

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.

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 on purpose because they don't want to come back home and face reality," she says.

Lord! I came home for this? I left prison for this?

The news hasn't travelled yet. The only thing I see on the news today are stories about that Brian guy being 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 remained 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 the 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, I can't tell them about what this man has just asked me to do.

And then enters Bab'Ngcobo with his wife. Now I'm even more convinced 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 caught fire and the people in them were burnt beyond recognition.

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, took the mattress back to the bedroom and ordered that the furniture be put back in its place.

"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 has joined the search.

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.

"I'm going to run you a bath," I ask. That's all I have to offer.

He shakes his head, takes off his clothes and climbs into bed. He doesn't smell as fresh as he always does. I want to ask questions but I feel that would be torturing him.

"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 to find him 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 handle turning.

"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.

I think they are all outside my door now.

"There's no answer," Nkosana says.

I want to go and 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 to 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.

"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 a 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, not talking 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, kisses me on the cheek and he's gone.

I'm getting used to this. Let me go back to sleep.

"You must be Lwandle's mother,"- the woman I now know as Hlomu's aunt says when she finds me alone in the kitchen.

"Yes, I'm Zandile,"

I hear she is a colourful character.

"What are you doing up 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 opens 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 heyday.

"I hear you were in jail," she says, just like that.

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 that 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 when she's finished the apple and goes 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 know a single person 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 to look at her. Her face is serious now.

"Was it him?" she asks again.

Our eyes meet. How can she tell?

I nod.

"Mmmmmmm with me it was the pastor," she says and takes 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 home again for years. He found me and left still believing I was a nurse. I came home at least 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 asks.

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 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.

"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.

I have goose-bumps 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 on that side, I'll stand here. I'm going to throw something at it, it will raise its head, when it does, hit it on the head,"-Ngcobo.

I don't even want to get close to all this.

They've thrown three things at it but it still won't raise its head, it's lying still. Everybody has gathered at my door now and I'm standing at a distance. I don't want to see the bloody thing again.

"This is strange," I hear Mzimela say.

"It is, it should be reacting by now,"-Ngcobo.

"Someone 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 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 runs to 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.

Xolie appears from behind me.

"What's going on?" she asks. She looks like she's just come out of the 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 goes 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 move 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 that 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 looks at me 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 are ready to go in 30 minutes, but Mzimela stops us just 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.

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.

"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 group 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 with 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.

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 at least 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 that almost killed his brother. I still don't get 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.

I run my hand down his back.

"Get in bed Zah. And sleep," he says.

I tip-toe 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 he did 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 in-case Amanda comes here to finish what she 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 linen that's 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 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.

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 lining 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 to us when the baby starts crying. She takes him.

"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 goes 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.

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 in 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 at the 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 all of you 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 Nqoba 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!!

It's a gunshot.

Silence.

Fourteen

Nkosana is away, again.

I refused to go with him this time. I'm not going to be that woman who tags along and goes shopping and do lunches alone while he goes in and out of meetings in some small town.

And then joining him later for dinner with people who think they own the world while sitting there looking pretty like I'm some trophy.

This one time, this man who had a woman young enough to be his daughter with him, commented on the way I look. Nkosana got angry and so we had to leave the table before we finished dinner. He's always been like that, too jealous and too possessive.

In fact, I must find something to do with my life, even if it's not for money. I can't be a full time grandmother and housewife, especially because Mvelo has started crèche, which basically means I have nothing to do all day except walk around that gigantic house.

Nqoba came home today. He's still on crutches but he's back to being himself.

Gugu has spent every day at that hospital. She wakes up, drops the baby off with Hlomu, goes to hospital, fetches the baby in the afternoon and goes back home. That's her life now. Her house is always surrounded by men with guns. They suggested that she move in with one of us while Nqoba was in hospital but she said no.

She wanted her mother to come and stay with the baby in the meantime but she refused, she's still against her coming back here after everything Nqoba put her through. This is why you shouldn't share you marital problems with your family, they never forgive.

I offered to come here and help her out. I'll look after the baby while she gets Nqoba settled.

She said they haven't spoken at all about their problems. She's just been focusing on getting him back to his feet. She said even when he raised the subject she just ignored it, she's not ready yet.

But now that he's here they are going to have to talk eventually, even if it's not tonight.

"He's showered, I'm going to give him dinner now and hopefully he'll go to sleep so you can be free to go," she says standing at the nursery door.

But I don't want to go, I wanna sleep here tonight, that house of mine is scary sometimes.

"No, I'm fine don't worry, I'm not in a rush to get home," I say.

"Okay, he'll eat in the bedroom, I'll come back when he's sleeping," she says.

It's like she has two babies.

S'hlangu is only a month old but he looks older. These huge eyes of his remind me of my boys when they were babies.

"This is nice. Thank you, you've always been a great cook,"

Huh?

It's Nqoba speaking.

But...?

Oh, the baby monitor is on.

"You must finish it, including the vegetables,"-Gugu.

There's a "snappy" tone in her voice, like she doesn't believe or care about the compliment.

I don't need to hear their conversations, but how do I switch this thing off?

"I will,"-Nqoba.

"I'll leave my cellphone on, in case you need me at night,"-Gugu.

"Why? Where are you going?"-Nqoba.

"I'll sleep in the other bedroom," she says dismissively.

There's silence.

Okay, this is wrong, I shouldn't be hearing this.

"Gugu, you don't have to.....can you just stay with me, please?"-Nqoba.

"No Nqoba, I'll come if you need me, you just have to call. I'm going to help you get better but that doesn't mean I want to share a bed with you. The last time I checked you only shared a bed with me when you wanted to release sperms, I'm done with that," she says before I hear the door slamming.

Oh crap!

I thought things were better between them.

She walks in just as I try to toss the baby monitor under the bed. She doesn't notice anything.

"He's still not sleeping? It's past his bedtime," she says about S'hlangu

I've been trying to get him to sleep all night but his eyes are wide open, he keeps chewing on his hand.

"I think he's hungry,"-I say.

"Probably," she says taking him from me.

I watch as she breastfeeds. She's a totally different person from that woman who was strutting in heels and making stupid comments the first time I saw her.

She must really love Nqoba. To be doing this for him after everything he did to her? She must really love him.

I've been meaning to ask.

"Gugu, have you thought about seeing someone, a professional maybe about...."

She raises her eyes.

"About?" she asks, like she doesn't want me to go there.

Sigh.

"About what happened that night,"

We don't talk about that night, but I've sensed deep anger in her a few times.

"No," she says.

Okay. I tried.

"I'm a Zulu wife, we don't do therapy, we do revenge, I'll find Amanda," she says.

The way she says it makes me cringe.

We still don't know what happened to Amanda but that gun that went off was Mqoqi's.

There was no blood, or dead body.

The owner of the lodge was told that the gun went off by mistake.

He was freaked out, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Those men, the ones Amanda paid to kidnap Nqoba, it turned out they had no idea that the man they were supposed to kidnap was Nqoba Zulu. They realised only when they were in the car driving to Dundee. At least that's what they told the brothers when they were pleading for their lives to be spared.

But I think they were telling the truth because no criminal would want to mess with these men.

Gugu's phone rings.

She looks annoyed.

"Yes," she says.

"Okay," she says and hangs up.

She walks out with the baby.

"Here,"-I hear her saying.

This baby monitor thing is going to get me in trouble.

"I thought he was already sleeping,"-Nqoba.

I figure he asked to see his son before going to sleep.

He's talking to him. He's calling him by his clan names.

I know Gugu is there with them but she's not saying anything.

"He's sleeping,"-Nqoba says after a while.

"Okay then goodnight,"-Gugu.

"Gugu wait...."

"Give me my baby Nqoba,"

"No, we need to talk," he says.

"So now you're going to refuse to give me my baby to force me to stay here and talk to you?"-Gugu.

She sounds angry.

"I just want us to work things out,"-Nqoba.

"Work what out?"-Gugu

"Our marriage,"-Nqoba.

"Nqoba I'm not doing this because I want something in return. I'm doing this because despite everything you've put me through, I do love you and I'll never allow anyone to hurt you. I made a promise before God to be with you in sickness and in health. You know, there was a time where I would have jumped at the opportunity to sit on that bed and talk to you, but I'm over that now,"

I think she must give him a chance, hear him out. I think he really does want to work things out.

"I do love you, and I'm not going to give up on us. Here," he says.

I take it he's handing her the baby.

"Wow, this is the first time I hear those words in three years,"-Gugu

I hear the door slamming again.

Geez, what kind of person am I? listening to people's private conversations like this?

Judging from what I've just heard, Gugu has been taking care of Nqoba but I think she's been mean to him throughout. She sounds like an angry bitter woman right now. But I understand why she's like this.

She walks in and puts the baby on the cot-bed.

She looks angry.

"Wine?" I ask.

I'm becoming Hlomu now, she thinks alcohol is the answer to every problem.

She ignores me. She's breathing fast while walking back and forth with her arms folded.

I want to give her advice. I want to tell her to go and talk to him but then she'll know I was listening to them. The baby monitor is under the bed. I'm such a bad person.

She's still pacing.

"I'll be back," she says walking out of the bedroom.

I hope she's not going to strangle him.

I pull the baby monitor from under the bed. I doubt I'm going to heaven after I die anyway so I might as well be bad.

"Talk, I'm here," she says.

Silence.

"Nqoba, I want to go sleep, you said you wanted to talk, talk I'm listening," she says.

He clears his throat.

"First I want to apologise to you for being....."

He takes a deep breath.

"For treating you the way I did," he says.

She's quiet.

"I don't know why you stayed with me, but I do know that if you had tried to leave I would have done anything to stop you because, I know you don't believe this Gugu, but I do love you, I really do love you," he says.

I've never heard him this serious.

"Nqoba, loving me is not giving me money and buying me cars, loving someone is telling them that you love them and making them a priority in your life. You've never held me or kissed me without fucking me Nqoba. You call that love?"

Yoh!

"I know, I just....I'm sorry, I'm really sorry. I want us to start over Gugu. I don't want to be with anyone but you. I don't care about the money and all this other stuff, I just want you and our baby and I want to try to be a good husband and do all those things that you want me to do, I promise, just give me a chance please," he says.

Now he's begging, really really begging.

"I'm angry at you for many things Nqoba. I'm angry at you for not being happy when I told you I was pregnant. For neglecting me throughout the pregnancy and for leaving me alone when you knew I could give birth any time. I had to give birth in a jail cell Nqoba! A jail cell! I almost died!" she says.

Whew! This is hectic. But at least they are talking about it.

"I'll never forgive myself for that. I've done many bad things in my life but that's one thing I'll never forgive myself for. I hope you and our son will forgive me one day," he says.

Shame, now I feel sorry for him.

"But why? I want to know why you were so mean to me. I'm your wife Nqoba....." she stops.

I hear her taking a deep breath.

"I know that maybe I tried too hard when we were still dating. I came too soon, you were still grieving your ex's death but you gave me an impression that you wanted me in your life. I thought things were going to change after we got married, but nothing is going to change Nqoba, you have issues, and I can't put myself through that any more, it's too much," she says.

I hope she's not about to cry because once she starts crying she'll lose the upper hand in this conversation.

"The thing Gugu is, I don't think I know how to love,"

Oh. That's deep.

"So why did you put a ring on my finger if you can't love me?"-she asks.

"I do love you, I just don't know how to show it," he says.

He's worse than I thought.

"I treated you bad when you were here but I missed you when you were not around. I really did....."

"I missed hearing you laugh loud when you were watching that show that you love so much...the one with..."

"The Big Bang Theory,"-Gugu

"Yes. I missed your rude personality, the one you have when you come home late drunk after going out with your friends. Yes, I know you drink, you hide it from me but I know you drink...."

I hear her giggle.

That's progress, quick progress.

"I'm hoping we can get drunk together from now on," he says.

He's aiming too high now.

"But you never cared, you'd just look at me like I wasn't even there," she says.

He takes a deep breath.

"Yes, and then you'd go straight to bed and fall asleep with your clothes still on. I'd sit next to the bed and watch you. I hated myself for not knowing how to love you. I hate myself for many things,"-Nqoba.

"You'd take my shoes off? I always thought I kicked them off in my sleep," she says.

I like the direction this conversation is taking.

"Gugu, I love you, I really do," he says.

Crossing fingers....

"But why can't you show me? What happened to you?" she asks.

Whoah! She doesn't want to know....

"I lost someone, someone who was important to me..."

Oh crap! He's going to be honest! He's going to tell her everything! It's a mistake! He mustn't!

"I've never told you this but I was married once..."

"What?????"-she shouts.

"Let me explain Gugu," he says.

"No no no, married to who?" she's still shouting.

I did say this was a mistake.

"I got married when I was 23. We were young and spontaneous and one day we decided to go and get married without telling anyone. It was just for fun,"

"Nqoba, you don't get married for fun..." she says, shocked and all.

"Yes, I know that now. But, we really did love each other, partly because we could be stupid together, that's how close we were. But when we were done being stupid and had to start being adults, things got a bit complicated. It was my fault, I made a mistake..."

Oh God! He's going to tell her!

"Long story short, she died. She was shot right in-front of me. I held her and watched her take her last breath,"

I hear Gugu gulp.

"Shot by whom?"

"By Ntsika, he was still a kid. He was playing with a gun,"

He just told her! Jizas! He just told her! Gugu can forget about leaving this marriage alive, she must forget it!

"Oh God Nqoba! Why are you telling me this? Why?"-she shouts.

"Because I want us to start on a clean slate, I want you to know me and where I come from," he says.

He's really serious about this.

"Mandisa, my ex, the one who was here before you, she was there too. I was cheating on my wife with her,"

"This is crazy,"-Gugu

"And so I was stuck with her. We lived together for years but we both knew we didn't love each other. I did see other women but she would fight with them, she wasn't going to let anyone kick her out of my life. Actually, she needed to get her son a good life and I was the only one who could fund that,"

"So she used you for money?"

"Money in return for her silence. In that time, when I was with her, I forgot how to love a woman. With me and her it was war, that's how we lived, even our sex life had no emotions involved, it was more like a fight," he says.

Okay, that's new information to me.

"Gugu, I'm not trying to make excuses here or sound like a victim of.....circumstances. I'm not a good person, I've done bad things, really bad things and that time, when I was sure I was going to die I reflected. I looked at Amanda and instead of being angry with her I felt sorry for her. She lost someone she loved, her sister and I was responsible for it. I may not have killed her but I did take her to my house knowing it was a risk. All I wanted was to fuck her, take her home the next morning and never call her again, that's all it was,"

"I don't even remember what her name was, or the exact spot where we buried her. I never even felt guilty about it until I saw that look on Amanda's face, that hunger for revenge and desperation for the truth. But, I wasn't going to give it to her, I wasn't going to destroy all your lives just to save mine," he says.

That's the number-one rule in this family, if you have to take the fall to protect the others, you do that.

"I don't think I can ever forgive her for hurting you like that, never!"-Gugu

She sounds like she's more angry at Amanda than she is at Nqoba.

"She's gone now, she's out of our lives," he says.

I hope so.

"Good because nobody does that to my man and gets away with it,"-Gugu

"Your man? I like that,"-Nqoba.

They both laugh.

"Yes, my crazy tall man with big eyes and a hoarse voice," she says.

They sound really sweet right now.

"Nqoba, the Mandisa thing, is that why you're this rough with me, pulling my hair and all that?"-Gugu.

He keeps quiet.

"I'm not saying I don't like it but it would be nice if you kissed me slowly and looked into my eyes while doing it, and hold me when we're finished sometimes," Gugu says.

"I can do that. Is that what you want? I can do that," he says.

He sounds desperate.

These men are more damaged than I thought.

There's silence.

"What did you do with her, after she died? How is it that Ntsika never went to jail?" she asks.

Dangerous question Gugu.

"We buried her. I didn't know her family at all. She told me she didn't have one. She grew up in an orphanage after her mother left her in hospital when she was a baby," he says.

"You never tried to find at least one person?"

"No, we just buried her and moved on. Well, everybody else moved except me, I couldn't. But we weren't going to risk destroying Ntsika's life, he was just a kid,"-Nqoba.

"Was her name Nqobile?"-she asks.

Oh No!

He sighs.

"Yes. I'm sorry about that, I'm sorry for calling you that," he says.

This might make her angry.

"Now I have you and S'hlangu and I want to let it all go," he says.

"Did you name him that? S'hlangu, did you give him that name?"-Gugu.

"No, Nkosana did, he names all the children. Msebe wanted to give him some cartoon name,"

"It's a nice name, I like it. But you are going to have to explain to him why he was born in jail when he's older, I'm not doing it,"-Gugu.

"He doesn't have to know about that. I'm going to try my best to be a good father, I know I love him, and you," Nqoba.

That baby is the best thing that's ever happened to these two's relationship.

"But Nqoba, you're going to have to let go of,.." -Gugu

"I have. I've let it all go. On that night, when Phakeme called us to say you had all been taken by the police, and I knew that you could spend a night in jail for me and that I wasn't there to protect you. On that morning when I saw you lying still on the floor and realising that you could die because of me, I let it all go. I knew there and then that I had to make things right..."

Shame that must have been really hard.

"Why did you marry me?" she asks.

These questions though!

"To be honest I could have married any girl. I have women throwing themselves at me all the time but you are the one I married, I think I loved you from the start," he says.

He can be sweet sometimes, it seems.

"Those women throwing themselves at you, tell them I'll stab them," she says.

They both laugh.

This is going well.

"That's the attitude you have when you're drunk," -Nqoba.

They're still laughing.

And then, there's silence.

"Nqoba," she says.

She sounds serious again.

I don't hear if he responds or not.

"What about the other women? I know there have been other women," she says.

Silence.

"I've found things in your pockets, condoms and hotel slips and..." she stops.

Oh no! They're going back. This was going great.

He takes a deep breath.

"I'm sorry Gugu," he says.

He's being really honest today.

"I just want to start over. I promise I'll be a better husband, but I'm going to need your help. Those women, they meant nothing to me, that's why I always came back home to you. Now I just want to come home to you for the rest of my life, that's all I want to do," he says.

He sounds sincere.

"Good, because I'm not going to tolerate that anymore Nqoba. We're too old to be fighting over things like that," she says.

There's silence.

"So, what are you going to buy me for pushing that big head out of my vagina? It wasn't piece of cake I tell you," she says.

They both laugh.

They are a bit strange I must say.

Nqoba is still laughing.

"What do you want? I could buy you an island if you want, just for you to walk around in that leopard print bikini all day, alone because I don't want anyone looking at that tight bum," he says.

We are back to joking and laughing again. I like.

"Nope, I want to start a magazine," she says.

Huh?

"A magazine?" -Nqoba.

He's as shocked as I am.

"Yes, not about shoes or hair or all that stuff that's in women's magazines these days. I want it to have real life stories and real people and..... It's been my dream since I was a young girl," she says.

She sounds excited just talking about it.

"Hlomu used to be a Journalist," he says.

Oh by the way.

"I can ask her to help. I'm thinking the first cover should be the four of us, the wives, trust me it will sell like hot cakes," she says.

I'm not sure I want to be part of that.

"I could start with Zandile's story," she says.

Bitch what the fuck? Now I'm starting to regret spying on them. Just now these two were like cat and dog and now they are talking about how they're going to make money out of my life story?

How do I switch this baby monitor thing off?

"Okay, you want a magazine? You can have a magazine, you know where all the money is," he says.

They get whatever they want, that I've made peace with.

"You're going to work on that magazine thing from home right? Because I don't want you leaving my son with some nanny to go sit in some office all day," he says.

Oh here we go, I knew this was coming.

"Nqoba, don't start. You're not turning me into some Stepford Wife," she says.

I don't think Nqoba knows what that is.

"Okay okay.....Come here," he says.

I take it that's for a hug. They seem to be at a good place now.

I don't hear her protest so now I have a picture of them hugging.

"Does it still work? Over here? Is it still alive," she asks in a rather seductive voice.

Oh no! How do I switch this thing off?

"Of course, what do you take me for? Mageba here is a never-die," he says.

I hear them both giggling.

"Okay, I'm gonna have to climb on top of Mageba then because his keeper has only one leg, I'll be careful not to break it," she says.

"You can break the leg it's fine, as long as you make Mageba happy tonight," he says in almost a whisper.

I'm about to be subjected to live porn here!

I hear the first 'mmmmmmh'.

Oh Lord! She's giving him a blow-job!

I cannot!

I literally run to the guest bedroom!

I have to get some sleep, it's after midnight already.

I'm glad these two have made up, there's one thing he forgot to tell her though.

Fifteen

I thought I was in charge of this trip, why are you just driving and not asking me where we are going?" I ask.
Nkosana though! He's looking at me like he's forgotten all about that, like it doesn't even matter.

I'm the one that wanted to go out and do whatever I want and he offered to be my designated driver because in his crazy mind he thinks all the men in this world want me.

"We'll start with where I want us to go first and then you can go do your things," he says.

Okay. I shake my head and look at him.

"Why do you look like you want to slap me?" he asks sarcastically.

I want to scold him but I smile instead. I can't help it, he's just.....Mnx!

"So where are we going?"

He smiles.

"It's a surprise," he says.

Nkosana doesn't do surprises, if he starts now, I just know it's going to be disastrous.

I hope it's not something crazy or something I won't like and will have to pretend to like just to make him happy, like that dress he once bought me.

We are heading towards Pretoria. I slide the chair back and sit with my feet on the dashboard.

"You used to sit like that in the Mazda," he says.

I laugh.

I had forgotten, I used to sit like this. He would give me a side-eye because he didn't want his dashboard to be left with footmarks. I would continue doing it anyway, just because this phobia or disorder or whatever it is that makes him want everything around him to be spotless irritates the crap out of me.

He would shake his head and look ahead, moving his head to Jimmy Dlu'dlu's music, that's as far as he can go when it comes to dancing, moving his head.

I don't know what happened to that car.

"I forgot to tell you, I've been invited to do another talk,"

"Another one? Where?" he asks.

"In Alex, the event is hosted by an NGO, something about women trying to start over after going through traumatic things," I say.

I've done three similar talks in the past three months. Ever since that TV station walk-in incident, people have been warm to me, a total opposite of what I expected.

My intention was to tell my whole story myself so that the media would have nothing to say about me, especially the lies they had started telling. I did that because I wanted the whole thing to be out in the open so they would leave me and my family alone.

But I got more than I bargained for it seems, I've moved from being a jailbird murderer to being an inspirational survivor, to some people at least.

Nkosana accompanies me to all of them, no matter where they are. I see a lot of myself in those women, except they were not lucky enough to have someone hold their hand through it all.

I speak my mind, tell my story as it is and leave it to them to take lessons and apply them.

I can't say I've conquered, but I'm living, I'm here.

"We're going to Hatfield?" I ask.

"Yes, we are in Hatfield," he says turning left at the robot.

He drives into a car dealership. Audi? Okay.

He gets out of the car and walks to my door, opens it. I take his hand. He's on a romantic tip today.

There are three people, including the manager waiting for us at the entrance, it looks like they were expecting us.

"Mrs Zulu, good morning," one says with a big smile on his face.

I was right, they were expecting us. I hope this man is not buying yet another car because we don't have any more space in the garage.

I greet and return the smile. When I turn around he's gone. He's at the far side of the floor talking to the manager.

Damn! This man is buying another car! Without even consulting me!

"Can I offer you some tea or anything to drink mam?" a lady asks.

What is it with people always offering tea? I ask for water and she directs me to a small lounge with couches and a coffee table with magazines on it.

I sit and just admire the cars I see through the glass door all over the showroom. It's crazy how much people spend just to get from one place to another.

There's movement all around me. Nkosana is coming to me with a big smile on his face.

"Come," he says.

I stand up and follow him. The rest of the staff follows us. Okay, weird.

We stop in-front of a red car, a sports car.

"Here," he says holding the keys to my face.

Whaaaaat???

What the heck?

"Huh?"

"Here, there's your car," he says still holding the keys and pointing at a red Audi R8 parked on the floor.

I take the keys and walk to it, slowly. I'm looking at it with a smile combined with.

I click and open the door. The interior is all beige. The seats are written **Zazah** in red on the head-rests.

I can't stop smiling.

MRSZULU-GP- the number plate reads.

I laugh and put my hands over my mouth. I love it!

I run to him and wrap my arms around his neck. I'm jumping and screaming like a child.

He looks at me, my arms still around his neck and says: "So, do you like it?"

"I love it!" I scream.

There's clapping and whistling from staff who have gathered behind us. But they all look like they are relieved more than anything.

I look at Nkosana.

"Thank you for all your hard work, she loves it," he says.

Okay?

"Whew! That's a relief, it's been a hectic three weeks," one young guy says.

What is that about? Three weeks to buy a car?

"I'm glad you like it Mrs Zulu, Chief, it was great doing business with you," the manager says shaking Nkosana's hand.

I don't know what this is about but I want to get in my car and drive it right now!

"Thank you guys," I say waving to all of them and running back to the car.

"So now you're gonna leave me here?" he says standing next to the car as I reverse it.

I laugh and tell him to come in.

He runs back to the manager, talks to him about something and then runs back to the car.

I have a smile stuck on my face as I drive out, he keeps looking at me and smiling too.

"I want the top down," I say. I'm like a child right now.

He presses one button and it opens.

I scream and switch the radio on.

"Good morning MaFuze," a voice says.

Whaaaaaat?

"How did they do that?" I scream.

He laughs but doesn't explain it to me.

"How did you do all this?" I ask.

"I have my talents," he says.

I'm so happy I can't contain it. I get on the highway, I don't know where we are going exactly but I know I want to take this baby for a spin!

"Let's drive to a far place and back," I say.

He's still just looking at me with a big smile on his face.

"We can do that later, we have to go," he says.

I'll just drive to wherever he wants to go, I think I'm going to sleep in this car tonight!

"Take the next off-ramp," he says pointing at the Brakfontein exit.

I swerve and cut in.

He looks at me, shocked.

"Okay easy now, my kids still need their mother," he says.

Mnx! I should have left him there.

Oh wait, where is....

"We left the Merc," I say. I've just remembered we left the car we came in at the dealership.

"Don't worry, they will take it back home," he says.

Must be nice being Zulu.

"So when exactly did you put all this together?" I ask.

I think he loves seeing my reaction more than anything. He loves watching me be happy.

"Take a left there," he says pointing at a robot ahead. The sign says Irene.

"Tell me how you did this without me knowing," I say.

The self-satisfaction on his face!

He can't wipe the smile off his face, he's so proud of himself.

"Well, I thought the car would look good on you so I bought it last month. They didn't have red so they had to go look for it all over until they found it. And then, they had to make the car all about you, everything custom-made from the seats to the music to everything. Turn right on the next road....."

I can't stop smiling, I'm so happy.

"They spent three weeks making sure that all my demands are met. I wanted it ready by today and they did manage. I'm glad you love it because they were crossing fingers hoping you would," he says.

Those people must think I'm a spoiled little brat.

"Get in there," he says pointing at a gate. It looks like a little Lodge of some sort, maybe we'll spend the day here.

Oh! It's a health spa? We've never been to a health spa together, he doesn't like the idea of being touched by strangers.

I look at him, I'm confused. He just smiles.

I take it he's being romantic today and is doing things we never do together.

"It's fine, you can get out of the car, it will still be here when we come out," he says sarcastically.

He's being silly again.

Whoah!! Everyone is here?

Gugu, Hlomu and Xolie look as lost as I am. Our husbands are treating us to a spa day? These ones we know? The taxi-owner Zulu's from Greytown? No man.....

He takes my hand and leads me to the entrance.

I look at the wives and they all shrug.

A pretty lady at the door greets us with a big smile. It seems we are expected.

Another lady, with make up on point and the same dress as the one at the door, appears and offers to take us on a tour.

All four of us are being pulled by our beloved strange husbands by hand. We are yet to understand what the heck is going on here.

We look at each other and follow her. She walks very fast.

"This is the lounge where you can sit and have lunch," she says.

It's nice, it looks more like a small restaurant with four tables and chairs.

"This here is where you can sit for pedicures while you enjoy some TV," she says.

I count eight pedicure chairs facing a big-screen TV mounted on the wall. The whole room is lime-yellow with dusty-pink chairs. Very bright and girly.

Nkosana keeps glancing at me. I've been to many Spas but I think I'm going to like this one more.

We move on to another area.

"These are the change rooms complete with showers and a bath tub, a Jacuzzi over there, a sauna and a steam room. Let's go up,"

We follow her up a couple of stairs.

"This is where you can have your facials. Over there for full body massages and mud body wraps, hot stone massage and more. That room over there is where you can have your endermologie," she says.

I laugh out loud. They are really serious about this thing.

"Don't laugh, everybody is getting into it these days, nobody wants to walk around with cellulite," she says and walks on.

She's right, she has no cellulite whatsoever.

"That's for Thai massages," she says opening a curtain and showing us some dark corner.

"Follow me," she says walking on.

We ladies keep looking at each other. These men of ours look worried about something, they look like they are crossing fingers that we like this day-out.

There's more?

"This is the fitness centre," she says waiving her hand pointing at a full gym we are seeing through a glass wall.

She then opens the sliding door and walks outside.

"That's the pool, it can be heated too," she says sounding impressed with herself.

The pool is in the middle of the yard, a very green yard with trees and a well-manicured garden not far from it.

"You can have high-tea parties here, that would be nice don't you think?" she says smiling at me.

I've never had one of those and I'm not sure what it is but I'll definitely hire this place if I decide to have one in future.

"It's nice hey?" I say to Nkosana, he hasn't let go of my hand since we walked in here.

"You think?" he says with that smile of his.

Now I want to have a massage and chill by the pool.

"There's more," she says walking on.

It's a big room with white couches and a fluffy carpet and a huge oak coffee table.

"There's also a small bar there, you know we ladies love our cocktails," she says smiling and winking at Gugu.

It has a homely feel to it.

They stand at the entrance but we girls walk in, it's fascinating and has a familiar feel to it...wait?

There are pictures all over the walls, pictures of me, the kids, Xolie and Gugu and Hlomu, all of us....pictures of us when we were younger, pictures of me and him, of all the brothers and the wives and family portraits..... there's pictures of everyone and they are all random and happy pictures and everyone is laughing in

them.

“What is.....?”

“It's your spa?” Sambulo says still standing at the entrance.

WTF?

“You bought us a spa?” Hlomu asks with shock written all over her face!

Who on earth buys someone a spa?

“Yes, you love Spas so we bought you one,” Nqoba says like there's nothing unusual about it.

The lady is still standing next to them. I look at her, she smiles and disappears. We stand still.

And then we start screaming and jumping up and down like little kids.

They look more relieved than happy.

They wait for us to calm down before walking in and sitting down on two couches, quietly.

The only space left for us to sit is two couches across them.

All four of them are sitting with their elbows resting on their thighs. It's like a family thing sitting like that.

They are suddenly serious. So we too sit down, and wait for whatever they plan to do next.

Nqoba is supposed to speak first judging by the way he is restless.

“We wanted to do something for you,” he says.

It's suddenly intense here. Their faces have guilt written all over them. Nkosana is rubbing the palms of his hands together, Mqhele has his face in his hands, Sambulo's jaw is tightened, Nqoba is talking.

“We've put you through so much in that past few months, there is not enough we can do to apologise or make up for what you had to go through. You know that we don't believe in buying you things every time we screw up, we know you are not with us for the money, it's all yours anyway. All we want is to be good husbands to the women who give us homes and raise our children, that's all we want.....” he says and stops.

Gugu is already crying next to me.

“We didn't mean for all that to happen. Gugu, I don't think there's anything I regret in my life more than what I put you through, causing you to almost die in the process. I'm going to try, I just, I need your help in this....” he stops and puts his hands over his head.

If he could, he would cry, but he's as damaged as I am.

Sambulo clears his throat before he starts talking.

“The truth is, without all of you, we are nothing. We are screw-ups, we know that. But you are still here.....not that we'll ever allow you to leave us but....”

We all laugh. What is wrong with this guy? He's throwing threats in the middle of a deep session.

“But, you love us anyway. So here is your spa, I'm not sure what it is exactly that people do in spas but you all seem to enjoy going to one, so here,” - Sambulo is still talking.

I look at Nkosana. He's looking at me, I think he's trying to read my face. I'm happy but I'm a bit shocked too.

How on earth do you start explaining to people that your husband bought you a spa?

Where on earth do they sell spas and how much are they?

I smile and shake my head.

"I'm proud of all of you," I say.

They look down. They know what I'm talking about. They know I'm suddenly thinking about where we all come from, all the struggles and all the pain.

I stand up and go to hug Nkosana.

"You made it, you made it out alive," I whisper in his ear.

He hugs me tighter.

Hlomu stands up and walks to Mqhele. He stands up and they hug.

"I'm sorry Hlomu, I'm sorry," he keeps saying in her ear.

I know she's crying.

My feeling is he is apologising for a lot of things, not just what we are aware of.

They have apologised, we have heard them. What they don't know is we forgave them a long time ago. We love them that much.

There are people walking up and down outside this lounge, in uniform. Are they going to be permanent staff here just waiting for us to pop in any time we feel like being pampered?

"So where are we going to start?"-Hlomu.

"Pedicures!"-Xolie. She's too excited.

We all agree on that, there are eight chairs so we will all do it at once.

"Let's go," Xolie says pulling Sambulo's hand.

They all stand still and look at us.

What now?

"Errrr we're going to drink, we'll see you when you're done," Nkosana.

Lord has mercy on us!

That little apology session clouded our minds into thinking we were married to normal people for a second!

"Why haven't we divorced you people again?"-Hlomu.

They all laugh and follow each other to the bar.

We are going to do our pedicures.

I'm loving the new Gugu and Nqoba. The display of love and affection I see in them.

Nkosana once told me that Hlomu is a good person but if you mess with the people she loves, she can be brutal.

I saw that with Gugu and how she handled the Amanda situation. She would have killed that girl with her bare hands had they allowed her near her.

She kept screaming that nobody did that to her man! Nobody! She went through every chalet in that lodge screaming looking for her.

At that time, the men were busy trying to explain to the owner that a gun went off by mistake in Mpande's room. He was insisting on calling the police.

We never saw Amanda, we knew she was at the lodge, probably in that chalet that Hlomu instructed us to stay away from, but we never saw or heard her until we left two days later.

Nqoba has been spending too much time with Mqoqi. I think he's still trying to convince him that he doesn't blame him for what happened.

Mqoqi was quiet and a bit distant after that incident but he's improved lately, he laughs and jokes more now and I think he might be back to his player ways soon.

I just wish he'd get over his feelings for Hlomu.

In three weeks we will be going back to that place again. I don't know why we can't just have Christmas here. I don't want to be dealing with snakes and all that weird crap that happens every time I'm there.

But I'm looking forward to the boys coming home this week when schools close.

We talk a lot lately, even Sbani calls and sends random messages now and again. I've made peace with that I can never match Hlomu in their hearts but I'm just happy to have them.

Lwandle is coming with both his partners in crime Mbulelo and Zamani, the best friend.

Nkosana let them back in the house and gave them back the car after all those shenanigans. I think he realised that it was not worth it punishing them further. Besides, they had started what they are famous for in KwaMashu, and you don't want to mess with township fathers when it comes to their daughters.

But I know he is watching them closely, one foot wrong and he'll have them back in the dog-house.

I don't know much about Zamani but I know they met in primary school and became friends. His father died when they were in Grade-7 and his mother wanted to send him to the rural areas because she couldn't afford taking him to school here. And so Nkosana intervened, took him to the same private school as Lwandle and he's now taking him through university. His mother still lives in Soweto.

"We're doing manicures after this, someone needs to do her nails," Gugu says side-eyeing me.

My nails look like little stumps, I bite them at every chance I get.

"What am I going to snack on if I have artificial nails?"

They all look at me like I'm crazy, and laugh out loud.

We've come too far in the past three months.

Gugu is back to being glamorous and celebrity but motherhood and wife duties are her first priority. She's happy, you can just see.

She nursed her man back to life, bathed and fed him until he was up on his feet while still having to take care of a small baby. None of us thought she had it in her but she did it and proved us all wrong. She also forgave and started over.

When I asked, she said she only heard about Nqoba being missing when her brother gave her a message that a man sent by the Zulus had come looking for her because her husband had been in a car accident, two days later. She said she immediately packed her bags and her child and drove to Mbuba, only to get there and be told that we had all gone to Newcastle.

The drama about Amanda, she only heard about it when Nqoba told her the story, she was under the impression that he had been in hospital since the accident.

"Gugu, did you send the documents to Peter?"-Hlomu.

That's such a random question to ask at a beauty spa.

"I did, all of them, he said everything was in order,"-Gugu.

"Who is Peter again?" I ask.

They all look at me.

"Oh! Peter the lawyer," I say. I've just remembered.

"Maybe you should speak to him about completing your degree,"-Xolie.

I remember Hlomu told me the same thing.

I thought he was an employee in this family responsible for getting us out of jail.

"I'm sure he'll show you the ropes and give advice,"-Hlomu.

I'm not sure.

"But that's not his job," I say.

"I'm serious, he solves all the shady problems. Ask Xolie she knows. His duties stretch all the way to paying off side-chicks to disappear,"-Hlomu.

The way she says it, it's hilarious.

I heard that story, but just bits of it.

"I'm just waiting for Nqoba to cheat again, I will break his legs,"-Gugu.

Seriously, we shouldn't be laughing about this.

"This one almost killed Mqhele, the mess that was her house when I arrived! Sometimes I think we are as crazy as the men we married,"-Xolie.

"Yes, he knows, the next time he thinks about sleeping with some hoe he'd better make sure I don't catch him,"-Hlomu.

We all laugh. But stop when one of the masseuse' looks up. We totally forgot they were here and can hear everything we are saying.

We've just finished our manicures when it hits us that the men must be hungry now. Yes, they don't know they are hungry until we decide they are hungry.

Lunch is already prepared. I might just move in here, it's nicer than that empty house I live in.

"This is our spa, I don't understand why there is beer and why there are men drinking it," I say when we walk in.

"You are already kicking us out?" Nkosana says pulling me close to him by my waist.

"Yep, this is not a bar," I say.

He laughs.

"We can make it a bar," he says.

We all gather around the table.

I can't help but wonder how this is going to work. Obviously we can't use this place commercially. It was a gift given to us, not a business, so when we are not here, is it going to close or stay open? What will the people that work here do during that time?

I won't ask them these questions because I'm pretty sure they didn't think about them before they went and did this. Only men I tell you, only men.

There are waiters too? I did say I wanted to move in here.

"You're having a party without us?"- he shouts.

Where did these two come from now?

"Noooooo, who called you?"-Mqhele.

They laugh, pull chairs and sit with us.

"Who told you we were here? We were ignoring your calls on purpose,"-Sambulo.

"No bafo, not that easily. So, what's going on? What are we having for lunch?" Mpande asks looking at all of us.

Did Mqoqi and Mpande just gate-crash a couples' quality time date?

"Who invited you? The lunch is for eight people, how did you even know where

we are?"-Nkosana.

This conversation, they are laughing their lungs out through it.

The food arrives and we accept that we have two extra mouths that eat enough for four people each.

"And that red toy outside?"-Mqoqi says between chewing.

"It's mine!" I say very quickly. To be honest I can't wait to finish here so I can go marvel on those beautiful leather seats.

"Whaaat? You have a new car?" Xolie.

"Yeeeeees," I say waving the keys.

Hlomu stands up first, and then Gugu and Xolie.

"Come on, we want to see it,"-Xolie says pulling me by my arm.

We rush out the door and to the parking lot. We even have a parking lot. The life.

"Wait, let me open, the inside first and then you can jump around it all you want," I say.

These girls, they are like kids sometimes.

I turn around and the guys are all standing on the porch watching us. They look very pleased with themselves.

Hlomu is screaming and jumping up and down like a teenage girl seeing Justin Bieber. When she's not uptight, she's really cute.

"I wanna drive it! I wanna drive it!" she screams.

I hand her the keys. We left the top down when we parked earlier.

Unfortunately we can't all fit in it. So I guess she's going to drive around the corner and come back and give the next one a chance to do the same.

It all happens exactly like I thought.

It's funny how the smallest things, and yes this is a small thing, done for us by our husbands, make us so happy.

I'm calling it a small thing because buying this car didn't dent Nkosana's wallet at all. In fact, he could have bought it any time he wanted, any one of them can buy it today if they want it, but because he did it for me, went through the trouble of finding a colour that he knew I'd love and had it custom made specifically for me, I'm happy. It could have been any car, it could have been anything really, and I would still be this happy.

"It's great to see you all happy,"-Mqoqi says when nobody expects it.

He's going to take us back to that awkward place now.

Silence.

"We won't be completely happy, unless you are happy too,"-Hlomu.

She always knows what to say. It's just that she doesn't have timing.

He looks at her and smiles.

"I'm getting there," he says.

Really it's not so much about Amanda, I don't think he misses her at all, if there ever was any love for her in his heart it ended at that moment when he found out who she was. I think he's just blaming himself for not paying enough attention, for not figuring out that something was amiss about her. He started remembering incidents where he should have seen that there was something wrong only after the Nqoba incident.

It can't be that his heartache is caused by losing Amanda, because the woman he loves is sitting right across him with another man's arm around her shoulders.

"Shhhh," he puts a finger over his lips and we all sit quietly.

I saw him walking in but I was too shocked to even open my mouth.

"Langa!!" she says.

He laughs.

"How did you know it was me?" he says removing his hand from over her eyes and letting her stand up.

"Helloooooo, you are the other me, when did you get here? How....?" she asks hugging him.

I didn't know a male and a female could look this much alike. I've seen him in pictures but I didn't expect them to be this identical when you see them in person.

"Oh My God! Are you a real human being?" he asks looking at me.

I'm used to these kinds of comments, but I still don't have responses to them.

He officially greets everyone when they are both done being excited.

I expected some kind of hostility from these men but they are surprisingly comfortable around him, I guess it's because they've known him for a long time.

Mqhele stands up and offers him his seat.

"This is your present," he says to Hlomu.

"I knew you had everything to do with it. Thank you, it's the best present ever," she says hugging her twin again.

I thought Mqhele was going to pull another chair and sit but instead he picks up his cellphone.

"So this is where I should forget I have a wife, until he's gone," he says pointing at Langa and laughing.

"Are you two loafers done? I'm going with you wherever you're going," he says to Mqoqi and Mpande.

They say something stupid and both stand up.

Mqhele bends and kisses Hlomu's forehead, and they are gone.

"I'm going to call it a day too. I miss my boy. Dladla, you must come by to meet my boy," Nqoba says to Langa and stretches his hand out to Gugu.

"I can't wait to see another set of binoculars," Langa.

The jokes they make about the eyes though!

It looks like we all are ready to leave. Hlomu and her twin look like they want to catch up.

"Dinner at my house tomorrow night," she says as I jump in my R8 and they get in Hlomu's car.

I think I'm going to like this drama queen brother of hers.

"I can't wait for the boys to arrive," I say.

I'm excited about a lot of things today.

"Mmmmmmm," he says.

What does that mean?

"You're going to be nice to them right? They've already paid for their mistakes," I say.

I don't trust that 'mmmmmm' he just gave me.

"They are boys Zandile, if I want them to grow up to be responsible men I have to be tough on them, that's how I operate,"

I know, no wonder his brothers turned out like this.

"So you're never going to borrow me this car?" he asks.

He wanted to drive but I said no.

"Nope, it's my car, drive your own cars,"

He laughs and shakes his head. And then he sits and looks at me.

"Do you remember that day? That first day at Bree...?"

I know exactly which day he's talking about.

I nod.

"When I told you I had nothing, and you said it was fine, we'd have nothing together?" –him

I nod.

"I never forgot that. Those words, I never forgot them. I love that you haven't changed. You're still the same Zandile I had to beg for a kiss when I was a young boy," he says with a laugh.

"I didn't understand, you had agreed to be my girlfriend but I still had to beg you for a kiss. You're still as crazy as you were then," he says.

"And you're as.....who is that?" There's a man standing at our gate.

"I don't know, slow down," he says and puts his arm over me. I can't drive like this.

"No it's fine. It's Mzimela," he says.

Mzimela?

He rolls down the window.

"Baba?" he says.

The old man has a small bag over his shoulder and a stick in one hand.

This is strange.

"Nkosana, I've been waiting for you,"-he says.

"Why? How did you get here?" he asks getting out of the car.

He's as confused as I am.

"Makoti," Mzimela says looking at me through the open passenger window.

"Let's go inside,"-Nkosana.

They can't both fit in this car, it's a two seater.

"Zandile, take baba in and come back to fetch me," he says.

I do so.

I dare not speak or ask questions until I drop him off at the entrance steps and drive back to the gate.

Can this not be about some Mbuba drama? Please Lord!

"Why is he here?" that's the first thing I ask when Nkosana gets in the car.

He doesn't know, but he looks worried.

"This will be your bedroom baba, the bathroom is there, that door," I say signalling for him to put his back down.

I put him in the bedroom downstairs because I think it will be too much trouble for him to go up and down the stairs.

"Thank you," he says, drops the bag and walks out immediately. He's looking at me funny. I sense that whatever brought him here is about me.

Nkosana is still standing where I left him, on the passage.

"Son, come, let's talk," Mzimela says walking past him and all the way to the lounge.

"How did you get here?" he asks.

"I took a bus, driving here was going to be tiring for me. So I took a bus from

Pietermaritzburg and when I arrived here I went to Bree and told one of your drivers to take me to your house, that boy from there across the river? Yes, that one, he knows me, he dropped me off at the gate," he says.

What could be so important?

"When was that?"-Nkosana.

"During the day,"-Mzimela.

So he's been camping at our gate all day? It's almost 7pm now.

"Why didn't you call me?"-Nkosana.

"I bought that airtime thing but I forgot to ask my son to put it on the phone for me, and this phone just went dead on the way," he says.

It must have run out of battery.

I'm not part of this conversation but I can hear what's being said from the kitchen. I must make him food, but I don't know what to make since that hood-rat aunt advised me never to attempt cooking again.

For now, I'm going to give him tea and biscuits.

"Didn't you get my message? I said I needed to see you, urgently," he says.

Oh shit! I was supposed to pass that message three months ago and I completely forgot.

"No, is everything fine?"-Nkosana.

"No, nothing is fine Nkosana, nothing is fine," he says.

Now I'm worried.

"It's hot, let me take this jacket off..."

"No, it's fine we can go sit outside,"-Nkosana says standing up.

He follows him out the sliding door. I'm thinking they are going to sit on the porch but instead they take a walk in the garden, they are still talking. Now I can't hear anything but I'm sure freaked out by all this.

This man took a bus, a taxi and waited all day in the sun outside our gate just to see Nkosana? I have a bad feeling, a bad bad feeling about this.

The food is ready when they come back inside. I can't read Nkosana's face but he seems to be thinking hard.

I hope my cooking is not as bad as that woman said it was.

The plates are half-empty when they return. I thought this man was really hungry.

"I'm off to bed, baba please call me if you need anything," I say.

There is something they both know that I don't, it's written all over their faces.

I leave them to it.

"When did you come to bed last night?"

I didn't hear him at all. It must have been after midnight because that's when I went to sleep.

"Very late," he says.

That's all? He knows what we should be talking about. I'm going to give him five minutes, if he doesn't start talking I'm going to start asking questions.

"How is Sisekelo? I mean, have you noticed anything different about him compared to the other kids," he asks.

What does Sisekelo have to do with anything?

"He talks too much, that's all,"

"Yes he does, but, how is he to you? Do you get along?" he asks.

He's six, he's not trying to get along with anyone.

"I don't understand Nkosana, he's just a kid. Except for his unique imagination, there's nothing unusual about him. And why the sudden interest in Sisekelo? Is that why Mzimela is here? Did something bad happen to the child?"

He takes a deep breath. Something seems to be worrying him. He hasn't turned around to face me, he does that when he doesn't want me to see that something is bothering him.

"No, but Mzimela seems to think that he has a special connection with.....he thinks my father is communicating with us through him,"

Whaaat? His father? The man has been dead for so long I doubt they'd recognise him if he walked in here.

"Nkosana," I say walking to him.

"That's impossible," I say looking in his eyes.

I can see in his face that he is doubtful too. But he is the type that pursues everything, one part of him is hoping that this is true because he's longing for a connection with his father but the other part is more realistic.

"And how would Mzimela know that? He sees us once in months....."

Are we really having this insane conversation?

"Okay, I'll ask Sambulo about it. I'm seeing him later. The old man will leave tomorrow, I'll get someone to drive him back home, today we're going to Dube hostel, him, Ngcobo, Gumbi and all of us. We're going to watch indlamu," he says.

You can take a man out of the taxi rank, but you can never take the taxi rank out of him. Once a hostel dweller, always a hostel dweller.

Mnx!

"I'm going out with Hlomu and her brother, we'll probably end up at her house because we are all having dinner there anyway," I say, kiss him and go to the bathroom.

"Oh and don't take my car please, use your own car," I say pointing a finger at him.

He laughs and shakes his head.

"I was hoping Niyā would look like Hlomu, but no, the poor child couldn't escape the binoculars," Langa says.

He talks. A lot.

"S'hlangu looks exactly like Sbani and Lwandle when they were babies, the genes here are too strong," I say.

We all knew he was going to look like all of them but can't nature shock us? Just once?

He's a bit too big for a three month old, too fat actually. He's one of those babies that you think twice about picking up, but also he's just too cute you can't help being cuddly with him.

Gugu has become a full force mother. She does everything from breastfeeding to nappy changing to smelling like baby milk all the time. And Nqoba, all I can say is, he's surprised me.

"You missed out baby-mama,"-Xolie walks in and says. She was upstairs checking on the kids.

"On the shopping and the lunching and the spending? I know, and I know this

diva here was the ring-leader," she says looking at Langa whom I have concluded is a serial drinker like his sister.

He did all the cooking today and I must say, he's good at it. I awkwardly asked him about his husband and he blushed and started talking like a love-struck teenage girl.

I've known him for only two days but I've forgotten a few times that he is actually male, biologically speaking.

The men will be here any time now, it's another family dinner, they happen too often, we are like a mafia family, everything happens within the family, even the children are each other's friends.

"I can't wait for all these kids to grow up and go to varsity or wherever it is they'll want to go," -Hlomu.

She was solving yet another dispute I assume.

"And they say they want more, I'm sorry I have enough drama with just the two," -Xolie.

"I have to go to the school on Monday because guess what? The twins have discovered that people can't tell them apart, and so they are showing teachers flames," she says.

I still can't tell them apart. But I pretend I can.

"What happened?" -Gugu.

"One of them pulled the main switch down, the whole block of Grade-0 to Grade-R went dark for half a day, they thought something was faulty, only for the teachers to be told by another child later that she saw one of the twins standing on top of a chair fiddling with the main switch,"

I want to laugh.

"So, they are the only twins on that block so there was no guessing. But when they were called and asked which one of them was responsible, they both said it wasn't them, they wouldn't even tell me. One of these days I'm going to beat the shit out of them and Mqhele will just have to deal...."

I laugh out loud, I've been holding it in for too long. I'm glad I'm not the only one laughing. That helps.

"My money is on Msebe," -Langa.

"The obvious suspect would be Msebe but Langa is a dark horse, I wouldn't be surprised if it was him. Problem is Msebe likes taking the rep for him, he just.....he seems to enjoy being in trouble," she says.

It worries her I see, I think she's taking things too seriously.

"What did Mqhele say?" - Xolie.

"He said they are boys, boys are like that," she says.

That's just like Mqhele.

He walks in first, we all stop talking and look at him.

He can tell we've been talking about him.

"I was telling them about your sons and how slim their chances of finishing school one day are," -Hlomu.

That smirk of his appears.

"They're five-years-old, they don't care," he says and walks past us to the dining room, the lounge, another passage and out another door that takes him outside.

The rest of them are already outside on the backyard, they must have walked around the house.

"Babes, can I have an ice-bucket? We will be outside," he says and disappears again.

This house was also built from scratch. It's just....it's Hlomu. It's super spacious. The ground floor is almost completely open plan, the kitchen, dining room and lounge are separated by poles. There are no walls or doors, in fact you can see the whole floor from the kitchen. It's only on the way to the stairs where you find a door that goes to the bathroom, another one to the garage and another to the basement, somewhere around there is a mini cinema too.

All the bedrooms are upstairs.

"Speaking of identical humans, where is his almost-twin? I didn't see him today,"-Langa.

I haven't seen him in a while.

"He's around, he's just a bit scarce lately I don't know what's going on,"-Hlomu.

"But is he...? Moving on? Living again?"-Langa.

"There have been a few women but nothing to write home about, I think his heart will always be Oleta's. I also miss her,"-Hlomu.

It must be really hard for him.

"Why is Mzimela here again?"-Hlomu

I shrug. I really don't know.

"I need that too, two glasses actually, I want to keep him awake all night," she says to Xolie.

I don't know why we are all still in the kitchen when all other people are having dinner. Only Mpande came in here, took the baby and went back outside. I haven't seen Nkosana since he left home this morning.

"What on earth are you two drinking?"-Langa.

"It's called CinnaMilk sweetie,"-Xolie.

Huh?

"What the fuck?"-Langa.

Xolie: "It's milk, mixed with cinnamon".

Me: "Why would you drink milk with cinnamon?"

Langa: "Yes, why would you drink that?"

Hlomu and Xolie look at each other and laugh.

"Here, drink it, and call me tomorrow morning," Hlomu.

Langa: "Ohhhh it's one of those women things. This is witchcraft do you know that?"

Okay, I'm lost.

Gugu: "I prefer LemonMilk, it's more drinkable,"

Langa: "There's LemonMilk too?"

Xolie: "I'm never drinking that one, Sambulo almost locked me in the bedroom all night and all day after I drank it, if my vagina could speak, it was gonna ask for forgiveness that day".

Hlomu: "I know, if mine could, it would have opened a case against me. That thing is hectic".

Now I get it.

Me: "So what does it do exactly? Does it give you more energy or....?"

Hlomu hands me a glass and says nothing. I drink it.

"Zah you must learn these things, that man waited for that for 17 years, he

deserves some extracurricular activities,"-Gugu.

That is just like her.

"It's not like he really really waited but all I can say is, he gets it, anytime, anywhere," I say.

They laugh.

"Please don't tell me you do it on the kitchen table too, I like eating on that table," Xolie.

Me: "Like I said, anywhere and everywhere""

"Plus Nkosana looks like he knows how to take care of business,"-Langa.

They all giggle and look at me.

Me: "Do I look like someone who is not taken care of?"

They laugh louder.

Things are getting ratchet in here.

"Nqoba likes it rough, really rough,"-Gugu

Great. Now they can focus on her.

"Rough as in just rough or rough as in you hanging from the ceiling?" -Hlomu.

Gugu: "Rough as in me handcuffed to the stairway bars with my legs spread and him at the back pulling me by my weave,"

"Wooohhhhhhhhh"-we all say

"Most of the time it's spontaneous, I'd be on the stove cooking and the next thing I feel him breathing behind my neck, that on its own makes me wet and he knows it,"-Gugu.

This conversation started with milk and cinnamon. I'm just reminding you.

"Do you have things our kids should never see in that house of yours?" Hlomu asks Gugu.

"Don't worry, they are well hidden,"-Gugu.

We all laugh. I hope she means that.

Xolie: "So when you say the back, do you mean the back back?"

Hlomu: "Back back? Do you mean.....? I can never!"

Xolie: "All I'm saying is, you must allow your man explore and enter every hole in your body. That's all I'm saying," she says and sips her wine.

What is going on with these women today? It must be Langa, he came with this madness.

Gugu: "We've done it a couple of times, but I stopped him because he's too rough, he just couldn't slow down....."

Yeses!

Hlomu: "So am I the only ass virgin here?"

Langa: "Yes, you and the senior Mrs here, I must teach you some tricks".

Hlomu: "I can be forgiven because everything I know about sex I learnt from Mqhele, he hasn't taken me there yet".

Gugu: "What? You've only ever had sex with Mqhele? You were a virgin when you met him?"

She nods.

"He was my first, and my only,"-Hlomu.

Gugu: "Oh My God! No wonder he's like this. I'd forgive you if you cheated, it's a crime to never explore anything in life, especially when it comes to sex".

Langa: "I think he'd go crazy, as in literally mental institution case if Hlomu ever cheated on him".

I think he'd be worse than that, I wouldn't rule out mass family suicide too.

Hlomu: "But if you must know, I swallow".

"Noooooooooooo," we all shout at once.

Xolie: "I can live with being tied to a tree, but swallowing! No no no!

Me: "Tied to a tree? What kind of kinky dark shit do you get up to? Xolie what the heck?"

I can't help laughing, what the heck?

"Oh Lord! I think I've heard enough for today! And when exactly do you do all that kinky stuff? What if someone sees you? What if they take a video and.....Xolie I knew there was a devil hiding behind that sweet face.."-Gugu.

"That's why we live in Houghton, the fences are very high,"-Xolie.

"I'm never letting my kids visit your house again,"-Hlomu.

We are all in stitches.

"But I still think you Hlomu must experiment a little, it's a sin to only ever know one penis in your life,"-Gugu

Xolie: "Errrrrr let's not be suicidal now okay?"

Hlomu: "Guys, really? You make him sound like a psycho. And I'll never cheat on him, I love him too much...."

"That's good to hear," he says, walks to the fridge, takes out a bottle of water and leaves.

I want to dig a hole, a deep dark hole and jump in there and die and turn into a skeleton immediately and disappear and die again and again...

Oh my God! We are not even freaked we are literally trembling! All of us including Hlomu herself.

How is it that we didn't hear him coming?

"Do you think he heard everything? On My God Hlomu please tell him I was joking, I was just saying that as a joke, Oh my word! He won't let you go anywhere with me from now on....."-Gugu.

I'd really love to go home right at this moment. Run home if I have to.

"Guys calm down, he's not angry, he knows you bitches are crazy,"-Hlomu.

I guess she knows him better.

"He's gonna hate me, I know it, he's going to hate me,"-Gugu.

She's panicking.

"Gugu, Mqhele doesn't hate anyone. He either likes you or he doesn't care. He's not taking any of this seriously so relax,"- Hlomu.

She's right about Mqhele on that part. I also know that he would never hate or hold a grudge against a woman his brother loves. I really hope he didn't take this seriously.

"Hlomu, can I see you for a few minutes," he says. Again, we didn't see or hear him coming, we just turned around to see him standing behind us.

Hlomu puts her glass down and follows him down the passage and up the stairs.

"Do you think it's about this? Maybe he's mad, that's why he wants to see her alone,"-Xolie.

"No, he probably just wants to talk to her about something,"-Langa. I can see he is worried too.

Xolie looks more worried than all of us.

Mqhele does that to people, there's something about him that you can't put a

finger on, but it's there, and it's scary.

"They are done eating, let's go tidy up and clean this kitchen before we leave," I say.

I know Hlomu hates doing dishes, she was just going to leave them there for MaMnguni in the morning.

I've noticed too that she hardly ever does any hard labour except cooking. I think it's a thing of this family. I used to do laundry by hand when I came back but Nkosana told me to stop, he said he knew I hated anything that has to do with work so I mustn't put myself through all the trouble.

I guess it's because he understands where I come from, my mother used to work me like a slave when I was young, she said she was preparing me for marriage.

"I'm going upstairs to check on the kids,"-Xolie.

Something tells me it's not just the kids she wants to check on.

It's getting late and I want to go home now.

Mqhele walks past the kitchen first, beer still in his hand.

A few minutes later Hlomu appears. We all stop and stare. What happened to her?

"Wow, this place is spotless, thank you ladies," she says with a wide smile on her face.

We keep quiet.

"You all look like you're ready to go, but I doubt your men are," she says pouring another glass of wine.

We're not paying attention to what she's saying at all.

"You look different,"-Gugu

We all wanted to say that.

Hlomu rolls her eyes and sips her wine.

"Your hair wasn't like that when you left. The braids were tied up, now they are tied behind your neck,"-Xolie.

"Well, they were tight and I decided to loosen them," she says, she has that smile or smirk on her face.

"Mmmmmmmmm, what happened to the belt you had on with that dress? Was it tight too? And the earrings?" Langa.

She rolls her eyes again.

"Oh my God! You've just had sex, oh lord I'm going to my house where are my kids?"-Xolie.

That's what it is!! This little hoe!

"I don't know what y'all are talking about," she says and laughs.

I did say they were freaks.

"He's sleeping," Nqoba says, at least we heard him coming. He has the baby in his arms.

"It's fine, I'm ready to go anyway,"-Gugu says going to him. There's a kiss and an arm around her waist, it still looks weird.

I imagine her handcuffed to the stair rails..... Okay Zandile, stop with the dirty thoughts!

"Gugu before you go, can I talk to you guys about something,"-Langa

Alrighty.

Nqoba disappears somewhere.

"My friend Lloyd is launching his fashion label next Friday. He's going to have a fashion show and you know, the usual...."

Okay, it's another invitation, sounds interesting.

"The line is for male wear, specifically suits and shoes and a limited edition of watches,"

Nkosana loves watches, I might just get him one.

"So are you inviting us to a girl's night out? Because I'm definitely going,"-Xolie.

We all agree that we definitely want to go.

"The thing is, I need a favour from you guys," he says and looks at us one-by-one.

"Okay, what do you need? I know Lloyd and he knows I'd do anything for him, if I can,"-Hlomu.

"Yeah he designed my wedding dress, the way he was going you'd swear it was his wedding,"-Xolie.

I can just imagine.

We all keep quiet and wait for him to tell us what he needs us to do. Maybe he just wants us to be there so the media will get excited....

"I need you to ask your men to model his clothes, just one walk on the ramp and that's it," he says.

We all freeze! Did he just mention "our men" and the word "model" in one sentence?

"So?" asks.

Nobody speaks, I think it's shock more than anything.

"It's going to take five minutes, just five for them to walk in and out. Lloyd is trying to build his brand and you all know everybody is interested in the Zulus. They are hot and handsome and they look good in suits and....."

Hlomu raises one hand to stop him.

"Langa, let me explain something to you. These men, they have all the money and businesses and wear suits and ties almost every day, but that's now, you of all people know where we started with them. They are who they are now but they will always be taxi owners and taxi drivers at heart. Do you know where they went today? Dube Hostel, for indlamu. That's what they do, and then they eat skop and drink beer from bottles....."

"I know Hlomu but....."-Langa.

Xolie: "What she's saying Langa is that what you're asking is mission impossible. Imagine me asking Sambulo to model, at a fashion show, I don't think he even knows what a fashion show is".

Gugu shakes her head.

"I'm just trying to imagine Nqoba and what his face will look like when I even start to raise this. He'll probably think I've lost my mind,"-Gugu.

"Mqhele won't do that, I just know it. Imagine him modelling, If I force him he'll probably walk down that ramp with a lit cigarette in his hand, that's how annoyed he will be,"-Hlomu.

I'm not even going to mention Nkosana in this, he is definitely not doing it. He's not that much into people in general, now imagine him walking the ramp with people cheering, he'll probably jump down and slap the crap out of a few of them.

"I'm begging you, just try and see what they'll say. I don't know, give them sex, use emotional blackmail, anything, they are your men you know their weak spots. And you bitches owe me for all the times I got burnt by pots and stoves there in Mbuba cooking for your functions. Now it's time to pay up, go fuck those men into modelling for my friend, I don't care if they tie you to trees or make you swallow their sperms, just do it....." he says.

Did he just blackmail us?

"You are such a hoe," -Gugu.

Langa: "I know, now go get yourself in those handcuffs and get that man on the ramp on Friday, 8pm, I'll SMS the venue and directions. Goodnight,"

"Oh and I'm going to need the other three too, and the boys Sbani and Lwandle. Work around it ladies," he says.

He walks away. We are left stunned, and burst into laughter when our minds start functioning again.

"Gotta go," Gugu says and walks out.

"I'm going to get my brood and we're going," -Xolie.

I'm left alone with Hlomu in the kitchen.

"And you? You left us here for a quickie?" I ask.

We both laugh. I haven't heard her deny it so it's true. Naughty girl.

"Well, he said he just wanted to remind me why I'll never cheat on him," she's blushing as she says this.

But that's not why she'll never cheat on him. She'll never cheat on him because she, and everybody else, knows he'd put a bullet in her skull, that man, that man's friends and parents and.....

If I ever cheated on Nkosana he'd kill me and every single living person in this world. He'd kill cats and dogs and birds too.....

I had to leave my car at Hlomu's place because Nkosana the controller didn't want me driving alone at night, although he was going to be driving right behind me.

Now I'm forced travel with him and the mysterious Mzimela while involuntarily being subjected to Jimmy Dlu'dlu's guitar, like I don't hear him enough in the house.

I won't raise this modelling thing any time soon, I'm going to wait for the others to do it first. I think Nkosana is going to be the most difficult to convince.

Sixteen

Nkosana!”

He’s out the door before I know it.

Where is he going at this time? It’s 4am!

I was woken by his alarm clock and the next thing I see is him walking out the door.

I jump out of bed and follow him. This is strange.

“Up! Up! Up!” I hear him shouting as I approach Lwandle’s bedroom. The lights are on.

What is going on?

“Hey! Up! All of you!” he says pulling the blanket off Zamani.

The poor kids are as confused as I am.

“Get ready, it’s time to go to work,” he says.

Work?

“Nkosana! It’s 4am,” I say.

“That’s when work starts at the taxi rank,” he says.

Oh shit! I thought he was over that.

The boys are stunned.

“Get ready, you, Bree,” he says looking at Mbulelo.

“You, Faraday,” he’s talking to Zamani.

“And you, Wanderers,”-that’s to Lwandle.

I can’t believe this!

“I have people already waiting for you at the ranks, get going, I want you out of here in 15 minutes,” he says and walks out of the room. I follow him. This must stop now!

“Nkosana are you really going to do this? Haven’t you punished these kids enough?”

He blatantly ignores me.

“I’m talking to you!” I scream as we enter the bedroom.

He turns around and I freeze. That face! I had forgotten it.

“Go back to bed!” he shouts.

No!

“Do you have to be so cruel all the time? What do these kids know about taxi rank business.....?”

He pulls inside the bedroom and slams the door closed.

“Cruel? Is that what you think I am Zandile?”

I keep quiet.

“I’m trying to raise them to be responsible men. I didn’t get to where I am today by being given things, I worked. If I hadn’t worked hard they wouldn’t be living the life they are living today. I’m not going to raise men who will not see the importance of having to provide for their families. It’s going to be tough but they will learn,” he says and switches the lights off.

I hear him but I can’t allow this to continue. Two of these kids are not even ours, what are their parents going to say about this abuse?

I take a pillow and walk out.

“Where are you going?”

I ignore him.

“Zandile!” I slam the door behind me.

Why can’t he just be a normal caring human being for once?

I hear a car starting. They’ve left. Poor kids. I don’t even think they have money for lunch.

“So you won’t talk to me all day?” he asks.

It’s a bit early for him to ask, it’s only 12pm, I can do this until 12am.

Today is that fashion show thing. I was excited about it but I’m not so sure any more. He has completely ruined my day.

I had to beg and explain to him before he agreed. And it wasn’t even agreeing, it was more like “I’ll do it so you can stop nagging me”.

They are all going to do it. It was easier with Mqoqi and Mpande, as long as there is going to be a party afterwards they don’t care, plus, there’s going to be women watching and cheering, I think that’s the first thing that came to their minds.

I keep thinking about Lwandle and them, what it must be like for them in those taxi ranks, at least Lwandle is known, I’m most worried about the other two.

“Good morning,”

Oh Lord! Our everyday walk-in-visitor is here.

“Bafo,” Nkosana says. He looks excited to see him today.

I say a lazy “hi” and continue with what I’m doing. Mpande will just have to forgive me today, I’m not in the mood.

“Do you wanna go to shisanyama?”-Nkosana to Mpande.

I turn around and give him the look. He raises his arms in a “what have I done now?” gesture.

I’m not talking to him, but I don’t want him to leave, I want him to stay here and suffer the consequences of me not talking to him.

Mpande looks rather confused, he can sense that something is wrong.

“Sis Zah, I brought you something,” he says taking something out of a shopping bag. It’s perfume, why would he buy me perfume?

"You're buying my wife gifts now?"-Nkosana asks with a lazy smile.

I look at it. It looks expensive.

"Thanks," I say.

I wonder what the story behind this perfume is.

"I'm waiting for you to tell me why you'd wake up and go to the shops to buy my wife perfume," Nkosana.

He's on another level these days, it's like he lives to make me angry.

"I walked past a perfume store and something tempted me to go inside, it's tall and dark and has long legs," he says

I knew it!

"Oh wow! And here I was thinking I was special,"

He smiles.

"You will always be my number-1 Sis'Zah. And you'll be happy to know that I think I've found you a daughter-in-law, or is it a sister-in-law? I don't know but I think you can bank on me settling down now,"

I've heard that about four times since I came home. I won't know even when he's serious.

"And you met her this morning?"-me

"What's wrong with that?"-him

"I don't know what women see in you,"-Nkosana says shaking his head.

We all laugh. Mpande is....you can't pin him down, no matter how hard you try. He has this charming personality that makes him so unique. He laughs and jokes a lot and is very easy-going. I think that's why women love him, he is the guy that could be your boyfriend and your friend at the same time, he's easy to be with, only, he uses that for his selfish benefit.

"I just stopped by to say hello, I'll see you tonight," he says and leaves.

It's strange because he lives on the other side of town, but he stops here almost every day. Nkosana says he didn't come here that often before I came back.

Of all of his brothers, I was closest to him. He was just a kid when I arrived, just starting high school. I pretty much raised him.

I remember I used to travel with him to Soweto every morning. His school was close to the salon where I worked so he'd walk from school straight to my workplace and sit there until Nkosana came to fetch us after finishing his shift.

And after I left, he was never the same.

He is also the one that never got close to Hlomu.

I have no doubt that he cares deeply for her but they don't have much of a relationship. My gut tells me he held back from her because he didn't want to let go of me.

"This guy needs to get a life,"-Nkosana.

Oh really? And you need to get a heart.

This is a warehouse.

The set-up is all arty and stunning, but it's still a warehouse. We are at a fashion show in a warehouse.

We were put in front-row seats. There are five other designers showcasing their stuff tonight, Lloyd will be the third to go.

The guys arrived here two hours early. It was an instruction from Langa and needless to say, they were annoyed. In fact, except for Mqoqi and Mpande,

they've been annoyed all week.

Mqoqi was happy that there'll be female models here too, that's all we needed to say for him to agree to do this. Mpande, well, he goes wherever life takes him.

We dressed up and dolled up for the occasion, another of Langa's instructions. He even got his sister to put on a weave, she looks cute.

"Hi, that will be me,"

This young lady says pointing at the empty chair next to Xolie.

We don't know her, she must be one of the guests.

She sits, crosses her legs and turns to look at the four of us.

"Do you know what time they'll come on? I was almost late, Mpande has not been answering his phone and I was getting frustrated," she says.

Oh, now I see, it's the perfume girl.

These three next to me are shit confused.

"Did you say Mpande?"-Hlomu.

She flaps her eyelashes a few times before speaking.

"Oh, sorry, my name is Gwen," she says with a smile.

Errrrr okay, is that a Tswana name? Because she says it with an English accent.

"I came with Mpande, well not physically, he sent a car to pick me up but I'm with him," she says rolling her eyes.

This is rather strange. Mpande always comes with a girl to these things but they never sit with us.

"Oh, okay, nice to meet you,"-Gugu says.

She smiles and sits up straight.

She really is Mpande's type, tall, flawless dark skin, unique eyes and very very tight clothes.

"I can't believe they agreed to do this, they're normally so private," that's Gwen.

Huh? Girl you only arrived this morning on these Zulu streets why are you talking like a main member?

We all look at each other and frown.

After Amanda, we are too careful about who comes in and who goes out.

The ramp lights up, we are about to start. I wish I could go backstage and check on them, but Langa would have told us if there was a problem.

The music starts playing, and so it begins.

"I like that, I could wear it to Peter's wedding," Xolie.

It's nice a dress, a bit too short but we are talking about Xolie here, the sexy yet elegant one.

Peter is getting married in three months and we are invited. I didn't know lawyers invited their clients to private functions. It's his third marriage from what I hear.

"That would look good on you," someone says.

Oh, it's the new member, she's talking about the leather dress, we are not sure who she's talking to between us.

"I'm going to go check on them backstage,"-Hlomu.

But we talk her out of it and she sits down. The first show is over and I am glad. The items were too similar.

The second one is, not bad, but not really my thing either. The clothes are traditional, African theme from Ankara to Dashiki, I feel that it's overdone but everybody else seems to find it fascinating.

I get butterflies in my stomach when the last model of the second show walks out. It's time.

It's quiet.

And then Lloyd's name appears on the screen just at the beginning of the ramp.

The music starts playing. It's a familiar sound. The look on people's faces says they're finding this unusual.

That guitar sound.....

Kwanyakaz'mkhonto weNkonyane kaNdaba.....

That song.....

"I didn't expect this at all..." Hlomu says with her hand over her mouth.

"It's that Mfazomnyama song that they sing when they're drunk"-Xolie.

Zinyane lamaKhosi akwaZulu....weNkonyane kaNdaba.... -the music plays on

The ramp lights up!

I'm going to reach orgasm! Now! Here!

"Oh my God!"-someone says from the row behind me.

I turn around to look at her briefly.

Okay, I shouldn't have done that.

The house grows still. He's just standing there looking like heaven with that grey hair and an all-black suit with a white shirt. He has one of those thin ties.

"Are those skinny pants?"-Hlomu.

It looks like it, but they are not tight, if they had tried to make him wear tight pants he'd have walked out the door.

I'm sitting with my mouth open like every other woman in this warehouse.

The music is still playing. He starts walking. That thing in my stomach, it keeps coming and going.

I've seen Nkosana looking sexy but today is something else. His hands are behind his back, I'm not sure if that's allowed in modelling.

"Damn!" someone says out loud. I don't turn around this time.

All we hear is the music and cameras clicking, nobody speaks and nobody moves as he walks all the way to the end of the ramp and stops. He turns once too look at us and our eyes meet, my mouth is wide open.

I hear throat clearing as he walks back and disappears behind the wall. There's clapping and then what feels like relief.

We've just had the Nkosana moment.

"Wow! I didn't know he was dressed by him," I hear someone say behind us.

It's dead quiet again, and then Nqoba appears. He flashes a smile now and then but he walks very fast, almost like he wants to be out of here as soon as he can.

But then, he stands at the end of the ramp longer than we expected, longer than he should. It's like he doesn't know what to do next.

"I'm crossing fingers,"-Gugu whispers.

We all are because we know they don't want to do this.

He raises his eyebrows at the camera people in front of him. One nods. He raises his hand and does the "sharp" sign, turns around and walks a back.

Gugu laughs. She's been smiling and blushing this whole time.

He turns just as he walks past us and winks at Gugu, she blows him a kiss,

everybody laughs.

This is a different kind of models I tell you.

I think Lloyd made us sit where we are sitting on purpose.

"Oh my word!"-Hlomu says.

Judging by the giggles behind us, we are not the only ones who heard her.

Mqhele, I can never understand. That thing about him, that thing.

He just stands there with his hands in his pockets.

He's in navy pants, yes, those ones that are tight at the bottom, a crispy white shirt and a navy blazer. No tie or bow-tie or waistcoat. Just that. The shoes are black.

He has these four things on, just these four and he looks like he's just come out of a fashion magazine. He is intense, just like Nkosana.

He stands still until the room is dead quiet. They keep repeating that maskandi song.

He finds Hlomu with his eyes, and then he starts walking, no smile, no expression on his face, just Mqhele being Mqhele.

The only thing he does is walk with his hands in his pockets, but I can just feel the number of hearts pounding and stomachs turning in this place, what is it really about these men?

You'd swear it's the same person that just left, but that would be impossible in just five seconds, it's Qhawe, he has on the same suit but with just a shirt and a waistcoat. He walks, he doesn't smile, he doesn't care, he doesn't look at anyone, and he's gone.

Sambulo complained from the day he was told about this until today, he was still sending Xolie SMSs complaining 30 minutes ago. She must have let him tie her to a tree because otherwise, he wouldn't be here. And there he is. I expect him to walk very slowly but then I remember, he only talks slowly.

"How hot is my baby-daddy?"-Xolie.

I laugh. I didn't expect that at all. He seems really really comfortable being up there, and hot he is. His suit is maroon, strange because it looks great on him. It's those pants again that are tight at the bottom. The music plays, the cameras click and Xolie here looks like a love-struck teenager. She blows him a kiss, he smiles and walks on. What kind of models are these?

"Ohhhhh he looks so good...." the new member says.

We all turn to look at her? Is she serious?

She doesn't understand why we are looking at her like this.

It's Mqoqi, his pants are tighter than the others but he looks comfortable in them. They are going to kill Langa for making them wear tight pants!

His suit is also black but the material is different. He's wearing a black shirt and a black double-breasted waistcoat.

How did we move from Bree to fashion ramp?

He's having too much fun. He is enjoying every single minute of the fame and attention and shock on people's faces.

"Mqoqi can stay up there all night,"-Gugu.

"Oh," the new member says and puts her hand over her mouth.

Oh now I see, she thought this was Mpande. Lord help us!

I don't know if that's a dance or stunt to charm that Mqoqi just did up there but there's cheering. He is hot and he is charming and he is..... just Mqoqi.

He's out and in comes the last one, Mpande.

"He's sizzling," -new member.

Oh, good to know you now know which one is about to shag you.

She doesn't sound like she can speak any African languages, that's how Model-C she is.

Mpande is a celebrity, Mpande is good looking and Mpande is naturally charming. That boyish yet bad and if I may say, a little shady thing about him shows in his personality.

He walks a bit slower than the others and keeps biting his lower lip like he's trying to suppress a laugh.

"My kids are going to look like that," -new member.

Holy ghost take control!

He does what he does and leaves.

"And then?" -Langa says with his hands on his hips.

What now?

"That's my seat," he whispers.

But now, how are we going to tell the new member to move?

Langa shrugs and walks away. I think he's going backstage again. I didn't get a chance to ask him if these men did well or not.

We are not that interested in the last two shows so we decide it's time to strut out of here. It's rude seeing as we are on the front row but....

We find them at the bar, they are still wearing the suits.

"Hello supermodels," -Hlomu

They laugh but you can just see that they're still holding a grudge.

"There are two more shows coming, don't you want to go sit and watch?" -Gugu.

"You've put us through enough trauma for one night, no we'll pass," -Nqoba.

They're starting to be clingy like Hlomu and Mqhele. They're cute but they must go easy on the public display.

"That guy touched my balls," -Mqhele to Hlomu.

What?

"No he didn't" she responds with a laugh.

"He almost, I was going to slap him if he did. Tell your friend this was the first and last time I'm doing this, I'm not being touched by another gay man in my life ever," -Mqhele.

He is one heck of a character.

He must be referring to the design and make-up guys backstage.

"They wanted to put make-up on me," -Nkosana

LOL he sounds like a small boy.

"Really? And what did you say?" -Me.

"Nothing," he says.

Yeah I know what he means, he said nothing, all he did was look at that poor make-up person who probably got so scared he ran off with his brushes and powders.

They say nothing is impossible but making Nkosana Zulu wear make-up is impossible.

"That was amazing," -that will be the new member to Mpande, she says kissing him on the cheek. His reaction is a bit awkward, but he keeps quiet.

Everybody is looking at her.

"This is Gwen,"-Mpande.

"Oh, the perfume girl,"-Mqhele.

Hlomu pinches him on the arm. What is wrong with him?

She doesn't look offended, I would be.

"Your name is Gwen?"-Qhawe

She nods.

He looks confused. We all look at him.

"What?" he says and shrugs.

The fashion show is over judging by the number of cameras around us.

I spot Mqoqi somewhere in the crowd with one of the models I saw during the first show. I think his night is complete, his goal has been achieved.

There are waiters walking around with finger-food and champagne flutes, I'm the only one with no glass in my hand now. I'll have juice with my partner in this alcohol-free life, Mpande. I still don't understand how he doesn't touch alcohol at all.

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank you ladies!"-Lloyd.

He's just a bowl of happiness and energy.

"We were the ones parading ourselves, you should be thanking us not them," - Nqoba

"Of-course, you are my supermodels," he says looking at all of them.

It's like there's something he wants to say but doesn't know how to say it.

"Hlomu," I hear him whisper.

"My suits," he says.

Whoah! They forgot to take off the suits.

Hlomu laughs.

"The fashion show is over, it's time to return Lloyd's suits," she says to all of them.

"No," Sambulo.

Whaaat?

"You're not getting the suits back,"-Qhawe, he looks serious, they all look serious.

No man.

Xolie and I look at each other, are they crazy?

"We had things to do, but instead we came here, so no you're not getting the suits back," Mqhele.

Okay they're serious. This is childish.

"Sambulo,"-Xolie.

Lloyd looks...I don't know a bit scared.

They're all looking at him.

And then they burst into laughter.

These fools!

"No we're joking,"-Nqoba says patting his shoulder.

Whew!

"But you can make us more suits,"-Nkosana.

And with that they go back to their alcohol like they didn't just abuse the poor guy.

I don't think I want to be here anymore, I feel a little "senior citizen" amongst

this crowd.

"I think we can go now," he says, finally.

I'm surprised we've stayed here this long, he hates these things with too many young people.

I say my goodbyes and leave them all there, but first I had to endure a gigantic hug from the new member, she promised to see me again soon. I know Nqoba will be the next to leave, he can't go for long without seeing his son. The perks of becoming a father at old-age.

The boys are fast asleep when we get home. I don't even know if they had supper.

"Nkosana, at least don't wake them up too early tomorrow morning, please," I say.

I just know by the look on his face that he's not going to let me turn him into a softie.

He ignores me and gets in bed.

"I saw you there looking at me like you wanted to eat me," he says rubbing himself on my back.

He can forget it.

"Not really," I say.

He takes a deep breath, I can't see his face but I know he's laughing.

He kisses the back of my neck.

I feel the tingles, but I'm not going to let him win this one.

His hand goes up and down my back.

I shift away from him, he shifts closer to me, I shift again and he shifts closer until I'm at the edge of the bed.

Damn him!

"Please," he says.

I know he's not really begging, he's just trying to push me until I give in so that again, he can prove that he always wins.

I could get up and go to another bedroom but I'm not that angry with him.

"Leave me alone,"

"No," he says.

I want to push him off but I feel his hand on my bum and down and down until it.....

"Nkosana!"

"What?" he whispers.

I turn around to face him.

I can't help it.

I kiss him back.

The boys are gone when I wake up. I didn't hear anything this morning.

"You made breakfast?"

"Yes, for a special lady after a special night," he says.

He's in high spirits today. He never cooks.

"So where do you think we should go today?" he asks.

He really is in a jolly mood today.

"We're going shopping with the ladies for Christmas clothes for the kids," I say.

He looks bored.

He can go do whatever he wants to do without me.

"Okay, since you don't want me, can I borrow your car?"

He can have it.

His phone rings.

"Ngobizitha,"-he says.

"What?" he asks before he laughs out loud.

I'm going to stand here and wait until he's finished so he can tell me what the joke is.

"Where is he now?"

He laughs again.

"I think I'm going to like that girl," he says before saying goodbye and hanging up.

He's still laughing. I'm still waiting.

"The perfume girl is on her own level," he says.

"What did she do?"

"She has launched herself," he says.

Really? What does that even mean?

"She went to one of those things, Facebook I think and told everyone that Mpande is taken," he says.

I don't understand, how is that a big deal?

He leaves me standing there and goes to wherever in this house.

Let me just get the whole story from the horse's mouth.

"Mpande,"

"Sis Zah, can I come over?" he asks.

He never asks, normally he just rocks up unannounced. But he does sound a bit down.

"What's going on?"

I hear him sigh.

"This girl, she went through my phone last night when I was sleeping. She deleted every phone number saved under a woman's name. And then, she went to my Facebook, it doesn't need a password, and she uploaded pictures of herself and wrote "Meet my future wife, I'm finally taken"...."

I don't want to laugh. I really don't.

"But can't you delete everything?" I ask.

I don't even know how that Facebook thing works.

"I have but it was too late, the thing is all over now, I have tabloids calling me," he says.

I don't understand why he is so worried about this. Who cares if he's taken or not?

But considering that he met this girl only yesterday morning, it's a bit creepy.

"Where is she now?" I ask.

"I told her to leave early in the morning, and she did. I'm not seeing her ever again," he says.

Poor thing. That girl is crazy.

"Okay, come over, Nkosana made breakfast,"

“Errr no I think I'll bring a takeaway, I can't eat that,” he says.

But he always eats my food. Maybe I'm not a bad cook after all.

I hope this will teach him a lesson to settle down with one woman and stop chasing after every skinny dark girl in Gauteng.

I know his brothers are having a blast with this. They will laugh at him until they can laugh no more.

I must get ready to leave. Langa is also leaving for Durban this afternoon. He's going to spend Christmas in KwaMashu.

I must say I've enjoyed his stay. He is totally different from his sister, he's very simple and outgoing. Hlomu I have a feeling has always been stuck-up. I hear she was the apple of her father's eye. That she was closer to him than she is to her mother. Meeting Mqhele obviously made it worse because now she is a true definition of a spoiled brat. If she said she wanted the world to stop so she could take a nap and not miss anything, he'd try anything to make her wish come true.

There's just something about them that is..... I don't know...toxic. I guess it's how they love each other. I've also accepted that she makes the rules around here. There's also talk about throwing Niya a 2nd Birthday party, I don't know why, the child doesn't even know how old she is.

He looks rather distressed when he walks in. I still don't understand why this is such a big deal.

“So it's over? Just like that?” I ask.

He says yes.

This must be the shortest relationship I've ever heard of.

Nkosana appears and the first thing he does is laugh at him. I know, it's going to last for a long time.

But me, I have to go, I'll leave them to it.

We laughed about the Mpande thing all day, over lunch, over drinks and all the way back home.

Nobody understands why he is so serious about it, unless he's worried that it will interfere with his player ways.

“I'm coming over to sleep at your house,” -an SMS from him.

What now?

“Why?”

“I found her in my house when I came back. She's rearranged furniture, put pictures of herself all over the house and even cooked dinner” -he says.

What???

Seventeen

Nkosana!
Zandile!
He pushes me to the floor and jumps out of bed.

What's going on?

There's noise and movement all over! There are people outside!

He opens the door and runs out. I follow him.

"What's happening?" I shout when I bump into Gugu running to the same direction as everyone.

"There's a fire," she says and keeps running.

"Get the hose pipe!" someone shouts.

There's smoke going up and quickly filling the whole yard.

"Go inside! Go inside the house!" Mqhele shouts to the kids.

It's the rondavel behind the main house. It looks like it's been burning for a while because flames are already coming out through the roof.

There's a tap in the yard.

"Hlomu get them out of here! Get out of here!" Mqhele again.

How did this happen and how come nobody saw the fire early?

We gather the kids in Mqoqi's rondavel, it's close to the gate and far away from the burning one.

"Did someone go in there today?"-Xolie.

I doubt it. We only ever go in there if there are traditional functions. The last time I was in there was when I was straining that traditional beer that didn't brew.

Maybe one of the kids went in there and left something flame-able.

The hose pipe is not helping, the fire is getting more and more aggressive.

"I think they must just leave it, it's getting dangerous,"-Gugu.

We are standing outside, at a distance, watching them trying to battle the flames with just one hosepipe.

They start moving away when the flames get too hot for them. There's space between the houses, hopefully it will not spread to the others.

Eventually they give up and come to stand with us. We watch it burn to the ground. We have no choice.

“Go inside,” Nkosana says when Gugu starts coughing. The whole yard is covered with smoke now.

“When did it start?”- Sambulo.

“I don't know, I was woken by Sisekelo screaming,”-Lwandle.

He sleeps in the main house with the kids.

He must have heard the flames. I don't understand how none of us heard it though.

“Go back inside,”-Nkosana again.

It's almost morning, I don't think any of us will be able to go back to sleep now.

We gather the kids and we all go to sit in the main house. Judging by the silence, everybody is trying to figure out what just happened.

The smoke is dying down but the smell is still very strong.

“There's a car at the gate,”-Xolie.

They all walk out, leaving us sitting there.

Sisekelo looks frightened. His eyes are all over the place. It's understandable, he was the first person to hear everything.

“Sisekelo, come here,”-Hlomu says.

He stands up quickly and walks to her. She puts him on her lap and holds him tight.

“It's over, the fire is gone, don't be scared now,”-she says cradling him.

The poor thing is so scared I wouldn't be surprised if he never leaves the house again.

“Mami, I want to go home,” Sisekelo says.

I also want to go home, this place doesn't love me much.

“We'll go home after Christmas boy,”-Hlomu.

“We have to go now, Mkhulu is angry,” he says.

Not that again.....

Hlomu's face doesn't say “not that again” she seems to be taking him seriously.

“It was one of the neighbours, he came to check if we are fine,”-Qhawe says as they walk back in.

“What's going on?”-Mqoqi asks when his eyes meet Hlomu's.

“Kids, go to the bedroom, including you Lwandle,”-Hlomu.

What is it now?

We all sit quietly and wait for the kids to leave.

“What did Mzimela say again?” she asks looking at Nkosana.

I told her about that but we both laughed it off.

She doesn't get a response immediately. Nkosana looks like he's thinking hard.

“He said he thought Sisekelo was communicating with my father,”

Silence.

Is Nkosana even.....?

“What??”-Sambulo.

I take it Nkosana didn't tell them the whole truth about Mzimela's visit.

“No, that's impossible,”-Xolie says with a slight smile.

It really is impossible.

“I'm not sure where he got that from but he seemed certain, and worried,”-Nkosana.

Everybody is shocked, and confused. My mind is racing back and forth.

"But why? What did Sisekelo say?" someone asks, I don't know who, I think I'm losing my mind.

No, it can't be.

"When I came home..."

Everybody stops and looks at me when I start talking.

"The first day, when you all came to my house, Sisekelo said...."

No, why didn't I see it all along?

"That sketch of me that is on the wall Nkosana, the first thing he said to me was that he saw me on that picture,"

"But nobody knew that was you,"-Nkosana.

"Yes, even I didn't recognise myself at first, but he did,"

I take a deep breath.

"And then, on that day, the day of our wedding, he came to me crying saying Msebe had hit him. When I asked why he let Msebe hit him he said because Mvelo had told him not to hit Msebe back because he is his brother and he is small,"

"I told him that Mvelo could not have said that because he couldn't speak yet but he said, "not the small Mvelo, the big Mvelo,".

I hear gulps.

"No, not my child! Why did they choose my child?" Xolie screams.

Sambulo sits next to her.

"Calm down," he says.

"And then, the first time we came here after I had come home, he found me in that rondavel straining the..."

Oh God!

"He said to me 'mkhulu says he doesn't know you'. I couldn't understand what he was on about,"

Qhawe has his hand on his forehead. I'm scared to look at the others. The atmosphere here is bad.

"That's why it didn't brew,"-Mqhele says with a blank stare.

Mpande shakes his head and says: "Mkhulu doesn't like strangers in his house, that's what he said".

It all makes sense now.

"And that time when he called you by name and said it was because mkhulu got angry when he called you mama,"-Hlomu.

"I remember, I was there,"-Mqoqi

Everybody is piecing the puzzle together now.

And the snake? Oh my God! The snake!!

"I think the snake incident was related to this too,"-Hlomu.

"What snake incident?"-Nqoba.

Gugu looks confused by the snake thing too.

They were not here.

I tell the story and how it only left when Xolie entered the room.

How dark is this?

But now, what does this mean? What does mkhulu want?

The attention turns to Nkosana, he's been quiet all along. As always, he is expected to have all the answers.

He sits still, staring ahead for a few seconds, rubbing the palms of his hands

together.

"It's not enough that he died and left me to raise his children, now this, when am I ever going to find peace?" he says, stands up and walks out.

I try to stand up and follow him but Hlomu pulls me back to the couch.

They all look at Mqhele.

He stands up and follows him.

They've always had that relationship, a soul connection.

We are still shocked.

Why didn't I figure this out earlier?

The sun has come out.

It's Christmas day.

"Can we open the presents now mami?"-Msebe.

We didn't see him coming.

"Yes," Hlomu says.

There's suddenly noise and chaos around us. We are still sitting here motionless.

Lwandle puts Niya down on my lap and walks to help the other kids unwrap their gifts.

"Mama," she says looking up at me and lifting her arms. I hug her tight.

"Yay!... I got an iPad," Phakeme shouts.

I wonder which one of these fools thought it proper to buy an eight-year-old an iPad.

"We got new bicycles," one of the twins says, I think it's Langa because it wasn't Msebe's hoarse voice.

"I got a Playstation-4"-Sisekelo.

He's so happy. It's like he's forgotten about what happened just now. He seems.....free, like something that was with him has left him.

I guess his work here is done, the shit is with us now.

"I'm going to make breakfast,"-Gugu.

We should start preparing lunch too.

I hand Niya to Mpande and follow Gugu.

"Come, let's go open your present," he says standing up and walking to that corner with her.

It's mostly dolls and a lot of pink things.

Nkosana and Mqhele have not come back. It's been over an hour and I'm getting worried.

What he said before he left, he's never spoken like that before. I never got the feeling that he resented his father for forcing him to be a grown man when he was just a boy.

It's worrying me a lot. It's worrying everyone.

"Mzimela has just arrived," Xolie walks in and says.

It's clear we are going to have a dark Christmas, and it's clear I'm responsible. I'm not wanted here, his father doesn't want me here.

There's awkwardness all around us. Normally the four of us in one place means witty girl-talk but today is different. It's worse because Hlomu is here and she is known for taking everything seriously. She worries about everyone and everything. Right now I'm not sure who she is more worried about between Nkosana and Sisekelo.

Xolie looks like she is about to burst into tears. I would be like that too if some

evil ghost chose to torment my child.

Mqhele and Mzimela walk in together just as we are about to tidy up after breakfast.

They both say no to food.

"Where is Nkosa...."

"Still in his room, just give him a little space he'll come out when he is ready,"- Mzimela.

Mqhele looks like he's been crying.

They never cry.

Nothing we do or say will make this Christmas a good one. It's my first Christmas at home after 17 years.

There is that tree again. I wonder what is happening in that house, who my father is with and what he's going to eat. He's been living alone since that day I left a dead body in his house. I never understood why he never took a second wife because he had mistresses all over. He could have chosen any one of them to marry and torture and abuse like he did with my mother.

The rondavel door opens and Nkosana comes out walking furiously towards me. I go to meet him but he rushes past me. He's angry.

I follow him to the main house.

"Everybody out!"-he shouts when he walks in.

There's a frozen moment. His brothers all come rushing but they know better than to get too close.

Someone hushes the kids to go to the bedroom.

"No, not to the bedroom! Outside," he screams.

We all grab the first one we can find and rush outside, his brothers are still in the house. I don't see Sisekelo and Langa, they must be still inside.

They are trying to calm him down but we all know it's not going to work, not when he's like this.

The younger four are the first to come out, I see Langa amongst them, then out comes Sambulo and Mqhele and Sise.....

I see the little thing being pulled back in the house swiftly and the door closing.

"Sambulo!!!"-Xolie screams.

What did Nkosana just do?? No!

Sambulo is banging on the door! He's screaming and kicking it! The rest of them are running around the house trying to find a way back in but he's locked all doors. He's too quick!

"Zandile! Do something!"-Xolie is screams at me.

I don't know what to do! I've been screaming for him to open the door but he won't listen.

What's gotten into Nkosana? How could he do this? He loves these children with all his being!

"Sambulo get my child out of there! Get my child out of there now!"-Xolie still screaming.

Hlomu is shouting at Mqhele and all of them to do something!

They are trying. I know Nkosana but I don't know this person he is now.

All the windows have burglar-guards, they are also bullet proofed so there's no breaking them.

We've been shouting and running around the house to try and communicate

with him but it's not helping.

A large part of me doesn't believe Nkosana could hurt the child but I'm as terrified as everyone.

Lwandle is in one of the houses with all the other kids.

"Bafo! Bafo please, I'm begging you,"-Sambulo pleads.

"They're in this bedroom,"-Gugu shouts.

We all run to the window.

"Zah, talk to him,"-Mqhele.

The window is slightly open but somehow we can't open it wider, it seems to be locked somehow.

"Nkosana," I say calmly hoping he will respond.

No response.

"Nkosana, I need you to assure me that you won't harm the child," I say.

Silence.

"Leave Zandile," he says after a while.

My stomach turns, this is Nkosana, he kills.

"Sisekelo," he says.

We all stand quietly next to the window. We can hear everything he's saying.

"Baba," he responds. He doesn't sound scared.

"Tell him I'm here. If he has something he wants to say, he must say it to me,"-Nkosana.

This is not good at all! He's gone insane!

"I'm here! Speak to me! I'm here!" he shouts, he's walking up and down the bedroom shouting.

"What do you want? What do you want from my child?" he screams louder.

This is disturbing. It stabs right through my heart. I hate that I can't be in there to help him.

"Nkosana!"-my voice is trembling.

He's quiet for a short while.

And then we hear him again.

"Is he here?"

"No," Sisekelo says in a tiny voice.

The poor child must be hell confused.

"Talk to him, wherever he is tell him to talk to me!" he screams.

I can figure by the way the sound of his voice keeps changing position that he's still pacing.

"Talk to me like a man Sbopho! Tell me what you want from me! What do you want? You should be happy, I turned out exactly like you! You should be proud! I did what you asked me to do! I became a man! What the fuck do you want from me now?"-he's shouting but his voice is breaking now, it's trembling.

I think he's crying! I can't take it anymore!

"Nkosana," I scream banging the window.

"Nkosana open the door!" I scream.

He's wailing now. I can't, I can't do this!

"I've opened the kitchen door!"-Lwandle. I didn't even know he was out here.

I run in first followed by Sambulo.

"Nkosana," I say when I walk in.

Sambulo walks in, grabs Sisekelo and rushes out.

I close the door before they all reach it. I stand behind it. I'm not sure whether to go near or stay far.

He doesn't move, or speak, or look at me.

I take the walk, it's a leap of blind faith, but I take it anyway until I'm standing in front of him, our knees almost touching.

"Hey,"

"Nkosana,"

It's like talking to a statue.

I push my way to his lap and sit on it. I wrap my arms around his neck. I'm here, why can't he accept that.

I'm going to sit here even if it takes the whole day.

He sighs and wraps his arms around me.

He rolls on the bed and takes me with him.

We lay like this in silence.

And then I remember.

"He's fine!" I shout.

I know they are standing at the door.

"Baba," a voice says.

It's Lwandle.

"I'm fine boy,"-Nkosana.

Whew! He speaks.

I'm going to be here in his arms and let him cool off for a while.

"It's Christmas," he says.

That's a bit random.

"Yes it is," I say.

"Did they open their presents?" he asks,

I look at him and nod.

"We never used to buy them presents, or celebrate Christmas and stuff like that. Well at that time it was just Sbani, Lwandle and Mvelo and none of us were interested in all that. They went to church for the first time with Hlomu and they came back with all kinds of questions that I couldn't answer," he says.

I'm not sure where he is going with this.

"We've had a lot of Christmases here, and they've all been filled with joy,"

I could jump in and say something but I'm kind of treading carefully right now.

"What is Christmas about anyway?" he asks.

Let me jump in.

"It's Jesus' Birthday," I say.

"Really?"

Oh Lord! He really didn't know I can see it in his eyes.

I laugh. He laughs with me.

I hold him tighter.

He's not laughing anymore, I know by the way he's breathing.

"I know what he wants Zandile," he says.

I think I know too. I don't want to say it or believe it but I know.

"What are we going to do?" I ask.

He's quiet. I know what that means.

"Why do they always get what they want Nkosana? What do we get?" I ask. I'm

getting really upset.

"We get each other," he says.

I know. But that's not enough to make me less angry.

"Zah we're going to start with lunch," Hlomu says from outside.

Really Hlomu?

"Okay," I say.

I think she just wanted to hear me speak. She was checking if my psycho husband hasn't strangled me to death.

"Maybe she wants me to come and help out,"

"No, don't worry about it. You're fine right here with me," he says and kisses my forehead.

I've noticed that he always kisses my forehead when he is trying to tell me something he doesn't want to tell me.

"Nkosana, am I a bad cook?" I ask.

He acts surprised, but I can see that smile he's trying to hide.

"Nooooooooo,"

I know that noooooooooo

"Don't lie, Hlomu's aunt said I was the worst cook she's ever met in her life,"

He laughs, he can't stop himself.

Okay, I am a bad cook. But I don't care, I just want to look at him laughing. It's hard to believe that just now he was losing his mind and crying like a child.

The happy moment doesn't last very long.

He is back to brushing my back and being quiet.

"What are we going to do Nkosana?" I ask.

He looks into my eyes.

"I'm going to go to him and beg,"

No! Never! Not as long as I'm alive!

"Zah, I have to,"

"No Nkosana! No! You didn't work this hard all your life to go back and grovel to some low-life... no! I will not allow that! Not the father of my children!" I shout.

"Zandile! Zandile!" he's shaking me.

"Listen to me, I have to do this," he insists.

Nkosana doesn't understand. I can't! I can't let that man imprison me again. It took so much for me to get to where I am, I can't go back there.

"What if we stay in Joburg and never come back here, that's going to work. It's obvious your father doesn't want me here but that one is my house, nothing can happen to me there....."

"It's not about that," he says.

What is it about?

"You're not doing it, I'd rather suffer all my life than see you do that,"

Why is it that this life can't just let us be? We love each other, we would die for each other but the world just won't let us be happy.

Haven't we suffered enough?

Sometimes I do wonder how life would have been if I had followed instruction and married Gwaza. But just the thought of it is nauseating.

I never loved him. We had been childhood friends and our families were very close so I was guaranteed a comfortable marriage but there was just no love there,

at least not on my side.

I believe that even if I had not seen Nkosana that day and the lobola negotiations had gone through, I would still have found a way to escape it somehow.

My heart has always belonged to Nkosana, always.

“MaFuze, this is going to be difficult, but it has to be done,”

I don't care what he.....

“No no listen to me, you're my wife, you are my soul-mate. I can have anything in this world, go anywhere, be with anyone, but in the end it is you, it has always been you Zandile that keeps me alive. You know it was circumstances that forced us to do things the easy way, but as much as I don't want to do this, I want you to be rightfully mine, to own my surname and to take your place in this family. That is what I've always wanted,”

I understand him, but how could he want to break me like that after he's worked so hard to put me back together?

“Ours was never going to be an easy life, you know that. But we are still here, we've beaten everything, all of it. I just want to beat this one last thing and maybe after that we can find our happiness,” he says.

I wish I had tears, I wish I did because maybe crying would make me feel better afterwards.

“You're doing it alone Nkosana, I will not be part of it,”

I can't sit here and listen to this nonsense.

“Zah....”

I'm out.

Eighteen

I keep going back and forth, it's a curse. I have concluded that in my life, I will never get away with anything. Everything I have done wrong will catch up with me, it always does. Just when I think I have come out, I find myself back in again, deep in.

My marriage is taking a strain. I have tried to be myself, to act normal but I can't. I have never been the type that suffers in silence, if I'm in a bad space, everyone around me feels it.

I get disgusted even more when they say I've lost weight, like I've ever been fat or anything other than perfect looking.

I didn't say goodbye when he left. I pretended to be fast asleep even when he kissed me on the cheek and walked out the door.

I am angry, I'm angry at him for loving me so much that he is prepared to lay his dignity down, but more than anything I am angry at myself for being such a burden to his life. Had I forgotten and let go maybe he would have found another woman, a normal woman who was going to give him a normal life, not me and all the darkness that's been hovering over me all my life.

I don't leave the house much and I don't communicate that much with the family. I've even blocked Mpande's perfume girl's phone number because I realised that if she called me again, I was going to kill her with my bare hands.

At first it was funny, but now it is downright disturbing.

Mpande has turned into this paranoid person who has to look over his shoulder all the time. Every day he wonders what new stunt she's going to pull.

Just three weeks ago, on the day after we came back from Mbuba she invited him to lunch at a restaurant. She convinced him that she wanted them to talk and apologise for among other things, showing up at every place he goes to and going to a tabloid newspaper to lie about them planning to settle down together.

For some strange reason he believed her, only to get there and find her sitting with a middle-aged white couple, her parents.

The girl introduced him as her fiancée'. He refused to play along and told the parents everything. She stormed out crying and when he got home, he found her there, happy, smiling and waiting for him with open arms.

I have never seen Mpande this frustrated, ever!

"Sis Zah, I don't want to hurt her, I can never get violent with a woman but if this continues I swear she is going to end up in a grave," he said to me once.

In the beginning Xolie and Hlomu used to laugh and say he was paying for all the women whose hearts he broke in the past by being an unapologetic womaniser.

He's blocked her number three times but she always gets hold of him before the day ends. As to how she's still able to get in his house? We are all, including Mpande himself, still puzzled.

His brothers have not been very helpful. Nkosana is dealing with his own problems and the others just don't want to get involved in anything that involves "dealing" with a woman.

I've been thinking that I should reconnect with Buhle and make time to see Lulu, those are the two best friends I have had in my life. Being back here and this life took over me a little, I forgot where I came from and now that I'm forced to go back there, I'm reminded of the important things.

I didn't call to check on him, not even once today. I am becoming that woman, that Zandile that is angry and stubborn.

I know he will walk in any time now and I am going to try my best.

He walks in just after I settle down in-front of the TV in sleepwear.

It's still early in the evening.

The look on his face says it all.

He looks at me once, says 'hi' and walks up the stairs.

I know. I understand. I would look like this too, maybe even worse if I had to face my father again.

This is the second trip they've made to my father's house. On the first one it was just Ngcobo and Mzimela. When they came back they told us that he wanted a goat to cleanse his house because I splattered blood all over it by killing my mother. And then he said he wanted Nkosana to pay damages for Sbani and Lwandle.

The fool has a nerve to make demands!

I made dinner. It may be horrible food but I made my husband dinner and I do want him to feel better.

"Your food is ready,"

He's just come out of the shower and is putting on pyjamas.

I stand at the door and wait for him to say something, if he is going to say something.

"I'm coming," he says at last.

He won't even look at me.

I guess this is when I should leave.

He finds me sitting at the dining table with a plate in front of me. He's sitting at the end of the table as always. He hasn't smiled, not even once.

I've been the one throwing tantrums all along, by the look of things he is tired of begging and chasing.

"Did you travel well?"

"Yes," he says, and that's it.

He doesn't want to speak. He isn't much of a talker naturally, unless he is with me.

So is he just going to sit there and be cold towards me? The least he can do, seeing as this involves me too, is give me feedback and then continue being an ice-bucket after that.

"Did things go well?" I ask.

I can feel anger boiling inside me as I wait for the answer.

That we had to adhere to my father's demands, after everything, just grinds me.

"We got there in the morning, gave them a goat for that cleansing thing they asked for. And then later in the day we did the paying of damages, and then we left,"

I can just tell that he hates this as much as I do.

"We are going to pay lobola next weekend," he says.

What???

"And you didn't tell me....?"

He stops eating and drops the fork on the table. This is not good.

The palms of his hands again.

I've just pissed him off, again.

"We are going Zah. We have to do this quickly, he doesn't look like he's going to last long and please, could you just do what I tell you to do? just this once so we can get this thing over and done with?"

I don't want to challenge him when he's like this.

I nod and go back to my food, but I can feel him still looking at me, he's quiet but he's still looking at me. I won't raise my eyes.

I know his eyes have moved somewhere else when the aura around me suddenly feels light.

He's eating again. I decide I won't mention this again tonight. We don't talk much these days anyway. He spends most of his time in that office of his and I keep myself occupied with Mvelo, that's what we've become.

Hlomu says it's not about me, she says he's angry at his father more than anything.

I wish I could do something to help him, I really do. But he's determined to do what is right, as always.

He's done eating. He stands up.

"You have to be there for lobola negotiations. You have to sleepover at your father's house," he says and walks away.

Whaaat?

No! They can't do that to me! I swore I would never go back there!

He's gone. I want to shout and throw a tantrum but he's gone and I know he's not interested in my whining, not tonight.

He's gone when I wake up. He didn't even kiss me goodbye in my sleep, I know that because the kiss always wakes me.

I'm beginning to think I'm being selfish. That I'm making this all about me and the fact that I don't want to be part of it.

But, I know that it's important to him, he really does want to do things right, he wants to fully own me. My problem is my father, he is using this to get back at us and I know he's going to make things difficult throughout.

Why doesn't he just die? Why doesn't he?

We're going to Peter's wedding in two weeks, I've never met him but from what I've heard, he is a typical lawyer. And that means I have to go shopping soon, apparently it's one of those Top Billing types of weddings. He's marrying a model almost half his age and I hear this is his third marriage. It's a good thing white folk don't have to pay lobola and go through all these ceremonies that we go through otherwise he'd be broke by now.

How are you doing?

An SMS from Xolie. That's a bit random.

I'm good, just being a desperate housewife as always"- I respond.

I'm sure she's about to ask me to do lunch or all that stuff that we do because we have no life.

Sambulo told me about next weekend, I could go with you, sleep over there with you"- she says.

They all know now?

I don't want to talk about it, but that's nice of her, I think that will work for me.

"That would be great Xolie, thank you so much,"

She doesn't respond. She's the sweetest one.

I have an idea.

Yes, this might work. I need my husband back.

"You can park here suster it's fine,"

No it's not fine, this is a loading zone, I don't have time to deal with cops, not in Braamfontein on a Monday!

"I'll look after it, don't worry the traffic cops are eating lunch at this time," he says.

And he knows that how?

I park anyway. If this car gets towed I'll deal with him.

"Eish suster, this is a mean machine hey, you drive around like Michael Knight hey," he says walking around my car with a wide smile on his face.

I smile back, what else can I do?

I go to the passenger seat and take out the basket, it's a bit heavy.

"Make sure I don't get towed okay? I'll be back just now," I say.

He's still smiling.

"Don't worry suster, you'll find me here, my name is Remember and this is my territory, I rule this street," he says. I think he actually really believes he rules this street.

He sounds like he's from Zimbabwe judging by the accent he speaks isiNdebele with.

When I went to jail there was no such thing as car-guards. I guess people have had to create their own careers to survive.

I've only been here once, at night, when Nkosana had to come in on a Saturday to pick up some documents. Besides that the business involves all kinds of transport, I'm completely clueless about how I get all the luxuries I have.

"Mrs Zulu," - a very tiny woman says just as I come out of the lift.

I don't know her, but then again, the whole of South Africa knows me.

"Hi," I say and stop with the basket in my hands.

"He's in a meeting but they're almost done, would you like to wait in his office or here at reception? Would you like something to drink while you wait? Let me help you with that...."

Whoah! Slow down Miss.

She's nervous, I don't understand why.

"I'll just wait here," I say sitting on one of the reception couches.

This is nice. I didn't get time to look at this place the first time.

It's like a loft of some sort. Reception on this floor and then stairs going up to what looks like offices, but they are all glass and I can see that they are all empty.

There are people coming in and out, some see me, others don't even look my way.

I understand we own the whole building, all twelve floors of it. Behind me is a glass wall with a huge sign, it's a drawing of a pleated grass rope, you know that thing that you use to make a grass mat.

Under it is a writing: "**Sibopho Logistics**"

I've always found it weird that they named their business after their father.

Nkosana's office is on the last floor, in a corner and you can see the whole of Joburg through its glass wall.

"Good day,"- someone says, it's a woman, she's dressed formal, I don't know her either but she has a smile on her face.

She reaches out her hand, I assume we have to shake hands. She stands still and stares at me with that smile still on her face even after the handshake is over.

"This is Refilwe, she's our Communications Manager," the reception lady says nudging her with her elbow.

I nod and smile back.

"I'm sorry, I just.....you're even more prettier in real life,"- that's Refilwe.

Oh that thing about me again.

I smile, I'm not good at small-talk.

They're still standing looking at me.

Where is Nkosana?

"Sis'Zah,"- it's Mpande.

He's just come out of the lift. The two girls scurry off somewhere.

"You're walking around eating? What is wrong with you?" I ask.

This boy will never change.

"Mmmmmmm I went to get a bagel from Fruitcake Crumbs, it's the best. What do you have in that basket?" he asks with food in his mouth. Lawd!

"I brought you all lunch. Nkosana is in a meeting so I'm waiting here....."

"It's fine I'll get him out of there, let's go," he says taking the basket from me.

But we meet a bunch of men in suits on the stairs. They are a different crowd from what I'm used to. I'm used to the taxi business lot, that's who they bring home for Saturday soccer and random braais, that's who their friends-in-business are.

"Zah, what's wrong?"-Nkosana.

He's standing in front of me, I didn't even see him coming. I blink once and they're all standing around me.

"Are you okay? Did something happen?"-Qhawe.

The paranoia in this family!

"No, I brought you all lunch," I say pointing at the basket Mpande is carrying. He's still eating that bagel like some animal.

I see relief on their faces.

Can't a wife stop-by at her husband's office without people thinking there's something wrong?

"What's in here?"-Mqoqi asks snatching the basket from Mpande and opening it.

"Skop!"-he shouts.

I hear whistling and cheering.

They're like kids sometimes.

They walk and I follow, Nkosana alongside me with his hand on my back.

It's a boardroom with a big long table and chairs. There are water bottles, I think this is where the meeting was.

All their focus is on the food now, it's like I'm not here at all.

"Where did you get this?"-Sambulo, he still speaks like his batteries are running low.

"I bought it from some women in Soweto," I say.

"You went to Soweto?"-Nkosana asks shoving a large chunk in his mouth.

He needs to relax, I know Soweto like the back of my hand. I used to work there.

I thought maybe they were going to be proper humans and get plates and spoons but no, they're eating with their hands, straight from the disposable containers, suits and ties and all.

"Mqoqi don't finish the liver, and I don't know why you're all here, my wife bought this food for me not you fools,"-Nkosana.

"I'll remind you of this when you're stuffing your face with my wife's food in my house,"-Mqhele.

They all laugh.

This was a good idea I think, Nkosana looks happy, I haven't seen him laugh and joke in a while.

"Come on, let's leave these fools," he says taking my hand.

The boardroom table is a mess, I wonder who is going to clean it.

"Thank you MaFuze,"-Mqhele says as we walk out the door.

I turn around and smile at all of them. Never in my wildest dream did I ever think our lives would turn out like this. They've done well for themselves, I must tell them this one day, that I'm proud of all of them.

Nkosana's office is spotless, not even a crooked paper on his desk, everything is perfectly placed.

I'm glad none of my kids turned out like him.....

"So, MaFuze, what brings you here? Did you miss me," he says pulling me close to him.

Now this is a better mood compared to last night.

"I miss you all the time," I say kissing him.

He blushes. I like this side of him, the soft child-like one.

"How was the meeting?" I ask.

I get worried sometimes that maybe my past still affects their work.

"Nothing serious, just some folk wanting us to transport some goods to Kenya for them. Speaking of that, I have to get Mpande to do background checks on

them, I don't trust these foreign folk," he says.

Mpande, it turns out, has all kinds of dodgy skills that can trace your life all the way back to the colour of the first panties you ever wore. I think he's responsible for this 24-hour surveillance they have on us too.

"Thanks for the lunch," he says.

That's not why I came here though.

He sits down on his big leather office chair. Does this mean he has to work now? That I should leave?

"Come here," he says stretching his hand.

I walk to sit on his lap with my arms around his neck. He has his arms around my waist and he's not saying anything, just looking into my eyes.

"You know I love you right?" he asks.

I know.

I nod.

"So, Zazah, why are you here?" he asks.

He always could see through me. He knows this is not just a random visit.

"I'll do it. I'll do it for you, for us and for our kids. Maybe if I..."-Lord! this is difficult.

"Maybe if I go back, even if it's just for one night, maybe I'll find peace," I say.

He nods.

"Tell me about it. Tell me what happened when you were there," I say.

I need to prepare myself, to know what to expect.

He sighs.

"First, they wouldn't let us in for about three hours. We waited. Your uncle, the one that I know and two other uncles and several women were there. When we eventually went in someone said we should have come with you. But your uncle talked them out of turning us back. So after a while of negotiating we gave them the goat for the cleansing and then later the two cows and four goats for damages," he says.

I think he is summarising, there are things he doesn't want to tell me.

"Your father was just sitting there staring at me like he wanted to kill me the whole time. He had this evil look on his face, I think he blames me for everything that happened, he believes that if you hadn't loved me so much you would never have defied him," he says.

"Nkosana, whatever pain my father suffered, he brought it upon himself,"

"Speaking of that Zah, your home looks like one horrible place, that man has been living like a pig, alone. I think he is going to die there alone and he will rot before anyone finds him," he says.

How is it that I don't feel anything for a man who fathered me? Nkosana seems concerned, I couldn't care less.

I kiss his forehead.

"Don't tell me you're thinking about helping him," I say. He must never!

He takes a deep breath.

"Sbani has been hinting that he wants to know your side of the family," he says.

What? No! No! No!

"It's natural Zah, I knew it was going to come up one day. All I did when they were teenagers was tell them not to get involved with girls whose surname is Ngcobo, that's how they found out what your surname is. But you know family

stretches beyond one surname," he says.

I didn't come here for this kind of talk.

"I just don't want them sleeping with their cousins," he says.

Now that would be wrong.

I understand him, but that doesn't make it less complicated.

"Let me talk to them about it," I say.

Our relationship has improved, a lot, and now this?

"Nkosana! people can see us,"

Crap! This office has glass walls, people walking outside can see everything and I'm sitting on his lap as we speak.

"Shit! I forgot," he says pushing me off and walking to the door.

No employee wants to see their boss being cosy in his office with his wife.

He pulls down the blinds on both sides of the wall. I didn't realise there were blinds but they are top-to-bottom covering the whole wall, and now this office is almost completely dark.

He switches the light on.

I'm sitting on top of the desk. He looks at me, I know, he wants me to get off the desk because I might just leave hand-prints or maybe my dress will leave a colour stain or whatever is going on in that crazy mind of his.....I don't know, but I don't move. I want to push him a little, evoke some emotion.

He comes back to sit on the chair and opens his arms. He wants me to sit on his lap again. But I don't think so.

"What are you.....?" he asks with his eyes all out and mouth open.

Yep! I'm doing it!

"Zandile!"- he says again. But he doesn't want me to stop, I can see by that smile he's trying to hold back.

"Here....you can keep it here," I say opening the top shelf, putting it inside and closing it.

"Or I can keep it here," he says taking it out and putting it in his jacket pocket. The smile is there now, he's still trying to fight it but it's there.

"Suit yourself," I say.

I take his hand and place it on my inner thigh.

"I'm supposed to be working....." he says.

But I know he wants to...

"Yes, work me," I say opening my legs wider and pushing his hand up my inner thighs.

His eyes are getting smaller and smaller, the animal in him is slowly coming out.

I lift my right leg and touch his chest with my toes.

"Zah, what is wrong with you?" he asks, smile wide.

I run my toes down all the way to his belt.

"Come here...." I say.

That look on his face, he's looking at me like I'm food.

"Mmmmmm" I moan when his hand touches my inner thigh.

It goes higher and higher and....

"Mmmmmmm"

"Ssshhhh,"-he says. He's standing in-between my open legs.

"There.....there," I whisper.

He pushes the finger deeper.....and deeper.

"Mmmmmmm...." I moan.

"How is it....?" he whispers and kisses my neck.

"Goo..."

He pushes his finger deeper before I can finish talking.

I find myself with my hand over his, I don't know when that happened, I can't control what I do anymore.....

His hand is on top of mine now...

What's he doing...?

"Is it here?" he whispers.

I feel the moist.

His fingers are in-between mine.

We're both touching "me".

I was supposed to be in control here but he's taken over.

If someone walked in here.....

I hear the sound of his belt buckle just before he roughly pulls me to him, my one leg in the chair and another over his arm.

I'm not going to let him control me. I push him off, he tries to fight me but I push harder. I jump off the desk and stand in-front of him.

He looks confused.

"Sit down," I say.

He stands still. I push him to the chair and pull his pants down.

The way he's looking at me.....it makes me weak, but I'm gonna stay strong.

He watches me carefully as I sit on top of him. He slips his hand under me but I push it off.

"Let me....." I say looking in his eyes.

He closes his eyes as I slowly push him in.

"You're a naughty girl," he whispers.

I shut him up with a kiss as I move slowly.

I can feel it all over his body, the urge to take control. His grip on my butt gets tighter and tighter. I'm still moving slowly.

His moaning gets louder and louder, I know he won't be able to control himself for long.

I feel the grip on my neck and I let my body loose, he can take over now.....

The land-line phone is on the floor, he pushed it off the table when it rang just before he groaned and almost banged me on the desk by my spine.

"Don't ever do this to me again Zah, are you trying to make me lose my mind?" he says.

He is so happy I can just see it in his face.

We're now lying on the couch at the far end of the office, my back is on his chest, he keeps playing with my hair.

"You just can't be powerless can you?" I ask.

He smirks.

"It's just not in my nature," he says.

I laugh, what am I going to do with this man?

"And that's another reason I love you so much," I say.

"Really?" he asks. Why does he look surprised?

"Yes, that and many other factors, including that you're a dictator, a control freak, you believe in violence....."

"Okay you can stop now...." he says laughing.

I like this here but I have to go now, it's almost time to pick Mvelo up from school. And, I'm sure Nkosana still has work to do.

He watches me as I get up and get dressed.

"There's a bathroom there," he says pointing at a closed door.

Oh Lord! I was just going to get dressed and get out of here. I walk my cute embarrassed ass all the way to the bathroom without looking back.

I didn't come in here the last time I was in this office.

It has a toilet and a hand-sink only. I'm surprised there isn't a shower, I expected to find it.

His neatly folded towels and perfectly placed hand-wash are so proper that I'm scared to even touch them. My life is tough.

I come out looking and smelling fresher. Everything is back in its place, the desk is neat and perfect again.

He goes inside the bathroom and comes out within minutes, looking like he didn't just have sex in his office.

"I have 20 minutes to get to Mvelo's school," I say.

I don't want to be late, it's the worst thing a parent can do to a three-year-old.

I brave stares and nervous faces as we walk down the stairs to reception. It looks like people are knocking off already, but they rush back inside when they see us coming. Sometimes I wonder how I'm able to live with this man that everyone fears so much.

I wave at the lady at reception when we walk past, I don't wanna be that kind of boss's wife.

He spans me as soon as we are alone in the lift.

I'm still not wearing panties, I forgot about them. They are in his pocket, and his jacket is in his office.

"You're welcome back anytime," he says.

He's being naughty I see.

"Stop!!"

Seriously what is wrong with him, he keeps running his hand up my dress, what if this lift stops and someone sees us.

Whew! We're on the ground floor.

He's pulling me by hand when we walk out.

"No I'm parked this side,"

"Which side?" he asks.

"Just outside the door,"

"You're parked on the street?" he asks, like it's a crime or something.

"Yes, I didn't know where else to park," I say.

Can he not give me grief about something so small? Can he not please!

I follow him out the door.

Yes, this is where I parked.....but!

He looks at me, I look at him.

There's a small truck on the loading zone, where I had parked, it is loading.

"Errrr suster," I hear a soft voice behind me.

I look at him.

He takes his hat off and squashes it.

"Remember, where's my car?"

He looks down. Nkosana hasn't said anything, he's standing next to me watching all this.

"Eish suster, you see, you said you were going to be back shortly. You see, here on these streets shortly means ten minutes or fifteen minutes or so, you see suster?"

What the hell?

"But, suster, you were gone for two hours so I couldn't stop the cops from towing your car," he says.

They towed my car? Who tows a freaking R-8?

How the heck am I supposed to get home now?

"Remember, how many times have I told you not to make people park in-front of my building? This whole stretch is a loading zone, we load trucks here,"-Nkosana.

He scratches his head.

"But boss this is the Mrs so I thought she could park here....."

I don't care about this conversation, I just want my car back.

And this Remember moron is not getting a tip from me.

"Ask Hlomu to get Mvelo, you're late already. I'll get a driver to take you home and send someone to get your car,"-Nkosana says pulling me back inside the building.

"And you Remember, you're fired, I don't want you here," he shouts.

"Ay no boss I don't work for you, I'm self-employed, you can't fire me," he shouts and runs off to bug another motorist.

Nkosana smiles. I didn't expect that, I thought he'd be angry with him.

"He's gonna go far," he says. That's all he says.

He's been smiling and blushing the whole time we've been standing here waiting for the driver to pick me up.

I asked him why he doesn't give me his car and use the other one that's always parked here to get home, but he didn't give me a straight answer. I think he just doesn't want me to go yet, he wants us to stand here with his arm around me and people walking in and out looking at us like they're seeing unicorns.

The car, with dark tinted windows pulls up.

"Okay, this is me," I say looking at him.

"Yes, it's time to go," he says but still holding me around the waist.

"It's just a couple of hours Nkosana, you'll be home just now," I say kissing him on the lips and walking.

He follows me, opens my door and says a sad goodbye.

He's like a love-struck teenage boy.

I wave and close the door.

He stands and looks at the car as it drives off.

Sometimes all you have to do is feed them and fuck them, that's all.

I've prepared supper. Okay actually I've organised supper.

I don't bother much with cooking anymore, it's not my best skill, as one Savanna drinking middle-aged hustler of a woman once informed me.

Things have been great. He's been acting like a love-struck puppy all week and we haven't at all talked about tomorrow.

I'm dreading it but I'm glad that Xolie will be with me.

It wasn't supposed to be a big thing, but, you know the Zulus. So, tomorrow the whole crowd will trek to Mbuba, for what? I don't know.

"Sorry I'm home late, I had to go past Saxonwold," he says when he walks in.

Saxonwold? That's where Mqhele and Hlomu live.

"Oh, I haven't spoken to Hlomu since Monday, I must call her tomorrow," I say.

He's quiet.

"I'm seeing her tomorrow anyway," I say.

He's not there anymore.

"Lamb chops, my favourite!" he says looking at the plate.

Yeah they're from your favourite restaurant too.

We sit on that table that we always sit in every night.

This is great. I always imagined us having dinner like this, all four of us, except in my imagination the table was smaller and in a smaller house. I never ever thought we would have all this, it seemed impossible.

"So, were you missing Niya?" I ask.

That must be why he went to Saxonwold.

He raises his eyes to look at me briefly.

"Not exactly, I went to check on those two," he says.

Huh? Why?

I don't speak but he knows I'm asking.

"I sensed yesterday that something was wrong. Mqhele was a bit down so I went past their house just to make sure that, you know, nothing happened," he says.

I'm a bit lost. Couples fight, we fight.

"Did you really have to? They probably had a small fight, it happens," I say.

But he doesn't think so.

"Hlomu and Mqhele do not have little fights. They love each other like crazy but when they fight, it's World War 3," he says.

I did say they were weird.

"But are they okay now?"

"Yes, at least there was no beating this time," he says.

What???

I'm shocked!

"It's not that bad..."

"What do you mean it's not that bad Nkosana?" - I can't keep my voice down.

"I mean, it has happened only twice since they met, but I worry a lot because Hlomu can also be a bit aggressive when she gets angry. This other time she crashed two cars after she found out Mqhele had had an affair," he says.

Oh crap!

It must have been with that girl we met at the mall that other day.

"I can't believe this," I say.

I really can't.

"They remind me too much of my parents. My father loved my mother with everything he had. He was brutal to other people but with my mother, it was like

she was his reason for breathing. He'd freak out when he heard her screaming, even if it was just because she saw a cockroach, she was scared of cockroaches. This one time a cup fell and hit her on her toenail, you could just see that he wished he could feel all that pain for her,"

I remember he used to walk her everywhere, even to the bus-stop.

"On that night, the night they died, my mother could have left with us, he kept telling her to leave with us, but she wouldn't leave the house without him," he says.

Oh my! We're talking about this? It's not a subject we visit often.

"She must have had hope that they'd both survive," I say.

I'm trying to make him feel better about it.

"But, it looks like it wasn't a major fight. They'll be laughing and kissing again by tomorrow, I hope," he says.

Great, we're back to Mqhele and Hlomu.

I know Mqhele has a short-fuse but I never thought he could hit Hlomu? It seems a bit odd.

And Hlomu? She can be violent? I was beginning to think I know all about the family but I'm not so sure anymore.

"I'm going to pack," I say standing up to leave the table.

I'm not really going to pack, I just need an excuse to leave the table and go to the bedroom. I have to emotionally prepare myself for tomorrow, and that means praying.

He grabs my hand just as I walk past him. I turn to look at him, but he doesn't speak, he just holds my hand tight and looks down at the table. I pull away slowly, I can do this, he must trust me.

I know he'll come to bed late, he's going to lock himself in that office or that creepy room with a chair until the wee hours, he does that when he feels helpless, when he knows I need him but he can't be there for me.

I was right, I know him too well. He's not in bed when I wake up to go pee. It's almost 2am.

Maybe he fell asleep in the office, on that chair there.

I must go wake him...or maybe not...but I can't let him sleep on a chair....and he has an early meeting tomorrow....but he'll be fine.....no I'm going to wake him.

I walk barefoot just so I don't startle him because he might just go crazy and think there's someone in the house and start shooting.

The light in the office is off, it's locked though.

There's a sound coming from not too far.

It's a low sound.

It's someone crying.

I stop myself just as I'm about to turn the door handle.

The cry is low but it's rattling, it's like he is trying to hold it back but he can't.

But why is he crying? Nkosana doesn't cry.

I lean on the wall next to the door and slide all the way down until I'm sitting butt-flat on the floor.

I don't know what to do.

How can I not know what to do?

I'm his wife, I should know exactly what to do right now.

Zandile

He's still crying.

I can't take it any more.

I stand up and swing the door open.

I can see him, but the room is still dark.

"Nkosana..." I say standing at the door.

He's sitting on the corner with knees raised and his face over them, his arms are around his legs.

He doesn't raise his head.

I'm not sure if I should switch the light on or not.

I decide not to, but I open the door wide so that more light comes in.

This is a risk I'm taking, but I walk to him anyway.

I see a piece of paper on the floor, just in-front of where his feet are as I approach.

"Nkosana..." he still doesn't respond.

I'm standing in front of him and I have no idea what to do next.

I kneel in-front of him. I want to touch him but he's acting really strange right now.

I can see the piece of paper clearly now, it's a picture.

It's a boy. He looks just like him and the rest of them.

It's Mvelo.

He would have turned 16 today.

Nineteen

The smell is still the same.

Pot-pourri, yes that's what my mother used to stash all over the house. She said it kept the whole house smelling fresh. Now there's nothing fresh about this house, but the Pot-pourri must have stuck on the walls.

"We can go straight to your bedroom and stay there the whole night,"-Xolie.

My room?

She's been doing this since we left home, pushing me forward every time I stand still. I packed too slow, walked too slow and drove too slow.

They all stood outside in the yard and watched us drive off. It felt like we were going far, very far, but we are just two hills away.

If they want to see us they just have to stand on the yard and stretch their eyes, the tree in this yard will connect us.

It's as tall as I remember it. The rock just under it is still there, still round and shiny.

Over there behind it was a chicken coup, but now, all that's left are rusted iron strings.

That was the kraal, there by the big gate was a big kraal. But, judging by how dry the ground is inside it, no cow has slept there in many years.

I was an only child but there was always a boy, an older boy living with us. They came and went, "umfana wezinkomo" (herdboy), that's what they were called. I never understood why they never stayed long because my father treated them like princes. He treated them better than he treated my mother and I.

I put one foot in, it feels like walking backwards, back to my pain.

Xolie is behind me, she's not doing it physically but I can feel her pushing me forward.

"Zandile," a voice says.

She has a smile, I can't tell if it's a real smile or that smile that the radical religious type gives you, that one that says: "The Bible says....."

Because when they start a sentence with those three words, you know they're actually saying: "I'd really like to chop you into pieces right now, but the Bible says....."

"Aunt Phumlile," I say.

I haven't seen her in over 25 years but she's easy to recognise, her left eye is smaller than her right eye.

I can't say I expected to see her, or any member of the family for that matter.

"Come on in," she says, that smile still stuck on her face.

She has a dress underneath and a pinafore on top of it. She has a doek over her shoulders and another one covering her head. She's looking at both of us from head to toe.

The kitchen, this is where my mother spent most of her time. She cooked here, ate here, cried here, got beaten here and prayed here.

It used to be the cleanest part of the house.

The coal stove is still here?

It took years for Mbuba to get electricity, in-fact we were probably the last village in Greytown to get electricity.

My mother used this stove, even when electricity had arrived, until the day she died. I realised there was something wrong with the picture when I went outside one night and realised we were the only house with smoke coming out of the chimney.

That big kettle there at the corner, she used to boil water for my father's tea with it. Sometimes she'd fill the water up just for one cup of tea, a part of me thinks the plan was to pour boiling water on him, but she was never the brave type.

I feel Xolie getting heavier behind me again.

I go forward.

The sofas are gone. I remember my mother's face when the truck from Lewis furniture shop arrived, she was so happy, like it was a dream come true.

She kept the cushions covered in plastic-wrap for years and would polish the wood every day without fail. I used to sit on the floor most of the time because there's nothing as painful as hard plastic sticking on your butt on a hot day. But she thought I did that because I respected her property.

I look on my left and here she is, on the wall, in a white dress that looks more like a nun's outfit than a wedding dress. She looks like she was about 16-years-old here, I looked like that when I was 16. Next to her is a man with a smile on his face, a warm smile and loving eyes.

I never met that man, but I did look at him every time I walked past this picture and wondered where he disappeared to, why he took off and gave his body to this demon I call my father.

"Don't tell me you don't remember where your bedroom is," my aunt says with a less judgmental tone.

Oh yah, I've been standing here staring at that picture this whole time.

We both brought overnight bags. I suggested we wake up early tomorrow morning, go home to bathe and then come back here but Xolie said that would be rude not just to my father but to the other members of the family.

We follow her. The walls are still the same. The house looks like a dilapidating cave but the smell and the feeling is still the same. My mother's presence, I feel it too.

"I cleaned it up, I don't think your father ever came in here after.....," she stops.

"But I come by once in a while just to clean up...." she says pushing the door

open.

I stand still.

This is where it all happened, in this room, on that floor.

The Joe Nina and Boys2Men posters are still on the wall.

Xolie again, she pushes me aside this time and walks in.

My aunt, she's already sitting on the bed with that smile on her face.

She's my father's sister. I think she's the only person in my life that I was sure cared about me when I was young.

She got married and left when she was in her early 20s, we never saw her again until just before I ran away to find Nkosana, she rocked up with her four children and said she had left her husband, that she could not stand being one of his four wives anymore.

"You can come in Zandile, it's fine, just come in and sit down," my aunt, I can hear her, but in my head that day is playing it itself out.

I can see my mother's lifeless body on the floor, I see myself standing over her, I can see MaMpongo's bag lying next to her...

"Zah!"-Xolie says shaking me.

I've just had a blackout again. I must see a doctor about this soon.

I walk in and sit on the bed, it's still the same bed, after all these years.

It makes a sound when you sit on it. I think the springs have gotten rusty. But it still bounces and that sound of the headboard hitting the wall behind it is still there.

I used to lie still, close my eyes and listen to that sound, it was my escape. It sounded like a melody, it rhymed with his breathing, his moaning and his in-and-out movements on top of me.

I still remember the smell, boiled eggs and tea. That's what his breath smelt like, boiled eggs and tea. I'd hold my breath and pray that he finished quickly.

Sometimes, when my mother had come in here earlier and placed the headboard properly so that it didn't hit the wall, I counted in my head, some days it would stop at 50 and on other days I would count all the way to 100.

Most of the time I'd have my hands over my face just to avoid our faces touching. Sometimes he'd forcefully remove them and I'd feel his beard scratching my cheek.

The first time it happened, I was six, or atleast that's when I remember. My mother was in the other room. She walked in my bedroom just after my father left the house.

She dragged me out of the bed, I remember I couldn't walk properly and my whole lower body was sore, I was still naked.

She filled a bucket with water, pulled me by my arm all the way to the kraal, poured half the cold water over me and handed me soap.

"Wash yourself until that soap is finished," she said and left me there.

I did as she said, I thought it was possible, I was six-years old.

By the time I heard someone speak the bucket was almost full with foam, but the big pink bar of Geisha soap was still as big as it was when I started.

"Zandile, what are you doing in there? You're so naughty, come on," she said ordering me to stop what I was doing.

I wonder if she remembers that day. She's sitting here next to me, I could ask her but I didn't come here for that.

She went inside the house and came back with a bath towel. She wrapped me with it and carried me back to the house.

When she asked my mother why she let me play in the kraal with water and soap, my mother just looked at her and continued with what she was doing.

That was the day my mother started hating me.

Suddenly I feel like throwing up.

"Let's go!" I say standing up and taking my bag.

I'm getting out of here!

"No no no,"-Xolie says pulling me back down.

My aunt is still sitting.

"Stop running! What is wrong with you?"-Xolie.

She doesn't understand.

"You're going to stay here and face this," Xolie says.

Is she "handling" me? Because I feel like I'm being handled right now.

"I can't," I say.

"Yes you can, I'm here with you. You promised Nkosana remember?"

I did.

I sit back down.

What is it exactly that I'm expected to do here again?

"Here,"-my aunt says handing me a pinafore

Oh! It begins.

He hands Xolie one too.

"We have to prepare for tomorrow," she says.

There's nothing to prepare, I don't think they'll be expecting lunch or any kind of hospitality.

"I made the traditional beer. I bought two live chickens, I'll make steamed bread, do you know how to make steamed bread? I know you Joburg high flying people eat spaghetti?" she says looking at Xolie and smiling.

Honestly I don't think she should bother.

We walk past the main bedroom, the door is closed. My aunt looks at me.

"He's in there," she says and stops.

I know she wants to open the door. I shake my head and walk on.

I haven't asked about him so that means I don't want to know.

"Does he know I'm here?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

"I don't know, he hasn't been well lately. Maybe he did understand when I told him you were coming tonight, maybe he didn't. But last week when your.....your people were here he was better, he was well aware of what was going on and he...."she says and stops talking.

"At least your uncles were here, that made things easier for your husband, I don't understand why my brother has such a cold heart," he says.

I knew it! I knew Nkosana didn't tell me everything.

There are two more people in the kitchen. One of them is my cousin.

"Heeeee Za-ndi-le!" she says and "claps once".

I stop and stare.

"Is this you? HUUUUUU!"-she says looking at me from head to toe with a smirk on her face.

She moves her eyes to look at Xolie.

"Ayi we are not small after all, we have people we see on TV, here in this house!" she says and claps once again.

She hasn't changed a bit!

"Nokthula," I say.

She looks at me from head to toe again.

"You're still beautiful," she says.

I smile. We were close when we were young. In fact, she walked me to the taxi stop when I packed and left. I said goodbye and promised to contact her when I got to Joburg but I never did.

She still looks the same, a bit heavier but she's still that lady that's thin at the top and big at the bottom. The hips and ass are bigger now but her stomach is still flat. Her legs are full and smooth. She's a true definition of a "attractive Zulu girl".

"I saw you on TV," she says looking at both Xolie and I.

"What are you making there?"-Xolie asks.

I think she's just tired of the loud cousin and wants to change the subject.

"I'm boiling beetroot for tomorrow," she says.

My aunt must have made all this happen because I didn't bring anything, not even bread. Besides, I don't think Nkosana would even want to drink water offered to him by my family.

My phone rings, it's Nkosana.

"I'll be outside," I say leaving them both in the kitchen.

"Love,"

"Zah," he says.

We're both silent after that.

I know he called to ask.

"I'm fine, my aunt and cousin are here," I say.

I hear him breathing but he doesn't say anything.

"I haven't seen him," I say.

He sighs.

"I'm sorry about all this," he says.

He doesn't have to be sorry, none of this is his fault. It's that evil ghost that's his father that must be blamed.

"I can handle this my love," I say.

I think I can.

We say goodbye and hang up.

I wonder what's happening there, if I could still climb up this tree I would be able to see the roofs of the houses there.

Mpande wanted to come here with us, I don't know why he thought that was proper.

I didn't want Sbani and Lwandle to be part of this. I told them I would take them to meet my side of the family when the time is right, they respected that.

When I walk back in my cousin is still talking. She's asking Xolie questions about how it's like to be famous and all that stuff people think is a privilege when it's actually the opposite.

"Where is malume?" I ask.

"Oh, he died, a long time ago," she says.

That was her father.

Oh that's bad.

"Your boys are grown, I saw them in a newspaper once, they look exactly like him," she says.

"Him" would be Nkosana.

"And Zakithi and Sbongile?" I ask

Those are my other cousins, her sisters.

"Zakithi is a teacher, she lives in Pietermaritzburg. Sbongile is in America," she says.

America?

"She married a white man and left with him to America," she says.

Huh? Okay.

"A lot happened while you were away Zandile, a lot changed," she says, suddenly serious.

There's a knock on the kitchen door before it opens.

It's my uncles, four of them. It's my mother's brother, my father's two brothers and my mother's cousin.

I take it they will be handling the lobola negotiations tomorrow.

They walk straight to the lounge. There are no sofas there but they seem covered because they find a bench somewhere and sit.

"Mom prepared the two rondavels outside so they will sleep there,"

Her mom is my aunt.

"Come on, we have to serve them food," she says looking at me.

I stand still.

She looks at Xolie and hands her the tray. They follow each other to the lounge, one with a tray of food and another with a tea set.

I don't even want to look at my uncle. The last time I saw him he was being shoved out of the gate by Nkosana.

"I should have brought wine," Xolie whispers to me when she walks back in the kitchen.

My cousin is right behind me, she heard her. She's standing with her hands on her hips.

"Heeeeeeee"-she says and claps once.

This doesn't feel like home at all to me. I don't think it ever will.

"Done," my aunt comes back and says.

She must have been straining the traditional beer.

"I'm going to wash and sleep now, we have a long day tomorrow," she says.

I don't think I'll be able to sleep at all.

"Mah, please sleep in Zandile's room if you don't mind. The three of us will sleep in that rondavel you were going to sleep in, it's just that we want to catch up,"-my cousin.

My aunt looks at the three of us, shrugs, nods and walks on.

I think that's a better idea.

We take our overnight bags and leave the house after my uncles finish eating and these two have tidied up. I'm not getting involved.

There's only one bed here, but all three of us will fit in it.

It feels like I'm at a different place now, not my parents' house. I don't know if it's because Nokthula is here or if it's because this rondavel wasn't here when I left.

Nokthula kneels on the floor and pulls something out from under the bed.

Oh no!

"Here, this is for you," she says handing a six-pack of Hunters Dry to Xolie.

I laugh briefly, this must be the first time I laugh since I arrived here.

Xolie drinks wine, I think each bottle of her wine costs as much as, let's say 50 six-packs of Hunters Dry.

"Thank you cousin,"-Xolie says, pulls out one bottle and opens it with her teeth.

What the fuck?

She drinks half of it at one go. Nokthula does the same.

I'm just gonna be here watching them get drunk.

I'm not even gonna ask.

It's getting late, I have to call Nkosana, I know he won't sleep tonight.

"Zah!"

Really?

"I'm fine Nkosana, I just wanted to say goodnight,"

He sounds relieved.

"Okay,"

"What's everybody doing there?" I ask.

He sounds like he's all alone.

"Everyone is in their rooms now," he says.

That's unusual, normally on the first night in Mbuba they stay up late.

"Okay, well the good thing is I don't have to sleep in the main house, we are sleeping in one of the rondavels, Xolie, Nokthula and me,"

I think he's relieved by that too.

We chat briefly and say our goodbyes, I guess I'll see him in the morning then.

When I come back in they've changed into nighties, but they're still drinking under the blankets. I change and get in bed too.

"Zah, the first time I saw you on TV! Heeeee! My kids could not believe me when I told them you were their aunt. We didn't even know you had come out of jail," she says.

But, Nokthula talks too much!

I know Xolie feels a bit awkward about this conversation, drunk as she is.

"So, where is Mqhele?"

Huh?

"Mqhele, where is he? Is he here in Mbuba?" she says blushing.

Seriously Nokthula?

Xolie and I look at each other.

Mqhele was a kid, probably about ten or eleven when they left Mbuba. Okay they are the same age but you can't seriously tell me she had a crush on him when he was eleven.

"I'm just asking, I mean he was my first boyfriend, and my first kiss,"

Oh Lord please send the holy ghost to fly over this rondavel!!!!

"Are you serious? How old were you?"-Xolie.

"Eleven," she says.

How is it that I knew nothing about this.

It's crazy but we end up laughing.

My phone. It's an SMS.

I'm outside.

Whoah! When did he....?

"Nokthula, is the gate locked?"

She looks at me and shakes her head.

"I have to go, Nkosana is outside," I say as I walk out the door.

This is crazy! Why would he come here at this time?

I'm careful not to make any sound as I pull the gate open. He is parked just outside.

"Nkosana, at this time?"-that's the first thing I say when I sit.

He takes my hand and kisses it.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I think he's too worried. I wasn't okay when I arrived here but I think I'm better now.

"I missed you, so I drove here," he says.

I don't believe him, I think he just wanted to make sure I'm okay. But I won't say that to him.

"Sbani and Lwandle are here," he says.

What? I told them not to come!

He raises his hands and says: "I told them not to come but they just rocked up now at night. When I asked they said they were worried about you, you sounded stressed when they spoke to you on the phone'.

These kids!

"They didn't even tell their moth....Hlomu, they didn't even tell her they were coming," he says.

This is going to be more complicated than I expected.

He squeezes my hand tighter and leans over to kiss me.

I see a brief smile on his face.

"I used to stand there and hide behind that bush when I was still courting you," he says.

I remember that. He would just jump out the bush and almost scare me to death. At first I would run from him but he just wouldn't go away.

He'd wait for me at the gate after school and offer to walk me home. I'd refuse but he'd still walk behind me all the way to this gate.

"Zandile please, I love you, I promise I will be good to you," he'd keep saying

Once I was inside he would then walk home.

Sometimes I would talk to him but I was not really nice. Even when I told him he was annoying me he just wouldn't leave me alone.

It was normal at that time, but these days it's called stalking and you can go to jail for it.

This one time he came with Nqoba, Mqhele and Qhawe. I assume they were there to assist him in begging me to be his girlfriend. I just locked the gate and went back to the house.

It took a year before I agreed to be his girlfriend, and about a month to let him kiss me.

"You were such a stalker!" I say laughing.

"I'll always be your stalker," he says.

Oh wow! He's acknowledging it.

"Come here," he says.

I move to lean on his shoulder.

"It's this and two more things, after that we're done okay?"

I nod.

Why must our things always be complicated?

"When all this is over I'm going to take you on a trip around the world, just the two of us," he says.

I'd love that.

But.....

"Not possible, not with my criminal record...."

He tilts my head so I'm looking at him.

"Zandile, do you know who you're married to? We can go anywhere we want, criminal record or not...." he says.

He's right, he makes things happen.

I laugh before I can stop myself.

"What?" he asks.

"I'm just thinking about how, when we were teenagers, how you promised to take me to Durban. That was my dream, to go to Durban and see the ocean and tall buildings and trains, and you said you were going to take me there one day,"

His arm tightens around my shoulders.

"And now, we can go anywhere we want...."

He kisses the top of my head.

"Tell me where you want to go, anywhere, I'll take you," he says.

"To happiness, that's where I want to go, to happiness and peace and love," I say.

"I'll take you there," he says and kisses the top of my head.

He smells nice as always. The material of his sweater is soft and smells fresh, he's pressing my face to his chest.

"Shit! Zah"

Mmmmmmmmm

"Zah, wake up!" he's shaking me.

What now? It's still dark outside why would he wake up this early..?

"You have to go back in, wake up,"

What is he panicking about?

Oh crap! we're in the car!

"Oh shit! We slept here?"-I ask.

He nods and rushes me to get out of the car.

Okay!

"I think there are people on the yard," I say. I'm hearing people talking.

"Yes, some women just walked in now, it's 5am, you have to go back in the house," he says.

But how?

"Zah, go,"

He's kicking me out of our car now?

I say okay and get out.

How am I going to go inside now? My aunts will see me. I feel like a teenage girl all over again.

And so what if they see me? I'm a grown ass woman, heck I'm a grandmother!

But then again, I don't want to give them something to talk about.

I walk around the fence.

Good, the big rock is still here. I used to climb on it and jump over the fence to get back in the yard after sneaking out to see Nkosana.

I'm taller now so it should be easy.

Nope! It's not easy. I fall on my bum when I land on the other side.

"You will never change will you?"- someone says.

Oh wow! another aunt, my uncle's wife.

I get up and look at her, embarrassed really.

She was the first person to find out I was dating Nkosana, she caught us being cosy under some tree, threatened Nkosana, and pulled me by my ear all the way to her house.

"Go inside before they all see you," she says hushing me.

I do as she says.

This is ridiculous though.

Barely half-an-hour later someone walks in and wakes us. We should have locked the door but I don't even think it has a key.

"You can't still be sleeping at this time," she says.

I'm not sure who she is but I know her.

"Zandile, you have to prepare for the guests, come on," she says.

We grumpily put clothes on and go outside.

There's a wood fire already burning with a three-legged pot on it.

Is this a party or something?

"Mapholoba.....Mashiyamahle engathi azoshumayela....Fuze,"

"They're here,"-Nokthula.

That's Mzimela shouting at the gate. Nobody answers or pays attention to them.

They keep shouting but everybody is going on with their business.

"I'll make rice, you cook the meat, mom has already made the steamed bread,"-Nokthula.

I'm not given any task, oh well, I'm used to it.

I'm getting more and more worried about those men outside the gate.

Someone opens it, but they don't come in, instead a red Kia Sportage drives in.

Huh?

"Is that.....?"

"Zakithi....." Nokthula says, she doesn't seem happy.

I don't understand, that's her sister.

She parks right in front of the kitchen with the back of the car facing the kitchen door. She opens the boot and walks to stand at a distance with her arms folded.

Nokthula takes a deep breath.

"She expects us to run to the car and unload those groceries, because she's doing us a favour," she says.

Huh? What happened here while I was gone?

Yes, the car boot is full of groceries, an unnecessary gesture if you ask me. This is not a celebration. And I'm not unpacking that, nobody does until she calls some young boys walking past to do it.

They make five trips between the kitchen and the car, each time leaving the plastic bags on the kitchen floor.

There's a lot of cold-drink and juice and meat and.....

"Did you sleep well?" she asks when she comes in.

Okay.

"Zakithi," I say. I'm happy to see her. Her groceries I don't care about but I'm happy to see my cousin after all these years.

"Zandile," she says looking at me from head to toe. It's probably because she hasn't seen me in a long time.

"It's so good to see you," I say hugging her.

But, her hug is that one.....the one where only the chests touch.

She has her handbag in one hand and her car keys on the other, she keeps spinning them around her finger.

She has a big gold ring, you know those ones that come in like seven pieces and cover half your ring finger? She has one of those.

I didn't even know she was married.

She's dressed up and is even wearing make-up. She has that "married for a long time" hairstyle, pleated dreadlocks. It's expected.

"So what are you all making? I hope it's great food because yesterday I was at Golden Horse for a workshop, the MEC was also there, and all I can say is, the food was not what I expected especially with guests like us, they should have tried harder,"-Zakithi.

Xolie looks at me. I shrug.

"Yesterday we..."-Nokthula.

She doesn't finish the sentence before Zakithi cuts in.

"I'm so proud of Qwabe, he's so close to getting that tender to build four schools, it's a lot of money but I mean, when your wife has an honours degree you're unlikely to fail at anything you do...."

I see Xolie trying to hold back a laugh.

Really? Is she bragging about having an honours degree? Of all things?

"I was saying that....."-Nokthula.

"Qwabe is my husband by the way Zandile, he's a businessman, construction, catering..... everything actually,"-Zakithi.

Has she not noticed that nobody has gotten a chance to say anything here since she came in?

Does she know how ridiculous she sounds?

"They're coming in,"-Xolie.

It's not even 8am yet.

My male cousin is walking in with them, they disappear somewhere, I think they're going to come in through the lounge door.

I haven't seen my father since I got here, maybe that's why I'm still so calm.

"Sbani?"-Xolie says.

They came too?

"I don't think they are supposed to be here,"-Me.

"Are those your kids Zah? Oh my they're so grown, they look exactly like Nkosana," Nokthula says excitedly. She's happy to see my children, wow!

"Mine is going to university next year, he's doing so well I'm thinking of sending him to study overseas," Zakithi.

I see Nokthula rolling her eyes.

Okay, I'm going to take a bath and change into proper clothes. I hope this will

be quick, and Nkosana will have to give me a very good reason why he brought my kids here.

I'm told soap is in the cupboard on the passage.

I smell him before I see him.

Calm down Zandile.....calm yourself down....

Our eyes meet. No, he's not sick, he's still himself, I see him in his eyes.

I assume he's going to the lounge, it's going to take him forever judging by how slow he's walking, that walking stick is not helping him much.

I take the soap and pass him still on the passage as I walk back to the kitchen and out the door.

I'm not sure if I'm going to be required to be there at some point but I'm going to doll up and be ready anyway.

Xolie is comfortable here, she's getting along very well with Nokthula.

I know we're going to laugh about the "honours" situation later.

My three uncles are still walking around the yard, that means nothing has started. I can't even go there to greet my husband and children.

I saw Mqhele and Nqoba with them.

Apparently I'm supposed to cover my head. I do so and put on a dress that I believe is presentable.

My uncles are still outside, okay this is ridiculous now.

"WeZandiiiiiiile!" someone shouts.

I change direction and walk towards them. They are sitting on the ground next to the fire.

It's Gog'MaMchunu, I can't believe she's still alive! She still wears that yellow "bhayi" over her shoulders. She has sagging earlobes like most elderly women in this village.

"Where are you going Zandiiiiiiile?" she asks.

And she still calls me like that? I give up. She is our neighbour, it's just that here the neighbours' house is about a two-kilometres away.

"I'm going to the kitchen gogo,"

"Dressed like that? Ask your aunt to give you a pinafore to wear over that dress. And you must not walk up and down the yard, you're supposed to humble yourself today," she says.

I'm too old for this!

Now I look like some old woman with all this stuff I'm wearing.

"The boys are sitting in there with them Zah,"-Xolie whispers.

I know, it's weird, where have you ever heard of kids sitting in on their mother's lobola negotiations?

But, they probably insisted on it, I know how they are, they are just like their father.

"I think they've started,"-Nokthula.

They have, I can hear my uncle speaking.

I stand next to the last cupboard so I can hear everything.

It's just my uncle counting what needs to be paid.

"No, stop right there sbali (brother-in-law), these people can't just come in here and negotiate like they don't know what they did,"-that's my father speaking.

What does he want now? He got the cleansing goat and damages, now what is this all about? He doesn't even deserve to be in there.

“I don't understand.....”-Ngcobo

I'm also confused.

“This boy,” my father says pointing at Nkosana.

“This boy here is responsible for all the suffering I've been through. He destroyed my family. He can have that whore but he must forget about getting my blessing.....”

“Sbali no, there are children here, you can't talk like that...”-my uncle.

This is why I didn't want my kids here!

“Zandile, come on you don't have to listen to this,”-Nokthula.

We can hear everything from here, my father is talking very loud.

I can see Mqhele from here, he looks pissed.

“We didn't come here to fight, my son here just wants to make things right with you?”-Mzimela.

“Mzimela! Mzimela! You're on these people's side now? You know what they did don't you?”-my father shouts.

I knew this was going to go bad but I didn't expect it to happen so quickly.

“Can we all calm down please,” someone says.

Silence.

“So, what do you want us to do Mapholoba? Tell us what you need us to do so we can all move forward,”-Gumbi.

Silence.

“Nkosana! No!”-Mqhele shouts.

Nqoba is also calling his name!

I run in there.....

Nkosana! No!

“Get my kids out of here! Get them out of here!”-I'm screaming! I can't let them see this! I can't let this happen!

Qhawe pushes Sbani and Lwandle out of the room. They don't resist.

Nokthula and Xolie are behind me.

I kneel in front of him. He's on his knees too. I can hear my father breathing behind me

“Nkosana,”-I say touching his arm.

He looks into my eyes.

“You don't have to do this, please don't do this. I will suffer it's fine, I'll stay away from Mbuba, anything. Please, don't degrade yourself like this. Don't give him the satisfaction, please I'm begging you,” I plead.

He looks tired, like he doesn't know what else to do.

“It's fine Zah, it's fine,” he says.

He turns to look at Nqoba.

I know he's telling him to “handle” me.

But no! I won't let him do this! No!

“Zah, let's go,”-Nqoba.

No!

He pulls me up. I'm kicking and screaming but he pulls me up to my feet and drags me out of the room.

I can't be here. I can't watch my husband kneel and beg in front of a man who abused and broke me! I can't!

“Come on, let's get out of here!”-Xolie.

No! I'm not leaving this house.

Nqoba is still standing on the passage, I think to make sure that I don't go back in there.

Nkosana is still on his knees in front of my father. I see satisfaction on that old demon's face.

He's happy. Nkosana Zulu, the famous millionaire, a respected businessman and father kneeling at his feet begging him to give him the one thing he wants more than anything in this world, me.

Nkosana is not talking but his head is bowed. How dare he reduce my husband to this? How dare he?

"Speak boy, what do you have to say?"-my father.

"I'd like to apologise,"-Nkosana.

"For what?"

"For everything I put your family through," Nkosana.

My father laughs.

I see Gumbi blocking Mqhele with his arm.

"Sit down,"-Gumbi whispers to Mqhele.

My father is still laughing.

Mqhele stands up and comes to the kitchen, he's going outside.

"Mqhele don't leave me alone,"-Nkosana.

My heart sinks. I feel a lump forming in my throat, my lips trembling, my eyes getting heavy, I can't stop them, tears.

Mqhele goes back to sit.

Hlomu should have been here.

"Ssshhhhhh It's fine. Let's get out of here," Sbani. He's patting my back, I don't know where he came from. I press my face hard on his shoulder.

"Let's go home," he says.

I can't leave Nkosana here, not like this!

"We'll go with you, come on,"-Nokthula.

We all walk out.

We pass Zakithi talking to the women sitting by the fire outside. She's still talking about her honours degree and Qwabe.

All five of us get in the car and drive off.

The tears are still pouring out, for the first time in many years, I'm crying, and again, it's because of my father.

I walk straight to my rondavel when we get home.

I don't care what's going to happen to Nokthula, Xolie can entertain her.

There's a knock on the door, I ignore it until it stops.

How am I going to look Nkosana in the eye after putting him through all this?

"Zah!"

"Zah!"

She keeps shouting.

It's dark in this house.

"Zah open the door," she shouts. It's Gugu.

I let her in.

It's dark outside. I slept all day and all afternoon.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

No. I will never be okay.

"Where's Nkosana?" I ask her.

She doesn't respond.

"Okay, I'm coming, I just need to use the bathroom first,"

"I'll wait for you here," she says.

She's guarding me now?

"I brush my teeth and throw the doek I still have on my head in the laundry basket. This freaking pinafore must go too.

There's one car missing on the yard, the one Nkosana and I came in.

There's immediate silence when I walk in.

They're all sitting around the table. I don't see Nkosana but the chair he always sits on is empty, and so is mine next to it.

Looks like we're having special dinner tonight. I don't see the kids, they must all be sleeping.

"Sit," -Hlomu says pulling a chair for me.

I do as she says.

They're all quiet. I sense tension all over the table.

I look at Mpande, he always gives something away, but tonight he is blank, closed.

"Okay," -Hlomu says and clears her throat.

"We planned this before we came to Mbuba, we had no idea things we going to go the way they did today....." she stops.

I think she's just realised that it's not necessary to go there.

"Zah, today marks exactly a year since you came home....." she says.

Oh my! It does. I had no idea. It's been a year?

"Happy Birthday to you....." - one is singing

"It's not he birthday" -Sisekelo snaps at Langa.

It's five of them trying to carry the cake together.

Where were they?

Phakeme puts the cake in front of me. They're all smiling. They look so happy.

"Are you going to cut it gogo?" -Mvelo.

I don't know what to say.

I smile but actually I'm trying to stop myself from crying.

"Thank you," I say looking at all the kids standing in front of me.

I didn't expect this.

"Okay, you can go now," -Xolie.

They run off back to wherever they were hiding.

I want to ask Mqhele about Nkosana but I decide I will do that in private, later.

Everyone picks up their plates and start dishing up.

"I drove Aunt-Nokthula home. She's so much fun to be around. I met her son, my cousin," Sbani says. He's sitting next to me.

I'd forgotten about her.

I nod and continue looking down at the plate in front of me.

I feel a hand on my back.

He bends and kisses my cheek.

He looks clean and proper.

Zandile

Where has he been?

He sits on his chair and picks up a plate.

We're all quiet.

He doesn't look or speak to anyone, he just focuses on his food.

He holds my hand under the table.

"Mah, please pass me the salt,"-Lwandle.

I raise my eyes, he's looking at me.

He's just called me 'mother'.

Twenty

Mqhele is one of the groomsmen? How did I miss that? Hlomu did say Peter was more than just a lawyer to this family. He looks like he could be Mqhele's age.

"We made it,"-Xolie says sitting next to me.

They're late as usual.

"She changed clothes three times,"-Sambulo says.

It took me three days to decide which outfit to wear. It took Nkosana about ten seconds to choose a suit among a gazillion hanging in his wardrobe.

I can't help dreaming about what my white wedding would be like, if I decided to have one. But then, it gives me creeps just thinking about the last time I was in a wedding dress. I just.....I can never get over that day.

"Shhhhhhh," someone says.

The bride is coming. We all stand up.

Peter and Mqhele and two other guys are standing there next to the priest. The weather is perfect, it's still winter but it's warm and sunny.

This garden is beautiful too, you can just tell that a lot of money was spent on this.

The best part though is that the wedding venue is in Rivonia, close to home.

"She looks stunning,"-Gugu.

She does.

She looks perfect actually, she's also far taller than Peter, and far younger. Her father doesn't look too pleased walking her down the aisle I notice.

Her dress is plain and long but has a slit on the side that goes all the way up to the thigh. She really is young and bubbly.

"She looks familiar,"-Hlomu.

"Yes, she's a model,"-Xolie.

"She really is Peter's type,"-Hlomu

I've never seen her before.

There must be about 60 guests here, it looks like just close family and friends.

I turn to look at Nkosana next to me, he's staring at me.

"We can have a white wedding if you want,"-he says.

He must have seen the fascination on my face.

"No, not my thing,"-I say.

The service begins as soon as the groomsmen and bridesmaids sit.

Peter has a Kippah on his head, I didn't know he was Jewish.

They're standing under a small tent and Peter has a blue and white shawl over his shoulders. I'm going to ask what that symbolises later.

The ceremony is short, there was no preaching by the priest and no ululating women. But everybody, except us the lost blacks, shouts something after Peter crushes a glass on the ground with his foot.

They're done. They walk out. They look happy. I wonder how long this one is going to last.

I follow everyone out of the garden to a small stretch tent not too far.

There are drinks and a finger lunch.

"Ntsika?"

How?

"Sis'Zah," he says.

I didn't know he was back.

"When did you arrive? I didn't know you were coming home,"

"Last night, I'm here for three weeks," he says.

He sounds like a white black man, he even has a strange accent. I wonder how he sounds when he speaks English.

"You look good," he says.

I don't know if he means I look good physically or if he's saying this because I'm holding up considering the circumstances.

He spots his "mami" and walks over to her.

Mpande. I give up. He's with a girl. She looks like a model. There are a lot of them here.

"This is why I don't like weddings,"-Hlomu.

Huh?

"That girl is flapping eyelashes at my husband. This thing must end now," she says.

Oh she's talking about the bridesmaid paired with Mqhele. She's cute.

Nkosana is there shaking hands and talking to people.

"Zandile Precious Ngcobo," a voice says behind me.

He should have left out "Precious". And how does he know my names?

I turn around and there's an old man with a beard and spectacles that have a rope hanging on them. I haven't seen one of those in a while.

"Excuse me?" I say.

He smiles, briefly.

"You know, I still use your assignment on Constitutional Law as reference in my lectures," he says.

What is this.....?

"I used to look forward to marking your work. You have some of the most interesting theories about law," he says.

"I liked how you used your own case as a scenario on your fifth assignment on criminal law. You said that had you not pleaded guilty, you would have won the

case on self-defence argument” he says.

Now I know who he is.

“But the problem is, I ran. If I had stayed with the dead body and waited for the police to arrive and arrest me, I would have won that case, or maybe got a lesser sentence,” I say.

But law is a bit more complicated than that.

“I still disagree, I think you would have gone down either way,” he says.

“My background of abuse would have worked in my favour,”

“It doesn't always work out like that, it could have made you look like a bitter angry person hungry for revenge,”

I see we can argue this all day.

“So, I'm thinking, how about you come through to campus and work with me?” he says

Work with him?

“Huh?”

“Yes, you can finish your degree while at it. I like your take on Constitutional Law, you can tutor now and again and help me with research,” he says.

“Hi,”-Nkosana says putting an arm around me.

Territorial moron.

“Hi, baby, this is Professor Gordon, he was my lecturer, if I can call it that,” I say.

He reaches out for a handshake.

“How do you know Peter?” he asks.

“He used to be my student, one of the smartest I've ever had, like this beautiful wife of yours,” the old man says and smiles.

Nkosana tightens his arm around me.

“She's smart, isn't she?” he says.

I don't know if that's coming from a good or bad place.

“Precious, think about that offer and get back to me, I'm begging you to say yes,” he says and walks away.

“Precious, I forgot your name was Preciouuuuus,”-Nkosana says with a smirk. He's going to tease me about it.

Mnx!

“What offer is he talking about?” he asks, he's serious now.

“A job offer,”

He raises his eyebrows.

“You don't need a job...”

I leave him standing there. I don't have time for this, not today. And I'm taking that job whether he likes it or not.

“Prudence, you must make sure the spoons are thoroughly wiped before you put them in the shelves, please I always tell you this,”

She just never listens.

She doesn't understand how important this is. Nkosana freaks out at the smallest things, even a spoon with a water mark.

I wanted to do the dishes myself after they left with Mpande but Prudence was

already on the sink when I came back from the bathroom.

She seems desperate to please, she jumps at everything and although she comes only three times a week, sometimes I feel like she's crowding my space.

Another space crowder is Mpande. He pops in any time, every time since he moved to live this side. He left his house empty and came to rent another house here in the South. Ntsika is squatting there until he goes back to London after my membeso.

But it's only been weeks and I have a feeling that the blue-eyed black girl will find him eventually. The problem is, there's another girl in the picture now and he seems to be into her. They're always together, although she hasn't been formally introduced yet.

I personally think Gwen should be institutionalised before she kills someone. The girl is nuts. The last of her shenanigans was when she showed up at Niya's birthday party, unannounced and uninvited. But first she checked in on Facebook and wrote: *"At Nqoba's house, niece's birthday party, it's all about family."*

To say Mpande was angry would be an understatement. The problem though, is that the kids love her to bits. They literally run to her when she appears, which is mostly anywhere and everywhere from nights out to family dinners and lunches.

His brothers, they still find it funny.

This other time, I overheard them asking him if he's still sleeping with her. He said no but they laughed and said they didn't believe him.

I don't even want to know what she will do to this new girl when she finds out about her.

"We're going to Kimberley later today, be ready,"-an SMS from Nkosana.

Kimberley? For what?

"Why?"

"Qhawe's birthday, he says we should all go to Kimberley for dinner"-he responds.

Since when does Qhawe care about his birthday? I didn't even know it was his birthday today.

I respond with an "okay".

"Formal dinner, I'm going to wear the navy suit," - he says.

A suit for a birthday dinner?

He wears them a lot these days since he became Lloyd's number-one customer.

It's noon already and as always I have nothing to do. I've become a typical suburban wife. If I'm not out shopping I'm at that spa pampering myself. I'm bored actually, I keep myself occupied by reading, which also gets boring sometimes.

Last weekend I had the whole brood here running around and keeping me on my toes.

I'm sure everyone knows now that we're going to Kimberley. As to why Qhawe, of all people, would want us to have dinner in Kimberley I do not understand.

Now I have to pick out an outfit and fix my hair.

By the way, my membeso is in two weeks and I'm not looking forward to going back there.

I've been ignoring Hlomu bugging me about us going to buy blankets.

And my aunt, she's already issued invitations to the whole village. I hope it won't be as bad as it was last time.

My father eventually accepted the lobola, all of it including live cows. There are so many things I will never forgive him for, but what he did to Nkosana, I still cry when I think about it.

I cry now, a lot, I even cried the other day when Nkosana made me angry. He smiled. I was crying and he smiled, he said he was happy to see me cry. How weird is that?

I'm going to prepare dinner. No I'm going to organise dinner. Yes I'm going to call the owner of his favourite restaurant and have it prepared and delivered. I'm not sure what time we're leaving but I want him to have food when he gets home.

My phone.

"MaFuze, I'll be there by 4pm," he says.

That's in two hours.

"Why are we going to Kimberley again?"-me

"Qhawe said there's this nice restaurant there, and he wants to eat there for his birthday," he says.

Oh. Okay. He did once say that having too much money means you can do pretty much anything you want, even if it doesn't make sense.

I think if it had been anyone asking them to go all the way to Kimberley to eat meat they would have told him to fuck-off. But with Qhawe, just him showing a sign that he wants to live again gets everyone excited. And so, we will trek off to the desert province tonight.

I chose this black jumpsuit because the first and only time he saw me wearing it he was impressed. I thought he'd be himself because believe it or not, he'd rather have me in a dress and a doek instead. It's elegant too, I'll do it with a gold bangle and hanging earrings.

"I think you should wear that other black dress," he says when he walks in.

Seriously?

"Why? Do I look ugly in this?"

He almost says something but stops before the words come out. He knows he must tread carefully because there is no right answer to this question.

"No, it's just that I like that black dress better," he says.

I see. I'm not taking this jumpsuit off. He must know that I dress for myself and not for him.

"Your suit is ready. I'm ready to go," I say taking my clutch-bag and leaving him standing there.

I feel his eyes on me as I walk away.

He showered first judging by the time he takes to come downstairs.

"How are we getting there?" I ask.

He looks at me like he's scared, it must be this jumpsuit issue.

"The jet, we were lucky to get an airway at short notice," he says.

I wouldn't call it luck. He does get what he wants when he wants it, all the time.

His hand is on my thigh as we get drive on the highway following signs taking us to Lanseria Airport. He keeps brushing them and I'm worried that he's going to wrinkle my outfit.

"This is why I wanted you to wear a dress," he says.

I don't want to, but I smile, I can't help it.

"But you are a feisty little lady, and now I can't touch my property," he says.

I laugh and look at him. It's going to be a looong night in Kimberley with a horny grey-haired man.

We are the third to arrive. Mqoqi and Qhawe are already waiting. Well, they didn't have to wait for women to get dressed and put on make-up.

"Happy Birthday,"- I say to Qhawe.

I know Nkosana won't say it, or any of the guys. I think they think fussing about birthdays is a women thing.

"Kimberley?"- that's the first thing Mpande says when he arrives.

"Yes Kimberley, where is your girlfriend?"-Qhawe.

They all laugh. It's going to go on all night.

"Somewhere plotting to murder me slowly," he says and walks off to answer his phone.

Qhawe's phone beeps and he steps aside.

"He's been like that for days,"-Hlomu says next to me. I didn't see her there.

Like what?

"Always on his phone and smiling to himself," she says.

Oh, she's talking about Qhawe.

"You look sexy," I say.

She's back to her signature braids, weave is gone.

"Thank you," she says smiling.

That dress she's wearing is too close to the skin but at least it's under the knees.

"Ki-mber-ley?" Gugu says behind us. She looks annoyed.

We laugh.

"Where the heck is Kimberley on the map? Who lives there? Are there even people there?" she asks, still looking annoyed.

She's so interesting when she's being herself.

"Birthday boy wants, birthday boy gets,"-Hlomu.

Birthday boy needs to get a life.

Xolie and Sambulo arrive as we start boarding.

They run to us. But, it's not like we were going to leave them behind anyway.

The flight is about an hour, we should land at least by 6pm.

"Why are we going to Kimberley again?"-Sambulo.

Okay I'm getting tired of that question already.

"Because it's my birthday and I want us to go to Kimberley,"-Qhawe.

"You have a birthday?"-Nqoba.

Okay, here we go, the teasing and the laughing is about to start.

"Do you want balloons? And a cake with candles?"-Nkosana.

It's great to see him laugh and joke, he does that a lot lately. That incident with my father, I thought it was going to break him completely, but it didn't. The first few days were bad, also because I felt guilty, so guilty I found it hard to maintain eye contact with him. And so we walked around the house like everything was normal, avoiding the subject at all cost until one night, out of the blue he just said: "I did it because you're worth it".

That was the beginning of our healing process. We are over it, it's in the past,

we're moving forward. Now we just have to get through umembeso and umbondo, which he wants done within three months.

I catch Mqoqi staring at Hlomu who is cuddling with Mqhele. Nothing scares more than Mqoqi's feelings for Hlomu. And the fact that I'm the only one that knows about it is not making it any easier. I notice even the smallest things. I notice the chemistry that they have which everyone thinks has to do with that they are the same age and they were born on the same month.

How is it that Hlomu doesn't see or even suspect that Mqoqi is in-love with her? The signs are all there.

"You should have brought a jacket," -Nkosana says to me.

I turn to look at him. I was so deep in thought I forgot for a moment that he is here.

"I'll wear yours if I get cold," I say.

He smiles and kisses me. I didn't expect that kiss.

"Ayiiiiii, don't do that," -Mpande.

"Don't do what?" -Nkosana.

"Don't kiss Sis'Zah," -Mpande.

"Why? I can't kiss my wife now?" -Nkosana says with a laugh.

They're all finding this conversation funny.

"You can kiss her but not when I'm here," -Mpande.

I hear laughter.

"Why? She's my wife I can kiss her anywhere, anytime," -Nkosana

"Not when I'm here, it's Sis'Zah, she's like my mom," -Mpande.

They laugh at him even more.

"Leave him alone," I say.

They're so cruel.

He's right when he says I'm like his mom, that's why he's always at my house.

"I should have invited Gweeeeeeeennnnnnn to come along," -Qhawe.

That's how they pronounce her name, with a long eeeeeeeennnnnn.

I don't even know why.

This trip seemed too short, probably because we had to endure idiotic conversations by grown men.

There are three cars waiting for us at the airport. Looks like this is well organised but, Qhawe? I really doubt it.

I wonder where we are going, there hasn't been much explanation.

It's a hotel, Savoy. Okay.

But Qhawe tells us to follow him to the part where there's a restaurant.

"Booking for Qhawe Zulu," he says to the young man at the door.

"Oh, table for two," the guy says.

"No, table for 12?" -Qhawe.

The guy looks confused. I'm the only one seeing all this, the others are paying no attention whatsoever.

"Okay, please give me a few minutes," the guy says and disappears inside.

He comes back with a lady and we are lead to our table. Very nice, very classy and cosy, but it still doesn't make sense why Qhawe would bring us all here just like that.

A bottle of white wine is ordered, and beer, in bottles.

"I think I'm going to have whiskey tonight," -Nkosana.

That's great. I like the whiskey drinking him better than the Heineken drinking taxi driver.

As we wait for the starter to arrive.....

Qhawe stands up and leaves the table. He must be going to make a call.

Nqoba and Gugu are whispering things to each other, it's amazing how things can change but still remain the same. They agreed that Gugu was going to wait until S'hlangu is at least old enough to start crèche before she starts her magazine.

I don't know why she agreed to do that, women have been giving birth and working since before Christ, I mean our mothers ploughed the fields with us strapped on their backs.

But, it's different strokes for different folk, I would never have agreed to that, which reminds me, I shouldn't be judging her, at least she has a dream, I have no idea what to do with my life and time.

And then?

I look at everyone, they are as surprised as I am.

We watch as they approach, him pulling her by hand and her looking nervous.

He pulls a chair for her, she sits, he sits.

"Hello," she says. It's a low hello, a shy hello.

Silence.

But we are all looking at her like psychos. And then all eyes turn to Qhawe.

"Happy Birthday to me," he says and smiles.

I forgot he can be as stupid as they all are sometimes.

Xolie looks at Hlomu, and then me.

The lady is a bit, well.....overwhelmed.

She keeps looking at Qhawe, and then Mqhele, and Qhawe again, and Mqhele again....

"I'm older," -Mqhele says, smiling. I think he wants to help her relax a little.

"Don't worry baby, it's easy to tell us apart, he's the stupid one. Just listen to what he says and you'll know it's not me," -Qhawe.

They all laugh.

Baby?

She smiles. We still don't know who she is, and we're still staring at her, and she's still uncomfortable.

The starter arrives. But before we start eating Qhawe gets serious.

"This is Naledi, he says looking at her and smiling.

Okay.

"She is....." he pauses and looks at her again, with a smile.

We're waiting.

"I love her," he says, picks up his cutlery and starts eating.

We're still here, alive. Nobody has said anything because, you know, we're stunned.

"Nice to meet you Naledi," -Nkosana.

Everyone follows with the same words.

Someone needs to kill this awkwardness.

"So Qhawe, is Naledi the reason you've been smiling to yourself lately?" -Hlomu.

"I could say that," -Qhawe.

He seems to be in-love, nobody saw it coming, not a single one of us.

"So Naledi, where are you from?"-Nqoba.

"Mafikeng," she says. She's starting to relax a little bit.

"So what on earth are you doing in Kimberly?"-Mqoqi.

"I work here, but I'm not planning on staying long, it's too far from everywhere," she says.

"How long have you been here?"-Mqhele.

"Easy with the interrogation,"-Qhawe.

We laugh. It was starting to sound like an interrogation for sure.

We've all ordered and are waiting for our main course but the drinks keep flowing, and so is my and Mpande's juice, oh and Naledi too, for now.

Qhawe keeps brushing her arm, I think he's trying to help her relax.

"So Naledi, this is your man? This guy?" Nqoba asks pointing at Qhawe with a beer bottle.

Oh dear, the idiots are about to start again.

She blushes.

"How did he convince you to go out with him? And you said yes? To him?"-Sambulo.

They're on a mission to embarrass him.

"I did, yes," she says suppressing a smile by biting her lower lip.

"Are you going to tell them that I had to come to Kimberley five times before you agreed to go to lunch with me?"-Qhawe.

"And that you made me wait for two hours in the rain?"-Qhawe.

LOL this is funny.

"Oh, and you threw the flowers I bought you out the window," he says.

She's laughing.

"I think I like her,"-Nkosana.

I think we're going to like her, she seems like a good person. She also seems like a confident and smart girl, I don't know why but I get that vibe about her.

The waiter comes to our table with a cake, it has one candle.

He places it in-front of Qhawe. He seems confused.

"Qhawe didn't tell me you were all going to be here, I thought it was going to be a dinner for two so I organised a small cake," she says, like she's embarrassed by it.

We don't mind really.

She looks like she expects us to sing "happy birthday", Qhawe must have not briefed her about us.

"I have a gift for you," she says pulling out a small box from her handbag.

Yep! She's a buyer of little precious sentimental value gifts. She wasn't briefed.

He unwraps it with a smile, like a small boy unwrapping a toy car.

His smile gets wider when he sees what's inside.

He leans over to hug her.

Huh? Who is this girl and where did she come from? Qhawe is a hugger now?

"It's cufflinks," she says.

Are they diamond cufflinks?

"They have my name on them," he says.

This is just too sweet. He's happy. I don't think I've ever seen him happier.

I notice Hlomu's eyes getting wet. What is she getting emotional about now? I hope she's not pregnant again. Xolie also looks like she's about to get emotional.

They must be thinking about Oleta.

I never met her but I know, from the way they described her, that she was totally different from this girl.

She was glamorous, this one is simple, so simple that she's tied her relaxed hair up in a bun. Oleta was tall and slim, this one, I'll put her at size-42 maximum. She's a big girl, a big and beautiful and lovely girl. Everything about her is just calm and natural.

She's wearing a pencil black dress that highlights her curves and little stud earrings. She's adorable, but also, she doesn't seem like the soft type.

"How long have you been here again?" I ask.

She stops eating and looks at me.

"Three years, I've had to move around a lot, different hospitals," she says.

"You work in a hospital?"-Gugu

The interrogation has started again.

"Yes, I studied through a government programme so I'm working at a state hospital but for me it's more about giving back," she says.

"Where did you study?"-Hlomu.

"In Cuba," she says.

Cuba?

She can see we're surprised.

"I went to study medicine in Cuba, I spent five years there and when I came back I was deployed in the Free State and then I think Limpopo and....." she looks like she's counting in her head.

"You're a doctor?"-Hlomu.

She nods.

There's clapping and cheering.

This reaction was not planned at all. She smiles, she looks more comfortable now.

"So how did you two meet?"-Gugu

They look at each other and smile.

"He stole my parking space,"-Naledi.

Qhawe smiles and looks down.

"I didn't steal her parking space, the space was empty so I drove in,"-Qhawe.

"No, I was waiting for the other car to come out, and then, just as I was reversing he appears from nowhere and parks in my space," she says.

"I didn't see you,"-Qhawe says kissing her hand.

I think we all look smitten right now.

"Are you going to tell them what you did after that?"-Qhawe.

She laughs.

"I parked him in, parked behind his car and left," she says.

"I had to wait for two hours for her to come back, and it was raining. And when she came back she just walked past me, tried to get in her car and drive off,"-Qhawe.

"And then he started stalking me," she says.

We laugh.

"I was supposed to go back to Joburg the next day but I stayed. To cut the story short, she called security guards on me, threw away my flowers, refused to go to lunch with me about a thousand times and once told me to take my big eyes

and disappear,”-Qhawe.

It's a sweet story.

“So that's why you've been coming here a lot in the past two months?”-Nkosana.

Hlomu is smiling. She likes her. She's in.

We've gathered and labelled all the blankets.

Most of the people who will be getting them don't even deserve them, but what can I say? The Zulu ghost has spoken and we have no choice but to listen before he starts sending more snakes and fires.

It was a long day in the Joburg City Centre with people looking at us like it's a miracle that we're there.

Yes, I know, we are known for being wealthy but where else are we supposed to buy stuff like blankets?

I wanted to buy the cheapest ones, but Hlomu is the type that doesn't even look at the price before picking something.

“The hat and coat are for your father. Your aunt will have to take your mother's stuff and the rest of your cousins will get the blankets,”-Hlomu.

She's done this many times before. She was responsible for Xolie's and Gugu's membeso too. We should be calling her mother-in-law.

We pack the stuff away quietly, but I can see there's something she wants to say.

“Are you going to be okay? Going back there are you going to be fine?” she asks.

I can't say I'm looking forward to it but I want this done and over with.

I nod and continue with what I'm doing. If I think about this I'll be crazy by the time we get to Mbuba tomorrow.

“That bathtub is like a swimming pool,”-Nokthula walks in and says.

She's been commenting about this house since we got here this afternoon. Hlomu let her take a bath when we came back from blanket shopping because she kept complaining about how overpopulated Joburg is and how dirty the city and people are.

“Even the air is not fresh, I feel sticky,” she kept saying.

It's a good thing Mqhele is not here because that little “first love” crush is going to get her into trouble.

She was a bit hurt when Mqhele didn't recognise her on the day of the lobola negotiations.

The two of us still have to drive to my house later tonight.

“I'll be back just now,”-Hlomu says and leaves the bedroom.

“Hey, don't look at her like that, what is wrong with you?” I ask her laughing.

“She stole my man,”-she says.

Nokthula though. I'm sure Mqhele would laugh if he heard this.

“Yeah it wasn't like that when you were drinking cocktails with her,” I say and we both laugh.

I haven't gathered the courage to ask what happened to her, why she never made it out of Mbuba when her two sisters and one brother did.

She still lives with my aunt, unemployed and uneducated. She has two children but I don't know if they are of the same man.

Zandile

I need a snack, I'm going to the kitchen.

"Ntsika?"

"I'm looking for mami," he says. He's opening every door calling her name.

"What's going on?"

He looks worried about something.

"Ntsika?"-Hlomu appears and says.

"Mami, I need to talk to you," he says.

What the heck is going on?

We're still standing on the passage. I push open the first door I see.

It's Niya's bedroom.

I walk inside first and sit.

They look at me. I'm not going anywhere.

This sounds really serious.

"I did something bad mami. I did something really bad," he says burying his face in his hands.

Twenty-One

Who are all these people? I don't know half of them. The yard is buzzing with unfamiliar faces, or is it that I don't remember them?

"This is Mbuba girl, overhearing someone talk about an upcoming function in the area is an invitation. You don't have to know them," she says.

Yes I'm from here remember? She's the one that grew up in the township where there are guest lists and the neighbour's house is so close you can smell their supper from your house.

"Okay it's this one last thing, you just have to go outside, come back here and change to the clothes we brought and go outside again, then it will be over," she says.

She's been going to and from trying to make sure that things are going okay on both sides.

"I have a feeling I'm going to be doing this again soon," she says.

"Soon?"

"Yes, Qhawe and Naledi, I think it's going to happen soon," she says.

I think so too.

Talking about these men....

"Hlomu, have you thought about what we should do about this Ntsika thing....."

"Can we have our makoti please?" - this young woman walks in and says.

I don't know her, she's not family. She must have come from that side where the Zulu house is and so automatically she belongs in the groom's side.

"Go..... go.... go," Hlomu says pushing me out the door.

An image of Mandisa flashes in my mind. I remember her saying this to me many years ago. In fact, now that I think about it, this is my third attempt at marrying one man. It's rough out here in Zandile's world I tell you.

I'm walking behind this group of girls singing and ululating. It is rowdy outside, everyone is in a celebratory mood I can just tell from in here.

I step outside and everything stands still, it's quiet, everyone is looking at me. I hear some throat clearing and rumblings.

The way they're looking at me.....

I'm used to people looking at me but I know the Mbuba stare, I know what it is all about and what is being said even when no words are spoken.

Nokthula starts singing at the top of her voice. She saves me again.

Some of the faces look familiar now.

My uncle is responsible for this whole thing, he's the one driving this whole function. My father, I looked at him once and realised he was not worth my time, not today.

He's been sitting there looking dead all day. He can hardly walk.

I do what I'm supposed to do and go back to the house, and then I come out again wearing a R20k dress, but, like I said, this is Mbuba, nobody cares.

A chair is put next to me as I sit on the grass mat. Nkosana is called, he sits on the chair. My aunt keeps telling me to look down, I keep forgetting.

It's over before I know it.

I would have loved to enjoy this, to respect it and to acknowledge its significance but it's just not happening. It's not happening with me, with Nkosana and with the whole family. We're just doing it because we want to move on.

On my family's side it's different, except for that zombie sitting there, everyone is excited. I expected them to be angry with me or to chase me down the street with knives and pangas when they see me, but no, the total opposite happened.

I appreciate it, but the best part now is that my kids have cousins.

Lwandle took it upon himself to find Nokthula's son in Durban. He is about two years older than him. And now, there are four of them, Lwandle, Mbulelo, Zamani and Mqhele (don't ask), I was shocked too but I laughed, it really is funny. Only Nokthula would name another man's child after her first love.

"Are you going to stay for lunch?" I ask Nkosana when we finally get a moment alone.

"Who cooked?" he asks.

I laugh, I didn't expect that.

"Nokthula and my aunt and a few of her friends, I don't think they have a motive to poison you," I say.

"Okay, I'll eat then,"

I brought groceries this time but I didn't bother fixing the house. It's not my home. And I don't know what's going to happen to this place when my father dies, it will probably crumble to the last brick.

Mrs "honours" is here, but I wonder where the infamous Qwabe is, I've never met him. He must be chasing tenders somewhere.

"Zah.."

Speak of the devil.

"Zakithi, hi, thanks a lot for coming,"-she's still my cousin and I'm happy to see her.

She's looking at my dress like she's trying to find something to say about it.

"I brought drinks and snacks, Qwabe couldn't make it, you know he's a businessman and all so I just had to let him go do his things and besides I had to go past my designer to get my dress....."

That's a nice sishweshwe she's wearing, very typical.

She looks at me from head to toe.

"Maybe I should introduce you to my designer, his prices go up to R3000 sometimes but I'm sure you can manage," she says.

Now I see why Nokthula can't stand her.

"Zandile, I'm going to leave early, I have to prepare for a funeral tomorrow,

someone from church died,"-my aunt says.

She's just saved me.

Thanks to her "honours" has moved on to torment someone else.

"Lwandle says he will drive me," my aunt says smiling. I think it makes her happy.

Soon, when all the food and booze is finished the yard will be empty. But I have a feeling that this crowd will shift to the Zulu household where the meat and alcohol never run dry.

Now, I'm left with just one thing to do before I get my happily ever after with the love of my life, and Nkosana wants it done in four weeks.

I don't see my father anymore, someone must have taken him inside.

"You don't have to do that you know, we can get someone to do it, and pay them, there are a lot of people who need jobs here,"-I say to Nokthula, she's been washing dishes all afternoon.

She smiles and shakes her head.

"I like doing it Zandile, I like working remember? You were the lazy one, I had to do all your work when we were kids," she says.

She's right.

I'm about to take a risk now.....

"Thule I was thinking, don't you want to do something? Like maybe start a business? I could help you with....."

"Don't offer me money Zandile," she says with a firmer tone.

Whoah!

"I'm not offering you money I was just asking if you're interested," I say.

My defence is lame, I know that.

"I'm fine, I'm not struggling if that's what you think. I'm the one that couldn't finish school, the one that got pregnant early, the one that will never get married and leave home. So, all that summed up means I'm the one that's supposed to remain at home and take care of my mother while the others stop by once every month to drop off groceries or pack their children and dump them here during school holidays without even asking if I have plans or not," she says.

I shouldn't have started this conversation. And I'm going to shut-up now.

"The fathers of my two children support them financially. I do people's hair to make money, so yes, life is simple," she says.

I laugh because I'm thinking about....

"You taught me to do hair remember? You are younger than me but you taught me a lot of things. My first job when I arrived in Joburg was at a hair salon, I used all the skills you taught me," I say.

We're back to laughing.

"So Zah, are you happy? You and all the other wives, are you guys happy?" she asks.

Where is this coming from?

"We have our problems as a family, which comes with being rich and famous, but yes we are loved and happy,"

"Done!" she says hanging the dishcloth somewhere.

Now I have to drive her home so I can go home.

There are only a few people left. My uncles and the known village drunkards who will start singing anytime from now.

Her house is about ten-minutes away. It is where my father and their siblings were raised. It was a family home actually and when my youngest uncle got married it became his house. But then, my aunt left her husband and came back here so my uncle had to go build his own house.

I spent a lot of time here when I was growing up, I was always trying to escape from my parents.

"Lwandle is still here?" I ask as we drive in. I thought he dropped my aunt off and went home. It's already dark outside.

He's here, Sbani too.

"I thought you'd gone home already," I say when I walk in.

They seem and look happy and comfortable here. That must be Nokthula's daughter there, she looks exactly like her. She's Lwandle's age.

"Gogo was feeding us,"-Lwandle.

Yeah I know, they can eat a whole cow.

I'm just here to drop Nokthula off and then we can go.

But they don't want to go yet. It's funny how they are so comfortable here, in this place that has so little when they've had so much all their lives.

Hlomu raised them well, Nkosana always tells me that.

I don't know where Nokthula disappeared to, but I need to talk to my aunt.

I find her in her bedroom.

"They're such good boys," she says.

Yes they are, until you mess with them.

"Aunt Phumlile,"

She turns to look at me.

"Have you forgiven me? For what I did, have you forgiven me?"

She doesn't raise her eyes.

"I was never mad at you for that Zandile, but I've been mad at you for not coming to me when you obviously needed help. You should have told me what was happening in that house," she says.

It wasn't that easy.

"And then, I found out through the media that you were out of prison. You know, I did come, once, I took a bus to Joburg and I went there to the prison but I was told that visiting days are only on weekends. It was a Tuesday, I couldn't stay that long," she says.

I wish I had known that.

"Aunt, why? Why didn't my parents love me?" I ask.

I notice her looking up and blinking a few times.

"Come, sit here next to me, close the door," she says.

I oblige.

"Nobody in this family hates you or is mad at you. We should have known that something wrong was happening in that house, but we were too busy to pay attention," she says.

I don't blame them. I don't blame anyone.

"You see, Zandile, you are a product of rape,"

Huh?

What?

No!

"Your mother, she was every man's dream but she was proud and she knew

who she was and what she wanted, she wanted to succeed in life. She wanted to be more than just a pretty girl. She was smart too, she was that girl that your parents used as an example to measure how bad a child you are," she says.

That is hard to believe. I remember her as a mousey little submissive who had no say in anything, not even her marriage.

"But in our times, a girl wasn't exactly expected to leave home and build a career, you had to leave home to make a home for a man,"

"So, your father had been asking your mother out for years, but he knew she didn't like him and that she was never going to say yes to him. One day, when your mother was walking home from fetching water, he jumped out of a bush and.....he raped her,"

She stops. I'm numb.

"Unfortunately, she got pregnant. When her father found out all he did was ask who the father was, she told him what had happened but he didn't care. The only thing he said was she is damaged and therefore she was of no use to him,"

The female species will never get a break in this world.

"The next day her father and uncles brought her here with a suitcase. And so she became her rapist's wife. That's how your mother arrived in this family," she says.

I.....I'm numb. I don't know how I feel about this. I don't know if it is supposed to make me feel better because I now understand why my mother didn't love me, or if I'm supposed to be hurt by the fact that I'm a product of rape.

This can't be happening, why did I ask?

"Sometimes I would hear her cry at night. She never loved your father, not a single day in her life. Sometimes I think she came close to killing him in his sleep, but you know how she was, she never took the leap,"

"So that's why she....."

"But, it doesn't matter how you were conceived, the bottom line is you are a Ngcobo and we are your family," she says.

I hear a car starting outside. Are these boys leaving me behind?

"Zah, where are you, I don't want you driving alone at night,"- Nkosana's SMS.

It's getting late.

I stand up and say goodbye. Now I'm not sure if I want to be part of this family again.

Lwandle and Sbani are gone.

Nokthula's daughter is sitting alone in the lounge. I've never formally met her.

"You look exactly like your mother when she was your age," I say to her, just to start a conversation.

She smiles.

"Everybody says that," she says.

"I didn't believe it when Nokthula told me you were my aunt, I mean, you were on TV with the famous Zulus, and they are my cousins? How cool is that?" she says.

She looks so excited.

And she calls her mother by name?

"You must come visit us in Joburg," I say.

"Really? I'll come during the school holidays," she says.

She's such a cheppie fellow!

"Where did Sbani and Lwandle go?"-I ask.

She doesn't seem to know.

"I don't know, Sbani went to the kitchen and when he came back he looked really angry, he just grabbed the car keys and ordered Lwandle up, they rushed out the house and they were gone," he says.

That's strange.

But I have to go before Nkosana goes crazy.

I drive past a couple, they're probably still in high school, kissing somewhere in the dark under a tree. They remind me of Nkosana and I, the sneaking out and trying to hide our relationship from everyone, those were simple times.

I don't know if I should tell Nkosana about what my aunt told me. It shocked me but somehow I'm not reacting the way I'd normally do, perhaps because now I know the reason. But my hatred for my father, I feel it, and it has just increased to a gazillion times more that it was an hour ago.

The singing drunkards are still there when I drive past the gate.....

I feel like I'm going to lose my mind. I can't see clearly.....

Is that Mpande's car?

"Zandile!"

"Zandile open the door!"

He's banging the window.

Where am I?

"Why are you parked here? In the dark?" he asks when I open the door.

Why am I parked here?

"I've been calling you for the past two hours! I thought something happened to you"

He looks really really freaked out.

"Nkosana, how long have I been here?" I ask.

"I don't know, I started looking for you two hours ago," he says.

I'm parked behind the fence of my father's house.

The last thing I remember is me driving past the gate. How did I end up parked here and sleeping?

"I must have fallen asleep, I don't know how," I say.

He's looking at me with concern in his eyes.

"You were not sleeping Zah, you were sitting here staring into space with your eyes wide open," he says.

That's weird.

"Come on, let's go home. We'll leave this car here, I'll send someone to come and get it. I don't want you driving again," he says.

What happened?

Sbani's car is not in the yard, I remember them driving out of my aunt's yard at high speed.

"Where are the boys?" I ask him.

"They're not back yet, I thought they were still at your aunt's house," he says.

No but they left, they didn't even tell my aunt they were leaving.

Oh well, they're boys after all.

I'm trying to block that thing about my mother, simply because it is starting to make me think that all the shit she put me through was justified.

"I'm going to make some green tea and come to bed," I say after showering and changing into sleepwear.

He looks like he wants an explanation, but I don't have one, I have no idea where I was in those two hours.

The main house is empty, people must be sleeping already, it's been a hectic day.

Mpande?

"Sis'Zah, hi," he says.

He's behaving a bit strange, avoiding eye contact and all that.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

He opens the cupboard, takes out a bottle of bleach and leaves.

I wonder what's wrong with him now.

Nkosana is already in bed.

"Hey," he whispers in the dark when I get in.

I think he wants to.....no, he wants to cuddle.

We'll talk about today tomorrow, he's tired.

There's a knock.

Oh, it's morning already.

"I'll get it," -Nkosana says.

I think that means I must go back to sleep.

It's Xolie.

"It's Nokthula, she wants to talk to Zah," she says handing him the phone.

What does Nokthula want so early?

"Hi,"

"Zandile," she says.

She sounds terrified.

"Come over, it's your father, he's dead," she says.

"Dead?" I ask and look at Nkosana, he shrugs but he looks shocked.

"Yes, we found him in his bedroom this morning, it doesn't look like he died in his sleep, his eyes are open and his tongue is sticking out," she says.

Huh?

Twenty-Two

I'm not doing it,"

"Me neither," -Nokthula says.

We're both standing over the bed looking at him. He's turned darker but his eyes are white. His wrinkled skin is getting dry and his tongue is purple, sticking out of his mouth and purple.

"I wonder what happened," -Nokthula.

Me too.

But that's not my biggest wonder, my biggest wonder is whether we'll be able to continue with the traditional part of the marriage process now that he's dead.

Yes, that's me, when it comes to my father I don't have a heart.

We've been waiting for the mortuary car for hours. The police came in here briefly, they didn't even ask questions. They just looked at him for a few minutes and then left the room, now they're all over the yard doing things that have nothing to do with a dead body.

My uncle walks in, goes to the other side of the bed, bends over and pushes his eyelids down.

Good.

Nokthula and I have been standing here debating about who is going to close his eyes.

He doesn't look peaceful, not even in death.

We're all still puzzled about what happened to him. Obviously, judging by the way his face is, he didn't just go to sleep and never woke up. He looks like he fought death until it defeated him.

"The mortuary car is here," -my aunt shouts from the kitchen.

Oh wow! They made it, finally.

I had to call the Zulu powers that be on the other side of the valley to make it happen, I wouldn't be surprised if they personally went to the mortuary and demanded that a car be sent here.

The police are still all over the place, but they've been eating meat from yesterday and chatting with people in the yard.

I overheard one of them saying: "Take statements? Are we going to waste our time investigating the death of a 200-year-old man now? And how do you know he was murdered? I think he was masturbating and got overwhelmed,"

They laughed after that.

"The mattress is ready," says some woman.

Ready for who?

We follow each other to the kitchen while the mortuary people pack up the body.

I've been cracking my head trying to remember what happened in that two hours last night but it's just not happening. I didn't see Mpande at all this morning, I think he's not okay because the way he behaved last night was a bit strange. Sbani and Lwandle, they drove in just as I was trying to fall asleep, I hope they weren't somewhere partying.

"Mmmmm, to think that yesterday we were celebrating, and now this, how are you holding up my child," this woman says patting my shoulder. She was here yesterday, I remember her face.

The mortuary car drives out the gate, and in comes the Kia Sportage, featuring Qwabe this time.

"I came as soon as I heard," - Zakithi comes out of the car and says.

I doubt that, we had to wait for a mortuary car for three hours, driving from Pietermaritzburg to here is about an hour.

"Have you decided on a date for the funeral?"-she asks

Errrrr no..! The man was a walking corpse and was so sick that he could no longer speak properly, but he pronounced the word "whore" very fluently when he was talking about me.

"We should start as soon as possible," she says.

Nokthula and I look at each other.

"Do you know who has his ID?"-Zakithi.

How would we know?

She realises we're not helping and walks on.

"Trust me, she's going to your father's bedroom to look for that ID, forget that he just died there, she's going to turn that room upside down"-Nokthula.

"But why...?"

She laughs and shakes her head.

"Money darling, I'm sure she had over five policies on him, she's about to get rich and buy piles of those dreadful sishweshwe dresses she's forever wearing,"

Nokthula, she can be funny sometimes.

"So is that the famous Qwabe?"-I ask.

"Yes, every single bit of him,"-Nokthula.

Jizas!

I went without sex for 17 years but even if they had donated Qwabe to me for just one night I would have said no.

It's 10am and he's already sweating. The guy can't even walk fast.

Nokthula has a naughty smile on her face.

She takes a plate and starts dishing out rice and curry and all the salads that were left from yesterday.

"Whoa! that looks like a mountain,"-me

She smiles.

"I know," she says.

She puts the very full plate and a jug of water on a tray and walks out. I don't know what she says to him but he stands up, picks up a chair and goes to sit right in the middle of the yard where everyone can see him.

He takes the food and puts the jug on the ground, just next to the leg of the chair.

"Watch, and enjoy," Nokthula says when she comes back.

I have a look of disgust on my face. How does one even eat like that?

He eats too fast, mouth opens too wide, he doesn't close it when he chews and he drinks the water almost after every chunk.

Nokthula is enjoying watching this.

He drops some of the food, I think it's a potato, it falls on his thigh.

I hear Nokthula giggle.

"Wait...wait....wait...."-Nokthula.

I wait.

"Oh My God!"

"This is my favourite part!"-she says laughing.

The guy just picked the food from his pants and tossed it in his mouth. Everybody on this yard is watching, but it doesn't look like he cares, he's just eating his mountain.

"Nokthula this is wrong," I say, I can't stop laughing too.

And there is Zakithi walking furiously to him, snatching the plate from him and walking straight to the kitchen.

We don't even want to look at her in-case she figures we were responsible for this, but then Qwabe is not embarrassed, in fact he's about to come in here.....

He's here, and he wants his food back. He's still chewing and moving his tongue around the mouth.....

"Zakithi, I'm not done eating," he says.

The way Zakithi is angry!!

"Go sit in the bedroom and finish eating there," she says handing him the plate. He does as she says.

She turns to look at us, she can see we're trying really hard not to laugh. She storms out and we burst out laughing the moment she closes the door behind her.

"We are mourning. The head of this house just died and we are mourning,"-my aunt.

Oops! We forgot and got carried away..

Today is Sunday, I think we can bury him on Tuesday or Wednesday, he'll be buried in the backyard anyway.

And then? What happens after that?

"Zandile, the mattress is ready,"- this woman says again.

I'm confused. I'm his daughter not his wife. Actually I don't even belong to this surname or family any more so, why am I being told this?

I ignore her again.

"Are you okay? Nkosana is worried,"-Hlomu walks in carrying Woolworths shopping bags.

Nkosana is always worried.

Lwandle and Phakeme are behind her with more plastic bags.

It's juices, all kinds of juices from Woolworths in nine plastic bags.

There's something different about Lwandle, he looks.....I don't know, he reminds me of Mqhele even more today.

"Mah, are you okay?" he asks.

He looks worried, really really worried about me.

"I'm fine, and you? What's going on?"

He doesn't answer me immediately.

"Sorry we left you last night, we had forgotten that baba sent us to Mkhulu'Mzimela's house," he says.

He doesn't sound convincing, I hope we won't have people coming to our house soon demanding virgin damages. I love them but they are men and they cannot be trusted to always use their common sense.

Oh Lord! most of the people who'll be drinking these juices won't know the difference between them and Esto.

I mean, what kind of crowd would you expect at my father's funeral? Yes, the type that doesn't eat sugar, spicy food, fried food.....

"Is it finally gone?"-Gugu. She has a look of disgust on her face.

Now where did she come from?

I take it she's never seen a dead body in her life, she must just wait and see.

"Yes, the mortuary car left about 40 minutes ago"-Nokthula.

Nokthula has this rare thing about her that makes her just gel with whoever she meets.

"We brought some cakes and drinks and whatever else is there because I know, and I'm talking from experience, that the whole of Mbuba is moving in here as from today,"-Hlomu.

I think she knows Mbuba and its people better than I do.

They've shared happy times with her, but they've also hurt her in the worst possible way.

She might not know their names or where exactly they live in this village but they came in large numbers to welcome her on her wedding day. They came in numbers to help her bury her child even though they knew they were the cause of her misery.

She lives on a level high above theirs, but I think they see her, they acknowledge her and they trust her.

See, that's the thing about the aftermath of war, after the weapons are thrown down, you are left with nothing but the people you couldn't defeat. You look around you and you realise there were no winners, just broken souls.

There have been no winners in my family too. Our war had only three people, just the three of us but it was as brutal as genocide.

I'm left alone now, just me. Is this when I should start living? I think that maybe I'm the winner here.

My uncle's wife is here. She's his brother's wife.

She sits on that mattress.

Zakithi appears, we had forgotten about her.

"Oh wow! Hi," she says to Hlomu and Gugu.

She wasn't this happy to see me.

They greet her back, awkwardly because she's just too much.

"I have to go, I'll be back later," she says walking out the door.

I look at Nokthula.

"She found the ID," she says and laughs.

A picture of my mother flashes, it's not a happy face.

Mqhele is here. Why?

He finds his wife with his eyes first and doesn't bother looking at all of us.

He looks rather...I don't know troubled.

His eyes are on Hlomu. I think she gets the message. She walks to him and they both go outside.

I catch Nokthula staring.

The funny part is, he still doesn't remember her.

They get inside his car and leave, strange.

Something is going on.

It's Wednesday, the day of the funeral.

Yes, we pulled it off in two days, I don't know how but things just came together and so we are here.

Today is also the day we, the wives, were supposed to go to Zanzibar for a holiday, just the four of us.

It was going to be a surprise from Nqoba, I think he still feels guilty about that jail thing. But, due to this, they had to tell us about it.

My aunt is sitting in front of the coffin. I couldn't, I just couldn't do it.

I haven't seen the men since last night, they came for the night vigil but ofcourse they weren't here for the vigil, the majority of them were standing behind the house smoking cigarettes while speakers in the tent lying about what a great man my father was.

"He changed a lot after his wife died, he couldn't handle living without her, that's how much he loved her," one woman said.

I don't even know her.

Everyone had left by 3am, but there was a group of men that sat in the tent until the morning, they were probably drinking.

We had to hire a priest because, although he pretended to be holly, the last time my father went to church was for my mother's funeral.

"How many were they?" she asks.

How many were who?

"Do you think they're coming?" she asks.

I'm confused and so is Nokthula. But she keeps quiet, she's a bit.....I don't know, reserved when Hlomu is around. I've had to nudge her a few times to stop her from staring.

She's looking at me and waiting for an answer.

Oh crap!

"There were six of them, two died during the political violence, the other two....."

Gwaza was one of the other two.

"They were murdered in Estcourt, oh and that was just after your wedding when Gwaza died...."-Nokthula.

That story still traumatises me.

"There's only two left now," I say.

I'm sure they are grown men now. They were both still in primary school the last time I saw them.

"I don't think they're coming, things changed between us and them after you left, they took all your father's cows as compensation for the runaway bride,"-Nokthula.

Hlomu laughs out loud. I laugh too.

Nqoba always says the only way to deal with things is to laugh about them.

"Mmmmm that explains the hitmen,"-Hlomu.

I don't think she meant to say that out loud, but I get her, the men who sat in the tent all night are here to make sure nothing happens to us. We are like property that needs to be guarded all the time.

The service is starting.

I'm supposed to sit somewhere in front but there is no empty chair. Zakithi's hat has taken up all the space. As to why she is wearing sunglasses inside a tent, I have no idea.

I sit on the second row with Nokthula. I look behind me and there is Nkosana there. I miss him so much.

Sbani and Lwandle are sitting with their cousins, they don't seem bothered by that we're burying their grandfather.

I'm thinking that from now when we have functions as the Zulus, I will also have people from my family. It makes me happy.

The first speaker is Ngubane, his friend and former bus driver colleague.....

"Mapholoba was a great man. The most important thing to him was his family....his wife and his daughter....."

Mother-fucker sit down and shut-up!!!!

And this programme is too long.

"Who compiled this?" I whisper to Nokthula next to me

"Who do you think?"-she asks.

Oh, I should have known.

I still think that coffin was a bit too much but my dear cousin Zakithi always has to shine. She bought a black casket, which, expensive as it was, is not even half the money she claimed from funeral policies.

And then she invited, to a funeral, everyone she knows including Qwabe's business associates, and that was all about the Zulu brothers, they had to know that she knows them and that they are family.

This programme is too long. I was here but I chose not to get involved.

But, this funeral here is dignified, Nkosana insisted on it.

I think he wanted him to go well so that he never returns like that ghost of his father.

The service starts....

I hear the sound of chairs moving. They're here. Why are they here?

"Just relax,"-Nokthula.

They walk in and sit on a row behind us.

I look at Nkosana, he seems unfazed, good.

But still, why are they here?

The Zulu's and the Ngqulungas have always been sworn enemies dating back decades.

There was always that hidden rivalry between them, even with the kids. It was like a power struggle. The Zulus were well off but we all knew where they got their money from. The Ngqulungas were some kind of royalty, rich and out there but they still knew that the Zulus didn't think much of them.

And then, after they had been promised me as a gift, I ran off with the man they hated the most.

There's a loud cry!

Lord! it's Zakithi and her hat, the MEC has just walked in. Qwabe looks confused.

Zakithi is just dramatic, she didn't even like my father.

What? Mpande's girlfriend is here? Things must be getting real serious.

That's another one who's been acting strange. I think he's been avoiding me on purpose.

My uncle, whom I have not seen in years and was not even at my lobola negotiations is the last to speak.

I think Zakithi put him on the programme because he is well known and prominent.

"I would like to assure everyone that whoever did this will be found. My brother didn't die in his sleep, he didn't die because of old-age, someone went to his bedroom and strangled him to death. We don't know who it is, they can even be here in this tent with us but I want to tell them that justice will prevail in the end," he says.

There are rumblings and gulps from the crowd.

Why is he even mentioning this? The man was half-dead anyway, he didn't need to be strangled.....

But wait, I still don't know what happened in those two hours before Nkosana found me sitting alone in the car.

Is it possible that I blacked out and went and strangled my father? No, I don't think so, someone would have stopped me, there were people all over the yard.

All I remember seeing was Mpande's car parked behind the house and.....

No, it can't be, I'm sure he had a good reason to be there. And besides, he is the James Bond of the family, he was probably spying on something.

His obituary says he left one daughter, two grandsons and one great-grandson. He didn't even know them.

I get emotional when the coffin goes down, I don't know why but I feel something in me that I last felt for my father when I was five years old. Before I knew who he was.

His grave is next to another, I assume it is my mother's. It actually has a tombstone, I had no idea.

"Zandile, where is mkhwenyana?" my uncle, he looks so much like my father, his older brother.

"They're sitting behind that rondavel," I say.

He leaves.

I wonder why he's looking for him.

Nokthula is washing the dishes as usual, I think it's her escape.

Naledi walks in with another pile of dirty plates.

She says something and we don't get it immediately.

She looks embarrassed but walks out again to get more plates.

What was that about?

"I think she makes him happy, she's cute isn't she,"-Hlomu.

She is.

I must say my father was given a dignified send-off, thanks to my husband, the one man he hated with all the hate he could fill his heart.

We're going back to Joburg tomorrow. I thought there'd be less people here because it's Wednesday, but no, the yard is buzzing.

I don't know and I don't care what's going to happen to this place, the rest of the family is going to have to decide.

"Zah,"- Hlomu says.

She indicated with her eyes that I must look behind me.

I do.

It's her. She's standing behind me. She's still alive.

I look at her from head to toe, she looks as evil as she did the last time I saw her.

"You killed him too?"-she says.

I don't answer.

I'm quiet because I don't even have the strength to have a go at her. She didn't win, I did.

"MaMpongo, it's good to see you again. Hlomu, let's go home now, my aunt will decide what to do with this place," I say.

We walk past her and out the door.

I spot Sbani talking to some girl. I thought they didn't know anyone in Mbuba. The girl looks familiar though. She looks like she's in her early 20s.

I have to disturb their chat because he has to drive us home.

I don't know what happened to the Ngqulungas, the last time I saw them was at the graveyard.

"Sbani,"

"Mah, I'm coming," he says but continues talking to the girl.

When he finally decides to be an obedient child he walks backwards, it's like doesn't want to turn his back on this girl.

He's still looking out the window as he drives.

A smile still stuck on his face when we get to the road.

They're chasing after girls at funerals now?

We're leaving early tomorrow. The kids have already missed three days of school.

Mpande looks happy.

Well, it's only been a couple of weeks and I don't trust him to keep a woman but I think he's really feeling this one.

He even brought her to the funeral and we all know that if you are brought to Mbuba it means you have potential.

Hell, she's even riding with us on the private jet.

I can't wait to get home, I miss my life and my space.

Nkosana stands up, I think he's going to the loo.

Mpande stands up and comes to sit next to me

She catches me watching them, and smiles.

I smile back.

And of-course she's his type, tall and dark and skinny.

It's unfortunate that.....

"Sis'Zah," he says.

He has that charming Mpande smile on his face.

"You're still going on that holiday soon right?" he asks.

Oh by the way.

"Yes, but it's not Zanzibar anymore, we're going to have to do Margate, atleast it's by the beach too," I say.

I hope he doesn't want to come along.

"Okay, can you take Thando with you?"

Huh?

"Just so you can all know her better, you know," he says

I didn't see this one coming at all.

"I think....." he stops.

"I think I want to make things work with her, I think she's the one," he says.

Oh Lord! He's serious!

"Mpande you've known her for how long? Three weeks?"

"No I've known her longer than that, you have known her for three weeks," he says.

But still.....he doesn't know her at all.

"And I think I'm ready for marriage," he says.

I almost drop my glass.

Just when I thought our troubles were over, here comes another one.

Twenty Three

I wonder who organised this but all I can say is they did a pretty good job. It must be those PAs they have who, because we know our men and how far their romantic capabilities stretch, make sure we get flowers once in a while.

In the beginning I was impressed thinking Nkosana had turned into a bourgeoisie flower-buying grey haired man. But then, it became too good to be true and that was proven when I thanked him for buying me proteas, he had no idea what I was talking about.

I got mad and decided I wasn't going to speak to him all day, but ten minutes later he turned me around, spread my legs and I was screaming his name before I knew it.

"This is soooooo nice,"-Thando.

We agreed to take her along, reluctantly because she's a tad too young. We don't even know what type of conversations we should have with her.

"Ncoooooh there's a Jacuzzi," she says.

Of course there's a Jacuzzi.

She and I got the rooms downstairs while the others got the ones upstairs.

It's a beautiful house, too big for a family holiday rented house but I love it.

It has a pool but it's right by the sea, and I mean about 500 meters from the waves.

Zanzibar we will do some other time, this is great too.

They said they were doing this because they thought we deserved a break. I'm going to be honest and say it sounded a bit suspicious but I'm going to give them the benefit of the doubt.

One person who was not happy about this was Mqhele. It's like if you take Hlomu away from him for a few minutes he starts panicking.

I heard them teasing him about it once when they were in my house saying if Hlomu was to be diagnosed with a terminal illness, Mqhele would die of it first.

All the kids were packed and left with MaMnguni, we couldn't risk leaving them alone with their fathers because every time we do, we come back to notice

some serious taxi-rank tendencies in them.

"So, what do we do first? Do we go to the beach or hang out here with some wine or a movie.....?"-Xolie, she gets excited very easily.

We decide eventually that we are going to sit on the porch and gossip over wine while the chef prepares dinner, it's evening already anyway.

Naledi is the last to join us. She's always on her phone and smiling to herself.

"Someone is happy,"-Hlomu.

She blushes.

"I was telling Qhawe that we got here safe, he says we must enjoy ourselves,"-Naledi.

Shame, new love. What she doesn't know is that we don't bother reporting to them because we know they know exactly where we are, all the time.

For all we know, those guys standing on the balcony of that house across us could be here to guard us.

"Is this correct?"-she says showing Gugu her phone screen.

"Ngigugumbule....." Gugu reads out loud.

"What is that?"-Gugu.

"I want to say I miss him,"-Naledi.

We all burst out laughing.

"Ngikukhumbule, that's what you should have written,"-Gugu.

She looks embarrassed but, she's laughing at herself too.

"I'm trying to learn Zulu,"-Naledi

Smart girl, otherwise she won't survive in this union.

Xolie walks in with flutes and two bottles of champagne.

Okay, fine, not so long ago she was opening a Hunters Dry with her teeth.

I wish I had invited Nokthula to come along.

"Zandile, we're getting you drunk tonight, it's not negotiable,"-Xolie.

I'm older than these girls, but they just don't seem to acknowledge that.

"I don't drink, and that's that," I say.

We move to the dining area when the chef tells us dinner is ready. Shame, he even set the table for us. .

"So, Thando, where are you from?"-Hlomu

I hope she's not about to start.

"My parents are from KZN but I grew up here in Joburg," she says.

She does have a funny accent.

"How long have you known Mpande?"-Xolie.

The interrogation begins.

"Can you tell him apart from Mqoqi?"-Gugu

She laughs and says yes. They all laugh, Hlomu isn't laughing.

"Don't worry Thando, I was also interrogated,"-Naledi.

We all laugh. We love Naledi.

"I was just asking because sometimes I can't tell Qhawe and Mqhele apart,"-Gugu.

This is nice, we should do it more often. I'm almost completely sure that Naledi is going to stick around, the other one is a different story all together.

Sleeping?

No driving home, are you missing me?" he responds

No, I'm having too much fun here

"Mxmmmm, I'll call you when I get home,"-that's all he says.

I miss him like crazy.

There was breakfast already waiting for us when we woke up.

Naledi, she's just like me when I came home from jail. She just doesn't understand this life.

She woke up and went to the kitchen to make breakfast only to be greeted by a chef and offered coffee.

There's someone at the door.

Xolie stands up to get it.

"It's a man, he says we are going on a yacht in 15 minutes," she says when she comes back.

Yacht? This was really planned to the core.

We all stand up to go get ready but Hlomu asks Gugu to call Nqoba and ask if this was planned.

The paranoia!!

"We should have brought some snacks and drinks,"-Gugu

Yes, how did we forget that?

Never mind, it's all here, from food to wine to cocktails.

It's just us here and the guy driving.

There's not much to do except bask in the sun on the deck.

"There's no signal here," Naledi.

Yes because we are at sea woman.

"Why? You miss Qhawe?" Xolie

She blushes.

She's so in-love.

"I go crazy when I don't speak to him, or see him. He's sooooo, I don't know, loving. And hot too," she says.

Yeah sweetie wait till you double-cross him, he'll make you eat your brains with a teaspoon.

She's just too adorable. I understand why Qhawe is smitten.

Xolie is the first to take her dress off.

"We're at sea ladies, why are we still dressed?" she says.

Good idea, bikinis it is.

Naledi stays put.

We all look at her. She shakes her head.

"Really? Come on girl don't be like that,"-Thando

It's fine I get that she's uncomfortable because she's big but it's just us here.

We are not taking no for an answer.

"I'm a size 42, I can't be walking around in a bikini," she says.

"Nx! You're crazy, come on take that dress off or we will do it ourselves,"-Hlomu.

She still won't budge.

We stand and stare at her until she gives in.

We're still staring when she's left in a bikini.

Bitch doesn't even have cellulite or a scar or stretch mark.....

"Woman, do you bathe in milk?"-Gugu

We all laugh.

"I don't understand why you wanted to hide that, it's gorgeous," Hlomu says. She looks a little more comfortable now.

"Where's Thando?" I ask.

"She went down, I think she's sitting inside. She was behaving a little funny I think she's sea sick,"-Gugu

Oh well.

They're drinking their alcohol and I'm sipping on water as always.

Naledi drinks champagne.

"So how is it being a doctor? The way I'm scared of blood,"-Gugu says.

Yeah, we want to know more about her.

"It's the only job I've ever done so I have nothing to compare it with. But, sometimes it's great when a life is saved and it is bad when a life is lost. That moment, there's that moment of the last breath, it is so final," she says. I can just see that it's not an easy job.

"But, I'm used to it and I'm passionate about it," she says. I see her lightening up a bit as she speaks.

Only if she knew how much she's going to have to give up.

"You do know that soon you're going to be barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen with a half-a-million worth diamond on your finger right???"

Gugu though.

"That's if you tolerate Qhawe long enough," Gugu again.

We laugh, it's all we can do.

But suddenly Naledi's face is serious.

What now?

"Does he need tolerating?" she asks.

She looks worried all of a sudden.

"No I was just joking, he's a nice guy in our family standards,"-Gugu

This girl though.

That look on Naledi's face is still there.

"Abuse?"-Hlomu asks.

Naledi takes a deep breath.

"Yes, ex-boyfriend. Physical, emotional, mental.....all of it, you name it, I've been through it all," she says.

No man, I've seen many things in my life but Nkosana has never abused me, well not to a point where I figured out I was being abused.

"How long were you with him?"

"Six years, and we've been broken up for almost two years but he just won't leave me alone," she says.

You can just see that this is frustrating her.

"That's why I didn't want to go out with Qhawe initially, I just.....you don't want to bring a man in your life when you have such baggage," she says.

I understand.

"Does Qhawe know?"-Xolie.

"No,"

Whoah!

"He really is crazy,"-Hlomu

Shame poor thing.

"But, you're going to have to tell Qhawe, just so he knows, trust me he will

know what to do,"- Hlomu again.,

And he will know for sure. I think he really loves this girl. I think nobody will ever match Oleta but I think Naledi is close enough. I'm also pretty sure he loves her for who she is because she is totally different from Oleta.

She looks at Hlomu.

"He told me his ex died?"

Sigh. We don't have to go there.

"Yes, there was an incident, she died in Mbuba. For the past four years Qhawe has been, I don't know absent and distant, that's how he dealt with it. And then, out of the blue he tells us we have to go to Kimberley for his birthday....."-Hlomu, she's smiling now.

"I mean, it's Qhawe, I didn't even know he remembered his birthday. If it had been someone else we would have refused to go, but because we all want him to be happy we agreed. And there you were....he's just so in-love with you,"-Hlomu

"And I'm so in-love with him. We like the same things and he wants to spoil me all the time,"-Naledi

Oh by the way she's the cuff-link buying type.

"You'll get used to it, we get pretty much anything we want, any time we want it,"-Gugu.

She's right, it doesn't come easy though.

We are back after four hours, and yes there's lunch waiting for us, a picnic at the beach. Naledi still doesn't understand.

"This is nice," Thando.

I'm not even going to pay attention to this one.

Naledi rushes to the house to get her phone, she's still in a bikini. In no time she's on the phone smiling to herself again.

"We must go to Mauritius next time, for the whole week,"-Xolie.

"We should go next weekend,"-Gugu

"Next weekend?"-Naledi.

"Yeah, I think that would be cool,"-me

"Can you really just go to Mauritius at one week's notice? Isn't it something you plan over months?"-Naledi.

We turn to look at her. The look we're giving her is the same look I got when I asked how they can order food through SMS.

"Naledi, like I said, we get what we want, when we want it,"-Gugu

The day goes quicker than usual, maybe because we don't have grown men stalking us. They must be busy with something really important because Nkosana has called me only twice today.

"Thando, can you come here for a minute?" -Hlomu.

She looks stunned for a few seconds but stands up and follows her upstairs.

Oh no! Hlomu is crazy, I'm going there too.

I find Thando sitting on the bed when I barge in and Hlomu standing with her arms folded.

She doesn't tell me to leave, good I'm going to stay just to make sure she doesn't murder this child.

"Close the door Zah,"- she says.

I close and lock it.

She's pacing to and from, her arms still folded. Thando looks nervous. I'm just

sitting here watching.

"Thando, I know what you did," she says.

Oh crap!!

"What I did?"-Thando, she looks scared and confused all at the same time.

"I've been watching you all week, and you know what pisses me off most? It's that you have no conscience at all. You walk around like everything is fine, so basically you are lying to all of us," -Hlomu

She's right though, the girl has no shame.

"Now, this is what is going to happen, you are going to leave Mpande, I don't care how but you are going to get out of his life," -Hlomu.

She went straight into it. This was not the agreement. Oh wait, there was never an agreement, she was always going to do things her way.

"I can't just leave Mpande, what am I going to say to him?"

Jizas this girl is still trying to negotiate!

She starts crying, what did she think was going to happen?

"No no no my dear, you weren't crying when you fucked his brother. Now I'm not going to allow you to destroy Mpande and Ntsika's relationship, I'm not going to allow you to destroy this family," -Hlomu

This girl must do what she says if she knows what's good for her.

She looks at me.

Does she expect me to defend her?

"The sooner you disappear the better, we don't do shit like that in this family,"
I say

I'm only realising now how angry I am with this girl. And she has the nerve to come here with us like she isn't a hoe.

"It was a mistake," she says, still crying.

"A mistake, you sleep with your boyfriend's brother and call that a mistake?"-
me

She's quiet.

This can never come out. This girl must just leave. There can't be beef between Ntsika and Mpande, they are close, very close, and we can't let a moment of weakness break that bond.

I could just see the frustration and regret and shame in Ntsika's eyes that night.

He kept saying

"I did something bad mami, I did something bad,"

And when he broke the news, I felt things turning in my stomach.

Loyal, that's the word that describes everything these brothers are to each other, that is what made them this powerful force that they are.

"So it's my fault? Ntsika is not to blame in this?" she says.

She's still talking?

"Okay Thando look, Ntsika is family, you are not. We care about Ntsika, we don't care about you. Whether he was in the wrong or not is not important," I say.

This girl? Really?

"You said you grew up in Joburg?"-Hlomu

She blinks a few times.

"Yes, with my mother's family, my father's family is in Botswana," she says.

Good it's not far, she must just walk there and leave us in peace.

"I'm going to give you money, take it, go to Botswana and do whatever they do there. But don't come back here. And if the story of your little quickie with Ntsika comes out, I will hunt you down....."-Hlomu.

Yeses!

I can just see by the look on her face that she's going to take the money and disappear.

"Be gone by Monday,"

Hlomu though!

Our flight back to Joburg is at 6pm, and we still have to drive to Durban to get to the airport. It's only 12pm.

Three women here have a hangover, one looks like the world crumbled and landed on her, and me, I'm just looking forward to getting home.

"I think we should drive instead, have a girls road-trip,"-me

"And the flights? They're already paid for,"-Naledi

Didn't she hear anything we told her yesterday?

"I'm in,"-Xolie

"Me too,"-Hlomu

We're going on a road trip!

The agreement is, we don't tell the men about this because they're gonna start being paranoid and thinking we can't drive on the N3 or whatever it is that they are delusional about.

Besides, we are going to be home early, they should be happy.

"You're quiet today,"-Xolie to Thando.

She looks like hell.

"No I'm just....I'm not used to the sea, it makes me tired," she says.

Yah shame. I feel for Mpande, he seemed to really like her, but we can't risk it, if she's done it once it means she can do it again.

As for Ntsika, at least we saw remorse in him, this one here thought she could do as she pleases.

We drop Xolie off at her house first, then Hlomu, Thando and Gugu.

Naledi, her man will have to come fetch her from my house, I'm tired.

Wow!

Yeah I know.

"Let's go in,"

Looks like the men are all here, judging by the cars parked outside.

The reaction I get I did not expect. They look stunned.

"We decided to take a road-trip instead," I say.

I expect them to say we are crazy and continue with what they were doing but no.

Qhawe stands up and goes to Naledi.

That new love thing.

I hear noise coming from upstairs, they're coming down and they are running and they are screaming.

Why are these men looking at me like this? It's like I'm a ghost or something.

I hear a lot of 'mama' and blah blah blah they all speak at the same time.

"Mama can we please have ice-cream?" one says, I think it's the other twin.

Okay, I might as well focus on the little people.

I take out six dessert bowls including one for Shlangu who just crawled in the kitchen.

I gave them all their bowls, but there's one still standing with no bowl, it's one of the twins.

I thought I knew how many kids we have in this family.

Or did I count wrong?

I count them again, there's one extra.

The twins are sitting together, it can't be one of them.

He's still standing with his hands stretched out waiting for his bowl.

He looks exactly like all of them.

He must be about five-years-old.

Noooo! Whose child is this?

"Nkosana!!!"

No answer.

"Nkosana!!" I shout walking to the lounge.

It's empty.

They're all gone.

They must have gone out through the sliding door.

Twenty-four

What the heck is wrong with these men?
Whose child is this?
And where on earth did they go?

Bloody cowards!

"Mabutho you can have my ice-cream,"-one of the kids says.

Mabutho?

I go back to the kitchen. I want to ask questions but I doubt I'll get proper answers from the kids.

Jizas! I don't even know what to say about this.

The kid is almost as old as the twins, maybe younger by a few months.

And judging by how he interacts with all the others, they know him. He seems very comfortable, even Niya tries to pronounce his name.

But whose child is he and what am I supposed to do now?

He is obviously not Qhawe's or Mqoqi's or Mpande's because they would have no reason to hide him.

And Nkosana, he would have told me if he had another child five years ago.

So that leaves the three.

His phone rings unanswered four times.

I have no idea what to do next.

Naledi and Qhawe left just before the kids came downstairs.

I try to find the kid with my eyes amongst all of them sitting on the kitchen floor. They all look the same.

He has a red t-shirt on, that's how I recognise him.

"Mabutho"

He stands up and comes to me, his hands behind his back.

"Who is your father?" I ask.

He looks up at me with those big eyes.

"Baba," he says.

Ghosh! This is not going to work.

My phone. It's Hlomu.

"Zah, are they there?"

"They were here, but they went out, the kids are all here though,"

I could tell her what's going on but I don't want to talk until I have all the facts.

"Nkosana, I'm going to tell Hlomu to come here, maybe you'll give her answers" - I SMS him

They are behaving like kids right now.

"Go upstairs, all of you. Have you eaten?"

They're already running up the stairs before I can finish.

I don't know which will be worse, if this child is Mqhele's or Sambulo's or Nqoba's, I don't know.

I'm just worried that one of us is about to be heartbroken.

It's one thing finding out that your man is cheating, but finding out that he went out and got himself a child with some woman? That's a wound that will never heal.

"Zah! Please don't call Hlomu!"-Mqhele walks in and says.

Where were they all along?

They have guilt written all over their faces.

"Why Mqhele? Why shouldn't I call Hlomu?"

He doesn't answer.

I look at all of them. They look nervous, even Nkosana.

"Whose child is that?" I ask.

No answer.

Oh okay.

I start dialling.

"No no no" they all say at the same time.

"Is it yours?" I ask Mqhele.

No answer.

I don't even want to look at Nkosana.

They really are stupid.

"So this was the plan? You sent us away so you could have quality time with children we don't know about? Were you going to take him home before we arrived?"

No answer.

They're just standing there like statues.

I hear a car pull up outside, maybe it's the mother of this child.

"Zahzah, we should have just driven straight here," she says when she opens the door.

She frowns.

"I thought you all went out," she says looking at all of them.

That frown on her face means she knows that something is going on.

She looks at me, I have no answer.

She wants to ask but she doesn't.

"I came to get the kids," she says walking past me.

"No, don't worry, I'll go get them,"-Mqoqi

She ignores him, walks past him, and up the stairs.

I hope they're not about to run away again.

I'm still standing in the kitchen waiting for that moment.

Hlomu is observant, she will see it the moment she walks in that room....

"Mqhele!!!"

Oh shit!!!

"Mqhele!! She's shouting as she rushes down the stairs!

"Don't even think of it!!"-I shout when they try to run outside.

She stands in-front of them with her hands on her hips.

"What's going on?" she asks.

Silence.

"Mqhele?" she says.

He scratches his head.

She looks at all of them one-by-one but they all drop their eyes.

I hope this child is not Mqhele's because she will murder him if it is.

"Zah, call Xolie," -she says.

"No no no," they all say. Nqoba snatches the phone from my hand.

They're being themselves now, the 'them' I know too well. Always covering for each other.

Hlomu walks until she's standing in-front of Ntsika. I know what she's doing, she's going for an easy target.

"Ntsika!" she says.

"Mami,"

"Whose child is that?"

He looks at all of them, and then her.

"Don't even think of lying to me," she says.

He stutters a few times and then.....: "It's Sambulo's"

Oh Lord!!

Hlomu is as stunned as I am, but she's calmed down, her calmness seems to be motivated by hurt.

"Please don't tell Xolie, she's going to leave me if she finds out,"-Sambulo

Hlomu and I look at each other, she's as shocked as I am by what Sambulo just said.

Men live in their own stupid world. Does he really think he can hide a human being? Forever?

"No, you're going to tell her yourself, tonight, and if I don't get a call from her screaming, I'll know you haven't told her,"

"Hlomu..."-Mqhele.

"What? Do you also have a child somewhere, you might as well tell me now while we're on the subject,"-Hlomu

I understand why they didn't want me to call her, she can be a bit scary sometimes.

She goes back upstairs and comes down with her three children, out the door and she's gone.

Nobody has said anything since Ntsika dropped that bomb.

The look on their faces says they're only realising now how dire the consequences of this are going to be.

I have to get out of here too. I leave them still standing in the kitchen, quiet.

I'm expecting a call from Xolie, or maybe not, maybe she's still too hurt to talk

about it.

How could Sambulo, actually all of them, how could they do something like this?

How long did they think they were going to hide it?

I'm beginning to think that this child has always been part of our children's lives. We were the only ones that didn't know he existed. And where is his mother?

I feel for Xolie. No woman should have to go through this.

"Hi,"-Nkosana

He's awake, finally.

"Hi," I say and continue with what I'm doing.

"Did you sleep well?" he asks.

Yes stupid!

I don't answer him.

My phone. It's Xolie.

I think about not answering but then.....

"Xolie," I say.

He widens his eyes, and then rushes off.

"Zah, have you spoken to Naledi today?" she asks. She sounds anxious, like something happened.

I understand, if I were in her position I'd act crazy too.

"No, they left as soon as we arrived last night, I haven't spoken to her....."

"I've been trying to call her, pictures of her are all over, and the things being said oh my word!!!....."

Huh?

"Slow down, what pictures?"

"Pictures from the boat and from the beach, pictures of her in a bikini, people are so mean...."

Nooo! Who could do such a thing?

And none of us were taking pictures, even Thando did not have her cellphone with her.

"Let me try calling her,"-I say and hang up.

She definitely doesn't know about the kid yet because if she did, she wouldn't be bothering herself with Naledi's naked pictures.

But how did that happen? It was just the five of us, and the boat driver guy. He couldn't have done this.

I turn around to find Nkosana standing behind me.

"Have you spoken to Qhawe today?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

"Someone took pictures of us on the boat, in bikinis,"

"What??" he says. Oh, he's back.

"Now they're saying nasty things about Naledi's weight,"

"Oh shit, who was there with you? Did someone go with you besides the driver? I told those fools to look after you! They were supposed to make sure nobody comes near you....."

He stops when he notices I'm staring.

"Nkosana, you're a psychopath. All of you are psychopaths," I say.

He seems to be aware of that fact and to not understand why I'm mentioning

it.

We can't even go on holiday without being stalked?

"I'm going to Qhawe's house," I say grabbing my car keys.

He follows me.

"Baba"- a tiny voice says.

Really?

"He slept here?"

His eyes go all over the place.

"Nkosana!"

"Yes," he says and looks down.

What the fuck is going on here?

"When is he going home? What am I supposed to tell Xolie?"

He's quiet.

I'm leaving.

The security guard looks at me once and opens the gate.

He's supposed to ask me to sign somewhere but no, he lets me drive in. He knows where I'm going too. I thought maybe he recognised the car but then I remembered that I'm famous, I've been where Naledi is right now.

Qhawe finally opens the door after I knock and knock and knock.....

He looks exhausted. He's still in his pyjamas and he looks like he's had a rough morning

"How is she?" I ask.

He sighs.

"Come on in," he says.

I haven't even seen what is being said about her but I know how painful it is to have your privacy violated like that.

I follow Qhawe up the stairs.

This house is all glass. I can see the whole golf-course as we climb the stairs.

It is also very empty and too open. I wonder who furnished it for him.

We've been here a few times. The guys love it because, if I can put it that way, it's a man cave.

He stops at the door. It's the main bedroom.

"Baby....." he says knocking.

No answer.

"Naledi, baby please open the door," he says

Still no answer.

She must be really upset.

"Baby Zah is here, she wants to see you," he says.

It's quiet before the door opens slowly.

Her eyes are red, they are still wet. She's really hurt, and so is Qhawe.

I walk in and Qhawe goes back downstairs.

She gets back in bed and sits with her back on the headboard.

What do I do now?

I don't know.

I sit next to her.

"Is this how it's like?" she asks.

I wish I could lie.

"Not all the time?" I say.

She shakes her head.

"The called me a hippo. They put my picture next to a picture of a hippo and wrote "spot the difference".

Oh Lord!

"They don't even know me but they are saying all these nasty things. I don't even know how they found out that I'm Qhawe's girlfriend, now they're having a go at him too saying he "likes them plenty". Is that all I am Zah, a fat girl? They don't even know my name," she says.

This is more difficult than I expected.

I'm starting to feel useless because really I have no idea what to say.

"You shouldn't take anything people on social networks say about you personal, the reason they attack people they don't know is because they are miserable in their own lives. This will blow off and soon they will be attacking someone else," I say.

She wipes her eyes.

"I'm embarrassed, the whole world has seen me half naked, how is Qhawe supposed to feel about that? What about his brothers? How am I going to look them in the eye?" she says.

I don't even want to talk about those shady fools.

"Don't mind them, they probably haven't even seen the pictures," I say, I could be lying but I don't know for sure.

We hear footsteps.....

"Champagne?"-Gugu

She has two bottles under her arm. Really?

"Pour!!"-Naledi says.

Am I missing something?

Okay, I understand now, alcohol fixes everything in these people's minds.

"I know you're hurt now but girl, those pictures are gorgeous,"

Really Gugu?

Someone is coming.

"We must start going to church," she says when she comes in.

Our eyes meet, it's about that thing from last night. We toss it aside.

She throws herself on the bed and lies on her stomach.

"You're gonna be fine don't even stress about it, drink up that champagne so we can go out for lunch," she says.

Is she crazy?

Nobody supports her suggestion.

"Okay then, if we can't go out for lunch, we'll bring lunch to us," she says.

She's about to abuse some restaurant owner! I just know it!

"Or we can have a braai here,"-Gugu

"Who's going to braai the meat?"-Hlomu

"The guys"-Gugu

"I don't want those bug-eyed fools anywhere near me today,"-Hlomu.

We laugh.

Naledi is laughing.

Qhawe walks in and stares. He's surprised to see her laughing. But he's happy.

"The guys are coming over," he says and looks at all of us.

Mnxxxxmmm!

I guess this is family day then, its Sunday anyway.

I wonder what they are going to do with the new kid. I wonder what the story behind him is.

“Get dressed, we're going downstairs, you can't be sobbing here for minor crap like this,”-Hlomu.

I keep thinking Xolie is going to walk in but no.

Her phone is also off. Sambulo is not here either.

The new kid is not here, Nkosana must have taken him home because he also arrived alone.

I'm still avoiding him. At least he's just sitting there and I catch him watching me now and again but Mqhele, it's like his world has come crashing down. Hlomu won't even look his way and he just won't take his eyes off her. Their love seems a bit dangerous if you ask me.

Naledi has lightened up a little.

I'm looking at Mpande and Ntsika laughing and joking outside in the braai-place. It's that thing that you see only in siblings, that love that doesn't need to be shown because it's just there,. Always.

I'm convinced now more than ever that we did the right thing.

We can't let a woman come between them, we can't.

Food is ready, now we have to go sit with them.

“Where's Sambulo?”-I ask as I sit next to Nkosana.

He takes a deep breath.

“Talking with Xolie. He's telling her,” he says

Oh crap!

Mqhele puts his arm around Hlomu's shoulders when she sits next to him. She gives him a look. He doesn't remove it.

“Before we start eating I'd like to propose a toast,”-Ntsika.

Oh, the toast guy!

“To Naledi,” he says and smiles.

“Welcome to the family, from here on it's uphill. But Zulu women are made of steel.....so you will soon learn,” he says.

We all laugh.

He's right, if we were weaklings we would have packed and left a long time ago.

“You mean it's going to get worse than this?”-Naledi.

We laugh at her, she has no idea.

I like the way Qhawe is looking at her right now.

She's staying, and we all love her.

But she must learn to speak Zulu, quick.

“What??”-Mpande

He said it out loud. Unintentionally I think.

He stands up and walks outside.

He's on the phone.

I look at Hlomu.

We both know what this is about.

When he walks back in, the look on his face breaks my heart.

He doesn't say anything, he just sits and looks down at his plate.

"Are you okay bafo?" Mqoqi asks.

He doesn't answer. Now everyone is really really worried.

"Thando is gone," he says.

Everybody is confused.

"She's gone, just like that, she said she's going to Botswana to live with her father's family," he says

Ntsika looks at Hlomu and then at me.

He must never! He made us do this!

Mpande stands up and walks outside.

Ntsika is the first to stand up and follow...but Hlomu gives him a look that says "sit the fuck down".

Mqoqi stands up and follows him.

Soon they are all outside smoking and drinking, but there are no loud laughs today.

We are left alone on the table.

"So she just left? Just like that?"-Naledi.

I look at Hlomu, she always has answers ready for these kinds of question.

"Shame Mpande looks really hurt. I think he does love her,"-Gugu.

It doesn't matter now does it? The reality is that she's a hoe and she had to go.

I still don't know how much Hlomu gave her and if it was in cash in a black briefcase or what. As long as it is not traceable I'm fine.

Besides, Amanda stole hundreds of thousands from Mqoqi and he never noticed.

"MaSbisi,"-Hlomu

I didn't even hear her phone ring.

MaSbisi is Xolie's domestic worker

"What??" she shouts.

Huh?

"Mqhele!!!" she screams.

They all run in at once.

"You have to go to Sambulo's house! Now!"

They look stunned for seconds.

"What's going on?"-Mqoqi is the first to ask.

"There's a fire," Hlomu

What??

They all run out leaving us standing there.

I thought Xolie was joking when she said if she ever caught Sambulo cheating she would burn his house down, with him inside.

Hlomu turns to look at Naledi.

"Welcome to the family," says raising her glass.

Twenty Five

I'm worried about Xolie,"-Hlomu
Me too.

"Maybe we should have gone with them,"-Gugu
I think we should have. What if she really burnt down her house with Sambulo inside? And where were the kids in all that? To be honest, I'm not even sure where Mvelo is right now.

I thought he was at Xolie's but now I'm starting to think he is at Hlomu's, judging by the low level of concern about the kids right now.

"We have to!"-Gugu says picking up her handbag and rushing to the door.

Naledi sits still, she's confused.

"Get your handbag we're going," I say.

She might as well get used to these things.

Gugu got an SMS from Nqoba saying we must come over to Xolie's house. That can only mean one thing, the situation is bigger than them.

"Did they have a fight?"-Gugu

Oh, she doesn't know by the way.

"Long story, can you drive faster? I'm really worried now,"-Hlomu

Faster? She's crazy!

Naledi doesn't know where we're going and why.

I think once she sees what she's about to see, she'll forget about that little bikini photos incident. She will soon understand that we have bigger problems than that, stuff like dodging bullets and a ghost of a father-in-law who torments our kids.

I wouldn't be surprised if Qhawe already has security following her around. But then again, she's always in Joburg if he is not in Kimberley. They are such a cute couple but I can already foresee their marriage: Naledi quits her job and opens a private practice in Joburg with the Zulu money, Qhawe convinces her to hire another doctor to work there, everything from accounting to installing facilities to choosing the place is done by a consultant. At the end of it all, the only thing that'll have to do with her in that surgery will be her name.

It's the same thing with Hlomu, she doesn't even know what time Fruitcake Crumbs opens.

"Whoah! Firefighters?"

"So there really was a fire? Shit!"-Gugu.

We can't drive in. There are cars parked in front of the gate, there's even a tow-truck.

So we park outside and walk in. It's Naledi's suggestion, we had absolutely no idea what to do because parking outside and walking all the way across the road, among people, is not something we do often, that's what we've become.

We can still smell smoke but the house is intact, that's a relief. But outside the garage, that's where the smoke is coming from. It's Sambulo's BMW i8, he bought it last week.

"Where's Xolie?"-Hlomu asks.

Mqhele turns around swiftly and hugs her. She tries to let go but he hugs her tighter until she gives in.

There are clothes all over the yard, I think they are Sambulo's.

"She's inside, alone. When we went in she threw everything she could find at us. She's really angry,"-Mqoqi

What did they expect?

Naledi is standing there looking like she doesn't believe what is happening. Shame, she'll get used to it.

"I'll go talk to her, where is Sambulo?"-Hlomu.

"In the ambulance,"-Mqhele

Huh?

"Smoke inhalation," he says.

Oh okay, that's a bit of a relief.

"Tell all these people to leave Mqhele,"-Hlomu

I also think they should leave, and take the grilled car with them.

This is yet another scandal, I hope it doesn't make it to the media, but with police all over here, I'm pretty sure we are making Page-One of some tabloid tomorrow.

"I'm going with you Hlomu," I say following her.

"Xolie,"-Hlomu shouts when we walk in.

The house is quiet. Where are we going to start looking for her?

"Xolie, it's Hlomu,"-she says.

We still don't see her.

The house is in tatters. It looks like she was throwing things all over the place. There's even a couple of blood splatters on the wall.

I turn around and I almost jump, she's standing right behind us. She's wearing just panties and a bra. She looks a scary.

"Xolie,"-Hlomu says.

She looks at her and doesn't say anything.

"Let's go get dressed, there are people all over this place,"-Hlomu

She doesn't move, she just stands there and looks at both of us.

"You knew about this?" she asks looking at Hlomu.

We all know Hlomu knows everything that happens around here, but I don't think she knew about this.

"No Xolie I didn't, I swear,"-Hlomu

She looks at me.

"I only found out yesterday when I got home, and we had to force them to tell us who the father of the child is,"- I say.

I'm not sure if this is helping at all.

"Okay then, you can go," she says

I've never seen Xolie like this.

"No Xolie, we're not leaving you alone,"-Hlomu.

She starts pacing up and down with her arms folded.

"He wants me, me Xolie Mzobe, his wife, he wants me to live with that bastard child," she says.

"He wants to bring him here, to my house to live with us,"

What? No that's just wrong.

"He says it's his child and he deserves to be in a proper home with his siblings and his father. Now I must mother another woman's child because I'm married to him, who does Sambulo think he is?" she says.

I thought this was going to happen, I just knew it. Such cruelty.

"He says it's a Zulu child, Zulu children have to grow up in this family. What the fuck is that? He can go raise the bloody child with its mother," she says.

I never asked about the child's mother.

See this is the problem with sleeping with a married man and getting pregnant while at it, the child will suffer. Even if Xolie agrees to live with this child she will never love him, the child will always be a reminder of Sambulo's betrayal. He will always feel left-out, even by other members of this family.

The door opens, it's Nkosana.

He takes one look at us and rushes out again.

"Xolie you have to get dressed,"-Hlomu

She leaves us standing there and goes up the stairs. We aren't sure if she's going to get dressed or not.

The yard is empty now except for the guys. The burnt car is gone too.

Things like this don't happen in Houghton but hey, the blacks have arrived.

"Is she okay?"-Mqoqi meets me at the door and asks.

Duhhhhh.....

"What happened to you?" I ask. He has blood on his sleeve.

"I don't know, I think it was a glass she threw at me or something," he says.

Things must have been really hectic.

"Where is the child?" I ask Nkosana.

He looks at me like he's trying to read my mind.

"At home," he says

Great.

"You'd better take him to his mother first thing tomorrow morning,"-I say

Qhawe and Naledi are the first to leave. She has to be back in Kimberley tomorrow morning. I'll call her later just to get her feeling on all this because this is how her life is going to be now.

Hlomu stays behind with Xolie.

Sambulo is still being difficult saying he will sleep in the garage if he has to but he is not leaving his wife or his house like this.

I'd be lying if I said I feel sorry for him.

"But Zah, why are you mad at me? What did I do?"

Is he really asking me that dumb question?

I shake my head and look out the window.

"Okay, what was I supposed to do when Sambulo came to me and said he had

a child? Was I supposed to reject the child? It's my child too. He's a Zulu and there's nothing we can do about that,"

"There's nothing you can do about that? So your brother cheats on his wife and makes a child while at it and all you can say is the child is a Zulu? Like that's more important than Xolie's feelings.....?"

"No Zah, I'm saying we can't change what happened so we might as well learn to live with it....?"

What the fuck?

"Are you even listening to yourself Nkosana? Live with it? You don't have to live with it, Xolie has to live with it, and it's painful,"

He looks at me.

"Okay, let's not talk about it," he says.

Nx!

"And I want you to take that child to its mother first thing tomorrow morning," I say.

He must not test me! I'm not going to be that woman in the family!

"I can't, his mother died years ago. He was living with his grandmother and now she's dead too. Basically we are all he has," he says.

I'm trying to understand this. So we were treated to a holiday, if that's what it was, so they could go fetch this child and force him on us.

In fact...

"When was he born?" -me

"Just after the twins," he says.

Damn Sambulo!

I raise my eyebrows, he knows I want him to talk.

"It wasn't even an affair Zandile, we were on an out-of-town business trip, there was this girl, she ended up in Sambulo's hotel room and that was it. They bumped into each other again when we went back to Vryburg and one thing lead to another, the next thing we knew she was pregnant,"

"So this is what you do when you go on these business trips? You sleep around and get your floozies pregnant?" I ask. I'm pissed.

He doesn't answer me.

And where the fuck is Vryburg?

"I'm listening," I say.

He glances at me briefly.

"The child was born, as you could see, he is our child so we had to go pay damages....."

"Whaaat?"

He stops talking.

"You did all this behind Xolie's back, what kind of shady people are you?"

He scratches his head.

"His mother died when he was a few months old. So, we moved him and his grandmother to Pretoria so he could go to a proper school and....."

I don't think I want to hear more.

"So the kids know him?" I ask. I don't even know why I want to know.

"Yes, when we go out with the kids, when it's just us, we go via Pretoria to pick him up," he says.

I'm hurt, I'm really hurt by this.

"Do you have any idea how much this will hurt Xolie?"

"Yes, that's why Sambulo didn't want to tell her, he doesn't want to hurt her, he never meant for this to happen. But also, we can't punish the child for his parents' sins, he deserves a comfortable life like all his siblings," he says.

I don't care.

"So you were just going to hide him, how long did you think it was going to last?"

"Sambulo tried to tell Xolie numerous times," he says.

I'm angry. I'm just really angry at them.

"I hope she leaves him," I say.

He looks at me.

"Zah, you can't say that. Sambulo would die if Xolie left him. Please just talk to her, I'm sure they can get through this. It was a mistake and there is no way of fixing it now, we can all just accept it and move on," he says.

The selfishness of men!

"Like Sambulo would forgive Xolie if she did the same thing," -me

His face changes immediately to that him, the intense him.

"She will never do that," he says.

"Oh really? Is that why you all keep us in 24-hour surveillance, so you can make sure that we don't do all the shady things you do when we're not around?"

He sighs.

"No Zah, we want to make sure you're all safe," he says.

Nx!

The kids are all here with MaSbisi. Someone must have driven her here as the drama continued in that house because she was the one who called Hlomu to tell her.

They are sleeping already, hence the peace and quiet.

I'm going to bed, this fool must forget about touching me tonight.

I hear noise as I approach the kitchen.

Nkosana is going to be late for work, why is he still here?

He's laughing. I hear a tiny voice too.

"No baba I want coke,"

"No Mabutho, you're getting juice, coke will make you go crazy," -Nkosana.

The tiny voice laughs.

"Crazy like a.....aa cat?" he says.

"Cats are not crazy, crazy like a beaver," -Nkosana.

"What's a beaver baba?" -kid.

He doesn't answer him. Instead lifts him up and sits him on top of the kitchen counter. He starts tickling him all over until the poor thing can laugh no more.

It's a cute scene. I can just see that he loves the child.

"Eat your breakfast and drink your juice, all of it so you can be a big boy," -Nkosana.

"A big boy like Lwandle?" -kid.

Oh Lord! It gets worse! Lwandle knows about this too?

"Yes, a big boy like Lwandle and a big man like baba," -Nkosana says stretching his arms.

He turns around and sees me. I've been standing here watching them the whole time.

I don't even know what to say to him.

The kid keeps looking at me, and him, and then me again. He's probably wondering who this woman is.

I open the fridge, take out a water bottle and leave.

"Zah..."

I ignore him and keep walking.

What exactly is Nkosana's plan? Does he think I'm going to be a mother to this child now? And why wasn't I consulted about the child staying here while Sambulo continues being a dog by trying to make Xolie mother this child.

He must forget it, I'm not betraying Xolie, if she doesn't want this child, then I don't want him in my house. They can hire a nanny to stay with him somewhere.

I'm not doing it and I know Hlomu won't do it.

He walks in.

"I'm going to work now," he says.

I raise my eyes once and nod.

"I'm taking Mabutho with me," he says.

Good for him. He probably thinks I will murder the child or something if he leaves him with me.

"I thought I was going to stay in but Qhawe has some radio interview thing this afternoon, so now I have to take over his meeting," he says.

I don't care.

He tries to bend and kiss me but I move my face.

"I'll see you later," he says and walks out.

Nx!

I don't know if this kid is coming back here this afternoon, but they'd better make a plan, soon.

Xolie hasn't been answering her phone and I don't know where Hlomu is.

I'm also a bit skeptical talking to them because I'm going to have to tell them that the child slept here.

Xolie and Hlomu are very close, they've got each other's back, they always have. It probably has to do with the hardships they went through when it was just the two of them. But, together they create a scary force and I'm a bit scared of how they might handle this.

And Sambulo? Sigh. How do you even do this to your wife of so many years.

If he had told her in the beginning, while the girl was pregnant maybe things would have been better. That would have been the only crime he'd committed, getting his side-chick, if that's what it was, pregnant.

But now, he has been hiding a secret for almost seven years, he probably bought the house where the grandmother was staying, the school fees, the weekend visits and all that. Basically he's been living a double life.

I'm driving to the shops to buy things I don't need.

Anyway, this is my last week of being a housewife. I finally accepted the Professor's offer after swimming through a tsunami and walking on fire and jumping over a volcano called Nkosana.

The salary they offered, well, all I can say is it's enough to buy me one weave. But it's not about money, I need to do something with my time.

"We are joined in studio by Qhawe Zulu of Sibopho Logistics....."

Oh! I almost forgot about Qhawe's radio interview.

It's usually Qhawe and Nkosana who do these things on radio and newspapers. I think that's because they are the polite ones, sometimes. Nqoba and Mqhele are a no no.

He's talking about the Rea Vaya project and how it has seemingly failed.

"When Rea Vaya was announced, of course we were hostile towards it. First because the buses were going to move in on our routes, which we created and secured. Now, you have to understand that the taxi industry, as you see it now was started from scratch with no assistance from the government. Our fathers, most of them couldn't even write their names, all they had to know was how to count money....."

Okay.

"But they built a multi-billion rand business and it's still growing. The taxi industry goes on strike for one day and the country loses over a billion, that's a fact. So the reason why Rea Vaya is failing is because the City didn't consult with us, instead they tried to bulldoze us out. But, the offer still stands, the taxi industry is still offering to buy the bus service....." he says.

I think we have enough money to take care of our grandchildren and their grandchildren but no, anything they can put their hands on, anything. Nkosana says it's fun, chasing money and getting it, he says it's fun.

Besides his ridiculously expensive watches and cars, I don't know what else he does with it.

So Qhawe, I know this is a bit off the topic but you know I can't help asking.....

Here we go....can't they just shock me for once?

"Social networks have gone on a rampage about a certain lady. It is wrong and it is disrespectful and I can't even begin to imagine what the family is going through....."

Damn this radio presenter, how can he even ask this?

Qhawe clears his throat.

"Yes, that lady is my girlfriend Naledi,"

"Oh," the presenter.

"I've seen just a little bit of what people are saying but I don't get it, she was on a boat, in the sea and that's why she was wearing a bikini, that's what people wear when they are at the beach isn't it?"

"Yes, it's just that a lot was said about her weight....."

"Yes, but I don't understand that either. I mean, she is beautiful and she is sexy, she's hot....."

"So you're not angry about it all?"

"The only thing I'm angry about is that someone decided to stalk and take pictures of the women we love while they were on holiday. That's what I'm angry about. As for my Naledi, all these people saying things about her on social networks, they have nothing on her, she's flawless," he says.

He sounds like he's talking with a smile on his face.

They're back to talking about business and I've been sitting here in the car for

a while now.

"Zah, hi, sorry I haven't been in touch. We need to talk, it's a long story but we need to talk soon...."

Huh? An SMS from Buhle?

I call her back but the phone rings once and goes to voicemail.

What do you mean? Okay, where can we meet?

What does she mean? I guess she'll call me when she's ready.

I haven't spoken to her since that day almost two years ago at a restaurant in Durban.

I don't even know what I'm here at Pick n'Pay to buy and people are looking at me as always. I don't know what's wrong with them.

My phone again.

"Mpande,"

"Sis'Zah, I'm going to Botswana,"

Fucking hell!

"Why?"

"I have to find Thando! I have to find her, she has to come back to me," he says.

Holy ghost intervene now!!

"Mpande, she left, if she wanted to be with you she would have stayed," I say.

I'm not trying to hurt him but he needs to wake up and be a man, not some little wet puppy running after a woman he doesn't even know.

"But Sis'Zah, I want her to tell me that, she must tell me why she left me and she must say it to my face. And besides, I found out that almost half-a-million was deposited to her account yesterday morning. I suspect that something is going on and she doesn't want to tell me,"-he says.

Lord have mercy!!

I forgot he was the spy of the family?

What are we going to do now?

Nokthula, what does she want now.

"Zah, are you in Mbuba?"

"No, I'm in Joburg, why?"-me

"I saw Sbani driving past here earlier so I thought you were all here," she says.

Sbani? That's impossible.

"Oh, here he comes again," she says.

Has Nokthula gone crazy? Sbani is in the Eastern Cape.

"There's someone in the car with him," she says.

Let me just shut up and listen until this fairytale is over....

"Oh my God! Zandile. He's with Thabitha, Gwaza's daughter".

My stomach turns.

Gwaza's daughter?

No, this can't be happening! It can't!

Twenty Six

That went well, quick and very well I guess partly because my father was not there.

The Zakithi drama was not that bad too.

The tent is still on the yard and the last of the singing drunkards have just left. There's a mountain of groceries in that rondavel that burnt, yes it was rebuilt soon after, and I'm not sure what to do with it.

Hlomu says we must give it to some of the women around the area because obviously we won't take it to Joburg with us.

Can you do that? Can you give away groceries for umbondo to people? I still don't know what umbondo symbolises but what can one do? We are ruled by a big-eyed ghost in this family?

Hlomu's aunt and mother were also here. Oh and the remarkable uncle. There was also her cousin Gaba. I thought that was his real name but nope it derives from Mgabadeli which is his clan name.

There's something sexy about him. He reminds me of Nkosana before he became the suit and tie type.

I didn't feel my father's absence this weekend. I slept at home last night and it felt different, like it was home again.

Nokthula says my uncle is obsessed with finding out who killed him, if he was killed. She says he goes to the police station frequently to check on the progress of the investigation but the police are also annoyed by him now.

I still don't know what happened that night. I just know I had a blackout for two hours and that's all.

Sisekelo hasn't said anything about Mkhulu since the day of the fire. I guess that means we've done what he wanted us to do. So tomorrow we are going back to Joburg officially married traditionally, our happily ever after can start now.

"You know, I think I want a white wedding," I say
He looks shocked.

"Yes, why not? Just to feel that experience and spend money on unnecessary things," I say.

I know he doesn't care that much about it.

"And the sudden change of heart?" he asks.

I'm not sure really.

"I've realised that life is short and that I'm blessed with the opportunity to have anything money can buy, I'm blessed with a hard-working man who wants me to be happy, so holding on to the past is pointless, I want to have fun, be happy, and be crazy with you," I say.

He has a slight smile on his face.

"Come here," he says

I throw myself at him

"I love you," he says.

"I love you too Sthuli'skandaba,"

"Okay, you do what you want to do but I want that wedding done within the next six months," he says.

Why six months?

"Okay," I say, I don't even ask.

We are going to the main house for dinner. Naledi cooked, that thing of the way to a man's heart being through his stomach still applies to her, although I know for sure that she already has Qhawe's heart in her hand.

She's gotten over that bikini pictures saga. After that interview Qhawe had on radio, it was all over.

I've also had to slave in the kitchen all week preparing dinner because that jackal brother of his eats at my house now.

He is technically homeless. Xolie told him to move out, when he refused she said she was going to move out instead, so he packed a bag and checked in to a hotel. I think he thought it would take a couple of days before he's allowed back home but nope, things are not looking very bright for him.

He can't go home, he can't go to Mqhele's because Hlomu hates him, and so poor Zandile has to suffer. He must get a proper place to stay because he can't live in a hotel forever.

The child, well, he is living with Mqoqi, for now. He now goes to the same school as all the kids.

The awkwardness starts as soon as we sit. Xolie and Sambulo are here, sitting across each other. And there in the lounge are the kids, featuring Mabutho who is so innocent that he doesn't even notice he is the centre of the feud.

Xolie is angry, she's been angry since that day and the only reason she came here today was because I begged her.

They are officially on separation but Sambulo doesn't understand what that means. He calls her about 100 times a day, crying. He goes to the house every day even when he knows the kids are not there. He sends flowers and gifts and he comes to my house at night and cries and he's asked everyone in the family to speak to Xolie for him.

It's sad, and I know his brothers are feeling his pain but Xolie must be allowed to be angry for as long as she needs to be, after that she will decide what to do.

Mabutho and Msebe are very similar. They both have that hoarse voice that Nqoba has and their grandfather had.

He's a happy kid, a funny and smart little midget. It's a shame he is stuck in this situation that he doesn't even understand.

Nkosana, as usual is going to eat with Niya on his lap. They always end up eating from one plate anyway.

Mpande went to Botswana but came back with no Thando. I don't know what was wrong with him. The girl left, she took the money and left.

He might find this out one day and blame us but a girl who sleeps with your brother shouldn't even be on your mind. But of course, he will never know that, we made sure of it.

The food is great.

"I didn't know you could cook,"-me

She laughs.

"I've even learnt to cook uphuthu because the Mr here loves it," she says

They are just so inlove.

"Zah wants a white wedding,"-Nkosana says, just like that. I thought it was something we talked about in private.

"That's nice, and I am the maid-of-honor," Gugu

I was thinking Lulu actually but.....

"And I am planning that wedding,"-Hlomu

Here we go, they're going to take over everything.

Xolie is quiet. She keeps poking her food with a fork.

Sambulo is sitting staring at her. It's sad really. On top of all this, Phakeme has figured out that something bad is happening, and so he's become a little too reserved for my comfort.

"Xolie how are the preparations for the gala dinner?"- Nkosana

I think he's just trying to make conversation.

She raises her eyes, looks at him and doesn't say anything.

She hosts a gala dinner for her NGO every year. We always look forward to it because it is something she is proud of. She works her butt off this girl, yes it's easier with all the money but she is hands on.

"I don't know, I'm thinking of closing the organisation," she says.

What?

"Xolie....."-Hlomu

"You can't do that Xolie,"-Gugu

She turns to look at her.

"Why?"-she asks.

Nobody speaks.

She's become a totally different person from the sweet Xolie we all know. I also think Mabutho being here makes things worse.

But apparently the kid has nowhere else to go. His family was his mother and grandmother and now they're gone.

"What's going on now?" Hlomu asks when one of the kids starts crying.

It's Mvelo and Mabutho, someone hit them. It's Niya, she's learnt to slap and bite.

"Mamiza,"-Mvelo says standing next to Xolie's chair.

Mabutho is standing next to him, they're both crying.

Xolie brushes Mvelo's head and tells him she's going to punish Niya. He stops crying. Mabutho is still crying, he expects the comforting brush on the head too but it doesn't come, instead Xolie sits straight and continues poking her food.

I look at Nkosana, he looks like something has just stabbed him in the heart. I got the same feeling.

Eventually Mabutho gives up and walks back to the other kids. Lwandle stands up and goes to him. This is painful, it really is but I don't know if I can blame Xolie for it.

Everybody eats quietly. Sambulo is not eating. He's just sitting there staring at Xolie.

"Xolie, I'm sorry," he says.

Can he not start? Please not here, not now.

"It's over Sambulo," she says, stands up and walks out.

Silence.

Things are worse than I thought.

"Where is Sbani?"-Mqhele asks.

Yes, where is Sbani?

"Oh crap!"- Qhawe

We all know where he is. He's been told numerous times to stay away from that Ngqulunga girl but he just won't listen.

This is going to start an unnecessary war.

"Someone call him please,"-Nkosana.

"He's on voicemail,"-Mqoqi.

It's on purpose.

He walks in, I'm relieved.

"Where have you been?"-Nkosana asks.

Silence.

"Sbani, where have you been?"-Nkosana.

"Out,"-Sbani

"Out where?"-Nkosana

He raises his eyes to look at him, and starts dishing food without answering him.

"What did I tell you about that girl?"-Nkosana

"I'm a grown man baba, you can't tell me who I can or cannot be with,"-Sbani.

This is not going to end well.

Nothing is said after that, just the sound of spoons clicking on plates.

I feel a bit sorry for Naledi, she shouldn't be subjected to this.

We are the last to leave the table.

This was the most dreadful dinner we've ever had.

Atleast we're going home tomorrow.

"We're going to church on Sunday," I say

I've been thinking about this and I think it's time I introduced the good way of life to these people.

"Oh really? Who are you going to church with?" he asks.

I don't know if this is a real question or if it is him being sarcastic.

"With you Nkosana, all of us," I say.

He thinks I'm crazy.

"Why?"

"Because people go to church, it's the right thing to do," I say.

"First you made us model, now you want us to go to church? It's not happening," he says.

His problem is that after all these years he still hasn't realised that he can't say no to me.

I'm doing this for the kids, the smaller ones have never been to church at all, they have to know these things.

What could be so wrong about going to church?

"Hi Zah, sorry for not keeping in touch, I need to see you, this afternoon,"-Buhle

She needs to tell me why she wants to see me because this thing of sending random messages and then disappearing is not on.

And I want to tell her about my wedding.

"I'm seeing Buhle this afternoon," I say

He frowns

"Buhle? Where?"

"We still have to confirm but she sounds desperate to see me," I say

"Melrose Arch," I say. She's just sent me an SMS naming the meeting place.

Which reminds me.

"Madam," he says when he answers.

"Lloyd, I'm having a white wedding in October, budget is unlimited, venue is my house, start working,"

Geez! he's screaming his lungs out!

"Colours?"- he asks

"White with a touch of yellow, a summer wedding,"

He's still screaming. I just know he's about to take over my life.

I have to start compiling the guest list.

Nkosana is on a call on the porch.

I've been sensing some restlessness in him all day, like he's up to something.

I feel him breathing behind me. His hand slipping under my nightie and his body covering my back.

He kisses the back of my neck and pushes me down until my whole upper body is resting on the table.

I know what he's doing but I can't stop him, I don't want to stop him.

Why can't I resist him? Just once at least.

"Nkosa....."

He comes in.

I feel tingles on my lower body. His thighs are touching the back of my thighs.

He started slowly but the pace is getting faster and faster

I'm holding on to the table for dear life. The animal in him is awake today.

I hear him groaning behind me but I can't turn to look at him, his hand is pressing me down.

It is fast, it is rough but I don't want it to stop.

A loud groan and he is done. I feel him coming out and warm liquid running down at the back of my thighs. He's gone by the time I turn around.

He does this sometimes, and each time he does I get obsessed with him all day, I want to cuddle, I want more sex, I can't get my hands off him and I want to see him all the time. It makes me needy and clingy and he knows it.

I might as well go get ready to leave.

I'm in the right place I think, she said we should meet here, at this restaurant.

I understand Joburg traffic can make you late but I've been here for almost an hour, even waiters have stopped asking me if I want to order something.

This is not like Buhle at all. She sent a message saying she was on her way here just before I left home. Now her phone is off, it must be the battery.

I order another Latte' and wait, there's not much I can do.

"Hi, sorry something came up,"-an SMS, that's all she's going to say?

She seemed so desperate to see me, what could be so important?

Nx! And I've been waiting here for two hours.

I'm never doing this again, she'll send me an SMS to tell me whatever it is that she wants to say.

I'm going home.

I stop by a couple of shops and buy myself things I don't need.

That jacket would look good on Mvelo I think. I take one, but, I take another one before I can stop myself. It has to be one size bigger, they are two years apart I think.

I tried, but I can't help it, he's a child, a beautiful innocent child. Maybe I must go have a talk with Xolie, convince her that her being angry or ending her marriage is not going to change anything.

Yes, Sambulo cheated and a child came out of it but his mother is dead now and we are all he has left.

When I come out of the shop I have two of everything. I'll tell Mqoqi to come and get Mabutho's things.

Nkosana is not home. He didn't say anything about going out today.

Oh, well, it's me and my big house then.

I've been meaning to change the curtains in Lwandle's room. The ones he has now are black and he loves them because they make the room darker even during the day, and so he locks himself in there and sleeps throughout the day.

The picture of Hlomu is still here, it's still the largest. There's one of Mvelo too. I never asked if they were ever taken for counselling after Mvelo's death, a part of me believes that the anger I see in them has everything to do with losing their brother.

But also, even raising the subject of Mvelo's death in this house sends Nkosana down below, he will never get over that pain.

Only Lwandle can leave clothes and shoes lying around on the floor, these are the sneakers he wore to my membeso, I remember because I asked him why he didn't wash them and he said because they'd be ugly if they were clean.

They are dirty as hell. I'm going to wash them.

What is all this under them?

Oh, pot-pourri, it's all over the sneakers. I wonder how it got here, I don't use pot-pourri in this house.

The last time I saw it was on my father's bedroom floor, my aunt sprinkled the

petals all over the floor because she said the bedroom had an awful smell.....

It was still all over the floor when they found him that morning.....

Wait. No! no! no! no!

"You're back?"-Nkosana.

I didn't see him behind me.

"Yes," I say, still holding one of Lwandle's sneakers.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

No

But maybe I'm just imagining things.

He could have gotten it from somewhere, maybe somewhere in the house. But he never went inside the house, let alone my father's bedroom.

"I'm fine my love," I say and walk over to hug him.

He smells nice, but I can also smell sweat on his clothes.

"Buhle didn't show up," I say with my face on his shoulder.

He pats my back.

"I guess whatever she wanted to say wasn't that important then," he says.

He doesn't seem bothered by it.

"I was serious about going to church, the others have agreed, and you're also going," I say.

"I'm not going," he says.

We'll see about that.

I have so much to pray for, including a revelation that my sons are not murderers like me and their father.

I need a sign, just a sign to prove my suspicions wrong.

I don't even know why they would go out and kill my father. He was an evil monster but they don't know half the things he did. What reason would they have to strangle him to death?

I haven't mentioned this to Nkosana at all. I know that if I did he would want to get to the bottom of it, and I know it would hurt him, I just know because he tries really hard to keep his children away from the life.

"We're going to Sunday School mama?"-Mabutho.

"What's Sunday school?" Mvelo

The kids don't even know what Sunday school is, it's embarrassing, at least it's just us family in this car.

But at least one of them has been to church.

Xolie and Sambulo are not here. I was hoping she'd come so that we could talk a little.

"Why did we choose this church again?"- Qhawe

"Because it's the closest we could find," I say

It's the Catholic church in Soweto. I just chose it randomly and because I heard their services are short.

"How long are we going to be here for?"-Mqhele

He's been grumpy like all his brothers here since the morning.

"Just three hours, only three hours," Hlomu. She says it sarcastically

And oh, we came in a Quantum. Gugu was not impressed.

They may be grumpy but atleast they dressed up for the occasion, begrudgingly