and rushes off again.

I still can’t keep calm here, I keep looking at each of these men and thinking what the hell is going on here?

The Dr appears from the back. He's also stunned.

"I'll write you a prescription and you can go home. You're fine those bruises will be gone in a few days," he says.

"Are you sure about that?" hoarse voice again. These people are here to embarrass me, that is why they're here.

The Dr nods and walks away. He comes back seconds later with a piece of paper and hands it to me. It's just Myprodol, I have plenty of it at home so I won't even bother going to the pharmacy.

"We can go now," I say.

The whole group follows me outside, a bit calmer now. Three taxis are parked outside. Oh good, they came in taxis, no wonder people here were scared.

They stand in a circle again, Mqhele still clinging on to me.

Now they're all just looking at me like I'm a new baby that's just been brought home.

Okay. I'm just going to stand here until Mqhele does some introductions.

Now that I look at them carefully I see there are age differences.

"This is her," Mqhele says tightening his grip around my waist.

They all still stand there looking at me like I'm a miracle or something. I'm not sure what to do right now.

The first handshake comes from the one who looks exactly like my man, and then the others follow.

They're definitely not the hugging type. The last one to shake my hand, although he has bug-eyes as well, seems a bit too young. Now that I look closely at him, I see he is a kid, about 16 maybe, though far too tall for his age.

So now I've met the Zulu-Brothers, under some strange circumstances I must say.

"So when are you cooking for us?" one, who speaks very slowly, asks.

I look at Mqhele, not knowing how to respond. He notices the awkward situation and jumps in.

"Sambulo, get your own woman to cook for you," he says.

They all laugh.

"We're coming to Naturena on Saturday. It's nice to meet you MaShandu, if anyone shoots you again call us," someone says, I'm not sure which one it is but anyway it will take me about two years or forever to remember all the names, or even tell them apart.

I know now that the one who talks too much with a hoarse-voice is Nqoba.

They all get in the two taxis and drive off. I realize it's going to 10pm now and all I want to do is sleep.

"Are you sure you're fine?"

I nod, I thought the Dr confirmed this and we had moved on from it.

But I must admit I was shaken by all this, and I'm glad he is here.

I wrap my arms around his waist, my head on his chest and I give him a tight hug, a long one.

He is quiet but I can feel his heart beating faster, I don't like it.

"I'm fine, those cops didn't mean to hurt me they were just doing their job," I say, he can be crazy sometimes this one.

On our way home, yes I'm sitting on the front seat of a Quantum, I'm the taxi queen after all, I keep thinking about the Saturday situation. I'm going to have to cook for his brothers and I'm nervous, what if they don't like me?

Cooking I have no problem with, I'm good at it. But what if they don't approve of me or find me disrespectful and stuff. I don't even know how I should dress or behave around them.

Nobody ever really taught me about these things. My mother insisted on me going to school and having a career, not entertaining in-laws.

"Are they really coming on Saturday?" I ask him.

He smiles, sensing that I'm nervous.

"Yes they are, they were going to come to my house to meet you on Saturday anyway before all this shit happened, that was the plan," he says.

"And you didn't tell me?" I'm not happy about this.

"I was going to tell you tomorrow, just didn't want you to worry the whole week about meeting those morons, infact they are the ones who should be worried about whether you'll like them or not," he says. I'm not sure if that is supposed to put me at ease but really?

I start working out the menu in my head but nothing comes up right now. Maybe I should just stop worrying for now.

He drives to his house instead. I don't ask why our place of sleep tonight was not negotiated because all I want is a shower and a bed right now.

I must say this house looks far better than the way I found it. I've used up all that 'coffee-table' money. I bought cutlery, cushions for the ugly sofas, ornaments, a big mirror for the lounge wall and some colourful throws. I even had blinds installed in the kitchen and bathroom and got rid of the dreadful voile curtains.

The bedroom, well, we need a new bed. I don't know who slept here before me and I just don't like this bed, period.

I also sleep better now knowing there isn't R600 000 in a bag inside the wardrobe. It wasn't easy but the bag made it to the bank and through the suspicious bank manager who only calmed down after taxis were mentioned and has now deployed a personal banker to call him all the freaking time offering all kinds of stuff.

I must say though, there are some improvements I came with up in here.

I hear my stomach rumbling, I'm hungry. I had brought food from my house to work but I left it on my desk.

It's Friday tomorrow and I'm not working, I had forgotten about that when I was at the hospital.

Mqhele is still in a foul mood, urgh. I have to find a way to cheer him up, sex is out of the question though, I can't have his tall self humping on top of me with these bruises I have.

"I'm going to make something to eat," I say.

He's sitting on the couch with a beer.

"I ate earlier but I can eat again. We were at Nqoba's when you called," he says.

I know Nqoba is the one who talks too much with a hoarse voice, although I can't guarantee I'll be able to tell him apart from the others but there was one who looked exactly like Mqhele, he didn't speak much, I assume it's Qhawe because he once mentioned that people can't tell them apart.

"Who is older between you and Qhawe?" I ask.

"I'm older by 11 months," he says.

I count in my head. Okay, so his parents had sex when he was two months old and got pregnant again. Okay.

I could have made spaghetti with bacon stir-fry, that's what I wanted, but he hates spaghetti with a passion so I microwaved some chicken wings and put together a green salad, which he also doesn't

consider as food.

When I wake up the sun is already out, oh well, he's probably long gone. I didn't even wake up to cook him his pap and pack him breakfast. It's that Myprodol, it knocked me out completely.

What to do today? Oh yah, I have to update the twin. He says I don't call him as much now that I have a man.

I never told him about the man beating me up though, I never told anyone. It's what abused women do I know, they don't tell.

Langa is hysterical when I tell him about what happened last night, a bit too dramatic I feel. I can't deal! The conversation is short. He'll call me when he's composed. But first I make him promise not to tell the parents.

I put on my robe and make my way to the kitchen only to bump into Mqhele in the passage.

"Are you feeling better?" he asks.

"Yeah I think, I just need to eat and drink those painkillers again,"

"I made you breakfast," he says. Lord help me! I don't even want to know what I'll be dealing with but I smile a thankful smile.

My phone rings.

Geez it's 11am already.

"Hello" "yes" "why?" "okay please email me the invoice I'll work out an arrangement, atleast settle it over three months," thanks"

He hasn't moved, he's looking at me as I speak on the phone. It's rude but I don't think he knows how not to be rude.

Let me just tell him.

"It's the hospital. My medical aid won't pay the whole amount so I have to pay it myself, which is crazy because all I did was see a doctor for five minutes," I say.

"But why won't your medical aid pay?" he asks.

"I took the cheapest, couldn't afford the full cover one," I say.

I don't like the look he's giving me now.

"What do you mean you couldn't afford it? How am I supposed to feel about that?" he's angry.

How has this suddenly become about him?

"Why didn't you tell me about this? About you not affording things. First you refuse to let me pay your rent and now I find out you're on some useless medical aid. It's insulting," he says.

I'm not going to say anything, I'll let him rant all he wants.

"How much do they want?" he asks.

"R2 400"

"You were going to pay R2400 over three months?" he asks with a disgusted look on his face.

I know R2 400 is nothing to him, but he's being a jerk right now.

I don't answer, I'm offended more than anything really.

"We'll go pay it when you're done with everything," he says and leaves me standing there.

I've lost my appetite, but I eat the freakin' burnt scrambled eggs and tomatoes. Nx!

He takes a shower while I eat. I'd join him but I hate him right now. He comes out as I enter the bedroom and make the bed. I also need to take a shower so I undress and I'm left only in my underwear.

"Those dogs!" I hear him saying behind me.

He inspects the back of my thighs and legs without touching them. This is the first time he sees the bruises. I haven't seen them at all.

"Is it painful?" he asks.

"Yes," I say, not that it's really painful but I just want an excuse to be emotional after that passage rant of his.

"I'm going to shower and take the pills afterwards," I say and leave him standing there.

Maybe he'll notice that I'm angry, most likely not. I wonder how he was with his past girlfriends.

He's already dressed and looking rather handsome when I come out.

"I have to go somewhere," he says, looking a bit anxious.

"Where?" I ask. He gives me a look I don't understand.

"It's a work thing, I'll be back before you know it," and with that he leaves.

I hear the Sprinter taking off, what happened to the taxi we came in?

What am I going to do in this house all alone. I have clothes that I keep here so I dress up. I need to do some shopping also, winter is almost over.

I take my pain killers.

I'm woken by the sound of a car outside. I must have dozed off on the couch. Geez! It's been two hours already.

First in is a bug-eyed toddler, followed by a taller one and another taller one all carrying backpacks. They stand next to the door, looking at me like I should be saying something instead of standing here looking confused.

The little one, he must be three or so, wears this mischievous smile on his face. Again, they are identical. Nothing shocks me anymore with these people.

Mqhele walks in followed by another person who also looks exactly like him but is slightly older I observe.

He walks past me and straight to the bedroom and the other man, whom I immediately conclude is the older brother stays behind to greet me. He introduces himself as Nkosana, oh yes, the last one remaining.

I can't help but drop my eyes when eye contact happens, he is nothing like that chaotic lot I met in hospital. You respect him without being told to. He is the type that will humble you while at the same time making you feel awkward.

The rascals are now all sitting squashed on a single couch, all three of them. The older one, about 10-years-old has his arm around the two, kind of a protective gesture, and they have their eyes glued to me.

"I'm sorry about what happened yesterday," he says.

"Thank you," that is all I can say.

My mind tells me to run to the bedroom to find Mqhele but then I remember what I have to do.

"I'll make you something to drink," I say as I make my way to the kitchen.

"That won't be necessary baby, we have to leave now," Mqhele's voice says behind me.

I'd ask to where but I'm scared to even speak in front of the big brother.

He's carrying a bag. He walks out the door, the brother following him. He tosses the bag inside the boot of that red Golf as I stand on the doorstep with my jaw dropped.

Big brother gets on the passenger seat. Mqhele comes to me. Pulls me inside the house.
“We have to go somewhere now, we’ll be back hopefully tomorrow or by Sunday,” he says.
Huh?

I turn around to look at the rascals still squashed on the couch.

“We’re going to leave the boys with you,” he says.

“Boys, you’ll stay with your mother for now, we’ll be back,” he says to the kids.

Mother?

And with that, he leaves.

What am I going to do with three kids for the whole weekend? And whose kids are they? It’s obvious they are Zulu kids but who is their father?

The little one is restless now, probably already bored with looking at this woman he doesn’t know. The middle one doesn’t even seem to know what’s going on, he’s missing front teeth so he’s probably six-years-old and needs a high dose of Ritalin

“Hello boys,” I say. I have to start somewhere.

They don’t respond. Okay.

“Take your bags to the bedroom,” I say

They all stand up at once and run to the spare bedroom. I see they’ve been here before, they’re familiar with the house.

An sms comes in.

“Under the pillow, I want it all used up when I come back. I love you”

I immediately know it’s money.

“where are you going?”

“work stuff, we’re all going. Just take care please, use a cab when going out”

Like I even know where to take taxis.

“You’re getting me worried, I won’t ask further but please be careful. All of you. I’ll take care of the kids, Love you more”

I choose not to ask whose the kids are. I decide to trust that he’d have told me if he had three kids, or even one.

By the time I finish writing the sms the little one is standing in front of me, his face raised up to mine and his hands on his back. He has the most adorable smile. And he looks exactly like Mqhele and the other bugs.

The older one seems a bit reserved. I get the feeling he’s used to taking care of the other two. Where’s their mother? Or mothers and who’s their father? Or fathers.

What does one do with kids, except take them to Spur.

“Get your jerseys boys, we’re going out,” I say. They literally run to the bedroom.

I call a cab in the meantime. We’ll go to Southgate. It’s not my kind of joint but it’s ten minutes away.

I can hear the kids arguing about who should wear what. Older one is giving instructions and these little two are totally defying him.

I walk in the room and it becomes dead quiet. It’s up to me to decide.

I go through the backpacks.

How can kids from a family with no money problems have no proper clothes whatsoever. Jackets are either too small or too old.

I pack up the money, yes I won't leave it, and go with the kids to wait for the cab at the gate. Come to think of it, I've always entered and exited this gate in a car. I don't even know what the neighbour's house looks like, not that I want to know neighbours anyway.

Southgate is buzzing as usual, it's month end after all, I think Columbine Square would be a better idea, but first I have to buy clothes for these kids. I was given an instruction to finish this money anyway.

Ackermans and we come out with each pulling their plastic bag. Order has been maintained so far, they're not used to me yet.

Spur on Columbine was the best idea, it has a play area too. They don't immediately run there like I'd expected. Okay.

Unlike my kid cousins who know the Spur and McDonalds menu by head, these three seem to not even know where they are.

"Have you ever been to Spur before?"

Sbani, the eldest one shakes his head. Lwandle, the middle one is five, he has his eyes glued on the play area and Mvelo the little one is standing on top of the chair.

"You can choose your food and then go play" I say. They point at pictures, no thought put into it all and disappear.

I'm left with Sbani whom I've now learned is 9-years-old and in Grade 4. He is one tall kid.

They all live in Riverlea with their father whom I now know is Nkosana. But they all refer to all of them as father, it would be weird if they didn't know which one is their real real father, I think.

"Where's your mother?" I risk asking, this could turn out bad I know.

"I don't know," he says.

That explains a lot.

I'll leave it. The food arrives and the two kids are back before I can call them.

We leave late so I buy take-aways and we head home. They insist on checking out their new clothes before going to sleep and in between the excitement, I hear the first 'mami', from the small one.

Oh great, I'm a 'mami' now. I never thought, but nobody can escape being taken by kids, it would be unnatural.

I put them to sleep by 9pm, new pyjamas and all. Tomorrow I'm taking them to cut their hair. I need to do something about my hair too, short and natural has become boring but I can only go as far as braids, maybe next weekend.

They're awake by the time I'm finished cooking porridge.

The two are watching cartoons but Mvelo has been following me around the kitchen all morning. I let him be, careful I don't drop anything on him. He is just the cutest thing with those humongous eyes. I'm just so used to seeing faces like this I think the eyes have started to seem normal.

I have to feed Mvelo when he looks at porridge like he's never seen it before. Sbani is opening up slowly but surely. He's even told me about his teacher at Southside Primary who said he should be a doctor because he knows maths.

"But nobody came when I got the trophy, are you going to come next time?" he asks.

Honestly I don't know.

"I'll come if you invite me," I say.

He smiles. I think we're going to be friends.

Lwandle is on his usual sugar-rush tip, I swear he even blinks on fast-forward. He doesn't demand

much attention, I guess that's because he can't pay attention to anything himself.

The only thing I got from Mqhele since he left was an sms saying '*goodnight, miss you, love you,*'.

A part of me is worried but a bigger part of me trusts that he can take care of himself.

So, what do I do with these rascals the whole day?

The trip to the salon is quick, minor protests but they come out looking good and clean in the end.

Next stop is Johannesburg Zoo. Like I guessed, they've never been here. What kind of parents don't take their children to the zoo?

The zoo walk is exciting and adventurous for them but it's long and tiring for me, I soldier on, occasionally having to chase Lwandle everywhere.

Mvelo clings on to my hand and screams 'mami' every time he spots and points at an animal.

Sbani is the designated photographer, he has completely taken over my cellphone.

By afternoon I'm bushed but manage to squeeze yet another trip to Spur. Now familiar with the place, they run amok. I could use a glass of wine right about now, I deserve it white and sweet.....

It's Sunday afternoon and I'm starting to get even more worried. I haven't had any communication with him since Friday night. I have to be at work tomorrow, back on normal day shift so they'd better come back today.

The kids need to go to school also.

"What school do Lwandle and Mvelo go to?" I ask.

"They don't go to school yet," Sbani says.

"Not even creche?" I'm shocked really.

"No, they stay with gogo when I'm at school and baba is at work," he says.

There's a gogo? Mqhele has never said anything about his mother being still around. Infact I don't know anything about his parents, I just assumed they were dead because he never speaks about them.

There's really so much I still don't know about him.

I haven't been to my flat in days, I miss my space. Maybe I should just pack these kids and go there. But no, Mqhele and them will walk in anytime from now.

I sit and hope until 10pm and the kids fall asleep in front of the TV. His phone has been on voicemail right through.

I'm worried about what is going to happen in the morning, where will I leave these kids, I can't call in sick really that would be wrong.

On whether he is okay or not, I'm just going to be in denial about that, he is fine and he will come back and that's it.

I have to pick the kids one-by-one and put them to bed. They were all dressed in pyjamas and robes and slippers and ready to go.

I'm surprised I was even able to sleep at all when I wake up at 5am. Still no phone call or message from him. I'm in trouble.

I have no choice but to take these kids to work with me and hope these men will show up before any of my colleagues notice my life is dysfunctional.

I should have just hired a cab for the weekend, the paying I've done in the past three days is

shameful, but I guess that's how women of taxi owners live, maybe.

I explain to security guards at work why I brought a whole creche with me to work, although the explanation is not entirely true. I have to do the same with my boss too and I end up having to pass on a story that requires me to go out of the office. I get stuck with having to Google statistics of cash-in-transit heists in the past two months because three happened this weekend in two provinces. Urgh, I hate these kinds of stories.

I am so embarrassed, especially when I see my colleague who immediately noticed the resemblance these three have to the crazy men who asked him where he was when I got shot.

By midday nobody has shown up. I've resorted to begging the security guards to let the kids play at the parking area while they keep an eye on them. This will definitely leave a bad impression on my bosses and colleagues. I'm called in to the editor's office and after we laugh about that rubber bullets situation, he allows me to go home early but warns that this thing of bringing three kids to work is not acceptable.

This is the first time I'm in trouble in the eight months I've been working here. Ghosh! My life is changing, I haven't even seen any of my friends in like two months, and now I have three kids calling me 'mami' and a man who disappeared four days ago.

I decide to take a taxi this time, it's still early in the day anyway. With my three bug-eyes on tow we take a ride to Bree.

Okay, these rascals are well known here, they run amok greeting uncles and grandpas I don't know. Nobody seems to notice that there's something wrong with this picture except one old guy who is standing in front of me right now.

He knows something, more so because he orders the driver of one of the Zulu taxis to take me to Naturena. No, I'm going to my flat, I'm tired of this nonsense, and I'm taking my three kids with me wherever I go.

It's 3am when I hear a knock and suddenly just think the worst.

I stand in front of the door for a while, just scared to open.

"Hlomu, it's me", I hear his voice and I get this feeling in my stomach.

It's like I haven't seen him in a very long time but nothing has changed about him. I can see in the parking lot that they're all here, standing outside the car with some of them smoking.

"Are you good?" he says giving me a big hug.

I don't answer, but he doesn't seem to mind that.

"Where are the boys?" he asks.

"sleeping," that's all I say. I'm actually mad at him, funny I'm only realizing that now.

"Why didn't you stay in Naturena,?" he asks walking past me to the bedroom. He goes out again and signals for someone to come in. One of them, not sure which one it is, greets and walks on to the bedroom. He comes out carrying the two small ones.

Mqhele also carries Sbani to the car, all their clothes were left in Naturena in the morning.

He comes back and signals for them to leave. I'm still standing where he left me, I want an explanation and I want it now at 3.10am.

"Do you even understand what I had to go through in the past four days," I say.

"I'm sorry I couldn't call," he says

"You couldn't call? You couldn't tell me where you were going and you couldn't come back on the day you promised?" I'm fuming!

He's looking at me like he expected me to jump on him and be happy when he walked in, not this. What pisses me off most is that he doesn't seem to understand that he did something wrong here. "I'm sorry we couldn't come back yesterday. Why did you come back from work early? Was it because of the kids?" he asks.

Stupid!!

And how does he know I came back from work early? It must be that old man.

I can't take this, I go inside the bedroom, close the door and lock it.

I can't!

I ignore him knocking and pleading until he complains that he doesn't have a blanket and it's cold.

He makes me angry but I can't stand seeing him suffer, so I let him in.

"You're still going to tell me where you were," I say as he comes in.

"It wasn't a woman if that's what you think," he says.

That's a bit of a relief.

"I didn't say there was a woman. Honestly Mqhele, why do you never think about me and my feelings and what I go through when I don't know where you are and if you are okay? If it was me who disappeared like this what would you do? It's not that I want you to stop doing other things and sit here with me all day, but I want to know that you're okay, all the time, so that I can be okay too. That's all I want from you," I say.

I can't believe I'm angry and that he still hasn't given me a proper explanation but I'm already letting his hands and lips run all over my body, and I'm already digging my nails in his skin.

I'm late and I have to be at work in an hour and 15-minutes. He is not in bed and he didn't wake me!

I take a quick shower and get dressed in a flash. How am I going to get to work on time though? I'm already in trouble as it is.

I'm ready to go in 20 minutes, but then I find him in the lounge with two other clones of him. It's Qhawe, his almost-twin and the hoarse-voice one, he is Nqoba, the one who owns a tavern and is into crazy women.

They're sitting comfortably in my house, eating what looks like a 'skop' and pap, I don't think I'm happy with this. I might have to have a word with the security guards, which could be difficult since Mqhele has now become the son Bab'Gumbi never had.

I don't have time for breakfast or chatting so after saying my greetings with respect and some level of submission, I pick up my handbag. Any man knows that that means 'let's go'. I'm still a bit uncomfortable around these guys but Nqoba doesn't care about that, he talks and talks and talks.....no wonder there's so much drama in his life.

They get in their car and we get on the Sprinter, I don't even know where it came from because I haven't seen it all weekend.

"I hear the boys love you, Mvelo cried when he woke up and you weren't there," he says in the car. I blush but try to hide it, honestly I wasn't sure, kids are too honest with their feelings, if they don't trust you they won't like you.

"They're good kids. But it's not good to just leave them with strangers for the whole weekend," I say, realizing I'm not over his nonsense even though the good sex left me defeated.

"Well, I didn't know you were a stranger, nobody thinks of you as a stranger here," he says, seemingly a bit hurt. Weird, I've never seen him hurt by anything at all.

"I like them and their eyes, they look like little bugs," I say.

He laughs.

"I know when I'm being indirectly insulted. And I don't have bug-eyes, I have zoom-lenses," he says opening his eyes wider and leaning over to kiss me.

He is crazy and funny and I just can't stay mad at him. I have no choice but to let him continue being shady and complicating my life.

"Langa is coming on Friday," I say before getting out of the car. He looks nervous. Shame.

I'm glad to not be the centre of attention at work today. I even take on a big story that keeps me out of the office the whole day and requires extra work, I have to make up for the drama.

After work we go past my flat just to get my extra clothes and drive off to Naturena. Maybe I should let just him pay my rent.

We find the red GTI parked in the yard, the big brother is probably here and he probably has keys for the house.

As I get out of the car, little Mvelo comes running followed by the hyperactive rascal and Sbani behind him. They almost trip me over. I have to say I missed them, a lot.

"They insisted on coming to see you, I couldn't say no," big brother Nkosana says with a huge smile.

Sbani reminds me that I had promised to come to his school if he invited me. He says I should come in September, it's only August now but I have a feeling he will remind me every day for the next month.

It's just after 5pm so I can still cook something that will be ready before 7pm. Everything is frozen, but me, I bought a microwave in this house.

Lamb curry with rice, grilled butternut and a cold salad. I start chopping, Mvelo, as always, is following me around the kitchen.

The guys disappear to the bedroom and I know not to go in there. This family though.

Mqhele enters the kitchen a while later and seems to be surprised by something. Big smile on his face.

"You're cooking?"

Duuuuuuuhhhhhh

"Yes, I'm trying to make something quick but not light," I say.

He takes out his phone and makes a call.

"She's cooking, come over," he says. Hangs up and walks back to the bedroom.

SMH.....now I have to defrost another tray of meat, or even two because I have no idea how many of them are coming. I can't risk going to the bedroom to ask him too because I don't want to see whatever it is that they're doing in there.

Rice is easy and quick so I start with it. I almost made Basmati but I doubt the crowd I'm cooking for will understand it. My lamb curry is just about done when I hear rowdiness coming from outside and very tall people start coming in one by one, each picking up or taping the head of the first of the three little people they see.

Mqhele and Nkosana are now sitting in the lounge, seemingly in deep discussions although I can't hear what about.

All the brothers join them on the sofas, except one who remains standing. He stands and I get the feeling he's not sure whether to join the men or the kids who are now with me in the kitchen.

It's the young one, the teenage one. Now it's quiet and everybody is looking at him, including me.

He looks at them, then me, then them and then walks towards me.

I catch a glimpse eldest brother, smiling.

It's Ntsika, he's chosen to be a child.

I don't know if I should make this a buffet or dish on plates and walk up and down with a serving tray like I'm a waitress. I drop the buffet idea, you know these rural types, they judge you on everything.

First I bring a towel and a bowl of warm water for them to wash their hands, like I always do with Mqhele before I serve him his food.

And then, plate by plate I deliver, like one of those women I've seen in some of the most sexist movies, except for the kneeling part, that I won't do, he can take his love and keep it (in Steve Kekana's voice).

Lwandle insists on praying before they eat. I'm surprised because I mean, it's Lwandle. I think he takes after Nqoba, he has a loose-cannon personality of some sort. The prayer is short and I can see it has no significance to them whatsoever.

I'm smitten by the compliments that follow. By time they leave it's going to 10pm, the little one has fallen asleep on my lap and the kitchen is already clean thanks to the teenage boy.

Elder brother calls me to the side before he leaves.

"Thank you for the clothes, and Spur and the zoo," he says before he leaves.

As to why he had never done those things with the kids? It beats me.

"You're good at this," Mqhele says as my head rests on his chest later in the night.

"Good at...?" I ask.

"Bringing us together and creating that family atmosphere. With the kids too," he says.

Honestly, I don't know where I learned this stuff but I must agree with him, that was some serious hectic warm family gathering I saw there.

He lies on his side so he can look at me.

"We have a problem with Ntsika, he's stopped going to school, he's started hanging around at the rank. I don't want him getting involved in the taxi business, he has choices....," he says, giving me that look that says 'intervene' without actually saying it.

"I could speak to him. Who does he live with?" I ask.

"Nqoba, because he has a business and is home most of the time," he says.

Oh and I have another question to ask.

"Why aren't Lwandle and Mvelo attending creche?"

"Look, I'm sure you've noticed, we're a family of eight men just trying to survive, Mqoqi, Mpande and Ntsika are technically still kids themselves..... we know how to make money, that's all we know. We came from a bad place Hlomu, we're still trying to get out, out to so far that nobody in this family will ever find themselves back there," he says, calmly so.

I could dig deeper but I have a feeling it's darker than I can handle. Now all I have to do is get these kids in school and try to negotiate with the teenager.

My friend, Zaba has a daughter she had when she was still in high school. She's recently moved her to Joburg and she's in pre-school here. I could talk to her about enrolling Lwandle there, atleast it's also in the South. Maybe Mvelo could also go there.

I've learned since that the 'gogo' they were talking about is an old lady living next door who gets paid R1000 a month to look after them. I also learned she spansks them, no wonder Lwandle is such a rascal.

Chapter 6

I've been sensing some destruction in him throughout the week but I guess running a business comes with those things.

I managed to get the two kids to the school. It was easy really because the main requirement is the ability to pay shit-loads of money every month for them to sing, sleep and run around all day in one building.

They will start next week but I was warned by the principal that it was going to be a tough task. Kids their age can already write. She seemed rather suspicious I'm surprised she didn't call social workers on me.

The teenager, whew! I think the only reason he agreed to go back to school is because he is scared of me. I had to beg, reason and threaten with a promise of a bleak future, I had no other choice. He's going back.

"How is the twin getting to Joburg," Mqhele asks as we sit through dinner at Capello's in Eastgate. Yes, I do drag him kicking and screaming to these places, just like he's taken me to shisanyamas and township chills against my will.

"He is taking a bus tomorrow morning, he'll be here on Friday" I say.

"A bus from Cape Town? No, book him a flight I'll pay for it," he says.

"Okay," I say. He looks surprised that I don't protest. "I think he wants to meet you, that's why he insisted on coming. He sees that things are getting really serious between us and he wants to know you," I say.

"With me things got really serious the first time I saw you," he says, dead serious.

Why does he have to be like this though?

Langa, SMH, I love him with all my being, Lord knows I do but if he didn't look so much like me I'd swear we were not related at all. We are two completely different people.

He took an an early morning flight, which is good because it's Friday and I'm not working and I was able to get him a cab from the airport.

As to when or how he decided on his current hairstyle is a mystery, but it's outrageous, although it looks beautiful on him. He never leaves the house looking anything less than stylish and funky and smelling nice and expensive.

He bounces, rushes, compliments and criticise everything he comes across in this flat. He's already raided my wardrobe and pointed out what needs to be there and what doesn't. His conclusion is that I need serious shopping.

"So when's the taxi driver coming to 'check' you," he says. He's loud and blunt, naturally.

"He is not a taxi driver, he's a taxi owner," I say, on the defensive.

"Yah shame, socially it doesn't make a difference, economically it does. But you look happy and well-kept so I might just approve of him," he says.

Like I need his approval. No, who am I kidding? I do need for him to approve. I wouldn't be able to choose between the two of them.

Mqhele, begrudgingly so, arrives during the day. I know he doesn't want to be here but he won't go to sleep without seeing me. He walks in looking a bit nervous but with a 'I'm ready to defend myself' look on his face.

But when he is greeted with a enthusiastic ‘Hiiiiiiiiiiiiii’ from a male looking version of me, he seems a bit confused.

Langa gets right to it.

“Have you been good to my sister? Because if you haven’t been I can deal with you right now,” he says looking at him with his hands on his hips. Not really intimidating or convincing at all.

“Well, I can’t really kick your ass but I can find means to make you pay, trust me,” he continues.

Oh! Can he stop already!

Mqhele hasn’t said a word, just confused and in awe. His nervous face completely gone. I have to intervene.

“This is the twin, Langa this is Mqhele,” I say and look at them both. Langa standing next to me and Mqhele sitting on the couch. Silence. Okay.

“I’m going to make you something to eat, and drink,” I say as I walk on to the kitchen.

I pull out one of his beers from the fridge which I now keep because he is always here. Hopefully it will help him relax.

“Hlomu tells me you’re still at varsity,” he says.

Good, atleast he is making conversation, although he says it with a judgmental tone.

Wrong question to the wrong person. Langa starts rambling about how he can’t wait to finish and get a job and buy this and that and how Cape Town has become boring and blah blah blah.....

That while Mqhele gulps his Castle Lite like he’s watching unicorns dance to kwaito. He keeps giving me awkward looks and I can’t help laughing.

I make him a chicken club-sandwich, something quick and easy so I can quickly free him from the drama.

He downs it as quickly as I expected and stands up, ready to go.

“It was great meeting you Langa, but I have to go back to work,” he says and then turns to me: “what are your plans for today?” he asks.

“I think we’ll go to the mall for lunch,” I say.

He says his goodbye and I walk him to the car. He’s holding me on the waist but he isn’t talking.

“So, that’s my brother, all of him,” I say, still trying not to laugh at how awkward he looks right now.

I know he wants to ask, and I won’t make it easy for him by just saying it.

“So you’re going to the mall?”

I nod.

“Here, I’ve never used this, buy whatever you both want, I’ll sms you the pin,” he says as he hands me his bank card, squeezes me in a hug, a kiss and he opens the car door.

Just as he’s about to get in he turns around.

“Is he.....?”

“Yes, he’s gay,” I say with a giggle.

He shakes his head, smiles and gets in the car.

This drama-queen is waiting for me at the door.

“He is sooooooooooooo hot!!! I think I like him!,” he says with the biggest grin.

“Yeah, you’ll like him even more because he gave us his bank card, said we can buy whatever we want.....” I don’t finish the sentence and he’s already jumping all over the house. Looking for his bag and ordering me to call a cab so we can go.

Like, sometimes I don't believe we're the same age, really.

Now, Langa may be crazy and have excessive female hormones but he is also very protective of me. As much as he is going to spend my man's money with no conscience whatsoever, he has to be sure that I'm in the right place.

"I think he really does love you, I saw the way he looks at you, but if you have any doubts I don't want you staying with him, you can always walk away....." he says.

"I don't have doubts, infact I'm happy, sometimes it's a bit complicated but I know he's not a bad person," I say, I think I really mean this.

"No funny business like beating you? Because he did seem a bit...."

"No..no ...no..." I lie, very quickly and convincingly.

"Okay good," he says.

"Did he pay for my flight ticket?" he asks.

"Yes"

"Did he deposit me that R3000?" again.

"Yes".

"So how much money does he have?" it goes on.

"I found R600 000 cash in a bag in his wardrobe," I say.

He almost jumps up from his chair, totally drawing attention in the restaurant.

"I made him open a bank account and put it there. I don't think they have that much money but they do have it. Not really wealthy. It's hard to tell though because they're not even extravagant"

He drops his face.

"He didn't have a bank account? Really? Looks like you still have a lot of work to do with him," he says.

"Urgh, they own taxis, I don't know how many but it seems like a lot, so they are cash-to-hand kind of people. I have to work on making him change that car, it's dodgy...." I explain.

"They?" he asks.

"Yes, he has seven more brothers," I say.

"I give up!" he says with a clap.

Lunch is done, now it's time to go spend some taxi money. Oh! he won't know what hit him once we're done! Rosebank Mall has no limits!

Now, I love shopping for clothes but I'm also more into uniqueness than price so you'll mostly find me raiding local designer stores like The Space, Big Blue and Urban Zulu.

Langa on another hand, is going to drive my man to bankruptcy! Together we are unstoppable.

I expect to get a call or message from Mqhele anytime, he knows how much we've spent so far because sms notifications are flooding in on his phone. But no call and no message so far, I take it we're still within budget, not that I was given any.

I have a conscience, unlike this diva I shared a womb with, so I decide to buy my man something as well. I've been taking care of his cosmetics supply and things like vests socks since I saw him putting on a pair that had the biggest holes in them, I haven't gone as far as buying him underwear but I'm working on it. Not that I want to mother him but if he walks around in public looking like he woke up in jail, it reflects badly on me.

I'm going to buy him jeans and I know exactly where to go.

"Is this something he'd wear," Langa says as I inspect a pair of G-Star dark blue jeans from a pile at a Fabiani store.

"No, he normally wears tracksuits, that's all he wears," I say.

"Trying to change the man I see, not good at all," he says.

"Not trying to change, trying to introduce and improve," I say.

We both laugh about that as we walk to the till. They set me, or should I say him, back about R2000, but who's calculating?

I wash his clothes so I know his size.

Langa is carrying more shopping bags than me, he even went as far as buying a Woolworths voucher for groceries when he returns to res. What kind of brother is this? He is literally cashing in on my vagina.

We leave the mall after stores are long closed, we decided on dinner first.

I've had so much fun I've forgotten about the man when he calls.

"Are you still okay there," he says.

I remember I've just set him back R7000 or more.....

"I'm fine love, about to leave Rosebank, how are you?"

"I'm in the East Rand, I'll meet you at your flat later," he says.

Well, he didn't say anything about my spending his money like a gold-digger so I guess it's all cool.

When we get home Langa insists on trying on everything! Again! I decide I'll be a spectator, with a glass of white one in hand.

Mqhele arrives later than I expected, I've learnt not to ask. He comes in, greets briefly, seems to be in a great mood but frowns at the wine glass in my hand.

I know it's coming as I walk him back to the car.

"I didn't know you drink," he says, walking ahead in front of me.

"Just wine, and only because Langa is here," I explain, not the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

I'm not sure if he has a problem with it or not, if he does, I know it will come up eventually.

He signals with his hand that I should get in the car.

"We're going to get ice cream," he says.

Funny how he never says 'can we...?' or ask if I want to do something first. I don't even like ice cream.

He's holding my hand, he keeps kissing the back of it as he drives. Still nothing about my spending. Maybe I should just get over the guilt.

"I bought you something," I say, realizing that I forgot to bring the jeans with me.

"Mmmm at Fabiani?"

How did he know?

"I saw the sms notification," he says.

"So you know the store," I say hoping I'm not going to offend him.

"I know all these stores, Sambulo spends all his money in them, it's like a disease," he says.

I've noticed how that one is always snazzy, he is the scruffy type but I noticed he has expensive taste. He doesn't talk much but speaks very slow when he does. Mqhele once told me that he's been smoking weed since he was a teenager, that's why he talks so slow. LOL, these people though.

"So you don't like expensive clothes?" this is my chance to weave in the dress code subject.

"Errrr, I like being comfortable more," he says.

"Why are you always wearing tracksuits? Infact most of you, why?"

He laughs and looks at me.

"You should have asked me that a long time ago. They're comfortable plus, they have tightening elastic on the ankles, makes it easy to hide and secure a gun".

I'm so shocked my eyeballs are all out. I really didn't see this one coming.

"I don't want a gun in my presence," I say, dead serious. Infact I'm getting pissed off.

"I've had a gun in your presence for the past two months," he says.

Did he really just say that?

That's it. I'm not speaking to him anymore. I look out the window, that's what I plan to do until he gets his bloody ice cream and takes me back home.

Why does he think he can talk to me about guns just like that? I've let a lot of things go, like his disappearance to wherever for four days and the ever available money which I'm sure doesn't come from just the taxi business. But that doesn't mean I'm comfortable with guns and shit like that!

"You're angry"?

I ignore him.

"But I need a gun, I'm in the taxi business, I need to protect myself," he says.

"Protect yourself from what?" I snap.

"The business, you won't understand,"

I ignore him again, I keep my eyes glued outside the window. And this maskandi music is getting on my nerves!!

"Okay, let's agree that I won't have the gun on me when I'm with you, I'll hide it somewhere here in the car,"

Like it makes a difference stupid. He's not even serious about this I can tell.

The lady at McDonalds drive-thru is too happy for my liking, annoying really but atleast we're out of there in a flash.

I'm not having ice-cream at 10pm, I'm not crazy. He indulges on his Oreo-McFlurry alone as we drive back. He doesn't seem to care much that I'm fuming right now.

"So you're going to be mad at me the whole night? I thought we were going to have sex in the car," he says.

I cannot! I just cannot believe what he just said!

All I can do is look at him. I don't know what to say but I really want to slap that smirk off his face right now. When he's an idiot, he's a real idiot!

"I'm not going to have sex with you and your gun, bye!" I say as I open the door and get out just as he parks.

He gets out of the car and follows me, grabs me by the arm.

"Okay, we'll negotiate the gun thing, maybe we will come to some agreement, just get back in the car,"

I want to get back in the car even though I know he's still not taking me seriously right now. I give him a warning look before jumping back in.

He's laughing. This idiot!

I have one major thing I need to do today, shopping for the kids, they're starting school on Monday. Langa will take an evening flight back to Cape Town tonight. I'm working tomorrow. Mqhele drops all three of them at my flat very early in the morning. I have to do the porridge thing before we head off. The two little ones immediately warmed up to Langa but Sbani is still a bit confused by this uncle who can't stop whingeing about how much they look alike.

I just have to pile up navy shorts and underwear for both of them, the rest, like t-shirts, jerseys and tracksuits are sold at the school. It makes my life easy.

"Where's their mother?" Langa asks, ensuring that the kids are far enough not to hear.

"I don't know, I haven't asked yet. There's a lot I still don't know about this family," I say, realizing that infact I should have asked that questions already.

Spur it is again, their new obsession.

I do love them kids but I'm happy when we're done and Mqhele calls. But he says he can't come pick them up, he will instead send Qhawe to pick us up from the mall, drop us at my flat and take the kids home to Riverlea.

I'm cool with that although his resemblance of my man still freaks me out a bit. I have this fear that maybe there'll be a time or incident where I won't be able to tell them apart. Now that would be a disaster.

He finds us already waiting. Judging by the way he is so relaxed I'm sure he's been briefed about the dramatic looking twin.

The twin on the other hand looks like he's just seen a ghost.

"No half, this is creepy. How do you tell these people apart?" he whispers as we get in the car while Qhawe packs the bags in the boot.

"I know the one I'm sleeping with," I say, confidently so.

He laughs but continues to look startled.

Qhawe even speaks like Mqhele. He also, like him, has this shady thing where you can feel his presence even when he's just sitting there quietly.

I catch him on the rear-view mirror a couple of times trying to hold a laugh while we all listen to a very strange conversation between Langa and Lwandle, they are not normal these two.

I have to negotiate with the little one who's now crying because he doesn't want to go home without me. It takes a while.

Before driving off Qhawe calls me aside.

"Are you good?" he says.

That's rather random.

"Yes, I'm good," I say, suddenly nervous being alone with him. There's something a bit scary about him, or is it that it's like looking at Mqhele.

"He told me what he did, I promise you it won't happen again," he says, and then leaves me standing there.

I assume by "what he did" he's referring to him beating me.

I also hope it doesn't happen again, because I'll leave if it does.

Chapter 7

I'm not even sure how I got through work yesterday because after the weekend I had, particularly the Saturday afternoon drinking binge I had with Langa before he left, I was a walking zombie.

I tried hard to hide my hangover from the man and he bought my story that I was just tired and drained out. I slept over in Naturena and as usual this morning he left me in bed at 3am, came back at 7am to take me to work. I don't know why he doesn't let me just take a taxi instead.

It's going to 1pm and I've only spoken to him once since the morning. He's probably busy or something.

"Hlomu please take over this story, Thapelo has to go out, there's been a shooting a Bree, taxi violence of some sort," my boss shouts to me from his desk.

Did he just say what I thought he said? Nooooo!

"Did you hear what I said Hlomu?"

I can't respond. I'm just standing here with my mouth open and eyes wide. I have to call him, I have to call Mqhele!

The phone rings twice and goes to voicemail. I'm not sure what this means. I try again about four times but it goes on voicemail. I remember Qhawe phoned me when he came to pick us up, his number must still be on received calls. I dial it, it rings twice and he answers, but all I hear is noise, chaos, police sirens ambulance sirens in the background and it goes dead. I'm shaking right now.

I almost jump out the chair when I feel someone tap me on the shoulder. It's my boss.

"Are you okay?" he says.

I stare at him for a few seconds before lying.

"Yes, I'm fine, I'm just....."

"Okay good, please make one call and put together this story about nurses selling contraceptives in Orange Farm, Thapelo was already halfway through it. All you have to do is call the department of health," he says, hands me a piece of paper and walks away.

The news is already on radio.

"FIVE PEOPLE DEAD IN A TAXI VIOLENCE SHOOTING AT BREE"

Five? God please, I can't deal with this. I rush to the ladies room to try and call again but I still can't get any of them. I call Langa but he doesn't answer. I'm in tears now. I don't even know why I'm thinking the worst but I can't help it.

I need to get out of here, I need to leave now. But I know that won't happen, my boss will not understand that at all.

There is no information yet as to who the dead people are. I try checking on the news sites but they all mention a shooting, five people, more injured and details to follow.

Thapelo is still on his way there so I can't call him to fish for more information.

What am I going to do now? What if.....No! I refuse to think that, even though I can't shake the bad feeling. God wouldn't do this to me. I've totally abandoned my church ways since I got to Joburg but I've always been a good girl, he wouldn't betray me like that.

It's been an hour, nothing. All Thapelo could tell me was that police are waiting to inform relatives before releasing the names of the dead and injured, he said the area is barricaded and they can't go any closer to the scene but that the bodies were being collected now.

If Mqhele is alright, if they're all alright then why haven't they called me?

I made that call and got that comment from the Department of Health and sent the story through. I hope this old guy won't bug me again. I have two hours before I can knock off.

Langa hasn't called back, why hasn't he called because he filled up his phone with a year supply of airtime using my man's money? Why hasn't he? Nx!

Okay, it's 3pm and he's still in class.

An sms comes through. I grab my phone like a crazy person.

"Don't leave the office. Don't even go outside"

Who is this now? I call the number back, it rings once and goes to a beep sound.

WTF is going on? And who could this be and why shouldn't I go out? And what about the kids? They're at school.

I keep checking the news, it's been confirmed the shooting was related to taxi violence and war over new routes and that two of the dead were random taxi passengers.

But who are the three?

It's almost 5pm, maybe I should just go, but then, maybe I should follow instructions and stay here. What about the kids?

I must call the school.

They say they've been picked up by their father. These kids have eight fathers, it won't help me asking what he looked like, they all look the same.

Sbani's school is close to Ntsika's so I'm not worried much, even though I maybe I should be.

"What time are you going home? Isn't your boyfriend picking you up today?" my photographer colleague, the one from the rubber-bullet incident, asks.

I just look at him with a blank face.

"His brothers are hectic hey, they're like typical taxi.....Oh shit!" he says, realizing why I look like the world has just ended.

"Have you heard anything from them? I'm sure they're fine just that it's hectic at Bree and I hear the rank is closed....."

Now tears are just rolling down my cheeks. I can't even utter a word and frankly I'm getting pissed off by his rambling.

He notices I'm crying and walks away. Men are just cowards when it comes to tears.

It's going to 7pm and I need to get out of here. My desk phone rings, it's reception, someone is asking for me.

"What do they look like?" I ask the lady on the phone.

"Two tall men with big eyes," she says in a whisper. "Give me one of them please," she says with a giggle.

This hoe thinks I have time for nonsense. I drop the phone and pick up my bag to leave.

It's the elder brother and Nqoba, this can't be good. Where's Mqhele? I don't like the look on their faces too.

I walk up and stand in front of them. I won't ask, if they have something to tell me they must just come out and say it.

They don't say anything, they just stand there and look at me.

"Where is he?" I ask, tears and all.

No answer.

“Where are the kids?” I ask again.

“At home,” Nkosana responds flatly.

“Is he alive?” I ask, expecting the worst.

“Yes, he's in hospital. Sambulo was shot”.

Chapter 8

It's been a year.

June 6, the exact date he stood at my door at 5am and kissed me. I've loved him more and more each day since then.

I'm happy, he's happy, but it's been a difficult 10 months.

Sambulo spent two months in hospital, three weeks in a coma. When he was finally discharged he was on a wheelchair for another three months before moving on to crutches after almost spending everyday in a rehab facility.

His useless girlfriend, whom I only got to know on the day he was shot, couldn't stick around. She said she couldn't deal with the anger and the temper tantrums. She got tired.

I don't know how I've been able to do it myself but I've stayed, tried to keep this family together despite my fears of what they might do next, to whom.

I choose not to get involved and not to know too much when it comes to their business dealings. It's a dangerous place.

There were more shootings after that one, three people from a rival taxi association killed, the same association suspected to have ordered the shooting that left Sambulo injured and five people dead.

Sometimes I connect dots in my mind, and then I stop when they seem to take me towards a direction I don't like. I choose to be in denial.

I still remember Mqhele's words when he came back that night to all of us at Nkosana's house, the kids all curled up next to me.

"They wanted us, they wanted to kill all of us".

With that I pulled the kids behind me and went to sit with them in one of the bedrooms. I felt I didn't need to hear all that, neither did they.

That morning I woke up with bruises and missing braids. That wasn't making love, that was him trying to release all his anger. He held me too tight, pulled my hair and dug his fingers in my skin and when he let out, he growled, like some animal. But there were tears in his eyes as well.

I allowed it all, painful, but I just lay there and sacrificed myself hoping it would take away his pain. I wanted to carry it for him, feel it for him.

On the days that followed I sometimes felt like I didn't know him at all. His smoking shot up to double of how much he used to smoke a day. On top of dealing with the pain of his brother on the deathbed, he had to live with the guilt of hurting me, deep in my soul.

I held on, assured him that it would all be fine and loved him even more.

Things changed, my movements changed, my freedom changed. But my love for him, and his for me, and their love for each other grew stronger.

My brother, he was my pillar. He's in Rustenburg doing his internship in one of the mining companies. He is close.

Things got better when Sambulo was discharged from hospital. Even better when he got off the wheelchair. Now he is walking again, with little difficulty, but he's back to his weed smoking, slow talking women liking self. He's even been going to the rank now and again.

The kids are doing great at school. I went to Sbani's school in September and yes, he's a little genius. His teacher suggested we enroll him in one of those 'Schools of Excellence'. I'm waiting for

feedback for next year.

Ntsika is in matric. I'm surprised he stayed on and kept pace even with everything that's been going on. He also calls me 'mami', strange because I'm 23 and he is 17. But I guess that's what I am to him, their mother died when he was a year old.

That's another subject that's never spoken about.

Both the parents died in the early 90s. Their father was a feared man in the Greytown community, he was also supplying guns to one of the fighting political parties, he ordered some killings and fueled violence in the area.

When the community got tired of it, they raided the house in the middle of the night and hacked every living thing they found to death.

Mqhele was 11-years-old. He said his father heard the angry crowd coming, woke up all the kids, strapped Ntsika on Nkosana's back, opened the back door and told of them to run and not look back. Their mother was supposed to follow but they never saw her again.

They ran and walked the whole night with Nkosana leading the way. They made it to their mother's family home in Eshowe two days later. All they found was an elderly grandmother who was too happy to take them in.

Nkosana had to drop out of school and be a taxi conductor while Nqoba, although attending school, had to herd cows for neighbors

There were no luxuries in their lives but nobody was to be left behind, they were determined to keep running through life together.

Nkosana left for Joburg when the man he had been working for promised him a driving job there. He rarely came back home but sent money often. That time Nqoba was selling fatcakes made by their grandmother in town.

Mqhele was in matric, Sambulo was starting to be a difficult teenager, Mqoqi and Mpande were still hunting birds with slingshots and Ntsika was still running around naked when the grandmother died in her sleep on one night.

Nkosana, although not really sure what he was doing, told all of them to pack all their belongings and trekked back to Johannesburg with them.

He, Nqoba, Mqhele and Qhawe were by then old enough to live in the men's hostel in Denver but the other four they had to place with a woman whose surname was Zulu, and therefore they considered a relative, in a squatter camp just next to the hostel.

Nqoba, with his business minded nature found something to sell. First it was loose cigarettes, then he added airtime, and in no time he had a stand trading stand at the taxi rank.

Mqhele said he tried to find a school and stay in for the last six months of his matric year but it was difficult. He never wrote the exams.

Two years in Johannesburg they raised enough money to buy one taxi. The exact term used was "we organised money and bought our first taxi".

They were already connected in the industry so things were easier.

Eleven years later they have 14 taxis, a tavern, three mini buses for a schoolchildren transporting business, recently two trucks and houses of their own.

I never asked what happened to the woman who looked after the young boys when they arrived in Joburg.

Nkosana had his first child when he was 22-years-old with a woman he'd been dating since he arrived in Joburg. They had another one four years later. She left on the night she found out he had made another woman pregnant. She tried to take her children with her but she knew better. I hear

she went back to Botswana but nobody knows for sure.

Mvelo was born four years ago. His mother is now married to another man. I don't know what happened. I don't know her, not even her name. She doesn't bother.

Now, these men may be identical but they are unique in their own way.

Nkosana (33)

Nqoba (31)

Mqhele (28)

Qhawe (27)

Sambulo (25)

Mqoqi (23)

Mpande (21)

Ntsika (17)

I'm older than two of them, I'm the same age with Mqoqi but I've assumed the role of a mother, not how I envisioned my life at 23.

I still have my flat but I'm hardly ever there at all, except when Langa is visiting and that one time when my parents and sister came for a weekend. I didn't see Mqhele at all that weekend but he made sure that they had a comfortable stay. He even bought VVIP tickets for Langa and my dad to a soccer game, not that Langa had fun with that.

My mom, Lethu and I had a spa day which would have been more fun if the little Model-C spoiled brat was nice to the staff. Honestly I don't know what is wrong with that child. I had to give her money and told her to go shopping, just for some peace.

My mom, although she did not want to get straight to it, suspected there was more to my life than what I was putting out. I don't go home as often as I used to, maybe once in two months but I call them everyday, I know everything they're up to and I never miss extended family functions.

Things are almost back to normal. He is eating ice cream again.

I'm doing great at work despite having to juggle between three kids and a demanding career.

Today is Saturday, it's early morning and I'm still in bed. He left very early, said he had to meet with the brothers for some trucking deal they're trying to secure.

Maybe I should make a big deal out of this one year anniversary thing, organise lunch, buy a cake...I don't know. But then again, he probably doesn't even know June 6 was the day we started dating. I don't think he's into these things, same as birthdays. On his birthday in August last year Sambulo was still in a coma so I didn't even raise it.

I hear him pulling up outside just as I come out of the shower. I think we're going to stay in and cuddle today so I pull out leggings and an oversized top from the wardrobe.

"You might wanna wear something warmer, we're going out," he says leaning against the doorway of the bedroom.

The look on his face says it's not negotiable. Okay.

I walk over to give him a hug. My arms wrapped around his waist.

"Or, we could stay in the house and I'll walk around naked and let you do whatever you want to do to me," I say looking up at him.

I spot a mischievous smile on his face, like he is tempted but.....

"That's really tempting, but we have to go out, I'll take you up on that offer when we come back," he says.

Urgh okay, no use arguing with him. I always know when he won't back down.

I put on skinny jeans, high boots and a black trench-coat on top. Long thin braids are still my signature hairstyle although I had short hair until early this year. He loved it.

He's standing by the door by the time I come out of the bedroom, still not sure where we are going.

Oh, we have an Audi A4 now. The Sprinter is still part of this life but well, I like the A4 better.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"To the beginning," he says without looking at me.

To the beginning? What does that even mean? Since when is he deep and poetic?

He's on the phone before I can probe further.

I guess he wants to sort out some work stuff first before we go on this mystery date because we're heading straight to Bree taxi rank.

It's buzzing as usual. This place gives me creeps, ever since that day.

He pulls me by my hand and leads me to a once familiar place, where I used to queue for a taxi to Berea for the first six months of my Joburg life. He stops at a certain spot and stands to face me.

Wait! I remember this spot, this is where I saw him for the first time, where he told me to move with the queue.

"So, can I send people to speak to you father. I need you to be my wife," he says without a slightest warning.

Is he proposing to me at a taxi rank? Really?

"Can I?" he says, widening his 'zoom lenses' at me.

I smile, this I did not see coming at all.

"Yes, you can," I say with a giggle.

He hugs me, almost lifting me up. With one hand I notice he is raising a thumb at someone. Not too far from us there's Bab'Ngcobo. He is smiling, and slowly, he walks away.

People around us are carrying on with their business, they have no idea what just happened here.

He leads me back to the car but before we move. He makes a call.

"She said yes, June 28," he says and hangs up.

I'm still too lost in the moment to ask who was on the phone. One day I'll write a book about my life, I don't think there's ever been a woman in the world who was proposed to at a taxi rank! Never!

Wait! Where's the engagement ring.....? I get rid of that thought immediately, this is Zulu from Greytown, he doesn't subscribe to that down on one knee shiny diamond thing.

I keep looking at him with the biggest smile on my face and he has this look, like he's pleased with himself, like he's achieved something big. He is holding on to my hand.

"I'll take that offer from earlier now," he says.

I laugh out loud, not sure if I'll be able to focus after all this.

All the way back to the house I've been thinking about how I'm going to break the news to my parents. Oh well, I'll worry about that later.....for now, I have to give my soon-to-be husband what's due to him.

The whole family came over for lunch on Sunday. I knew Nkosana and Qhawe already know by the looks they were giving me. Oh! I never!

"So when exactly did you decide on this?" I ask as he runs his hand through my braids.

He is quiet for a while.

"I think I knew from the beginning. But on that day, the first time you came to my house and I was trying to shag you and you told me you were a virgin....."

Shag? Nx! I'm still embarrassed about that.

"And I asked you why you waited and you said "I was waiting for you", you remember that?"

"Yes I do," I say.

"I could see you spoke without thinking, but the way you said it was so honest, you meant it," he says.

True.

"And it wasn't just about the sex, you know, the fact that nobody had touched you before me, I just felt that it was all fate and that we were meant to meet and fall I love," he says.

We're having a soft moment here aren't we? I like this side of him.

It's Wednesday already and I haven't had the guts to tell my parents that there are people coming to test their patience in three weeks. I'm really not sure how to break the news but I can see Mqhele is not impressed by the fact.

I have to make a call.

"Half, I need you to shut up and listen. I'm getting married and I want you to call the parents and tell them people are coming to pay lobola on June 28...." I say.

"Whoaaahhhhhhh! Wait! You're what?" he says, about to get on his crazy tactics again.

"You heard me, just do it," I wish he'd just get on with it without all the drama.

"No woman, you're going to have to start from the beginning, when and how did he ask you, do you have a ring?"

"On Saturday, at Bree taxi rank and no there was no ring," I say, realizing how weird it sounds.

He laughs out loud.

"Oh, that man of yours, I love him nevertheless. When's the wedding," he's still laughing.

"When you tell the parents and the lobola negotiations start, now get on with it," I leave him at that. I can't deal!

My mother calls me the next morning. I hesitate to answer for a second but then, I might as well deal with this now than later.

"Is what Langa is telling us true?" that's her greeting, I can't read her immediately.

"Yes...it's true," that's all I can say.

"How long have you known this boy?"

"A year," I think she can sense I'm nervous.

"How old is he?" she goes on.

"28,"

"Oh, I see, does he have a job?" she says.

Trust my mom to ask that of all things. Like I'd date anyone without a job.

"Yes, he does, he's in the transport business," I say. I don't mention the word taxi, that would raise some serious sirens.

"I see," she says and moves on to another subject.

I'm surprised, I expected the conversation to be lengthy and interrogative. She didn't even know I had a boyfriend, let alone one that would want to marry me.

I'm pretty sure she is not a fan of marriage, especially marrying young because that's what she did. She had us when she was 21, two years after marrying my father.

She only went to nursing school after we were born and she once told me that it was difficult to get in but she wasn't going to give up.

I know my father will not speak to me about it at all, apparently it has something to do with culture.

Now that this part of it is sorted, I have to put in notice for leave at work, atleast so I can be home two days before the actual day.

By now most of the colleagues I'm sort-of close with know about my taxi queen status. The friends, although some were judgmental at first, have gotten used to my rather unique lifestyle. We even had a baby-shower for one of them in Naturena a few months ago.

Mqhele agreed to it reluctantly but was clear that he was not going to even show his face.

When they're around, he never sticks around for more than 10 minutes, he says he can't handle many women in one place, the giggling and screaming and clapping and crazy talk.....he says it makes his head spin.

"A bunch of screaming and laughing women in one place, I don't think I'll survive that, I'm going to be somewhere drinking my brains out. Call me when they're all gone," he said.

Best decision by him, he makes everyone uncomfortable anyway.

I've also had to fend off some of the friends throwing themselves at the brothers. I just know it won't end well and I don't want complications in this life. And on top of that, I've got to know the official girlfriends, including Nqoba's one, Mandisa, who'll attack anything that even looks at him.

Qhawe's one is one of those radical born-again types that will wear a skirt even on the coldest winter day.

I don't know how they even got together, but, much as I like and respect him, Qhawe is a control freak who'll never be with a woman who won't do everything he says. He's right at home with this one, he cheats, she prays, he disrespects her, she prays.....

It's only a week and a half before the lobola date and we're in Naturena.

I haven't been to my flat in weeks, infact, it's not even my flat any more because Mqoqi and Mpande have decided to take over the place. Okay, I confess, I let them stay there just so I won't have to let it go, you know, just incase I find myself homeless for some reason.

Nkosana stopped by with the kids and I asked that they stay for dinner.

My phone rings, it's my dad. I'm not sure if I should go answer it in the bedroom or just do it here. I stay.

"Hello baba," I say. There's immediate silence in the house.

"Errrrr yes he's here,"

"No"

"I don't know, he hasn't told me about that"

"Yes, his older brother is here"

"Okay"

I reluctantly hand over the phone to Nkosana. Mqhele is standing in front of me with a very worried look on his face.

"My dad wants to speak to you," I say.

"About?" I have to read his lips to get what he is saying.

I shrug.

He takes the phone and goes outside.

“What's going on?” Mqhele asks me, now looking really worried.

“I don't know, he just said he wants to speak to one of abakhongi(lobola negotiators) or an elder in your family, I'm not sure what it's about,” I say, also worried, I know my dad.

We stand there looking worried, both of us. Dad is not screwing this up for me. I won't allow it!

Nkosana peeps in through the door after a few minutes and signals to Mqhele to come outside.

Why am I being kept in the dark here?

All I can hear from where I'm standing is him saying furiously: “Tell him I'll do it myself”.

They both come back in, Mqhele looking irritated now. I don't like this, I don't like it at all.

I give him an inquisitive look but he totally ignores me.

Nkosana gives me a half smile before he calls on the kids and tells them it's time to go.

I still don't know what's going on right now.

“You father says we can't start with the negotiations, because he still needs to do umemulo for you”

Umemulo? I'm freaking 23-years-old!

I give him a confused look. Not even one of my older female cousins has ever had umemulo. And since when is my dad so culture conscious?

'Nkosana will speak to Bab'Gumbi and Bab'Ngcobo about it tomorrow.....” he says.

Wait a minute! Bab'Gumbi?

“You asked Bab'Gumbi to be your mkhongi?”

'Yes,” he says flatly.

“And you didn't tell me?” really dude?

“You don't have to know about it,” he says.

I think we're going to have some serious problems here if things are going to be done and I'm going to be told that I don't have to know about them. I'm not going to have shit like that happening.

But I know my tantrums are the least of his concerns right now.

“I'll speak to my mom tomorrow and find out about this memulo thing. He's never even mentioned it before so I don't know where it's coming from now,” I say, trying to put him at ease.

It doesn't work really.

He's still sulking in the morning. I have to raise the issue again because really I'm also frustrated by all this.

“So, what are you going to suggest to my father? Because I mean I can have umemulo maybe three months from now and then we can start after that,” I say, not sure if starting this conversation is a good idea.

'No, we're not postponing anything. If you have to have umemulo it can always be done later, I don't see why it can't be done after amalobolo, it happens all the time,” he says.

I'm not sure what my father's stance on this is but I know he won't back down easily, especially when it's about him commanding respect from a man who is about to take his daughter away from him. He could make things very difficult for this guy.

“What if my dad says no?” that was my mind again rushing to my mouth.

The reaction is exactly what I expected, a look that says 'stop fucking talking'.

I adhere, and look out the closed window. There is silence in the car, long silence.

"If your father says no, well, that will be my bad. I don't have a mother or father to fend for me or make decisions on my behalf. I guess I'd just have to take what I'm given, I know all about not having choices. I still have the challenge of proving I'm good enough for you....," he says.

I'm hurt. He just really hurt me right now.

"That's unfair and you know it...." I say as I get out of the car and bang the door. I'm going to bury myself in my work today. I don't want anybody in this office to even try to speak to me today, not even one!

I hadn't thought about that, about whether my parents will approve of him or not. I know they won't judge him by where he comes from or who he is now but you never know, sometimes people just don't gel.

I'm the first daughter and this is the first time my family is marrying someone off so some glitches can be expected, but how big are they going to be?

I've never brought a boyfriend home, like, that's not even legal where I come from.

I understand his frustration, maybe I should call first. Yeah, let me do that.

"Hey, love,"

"Hi, how's work?" he says. I can feel he's still a bit down.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine....just...sorry about this morning," he says. I can always tell if he's sincere. Not that it's ever hard to tell, with him, everything is what it seems.

"Maybe I shouldn't have raised the issue. I'm sorry about that. I miss you," I say.

I can hear the relief in his breath. I don't want to fight, not when I should be planning for the biggest step I'll ever take in my life. We've come too far.

"I'm on my way there," he says.

Maybe this is how we should handle our fights after we're married.

Much to my relief, my dad is willing to negotiate. He's agreed to lobola going ahead but insists on doing umemulo before the next step, umembeso.

Umemulo is sort of 21st birthday for a girl, a confirmation by her parents that she is no longer a girl but a woman and that she can go out and live her life. The next step after it, in sequence, is marriage. In our Zulu culture, a ceremony called umhloniyane is performed for a girl when she starts her period, umemulo when she is 21 and umncamo on the night before her wedding.

But then, it is believed that for a girl to have umemulo, she should still be a virgin. I was so close hey? Infact, don't judge me because I was still a virgin at 21, I just couldn't resist the charms of a maskandi playing big eyed taxi driver when I met him, that was my downfall.

It's Wednesday and I'm going home tomorrow, I need the two days to prepare for the negotiations on Saturday. Mqhele will drop me off at the airport tomorrow morning where I'll meet Langa and we will take the same flight.

He's hired a car for us which we will pick up when we arrive. I still can't drive, but Langa can.

He and the four older brothers will fly to Durban on Friday, with Bab'Gumbi and Bab'Ngcobo. I don't think Bab'Gumbi has ever been on a flight before.

I'm thinking about all this as we drive to back from Nqoba's place, It's not exactly a tavern but one of those classy township hangout places that look bad on the outside and shockingly good on the inside.

The only thing wrong with that place is his girlfriend. She's never been rude to me but she's got this demonic aura about her that just makes you fearful. She's older too, I think that contributes to it.

Mqhele says she's the perfect match for his brother because if she wasn't this psycho he'd have 15 kids by different women running around with big eyes.

My phone rings, it's my dad.

Fuck! We're in this car! It has that blue-tooth thing that connects your phone to car speakers automatically.

If I answer it, I'll have to have the conversation on speaker, with Mqhele hearing everything.

I hesitate, but in a spur of a moment, I press answer.

"NoMandla," my dad says. He has always called me that, it was my grandmother's name, his mother.

"Yebo baba," I say, already holding thumbs that he doesn't say something that will offend this man next to me.

"What time will you arrive tomorrow?"

"At about 11am," I say.

"And umkhwenyana yena?"

"On Friday night," I respond.

"Oh, do you love him?"

"Yes, I do" I say, not sure where this is going.

"Does he love you?"

I look at him next to me. I know he does.

"Yes he does, I'm sure of it," I respond.

"Do you feel safe with him? Protected?" Oh Ghosh! This is too awkward.

"Yes, I do," I say with almost a sigh.

"Okay, that's all I want to know. As long I know those three things I'm fine. I don't care about the rest. I'll see you tomorrow," he says and hangs up.

This has to be the most uncomfortable conversation I have ever had with anyone in my life! Ever!

I look at him, just to check his impression. I'm not sure how he took this.

He looks like he is deep in thought, like something is worrying him about what he's just heard.

I'm not going to start with him, so I keep quiet and look out the closed window.

"I will never hit you again, I'm sorry I ever did," he says.

If I said I'd ever forgotten about that, I'd be lying.

Chapter 9

I'm worried. I'm panicking and I have a feeling that my father and uncles are ruining my life as we speak. I know them, they are going to say all the wrong things.

I tried talking my mother into not telling one of my uncles about the lobolo negotiations, but he is family, and he's been here since Thursday and he hasn't been sober for a single second of his stay. Then there is my aunt, the self-ordained culture guru. She's been barking orders and telling everyone how this is done and how this is not done, how I should not leave the house the whole weekend and that I should cover my head...I mean, like WTF? The woman has never even gotten married in her life. Ghosh!

They've been talking behind closed doors for two hours now and I'm getting restless. I'm pacing up and down the kitchen and Langa is not helping with his apron wearing drunk self. He's been sipping wine from a coffee mug since early in the morning, at least, with the help of my cousin, they cooked quite impressive food.

Mqhele couldn't be part of the negotiations, they say it's custom but I think it's done just to preserve good relations between a man and his father-in-law.

I'm not sure where he is, the last I heard from him was an sms just before this whole thing started saying: *"hello almost Mrs Zulu"*.

That was cute but I know better. They might just leave here with all their money and cows and never come back if my uncles decide to be themselves. Even worse, there's Nqoba there, he is the same as them.

There's also my cousin, that one who is famous for being alive, I don't even think he is hearing anything that's being said there, he's probably busy planning a after-party in his head.

Maybe talking to him will put me at ease. Maybe he knows what's going on, Nkosana must be briefing him over sms or something.

"I'm worried, they're still busy inside," I sms.

"what are you worried about fiance,"

Fiance, I like the sound of that.

"What if they're not agreeing on anything?" I say.

"We'll got Home Affairs then and forget about them" he says.

This man, he thinks this is a joke.

"It's not funny," I say, trying to sound irritated.

"I'm serious. You look good with your head covered, like a true makoti," he says.

Huh?

"Where are you?"

"Outside in the car. I saw you standing outside in the yard earlier," he says.

What? I thought he was at the guesthouse sleeping. Why is he here? He's not supposed to be here.

"Langa, I'm going somewhere I'll be back just now. Just tell them I'm in the toilet or something.....," I say to the drunk gay twin as I sneak out and through the small gate to the neighbor's yard and out to the road.

He almost jumps from the car seat when he sees me standing outside the window. He quickly unlocks the door.

"You're not supposed to be here, do you want your crazy aunt to kill me?" he says, although looking rather impressed with me.

I put a kiss on his lips before I say anything. I haven't seen him in two days!

"You know about my aunt? She's in there, I think she wants to sabotage me or something. She's not supposed to be there in the first place but everybody is scared of her..."

"Yes, she's turning things up in there, I don't even want to know anymore," he says, seemingly finding this whole thing funny.

"So what else are they telling you? Are they almost finished?" that's all I'm worried about, my aunt, well my uncle will deal with her when he's drunk enough, it ends like that all the time.

He looks at me, looking rather self-impressed about something I just can't figure out what.

"You're not supposed to know the details of these things Hlomu, it's culture,"

Urgh, I didn't come here for this.

His phone rings. I can see Nkosana has come out of the house and is leaning against the wall with his phone on one ear.

I assume it's him calling but all I hear is Mqhele saying: "Give them whatever they ask for, don't even negotiate, I found her sealed,".

Oh hell no! Sealed? What am I? A can of Fanta?

I see Nkosana rushing back in the house.

"Sealed? Is my dad asking if I was a virgin or not?" seriously I can't deal.

He laughs, very loud.

"I told you, you're not supposed to know about these things Hlomu. And you're supposed to be in the house not here. They're gonna make me pay if they find you here," he still has a smirk on his face as he says this.

If I stay here any longer I'm going to lose my mind, this man has not a single bone or seriousness in his body today.

"You're not helping, let me just go, you're going to come in when they eat right?" I ask.

He hesitates and then nods.

He sees the inside of my home the first time today, officially as part of the family. I wonder what's going on through his mind as he sits on the dining room table, the same table as my father having lunch.

I noticed him trying to hide a smile when he saw pictures of me as a child, In high school, my graduation etc hanging on the walls.

Honestly, I'm supposed to be here in the kitchen making sure that they are well served but all I've been doing is stealing glances at him. I'm so in love, and taken. I'm on my way to being a wife, to being part of the strangest family I've ever known.

My cousin, yes that one, seems to have found a perfect match in Nqoba, they're gelling so well.

I've never really asked why Nkosana is not married. There's been some women but they never last that long. There's something a bit detached about him, like he's the type that will have sex with a woman without kissing her. I don't know, maybe his childhood has a lot to do with it.

They leave at noon and I don't even get to kiss him goodbye, not with my aunt's threatening eye fixed on me. Like, really? This man has just paid for my vagina.

I desperately want to know how much they made him pay but as I've heard so many times before, I'm not supposed to know.

“So how much did you and your aunt scam out of my man?” I ask my cousin as we sit in the garage in what has suddenly turned into a mini family reunion.

“Why do you want to know? It's none of your business,” he says.

I give him a threatening look but I know he won't budge.

“I'm coming to Joburg next week,” he says.

Whaaaaat?

“Who do you know in Joburg?” I ask.

“I have brothers-in-law, there's some business we're going to be working on. By the way, they paid everything, all the lobola money and they'll bring four live cows later. This guy really means business, he wants to take you away as in yesterday,” he says.

I knew he was going to do that, but I still want to know how much so I know who I should start hating in this family.

And I don't like this new found relationship between my cousin and the Zulus because I know whatever it is that he does for a living is illegal. But who am I kidding, I'm not exactly marrying into a family of law abiding citizens.

It's Sunday and everybody has left, except my drunk uncle. Langa took a morning flight back, he's just always eager to leave home I'm not sure what his story is.

My parents said we had to talk about something before I leave this afternoon. Everybody is flying back but I am driving back with my man, it was a spur of the moment decision that we drive up in the hired car, just so we get that time alone.

My dad looks rather pleased with himself, it's a good sign, but there's still a lot he doesn't know about the Zulus.

“I saw there were no family elders with them except the brother,” he says as we sit around the dining room table, my mother looking ready to be annoyed by him.

“They don't have parents, they died so the brother is the elder,” I say.

“I see. They mentioned they're originally from Greytown.”

“Yes, but they left there when they were young, when their parents died, they went to live at their grandmother's home in Eshowe but she died too so they all moved to Joburg,” I say, not wanting to get into deep detail, it's not a nice story.

“So you're going to get married in Joburg?” my mom asks.

Oh my, I've never really thought about that.

“I don't know how it's going to work, I'll ask him about it,” I say.

“I hope they're not going to be in that taxi business forever because it can get dangerous and I don't want my child surrounded by guns and.....” my father, just as I expected.

He is stopped by that look that only my mother can give, that look that shoots straight to your nerves.

“We've decided your memulo will be in September. It will be umemulo in the morning and umembeso in the afternoon on the same day. That's what we all agreed on,” he says.

Okay, people are agreeing on things without asking me, okay.

“Why didn't you tell me about the date for umemulo?” I ask Mqhele as we drive back.

“I thought your parents would tell you, besides I was busy being excited about you being officially mine,” he says, with that smirk again.

I can't help blushing.

"I hear you paid everything. It's just like you," I say shaking my head.

"I was willing to give more, you're worth everything," he says, looking all too serious all of a sudden.

I touch his arm and slide my hand all the way down to his hand, I put my fingers in between his and squeeze tight. His eyes fixed on mine. I love him.

But then, I'm about to raise a sensitive issue.

"Where are we going to have the traditional wedding?" I say with almost a sigh, I know it's about to get serious.

He doesn't answer me. Instead he fixes his eyes on the road ahead, his face hardening, but he doesn't let go of my hand.

I also keep quiet, but this can't wait.

"You're going to have to go back Mqhele, we have to do things right," I say.

He stares ahead, without a blink.

Chapter 10

Sbani is going to boarding school next year. I'm not sure if he's happy about it but I explained to him that it's not that I'm sending him away, it's because he is the smartest kid in the world and it is the best school in the country. Only, it doesn't have a day-school option.

I remember how confused I was when my parents told us we are going to boarding school, I thought they were trying to get rid of us, but I know better now.

Ntsika wants to go study at UKZN, I must say I'm so proud of him right now.

I have just three months to plan two functions, in between work, three kids and a complicated yet compulsory mission to get my future husband to go back to a home he last saw 17 years ago.

See, in our culture, you're not married into a family until you're had gall of an animal sprinkled on you by the eldest member of your husband's family, at the husband's home and home is not where he lives, home is his father's house.

You can go to Home Affairs and sign for a marriage certificate or go to a church and have a glamorous wedding, but until this has been done, you have no right to his surname.

He hasn't said anything about going back, but I know they're discussing it. I can see it in all of them, they walk around with that tense and heavy aura, the same aura I could feel when Sambulo was in hospital.

I've resolved not to talk about it. He'll tell me what he decides when he's ready.

"You look worried about something," he says to me as I rest my head on his chest in bed.

"I'm just thinking about all these things I have to do before September, all the planning....."

"You're worried about that?" he says as he turns my face towards him with his hand.

"Yes, that and you," I say.

He is quiet.

Oh no, I shouldn't have said that, I'm not sure how it came out, my mind rushing to my mouth without warning me again.

"We're going next weekend, and you're coming with us," he says.

Whaaaaaaat? Where am I going? Why am I being involved in this?

"Don't you think you guys should go alone, I mean I....."

"No Hlomu, you're coming with us, we're all going," he says.

"Even the kids?"

"Yes, even the kids," he says.

I don't like this, I don't like it at all. The few times I've seen him being emotional haven't been the best moments. He goes away, the person I know disappears completely. I don't like the emotional him.

I'm woken by the sound of something dropping on the floor. I turn around and he's not lying next to me. I scan the room with my eyes, it's dark.

"Go to sleep," he says, pulling the duvet over my face.

Huh?

"What's going on?" I don't know if I'm dreaming or what.

"I said go to sleep," his tone harder now.

"Where are you going?" I ask as he closes the bedroom door behind him.

No, I can't have a man just walk out on me in the middle of the night. I get up and follow him but by the time I get to the door he is already in the car. He took both keys with him.

I switch on the kitchen light, open the door and stand there. He stops reversing and gets out of the car.

"I said go back to bed, go back to bed!" he is shouting now, walking very fast towards me. I move backwards. I know this face and this tone.

"Switch off all the lights," he barks again.

I move back further, switch off the kitchen light and close the door, he locks it from outside. I slowly walk back to the bedroom as I hear the electric gate close and the car lights fade.

I sit on the bed, not sure if I'll be able to go back to sleep. It's 2.30am. He's not going to the taxi rank because it's Saturday morning. Where's he going? He was already dressed when I woke up and whatever it is that he dropped on the floor was heavy judging by the sound it made.

Where is he going?

I call him, his phone is off.

Okay, I'm just going to sit here and wait, it won't be the first time anyway, I once waited for four days.

Many thoughts are running through my mind, mostly bad ones about where he could be going. It's funny how I never think it has something to do with another woman.

It's 7am when I wake up. I must have dozed off because I was still awake at 5am. I scan the room, he's not there. I check the whole house, nothing. My phone, nothing. I call him, still on voicemail. But I see through the window that there's a car parked outside. It's Qhawe's car, but that's not him inside. The person seems to have been here for a while, judging by the way he's sitting with the chair slayed back. The gate is closed, so he must have the remote.

I can't even go out to check who he is because I'm locked inside.

How can Mqhele leave me here with some man I don't even know? What if this man does something to me? What would my father say if he heard I was locked in a house like some slave?

My phone rings. I don't even know this number.

"Hi, Miss Dladla, it's Maureen from Fugard Properties,"

Oh, owners of my flat building, this is a first.

"Hi Maureen".

"Yes, can you come through to the caretakers flat today, we need to talk about what happened," she says.

About what happened? What's she on about?

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about, what happened where?" I say.

"Miss, I understand if you're in a place where you can't talk right now. Please come see us later," she says and hangs up the phone.

What have those two boys done now? Ghosh! I hope they didn't throw a party and keep the whole building awake.

Urgh, I dismiss that thought, they probably want to talk to me about the lease and probably someone's cat getting stuck on my window and dying. An old white lady called Maureen would see that as a serious disaster.

I'm not even going to make breakfast, I have no appetite at all. Mqhele's phone is still off.

This can't be happening again. He can't continue to treat me like this if I'm going to be his wife. I won't allow it.

I feel a bit relieved when I see him walking in followed by Nkosana....Nqoba... Qhawe...Sambulo....Mqoqi.....Mpande....and Ntsika following behind with the kids. The don't look too happy, or harmless.

Mqoqi and Mpande look even worse, like they've been beaten up. I don't like the way they're avoiding eye contact with me. Something is seriously wrong here. Atleast they're all here so I know they're all alive.

I give them all a stare, one by one, before I pull the kidd to the bedroom.

"Ntsika, come with me. We're going to McDonalds" I say when I see him stay behind.

I get my handbag from the bedroom and walk out with the four kids following behind me.

Mqhele appears behind me just as I throw Ntsika his car keys and tell him to drive. The kid is only 17, talk about breaking the law. He's been driving since he was 12 from what I hear.

"He'll drive you," Mqhele says pointing at the guy I woke up to find in the yard. He's still sitting in Qhawe's car.

'Who is he?I'm not going anywhere with people I don't know," I say. I'm actually mad at him right now.

"Just do what I say,"

"No Mqhele, I'm not going to do what you say. I'm going to get in this car and get out of this yard because I have to get these kids away from here, away from whatever it is that you are all up to. Just get away from me," I say signaling with my hand that he shouldn't come any closer.

"Drive!" I say to Ntsika as I sit on the front seat. The way this child is scared of me though.

"Mami, we're going to buy burgers?"

"Yes Lwandle, we're going to McDonalds, they only sell burgers," I say, trying to sound less irritated about this situation.

"I want a big burger," he says.

Oh! I forgot about this crazy one. If I say he can't have a big one he'll ask why?

After I tell him why he'll find another reason to ask me why the reason I give him is the reason I give him. He is standing on the seat as we speak, he never sits.

I can see Ntsika is restless, but I won't put him in that position, I won't ask him what happened. He seems too eager to get back to the house, snapping at the kids to rush when they keep changing their orders at the drive-thru.

Normally I'd give him the look but seriously, these kids are getting on my nerves as well right now. I figure I should just buy time a little, atleast give those men enough time to return to being human again. Maybe we should go buy some groceries.

"Ntsika we're going to Spar in Ridgeway from here," I say.

He looks at me like there's something he wants to say, but says nothing.

He starts the car but drive a bit too slow.

"Mami, we have to go back," he says.

I'm not sure what's going on here. Normally Ntsika does whatever I say with no protest at all. When did he start making suggestions?

He doesn't even give me a chance to say no before he turns the car back to the direction of Naturena. He looks scared. Now I'm worried.

He runs to the house as soon as we park the car. I'm not sure if it's me or my ears but I can hear a voice of a man screaming from inside the house.

WTF? I run in, Ntsika left the door wide open, I think on purpose.

I find them all in the lounge, sitting quietly like they can't hear anything, except Nkosana and Mqoqi. Ntsika is standing in the passage looking like he is about to burst into tears. The sounds are coming from the guest bedroom, and I'm going in there.

Mqhele tries to grab me but I've already grabbed the door handle.

I let out a scream! I can't believe what I'm seeing! How can they all sit and allow this? How can he beat up his own brother like this?

What is it with this family and violence?

Nkosana stops when he sees me behind him but when I opened the door, he was holding Mqoqi by the throat with one hand pressing him against the wall and punching him on the upper body. He is not fighting back at all.

I think about running off but my maternal instincts won't allow me to. I walk inside. This is not going to continue. Not in this house. Not as long as I am part of this family.

Nkosana looks at me, I don't budge, I fix my eyes on his. He walks out of the room.

Mqoqi is still trying to pick himself up. I decide I won't go near him because I don't know how he might react.

I go back to the lounge. I don't say anything but they know what I'm saying.

Get out of my house! all of you!

But these kids are staying with me, they're not going anywhere with you.

They all stand up and leave, including Mqoqi.

Ntsika stays behind.

I blame myself for this. If I hadn't left none of this would have happened. Not in my presence.

The kids seem traumatised, Ntsika, angry. I'm tempted to ask him if this happens often but I decide not to, part of me is afraid to know more than I think I already know about these people.

Mqhele left with them, I don't know where they went. What if this is going to continue somewhere.

"Where are you?" I ask the moment he answers the phone. I don't greet, he's taught me well.

"I'm outside," he says.

"Okay," I say as I hang up the phone. At least believing that Mqoqi is safe somewhere.

I instruct the kids to watch cartoons while I prepare something to eat for them. I try to distract Ntsika by asking him about school and if he's started applying for varsity and what he wants to do. He has changed from wanting to be an accountant to pilot to engineer in just under six months. I'm just happy he wants to be something.

Mqoqi and Mpade don't seem to be interested in anything like that although they are just 21 and 23. I don't even know how far they went with school. To be honest I've never really paid much attention to them, they seem happy and fine where they are, wherever that is in life.

Mqhele walks in and goes straight to the bedroom. I don't even look his way instead I continue with what I'm doing in the kitchen.

He comes out a few minutes later.

"What are you making?" he asks.

I keep quiet

"Can you make me something to eat as well," he says.

I keep quiet.

"So now you're not talking to me?" he asks again.

I keep quiet.

He stands still, looking at me. I briefly glance at him and I see his face has changed. He is getting angry. He might as well, I will not talk to him.

“Can we go to the bedroom and talk?” he says, his tone a bit aggressive.

I keep quiet.

He grabs me by the upper arm, I let out a low 'ouch'. At that moment, Ntsika stands up from the couch. He doesn't move towards us in the kitchen, but he stands there looking at him, with a face that seems to say “just you touch her!”.

Mqhele seems to be shocked by his reaction. There is a staring contest between them for a few seconds and without saying a word, he lets go of my arm, grabs his car keys and walks out of the house.

I try, but I can't hold back the tears. I can't let these kids see me cry. I rush to the bedroom and close the door behind me.

I put a pillow over my head and cry my lungs out. Am I really going to marry this man? What if he can't control his anger? What would have happened if Ntsika was not here?

Maybe it's my fault. I made him angry by not responding to him. Maybe I should have followed him to the bedroom when he came in to find out what happened. Maybe I shouldn't interfere in family matters. I sound like a typical abused woman right now don't I?

I hear a soft knock on the door.

“Mami....mami....mami.....” it's Mvelo. He sounds almost in tears.

I have to compose myself here and walk out of this bedroom like everything is fine. I can't let these kids see me like this.

When I open the door they're all standing there. I flash a smile. They give me an awkward look. The ice is broken by the toothless rascal.

“Mami when are you going to buy me the Ben-10 watch?” he asks.

Lwandle though, he has absolutely no clue what's going on.

“When you finish your food and when you stop teasing your little brother,” I say as I signal all of them back to the lounge.

It's already the afternoon and I haven't heard anything from Mqhele. No call, no sms, nothing.

Why on earth is he mad at me? I'm the one who should want nothing to do with him right now. It's fine, I'll just stay here in his house and look after his children like I always do.

I'm worried about Mqoqi though. I should call him and find out if he's fine but that would just be awkward on his side. I still don't even know why he was being beaten up. Which reminds me, I've forgotten about that meeting with the caretaker. I'm definitely not going there, I should call to tell them I can't make it.

“Hi, Maureen, look, I can't make it there today I'm kind of caught up somewhere. Whatever it is we can discuss it over the phone,” I say.

“Yes Miss Dladla. The problem is the other tenants are complaining about cops that were all over the place last night. I don't know what was happening but we can't have things like that here, this is a respectable building,” she says.

Police?

“The caretaker also tells us that you don't live there anymore, that there are two young men living there now and the tenants are also not happy with their behavior. There's always noise and

women coming in and out in the middle of the night. You know the rules of the building," she says. I'm a bit confused here, it seems a lot has been happening under my nose.

"I'm sorry about that, I had no idea, those two men are my brothers, they were just looking after the place since I'm away for now. I'll sort it out," I say.

I want those two little fuckers out of my flat as in today!

And what is this about police all over? I hope they weren't doing anything criminal in my house!

It's almost evening and still nothing from him. I'm preparing supper although I'm not sure any more if he'll be back. I resist the urge to call him.

I'm working tomorrow but at least the teenager is here, he'll look after the little ones if I have to leave them here all alone in the morning.

We go to sleep at about 10pm. I've given up, maybe he'll be here when I wake up tomorrow morning, if not I'm going to have to come to terms with a new scenario, that there could be another woman in his life. I don't care how angry he is or how much he hates me but he should be able to come back to his bed every night and sleep next to me, even if we sleep with our backs touching each other. He has to come home.

I'm woken by a light shining on my face. My eyes meet his. He is sitting on the edge of the bed, just looking at me. I don't even freak out, it's weird.

He says nothing.

I say nothing, just look at him.

"I'm hungry". He says after a while.

Oh hell no!

I pull the duvet over my head and turn to lie on my side, turning away from him. I can't believe that's all he has to say to me.

He doesn't move or say anything else.

He just sits there until I get really really pissed off and kick the duvet, pick up my robe and walk the fuck out to the kitchen. He follows me there.

I pull out a plate, dish out food and angrily toss it in the microwave. I stand there with my hands on my waist looking at the microwave clock as it counts down seconds. A thought of the first day I came here, the day I bought this microwave and the way I have transformed this place over the past year.

How my life has changed since then.

I put the plate on the kitchen counter in front of him and a spoon next to it. There will be no washing hands today, not at 3am. And where the fuck has he been?

"I scared you, didn't I?" he says as he starts eating.

I keep quiet.

"Can you talk to me please?" he says as he stops eating and raises his eyes.

"And if I don't? What are you going to do? Hit me?" I say.

He widens his eye, I'm not sure what this gesture means, if it's threatening or apologetic. Sometimes I can't read his face, or maybe I choose not to because I'm trying to shut him out.

"I said I'll never hit you again," he says.

"I'm not sure what to believe any more Mqhele. Sometimes it's like I don't even know you at all. You treat me like I'm some girl who should be in your life only when it suits you. You shut me out, you scare me, you disappear and you lock me in the house like I'm some prisoner and you bring

your brothers here and you allow Nkosana to beat up a child....." I can't stop talking, soon I'll start crying and I don't want that, I don't want to end up weeping on his chest when I really really hate him right now.

"You're not some girl, you're my wife," he says, his eyes still wide.

"Well, it doesn't feel like it. It feels like I'm some token or something you can control and expect to be happy when you're happy and just roll over and pretend all is good when something bad is happening in this family. Why do you want me to marry you Mqhele?" I'm really angry and emotional now.

'Because I love you and I can't live without you," he says.

"Well then live with me, be with me, not this. Not this. Where were you all day?" I don't think I even care to know, but I'm asking anyway.

"I was at your flat. I went to clean up," he says.

Oh, there's also that.

"Why? Why did you have to clean up my flat?" I ask.

He lets out a loud sigh, like he doesn't even know where to start.

"There was a police raid at your flat last night. It seems Mqoqi has been running his own business of smuggling marijuana from KZN and he kept it at the flat," he says, flatly so.

WTF?

"The police found some, at least it wasn't too much, looks like he sold most of it over the week. They arrested both of them," he says.

Never in my life did I ever think I'd be standing in a kitchen with my future husband talking about his brother dealing drugs in my flat at 23-years-old. Never!

"They turned the flat upside down looking for more," he says.

I'm just looking at him with my mouth open. I don't even have the strength to get angry.

"Mpande wasn't charged because police knew he was not involved, the person who tipped them off told them it was just Mqoqi," he says.

"So what happens to Mqoqi now? does he have to go to court on Monday?" I ask. This could be really bad.

"No, we sorted it out when we went to bail him out yesterday. There won't be a court case," he says.

I'm not even going to ask who was paid for it to disappear.

"And the guy who told the police about it? Do you know him," I ask.

"Yes we know him," he says.

"Where is he now?"

He looks at me, blankly so before he answers.

"He is sorted," he says and immediately goes back to his food.

I won't even ask.

I can't say we've resolved much but at least now I know where he was coming from. I just had to give him a lecture about his disappearing tactics. We don't walk away from each other. That's that. Also, I instruct him to make it up to the kids, for scaring them yesterday when he got all aggressive with me. Although I must say, these kids are a bit too tough for my liking, something tells they don't get traumatised that easily. It probably has something to do with the absence of their

mothers in their lives.

“You have to take them out, they like going to Spur, not for the food but for the play center Give Ntsika some money to buy whatever teenagers like,” I instruct him as he drives me to work. He doesn't even know what the kids like. And he doesn't even see the importance of making it up to them with his sort of like 'they'll get over it' attitude.

Sundays are just normally lazy days but I bet you, there's always a big story for every Sunday. I ain't got time for that today, I'm just going to be in the shade and cut and paste press releases until it's time to go home.

I've worked my way out of being a crime reporter by focusing mostly on human based features. Although they require extensive research and more of my time, at least it's something I enjoy, going out and talking to people.

Sunday diary meetings are always dreadful with our elderly bosses spitting the previous night's whiskey through their pores. Journalism is a hippy job, everyone drinks too much, smokes too much and is more insane than the next.

I've pitched my two non-stories and survived the look that our news editor always gives anyone who bullshits him. That 'and you expect to get paid for this' look that we are all used to by now. The turn arrives for our newest, over-excited, over-fascinated junior reporter who hasn't realised that holding the responsibility of calling police every morning for crime-checks is a reflection of your place in the hierarchy, right there down below.

“A 26-year-old man was found dead in Springs early this morning. He was shot and his body dumped in a river. Police think he was killed last night but say it looks like he was beaten up first. I have a source who told me the guy was a police informer for the drug unit,” she says.

Why is it that I'm sitting here thinking what I shouldn't be thinking? No no no I'm just paranoid and going crazy. How could I even think this?

Breathe Hlomu...breathe. You're being paranoid.

I'm glad this story is being handled by this junior kid because I know she won't get anywhere with it, incase.....No No No.

During the day I'm tempted to keep checking with her, you know, if there are any new developments so far about who the man is and if there are any suspects identified.

The only thing I overheard was her saying the man was from KwaZulu-Natal and that police continue investigating. When her final copy goes in at deadline, all she has is that a man was found dead in Springs and some police jargon. Her theory that the guy was a police informer didn't really come to life, and experience has taught me that it's not because the theory is not true, it's that nobody wants to confirm it. I can't wait to get out of here.

I want to go to my flat today but Mqhele came to pick me up with the kids. The little one is fast asleep on the teenager's lap. Lwandle is on some sugar-rush as always, he's talking to himself, and the 10-year-old nerd wants to go home and do his homework so we're forced to go to Riverlea first.

We find Nkosana home alone. I wish I could stay in the car and not go inside the house but that would just be rude. I don't think I'll be able to be nice and act normal after what I saw him doing yesterday.

His house, very beautiful outside. You can see it was bought small and extended to a Tuscan style double-storey home.

I've been here many times but it still fascinates me. It is clear there was a touch of a woman when it was built and decorated but now, well, it lacks that warmth and homely feeling. No wonder

these kids never want to leave Naturena.

"I thought you were going to stay longer," Nkosana says as we stand up to leave.

No can do, I say in my head as I pick up my handbag.

He turns to me but I shift my eyes away from his. I'm still as scared and uncomfortable around him as I was a year ago.

He's still looking at me, saying nothing at all but I think I understand what he's saying in his mind. I know I won't get a 'sorry about yesterday' from him but I know he wishes I had never seen that.

I follow Mqhele out the door after saying goodbye to the kids. We leave Ntsika there, he seems better than yesterday, relaxed rather.

"You know, we don't just beat each other up when we don't agree. Nkosana is the only one who has the right to lay a hand on the young ones, and only if they did something wrong and have to be punished. It has been like that since we were kids, he had to assume a father's role. Mqoqi put us all at risk with this, if he had gone to jail I don't know what we would have done," he says as we drive to my flat.

I don't know how I feel about this 'punish' aspect of it because what I saw was definitely not punishment, assault rather.

Bab'Gumbi is at the gate. It's well after 6pm so I figure he is on night shift. Ghosh! I didn't realize I haven't seen him in so long. But since his relationship with my man now seems to be more important than ours, me the woman he wished could be his daughter-in-law only if he had a son, I know I have to be brief. And besides, he is my mkhongi now so I have to treat him with some kind of submissive behavior

I leave them talking about whatever, I don't care, and move along to the flat. It's cleaner than I expected, in fact cleaner than it's ever been since I moved in. But some of my stuff is broken like a side lamp and a small tray-table.

There is no sign that two men were living here. None of their clothes are here, not even a missed shoe lace.

"So where are Mqoqi and Mpande?" I ask Mqhele as he walks in.

"I don't know I made them pack and leave yesterday," he says.

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

"Wherever they stayed before they decided to turn my wife's house into a crack-house. They're grown men they'll figure it out," he says with no care in the world.

I don't like this. I feel bad. I must invite them to dinner during the week just so I know they're okay. And as a matter of fact, they owe me an apology. But then again, this is not a family of apologies.

"Can we sleep here tonight?" I say.

"Are you sure? I thought you'd not want this place after everything," he says, sounding rather shocked.

"Well, it has some good memories. The building owners phoned me yesterday about other tenants complaining about cops being all over the place on Friday night. I wasn't sure what they were talking about because I didn't have the full story but I assured them it won't happen again," I say.

He shakes his head, like he's getting angry about it all over again.

"You know, you could always let go of this place, it's not like you live here anyway," he says.

I know where he's going with this.

"I'm not moving in with you until we're married," I say.

I see that mischievous smile of his coming along. He moves towards me. Pushes me with his whole

body until I'm pressed against the wall. His hands go under my skirt and slide up slowly.

"Not even if I persuade you?" he says, his hands still sliding up.

I'm totally defeated. He knows what this does to me, when he puts me in a defenseless position, I just collapse under his control.

"Not even if you persuade me...." I murmur, getting weaker and weaker with his forehead pressed on mine and his eyes staring into mine.

"We'll see about that," he says as he undoes my bra hooks with one hand.

Our sex is always the best but this, this was slow and passionate and.....just out of this world.

"I'm still not moving in with you," I say as I jump out of the bed and run to the bathroom. He tries to grab me by the arm but I manage to escape.

He laughs.

"You're stuck with me here the whole night you know. We could do this until you give in," he says.

I laugh at that.

"I'll move in with you after umembeso," I say, knowing he won't give up until he wins.

"Fair enough," he says.

He always gets what he wants, doesn't he?

Chapter 11

This drive is exactly how I imagined it. Long, dreadful and draped in tension.

I'm suddenly not sure if I was fair on insisting on it.

It gets quiet in the car when we turn on the sign written Mbuba. I know we are near. Nkosana is driving, he is apparently the only one who remembers the way.

I am sitting on the back seat with Mvelo on my lap, he's been asleep almost all the way. Lwandle has gotten tired of asking where we are going without getting an answer. Sbani has an idea, but he doesn't know the extent of damage this trip could have on his fathers. Ntsika doesn't remember anything about Mbuba, but he was told the truth about why he doesn't have parents when he grew up and started asking.

If this backfires, if these men turn out to be worse than they already are after this, it will all be my fault. Maybe they will wish I never came into their lives. I might regret this more than I already do.

We enter into a gravel road. The car, a white Iveco that's always parked at Nkosana's yard, is covered in dust before we've done even one kilometre

His eyes are fixed on the road. Mqhele's has been looking out the window since we took that turn. It's a beautiful place, green and moist even though it's July. It is lined by mountains, it truly is the KwaZulu-Natal midlands. I can't help looking at all of them one-by-one, the younger they go the less the strain on their faces.

There is so much space between houses which are mostly rondavels and one square house on each yard. Some houses are bigger than others, you can tell the economic state by just looking at them.

We pass cows and a number herd-boys carrying sticks across their shoulders. This place doesn't seem to have developed much. The road doesn't look like it has seen many cars. But the beauty of nature, of it all, is indescribable

We almost bump our heads when Nkosana suddenly almost goes off the road.

"Sorry about that," he says as he drives on. I can see from where I'm sitting that he is looking on the side mirror at an old man we have just driven past. The old man has also stopped walking, he is standing with his walking stick, staring at the car as we drive off.

Nkosana and Nqoba share a look, like they both know what's going on but won't say a thing.

The man stands there until we disappear into a corner. We come out on another road, I turn around, I can see him again.

Nobody is talking or moving in this car. There is a structure we are approaching. It looks like it used to be a house, a big house on village standards, but now it's only half walls with high grass inside them.

We arrive at what looks like it used to be a gate, not far from it, is something that looks like it was a kraal. I can make this out because I've been to my grandmother's house, where my father was born at eNquthu many times before.

We park the car right there. I'm not even going to move until I'm told to. This is more hectic than I thought it would be.

"This place hasn't changed very much," Nqoba says. If anyone was going to break the ice it was going to be him.

"Let's do this," Nkosana says as he turns back to everyone in the car.

He gets out of the car first. Nobody tells me but I know that I'm not supposed to follow. I hold on

to Mvelo and pull Lwandle back when he tries to jump off. He looks at me, a bit confused, but sits quietly next to me when I wrap my arm around his shoulder.

Sbani also stays in the car, I think in his case, he just doesn't want to go to this place that he doesn't even know.

They all move at once, walking slowly into the yard with Qhawe stopping now and again to pick some things and throw them back on the ground again.

"Where is this mami?" Lwandle, the ever so curious one, asks.

"It's daddy's home," I say.

"Ewwww it's ugly," he says with a frown on his face.

Okay, I don't have a comeback for this one, so I just keep quiet.

I see Nkosana sitting down on a stump of what used to be a wall. Each follow suit and sit wherever they can find space on the high grass. I don't think they are talking at all.

Ntsika is the only one still walking around the place, inspecting everything he sees. Perhaps he is looking for a reminder.

I notice that on three houses facing us, groups of people have gathered and are looking this way. I doubt they all live in those houses, I think someone must have called them to 'come and see' this.

I'm immediately uncomfortable being here. The story about how they left comes to mind once more. What if this community is still hungry for revenge? What if they weren't happy that the children got away? Maybe we should go now.

Mqhele walks back to the car, opens the sliding door and signals for the kids to come to him. I let them go. He looks at me and I shake my head. He nods, closes the door and walks back with the kids running ahead of him, jumping like they're in some kind of adventure park.

They continue sitting, now all in one place with their knees up, looking directly at the three houses across where the number of people gathering seems to keep increasing.

Atleast now they're talking, I'm getting even more uncomfortable.

It's about an hour before Nkosana stands up and starts walking back. They all follow him. It's interesting how he always leads the way for them, it must be a hard responsibility always trying to ensure they don't stray.

They walk in silence. Mqhele comes in and sits next to me. The kids find another place to sit but not before Mvelo gives him a begrudging look.

He puts his arm around my shoulders and rests his head over the top of mine. He is too tall to rest it on my shoulder. It's heavy and uncomfortable, but I let him be. I'll suffer, anything, if it will make him feel better.

The car starts and we drive off. They keep looking back, I think it's a good sign.

He raises his head to look at me after what seems like a very long time.

"We're not going back today. We'll find a place to sleep around town for tonight," he says.

"Okay," I respond.

I have a feeling finding this place is my responsibility.

But then, I'm thinking in my head, where are we going to find a place to sleep for 12 people? At short notice?

I pull out my phone and start googling places. After three unsuccessful tries I finally get ahead with The Falls Guest Lodge. It's 45km away from the main town but that's nothing compared to how far we've travelled today.

It's a nice place. It has that country feel about it but it looks like I'm the only one who cares about

that.

I'm not even sure how much we end up paying but the staff here seems to be raising eyebrows about that it all came in cash, not to mention that there are 11 identical people and one woman standing at reception.

And really, I should have foreseen that this would happen, I should have asked everyone to pack a small bag just incase. Oh well.

When everybody is set about where they're going to sleep, I also retire in our room. Luckily this place has dinner facilities. They have to conjoin two tables for us because well, we are the Zulus and we come in large numbers.

This doesn't feel like our normal dinner gatherings where there is always laughter and teasing. It's a bit tense today.

I leave first because I have to put the kids to sleep and make sure they shower first. When I go back to our room Mqhele is still not there. When I come out of the shower later, he's still not there.

Should I call him? No, let me leave him. I go to sleep.

I'm woken by the smell of nicotine hovering over me. He's here.

"Are you asleep?" he asks.

"I was. Are you okay?" I ask in a sleepy voice.

He doesn't answer. Instead I feel his lips pressing against mine, pressing so hard that I can feel the trace of his teeth on his upper lip. His arms wrap around me. It is not a tender wrap. I stop trying to participate. I remember this. He said it would never happen again. It's happening again. I brought him here, I made him do this, I should have known there'd be consequences.

It might hurt now but it will be worth it because I'm helping him. I'm helping him release the pain I had nothing to do with in the first place.

But I'm here now, so I let my body loose and I allow him to fight with it, every part of it from the roots of my hair to the grip on my neck, the digging of my skin and deep into my being.

It is about sacrifice isn't it? This marriage thing.

He stands up and walks out when he's done. He is in the balcony, smoking.

I'm bruised. My back and neck hurt I don't want to get up and go to the bathroom. I don't want to see the extent of it, not now, I'll deal with it tomorrow. I turn to my side, close my eyes, and get away.

When I wake up he is already getting dressed. I can never beat him on that no matter how hard I try it's difficult to wake up before he does.

He knows I'm awake but he doesn't look at me.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi," he says back, still not looking at me.

I get off the bed and walk to him. I wrap my arms around his waist from behind. He is tense, I can feel it in his breathing.

"Don't worry about it," I say.

He doesn't respond, but turns around and look at me. He seems to be seeing something I haven't seen from the mirror behind me. His face hardens, he takes a deep breath and lets me go.

I knew this was going to be hard but I didn't know I was going to be the casualty.

"I'm going to take a shower," I say.

Fuck! I don't even have a toothbrush or clean underwear! It's going to be a long day.

I meet all of them at breakfast. At least the dress I was wearing yesterday and am still wearing today covers the back fully. I had also brought a light front-button jersey so my arms are covered. The neck, well, I hope my braids are enough.

Mqhele is still avoiding eye contact with me although I'm sitting next to him. But he does hold my hand very tight from under the table. I don't know what this means.

"Baby, can you and the kids stay behind. We're going back, we want to meet with the chief and talk about rebuilding our home," he says before everybody stands up.

Whoah! That I didn't see coming at all. Rebuild the home?

I should have brought my laptop, at least I would have had something to do instead of sitting here looking pretty with un-brushed teeth all day.

The kids, well, they don't even know I exist today. They've found a new best friend in an old man who works here in the lodge, he's helping them make slingshots. They've been running around all day.

But then, there's Sbani, he is sitting in the lounge reading a book. Nerd.

I haven't spoken to the twin since Thursday.

"Hello half," he answers in his usual bubbly self.

"I see you've found yourself a rock drill operator over there. Why else would you not call me for two days?" I say.

"I wish, they still make them rural and homophobic this side. Speaking of rural, how did things go yesterday?"

"I don't know, we're still here, we slept over at a lodge, they went back this morning, they want to rebuild the home," I say.

"I thought you said their parents were killed there. And they want to go back?" he says.

"Yep, I'm not sure if it's a good or bad thing," I say.

I hear a beep on my phone, it's an incoming call from Mqhele. I tell Langa I'll call him later.

"Babe,"

"Yes love, how is it going there?"

"It's going well, we've spoken to the chief. The land was not given to anyone after we left so it still belongs to us," he says.

Oh, the humble life of the rural areas. In my hood you leave your house empty for three months you'll find it turned into a tuck shop by your own neighbour when you come back.

"We're going to rebuild," he says.

This is good news I think. He sounds like he's in a better mood than yesterday. Good for me.

I don't see the little kids anymore so I decide to take a walk and look for them. I find them under a tree with the old man. They're sitting with their legs crossed, looking at him as he builds a toy car with pieces of iron strings. The fascination on their faces is priceless.

"Mami, look," Mvelo runs to me waving his slingshot when he sees me approaching.

"It's a shlilingi, mkhulu made it for me," he says. He has the cutest smile though.

"Okay, who are you going to shoot with it?" I ask.

"Miss Khumalo," he says.

That's his teacher. He doesn't like school, or her.

He runs back to the old man under the tree leaving me behind.

"Good day baba," I say as I stand behind them.

"Hello lady," he says without raising his eyes to look at me. He continues putting together the strings.

"Are they not bothering you?" I ask. I'm trying to make conversation here.

"No," he says raising his eyes. "We're having a great time,"

"Well, I'm sorry I have to take them for now. Boys let's go it's time for lunch," I say.

The expected protest follows, but I'm used to it and they know they never win. They run ahead of me.

"Did they all survive?" the old man says as I turn to walk away.

"Excuse me?"

"The boys, all eight of them, did they all survive?" he says.

What? he can't be talking about them.

"I saw the kids and I knew it. I knew exactly who they were. Nobody else looks like that, they're Zulu children," he says.

I can't control my reaction, I'm freaked out and I walk away.

The kids hate me right now but there's no way I'm allowing them to go back to that man. We're confined indoors, in the room watching TV.

They come back late in the afternoon with plastic bags. Good, toothbrushes and towels and deodorants. I'm surprised they even thought of that. But I suspect Ntsika was responsible for it.

We'll drive back tomorrow morning, it's been decided. I had taken leave for Sunday so I'm cool with that. Besides, maybe we could use tonight to iron out the shit that happened yesterday before we go back home.

Should I break the news of the old man now or wait till later? I don't really speak to them about things I normally just tell Mqhele in private and he delivers the news to them.

We're sitting outside waiting for dinner time to start. It's such a beautiful afternoon and the sun is still out.

I've tied my braids up, it got really hot earlier.

I'm watching Mqhele and Sambulo having a smoke not too far and having what seems like a light conversation.

"What happened?"

I hear a voice coming from behind me. I turn around to see Qhawe.

I give him a confused look.

"What happened to your neck?" he says.

Oh shit! I cover my neck with my hand.

"Nothing," I say. I could sound more convincing than this.

He fixes his eyes on mine. Damn he looks exactly like Mqhele when he's angry.

"Nothing," I repeat.

He storms off, goes straight to Mqhele and pulls him aside by the seam of his jacket.

I can see he is scolding him although I can't hear what he is saying. I stand up and walk to our room.

Mqhele walks in a few minutes later. He stands at the centre of the room, constantly rubbing his hand on his forehead. He walks to the bathroom, and comes back again shortly.

Oh! That thing of his of walking away and coming back.

"I'm sorry. I know I keep doing things and apologising, I'm sorry," he says.

I could tell him how I feel about this, but I'd need about five hours to get it all out so I'm just going to lie.

"I told you not to worry about it, I didn't stop you did I?" I say.

I know he doesn't believe me. But there's nothing more I can do to free him from his guilt.

"Qhawe thinks I hit you," he says.

You did far worse than hitting me broer.

Anyway. Change of subject.

"There was a man here," I say.

Whoah! I have never seen someone change from being a sorry little puppy to being a lion ready to attack that fast!

"A man? What man? Where?" his eyes are as big as dinosaur eggs right now.

"Here, in the lodge, there was a guy who was playing with the kids. When I went to get the kids he asked about you, about all of you. He said 'did they all survive? all eight of them?'"

I see his face change from being a lion ready to go attack a man who hit on his fiancée while he was a way to being deeply disturbed.

"What exactly did he say?" he asks.

"He said: "did they all survive? I saw these kids and I immediately knew who they are, they are Zulu kids,"

"Lock all doors, I'll be back," he says as he walks out.

Lock all doors? It's dinner time and I want to go eat.

I wait for five minutes, just to be sure he's not near, before I walk out the door.

I walk past them as I enter the dining room. Mqhele gives me a look that says "are you crazy?", I walk on. I phone Ntsika to come and join me with the kids.

After what seems like a serious discussion they all come to surround me.

"Hlomu, what did that man look like?" Mqoqi speaks first. I haven't forgotten about his drug dealings in my house. Wait till I get drunk while on periods, he will know me.

"Old, maybe 60's, I think he works here as a gardener or something. He has a black mole over his right eyebrow," I say.

I see Nkosana, Nqoba and Mqhele looking at each other. This isn't good at all.

"How exactly did you meet this guy?" Nqoba now.

"He was playing with the boys, he helped them make slingshots and he was making a string toy car with them until he asked me about you, that's when I took them and we sat in the room the whole afternoon. They're still mad at me for that," I say. They all seem shocked that I'm so relaxed about this but they should know better, nothing shocks me any more when it comes to them.

They all rush to reception at once. Now, see, I don't want no drive-by's up in here tonight. I know these men when they're like this, it never ends well. They speak to the lady at reception and they all at once rush off.

Oh, so they're not concerned about me or the kids' safety anymore?

We're just gonna be sitting here having dinner.

Infact, why am I so pissed off right now again? Besides female staff here who've creeped out from every hole parading themselves for these men I came with. What is it with women though? How are you gonna throw yourself at a man who is 'passing by' a lodge.

They come back with the old man. Oh wow! This is unexpected. The kids want to stand up and run to him but I tell them to sit.

They don't come to the dinner table and instead they all stand in the foyer talking and others smoking. Nkosana signals Ntsika to come to him.

He's shaking his hand. Wow.

And then Mqhele comes to me, with the old man, I am introduced as the 'wife' and the man as Mzimela. We had met already, but I say 'nice to meet you' nevertheless.

"So you're telling me that Mzimela is the man who hid you all and made sure that made it out of Greytown alive," I ask. Still fascinated by all this, it would make a great story for the newspaper.

"Yes, he found us in the morning still walking in the bush, we couldn't get on the road because we were scared someone would recognise us. Ntsika was hungry and crying. That's how he heard us. He took us to his house, a dilapidating mud house, kept us there until it was dark. He knew a lot of truck drivers because he used to sell in Pietermaritzburg. So that night he put us on a truck that was to drop us off at Maritzburg and there we were put on another truck going north. We kept connecting until we got to eShowe. It took two days but we arrived eventually. He told them we were his sister's kids," he says.

The more I hear this story the more sad it gets. Maybe I should forgive him for being a psycho sometimes, no child should have to go through what he went through.

This trip didn't start well but I think it ended far too good. They're happy, I know. I've also calmed down a bit, I had a bit of bitch-fit earlier.

"So you're building?" I say.

"Yes, we're building," he responds with a smile on his face.

"The community?" I say.

"They will just have to deal with it," he says.

"And if they can't?" I ask.

"We will deal with them," he says.

Oh Jizas!!! please!

He laughs at my reaction.

He's laughing again. Good.

"I'm joking. We'll try to mend things, we're not coming back to fight. The place has changed, people have changed. Nobody wants to go back there, it was too brutal," he says.

I smile. This must be the first time I've heard him say something so, well, humane in a situation where he'd normally be, well, himself.

I rest my head on his chest and hug him tighter.

"Thank you," he says.

I raise my face to look at him.

"For?" I say.

"For sticking around, even when I hurt you sometimes," he says.

"If you continue hurting me I might not stick around forever," I say. Dead serious.

Sometimes you just have to throw in some threats. Just for control.

I can tell he doesn't know what to say.

I put a kiss on his mouth and close my eyes. I'm going to sleep now.

And he ain't getting any sex until these bruises are gone.
The thug tendencies have to be addressed once in a while. Randomly.

Chapter 12

It's not that I'm anti-social but, as it has always been, I don't just allow anyone into my life. This could be why my list of who to invite to my membeso slash memulo can't even get to 50, excluding family.

It's two weeks away, first weekend of September as was decided without my knowledge or approval.

My mom has taken over everything. It's basically her event I just have to show up and adhere to random customs, some I think my aunt makes up along the way.

But first, Friday is Mqhele's 29th birthday, it's Wednesday today, I have invited the whole family for a small braai but I still have no idea what I'm going to get him. He won't want anything big I know, infact he'd be happy even if I ignore it. But then, I have to make some changes in this union especially now that they're all excited about something.

Building in Mbuba will start soon. They were so serious about it they hired a builder, an expensive one, all the way from Pietermaritzburg. My responsibility was to come up with an idea of what the house should look like. That was an easy one, a three bedroomed main house and eight rondavels each with it's own bathroom. It's going to be pricey, but it's going to be home.

The issue of whether we will be welcomed or not still bothers me though. They seem to not care, except for Qhawe, I once overheard Nkosana saying he is exactly like their father. That can't be good.

Speaking of Qhawe, I've invited his holly girlfriend to the braai on Saturday as well. If I'm going to be stuck with this family for the rest of my life I must as well start reaching out to all the branches, including miss hood-rat the tavern queen as well.

"Come back...we're here...we're here," says Nana, bringing me back to the chaos of loud drunk rowdy women around me.

"Gal, you'd better enjoy this, soon you'll be pregnant and changing nappies and cooking three course meals every day. And having involuntary sex....." Thobi. This bitch can go on and on.

"Urgh! Whatever," I say hoping she'd shut up and leave me alone.

It's Nana's birthday and we're at her town house in Randburg. We've been friends since tertiary but she was always more advanced than me at pretty much everything.

She's got other friends, many friends, some who think I'm a snob and whom I couldn't care less about.

But there's four of us, me, her, Thobi and Zaba.

"Still trying to keep me away from the Godfather?" Thobi. She has such an amazing personality. Hard to not like and she knows it.

"He's old, control yourself," I say.

She's always had a crush on him. It's not even cute it's funny.

"Well he's still hot and mysterious and loaded. Besides, we could be sisters in future," she says, bubbly as always.

Thobi is that kind of girl that came from nothing but fought with everything she had to get out with something. A drunk mother, an absent father who had her when he was already married to another woman.

I don't know how she made it through tertiary but she did. While we went home after lectures she went to work. Her road however has not always been decent. It was lined with sugar-daddies who

got what they wanted and gave her what she needed.

She's fine now, she's done very well for herself and can afford anything she wants, which is why I don't understand her obsession with Nkosana.

"I can hook you up with Sambulo, how about that?" I say, just to steer her away, I don't want any of them dating these men and complicating my life even more.

"No thanks, I can't deal with his slow-motion. And he looks like he's trouble that one," she says.

Can't argue with her on that one. But it's not happening with Nkosana, plus I don't think he'd even recognise her on the street.

This get-together slash birthday party on a Wednesday night was not planned at all.

I had to call Mqhele this afternoon to tell him not to pick me up but pick me up later at Nana's house.

I expected him to give me crap about it but all he said was: "are you going to drink wine again?"

Like I was going to drink coffee at my friend's birthday party?

He arrives to pick me up at about 9pm. He didn't call or buzz at the gate. We just hear a knock and see him at the door.

There's silence as he walks in and stands next to the kitchen counter. Why are all these women looking at my man though?

He greets, his eyes scanning the room until they find me, and then he stretches his arm out. I know what that means. I stand up, pick up my handbag and take his hand. We walk out, it's still silent.

"Wasn't this supposed to be a girls only thing?" he asks as we walk down the stairs. He is calm, but I know him.

"It was, that's Nana's boyfriend and a couple of his friends," I say. I hope it doesn't go further than this.

"So why was a man sitting next to you?" he asks. It's not going to end here.

"I don't know, there were only two couches, he needed to sit down," I say pulling my hand off his and sounding irritated.

Why does he have to be like this? When have I ever given him a reason not to trust me? Haven't I given everything to this man?

I'm sitting looking out the closed window as we drive out of the complex. I will not talk to him, not when he intentionally embarrassed me like that.

"I'm going to my flat," I say. I'm not backing down on this one.

He says nothing.

I turn to look at him. I'm crying, I don't know why. I'm like a tap. Maybe I need to see a psychologist about my crying.

He almost stops the car when he sees that I'm crying. Sometimes I can't read his face but I'm pretty sure what I'm seeing right now is concern and confusion.

"What did I do?" he asks. Eyes wide.

Good, he knows he's responsible for all my misery.

I cry harder, I can't stop.

"Okay, I'm sorry. Are you crying because I asked you about the guy sitting next to you? I was just asking....," he's blabbing now.

"No, you don't trust me. That's why I'm crying. What is it exactly that you want me to do. What haven't I done to prove myself to you?" I'm having a serious breakdown right now. I know I'm

overreacting here.

He doesn't know what to say, I can tell. I don't blame him, I'm weird.

"But I didn't say I don't trust you," he says, shrugging his shoulders.

I'm done talking.

"I want to go to my flat," I say. I'm serious.

I end up in Naturena, naked in his arms.

I can't stay mad at him, that I've made peace with.

I'm here shopping for his birthday present. He still comes first and I still want to see him happy.

So what will it be?

I've managed to get him off tracksuits, not entirely though but he does put on the jeans I bought him now and again. The sneakers, well, he won't be walking to any office or boardroom probably for the rest of his life so I'll let him be.

I've stopped by Rosebank on my way from a story. I had to bribe the driver with lunch to drive by the mall and give me an hour to do this.

What does one buy a man like this one?

A watch, yes, he doesn't own one.

Tag Heur? Never. I could buy the whole of Lesotho with that money!

Jacob&Co? Lovely stuff but I'm not spending over R50 000 on a watch!

Guess it is, it's his first watch anyway plus it's a gift so he'll have to appreciate it. I'm going to be honest and say that this is his money I'm using. I get random deposits on my account now and again.

R2000 is reasonable enough, I'll add some sunglasses to that. No, actually, I'll add perfume. I bought him two last year.

I'm gonna have to hide these things until tomorrow. It's the first time we're even celebrating his birthday. Last year I let it pass without saying a word. He's never really told me his birth-date, I had to dig.

He hasn't left in the wee hours of the morning at all this week. It's nice waking up next to him once in a while although by the time I open my eyes, he'd have been awake for over an hour.

"Good morning," I say as I switch on the side lamp and stand over him next to the bed.

He immediately jumps up and sits. Startled! Oh well, this I didn't envision.

"Whoah! It's me. I didn't mean to scare you," I say, shocked myself.

"When did you wake up?" he asks, 'zoom -lenses' all out.

I'm still standing with a tray in my hands.

"About an hour ago. Happy Birthday," I say as I push the tray towards him.

He looks at me like he doesn't know what I'm talking about before his face changes to a look that says 'oh, is that today?'

"Here's your gift," I say picking up the wrapped box from the tray and handing it to him.

He smiles, seemingly relaxed now. He keeps glancing at me as he unwraps it.

He inspects the watch with the biggest smile on his face, it reminds me of Mvelo's smile, too cute.

"You bought me a watch?" he says, still wearing that goofy smile.

"And this," I say handing him another box.

"Perfume?" he says after unwrapping it.

"And breakfast in bed," I say pointing at the tray.

He laughs. Puts on the watch, opens the top of the perfume and smells it without spraying it.

"I love it," he says, looking at the watch now on his wrist.

"And I love you," I say. I've meant this from the first time I said it.

That smile, it's just stuck in his mouth and it's melting me away.

"And I have one last present for you," I say as I remove the tray from him and unwrap my robe. I'm wearing that same lace lingerie I wore the first night I spent here.

He remembers.

"That's the....."

I get on top of him before he can finish speaking. I shut his mouth with a kiss...on the mouth..neck..chest..chest....belly button and all the way down to places that have him moaning with pleasure.

I'm getting good at this sex thing. Getting out of the box slowly but surely. I might as well because it seems I'll only ever sleep with one man in my life.

"Thank you," he says I lie with my head on his chest. I'm not sure if that's for the sex or the birthday gift but either way, he's happy, and that makes me happy.

"This is the first birthday gift I've ever received in my life," he says.

That's odd. I mean, I don't come from a family that buys birthday gifts or Christmas presents but even that moron I used to date always bought me something for my birthday.

"Not even from the ex-girlfriends?" I ask.

He laughs.

"They were not exactly the birthday present type," he says.

"And you? Are you the birthday present type?" I say.

"I am now," he responds, wrapping his arms around me very tight.

Good, that means I'm getting a present on my birthday.

"You're not going anywhere today. That's an order. I'm taking you on a road-trip," I say as I pull the duvet over him.

It's only 7am so we can nap atleast for another hour. I don't think he can go back to sleep though, he's been looking at that watch since forever.

When I wake up he is already dressed, wearing those jeans I bought him and ofcourse, Puma jacket, with sneakers. He smells of new perfume.

"You're ready to go?" I say as I jump out of bed, naked, and walk to the bathroom. He's looking at me like he wants to jump me. Can't allow that so I walk quicker, laughing at him as I close the bathroom door behind me.

We've been on the road for 45 minutes and he still has no idea where we're going and I won't tell him until we're there.

He keeps looking at me and smiling, like a curious little boy.

"You're not going to chop me up and bury me somewhere are you?" he says jokingly as I instruct him to take the next road turning left.

"Now that's an idea," I say, trying too hard not to laugh.

He shakes his head.

"That gate, get in there," I say pointing.

It's a small flea market lined with stalls trading in anything from ornaments to exotic food, plants, fruits and more.

There are also little shops, some vintage and others rather weird.

There's a bigger one on the corner with a pink banner written 'Rose's Frosts' in Italics.

I lead him by hand to it.

"Here, go crazy," I say opening my arms.

He just laughs.

"I will do that," he says walking forward and grabbing a bowl.

Rose's Frosts is an ice cream buffet slash coffee shop somewhere in the middle of nowhere on the road to Magaliesburg. I didn't even know that something like it existed until I read a magazine on a flight to Durban once.

It's owned by two sisters, Louise and Tessa whom I think are in their 70s. They make ice cream from scratch, a skill they apparently learned from their mother whose name was Rose and worked at an ice cream shop.

There's something warm and homely about their store, which makes it dangerous because nobody should have this much ice cream on one day, but this man of mine, he is swimming in it.

The idea is that you get a bowl, put one scoop of each flavour and taste before you choose which one you like most and fill up the bowl with it.

This one is filling and eating and filling and eating..... he's like a child right now.

"He loves ice cream, doesn't he?" I hear a voice speaking behind me.

It's an old lady with short red hair now standing behind me.

"He does, it's weird," I say, still looking at him tossing a blueberry flavoured scoop in his mouth.

"Boyfriend?" she asks.

"Husband, soon to be." I say.

She raises her eyebrows.

"Aren't you a tad too young to be getting married?" she asks.

Okay old lady, straying away now aren't you?

"I don't know, I'd probably still marry him even if I was 60 years old so I might as well do it now," I say, not sure where that came from.

"That's good to know. I can make you ice cream especially for him, put together all the flavours he likes most and blend them into one. What do you think about that?" she says.

"He'd love that," I say with the biggest smile on my face. My mission today is to just make him happy.

"You must be Louise or Tessa," I say to her.

"I'm Tessa, how did you know?" she asks.

"I read on a magazine about this store. I must say it's as good as they described it," I say, looking around.

"Oh yes, some snobbish journalist came here and interviewed us. They're not exactly my favourite people but we did the interview anyway," he says with a bored look on her face.

I will not dare mention what I do for a living, not until I have that custom made ice cream in my

hand.

"Here, taste this," Mqhele says pushing a spoon to my mouth. I don't even like ice cream but I open and swallow anyway.

"Nice hey? I like this one," he says before walking back to the buffet.

I look at Tessa and nod, she knows what I mean.

We walk past the shop again to collect the 'package' after having lunch and me buying little things I don't need.

"It will stay frozen for about two hours make sure you put it in the freezer the moment you get home," Tessa says as she hands me a very cold box.

"What's that?" he asks as we head to the car.

"Your year supply of ice cream," I say in a sarcastic tone.

He smiles. It's like hanging out with Mvelo, seriously.

The drive back seems shorter than the drive there, probably because we know where we're going now.

I have to check if these people are at the house already.

"*We're on our way back*" I sms Mandisa, Nqoba's girlfriend.

"*Okay, we're all here already,*"

"*Cake?*"

"*Fetchd, it's here,*" she responds.

"Who are you sms'ing," he asks, looking at me suspiciously.

"Langa," I say dismissively.

I can't wait to see him and his drama that one. I had reluctantly asked Qhawe to pick him up from the station. Qhawe is not exactly one of the most tolerant people, I hope he didn't offend him in any way.

"Oh! I should have known," Mqhele says with a laugh as we park outside the gate because there is just no space for our car at our own house.

"It's a small braai, the last treat for your birthday," I say as we walk in the house.

I think I see more alcohol than actual food here.

Mandisa and Langa are in the kitchen wearing aprons. I see they brought their own because I surely don't own an apron.

"Happy Birthday," the two say as we walk in. The guys, well, they don't have time for that, they hand him a beer. I don't know how he doesn't get sick with all that ice cream+cigarettes+beer he consumes everyday.

Good. The meat is already on the braai-stand and the gay and the hood-rat have already made all the salads.

Zanele, Qhawe's girlfriend is sitting on the couch sipping on what looks like tea. She has a judgemental face, naturally.

We've gossiped about her a few times with Mandisa but it never gets that deep, we're still not that close.

Things are going exactly the way I planned, the guys are drowning in alcohol, Langa is loud and funny as usual and as planned, everybody is enjoying themselves.

Zanele finds me in the spare bedroom putting a blanket over Mvelo who has fallen asleep.

"So are you ready for next weekend," she says, standing with her arms folded at the door.

"Yeah, my mom has made sure of that. I'm going to leave for Durban on Sunday," I say. There is this rule that if you're going to have umemulo you should stay in a room without going outside for seven days. I think I'm going to do two days, I'm not a girl anymore, technically I'm somebody's wife already.

"Wow, it must be nice," she says with a look on her face I do not understand.

I don't answer.

"Has Mqhele said anything to you, you know, about Qhawe and what his plans are.....?" she asks, still seeming a bit shady.

"Plans about?" I ask, even though I know where this is going.

"I mean I've been with him for almost four years," she says, with a tone that says "way before you came along".

I say nothing.

"Has he talked about marriage at all?" she asks.

Whoahhhhh! This is rather uncomfortable.

"I don't know, Mqhele doesn't really talk to me about his brothers' personal matters," I lie. I know he would have told me if Qhawe had ever mentioned it.

Infact, I don't think he's ever going to marry her. I think there's this one woman that he really loves but can't have, I always get that vibe. I think if he can't be with her, he'll never really fully commit himself to anyone, definitely not Zanele. Yes, it happens, even to praying girls.

I'm saved from the interrogation by Mqhele who opens the door without knocking. He looks at both of us as we stand awkwardly in the room.

I think he sees I need saving.

"Hlomu please come over here I need to ask you something,"

I literally rush out the room. He pulls me by hand to the main bedroom.

"What's up with that one now?" he asks.

"She wants to know if Qhawe is going to marry her," I say before realizing that maybe I shouldn't have.

"Next time she asks tell her NO,"

Awwwww. I look at him with a surprised face.

He means it. I leave it.

"You wanted to ask me something?" I say.

"No I was just missing you, I saw you needed saving from her that's why I said that," he says.

"But now that we're here....." he says slowly pushing me to the bathroom.

Oh no! He's crazy!

But how can I say no, it's his birthday.

We're done in 10 minutes, it's not even a quickie it's a briefie.

I try hard to wipe the smile off my face when I go back to join the ladies in the lounge. I hope they don't suspect my unholy escapades.

This was not meant to be a party but I'm bumping into people I don't know now in this house.

From what I hear, Mqoqi had everything to do with the strangers being here. This kid, he will be the death of me.

Mqhele walks out of the bedroom carrying something. It's the guitar. How come I never asked him to play it for me? I don't even know if he can play it.

The guys outside start cheering when they see him coming with it. This must be big.

I walk outside followed by Langa and the two ladies. This, I have to see.

He sits on the edge of a pile of bricks. Now everyone is quiet, staring at him as he places the guitar on his lap. He starts moving his fingers on the strings. Beautiful.

His eyes find mine, we have a moment, he smiles, and then he starts.

"Noma ungangichizela ntombi uyoze ungithande....."

I've heard this song before. It's that song, the one he played for me before I knew he'd turn out to be my everything and more.

I can't believe all along I didn't know he could sing. I'm getting emotional, not sure if it's the song or the fact that he looks extremely sexy right now.

"He hasn't touched that guitar in 11 years," I hear a voice coming from behind me.

I turn around. It's Nkosana. His face is hard.

But why hasn't he touched it in so long? And why now?

"It was my father's," he says.

Chapter 13

It's Friday night, just hours before I'm to be walking around with my boobs exposed for everyone to see.

My aunt, yes that one, insisted that I stay indoors from the moment I arrived. Normally in rural areas a girl would be given a room or rondavel outside the main house to sit in until the day of the ceremony.

But I'm from the township so I'm confined in my room, covered in ibomvu and not allowed to look at men at all, including my father. Langa will have none of that, he's been walking in and out as he pleases much to my aunt's irritation.

My mom's friends and neighbours have been coming throughout the week. Can't say I've enjoyed that part but they did leave me with money as per tradition.

The yard is abuzz with some relatives we only ever see during family functions. My uncle has been drunk since Tuesday and has been telling everyone their business since then. He asked me if I had been to a doctor to check if I can bear children before I "waste people's money" by marrying into their family when I won't give them anything back.

If it wasn't him saying that, I'd be offended.

Thobi and Nana are here with me and we're all covered in ibomvu, this I hear, will make us look beautiful and glowing. Zaba, well, she had a child at 16 so she can't sit with us 'pure' girls, although I'm sure these two next to me have slept with more men than she'll ever do in her life.

My cousin, yes that one, has been trying to get it on with Thobi since forever. She finds him annoying and too ghetto.

My aunt from Nquthu came with some teenage girls in a taxi. They're going to be doing the traditional dancing and the singing during the ceremony while I stand with them not knowing shit about what I'm doing. She knows these things and she's one of the most humble people I know. Beautiful even in her old age. She never had children of her own but her husband, my father's brother, kept bringing his from Johannesburg until she had to raise four.

Lethu is here too, judging everyone. She is supposed to be my 'makotshana' but got irritated with me sending her to do things because I couldn't leave the room by the second day. I promised to buy her a smart phone so she's been sticking it out.

"You have to go to sleep now, I'll wake you up at 4am," my mom comes in and says.

I still don't know why my father insisted on this. I understand it is culture but it would have been more fun if I had done it when I was 21. We've been walking since the wee hours of the morning to a river, or is it a swamp? Because really where are we going to find a river in KwaMashu?

This walk must have been 6km or more but we've finally found a stream somewhere at C section. There must be 30 girls here and we are all naked bathing. We have to be done before the sun comes up. These teenage girls from Nquthu have taught me some very disturbing songs.

"Usbari uyatelebhela simbonile izolo ehamba nesfebe sakhe, amacala amacala sithethelele baba..."

Loosely translated, *the groom is a whore, we saw him yesterday walking with his bitch.*

I don't know if we're singing about my man here but hey, my favourite one goes like: *balele obaba nomah ubhebhana nami msunu kanyoko* (my parents are sleeping and you are busy fucking me). I find it funny.

I don't even have a phone to check on him, I haven't seen him in five days. He must be either

nervous or pissed off already by all the chaos around him right now. I'm yet to find out what happened to the rest of his father's family. But they will be leaving from Bab'Mzimela's house in Greytown. I had to also go there to fetch 'umkhonto'. The home is almost finished.

Going back home I'm not allowed to enter the yard, I will get dressed at the place where the traditional dancing and whole ceremony will take place. It's an open area just before the school opposite my parents' house.

I get a message that they have arrived. Good because I'm all dressed and I'm glowing like they said I would. I have cow stomach fat known as umhlwehlwe hanging over my boobs. The belief is that if you're still a virgin it will stay intact but if not, it will tear away as the day progresses. We'll see about that.

"Lethu, please go get my phone," I need to speak to him.

"You're not supposed to have a phone," she says with a pout.

This little skank!

"You'll go get the phone if you know what's good for you,"

She rolls her eyes and walks on.

I think we're ready, so I tell the girls to start moving to the spot where we'll be dancing. It's 9am, we had to do this early because there's still going to be umembeso later.

"Umhlwehlwe is tearing" I sms Mqhele.

"Haaaaaaa I'm not responsible for that. You're the one that got naked in my shower," he responds. I can't help laughing out loud.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, we're ready, you?" he says.

"We are. My boobs are cold though,"

"Make sure umhlwehlwe doesn't fall I don't want the whole world seeing my property," he says.

Eish, sometimes I forget how crazy this man is.

The procedure is that I poke the spear on the ground in front of someone, anyone, they pin money on my hat and move on to the next one.

My father was the first to do it, and then my uncles and whoever else I could find next. I'm not sure if I should go to Mqhele or not. They're all standing on one side, with Nqoba's hand on Mvelo's shoulders, restraining him from running to me. I've missed my little rascals.

I keep finding him with my eyes, the last our eyes met he winked at me, I melted.

The crowd around them seems to be growing faster and faster. I notice a few familiar faces from Bree. Crazy.

"You have to go that side now," my aunt whispers an instruction behind me pointing at the direction where the whole taxi rank is gathered.

I'm suddenly nervous about this, being too close too him when I can't even touch him.

I start with Bab'Mzimela, he is technically the father of this family now, then Nkosana, then all of them. But now, this money from the taxi rank people doesn't come in just notes, it comes in a roll, some in those small bank plastic packets. One old man with a long beard says as he pins it on the hat "This is from eShowe Taxi Association".

WTF?

I feel too many eyes behind me, I know people are talking.

By the time I get to him I've emptied the hat twice.

"You look beautiful" he whispers as he pins R10 on the hat. He doesn't look me in the eye. I feel his

arm rub on mine and I want to grab him and kiss him, but I can't. I have to keep my head bowed throughout this.

"I love you," I whisper back. He briefly rubs my hand and I feel it, the urge to wrap his arms around me, it's as strong as mine. The sooner I walk away the better.

I hear someone ululating from the crowd. Okay. It's Mandisa, I haven't seen the holly one but I'm sure she's here too.

I hear Thobi and Nana giggling next to me, they must be laughing at this R10 situation. I hope Thobi is not making googly eyes at Nkosana.

Umembeso goes quicker, like I wanted. But just when I think it's over, the man has another thing in store.

Langa pulls me from a group of neighbours I'm sharing a joke with.

"Where are you taking me?" I ask.

"Come," he says as he pulls me to the front of the house and all the way to the road.

Mqhele is standing there leaning on someone's car. The smile on my face!

"Happy 21st birthday," he says, with a smile but I know there's more to this than what I see.

"I wish I was 21, and still a virgin," I say jokingly.

He laughs.

"I'm still glad I tapped that first," he says with that mischievous smile of his.

This moron. I hope Langa didn't hear that.

My birthday is on Tuesday, September 7.

"I saw you there almost grabbing me and kissing me. Here is your present," he says pointing at the car with his head.

Huh?

"Present?"

"Yes, your present," he says handing me the keys.

How can he be so calm! He's just given me a car! A freaking BMW 1Series!

My mind says jump and scream but I'm standing here frozen with my mouth open!

I grab him. I don't care what anyone says I'm just going to kiss him and cry and laugh and scream!

Oh wait, I can't drive! I don't even have a driver's license!

"I got a watch," Langa says as he turns and walks away excitedly.

Chapter 14

It's January, Sbani went to start boarding school in the North West last week. I still feel bad about this, but I hope I was able to convince him that it's for the best and that's its a good opportunity for him.

Ntsika left for UKZN two days ago. I'm worried, he'll be all alone in a province where he knows no one. At 18-years-old I don't think he is capable of taking care of himself and making the right decisions. I wanted him to live in a flat but he insisted on living at res, not that it makes any difference both are equally dangerous for a teenage boy's sanity.

The wedding is in April. I hope there'll be no drama like we had when we had umbondo in December. I haven't seen so many guns in my life.

It became clear that there was still unfinished business in that community. The children whose fathers Mqhele's dad had killed have grown, and they know.

Word came on the night before the function that some people were questioning how the chief allowed them back after what their father did. There were unconfirmed rumors that some were planning to attack them. Some are annoyed that they came back from wherever they've been to build what seems to be a mansion in a community that is still ravaged by poverty due to its past. They're probably boasting about their success after everything their father did, it was said.

Mqhele didn't tell me about this, instead he beefed up security and sent three cars to come and escort us all the way from KwaMashu to Greytown.

I don't think many people, including my father, noticed there was something going on. They probably thought those people, whom I know were hit-men, were part of the family or the taxi industry. But me, I've been around them long enough to know when all is not well.

He only told me this after everyone had left and we were lying in bed in our rondavel.

"Maybe you shouldn't have come back," I said, shit scared.

"No, we're not running any more. If these people are not willing to let go they can do whatever they want. They don't see us wanting to avenge our parents' death," he said.

I didn't like this talk.

"You can't talk like this, I thought you were going to try and build a relationship, try to fit in and forgive. I won't be bringing my children here if they'll be in danger," I said.

He tilted my head and looked at me with a smile.

"Our children, how many are you going to give me?"

"Maybe one or two," I said jokingly.

"I want seven,"

What?

"I already have 11 big eyes surrounding me all the time, I can't have 18, that would be too much," I said. I'm not having seven kids, he can forget about that.

"Haaaa plus they will all be boys, we don't make girls in this family. The last time a girl was born was over 100 years ago, and she was the only one among 12 boys. We've never had a female relative on my father's side," he said.

On that relatives tips, I decided to ask.

"So there are relatives?"

"Yes there were, but we don't know what happened to them, they all disowned my father when he started his things," he said.

I could push it, but I decided not to.

Now I have just over two months to plan a two-day wedding. I have Langa thinking it's his wedding and my mother inviting even the people she hates.

I want a big one, a glamorous one and he's willing to give me whatever I want. He wants what I want.

The challenge though is where am I going to find seven bridesmaids because he's decided that all his brothers are going to be his grooms-men.

I have three real friends, I could get two of my cousins and the teenage drama queen and then that's it, I'm stuck. Mandisa, no that wouldn't be right at all. The holly one is no longer in the picture, she left when she wouldn't get a clear answer on marriage. I never understood her but I must say, I commend her for that.

Mqhele is not home most of the time. I don't know why they are so obsessed with making more money, it's not like they need more than they already have.

Not that I'm complaining, if there's anything I've learned in the one-and-a-half years I've been a 'kept' woman is that I actually like it.

Speaking of that, I need to speak to Sambulo.

"Sisi," he answers, slow motion guaranteed.

"Hi Sambulo. I need you to do me favour,"

"Anything, is someone bothering you?" he says.

Oh ghosh!

"Can you handle the suits for the wedding?"

"Why? Are you scared he's going to show up in a tracksuit?" he says, laughing.

I laugh.

"No, I know he hates anything that has to do with shopping, he won't do it, please. I'd ask Langa but he's far.....,"

"Whoah! I'll do it don't worry. I don't want to find myself wearing a pink suit," he says.

I don't like this comment, but I'll let it pass.

"Good. All black," I say.

He's the easiest to talk to, weed and all. Sometimes I even forget that he almost died.

Anyway, it's Saturday morning, I might as well punish myself by taking Lwandle and Mvelo out on the town.

Lwandle has toned down on his hyperactivity, I think going to school has everything to do with it, he's in Grade 1 now.

"Boys, put on your shoes let's go," I say grabbing my handbag.

"Where are we going mami," Mvelo

"Shopping,"

"Why?"

"Because we need new stuff,"

"Why do we need new stuff?"

"Because the stuff we have is old,"

"Why is it old?"

Jizas!

By the time we sit down for lunch I'm so tired I want to walk barefoot. Maybe I should ship all of them to boarding school, but Mvelo will probably hitch-hike back if he doesn't get expelled on the first day.

He is so lovely yet sooooo, I don't know, there's another side to him that is not lovely which he doesn't hide but you can't help loving him, with all that. Kind of like Mqhele.

"You've had two kids already," a voice says from out of nowhere.

I raise my eyes. You've got to be fucking kidding me!

"That was quick. I heard you were getting married but I didn't know you were popping them already,"

Still as stupid as the first day I met him, even if he's being sarcastic right now, he's still being stupid.

"Hi Sandile. Nice to see you again. Are you still looking for a place to sleep?" I say. Annoyed.

He looks shocked by my attitude but hey, I'm not that mousey young girl anymore.

"I was just joking. You look good by the way," he says.

"I know," I say. Okay maybe I'm being a bit too much now.

He looks defeated.

"We should have lunch sometime, just as friends," he says.

"No that's not gonna happen," I say, giving him the 'go away' look.

He starts walking away, but then turns and walks back.

"You know, I will always love you," he says and walks back to his table.

Seriously, I know this asshole doesn't mean this, what I don't understand is why he would say it at restaurant full of people of all places. Nx!

"Who is that mami?" Mvelo and his questions.

"Some stupid fool. Finish your food we have to go," I say.

As I drive back, I wonder how Sandile knew about me getting married, who told him? I wonder how many other people from my 'past life' know about this, what they are saying and what they think about me marrying this young. I realize how much I have left behind, including the ability to worry about what other people think or say.

I moved from trying to build my career so I could be successful and earn a big salary and want for nothing. But then, I've been wanting for nothing since the day I picked up that pile of cash from the coffee table.

I'm already raising children whose mothers I don't even know, I've forced grown men to face their past, I've been abused, I've been hurt, I've been loved unconditionally and I've been happy, very happy. Sometimes it all doesn't make sense at all how I can love this one person so much, why him?

This is not how I had planned by life but from where I'm sitting, I wouldn't trade it for anything. Not even these two little bug-eyes in this car, God knows, I'll die first before I let anyone hurt them, or take them away from me.

I'm distracted by the phone ringing.

"Half," I answer.

"Look, the lady at the venue wants to confirm the number of people they should cater for and if any of them will be booking rooms at the lodge," he says.

Langa will make me elope I tell you.

"I said 250 but I don't know, it could increase again," I say.

"Increase? I don't think you know more than 50 people in your life. Big weddings are ghetto, you have to surf the crowd we can't have folk spoiling pictures," he says.

He is fucking crazy right now!

"I don't know stupid, these are people we are sure are coming, including your whole neighbourhood and all your skanky friends from UCT. Mqhele doesn't even care about the white wedding, he just wants a proper Zulu wedding," I say.

"Who cares? As long as he's still paying for the white one I'm fine," he says.

"I'll talk to you later I'm driving. You must come to Joburg soon so we can go look for a wedding dress," I say before hanging up. I'm not calling him again today. I have to get home and cook.

I love this house but at some point we are going to have to move into a big one, especially if we are going to have children. I don't think he will agree to let it go though, he built it from scratch and it has so many memories. Kind of like the Sprinter, it's still in the garage, sometimes I wish someone would just come and steal it.

Sometimes I miss my flat, my space. They were only too happy when I put in my notice to move out, that police raid situation didn't really make me Miss Popular. My parents though, they think I still live there, there was no way I was going to tell them I'm moving in with the man, fiancée or not.

I hear him breathing close to my ear, arms wrapping around my waist from behind, his chest over my shoulders and his chin resting on top of my head. I stop stirring the pot. How did I not hear him come in?

"Hey love". I say.

Silence.

I put my hands over his, trying for some connection.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

Silence.

I try to turn around to face him without moving him from his position. It's impossible, he holds my waist tighter. I switch off the stove, and just stand there. I don't know what's going on.

"Where are the boys?" he says after about five minutes of him holding on to me in complete silence.

"They're sleeping. We went to the mall and by the time we got back they were too tired," I say, trying to lengthen the conversation. I need to get him talking maybe he will tell me what this is about.

"And you? how was your day?" I ask.

He doesn't answer, instead he turns me around to face him.

"Did you shop?" he says.

"Yes I did," I respond, a bit confused because normally he doesn't even care.

"Are you okay?" I have to ask again because he's being weird right now.

"I'll drive you to work tomorrow morning," he says before kissing me on the forehead and walking to the bedroom.

I might as well stop cooking, he's not eating tonight, or talking about what's bothering him.

Sometimes I wonder what my life will be like after we are officially married. You know, when I'll need to go to court to get permission to break up with him. Strange though because in all the times that he's fucked up, I've never thought about leaving him, it may have crossed my mind in a

moment of anger but deep down I've always known that I'd end up in his arms.

Tonight, as always, I fall asleep in his arms. I still don't know what's going on, but I feel safe in his arms because by now I know he will never let anyone hurt me, except him.

Don't get me wrong, I'm happy here and I know without a doubt that this man loves me more than anything in this world. They say there is no relationship without hurdles. True. But if I were to jot down all the wrong things he has done and compare them with the right things, he'd come out as the best husband ever. But then, I'm a woman, we don't forget.

I'm about to knock-off work and I say, without feeling guilty at all, that I produced nothing at all today to earn my salary.

I'm sure he's parked outside already, he's always punctual with picking me up from anywhere.

I hope his mood has improved, he was a bit quiet than usual this morning. I also noticed there was a car that seemed to be following us. Infact, I have had this feeling for the past two weeks that a car is following me but I've never raised it to him. Firstly because I could be wrong and imagining things and secondly, because he might just go crazy and send a helicopter to circle over the whole of Joburg and shoot any car driving behind me from the sky.

But I need to get to him right now, this could work.

"I think someone has been following me," I say, ready to deal with whatever his reaction will be.

He stares straight ahead. He lets out a deep sigh before speaking.

"When did you start suspecting this?" he asks.

"About two weeks ago," I say.

He turns to look at me.

"And you didn't tell me because?"

"Because I thought I was just imagining things," I say.

"Hlomu, you're marrying me. You don't imagine things. If you think someone is following you, someone is following you. You're my weakness, my everything, everybody I've ever wronged knows that," he says, his face hard.

I don't like this, what does he mean everybody he's ever wronged?

"You've wronged people?" I ask, I know it's a dumb question.

"Everybody has wronged someone at some point in their lives," he says.

"Is someone trying to hurt me?" I ask. I'm getting scared and worried.

"I'd kill anyone, their families, their friends and everyone they know. Anyone, if they ever try to hurt you," he says. I know he means this, so why am I so comfortable with it?

"I know," I say and look out the closed window.

Will we ever have peace in this family? Right when I think it's all going well, they're moving into the trucking business and shuttles so maybe the taxi business will end soon, this happens.

He can't keep me in the dark when my life is at stake, I won't allow it.

"Who is following me and why?" I say with a fiery look on my face.

He looks at me, says nothing, and turns his eyes back to the road.

"There you go again, shutting me out of your life," I say. I'm angry.

"I've never shut you out of my life," he says with a confused look on his face.

Geez! He makes me so mad when he is so calm about things! I look out the window, my arms folded.

We sit in silence for minutes.

I can't anymore.

"Look Mqhele, I'm not going to tolerate your shady-ness anymore. If you really see me as your wife you're going to keep me on the loop. Now, I want to know who is following me and I want to know why, now," I say. I can't stop my voice from going higher.

He glances at me for a second and turns his eyes back on the road.

"I'm talking to you!"

"I don't like your tone," he says calmly without looking at me, his eyes still on the road.

He's making me more mad.

"And I don't like your silence!" I say, I can't control the anger.

He turns to look at me.

I stare back.

"I said I don't like your tone Mahlomu," he says, his tone firmer, with a face I know too well.

"So this is how it's going to be? You're going to threaten me when I challenge you?"

I already know this conversation is not going to end well but I can't help it.

He keeps quiet. I know he's done talking.

I drop my eyes and turn to look out the window

We haven't spoken at all after that. I grab my handbag and get out of the car. There's a black car parked outside the gate. I can't see who's inside but I'm sure it's the same car I thought was following us in the morning.

I won't talk to this man until he tells me what he has done to whom to put my life in danger. He mustn't even try with me.

He spends most of the evening in the garage on his guitar. He plays it once in a while and he always wants to be alone when he does.

Despite the anger that I feel towards him right now, I've prepared him dinner. I leave it on the kitchen counter and go to sleep.

I'm woken by a sound of a phone ringing. He's up already answering it and walking to the en-suite bathroom. I don't think he realised that I'm awake.

I can hear just his side of the conversation.

"For how long?"

"Just him alone?"

"What did he say?"

"Deal with it,"

The word 'deal' is used very loosely in this family. I never know if they really mean deal when they say deal.

I pretend to be asleep when he comes back. He wraps his arms around me and kisses the back of my head. His body is less tense.

"I want to go visit Sbani this weekend, I'm sure he's scared and confused with all those strangers," I say as he drives me to work.

I don't know what happened last night or who was talking to on the phone. All I know is that I woke up to find him staring at me and that he seemed to have forgotten that we weren't talking to each other.

"It's only been a month, he's a tough boy he'll be fine,"

"He's 11," I say, widening my eyes.

"If I were to tell you things I was already doing at 11....," he says with that smirk of his.

"I don't think I want to know but I'm comforted by knowing you were too young to get an erection at that age," I say.

He laughs out loud.

"You never know," he says. When he gets silly, he gets really silly.

I've noticed there is no car following us lately. He still insists on driving me to work though. It's been three weeks since that night where I heard him telling someone to 'deal with it' in the middle of the night.

This morning when I woke up Nqoba was already waiting for me in his car outside by the time I finished getting dressed. Worst part is I didn't even know Nqoba was driving me to work, I assumed that because Mqhele left at 3am for the first time in three weeks, I could also get in my car and drive myself to work

I greet and make myself comfortable on the front seat. I won't even ask why he is my chauffeur this morning because I know chances of getting the truth are slim.

But we are going to have to talk about something because this is Nqoba and he doesn't believe in silence being golden.

"Off to mind other people's business again today?" he says as he drives out the gate.

I guess he's right, that's what I do for a living, mind other people's business.

"Yep, people always have business for us to mind and there's always people ready to read other people's business. Someone has to do it," I say.

He looks at me, smiles, and looks away.

"I heard about this journalist who wrote about his own mother," he says.

No man that's a lie.

"I'm serious," he says as if he just read my mind.

"His mother died of cholera and he wrote a story about it with a headline: CHOLERA KILLS O'LADY".

I'm in stitches.

I forgot he is a comedian. If there ever was anything like that I'm sure I'd know about it.

"You must come and write about those people who come to my tavern every day, some of them will drink anything between water and paraffin. But the drama you'll see when their wives come to force them to go home in the wee hours of the morning. This other guy, he was so drunk he didn't recognise his wife at all. Infact he was busy asking her to be his girlfriend. She smashed a bottle over his head and I had to write a police statement," he says shaking his head.

This guy though.

"I hope this is not an inconvenience for you, I could have driven myself to work you know, but then....."

The smile has disappeared He looks like he is thinking hard.

"It's not an inconvenience Hlomu. I'd drive you anywhere, anytime," he says. serious face.

I find it a bit weird but hey, weird is very normal in this family.

"How is Mandisa?" I ask, although I don't really care how she is, but we have to move on to a less

awkward subject.

"Mandisa is.....there," he says.

He sounds like he doesn't want to take it any further. He's suddenly a man of a few words, it's unusual.

I don't even understand why these two are together really.

"And you? how are you?" he asks.

I'm.....there.

"I'm good," I say.

"And how is he?" he says.

I didn't expect that at all. And besides, he should know how he is, he's his brother.

"I'm not sure what you're asking Nqoba, you see him every day, he's okay," I say.

This conversation is a bit awkward.

"I know he's okay, I want to know how he is with you," he says, his eyes tense.

I could tell him that sometimes he gets complicated but it's his brother, he probably knows that already.

"He's my world, I want to love and protect him and make him happy. But I want him to stop being so overprotective," I say, not sure if I'm doing the right thing.

He sighs.

"Let him do whatever he needs to do Hlomu. He is a man, that's what we do, we love and protect," he says.

I didn't know Nqoba was capable of being this serious.

I'm early for work so I have enough time to look for some story to do. Maybe I should go out today but I'm not sure if it's safe yet. My personal life is interfering with my job big time.

I'm not going out, I'll do whatever I do on the phone.

"I think I have a big one today," says that crime reporter again. She's improved over time but she still overrates her crime stories.

"A body of a man was found decomposing in the forest in Estcourt yesterday. They still have to confirm this but judging by the clothes and jewellery, they believe it's Sfiso Ngqulunga," she says.

Wait! I've heard that name before.

"What?" the news editor says, along with everyone in the diary meeting.

And then, the intern.

"Who is Sfiso Ngqulunga?"

Wrong question intern! Nobody answers him instead he gets annoyed looks. See, Journalists know everything, and they don't understand why other people don't know everything.

"Apparently he's been missing for the past three weeks. I hear he was seen around Greytown before that, about a month earlier," she says.

"Wait! He actually went back to Greytown? That's odd considering the number of people he killed in that area during the political violence in the 90s," one of the senior journalists responds.

Why is all of this bothering me?

"That's what I plan to find out. Is it possible for me to go to Mbuba and investigate more?" she says.

I don't hear what the boss's response is. I stand up and leave the meeting.

"I need to go to the loo," I say as I walk out.

So, Hlomu, look, you're going to have to stop making up stories in your mind. This Ngqulunga guy killed a lot of people which means he has many enemies which means anyone of them may have killed him.

If he has been missing for three weeks than it's impossible that what you think right now is correct because your man has slept in your bed and eaten dinner at your house every night before and after this man went missing.

"Love, can you talk?" I say on the phone. I couldn't help it, I had to call him.

"With you I can talk anytime, why? You want me to come over for a quickie?"

WTF is wrong with him?

"That man who was following me, did you ever find out who he was?" I ask.

"No".

He is lying to me.

But I'm not going to pursue this any further, I never do.

I still haven't decided on which dress I like most between the two I went to fit last weekend.

Langa has already chosen the one HE likes, I think I'll choose the other one.

"Do you like this,?" I say to Mqhele showing him a picture in a magazine.

"What's this?" he says, looking at the photo with a frown.

Duh!

"It's a wedding cake," I say, shocked really.

"This is a cake? How does one even begin to eat this? It looks like flowers," he says.

God! Why me? Why did you have to make me love this one?

"It's fine then, I'll choose the cake without your input, and the dress and the décor. By the way, Sambulo will take you all shopping for the suits, all you have to do is pay," I say, wearing my 'not-negotiable' face.

He frowns.

"Why Sambulo? I can buy my own suit," he says.

"No, because I don't want you showing up at our wedding wearing tracksuits. But if you have a problem with Sambulo, I'll get Langa and his friends to take you....."

He answers before I can finish the sentence.

"Sambulo is fine, I'll go with him, anytime," he says.

His relationship with Langa is great, he knows that caring about me means caring about him.

He's been coming home early lately. I'm back to driving myself to work but he wants to know where I am all the time, like I can't take care of myself or something.

"Today you cooked the same meal you cooked me the first time you let me in your flat," he says.

He's right, I didn't realize

"What do you mean 'let you'? I literally begged you to come in because you just kept dropping me off there and not even trying to kiss me," I say.

He switches on the side-lamp. Oh no! he has that little boy smile he always has in his ice cream moments.

"You wanted me to kiss you?" he asks, smile wide, eyes wide. He's now lying on top of me. He's heavy but his body is warm.

"Why do you think I got in your car?" I say.

He laughs, loud.

"Feels like it was just yesterday, you have no idea how much you've changed my life," he says. There's so much I still want to change about his life.

I come home to find the two little rascals running around. Mqhele is home. Strange, I'm always the first to arrive.

"Nkosana had to go somewhere, he'll pick them up later," he says when I find him in the bedroom. He probably has a woman in that house, I hope it's not Thobi because I'd kill her.

"You should have told me I would have picked them up from school," I say.

He's not interested in that, instead he wants to ambush me.

"No, it's not happening," I say moving backwards.

"But look," he says pointing to his pants.

"Take a cold shower," I say walking out the bedroom. You'd swear he takes Viagra or something.

I'm beginning to think I should prepare these kids for bed because it's getting late, I don't think Nkosana is coming to pick them up.

I'm washing the dishes when Mqhele comes and hugs me from behind, kissing me on the cheek.

"Why are you always kissing mami?" a voice comes from behind. It's Mvelo looking rather annoyed by this kissing business. Lwandle is standing behind him.

"Because I love mami," Mqhele responds.

There's a confused look on both their faces.

"Like that man at the mall who said 'I will always love you' to mami,?" Lwandle shoots.

I feel my body shake. His hand lets go of mine.

There's a long silence. The two rascals are still standing with their eyes popped. I think they can sense the tension suddenly filling up the room.

I'm crossing my fingers that Lwandle doesn't say anything more.

He picks up his phone, dials a number, drops it, dials again.

"Come and get the boys," he says, hangs up, and walks to the bedroom.

I won't follow him, I know better. He comes out of the bedroom and walks outside. He's smoking.

The boys have left the kitchen and moved on with their lives. They have no idea what they've just done.

See, if anyone was going to do what just happened, it was Lwandle. He is the middle child and middle children are the most dangerous species in life. They move around unnoticed so they are most likely to be free spirits, they will probably speak their minds more.

I didn't know he heard when Sandile said that to me, probably because I wasn't paying attention to him because he's the middle child and he floats.

I'm still standing where he left me, it's been over 20 minutes. I hear a car pulling in, I assume it's Nkosana because he lives close enough to drive here in 20 minutes. It's Nqoba.

He's just going to take the kids and leave me here? He knows his brother, how can he do this? He doesn't even come inside the house, or talk to his brother. I just hear the car driving off and I know I'm doomed.

I see him walking in. I'm standing with my hands on the kitchen counter. He comes and stands in front of me. I've seen this face before.

"You said you'll never hit me again," I say. It's my mind rushing to my mouth without telling me again.

He is quiet for a while.

"Who is he?" he says.

"Who is who?"

"Tell me, because if I go and find out for myself, there will be corpses by the time I'm finished," he says.

"You haven't asked me what Lwandle was taking about," I say. But this is not the time to negotiate, he could go off at any moment.

He doesn't respond. I tell him what happened anyway. His hands are shaking. I know what he wants to do, he's fighting the urge to raise his fist. I keep calm as I tell the story, as dangerous as the situation I'm in is.

"If you hurt him we're done," I say, and walk to the bedroom.

We haven't spoken since last night. He woke up at 3am and left. I didn't sleep at all.

I'm trying to get through the day, but then the faster it goes the sooner the time to go home, I'm not sure if I want to go home today.

His sulking means he's still mad. I swear if he had hit me last night I was going to call-off the wedding.

An email comes in as I sit staring at my computer screen. I don't know the address.

Hi

I hope you know what you're doing. I hope you're strong enough.

Have a nice day.

Huh? It must be about work, I hope it's another angry person I wrote about. I don't respond to those so I just ignore this one too. I can't be dealing with whining today, I have enough problems of my own.

Hi again

I wasn't trying to scare you or anything, just thought you should know that what you're getting yourself into is no child's play.

Really? Who the heck is this now?

Hi there

I'm not sure I know what you're talking about. Can you explain further.

I sit with my hand on my chin waiting for a response.

Hi

I'm sure you're a great person. I won't say much. Thank you for taking care of my children, please

continue, I promise I will repay you one day.

Thank you

My children? The only children in my life are..... No wait!!!

Are you Sbani's mother?

No response.

Hi

Can we talk please?

No response still.

Hi

You should come and see them sometime, they're good kids. Sbani is at boarding school and Mvelo lost his first tooth last week.

Can you send me your numbers?

No response. I give up. Maybe I'm coming on too strong, but then again, I'm raising this woman's children so she owes me an explanation. How could she just pack up and leave without her children? What kind of mother does that? Worse she left them with a man who beats up his siblings to punish them.

No no no she needs to say something.

Hi

Don't you think that maybe I deserve to know what happened to you so that when your children ask I know what to tell them?

No response.

Hi

It's fine then, I'll tell them you're dead.

Thank you

Bye

I give up when there's no response three hours later and I have to go home. Oh home! I wish I didn't have to go there.

He's not home when I arrive, and at 10pm when I dish his food and leave it on the counter, and at 1am when I wake up to go to the bathroom.

He's still not here when I wake up to go to work. His phone has been off since yesterday.

I don't want to be the wife that calls family members every time we have problems, but I need to know if he is okay.

Qhawe would know where he is but I'm going to go with Sambulo, I know he won't be shady about

it. I won't call him though, If I speak to him I'll cry.

Hi, I haven't seen Mqhele since Tuesday night. I just need to know if he's okay.

Maybe I shouldn't have sent that sms, now they're all going to know we're having problems.

"Sisi. He's okay, I'll get him to come home. I'm sorry about this"

I'm not sure what this one is apologising for but I'm glad to know he's alive and I'll have to continue dealing with his shit.

I'm embarrassed and degraded right now. A man I'm marrying in seven weeks time walks out on me and I have to call his brother to get him home? I will stand in front of the priest and vow to tolerate this for the rest of my life?

He walks in at about 7pm and yes, I have dinner waiting for him. He's still wearing the same clothes, he looks like he hasn't slept in days.

I put his plate in front of him and walk away. I'm not going to be the first to speak, he's the one that left this house, he must find his way back in.

"I went home," he says after minutes of standing in silence watching me get dressed in the bedroom.

I knew he was there, I could feel him behind me. I think about not responding but I have so much I need to vent out.

"I thought this was your home," I say, not turning around to face him.

"I went to Greytown," he says.

"And left me to sleep alone in your house?" I say

"I just needed to get away," he says.

Oh no he didn't just say that! I swiftly turn to face him.

"Get away? From what? Me? You needed to get away from me? I didn't know we had an option of getting away Mqhele. I thought we were committed to each other. So what happens when you get mad again? Are you going to get away for a week while I wait for you and make sure you have a warm meal when you come back?" I'm tears now, I hate being like this.

He stands there is silence.

"When were you going to come back if I hadn't spoken to your brother?"

"I was going to come back today," he says.

Nx!

"Why did you leave Mqhele? What did I do to you?" I ask, trying too hard to sound calm.

He's quiet.

"Is this how it's going to be? Tell me now so I'll know what I'm getting myself into before I do," I say.

"Hlomu, it's not like that, it's just that I almost....." he stops.

"You almost hit me again. I lied to my father I said I felt safe with you," I say.

I've hurt him deeply by saying this, but I'm so angry I don't know what to say to him anymore.

I switch off the light and climb in bed, he's still standing there smelling like an ash-tray. He can stand in the dark, if he even dares switch on that light I'm going to throw everything I find at him!

How did I get here? I'm only 23.

He climbs into bed, lies on his back, in silence.

"I got an email from a woman asking me if I know what I'm getting myself into by marrying you," I say with my back on him. I need to sleep now.

I feel him getting up and sitting.

“What? Who was that?” he asks.

I don't answer.

“Hlomu....” He says grabbing my arm.

“Don't touch me!” I say with the loudest scream.

He pulls away.

I cover my head and close my eyes. I try to imagine what my life would be if I hadn't gotten in that Sprinter. I see nothing.

Chapter 15

It's Friday night. I'm getting married tomorrow.

"I'm going to tell you something, but only if you promise not tell anyone," I say to Langa.

His face changes to worried in a snap. He puts down his coffee mug, I still have mine. I take one last sip before I break the news. I think we'll need one more bottle of wine after this.

"I think they kill people," I say.

He looks at me, stunned and confused at the same time.

"I think they kill anyone who betrays or threatens them,"

"I think you're drunk now," he says.

I'm drunk yes but I know exactly what I'm talking about.

"I'm serious, it can't all be coincidence. I just don't know if they do it themselves or if they get someone to do it for them," I say. My head is spinning a bit now. The plan was to have a glass of wine just to calm my nerves. To say goodbye to my surname.

We're on our second bottle already. After all the theories about what marriage is going to be like and what I should do or not do to make him happy and ensure he doesn't go outside to get what he doesn't get at home and blah..blah..blah, I deserve a glass.

I understand those women are career wives but they have no business telling me how to make this marriage I'm getting into work. They have no idea.

Now back to the issue at hand, Langa thinks I've lost my mind. He is patting my head while I lean on his shoulder like I've just come out of a delusional moment.

"Go to sleep otherwise you'll look like a drunk bride tomorrow," he says putting a blanket over me.

Okay, he doesn't believe me, maybe I really am delusional.

I'm woken by my phone vibrating under my pillow.

It's my wedding day.

Shit! It's 8am! Why didn't anyone wake me?

"Good morning groom,"

"Hello bride, why do you sound like you're still in bed?" he says.

"I am, these people didn't wake me, not even my aunt,"

He laughs. He just can't get over my aunt, he's probably the only person I know who finds her amusing.

"I can't wait to see you. I can't wait to marry you," he says with a very humble tone.

"I'd marry you anytime, anywhere," I say.

We're both silent.

"My world is going to be complete today," he says. "Speaking of that, can I sleep in your room tonight? It's been two weeks, the big man can't hold on for that long," he says.

I laugh. Oh Ghosh he's so crazy.

"Maybe I'll let you sneak in, maybe not, I'll think about it," I say.

"Mmmmmm I love you, your cruelty and all of you," he says.

"And I love you, your horny arse, your zoom lenses and all of you," I say.

“Don’t joke about the lenses, you’ll be surrounded by a lot of them for the rest of your life,” he says.

We both laugh. I don’t know if I could ever live without him, it seems impossible.

I’m all smiles by the time I get out of my bedroom and join the scores of people doing I don’t know what in my mother’s house. Seriously, there’s not even space to stand in here. Some look like they’re ready to go, others are cooking while some are just there, just. I love them all but the wedding is at 4pm, can’t we just all chill a little?

“Oh! the makoti is finally up, you can’t sleep this late at your in-laws,” my aunt says as she sees me coming down the passage. She’s never been married so I don’t know how she knows that. My man lets me sleep, he knows I love my sleep.

I have to find Langa, he’d better give me something for this headache, he’s the one who got me drunk on the night before my wedding.

I bump into my dad on my way out, he doesn’t look at all excited about today. My mom on the other side is trying to keep dodgy relatives away from her Tupperware Lethu is, well, being Lethu.

“Where’s Langa?”

“I don’t know, he left in the morning,” she says. She never puts her smartphone down, never. Left in the morning? Where is he?

I’m panicking now. As we grow older I’ve realised how much I rely on him, somehow when he’s around I feel like nothing can go wrong.

Memories from our conversation last night come flooding back. I shouldn’t have told him that! What was I thinking? Where on earth is he?

“Hi half, you look like hell, start drinking water,” I hear him behind me.

“Where were you?”

“Collecting my outfit,” he says walking past me with a suit-cover over his shoulder. I realize I hadn’t even asked him what he was going to wear and how he feels about all this.

Since I couldn’t make him my maid of honour, he’ll be signing me away to him.

I follow him to his bedroom.

“Try it on I want to see,”

“No,” he says.

“Why?”

“It’s a surprise,” he says

I know he means no so I won’t push him, I just know it will be great.

Oh an sms.

“All the best for today, I guess the best man won”

“Oh damnit! What is it with this motherfucker!!” oops I said that out loud.

“Whoah! Who is that?” Lang asks, shocked by my reaction.

“It’s Sandile, I don’t know what he wants from me. Jizas! The guy is so shady it’s crazy,”

“Are you still talking to that fool?” he says.

“I bumped into him some weeks ago, I didn’t even know he still had my numbers,” I say.

“He’s gonna die,” he says.

Huh?

I look at him with a questioning face. He smiles, I smile back. We’ve addressed last night’s

conversation. It won't be spoken of again.

By 12pm we're all set and ready to leave for Pietermaritzburg. I'm already in my white dress and my face covered in a veil. All that's left now is my for my father to walk me around the yard while telling the ancestors that I'm officially a non-member of the family. My cousin and Bab'Ngcobo are following us carrying the kist.

See in many African cultures, everything that is done and featured during a traditional ceremony has a meaning. You can ask, but nobody will ever tell you the truth about why a woman has to be followed by a kist when she leaves home to get married. But if you look at it, that kist signifies your coffin, that even in death, you will not return to your home.

I insisted on no car decorations. Imagine driving from Durban to Pietermaritzburg with balloons and ribbons and people in other cars waving at you on the N3. I can't!

We're here" I sms him.

"We're on our way. I'm nervous, you're the only person in the world that can make me nervous", he says.

"Have one beer you'll be fine,"

"I've had three already" he says.

OMG!

"Are you drunk? Oh my God! I'm going to marry a drunk man!"

"I still love you even when I'm drunk. But I'm not, not after drinking only three beers" he says.

"Two hours to go, I can't wait to be Mrs Zulu"-I say

"And I can't wait to get you pregnant with seven big-eyed boys" he says.

Okay, he's definitely drunk. I'm not having seven children! Never!

Come to think of it, I don't remember him ever being drunk, but there hasn't been a day since I met him where he hasn't popped a bottle.

The garden is beautiful, I initially wanted white Wimbledon-chairs but Langa convinced me to go for transparent glass-looking ones. He was right, they're more beautiful. The walkway to the small stretch tent where we will say our vows is covered with a white carpet just like I wanted and is lined with yellow roses.

"Let's go," my dad says, gripping my hand tighter. I take the first step. This is it. All heads turn as we approach, the piano playing. I didn't know there'd be a piano!

Everybody is standing but I can see him, only him, I can't take my eyes off him, he can't take his off me. I've never seen him in a suit before, he is beyond gorgeous, powerful, sexy.

My babies, I missed them, they look good in their little suits. They're page boys, Mvelo is waving at me with a toothless smile.

I see Nkosana putting his arm around his shoulders, patting them. Nqoba and Qhawe move closer to him too, all patting him in a comforting manner. My dad tightens his grip on my hand again, and stops. Mqhele comes towards us, he stops in front of my dad, shakes his hand and says 'thank you'. My dad doesn't let go of me immediately, I look at him, hug him and pull away. I turn to my soon-to-be husband, he has tears in his eyes, I take his hand, he leads me to the altar.

I've never seen him cry before.

All eight of them in suits, I never! I must say Sambulo did a good job, he even got problem child Mqoqi looking like a decent person and Ntsika, I think he'll fit well in the corporate world one day.

I turn around and see my brother behind me, I want him here next to me right now, he knows it,

he gives me an assuring look. Now I can do this.

I recite my vows repeating after the priest. They may have been said over a million times before by every other bride but I mean each and every word.

When his turn comes, he stops the priest.

Has he prepared his own vows? That is so unlike him!! Last I checked he thought a white wedding was a waste of time and energy.

"In my life, I wasn't given many things. I lost many things when I was young. I learned to fight, to survive, to be strong at 11-years-old. Never in my life, before I met you, did I ever think I'd be standing here today looking at the best thing that has ever happened to me. God took everything away from me, and gave me you, you are beyond everything. I'm not perfect, you know that, but you love me still, more than I deserve. This ring is just a piece of steel, if I could I would cut out my heart and put it around your finger as my promise to love and protect you with all that I am."

I'm crying. I can't help it. I love him.

I feel a little bad about not being deep enough to prepare my own vows but it's not like I expected him to do this.

Qhawe signs him away. I can't help noticing gob-smacked faces of people who are seeing them all for the first time. I'm used to them, but Mqhele and Qhawe are just creepy, they're like one person.

"This white wedding thing is not so bad," he says as we pose for yet another photo.

"I made you wear a suit, that's the best part. And you look hot,"

"Yeah but I'm tired of this picture thing now, do we have to take so many?" he says.

To be honest I'm tired of it too and it's going to get dark soon.

"I loved your vows," I whisper to him as we make our way to the reception hall.

"I meant every word, you know that don't you?" he says, suddenly too serious.

I stop walking and wrap my arms around his waist.

"I know," I say looking up at him.

We kiss, a long deep one, until we realize that everyone who was still outside has stopped to look at us.

Errrr my dad should not have seen that, if he saw it.

Langa appears from out of nowhere. He just stands there smiling. I let go of Mqhele and throw my arms around him.

"Thank you for all of this," I say.

If it wasn't for him this wedding would have probably been less classy and stylish.

"You're not leaving me for the taxi driver are you?" he says.

I laugh. I've even forgotten that this man used to be 'taxi driver'.

"I'll never leave you for anyone," I say squeezing him tighter. Mqhele has moved a distance away. I think he understands that he'll be sharing me with him for the rest of his life.

I spotted Bab'Gumbi earlier with his very rural looking wife. He's wearing a safari suit. I'm just saying.

Someone, in their high or psycho mind decided to include my uncle in the reception programme. Yes, he is the eldest and important member of the family but we all know he lives to tell people the truth they don't want to hear.

“You mkhwenyana (son-in-law), I know you have money but you don’t have an education so don’t think you’re going to be smart with my daughter,” that’s the opening line of his speech on behalf of the family.

I want to jump under the table and die right now!

Mqhele doesn’t even seem offended, he thinks it’s funny instead. I am so embarrassed.

By the time we get to the cutting of the cake I’ve been embarrassed enough from my uncle to Nqoba’s speech about how I did Mqhele a favour by agreeing to go out with him in the first place. Sigh....boys!

“I don’t want you to go,” I say.

“We can have sex in the car,” he says

Why the heck would he want to have sex in the car on our wedding night?

“Okay now I want you to go,” I say.

I respect my culture but sometimes it can be torturous. I mean, why can’t I go have sex with my husband in bed and then wake up tomorrow and do the traditional wedding? The dude paid thousands for unlimited access to this vagina.

I didn’t expect this but they pulled it off. I’m pretty sure Mandisa had everything to do with it. There’s this mystery around her that I don’t understand. It’s like she’s here, in this family, but not really really here.

I remember when I told her about Sbani’s mother contacting me she insisted that I should ignore her. When I asked her why she never took the kids in after their mothers left she said “Nkosana doesn’t trust anyone with his children, except you”. I didn’t know if that came from a good or bad place though. I’m still not trying to get close to her, it’s better that way.

The yard is buzzing, there’s even more people than the 350 we had yesterday. Mqhele looked rather appetizing in ibheshu, what I didn’t expect though was that he can do the traditional dancing like that, all of them actually.

I’ve been sprinkled with gall, I’m officially a Zulu.

Sometimes I try to imagine what it would be like if I had found his parents still alive. But then, would he have found me on that day almost two years ago if his life had taken a different direction? I think not, everything, good or bad leads to one’s fate.

This man, the one sitting in a circle with others, I think I’ve seen him before. Oh yah, he is the old man on the road, the first person we saw when we entered the gravel road on that awkward day of returning to Mbuba.

Does him being here mean all is buried and forgotten? I hear there are other people from the area also here. I also noticed earlier that they kept arriving in small groups.

At first they’d look like they were scared to enter the yard but after that they’d look too comfortable. I think almost the whole neighbourhood finally came.

I’m in bed trying too hard not to fall asleep. My family and friends left in the afternoon but the party continued long after that. Mqhele is outside trying to get the group that’s so drunk they’re singing church songs to leave.

“I must just buy dogs. If we are going to have another function in this family we need to have dogs,”

Huh?

"Why dogs?" I ask.

"To set them on these people who don't want to leave," he says.

SMH.....only he would want to set dogs on guests at his own wedding.

"I saw that old man," I say.

"Yeah, he's been coming all week,"

How did he know which old man I am referring to?

"He's my father's cousin,"

Whoah!

"So you're related to him,?" I ask, a duhhhh question really.

"Yes but we're not family," he says it so dryly.

He's not going to go any further, I know him.

"I didn't get to say goodnight to the kids. I've missed them so much," change of subject, vital.

"What about me? Did you miss me," he says wrapping his arms around me and pulling me close. I don't get a chance to respond, he's all over me already.

It is expected that a new bride, on the morning after her wedding, would wake up and do some ancient slavery shit like spring cleaning and breakfast and laundry and all the things I won't do.

By the time I wake up everybody seems to have been up for hours. It's only 8am. It must be a taxi industry thing.

Instead I find breakfast already made, shame but Ntsika, I taught him well. Mandisa left early in the morning, something about her child back in Joburg, I didn't even know she had a child.

"Mrs Zulu," Nkosana says as I walk in the kitchen. I'm already washed and dressed in what I perceive as presentable. Right now though I need food.

I can see them sitting on the fence from the kitchen table, they're drinking, really? Mqhele is smoking as usual, strange, I didn't smell nicotine on him in the past two days, or am I just used to the smell?

I see Mvelo galloping around the yard as usual, I wonder where his partner in crime Lwandle is. Sbani is probably somewhere being an academic, which reminds me, I have to speak him about how things are at school. I hadn't seen him in over a month before the wedding.

I find him in the dining room watching TV.

"How is my big genius doing?" I say.

He turns around to look at me. He smiles, but his reserved nature shows, he's always been like that, not letting out emotion or himself. He has grown taller, he looks like a shorter version of Ntsika now.

"I'm watching the History Channel," he says.

Yeah, like he's even gonna watch the Cartoon Network like normal kids his age.

"What's on?"

"It's this show about people who buy old storage lockers without knowing what's in them, and then they sell the stuff they find, some find really valuable things like jewellery and stuff," he says with an excited and curious face.

Okay. I still love him though and I accept that he'll only have his first girlfriend after he gets a job and buys a sports car.

Mvelo comes flying in leaving dust and grass wherever he passes.

“Mami why didn’t you give me a ring at church, why did you give baba only?” he asks.

Atleast he knows that was supposed to be a church.

“I’ll give you a ring when you stop playing in dirt, look at you,” I say trying shake dry grass off his pants.

“But I haven’t washed,” he says in his defence

“Yes, true, now go wash,” I say.

“But mami.....?” he says with a complaining face.

“Where is Lwandle?” I ask.

They look at each other first before Sbani answers.

“I think he’s still sleeping,”

It’s so unlike him, he has too much energy to be still sleeping at this time. But I won’t disturb him.

I need to go to the shops anyway to buy some things I need for cooking supper. It’s time I start behaving like a true makoti.

I decide that I will take the kids with me, anyway I know Mqhele won’t let me drive to town alone so he’s also probably coming with us.

“Sbani, wake Lwandle up we’re going to town,” I say.

He runs off to his father’s room, then to the main house, then to another room and after going into all of them, he comes back to me.

“Mami, I can’t find Lwandle,”

I get a punching feeling in my stomach. But then, he’s seven, he could be anywhere, even under one of the beds.

“I looked everywhere,” he says, like he’s just read my mind.

“When was the last time you saw him?” I ask.

“Yesterday, I thought he slept in baba Ntsika’s room,” he says.

I think I want to sit down. No, I think I’ll stand. It’s going to 11am and nobody has seen a seven year old boy since last night? How could this happen?

I take that walk. The walk to the edge of the fence where they have been sitting all morning.

I am dragging myself, if I walk faster I’ll probably lose my mind before I get to them. I need to stay composed, for my own sanity.

They see me approaching and by the time I get there they’re all quiet and looking at me. Mqhele is already on his feet.

“Lwandle is missing”.

Chapter 16

I get blank stares before everything goes haywire. Them running to different directions and me standing there trying too hard not to think the worst.

Each of them runs to the first door they find. I figure they are searching for him. But this is Lwandle we are talking about, he can't stay still for more than five minutes, imagine overnight, impossible.

Nqoba runs back to me.

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Yesterday, in the afternoon I think, I didn't check on them before I went to sleep. When did you last see him," I say.

"I don't even remember," he says.

He gets on the phone. He's speaking to Mandisa, she also doesn't know where the kid is.

I'm not sure if I should also be frantic right now but something is just holding me still, my mind is not functioning.

Eventually they all come back to where I have been standing like a statue for a while. The look on their faces is not promising.

"I think we should call the police," I say.

"No!" Nkosana responds first.

I'm confused now. My child is missing and I can't call the police? We all know he is not at a neighbour's house or something.

I try, but I can't, I'm emotional. I should have checked on them before I went to sleep last night, at least we would have found out then that he's missing, what if it's too late? He could be somewhere dead by now or trafficked to another country or something.

Seriously, who comes and steals a kid at a wedding in the rural areas? It doesn't even make sense right now.

They're on their phones speaking to I don't know who. Ntsika, Sbani and Mvelo are standing next to me, in silence, I don't have the strength to assure them that it's not as bad as it looks. I would be lying. The only people who've entered this yard today were the ones who came to collect the tent, they couldn't have taken him, we were all here. So I think whatever happened to him happened during yesterday's chaos.

I start walking to our rondavel, these three follow me. I know Mvelo follows me everywhere especially if he senses something bad is going on but these two, I think, are just worried about me.

I had left my phone on top of the kist. I have five missed calls, it's Lethu. I call her back.

"I thought you didn't wanna talk to us anymore. Anyway, mom wanted to know if you're okay and if you woke up and made breakfast for everyone like she told you to," she says.

"No I didn't. I'll call you guys later we have a problem here," I say and hang up.

She calls me back, seriously Lethu this is not the time.

"What?"

"Nomamdla?" It's my dad.

"Hi baba,"

"What problem are you talking about?" he asks.

"One of the kids is missing, we haven't seen him since yesterday," I say in between tears.

I can hear Lethu on the background asking what's happening. My dad tells her before coming back

to me.

“Are you sure he’s not out playing at neighbours houses,” he asks.

“Yes I’m sure, he doesn’t know anyone here,” I say. I feel like screaming!

“Which one?” that’s Lethu screaming from the background.

I answer before my dad can pass the message.

“Lwandle, the middle one,”

“Lethu says she saw him getting in a red car last night just before we left,” my dad says.

Oh God!!!

I peak through the door and wave for Mqhele to come to me. I hand him the phone, he takes it with a questioning look on his face.

I go inside the bathroom and close the door. This can’t be happening.

He knocks on the bathroom door after a few minutes. Maybe he has some good news.

But when I open the door he just stares at me, I’ve never seen him so helpless.

“Any idea whose car it was?” I ask.

“No, your sister described it but I don’t know anyone with a car like that, I don’t even know the person she says was driving it,” he says.

This is not how I envisioned my first week of marriage.

“I have to go, stay here I’ll be back,” he says and leaves the room.

Why again did I make them come back here? If anything happens to this child, that will be the end of them, the end of everything that’s been built in the past two years.

I hear a car driving in and hope that maybe someone’s sanity prevailed and they decided to call the police. But no, it’s a freaking taxi full of men I have never seen before. That’s it! I can’t hide in here forever.

The three follow me as I march to the main house. I meet all seven of them at the door coming out.

“Babe, I need you to stay here, in the main house, don’t go out,” he says.

“You’re not leaving me alone here Mqhele! You’re not!,” I’m going to cause a scene if I have to, I won’t allow this again.

He takes a deep breath, grabs me by my arm and pushes me inside the house.

“Where are you going?” I ask. I know he’s going to leave me here. I know.

“Can you stay here, I promise you you’ll be safe,” he, squeezes me in a tight hug and walks away. I run after him but he closes the door and locks it from outside. The cars start and they are gone.

I turn around, Sbani and Mvelo are sitting together in a single couch, just like that first day I met them, but one is missing. Ntsika is standing by the door, I think he’s assumed the role of being the man of the house right now, poor child.

Outside there are strange men all over the yard. I spot Sambulo amongst them. Atleast we’re not alone.

I’m that wife who gets locked inside a house with kids. That is what I’ve become.

I get this feeling of relief when I hear cars driving in in the evening. They’ve been gone for seven hours. I pray they have my child with them.

They don’t.

And they’re avoiding eye contact with me, all of them, I don’t like this.

Mqhele pulls me aside. I'm angry and hurt by what he did but this is not the time.

"We're still looking," he says.

What's that supposed to mean? where are they looking?

"We're talking to some people. We think he was taken," he says.

"Taken as in kidnapped?"

"Yes, we think we know who did it but we're still trying to find out where they are," he says.

That kidnapping shit is for white people, in movies.

"Do they want money?" I ask.

"No, it's a business grudge," he says.

"Oh! so it's your fault, all of you, you screw people over and they come here and take the kids? And where were you? why weren't you watching him? Why didn't you organise tight security?" I can't stop talking. I know I'm being unfair here but I'm just too angry to act normal.

"We'll find him," he says pulling me to his chest hugging me tight.

The strange men, whom I've concluded are armed and dangerous are in the house now. There's just too much going on. I go to one of the bedrooms and close the door. Sbani and Mvelo are already sleeping.

An hour later they're still up in the lounge discussing useless shit when they should be out there looking for my child. Mqhele has been here to check on me three times already, telling me to sleep, I won't sleep, what's he gonna do? Lock my eyelids?

They should have let me call the police, but that's not going to happen.

Tonight, they will know me.

They see me walking down the passage and they're all instantly quiet. They're shocked, but I'm here, standing over all of them and they will listen to me.

"Listen, all of you, I'm not sure what you're sitting here talking about but I know it hasn't brought my child back, so it's useless. So you go out now and bring me my child back, I don't care what you do. If you have to kill someone, do it, but when I come out of that room tomorrow morning Lwandle had better be here, or you will know me, all of you," I say.

I can feel their eyes behind me as I furiously march back to the bedroom. Mqhele follows me but I shut the door in his face, and lock it.

I hear the door opening. Cars driving off.

I don't even know when and how I was able to fall asleep but I'm woken by the bedroom door opening. A hand pushing a tiny figure inside and closing the door again. The tiny figure walks in and finds its way to the bed in the dark.

"Mami," he says.

I pull the duvet open, he gets in. I use my hand to pat behind me, Mvelo is still there fast asleep. I check the floor, Ntsika and Sbani are still there also fast asleep.

I put my arm around him, kiss him on the head and close my eyes.

It's over. My baby is home.

The sun is almost out and I'm dreading getting out of this bed, to go out and face reality. Honestly, I don't want to know what happened last night, I'm just glad the child is back, but I need to know.

I've been living in denial about this family I married into for far too long. I'm in, I'm in, I can't get out now so I might as well be here.

The house is quiet so I assume they are all still asleep. It's already 6am, but it's April so it's still a bit dark outside.

Let me wake up and go do what my mother told me to do. I'll cook lunch and dinner as well today, I think some family time will do us good before we all go back to Joburg tomorrow.

I know he's here, watching me as I go up and down the kitchen trying to fry eggs and bacon and sausage all at the same time.

I turn around, he's standing leaning on the door step with his hands in his pockets. A bandage is wrapped around his lower arm, there's a scratch on his left cheek and a cut on his lower lip, I can see he's been bleeding.

My heart sinks, the tears, I can't stop them. I switch off the stove and walk to him, slowly, his eyes fixed on mine.

I want to caress his face but I don't want to hurt him.

"Who hurt you?" I say, with a low and trembling voice.

He doesn't answer, but doesn't move his eyes from me.

"Let me see your arm," I say touching it.

He pulls his hand out of the pocket and reaches it out. This is not a bandage, it's a white t-shirt. I unwrap it gently. The cut is not too deep, but it goes all the way across his lower arm, it looks like a knife cut.

He's not looking at his arms as I inspect it, his eyes are fixed on my face. I'm not even wiping the tears.

"Who hurt you?" I ask again. I don't think I'm going to get an answer right now. He hasn't said a word at all.

"Come," I say pulling him with the other arm to our rondavel and to the bathroom.

I undress him, he looks confused by what I'm doing. I also undress and lead him to the shower. I wash the cut with Dettol as hot water runs over us. I wash his back, his head and his whole body. An erection? Really now?

He refuses food but I give him painkillers anyway. Infact I haven't seen him eat anything since yesterday morning.

We cuddle, his head on my chest until he falls asleep, it must be the painkillers because he doesn't sleep during the day at all.

I'm sitting here thinking 'we should be on our honeymoon right now'. Not that we had planned to have it but it's only three days after our white wedding atleast we should be sleeping in and having crazy married sex.

I remember when I mentioned the honeymoon thing to him, he asked me "what's that?"

He really had no idea what I was talking about.

I leave him there and go back to the main house. The kids are awake. Mvelo keeps asking Lwandle questions about where he has been.

"I was at KFC and baba came to fetch me," he says. I don't even know what that means. But something about how he moves his eyes quickly and the way he behaves right now tells me he was aware that he was in danger.

I finish off making breakfast and put everything on the dining table, buffet style.

Mqoqi is the first to appear followed by Mpande as usual. I inspect them as they come down the passage, they look okay physically but I know I can't say the same emotionally.

"Mami," Mqoqi says first. Last I checked he called me sisi.

"Breakfast is on the table," I say as I go back to the kitchen.

When I come back they're already eating. Mpande and his tea as always. He is the only person in this family that doesn't touch alcohol.

"Did you sleep at all?" I ask, I'm just worried really.

"We tried," Mpande responds.

Soon they're all in the dining room eating. I don't know if it's me or what but it feels like they suddenly see me differently.

Is it about what I said last night? That they must do whatever it takes, even using the word 'kill'?

I notice the five older ones look like they were in some serious mass fist fight. But I won't ask.

My phone. Private number.

"Hello'

"Hi Hlomu, it's Lerato from work," Oh! it's that budding crime reporter.

"Hi Lerato," I say.

"Hi, congratulations by the way," she says.

I never know how to respond to these things so I settle for 'thanks'.

"Look, I hear that your husband is from Greytown and that you're probably there since you just got married so I was just thinking that maybe you'll have some details about what happened last night, I don't know maybe you could just find out from people around...."

I stop her.

"About what happened where last night?"

"Well not exactly in Greytown, in Estcourt but the people killed were both originally from Greytown," she says.

People killed?

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I say. My mind is buzzing right now. This girl will be the death of me.

"Do you remember that story I did about Ngqulunga being found dead almost in the same place, I got news this morning that his brother and three other people were also killed last night. I don't have the details yet but sources tell me the house they were found in was turned upside down and everything broken, they weren't even shot they were killed with bare hands," she says.

I hear her, but I'm not sure if I'm really listening.

"That's bad, but I don't know anyone around here and I can't help you," I say and hang up.

My instincts never fail me. I know it. Last night I stood in a room full of men and ordered the killing of four people. It was me, I did this.

Chapter 17

I'm trying to find the right moment to raise this new house issue.

I do love our little low-income crib, it has a lots of good and bad memories but I feel we need to move on, move higher.

I've been looking at houses on the internet, I think the south is still the best place for us.

We've been married for four months now so I think I can start making some changes.

"Love, I've been looking at houses," I say at dinner, intentionally wanting to catch him off-guard and push him into a corner.

"Whose houses?" he asks.

Seriously?

"I don't know, I was thinking that since you want seven children we're going to need a bigger house," I say thinking this could work.

He gives a look that says 'yeah right' before responding.

"What's wrong with this house?"

There we go, time to bring out the big guns.

"Nothing, we can still keep it and have another one. But I was thinking that since you won't let me do anything with my salary I might as well invest....." he cuts me before I finish.

"If you think I'm going to live in a house owned my wife forget it. If you want a new house I'll buy you one," he says.

Chapter closed. That went exactly like I planned.

Next I'll have to introduce the cost issue. But first I'll drive around Glenvista tomorrow to see if I like the area, atleast I can drive myself now. For the first two months after we came back from Greytown I basically couldn't go anywhere without his big eyes.

You know, we never really fully spoke about what happened that night and I never told him about that phone call from my colleague.

All he said to me later the next day was: "Next time something like this happens I don't want you getting involved, just trust me to handle it. You scared me last night".

I don't remember what my response was but up to now the words 'next time....' still haunt me, it's going to have to end at some point.

There were stories in the media about what happened, some far-fetched others almost close but nobody really got it right. Besides, who cares about the killing of the brother of one of the most notorious warlords of the 90s. He must have had a million enemies, one got to him, tough.

What I don't know though is what the gripe between the Zulus and the Ngqulunga's is all about. It's deep, it's historical and it's not over.

I'm having lunch with Mandisa today. I don't even know how I agreed to it, it's going to be so awkward. Mqhele insists she's not as bad as she seems but I can tell he doesn't care much about her, as long as she's there too keep his brother on a leash and under control he's fine.

I've also realised I don't know anything about her or where she's from. Maybe I should ask her today, at my own risk.

She finds me already sitting and downing my first glass of white wine. It's only 12pm on a Friday but hey, who's keeping time?

"You drink?" she says as she sits down.

“Occasionally,” I say, I’d drink more often if I could really.

Every time I see her I can’t help noticing she has an expensive taste, but not much style. She’s the chick that will wear a pair of jeans, t-shirt and shoes worth your car instalment but still look like she’s going to the tuck shop. Pretty face, hard face too.

“How are the kids?” she says.

“They’re good,” you should also take them once in a while, I think to myself.

“Great, you’re the married one, you know everything that goes on,” she says.

Oh no! not her too. I had enough of this from the holly one.

I flash a fake smile simply because I’m not sure how to answer.

I’m tempted to ask her about her relationship with Nqoba but I don’t want to offend her or anything.

“I’ll have lamb chops with salad please”

“I’ll have salmon pasta,” I say.

We’ve ordered a whole bottle of wine, as to how we are going to drive home, that’s another story.

Something tells me Mandisa has something she needs to share, why else would she randomly invite me to lunch? I know she thinks I’m a spoiled protected brat and I know we can never be friends, we’re too different.

“I’m pregnant and I’m going to have an abortion and I need you to come with me to Boksburg because I won’t be able to drive myself afterwards,” she drops the bomb.

But then, excuse me but you should know by now that I have my psycho moments, this is one of them because the first thing that comes to my mind is why do we have to drive all the way to Boksburg to have an abortion when we could just have it at the nearest hospital.

And why am I not freaked at all by this. Psycho.

“Why do you look like you expected this, am I showing already?” she says looking at her belly. She’s so calm about it.

“No, I’m just...I don’t know. But why do you want an abortion? It’s not like you can’t take care of the baby?” why am I even asking this? It’s my mind again doing what it does best.

She looks at me with a ‘don’t judge me’ face. Our food arrives at that awkward moment, atleast I’ll have something to focus on.

My phone rings.

“Love,”

“Wife, how’s lunch with that crazy woman,” he says. Only if he knew that she’s beyond crazy right now, she’s downright Nazi.

“It’s good, I’m good and having my favourite meal,”

I hope I don’t sound weird.

“Why do you sound like you’re drunk though,” he says.

He’s psychic now?

“I had one glass of wine,” I say with a giggle.

“Mmmm call me if you need to be picked up, I don’t want you driving drunk,” he says before saying goodbye and hanging up.

I turn my eyes to Mandisa, she’s looking at me. She’s probably analysing the phone call.

“Does he do that all the time?”

“Do what?” I ask.

“Call you and ask you where you are and what you’re doing?”

She says it like it’s something wrong.

“Yeah, I do that too, we just like to keep up with each other all the time,” I say.

She gives me that look. You know that look that other women give another woman when her man is worse than she thinks he is. That look.

I don’t like where this conversation is going. We’ve been here for over an hour and I haven’t mentioned Nqoba at all, even after she told me she was going to kill his baby. Why does she think she has the right to ask me about my marriage?

Last week I had to deal with Sambulo’s new floozy who thinks I’m her ticket 'in' so she has to suffocate me for approval. I don’t even call my twin five times a day. I’ve resorted to ignoring her calls until I see her again.

Now, we have some unfinished business on this table.

“You didn’t answer me,” I say.

“On?”

“On why you don’t want this baby,” I say.

“Oh” she says and continues eating.

“It’s not his, and you know he will know the moment it is born that it’s not his,” she says.

Okay, that’s shocking! And she’s right, the genes in this family are strong, freakishly strong.

Let me push on.

“Who’s the father?” I ask.

She widens her eyes. I’m drunk and when I’m drunk I’m brave, I’m not backing down.

“Look if you’re going to involve me in this you’re going to be upfront with me or I’m not going with you. If I didn’t know who we are dealing with I would have left this table by now, but I do and I know how bad this could end. Now, level with me,” I say.

“The father of my first child. We’re not dating or anything it was just a once-off thing when you all were still in Greytown,” she says.

This does not even make sense, we were in Greytown for one week, you’re telling me she couldn’t keep her legs closed for just one week.

“Okay, I don’t want your first child to end up without a father or mother. What time do we leave tomorrow,?”

“9am,” she says.

You know how family secrets are always revealed by an uncle’s wife. Yes, they always know which child is not family, who is bewitching who and who slept with who 40 years ago. Strange thing is, most of the secrets are already there when they get married, and sometimes most family members don’t even know about them. But they find them out, keep them until they are 70 and have had a stroke and they don’t give a shit what anyone thinks about them and half the family is dead and boom: “Your father is not your real father, that’s why your things are not working out. You must go find your real father, he used to live there”.

That time, she’s pointing to the neighbour’s house.

I think I’m going to be that ‘uncle’s wife’ 50 years from now. The amount of secrets I’m walking around with!

I still don’t get why Mandisa would come to me with this and not get one of her friends to drive her. But then again, with us women, everything is strategised.

See, if she had asked her friend, it would have been easier for that friend to rat her out if they

happened to have a fallout in future. But with me she knew that I would have to either tell now or not tell at all. I have no reason to tell now, but if we do have a fallout in future, I still can't tell on her. It would mess my marriage, not because I allowed for his brother's child to be killed or because I assisted, but because I didn't tell him about it there and then. See, men have this thing of "if she can keep a secret from me for so long, it means there's a lot more she's hiding". Which is crazy because we are made like that, we take them to the grave with us.

I make up some story to Mqhele when I get home about where we're going the next morning. He doesn't even suspect I'm lying and he's cool like that.

Another Monday. When I look back and think about how much I used to love my job and how much I couldn't care less about it right now, I realize how much my life has changed. How I have changed. This was never the plan, I was going to be a kick-ass career woman who was going to live for the job and be the best.

It's Monday and I have just one hour before I pack and go home. Let me just pass it by watching pictures of my traditional wedding. I keep the memory stick in my bag, which is stupid because if I lose it I'll be left with not a single picture of the most important day of my life.

I don't even know most of the people in the pictures except for familiar faces from Bree and others that were at my umemulo.

"I thought you said you didn't know him," someone says from behind me.

It's Lerato. Urgh.

"Know who?"

"Ngqulunga. There he is in the picture. Of your wedding," she says pointing at my computer screen.

Honestly, I'm starting to hate this girl.

"That's him?" I look closely to the screen.

It's a guy, I don't remember him but not far from where he's standing is a red Mazda.

"He was at my wedding? How do you know it's him?" I say, confused.

"I got a mugshot of him from the cops after he died, it wasn't clear enough but I'm definitely sure that's him, he even looks like his brother," she says.

So this guy came to my wedding, kidnapped my child and died the next day?

"He must have come with someone from around the area then because I don't even know him.

What happened to him again?" I ask. I know.

"He was killed in Estcourt with three other people, it looked like a robbery," she says.

Good for you my darling. Robbery it was.

"That's really bad," I say and scroll on to the next picture.

She's still standing behind me. I turn around, look at her and shrug. She knows she must leave now.

I won't mention this to the husband.

Sometimes I wonder how we haven't had police kick down our door in the middle of the night at least once, even if it's just to ask questions. But then again, I could be just imagining things.

Now back to my project, finding a house and teaching this man that you can actually take a loan from a bank to buy a house, and then, convincing him to enter into a joint bond. The impossible.

I asked him about the price limit and he said whatever I want, the most dangerous thing for a man to say to a woman. But I'm not crazy, yes the taxis, the trucks, the buses keep increasing but my

momma raised me better than that.

"We could go view some houses this weekend" I sms him.

Him: *why? Have you found one you like?*

Me: *No I want us to choose one together*

Him: *I'll live wherever you live*

Oh ghosh! I knew this was going to be difficult.

Me: *No. you're coming with me. I'll start making appointments.*

Him: *Okay*

Just like that? I was ready to put my foot down, and he disappoints me like that?

Me: *I love you, you are my everything.*

Okay, that came out of nowhere but I do mean it. He doesn't respond. Really?

I get back to my work which I have zero passion for right now. I don't even read anymore and I think my bosses and colleagues have noticed. I've been working here for over two years now but I don't even have friends in the office. Sometimes I think they think I'm a snob, but also, I don't make any effort to be friends with any of them so maybe I am a snob.

Like now, I'm sulking because he hasn't responded to my sms. Imagine if any of my colleagues came and tried to talk to me, I'd probably snap.

I think I'm becoming 'the wife', like, you know, those women who look 30 when they're 23 because they are surrounded by people who've convinced them that if the marriage doesn't work out, it will be their fault for not doing stuff that women must do to keep a man.

The poor girls will panic at anything. The guy be saying no to dinner one night and instead accepting that he is not hungry, because that happens with human beings, they freak out and think he ate at another woman's house. They don't even consider the most probable factor, that they are bad cooks and the man deserves a break once in a while, hence he grabs Streetwise-Two oh his way home and eats it in the car, in the garage, just before walking in.

Marriage comes with paranoia, it's unavoidable.

And why hasn't this man responded to my sms? Where is he? Who's he with?

"Hlomu they're calling you at reception, they say there's a delivery for you," it's Lerato. She's just too happy a person, bordering on annoying.

What could that be?

"Oh thanks I'll go there just now," I say.

Should I go or should I call Mqhele? I hope it's not someone here to kidnap me or something.

"You look scared, what's wrong? It's just a delivery," she says.

She's still here?

I give her the look. She walks away. She's always annoyed me this girl.

I scan the reception area with my eyes before even coming out of the glass door. No shady looking people around, just a young guy with a green t-shirt. He has a bunch of flowers? Flowers?

"Mrs Zulu?" he says as I approach.

"Yes,"

That smile, the one that people who have to maintain good customer service every day, yes the ones that wear branded clothing or wear name tags and have to smile and put up with shit every day because they are 'representing the company', that's the smile he's giving me.

"These are for you, please sign here,"

Flowers? Really Mqhele? This is the guy who didn't even have a bank account when I first met him, now he's buying flowers? Come on, congratulate me people, I've done well here.

I love you too. You are more than everything Mrs Zulu.

I'm blushing and smiling to myself, at work, at reception and people are looking at me.

It's red roses. Well, I don't think he knows they come in other colours as well.

"Love"

"Yes," he says.

"You bought me flowers,"

"Yes I bought you flowers," he says. "Did I do good?"

"You did great," I say.

"I'm outside," he says.

I get to my desk, bunch of flowers on my arm, grab my handbag and go. I'll explain tomorrow.

I see him the moment I walk out the reception door. He's standing leaning on the car, his ankles crossed and his hands in his pockets. He still looks exactly like he did two years ago. And yes, he is wearing tracksuits and Jack Parcels.

I want to run and throw my arms around him but people are watching.

Oh what the hell! This is my husband! I jump him and kiss him.

"Thank you," I say.

He looks overwhelmed but I love the smile on his face.

"Let's go," I say. My arms still around his neck. He's so tall I have to stand on my toes to reach his face.

"And work? you have three hours before you knock off," he says with his eyes wide.

"I don't care, I'll see them tomorrow,"

He obliges and opens the door.

"Hlomu,"

I hear a voice behind me and turn around. It's Lerato. What does she want?

"Are you leaving already?"

Duhhhhh bitch I'm in the car with my handbag. What does it look like?

"You must be Mr Zulu, nice to meet you," she says reaching out her hand to shake his.

He shakes it but very coldly. She looks in his eyes in a way that makes me uncomfortable.

"Yes Lerato I'm leaving what do you want?" I say, rudely so.

"I just needed your help with something but it's fine we can still do it tomorrow," she says, but doesn't move.

I look at Mqhele and he knows I mean it's time to go. He reverses the car. We drive off leaving her still standing there. I'm pissed off, and my face won't even hide how I feel right now.

"And then?" Mqhele says as we drive out the gate.

"This girl is just annoying," I say.

He laughs.

Really?

"Maybe she's just trying to be your friend," he says.

No, she's trying to poke her nose in my business and my family.

But I don't say that to him because then I would have to explain why I don't want her near me.

“Urgh, I don’t want to be friends with her,” I say.

He seems confused by my anti-social behaviour but has this smirk on his face. I know he’s about to say something stupid.

“Or maybe you’re jealous because she shook my hand?”

I just shake my head and a smile I can’t stop appears.

“I don’t want any woman touching you, not even a handshake,” I laugh but realize that I really don’t want any woman touching him. He’s mine.

My flowers are still on my lap. Bloody Lerato spoiling my moment.

“Thank you for the flowers. When and where did you buy them?”

“From the flower shop. They said women love red flowers,”

SMH and here I was thinking he personally chose red roses for me because he thought I’d love them.

“Red roses,” I say, smelling them for the 50th time.

“They’re called roses?”

He really doesn’t know. But I must commend myself, I’ve done some major improvements, we eat at respectable restaurants now, I got him out off the Sprinter, there are cosmetics in his shelf.... The list is long.

And now I got flowers? There’s light.

He still won’t set foot at a cinema though. I’ve stopped trying to negotiate that one.

My phone rings, it’s one of the estate agents I had left my details for on her web-page less than an hour ago. I saw a house I think I might like.

You see, salespeople are some of the smartest players in the game. The moment they see ‘Mrs’ on title they jump! They know you have two salaries, that chances are you will afford whatever it is that they are selling you because you can always buy it jointly with your husband.

And also, you could be a shopaholic brainless bimbo married to a rich man who has to buy you anything you want to substitute for his dysfunctional sex situation. Every salesperson’s dream.

“I’ve made an appointment for Friday,”

“For?” he asks.

“The house Mqhele. I get the feeling you’re not interested in this,” I say.

If I didn’t know him better, I’d say he just rolled his eyes.

“I told you I’ll live wherever you want to live,” he says. He is not serious about this at all.

“Okay,” I fold my arms and look out the window. My roses still on my lap. He is quiet and I know he is trying to figure out why I’m getting mad. He just doesn’t get it, it’s frustrating really.

“Okay, I’ll go with you,” he says after a while.

I keep quiet.

“You did that the first time you got in my car,” he says.

What’s he talking about?

“I did what?”

“You looked out the window. Because you didn’t want to admit that you liked me,” he says.

I smile, I can’t help it, he is my bug-eyed obsession and I can’t even be mad at him.

We’re going to Eastgate for dinner, but first we must call my little nerd, I have to go visit him before the end of this month, and everyone is coming with me whether they like it or not. Langa has been stopping by his school now and then since they’re in the same province, but he needs his ‘mami’. I

miss him.

"How is business?" I ask as I lay my head on his chest late at night.

We've had our deepest conversations like this. My head on his chest, his arm over me, not looking into each others' eyes but completely sincere, in our bed.

"It's great, the work is getting too much though," he says.

I've never heard him complain about work being too much before, infact he makes it look so easy.

"Can we afford a new house?"

I feel his hand on my forehead, he uses it to turn my face up so I can look at him.

"I can buy you anything you want," he says, with an assuring look.

Okay. I was just checking. Because a girl has to do that now and again.

"You know, I'd still love you even if you didn't have all this money," I say. This is random and he probably knows it already but I'll let him know anyway.

He sighs.

"I know, it scares me, I never thought it was possible until I met you," he says.

I turn around to face him.

"You're easy to love, well, for me that is. You're one of the most complicated people I know but you're mine, you were made for me and I can't imagine my life without your madness," I say.

He laughs.

"What is it that you see in me though?" he says.

Honestly, I could count a few things but they'll still not be enough to explain what I feel for him, it's too deep.

"I love that you're you. I love your intelligence, that you are persistent and won't stop until you get what you want, that, even in your craziest and angriest moments, your eyes never lie to me, they tell me you love me even in situations where I should be doubting it," I say.

He tightens his arm around me. His face is serious.

"Wanna know why I love you so much?" he says.

I nod.

"I don't know, I can't explain it. But I love that you know me, that I can't hide myself from you no matter how hard I try. You make everything feel so natural. You know what's important and that it can't be bought. I wish I had met you earlier because I don't know how the heck I was doing before you," he says.

I don't know who I was before him either.

"Oh and you're extremely hot. Plus, I tapped that first," he says with that smirk of his.

The idiot in him is always around!! I pinch him on the arm and he screams.

"You are abusive too," he says rubbing his arm.

"You should be thankful I saved you from that ex of yours who had no style whatsoever," I say. I'm not even sure why I'm thinking about exes in this cosy moment.

"No, you should be thankful I saved you from that sly Model-C you were dating who wanted to sleep at your flat, I was going to beat the crap out of him. And he's dumb, how do you have a woman so hot for so many years and keep her a virgin? Stupid," he says.

What's this man on today? He's a complete moron.

"The thing is, some men have respect, they don't use their big eyes and charming personalities to take advantage of innocent women just so they can rob them of their virginity," I say.

He laughs loud and kisses my forehead.

"You really stomped on my ego do you know that? I felt like an annoying little puppy following you around every day, but I wasn't going to stop until I had you. I imagined you in my kitchen with a ring on your finger and a big-eyed toddler on your hip even then," he says.

Oh! the chauvinism is rife in this one's mind.

"I wasn't going to say yes to you, I was sure of that. And then, I don't know what happened I just found myself in love with you," I say shaking my head.

He laughs.

"I love you Mrs Zulu," he says.

There's a way that only he can say these three words, and they go straight to my heart.

"And I love you, bug-eyes," I say.

We both laugh.

I want to lie on his chest like this, forever.

Chapter 18

It took five viewings, an annoying middle-aged woman who was bordering on being a stalker and a grumpy 30-year-old ice cream loving taxi owner to finally find the house I'm going to raise my children in one day.

It's a four-bedroom three bathroom single storey house with a swimming pool. It's one of those old style of building, but there's something arty about it that I love.

I think he also likes it, he just won't admit it now because he hated the process of finding it so much.

And then there was the process of convincing him to take a home loan because he wouldn't let me do it. Not that I'd get approved for that house with my salary if I wasn't married to him, but with our bank balance we have more than enough options.

Oh and in between all that, I had to take him to SARS to register and get a tax number.

We're moved in in November.

All of this made me realize that these guys are running a business, an unregistered one, with no plan at all.

They are highly intelligent, all of them, that I know. So why are they running a major transport business like they're selling vegetables off the street?

Maybe I should schedule lunch with the baby-killer, get her drunk and ask some questions. But she's always said I know more than she does. The last time I spoke to her was when Nqoba cheated, again, and she called me to ask which is quicker between poison and boiling water. I ended up laughing but part of me thinks she was serious.

Langa has a new boyfriend. We'll get back to that one later because now I have to marinate meat and start making salads, the whole homestead has started arriving.

Sambulo's girlfriend is here to help me out, yes, that one I thought would do anything to 'get in'. Turns out she's not even that bad. I like her actually.

"What exactly are we celebrating today?" she asks.

"Nothing really, these things happen randomly in this family, they just wake up one Wednesday morning and decide they're all coming to your house on Saturday,"

She smiles. Something tells me she has 'sense of belonging' issues, the way she makes so much effort.

"We'll come to Sambulo's next, prepare yourself for the madness," I say. She seems pleased.

We haven't been to Mbuba since we came back from the wedding, it's been six months. This crosses my mind as I look at this girl in this kitchen with me, rushing around excitedly like this is the beginning of what she's always wanted. She's spoiled and taken care of, like me. This is what they do, it's how they love, their hearts are far deep in, you have to be a rare breed to reach them. I think she genuinely loves Sambulo, but then, she doesn't know crap about here.

She's from Empangeni, came to Joburg to study while working at a call centre part time. She's now a nurse and is 23-years-old. I didn't know this but they met when he was in hospital, that time when he got shot, she was his nurse for one week. When he got better and went looking for her but she had moved to another hospital. He looked until he found her. How romantic, especially for Sambulo.

I feel his arm wrap around my waist and the smell of nicotine coming from behind my neck. Funny how I still get butterflies when he touches me after almost three years together.

"Are you okay here?" he whispers from behind my neck. I turn around and wrap my arms around his neck.

"I am. Did you miss me?" I say.

"I miss you every minute I don't see you," he says. I feel the poke on my abdomen. He's not having an erection in the kitchen with people watching! I can't help him with that.

He notices that I can feel it. We look at each other and we both laugh.

"Please" he whispers again. Okay it's cool to be spontaneous but it would just be wrong right now.

"Sorry," I whisper back.

A normal person would walk out but not Xolile, she's still here, watching with a grin on her face, a bit of envy too.

I'd tell her he beat me within the first two weeks of our relationship but I don't want to scare the poor thing away. She can stand here and grin all she wants while she still can.

I hear noise coming from outside, laughing and shouting. They do that all the time but I think one of them has just arrived. Last I checked Mqoqi was not here yet.

Oh, he's here, I can see his car from the kitchen window.

Mqhele finally leaves me alone when his genitals decide to calm down. He meets Mqoqi at the door, he's with a woman.

You've got to be fucking kidding me!!!

"Oh wow! what a coincidence! This is your house?"

Oh no the bitch didn't!

"Lerato? What are you doing here?" I ask.

Mqhele is still standing at the door looking confused. I don't know when Mqoqi disappeared but he didn't even stay to introduce his guest and make sure she's comfortable.

"I came with Mqoqi. I didn't know you knew him,"

Yeah right. He looks exactly like my husband. Nx!

Oh.

Xolile is puzzled but she can see I don't like this girl at all.

"So you're sleeping with my brother-in-law now?" I ask, irritated as hell.

"We've been together for two weeks," she says, looking rather disappointed at my reaction.

I'm tempted to ask her how they met but I have a feeling it wasn't by chance so the less I know the better because I might just end up slapping her not so-pretty face.

It's odd that she's here when they've been dating for only two weeks.

"Get something to drink or whatever I'll be back," I say waving my hand behind me as I approach the door and signal for Mqhele to come to me. He follows me to our bedroom.

I'm anxious, I can't help it. If I tell him everything right now, and it turns out this girl is dating Mqoqi because she wants to fish for stories, she might not even make it home tonight. But I'm pissed, really pissed.

"What's she doing here?" I ask, pacing up and down the bedroom.

"Who?"

"Lerato, this girl from work," I say.

He narrows his eyes, making them look like normal eyes and says: "I thought she looked familiar..."

I don't care about that.

"I don't want her here,"

Now he's really confused. But I don't have time to explain, I don't like this girl, period. He is standing by the bedroom door as we are speaking. What I missed though was him locking it. He is over my rant about some girl I don't like. He has me against the wall in a flash. Why did I wear a skirt? He pulls it down so fast I think I hear the zip break. My one leg goes up and his hand in. I'm moaning already. My hands tighten the grip, my nails dig, he's in. How am I going to get out of this bedroom. I'm sure I smell like sex. Taking a shower will just give everything away.

I walk out eventually, with my head held high.

Xolie is still in the kitchen, the food seems ready.

Where the hell is Lerato?

"She went to the bathroom" Xolie says before I can ask.

This house is big, there are three bathrooms, including a toilet in the garage, that's where she should have gone not inside my house.

If she's not back in five seconds I'm going to find her.

I see her coming down the passage, inspecting everything from pictures on the walls to peeping through half open doors.

I meet her halfway.

"If you wanted a tour you should have said, I would have taken you on one,"

She smiles, but the smile disappears soon, I'm not joking, she knows.

After I put the kids to sleep, Xolie says she has to leave too, she has to drive because that man of hers is sloshed.

"Are you sure Mqoqi hasn't forgotten about you? He hasn't come once to check if you're okay since you came in here. And I want to sleep now," I say.

Maybe I want to hurt her, I don't know.

"I'll go find him so we can leave," she says.

Good. It's 1am, people must go in their holes now.

I'm still pissed off about last night. I mean, how can this girl come to my house? How can she worm her way into our lives by dating my brother-in-law? How did they even meet in the first place. I'm pretty sure it wasn't by chance, she planned all this.

See, the anger I'm feeling right now comes from guilt. I'm reacting exactly like someone who doesn't want certain people in her life because she's afraid they might uncover the truth about her.

It's possible that Lerato doesn't even suspect that we are connected to her stories. She might be just trying to 'get in' like Xolie and them. I don't even think she's smart enough to figure it out, infact, I know that if I was the one working on this story I would have cracked this thing a long time ago.

But it doesn't matter, I still don't want her.

Perhaps it's time I started talking.

"How did Mqoqi meet Lerato?" I ask.

"Lerato who?"

"Lerato, the girl from work that he came with yesterday?"

"Oh, that one, I don't know. Mqoqi has a different girl with him every second week. I'm sure she'll be history soon," he says.

I hope so too.

Maybe I should leave it for now and trust that she'll disappear.

"Why does it bother you so much though?" he asks.

I hesitate, think about lying but then, I might as well.

"I just feel like she's here for other reasons. She's been doing stories about Greytown and stuff that's happened there. She called me once just after our wedding asking about some guy who got killed in Estcourt. She was asking if I knew anyone who knew him and would have more information....." I realize I'm blabbing and he is totally silent.

His face, hard, but he isn't panicking at all.

"She's been calling you asking about people getting killed," he asks. He's angry, but I'm not really sure what he's angry about, that this girl is harassing me or that she's digging.

"Yes, it's part of work I don't mind. My problem is that she might be with Mqoqi to try and get information about whatever it is that she thinks she wants to know," I say.

Maybe I should have kept quiet.

"Don't worry, she won't bother you again,"

Oh no. Here we go! This is what I was afraid of.

'What do you mean?' I say, fear written all over my face.

He notices I'm freaking out, but doesn't seem to understand why.

"I'll tell Mqoqi to break up with her. She can go milk someone else for that information," he says.

Whew! I trust he wouldn't lie to me. Maybe I am just imagining things, maybe they don't kill people after all.

Imagine if I got to work on Monday to hear Lerato has disappeared or something. I'd never be able to forgive myself, on top of that, I'd have to accept that I'm married to an ice-cream loving killer who goes after naïve women.

I know I've kept quiet about things, but don't judge me, I still don't have proof that things happened the way I think they did. Screw that 'a woman's instinct' theory, it's never even been proven anyway.

Sometimes, in some of my psycho moments, I justify all of it in my head. That guy, he told the police about Mqoqi selling weed, he would have done worse if he had lived. That other one, he stalked me for three weeks, he probably would have killed me eventually had he lived. And his brother, he kidnapped a 7-year-old, who knows what he would have done to him had he lived?

I sleep better at night knowing this. Infact, I'm lying, I've never lost any sleep over any of this stuff.

I used to be a church girl. Maybe I should go back.

It's always nice when it's just the two of us at our house. We've been here for only a month-and-a-half but it already feels like home. I'm still not sure what we are going to do with the Naturena house but selling it is not an option. He won't allow it.

Christmas is next Wednesday and I think it's a good idea that we all go to Greytown. This will also be the first Christmas I don't spend with my own family, I know it will be different. It will be different because the people I will be spending it with don't even understand the significance of it. I'm doing it for the kids. I've taken them with me the four times I've been to church in the past two years. Atleast they know what a priest is so it won't be a tough job explaining the Jesus story.

Oh and there's that ceremony that's going to happen. I'm not sure what it's about but Qhawe has developed this new love for sangomas and honouring ancestors and all that. He suggested a goat be slaughtered, and in Zulu culture a goat cannot be slaughtered without traditional beer brewing

in another room.

I saw all of them looking at me when that issue came up. I'm from freaking KwaMashu! How the hell would I know how to make traditional beer?

It's time someone invented a 'just add water' version of it. The recipe is not even on Google. And if I have to make that thing it means I'll have to be there atleast four days earlier. Yeah, that's how long it takes to make.

I need to consult.

"Half, these people are complicating my life,"

"Huh? What have they done now?" he says with his usual bubbly attitude.

"They want me to make traditional beer, just imagine,"

"Yeah, unfortunately you are the only female member of that family and it's your responsibility. You know you are the backbone of that family"

Excuse me! Is he turning against me now?

"You're not helping bro! I don't even know where to start," I say.

"I'll find you a recipe. How is the house?"

He hasn't been here. Geez! My twin brother doesn't know where I live.

"I won't tell you how the house is, you'll have to come see it yourself before you leave,"

His one-year-internship ends at the end of this month and he's moving back to Cape Town, with the new man.

"Are you going home for Christmas?" I ask.

"I don't know hey, won't be the same without you. Who am I going to drink with after church?"

We both laugh. We always have a blast, he corrupts me every chance he gets.

The teenage diva is going to matric next year. Something tells me she's going to want to go study in Mars or Jupiter or anywhere further than that when she goes to tertiary.

If I'm going to make traditional beer we're all going to Greytown on Friday, I'm not going to that place alone.

"Do you think Sambulo could invite Xolie to go with us," I hope he says yes.

"No,"

Urgh.

"Why?"

"Because where we come from you don't bring a girlfriend to your father's house unless you plan to make her your wife," he says.

Fair enough.

He decided to drive me to work, one of his random acts.

It's my last day at work today before we break for Christmas. I got a week off but have to be back at work two days after Christmas.

I plan to get through today as fast as I can, I don't like being in the office anymore, I feel like I don't belong.

Oh this girl, I've been avoiding her all week. She's here.

"Can I help you?" I can't be nice to her. I can't help it.

"Hi, we haven't spoken since that day," she says.

I....like....don't know what to say so I just look at her.

"Look, Mqoqi hasn't called or returned my calls since Sunday. Is he okay?"

"Yeah he's fine," I say.

"Do you know why? Was it something I did maybe?"

I'm not going to have this, not today.

"First of all you didn't tell me you were sleeping with my brother-in-law..."

"I didn't know he was your....."

"No no no please don't even start with that lying shit. You follow me to my husband's car and act all shady, and then you rock up at my house and act like you're surprised to see me?" I'm getting louder, people are watching.

She's standing with her mouth open.

"So, my dear, you have no right to ask me why he's dumped you but I'll tell you anyway. It's because I told him to," I say and turn around to my computer screen. The whole newsroom is silent now. She walks away.

I can be mean sometimes, and this one deserves my wrath.

Chapter 19

That we had to travel all the way from Greytown to Durban to do shopping didn't sit well with the three bug-eyes tasked to go with me but I'm Mqhele's wife, I get what I want.

We trekked from the village as early as 6am because you know, it's over 150km away and I won't settle for Pietermaritzburg, it has one mall. We had to use Nkosana's Range Rover.

The older guys had some business to handle, which I know is shady, so Sambulo, Ntsika and Mqoqi had to accompany me and the kids to Gateway in Durban. I'm not sure what is wrong with me going alone but hey.

I'm introducing these kids to the Christmas clothes culture, I can't believe how much childhood wonders they've missed out on.

We went our separate ways as soon as we entered the mall. Me with the kids, Sambulo and Mqoqi were clear they weren't following me around the whole day and Ntsika, well, after a year at varsity he is not exactly my fourth baby anymore.

Langa is back home and so are Zaba and Thobi. I've sms'd all of them to come meet me for lunch. Now, what am I going to do with these kids?

"Go drop them at home with the pensioners," Langa says. The pensioners would be our parents who are not even close to pension.

But it's a good idea. I don't know where the three bug-eyes are and I don't want to bother them so I wait for Thobi to arrive, we'll drive the kids to KwaMashu and come back to Gateway.

My dad is home, he loves kids, I'm sorted.

We settle for Tashas restaurant after I pull all strings to convince them. I want cocktails, a lot of them. Zaba is late, as usual.

"I have a nine-year-old remember?" she says as she sits down next to Langa. "Hello bitch, you look good," she says as she kisses his cheek.

"Yeah it happens when you discover a penis at 16, you get nine-year-olds at 25," Langa says to her. We all laugh. Their relationship is special.

Oh and Langa's new boyfriend is white. And rich. No wonder he hasn't scammed me out of money in a while.

We interrogate him about what every black girl is curious about.

"What colour is a white man's penis? Is it black? Because if it's not that would just be weird," that's Thobi.

"I've never really sat and tried to compare it against paint colour shades, but it does what it needs to do, very well too. No need to be racist towards my man's penis, they are all equal before the law" he says.

He's crazy this one. This conversation is as normal as the ones we had in our tertiary days, before I started my life and gave it away to someone six months later. Before I became a woman, a mother, a wife.

I'm on my second Mojito cocktail and I haven't even had my food.

"Isn't that one of your husbands?" Thobi asks pointing to the table behind us with her eyes.

"One of my husbands?"

"Yes, there," she says.

I turn around. Oh! I never! It's Ntsika! With a girl.

I'm not sure what to say or how to react. He has a girlfriend? Well, I know he's 19 and has high testosterone levels but he was my baby just a year ago, what on earth does he talk about with a girl?

I stand up but Zaba pushes me back to the chair.

"Leave the kid alone," she says.

"No I just want to go speak to them. I won't be rude or anything, this could be my future daughter-in-law," I say. It's sister-in-law actually but you know what I mean.

I go there anyway despite the disapproving looks they give me.

"Hi," I say. Standing over them like a mother who's just caught her child sneaking in through a window.

Ntsika raises his eyes. He freezes when he sees me standing there like a psycho stalker.

"I'm his mother," I say to the girl, reaching out for a handshake. She's nervous shame. I'd expect her to be confused by the 'mother' situation but she isn't, infact she seems like she knows me.

Ntsika hasn't said anything. Maybe I should just leave the poor kids alone.

"Mami, this is Namhla, Namhla this is my mom," he says after what seems like ages.

"Nice to meet you," I say looking at the girl. I give Ntsika a 'I got you' smile before walking back to my table leaving some serious awkwardness behind me.

So this child has been busy dining some girl while he's supposed to be at varsity focusing on his studies? I have to be fair though, he did very well, passed all his modules.

"What is wrong with you?" Langa says as I sit back on my chair.

"You'll know when you're a parent darling," I say sipping my Mojito and unwrapping my cutlery, it's time to indulge on some mean seafood pasta.

I'm drunk before I realize it, but who cares? It's the festive season.

"Wanna go spend Zulu's money?" I say, drunk yes, but I know exactly what I'm saying.

Nobody asks, they all grab their handbags. We're going shopping.

These bitches, they have no conscience at all. I need some retail therapy anyway and them, they're just drunk little gold-diggers.

I'm swiping like a mad woman. Dresses and handbags, that's my obsession. Langa even buys his boyfriend a Christmas present, like WTF? The guy is Jewish.

Atleast Zaba is the arty type so she's only interested in a few shops. Thobi, SMH, will drive my man to bankruptcy I tell you.

Two hours later we're still at it. The bitches have convinced me to buy some skanky lingerie set.

"Mam, the card is declining," the cashier says handing me the card back and putting the items aside.

Huh, no ways?

My phone immediately rings, it's him. He's been receiving sms notifications, he knows exactly what I'm up to.

"Let me speak to the cashier," he says.

Huh?

"Why?"

"Just hand her the phone," he says.

I give the lady my cellphone. Langa is standing in front of me shrugging his shoulders. We're all standing here with some embarrassment written on our faces.

"Yes Sir,"

"Okay Sir"

"I'll do that Sir. Thank you".

She hands me back the phone but he's hung up already. The lady picks up the items again and place them on the counter.

"Let's try that again," she says.

I hesitate. I don't want to be more embarrassed, but I pull out the card and give it to her. It goes through. We're back to business.

My phone rings again.

"I've called the bank and increased the swiping limit . You should have done that in the first place," he says.

Well, I didn't wake up this morning planning to spend your money dude. I totally forgot about the limit thing, or that I can call our banker anytime, anywhere. I taught this guy there was something called a bank and now he's the one telling me what to do.

My conscience visits me.

"Thanks love, but it's fine that was the last thing I had to buy anyway," I say.

"No, keep buying, you haven't even spent half of what you should. And I can't wait to see you wearing whatever you're buying at Temptations," he says before saying goodbye and hanging up.

He knows Temptations? How the hell does he know a woman's lingerie shop? He'd better talk tonight or he's not seeing anything!

"Okay bitches, we're on again! Zulu says we're not even halfway into boxing his money yet,"

They jump and scream. Gold-diggers!

I have to buy him something, just.

We're walking around some menswear shop when I see a familiar figure coming towards me with the biggest stupid smile. He throws his arms around me.

"Hey, now you won't even give me a hug?"

Of all people I could bump into, why Sandile? Why?

"Hi," I say, coldly.

"You look good Mrs....."

"Zulu," Langa responds before I can.

"You must be the twin," he says.

"Yes, I am, and you are?" Langa, with some very bitchy attitude.

"I'm the ex," he says and turns to me, "We should have lunch sometime, for old times sakes,"

What does he mean for old times sake? he never took me to lunch or anywhere for that matter.

"I don't think so, she's married," Thobi jumps in. I don't even know where she came from. They never liked each other.

Zaba is here as well. Tension all around me, but it's nothing compared to what's about to happen.

"Is there a problem here my brother?" a familiar voice. It's Mqoqi. Where did he come from? He's standing between me and him. A threatening look on his face which I know very well. It's amazing how they look exactly the same, all of them.

"Nah," Sandile responds with his cheese-boy attitude. Oh Lord! He mustn't! he doesn't want to mess with this one!

"No he was just leaving," I say moving away from what could become a crime scene at any

moment.

Mqoqi and the others are still standing in front of him. He walks away. I'm relieved. Mqoqi walks out of the shop leaving us standing there. People are watching. I have to get out of Gateway. Now! I've had enough drama for one day.

I don't even know where Mqoqi disappeared to, or Sandile for that matter.

"Where did he come from?" Langa asks as we walk out of the shop.

"I don't know, I didn't even know they were still here at the mall," I say. I have no choice but to tell myself he was already inside the shop when we came in and that it was by chance that he appeared. Just for my own sanity.

"I saw him when we came in but I thought it was the same one we saw at the restaurant," Zaba says.

That's a relief, atleast I know I'm not being followed all around Gateway.

I send an sms to Sambulo telling him I'm ready to go. No more shopping.

When we arrive in KwaMashu the two smaller brats look like they've been on some mining expedition. They are so dirty it's not even funny.

I tell my mom I'm just getting the kids and we're leaving, it's late already and we're going far. But she's cooked and doesn't care much about what I say, instead she sends Sbani to go and call 'abakhwenyana' from the car outside. Seriously? This is a feast! She went all out shame, table setting and all. She even calls in my dad, who seems to have become a full-force grandfather in just a few hours I made him babysit, to come and join them.

I go out to greet the neighbours, that should help me to pass time.

'was that your husband? An sms comes in.

"no Sandile, my husband's brother. Can you not communicate with me again please? I'm just not comfortable with it" I respond.

I hope he'll oblige.

"I see. You know, it's not exactly a great marriage if you're scared to even speak to people you know".

I'm offended by this. He doesn't know anything about my marriage so he has no right.

It's not that I'm scared to talk to people I know, the problem is him, you don't just go and hug people's wives, especially if their brother is around. But I don't have time to explain this to him.

My dad seems sad that we are leaving, but I sense it's not about his beloved first daughter, it's about his new found grandsons.

"You must let them come visit again," he says.

"I will,"

They're asleep by the time we get to the freeway. It's already dark, Mqhele is restless already. He keeps sending "I miss you" messages.

I'm sure my mqombothi will be boiling by the time we get home. My eyes are heavy.

I wake up as we drive inside the gate. Mandisa's car is here.

We find them all sitting in the lounge. Alcohol all over.

Mandisa, my partner-in-killing-babies is here. I thought the rules were you can't come here if you're not a wife. But knowing her, she wouldn't subscribe to that nonsense. Atleast she cooked while I was busy spending money and meeting exes all day. Which reminds me, I need to have a talk with the teenage boy now that I know he has a penis.

'Madame,' Mandisa says as I walk in the the kitchen.

"When did you arrive?" I say. We don't really hug in this family.

"This morning. If I had arrived earlier I would have gone with you," she says.

Is it me or is she reaching out?

"Yeah sorry I had to leave early. But we still have to go do groceries for Christmas lunch tomorrow," I say. I need to prepare myself for that.

Mqhele tells me as we walk to our room that she arrived unannounced and unexpected, they just saw her driving in at 8 in the morning. She's crazy, I love her. LOL

My shopping bags are all over the bed. I kind of feel bad. I should have packed them away when I arrived.

"You should do this more often," he says.

I give him a look, I'm not sure what he is talking about.

"Shopping. Spending our money. It makes all the waking up early worth it," he says.

Okay. He's always been weird and I love him for it but no man should say this to his woman. It's calling for a natural disaster.

"I had fun doing it," I say.

"My point exactly. I want you to be happy,"

"And spoiled.....?" I ask, smiling.

"In every possible way," he says, pulling me close to him. He always smells good, even with the permanent nicotine scent. I slip my arms under his armpits and rest my hands on the back of his shoulders, kiss his chest, I know he loves it.

"Mqoqi tells me he almost beat up your boyfriend,"

Oh God! Really? Just like that!

I let go of him immediately and move away. I can't believe he told him!

I'm scared. He isn't angry, which makes me more scared.

"I don't have a boyfriend," I say. My face is red now.

"I didn't mean it in a bad way. I know you bumped into him, it's the hugging that Mqoqi didn't like," he says, moving towards me.

I say nothing. I'm just standing here trying to read his face. Every time we're in a situation like this it all comes back, that moment at my flat on my couch with him pressing me down with his knee. The memory is still too clear. Does it ever go away?

"He hugged me, I didn't hug him back," I say. Why am I so scared right now?

"I know my love. Mqoqi told me because he thought you were mad at him for causing a scene," he says hugging me. I want to cry. Why though? He didn't even raise his voice.

I've said it before, this Mqoqi kid will be the death of me. I don't understand him at all. First of all, he's never even apologised for selling weed at my house, he just kept quiet. And today, he went all street-fighter on my ex, said nothing to me, next thing I hear it from my husband.

"So do you wanna show me that Temptation thing?" he says, mischievous look on his face. I know this look, he is going to ride me like a bull tonight.

"By the way, Ntsika has a girlfriend," I say as we get ready to leave in the morning.

"He's a Zulu, ofcourse he has a girlfriend, what would he do with all those sperms," he says. This man though.

Grose!

"Sies..He's a kid," I say.

"He's 19, do you want to know what I was doing at 19," he says. All this with a smile on his face.

"No thank you, I don't think I want to know,"

He thinks I'm funny.

"Or I can show you," he says cornering me against the wall.

Oh hell no! Doesn't he get tired? He spent almost the whole night going in and out of me from all angles.

"If you come any closer I'll scratch you," I warn, my claws aimed.

He backs off, but I know it has nothing to do with my threats. He's just being obedient for a change.

So we're not going with his idiot brother today. Anyway we're just going to buy groceries and come back. I tried to negotiate that we go alone with Mandisa but they would hear none of it. They won't admit it but I know they still fear the area, especially with what happened to Lwandle. It seems every time we are back here the word spreads all over the village, all the way to local ladies as well who'll do anything to get inside this gate.

It's a known fact amongst us township women that rural women are dangerous. They are taught and trained on how to treat a man at a very young age, something we think is backward and degrading because we don't see anybody training men on how to treat a woman. But, because this world has been unfair since before Jesus was conceived with no sex involved, someone will bang it in their heads and our heads that you're not woman enough until some man puts a ring on your finger.

He doesn't go inside the mall, not on December 24 when he'll have bump heads and shoulders with strangers until he gets really irritated and won't know how to calm himself down because he can't even have a smoke inside the mall.

"I get enough of that at Bree," he always says every time I try to make him go inside a crowded place.

He says he's going to cut his hair instead.

Fair enough. Now it's just me and Mandisa, I hope she doesn't shock me today.

What do I make for 13 people? I come from a family of 5?

Meat: yes, that's all they eat. Lamb, pork, beef. All in rolls. Chicken as curry. Hake kebabs. Would have loved some prawns but they'd probably never eat my food again if they saw them on a plate. Vegetable bake. Beef lasagne. Selection of salads and three starches. That's it.

"You'd better take about four of those, those men are animals," Mandisa says to me as I pick up one piece of gammon. She's right, they can clean up a whole feast at one go.

We are done quicker than we thought it would take, probably because we arrived early in the morning. Mqhele is shocked when I tell him we're done.

"Okay, we'll grab a bite of something while we wait for you," I say.

It's annoying with all the trolleys but we manage to get a table at one of the coffee shops.

Cocktail? No. Latte.

"Are you okay, after you know....." I say to Mandisa after gathering some courage. It's been months, I'm sure she's okay, but I just had to ask.

"I'm fine. You didn't say anything to Mqhele did you?" she says.

"No, I wouldn't," I say, frowning. How can she even think that?

“No sorry, it's just that I feel like Nqoba suspects something, I don't understand him lately,” she says.

No, it's not him, it's this thing of you having a big secret, it does that.

But: “No, he's probably just being a man, he'll come around”.

Lying isn't bad when it's done to make someone feel better. This should have been a verse in the bible, it makes a lot of sense.

“You don't know how they're like when it comes to their children. I remember Mqhele almost went crazy when his ex left with his child. I'd never seen him like that. Did he tell you that.....”

Her eyes meet mine. But mine are hollow, I can't even move my hands.

Did she just say what I think she said? Yes she did. I think I'm going to throw up or fall down. I think I'm sweating, I don't sweat. But my hands are shaking, I can feel them now.

She's looking at me, her face pale.

“I mean Qhawe,” she says. She's lying. She knows I know.

How could he lie to me like this?

He arrives as I try to compose myself. I can't look at him. I stand up and try to push the trolley but my arms are weak.

“What's going on?” he asks as I drag my feet next to him. Mandisa is following behind.

I can't speak. Let me try looking in his eyes maybe the words will come. No, it's not happening. I don't know this man.

The drive back is about 100km, too long for me to stare outside the car window throughout. I answer whatever he asks, briefly. He's stopped asking me what's going on or if I'm okay. By now he's figured that he is responsible for whatever is bothering me, and he knows that Mandisa is responsible, judging by the way he keeps looking at her in the rear view mirror.

How could he do this to me? This is not something you hide from your wife.

This changes everything.

I go straight to our room when we get home. I want to pack and leave, that's what I want to do.

He is behind me. He locks the door after he comes in.

“Are you going to talk to me like you should? I'm your husband remember?” he says.

How could he?

“Did I do something wrong?”

I'm silent. He pulls an auto-man next to the bed, places it in front of me and sits, his knees on either side of me on the one seater couch I'm sitting on. I remember a scene like this, it was just before I told him I was a virgin, just before I gave him all of me.

“You have a child”. It's not a question, or a statement, it's me saying the words that cut deep into the most painful part of my soul right now.

He immediately drops his eyes, fixes them on his toes, and says nothing.

I know what he's saying.

“Why didn't you tell me?” I want to sound tough but my voice is trembling.

He stands up and goes outside. I know he's standing just outside the door, smoking.

I curl myself on the couch. I want to fall asleep, now, maybe when I wake up I won't feel so betrayed, maybe I'll understand better, maybe by then he will respect me enough to tell me why. Maybe that thing that made me believe he really does love me, maybe it will be back by then.

But he'll be back any minute, I know the routine. For now, all I'm able to do is cry.

He comes back and sits on the auto-man again.

“Who told you? Mandisa?”

Does it matter?

I don't respond.

“Yes, my ex was pregnant when she left,” he says after a long silence.

The tears are unstoppable, I've stopped wiping them.

'Why didn't you tell me?' I manage to utter just those words, it's the most important question here, maybe he had a good reason, I hope. I don't think I care that he has a child, I care that he didn't tell me about it.

“I was going to tell you. I wanted to tell you but I thought maybe you'd leave me,” he says.

Oh no, he didn't. I'm beyond hurt now, I'm pissed!

“Leave you? Leave you Mqhele? You beat me like I was some dog, I stayed. You turn me into a trash bin where you release and throw your pain in, and I let you, I let you hurt and and violate my body, but I'm still here. You go around killing people, but I'm still here, with you. And you're going to sit here and tell me you thought I was going to leave you? Does it look like I'd leave you for anything?” I'm on my feet now.

His head had been bowed until I mentioned the 'killing people' part.

“Yes, I know. But I love you anyway. Why did you lie to me Mqhele?”

“I didn't lie,” he's denying it. He's making things worse.

I drop on the couch, put my hands over my face and curl my body. I cry, a loud cry.

I feel him rising from where he's sitting and coming closer to me. My foot lands on his stomach, he almost falls on his back but manages to balance, I couldn't stop myself. I've just hit my husband.

He opens his mouth to say something. My mind does it again, it goes straight to my mouth.

“Don't fucking talk to me, stay the fuck away from me,” I say and go back to my crying.

He's just standing there, over me.

How did we get here? We were happy this morning.

“Mahlomu, this is how you talk to me now? This is what you do to me?” he says.

He's broken. But I'm also broken. He was supposed to love me better than this. It's what he promised to do.

I don't answer him. I just cry. He walks out.

Chapter 20

After a tornado, comes the time to gather the rubble, throw them away and start rebuilding.

That's where we are now, but who is going to lay the first brick?

I hit my husband. He hurt me. Everything I believed we were, he took it away. It would be different if he had a better reason, a good reason for not telling me but thinking that I'd leave him for having a child? No. That means he doesn't trust me. He doesn't believe in the love I have for him. That hurts even more.

But I made a mistake. I lay a hand on him, or a foot in this case but either way, I disrespected him and I feel like hell about it.

I got through today, difficult as it was I managed to cook, fake smiles and avoid him as much as he was avoiding me. He didn't come to bed last night, I assume he slept in the main house. He hasn't been in our room since then.

I'm going to find him.

He's sitting on the bed in one of the bedrooms in the main house, quietly. He sees me walking in, he doesn't take his eyes off me until I sit down, on the floor, next to him with my knees up and my chin on top of them.

This is too difficult.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He doesn't speak.

"I'm sorry I kicked you. I'm sorry I spoke to you like that," I say.

We're both staring ahead at the wall in front of us.

I'm getting no reaction from him at all. But at least I know he's listening, so I'll keep talking.

"I disrespected you, I will never do it again,"

Still no response. I get up, my mind says I should take his hand, make some kind of physical connection but instead, I find myself on my knees. I'm kneeling in front of him like some servant kneeling to her master.

My mother didn't raise me like this, she'd be disappointed at what I've reduced myself to.

"Be the woman that bows for no one but God," she always told me.

This is not God, this is the man I love. This is also the man who hurts me.

He can't believe it, but at least I'm getting eye contact from him.

"It will never happen again, I'm truly sorry," I'm surprised I haven't started crying. But then again, I don't think I have any more tears left.

I knew it wasn't always going to be easy but I never thought it would be like this. See, with me and Mqhele, it's not so much about the things we fight about, it's about the way we fight, the consequences end up exceeding the problem.

We are here, it's not even about the fact that he has a child he didn't tell me about. It's about him not trusting me, and me breaking the major rule, which is to respect him through it all.

I have nothing more to say now, it's up to him so I stay on my knees, looking into his eyes.

After what seems like years, he moves. His arms land on my shoulders, he opens his legs and pulls me towards him. I rest my head on his chest, my knees are still on the ground, but his arms are around me. Now I can cry, he lets me cry, on his chest.

"Sometimes I get scared," he says.

I could ask scared of what? But I don't.

"I get scared that I'll never get anything right. That you'll wake up one morning and realize you shouldn't have gotten in my car, that your life would be better and easier if you had walked away," he says.

Now I'm sure he has no clue how deep and unconditional my love for him is.

"I feel like I'm dragging you down with me, to a dark place. And it kills me because I want to protect you from my life, my way of life," he says.

I still don't know how to answer him, so I let my mind run to my mouth.

"You're doing great, better than I could ever wish for," I say.

I feel his body starting to relax. It could be because I'm responding to him, I think.

I stand up, direct him to get in bed and lean on the headboard on his back. I lie next to him.

We are about to talk, really talk.

"I'll never leave you, you have to trust me on that. But this, it has made me realize that you don't know how deeply I love you, that you don't trust me completely," I say. This bothers me, a lot.

He turns my head with his hand to face him.

"I trust you. It's me, I'm tired of hurting you, I just want things to be smooth, for you to be happy,"

"I want you to be happy too. I will hurt you too, we can't avoid it, it happens when two people love each other, but the point is to rise above it, together. You can't achieve what you want by not being honest with me. That's the one thing I want from you, whatever it is, no matter how bad you think it is, you have to tell me because I'm not going anywhere," I say. I want to cry again. How can he not see that he is my life, my everything, that I could never live without him.

There's a long silence. So much is going through my mind and I know so much is going through his. I must tell him this.

"I don't mind that you have a child. He's my child too," I say.

He looks surprised by this.

"I mean, I'm technically raising your brother's children and I love them like they are mine," I say.

He's still looking at me with a confused face. I'm not sure what's on his mind.

"I'd love to meet him one day. But first, you're going to have to tell me what happened, the whole story," I say.

He let's out a deep sigh. And then he begins.

"I don't know where he is, or where his mother is. I found out she was pregnant after she left,"

"Our relationship was never really deep, I wasn't sure where it was going and I'm not sure if I loved her at all, I never told her, which was one of her problems. She wanted marriage, and I was sure I was never going to get married, until I met you. She contacted me a week after I saw you for the first time saying she was pregnant, she wanted to come back. But I knew I had moved on, with you, I was sure from the first time I saw you that I loved you, before you even knew I existed," he says.

I'm still not sure if I understand. If I didn't know him, this would sound rather cheesy.

"How long were you with her?" I need to know.

"Two years," he says.

I get a stabbing feeling in my stomach. I had hoped he'd say two weeks or something. Two years? That's a long time.

He notices I'm worried about that fact.

"She never got to where you got with me in less than a month. She wasn't the one, you are," he says.

The thing about marrying your first real boyfriend, which is what I did, is that he gets to get all of you when you on the other hand, get what's left of him. Imagine if he had waited for me, like I waited for him.

"I can't get around the fact that you once loved someone else. I waited for you," I say.

I know what I'm saying is impractical. He's probably been with more women than I can think of.

"You did, didn't you?" he says, kissing my forehead.

I hug him tighter, I need a reminder that he belongs to me, all of him. He knows, and he takes over my body, I take over his. I want to be here, in his arms, under him, on top of him, his skin on mine. I love him.

"I'm hungry" I say as I recover from what must be the most passionate love making we've ever done.

I didn't eat at all today.

"Me too, let's go raid the kitchen," He says picking up his pants and throwing me my panties.

Yeah, they do that. They take them off nicely when they want what's under them and when they're done they throw them at you. These creatures, they're half-human half-animal.

I'm smiling as I think about this.

"Good to see that smile back again," he says as we walk to the kitchen with him hugging me from behind.

"You take it away and bring it back, all the time," I say. I hope he doesn't take this too seriously.

He laughs. Good.

"I haven't forgotten about that Model-C donkey of yours. I'm going to find him and beat the crap out of him," he says. He's back.

I laugh, but I know he'd really beat him. Poor Sandile.

Damn these men can eat! There's only a few scraps left from supper. Oh well, we're hungry so we'll eat.

I'm woken by the noise in the house. The brats are already running in the passage. He's here, still asleep, that's weird, but nice. I get to watch him sleep. I wonder what he looked like when he was a kid. They don't have old photographs, not even of their parents.

"What are you thinking?" he says as he opens his eyes, I think he's been awake for a while but kept his eyes closed.

"I'm wondering what you looked like when you were a little boy,"

"You just have to look at Mvelo," he says.

He's right, they're all like one person in different heights.

It's Qhawe's traditional thing today. I have to cover my head and wear a scarf over my shoulders apparently. The perks.

When we walk out of the bedroom they are all all over the house. They become quiet when they see us. I see Nqoba let out a sigh of relief, I think Mandisa told him.

I'm embarrassed right now.

"Mami are you going to eat the goat?" Lwandle says. My boy. He always knows the right time to kill awkward moments.

"Yep, I like goat meat," I say brushing his head.

"Ewwwww, it has hair mami you'll swallow it and it will grow inside your stomach," Okay I don't know where he got that theory from but it's scary enough to turn one into a vegetarian.

"Okay I won't eat it then," I say.

People have gone back to what they were doing, what did I say about the middle child?

Nkosana grabs Mqhele's arm as we walk out the door to our room.

"You two, the next time you decide to hate each other, think about my children. There will be no breaking up here," he says laughing.

This family.

"Be nice to Mandisa, she thought I knew already," I say to him as we get out of the shower.

Not that I believe he will do as I say.

We came back to Joburg yesterday. It's December 28 and I'm at work, for the what? Nobody is going around doing weird things on December 28 that newspapers can write about. We're all just lazing around in the newsroom. I notice Lerato is not here, she must have signed for leave.

But later in the day, I hear she emailed her resignation.

"Where's she going to work now?" I ask one of my colleagues, my heart pounding, what did they do to her?

"She got a job at some government department in Limpopo,"

Whew! One less bitch to deal with.

Oh wait! There's still the baby mama issue.

Deep down in my heart I haven't forgiven Mqhele for lying to me. To think he'd been keeping a secret from me for three years. What went on his mind when he woke up next to me every morning? How did he feel when he saw me with Mvelo? Didn't it make him think of his own child?

My difficulty to forgive though has everything to do with the fact that my life is about to get complicated. How am I even going to love this child? Or tolerate his mother if she's THAT type.

Mqhele, he's been trying, but he knows things are not the same.

"Find them," I said when I left home this morning. He doesn't want to, but I don't want to be the 60-something-year-old woman people will be judging on Khumbulekhaya because she rejected her husband's child.

I hope I know what I'm getting myself into here.

My desk phone rings, who calls newspapers and 2pm on December 28? Urg!

It's reception.

"Hlomu please come downstairs," the lady says and drops the phone.

What now? The first thing that pops in my mind is that I should call him. I've become so paranoid.

What's he doing here? It's not my knock-off time. He turns around, I know this face, something is wrong.

He hugs me, it's a long hug.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

The woman at reception is avoiding eye contact with me, so is my boss whom I'm not sure why is here.

"Go get your handbag," he says. He's speaking softly, but I know something is wrong, I just know.

Nkosana's car is parked outside. The three eldest are sitting in it with him. Nobody says anything

when I get in the car not even the motor-mouth Nqoba. Mqhele sits at the back with me and Qhawe. He has his arm around me throughout. When he arrived he asked to see my phone and never returned it.

I'm confused, we're not even going the direction of home.

Airport Departures? I know it's not a surprise holiday, not with his mood like this.

My travel bag and his are in the boot.

"What's going on Mqhele?"

He embraces me again, and with his forehead pressed on mine, he kills a part of me that will never rise again.

"It's your father. It was a heart attack. We're going to Durban".

Chapter 21

Seriously, I need a wheelchair right now, just to get me through the next two months and I'll be fine.

They told me it was tough but I didn't know it would include me walking like a penguin. But the more I allow myself to be immobile, the more weight I gain, and I can't allow that, I already look like Shrek with a swollen nose and black neck.

This other time, Mqhele was looking at me like I'm some scary monster. I got mad and didn't speak to him the whole day, he did this to me. In those days, the ones where I don't speak to him either because none of my clothes fit or he forgot to bring me something I didn't tell him he had to bring, he laughs it off.

This pregnancy has been the most difficult thing I've had to deal with physically in my entire life. But I'm thankful and grateful for it, we tried for four years without success. I had made peace with that I'm infertile until one day five months ago I started throwing up...and the next day....and the next day.....

It's not exactly a normal thing to have your first child on the fifth year of marriage, at 28-years-old. It bothered me. He tried to assure me that everything was fine and we didn't need to have children to define our love, but it still bothered me, a lot.

I remember when we went for the third ultrasound scan, he didn't want to get out of the car, said he didn't want to know what happens before the baby arrives.

I managed to atleast get him to sit at reception while I was inside the consulting room.

"Whoah!" the doctor said pointing at the screen with a smile on his face.

"What? Is there something wrong?" I always think the worst don't I?

"Look at that," he said pointing at two figures on the screen.

I wasn't sure I understood.

"There's two of them," he said.

Holly crap! I'm having twins!

I just lay there with my mouth open. But I found comfort in that atleast it's not quadruplets or stuff like that.

"Could you please call my husband, he's at reception," I said to the Dr's assistant.

He had to see it for himself, that's if he was going to agree to come in.

He walked in with his zoom-lenses out in full force, walked straight to me and held my hand.

"What's wrong,?" he said.

"Look at that," I said to him pointing to the screen.

He seemed to find what he saw very creepy judging by the look on his face.

"What's that? Is that the baby?"

"Babies, it's your babies," I said.

He looked at the screen again, obviously examining what he was seeing in his mind.

"Twins?" he said at last, with the same tone and attitude he had when I told him I was a twin.

He was traumatised the whole afternoon, I'm not sure if it was because we were going to have two kids at once or if it was because of what he saw on the screen.

"What if one of the babies is gay?" he said in one of his most random moments in the seven years I've known him. Why haven't I divorced this guy?

He's made it clear that he won't be with me in the delivery room. He'll be outside the door but he's not going to witness a head coming out of my vagina, never.

I have only two months to go before my life and body gets back to normal, that's if it will ever get back to normal with two more bug-eyes in my life.

I wish my father was still around to see them.

Ntsika is in the UK, he left after finishing his degree. I tried to convince him to stay and formalise the family business but he would hear none of it. Sbani is in high school, going to matric next year. Lwandle is going to high school next year. Mvelo is not a baby anymore.

Nkosana is going on 40 and is still a bachelor. Nqoba and Mandisa are still together, still not married.

Qhawe, SMH, he's had four women in the past five years, I still don't know why they left him.

Sambulo got Xolie pregnant twice in five years, two more bug-eyes and they look exactly like the 11 others, yes boys. They're getting married in seven months.

Oh and Mqoqi, he's a biker now.

Life changed, a lot, in the past five years.

We're not just rich, we're very rich.

The number of taxis has more than doubled, there are trucks, buses and other crap popping on the sides like bottle stores and stuff, and so has the fear amongst us women in their lives that they might not come home one night.

There are offices now. A hired accountant and subscription to a law firm. I had to see to that because they didn't take the tax thing seriously and because well, everybody needs to have a lawyer on standby, especially the Zulu brothers.

We have everything we need and want, but we know, yes we know, that there is a dark side to how it is all obtained. Every night you see him walking in the door you thank God. Is that a life?

I figured things out very early, but with Xolie, it's either she is in denial or naïve. She thinks it's all love when Sambulo won't leave her side, when out of the blue we are booked a holiday somewhere in the middle of nowhere. This is not the life.

But I'm pregnant now, and things are going to have to change. I told him, I said to him if you die I'm going to leave your children here and move on with another man. He almost cried.

I had to take early maternity leave because I'm a whale and I can't function. And because I can.

Sex is mostly from behind, and I want it, all the time, even though I can't even move my pelvis.

"I'm going to scare my boys if we continue, I'm sure they see it coming in," he keeps saying.

I'm in the house mostly, we've bought three town-houses in the past five years. He laughs and says other women buy shoes, his wife buys houses. I can't help it.

"You're not at home, where are you?" he says when I answer the phone. He still doesn't greet.

"I'm at Chicken Licken, eating hot wings," That's all I eat these days, I get heartburn afterwards but at least I can swallow them.

"How did you get there? You know you're not supposed to drive,"

Please! I'm pregnant not blind!

"Yes babe, but I was hungry and I didn't want to bother you," I say.

"Bother me? You know it's not safe for you drive, what do you want to do? Kill my children?"

What on earth is getting angry for? And what does he mean kill his children? What about me?

What am I? a vending machine?

I don't answer him.

"I'm coming there now," he says.

Mnx!

Seriously, he could have called before leaving the office and I would have lied that I'm at home while rushing to the car. I would have gotten home before him and he would not have suspected anything and we would have avoided this mini-fight we are about to have.

He's here in a flash, it's 10 minutes away from our house anyway which is why I don't understand what he is freaking out about.

"Hlomu, what is wrong with you?" he says.

I hate that question. I hate it because you never know if they're referring to what's wrong in your head or what.

"I was hungry," I say. I don't have time for this.

"You should have called me," he says.

If I take this any further it won't end well.

"Okay, I'm sorry love, I thought maybe you were busy so I drove because it's close by anyway," I say.

"When have I ever been too busy for you?" he says. He's right, I know he would have dropped everything if I had called him.

And yes, I'm being stubborn and unreasonable, it's really not safe for me to drive now, my belly literally touches the edge of the steering wheel when I do. Plus, with twins, they rarely wait for nine months so I could go on labor anytime and I don't wanna be on the road in the middle of nowhere when it happens, I'd rather be at home instead.

"How many hot wings have you eaten?" he says.

Oh no he didn't! He's monitoring how much I eat now? I'm feeding his freaking babies.

"No, how many wings did your children make me eat, that's what you should be asking," I say as I pick up my handbag and walk out.

He follows me muttering something I don't care about. I heard what I heard and I hate him for saying it.

"I didn't mean it in a bad way, I was just asking, incase you want more," he says.

That's even worse than the first insult. I would slap his face right now if he wasn't so big and crazy.

"Okay, I'll just stop talking. I'm not going to say anything more, just get in the car," he says. I think he's making the right decision by shutting the hell up.

"This baby is just like you," I say. The little bugger just kicked me again.

He looks at me with a confused face.

"This one on the front," I say pointing to the left side of my belly. "He kicked me, I touched him so he could stop, instead he kicked me more, harder," I say.

He looks impressed. SMH.

"Promise you'll go straight home okay?" he says after I've calmed down from whatever it is that made me mad in the first place.

"I promise, it's just 10 minutes away Mqhele and I promise I will drive slowly. I love you," I say.

"I love you more," he says signalling for me to drive on. He bought me a Q7 when we found out I was pregnant. He said it was because I was going to need more space. Now that I think about it, I should have been offended by that.

He went the opposite direction. I hope he'll be back early today, before I fall asleep no later than 7pm, that's what I've become.

"I'm almost there," I say as he calls five minutes later. "Yes, I have the phone on speaker, I've stopped at a red robot".

Must he be such a pest?

"Bang!" That's what I hear before my car door swings open. Who are these men?

One has his hand over my mouth before I can scream. I feel a cold thing pressed on my forehead and someone grabbing me.

"Oh shit! She's pregnant," he shouts. There's a standstill and silence for not more than a second.

"Put her in the boot," another voice shouts! Things start going crazy again! there are more hands dragging me at once. I hear a door slamming and I'm in complete darkness. There are things on top of me, I don't know what they are but they're taking up space and I can't move.

I want to throw up! I'm sweating! I can't breathe properly!

The car is moving. My phone? What happened to my phone? I remember it dropping on the ground when they pulled me out of the car.

And then it hits me! I'm being hijacked, or kidnapped, but whatever it is, chances are I won't make it alive. If these people don't kill me I'll die of suffocation in this boot.

I'm shaking, I'm crying. I think of my dad, him lying there in the coffin peacefully. I still don't know if it was a good or bad thing that he died without warning us. I never even knew he had heart problems, he was still fairly young. My mother, I had never seen her so broken. A part of her died with him.

Langa had to take on the responsibility of overseeing the funeral. My duties were limited, I'm no longer a Dladla. Lethu was a child. But Langa, it's not who he is, he didn't have the strength. So, my husband had to take over the responsibility. He never buried his father, the last time he saw him he was alive. But he buried mine. Me, I never thought I'd pull through from that, but he made sure I did. Now he's going to have to bury me.

We've been driving for a while now, 30 minutes maybe, and it keeps getting hotter and hotter here, I'm literally dripping in sweat. But I'm going to remain calm, if I'm going to die I'm going to die peacefully.

No, I have to keep fighting, for Mqhele, he'll die if anything happened to me.

Where are they taking me? I can hear voices speaking but I can't make out what they are saying, it's a language I don't understand.

"Screeeeechhhhhh"..... it's car tyres. The car stops. A bang! Shouting! Screaming! Windows breaking! I don't know what's going on! Someone is banging over me, the boot door I figure.

There's light! I move my arm from over my face. It's him, he's holding my arm already. I just cry.

"Shhhhhhhh, I'm here," he says trying to fit the whole of me in his arms. It's impossible. I'm still lying on my side in the boot. He's trying to pull me out but I feel like I'm frozen.

I hear sirens, police or ambulance, I can't make out. There's also a sound of the helicopter circling. He's here, I won't die.

He puts his arms under my shoulders and pulls me out. I throw up the moment I wrap my arms around his neck. Qhawe is here too helping him pull me out. There are many people here, some lying on the ground, some are still being beaten. Blood and broken glass all over. There are cars and taxis surrounding my car. We're on the freeway, it seems everything has stopped.

"Hands up! Hands up!" the police shout! Those sirens must have been theirs.

"I have to take my wife to hospital," Mqhele says to one cop approaching with a rifle pointed.

The cop will hear none of that until he gets closer and sees me throwing up and about to collapse. An ambulance appears out of nowhere and I'm whisked in. I feel his hand slipping away from mine,

I try to hold on to it but this paramedic is sticking a needle up my arm and covering my nose and mouth with a plastic mask.

"Mrs Zulu," an unfamiliar voice says.

I open my eyes. Hospital.

"Are you feeling any pain?"

It's a nurse.

"Where's my husband?" I say. The last thing I remember was his hand slipping away from mine.

"Are you feeling any pain mam?" she asks again.

"No!" I shout. Judging by her reaction I've scared her. She walks to the hospital ward door and signals to someone. Xolie comes in, she's been crying I can tell. She's still in her work uniform. I figure I'm at the hospital where she works.

"Are you okay?" she says.

Do I look like I'm okay?

"Where are they?"

"Arrested, Mandisa is handling it," she says.

Arrested? My husband is sitting in a jail cell as we speak? That's worse than me squashed in that car boot.

"But why?" I ask.

"I don't know, public violence or something. I spoke to Sambulo about an hour ago, he said they're fine, but Mqhele is not fine," she says.

I try to get up. I want to get out of here. I want to go to him, he needs me.

"Mrs Zulu you have to lie down," this nurse! Nx! She says pushing me back to lie on my back.

I'm in a single ward but I can see there are a lot of people outside, standing by the door.

I give Xolie an inquiring look.

"Guards," she says.

We're used to it now. It's never the same people though.

Now for the big question.

"Xolie, are my babies okay?"

"Yes, they're fine, you're all fine," she says. She's about to cry again. She's holding my hand, but I want my husband to be here holding my hand instead.

"Can we call them?" I ask.

"We can't, that was the last call they could make, it's 10pm already," she says.

The nurse grabs the remote control from next to my bed and tries to change the channel, but she's too late.

"Don't," I say.

MAYHEM ON THE N1- the flash reads.

It's all there, it's them, they're jamming my car, they jump out, pull people out through windows and punching, kicking and strangling, there is Mqhele breaking the boot door open with what seems to be an iron rod. That's me, being pulled out of the boot. Cops arrive, all of them now have their hands held up, Mqoqi is still beating up that guy who put a gun on my head, the police are trying to restrain him, he's on the ground, hand cuffed, they're all handcuffed. The ambulance takes off.....

The anchor's face appears on the screen. She moves on to read another headline.

I look at Xolie.

"Someone took a video with their cellphone and sent it to the media, it's all over," she says.

This is not good. This is not good at all.

I feel a kick, and another, they're fine, my little bug-eyes are fine.

"Mrs Zulu, the Dr will be here early in the morning, you might have to go into early labor," the nurse says. Why is she still here?

I'm not giving birth with my man in jail. I'm not.

I'm not sure when I fell asleep last night, or when Xolie left if she left at all because her watch is still here next to my bed.

"Are you feeling any pain?" it's my gynae, thank God!

But what is it with this bloody question?

"No," I say, I don't want to talk to him or anyone for that matter. And I'm hungry.

I want to switch on the TV but the remote is not here.

"We thought it better if you don't watch the news, it's not good for....."

I scream! I scream loud! WTF? Can people just please stop telling me what's good for me!

He hands the remote to me. Yeah I'm crazy and I'll throw this drip in your face if you keep telling me what to do.

It's still the top story, but with different headlines on different channels.

-PREGNANT JOURNALIST PULLED OUT OF HIJACKED CAR

-TAXI TYCOON FAMILY BLOODBATH ON N1

-ZULU BROTHERS TO APPEAR IN COURT

-WHO ARE THE ZULU BROTHERS?

I don't like the last one. This is one question you don't want the media asking about you, especially if you have secrets, they will go as far as asking your cat about you.

"Good news is you're not going on early labor, bad news is you're not going home yet," the doctor says.

Okay, my babies are fine, I'm not going to early labor. That's all I needed to hear, the rest I don't care about.

Xolie. Urgh, I don't have a phone.

She walks in, great.

"Have you spoken to them?"

"No, I spoke to Peter, they're about to appear in court now," she says.

Just this 'appear in court' thing gives me creeps. I'm trying to imagine Mqhele lying in a jail cell. It makes me want to cry.

Peter the lawyer. The one whose law firm we pay shitloads of money every month for that one day when we're going to need him.

Now that day has come, and he'd better deliver.

It's on TV. They allowed media cameras inside court? Why?

The courtroom is packed.

Mqhele Zulu

Qhawe Zulu
Nqobizitha Zulu
Nkosana Zulu
Sambulo Zulu
Mpande Zulu
Mqoqiwohuhle Zulu

One-by-one they appear as their names are called. They stand on one line. Cameras flashing in their faces. Shouldn't media be focusing on the people who hijacked me? Where are they anyway? I know the drill, I've been to courts, but I never thought my husband would be standing in the dock being referred to as 'accused number-1'.

Peter is with two other people whom I assume are his colleagues.

The prosecutor is the first to speak.

"Your worship, the four complainants refuse to press charges, or testify or be part of the investigation at all," she says.

"They refuse to make statements too," she continues.

"Where are they?" the no-nonsense looking magistrate asks.

"In the courtroom next door, appearing on charges of hijacking and kidnapping," the prosecutor says.

The magistrate turns her eyes to Peter. He jumps up.

"Your worship, my client, accused 1, his pregnant wife is in hospital and he hasn't spoken to her since he pulled her out of the boot of the car and she could be in labor as we speak. Since nobody is planning to lay charges against my clients, it would be best that we don't waste the court's time," he says.

The prosecutor indicates she can't argue with that.

Steve, you're not so bad after all. But you're still not worth the money we pay you.

They disappear from the screen. Someone left a pile of newspapers on the table next to the bed, they must have not been briefed. There's commotion outside. A journalist tried to sneak inside but was stopped by the guards, I'm sure it's someone I know. They may have come just to check on me but I know they were going to write a story afterwards.

Newspapers, each and every one of them is leading with the 'mayhem' 'bloody scenes', one even went as far as interviewing 'eye witnesses'.

They went deeper as expected, one even getting an 'expert' to analyse the video and say whatever crap comes up in his head first. This one, in his expert opinion, my husband and his brothers are probably career hijackers, that is why they were able to find the car before the police and the tracking company, and that is why they were able to jam it on the freeway.

He must be from the suburbs.

The question of 'who are the Zulu brothers?' appears again.

I know it has begun. This is it, and it's never going to end.

"Thank God," he says as he squeezes me in a hug.

He looks like hell, smells like hell. He's here, hugging me, brushing my belly.

We've survived yet another ordeal.

But, at what cost?

Chapter 22

We've been fending off media all day. It's a good thing I lost my phone that day, I'm not getting a new one anytime soon.

This was a story that was supposed die off in two days or so. But it's getting bigger and bigger every day. First there was the discovery that we are super rich, which made the story even bigger. And then, my worst fear.

ZULU BROTHERS' DARK PAST

ZULU BROTHERS SONS OF 90s WARLORD

HOW THE ZULU BROTHERS MADE THEIR MILLIONS

LOATHED AND FEARED IN THE TAXI INDUSTRY

There are pictures of us everywhere, some of mine I didn't even know existed. It seems people have been going through their files to find any picture of me. There are some I recognise from Ntsika's Facebook page from our wedding. It's a picture of all of them in suits, it must have been taken when I was walking down the isle because they all seem to be looking at one thing.

It is splashed on the front page of a broadsheet daily paper, above it a screaming headline.

MEET THE ZULU BROTHERS: RICH. HANDSOME. DANGEROUS.

As to how they arrived at 'dangerous' I don't know. I must call Peter to sort this out, threaten lawsuits or something because this is getting out of hand.

They've gone as far as raiding a child's Facebook page to source information. He's had to deactivate it.

We've told Peter to handle all media.

I got a call from HR at work asking me how I'm doing through Mqhele's phone. I had forgotten they even had it. I had a brief chat with my boss and that was it. I drew the line the moment I answered the phone by just being hostile.

I'm back at home after two days in hospital. I think I'm fine, but he's not fine.

He doesn't care much about this invasion of privacy by the media, not as much as I am worried. He has no idea how bad it can get, especially when everything that is true has been reported and the false reports start because people are interested, and so the story has to go on.

Langa is here, he flew in the day after the hijacking. He's been hogging me wanting to share a bed and making me food I don't want to eat.

My mom and Lethu are coming tomorrow. Lethu is 21 and varsity. She's human now.

Mqhele has been distant, I think he blames himself for what happened. I'm not sure why because we know it was a random hijacking, nothing to do with grudges people have against them.

Qhawe walks in with a newspaper under his arm, he throws it at Mqhele and walks on to me.

"How are you feeling?" he says.

"I'm better. Thank you for everything," I say.

He looks at me like I'm being weird, like I shouldn't thank him.

Mqhele is glued to the newspaper and whatever it is that he is reading is not pleasant, judging by the look on his face.

Sambulo walks in carrying one of his toddlers, Mqhele closes the newspaper and throws it at him.

"Are you feeling better," he says as he sits down and put the little bug-eye on the floor to wander to wherever.

I nod.

He focuses on the paper.

I look at Mqhele who's sitting on the couch across me. I miss him, he's here but I miss him.

He catches me staring at him. I keep staring. He seems to be getting the message because he stands up, comes to me and tells Langa to move. He sits next to me, I rest my head on his shoulder.

What is it that is upsetting them so much in that newspaper?

"Mqoqi is going to find her and....."

"No leave it," Mqhele says.

"What is going on?" I ask, it seems more serious than I thought.

"Nothing, it's just another article, forget about it. Do you want a pillow?" he says.

"No, I want to go sleep," I say. Infact, I don't want to sleep, I just want us to go to the bedroom and be alone. I'm glad this house is a single storey because I don't know how I'd cope if there were stairs.

He makes sure I'm comfortable in bed and stands up to leave.

"Don't go," I say.

"You want to sleep,"

"No I want to be alone with you, come," I open my arms. He comes, reluctantly. Since I got pregnant he has this thing of handling me like I'm glass, too careful not to bump my belly when he holds me.

"I shouldn't have driven," I say. I have to get him back, and the only way to do that is to assure him that he's not to blame, I've learned that.

"It's my fault my love, not yours. I know you try your best to protect me, I shouldn't have put my

life and our children's lives in danger like that," I continue.

He is quiet.

"And I landed you in jail," I say.

He laughs.

Oh wow! I'm making progress.

"I don't remember much about jail, I just know I spent the whole night thinking you could be dead in hospital and everybody was hiding it from me," he says.

Huh?

"Yeah I saw you on TV, you looked like a ghost,"

"You were watching that? I don't know what's wrong with journalists they've been calling us non-stop, asking about things that are even personal," he says.

I don't want to scare him but he has to know.

"It's only the beginning love, it will never stop. I have to send my resignation letter, I can't be a journalist anymore, I've become the story," I say.

He doesn't seem at all unhappy about that. I'm surprised he's never asked me to quit my job before.

I take his hand and put it over my belly.

The smile on his face when he feels the kick.

"They're saying hello daddy, we're fine, thank you for saving us," I say looking in his eyes.

They're wet. He should be letting the tears flow, but he won't, he is Mqhele Zulu.

"I know you'll never allow anyone to hurt me, to hurt us," I say, kissing him on the forehead.

Speaking of which.....

"What's happening with those guys who hijacked.....?" I can't finish the sentence, just the thought of it makes me scared.

He notices. His expression changes to anger.

"Don't worry yourself about them," he says.

I hope that doesn't mean what I think it means.

"Don't do anything you shouldn't do, you have children now," I say.

He says nothing.

We've become the media obsession, with every little thing that happens, someone will make a connection.

The room is pitch dark when I wake up, he's not here. I want food, water, I want something sweet too and I want to pee.

I drag my body and my load out of bed. It's easier than I thought it would be, I feel lighter and I can walk with no trouble.

The house is quiet but all lights are on. They must have stayed until it was dark. Langa is probably already sleeping, or maybe out with his Joburg friends. But where is Mqhele?

There's cooked food, Langa I assume, just what I need.

We're still using that microwave I bought back in Naturena. I miss that house sometimes, so many memories were made there, I think that's also why he doesn't want to sell it.

Ahh, that newspaper, Let me see what they were getting upset about.

A picture of them on the front page and an inset of mine. Some sleazy headline and a cross-reference to page 6. :

Inside the Zulu circle: Special Report by Lerato Malope.

Oh no she didn't!!!

I'm already freaking mad by the time I start reading her 'special report' which is probably nothing but lies.

Lerato Malope

I suspected there was more to the Zulu brothers the first time I saw them at a chill spot owned by the second eldest. They were freakishly identical, freakishly attractive and commanded power in the way they walked, talked and even looked even though the youngest couldn't have been older than 20.

I was later to find out one of them was married to my colleague, who herself is like a closed book. My journalistic instincts may have played a role but I can't deny that I was smitten with one of them, Mqoqi, whom I went after in full force and ended up dating as I had planned.

He has a short-fuse, arrogant, has attachment issues but is dreamy to look at. I was already in love with him on the second day we spent together, but I knew I wasn't the only one in his life.

Sometimes he'd go a whole day without calling me after waking up at 3am leaving me in his bed. He'd send someone to pick me up and take me to work. He'd leave money, a lot of money, on the pedestal. I'd take it and he'd leave more the next time.

I figured that's how he showed love, and accepted it. But I wanted more, I wanted to be part of him, of everything. He spoke a lot about his brothers and 'mami' whom I later learned was his brother's wife, my colleague. They are exactly the same age, which made me curious as to why he'd refer to her as mother.

He never spoke about where he came from, about his job or about himself. He shut me out completely. On the day he told me he was going to his brother's house for a family braai I insisted on coming with him, he blatantly refused, but I pushed on, went as far as making up a story about why I couldn't go home which he ofcourse he didn't believe because he is intelligent.

The house, the cars, there was money written all over them. But also, there was that closeness, loyalty, love and 'I am my brother's keeper' kind of aura around them.

My colleague wasn't very welcoming to me, which I found rather strange. There was another woman, whom I now understand is about to be the wife of one of the brothers Sambulo. She seemed to be trying too hard to get in, had I stayed I think I would have become exactly like her.

I would have been desperate to be like Mahlomu, surrounded, protected, spoiled.

But, I never heard from Mqoqi after that night. I kept thinking that maybe he'd call but days went by and nothing from him. When I did finally gather enough strength to approach the wife and ask questions, she tore me down.

"He broke up with you because I told him to do so," she said. With a straight face.

She has power over them, all of them. She made me disappear, kicked me out, and she knew exactly why.

So when I saw that video of her being pulled out of the boot and them fighting hijackers with their bare hands just to save her, I knew.

I started putting pieces together.....

Okay, I've read enough, I don't want to hear her rumblings anymore. Honestly, I don't even understand the point of this article, except that it's making me look like a Madame DeFarge of

some sort.

"You're awake?" Mqhele says standing on the doorway of the lounge. He has his guitar over his shoulder. He must have been at the garage this whole time playing it.

"I'm going to find this bitch, and I'm going to deal with her," I say, throwing the newspaper on the coffee table.

He looks at me, eyes wide mouth open.

"I mean it," I say trying to stand up, but I fall back on the couch. He's next to me in a flash with his hands on my stomach. The way a man will jump to save his precious cargo.

"Okay, how about you deal with her in two months time? After you give birth, okay?"

Oh, he's being sarcastic isn't he? Nx!

I'm still going to get that bitch, she'll know me.

I can't sleep so I'm going to watch some TV, which I know is boring.

"Wanna play the guitar for me," I say, trying to be cute.

"Noooooooooooo," he says. He's never played it for me and I've never persuaded him because I think it's his sanctuary, his escape. I think it's the place he goes when he wants to be with himself.

"For your babies?" I say rubbing my belly.

He laughs. I need to work on my manipulating skills.

"Okay, let's watch a movie then. I can't sleep so you also won't sleep because you did this to me," I saying pointing at my belly again.

He laughs. I love it when he laughs.

"I'm going to get ice cream, do you want some?" he says standing up.

Oh! ice cream, the third arm of this relationship. It's been with us since day one.

Infact, now that I'm going to be jobless, I have an idea. But I won't tell him about it yet.

Chapter 23

“Wake up,” my hand patting his back, since when is he a deep sleeper?

Ouch!

“Mqhele! Wake up!”

He raises his head and jumps to sit up

I’m already trying to get out of bed. My pyjama pants are wet.

“Ouccchhhhhhhh” the shooting pain!

He’s on his feet putting on clothes. I’m trying to get to the bathroom, I want to pee but he grabs me before I get in. He has my bag over his shoulder already and is trying make me put on my robe.

That pain again.

“Come on let’s go,” he says holding me by the waist.

“Go where?” I say.

“To hospital,” he says grabbing the car keys.

Oh shit! I’m in labor! It’s supposed to be in three weeks. I was going to go home to Durban next week! I need my mother!

He is trying too hard to stay calm but I can see he is shit scared. I don’t care. Right now he needs to drive me to hospital because I can’t stand this pain.

He puts the phone on speaker as soon as he starts the car. He wanted to make me sit at the back but I refused. So I sat in the front and he had to strap me, torture.

“Xolie, we’re going to hospital now, I don’t know what to do. What should I do? She’s screaming,” he says on the phone.

“Awwwwwww” seriously? Does it have to be this painful?

Xolie had been sleepy when she answered the phone but now she’s wide awake, I hear Sambulo on the background asking what’s happening.

“Just drive to hospital, carefully, I’ll meet you there,” she says.

Now they’re talking about me like I’m not here. I feel like there are bricks all over my lower body. There’s a sharp pain that keeps coming and going in my back. I read books about this, I thought I knew what’s supposed to happen but this is totally different.

This is the same hospital I was in five weeks ago, atleast Xolie will be here.

Paramedics are already at the parking lot when we arrive. I want to throw something at someone really hard, especially this one holding my hand and looking like he’s going to faint. This is his fault.

This is not how I planned everything. It was supposed to happen in Durban with my mother and my husband there. I was going to fly my gynae to Durban to deliver this baby, but now he’s on holiday out of the country.

I’m in the labor ward, but nothing is happening. Why aren’t they getting these babies out?

A middle-aged lady walks in after about five episodes of that stabbing pain. wearing scrubs, she must be the doctor. I don’t know her so I don’t like her.

“How are we doing Mrs Zulu?”

Errrr I’m sitting by the sea sipping cocktails! How does it look like I’m doing. And where is my husband?

“Mr Zulu is right outside. Sister Mzobe will be here just now,” she says like she just read my mind. That would be Xolie.

My contractions are too close now. I'm getting tired physically from the pain. There's immediately five of them around the bed. I don't even know when I got off my pyjamas into this backless thing. "I think it's time, we're ready to go," one of them says.

I see Xolie, she holds my hand and tells me to be strong. She's gone before I can say anything.

"Push!"

That was probably the longest 15 minutes of my life. I should have gone with the Caesarian like everyone suggested.

The last thing I remember was the second cry and me slipping away. When I wake up Mqhele is sitting next to the bed, watching me.

I scan the room.

"They'll bring them just now," he says.

"Have you seen them,?" I ask.

"Yes," he says with a smile.

"How big are their eyes?" I say, I'm smiling now. I can't believe it's all over.

"Zoom-lenses baby," he says, getting off the chair to hug me.

"Thank you," he whispers.

Yeah he should thank me alright. That wasn't piece of cake I just went through.

"What are their names?" I ask. I hadn't thought about that.

"I haven't named them, I was waiting for you to wake up," he says as he takes out his phone and dials.

I hope he called my mom because I'm really going to need her when I get out of here. Maybe I should still go to Durban, for a couple of weeks maybe.

"Bafo, we need names," he says.

I assume he's speaking to Nkosana. They never call him by name, which is why I never know what to call him, which is why I avoid speaking to him as much as I can.

Apparently he names all children in this family.

I hope he is not going to give my children some war-like deep intimidating names like their father did with them.

"Msebe and Langa," he says.

Not bad, I'm yet to hear the story behind them. I'm sure Nkosana did not have my brother in mind when he decided on this name but I know it's going to be the highlight of his life.

Xoli walks in pushing a double cot bed.

My boys. I'm not sure which one to pick up first. Mqhele makes the choice for me. They are in the same clothes but different colour hats, I think he told them to dress them like that so he'd be able to tell them apart.

I'm holding both of them, Mqhele keeps kissing their hands. He's happy, I'm happy. They're few hours old but they look exactly like him.

"I'll be back just now," he says standing up to leave.

He's probably going to smoke, he'd better not come back and suffocate my children with that smell. Infact, we need to talk about the smoking thing.

Xoli is still here.

"Why is it so quiet here though?" I ask.

"We're the only people on this floor," she says.

But why?

"They paid for the whole floor, nobody comes in beyond the floor below," she says.

This is stupid and crazy.

"Xolie! And you allowed that? Why?"

"I didn't know until I found the whole floor empty. Problem is the media already knows about it and it's all over the place," she says.

"What are we going to do Xolie?" I ask her. It may seem like a simple question but she knows exactly what I mean.

"I don't know, I blame you for not telling me things were this hectic when I arrived in this family," she says.

We both laugh.

"Yeah, like you were going to leave if I had told you," I say.

She's grown so much since the days of her calling me five times a day.

My babies are fine and perfectly healthy, that's all I care about right now, and getting out of this hospital as soon as I can. I'm not a teenage mother so I should be able to figure out the basics on my own. Besides, I'm sure there are many people who need hospital care so I can't be hogging the whole floor for many days. This is embarrassing really.

"How's the mommy?" It's Thobi, barging in like she's walking into a hair salon or something. Zaba and Nana following behind her.

Gosh am I glad to see them!

"But where are the babies?" Zaba.

"At the nursery, they're fine though. They look exactly like their father," I say.

At that moment he walks in, hesitates at the door but walks in eventually. There's silence, it happens all the time with my friends, there's always that awkwardness when he's around. I don't know how they managed to rope him in on my surprise baby shower but he was so in on it.

"Ladies," he says walking to me and holding my hand.

Silence.

"Okay, I brought you this," Thobi again. Trust her to break the ice.

She's holding up a belt, one of those electric ones that are supposed to give you a flat stomach in seven days. Yes, those ones on infomercials that sell us dreams.

I can't help laughing. But I appreciate the gesture anyway.

Mqhele decides this is his cue to leave.

"I'm going to get you food," he says. I am hungry actually.

Now we can be ratchet.

"What's up with the empty floor and security," Nana asks. I was hoping they wouldn't notice.

Zaba and Thobi give her looks. But she doesn't think she's out of line so she continues.

"Did they give you problems?" I ask.

"No, our names were on the list, we had to leave my cousin outside though, they wouldn't let her in," Zaba says.

There's a list?

"Urgh, I'll be out of here soon anyway," I say. I don't even want to get into it.

Xolie walks in again with the babies and they all go crazy. It's like I don't even exist.

"It's only for a few minutes ladies, they need feeding and that's it," Xolie says.

I'm not a fan of breastfeeding, I fear what my boobs will look like afterwards, but I have to do it.

"Can I take a picture?" Nana says just as I'm about to hand the babies back to Xolie.

I allow her. This is a first picture I'm taking with them, how did I forget to do that earlier?

My phone has been off since last night. I haven't even spoken to my mom or Langa but I'm sure they know by now.

"Where's Nkosana, is he coming?" Thobi.

Oh Ghosh! When will she get over him?

"No, they'll only come when I go back home," I say. It's not normal for men, except for the father, to come to maternity wards. Infact, male members of the family will come see the baby atleast after a month, when it starts to look human.

"Oh, I forgot they're rural," she says. That's just like her.

I wish my father was still alive to see his first grandchildren. I would have named one of them after him but his name was Mbambeni so nope!

I need to find my phone. 18 voice messages! The first five are from journalists, including some I went to school with but haven't spoken to in years. One even calls me 'my friend'.

What is all this? There are so many stories, real stories about real issues they could be doing.

Personally I would refuse to be assigned to write about someone having a baby. Women give birth everyday.

It's Saturday so I know Sunday tabloids will have me splashed on front pages. That time, a woman who had to give birth on the street because the ambulance arrived too late will get a little spot on page 8 while I, who had the whole hospital floor booked just for my giving birth will make headlines. This, it's not right.

An sms from a number I don't recognise.

"Congratulations, I've just read the good news. Those could have been my babies (smiley face)"

He has a nerve. I delete it immediately. Maybe it's time I changed my phone number.

There are messages from my colleagues as well. Some asking how the babies are. Although I know my boss would never allow the story to go on the paper, that's not enough a good reason for me to entertain them, I won't respond.

Mqhele walks in with a brown paper bag. My food. Good.

"I had to have it delivered here, there's media outside," he says.

It's worse than I thought.

I switch on the TV.

CAR BOOT TWINS DELIVERED SAFELY

A flashing headline on the TV screen.

I guess, maybe, the fuss is about that I was hijacked and my babies survived? Maybe that's what it's about. They'll probably leave me, us, alone after this.

It's funny how they have reduced my children to just 'car boot babies'. On their first day on earth this is the tag they come out with.

He takes the remote from me and switches off the TV.

"You don't have to watch this," he says.

"When am I getting out of here?" I ask.

"The doctor said Monday atleast,"

I don't like this, two more nights here? And this wasn't even in my plans. Plus this hospital still gives me creeps.

"Did you call my mom?" I ask.

"Yes, she'll be here this afternoon," he says.

That's better, I won't raise the issue of going to Durban, I don't think he'll agree to part with his babies at all. He's already too obsessed with them.

At some point we're going to have to go to Greytown, atleast when they are three months old. We have to do some traditional ceremony thing, I know Qhawe will insist on it.

"When are we going to be able to have sex again?" he asks.

This man! Of all the things he could ask?

I just look at him. I won't even answer this stupid question.

"Okay, my hand it is," he says shrugging.

Are we even having this conversation right now? I mean really, I can't even feel my vagina, I'm sure it's swollen and scarred from pushing out his big headed kids.

"I want to take a bath, and brush my teeth," I say.

He stands up immediately. He has my toiletry bag. I wonder when and how he packed it.

I have difficulty walking so he has to carry me to the bathroom. The shower has a place where I can sit. I'm as good as naked with this backless thing so he just unties it and it drops on the floor. He takes off his clothes too and gets in the shower with me. He insists on bathing me which I welcome.

"Why did you book the whole floor?" I ask, I'm still not happy with this.

He is quiet.

"I'm sure this hospital is safe, or is there something you're not telling me?" that will get him talking for sure.

"No, I just didn't want anyone coming and going as they please, including the nurses. I don't trust anyone especially with the media following us around," he says.

Fair enough, I wouldn't want that as well. But still, this thing, it's not who we are.

Langa barges in late in the afternoon. He's still living in Cape Town, with his new Italian man.

He's been cradling the babies, picking one and putting it back and picking another one and putting it back.

"What are their names?" he says.

"This one is Langa, I hope he doesn't grow up to be like his uncle," I say.

I can already tell them apart even though they are completely identical.

"You really named him Langa, after me?" the reaction I expected. He is over the moon.

"Actually, Nkosana named them. The other one is Msebe," I say.

"Oh good, the shady older brother, atleast it's not the typical intimidating names of this family," he says.

We both laugh.

He tells me how he had to escape the drama outside with cameras flashing and questions being thrown at him.

"Aren't these people your friends? I'm sure you know all of them," he says.

Yes I know all of them, but I never got an opportunity to make friends. My career technically ended six months after it started. I judge them but I know how it works.

Mandisa came by earlier with Lwandle and Mvelo. They didn't stay long and I hear Lwandle shoved one of the reporters when he tried to ask him questions and take photos of them. There's a Mqoqi in him.

My mom is here now. She's already prayed and undressed the babies to see if everything is fine with them. She's also passing orders, like a typical old-school nurse.

She worries about me, always. And I worry about her.

"Is he still treating you good? I don't want you to be stuck in an unhappy marriage, like I did," she says.

I thought she loved my father, or at least that they were happy.

"I'm fine, mah. He's treating me right,"

"I don't know, there's just too much around this family. And when I saw that video I almost collapsed," she says.

I watched it once and never wanted to see it again. They're animals these men, they almost killed those guys with their bare hands. But I know it could have been worse so I'm not even bothered by it.

Mqhele leaves late in the night. He'd sleep here if he could but I won't allow it. And I have a feeling he wants to get home after my mom has gone to bed. He's awkward around her, he never knows what to say but my mom, she be talking non-stop to him whether he's listening or not.

This other time he wanted to buy her a new car for mother's day. I refused. Besides, my father left her with all the money she could ever need, only, she's still fighting over it with a brother we didn't know we had until the day of the funeral.

"You will not do that to me, I will dig up your grave and disassemble your skeleton," I always tell Mqhele when the subject comes up.

We still don't know where his first son is, if he does even exist. I gave up trying, it's not like I want the complication in my life and marriage.

I was woken up to go feed the babies in the wee hours of the night. This is what my life is going to be like from now on, isn't it?

"Can you get me newspapers?" I say to the nurse who comes to check on me. I don't know her. I wonder how she was allowed here seeing as I'm on quarantine.

"I'm sorry mam, I was told not to give you newspapers,"

Why is she calling me mam? And who told her not to give me newspapers? Nx!

I switch on the TV, she moves towards me but I already have the remote in my hand. I give her the look.

News station. Newspaper reviews. There it is on the screen. A picture of me holding my two babies lying on a hospital bed, smiling. On the front of a Sunday tabloid with a huge 'Exclusive' stamped next to the picture.

I switch off the TV.

This isn't even betrayal, I don't know what it is. If I call Nana now..... but let me just leave it for now and hope she'll call and explain herself.

It's already 8am and Mqhele hasn't arrived.

Oh yah, here he is.

He knows the moment he comes in that I'm upset. My cheeks are red.

"So you've seen it?" he says.

“Yes, just now on TV. I can't believe she'd do this to me,” I say. If this was two days ago I'd be crying right now but I think my hormones are already getting back to normal, except the ones that fuel thoughts of violence and revenge.

“She had it all planned, that's why she came here. This is why my friends are my brothers,” he says. And he knows this already how?

“They paid her for the picture,” he says.

It's even worse. This girl was my maid-of-honor. We've been friends since we were teenagers.

“I want to take a walk,” I say trying to get out of bed.

He brought another set of pyjamas and a robe. Good, because I feel so dirty and ugly. I'm going to have to remove these braids the moment I get out of here.

We walk around the hospital corridors, the whole floor is empty. The nursery is on the bottom floor. They wouldn't empty the maternity ward or nursery, that would be just wrong and selfish.

I want to see my babies again so we have no choice but to go to the bottom floor.

Oh! people! Normal people walking around minding their own business. I missed that. But my joy is short-lived. They start whispering, pointing, taking pictures with cellphones until one doctor calls them to order.

There they are behind a glass with several other babies. They're all bathed and wrapped in blue blankets. I think Xolie has been doing all this, she has experience with babies. She's going to be a mother to them as much as I am a mother to her two brats.

“Would you like to go in?” this seemingly 'too-nice-looking' nurse who somehow reminds me of my mother says as she opens the door.

We walk in after sanitising our hands. The fuss in these private hospitals! These things will be eating sand and ants in no time but they'll still be fine and alive.

Msebe is a crier, Langa is a sleeper.

“This is the one that's like you, look, he's fighting I don't know what for,” I say to Mqhele as he picks Msebe up.

“Okay, so this is the gay one,” he says trying to pick Langa up as well.

I don't know what to do with this guy anymore!

There's a flash from outside. I don't know where it came from but I'm sure it was a camera.

Mqhele puts the babies down and rushes outside the nursery.

He comes back, upset. I know he didn't find whoever it was that took the picture. We'll be in the papers again tomorrow.

“I want to go home,” I say, putting my baby back in the cot and walking out.

“I'll speak to the doctor, let's go pack,” he says.

We leave late in the afternoon. No media. Good. Hopefully they are over us.

Xolie is going to stay with us for a couple of days just until we're on the green light. My mom is also not staying long, she says I'm a grown woman I should be able to take care of my kids.

“I was 21 when I had twins and I managed by myself in my own house, and your father wasn't as 'there' as your husband,” she says.

She's always been like this with me, pushing me to be independent and then worrying about me all the time.

And I'm yet to hear what pissed her so much about my father. May he rest in peace, his sins and all.

None of these bitches have called, I know they know what happened and they'd better start

talking.

"I never really trusted her you know," Langa says to me as we cradle the babies.

"Nana," he says when he notices I'm confused. They've never really gelled.

"I can't believe she'd do that to me. She hasn't even called to explain herself. I should have said no when she asked to take a picture," I say.

"The friends we keep. Restrain the man, he was super-pissed this morning. After I saw that video I'm scared of all of them now," he says. He should be.

"Urgh, they're harmless, until you mess with stuff they care about. He won't touch her though," I say. He wouldn't, would he?

Mqhele walks in. This means Langa should leave the room. He doesn't say it but we both know he's saying it.

He is totally obsessed with the boys. I'm going to leave him to it.

"I'm going to take a shower," I say grabbing a bath towel.

"Can I join you?"

Now he's gone crazy.

"No, you can't. You won't be joining me for atleast three months," I say leaving him grumbling to himself.

I should start avoiding this full length mirror in the bathroom. I look like a shapeless cow. This is what men and their sperms do to your body. I wonder if it will ever get back to its original firm state.

He's forgotten all about me and my disfigured vagina when I come out. He's been taking cellphone pictures of the boys while they sleep.

"I'm sending Ntsika pictures, he's been hounding me all day," he says.

Ntsika, I haven't seen him in over a year.

"Please tell him to come home soon or I'll personally come fetch him,"

He laughs.

I know he'll be here for Sambulo's wedding but that's in another four-and-a-half months.

I start getting dressed with the bath towel still wrapped around me. He looks at me like I've gone crazy.

"So now you're going to hide from me?" he says.

Yes I am.

"I look horrible with all the stretch-marks and this stomach,"

He puts the baby down. He hugs me.

"They will go away. They don't stop you from being sexy though," he says, dropping my towel.

Yeah right. I feel like a big bloated whale. I must start going to gym, I've never exercised before except for a stint at netball in high school. I've never been really good at anything physical. It's time I found something, my passion.

Which reminds me.

"Now that I'm going to be unemployed, I'm thinking of starting something," I say.

"Something like?"

"A restaurant maybe.... not exactly a restaurant. Something like...Rose's Frost, but with more than just ice cream," I say.

That's his favourite place. We've been there so many times since six years ago when I took him

there on his birthday.

“Sounds like a great idea. But you don't have to do anything you know, you could just stay at home and have more babies,” he says.

Sometimes I think he gets the kicks out of making me angry.

I pick up one baby and sit on the chair to breastfeed. I'm not talking to him again tonight.

“So now you're not talking to me? I was joking,” he says.

Fuck off.

“It's fine then,” he says picking up one baby and cradling him.

I married an idiot.

Chapter 24

I thought my family was dramatic but now no, I forgive my drunk uncle and my nazi aunt for all their sins.

Xolie has it bad.

If it isn't cousins trying to sabotage her, it's her father's sister saying she bewitched Sambulo, just like her mother did with her father.

She's pretty much the only one that made it out and had a career in her family, the rest are totally hopeless and utterly bitter about it.

The words 'she thinks she's better' are thrown around carelessly here.

I have to make sure she leaves this house in one piece, in a white dress and that she'll get to Ballito in one piece. I'm the mkhongi's wife, it's my responsibility.

'Ready?'

"Yes, let's do this," she says picking up the frock of her wedding dress.

There's argument in the other room about whether she should wear a veil or not. An uncle says she should while the father's sister says she shouldn't because she already has two children. The uncle's argument is that the children are of the man she is marrying so she should wear a veil.

Her father, shame, he's the black sheep of the family, has no say in anything whatsoever.

It will take about two hours to travel from eMpangeni to Ballito, and it's getting late. The guys are already panicking. Infact I should have been in Greytown to make sure everything is in order. But I'm here, with Bab'Ngcobo and my babies are with my mom.

"Is everything okay there? Xolie is not talking to me"- an sms from Sambulo.

LOL, it wouldn't be a wedding.

I call him back.

"Xolie please speak to your man, he wants to jump off a cliff, he thinks you're not coming to your wedding," I say handing her my phone.

She gives me a 'talk to the hand' gesture.

I'm not even sure what they're fighting about. I shove the phone in her face. She rolls her eyes and takes it.

"Hi," she says. LOL, it's not a loving hi.

By the time she hangs up she's smiling. Atleast we're going to have a smiling bride.

As she walks out the door with her father and her bridesmaids behind her. She looks so beautiful, such a simple girl she is.

I'm not sure how the veil issue ended but after a short prayer they follow us all out of the house. The whole neighbourhood has come out to ululate and see her off. I haven't seen her stepmother though, I've met her twice, she's such a lovely humble woman who loves her like her own child.

"Hlomu, where's my mom?" she asks as she's about to close the car door.

"I'm not sure I haven't seen her," I say.

"Please find her," she says as she closes the car door.

I go back to the car. I know she won't get married without this woman. The house is almost empty now.

I find her in the bedroom, all dressed up with her cocktail hat placed on the bed next to her. She has her hands over her face. She's crying.

I don't remember if my mother cried when I left home on my wedding day.

I don't ask, I just sit next to her and pat her shoulder. She cries louder.

I'm just going to sit here and wait until she composes herself, and then tell her that we have to go.

"Are you going to look after her?" she says after a while.

Only if she knew that she looks after me more than I look after her.

"Yes, we've always looked out for each other," I say. Hopefully this will put her at ease.

"I'm just worried. This is not a normal family she's marrying into," she says.

True that. But we make it normal.

"Mah, no family is normal or perfect. But we love these men and they love us. Trust me, they will never let anything bad happen to us," I say.

She's still worried I see.

"With the taxis and all, I don't want to wake up one day and hear my child has been shot. And how are these men? I like Sambulo, but sometimes I feel like he has a dark side," she says.

They all do.

"No he is okay, Xolie knows how to handle him," I say.

She comes round eventually and we get in the car and go. I'm driving Xolie's Mercedes-Benz which Sambulo bought her for her birthday. She insisted I take it just to avoid her cousin, who was been demanding it, driving it.

"*We're on our way*" - I sms Mqhele. This kind of reminds me of our wedding. I was so young.

We had to instruct the venue to allow only people who are on the guest list. We turned down all media who asked for invitations, even magazines that were offering money. Like we need it.

I didn't want my babies to be at the wedding but my mom and Langa insisted on coming with them. Dressed them in the same clothes, I hate that shit! They are too fat and heavy for four-month-olds.

The venue is beautiful, simple yet glamorous at the same time. This is, after all, Sambulo's wedding, the only man with style in this family. But it has a lot of Xolie in it too, all white and clear including the flowers.

They went for a chapel instead of garden wedding. It's a small farm-style built church with a wooden roof and open on the sides. There aren't chairs but old wooden benches with scatter cushions on them.

It's going to be a beautiful wedding, crazy family or not.

I'm here now so I have to go to the side where I belong.

I find the guys in one of the guest rooms. It wouldn't be them if they weren't gulping alcohol just ten minutes before one of them walks down the aisle.

Xolie had to find eight bridesmaids because Sbani is almost as tall as all of them now, he couldn't be a page boy anymore so he had to be a grooms-man Imagine, who does this string of wedding party crap thing these days?

Ntsika is a grown man, totally grown it feels weird when he calls me 'mami'. He is different, a bit of an intellectual.

"Are you all ready?" I say standing at the door. They all turn to look at me. They are flippin' gorgeous in black tuxedos with thin black ties.

"How do I look?" Sambulo asks turning in a circle.

"Like a grown man who is about to be a husband," I say. He laughs and gives me a hug. He's always been the soft one. It must be all the weed, or maybe that he once almost died.

They're all just standing there until I bring them to their senses.

"You have to go now,"

They scurry off and get out of the room. Nkosana is starting to get grey hair.

"You look hot, I'm stripping you out of that the moment we're alone," Mqhele whispers to me before a slight kiss and walking out the door.

His high libido is a problem. Oh and that waiting for a month after giving birth thing, it didn't work, four days was enough. I have to take an injection otherwise he's going to get me pregnant again.

It's like five years ago all over again, except Lwandle and Mvelo are taller page boys, Phakeme, Sambulo's three-year-old looks exactly like Mvelo when I first saw him. It's like one person being born over and over again.

The violin guy is standing there close to the altar, the priest and the Zulu brothers. And here she comes.....veil covering her face. That's my girl. The violin starts playing.....

The beautiful thing about weddings is that they resuscitate the deepest feelings between couples, especially if you have been married for a long time. I have nothing against Xolie's bridesmaid but I want my man now, here, with me. Our eyes keep locking now and again.

The couple are saying their thank-you speech and we'll be done. Only, it takes Sambulo three minutes to say what a normal person would say in one minute. I thought the slow motion would get better with time but no.

All is done by early evening and we have to trek back to Greytown to prepare for the traditional wedding tomorrow.

There's more drama about whether Xolie should go back to Esikhawini, sleep at home and travel to Greytown tomorrow morning. That's the evil aunt coming with that impractical idea.

But then her uncle says, traditionally she has to go sleep at the mkhongi's house. A bride cannot go back home after she's left with a kist.

I'm tired of this. Nkosana must deal with it.

She ends up at Bab'Mzimela's house, he was one of abakhongi as well.

I had to leave the babies with my mother in Durban again. I wasn't going to bring them here to this chaos.

Someone is not happy about that.

"I miss my boys," he says as we get into bed at about 2am.

"I know baby....," shame poor thing. He hasn't spent much time with them since we came to KZN.

I can't help remembering what happened the last time there was a wedding in this family.

"We're fine right? This is going to go smoothly," I say.

He knows what I'm thinking.

"We will make sure of that, don't worry about anything," he says.

I'm going to be honest. This is one of the reasons I didn't bring my babies here. It's their home I know but it's better when it's just us, not all these people who will be here tomorrow.

I lay my head on his chest, he's warm as always.

"You're doing great," I say, my mind running to my mouth again.

He lifts my face with his hand so that I'm looking at him. He gives me a questioning look.

"You've done well, as a husband," I say.

He doesn't believe me.

I hold him tighter.

"I don't regret getting in your car, it was the best thing I ever did in my life," I say, squeezing him tighter.

He kisses my forehead. His hand starts sliding down my back, front, I know where he is going.

"Periods," I say, and close my eyes.

I feel the hand dropping.

'GLITS, GLAMOUR AND DRAMA AT ZULU WEDDING'

'TWO DOWN, SIX TO GO'

Screams the newspaper headlines on Monday morning. As to how they got the wedding pictures, I don't know. It seems we might have to start doing family functions with just the 17 of us, yes, that's how big this family is now.

Apparently there was drama, which nobody who was at the wedding knows about but it included an ex-girlfriend being amongst the guests and causing havoc. This is why one needs lawyers.

All in all, things went well at the traditional wedding, almost the whole of Mbuba was there which makes me believe we are now forgiven for the sins of the father. Bab'Gumbi was also there with his wife and one of his daughters. It seems like a long time ago when he was just a security guard at my flat, he is more like family now.

We are going back to Joburg tomorrow. I miss my house and besides, I have to start working on what I'm going to do with my life now that I'm at the receiving end of the media wrath.

I might as well read this jargon written on this gossip column here.

"The wealthy Zulu brothers looked dreamy in tuxedos as they accompanied the second one to tie the knot. But it was Mqoqi, the arrogant, unapologetic biker who has women pining over him, that had our attention.

He came alone, which is great because it means he is single and we still have a chance. The UK based youngest member of the Zulu brotherhood is also not bad at all, he too is single, and the four others.

We also love the mysterious one, Mqhele, but he is taken and we wouldn't want to spoil things. His wife, yes the one we all saw on TV being pulled out of a car boot, looked fabulous. She needs to lose that baby weight though.....

Really? This is a waste of newspaper space!

They're right about Mqoqi though, women are throwing themselves at him, not that he minds.

Hi Hlomu, can we talk? It's an sms from Nana, four months later.

I'm not going to respond to it now because I'm not really sure if I want to talk to her. I haven't missed her at all, I've been too occupied to with my babies to care about untrustworthy former friends.

Thobi and Zaba phoned me to say they were not involved, I believe them, but I haven't seen much of them lately.

"You look upset, what's wrong? Don't tell me it's about that article in the paper because it's nothing but bullshit," Mqhele says as he walks in the room.

I'm going to lie. I don't want to upset him too.

"Nothing, I'm just tired. Are you ready to go?" I say.

We are going to Durban to fetch the babies. He insisted that we leave this early, like, it doesn't even make a difference, they'll still be there even if we fetch them in the afternoon.

But I guess he misses them as I do.

That old man, the one we saw on the first day we came to Mbuba, we've just driven past him again. And again, he stopped and looked. I remember Mqhele said he was a relative but strangely, he looks nothing like them and he didn't even stop to greet him, again.

He knows I'm curious, but I know when I shouldn't ask. I'll find a way around it.

"I see the neighbours came in large numbers yesterday," I say.

He isn't as bubbly as he was when we left home a few minutes ago.

"Free food and alcohol," he says, coldly so.

I'm shocked, I didn't expect this answer, this is so not like him. He may be crazy sometimes but he is humble too.

"No Mqhele, you can't say that, those people came to support and celebrate with us," I say. I can't believe he just said that really.

He is silent.

"They killed my parents," he says after a while.

I thought we were past that. If not, then why the hell did we come back here? I don't like this. And it doesn't help that everything about his father, who he killed and how notorious a warlord he was has been dominating the news since we became a 'media sensation'. Journalists went as far as pulling out TRC transcripts, which is worse because he was already dead by the time the hearings started and all that is there is what was said about him, not by him.

I know, my children will have this tag on them for the rest of their lives, maybe even generations to come. So far nobody has linked us to the Ngqulunga killings. I hope no one ever will.

His mood has changed completely, I won't bring up the old man for now, I don't want to make it worse.

"They said I need to lose the baby weight, am I too fat," I say. I need to change the subject.

It doesn't even bother me what that gossip columnist said but I need to get his mind back on a lighter note.

The smile. I'm winning.

He takes my hand, pulls it to his mouth and kisses it on the back.

"You're not fat. Besides, I love your curves, and you," he says kissing my hand again.

I look at my boobs, I can't help it.

"And the boobs too," he says with a smile.

I must stop breastfeeding otherwise these things will start sagging. I've seen how women look at him these days, now that he is famous and as they put it "mysterious, commanding and attractive". And this, from people who have never ever met him in person. It's funny how people would think they know someone by just seeing him in pictures.

"We should go on holiday," I say. I've been thinking about this for a while. We need a break from all the madness around us.

"Holiday? Where? I've never gone on an overseas holiday," he says.

Great. I've never gone on one too.

"Okay, we will go somewhere for your birthday," I say.

It is coming soon, his 35th.

My mom doesn't want to let go. Seriously, we've been trying to leave for the past hour but she keeps delaying us. I know, she loves being a grandmother and wants to hog the boys, but we've got to go.

Every time I'm at home I think of my father, try to imagine what he'd be doing right now and what he'd look like.

We finally leave after a protest and what seems like tears from my mom.

We will stop somewhere for a light lunch. I just want to sit with the three of them, my men, my everything. Just us.

You walk in a restaurant and it is suddenly quiet, everybody looking at you like they're seeing a ghost. That's what our lives have become. But we sit anyway, through the whispering and an annoying manager who treats us like we're going to spend millions on one meal. Why do people do that though? Okay, good service is nice, but the attention is not, we just want to have a quiet meal with our children, that's all.

"It was nicer when we were just the simple Zulus, when nobody knew us. Damn those bloody hijackers," I say bumping Langa on one knee.

Come to think of it, I haven't heard much about them in the past months. Last I checked the trial had not started. I made a statement but I have no idea when I will be called to testify in court.

"I hate every moment of it," he says. Disgust visible on his face.

Now I think would be the best time to put my plan forward.

"So, I want to open a restaurant slash convenience store slash market....."

He has no idea what I'm talking about. I think he thinks I'm being crazy.

"See, it's going to be a place where one can sit and eat, but also be able to do shopping, grocery shopping. Not your typical groceries, just custom made stuff like jam and honey and all those things....." I have this idea worked out in my head but I'm not sure if I'm explaining it right.

I don't think I am, judging by the confusion on his face.

"Okay, tell you what, I'm going to put it down on paper, as a business plan and then get advice from relevant people," I say.

He is a good business man but wouldn't know anything about starting a restaurant. I don't even think he sees it as a real business.

"I'll tell you how much I need after that," I say.

He seems impressed by that.

"It's your money you can use as much as you want. That's why I wake up every morning to work, so you can buy your restaurants and houses and whatever else you want," he says.

I'm not comfortable with this statement, I'm offended actually, but I don't have time to be fighting with him today.

Which reminds me, I have to speak to Peter about setting up a Trust Fund for this family. I don't know why I have been postponing.

Our food arrives quicker than normal at restaurants. The manager keeps coming to ask if we are okay and if we need anything. It's embarrassing really, we are customers just like everyone here.

I want to tell him but I don't want to see a story accusing me of being a diva in some tabloid tomorrow.

'Do you want another.....?'" I notice he is staring at something behind me with his mouth open.

I turn around. It's a woman. She's dark, pretty and tall, almost as tall as he is. She's the weave type.

Who's she?

"And then?" I ask. How did I get angry so quick?

He brings his eyes back to me. I'm looking at him with a fierce face.

I widen my eyes, I'm not saying anything but he knows what I'm asking.

"That's my ex," he says.

WTF?

I don't like the 'my' part of it. 'That's the ex', that's what he should have said. Not this 'my' as if she still means something to him.

"The ex?" I ask.

"Yes, the one that disappeared with my child," he says.

I don't like this. Or her.

I say nothing after that. All I know now is that I'm angry and I don't want this woman here.

She walks towards our table..... breathe Hlomu....breathe.

"Hi, " she says, not looking at me at all, just him and a few glances at the babies.

So I don't exist now? I'm invisible?

He nods at her. And then he looks at me. My cheeks have turned red.

"Nice to see you after all these years. I see you've done well for yourself, cute kids," she says. She still hasn't acknowledged my presence. I want to stand up and slap her.

"This is my wife, Hlomu," he says, taking my hand.

She turns to look at me just for a second and says "oh".

I try to pull my hand from his but he holds on to it tighter. It's shaking from anger.

"I've been trying to find you. No, infact, my wife has been trying to find you," he says.

She glances at me again, arrogantly so.

"Did I leave with something that belongs to her maybe?" she says.

Oh no she didn't? Not like that! Not to me!

Mqhele is on the spot now. He keeps looking at me, then her, then me. I haven't said anything because if I even open my mouth I will turn this place into a Jerry Springer Show.

'Yes, a child," Mqhele says.

She flashes a sarcastic smile.

"If you wanted your child you would have found me a long time ago. I know you're more than capable of doing that so don't try to look good to your wife at my expense. I'm sure she knows what kind of man you are," she says.

Why is this woman still here?

The manager comes to our table, again, with two men who look like they are bouncers.

"Is everything okay here," he says, looking at me.

I don't answer.

'Yes, everything is fine. This woman was just leaving, or if you don't mind, please make her leave now," Mqhele says.

She looks shocked and hurt by what he just said. She walks away, grabs her handbag from one of the tables and leaves the restaurant with two other women following her.

I have never been so disrespected in my life and I have never been this angry at someone I don't even know.

"Can we have the bill please?" I say, pushing my plate away.

Eye contact gone. He can't even look me in the eye. I'm not exactly approachable right this moment. Plus, I have a feeling this woman is going to be in our lives from now on.

The only words I've said to him since we left the restaurant are "make sure the car seats are properly strapped". Otherwise, I have nothing more to say.

How could he allow that woman to disrespect me like that? He should have set her straight the moment she started talking. And what gives her the right to come speak to him? in my presence?

"I didn't ask her to come speak to me you know?" he says as we drive past the first toll-gate.

"She came to me, I didn't call her. I haven't seen or spoken to her in seven years," he says.

Is that supposed to make me feel better?

I'm sitting looking out the window. That bitch spoiled my day completely.

I'm just quiet.

"Okay, I don't know what to say to you now," he says.

He should not have said that. He should not!

"No don't worry, don't say anything, just like you didn't say anything when she disrespected me," I say.

He turns to look at me, seemingly shocked by what I've just said.

"But..... are you going to blame me for it now? I was shocked as you were to see her. I didn't know what to say or how to react," he says.

He is making things worse really.

I'm done talking.

"So are we at that place again where you shut me out because you're angry and I have to tip-toe around you because I don't know what you're thinking?" he says.

How dare he? Am I supposed to be jumping with joy right now? And why is he getting angry, I'm the one who was treated like shit by the woman he used to sleep with. He should have stepped up, that's what he should have done, for me.

How did he even love that girl anyway? she is a complete opposite of me.

"You're my wife, you're supposed to be helping me figure out how I'm going to resolve this, not crucifying me for something I had no control over," he says.

Oh yah, here we go again, it's all about him now. I'm about to be the bad guy here.

"I can help you through anything but not you and your ex flirting in my presence," I say.

I'm not sure where that came from. I'm pretty sure they were not flirting but I have to fuel this further just so I can release the anger, even if it means making false accusations.

"Flirting? Have I ever given you a reason not to trust me? You think I'd be interested in a woman I left for you before I even knew you'd want me? Since when are you this insecure Hlomu?" he says.

I realise he's not going to be apologetic today. He is throwing punches back at me as much as I am throwing them at him.

I've always been insecure, I've just never shown it.

After long silence, and me realising that this could get worse if it continues, I move right along.

"So what are you going to do?" I ask.

He sighs.

"I don't know, I'm going to track her down and get my child," he says.

I don't want that child anywhere near me or my house. I thought I did, but that changed about an

hour ago when its mother chose to disrespect me.

Infact, I'm surprised she hasn't contacted him before asking for child maintenance and all that crap. That child must be about 6-years-old now, he probably has big eyes. I try to imagine what he looks like, it's not hard, he's probably a shorter version of Mvelo and all of them.

He keeps checking on the babies on the rear-view mirror. They've been sleeping since we got in the car.

He takes my hand, holds on to it tight but doesn't say anything.

My spirit is down, I'm not even angry anymore I'm just sad, sad that this is happening and sad that I've met this woman he used to get naked with. It was fine when I just imagined stabbing her to death in my head, now there's a face to go with my evil fantasy.

“Nothing is going to come between us, I swear,” he says.

Maybe I should believe him. He once swore he'd never hit me and he hasn't since then. I can trust him, I have to trust him.

I lean over and put my head on his shoulder. He puts his arm around me. This is risky because he is driving but I need some affection from him.

He kisses the top of my head.

Chapter 25

Today would have been my first day back at work, if my life was still normal and I didn't wake up to see one picture or another of me or a story about which woman Mqoqi was seen with this time and this and that about the Zulu brothers every Sunday morning.

It's funny how in just six months Mqoqi has become a full-blown celebrity slash bad boy slash playboy. Oh well, he's always been a playboy and bad boy anyway.

I've hired a consultant to work out a formal business plan for me, that's what rich people like us do. I scribbled some notes and explained to her what I want, which she understood and even made some suggestions. She'll even advise on what area and space will work out well which is good considering how much I'm paying her.

When I sent my resignation letter last week, my boss wasn't too impressed. But I think he expected it. I could have sent it earlier, or immediately after I decided I wasn't going back but then, they were still paying me while on maternity leave so I thought let me just be greedy.

I'm officially a housewife until my project takes off. For now, I have to plan on how and when I'm going to drive around the most rural places looking for farm stalls, like, you know the ones that make jam and rusks and pickled things and bake the most amazing cakes to see if I could negotiate them stocking their stuff at my store. That is the idea.

The boys are still napping so I have time to check my emails and Google some information on the stuff I need for my upcoming store.

"Are you home?" an sms from Mandisa.

How about a hello Hlomu? Just for control.

"Yes I'm home. Why?"

"Please come over" she says.

What now?

"I could come later, the babies are still sleeping, I don't want to wake them," I say.

Imagine me getting in the car and driving all the way to Winchester Hills just because Mandisa asked me to come over. Is she for real?

My phone rings. It's her.

"It's important, please, I need you" she says.

The last time we had a conversation almost similar to this one we ended up at an abortion clinic, that was six years ago.

"Are you okay?"

"It's important, please, I need you," she says again, repeating the exact same words.

There's something wrong, really really wrong. Her calmness doesn't seem normal.

"Please don't tell anyone you're coming here," she says. Okay, she's scaring me now.

I pack the babies in the car. I haven't even taken a bath or had a meal all day and this has suddenly killed any appetite I had.

Mandisa is, I don't know, she's like a closed book. All I know is that she has a child, a baby-daddy whom she finds herself sleeping with sometimes, that she's been with Nqoba for over ten years and that she is dramatic.

I don't know where she is from, I have never met any member of her family nor the child she says she has. Again, we've never really been close.

They live in an estate complex so it's easy for me to just drive in because the security guards know us all.

I find her sitting on a bar stool with an almost empty bottle of wine on the kitchen counter, a glass in her hand. It's 10am!

"Can you help me get the babies to the bedroom, they're sleeping again," I say struggling to carry them both at once. If Mqhele happens to come home right now he is going to freak out, I didn't even sms to say I was going out.

But she just sits there, sipping on her wine. She's dressed up and even wearing make-up.

"Mandisa are you okay?" I ask again, still no proper answer.

"Take them to the bedroom, the guest one," she says. There's a way that she's looking at me that I find very uncomfortable and scary. I'm not sure if I should be here at all. We've shared some wine and cocktail moments but I've never seen her this drunk, or scary.

I'm going to put my children in the guest room downstairs, just so they are near incase I need to run out of here soon.

She's still sitting with one elbow on the counter and one hand holding a glass of wine.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I say walking towards her. Maybe she just needs to talk to someone, it can't be that bad.

"Oh Hlomu my dear, even if I wanted to talk about it, you wouldn't be able to handle it. It's above and beyond you. You mother children and you go shopping and you sleep with your man next to you every night..... what do you know about real life Hlomu?" she says in a very drunk tone.

Okay, she's insulting me now. She called me here to insult me.

"You grew up with mummy and daddy and your girly little twin brother and you went to nice schools with your fancy little friends and got your nice little job....."

Okay, now I've had it!

"What is this about Mandisa? Because if you go on like this I'm going to take my children and leave," I say. She's still sitting, looking like she could fall on her face anytime and I'm still standing at the centre of the kitchen.

"Take your children and leave? Where do you think this is Hlomu? Nobody leaves here. Nobody gets out," she says.

I'm not sure if we are still talking about the same thing.

I pull one bar stool and sit down, a bit far from her, she's gone crazy. She's staring at me now like I'm a puzzle she's trying to solve.

Finally, she stands up.

"Follow me," she says going up the stairs. I panic, but then, I don't have much choice so I follow her to the main bedroom. She opens the door, it had been locked from the outside, she leaves the door key hanging. The bed is not made, the linen is all black and there are just too many pillows on the bed.

She still has her glass of wine in hand. She stands at the edge of the bed and without a warning pulls the duvet open.

It's a woman. A woman younger than her and me. She's lying naked, still, she's not breathing.

I stand there with my mouth open. She's not moving for now but..... just now she'll wake and say hello to both of us. She doesn't.

I'm afraid to take a step back or a step forward. I stand still.

"I went away for two days, it was supposed to be three days, but I came back this morning. I found

her sitting here, naked, watching TV and eating cereal. On my bed, eating cereal on my Egyptian sheets Hlomu," she says. So simply.

"Mandisa, what did you do to her?" I ask.

"I did to her what we do in this family. I dealt with her," she says. She may be drunk but her mind is sober, I can see through her. I know she knows exactly what she is doing and saying.

"Is she dead?" I ask. I want to run!

"No. She's taking a nap," she says rolling her eyes.

Why did I even come here in the first place, I should have said no. I'm about to be roped into yet another secret I'm going to have to keep. But how? How does one keep something like this?

"I'm going to call Mqhele," I say. My hands and knees are shaking now. I'm looking at this woman's face. Her eyes are white, her mouth is open and her tongue is sticking out. She strangled her to death.

"Call Mqhele? No need. I'm sure we will manage, just the two of us princess," she says. She is so calm, even flashes a smile now and again.

I pull my cellphone out of my pocket, and just as I do she comes charging at me, but I'm by the door so I pull it and lock it from outside, locking her in. She's screaming and cursing. I run downstairs. My first thought is to put my kids in the car and drive off.

"Mqhele, where are you?" I say the moment he answers.

"I'm in town, what's wrong?" he says.

I don't have time to explain. The monster I locked inside the bedroom could escape anytime.

"I need you to come to Nqoba's house, Mandisa has.....just come now please," I say.

"Get out of there! Now!" he says.

The conversation is cut off at that moment. Mandisa is still cursing in the bedroom upstairs, it's a good thing this house is big.

I'm pacing up and down the lounge. Who could this girl be and what are they going to say at her home when she doesn't come back? I should call the police, but say what to them?

There has been so much shit in this family but I don't remember, not even once, anybody even mentioning the word 'police'.

Nqoba barges in first followed by Mqhele.

"Where is she?" he says walking past me.

"In the bedroom, I locked her in," I say. They both race upstairs.

Mqhele comes back shortly and grabs me by my upper arm. His grip is tight, very tight. He is angry.

"Why are you still here? Did I not tell you to get out of here?" he says, pointing his finger to my face. He is angry, very angry.

"I couldn't leave her here....." I say. I'm trembling.

"Where are my children?" he says. He's scaring me now.

"In the guest bedroom," I say walking to the bedroom. He follows me and once inside grabs both of them at once from the bed and walks out.

At the door we meet Nkosana.....Qhawe.....Sambulo.....they keep walking in and rushing up the stairs, one by one until they are all upstairs.

I'm walking behind Mqhele clutching two baby blankets and a bag. He goes straight to the car and put the babies on the back seat.

"Get in, drive and go home. Now!" he says. I've seen him angry but this, no.

He goes back to the house. I left my handbag and cellphone on the kitchen counter so I follow him. Just as we enter, Mandisa is walking down the stairs, staggering with the glass of wine still in her hand.

I don't know when and how but the next thing I see is her rolling down the few remaining stairs and Mqhele's hand pulling her hair. His nose is already bleeding and there's blood all over the floor. "You called my wife? My wife? I'm going to kill you," he shouts pulling her up and banging her on the wall.

I can't! I step forward. He turns around.

"I said get in the car and drive!!!" he says rushing towards me with his finger pointed.

I panic and run out the door. I climb in the car and drive off. My babies are awake. How I wish I was them, innocent, clueless.

I haven't heard from him since this morning, since I ran off and left him bashing that woman on the wall even when she was bleeding.

I could call Xolie, but she seems to be way behind when it comes to knowing the darkness in this family. So I'll let her be because I myself wish I knew less than I do.

It's after midnight and I'm literally alone in this house. There's a security guard at the gate, hi-tech security and an alarm system that could sense even a cat passing by but I still don't feel safe, not when I don't know where he is.

I'll never know what they did with that body. I know that. Maybe that is what drove Mandisa to madness, that she knows there are things happening around her but she never knows the full details, she had to keep putting the pieces together, just like I do.

The most complicated part about it though, is that we love these men so much that even with their demons, we could never leave them.

His phone is off, like it has been the whole day.

My phone rings. It's Xolie.

"Hi Hlomu, do you know if they are working late or something, I've been trying to get hold of Sambulo all night," she says.

Let me just lie. Maybe I'll tell her the truth later after I've measured the level of my involvement in all this.

"They must be, Mqhele is also not here, he told me they had to go somewhere. They are fine though," I say. I hope I sound convincing.

"Oh," she says, hesitantly. She wants to chat more. Geez! It's almost 1am. I say goodbye before she can start.

I take a book to bed with me. I'm sure I won't sleep at all so let me rather read.

"Sleep," he whispers as I turn around to face him.

I dozed off. He's put a blanket over me.

"Mqhele....."

"I said sleep!" he snaps.

I don't want to sleep. I want him.

He smells like.....soil I think.

I shift closer to him. He wraps one arm around me. He must think I want to cuddle. I want more.

I find his lips in the dark. I find his shoulders under the duvet, his back, his chest. But he is tense, it's like he doesn't want me too close to him.

"I'll go take a shower first," he whispers.

"No, I want you like this," I say curling on his body.

His skin is salty and his hands are rough.

I try to climb on top of him but he rolls and pins me down. He turns me to lie on my stomach, separates my legs with one of his and pushes himself inside me.

I'm holding on to the edge of the mattress with one hand and the other is pressing the headboard. He is pumping fast, too fast, I can hear his breathing behind my neck.

His hand tightens on my hair and I know it's coming.

He lets go of my hair and punches the headboard with his right fist, on and on and on until he lets out a loud groan, and then his body collapses on top of mine.

Unlike always, he didn't wait for me. It was all about him, it was for him, that was the plan.

He had anger and stress he needed to release. I must help him. I'm his wife.

I know he'll be less angry and stressed tomorrow.

When I wake up he is sitting on the bed looking at me with one baby in his arm.

I must have overslept.

"Are you traumatised?" he asks.

What kind of question is this? I give him a confused look.

"Are you traumatised by what you saw yesterday?" he emphasizes.

I don't know how to answer this. Ofcourse I'm traumatised, I don't wake up randomly expecting to see a dead girl on my brother-in-law's bed while being insulted by his psychopathic girlfriend.

"Yes, I am," I say.

"Good. Because I don't know why you went there in the first place without telling me," he says as he stands up and walks out of the bedroom.

OMG! I married a demon!

Baby Langa is still sleeping, he must have woken up and gone back to sleep already because they always wake up at the same time. Maybe I should start thinking about getting a nanny.

He's prepared milk formula. I'm not making my babies drink this, it looks like it was made with cold water and only two scoops of formula. I must just compliment him for being so helpful and then pour the bloody thing down the sink as soon as he turns his back.

"Did you sleep?" I say as I drop on the couch next to him.

His expression changes, like he's just remembered something.

"I tried," he says.

Now this is just random, but this is exactly what Mpande said to me when I asked him if they had slept on the night they brought Lwandle back after that kidnap drama years ago.

But this is a simple phrase, people say it all the time, every day.

'Where is Mandisa?' I ask. When I left he was about to crack her skull, I hope it didn't escalate to something really really bad.

"I don't know," he says dismissively.

"Was she? that girl, was she Nqoba's girlfriend?" I ask.

Duuuuuhhh Hlomu. But I need to find a way in.

“Just some girl he met the previous night who ended up in his bed,” he says.

So, this is what they do? They pick up girls just like that and end up in bed with them. I'm never going to visit home again.

“I'm not Nqoba,” he says. It's like he's reading my mind or something. Damn! I'm so insecure these days.

In my mind I play back what happened yesterday. How Mandisa was so calm throughout everything. How she pulled that duvet like it was some kind of prank.

How on earth do you kill someone because they are sleeping with your boyfriend? At what point does jealousy escalate to that level?

And Mqhele? Beating up his brother's woman? That's not even wrong it's downright shady.

“Mandisa said I didn't know anything about real life. She said all I knew was to mother and shop and that I have you and my perfect little life,” I say.

Why am I telling him this though?

He is quiet.

“You know more about life and how it should be than any other person I've ever met,” he says after a long silence.

“You didn't hurt her did you?” I ask, realising that he could have done something really bad to her.

“I could have done worse. Of all people, she calls my wife? To come and see her shit! I'm still going to deal with her,” he says.

I think he is overreacting a bit, the woman was obviously disturbed when she called me.

“What did you do with the body?” that's my mind running to my mouth again.

He gives me a blank stare, which changes to be an inquisitive look and then a hard face.

“I don't want you asking questions like that. I don't want you knowing these things. You and Xolie,” he says.

So simply put, he means I must never tell Xolie about this.

He stands up and leaves.

“I'm going to the office,” he says closing the door behind him.

What am I going to do today?

Lunch.

Which car?

Porsche.

Chapter 26

I'll be fine if I never see Mandisa again.

All I do these days: Lunches. Shopping. Babies. Cooking.

And I think he loves it like this. What is it with men and wanting to totally dis-empower women in their lives? He keeps saying we should have more kids, that time the milk in my boobs hasn't even dried. I'm not getting pregnant again. I'll keep taking the injection without him knowing.

I'm bored. I'm becoming a shopper and religious wine sipper. I'm becoming a typical suburban housewife. This is not how I planned my life. They say it happens at some point in ones life, that it's a phase.

I wonder where and how Sandile is doing. He hasn't stalked me since that almost-violent situation with Mqoqi. Don't get me wrong, I love Mqhele more than life itself but sometimes I wonder what it would have been like if I had not met him, if I had had maybe two or three boyfriends before him, you know, the fall in love, break my heart break up and move on kind of thing. I never experienced that.

I hear married women cheat, a lot. For me, that would be suicide, he'd chop every single part of my body before burying me somewhere where I'll never be found. But also, it would totally destroy him, totally.

Sometimes I don't understand myself at all. How can I be with a man I know won't hesitate to harm me if I put one foot wrong? If there's anything the past seven years have taught me, it's that I'm not the good girl I thought I was. I have a side I don't understand, a side that stays calm through dark situations. I'm standing here sipping dry white wine like there's no problem when I know there's a family out there looking for their missing daughter.

Urgh! My cellphone! I left it in the kitchen.

Private Number.

"Hello"

"Hello Mrs Zulu" a man's voice. I don't know him.

"This is Owen from the Weekend Expose', I need you comment on a story that I'm doing," he says.

I think about dropping the phone in his ear but what the heck.

'Keep talking," I say.

"I spoke to a woman who says she has a child with your husband. A 6-year-old-boy that your husband won't pay maintenance for because you refuse, and you refuse to accept the child. So, Mrs Zulu, with all the money that you have, why are you refusing to pay maintenance?" he says.

I'm listening to this and thinking: What The Fuck?

"What did you say her name was again?" I ask.

"Mbali," he says.

I realise I don't even know the baby mama's name.

"Naaahhhh, I don't know her. Tell her to send me her banking details I'll deposit money for school fees for that kid and an expensive weave for her," I say dropping the phone in his ear. I've just given him the best story of his sorry-excuse-for-journalism beat.

I know this is going to look bad in the papers but I don't think I care much. We are not the type

that needs good publicity to survive.

"Just got a call from a newspaper. Your baby mama told them I'm stopping you from paying maintenance"-I sms him.

My phone rings immediately.

"What?" he says.

"Yep, just got a call from some reporter saying he spoke to a Mbali who said she has a six-year-old with you and you are not paying maintenance because I don't want to accept the child," I say.

He is silent. Okay.

"The ex's name is Nokzola?" he says.

You've got to be fucking kidding me!! Jizas! help me! Don't tell me this man has another child I don't know about!

"They said it's Mbali. Who is Mbali?" He'd better start talking.

"I don't know," he says.

This doesn't make sense at all. It's either this girl is lying or he is lying.

Damn those bloody hijackers! This wouldn't be happening if it wasn't for them.

"Okay love, I'm not sure what's happening but I told that reporter that I don't know anything about a Mbali or a child," I say.

I'm just going to leave it here with him, and then do some serious digging. If he is lying to me, he will know me.

But if he really doesn't know anything about it, knowing Mqhele, he won't even pursue it. He thinks this media thing is a joke. What he doesn't know is that it never stops, it starts with stupid stories and goes all the way to the almost factual ones and then the real ones and ends with the truth.

"Peter, just got a call from this tabloid, they'll be running an inaccurate story about us. Please deal with it. I'll email you the details. The reporter's name is Owen. Thanks"

SMS sent, now moving on to more important things. Langa is coming to visit, I haven't seen him since Xolie's wedding which was over two months ago. But I know he's not even coming here for me, he's just obsessed with his nephews just like his mother and his brother-in-law.

If I could, I would tell him about this Mandisa thing but that would just be stupid of me. I have all these things I walk around with in my head and I can't talk to anyone about them.

I'm a wife, a loyal wife, and that means keeping my man and his family's secrets no matter how dark they are. And come to think of it, I was as involved in this as they were. A part of me believes that Ntsika left just to escape this life.

I miss him. I miss Sbani too. He is so grown now it's hard to believe he was a nerdy nine-year-old when I first met him. Soon he'll be bringing girls to my house and I ain't got time for that, he'd better wait till he's 30 before using his penis!

Lwandle is going to high school next year. Of all the kids in this family, I worry most about him. He's grown to be an angry, aggressive, confrontational big-eyed tall menace.

I never told Mqhele about that email, only Mandisa. Which reminds me, I haven't seen or spoken to that killer bitch since that day. I'm not even mad at her anymore. Our paths will cross soon, we are after all family, and I'm not looking forward to the awkwardness.

Part of me blames Nqoba for all of this. I mean how could he just bring a woman to their home? their bed? It's not even shady it's cruel. They say men cheat, and that we as women should accept it because it's who they are.

Now I don't have much experience in this relationship thing, I married my first real boyfriend remember? but I know it would break me. Just the thought of him on top of another woman sends shivers down my spine because it would mean I'm not enough. I wouldn't go as far as Mandisa has gone, but I'd be lying if I said I'd 'accept' it and forgive and forget.

I'm still battling with the fact that he has a child with another woman, I don't even know if I could love that child at all. I already hate the mother and he knows it.

Which reminds me.

"So how far are you with finding your baby mama?" I sms him.

No response. Let me assume that he is busy. Why am I already angry though?

There's also that Mbali thing. My life is complicated and I'm too calm about it. A normal woman would be throwing tantrums right now demanding answers. Do I let him off too easy?

But then, I have no reason not to trust him, he has never given me one.

I feel his hands on my shoulders. He is standing behind me as I sit on a slide chair next to the swimming pool. I've had this book in my hand the whole afternoon but I haven't done much reading, too much thinking.

"When did you arrive?" I ask. It's funny how I always turn around to find him there, I never see him coming.

"About 15 minutes ago. I was standing there watching you," he says pointing at the kitchen.

Okay, that's not creepy at all.

I'm not sure what to say, or ask.

"I found the ex, but not the child," he says.

That's weird. And when did this happen?

"When? But where is the child?" I ask.

He stares at me for a while before speaking.

"There is no child," he says.

But why do men lie so much? What does he mean there is no child?

"She won't tell me what happened but there is no child, that I'm sure of," he says.

I'm not sure if I should be relieved or worried about this situation. I have spent all this time secretly mad at my husband and resenting this woman and a child that doesn't even exist.

I try to read his mood, is he hurt or disappointed by this? I can't, he is closed.

"How do you feel about all this?" I ask. I need to know so I can comfort him if I have to.

Silence.

"I don't know. I'm just angry because she's put me through so much shit for the past seven years. I've been feeling guilty about neglecting the child and I've been feeling guilty about what it has put you through," he says.

It's understandable.

"I even got kicked in the stomach and sworn at for nothing," he says.

I don't know if I should take him seriously or laugh at the last statement because I can't tell if he is serious or not.

I think he needs comforting.

"Come here," I say pulling his arm and patting the empty side of the chair.

I place his head on my shoulder and kiss him on the forehead.

"You'll be fine my love," I say.

He is quiet. Now I know how he feels. He is sad.

Later, I will ask him to tell me everything, how he found the ex and how he found out there was no child.

My phone beeps.

"It's sorted. It was some girl lying. The story won't be published." an sms from Peter. Part of me thinks there's more to this Mbali thing than this. But I don't care, I have better things to worry about, including this sad big baby I'm cradling right now.

"Do you think you can make time for us to go away? On an overseas holiday maybe?" I ask.

I need to get his mind off this thing.

"Where?"

"I don't know. Greece maybe?" I say. I've never even thought about going to Greece before.

"Or we can go to Europe and after that stop by in London to see Ntsika," I say.

He nods.

"Now that's a better idea, Greece didn't sound very appealing," he says.

We both laugh.

"You're turning 35 in two months," I say in a random moment.

He turns on his side and hugs me tight.

"Promise me you'll never leave me," he says. His face serious.

That's a hard thing for anyone to promise. What if he abuses me again? will I stay for that?

"Promise to always protect me and take good care of me," I say.

He tightens the hug.

"I try my best Hlomu, I always will," he says.

I take a deep sigh.

"I know. I'll never leave you. It would hurt me more than it would hurt you," I say.

I can't imagine my life without him. It would be empty.

I want to ask him about Mandisa but I don't think this is the right time. Xolie still doesn't know what happened. I also wish I didn't know.

Her words: "Where do you think this is Hlomu? Nobody leaves here, nobody gets out".

They still haunt me. What exactly did she mean by that? Many women have come and gone in the past seven years, nobody ever tried to stop them from leaving. Or was she talking about herself? Why is she still with Nqoba after everything he has put her through? And how do you even 'date' someone for more than 10 years?

"What's on your mind?" he says, disrupting me from my deep thoughts.

I could lie and say nothing serious. But no.

"I'm thinking about Mandisa," I say.

"Oh, that. Do you want to see a doctor or something?" he says.

Really dude? I assume he means a psychiatrist or psychologist.

"And say what exactly to that doctor?" I ask, sarcastically.

"Oh yeah, that's going to be a problem," he says.

How can he be so.....I don't know.....unfazed by all this? Someone died, a girl whose family I'm sure is still looking for. She was probably a student in one of the universities or something. I never even got to find out her name or where she was from.

"You didn't hurt her did you?"

"Who?" he asks.

"Mandisa, when I left you were....."

"Yes, I did beat the crap out of her. She deserved it," he says. Sometimes I don't understand him at all.

"Mqhele, you can't beat up women, no matter what they do to you, there's just no excuse for it. What would you do if someone beat me?"

There's an immediate frown on his face. I think he just got a flash vision of someone beating me up in his mind. Good. I hope it will appear every time he thinks about raising his fist to a woman again.

The part I don't understand is how Nqoba allowed that to happen. A strange family this is.

I'm going through this morning's newspapers and yes there is no story about me stopping my husband from paying 'paggeld' for a child I don't even know about.

But there's one about Mqoqi and a certain actress who was seen on the passenger seat of his convertible car. I stopped keeping up with that kid a long time ago. He has become the life of the Joburg party scene, famous for being alive.

I'm picking up Langa from the airport in two hours. But first I have to go to Xolie's house, drop off these kids with her nanny and drive with her to the airport after which the three of us will have lunch.

"You look good, baby fat all gone hey," Langa says as we drive off to Eastgate.

Xolie was saying the same thing earlier but I don't think I'll ever be as comfortable with my body as I was before I got pregnant. I have been exercising, at the gym, in my house. Don't ask.

"I have to get my life back on track. Starting by finding something to do with my life and time, I'm not going to be a housewife, it's not gonna work," I say.

The restaurant idea is coming together. However, the dictator I married didn't support the idea of me driving across the country looking for unique products.

"You can hire someone to do that for you," he said. I did.

Langa's appearance has sort-of toned down. Still stylish but no longer in-your-face. I think he's grown and besides, a successful economist has to look presentable.

He still talks a lot though. I have moments where I'll be sitting with him talking but my mind would switch off and come back again later to catch up with what he is saying. It's like watching a soapie.

"Hlomu, have you seen or spoken to Mandisa recently?" Xoli asks.

It's time to lie.

"Not really, how is she?" I ask.

"I don't know, I haven't seen or spoken to her in a while. Not that we speak often. She never really liked me," Xolie says. I think it bothers her.

Langa is looking at both of us like we are the dullest people on earth.

"She just doesn't like humans in general. And don't even worry about her, she is a non-factor," I say signalling for the waiter to come over.

Okay, that came out a bit too bitchy and harsh. But hey, I'm slowly losing my good-girl personality.

They both laugh at what I just said.

"She freaks me out for real. And there's also Miss Beyonce, I hear this weekend she's going shopping in Cape Town," Xolie says.

Beyonce would be Qhawe's latest girlfriend. We call her that because well, her life will be complete only when she finally looks exactly like Beyonce. She orders her weaves from Malaysia. She has the longest artificial eyelashes and nails and speaks with a shady twang.

"By the time she's done with him his bank account will be empty," I say.

We are onto some serious gossiping today.

"How long do you think she'll last?"

Langa widens his eyes, in shock as Xolie asks this.

We all laugh. But this is the question to ask, she won't last that long. They never do. She's just another gold-digger passing by.

It irks me, it really does. These women come here because they see all the cars and houses and the luxuries and think they want to have it all. They don't know how hard these men work, they don't know their struggles or where they came from.

They don't even try. They are quick to walk away when they realise it's not all roses and pearls. But also, if I had to be fair, these men may be heartthrobs but they are heart-breakers too.

"Your wedding was beautiful Xolie," Langa says out of the blue. I think he is just trying to get us all back into one conversation.

"Thank you, it feels like it was just yesterday," she says smiling.

"How is Sambulo, I haven't spoken to him in a while," I say.

The last time I saw him was when he walked in with the rest of them at Nqoba's house. That day the evil witch made me witness a murder. All he gave me was an acknowledging look. It was a bad time.

"He's fine. Always working. Story of our lives," she says.

She's right. They are always working. But they always come home at night.

"It's hard to believe he almost died once. That was one of the scariest moments of my life, and I had just started dating Mqhele. Every woman in their lives left that year, they turned into animals," I say.

Xolie is looking at me with an expression I can't figure out. Maybe I shouldn't have said that.

"I was there when he woke up from the coma. I left the hospital five days later when he could see and speak. I remember seeing you a couple of times coming to visit. You always looked drained and depressed," she says.

Wow, I never recognised her. I usually went to hospital with Sambulo's then girlfriend who left when he got confined to a wheelchair and started throwing things at her.

"I never thought I'd ever get used to his slow-motion talking," she says on a lighter note. "And can you believe he still smokes weed, I've given up on trying to stop him".

We laugh so hard. I just can't get over the weed part, I don't think he'll ever stop.

"But he is the most normal person in that family. I've always found him to be the easiest to talk to," I say.

He's always been the one I go to first.

"And I battle to get him to talk about anything," she says.

Yeah I know what she's talking about. It takes a big fight and make up session for Mqhele to open up about anything.

"So how is the scary one?" she says.

Scary one?

“Yes, Mqhele. My knees used to shake every time he walked in. To be honest he still scares me,” she says.

I've heard he's intimidating and stuff but scary? This guy is always laughing and making silly comments. He gets angry and crazy sometimes yes but I think that's only with me, not other people.

“He is fine. Just dealing with some stuff,” I say.

The both look at me like they're expecting me to continue with the story.

I might as well, it's Xolie and Langa anyway, the two closest friends I have.

“So before I came in the picture he was dating some girl. She left, and two months later, just a week before we started officially dating she called him saying she was pregnant,”

I hear Langa gulp.

“He was busy trying to pursue me at that time so he brushed her off. But he still wanted his child, the girl would hear none of it so she just disappeared, changed phone numbers and moved to I don't know where,” I say.

They seem to be in shock.

“Fast forward. A few months after we got married Mandisa, thinking I already knew, starts telling me about how angry Mqhele was when the ex disappeared with the child. That was the first time I had ever heard about him having a child. We had a bad fight about it. But I was willing to compromise,”

“I told him to go find the child. He didn't,” I say.

“So he has a grown child somewhere out there?”

“It's complicated Langa but let me finish. Recently, when we were at home for your wedding Xolie, we were in Durban having lunch with the kids. This woman comes to our table, totally disrespects me. She tells Mqhele that if he really wanted his child he would have tracked her down a long time ago,”

I get angry just telling the story.

“Fast forward again. Yesterday Mqhele tells me she found her and there is no child. I'm just giving him time to get over this before I demand all the details,”

They both have this WTF? look on their faces. Now that I look at it, this is all weird. But then, so is my life.

“Some women are seriously psycho. Why didn't she just tell him in the first place that there was no child?” that's Langa.

He might have excessive female hormones but he will never understand how we women operate.

“You know, Sambulo mentioned something in passing. I think he and Mpande were the ones looking for the ex, apparently because if Mqhele found her first it was going to end up really bad,” Xoli says.

I think she realised immediately that she shouldn't have said that.

There we go again! It's like I am married to an animal and everybody sees it except me. What does she mean by things ending up really bad?

“I don't think he'd have hurt her, he just wanted his child,” I say, sounding rather defensive.

I don't like where this is going. We were supposed to have fun at lunch and catch up on some gossip. Speaking of.

“Where is Andy? When is he coming to pay lobola?”

His face lights up immediately. He is so in love with this guy.

I like him too. He is the arty type, a interior decorator slash advertising creative slash graphic designer. We have met several times and we share our love for books and crime drama series.

"So, that is part of the reason I came here. We're getting married and moving to Accra, Ghana," he says before taking a gulp of his wine.

Talk about dropping a bomb! What?

I stand up to hug him. This is the best news ever!

"There won't be lobola or anything like that though, like, imagine what that would be like," he says laughing.

Xolie is already ordering wine to 'drink to that'! Seriously?

Wait a minute!

My heart sinks. My dependency syndrome kicks in. What will I be without Langa?

Xolie gives me a reprimanding look. I know she's telling me to stop being selfish and be happy for my brother.

"I will be in Accra every second month, with my brood, maybe I'll have had triplets by then," I say.

We all laugh.

"Don't let him get you pregnant again, you were so horrible, and you looked like a monster," Langa says.

Can't argue with that, it's the truth and nothing but the truth.

"You're going to have to tell mom," he says.

I see. Shooting me with my own gun. I made him tell the parents that I was getting married.

My mom is going to freak out, not because Langa is getting married but because he is emigrating to somewhere across Africa afterwards.

She will, however, like the idea of the wedding being far from home because a whole lot of family members, if not all of them, won't have the means to attend. Because they live to judge, some of them even have the nerve to quote the bible when they don't even know how to pray.

Atleast this wedding is one thing to look forward to.

I wish my father was still here.

My phone, it's ringing in my bag but stops just as I'm about to answer.

Four missed calls. It's Mqhele. I must have not heard it because of the noise here.

I call him back.

He answers but says nothing.

"Hi," I greet, reluctantly.

"Why aren't you answering your phone?" he says. It's not good, I just know.

I take a deep breath.

"I didn't hear the phone ringing, it must be the noise, we're at a restaurant," I say, explaining too much I think.

He hangs up. Just like that.

I'm confused, what was that all about?

"You okay?" Langa says bringing me back to the real world.

I'm not sure if I'm okay.

"Yeah, it's Mqhele he seems a bit down, not sure why,"

I hope that's good enough an explanation.

"I guess maybe the child thing is still bothering him," Xoli says.

I get the feeling she's just trying to downplay the whole thing.

I'm about to finish my third Mojito but suddenly it doesn't taste so good. I want to go now.

"It's getting late, we can leave if you guys are okay with it," that's Xolie. She knows I want to leave.

When we get to Xolie's house we find my kids gone, Mqhele has already picked them up.

I think this is worse than I thought. I'm starting to get embarrassed because my brother obviously figures that something is wrong here.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asks as we drive to my house. I haven't been speaking much since we left Xolie's house.

I'm not about to be honest now.

"I'm fine, I just hope I won't have to cook when I get home because I'm tired and just want to sleep," I say. This is the most ridiculous answer to the question. Cooking? Really?

The car he left with in the morning is parked outside the garage so I know he is home.

I thought I'd find him in the lounge, waiting atleast to welcome Langa before going back to his sulking. He is in the bedroom. The kids are sleeping on our bed, already on their sleeping clothes. I know he's not capable of doing all that so it must be Xolie's nanny.

He comes out of the bathroom and finds me standing at the edge of the bed. He takes one look at me and continues with whatever it is that he is doing in the wardrobe.

"Were they already sleeping when you picked them up?"

He looks at me again but doesn't answer. Okay, something is really wrong, I close the bedroom door, preparing to talk about whatever it is that is bothering him.

"Did I do something wrong?" I say, funny because he is the one always asking this question.

"I don't know. Besides that you're only coming home at 9pm to find your children already sleeping, and that you're drunk, I don't know if you did something wrong," he says.

What?

I roll my eyes. Oops! He saw that, I shouldn't have done that.

The look on his face says it all. The rage, it has shot high up in just seconds.

He walks out of the bedroom. I hear him chatting and laughing with Langa. He was angry just now. Scary.

I carry the kids, one at a time to the nursery before going to the lounge.

"Your nephews are already sleeping, you'll see them tomorrow unfortunately. I'm going to go take a shower and go to bed. You know your way around here, love you," I say to Langa blowing him a kiss.

He knows there's something going on because normally we sit and chat through the night when he is visiting.

Hopefully his mood will have improved when he comes to bed, I think to myself as I take off my clothes and get in the shower.

I stand there and let the hot water run down my body. It's such a soothing feeling until.....

I feel a cold hand gripping my neck and pulling. I almost slip and fall but he grabs me by my upper body and pulls me out of the shower.

I don't know when he took off my shower-cap but he is now dragging me on the bathroom floor by

my braids.

The bathroom door is closed, the shower is still running, even if I screamed no one will hear me.

I've realised now that I'm being beaten.

And I will not scream, I will not drag my brother into this.

All I see are his feet. He hasn't beaten me yet, just the grabbing and the dragging, but I know it's coming. He hasn't said anything either.

"Mqhele, please," I say in almost a whisper. I raise my head to look at his face. He is staring down at me, enraged. I'm on the floor, naked, in tears, helpless.

He lets go of my braids and I quickly curl up in one corner. I have nowhere to run to. He pulls me up and throws me on top of the toilet seat.

I cross my arms over my face. Throughout the numerous punches and slaps all over my body, I keep my arms over my face.

I'd be damned if I let my brother and people outside this marriage see what he's done to me. The body I will cover, but my face can never show, never.

There's blood on the floor and the wall, my nose is bleeding, but there's too much blood on the floor to be coming from just the nose. He didn't touch it but it's bleeding. I've been quiet throughout the ordeal, no screaming, just silent tears.

He walks out of the bathroom, seemingly satisfied with himself, he's in the bedroom balcony, smoking.

Seven years later, a wedding ring and two children, I'm here again, and I have no idea where to go from here.

It takes me a while to drag myself from the floor to the shower, the water is still running, now cold, I just sit on the shower floor and let it pour over me, fused with my tears and blood from my nose.

I'm cold and almost shaking when the bathroom door opens. He turns off the tap and it becomes quiet, dead quiet. I'm sitting on the shower floor with my eyes shut, water from my wet braids running down over my breasts. I'm in pain, my body is heavy, I can't move.

He scoops me from the floor, carries me and places me on the bed over a bath towel. He uses another towel to wipe the water from my braids. He puts two blankets over me, disappears to the bathroom and comes back to place a glass of water and a box of painkillers next to the bed.

He goes back to the bathroom, I think he's cleaning the blood.

I think about my father. This one time, I must have been about six-years-old and a clumsy girl-child who bumped things wherever she passed. So there I was, whoozing in the kitchen while a pot of beans was boiling on the stove. I hit the handle, just the handle and it came down pouring. I got a few minor splatters, it all landed on my father's arms and hands. He tried to catch the whole boiling pot with his hands so it couldn't get to me. He lived with those burn marks throughout his life.

I'm still cold and I know I won't fall asleep. The headache is getting worse but I can't lift my arm to take the painkillers. I close my eyes and wait for sleep to come.

Chapter 27

He isn't in the bedroom when I wake up but I hear noise coming from the lounge.

I force myself to get up with all the pain I'm feeling. My abdomen is so painful even my back seems to be getting weak. I check myself in the mirror to ensure that everything that needs to be covered and hidden is, long pyjamas and a long robe should do. My face is intact.

I'm on my period, so random, I even have period pains, there's blood on the sheets too.

"Look who's awake...mommyyyy,"

"I can't believe I slept in so late. Have they eaten?" I say to Langa who seems to be making a great babysitter.

"I cooked them porridge, old school style," he says, impressed with himself.

My eight-month-old already too fat children being fed porridge? It's worse than I thought.

"Can you watch them for like an hour please? I need to pop out to the bank and the market for a few things," I say.

"I can watch them all day if you want,"

That's great, because I really do need a break.

I walk back to the bedroom without even touching my kids. I can't get myself to do it, not now when I feel like I'm a failure and a coward.

I put on leggings, boots and a sweater without even showering. I'll see about that when I come back. I still have a minor headache but I'm ignoring it.

"Mrs Zulu, hi, did you have an appointment for today?"

"No Vanessa, but I need to see the doctor, it's kind of an emergency. I'll wait if I have to," I say sitting down on the waiting couches.

I'm trying too hard not to show her and the two people also waiting to see the doctor that I'm in pain. Luckily it's an elderly couple so they won't be paying much attention.

I haven't heard from Mqhele and I don't know where he is. I left my cell-phone at home I think, I haven't seen it since last night. The bathroom was squeaky clean this morning.

"You don't look too good, Vanessa says you have an emergency?" Dr Masetla says as I sit down on the chair in front of him

He's been our family doctor for five years, every single member of this family is treated by him. But today will be the first time he learns what he is about to learn about the famous Zulus.

"I need you to check me, I don't really know what for, internal bleeding or something," I say.

He raises his eyebrow.

I look at him with a straight face and he knows I'm serious.

"Come with me," he says leading me to another room where he tells me to take off my sweater.

I see the shock and pity on his face when he sees my arms and shoulders. I end up undressing completely except for my bra and panties. There are no mirrors in this room, good.

He orders me to stand with my feet over two red-painted footprints while he moves a hand-held scanner from the top of my head to my feet, front, back, sides.....I stand there with my arms raised up, silent, holding back tears.

He runs the scanner over my stomach and abdomen a few more times. Gives me a frightened look and walks away to his table.

"I'm not seeing anything too bad right now, but I need you to lie on your back on the bed there," he says after I have put my clothes back on.

Ultra sound? For what?

He looks briefly at the screen and I notice his face hardening.

"It's fine, we're done now," he says as he goes on to sit down and write a prescription.

"I'm going to give you pain killers and some antibiotics, also something to kill the blood clots," he says.

"But, Mrs Zulu, can you call me late in the afternoon, there's something I still have to confirm and get back to you," he says.

Geez! I'm not sick, I'm just a battered wife. He didn't even ask me what happened.

I had to buy a whole chocolate cake and some biscuits on my way home because I had lied to Langa about going to the market.

He's leaving tonight. I had begged him to stay longer before he arrived but now I think I'm glad he was visiting for just one night. There's just too much hostility in this house.

"Have you guys decided on a date yet?" I ask him just to make conversation. He knows something is wrong but he's decided not to push.

"Not yet, we still have time though," he says.

I got myself to pick the babies up and hold each of them for a while. They look so much like their father. I see him in their eyes.

What kind of a mother am I? He makes me angry and I take it out on my kids?

We have our lunch, which Langa prepared, by the pool over a bottle of wine.

I'm still drinking, even after yesterday, I can't help it.

I desperately want to tell him everything, how my life looks rosy on the outside but is complicated and dark on the inside.

I still don't know where Mqhele is. He hasn't called, sms'd or come home since he left this morning. I don't even know what time he left.

"Urgh I'm used to this, all they do is work, but he'll be back eventually," I said when Langa asked about him.

To be honest I'm not not sure if he'll be back, I remember that day after we had a fight about Sandile, he disappeared for two nights after he almost beat me again, I had to call Sambulo to get him back home.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm really happy here. Many women would kill to have my life, a handsome rich man who would do anything for them and is not afraid to show the world how much he loves them.

Even now, with the pain and hurt I'm feeling, I know I will not leave him. I don't want to see him, I hate him, I'm angry but deep down, the love I have for him overpowers everything.

"You've been absent today, both emotionally and mentally," Langa says as I drive him to the airport. He sat at the back with the kids, the obsession!

I hate hiding things from him, but I can't have him hate my husband.

"I need to get my life together broer, I'm going on 30 and towards the direction when I end up being a wife and mother only. This not how I envisioned my life, do you remember how driven I was? How much I wanted to be a successful career woman," I say. Almost with regret.

The worried look on his face is still there.

"But you chose this life, you chose him, and I think you are exactly where you want to be," he says

giving me a hug and walking away.

Just the thought of going home gives me creeps. If I had somewhere I could go to and have peace and not be asked if I'm okay I would go straight there.

But they say as a woman, never leave your house no matter how bad things are, let him be the one to leave and he will come back eventually. I think that's a stupid theory considering that I have a home and a family that loves me. I could leave him anytime I want with his house and his money.

Funny how he made me promise never to leave him just two days before he betrayed me, again. He is still not home when I arrive. Still no phone-calls, no messages, nothing. I won't try to find him, I'm not sure if I want him to come back either.

It's late at night by the time I finish preparing dinner. I leave the plate on the kitchen counter, covered, with a knife and a fork and a two chilli peppers next to it.

I remember I taught him to use a fork and knife the night before he went for his first formal meeting with a mining company bosses. That meeting led to them getting the biggest business deal they had ever had, millions. He didn't even know the difference between a steak and a butter knife, I had to keep reminding him that knife on the right hand, fork on the left.

The painkillers the doctor gave me should help me sleep better. And by the way, I was supposed to call him this afternoon but I forgot. I'll call him tomorrow although I don't think it's that important. He probably wants to advise me to see a counsellor or something.

I haven't prayed in a while, but I'm not going to pray now because I'm in trouble, I'm not about to patronise God.

I try to get some sleep only after getting a call from Langa to say he arrived well in Cape Town.

The dinner I left on the kitchen counter is still there, untouched. I'm pretty sure he didn't come home last night, not even for his children.

Maybe it's time I started worrying about the possibility of another woman.

I check my phone. Nothing.

A call, it's Mqoqi.

"Hi Mami, I'm trying to get hold of Mqhele, his phone has been off since yesterday, Is he home?" he says.

Home. I don't think he knows where that is anymore.

"No," that's all I can come up with really. I don't know what else to say.

Silence.

"Okay, do you know how I can get hold of him atleast?"

"Mqoqi, I don't know where Mqhele is. And no, I don't know where you can find him," I say, now crying.

"Are you crying? What did he do? Are you.....?"

I hang up before he finishes talking. I switch the phone off. I don't want to talk anyone.

By afternoon there is still no sign of him. A part of me is starting to get worried. What if he is dead or injured or something? What if he hurt himself?

I have eight voicemails, four from Nkosana, Qhawe and the doctor. I keep forgetting about the doctor. He says he's been waiting for my call. I might as well call him back.

"I have spoken to my colleague, I think it's best that you see her, she's a professional and is good at what she does," he says.

I'm rather confused. Professional in what?

"I think you should get counselling before and after I tell you," he says.

What?

"Tell me what doctor?"

"Like I said, I think you should see her first, you are already going through so much....."

Seriously, can he just stop already.

"I'm a grown woman, I can handle whatever it is that you need to tell me. I'll be the one to decide whether I need to see your friend or not. Now please speak, I'm listening," I'm angry now.

He takes a deep sigh.

"The ultrasound showed that you were pregnant," he says.

Huh? Pregnant? Impossible!

"Pregnant? It can't be, I'm on contraceptives," I say.

"I know, but it happens. You were about five weeks far, though I can't tell now for sure," he says.

Wait a minute! What does he mean 'was pregnant'?

It's like he read my mind.

"You lost the baby. Those bruises on your lower back and abdomen, I think you lost the baby when they were inflicted," he says.

I'm quiet. I'm shaking and struggling to maintain balance. I find myself on the floor. I hang up on him.

The painkillers he gave me, I take four instead of two. I want to sleep, sleep like I'm dead atleast for hours. I'm so broken that I'm not even thinking about my two children who will practically be alone in the house if I drug myself to sleep.

But I still can't get any sleep. I keep thinking about it. I don't want to get pregnant again, it was not in my plans, but I can't get through that he killed my child, his child.

I hear footsteps coming towards the bedroom, I know it's him. They stop along the way, he must have popped into the nursery. He is careful not to make any noise when he opens the door. He goes straight to the bathroom.

I'm just going to pretend that I'm asleep.

I can hear him peeing but not flushing the toilet afterwards. The bathroom door opens, again carefully. Suddenly I feel a figure hovering over me. He's standing next to the bed, in the dark, over me, staring at me.

I close my eyes: "God, I need you now more than ever. Protect me".

It's a silent prayer, the most desperate prayer I have ever had to do.

He could kill me right now. I know he could. He's done it many times before.

Chapter 28

When you have everything, or when you think you have everything, everything that everybody wants, it's easy to believe that everybody is out to get you.

"I hope you know what you're getting yourself into, I hope you're strong enough" – an email from the woman who disappeared and left me to raise her children read years ago.

"I'm sure she knows the kind of man she is married to" - the woman who used to sleep with my husband once said.

"Where do you think this is? Nobody leaves here, nobody gets out" - a woman once said to me before showing me a dead body.

I'm happy to hold my children again. I'm alive. He could have done anything to me. But he didn't. He stood there and looked at me until I fell asleep. I could hear him breathing. I was praying he doesn't touch me.

He wasn't there when I woke up this morning. It's like he's become a stranger in just three days. I'm not sure if he is here somewhere in the house or if he left before I woke up. I didn't bother to check.

I didn't make him any breakfast and I didn't leave him dinner on the counter last night.

I'm still bleeding, and it's an issue now that I know it's not normal periods. I'm going to have to go back to the doctor so he can refer me to a gynae, my one emigrated three months ago.

I will not tell Mqhele about this. He will never know that he beat me into a miscarriage. He can never find out.

I've been ignoring Xolie's calls since yesterday. Actually I've been ignoring everybody's calls, including my mother's.

I don't want to talk, I want to sit here and figure out what I need to do next.

I hear a car pulling up at the front of the house. He must have stopped being a coward and come back home.

But it's not him, it's Qhawe.

I watch him as he walks over to the pool house where I'm sitting with a book I haven't even looked at.

He greets me with just a 'hi' and sits on the chair next to mine.

I don't respond.

We sit there for minutes, both of us staring at the still blue water in the swimming pool.

"He promised me it would never happen again. You too Qhawe, you promised me," I say. I'm not going to cry, not today.

Silence.

"I know," that's all he says.

We continue sitting in silence.

"He won't survive if you give up on him," he says.

"I won't survive if I don't. He is going to kill me eventually. I have children," I say, standing up and walking back to the house.

I have nothing more to say to him. This conversation is over. He knows it. He leaves.

My gynae appointment is on Wednesday, he'll probably give me something to clean my womb. I

also want to know if this won't affect my ability to conceive in future.

Again, I leave his dinner on the kitchen counter and go to sleep. If I had spoken to someone about this, maybe Thobi, she'd ask me why I still make food for him and want to take care of him with all that he's done to me.

I'd tell her that she doesn't understand, that she can never understand until she has stood in front of a priest and made vows. Until she has, mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually committed to living for another person.

A memory flashes through my mind, me getting in that green Sprinter for the first time. That was when it all began.

He is lying here next to me. I didn't see or hear him coming in but the smell of nicotine must have woken me. My back is turned against him, I know he isn't sleeping. I want to turn around and face him but I decide not to. Instead I get out of bed, out the door and off to the guest bedroom. I don't know why I did that but I'm following my heart right now.

The plate is in the sink. He ate. He is still in bed. I decide not to make him breakfast. I just don't feel like it.

The kids are taking their midday nap and I'm again wandering in this house with anger, fear and resentment written all over my face.

I feel him touch my shoulder from behind, it makes me scream and jump.

He looks startled, his eyes wide and all out.

I'm scared of him. I'm scared of his touch and him being near me.

"I am sorry" he says.

Those words! Those three fucking words! I hate them!

"I don't know what happened," he says.

I remember hearing this once years ago.

"I have no explanation. I have no excuse. I just hope that you'll forgive me," he says.

I haven't said anything. I've just been standing here looking at him. Now he wants to talk?

"Where were you?" I ask. I'm surprised that this is the first thing I ask him of all the questions I have on my mind right now.

He is silent.

"Are you cheating?" this is another surprise.

"No!" he says with shock on his face. As if he'd say yes if he was.

One baby starts crying. I leave him and walk to the nursery. I don't think we are going to have another conversation today. I don't want to.

He's been in the study all day, I assume playing his guitar.

The one thing he won't do I know is come and talk, really talk and tell me how he feels, that he won't do. He will keep apologising and hoping that with time everything will pass.

I must have been wrong because he appears again in the kitchen as I prepare dinner.

"I screwed up," he says.

You have no idea how much you screwed up broer.

"You have no reason to forgive me or to stay with me after all this but I hope you do. I will never

kill you Hlomu, I live for you," he says.

He must have spoken to Qhawe.

"You said you'd never hit me again, but you did," I say. I'm looking away from him as I speak, I don't want him to see me cry.

He is quiet.

I still don't understand what drove him to it, it can't be just that I was drinking and I stayed out until late.

"Why?" I ask.

"I got angry and I couldn't control myself," he says.

Oh wow! That makes me fear you less.

"So what happens the next time you get angry and can't control yourself?" I say.

He's quiet.

I put a plate in front of him and walk away to the bedroom, locking the door behind me.

I'm not sure what happened to him last night or which bedroom he slept in but he has already left when I wake up.

I'm going to get out of this house today or I'll die.

I drop the babies at Xolie's house with her nanny, promising to be back before late. She loves them and I do give her some extra cash now and again. I've been postponing looking for my own nanny or better yet, take these big-eyed brats to daycare.

I'm not sure exactly what I'm going to do or where I am going. I just need some air.

I end up at a hair salon, undoing my braids and cutting my hair very short. I sit through salon gossip and brave stares and awkward moments with people who think they know me or my life just because they've read about me in newspapers and saw me on TV.

Some just have no manners.

"So do you think you can hook me up with the big brother," this girl says playfully, she can't be older than 21 but she looks older with all the make-up.

I think she's just trying to make conversation, but today is not her lucky day.

"No," I say coldly. There's silence in the whole room. She walks away without saying another word.

The next thing I get an sms from Langa telling me that people are talking about me on twitter. That some girl has just tweeted that I'm an uptight bitch.

Oh well, maybe I am for refusing to hook up a kid, who should probably be in class, with a 40-year-old man.

He has called me four times since this morning but I just can't get myself to answer the phone so I keep ignoring him.

"I will do anything I have to do. I'll even go to those marriage doctors. Just please give me another chance to be your husband again"-

Wow. He's resorted to sms now. I'm not responding.

We bump into each other briefly in the passage. He tries to make some conversation, comments about my hair but I just walk past him.

He may think I'm being difficult but he has no idea what I'm going through right now.

We continue like this for two more days, him trying to talk to me and me ignoring him.

When I came back from the gynae I was in tears almost the whole afternoon and the whole night. He saw it but thought I was still crying over him beating me up.

I've been sleeping with the bedroom door locked. I've been ignoring all calls.

But I think the beating I can deal with, it was the reality of losing a child, a child I didn't know I was carrying that had sunk in, that was why I was crying.

But this morning I woke up feeling lighter. Yes I've lost weight in the past week but it's my heart that feels lighter.

I want to live again, laugh again, care again.

He's already gone when I get up. Story of my life.

I check my emails for the first time since last week. There's one from Jamil, he wants us to go check possible spaces for the store in four different areas tomorrow.

Wasn't he supposed to research a proper area with a suitable market and then come back to me with a decision? That's what I'm paying him for.

There's also one from Ntsika, it's pictures of him at a John Legend concert, he knows I love John Legend. Mqhele always says if he were to come perform here in South Africa he'd make sure he locks me in the house until he leaves.

LOL, he has no chill whatsoever this guy.

Wow! A smile on my face.

There are also invitations. One for the launch of some new female cosmetic range, some ladies society which seems to be consisted of rich bored housewives, some party with a long celebrity guest list....and this and that..

We've been getting a lot of these invites since we got 'famous' for being rich and controversial. We never go to any of them. Mqoqi shows up at all the parties but he also always goes for the sleazy ones with affection-desperate female celebrities.

Mpande, yes the dark horse of the family, is the philanthropist of the family, always throwing parties for poor little famous people who don't have money to buy their own booze. He doesn't even drink. He knows all the famous DJs and musicians. The curse of too much money.

I can't sleep, as always. He didn't come to the bedroom when he arrived but I know he is somewhere here in the house. He's already been to the nursery, I can't remember the last time he came back to find them still awake since this saga.

I get off the bed, put a robe over my nightie and go out of the bedroom. He is not in the kitchen, lounge or any other place in the house.

I think I know where to find him.

I push the door open slowly after knocking once. There he is, guitar on his lap. He's sitting at the corner of the only couch there is in the study.

I stand briefly on the doorway before walking to him. He is surprised to see me and keeps his eyes fixed on mine as I walk towards him, I think he's trying to read my face.

I stand in front of him for a few seconds before I sit on his lap. He quickly throws the guitar aside and I'm able to wrap my arms around his neck, rest my head on his shoulder.

He hesitates a little before wrapping his arms around me, tighter and tighter as he realises that I'm really here.

A leap of blind faith, again. It's the love I have for him that I can't fight. It defeats me every time.

Chapter 29

Things have changed so much since I, and about 1000 other creative freaks, took that long walk to the podium to be confirmed as 'educated' individuals.

We looked more natural, we dressed more presentable and we took the whole thing more seriously.

Lethu and her crew, I can't say the same for them.

But I'm really proud of her. We have a lawyer in the family. I feel for the poor people she'll be arguing against in court. This girl has the ability to reduce anyone to the ground.

People are always commenting about how much we don't look alike. She looks like my mom, me, I am my father's daughter.

Mqhele had been excited about coming to this graduation for days. They have a great relationship, probably because he buys her anything she wants. He sort of assumed a father's role to her after our dad died.

He spoils her. I don't like it, she must learn to earn things, not be given. But it doesn't hurt anyone so I let it go.

The only graduation ceremony Mqhele has ever been to was Ntsika's, the pride on his face, I still can't get the picture out of my head.

"Soon this will be Sbani," I say to him as we drive off to Umhlanga.

My mom wanted to throw a graduation party but Lethu said never, she wanted a small lunch with family and some of her friends. Oh and the boyfriend. The less said about him the better.

"It's going to be a long afternoon of English and giggling," he says.

We both laugh because I'm thinking the same thing and I'm dreading it all.

Lethu keeps mentioning that she intends to stay in Durban and build her career there. It's unlike her really, I always thought she'd want to move as far away from us as possible.

It's good news for my mom though because Langa has already announced that he is moving far up the continent.

This lunch thing turns out to be not as bad as I thought it would be, probably because only five friends of the twelve she had invited showed up. She wasn't impressed but I learnt at her age that as you grow, those who are not supposed to be in your life always see their own way out.

We're booked at a hotel because this big-eyed man has a problem sleeping at my mother's house.

"Imagine me waking up in the morning to pee and take a shower and bumping into your mother on the passage," he says when I try to convince him again to sleep at home.

I fail, again, so we leave the kids with my mother and head back to Umhlanga.

It's good to be here, away from Joburg and all the drama that follows us there. Can you believe somebody took pictures at Msebe and Langa's 1st birthday party and sold them to some tabloid?

The headline read: MILLIONAIRE CAR BOOT BABIES TURN ONE.

The story went on to estimate how many millions they already have and mentioned all the luxurious extravagant things that were supposedly at the party, which is rather strange because it was catered for by McDonalds and the most expensive thing there was the clown.

"Do you remember when you said you'd do anything you had to? When you were begging for my forgiveness after you....."

"After I fucked up," he responds before I can finish.

“Yes, well, I want a house,”

“A house? Another one?” he says with his eyes wide.

I thought he said anything.

“Yes, but we are going to live in this one, unlike the other ones I’ve bought,” I say. I’m a serial property buyer.

“We’re moving again?” he says.

“You said anything,”

He’s quiet for a few seconds.

“Okay, okay. But this time I’m not going to be subjected to annoying salespersons. Just tell me when we have to move in,” he says

“I want a new car too, and a holiday on an island,” I say.

He looks at me and smiles.

“I like you when you’re a gold-digger,” he says.

I can’t help laughing.

But I’m glad he’s back to being his arrogant self. It took us weeks to get back to normal after the beating episode. I was still hurt and angry and he was overcome with guilt. We both tried too hard to make things right again. When he tried to be intimate, just one day after we made up, I had to turn him down because I was still on medication after the miscarriage. He assumed it was because I was still a bit hostile.

“It’s going to be built from scratch, the way we want it,”

A bit of excitement I notice in his eyes when I say that.

“I built the Naturena house from scratch,” he says.

“Yeah I know and I think that’s why you don’t want to let it go,”

By the way, that’s where he went when he didn’t come home to face his sins.

We never went to that planned Europe holiday. By the time we were supposed to be good to go my store, ‘Fruitcake Crumbs’ was coming together.

I’m opening it next Friday. The capital needed went up to just about R2million including paying consultants and revamping the space I finally chose.

I just wanted people in the area to wake up one morning and find a new joint there without knowing who owns it. But things didn’t exactly go my way. I got a call from some journalist just after everything was finalised. I’m still convinced it was one of the consultants that told, they need the publicity anyway.

So we are going to have a launch function. Yes, a party with media and all things I’d rather we stay away from.

I hired an event organiser, Palesa, but I was strict about the guest list, I want restaurateurs, chefs, food critics and lifestyle writers. Anyone who isn’t in that business, and is not my friend or relative, is not welcome.

I’ve gotten really stuck-up over the years, it must be all the darkness that surrounds me and the guilt I have to live with.

“I’m nervous about the launch next weekend,” I say to him as we walk back to the hotel after having dinner at a restaurant by the sea.

“There’s nothing to be nervous about. It’s going to go exactly like it’s planned. I’ll be there next to you,” he says.

That’s comforting, Lord knows I could use his misdemeanour’s with all the strangers I’m going to

have to be laughing with.

All of them are going to be there, even Mandisa whom I've had a few awkward encounters with since that incident I'd rather not mention now.

Nobody has tried to kill us or kidnap any of us in a while so I guess we are heading towards being a law-abiding-family after all. Hopefully.

"I'm going to have to find a school for the twins,"

I'm not expecting a warm reaction to this.

"School? For what? They can't even talk yet," he says.

I normally have a plan for these kinds of conversations but I think I'm going to have difficulty with this one. This man is hell-bent on ensuring I don't have a life.

"Creche, they are 16-months-old they must start learning things like all other children," I say.

He chooses to ignore me and not take the conversation any further. I'm not sure if he's giving up or working on a comeback.

"Well, I have a few things to teach you too, like reminding you why I'm the man of this house," he says running his hand up in between my thighs as I stand in-front of the mirror wiping make-up off my face.

He knows I can't resist him once his finger is in there. He rubs his other hand up my breasts and I lose all will to fight him. I won't even make it to the shower now. He unties and drops the towel. I feel his skin on mine, his lips and that smell of nicotine that has become a permanent part of the aura around him.

"Teach me everything, roughly," I whisper in his ear before he has me against the wall in a second. It's a miracle we didn't break anything.

It's Friday and I'm running around like a headless chicken. I didn't have a hand in any of the planning and set-up but this thing has my name attached to it so I want it to be perfect. Besides, I paid people here, and they'd better deliver.

My dress is not ready. No it's not a cocktail dress, it's a pale cream-white vintage pencil dress that I will wear with nude high-heeled pumps. It had to go for some minor alterations.

My hair is still short so I don't have to worry much about that, but I've booked a make-up artist to come do my make up at home an hour before I leave.

I've been making Mpande run up and down all day. Anything that's not sorted yet he knows is his responsibility now.

This must be the biggest thing I've ever done for myself and I'm super-excited.

"I've picked up your dress. But I had to survive your over-the-top friends looking at me like I was a penis on display," he says.

Shame poor thing. I can't help laughing.

"You should be used to this, your brother-in-law is worse," I say.

I can't believe he didn't figure that the designers will be gay, aren't they all?

"Is your outfit ready?" I say.

"I need an outfit? I thought I'd just wear pants and a shirt and a jacket. The stuff you are forcing me to wear," he says.

He's being sarcastic. Okay.

"I thought you were going to be supportive," I say.

I don't need this right now.

"Okay, sorry love. Are you ready?"

"I am, three hours to go. Now get here please," I say hanging up and moving on to shave my legs. Langa and Andy were supposed to be here an hour ago. My mom and Lethu arrived yesterday but my mom insists on staying back with the kids. I've pleaded and begged but I think this grandmother thing is the most important thing to her. I know she is lonely especially because it's been so long since my father died.

She's probably done grieving by now and with Lethu going out on her own, it's going to be tough on her.

Oh and Lethu is entertaining the idea of umemulo. With my father not being around anymore, we have to prepare ourselves for the dictatorship of my drunk uncle and the return of my incredible aunt.

"It fits perfectly doesn't it?" I say turning around before getting in the car.

He's been looking at me like he's seeing me for the first time since I got dressed up and made up.

"With that short hair and this dress you're wearing, you remind me of the first time I saw you. You had short hair, and then the following week you came back with braids," he says.

I don't even remember that.

"You said I was beautiful. The first time I saw you," I say. He tells me that a lot, always randomly.

"You are, you've always been and you get more and more beautiful as you grow. I'm lucky," he says as he kisses the back of my hand.

"And you have everything to do with it. You're the centre of my joy," I say.

I know he doubts that lately but he knows I'm serious.

He looks gorgeous too, powerful and sexy in a black tuxedo minus a tie or bow tie. It's a simple function and the dress code was clear so I don't expect people showing up looking like they are going to the Grammy Awards.

I'm not looking forward to the media circus we are going to. I know some of them will be there not really for the launch but for these brothers and to fabricate some senseless gossip.

"Ready?" he says as we arrive in Fourways and he is about to open the car door.

"Yep, let's do this," I say picking up my clutch bag.

Cameras start flashing the moment he gets out of the car. They follow him all the way to the passenger door as he opens it and pulls me out with one hand.

I'm blinded by flashing lights the moment I come out of the car. Mqhele is already getting annoyed by all this. He puts a protective arm around my waist and leads me to the red carpet.

Wait! Who put a red carpet? I was specific that this is not an award ceremony and it shouldn't be about who was there and what they were wearing. This event organiser is never getting work from this family again.

I pose, smile, put my head on his shoulder and do all the other stuff I've seen people doing on red carpets on TV.

I see him stepping forward and giving a warning look to a photographer who comes almost too close. He gets the message and moves back behind the line. I know him, it's Mohammed, I used to work with him.

"You'll take two interviews for now and two more later, please come this way," Puleng says directing me to a TV camera already aimed at me.

Why wasn't I briefed about this? I maintain the smile nevertheless.

I'm still holding on to Mqhele's hand, tightly so just to make sure he doesn't leave me alone here.

"Mrs Zulu, Mr Zulu, I'm from Lifestyle Focus I'm sure you know about the show," this girl with red lipstick and a proper face says.

I nod. Mqhele is not even interested.

"You look stunning by the way....."

"Yes she does," Mqhele jumps in before she finishes speaking.

She smiles.

"It's good to see you out, infact the whole family out, it's rare," she says.

I knew this was about the family.

"Well, this is an important occasion for all of us. It's kind of a new venture because it's totally different from the business we know and have been involved in," I say.

The sooner I speak and get this over with the better.

"So what inspired this, I mean this is totally different, selling custom made products and running a restaurant in the same place, how's that going to work?" I expected this question.

"I'm trying to create a place where people can have an option to try new products instead of the traditional ones. And as you know most people are now into green living and natural stuff, that's what I'm going to be giving them. Most products here come from the most obscure farms across the country, you know, that elderly woman who has been baking her own rusks since she was young or making jam from peaches she grew in her own orchard, that's who is supplying me," I say. She keeps nodding as I speak but I'm not sure how much she really heard.

"And Mr Zulu, we don't see you out on the town often. Is this a big night for you too?"

I'm crossing fingers that he doesn't put her in her place.

"I think it's more important to me than it is to my wife. Just seeing her so happy and doing what she's always wanted to do. I'm hoping that this is the beginning of an empire and I know she is more than capable of doing it," he says.

I realise when he stops talking that I have turned my head to look at him, forgetting for a few seconds that I should be looking at the camera. That was the most beautiful thing he just said.

"Well thank you I wish you all the best," she says before moving her microphone aside.

I nod and take two steps further before Puleng is directing me to yet another pointed camera.

I put my signature smile back on and hold on to my man who is still by my side.

Different crew from the first one, not very organised or proper.

"Good evening, so great to see you again," she says.

I see. I don't remember ever seeing her before today though.

"So Hlomu you look stunning, who dressed you?"

Really, that's her first question?

"Oh, this was made for me by my good friends Munya&Lloyd, they have a boutique in Newtown," I say.

"Newtown? Isn't that a bit downtown for someone of your status?" she says.

I assume they haven't told her that I'm not exactly a nice person.

"And what status is that?" I ask with attitude.

She looks a bit shocked by my reaction.

I feel Mqhele's shoulders move and I know he's laughing.

“So who can we expect to see here tonight?” THAT is her follow up question.

“Come in and see for yourself but mostly family and our close friends will be here. But more importantly just enjoy the night it looks like it’s going to be a great one,” I say, now smiling and a little warmer. I had to put her in her place first.

“It’s great to see you Mqhele. May I ask who dressed you?” she says as we make moves indicating we are leaving now.

“I bought my suit from a shop,” he says before pulling my hand and leading me to the store entrance.

There is activity again outside as we are about to go in.

Oh yah, Sambulo and Xolie are here, they’re trying to escape the camera flashes as they march through the red carpet as fast as they can.

There’s only a few people inside the store already helping themselves to wine and tasting little portions of food products that will be available at the store.

It doesn’t look like a food store at all, it’s like a party venue.

“Don’t worry, it will be a full store and up and running by Tuesday,” Jamil says from behind me.

I must say I’m impressed by his work although I still think he was the one that told the media about this.

“I hope so, thank you,” I say giving him a hug.

Xolie comes barging to me the moment she walks in.

“I’m so proud of you,” she says giving me a gigantic hug. I think we are the only two people that hug each other in this family.

She looks beautiful in a short white frock dress and dusky-pink stilettos.

Sambulo, looking equally stylish, gives me a slow ‘helooo’ before snatching a beer from his brother’s hand. Boys.

Qhawe walks in with Beyonce running behind him. He looks irritated, apparently they had to stop on the red carpet because she wanted them to pose for pictures. But then, this is Qhawe, he just walked on leaving her standing, she had to run after him.

Langa, Andy and Lethu walk in together.

“I had to answer some useless questions outside. Someone asked me if you are happy in your marriage,” Langa says as he stops next to me.

“Tell me about it, someone asked me why I shop in Newtown considering my status,” I say and we laugh about it.

Nqoba arrives minus Mandisa, I don't know what’s the story there and I won’t even ask.

Mqoqi arrives with a daughter of a well-known politician who also happens to be a cabinet minister. We are going to have serious problems after this.

Mpande, I don’t even know when he arrived but he’s here with an entourage of a crowd that probably doesn’t even know what we are launching.

Nkosana is the last to arrive. There is something about him that just whispers money, power, intimidation, control. He’s wearing a suit that looks expensive even from far. His hair is uncut and is going grey. He brought the three boys with him. Nobody told me they were going to fetch Sbani.

He is so tall now, he looks exactly like Ntsika when I first met him.

He stops a couple of times on the red carpet with his kids by his side but doesn’t answer any questions, including one about when he plans to let go of his bachelorhood.

You can feel that he is in the room the moment he walks in.

I nudge Thobi with my elbow, she's standing with her mouth open.

"Ouch! What?"

"Stop it, you're here with your man," I say. Really? I don't want no drama here.

"But you know Nkosana is my soulmate, even though he doesn't even know my name," she says with that 'hoe' smile on her face.

I give up!

After greeting the boys, who don't seem to want to cling on to me anymore, especially the two now teenagers, I decide to go look for my man.

He's at the bar with all of them. I feel sorry for these journalists here because their picture captions are going to be so wrong. They will mess up the names big time, it's hard to tell them apart unless you live with them.

I put my hand on his back.

"Are you okay," I say.

He turns around and wraps his arms around my waist.

Flash!

Urgh! I thought they'd stopped taking pictures now.

"Yes I'm fine, and you?" he asks kissing my forehead.

Another flash!

"I'm sitting there with Langa, Xoli, Andy and some of my friends. Lethu has found people her age. I'll be there if you miss me," I say flapping my lashes and walking away. He looks at me with a mischievous smile as I walk away, all the way until I'm sitting down.

"Hlomu, I have people that want to meet you," It's Palesa. She sure works hard for her pay-check. Something tells me that this is just for her to boost her profile. I'll be sure to mention to everyone that this is all her work.

I meet, greet, smile and thank pretty much the whole room. It's full now but I'm still happy with the kind of crowd I'm seeing, although there seems to be too much female species circling the bar area now.

"You didn't think I'd miss this did you?" a familiar voice says from behind me.

It's Ntsika!

I jump up to hug him. I don't care that we don't hug in this family, this is my child and I haven't seen him in a long time.

"When?"

"About an hour ago, I couldn't get an earlier flight and I wanted to surprise you," he says.

"Do they know you're here?"

"Some of them. Let me go greet them," he says walking away. I hear noise coming from the bar and I know the reunion is underway.

This is not too bad. The kids stayed for just an hour before a driver was called to fetch them and take them home. Sbani was not feeling that but his father can't be challenged.

"I'm going to the ladies," I say picking my clutch-bag and standing up to go.

I have to check my make-up and make sure it's in place, you never know with these journalists around.

My face is oily, it must be the heat. Nothing a little powder can't fix.

I'm looking at myself in the mirror and can't help thinking about how much I've grown over the

years. I'm going to 30 already.

"I see you've lost the baby-fat,"

A voice comes from behind me. I look up the mirror, it's a woman, a familiar looking woman, standing behind me inside the ladies room.

I'm sure it's just the two of us here, she's closed the door.

Oh hell no!

"And how did you get here? Who invited you?" I say.

"Oh good, you remember me. But then, it's hard to forget someone you took everything away from isn't it?" she says.

What is this bitch talking about? She's the one that lied about having my husband's child.

"I'm not sure why you are here or what you are talking about but I know I don't have time for it so goodbye," I say heading for the door.

She moves to block me from getting to it. She is so tall.

"I'm not done talking to you," she says. I can see the hatred in her eyes after just one staring contest.

"Move!" I shout,

Who does she think she is?

"Oh! tough girl aren't you? He's taught you to be a fighter I see. He does have the tendency to turn women into animals," she says.

I don't have time for this.

"Look, I don't know what it is that you want but just so you know, I never stole him from you, he just happens to love me more than he once loved you, that's if he ever did love you because from what I hear, you were never a factor," I say.

Bitch wants to take this to the streets, I'll take it to the streets!

"I did everything for that man, everything! He knew I'd give him the world if I could. We were going to make it work. He was going to come back to me and we were going to try again after I told him I was pregnant but you had to come along and ruin everything," she says. She's crying now.

I can't believe this woman. It's been almost eight years and she's been AWOL almost the whole time. What the heck is she crying for? I had to start from scratch with this man to turn him into what he is today. What was she doing in the whole two years they were together?

"He chose me, and I don't have to give him everything or give him the world for him to love me, he just does. And that's never going to change," I say.

The door swings open and three drunk women I don't know walk in, giggling and giving each other high-fives. They stop when they see me and in that awkward moment I walk out.

I turn around before closing the door behind me..

"By the way, were you ever pregnant or was it all a lie?" I ask.

She throws her handbag at me, hitting me on the arm.

I continue walking.

"There's a woman in the restrooms wearing black pants and a white shirt, please get her out of here, and through the back door I don't want any drama," I furiously say to security guards who immediately run towards the bathrooms.

"What is going on? Where have you been?" Mqhele. When did he get here?

"I've been looking for you, they said you were in the restrooms. Why are the security guards

running there?" he asks, I don't like him when he is on panic mode because it can lead to anything. "I told them to kick your ex out, she tried to attack me in the restrooms," I say walking on and leaving him standing with his mouth open.

"What ex?"

"The bitchy one," I say.

Security guards come with one of them pulling her by hand, out through the balcony and they disappear to the back of the building.

"Is that.....?" Mpande says pointing to the direction they went.

"Yes, and I'm going to make her life hell," Mqhele says.

The security guard comes back.

"She was one of the caterers," he says.

"No. she's not," I say leaving them all standing there and walking back to where I was sitting. I'm glad they were able to get her out of here with no drama at all, hopefully nobody noticed.

"That was long, I was thinking of going to look for you," Langa.

"Yeah I bumped into Mqhele's ex in the restrooms and we got into a bitch-fight," I say.

They look shocked, they think I'm joking.

I feel him patting my shoulder from behind.

"Can we talk?" he says.

I'm not even angry about this whole thing.

He leads me by hand to the balcony where it's empty and quiet.

"What exactly happened in the restrooms? Did she hurt you?"

"No, she blocked the door, insulted me and said I stole everything from her. I wasn't going to let her touch me," I say.

I was ready to kick her ass if she tried anything. Nx!

"I swear I had no idea she was here," he says.

"I know, it's me she wanted not you,".

"Do you want to go home now?" he asks.

Yes I do, not because of this ex nonsense, but just because I've had enough smiling and greeting for one night.

"Let's stay for a while, atleast an hour," I say. I'm already turning into a socialite in just one night.

He is more than happy to stay. I thought he hated crowds, especially this type of crowd.

I walk back to my spot and free him to go back to the bar which now is almost like a female stampede. I thought this was a launch of a store not a night club.

And what's happened to Puleng and Jamil? they've probably forgotten that they're at work.

"You two might wanna make your way to the bar, there's astrogen all over there," Andy says.

It's seriously hectic even the ones with wedding bands don't seem to be safe.

"Don't worry about those men they're coming home with us. Even if they do succeed in stealing them, trust me they'll bring them back within two days," Xolie says.

We all laugh. It's a tough job we have here.

"Hlomu," a soft voice behind me.

It's Mohammed the photographer.

"Hey, you," I say standing up with an intention to hug him. He stands back. Oh yah! He's a fast

learner.

“Do you think I could have a group picture of all of you,” he says.

LOL, the way he is asking this question, I remember it from my days in the streets of reporting.

The 'do you think' is in the place of 'please', you use it because you can't get yourself to use the word please because it makes you feel like you are begging, you have your pride. But then, you have to be polite for the sake of getting the job done, which irritates the crap out of you.

See, journalists have absolutely no respect or regard for rich and famous people. As far as they are concerned, they are not worth writing about, but then, readers love being sold dreams so the materialistic and artificial will always sell.

Now back to Mohammed I don't see why he thinks he needs to be polite with me, we used to be buddies.

“Anything for you bushy,” I say patting his arm.

I used to call him bushy because he has thick eyebrows.

We all manage to gather within a few minutes, we had to go pull these men away from the bar. They agreed to the picture, begrudgingly. I had to pull Andy by the arm when he tried to get off the picture. He is family now.

“I'm not going back to the bar. I think we must go now,” Mqhele says as we disperse from the picture moment.

I thought tonight was about me, why is he the one telling me when I should leave now?

Anyway, it's after midnight and these heels are killing me.

I find Palesa and Jamil and say my goodbyes. I think it's better for me to disappear without people noticing.

My siblings know their way to my house, they're still in a party mood so I leave them there.

He has this smile on his face that just won't go away as he drives us home.

“You seem very happy,” I say, hoping he will share his amusement.

“I am. This was a great night. Maybe we should do this going out thing more often,” he says.

That's unexpected.

“With the media and all?”

“I don't care about those, all they're going to ask is where I bought my clothes. I just love the idea of having you in my arm, it makes me feel powerful,” he says.

Oh wow. I'm a trophy.

I'd show him that I'm offended but it will be a hard exercise making him see why, so I'll leave it.

“So you like parading me around?”

“Yes, especially when you look this beautiful,” he says leaning over to kiss me.

Suddenly I find his chauvinism very sexy.

“I see,” I say as I run my hand up his thigh and push it further in between his thighs.

He isn't wearing a belt so I easily undo the zip.

He has a shocked look but with a wide smile on his face.

“I'm driving Mrs Zulu,” he says.

“So what?” I whisper as I push my hand further into his underwear.

He starts moaning. Like, seriously, I haven't done anything to him yet.

“Should I stop?” I say kissing his neck.

He moans again. He puts his hand over mine.

"This is dangerous," he says.

Rich coming from a man who lives on the edge.

"Tell me to stop," I whisper. I know he won't, not when his balls are in my hand.

I'm about to get real ratchet right now.

I slide down, kiss him all the way to his belly, down to his manhood.

He has difficulty holding the steering with my head resting on his thighs. But I'm not letting him off.

His left hand is over my head, I know by the way he is moaning that he won't last very long.

I feel the car losing some balance and almost skidding off the road.

He let's go, inside my mouth, I swallow.

I get up, wipe my lips and sit up straight.

Whoah! I didn't realize we had parked on the side of the road.

I notice his knees are shaking. His forehead rested on the steering wheel and he is breathing fast.

I sit quietly watching him.

Seemingly more composed now, he raises his head, looks at me, smiles, shakes his head and starts the car.

I'm satisfied with myself. Once in a while you have to remind them that you own their body.

He's been holding on to my hand the whole trip, he keeps looking at me and smiling. He's like a teenage boy who's just lost his virginity.

We used to have sex in the car a lot in the days of the Sprinter, just for the fun of it.

The whole house is dark so I assume my mother is already sleeping. I hope the garage door opening won't wake her.

It's been a long and interesting night and right now I just want to jump in bed.

"I want to get out of these high heels," I say as I open the car door. But I feel him grabbing my waist from behind and pulling the door closed.

I get the feeling he wants to climb on top of me but he is too tall, so he pulls me to sit on top of him, he's still on the driver's seat. I feel my dress ripping as he pulls it up my thighs.

I thought he was done and satisfied, and that was just 15 minutes ago.

He has spread my legs and pushed himself inside me before I know it.

It's my turn to moan now, and gyrate. My back is turned against the dashboard and windscreen.

He is holding me by the waist and occasionally moves to clench on my buttocks. I try too hard not to scream but I let out a wail now and again.

"Shit!" he screams and lets go of my waist.

I open my eyes. There's light.

I turn around and there, my mom standing at the door connecting the garage and the house, frozen.

I freeze too. She shuts the door and disappears.

"Shit!" he says again.

I'm still sitting on top of him. Even my brain is frozen with my body.

How can so much stuff happen in just one night? It's hard to even remember what I did this morning with all that has happened.

"I'm not going in that house," he says.

That's right, I'm not going in there neither.

"Do you think she saw it?" I say.

He looks at me with that don't be stupid look.

"How am I even going to look at her?" me.

"She's going to hate me from now on," him.

The light in the kitchen is still on so she could still be in there.

Imagine two grown people stuck in the car too scared to go in the house because they were caught having sex.

We are married. This is our house. We have kids so obviously everybody knows we have sex.

So why are we sitting here like little rats? It's the fear our elders have been installing in us for generations and generations.

Okay, let me stop trying to be deep, I've just subjected my mother to live porn.

We've been sitting here for over 15 minutes. He looks really freaked out.

I want to laugh at this, it is so unlike him to be scared of anything.

"I'm going to go and check if she's still in the kitchen, I'll look through the keyhole," I say. Is that even doable?

I do it anyway and while at it I'm brave enough to open the door slowly. She's not there.

I signal for him to come over. He hesitates but opens the door when he sees me walking in.

We both have our shoes in our hands as we tiptoe through the passage and all the way to the bedroom at the end corner of the house. I peep through the nursery as we walk past it but it's empty.

Nobody tells the other to take their clothes off and get in bed, we are both there before we know it.

Damn! I didn't even get my happy ending.

"I'm not getting out of this bedroom, ever!"

Really now? he needs to calm down.

We go to sleep without even cuddling, that's how much freaked out he is.

I'm woken by Msebe crying, he has a deeper voice and is aggressive by nature so I always know when it's him crying or screaming.

I figure everyone is awake except me and this man next to me.

My phone. I have three missed calls from Langa.

And an SMS: *"hey, are you dead in there, wake up breakfast is ready. And you promised we'd do lunch, just the two of us"*.

Oh crap! Reality sucks!

It must be really late if Langa and Andy are already here. They slept in a hotel because they believed Mqhele would not be comfortable with two gay men sleeping together in one of his bedrooms. I don't even know why they'd think that.

"are you all in the kitchen" I SMS him back.

"Yes, mom made breakfast, come out already" he replies.

Geez why did she have to make breakfast tough? How am I even going to eat it with all the shame and guilt I'm feeling.

"I can't" I say.

"why? What's wrong?" he says with that panic tone of his.

"mah caught us having sex last night, in the car, in the garage. I want to go throw myself over a bridge".

Mqhele is still sleeping. I shake him, he needs to wake up and suffer with me.

'whaaaaaat' he says covering his head with the tip of the duvet.

"wake up breakfast is ready,"

He raises his head seconds later, gets off the bed and walks to the bathroom to pee.

He stands next to the bed stretching his arms and upper body when our eyes suddenly meet.

"shit!" he says putting his hands over his head.

Good. He's just remembered.

An SMS from Langa: *"whaaaaaat? Stay there I'll bring you a rope and poison"*

Langa doesn't understand that this is no time to be funny.

"Mqhele is freaked out he says he'll never leave this bedroom,"

"haaaaa I can imagine. You're going to have to come out though, she's leaving in four hours".

Langa.

And I haven't spent any time with her since she arrived. I've just been too busy with the launch and everything. I think our relationship is going to be awkward from now until the day I die.

I take a shower and get dressed up, just so I don't appear to my mother smelling like sex. I instruct Mqhele to do the same incase he can't handle the awkwardness and needs to lie that he is going somewhere.

Langa giggles as I walk in the kitchen.

Msebe, who I'm sure doesn't remember what he was crying about earlier runs to me with his hands open.

"Mami" he says as I pick him up. They haven't seen me since yesterday morning.

Little Langa clings on to Lethu and pays me no attention. They've kind of learned that I can't entertain both of them at once so they give each other a chance.

But he stretches his arms when his father enters the kitchen.

"Babaaaa..."

My mom is sitting on the kitchen counter sipping tea. My eyes have wandered everywhere except her direction.

"Good Morning," Mqhele says with shame written all over his face.

"Good morning to you too," my mother says with a creepy smile. I don't understand this, she's the one that should be embarrassed by all this, not us.

But then again, this is my mom, life is lived according to her rules.

Lethu appears with a tray and puts it on the dining table. It's Mqhele's breakfast, atleast he doesn't have to eat in the kitchen.

He takes his kids with him to the lounge.

"I heard about your porn-star tendencies," Andy whispers as we stand side-by-side over the kitchen sink.

Great! These bitches, I'll never hear the end of it.

"I just want to die right now, I don't even know what to say to her," I say.

I don't even know if I should go to her and apologise for everything or if I should leave it and hope

it will not be mentioned until the day we die.

I don't feel like eating so I just grab plain yoghurt from the fridge and join them on the counter.

"What's wrong madam? Are you on diet?" my mom.

The way she says it!

It's the way only my mom can say it and you know there and then that she is going to torment you all day with similar sarcastic comments.

"No, I'm just not really hungry right now," I say.

I could slap Langa right now, he keeps looking at me and then mom and then me again and laughs.

"Mmmmmmm I see. It must be nice," she says looking at me from head to toe.

It's worse than I thought. I love her but these four hours must go really fast so she can head home.

"I think it would make sense to have lunch at the airport, all of us together, and then leave from there," Langa jumps in. I think he is just trying to save me from this torture.

Infact, this is what my mother used to do with my father, have him walking on eggs.

If last night had not happened I'm sure we'd be having a great Saturday. The plan was to go out for breakfast, do some shopping with mom and the siblings and then have lunch with Langa, just us, after driving my mom to the airport.

Lethu would have found something to do on her own, she may have turned into a human being in her late teens, but she's still Lethu.

There's a car pulling up outside. It's Xoli with the other five Zulu rascals. I forgot she said she'd stop by today.

They barge in one running after the other.

"Hello gogo" Mvelo says jumping at my mother.

"Wande," the little Langa screams. That's how he calls Lwandle, they just love each other.

Sbani, well he is a teenager, he doesn't talk, he is not interested and he won't be trying to be anyone's friend.

The reunion at the lounge leads to ear-shutting noise and we all accept that this is no longer a place for adults. We all go our separate ways around the house.

Xolie finds me alone in the kitchen. I know her, she wants to talk.

"So, what happened last night?" she says.

I've been ignoring this. I don't want to talk about it and I'd prefer to downplay it even though it could be bigger than I think.

"Let's go sit there by the pool," I say. I can't risk my mother hearing us, she already thinks I'm a hoe with no self-respect.

I know I can talk to her and that I can trust her to respect my business, although most of the time I prefer keeping my secrets my own. Sharing secrets with a woman who is married to your man's brother never ends well, you never know what could come out during their pillow talk. Besides, some women can't keep secrets, the one thing that separates us from men, they can't do.

"Long story short, I was almost attacked, no infact I was attacked by Mqhele's ex in the restrooms," I say.

She looks at me with a confused look.

"Yeah, I was as confused as you are too. She's the last person I expected to see there. She posed as one of the caterers, imagine, she went through all that trouble," I say.

Xolie seems more worried than I am about this. It's just a girl fight, she'll leave me alone once she

realises she won't win. And I'm not even scared of her.

"I'm not trying to scare you but don't you think you're too relaxed. If she can go through all that trouble just to get to you, I'm afraid she can do worse. Maybe you should get a restraining order," she says.

A restraining what? She surely hasn't phantom what's going on around her or who she is.

"I don't think that's gonna work," I say, laughing.

"I'm serious, girls can be crazy out there. Do you know that when they travel for business sometimes, women actually come to knock at their hotel room, to offer themselves to them. I'm just worried, this is not a normal life," she says.

Mqhele has never told me about girls hounding him, I just know about the insults I get on social networks which I don't even pay attention to.

"Don't worry, he won't let her hurt me. What I'm worried about though is how far he will go to ensure she doesn't," I say, my face suddenly turning serious.

We are both silent, looking at the pool.

"They're not exactly saints are they?" Xolie says after a long silence.

Good, she's starting to see the light.

"They never have been," I say. I accepted this fact long ago.

"What happens if one day they don't come home Hlomu?" she asks.

I ask myself the same question every day.

"We just have to keep praying that it doesn't get to that," I say.

I think about all the people who didn't go home one night. Those Ngqulunga brothers, that police informer, that girl Mandisa 'dealt with'. I never heard anything about her, not even in the news.

It's true, we pray that the bad things we do to others never happen to us.

"Imagine having this conversation with Beyonce," I say.

We both burst out laughing. She'd probably be sitting here confused. I bet she doesn't even know what business this family is in and where their offices are.

"Did you see her last night posing for every camera in sight. She even wanted to jump in on that family picture but Qhawe told her to move," she says.

"Oh ghosh! I didn't see that, that was mean of him," I say laughing.

It would be a disaster if she ended up in this family. Call me an evil bitch but seriously? Any man can do better than that woman. Even Nqoba with his crazy Mandisa.

"Do you know why she didn't come last night?"

"I don't know hey, I was about to ask you," she says.

It's funny how we always know when we are talking about her without even mentioning her name.

I always think that maybe we are being selfish, instead of digging deeper and trying to find out what her problem is or maybe reach out to her somehow, we judge her.

There has to be a reason why she's stayed with Nqoba for all these years and why she is the way she is.

Sometimes she's great, there was a time when I thought we could be cool and comfortable with each other, but now, never, not after she intentionally traumatised me.

"We haven't been to Greytown in a while hey?"

I don't want to go there.

"Yeah, it's not exactly my favourite place. Something weird always happens when we are there," I

say.

"It's the creepy neighbours that get to me," she says.

It's been years since they went back to rebuild but I still can't shake the feeling that people have not done anything to them only because they fear them, just like they feared their father. And when they decided to stop being fearful, the worst happened.

Mzimela's nephew has been living there in the main house. He is a teacher at a nearby school. He says he doesn't care but some of the comments that have been made to him need to be worried about.

"Ahhhhh... the Zulu women. My father would be proud," Mqhele says standing behind us.

I like him when he's being his normal maskandi loving ice cream eating taxi driver self.

"And he would want you to drive my mother to the airport too," I say.

He laughs.

"He can stay unhappy, that is not going to happen," he says.

We both laugh. Xolie is confused.

"I'm going to Nkosana's. I'll take the whole brood with me, they're saying goodbye to gogo now. I'll see you later," he says kissing me and walking away.

The drive to the airport is long. My mother is still judging me but is nice to Xolie as always. The nurses!

We split cars, the three of us in one and Langa, Andy and Lethu following us in another.

We are already late so there won't be sitting down for lunch. Langa and Andy are going to stay at the airport and wait for their flight which is early in the evening. And me, I just need to sleep while this man is away with his rascals.

"Don't get home and sleep, make sure you cook dinner. You don't even have proper groceries, what are you cooking for that man?" my mother says.

I don't remember her training me to be a wife but the way she dictates!

"I'm going to buy groceries today ma I've been busy with the store and everything, but I always make sure he doesn't go hungry,"

I look at Xolie from the rear-view mirror and roll my eyes. She laughs quietly.

Langa will be gone soon, Lethu is no longer a child and she is about to go make her own mistakes, which means my mother is about to focus all her attention on me and trust me that's not a good thing if you are trying to hide some aspects of your life from the person who gave birth to you.

She adores my husband, but if she ever found out about his faults, I don't even want to imagine what would happen.

"It was great seeing you Xolie, you must come see me when you're in KZN," she says hugging her.

My mom thinks we have the luxury of waking up one morning and deciding we are going to KZN, or wherever else for that matter. I can't even remember the last time I just drove from Joburg to KwaMashu, alone, just like that without someone wanting to send a whole security company to accompany me.

"Bye mom," I say, making no attempt to hug her. But she comes forward and embraces me.

"Bye baby. And oh, sex in the car is for mistresses, you are the wife, you have a bed, have some class," she whispers in my ear.

I have no come back to this. She has totally burnt me to the ground.

Chapter 30

"I'm going to be fine, I'm not a child anymore,"

The way he says it, it's like he is pleading with me to believe him.

I want to, I really do, but to me, no matter how tall or old he gets he will always be that nine-year-old who sat squashed on a single couch with his arm around his two little brothers.

"But Mami, I've been in boarding school since I was 11, I'm better at taking care of myself than I ma at being taken care of. This is just one flight away, pop in anytime," he says.

I know he doesn't mean that. No first-year university student wants their mother dropping by every now and then when they are supposed to be enjoying their new found freedom.

It's the third semester already and I always do this when I accompany him, I think he's just being polite otherwise he would have told me by now that he can drive himself to school.

Yeah, he got a car when he passed matric.

"Promise me you will call if you need anything," I say. I don't want to cry and embarrass him in front of his schoolmates, there's already too much attention around him which he despises.

"You know you're always the first person I call," he says. I think he really wants me to leave now.

I blink many times hoping my eyes will dry by the time I get to the car.

I turn around one last time as we drive away. The sign, University of Fort Hare, large above us. I'm hoping he'll be standing waving, he is not.

I had always thought that Sbani would want to go to Medunsa and study medicine or that he's want to join Ntsika in the UK after finishing school.

But no, he wanted Fort Hare and it was not negotiable. He could have gotten in at any institution he wanted having been in the top-100 of high performing matriculants in the country, but he wanted this one, and he wanted to study politics.

I trust that he will be good because I know how Res life can be.

"They grow up too fast don't they?" Nkosana says noticing that I haven't said anything since I got in the car.

I nod. I'm not in the mood to talk right now.

"He'll be fine, he's almost 19-years-old. He'll make some bad decisions on the way but he'll be okay," he says.

"Sbani? Make bad decisions, I doubt it," I say.

We both laugh. He is such a good yet weird child.

After all these years I'm still awkward around Nkosana. He is just, I don't know, tense I think is the word.

The airport is 130km away so that almost another hour on the road with him. It was better when we were coming here because there were three of us.

There was a suggestion that we take the private jet, but Sbani said he would rather take a bus, alone, from Johannesburg to Alice than be the first year student that arrives on a private jet.

I know exactly what he was talking about, I also protested when the decision to buy it was made but I was never going to win that war. I've learnt never to get between boys and their toys.

"Do you mind if we make a stop somewhere?" he says.

Errrrrrrrr...

"No it's fine, we're still on time anyway," I lie. I do mind. I want this trip to end as soon as possible.

But, where on earth are we stopping and for what? It's getting dark already.

"It's just a business appointment, it will take only ten minutes," he says. It's like he read my mind. I hope it's not something shady. But then again.....

We drive into a suburban area, high built mansions and high trees lining the streets. We stop at a house in the corner. It's white, Tuscan style with a green roof. There are two security guards at the gate.

Judging by how swiftly they open the gate and how welcoming they are, I'd say they've been expecting us.

Strange though because the house is dark. But I trust, in fact I know Nkosana would never take me to a place where I won't be safe.

I worry sometimes about how paranoid I've become over the years. The moment I find myself in an unfamiliar place the first thing that comes to mind is whether I'm safe or not.

Forget that I'm surrounded by security, well at times when the man I married and his brothers make yet another dangerous business decision.

We've become used to it, we just wake up one morning to find suits all over the yard, even my two-year-old twins are not even bothered. They call them uncles and they bug them at every chance they get. The rule is, although I know they're carrying guns, I don't want them visible, not in the presence of my children.

I hope this thing takes ten minutes for real, I want to be back in Joburg in my house with my husband and my children.

"Come on in I won't leave you alone in this car," he says opening his door to get out.

I follow, reluctantly because I'm in no mood to entertain their business friends. I do that a lot in my house and frankly it's not my kind of thing.

There's another security guard at the door, he is wearing those blazers that are long at the back and short in front, and a hat. He bows as he opens the door. Unnecessary.

It's still almost dark. How do they sit in a house with such dim lights. There are steps going all the way high up, there's something Victorian about the design of this house.

"We're going that way," he says, now his hand on my back, very uncomfortable.

He leads me to another door that goes outside.

"Surprise!"

Oh fuck no!!!

Really? I didn't figure this out?

He's standing there, smiling with a glass in his hand. This man though!

"Happy 30th Birthday wife," he says taking my hand.

I'm just standing here frozen, crying. I'm not sure why I'm crying though but I know everybody is laughing at me.

I turn around and bury myself on his shoulder.

"Okay, the party can start now," he shouts.

I'm just standing here with my arms around his waist and my head on his shoulder.

"I'll wait for you to finish and then we can start partying, is that okay with you?" he says. He's being sarcastic.

"How?" I ask. This is the first thing I've said since they almost gave me a heart attack.

How on earth did he pull this off?

"I have my talents," he says with that smirk of his. "Happy Birthday wife," he says kissing my forehead.

"Thank you. For all this," I say looking around at the people, the décor, the live band, my family.

"No, thank you for everything, I thought you'd have left me by now," he says laughing.

Seriously now is not the time.

I smile and hug him.

Langa is not here, if he was I would have seen him by now. Our birthday was on Wednesday. I would be unfair of me to expect him to travel all the way from Ghana to here just for my birthday, besides, I'm sure they had plans with Andy.

I miss him so much.

"Surpriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiise," that's my cousin, yes that one. He comes running and smoulders me with a hug that almost have me falling to the ground.

Everybody here has grown except him, not a single piece of him has changed.

I greet him, he says something and leaves before I can even answer. He is just, him.

"You should have atleast tricked me into dressing up, look at me," I say to Xolie pointing at my floral maxi dress and flops.

It's not even my favourite dress I only wore it because I was travelling with the big brother.

"There's a dress for you upstairs in the bedroom," she says.

Oh well, I might as well get on with it, you only turn 30 once in your life, plus I've never really had a party, in my adult years.

"Happy Birthdayyyyyyyyyyy. Let's go get you out of that awful dress," she says pulling me by the arm all the way up the stairs.

She's wearing six-inch heels but walks so comfortably like she's barefoot. She's always in good spirits, she's loud, she laughs, she's glamorous and she's beautiful.

It's like she sees no evil in this world or maybe she doesn't bother looking for it, but wherever she goes, she rubs her permanent happiness on everyone.

Her name is Oleta and she's Qhawe's girlfriend. Beyonce, well, I had been saying that two months was a long time.

Oleta came when nobody expected her. They met at a supermarket, I don't even know why Qhawe would go to a supermarket.

She's been around for six months, and that's a long time. I wish she'd stay permanently.

We walk past Mandisa on our way back but I choose not to entertain her for now.

"I can't believe we are 30," says a voice from behind me.

It's Mqoqi. I forget we are the same age sometimes. I've always considered him a 'kid.'

"Yeah can you believe it? just yesterday you were a kid selling drugs at my house," I say.

He laughs. The little prick!

But his smile fades slowly and suddenly his face is serious.

"Are you good though?" he says.

I'm not sure what he means by this, whether he wants to know if I'm good today or good in general.

We are both quiet for seconds, our eyes locked.

"You know, I'm tougher than I look," I say. I think I believe this.

He doesn't move his eyes, he stares at me for about five seconds before speaking.

"I know. Happy Birthday," he says raising his glass.

I raise mine too.

"Cheers," we say together.

He walks away.

If you asked me what that was about I would never be able to explain it to you. But I know what it was, a deep conversation.

"Oh you've changed the outfit? Good because I was worried how you were going to look in pictures. And who is that girl? I hope she's not here with Nkosana, he's mine. What are you drinking?" she says snatching my glass from my hand and smelling it.

That will be Thobi. I'm not sure which of her questions I want to answer first but most of the time by the time I want to answer she'd have moved on to talking about something else.

There's Zaba too, drunk already.

"I have someone who wants to see you," she says moving aside.

It's her. Nana. Standing alone on the far side of the lounge. She flashes a lazy smile and a low wave.

I turn to look at the two of them.

"Please," Zaba says, almost begging.

I walk over to her. I'm not sure what to say but I know I'm not angry, which surprises me because every time she crossed my mind in the past two years I would just boil with anger.

"Happy Birthday," she says.

"Thanks," that's all I can say.

"I'm sorry," she says.

I don't know what to say. So much has happened in my life since her betrayal that I don't even know of there is still a need for her to apologise.

"Wanna grab a seat," I say. I'm handling this so well even I am surprised by myself.

"I heard it was all about money. You know, you could have just come to me, I would have given you any amount you needed," I say.

She is quiet.

"I know. But at that time it wasn't easy," she says.

I remember she sent me an sms once and I totally ignored her. I realise now that I should have just let it go then. This really just wasn't worth the anger and resentment.

"So who are you sleeping with now?" I say.

We both laugh. And that's how we girls end a war.

Mpande probably organised this DJ because the music he is playing is far too young for me and the crowd I relate to.

But I'm happy and thankful to my husband for all the effort.

A surprise party? It's amazing how people change, just a few years ago he couldn't care less about his own birthday.

He's going for his late thirties, and he gets more and more attractive as he grows.

The past year-and-a-half have been great, his demons haven't returned and we even got past that thing of the car sex scene with my mother.

I'm happy, he's happy, he wants another child, I don't.

He still doesn't care much about the fame and what the media writes about us, but me, I'm slowly

becoming paranoid, they seem to attack me at every chance they get. My personality, my bitchiness, my plain-Jane appearance.

I won't even start talking about the things they wrote after that launch.

They even took a swipe at Oleta recently saying she was dating a 'sugar daddy', she is 26 and Qhawe is 36.

"I'm impressed," I say to Mqhele, "I really didn't expect this".

"So you like it?"

"Yes I do, and the man who organised it," I say.

"Well, I organised the money, not the construction," he says.

I'm not sure what he is talking about, it must be all the Castle Light that he's been gulping. It's funny how, with all the money that he has now, he hasn't changed a bit. He still drinks what he used to drink, smokes like a chimney and still says random stupid things now and again.

But most of all, he loves his children. And with all his faults, he loves me deeply.

"It's yours," he says.

Huh?

"The house," he says.

OMG! This man!

"I have something for you, follow me upstairs," I say after my going crazy and jumping out and down moment.

Hi face lights up and he puts on that little boy smile. But then, Nqoba and my cousin come and pull him by hand. They seem to have something that can't wait that they want to talk about.

I shrug and walk away, he looks so irritated by them.

There are people here that I've never seen in my life. I guess it's always like that at parties, some on will invite someone and you will end up with more strangers than people you know.

I find Xolie coming out of the bathroom when I enter the main bedroom. This house is fully furnished and homely, but I'm going to make some changes soon.

I was also on my way to the bathroom but I can do that later.

"Come in here, I want you to tell me how this was done behind my back," I say pulling her to inside the bedroom. I'm lying, I just want some gossip and to get away from the crowd.

"Remember my friend who sold my kids' picture to the media, she's here, we just made up," I say. She raises her eyebrows.

"Yeah she's here. I realised when I saw her that I wasn't even mad at her anymore," I say.

She has this doubtful look on her face, like she's thinking I let Nana off too easily.

I don't care, I just don't have time to be angry at anyone, not at this age.

"What are you two gossiping about here?" she says with a soft giggle, throws herself on the bed and lies on her stomach with both her hands on her cheeks.

She's looking at both of us with an inquisitive smile. This girl, she's something else.

"We're talking about how you all lied to me for weeks planning this party," I say.

She laughs so loud that I'm sure someone walking on the passage heard her.

I look at her sometimes and wonder if she's as happy as she seems. She's into the flashy life, the expensive things and the limelight but that doesn't overshadow the fact that she is a good person. Qhawe gives her all that she wants but he is trying to make her quit her career as a Marketing Executive. She'll hear none of it.

I turn around and there is Mandisa standing at the door, a wine glass in her hand. A picture of that day flashes in my mind. Oh! the things one has been through!

"Why wasn't I invited to this Zulu wives meeting?" she says. Oleta laughs, she thinks she is joking, but I know that face.

She walks in slowly, she's struggling to walk up straight but she's still in high-heels.

We are just sitting with our mouths open. I already know that this won't end well.

Mandisa, she's a broken woman.

"This is nice, beautiful young ladies talking about their perfect lives,"

Oh God! There we go again.

We can hear the music coming from downstairs, it is house-music.

She starts dancing, but it looks like she's following ballroom music only she can hear.

She has one arm stretched out and her wrist bended, like she's dancing with someone and has her hand on their shoulder. With one hand she holds her wine glass which is almost empty.

She starts humming something.....

"Good girls sold their souls for love and money and comfort...," she's still singing and dancing, sliding across the room with her glass and arm still holding the invisible dance partner.

She continues to hum something in a similar tune.

We are just sitting here not knowing what to or say to her, this is more than weird.

"Mandisa...." I say standing up.

"You shut up! Shut the fuck up Hlomu. Everything was fine before you got here, we were fine! But you came and tried to change things, turn them into model citizens, push Nokzola out of the picture....."

Oh God! this is about that bitch ex?

"I think I should leave now....." Oleta says getting up but Mandisa rushes to her, pushes her back to the bed.

"Leave to where you little gold-digger? What? you think you're different than the rest who have come and gone because you've lasted longer than five minutes?" she says with the biggest frown on her face.

I wish someone would walk in right now and save us.

"And you, darling, you married a hitman," she says pointing at Xolie.

I can't let this continue.

"Mandisa, I see where your problem is. But this is between me and Nokzola, whatever it is that you both hate me for. I've been nothing but nice to you but you've tried everything to destroy me," I say, my voice raised.

Come to think of it, when she told me about Mqhele's ex disappearing with his child, she probably knew I didn't know anything about it.

And when she called me to her house to witness the murder she committed, her aim was to get me out of my shell and drag me into her world of knowing things that kill one's soul. But first, she had to have something on me, that's why she forced me to conspire with her on that abortion she had.

"Maybe it is about Nokzola, or maybe I've never really liked you," she says.

"Well, if Nokzola has something to say to me she knows where to find me. I'm tired of being terrorised by you Mandisa, deal with your freaking demons," I say, I'm angry and I'm getting loud.

Xolie and Oleta have been quiet throughout, they keep looking at us both. This has turned into a heated argument.

"Nokzola would definitely have something to say to you if she wasn't dead, if that animal you married hadn't killed her after she threatened to go to the police and tell them about all the cash-in-transit heists, all the robberies and....."

What is she talking about?

"But you know what's worse? He would have paid her off or charmed her into not going to the police, but he decided to kill her when she threatened to tell you about all the women he's been fucking throughout your marriage," she says.

No. No. She is just trying to hurt me,

She laughs and walks out of the bedroom, glass still in her hand.

We continue to sit in silence.

Nothing could ever have prepared me for this.

"Ladies, we will stand up, get out of this bedroom and walk down the stairs with smiles on our faces. None of this ever happened," I say putting my heels on.

Oleta does as I say. Good. She's a fast learner.

"You smell nice," I say with my arms wrapped around his waist, looking in his eyes with a smile on my face.

The party is continuing, everyone seems happy.

The thought crosses my mind: *What if I had never gotten in that car?*

Chapter 31

This room, it could actually be someone's whole house.

It's bigger than my family house in KwaMashu, before my parents got money and made it bigger.

I like the feel of it, it's almost empty with no furniture, just a big black leather chair with a foot-rest under it. I had it painted white so that it would feel light and fresh.

It was a my special gift to him, a room where he can sit alone and play his guitar.

It's at the far end of our three-storey, six bedroom, four garage house in Saxonwold, Johannesburg.

It kind of reminds me of my newest addition to the house collection.

After blackmailing him into buying me this one, the toughest exercise was convincing him to move from the south, away from everybody.

I did my magic and he agreed begrudgingly. It took one trip to the the site I had my eye on and he was hooked, he pretty much oversaw the whole building process.

He wanted a full entertainment area with a bar and pool table and gigantic screen for soccer days, I said yes.

He wanted a helipad on top of the house, I refused.

He doesn't have a helicopter and he is never going to buy one. Not as long as I live.

He sat here in this room most of yesterday afternoon while I slaved away in the kitchen.

And like a king, as it has been in the past eight years we have been together, he sat at the end of the table and feasted.

From there he feasted on my body, and then he fell asleep with my head on his chest and his arm around me, holding me, his greatest asset.

I haven't slept for more than three hours since we came back from Port Elizabeth two days ago. I get terrible nightmares when I do. I fee like I'm haunted, like I'm in a dark place with strangers staring at me with their fingers pointed, they seem to want to hurt me but are struggling to get any closer to where I'm seated.

Last night, when it happened again, I woke up gulping and him shaking me to wake up.

He has asked me three times since we came back if I'm fine and I've lied each time, I said Langa was going through something so it's natural that I'd be under the weather too, that it had been like that since we were kids.

I can't believe he bought that, that's if he bought it.

I also haven't spoken to Xolie or Oleta since Friday night. We agreed amongst ourselves that that little incident never happened, unless we wanted turmoil in this family.

I think Oleta will be with us for a long time.

"Are you going somewhere tomorrow," he asks as he wraps his arms around me from behind.

As if he doesn't know all my comings and goings.

"I have to pick up MaMnguni from the station in the morning. I'll go past the store during the day and from there I'm not sure I think I'll just come home," I say.

MaMnguni has been with us since the twins were a year old. She's a widow in her 50s from Nquthu, where my father is originally from. I got her through my aunt. I was sceptical about it at first but I've since realised I need her more than she needs the money I pay her.

She stays clear of Mqhele because, you know, women her age believe that a 'mkhwenyana's house

and space need to be respected at all times. She has her own one-bedroom flat outside with its own entrance.

"Sure you don't want to go spend my money on something?" he says jokingly.

I try very hard to make the smile on my face convincing. I think he knows that it's not really there, but he doesn't mention it.

"I thought we'd have lunch before I leave, I'm going to Rustenburg for a couple of days, I have to finalise that sand transporting deal Nkosana has been trying to close," he says.

He doesn't travel often, maybe once in about four months and it's never more than two nights. Him and Sambulo, I've always assumed those are the rules because they are married.

Him going away has never bothered me before, but now that I know what I know, I can't help feeling uncomfortable and maybe even a little angry about it.

"Oh, where will you be staying?" I ask.

He gives me an inquisitive look.

"Royal Bafokeng. Why?"

That he asks why, it makes me even more suspicious.

"I'm just asking, Rustenburg is a small town and the last time I went there, when Langa was still living there I didn't like it very much," I say.

That's all I could come up with.

"Does he still have friends living there?" he asks.

Had this been five days ago, I would have seen this question as just being out of curiosity and showing interest in my brother's life. But now, my female instincts tell me he wants to know so that he can be extra careful if ever he will be with one of his whores.

I've never suspected anything? How is that possible? Or is it that I'm in denial, just like I am of the fact that I'm married to a killer? or that I had a miscarriage and it bothers me a lot?

"Yes, a lot of them," I say before turning to face him.

I run my hands up his back. Amazing how his skin still feels like it did on that morning he caressed me out of the shower and made me a woman.

I run one hand down to his waist and slip it under the elastic of his pyjama pants.

My eyes are fixed on his, he knows what I want and how I want it, but he won't just give it to me, he's going to make me go all the way and take it.

I pull his pyjama pants down, pull up his top all the way over his head as he raises his arms and throw it on the floor.

I kiss his chest, down to his belly and all the way down until I'm on my knees. I dig my nails on his buttocks as I push him all the way to my throat...in...and...out...and...in.

He is holding on to my braids very tight. He is moaning, loud, and I'm sucking as hard as I can.

He moans again, louder before he pulls me up to my feet by the braids and swing me around to face the single chair by the wall. He pushes my back down until I'm holding on to the chair with both my hands. From behind he pulls up my left leg and I feel his finger sliding in and out in a second, he's inside me before I know it. His one hand holding up my leg and the other on pressing on my back.

A scene of him doing this to another woman keeps flashing in my mind. I don't see her face but I see him very clearly, his face like I've seen it in the millions of times I've pleased him in between my thighs believing he was mine and only mine.

He grips tighter, I feel his body getting tense, he groans, and he lets go, I feel the warmth inside

me.

"I love you," he whispers in my ear, pressing me against the wall with his whole body.

Lord knows I love him with all my being. But I can't say it now.

I watch him getting dressed for the trip. I've packed everything he is going to need, just like I always do.

I wonder how long I'm going to keep this shereade I'm on. Why can't I just ask him? Maybe it was all a lie. Maybe Mandisa was just trying to hurt me like she always does. But Mandisa has never lied.

No, I'm not going to do it, I'm not going to interrogate my husband about something I heard from some crazy murderous woman. He has never given me a reason not to trust him.

And why am I not even bothered by that Nokzola factor? Oh well.

"I hope Nqoba will be ready to go when I get there and that there will be no drama with that unstable woman of hers," he says.

Mandisa once showed up at 2am at a hotel Nqoba and Nkosana were sleeping, in Bloemfontein. Whatever possessed her to drive across two provinces in the middle of the night, I don't know. She found him sleeping alone, but they were kicked out of the hotel after subjecting everyone to a real-life Jerry Springer episode.

"She really is unstable," I say with a blank stare on my face.

By the time I come back to reality he is standing in front of me, looking at me.

"Hlomu, are you sure you're fine? I don't think this is just about Langa, you're distant, I'm worried," he says.

I'm not sure what to say to him. His eyes are piercing through me, I want to hide but I'm betrayed by my emotions.

"Hey, what is wrong? why are you crying? Did I do something?" he says sitting me down on the bed.

Yes, you did everything! you made me love you and complicated my life.

"No, I'll be fine, I don't know what's wrong with me, I miss my dad, it's his birthday today," I say.

It really is my dad's birthday today, he would have been 55-years-old. I remembered it this morning.

"I'm sorry my love. I could stay here with you and leave early tomorrow morning if you want. I don't want to leave you like this," he says.

Nope, I want him to leave. I need a break from him and I need to think about what I'm going to do about all this crap that's going to destroy my marriage.

I haven't laughed, like, really really laughed recently, not even at Langa's madness.

I'm having lunch with Xolie today before I go and pick up the twins from school. Mqhele will be back this evening so I have to be at home early enough to cook proper dinner.

There's a part of me that didn't miss him at all.

See, this is the problem with keeping quiet about things that bother you, you suffer alone while the person responsible continues with their normal lives.

"You know, sometimes I really want to ask him," I say as I down my second glass of wine.

Xolie is looking at me with a concerned face. What she doesn't know is that I've been dealing with

these demons since I was 22-years-old, and my wine has never betrayed me.

"I think that if my husband is sleeping with other women, I have the right to know and I have the right decide whether I want to stay in this marriage or not," I say.

She raises her eyebrows.

This is the first time, in all the problems that we've had in the past, this is the first time I have thought about whether I should still be in this marriage.

"So you're just worried about the cheating part only?" she says.

This girl, don't tell me she's about to start judging.

I don't answer her.

"Could he really kill her? I mean I understand with all the other people, but his ex?" she says.

Okay. She's judging, and I'm getting pissed off by it.

"Xolie, the sooner you understand who we are and who we are married to, the better. We are the women they really love, the backbones of this family, and that comes with its perks, they will do anything to keep us here," I say.

She drops her eyes.

I pour the last of the wine and signal for the waiter to come and take the empty bottle.

We've mastered the art of finding obscure restaurants where we know that if we are seen there our doings won't be splashed in newspapers the next morning.

"But, why does Mandisa do this? I've tried to find out what the story is with her from Sambulo but you know he's not a talker. He just says she's a demon they can't get rid of," she says.

The demon part I agree with.

"She's a demon alright. Problem is, she's not a liar," I say taking another sip of my wine.

My phone rings, it's him.

"Babe, are you okay?" he says.

"I'm good, just having lunch with Xolie, what time are you driving back?" I say.

"Yeah, that's the thing, we can't come back today, we have another meeting tomorrow morning so we're going to stay over," he says.

My heart sinks. The reality.

"Oh," I say.

So many things are going through my mind right now.

"Don't sound so sad, I know you miss me but it's just for one night," he says, I can tell he's speaking with a smile on his face.

I have to maintain my calmness at all cost.

"Just one more night it is, I'll call you later," I say.

"Okay, love you," he says.

I hang up immediately.

"He's not coming home tonight," I say to Xolie. I feel down, really down.

She drops her eyes. Wow! She's feeling sorry for me. I'm that woman now.

I try very hard to maintain my step as we walk out of the restaurant.

Xolie is parked close to the exit so we say our goodbyes and she drives off. I have to walk a couple of blocks to get to my car and I'm struggling.

A couple of years ago they suggested that we get drivers and stop driving ourselves to places. We

put our foot down and went on a full force protest using all kinds of weapons from withholding sex to random tears. We won in the end.

As I reverse the car, I can't see clearly in front of me, everything is blurry and my knees are weak. I keep burping. Did I have too much of that wine?

Let me just park and sit here for a few minutes, I'll be okay.

I'm still not okay 10 minutes later. I'm sure I've dosed off a couple of times and I really can't fetch my kids from school feeling like this.

I have to make a call.

"Could you do me a favour," I say.

I don't know why I chose him.

"Anything, are you okay?" he says,

No, but hey.

"Yes I'm okay, I'm just not in a good space right now. Could you fetch the kids from school for me and drop them off at my house?" I say.

"Yes, anytime. I'm just worried about you, weren't you having lunch with Xolie today?"

How did he know that? Are we being stalked now?

I burp unexpectedly.

"I'm on my way there, don't move," he says and hangs up.

This is the drama I don't need in my life.

He's here in 15 minutes, on a bike, a small one. How am I even going to look at him when I'm sober and back to being the perfect wife?

Surprisingly he doesn't cause any drama. He opens the boot of my Range Rover and manages to squeeze his bike somewhere in the back, I don't even know how he did that.

He doesn't say anything but pulls me from the drivers seat to the passenger seat.

He drives off. The security guard we drive past has been watching me since I got in the car but I think he's not the nosy type.

We're both quiet throughout the way to the twins's school. I've been sitting looking out the window.

He gets out of the car and comes back with them minutes later holding each by hand.

Msebe is galloping as always. I know he'll start talking the moment he gets in the car and we are going to have to listen, although it's hard to make out what he is saying, until he falls asleep.

"Mami you are sleeping?" Msebe.

"No, mami is not well" he says before I can respond.

"Mami you are sick because you didn't eat your food?" Langa.

And so it goes on and on until they fall asleep on the back seat.

The driveway to my house brings me back to reality. He won't be here again tonight and when he comes back I'm going to have to pretend that everything is okay, that I still trust him and that I am still fully committed to this marriage.

The kids run off to find MaMnguni as soon as they get in the house. They must have figured that mami is a stranger today.

I drag myself up the stairs, barefoot. He follows behind me carrying my handbag and my shoes.

We walk past Evelyn, she comes three times a week to clean up the house, she mutters something I don't understand, as usual. She's from Zimbabwe and speaks only Shona.

I sit on the bed. He heads straight for the wardrobe and pulls out a small blanket. He lifts my legs up and puts them on the bed too.

"Sleep," he says, putting the blanket over me.

I take my phone and set the alarm for 5pm.

He's still here, standing over me, watching me.

"Thank you Mqoqi," I say as I close my eyes.

Chapter 32

I woke up late in the afternoon, prepared dinner and put my children to bed.

Now, I'm walking around like a zombie and I can't sleep because I find it hard to believe that there's a meeting that just came up out of the blue.

I've become this miserable person in just a few days. The woman who gets so drunk she can't even pick her kids up from school.

Now, Mqoqi has shocked and disappointed me many times in this life but I know he won't say a word about today, not to Mqhele anyway.

I still don't know why I called him of all people. But I knew, and I was certain that he would come. Infact I could have called any one of them and they would have come running.

It's getting late and I should call him before he goes to sleep.

"Hello," a voice answers. I must have dialled a wrong number.

I check my phone screen, no it's not a wrong number, it says "Hubby" here.

"Hi," I say.

She drops the phone immediately.

I dial again and it rings unanswered.

Breathe Hlomu.....Breathe!

I've been sitting here motionless for minutes. This can't be happening, not to me.

My phone rings, it's his number. I can't answer now, I'm just frozen.

I answer it when he calls for the eight time.

"Hlomu, it's not what you think," he says. He sounds like he's on the road.

I keep quiet.

"Hlomu, talk to me please, I'm on my way home, please," he says.

I hang up and switch my phone off.

What the heck? Where am I? What happened to my great life?

I sit on the bedroom floor because right now I have absolutely no idea what I should do next.

I need pills, a lot of pills to help me sleep. Actually no, I need to get out of here.

I see MaMnguni peeping through the curtain when I drive off. I ignore the security guard waving and drive off on full speed.

I find myself on the freeway heading south. Where am I going though? I left my children alone in that house. What if something bad happened and I'm not there? He and that whore of his are not worth it.

But I need some air, I need to get away from his house and everything that has his name attached to it. So I drive on. The signs say Bloemfontein, I follow them. My phone is still off, I know he's calling.

Bit how can Mqhele do this to me? After everything, everything I have done for him, every thing I have sacrificed for him?

Why did my dad have to leave me? I have no one to run to now. I should never have lied to him that day, I should have told him the truth about this man, he would never have allowed me to marry him, I would not be going through this today.

I finally stop at a petrol garage in the middle of nowhere and go inside its convenience store.

"Can I have that pack of cigarettes with that?" I say.

The cashier looks at me with stunned eyes. I pay no attention to him.

It's 1am already, I've been on the road for two hours. I light a cigarette, I've never smoked before but they say it calms you down, makes you think clearly. But I cough on the first pull, it tastes horrible, I don't know why people do this. I throw the whole packet away and get back in the car. I don't even know where I am right now.

But wait, why am I running?

I slide the chair back and switch off the car lights.

"Mam," a voice says from outside.

It's the store cashier knocking on my window.

There's light outside, it's already morning.

I roll down the window.

"Mam, I'm knocking off now, I just wanted to know if you are okay and if you need me to call someone," he says. He's young, must be Sbani's age.

It's 6am already.

"No, I'm fine, I must have dozed off," I say, a bit embarrassed really.

He says thank you and walks away.

I need to use the restroom before I go back to face the ruins of my life. I try to switch on my phone but the battery is dead, I hope my kids are okay.

A few metres after I get on the freeway back to Joburg I see this young boy again, walking. This is the middle of nowhere. This is risky but I stop anyway.

"Where are you going?"

"Home," he says. He's standing outside the car.

"But, where is home? There are no houses near here,"

"It's about 20km away from here," he says.

Geez! That means he walks 40km a day!

"Get in, I'll take you home," I say directing him to open the door.

He gets in, but he's nervous I can tell. He has a cellphone and a packet of cigarettes in his hand.

"Are those my cigarettes?" I ask.

He stutters and then hand them to me.

I shake my head.

"No, you can have them, I don't even smoke," I say.

"I don't either, but my uncle does so I was going to give them to him," he says.

He seems like a great kid. I hope he doesn't grow up to be a typical man who never get satisfied with what he has and cares about no-one but himself.

"So you walk to and from work every day?"

"Yes," he says. He keeps playing with his fingers.

"It must be really hard, you look like you should be at university or something,"

He suddenly has this sad look on his face.

"I finished my diploma last year, I'm still trying to get a job," he says.

Wow! I know a lot of kids his age with qualifications who would rather sit at home if they can't find a job than go work at a garage and walk 40km every day.

"It must be hard. How old are you?"

"It is hard. I had to find work, any work, because I also have to take care of my mother," he says.

Poor kid.

"Is she sick?"

"Sort of, she's in a wheelchair, my father beat her for years and she stayed with him. The last was when he beat her so hard that that he broke her spine," he says.

This is too close to home for me. I look at this kid, pain and anger and resentment is written all over his face.

OMG! The sad part is that this is a story of many women alive. It could end up being my story too.

"Are you okay mam?" he says.

I'm upset. I'm angry at his father and I don't even know him.

"That's really bad. I'm also running away from a man like your father," I say without thinking.

I regret saying that immediately.

"But you're driving back where you came from," he says.

He's right.

"I'm going back, I left my children," I say.

He keeps quiet and looks out the window, like I've disappointed him somehow

"Here, write your phone number down," I say handing him a piece of paper.

He does as I say.

"I can get off here, my house is over there," he says pointing to an informal settlement not far from the road.

He jumps off. I didn't even ask him for his name. Oh yah, he wrote it under the phone number, his age too, he's 21, a little older than Sbani.

Ahhhhhhh cars on my driveway, Lord knows why they are here. I'm married to only one of them, and they probably know about all his cheating so I don't know why they are here to patronise me.

They all come out when they hear the car drive in.

It's Mqhele first followed by Nqoba, Qhawe and Sambulo. Mqhele runs to my car while the others stand on the porch.

Is there ever privacy in this family?

"Hlomu," he says as I come out of the car.

I'm still wearing pyjamas and a robe on top.

I walk on to the house with my arms folded across my chest, passing the three standing there, I don't greet or look at them.

Mqhele is walking behind me and all I want to do is turn around and slap his unfaithful face.

I head straight to the twins' bedroom, they're not there.

"Where are my children?" I ask.
He's quiet.
"Mqhele where are my kids?????" I scream.
Nqoba appears behind him.
"Guys leave," Mqhele says to him.
Nqoba shakes his head and comes towards me.
"It's fine Nqoba you can all leave I'll take it from here," he says.
"Are you okay Hlomu?" Nqoba asks.
I don't answer.
They scurry off at the same time and leave.
"I took the boys to Xolie," Mqhele says.
He must have come back a while ago then.
"I want them back," I say and walk on to my bedroom and into the shower.
When I come out he's sitting on the bed quietly. My walk-in closet is connected to the bathroom so I'm already dressed when I come out.
"We need to talk about this Hlomu," he says calmly.
Mqhele wants me to hurt him, he really does. Why is he here? Why is he talking?
I turn around to face him.
"Talk," I say.
He's quiet. I thought he said we must talk.
"Who is she?"
He's still quiet.
"I asked you a question, who the hell is she?????" I scream
He stands up.
"It's not what you think," he says.
He'd better not start with that lie.
"You've taught your whores not to respect me? They answer your phone now? did you sleep with her last night? Was she good? was she better than me? Did you tell her you love her?" I'm screaming, my hands are shaking.
"Calm down please," he says.
Oh Hell No!
"I know there's been more Mqhele, she's not the first one! I know that," I say. I'm in a rage here!
I move towards him and he immediately moves backward. I stop.
"I'm going get my children, and I'm leaving you, go get you whore, let her move in here, marry her I don't care" I say and walk out of the bedroom.
He's right behind me.
"Hlomu, you can't drive when you're like this. And where were you all night?" he says.
He has the nerve to ask me that!
"I was out fucking some man, that's what we do in this marriage isn't it?" I say.
His face changes. Oh! How easily he gets hurt!
"You're not walking out of this house, not when you're this angry," he says.

Like I'm supposed to be happy.

He runs ahead of me and takes the car keys from the kitchen counter, locks the kitchen door and puts the keys in his pocket.

Wow! Smart isn't he?

I grab a key for another car and walk out the sliding door. The car I had been driving, for which he now has a key is parked outside the garage and is blocking all the other cars inside.

But who cares? I start the Q7 and reverse, I press on the accelerator harder and ignore the crashing sound. I'm going to get out of here, even if it means tearing the bloody Porsche blocking my way into small pieces! I'm getting out of here and I'm getting out now.

I keep pressing harder and harder.

He's standing in the garage screaming my name. If he comes any closer to this car I'll run him over, he knows that! But he comes to the car anyway.

"I'm not going to let you hurt yourself," he is shouting, standing in a small space between the car and the wall, if I move even one inch forward I'm going to crash him.

"Go ahead, you can run me over but I'm not going to let you hurt yourself," he screams.

I hear police sirens. This is bad.

Two police cars drive in on high speed, police come out running towards the garage. I'm still banging on the Porsche behind me.

Why did that security guard let them in? He's fired!

"Hlomu! Stop!" he keeps screaming.

One policeman manages to walk to my side and tries to open the door.

"Don't touch her!" Mqhele says pushing the policeman aside.

I stop when I realise if I move any further I might run both of them over. There's silence and calmness. I get out of the car and walk back to the house, leaving all of them standing there.

My nose is bleeding and the blood drops are making a trail on the floor as I walk to the bathroom.

I'm washing my face when I hear a voice behind me.

"Mrs Zulu," he says, it's one of the cops.

I turn around to look at him and immediately go back to washing my face.

"Mrs Zulu, should we stay or leave," he says.

Is that even a question policemen are supposed to ask? Who called them here anyway?

Mqhele barges in with three other cops following him.

There's blood all over the floor.

"Mam, did anything happen here? Are you hurt?" another cop, a bit older this time asks.

I keep quiet.

"Were you assaulted?" he asks again, turning to look at Mqhele suspiciously.

Mqhele tries to move towards me but the cop grabs him and pulls him back, giving him a warning look.

Where were they when he was beating me before?

I turn to face them.

"Yes, you can leave, and take him with you," I say.

He has this shocked look on his face.

One cop takes his arm. He resists.

"Sir, you're coming with us, if she feels she won't be safe with you here then we can't leave you. You can come with us to the police station or go somewhere else until she says it's okay for you to come back," says the cop.

"I'm not leaving my wife alone like this," he says. Stubborn to the core. These cops don't know him at all, he won't go anywhere with them.

"Well then call someone to come and be with her, we're not leaving you two alone here," the older cop again.

I need painkillers, my head hurts.

He makes a call, and leaves with the cops eventually, but only when another car drives in.

I think I'm going to have a nervous breakdown, I can't stop my hands from shaking and I'm sweating and I have a headache.

It's Xolie. He called Xolie. She looks scared, like I could hurt her or something.

"I need painkillers, I want to sleep," I say.

She's standing there just staring.

"They're in the cupboard there in the bathroom," I say to her waving my hand.

She walks there and comes out with a plastic container and a glass of water.

I take four of them at once. I haven't even eaten all day.

"Where are my children?" I ask.

"At my house, they're fine," she says putting a blanket over me.

"Okay, don't bring them here," I say.

I don't want them seeing me like this.

I close my eyes. I want to fall asleep, right now.

When I wake up it's already dark outside. He's here, sitting on a chair next to the bed, his face in his hands.

That was not me at all, I've never in my life reacted like that to anything.

He raises his head, looks at me. There's a bit of fear in his eyes.

"How's the headache?" he says.

"Better," I say.

We stare into each other's eyes for a while. How did we get here?

"Should I make you something to eat?" he says.

"Yes please," I say.

He stands up and walks out of the bedroom.

Shortly after that Nkosana walks in and sits on the same chair. I wait for him to speak first.

"I won't leave until I know you two are going to be fine," he says.

Had he come earlier, at that time when I was going crazy, I would have given him a piece of my mind, but I'm calm now.

"We'll be fine. We're going to talk," I say.

He doesn't move, instead he fixes his zoom-lenses on me until I feel really uncomfortable.

"Please don't make any radical decisions," he says, stands up and walks out.

I stand up to go pee.

When I come back Mqhele is standing next to the bed with a plate of cooked food. Xolie must have packed it for him.

I get back on the bed and sit with my back on the headboard. I'm really hungry. He sits and watches me eat.

"Where is the Porsche?" I say in between chewing. I'm not looking at him as I speak.

"Don't worry about it, it's not here, both cars were towed," he says.

He loves that car. He came home with it one day after we saw it on TV earlier and I commented that it was cute. So he just went and bought it, just like that.

When I asked him about it he said: "Because you said it was cute, and I think you'll look cute in it".

"Did I hurt you?" I ask. I could have really hurt him.

He sighs.

"No, I was worried you'd hurt yourself," he says rubbing his forehead.

It's going to take some real work for us to get through this one.

And yes, I'm not thinking about leaving him. The killings, the beatings and now the cheating, and I'm still not thinking about leaving him.

"Who called the police?" I ask.

"The neighbours," he says.

Bloody nosy people! We're probably the talk of the neighbourhood right now.

I don't even want to talk about his cheating, not now, I need to be calm. But I've been bottling things. I had every right to go crazy but that was dangerous, and I almost hurt myself.

"Mqhele," I say.

He raises his eyes, on immediate panic mode.

"I had a miscarriage," I say. I feel like a huge rock has been lifted off my shoulders the moment I finish the sentence.

His eyes are all out.

He opens his mouth like he wants to say something, but doesn't, instead he buries his head in his hands.

"I don't want to talk about your...that girl and whatever you were doing with her, not tonight. But let's talk about this," I say.

He is quiet. I want to touch his head and tell him to raise his face because I want to see him, but I don't, I wait for him instead.

"Was it me? Did I cause it?" he says.

I don't answer, but I know this is going to be worse than I thought.

"I went to see Dr Masetla the last time you beat me because I was worried about possible internal bleeding. He did a scan and ultrasound and said I was fine but that I should call him the next day because there was something he needed to confirm,"

I've never told this story to anyone until now, it's like reliving the trauma.

"I called him the next day and he told me that.....that I had been pregnant, a few weeks, but I lost the baby because of the injuries I suffered on my back and my abdomen,"

He is sitting with tears. Normally I would jump to hold and comfort him, but now, my heart won't let me. This must be the second or third time I've seen him cry. I think I'm the only person in this world that can ever make him cry.

He stands up and goes to the en-suite bathroom and closes the door. I hear the shower running.

In between the sound of the water running I hear him, it's a low cry. But soon he can't hold it in anymore, it becomes louder and louder.

I get under the blanket, switch off the side-lamp and cover myself.

Chapter 33

A large part of me is still extremely angry. We haven't spoken about the cheating issue because he's been walking around like a zombie for the past 24 hours, or is it that he has been avoiding eye contact with me or that maybe we're both aware of the fact that our marriage is on the rocks.

I haven't been trying to reach out, I don't want to because whatever explanation he is going to give me will hurt me even more.

What did the ex say to me again? Oh yes, 'He has a tendency to turn women into animals'.

May her bitch soul rest in peace. She was right. I'm tired. I'm exhausted. I'm hurt. But I didn't know it until yesterday. I know now that infidelity is a hard limit for me. I can never share him with another woman, never.

I'm going to be at a place where I don't try at all, where I don't worry about the future and where I don't blame myself for everything. I'm going to be like this for as long as it lasts.

He didn't even go work today, he always goes to work and infact that is where he runs to every time he has fucked up.

The twins are still not here and I know Nkosana won't allow them to come back until he is sure there is peace in this house. MaMnguni I assume is still at Xolie's house, I'm just glad she didn't witness that crap from yesterday.

I'm still going to cook dinner for him though, like I made him breakfast this morning and lunch after that.

Imagine how easy it would be to poison him.

I'm slaving away in the kitchen when I feel that someone is standing behind me.

Geez! this child.

"Lwandle!"

"Hello mami,"

"When did you get here? How long have you been standing there?" I say.

This kid is becoming like his fathers, I didn't even hear him come in.

"Just now," he says.

He's still in his school uniform. I'm sure he is the tallest kid in his class.

"How did you get here?"

"I asked the driver to drop me off here from school," he says.

They have a driver who takes them to and from school every day. I wanted to send Lwandle to boarding school when he started high school but he blatantly refused. I could have forced him but I decided not to because I know him, he would have found a way to get out of there, even if it meant getting himself expelled.

He was angry with me for a short while but eventually he came around.

I have a feeling he wants to talk. Normally when they are here he goes straight to the entertainment centre and sit in front of the TV all day. But today he is standing in the kitchen with his backpack still over his shoulders.

"Sit there, I'll make you a sandwich," I say pointing him to the counter.

He adheres and sits with his hand on his cheek. This must be really serious.

He has changed so much from when he was a kid, and not for the good I must say. I worry about

him, he is his father's son.

"Are you okay Lwandle," I say placing a plate in front of him and sitting to face him.

"I'm okay mami," I say.

He's learnt to lie, typical man.

"No you're not, I know you. Talk to me,"

He sighs.

"I need answers to some questions," he says.

There we go.

"About my biological mother," he says.

I've always known this day would come. I've dreaded it because I also don't have answers, and this child trusts me more than anyone in the world and I'm about to disappoint him.

"What do you want to know Lwandle?"

"What happened to her, why she left, if she's alive and why she hasn't come back to see us," he says.

I have no idea what to say, so I sit here and look at him for a while.

"Lwandle, you know I love you with all my heart right?"

"I know mami," he says

"I'd do anything for you in this world, anything. But this is the one time where I'm going to disappoint you,"

He is dispassionate, I see it in his eyes.

"I don't know where your mother is, I don't know why she left. I've asked but nobody has given me answers. I know she is alive though because she sent me an email years ago,"

His face lights up at that last statement.

"She didn't say much in the email, just that I should take good care of you. I never heard from her after that. But I wrote down the email address, I'll go get it for you, I hope it still works," I say.

I walk to the bedroom to get the email address, the floor is squeaky clean, no traces of blood from my bleeding nose. I don't know who cleaned it but when I woke up this morning it was gone, so were pieces of glass in the garage and the two cars I almost tore into pieces.

In times like this, when we are at our worst, this house feels empty and hollow. I feel empty and hollow.

But tonight, when it's just the two of us here, decisions are going to have to be made, in this bedroom.

He is here.

Oh God!!!

"Mqhele!!!!

He can't do this to me! No!

"Mqhele! please I'm begging you," I say standing at the door.

He raises his eyes when I take a step further.

"No! you are not going to do this to me and your children! You are not going to be a coward Mqhele," I say.

My hands are shaking now. I want to jump and grab the gun from him but that would be too risky, he could pull the trigger anytime.

"Lwandle!" I scream as loud as I can.

He stares at me, a blank stare.

In no time Lwandle comes running in the bedroom.

He drops the gun and tosses it under the bed immediately.

Lwandle saw it.

I walk to the closet, get one of my empty handbags, kneel next to the bed, pull the gun out from under it and toss it in the handbag.

"Stay here with your dad, I'll be back just now," I say walking out of the bedroom.

Lwandle stands still, looking at him with a disappointed face.

My head is spinning as I walk down the passage. What if I had arrived a minute later? what if.....?

"Nkosana, I just found Mqhele with a gun on his head, I don't know what to do, please come....."

"What? where are you?"

"At home," I say.

"Get out of there now!" he says.

That's not going to happen.

"No, I'm not leaving him alone," I say.

He hangs up.

I sit on the kitchen bar stool thinking about what could have happened. The handbag still in my hands.

I have never seen a gun in this house before. The first and last time we spoke about a gun was years ago when we were still dating, and I was clear that I don't want it in my presence.

How could he do this? How could he try to take his life and leave me? How could he be so selfish?

"Is everything okay Hlomu," MaMnguni asks when she finds me sitting in the kitchen with the handbag pressed to my chest. I thought she wasn't around.

"Everything is fine, it's okay ma you can go to your house now, I'll be fine here," I say.

"Is mkhwenyana okay, I saw him this morning and he was....."

"Everything is okay, like I said," I say. I'm done talking to her.

This is the problem with employing elderly people, they start thinking they are your mother. I don't want her knowing my personal business because it might end up getting to my aunt and then to my mother.

She must do what I pay her for, she doesn't need to know what happens inside my bedroom.

I hear a car pulling up outside, and another.

The kitchen door swinging open and Nkosana barging in with his eyes all out. Nqoba is behind him.

"He's in the bedroom," I say.

They both run there leaving me still clutching the handbag.

I hear more cars pulling up.

Sambulo, Qhawe, Mpande walk in. I'm still sitting in the kitchen.

I see Qhawe inspecting me with his eyes.

"Bedroom," I say pointing to its direction.

They run there.

Mqoqi is the last to come in looking and breathing like he's been running.

He stands still when he sees me in the kitchen.

"Are you okay?" he says.

"I'm fine. Here," I say handing him the handbag. "Throw this away and make sure I never see it again," I say.

He snatches the bag from me and opens it to see what's inside. He closes it immediately and runs outside.

He comes back seconds later and runs to the bedroom too.

I need my mother. I need Langa. I need my father. I feel so alone.

If I call Langa now I will just break down.

I walk on to the bedroom. I find them all standing around him, he's still sitting on the bed where I left him, with his hands over his ears and his head bowed between his thighs.

"Lwandle, come here," I say.

I close the door after me and lead the kid to the entertainment centre.

"Stay here and don't come out until I tell you. Sit here and watch TV. You can have anything in the cupboard and the fridge," I say.

I keep a cupboard and fridge full of junk food in the entertainment centre, mostly because it keeps them in there for the whole day when I don't want to be bothered.

I hear another car pulling up.

It's Xolie and Oleta, judging by the look on their faces, they already know what's going on. Why do we always have to be the ones with all the drama?

Xolie the hugger is the first to jump me. She brought her boys, including Mvelo and the twins, I point them to the entertainment centre.

"Mami, are there marshmallows there?" Phakeme asks when I tell them to go join their brother.

"Yes, and you are not supposed to eat them," I say.

He's not allowed to eat sweets because, well, he is like the real life spiderman. He starts climbing walls and sliding down stairs once he gets sugar in his system, exactly like Lwandle when he was his age.

Strangely, I haven't cried or felt like crying throughout all this.

"Let's cook dinner," I say pulling out onions, peppers and spices from cupboards.

The both stand still looking at me like I've lost my mind.

I start chopping, in silence.

They both join me, in silence.

"There's a John Legend show next month, in Cape Town," Oleta says.

Poor thing, she's trying to break the ice.

"It would be nice if we all go, just as girls, minus the evil witch ofcourse," Xolie says as she strains the rice.

"It would be really nice, I think. I need a break from all this," I say.

I see relief on their faces, I'm talking, atleast.

But I'm not going to go into details, atleast not for now.

I wonder what is happening in that bedroom. I hope they will talk sense into him, even if Nkosana beats the madness out of him I don't care.

We are done cooking dinner and sitting watching some sleazy reality show when they all walk in at the lounge, in silence.

I don't see Mqhele. I don't want him being left alone.

He walks in just as I'm about to stand up.

Sambulo goes straight to Xolie and puts his arm around her shoulders. Qhawe has been holding Oleta's hand since.

None of them have said anything to me, they won't even look me in the eye. He must have told them everything.

This is the point where they feel sorry for me and I hate it.

He sits on the far side, away from me, his head has been bowed since and he keeps playing with his wedding ring.

I look at Xoli and Oleta and signal that we have to go to the kitchen. It's time to feed these fools and their offspring.

There's thick air all over in the lounge, silence, only plates and spoons clicking.

I stayed back in the kitchen, tidying up I don't know what.

I've even forgotten that there is a child hoping I'll lead him to a mother he's never known. But he saw something he shouldn't have seen today and that should take his mind off things for a while.

"We are going to Greytown on Friday," Nkosana says as he stands up to leave.

There's rumbling in response.

"Everyone. It's not negotiable," he says, his tone firmer.

Everyone is silent.

He finds me in the kitchen.

"It won't happen again," he says. There's a sting of fear in his eye as he says this. This is the first time I've seen Nkosana uncomfortable.

Chapter 35

The house is quiet again. Xolie left with the twins, I tried to argue until Sambulo came out and said it was Nkosana's instruction.

Now it's just us and our demons. The gigantic house and the secrets lining its walls.

I'm sitting on one of the mini-cinema chairs, the kids had been watching a movie so I came here to switch off but ended up just sitting and staring into space.

He walks in and sits next to me.

A jar of black olives and two forks in his hands, oh wow, I haven't seen this in years.

I accept the fork and prick out the first olive.

We sit in silence.

"You said you'd never leave me," I speak first.

It feels like he's a stranger sitting next to me.

"I'll never leave you," he says.

I turn to look at him. He still won't look at me.

"You tried to take your life Mqhele. I thought we were partners in this, that no matter what happens we will stick with each other. Why would you want to destroy me like that?" I ask.

He keeps quiet.

"I have something to tell you. It's the last of the things I've been hiding from you and I want you to be honest with me, do not tell even one lie, not even one. From here, we will walk out of this room and try to rebuild our marriage," I say.

This is me taking a risk but I'm going to make him talk, even if it means his talking will tear my heart into pieces.

He's looking at me now.

"Mandisa told me Nokzola is dead," I say.

He widens his eyes.

"Did you have anything to do with it?"

He's quiet.

"I'll take that as a yes," I say.

He takes a deep breath.

"No Hlomu, she's not dead. I wouldn't kill a woman. She's out of our lives for good though," he says.

That's a relief, although I don't know what he means by her being out of our lives for good but I'm glad to know he doesn't believe in killing women.

"Mandisa also said there's been women, before this one now," I say.

"Hlomu," he says touching my arm.

I look at him, his face says it all.

"How many?" I ask.

I'm trying to be calm, this is the first time in the many years that I have known this man that we've had a conversation about this.

"How many Mqhele?"

"Just one before this.....," he says.

I get that feeling in my stomach, like I'm going to be sick.

"When?"

He's quiet.

"Hlomu, I love you, only you, no other woman.....?"

"I said when? Tell me when!" I scream.

Why does he have to do this to me? why?

"Two years after we got married," He says it so calmly.

"Two years after we got married? When exactly did you sleep with her? When Mqhele? did you sleep with her during the day and came to me at night?"

I'm screaming! I want answers and I want them now.

"Hlomu it wasn't like that it was just some woman I didn't even....."

Oh Lord! He's still lying!

"Answer the questions!"

"It lasted for only two months, yes there was sex but I always made sure I was protected,"

Really? and that makes it okay?

"It wasn't about you my love, it was me, I was wrong I made a mistake, I....."

"Yes Mqhele, it was about you, it's always about you. It's about you and your past, it's about you and your anger, your demons your insecurities. Haven't I given you everything Mqhele? Haven't I..?" I scream.

He is silent.

Why would he go to another woman? didn't I do it all?

"I don't remember Hlomu, I think I met her at a petrol garage where she worked....."

"A petrol attendant?"

"Yes we used to go there every night to pay to fill up the taxis and I'd just chat to her because she was always there and we would chat and one day I gave her a lift home and she....."

Chat? WTF? since when does he go around chatting to people?

"It just happened, I hated myself afterwards but it continued for a month, I walked away from it,"he says.

He is doing all the talking now. I'm just sitting here defeated and confused.

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know, two years ago, when the media started focusing on us, she blackmailed me, said she was going to tell you and go to the media if I didn't pay her," he says.

"How much?"

"I gave her R300 000. She wanted more,"

"What was her name?"

"Mbali," he says,"I know what you're thinking, yes that was her after I refused to give her any money, but she was lying about most of the things. I got Peter to pay her on that day and that was the last time I heard from her,"

I see.

"Okay, the second one?"

I think I've heard enough about the blackmailer.

He hesitates. He is uncomfortable doing this but he doesn't have a choice, I want the truth. He's holding back but I'm getting the basics which is what I want, I don't want to know which direction she rolled her tongue when she gave him a blow-job.

"Tell me about the second one Mqhele,"

I'm calm now, I have no emotions left to show.

"She's.....we met at a restaurant, I was there for a meeting, she knows a guy we are doing business with,"he says.

"Name please,"I say.

He's quiet.

"I want the name,"I insist.

"Linda"

"Linda who?"

"Linda Sabela"

Why does that name sound familiar? Wait!

"The TV presenter?"

He looks at me. I'll take that as a yes.

"She was at my store launch. Were you already fucking her at that time? Did you invite her to come? Was she like, you second date there? What? Mqhele? Did you sneak out with her when I wasn't watching?," my temper is rising again.

"Hlomu, it was a mistake, I ended it long before the launch, I don't know why she was there or who invited her,"he says.

"Why did it end? and don't lie to me because I know where to find her?" I say.

"It just ended, it was a stupid fling and it lasted for only a few weeks,"he says.

How is it that I have never suspected anything? Was I too busy trying to be the perfect wife? And how did the ex know about all these affairs?

"So what was she doing in your room and why did she answer your phone?" I ask.

He sighs.

"We weren't in my room, we were at the bar, she was there with another guy we are doing business with. She has the same phone as mine so when it rang she picked it up and answered thinking it was hers. She said she didn't look at the screen before answering," he says.

Such a ridiculous explanation. But if it's true, he obviously doesn't know women that well, that woman answered his phone on purpose.

"Mqhele I thought we were going to be honest here," I say.

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but that's what happened, I wish I could give you a more believable explanation but I can't,"he says.

This is going to be harder than I thought.

"Am I lacking somewhere? I mean, I thought we were fine, that our marriage was great and that I was doing well as your wife. I know we have our troubles sometimes but I thought I was enough. Why would you go to another woman Mqhele?"I ask.

I'm surprised I'm still so calm.

"It was never about you Hlomu, it was me, my mistakes and my stupidity. You are more than enough and honestly I don't know why I did it," he says.

As to how we will ever get things back to normal, I don't know, trust is gone. Maybe I should have let him pull that trigger and blow his brains out.

"Were they worth it? These women, were they worth this moment that we are having right now?" I say.

"Nothing and nobody is worth this," he says covering his face with his hands again.

He's right, it was supposed to be just the two of us in this. That's what he said on our wedding day.

"You've hurt me Mqhele, you've really hurt me this time. What would you do if I did the same thing?"

He sits up immediately and looks me in the eye.

"Hlomu please, anything but that, hurt me in any way you want but not that," he says, and then takes his eyes off me again.

"I'd kill you," he says calmly, looking at the blank screen in front of us. I know he means it.

It's funny how men will do things to women that they would die if are done to them. If you want to break a man, cheat on him.

But let's move on to the next subject. It's not one I want to know details of but the truth is flowing here so I might as well.

"When was the last cash heist?" I ask.

He looks shocked.

"Mandisa again?" he asks.

Really? Where else would I get this information?

"A week before our wedding," he says when I don't answer him.

That time I was already at home preparing for our wedding. I thought he was in Greytown.

"When was the first crime after you met me," I ask.

"The time we left you with the kids for four days," he says.

I should have known.

"The Nqulunga brothers?"

"Yes," he says with a sigh.

"The three taxi owners?" I ask.

"Yes," he says.

I suspected that too, that they went after them after Sambulo's shooting.

"The police informer?"

"Yes," he says again.

I know there were more, but I don't want to know any more than this.

"Where is Sbani's mother?"

"In prison," he says,

WTF?

"And you didn't tell me this all along because?" I ask.

"Because we knew you'll be the one they ask when the time comes, and we knew you'd want to do the right thing, that was the problem. Nkosana visits her," he says.

I wonder what that 'right thing' is.

"Why is Mandisa still here? because I know it's not Nqoba's love for her," I ask.

"She saw things she shouldn't have seen," he says.

By now he knows I want more than headlines, I want the full story.

"What things?"

"Hlomu you know I don't want you knowing these things. I don't want to drag you down with all of us," he says.

I'm way down there already.

"I want to know," I say.

"Nqoba's wife being killed," he says.

Nqoba's wife?

"Mandisa was his....girlfriend or mistress. It was a mistake, but Mandisa saw everything," he says.

"When was this?" I ask.

"A long time ago, I think I was 23 and Nqoba was 26-years-old,"

Some of these things I regret asking, but I need to know.

"How?"

"Ntsika shot her, he was playing with Nkosana's gun," he says.

Oh God!

"We buried her body. No police were going to believe that sons of a notorious killer shot a woman by mistake. It's been like that all our lives, everybody expected the worst from us. And yes, we grew up to be our father's sons," he says.

That's not true. They may be criminals, okay killers too, but they are still.....I don't know what I want to say here.

I want to know more about that girl Mandisa murdered but no, I don't want to hear more gruesome details.

"Okay, I mean she also killed that girl, so now you are even, so why is she still here?" I say.

I don't understand the look on his face.

Do I sound like I'm saying: 'get rid of her'?

I'm mad at her and I have developed genuine hate for her but I don't want her to die. She could get meningitis and go blind or lose her legs or something but not die, I'm tired of all the deaths around me.

I poke another olive and toss it in my mouth as we sit in silence. I hope he feels lighter inside now that he's shared his evil deeds with me.

"So, do you want to know who I slept with?" I say calmly with a straight face.

He puts the olive jar on the floor. His face has changed from being an apologetic little squirrel to a freakin cobra. He was never far.

"Nobody. Yes, you're the only man who's ever been between my thighs in my life," I say.

He looks down to his feet.

I hope we never bump into Sandile because if we do, I'm not sure if I won't stand by and watch him being punished for his sins.

I wonder what he will do to Mandisa this time.

But I'm tired of this. I miss the times when things would go so smoothly that I'd forget about all the hardships.

"Why didn't you tell me Hlomu?" he says after a long silence.

"Why didn't you tell me that I killed our child?" he asks.

I've been dreading this conversation, but it's my turn to be truthful now.

"I wanted to protect you," I say.

"Protect me from what?"

"Yourself," I say.

He is quiet, I don't know what he is thinking.

"Was it painful? Did you suffer?"

I don't know how to answer this, the truth is I don't really know if it was painful or if I suffered. I just know it happened.

"I don't know, I just know I went through it, all alone. I needed you Mqhele. I think that's why I forgave you so quickly you at that time, because I knew you were the only person who could help me heal, even though you didn't know about it," I say.

I don't want to cry about this anymore.

He's looking down at his feet, his jaw tight, his eyes red.

I know this, he's about to shut down.

"We have to get past this. I'm past it," I say.

I want to touch his shoulder, but something in me doesn't really want to comfort him.

"What am I going to do with all the guilt?" he asks, his eyes still staring at his shoes.

This question is nothing like him. We are truly at a different place from everywhere we've been in this marriage.

"You will allow me to help you through it," I say, taking his hand.

He doesn't know how to do that.

"Hey, look at me," I say pushing his face up.

We are looking into each other's eyes. This we haven't done much throughout this conversation.

"Raise your face,"

He does.

"Raise your eyes,"

He does.

"Look at me,"

He does. I still don't see him in there.

"You are Mqhele Zulu, you don't bow, you don't back down, you don't fear, you don't fall....."

His eyes toughen. He's coming back.

"This is the man I married, you don't put a gun on your head, you pump it in the head of anyone who messes with your family," I say looking in his eyes, my forehead almost touching his. I hear the sound of my panties ripping and feel his fingers digging in my skin.

Toxic. That's the word they use.

Chapter 36

Nobody knows for sure why the big brother summoned us to the Zulu Headquarters in Mbuba, but since we got here last night, he's been laughing with no-one.

He is tense, very tense and has everyone walking on eggs.

Mqhele says when he gets like this he reminds him too much of his father. That can't be good.

He's been standing leaning on the wall in the lounge, silent and hard-faced as we all walk in one-by-one to what we have now concluded is a family meeting we weren't briefed about.

Xolie, me and Oleta sit together squashed on a two seater couch. The guys are sitting on the big one opposite ours with Mqoqi and Mpande on dining room chairs they had to pull from the table because there was no space left to sit.

They all look fearful, they must know him better than we do. We all sit in silence.

"I understand that there are things that have been happening in this family under my nose," he starts talking, his eyes on the ground but his words piercing.

Silence.

"I see you have all forgotten who you are," he says turning his eyes to the guys. They all look like they want to run.

Strange, because he is speaking very softly.

"Mqoqi, you're smuggling cars now?" he says.

Mqoqi raises his eyes, I can see he wants to deny it but seems to change his mind when Nkosana's face hardens even more.

"Mqhele, have you ever seen me beat up a woman?" he asks.

Mqhele keeps his eyes down.

"I'm talking to you," he says

Mqhele raises his eyes. "No," he says before looking down again.

The tension and fear is so thick in this room you can cut it with a knife.

"Nqoba, what did I say to you about the Police Commissioner's wife?" he says.

He hasn't raised his voice once but we are all almost shaking right now.

Normally Nqoba talks like he's on batteries but he won't say a word now.

"Mpande, do you think we worked so hard all our lives just so you can splash money on useless crap and undress every woman you meet," he says.

Silence.

"Qhawe, Sambulo, what happened to Nokzola," he says.

I see Sambulo widening his zoom-lenses and looking at Xolie before looking down again.

"I'm talking to you," he says looking at them both.

Silence.

"So we kill women now?" he says, moving towards all of us and leaning on the TV stand.

I hear Oleta gulp next to me. Xolie looks like she's just seen a ghost. Why am I unfazed?

His eyes go round the room, through all of us.

They soften a little when he looks at us.

"I need to know that you will be here, that you are staying," he says looking at the three of us all at once. How does he do that?

"I need to know that my children will be safe and that they will have a home and mothers if something happens to.....," he stops.

We all nod at the same time. I think we are too scared to even open our mouths.

When he says his children, he means all seven of them. I have never once heard any of them referring to these kids as the other's children.

He must see how scared we are because suddenly he's looking at us like he feels sorry for us.

"Its fine, you can leave,"he says looking at the three of us.

We sit still for a few seconds; I think we are not sure if he's really letting us go.

I look at Mqhele before I stand up and he gives me a reassuring look.

We stand up and leave all of them still in the same positions. Whatever is going to be discussed next must be bigger than us women.

This reminds me of that day many years ago when I walked in my house to find him beating the crap out of Mqoqi. I'd like to think that he wouldn't lay a hand on a 30-year-old man.

We don't even talk after we close the door behind us; everyone heads straight to their respective rondavels.

I've seen Nkosana being Nkosana but not like I saw him today. And that was rather intense; he turned them into little boys.

Sometimes I wonder how our children will grow up to be. They have everything money can buy, all the love and all the support. That is a total opposite of their fathers' life story. But I see them. I see Mqoqi in Lwandle. I see a bit of Mqhele and Nkosana in Mvelo.

Speaking of Mvelo, he is 12, his voice is breaking and he looks far older than his age. He goes to an all-boys school and walks like he owns the world. But he is still mami's boy.

It's late when Mqhele walks in looking drained, worried and distracted.

Normally, when he is like this, it's either I have to leave him alone or give him extra attention. This is always determined by the first thing he says when he comes in.

"I was worried I'd find you asleep already,"he says throwing himself on the bed and wrapping himself around me.

We are cuddling and talking tonight.

"No, are you okay?" I only realise now that I was actually worried about him.

"I'm fine, Nkosana hasn't gotten like this in a long time, but he'll come around soon,"he says.

He makes it sound like it's nothing.

"The boys are sleeping in the main house, they're clinging on to Lwandle as always,"I say.

I'm itching to ask what was said and done after we left but I have a feeling I won't be told anything, that's probably the reason why we were let go in the first place.

I'm also not going to ask about the Nokzola thing, I don't want to know the details.

"Oleta is freaked out you know,"I say.

He doesn't even finch.

"She's going to have to get used to it. Qhawe is going to pay ilobolo at the end of the month," he says.

Now, I know one thing for sure, Oleta doesn't know about this, she hasn't even said yes but the date has been decided. Sounds very familiar.

"Do you think Lwandle saw that, that episode in the bedroom?"he says.

We've never really spoken about it.

"He did and he was really dissappointed," I say.

I've never really asked the poor kid how he feels about it. Seeing your father almost killing himself must be traumatic.

"I know. I don't know what got into me. I'm sorry again," he says.

If I had to count the times he has had to apologise since I met him I'd need the whole day. I just wonder if I had to make a mistake, a big mistake, if he'd forgive me as easily as I forgive him for all his flaws, even the cheating he hid so well.

I've blocked that off; I have too much more to worry about right now. But I know those women meant nothing to him, it's the one thing I know I have in this relationship, the knowledge that I fully own his heart, and that he can never love anyone more than he loves me.

"How come you never make any mistakes?" he says.

Seriously? Is he really asking me that?

"Because I'm the woman and if I started making mistakes things would fall apart. And you wouldn't forgive me as easily as I always forgive you," I say.

My real answer though would be 'it's because I'm a woman and we are generally more intelligent and more human'.

But there is that male-ego thing that I don't want to mess with.

He is silent. He knows that this is the truth. But I can't say I've never made any mistakes.

"We can go on that holiday you wanted, we can even visit your brother in Zambia if you want," he says.

"Ghana,"

"Oh yah, wherever, I just want us to get out of here for a while," he says.

We've been planning and postponing this holiday forever.

I shift closer to him. With all his faults, he is still a freakishly beautiful man. My man. The father of my children.

"Make love to me, like you did the first time," I whisper.

I just want to be reminded where it all started, and maybe why I love him so much.

He is not in bed when I wake up.

The sun is already out and there is so much noise coming from outside. The rascals must already be up and roaming the yard.

I take a quick shower, tidy up and head for the main house where everybody has already been for breakfast.

I'll have to settle for what's left. Oleta must have made all this happen, she's the one still trying to impress, I am way past that stage.

I'm all alone in this house and I sit on the same couch we were sitting on during that kangaroo-court session yesterday.

"Mami, baba said we can have 'astrim' after we finish our food," Msebe appears from nowhere and says.

That would be ice-cream by the way, the bond they share with their father.

First of all, I know he's lying, secondly I'm not sure which 'baba' he is talking about and I know he's doing this on purpose because he knows I won't go and ask all of them.

But the craziest thing is that he tells the lie with such authority, at three-years-old. I worry sometimes, but his father says he's just like him when he was a child.

"No Msebe you are not getting ice-cream this early in the morning," I say.

His face changes and his zoom-lenses harden. WTF?

"But mami!" he says with that deep voice of his and aggressive tone.

I give him a warning look.

He storms out of the room with his fists clenched, bumping Nkosana at the door. The little freak doesn't even stop to say sorry.

"I always told Mqhele that one day he will experience everything he put our parents through. This one is that thing," Nkosana says laughing and pointing and the little rascal.

I'm still creeped out about yesterday. The plan was to try and avoid any interaction with him until we go back to Joburg.

But he comes to sit next to me. I won't be able to continue with my breakfast now, not with him here.

"Our father said he named him Mqhele, as in a crown, because he was told that the moment he came out during his birth he cried so loud that all the nurses just wanted to stay away from him. They said he was a little fighter, didn't want to be fed or bathed or dressed. So dad reckoned he'd grow up to be like a warrior, a king of his castle," he says.

This is the first time I hear this story. A part of me believes he doesn't even know it himself.

"Are you good?" he says.

That question again, I'm still not sure exactly what it means.

"I'm good," I respond. Whatever that means.

I hope he's not about to get deep and talk to me about my business.

"You know, I think he loves you too much," he says.

Yep! he's going deep in my business.

I don't respond. Is this what men see as too much love? Because this is not how too much love is supposed to be.

"I don't understand why you never came to me Hlomu. I know you can handle him, better than anyone in this world, better than all of us. But I solve the problems in this family. You should have come to me," he says.

Maybe, maybe if someone had told me from the beginning that he needs special 'handling', maybe I would have done things differently, like leave the first time he hit me.

"He has his flaws but he's still my husband, and as you say, I can handle him," I say.

That came out a little rude didn't it?

There's a little sign of shock on his face and I immediately regret going at him like that.

"You know, the first time he told me about you, we were at the rank and he was eating his lunchbox. I was still confused as to where on earth he got a lunchbox with cooked food and salads and stuff," he says.

"He offered me the food and said: "here, it was cooked by the soon-to-be Mrs Zulu. She loves me, it's not about the money or whatever it is that women see in me, she just loves me". And that was just weeks after he met you," he says.

That was true, although the money makes it all easier, I mean anyone can love better draped in diamonds.

"And then a few days later he comes to my house, frantic, asking to borrow my car saying he had

to drive to Durban to find you because you had left him. He said he wasn't going to come back until he found you and you took him back, "he says.

The way Nkosana tells this story makes it sound funny. I can't help laughing.

"The Mqhele I know would not have bothered, instead you'd have been the one running after him. I knew then that he'd found the one, "he says.

That was just nine years ago but it feels like a really long time now. So much has happened between then and now.

"I think you raised them well, they didn't turn out too bad, "I say. That's random but it's something I've always wanted to tell him. Forget that they turned out to be killers.

"I tried the best I could. You've raised my children even better, "he says.

Now that we're on that subject.

"Lwandle has been asking questions, "I say.

He is silent for a while before he speaks.

"I always knew they'd come to you," he says.

That's because you're a flippin Hitler dude.

"He wants to know where she is and why she left, "I say.

"It's complicated, and I don't want them to know, "he says.

I know he won't go further than this on this subject.

Now, what am I supposed to tell these children?

"So what do I....?"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

He pushes me down to the floor and flip the couch over me.

He's running out the door by the time I turn around.

The sound, a banging sound is coming from outside and it's deafening and it just keeps going.

I hear screams in between the bangs.

The kids! It's the kids!

Lwandle barges in pulling Phakeme and one of the twins by hand and runs straight to the kitchen.

This is not happening!

I jump up from behind the couch and run to the door. But I meet Mpande at the door running in with one of the kids under his arm, he pushes me back to the floor and throws the kid on top of me, it's Sisekelo, Xolie's youngest.

Where is my child?

He pulls the curtain open and starts shooting at the direction of the gate.

The screaming has stopped but the gunshots continue.

Why am I inside this house when I don't know where the rest of my children and my husband are?

I try to stand up but Mpande turns around and points the gun to me.

"Get down! Get down now!"he screams.

I'm back on the floor on my stomach in a split second.

The bangs become less and less and finally they stop. The screams start again.

They come running in the house one-by-one. Nqoba is carrying little Langa, and a gun on one hand. There's blood, I don't know whose it is!

Mqhele and Nkosana walk in last.

He finds me with his eyes first, finds Msebe and Langa and then everyone else.

I jump and grab Langa from Nqoba, he's screaming. I check him to see where the blood is coming from.

It's from his thigh and I'm covered in it in no time.

This is the rural areas and the nearest hospital is kilometres away.

Mqoqi is on the phone.

Xolie takes him from me and lays him on the couch, she's doing something, I don't know what, she's trying to stop the bleeding.

Police sirens can be heard from afar, there's a helicopter circling above the house.

It lands in an open veld metres away. It's paramedics.

There's chaos and screaming and these men walking up and down the house with guns.

There are people lying on the ground outside the gate.

"Where is Mvelo?" I ask when I don't see him.

"Where is Oleta?" Mqoqi asks.

There's silence.

And then mayhem!

Chapter 37

The sounds of shovels cracking the hard soil. The sound of cracked stone particles landing on the wood seem to be harmony with the low humming sound behind me.

“Singathini na? Ngeke sasho lutho, kuphela halleluya, mayenzeke intando yakho” (what can we say? Nothing except halleluya, may His will be done)

They sing it with such sadness, such grief and no conviction whatsoever because this, it cannot be God’s will. Slowly but surely the soil rises high to level. This is it, the end of the 12 years he was given to experience this world.

See, they say you are never given more than you can bear, apparently somewhere in the bible it says that. But I say that's a lie, nobody can ever bear burying their child, it's impossible.

It's impossible for me and it's impossible for these men excavating with shovels as sweat dampen their white shirts. I want to see tears, I want to see grief but all I see is anger and vengeance on their faces. I've been seeing guilt too.

These people here, the ones who came to 'mourn with us, 'cry with us' 'give us support', they don't know that nothing they can say or do can ever reduce the pain.

It's indescribable and unbearable. You want someone to hit you, hit you hard so that maybe the physical pain can overpower the emotional pain you are feeling. At least physical pain heals eventually but nothing can ever heal this thing that I'm feeling right now.

Watching a coffin go down, that finality, it makes everything in your body crumble. Something in you goes down with that coffin.

Finally, after the last shovel is thrown to the ground, he thrusts the little white cross on top the hill of soil. It's like he's stabbing my heart.

Mvelo Zulu

12 March 1999 – 15 October 2011

'Lala ngoxolo zinyane likaZulu'

It's over, he is gone, and life has to go on, but how?

People start to disperse and head back to the tent, even the priest too and the large group of boys in school uniform and red blazers.

We are left alone next to the grave. It's the first and only grave. He is the first person to be buried in this family. His grandparents were reduced to ashes right on the ground where he too took his last breath.

It's still unbelievable, the sight of him lying in a pool of blood behind one of the rondavels. That's where we found him after a frantic search on that day. He was gone, there and then. Six bullets, three in the head. The paramedics didn't even touch him, they just called the hearse.

I don't remember much about that day, I just remember Mqhele dragging me back to the house because I had gone crazy. I also remember Nkosana picking his body up, although the face was completely riddled, he sat on the ground on the pool of blood and cradled him.

I also remember Qhawe wailing with his hands on his forehead, still holding a gun with one.

“I think you should come with us mam,” the paramedic said to me.

I got on the chopper, my little Langa's face covered in an oxygen face mask, a needle stuck in his

wrist; he looked like he was fast asleep.

"I'll come join you later, they say he will be fine," Mqhele said to me before the door was closed and we took off.

I didn't even remember to change my clothes; I was still covered in blood.

As we rose up to the air I saw him, the man, that old man we passed on the road the first time we came here. He was standing on the yard of one of the houses on the hill across ours, with his walking stick, smoking a pipe.

I haven't seen him here today.

I can smell the curry from where I'm sitting. People here don't go to communal graveyards like we do in townships and suburbs, they bury in the yard, sometimes inside the gate.

Sbani and Lwandle have been sitting next to me on one side, Xolie on the other. At least they cried, a lot.

I have been the one sitting on the mattress with candles. I'm the one wearing the black hat and the black scarf. I'm the one who had to sit in front of the coffin. I'm the one who had to go fetch the body from the mortuary.

Mvelo's mother arrived this morning with her husband who wouldn't let her leave his sight. She had to be called to throw the soil in the grave.

"Come, we must go now," Mqhele says to me extending his hand. I take it, it is dusty and coarse from holding a shovel, but it is warm.

Sbani and Lwandle stand up and follow us with the rest of their fathers.

Behind us Nkosana sits on the ground next to the grave. He is talking to himself. And then he breaks into a loud cry. We walk on.

In the tent Langa, Thobi, Zaba and Nana and some of my cousins and Xolie's family have made sure that lunch is served.

My mother walks around carrying little Langa, careful not to bump his thigh which is still bandaged. Luckily the bullet hit him and came out without hitting the bone.

I've seen Mqhele's face and how he turns into a monster every time he looks at that bandage on his child.

By tomorrow all these people will be gone and we will be left with the burden of letting go and moving on.

The media has been hounding us. So many stories speculating why we were attacked have been written, some calling it a revenge attack, and we have been called for comment and have had camera crews camping outside our gate.

I still don't know why we were attacked.

They wanted to cover the funeral but we said no. The audacity of wanting to sell papers off a 12-year-old's funeral.

The focus was turned on to Oleta's family when we couldn't give them much to go on.

She was buried at her home in Mpumalanga yesterday, Saturday; I couldn't go because I had to stay here. Her family made it clear that they did not want anyone from the Zulu family attending. They even refused the money we offered to assist in burying her.

Her father blames Qhawe for her death, in fact he blames everyone in this family.

He's been speaking to the media, saying he only found out when he saw a picture of them in a newspaper that they were dating and says he warned his daughter about the relationship.

Oleta never really spoke about her family so we did not know that much.

She died in the shower. The bullet entered through the window and hit her on the head. Even though her family didn't want the Zulus there, Nkosana, Sambulo, Xolie and Ntsika went with Qhawe. There was no drama.

"I'm going to take the kids with me, at least until you are back to normal," my mother says.

I'm not sure when that will be but I do think she has a point. She stayed with little Langa in hospital for three days while I had to be here and prepare for the funeral. She arrived that afternoon to find police still all over the yard and men with guns all around.

I was still at the hospital losing my mind because they couldn't find a blood-match for Langa. Mqhele was fetched by the same paramedic helicopter; luckily they have the same blood type.

"I'm going to speak to Mqhele about it, but I doubt he'll agree," I say. I really doubt he will.

Msebe has been clinging on to Lethu. He knows something bad is going on but he doesn't understand what. How I wish I was him right now, clueless.

The yard is almost empty now except for our families and the men with guns who have been roaming the yard and lining the fence outside since the day of the incident.

Honestly, I want everybody to leave now. They must just let us be.

"No Hlomu, I don't want my children to be away from me, I want them to be here where I can protect them," Mqhele says when I tell him about my mother's request.

I expected this but I doubt anything can happen to them at my mother's house.

"I just want them to be in a normal environment, because let's face it, we are not in a position to take care of them right now," I say.

He is quiet.

"Okay, if you insist, but I'm sending security with them," he says.

I expected this too. What I don't know though is how much security he is talking about and if my mother will allow it.

I managed to convince my mother and my whole family to leave today, arguing that it was not safe for them to stay here and that Nkosana wants everybody to leave.

They are escorted by about seven cars full of armed men, much to my mother's discomfort. The twins are only too happy to leave these dreadful premises.

We haven't been to Joburg at all since the incident and I don't know when we will go back.

I saw Bab'Gumbi earlier. It turns out Mqhele bought him that flat I used to live in, I don't know what for.

Nobody has seen or heard from Mandisa, not even Nqoba.

The windows of all the outside houses had to be fixed during the week because they were riddled with bullet holes. Us women and the kids have been sleeping in the main house ever since.

I always knew that one day something would have to give, that the sins would come back to haunt us but never once did I imagine that it would be in this form.

They all keep saying it would have been better if they had died instead of Mvelo and Oleta. But I don't think it would have made any difference, we would still have had to deal with equal pain and they would still have blamed themselves for everything.

I've just come out of the shower and I'm preparing to pack my pyjamas and go to the main house to sleep, I haven't done much of that lately.

I feel him standing behind me.

He's leaning on the wall with his hands in his pockets and his ankles crossed. He's still wearing the

black pants and white shirt, he is dusty.

"Come to me," I say sitting on the bed.

He stands still for a few seconds and, in what seems like a quick change of mind, walks towards me with his eyes fixed on mine.

He throws himself on the bed, shoes still on.

I put his head on my chest.

"Cry," I say.

I feel his body loosening. His shoulders moving. I hold him tighter.

He starts off softly, and then he lets it out, it gets louder and louder until the voice can't come out anymore.

My chest is wet from the tears, but I don't want them to stop, maybe they'll come out with the pain.

It's almost an hour before he raises his head.

"It's not your fault you know," I say as he stands up.

He doesn't say anything but looks at me with red eyes.

I know he doesn't believe any of this shit I'm telling him.

He walks out the door, leaving me still seated on the bed.

I'm not sure where he went because when I get to the main house he isn't there. There's just Xolie preparing dinner for the kids and Sbani and Lwandle sitting there staring at the TV they are not watching.

It seems nobody speaks in this family anymore, not even to me.

"What are you making?" I say to Xolie as I walk in the kitchen.

"I don't know I'm just going to give them what's left from earlier," she says.

I want to ask her about Oleta's funeral but now is not really a good time.

"I got a call on Friday from a woman in Cape Town asking me if we wanted three separate rooms or the penthouse. I didn't know what to say I just hung up," she says.

I see her trying to fight back tears.

"She had already started organising accommodation for the John Legend concert," she says.

I had forgotten about that.

"Don't cry please, we've done enough of that," I say.

I'm being a hypocrite because I want to cry too.

"Where do we go from here Hlomu? How are we going to even begin to live after this?" she says.

I could lie and come up with some deep motivational quote, but nothing comes to mind quick enough.

"I don't know," I say.

My phone rings. It's Langa, he says they arrived home safe and that there are about ten men who insist on staying in the yard the whole night. My mother agreed because she thought there'd be just one or two guys in a car outside the gate.

Well, there's not much I can do right now, if I raise it with him he will just have them return his children.

And I don't know where he is right now.

"Where are they?" I ask Xolie.

I don't know where they are but I think I know what they are doing.

"In Qhawe's room," she says.

I poke my food a couple of times before I accept that I'm not even able to chew. I haven't eaten much in the last few days. Langa said I looked hollow, empty, and that I should try eating or drinking liquids if I can't.

I go to the bedroom leaving Xolie still doing I don't know what in the kitchen. I've been fighting to get Mvelo's image off my mind. It's crazy because the one that keeps popping is of him the first day I saw him, the three of them. That first day I took them to Spur and how fascinated he was. He was so cute when he lost his front teeth.

"Mami," its Lwandle. He is standing over me. He looks like a grown man now, his voice is even deeper than Sbani's.

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

"They saw Mvelo. That man, he saw him but he shot, he aimed at him and fired,"

What is this kid talking about?

"We were there behind Bab'Mpande's house. And then we saw this man trying to climb over the fence, but he wasn't getting in, it looked like he was standing on top of something because we could see his whole upper body. I saw that he had a gun and I grabbed Msebe and shouted to Mvelo to run. He was behind me. I thought he had run to another house," he says.

I'm trying to read his emotions as he says all this but he is completely blank. So am I.

"He just shot him. He was just 12-years-old mami, he was a child, why didn't he shoot me instead?" he says.

He is getting angry, very angry, but no tears.

"Lwandle. I want you to go to the bedroom and try to sleep. Can you do that for me my child?" I say calmly, almost pleading with him.

I know he doesn't want me to hold and comfort him. He doesn't want me to do anything for him.

He walks out after a minor staring contest with me.

My heart is pounding, my hands are trembling and I want to strangle someone and squeeze the life out of them.

I take off my pyjamas and put back on the clothes I was wearing when I came from my rondavel.

The house is empty; Xolie and Sbani must have gone to sleep already.

The security guards in the yard scurry towards me when I open the main door and walk out. Two of them follow me all the way to the door of Qhawe's rondavel.

I knock once and walk in, closing the door behind me.

They're all sitting in a half circle at the centre of the room. It's tense in here. They watch me in silence as I walk in.

I stand at the centre.

"Find them. Kill them all. Slowly and painfully,"

I say, and walk back to the door.

Leaving silence behind me.

Chapter 38

I shouldn't have done that, I shouldn't have.

I'm the woman, I'm supposed to be encouraging peace, instead I'm fuelling this war that I don't even know how and when it started.

I should go back there and tell them I made a mistake that it was anger and the hurt I'm feeling that took over me. Maybe they will listen. But who am I kidding? That's probably what they were planning when I entered the room. I just gave them approval.

That girl, Lerato, she said in that article many years ago that I 'have this power over them'. I do. I've changed their lives a lot; I know each and every one of them will do anything for me, to protect me. Now, this is me using that power to destroy everything I've built by telling them to go kill, again.

Come to think of it, I seem to be at the centre of all these killings. That Ngqulunga brother, he died because he was stalking me, the second one, I told them to go find Lwandle and kill the person who kidnapped him if they had to.

I brought them back here, to Greytown, they had left this place and their past behind but I brought them back. I'm the animal here.

The bedroom door opens just as I battle with myself.

"Are you asleep?" he says standing over me.

I think about ignoring him and pretending to be asleep but he sits down on the edge of the bed, he wants to talk.

"No, I can't sleep at all," I say pushing the duvet away and sitting up.

He sits and just looks at me. I can't tell what he is thinking but I feel this is about what I did earlier.

"I know you loved Mvelo like your own child and I know what you're going through right now," he says eventually.

I'm not sure yet where he is going with this.

"But I think what happened there, what you said; it's about more than that isn't it? Something triggered it. Tell me what it is," he says.

I don't want to make things worse, it's fine that they assume Mvelo was shot by accident, that the shooters were targeting them and wouldn't intentionally shoot at a child. But they will find out eventually I know.

"Why did this happen Mqhele? Who are those people that attacked us?" I ask.

He doesn't respond, he wants an answer from me first and he won't back down until I talk.

I take a deep breath. How did I end up here?

"Damn you Hlomu! These people shot my child! Tell me what you know," he screams. He's on his feet now, pacing up and down the bedroom. This is what I've wanted him to do all week, go crazy!

"Lwandle came to me just before I went to Qhawe's room, before I said what I said," I say and pause.

The look says 'keep talking'.

"He told me that they saw one of the shooters, he and Mvelo. That the guy aimed at them and fired. He grabbed the little ones and ran and told Mvelo to run too," I say.

He is rubbing his hands on his forehead now. He pulls out a cigarette and lights it. He's not allowed

to smoke inside the house but he'll snap if I even mention that now.

"Do you know what he said to me Mqhele? He said 'mami, why didn't they shoot me instead? Mvelo was just a child,'" I say, I'm getting emotional, it's anger.

There is smoke all over the room now. He keeps sitting and standing and sitting again.

I assume that they hadn't spoken about this or tried to find out what really happened until tonight. I know that if they had they would have found out by now.

"Where is Lwandle?" he asks.

No, he's not about to go speak to him about this now.

"I don't want you asking him questions Mqhele, he's dealing with enough already. He's sleeping," I say.

He pays me no attention.

"He's 15-years-old. He's a grown man," he says walking out of the bedroom.

I think I've just made things worse. I think he's going to ask him what the man looked like. I think they will find out who attacked us. I think there's about to be blood and war. I think there will be no winners; there are never winners in situations like this.

He doesn't come back.

They're all gone by the time we wake up. Lwandle too.

I don't like this; I don't like it at all. No!

Xolie finds me in the lounge trying to break up a fight between her two rascals. I think we need to slaughter something for the kids of this family, they don't believe in peace and harmony at all.

She hasn't seen any of them too, not even Sbani and Ntsika. They probably went with them to wherever they went.

You know, I did my best, I put these kids in school just so they would have choices and not end up serial killers like these men we married. Now this is setting us all back, and it could all be my fault.

Mqhele's phone has been off all morning and so has Sambulo's.

The armed men are still all over the yard and outside the gate. I've instructed the kids not to go outside at all; I think that's partly why they're being rebellious.

On top of all this we have had to deal with cops coming in and out of this house throughout the week asking questions and taking statements. They've been investigating since day-one but it doesn't look like they'll ever find anything out. And besides, nobody really cares about their investigation, we'll probably get to our attackers before they do, and then they will have to investigate that just like they are still investigating those deaths from over 10 years ago.

Police are not exactly a factor to this family; forget that Nqoba is sleeping with the police commissioner's wife. I just think he is an adrenalin junkie, that's the only explanation I can come up with for this madness.

But six men were lying outside the gate, dead, by the time the shooting stopped that day.

SHOOTOUT ENDS WITH EIGHT DEAD AT ZULU HOMESTEAD

ZULU BROTHERS MOW DOWN SIX ATTACKERS IN BLOODBATH

MYSTERY OVER DEAD ZULU ATTACKERS

These were the newspaper headlines after the story shifted from Mvelo and Oleta's death to the attackers. They told the police that they don't know any of those dead men, and I think they were telling the truth because if they did they would know by now who ordered the attack.

"You know Xolie, sometimes I think all of this is my fault," I say. I didn't mean to speak, I was just

thinking this and my mind and mouth colluded against me again.

She's not exactly following judging by the confused look she's giving me.

"I brought them here, I made them come back, they had moved on with their lives," I say.

She tells the kids to go to the bedroom. I assume she thinks we are about to get deep. That's not what I want to do.

"Where do you think they would be if you hadn't come along?" she says.

I don't know, I would never have known, my life would have been different.

"I don't know but they were fine before me," I say.

She stands up and walks to the kitchen, comes back with two glasses, orange juice and a bottle of Tanqueray. I remember this, I bought it the last time we were here and I said it was for marinating meat, like, really?

"I'll go get ice," I say standing up. We are supposed to be mourning.

She takes two sips, looks at me with a hard face and starts talking.

"You are wrong Hlomu, they were not fine. Sambulo was a hit man, he got paid to kill people and I don't think he felt guilty about it, it was his job. Ntsika was never going to go back to school. They were carrying out cash heists almost every second month and they were killing people. They stopped after they came back here, after this place was a home again," she says.

I didn't know she knew this much. But I know the last heist was a week before my wedding.

"I know they'll never tell you this but you did make them who they are today, that's why Mandisa hates you," she says, pouring another glass. I'm on my second one too and I can feel my eyes getting heavy.

But that's a lie, I didn't make them who they are today, they worked hard for it.

"You know, I've always known the dark side of this family, that's if there is a light side at all. I know about some of the killings, including those that were done to protect me, but I have never tried to stop any of them, not even once," I say.

She's quiet, I'm quiet. She pours another glass.

"Last night I told them to kill them all, slowly and painfully," I say, looking ahead at the blank TV screen in front of us.

She turns to look at me. There's no sign of shock or concern on her face, in fact her face is hard.

"They must kill them, all of them," she says with her eyes fixed on mine.

She's fallen into the dark place, right on top of me.

What kind of mothers are we?

I turn around and there's Nqoba standing leaning against the wall behind us.

He's been here for a while I know. He heard the whole conversation.

"It's done. Pack your things we're leaving,"

He says and walks away.

Without speaking, we both stand up and walk to our respective rondavels.

We know what he means by "it's done".

I turn around one last time as we drive off. The white cross marks a lonely figure over a hill of soil; we're leaving him behind, all alone in this place. I'm not going to cry.

Msebe is on my lap fidgeting and singing to himself what I can't make out. Little Langa rests his head on his father's chest, his thigh still bandaged. Who shoots at a three-year-old really?

I'm surprised my mother hasn't called me to complain about them being taken away from her. I don't even know when this was decided or what he said when he got to my mother's house.

When I asked him about it, just as I was packing all our stuff. All he said was: "These are my children Hlomu, I don't have to ask for permission to take them".

I knew then that I had to drop it.

It's the four of us, Sambulo and Xolie and their two boys in this Iveco, a man I don't know is driving. The rest of the family is in the three cars behind us. There hasn't been much talking since they came back from wherever they were.

I think about the old man again, we don't see him this time. Soon, when things have calmed down, I will ask about him and I won't stop until I get all the answers.

He is tense, I can feel it. I put my head on his shoulder, reluctantly because I don't know if he even wants to be touched right now.

He doesn't move for a few seconds and then he takes a deep breath and put one arm around my shoulders. He pulls me closer and kisses the top of my head. Msebe raises his head and looks at us both, and then goes back to his singing.

"I love you," he whispers in my ear.

"I love you too," I whisper back.

I wish I could fall asleep.

Chapter 39

It's almost dark when we get to Joburg. The house looks rather different, it's like we've been gone for months when in fact it's been just under two weeks.

I called MaMnguni and told her to go home the day after the shooting, just for her own safety.

I could make dinner but I don't think this man will be interested in my food today. I know he is about to go sit in his sanctuary with his guitar until the wee hours of the morning. Me, I have to bathe these kids and put them to bed.

He immediately walks out of the bedroom when I start to unwrap the bandage on Langa's thigh. Msebe follows him galloping as usual.

He walks back in the bedroom a few minutes later.

"I have to go," he says, softly but I know something is very wrong.

"Don't leave me alone here Mqhele," I say.

I'm scared.

He stands there and looks at me. I haven't even asked where he has to go.

He picks up Langa and signals with his head that I should take Msebe. I grab my handbag and follow him out the door and to the car.

He is quiet, I still don't know where we are going and I'm scared to ask. His phone has been ringing non-stop and he has been ignoring it. Msebe has given up on asking whose phone is ringing and why it is not being answered.

We end up at Sambulo's house. We are dropped off there and they both drive out without telling us where they are going. But experience has taught us not to ask too many questions in situations like these.

I must call my mother.

"Yes, your husband arrived unannounced and said he was here to pick up his children. I thought you had agreed on it but what I didn't understand is why you didn't call me to tell me," she says.

I don't think I'm in the mood to defend him, my mother must just accept that we are going through a hard time and we don't have time to be 'correct'.

"I'm going to bed," I say to Xolie when the noise and chaos have calmed down and all the little people are asleep.

We haven't talked much tonight, she's as confused as I am.

My phone beeps, it's him.

"Mandisa killed herself, she cut her wrists, we are at Nqoba's house." the SMS reads. I hand my phone over to Xolie and walk to the bedroom and straight to the shower.

It begins again.

"Hlomu, phone," Xolie says peeping through the bathroom door. I dry my hands and take it.

"We don't know what to do," he says.

What does he mean they don't know what to do? What do people do when they find a dead body?

"Is there a note? Something she wrote before, you know.....?" I say.

I trust she wouldn't be that selfish as to not tell us why she thought this was necessary.

"Yes, there's a two page letter,"

"Okay, take it, call the police, they'll call the mortuary," I say.

He doesn't seem to be following.

"Mqhele, you have to call the police, she killed herself, there's nothing wrong with involving the police there. Just make sure they don't see that letter, don't even mention it when they ask, "I say. He gives me a simple okay' and we hang up.

How can they not know what to do? What were they thinking of doing? Burying her in some shallow grave and pretend she never existed?

Mandisa's life was never going to end normally, not her, she was too broken. I wonder how we're going to do this because I don't even know where she is from or where she will be buried. She wasn't legally or culturally a member of this family so basically we have no right to bury her.

The headlines scream again this morning, are we ever going to get a break?

ANOTHER DEATH IN THE ZULU FAMILY

BODY OF GIRLFRIEND FOUND DECOMPOSING IN MANSION

ZULU WIFE KILLS HERSELF

She had been dead for a few days. Nqoba found her on that very same bed that other girl lay dead, with an empty broken bottle of wine next to her, she used a piece of it to slit her wrists. There was blood all over.

"Sbani you have to go back to school now, "I say.

He's been walking around like a zombie since, not talking and not eating. The sooner he goes back to his normal life the better.

Ntsika too, he hasn't said anything about when he is leaving. I want him as far away from this as possible.

"I'm not going back mami, "he says. I can't deal with this now. He's on his second year and he is not going to quit now.

"You are, even if I have to drag you back there myself. I'm not going to allow you to become a....." I stop right there, this is not the time.

They're still trying to track down Mandisa's family. How Qhawe could live with a woman for so many years and not know any members of her family I do not understand. She's originally from the Eastern Cape, that much I know.

And the child, the son she always claimed she had, he doesn't know him either.

I still don't know what's in that suicide note. Honestly, I had come to hate Mandisa but I didn't want her to die.

I haven't seen Mqhele since we came back to our house this morning. It seems all the kids have decided to move in here but it's not as noisy as you'd expect it to be.

I have to find him; I need to know what's in that letter.

He's in his sanctuary as I expected.

I stand at the door for few seconds, just to check if I'm welcome. He opens his arms when he sees me, I'm welcome, I walk in and go to sit on his lap, he puts the guitar aside. He's been smoking in here; the nicotine smell is still very strong.

"Why did she do it?"I ask him.

He takes a deep breath.

"She said she was tired,"he says.

Is that all he's going to give me? Really?

"Where is the letter?"

"It's with Nkosana," he says.

"He must burn it. These things have a way of being found, "I say.

I'm sure there was more in it than just that she is tired, it was two pages after all.

Now for the big question.

"Who was it? Where did you go yesterday morning? "I ask.

He might talk, he might not talk, either way I don't care, I'm not even sure if I really want to know. But I want to take him to task for involving Sbani and Ntsika.

"A son of a man my father murdered," he says.

I knew this day would come, I just knew it. Why did we go back to that place? This war will never end.

"What did you do?"

"He was never going to stop until he finished us all. So we stopped him, "he says.

I know what that means.

I look in his eyes.

"It's going to have to stop at some point Mqhele otherwise Msebe and Langa will still be fighting the same war when they're your age. Fix it, "I say as I try to stand up.

But he pulls me back to his lap.

"They shot my child Hlomu," he says.

I know he will never forgive for that.

"Are we safe now?" I ask.

He's quiet. We're not safe.

"You know, I once accompanied Mandisa to have an abortion," I say. I guess it's no use keeping the secret now that she's dead.

He sighs.

"Yeah, she wrote that in the letter, she said she was sorry for doing that to you. And for that dead girl incident, "he says.

Oh! That I wasn't expecting.

"And you're not mad at me?"

"Not really, you did what you had to do to keep the peace in this family. Now we have to figure out what we'll do with her body if we don't find her family," he says.

"How is Nqoba?"

"He is Nqoba, I don't know how he is. I don't think he loved her but he did care about her, "he says.

He tightens his arm around me.

"Promise me that I will die first, "he says.

That's a hard promise to make, and why are we talking about death, he won't do that to me.

"Promise me you won't die, that we will raise our children together until they are old, "I say.

He presses his lips on my arm.

"I wish it was that easy my love, but I'll try my best, "he says.

I don't like this talk we are having.

Suddenly he looks at me and smiles.

"Do you remember the first time you told me you loved me? That day in Naturena after you found money in the bag and assumed I was a criminal?" he says.

LOL that was about 11 years ago. And dude, you were a criminal.

"I was so shocked when I opened that bag. And you know, a normal girl would have run, but I stayed, I must have really loved you even then," I say.

His smile fades slowly.

"You stayed even after I hit you. Well, technically you left me, but I wasn't going to let you. I'll never let you," he says tightening the grip.

Is this a conversation we should be having right now?

He hasn't been sarcastic or said random stupid things in a while; I miss that side of him. I miss his obsession with sex in the car and ice cream and his arrogance. I want that him back, and I want him to touch me again and I want to hear him groan on top of me.

His phone beeps and he swiftly pulls it out of his pocket.

"Mandisa's uncles are at Nqoba's house, there's chaos," he says standing up.

"I'm going with you," I say following him.

He opens his mouth to say something but he knows I won't take no for an answer so he keeps moving.

There are three cars parked outside the house with an EC registration. The whole village must be here.

You can hear the noise coming from the house from the driveway. Suddenly I'm not looking forward to this meeting.

Nqoba, Nkosana and Qhawe are here, sitting together on one couch opposite about 12 men, evidently from a rural village somewhere judging by the way they are dressed, hats and all. One with a long beard is standing, speaking loud and pointing a finger at them.

"You kept my wife here for 26 years and never once thought about doing the right thing," he says.

Wife? Holy fuck!

They look as confused as I am. Mqhele is still standing with me with his zoom-lenses all out.

The men, they all turn to look at me, they stare quietly.

Oh! I had forgotten, I can't stand over them, I'm a woman.

"I'll make tea," I say walking to the kitchen.

"You will NOT believe the shit that is happening here right now" I SMS Xolie as I take out cups and switch on the kettle. Everything in this house looks expensive, even a teaspoon.

Mandisa only invited us here three times, she never really believed in this tight family thing.

"Trust me, nothing shocks me anymore, what's happening?" she replies.

"I'll fill you in later, for now I'm making tea for the whole of Lusikisiki".

They haven't said anything, the man keeps talking about how, after he paid lobola and was ready to start a family with his new bride, she disappeared without a trace and all his efforts to find her were fruitless.

"I thought she was dead, and all the while you were keeping her here. Are you going to give me back my lobola money?" he says?

Oh Ghosh! If this was a normal time, all this would be funny.

Come to think of it, Mandisa avoided the spotlight by all means; she never went to social events, even the ones that required us all to be there. I have never seen a picture of her in a newspaper at all.

Yes, she was older than Nqoba but this man who claims to have been her husband is far too old for

her still, maybe that's why she ran away, 26 years ago apparently.

I drop the tray on the coffee table with about a thousand cups and teabags and sugar and a litre of milk.

These men are still giving me strange looks. Errrrr no, I 'don't kneel when I serve tea, they must just deal with it.

They want the body, their lobola money back and the money to bury her. I don't think they want us at the funeral though.

By the end of the day a lot of things seem to have been agreed upon and money is handed over in cash.

Peter is here looking confused, I haven't seen him in a while. Shame poor white guy, having to deal with black drama must be hard.

"So where is that girl you paid off and lied to me about it? "I say when I bump into him in the passage.

"Mrs Zulu....."He says with a stutter, his cheeks turn red immediately.

"Yes Peter, that girl who was sleeping with my husband, the one that you paid R300 000 to disappear, I want her address and her phone number, and you are going to give them to me, "I say walking on and leaving him standing.

Bloody lawyers, they have no morals at all.

Mandisa, it turns out left the Eastern Cape when she was 17-years-old. She had been married off by her uncles to a 50-year-old man after he abducted her in what is known as *ukuthwala*. That must have been before 1994 because nobody tolerates that shit in this country anymore.

My math tells me she was 42-year old now.

Nevertheless, her body was transported to Lusikisiki early this week and thanks to our dear Peter and the money we pay him that whole story didn't make it to the papers.

The funeral is today, yes, three funerals in two weekends, that's how miserable our lives have become.

We fly to East London but still have to drive about 250km to her home, or rather her husband's home for the funeral.

I haven't made out how Nqoba feels about all this but I remember on that day, after the Lusikisiki crew left the house, there was silence before they all broke into laughter and went their separate ways. I think the laughing was a reaction to "what the heck just happened?".

We are in a deep deep rural place, even Mbuba and my father's home in Nquthu are not this rural. There are donkeys and the works. We stand out but I can see that most people here have no clue who we are, even local media is not stalking us.

But we are not the only out-of-towners here, there's a man with a teenage boy who looks like him. The boy, he keeps staring at me, like he knows me. I know, without even being told that he is Mandisa's son, but I won't be talking to him. That must be his father he's with.

And then, there are these three women who look like they could be Mandisa's age, they are, how can I put this? Seemingly very streetwise. They're also not from here judging by the way they are shunned.

We were instructed to stand far away from the important people and family, talk about being unwelcome.

I see Nqoba getting emotional now and again, it's understandable.

"I want a beer, there's no beer here and it's hot," Mqhele says just after we finish eating.

Really? This is a funeral.

"Drink water, it's good for you," I say brushing him off. He can't seriously be whingeing about alcohol at his brother's girlfriend's funeral.

"And I want to leave now, I've had enough of this grandpa husband and his drama," he says.

I laugh, I can't help it. The crazy thing is that I know he's serious.

One of his brothers pulls him aside and I'm left sitting alone in our little far corner table.

"You look cuter in person," this one lady says as she sits next to me.

She is one of those streetwise 'seniors'.

"Well, thank you, if that's a compliment," I say, with a smile just so she knows it comes from a good place. Safety first.

She smiles. I can tell she used to be a really beautiful woman, but age and Joburg have left her face challenged.

"She spoke about you," she says.

I don't think I want to know what she said, it can't be good. I don't ask.

"Were you friends?" I ask.

"Yes, best friends. We met when she arrived in Joburg, I taught her to survive," she says.

She was a survivor alright.

"She got pregnant along the way, didn't work out with the baby's father and later she met Nqoba. I can't say that worked out either but she held on," she says.

"I never knew her story, she didn't share much but I knew about the child and the father...."

"Yep, she took him to the best schools and made sure he had everything he needed. I think that's why she stayed with Nqoba for so long, because she could get anything she wanted from him," she says.

I don't know if this conversation we are having is proper considering that we just met five minutes ago. But I'm sensing that this is going the direction where we're going to have to work out a solution as to how this child is going to be taken care of now that she's gone, and I don't want to go there. This child has a father.

"You know, when we were still working the streets, in Hillbrow, Mandisa saved every cent she made every night hoping to buy her own house and start a business one da....."

Whoa! Stop right there! working the streets?

"Working the streets?" I ask.

"Yes, prostituting. We had to do what we had to do to survive, we were young rural girls in Joburg," she says.

SMH, I need a glass of wine.

"So, as I was saying....."

"Let's go," Mqhele says with his hand stretched out. I didn't even see him coming.

He widens his eyes in a questioning manner when I don't stand up.

"Let's go," he emphasizes and takes my hand. I stand up.

"Hope we will meet again," I say to the lady as I walk away. I didn't even get her name.

I'm lying though; I don't want to meet her again.

"So you have new friends in Lusikisiki now? You wanna stay here and ride donkeys?" he says as we walk to the car.

This man. Nx!

I can't wait to get back to Joburg and tell Xolie all about this. Now it makes sense why Mandisa had such a short fuse, she had a tough life shame and the Zulus didn't make it any easier.

Imagine getting out of prostitution thinking you've found a better life only to end up with Nqoba.

I wonder if he knows about it. I'm not telling though.

Chapter 40

I'm serious; Nqoba has a new woman living with him in his house, six months after we buried Mandisa.

I'm judging him, I'm judging him with a flaming giant fork in my hand and I am going to judge and discriminate against this woman until I can do it no more.

These men, they seem to see nothing wrong with it.

I told Mqhele, I said to him: "If you bring a hoe in my house soon after I die, I will be a ghost, you will open the oven and find me, I will be in the fridge, I will be in the cereal box, you will find me waiting for you in the shower".

He laughed. He'd better wait no less than five years.

We've been to Greytown twice since the funeral. We went two weeks later for a minor cleansing ceremony and we went again last weekend for a bigger one. It still feels weird that we will never see Mvelo or Oleta again. Let alone that Lwandle has become a stranger to everyone. But life is.

Nobody has been arrested for the shooting, police are still 'investigating' and the way they're carrying on it seems like they are investigating us and not the people who attacked us. Well, at least we know we won't be testifying in court and have to relive the traumatic incident again.

Mqhele convinced me a couple of months ago to start franchising Fruitcake Crumbs'; I had turned down so many offers.

"It's a business Hlomu, the point is to make as much money from it as you can," he said.

I didn't want to, that was my baby and I was afraid some owners would stray from the original idea and start selling crap like polony sandwiches. So yeah, it's going to be all over now and I'm making money I don't even need.

But you know what rich people do to make themselves feel less guilty? Donate to charity, I do that.

We also had the twins' fourth birthday two months ago, little Langa doesn't even seem to remember he was ever unable to walk. He is so much like me while the other bug-eyed clone of him is just like his father. I swear one of these days I'm going to beat that kid, if only his father wasn't so protective. He made it clear that nobody will beat his children as long as he lives. mnx!

"Babe, I want to go visit my mother, just for a few days, i haven't been home in a while," I say.

I really have been neglecting my family lately.

"And exactly how long is a few days?"

Really? WTF?

He knows I don't appreciate this question by the way I'm looking at him. What am I? His teenage daughter?

"I'm just asking because I want to know how long I'll have to sleep on Streetwise Two,"

Oh! He's being himself.

"I've been cooking for you for 11 years I'm sure you can survive three days of take always," I say. I'm getting pissed really.

I see a little smile on his face. I think he's trying to push me on purpose.

"So, it's three days? Okay," he says, just like that. But why does he have to be a bully?

"Mnx," I say as I turn to walk away.

He laughs, loud, before grabbing my arm and pulling me to his chest.

"You're so cute when you're sulking do you know that?"

I don't answer him. The bloody bug!

"You're mad at me?"

Yes stupid!

"You don't love me anymore?" he says with that smile of his.

He knows how to play me, he really does. I'm holding on to my angry fierce face but I know he will disempower me soon.

"Yeah I don't love you anymore, I'm going to leave you for that guy who's been asking me out," I say, trying too hard not to laugh.

He shakes his head.

"You want to send me to jail I see," he says slipping his hand under my top and running it up my back. His lips are on mine before I can speak.

"I'm going to remind you why that man will never have you," he whispers in my ear before his lips touch my neck. I smile at the tingling and pull him closer.

He's home most of the time these days. He is clingy but I like it, just having him around and watching him obsess over the twins, and me.

It's funny how, with all the money that we have, he has never lost touch what is important.

Which reminds me.

"Here,"

"What's this?" he says unwrapping the piece of paper I've just handed him.

"Call that kid and give him a job," I say.

He gives me an inquisitive or suspicious look; I'm not sure which it is.

"He made sure I came home safe that night....."

His eyes drop before I can finish, he knows what night I'm referring to.

"I'll call him tomorrow morning. Anything specific that you want me to give him?" he asks.

I think he'd appreciate anything offered to him, but today is his lucky day.

"No, just pay him three times more than he's worth," I say.

"Anything you want," he says.

It's good to be home, among normal law abiding, God fearing, drama-free people. Well, the drama-free part doesn't apply to my mother.

She's hell bent on smouldering the twins but they are not babies anymore, they go out to play and come back looking like construction workers since we've been here.

We're going back tomorrow afternoon and with all his madness, I miss him so much, I can't remember the last time I didn't see him for this long, trust me three days is a long time.

But first, I'm going out tonight. I'm going to dress up and I'm going to look gorgeous and I'm going to be wild. This is freedom, no security following me around and no Mqhele wanting me to be a Stepford Wife all the time. He's been stalking me with phone calls and SMSs but I can handle that.

I don't know where we are going but Thobi said I should wear high heels and look hot. Okay.

"Don't do anything stupid and end up in newspapers tomorrow," my mom says as I leave the house. I'm in my 30s for crying out loud!

We're going in Thobi's car, good; nobody will know we're there, especially the tracking device I

married.

"Woman, where are we going, Nongoma?" I say, we've already passed a tollgate and are heading north to I don't know where. I thought we were going to town or something.

"Ballito, you said you wanted to be free and wild, so I thought we might as well go to the bundus where people won't recognise you," she says.

I'm not sure about that last part but I hope it's true.

It's a hotel with a restaurant and bar slash club downstairs. It's a nice place. We find our table in a little corner. The plan is to have food, knock down shooters and cocktails and dance if we want to. How we are going to drive back home I don't know.

The last call from the husband was an hour ago, it's been a while.

Thobi has been greeting people here. I don't know how she knows them because she lives in Joburg but hey this is Thobi we are talking about and these are her kind of people, older men with too much money.

I'm left alone on the table when she disappears to the balcony with some guy who has two chins.

Oh well, I came here to have a good time so let me get drunk.

This is not a place Mqhele would take me to, which makes it even more fun. I wonder what he is doing in that house all alone, probably playing his guitar and frustrated because he doesn't even know where we keep toilet paper.

"I miss you" I SMS him.

"I can send the jet to come get you" he replies.

Oh can he not be so basic.

"Yeah right, at 9pm? I can hang on for a few more hours. What are you up to there? Please don't burn my house down"

I don't think he knows how to turn on the stove.

"I'm masturbating since the wife I paid for with so many cows left me alone for days" he says.

SMH, he has never been normal.

"The response was supposed to be: "I miss you too my love". But you are my God-given problem, there's not much I can do about that" I say.

"Haaaaaaa I love you to Hiroshima and back," he says. That's his favourite line; he heard the name Hiroshima somewhere and thought it was funny.

Let me get back to my alcohol. I still can't see Thobi, I can't believe she left me alone, and I can't believe I'm whingeing about it like a child. I am so dependent and paranoid sometimes I hate myself for it. Thobi didn't come here to babysit me.

"I'm not seeing men in black suits, so I guess I can sit," a man's voice.

I raise my eyes. Holly fuckin'crap! Not again!

He's seated before I can say no. How is it that there is never a dull moment in my life? Never!

"You look good. And I'm sorry about your loss, I wanted to call you but you know....."he says.

"What do you want Sandile? Really? What are you doing here and why are you talking to me? "I say. I'm just; I don't know why is this guy here?

"I'm staying here for the weekend, work stuff, so when I saw you I thought I'd come say hello. But I checked for your husband first and made sure he's not here, I'm surprised he let you go out alone,"

There's no mirror here but I'm sure I have a grossed look on my face.

"Don't talk about my husband, "I say.

"Okay," he says raising his hands.

"Can I buy you a drink?" he says.

I give him a look.

"Stupid me, I know you can probably buy me the whole bar," he says rolling his eyes.

Oh! It's going to be a long night.

I lean back on my chair; my eyes are a bit heavy now. There's still no sign of Thobi.

"Hlomu, how are you? How are you holding up? Losing a child can't be easy," he says.

Why do I feel like I want to answer this question? Oh yah, nobody has asked me this before. Mqhele has never asked how I feel about losing Mvelo.

I turn to look at him, I can't believe we are about to have a conversation.

"Sometimes, when I wake up in the morning I think I'm going to see him. That he'll come running and jump on me like he always did, even when he had grown to be taller than me. He was such a great child. I remember, he was the first to call me 'mami' and it just felt so natural," I say. I'm about to cry, this is the first time I'm talking about him after he died.

"You don't blame yourself though, do you?" he says.

"Sometimes I do, I guess it's normal for any adult to blame themselves when a child dies, because you feel like you failed to protect them," I say. This is how I feel, I didn't know it until now that I'm talking about it, but I do feel guilty.

"Do you want to take a walk, I feel you need to talk about this more," he says.

I do really. I might as well.

I pick up my clutch bag and follow him out the door. The air is so refreshing; we can see the ocean from here. It's such a beautiful night.

"There's an ice cream parlour still open just down the road, wanna be a kid a little?" he says nudging me with his elbow.

I laugh. Ice cream, my second husband!

"I'll take that as a yes," he says excitedly as we head up the road. There are people here looking like they're on their way to party. I hope none of them recognises me.

"How are the twins? I heard one of them got hurt?"

"Yes, shot in the thigh, but he's fine now, he's walking and running, I'm glad he was too young to understand the trauma," I say.

It's really nice to talk to someone about this, even if it's this deuchebag who just won't disappear from my life.

"Ouch!" I say.

We are both too late to catch the ice cream before it lands on my chest, leaving my dress with a big brown stain from the chest down. I'll never wear this dress again, chocolate stains are difficult to remove.

"Urgh, what am I going to do now? I can't go back looking like this. I'm going to call Thobi and tell her we have to leave now," I say trying to wipe it with a serviette, it's making the stain worse.

"Yeah that's not going to work just stop wiping it. We could go to my room, I'll give you a clean t-shirt," he says.

Really dude? your room?

"Don't look at me like that, I'm offering help here," he says.

Urghhhhhh

"Okay let's go, I'm just going to get the t-shirt and that's it, "I say following him again.

The room is not very impressive. Well, it's a top class hotel and everything but I'm used to getting the penthouse if I'm at a hotel. This is just too, average and normal.

He notices the way I inspect my surroundings.

"This is how the other half, the bottom half, lives. I'm not sure if you still remember, "he says.

These kinds of comments usually make me mad but I'll let it pass this time.

"Can I have that t-shirt now?" I say widening my eyes.

He throws it at me and I put it over the dress. There's a laptop on the table, it's open and the screensaver.....wait!

"You put a picture of me on your screensaver? Why?" WTF? That's creepy man!

He shuts it immediately.

"You weren't meant to see that. And no I'm not a stalker, I just found the picture a few days ago, scanned it and put it here just for fun," he says.

For fun? What? He stares at my picture for fun? Does he even know who I'm married to?

It's a picture of me when I was young, when I was still dating him I think. I don't even remember when or where it was taken but it must have been when I was at tech, in the few times that he behaved like a real boyfriend.

"You don't know about this picture I know, you didn't see me taking it but it was on your birthday, we were having lunch at Steers, burgers, "he says and laughs.

I think I remember that day a little.

"You know, I did love you, I just realised it when it was too late,"he says pointing me to the couch.

I sit, I don't know why but I just sit and he sits next to me, too close to me.

I start thinking about how life would be like if I had ended up with him. It would be simple, yes we'd be on a shoe-string budget probably but it would be simpler and less shady.

"It doesn't matter if you ever did or did not love me Sandile, I think I would have still met him and I would have still loved him more,"I say.

"Do you love him or do you love the idea of him, the power, the look, the money....." he says.

He obviously doesn't know me much.

"When I started dating him I thought he was a taxi driver, at least that's what he made me believe. I only found out later that he was more than that," I say.

He nods and looks at his feet. I must say this is the most serious conversation I've ever had with him. He's grown so much.

"Are you happy?" he asks. Random.

That question! That complicated question! Am I happy? I don't know.

Tears, I can't stop them. Why am I crying though?

"He, hey, don't cry I was just asking, "he says leaning over to hug me.

This is the first time I've had another man other than my husband get this close to me. He smells different, no nicotine, just perfume. I hug him back, tight.

He pulls back and our eyes meet.

I let go of my common sense and my lips meet his. I allow him.

I allow him to go all the way, unzip my dress and lay me down on the couch and run his hand on my skin and kiss me everywhere.

He is so gentle and so slow and so patient. He holds me tight as he does it and whispers in my ear.

He wants to know if I'm okay and kisses my neck as he does it.

He waits until I'm done before he finishes. I hold on to him, on top of me, even after he is finished.

We lie here for minutes, not talking and not moving.

My phone beeps.

Oh God! I push him so hard he almost lands on the floor. I find my underwear on the floor, put my dress on, grab my clutch bag and run out the door leaving him calling my name behind.

What the fuck have I done?

I find Thobi frantically wandering around the bar.

"Hlomu! Where have you been? I've been looking for you all over! I thought something happened to you, I was about to call your mom and ask for Mqhele's numbers. I thought someone kidnapped you or something," she talks non-stop again.

"You look... what happened? Where were you?" she says.

Now I get an opportunity to speak.

"I needed some air so I went to the ice cream store up the road, but I stained my dress while eating it so I went to the restrooms, I spent so much time there trying to remove the stain but as you can see, it didn't work. Can we go now?" I say. I need to get out of here before Sandile appears again and make her suspicious.

"Yes please, if I lose you again your husband will kill me," she says pulling me by hand.

I check my phone the moment I sit in the car.

"I miss you too Mrs Zulu" an SMS from my husband.

"You know it was not a mistake" an sms from the man I just slept with.

I delete it immediately.

He is already waiting for us at the airport when we land. He is waiting with flowers. LOL flowers? This is the second time he's ever bought me flowers.

He carries both the kids at once, strange how he can still carry them even though they're big and tall now.

Msebe is bombarding him with township stories and his usual questions while I drag myself behind them.

"Don't ever leave me alone again do this long, I felt like a lost orphan," he says as he starts the car.

I'm trying very hard to maintain eye-contact but I'm battling. The picture of that man on top of me keeps recurring, how could I allow that?

And knowing Sandile he won't leave me alone, not after I showed him signs that I'm not happy and am capable of being unfaithful.

If this comes out, he's dead. So am I.

"You're very quiet, I thought you missed me," he says kissing the back of my hand as he drives.

"I did, just that I did a lot of thinking this weekend, and a lot of talking with my mother about Mvelo," I say.

I lie like a man don't I?

His face hardens.

"We've never talked about it. Maybe you should go see one of those doctors that deal with these things," he says.

He could have just said: "do you want to talk about it? To me?"

But that's not who he is and of course I know that now because I've decided to be a whore and break my vows. How will I ever fix this?

"I think I should, and maybe you should come with me," I say.

I know that's not gonna happen. He's not going to let some random person tell him how to feel and make him talk about his feelings.

I walk straight to the shower when we get to the house. Maybe if I wash myself hard enough I'll feel less dirty.

I feel him breathing behind me, his hands on my waist and his skin meeting mine from the back.

"I missed you," he says rubbing one hand on my breasts. He turns me to face him, opens the shower door and leads me out.

Everything is different. He feels different.

"You should really go see that "feelings doctor" babe," he says as I lay with my head on his shoulder.

The worst thing is, there was not even a condom.

Chapter 41

I've had to block Sandile's phone number. He just won't stop.

How are you gonna sleep with someone's wife and still keep hounding her like it was a normal thing to do? And where is his girlfriend or wife in all this?

He kept saying he wanted to know if I'm okay and that I should know that I always have a choice.

Seriously, does he think I'm going to leave my husband for him? I don't even love him. It just happened that he found me in a moment of weakness and intoxication. Now he thinks he can have his claws all over me?

Besides, I'm past all that. My life has gone back to normal and I can now have sex with my husband without that scene of him flashing in my mind.

If I can live without feeling guilty about people being killed, I'm sure I can easily handle a one-night-stand. What my husband doesn't know won't hurt him, or land him in jail.

Oh, and I've been roped in by Nqoba's new love in planning his surprise 40th birthday party two months from now. I think it's a way to launch herself. She's trying too hard and she's being judged so much, by me included. I won't be surprised if there's media there just so she can officially claim her place.

I hate on other women, don't I? Go ahead, judge me. You know you do it too.

I decided to stop by the store today. I don't know any of the staff, just the manager. And no, I don't know how much it makes a day or when it opens or closes. But when I walked in this morning I saw everybody scurrying off and pretending to be busy with something.

The Zulu brothers are regulars; Nkosana apparently had his favourite meal that they always have to be ready to make in case he pops in. Mqhele too, they say he stops by almost every day for ice cream and a bagel. And then, Mqoqi was dating one of the chefs here and she became big headed as a result. The manager came to me and asked for permission to fire her. And then I had to deal with Mqoqi trying to get her job back and Mqhele telling him to fuck off. She got another job, a better one, and I know they had everything to do with it.

But now, I have to work out a diet plan and start going to gym, in my house, again. I've been gaining weight in the past seven weeks and I don't like the way I look anymore, plus it's going to summer and I can't be this fat in the heat.

Mqhele says it's because I'm growing and that he likes the curves. Nope. I'm not going to buy that. He still has the body he had when we first met. His hair has started going grey, but he still looks good, really good.

I have to keep up.

And then she walks in, of all people, she walks in when I'm here, today.

She freezes when she sees me sitting on one of the tables with my laptop. But then she remembers that I probably don't know anything about her shenanigans and walks on to the counter.

She's a celebrity so yeah some people here are a bit star struck, except me, I want to strangle her and wash that make-up off her face with toilet water.

She gets a take-away and heads for the exit, but then she stops and turns back, heading straight to my table.

"Hi, Hlomu," she says.

Breathe Hlomu.....breathe....

"Hi," I say trying to appear as normal as I can.

"Nice to meet you again, we met here for the first time during your launch, I'm not sure if you remember," she says, with a smile.

Well, I've tried but returning the smile I can't pull off.

"Yes I do remember," I say, raising my eyebrows.

"Okaaaaaay," she says sarcastically.

Oh no! Not with me woman!

"I have this charity event next weekend, it's a breast cancer thing and I was wondering if you could come through just to support and endorse it," she says.

Wow, she's inviting me to events now? We're best friends already? Let me shock her.

"Of course, I would love to. In fact I'd like to donate some money to it," I say.

She smiles.

"But I'll come only if you're there too because you know, I could be busy smiling with strangers there and you could be busy fucking my husband somewhere during that time," I say.

She stands there with her mouth open.

"Good. I'll see you next weekend, send me an invite to this email address," I say handing her a piece of paper.

She takes it and walks away.

Now, where were we? Oh, there's a juicing diet everyone's been raving about, I think it will work for me. I don't even know what some of these things on this shopping list are but I'm determined. I'm going to have to cut out meat as well.

Before I know it, it's time to pick up the twins from school already. I miss having a job in times like this, I'm just never able to keep track of time these days.

"I saw your girlfriend today," I say as I tie up my braids preparing to get in bed. He's sitting with his back on the headboard with a laptop.

He raises his eyes, but doesn't speak.

"Ask me which one" I say.

He still doesn't speak and instead shakes his head and goes back to his laptop.

"The TV presenter, she invited me to an event next weekend, I'm going to go," I say.

I knew that would grab his attention, he puts the laptop aside but doesn't say anything; instead he looks at me with a hint of fear in his eyes.

Seconds later he speaks.

"Why would you want to go there?" he says.

Why is it important to him?

"Because it's a charity event and I'm not going to not go to it because your girlfriend is there," I say.

Tension in here is mounting.

"I know you saw her at the shop but....."

What????

I stop what I'm doing and walk to him.

"Mqhele, how did you know I saw her at the store? I didn't tell you that, I just said I saw her,"

He scratches his chin. This is new.

"Are you still talking to her?" I say.

He's quiet.

"Or are you still sleeping with her? Maybe that sounds more familiar," I say. I feel like pulling my hair right now!

He just sits there with his zoom lenses all out.

"I'm not sleeping with her, she sent me an email asking how you found out and panicking about the whole thing," he says.

I see. That is supposed to make me feel better I assume.

"I can't believe this," I say walking away.

He grabs me by my waist before I reach the door.

"I thought we were past this Hlomu," he says.

I thought so too.

"Obviously I am the only one who was past this, not you. I thought you cut all ties but obviously if she can send you an email out of the blue, and if she has that much access to you, it means you lied to me. Thank for making me a laughing stock," I say and walk out.

I think I'm the only woman in the world who allows things like this to happen to her. I should have known. I'm so naïve. I never even took this thing seriously, I let it pass easily because I was glad he was honest and thought he meant every word he said. Why am I so stupid though? And where am I going?

I end up staring at the open fridge in the kitchen, I want something, I don't know what but I need to eat something.

I pull out the chocolate cake and cut the biggest slice. And yes, I'm going to have Coke with it and I'm going to eat until I can eat no more, at least I know my food won't betray me.

"Are you coming to bed?" he says from behind me.

"No," I say.

He comes to stand in front of me.

"Why are you so angry lately? You just blow up anytime, I can't even talk to you without worrying how you'll react anymore," he says.

He's got to be fucking kidding me!

"I don't know Mqhele, maybe it's my turn to be angry. I have many reasons to be don't you think? I mean, between your cheating and abuse and control issues; I was bound to crack eventually. So don't look so worried, you created this new me, you're a tough man I'm sure you'll be able to handle me," I say.

He's hurt by what I've just said. I don't care, I want to hurt him.

"I can't talk to you when you're like this," he says starting to walk away.

"You can't talk to me at all without lying," I say as I shove another large chunk of cake in my mouth.

He takes a deep breath.

"For what it's worth, that woman is not my girlfriend and I'm not sleeping with her. Come to bed when you've calmed down," he says, softly, and walks away.

He has a nerve to walk away from me! I'm not going to bed with him! Never!

I'm woken by a cold feeling on my cheek.

It's Langa.

"Mami, wake up, I want the remote, you're sleeping on the remote mami, wake up" he whinges.

Geez! I slept on the couch. There's a blanket over me, he must have put it there last night.

MaMnguni is in the kitchen, I feel embarrassed walking past her.

"Would you like some tea?" she says.

Since when do I drink tea?

"No I'm fine, I'm going out just now anyway," I say.

I don't even know where I'm going but now that I've lied about it, I'm forced to find a place to go to.

He's gone. Yes, we are at that place again. I wonder how long it will take this time.

Most of my clothes are a bit tight so I go for the casual look, maxi dress and flops and a straw hat. It's Saturday and I'm going to the cinema to watch a movie, and have lunch, and buy whatever I want even though I'm feeling a bit tired. It must be because I didn't sleep well.

He still hasn't called when I come out of the morning movie, even after I finish brunch and as I swipe our bank card at every store I dare to enter. He probably won't even notice there's money going out because he has so much of it, that is why he behaves like a moron, it's all this money that makes him think he can have anything he wants.

I will never say this to him but sometimes, like now, I do hate him, I get angry just thinking about him.....I need to sit down, I can't see anything, my knees are weak, I....

"Hi," he says just as I open my eyes.

He's watching me sleep again? Last I checked he was AWOL.... wait! Where is this place?

"You're in hospital," he says when he sees the panic on my face.

I don't understand. He doesn't even look worried. In fact he looks almost happy.

"You fainted, at the mall," he says.

Yes I remember being at the mall but.....

"What happened?" I ask, bits and pieces are coming back to me but I still don't understand what's going on.

"You fainted at the mall, inside a sunglass store," he says. He is so calm about it but I can see some relief on his face as he explains further.

"How did I get here?" I ask.

"It doesn't matter. Are you fine now? Are you back?" he says waving his hand in front of my eyes. He has this smirk on his face, like he's happy about something.

"I'm fine I just don't understand how I ended up here, I was fine. Am I sick?" I say, reality is kicking in, I'm in hospital! This can't be good.

He gives me a brief smile.

"No, you're not sick, just pregnant. And it's going to be a looooong seven months for me," he says and laughs.

Pregnant? That's..... I don't know.....unexpected.

"Don't worry, I can handle it, I survived the past seven weeks," he says.

I guess then this is good news I suppose but I.....

He moves closer and takes my hand and kisses it.

"Another big-eyed Zulu boy is on the way," he says. He looks so excited and happy.

I'm starting to get excited too, until I remember.....

A wave of panic rushes to my face immediately and I freeze. This is not happening!

"Whoah! Relax, you've done this before. It will be easier this time," he says.

He probably thinks I've just remembered how physically hard it was for me the first time.

But no, I've just realised that I'm not sure who the father of this child is.

Chapter 42

He kept brushing my belly, flat as it still is and smiling non-stop all the way from hospital to home. I've been tense throughout. I thought about asking to stay in hospital overnight, just so I could get time to think about what I'm going to do about this problem, but I think he would have stayed with me the whole night.

"You really scared me. Imagine getting a call that your wife has just collapsed in a mall, I almost lost my mind," he says.

I still don't understand how that happened.

"Who called you?" I ask.

"The store manager," he says.

"The paramedics had already arrived when I got there and they were putting you in a stretcher. I never want to feel like that again, ever!" He says. Shame I can tell he was traumatised.

"Mpande has all your bags, the stuff you were buying. He left the store with them on our way to hospital. They all left the hospital when I told them you were okay, just pregnant," he says.

So everybody knows now?

Isn't it that a doctor cannot tell anyone about a patient's condition before telling them, especially in things like pregnancy?

But this is Mqhele, no doctor was going to tell him about patient-doctor confidentiality, not with his wife lying on a hospital bed.

If I had found out about this first I know exactly what I would have done. But what am I going to do now? This could be the beginning of the end of everything.

I'm trying, I'm really trying but I can't help thinking about what I have done. My children! What will this do to my children? My family? My husband! What have I done!

"You're not still worried about that fight we had last night are you? Although it wasn't exactly a fight, it was your hormones abusing me again," he says with a laugh.

We are really not in the same space right now.

"Promise me you won't be as horrible and complicated as you were the first time, because I'm too old to deal with that now," he says. He is so happy.

I imagine how different things would be if I hadn't done what I did, this would be a joyous moment for both of us.

How could I not have seen it? The weight gain, the outbursts, the eating?

Seven weeks, that's how long this baby has been growing inside me without me knowing. I actually slept with these two men about 16 hours apart. Just saying it makes me feel so dirty.

If this child is not his, he will know immediately after it opens its eyes. I have to come up with a plan, quick.

He falls asleep with his arms around me. How can one stupid mistake change so much? Change everything.

I don't even have someone I could tell about this, not even Langa, but I know it will eat me away every day.

And yes, I made the front pages. Some say I collapsed because I'm depressed, others say I 'allegedly' have a terminal illness and then that other gossip blog says I was drunk.

"I wish you'd stop bothering yourself with what the media says, especially now," he says brushing

my belly again.

He left very early this morning, before I could make him breakfast so I guess that's why he's come back now. Problem is, I can't stand the smell of eggs, or anything that is food, strange because I only found out yesterday that I'm pregnant.

"Why are you always touching my mami?" Msebe says. I don't even know where he came from. He's beginning to be sneaky like his fathers.

We both turn to look at him, he has this fierce look on his face and as we have come to know, he never drops his eyes, he will beat you in a staring contest no matter how big or mean you think you are. He's on some tense one with Mqhele as we speak.

"Because she is my wife," he says, with a little smile on his face. He is impressed by all this and it is disturbing.

"Well, she is my mami and you must leave her alone," he says and immediately runs off to I don't know where.

We both burst into laughter after seconds of silence.

"Oh my! I gave birth to you, this is a smaller version of you and I have no idea what I'm going to do with him," I say.

He's still laughing; he looks so happy and so beautiful. The love of my life. We've been through so much but we've never stopped loving each other, supporting and protecting each other. The father of my children, I could never live without the three of them, never.

"Hey...why are looking at me like that, are you okay?" he says moving closer to me. I didn't realise I was staring.

I wrap my arms around his waist.

"I think it's crazy to love someone this much, me, the way I love you, I think it's not normal," I say.

I don't expect him to get me immediately.

He moves closer and wraps himself around me.

"I know you will never betray or hurt me," he says kissing the top of my head.

My stomach turns immediately and my body tenses. Where does this come from?

I hold him tighter, too tight, I can't lose him.

"I'd make you breakfast, but if I even see eggs I'm going to throw up. You have my permission to go eat that deadly food from the rank. I'm off to shower" I say as I let go.

He laughs again.

"I did say it was going to be a long seven months for me," he says as I walk away.

He doesn't even go to the rank anymore. The taxis, they kept saying they would sell them and get out of the business, but instead they kept buying more. All I know is I don't want my children in the taxi business, never!

Maybe I should just stop worrying and trust that this baby is his, I mean, I'm not the unlucky type, things always work out for me in the end. And if it's not his, let me just hope it will come out looking like me. It would be a first in this family but there's a first time for everything.

Maybe I should go visit Langa, I could get some weird disease like Ebola there or something and lose the baby and then come back and start over.

But then, I'm brushing my belly as I think this, there's someone growing in here and I can already feel him.

About that surprise party, it's in two months' time and I'm responsible for the guest list. I'll be throwing the same party for Mqhele in about three years, if I'm still here.

"I have to put together a guest list for Nqoba's surprise birthday party, I'm not sure where to start, can you help?" I say to him as he comes in the bedroom.

He gives me a bored look.

"Nqoba and a surprise party? is she really going through with that? Besides, it's barely a year after we buried three people in this family, I don't think we are at a point where we should be throwing parties," he says.

He has a point. I've tried raising this with her but she's on a mission and can't be stopped.

That's it! I'm out of this; she'll have to do it on her own. I have my own problems and right now I'm craving wine. During my first pregnancy he threw away everything alcoholic in our then house, he even kept his beer in the locked fridge in the garage. He'll probably do the same now.

"Have you told your mother?" he asks.

I'm confused for a moment.

"Oh, not yet, I haven't even told Langa. I'm still in a bit of a shock but I'll call them today," I say. Normally they'd be the first people I tell but the situation right now is complicated.

I'm nervous and sceptical, but this is something I had to do, it is my responsibility.

These women here are hugging and laughing and chatting away like life is normal. Their hair is well kept, weaves even and they have found a way to somehow make the navy and white gear they're all wearing look stylish.

I'm trying to imagine what it's like to be locked up in one place for years and only be able to see your family on weekends, if they show up.

The woman on the bench opposite mine has been kissing the toddler she's holding none stop since she sat down. She's about my age and judging by how young the child is, she hasn't been here for too long. I can't help wondering what crime she committed and what drove her to it.

I've been flashing some fake smiles at some stares I've been getting. I'm more nervous because I don't even know what the person I'm here for looks like.

"You should come here more often, maybe they'll let you sneak into our salon and I can do something about that hair," she says standing in front of me.

I touch my braids. I'm not sure if it's her or not.

"You're prettier in person, Mami," she says.

It's her. I have never in my life seen anyone with such beautiful skin. I'm literally staring at her.

I realise I haven't said anything since she sat down.

"Hi," I say finally.

She smiles, she has dimples. Ghosh she's so beautiful it's freaky! She must be in her late 30s, maybe Mqhele's age.

I'm not sure what to say next but I think I'm acting really weird right now.

"Well, this place makes a lot of people uncomfortable, except us of course," she says looking around the room.

"It doesn't look that bad," I say. That's probably the last thing you should say to someone in prison but this is me.

She shakes her head and says: "Anything is better than this trust me".

We are both quiet. I don't know why I'm here but I know I had to come, I had to do this.

"Do they know you're here?" she asks, probably after realising that I'm still uncomfortable.

"No, they don't. I'm here for the kids," I say.

Her face changes immediately. It must be hard.

"They want to know Zandile, I don't know what to tell them anymore," I say.

She takes a deep breath.

"Tell them you don't know," she says with a straight face.

How can she and Nkosana be so selfish about this?

"Zandile, you have to understand, anyone, and I mean anyone in this world can disappoint these kids but not me. They trust me, they rely on me, and I cannot lie to them like that. I can't, especially not now. Lwandle is a ticking time bomb, he's so angry he's becoming scary. I had to force Sbani to go back to university; he was ready to drop out....."

"But this would make things worse, I don't want them to know and that's it," she says. She sure is a Zulu wife, that feistiness is in all of us.

"That's unfair, you're their mother, you should be working with me here and not leaving everything up to me," I say.

I can't believe I'm here arguing with a prisoner on a Sunday morning. I stop talking because I'm getting angry and my hormones could push me further.

"If you tell them, they'll want to know what I did to be here," she says.

I also want to know, that's why I'm here.

"Whatever it is I'm sure they can handle it. They're 16 and 20-years-old," I say.

I can tell she's not convinced. In her mind she thinks she's protecting them but she doesn't understand what they could become if she continues to neglect them, especially Lwandle.

I have done the best I could, given them everything. I don't think they need a mother's love, they need the truth.

"I killed my mother," she says, just like that.

Am I the only one in this family who's never killed anyone? And why am I not shocked by all this? She's been in jail for a long time so I expected it to be a serious crime but this? No.

"Go on," I say.

She looks surprised that I'm not freaking out, but then her face changes into a half-smile right there.

"You really are a Zulu wife," she says shaking her head.

"So, this is how the story goes. When Nkosana's parents were killed, he was already 17-years-old and we were in high school and we were dating. He was my first love but nobody knew about it, especially my parents because the Zulus were not exactly popular," she says.

Wait! But this means she's also from Mbuba!

"So, one night their home was burnt to ashes and they were gone. At first we thought they were all dead, including the kids but later we learnt that the kids may have gotten away, I waited hoping he'd come back one day but he never did. Until six years later, I saw him on the N3 to Pietermaritzburg driving a taxi, but he didn't see me. It had a GP number plate so I assumed it was going to Johannesburg. I went home, to Mbuba and packed one bag, stole money from both my parents and went to take a taxi to Joburg," she says.

Some weird shit happens out there.

"I stayed with an old friend for a couple of days while looking for him at every taxi rank in Joburg. I found him a week later at Bree and the rest is history," she says.

I don't think there is a woman in this world that has been lied to like I have. That story about her being from Botswana and her leaving because Nkosana got another woman pregnant. WTF?

"Now, for the part where I killed my mother. I went back home after a year, pregnant, to tell them that the father wanted to come and pay lobola. I told her who the baby's father was and she tried to force me to have an abortion. She held me down while some woman pushed a coat-hanger inside me. But I fought and in the end she was lying on the ground with the coat-hanger in her neck and me standing over her. I don't know what happened to the other woman. I ran, Nkosana and all of them tried to make it go away but cops caught up with me five years later. I didn't even go on trial I just pleaded guilty," she says.

I should have listened to her when she said she doesn't want to tell. This is too much, even for me. But then, she tells the story like it doesn't even bother her.

"You know Hlomu, I could feel guilty about it but I don't, because really I wanted to kill my mother, I had wanted to kill her since I was a child for allowing my father to sexually molest me," she says.

Oh God! No! I want her to stop now!

But she won't.

"Nkosana tells me you've been seeing my father in Mbuba," she says.

"I'm not sure I know which one is your father," I say.

The bell rings, they have to go back in, they all immediately stand up.

"That's my cue," she says opening her arms. I stand up and hug her back.

She takes a few steps before turning around to look at me.

"Hlomu, thank you for everything, you've done better than I would have with my boys. And please, don't come back here, not with my children," she says and disappears in the crowd.

I had brought a plastic bag full of food and cosmetics; I'm still carrying it until the warder comes to me and greets me with stupid grin. I'm famous after all. I'm just glad cell phones are not allowed in here so I won't see my picture on some tabloid tomorrow.

I leave the plastic bag with her.

I will do as I was told. I'm going to have to continue lying to these kids. I even forgot to ask her about that email.

I feel like a lost soul when I walk out of those high walls. It's like a different world altogether.

As I approach my car, I see him. He's standing leaning on the car with his hand in his pocket and his ankles crossed. He has a lit cigarette in one hand and he is wearing tracksuits.

When did he get here and how did he know I was here? Is he following me now?

My pace gets slower and slower as I approach the car, this can't be good.

"Why?" That's the first thing he asks when I reach him. He doesn't look at me as he speaks. I know this, and it's not good.

"Because I needed to know," I say.

"Why do you need to know Hlomu?" He says.

"Because I'm the mother of her children," I say.

He looks at me, briefly, before opening the car door on the passenger side. He's driving? How did he get here though?

"Let's go home," he says starting the car.

I look out the window as we drive out the gate. I wonder if I shouldn't have done this.

Her mother must have really been evil, how do you even do that to your child? And what was that about her father?

"Mqhele, who is her father?"

He sighs.

"The old man," he says.

I know which old man. He told me a long time ago that the old man was a relative. Maybe I should accept that there are things he's always going to lie to me about.

I won't even go into how he knew I was here and how he got here. Today has been hectic enough already.

He didn't put me on some Kangaroo Court about my trip to prison last weekend but he was a bit sulky the whole afternoon.

I'm getting fatter and I'm starting to show and I'm getting more and more worried every day.

My mother is excited, too excited. And so is everyone else except me.

I haven't told Xolie about my trip to Sun City and I don't think I ever will, we are far from getting drunk and deep again anytime soon anyway.

"I want to go shopping, none of my clothes fit me," I say.

He smiles, he's in one of his "I'm offensive and stupid today" moods again, I've been sensing it all morning.

"You know, I could buy you a shop with all the clothes you want and you could just go there and pick anything, instead of you walking around malls all day. They could just stock the same clothes in bigger sizes ever month," he says with that smirk of his.

I want to throw this body lotion at him!

"Or you could just leave me alone," I say turning away from him.

He laughs. He's pissing me off right now and he's doing it on purpose.

"What have I done now? it was just a suggestion," he says coming towards me. He kisses the top of my shoulder and brushes my belly from the back.

"He's growing. I haven't heard him kicking at night yet. The twins used to wake me about three times on one night," he says. He's past that little issue we just had. I might as well move along with him.

"It's still a bit early for him to start kicking," I say. I don't want to talk too much about this pregnancy. I'm still hoping to wake up one of these mornings with this baby gone.

"If you're going to the mall I'm going to get someone to go with you," he says.

You've got to be fuckin kidding me.

"Why?"

"Because I don't want you fainting again," he says.

What the heck is wrong with this man?

I know I'm pregnant now so no, I won't faint again.

"We have to go somewhere but I'll get someone to look after you," he says picking up his car keys.

"Love you, later," he says kissing me and walking out.

I'm at Clearwater Mall. I love the calmness of it and that it's not too big.

I need dresses, a lot of dresses because it's hot and I am ballooning. I didn't answer this man's two last calls because I know he wanted to find out where I am and send people to track me.

I hate it when he treats me like I'm a child. But then, he's going to freak out and go crazy if he can't

get hold of me.

The life I live.

"Saw your missed calls. Miss me?" I SMS him, better that than calling.

"Yes, that and the fact that you're ignoring me on purpose. Enjoy Clearwater Mall but be safe please," he responds.

I didn't tell him I was going to Clearwater, he's stalking me.

I turn around and oh crap!

"So you're the bodyguard? "I say.

"Yep! I'm here to make sure you don't faint again," he says.

Don't get me wrong, I like Mqoqi but seriously, he is so much work, he should have at least sent Qhawe, he's a hard head but he doesn't speak much. And worse, Mqoqi is a hard-core celebrity. This is going to be a long day.

"So where do we go next? "He says.

I have to get out of this.

"We're going to have lunch, I've bought a few things and that's it I'm tired already, "I say, I'm lying.

"Well then after you," he says taking the shopping bags I'm carrying and following me to the door. I hear the ladies at the store giggling.

I choose a restaurant that seems to be the emptiest, just so this ends quickly. He doesn't suggest anything; he just follows me wherever I go. Doesn't he have a life?

"So who is your girlfriend now? "I say, it's time for me to make him uncomfortable, just as his punishment for agreeing to do this.

He laughs.

"Please don't ask me when I'm getting married, please don't," he says still laughing.

That's where I'm headed.

"I just want to know, I mean you can't be changing girls every month, you need to choose one at some point, "I say. No man likes having this conversation.

He has that smirk on his face. He looks exactly like Mqhele a couple of years after we got married, he looked exactly like this.

"Well, mami, I am looking for a woman to marry, just that I'm looking for someone exactly like you and I haven't found one," he says.

Oh crap! He's just like his brother; he knows how to divert a conversation.

"Yeah right! Just settle down please, and find someone who is not after your money, "I say.

He face turns serious immediately.

"But how will I know if they're not after money?" he says.

It's hard to tell these days.

"Trust me, you will know, and she won't be like the usual girls you're always running around with, she will be different and you will know she is the one," I say.

Our food arrives and I start eating immediately. I'm always hungry; maybe I'm carrying twins again.

"Mqhele tells me you went to see Sis'Zah," he says unexpectedly.

I don't want to discuss that but hey.

"Yes I did, I needed to know, the boys have been asking for answers, "I say.

He sighs.

"Yes, we always knew they'd come to you," he says.

This is the fourth time I'm hearing these words.

"Her story is sad, I won't tell the kids about it or the fact that she's in jail. What I don't get though is why her father never reached out to his grandsons, I mean he's always around when we have functions at Mbuba," I say.

He's stopped eating and is staring at me. His eyes drop when they meet mine. He takes the fork and continues eating.

"Did she tell you what he did to her?" he asks.

Oh that.

"Yes she did," I say.

Now I understand why.

"I've always found him to be creepy, the way he always looks at us when we drive past him, and the way he was standing and watching on that day we were attacked....."

I raise my eyes and his zoom-lenses are all out, his mouth open.

"Standing where?" he asks.

What is this about now?

"I saw him when the helicopter was taking off, he was standing outside the blue house opposite us but he was in like a bush, so I don't think you could see him, I only saw him because I was up in the air. He was just standing there watching, smoking his pipe," I say.

I think that maybe I shouldn't be telling this judging by the look on his face. I don't even understand why he is reacting like this that old man is always appearing from out of nowhere.

"I'm going to go across, to that shop, I just want to buy a packet of cigarettes and I'll be back," he says as he stands up and dials on his phone. Nkosana, Qhawe and Mpande are the only people who don't smoke in this brotherhood.

I know he is calling one of them and that it's about what I've just told him. It had better be nothing major; it would be nice to have no drama at least for one year in this family.

But how did Nkosana and Zandile think this was going to work after everything that had happened in Mbuba? It was a kind of Romeo and Juliet love they had and yes it ended tragically. I still can't get over how beautiful she is though. She has that rural gal beauty thing about her.

He comes back, sits down and continues with his food. No cigarettes.

"Got those cigarettes?" I ask.

He widens his eyes like he's just remembered.

"What's going on Mqoqi?" I ask. Why do I ask these things?

He keeps his eyes down,

"Nothing," he says.

He even lies like his brother.

He's the one driving when he takes me home. I wonder how he got here and where his car or bike is. Anyway, my feet hurt and I wanna hang out with my rascals before I take a nap.

He leaves immediately after he drops me off at my house, he doesn't even come in for the twins, and he leaves in my car. Oh well.

"We're going to Mbuba," he says taking off his shirt and vest. He's been tense since he came back. I should have been asleep by now but I stayed up and waited for him.

"When?" I ask.

"Tomorrow,"

"Why?" I ask him.

"We have to take care of something," he says.

I figured this earlier but I have been in denial.

"Something like Zandile's father?"

He stops looking for his pyjamas and stands still.

"It's not going to happen Mqhele, I won't allow it, I told you it has to stop," I say.

He continues with what he was doing.

"If you come back in this house again with blood on your hands you will find me and my children gone," I say.

He turns around and slowly walks to the bed. He doesn't care about my threats; he knows I'll never leave him.

"I thought you said we must kill them all," he says.

Mind games I see, they would still have gone after them even if I had not said that.

"You know I didn't mean that, I was just angry. Mqhele please, you're already dragging the kids into this and it's not right," I say.

"We didn't take Sbani and Lwandle with us that day, we wouldn't do that," he says.

I don't care what he says, this has to stop and I must stop it.

I send an SMS to Xolie. She responds.

"We're going with you," I say as I turn off the side lamp and turn away from him.

"But Hlomu....."

I put the duvet over my ear.

Chapter 43

I'm going to have to go and clean that grave; the grass has grown so tall the tombstone is almost invisible now.

Really I don't know why we keep coming back here, well maybe for Mvelo but these people don't want us and they want to kill us.

The chief is the only one who seems to warm up to us but I think that's because he gets some money from them sometimes. But then, when we have functions, the yard fills up. I don't know how things work around here but it's not like this in the township, you don't go the house of someone you don't like.

"We just want to talk to him, to find out why," he says as I unpack our clothes.

Since when do they negotiate?

They said we were here for only two days.

Nkosana didn't like the fact that Xolie and I were coming with them but these men we married know when we mean business.

Tonight, that is when they will see us.

"I'm going to the kitchen, we're going to make dinner," I say as I make my way to the door. But he grabs me before I reach it.

He doesn't say anything but starts kissing me all over. I know what he wants, I'm not up to it but he is so I give it to him.

I have to shower before going to the kitchen to join Xolie who is already halfway through dinner.

"We should have done this a long time ago," she says.

"Seriously, they are escalating and it's going to keep getting worse," I say.

I think normal rich wives everywhere are discussing stuff like where they're taking the family for holiday next or new tips on how to spend money without feeling guilty. But us, we are discussing how to stop our husbands from killing.

Dinner will be had on the dining room table tonight. Kids have been summoned to go eat in the bedroom. Xolie and I sit next to each other. They know something is going on. Mqhele keeps giving me a look like I'm being weird. But everybody is eating in silence.

"Why are we here?" my mind and mouth again. It wasn't time yet.

We agreed that I should speak first and more, because at least I can always blame it on hormones.

Nobody answers me so I fix my eyes on Nkosana. I ignore Mqhele totally.

"Why are we here?" I say, still looking at him. He is the head of this family so he must answer.

"We have some business to take care of," he says.

"What kind of business?" Xolie jumps in. Everybody looks shocked, she never gets involved.

Nkosana looks at Mqhele and then Sambulo. Maybe he wants them to reprimand us but they know better.

He doesn't answer.

"It must stop and it must stop now, because if it doesn't our children will be sitting on this table 20 years from now planning who they are going to kill next," I say. The shock on Nqoba's face.

"Hlomu you don't understand how this works, this is the life we live; we are always fighting for survival....." Nkosana. He's the only one speaking.

"No I understand, I understand that a year ago I lost my child whom I had raised from when he was

three. I understand that every time I dress up my four-year-old I have to see a scar on his thigh that will never go away. One day he will ask me what happened and I will have to tell him the truth, the whole truth. And if all of you are no longer here he will want to go and do the same thing you're planning to do now," I say. I'm getting emotional, but I'm careful not to raise my voice, this is still Nkosana I'm talking to.

He doesn't respond to me, instead he looks down at his plate and continues eating.

"If this continues, we will never have peace in this family. Do you know that we thank God every night when we see you walk through the door? Because every single day could be that day when you don't come back," Xolie says. She's crying.

All of them are looking down at the table now. It's strange because they are not the bow-down type.

"All this, the wealth and the luxuries, it means nothing if you all are not here, if this family is not complete. You have to understand that," she says.

"We do all this to protect you, it's what we do," Mqhele says.

Why is he speaking? Why doesn't he shut up like the rest of them?

"You don't have to do anything to that old man, because if you do something to him, someone is going to want to avenge him, and you are going to go after that person and it will go on and on and on. Just please, we never ask you for anything, do this for us," I say.

How do they not understand this?

There's silence. Xolie is still crying and she gave Sambulo the stop-right-there hand when he tried to stand up and walk to her.

"So what do you suggest we do?" Nkosana says after a long silence.

"Make peace, apologise if you have to," I say.

The look on his face after I say this, in fact all their faces, says it all.

"We don't apologise," he says.

Oh Lord! We haven't achieved anything here.

Xolie and I stand up at the same time and walk out. This was not part of our plan but it's necessary. I'm so angry when I get to our room I can't help pacing up and down. I wanted to scream at these security people when they followed me from the main house to here. Just seeing them and their guns makes me even more angry.

When I wake up to go pee I check the time, it's 3am, he's not in bed. This means they didn't listen to anything we said. There'll be another dead body or bodies tomorrow. I check through the window, all the cars we came in are still parked outside, the light is still on in the dining room, and maybe I'm wrong.

I go back sleep, there's not much I can do now anyway.

"We talked about it,"
Huh?

"We talked about it, what you and Xolie said, we stayed up the whole night and talked about it," he says.

I switch on the side lamp. Geez! He's standing over me, in the dark and he's talking to me. Who does that? I don't even know how long he's been standing here. I was fast asleep until seconds ago.

"Come on; get in bed, "I say pulling up the duvet.

I put my arms around him.

"Go to sleep, we'll talk about it when we wake up, "I say.

I'm sure it's morning already, but he needs to get some sleep because he's being really weird right now.

He's tense; I hold him tighter and kiss his chest. He puts his hand on my belly and closes his eyes. That problem, I still don't know what I'm going to do with it.

They go through breakfast quickly and immediately leave without telling us where they are going. But because he said they talked about it I think maybe they will do the right thing, the problem is, the right thing to me could not be the right thing to them.

"They seem a bit light today, don't you think?" Xolie says to me.

"I don't know Xolie, you never know with these men. But he said they talked about it the whole night so maybe there's hope after all," I say.

Security in this homestead is still very tight, and this time it looks like they will stay forever. I take a shovel and head for the grave site. Four of the guards follow me there. They never say anything, they just follow you.

The white cross is still here, on top of the tombstone. Oh how I miss him!

"I can help you with that mam," one guard says as I start pulling out weeds.

"No, its fine I'll do it myself," I say continuing with what I'm doing.

Lwandle comes and joins me. But he doesn't say anything to me at all. I've tried and tried getting through to him but I think he is rebelling on purpose; he won't let me in until I tell him about his mother. Which I won't do. And worse, his fathers could be killing his grandfather as we speak.

We dig and pull and cut in silence and by the time we're done my feet are swollen. I walk back to the house and leave him there alone.

It's rowdy as expected. Soon there'll be another bug-eye running around with the others fighting and screaming and.....that's if my prayers are answered.

There are cars pulling up outside. They're back. We have lunch already waiting for them.

Qhawe is the first to come in and looks at me like there's something wrong with me. The rest do the same until Mqhele stands in front of me and says: "What happened to you?"

I'm confused for a few seconds until I remember, I'm dirty and sunburnt.

"I went to clean the grave," I say and walk out to my rondavel. I know the mood I'm leaving behind has changed completely.

I get in and out of the shower quickly; it's my second one for the day.

Zandile was right, I need to do something about this hair, I have too much money to have a shady hairstyle. I'm going to put on that weave I've always wanted when I get back to Joburg.

"I don't want you doing hard labour like that, not in your condition," he says. Dictatorship in this marriage is rife.

"Lwandle helped me, it wasn't that much work, "I say, it's no use arguing with him, especially not now with all the tension since we got here.

"Nkosana wants everyone in the house in the next ten minutes. There's something he has to tell you," he says.

I could ask what but urgh. I dress up and head for the main house. Xolie finds me already there, she gives me a questioning look but I shrug, I also don't know what's going on.

One-by-one they walk in until we are all sitting around the dinner table. He takes his place. His face

is hard and already we are all nervous.

It's strange how he can instil fear on so many people without even saying a word or looking at them. We're walking on eggs again.

"You spoke and we heard you," he says looking at me and Xolie.

"You two are the pillars of this family, if it wasn't for you we wouldn't be who we are today," he says.

Mqhele holds my hand under the table as Nkosana says that. I don't know what it means.

Everybody is looking at us and we are sitting looking scared.

"This morning, we went to see the chief. He will call a community imbizo to be held tomorrow. We are going to face these people, if it's an apology they want, we will give them one," he says, so arrogantly that I know for sure he doesn't want to apologise to anyone, especially not to people who killed his parents.

My eyes meet with Xolie's, we both have nothing to say about this. Well, we are too scared to say anything. But this is good news.

"Thank you," I say after a long silence. I don't know where that came from, just my mouth being ungovernable again.

"You're welcome Mrs Zulu. On the day we paid lobola your aunt told me that I should always listen to you if I know what's good for me. That was after she demanded R5 000 just for the fact that you're too beautiful for my brother, on top of the lobola," he says, with a smile.

Whaaaaat?

Everybody breaks into laughter.

I look at Mqhele with my mouth open, he's in stitches.

OMG!

"You didn't give it to her, did you? I say looking at Nkosana, he's still laughing.

"He said I should give them everything they ask for, what was I supposed to do?" he says pointing at Mqhele.

OMG! I cannot believe that old witch!

We were not invited to Imbizo but judging by the large groups of people who keep walking past here to the direction of the chief's house; it's going to be a big one.

I hope nothing goes wrong because if it does we will be back to square-one. If these people don't accept their apology they will walk out of there worse than they were before.

I'm just happy that we are going back to Joburg this afternoon, back to normal life, if we ever had that.

The twins are turning five next year and in April, it will be our ten year wedding anniversary. But then this baby I'm carrying will be three months old by then. I may not see our anniversary at all.

I've decided I'm going to give birth at home and I'm going to make sure that he is not there until the baby is born. If it's not his, I don't know what I will do but something will have to be done. I might just skip the country, or kill myself I don't know.

"How did it go?" I say the moment he walks in the door.

I can't read his face but he does look a little different. They'd been gone the whole day.

"It went better than we expected," he says.

Come on, keep talking.

He pulls out a cigarette instead and walks out. Okay.

"We talked, a lot of people my father wronged stood up and told their stories and we apologised on his behalf, "he says when he's back from his smoke.

Honestly I know I was the one who said they should apologise but I feel that it's unfair that they are being crucified for their father's sins.

"We told them all we wanted was peace, to know that we are welcome here and that nobody is going to try to kill us for things we were not responsible for. It was tough, people still hate us Hlomu, more for the fact that we have this much money, but in the end things calmed down and it was agreed that there's going to be peace," he says.

I'm so relieved by that fact. I know there are many other enemies out there baying for our blood but these ones here in Mbuba were the most dangerous because their grudge is personal.

"Oh, and this woman stood up and said there was no school in the area, that kids have to walk a long distance to get to the nearest school. Another one said the clinic was too small and the other said it would be nice to have a community hall. I don't know how things got there, "he says shaking his head.

I laugh. These Mbuba folks are smarter than I thought.

"So now we're building a school, extending the clinic and building a community hall," he says, still shaking his head like he doesn't believe they were just scammed by three old women.

"It's called giving back baby, see, me and my aunt are not the only gold-diggers on this planet," I say kissing him. I think this baby loves the smell of nicotine too.

He holds on to me tighter and he's in between my thighs soon after, he's always gentle when I'm pregnant.

I'm all dressed up for the party, weave and all, but I have a bad feeling about what's going to happen tonight.

Imagine Nqoba walking into a room and everybody screaming 'Surpriseeeeeee'. LOL it's going to be a disaster!

But everybody is going including Mr Grumpy Face here who still thinks this is all a bad idea.

"The weave looks good on you I must say, how much was it again?" he says.

Since when does he care about the price of anything I buy?

"R4000," I say.

He shakes his head; I'm not sure what that's about.

The venue in Bedfordview is great. The theme is masculine, all black and a touch of gold. I wonder what she said to him to make him come here.

I don't know half the people here but I assume it's mostly her friends, and then us. Xolie is looking beautiful as always and Sambulo is looking all expensive but bored. He pulls his brother away the moment we walk in.

And yeah, I spot the first camera person and another and another and some tabloid journalist. I told you so.

She appears from nowhere and put her arm around my shoulder, her hand on my tummy and snap! We're making the tabloids this weekend.

Mr Party is not here yet but the party seems to be in full force already.

I spot Nkosana looking like he's judging everyone here although I know that he doesn't even care

who everybody is.

Mqoqi is with some girl, a new one again in skimpy shorts and a long weave. I hope I live to see the day when he grows up. We're a couple of years away from 35 you know. She doesn't get introduced so I know she's just passing by like all the others.

"Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh," somebody says. That means the main man is here. The lights go off. The brothers are standing together at the bar; I know they won't do that "Surprise" nonsense.

"Surpiseeeeeeeeeee" people all scream at once. Nqoba is standing at the door looking all confused. He doesn't even smile.

In no time she's standing next to him with the biggest smile on her face, cameras are flashing like crazy.

"Can I talk to you for a moment? Outside," he says pulling her by hand.

Oh shit! Here we go.

I turn around to look at Mqhele. He gives a 'I'm not getting involved look'.

Let me find Qhawe, he's the only voice of reason in this clan.

"Please go calm him down, we don't want a scene here please," I say.

He doesn't want to but he goes anyway.

They come back a few minutes later. Nqoba goes straight to the bar to join his brothers.

Shame she doesn't look too good. But the party continues anyway and it's a great one. She went all out I tell you, even inviting celebrities we are not even friends with. It's more like a networking session for people we don't know who are obviously here to pitch some business deals.

As I predicted we are all over the papers the next day.

ANOTHER MRS ZULU TO BE?

MRS ZULU SENIOR PREGNANT AGAIN AND GLOWING.

NQOBA ZULU TURNS 40 IN STYLE

These are some of the headlines splashed around. There's a picture of me and her, a picture of her and Nqoba and a picture of me and Mqhele with his hand on my tummy. I look like a whale already.

My phone rings, I don't know this number, but I answer it anyway.

"Hlomu, hi," he says.

Yeses! I shouldn't have answered.

"I hear you're six months pregnant, if that child is mine I want it. Don't think I'm going to let another man raise my child," he says.

I hang up.

Chapter 44

The school is almost finished, the clinic is finished and the community hall is under construction. They did it all so fast. The power of too much money.

Me on the other hand, I'm a stressed out horrible whale. At least I know I'm not having twins this time. I never really look forward to ultrasound scans.

Mqhele has stopped trying to figure out why I'm so stressed and crying all the time, he's settled for believing its hormones and tiptoeing around me to make sure he doesn't become a victim.

The sad part is that the twins too are feeling the bad vibe; he keeps them away from me as much as he can.

In two months' time, everything could change. I could either be the happiest woman on earth or dead.

Sandile has never called again but I know he is counting the months and ready to cause trouble. Imagine if this made it to the media, our lives would be totally destroyed.

I still don't have a plan, I will deal with it when it comes but I know that despite having forgiven him for so many things he's done wrong in this marriage, he would never forgive me for this. Nobody ever will.

Anywho, they say hard work and perseverance pays in the end, it has done exactly that for Nqoba's girlfriend in the past two months. She's in and she's staying.

Lwandle is going to matric next year. We had a conversation last week, he even laughed and joked but I know soon he'll raise the issue of his mother and I'm not looking forward to it.

And Sbani, that child hasn't come home in a year. He keeps saying he's a grown man he's fine where he is just that he has so much work because he is doing his honours and can't make time to come home.

At first I thought it was about Mvelo but now I think there is more to it than that.

I read his blog religiously, he has some really interesting opinions about politics of this country and he is becoming rather controversial for it.

"Mami," he says. He sounds like his father more and more.

"Sbani, how are you doing?"

"I'm fine, just swamped with schoolwork," he says.

Yeah yeah the usual.

"Schools are closed, when are you coming home?" I say.

He's quiet before he answers.

"On the next holiday mami, I just need to focus for now I'm almost there," he says.

I know this child. He has always been a little nerd who doesn't talk too much, closed off and tough, but I raised him so he can't lie to me even if he tried.

I say my goodbyes but I'm on to him and I'm going to find out what is going on. I hear he's been using his credit card a lot too in the past year.

"Babe, I need to use the jet," I SMS.

"The jet? For what?" he replies.

"I'm going to Fort Hare, I need to find out what's going on with Sbani"

"But, it's not safe for you to fly" he says.

Yeah dude, that's why I called you and not SAA. Besides, I may be a psycho in the head right now

but physically I'm carrying very well.

"Can we talk about this when I get home? I'm not sure if it's a good idea" he says

Normally he would have just said NO, but because I'm crazy now he always tries not to push me. Only if he knew the battles I'm fighting with myself.

I leave early in the morning, with a nurse, a doctor and security on board. I'm surprised nobody amongst them was sent with me but convincing all of them was a tough exercise. But then, I've said this before, I'm Mqhele's wife, I get what I want.

The drive to the university is as dull as I remember it the last time I accompanied him here, when he could still pretend he needed me. I stopped being clingy on his second year and made peace with that I'm not the number-1 woman in his life anymore.

This is going to be a big surprise for him; he can hate me if he wants I don't care.

The campus is empty, only a few too-serious-looking students, Sbani's kind, are walking around with books.

The door in his room is opened by some kid who looks too young to be at varsity.

"Is Sbani here?" I say when the little bugger stares at me instead of letting me in.

"Errrrrr no, this is my room," he says,

That's impossible; this was supposed to be his res throughout his stay at university.

"Do you know what happened to the person who used to live here," I say.

His eyeballs are still all out.

"He graduated," he says.

I know that. Nx!

"Try next door, it's still occupied by the same people from last year," he says.

This is weird.

I recognise the boy next door as soon as he opens the door. He's been one of Sbani's friends since first year.

"Mam," he says, looking all freaked out.

"Where is Sbani?" I say. My hormones are taking me over, I don't know if its anger or worry anymore.

He stutters.

"Take me to him now," I say pointing him to the passage.

We drive out of the campus and into a residential area about 10km away. We stop at a block of flats.

You can't be serious. He never told me he'd moved to a flat that explains the money he's been spending but why does he have to be so discreet about it?

That's what I'm thinking as I climb up the stairs to the third floor. This little bugger I'm with seems to be too nervous and hasn't said a thing since we left the university.

I knock twice and the door opens.

Zoom-lenses come out. He has a bug-eyed baby on his hip and a towel over his shoulder.

"Mami," he says.

I'm breathing fast, I can't stop it.

"Sbani, this is not how I raised you," I say.

The child must be about eight months old; he looks exactly like the twins when they were that age.

I push my way into the flat. It's a small two bedroom with pretty much everything needed to make a home. There's baby formula on the kitchen counter, a baby walker and baby toys splashed all over.

A girl walks into the lounge with just a towel wrapped around her, her hair wet.

I can't!

I walk out and go down the steps. I'm not dealing with this now.

My phone rings, It's Mqhele.

"Hi, how are things there?" he asks.

I don't have an answer to this.

"Errrrr I don't know. Can I call you back love, I'm still trying to figure what's going on with Sbani," I say.

He agrees but reluctantly.

I turn around and Sbani is standing behind me. You'd better start explaining my boy.

"I'm sorry mami," he says. Not enough.

"How old is the baby?" I ask.

"Nine months,"

"Is that his mother?"

"Yes,"

"You live together?"

"Yes,"

"So you have your own little family here? That's why you don't come home anymore?"

"No mami, I was going to come home, it's just that....."

"Do this girl's parents know she has a child and is living with you?"

He's quiet.

"Sbani?"

"No mami," he says.

I walk back up the stairs. The girl, now dressed is sitting on the couch with the baby on her lap.

"How long did you two think you were going to hide this?" I say.

She looks at Sbani and then me and keeps quiet. They both keep quiet.

"Where is home?" I say looking at her.

"Durban, eMlazi," she says.

This means she hasn't been home in almost two years. I wonder what her parents are thinking.

"Pack up, we're leaving, "I say taking the baby from the girl.

They sit still.

"Pack!" I say walking out the door.

Oh! The problems I have in this life

The crew I'm with had been sitting in the car the whole time. They're shocked to see me walking in with a baby.

The shady couple gets in the car minutes later and we drive off, I don't know what happened to that other one who brought us here.

"I need everyone to be at our house this afternoon. 6pm" I SMS just before we board the jet.

I switch my phone off; I don't want him calling and asking questions.

I have a gazillion missed calls by the time we land, some from Nkosana and Xolie. I won't return any of them; I'm surprised they're not already waiting for me at the airport.

I'm still carrying the baby when I walk in the lounge to dozens of bug-eyes looking at me like I'm going to tell them someone is dead or something.

"What's that?" Mqhele says as I stand with the baby on my hip.

"Your first grandson," I say, calmly so.

There's silence.

I check behind me and Sbani is not there.

"Sbani," I shout.

He appears behind me, walking slowly, the girl appears behind him.

All hell breaks loose. Nqoba and Qhawe are holding Nkosana trying to restrain him. Sbani is hiding behind me and the girl has run outside. Mqhele pulls me away from all the commotion.

I love Sbani but he's a grown man now. He held down his own family for nine months I'm sure he can fight his own battles. I go to my bedroom to take a shower; it's been a long day. The noise coming from the lounge is deafening.

There's another toddler running around this house now. Yes, I'm that woman in the family who gets dumped with babies.

Nkosana ordered Sbani to get a job and start supporting his 'own family'. They all went to eMlazi to the girl's family to explain themselves. And yes, it all made it to the media when the girl's family was too generous with information.

I still can't believe Sbani, of all people, could do this.

I find it funny sometimes.

"I'm going to hit your child, and when I do I'm going to make sure that you are not here, and I'm going to hit him so hard that he'll be scared to tell you that I did," I say as he walks through the door late in the afternoon.

He stands still.

"Hi, how are you? Should I call social workers?" he says in that sarcastic tone of his.

I'm not laughing or joking here.

"Msebe, what did he do this time?" he asks when he realises I'm in no mood for his jokes.

I don't answer; instead I point him to the lounge.

"Whoah! What happened here?" he shouts.

I don't even have the energy.

I'm here packing because I'm going to Durban tomorrow, I'm a week and a few days before my due date. I have a specific date, I'm not going to wait for labour pains to ambush me again, I can't go through what I went through last time. But he doesn't know this.

Mqhele doesn't want me to go; he doesn't understand why a grown woman like me needs her mother to take care of her own new-born. I'm taking the twins with me too. If anything is to happen to me soon, at least I would have spent my last days with them.

I don't know why I keep thinking the worst. Maybe he'll find it in his heart to forgive me, I am his everything after all, he did cheat on me twice or at least those are the ones he told me about.

"I'm going to miss you," I say trying to wrap my arms around him, it's impossible.

"I still don't understand why you have to go Hlomu, I'm here, we can do this, we've done it before," he says.

"It wasn't that easy Mqhele, I promise you. I've had so much to deal with before and during this pregnancy, I just want to be able to sleep at night after I give birth or I'll go crazy," I say.

"Can we have sex? One last time before you go," he says, with that smile of his.

He's teasing me on purpose; he knows that ain't gonna happen.

"Have sex with your hand, I'll sit here and watch," I say.

He laughs and shakes his head.

"It's fine. As soon as you pop this one I'm pumping another one in, three down, four to go," he says with a smile but looks ready to run in case I throw something at him.

"I'm never going to sleep with you ever again you big-eyed bug," I say. He's so silly and he makes me laugh and I love him.

"I told you, zoom-lenses baby," he says coming closer to me.

"You're my world do you know that? And thank you loving me," he says.

Now I want to give him sex.

I hold him tighter and slip my hands under his t-shirt and into his boxer shorts.

"Are you sure?" he asks.

"Yes, but be gentle," I whisper.

I want to cry. This could be the last intimate moment we have as a loving couple.

"Do you have everything ready? I'll be home by tomorrow afternoon" I SMS

"Yes, everything is all set; I hope it doesn't come to that though. All the best." that's the response.

I delete the SMSs immediately as he comes out of the bathroom.

"This is the last baby we're having, I'm serious" I say clinging on to his arm.

He turns to look at me.

"Says who?" that smirk on his face though.

He is joking. We can't have more children than this.

"You can't have any more children Mqhele, you're already a grandfather," I say, laughing.

He shakes his head.

"That little prick, I always knew there was a sly man behind that big brain. To think he had us all fooled for a whole year. He's still looking for a job, but we've made sure he won't find one in the next six months so he's gonna have to go work at the rank to raise money for damages. And I want him to pay maintenance, to us for living with his child," he says.

LOL

"No, I won't allow that, this kid has suffered enough," I say laughing.

"I can't believe he's about to come out and I've never felt him kick," he says as we lay in bed, like it's something that should bother him.

He's right; this baby never kicks when he is around. With the twins, it was like they knew when he was in the room, they'd kick like crazy and then he'd brush my belly and they'd calm down.

He's flying with us to Durban but just to drop us off and come back. I left the grandchild with Xolie.

"If anything happens just please call me immediately, I'll fly down there and then," he says to Lethu just as he's about to leave.

My mother cooked food enough for a village and packed it for him.

"Put it all in a freezer, it should last you for at least two weeks. I know she didn't leave you any food in that house," she says handing him the basket.

Why does she have to be like this though?

Mqhele takes the basket with a smile on his face. I know as soon as he gets to Joburg he will call the whole brotherhood and they will eat all of it at one go.

I feel bad, really bad when he hugs the twin's goodbye, this could be last time he does, if everything goes wrong and I have to put my plan in action.

"They're going to miss you. I'll miss you too," I say as he starts the car. He looks so sad.

I'm crying, I can't help it.

"You could always change your mind you know, this still doesn't make sense to me at all," he says.

I wish I could.

I give him one last kiss and watch him as he drives off.

"You look better than you did last time," he says.

He's here. I jump up and hug him, very tight. I haven't seen him since Mvelo's funeral. He looks so good even though he is always complaining about how hot Ghana is.

We sit there, just looking into each other's eyes for a while. It's like looking at myself.

"I really fucked up didn't I?" I say. And yes, I'm crying. I've said before that nobody cries as much as I do in their lifetime.

"You did. But I'm here now. Are you sure you want to do this?" he says.

I take a deep breath.

"I'm sure Langa, I have no other choice," I say.

He knows what could happen and as much as I put myself in this shit, I know he'll do anything to help me.

"What do you think he'd do if you offered him money, to disappear and never come out to claim the child, don't you think that could work," he says.

I've thought about that many times but it still wouldn't make any difference. Mqhele will know if this is not his child and he will find whoever its father is and he will kill him. That I know for sure.

"No, it wouldn't work," I say.

I tried to hide this from Langa, I tried really hard but he knows me like he knows himself and he pushed me to a corner until I had no choice but to talk.

We sleep on the same bed. Tomorrow will be another struggle.

Oh Lord! The bed is all wet!

"Langa!" I scream almost slapping him.

He jumps up and is on his feet immediately.

"Oh shit! Put on your robe we're going to hospital!" he says grabbing my already packed bag and handbag.

"No!" I scream. The pains have already started. They're closer this time. I can't stand straight already.

My mom comes running in the bedroom.

"She's in labour," Langa says.

Lethu walks in.

"Get the car!" my mom says pushing her out.

"I'll call Mqhele now," Lethu.

"No! Don't call him!" I scream

"But....."

"Lethu, I said don't call him," I say. She knows I mean it.

My mom looks really confused but she's trying to help me walk out of the bedroom.

"Mom, we are not going to hospital, you are going to deliver this baby here," I say.

She let's go of my arm.

"And why would I do that my child?" she asks, calmly.

I'm not doing this with her now.

"Mah please, I'm begging you, just do this one thing for me," I say.

It wasn't supposed to be tonight, I'm a week early.

"Mah please," Langa says as well.

"The car is ready!" Lethu says barging in to the bedroom. She's shocked by our calmness.

My mother looks at both me and Langa suspiciously; she knows we are hiding something.

"Lethu, bring me warm water in a basin, get my first aid kit and some latex gloves from my bedroom. Bring some towels too. Langa switch on the heater," she says.

I lie on my back on the bed. Langa helps me take my pyjamas off. I can't believe I've now dragged my whole family into all this, even my mother, I wonder what she's thinking.

The contractions are getting worse and my back is killing me.

Langa is holding my hand. I look at him one last time before my mother slaps me on the thigh and shouts: "Push!"

I push as hard as I can, about 10 times before she says: "I see the head, push harder!"

I push harder and harder. I know I could be pushing my life away but I push more anyway.

I feel some relief on my lower body. And then, a loud cry. I'm so tired.

"It's a girl," my mom says. I see Langa's face turning red, I'm still holding on to his hand and I feel it trembling.

This is the end, this is it for me. My mom is now standing next to the bed with the baby in her hands, she's smiling.

I don't stretch my arms, I don't want to hold this baby, not when it's responsible for what I'm about to do.

But my mom places her on my chest before I can argue. She's wrapped her in a towel.

She starts crying again. She opens her eyes. I see him. In her. She is her father's daughter.

"Lethu, call Mqhele," I say.

This is so different from how it was the first time I gave birth. There are actually people here. The nurses have been fussing over me all morning since the minute I arrived, one because I am who I am and two because my mother is their boss. The baby is already at the nursery and I know Mqhele will walk in any moment now. He's been calling non-stop all morning and so has everyone.

I think they're all on their way here.

"A girl? A are serious?" this is the reaction I've been getting from all of them.

Mqhele is still freaked out by the fact that I gave birth at home, he keeps asking if we are both okay, me and the baby.

Langa is here next to me as he has been throughout. When I told Lethu to call Mqhele I saw tears, like he was saying 'Thank you God'.

He walks in, followed by the rest, his eyes all out. I smile at him.

"You have a daughter," I whisper in his ear as he bends down to hug me.

They're all standing around the bed looking at me. Langa stood up and left the moment they walked in.

I heard Mqhele saying to him "I didn't know you were here" as he was walking out.

And there is my mother walking in pushing a small cot bed with a little thing wrapped in a pink blanket. They all turn their attention to her.

Mqhele picks her up and kisses her forehead. They all gather around him, the biggest smiles and fascination on their faces.

He looks at Nkosana who stretches out his hands, he hands him the baby.

Nkosana looks at her, takes her little hand and looks in her eyes.

"Mthaniya, her name is Mthaniya Zulu," he says.

Chapter 45

"I can't believe you did this to me, again," I say to Xolie and Langa as they tie up my dress at the back.

It's April 5, the exact day I stood in front of a priest and promised to love him unconditionally until the day I die, ten years ago.

It's been a long and testing journey but I'm still here aren't I? Loving him like I promised I would. I may have strayed a bit along the way, like he also did, but I've kept all my promises.

When Sandile called me again after I gave birth I told him I'd have him killed if he ever contacted me again.

"We're ready to go," Thobi says walking in followed by Nana and Zaba.

It's just the three of them this time, that there are now nine groomsmen including Sbani and Lwandle. Besides, I didn't know anything about this until an hour ago so I should be forgiven.

I look out the window; my backyard looks beautiful with white tiffany chairs and a small white tent at the front. There are people already seated. I spot my cousin; yes that one, and my aunt walking around looking important.

I see the old man as well. Just last week we were celebrating because Zandile's name is on the list of prisoners to be granted presidential pardon in the next three months.

We've also been planning for Nqoba and Zinhle's membeso.

"Done! Let's go," Langa says stretching his arm out.

I pull up my dress, a cream-white long tight mermaid dress with a see-through lace covering my chest and arms. It's beautiful, something I would have chosen myself.

My hair is tied back with just one gold hair clip. I look in the mirror one last time before I walk out.

"You look beautiful, come on," Langa says rushing me.

But Mqoqi walks in just as I head for the door. He's pulling a woman by her hand.

"Mami," he says.

Langa looks at us both and walks out the door.

The girl Mqoqi is with seems a bit nervous around me.

"She's different," Mqoqi says.

He's found her.

I smile and make my way to the door.

Everything becomes quiet as soon as I appear. I see the priest; he has aged a bit since ten years ago. There they are, standing next to each other, looking as handsome as they did ten years ago.

The twins are standing holding small white cushions in their hands, Phakeme and Sisekelo standing next to them. Nkosana is holding Mvelo the grandchild, and Mqhele is holding Mthaniya. They dressed her in a white little dress with white pantyhose and a headband with a pink flower. I have never seen a father so obsessed with his daughter like he is.

And there, on the piano, is John Legend.

My eyes go wet. How is it that I am this blessed? What did I do so right?

"Don't do this, you're going to spoil that good make-up," Langa says.

I compose myself.

"Let's do this," I say and slip my hand under his arm as we start our journey down the aisle.

His eyes are wet. I see it as he takes my hand from Langa and leads me to stand in front of the

priest.

“We made it,” he turns and says to me with a smile on his face.

Yes, we made it.

Hlomu.....The Wife

by

Dudu Busani-Dube

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