



Zandile The Resolute

CHAPTER ONE

This is it.

This is the day I've dreamt of all my life.

I want it to be perfect and memorable. I want to be there, present in body and soul and I'm going to make it the happiest day of my life.

I check the mirror for the zillionth time, my face is perfect, my hair is perfect, but I still think I could have done better with the dress, if only I had enough money.

I've played the moment over and over in my head, him standing there in a suit and tie, watching me, just me with a big smile on his face.....

"Let's go, let's go, everybody up!" that's Mandisa, she barges in screaming and clapping. She's just always been a bully. But with her around, I know nothing can go wrong.

She stops and stares at me. Yes, I'm used to it, people have been staring at me since I was a young girl.

"You, you are not human, somebody made you and they made you perfect," she says with her hands on her hips.

Those jokes of hers, she just always has them ready.

"Come on let's go, the cars are waiting outside,".

She picks up the trail of my dress.

“Where’s the baby?” I ask.

I haven’t seen him since the morning. Mandisa has had me confined in this room for hours making sure I don’t lose focus, like I’d lose focus on my own wedding.

“Forget about the baby, he’s fine, let’s go we’re running late already,” she says.

She really does take her maid-of-honor duties seriously.

“Mandisa where’s my bouquet?” I ask, panicking.

Oh, I have it in my hand.

She rolls her eyes.

Mam’Ngcobo stops us just as we head for the door.

“Let’s gather here for a minute,” she says.

Another prayer, the fourth one today.

We all stand in a circle holding hands.

“God father. As we leave this house with this child, I thought I should, again, ask for your blessing and protection from the evils we will meet along the way.....”

Mandisa squeezes my hand. I open my eyes and we both giggle. She's been saying the same prayer since the morning and we've been joking about it.

"May she always know that it was through your will that she made it this far, and that it is your will that will guide and protect her from this moment onwards....." she continues.

After what seems like decades, we all say 'amen' at the same time.

I'm ready.

"Stop panicking, you look perfect, everything is perfect, let's go," she says lifting the trail up and pushing me out of the bedroom.

I look around the house one last time. This not how I imagined my wedding. I was supposed to be home surrounded by family, there were supposed to be people here singing and women ululating and I was supposed to walk out followed by a kist.

My father was supposed to be walking out with me, holding my hand and my mother was supposed to be here all dressed up and crying because her only daughter was leaving home forever.

But it's just me, Mandisa and my three friends, some neighbors and Mam'Ngcobo. Oh well, it doesn't matter, nothing is as important as the fact that I'm marrying the love of my life today.

"Who's got the rings?" I ask Mandisa.

She takes a deep breath.

“The rings are where they are supposed to be,” she says.

Okay I need to calm down. I haven't even seen the hall and if the decorations are what I wanted. It's a little hall just outside Soweto and I hope everybody will fit in it. I told him not to invite the whole taxi rank but he said that was not possible, that he didn't even have to invite people, they were just going to show up in large numbers anyway.

If we were doing this properly back home it would be easier. But there will be a cow slaughtered and there will be a big celebration somehow, I deserve that much.

“Let's go makoti, everybody is waiting for you now,” he says patting my back and gently pushing me outside.

My father is not here, but atleast he's here.

“Thank you Bab'Ngcobo,” I say holding my bouquet close to my chest.

I hold on to his hand, very tight, if only he were my real father instead of that monster. But he is my father today, we share a surname, so he is my father today and he will give me away to the man of my dreams.

I stopped worrying about us doing this without following the proper channels a long time ago, but I know it bothers him. He will never feel like I'm rightfully his until all that needs to be done has been done.

“Stop worrying,” Mandisa says to me squeezing my hand.

We look at each other, smile, and embrace in a tight hug. We’re both sitting on the back seat of the Mercedes, it belongs to my soon-to-be-husband’s boss.

“Ah ah no, don’t do it, don’t mess that make-up now,” she say pointing a finger at me.

I’m emotional, I should be, I’ve been through so much in the past five years and yet I’m here, still standing, still happy.

I asked her to be my maid-of-honor because nobody fitted that position better than she does, she’s been more than just Mandisa to me, she’s been my sister, my confidante and we have stuck together through difficult times.

It’s been difficult, it really has been but we have survived up to this far.

“Everyone! Get in the cars please,” she shouts.

It’s three BMW’s all belonging to the taxi owners they work for.

He always says that we will not struggle for the rest of our lives, that he is going to make sure that our children have everything they’ll ever wish for and that I have everything I want.

I just laugh. It’s not that I don’t believe in him, it’s just that he makes it sound like that’s the most important thing in life, for him to be successful, but I just want to study and I want him and our kids and a home, that’s what’s important to me.

“I wonder how he is now, do you think he’s nervous?” I ask, I don’t even know why I’m asking this, he never gets nervous.

“You two have been cohabiting for five years, why would any of you be nervous? Just shut up and make it to the altar,” she says.

She doesn’t shock me anymore!

I laugh and she laughs too.

“I’m glad to see you happy, this is the beginning of everything. He kept his word, he loves you, always remember that, okay?” she says stroking my hair.

My eyes are wet again.

“Okay stop now, baba let’s go please,” she says looking at Bab’Ngcobo on the front seat.

The gate opens, the first car drives off but it stops at the gate. We can’t afford further delay.

They reverse, what now?

There’s a car driving in, it’s a police car.

Three police officers jump out, we all look at each other. One has a piece of paper in her hand.

What on earth is going on now?

“Zandile Ngcobo!” they shout as they each inspect all the three cars.

No!

The female one, she looks at me. Our eyes meet. She looks at the piece of paper in her hand, then me again.

“Please step out of the car,” she says.

No please!

“Step out of the car please,” she says and pulls my door open.

She ignores Bab’Ngcobo when he asks her what’s going on. She pushes Mandisa aside and pulls me out of the car by my arm.

No!!! handcuffs???

“You are under arrest for the murder of Khululiwe Ngcobo, you have the right to remain silent.....”

I hear screams and shouting.

My children! I have to see my children!

“Please, I have a one-year-old! Can I see my children first? please! can I see my children....!!” I scream.

Mandisa tries to pull me by my arm but it doesn't help.

“My children! please! my children!” I scream.

“That won't be possible....” she says pushing me forward.

I hear the sound of shackles, it draws nearer and nearer.....

“Wake up! Wake up! Do you want to stay here for another year?”

It's the guard, she's banging the iron door. I didn't hear the bell ring, how is that even possible?

“You were in such deep sleep you were talking to yourself. Just pack up and go please, you're going to have sex tonight, I haven't gotten any in a year and I'm not even in prison,” she says.

I can't help smiling. She just always has something to say.

“I had a bad dream that's all,” I say. That's the only way to explain it.

I wish it was just that, a dream, but no, it is exactly what happened on the day that was to be the beginning of the end of my life. The day my body was separated from my womb and my heart was separated with its owner.

I hadn't had the dream in a long time. It's funny how it never changes, it still happens the exact way it did 17 years ago, only, at that time it was real life, not a dream.

I must have dozed off an hour ago because I stayed up all night, too nervous and too anxious.

"Come, we have to finalise the paper-work. There's somebody already allocated that cell so the sooner you leave the better," she says with a smile.

She's been here since day-one. We were both young when we met behind these walls and at first, our relationship was not that good. But we've since become friends.

"I passed him already parked by the gate, at 6am when I arrived," she says.

I blush and smile.

I take that long walk again through the corridors. I said my goodbyes to everyone yesterday. It was bitter-sweet but anyone who's ever been in shackles will tell you that anyone being freed is a great feeling, because it creates hope that maybe one of these days you will also be lucky enough.

"Go, and don't come back here," she says handing me two gold bangles. They kept these?

I'd forgotten about them. They were the only thing I left on when I took off my wedding outfit.

“Thank you, for everything,” I say.

She’s probably the last person I’m going to speak to inside these walls.

I should have asked someone to bring me better clothes, a shorter dress and maybe some sunglasses. Atleast I got my hair done and I’ve been on a diet.

What if he thinks I’ve aged or doesn’t find me attractive anymore?

I know I saw him just last weekend but things are going to be different now, I’m going to have to see him every day and there are going to be expectations, what if I don’t meet them?

What if he’s changed?

Oh no! He’s walking towards me, he was supposed to wait there at the gate! he’s running!

“You were walking too slow, I couldn’t wait,” he says wrapping his arms around me, too tight.

I embrace him back. We kiss, a long and passionate one. This is it. This is the beginning, all over again.

We stand like this for minutes. He keeps hugging me, letting me go and hugging me again. This is the longest hug we've had in 17 years. The last one was on the night before what was supposed to be our wedding.

"Let me carry that," he says taking the vanity-case from my hand.

It's all I have. I don't even have a handbag. It's just underwear and all the perfume he kept buying me and make-up.

He's holding my hand very tight as we walk out the gate and to the car. He opens the door for me and I get in.

I've never seen a car like this. The last time I was in a car it was a police van. The last time I was in his car it was a Mazda Sting.

He doesn't start the car, instead he sits and looks at me as I look around with fascination. The smell of leather and perfume and all this stuff in this car that I don't recognise.

"Are you going to say anything?" he asks.

I haven't said anything at all.

"You look nervous," he says.

He's right, I am, I thought this would be easier but I've been out for five minutes and I already know that the world has changed so much.

“MaFuze,” he says placing his hand over mine. “It’s really happening, we’re here,”

It really is happening.

I couldn’t sleep at all for the past two days. I was worried, I kept thinking they would change their minds or tell me that they had made a mistake, I wasn’t on the list.

I was supposed to be out within three months but it ended up taking nine months.

“Did you tell them?” I ask.

He rubs his chin, and then he starts the car. He’s not going to answer me. I assume it was bad.

I don’t look back as we leave the sign Johannesburg Central Prison behind.

Just outside the gate we meet a police car, it’s full of people in the back, this was me 17 years ago. Yes, they’re here to start what they will soon learn is the worst thing that’s ever happened to them.

I’m leaving this place, and I will never come back.

“I couldn’t sleep last night, I was too excited,” he says.

He still has that twinkle in his eyes that appears only for me, and he still looks at me the way he did when I was 14-years-old and he was just a tall big-eyed boy in the village that every girl had a crush on but wouldn’t dare try to get close to.

He has grey hair now, and strangely it makes him look even more handsome.

I can't remember the last time I saw so many strangers walking around freely, and so many men too.

"What's that place?" I ask.

He looks at me and smiles.

"It's Ntinti's, it's a bottle store slash shisanyama slash shebeen," he says.

I don't even remember what alcohol tasted like, not that I drank much but Mandisa used to make me, especially when she thought I had "stress to relieve".

There are cars, all kinds of cars and houses and flats and shops, it's rowdy and it's lively. It's freedom, but these people, they will never know how free they are until they lose it all. That's how I was, I didn't realise how great my life was until the day I realised I would never hold my children again.

"Let's get KFC," I say when I see a KFC right next to a Total garage.

He looks at me and nods.

I'm not even hungry.

He does a U-turn and we drive into the garage.

“Aren’t we going to park and go inside?” I say when he seems to be driving past it.

“No, we’re going to the drive-thru,” he says.

Whatever that is.

KFC used to be a luxury meal for us back in the day. He would pick up random passengers along the way and when it was time to knock off, he’d give the taxi owner only the money he made through the recorded trips and keep the rest, just so he could buy me Streetwise-Two.

“I’ll have Streetwise Two and a Stoney,” I say.

He looks at me and smiles, I smile back. I think he just remembered that this was my favorite meal.

“We’ll have two Streetwise Two’s and two stoney,” he says to the lady at the window.

What? R25? It was R12 the last time I bought it.

“So how far are we going?”

“Glenvista, it’s about ten minutes away,” he says.

He's moved three times since I went away but in my mind I still have the picture of our Riverlea house as home. He told me he extended it into a double-storey, he even brought me pictures but I still couldn't recognise it. In my head I have a picture of that two bed-roomed house we had just finished building and I was so excited about before I was arrested.

I had never heard of Glenvista until the day he told me he had bought land there and was going to build a house during one of his visits.

"It tastes different," I say.

I haven't had KFC in a long time.

He smiles but doesn't say anything.

"Why aren't you eating?"

"I don't really eat in the car," he says.

He hasn't changed a single bit!

His being a neat-freak was always what ticked me off. We fought about it until we could fight no more. Eventually he gave up and would pick up all the stuff I left lying on the floor and put it back in its place.

He used to give me the look, the one he just gave me now for doing stuff like sitting with my feet on the couch.

"I missed that smile," he says.

And I missed that soft-spoken yet deep voice of his.

"And those dimples," he adds.

"And I missed your neat-freak self," I say before taking a sip of my Stoney and almost burping while at it.

He smiles and looks away, I think he's always been embarrassed about that part part of his personality, but he can't help it.

In all these years that I've been away, he always said the important thing was not to lose each other, he said that we could not be together physically didn't mean we could not be together at all. He came to see me every second weekend, sometimes all four weekends a month depending on how busy he was.

I kept telling him that I'd prefer it if he focused his attention more on our kids instead of focusing on me, but he never listened.

He sent a cake for my birthday every year without fail. Last year I even had a party, a proper one in jail standards with decorations and tables and chairs, I don't know how he pulled that off.

"We're here," he says as the electric gate in front of us slides open.

I recognise the outside from the photo.

We drive about a kilometer before we reach the actual house.

Is that a traffic circle? with a fountain in it?

He parks right where the stairs to the big double-door start and gets out of the car quickly. He's at my door, that was quick.

He takes my hand, we climb up the stairs, he has my vanity case on the other. I wanted to stop and look at the house from outside but he seems to be in a rush to get me inside.

"Welcome home, MaFuze," he says pushing the double-door open.

I freeze at the doorstep, in awe.

How did all this happen? This is not a house.....this is a castle.

I take two steps forward, I don't know where to start.

"You can start at the kitchen," he says.

How is it that things have changed so much in just 17 years? That he has so much?

I walk to the left, it's the lounge.

“Okay, wherever you want to go first,” he says following me.

The walls are high, painted in deep caramel, there are paintings lining them. One is of a woman, it’s a pencil sketch, it’s me.

“You have a picture of me in the house?” I ask, shocked.

The agreement was that we’d hide everything that had to do with me from the kids, incase I never come home.

“Yes, but they don’t know it’s you,” he says.

I hope so.

I look up and above me is a crystal chandelier hanging. This is like a dream.

“You did all this?” I say looking around the house.

I’m just asking but I know the answer, it’s a no.

He shakes his head. “I paid someone to do it,”

I wonder how much you pay someone to decorate your house.

“Are you okay?” I ask, his mood seems to have suddenly changed.

“I’m okay. If you don’t like the house we can always buy another one, one that you’ll like,”he says.

Oh! I forgot how he gets sometimes.

“No, I love the house. it’s just that I’ve lived in a space as big as a bathroom for may years so this is.....” I say.

It’s no use. I walk towards him and wrap my arms around his neck.

“I’m proud of you. Now, let me go check out the rest of my house,” I say before running up the stairs leaving him standing alone.

I’m almost out of breath when I reach the top, this house is three floors. I look down and there he is, still standing looking up at me with a smile on his face,

“I loooooove it,” I shout with my arms raised, there’s an echo.

The first bedroom, it must be Sbani’s judging by the wall-to-wall bookshelf. It’s very standard, a standard bed, a study desk and standard curtains. And there on a small table, a picture of her, a picture of him with Lwandle and Mvelo and a picture of a baby-boy, that must be my grandson.

I’ve lost so much time of my life.

I close the door behind me and move on to the door across. This is Lwandle’s, I just know it is. I haven’t seen him since he was a year old but I knew even then that he would turn out like this.

The closets are a mess. There's a huge flat-screen TV on the wall and a couch just in front of it. It has a carpet, a dirty carpet, I think he eats in here. He has a picture of her too, one of them together. He must have been about ten-years-old here.

I turn around and he's standing at the door.

"Come here," he says stretching his arm out.

I do as he says.

"You'll get to know them again, with time everything will work out right, you'll see," he says.

I hope so.

"Do you want to see your bedroom now?"

I do. So I follow him all the way across the passage to the far end of the house. It has a double-door too.

This is even better than I imagined.

"You painted it white?"

"Yes, you always said you wanted a lily white bedroom," he says.

Everything is white, even the fluffy carpet.

I walk on to sit on the bed. It bounces, I haven't slept on a bed that bounces in years.

"Is it new?" I ask.

He nods. "It arrived yesterday".

I walk on to the bathroom, and an empty walk-in closet.

"You must fill that up," he says.

I look at this dress I'm wearing. It's not something I'd pick at a store. It was bought for me by Hlomu, I've met her only once but I already know our tastes are totally different.

"No, that one is not bad, but I mean, you still have to dress up, in different clothes every day for the rest of your life," he says.

Nkosana hasn't changed a bit! It's unbelievable.

"I'm not sure about going to malls yet I mean, I still have to get used to seeing people, strangers....." I say.

He moves forward, very quickly and takes my hand.

“You don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with, we can stay inside this house forever if you want, I’ll stay with you if it makes you happy. I can hire someone to go buy you clothes and anything else you need,”he says.

That’s a bit impractical.

But the truth is I have nothing to wear, not even a night-dress or pyjamas.

He sits on the bed while I wander around and open the sliding door to the balcony.

“That’s a big pool,”I say.

He stands up and walks to join me.

“You have all the time in the world, this is your house, our home,” he says.

I know what he means by this, I follow him back inside the bedroom.

He sits on the floor with his back leaning on the bed, I move to sit sit next to him but he pulls me by my arm and makes me sit in between his legs, on the floor. My back is on his chest and he has his arms around me, his chin is on the top of my head. My body tingles, I haven’t been this close to him in a long time.

We’re both quiet waiting for the other to speak first. I do.

“What did they say?”

He rubs his palms together.

“They stood up and left,” he says.

My heart sinks. But why? I should have known it wasn't going to be easy.

“Sbani went back to the Eastern Cape and Lwandle went to Mqhele's last night. I begged them to stay and wait but I don't think they're ready,” he says.

Will they ever be ready? I'm not even sure if I am ready.

“The thing Zazah is that they have had to deal with so much in the past few years and I lost them there along the way, I don't know how to get through to them anymore,” he says.

They really are grown men I suppose, otherwise he would have slapped the attitude out of them.

“I told everyone to give us atleast two days alone, just so you can settle. They'll come over on Saturday,” he says.

I'd appreciate that too. They all came to visit me once in a while but the truth is, it's been too long and I really don't know them that much anymore. There is also the wives, I've met only one of them, the other two didn't even know I was alive until recently.

“Maybe we made a mistake Nkosana, maybe we should have told them the truth from the beginning,” I say. This thought has crossed my mind every single day.

I think he thinks so too because he doesn’t answer me, he just squeezes my hand.

Huh?

There’s a sound coming from downstairs.

I turn to look at him.

“It’s the chef,” he says.

What chef?

“The chef who is making us dinner for tonight,” he says.

What the heck?

“I don’t want a stranger cooking in my kitchen,” I say. What is wrong with him?

He laughs.

“I forgot how feisty you can be,” he says shaking his head.

“But don’t worry, it’s only for tonight, dinner just for the two of us,”he says.

It’s clear I am going to have that dinner naked because I have absolutely nothing to wear.

“I’m gonna go check on him in the kitchen,”he says standing up. He stops when he realises I’m not following him.

“I’m going to take a bubble bath,”I say.

He hesitates a little before walking out the door.

I’m going to use his facecloth, I don’t have one.

This bath-tub is bigger than my jail cell.

He’s back in five-minutes, just as I sit back and my whole body disappears under the white foam. I get a little uncomfortable, he hasn’t seen me naked since I was in my early 20s.

“I had that installed just for you a couple of months ago, I’ve never used it,” he says, I assume he’s referring to the gigantic bathtub. That was thoughtful of him, I’m not getting in a shower again for as long as I live.

“Thank you, Sthuli’skaNdaba,” I say, smiling.

He blushes. I used to call him that when I wanted to soften him or when he was mad at me for whatever reason.

He walks on to sit on top of the toilet. Why now? He's supposed to leave me alone to my bath.

His phone rings, thank you! He goes out.

When I come out of the bathroom, wrapped in just a bath-towel, I find a dress on the bed. It's a long maroon satin flowing dress, with a dropped back-line. I have no idea what's going on.

I'm going to use his body lotion because I don't know where he put my vanity bag. It's quiet inside the house so he must be outside or somewhere on the far end of this ridiculously large house.

I drop the bath-towel on the floor. My skin has always been soft and spotless.

This lotion smells nice, masculine but nice. I apply it from the feet all the way to my.....

"Nkosana!"

He's standing at the doorstep with his mouth open and eyes popped, with my vanity-case under his arm.

I quickly pick up the bath-towel and cover myself. He doesn't seem too impressed by that.

"I brought this," he says handing me the vanity-case.

“Let’s meet downstairs in 20 minutes,” he says and walks out the door.

He’s wearing black formal pants and a white shirt. I thought we were not going anywhere, now why is he formal and why must I wear this dress?

It’s a nice dress though and it fits me perfectly, the only thing wrong with this outfit is that I’m wearing jail-underwear under it.

My weave is on-point, I’m made up and I’m ready for whatever it is that I’m going downstairs for.

I see him, standing down there at the bottom of the stairs with his hands behind his back, he’s looking at me, he’s wearing a suit.

I take the first step. I have to hold on to the rails as I walk because I don’t know how to walk in high-heels anymore.

He doesn’t take his eyes off me, even when all he can see is my back because the stairs go...round... he keeps staring.

He stretches his arm when I’m on the third step from the last, I take it, he pulls me all the way down.

This is deep, but I don’t cry, I never do.

“Walk with me,” he says putting my hand on his elbow.

I do as he says.

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He leads me to an opened sliding door and outside to a porch.

Wow! This is where we're having dinner?

There are flowers all over, a set table for two people with candles and the works. He really took his time organising this.

"Sit," he says pulling out a chair for me.

He moves to sit across me.

That suit goes really well with that grey hair. When I'm done being fascinated, I will take time to admire how dreamy and breathtaking this man of mine is. He matures like fine wine.

"Wine?" he asks, already opening the bottle.

I nod, I hope it's nothing heavy because I don't know if my body can handle alcohol at all.

He pours himself a glass too.

The last time I checked he drank Heineken, from a bottle. What is this now?

The chef appears, young boy, he could be Sbani's age.

He places two big plates in front of us with something as big as my finger and a green salad next to it.

What on earth? Nkosana must not overwhelm me like this, atleast not today.

"We can ask for something else if you don't like it," he says.

Oh well.

"Let me try it first," I say.

It's just a strip of chicken. I eat it all at once. He eats the chicken and leaves the salad.

"So how are the brothers?" I ask as we wait for the next serving. I've stopped drinking the wine, I took two sips and my knees started feeling funny.

"They're exactly the way you left them, except for that they are grown, they are still very much the same," he says.

"How is Qhawe holding up?" I ask.

I can imagine how painful it was losing someone you love like that.

He rubs his palms together.

“He will live,” he says, looks down and goes back to his wine.

I’ll ask him myself when I see him.

The food is here. It’s lamb chops and vegetables, I’m glad it’s something simple because I was going to be confused, again.

“The food is nice, I love it,” I say before he starts thinking I don’t like it.

He hasn’t been eating much, and I know he loves his food.

“How is the crazy one?” I ask.

He smiles. He knows who I’m talking about.

“He’s fine, still crazy but you know, he’s perfect just the way he is,” he says.

Of all of them, he was the most interesting.

“I hope having a daughter has tamed him a bit,” I say.

His face lightens up as I mention 'daughter'. I think this girl is his second love after me, the third is Orlando Pirates and Jimmy Dladlu.

"She has big eyes and looks exactly like all of us, atleast she got her mother's complexion otherwise she'd look like a boy," he says with a smile on his face, he loves that little girl, I can just tell.

My plate is almost empty.

"Does it taste better than Streetwise Two?" he asks.

I raise my eyes. We lock, and we both laugh out loud. He pulls something out of his jacket pocket.

"Here," he says stretching his hand.

It's a ring. I remember it.

"You kept this?"

"Yes, I kept you, us," he says.

I know that look on his face, it's the deep and hostile him.

"I love you," I say.

He looks into my eyes. I know he loves me too.

I push the ring down my finger.

“No wait,” he says standing up and walking to me.

He takes the ring from my hand, looks into my eyes and puts it on my finger.

I have all kinds of emotions taking me over, but I don't have tears to show.

“Where is yours?” I ask.

He takes it out of his pocket and hands it to me. I put it on his finger. He walks back to his chair.

“I'll buy you a better one soon,” he says.

I keep looking at my finger. I remember that day very well, I was so looking forward to this moment.

We bought these rings at some jewelery store in Joburg. Mine was only R400, his was even cheaper. I've never wanted to hear the details of that day, as in what happened after I was thrown in that police car handcuffed. But when Mandisa came to see me soon after, she cried as she described how when everybody sat in church waiting for a bride in a white dress to walk in, Ngcobo walked in instead and walked straight to Nkosana at the front. He ran out of the church with his brothers following him. That was the end of it. All Ngcobo announced to the guest was “the wedding has been canceled”, he gave no explanation whatsoever.

“You’re thinking about that day aren’t you?” he says, bringing me back to this present moment.

“I was worried about you the whole time,” I say.

He puts his hand over mine.

“We’re here now, no need to worry anymore,” he says.

Dessert is here. Oh wow, he remembered my favorite, custard and pudding.

“Here you go mam,” the chef says putting the bowl in front of me.

“You remembered,” I say looking at Nkosana.

“I never forgot,” he says. I like that little smile on his face.

He’s not having dessert.

“You want more?” he asks after I wipe the bowl clean.

I shake my head.

If I eat anymore food tonight I’ll wake up five times heavier tomorrow.

He stands up and stretches his hand. I take it and follow him to wherever we're going. I haven't seen the rest of the house, I wanted to do it before I go to sleep, but it's 9pm already and we are heading up the stairs.

"What is that?" I say pointing at the door at the end of the passage.

"The office," he says.

I want to go there but he holds me by the waist and pulls me to the opposite direction.

"You have all the time in the world for that," he says.

He leads me to our bedroom and closes the door behind him.

"Don't close the door!" I panic.

He stops and stares. And then seems to have remembered something. He pulls one half of the door open.

I walk on to sit on the bed and take my shoes off, leaving them there on the floor. He walks to me, picks the shoes up and put them somewhere in the closet.

Now what?

I just sit there, he takes off his jacket and stands by the closet looking at me.

I'm nervous now.

And then he walks towards me.

"Let me help you out of that," he says.

I stand up. I'm really nervous now.

He stands behind me, pulls the side-zip down and the dress drops to my ankles. Eish.....this underwear.

I feel his lips touch my shoulder and his hands going down my arms.

"You're beautiful Zandile," he says, softly.

I'm standing still, I don't know what to do, it's been too long since I've been touched like this.

He undoes my bra, drops it to the floor and cups both my breasts in his hands.

"I've missed you so much," he says kissing the back of my neck.

His hands move downwards to my waist, my stomach, I put my hand over his, his skin is still as soft as it was.

I turn around to face him, he's still fully dressed. He starts unbuttoning his shirt.

I raise my eyes, they meet his.

"Nkosana," I say.

"Mnnnnnnn" he says still unbuttoning his shirt.

"I don't know.....there's been women," I say.

He keeps unbuttoning with one hand and another caressing my back.

"They didn't matter Zandile," he says.

I'm still not sure. I'm not sure if I'm ready to go that far yet. But this is Nkosana, he gets what he wants, when he wants it.

But he shocks me.

"I'll understand if you're not ready yet. I can wait," he says leaving his shirt half-buttoned.

I think he's waited for this moment for years. I dreamt about it too, a lot in the early years.

But now, I want to know him again, I want to know more.

I quickly pick up a bath towel neatly folded on the couch next to the bed and cover myself. He doesn't like this but he doesn't say anything.

I pull him by hand to the bed. He lies down. I lie next to him with half my upper body on top of his chest, my hand on my cheek, and I look at him.

He laughs and looks away for a second.

"Do you remember how scared you were the first time we made love. And then, when we were done, you lay like this, exactly like you are now and looked at me. And you didn't want to go home," he says.

I blush.

"I was 14-years-old Nkosana, and you tricked me, you were such a naughty boy," I say.

He laughs.

"You drove me crazy. I had to beg you for days to sneak out with me," he says.

I was so young and so in-love. He was 17 but looked like a grown man. That day, we both sneaked out of school and went to his home. I don't know how he convinced me to do that, he was such a charmer. I think I agreed because I was worried that if I said no, another girl would say yes. Every girl at school and the village was mesmerized by him, with all the Zulu boys. But, we all knew they were a no-go area, the whole community hated and feared that family. But I've always been a risk taker so I broke all the rules.

“And then, your mother came back home early and I had to sneak out through the window,” I say. We both laugh. But his smile disappears very quick. I know what just crossed his mind.

“I’m not going back. Never,” I say.

I don’t want to go back, that place, those people, they are the reason my life turned out the way it did. I’m never going back there.

“Hey hey, come here,” he says pulling me up until my head is on his shoulder.

“Don’t think about it too much, your life and family is here, with me and our kids. And you are a grandmother now so you have more important things to worry about,” he says.

I smile and shake my head.

“Do I look like a grandmother?”

“No, you’re far too sexy,” he says.

He’s always been a charmer.

This is nice, today has been great, but eventually when we get used to being with each other, we’re going to start a relationship and that’s going to be hard. I’m going to try to put my family together again, just the four of us and our grandchild.

He's been fidgeting and seemingly uncomfortable with this cuddling thing since we got into bed, but he's still holding me tight.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"I'll be fine. I don't want to fall asleep," he says.

I don't want to fall asleep either, I might just wake up tomorrow to find that this is all a dream.

"I'll still be here in the morning Nkosana,"

He brushes my back.

"I thought about you every day before I fell asleep. I wished you were here, lying next to me like this, even when I was with....."

He stops talking.

"How many were there?" I ask.

I thought I wasn't going to go there, not on my first night out of jail but the sooner we get through these things the better.

"I doesn't matter Zandile, none of them mattered,"he says.

I'm not letting this go that easily.

"Why did Mvelo's mother leave?" I ask.

"I couldn't touch her," he says.

Huh?

"What do you mean you couldn't touch her? you had a child together,"

He runs his hand up my back all the way to the back of my head.

"I couldn't, not like this, I couldn't lie in bed like this with her or do things with her that I used to do with you and wish I was doing with you right now....." he says.

I thought he said he could wait.

But that must have been a hard relationship.

"I tried, I really tried, but in the end she realised it was all a waste of time, and so she left, tried to take my child with her but I told her not to test me, that was the last day she ever cared about him, or saw him until the funeral,"he says.

To be honest, I resented her for being in his life.

“How many others?” I insist.

His hand moves again, downwards this time.

“I don’t know?”

He lost count? Were they that many?

“Do we have to talk about this Zah? Tonight?” he asks.

It’s funny how he is always so calm, calm but commanding.

“No, I know, I’m sorry,” I say.

He’s still fidgeting, I know what it is, he’s fighting the urge to make love to me, but I can’t help him, not now.

“You still have this scar?” I ask brushing the left side of his chest with my hand. I thought he was going to die the day he got it.

“Yeah, it’s not going to go away,” he says.

I remember screaming and trying to pull him away from it all, he kept pushing me behind him with his arm. He was still fighting, even when he was injured and bleeding.

Had things ended differently on that day, I would be Mrs Ngqulunga today.

CHAPTER TWO

I'm nervous about all this.

I have no problem with the guys, it's those wives that I'm worried about. From the little that Nkosana has told me about them, they seem to have come from proper homes with normal childhoods. I hope they won't judge me.

I'm still also trying to work my way around this house. Nkosana left me alone for a few hours yesterday to go buy me stuff I need, but he flatly refused to buy me underwear so I still have to wear the one I used in jail and some ugly dress he came back with.

I'm scared to go out, I don't know why but I'm not comfortable with it. He said I could go shopping this weekend with Hlomu but I also don't know her that much, just that encounter we had a couple of years ago when she came to see me, pregnant and looking like she woke up and got in the car. I remember she was staring at me like some psycho.

They'll all be here in a few hours, but Nkosana didn't say anything about Sbani and Lwandle coming with them, atleast I'll see my grandchild for the first time, to him, I'm going to be his grandmother and my past won't be an issue at all, I hope.

And this family, all of them, they are all I have. I don't know if I can ever go home, to what? I killed my mother and my father probably never wants to see me again. I don't want to see him.

Nkosana said they tried to bring him closer after they confronted him about that attack that left Mvelo dead and after they found out that he had nothing to do with it, he even attended that 10-year wedding anniversary. But after they told him I was finally going to be released, he never

wanted anything to do with them or my kids. And to be honest, I want nothing to do with him either, not after what he did to me when I was young.

“That looks good on you,” Nkosana says picking up an empty glass from the coffee table and taking it to the kitchen, he spends a few minutes there and I know he’s washing it, wiping it and putting it back in the cupboard, this is the part of him I didn’t miss at all.

“I was going to take it back,” I say when he comes back.

“No, it’s okay, it was leaving a round mark on the table anyway,” he says.

Maybe I must give him sex soon so he can lighten up.

“Have you decided what you’re going to cook?” he asks sitting down next to me.

I raise my eyebrows.

“I could call that chef back, that’s why I’m asking,” he says.

I don’t remember how to cook and I don’t even know now that they are rich and high up there in the social ladder, maybe they’re now into those foods with names I can’t even pronounce.

“I don’t know, I’m not even sure where to start,” I say.

He has this thing of rubbing the palms of his hands together like he’s feeling cold.

“We’ll have a braai then, I’ll call someone to make and deliver salads before everyone gets here,”he says.

That works for me, I hope he hasn’t forgotten that I’m naturally lazy.

“Come here,” he says putting his arm around my shoulders and pulling me close to him.

“The kids are not coming today. I’m trying to get them to come tomorrow so we can all sit and talk, just the four of us,”he says.

I’m dreading that moment. I’m desperate to see them, there hasn’t been a moment in the past two days that I haven’t wished they’d just walk through that door and hug and kiss me and tell me they missed me.

“Are they mad at me? For what I did to my mother?”

“No, they are more angry about us making them grow up believing you abandoned them on purpose. They are angry that we didn’t tell them the truth,” he says.

But we didn’t tell them anything at all.

The door burst open and a brood of little people come whoozing past me and up the stairs.

I hear a number of “hello baba”s as they run past Nkosana on the passage.

“They don’t shock me anymore, you’ll get used to them,” he says.

I see two cars parked outside. They’re here and those are some cars they’re driving!

“Where are they going?” I ask.

“Play centre, it’s two doors away from the office,” he says.

Oh I saw that yesterday.

“Did you see Mvelo amongst them?” he asks

I was about to ask. I can’t believe I didn’t recognise my own grandson, but then again, these people are freaks.

“He’s the smallest one,”he says.

He’s two-years-old now. I’ve seen him in pictures but he looks like the rest of them, like Lwandle the last time I saw him.

The first one walks in, It’s Mqoqi, no it’s not.

“Zah,”he says.

It's Sambulo.

He stands still at the door, he doesn't know what to do or say next, I don't know either.

"Sambulo," that's all I can say.

Nkosana is standing next to me, also quiet.

I don't know if I'm ready for this. The last time I saw Sambulo he was dropping off the make-up lady at Ngcobo's house on the morning of what was supposed to be my wedding. He wasn't even 21 yet.

A lady appears from behind him, she's almost my height and she has the most beautiful eyes and long eyelashes.

"Hi, Zandile," she says giving me a gigantic hug. I return it but this is a bit awkward.

"I'm Xolie. I heard you were pretty but I didn't know it was this extreme," she says with the biggest smile on her face and her hands on my shoulders.

She smells nice, like money and her hair is on point, at least I have something in common with someone in this family.

"So, what are you cooking? Do you need help?" she says moving on to the kitchen table and looking inside the salad bowls. That's a bit too comfortable of her.

Sambulo has walked on, I think to the porch with Nkosana., now I'm just standing here looking at this woman being all over my kitchen and helping herself to drinks in the fridge.

"So, I was thinking that we could all go to a beauty-spa, just the four of us ladies so we can catch up and then go shopping..." she says looking at my dress.

Is it that bad? I know I don't like it but I had to wear it because Nkosana bought it but.....

"I'll make some bookings, we could even go away for the whole weekend....."

She's still talking when I turn around to see someone at the door.

"You haven't changed a bit," he says.

"And you.....look like a grown man," I say.

He's always been the serious one, a total opposite of his almost-twin.

"Have you been good?" he asks looking at me with what I figure is concern on his face.

"I'm here, I'm going to be good now," I say.

I can tell just by looking in his eyes that he's been through so much. I would ask but I don't know how far he is with dealing with it.

The last time I saw him was about four years ago when he just rocked up to visit me because Nkosana was too busy.

“Everything will be fine, you’ll see,” he says patting my shoulder and walking right along.

“MaMzobe,” he says looking at Xolie and walking off.

She nods. She became quiet and stopped whatever she was doing the moment he walked in, stood with her arms folded and dropped her eyes when he greeted her.

“So, have you been out yet since you came home? For lunch or something?” she asks.

She’s back to being bubbly.

“Not really, I’ve been here in the house the whole time, I’m still trying to get used to being here,” I say.

She flaps her lashes a few times, I’ve noticed she blinks rapidly.

“I like your weave,” she says looking at me like it’s weird that I have a weave on.

I laugh.

“We had a hair-salon in prison, and they did allow weaves in,” I say.

She seems shocked by this, oh! The innocent comfortable ones, they know nothing about the outside world.

“We must go shopping, it’s not negotiable. I’m going upstairs to check on those big-eyed kids,” she says squeezing my arm.

Nice girl.

Another car parks outside, I’m beginning to feel like a door lady here. And why am I in the kitchen, alone, when everybody is doing their own thing somewhere all over this house.

It’s a sports car, I don’t know what it is. A lady comes out, she’s alone, she’s wearing high heels and tight jeans, sunglasses and is on her cellphone as she walks up the stairs. Very glamorous.

She pushes the door open and freezes when she sees me.

“Hi,” she says taking off her sunglasses.

I return the greeting, reluctantly, I don’t know who she is but she has a very large diamond glittering on her finger.

“What were they feeding you in there? You are so fresh,” she says trying to touch my cheek. I move my face before her hand reaches me.

“Are you okay? I mean, you’ve been locked up for years and this must be overwhelming for you.....all this,” she says looking around the house.

Is this for real?

“Tell you what, when you get used to freedom and all that, you must tell me all about it, I’ve been watching “Orange is the new Black and I want to know if all that stuff is real and…….”

“Gugu!” a voice says from behind me.

It’s Nkosana, he doesn’t look too happy.

She drops her eyes and scurries off to the lounge. This one too? Okay, I understand with Nkosana, he’s always been the intimidating type but I don’t get why Xolie would be like that with Qhawe.

“She must be Nqoba’s wife,” I say.

“He chooses them very carefully, are you okay? You don’t have to be in the kitchen you know, just come to the porch with us,” he says.

Yes, I must leave this kitchen, it’s not like I’m cooking anyway, or will be cooking anytime soon.

He takes my hand and I follow him out of the kitchen.

There’s already noise in the house but only three of them have arrived so far. They’re laughing and teasing each other. Some things never change!

I sit next to Nkosana on the couch outside in the porch, Sambulo and Qhawe are sitting across us, looking at me.

It becomes quiet. Someone needs to break the ice.

“I wanted to come fetch you, with drum majorettes and a brass-band but Nkosana said no,”

It’s Nqoba. He’s standing at the doorway with his hands in his pockets and is speaking very softly with that hoarse voice of his.

I laugh.

“Are you ever going to change?” I say.

He laughs.

“It’s good to have you home Zandile,” he says, now serious.

He’s starting to get grey hair too.

He sits next to the other two.

I sit and stare at them.

“You all have aged,” I say.

They all laugh out loud at the same time. Nkosana has his arm around my shoulder, he pulls me close to his face, looks at me and smiles.

Just in that moment Gugu struts in with a bucket of ice and a tray full of alcohol. She's still wearing heels?

But she doesn't sit with us, she puts everything on the table and leaves after greeting Nqoba. I don't even know why they arrived separately.

"So who's going to start the fire?"-Nkosana.

"Noooooo, we'll wait for the young ones," Sambulo.

I see they still bully the little ones.

I'm sitting here but all I'm thinking about is my grandson. I want to go hug and kiss him although he doesn't know who I am.

I think Nkosana can sense that my mind is no longer here.

I turn around when I hear a toddler screaming. She's stretched her arms out and wants to jump to Nkosana.

He turns around and with the biggest smile on his face he stretches his arms out and takes her.

“Hello my Mthaniya,” he says kissing her cheek.

There, at the doorway is Mqhele, standing and staring at me.

“You look younger than the last time I saw you,” he says.

He was always going to say the most random thing.

“Hello troublemaker,” I say.

If I were to sit and count all the scandals he put us through when he was a teenager, it would take the whole day.

Behind him is a familiar face.

He puts his arm around her shoulder the moment she appears.

“You two already met so no need for introductions,” he says moving along to sit.

He is pulling her by her hand but she pulls away, he turns around to look at her and she gives him what seems like an assuring look.

I’ve seen them together for only two minutes but I can conclude that they’re weird.

He sits next to his brothers. Now four of them are squashed together on a three-seater couch, staring at me with gigantic eyes.

“Are you getting used to the environment?”-Mqhele.

“I think I am. I mean you all have been in jail too,” I say.

They all laugh. I laughed too when Nkosana told me about it although I knew it was serious.

Hlomu has come to sit next to me.

I turn around to look at her. She looks better today, a bit more presentable although I must say that she is too plain for my liking.

“That hairdo offer still stands you know,” I say poking her arm.

She laughs. Damn! She’s gorgeous.

“Come on, you can’t be sitting with these people, for what?” she says standing up and pulling me by the arm.

I might as well go because this man of mine has forgotten all about me, his attention is on this giggling toddler he is holding.

I notice that Mqhele looks at Hlomu from the moment we stand up to when we disappear into the house. His eyes move with her.

I haven't held a child in years, maybe that's why I didn't offer to hold Niya. I hope they didn't find it strange.

Hlomu is still pulling me by hand. She looks thinner than she did the last time I saw her. Oh she was pregnant by the way.

"Are you good? Is everything going well, Nkosana was nervous about you coming back," she says.

Nkosana? Nervous? Noooo.

"I'm serious, I think he was worried about whether you two will be able to connect again," she says.

I think she doesn't know that me and Nkosana have never gone a month without seeing each other in all these years, but from what I've heard, she knows everything.

"You made these?" she asks with a look that says she doesn't think so.

"No, Nkosana had it delivered, I'm not much of a cook,"

"Mnnnnnn," she says.

"You should have called me, I would have brought salads," she says.

Mqhele appears from out of nowhere. He goes straight to her and puts his arm around her waist. He whispers something in her ear and she laughs and raises her face to kiss him on the lips. She has to stand on her toes to reach his face, just like I do with Nkosana.

They catch me staring and they let go. He leaves. She's still smiling to herself when our eyes meet.

"Don't mind him, you know how he is," she says.

I can't say that's true, I remember how he was before he met her, he wasn't like this.

Our eyes keep meeting, in a rather awkward way. She knows what I want to talk about but I have a feeling she wants me to raise the subject first.

I want to but I'm scared I might get answers I don't want.

"When was the last time you spoke to them?" I ask after gathering some strength.

She doesn't turn to look at me.

"They call me everyday, it's the first thing they do when they wake up in the morning," she says.

Why does that hurt me a little?

"Is there wine in this house?" she asks opening the top cupboards.

I've noticed that they are all too comfortable in this house. They go about as if it's their house or a second home maybe.

She finds it somewhere and pulls out a corkscrew from the drawer, a wine glass in another cupboard but she puts it back immediately and pulls out a coffee mug from another cupboard.

She knows exactly where everything is.

"I forgot we're in this house, we have to drink smart," she says pouring the wine in the mug.

She offers me some but I refuse it. She shrugs.

"Soon you'll be drinking trust me, the drama of this family will drive you to it," she says and laughs.

I can't believe I'm standing here with the woman who raised my children. I always pictured her hugging them and taking them to school and laughing with them in moments that were supposed to be mine.

"So have you seen Mvelo?" she asks randomly.

I shake my head. She raises her eyebrows.

"He doesn't exactly know who I am," I say.

“Don’t worry, he’s two, he doesn’t know who he is either,” she says.

The door swings open.

It’s Mqoqi, with a girl, he’s on the phone.

“I’ll call you back,” he says and hangs up.

He takes a few steps towards me but stops just before he’s too close. I thought a hug was coming but then that would be unusual.

“Sis Zah,” he says.

He looks different, he used to be the scruffy one.

“I hear you’re running around in motorbikes, you’re still addicted to danger I see,” I say.

He’s too serious right now.

He blushes and looks away.

“No, it’s Joburg traffic I have a problem with,” he says.

His face softens.

“Mami,”he says looking at Hlomu.

He calls her ‘mami’too?

The girl behind him has been standing there like a statue. She looks scared.

“I’m glad you’re home,”he says and walks on leaving all three of us standing in the kitchen.

This Hlomu woman is gulping wine like she’s drinking plain water. She’s pouring the second cup already.

“Oh, this is Amanda, Mqoqi’s other half,”she says smiling at her.

The girl still looks scared. She looks at me and says a reserved hello. I wonder what this is all about.

“I need to use the loo,”-Amanda.

She’s gone. I’m confused.

“Ah, don’t worry, she’s a bit shy. I don’t even know why she’s so scared of me,” she says.

I’m also confused.

“I’m going upstairs, I haven’t seen the twins since Sambulo came and collected them last night. I’ll come back with your grandson,” she says and leaves just like that with the mug still in her hand.

I think I’m going to have my hands full here, these people are not normal.

Another car, I hope it’s the last one.

I wait for the door to open.

There’s two of them.

The first one in looks at me and says “hi”, It’s Ntsika, he was very young the last time I saw him. He doesn’t know what to say to me.

“Hi, they’re all out there in the porch,” I say.

This is a rather uncomfortable moment.

I smile and hush him to walk on. He hesitates a little but walks on eventually. He seems a bit different from all of them.

I turn around and there he is, his hands behind his back. He looks exactly like Nkosana looked before I left.

“Boy, boy,” I say.

I expected a smile but it's not there. He's biting his lower lip, I know this scene very well.

"Don't do that, you're a grown man now," I say, but I can't stop him.

I walk to him. He's standing still.

"It's okay, it's okay," I say patting his back. He's too tall, just like all of them.

It's a while before he loosens up and returns the hug.

The dress I'm wearing is wet on the shoulder, he's still crying.

"Mpande don't do this," I say pushing him off and looking in his eyes.

He cries more.

I have no choice but to put his head back on my shoulder and wait for him to compose himself.

Nqoba appears and disappears immediately when he sees us.

He lets go when we hear noise coming down the stairs, it's the kids.

"I'm not a boy-boy anymore," he says.

I laugh. He laughs.

“Have you been behaving?” I ask.

That naughty smile of his appears.

“I could say that, whatever you heard about me was exaggerated by people who don’t like me,” he says.

I laugh out loud. When I look at him again, his face has changed to serious, his eyes intense, I swear I just saw Nkosana there in him.

“I thought you were never coming back.....” he says.

The brood comes racing in and there’s immediate chaos. The kids of this family seem to have no order at all, I think they’ve been spoiling them.

“Say hello to mama,” Xolie shouts to all of them. There’s immediate silence, all of them looking up at me with those eyes. I smile, it’s not helping.

They’re confused.

“I saw you,” one says.

He’s looking up at me. His front teeth are missing.

“You saw me....?”

“Yes, I saw you there,” he says pointing at the sketch hanging on the wall.

Oh wow!

“That’s you?”-Xolie.

Strange that the kid was able to figure that out.

“Oh wow! It really is you, that sketch has been around forever. It’s been at every house Nkosana has lived in,”-Hlomu.

I look down and the toothless one has gone back to causing chaos with the others.

“Outside!” Hlomu screams. They all head for the door at once but one is on her hip.

She hands him to me when the kitchen is quiet again. I don’t know what happened to Mpande, he just disappeared.

He smells of baby Vaseline, it reminds me of Lwandle’s smell. I hold him tighter and try to put his head on my shoulder but he resists, he wants to look at my face instead. He is sucking on his two fingers, Sbani used to suck on the same fingers when he was a baby, I had to put chillies on them so he could stop. I remember how angry Nkosana was when I did that.

“Say hello gogo,” Hlomu says brushing his back.

He looks at her, and then me, and then he smiles and touches my face.

Inside I’m crying but tears are not coming out, I finished them all years ago.

My knees get weak, I have to sit. I slide down all the way until I’m butt-flat on the kitchen floor, still holding my grandson tight to my chest.

Hlomu rushes out. I hear her shouting: “Nkosana!”

They all come running in at once. Nkosana sees me on the floor and raises his hand. They all disappear at once.

He comes and sits on the floor next to me, but doesn’t say anything.

“It feels like I’m holding Lwandle,” I say to him.

He says nothing.

We sit here until little Mvelo starts fidgeting , he must be bored and wondering why we are hogging him.

I let him go and he walks to stand next to the door, he can’t reach the handle and he can’t speak yet.

His eyes start wandering all over the place, he's frustrated. I've seen this too many times, this is one heck of a family.

We both stand up, Nkosana opens the door for him and he runs off. We take that walk back to the porch.

"You still haven't started the fire?" he says to all of them. They're just sitting here drinking beer.

I don't see Niya anymore, she's probably sleeping.

Their wives are sitting at the dining table drinking things from coffee-mugs, except for that other one who still looks scared.

I might as well join them.

"There will be no braai, we might as well call Meet&Grill," -Xolie.

"What are we ordering?" Hlomu says scrolling her cellphone.

"Everything, salads are here already, add more chicken Phakeme doesn't eat red meat remember?" -Xolie.

"And rolls too, I'm not cooking pap," -Gugu

"They don't sell rolls," -Xolie

“Well, they’re gonna have to go find them somewhere because we need them,”-Hlomu, she’s typing on her phone.

“Done!”-Hlomu again.

I’m confused.

“So when you say done, you mean the meat issue is sorted?” I ask.

They all raise their eyes to look at me, like I’ve just asked them a stupid question.

Gugu nods.

“What is Meet&Grill?” I ask.

Amanda looks at me. She probably doesn’t know the story.

“It’s a restaurant,”-Xolie.

“So they’re going to deliver food for 19 people?”- I ask, I have to, I don’t understand this.

That look again.

“Yes,”-Hlomu.

“But you didn’t call them,” I say.

“I SMSd the owner,”-Hlomu.

I give up!

“You’re quiet,” Nkosana says as we climb the stairs up to the bedroom.

The house is spotless. They cleaned up before they left, atleast there’s something they can still do with their hands other than typing SMSs to order food for their husbands.

“I’m just trying to digest today and everything that happened. It’s going to take a while before I get used to this kind of life,” I say taking my shoes off, leaving them on the floor.

He gives me the look. I pick them up and put them in the closet.

“When you say this kind of life you mean?”

“I mean the life of ordering food through SMS, straight from the restaurant owner, and the cars and everything,” I say.

I don’t know if I’m ever going to get used to it.

“Don’t look at it in a bad way. The truth is we work hard and give the women we love everything, they make home and take care of our children. At the end of the day, no matter what crazy things we get to do or they get to do because they have too much money, we know that when shit hits the fan, they will be here. So if they want to order food through SMS or go to beauty spas all day, it doesn’t bother us, if they’re happy we are happy,” he says.

Now that’s a long speech. I still don’t get it though.

“And you, MaFuze, you must go buy clothes,” he says.

True, It’s been three days.

“I miss him already,” I say.

At first he looks confused.

“Mvelo, I miss holding him,”

He walks from his side of the bed until he is standing behind me in front of the huge wall mirror. He runs his hands from the top of my shoulders down my arms, and kisses the back of my neck.

I put my hands over his but doesn’t let go this time. He slips his hands under my dress, they are warm, they caress me all the way up to my hips, my waist, my back until he pulls my dress over my head and leaves me completely exposed.

I wrap my arms around me.

“Nkosana...”

He doesn't answer. He doesn't stop.

I feel his fingers between my skin and the helm of my panties, he pulls them down once and they drop to my ankles.

I take a deep breath.

“It's me Zandile, remember me,” he whispers behind my neck. Our eyes have been locked on the mirror throughout this.

I'm standing here frozen. He pulls my arms apart and looks at me in the mirror in front of us.

“You're still beautiful,” he says.

He tries to turn me around to face him but my body is stiff.

“Let me in.....please,” he says.

I want to let him in, but I can't break this wall I've kept around me all these years.

This is the man you love Zandile, let him love you....

I can't, I don't remember him...

The hands go up to my breasts as these thoughts battle each other on my mind. He undoes the bra and throws it on the floor. I am fully exposed in front of the mirror with him behind me, still fully dressed.

I quickly put my hand over the scar on the left of my stomach.

"No, don't, you gave me my children through that," he says removing my hand.

I got the scar from Lwandle's caesarian.

Our eyes meet on the mirror again.

He moves to stand in front of me, I can see his back on the mirror, he's facing me now.

Our lips meet but he stops just as I return the kiss reluctantly. He kisses my neck....my shoulders....my chest...my breasts... my tummy..my hips and all the way until he is down on his knees. He stands up and turns me around before he kisses the back of my neck all the way down to the back of my thighs. And then he turns me around to face him again.

I'm standing here like a frozen chicken. I look down and our eyes meet again. He puts one hand between my thighs to separate them. I feel his lips first before his tongue coming in. I make the first sound since all this started. His hands are on my bums, he pushes his tongue deeper and before I can stop myself my hand is brushing his head.

My knees are shaking.

He stands up again and kisses me on the lips.

He cups my breasts, they fill up his hand. I remember this, he used to love doing it.

He tries to pull me but I still don't move, and so he lifts me and puts me on the bed, on my back.

"Don't move," he whispers.

I do as he says.

He lies on top of me, careful not to let his body loose. He again kisses me from the neck down, all the way to my thighs. He opens my legs wide and I feel his tongue coming in, I almost sit up.

"Don't move," he says.

I can't help it.

He restrains me by holding both my arms down with his hands. His shoulders are over my thighs, I can't move them.

He's back up on my face just as I struggle to control myself.

“I need you Zazah,” he whispers, his face is on my shoulder, I can feel his lips touching my ear as he whispers.

I keep quiet. I need him too, but.....my body is tense.

“Let me in, please,”he whispers again as I feel the pressure of him coming in.

He struggles wit the three first pushes and then I feel him, all of him inside me.

He moves in and out about three times and whispers again.

“Please, let me in, please,”

He’s inside me already. He wants me to let him into my heart, mind and soul.

He moves again, I can’t fight the feeling anymore.

I wrap my arms around his back, he pushes harder.

“Please baby, be with me, please” he begs.

Slowly I feel my body letting loose. The more he moves the less the strength I have to fight him.....

He feels it too.

“I love you,” he whispers before he starts moving really fast and holding me very tight.

I can't speak.

“Nkosana....I missed you,” I manage to whisper.

He holds me tighter and moves faster. I hold him tighter, too tight. I remember him.

He pulls out just as my moaning grows louder.

He turns me to lie on my side, he lies on his side too, facing me while pulling my leg up and slips in again. He slips one arm under my neck and pulls my face close to his.

“Look at me,” he says, still moving inside me, slower now.

I do as he says.

“I love you,” he whispers before kissing my lips.

I tighten my arms around him. He moves faster and my body gives in. He waits for it stop trembling. He pulls out and hold me tighter.

I try to pull him back in.

“No, this was for you,” he whispers.

CHAPTER THREE

APRIL 4, 2015 DUDUBUSANIDUBE 14 COMMENTS

“Do you want to drive?”

Really Nkosana?

“My license expired 14 years ago,” I say.

Surely he should have thought about that before asking me this stupid question.

This is a different car from the one we used that other day. I haven’t checked how many cars are in the garage but there are two that are always parked outside.

I’ve always known about his love for cars, even when he couldn’t afford much he always talked about this and that car that he thought was great, I would listen but I wasn’t that much interested.

“What car is this?”

“It’s an Aston Martin,” he says with self-satisfaction written all over his face.

It’s very nice.

I'll probably have to drive myself in future, so I have to get the license thing sorted soon.

Oh, which reminds me.

"I'll also buy a cellphone today," I say.

He frowns.

"Why?"

What does he mean "why?"

"Because I don't have one," I say.

"Why do you need one, I'm here with you, who do you need to call?" he says.

Really?

I thought he'd have outgrown that attitude by this age.

"But Nkosana..."

He doesn't respond.

I woke up feeling great this morning after the night we had. We didn't get much sleep, we just couldn't keep our hands off each other.

But by the time I finished getting dressed for this trip, I was feeling heavy and worried, and when I'm worried, I get irritable, he's already noticed.

"Don't worry yourself too much about it, it's not going to be easy but it has to be done," he says.

I don't want to talk about it, not now, I'll cross that bridge when I get to it, which is a few hours from now.

We have to be back home by noon so that I get a couple of hours to prepare something before they arrive later this afternoon, and to prepare myself for whatever they will come with.

I was told this morning that I have to fill up the giant closet and the multiple shoe-shelves, today.

I'm not sure if this kind of life is for me at all.

"Where are we going?"

"Melrose Arch, it's the only place with shops that I go to," he says.

I think I've heard about it before.

“Are you ready for this?” he asks as we get out of the car. I’m still not sure about the way I look, I’m wearing one of the only two dresses I own and flat shoes.

Nkosana insists that I look great but I know I can do better.

He pulls me by hand as we enter the elevator that takes us up to a chain of stores and restaurants lining the pavement.

I shouldn’t have done this, I’m not ready for all this.

He seems to sense that I’m nervous and holds my hand tighter as we stroll up the road.

He waves at a man standing outside one very manly shop as we pass.

Why is everybody looking at us?

“So what do you want to buy first? Clothes? Shoes? Underwear?” he asks.

I don’t know really, I haven’t done this in years.

“Let’s start here,” I say pulling him to a clothing shop.

Everybody stops and stares when we walk in. There’s a lady already offering to assist us before I can look on my left.

“Yes, we will buy whatever she wants to buy,” Nkosana says to her.

I’m not sure what to do next.

He lets go of my hand and goes to sit on a chair next to the shoe section.

“I’ll be fine, thank you,” I tell the lady and she moves away immediately.

I walk to Nkosana.

“How much are we going to spend here?” I ask.

“We can buy the whole shop if you want it,”

I laugh. He’s not laughing. He’s serious.

Within 15-minutes I already have four dresses hanging over my arm.

I pick out two tops and look at him before taking a pair of jeans, he used to be uncomfortable with me wearing pants, I never understood why but I learnt early that some battles are not worth pursuing.

“Let me put that aside for you while you continue looking,” the same lady again. I give everything to her and move on to the shoe section.

I'm starting to remember how great this felt! Shopping!

I pick out three pairs of high-heels at once and some sandals.

"Are they nice?" I say to Nkosana, trying on one pair.

I catch him staring and smiling.

"You make them look nice," he says.

He always has something ready to say.

I'm done after taking three handbags. He swipes and we leave.

We're walking outside again and.....

"Nkosana, why are people looking at us?"

He raises his eyebrows.

"They're looking at you Zazah, people stare at you, they always have," he says.

I don't think it's just about that though.

I pull him to a lingerie shop, this I'm going to have fun with.

"People are taking pictures of us," I say.

I've been seeing people taking pictures with their phones.

He pulls me inside the shop swiftly.

"Sorry about that," he says.

I don't understand, I know he is famous for some reason but why would people do this?

I did say I wasn't into this kind of life.

We come out with two full bags of just underwear. I didn't even ask him how much he paid.

We go to several more stores before he complains about being hungry. I thought he was the one who wanted this.

"One more stop and we get out of here," he says.

I wonder where that is. I'm tired now.

We enter a rather classy place, oh, it's a jewelery store.

A man in a suit meets us at the door.

“Mr Zulu,” he says with a smile and a handshake.

He turns to look at me with his hand still stretched out. I look at Nkosana, not sure if I should return the handshake or not. I realise I haven't forgotten him at all.

I smile instead, but the guy doesn't move or move his eyes, he's staring at me. I keep smiling, he keeps staring, his hand still stretched out.

I look at Nkosana, his face has changed, the smile is gone, he's holding my hand very tight and is looking at this guy.

The guy notices and smiles at him, but the smile is not returned. We're still standing at the entrance.

Another man appears just as that tension is starting to get too uncomfortable for me.

Only Nkosana can do this, only him can change the whole atmosphere in a place just by being there.

“Mr Zulu,” the second man says, he's the manager.

He directs us to a couch and asks if we'd like something to drink.

“We have a new collection of watches, it came in this morning,” the manager says, sounding too polite.

He also keeps glancing at me and looking away.

“No, I don’t want a watch today, I want a ring for my wife,” he says.

He just called me his “wife”.

The manager looks surprised but turns to look at me.

“Is there anything in particular that you’d like Mrs Zulu?” he asks.

I don’t know. I didn’t even know I was getting a ring.

I squeeze Nkosana’s hand.

“But I love my ring,” I say.

He looks at me, no smile and no affection on his face.

“I know, you can have two and love them both,” he says dismissively.

It’s no use arguing, I know this ‘him’, and this guy here is looking at me like he’s begging me to like one.

I shrug and walk on to the glass shelves lining the whole store.

That one looks like Gugu's.

I go through dozens of them from gold to white gold to everything, I still can't decide. Nkosana is not even helping me he's just sitting there.

I haven't seen that first guy who was staring at me, he seems to have disappeared.

I think I've found it. There.

I turn to look at Nkosana, he stands up and walks to me.

"I like this one," I say.

The manager is next to us by the time I finish speaking.

"She wants this one, pack it up," -Nkosana.

Why does this manager look nervous? He's been like this since we came in here.

He goes to the back and comes back with two other men. They unlock the glass-top, take it out and hand it to me.

I try it on, it fits perfectly.

“I like it,” I say looking at my finger.

Nkosana pulls out his wallet . I give the ring back and one of the men disappears with it to the back.

He pulls me by hand to the counter.

“That will be 460 Sir,” the man says.

Oh! That’s cheap.

The card is swiped, the ring is brought to us, there’s some talk about paperwork, and we leave.

“That was not what I expected, that store looked expensive,” I say as we sit down at one of the restaurants.

“Me too, I expected to be no less than R600 000,” he says.

Huh?

“But....” I’m shocked

Noooooo.....

“Nkosana, when he said 460, did he mean....?”

“R460 000,” he says opening the menu, he’s not even looking at me.

“Nkosana!!!” I say, shocked!

He raises one eyebrow.

“What? You said you liked it,” he says and goes back to looking through his menu.

I have had only two hours to get ready, both physically and emotionally. I’ve looked forward to this day for half my life and now that it is finally here, I wish I didn’t have to go through it.

“I should have cooked something, what are they going eat?”

“This is where they live Zandile, they’ll make their own food,” he says.

Nkosana is too calm about this. Maybe I should drink something to calm my nerves, but no.

I’ve taken a long bath and changed to new clothes. I feel better now that I look better, I think.

“Zandile, I need you to be patient with them, but don’t allow them to disrespect you, you are their mother,”

The honest truth is that I don’t know them that much, and on top of that I feel guilty about not being in their lives so it’s hard for me to do what he says.

We hear a car pulling up outside and my stomach turns.

“Relax,” Nkosana says.

I’m more worried about him.

“Control yourself please, I can handle this, don’t get angry and do something crazy,” I say.

Any person who heard this conversation would be shocked to find that we are two parents talking about their children, we sound like two scared kids right now.

The door opens, we hear footsteps coming towards the lounge.

God be with me please!

“Good Afternoon,” -it’s Sbani, he’s standing with his hands in his pockets, looking at me.

Behind him appears Lwandle. They are so tall!

I haven't returned the greeting, I'm just staring at both of them like I've just seen a ghost.

"Hi," Lwandle says, he sounds exactly like his father, but something about him reminds me of Mqhele.

Nkosana looks at me and puts his hand over mine.

"Hello," I say, my voice is trembling, it must be the nerves.

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"Sit down boys," Nkosana.

They follow each other to the couch across us, there's tension in this room, suddenly I'm feeling hot.

I look at both of them. It's Sbani on the left and Lwandle on the right, they're sitting next to each other.

"Good afternoon," the older one says again.

He is Nkosana, the hostility, the calmness and the command, he is Nkosana in every way.

They won't take their eyes off me and I can't take mine off them.

“Boys, this is your mother,” Nkosana, he says it with almost a sigh.

They already know that.

I’m not sure if I should be speaking or not. They are really grown men now.

I should be crying, but I can’t.

They’re both quiet.

“As I have explained to you before, we didn’t tell you because we wanted to protect you.....”-
Nkosana

“From what? from growing up without a mother?”-Lwandle says, calmly. I did say there was a
Mqhele in him.

“Lwandle, let me finish,”-Nkosana.

He looks at me and then him.

“I know you are angry and I understand why. Everything we did and every lie we told was to
protect you. Your mother was never supposed to come back home, she was going to spend her
whole life in prison.....”

“And we would never have known the truth? You think we weren’t going to go and find out
ourselves?”- Lwandle.

“Lwandle please, don’t interrupt me when I’m talking,” Nkosana.

He’s starting to lose it. I told him to try and control himself no matter how bad they are.

“We had to keep you away from her family as well, that’s why we hid things from you. We didn’t tell you because it was better for you to not know than to know what happened..”

“That was not your decision to make baba,”-Sbani, he’s still calm.

I press Nkosana’s hand down when I feel it shaking.

It’s time I said something.

“I didn’t mean to abandon you, it was beyond my control and I would have done anything to protect you,”I wish I had better words to explain this to them.

They both just sit there and stare at me.

“I thought about you every day, how it must feel like to grow up without a mother....”

“We have a mother,” Lwandle.

“Yes, and I’m grateful to her for everything, but I need you two to understand that it was better for you to grow up thinking I had left you than knowing where I was and why I was there. I didn’t want you having to carry that burden over your shoulders. I didn’t want you walking

prison corridors every Sunday to see your mother through a burglar bar and knowing that she will never take you to school or see you get married or hold your children.....”- I stop, I’m struggling.

“We just thought it would be better that way. I told your father to move on with his life, just so you’d be in a normal family and maybe even forget about me. I may have not been there but I’ve always loved you....”

Sbani raises his hand.

“No no no, if you loved us you would have kept us in your life,”-Sbani.

I pull my hand away from Nkosana’s. I need to fight this battle myself.

“I did what I thought was best....”

“Best? you thought this was best?.....-Sbani. He stands up.

Nkosana: “Sit down and don’t raise your voice!”

He doesn’t sit.

Nkosana: “Sbani! I said sit!”

He doesn’t.

“Do you have any idea what our lives were like before mami came??? Did you ask him?? Did you ask him who he left us with when he disappeared every Sunday to visit you??”

He’s shouting. Nkosana tries to stand up but I pull him back down.

“Do you have any idea how old Lwandle was when he started school??? How he hated going to school because kids his age could already write and he couldn’t?? If you were loving us and mothering us from jail why didn’t you tell him to be a better father?? It was not your choice to make! Having us believe our own mother didn’t want us? That’s what you thought was best for us Zandile!!!!”

Nkosana stands up! Lwandle stands up too. It’s the two of them against him.

“I said sit down and don’t raise your voice! This is your mother!”-Nkosana.

Sbani: “I would never raise my voice at my mother, she raised me, she loves me, she didn’t lie to me all my life”.

I don’t know what to do. I have three men shouting at the top of their voices and I don’t know how to stop them.

They all sit down after what felt like a blazing fire!

“Just so you know Zandile.....”- that’s Lwandle, he’s sitting with his elbows on his thighs and keeps rubbing his palms together like his father always does.

“This.....”he says pointing around the house with his hand.

“This is what is important to this family, all this and all the cars parked outside and that big stone you have on your finger, that is what he put first. I didn’t know there was something called Christmas until I was six-years-old. I used to be left at an old woman’s house with my little brother every day. She beat us, no, she beat me, I let her beat me so she could not get to Mvelo. I’m not going to lie and say he didn’t try, he did...but you two had no right to force us to believe that we were unwanted by our own mother. I blamed him, every day I blamed him for driving you away like he did with all the women that have been coming and going in his life,”

Nkosana takes a deep breath and rubs the palms of his hands together.

I never thought the consequences would be that. I was sure we were doing the right thing.

“Can we all just calm down... this is as difficult for us as it is for you,”he says with his face in his hands.

We all sit quietly for some time.

“I don’t want you blaming you father for this, he was put in a difficult position but he stuck it out, he may have made some mistakes along the way but he was always with you, always,” I say.

I don’t understand my emotions. I don’t know if I’m sad or angry or hurt by all this.

“If she hadn’t come out of jail were you ever going to tell us?” Sbani says looking at his father, a bit calmer now.

We look at each other, probably not.

We say nothing.

Sbani takes a deep breath.

“So what now? What are your plans? I’m a grown man with my own child, do you think I still need you in my life?”

“Sbani!!!” Nkosana shouts.

He needs to calm down, he said he would.

Sbani: “What baba? Am I supposed to act like this can still be fixed, like I’m not angry with the both of you?”

Nkosana stands up and walks out.

I’m left alone with the both of them. I keep my eyes down, I can’t deal with the judging and the hate I see in their eyes anymore.

“I guess we’re done here,” Lwandle says standing up.

“No, please stay,” I say before I can stop myself.

“Why Zandile? Why should I stay here?” Lwandle.

I don't have an answer.

I drop my eyes again.

"Sit down," a voice says from the lounge entrance.

It's Qhawe.

"Lwandle, I said sit down," he says with a firmer tone.

He stands still. This child!

Qhawe moves towards him and they stand facing each other, none of them wants to back down.

He sits after what seems like a century.

I don't even know when Qhawe got here and who called him.

"The problem with you boys is that you think life owes you something. So what if your mother wasn't in your lives? So what if she made bad decisions? Didn't you grow up getting everything you wanted and needed? Did we not all raise you and care for you?" he says.

They are looking at him and listening but their faces say they don't care about his ranting.

“What I won’t tolerate is you disrespecting your mother like she hasn’t had so much to deal with already,” he says pointing a finger at both of them.

“The least you could do is listen and give her a chance.....”

Lwandle: “A chance to do what baba?”

Nqoba: “A chance to explain why she did what she did,”

Sbani: “We already know. So what now?”

Qhawe: “ Now you’re going to allow her back into into your lives”

Lwandle: “She was never in mine”

Qhawe: “Where do you think you came from if she was never in your life?”

I know Qhawe is trying to help here but I don’t think it’s working. And where on earth is Nkosana?

He walks in. He’s angry, his eyes are red.

Sbani: “Why were you in jail?”

I thought Nkosana told them all about that. I look at him, he is staring ahead.

“No, he told us, but I want to hear how you murdered your own mother. He never told us why you did it,” Sbani.

I don't think I can do this.

I stand up and walk out.

I hold on to the rails as I climb the stairs, if I let go now I will fall. I run to the bedroom, the door is wide open, I close it and throw myself on the bed.

This is not happening! Why did I come back here? Why? I should have killed myself the first night I slept in that prison cell! I should never have come back to this place! This family! This man! I should have married Gwaza!! I should have stayed at home and never come to Joburg to look for him! I should have listened to my mother!!!

“Zandile!” Nkosana says grabbing me from behind.

I stand still. It's like I've just been woken from a dream! The bedroom is in tatters, the side lamps are broken on the floor, the clothes from the closets are all over the bedroom, the picture frames are broken and the curtains pulled down. What did I do?

“Just sit here, sit down...” Nkosana says pulling me to the bed.

“Is everything...?” Qhawe is standing at the door.

“Yes, everything is fine,” Nkosana says quickly pushing the door shut.

I’m sweating, my armpits are wet. I never sweat.

“What did I do?” I ask.

He puts his hands on my shoulders, there’s a bit of fear in his eyes.

“Nothing, we’ll have this sorted, just sit down for a few minutes,” he says.

I wish I could cry, I wish I could.

“You didn’t tell them why I did it?” I ask.

He looks down.

“I couldn’t, it became too much for me too,” he says.

How am I going to look them in the eye through all this?

He locks the bedroom door behind us when we we walk back.

“Are you sure you want to go back there? We could always do this another time...”

“Yes I’m sure, I want to tell them everything,” I say.

They’re still sitting where I left them. Judging by the look on their faces, not much has changed.

I sit down, Nkosana sits next to me and puts his hand over mine.

“I was 19 when I got pregnant with you Sbani. I had left home to look for your father after I found out he was here in Joburg. I gave it all up, my family, my home, my parents, school, I gave it all up and came here because I loved him,”

Nkosana squeezes my hand.

“I got pregnant a few months later. We were both young and struggling financially and we had no plan but when we found out I was pregnant we were both happy. Your father wanted to do the right thing so we agreed that I should go home and tell my parents. I knew it was going to be difficult but I was hoping that in the end they would understand. But when I got there.....”
I can’t continue.

They both just sitting there staring at me. Qhawe is on the single couch next to them.

“We’re listening,” Lwandle says arrogantly.

“Shut up!” Qhawe shouts.

They sit quietly.

They must know this.

“I want you to know that I was going to be a good mother to you, I was going to try my best and even at the time when I was still here, I did put you two first, you may not remember but I was a great mother....”

Sbani: “That’s not important now, that’s not why we’re here. You were never a mother to us and.....”

Nkosana is on his feet before I can stop him. He’s pressing Sbani down with his knee! Qhawe is pulling him back! Lwandle is pushing Nkosana off his brother!

I’m frozen!

There’s noise and shouting all over. I want to stop them, all of them, but I can’t move!

“Stooooooooop!” I scream!

Silence.

Nkosana slowly gets off Sbani who is crouched on the couch with his arms over his face.

Lwandle moves away too. Qhawe is still standing next to Nkosana, I think he doesn’t want to leave his side until he’s sure it’s safe.

They all return to their seats eventually.

Lwandle is crying.

“We can do this another time,” -Nqoba.

“There won’t be another time. When I walk out that door today I’m never coming back,” -Sbani

This child is beyond stubborn.

“Atleast let me explain what happened....”

Sbani: “Explain what Zandile? You murdered your own mother,”

That stabs me right in the heart. I feel Nkosana’s hand pressing mine down, I have to control my breathing, I pull my hand off his and stand up!

“I did, I killed her! I stuck an iron hanger in her neck and watched blood gushing out of her. I stood over her, watching and counting each breath she took until the last one! She never took her eyes off me and I never took mine off hers until the last bit of her disappeared! It felt peaceful, I felt free, it was all over at last!!”

“Zandile!” Nkosana shouts and tries to pull me back to the couch.

“No!” I say pushing his hand off me.

I walk to stand in front of them, very close to them.

“See Sbani, a person had to die that night, it was either you or my mother, I had to make a choice of who lives between the two of you, I chose you,” I say.

I can't be part of this anymore. I'm going to the bedroom.

CHAPTER FOUR

APRIL 6, 2015 DUDUBUSANIDUBE 6 COMMENTS

The smell of fried eggs and bacon has always been my favourite. It reminds me of several Monday mornings when I would open my eyes to find Lulu at my cell's door with her hands in her pockets and something under her arm.

“Rise and shine pretty girl, I brought you your fix,” she'd say.

I'd know then that she smuggled in a bacon and egg sandwich from home and we would sit on my bed, just after 6am when she started her shift, and share it.

She's the one thing I miss about prison, that and the fact that I didn't have to face my realities.

She spoke a lot about her two children and how both their fathers left the day she told them she was pregnant. I sensed that she had hope that her daughter's father would come back and want to be in her life again and that one day she would find love and get married and live happily ever after. She was so positive about life, I think my friendship with her is part of what kept me going because she never lost hope, no matter what.

Her story was almost similar to mine, bad childhood, bad parents.

Sometimes she'd tell me stories she read in the media about Nkosana and the whole family, but I think she only told me the good ones. She too never believed I would ever get out of jail but she was happy when I did.

Sometimes I wished she would meet and maybe fall in-love with Nkosana so she could be a mother to my children, but that was just me lying to myself, I could never let go of Nkosana or allow him to love another woman, not even if I tried.

I don't know when I fell asleep last night. I didn't see Nkosana after I left them all there in the lounge, I assume he came to bed late and woke up early hence the smell of bacon and eggs coming from the kitchen.

I might as well go take a bath and go downstairs.

Something is.....oh now I remember, the bedroom was upside down when I threw myself in bed last night. Now it's spotless. The bathroom too. There's a red rose at the corner of the bath tub, and a note.

You did well yesterday, I'm proud of you MaFuze.-it reads.

Now, Nkosana was always a romantic and very loving, to me, but this I could never have expected from him.

I put them both on the toilet seat and run a bubble bath.

Maybe I should try that shower one of these days, he never uses the bathtub, he always uses the shower which is big enough for about ten people. I could never join him in there, anything that reminds me of prison I would rather avoid.

It's only been four days since I've been out but I've only left the house once. I don't know if it's me and the fact that I'm still scared to go out or if it's Nkosana's doing. He's always preferred me being at home.

I think about wearing pants, that's all we wore in prison, but I don't want to tick him off, not after yesterday so I put on a high above the knee dress and make my way downstairs.

The smell has toned down, I take it he's done cooking.

But when I get to the kitchen.....what's she doing here?

"Hi, all dressed up so early in the morning?" she says.

How and when did she get here?

"I..... where is Nkosana?"

"At work, it's Monday, did you sleep well?" she asks.

Oh! I forgot people work.

"Yes, I tried. When did you get here?"

"This morning, I made breakfast," she says putting a plate on this ridiculously huge oak kitchen table.

“Sit,” she says opening the fridge and pulling out juice.

I did say these people are too comfortable in this house.

She moves very comfortably in the kitchen, it looks like her kind of thing, she is after all the mothering and problem solving type.

The food looks nice, bacon and eggs and a croissant and grated white cheese. I haven't even figured how to switch on the stove in this house.

“You're not eating?” I ask.

“No, I had fruit and water earlier, I'm still trying to lose baby weight, after 11 months,” she says rolling her eyes.

I can understand why Mqhele is so obsessed with her, there's just something about her that draws you in and makes you want to be part of her. She's gorgeous too, plain, but she looks very unique with those plumpy cheeks and killer smile.

“You're drinking wine already?” I ask.

I can't believe this!

“Yeah, I have problems, and it's not just wine it's champagne, it's slimming,” she says, laughing.

I don't believe that.

We're chatting about useless things but we both know what we should really be talking about, hence the awkward silence in-between the conversation.

"They went straight to bed when they arrived last night," she says, unexpectedly.

Now we're talking about what we should be talking about.

I say nothing.

"At about 2am, Msebe and Langa came knocking on my bedroom door, to wake me because Lwandle was crying in his bedroom, I don't know how they heard him," she says.

I don't know what to say.

"I had a talk with him," she says. I think she expects me to say something but I really don't know how to respond to this.

She gives up after a few seconds and starts talking again.

"I think this is as difficult for them as it is for you Zandile. They were not prepared for this, nobody prepared them. They only found out five months ago that you were alive and even after that Nkosana was not generous with information, he's never really been that open with them," she says.

It's strange that I'm sitting here listening to someone tell me things I don't know about my man and my own children.

"I think you should all, all four of you, I think you should go see a professional. You know, talk about things and try to find a way forward. I'm worried, I heard what Nkosana did yesterday and I don't appreciate him hitting my childre....."

She stops.

There's silence.

I take a deep breath.

"Do you think they will ever love me Hlomu?"

No reaction on her face.

"They will, you are their mother. The problem is that you are the one who is going to have to try harder because according to them, you are the one that wronged them, that's the only way they understand it," she says.

She talks a lot of sense I must say. I hear she's turning 33 soon and Mqhele wants to throw her a party, apparently she's the most spoiled wife in this family, even Nkosana seems to have a very soft spot for her.

"Maybe I should have listened to you when you told me to be honest with them, maybe things would have been easier," I say.

She gives me no reaction.

We're both quiet.

"So what are your plans for today? We should definitely go out," she says looking rather excited.

Alrighty. That was a quick change of atmosphere.

"I'm in, first it's the hair salon, you need to put a weave on that head and twiz those eyebrows," I say.

She touches her head like there's nothing wrong with having short hair and looking like a boy. And she must start making some effort in the way she dresses, those tight jeans and tight t-shirt and a scarf with pumps are not exactly appealing. But it will have to do for today.

"I'll go get my handbag," I say standing up.

"Handbag? Where are you going?"-It's Mpande. He didn't even knock or say he was coming.

"Don't you have a job?"-Hlomu asks him.

He laughs and walks on to dish himself some food.

"Where are you two going?" he asks in-between chewing.

I still don't know why he's here.

"I don't know, out to see the world,"-I say. I haven't been briefed fully about where exactly we are going.

I sense that Mpande is a little well-behaved around Hlomu. I think he regards her as a mother or big sister. And something tells me he didn't know he was going to find her here.

"Thank you mami," he says putting the plate in the sink.

That "mami" again.

"Do you want to me drive you around?" he asks.

Errrrr hell no!

We keep quiet.

He shrugs.

"Okay, have fun," he says and leaves.

Why was he here again?

Hlomu is as confused as I am.

I go upstairs to fetch my handbag.

When I come back she's on the phone speaking and smiling to herself.

"Yes, we're going out.....I don't know we'll decide on the way.....no, you want to get me pregnant with another big-eyed head....."

She turns around to find me standing behind her.

"Okay I have to go now.....I love you more," she says and hangs up.

"Ahhh Mqhele, he's on his own level, let's go," she says heading for the door.

That's one hell of a car she leads me to!

She notices me looking around when we are inside.

"It's a Bentley, my favourite at the moment," she says like it's a packet of chips or a pair of shoes.

"It's Nkosana's actually, which makes it yours, but I said I liked it do he let me have it, I'll bring it back when I get bored with it," she says.

I will exercise my right to remain silent on that.

I still don't know where we're going and why we're going there but it wasn't exactly negotiable.

"Hey, I don't have your numbers," she says like she's just been reminded.

Oh that.

"I don't have a cellphone, yet," I say. I won't mention why I haven't bought one.

She seems shocked but moves on from it like it's nothing.

"We're going to Rosebank, and oh I'll take you by my store one of these days, and we can also go to a spa and catch a movie and...."

Are we going to do all this stuff in one day?

She's a totally different person from the girl I saw when I met her for the first time.

"You don't have sunglasses too? Here, wear these," she says pulling out a pair from somewhere in this car.

I do have sunglasses, it's just I didn't bring them because the sun is not out today. But what can I say? I put them on.

I still don't know why we're here.

"We're shopping for clothes," she says.

I think I bought enough clothes the other day but I guess this is what my life is going to be like now. I might as well get with the programme.

People are looking at us here, some even stop and stare when we walk past them. She doesn't seem to notice or is it that she's used to it?

"I must do shopping for the kids soon, Mvelo is growing too fast and he's losing baby weight already. Do you know that he wears a size twice his age. I don't know what is wrong with this family, they are too tall, their eyes are too big, so is their drama!" she says pulling out her phone from her handbag.

"Oh it's Nkosana, I think he wants to talk to you," she says before answering.

"Yes, she's here..." she says handing me the phone.

"Where are you?"-Nkosana.

Not even a hello?

"I'm with Hlomu,"

"I know that, I asked where you are," he says.

“At a mall, Rosebank I think,”

“And when do you plan on coming back?” he says.

What is wrong with him?

“I don’t know, when we’re done,”

He says okay and hangs up. Nkosana hasn’t changed a bit!

She shakes her head and says: “They’re stalkers too”.

She has no idea.

This is the one thing we used to fight about with Nkosana, him wanting to control what I do and when I do it. I don’t know if it’s insecurity or that he’s used to having the last word with everyone in his life.

“So, what’s your style? what kind of clothes do you like?” she asks.

Does she really care about that? I think she’ll make me buy what she wants anyway.

“Anything classy,” I say.

She smiles and shrugs and pulls me to the next shop we see.

Someone rushes to us again. I'll never get used to this. I wonder if they'd rush to us if they knew I've just come out of jail.

"No, we're fine," she says with a look that says "go away" to this poor young woman.

She's not as sweet as they say she is.

"I just want a couple of dresses," she says and leaves me standing there, I guess I should follow.

Her phone beeps. She reads a message and smiles to herself. I assume it's Mqhele. They're like conjoined twins.

"Found anything you like?" she asks. She already has a pile of things over her arm.

I pick the first thing I see, just so I don't seem like I'm not enjoying this.

"Awwww," she screams. The whole store becomes quiet.

"Sorry," a lady behind her says. They stand and stare at each other before the lady walks off and straight to the door and out the store.

She suddenly looks angry.

"I can't believe this bitch!" she says furiously.

I'm confused, the woman bumped her, obviously by mistake.

"I'm sure it was a mistake...."

"Yeah I don't care, next time I see her I'll slap her fucking face," she says, still angry.

I don't understand.

"Well we're not just bumping each other in clothing stores, we used to share a penis too," she says and picks another dress.

Huh?

"Yes, she had an affair with Mqhele," she says angrily.

I wasn't expecting this one at all.

She goes straight to the paying-tills after this. I guess this is the end of our shopping trip.

"You shouldn't worry so much about it you know, I'm sure it was just a fling that had nothing to do with you," I say, maybe this will help improve her mood.

"Oh really, has Nkosana ever cheated on you?" she says it with such attitude.

I don't think so, there were women while I was away but I guess it's understandable, they had his body, I had his heart.

I don't say anything.

She leads me to a restaurant. We are seated and fussed over the moment we arrive.

She orders a glass of wine, let me not jump into conclusions.

"I'll have a salad," she says.

I want steak but let me order a salad too.

I heard she was only 23 when she got married, I was about that age too when I almost got married. I had two children already. She must be really something special because Mqhele is.....well, he is Mqhele.

She's drinking that wine like she's drinking water.

She puts the glass down and looks at me.

"So what are your plans? As in what are you planning to do now that you are here and free to do whatever you want with your life," she asks,

I hadn't really thought about that in the past four days.

"I don't know, I studied law when I was in prison, I finished all my modules but obviously I'm not a qualified lawyer yet," I say.

She raises her eyebrows and takes a sip from her glass again.

"That is smart of you, so you used the time to study?" she asks.

I nod reluctantly. I just studied in jail because I could but I never thought it could be of any use. And can I really be a lawyer with a criminal record?

"I don't mean to discourage you but the men of this family prefer it if we don't work at all. I used to be a journalist. My plan was to make it big with my career but then.....love happened and here I am shopping and sipping wine at 11am. But I don't want you ending up like me so go out there and be whatever you want to be. Infact, you should talk to Peter," she says.

"Peter?"

"Yes, he's our lawyer, he could help you out with completing that degree. Infact, he will help you out. He's more like a.....like a family 'tokoloshe'. He fixes all the problems," she says.

I laugh. She's insane.

Her salad is just leaves and olives, atleast mine has some chicken strips. I'm not enjoying it at all.

"So this is all you do? Shop and have lunches and...." I ask.

She looks at me like she thinks I'm judging her.

"No, sometimes we dodge bullets, deal with infidelity, take care of grown men, raise children and....you know, all that stuff. But there's always someone trying to kill us," she says.

I've noticed the level of sarcasm with her is a bit high.

She puts her fork down and sits with her arms folded.

"See, Zandile, I don't know what it was like before you left but with me it was hectic from the beginning. If I had to tell you the things I've been through you'd wonder why I'm still here. I've seen it all, and worse I found Mandisa here and she didn't make things easy for me. Did you know her?" she asks.

I don't understand how Mandisa could make things difficult for her.

"Yes, we were very close actually," I say.

She gives me a disapproving look.

"We were never close, she was closer to Nokzola and she made it clear she didn't want me here," she says, but there is something about the way she says it that says "I don't even care".

But, who is Nokzola?

I don't ask.

"Hi," a voice says from behind us.

They both pull chairs from another table and join us on ours.

This is rather strange.

"Hi," we both say at once.

I'm confused but Hlomu has a look of fear on her face.

"We saw you ladies sitting alone so we thought we'd join you and say hello, maybe treat you to some drinks," this one guy says.

Hlomu looks at me. I don't know these people.

I hear a sound of chairs moving. There are men standing up from different tables.

"No thanks, we are fine, and we are having a private conversation so if you don't mind please....."

This one guy's face changes.

“There’s no need to be rude. What’s the problem? You think we can’t afford to buy you drinks? This is the problem with you rich gold-digger bitches you think.....”

She stands up. The men from other tables are still standing

“Zandile let’s go,” she says throwing her phone in her handbag.

No no no, have we just been insulted by some strangers? And she wants us to leave? No...

“I’m sorry, you were saying? Did you say the word “bitch”? Were you referring to us?” I ask. I’m not going to be insulted by some fool, not me Zandile Ngcobo! Never!

I stand up.

“Zah please just leave it.....”

She doesn’t finish the sentence before I have the whole salad bowl on top of the guy’s head.

“Who is a bitch?”

He tries to grab my arm and the next thing he’s on the floor. There are about five men surrounding us. We don’t know them but there’s three others dragging the two idiots outside.

The whole restaurant staff is standing and watching.

"It's all clear," one of the men around us says.

Who are they again?

"Walk them to the car," he gives instruction to the others.

Hlomu takes my handbag and pulls me by arm all the way to the door. She's walking fast and quietly all the way to the parking lot. These men we don't know are walking in-front and behind us. She's walking like she doesn't notice them.

"You tolerate crap like this from people? You just walk away? no, not me, never!" I say. I'm angry, I'm really angry.

I will never let anyone talk shit like that to me, I know how to fight for myself.

She doesn't respond. She starts the car and drives off.

I don't know where the men disappeared to.

I'm still fuming.

"Zandile," she speaks, finally.

"We don't do stuff like that, not us," she says.

What does she mean?

“We don’t go around causing drama in public places because everybody is always watching us, we make news, we make stories, we sell newspapers, people are always trying to find our bad side and it fascinates them. We are not exactly famous for good things, and stuff like this makes it worse. We may not care about it but at the end of the day our kids still have to go to school and make friends and live their innocent lives, that’s where the problem is.....” she says.

So we have to sacrifice ourselves? This life is definitely not for me.

Her phone rings. It goes on speaker.

It’s Mqoqi.

“Mami, are you okay? where is Sis Zah,”he asks.

She signals with her eyes that I should speak.

“Hi Mqoqi, I’m here, yes, we’re fine,”I say. Not true. I’m angry.

“What happened there? Did that guy hurt you? Did something happen to you?”he asks.

I’m confused, how did he know about that? Who told him?

“Mqoqi, we’re fine, we’ll call you back,” she says and hangs up.

What is going on here?

“We’re all over social networks,” she says with a sigh.

I still don’t get it.

The phone rings again.

“Hlomu! where are you?” It’s Nkosana.

“On the road, we’re both in the car,” she says.

Urgh, why does he sound so angry?

“Go home! now! my house! Both of you!” he shouts.

It’s gonna be a loooooong day.

Another call, I guess the whole family will be calling.

It’s Mqhele this time.

“Hlomu, what happened? I’m seeing a video here....” he asks. Oh great, he’s calm.

A video?

“Some guy called us gold-digger bitches,” she says

“What? What restaurant was this..?”

She tells him the name of the restaurant.

“Go to Nkosana’s house, I’ll meet you there later,” he says.

“Where are you going now?” she asks.

“To do some housekeeping,” he says and hangs up.

She takes a deep breath and continues driving. She seems too worried about all this.

I might as well shut up because I’m never going to understand how these people live.

Nkosana’s car is already parked outside when we arrive.

She takes a deep breath before opening the car door. I take it we are in trouble.

We find him standing in the kitchen, rage all over his face.

I expect Hlomu to start explaining but she keeps quiet. His eyes are on me.

“They called us bitches,” I say carelessly.

He’s quiet. So is Hlomu.

He pulls out a Heineken from the fridge, opens it and drinks half of it at once.

I don’t know what this is about.

“We’re sorry, we should have just left,” -Hlomu.

I’m not sorry.

He looks at her and then at me. We are all still standing in the kitchen.

“Zandile, do you know why I wanted you to stay in the house? It’s because of this,” he says.

I don’t understand.

“Now you will be all over the media for this. People are going to start digging and everything is going to be out in the open. I don’t care about it coming out and what people will say, I really don’t, but I care about what it is going to do to you. You’re not used to these things and trust me, it’s not easy having your personal life splashed all over for the world to see,” he says.

I didn't think of it that way.

His phone keeps ringing, he ignores it.

Hlomu's phone rings too and she walks off to the lounge.

"I had made sure that nobody except this family knows that you're back yet. Now this is going to all the way to Mbuba and people are going to start giving stories to the media and we're going to have to deal with nonsense again," he says.

Doesn't he see that I reacted after being provoked?

Hlomu comes back.

"The video is circulating, the media has started calling. The guy says he's going to press assault charges," he says.

No! if that happens I'm going back to jail! No!

His phone rings. He answers it this time.

"You're all fired, you and all your men are fired..." he says.

I've got people fired now?

“You were supposed to act the moment they walked to their table. That’s what I pay you for. They could have done anything to them while you sat there stuffing your faces with my money. We pay you to protect our wives not.....you’re fired!” he says and hangs up.

Hlomu is as confused as I am by this phone call.

“Stay here, I’ll be back,” he says and walks out the door.

Oh God! What have I done? I can’t go back there! I can’t!

“Don’t worry, they’ll sort it out,” she says. She’s so relaxed about it now.

“How? it’s all over, how are they going to sort it out?” I’m panicking. It was not supposed to be like this, not barely a week after I came home!

“Well, they’ll either pay someone and if that doesn’t work, they might have to kill someone, either way it’s going to be sorted,” she says.

She’s not taking this seriously I see. She’s never been to jail, she has no idea how it is there.

Her phone keeps ringing and she keeps ignoring it saying it’s the media.

How could I do this to Nkosana? My kids?

“Have some wine,” she says handing me a glass.

I could slap this bitch right now! I don't want her bloody wine!

"Zandile you have to calm down," she says.

How?

"Hlomu, we have body-guards?" I ask.

That phone call says so.

"It seems like it, I had no idea. This means they track our every move," she says looking like she's thinking hard.

"Oh good, Gugu is here," she says as a car parks outside.

I can't deal with another spoiled too pretty brat wife telling me things are going to be sorted. Why are they even here? To judge me? To tell me I shouldn't have done that because their husbands have a reputation to maintain? I know these men, I knew them when they had nothing, when they were really bad and brutal and had no reputation to worry about. At least our lives were real then, we did what we had to do and didn't have to take shit from random strangers!

"You're trending!" this Gugu woman walks in and shouts.

What does that even mean?

“Zandile, I like you already, you and I are the only normal people in this family,” she says with a stupid smile on her face. She has no idea how bad this is.

“Gugu please, this is not the time,” -Hlomu. Atleast she’s starting to be serious.

We stay in the house for hours without knowing what’s going on. They say schools closed for Easter holidays last week so the kids are all in one place.

There is a bedroom in this house with five single beds, Nkosana said it was the children’s room. I was confused because I mean, they have bedrooms in their own homes. But he said they have seven homes and told me to not be surprised if one day they all just come in here house running with backpacks. I’m yet to understand how that is even normal.

I still don’t know where all these people live but I know Mvelo and Niya are at Hlomu’s house with the nanny whom I hear is called MaMnguni.

I’ve been meaning to raise the issue of taking Mvelo to live with us but I think it’s still a bit too early for me, I’ve only met him once.

“Do you have Coke in this house?” -Hlomu.

I thought she knew everything that’s in the fridge, she probably even knows what bed linen we’re using this week.

I point her to the fridge.

“Good, these men will be back anytime now, I have to dumb down the alcohol,” she says.

Gugu shakes her head. She seems to be a bit of a loose canon but she also seems a bit toned down around Hlomu, like she's a bit scared of her.

They walk in just before it gets dark.

Nkosana, Mqhele and Nqoba.

We don't have to ask, we can just see it on their faces that they've had a tough day.

There's dinner prepared. Hlomu thought it was important. I didn't even think of it. We sat and watched her cook.

Mqhele walks straight to her, puts his arm around her waist and kisses her forehead before walking on. Nqoba doesn't even look at Gugu, he walks straight to the lounge. They behave rather strange for people who've been married for only three months.

I was looking forward to attending that wedding. I thought I'd be out by then but it didn't happen, I was told I had to wait another four months a week before the wedding. Nkosana was so broken.

All I got from Nkosana was an acknowledging look. There have been no smiles or talking.

I sense by Hlomu's reaction that something big happened today, she's suddenly tense.

"I'll dish up, Gugu please take the food to them," she says.

All is done in silence. This is a totally different scene from what I saw when everyone was here just the other day.

Is this the other side of this life?

When the food is taken to them the three of us remain in the kitchen. I wanted to go join them in the lounge but Hlomu said I shouldn't, so I stayed. We are not even eating. Gugu said she was on some diet, apparently she's always on diet. Hlomu I think is just worried and I'm standing here biting my nails.

"Let's go," Nqoba says patting Gugu's shoulder.

I've never seen any affection between them, or even a conversation, he didn't even call her once the whole time she was here.

Hlomu picks up her handbag, I think she's also expecting Mqhele to come in anytime, he does and they both walk out the door.

I'm left alone to deal with this.

He's not in the lounge. Where could he be? And where do I start looking for him in this enormous house?

I go to every room downstairs, every room on the floor above and every room on the next floor until I'm at this one door that I've never opened. It's at a corner behind the office, the last time I tried to open it it was locked, I forgot to ask what it was.

It's open this time, it's dark, but I can hear him breathing.

I switch the light on and my eyes meet his. It's empty and huge, there are no tiles on the floor, just cement. At the centre of the room there is only one chair, an iron chair, he's sitting on it with his elbows on his thighs and keeps rubbing his hands together. His shirt is unbuttoned and he has a white vest underneath.

What is this room?

I walk to him.

"You're not supposed to come in here," he says.

But I'm here now.

I walk to stand in front of him. I know what I want to ask but I can't get the words out of my mouth.

He looks down.

"What happened there Zandile?" he asks, calmly.

Sigh.

"I don't know. I lost it," I say, that's the only explanation I have.

“You know you can’t afford to lose it,” he says.

I’m still standing. I have nowhere to sit, this floor seems very cold.

I notice there are chains just at the end of the legs of this chair. It also seems to be nailed to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” I say. I really am sorry now.

He clears his throat and stands up.

“Nkosana what is this room.....”

“Walk with me,” he says walking to the door. I follow him. He locks it from the outside and pulls me by hand to our bedroom.

What is this room?

He gets in the shower and I get in the tub. He’s not speaking much tonight. I still don’t know what they went out and did.

I bathe quickly and leave him in the bathroom, still in the shower.

I put on pyjamas and run downstairs to switch off the lights. The doors are all locked.

“Zandile!!” he screams.

I run back up.

“I’m here!” I shout meeting him on the passage.

There’s a look of panic on his face.

I don’t understand.

“Don’t disappear like that,”he says.

I didn’t disappear.

We walk back to the bedroom, me straight to the bed and him back to the bathroom.

I wonder what that panicking was all about.

He comes back without the towel he had around his waist.

He’s stark naked. I feel the tingles.

He walks to the wardrobe. I'm looking at his back. His skin is pitch black and spotless. My eyes go from the back of his neck down, his shoulders are wide and muscle toned. I can't stop myself from watching all the way down to his butt and behind his thighs..... he turns around and catches me staring with my mouth open. Those abs are something.....

"Come here," he says stretching his hand.

I don't move. I feel my body getting warmer.

He walks towards me, slowly, his eyes on mine. He opens the duvet and pulls me out of bed with my arm. He moves backwards until he's sitting on the auto-man just behind the bed. He pulls down my pyjama shorts. I take off the top. He puts one hand between my thighs to separate them. I move to sit on top of him, facing him. He puts one arm around my waist and pushes me down, I feel him coming in, I'm already wet. He's holding my neck with the other hand, I can't move my neck.

"Look at me," he says holding my neck still.

I do.

"Do what you want to do to me," he whispers.

I hesitate a little, I'm a bit embarrassed.

"It's yours, take it," he whispers, his lips on my shoulder.

I put my arms around his neck, and move. He's sitting still but his arm is tight around my waist and hand pressing down my neck.

He's moaning, I move faster and more aggressively, he moans louder and grips tighter.

"I love you," he whispers.

I can't speak.

He moans louder and louder and pushes me out quickly, his legs are trembling as he lets go.

I want him back in but he rolls me over and puts me on the bed, his tongue goes in, my body gives in in a few seconds. He lies on top of me after I've calmed down.

I'm running my hand on his back. He's still tense.

"Are you going to tell me what you did today?" I ask.

He knows I know what he's capable of. He knows nothing can shock me.

"There won't be charges laid. It's all over," he says.

Oh. That's a relief.

But.....

“Nkosana,”

“Mmmmmmm”

“What if Gwaza finds out that I’m back and tries to.....”

He taps my back once.

“He won’t...” he says.

“But you know how.....”

He taps my back again, twice this time.

“Sleep Zah, don’t worry about Gwaza, I killed him,” he says, so simply and so.....confidently.

“Nkosana!” I’m shocked.

He taps my back three times.

That means sleep Zandile.

CHAPTER FIVE

APRIL 6, 2015 DUDUBUSANIDUBE 16 COMMENTS

“What do you mean you lost him? Lost him where?”

I can hear him talking outside in the balcony.

What the heck? It's 1am!

I jump out of bed.

“Nkosana,” I say peeping through the sliding door.

“I'll call you back,” he says and hangs up.

I don't like this.

“Don't worry, it's nothing,” he says pushing me back in the bedroom and closing the sliding door.

I've been tossing and turning all night thinking about what he told me.

Now, I know Nkosana, I love him but I know him. He doesn't lie.

“I'm sorry I woke you,” he says.

I've always been a light sleeper, I thought he remembered that.

He's apologising? That means he is over that little incident he was sulking about. It must be the sex.

I'm lying in bed with my back on him, he is holding me from the back. He does this when he wants me to fall asleep, he holds me like this and breathes behind my neck until I'm out. It's crazy how he remembers everything about me and what he has to do to make me do something.

The house is quiet, I put on my pyjamas and leave the bedroom.

I spoke to Hlomu yesterday about the boys and she promised to talk to them about seeing me again. I've been trying to be strong but that's all I've been thinking about, my boys and the fact that they hate me.

I don't even know where to start trying.

The house is quiet. No Nkosana, but all the cars are here, there's even one I don't recognise. Someone must have picked him up.

"Sambulo!"

"Hi Zah," he says, walks past me and out the door.

What the heck?

Sambulo had always given me creeps. He's a nice simple guy but he....how can I explain this? He is brave, too brave.

Those years ago, when they started living on the dark side, he was the one who seemed most fearless. He was still very young. At first Nkosana wanted to exclude him from the life but he's always been too smart, he figured things out and he was in before they could stop him.

I remember the first bag of money I buried in our two-roomed house, under the stove. I didn't ask questions, I just buried the bag and left it there. I buried another one three weeks later. They weren't big bags so it couldn't have been a lot of money.

When I arrive back in the bedroom Nkosana is there, he's just come out of the shower. There is no way he was in the shower when I woke up, I would have heard it running.

He smiles, he seems to be in good spirits.

"Where were you? I just saw Sambulo downstairs...."

"Yes, he came here to pick something up," he says.

I don't know, he doesn't sound very convincing.

He moves closer and hugs me on the waist.

“So, MaFuze, did you sleep well?” he asks.

He really is in a good mood.

“I did, did you sleep at all? I mean you were talking on the phone in the wee hours of the morning with whoever that was.....”

“Forget that, I was thinking, we never really officially got married,” he says.

That’s true, but where’s he going with this?

“Let’s do it. I want your surname to be Zulu,” he says.

Oh.

“When?” I ask.

“Today,”

Huh?

“But...”

“We’ll go to Home Affairs and get married, we can have Xolie and Sambulo or Hlomu and Mqhele as witnesses,”he says.

He's serious and excited about this whole thing. I also don't want a wedding, I'm never wearing a white dress again.

"Okay, but don't you have to book a date for these things? I mean...."

He looks at me like I'm crazy.

"I don't book dates, when I want things to happen, they happen there and then," he says. "You can wear that maroon dress,"

I'm not wearing that maroon dress to Home Affairs!

He has all this planned doesn't he? I adhere.

I'm going back downstairs, it's time I learned how to use that stove. I'm making breakfast.

He's shocked when he walks in the kitchen.

I've put a plate with two fried eggs, tomatoes and two toasts. The toast is a bit darker than it normally looks when other people make it but I don't think there's something wrong with it. He's staring at the food, still standing.

"Would you like juice with that," I ask. I think he's impressed.

“Yes, a lot of it,” he says.

I take out the whole bottle and put it in front of him with a glass next to it.

He looks at the food again before cutting the egg with a knife and tossing the piece in his mouth. He chews it longer than someone would normally chew an egg, like it's crunchy.

When we were younger he used to tell me not to worry about cooking for him. But if I don't cook for him, who will?

He drinks a lot of juice after each swallow. Doesn't that kill the taste?

“It's nice,” he says raising his eyes briefly to look at me and then going back to the food.

“Don't you wanna go get ready in the meantime?” he asks.

No, it's not even 7am yet.

“No, I'll wait here for you to finish first so I can clean those dishes and put them back,”

That's what we have to do in this house, you clean up immediately because everything has to be spotless or else he'll go psycho.

“What happened to your....?”

He pulls the hand away before I can touch it.

His knuckles on his left hand are bruised.

“it’s nothing, I hurt myself down at the gym,” he says.

Oh.

I leave before he finishes eating after he assures me that he doesn’t mind cleaning up. Let me go get ready for my wedding, if I can call it that.

He’s wearing a suit. I don’t get why he doesn’t cut all this grey hair.

We meet a car driving in just as we drive out the gate, but he doesn’t stop to talk to them, it’s Mqhele, Mqoqi and Qhawe.

He says they have to get some documents from the office. Sometimes I don’t understand them at all. I hope it’s nothing criminal because Nkosana assured me that they stopped that life a long time ago.

And why would they continue? They have more money than they know what to do with.

“Lwandle is going back to university this weekend,” he says.

I know. I just wish things between us would change before that, but that's me aiming too high.

"Have you spoken to them since?"

"Yes, we spoke that night after you left. I told them everything, but they still won't speak to me, because of what I did," he says.

It's understandable. And I just sat there and did nothing to stop him, they're probably mad at me for that too.

So, Sambulo and Xolie are going to be our witnesses. I know this because we find them outside the Home Affairs offices.

And there she comes rushing and smiling to give me a huge squeezing hug.

I greet Sambulo and we all head for the back entrance. I haven't been to Home Affairs in years but I know this is not proper procedure.

Nkosana has my new ring in his pocket. I've only worn it once.

He still wears his old one, he says it's cheap but that it has sentimental value.

We're done in 30 minutes, 30 minutes and I'm officially Mrs Nkosana Zulu.

Those vows were said but they were meaningless, we've already done the through good times and bad times thing, we've conquered that already. I could say I've been married to Nkosana all my life.

I notice the direction we are taking is not towards home.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

Shouldn't we have negotiated this before going?

"To lunch, with the whole family," he says.

When was all that put together? Without me knowing?

We drive to a secluded area, it's houses with long trees, the signs say Irene. I have to figure it out because all he said was we're going to lunch. He's not as happy about this wedding thing as I expected him to be.

"You know, I wish I had the opportunity to do things the right way, you know, all the right procedures," he says.

I know that bothers him but he needs to understand that it's not possible. I'd be happier with that too but I made my choice a long time ago, and it was him.

We turn left just after a traffic circle and drive a few meters before entering a gate. It looks like some kind of a lodge, there's even a pond not too far from an open balcony area with chairs and tables.

I see the kids running around the yard. It seems everybody is here already.

He parks next to all the other cars and tells me we're going in. I follow.

"We're going to do this outside, it's too hot in here," she says.

I follow instructions and walk to the balcony. How did they get here before us?

This seems to be a restaurant, but we are the only people here, and staff wearing black-and-white.

I don't see Nkosana anymore. Oh, there he is, he's found Niya.

My kids are not here. My mood drops to zero immediately, they must have refused to be part of this, they still hate me.

"Be happy, it's your wedding day," Hlomu says.

She doesn't have a glass or mug in her hand, it's a miracle.

Every woman here, including me, is wearing high heels. She's wearing a wedge shoe. I've concluded that she's just lazy. I hope it's not Mqhele forcing her to tone herself down, I know how men can be.

"Did I not tell you to put it in the car?" -Nqoba.

He's standing in front of Gugu, she's seated.

She stammers a few times and says: "I thought I did, I must have left it on the kitchen counter".

She seems terrified. It's just the three of us women here and all our attention is on them now. Nqoba notices and walks off.

What was that all about?

Everyone goes back to whatever they were doing immediately.

"This way please," a very proper looking woman says pointing us to a long set table on the left.

Someone shouts for the kids to come over, there's another smaller table set for them next to ours.

I see Mvelo there running trying to catch up with the others but he's only two years old, I don't know how he plays with them.

I walk over and pick him up. He smiles and puts his head on my shoulder.

I can't wait for him to start talking.

"Hello, granny,"

It's Mpande.

"Hello, boy-boy," I say.

"I'm a grown man," he says like I've just insulted him.

"It doesn't matter, to me, you will always be that troublemaker who got expelled from every school he went to," I say.

He laughs. I don't remember ever hearing about him being in matric, or writing an exam for that matter.

She's a bit of a freak but I'm glad Hlomu came into our lives and made sure my kids were educated, imagine how they would have turned out.

Everybody is gathered around the table so we all sit and wait for this wedding reception or wedding lunch to start. It seems, judging by how quick they were able to put this together, everybody was aware of the planned wedding except me.

I don't see the shy girl today, I still don't get how she was able to pin Mqoqi down but word is he is in-love.

The starter arrives quickly.

The kids are quiet. They seem to be well trained now, like they know when to be rowdy and when to be well behaved.

“I’d like to propose a toast,”-Ntsika.

Everyone looks at him like he’s lost it. This is not a “toast” crowd.

“To the newly weds, for making it to the altar, finally,”he says.

I laugh first and everybody follows. He is so well spoken, and very different from the rest of them.

“This is not how I imagined my wedding day, but because I was marrying you, it’s all perfect,” I say touching his hand under the table.

“We could have a white wedding if you want it, with balloons and white tents and all that,” he says. I know he couldn’t care less about no white wedding.

I also don’t want it. I swore I would never wear a white dress again the day I sat in that jail cell waiting for them to bring me proper clothes.

“Seriously though, thank you for this, and for bringing everyone here,” I say.

He holds my hand tighter.

“So, Xolie said we could go buy a cellphone tomorrow,” I say.

His face changes immediately.

“You don’t need a cellphone Zandile,” he says.

I don’t understand this but what I know is I’m going to get one whether he likes it or not, and I’m going to get my license renewed and drive myself to places.

The main course arrives, I don’t know what it is but it is meat and it looks eatable.

“Enjoy your lamb shank everybody,” Hlomu says smiling at me. She must have noticed the look on my face.

Gugu has been quiet. She looks absent but Nqoba is being himself, talking and joking.

Now, I know Nqoba and I don’t know who is worse between him and Nkosana, Mqhele is a different story altogether.

“Mama,”

I feel a hand touching my arm. It’s one of the boys, he’s standing next to my chair.

“Msebe hit me,”he says.

That Msebe is trouble, I’ve already figured that out, whenever there is trouble he is involved.

And Sisekelo is a year older than him, I don’t understand how he beats him.

“Sorry boy, don’t let him bully you,”I say brushing a non-existent bruise on his arm.

He looks more angry that hurt.

“But Mvelo says I mustn’t hit him because he’s my brother and he is small,”he says.

Really? I know they lie a lot when they’re this age but Mvelo can’t even say his own name, how’s he going to make such deep statements?

“Mvelo?”

“Yes, not the baby Mvelo, the big Mvelo,” he says.

Someone calls his name and he runs off.

Kids and their imaginations!

I shake my head and go back to my lunch, atleast, crazy and colourful as he is, he’s the one that seems to be warming up to me quick.

By the time we finish dessert, yes my favourite which I know these snobs here are looking down on, it so hot I want to walk around naked.

“I’m going to the ladies,” I say to him standing up.

He wants to stand up and go with me but I shake my head.

What is wrong with him?

I powder my face, which is what I came here for anyway and stand to look at myself in the mirror. I look exactly like my mother. She was such a beautiful woman. Those that grew up with her used to say she was every guy’s dream in Mbuba, but my father got her first. She wasn’t a bad person, but marriage and dependency and society changed her.

I already hated her by the time I was 10-years-old. We never talked or sat together or shared anything. She used to say I had an evil heart like my father, that she wished she had had more children because I had brought no joy in her life.

Even when I was 14 I used to tell Nkosana all this. He used to say that when he finished school he was going to get a job and he was going to take me with him and take care of me forever.

That dream faded when on one night I stood on my yard and watched smoke going up to the sky. I couldn’t see the house burning, but I knew, I just knew where the smoke was coming from. That thing had been brewing for days, secret meetings at night and random gatherings by small groups had been one of the signs. I just never thought they would do something to them, or that they’d succeed if they tried.

I watched and cried silently, I was sure he was burning to ashes as I stood there.

“Admiring yourself?” a voice says.

It’s Gugu, when did she come in here?

“No, just powdering my nose. You okay?” I ask.

She knows what I’m asking.

She stands and stares at me for a few seconds. I see a different her during that stare.

“Yes I’m okay, pregnant and married to a man who won’t even hug me or tell me he loves me, but yes I’m okay.”she says.

Huh?

“I didn’t know you were....”

“Nobody knows, I was going to tell him today but we didn’t really start the day on a high note, and it could last for another two days so since I had planned to tell someone anyway, I’m just gonna tell you, besides, I can trust you, you’ve just come out of jail I’m sure you’re still good at keeping secrets,”she says.

Sigh.....what am I going to do with this one?

“You should tell him, I’m sure he’ll be happy. They love their kids,” I say.

She raises her eyebrows and folds her arms across her chest.

“I wish he would love me instead, and maybe sometimes stop calling me Nqobile when we have sex,”

I drop the make-up brush on the floor! Noooo! Noooo!

She raises her arms!

“Hey! calm down, it hurts me but I’ve survived worse before. Besides, I don’t even know who Nqobile is, it could be some fantasy crush he can’t get over,” she says shrugging and getting inside the toilet.

I knew it! I just knew the first time I saw her. How could Nqoba.....?

“Are you okay mam?” a man looking like he works here asks when I almost bump him on my way back to the table. He’s holding me by the arm.

I nod but he still doesn’t let go of my arm because I could fall anytime.

“What’s going on here?” Nkosana says pushing him aside roughly.

The poor guy wants to explain but he obviously can’t speak with this man looking at him like he’s going to punch him.

“She almost....”

“Don’t touch my wife,” he says pulling my hand and furiously walking back to the table with me.

That was rather embarrassing.

When we sit down everybody is chatting and laughing, I’m glad they didn’t see that, or maybe they did it’s just that they see it as normal behaviour.

Gugu comes back and sits next to Nqoba, he doesn’t even pull a chair for her. I can’t help glancing at her now and again. She doesn’t seem to be happy at all in this marriage.

And Nqoba is so selfish, how could he do this? What if...?

But they are very smart people, I’m sure he did his research.

“Why aren’t there other people in this restaurant?” I ask him. I’ve been asking myself this question all day.

“We booked it,” he says.

Oh, I know what that means. The life.

The kids are back to playing. Niya has fallen asleep in Qhawe's arms. She looks nothing like her mother, if she had been a boy she'd be good-looking like the rest of them but right now, all I can say is she is cute, all babies are cute, they don't have to be pretty to be cute they just have to be fat and fresh.

Mqhele, Sambulo, Mqoqi, Nqoba and Ntsika all stand up and walk all the way to the pond. They're smoking, it's an old habit. I don't get how Ntsika ended up smoking too.

Nkosana and the rest of them stand up too, Qhawe hands Niya to me without even asking if I want to hold her. She's still sleeping.

It's just the four of us ladies now.

"What time are we leaving on Friday? I don't like that place at all,"-Gugu.

Nobody responds.

"Leaving to where?" I ask.

She looks at me.

"Mbuba, we have to do the goat thing, again," she says rolling her eyes.

Mbuba??

They all look at me like it's strange that I don't know anything about it, except Hlomu, she gives me a half smile and changes the subject immediately.

I haven't seen her drinking today or shouting at the kids. It's strange because she's the one with the tough hand but they all seem to love her the most.

"I have something for you, happy wedding, or is it congratulations? I don't know but hey, I got you a present," Xolie says handing me a plastic bag.

Isn't it supposed to be wrapped with a ribbon on top?

"You can open it at home,"

Open it at home? It's not wrapped.

"Thank you," I say with a smile.

I sit and look at all these people, and this baby sleeping in my arms. This is who I am now? This is where I belong?

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Why the hell didn't he tell me?

He looks confused.

“About Mbuba, why didn’t you tell me we’re going to Mbuba this weekend?”

He takes a deep breath.

“I was going to tell you Zah. I was going to discuss it with you. You don’t have to see anyone, even the others never leave the yard so nobody is going to know you’re there. You’re going to have to go at some point so it might as well be now,” he says.

Nkosana is being insensitive now. He knows I haven’t been to that place since that day. The least he could have done was allow me time to prepare myself.

“Why are we going there?”

“For a small traditional ceremony, plus we haven’t been there since Christmas,” he says.

I don’t understand this and I don’t like it.

Which brings me to another subject.

“How did you allow Nqoba to marry Gugu? you know why I’m asking,” I say.

His face changes.

“Nqoba is a grown man, he can do whatever he wants,” he says. He sounds irritated all of a sudden.

I thought he was supposed to be the one making the rules in this family.

“But did you make sure that there’s no connection? Did you research her?” I ask.

So much dodgy things are going on this family I’ve noticed.

“We did, and no they are not related,” he says.

It’s going to end here, I know.

“Okay, I hope you’re sure because there’s a child coming,” I say.

I know I should have kept it a secret but I can’t help it, I don’t understand how Nqoba thinks he can get himself a photocopy of Nqobile and make it his wife. Things like these never end well and this is one family secret that must remain buried.

I insisted that we call the police on that day, it was a mistake, we all knew that. Ntsika was just a kid I’m sure police would have understood that, but no, they had to do things their own way, their evil way.

It helped that Nqoba had never met her family. They just went and got married at Home Affairs when he was 23 and she was 21 without telling anyone. I don’t know how they thought that was proper but she was as wild as he was, they loved each other like crazy.

But then, Nqoba started cheating when the fun was over and they had to start being husband and wife and face responsibilities.

Nqobile only found out when she came home early to find Mandisa and Nqoba in her bed. She went crazy, there was chaos, scuffles and there was Ntsika walking in the bedroom with Nkosana's gun in his hand. In-between the scuffle, someone tripped him over and it went off.

She was gone by the time we all arrived there. We sat for over two hours with her body on the floor trying to figure out what to do next. That was how Mandisa came into our lives.

I hated her with a passion in the first few years but eventually I made peace with the fact that she was not going anywhere. She was never happy, never loved, but she knew the only way out of here for her was in a coffin.

"Is she pregnant?" he asks.

I thought that's what I said.

"Yes, but she hasn't told Nqoba yet," I say.

I hope he understands that this means he shouldn't tell him either.

We're both silent, I can't believe he is taking this Mbuba thing so lightly.

"Are we having a fight?" he asks.

I turn to look at him.

“Okay, let’s just get home, together,” he says raising one hand and keeping the other on the steering.

I did anger management classes in prison. He was happy about it, that was when I realised that my temper tantrums were worse than I thought. But I have always been like this, he knew that from the beginning.

It’s our wedding day, I don’t want to fight with him.

“Lwandle is here,” he says as we park outside the garage.

There’s a Polo parked outside, it must be the car he bought him when he passed matric.

My stomach turns. What am I going to do or say to him?

He tells me to relax. The last time I saw him I was looking into his eyes and describing how I enjoyed killing my own mother.

“Maybe he thought he’d leave before we come back,” I say.

Why else would he be here?

“He lives here Zazah, he was going to come back eventually,”

I can't believe I'm scared to see my own child.

"Come on," he says pulling me by hand up the stairs.

"He must be in his bedroom, I'll go check on him," he says and climbs the steps.

I'm nervous and pacing up and down the kitchen. What am I going to say to him? What does he think of me? Maybe he'll be nice, maybe he wants to reach out.... I must stop worrying too much, I gave birth to him, we have a natural bond, he will remember that I'm his mother and,,,,,,,,,

"Who are you?"-Nkosana is shouting upstairs.

What is going on?

"I asked you who you are and what you are doing in my house?" he shouts louder.

Who the heck is he talking to?

I run upstairs. I keep calling his name but he doesn't answer, I see Lwandle running down the passage, we arrive at his bedroom door at the same time.

Oh I never!

He moves to stand between his father and this girl who, except from the bath-towel she's wrapped in, is naked and barefoot in my house.

“Lwandle who is this?” his father.

I’m standing here like statue.

He doesn’t respond, he just stands in front of the girl trying to shield her.

“Nkosana calm down,” I say.

He turns to look at me briefly, he’s really angry.

“In my house? my house Lwandle? Is that how little your respect is for me? What? Are you a man now?.....”he’s fuming.

“I’m sorry I thought you were going to come back late,”-Lwandle.

This child didn’t come to our wedding lunch because he wanted to come here and have sex? Just associating the word “sex”with him makes me cringe.

“You’re 19-years-old Lwandle, you think you’re man now?”

Lwandle looks down and keeps quiet.

“Get out!! Now!” he says and walks off.

It's just the three of us now standing not knowing what to do next.

He is looking at me like he expects me to tell him what to do and I'm looking at him like I don't know if I should be talking or not.

"Take her home," I say at last.

They both go inside the bedroom and come out in minutes, I didn't know people could get dressed so quick.

When I arrive in the bedroom Nkosana is on the phone, he's still angry.

"You deal with him because I'm going to kill him," he says and hangs up.

"Damn this boy!" he says when he turns around to see me. "I don't know what to do with them anymore, the next thing there'll be another pregnant girl and....." he stops.

Who was he talking to?

He's rubbing the palms of his hands together all the way until he sits on the auto-man behind the bed.

"Who was that?" I ask.

He looks confused.

“That person you called? Who was it?” I ask.

“Oh, that was Hlomu,” he says like I should have known.

He called Hlomu? I was here, he left me standing there and went to call Hlomu to “deal” with my child?

“Don’t worry she’ll know what to do, they listen to her,” he says.

Does he not see that he’s rubbing salt into the wound?

“I’m going downstairs..” I say furiously rushing off out the bedroom and banging the door behind me.

I find myself at the gym in the basement.

I haven’t been inside here before, I peeped through the door once when I toured the house but it’s the first place I thought of when I realised I’m going hurt him if I stay in the bedroom.

What the fuck does he think I am? A plastic doll with no voice? How can he leave me here and call another woman to come and solve problems of this house?

What am I even doing here? There’s a sauna and a pool, I could get in one of them, but I end up sitting on the treadmill with my arms wrapped around my knees.

“Zandile?” I hear his voice shouting, I don’t know where he is but it’s drawing nearer.

I ignore him.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay? Where are you?”

I ignore him further until he is standing right in front of me.

“What’s going on now?” he says.

Did he just use the word “now”?

I keep quiet, I’m trying to contain myself.

“Did I say something wrong?” he asks.

I wish I could cry, things were easier when I could cry. He knew if he’d hurt me because I would just cry about it and be vulnerable and he’d feel bad and apologise.

“I just need to be here, alone Nkosana,” I say.

Why is he here?

“No, I’m not leaving,” he says sitting down next to me.

He's going to make me more angry by being here.

"I'm not leaving until you tell me what I did wrong," he says.

If he doesn't leave, I'll leave.

"I locked the door. Nobody leaves here until we sort things out," he says when I stand up.

He's locked me in? He's taking me back where I just came from?

"Nkosana don't lock me in!! Don't do that!!" I scream.

I'm trying to control my breathing, and my anger and my emotions.....

He moves and stands behind me with his arms around me.

"Talk to me, what did I do?"

I'm trying to control myself.

"What did I do Zazah?"

He is so cool about it.

I take a deep breath. He must know.

“You gave my children to Hlomu,” I say. This was not part of the plan but there, I’ve said it.

I feel his arms loosen around me. He doesn’t respond, instead he let’s go of me and walks back to sit on the treadmill

I remain standing.

We stay like this for minutes. I don’t know if that’s anger or hurt I see on his face.

“You can go,” he says, very softly.

I stand still.

“It’s fine Zandile, here is the key, you can go,”he says.

I won’t move. I don’t want to go, he said we had to stay here until we sort things out.

“Zandile, I said take the key and get the fuck out of here, now!!!”

He’s probably forgotten who I am. I’m the only person in this world he can’t control, he’s obviously forgotten that.

I stand still.

He stands up and walks to me. I stand still until our chests are almost touching. I don't drop my eyes, I stare back.

"So that's how you feel?" he says. He is tense, I can just feel it, I'm surprised he's still talking. His jaw is tight and normally this is where you should walk away from him, far away.

He grabs both my upper arms, tight, too tight.

"You're hurting me," I say.

He's never touched me, not even once, he can't start now.

"You're hurting me Nkosana," I say, louder.

He looks into my eyes for seconds. I think he's going to let go but.....

He grabs me by the waist, lifts me and puts me on a table. I hear the sounds of the small weights landing on the floor, he pushed them off the table.

He pulls my legs apart and pushes his body in between them. He pulls me closer to him by my waist. His lips are on my ear.

"Talk to me, tell me what I did wrong," he whispers.

I keep quiet, I don't move.

I feel my dress loosening, it's torn, he tore the whole left side at one go. I'm exposed.

"They needed her, she loves them, she took care of them....." he whispers.

"I had no choice, she was the only person I could trust," he whispers again.

I'm still quiet, but my hands are on his shoulders.

He unbuckles his belt and pulls his zip down.

I feel his hand pulling my panties to one side.

"Talk to me Zah, tell me I was wrong, tell me I shouldn't have....."

"Ohhhhhh..." I scream when he pushes himself inside, aggressively.

I hold him tighter, his face is touching mine, I'm breathing in his mouth.

"They don't want me, they want her.....they're mine Nkosana," I mumble.

"Talk, tell me how that makes you feel,"

He pushes harder, parts my thighs more, moves faster.

“I want Mvelo, I want her to step back....”

Ahhhhhhhh

“I want you to stop calling her when they do something wrong...let me try,”

He grips my thigh and pulls up my leg, it's on his arm.

He moves more, roughly.

“What else do you want?...tell me, I'll give you anything,” he whispers.

“I want you.....” I whisper back.

He grabs my one breast and puts his lips on my neck, I'm breathing his breath, it smells and tastes like peppermint, he smells of expensive perfume, he's clean.

His hand grips my neck.

“Look at me,” he says.

I hold him tighter, and then push him off. He knows how I want him.

He pulls me from the table with one arm and turns me around.

He's inside.

My hands are pressed on the table. His one arm is just under my breasts. I can't see him behind me but I can hear him moaning.

He humps faster and harder. This is my Nkosana, the one I know.

Our bodies tremble together at once.....

He waits before lifting me and putting me on the floor.

"You will get it all," he says.

This was the most important conversation we've ever had.

It's our wedding day.

CHAPTER SIX

APRIL 7, 2015 DUDUBUSANIDUBE 11 COMMENTS

"Zah.....!"

"Don't jump! Don't do it!" they'd all scream at the same time with their faces raised.

I'd count to three and then jump!

I'd feel my feet burning afterwards but it was the greatest feeling ever, a feeling of conquer, of bravery of being in control and of defiance.

"Are you okay?" Gwaza would ask pulling me up to my feet. He was always trying to save me from something or whatever danger I'd be putting myself in at that time.

But there was one thing that I needed saving from, he couldn't save me from it.

I'd be back up on the tree before they all knew it, shouting for the game to continue.

"Qithi!" the first one to jump to the ground and pick the stick would shout before climbing back up the tree again.

I used to win all the time, but only because I'd have everyone nervous by climbing up to the highest branch and jumping when they least expect it.

I was so competitive, always wanting to come first in everything, I realised when I was older that I was that way because I wanted to be something other than pretty. Everyone was always commenting about how good I look, never about how good I am or how smart I am. I was the beautiful baby, the beautiful kid, the beautiful girl, the beautiful woman. I wanted to be more, I wanted to be remembered for something other than my perfect face.

My mom, she never wanted more, she wanted security and the perfect picture on the outside that was blurred and damaged on the inside. That was our home, our family, everybody

thought we were perfect and happy but the truth was, there were demons crawling all over our walls.

My father was a beater, a sexual abuser, a controller who stood tall and preached morals to anyone who cared to listen.

He was a man of God, they all believed. A husband every woman who believed they had married a loser wished was theirs. They all loved and respected him, I hated him, I wanted to spit on his face when he was sleeping. I wished him death. My mother wished herself death. I gave it to her in the end.

The tree still stands, it must be the tallest tree in this village.

I can't see my parents' house from here but I can see the tree standing tall miles away, it always stood out.

I'm not as nervous as I thought I would be coming here. But I will not leave the yard, I'm not that brave.

Nkosana slept with his whole tall self wrapped around me, he wouldn't let go even when I was covered in his sweat. I think he is more worried about me being here than I am.

"Thinking hard hey?" he says.

Where did he come from?

"Huh? where were you?" I ask.

He's just walked through the gate. Nobody ever leaves here on foot.

"Sis'Zah, I'm a man, I'm young and this is Mbuba. The valleys are beautiful and so are the women roaming them," he says.

Mpande though! Is he ever going to grow up?

"And what's with all these tattoos? You look like a criminal," I say.

This must be the first time I see him with with a sleeveless top because I've never seen these tattoos all over his arms and back before.

He stretches his arm out and starts explaining what each of them means.

"See here? Can you read that?" he says moving his upper arm close to my face.

"Sbani, Lwandle, Mvelo, Phakeme....." I read.

It's the names of all the children.

"I left this space open for the ones still coming," he says.

"When is yours coming?" I ask.

He looks at me with suspicion.

“Let me get out of here before you start asking me when I’m getting married,” he says, and with that he runs off.

I’m left standing with my hands on my hips, shaking my head.

“Here, across your shoulders,” Hlomu says throwing me a scarf.

She’s also appeared from nowhere.

I follow her inside the house. I’ve been standing on the yard alone staring into space like a crazy woman.

She has covered her head and is wearing a scarf across her shoulders. I forgot we had to do that.

There’s a goat in the yard, ready to be sacrificed for whatever it is that we are here for. I forgot to ask but I have a feeling that these wives couldn’t care less why we are here, they just do what they have to do.

“It’s Qhawe’s things,” Hlomu said earlier.

Qhawe, it seems, has become the traditionalist of this family since they came back years ago. He’s into thanking ancestors now and again.

It's just us though, no outsiders. Everyone is here except Sbani, he went back to the Eastern Cape the day after that meeting.

Lwandle wanted to go straight to UKZN but his father would hear none of it, not after he proved he cannot be trusted. And so, we've been bumping heads and there's been that awkwardness between us. When we were all having dinner last night I caught him staring at me, I stared back and smiled but he looked away immediately.

I sat and watched how he treats Hlomu like she gave birth to him. He calls me by name, and he calls her mother, I'm right here, I'm not dead but he calls her mother.

"Let me see," Hlomu says looking at my hands.

"Good, no manicure, you're straining the thing," she says and pulls me by hand to I don't know where.

We walk past about four rondavels, including Nkosana's until we get to one that is empty, except for a three-legged pot, a blue barrel and a beer-pot on the floor.

She has ivovo (a strainer made of grass) in her hand.

"I'm not messing my nails this time, I've been doing this for years, it's your turn now," she says handing me the strainer.

Does this girl not understand that I'm older than her?

I know how to do this, my mother used to make me do it when I was young, saying she was preparing me to be a wife one day.

“Okay,” I shrug and take the strainer from her.

But then, how.....?

“There’s a lady from two houses away that I call every time we have these things, she starts with it on Wednesday and by the time I get here on Friday this is all I have to do,” she says before I can ask.

Great, now we pay people to make traditional beer for us?

She’s standing and scrolling her phone as I do this. She has no shame at all.

“It’s just going to be one pot, I don’t even know who is going to drink it but I hope the locals are not coming over because they never want to leave once they enter that gate,” she says.

Township girls!!

She seems to have remembered something all of a sudden.

She stops and stares at me.

“You know, he always comes when we have functions,” she says, suddenly serious.

I know who she's talking about, Nkosana said he wasn't coming.

"No, he won't," I say and continue with what I'm doing.

Her face says: "don't be so sure".

But I'm sure, Nkosana would kill him if he came anywhere near me. I don't want to see him and that's that.

Eventually she puts her phone in her apron pocket and starts helping me do this. I haven't seen her with a mug or glass in her hand today, maybe I was wrong, I was beginning to think she has a drinking problem.

There's so much I still need to learn about these people.

"I hear you are a twin?" I say, just to kill the awkward silence, we both know what it is about.

She smiles.

"Yes, I have a male twin, he lives in Ghana with his husband," she says excitedly.

Huh?

She rolls her eyes when she sees confusion on my face,

“Yes, gay people do get married now, it’s the 21st century. You’re very good at this,” she says moving right along.

I am good at this, I am good at these things, my mother took her time training me, I was always going to end up somebody’s wife somewhere, as long as it wasn’t Nkosana according to her. But when I moved to live with Nkosana he allowed me to be myself, he allowed me to be lazy.

I might as well bring this up now.

“Hlomu, I was thinking that maybe I could try with Mvelo, you know, start now while he’s still too young to understand why I wasn’t around all this time,” I say and glance at her briefly.

No reaction, she doesn’t even raise her eyes, it’s like she knew this was coming.

“I don’t know Zandile, don’t you think it’s a bit too early? for you that is, don’t you think you should focus on getting the older ones first, or probably finding yourself again and normalizing your marriage?” she says.

It’s funny how she can be so blank and yet so....

“I’m a grown woman and this is my grandson,” I say. I’ve gotten angry, I don’t know how that happened so quick.

She raises her eyebrows.

I withdraw and look away.

“That didn’t come from a bad place, what I said just now, I didn’t mean it in a bad way. I’ve lived with Mvelo since he was eight months old, he thinks I’m his mother and I’m just saying that he needs to adjust first, get used to you being around before I can pack him away to Glenvista,” she says.

This girl is used to getting everything she wants I see. I can’t be standing her taking parental advise from her just because she’s the barefoot-and-pregnant-in-the-kitchen type in this family. She thinks it’s a privilege but infact, it’s the opposite, she’s exactly where these men want her to be, domestic and submissive, and right now she’s pissing me off.

“I wasn’t asking for permission,” I snap.

She puts the strainer down and raises her hands. I don’t like the way she’s looking at me, it’s looking down on me actually.

“You don’t need my permission, ask Sbani for permission to raise his child,” she says and starts walking away.

Oh no she didn’t!

“So you’re going to use that against me?” I shout.

She stops and walks back to me, I thought she was going to walk on.

She walks until she’s standing too close to me.

“I hear you have a temper problem,” she says, very arrogantly, it sounds like a threat too.

She must never!

“And I think you have a drinking problem,” I shoot back.

His face drops, but her eyes are still on mine, for too long until I look away.

“Don’t judge me Zandile, you don’t know what I’ve had to do and what I’ve had to survive for you to come back to all this, including your husband and your children,” she says and starts walking away again.

She sounded a little scary there for a moment.

She turns around just as she reaches the door.

“And by the way, I don’t have a drinking problem, I just love the taste of alcohol so sometimes I drink it like it’s water,” she says and walks out.

I’m left alone. I’m starting to regret this little incident we’ve just had, this woman can make things very difficult for me if she wants.

Let me finish this and go lock myself in my room.

“What are you doing mama?”- a voice says.

It’s that little midget again.

“I’m making traditional beer Sisekelo,”

He’s standing at the door with his hands behind his back. Nkosana stands like that sometimes. His grandfather used to stand like that all the time, infact every time I saw him his hands were behind his back.

“It smells funny, are you going to drink it?” he asks.

Great, now I’m having a conversation with a six-year-old?

“No, I don’t drink alcohol,”

He looks at me like he doesn’t understand what I’m saying. He shrugs and starts walking towards me until he is crouching next to the barrel, his hands are on his cheeks, he has no front teeth and is watching what I’m doing with so much interest.

I decide to continue and let him watch.

“Mkhulu says he doesn’t know you,” he says out of the blue.

Mkhulu who?

“Huh?”

“Mkhulu, he says he doesn’t know who you are,”he repeats.

What is this child on about?

“There you are, I’ve been looking for you all over, performing your wifely duties?” -Nkosana says walking in.

The little midget stands up and runs to him. He picks him up and brushes his head before ordering him to go take a bath. He runs off and that’s it.

“What’s wrong? was Sisekelo interrogating you? he does that with everyone don’t worry about him,” he says.

He must be the free-spirit of the family then, like Nqoba.

He notices I’m distracted.

“What’s wrong? Is Mbuba frustrating you?” he asks.

I guess I could say that. I’ve just had two very weird incidents in the last 30 minutes.

“No, I’m fine. When are you slaughtering the goat?”

“Tonight, the ceremony is tomorrow,” he says.

Oh, I thought this would be over and done with today.

“What is it for again?” I ask.

He laughs.

“You Zulu wives must learn something about tradition, you are raising men you know,” he says and laughs.

“It’s to thank the ancestors, for everything, including you,” he says.

I know they don’t go to church, not even the women. I heard Hlomu took the boys to church a few times when she first arrived but she must have given up along the way when she realised it was pointless.

“Done,” I say putting the strainer down and putting a plate over the clay beer pot. It will brew now and by the morning it will be ready to drink,” I say, unsuccessfully trying to wipe my hands clean. I might as well go take a bath or I’ll smell like sorghum until I go to sleep.

I walk out and he follows me all the way to our rondavel. I thought he was going to join his brothers there under the tree.

“I’m going to take a bath,”

There was only a shower here but he had a bathtub put in when he heard I was coming back.

“Can I join you?” he asks.

I don't think so.

"No, I'll be quick," I say.

I really don't have time for sex, not now, I need to sit down and think about what I need to do now to get my children to stop hating me.

"By the way, Xolie bought me a cellphone as wedding present, I haven't opened it but I will do now when I finish my bath,"

His face changes immediately to a frown. He is so controlling and so possessive!

I'm worried about Gugu, she still hasn't told Nqoba about being pregnant I know, Nkosana would have told me if she had.

When I come out of the bathroom he's still here.

"Where is that cellphone?"

Mnxm! I don't answer him.

"Zandile, why do you need a cellphone? Who are you going to call?" he asks.

Grand-grand what exactly is this man's problem?

"I don't know Nkosana, people have cellphones out here, they call their husbands and family members and friends and I don't know.....it's just something that people choose to have and I choose to have one too," I say, I'm not even angry about his stupidity.

He just wants to control me, control my movements and keep me where he can see me. I was in jail for so many years and I refuse to be imprisoned by his jealousy and possessiveness out here.

He doesn't say anything. I'm good with that.

I put on a dress, one of those dresses that he likes me in, long and plain.

"I had a chat with Hlomu about Mvelo,"

He raises his eyebrows.

"It didn't go very well," I say.

He doesn't look surprised, so he expected her to react the way she did?

"I said you'll get everything you want, but I didn't say you'll get it now," he says.

What does he mean by that?

“Hlomu will die before she gives the kids up. She won’t let Mvelo go until she’s sure she’s doing the right thing,” he says.

Wow! Doing the right thing?

He raises his arms.

“No, don’t get me wrong, I’m saying she is too overprotective of them, of everyone, unfortunately you’re going to have to prove yourself to her before she lets go,” he says.

Does Nkosana even understand what he’s saying to me?

“I don’t care, she didn’t carry them for nine months, I did,”

His face changes, why is he getting upset?

“You can’t talk like that Zandile, she has every right to those kids. I think you should apologise and start the conversation from scratch, on a clean slate.....”

Apologise? Apologise for what?

“Nkosana whose side are you on?”

“There are no sides,” he says.

“Now I have to beg that woman to....”

Him: “She’s not ‘that woman’, she’s Hlomu, the one who raised your children, kept this family together and made us who we are. You know where you left us, and you know where you found us when you came back. Apologise to her and start over”.

He is serious.

I’m so angry I feel like smoke is going to start coming out of my ears any time from now.

The door swings open!

“Knock!” Nkosana shouts.

It’s Mqoqi.

“Someone has just walked in the gate,” he says and stands there with his eyes all out. I see worry in his face, I see anger too.

“I want to see her!” a man’s voice shouting from outside.

I know this voice.

“Zandile, stay here, don’t come out,” he says rushing to the door and closing it behind him.

I'm not going to do that. I want to see him. I want to look him the eye.

"Where are you going? I said stay inside," he says when I open the door.

He knows me better than that.

He's standing not far from the door. Mqhele is blocking him from coming any further with his arm.

Our eyes meet. He looks frail, sickly and pathetic. He can't even stand up straight. That walking-stick is now his third leg.

He used to be a tall well-built man, but now, he is a shadow of himself.

He's with my uncle, my mother's brother.

"Zandile!" my uncle shouts.

I don't respond. I walk forward, I want to look him in the eye.

My uncle moves forward but Mpande pushes him back.

"Zah..." Nkosana says trying to pull me by the arm.

“No! I want to talk to him,” I say and walk forward.

I stop close enough. I can hear his breathing, it is loud and.....

“You look like death,” I say, in almost a hiss.

He stares.

“You’ve suffered a lot haven’t you?” I ask.

He stares, and then nods.

“Good,” I say.

He coughs, I can hear his chest breaking from just that one cough.

My uncle looks shocked by what I’ve just said.

“I prayed. In all these years I prayed for you to suffer. You see baba, you will not die, not anytime soon, you are going to live until you see maggots crawling out of your skin, you will live until you can’t lift even one finger. And when you finally die, it will be slow and painful. But me, I’m going to start my life, I have my children, I have a man who loves me and I have a family, you have nothing,” I say.

I feel Nkosana touching my arm.

I'm not done.

"Go get mami," Sambulo says to Mqoqi. He runs off.

He squints his eyes and looks at me like he's trying to read me.

"You whore! You killed my wif....."

He doesn't finish the sentence before he's on the ground. I watch his clothes gather dust and grass as Nkosana drags him on the ground all the way to the gate, throws him out and locks it. My uncle right there with him.

Mpande picks up the walking stick and throws it over the fence.

I'm done.

"Come on, it's okay, let's go inside," Hlomu says putting her arm around my shoulders.

I turn around and there is Lwandle behind me. He's looking at me with shock.

I walk with her all the way to the main-house.

I feel very light, like a load of baggage has just been lifted off my shoulders.

"Sit," she says.

There's Xolie and Gugu here too, sitting on the bed. The kids are all on the floor. It looks like they were instructed to stay here and not come out.

"Go watch TV," Xolie says hushing them.

They all stand up and run out, except for one of the twins, he waits for Mvelo to stand up and then he takes his hand and walks out with him.

"Langa is so caring," Gugu remarks.

"Mqhele says he's gay," -Hlomu.

They laugh. They expect me to laugh too but my mind is not here, I'm sitting staring into space.

We all sit in silence.

"You don't have to forgive Zah, he doesn't deserve your forgiveness. But you have to move on, for yourself," Hlomu says.

She doesn't understand, she'll never understand the hatred that has been building up inside me all these years.

But I'm glad I did that, it's what I needed.

"What was that all about?"-Gugu.

The clueless one.

We all look at her. She shrugs.

“My life can start now,” I say. I don’t know where that came from.

They all sit awkwardly, I know they don’t know what to say.

Xoli puts her hand on my back. I assume she’s trying to comfort me.

“You can start with Mvelo,”-Hlomu.

What does she mean?

“I’ll give him to you, nothing heals better than the unconditional love of a child,” she says.

She’s right. I should thank her.

It’s funny how just an hour ago I wanted to strangle her, and now I’m sitting here with her trying to make me feel better.

“By the way, I told Nqoba,”-Gugu.

There's that too.

Xolie doesn't flinch. She knows.

Hlomu looks confused. She doesn't know.

"What did he say?" - Xolie.

He said: "I thought you were on contraceptives, did you forget to take them?"

"That's all he said to me. I told him he's going to be a father and that's all he said to me. I don't know why Nqoba married me, he doesn't love me. I know he's capable of loving because there is definitely somebody that he's inlove with, it's just not me his wife," she says.

Hlomu drops her eyes. She knows.

There's a knock on the door.

It's a woman I don't know.

She waves reservedly before speaking.

"Makoti, it's not brewing," she says.

We all look at her with confusion.

“The traditional beer, it’s not brewing, it’s still. It is supposed to be pouring out of the pot by now, but it’s not,” she says.

That’s impossible.

CHAPTER SEVEN

APRIL 7, 2015 DUDUBUSANIDUBE 10 COMMENTS

“Wan...tu...tiii,” he says and giggles just before I dunk him in the water again.

He sticks his tongue out and wipes his face when I pull him out.

“Again gogo, do it again....” he says.

I oblige.

We’ve been in this pool for half-an-hour. I don’t know why this child loves water so much.

He giggles, again, when I pull him out. He is so happy and so much fun to be around.

Nkosana has been feeling neglected but he understands. He’s as obsessed with him as I am.

“Okay, we have to get out of here now, it’s time for you to eat,” I say.

He frowns.

“But gogo....” he says.

He can barely pronounce words but because I’m always around him, I’ve learnt to make out what he says. I actually have conversations with him. Yeah, I know it’s weird but he’s become my best friend, my two-and-a-half year old best friend, and I don’t want him to go to creche yet.

He jumps up and down when I put him on the concrete floor, I panic, he could slip and fall on this wet floor.

“Come on, swimming is over now,” I say wrapping a bath towel around him and picking him up.

He wraps his arms around my neck, I think he’s cold so I rush into the house.

I’m in a bikini. It’s a good thing the man who does the garden comes only on Tuesdays and the cleaning lady comes only three times a week, otherwise I wouldn’t be free to walk around naked in my own house.

“Koflakes,” he says pointing at a glass jar on top of the counter after I wrap him in a throw.

“No, corn-flakes are for breakfast, you’re having proper food now,”

He frowns again. He has this face that he makes when he wants something that I don’t want to give him.

In the first few weeks it was hard, I couldn't say no to him at all. I used to just give him whatever he wanted, just so I could see him happy.

And then Hlomu came to visit one day and noticed that. She said it nicely, but I know she was trying to tell me how to be a parent, and to my surprise I wasn't offended.

My temper tantrums have toned down in the past five months. I don't get angry quickly anymore and I have learnt to hold my tongue. It has sunk in that I'm not in jail anymore, I'm in the normal world with people who are free to do whatever they want, I'm free to do whatever I want too.

"Here," I say giving him a hot-dog.

He looks at it like he's not impressed.

"More gogo," he says pointing at the tomato sauce on it.

Oh, I forgot he likes tomato sauce more than he likes the food itself.

I do as he says and hand it back to him.

He takes a big chunk at once.

I smile looking at him trying to chew it all in that little mouth.

He tries to shove the piece still in his hand in my mouth. I take one small bite. He laughs as he chews. Now his cheeks are covered in tomato sauce.

He is so beautiful with those big eyes and chubby face.

I met his mother only once but I've spoken to her on the phone a few times.

Relations between the two families are not exactly pleasant. They don't like us, they never have, more especially because we wouldn't let them live with the child. To make things worse, Sbani and his mother are like cat-and-mouse. It's hard to believe they were ever a couple, I can confidently say there is no love lost between them.

I've seen Sbani only twice since that first meeting we had. He's the type that doesn't like coming home, I don't know if it's because I'm here or something else I'm not aware of. But I call him and I SMS him, sometimes he responds to the SMSs, mostly when they are about Mvelo.

They say I shouldn't pressure him, that he will come around eventually but I think about him, about both of them everyday and I'm desperate for their affection.

I still don't know how he agreed to let the child live with me, but Nkosana tells me it took some serious convincing from Hlomu, maybe I must just accept that I'll never beat her, she'll always be number-one to them.

But, despite that, I'm happy. I laugh more, I love more, I'm loved more and I'm starting to warm up to this "kept wife" lifestyle. I've even been to a spa a few times, just because it's what we do around here.

Tomorrow night we are going out to an awards ceremony. It's going to be the first time we go out to a function together. We've been out to dinners and lunches and malls and all that but we've never done anything like the red carpet that they say the function is going to be.

He's asked me to accompany him a couple of times and I always change my mind on last minute. For now, I'm just the woman seen on the video hitting a man with a salad bowl at a restaurant, the stories came out saying I was Hlomu's friend, I was fine with that.

I've already bought a dress and new shoes and I will put on a new weave tomorrow morning. I want to look amazing. Things could change after tomorrow night, for the bad, but if I'm going to go down I might as well look fabulous for it.

Oh! he's fallen asleep in my arms. My bath-towel is now red with tomato-sauce all over it. It must be the water that got him so tired.

I'm going to leave him here on the couch and start cooking supper. Nkosana wants us to eat out most of the time, I'm beginning to think he doesn't like home-cooked food that much but it's strange because when we are at Xolie's house or the others, he eats their home cooked food like it's the best thing that's even happened to him.

I'm going to make grilled pork-chops and veggies, I hope he'll like it.

My phone.

"Hi,"

"MaFuze, what are you up to?" he asks.

“I’m cooking supper, Mvelo is sleeping,”

“Supper? Okay, I could have asked a restaurant to prepare and deliver something for us,” he says.

There we go again.

“No, it’s fine, I’m in the mood anyway. What time are you coming back?”

“A bit later today, we are going past Bab’Ngcobo’s house tonight, he asked to see us,” he says.

Oh well, he knows I’ll wait up for him. Not that I have a choice because he calls me all the time on this cellphone that he didn’t want me to have in the first place.

With Nkosana you must always put your foot down, he’s used to dictating and getting what he wants all the time, that won’t work with me, I can’t allow it.

It was the same thing when I wanted to get my own bank account and when I raised the subject of completing my law degree. I studied and I passed but I’m not a qualified lawyer yet for obvious reasons. He’s determined on keeping me couped in this house like I’m part of the furniture.

Xolie started an organization that focuses on female health and Hlomu has that store of hers. Gugu also finally quit her job and became double her size because all she does is eat and sleep and stress about Nqoba not even wanting to go to doctor’s appointments with her.

She says they sleep in separate bedrooms and since she got highly pregnant he doesn't even want to touch her. He doesn't even want to feel the baby kick.

But from what Nkosana says, he is excited about being a father, he's just worried that he won't be good at it and that something might go wrong "like it always does" with him. He thinks he is incapable of loving and caring and that he might struggle to connect emotionally with his own child. But that's weird of him because he is so loving to all the children of this family.

He also seems to have a special relationship with Sisekelo, they are very similar. I remember when we were in Mbuba and had to cancel the ceremony because the traditional beer didn't brew, everyone was serious and worried about what could have been the cause. But the two of them couldn't be bothered, Nqoba made a joke saying the goat must have prayed really hard for its life to be spared while Sisekelo just burst out and said: "Mkhulu says there's a stranger in his house, he doesn't like strangers".

We all looked at him and wondered what he was on about, and then we remembered he is six-years-old and talks too much.

Nkosana is still not back when I go to bed. His supper is waiting for him in the microwave. We ate alone with Lwandle but I had to make him another hot-dog because he didn't seem to like the meat.

I wonder what Ngcobo wants. I like him, he is like a father to me but sometimes I don't agree with his lifestyle. He is way over 60 but he recently married a fourth wife. I think these women, except for his first wife, are just interested in his money more than anything, but then, he marries them and leaves them back in the rural areas, there is no place to spend money there.

I remember that day when I arrived at Bree, at only 19-years-old looking for Nkosana. He was there. When I asked one taxi driver if he knew Nkosana Zulu and if he worked at the same rank, he just left me standing there and came back with Ngcobo.

He looked at me like I was an alien or plastic doll, and then he started interrogating me about why I was looking for Nkosana. When he was done and satisfied, he brought a chair and told me to sit down somewhere. He left and came back with a plate of food and a can of Coke.

I sat there for over two hours before I saw him, my first love, coming towards me, in a tracksuit and sneakers and a cap. I wanted to jump and run to him but I was shy with all the taxi drivers and people all over the rank watching. By the time he got to where I was sitting I was already in tears. I had spent years believing I would never see him again.

He stood in front of me, looked at me and said: "Zandile".

I think part of him didn't believe I was really there, in front of him.

I just sat there with tears pouring out.

He stretched his hand and I jumped up and wrapped my arms around him. I cried hysterically until his boss came over and told him he could leave early.

"Zandile. I have nothing," he said when we sat in a taxi to Yeoville, where I was staying with my friend at that time.

"It's fine, we'll have nothing together," I said, still teary.

He looked really worried, so worried that he didn't even touch me or hold my hand during the whole trip.

I ended up thinking that maybe he didn't want me there. That I had made a mistake and was stupid to think he'd still want me after all those years. I thought that he had heard about Gwaza, the news was known all over Mbuba.

He kept rubbing his hands together and pressing his two pointing fingers to his lips. He was really nervous. When he said nothing about taking me to where he stayed I concluded there and then that he was living with someone, a woman he had met along the way and fallen in love with and forgotten about me.

I had expected him to jump for joy and whisk me away to our happily ever after when he saw me but things didn't exactly go as I had imagined. He was more nervous and worried instead of happy.

He had also grown so much. He was a mischievous teenage boy the last time I had seen him but now he seemed like a grown man with responsibilities.

When we jumped off the taxi and had to find our way around the overpopulated Rocky Street, that was when he held my hand for the first time. I think it was more about protection than it was affection.

"This is where I live for now," I said when we stopped in front of the blue door. It was an old house, an ugly house that had been turned into a commune. Every room could be turned into a bedroom as long as a bed could fit in it. There must have been about 15 people living there.

He looked around the place and people walking in and out before making that face that I knew too well.

“I’ll get you out of here,” he said.

I invited him in, reluctantly because there really was nothing worth inviting a visitor to in that bedroom we shared. We had a single bed, well my friend had a single bed, I had a plastic bag with a few clothes and R350.

He walked in, looked around the room and sat on the bed.

“How many people live here?” he asked.

“In this room, just me and Buhle, in the whole house, I don’t know, but I know the whole of Africa is represented,” I said.

He smiled briefly.

“Give me a week,” he said.

I wasn’t sure I fully understood what he planned to do in a week.

I poured him juice, Breakfast Punch Liqui-Fruit I had bought the previous night. I was crossing fingers that it wasn’t already sour because we didn’t have a fridge.

He took it, and drank it, I was relieved.

I went and sat next to him.

“Nkosana,” I said.

He turned to look at me.

“I ran away. I ran away from home to come look for you. I saw you two weeks ago on the N3, driving a taxi with a GP number-plate so I assumed I would find you here in Joburg,” I said.

He was so shocked.

“You saw me? why didn’t you stop me?” he asked.

I tried but he never turned around, I watched him drive away.

“I tried. After that I went straight home, packed my bags and came here. I had spent so much time thinking I’d never see you again and when I did I.....” I stopped, remembering what I had left behind at home.

I wanted to tell him there and then but I couldn’t. I just couldn’t.

He put one arm around me and kissed my forehead.

“I’ll get you out of here,” he said looking around the room.

The most embarrassing moment was when he had finished the juice and didn't know where to put the glass because there wasn't space for even a table in that room. He ended up putting it on the floor.

"Nkosana," I called his name after I was done pretending like that homeless glass situation was not an issue.

"Are you all here?" I asked.

He understood what I was asking.

"Yes, all eight of us," he said.

I took a sigh of relief. I was sure the parents had died but I wasn't sure if the kids had all made it, especially Ntsika because he was just a baby then.

"We are here, scattered but together. I live in the men's hostel, me, Nqoba, Mqhele and Qhawe. The younger four are living with this woman just next to the hostel," he said.

I did not expect his life to be so hard but I was happy about that "men's hostel" part because it meant he was not cohabiting with some Joburg hood-rat.

"How are things back home?" he asked.

I was surprised, I thought he'd not want to hear anything about that place.

“It continued after, you know, after your family. More people died, there were more attacks and more burnings, but things are better now,” I said.

There was something different about him. He seemed so serious and so concerned about things and he was so....I don't know, hostile towards everything around him.

I heard Buhle's voice all the way from the street. I had forgotten about her.

The door swung open and there she was, standing with her hands on her hips.

“You found him?” she shouted with a huge smile on her face. She was naturally loud.

Nkosana just looked at her, no smile, nothing.

“Hi Nkosana, remember me? I used to live in that house just next to the school,” she said, her hands still on her hips and smile still wide.

Nkosana just shook his head to say he didn't remember her but nodded to return the greeting, still no warmth.

He had really changed.

Buhle had lived in Mbuba for only one year when we were 13. Her father was a teacher at one school but he was killed during the violence so her mother packed and left. We became friends then and stayed in touch.

“So, where is Nqoba? Is he still rude?” she said trying to find a spot to sit on the bed.

I was surprised she still remembered Nqoba. She had had a huge crush on him, her and about a gazillion other girls. There were two choices, you had a crush on Nkosana, if not, you definitely had a crush on Nqoba. It’s just that they didn’t know about it and knowing them, if they had known, they would have pulled down panties of every girl in Mbuba.

“Zah, you didn’t even offer him biscuits? what is wrong with you?” she said opening a cupboard somewhere in-between a laundry basket and a coat-hanger with our bath towels.

I decided I had to get that man out of there.

“No, I was just about to leave anyway,” he said, saving me from sudden Miss-Hospitality.

He stood up, said goodbye to her and walked out of the room, I followed him. It was already dark outside.

“I’ll take a taxi here, I know all the drivers so it won’t be a problem,” he said but with no indication that he was about to leave.

I kept biting my nails and he kept removing my hand from my mouth until he decided to hold both my hands because it was the only way to stop me.

I still bite my nails even today and he still tells me to stop all the time.

“I’m going to make a plan Zah, just give me a few days, a week,” he said.

I tried to tell him not to worry, I was fine there, as long as I got to see him I was fine, but he wanted to be a man.

"I'm glad you came," he said squeezing both my hands.

"I'm glad I came," I said smiling.

I wanted the moment to last forever but I knew he had to let go, it was getting late and he had said earlier that he had to go past that woman's house and drop off bread for the younger ones.

"You'll still be here tomorrow, promise me that," he kept saying.

Where would I go?

"I'll be here Nkosana I promise," I kept saying and blushing.

He flagged an oncoming taxi once and it stopped right in-front of us.

And when I least expected it, he pulled me to his chest and kissed me. I was so shocked I almost fell because I had to stand on my toes to reach his face.

The guys in the taxi were whistling.

"Wadla Mageba!" they kept shouting. He let me go when they got more and more excited.

He waited for me to get inside the gate and close it before he shouted.

“Zandile! I’m going to marry you. I’m not sure when yet, but you’re going to be my wife,” he said before closing the taxi door and driving off.

I barely slept that night. I kept reminiscing about every moment we shared and the more I thought about it, the more I fell inlove with him all over again.

But something at the back of my mind kept killing the excitement. I knew I had to tell him, he was going to find out eventually but I just couldn’t get myself to do it.

I saw him only four times that week because he had to make trips to Durban and back and would arrive in Joburg very late at night.

And then, on that Sunday morning he just showed up and told me to pack all my stuff. I didn’t know what that was about but I did as he told me and said my goodbyes to Buhle.

We ended up in Riverlea, in a back-room. It was one large room with a curtain separating it into two portions. There was already one bed, it wasn’t new but it was workable.

I still had R300 on me and he gave me another R500.

I had no idea where to start but I was happy that we had a home now.

The first thing I bought was a two-plate stove, one pot, two plates and two cups and spoons. I also bought one fitted-sheet, a blanket and two pillows. That was all we had to start a home with.

He would leave very early in the morning and come back very late. Every morning he would leave me with a R20 or even R50 on good days. I'd make sure he had something to eat every night.

We had nothing, but we were inlove and we were happy.

The honeymoon phase though, it lasted for only one week before he didn't come home one night. I was so worried, I thought he had had a car accident or something until in the wee hours of the morning when Nqoba just arrived and gave a me a lousy explanation about where he was, something about work.

He assured me that Nkosana was fine and told me to go to sleep, he slept in the kitchen. I didn't believe his story at all.

When Nkosana finally came home, at midday, he was wearing a jacket, in the scorching heat, he was wearing a jacket and refused to take it off. He looked rather suspicious and I was not going to pretend like everything was fine. I was not going to be left alone in the house for the whole night and he sent his brother to guard me.

"Where were you?" I asked after shoving a plate of food in-front of him.

He raised his eyes. I could see fear in them. It was such a strange and rare thing, Nkosana never fears.

"I was caught up at work, the taxi broke down," he said, not at all convincing.

I didn't believe him but I let it go and things went back to normal until three days later when I had been in town and I was sitting on the front seat of the taxi waiting for him to go drop me off at home, a hand came through the window and pulled me by my hair.

"Is this the little whore? Is this her Nkosana?" she screamed as she pulled my hair and slapped me.

I didn't know what was going on but my first instinct was to hold the door closed and make sure she doesn't pull me out.

There was mayhem, taxi drivers trying to restrain her and Nkosana threatening to beat the crap out of her.

I sat there frightened and crying until Nkosana got in the taxi and drove off, leaving her still threatening and screaming and cursing.

We traveled in silence. Him obviously waiting for me to ask and me being so angry that I wanted to throw everything around me at him.

"I have to go back to work," he said just ten minutes after we got home.

"Why? You want to go and apologise to your girlfriend for leaving with me?"

"Zah, it's not like that, I'll explain everything when I come back," he said.

"Were you with her that night you didn't come home?"

He kept quiet. I took that as a yes.

As soon as he left I packed all my things and left. I didn't know if I was doing the right thing but I knew I couldn't stay with a man who thought he could do as he pleased with me, not me Zandile Ngcobo! He was the one who treated me like a princess and made me believe I was gold, he made it like that from the beginning and showed me how it felt to be loved and cherished, and now he thought he could just change things and treat me differently, no!

Buhle was surprised to see me walk in. She thought I was wrong for packing up and leaving but she had to understand that I had given up everything for this man and there was no way I was going to let him play me, put me in a house and force me not have a life while he was running around with violent hood-rats.

"You must understand that you've been with him barely a month. He obviously had someone before you came and I'm sure he's still trying to end things with her. I mean, look at it this way, she asked him if "this is her", which means she knows about you, which means he told her about you probably when he was breaking up with her, I think you are overreacting, I mean, he obviously had a woman, he has a penis," she said.

I was angry, maybe she was making sense but I was still mad at him.

We were woken by a knock on the window after midnight. I'm sure he jumped over the fence because the gate was locked at night.

I only opened when it became clear that he was going to wake the whole house if I didn't.

It took him ten minutes, only ten minutes to convince me to pack my stuff and get in the car, I didn't even know who the car belonged to but it was a Cressida.

His explanation for that night he disappeared was that the woman, who was his girlfriend before I came had locked him in her house when he told her it was over.

I saw for the first time why he had been torturing himself with long sleeved jackets the whole time, his arms were covered in scratch-marks.

I never heard from her again.

Things went back to normal after that but he wanted me to stay in the house, everyday, all the time. He didn't even want me to make friends with the neighbors, but I was allowed to talk to the old woman who was our landlord and lived in the main house.

She was nice but she was also a bit cold-hearted. She never had children and had lived alone with her husband until he died.

One day she asked me if I had any skills. I told her I had none whatsoever, I was just a rural 19-year-old who had never worked anywhere, but I was good at doing hair.

And so one day she asked that I go to Soweto with her. I did so without telling Nkosana. When we came back I had a job at a hair-salon.

It took some serious work to convince Nkosana to allow me to take the job. That was also when I decided I had to be tough with him otherwise he was going to control me all my life.

I enjoyed working, the people were nice, the money was little but I felt like I had a family with those women and one guy who seemed to be more female than male.

Our lifestyle improved, a little but atleast we could now afford to buy new clothes and send more money to the woman living with the younger boys.

He, without even telling me changed from doing long-distance trips to driving from town to Soweto. It meant less money but I guess stalking me was more important to him. He would stop by the salon unannounced. The ladies there were mesmerized by him but you know, taxi drivers are not exactly ideal boyfriends for many.

He was the most hard-working man I knew. He was also a father to seven boys and some of them were not exactly model citizens. He had to attend to Mqhele's one scandal after another.

I remember when one morning we had to go the hostel because there was a group of people looking for Mqhele, demanding that he pays damages for their teenage daughter whom he had allegedly kept overnight and "deflowered".

When we got there the bloody big-eyed pest was nowhere to be found. We found four men sitting on his bed and two women sitting on the floor with a girl who could have been 17-years-old. Now you have to understand that in these hostels there is no such thing as privacy. It's more like a hall with beds all over.

So they were sitting there with everybody walking past them wondering what the heck was going on, and they were adamant they were not going to leave until they got what they came for.

Nkosana finally found him hiding in another block and forced his ass to come face his sins.

He walked in and sat on the bed across, looking like he was ready to run. I caught the girl looking at him and smiling with teenage love written all over her face.

When the men started counting their demands, Mqhele just stood up and said.

“But she wasn’t a virgin. And she’s older than me,” he said, with no care in the world and that fierce look on his face.

I wanted to get up and run and I saw Nkosana shaking his head.

The attention was suddenly turned to the girl.

All I can say is, by the time they left the look of love on the girl’s face had disappeared and she was in tears.

When I asked him later what had happened to the girl, all he said was: “she dumped me”. And that time there were already two other girls fighting over him.

He was a problem, but my perception of him changed completely when the day I had been dreading finally came.

Mqhele had been sleeping on our kitchen floor that whole week after he was kicked out of the hostel, first because he had gotten into trouble again and secondly because he had been caught smoking inside the room.

The men he was living with at the hostel gathered and decided they were done with the boy, if he wasn’t sneaking girls in when they were away at work he was getting into fights with other people.

We heard what seemed like the door being kicked and voices shouting outside. I recognised one voice. By the time I put on a robe and flops Nkosana and Mqhele were already at the door trying to push it closed. They thought we were being burgled.

They were overpowered and when the door flung open, Gwaza was the first in.

“Where is she??” he shouted.

“Zandile!!!” him and other men with him shouted.

I opened the curtain separating the bedroom from the kitchen but Nkosana pushed me back to the bed.

Gwaza was trying to push his way to the bedroom but the two were not going to let him. Fists started flying, chairs and everything they could find started flying. It turned into a brawl, just the two of them against about seven grown men.

I kept trying get out of the bedroom to stop the fight but Nkosana kept pushing me behind him with his arm. I kept screaming for Gwaza to stop but he was on some serious fist fight with Nkosana. Mqhele was like a crazy man hitting everything found in front of him.

The last time Nkosana pushed me back his hand left blood on my robe. I went crazy! He was bleeding from the chest but he was still fighting. That was when I saw a knife in Gwaza’s hand and Mqhele snatching it and sticking it in his stomach. There was blood all over, and police sirens. Our landlord had called the police.

Everyone in the house was taken out in handcuffs. Nkosana and Gwaza were transported to Bara Hospital in one police van, I was with them inside it holding Nkosana and trying to stop his bleeding while Gwaza was writhing with pain next to us.

I don't know what happened to Gwaza after we got to hospital. I couldn't care less.

All I know is in the morning Nqoba and Qhawe came to hospital with Mqhele, I don't know how and when the police released him but I assumed they realised he was just a kid defending his brother and let him go.

Nkosana was in hospital for five days. I had to tell him the whole story while sitting next to the hospital bed, that I left Mbuba on Friday as my family was preparing to welcome lobola negotiators sent by the Ngqulunga family on Saturday morning.

I also had to break the news that he was about to be a father in a few months as he lay on that hospital bed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

APRIL 8, 2015 DUDUBUSANIDUBE 10 COMMENTS

I check myself on the rear-view mirror, again.

My nose is oily, I have to powder it.

"Are we ever going to get out of this car? Tonight?" he asks.

He doesn't understand. All these people are going to have something to say about me and that makes me even more nervous. What if I trip and fall or if someone asks me something and I don't know how to answer them? And how exactly am I supposed to behave around these people? I don't even understand them.

Nkosana says most of them are just greedy money-obsessed useless snobs that I shouldn't bother to try and impress, but it's people he mingles and does business with so I have to be perfect to protect his image.

"Can we go now? Is that fine with you Mam'Zulu?" he says.

He thinks this is a joke I see.

I look at my dress again. It is a long beige flowing chiffon dress, it's tight all the way to my hips and opens at the bottom. I chose it from many others at that ridiculously expensive boutique only because it was the simplest piece, and it compliments my complexion.

I thought Nkosana was going to have a problem with it because it's a boob-tube but he surprised me.

My weave, I asked them to make thick curls that go all the way down to my breasts, they bounce when move my head.

Nkosana personally bought me diamond earrings, I was impressed, I'm not into accessories, especially anything that goes around the neck but the earrings were a good idea.

"Okay, I'm ready," I say.

I'm not ready.

He opens his door and gets out, comes to my door and opens it.

I take his hand and step out, only to be blinded by a flashing light. I pull away immediately and sit back on the passenger seat.

“No, come on, it will be over in a few minutes,” he says pulling me by hand.

I do so. I have to put my clutch-bag over my face a few times when the flash gets too much but he keeps whispering that I need to relax.

We walk a few steps to get to the red carpet.

“I promise you we’ll be inside as soon as possible, don’t panic, I’ll hold your hand throughout,” he whispers.

All the cameras seem to be focusing on just us now. There are other people on this red carpet thing but they’ve also stopped to look at us. He puts his arm around my waist and I put mine around his. He has his one hand in his right pocket.

I smile and look at the cameras. One camera man seems to be focusing on photographing my left hand.

I put my head on his shoulder a few times. He smells nice, he always smells nice. I looked at him when he turned around after he finished getting dressed and I swear I felt my knees getting weak.

The man has grey hair for crying out loud, I don’t understand how he can look so good and so sexy.

“You look sexy in a suit,” I said.

He smiled and adjusted his tie.

“I’ll look good with you in my arm,” he said.

I blushed.

“Nkosana, who is the lady?” someone shouts from the media crowd.

He pulls me and we walk closer to the cameras.

“This is my wife, Zandile,” he says looking me in the eye, smiling, I smile back.

He immediately pulls me by hand all the way to the venue entrance and the flashing is gone.

“Whew!” I say as we walk further inside.

He laughs.

“You’ll get used to it,” he says.

I don’t think so.

This is a business awards ceremony, and the crowd says it all.

We are seated on a table at the front with older looking men and younger looking women next to them. It's normal, what does a man with everything need? A perfect looking woman.

They all probably have been married before but left their wives for the trophies when they started thinking they own the world. Wait until they lose everything, they will be on their knees licking that ex-wife's feet.

I exchange a few smiles with some of the ladies, I get about two fake smiles in return, the others are looking at me with disapproving faces.

When Nkosana is done exchanging laughs and handshakes, he settles next to me.

"Are you okay? Do you need something to drink?" he asks.

"Water," I whisper to him. He signals a waiter passing by.

Obviously this thing is not about to start because people are still walking around laughing and talking loud.

I feel so out-of-place. I don't get why we are the only ones that had to come here, isn't ours a family business? Don't they all get invited to these things?

My water arrives, it has a slice of lemon in it. I see.

A loud voice comes from the stage and the room goes quiet. We must be starting now. He holds my hand under the table, he must be sensing that I'm still nervous.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen....." that's all I hear, after that the MC just rambles non-stop in return for random clapping and random laughs.

"Do you want more water?" Nkosana.

I shake my head.

I've been catching some of these people on this table, especially men staring at me. The ladies don't seem impressed by their roving eyes.

Three people have gone up to the stage to collect awards but I didn't even get what they were for except for one woman whose business has something to do with innovation. I'm so lost it's not even funny, but I have to start focusing and getting used to these things.

I need to start doing something with my life too, maybe start a.....

Nkosana stands up.

"I'll be back," he says kissing me on the lips before fastening the two buttons of his blazer.

I watch him walk away and disappearing to the back. I didn't even ask where he was going.

"That's a nice ring," the lady sitting next to me says touching my hand.

I smile.

“When did you get married? I didn’t hear anything about a wedding,” she says.

I can tell just by the look on her face that everything she’s saying does not come from a good place.

“I prefer keeping my personal life private,” I say.

She looks shocked.

The clapping starts again.

There is Nkosana there walking on stage.

Huh?

He stands with his lips in-front of the microphone and his hands behind his back. But first he had to adjust the microphone and pull it up because he’s too tall.

The whole room becomes quiet. I feel tension all over here. How does Nkosana do that? Walk in a room and completely change the atmosphere.

He greets, says he is here to announce the winner of Young Entrepreneur of The Year Award and slowly opens the envelope in his hand.

He stops just as he is about to pull out the paper inside it.

“By the way ladies and gentlemen, tonight, I’m accompanied by my wife, Mrs Zandile Zulu,” he says.

There’s suddenly light shining on my face and everybody looking at me and clapping, some looking rather shocked. I smile, that’s all I can do.

“I just thought I’d let you know.....” he says with a slight smile. They clap more.

“That I’ve given up bachelorhood....” he says. There’s loud laughter.

In a split second he’s back to his serious face and is calling the name of a young woman who runs to the stage, shakes his hand and cries while thanking a string of people.

He walks off the stage. I’m still embarrassed by that stint of his of putting me on the spot.

He kisses me on the cheek when he sits down.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

I want to call him to order for what he just did but my heart betrays me, I smile and hold his hand under the table. He smiles back and squeezes my hand tighter.

“This is the last one, are you still fine staying,” he says after a long night of people going to and from the stage.

I want to say let’s go home but I think he still wants to be here.

We had a starter earlier, it was a weird little piece of cheese and olives, I ate just the cheese.

The main course arrives, it looks like something I’ve never seen before but there’s meat in it.

Everybody gets to it. I don’t know where to start. There are three forks here, I don’t know which one to use, I’m scared I might pick up the wrong one and embarrass myself. I sit staring at the food while everybody digs in. Nkosana hasn’t noticed that I have a dilemma here.

“Aren’t you eating?” this nosy lady next to me asks.

I have to come up with a quick answer.

“No, actually I’m off red meat for a few days,” I say.

She raises her eyebrows.

“It’s salmon....fish?” she says looking at me like I’m being weird.

I lean over to Nkosana.

"I'm ready to go home," I say.

He looks confused but puts his fork down and stands up. I take his hand and walk behind him as we make our way to the exit. I'm so embarrassed I want to get out of this place as soon as I can.

He waves at a few people as we walk past tables.

The media is still around and I brave a few flashes as we walk to the car.

"Are you okay? What happened?" he asks.

I want to lie but no.....

"I thought that was red meat. That girl who was sitting next to me asked why I wasn't eating and I said I was off red meat, and then she told me it was fish," I say.

He can see the shame on my face. He opens the car door for me.

"Don't worry about those people. Those girls, the one sitting next to you is from KwaNongoma, she was a stripper at some down-town Joburg bar before she met that old white man and married him," he says.

LOL, that's unexpected.

I shake my head and lay back on the chair. Does this mean I'm going to be a celebrity now?

“Nkosana, it’s going to come out isn’t it?”

He looks concerned and serious all of a sudden.

“I’m not going to hide you Zandile. If it comes out, it’s fine, we are going to have to deal with it, but it won’t take anything away from us trust me. You’re my wife and I’m not going to hide you. I’d rather have you than all the fame and fortune,” he says.

I’m worried about the kids and what their friends will say.

By the time the sun came up I was already in the lounge watching TV. I left him still fast asleep, I didn’t want to disturb him after the night of passion we had.

I won’t bother making him breakfast, well, I’m lazy and he knows it but I know he’s going to have it waiting for him when we get to Xolie’s house anyway.

We dropped Mvelo off there before we left last night but I can’t wait to go get him. This house is too quiet without him. I miss running after him and always shouting for him to stay away from the stairs.

This house is not safe for a toddler, not with these stairs.

“Oh, you’re alive,” I say when he walks past me to the kitchen.

He doesn't greet or respond or find me funny.

What is wrong with him now?

He opens the fridge, pulls out the water bottle and drinks from it. He never does that, he always uses a glass.

He puts it back and bangs the fridge door when he's done.

What's the matter now?

I stand up and walk to him.

He's not paying any attention to me, he's just walking up and down the kitchen in just his pyjama pants.

"Nkosana, what's going on?"

He doesn't respond. Instead he walks to the dining-room and switches on the laptop he left on the table yesterday.

He turns the screen to me when he seems to have found what he was looking for.

Oh God! Lwandle?

“I’m driving to Durban, now! These boys are going to know me today,” he says, he’s angry.

What the heck is wrong with Lwandle?

His pictures are splashed on the front page of a newspaper. There’s one of him and two girls on each arm. He has a glass with ice and what I’m sure is alcohol in his hand.

There’s another one of him and another boy who looks his age, both smoking cigars and drinking. Another one shows him standing over a long table full of alcohol and ice buckets. There are other kids his age, mostly girls in skimpy clothes looking like they are cheering him.

On top is the headline.

LWANDLE “RITCHIE RICH” ZULU TURNS THE PARTY UP.

It says here that he spent R18 000 at a club buying alcohol for his friends and partying the night away. It says him and his “cousin” are the most popular boys on campus and that no party starts before they arrive.

Lwandle remained unnoticed for the first semester. Although everybody knew he was a student at the varsity, he rarely came out or mingled with his fellow students. But now, he seems to have come out of the shell.....

The article reads.

I’m going through it with my hand over my mouth. I can’t believe Lwandle could do this. He was raised better than this.

It says here that all this happened on Thursday night, today is Saturday, so Lwandle was drinking the whole night when he was supposed to wake up and go to class the next day?

“Nkosana who is this cousin they are talking about?” I ask.

They don’t have cousins.

“That’s Mbulelo, Xolie’s youngest brother, he also goes to UKZN,” he says.

This is bad. Nkosana is very angry.

“I’m sure he has an explanation.....”

“What explanation Zah? This boy thinks he can do as he pleases now? He thinks he can drink up our money in clubs with girls? Is that what we sent him to school for?” he says.

Okay, this is my cue to shut up!

But the going to Durban thing is not going to happen, not today. If he sees them like this he’s going to beat the crap out of them.

“How did you.....?”

“I got an SMS from Sambulo, this shit is all over the place,” he says.

Okay, Nkosana doesn't swear, when he swears it means he's really angry. It's going to be a loooong day.

"Book me a flight to Durban, for two...."

"The first one you can get I don't care what class..."

"And a car....." he says and hangs up.

I'm sitting here looking at him like..... seriously Nkosana?

He doesn't care about my drama.

"Let's go get ready, we're going to Durban," he says.

I sit still and shake my head. I'm not going to behave like a psycho parent. The kid is 19-years-old, of-course he's stupid.

"Zah, you said you wanted to try right? You want to take over? Let's go then," he says.

I hesitate but realise that he has a point. What bothers me though is what it is exactly that we are going to do when we get there. It's only 7am and already there is so much drama in this life.

He rushes me even more when the call comes in to say we must be at the airport in an hour.

I'm not comfortable with this journey but I can't stay behind either, someone has to keep an eye on him.

I've been on a flight only once in my life and it was three months ago when he had to work out of town and didn't want to leave me alone in the house.

I thought he'd have softened by the time we land but he's still as angry as he was when he slammed that fridge door this morning.

There's a car, one of those sports cars that he likes very much waiting for us just as we exit the airport. A man rushes to meet us but stops when he sees the only luggage we have is my handbag.

I don't know where the man disappears to but I have to open my own door, no, things are really hectic today.

I know Lwandle lives in one of the properties owned by the family in La Lucia. I asked why he doesn't stay at Res because he is too young to live alone and Nkosana explained that sharing a Res was out of question, especially if you are a young boy from a controversial family.

I accepted that.

I haven't even called Xolie to check on my baby, but I know that by now she knows that we are not even in the same province, there is no such thing as privacy in this family.

He drives into a complex, for a moment there I thought it was hotel or something. It almost looks like those country estates Mqoqi and Mpande live in.

The security guard opens the gate without asking questions when he sees him. It's not a big complex judging by how quickly we reach the end street and park on the driveway.

He gets out of the car without saying a word. No opening my door today? Okay.

I follow him.

He knocks until he starts to get really irritated before the door opens and a boy with dreadlocks and only his pants on opens the door, stretching and yawning. It's almost 11am.

We stand at the door and look at him. He looks at us too, and suddenly comes to his senses.

"Oh crap!" he says and tries to push the door shut.

He lands on the floor. That slap was so quick I couldn't have stopped it if I tried.

I'm gob-smacked! He's beating up people's children now?

There are bodies all over, from the floor to couches to the dining room table. He is kicking anything blocking his way as we make our way to the stairs. There's suddenly movement, some of them are being woken by kicks while others wake up before he reaches them and run for cover.

I'm just here following him and allowing all this child abuse that could land us in jail to continue.

There's a girl sleeping at the bottom of the stairs, I don't know if that's a dress or a top she's wearing.

He doesn't kick her but uses his foot to move her out of the way. She doesn't even wake up.

We find a couple more, empty beer bottles and paper plates as we climb up the stairs until we enter the first bedroom. There must be about 20 people sleeping in this room. He looks around briefly and walks on to the next one.

He enters and goes straight to the bed, opens the duvet and slaps the poor boy just as he opens his eyes. I recognise him.

The boy tries to cover his head but the slaps just keep coming.

He leaves him when his face is red enough and we move on to the next bedroom. It's chaos now. There's a group coming out of the other bedroom just as we come out and they all immediately go back inside when they see us on the passage. I think I heard the door lock.

This must be the main bedroom. He goes straight to the bed again.

The duvet swings open, I see the big eyes first and then total mayhem. A girl in a t-shirt runs out screaming past me and joins the other group trying to escape.

Lwandle is screaming and covering his face with his arms. He keeps trying to jump off the bed but his father keeps pushing him back and beating him even more. I'm shouting for him to stop but it's pointless with all this noise. When I can't take it anymore I get move and grab him from behind. He tries to push me off but I hold him tighter until Lwandle manages to escape.

The driveway is full of people, some getting in cars and others running out of the gate half naked.

“Be out of my house in five minutes or I’ll fucking kill you all,” Nkosana shouts to the few that are still inside trying to locate either their cellphones or clothes.

The house is empty in five minutes. I don’t see Lwandle and Mbulelo.

We hear a car starting in the garage. He rushes there.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he shouts.

There’s three of them in Lwandle’s Polo. I don’t know who the other boy is.

They realise when they open the garage that he has parked them in , there is no way for them to drive out.

I heard he wanted a Jeep but Hlomu put her foot down, so he got a Polo.

They look terrified, bruised and terrified and they won’t get out of that car until they’re sure they’ll be safe.

The problem is I can’t promise them anything.

“Nkosana, there will be no more beatings,”I say.

He looks at me like I'm crazy.

But I'm not joking.

"No, stop it, you're not touching these kids again," I say and walk to their car.

I knock on the window and Lwandle's eyes pop out first. He looks traumatized I don't know if it's the hangover and shock combined.

They don't open the doors or windows.

I knock again and Mbulelo rolls the window down reluctantly.

"Come, he won't do anything to you, he's calmed down," I say.

They don't believe me.

"I won't let him beat you, now come on before you make him more angry," I say hushing them.

They open the doors, reluctantly so and follow me inside the house.

They stop and almost run back when we find Nkosana standing in the kitchen with his hands in his pockets.

He walks to sit on one of the couches. I direct them to go there too. I walk to sit next to him.

Just as they are about to sit.....

“Who said you could sit? Whose couches are these?” he shouts.

They stand still.

“I hear you’ve been drinking my money with girls, you’re throwing parties in my house too?” he shouts.

They keep quiet.

“I gave you boys that credit card for emergencies, school related emergencies, but you decided to be stupid instead. How long has this been going on? You are Durban celebrities now? parties don’t start without you?”

They look at him like they don’t know what he’s talking about. Oh I see, they just woke up now, they haven’t seen the newspapers.

No answer.

“Mbulelo!!!”

“We’re sorry baba,” he says looking down at his feet.

I know an apology won’t change anything.

“And you? Aren’t you supposed to be at UCT ?” he asks looking at the third boy.

The poor thing looks so scared he can’t even utter a word.

“Pack your things,” he says.

They both raise their eyes.

“I said pack your things and get out of my house, now!!” he shouts.

Nkosana!

“Don’t Zandile! Don’t! These boys think they’re men now. I found them in bed with girls, there’s alcohol all over my house. I pay for them to study but they think this is better. If they want to be men they can go be men somewhere else,”he says.

“You have 20 minutes. If you’re not out of here in 20 minutes you will count your teeth on the floor,”he shouts.

He means this. They know it.

They follow each other upstairs.

I know that this is when I should keep my distance.

I start cleaning up the kitchen.

“Don’t do that Zah,” he says. I don’t know why he doesn’t want me to. He keeps looking at his watch.

My phone beeps.

Lwandle just called me crying, he says Nkosana beat him, what’s going on? Is he back home?

An SMS from Hlomu.

Where do I start explaining?

“We’re in Durban, long story, I’ll explain when we get back but they are in deep trouble”

I don’t know how they’re going to get out of this one.

Oh no, please control him

I’m sure she’s about to throw a tantrum, and I’m sure Lwandle didn’t tell her what he did, he only called her because he knows she can’t stand anyone beating him up, even if it’s his own father.

They come down the stairs walking slowly. I think they are hoping Nkosana will say he was joking.

He stands up and asks them for the house keys.

“And the car keys too,”he says.

They look shocked.

“It’s my car. Do you have a car? Do you know how much a car is?” he says looking at both of them.

They hand him the car keys.

This is rather harsh.

“Thank you. Now get out of my house. You are grown men now go find jobs and build your own houses, And you owe me R18 000, when schools close you’re all coming to Joburg, you’re going to be on taxi-rank duty until you pay me all that money back,” he says sitting back on the couch.

I heard he made Sbani work at the rank for months until he raised enough money to go and pay damages to Mvelo’s mother’s family.

They walk out with bags and backpacks.

“I’ll get a cleaning service to tidy this place up. And an agent to look for a tenant,”he says.

What the heck? He’s seriously kicking the kids out!

“We’re on TV,” I say when I catch a glimpse of us on TV.

It’s at that function from last night. I’m being called “a mystery wife”. Really?

He looks at the screen once and seems to not be interested at all.

But it’s my first time on TV and I’m excited.

“You’ll get used to these things Zah I’m sure we’re all over newspapers too, and social networks,” he says.

He’s not on any social networks. I’ve been thinking about joining Facebook too and that Twitter thing but I think I’m a tad too old for that stuff.

“Nkosana, who’s the other boy?”

He shakes his head.

“Lwandle’s best friend, they’ve been friends since primary school. He’s supposed to be at the University of Cape Town, I don’t know how and when he got here,” he says still shaking his head.

“Come, let’s go home. I’ll have this house sorted, we never had problems when Lethu was living here,” he says picking up his phone from the coffee-table.

Lethu I understand is Hlomu's younger sister, I've never met her but I hear she is a lawyer. Xolie advised me to speak to her about pursuing my degree but I've decided I'll start focusing on that next year.

We see them sitting on the pavement across the gate as we approach. The security guard immediately opens the gate but Nkosana stops and rolls down the window.

"They don't live here anymore, don't open the gate for them," he says.

The security guard looks confused but nods and waves when we drive out.

My poor kid. I can't believe I'm leaving him stranded on the pavement. He's probably going to hate me more for not standing up for him. But if I do he'll never learn to be responsible. However, that doesn't stop me from feeling guilty and thinking that maybe I should have done something to help them.

Our flight back is in the afternoon so with the four hours we have to spare, I suggested we do lunch at uMhlanga, it's towards the airport anyway.

I've been thinking that I need to start taking control of my household, including doing shopping for him and firing that personal shopper who is overpaid.

I don't understand this, how did Nkosana even get to "personal shopper" status? The guy was living at a hostel and wearing Orlando Pirates jerseys just years ago, how did life change so much? Is it money? Does it have that much power to change a person?

It's Olive & Oil, I've never heard of it but it's nice. I can see the sea from here.

I want proper food, I didn't even have breakfast except for that dry food we had on the plane.

Nkosana is a bit distracted but he's less angry now, good for me because I also struggle with the grumpy him sometimes.

"Have you decided what you want to eat," he says noticing I've been staring at the menu for a while.

"Yeah, I'll have hake and salad,"

He orders a beer, at least something about him hasn't changed.

I'll have my food with a glass of water.

"Hlomu says Lwandle called her crying. I feel really bad Nkosana, where are they going to sleep I'm sure they don't even have money....."

He raises his hand to stop me.

"They'll never learn if I'm not tough on them Zandile. They must know that nothing is for free, you have to work and earn things," he says.

He has a point, but he must understand that these kids did not have the same childhood as his, they've never had to work for anything in their lives.

Plus, I don't understand why he is so pissed, Lwandle is behaving exactly like he did when he was young, running after girls and sneaking them into the house, that's what he did with me.

I hear a laugh and voice speaking behind me, it sounds very familiar.

I turn around.

OMG!

"Buhle?"

She raises her eyes, and frowns.

"Oh my God!" she says putting her hand over her mouth.

I stand up, she stands up too.

I walk to her table but we meet halfway, she was walking to mine too. We hug and scream. Oh crap! The whole restaurant is looking at us now.

"How have you been? You haven't changed at all! When did you come out of....." she stops and seems to have just remembered something.

The joy on her face fades quickly.

It's understandable. She was there when I was arrested on my wedding day.

"About six months ago. I would have contacted you but I didn't know how, I was sure you'd left Yeoville a long time ago," I say.

She nods. I'm still excited but she seems not too happy to see me all of a sudden.

"You must give me your numbers," she says leaving me standing there and rushing back to her table to take her phone.

"You're married now?" she says inspecting the ring on my finger.

"Yes, he waited," I say with a smile.

She's not smiling.

"I'll call you so we can catch up," she says, gives me a light hug, glances at Nkosana and walks away.

That was weird. We used to be best friends, but I guess time changes people. She didn't even walk over to greet Nkosana.

"She is the last person I expected to bump into today," I say sitting down.

He doesn't respond or seem happy about this little reunion. Infact he has changed to the hostile him.

Our food arrives and he starts eating immediately. He's suddenly serious and looks like he's rushing to get out of here.

Buhle visited me only once in prison, and it was to tell me that she was moving back to Durban and will probably never see me again. She was my bridesmaid and had been acting a bit funny because I made Mandisa my maid of honor and not her.

She used to also be critical of my relationship with Nkosana. She never had anything nice to say about him. Mandisa used to say it was just her being jealous and wanting what I had. I never believed that, Buhle always had my back.

"Are you enjoying that?" he asks as I dig in.

"Yes, atleast it looks like fish, not red meat," I say laughing.

I expect him to get the joke but he doesn't laugh. He finished eating a long time ago and he keeps looking at the watch and drinking his beer.

I've also noticed people looking at us here, some clearly talking about us.

"They saw you on TV and newspapers,"he says before I can start complaining about all the attention.

Oh by the way, I'm now the famous "mystery wife".

“Did you ever see her?” I ask.

The look on his face says ‘who’?

“Buhle, did you ever see her when I was away?”

He clears his throat.

“No Zandile, after you left I focused on getting you back,” he says.

He obviously doesn’t want to talk about this subject.

“I’m not talking to him, I’m not answering his calls and I don’t care if he sleeps under the bridge for the rest of his life,” Xolie says.

She is really angry with her brother, so is her mother and Sambulo.

“They are teenagers experiencing freedom for the first time Xolie, you must also consider that. Yes they were wrong but at some point they’re going to have to be forgiven and given another chance,” I tell her.

She’ll hear none of it.

Am I the only person in this family who believes in second chances?

“Nkosana already beat the crap out of them,” I say zipping Mvelo’s baby-bag and putting it over my shoulder.

It’s way past his bedtime, I’m surprised he’s still awake and running around the passage with the rest of the brood.

The twins are here too, and Niya, which explains why Nkosana is not pestering me to make it fast.

“Are you babysitting this weekend?” I ask.

She laughs.

“It’s not exactly babysitting. Sambulo woke up this morning and went around collecting all the rascals, brought them here, left and came back with a jumping castle, put it up and sat there on the porch watching them play and fight all day. It happens all the time, nobody asks you for your child in this family. The kids also understand that they have seven homes and they live in all of them. Don’t be surprised when one day soon they all show up at your house unannounced,” she says.

I’ve heard about that, they even have a bedroom in my house. Nkosana said we must decorate the other bedroom in pink because it’s going to be Niya’s. I think once she starts talking and playing with them, she’s going to have a tough time being the only girl. And by the look of things, she’s going to be really spoiled.

I see a different side of Nkosana every time Niya is around, she turns him into a soft bear.

“We should start planning for Gugu’s baby shower, she’s a few weeks away from giving birth, three weeks I think” she says.

I had not thought about that. I don’t even know what baby she’s having but, obviously, it’s another big-eyed boy.

If Niya didn’t look so much like Mqhele and all of them I’d have doubts about her paternity. But I guess there’s a first time for everything, a first daughter for the Zulus too.

We agree on a date a week before her estimated date. I wonder if she even wants a baby-shower, she’s been so distant lately and keeps herself couped in the house.

She told me the last time I called her that she doesn’t think Nqoba will be around when she goes into labor, she might have to drive herself to hospital. But then that she doesn’t want to go give birth back at home because she doesn’t want her family knowing that her marriage is troubled.

I told her she could call me anytime.

“What’s your name?” a voice says.

Oh, it’s the blabbermouth toothless rascal.

“What’s my name? What are you going to do with my name?”

He widens his eyes.

“I want to call you by your name,” he says.

What? This kid.

“Why would you want to call me by my name? That’s disrespectful,” I say.

He drops his eyes.

“I know, but Mkhulu gets mad when I call you ‘mama,” he says before another little midget comes whoozing and almost pushes him to the floor.

“Msebe!!!” he shouts and chases him down the passage.

I’ve just had another Sisekelo moment. I can’t wait until he’s grown up and starts having a normal brain.

We leave after Nkosana cleans out a plate of cooked food. Maybe it’s not cooked food that he doesn’t like, it’s my food. But why?

Maybe I should sneak money into Mvelo’s bank account, just so they can survive until he returns to his senses.

That bloody phone thing again!

It gets me every time! I don't know why they like speaker phone so much.

"Bafo!" he says.

"Bafo," - it's Mqhele. It sounds rowdy where he is.

"Are you back?" Mqoqi.

They must all be together somewhere.

"Yes, I'm driving home, did you get it?" Nkosana asks.

I hear many yes'es at once.

It sounds like they're all in one car, and judging by the way I can hear all of them at once, they are on speaker phone too.

"Bafo, I can't do the warehouse tomorrow, I have to fetch the kids from school, Hlomu has to go pick Lethu up from the airport,"-Mqhele.

"Lethu is coming?"-Mpande.

"Yes, Lethu is coming and you are going to Stanger for the Taxi Association Meeting, tomorrow,"-Nkosana.

I hear laughs.

“No but it’s Qhawe’s turn, he’s on rank duty this month,”-Mpande

“No, we’ve decided it’s your turn,”-Nqoba.

“Okay, I’ll leave in the morning and drive back late in the day,”-Mpande.

“It’s a three-day meeting,”-Nkosana.

They all laugh out loud. This is unfair.

“No but, when were you going to tell me this?”-Mpande.

“We’re telling you now,”- two of them say at the same time.

Shame poor thing, it must be tough being younger.

“Whose idea was this? I suspect you two morons,”-Mpande. I’m not sure who the morons are.

“Mine, because I don’t want you anywhere near my house, or Lethu. She’ll be gone by the time you come back from Stanger,”-Mqhele.

They all laugh. Nkosana says goodbye and hangs up.

So this is about.....?

“Nkosana, is Mpande trying to.....you know, does he have a crush on Hlomu’s sister?”- I ask.

I never got that vibe.

He starts laughing again.

“For years. She’s the one girl he wants but can never have. And besides, we will never allow it to happen, but it’s funny to watch,” he says, still laughing, he’s so mean.

“The last he tried to hit on her she asked him if he had matric, atleast.....” he says, still laughing.

I did say that girl is a snob.

Mvelo is fast asleep by the time we get home and all I want is to throw myself on the bed.

But I’m worried, really worried.

“Don’t worry, they’re big boys, the friends they were drinking my money with, they must help them with a place to sleep. This experience might just help them realise who their real friends are,” he says and switches off the bedroom lights.

Nkosana though! I don’t know if this is being strict or down right evil.

—

We sleep with the door open, all the time.

I can't stand waking up and looking around and seeing no way out. It haunts me, it reminds me of prison.

He's not here, but I can hear voices coming from downstairs.

What is going on?

He must be on the phone, but no, there's another voice. It sounds like one of his brothers but I'm not sure which one.

I try going back to sleep but it's not happening.

I might as well go downstairs to get some water and greet whoever it is that is in my house at 3am.

I recognise the voice as it becomes clearer and clearer, it's Nqoba. He must have wanted to get away from Gugu for another selfish reason, that's why he's here at this time.

"I can't bafo, I can't go to jail for this....." he says.

I stop walking. They haven't heard me coming otherwise Nkosana would have already jumped to ask if I'm okay and why I'm not in bed.

"What exactly did they find?"-Nkosana.

Nqoba: "The club was closed down months after that incident. It was left empty but the owner left some of his things there, including the tapes from CCTV cameras in boxes. So that fool who has bought the place now opened the boxes and decided to amuse himself by watching those tapes. One of them shows me walking out of the club with the girl, but it doesn't show us getting in the car because I was parked very far. He went to the police after he recognised the girl from her picture that circulated on email and social networks after she disappeared, apparently her friends went on this campaign of trying to find her..... I didn't even know she was ever reported missing,"

All Nkosana says is "mmmmmm".

"So basically, their case is that I was the last one to see her, that's why all this shit is coming back to haunt me,"he says.

I'm trying to put pieces together but I'm totally lost here, what are they talking about and who is that girl they're referring to?

"Zandile!!!"

CHAPTER NINE

APRIL 8, 2015 DUDUBUSANIDUBE 34 COMMENTS

"Everything ready? We're leaving the restaurant now"

We're running late like I expected. I knew I couldn't trust them to get everything in order on time.

And guess who suffers? Me. I've had to endure Gugu's grumpiness and hormones all day while they're busy doing whatever they're doing in slow motion.

I mean, how difficult can it be to set up for a baby shower?

"Yes, the cake just arrived, come," - she SMSs.

Finally!

It takes her forever to stand up, pick up her handbag and drag herself all the way out the door.

I've been pregnant two times, it was a long time ago, but I don't remember it being as hard as she makes it look.

We managed to track down a few of Gugu's friends and invited them to the baby-shower. Most of them were surprised by the call, it seems she has shut everybody out completely.

It's a surprise, hence I had to force her to go to brunch with me just to get her away so they could put up the marquee and set up at her house while we are away.

We had to invite Hlomu's friends too otherwise there would have been less than ten people there.

She instructs the driver to switch on the air-con the moment we sit on the back seat. It's cold for crying out loud! The poor old man has no choice but to oblige, and so he and I will freeze just so the madam can be comfortable.

Gugu gets driven wherever she goes since she got pregnant, Nqoba insists on it.

When I suggested to her that we do brunch today her response was: "Speak to Nqoba first, he doesn't like his trailer going out incase it trips and falls and injures his cargo,"

She's become such a sad person. I don't get why his brothers don't talk to him about treating his wife this bad, we are all supposed to have each others back, that's what I know this family to be about.

Good, they managed to hide the cars and the marquee is on the backyard.

"We're here" .-I SMS Xolie before we get out of the car.

She wants to go to the loo first, I wait for her on the passage.

"You're just going to stand on the passage now?" she says when she comes out to find me still standing outside the bathroom door.

"No, let's go outside, there's something I need to show you," I say.

I expect her to be difficult but no, she follows me.

“Surpriseeeeeee!”

They all shout just as we come out.

She stands still.

We all stand and look at her. We don't know if she's happy about this or not. She looks at all of us.

“No! no! No!,” one of her friends, Rato I think, rushes to her and hugs her.

She's crying, she's so hysterical that we are all standing here not knowing if it's because she hates what we did or if she's happy about it.

We all stand and wait for her to finish.

“You bitches!” she says and walks on to sit on her chair.

We all laugh. That was one weird reaction.

Her nursery was done and ready by the time she was six months pregnant. She's having a boy. Nobody really knew what to buy her so the gifts are not as important as this excuse for us to party.

Hlomu's friend, Thobi, the one who looks like a model has been talking non-stop like she knows us all. Her gift to Gugu is a waist-belt, those ones that are supposed to make your stomach flat in a few days.

"Where do you get these things? She bought me the same thing when I gave birth,"-Hlomu.

"She gave me one too,"-Xolie.

We all laugh. They must make her a brand ambassador.

I never had to wear a waist belt, my stomach was flat within two weeks after each pregnancy.

There's another one, apparently she's getting married soon, her name is Nana I hear. She seems nice but she doesn't talk much and seems like the serious type.

And then there is Amanda, she's been sitting there quietly laughing at all the madness but not saying anything at all. Hlomu is trying to get her drunk.

"Hi," a voice says.

I turn around to see Mqhele. Everybody goes quiet. These girls, Gugu's friends, are looking at him like he's a bowl of dessert. I've never understood this effect he has on women.

She's looks at Hlomu, me and Xolie and indicates that he wants us to come to him.

We stand up and follow each other inside the house.

Most of them are here and they look anxious.

I go straight to Nkosana. He puts an arm around my shoulders.

I don't see Nqoba or Mpande anywhere.

"We have to go somewhere,"-Nkosana.

Huh?

"Hopefully we'll be back by tomorrow night, if not, it will be on Monday morning," he says.

We are confused by this.

The door opens and the brood comes running in followed by Mpande.

What is going on?

"Here, if there's an emergency call us on this number, use this phone," Qhawe says handing Hlomu a small cellphone, it's one of those cheap ones.

What the heck is going on here?

“Nkosana where are..?”

He twists my head and kisses me before I can finish speaking.

“Nobody leaves this house, not until we come back, this thing must finish early and your friends must leave when you’re done,” he says and picks up his car keys.

Mqoqi disappears to somewhere.

Nqoba appears with a bag, he must have been packing.

Mqoqi comes back with Amanda, he kisses her and walks out the door leaving us standing there.

Sambulo is the last to walk out the door and just like that, they’re gone.

We all look at Hlomu, that’s what all the women of this family do when they’re in the dark.

She shrugs.

“I have no idea this time,” she says.

We stand there for minutes before it becomes really awkward and we all follow each other back outside.

Gugu has no idea what just happened. I'll tell her later.

Just as we are trying to pretend like nothing is wrong and get back to the party mood, Amanda stands up and starts taking her clothes off.

What the fuck? We all stare.

She's left in panties and a bra.

"You ladies don't know how to party?" she says before throwing her dress on a chair and running off to jump in the pool.

Wasn't she shy and shivering in a corner just now?

"Hlomu!!" Gugu says laughing.

"I knew there was a real human being somewhere in there. Thanks to alcohol she's coming out," she says and we all laugh.

I can't believe she got the poor girl drunk.

"Get her out of there before she drowns," -Xolie says before walking off to check on the kids.

"You're so pretty," one of the girls says to me, randomly.

I smile,I don't know what else to say.

"But, when did you meet Nkosana? he was single one day and the next thing we all see him on TV with a 'wife'," she says, emphasizing the word 'wife'.

This is rather uncomfortable.

Now they all look interested, like they've all been meaning to ask.

Where is Hlomu when I need her? Oh, she's getting the drunken hoe out of the water.

She comes back pulling her by hand. She's laughing and singing and her braids are dripping wet.

"Sit here, we can't have you drowning on us, how are we going to explain all that to Mqoqi,"- Hlomu.

"Urgh, don't worry he'll forgive you, he loves you, he's alwaaaaays talking about you," she says rolling her eyes.

She's really sloshed.

"And by the way, when is he coming to pay lobola for me, I also want to go to that rural place you always go to in KZN, I hear the access card is marriage," -Amanda.

Hlomu frowns. This girl is starting to shock us now.

I've even forgotten that these girls here were interrogating me.

"So Zah, where are you from and where have you been hiding?" -Rato.

"Yes Zah, where were you exactly?" -Amanda.

She calls me Zah, her man calls me Sis'Zah, she has no respect, I don't care that she's drunk.

"She was out of the country," Hlomu says and changes the subject immediately.

Xolie comes back just as I try to understand how these girls, who met me for the first time about four hours ago, think they can ask me personal questions.

I'm still wondering how the story hasn't come out yet. I mean, I'm famous now, but nobody has written about where I was all these years.

I asked Nkosana the other day but he said it was never going to come out, he'd made sure of that. I didn't ask more questions.

Nana is the first to stand up and say she's leaving. It's getting late and Miss Party already looks tired. She complained about her load being heavy earlier.

"Phakeme says MaMnguni was dropped off at the airport," Xolie says to me, she looks worried about this.

I think they just didn't want her asking questions about where they are.

Amanda, whom we were not told to keep in the house is the last to leave. We had to make sure that she's sobered up before getting in that very fast car.

Mqoqi seems to be committed to her. He's been taking her along to all the parties, for over a year, trust me that's like a decade. They seem to be two very different people though, but they say opposites attract.

I heard she's from somewhere in the Free State, that Mqoqi met her there during one business trip and they just hit it off. Strange though, she speaks fluent Zulu.

The kids are fed left-overs from earlier. We haven't talked at all about where these men could be, but we all know they're not out planting trees somewhere.

Nqoba didn't even tell Gugu he was leaving, and this girl is a few days away from giving birth.

Mvelo is clinging on to Hlomu tonight, I understand, he still thinks she's his mother. She has Niya on her chest and Mvelo leaning on her shoulder. We're all in the lounge being forced to watch some kiddies movie by the offspring.

We were laughing just now talking about Amanda and how she's going to wake up tomorrow regretting today.

There's a knock on the door and Phakeme jumps up and runs to the kitchen.

Xolie shouts after him but he's long gone. He's eight-years-old, he's fast.

He comes back walking slowly with his eyes all out. He keeps looking behind him as he approaches.

It's two men we've never seen before. They are cops.

Just as we wonder, a group of other cops in uniform appear behind them, and others and others until they are all over the house. There must be about 20 of them.

"Can we help you?" Gugu.

"Where are they?" one says.

Where is who?

"Mrs Zulu, where is your husband?" the cop says looking at Gugu.

She frowns and looks at all of us.

I also don't know what's going on here.

He throws a piece of paper at her and says: "Search warrant, you can stay here and watch or you can go outside, your choice".

He immediately looks at all the cops behind him and shouts: "Begin werk nou! (start working now)!!!"

It starts going crazy, they are going through everything in this house even jumping over our children on the floor and opening the TV stands and turning couches over. We hear cupboards in the kitchen opening and closing and people walking up the stairs.

We haven't moved at all.

"Mami," Phakeme says first. He looks terrified.

"Come," Hlomu says hushing them all and standing up.

I help Gugu to stand and pick Mvelo up. We're not sure where to go.

"I asked you where they are, you still don't want to talk?" the same cop. He is tall and very... Afrikaner. He's starting to get aggressive.

We don't know where they are and why he's looking for them.

Xolie walks out the sliding door and we all follow her.

We are all terrified and have no idea what to do next.

The kids, they're crying now.

The same cop comes back and demands all our cellphones. When we resist three others appear and we realise we are about to be manhandled. We can't let our children see that.

“You still don’t want to talk?” he shouts.

We keep quiet.

“Take them in,” he says to the other cops.

We are pushed back inside the house and ordered to sit on the couches. We are all squashed on one four-seater couch with all the children.

He sits on the coffee table and faces us all.

He indicates with his hand that the other cops must leave. They all disappear somewhere in the house and we are left alone with him.

His eyes go through all four of us.

“Rich black bitches aren’t you? You think you’re untouchable? Where are those shit-head husbands of yours? I knew I’d get them in the end, it may have taken me years but I’ve got them, this is the end.....” he says.

I hear Hlomu breathing fast next to me.

“That’s the problem with you people, money goes to your heads. Who told you could be rich? You are supposed to be maids and garden boys, I’ll put you all back in your place.....”

“There’s no need for that....” -Hlomu.

He slaps her before she finishes talking.

Phakeme is the first to jump up followed by Sisekelo and Msebe, he pushes them back all at once.

He pushes me too when I try to stand up and defend them.

“You’ll grow up to be low-life criminals like your fathers,” he says looking at the boys.

“Here, call them,” he says handing me one of our phones. It’s not even mine it’s Hlomu’s.

I dial each and every one of their numbers but they’re all off. They’re not even on voice-mail, they say the numbers don’t exist.

One cop, a bit older comes and stands at the lounge entrance.

“I was just asking them some questions,” this bloody racist says and stands up.

There’s still movement all over.

Hlomu is not even crying she’s sitting with Niya pressed to her chest.

“We didn’t find anything,” one cop says.

It's quiet.

"We're taking them," this cop says.

Taking who?

There's silence.

"They knew we were coming. Trust me, I've been following them since they were young boys, they're too smart. Load the women in the van, they'll come running," he says and walks out.

They can't be serious!

"The...?" one cop asks.

"All of them!" he screams and walks on.

We look at each other! This can't be happening.

We pull the kids close to us but it's no use.

I catch Hlomu slipping something into Phakeme's pants before giving him Niya.

We scream and wail and beg as our children are pulled away from us and held back by men with guns.

Gugu is being carried out by five men, she's stopped crying and is just numb. She's thrown at the back of the van first.

Hlomu is still fighting, she's holding on to the kitchen door and screaming for everyone to get out of the house.

"I'm not leaving before everyone is out of this house. I'm not leaving you with my kids," she keeps shouting.

I literally walked to the back of the van and jumped inside. My mind just switched, I've been here before, I know you always end up inside anyway, and there is no going back once you're in there.

The van we are in is the last car to leave the yard. We can hear the cries as we drive off. The twins are standing at the window.

They are left all alone, the eldest is eight.

—

They're all still sobbing when the car door opens, except me, I don't cry.

Gugu has thrown up twice in the 20 minutes that we've spent at the back of this van. She's been sitting on the floor, still and staring ahead.

There is a group of female cops waiting outside the police station as we are loaded off. We have no phones and no jackets with us.

The female cops all burst out laughing as soon as we appear.

We have no strength to fight or get angry anymore.

“This way,” one says pulling Xolie’s arm.

She pulls away.

“Do you want me to handcuff you?” she asks pointing a finger to her face.

“Go on, you’re used to this,” that racist cop from the house whispers in my ear before pushing me off to a female cop.

He knows.

We walk to the direction we are ordered to take.

It’s late at night. We see a couple of people through a glass door sitting at the charge office as we walk past and all the way through a door that takes us to a narrow passage.

I know these passages. I know this smell of concrete and steel. I remember the sound of the echo. I’m back here.

They stop us at one burglar door, push us in, lock it and walk away.

But first we are told to take off all our jewelery, including wedding rings and hand all of it to them.

We'd be lucky if we ever get it all back.

Xolie starts wailing with her hands over her head.

I'm just numb. I feel like I never left this place. It is so familiar and I feel so comfortable in here.

There's only one sponge mattress and two blankets. It's not blankets, it's those grey things with two stripes that smell like a wet dog.

I take Gugu's arm and tell her to lie down. She's like a zombie.

After all the crying stops. The three of us sit on the concrete bench, or is it a bed? It's a bed, you're supposed to put the sponge on top of it and sleep. Gugu is lying down on the sponge.

We hear footsteps approaching.

"I brought you extra blankets," she says throwing them in through a space on the burglar door. It's those same grey things.

"Here is some water too for the pregnant one," she says rolling a two-liter Coke container filled with water on the floor.

We don't move.

She smirks and shakes her head.

"You think this is Mauritius hhe? you think this is the red carpet?" she says and laughs.

What is it exactly that we did to these people that was so bad?

"I suggest you sleep now because there's only two of us on night shift and we can't keep coming down here to tell you to stop with the noise," - and with that she walks away.

The lights go off.

"Oops! load-shedding," she shouts from down the passage before we hear the door opening and closing.

It's dead quiet. It's dark. The only reason we can still see each other is because there's a small window right before where the wall meets the ceiling and there's light coming in through it. It must be a street light, or is it that the moon is out? I don't know for sure, I don't know where we are.

"Hlomu, why are we here?" -Xolie.

No answer.

“Hlomu, I know you know, why are we here? Where are they?” she shouts.

Silence.

“I think they left us. I think they packed up and left us,” -Gugu.

They’d never do that, those men would die for us.

We go back to being statues in the dark.

“I left that phone with Phakeme, he’ll know what to do,” -Hlomu. She speaks, finally.

I had forgotten about that phone. That must be what she was slipping into Phakeme’s pants.

It’s cold in here and it’s going to get even more cold after midnight.

“Gugu, try to sleep,” Hlomu says putting the rest of the blankets over her. I can smell them from here, it’s terrible.

There’s a toilet on one corner, no door, no privacy, just the toilet standing there alone. I really am back in jail.

Gugu rests her head on her arms and closes her eyes. At least we can hold on until the morning.

Xolie is still sobbing.

“What if something happens to the kids?” she says.

I’d rather not think about that, I’ve chosen to believe that Phakeme made that call the moment the cars drove out.

Nobody answers her, purposely so. None of us want to think the worst.

“What!” I shout and almost jump when I feel a cold hand on my leg.

It’s Gugu.

“My water broke,” she says, so calmly.

“What? No!!” I scream.

These two jump to their feet.

We must have all dozed off on this bench and it must have been minutes ago because we were all awake watching Gugu sleep just now.

I can see she’s in pain but she’s trying hard not to show it.

“When?”-Xolie.

“I don’t know, the contractions are getting worse,” she says sitting up.

This can’t be happening!

I run to the burglar gate and shout as loud as I can, but nobody answers, the lights are still off, the passage is dark.

“Aaaaaaaaahhhh”-Gugu screams loud for the first time, from here it’s downhill, I know it.

“Keep breathing, keep breathing..... they will hear us and come to get us out of here. You’re going to deliver this baby in hospital,”-Hlomu.

What the heck is she talking about? We are in jail for crying out loud! Nobody is coming here to rescue us tonight. Those cops are probably sleeping or cheating on their husbands somewhere in the parking lot.

All three of us are kneeling next to her. Hlomu next to the head, me on the side and Xolie on the feet.

“How far apart are they?” she asks.

“I don’t know! I want to get out of here, get me out of here!!!”she screams and presses her thighs together.

“Aaahhhhhh”

Another contraction.

“They’re close,”Xolie says in almost a whisper.

My contractions on both pregnancies started at about 5pm and by 7pm I was holding the baby.

Hlomu told me she pushed the twins out in 15 minutes, but her contractions lasted for three hours.

We’d better get this woman to hospital as soon as possible.

I run to the burglar door again but it’s all in vain.

“Open your legs,”Xolie says slapping her thighs.

“No!”she shoots back.

“Ahhhhhhhhh” another one. She presses her thighs tighter.

Hlomu pulls her by her shoulders and puts almost her whole upper body on her thighs, as if she’s resting on a pillow.

But she’s fighting her, she’s fighting all of us.

"I'm not having my baby here!" she screams.

"Gugu you've been in labor for over an hour, do you want this baby to live?"-Xolie.

She cries louder.

"Good, now open your legs,"Xolie says forcing them apart.

It's dark. We have to turn the mattress around so that she's facing the light.

I don't even know when her underwear was taken off, if she was wearing any.

Xolie slips two fingers inside her and pulls them out quickly, there aren't even gloves to use here.

"You have to push," she says.

She cries louder. If she continues like this she won't have any energy left.

"Gugu! push!!"-Xolie.

I roll one of the blankets and put it just under her bums, incase the baby slips from Xolie's hands when it comes out.

She's holding back.

"Gugu, you have to push now if you want your baby to live,"-Hlomu.

She's crying and screaming more than she's pushing.

Hlomu has to hold her still forcefully by holding her arms down. I pull her thighs apart and hold them still by pressing her knees.

Now all she has to do is push.

She pushes once, stops and cries again.

The contractions are getting more and more hectic.

She pushes six times and I see the hair.

"He's almost out, almost..." Xolie shouts slapping her thigh, again.

"Push!"she shouts.

She pushes two times and the head appears.

"Two more times! Two more!" Xolie shouts slapping her thigh again, really hard this time.

Gugu pushes once and a little body pops.

Xolie pulls up the blanket and does something to its face before wrapping it.

Silence.

She opens the blanket again and does something I can't see. But there's no sound.

Gugu is still breathing fast and wailing on the floor.

The three of us look at each other.

It's quiet.

No cry.

CHAPTER TEN

APRIL 9, 2015 DUDUBUSANIDUBE 57 COMMENTS

There's blood all over the mattress and the floor.

Xolie is still holding the silent baby. It's been about a minute and trust me that is too long.

We are waiting for that moment when Gugu realises she hasn't heard a cry.

We are giving up.

“Waaaaaaaaaaa...!!!” the noise fills up the whole cell.

Relief is written all over our faces.

“We need more blankets!” Xolie shouts.

But they’re all covered in blood.

The baby is still attached to its mother, we must cut the umbilical chord, but with what?

Xolie is cradling the baby.

“It’s cold, we need more blankets!” she keeps shouting.

By now we’ve made peace with that we are alone and nobody can hear us.

Hlomu takes off her top off and throws it at Xolie. She wraps the baby with it. But it’s no use, the shirt is light.

I take mine off too, but Xolie is still shouting that the baby is cold.

Gugu is still on the floor, Xolie is kneeling in-between her legs with the crying baby.

We strip until we are both left with only our underwear.

We have a bleeding woman on the floor still lying with her legs up and wide open.

Xolie hands the baby to me and strips until she's left with underwear too. I hand the baby to her and she wraps her clothes around it too.

We are cold and shivering.

"Who has a wired bra?" I shout.

I have a plan.

Hlomu does. She takes it off and throws it at me.

I tear it with my teeth and pull the wire out. I have to chew the burnt plastic covering the end of the wire to get to the sharp part of it.

"Gugu, I need you to stay still," I say kneeling in-between her open legs next to Xolie.

I tie the wire around the umbilical chord, I'm not even sure if I'm tying in the right place.

"lower...lower" Xolie says.

I do as she she says, I tie tighter and tighter until it breaks. Blood splatters all over me.

They're separated and Xolie is able to walk around the cell cradling the baby, it's still crying.

"Gugu, you have to breastfeed him, it will keep him warm," she says.

Xolie is the nurse here, she must know what she's doing.

Gugu raises her arm, she seems weak.

The baby, covered in a pile of clothes is put on her chest. She wants to look at its face but it's dark. She slips him under her top and puts her breast in his mouth.

I hope this is not a mistake.

It takes a while before he understands he has to suck.

It becomes quiet when he does.

We are kneeling on the floor next to them, naked and shivering.

Gugu is shivering too but she's trying too hard to stiffen her hands.

“Let’s pray,” I say.

Hlomu turns to look at me. She doesn’t seem to know what to do next. I think she doesn’t know how to pray.

I take her hand, she takes Xolie’s.

I can hear the sound of Gugu’s teeth chattering. She’s getting worse but I know she won’t go down without a fight. I know that.

I take her hand too. It’s cold and still trembling.

I start praying, but I’m praying alone.

There’s a bit of light coming in, we can see better now, it must be morning already.

The baby is quiet, it has even opened its eyes.

But Gugu has gotten weaker and weaker.

Xolie says we must keep talking to her to keep her awake.

“She mustn’t fall asleep,” she keeps saying.

She’s still lying on her back, on top of her own blood.

The baby has fallen asleep on her chest. She's in pain, we can just tell, but she's trying to be strong.

We hear a door from down the passage opening, footsteps and laughter, it's two people approaching.

"Wake up! This is not a hotel!" a female voice shouts before she hits the burglar bar with something, the noise is deafening. The baby wakes up and starts crying again.

They take one look and their smiles disappear instantly. Their eyes go around the cell, at us kneeling next to the mattress shivering and at this woman lying on her back with a crying baby on her chest.

A frozen moment before they both run off screaming!

It's the same cops from yesterday. They must have come to check on their prisoners before knocking off.

Gugu starts crying again.

Xolie takes the baby and cradles it.

"We have to get to hospital before it's too late," she says in almost a whisper. She doesn't want Gugu to hear her.

We still don't know why we are in jail. We still don't know if our children are okay.

“Gugu! Gugu!” -a voice shouting from down the passage.

It’s Nqoba. They’re here. We’re getting out of here.

We can hear he’s running. He keeps shouting until he’s standing outside the cell. The burglar bar is still locked.

“Gugu! Gugu!,” he shouts louder.

His eyes go through all of us. Xolie is still holding the baby.

Gugu has closed her eyes. She’s not moving. She can’t hear anything.

He puts his hands over his head and screams!

We hear more voices. There are people coming, more people.

It’s cops, a lot of them, and paramedics.

The burglar door opens and Nqoba is the first to run in, the paramedics follow with a stretcher.

Nqoba is now kneeling next to Gugu shaking her, trying to wake her. She’s lying still. He keeps screaming her name. She doesn’t move or open her eyes. He’s kneeling on her blood.

One paramedic pushes him off and touches her wrist, he's trying to find her pulse.

"Quick!" he shouts for the other paramedics to come to him.

Three of them are attending to Gugu, one takes the baby from Xolie. We are still naked with only underwear on.

Nqoba raises his eyes and looks at the three of us now standing against the wall.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

We don't answer.

"Here," one female cop says handing us three small blankets. We cover ourselves and stand still.

There is noise and movement all over the passage.

"I didn't hear anything, I thought they were sleeping!" a woman keeps shouting. She sounds like she's crying, it's that female cop from last night.

Gugu is taken out in a stretcher, there's a drip in her arm. The baby is still with that paramedic.

Nqoba comes and stands in-front of us.

He hasn't seen or held his son yet.

His eyes go through all of us.

"Let's go," he says.

We stand still. We're frozen.

He touches Xolie's arm and she moves, we follow her out.

We walk past scores of cops lining the passage. The lights are back on. I see that female cop from last night, she drops her eyes when we meet, she's been crying.

It's over for her, I know that by the way Hlomu looks at her, she's not going to let her get away with this.

The door opens and there's light. It's morning, the sun is out.

The stretcher goes out first, followed by the baby, and then us and Nqoba behind us.

There are more people outside. It's them.

They try to run to meet us at the door but the cops hold them back. There's mayhem.

Nqoba gets in the ambulance with Gugu, and the baby. The door closes and they drive off.

“You’re all going to pay for this,” Nkosana keeps shouting to the cops.

Mqhele is handcuffed. A few of the cops look like they’ve been in a hectic fist-fight.

And us, we are still standing clenching the blankets around us. I recognise this place. It’s Mondeor Police Station. I was kept here on the day I was arrested 17 years ago. It looks different now.

Hlomu is the first to move towards them. She stops right in-front of the cops holding them back.

“Where are the children?” she asks looking at Mqhele.

“They’re fine,” he says.

And with that she walks away.

“Hlomu! Hlomu!” Mqhele keeps shouting.

She doesn’t stop or look back. She walks all the way to the parking lot and stands next to one of their cars. We follow her there.

One young female cop comes to us. I don’t recognise her. She wasn’t there yesterday.

“I’ve been told to drive you home, or hospital,” he says.

I'm not sure. I don't trust cops any-more

We get in the car anyway. I'd do anything for a bath and a bed right now.

"We have to go to hospital. Gugu is really bad," -Xolie.

She didn't tell us this all night.

I realise as we drive off that none of us seem to care about what's going to happen to our husbands. They did this to us.

We are driven straight to Hlomu's house. We don't even ask. How this woman knows exactly where to go, we don't know. There's a police car following us all the way.

The security guard at the gate opens and rushes to close the gate just as both cars drive in. He seems to be more alert than normal.

We walk to the house in silence.

At the door we are not met by the usual running and screaming kids.

In the lounge, they're all sitting squashed on one couch. Phakeme is holding Niya. He can barely balance her in his arms but he's not letting her go.

They don't move, just raise their faces and look at us.

We probably look like dead people. We still have blood everywhere.

We stand and stare at them.

Langa is the first to stand up and run to his mother and then the others follow.

Mvelo is only two, he doesn't understand what's going on but all the crying around him makes his anxious.

"Oh my God! Are you okay?" Amanda appears from nowhere and tries to hug all of us at once.

None of us return the hug.

"Mami is going to take a shower, have some chips,"-Hlomu says looking at all the kids before walking to one cupboard and pulling out everything from chips to sweets to biscuits to everything she can find and hands it all to the kids.

I think she wants something that's going to distract them. I doubt it's going to work, not after what they witnessed.

She brushes Phakeme's head.

"You did well my boy," she says with a forced smile before she walks away.

I hug Mvelo one more time before I walk on to my designated bedroom, the one we always use when we're here, and get in the bathtub.

That was one hell of a night.

I still don't know what's going to happen to Nkosana and all of them, or why this happened or how Gugu is and how the baby is doing.

Xolie knocks on my door just as I finish putting on the dress Hlomu has borrowed me. It's slightly big.

"We're taking the kids with us," Hlomu.

"No it's fine, I'll stay with them,"-Amanda.

I don't think anyone of us wants to take that risk. She's Mqoqi's girlfriend but these are our children.

"When did you get here?" Hlomu asks with a frown on her face.

"When I got home last night, very late because I went past my cousin's house, I realised I had left my house keys behind, at Gugu's house," she says looking at me.

"So I drove back. But when I buzzed at the gate the kids wouldn't open, Phakeme told me straight that he wasn't opening for anyone. I sensed that something was wrong when he told me they were all alone. I had to get out of the car and stand at the gate so he could see that it was really me through the window. When I went in I found them all in the bedroom, the twins

and Sisekelo and Phakeme sitting next to the bed watching Niya and Mvelo sleeping. It looked like they were guarding them,” she says.

My poor children.

“I asked them what had happened and they all started talking at once but I did make out that you were taken by the police.

“Phakeme told me he had called his father but I didn’t understand because I had tried calling them too and their phones were all off. They walked in at 4am. We were all put in a car and driven here. I was instructed not to leave the house,” she says.

Hlomu still has that frown on her face.

We still don’t have our phones.

Amanda’s phone beeps. She widens her eyes.

“Mqoqi says Gugu is in ICU,” she says.

Nobody asks the other, we gather the kids and get in two cars.

We haven’t slept. We haven’t eaten. We are in the dark about what’s happening.

“Mamiza did they hurt you?” that’s Langa talking to Xolie.

It's been too quiet in this car.

Xolie is driving. She doesn't answer but I see her eyes getting wet.

It was pure luck that Amanda forgot her keys. I was worried the whole time about the kids being alone.

Phakeme has been too quiet. He naturally doesn't talk much but he's been creepily quiet. That was a tough responsibility to place on an eight-year-old. These kids, they remind me too much of their fathers when they were young. They always stuck together, even at school if you touched one of them you knew they would all come for you.

It's good, but it's bad too because they might just turn out exactly like their fathers.

There's only Mqhele and Mqoqi at the hospital, we don't know where the others are.

The kids run to them.

The noise and chaos is about to get us kicked out of reception.

I can't get myself to smile at these men. Part of me is angry with them for putting us through that hell.

"Hlomu, why is your cheek red? What happened to you?" he comes towards her and tries to hug her, she moves backwards and doesn't respond.

I feel the same way she does. I don't think I want Nkosana anywhere near me.

But Mqhele has never been obedient in his life, he moves closer to her.

"What happened?" he asks. His face says it all.

"Mqhele, please I've had a rough night and rough day, please can we just focus on what's happening here?" she says in a snappy tone.

He'll hear none of it.

"Bafo, we'll deal with them later, each and every one of them,"-Mqoqi.

Hlomu looks like she's trying too hard to hold back tears. I don't know if I should intervene or not.

And then she cries.

I gather the kids and push them to the passage before they see all this.

He hugs her, she tries to push him away but he hugs her tighter until she gives in and cries on his chest.

I feel sorry for that racist cop, he messed with the wrong man's wife.

“Can we see her?” Xolie asks. I haven’t seen her smile since last night.

“Nqoba is with her,” -Mqoqi.

Mqhele is on the phone.

A security guard appears and tells us to follow him, we gather the kids and do as he says. We are told to sit in a room, it looks like a lounge. They must have organised this because Mqhele walks in seconds later.

“I’m going to check on the baby,” Xolie says and walks out. She used to work here.

A man I don’t know walks in and stands at the door. The kids seem to know him.

“The baby is fine, he’s fine and healthy. We are working on Gugu now,” he says, looks at all of us before continuing.

“Are you sure you don’t need to be checked? Or get some counselling?” he says looking at Hlomu and I.

He obviously doesn’t know that we’ve survived worse.

Hlomu shakes her head.

“Who’s that?” I ask as soon as he walks out.

“Dr Masetla, family doctor,” she says waving her hand dismissively.

Mqhele keeps looking at her. I know he wants to come over and hold her but she’s shut him out completely. She’s not laughing or talking, she’s just clenching the tips of her jacket with her hands.

I’ve been biting my nails throughout.

“Where is Nkosana?” I ask them.

“He’ll be here soon,” Mqoqi.

Not a good enough answer.

Nqoba walks in. He looks like a dead person walking.

“She’s still unconscious,” that’s all he says and sits down.

Mqoqi puts his hand on his back, to comfort him I think.

He puts his hands over his head.

“I want to tell her I’m sorry. I’ll make things right, when she wakes up I’ll make things right,” he says.

I do feel sorry for him.

“Did you call her mother?”-Hlomu, she says it so coldly.

He widens his eyes. He forgot to do that.

And this means Gugu’s family will have to travel all the way from Ulundi. And where are they going to stay? Her house is in tatters. How are we even going to explain to her mother that she gave birth in jail?

“I’ll call them,” he says and buries his face in his hands.

If Gugu doesn’t survive this Nqoba will live with the guilt all his life. He’s still living with the guilt of Nqobile’s death.

“They hit mami,”-Langa says out of the blue.

The room grows quiet.

“What?”-Mqhele.

Langa doesn’t look up, he continues rocking the magazine rack on top of the coffee-table.

Nobody speaks.

“They hit mami,” he says again, without raising his eyes. It seems like he’s battling to get the picture of his mother being beaten out of his mind.

Mqhele tries to speak but he stutters, his chest is moving, he is breathing fast, too fast.

“Bafo.....”-Mqoqi says trying to calm him down but he stands up and comes to crouch in-front of Hlomu, he grabs her by the upper arms and looks her in the eye.

I think I should take the kids and leave this room, Mqhele looks like he’s gone crazy.

“Someone hit you? They hit you? who Mahlomu?” he says in a low but very creepy voice, it’s almost like a hiss.

“Bafo!”-Mqoqi says.

This is freaking everyone out.

“Who was it Hlomu? Who hit you?,” he asks still looking her in the eye.

I know we are all traumatised but Hlomu must do something to calm him down before he goes crazy and kills everything that breathes.

“Is that why your cheek is red?,” he says caressing her cheek with his hand.

Why is she not calming him down? She’s just looking in his eyes quietly.

“One of the cops,” she says at last.

“Strijdom?” he asks, still crouching in-front of her and holding her by the upper arms.

“That’s what they were calling him,” she says.

Hlomu is really baying for blood. She knows today won’t end with that cop still alive, she’s just signed his death warrant.

“Okay, okay, okay.....” he keeps saying as he stands up and squeezes himself next to her.

He wraps his arms around her, but she sits still.

He looks at me.

“Did they see that? The kids, did they see it?” he asks.

This will make things worse.

“Yes, they were all there. They stood up and tried to fight back,” I say.

He closes his eyes and tightens his jaw.

Why am I being so truthful? I think I’m also baying for blood.

He lets go of Hlomu, stands up and leaves the room.

I look at Hlomu.

“He’s going to smoke,” she says.

Mqoqi follows him but comes back shortly. I think he went to check if he was really smoking or if he had gotten in a car to go find that Strijdom.

“Langa, come here,” Hlomu says.

He does.

She puts him on her lap and hugs him tight.

“Mami is okay, I’m okay,” she keeps saying as she rocks him.

“What’s the baby’s name?” - Sisekelo.

We all turn to look at him.

Who told him about the baby?

“There’s a baby here? I wanna see it mami! I wanna see it!”- that’s Msebe screaming and jumping up and down. He has a hoarse voice like Nqoba. Their grandfather had a hoarse voice too.

I can see Hlomu doesn’t have the energy to entertain him.

Mqoqi pulls him and sits him on his lap, that will make him shut-up I hope.

“What’s the baby’s name baba?” Sisekelo again.

The door opens and Nkosana walks in. He stops and looks at me for a second.

I realise for the first time how angry I am when I can’t even look him in the eye.

He sits on the edge of the couch next to me.

Sambulo is behind him.

“Where is Xolie?” he asks with his eyes all out.

“Checking on the baby,” someone responds quickly, I’m not sure who.

I see relief on his face.

Oh wait! Where is Amanda?

She walks in just as I ask myself, with her phone in her hand.

Qhawe and Mpande follow her in.

We all sit awkwardly. I catch Nkosana glancing at me now and again. It's a good thing the kids are also here otherwise I would have lost it by now.

There's a knock on the door.

Four people walk in carrying brown paper bags and flat boxes and Woolworths plastic bags.

Good, someone organised food. They leave it all on the table and walk out quietly.

Nobody moves except the kids. Amanda decides it's her duty to open the bags and feed everyone.

"I don't know if I can eat, I can still smell the blood," Hlomu says.

She meant to say that to me but she said it out loud and everybody heard.

One-by-one the kids fall asleep wherever they can find space.

Mqhele came back alone.

“The baby still doesn’t have a name,” -Hlomu says.

It’s Nkosana’s responsibility to name the children, but I think he wants to wait for Gugu to wake up. But what if she doesn’t?

We got all our cellphones back when we arrived here. We still don’t know where our wedding rings and jewellery is.

That Dr Masetla has come here about three times to tell us the same thing. I hear we all go to him when we’re sick. I don’t get sick often, not even with flue.

“I’m trying to hire a chartered plane to get Gugu’s family here,”-Qhawe.

We have to come up with a plan as to where they are going to stay because we can’t put them in a hotel, that would be disrespectful.

It’s already afternoon, the kids are restless.

“She’s awake, and she’s talking,” Xolie says when she walks in.

Nqoba jumps to the door.

“She doesn’t want to see you Nqoba. She wants her mother and her baby. She’s told the nurses not to let you in, and she wants to go home to Ulundi,” Xolie says and walks on like she didn’t just break the man’s heart.

This is not what I expected.

Nqoba walks out the door anyway, he's going to cause chaos there I know it.

Two of them follow him. ICU is about three passages away but we can hear the noise from here.

"That's my wife in there, you can't keep me away from her!!" he shouts.

I have to go deal with this.

Two middle-aged nurses are standing at the door. I can just see by the look on their faces that he's not going in there, they don't care about his tantrums.

I walk on to stand in-between Nqoba and them.

"Please, just for a minute, he wants to make sure she's okay," I beg.

The response I get is a look that says "and you are?"

These old ladies don't care that we're the famous Zulus.

The day is saved by Dr Masetla who appears from nowhere and pleads with the two nurses to let him in, even if it's for a minute.

The nurses are not sure.

“I’ll go in with him,” I say, hoping it will help.

I don’t think Nqoba is impressed with my suggestion but he’s desperate.

They seem to think it’s a better idea. We are let in.

I have to look around about four beds before I find her. Nqoba is already at her bedside.

She has an oxygen mask covering her face. She looks pale and weak, but better than she was when we left that prison cell.

“Gugu!” he keeps saying.

She’s quiet but looking at him.

“Gugu I’m sorry,” he says.

I stand a bit far from the bed, I must give them space.

She raises her hand slowly and pulls the mask down to her neck.

“I’m sorry,” Nqoba again.

She clears her throat.

“What exactly are you sorry for Nqoba?”

“For everything, I’m sorry Gugu,” he says, he sounds extremely frustrated.

“This was the last straw Nqoba, the last one,” she says, puts her mask back on and looks the other way.

I move closer, maybe I can help.

“Gugu, how are you feeling?” I ask.

I can see tears under that mask.

“I want to get out of here. Where is my mother? Did you call her?” she asks.

“Yes, they’re on the way. The doctor says you’ll be out of ICU by tonight. He says you’re doing great,”- I’m trying to be positive here.

She nods.

“The baby is fine,” that’s me again trying to highlight the bright side.

She turns to look at Nqoba.

“What’s his name?” she asks.

He still doesn’t have a name.

“He doesn’t have one yet. We were waiting for you to wake up,” -Nqoba.

She nods.

“Okay, name him. I want a divorce,” she says, puts the mask back on and presses the red button for assistance. The nurses come rushing in. She closes her eyes.

We are told to leave the ward.

Nqoba stays put.

“I’m going to call security,” this nurse says in a very threatening tone.

“You’re going to call security to stop me from seeing my wife?” he shouts with that typical Nqoba attitude. He’s been arrogant since the day he was born.

“Nqoba let’s go,” I say. I don’t want drama here.

He stands up and storms out of the ward.

“It’s not even visiting hours I don’t know why they’re here,” I overhear one nurse saying.

They’re not very nice.

I don’t know where Nqoba disappeared to but I saw him pull out a pack of cigarettes, he’s probably out somewhere smoking and looking back at all the sins he has committed against this woman he has a nerve to call his wife, when all he has ever done is emotionally abuse her.

As I walk back to our designated holding room I see the whole clan including the brood approaching, led by Xolie.

They turn to the right before I meet them, I follow.

They stop somewhere. Oh! It’s the baby viewing area, we can only look at him through a glass window.

It’s quiet before it gets noisy.

“Why is it so small?”- Msebe.

“Because it’s a baby,”-Langa

“Where did it come from?”- Langa again.

“From Jesus,”-Sisekelo.

“You’re lying it came from mama’s stomach,”-Msebe.

They are the only people talking here, we adults are just standing here quietly looking at this baby, who looks exactly like all the male persons here.

“What’s his name?”-Phakeme, he’s been quiet all along.

Hlomu’s phone rings, she ignores it.

“I know, I know...errrr Timon,”-Msebe.

What the heck is that?

“Timon? He’s stupid!”-Sisekelo.

Who is Timon anyway?

“Msebe, you can’t call a baby Timon, this is a real baby not a cartoon”-Phakeme.

Why are we even listening to this conversation?

“Who is Timon?”-Mpande.

“Timon is from The Lion King,” Phakeme.

Oh Lord please help us!

“Sihlangu, his name is Sihlangu,” -Nkosana says. He’s been quietly staring at the baby. I don’t think he heard this Timon conversation that just happened.

Sihlangu. It’s a nice name.

“What does Sihlangu mean baba?”-Langa.

He looks down at him.

“It means shield, a protector,” Nkosana says before picking Langa up.

Hlomu’s phone rings again. She looks at it and in what seems to be a sudden change of mind, answers and walks away from us.

I think we all love Sihlangu as a name for this baby.

“The media is calling,” Hlomu says when she comes back from that brief phone-call.

Urgh, this is the last thing we need.

“How did they find out about this now? This is.....”-Qhawe.

“They’re not asking about this. They’re asking about Zandile. They have the whole story,” she says.

All eyes turn to her.

No!!!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

APRIL 9, 2015 DUDUBUSANIDUBE 48 COMMENTS

I knew this day would come, Nkosana promised me it wouldn’t happen but I knew deep down that it was coming.

My life, brutal as it has been, is now splashed all over for the world to know and judge. I feel naked, exposed and violated.

JAILBIRD IN THE ZULU MANSION

MYSTERY WIFE A CONVICTED MURDERER

A STORY OF LOVE AND MURDER

This is how they’ve summed up my life, who I am and what I am.

I'm more angry than hurt. They can never understand, the people who will read these things about me, they will never understand what it is to have to fight someone who is trying to pull your child out of your womb.

How it feels to be locked up in a space as small as their toilet but fully believing that it was worth it, it was all worth it, Sbani was worth it.

They have my confession statement, how they got hold of it, I don't know. I understand that it's a public document, but it is still my life.

Nkosana has been walking around this house looking guilty. He's been receiving calls, a lot of calls.

At first I thought it was the media but I heard him swearing a couple of times, I think that conversation was with whoever was supposed to ensure that this doesn't come out.

I got a call from Lulu this morning. I got another call from a magazine offering me money for an 'exclusive' story of my life.

Sbani has been ignoring my calls, I haven't tried calling Lwandle.

"Gugu is gone,"-Nkosana barges in and says.

Gone where?

"She's gone, she's left the hospital, with the baby," he says.

Of-course she wouldn't leave without her baby, but how? She was in ICU yesterday and now she's just walked out of hospital? with a baby? unnoticed?

"But...."

"Nqoba arrived at the hospital this morning to find her gone, nobody saw her leave. Now we have to go to Ulundi and plead with her to come back, or allow us access to the baby," he says.

That's going to be tough seeing as she wants nothing to do with Nqoba and has made it clear that she wants out. But her family was wrong to just take her, it doesn't matter what the situation is between Nqoba and her, he's still her husband and they had no right to just take his child with them.

"I'm going to see Nqoba, he's going crazy, he wants to go to Ulundi as in now and he says he won't come back without both his wife and his child," he says.

I know Nqoba, he is not just cold, he is brutal too. He will not be kind to whoever stands in his way.

"It's fine, I'll stay here," I say. I don't think I can go out and face the world, not until I know how my children feel about all this dirt on me splashed all over, I don't want to embarrass them even more.

I saw in the news this morning that almost half the staff at Mondeor Police Station has either been suspended or is being investigated. They say details are sketchy but it has something to do with a pregnant woman who cannot be named to protect the identity of the child.

I wonder if that white cop is one of them but I think his punishment is going to be heavier than losing his job because he slapped Hlomu, you don't slap Hlomu, not as long as Mqhele is alive.

Breaking: "MONDEOR STATION COMMANDER COMMITS SUICIDE"

The headline reads just as I switch on the TV.

Suicide my foot!

He was never going to live longer than last night, I knew that the moment Langa uttered "they hit mami". That was the first shovel to his grave.

I've been saying. I wonder how they do these things.

I've been trying to call Gugu but her phone has been off. I think that instead of her being angry and wanting to make Nqoba pay for all her misery, she should be focusing on getting help and healing from that trauma she experienced giving birth in a jail cell. Nqoba and her marriage she can deal with later.

Maybe someone, someone older will talk sense into her when she gets home. But then again, I'm being unfair, Nqoba never loved her, I think she's better off outside this marriage than inside.

Oh! Nkosana, he must be calling to tell me to pack a bag for him.

"MaFuze, are you okay?" he asks.

I think there are bigger problems here than my new found fame.

"I'm fine, have you spoken to Sbani or Lwandle?" I ask.

He takes a deep breath.

"They haven't called, but I'm sure they can handle this," he says.

I wish I could believe that.

"Please pack me a bag, we're going to Ulundi, we'll be there in 40 minutes,"

I thought so.

"I love you Zandile," he says. He sounds tense, worried, like he thinks that maybe I've forgotten.

"I love you more Mageba," I say.

We both stay on the line, I won't hang up first, I can hear him breathing.

He hangs up eventually.

The first car drives in half-an-hour later. It is escorted by two taxis.

It's Hlomu and her kids.

Another one shortly after, it's Xolie and her boys.

There are five taxis on my yard, each fully packed with men with guns. They are all over the yard. I don't know what's going on.

Hlomu instructs all the kids to go somewhere in the house and stay there. She straps Niya on her back and is pacing up and down the living room.

She and Xolie keep stealing looks, they know what's going on. I'm waiting here hoping that maybe they'll do the noble thing and tell me why they are in my house.

But no.

"How are you doing Zah?"-Hlomu.

Oh there's that thing about me by the way.

"I'm okay, I've survived worse. Do you know what's going on? Why there are all these people here?" I ask.

They look at each other.

"Like I told you Zah, we don't just shop, most of the time we dodge bullets and people trying to kill us," she says and walks on to answer her phone in another room.

I'm left with Xolie. She's drinking wine, I've stopped worrying about their drinking.

Maybe she can shed some light.

"Don't worry about it, it will go away eventually and people will forget about it," she says.

She's on that subject too, I'm trying to block it off.

Amanda walks in. I had forgotten about her, I didn't even notice she was missing.

"That's a bit extreme don't you think?" that's the first thing she says when she walks in.

I take it she is referring to the armed men outside. She doesn't even know what's going on and yet she's making stupid comments. And I don't like her new found personality, she was better when she was mute and mousy.

"Did you drive yourself here?" -Hlomu asks.

"Yes Mqoqi told me to come here or go to my flat, he left me at his house this morning," she says.

I think she should have gone to her flat.

"And you came here?" -Hlomu.

She raises her eyebrow.

“Yeah, I wasn’t going to be alone in my flat with everything that’s been going on.” she says and goes back to typing on her phone.

Hlomu has that frown on her face again. But then again, it’s Hlomu, you never know what’s on her mind.

The TV station is going on and on about that station commander who killed himself. It says he shot himself in the head. Nobody knows why.

“Good riddance,”-Xolie.

I’d expect that from Hlomu, not her.

They drive in exactly 40 minutes later, they are in two cars.

They walk in, each go to their beloved women and cling on to them.

I don’t think Nkosana showered before he left, it must have been really hectic because he’s a neat freak, but he still smells fresh and sexy and rich.

“I’m going to shower, is my bag ready?” he asks.

It is. I follow him to the bedroom, and to the bathroom. I sit on the edge of the bath-tub and watch him shower.

I can't believe he's leaving me here to attend to other people's problems with everything I'm dealing with right now. But that's who he is, he feels he is responsible for this whole family, he puts everyone first and himself later.

But I guess Nqoba's problems are more serious. Whatever we do with mine won't change anything, the fact is I am a convicted murderer and nothing can change that, especially not me wanting pity and attention.

I'm waiting for him with a white bath-towel when he comes out of the shower. He's careful to step on the shower mat, he hates it when there's water all over the floor, even if it's a few drops.

"Thank you," he says wrapping the towel around his waist.

I stand there watching him shave with my arms folded across my chest.

He turns to look at me and frowns.

"Hey, come here," he says stretching his hand.

I rush to him and wrap my arms around his waist very tight and press my face on his chest.

I don't want him to go.

He pushes me off and cups my face in his hands.

“I have to do this, I have to fix this, I’ll be back tomorrow,” he says, his face too close to mine.

I need him.

I undo the towel around his waist, it drops on the floor.

He gives me an inquiring look. I stand on my toes to kiss him.

He knows what I want.

I feel his hands grabbing me behind my thighs. He lifts me up, my legs are around his waist. He walks with me still wrapped around him until I’m pressed against the bathroom door.

He kisses my neck. He must think I want to make love. I slip one hand under him and pull out his penis, I’m trying to push it inside me, he gets the message and stops with the neck kissing. He’s inside, his hand tight behind my neck and another arm around my waist, I’m holding on to him as tight as I can. He keeps using his arm to lift me up when I slide down.

“I won’t let you fall,” he whispers.

I let my body loose. I know I’m safe.

He pounds, so hard that I feel his sweat dripping on me. I’m screaming, loud.

“Ssshhhhh” he keeps whispering in my ear.

I can't stop. He puts his hand over my mouth and pounds faster, too fast until my legs tremble. I'm done, he is not.

He puts me down and pulls me with his hand at the back of my neck, he leads me to the hand-basin. I hold on to its edge. He separates my thighs with one hand and he's in. I feel my body coming alive again. His sweat dripping on my bare back. He's moving too fast. His hands tighten around my waist. He's groaning, louder and louder. I feel his warmth inside me. He stands still. I'm still bending and holding on to the sink edge for dear life.

He seems to have caught his breath when he pulls a bath towel and throws it on the floor. He's still inside me.

He pulls out, slowly and pulls me up. He moves to lie down on the floor and stretches his arm. I oblige. I lie on top of him, in-between his thighs.

He keeps brushing my back with his one hand while the other is behind his neck.

"You don't want me to go do you?" he asks.

I nod.

He looks into my eyes.

"I have to, I always come back to you, you know that," he says.

He's right, he always does.

I must let him go now. I kiss him on the lips and stand up.

He watches me as I pick my dress up and put it back on, and walk out.

He comes out of the bathroom looking fresh. His bag is packed. I hand it to him when he's done getting dressed, he pulls me by hand out of the bedroom, down the stairs and to the living room filled with people who look exactly like him and three women hanging on to three of them like they are seeing them for the last time.

The all stand up, say their goodbyes and get into cars. Mqoqi remains behind, he must have been given the duty to watch over us while they're gone.

He walks up the stairs leaving all of us, including his Amanda, still looking out the kitchen window, although they're long gone.

"Amanda, you're cooking lunch,"-Hlomu.

The dictatorship!

"I'll cook,"I offer.

"No don't worry," they all say at the same time, very quickly.

"It's fine I'll do it, Zandile just relax,"-Amanda, she's keen on it all of a sudden?

They'll be at Ulundi in no time, they're flying there.

For now, we sit here and wait, in quarantine, nobody leaves these premises, that was an order.

We now all know why we had to spend the night in jail, except Amanda of-course, she's not at that level yet.

What shocked me though was Hlomu's role in all of it, and that she actually kept quiet and didn't go to the police with it. Mandisa must have really changed over the years, she was many things but a killer? I still find it hard to believe.

"Where's the remote?" Xolie says looking under the cushions on the couches.

Something seems to be confusing her on her phone.

She switches the TV on and goes straight to a 24-hour news channel.

A picture of me from that award ceremony we went to fills half the screen. They've photo-shopped prison bars into it so it looks like I'm standing behind bars. Next to the picture is a live interview of a familiar face.

"I didn't know she was who she is. If I had known I would have reported her a long time ago. She used to brag to me about how she killed her mother and how she managed to evade the police for five years. She said her baby-daddy had made sure that her stay in prison is comfortable, that is why she was a bully, even to the warders, I asked to be moved from the cell when I couldn't take it any more....."

What is this woman talking about?

Hlomu puts her hand on my back. If I could, I would cry.

“I don’t know what she is talking about. I shared a cell with her for seven months, a long time ago. She was moved to the hospital section because she had TB,” I say.

That’s the story, all of it. I have no idea where all this other stuff is coming from. And she was nice, I liked her when we shared a cell.

Just as I reel in confusion that video from the restaurant comes up on the screen. I take it they are playing it to support her claims that I really am a bully, in and outside prison.

I have to call Nkosana. He doesn’t answer.

A call from Lwandle.

“Are you okay?” that’s the first thing he says.

“I’m fine, it’s just that.....”

“Don’t worry about it, it will blow off, be okay,” he says, says goodbye and hangs up.

Suddenly I feel a bit better. He cares.

I want to get out of this house. I'm going to find this woman and I'm going to show her who I am. She doesn't know me!

"Zandile,"-I hear that, someone is calling my name.

"Zandile!," I hear her again, and a hand touching my arm. I freeze.

I'm sweating. I don't sweat, I never sweat.

"Sit down, it's okay just sit here,"-I hear her.

They're all standing around me looking terrified. I've just had one of those moments, I think I must see a doctor about this.

"Here, drink this,"she hands me a glass. I drink it. It burns in my throat. It's Nkosana's whisky, I know the smell.

"Now, calm down, this thing will blow off and trust me it won't take anything away from you,"-Hlomu.

She doesn't understand how this feels.

"By the way, Sbani called to ask how you are, he said we must take care of you,"-Hlomu.

I'm okay now. I think I'm okay.

They are telling me that this will blow off but I'm not sure. The one thing I know is that suddenly I don't feel ashamed of my past. I'm worried but I don't feel ashamed, it's not like I can go back and change it. In-fact, I fully believe I did what I had to do.

Nkosana and them must be almost at Ulundi. I didn't even know there was an airport in that place. The only thing I can associate that place with is the IFP and that people from there used to be rich. But Gugu once told me that since the provincial Parliament moved to Pietermaritzburg it's become a ghost town, young people are leaving the area in large numbers because there is really not much to do there.

I'm going to shower because these women have taken over my kitchen now. The men outside are not making things easier too. They've been walking around the yard, all over the yard, you turn around to see someone standing at the window. I don't like this.

I'm not even wearing panties, I forgot to put them back on when we left the bathroom earlier, I can still smell him all over me. He is just so.....contagious. Sometimes I ask myself why he loves me so much. I mean, we are two totally different people. He is neat and proper and calm and I'm just, me, the total opposite of him. Sometimes my habits annoy him, but when I try to change them he always seems uncomfortable with it.

He says: "you wouldn't be Zandile if you weren't like this or like that".

"Lunch is ready,"-Xolie, she's standing at the door. I never close the bedroom door but I didn't see her coming.

"Okay, I'm coming," I say.

I haven't even showered, I've been lying on this bed on my back staring at the ceiling.

You've come too far Zandile, too far, and you're still here.

The house is filled with deafening noise all of a sudden. Xolie must have opened the play room door and called all the kids for lunch. They never walk, they run, they don't speak, they shout.

"We've arrived. I miss you" .- an SMS from Nkosana.

I hope everything will go well, but I doubt Gugu will come back with them, she seemed to have made up her mind. I don't wish to know what will happen when she finds out Nqoba married her because she is a clone of his first wife, the only woman he ever really loved.

"Zandile, where were you?"

Sisekelo bursts out when I walk in the lounge. It becomes dead quiet. Everybody is looking at him including the other kids.

I'm shocked too, I don't know what to say.

"Sisekelo, what did you just say?" -Xolie.

"I asked Zandile where she was," he says, like he didn't just break the biggest rule in the black community.

Everyone is even more shocked that he says it again.

“Sisekelo!” Xolie shouts, her tone firmer.

He frowns. It’s still quiet.

“Sisekelo! Why are you calling your mother by name?”-Xolie. She looks angry.

We are all now looking at him. It’s strange that he doesn’t look frightened, he’s rather defiant.

“Mkhulu says I shouldn’t call her mama, he gets mad when I do,” he says.

That mkhulu story again.

“What mkhulu?” Mqoqi asks. His phone rings, he looks at it once and stands up to leave before he can get an answer from this little toothless rascal.

I see Xolie shaking her head and Amanda looking confused. Hlomu seems to be lost in thought while feeding Niya.

“If I ever hear you call her by name I will beat you,”-Xolie.

He frowns and goes back to his food.

This kid must grow up, fast, I’m tired of hearing about his imaginary friends who seem to have a problem with just me in this family. I move on to the kitchen to get my food. It looks nice, I don’t know how they can cook so much food in so little time.

I can hear Mqoqi talking just outside the door but I can't make out what he's saying. It seems to be a hush-hush conversation but I can tell it's not a happy one.

He walks back in when I'm already seated with everyone else in the lounge.

"Hlomu, Mqhele wants to talk to you, he says you're not answering your phone," he says.

She immediately puts the baby on my lap and walks to him, takes the phone and disappears to the kitchen.

"Don't go outside Hlomu," he shouts after her.

Oh! I forgot we were prisoners.

He seems to have forgotten all about the earlier incident with the 'mkhulu' situation judging by how he takes Niya from me and starts tickling her. It's noisy and rowdy again, I might as well be happy like everybody else.

"They called the cops on us. We're sleeping at the Holiday Inn here for tonight. Ngcobo and Mzimela will arrive tomorrow, we are hoping they'll agree to talk to them," -an SMS from Nkosana.

I was hoping he'd come back today.

"Did you even speak to Gugu?"

“No, she refused to see us, we could hear S’hlangu crying inside, they didn’t let us inside the gate,”- He responds.

Shame, I can imagine how painful it was for Nqoba hearing his child cry. He’s never held him, not even when we were in hospital, he just focused on Gugu.

I’m surprised they didn’t walk in there guns blazing and took her and the baby by force. They really have turned into model citizens.

“They’re not coming back today,”-Hlomu says and walks on to sit down.

I have a feeling that everyone is sleeping here, in this house tonight. I hope it’s only because they are not here so they want to know exactly where we all are. I hope nobody is trying to kill us for whatever reason.

I thought this life was about the glitz and glamour, but now I know it comes with a lot more than that. Nkosana was right, these women are entitled to all the useless things they spend money on because no woman should have to live like this, not knowing whether your husband will come home tonight and having to be surrounded by guns and danger most of your life, it’s a tough life this.

The kids have left us alone, they hardly ever hang out with us anyway, probably because their mothers are too tough on them, especially Hlomu, but then strange enough, they all seem closer to her than Xolie.

Even Mvelo doesn’t care about his gogo when the other kids are around.

“So, you’re a loner now? I hope you’re not stressing about all this media nonsense, they’ll move on to other people soon,”-Mqoqi.

I’m sitting all alone, I didn’t realise.

“I’m just thinking about.....all the stuff that’s been happening,” I say.

He drops his eyes. They all drop their eyes when one of us says something like this. It’s that jail thing, I know, they all feel guilty, maybe when all this drama we are dealing with lately calms down they will call us all and apologise.

“It’s bad. But we will pull through, we always do,” he says.

He was such a kid when I left. I always thought he’d end up in jail. He just.....I don’t know....enjoys danger. I don’t have proof of this but I’m sure his first job involved stealing.

I wonder why he was the one chosen to baby-sit us.

“Where is Amanda?” I ask.

I hear she’s lasted the longest compared to his other girlfriends. There’s seriously something wrong with these men.

“Somewhere in the house, I think taking a shower or something,” he says like he’s not interested, he’s typing on his phone as we speak.

“I think she’s nice,” I say. I don’t know where that came from, I’ve never really thought of her as nice, she’s just a girl and she’s here so I guess I have to acknowledge her.

He puts his phone down and looks at me.

“You’re not going to tell me to marry her are you?” he asks.

I laugh, I can’t help it.

He laughs too and shakes his head. Nkosana does that too, and Mqhele, they are all like one person.

“Would I be wrong to ask you when you are marrying her? Or anyone else for that matter?”

He’s not comfortable with this conversation, I can tell just by looking at him.

He keeps quiet.

“Is she not the one?” I ask. I’m pushing, I know.

I think I’m upsetting him.

He starts popping his finger-joints, he does that a lot. I notice his jaw is tight, is he that upset? I suddenly regret starting this conversation.

He turns to look at me again just as I try to find a way to change the subject.

“The one? It depends on what you mean by the one. I don’t know, does the one sit and wait for you to find them or do they happen to end up with someone else while you sit and wish you had met them first?” he asks.

He is serious now, very serious, he is not smiling and he is not joking.

I don’t know how to respond, I didn’t expect him to be this deep out of the blue. I look in his eyes and wait for him to continue.

“I do know “my one” but I can’t have her, I can never have her,” he says, drops his eyes and looks ahead at the TV.

That’s rather sad.

“You must fight for the person you love Mqoqi, do all that you can, you can only love once,” I say.

I think he needs to talk about it, that’s why he’s taking this conversation further.

“Not me Sis’ Zandile, I can’t, I could never do that to.....” he stops and pops his fingers even more, fiercely this time.

I’m confused.

“Is she with someone you know?” I push harder.

“It’s more complicated than that Sis’ Zah,” he says and stares at me.

I keep thinking he’s going to come out and tell me who that is but he’s not budging, our eyes are locked, it’s like he expects me to figure it out.

Wait a minute! Please Lord tell me this is not what I think it is! I’ve seen it but I thought I was just imagining things! No! Please! this can’t be!

I clear my throat before speaking.

“Mqoqi, is she light in complexion?” I ask.

He keeps quiet.

“Does she have three children?”

No answer.

“Is she the same age as you?”

Silence.

“Mqoqi, is she a twin?” I ask.

He turns to look at me. I can see it in his eyes, he doesn't have to answer me, I can just see it.

"Mqoqi!!" I shout before I can stop myself.

He buries his face in his hands.

This is not supposed to happen! No! It will tear this family apart!

"Don't you think I've tried Sis'Zah! I've tried everything, I can't help it!" he says, his voice is rising. This is not a conversation we should be having here. This is not a conversation we should be having at all.

"Does she know?"

He tightens his jaw even harder.

"Does she know Mqoqi?"

He shakes his head.

That's a relief. I don't know why but I'm relieved.

"When? When did this start?" I ask. I don't know how me knowing is going to make things less complicated.

“The first time I met her,” he says.

My stomach turns. Lord help us!

We both sit in silence. This is complicated.

“Mqhele would...”

“I’d never do that to him. Never!” he says before I can finish talking.

He stands up and leaves just as I battle with all this.

CHAPTER TWELVE

APRIL 10, 2015 DUDUBUSANIDUBE 57 COMMENTS

They’re on their way back.

Their trip to Ulundi was, needless to say, unfruitful. They never even made it to the dining room of Gugu’s parents’ house. They were so unwelcome that even Mzimela and Ngcobo, who are culturally the right people the wife’s family should speak to if there’s a serious problem in the marriage, were not welcome. At least they made it inside the gate and got chased by dogs, that’s some progress whichever way you look at it.

Mqoqi left in the morning with all the older kids. I have a feeling he’s been parked outside their school gate the whole day, maybe that’s why he was left behind.

I can't get that conversation we had last night out of my mind. I don't think I'll ever look at Mqoqi and Hlomu the same way, every little interaction they will have, every laugh they will share and every little thing, I'm just going to find it all suspicious, I just know I won't be able to stop myself.

I know Hlomu doesn't know how Mqoqi feels about her, she thinks he cares about her like everyone in this family does. This is dangerous, who knows how long Mqoqi is going to be able to contain himself.

I look at Amanda sitting across me, I feel sorry for her. Her being here in this relationship is a waste of time.

She raises her eyes and we meet. She's just caught me staring at her. She smiles and goes back to scrolling her phone. That was weird.

"We've just landed"-an SMS from Nkosana.

They'll be here before the kids get back from school. It's a good thing then because it means they can brief us freely about what happened.

My phone.

Whoah!! Gugu!

"Hi,"

"Zah, hi," she says.

This I didn't expect.

"Are you okay? You're all over the media. How are you coping?" she asks.

I'm more worried about her. She doesn't sound too well either.

"Yes, urgh I'm not paying much attention to that. Gugu why did you leave the hospital? You should have atleast stayed until you got better," I say.

I'm really worried.

She's quiet, but I can hear her breathing on the other side.

"Zah, I need your help," she says.

Huh?

"I need you to go get me some things from my house, Nqoba's house. I need my ID and Driver's Licence and my Passport, they are all in the first drawer of the big desk in the study. That's all I need Zah, everything else I can leave behind," she says.

But how am I supposed to do all that? I don't even have the keys to her house.

"I don't think that's possible....."

“Please, you are the only person I can rely on,” she says and hangs up.

She wants out, she really wants out!

I’m not going to Nqoba’s house. I love Gugu dearly but I’m not messing with Nqoba, I’ve known him all my life and I know he would never hurt me no matter what I do to him, but I’m not going to go as far as breaking into his house.

They all walk in following each other, minus Nqoba. The one person we all want to see is not with them.

We all look at them with surprised faces.

Qhawe seems to understand why.

“He asked to stay behind. He said he needed to be near incase Gugu changes her mind, and that he needed to be alone for a few days,”-Qhawe.

I didn’t expect that.

“But where...?”-Hlomu.

“He’s staying at the La Lucia house my love,” Mqhele says and moves to stand closer to her. They are so clingy.

They all look drained and frustrated and just really really down, like they've had a tough few days. We all have had a tough few days. Everything has been happening too fast, all at once. I miss the times when our lives were simple, if there ever was such a time, but anything is better than this.

"We're going home when the kids come back," Mqhele says to Hlomu. She has her head on his shoulder. He just never lets go of her. It's like he lives for her.

But, I'm glad they are all leaving today. I want my house and my husband and my grandchild all to myself now. I hope they will take those gunmen with them.

A car pulls up outside. Good. The kids are here.

We all stand quietly and wait for chaos to come running in.

The door swings open and boom! It's a carnival!

But it becomes dead quiet, very quick. What just happened here is....let me describe it as strange.

The kids didn't make it past the kitchen table. Each of their fathers grabbed the first one they could find, picked them up and are holding them very tight. Nkosana has one of the twins, I still can't tell them apart. Qhawe has Phakeme, the boy is tall, I don't know how he managed to lift him up.

The kids all look confused, but they are quiet.

Mqoqi walks in just at that moment. His eyes find Hlomu before anyone else. This is going to drive me crazy!

“Let’s go watch TV,” Sambulo says, he has the other twin.

The kids leave all their school-bags there and the kitchen floor and follow them to the lounge.

We are left all alone.

Hlomu and Xolie follow each other out. I don’t know where they are going but I also follow.

They head for the guest bedroom downstairs. Niya and Mvelo are sleeping.

They pick them up and walk back to the lounge.

Hlomu hands Niya to Mqoqi. Xolie hands Mvelo to Mqhele, and they walk away.

Amanda is as gobsmacked as I am.

“Let’s go prepare dinner,” Hlomu says.

We all leave the men cuddling with their children and follow her.

I'm back to that place where I feel like I lost so much in the past 17 years. Now and again something happens to remind me that there was a time when I wasn't here, and a lot happened during that time, this behaviour that I just saw has reminded me of that.

"What are we cooking?" I ask.

All three of them turn to look at me.

"We're not sure yet," Xolie.

"You can focus on dessert,"-Hlomu.

They said dessert for tonight is cake and ice cream.

It's okay then, I'm just going to sit here and watch them. Forget that this is my house.

"Is it a formal or casual meeting? I want to know what clothes I should prepare for you?"

He's been on a go-slow all morning, I don't want him to be late.

"I'm going to be in the office all day, I'll wear the usual," he says.

Huh?

“But, it’s Friday today Nkosana, you’re supposed to go to Klerksdorp for that meeting remember?”

How could he forget this? He’s been stressing about it all week. He’s been excited too. I’ve never seen him this excited about work things before.

“Oh that? It was cancelled, forget about it,” he says.

I don’t understand. Cancelled when?

“But....you said it was a big deal, that it was going to bring a lot of money in?”

He shrugs and takes off his pyjama top.

“I don’t care anymore, it didn’t work out,” he says and walks on to the bathroom.

I’m confused here. He was supposed to drive to Klerksdorp with Mqhele this morning. They’ve been talking about it on the phone since they came back from Ulundi on Tuesday. Now all of a sudden it’s not a big deal anymore?

I’m going to make him breakfast. I’ll ask more questions later.

Hlomu has been nagging me about taking Mvelo to creche. I don’t want to. He’s fine here with me. He’s too young to be going to school anyway, to learn what? He can’t even talk properly yet. She must stop trying to control everything around here. We are all adults. And she must not test me by raising this with Nkosana. I know he will agree with her, he always does. In his

eyes she can do no wrong, anything she says goes. I hope he is not in love with her too. I'd burn this house down, with him inside if he ever pulled shit like that with me.

Damn! This bloody stove!

"Hey, don't kill yourself, what are you doing?" he says pulling me away from the stove.

I take a deep breath, I'm not sure what just happened.

"I don't know, I put my hand on the stove, I don't know....." I say.

I just burnt my hand.

"Come here," he says pulling me to the sink and putting my hand in cold water.

Damn it! The eggs are burning.

"It's fine, I'll grab a fruit," he says.

There goes my hard-work. Sometimes I think he'll use any excuse to skip breakfast.

My hand still hurts.

"You're going to be in the house all day right?" he asks.

I never go anywhere. He makes sure of that. He lives to control me. He is as possessive as he was when we were younger. I don't know if in his dictator mind he thinks every man on earth is out there waiting for me to come out of the house so they can steal me from him.

"No, I never go anywhere anyway, you're happy with me stuck inside these walls," I say.

He raises his eyebrows. I know what that means.

Oh crap! I'm in one of those moods again. I'm irritable. It happens when something is bugging my mind. I didn't realise.

I keep quiet, just to calm myself down.

"I'm just...stressed about everything I think," I say.

He seems to know exactly what I'm talking about.

"You'll be fine," he says, kisses me and walks to the door.

I need to ask.

"Nkosana,"

He stops and turns around.

“The meeting, was it cancelled because of me? Did they pull out because of, you know, what’s being said about me?” I ask.

He’s quiet for a second. And then he walks back to me.

“Zah, why would you think that? These things happen in business. This is just another deal that didn’t work out. It was all about money, we have more than enough of that, this one deal not working out won’t make any difference. Forget about this please,” he says, kisses me again and walks out the door.

He’s just lied to me. I know him, maybe he’s forgotten that, I know him like I know myself!

Bloody assholes!!

I have to sit. I have to breathe in and out and in and out.....

I feel my body again when my hand touches the floor. I wait for it to calm down. I’m alive.

I sweep off all the broken glass on the floor. I bought this flower-vase the last time we went out to the mall. Maybe he’ll ask what happened to it when he comes back, maybe he won’t notice. The little water that was in it left a mark on the wall, right on the spot where I threw it.

Now I have to wake Mvelo up.

We have to go. I know what I have to do. I can’t let this continue.

“Get a car ready, we’re going,”

He stands still. Did he not hear me?

“I said get the car out of the garage, we’re going,” I say.

What is wrong with this man?

“Where are we going gogo?”-Mvelo.

I have no time to explain to a toddler.

“But.....Mr Zulu didn’t tell me to drive you anywhere,” he says.

This man must understand that his job is to drive me and make sure I come back home in one piece, not to ask questions.

“Let me call Mr Zulu and.....”

He’s going to make me lose it now.

“He’s in a meeting. I’m his wife and your job is to drive me. If you ask another question you’ll be unemployed by the time the sun goes down today,” I say.

I’m trying to be polite. I don’t want to shout at him or disrespect him. He is somebody’s husband, somebody’s father.

I’ve never been rude or mean to him before so he must understand that this is important.

He nods and opens the garage. I’m going to stand here and watch him, I won’t give him a chance to make that phone call to Nkosana.

I have to take matters to my own hands now. I have to fix this. I’m tired of having people protect me and try to spare my feelings like I can’t fight my own battles. I’ve been fighting battles all my life. I refuse to be a sorry case.

“Where are we going MaNgcobo?” he asks as we drive out the gate.

He’s always called me that.

“I’m not sure. We’re going to the TV station, it’s called Africa Connect, do you know where it is?” I ask.

He hits the break.

“Drive,” I say.

He turns around to look at me. I see shock. He must already know that the stupid TV station has done nothing but obsess over me for this whole week.

I widen my eyes at him.

He drives immediately.

“It’s in Parktown,” he says.

That’s the last thing he says before we drive all the way to the highway, over that bridge crossing town and up to the high trees and posh schools. The kids go to school in this area.

I ignored Nkosana’s last two calls. He phones all the time, every day just to stalk me.

“We’re here,” he says driving into a very colourful building. There’s a huge sign on the wall outside written Africa Connect, a map of Africa with different bright colours.

Judging by the type of people I see going in and out, I wouldn’t want to work here.

“I’m coming with you,” he says when I get out of the car.

I shake my head. He must not start with me!

“Watch him,” I say pointing at Mvelo on the back seat. “And don’t call Nkosana,” I say. This is an order.

People have already stopped and are looking at me by the time I push the reception door open.

Everybody freezes when I walk in. I stop and look around. It must be that way. I walk towards that door and immediately there's movement all around, it's chaos.

There are people standing around me, they seem to all be competing for my attention.

"Mrs Zulu, please come this way...."

"Is there anyone you want to see in particular...?"

"Would you like some tea...?"

They are all talking at the same time. This is not what I expected, I expected them to call the police on me or run away when they see me because I'm a cold-blooded murderer, that's what they've been saying all week, demonising me and dragging my name in the mud like I'm some animal with no feelings. They don't know shit about me, where do they think they get the right?

I push one of them aside and walk on to the door on the left. I ignore the security guard running behind me with some stupid register he says I must sign.

There are TV screens lining the wall on this passage, and on that screen is exactly the person I'm looking for. Today, the bullshit will end.

Everybody I've met as I make my way to that door at the end has looked at me with a shocked face.

They haven't seen anything yet, I'm going to shock them today, they will know me.

There's a sign on the door that reads "Live Studio". I think I'm in the right place.

I see three security guards running down the passage. They are running to me. There are people all over, the passage is filling up.

I push the door open and a bright light almost sends me back running. But I am Zandile Ngcobo, I walk on. There are cameras all over this room, and they all seem to be pointed at me. I can see his back. He turns around and freezes when he sees me approaching.

There are people here operating these cameras, they don't move.

I pull a chair and sit next to him on this bean-shaped desk or table or whatever they call it. There's a light above us that keeps flashing "on air".

He stands up. He looks like he wants to run.

"We are live on air, can I ask that you excuse me until I'm done," he whispers.

He's got to be kidding me.

He looks scared, really scared.

There are security guards and scores of people outside this studio. I can see all of them through the glass walls.

I lean back on the chair and cross my legs.

“You’ve had a lot to say about me over the week. I’m here now, ask me,” I say.

He tries to stand up again but sits back down immediately, it looks like someone from outside the studio is giving him instructions.

He clears his throat. Stutters a bit and keeps fidgeting with his earpiece. I can see his hands shaking. He’s sweating.

It takes him a few seconds to compose himself and his eyes are back to focusing on the camera on the left.

“We are now joined in studio by a special guest for an exclusive interview....”

Just as he starts speaking four people surround me. One pushing an earpiece in my ear and another clipping something at the back of my top and some woman applying powder on my face and lipstick and someone brushing my weave.

I push the one on my face off.

“I have to put make on you.....”

“Do I look like I need make up?” I snap.

She moves away slowly.

They're all done and gone in less than a minute and the next thing I'm being instructed to look at a certain camera.

The crowd is still outside the studio. I take it everybody here has stopped working. They are on their phones, some are taking pictures and typing on their phones.

"Mrs Zandile Zulu, thank you for finally agreeing to speak to us. Tell me, how was it spending half your life in jail, 17 years is a long time away,"he says.

That's the first thing he's going to ask me? After everything? But let me calm myself down, I know why I came here and I shouldn't let him get to me.

I clear my throat first.

"First of all, Bruce, I didn't "finally agree" to come here. You've never asked me to come here. But this morning I decided, after watching my life story and experiences being distorted, I decided that I needed to come out here and tell it myself,"I say.

He keeps nodding as I speak. He's still nervous. He looks like he's crossing fingers for me to not say something damaging.

"I want everyone to know that I'm not hiding behind high walls and hoping that the world doesn't find out who I am. I'm not ashamed of my life. I'm here, I'm still standing, after everything, I'm still standing with my head held up high"

“Secondly, I didn’t come here to seek pity or to justify what I did,”-I say.

He looks like he wants me to keep talking instead of him leading me with questions.

“So, this is how it goes, I went home to KwaZulu-Natal the day before my 20th birthday, pregnant. On the same night, after I told my mother that the father of my child wanted to marry me, she ran out screaming and an hour later came back with an elderly woman carrying a bag. I didnt understand what was happening until my mother pushed me to the floor and pressed my arms down with her knees and the woman tried to force legs open.....”

I raise my eyes once to look at the crowd outside the studio. There are many faces, but I can see only one, just one, it’s Nkosana’s. The look on his face says he’s hurt, he’s disappointed, he is broken.

I’m sorry but this is about me. He can’t stop me. It’s time he lets me fight my own battles.

And how did he get here so quick?

I turn my eyes back to this idiot infront of me.

“I ran, yes I did. I was young and pregnant and scared. See, my childhood was not easy, I had to learn to fend for myself at a very young age and I wasn’t going to let my child grow up like I did. Most of all, I wasn’t going to allow anyone to hurt him, never! I went back to Joburg and tried to forget about it. I knew I had done something bad and I prayed, I prayed hard to God to let me get away with it, for all the bad things he had allowed to happen to me, I needed him to make up for it by letting me have a normal life. By allowing my child’s father, the man who has loved me with all his heart since I was 14-years-old, the man who still loves me now like I have no flaws, I wanted God to allow me to have a life with him. I spoke to my mother, she was dead but I spoke to her almost every night when I was in that prison cell, telling her that I had a choice to make and it was an obvious one, I told her that although she never showed me love, I

knew that deep down she did love me, and if she had been in my position she would have done the same thing, she would have chosen her child.....”

I’m getting emotional. But I don’t have tears, they dried out a long time ago.

I look at the glass wall again. He’s still there, standing, watching me.

“The police came to arrest me as I was driving out to my wedding. While my future husband waited for me to arrive in a wedding dress with a bunch of flowers in my hand. I begged them to let me hold him, to let me hold my two children for the last time before I started paying for my sins. I never got that chance. And for 17 years that was all I longed for, to hold the child I had to kill for. To watch the two of them grow and to hold and protect them and tell them nobody was ever going to hurt them as long as I lived, not like my mother allowed people to hurt me.....”

I feel heavy presence behind me. I turn around and there is Nkosana. He’s given a chair. He sits next to me and holds my hand over the table.

I don’t know what this means.

He nods.

I continue.

“I was lucky enough that about 12 years ago a woman came into their lives and changed everything. She loved them like they were hers, she raised them into good men even though she for many years did not know where I was. Nkosana stood by me. There never was a day that went by where I thought he would give up on me, even at times when I wanted him to, he refused,”

He squeezes my hand tight.

“But, we have heard that you were not a very pleasant person in prison. Judging by the information we have you are not exactly a nice person to be around, does that part of you have anything to do with you killing your mother?”-Brian.

I look at Nkosana before I answer. This Brian guy is going to regret this later.

“See, that’s the problem. You’ve concluded that all the information you have is true. But none of those people you’ve spoken to know me. I did share a cell with that woman for months but everything she said to you was a lie. We got along very well, we became friends. She contracted TB and was moved to a single cell in the prison hospital. She asked to see me on the day she was released, she wanted to say goodbye and wish me well. I only told her the story of why I was in prison once and that was it,”

He raises his hand.

“Okay but let’s talk about that little incident at a restaurant in Rosebank, and that was just a few days after you came out of prison, you assaulted a man who tried to talk to you....

I shake my head. I feel Nkosana’s hand getting warm. This guy doesn’t know him, he’ll make him pay for this.

“Yes I did, I did that because a man I didn’t know came to me, to us, and offered to buy us drinks, when we refused he started getting aggressive and calling us names. Now, like I told you, I’ve had to fight all my life, that’s why I’m still standing. I’m currently fighting for my children to love and accept me, for my past to leave me and set me free, for my mistakes to stop haunting me. I’m here fighting for my dignity, for all these people you’ve been feeding

false information all week to see me as a human being who is trying to get a second chance in life.....”

My eyes move to the glass wall one more time. They are there, standing with their faces almost pressed to the glass. Some have their arms folded and others their hands in their pockets. Mqhele’s arm is around Hlomu’s shoulders. I spot Mpande, he is blinking rapidly, he mustn’t cry, not today, not here.

I have to finish this.

“Zandile, do you have any regrets? Are you remorseful at all for what you did to your mother?”

That question.

“I’ve paid my dues to society. I’ve done my punishment. But, speaking of regret, I don’t regret that I chose my son’s life, he was the innocent one in this situation. If you’ve ever carried a life inside you, you will know that you would walk on fire to protect them. Yes, I did kill my mother, I did spend 17 years in jail, I did cause a lot of suffering for a lot of people, but, if I had to be honest with you, my children were worth it, they were worth it all...”

“Mmmmmmm,” he says.

That sounds like him judging me.

I don’t see them through the glass wall anymore.

Whoah! They are walking in. They all stand behind us.

I see Brian's eyes going all over the place. He looks scared, nervous, like he doesn't know what to do next.

They stand still, quietly.

He turns his attention away from me and into the camera.

"Well, this was not planned at all but the whole Zulu family is with us here in studio. It's a rare occasion and remember you saw it on Africa Connect first," he says with what seems like a smile or a smirk or pride on his face.

We are not smiling.

"We are still on that exclusive interview with Zandile, the wife of the eldest Zulu brother whom last Sunday we learnt had been in prison until a few months ago for the murder of her own mother. A lot has been said and reported in the past few days but today she is here to tell the story herself....."-Brian.

He says it with no emotion at all, like it's a fictional story from a cheesy novel.

"So, Zandile, now that you are back home how have things been? How have your two children, you have two children right? How have they welcome you?"

He is getting personal now.

“My children are my children, it’s going to take time because they are just getting to know me but they know that I love them more than I love myself,” I say.

“We all thought Hlomu was their mother. It looked a bit strange but we all knew Hlomu as their mother, do you feel that she has a stronger bond with them?”

I turn around to look at Hlomu. I don’t know how to answer that.

She moves slightly forward and starts talking. This could end up bad, this is Hlomu we are talking about.

“I’m sorry Brian, but what do our children have to do with your audience?” - she asks.

Oh crap!

“Well Hlomu, I’m sure you’ll understand this since you’re a Journalist by profession, your family is prominent and well known and so yes the public is interested in your affairs,” he says with attitude.

She takes a deep breath first.

“See Brian, there is a difference between what is of public interest and what the public is interested in. But, ofcourse you wouldn’t know that since you faked your Journalism qualification. And if you spent your time trying to learn about the job instead cashing in on kickbacks from individuals and companies in return for free publicity on your show, trust me you would have learnt a lot by now,” she says.

I've been hearing gulps all over.

"This interview is over, let's go," she says looking at me.

She has that look on her face. The one that sends shivers down your spine.

He attempts to say something but I think the look stops him.

Nkosana stands up.

"We're done here," he says.

He's right, I've said what I came here to say.

I stand up and we walk hand in hand out the studio door followed by the whole family.

It is so full outside that security has to push people aside for us to be able to walk out. People are better behaved than they were when I walked in this building. Not a single one of them takes a picture of us with their phones.

"Errr Nkosana, hi," a man rushes to us with a big smile on his face as we struggle to walk down the passage.

"I'm the CEO of this TV station....."

“Fuck off,” Nkosana says and we continue walking. The poor CEO man is left still stretching his arm out for a handshake.

It’s difficult to even get out of reception. There are cameras and media waiting for us outside. How does media come to another media house to do a story? I’m gonna have to ask Hlomu about this madness.

We are helped by security to even make it to parking. My driver is standing outside the car with Mvelo, I hope they didn’t take pictures of my grandchild.

Nobody has said anything as we walk on, but all of them come to my car and gather around it.

There’s still no talking.

They all walk back to their cars. Hlomu took Mvelo.

I feel light. Like I’m really really free now. I feel like I can walk in public without worrying. I said all that is in my heart. Maybe I made a mistake, maybe this will make things worse but I’m free.

“I’m proud of you,” he says pulling me close to him.

I’m a little surprised by this.

“I thought.....”

“No Zah, you did well, you did great. You stood up, and I’m proud of you, for all this,” he says.

I put my head on his chest and close my eyes.

“We’re going home,” he says to the driver.

That’s all I need. Home.

I’ve switched my phone off. It’s been ringing non-stop all afternoon, I don’t know where all these people got my numbers.

I’ve come out and poured my heart out, lay my business in public for everyone although it’s really none of their business, what do they want from me now?

I took a nap after when we arrived home while Nkosana sat on the chair in our bedroom and watched me. He just sat there, watching me. when I woke up two hours later he was still there, watching me.

“That was peaceful, I even closed the door and you didn’t wake up screaming,” he says, still sitting on that chair watching me.

He’s right. I slept peacefully.

He clears his throat and rubs the palms of his hands together.

“I once read this article about The Resolute,” he says and pauses.

I’ve never heard of The Resolute before.

“It was a ship. A long time ago the queen of England sent an army of men to sea to search for a missing explorer,”

Huh?

“They travelled on a ship called The Resolute. They spent a long time at sea searching and searching until it was winter and the sea got too cold. There were icebergs all over, making it hard for the ship to sail, so they abandoned it, got on another ship and left it there. It was left alone, floating alone for over a year with no people inside. But it didn’t stay still, although no one was driving it, it made its own direction and floated to where one day, another ship, an American one found it,”

Where is he going with this story? It doesn’t sound like something he’d be interested in.

“And so the Americans took it back home with them. It wasn’t just any ship, it was neatly and perfectly crafted, beautiful and strong and unique. But in all that time it floated alone trying to find its way, it suffered,”he says.

His face as he tells the story says it means more to him than some tale about some ancient ship.

This is how the author of the article in The Illustrated London News described the ship’s condition when it was found: “The ship was found not to have sustained any very material damage. The ropes, indeed, were hard and inflexible as chains; the rigging was stiff, and cracked at the touch; the tanks in the hold had burst, the ironwork was rusted, the paint was

discoloured with bilge-water, and the mast and topgallantmast were shattered; but the hull had escaped unscathed and the ship was not hurt in any vital part.”

“Eventually the British found out that the Americans had their ship, they could not believe it. There was no way that the ship could have survived being ice-locked for that long and worse, it was still able to sail all the way to America,”

“At that time the two countries were sworn enemies, they were on the verge of going to war over slavery which England was against and was trying to force America to abolish. So, as a peace offering, the Americans gave the ship back as a gift to the Queen of England,” he says.

I still don't get where he is going with this.

“The British were happy, this ship was after all some kind of a miracle. A great achievement because even they did not believe that they could build something so strong and so fearless. And many years later, when its body started crumbling and the wood was dying, they still did not believe in letting the Resolute die. So its body was dissected and a unique desk was made from the wood. It was then sent to America as a present for the President,” he says.

Since when is he so learned?

“The desk was stored in the basement of the White House for years until in the 1960s, the wife of President John F Kennedy, well know for supporting equal rights for black Americans, found it, cleaned it and took it to his office. Kennedy used the desk until he died. Until today, it is still one of the most priceless history objects,” he says, stops, and stares.

I'm still curious.

“It is you Zandile. You are The Resolute. You are timeless, you are unbreakable, you are rare, you are immortal and even when you die, you will live forever. Just when life thinks it’s done with you, you rise back up, bigger and stronger. It’s you,” he says.

My heart skips, now I know where he was going with this.

He smiles and looks at his hands.

“What you did today.....” he says, smiles and shakes head.

I smile back.

He stands up and comes to stand over me.

“You were made just for me, God created you for me,” he says and walks out.

I’m left smiling to myself.

“I’m ready,” I say.

“You look beautiful, as always,” he says leading me out the bedroom door.

We are going to Xolie's house. She's cooked dinner and invited everyone over. She thought it would be a good gesture after what happened today.

I'm happy about it. I want to be surrounded by all the people I know love me. I want to sit and eat and laugh with them today. They are all I have.

I'm dressed up, high heels and all. It's not a formal thing, I mean we are only going to Xolie's house but I feel good when I look good. And today, I feel like I achieved something great. I'm not where I want to be yet but this is a start.

"Are you really going to get that guy fired," I ask him as we walk down the stairs.

"He's already been fired," he says.

That was quick.

And Hlomu, yeses! Nkosana once said she is a sweet and caring person, but once you get on her wrong side, you'll wish you never met her.

"Okay, I'm not complaining, he deserves it," I say.

Maybe one day he will see the need to apologise to me.

We've just stepped in the kitchen when the door swings open. I'm so scared I grab Nkosana's arm.

“Zah!”- that’s the first thing he shouts when he walks in.

He freezes when he sees us there.

He walks to us, slowly until he is standing in front of me.

“Are you okay?” he asks, the big eyes all out. He looks like he’s been running.

“I’m okay Sbani, when did you get here?” I ask him. I want to step forward and hug him, but I’m not sure yet if that would be a good idea.

“Baba, are you okay?” he says looking at his father.

“I’m fine boy,” that’s all he says.

He keeps looking at me and then him and then me.

“I took the first flight out of PE. I had to fly to Cape Town first and then to Joburg, that’s why I’m only arriving now. Are you okay after that....?” he asks looking at me.

He seems anxious, like he thinks this is the worst thing that’s ever happened to me.

I flash a smile. I have to convince him that everything is fine.

“I’m more than okay. I’m free,” I say.

The urge to hug him visits me again but that voice tells me to stand still.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

Oh by the way.

“To Sambulo’s, for dinner,”-Nkosana.

“Okay, let’s go,”-Sbani.

Just like that?

“Aren’t you going to bring your bags in?” I ask.

He looks like he’s just remembered something.

“I didn’t bring any bags. I just grabbed my wallet and phone and drove to the airport when I heard you were on TV. It was all over Twitter and other social networks,”he says.

I don’t even want to know what is being said about me by those shallow social network people.

“Let’s go,” he says touching my arm.

I think he is reaching out. I think I don't know how to react because I wasn't expecting him to.

We take a bigger car. It's not just the two of us today so a proper car with a closed roof and acceptable speed will do.

My eyes keep meeting Sbani's in a rearview mirror. He's sitting at the back. It's awkward but I love that he is here. Atleast Lwandle answers my calls, Sbani, he's been cold to me from day-one.

"How did you get home?"-Nkosana.

"I took a cab,"

"You should have called,"-Nkosana.

"I assumed everybody was preoccupied. Where is Mvelo?" he asks.

"With your mother,"-Nkosana.

I'll pretend that last statement doesn't hurt a little.

"Okay," he says and looks out the window.

I hope he doesn't start asking about Nqoba and Gugu. We sometimes hide these things from them, even from Ntsika because we don't want them worrying too much about home. Nqoba is still not back. He's still trying to fix his family.

I brought a bottle of wine with me, just because that's what you do when you go to someone's house for dinner. My knowledge has improved since my days of not knowing the difference between red meat and pink fish.

"Whoah! Where did you come from?" Xolie shouts when Sbani walks in with us.

He laughs and hugs her.

"What's that? bring it," she says snatching the bottle of wine from my hand.

Nkosana laughs and walks on to join his brothers.

The kids come running to Sbani and almost trip him when they all try to hug him at the same time. They are all speaking at once as usual. He picks up his son last and walks on to the lounge.

I hear by the voices that he met Hlomu on the way. He speaks to her like he's speaking to his mother. I guess that's what she really is to him. I must just accept that.

"Dinner is almost ready,"-Xolie.

She's in high spirits. This is the first time I've seen her like this since that night in jail.

Hlomu seems to have gotten over it quickly. She got mad at Mqhele and showed it. I think they talked about it afterwards and got through it. Or is it that she was also involved in that crime that landed us there in the first place. I still don't know how we got out of it, but I was told it was over and nobody was going to go to jail for it. It must be something they did that night they

disappeared, I think they went to make sure their tracks were covered and whoever was pursuing it was taken care of.

“What? Did you bring this? You’re a fast learner,” -Hlomu. She says this as she pulls a cup out of the cupboard. Alcohol is a problem in this family.

“We are doing the table sitting tonight. No eating on your lap,” -Xolie.

She’s serious, the table is set with candles and everything. Her house is the most homely. I can see Sambulo’s expensive taste all over it.

“The kids will sit in front of the TV, there’s too many of them,” -Xolie.

She’s walking to and from the lounge dropping off plates and bowls.

I decide to help her out while the other diva here is leaning on the cupboard with a cup in her hand.

I’m glad nobody has asked me if I’m okay since I got here, I’m tired of that question.

Amanda is not here.

When the table is ready they all stand up and walk to the dining room. Nkosana is carrying Niya. How is he going to eat with her on....?

Oh well, he’s going to eat with her on his lap.

I go sit next to him. The kids are sitting in front of the TV. I must start the culture of praying before we eat here. In fact I must introduce the culture of going to church, what kind of family is this?

"Hi," a voice says.

We all turn around. It's Lwandle. How?

He has a small bag with him. He's looking at me.

"I'm fine," I say before he can ask.

The last time I saw him he was being kicked out. He's never apologised to his father for that. Pride, they all have it.

"Come, sit down," Xoli says pulling a chair for him.

But he walks to me first, stands behind me and puts one arm around my shoulders. It's a hug, He's standing, I'm sitting, but it's a hug. I hug him back.

"How did you get here?"-Hlomu.

"I went to Durban Station and told one of the drivers, Stix, that I needed to go home but I didn't have money. So he took me but said I must tell baba when I get here why his load money is short," he says.

Shame. Poor thing.

“He dropped me off at the gate. Sbani told me you were all here,” he says.

“You look hungry,”-Xolie.

He does look hungry.

He shakes all his fathers’ hands before going to deal with the kids’ chaos and coming back to sit down. But he avoids all eye contact with Nkosana. I know Nkosana won’t say it but he is happy to see him.

I keep looking at him and Sbani as they eat like typical young men. I don’t understand how they are still so slim, actually all the men of this family, the way they eat and the way these wives of theirs feed them is scary.

We haven’t talked about this morning. Nobody is prepared to raise it. I know that if Nqoba was here he would have already made a joke about it. I do miss his motor-mouth and hoarse voice.

“I’ll take her to bed,” Hlomu says as she takes Niya from Nkosana. She fell asleep a long time ago but he kept carrying her. The child is fat. I hope she’ll lose some weight now that she’s walking properly.

I help Xolie clean up the table.

“I’ll wash the dishes,” I say.

I'm not one for hard labour but let me just do it. I'm sure the helper is cosying up in front of the TV in that little house of hers now.

She shrugs and walks off. I'm left alone in the kitchen. It's smaller than mine but it's warmer and homely, you can tell it's actually used for cooking, with mine I'm sure we have more sex in it than cooking.

"I'll dry and pack,"-Lwandle says behind me.

He is so tall I have to look up at him.

"You should have used the dishwasher though, but this is fine too," he says with that smirk that Mqhele normally has.

There's a dishwasher?

I laugh and continue with what I'm doing.

Now I don't know what to say.

"If I ever see that Brian I'm going to kick his ass," he says.

This child.

"You are a kid you shouldn't be kicking people's arses," I say.

“A kid this tall? I’m a grown man, plus I’m learning to be independent now since I’m officially poor,” he says. He laughs as he says this.

He is just like his father. Had he apologised I’m sure his life would be back to normal now.

“How is gogo treating you?” I ask.

He has this smile on his face.

“I love gogo but she sure knows how to make one’s life hell. She makes us go to church, on Thursday night. When people our age go out to party, and that is Durban, people party, she makes us go to church,”

I’m laughing. I can’t help it.

“The worst part though is that she locks the gate at 7pm. Everyone must be inside by 7pm or you will know her. Other than all her shenanigans, she’s still my gogo and I do like being around her. The only time we get a break is when malume(uncle) comes by to pick us up and drive with us around the township all day on weekends. We go from one of his baby mamas to another all day, and trust me some of them are not very nice,” he says.

He is funny.

Nkosana did say them living with Hlomu’s mother was the best thing. That’s where they ran to when they found themselves homeless and realised that that their so called friends were not as loyal as they thought.

We only found out about it when she called saying they had been visiting for a week. They normally went there once in a while and left soon enough to escape her dragging them to church on Sundays.

He sends her money but they still have to take a taxi from KwaMashu to varsity every day. The car is still parked where we left it, I believe.

“He will come around eventually and give you all your benefits back. The bright side though is that you can now focus on your studies instead of parties. And stop with the girls I don’t want another grandchild,” I say waving a warning finger.

He blushes.

“I can’t help it if they can’t keep their hands off me.....” he says with a laugh and rushes off before I can start with the mothering.

What the heck?

I walk back in the lounge with a smile stuck on my face. Everybody looks at me. I won’t even start telling them that their son is just like them.

“That’s baba’s shoe,” Phakeme shouts from the living room.

They just can’t speak normally. They always have to shout.

“It is, it’s baba Nqoba’s sneaker!! I know it, he said he was going to give to me when I’m older, he bought it from Brazil,” he screams pointing at the TV screen.

What is this child on about?

We all rush to the living room.

They all look at each other.

It’s an accident scene. On TV. It looks bad.

“Where is this?”-Qhawe.

In Mooi River.

What would Nqoba be doing in Mooi River?

“Look there is his jacket too, on the ground. It’s his Sundowns tracksuit jacket!!!” Phakeme again.

It could be anyone’s jacket. That’s what we are all thinking. But there’s just that thing that says we should be panicking, I don’t know what it is.

“Where is my phone? can someone call Nqoba!!!”-Mqhele. He doesn’t seem bothered much. He looks like he wants to call Nqoba so he can tell us he’s fine wherever he is and put a stop to this madness.

There are police and ambulances and crashed cars all over the place. There's a truck too.

"It says the line is busy, it just beeps," -Mpande.

EIGHT PEOPLE CONFIRMED DEAD ON N3 ACCIDENT

The headline keeps flashing on the screen.

"What car did Nqoba hire?" someone asks.

"He said it was a Mercedes," someone responds.

We still can't get him on the phone.

"Go upstairs, all of you!!"-Nkosana shouts to the kids. They all walk away reluctantly.

Someone, seemingly a cop picks up the sneaker and the bloodied jacket from the ground and tosses them somewhere.

A phone rings. It's Hlomu's.

"It's Nqoba!" she shouts.

“Nqoba,” she answers.

I don’t know if this happened too fast or too slow, but her face takes away all the hope we had that we were just being paranoid.

“Where is he?” she asks in a trembling voice. And then tears.

She puts the phone on the table and walks off. I can tell she’s not sure where she is going.

The person on the other side is still talking.

Sbani is the only one still sane enough to pick the phone up and put it on loud-speaker.

“I found this phone inside a black Mercedes, it looks like a hired car. I called the number saved as Wife three times but there was no answer. So I called this one saved as Mrs Zulu.....” he’s just going on and on.

“Yes but where is the person who was in that car?”-Mqhele.

He pauses. He must be wondering who this is now.

“I’m his brother,” Mqhele.

“I don’t know,” he says with a sigh.

“There are eight dead people here, so far. Many more are injured. I don’t know which one of them was driving this car but it is completely messed up on the driver’s side. I just called because I found this phone...”

Mqoqi has his hands over his head.

Xolie is hysterical. I don’t know where Hlomu is.

The rest of us are quiet.

“They are taking the injured ones to Pietermaritzburg. I’ll keep the phone. Ask for Constable Jabulani Mlotshwa when you get to Mooi River police station. I have to go now,” he says and hangs up.

There is no movement until Sambulo throws himself on the couch.

“Go upstairs!!”-Mqhele. He’s looking at the three of us. I don’t know when Hlomu came back.

We stand still.

“I said go upstairs!!!” he screams.

We rush off immediately.

The crying is getting louder. Nkosana is on his phone, most of them are.

We gather in Xolie's bedroom.

They are crying. I don't know what to say to them. My heart is pounding. This can't be happening.

"What if he's dead? What if....?"

"No Hlomu, we don't know that, he could be among the injured," I say. I don't believe any of the things I'm saying.

"They said the car was completely damaged on the driver's side. And his clothes on the ground?" Xolie says in-between the tears.

She's right, but we have to think positive.

"We can't deal with this, not now," Hlomu.

Mqhele walks in, his face hard. He goes straight to his wife and hugs her.

"Stop crying," he says.

She cries harder.

"Stop crying Mahlomu!" he shouts pushing her off and putting his hands on her shoulders.

“We are going to go now. Sbani and Lwandle will stay here with you and the kids. Don’t leave this house,” he says, looking into her eyes.

She doesn’t respond.

He looks at all three of us.

“Stop crying. You will scare the kids,”- and with that he walks out the door.

The house is quiet.

“If Nqoba is dead, it’s over, they are over! They can’t function without one another. It will break them! It will tear us all apart!”

Lawd! she’s been speaking for as long as we’ve been in this room. She’s pacing up and down like a mad woman.

“Zah, try Gugu again,”she says.

I’ve tried her a hundred times, she’s still not answering her phone. Besides, it’s after midnight, she has a new-born baby surely she’s not sitting in bed looking at her cellphone.

“Hlomu, let’s just wait and hear what they find when they get there, they’ve been gone for over three hours I’m sure they are almost there,” I say.

The best thing we can do now is stay positive.

“Zandile, you know how to pray, please pray. Xolie you go to church, pray, just pray that he’s alive!”she says.

I’ve never seen her like this.

“I’m going to call that cop back, maybe he’s found something out,”she says.

There we go again!

“Calm down Hlomu,” Xolie.

She’s been saying this all night.

I don’t want her to call that cop. I don’t want them to get to Mooi River anytime soon. I don’t want to face the possible reality anytime soon, I’m not ready.

“Sambulo!”-Xolie.

“Yes...”

“Okay,”

“We’re fine..”

“They’re sleeping...”

That’s all she says and hangs up.

“They’re in Mooi River. They went to the hospital there but didn’t find him. They’re driving on to Pietermaritzburg now, if they don’t find him in the hospital there they’re going to start searching mortuaries,” she says.

The way she says it alone kills all hope. You can just tell she’s thinking the worst.

Gugu is somewhere being angry not knowing that the man she’s angry at is most probably dead, that her child is now fatherless.

Sbani walks in. I thought he was sleeping.

We all look at him, but he just walks in and goes to sit on the bed.

What now?

“I’m here to watch you. That’s what baba told me to do,”he says.

Oh great! Now we are being guarded by a kid.

Hlomu is right when she says they can't function without each other. It's always been like that, especially the eldest five.

I'm worried because I'm seeing the same pattern with the small kids. They all tend to go wherever Phakeme takes them. He decides what they do, where they play and he's the one always breaking fights between Ssisekelo and the twins. He also looks after them. They all go to the same school and the other kids know that that you do not mess with the big-eyed boys.

What freaked me out completely though was their reaction on that night when we were taken by police. When that cop slapped Hlomu they all, Phakeme, Sisekelo and the twins, they all stood up, even the cop himself was shocked. They are eight, six and five, and what I saw was disturbing.

I don't even want to go into the fact that they stayed up, next to the bed, watching over Niya and Mvelo the whole night. I'm going to have to talk to their mothers about this. If they are not careful, they are going to end up raising the same men as the men they married. And that is dangerous, they are dangerous because they will do anything for each other, anything even if it means taking lives.

My phone.

"Zandile,"

"My love,"

"He's not in any of the hospitals.." he says. I can just feel the emotion in his voice. He's given up.

“Are you sure?”

He sighs.

“Yes. We made calls when we left Joburg and our people here have looked everywhere. We got confirmation from hospital management too. He is not here,” he says.

“Nkosana don’t give up, keep looking,” I say, I know I’m not making any sense but I want this call to end now, I can’t stand hearing him in pain, I can’t.

“I will. When the sun comes out, everybody go to their houses and pack. We must all be in Mbuba by noon tomorrow, including the kids,” he says and hangs up.

CHAPTER 13

APRIL 18, 2015 24 COMMENTS

Xolie’s mother suggests we put the mattress on the floor and light a candle.

But Hlomu’s aunt says we shouldn’t, not until we are certain.

They’ve been gone all afternoon. We saw them briefly when we arrived but they all left immediately after that. They went back to the same mortuaries, even though they looked and looked and were assured that he was not there.

We are sure he was in that accident. The car-hire company confirmed that the car involved in the accident was rented out to him. He called them before he left to inform them that he was driving to Joburg and would leave the car with their branch there.

His bags were also in the boot. His petrol card was on the car ash tray and records show that he swiped it at the Marianhill toll-gate about two hours earlier. His wallet was not found so we assumed it was in his pocket, which would have made it easier for him to be identified if he was taken to hospital.

What we know is, where ever he is, he is either dead or seriously injured because otherwise he would have contacted us by now.

Gugu is still not answering or returning calls. They have sent one of the drivers to Ulundi to tell her what happened. She's going to have to come here and sit on this mattress under a blanket and bury her husband.

There is only one grave there on that open veld, there's going to be two now.

We have covered our heads and put scarves over our shoulders. I see this as us already mourning but I couldn't say no when everybody was doing it.

I'm scared to call them to get an update. I'm afraid they might tell me something I don't want to hear.

"Mamiza, what is going on?"-Msebe

I don't know where he came from. And that's a deep question coming from a five-year-old.

Xolie brushes his head with her hand and tells him to go play with the others outside.

“I don’t know what to tell him. I wish I was them, their innocence will protect them from the pain. I’m worried about Phakeme, he’s been sitting alone in the bedroom all day, he knows his father is gone,”she says.

I know Xolie concluded a long time ago that it’s over. I’m still holding on to hope with a thin shoe-string.

“Hlomu’s mom said she was going to bring a bucket of cakes, for when people start arriving. I’m going to tell Lethu to bring drinks and more tea because we can’t leave this house,”she says.

Hlomu’s mother was at work so her aunt arrived first, just after Xolie’s mother.

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Their families are coming. I’m the only one with no mother or relative here.

“Have you spoken to Sambulo?” I ask.

“Yes, just now, they’re still in Maritzburg, I think they are just delaying coming back home and facing reality,” she says.

Lord! I came home for this? I left prison for this?

The news haven’t travelled yet, the only thing I see in the news today is that that Brian guy has been fired. He was escorted out of the building by security. It’s true that money can buy anything, it has just bought his downfall.

I hope my father won't come to the funeral, if there's going to be a funeral.

The yard is filling up. I spot that woman who made traditional beer the other day. Hlomu must have called her.

"Bab'Mzimela is here," Xolie.

I haven't seen him since I was a teenager. It's strange that he stayed in Mbuba and was an active member of this community without anyone knowing he helped the Zulu children escape. I think the people here would have killed him if they had found out.

His used to be one of the poorest families in this village but I hear he now owns a shop and has cows enough to pay lobola for Oprah.

He stops and stares when he enters the main house and sees me. I know it's not the usual stare that I get for being a perfect combination of perfect body parts, it's the Mbuba stare, the one filled with unspoken words and judgment.

"MaNgcobo," he says after redeeming himself.

I nod. I don't know what to say.

"Call the boys. We have to empty the dining room, leave nothing, not even the TV stand," he says and walks on to the other people in the house.

Huh?

I'm beginning to think there is something they are not telling us. I have a feeling they are waiting to get home and gather all of us in one place and tell us what we don't want to hear.

It's not helping that Hlomu and Xolie are emotional wrecks and I can't go and tell them about what this man has just asked me to do.

And then enters Bab'Ngcobo with his wife. Now I'm more convinced that we are preparing for a funeral.

They came back early in the evening. All they said was that they found nothing. Nkosana said they had people all over, people in high places helping them but no hospital or mortuary has him. What's worse though is that they said three of the cars burned and the people in them were burnt beyond recognition.

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I think we must come to terms with the fact that Nqoba got caught up in that fire somehow.

Maybe he crawled out of his car only to end up in the cars that burst into flames. I think that's the only explanation.

Nkosana said they've been advised to provide samples for DNA testing, but he said they said it was going to take time as they believed the number of burnt bodies was four. The death toll from that accident has risen to 12. We are not the only ones walking around with scarves over our shoulders.

We had put the mattress on the floor and lit a candle but when they arrived, the first thing Mqhele did was order the women to stand up and took the mattress back to the bedroom.

“We are not doing any of this until we find my brother. There will be no mattress or candles until Gugu gets here,” he shouted and left us all standing there terrified.

His wife followed him to their rondavel and that was the last time we saw them.

The driver sent to deliver the message to Gugu has not returned or called. It would be a shame if she heard the news through the media, which could be any time now because it seems everyone who is anyone is assisting to find him.

I’m waiting for Nkosana to come to bed. He is somewhere with Ngcobo and Gumbi discussing I don’t know what.

The kids are with their grandmothers’ in the main house. There are too many people here today.

He walks in just as I switch the light off.

“Should I run you a bath?” I ask. That’s all I have to offer.

He shakes his head, takes his clothes off and gets in bed. He doesn’t smell as fresh as he always does. I want to ask questions but I feel that would be torturing him.

“Go to sleep,” he says tapping my back once.

I fidget.....

He taps my back three times.

I lie still and close my eyes. I doubt he will sleep at all.

Someone is at the door!

I open my eyes and he's already getting up.

I switch on the side-lamp but he jumps to my side quickly and switches it off.

There was light for only a second but I swear that was a gun I saw in his hand.

"Go to the bathroom," he whispers.

Why?

Oh Crap!

I jump and run to the bathroom.

“Bafo!” a voice I don’t recognise says from outside.

“Bafo, it’s me, Gaba, open,” the voice says.

I hear the door opening.

“Zandile come back to bed,” he shouts before closing the door behind him.

He doesn’t let whoever it is inside our room but I can hear them talking outside.

“I’ve been calling you, all of you all night, what is this I hear about Nqoba? I was with him last night, just before he left he stopped by my house,” this guy says, he has a loud voice.

I don’t hear Nkosana’s response but I can hear there’s a third person now. The others must have woken up. How did this guy enter the gate? It’s always locked.

“No no no he was supposed to meet someone just after the Mooi River toll-gate. I don’t know who but he was on the phone with them the whole time. Where is his phone?” the mystery guy.

The door opens, Nkosana rushes in and takes Nqoba’s phone from the pedestal. He’s out again before I can ask what’s going on.

“He left my house at about 7pm, just after receiving a call from that person. Check calls from that time,”he says.

There’s a lot of them outside my door now.

“There’s no answer,” Nkosana says.

I want to go stand next to the door so I can hear everything clearly but he could open it any time.

“Something is going on, how does a person go missing from an accident scene? I’ll get my boys on it,”the guy again.

“We have people on it but it’s not helping,”- that’s Qhawe.

“No, this does not need people in high places, it needs township boys,”the guy again.

What’s he talking about? It’s 3am, who is going to look for Nqoba at this time? And who on earth was he going me meet with in that ghost town?

“We can’t talk here, Mqoqi let’s go to your room,”Qhawe, and with that the voices fade.

What the heck was that all about?

She only picks up when I call her for the third time.

“Hlomu, there’s someone here, what’s going on?” I ask.

She sounds like she was fast asleep. I know she loves sleeping but there’s a crisis here.

“Someone where Zandile? There are people all over here, we are preparing for a funeral remember?”

She sounds annoyed.

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“No, someone has just arrived, he says he saw Nqoba yesterday and that he was going to meet someone and that...”

“Wait wait wait.... I don’t understand what you’re saying. Mqhele is not in bed. Did they leave again?” she asks.

Why must she be so slow?

“No, they are in Mqoqi’s room. Someone called Gaba is here.....”

“Gaba? that’s my cousin,” she says.

I’m confused.

“Well, he’s here. He said he thinks something is going on and he’s sent his boys to find out,”

“His boys? things are going to get dangerous. But I want to sleep now, go to sleep, nothing we do or say now will make any difference,” she says and hangs up.

I should have called Xolie instead, and what does she mean things are going to get dangerous?

“You’re supposed to be sleeping and not on the phone,” -Nkosana.

He walked in before I could put my phone under the pillow.

“We’re leaving. I’ll explain in the morning,” he says and kisses me on the cheek.

I’m getting used to this. Let me go back to sleep.

“You must be Lwandle’s mother,”- the woman I now know is Hlomu’s aunt says when she finds me alone in the kitchen.

“Yes, I’m Zandile,” I say.

I hear she is a colourful character.

“What are you doing here so early?” she asks.

“Making breakfast. I don’t know how many people are here so I’ll just make as much food as I can,” I say.

She nods and moves on to open the fridge, takes out an apple and sits on a bar-stool. I thought this was where she is supposed to offer to help me.

“Make some chutney too, with a lot of chillies, I need something to get me fired up,” she says still sitting there biting her apple.

She really is something else.

She is Hlomu’s father’s sister. From what I’ve heard she thinks she is in charge of everyone and everything. She does look a lot like Hlomu. You can tell she was beautiful in her young days.

“I hear you were in jail,” she says, just like that.

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This is about to get awkward. I’m not comfortable answering questions from people I don’t really know.

“Urgh don’t worry about it, I went in and out of there in my heyday. But it was never for a long time, just a couple of months at a time,” she says.

Whaaat?

I raise my eyebrows.

“Yep, for shoplifting, assault, and a few other things I can’t remember,” she says like it’s nothing major.

“Assault?”

“Yes, I used to sort out any bitch who got close to my man. I didn’t play games. See this scar here..?”

She pulls up her sleeve and shows me a scar on the left arm.

“I got it from Doris, the bitch stabbed me but not before I rearranged her face. In the end she got the man but wherever she is, she knows about me,” she says.

What conversation is this so early in the morning?

“Hlomu never said anything about you being in...”

“She doesn’t know. You know she’s a princess that one and that man she married treats her like glass. My family never knew the life I was living in Joburg, they believed I was a nurse..”

“A nurse?”

“Yes, I had a nurse uniform that I wore every time I went back home, but I was a hustler.....” she says.

I laugh. I can't help it. She really is something else.

She stands up after finishing the apple and walks back to the fridge.

“There's nothing to drink here. What do you do in this place without alcohol?”

Huh? It's 6am.

“There's wine there in.....”

“Ay I don't drink that stuff, it's for white people. I want a Savanna,” she says.

There is no Savanna in this house. I don't even know anyone who drinks Savanna, especially not a woman in her 50s at 6am!

She settles for orange juice.

I've been chopping onions and tomatoes for her chutney. Not even a little help from her even when the onion was making me cry my eyeballs out.

“Was it your father?” she asks after a long silence.

I turn around to look at her. Her face is serious now.

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“Was it him?” she asks again.

Our eyes are locked. How can she tell?

I nod.

“Mmmmmmm with me it was the pastor,” she says before taking a sip of her juice.

“I kept quiet about it until I was 17, and then one day I packed my bags and ran off to Joburg with a friend. I wrote a letter to my mother telling her I had been accepted to nursing school at Bara Hospital. The next time I went home was for her funeral, years later,” she says.

It’s like listening to my own life story.

“I left again but Hlomu’s father came to look for me when I didn’t come back again for years. He found me and left still believing I was a nurse. I came home atleast twice a year after that, mostly because he had married Hlomu’s mother, she made that place home for all of us,” she says.

She talks non-stop. I can’t even get a chance to ask her questions.

“So how much lobola did that man who never smiles pay for you? He should have paid double,” she says.

She’s hilarious!

“Well, there was nobody to pay lobola to, we just went and got married without all that,” I say.

She stops and stares, shocked.

“I understand,” she says and drops her eyes.

I’m surprised nobody has woken up with all her talking and my laughing.

“I’m done, would you like to eat now?” I ask.

She nods.

I dish up the chutney, eggs and bacon and put the plate in-front of her.

She looks confused but picks up a spoon and starts eating. I walk back to the stove.

“No....no...no my dear, is this how you cook?” she says before I can even get to the stove.

I don’t understand.

She puts the spoon down and looks at me with her arms folded across her chest.

“You must stop cooking. Don’t even attempt to do it again, it’s not your strong point. I can’t even chew this egg,” she says.

Is she trying to offend me on purpose?

“You’re a bad bad cook, and this is just breakfast. I don’t want to know what your main course tastes like. Now, don’t worry about it men love women who can’t cook, forget what people say it’s all a myth,”

Okay.

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“You are already too pretty, so you’re fine there. Now, your strength must be in bed, you must be a sex goddess to make up for the horrible food you feed that man. Every night after he finishes dinner, walk around the house naked, he’ll forget about the trauma.....”

Whoah! there are kids in this house! They could be awake!

“Do you want to know how I used to keep my men..?”

No, I don’t think so, someone please walk in here and save me.

“Be on top, take control...!”

Oh God!

“Or just buy already cooked food and say you cooked it yourself, and then give him sex,” she says.

“But he will know.....”

“He’s a man, they’re not that smart. Is there still more eggs? Let me make breakfast, we are throwing all that stuff you cooked away,” she says, stands up and pushes me away from the stove.

I have never!

“Do not corrupt this poor girl MaDladla,” someone says. It’s Hlomu’s mother. She’s all cleaned up and dressed like she’s going somewhere, she has Niya on her hip.

I hope she didn’t hear that weird conversation.

“She doesn’t need me for that,”-aunt.

That wasn’t even corrupting me that was.....

“Your brother is coming today, why can’t he just stay at his house and come on Saturday morning?”

I assume they are talking about Hlomu's uncle. He's another interesting character from what I hear.

I will talk to Hlomu's mother about Lwandle and Mbulelo later.

I make up an excuse and leave the kitchen, these old women are as blunt as a butter-knife and they couldn't care less about it.

I know Hlomu is still sleeping, that woman can sleep all day, I don't know how she does it.

I have to clean our room before Nkosana comes back and acts all disgusted at something as small as a crooked mat on the bathroom floor.

Oh My God!!

"Help!!!"

I slam the door and run. It raised its head the moment I opened the door! I swear our eyes met.

"There's a snake in my room! A snake!" I scream running all over the yard.

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I have goosebumps all over my skin! I'm more scared of snakes than death itself.

“Where is it?”-Mzimela.

“On the bed, it’s black!” I shout.

He walks to my room followed by Ngcobo and Lwandle. I don’t know where they all came from, the yard was empty just now.

They open the door slowly and shut it again immediately.

“Get a stick,”-Ngcobo says to Lwandle.

“It’s curled up on the bed. It doesn’t look aggressive,” -Mzimela.

It’s a snake! A big black snake! What does he mean it doesn’t look aggressive?

“Stand that side and I’ll stand here, I’m going to throw something at it so it raises its head, when it does, hit it on the head,”-Ngcobo.

I don’t even want to go close to all this.

They’ve thrown three things at it but it still won’t raise its head, it lies still. Everybody has gathered at my door now and I’m standing at a distance. I don’t even want to see the bloody thing again.

“This is strange,” I hear Mzimela say.

“It is, it should be reacting by now,”-Ngcobo.

“Someone go get Jeyes Fluid,”-aunt.

Phakeme runs off to the main house.

Why didn't I think of that? It will chase it away.

But it doesn't, the bloody thing is still sleeping comfortably on my bed from what I hear.

I move closer so I can see what is happening.

There are three men in the house now, each with a stick. They won't dare to go too close to it because it might just strike unexpectedly.

Let me go inside, it won't do anything to me with them here.

“Whoahhh!” -everybody screams and heads for the door.

It raised its head and almost all its upper body the moment I stepped in. I ran for my life!

We wait outside the door. Nobody knows what to do now.

“Let me check again,”-Ngcobo says opening the door very slowly.

“It’s still on the bed, curled up again,” he says.

Maybe we must call the cops to come and shoot it, if that’s even doable.

Aunt throws Jeyes Fluid on the floor again, it still doesn’t move.

“Just shoot it,” Lwandle says to Ngcobo. He looks at him and shakes his head.

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Xolie appears from behind me.

“What’s going on?” she asks. She looks like she’s just come out of a shower.

“There’s a snake on my bed, it won’t move,” I say.

She looks as scared as I am.

“It’s just lying there, it won’t move,” I say again. I’m trying to downplay how weird this is.

She leaves me standing there and walks on to the people close to the door.

“Mamiza don’t go in, it will bite you!”-Langa shouts pulling her by her skirt.

“I’m just going to stand here on the doorstep, I won’t go close to the bed,” she says and walks in.

The men are back inside. I walk closer to see too.

It moves the moment Xolie walks in, and quickly it slides off the bed to the floor, up the wall and out the window. It’s gone. Even when they go behind the house to check where it went they can’t find it. It has disappeared just like that.

We are all now standing here asking ourselves what just happened.

Sisekelo takes a deep sigh.

“Mkhulu,” he says shaking his head, and walks away.

I’ve learned to ignore him. But Mzimela’s face looks like he’s just seen a ghost. I’m going to shower in the main house, I’m not setting foot in this room again.

I’m getting more and more worried as the day goes. It’s almost afternoon now and we haven’t heard anything from them.

And where the hell is Gugu? Her phone is on voicemail, it has been since yesterday.

We've sent Hlomu's sister to Pietermaritzburg with Sbani. She's a snob.

"We found Nqoba. Please tell Hlomu to call me, I can't get hold of her." – an SMS from Nkosana.

My stomach turns! Did he just say he found Nqoba?

"Hlomu!!" -I scream.

"They found him! They found him!"

She turns around with her eyes all out, but then her face immediately changes.

"They found him? Dead or alive?" -she asks, calmly.

Oh shit! Nkosana said nothing about that. My joy is short-lived.

It's funny how quickly people can gather in one place here, everyone is in the lounge now.

"They found him where? How is he?" -Xolie.

They are all expecting answers from me now?

“I don’t know. Hlomu, Nkosana says you must call him, now,”-I say.

She looks frightened. She leaves us all standing there and walks to the bedroom, she closes the door behind her.

We are all just going to be here waiting for her. I wonder what this is about and why it needs Hlomu specifically.

“Where is his wife?” Hlomu’s mother asks.

We’d all like to know.

I shrug. She takes a deep breath.

The bedroom door opens and we all stand still.

“Lwandle, you are going back to Joburg with all the kids. You have to take them to school tomorrow. Niya and Mvelo will stay behind with my mom. When Sbani comes back pack and leave. Stay in one house when you get to Joburg, I don’t care which one but I want you all in one house, security will be sent,” she says.

Huh?

“Xolie, Zah, pack, we are going to Newcastle, now,” she says.

She's not explaining anything, just giving instructions.

She looks at hers and Xolie's mother.

"There won't be a funeral, he's not dead," she says and walks out of the room.

What just happened here?

Something tells me Ngcobo already knows what's going on. He is too relaxed.

We drive out of the yard in 30 minutes, but Mzimela stops us before we drive out of the gate.

"Tell Nkosana I need to speak to him, he must come see me urgently," he says.

Normally I'd be curious but right now, I have too much to deal with.

We say yes and drive off. We are leaving a lot of people behind but they will decide on their own whether to stay or leave.

Now that's it's just the three of us, we expect Hlomu to give us the whole story but she's just quiet and driving like a maniac.

We keep stealing looks with Xolie. I guess I should be the first to ask.

"Hlomu,"

She keeps quiet.

“Hlomu, are you just going to drive and not tell us...”

“I don’t know Zah, all I know is that they found Nqoba and that they have taken him to a hospital in Newcastle, he is bad, but at least he’s speaking. Doctors say there’s a high chance that he’ll live but anything can happen,” she says.

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That’s the only thing she’s going to say, I know her.

Newcastle is about two hours away but the way she is driving, I’m sure we will get there sooner.

“At least we know he is alive,” Xolie. That’s all she has to say.

What I don’t understand is how he got from being in a car accident in Mooi River to being in Newcastle. How did he even get there?

My mind is moving from one strange place to another, from that man who arrived in the wee hours to that conversation with the aunt in the morning to that snake incident and now I’m in a car to Newcastle, how do so many things happen in a space of hours?

“Zandile, wake up,”-Xolie.

I was fast asleep, I’m even drooling, I don’t know how that happened with this woman’s driving.

“We’re here,” she says.

It’s a guest house. I thought we were supposed to go to a hospital.

“We are going to check in and leave our bags here and then go to hospital,” Hlomu the boss says.

We have no choice but to take instructions from her today.

We take our luggage and follow.

It’s not a place we’d usually go for but this is Newcastle.

It’s one of those lodges with separate chalets.

“Can I help you?”the lady at reception says.

So they were not expecting us?

“Yes, we need accommodation,”-Hlomu.

Lady: “For how many people?”

Hlomu: “The whole lodge,”

Lady: “Huh?”

Hlomu: “I said the whole lodge,”

There’s something about the way Hlomu speaks. She never raises her voice but her words are, I don’t know, she has moments where I think she and Mqhele are one person in different versions.

Lady: “Could you excuse me for a moment?”

She takes her phone and disappears to the back.

An elderly blonde man comes back with her.

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“I understand you are...”

“Yes, we want to book the whole lodge, if that’s not possible please tell me so I can go look somewhere else,” -Hlomu cuts him before he can finish.

“No, it’s fine, we have guests that were supposed to arrive today but we will find them alternative accommodation,” he says.

And just like that, we have taken control of a lodge in Newcastle.

We chose our chalets and made sure that they’ll be homely when our loved ones come back to sleep. But there was one that Hlomu insisted was off-limits. It’s at the far end.

We meet in the car when we are all ready. The last time I spoke to Lwandle they were ready to leave. He said Hlomu’s mother was going to Joburg with them. That was not the plan but well.....

The smell of a hospital just gets to me. Just two weeks ago we were in the same situation.

We were directed to the second passage on the left, that’s where we’ll find the single wards.

We open the first door and see a crowd of women standing around a bed over a man lying still, weeping.

It’s not Nqoba.

The second door is the right door. I run to my one and hug him tight. He hugs me back but I can’t feel him in there. He is hollow. He smells horrible and looks horrible. His eyes are as I have seen them in the darkest moments we have experienced in the past. They are a killer’s eyes.

Xolie is curled up in Sambulo's arms, they are sitting on the floor. He keeps kissing the top of her head, she's crying.

Hlomu is standing next to the bed, looking at Nqoba.

His face is covered in an oxygen mask. His head is bandaged and a plaster-of-paris is covering his left leg. He's in pain.

"Hlomu," he says, it's hard to make out what he's saying.

She touches his hand.

"Where's Gugu?" he asks.

That stabs through my heart.

"She's fine, you're going to be fine," she says holding his hand tighter.

These men have not said a word since we arrived here. Some of them are sitting on the floor. They all look like hell. Mpande is barefoot.

We find a place to sit.

"What happened?"-Hlomu asks. She's the only one still standing.

Silence.

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She looks at Nkosana.

“Who did this?” she asks. Her tone firmer.

They all look at her, silent. They look like they are all just too tired to start giving answers.

“Amanda,”- Qhawe says at last.

Amanda?? What the heck is he talking about.

Mqoqi stands up and leaves the room.

Someone please explain to me what Amanda has to do with this?

“It’s fine if you don’t want to talk about it now. We’re just glad he’s here. How is he?”-Xolie.

Actually I want to hear the whole story, but it really is not the right time.

“The doctor says he’s going to be here for a while, but atleast he’s awake and talking now. When we found him he was.....they tortured him, they tortured him all day and all night,”- Mqhele. I can just hear the pain in his voice.

They all stand up and walk out when I tell them I want to pray. It’s just the three of us left. We all close our eyes but I’m the only one praying.

Mqoqi has been coming in and out of the ward. I think he blames himself for all this. That he brought this woman into our lives who almost killed his brother. I still don’t know how and why Amanda did all this.

Qhawe and Mpande stay behind when we all leave late at night.

I don’t know what to do for him. I’m as hurt as he is by all this.

“I think we should move him to a hospital in Joburg,” I say.

He might not answer me, he’s not talking.

I look at him and wait for a response. It doesn’t come.

I lead him to our designated chalet hoping he’ll be more accommodating when we are alone. It doesn’t happen.

I want to tell him about that snake story but I already feel like I’m annoying him.

I had already taken out all his toiletries and put them in the bathroom before we left. I hope he'll go take a shower. He does. I sit and wait in a small nightie. I'm hoping that maybe he will touch me, he never touches me when he's angry, but he does when I'm angry.

He refused to eat at the hospital. It was a horrible sandwich from the hospital tuck shop but it was all that was available.

"Are you going to eat now?" I ask.

I feel like an annoying little puppy running after him.

He shakes his head. He's standing there naked applying lotion on his body.

I walk to stand behind him. He doesn't move.

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I run my hand down his back.

"Get in bed Zah. And sleep," he says.

I tiptoe my semi-naked horny arse all the way to bed and lie there like a log.

I must just forget about him talking tonight.

We are all back in hospital by 8am.

There must be visiting hours but it looks like that doesn't apply to us.

The kids are already at school, that's the update we got from Sbani this morning. The last of the people left in Mbuba are leaving today, Mzimela said he would lock up.

Nqoba looks better than yesterday. They have removed the oxygen mask and he was even drinking juice with a straw, Mpande was holding it for him. His face is all swollen and bruised.

Mqoqi is not here.

He flashes a smile, painful as it looks for him, to the three of us women. If he didn't talk with this much difficulty I'm sure he would have made some dark joke about this by now.

We were instructed not to start crying when we see him. This was given at the breakfast table. They don't have to worry about me. I don't cry.

I'm assuming that the plan is for us to stay here all day. They don't want him left alone incase someone comes here to finish what they started.

I can't wait for all of them to leave the room so I can ask Hlomu if she knows something.

She looks worse than she did yesterday, like something happened to her between then and now.

She walks out. I follow her. She doesn't seem okay.

We walk past a glass wall. I see Mqhele outside, smoking. He looks at her as she walks past. She doesn't even look his way. I think they had a fight.

I find her in the ladies room, bending over the sink washing her hands.

What happened to her?

"Hlomu!" I say. What is that?

"What happened to your neck? What are those bruises?" I ask.

She turns around, puts her scarf back around her neck, says nothing and walks out.

No! it can't be!

I knew Mqhele to be violent with women a long time ago but he wouldn't do that with Hlomu, he loves her too much.

My body is heavy when I walk back to the ward. Xolie is still sitting where I left her. All the men are gone. She's talking to Nqoba, he's still speaking with difficulty but at least he tries to move now and again.

They come back with food. It's almost afternoon but I didn't even realise I was hungry.

The doctor has been here two times today. He assured us that things were improving.

The door swings open and here she is.

She hands the baby wrapped in a blue blanket to Nkosana and rushes to Nqoba's bedside.

"It's okay, I'm here, how are you feeling my love?" she says.

She didn't even greet.

She starts removing the sheets over him. She touches his face. He raises his one arm, he wants to hug her. She puts one arm around him and rests her upper body over him, careful not to press too hard.

"Can you move? Can you stand up?" she asks.

"Where is our son?"-Nqoba.

"He's here, he's fine," she says.

Nkosana stands up and goes to stand next to the bed with the baby.

Nqoba can't hold him but he reaches his hand out and touches him.

The doctor comes back in with a nurse.

"Don't give him penicillin he's allergic, morphine is fine but not too much of it. He's a blood-type-O', he has a bullet on stuck in his right leg...."she says.

I don't even know what blood type Nkosana is.

We are all standing here shocked by all this.

"Oh, that explains why he wasn't responding to..."

"Can you stand up, we're going to take a bath, let's try going to the bathroom," she's forgotten about the doctor and is talking to Nqoba again.

He tries to get up. He shouldn't be but he looks like he's determined to.

"It's okay Mageba, it's fine my love, there, I won't let you fall, put your hand on my shoulder.....there you go..."

None of us move, we watch them battle together to move him from the bed to the wheelchair. It's not that we don't want to help it's just that we are still in awe.

Gugu looks like she hasn't eaten or slept in days. She has lost so much weight. Her hair is a mess and her skin is dry. She looks like someone completely different from that girl who never leaves the house looking anything but stunning.

"Please organise food, and clean linen," she says pushing the wheelchair to the bathroom and closing the door behind her.

What just happened?

She comes back minutes later to find us still standing here like zombies.

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She opens a bag with pyjamas and toiletries Xolie went to buy earlier.

"Did you get a facecloth and lotion?" she asks looking at Hlomu.

"It's all in there,"-Xolie.

"Thanks," she says and takes the whole bag with her to the bathroom.

I think this is where we are supposed to leave the ward and give them privacy. The baby is fast asleep.

We all sit on the benches on the corridor and wait, it's all we can do. A nurse enters the ward with a trolley carrying food and linen on the bottom shelf. She makes the bed and is out very quickly.

Gugu comes out to us when the baby starts crying. She takes him and walks.

"They are going to transfer him to a hospital in Joburg," she says.

"But....." Nkosana says.

"It's my decision to make," she says and walks back inside the ward.

We are not sure whether to go back in or stay here. We walk back in.

Nqoba is holding the baby with one arm. Suddenly he looks far better than he did just an hour ago. Gugu is feeding him.

We won't dare ask where she's been all along. She's not the Gugu we all know right now.

"Let's go, he's going to be fine now," Nkosana says taking my hand.

I haven't felt his warm touch in a while.

We leave the three of them alone.

“So what did you do with her?” I ask.

His chest is always warm. He smells fresh and sexy again. He’s running his hand up and down my back. I expected it to be a bit rough but he was slow and gentle, it’s like he wanted to please me in every possible way. He held me tight and put my head on his chest when we were done, and then he told me I was everything to him.

“With who?”

He knows who I’m talking about.

“Amanda, what did you do with her?”

He’s quiet.

“And the people who helped her? She couldn’t have done this alone,” I say, I’m going to keep pushing.

“They’re dead,” he says. Just like that.

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My stomach turns. I don’t know why I still get this feeling. I know who I’m married to. I’ve always known.

“And Amanda?”

Anything is possible.

“We don’t kill women Zandile,” he says.

That’s good enough for me.

We lie is silence. I have so much to ask but right now, I just want to give him peace. Gugu’s chalet is prepared. Qhawe is still in hospital, probably sitting on those benches on the corridor waiting for her to say when she’s ready to go home, it’s already late at night. I haven’t seen much of Mqoqi.

“Her name is not Amanda,” he says out of the blue.

“And she’s not from the Free State,” he says.

I am going to act less shocked and confused by all this.

“She’s from Mpumalanga. She’s followed and researched us for years, that’s why she was at that conference where Mqoqi met her. She knew exactly what to do and how to act to win him over,” he says.

I’m looking in his eyes but I won’t comment or ask questions.

“Do you remember that story I told you about Mandisa and the girl she killed? The issue that landed you all in jail?” he asks.

How could I forget that?

I nod.

“That was her younger sister. She was visiting her from back home and she took her to a club, the girl had never been to a club before. Apparently the girl got excited when Nqoba paid them some attention and agreed to everything he wanted, including going home with him,” he says.

It’s true that everybody’s sins will come back to haunt them at some point in their lives.

“They went to the club to celebrate because the sister had gotten a scholarship to go study overseas, she was 22-years-old,”

Oh Lord! No wonder Amanda went this far.

“Her family blamed her for her disappearance. She went to the police but they were not interested in investigating, they said she would be back when she’s done partying wherever she was. Eventually it all just died out and the police did not even want to speak to her. They didn’t even come to question Nqoba even after she told them numerous times that her sister left with him,”

“So two years ago she met Commissioner Strijdom, they had a common purpose, they were both obsessed with bringing us down,”

Strijdom I now know is that cop that slapped Hlomu and put us in jail. He's dead now.

"Strijdom had been following us for years, since the days of Bree, and we have been watching him since then. I think it frustrated him that he couldn't find anything to nail us on. So they decided with this girl that she should find a way in and gather as much information as she can. She spent the whole year in our lives, around our children, planning our downfall. I don't even want to imagine what she could have done," he says hugging me tighter.

"So, how did you get all this information?"

He sighs.

"She's here," he says.

What?

"When we found them she had a razor blade in her hand. She kept asking Nqoba to tell her where he buried her sister and each time he denied it she would make a deep cut on his leg. If we had not arrived she would have tortured him to death. We dealt with the four men there first and then with her. One of the men told us she had paid them almost half-a-million, in smaller amounts for the past six months. And then Mqoqi finds out this morning that one of his accounts is almost empty. There was a time where he couldn't find his ID for a few days, he found it after he told her he was going to go to Home Affairs to apply for a new one the next day,"

Whew! This girl was really busy.

“But didn’t Mqoqi see the resemblance when he met Amanda?”

“The girl was dead when we got there Zah. We didn’t look at her face we just wrapped her with a sheet and went to bury her,” he says it so lightly.

But then, I’m still lost, how did they...?

“They pulled him out of the car. They were waiting for him in Mooi River, pretending to be one of our taxi drivers, and when they heard about the accident from someone they had asked to follow Ngoba from Durban, they rushed to the scene and arrived before the police and paramedics. They pulled him out of the car, injured as he was and drove with him to a house in Dundee. I’m still surprised he survived this long. The mistake they made was to leave his phone behind, we were able to track the number they had called him with to that house,” he says.

Even jail was not this hectic!

“So what are you going to do with her now?” I ask.

He’s quiet.

“You know, we are always extra careful, nobody has succeeded in beating us before, but this, this girl...” he says and takes a deep breath.

“My children Zah, she was alone with them the whole night, all of them,” he says.

I think that's the one thing that scares him the most. Nkosana would die if anything happened to one of those kids, losing Mvelo left him with a clear understanding of how painful it is to lose a child.

"I'll let Mqoqi decide. She seems a bit mentally unstable right now, but if we let her go, she will come back, it doesn't matter when, I just know she will come back because if anyone ever killed one of my brothers, I'd come back for them," he says.

This life is tough. But at least we will get some sleep today. We should be back home by the end of the week.

"Where is she???" a screaming voice outside our door.

It's Gugu.

"Open this door Nkosana!" she screams banging on our door.

He's up and putting pants on in a second.

"Gugu, don't make noise,"

"No! Where is she? tell me where she is Nkosana!" she shouts.

Nqoba must have told her the whole story, that's why she's baying for Amanda's blood.

“Nobody does that to my husband! Nobody!” she screams.

BANG!!1

It’s a gunshot.

Silence