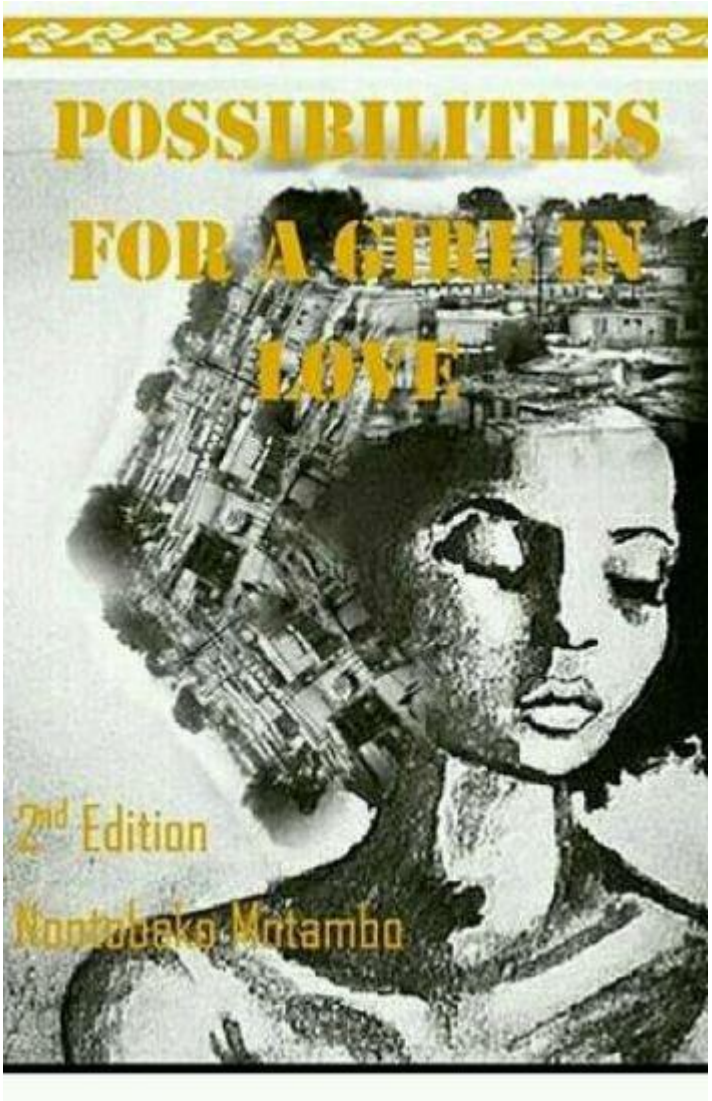
Possibilities For A Girl In Love: 2nd Edition



Prologue

"No Mandisa where are you going?" I ask, in more of a plea than anything else
"I'm going to talk to that scumbag, he must pay for what he has been doing to you. How could you not tell anyone about this Mbali?" she asks She doesn't understand, he told me nine-nine that if I ever uttered anything to anyone; no one would believe me and I'd be out on the street before I can even blink. So instead I kept quiet.
"Move out of the way Mbali!" she says, as I try to block the doorway.
"No, Mandisa you can't talk to him." I plead.
She is hearing none of it, she pushes me to the side and stomps to the small sitting room. I follow her and Hlubi follows me, remaining oblivious to all the hell that is about to break loose. How I wish I was a child, things were better back then. Mandisa goes to stand right in front of father, blocking his view to the TV. He's still wearing his uniform, but not the shirt. He just has a white Jockey vest on.

He raises his head in annoyance and fury. "Nx, voetsek wena man." he says.
Mandisa just move! That's all that goes through my mind. Just move.
"How could you do this to her...she is a child!" she says.
He looks at me, then at her and carries on sipping his Savanah.
"I asked you a question dammit!" Mandisa screams, he immediately stands up. Father has always been a tall man so he easily towers over us. But Mandisa doesn't budge.
"Never speak to me like that in my house, nondindwandini!"
She still doesn't budge, this time I move to her side and try to take her by the arm. She pushes me away and I stumble into a chair.
"You think you are grown up! That you can come into my house and act like a woman heh? Uletha ubastard emzini wami and you have the nerve to disrespect me like this?"
"My child is not a bastard; you are the bastard here..."
He smacks her straight across her face and she stumbles backwards, I think she's going to back off but instead she raises her own hand up and hits him just as hard.
Everything after that is a maze of screaming and crying. And suddenly all I see is father and Mandisa fighting over his gun. Both of them are screaming curses at each other, none of them willing to let go of the firearm.
This is not going to end well; I can feel it.
In their struggle, there is grunting and huffing and swearing and...

***BANG!**
NO! NO! NO!
And for those moments the room starts spinning, I think I'm going to vomit. There's a thump as the small figure falls to the ground, then silence, until we all realise what just happened.
"My baby!" Mandisa screams as she runs to Hlubi who is lying in a pool of her own blood.

Father stumbles backward upon realising what he did. His eyes wander all over the place, the gun still in his hand.
"You killed my baby! You will pay! You will rot in prison! You devil!"
He wipes the tiny droplets of sweat on his forehead with the back of his hand
"You whore, you made me do this!" father shouts
She stands up but the gun goes off again before she can even make it to her feet.
I can't do this. I can't watch this, why is this happening?
He shot her.
My eyes dart to her direction as she falls to the ground...
"Ba...le...ka." She mimes
Right at that moment I realise that I must get out of this place or else he's going to kill me too.
I'm going to die.
"Niyabona ke manje! Do you see what you have made me do?" he shouts, saliva dripping from his mouth.
He's closing in on me, his gun pointed directly at my head. I try to look for a way out but I can't see one. He's going to kill me.
I don't know what takes over me, but I reach for the spoke that's been sitting on the sofa for the past three or so months. It must've been God's divine intervention that neither of us saw reason to move it, I don't even know how it got there in the first place. He's closing in on me and my hands are unsteadily holding the spoke behind my back...
At his next step, I lash out at him, sending it straight to his throat. His eyes widen as he struggles to stay on his feet.

Done? What have you done Mbalenhle? His firearm falls to the ground first and he follows.
I stand, terrified and traumatised at the sight in front of me. What should I do? Must I call the police? I must call the police...but then what if they think that I did all of this? What if they don't believe me when I tell them what happened? That is what father always told me, he said no one would ever believe me... Baleka.
Where to? Where am going to go? And for some odd a switch comes on in my head.
Malwande Mahlase...

Chapter One

I hate waking up in this apartment. I don’t like the fact that it’s not mine and I hate the fact that it’s so huge. I should be appreciative I know but every time I think about the person who gave it to me I just flinch. I won’t lie to you; I’m scared of that man. Nkululeko Mthethwa, I fear him. He’s intimidating and he only smiles at Malwande. I don’t like that he’s a cop and I most certainly don’t like that I now owe him for all that he has done for me. And boy oh boy has he done a lot.
This apartment is located at Umhlanga Square so every time I have to get to work, I’d have to walk quite a distance so I can get to the nearest taxi stop. Funny thing is, as soon as Mr Mthethwa (I don’t know what to call him, I feel

uncomfortable using his first name) found out where I work, the next morning there was a meter taxi waiting for me outside the complex gate. I knew he was behind it but I kept quiet the next time I saw him because I wasn't sure if a 'thank you' was what he wanted. I don't want to think about that, it's too early and the day is too beautiful.
I need to get to work, I love my job. I love it more than most things in my life right now and I believe that it was a true blessing from the same God who allowed me escape death that night.
I go take a quick shower, make some breakfast and get into my uniform. Well it's not actually a uniform, it's a tight black t-shirt with the name of the restaurant that I work at. Another reason why I like that place, the uniform suits me. I also get a lot of tips and for some odd reason, every now and then a diner leaves a phone number…I laughed the first time it happened. But then it started happening frequently and it started getting annoying. I try my best to not show it though, I honestly don't like have attention drawn on me so I try my best to stay out of things that will attract other people's eyes. It's a pity I say that but if the world found out about the events of that night, all eyes would be on me and it would take them years to blink the other way.

Speaking of, I have no idea why no one is looking for me. For the longest time, I thought that maybe no one had noticed the lack of movement around father's house, but then I realised that it's highly unlikely. I shrug it off though every time the thought passes through my head.
Okay, I need to go before it gets late. Just as I anticipated the meter taxi is waiting for me at the gate. I even know the driver now, that's how deep this is.
"We must hurry up mam, today you are running a bit late." Says Chinwaru
He's Nigerian, his kids still live there with their mother and he came down here to work or something. I'm not sure anymore.
"I'm sorry to make you rush Chinwa…and please call me Mbali or Enhle. You're making me feel old." I say as I get into the back seat.
We arrive in less than 15 minutes' tops, because the man knows all the shortcuts in Durban. I work at City View Mall. The Cargo Hold Restaurant, I don't even know how I managed to get a job here because it is far too sophisticated. I can barely even afford to eat here, that's how standard this place is.
Wait, what is he doing here? He stands up, he was having a meal with the manager. What is he doing? He sees me, then looks away and shakes the manager's hand and I guess that's their business done. Oh, gosh, he's coming here. I swear I never know how to act around him and I don't even understand why. I'm comfortable with his brothers, I like Mondli because he is just so free spirited and Mseki is…well…Mseki. But him, I just can't figure him out. And for some odd reason I feel like he dislikes me, because you see every time I enter a room that he is in, he just leaves. And he never even talks to me, except that time when he 'offered' to drive me back home because I need to go and fetch some documents. But it confuses me because he's always doing these things that I don't understand and I don't even have the guts to ask him about it. He's intimidating, to say the least.
"Mbalenhle." He says, with a smile lighting up his face. He's smiling? At me?
"Oh, hi Nku…Mr Mthethwa, I didn't know you knew the manager." It's pretty much all I can manage.

He shrugs, he's always wearing pretty much the same attire. I think his go to shoe is Adidas, and he wears chinos and t-shirts. That's all I've seen him wearing, except at court he was wearing a black tux, they all looked very good…all of them
"When should I pick you up?" he asks. "I mean when you are going to…"
"Next week, if that's fine with you."
"Okay. Next week it is then. It was nice seeing you." he says, looking at his watch.
See I told you he's not very fond of me. This guy here has bought me an apartment; he probably pays for all those meter taxi rides that I take in the morning and evening yet he can't even manage a 2-minute conversation with me? I must pay him back, that's what I should do. I should…scratch that, I will pay back every single cent he has spent on me. I don't know how but I must find a way.
"You too." I say, taking the tray that's sitting on the table beside me, I want to occupy my hands because they're sort of shaking and I don't want him to see that.
He starts walking.
Whew!
But then he stops, hesitant on whether he should speak or not.
"You look good." he finally settles. He hesitates again, "I mean you look fine." He says.
And almost immediately he looks like he regrets even opening his mouth.
It's a bit amusing I must say.
"Thank you."
He carries on walking.
That was weird…
"And then? Who is he?"
Ayanda asks, looking at me like I'm the biggest traitor in humanity. He must chill. Ayanda was the one who showed me the ropes around here, for the first couple of days I had a problem with the fact that he is gay.
See the thing is that he doesn't look gay, excuse me if I sound ignorant but he's not that girly type of gay. Actually, if I didn't know better, I would swear he is straight. He dresses like a man, talks like a man ukuthi nje he's gay. When he told me I nearly fell over because for me, it's such taboo. Where I come from, you don't just walk around proclaiming your gayness. It's not a thing that people do. Mob mentality is very rife eMsinga.
"My friend's brother-in-law." I answer, I don't even know why he's being so nosy.
"Isn't he a Mthethwa?" he asks, mouth still wide open.
How does he even know? Oh, he must've seen them on the media during their trial…it's not the best reputation to have, now is it?
"He is."
"You never thought to mention that you know the Mthethwa brood? He's Nkululeko right?" he says, still very much engrossed I'm my business.
"Yes…yes he is." I want to get back to work, or at least start it because I have done absolutely nothing since I arrived.
"He is so…captivating!" he says

This is awkward. I leave him there with his mouth still open. Captivating is not the word I'd use to describe him but then again, I don't have time for diction right now.

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"Mbali, Greg is calling you. He said you must come to his office." Ayanda says, peeping in as I finish up with doing the dishes. I have kitchen duty for the next week, I don't mind though. It's already 5:25 pm, I'll be leaving soon. I wonder why I'm being called to the manager's office, but I know for a fact that I didn't do anything wrong.

I wipe my hands with the dishcloth, neaten up my uniform and head to his office.

It's right at the end of the hallway, it's a pretty small space I must say. I've only been here once during the application for the job. It's well decorated so it seems a bit bigger than it actually is.

"Miss Miya take a seat." He says

For some odd reason, I feel nervous now. I feel like a school child being called to the principal's office. It also doesn't help that Greg actually looks like a principal, he has this thing about him.

"Did I do something wrong sir?" I ask, hoping on my life that the answer will be no

"No iMbarli…"

That's how he says my name, because in his mind there is an 'i' before my name and an 'r' somewhere in there. He makes it sound like the name of some gadget. Like some manly voice is going to pop out from somewhere and say "while stocks last!"

"iMbarli, unfortunately we have to let you go…"

What? Am I being fired?

But what did I do? He's carrying on with whatever it is that he was saying but my ears switched off as soon as he said the words 'we have to let you go'…

"If I may ask, is there something I did wrong sir?" I say, trying very hard not to show how distraught I am. This job is the only thing I have to my name; I can't lose it.

"No, Miss Miya, as I said. We seem to have a surplus of employees and I can gladly refer you to another restaurant if that's what you wish." He says as he takes out my CV.

"You are not leaving us in bad terms and I hope you know that your work here has been truly appreciated." He says

He hands me a brown envelope; I don't even know what's in the envelope. I don't even care.

What am I going to do? I'm unemployed and I have nothing to my name. Can life actually be meaner to me; I mean can things get any worse than this?

"Are you okay iMbarli? I could take you home if that's what you…"

"No, I'm fine." I quickly say before he even fully offers. I'm tired of being a charity case. I stand up and take the envelope. Stay gracious Mbali.

"Thank you, sir." I say and make my way to the door, determined to leave as fast as humanly possible.

I don't even know how I feel, I'm not good with the whole feeling thing. But I'm not happy, that I know for sure. I head back to the kitchen and Ayanda is already waiting for me. I can tell that he wants to know what that was about but I'm not sure if I should tell him or not.

“Mbali, what happened? You look pale.” He says as soon as I reach him. I keep quiet. Take my back from the parcel room and stash the envelope into my bag. It’s heavy, I honestly wonder what is in here.
“Mbali, talk to me. What happened?” he seems worried now. I don’t want him to worry though.
“He said he has to let me go Ayanda.” I say, putting my handbag over my arm.
“What? No that’s impossible. Why?”It’s very possible, so possible that it’s happening to me right now.
“Something about too many workers. I just want to go home Ayanda. I’m tired.”
I really am, more tired than I thought I was actually.
“Okay, but will you be fine? I could come stay with you if…”
“No, I’m fine.”
Why do people always think that I’m some charity case? Do I look like a charity case?
“Look, Ayanda I have to go.” I say moving towards the door.
“I’ll call you later okay.” He says as I head out.
“Okay.”
I exhale. I didn’t realise I was holding my breath but it almost hurts to breathe because with every breath I take I feel like the air is boxing with my lungs. Contentment and happiness doesn’t exist in my life for more than a few moments at a time, and they are only illusionary. There is always something hidden. Lying in waiting to spring up and ruin everything. No Mbali, stand up. Stand up.
“Mam are you okay?” it’s Chinwaru, he comes to me and takes hold of my arm. I didn’t even realise that I was already at the parking lot. He helps me make my way to the taxi.
I’m not going to cry; I know I’m not because I haven’t cried in such a long time that I’ve forgotten how to cry.
“Mam, are you alright?”
“I’m fine Chinwa, please take me home.” I barely manage.
He nods and looks at me in the review mirror. I need to calm down; I have to calm down. And so, I let my thoughts drift back to today’s events, and I remember the envelope stashed in my handbag. I might as well just open it.
I rip the top open and immediately my mouth drops open.
What the hell?
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I’m still stunned as I walk into this overly huge apartment that doesn’t even belong to me.
This can’t be right, what if Greg gave me the wrong envelope? I must return this. I glance at the envelope; I’ve placed it on the small coffee table. Some of the money is still inside but most of it is on the table because the envelope can’t support it. That’s a lot of money!
More money than I’ve seen in my life time. This can’t be what all waitresses get as compensation, it’s probably twelve times more than what I might in three months, this can’t be right.
But what if it is, what if this wasn’t a mistake? Maybe I’m overreacting, I should be happy. But I should make sure before I get my hopes up. Surely, I wasn’t the only one who was ‘let go’ today, Greg said there was a surplus of staff so

surely there were other people who lost their jobs. Maybe they got the same amount of money. There's only one way to make sure.
It rings, and on the third ring he picks up. "Ayanda…"
"Mbali, are you okay. I've been so worried about you."
"I'm fine, I just wanted to know something."
"Okay sure."
"Who else got fired today? I mean because Greg said there was an excess of staff and…" He answers all too quickly.
"I was going to call you about that because as far as I know, no one else was fired. I feel like it's unfair what that Greg did." He says in an irritated tone
I see, so no one else was fired…
"Don't worry yourself Ayanda, I think I know what's going on here." I say, all too calm. "And like do you know how much a person gets as compensation after being 'let go'?"
He keeps quiet.
"Is there something I should know about?" he finally settles
That's not the answer I wanted…just answer the question dude.
"No Ayanda, so are you going to tell me or…"
He hesitates a bit
"Okay, I'm not really sure but when you're fired I don't think they give you anything. 4 months ago, when Gugu was fired, she didn't get single black cent. Sometimes you get the month's salary…" he carries on saying something else but my ears are already blocking him out because I have heard what I need to hear.
"Okay, thanks Ayanda. Bye."I hang up.
I feel bad for being so snappy, especially to Ayanda because he has shown me nothing but kindness. It's just that right now I'm not even sure if I can think straight because the thoughts that are running through my mind don't make sense to me. So, listen, this is what I'm thinking…so that man, that Nkululeko Mthethwa, he came to have a meal with my boss this morning, and now I'm suddenly unemployed with a stack of cash on my (his) coffee table.
I don't know whether I'm right to think that he's involved in this and that's only because I can't find a motive for him doing such a thing. Why would he just get me fired? What does he care whether I'm employed or not? I don't know what to think anymore, all I know is that I'm suddenly without a job and I'm living in an apartment that was kindly given to me by the man who might be the one who caused me to lose my job. Do you see just how confusing this whole situation is? Do you see this?
I'm still trying to figure out what I should do, I mean I don't have the guts to just go up to him and ask if he's behind this. What if he isn't and then I seem like the most unappreciative lass in the world. Every time my brain tries to figure this out it comes back to the main question, "why would he get me fired?"
I've decided, I'm going to return this money first thing tomorrow in the morning. And then I'm going to ask Greg (because he scares me less) what the heck is going on.
He has to tell me, because this surely doesn't happen to all him employees or ex-employees or whatever.
It's 9:33 pm and I've been in this bed trying to sleep but I can't. Jeez, this is so frustrating! I don't like being frustrated, I've lived a life full of frustrations and

sadness and just down-right grief. And now that I've received a second chance at life; I've been given a lot to start my life afresh, I don't want anything interfering with my happiness. So, that is why I try by all means to smile and be happy, see the world might not have been kind to me for the first 20 years or so of my life, but right now it is and I must appreciate that. What I don't want is taking advantage of all the kindness and then using that as a way to get forward, I want to work for the things I have…I want to be independent.
And as bad as I feel for saying this, I don't really want the handouts. I appreciate them yes, but I don't want them. I'd much prefer to live in a one-bedroom shack back in Mayville knowing that I'm paying for it myself than in this huge apartment knowing that I owe it all to a man I barely even know.
All those months ago, when I came to Malwande's gate seeking for her help, I didn't expect her to help me this much. Quite frankly I didn't expect her to help me at all. But she did, and she helped me in every way possible. She gave me a place to stay that night, she let me in her family and she's treated me like a sister ever since. I wonder how a person can be so beautiful inside and out, truly it amazes me. She listened to my story and even though she was no friend of my sister's, she still helped me. I must admit, that day when I saw Nkululeko in his police uniform I was sure she had called the cops on me. I was more scared than I'd ever been in my life, my first instinct was to run. Just as I had that night when my life shattered into unamendable pieces. She assured me that everything was fine, that she hadn't called the cops. I didn't believe her first because she had all the right to call the cops if she wanted to. I remember very clearly that he disappeared for a few minutes and he came back no longer veering his full uniform but a white t-shirt instead. I was still afraid, more at him than anything because when I started speaking again his eyes bore holes into me. I think that was when my fear for him developed, that day when he commanded me to speak. I spoke of course and I told them everything. I forced my brain to remember the events of that day, something I had tried to keep suppressed behind the thoughts that rummaged through my brain on a day to day. And at the end, when I broke down because my body was failing me and my heart was broken beyond explanation I remember the way his arms wrapped around my body and how I never wanted to admit to myself that for those 5 minutes or so, I felt safer than I'd ever felt before…
Wait, why am I thinking about this again?
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When I woke up this morning, I felt the urge to go running. I used to do that back home when I wanted to escape my reality. I would wake up in the early hours of the morning, especially when father was working night shift and I knew that he would be asleep. My shoes were a bit worn out, but I loved them nonetheless because they did what they had to do, which was get me from one place to the other without giving me blisters. I'd hit the dust (that's no metaphor, the roads were dusty) and in that hour of just running, I could feel my body relax and I would inhale the clean air of eMsinga. I miss the air back there, I can't lie. But that's pretty much all I miss, and my sister. I miss my sister.
I don't have running shoes though so I decided against the idea of taking a run. I guess I'll just have to settle to going to the restaurant with this lump of discomfort in my belly. I might as well just take a shower, but I'm not sure if Chinwa is waiting outside for me or not. I don't mind if he isn't though, I have

enough time to trek to the nearest taxi stop. Maybe the work will clear up the knots in my stomach.

I'm done in less than 20 minutes, it's got nothing to do with me being a fast dresser or anything but everything to the fact that I don't have a wide selection of clothes to choose from, I don't apply make-up because it's not my type of thing so basically the one thing that takes up most of my time in the morning is my naturally unruly afro. Most of the time I just tie it back with an allice band because I don't want it in my way while I'm at work.

I was planning to save up so I can buy myself a better phone, but now that I'm jobless I can forget it. I guess this Nokia will just have to do. It's not like I use my phone for a lot of things anyways so I don't even mind. If things don't go the way I want them to go today, I'll just have to come buy all the newspapers in Durban and hunt for a job. I can't afford to stay unemployed, it's not in my agenda.

I head out, oh I guess Chinwa doesn't have anything better to do with his time. Either that or Mr Mthethwa told him to always stay outside the flat just in case I have to go out. Which is a kind act on his behalf. I worry sometimes about just how much kindness that man shows to me and I worry even more about the fact that he does it without expecting anything in return. "Mam, I didn't think you'd be heading out today. But I waited anyways." Chinwaru says as I approach.

"But Chinwa we talked about the 'mam' situation…" I say, trying to put on a smile and hoping it hides all the emotions that I've been feeling these past couple of hours.

"Sorry mam, I mean Miss Mbali. I've grown accustomed to it." he opens the back-seat door for me and I enter. This is what my life has become, people opening doors for me. He returns to his own seat and realises that he doesn't know where it is that we're going because I told him yesterday that I lost my job.

"Chinwa I need you to drive me to work. I mean the Cargo Hold." I say, realising that this must be confusing for him. If he's confused, then it didn't show on his face.

"Okay Miss Mbali. I'll gladly drive you to work." He said, starting the car.

This time the trip to the restaurant took less time than yesterday's. There was less traffic anyways because we left the apartment early. I'd like to get there before everyone else does, just so I don't look like some pathetic woman who's begging for her job back.

Greg greets me right outside the entrance of the restaurant, careful not to let me in. I think he thinks I might cause a scene. Clearly, he doesn't know me, I'm not the type for that.

"iMbarli, is there anything I can help you with?" he says, seemingly nervous. I don't know why.

"Well actually Mr Phillips, I actually have something to discuss with you. Can't we move this conversation to your office?"

He hesitates, but at the end he escorts me to his office. It must be early because no one is at work yet. I didn't even bother to check the time when I left the apartment. He settles down in his seat and directs me to the one opposite him, the same one I sat in yesterday when he told me I was being let go. The memory comes back but I quickly push it away from my thoughts.

"Okay Miss Miya, is there something I can help you with?" he says

I reach into my handbag and come out with the envelope. His eyes widen when I lay it and its content on his table.

"Yes, Mr Phillips, I think you owe me some sort of explanation." I say, folding my arms waiting for his response.

He clears his throat, a throat that sounds dry. Then sighs heavily.

"It's compensation for all the hard work you've put in and to help you stay on your feet for the duration of time that you are unemployed." He finally says, a blatant lie that wasn't even said with conviction.

"So, this is what all your staff receives?" I ask

He swallows

"Uh…yes. Yes, it is."

I raise my eyebrow. I'm still calm but by now my suspicions have been proven correct. I swear

Greg is the worst liar in all of humanity. I've already figured out that if I beg for my job back I'll be putting him in a very awful position, clearly, he is obligated to take orders from Mr Mthethwa. And since it seems like Mr Mthethwa doesn't want me in this job, it would be a fruitless exercise to try and convince Greg otherwise. So instead I take the envelope and shove it in my bag and I stand up and leave.

I had barely even worked at Cargo Hold for three months and now this? The thing is I genuinely loved this job and it hurts to think that I lost it because of someone else. I don't know how I'm going to work up the nerve to even approach him but I have decided that it is best that I confront Mr Mthethwa. I need to know why he did what he did, even if his reason is lousy. So long as I hear him admit to being behind me being fired and he tells me why he'd do such a thing.

I throw myself back into the backseat of the cab, Chinwa has been waiting for me but right now he's on his phone. I close my eyes and take a huge breath in. No matter how much I try, I can't help but think about all that's happened in the past couple of months.

Sometimes when I close my eyes, I see that night replaying in my brain. Repeatedly. I remember how I lodged a scope into father's throat. And I remember the blood, more than anything else I remember the blood. There was too much of it and in some way or another it was my blood. The memory of that day is always enough to send droplets of sweat trickling down my back. I don't like to think about it, but I guess they're right when they say your past always haunts you. The thing is I know that every single thing that has happened in my life has led me to this very moment, and I wonder if it was worth it.

Chinwa pulls up to the curb at the entrance, I open my own door before he even attempts to leave his own seat. It's enough that I'm not paying him a single dime for his services, I'm not about to subject him to opening doors for me.

Surely that's not in his job specification.

"Have a lovely rest of your day Miss." Chinwa says as I close the door.

I move to his own window and flash him my best smile.

"You too Chinwa, take care."

And after that I watch him drive off, in my head I'm still trying to figure out how I'm going to approach Mr Mthethwa, let alone talk to him. What if I just call Malwande and ask her to speak to him for me? That would be far easier than

going up to him myself. When I turn my key to unlock the door I realise that it's already open. I must've forgotten to lock it then. I walk in and throw my back on the sofa, I need water…and an apple.

I freeze at the sound of the noise that's coming from my room. What the hell? Is someone in here? What am I going to do? Even as I debate my next move my feet lead me closer to the sound. Why am I not running away?

My throat grows extremely dry at the sight of the blue police uniform that emerges from my room. For a minute my brain rushes back to memories of pain and agony. I hate that uniform; I hate it more than anyone would ever know.

"You're back?" he says, eyes wide in what seems like nervousness. It can't be though; I don't think he's the type to get nervous.

I stand in front of him, unable to speak because the words have not yet reached my mouth.

Finally, my lips twitch in movement. I realise that I exhale with relief even though I was not aware of the fact that I was holding my breath.

"I… I didn't know you'd be here. I'm sorry for…"

"No, no need to apologise. This is your house." He says firmly. He barely even looks me in the eye.

"I wanted to…uhm…check on the plumbing." He says

"The plumbing is in my closet?" the words leave my mouth too quickly and immediately I regret it.

He closes the closet door and steps back.

"You don't have clothes." He states, his face straight and showing no trace of feeling.

I don't know how to respond. Should I respond? Because right now the idea of running away from this apartment sounds appealing.

"I don't have a job." That's what I finally settle with.

"But you have money." He says, seemingly annoyed at my answer or maybe at my tone, I don't know.

But what I do know is that his words pierce at me like a knife, so it was him who got me fired? Why would he do that?

Before I can stop myself, tears spring from my eyes and I try to wipe them away as soon as possible. Stop crying Enhle, why are you crying. At the realisation of my emotional breakdown he moves closer, but still maintains some distance between us. He looks torn, I don't know why but I'm sure that's the look painted on his face. His hands touch my shoulders and instinct tells me to move away. He looks hurt by this.

"Please don't touch me." I say, still trying to gather myself back up.

This time he looks straight into my eyes and I see how conflicted he is. For some time, I wonder what it is that has him so torn, what has he never seen a woman cry? Especially when he is the cause for my tears.

"Why would you get me fired Nkululeko?" I subconsciously pat myself in the back for working up the nerve to call him by his first name.

He keeps quiet, at least he's not denying it. I honestly wouldn't know what to say if he denied it, I doubt I'd confront him though.

"If I tell you will you stop crying?" he asks

I consider his words

"Yes."

He sighs and then steps closer. I step back, again listening to my irrational instinct and the flash of injure passes through his face again. I'm sorry, I just can't help it…his uniform stands as a reminder of things that I would much rather forget.
"Can we at least sit down?" he asks
Gosh I can't believe that this is the longest conversation I've had with this man and it is somewhat of an argument. I genuinely don't want to fight with him but I'm so hurt by what he did. Was it just to prove that he has enough influence to do as he pleases or does he want me to fully rely on his help for whatever reason? Does he want me to owe him? We both move to the sitting area but I walk to my handbag and empty it so all the contents splatter on the coffee table in front of him.
"Please take your money." I say, a calmness gliding over me
He sits still, looking only at me even though there are R200 bills splashed out in front of him. He annoys me because of how calm he remains, how unfazed he seems.
I'm annoyed.
"It's not my money, it's yours." He says
Nx.
"I don't have money, especially not this much money. I'm not taking money I didn't work for.
Thank you Mr Mthethwa but that's not the type of person I am." I called him Mr Mthethwa again, much to my irritation.
He clears his throat, making me very uneasy.
"You don't have a job, meaning you don't have a way of making money. I suggest you swallow your pride and take the damn money" he says in a rather calm tone.
Although my blood is boiling with anger and irritation I do my best not to show it.
"Well, if it wasn't for you I'd still have a job and I wouldn't be needing your money. And by the way you still haven't explained to me why you would do such a thing."
"Mbalenhle if you want a job I can get you a job."
Does he not understand anything that is coming out of my mouth?
"I don't want you to get me a job. I want you to tell me why you made me lose the one I already had!" I say, still trying to supress my irritation.
"Well Mbalenhle if you should know, I didn't want you working where you were working." He says, still rather cool.
"Excuse me?" I don't think I heard him right.
He clears his throat once more and this time he stands up and moves to stand in front of me. I fight the urge to move back, fearing it might give away how intimidated I actually am. "I said I didn't want you working where you were working. Simple."
I'm mind boggled and at this point I'm beyond enraged, I'm pissed off at this man and it bothers me that he can make me feel such a thing. I swear I think he hates me and I don't even know what I did to him. Maybe he's just tired of being my sponsor and he would do without the liability that is myself. I feel like that is the only logical explanation. And if that's the case then I can't do a single thing about it but I still think it's awfully mean for him to get me fired simply because he can. That is cold, and the fact that the first time he has ever

smiled at me was when he was busy getting me fired. The fact he did all of this with a smile on his face, nx.
I look up at him, greeted by the intensity of his eyes and for the first time I take the time to marvel at them, the brownish-black colour of them and the way they pierce through me like I'm nothing but mere material. They aren't big eyes but they are the type of eyes that are not very easy to forget, the type you can easily get lost in.
Why the heck am I thinking about his eyes? I hate the man.
"Look, if you have a problem with where I work the least you could do is give me a proper explanation. Honestly I think you've helped me way too much these past few months and I made it clear in the very beginning that I didn't see it necessary, now this? I don't understand."
He glances at his watch.
"I had my reasons."
"And you said you'd tell me your reasons."
"I just wanted you to stop crying." He responds flatly
What a dickhead! I stand there, unable to form my next response. I open my mouth to speak but close it again.
"I'll pick you up Monday morning and drive you to eMsinga." He says, funny how he thinks he can just command me around.
"No, that won't be necessary. I'll use your money to get a taxi home." I say
Surprised at my response, he laughs…which surprises me even more.
"You're stubborn." He says, a smile still lingering on his lips. "But I wasn't asking." The look he has now seems like the type you don't bother arguing with and so I don't. I want to protest, but something about him makes my throat dry and erases all my thoughts and I hate it more than I can explain.
He's gone, leaving the money on the table and my mouth wide open in disbelief. What the hell am I going to do now? Instinctively I take out my call the one person who can make me laugh my sorrows away.
"Ayanda."
"Yes darling." He says, I can barely even hear him because the background is too loud. Is he in a club? At 1 pm? No.
"Friend, where are you? It's too loud."
I can hear him scurrying off to somewhere, I guess he's trying to find a quiet place because I can no longer hear the noise.
"I'm at some function.
My mom is forcing me to attend these events of hers. She thinks I'll find a 'good girl'" he says, and even by his tone I know he is most probably rolling his eyes. See Ayanda has not worked up the nerve to tell his parents about his sexuality and quite frankly I don't blame them for not figuring it out…I think I mentioned that he's not the OTT type of gay.
"But Ayanda, I think you should just tell them." I say.
"Hhayibo friend, Zwide would kill me. You know how he reacted when he found out I had failed the semester, forget that I like men and not women. He would flip." He responds, a trace of laughter in his words. Zwide by the way is his dad, I don't know why he calls his mother mom and his father by his clan name 'Zwide'. Ayanda comes from a well accomplished family, the Nxumalo's are known for owning a chain of supermarket and I think they are also involved in the trucking business. Basically, his father is business tycoon turned family man these days because he is forever suggesting these family vacations that

Ayanda never wants to go to. He was the one who told Ayanda he wouldn't pay his fees because he failed first year and so he had to flunk out and get a job. He really didn't mind though, eitherway, they had made him do Biotechnology and Microbiology, things he genuinely didn't like. His mom owns an advertising firm; I've only met her once but even then, it wasn't a formal meeting. I doubt she'd remember who I am if we met again because we were never introduced, this was back when she came to the Cargo Hold for breakfast. I can't lie, she seemed so accommodating, warm-hearted even. Ayanda is much closer to her than with his dad but he still can't tell any of them that he's gay so he has to pretend like he's still searching for 'Miss Right', ek'beni it's not even like that.
"Friend I'm sure you didn't call me to talk about Zwide, is something wrong. You don't sound fine." He says
How can you even tell; I've barely said a thing.
"No Ayanda my friend, I'm not fine. I'm stressed out."
"Stressed out about?
"I move to settle on the sofa and switch on the TV. It took me the longest time to figure out how to use this remote, in fact all the appliances in this place were an absolute pain to figure. Some of them I just avoid using because I haven't quite gotten around to working out what they're for.

"You remember Nkululeko Mthethwa right?" I say, relieved to have someone to share this problem with.
"Honey how can I forget that hunk of a man? Plus, ke, he's all over social media these days."

"Why?" I ask, he doesn't seem like the type to go around drawing attention to himself.

"Phela girl ever since that trial of theirs, the Mthethwa family has become socialites. They become a hashtag without even moving a finger. Yindaba, did he do something?"

Child if you knew!

"I hate him…well I don't hate him but I think he's an airhead."
I can hear him laughing. After a while he gathers his words up, "What did he do?"
"He got me fired."

"What!?"

I don't know why I'm suddenly so calm, I was pissed off as hell when I decided to call Ayanda. It must be because it feels nice to share my problems with someone. The last time I had a person to talk to was in high school. My best friend Ntombi, she helped me get through a whole lot of things. She knew what was going on at home, I had to tell her because she noticed the scars on my back one time when we were changing in the bathroom after netball practise. I had to tell her the truth and once I started, I couldn't stop. I made her swear to

not tell anyone and she did. I don't know why but two months after ii told her, her family moved and that was the last of her. I missed her after they moved, I didn't have a lot of friends and so when she moved I kind of became a loner. But that was in the past…it's over now.

"Yup."
"Why would he do that though?" Ayanda is still surprised, trust me I was just as surprised
"He said he didn't want me working where I was working." Now that I say it out loud it sounds dumber than when he said it.

"Hhayibo friend tell me you're joking!"

"I wish I was joking Ayanda. But those were his words."

"That's just messed up."

"You telling me. The way I was so angry. I felt like punching him in the face, but lord knows that man scares the hell out of me."

He laughs again, Ayanda always seems to find humour in the most serious things. Did I tell you about the time he laughed at Charlene's divorce? Charlene used to work at Cargo Hold and she was telling us about her divorce this one time.
So, you know how couples have to discuss the whole divorce with their lawyers present and stuff like that, so at one of those meetings Charlene got so annoyed at her ex that she took off one of her 4 inch heels and threw it straight at the man. Apparently, he had to go and get some stiches because he had a gash on the side of his head. See, when she was telling us she didn't make it some sort of joke, she seriously regretted doing it but Ayanda was ripped and he made it a point to crack jokes about it whenever he saw Charlene.

"Friend don't laugh; I haven't even told you the rest…"
"Hhayibo, Kuyanda?"
"Yes, uthini wena, the guy decided to give me a lump sum of cash. Well actually Greg gave me an envelope that day when he fired me. I was so devastated I didn't even bother asking what was in it." I say recalling a painful memory. Nx.
"I got to the cab, ngadabula i-envelope. I nearly passed out friend."

"You lie! How much money?"

I didn't count it but I know it's a lot. It's more money than I've ever seen in my life.
"I don't know, 30 maybe…"

"R30 000?!?" I can only imagine the look that's probably on his face right now.

“Yeah.” It frustrates me to even say it because I know I can’t give it back to him, he’s already made it very clear that he’s not going to take it. And on the other hand, now that I’m jobless I think I might need his money. But boy oh boy would I feel shitty if I used it. I swear I would feel indebted to him more than I already am.

“No friend, you must be kidding! So much money? Either this man is crazy or in love. One of the two.”

I laugh at his second suggestion; I haven’t laughed like this in two days. Imagine nje, Nkululeko the guy who can barely manage a smile for more than two minutes, in love…with me? Never on a Sunday morning!
“I think we should settle for crazy.” I say, still laughing.
“If you say so, so what are you going to do with the money?” Ayanda asks

“Well, I’ve already tried to give it back to him and he flat out refused so I was hoping to ask for your help in that department.”

He’s silent…
“Friend you don’t have a job, and I doubt that you’ll be getting one anytime soon. Keep the cash, angini he gave it to you?”
Eish.
“But Ayanda you don’t understand. I can’t just take the man’s money.”

“Why not?”
“Because…it’s not right.”
“Friend he made you lose your job, and I think he’s somewhat compensating for that. Take the cash wena and stop being so hard headed.” He says

I can’t do that. I can’t just take his money; I already feel shitty knowing I live in his house.

“Ayanda, I just can’t…”

“Okay ke, if you really don’t want to then maybe you can use the money meanwhile search for a job and then repay him when you get a job. Because otherwise what’s your plan? You’re going to live like a varsity student ek’beni you have the money?”

I keep quiet. I mean technically I wouldn’t be taking his money if I repaid it later. Maybe he’s not speaking absolute bull.

“I’ll think about it friend. Shouldn’t you be getting back to the event?” I say, suddenly remembering where he is.
“I should but I’d much prefer to be listening to your nice life problems.”

Mxm, this person.

“And speaking of events, there’s going to be some gala dinner on Wednesday. Please be my date friend.” He says

I'm not going to those posh things. Never.

"Ayanda, you know I don't know jack about your high life events. I'd rather not embarrass you with my farm girl tendencies."

"Don't be ridiculous wena. I'll take you shopping on Tuesday, I'll swap shifts with Sibs." He says, well he sounds pretty decided. I guess it's a thing in this world for people to dictate Mbali's life. I end up agreeing, reluctantly though and then hang up.

For the next hour or so I just flip through the channels. Settling on a program and then changing it when it starts to bore me. I end up on channel 116 watching some show called 10 over 10. I've only watched it once but I must say I enjoyed it. They always have these celebrities basically talking about other celebrities on the countdown list that they're doing. It's entertaining but yoh, people are savages out here.

Tonight, they're counting down the sexiest men. I find myself laughing and commenting despite my lack of experience. Lord knows I wouldn't even know where to start if a man were to stand in front of me and say he wants me. I would run nje futhi. See the thing is, I've never had a boyfriend. Father would have killed me. I'd like to think of myself as a virgin but I know very well the things my body had to endure under the hands of father. I remember this one time he tied me to the bed and gagged my mouth. All I remember was his heavy body pounding into me and I tried block out the pain by biting the gag. When he finished, I had tears rolling heavily down my cheeks, he stood up and told me to figure out a way to untie myself. I spent the next three hours trying to untie the rope on my hands but eventually I started using my teeth to grind away the rope. I went to bath and came back to sleep on that very same bed that he had forced himself onto me in. I flipped the mattress thinking it might erase the memory but till this day, the memory remains engraved in my head. That memory and many others. Like the collection of scars on my back. Father always aimed for my back, it was seldom where he would beat my face or the other parts of my body. He never deviated from my back and over the years, the scars built on each other and my back turned into a canvas drawn with pain and agony. As I look at all these men who are considered fine as hell, I know for sure that I could never allow a man to touch me. Never.

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I ended up falling asleep on the couch yesterday so I get a bit of a startle when I hear noises. But I quickly realise I left the TV on. This time my body is aching for a run. I don't care what I'll wear but I feel tense and I know that the only way to relieve the tension is to go for a run. I'll have to settle for the takkies and my work jeans and that oversized ANC t-shirt in my closet. I go to brush my teeth, wash my face…you know the works. I'm ready in less than five minutes; I need to do something with this hair. I'll plait it later when I come back; maybe into two rows. I can plait my own hair. I had to learn that otherwise I would've gone to school looking like I was struck by electricity. Afro's are so hard to comb it's not even funny.

Right before I leave, I open the curtains and windows and realise just how beautiful of a day it is. It's a great morning to go on a lengthy jog. I notice a piece of paper on the floor right in front of the door. Someone must've slipped it under the door. Okay…

"Careful. He'll fuck you and flee." It reads.

I read it again, hoping to see a clue of some sort about who it might be from. Careful about who? What the hell? I shrug and put it on the kitchen counter, deciding that it was probably delivered to the wrong person. It must be, because firstly I don't have anyone to be careful of and secondly I don't have to worry about anyone fucking me and fleeing. It's one of the very few things that are not on my plate right now, well that and a job. I probably shouldn't pay it any mind; I leave it on the counter and head out.

I must say, this place is beautiful, in fact it looks like it was cut from a magazine and I still have difficulties believing that I live in such a place. I do a few stretches just to loosen up and I start off, slowly at first. I know I look out of place right now, all the people who are jogging have got their gear game on levels and they look equipped for an intense workout.
Me on the other hand, well I look like I got lost on my way to a Fees Must Fall protest. Talk about a sore thumb…

I find my groove after about ten minutes and I pick up my pace, letting the road consume me completely. For all those minutes, I feel at one with the world, my head cleared of all of my worries and thoughts. I run, until my feet hurt. I run until my feet numb and even after, I run as fast as they can take me. I run until I realise that I don't know where I'm going and I don't know where I am. I'm drenched in sweat, and I'm breathing heavily. When I finally stop running I look at my surrounding and my first reaction is 'oh snap, where the hell am I?' okay in my defence, I didn't think I would run as far as I have. I might've been running for about an hour and half, and by the pace that I was going I must be far away from home.
Okay, what am I going to do? Okay at least I have my phone here, I'm not sure if that's of any assistance but I mean hey…it's a start. I scroll through my contact list, Ayanda…he doesn't have a car. Cargo Hold…that's not going to help. Mam'Mahlase, that's Malwande's mom and she is out of the suggestion list. Malwande…I can't bother her, she's at work. And besides, what am I going to say? Mondli is at work too. Mseki…no, forget it. Nkululeko…not even if you gave me my job back. And Ntsiki…I could call Ntsiki, she stays at home most of the time these days because of Siwe's passing she took time off work. I'm not sure if she's planning on ever going back to work.

It rings…and rings…and rings. Okay I guess that's plan A failed. Right now, the only person who I know for sure can help me is Nkululeko but I don't want his help! I know he's the technology savvy one in the family, he racks people for fun. And as much as I hate to admit it, I need him to track this number and tell me where the hell I am so I can run back home.

It rings once.
"Mbalenhle." The depth of his voice makes my throat go dry, even on the phone the man has a way of making me feel small.

"Uhm…Nkululeko…"

"Are you okay, you're breathing heavily" He says, I sense some worry in his tone.

"No I'm fine, I was running…"
"Running? From what?"

Ghosh, could you please let me finish my sentence?!

"Nothing, I was taking a jog around the block and I got lost." I say, I don't think I've ever been this embarrassed in my life.

"Oh." I know he's trying hard not to laugh. Nx.

"Could you please track my phone and tell me where I am so I can get back home?" I'm annoyed now because he's still on the verge of laughter. I genuinely don't get this guy.

"I'll come fetch you." he says
No!
"No, that won't be necessary. I was enjoying my jog."

He keeps quiet and for a minute I think he might've hung up.

"I'll be there in a few minutes." He says and then he hangs up.
Urrrrrrgggggggg!!!! This person is so frustrating!!!!

I shove my phone in my back pocket and wait. I've only been waiting for five minutes but I'm an impatient person so I feel like it's been hours. And I'm also irritated because I've lost all the stamina that I had this morning. I honestly wonder if at some stage of life this Nkululeko person might consider listening to me, maybe even doing what I ask him to do and not what he deems as correct. Like for instance when I say, "I don't need your money", he might say, "Okay, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking straight, if you don't need it then you can return it." The thought of that has me laughing out loud, and although I didn't mean to I probably look like a mad woman right now. But I can't help it, the thought is so far from possible it tickles me.

"Hey…"

Shit. I turn around praying to my surroundings that he didn't see me laughing by myself but I still have a smile on my face and I can't seem to wipe it off. He's standing there, looking confused. Dammit! He did see me.

"Uh…I was just thinking, I'm not crazy." I blurt out

He laughs. It surprises me.

“I’m sure you aren’t. Let’s go.” He says

Okay, so where is the car? I look around, clearly confused.

“The car is at your place. I figured you might want to finish your jog.”

“So you’re planning on jogging with me?” I ask, knowing full well the answer to that. “But you aren’t even wearing the right…”

“Well you aren’t either.
Plus, I think my shoes are takkies enough.” He says, pointing at his Adidas. Mind you, those shoes look expensive and not fit for running.

He’s wearing a black and white printed t-shirt and chinos. He looks fit for hitting the nearest club and not jogging. But ke, what can I say? It seems like he’s already decided and I can’t tell him I don’t want to jog with him because he knows the way back home and I don’t.

“Okay, then you might want to start stretching.”

He shrugs then does a few leg stretches. When he raises his arm, I notice a bandage on it.
It’s doesn’t look well attended to, like he just rolled it on for the sake of it. I wonder what happened to him, and because of my wonder I end up staring at it. He notices.
“Stab wound.” He says, like the way one would say ‘it’s raining outside’

I stand wide eyed and trying to digest the lump on my throat.

“Let’s go.” I manage. I wanted to ask how he got it, ask if he’s fine, if it’s healing properly but all I can manage is a ‘let’s go’ and that’s just what I must settle with.

I’ve never ran with anyone; the whole point was for me to escape my problems and become part of the road. It has always been that way, somehow running has always been a temporary escape for me. Maybe even a distant hope because I used to wonder what it would be like to just run until I’m far away enough from father so he won’t find me. But logic would always kick in and I’d realise I didn’t have anywhere else to go, so my feet would lead me back to those cold walls I called home.

I pick up my pace when I realise he’s in front of me, he doesn’t even look like he’s trying. I guess it’s because he’s taller and so obviously, his steps are bigger than mine. He looks at me when I reach him but I look forward and pretend not to notice. I probably look like hell right now. My crazy afro and sweat dripping down my face. I notice that he’s no longer looking at me and so I look at him. Quite a task because he’s a full head taller than me so I have to look up. He looks straight forward, seemingly concentrating on the road

ahead. I look away very quickly when he sees me looking then I pick up my pace. By now, my legs are numb and even if I go faster I know I won't feel anything.

I can already see the flat, disappointed because the run seemed faster and I was enjoying it. I slow down, and he's already next to me.

"First one to the gate?" I say

He looks impressed by my suggestion.

"On three." He says
Ghosh, this seems so stupid. But for the second time since I met this man, I don't feel like strangling him. The first time I believe I was in his arms and as much as I hate to admit it, I wished I could've stayed in them for eternity because they made me feel safe and secure.

We dart off, sprinting and even before we reach the gate I'm in full acceptance of defeat. He's too fast and I'm too distracted. In my defence though, he didn't beat me by a mile. I got to the gate right after him but it was enough time for him to paint that smug look on his face.

"You owe me." he says, very self-satisfied.

He must be kidding; I don't owe him a single thing. Except for a house…and money…and my all-round well-being.
"I want a rematch. I was distracted." I say

He has his hands on his knees, bent forward and slightly panting. As for me, I would gladly drop to the floor and lye there until my body decides to co-operate. I should've known it was going to be like this, I haven't run in a long time and I think I might've pushed my body a bit too much. I didn't realise it while I was running.

"So you'd take me on a good day?" he asks. He's showing his arrogant side isn't he.

"I'd take you any day. That was a fluke."

He laughs

"We'll settle this some other day, for now you owe me and I still have to think about what I can possibly make you do." He suddenly looks like a joyful little boy and that makes me laugh. The mischief in his voice makes him seem even younger.

I sink to the grass, my exhaustion taking over.

"Why did you run that far anyways?" he asks, settling right next to me.

I keep silent, considering his question.

“I don’t know, it just happened. I forget a lot of things when I start running.”

He nods.

“So you always run?” he asks

“I used to…back home. It was my way to cope with all the shit.” I immediately feel like pinching myself for cursing. But he doesn’t notice, instead his face has changed. I can see the full intensity of his jaw because it’s clenched with what seems like anger. He stretches his neck and exhales. Why is he angry?

“Why didn’t you ever tell anyone?” he asks, still concealed in fury

That’s why he’s angry? He must not, I’m not angry anymore.

“I didn’t have anyone to tell. Father always said no one would believe me because he was a cop and no one would take the word of a little whore like me.” I say, remembering the moment he told me that. Even as I say it, I can hear his voice repeating it in my head. He was drunk that day, the stench of his alcohol covered body was enough to send vomit to my mouth. But I held it down, and hoped he would leave me alone.

My words hit Nkululeko like a blow to the stomach and even as I say them, I can see him clenching his jaw tighter.

“You didn’t have other relatives? Aside from your sister.”

I can’t believe I’m talking to him and I’m having a proper conversation without feeling the urge to kill him. I can only wish it wasn’t about this particular topic.

“I had relatives, from his side but I didn’t really know them. None of them lived eMsinga so I couldn’t exactly seek their help.”

He breathes faster beside me. Then he stands up and offers his hand so I can do the same. I take it and he easily scoops me up. We walk together to my (his) apartment in silence.

“You need some water?” I ask

“Yeah. And food.” He answers

This guy.

“I’ll get you some water. Can I make you the food after I shower?”

He moves to the sofa and settles down comfortably.

“Yeah sure.” He’s flipping through the channels, but unlike me he seems to know which one he’s going to. He finally settles on ESPN. I’ve watched it before, it’s for sport and stuff. I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and go to hand it to him.

“Thank you.” he says

I walk off, leaving him with his ESPN. I realise just stinky I am; this is embarrassing. When I get to my bedroom I strip off my clothes, careful not to think of the man in the living room. The very same man who got me fired because of no apparent reason, the same one who compensated me with more money than I’ve ever seen. This man who was kind enough to find me a place to stay during my time of need. The one who rarely smiles but when he does, his face lights up and he looks fit to be on one of those 10 over 10 sexiest man lists. Not that I care or anything, but I wonder what he thinks when he sees me. I think back of yesterday; how frustrated and angry I was at him. I genuinely felt like throwing him under a moving bus. It’s weird because every time I see him, for some odd reason my throat dries and I can barely manage piecing together my sentences.

I find myself staring at the full body mirror in the bathroom that I have avoided so much in the past three months of living here. I never liked looking at my body, it disgusted me. It would be beautiful if it hadn’t suffered so much. I’d esteem the light complexion of it, I might even appreciate the way my breasts perk up, maybe love my toned features, and the way my slender figure curves into my hips. I would admire my arched back and how my bum seems to fit so perfectly in the scheme of my physique. I might love myself if I hadn’t lived through the hell I lived through.

I get into the shower and drench myself with hot water, and I scrub. I do this every time I take a bath or shower, it’s something I’m accustomed to. I scrub until my skin is tender and patches of red cover it. I want to wash away the stench of father on my body, maybe if I scrub hard enough it will erase the feeling of his body on my own. And as I scrub the tears roll from my eyes and I let myself break down knowing that only I can hear my sobs.

After several minutes, I decide to gather myself up and remember that Nkululeko must be starving by now. I switch off the water and dry myself off and head to my bedroom. I smother the body lotion over my body and try to make my hair look as presentable as possible. At the end, I decide to comb it out and clip a section of it down it doesn’t move to my face. The only thing I have to wear is the white summer dress in the closet. I bought it with my first pay check, it wasn’t expensive but it is the most expensive piece of clothing I’ve ever owned. I realise that this is the longest I’ve taken to get dressed and ready, what is wrong with you Mbalenhle?

I find him in the kitchen, holding a piece of paper. Oh, it must be that note.

“Must’ve been the wrong address.” I say, walking towards him, I even feel more comfortable around him, not to say that he doesn’t intimidate me but he scares me less now that we’ve shared a laugh or two. He looks up from the paper and his eyes meet me. For a minute, I think I see the face of a lustful man but it must be my imagination because he quickly moves from the kitchen and settles back on the couch I left him in. Okay…

“When did you get the note?” he asks. He seems to be avoiding eye contact with me. I have no idea why.

“This morning, before I went for a jog.” I move to the fridge and grab all the things I’ll need for the meal. I’ve decided I’ll make beef stew and rice. My options are very limited because I haven’t gone grocery shopping this month, I was planning on going next weekend.

“Angiwudli utamatisi, and I don’t like rice.” He shouts from the living room.

Okay, so the rice idea is out. Now I must cook uphuthu. I don’t mind though, I’m pretty good with these things. I had to make sure father was happy with the food I cooked for him so I learnt very quickly how to cook. The man always thought he was fit for a gourmet meal on a cop’s salary. But ke, it doesn’t matter now because it’s coming in handy. I start with chopping up the onions, then dicing the potatoes and slicing the peppers. I keep glancing at Nkululeko (I’ve settled to calling him by his first name).
He has made himself very comfortable on the couch that is technically his…I don’t know where I’m going with this. Oh, doesn’t he have a job?
It’s 9:36 am, normal people are at work. But then again, normality is far-fetched in the Mthethwa household.

He seems uneasy, he keeps looking at his phone. Maybe he’s waiting for an important call. I start boiling the water and leave it to simmer. You don’t understand how long it took me to work out how to operate this six-plate stove. Phela mina I’m used to the usual four plate, and the plates are not just drawn on the surface. This one straight up baffled me.

His phone rings and he immediately stands up. I guess it’s a private call because he moves to the door and signals that he’ll be outside. I nod and manage a smile. He doesn’t return it. I can’t hear much of what he’s saying from the hallway, but the little that I do hear sounds like frustrated speech. Like he’s demanding answers from someone. He sounds annoyed. Okay I shouldn’t be eavesdropping, it’s hypocritical for me to expect him to butt off my life when I’m busy listening in on his conversations. I hear his footsteps as he approaches and I busy myself with mixing the phuthu.

He walks in, and moves to stand in the middle of the kitchen with his hands in his pockets. I put down uphini and turn my attention to him, that’s what he wants right?

“I’ve decided what you owe me.” he says, face straight

Is he being for real?

“I’m being serious.” He answers my unasked question.

I nod.

“Mbalenhle, I need you to listen to me.”

“I’m listening.”

He shakes his head.

“No, that’s not what I mean. I need you to listen to me, so if I tell you to do something I expect you to do it. I will never ask anything of you without good reason so when I give you money, or I get you fired or you think I’m ruining your life…I just need you to trust that I’m doing it for good reason.”

Okay, this is just weird. I have however concluded that he isn’t joking…which makes it even weirder.
“But Nkululeko…”

“No, you owe me this. Please.” He looks pained for some reason. Did I miss something here?

“Is there a reason to this?”

“Yes.” he says, moving from the kitchen. I should’ve known not to expect the actual reason.

“You understand me, right? Because I don’t like repeating myself.” He says

I nod. Why are you nodding? This is absolutely nuts. Now you’re agreeing to his terms and conditions because he outran you! Usuyahlanya yini? I ignore my subconscious and carry on with the cooking. The phuthu is ready and the stew has been ready. I finished with it first. I hope he’ll like it, just because he must be tired and he looks tense so maybe the food will help. Not that food has ever helped with fatigue and tension but I mean a girl can try. I grab the plates, and start dishing up. I’ll serve him first and then come back to get my food. I’m not sure if I should join him or…

I place his plate on a tray, along with my last serving of juice and a spoon. He must appreciate, I worked hard to impress him and I still don’t know why I bothered so much. I could’ve easily just made him baked beans and rice. That would’ve taken less time and less effort. He sits up when I walk into the living room and moves the coffee table closer to him. I don’t know how the heck he does that with a stab wound on his arm. I bend on my knees and place

the food on the table. I look at him and I'm greeted by a look that I can't quite figure out.

"Mbalenhle please stand up. And don't serve me food like I'm some sort of master." He says, still with that look that I can't figure out.

I quickly stand up, embarrassed once again. I'm just used to it that's all and I don't understand what offends him about it. I was taught to serve food that way, I don't get why that bothers him. I try to walk off but his hand reaches for my wrist and the intensity in his eyes sends a shudder down my spine. I want to pull away but I resist the urge.

"Join me. Please." He says, his hand still firm on my wrist.

I nod. He releases my wrist.

I can feel my blood rushing to my cheeks as I walk back to the kitchen to get my food. What is this man doing to me? And why am I letting it happen? I try to fix myself, get the red out of my cheeks so I do a few breathing exercises. When I think, I look decent again, I take my plate and head to the living room where I find him downing his food like it's nothing. Joh, this man can eat!

"Sit here." He says, patting the space next to him. I do as he says, something I should probably be getting accustomed to since I've already agreed to whatever it was that he was saying earlier in the kitchen.

"Do you like the food?" I ask, just to create conversation.

He nods. Eish, I don't think he likes the food.

"I'm serious, this is the best food I've had in a very long time." He assures, I guess he saw the panic on my face.

For a few minutes, we just sit in silence, the only noise is the sound of the TV and the cutlery hitting our plates as we eat.

"Don't you have a job?" I ask then later realising it might sound like a rude question. I seem to be blurting out a lot of things when it comes to this one.

"I'd rather be eating your food." He says while shrugging

That's not the answer I was expecting, but okay. I guess I'm flattered.

"Why are you a cop? I mean you don't need to be…"

He grabs a spoonful and I have to wait for him to finish chewing before he gets around to answering me.

"You really want to know?" he asks

Well if I didn't a minute ago, I do now.

"Yes."

He takes another spoonful. Jeez, this guy is something else.

"I liked guns and I'm a generally aggressive person and Mseki talked me into channelling that into something good." he says, with a straight face. He doesn't even look up from his food to see the stunned look on my face. My throat does that thing again, of going extremely dry and leaving me feeling like there is not enough oxygen supply in this world for my lungs.

"Are you still like that?" I manage.

He looks at me; panic covers his face when he realises that I'm afraid of his answer.

"I'm not perfect Mbalenhle, but please don't fear me. I would never hurt you."

I don't know whether to believe what he's saying, but worse of all I don't know how to feel about it. For some odd reason, I just can't seem to categorise my relationship with Nkululeko, no matter how short it has been, I don't understand whether we are friends or people who simply know each other. And thus, I have no idea how I should be reacting to what he just told me so instead I grab the remote from his hand and switch the channel to Travel Channel.

We sit in silence…

Chapter Two

"You're still coming, right?" Ayanda asks. His phone call woke me up this morning but I didn't mind because I was about to wake up and take a bath.

"I'll come Ayanda, but you know I don't have anything to wear." I say, as I put the phone on loudspeaker and place it on the mantel next to my bed. I need to neaten up this place.

"No honey, we will sort that out ksasa, I'm taking you to the mall and we are going to spend that airhead's money." He says

"He's not an airhead." I say before I even think about it. What the hell is wrong with me? Now I'm defending him?

Ayanda keeps silent…and then bursts out laughing. What is he laughing at? "You have the hots for the Mthethwa cop!" he says

What?

I don't know what he's talking about. Kqala he woke me up, although I was going to wake up anyways I still feel like he shouldn't have woken me up to

talk his nonsense. Just because I defended Nkululeko from my own insults doesn't mean I have the hots for him. He must calm down.

"You woke me up to talk about this nonsense? Mxm."

"Deny it." he challenges.

"Deny what? I don't know what you're talking about Ayanda. Yazini, leave me alone I must go and bath now." I say and click the red button. I'm not a morning person, never have been. I find that with myself, I am often smiling and I think I'm friendly…I try my best to be friendly but often people mistake it for naivety or weakness. And it bothers me most of the time but I suck it up. I'm not one to confront most of the situations I'm in but I try my best to not let them bother me too much. Unless of course you decide to get me fired for my job and then command me to listen to everything you tell me to do. Am I the only one who has noticed that I've seen this man every day for the past four days? And now I must travel all the way to Mawuzini, that's in Msinga where I lived for the majority of my life. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous about going back, but I need to go back. Not only for the documents but for me, I need to look at that place and proclaim that it is no longer part of my life. I must, and if anything, I'm glad Nkululeko offered to drive me there.

My phone rings.
"Enhle."

It's Malwande.
"Yes Lwande?" I say as I'm busy with fixing the cushions on the bed. She sounds…worried. I have no idea why.

"How are you mnaka?" she asks

She has a tendency of calling her friends 'abomnaka'. Normally I just go with the flow and let it be even though I have no clue what it means

"I'm fine. I'm trying to find a job after…" she knows, I told her the day after I got fired before I went to bed. She didn't sound surprised; she was just keen on me getting a new one. Mina I don't know what is with that family, it's like they live for shadiness.

"Look, don't worry yourself about that right now. I just wanted to ask if you're sure you want Nkululeko to drive you today."

What?
Well, kodwa to be honest it's not like I was ever sure I wanted him to drive me, in fact I flat out refused when he offered but he said it wasn't up for negotiation so I let in. What's worrying me is why Malwande is showing such concern about it.

"Yeah Lwande, it's fine. Yindaba? Is something wrong?"

She keeps silent…

“I could always tell one of the drivers to take you.” she says

What is going on here?

“Malwande what’s going on? Is Nkululeko fine?” I ask, realising there’s more panic in the tone of my voice than I intended. And although I don’t want to, I start thinking of the worst like what if he was hurt and she doesn’t want to worry me? What if they got arrested again? You know I don’t even know why I care so much about these ‘what-ifs’ because they don’t have much to do with my life. The only altercation that I'll have to make is getting in a taxi instead of getting in an expensive car to home.

“He’s…fine.” She finally settles.

“Well if he’s not fine then I don’t mind taking a cab or a taxi or something. Don’t worry yourself…”

“No no no no Enhle, it’s just that I'm a bit worried about him. That’s all.” She says

I don’t understand a single thing.

“Forget I said anything. Enjoy…I mean travel safe.” She says and then hangs up.

I am beyond confused. Really? Is this really how my day is going to start?

I throw my outdated phone on the bed and strip of my clothes. I must take a long bath, it’s only 7:15 am and Nkululeko is due to arrive here at 9-ish (that’s if he’s still coming). I have time. I brush my teeth, and then step into the bathtub with running water. Who would've thought? Me, Mbalenhle Miya, in a bathtub that’s nearly the size of my childhood room. I could have never even dreamt it.

I settle in the tub and instinctively I take the scrub and do what I always do. I always think these days, it’s actually unavoidable…most of my time is spent snooping through the Classifieds of newspapers and trying to find jobs that require only a matric certification. There’s still so much I want to do with my life. Firstly, I need to get my independence, look don’t get me wrong because I am truly appreciative for all the things that I have right now but I would love to at least get the opportunity to earn it all for myself. Maybe then I might even enjoy the lux life that I'm finding myself living in. I haven’t really thought much about what I want to study but I love psychology, criminal psychology to be exact. That’s what I want…either that or journalism. I’d love to venture into investigative journalism. Regardless of my circumstances back home, I always believed that my life would not be restricted to those walls. I knew that at some stage I would have to find a way out of there and if it meant staying on the street and hustling then so be it. I was willing to do anything just to get away from that place but each time I tried I would always be consumed by fear and

find myself back in the same place. It would be an understatement to say that I'm glad that part of my life is over…

I stand up and dry myself. I even washed my hair because I've finally figured out how to use the hair dryer. I catch myself inspecting myself again in the mirror, jeez what is wrong with me? All these foreign thoughts that are running in my head are terrifying and what scares me most is who their directed to. This must stop, as in now. After I finish hair drying my hair and deciding on a letting my afro live its rebellious life, I head to the kitchen with a towel wrapped. The intension was to get some yoghurt and then go back to getting dressed before Nkululeko arrives but I'm distracted by the sight of a white envelope in front of the front door. Clearly someone is on a mission, manje ke it's a problem because they keep sending these notes to the wrong person.

I take the envelope and rip it open. It's a note, same handwriting as before.

"Stay the hell away from him."

Whoah, girls out here are really serious when it comes to their men. This girl, whoever it might be who has been sending these notes is actually threatening the wrong person so nje her problem is not going to get solved until she finds the right address for whoever she's looking for. Maybe the next time she comes over to slip another note under my door I should tell her that she's wasting her time. But I never see the person who's doing this which is actually a bit freaky. Eish but this person has time to waste joh, all of this for a man?

This time I crunch it up and put it in the bin, it's not even worth thinking about. I go to the kitchen to take my yoghurt and then move to the sitting room and switch on the TV. I watch for 10 minutes and then realise I should probably be getting dressed. I'm starting to get nervous I have to say, well not nervous but a bit anxious. Even though I know exactly what I'm going to find in that house, I'm still wondering what I'm going to find in that house.

I hear knocking just as I throw on my scarf. I'm already dressed and he is unsurprisingly punctual. I hurry up to open the door.

What the hell?!

"Let's go, you're ready right?" he says in a flat voice.

Jeez, he looks like hell. He's eyes bloodshot and clothes a bit ruffled up. He looks like he just rolled out of bed and came here after a night of rage and anger. I'm not going anywhere with this man. He looks like he's going to kill me.

"Nkululeko, what's wrong?" I ask, I'm not really sure I should be asking or running. The only reason why I'm still standing here is because I care…

He doesn't answer, he's still standing outside the door looking at everything but me. He's not going to look at me, but I'm looking at him and all I see is rage

and confusion and hate painted on his face. As to why, I have no idea but I intend to find out regardless of the fact that it might damn well be none of my business. I care very little about that right now.

He's still quiet.

"Come in." I say

"I'm fine, let's go." He says

This time I'm not backing down, even though he's scaring me and I'm fighting the urge to run from this situation I'm still standing here and I'm not going to back down. I was not kidding when I said I'm not going anywhere with this man.

"I'm not going anywhere with you when you look like this Nkululeko. Just come in because this is not helping anyone." I say, sternly.

He knows that I'm serious. Are all friendships like this? Is this a friendship?

He comes in, however reluctantly it may be. I lead him to the sitting room and switch off the
TV. He sits on the sofa and so do I, the same sofa but as far away from him as possible, I'm not risking being a victim of one of his aggressive episodes, I've had enough of that shit in my life.

"Do you want to tell me what's wrong?" I ask

He looks at me, for the first time since he got here. I don't lower my eyes; I look straight at him. He's still quiet.

Okay then I guess we'll just sit in silence until that deadly look disappears from his face.
Really that's all I want, I want that look of hate and hurt and anger to disappear from his face because looks like that can only lead to violence. That's not the life he should be leading. I wonder what made him like this, then I remember the phone call I got from Malwande this morning. She must've known he was like this. Why? What happened?

"Nkululeko…"

"Can we not talk?" he asks; the anger is slowly fading. There's still a trace of it but now I just see hurt and disgust. Curiosity is eating away at me. I want to know why he's like this, maybe I can help. Maybe I can make him return to his normal unexplainable self. But instead I nod at his suggestion to not talk. I don't think this trip is going to happen. In fact, I don't even think I want to go anymore. I don't think I can be in a car with him knowing that something is eating away at him. Plus, I'm pretty sure I'll be in a sour mood after having to face that place. We can't both be in a state, that's not a good combination.

He leans back on the sofa and I can see him easing up. This is a rather awkward position for me because I think my body is yearning to comfort him, hug him so that he might feel better. Like he did for me all those months ago. I desperately want to do that but I'm not really sure if he'd appreciate that much. Maybe I should call Mondli and ask what I should do. I'm not really sure, I should call Lwande. She'll know, she always knows what to do. As soon as I make an attempt to stand up he calls me.

"Mbalenhle." His voice is deep, is has a raspy edge to it…making it very distinct and almost captivating, just like him.

He has his head on the top of the sofa, he's looking up with his eyes closed. I had started thinking that he might've fallen asleep but I guess not. This past week has been something for the books, firstly he got me fired. Then we had an argument about him getting me fired and I ended up hating him. Then he helped me yet again from my stupidity of jogging too far from the complex and I ended up agreeing to listen to his dictation. Now this… this is beyond me.

"Excuse me?" my throat did that going dry thing again and so a 'huh' was all I could manage.

"Sit with me." he says.
Well at least he sounds more human now. I only notice after a while that he's pointing to the place right next to him. Is he serious, what am I going to do so close to him? I stand up without even thinking and I place myself next to him. His arm goes around my shoulder; he hasn't looked down at me. His face remains on the top part of the sofa and he's still looking up. His arms are strong, just as I remember him and although I should be comforting him I still feel like I'm safe in his arms. I'm not sitting comfortably though; I'd be lying if I said I was.
I'm not really sure if I should endure the pain or just shift a little so I can sit properly but that would mean that I put my head on his chest. I'm not doing that. I still don't know what has got him like this. I can feel the tension radiating from his body, he's stiff. So instead I do what I just said I'm not going to do, I kick off my shoes and settle myself properly, his arms remain on my shoulders but mine go around his body and I place my head on his chest. I listen closely to his heart, its beating fast…faster than it should be. And I find it extremely weird because his body is not showing any sign of nervousness or anxiety or anger anymore. He exhales.

What ever happened to "I hate him, he's an airhead and a dickhead"? This is the closest I've ever been to any man…well voluntarily. And even before I never thought it would feel so right. I thought I'd hate the touch of a man but somehow this feels like something that should be happening. I actually feel stupid now because he's only holding me because he needs someone to comfort him, I just so happen to be the closest person. I'm attaching emotion to his act of need and I know it won't end well…

His breathing is level; I think he fell asleep. Kyafana he looked like he hadn't slept when he walked in here, he must rest. He'll be fine when he wakes up…hopefully.

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I waited for him to fall deep into sleep and then I untwined myself from his arms. He held me like one would hold onto a lifeboat in a sinking ship, but I managed to stand up without waking him. It's weird seeing him like this. Even in his sleep he still looks unsettled and uneasy. Funny thing is that I don't even know the guy that well. All I know is that he is a man of few words, he smiles and laughs but it's not very often. He's smart but he's controlling and I can't seem to get over that. I don't know whether he's controlling in general or if it's only towards me.

I must cook, so he wakes up and has something to eat. He'll probably be hungry. I'll make chicken and mash and gravy. It's all I can think of right now. I take out the ingredients and place them on the counter only to realise that I also put tomatoes on the counter. I smile at myself, remembering that he doesn't eat tomatoes. I wonder if he's allergic or if he just doesn't like them. I slice, chop, dice and spice until I have something that looks fit for a person needing comfort. Mash is pretty easy to make and so it's just marinating and roasting the chicken then making the gravy. I keep wondering if I should boil some vegies or make a salad but he doesn't look like the type for salads. He likes meat that much I know because he told me yesterday when he was downing my food. It's good that way because I love meat too. Don't judge me, I just so happen to love meat more than the average human being.

He wakes up just as I'm about to dish up. His eyes are still bloodshot but I'm guessing that's because he just woke up. He walks to the fridge, his fridge, and take out a bottle of water. He doesn't even say hi. He just walks back to the sofa. He looks better though, less stressed and angry.
He has to tell me what it was that bothered him so much; I mean he can't expect me to be his pillar for no reason. I'd feel used, I have to admit. I can't figure this man out, and sometimes it annoys me BUT most of the time it intrigues me. I dish up and put the food on a tray.

He looks at me when I walk in, pushes the coffee table towards him. I put it down, I'm not going to kneel this time, yesterday it offended him. Look at me taking into consideration all of these things, you'd swear he was my husband. But nix! I'm not even sure what my relation with him is so I'll just settle on 'friend'.

"Ngiyabonga." He says as I put the tray down. I nod and stand there with my arms folded. He notices me and widens his eyes. What's wrong with him, is he stupid?

"This time you're not going to talk your way out of explaining." I say.

He raises his brows.

“I'm serious Nkululeko.”
I say. I really am. I don’t care whether he’s ready to talk or if he wants to, he must explain and I must understand.
“Could you at least sit down, you’re scaring me.” he says, there’s a slight smile on his face

Jeez, this can't be real. He was in the deepest stage of depression like a minute ago and now he’s cracking stupid jokes. And I mean if anyone should be talking about scary it’s me. Unlike him, I was actually scared when he came in here. His jaw was so clenched that I could actually see the outline of his jaw. He rolls his tongue around his mouth when he’s angry, I noticed that today. I sit down.

“Eat.” I say
He raises his brow again, I raise my own and he picks up the plate. Maybe if I’m always this fierce he’ll end up listening to half of my instructions because right now this is working really well.

“But it’s hot.” He says, he sounds like a child…I nearly laugh.

“Okay then, talk.” –me

He puts the food down and exhales. He pops his fingers and stretches his neck. Something else
I've noticed that he does a lot, but right now I'm not sure if he just does it or if he does it when he’s feeling some kind of way.

“And what if I say I don’t want to talk about it?” he says. He’s testing waters I see.

“I’d say I don’t care.” –me

He looks slightly surprised at my response but he quickly shrugs it off.

“Mthethwa…he’s being released.” He says and it’s weird because he says it like it’s a huge weight off his shoulders to say it out loud but I don’t understand a single thing he said.

“I don’t follow, Mthethwa is…”-me

“Ubaba, uNgabaza.” –he says

I still don’t get it.

“Released from…”
“Prison.”

What the hell?! I know my eyes are wider than they should be, he looks at me and nearly laughs. Why is he laughing at this now?

“Your father was in prison?” I ask, still stunned. How is this a thing?

He picks up his plate again.

“Yes.” He says. Okay, talking to Nkululeko has proven to be the most difficult task in the world because he always responds in one word answers and I have to dig for the rest.

“Why?” –me

He stops eating and looks at me. He’s thinking.

“Arms trafficking.” He finally settles. There’s something he’s not telling me. I just know it.

“When did you find this out?”

He looks confused.

“That he’s being released.” I clarify

“This morning.” He says and carries on eating.

“And that angered you, why did it anger you?” Ghosh I feel like a shrink! But I need to know, surely he doesn’t act like that every time he’s bothered by something.
If that’s the case then he needs help, professional help.

“I hate the man Mbalenhle. My life would do just fine without him.” He says. I think I'm starting to annoy him. I should back off.

He notices the look on my face.

“I'm sorry.” He says

Did he just apologise? Him?!

“Look, Mbalenhleit’s just that we’ve all had to go through a lot of shit in the name of that man. I despise him and I guess I just let my anger get the best of me.
Did I scare you?” –him

Should I be honest?

“Yes.” I say

He looks down. “And you let me in anyways?”-him

I could ask myself the same question. Let me give him a taste of his own medicine because I know he wants a full explanation.

“Yes.”

He smiles. He looks a whole lot better.

“See, all you needed was some sleep to feel better.” I say.
He shrugs

“Actually all I needed was you.” he says. Then he grabs the remote and carries on eating like he did not just say what I heard him say.

Did he just…?

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I never said anything after he said what he said. Well not about it anyways, I feel like he was just saying it because I helped him and stuff. But it was in the way he said it. Look I think my head is going to burst open if I carry on like this. It’s 4-ish and I think I might’ve spent the majority of my day on a sofa with a man who has the ability to unravel me without even trying. It’s frustrating now, I've never had to deal with all these feelings that I have. I'm not going to act on them, I wouldn’t know where to start. But what worries me the most is if he has the same feelings and he decides to act on them I don’t think I'm ready for that.
I've never been in a relationship and I don’t even think I’m ready to be in one. Honestly I would struggle with the whole affection thing plus nje what is wrong with me? Who said anything about relationships?
Tholukuthi Nkululeko is just being his normal self and I'm misunderstanding everything. After all, when we were talking there was no sign of anything else but friendship. We talked and laughed and all in all we had a nice time in each other’s company. He’s a nice guy, as penetrating and enigmatic as he may be, he is still a nice guy.

He told me a bit more about his father. He was chilled about it; to say he had calmed down would be an injustice. It was rather unusual because when he arrived he was livid and distressed and when we actually got around to talking about the issue he was level. Don’t ask, I don’t know.

So now I have to decide what I'm going to be spending the rest of my days doing. I should call Ayanda…I have decided to spend that man’s money because firstly, I need to and secondly he wants me to. I guess I'll just have to learn to live with such things because as far as I know, this is the life I'm living and these are the people in it.

“Friend…”

“Mbali…” he sounds weird; his voice is deeper than normal.

“Am I interrupting something friend?”-me
He sounds like he’s moving…

“No honey, Zwide was watching me. Had to act like you were one of my hoes.” He says in his normal voice

Yazeyanzimaimpilo. I wonder how long he’s going to keep this up for.

“Oh, okay. I was just calling to tell you that we’re going shopping ksasa.”-me

I'm trying to stop myself from laughing at him.

“Eitrherway, I was going to drag you to the mall even if you hadn’t agreed. You dress like a hippy who had a child with the ANC.” –him

This guy, he genuinely hates that shirt. He says it makes me look like iqaba but as for me…anginavalo.

“Stop hating on my fashion Ayanda.”-me

“What fashion?” he answers almost immediately.

I can't deal with him; he must go back to his life of pretending. As for me, I will strangle him.
“You're so mean friend… I need to find a job, this thing of staying at home is annoying now.” –me

He keeps silent.

“But you have Mr Mthethwa…”

I will hang up.

“Are you ever going to stop about that”-I shout

He’s laughing, This is not funny!

“Honey, hlala phansi. I was just kidding but you just went on defensive mode like that!” he says, still laughing

I will not deal with this, even though he might be right I'm not going to entertain him.

“I'm going to sleep.” I say

“At 6 pm?” he says, sounding baffled

“I don’t have anything better to do. I'll read and then sleep. You know the life nje nawe.” I say.

Ang'mazi ukuthi ungenwe yini because he knows full well that I don't have a life so whether I sleep at 6 pm or at 6 am it will make absolutely zilch difference.

"Your life is sad friend." –him

"Don't say that, I'd rather this than…" I stop myself before I say anymore.

"Goodnight friend." I say instead

"Good evening honey." He says and then hangs up.

I'm tired. I must sleep.

My phone beeps. Must be some message from Vodacom or something…oh, it's a text, for me?

Don't play with fire, you will get burnt. It reads

Okay, this is freaky.
Could it be that it's from the same person who keeps putting those notes under my door? But I don't understand, what did I do to anyone? As far as I know, I'm not seeing anyone and so I should not be getting these threats. What the hell is going on here?

I stay awake in my bed for at least 30 minutes trying to figure this out until I realise that I'm not getting anywhere. I stand up to lock all the windows and door.
Nx, buka manje I won't even sleep easy because of this. How did this person get this number anyways? I settle back in bed but it takes a while before I can fall asleep.

Actually all I needed was you…

Stop thinking about him Mbalenhle.

Chapter Three

I'm going for a jog; this time I have equipment because I made sure to buy it yesterday on that shopping spree with Ayanda. Actually I think I might've bought everything I needed. I felt guilty for spending for the first hour or so but then the guilt faded away as soon as I saw a pair pastel pink pumps at Edgars. I was ready…

I shopped, I have to say. Regardless of the fact that I don't know how to walk in heals I bought about five pairs of shoes. One pair was really expensive but that should be the least of my worries. I sound like a blessee; I know but then again I don't care anymore. I even bought African printed head wraps and a beautiful African print pencil skirt. I've discovered my style, well more like developed but still. I like black…and as a result I ended up buying two black dresses. Ayanda was actually starting to get impatient because I was trying on everything.
You can't blame me; this is not something that happens every day in my life. I also am in dire love with dresses that hug my body, and I love African print. I also bought All-Stars and three pairs of jeans. Out of pure want, I decided to buy Nkululeko a pair of Adidas shoes. It's going to be my way of saying thank you, I realised yesterday that I've never actually thanked him.

Then Ayanda dragged me to Temptations, I nearly passed out. It was so awkward; I don't understand why women wear the things they wear under their clothes. I don't have anyone to impress so maybe I will never understand but yoh guys, those things look uncomfortable beyond measure.
Regardless though, I ended up buying a few things from there, lace underwear and push up bras (I only bought that because of the dress I'll be wearing to the event tonight) …but that was it.

I head out, it's a beautiful morning. This time I promise I won't get lost…can't be making the same mistake twice now can I? Although I have to admit, I wouldn't mind Nkululeko's company right now.

I run, I run until my legs can't carry me…I don't know why I do this to myself. Every time I run I end up overdoing it and it puts a lot of strain on my body. I wish I had music to calm me down…manje ke I'll have to get a new phone for that. Something else I also learnt yesterday is that Nkululeko and I share a love for deep house. I wasn't even surprised; I saw a Black Coffee album that day when I walked him to his car.

Where did he come from?

"Do you mind if I join you?" he says

I don't know this guy, and I don't understand why he'd want to take a jog with a stranger. He's tall, well built and light skinned. He has one of those fade hairstyles that all male millennials seem to have. I barely even look at him, I shrug and I guess he takes it as a no because he carries on jogging next to me. I will refrain from speaking to him, that's what I'm going to do.

"My name is Yonda." He says, he's struggling to keep up. I guess the body is just for Instagram then…

I nod. He must understand that this is not going to get him anywhere, if this is his way of hitting on me then he is failing dismally.

He has this smug look on his face…he's pretty. He's a pretty boy.

“What’s a beautiful lady like yourself doing jogging alone?” he asks

“Well I'm not jogging alone anymore…thanks to you.” I realise my response sounds snappy and rude as soon as it exits my mouth. I didn’t mean for it to.

“I thought you might need some company; do you have a name?” he says

If I run faster I'm pretty sure he won't catch up to me…but I won't do that.

“Yes.” I think about pulling a Nkululeko on him but then I decide not to. “It’s Mbalenhle Miya.” I say

I can see the complex; I wonder if he was planning on jogging this way or if he’s just doing it now because of me.

“It’s nice to meet you. A lovely name for a lovely lady.” He says

His level of cheese is ridiculously high. I don’t know whether he expects me fall on my knees and beg him to have me or…

“Thanks.” –me
Thank goodness, I'm almost home.

He has this smile plastered on his face, he has a beautiful smile I must say. I've seen better. Enhle, what is wrong with you.

I'm sweating, I'm panting and I'm tired!

“This is my stop.” I say as I slow down as I approach the complex gate. He stops when I stop. He must carry on with his jog.

“You should join me for dinner one of these days.” –him

Excuse me?

“No, thank you. I have food in the house.”

He laughs.

“How about we just hang out then?” he asks

How does one get rid of unwanted attention from a man? Okay let me just…

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, my boyfriend wouldn’t appreciate it much.” – me. What in the world possessed me into saying such a thing!? What boyfriend Mbalenhle?

He raises his eyebrows and bites him upper lip. He's going to back off. Good, at least it worked.

"Lucky guy." He says while backing away

"Yeah…bye." I say as I open the gate. This is me telling him that I've had enough of this conversation and I'm glad he understands because he shrugs and says goodbye then he's off.

Yonda didn't tell me his surname. It's fine, I'll never see him again anyways…

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The rest of my day is spent on the couch, looking at the Classifieds section. I really need to find a job, especially now because I've started spending that money and although it's not even close to being finished, I know it's going to run out.

I must start getting ready for this event, I really don't know much about it. All I know is that there will be important people and it's supporting some organisation that helps with assisting kids without parents. They don't just help orphaned kids, they also deal with kids who were abandoned and those who ran away from home because of some circumstance or the other. Ayanda tells me that his family plays some role in sponsoring food parcels for the organisations. It's a great initiative, I have to say.

"Mbali! Open this door!"

It's Ayanda, why is he here? It's too early…right? I quickly press 'i' on the remote and I'm assured that it is indeed too early. I was getting worried there. And anyways why can't Ayanda be normal and knock like everyone else does instead of shouting my name. This guy can be so ghetto at times. I rush to open the door.

Dammit friend! He looks as dapper as they come, I have to say if this guy wasn't gay, I would be drooling right now. He's wearing a black tux, white crisp shirt, bowtie and all. Jeez, how does a person look like this? You can never tell that he's only a waiter, the things a good suit can do.

"Friend, you look so sexy." I say

He laughs.

"They'll start thinking I'm straight." He pushes me out of the ways and makes his way in. I see the instant change in his expression.

"And you? Who are your parents? The Gupta's?" he says, looking around the apartment. He really is stunned; I can just see it. This is why I've never invited anyone to this place, they'll start thinking I'm some undercover on artist.

“You have a blesser? I can smell him, just admit it.” he says…now he’s walking around, going in and out of rooms. You’d think, with all the money his family has he would be used to this.

I'm merely following him around, trying to figure out what exactly it is that he is doing here.

“Ayanda, wasn’t the event supposed to be starting at 7 pm?” –me

He stops, looks at me from head to toe.

“Do you not understand that you need my help?” he says, like I just asked him a stupid question

And what does he mean ‘I need his help’? I can get dressed by myself.

“Have you even bathed nje?” he says, still looking at me up and down

I laugh, nx you know useyangijwayela. Surely I don’t look that bad!

“Hawu Ayanda, I bathed. And I was just about to start getting ready.”

He takes me by the hand and leads me to my room.

“Sit.” He instructs while pointing at my dressing table chair. I have no idea what he’s up to but I'm sure I don’t like it.

“There’s a small kit I bought yesterday, I slipped it into the Temptations shopping bag because
I knew you wouldn’t even open it.” he says

What! I roll my eyes; this person is something else.

“I left the bag in the closet.”-me

He was right though, I didn’t even bother looking inside that Temptations shopping bag. The irony. He moves swiftly to the closet; he almost screams when he realises it’s a walk in. Okay, I can't stop myself from laughing. I can hear him as he grabs the bag

“What the hell Mbali?” he says as he throws the bag on the bed. I'm still laughing at his madness. This moment would be so much more glorious if this house belonged to me. I'm not telling him that though.

“What’s in the bag?” –me, still trying to stop chuckling

“Make-up. I knew you wouldn’t buy it…” he says, a mischievous smile covering his face

No! I'm not putting make-up on my face!

“Friend, forget it! I'm not putting that thing on my face.” I'm standing up, ready to leave him here.

“Hawu but Mbali, it’s going to look good. I swear I'll do it properly for you.” he says

It’s a no from me.

“Nope.”-me

“Please, why not?”-he asks

“Hhayibo, you want me to look like some plastic hoe from ekhoneni? Never!”

He laughs. I'm not joking, he must know.

“Mbali I swear; you have nothing to worry about. It’s early so if I do it and you don’t like it then I'll just wipe it off.” He says, still laughing.

Okay, maybe that’s a better plan. I sit back down.

“Please don’t make me look like I used a spoon to apply it.” I warn.

He’s still laughing. This is not funny. I knew this guy was up to no good.

He spends the next 45 minutes plucking my brows, I have naturally bushy eyebrows and this is painful! Jeez, people are not lying when they say beauty is pain. He does the whole thing, from waxing my lady moustache, to applying eye shadow. I have nice skin so I don’t need that foundation thing. And I told him I want my make-up to be as minimal as possible. I'm starting to see it come together and as much as I hate to admit it, I look pretty beautiful. He even applies red matte lipstick, I bought that knowingly yesterday because I thought it might suit me. I didn’t think it would look this good. He even manages to do my hair. Although it’s only just combing it up and then securing it with a head band.

When I see the final portrait in the mirror I'm stunned. I actually look beautiful; I look like myself but better. It’s not even a lot of make-up. Damn, Ayanda is really good at this. He never told me about this. And to think I didn’t trust him.

“They will drool.” He says, as he finishes with a touch of lipstick.

I smile, I love it.

“I cannot believe this friend, you are really good at this.” –me

“Yeah, tell that to Zwide.” He says while rolling his eyes.

This situation with his father has been going on for way too long. A good father would accept his child no matter what…but then again what do I know about good fathers?

“Uncengeni vele kuZwide?” I ask, while standing up to take my dress out of the closet.

“Ifa lakhe oe. I need it.” he says it so casually. I can't help but laugh

“Usho ukuthi nje he would cut you out of his will if you told him you’re gay?”- me

“That and so much more.” He replies all too quickly.

He must be kidding.

“But you’re the only child. He can't just do that.”

“It’s his money honey, he can do as he pleases. He makes it a point to remind me of that.” He says, I see an ounce of hurt but he quickly shrugs it off.

“Get dressed, it’s 6:15 pm already.” He says, shooing me off.

The dress we chose is astonishing, if I do say so myself. It’s an off the shoulder. It’s black until my waistline and then it’s a lovely red African print. It makes me feel like a queen I have to say. And then I'll wear those pastel pink pumps. I even shaved my legs for this occasion, I wanted to make sure I don’t embarrass myself in front of all those influential people. Ayanda tells me that the MEC will also be in attendance, this must be a big deal then. Who knew I'd ever attend such events?

“Look at you. You look fit for royalty.” Ayanda says as I walk in. I have this smile painted on my face and I don’t think there’s a single thing in the world that could erase it. I look and feel beautiful I was worried that this dress would show the scars on my back but it’s just high enough to hide them.
That was definitely a deciding factor.

“We’re going to be late.” I say, looking at the time and realising that it’s just after half six. Plus, we have to take a cab because neither of us have cars. Maybe I should call Chinwa so he can fetch us. I grab my clutch, lock the door and we’re off.

I noticed that parked outside the gate is a stunning car, it’s hard not to notice.

“Zwide can come in handy.” Ayanda says as he moves to the driver’s side of the car.

This is his?

“Zwide gave you this?” I ask, this day has been nothing short of stunning!

“Only for today. He said he didn’t want me embarrassing him and myself by arriving on foot”

The way he says it makes me burst out laughing; Imagine, arriving on foot to such a aristocratic event like this. Cha shame, maybe Zwide is not as bad as Ayanda paints him out to be. But then again, he only gave Ayanda the car because he doesn’t want to be embarrassed.

I open the passenger side. The interior is splendid. Covered in black leather with silver accents. The car looks fit for a sports magazine. Quite honestly, I know very little about cars but I know top of the range when I see it.

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By the time, we arrive there are already people inside. There is also a lot of media coverage on this event. I'm greeted by a lot of noise; nut it’s not that overwhelming type of noise. Everyone is laughing, people look elegant.
I’ve noticed a couple of heads turning as I walk by; I guess I look good then. My arm remains attached around Ayanda’s. I feel sorry for this guy, this façade of his is not going to get him anywhere. He’s managed to paint a smile on his face. We paused for a few pictures, I don’t know what they were for but I did what I had to so I could look like the perfect date. Honestly if someone had told me that I’d be here eight months ago, I would've laughed in their face and then cursed them for selling me a dream.

There are banners with the organisation’s name and the sponsors. It looks so elegant; the venue alone is just so well decorated. There’s a lot of metallic colours. The golds and silvers but it’s all balanced out with a lot of white. I feel like a child walking into an aquarium. Ayanda is being bombarded with questions, something about the work his parents are doing. His ventures and all of that. He fails to mention that he’s working at the Cargo Hold as a waiter, why am I not surprised. One of the reporters asks for my name and I just stand there frozen until Ayanda answers for me. Gosh, I feel like an idiot. My arm is starting to get tired and my face is getting sore from all this smiling. I’d actually love to sit down and get away from all this chaos.

Just as I whisper my words in Ayanda’s ear I see him approaching. What is he doing here? He’s wearing navy blue tuxedo, a cream collarless shirt. He looks striking and immediately my throat goes dry. He’s coming here, to us. I nudge Ayanda to his direction. He stands in front of us, no smile…nothing.
Ayanda straightens up.

He’s not even looking at me, what is he…

Oh, the arm. I instinctively try to remove it from Ayanda’s but he’s having none of it and he grips tight. What is wrong with him?

Now Nkululeko is just standing with his hands in his pockets, looking as angry as hell. Why is he angry anyways? It's not like I'm not supposed to be living a life.
One of us has to talk and I'm assuming that's going to be me.

"Nkululeko… I didn't know you'd be here." I stupidly say, obviously, you didn't know!

He raises his eyes and looks at me. I feel like digging a hole to Tokyo and starting my life all over again. See, he has this ability to make me small without even uttering a single word.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" Ayanda, his voice has gone deeper. Why is he like this?

Nkululeko looks at him, then at me. Could you please just say something?!?

"Nkululeko, this is Ayanda Nxumalo. Ayanda, Nkululeko Mthethwa." –me

Ayanda reaches out for a handshake. Nkululeko takes it.

This is extremely awkward for me. I wish Ayanda would just tell him he's gay so this can end.

"Quite the grip you have there Mr Mthethwa." Ayanda says. He's acting too manly for my comfort!

And why is Nkululeko not talking?

"It was nice seeing you. You look beautiful" –Nkululeko, he says this and then he walks away, leaving me dry of a reaction.

He can't just leave like that. I want to call him back.
"Why did you do that?" I say at Ayanda, I'm so annoyed!

He shrugs. I could punch him right now!

"I just wanted to see if the cop would get jealous." He says

And then what? So, he gets jealous. What were you trying to achieve!?

"Ayanda, don't pull that shit. I need to go talk to him." I say. He's still not willing to let go of my arm.

"What's it to you? I thought you said you don't like him." He says

Is he being serious, is this what this is about?

"Stay out of my business!" I snap. He releases my arm. Good.

“Mbali, I was just having some clean fun.” He says. He sees nothing wrong with what he did.

“Next time Ayanda, have some clean fun with your own life! Maybe you might even grow some balls and stop pretending to be something you’re not!” I regret my words as soon as I say them but I won't apologise, I'm too angry and I don’t even know why. Well I know why but I don’t think I'm ready to confront what I'm feeling right now.

“You don’t get to judge me just because you’re having a bitch tantrum.” He’s whispering, I know he doesn’t want to draw attention on himself.

Nx. I leave him standing there and start walking. I don’t even know where I'm going and why I'm going there. What is wrong with me? My throat goes dry as soon as I see him. I am confusing the hell out of myself. My feet are leading me straight to him, he’s standing with a whole bunch of other people. He doesn’t really look engaged in whatever it is that’s being discussed.
I'm glad, because I'd feel really shitty seeing him having a good time. I touch his arm and he turns around.

“Hi.” I say, I feel like I have a giant lump lodged in my throat.

He puts his one hand in his pocket, the other holding a glass of what looks like whiskey. He doesn’t drink, well he doesn’t do it often.

“You’re going to drive me crazy.” He says…his voice calm. But he looks frustrated.

He is talking about Ayanda?

“Go back to him…whoever he is.”

His words hurt. Why is he being like this?

“He’s my friend Nkululeko. Why are you upset?” –me

He looks at me like I just asked him the most stupid question in the world.

“Why am I upset?” –him. He’s starting to get angry. He’s going to make a scene and that is not good for either of us.

“Can we talk in private?” I ask
He stretches his neck then puts his drink on the nearest table. His hands lock into mine, the act alone stiffens my body. He walks, and I follow until we are eventually at an empty room. We’ve been silent throughout but his breathing is heavy…he gets like that when he’s angry.

“What is wrong with you?” he asks, he’s not calm anymore

What is wrong with me? What is wrong with him!?

“Nkululeko but…”

“Don’t speak.” He commands

I keep quiet, I've forgotten my thoughts.

“Why do you not understand me?” he says

I don’t follow. Should I answer him? And what does he mean ‘why don’t I understand him’? He is literally the hardest person to figure out! Do I look like Dr Phil to him?

“I love you and I will kill him.”

My head starts spinning, did he just… no I must've heard wrong. He said he loves me. He can't, he can't. He can't. My jaw drops open. He can’t be serious. He has his hands in his pockets, he looks so powerful. Unfazed, unapologetic and so freaken potent! Needless to say, my mouth is dry and this matte lipstick is not making it any better because I would try to lick my lips but it won't work. He’s going to say he’s joking…any time now…

“What you just said doesn’t make any sense to me.” I say. Why am I being so stupid? What doesn’t make sense?

He looks at me, confused a bit.

“Ayanda is gay.” I manage. I'm hoping that as a result of that revelation he will change his mind and decide that he doesn’t love me anymore, it was just jealousy. Instead he shrugs.

“Good for him.” He says; not looking the slightest bit affected.

I'm going to walk out.
I'm going to walk out and leave him here. I'm not thinking straight; he can't love me. How can you love me when you know me? He knows everything I've been through; why would he love me? I'm no woman, I'm an excuse.
He doesn’t know what he’s saying.

He takes my wrist just as I prepare to leave.

“You can't go, you heard me right?” he says, his voice low. I'm going to fall over because my knees are really weak. And yes, I heard you…that is precisely why I'm running!

“Nkululeko, please…” I've become really feeble. And he can see that.

“Mbalenhle don’t go.” His hand, why is it on my waist…and why am I letting him pull me closer to chest? Stop this Mbali!

“But I need to…”
“I love you. It scares me.” he’s being serious, it’s not a joke. I want to talk but I can't anymore, not when he’s this close to me. Not when he’s breathing on my forehead. Not when he’s about to…

His mouth slides over mine, and I let it. His arms wrap tightly around my waist and I let them. Even though I stumble back a bit, I still let him indulge himself in me and although I have no idea what to do, I try my best to follow his lead. His mouth slants over mine, kissing me slow and deeply, a trace of whiskey and his own distinct scent. I seal my mouth over his, and for that time I forget everything. I forget who I am, where I come from. Who he is and why we couldn’t possibly be doing the right thing…

“See, you love me too.” He says as he slowly lets me go.

What have I done? I just stare at him, breathless and somewhat regretful. How could I be so weak? What am I going to tell this man when he starts wanting things that I won't give to him? I shouldn’t have come here.

I push him away; he looks hurt by my sudden act of coldness. He can't honestly think that this is going to work out.

“Mbalenhle…”

“No Nkululeko, this is not going to work. You don’t love me…you’re just saying that because…”

“Don’t tell me how I feel Mbalenhle. Don’t do that.” I'm on the verge of irritating him, I can just see it.

“I have to go…”

His hand reaches for mine but this time I slip away and immediately start walking. He must not cause a scene and come running after me. As soon as I slam the door I hear him cursing and I know he punches the wall because I hear the sudden thud.

I'm sorry.

****

“You’ve calmed down?” Ayanda says.

I have, and I feel terrible for all the shit that came out of my mouth. I was just…I don’t know, confused I guess.

“I didn’t mean what I said.” I say, I really didn’t.

He shrugs.

“You were just drunk in love. What did the cop say?” he asks, while offering me his arm. I take it and we carry on walking just as we were before Nkululeko showed up and messed up my brain.
He kissed me, he kissed me and I let him. I let him because I wanted him to. And then, I did what I thought I could never do, I returned his affection.
Why did I do that? Surely he was just saying the whole ‘I love you’ thing out of jealousy or maybe even anger. He didn’t mean it…that I know for sure.

“Nothing. He didn’t say anything.” I lie. I'm not good with lies but he doesn’t notice because he’s not even looking at me.

We keep walking, people make conversation along the way. I wonder if we’re ever going to sit down, right now I feel like I'm just walking around aimlessly.
“Act clingy, nang’uZwide.” He says and his hand immediately reaches for my waist. I feel so used.

Ayanda’s father is what you call a manly man. He’s wearing a tailored grey suit. The man looks like walking money. You can see that back in his day, he was quite the charmer. Even now, he has a well-built body. He has a bit of a belly but it’s nothing major. You know even though he’s walking with his wife I only notice him because of his aura. He’s a ‘look at me, I'm here’ kind of man. The type that turns heads. Ayanda’s mom on the other looks like a fragile little child next to Zwide. She’s beautiful nonetheless. I see where Ayanda gets the complexion.

“Baba…” he does that thing of deepening his voice again. It’s starting to get freaky how he can just switch so instantly, I guess it’s because he’s use to it now.

“Ndondana…you made quite the entrance with such a beautiful young lady on your arm.” He’s looking at me now. I have absolutely no idea what to say. So I smile and pray that Ayana will save me.

“Yebo baba, she is beautiful indeed. Mbali, this is my father Mandla Nxumalo and my mom Yvonne.” –Ayanda.

His father stretches out his hand for a handshake, I take it almost immediately. His mom on the other hand looks like she’s planning on hugging me. Might as well, she even smells lovely.

“Darling, it’s nice to finally meet you. Ayanda is forever going on about you.” she says, she has a perfect smile. Yoh, guys…you know when you can smell ‘rich’ mina I don’t understand. And what does she mean Ayanda is always going on about me? What’s there to even say?

“It’s nice to meet you to Mrs Nxumalo…”

“Oh, please call me Yvonne.” She says. I don’t know where Ayanda and his father disappeared off to but now I'm left alone with his mother and I’d be lying if I said I don’t feel the slightest bit awkward.

“You look stunning, I see where Ayanda gets the looks…” Eish Mbali you’re so stupid, now she’s going to really think that Ayanda and I have a thing going on.

“Child please, I'm old now. This is just a reminder of what I used to be…you know back in my days I was quite the pageant queen.” I see her face brighten as she says this. She must've really loved it, I'm not even surprised kodwa.

“Pageants? I could never.” I say, I'm genuinely enjoying speaking to the woman; I even feel less awkward

“Oh but you could. You know when the going gets tough you make the most irrational decisions. I was desperate for cash so I did pageants. They paid a few bills…if I won.” She laughs. I can't imagine her being anything but rich, the whole desperate for cash thing does not even sound right coming out of her mouth.

“So you didn’t love it? You just did it because of the cash?” –me

She takes a glass of chardonnay from a waiter passing by.

“No, of course I did.
Eventually I realised it was working to my advantage so I learnt to love it.
That’s how I met Mandla anyways. He was there for his girlfriend.”
She says, she sips her cava and I see a slight smile on her face but it quickly disappears.

“And you snatched him?” I ask, I'm hoping it’s not a rude question.
“As fast as I could honey.”

I can't help but laugh this time.

“So tell me Mbali, what do you do?” she asks so casually. This woman is graceful, I’ve realised that.

Look at this now, what am I going to say? Thanks a lot Nkululeko…if this was a week ago I could tell her I'm a waitress but now I can't! Nx.

“I'm currently unemployed, but I'm looking for a job. It’s not easy.” I settle for the truth.

“Oh yes, Ayanda told me when you lost your job at Cargo Hold.” –her

He did? She sees the look of surprise on my face.

“How are your computing skills?” she asks

I panic for a moment.

They really aren't that great, I only used computers at school but even then, they were outdated and irresponsive when they wanted to be. But I'm sure if I could have some time to learn, I'd figure it out. There is a laptop in the apartment but I've never used it so…

"Uhm…I can use a computer. I know the basics like typing and …" I'm not lying, I hope this doesn't qualify as lying.

There are a few women approaching, they look her age and most likely her status. She smiles at them; I'm guessing they're friends then. I don't want to be stuck here when their rich wife conversations start…

"Mbali, you must call me tomorrow. I think I might have something for you. I need a PA very quickly because mine decided to show up at work drunk. I think you'd be great for the job, that if you want…"

"I'd love to." The words leave my mouth so quickly. Out of sheer and uninterrupted excitement I feel like jumping! I cannot believe this, I'm not unemployed!! Well, I think… but still.

"Good, take my card." She says while rummaging through her purse. It's written Chanel.

I'm literally smiling from ear to ear right now. I can't help it. I take the card; I can see that she wants to move along to her people now.

"Thank you so much Mrs…uhm…Yvonne." I manage. I feel so clumsy right now because my mind is all excited and stuff.

She leans in for a peck kiss on my cheek and then walks off.

I must be dreaming, maybe coming here was not a mistake after all.

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As excited and happy as I am, I still really want this event to be over so I can just go home.
There's been speeches from a lot of people already. I've had to sit here with all these girls who were bought by men double their ages and twelve times as moneyed. It's been annoying, to say the least. Most of these girls talk like their noses are blocked, and the conversations they make are either about a pair of shoes or a club in Sandton. I can only take so much.

"Ayanda, exactly when are we leaving?" I whisper. He's been yawning! I don't understand why we're still here.

An old white man is speaking now. He says something about the Congo, I don't know what.
Kodwa he's been speaking for a really long time, I stopped listening at his second use of 'furthermore'. And these heels are going to kill me!
Plus, I'd really like to rest, aside from the job that Ayanda's mom offered me, I still have a lot in my head. Actually it's just one thing…one person. I've tried to dilute his image with petty conversation the whole evening. Heck I even tried some cava, it tasted terrible and I'm never going to put it in my mouth again. I think I need help, someone who will slap me really hard and bring me back to reality because right now I'm starting to think that the idea of him and I might not be as terrible as I make it out to be.

But what does one do in a relationship? That's what he wants from me right? A relationship. I don't know where I'd start, how I'd act. Do I have to spend all my time with him now? Do I just sit back and let him control me even more than he already is? What the hell Mbali, this is not going to work. He really doesn't even love you, he was just saying it because…

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen." It's his voice, I'd know it from anywhere.

I hear some muttering from the girls at my table. I can't blame them; the man is beautiful. He commands attention, and it's funny because he doesn't speak much. He has this aura of power that surrounds him. A consuming energy and I've figured out that's it's the same energy that makes my throat go dry and my head start spinning. The suit on him looks better just by virtue of being on him.

"For all those who don't know me, I am Nkululeko Mthethwa. Co-owner of Mthethwa Healthcare Institutions."

You remember how I've been yearning to leave for the past 45 minutes? Well right now, I'm not planning on going anywhere. In fact, I think I could just sit here and look at him from a distance forever. I confuse myself so much, you don't even understand.

Thing is, I can honestly admit to myself that I have feelings for him, I'm not quite certain what those feelings entail but I know that they are there and they are acting up. But honestly, I just don't think I'm ready for all of this. I don't think I'll ever be ready. And I'm fine with just sitting here and look at this man as he draws me inner and inner into his consuming aura. I'm not even listening to what he's saying anymore; I'm just looking at him. My throat as dry as ever. I like him, I like him a lot.

I should leave before I start going insane.

"Ayanda, we're leaving."
I say while standing up. People start clapping. I assume it's because he's just finished his speech. I would've loved to hear it, maybe I would've if he hadn't told me he loves me earlier…this is partly his fault.

“So soon? Are we running away from something?” he says, looking at me while rolling his eyes.

He must not start with me; I really am in no mood. I just want a nice long bath and my bed. That’s all I want.

“Can we not argue about this Ayanda? I just want to get home please.” I say, I’m a bit desperate now because he’s acting like a child but he’s the only one that can take me home so I have no choice but to beg him.

He finally decides to start moving but he stops in his tracks and looks at something behind me. No.

“Leaving so soon?” he says.

I flush, I genuinely don’t know what to say so I just keep quiet.

“Would you like me to drive you home?” Nkululeko is not one to give up easily then.

I shake my head; he takes my hand. Ayanda’s brow jumps up almost immediately. But I said no, why is he taking my hand? Nx, kodwa nawe Mbali you let him do all these things so don’t act like this is all his fault.

“Nkululeko, I already have a ride home.” I say, almost weakly. I don’t want to fight with him, heck I’m not even sure I want to talk to him.

“We need to talk.” He says it so calmly, as if what we need to talk about does not entail him telling me that he loves me.

“Okay.”-me

He seems surprised at my response. Ayanda is already sitting down eating. This guy has no chill, he literally abandoned me!

A smile reaches Nkululeko’s face, I wonder why. I won’t ask though. His hand is still in mine. I want to say goodbye to Ayanda but clearly he’s not interested so instead I look up at Nkululeko and tell him that we can go. These heels are killing me, but trust and believe that I’m not about to show that in front of him. When we reach the parking lot I realise that it’s a bit cold. It’s a pretty bit parking lot, I don’t think it’ll take us a long time to get to his car though. I know he’s looking at me, which is why I make sure to keep my eyes straight ahead. We haven’t spoken, I’m not willing to break the silence. He’s smiling though, I don’t know why until I look at my hand and realise that it’s still intact in his. He reaches for something in his pocket, car keys…

Whoah! What is that!?

It’s black, everywhere!

From the windows to the rims to the exterior. Gosh, it's beautiful. I've never really been one for cars but I know a beautiful car when I see one. He opens my door. Jeez, the interior is black too. This is nice!

"Impressed?" he asks as he settles into the driver's seat.

"Nah, I've seen better." I say while shrugging. Lord knows I've never been in such a lovely car but right now I need to loosen up and my less than average sarcasm will have to do.

He laughs then starts the car. I can barely even hear the car start, this baby is beyond! I've never seen this car, but I guess those are the perks of being rich. You get to change your cars as much as you change your clothes.

"You know there's no point in trying to deny me." He says while reaching for the gear. He's not even looking at me.

My throat goes dry; his arrogance baffles me. Does he not understand that I'm not ready for any of this? I keep silent.

"Mbalenhle…"

"Nkululeko what is it that you want from me?" I ask, I snap actually

He rolls his tongue in his mouth. What the heck? He's irritated now?

"What don't you understand exactly? That I love you?" he says

"But you don't, you can't." -me
He clicks his tongue. The car comes to a halt. Why is he stopping?

"First of all, Mbalenhle you don't get to tell me how I feel about you. I've battled enough trying to figure it out myself…"

"No but Nkululeko…"

"No, don't speak. Don't you see Mbalenhle? I don't know what to say it anymore, this whole thing, it's not my type of thing. I don't know how to flirt. So I'll just stare at you until you realise that I love you." he says

I can't help the smile that rushes to my lips. I can see that he's battling to find the words and honestly I think it's cute. This wonderful man in front of me, the most enigmatic man I know is sitting next to me confessing his love for me.

"You really love me?" I ask, I don't know where I'm going with this.

"I do, and it scares the hell out of me." he says

This time I laugh. He looks surprised…

“Okay, I hear you.” I say, I lean back into my chair, his jaw drops open. I’m going to laugh again.

“What the hell? Mbalenhle is that all you’re going to say?” he asks, his eyes wide in disbelief.

Look, if I’m going to give this guy a chance then he must know that I’m not easy to deal with.
He loves me, Nkululeko Mthethwa loves me! This man?

“You must kiss me now.” I say, I didn’t mean to say that but what’s done is done.

“I was going to anyways, but thanks for the invitation.” he says, Lord how am I going to deal with such arrogance from one person?

He leans closer, I lean in too. I’m not really sure how this works but it was good the first time so I won’t overthink it much. I guess I should start getting used to this though.

He smells so good, so powerful. He loves me, he really does. His smile hovers around my lips before he reaches for me and tilts my head upwards. I lose myself in his touch, exhaling to the very sensation of having him close to me. He’s consuming, he kisses me with greed and just the perfect amount of tenderness. I just follow, but I could never truly describe the pleasure that I’m feeling right now.

He lets me go, I don’t want him to. The smile reaches my lips before I can stop it. He leans back into his chair; the smile remains on my face. This is going to work. He loves me.

“You made me wait.” He says finally. What does he mean?

“I did?”

“I waited a long time for you Mbalenhle. You’re mine now.” He starts the car

I’m left stunned.

Chapter Four

So I guess I’m dating now. Okay, you don’t understand how weird this is, I was so determined not to. I tried, you saw right? I swore to myself that I would never allow a man to touch me yet I find myself shivering even at the thought of Nkululeko’s touch. Look I know things might have happened a bit too fast but I think this is going to work out. It has to.

He dropped me off yesterday, he didn’t come in. I asked him why and he said he doesn’t trust himself so instead he kissed me goodnight and left. I threw

myself on the bed and replayed the events in my head. I had a mixture of emotions brewing in my head, in fact I still do. I can't doubt that I'm happy though, he makes me happy.

Now I have to figure out a lot of things. For starters, what do I do now? Does he get to touch me whenever he pleases? Am I supposed to talk to him every day? Do I still call him Nkululeko or should I make up some pet name like 'babe' or 'honey'? Does he get to control me even more than he already is? How do I tell his family? Gosh, what if Malwande thinks that I'm an opportunist? But I never planned for any of this to happen, surely she knows that. Before this, I didn't even like Nkululeko. He guy got on every single one of my nerves. Not to say that he doesn't anymore but at least now I know that I like him a lot so it's not that annoying.

I've barely even gotten out of bed but the first thing in my head is him, the way he touches me, like I'm made of porcelain. I can't help but smile to myself.

My phone. I'm disappointed when I see that it's not him.

"Ayanda?" I put the phone on the counter on loudspeaker. I should buy a new phone; this is not even right anymore.

"Don't Ayanda me, where did you disappear off to izolo?" he asks.

Some nerve he has, wasn't he the one that abandoned me? But I am not mad, he did me a huge favour.

"I didn't disappear. I left with Mr Mthethwa…" I say with a slight smile; I know he can't see me but I still can't help it.

"Oh so it's like that, wait…did you just say?" I can hear the shock in his voice.

I laugh.

"Yup. Don't you dare judge me." I'm asking for the impossible I know; he's going to judge me.

"Kodwa do you remember me telling you that he has a thing for you?" this guy though

"Look friend, things just happened. I've never done this before so I'm really confused…"

"Never done what?" he asks all too quickly

"Dating and stuff." I'm a bit embarrassed now that I'm saying it out loud

"What! Tell me you're joking! What do mean?" he says, he's clearly baffled.

“What do you mean what do I mean? I’m saying that I’ve never dated before.” I say

“Mbali no! You’re 23 years old! What have you been doing all your life?” he says

If only you knew. It dawns on me every now and then that Ayanda doesn’t know a whole lot about me.

“I never really got the time for boys in my life.” I settle on that because it’s the closest to the truth.

“Girl, you have deprived yourself of great things!” he says

I can’t help but laugh. He must be joking.

Someone’s at the door. I’m still in pyjamas. Jesu!

I take the phone from the counter and put it back on handset while walking hurriedly to the door.

As soon as I open, his lips are on mine. He kisses me, passionately and with deep desire. I’m caught off guard so at first I don’t return it. I just let his arms tighten around my waist. Then I allow him to draw me deeper. Is this what I’m going to be waking up to because I really don’t mind. I don’t even know where I dropped the phone, all I know is that his arms have placed themselves neatly around my waist and I’m once again very lost in his touch. He lets me go, I guess he’s satisfied with himself.

“Ntokazi.” He says with a dashing smile

I stand, still stunned with my mouth probably still half open.

“Are you going to let me in?” he asks.

This is going to take some getting used to. I move to let him in and then I realise I probably look like crap. I haven’t taken a bath and I’m still in my pyjamas. My phone, I quickly pick it up.

“You must buy a new phone.” he says.

Is he being for real? So early in the morning? He came here to dictate me?

“I will…eventually.” -me”, all of a sudden I feel very shy. I have no idea why.

He notices I guess.

“Hey, don’t do that.” He says while taking me by the waist

My throat goes dry; my knees are shaking.

“I don’t know how to act,” I surprise myself, I didn’t expect myself to be so honest. He places his hands on my shoulders. I look up at him, he’s beautiful. Is he really mine?

“Well I don’t know how you should act either; you confuse me enough.” He says, Nx, you know I thought he was going to speak some words of wisdom. And what does he mean?

“I confuse you?” I ask, and instinctively my brow shoots up. He finds it amusing.

“You have no idea.” He’s still laughing. Mxm, this guy has no idea what confusing is.

“I’m sorry, did I get you fired?” I ask. I think he sees my point here.

“In my defence, I had good reason.” He says while raising his hands.

Yeah well you never explained it to me. How will I ever!

“You want to go for a jog?” I ask

He scratches his head.

“I would…but I injured my feet while on the elevator and so…”

He looks at me wide-eyed. I laugh at his boyish reply. Who injures their feet in an elevator?

“You’re so lazy. Aren’t you going to work today?” -me

“I am, a little later though. I came to greet you first.” He has that boyish look again. I blush, he sees that and it makes him smile. I like it when he smiles. He’s smiled more in these couple of days than I’ve seen him in the past four months I’ve known him. I make him smile. My ego is doing double back flips right now.

“You came to invade me, don’t act like the loving partner.” I say

“I haven’t invaded you yet. There’s still a lot I hope to do.” He says it so casually.

My body stills.

What did I expect? He’s a man, he has needs. But I can’t satisfy them. I just can’t.

“Are you okay?” he asks; he’s walking straight to the kitchen now.

I quickly nod my head. I just lied.

I need to go take a shower. And I also need to call Ayanda's mom about that job she offered me.

"You want me to cook you something?" he asks

I raise my brow; he wants to kill me? I've heard Mondli complaining about his cooking skills. I'd rather pass.

"No, I'll just go take a bath. I'll eat later." I say

He shrugs. I make my way back to the bedroom.

What am I going to wear?
I don't want to seem like I'm dressing up, but I definitely don't want to look like I put in as little effort as possible. A dress? Sure, why not.

I slander on some lotion and put on the dress. This hair! Lord knows I love my afro but it is unruly and it just messes things up for me. I take the afro comb and run it through my hair.

I look fine. I look good.

What is he doing? I quickly run over to the stove.
"Nkululeko, what are you doing?!" I shout.

He jumps up from the couch and runs to the kitchen. I already have the dishcloth in my hands trying my hardest to put out the mini fire that formed from whatever it was that he was trying to cook. Who puts a pan on the stove, leaves it on maximum heat and then goes to watch some TV? Who in their right minds would do that?

He takes the dishcloth from my hand and puts the fire out.

"Are you okay?" he asks while moving the pan to the sink.

"What were you doing?" I ask, I'm baffled beyond explanation.

"I was making an egg." He says as he makes his way to me. "Are you okay?" he asks again.

"Yes I'm fine. You were making an egg? Is that how you always make eggs?" I ask, my eyes wide in confusion.

"I've never made an egg before…"

Laughter escapes my mouth before I know it. I can't stop laughing. Why was he even attempting it?

“You’re laughing at me Mbalenhle?” he says, looking too surprised. I really don’t want to laugh. He nearly burnt the house down.

“Of course I’m laughing at you. I don’t understand who told you that eggs are cooked on maximum heat. And then you just left it there and you went to watch soccer?” I say, still battling with hiding my amusement

“But it’s Man United. I had to…”

Is he serious? He couldn’t just concentrate on the pan for 2 minutes? I’m still laughing. I honestly can’t help it.

We’re both still in the kitchen and he’s still carrying that half burnt dishcloth. I can’t even keep a straight face

“I’m going to kiss that smile off your face Mbalenhle.” He says.

Oh. Is he now?

“You must stay away from the stove Nkululeko.” I say and I’m not even joking. “Who cooks for you anyways? Because surely this can’t be what you go through every time you want to eat.”

He moves closer. I gulp.

“Gabisile cooks for me…” he says it dismissively.

Hold up. Rewind this. My brow shoots up

“Gabisile who?” I ask, my voice is painted in more jealousy than intended.

He seems to find it amusing but he doesn’t laugh. His hands shift to my waist. He smells like smoke. Answer me.
“You’re jealous?” he asks as he pulls me closer so that my chest is leaning on his body. This is not supposed to play out like this. Just answer my question.
I look up at him, irritation drawn on my face. He grins. Mxm.

“No need to get angry, she’s my 45-year-old housekeeper. Happy now?” he says

Oh. Good.

“You look cute when you’re jealous.” He says. I flush, I think I really was jealous

He wants me to kiss him, that’s why he’s holding on so tightly to me. I stand on my toes and give him a kiss. I nearly get lost in him…

“Nkululeko, your hand is on my ass.” I say as I stop kissing him and give him a warning look. He rolls his eyes and moves it to my waist.

Eventually he lets me go and I step away from the hold he has on my waist.

“I need to make a call.” I say

He nods and lets me go. I move to the living room with my phone. I think he’s trying to clean up the mess he made. I fear that he will make more of a mess than what it already is but I let him be.

“Hello, Mrs Nxumalo?” I ask, it only rang once so she can’t be that busy. I’m hoping this is a good time.

“Yes speaking. Can I help you?” she answers through the receiver

“It’s Mbalenhle Miya speaking. I hope this is a good time for you. I was just…”

“Oh Mbali, I was expecting your call. Are you still interested in the job? I’m up to my neck in paperwork and I was hoping that you would be able to start as soon as possible.” She says

I cannot believe this, it’s really happening.

Well it’s Thursday today so I could start on Monday. I feel like starting tomorrow would be too much of an inconvenience for her because it will take me sometime to settle, but on the other hand I don’t want to seem under enthusiastic and suggest Monday.

“I’d love to. When should I…”

“Monday would be great.
Look I’m running a bit late to a meeting. I’ll talk to Ayanda this evening and I’m sure he won’t mind running a few things through with you.”

I can’t even contain my happiness. I’m smiling ear to ear.

“Sure, thank you so much Mrs Nxumalo. Thank you.” I say. She hangs up.

I throw myself on the couch, a smile still stuck to my face. I have a job! Thank you Lord!

He comes in with a glass of juice in his one hand and his phone on the other.

Why is he not at work again?

“Heads up.” He says and I immediately reflex to look at him. He snaps a picture. This crook! I probably look terrible!

“Hey, you can’t do that…” I protest

He places himself comfortable next to me and reaches for the remote.

“Do what? Take picture of you?” he asks

“You can’t take ugly pictures of me, that’s destroying my cred.”

I like it when he laughs. He doesn’t do it often but when he does it makes me feel really good about myself. I feel like I’m good enough to make him do something that he usually doesn’t do. I know it sounds weird but I just feel 10 feet tall when I’m the reason for his joy.

“You don’t have cred Mbalenhle. So when are you starting work?” he asks

I’m about to laugh at the first thing he said when I realise that there is absolutely no way he should know about the second thing that came out of his mouth.

“How do you know about that?” -me

“I heard the phone call.” He says while shrugging.

I raise my brow. You like my indabas neh?

“Okay, but I don’t trust that innocent face of yours. For all I know you could’ve tapped into my phone.” I say

“I wouldn’t do that…”

He is lying. I won’t bother saying it out loud but I roll my eyes just so he knows that I’m on to him. Plus, I need to make him something to eat, that’s what he was doing when he nearly burnt down the house.

“I’m starting Monday.
Let me go make you something to eat.” I say as I try to stand up, he takes my wrist and pulls me right back to the space where I was sitting.

I fold my arms and look at him. What is wrong with him?

“I don’t want food. I want your company.” He says

I flush. I need that water that he was carrying, my throat is suddenly very dry.

“You have work Nkululeko.” I say.

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” he asks with a boyish grin.

Yes. Yes, I am.

“No, not at all. I’m doing the responsible thing and not getting you fired.” I say. I hope he sees what I did there.
“You not going to let the go anytime soon are you?” he says, still grinning

I can’t help but laugh, but I don’t even realise that I stare at him a bit longer than I should until he points it out.

“You’re doing that thing again.” He says

“What thing?” -me’

He clears his throat.

“That thing where you stare too long and I don’t know whether to carry on smiling because you look like you’re lost or confused.”

What? I do not do that!
Well, maybe a bit but it’s only because I can’t believe he likes me. Or as he so freely says, “he loves me”. It baffles me. And it baffles me further that he knows all the things that he knows but he’s still willing to be with me. Yesterday my subconscious kicked in and reminded me that if it seems too good to be true then it probably is, but I brushed it away because I don’t need any negativity in my life.

“I’m just thinking. Unlike you, I actually do that.” I say

“I think.” He says, but the look on his face says he’s not too sure.

“You don’t think Nkululeko, you just do things…”

“I think about you.” he says with his eyebrow raised.

I shut up. That was sweet.

I sit comfortably on the sofa and lay my head on his chest.

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I’m trying to get my life in order. I have so much to do and not enough time. Malwande called me right after Nkululeko left and told me about breakfast on Sunday.
She does this a lot, randomly inviting all of us to dinner or breakfast.
I don’t know why. She seems to enjoy cooking, I think she’s a natural born housewife but somehow she manages to balance being a wife and being a career woman. Honestly, I wonder how she does it.

I should probably get back to Ayanda, I kind of dropped the phone on him because of Nkululeko’s grand entrance.

“Ayanda…”

“You hung up on me friend.” He says, I sense some whining in the tone of his voice

And then because I am me I cannot help but flush as I reminisce why I dropped the phone.

“I had an unexpected visitor” I say, I know he can’t see it but I have the smuggest look painted across my face right now.

“I can imagine. I don’t even know what we were talking about anymore. I have to get back to work, my lunch break ends in five minutes.” He says

Sigh. It’s fine, I’ll just find something else to do with my time, I’ll have a job to keep me busy pretty soon too. I still cannot fathom my luck.

“Okay, it’s fine friend. I’ll talk to you later.” I say and I hang up.

I make my way to the kitchen to make a light meal. I don’t feel like cooking today. Where is that…

I ask him to clean up his mess and he throws everything in the bin? Who throws pots in a bin just because they burnt something in it? And the dishcloth too? What have I gotten myself into?

He threw away my pot?

Chapter Five

“Hey, Mbalenhle. Wake up.”

What? Where am I?

Oh

I can’t remember when I fell asleep but my body is aching. Sleeping in a car really isn’t the most comfortable thing.

“Where are we?” I ask, I realise that I’m still drugged by the sleep but I might as well say something to prevent myself from falling back asleep. I’m surprised Nkululeko let me sleep, I thought he’d wake me up earlier. I guess he realised that it’s his fault that I didn’t get any sleep. For starters, he kept texting me the whole night. Then he got bored of texting and called, I spent hours talking to him until I fell asleep in the middle of a conversation. I don’t even understand why he insisted on calling because he really doesn’t do much of the speaking. I talk, he listens then he says the most random things. Like we’ll be talking about books and he’ll bring up that my voice apparently makes him drunk.

Trust me, I don't understand either.

"We're nearly there. I was just waking you because I miss you." he says

He says this with a straight face, sometimes he has a way of de-romanticising the sweetest things.

I just shrug because I can't exactly blush.

"You seem to know this place pretty well." I've only just noticed that the GPS is not even turned on.

He stretches his neck.

"I've been here before." He says

He has?

"You have?" -me

"Yup." He answers

Typical Nkululeko answer. He answers but he might as well have not answered because not I have to come up with follow up questions so I can know more. Although in his defence, he only does this when he doesn't want to tell me something. So I guess I should leave it at that.

There is silence in the car, only for a while before I decide to search through his playlist and find a song that we both like. I don't think he's the musical type but he does listen to house, deep house more often. I caught him jamming to the Commodores a couple of days ago and I was truly surprised. He doesn't strike me as the type to listen to old music.

I laugh.

"What is it?" he says, he looks straight at the road

How is he not hearing this?

"The lyrics to this song…I can relate." I say, still supressing the laughter

He side eyes me, then I catch a grin creeping up on the corner of his lips.

"I'm being serious, I resented you. In fact, I was this close to loathing you." I say

I decrease the volume of the radio, Trigger by Mobi Dixon still plays as we turn at the off ramp

“You loathed me?” -him, a hint of sarcasm in his voice

“I didn’t loathe you, I said I nearly did. You made me lose my job then you gave me that obscene amount of money. And I swear I started thinking you wanted me to owe you, plus it didn’t help that you always exited the room whenever I entered.” I’m being serious, I hope he sees that.

“You thought I wanted you to owe me?” he asks; he seems hurt but I can’t lie.

“Yes. It was the only logical explanation.”

“I would never do that.”

“I know that now but I didn’t then.” I say

He nods

The road starts getting dusty, it’s a good thing that he’s moneyed and he doesn’t care about the rocks that are getting clogged in his tires. The ride gets a bit bumpy every now and then but all in all, it’s pretty manageable.

My phone beeps.

You’re still playing with fire. Stay the hell away.

Arrgh flip!

I only realise that I said it out loud when takes my phone from my hand. Who the hell told him he can do that? What the hell, no!

“Nkululeko…” I say in quick protest

“Are you still getting these? Why didn’t you tell me?” he asks, he suddenly looks very annoyed.
I thought he’d be angry but if I’m reading him right, then he is very irritated and pissed off.

“Nkululeko.” I say. I’m annoyed too but for a completely different reason

“What?” he looks at me, wide eyed and seemingly victimised.

“You don’t just grab my phone like that.” I say

He looks confused for a while. What for?

“Why not? You have nothing to hide.” He says

He doesn’t understand?

“It’s not about that, it’s a matter of principal. Allow me to have some privacy. I’m sure you wouldn’t like it if I took your phone without your permission.”
I’m trying my hardest to not show him my irritation.

He shifts in his seat, his one hand still placed firmly on the wheel. He reaches for his phone in his back pocket and throws it on my lap.

Nx

“Here, I don’t see what the problem is.” he says

It’s not about that you moron!

There’s about 20 minutes left of this journey, he can spend it talking to the windshield because
I will not be talking to him as of now. I fold my arms and sit back on the chair.

“What did I do?” he asks in an innocent voice.

I roll my eyes.

“Mbalenhle.”

“Nkululeko awungiyeke.” I snap. I take his stupid phone and put it in the cubbyhole.

“But…”

I hand him the deadliest look I can manage. He keeps quiet. Good.

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I feel like I haven’t been here in years. It’s only been a couple of months, but maybe it’s because I’ve changed so much. Nothing here changed, still the same wire gate with the unsecure padlock. I remember the day I walked running out of this gate. I was terrified, I wasn’t even sure of where I was going.

Nkululeko’s hand is placed on my back. I’m not even angry at him anymore.

“You’re sure you want…”

“Nkululeko we’re already here. I want to do this.” I say

He nods and then pulls the gate open, it makes a loud creaking sound.

This house has so many memories, lord I wish I could say they were happy ones but honestly I had the worst years of my life here. It was torture and although I hate the way I got out of these walls, I’m glad I’m out. I hated every single moment

We both walk up to the door in silence. The paint is peeling off the edges of the door frame.
It doesn't seem vacant; I notice a pair of shoes next to the metal rail.
Who could be here?

I knock, the door shifts open. Why is it open?

Nkululeko moves to stand in front of me. He knocks this time. My heart is thumping so hard I start thinking that it will jump out of my mouth if I utter a single word. This place is supposed to be empty.

"Who could that be, I thought I told Vuyiswa to…" she stills the moment she lays eyes on me.

What is she doing here?

She's aged, she was always a beautiful woman. Her beauty has dulled now, the bags under her eyes make her look gaunt. She is robed in an apron dress, a dishcloth in one hand. I hear the footsteps before I see him. Babomkhulu. I never thought I'd ever see him again.

"Ufunani la wena?" he barks. He, unlike my aunt has very little trouble conjuring words.

Nkululeko shifts uncomfortably next to me. My throat is dry; my head is spinning. What are they doing here? Are they living here now?

"I…I came to…"

I still can't believe the sight in front of me.

"Khuluma ntombazane." He says

Babom'khulu has always been a very impatient man. Much like father, he too had drinking problems. In fact, I remember how he used to beat this very same woman who is next to him. She had scars on her face; her beauty did not wane but her spirit did. His beatings left her damaged, not only on the flesh but also within her soul. They used to live not too far from here, when the community started complaining about all of the chaos that he caused he just upped and left. I never saw him after that. Nor did I see her, Aunt Khwezi. I liked her, I have fond memories of her.

"I came to get some documents." I say, this time with a little more conviction in the tone of my voice.

Nkululeko is going to get annoyed really soon, I can feel it. It's in the way his grip tightens around me. He's trying to stop his hand from shaking. We're still standing outside; they are inside the house. My aunt has not said a word since she saw me.

“Ubulale uyise.” He says, while pointing an accusing finger at me.

I gulp.
“I just need the documents.” I say
He doesn’t budge, my aunt looks at me then at him.

“Baba ka Vuyiswa, please let the child in…” she begs, she speaks so softly that it’s hard to make out her words.

Babomkhulu hands her a cold look, immediately she retreats back to her introvert shell. The sight alone makes me want to barf, he hasn’t changed.

Nkululeko clears his throat. No, I’m not letting him say anything. I can fight this battle, in fact I’d appreciate it a lot if it didn’t turn into a battle.

“Babomkhulu I need some documents; I won’t be long.” I say before Nkululeko gets the chance to speak.

He looks at me for a long while, I don’t drop my eyes. I will not.

“Nx, umuntu usedelelwa emzini wakhe.” He says

What the hell? This is not your house!
Before I even get the opportunity to speak, he slams the door in our faces but it doesn’t close because Nkululeko blocks it with his hand.

“She said she wants some documents. Let her in.” he says, I don’t like the look on his face

Uncle looks at Nkululeko from head to toe. Then he clicks his tongue. This is not going to end well.

“And this? You have no shame ntombozane? You bring your pimp to your father’s house. He would turn in his grave.” He barks.

“I didn’t come here to cause any trouble. I just want my things and then I’ll leave.” I say

He reminds me a lot of father. I hate it, maybe as much as I hate him.

We’ve been standing outside this whole time; he isn’t going to budge. That I can tell but I’m no frail puppy so I’m not leaving until I get those documents. It’s not like I can come back some other time because it seems to me like they have already moved in. what type of man moves into his dead brother’s house anyways?

The next occurrence happens fast, very fast.

Aunt Khwezi lets out a small scream. Babomkhulu stands still, looking petrified. It's aimed right at his head.

"Nkululeko put it down."
I plead, the words exit my mouth in a whisper. He's not going to listen. He is furious, more furious then I've ever seen before but this is not his battle to fight.

"Move." He says softly to Babomkhulu; he points his gun to the direction of the couch in the sitting area behind them.

Babomkhulu moves, reluctantly so but he still moves. Aunt Khwezi follows him. I need to stop this.

"Nkululeko, I'm warning you. put it away!" I say, a little strength gained in my voice.

He looks at me briefly, then at Babomkhulu. That same vexed and livid expression is still painted on his face.

"Mbalenhle go take your things."

I stand still, my arms crossed. I'm hoping he'll put the gun down but he doesn't. Instead he sits on the sofa opposite Babomkhulu and Aunt Khwezi and lays the gun neatly on left thigh.

"Go Mbalenhle." He says

It seems safe enough. He wouldn't hurt them…he wouldn't.

I hurry my way to the small space that used to be my room. I've grown so accustomed to that big apartment that this rooms looks small enough to be a pantry. When I lived here, the size of the room was the last thing on my mind. I take it their daughter Vuyiswa now sleeps here.

It's dark, the curtains are still closed but I don't know why because it's already midday. There are papers scattered all over the floor, I catch a glimpse of the carving on the wardrobe door. Mandisa was the one who carved that there. It reads M + M Forever. I swallow the lump forming in my throat to prevent myself from crying.

Breathe Mbali.

It's all in a file, buried deep the trunk at the corner of the bed. Everything in this house, everything creaks when it's being used. From the doors to the floors to the matrasses, that's just the way it is. After digging my way through the pile of clothing, I find the file.

On my way out of the bedroom I can't help but look back for the last time. When I left, I thought it would be last time I saw this place. I'm trying very hard to block all the memories from flooding back…

"You killed my baby! You will pay! You will rot in prison! Devil!"

"You whore, you made me do this!"

Snap out of it Mbali.
It's all in the past now. I keep repeating this over and over in my head as I walk to the sitting room. I stop by the doorway when I hear him talking

"If you ever so much as look at her in the wrong way, I swear ngizokusakaza ubuchopho…"

He's not shouting, in fact he looks so calm that I'm doubting that the words are coming out of his mouth.

"I hope we have an understanding." He says

I can't see uncle's face because the wall is blocking that side of the room, but I know he still has that petrified expression. Nkululeko clears his throat when I walk in. He looks at the file in my hand then signals to the door.

"I'm sorry auntie…" I say. I only wish she would not have been subjected to Nkululeko's irrationality. She doesn't look up to acknowledge my apology.

The walk to the car is silent, just like the first few minutes before he starts the engine. I think, mind you that this is just a thought, that he might actually be more jacked up than I am. I swear I think his mind doesn't function, how can a person be so illogical?

"It's like you want me to hate you." I say. I'm not even looking at him; my eyes remain fixed on the window.

"Mbalenhle I don't want to fight with you right now." He says

"Then why do you insist on angering me? What? You think I'm just going to keep quiet and take it?"

He keeps silent. Oh so I'm being ignored now? Well he's going to hear me out whether he likes it or not!

"You know what your problem is? Your problem is that you think you can solve everything by intimidation. You think if you walk around accumulating fear then you'll be respected. You're so messed up! Jesus, it's like I fell in love with a ticking time bomb! Nkululeko you need to control yourself and that stupid brain of yours! I will get tired of your tactics; how many problems do

you think you're going to solve by pulling out that weapon of yours? Answer me!"

When I stop shouting I feel faint, I didn't even realise how loud I was screaming. He makes me so angry!

"Mbalenhle you need to calm down. I'm not going to apologise." He says, calmness covering his face.

For the first time in a really long time I look at him dead straight in the eye. He must be messing with me, he just said he won't apologise.

"I hate you!" I say, anger flowing through every vein in my body. I hate him so much!

"No. You don't. You love me, and I love you so I don't understand why I have to apologise for something I'm not sorry about." He says

Is he being serious?

"Look, I will never just sit back and watch you get disrespected. I don't care who disrespects you, I just need you to know that I will never let it happen for as long as I live." He says

Lord, have you forsaken me? This is the first time I date and this is what you give me?

"But Nkululeko…"

"I said I don't want to fight with you."

"And I have to listen to everything that you say when you can't even follow one simple instruction from me?"

"What are these instructions that you are talking about? If you're talking about the old man, I already made it very clear that I will not be apologising."

I am so angry! I'm angry at everything! I'm angry at him, I'm angry at myself, at my life and I'm angry at my family! I'm angry at that house and I hate that all of this anger is burning within me! I don't care if it looks like I'm taking out all of my anger on him because he deserves it. He deserves my full wrath! He is an idiot to say the least. What is it that he doesn't understand? That I hate the sight of a gun? That I hate it when he becomes uncontrollably angry because it reminds me of father? That I hate that he is a cop because that uniform has disgusting memories attached it? That I hate that I feel like I ran out of the house of a brutal man and walked into the arms of another? What is so hard to understand?

"I don't like guns." I say as calmly as possible.

Silence.

“That’s why you’re angry?” he finally asks

“I hate the look on your face when you get angry.” I say, I won't tell him that it reminds me of father because I know it will hurt him.

There is a brief moment of silence again.

“Please, don't ever do what you did there again. You scared me and that’s a problem because you once told me that I shouldn’t be scared of you.”

My heart is beating very quickly. My calm façade is worrying me because I can still feel the raging fury flowing through my arteries.

Stay calm Mbalenhle.

“I didn’t mean to scare you Mbalenhle but …”

But what?

I look at him; his eyes are fixed on the road ahead.

“You just… look I don't really know what to do with all the things I feel for you but I know I love you and instinct tells me to protect you.” he says

Sigh. He thinks I need to be protected, that’s his problem. I honestly have no will to carry on with this conversation. I slide my chair back and close my eyes, I hope I can find some sleep but I know it’s highly unlikely.

****

“Baby, we’re home. Wake up.” I hear his distant voice.

I can't believe I slept again. He called me baby? Why do I want to smile?

I only realise where I am when he opens the passenger door. Why are we here? What is this place anyways? I step up out of the car and he closes the door. I look at the building in front of me. It’s enormous.

“And then?” I ask

He leans back on the car and I do the same. For a minute we both just stand looking at the building in front of us.

I'm trying to gather the words to explain it to you. For starters, there are palm trees right next to each pillar which stretches out into the front garden. It’s about three stories high, there are wooden accents on the sides of the windows. It looks like a modern beach house, there’s very little privacy though

because the huge sliding door is glass and it goes all the way through the front of the first floor. It's a beautiful house, I'm not even sure if I should call it a house because it's a mansion. It looks huge enough to reside a village and a half.

"You like it?" he says after a while

I'm wide awake now, and I don't even care about the fact that the car we're leaning on is dirty.

"You live here?" I ask in awe

"Yup." He answers so casually, like one would if you asked them what one plus one is.

"Alone?"

He laughs this time.

"Come on, you want to see the inside?" he says while taking my hand.

I feel so tiny as he opens the large wooden door. It opens to an open space. The first floor is huge, there are no walls separating the kitchen and the living areas.
Everything just leads to the other. Gosh, it's beautiful.

"When did you buy this? Why did you buy such a huge place?" I ask, still baffled

He looks rather proud of himself.

"I bought this place early last year. Before that I lived with Mondli in some apartment at Mdloti." He says

"Why is it so big?"

"I have a big family." He says

No you don't.

I raise my eyebrow.

"What? I like nice things." He says with that boyish grin of his.

I see what he did there. I smile.

Silence. He looks at me for too long, like he's trying to read me.

"You're still angry at me?" he asks as he moves closer to wrap both his hands around my waist.

I inhale his scent, his fresh masculine scent. I love him. Not because of all of this, I don't care about all of the things he has. I love him because no matter how hard I try to deny it; my heart keeps yearning for him.

“Not at you. I'm not angry at you Nkululeko.”

He presses his forehead on mine and pushes my head back. He lays a kiss gently on my lips and they tremble a bit when he stops and breathes.

“Follow me, I want to show you something.” He says

I hesitate, what if he wants to…

He notices the look of sheer panic on my face and gives me an assuring smile.

“Trust me.” he says

I do; for some demented reason I trust him with my life.

He takes my hand and leads me to a door located at the far end of the floor. When he opens it there are stairs leading down. We’re going to the basement? I follow him nonetheless, it’s dark until he switches on the light and I'm standing in front of a fully equipped gym. There are newspaper articles on the wall of famous sportsmen and women. This is crazy.

“And this is why you’ll never outrun me.” He says as he lays a kiss on my cheek. Arrogant isn’t he?

There’s a huge boxing ring right at the centre of the gym. I smell a challenge.

“I could outrun you any day Nkululeko.” I say, putting on my best fierce face

He laughs.

“You’re cute.” He finally says

Really? I was trying to be intimidating.

I roll my eyes and make my way to the ring. This place is a sanctuary. All the tension from my body drains away. I sit in the middle of the ring and watch him as he makes his way to sit right next to me.

For all those glorious minutes we just sit in silence, a beautiful silence filled with unspoken words. He’s looking at me, but not I at him.

“What was bothering you Mbalenhle?”

His question catches me off guard, I honestly didn’t expect it but I know what he’s referring to.

“Nothing.”

He scratches his chin.

“You have to tell me.” He says with a soft voice.

I look at him. He’ll think I'm crazy. Either that or he’ll realise that I have too much baggage so I just choose to stay silent.

“Okay.” He says while standing up. He offers his hand to help me up. I take it reluctantly; I can see that he has some idea in that head of his.

I watch him as he steps out of the ring and reaches for a pair of gloves that are hanging on a metal hook.

“You might want to take your t-shirt off.” He says when he’s standing in front of me.

Well that’s not going to happen.

“I’d rather keep it on.” I say

“No Mbalenhle you need to trust me; I wouldn’t make you do something you're not ready for. Just take it off because you’ll sweat a lot.”

That sounds so wrong in all levels, but he’s misunderstanding me. I don't think he’s trying to take advantage of me, I know him well enough to know that he wouldn’t do such a thing. I just don't want him to… well I don't want him to see the scars on my back.

I offer him a weak smile, “I'll manage.” I say

He shakes his head, “You're hard headed Mbalenhle.”

He moves closer and puts the gloves on my hands. What is his plan?

“Nkululeko what are you up to?” I ask

He doesn’t answer, instead he tugs my hair and lands a clean kiss on my mouth. Why does he just do that when I least expect it?

“Okay, now you’re going to tell me what’s bothering you.” he says, his tone suggesting that this is a non-negotiable matter. I'm not going to be dictated by Nkululeko Mthethwa, he can't just demand me to tell him.

I shake my head; he ignores my gesture.

“Well then we’re going to do this the alternate way. Hit me. Right here.” He says while pointing to his stomach, “I don't like seeing you angry, and people say hitting stuff helps.” He says ‘

What? Is he mad? I'm not going to hit him.

“Nkululeko…”

“Mbalenhle trust me, you’ll feel better.”

“By hurting you?”

“Baby you won't hurt me, I'm consenting. Do it Mbalenhle.” He says

I stare at him for a few minutes. His eyes gaze back at me as if searching for my pain. Right at that moment I see his intention. He wants to carry my pain. He loves me so much that he’d hurt himself just to see me smile.

My first fling lands straight on his abdomen, he doesn’t even flinch. I look him straight in the eye as I land the next blow neatly on his stomach. He still doesn’t flinch. The tension builds in my body all over again, and without intending to I start imagining myself alone, with nothing but a wall in front of me. Just me and my problems. All that runs through my head is the question ‘why?’.

Why me? Why did I have to endure such pain? Isn’t it true that my life is worth so much more than agony? Because of my suffering I am less of a woman, I have less to offer. It seems to me like I can't even catch a break, the family I knew is dead. The family I barely know says I'm responsible for the death of father. I am. That is what hurts the most. No matter how much I try to run away from the truth, it always catches up to me and I realise that I killed him. I grabbed that spoke and I gashed his throat with it. Even as my hands shook at the realisation of what I had done, I didn’t take responsibility. I ran, like a coward. The one time that I could’ve stayed and told everyone my truth I chose to run.

And now I'm starting to fear what I ran into. Did I step out of danger and then walk right back into it? Is that what this is to me? A danger. It hurts me to think that I fell in love with a perfect stranger and I did it full heartedly, it hurts even more to see that his version of solving problems includes pointing a gun at a person. But I love him, I love him so much. He never listens to me; I always have to listen to him. I've tried – Lord knows I've tried – to just talk some sense into that thick skull of his. It makes me so angry! I hated it when he got me fired, I hated it more when he didn’t provide a reason. I hated how he told me he loves me and then expected me to alter my life for him. I hate how my throat goes intensely dry when he starts following my eyes with his own, and how my knees start feeling like jelly when his hand lays on a single ounce of my skin. I hate him so much that I love him more than anything I've ever loved before…

I stop.

I've been punching him, all the while these thoughts have been rummaging through my head. He took it. He stood there and took it. For me.

As I'm about to break down, he pulls me close to his chest and lets me collapse in his arms. My tears form a pattern on his t shirt, he strokes my back…his mouth in line with my ears as he whispers beautiful words of hush in to it.

He loves me.

****

My brain tumbles back into the reality of things. I'm so distracted I've forgotten what I'm supposed to be getting from the kitchen. I'm listening to the buzz of conversation from the next room. Every now and then they all start going on and on about politics, this is most definitely one of those moments.

This morning, Nkululeko picked me up from my apartment and we drove here together. It was one of those silent drives because I was still embarrassed about what I had done yesterday night. Very minimal conversation was initiated, and even when he kissed I made it awkward by backing away too soon.

I wouldn't have come to breakfast but Malwande left me a message yesterday saying it was important that I was here. I'm anxious about what she wants to talk about…especially because she has been acting rather normal today. Don't get me wrong, there is obviously nothing wrong about normality but her normality is a bit suspicious. It's like there's an underlying message in everything she says.

Come on Mbali, pull yourself together. Right now.

"Enhle, you're joining us for breakfast right?" she has a tender voice, the type that can shoo you off to sleep but also keep you awake at night. I don't have a close relationship with Ntsiki, in fact I've never held a conversation that exceeds 10 minutes with her. I just never know what to say.

"I'll be there in a sec." I say as I try to look occupied with the glass in front of me. The truth is, I'm dreading going out there and facing all of those people. Call me crazy but when I came into this family I was nothing more than a nobody…and now it turns out that I'm in love with one of them. If I were an over looker, I'd probably think I clawed my way into this family. What if that's what they think of me? That I'm an opportunist.

I wipe my wet hands with the dishcloth and brush something off my jeans. I never wore jeans before because father despised them. He thought they destroyed the natural hierarchy of a man being the superior figure.

Much to my relief, conversation carries on as I make my way to the table where everyone else is sitting. I find a seat next to Msizi but opposite Nkululeko. He frowns when he realises that I have intentionally avoided him. I don't want anyone to know about our relationship. Not yet anyways. For starters, it is still relatively new and I'm not even sure it's going to work out.

Where are these new found doubts impending from?

I'm just scared, I'm scared of judgement and I think he should understand that. None of this is either easy nor familiar to me. I'm going to try to get through breakfast without saying anything because someone might sense that there is something wrong with me.

"Mseki. Can I have the salad?" Malwande says while looking at Mseki with irritant in her voice. Maybe they had an argument.

I feel a sudden touch on my leg. My eyes shoot up and land on Nkululeko. What is he doing?

"I love you." he mimes.

I flush.

I thought he was mad at me a minute ago. Talk about unpredictable. That's what he is, he is purely unpredictable. I like him that way.

"Nkululeko tells us you have a new job."

I'm forced to break my eyes away from Nkululeko's. Mseki asked the question, he's sitting next to Malwande downing an omelette packed with all kinds of meaty goodness.

"Yes. I'm starting ksasa." I say while offering him a smile

"Where?" he asks

I hesitate. I'm not really sure if it's a good idea to tell him where I work. Actually everyone in this family is shady so they might get me fired again. I brush the thought from my head.

"Sole Adverting Agency, it's owned by Yvonne Nxumalo. I'm not really sure if you've heard of her."

He nods, but he looks like he's making some mental note. I get the feeling that the women in this family are constantly monitored one way or another.

“Lwande, this is really good.” Mondli says while pointing to his food with his spoon.

He’s a random human being. He’s the fun one, the one who is evidently a play boy in all senses of the phrase

“Next time we’re going to Ntsiki’s place and she’s going to cook for us.” Malwande says with a secretive grin on her face.

Msizi is the first one to blurt out laughing, I'm in the dark.

“Nontsikelelo’s food tastes like shoes.” He says still laughing.

I can't help but laugh, she can't be that bad.

“Msizi you said you enjoy my food…” Ntsiki says looking in between amused and offended.
Their exchange makes me laugh even harder.

“Let’s all just stick to my wife cooking the food in this family.” Mseki says, a bit of arrogance in his tone.

But everyone is still laughing

“Mbalenhle’s food is better.” He says unexpectedly.

Silence.

I nearly choke on my food. What the heck did he say that for?

He doesn’t seem to notice the silence; he carries on eating.

“What? Mjita don't look at me like that.” he says while looking up at Mseki.

That was not how this was supposed to happen.

Too. Much. To. Handle.

“I thought you all might want to know that Mbalenhle and I are together.” He says, pride filled in his voice.

Nx.

“Mh.” Mondli says in an all knowing tone. The way he said it makes me want to laugh but that would be wildly inappropriate because I'm still mad at Nkululeko for blurting that out.

The reception of the news is not what I expected. Malwande looks relieved, I have no idea why. The rest of them seem to expect this. What is going on

here? Mseki is the only one who is showing the slightest bit of concern. He doesn't look pleased but he regards me with a smile and nods.

I am way too young for this life. I need someone to change the topic. Anyone…

As if on que, Malwande clears her throat.

"I want everyone to know why I called you here today…" she says

I've been wondering.

"Ngabaza, he's out in a month. And I just want us to deal with that as a family. I hate him, he killed my father but he is your father and I don't want you to forget that." She says while looking at the three guys.

She said…she said he killed her father? I look over at Nkululeko, suddenly overwhelmed with confusion.

What the hell is going on in this family?

Chapter Six

It's been just over a month since I started working for Yvonne. I'm happy, I really am. I don't have 'boss issues' or any of that usual pain at work. It also helps that I enjoy my job. I have however realised that this is not what I want to spend my life doing, as much as I enjoy scheduling meetings and running errands, I still want more for myself.

On a different note, I bought a new phone. For myself. By myself. Trust me it's rare for me to do things for myself, especially with that insisting nuisance that I call a boyfriend. I'm kidding, but Nkululeko can get a bit overwhelming at times. Regardless of getting a new phone I'm still receiving those warning threats from Lord knows who and it's starting to worry me. For starters, I have no idea how this person got a hold of my numbers. It's disturbing. Plus, I fail to understand who in their right mind makes the time to write threatening texts almost every day. Some people have time to waste nje.

I spend most of my time working or out with Ayanda. Well actually most of my time is spent on the phone with Nkululeko because he's an electronic stalker.

He said he'd be picking me up from work today even though I told him very clearly that I have dinner plans with Ayanda. You know, after that breakfast at Malwande's place when I found out why Nkululeko hates his father so much, I was kind of numb from feeling. I genuinely didn't know how to react so I didn't. He tried to bring the subject up but I kept quiet. It annoyed him but I wasn't about to budge, I just can't believe the things that that family live with. It's like a never ending chain of drama. I mean what is the likelihood of falling in love with the child of your father's killer. I did gather up the guts to ask Malwande about it and she said she had absolutely no idea when she met Mseki. When I further asked her why she stayed even after finding out she said love makes you do stupid things. I can't exactly testify to that but I've had my fair share of stupid moments because of Nkululeko.

It's nearly time to knock off but I want to finish next week's schedule before I leave. I guess I'll have to do that tomorrow because Nkululeko just sent me text saying he's outside.

Sigh.

Yvonne is buried in paper work; she stays till really late in the office. This one time I came here to fetch a document from my desk at round about 10-ish and I found her staring into her laptop screen. She said it takes more than just eight hours a day to run a business. I still think it's extremely inconvenient to work late and wake up early. She's a dedicated and committed career woman. That's probably why Ayanda loves her so much.

"Yvonne, I'll see you tomorrow." I say

I still have to get used to calling her by first name but she hates it when I call her Mrs Nxumalo because she feels like I'm aging her. Now I know how Chinwa felt like when I told him to call me Mbali or Enhle.

"Okay darling, you've scheduled Hudson for tomorrow right?"

"Yes, tomorrow at 9 am. Don't work yourself too hard." I say right before heading back to my cubicle and taking my sling bag. I'm not a formal dresser, every now and then I throw on a pantsuit or a pencil skirt if necessary but that's only when Yvonne has scheduled a meeting with some important clients and I have to look like a formal PA for impression purposes. Otherwise you'll find me in skinny jeans and a loose blouse. I take most of my fashion insight from Pinterest, it's an app I recently discovered that takes all my data but leaves me with some great screenshots as inspiration. I love sling bags, those antique looking, intricately designed and dark coloured sling bags.

I thrift too, it saves me money and I find fashion gems in the weirdest places. Durban is good like that. I am still yet to discover the beauty of make-up so for now I keep it very minimal. I use lipstick when necessary but that's as good as

it gets. And I got tired of my poufy afro so I decided to box braid my hair into a short braid bob style. It apparently accentuates the round features of my face (that's according to Sli, the girl who plaited my hair)

I use the stairs (when I'm not in a rush) because I have discovered my hate for elevators. They mini nauseate me so I avoid them by all means necessary. It doesn't help me much though because Yvonne's office is on the top floor and this is a 16 storey building. Needless to say, when I get to the top I am always breathless. Which brings me back to why Nkululeko never treks to the last floor when he's coming to pick me up. He stays in the reception or he waits outside because he is very aware that I will make him walk 16 flights of stairs down. He's a bit of a lazy one; I don't understand how that's even possible because he spends a good portion of his time in the gym.

"You must stop pestering me, get a life or something." I say as I lay a kiss on his neck. It's the closest place I can reach without having to stand on my toes. I'm starting to wonder whether I'm short or if he's ridiculously tall.

"I have a life; I was just missing you today…" he says with a half-hearted grin.

I wonder what's eating him up, he doesn't look as good as he sounded on the phone. Or maybe I just never noticed. Then I remember…

"Nkululeko…" I'm not really sure how to approach this matter.

He looks at me, then he opens the door to the passenger side and I enter as expected. I wait for him to settle on the driver's seat. He barely even looks at me now.

"Nkululeko you have to see him…"

"No Mbalenhle, I don't." he immediately answers. I sense annoyance in his tone but I carry on pushing the subject.

"Please. You have a lot to talk about with him, he's still your father." I say

Silence.

Is he going to ignore me?

"Look baby, I don't want to see him." he says, all too calmly.

Surely that can't be his final response, surely he wants to at least look at his father and say something to him. Anything at all.

"But Nkululeko you won't resolve anything by that."

"What's there to resolve Mbalenhle?" he says, a sudden vex lights up in his voice.

“What do you mean? You can't just leave things the way they are. Don't you want some answers?
Don't you want to at least talk to him or hear him out?” I ask, determined to make him interact

“Mbalenhle, if the table were turned would you want to see your father?” he asks. His question hits me like a blow to the stomach and I immediately look down at my hands.

That was a dick move, he knows damn well that he can't compare the two situations.

“Baby I'm sorry okay, I just don't want to see him.” he says.

He pulls up right in front of my apartment building. We sit in silence in the car, I'm contemplating my next words, that’s if I'm still willing to talk to him.

“You know what; I was just trying to help you! Nkululeko you’re so angry and you don't even realise it. You can't have that in your life and I can't have you like that in mine. So you choose, either you talk to your father or I'm out. I will not subject myself to living with a ticking time bomb.”

Whoa. That was surprising even for me.

Where did that come from? But I'm getting tired of his fury trances. I know I have my moments too but I want to help him. his way of helping me was to let me take out all of my rage on his body, he did that because he loves me. Now this is my way. This is the way I'm showing that I love him because I can guarantee that his anger will not go away until he resolves his issues with his father. Sure he wasn’t the best father in the world but he provided them with a good education and a prosperous future, he couldn’t have been that heartless.

I open the door and slam it shut before he even gets the chance to speak. I don't want to be weak and take back my words. I want him to know (well think) that I meant what I said. He doesn’t run after me, which comes as both a surprise and a relief to me.

My phone rings as soon as I open the front door, it’s Ayanda.

“Friend.” -me

“Honey, don't stand me up.” He immediately says

As if! I would never do that.

“I won't, I just need to take a quick bath and I'll head out.” I say

I look out the kitchen window to see if Nkululeko is gone. He is. My heart drops a bit.

“Good, you’ll find me waiting inside.” He says right before hanging up.

I let out a sigh of fatigue, the last thing I wanted to do today was fight with Nkululeko but it happened and I can't help but feel like it’s my fault. I'm trying to help him, and myself in the process because it affects me when he’s in a sour mood. I don't like having to deal with a sulky Nkululeko, sometimes he has this constant hard expression painted on his face and I don't know how to get to him. it’s been like this since last week when he got the news that his father had been released and he is staying at his KwaMashu house. I don't care what it takes, even if I have to threaten him like I just did, he will not shut me out and expect me to be fine with it.

I miss him though. I miss him a lot, the real him. I miss how spontaneous he is and how I never know when he’s about to kiss me. I miss his hands on my waist, the feeling of his muscular body on mine. I miss his smell, that enchanting fresh and intoxicating scent of his…

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“Mbali, udliwa yini oe?”
Ayanda asks as soon as I settle on my seat. I haven’t even uttered a word; how does he know that something is wrong? Is it that obvious?
“Stress friend.” Me

He laughs.

“You’re too young for this. Talk to me.”

I wish it were that simple, honestly I wish I could just bury myself in a pit and climb out when all of this is over. He called, three times. And I didn’t answer. I know for a fact that pretty soon he’ll start getting pissed and I might just find him in the living room when I get back home. He’s hectic like that.

“No, it’s fine. Nothing I can't deal with.” I say while shrugging it off.

Ayanda gives me one of those ‘I-know-you're-bullshitting-me’ looks.

“Okay okay, it’s the cop. But this time I think it’s my fault.” I say regretfully

“What did you do? Or him, whatever…just tell me what happened.”

I take a deep sigh

“Well I can't really get in the details but something has been bothering him the past few days and it’s making it really hard for me to live with him. he doesn’t even smile or….”

“Girl, that man of yours never smiles…” Ayanda mumbles thinking I can't hear him.

I roll my eyes.

“Excuse me, my man smiles. He just doesn’t see the need to keep smiling at people he doesn’t know.” I say, a tad bit too defensively.

“O-kay, don't eat me up. I was just saying. Anyways you were saying something is bothering him.”

“Yeah, it’s a personal thing and it’s eating him up. The only solution to it is for him to face it head on and he can't seem to see the necessity of that. So I kind of told him to deal with his problems or I'm out…”

Ayanda’s eyes bulge out in disbelief.

“You gave him an ultimatum? That’s a bit cold don't you think?” he finally says

What? No, it’s not. I'm trying to help him. this is the only way I know how to. I had to face my demons, I went back to that house. He’s stronger than me emotionally and physically so he can face his demons too.

“I'm not really going to leave; I was doing what needed to be done. Look Ayanda, I can't be with a man who is constantly angry. That’s not the life I want for myself.”

He raises his eyebrows and looks at me for longer than necessary. I stare right back at him, rising to his challenge. I'm not backing out of this, it’s too late for me to call Nkululeko and tell him “no I was just saying that because of blah blah blah…”

“Mbali oe, you don't make a man choose between you and something else when you know he’ll always choose you.” Ayanda says while signalling for the waiter

“But…”

“Good evening, my name is Calvin and I'll be your waiter tonight. Drinks?” the waiter says before I can even utter my last words to Ayanda.

I was just trying to help…

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I expected to find him here, scratch that, I hoped to find him here. But well, it’s empty. My phone beeps and for the slightest moment my heart jumps up because I'm praying that it’s him. It’s not.

“You met me today. You met the real him today. Open your eyes and start running.”

This is not normal. But what can I do? I'm not even sure if I should tell Nkululeko because I have no idea what these texts are about. Lord, you would swear that I’m fighting over a man with this person but it’s not even like that because I don't even know who it is.

I throw my phone on my bed and strip off my clothes. I'm exhausted, I'd like to sleep instantly but I know that I'll keep replaying that ‘fight’ with Nkululeko in my head before I find rest. I slide under the covers and just lay there, trying to force my eyes closed. Eventually I just pull out my phone. He was online about 10 minutes ago.

Stop this Mbali. Text him, tell him you’re sorry you had a bitch moment. Text him Mbalenhle.

No. I can't text him. if I text him then it means I'm giving in and I'm allowing him to walk around grumpy and angry. Nope.

I put my phone under my pillow and close my eyes. It’s going to be a long night trying to find sleep. Meanwhile I keep tossing and turning…

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There’s a knock on the door. It’s more like a thud after thud after thud. My eyes are still drowsy with diluted sleep. I take my phone from under my pillow and check the time. It’s just after midnight. At the realisation I start getting worried. Who could be at the door at this time? Should I answer?
But I mean, thieves don't knock so maybe I should check.

I stand up and place a thin satin robe over my body, I can't possibly answer the door with this skanky PJ that I have on. But it’s summer and the nights are hot so I had no choice. I look through the peephole.

What the hell? I immediately open the door.

“Nkululeko what are you…”

The next few moments happen really fast but in my head they are in slow-motion. His hand, it travels tenderly to my waist and he pulls me really close to his own body. I whimper in protest but I'm thoroughly defeated by his adorning touch. I find myself lost in his powerful scent, I bury my face on his neck and I inhale him.

I missed him.

My body shivers under the hold of his hands. He hasn't even spoken. Suddenly he grabs my braids down, forcing my face to lift up. He looks at me

for a brief second and then endeavours into the depths of my mouth. I can sense his deep desire, it's in the desperate grip. As if he's holding onto me for dear life.

I can't stop my next move, maybe it's the hormones. Maybe it's my longing for him…for all of him. I drop the satin robe to the ground and I stand in front of him with just a short thin cotton short and a vest of the same material.

I have scars, on my back I have scars. He doesn't know that.

"Mbalenhle..."

"Shhh. I want this." I say, laying my finger on his lips.

He stares at me for a long time, examining my body from head to toe. Then he sighs, a deep sigh as if he's talking all of me in.

I stand on the tips of my toes so I can reach his mouth. He's a beautiful specimen, and he's all mine. Just mine.

"You are beautiful my love."

The way he says it, the sincerity behind his words is clear and visible. Both his hands go straight to my waist and he picks me up so I can wrap my legs around his waist. I don't know if I'm doing any of this right but my body seems to fit so perfectly onto his own.

This is last thing I expected, being woken up in the middle of the night by a man who is desperate in desire. I can feel all of my fear and worries fading, my body becomes unnaturally light and I let him carry my weight.

The first piece of clothing comes off so effortlessly. By this time, I have no idea what to do so I let him take the lead. He kisses me tenderly on the nape of my neck, his breathing steady on my skin. I feel mildly uncomfortable but I'm not going to stop him. He walks towards my bedroom with my legs still wrapped very tightly around his waist. I have realised that I am beyond the point of turning back, my body is not mine at this moment and the thought of being fully his makes me extremely happy. The thought of him being fully mine makes me even happier.

I am put on the bed, with no top and very little will. Exhilarating shivers travel down my spine. I sit up, ready to take off his shirt but he freezes all too suddenly. I look down in shame almost immediately.

"Hey, hey don't do that.
You're beautiful Mbalenhle." He says while lifting my chin up with two of his fingers. I can't help but keep my eyes lowered.

"Mbalenhle, look at me." He says

I look at him.

“I'm sorry.” I say

He shakes his head, his eyes close as if I have stabbed him in the most painful of places.

“I love you yezwa? All of you. Every scar on your body, every curve…I love you.”

I nod
He places his body on top of mine, just enough that our bodies touch but his weight is not on mine. He makes his way to my stomach with his mouth. Laying a kiss on every inch of my skin. My hands distinctly move to his light t-shirt and I slowly pull it up to reveal his masculine physique. I inhale his scent over and over and over…

His hands meander through my body until one reaches the elastic of my shorts. He pulls it down without effort. For a minute he pauses and looks at the whole of my body. A slight boyish grin covers his face. He has an arrogance about him, as if he is taking something that rightfully belongs to him.

I lean into him and whisper my love. My body shivers in passion and pure want. I feel him, against my body I feel his fullness and I let out a slight whimper of pleasure. He enters me, slowly and tenderly…

My pain is concealed by my pleasure; every moment builds higher than the previous. An exhilarating warmth sensationalises my body as my toes curl uncontrollably. My nails dig deeper into his back and I hold on to him for dear life. Even as I gasp I feel the air rush to my lungs but I’m unable to exhale. It is a glorious and memorable moment that I thought I’d never have.

Freedom. He is my freedom.

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I wake up with his arms wrapped neatly around my shoulders. He wasn’t sleeping, he has been watching me sleep and I could sense that it had been like that for quite some time. I say nothing, for starters I fear that I have morning breath and I also don’t know what to say. What does one say after such an experience? I felt the urge to thank him, for making me a woman. I felt so whole. Funny because I had sworn to myself that I would never let myself be touched by a man. I hadn't planned what happened yesterday but I certainly wouldn’t change a single thing.

“Shit! I have to get to work!” I say as I hurriedly get out of bed. He raises his brow in disapproval.

“Are you one night standing me?” he asks with a smirk slipping across his lips

I roll my eyes; why didn't he wake me up vele? He knows I have work.

"Nkululeko you should've woken me up." I say as I rush to the bathroom

I can hear the springs on the bed creaking slightly so I know he's standing up. I turn on the facet but I don't even wait for the water to heat up before jumping into the shower. I need to be careful so I don't get my hair wet, synthetic is no friend of water.

A heavy presence lingers behind me. I freeze, I don't think I'm going to get used to this. So now we take showers together?

"You should've woken me up." I say while I turn back to face him

He looks at me from top to bottom then slightly bites his lower lip.

"Baby I was enjoying the view." He says, an all knowing smirk brightens his face.

I can't help but laugh, I'm convinced that he's crazy.

****

Nothing was said about the issue of him talking to his father. I didn't insist because I don't want to ruin this mood. I can't seem to wipe this stupid teenage love struck smile off my face. He too seems very pleased with himself. I keep catching him stealing glances at me.

"What's with that stupid look on your face?" I ask, looking at him suspiciously.

"What look?"

"That one right there. I don't trust it." I say

He laughs, loudly.

"You sure you still want to go to work? You're already late." He says in his best persuasive voice. I am truly tempted to not go to work but Yvonne has a huge client today and it would be a huge inconvenience if I didn't show up.

"Just drive, some of us have to work for a living." Me

"How do you think I afford this life?" he says, again that arrogance resurfaces.

I smile

"I like being the reason for your smile Mbalenhle." He says

This time I blush.

“And I like it when you’re the reason for my smile Nkululeko.”

He removes his eyes from the road and leans over to kiss me.

“Nkululeko, watch the road. You want to kill me now?” I say in protest as I pull back. What is wrong with him?
He just shrugs.

“I think I should marry you.” he says all too casually

“Nkululeko don't be silly. You don't know the first thing about marriage.” I say

“Seems easy enough. If Mseki can do it then…” he reveals that boyish grin again. I melt

He thinks life is a joke this one.

“You know what baby? I think you must stick to what you know best.” I say with a mischievous grin.

“And that would be…”

“Looking good and keeping quiet.” I say, a smug look covering my face.

He laughs out loud.

“Oh is that how you’re going to do me like now? Okay.” He says

I can't stop laughing, even as he pulls up in front of the building I'm still trying to gather myself up. I look at the watch on my wrist, it’s 8:06 am so I'm not that late. Only 6 minutes off.

“What is that?” he asks while pointing at my wrist

At first his question baffles me, then I roll my eyes.

“It’s a watch Nkululeko.” I say

“No I mean, what type of watch is it?” he says, he’s not smiling anymore

Okay.

“Baby, it’s a watch from Woolworths.” I say as if speaking to a baby.

He looks at me, baffled to the core. It seems to me like it bothers him that I have a watch from Woolworths but I don't understand because this is literally my nicest watch I have(regardless of the fact that I only have two)

“Nkululeko what’s wrong with you? You don't like my watch?” I ask

He hesitates, as if debating his next answer.

“No baby, your watch is cute.” He says

Did he just…he said my watch is cute. That means he thinks it’s ‘argh nunus’. Like one would say to a child who is attempting to walk, or trying to draw for the
first time.

“You should go before you offend me any further Nkululeko.” I say with my eyebrows raised.

He laughs at my feisty attitude. Just when I thought I could win!

He leans in for a kiss and I lay my lips on his. I'm surprised every time he kisses me, it’s like he’s exploring new aspects of me. To say he is a good kisser would be the understatement of the year.

I catch a glimpse of the watch on his wrist, simply because he just indirectly dissed mine, I swallow when I realise just how expensive it looks. William Strouch.
That is what’s written. I have never heard of such a brand but I know it’s nothing close to Woolworths.

“You look impressed Ms Miya.” He says when he notices that I've taken quite the interest to his watch.

Play it cool.

“No. I don't impress easily Mr Mthethwa.” I say

He laughs again. I really love the sound of his laughter.

“Aren’t you late for something?” he says in false attempt to get rid of me.

I roll my eyes and he grabs my face to kiss me again. He lets me go and opens his door to walk over to mine, I watch him as he opens my door and waits for me to exit.
I always believed chivalry would one day be resurrected. Thank you baby.

“Enjoy your day s’thandwa sam’.” He says

I smile and start walking towards the office doors. I have to bite my lower lip to keep
myself from smiling. Yah no, I've never been this happy. Never in my whole entirety have I been so happy and it’s all thanks to a man. Well will you look at that, seems like the male specimen is gaining a few points.
****
Normally when I get to work, Yvonne is already in her office working her way through the day’s work and I just interrupt her so she knows I'm available to her whenever I need her. So as I walk my daily walk to her office I hear bickering coming from her office and it catches me off-guard. I can’t really make out most of the words but I know I shouldn’t walk any closer. The other voice seems familiar but until I listen closely I can’t make out who it is. It’s Zwide, and I know this because he has a very distinct tone to his voice.

I walk back to my chair and sit uncomfortably while trying to ignore the constant drowned bickering but I can't. I end up blankly staring at a file while trying to look as normal as possible. This is honestly bothering me because now I'll have to pretend as though I didn’t hear anything. I'm still staring at the file when I suddenly hear her office door erupt open, Zwide exits looking rather satisfied with himself. He walks over to my desk and I instinctively fix my posture.

“It’s nice to see you again young lady.” He says

I gulp. Excuse my vagueness but I get bad vibes from this man and I don’t know why. Maybe it’s in the way his eyes gaze at me longer than necessary but maybe I'm looking too much into nothing.

“It’s nice to see you too Mr Nxumalo.” I reply in the friendliest tone I can manage.

He nods. I tighten my lips in attempt to stop them from twitching in nervousness.

“I hope my son is still treating you well because you don’t need to settle for…” this time I nearly choke even before he finishes his sentence. He still thinks…?

I have absolutely no idea what to say, should I tell him that Ayanda and I are not an item?

But if I do then it will contradict Ayanda and that might cause problems for him but then on the other hand, where does Ayanda get the right to just tell his parents that we're together when we aren't?

I'm saved when Zwide looks at his watch and luckily realises that he might be late for something so he says his goodbyes and leaves me with my mouth still hard of closing. I stand up to do what I intended before I heard the bickering.

I find Yvonne sitting on her chair looking down buried in stacks of paperwork. When I walk in she remains the same way, avoiding any eye contact.

"Good morning Yvonne." I say

She just nods, her eyes still stuck on the papers in front of he. This is suspicious behaviour.

"Yvonne, are you okay?" I ask, concern growing within me.

She nods again.

I move closer and stand in front of her. I know I'm probably crossing professional borders but surely it wouldn't be ethical to just leave her in this current state because she obviously isn't doing well.

"Mbali, I'm fine sweetheart. I need that report on Nike." She's trying to divert this conversation and for a minute it works but then I realise that she's hiding something and it's upsetting her.

"But Yvonne…"

Her head immediately shoots up as though as though I have worked on her very last nerve.
"Mbalenhle I said I'm fine." She says but it's already too late because my mouth has dropped open. What happened to her?

"Yvonne…"

"Go." She says, trying to supress tears from springing from her eyes.

I stand still, in awe. I'm a lot of things but stupid is not one of them. I know when a person has been beaten and that's because of obvious reasons. The side of her eye is a purple-black colour, there is swelling on her upper cheek. I stare at her, unable to move, could Zwide have done this? But why would he?

"Look, I bumped into a wall okay. I don't want you worrying." She says

I'm not going to be convinced by that lousy excuse.

“But…”

“This conversation is over. Get back to work Mbalenhle.” She says, firmness returning to her tone.

I swallow hard and start to make my way back to my desk. I can’t believe this. Surely it was Zwide who did that to her? How could he? He looks like such a respectable man. I wonder if Ayanda knows about this, I doubt it. This just ruined my day. I feel so powerless; I can't help Yvonne and I can't just butt into her business because clearly she wants to deal with this by herself.

This is the type of shit that’s constantly destroying our society: Men who use their physical strength to destroy a woman’s emotional strength.

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I know that Nkululeko will not be waiting for me outside so I figured that I should take a cab to his house. I had a rough day at work and I can't seem to get that image of Yvonne out of my head. She’s a role model to me, a woman of strength and great virtues, a powerful and influential woman and to see her broken and decreased to that level of vulnerability breaks my heart.
All I want to do is get into a bathtub and just drown the day’s sorrows away. My phone rings just as I'm about to get into the cab. It’s Ayanda. What am I going to say to him, I'm not even upset at him for telling his parents that we’re together anymore. I can't.

“You don’t call anymore friend.”

That’s his greeting; I’d find it amusing any other day but not today. He is right though; we haven’t talked in a while but maybe one of these days we can meet up for lunch. Or not.

“Well I could say the same for you.” I say, trying to cover up the anxiety in my voice.

“You okay?” he asks. Damn I wonder how he does that.

“I'm fine. Just tired.” That’s only half a lie so I guess I’ll have to settle on it.

“Okay, I just wanted to check up on you. See how you’re doing, listen to your nice life
problems, laugh and tell you about Kagiso…”

Hold up.

“Kagiso?” –me

He snickers for the briefest time and then resumes to telling me about this Kagiso person. Per Ayanda, Kagiso has managed to be the centre of his universe even though they only met a week ago. He is a contractor from what I

hear and he is the sweetest guy that Ayanda has ever met. It also helps that his job comes with a mess load of money and so that makes him easy to love. This, I was not ready for. Seems to me like things might be moving a tad bit too fast but I don't want to be a kill joy and tell that to Ayanda. After Ayanda spends the next ten minutes telling me about her new boyfriend I'm left more stressed than I was before this call.

"Look Ayanda, I'm happy if you're happy…"

"I am happy friend."

"That's good Ayanda but don't rush into things." I say

He keeps silent.

"I just don't want to see you getting hurt okay." I say

I can still hear his heavy breathing from the other side of the receiver so I know he's thinking about what I'm saying.

"And Zwide…"

"Don't talk about Zwide. I don't want anything to do with him." He soon says before I even get the chance finish my sentence.

For a minute, I wonder whether he knows about Zwide but then I rethink it and realise he would be far angrier than he is now. Yvonne is his mother after all.

I hang up soon after we further discuss Zwide and he tells me that this morning they had the mother of all fights and he slammed the door in Zwide's face. They haven't spoken since then. Before I hang-up I realise that the cab has already pulled up at Nkululeko's gate. I quickly pay the cab driver and thank him before exiting. I'mhoping he'll make my day better even if it's just a quick smile that will rush to my lips when I see him. I don't mind.

I slowly make my way to the resident gate, it's a huge metal gate with a small security guard house at the entrance. I don't even get the chance to meet the guard because the gate automatically opens. I stand still, wondering whether this doesn't defeat the purpose of security if the gate is just going to open for every single person who stands in front of the gate. But then reality hits me and I remember that this isn't my house so I shouldn't be trying to figure out the security intel so instead I make my way to
into the gate, down the stone pavement until I'm standing in front of the huge wooden door.

What am I doing here again? I should've called him before coming, Nkululeko is not one for surprises and what if I end up proving to be a nuisance?

I try to fix myself so I look half decent before he comes to open the door. I press the doorbell gently and soon after I'm greeted by the warmest eyes I've ever seen.
Much to my surprise, they are not those of Nkululeko's but rather a middle-aged woman wearing a long grey skirt paired with a loose fitting floral blouse. She has her hair wrapped in a white head-scarf and her eyes glimmer as she offers me a smile to reveal jagged white teeth. I know who she is, well I have a vague idea anyways.

"Come in mntanami. Nkululeko is not back from work yet." She says as she widens the door so I can enter. I'm no longer disappointed about Nkululeko's absence because I'm amazed at how Mam'Gabisile has managed to address me as though she has known me for a long time. Even as I enter the house I'm greeted by the smell of the ocean and a home cooked meal. I smile as I remember the struggles that Nkululeko went through while trying to make food in the apartment. I'm glad he has someone to cook for him and ensure his safety.

"It's nice to finally meet you Ma. Nkululeko has told me a lot about you." I say while extending my hand for a handshake and offering my most sincere smile even despite my sour mood. She takes my hand and holds my stare and I feel a slight ounce of discomfort and look away.

"You look like you could use a bowl of soup."

I wonder if she says this because I look like I need that bowl or if she's just trying to ease the awkwardness. Nonetheless, I nod and watch her as she makes her way to the kitchen.
I proceed to place my sling bag on the corner couch and take a seat. I don't know why I feel like this because I've been here before. Perhaps it's because I've never been here alone.

Mam'Gabisile soon re-enters the room with a bowl of steaming soup in a tray, I sigh in exhaustion and thank her for the soup. It smells divine. This may be just what I need to feel better.

"You know, it's nice to see that boy smiling for a change." She says while her eyes wander as she scrutinises me from head to toe as though she is trying to figure me out. I'm stunned at her statement, surely Nkululeko isn't so emotionless, and there must've been something that made him smile before me.

"I'm glad…" I manage, that's as much as I can say because if I say anymore I might end up blabbering.

"You should be." She says although it sounds as though she wasn't quite finished speaking. I look at her anticipating her 'but' moment.

"But…" she says as if scripted.

**“But you must be careful. We women fall in love too easily. Don’t forget that he’s a man
and simply by virtue of that, he is stupid at times.”**

**I laugh but still I listen intently as her words slip through her mouth, she has the gentlest voice and I can't help but grasp onto every word that comes out of her mouth. I nod and only realise I'm smiling when she does too.
It’s just that I know how stupid Nkululeko can be.**

“Thank you, ma. I'll keep that in mind.” I finally say.

Soon after, she sits next to me and we converse about the complex creature that is my love, she also tells me about her family; about how she met her husband of 23 years while walking on a railway line in KwaMabulala in Pietermaritzburg. She’s originally from Edendale but she’s lived with her kids and husband in Durban for the past 19 years. It’s’ seldom that I meet a woman whose face lights up at the mention of her significant other. It gives me hope. I know true love exists but I wasn’t sure if it lasted. She’s a testament to that.

We talk and laugh and I thoroughly enjoy myself in the presence of a woman I barely know. She stands up and I realise that’s it’s nearly dark outside. Surely she must get back home.

“Would you like me to call you a taxi ma?” I ask because I don’t want her going through the trouble of heading to a taxi rank.

“No mntanami. That man of yours already takes care of that even though he acts like he has nothing to do with it. I have a taxi waiting for me at 7 am and at 4:30 pm every single day.” She says with a smile

I remember those days, I guess Mr Mthethwa has taxi services at his beck and call.

“Okay ma, I’ll see you out.” I say when she takes her bag to leave. I walk with her to the door and we make our way to the gate. Again, I don’t see the guard even though I see his little house. The gate immediately opens. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to half of the things that this life comes with.

Soon after Mam’Gabisile has set off in the cab I walk back to the house. It’s quite windy but it’s almost always like that, especially this side because it’s right next to the coastline.

After a few minutes of occupying myself with washing the dish that had my soup in it and then cleaning the sink, I realise that I’m completely alone now. What is there to do when you are alone in an eight-bedroom house. I’ve already taken a complete tour of the place. I would cook but Mam’Gabisile has already taken care of that. Maybe if I take a bath and just watch a movie I would be occupied enough. That sounds appealing.

I move back to the sofa and pull out my phone from my bag. I don't have battery anymore. I doubt Nkululeko has a charger for my phone. I have a Samsung and he has an iPhone so the chargers aren't compatible. Oh, well, it's not like need to call anyone anyways.

I head up to the main bedroom. It's spotless and I'd love to compliment my man for that but I know all credit belongs to the cleaning staff. I step onto the balcony before stripping off my jeans and top. Views of the ocean surround me and in a moment of sheer amazement I inhale the calming scent of the beach.

I've never thought it through, I've just assumed that Nkululeko's wealth is exists because he was born into wealth. He sat me down once and he told me about his past, how they were raised and who they were raised by. To me it sounded like the world raised them more than any relative of theirs ever did. He was born into wealth but he was far from being born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He's seen the world in its most corrupt form, he's had to fight so much that he started doing it without even needing to. That's why he brawled when he was younger, everything to him had to be fought for. He was an angry young man, and it hurt me to hear all that he had to go through. He's a good man now, an honest and sincere man. I can't help but love him for that and so much more. I know a lot about him, more than any woman has ever known but I'm still stunned at how a 27-year-old has managed to have so much in such little time.

Surely the water in the bathtub is already full. It's a huge bathtub, much like everything else in this house. I strip out of my underwear and submerge my body in the water. It's a cooling and calming process, I feel every ounce of my body loosen and I close my eyes to relieve all the tension of the day.

I'm in the tub for just over 30 minutes until I decide to stand up so I can dry myself off.
There are towels in the bottom cupboard under the sink. I take the blinding white cloth and dry my body then wrap it neatly around myself.

Wait a minute.

I don't have underwear. I washed my underwear and I can't well wear wet undies. I step back into the main bedroom and head to the walk-in closet on the far left of the room. It's obviously much grander than the one in the apartment. There are far more clothes however a large majority of them seem to be the same. Chinos and t-shirts. He's also quite fond of cardigans and Adidas shoes. And then there is a tux section, fully equipped with expensive looking tux's which range from black to navy blue. There are Hermes ties displayed, others are Pierre Cardin, others from Fabiani and others from brands that I wouldn't be able to pronounce even if you taught me how to .I walk slowly across the room until I halt right in front of a glass display case.

This is why he was saying my watch is 'cute'. This is how his collection looks like? From
Tag Heuer to William Strouch, Rolex, Hublo and all the way to customs. On average, I would say there are about 50 watches and all of which probably cost more than I would make in three years.

I move right along even though my mouth has not managed to close yet. I find what I'm looking for. Again, I'm greeted by rows of Calvin Klein underwear. What is with all the brands? All I want is normal underwear and now I have to wear half my monthly salary. I grab one underwear and put it on under the towel still wrapped tightly around myself. Well I should've predicted that it won't fit but at least it has an elastic waistline so it doesn't fall. This will have to do, I'll put on some jeans anyways so that will hold it up properly. I grab one of his t-shirts as I head out simply because I don't want to put that blouse I had on at work back on. I walk back into the room, grab my jeans and put on the oversized t-shirt. It buries my body and I can't say I mind because I'm more than comfortable.

Soon after, I head downstairs. It's almost 7:30 pm and Nkululeko isn't back yet. I guess he'll be having a late night at work then. I settle in front of the television and stream Single Ladies. I think I might be obsessed with the show, I just recently heard about it and I can't seem to stop watching. It honestly makes me feel better about the type of woman that I am because damn these girls can juggle men! I also happen to like how
it starts, it reminds me of a show I used to watch at Ntombi's [my high school best friend] house on BET. That was one of the many things that I missed about Ntombi after her family left is'godi.

I'm so engrossed in the storyline that I don't hear the door open and then close. I just see him standing in front of him glaring with what seems to be relief and anger.
And then?

"Mbalenhle." He says, moving his tongue in his mouth then clenching his jaw.

"Nkululeko what's wrong?" I ask while standing up and heading to him. He backs away as if scared of what he might do. What is wrong?

"Mbalenhle, I have been worried sick about you." He says. His voice remains so calm that it scares me. I gulp, my throat suddenly becoming very dry. He's frightening me.

"I've been here the whole time." I manage even though my voice has become abnormally hoarse and low.

"You haven't been picking up your phone. You didn't call anyone. You left work and then disappeared!" his voice rises for the first time and I move back.

“I didn’t disappear. I came here because I thought you were here so I wanted to surprise you and weren’t here and my phone had no battery and I couldn’t find a charger so I figured you’d know that I was here because you always know where I am and I…”

“Mbalenhle why are you crying?” he asks, his voice much lower

I'm crying? I quickly touch my cheek and I realise that I actually am crying.

“You’re scaring me.
That’s why I'm crying Nkululeko.” I say and then make my way back to the sofa and sit with my legs close to my body. He comes closer and I look at him as he does so. It seems I have baffled him. How, because he was the one shouting at me. How am I supposed to feel about that?

“Baby. Mbalenhle look at me. Mbalenhle it’s just that I didn’t know what to think. I couldn’t find you anywhere and I got worried because no one had heard from you. I even called your gay friend and he said he last heard from you when you left work and he doesn’t know where to find you.” He says

I supress laughter as soon as he says ‘gay friend’. I can't believe he called Ayanda. That must’ve been hard for him because he’s not a fan of my ‘gay friend’ as he so offensively calls him.

“I might have overreacted.” he says

Jee whiz, ya think?

He has calmed down now. I'm glad because I don’t like being shouted at. Especially when I did nothing wrong.

“Can’t you just be a normal person Nkululeko?” I as in frustration more than anything.

He stays silent. I inhale, then exhale. Then I repeat this about three times before I speak again.

“I just wanted to surprise my man. I wanted to come here so we can be together and you can make me laugh and make me feel better because I had a crappy day at work. But now you’re making me cry because you’re a paranoid moron.” I say in exhaustion

“Okay, I deserve that.” He says

“Of course you do. Now the least you could do is kiss me better because you’ve really messed this up for both of us.” I say while letting out a deep sigh.
He moves to the couch and goes down on his knees, I look at him as he does this. He looks sorry, but there’s also his ever so charming boyish grin and I can't help but smile even though I don’t want to.

“I worry about you my love.” He says as he tilts his head so mine can meet his.

“I know. And I love you for that.” I say and I lean closer to meet his lips with my own. He endeavours the path to my tongue and leaves me quite literally breathless. I let him be because I know his thirst has not yet been quenched. He moves to the couch and I stretch my legs as to invite him to my side. His hand immediately travels underneath my t-shirt and grips my waist.

“You smell familiar.” He says and then I burst out laughing.

“I smell like you. All you have in this house are man products. I had no choice but to use them.” I say still grinning up at him.

“And I see you’ve taken the liberty of wearing my clothes.” He smirks, looking very impressed with me.

Let’s see what he has to say about this. I move my hand from his arm and reach under my jeans to reveal the elastic band with the words Calvin Klein on it.

This time he actually starts laughing, revealing himself in his most handsome self. I don’t think I've ever mentioned just how handsome my man is, and even if I have, I will not regret to repeat it. He is a beautifully made specimen.

“I would like my clothes back Miss Miya.” He says with the most devious of intentions.

“You’ll have to find a way to get them Mr Mthethwa.”

His right eyebrow raises and he bites his lower lips almost unintentionally.

“Any ideas Mr Mthethwa?” I ask all too innocently.

“I have a vague idea Miss Miya. Allow me to demonstrate.”

I giggle uncontrollably at the idea of how much pleasure I'm about to experience. His unexpected kiss stops me from giggling and I'm again lost in his being.

His hands rummage down to the tip of my jean button. Soon after he unbuttons it and moves onto unzip my zip. He leaves it open and instead moves to under the loose t-shirt. His hands move through my bare body until they reach my breasts.

“This is going to be easy.” I hear him mutter. I don’t even have the strength to respond.

He removes the t-shirt swiftly from my body.

“One down. One to go.” I say weakly looking at into his burning eyes, filled with desire and intense passion.
He smirks, and proceeds to take what is his…

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“What’s the deal with you and tomatoes anyways?” I ask as we settle on the couch to watch the series that I was watching before he rudely interrupted me for the deed.

“Never liked them.” He answers

I sit comfortably as I place myself neatly between his stretched-out legs so I put my head on his chest. His legs entangle with my own and I'm left with an assuring feeling of safety.

“So you’re not allergic?”

“I'm a man. What type of man is allergic to food?” he asks while shrugging. That is literally the most ignorant thing that I've heard a person say.

“Look at you being stupid.” I say while rolling my eyes.

“Baby you know I'm joking. To answer your question, I'm not allergic. I just don’t like them.” He says

I nod.

“What else don’t you like?” I ask

He shrugs.

“Chicken. Tea. Nuts…”

“Whoa. Maybe I should be asking what you like because it seems to me like you’re quite a picky person Mr Mthethwa.” I say while laughing at his ridiculous list of dislikes.

He clears his throat and hands me a mischievous look and I already know he’s about to comeback with one of his unconventional love declarations.

“I like the finer things in life Miss Miya.” He says as he proceeds to tighten his hand around my waist. As to how that hand got there is beyond my knowledge.

“I can definitely see that. Your taste is quite refined.” I raise my eyebrow and then my head so I can lay a kiss on his mouth.

He shifts uncomfortably.

I shake my head. A girl can only take so much; I don't understand how much stamina he can possibly have. It's just a kiss, it wasn't meant to arouse anything.

"Go take a cold shower.
I'm tired." I say as I sit up. He attempts to get hold of my arms but I make a quick escape right before I burst out laughing at his childish behaviour.
"Mbalenhle."

"What?" I say in concealed mockery

"Remember this moment later." He says with a slight grin

"Is that a threat or a challenge?"

"Take it as you please." He says in false victory. Then he stands up and makes his way to the kitchen.

I move back to the couch and continue watching Single Ladies. He joins me a few minutes later.
Can I just get 15 minutes alone so I can finish this episode…? (That's a bit too much to ask for my darling, this isn't your house remember?) my subconscious snickers. I shake my head in attempt to ignore it.

"So baby how was…"

"Shh… I'm trying to finish this episode." I say as I rudely cut him off before he even finishes his sentence.

"Okay so first you tell me to take a cold shower, now you're ignoring me for…what is this thing anyways?"

"Single Ladies. Now keep quiet, I have to concentrate."

"But you're not single."

I turn my head for the first time and raise my brow.

"Well if you don't let me watch my show in peace, I might be." I say in the feistiest voice I can manage.

He bursts out laughing. It's no use with this one.

"You're cute my love." He says, still trying to supress his laughter.

I laugh and kiss him so he can keep quiet. It doesn't quite do the trick.

"I have something for you."-Nkululeko

I sigh, I thought I made it very clear that I don't want anything from him.

“But…”

“It’s nothing big. I promise.” He quickly says

I nod reluctantly and he moves to a nearby drawer, searches for a couple of seconds and then his hand retreats with a powder blue box.

I roll my eyes as he moves back to the couch. Although he didn’t have to get me anything, I can't lie, I am a bit intrigued to see what it was that he bought me.

“Here.” He says as he hands me the box

Tiffany’s? Never heard of it. I wonder what it is.

I slowly open the box as I glance at him every now and then, for a minute I thought I saw him saying a short prayer. Is it really that important whether I like it or not?

When I see what’s in the box I can't help but burst out laughing. He doesn’t, he just continues to look at me at me even though I can tell that he is amused by my reaction.

Did he really buy me a watch? I don’t know whether to thank him or be offended because this is basically throwing shade at its best. In fact, he might as well have driven a truck full of shade and then poured it right on top of me.

“Baby, you bought me a watch?” I ask, still battling with keeping a straight face.

“Yes. Do you like it?” he asks

I nod, “I love it. But you bought me this straight after you dissed my watch?” I ask

He bites his lip in attempt to supress his own laughter.

“How could you do such a thing? Have you no shame?” I ask

“Look baby, I just thought you might like a descent watch.” He says in that cocky tone of his.

“My watch is descent. You are just being your usual mean self.” I say, still laughing

He raises his hands in his defence, as though he knows nothing about what I'm saying.

“I wasn’t being mean. But my love, you can't wear that.” He says as his eyes point at my watch

I burst out laughing once again.
“You’re a bully.” I say

He stands up and stands over me, towering over me because I'm sitting on the couch. The next thing I know. I'm in his arms because he’s managed to pick me up. I want to slip away but he’s tickling me and has rendered me powerless. I can't stop laughing. It’s all I've wanted to do today. Just laugh.

And so, our voices fill up the house as we laugh together…
****
After dinner, we both decide to walk to the beach for a short walk. The weather is beautiful and I feel like letting loose. I haven't gotten around to telling him about how terrible my day was before I came here. He has managed to make my day worthwhile and I guess I should just be thankful for that and stop worrying about other things.

“My love…” –me

“Yes?” –him

“Look I know you don’t really want to talk about this right now but this is as best of a time as any.” I say. I've been wondering how to approach this matter and I feel like this is the best opportunity I've gotten thus far.

“What do you mean?” he asks while rolling up his sleeves.

The breeze caresses my face as we make our way down to the ocean. His hands slip into mine and I look at him and can't help the smile that soon covers my face.

“First you have to promise me that you won't get mad or anything like that.” I say

He nods

“Your father…”

He takes a deep breath in.

“Nkululeko, you can't keep avoiding the subject.” I say

He keeps silent.

“Look baby, I know you don’t want to see him but I think you have to okay?” –me

Silence.

“Nkululeko.”

“I’ll go.” –him

Really, that was all it took? I was ready for a fight.

“You will?” I ask, just trying to confirm that my ears were hearing what I think I heard.

“Sure. But you’re coming with me.” He says

“Agreed.” I quickly say

I was planning on going with him anyways. Not because I want to meet his father but simply because I know I'm the only person who can stop him from doing something completely stupid.
“Thank you my love.” I say

We stand to look at the waves crashing onto the shore. I love this city. Durban, where I found my life, my love and my freedoom.

****

“Baby, come on. Wake up,” the voice that wakes me up has clearly been awake for some time now. I don’t understand why. It’s 3 am.

“Nkululeko, what do you want?” I murmur, still hazy from my sleep.

He says nothing, just waits for me until I’m finally sitting up.

“What is it?” I ask, my irritation is growing now.

“I need you...” he says

What the hell? This is why I’m being woken up? For a late night cheesy session? It’s dark so I bet he won’t see me roll my eyes, I fall back into the bed and cover my head. What an idiot.

“Mbalenhle, baby. Come on. I miss you.”

“It’s the middle of the night, you idiot!” I say, my words muffled because I’m trying not into scream into the pillow.

“Technically, it’s not sthandwa sam,” he has this that voice that threatens to seduce me. I cannot understand why he would choose this exact time to do this.

“I want to sleep, what do you want? You want to chat?” I’m baffled, to say the least. He never does this, perhaps this is one of his shows of spontaneity. I don’t know but this one here is really annoying me.

“What? You think I want to talk? No...” He says, his hand suddenly moving to my thigh. That is always the first place he puts his hand when he wants to...

No.

“What the hell? This is why you woke me up?” I ask, almost falling from the bed. I’m alert now, more alert than I have ever been.

He grabs me by the waist before I can make my escape, pulling me back into the bed. Then with his other hand, he reaches for the side lamp and switches it open.

“Baby...”

“Nkululeko you cannot just...”

It is too late, he has already started making his way to the nape of my neck with his tongue. Claiming all my strength and will. He sits up, forcing me to do the same even though I am on his lap, my legs falling short of being wrapped around his waist.

I did not want to do this a minute ago but now, this is all I want to do.

“Why do you have...” I want to ask him why he has to be this person that he is. Why does he have to make me feel these emotions that I have no control over, but my words fail me and I end up whimpering at the sound of his breadth behind my ear.

I have nothing but a short satin night-dress on, which makes his job of slipping down my underwear much easier than it normally would be.

His hands make journey through every inch of my skin, paving the path to my breasts and then my stomach until I cannot help but moan as he reaches what he is looking for.

He is mine. Mine alone and I am his.

It is at this moment that the familiar feeling of pure pleasure submerges in my body and I fail to even utter a single sound. I let my body follow the way he directs me, the sensation of fulfilment surges through my inner most self and I bury my nails deep into his back as he devours his path to my unlock...

Chapter Seven

“Maybe he’s changed.” I say, in desperate attempt to ease the tension.

“People like Mthethwa never change Mbalenhle.” His reply is cold; I can’t say I’m surprised.

The house in front of us is huge, not larger than Nkululeko’s own but compared to all the other houses in this place it is definitely a mansion. It's pale peach with high windows and a tile staircase leading directly to the front door. Not to mention the landscape, I don’t understand why it’s so well kept because no one lives here.

“This can't be easy for him either Nkululeko. He’s your father and he’s a man, furthermore he’s a Mthethwa so he’s full of pride and…”

“Hey, I’m not full of…” he says with that oh so innocent expression of his.

I can't help but laugh even though I know that this isn’t exactly the most appropriate time. I like how it makes him smile to see me smile. He has a beautiful smile

“Nkululeko, you know how you can get.” I say with an all-knowing grin

He shakes his head as if giving up on how adamant I am to oppose him.

“Baby all I'm saying is that Mthethwa has never given a damn about us. I don’t understand why we should.”

“Because you aren’t him Nkululeko.” –me

He stays silent for a while.

Then when I least expect it he leans over and lays a kiss on my forehead. I always feel like a teenager in love when he does this. Till this day I have difficulties believing that he actually loves me. He finds pleasure in looking at me, all of me. Even with my scars exposed. Nkululeko has managed to make me feel a way that I never thought I was capable of feeling. To say I'm deep in love would be an understatement. I don’t scrub my flesh in the shower; in fact, I rarely want the scent of him to disappear from my body. He makes me feel like a woman, a beautiful and ravishing woman. He not only showed me the wonders of my body but he taught me that I am also beautiful inside. He said that if the words that went through my head were painted on my skin I would still be as beautiful as I am. I nearly cried when he said that, it melted my heart even though he said it in that unconventional way of his. You know that thing he does of making romantic things unromantic by saying them with an extremely serious tone. I swear if he had added some sweet devotion, I would’ve rolled over and cried every tear I can manage. Indaba ukuthi I never know how to respond because he always says these things in the most

random of times. Most of the time I just kiss him senseless and watch him as a smile peaks across his lips. It's a glorious moment for me really.

"My love, you need to give him a chance. Be the bigger man." I say

He stretches his neck, and then lets out a deep sigh.

"Why are you in such an inspirational mood anyways?" he asks

Mxm, he has jokes?

"You can be a real jackass you know? Let's just go in." I say while rolling my eyes

"Yes baby I know. I love you too." He has that victorious grin on his face and it makes me want to pull out my hair.

He unlocks the doors and exits. I stay put because I know it makes him happy to open doors for me. Quite frankly it makes me uncomfortable to know that it's both in a literal and figurative sense.

As we make our way up the stairs we are both silent, I want to ask him a question but even I know that this isn't the time.

"Nkululeko you could at least knock…" I say when he just opens the door without paying any attention to the extent of rudeness it holds.

"It's my house. I don't knock when I enter my house." He responds

Before I even find the opportunity to reply I see a tall figure approaching. I'd say he's just a tad bit taller than Nkululeko but that makes him ginormous to me because Nkululeko is a full head taller than me (the only thing that helps me is wearing heals). He is a dark skinned, well-built man with deep brown eyes much like his Mseki and Nkululeko. I've noticed that Mondli's eyes are not the same, his are lighter. Mthethwa is a man fully equipped with strength; much like his sons he has an aura of sheer power. Every single hair on his head is grey, even his well-cut beard is the same shade of grey. He is not perfect, though I'm sure he was when he was young, but now he has lines on the sides of his mouth. I wonder whether it's because life has not given him a reason to smile or if he too, like Nkululeko, rarely smiles because he doesn't see it necessary.
In the past 5 minutes, neither of us has uttered a single word. Nkululeko has his hands behind his back, he rolls his tongue ferociously around his mouth and a look of hostility aims directly at his father. He is his father's son, no doubt about that. I must say though; it seems to me like Mseki was the one who took most of Mthethwa's genes. They have the same facial structure, same height if I'm not mistaken.

“Ndodana.”

My eyes damn near explode from their sockets. They have the same exact voice. It has that raspy edge to it. It’s deep and captivating; enough to make an ADHD child sit down and follow instructions.

“Mthethwa.”

Nkululeko’s cold and distant reply comes as no surprise to me.

Mthethwa’s eyes move and they land directly in line with mine. I immediately drop my head. Nkululeko’s hand reaches for mine. I look up.

“Sawubona baba.” I say while trying hard to swallow the lump that has formed on my throat. I had no idea that there was another man in the world who could make me feel so small simply by looking at me.

“Ntokazi.” He says as he walks over and offers his hand, I assume so I can shake it. I do as expected and then revert to my shell of comfort. He has a firm handshake but his hands are warm even though they are rough. A thought passes through my head; I wonder how many people he’s killed with those hands. I choose to ignore the thought almost immediately. I hear a knock on the door. It must be Mseki and Malwande. I instinctively move to get it. When I open the door, I'm greeted by no better faces than that of Nkululeko’s. As hostile as Mseki looks, Malwande looks furious. I've never seen her look so mad. They walk in without so much as a “good evening”. Mondli follows close behind them. We all make our way to the living where we find Nkululeko and Mthethwa standing in the same exact positions I had left them in. Mseki stands next to Nkululeko and rubs his face as he lets out an exasperated sigh.

“Baba.” He says finally

Malwande is standing next to me, away from the men. I can almost feel the ferocity radiating from her body.

“Msekiwezizwe. Mondliwamageza.” Mthethwa says while looking at both of his sons. This is a bittersweet moment for everyone in this room plus ke, I had no idea that Mondli’s full name is Mondliwamageza. It’s a beautiful name, I'm guessing it’s because Geza is a Mthethwa clan name.

Both Mondli and Mseki nod in unison.

“Mthethwa.” Mseki says

This is going to be a long night.

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Just the clattering of silverware against the plates.

I have no idea who cooked, that is the least of my worries. What worries me here is the fact that I dragged Nkululeko all the way to Kwa-Mashu so he can have a silent dinner with his father. That was never the plan. I mean sure there has been the occasional "so how's life?" talk and every now and then I attempt to give Nkululeko a fierce look to encourage him to start a decent conversation and thus far it has a 0% success rate. Why did we even come here? Oh, it was my bright idea. Way to go Mbalenhle.

Soon after we all finish our meals I notice that Mseki and Malwande exchange looks.
Malwande looks like she's going to protest at first but then she decides against it and looks over at me and signals the doorway. Oh, that was dismissal. I stand up and we both make our way out and leave the men to whatever it is that going to happen next. I must admit, I'm beyond glad that there is going to be some sort of progress. I take it someone is going to talk to someone else and that in itself is a huge achievement.

As soon as we exit, Malwande leads the way upstairs. As I've said previously, this place is rather big. I stay quiet because I can see that Lwande is in no mood to speak. It seems to me like no one is today.

She opens a room at the end of the hallway; I hadn't even noticed that there was a door there because it blends right in with the rest of the wall. Why do I get the feeling that we're about to do something that we shouldn't do?

"Enhle, come on." She says. This is the first time I've heard her speak since she arrived here.

I enter hesitantly.

What the heck is this place?

"Malwande…"

"This stays between us." She says as she quickly moves to take what looks like a remote. She presses various buttons and I watch as the room lights up with surveillance from every corner the house.

This is not right.

"But Malwande…"

She hands me a stifling look and I shut my mouth almost immediately.

I watch her as she brings the surveillance of the dining room into focus on the large screen. She further increases the volume so to hear what they are saying. I can't do this. This isn't right. We shouldn't be doing this.
Who puts so many cameras in a house anyways?

“…this is my house.
You’re lucky I'm letting you stay.” I hear a portion of the sentence but I know for sure that it’s Nkululeko’s voice.

“Don’t disrespect me boy. This is my house and that will never change.” Mthethwa says without so much as flinching. The man is naturally intimidating.

“Mjita why are we here?” Mondli asks in disinterest

This is not right Mbalenhle. I should not be listening to this conversation. It is a private conversation between a family that I am not even part of.

“We came here to resolve the unresolved.” Mseki says all too quickly. Then he turns his attention to Mthethwa. I can tell that he is the ordained head of this family. He leads with authority and you can almost see that he has taught himself self-control even in the most testing moments. Nkululeko could learn from that.

“Mthethwa, I think we all know that there is a lot to say.” Mseki says

Malwande’s breathing gets heavier by the second. This is by far the most intense moment of my life.

“Mmm.” He answers calmly.

“What makes you think we’ll listen to you?” Mondli asks

Mseki looks at Mondli without even raising his head.

“Ngiwuyihlo. I am your father and don’t you ever forget that” Mthethwa says

Even I can predict the reactions of everyone. It comes as no surprise when Nkululeko clicks his tongue and stands up to leave. But he doesn’t even take the first step because Mseki is up on his feet and he stands right in front of Nkululeko. He says nothing; he just looks at him straight in the eye as if challenging him to take one more step. Nkululeko takes his seat once again. Well will you look at that, turns out uyalawuleka. I never thought it possible.

“You are old enough manje. I'm not going to serve you shit; you all know where I was and why I was there. If you expect any apologies from me then I will disappoint you…” Mthethwa says as he rolls up the sleeves to of black shirt. He is fine built man, muscle and character. It is hard for me to imagine him in any situation where he is apologising. Much to my dismay, the same applies to his sons.

“We don’t want your apologies Mthethwa. We came here because we wanted to see you and make sure you hadn’t gotten yourself killed on your way here from prison.”

Mseki says

I think it's a smile but I'm not sure. One side of his mouth slanted upwards by less than an inch and so I'm not sure if I should call it a smile or an attempt.

After a moment of awkward silence, Mthethwa looks at Mseki's left hand.

"You married that girl?" he asks

Mseki shifts uncomfortably in his chair.

"Yes." He responds

Mthethwa shakes his head in what seems like disappointment.

"You thought I wouldn't recognise that girl?" he asks

"I didn't care." Mseki

Malwande needs to calm down. She's literally pacing up and down the room. I have absolutely no idea how to calm her down. Maybe I should get her some water.

"Does she know?" Mthethwa

Malwande lets out a small cough as if she is chocking on her own breath.

"She knows." Mseki replies, it seems pretty evident that he does not want to speak about this particular topic.

For once, I think I see an emotion that resembles surprise on his face.

"Out of all the girls, izintombi zigcwele kangaka …"

"You don't get to tell me my faults. You are not a father to any of us." Mseki says while cutting his father off from his speech.

You know that moment of instant change? That point of inflection where you know nothing will ever be the same again. It looks as though Mr Mthethwa has had round about enough of the insults. I should've known that the whole family ticks, and when they do; it's not a pretty sight.

"What do you boys want from me? I'm not going to sit and watch you disrespect me and disrespect this house! Wena, Nkululeko. You think this is your house? Mfan'wami this house belongs to me, the only way it will ever belong to you is if I drop dead right now. You understand?" he says while looking straight at Nkululeko. Nkululeko's face remains blank I know for a fact that he is not about to argue.

“And you. Msekiwezizwe, nkosana yoNyambose. This is what you’ve done to this family? You think you’re old now? You think you can talk to me however you please? You are a child Msekiwezizwe. You think you raised these boys? Tell me, whose money did you use? Whose businesses paid for that fancy English? Nx, I have done all that I needed to do. I sent you to the best schools, gave you all that you needed and wanted as you grew up. Nifunani kumina?”

The room remains silent.

“Phendula Mondli! What do you want from me? You think I abandoned you, that I wasn’t a father? Look at yourself! You turned out fine! What difference would it have made whether I was there or not?”

I'm stunned and in awe. He is pouring out every inch of his soul and although he doesn’t do it as gracefully as one would think he still pleads with his sons for forgiveness, I know I'm probably the only one who is reading an apology from all that he just said but I believe that he is just begging his children to forgive him, or at least to give him another chance.

“This is shit.” Malwande says as she switches off the surveillance and throws the remote on the table. She paces around the room a couple of times as if contemplating her next step. No no no, where is she going?

“Malwande wait! They aren’t done…” before I even get the chance to stop her she’s already out of the door and heading down the hallway. I follow her down the stairs until I find her standing in front of the Mthethwa men with her arms crossed, looking at each of them observingly. Well I can't stop her now, she’s already here.

Her eyes travel around the room. They land on Nkululeko’s father.

“They weren’t fine when I found them. You killed my father and you did a lousy job at being one to your own children. God, I really hoped that you would rot in a jail cell. That’s where you belong because you’re a criminal.”

Above everything else, what baffles me the most is the fact that she is speaking in perfect monotone. She doesn’t raise her voice; in fact, she sounds so calm that one would swear she smoked a joint before speaking.

“Sthandwa sami…” –Mseki

“Eyi! Don’t touch me Mseki!” Malwande says when Mseki tries to approach her. He immediately withdraws.

“That’s what you think? Little girl you have no idea what you’re talking about. You think your father was a saint?”

“But he didn’t deserve to die!”

She's shouting now and it's scaring everyone in this room.

"It was kill or be killed. I chose to kill." There is no remorse no regret in his words. It is as though if he could turn back the hands of time he would live that moment the same exact way again.

"I'm going home, I can't listen to this." Malwande barges past me and we all hear the door slam shut as she exits. Mseki doesn't follow her; instead he stands walks to stand right in front of his father and looks him straight in the eye.
That is the single most disrespectful act that a son can show to his father. There is fury, there is hurt lingering amongst these men and I am caught right in the middle of it all. To say I feel small would most certainly be an understatement.

"You don't talk to my wife like that." Although I can hear the words and I know that they elope from Mseki's mouth, I cannot see his lips move because he has clenched his jaw tight as if he is in angering pain.

"Boy. I am warning you." Mthethwa says. The man sure knows how to control his emotions, had it been any other father this would be a different story. Black parents don't take disrespect too tightly.

Mseki remains still.

I wonder how long this intense moment is going to last for. I can't watch this anymore.

"Nx." Mthethwa stretches his jaw as if fed up.

"I invested in you boys!" Mthethwa fumes as he pushes an angry Mseki out of his way.

In an attempt to retaliate, he moves forward as if he is going to lash at his father but
Nkululeko grabs him and stops him before it's too late.

"I wasted my time clearly." He says as he moves away from a Mseki who is still staring intensely.

He looks at Mondli.

"I've had to make decisions. And I don't care whether you agree with them or not but that's the life I chose to live. My job as a parent was to conceive you. I did that and more. I provided for you, ngafihla ihlazo likanyoko and I took you in. I made you my own son. This is what I get? This shit attitude?"

In my whole entire existence, I have never experienced such an intense moment. As soon as the words exited Mthethwa's mouth, each and every

single mouth dropped. Does he understand what he is saying. He is talking to Mondli, a non-responsive Mondli who has chosen to still in the same exact spot that he had been standing in the past few moments. He no longer looks angry; he looks like a man who just had his life taken away from him.
And not in that conventional murderous way but in the most excruciating way possible. The type that leaves you suspended and you slowly run out of air to breathe. He looks distraught and his brothers don't look any less distraught than him.

Does this mean that…?

"Mbalenhle let's go." Nkululeko stands up and walks up to me. I'm not going to argue but I don't think it's wise to leave a situation like this unresolved. Even as Nkululeko takes my hands and leads me out of the room I look back at the scene that we are leaving behind. I watch Mondli as he sinks on the chair with his face buried in his hands. I watch Mseki as he battles with uncertainty.

I never thought other households were broken too…

****

"So you're not even going to say anything?" I ask when I realise that Nkululeko is opting to be his usual self and remain very unemotional. Look, I'm a reasonable woman; so, I don't expect him to shed tears and bust windows but this can't be easy on him. He just learnt that Mondli is … well… Mondli is not a Mthethwa, not biologically anyways.

"What do you want me to say Mbalenhle?" he asks, his voice remains low and he makes very little attempt to look me in the eye.

"Look baby, I'm sorry." I say, in desperate attempt to reach out to him.

"You said that already and there's nothing for you to be sorry about. Now I need to go." He says while looking distantly at the watch on his wrist

I stand up and make my way to the fridge to get some water. I have no idea how to fix this. I can't help but feel guilty because I'm the one who encouraged him to take this step and see his father. Huge mistake on my behalf.

"I said I'm sorry Nkululeko…"

"And I heard you Mbalenhle. I need to go."

He scares me when he speaks like this; there is danger in his voice. A warning of some sort and it takes my mind back to that place of fear that I lived in as I grew up. I don't want to go back to that place so I immediately shut my mouth and retrieve back to my seat.

He takes his car keys and moves to the door. He looks back at me for the slightest bit of time and then proceeds to open the door and shuts it behind him.

This isn't how it was supposed to go. We were supposed to go to KwaMashu the he'd talk to his father, try to solve their indifferences and although I didn't expect them to immediately hit it off and start bubbling with affection, I could never have thought the situation would be this bad. This, unlike all the other problems in this family, cannot be easily dealt with. This has divided them and that is most probably the worst state they can possibly be in because they are more vulnerable when they don't have each other. The image of Mondli sinking into his chair with his face buried in his hands as if in agony still haunts me.

This was my bright idea;
I was the one who made it seem like it would be great for them to bond with their father. I know for a fact that Malwande did not want to go anywhere near Bab'Mthethwa. I know that had I not forced Nkululeko to talk to him then this wouldn't have happened. He wouldn't have had to speak to Mseki and Mondli about it so they would do it together. He wouldn't have even considered going to KwaMashu to show himself before his father. And that alone would've eaten me up because it's not healthy for anyone to bottle up their issues but now we're in this predicament and it kills me to watch what's happening to this family. How do you even begin when you find out that the family that you've always known is not fully yours? I can't imagine what Mondli must be going through but I know it can't be easy.

Its only 8:00 pm and all I want to do is bury myself in bed and cry myself to sleep because I miss the man I love and I've contributed to making his life more painful than it should be.

****

I'm woken up by the sound of my phone beeping.

Flip.

If I don't get moving, I'll be late to work! I quickly rush out of bed, not even paying attention to the heavy feeling of my eyes and the slight pain in my throat. Instead I focus on making my bed, pulling out clothes from the closet and then eventually going to take a quick shower. I have no appetite even though I know it's not good for me to not have breakfast.

When I finish getting dressed I pick up my phone, the keys to the apartment, my sling bag as well as my laptop bag. I've mentioned numerous times that I'm not the formal type so my work clothes are normally skinny jeans, a plain shirt and maybe a cardigan or light blazer. I never leave the house without pumps. Fortunately, my collection of pumps has grown to a respectable number.

I'm trying my best to occupy my mind with trivial thoughts like 'when is the taxi going to get here?' or 'I need to get started on Yvonne's schedule for next month'… but I can't supress my desire for the call I've been waiting since last night. He hasn't called. I think he's upset with me and I don't blame him but it's so unnatural for him to just block me out and ignore my existence. By this time of morning, I would've already spoken to him and my day would brighten up because he always manages to put a smile on my face. And I know he must deal with a whole lot but I would appreciate
it if he called, even if it's to tell me that he doesn't feel like talking to me. I just want to know how he's feeling;I'm concerned about him. I'm more concerned about Mondli though because this changes a lot more than just a surname for him. He doesn't know who his biological father is. Maybe he does, maybe Mthethwa told him after we left but I doubt it. I wonder how Mseki dealt with the collateral damage. I wonder how Malwande is holding up after her rant of rage. I wonder if she knows about Mondli.

And then it hits me…

I am an outsider in the Mthethwa family.

I know nothing about anything.

Sure, here and there I feel like part of the family but the truth of the matter is that I'm just a girl who just so happened to cross paths with them and that's all. Our lives interlink but that doesn't mean there's a bond between myself and the Mthethwas. They keep their business theirs and that's their right. I would call Lwande but now I realise that it's not my prerogative. The only reason why I know the things I know is because I stupidly fell in love with one of them and now it's driving me insane because I can't keep up with their high octane, always dramatic lives.

The taxi arrives just as I make my way out of the gate. Lord I'm hoping that this day is going to get better because anything either than this is a step upwards.

When I arrive at work I find that Yvonne has not yet arrived which is rather unusual because she is always the first to arrive and last to leave. This gives me enough time to get started on that schedule. She's already booked six meetings for next month with major photography companies. One in particular is the European client and it's important to her which is why I need to start researching the company because she asked me to join her for that meeting. I know Yvonne wants the best for me and it's helping that she has me exposed to all these hard-core business dealings. I'm gaining experience and expanding my knowledge. To tell you the truth, I thing I'm falling in love with the world of advertising. I didn't even look at it as a profession before this because I figured all you have to do is look pretty and have half a brain. I'm pretty used to being wrong nowadays.

Whenever I start working, I tend to erase my surroundings so I can concentrate and put in my all. Sometimes I literally block out a person who tries to talk to me, which is why Nkululeko always leaves me alone when I'm on

the laptop. He knows not to bother and it gives him the chance to make boyish comments about how I apparently look sexy when I'm serious. I usually laugh it off later but sometimes I make it a point to show him just how sexy I can be… "… here."

That's all I make out from what the person standing in front of my desk just said. I don't know who it is until I look up and I'm greeted by a vaguely familiar face.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that sir." I say immediately. I don't think Yvonne has an appointment with anyone but I just assume that this person has come to meet with her.

He raises one of his brows then reveals a dashing smile. He's a young man, light-skinned, pretty boy fade with…wait a minute…isn't he…?

"Aah, I see a bulb just switched on. I guess I don't have to introduce myself then?" he says in a rather polite but slightly cocky tone.

I know how to deal with arrogant people, I unfortunately fell in love with the King of Arrogant Land.

"I recognise your face. I still don't know your name though." I say, trying my best to supress the rudeness that could splurge out of my words any minute now.

A soft grin covers his face.

"I'll gladly reintroduce myself to you. I'm Yonda. Yonda Makhubalo." He says this as though the weight that his name carries is larger than God's himself. What a wow.

"It's nice to meet you again Mr Makhubalo. I'm M…"

"I know your name Mbalenhle. You're a hard woman to forget." He says

Okay. This just became awkward for me. A thought crosses my mind which makes me unexpectedly smile. I just realised that if Nkululeko were to somehow walk in here right now, he would probably punch this guy's pretty face. It's a comforting thought.

When I look back at Yonda I realise that he has a huge smile on his face. He thinks…

No no no no…

"Something crossed my mind, don't be flattered." I say as quickly as I can manage.

Ghosh no - even if I wasn't with Nkululeko – this guy is not my type. I don't like fades. And I'm not a fan of light skin either. Okay, you know what? I need to just admit to myself that anybody who isn't Nkululeko doesn't cut it for me. That's the fact.

"Look, you're bruising my confidence. All I came here for is to say hi." He says this with that same smirk on his face.

"You came all the way to this firm to say 'hi' to me?" I ask, I'm confused and I would appreciate some clarity.

"Not at all. I work here."
He what now?

"No you don't." I say all too quickly

"I do. First day of work and things are looking up." He says

"You work on this floor?" I ask.

Lord please let him say no. Please.

"No." he responds

Yes!

"I'm on the floor below you." He carries on.

My happiness is short lived.

"I guess I'll be seeing you around." He says just before he turns to leave.

I paint a smile on my face and respond with a weak, "I guess."

Well, isn't this just delightful?

****

"Get me out of this meeting."

It's a text from Yvonne.
She's been in the boardroom for the past 45 minutes with the Turkish clients and obviously, it isn't going well.

I have a good relationship with Yvonne, most of the time I feel as though she is the mother I never had but after that incident where I saw what Zwide had done to her, I just didn't look at her the same way. It maddened me that she was going through all the things she's going through and doing it in silence. It sounds hypocritical I know, but unlike Yvonne, I never had anyone to tell. I never had the option to tell the world because I fully depended on father. She

is a strong woman with her own advertising firm; surely she does not Zwide to support her. I wonder if she is so in love with Zwide that she has fallen into denial. I've heard that woman fall so deeply in love with a person that they start making up excuses for the abuser. Perhaps she can't imagine her life with Zwide.
Either way, I still think it's an atrocity for women to have to go through pain in the hands of a man. Let alone the man you married.

I gently knock on the door and then enter.

"Mrs Nxumalo, I'm sorry for disturbing but it seems that are needed urgently for a system configuration on the 5th floor. The technician says it's crucial that you be there." I say in my most professional voice.
This isn't the first time I've had to do this for Yvonne. In fact, whenever a meeting has been running for too long, she often signals me to intervene. I think it's fun because I can watch the expression of sheer surprise at every new lie that I make up. I genuinely don't know where I get half the things I say. Once, I went into one of her meetings and said Zwide had been hospitalised. I was just voicing my fantasy that's all.

"Thank you Miss Miya. I'm sure we were just finishing up here. I'll be down in a few." She says

I nod and we share a secretive wink. I walk out with my head held high, satisfied with my rescue mission that went really well.

As soon as I get back to my seat I take a deep breath in. I'm reminded about the situation 'back home'. I have not yet talked to Nkululeko since last night. I don't know if I should call him or let him call me when he's ready to talk. It hurts me to know that he's going through what he's going through. He loves Mondli, and it I know this situation with his family is breaking him.

Thinking back, I realise that Mthethwa probably didn't mean to reveal that Mondli is not his son. I think he was just driven by fury' he was trying to reach out to them and all they did was push him away. I guess he just wanted them to see that he tried as a father even though they don't see that. Accepting Mondli as his own was part of the many sacrifices that he made for them.

It's nearly 12:00 am so I should probably be heading out for lunch. I'll call Nkululeko on the way to the deli. I wait for Yvonne to lead the clients to the elevator and then they exchange good-byes in a language that I don't understand. Yvonne turns to look at me with an expression of relief as soon as the elevator doors close.

"Whew. Thank you so much." She says while walking back to her office

"Absolute pleasure." I say. Then I grab my bag and head to the stairs. I take out my phone and dial Nkululeko's number.

It goes straight to voicemail. He never has his phone on voicemail.

I try again when I get to the deli. Still on voicemail.

Maybe if I asked Yvonne to leave work early she might consider it. Well I'll just have to quickly get back to work so I can finish editing the proposals. After that, I'll be done for the done for the day. I want to be out of work by 2 pm at least.

I finish my sandwich and then make the 5-minute walk back to work. It's a relatively windy day today but I like this type of weather. I greet Mam'Jali who sells fruits on the pavement. She's always in such a bubbly mood, I wish I had half her joy right now because I'm starting to worry about Nkululeko. All of this is so unlike him. I quickly reach the building and make my way upstairs.

I find Yvonne in her office as expected.

"Yvonne." I peep in with just my head.

"Yes?" she says as she takes off her glasses to shift her attention solely on me.

"Well, I was just wondering if you would mind if I knocked off early today." I say while biting my lip

"As long as we don't have any other meeting booked and those proposals are edited, I don't see why not." She says

Whew.

"Thank you." –me

I head back to my chair to finish off with my work.

****

The cab drops me off at his gate. I've grown accustomed to the mysterious automatic gate. I know the guard is there to open but I still think it's weird how I've never seen his face.

I enter and make my way down the stone pavement. I knock and I'm greeted by Mam'Gabisile. She has a morose look on her face, unlike any I've seen her with before.

"Is he alright?" I ask, my heart has a sudden lapse and I feel as though my knees are string.

"He's in the basement. Hasn't come out since last night." She says and then shifts to let me in.

I come in quickly and head straight to the basement. It's dark everywhere but the ring. That's where I spot him ferociously punching away at a punching bag. He is dressed in loose fitting longish shorts and a light vest that has been drawn with his sweat. On any given day, I would be marvelling at this sight because his body looks like one of a black Greek God. He makes no attempt to look at me, I don't know whether he has realised that I'm standing here. I make my way to the ring, my heals indicating with every step that I am here. He still does not look up. I stand in front of the stairs leading to the ring and take off my shoes because I know I'll break my neck if I attempt to climb these stairs with them on.

There is a pained silence that echoes through every inch of this place. There is the silence and the sound of the bag being punched. It sounds like a melancholic beat entangled in a web of heartache. He remains focused on the bag. I know now that he has seen me so I stand in front of the punching bag because I know it will stop him from punching otherwise he will hurt me. And of course, he stops.

"I want to be alone Mbalenhle." He says while walking to the side of the ring.

"That's too bad." I say.

I had no plan when I came here. I was not sure of the mood he'd be in. I had not wondered whether he would show hostility towards me. I hoped he wouldn't but I see now that I expected too much. It's fine though because I've never been accustomed to getting what I want so I'll just have to work my way into his thoughts.

"You're angry, I get that." I say while trying to approach him even though I know he doesn't want me to.

He shakes his head and immediately an expression of irritation crosses his face.

"I'm angry?
That's what you think I am?" he says I a low and threatening tone. I refrain from moving backwards even though it sounds very appealing. I feel as though I am dealing with a beast, one that I have tamed on numerous counts before this but today I fear the worst.

"Please Nkululeko…"

"Mbalenhle please leave." He says, still maintaining a threatening calmness.

"I'm not going anywhere." I say

He keeps silent.

I keep silent.

My phone rings, I switch it off.

“He’s still your brother you know.”

He remains silent but looks at me for what seems like the longest minute.

“You don’t understand a damn thing, do you?”

His question is one that poses great confusion for me. I am unable to sense whether I should answer or simply watch him as he struggles to mask whatever true feeling that comes with the question.

“What is there to understand Nkululeko? Are you going to push me away because you’re going through a difficult time? Is that what you’re going to do?” I ask, my eyes looking straight ahead at him in challenge.

He exhales.

“I just want to be alone.” He finally settles.

“And I said…”

“Nx, voetsek man Mbalenhle, I said go!” he shouts

I immediately retreat.
He looks dangerous. I have seen eyes like those before. They are those of a man who is capable of anything. They are those of a man who is not thinking straight. They are those of a man who can hurt me.

I move closer to him again. This time I move close enough to feel his heavy breathing on my forehead. I look up at him.

“I will leave. But only because I can see that you need to calm down.” I whisper

He glares down at me as if I am irritating him more than I should be.

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It has been a week since the visit to KwaMashu. Since we found out that Mondli is not a paternal brother, since he learnt that he is not a Mthethwa.

He doesn’t eat, he barely speaks and I am starting to feel like I'm nagging.

The plan was that we go out to dinner tonight with Ayanda but I'm not feeling up to it so I think I'll just call him and tell him to cancel the reservations.

His phone rings three times before he answers it. I can immediately tell that his mood is better than mine, but then again I think all mood would be better than the one I'm in.

“Friend.” He says in a bubbly yet seemingly worried tone.

“Hi, Ayanda. About today, I don’t think I'll make it.” I say

“And why is that?” he asks.

I knew he was never going to just leave it at that.

I sigh

“Because I just don’t feel like going out anymore.” -me

“And that is exactly why you are going to get dressed and we are going to have a good time.” He says

I know that there’s very little use in trying to argue with him so instead I agree reluctantly and hang up. I then proceed to call Nkululeko, I know this is going to be a draining call because lately they always are.

“Hi.” I say when he picks up his end of the receiver.

He responds with a forced greeting and asks me how I'm doing. I tell him about my day and then we are both silent. I know he hasn’t hung up because I can hear his breathing.

“I'm glad you had a good day. Look, I need to hang up now because I'm in the middle of something important.” He says half-heartedly.

I nod, then remember he can't see me so I later respond with a weak ‘okay’.

Before hanging up I ask him if he’s really alright, to which he responds with an effortless lie of ‘yes’. I don’t want to push anything so I hang up and throw myself on the sofa.

With all this tension going on, I haven't had the time to tell him that I've been looking for an apartment of my own. I started a long time ago but only recently did I see its importance. I just figured that since our relationship is kind of on the rocks, I might as well take this time to look for a place to stay because I damn well won’t be residing in his property if, God-forbid, we end up not being able to resolve this issue.

I take out my laptop and once again pull up the picture of the apartment that I will be viewing tomorrow afternoon. It’s obviously far smaller than this one, with only 2 bedrooms, but I think 2 bedrooms is all a girl like me needs. Financially, I don’t think I'm stable enough to purchase property so instead I

will be renting. For now, I don't mind. I'm only 23 and I think that's normal for a girl my age.

My phone rings.

This is odd, it's Nkululeko. But I just spoke to him.

"Yes?" -me

But no one talks so I remove the phone from my ear to check if we're not disconnected. It says it's still in call.

"Hello?" -me again, a little more worried this time.

"Mbalenhle. Has Mondli contacted you?" he asks

"No. Why?" I ask in confusion

He keeps quiet yet again and just when I'm about to protest his silence, he starts to speak.

"We can't find him. But don't worry, he'll come around." He responds

What? What does he mean 'we can't find him'?

"When was the last time you talked to him Nkululeko?"

He sighs the way one does when they are deprived of all energy and strength.

"Two days ago, but as I …"

"What? Nkululeko, you haven't talked to your brother in 2 days and now you can't find him? Why would you tell me to not worry about this?" I ask, most certainly baffled by the news he brings to me.

"We'll find him. I just need to make a few phone calls and everything will be good. You're going out right?" he asks

"Yeah, with Ayanda. I thought you might've forgotten." I say

"No. I didn't forget.
There's a car waiting for you outside, there'll be one waiting at the restaurant when you're done with dinner." He says

I roll my eyes and the inner me clicks her tongue. The outer me remains civil and responds with an 'okay, thanks' only because I don't want to argue with him.

I hang up soon after and then head to the shower before I let my thoughts travel to Mondli. I hadn't seen him since the day he found out about his

paternity. He is a proud person naturally, they all are, but his pride also has a tendency of blinding him straight into the path of stupidity. I worry about all of them. After Nkululeko had told me about their past I figured out that each of them had their own weaknesses. Mseki has always been over protective, sometimes that had lead him to get involved in battles that weren't initially his. I know he ended up in jail because he had intervened during a physical altercation that Nkululeko had gotten himself into. He got involved even though he knew that the fight had started because of Nkululeko, they ended up in a jail cell together.
He's the type of man that would kill for any member of his family. I guess it has everything to do with the fact that he was always the one who had to look out for his brothers.

And then there was Nkululeko. Lord knows I love him but he's an angry person.
From what I hear, he's always been that way. He never smiled, barely talked if it wasn't necessary. He was obviously always the one to get into trouble but he was the hardest to reprimand because he never really was one to apologise even if in the wrong. That was always a huge part of the reason why he was in trouble in the first place. Nkululeko fears very little, not because he is certain that nothing is a threat to him but rather because he is too stubborn to admit defeat. He's impulsive, he never thinks anything through and he deals terribly with emotions because they require to be identified and then acknowledged. He is the reason why I have learnt to forgive without being offered an apology. He is a beautiful man. A loving, enigmatic, spontaneous, unpredictable, charming, smart, beautiful man.

But Mondli, Mondli has always been the 'normal' one. The one who went through all the phases that a normal male goes through. He was the youngest in a world that forced him to grow up. He, like many boys his age, turned to alcohol and drugs in his adolescence. He was the one with the mischief. The one who has the most stories about being chased naked by fathers of girls that he had been caught with. The one who smiled the most, joked the most and laughed the most. But he was also the one with no conscience. His personality left no room for regrets so when he did something, he would never go back on it. Danger lied in that fact because so often he would hurt people, physically and emotionally, then apologise even though he showed no remorse at all. Manytimes, this proved to be enough reason to question his sincerity.

These thoughts flashthrough my mind as I let the water absorb in my hair and then travel down to my face then later to the rest of my body like a splendid waterfall that splatters vapour upon hitting rocks.

I drag myself out of the shower and start the exasperating task of getting ready. The only reason why I washed my hair was because I know I'm going to wrap it in a head scarf. Nkululeko loves it when I do that, he says I look like a Zulu queen. Of course, today I will not be seeing him so I'm just doing this because I don't want to hair dry this restless crown of mine. Over the past months, I have learnt tips and tricks from Pinterest on how to beautifully wrap

my hair without looking like I'm going to church. All of this requires great precision and skill of course, both of which I am acquired with.

I check the time on my phone and I find myself glaring at the screensaver. It is a picture that I took a while ago of Nkululeko when he took me to a lodge in Northern Natal. He hates taking pictures so I had to steal one, and even though all you can make out is the arch of his back and slant of his neck, I think it is incredibly sexy. He had a black cap on and a loose fitting white T-shirt. I don't even think he knows that I have a picture of him like this.

I scold myself back into reality and then carry on getting dressed. I wish I had the energy to put on some heals but I grab the nearest pair of sandals and a pale pink V-line dress. It drops right above the knee, revealing enough skin so I feel like I'm youthful. I don't remember when I bought it but what I know is that I loved it then and I still love it now.

After getting dressed, I grab the only handbag that I own because you all know I have no interest in them. This one was different though, it is a vintage piece that I got from a 'ngoja' downtown. I fell in love immediately and you know what the best part is? It only cost me 50 bucks. I was over and beyond the moon.

I walk out of the apartment still feeling reluctant to go out however the idea of seeing
Ayanda is appealing because he always knows how to make me feel better. As promised, the driver is waiting outside but I come to a halt when I realise that it is not a cab that we will be travelling in. Instead, there stands one of Nkululeko's SUVs. I told him I liked this car once.
And then I saw the look that came across his face so I changed my mind and told him I hated it. Unfortunately, I must always be on the watch out for Nkululeko so that he doesn't end up buying me extravagant gifts.
My watch collection has grown significantly throughout this past month. This has forced me into doing research on watches so that I know just how expensive these watches are. A couple of days before we went to KwaMashu he had decided to gift me with a Hublo gold watch. I took it because I thought it was a cute gesture, then I googled the brand and realised the watched costs 21K. And that is how that watch ended up in his bedroom drawer with the bow still attached. Yes, we had a slight argument about it but because I'm the one with the allegedly
'goddess-like' bust area, I managed to keep him happy and returned his watch at the same time.

"Mam." The chauffer nods at me and then proceeds to open the back door.

I shake my head in absolute defeat then after I let out a sigh. So, he manages to not talk to me for almost the whole day but he has time to organise a chauffeur service for me. And since when is it a thing to be driven around in fancy cars? This is most probably one of his favourite cars, if he's not in the Audi then he's in this one. His most beloved Jaguar F-Pace. The one car that he even took the liberty of naming Charlotte. I never asked why he chose that

name because I feared that it might turn out to be the name of his first love. Sometimes I feel like I must compete for attention when we're in this car. When he fetched me from work one Friday evening, it had been drizzling the whole day so obviously, the pavements were still wet. Now because I had sandals on, I had to deal with the water that had made its way onto the inner surface of my shoe, leaving my feet a bit dirty. Nkululeko had come equipped because when I tried to enter the car, he locked the doors and threw a Glodina towel out the window at me.

"Wipe your feet my love." He had said in attempt to sound less serious than he actually was. I had stood for a few minutes trying to figure out which reaction deserved this action of his. Was I to laugh or be mad at this newly heard-off priority list which put a car above me. I was surely offended and I made no effort to hide it when I was finally let inside the car. We had laughed on our way to my apartment but I had not forgotten. So, when he pulled up at the parking space which was fittingly right next to the garden, I went outside and scooped up some mud in my left hand. I proceeded to fling it neatly on the side of his car and then ran off laughing because I knew he was going to chase me as soon he saw what I had done.

I catch myself smiling at the memory, it seems like it was such a long time ago. I remember how he had finally caught up to me, I had to promise to wash his car in the shortest shorts I have. He was the one who came up with the suggestion and because I thought it would be amusing to entertain his fantasy, the next day I found myself in the backyard of his house with jeans that I had cut short because I did not own actual shorts. To say he was delighted would be respectful. It was a wonderful experience, for both my body and my…okay, you've got me. Just for my body.

I only realised that the car has stopped when the door opens and the chauffer appears.

"Oh, thank you. It's unnecessary though because I think I can manage my own doors." I say while exiting the car.

He maintains a straight face.

"It is my job mam. I have no problem doing it. Have a lovely night." He says in a very military voice.

I nod and walk to the restaurant. Ayanda is the one who chose Nino's because he is the one who is paying. The weather is splendid. There is a slight breeze but for the most part, the air is fresh and fit for a late night walk at the shore.

When I enter the restaurant I'm immediately attended to. The waiter leads me to the table where I find Ayanda scrolling his phone with an expression of shear intrigue and a bit of amusement I see.

"Ahem. Am I interrupting you friend?" I ask when I notice that his eyes are still glued to his phone screen. His head immediately shoots up and he puts his

phone to sleep then lays it on the table. He then proceeds to stand up and gives me an adoring hug. I've missed him.

“I’m so glad to see you Mbali. You’ve had me worried.” He says as we both take our seats.

This place is not crowded and I appreciate that because I really wouldn’t cope with being in a place full of chaos and unnecessary noise.

“I’ve been a busy bee, your mom is making sure to keep me that way.” I say

The waiter comes over and offers a few choices of drinks. At the end I decide to have a Cola Tonic. I know I haven't really said much since I've gotten here and Ayanda is bound to notice. For now, I'm just going to let him pour out his soul about Kagiso. It seems like that man has him wrapped around his finger. I'm starting to see an Ayanda that I never thought existed, the one that says ‘how high?’ as soon as you tell him to jump. To be quite honest, I don’t like this Ayanda. I listen intently as he talks about how their planning to take a trip to the Midlands. Apparently the initial plan was to go to Cape Town but a business deal came up for Kagiso and they decided that the Midlands would be closer and just as beautiful. Looks like things are getting serious, but then who am I to judge? I can see that he’s happy. He is genuinely happy and that warms my heart because although Ayanda is a naturally bubbly soul who brings joy into other people’s lives, I haven't seen him celebrating his own joy. If this Kagiso guy is going to be the one to bring him that joy, then so be it.

“And you?
How are things on your side of life?” he finally asks when I see that he has tired himself out from all the boyfriend talk.

“You know. Same old, same old.” I respond with a weak smile.

“Mbali…” he gives me a stern look as to say, ‘Haven’t you learnt that I can read through your bull-shit?’

“I don’t know if I want to talk about it Ayanda.”

“Well then start speaking, you’ll stop half-way if you feel like it’s too much to talk about.” He says

He always has an answer for everything. He always presents problems with solutions and that’s part of the reason why I love him so much. I shrug and then inhale as I ready myself to break my heart once again.

“Ayanda, I don’t know what to do anymore. I was the one who pushed Nkululeko into going to see his father and that trip ended up being a disaster. Now he won't even talk to me. He says he’s not angry but I'm not stupid. I know better than that.”

“Wait, what do you mean ‘a disaster’?” he asks in between my rambling

I shake my head in defeat, "Well, in the middle of an argument, their father revealed to them that Mondli is not his son. It broke them Ayanda. I know it broke them and all of this is my fault." I'm trying my absolute best to remain calm but I can feel the tears building up in my eyes and leaving them heavy. I don't want to cry so I look up and let the air dry my tears.

"What?" He exclaims as a mount of shock shelters his face.

I nod. It's all I can do now. What's done is done.

"But Mbali even so, you can't possibly think that this is all your fault." He says

"Well everyone else seems to think so, Malwande hasn't spoken to me since that day and if I'm being honest with myself, neither has Nkululeko." –me

The waiter strides over and I'm given a slight moment to take my mind away from the subject and focusing on what I'm going to be eating. I order some rib, buffalo wings and a T-bone steak with a side of onion rings and French fries. Ayanda looks at me with judgemental eyes.

"What? My life already sucks and I'll be damned if I'm going to let my food suck too. Stick to your salad and I'll eat the real food."

"That's called stress-eating and it's how people end up on 'The Biggest Loser' but that's none of my business." He says and then proceeds to sip his beer.

For the first time in a long time, I let myself laugh. It feels so good to laugh, it feels like freedom.

"Now this is what I like to see. You, laughing. Mbali this whole situation is not your fault.
That man of yours went to see his father because deep down, he wanted to. You've told me enough about him and I know that he doesn't do things he doesn't want to do. As for the paternity of his brother, it's barely anyone's fault but it most certainly isn't yours."

"But I insisted so much Ayanda and I thought I was helping…"

"You were helping. If the truth is what breaks that family, then maybe they aren't as strong as you think they are." He says in final attempt to convince me.

I sit and digest his words. He's right. I still feel guilty but I can't keep blaming myself for everything, all I did was try to help and to some extent, I did that.

"I need to use the ladies." I say as I stand up

Ayanda nods and proceeds

to devour his meal. I feel a bit faint as I make my way to the ladies' room. I have no idea why; I am never sick.

The ladies' room is empty so I walk to the first mirror and take out my lipstick. I dab a little on my lips and put in back in my handbag, I rummage through my bag in attempt to find my phone, I'm hoping that Nkululeko has called. He hasn't. then and there I decide that I'm going to head to his place straight after dinner. I'm going to end this once and for all. I want him back and I know it's not going to be easy to reach out to him but I'm willing to try. I thought that maybe if I gave him some space however because it is now clear to me that this whole situation does not require a scape-goat, I will just have to initiate resolving it right now.

When I turn around I bump into a young lady who is entering the room. I clumsily drop my handbag and apologise for my maladroitness. I expect her to then move because I obviously didn't bump into her on purpose but she remains still. She looks at me with intent and I gulp because I suddenly feel awkward.

"Your skin is perfect." She says in almost a whisper

What?

I put back the remaining contents into my bag and try to make my way to the door but she follows my step and blocks me. I am becoming agitated now, I am surprised by this because normally under such circumstances I would e scared.

"Lady, please move." I say, a new found firmness accompanying my words.

"I've been telling to the same thing for the past 7 months but you never listened." She says

She has a pained look on her face, one that looks like it is in constant debate of her next move. She is slightly taller than me, if not then we are the same height. Slightly darker and slightly thicker. Her hair is short and natural but she seems fond of make-up. Her eye-brows are neatly done, I see she applied blush, even foundation perhaps a nice shade of red lipstick. She s a beautiful woman, perhaps 3 years older than me if I'm reading right.

"I think you have me confused." –me

She shakes her head all too quickly and moves a step closer. I stay put.

"This is the last time I will talk to you. The last time. Stay away from him, I have been patient with you but now I am warning you. If you don't…"

"You? You're the person that's been threatening me?" I ask, in awe

"Guess who decided to show up to the party."

I've had about enough of this woman. How dare she torment me and then have the audacity to show up here and then threaten me to my face? Who the hell does she think she is?

“Look here, I don’t know who told you that I'm intimidated by you but they were wrong okay. So if you ever come near enough to share the same air as me, I swear you will regret it until you die. You don’t know me, I don’t know you and I would prefer to keep it that way so get out of my way.”

For the longest minute she stands looking at me as if she was not expecting me to answer her like I did. I raise my brow in challenge. She moves out of the way and I start to walk to the door. Before I open I look back at her and conjure up my next words.

“Nkululeko is mine now so you can go bitch somewhere else because that’s not going to change because of you.” I give her a “do you understand?” look and she rolls her eyes.

I click my tongue in annoyance and open the door. I hear her mutter ‘slut!’ just as I push it closed but I continue walking with a smile of victory back to the table where Ayanda is seated.

“Well that took you long enough.” He says as I sit down

I shrug, “I had some unwanted company but I took care of it.” I say

He looks at me with a baffled expression and then soon after tells me to explain.

So I go on to tell him about the numerous texts that I had been getting. I tell him about the notes and I tell him about the incident that just occurred in the ladies’.

“And you kept quiet about all of this?” he asks when I'm done

“Mxm, I didn’t even deem worth my time. She was just seeking for attention, she messed with the wrong girl.”

He gives me a ‘claps once’ expression and laughs. I can't help but laugh with him. Believe it or not, I'm half-way through my plate and I'm not about to stop eating anytime soon. Even though Ayanda and I have been joking about the current situation, there’s a hindering thought that I can't seem to get rid of. That woman, she seemed dangerous. Like one of those women who end up on a show on Discovery ID. I brush the thought off and remember that I haven't told Ayanda about viewing the apartment tomorrow.

“I’m really considering getting my own place you know.” I say

“What do you mean? Your apartment is gorgeous.” He says in his usual melodramatic attitude.
“That’s not mine. I want one of my own.”

“But I thought…”

“No, it actually belongs to Nkululeko and now I want to move out.” I quickly say

He exhales and then rolls his eyes.

“I hope this has nothing to do with the fact that you guys are going through a rough patch because those pass okay?”

“No, I've been contemplating this move for a while now. I just think that now is the right time. So I was wondering if you’d like to come to the viewing with me tomorrow.”

“I’ll have to check my schedule.” He says and of course I laugh because I know he doesn’t even have a calendar, let alone a schedule.

“I'll be seeing you tomorrow then.” I add as I proceed to put another wing into my mouth.

This may be just what I needed. Good food, good music and good company…

****

“Please take me to Mr Mthethwa’s place.” I ask the driver when he opens my door.

He nods in obedience then closes my door and walks to his own. I wonder if Nkululeko is asleep, but surely not because it’s only 10:20 pm and Nkululeko is not an early sleeper. I call him but his phone goes straight to voicemail. I can always head back home if I find him occupied with something.

The car stops right in front of the garage door and I open my door before the driver even gets the opportunity to open his own. I hand him a dashing smile and then make my way to the stairs. I knock lightly on the door and the slide the knob open. What kind of person leaves the door open this late at night? It’s silent except for the sound that the abandoned TV makes.

I know now that he is home because his wallet and car keys are on the small round table next to the couch. Perhaps he actually is sleeping. There is an empty bottle of whiskey and a seemingly knocked over glass that looks like it was never used. All this is on tye coffee table. I ignore the pit that has suddenly formed in my stomach and head upstairs to his bedroom. It is unusually quiet. Normally there is soft music coming from his room because he likes it that way but today it is silent and I'm starting to get worried.

“Nkulule…”

For what seems like the longest minute in my life I just stand in front of the doorway and stare as my heart slowly dismantles into nothing. I try to move but my body has gone into temporary paralysis.

He staggers out of the bed with blood shot eyes and regret painted on his face.

“Mbalenhle…fuck…shit. Fuck.”

Only then am I flung back into the reality of things and I start to move away from him.

The young woman on the bed stands up and wraps the linen around her body. She seems rather annoyed at my sudden disturbance. As I concentrate my eyes on her, Nkululeko moves forward and grabs my hand. I push him away and I hear a deafening scream only to realise that it is I who is shouting.

“Mbalenhle wait…” he shouts when I start to move towards the stair.

I need to leave this place. I need to get out of here right now.

He catches up to me and grabs my elbow to turn me to face him.

“Remove your hands from me!” I scream.

I am beyond livid. I have never, in my whole entire life, felt so humiliated. How dare he?
This is what he does the minute I turn my back? He grabs the nearest skirt and brings it to his house?

“Baby please, this isn’t what you think.” He tries

“Fuck you Nkululeko. What the hell are you even trying to explain? That’s the shit you’re going to tell me? That it’s not what I think? I said remove your hands from me!”

He lifts his hands in the air and I leave him standing there until he decides to go after me once again. By the time, he catches up, I'm already heading down the outside steps.

“My love. Mbalenhle…baby wait.”

He is in boxers, just boxers. I stop and turn back to him. He stops to, like a deer in headlights. I walk back to him and stand right in front of him. He smells like alcohol.

“I don’t want you calling me, I don’t want you to even try to get a hold of me. I want you as far away from me or so help me God, Nkululeko I swear I will file a restraining order and throw you right back into jail.”

This time I swear I'm not coming back.

I leave him standing on the stand right before he even gets the chance to call my name again. Before my tears fall from my eyes, my feet itch and I find myself doing the inevitable.

I am not sure where I am going, I just start running hoping that the gate is open. It is so I carry on running to whichever direction comes to me first. This time, I run faster that I have ever before and soon my legs start to hurt but I continue because at least this pain replaces the heartache that I will eventually have to face.

The world has suddenly become nothing but a blurred image. Nothing but objects that I can't even make out. Sounds that have become distant and air that is so dense, I find myself struggling to breathe.

This is not how this night was supposed to end. This is not how things should be.

Again, I am running away from a man who has broken me. I am at the same exact place that I was all those months ago.

I have run home.

I slow down and open the gate. My exhaustion has less to do with the running and more to do with the thoughts that are now spiralling back into my head. I can almost see her half naked all over again. I can see him staggering out of the bed again. I can smell the disgusting scent of whisky and stupidity.

It all comes back in bulk. The tears feel like acid against my skin but I do not care. I have no idea how I managed to trek the stairs and get to my apartment but I am now in the living room and all I want to do is sleep my sorrows away…

****

The morning is worse. My eyes are a burden and every muscle in my body aches like it never has. I stand up nonetheless and head to the kitchen. I fell asleep on the sofa yesterday which makes the aching much worse.

My first instinct is to check my phone, so I do. Only to find 43 missed calls from Nkululeko's number and 29 messages. I want to open them but instead I select them all and delete them along with his number. If I'm going to move on from him then I will start to get rid of him right this minute. It's Saturday so I'm not going to work and I'm going to use this time to pack. I am leaving this house, whatever it takes.

There is a new found strength in me. Don't confusing it with healing, this is more like acceptance. I am also aware of my anger too; I am angry. Really angry. I don't deserve any of this shit. None of it.

There is an expected thud on the door. I knew he would come here. He knocks again, more violently this time.

“Mbalenhle, I'm going to knock this door down!” he says

I go to the door but stand in front of it as I contemplate my next move. I don’t care if he knocks it down, it’s his damn house anyways. But I open the door and find him standing there looking much more human than he did yesterday.

“Mbalenhle…I was drunk.” He says in a tone of defeat. One that I've never heard coming from him. It doesn’t even suite him.

“And I'm relatively short…” I shoot back. This confuses him and I carry on. “Oh I'm sorry, I thought this was a platform for us to say totally irrelevant things!”

I try to bang the door in his face but he’s too quick so he blocks it with his hand I'm forced to let go.

“My love…please…”

“Don’t you dare! How the hell did you think this was going to play out? You cheat on me and I forgive you? Weak little Mbali, always has to stand for your shit! That was the last straw.” I walk back into the apartment and he follows me in. That’s not what I wanted.

“It was a mistake.”

“Well so were we.”

I know that above everything else, I am frustrated. I want him to leave but I know I can't make him. Well if he wants to stay then he can but I'm leaving.

“Where are you going?” he asks when I take the handbag that I had yesterday and throw it over my shoulder.

“Anywhere but here. And I thought I made it clear to you that I want nothing that will involve you okay? Now because this is your house and not mine, I will leave.”

He shakes his head and stops me by blocking my path to the door.

“You don’t mean this. You’re just upset right now. I fucked up, I fucked up real bad and I'm sorry.”

“And if I hadn’t walked in? If I hadn’t walked in, then would you still be this sorry?” –me

He keeps silent.

I thought as much.

“Okay. I'll leave.” He finally says.

“And never come back!” I scream after him as he closes the door.

I hope the pain will fade one day…

Chapter Eight

A week.

That was the time frame I gave myself to get over that bustard. It doesn’t help then he’s been blowing up my phone every single day for the past week so it’s made things much harder for me. The only thing that has actually gone my way thus far is moving into my new apartment. I had to pull so many strings to ensure that I could move in within such a short period of time but it happened and I'm happy. At least now I don’t have to walk around his oversized apartment trying to get my mind off him, now I can just do that in the comfort of my own home.

Most of the time I just bury myself in mounts of work. I work overtime these days because I dread going home and being alone. I also do it for the money because my salary has decreased significantly since taking on the role of a responsible citizen and paying rent. I'm glad to say I haven't let myself go though. I jog each and every single evening and I make the effort to look good because even though I feel like crap on the inside, I see no reason for it to reflect on the outside.

I told Ayanda about the break up only because I want him to avoid saying the name of that nuisance in my presence. These days I mentally refer to him as every single swear word that I can come up with.

“Hey.” He says

I roll my eyes instinctively but then I realise it’s rude so I respond with a forced ‘hello’. I shouldn’t be taking out my frustrations on other people but this guy just doesn’t seem to be going away. I knew he was going to be a pain in my ass.

“Look, I just came here to offer you some lunch. Nothing more.” He says

For the short time that I have known Yonda, I have learnt that he is a persistent person. I suppose its’s why the field of advertising suits him so well.

“I can get my own lunch Yonda.” I say and then get back to the computer. He remains still and I'm forced to look up at him.

“Why are you so mean woman?” he asks in deliberate confusion

A smile escapes from my lips and I bite my lower lip to contain it. I am not charmed, believe me you. I am simply amused at his expression because it seems like I have totally defeated the man.

“Wow. That’s all it takes? I should’ve said that a long time ago.” He says

I shake my head and proceed with my work until he puts the lunch bag on my desk and turns to move.

“Hey.” I call after him and he halts and turns to me.

“I’ll have lunch with you tomorrow if you like.” I say while shrugging.

He maintains a cool façade and nods.

“It’s just lunch Yonda.” I say as he enters the lift. He nods calmly but I see a smile creep onto his face just as the lift doors are closing.

Sigh. I hope you know what you’re doing Mbalenhle.

I open the lunch bag to find a chicken and mayo sandwich and a can of vanilla Coca-Cola.

I haven't had much of an appetite these past few days so I'm not surprised when I barely even touch the sandwich. It doesn’t help that it smells like a burnt tyre but maybe that’s just me being dramatic. I put it aside and proceed with my work.

****

I've grown accustomed to finding messages on my phone so I don’t even listen to them anymore. I blocked his number and he found a way to contact me. I deleted every single one of his pictures on my phone. He doesn’t even know I have pictures of him because I had to steal every single snap that I own. He hates taking pictures and now that I think about it, it’s stupid because how else will the children he will get from being a man hoe know their father?

As you can tell, I am still very much angry. I've gone through the phase of heart break. I cried myself to sleep for three days and then I got tired so I unleashed a part of me that I never even knew existed. It’s a portion filled with hatred and anger and vex and fury and fury and…the point is, I'm angry okay?

My apartment might be considered as a downgrade to some but I'm happy with it. Two bedrooms is more than enough, I have a sitting room and a small

kitchen. I have a bathroom and a shower. That's all I need. I also have DSTV installation but I'm not sure if I'll be able to pay for that every month. On the bright side, SABC 1, 2, 3 and e-TV have raised many generations and I'm part of that generation. I never have time for TV anyways so I don't care.

I put my phone on silent but its within sight so I can see the screen going on and off. I pick it up with the intension of rejecting the call but it's not Nkululeko.

Malwande?

"Lwande?" I answer and she starts speaking almost immediately.

"We need to talk. Tomorrow, dinner at 6:00 pm. Meet me at Café 1999." She says

I'm left with very little time to respond before she hangs up and leaves me trying to conjure an excuse. Dammit.

I take out my work laptop and I occupy myself with the Puma proposal. Yvonne is working day and night to ensure that we have Puma secured by the ned of this month.
Companies like these are what keep the business going and we all need to put in the effort of getting them to sign with us.

I hadn't realised until later that I work for one of the most prestigious advertising firms in Durban. Sole Advertising has a commendable reputation amongst people in the business world. Regardless of the fact that I'm just a P.A, I still feel proud for being part of such a company.

I wonder what Malwande wants to talk about. If she's going to try to convince me to go back to that person that I don't want to talk about, then she can forget it.

****

"You haven't been yourself lately." Yonda says as he bites into a packed sub.

I raise my brow.

"You don't know me, how would you know when I'm being myself or now?" I ask

This burger tastes terrible. I've had this same burger every time I come to this deli but today it just doesn't taste right. It's like they added too much salt but I don't want to complain so instead I sit there and watch Yonda devour his meal.

"Well. You don't smile anymore. There's a hint of sorrow in your eyes and…"

“Wait, let me stop you right there. Who died and made you ‘shrink OG’?” I ask

He laughs and I can't help but do the same. I have to say, I'm enjoying his company. He’s not as bad as I thought he would be and the only reason why I agreed to this was because I wanted to get him off my back.

“I'm not being a shrink, I'm just saying what I’ve observed.” He shrugs

“Well, if you must know. I broke up with my boyfriend a week ago.”

I surprise myself because I certainly didn’t mean to tell him the truth but it feels like less of a burden now that I say it out loud.

“I'm sorry.” He says

He looks sorry. He shouldn’t be.

“Don’t be sorry. He cheated.” –me

“Dumb guy.”

“Senseless I tell you.” –me

Then for the first time, I let myself laugh this situation out of my thoughts.

“We should be heading back to work.” He says as he finishes off his sub.

I nod in agreement, relieved that I can finally get out of this terrible-smelling place. I don’t understand what I ever saw in this place.

We make our way out the door and head back to work.

“You barely ate.” He says

“You’re a bit too observant.” I respond

He laughs.

I buy a peach from Mam’Jali. She is as bubbly as always and immediately my mood betters. That woman is something rare. Often I see her son roaming somewhere close bye. He seems like a normal child going through his teenage years. I heard him complaining about not having a cellular phone. He’s a child, he hasn’t learnt that the world is a tough place and nothing comes easy. I admire Mam’Jali for that because no child should have to face those realities at such a tender age.

“I'm eating now. Happy?” I ask Yonda as I take a bite f the peach.

He rolls his eyes and I laugh because his sassiness amazes me.

We're just in time. It's 12:20 am and that leaves me with 10 minutes to climb those steps. That's adequate time.

Yonda accompanies me up the stairs without questioning the reason for us taking the steps even though the elevator is in its full functionality. When we reach his floor, he turns to me and smiles. I don't want him to get the wrong idea so I just look back at him.

"Friends?" he offers his hand for a handshake

I smile

"Friends." I respond while giving him my hand.

****

This is the first time I've left work at normal time in a week. The only reason I did this was because I had to rush home and get ready for dinner with Lwande. I'm dreading it, I hope she doesn't pull a cupid on me and decides to bring Nkululeko with. I swear I will freak if she does that.

I am now the number fan of Uber, that is what my life has become. I take an Uber to work, to lunch, home, to the mall and…basically, Ubers have become my friends and
I am fine with that.
I call an Uber and it arrives just as I finish putting on my pumps. I know this because the window in my room allows me to see the parking lot.

I make my way down the stairs after turning off the lights and locking up. I'm on the second floor so I don't even have to go far until I get to the parking lot and into my Uber.

The ride is relatively long because Café 1999 quite a distance from my apartment. The only reason why I even know that place is because I tried applying for a job there but they declined. It's fancy and I know I can't afford to eat there so guess who's going to be having lemon water for dinner?

I pay and head to the restaurant. It's not packed, perhaps it's because people are having the mid-month blues. i know I am.

"Enhle, I'm glad you could make it mnaka." Malwande says when I reach her table.

She's with Ntsiki. I haven't seen her in a long time.

Ntsiki also stands up and lays a kiss on my cheek.

"It's nice to see you Enhle." She says

I nod and sit down.

I feel like I'm with strangers.

For a few minutes, we all sit there I what seems to me like awkward silence until Ntsiki decides to break the ice by congratulating me on my break up. On any other day I would have probably failed to see the humour in her statement but right now I laugh and give her a smug 'thank you'.

"They're all being real jackasses right now." Malwande says

I wouldn't really call Nkululeko's infidelity 'being a jackass'. The man is a jackass on a daily basis, what he did was betrayal and stupidity.

"I just want to move on, no matter how hard it's going to be." I say

They exchange looks and then nod in unison.

"What?" I ask

"Nothing mnaka. It's just that with these men, there's a lot more you have to deal with." Ntsiki says

"Well I guess I'll never know because I'm never going back to him." I say

Luckily the waiter comes over before Malwande can put in another word. I haven't had much of an appetite lately. All I eat are fruits and then sometimes I just start eating things that I've never even liked. I eat a lot of cucumber. A lot of nuts and a whole lot of dunked wings. I'm still debating whether this sudden change in eating habits will leave me fatter or thinner. I also consume a lot of cheese but I've always loved cheese so it's nothing out of the ordinary

"Nothing to drink mam?" the waiter asks. He is a thin, dark skinned young man who looks rather nervous. For what, I have no idea.

"I'll have a lemon lime tonic." I say and then I smile in attempt to calm his nerves

Malwande and Ntsiki order white wine. From my knowledge, they don't normally drink but then again these are two grown women and they can do whatever they want.

"Watch the liquor mnaks." Malwande says to Ntsiki

Ntsiki rolls her eyes and then clicks her tongue.

"Look who's talking." She says and Malwande almost chokes.

I just sit there watching this exchange until Ntsiki looks at me and laughs.

"She can't hold her liquor." Ntsiki says

I laugh but I know that there is more to this story

“It was a onetime thing.” Malwande says

“She got so drunk, she could barely even walk. And it was all because of some hoe.” Ntsiki says while ignoring Malwande’s attempt to stop her from telling the story.
She carries on telling me about ‘Yellow-bone Minenhle’ and the occurrences at Malwande’s bachelorette party, half-way through the story I'm already laughing my lungs out. Not necessarily because of the actual story but rather because Ntsiki is being so melodramatic at telling it. She makes it sound like a scene off a telenovela.

Most of the time, I can't imagine Lwande drinking anything stronger than ginger-beer so this story is both unbelievable and unimaginable.

“I slept till midday the next day. Catch me ever downing shots.” She says and we all burst out laughing

For some odd reason, I start talking about the little incident that I had with ‘little miss short hair’ at Nino’s.

“…she had some nerve.”

But this time no one is laughing, they just sit and look at me but I can see that concern is growing within both of them.

“Enhle, why didn’t you tell us this?” Malwande asks when I finish telling the story. I gulp, suddenly embarrassed by this whole situation

“She was all bark. Plus, I got rid of her. What’s the big deal?” I ask

“The ‘big deal’ is that girls like that don’t just go away. Did you tell Nkululeko?” –Ntsiki
I roll my eyes.

“I was going to but then…” I stop and then take a deep breath in.

“I still think you should be careful.” Malwande says

I shrug because I don’t know what else to say.

“You know; you’re really surprising me here Enhle.” Ntsiki says

I look at her, confused by her sudden confession

“What do you mean?” I ask

“Well, no offence but you’re handling this whole situation with Nkululeko much better than I thought you would.” She says

I'm not offended; in fact, I'm rather flattered at her remark.

“I'm angry.” I say, this is the first time I outwardly say and it feels like some sort of weight lifted off my soul.

“You should be. I would cut Msizi’s balls if he pulled that shit on me.” She says

I can't help but laugh.

“I wouldn’t go that far.” I say

“Yeah well Mseki would never.” Malwande says.

I love how she is so sure of it; I wonder why she is so sure of it.

Ntsiki rolls her eyes and we exchange looks and the burst out laughing. Here I was thinking that these women would try to force me back into that relationship. I sure am glad I was wrong.

“No guys, I'm being serious. I know he wouldn’t. Not unless he wants his dirty laundry aired out for everyone to see. If he did that to me, I would make sure to ruin him and that whole empire of his.” She says and then carries on sipping her wine

All of this has me thinking about the possible revenge methods I could take on Nkululeko but I laugh it off and proceed to listen to Ntsiki talking about a documentary she once saw about women who tuned vicious after being cheated on. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, I couldn’t agree more William.

I ordered macaroni and cheese because as I said before, cheese is one of the few foods that I can still tolerate but right now it’s starting to taste like sorghum porridge and I don’t even want to see the site of it.

I focus my attention back on the ladies. It seems like the slight diverging of my concentration came with a change of topic. They are speaking about destinations now and I am yet to figure out how the conversation even got there.

We laugh and share and I start feeling like my old self all over again but there is a hindering voice that keeps saying, ‘you’ll never get over him.’

“You’ll never get over him.” It says

****

I'm having another one of those dreadful days at work. I feel sick and I'm weary and I'm thinking too much so I have a massive headache. Yvonne came to check on me about 20 minutes ago, but I brushed her off and told her it was just a passing migraine. I don't think I can handle this anymore. I have this lump stuck right at the centre of my throat and I feel like screaming it out but I can't.

"Boss Lady tells me we'll be working together pretty soon." Yonda says just when I least expect him.

He does this, sometimes I look up and find him standing in front of my desk. I don't know how he sneaks up on me like that but lately I haven't been on my A-game so perhaps anybody could walk right up to me and I'd still call it 'sneaking'.

"What do you mean?" I say, focusing my attention on a yet again, smartly dressed Yonda. It's like he's obsessed with ties. He has a different one every single day.

"The Turkish investors, they need a pitch and Yvonne asked me to work with you to make it happen." He says with a slight smirk.

"Me?"

I barely know how a pitch should be like, I can't just come up with one.

"Well yes, she thinks you're ready for the big bad world." He reveals his dashing smile and I can't help but laugh. Yonda is trouble I tell you.

"Okay. I guess, when does she need us to finish it?" I ask. I'm praying that it's not within the next few days because I don't think I'll be able to work under pressure.

"Not sure. Sometime next week though. I think Friday." He says while reaching for the candy jar on my table. Normally I would slap his hand round about now but I don't even like sweets anymore. There's a lot I don't like anymore, here I thought I was the food lover.

"You need to get your mind back in the game Miss Miya." Yonda says while walking off and throwing the sweet into his mouth.

I roll my eyes and then carry on with drafting the Simmonsburg account.

****

When I left the house this evening, I had a vague idea of where I was heading to. To tell you the truth, I was not entirely sure of what exactly it is that I planned to do once I got there but I found myself walking towards the

convenience store which is situated three streets from my apartment. I have never been her before but I assume they sell all the things I need.

What it is that got me to this point, I don't know. All I know is that there is an unquenched desire to let out all of my anger and until I do that, I will never find peace. I wish so dearly that I didn't feel like this, that I had had the strength to carry on with life after breaking up with that man. I wish this every day and every night I cry myself to sleep because this very same wish lingers in my head while remaining exactly what it is, a wish.

The store is rather empty. I like that. I walk straight to the hardware section and browse around until an eager shop assistant comes over to help.

"Would you like some help suster?" he says

He is one of those Carvela wearing, unnecessarily expensive shirt buying, gold tooth having young men. His intentions are clear even before he opens his mouth to speak.

"I need paint. Bright paint." I say

He looks at me in smug anticipation.

"5 litre. That would be good." I carry on.

He scans me from top to bottom and lets out a slight perverted sigh, then he carries on to lead me to an isle decked with cans of paint.

He is a tall man, that is just about the greatest compliment I can give to him. He easily reaches for the top shelf and pulls out a 5 litre can of Plascon paint.

I am currently in a state of incoherence, perhaps I do not want to think straight but then again perhaps I cannot think straight. His glaring really isn't helping but I will let him be because in life I have learnt that one can never change the animalistic characters of a man.

"What colour is that?" I ask.

He seems to not see that I am not in a good mood. I think he chooses to not see it because surely his staring should've told him a thing or two about my attitude.

"Entlek, what's a pretty woman like yourself doing in this side of town?" he asks

I look at him unwillingly and roll my eyes.

“I asked what colour thatis.” I emphasise this by pointing directly at the can of paint in his hand.

He looks at me, although confused by my spur of hostility. I look right back at him.

“It’s red suster.” He says

“Good. I need a bat, a cricket bat and a pocket knife too.”

How I wish I could lie and say that I'm not surprising myself but Lord knows I am.

His look of lust has suddenly drained and he looks like a man who is seeing a mad woman.

“Suster…”

“Do you have it or not?” I snap

He moves immediately towards the next isle and takes a wooden bat from the middle shelf. He proceeds to take a pocket knife from the end of the shelf and then stops to hand them to me.

“Thank you…Nkosinathi.” I say while reading the name on his tag.

“My friends call me Danger.”

“Thank you. Nkosinathi.”

I start to head to the cashier register to pay, leaving him with his mouth slightly open as though there is something that has been left unsaid.

I pay and then gladly leave the store. It is already dark outside although it is only 6 pm, the days are short in winter, the nights long. I can also see that the rain clouds are gathering but I want to walk. It starts drizzling after a few minutes within my walk to indecency so I stop take out my phone and call for an Uber.

It arrives very soon after and I had already sought after the shelter at the side of the road to prevent myself from getting wet.

I step into the Uber and throughout the whole ride, there is absolutely nothing running through my head. For the first time in a really long time, I'm blank. Not numb, just blank. Soon after, the Uber stops in front of the two huge metal gates and I open my door to get out. The paint container that I am holding has become rather tiring to carry but I hold it firm and walk towards the gate.

Again, they open with me even doing so much as to breathe loudly. I walk in, at this moment of time I wonder whether I will actually go through with what I plan to do.
Tit for tat might not look good on me but over the past few months, he has shown me that I deserve so much better than the crappy life that I've had to live through. I want him to watch as it backfires on him.

I promised myself that I would never come back here but here I am. He never parks all of his cars in the cars. Obviously because his garage would not fir all of his cars. A large majority of his cars are there for parked outside. It comes to my surprise that the F-Pace is included in this range of cars because he loves that car too much.

I am in no rush, in fact it seems to me as if everything is happening in slow motion, as if every movement is just a single step above immobility. By now, the rain is pouring yet that remains the least of my worries. I open the can of paint with the pocket knife but move backwards when the intense smell fumes across the air. I've always hated the smell of paint. Always.

I am silent in my anger, it is just the sound of the gravel underneath my shoes and my soft breathing as I try to manoeuvre the position in which I have to hold the can.

I hesitate.

Looking at the car and then back at the container.

But then everything comes flooding back into my brain and I am suddenly walking that dreadful walk to his bedroom all over again. I am walking slowly, I hear nothing. Not the normal sound of music, nothing. I had seen that bottle of whiskey, I had known right thereand then that something was wrong.
And then I saw him. I saw his eyelids fluttering open and revealing bloodshot eyeballs.

I see this. I see all of this and then it angers me. He took me for a fool. He embarrassed me, humiliated me and then broke my heart. He broke me.

The dense liquid hits the car the windshield of the car with a thus and I watch it as it glides ever so easily down to the strainer at the bottom of the windshield. I can barely make out any of my surrounding. Everything seems like a giant blur to me.

Again, I fling the paint, this time on the side of his car and it slides down to the stones, trickling at the end of the foot step. I take out the pocket knife now, and with such vigour I attack the first of his four tyres. I slash it and move on before the air escapes the tire. I move on to each and every single one until I am satisfied with myself.

I feel like I am having an outer body experience, although my brain and my body are at war and my soul is lingering somewhere hidden. I take the bat,

which I had carelessly dropped on the gravel. The bat is much heavier than it should be.

It is raining. It is raining heavily and there is a lot of wind. The cold air hits my skin with such force that I stumble and nearly fall. After a brief struggling, I swing the bat towards the driver's window and watch it shatter to the ground.

A deafening sound follows suit and at first I am frightened but soon after it becomes an anthem to my destruction. This time I swing more violently onto the side of his car, although the exterior does not budge I carry on until the car is dented and I have left satisfactory damage.

I am soaked, and I am tired and I am crying and I am furious and I am… being watched.

I look up to find him standing stare with his hands in the pockets of his trousers. He says nothing, so I too remain silent and just stare at him.

"Mbalenhle" he finally says.

He looks like a man in conflict, I am comforted by his gaunt eyes. He is suffering, perhaps as much as I am.

"Mbalenhle…" he says again

This time I fail to look at me but the floor seems to be spiralling beneath me. My body loosens and I feel a sudden fatigue, although I am going to fall.

He moves towards me and I step back. This time my vision becomes fazed and the last thing I hear is his voice calling my name as I fall onto his arms and black out.

****

I am in his bed.

I rush to my feet before I can comprehend what exactly is it that I'm doing here. I feel faint.

What am I… oh shit. A pang of regret surges through my body and I sit back onto the bed and bury my head in my hands.

What have I done?

I look down at my blistered hands then rub them together as I try to contemplate my next step from here.

How is it possible that in such a short period of time, my life has become this entangled web of trouble after trouble? I left my apartment in justified rage, but now

I'm sitting here painted in regret.

The problem: I didn't think.

I hadn't thought as far as this part, all I wanted to do was wreck something that was beloved to him. The rest to me was simply collateral damage. Now look at me.

"You're awake." His voice echoes in my head and I turn around to find him leaning of the dressing table next to the entrance.

I cannot even look at him.

"I would like to go home." I say, although I know that I am whispering this

He says nothing. Just walks towards me until he is standing right in front of me. Towering before as his gaze forces me to lift my eyes.

He nods and then walks out of the room. I grab what I can of mine and follow him out. I feel like an idiot.

I walk down the stairs and head out the door while rummaging through my sling-bag for my phone, when I find it, I dial a taxi but before I can speak he comes walking out of the house with a set of keys in his hands, He says nothing but I know the look on his face so I put the phone back into my bag and follow him towards the garage. The Jaguar is no longer there, nor are the glasses that I left there, nor is there any sign of paint on the gravel.
How could all of this have been fixed in such a short space of time?
How long was I asleep?

He opens the Audi, instructs me to do the same on my side of the door and then sits down to secure his seatbelt. I do what is required of me, he starts the car and we sit in silence throughout the ride back to my apartment.

He knows where I live, judging by the fact that he does not ask for any directions. If it was any other person I would think that this is freaky, but this is Nkululeko and this is normal.

He pulls up in front of the gate.

I exit the car.

No 'thank you', no 'goodbye'.

Nothing.

****
I know I have the flu, but every day for the past three days I have been dreading a doctor's visit. I always wake up feeling like I never slept and I'm this close to taking my first official sick leave. The problem is, I take a sick leave,

go to the doctor...and then what? I just sit at home and nurse myself back to health? Times like these make me wish I was a normal person, someone who had a family with siblings who worried and cared about me. Perhaps someone in a healthy, non-destructive relationship with a controlling yet thoughtful idiot. For the longest time, I have had these thoughts. Some days I just blank out and all I have constantly going through my mind is how screwed up my life is. It really doesn't help that I thoughtlessly marched to Nkululeko's house and slashed the tyres of his car.

When I woke up this morning my throat felt like it was on fire, my head is pounding but regardless of this, I stand up and head to the shower. It takes me quite some time to get fully ready but eventually I make it out of the apartment and head outside. I am greeted by chilly morning weather and under different circumstances; I would probably enjoy this type of weather. Right now my teeth are clattering uncontrollably because I feel cold and all I want to do is snuggle back in bed with a hot water bottle and a good movie about the planet's demise.

This place is far more vibrant that upscale Umhlanga Square. Even in the early morning, the streets are busy. Young mothers dropping off their children in unlicensed crèche's, brothers walking to the nearest taxi stops, the grannies are already out and about trying to replenish whatever it is that is left of their gardens. There is no early morning jogging here, instead there is running to avoid being late for school, or work or wherever it is that you need to get to. I like this place far better than Umhlanga, it is far more real. The people here greet each other instead of awkwardly avoiding ech other by concentrating on earphones that aren't even playing. The young one's help you with the grocery when you step out of the taxi. The neighbours shout across the fences to ask for sugar and any daily essentials and there is a spaza shop in every corner because that's the way it is.

I hadn't really considered any of these things when I decided to move to New Germany, but now that I'm here I realise that there is no place that I would rather be. I would take a taxi but the problem is that it drops me off at market square and I have to take another two taxi's to actually get to work so instead I opt for the Uber.

It arrives very soon after I call and the ride to work takes just under 30 minutes. I'm not feeling well but I choose to suck it up and carry on with life. I reluctantly decide to take the elevator even though I know it's bound to nauseate me. Better nauseous than sick and tired.

I make my way to my desk, I have so much work to do. So much. It's because I procrastinate the whole day and end up doing absolutely nothing it's exhausting and I no longer know how to deal with it.

I grab the water bottle that I had thrown into my sling bag before leaving the house and take a gulp. My eyes feel the urge to close but I battle with keeping them open. I have absolutely no idea what to do with this wreck that is myself. For the slightest moment I think about standing up to head to the restroom,

maybe if I wash my face I'll feel better but then I realise that my body has become undeniably weak and sit there trying to contemplate my next move.

I watch Yvonne as she approaches my desk, she is wearing a red dress. Her silhouette becomes vivid as she moves closer and all I hear is the click of her stilettoes against the wooden floor as she moves towards me.
I am tired. I am too tired.

"Mbali." She says

I look at her without purposefully.

I am tired. I am too tired.

"Mbali!"

****

"Ayanda?"

I wake up to find him sitting on a chair close to my bed, just staring at me without any sign of ever having stopped.

"Don't you ever pull that shit on me. Honestly, I was worried sick. Even when Ma called, I was convinced that you were already dead. Mbali you need to take care of
yourself…"

And so went on his dramatic monologue, I just lay in bed and listened to him going on about how I never eat anymore. How I don't drink enough water, how irresponsible I am. How much I scared him, the thoughts that were going through his head as he drove here. I don't know whether to be overwhelmed or appreciative. Ayanda is arguably the most dramatic person I know.

"How did I even get here?" I ask as I realise that I am yet again in my apartment.

"Well my mom brought you here. She thought about taking you to hospital first but then you woke up and she realised that all you need is some rest." He says while standing up and moving towards the door of my room.

"Argh, flip. It's just a flu. No big deal. I should call Yvonne so I can thank her." I say as I sit up and scan the room for my bag.

"Nope, you're staying in bed." Ayanda says.
I roll my eyes at his unnecessary melodrama.

"Ayanda I'm fine. I promise. I just need some cough syrup and pain tablets and then I'll be feeling good as new again." I say, in desperate protest against his illogical thinking.

He doesn’t budge. I throw myself back onto the bed and stare up at the slightly stained ceiling.

“I think you're pregnant.” He says, ever so casually.

I freeze. My body goes into paralysis and I know nothing about the way in which I should react.

“Ayanda don’t say that.” I finally say as I quickly sit back up and glare at him.

I'm not pregnant.

“Well, I'm just offering it as a possibility. That’s all.” He says

The lump on my throat gradually increases and I find it difficult to breathe.

“Don’t say that. Just don’t.” I say, trying to convince myself that there is not a single possibility that I could be pregnant. I know there is, but I try by all mean to disregard it.

“Well, it wouldn’t hurt to make sure. I grabbed a few pregnancy tests from the pharmacy down the road while you were sleeping.”

He doesn’t seem to understand that this isn’t a casual topic. I can't be pregnant, not at my age and definitely not at this stage that I'm at in my life. What worries me the most is if, theoretically speaking, I were to be pregnant, the father of this child would be Nkululeko. This automatically decreases my chances of ever getting over him to a humiliating 0%. How does he not see this?

“Ayanda I'm not pregnant, there is no need for that.” I say

He walks to the side of my bed and kneels.

“Baby G, just go make sure. It’s not that big of a deal. If you’re pregnant then that’s okay. If you are then that’s also okay. You’d know who the father is right?” he says, suddenly a bit worried.

“Ayanda voetsek, what do you take me for? This is not a joke. Pregnancy isn’t in my agenda. I can't deal with it, nor am I even ready to be a mother. This is nothing to joke about.” I'm suddenly very overwhelmed with the need to cry but I stop myself before the first tear forms in my eye. What in the world would I do if I was really pregnant?

“I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but Mbali you know haven’t been eating, you’ve been sick a lot lately and I'm worried about you. It doesn’t hurt to make sure.” He shrugs

Actually it does hurt.
Well, it might if the answer I want isn't the answer I will get. I realise that I have to stand up and face whatever distant fear that exists between me and that unseen pregnancy test.

"Where is it?" I ask, looking at Ayanda wide-eyed in distress.

He stands up and scurries off to the sitting room, I'm assuming. He comes back with a packet from Dis-Chem and he empties it on top of my bed. A range of home pregnancy tests tumble on the bed and a feeling of queasiness rushes through my blood.

"Are these things reliable?" I ask

"I don't know. I've never been pregnant." He says

I nearly laugh but I'm stopped by my nerves so instead I grab three pregnancy tests and just glare at them blankly.

"You know you might want to go do the thing that needs to be done round about now." Ayanda says.

He really needs to shut up.

I head to the bathroom with the tests in my hand and a mind bubbling with questions that I don't know the answers to. Honestly, please Lord. I can't be pregnant. I just an't.

I can't be pregnant…

Chapter Nine

I remember that day so vividly, only because I had tried my best to force the memory of it out of my head.

It was a Sunday morning, which meant that father was to be at home the whole day. Some Sundays I would be lucky and he would decide to head to the nearest tavern, which coincidently was just a street away. During those Sundays, he would either not return or return with a woman at his side so I wouldn't have to endure his ill-treatment.

Father was a man of many words. Unlike other men, he saw the need to complain about everything. I wondered what made him so. Was it his personality, was it the way he was brought up, was it life that turned him into such an unthoughtful monster? Either way, whatever, or whoever it was that had turned him into the person that he was had created a burden for me. I was

the one who had to suffer the consequences of the person that he was. Me, no one else but me.

For the past four years, I had barely lived. To be quite frank, it's not that I was unaware of the fact that what was happening to me was wrong, it was simply that I did not know any other way of being treated and I had no idea where I would've started had I decided that I had enough of his abuse.

Often, we let ourselves suffer because we don't know what 'not suffering' feels like. I was afraid that I would take that step to get away from him and run right back into a cruel and unforgiving world. I had heard many stories about girl my age who ran from home and life ripped them into pieces. I had heard about the endless struggles that people face simply by existing alone in a world meant to be shared.

Father had been the devil I know. Better him than the ones I didn't know right?

That day, that particular Sunday. I had not been feeling well. I had been tired since the night before and I had barely slept. It was as though my body was rebelling against something that I had done to it.

At 9 am, I was still in bed and I knew that this would get me into a lot of trouble because father expected breakfast at 8 am and I was nowhere close to preparing it. I had been having difficulties with standing up. I felt as though my spine and my abdomen were raging in a war to see which would cause me more pain. I muffled my screams into the pillow as I twisted and turned on my bed. I was all alone in a room with barely any light coming into it and all I wanted to do was grab a rope and end my misery.

I had thought a lot about that option. Many times, when I was tied up. Other times when there was a new addition to the collection of scars of my back. Even when I was being spat at and father's vulgar words dug into my heart like daggers.

I suppose we can say that I was born a coward because each and every time the thought crossed my mind, it was fear that would force me to look the other way.

At that very moment, even amidst the pain. I could hear a conversation. I did not recognise the female voice so I had naturally assumed that it was a woman that father had brought home. I could not make out much of what was being said.

Well not until I heard footsteps heading towards my door. I knew there and there that I was in trouble. I had no idea why but I knew that there was no way that I wasn't in trouble with father. He was shouting, but the footsteps heading towards my door were not his. These were lighter, I wondered whether it was perhaps the woman who was heading to me, I wondered why she would do such a thing but even in my wonder, I lay still because my body was neither

willing nor able to move. I had tears in my eyes because of the unbearable pain and the unwanted fear.

The door-handle was roughly twisted open and I saw a familiar face.

I had no idea what it was exactly that brought her here but I had a vague idea. It was only a week before that Ntombi had seen the scars on my back and I had to tell her the truth about father. I dare say that it was no coincidence that, now, a Sunday morning, Ntombi's mother was barging into my room drawn in concern and anger.

Although Ntombi had been my best friend, she was also not one to keep a secret. I knew instantly that she had told her mother.

It was either a blessing or a curse that Ntombi's mother had appeared right at that very moment as I was tossing in agony, trying to stop myself from screaming.

"Kodwa Nkos'enamandla." She had gasped as she lay her eyes on me.

I did not bother to look back, not did I bother to hide the fact I had been in pain.

"Are you alright child?" she had said as she hurried over my bed.

She had touched my forehead, then under my chin. She looked at me and shook her head. I knew nothing of what was happening. Where was father?

"uBaba…" I had managed

She shooed me and then neatly withdrew the blanket that I had been covering myself with.

It was her small scream that had me aware of the fact that something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong. She had immediately ran out of the room, screaming for the neighbours. Shouting for a car. Exclaiming that I needed help.

I lay still in bed terrified of what it is that had sent this grown woman running out the house.

"Call the ambulance! Call the ambulance! Sizani bo!"

It was all I heard before I had gone blank.

I remember that when I had woken up, I was in unfamiliar room. I had woken up to the distinct smell of Hibitane, it was overpowering to say the least.

I knew nothing of what had happened while I was asleep but I was quite aware that I was either in a clinic or a hospital. My body no longer ached like before

but every now and then I would feel a sharp pain on my abdomen. I had wondered just how sick I had been, being sick was an abnormality for me. Even during winter seasons when everyone else was catching the flu, I would be fine.

The young doctor had walked in. She had looked nothing less than a model. She had that beauty that was undeniable, the way she walked and even the way she had talked to me represented that she was a smart lady.

She had introduced herself as Dr Ndlovu.

I had smiled, although there had been very little to smile about in my life.

She went on to ask me about how I was feeling, she said that I had not been in a good state when I was brought here. She had said that she had noticed that the woman who had brought me here was not a relative of mine and so she asked whether I had any relatives. She had asked about my family, and through it all I had answered with composure and without hesitation.

It was only when she asked whether my parent was aware of my pregnancy that I had frozen. In all of my life, I had never been as shattered as I was when I heard her words. I had feelings that I, till this day, fail to explain.

Perhaps for the slightest moment, I had had an outer body experience. It was as though I was watching myself break down from a distance.

I had been pregnant. I had been pregnant because of father.

I had not heard what the Dr had said after those words. I do not even know whether she had carried on speaking. It was soon after I was being held by nurses that I stopped crying and started listening to the doctor again. It was only then that she told me that I had been bleeding when I was brought to the clinic. It was only then that she had told me that I had lost the foetus.

It was only then that I had started to breathe again. I had felt a pang of guilt as I realised that I was too relieved to have lost that child.
Nonetheless, I had never been 'happier' for a loss.

I never mourned for that loss. I had simply returned home the next day with father. He too had not said anything, I had been surprised that he had even come to fetch me. He did not touched me for two months after that incident.

But that very same day, I had heard that Ntombi and her family had moved.

To where? I never found out…

Chapter Ten

I never wanted that pregnancy. I don't want this one either. I am so conflicted at this moment of my life, I have not eaten a full meal nor have I spoken to any one for the past week. At first Ayanda thought that I was joking, he figured that I was just being dramatic about this pregnancy. The truth is, I really don't want this child.

I took all the pregnancy tests, each one showing either a plus sign, others clearly written 'positive' and others had the two lines. Each pregnancy test made me grow more and more agitated. By the end of it all I felt like screaming and shouting and breaking everything that was in my sight.

I haven't told anyone about my pregnancy, only Ayanda knows and I made sure to tell him that he shouldn't tell a soul. I'm incapable of aborting this child but I am not about to lie to myself and say I'm pleased. One of these days I will have to work up the nerve to go to Nkululeko and tell him that I'm carrying his child.

I've had to drag myself out of bed, I took two days off work this week and now I have to wake up and face the reality of life. I'm dreading work, matter of fact I'm dreading the whole idea of seeing people. I feel like they can all see right through me. They'll all point at me and snicker because I'm the girl who fell pregnant as a teenager and now I'm pregnant because I can't keep a man.

I head to the shower, just before that my phone rings. It's Ayanda. He calls every day now, I think he is worried that I might kill myself or kill this child, I don't know.

"Ayanda?"

"Mbali, are you okay?" he asks.

That's how he greets me these days.

"I'm fine. I'm just getting ready for work." I say

He sighs.

"Look, if you aren't ready to go back you can just stay home for a few more days. I'll ask my mom to…"

"No. I'm fine. I need to do something with my time." I say

He keeps quiet for some time and I am not sure whether I should hang up or…

"You've told Nkululeko right?" he finally says

Argh.

“No.” I say

I don’t want to speak about this. Not to him, not to anyone.

“Okay.” He says.

Which surprises me because I was expecting a lecture of some sort. I see he has finally come to terms with the fact that I want very little to do with Nkululeko.

“Okay, bye.” I say right before hanging up.

Honestly, can't I just catch a break in this life? People often say that we are the creators or two things: our wealth and our happiness.

I have created neither.

****

“There is someone at reception for you.” the voice of the front secretary bellows into my ear when I pick up the phone.

“Okay. I'll be right down.” I say as I struggle with organising the pile of papers on my desk.

I wonder who it is. I rarely get visitors. The only time I had someone at reception was when I was with Nkululeko and the person at the front desk was always Nkululeko. I'm very self-conscience now, even though I know that the baby bump is not yet visible, I have consciously decided to wear an oversized jersey with a pair of jeans.

I am surprised when I spot Malwande, standing there in red heals with a beige pants-suit on and her hair neatly tied in a ponytail. She looks like a woman with a schedule to keep. I wonder what exactly it is that brings her here.

“Enhle, mnaka. I'm so glad to see you.” she says with a huge smile on her face.
This woman really is something else, how does one even remain happy when surrounded by that brood of brothers?

“It’s lovely to see you to Lwande.” I say while giving her a tight hug. She is much taller than me because she is in heals, well naturally she is taller than me but now I just look like a midget because I'm wearing All-Stars.

“Well, I need you to do me a favour.” She says

“Anything.”

Really, I would go to the ends of this earth for this woman.

“Well, Mseki and I are going away for the weekend and we really don’t want to take Sandiso so I was just wondering if I can drop him off at your place?” she says, looking a bit worried.

Okay, that definitely isn’t what I expected but it’s fine because having Sandiso around is always a pleasure.

“You don’t even have to ask. You know I live in New Germany right?”

I'm just making sure, in case she changes her mind because she has to know that Sandiso won't be staying in a luxurious apartment with kid spa’s and indoor play areas.

She laughs and then looks at her watch.

“Mnaka, I know everything.”

The way she says this, it is as though there is something more meaningful to the statement. But how could it be? I am just being paranoid.

“Okay, just call me later so I know what to stock up on.” I say.

She shrugs, looking at me like I'm speaking a language that is foreign to her. Perhaps she does not understand that my house is not always packed with unnecessary food, I suppose I could blame her obliviousness on the amount of money she has but that would be unfair because the reason why she never runs out of food is because she always has to have it fully stocked for those Mthethwa people.

We hug again, and I watch her scurry off as she rummages through her handbag to get her phone.

I head back upstairs to find Yvonne standing next to my desk with a look of growing concern.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, sitting down.

She looks at me for a second before speaking. She really looks worried.

“The Turkish clients. They’re becoming hesitant about whether they should invest or not” she says, just falling short of biting her perfectly manicured nails.

“Don’t stress, is there anything I can help with?” –me

This is just a lame attempt to make her feel more at ease, I know for a fact that she doesn’t need my help. For starters, I don’t know the first thing about investments and advertising and marketing and everything that isn’t drafting

proposals. Sure, I read the proposals but I doubt that makes me any kind of useful in a situation like this.

“Actually I do need your help. I need you to pull an all-nighter. I'm calling Mr Makhubalo from 15th, this is his kind of thing.” She says

I want to protest, ask her why I have to stay if this whole department is actually Yonda’s ‘type of thing’. Yonda and I haven’t spoken in quite some time now, sure we greet whenever we see each other but our interaction ends there. I have to lay all blame on me for that, I have become somewhat anti-social in the past month.

“Okay, no sure thing.” I say with a comforting smile.

She nods anxiously, then makes her way back to her office.
Whew.

I just realised that it’s Friday today, tomorrow I have to babysit and I'm going to have to stay up all night. I'm going to have an exhausting weekend, to say the least.

****

“Yes, but we’ve tried that Yonda. They aren’t budging. We need something more.” Says Yvonne.
She is starting to get frustrated now.

We have finished three boxes of pizza, six cans of Power Play and just about all of our will power.

The Turkish clients are a hard nut to crack, we have been at this for the past five hours yet we still have nothing to hold onto.

“Mbali, you’ve scanned through their current investments right?” Yonda says while looking at me. He does this for the first time today because all along, he has been stealing glances at me.

“I did but…”

“Have you found something of commonality between them? Maybe their approach to business?
Their objectives, I don’t know…something.” He says. Like myself, he too seems to be getting tired of this. Yvonne has been breathing down our necks and I hate to say it but I've had round about enough. This is not our fault.

“Why are these clients so important anyways?” I ask, I swear my eyes are already half-shut.

Yvonne paces around the office. She has resorted to being bare-foot, her pencil skirt touches right under her knees and she looks very unusual without a pair of heals to support her stature. It is dark here, this office looks more like a loft than an actual office so when all the blinds are pulled up, Durban city lights dim up the whole floor leaving it just light enough so all we need is a lampshade.

It is only I that still has all of my clothing on, Yonda took off his jacket the minute he got, two hours later he took off his tie and half an hour ago, he pulled up his sleeves.

"Look, I really need this. These clients would be a huge breakthrough for us. They have collaborated with major companies all around the world and having them next to our name will do us major good. Now we need to start thinking." –Yvonne

But thinking is all we have been doing!

For some odd reason, perhaps it is because I am tired and all I really want to do is get home and get whatever little rest that I can still get, I start thinking about something Nkululeko said during his speech at the Gala event that I attended with Ayanda. He had said that the reason behind the success of the health institutes that they owned was all thanks to their ability to be real with their clients, their work ethic was based on building relationships rather than making money.

"You know, what we haven't tried is showing these clients that we can respect their way of working. Surely things aren't the same in Turkey so maybe if we give them a little bit of home, they will be willing to hear us out. People want power, they want status and that's what we should give them." –me. I have to say, I have no clue what exactly I'm getting to with this but Yvonne and Yonda have fallen silent and they seem to be listening with intent.

"We really have to make sure that whatever it is that we offer is worthwhile, reliable and just exactly what they need. Now, I've noticed that they don't have a stable South African based market and if we can assure them of that then we would have really hit home. They need transparency made simple. We can't just splash out a whole bunch of information to them, it makes us seem a bit detached from the idea of understanding their essence as a business. We have to do whatever it takes, even if that means landing them another client that has a huge South African customer base. I know it might sound a bit complex, but it's much easier for us to land Anglo-Accountants than this client. We already have them under our radar so if we can get them to agree to collaborate with the Turkish, then our job will be done." –me

We sat there is silence, I was still trying to figure out if what I had just said made any kind of sense or if I was talking unnecessary blabber.

"I can land Anglo before sunrise." Yvonne says

Whew.

And just like that, we all started packing our things and getting ready to go home. I don't know whether I should be having a victory moment but all I know is that I sure am glad to be going home and getting to bed.

****

I hear voices.

They are distant at first but then they become louder and then I hear a thud on the door. What frightens me the most is the fact that these voices are of men.

I quickly put on the robe that I had left hanging on the closet handle head to the door. I don't have a peephole and I'm too frightened to ask who it is. My fear fades when I hear a loud giggle and I'm made aware that it's Sandiso. I open the door.

I do not understand.

"Mondli." I say as they both enter the apartment without doing so much as greeting. Malwande couldn't have dropped off Sandiso?

"Ntokazi." That would be Mseki. He is the one who has Sandiso wrapped around his chest. These people are too tall for this apartment, it looks much smaller now that they are in it.

I'm am still confused and so I struggle with a neat response. I keep fumbling over my words, trying to jumble together a sentence that won't make me sound stupid.

"We're glad you're awake." Mseki says. Then he looks around the apartment and shrugs. He hands Sandiso to me, I don't know why we are still carrying the child because he can walk. I take him and put him on the floor.

Mondli puts a bag on the couch and they both stand there looking at me as though expecting some sort of delivery. By the looks of it, it would seem that they have sorted out their family matters. Mondli looks far better than he did the last time I saw him, so does Mseki. I wonder where the third one is, but I don't ask because they might start thinking that I care. I am yet to work up the nerve to tell them that I'm pregnant but one of these days I'll have to do it.

"Thank you for bringing him. I'll make sure he is well taken care of. Is there anything I should know? Does he have a set schedule for his eating, playing and bathing times?" I ask

They both look at me as though I am speaking French.

“Okay, no. It’s fine. I'll take it from here.” I nearly roll my eyes at them but I stop myself before it’s too late.

Mseki nods. Mondli kneels to whisper something into Sandiso’s ear.

“Mbalenhle it was nice seeing you, we hope to see more of you.” Mseki says, glancing at his watch.

They both look at Sandiso with mischief before walking towards the door.

What the hell was that about? I ask myself when they leave.

****

He has been crying for the past 30 minutes. I have no idea what to do with him. I have tried to feed him, I have given him every single toy in that bag, I've switched on cartoons and now I'm seriously thinking about giving up and calling Ntsiki. I know I can't call Lwande because I doubt she is even in the country, Mondli really wouldn’t be of use to me so Ntsiki is the only person I can think of.

Her phone rings but she doesn’t answer. Even after I call her for the third time.

He is still crying, and I'm getting worried because his sobs have become weaker, I think he strained his voice. The only person I can think of is Nkululeko.
“Sandiso, nana. What do you want my boy?” I ask

He bangs on the coffee table and I move back. This child is dangerous.

“Nana, look at me boy-boy.”

I've even resorted to making a fool out of myself and dancing to the rhythm of the cartoon theme song. It is not working.

“Okay, boy. Do you want mommy?” I ask

He carries on crying.

“Do you want daddy?”

He carries on crying.

What kind of kid doesn’t want their parents?
“Well baby, who do want? Do you want to go for a walk?” I ask.

He cries for another minute or so before keeping quiet. It worries me because once he keeps quiet, he looks as though he never cried.

“Baba…baba.” He says

This cute bundle of annoying! I asked nje, I asked if he wants his dad and he said no.

“Boy-boy, baba is not here right now okay?” I say and I watch his face change again. He is ready to torture me again.

“Do you want Baba-Nkulu?” I ask

For a second I think he is going to cry again but he doesn’t. He just sits there and looks at me with a slight grin on his face.

What the hell?

I grab my phone and dial his number. Although I deleted it, I knew I was kidding myself because I knew it off by heart.

He answers after the third ring.

“Mbalenhle.” He says

That voice of his, that husky yet deep sexy voice of his.

“I have a problem.” I say

He sighs.

“What do you need?” he says

You know, I don’t know why but I get the feeling that he was expecting me to call him.

“Sandiso. He says he wants you and he keeps crying and I don’t know what to do anymore.” I say in slight panic.

“Okay. I'll be there in a few minutes.” He says so casually.

Something about this is not adding up. Sandiso has become unusually quiet. He has turned his concentration back to the television and dare I might say that he is even laughing at the clumsiness of Tom.

I leave him to it and go to my room to get dressed. Something is wrong here. This whole thing just isn’t adding up.

I grab a sweater from the closet and a faded pair of jeans.

I hear a knock on the door right before slipping on my boots.

How?

How is it possible that he got here so fast?

I rush to the door, only to find Sandiso struggling to get down from the sofa. He looks happy. Too happy.

Nkululeko has never been one to dress up. He always looks like the average dressed man walking down the road, it is only his watch that gives away that he has more money than half of South Africa.

He looks pleased. I do not understand, but the again there is a lot that has happened that I don't understand.

"You called." He says.

I look at him, fighting the urge to roll my eyes.

"You came." I instead choose to say.

He walks into the apartment and a joyful child that I do not recognise jumps him and Nkululeko picks him up without effort.

Sandiso is a traitor. I have decided this. The child is a traitor.

"What was wrong?" Nkululeko asks

"He wouldn't stop crying." I reply.

"Well he looks fine to me."

This time I actually roll my eyes and Nkululeko unexpectedly lets out a loud laugh.

"Come on. Let's go." He says while moving to the couch to grab the bag.

This is unreal. And since when does he get the liberty to tell me to go with him?

"Fine. But I'm only coming with you because I don't trust you to stay alone with a child." I mutter.

"What was that?" he asks, leaning forward until his arm touches my shoulder.

"Nothing." I respond flatly.

****

I find him in the kitchen struggling to open a tin of chakalaka regardless of his use of a can-opener. He would never survive alone. He would either starve or get fat because he would have to order takeaways every day.

“You're up.” he says, turning his head to my direction.

I fell asleep with Sandiso in my arms about two hours ago. Luckily for me, Sandiso was still asleep when I woke up.

“What are you doing?” I ask

He glares at me from top to bottom. He is lustful, I can see that.

“I'm cooking.” He responds and then clears his throat while focusing his attention back to the tin.

“But we both know you can't cook. Why even bother?” I ask

“Well that hurts.” –him

I am inclined to laugh but I resist it and start taking ingredients from the shelves so I can carry on with whatever it is that he was attempting.

“Why did you cheat one me?”

The question comes so unexpectedly to both of us and I can't resist but gulp at the realisation that I have caught him completely unready. The truth is, I want to know. Maybe once I know I will forgive him and it will be easier to tell him that I'm pregnant.

It is silence now which echoes through every room in this house.

He says nothing, he just glares at me with apology drawn on his face.

What have I done? Am I even ready to talk about this with him?

“Mbalenhle…I…can we sit?” he says

I shrug in defeat and follow him out of the kitchen. At first I think that he is going to the sitting room but he moves past it and carries on to the door leading down to the basement. There are so many fond memories that I have of my time in this house. We laughed here, made love here, we fought here. In one way or another, one could say that we fell in and out of love with each other right here.

He reaches for the switch and the whole gym lights up. This place has a scent of its own, it’s like sweat and dust but it is not overpowering. He is walking in front of me, one hand in his pocket and the other reaching for the rope of the ring so he can enter. He puts his foot on the bottom rope so I can enter too. I

wonder if I will ever get used to him not being in my life, although it is highly unlikely that that will happen because I'm carrying his child.

I sit on the floor, waiting for him to say something. Anything that I can hold onto. He is still standing. He walks, ever so unsure of his next step.
Then he slowly drops to my level, remaining on his feet yet his elbows placed neatly on his thighs.

"You know…" he stops, inhales as if he is preparing himself for a long and daunting journey.

"I couldn't sleep after I met you. I knew before you had looked at me, before you had spoken. I knew the minute I saw, fearful and helpless. I knew you would be the woman to drive me crazy. Even before I knew your heart and your body and your slightly dry sense of humour…"

"It's not dry, you're just stupid." I interrupt.

"You see?" he says, with a slight smile on his face.

I swear, I roll my eyes so many times when I'm with this guy it's not even funny.

"What I was trying to say is, Mbalenhle I love you. You are the only woman that I have loved this much and it hurts me to see you hurt." He says. "Look, you might not believe me but there when days when I couldn't sleep. One time it got so bad and I ended up in Malwande's house, because I couldn't get the image of you out of my head. I wanted to forget you. Or atleast just get you out of my head for a second."

His words. They are sincere. I know this. But I am still in no state to respond because I am truly surprised. I had always thought that I was the one who fell first. I know he said he loved me first but I just always thought that I felt the full wrath of love first.

"So why cheat on me?" I manage

He touches my face, though I know he is unsure of whether I will mind or not. I drop my head instinctively.

"No, don't do that. Look at me."

And I do, out of pure obligation.

"I am sorry. I have never been this sorry for anything in my life. I'm sorry I did that to you and I'm sorry you saw that and I'm sorry I made you go through all of that shit." He says

I keep silent at first, "You broke me." I say ever so softly.

He drops his head, just like I did mine.

“And it broke me too.” His voice becomes huskier than usual.

When he raises his head again, his eyes are bloodshot and I can see that his eyes are becoming teary.
“Buka Mbalenhle, I had never been accustomed to such feelings for a woman. The way I feel about you, it’s foreign to me and I knew nothing about how to handle it. “

For a minute or two, we just sit in silence. Me trying to digest his words and him most probably trying to conjure his next.

“I screwed up. And I know that no matter how much I beg, you are not obligated to forgive me.
But I just never wanted to hurt you. That’s what I felt like doing, I felt like taking out my anger on someone and I couldn’t bring myself to doing that to you. I probably sound fucked up right now, but I couldn’t show you how angry I was. I just couldn’t do that to you.”

No no no no…

He is on the verge of breaking down and I don’t know how I will react if he does. I have never seen him being anything short of strong and watching him cry will hurt me.

“But Nkululeko what happens the next time you're angry? You cheat on me again and I have to forgive over and over again?” I ask

I receive no answer.

“You need to learn how to sort your shit out because I'm pregnant and I don’t want our child to have a father who can't control himself.” I blurt.

His reaction is not one that I expected. I wanted him to stand up, to show me that he is happy or anything really but instead he sinks onto the floor and buries his face in his hands. I watch him dismantle until the first sob comes so softly that one would not make out whether he is crying or not. I cannot, for the life of me, figure out what exactly it is that I should do to make him stop. I am absolutely clueless.

All I do is watch him helplessly.

At last I gather the courage to talk

“Nkululeko…”

He does not respond to me, he has fallen silent although his face is still in his hands, he is no longer crying.

I have no idea what possesses me to say what I say next…

“S’thandwa sami. Come on stand up.” I say

He responds to this only by looking up at me. He really is sorry, but as for the news about my pregnancy: I have no idea how he feels.

“So what happens now? Do you forget me?” He asks
I shake my head in deep melancholy, “I could never. Even if I tried, and I did, I just couldn’t.”

This is true, it is as though his face, his scent, his mere being is engraved in the inner most parts of heart.

“And you are carrying my child” he says

I have no idea whether he is asking or telling me this but I regret how I blurted it out. I wish I would have told him in a more appropriate manner.

I stare at him blankly and for once in a really long time, I forget. I forget what it was that got us to where we are, I forget why I don’t want this pregnancy, I forget everything but us.

“I want to kiss you.” he says after a while.

I cannot, for the life of me, understand what exactly it is that could possess him to say this especially during this particular conversation.

“You’re not going to do that.” In this instance I realise that I too have tears in my face, but his irrationality causes me to laugh them.

He shrugs, I lean close to his shoulder and comfort myself with the knowledge that we can now speak to each other in a civil manner.

“A man can try…” he says

I shake my head and rest my head on his shoulder again.

It is a weird thing that is happening here.

We are laughing.

Together but apart.

It has never happened before…

****

I have no idea what our conversation meant but I take it we are fine now. We are not back together though, but at least we are fine.

“Since we’re apologising, I'm sorry about your car.” I say, suddenly flushing with embarrassment.

His laughter fills up the whole house and I can't help but join him. Sandiso is watching television in the next room. The child has not cried since we got here.
I'm stunned.

“No biggie. Next time, just ask someone else to do it for you. I wouldn’t want you to get hurt, especially now.”

He really is stupid.

The news of my pregnancy was rather appreciated. He is happy and I can see that. It leaves me more at ease with the whole situation although I am still battling with whether I should tell him that I was pregnant once before. It’s not a conversation I want to have with him. It might just drive him back to that space of darkness and I’m not yet ready to deal with that again.

“What did you guys do to the child?” I ask, jokingly. But the look on his face shows guilt and I'm amazed by the fact that they might have actually done something.

“What do you mean?” he says with an all too innocent voice.

“I mean, what did you do? He was crying the whole time until I called your name and I found that weird.”

He bites his lower lip to stop himself from laughing. What the hell?

“Nkululeko I'm serious. Answer me.” I say

He raises his hands as though in surrender. This idiot.

“But you can't tell Malwande okay?” he says

There is absolutely no way this is real. I look at him wide eyed in sheer amazement.

“Don’t look at me like that, it was the only way to get you to call me. Plus I'm being honest here.”

“What did you do?”-me

He keeps quiet, almost bursting out in laughter but he stops himself in the realisation that I am truly shocked.

“His jersey, Mondli put it on Sandiso when they got to your apartment.” He says

“Yes, I saw that. What about it?” I ask, suddenly intrigued

“It irritates him, every time we try putting it on him it makes him cry. I think it’s the material. I took it off him when I got to your place.” He says, shrugging as though his deed is not an evil one. What doesn’t make sense is…

“But he stopped crying as soon as I said your name. The jersey doesn’t explain anything.”

He walks to the fridge to get a bottle of water.
“Well, I don’t know. I'm always the one who takes his jersey off so I guess he figured I was the only person who could help him.” He says

This is not right.

“You really should stop pulling these stunts of yours.” I say, reaching for the onions.

He has resorted to watching me cook because I told him to stay away the kitchen. He thought it was amusing but I was serious.

“You know you’ll have to move in with me right?” he says, I know he is testing waters because normally he would say these type of things with conviction.

“Why can't I just move back into the apartment?” I ask

“Mondli stays there now.” he says all too quickly.

“Why, what happened to his house?” –me

He walks to my side, making me feel slightly uncomfortable.

“Just move in with me. Please.” He says, looking down at my lips.

I will not be pressured by his use of sex appeal. That’s what got me pregnant.

“Fine.” I say and then I turn to carry on with the cooking, I feel him moving backwards. He must have a grin on his face, he thinks that was a victory moment but he really doesn’t know what’s coming to him.

“I'm staying in the guest bedroom downstairs, you are not to come into my room under any circumstances. You have to drive me to work every day, and don’t wake me up if you're feeling bored or lonely or anything that will require me to speak to you for a long period of time. We are not back together, understand that.” I say

This is the only way I know how to deal with Nkululeko. Clarity is what he understands best.

He raises his eyebrow, creating a furrow on his forehead. He looks like a boy.

“I understand Miss Miya.” He says

“Good.”

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When Nkululeko says, ‘things are sorted out’, he is normally implying that things are just the way he wants them to be. So when I left for work this morning and he said, ‘things will be all sorted out when you get back’, I was left very uneasy.

Nkululeko and I had to drop Sandiso off at Malwande’s place in the morning. Frankly, I didn’t have to go but Nkululeko saw it fir because he wanted me to be there when he told his family that I'm pregnant.

To say they were happy would be an understatement but I couldn’t help but sense an underlying concern. I bet it’s because I announced very clearly that Nkululeko and I were not together. Mseki seemed to think it was a joke, he laughed before I threw him a deadly look which made him shut up. At that very moment, they had exchanged looks with Nkululeko and I could see that they were trying very hard to not laugh. I had asked Nkululeko what the exchange was about but he merely shrugged and carried on driving.

Yvonne seems to be much happier than she was on Friday.

“The clients just called, they scheduled a meeting for tomorrow. It seems very promising.” Yvonne says.

This is good. At least we can all finally breathe easy.

I have noticed that Yvonne stresses a lot, sometimes she does it unnecessarily and I battle with knowing what to do. I'd like to say I've mastered her habits but I’d be lying because on top of stressing, she is also very moody.

“Come by my office at noon. I have something to discuss with you.” she says right before turning to leave.

The phone rings before I get the opportunity to ask her what it’s about.

“Sole Advertising Firm. How may I help you?”

“So I've been thinking…” he says

He is not being serious right now.

“Nkululeko I'm at work.”

“And that’s why I've been thinking,” he responds so condescendingly that I struggle with whether I should debate whatever it is that he wants to say.

“What have you been thinking about?” I ask, defeated by his persistence.

“About you. I think a lot about you s’thandwa sami.” He says

“Look, if that’s why you called then…”

“No, that’s not why I called. You just so happened to ask what I was thinking about and I responded honestly. The point is, I was wondering if you’d like to go to dinner with me tonight?” he says

What the hell is going on here?

“Nkululeko, are you courting me?” I ask, trying to supress my sudden urge to laugh.

“Call it what you want. I’m asking for dinner. Tonight. At 8 pm.” He says

He will be the death of me, I swear this to you right now that loving Nkululeko Mthethwa will be what is written under “cause of death”.

I know for a fact that he is capable of calling me the whole day if I do not agree to his stupid dinner.

“Fine. But don’t make this a habit, I'm only agreeing because I want you to stop pestering me.” I say and I hang up before he gets the opportunity to make some smart remark.

So, I think I just agreed to a date with my ex-boyfriend.

Well this is awfully progressive…

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I’ve been thinking a lot lately. I think about my life. What it was, what it’s become. I hink about the people in it. The ones that I want there and the ones that I have simply because they came as part of a deal that I didn’t know I was beckoning for.

I don’t want to wonder what my life would've been had I ran to another place for refuge. I certainly wouldn’t be pregnant, I doubt that I would've fallen in love but I also don’t think that I would've learned as much as I have learnt in the past year. I do not know why I think so much these days, perhaps I am

getting old. Really, I am, my birthday is tomorrow and I've resorted to not telling anyone about it. I don't want a big deal being made.

Yvonne said she would like to see me at her office at these times, so I neatly stack the paperwork on my desk and go to her office. It's always been quieter there. My space of work is a lot more crowded. With all the chattering and the pitter-patter that goes on between the PA's and the junior staff, I barely get a moment to just breathe.

"You wanted to see me?"

I feeling of familiarity comes over me, I remember so clearly the day I sat in Greg's office at the restaurant and listened to him discharging me of the first job that I ever had and loved.

She fiddles through a stack of paperwork on her desk and grabs a navy-blue file. When she opens it, I realise that it has my name on it. She scans through the pages, stopping to look over a few paragraphs and miming out the words that she is reading. She has not yet acknowledged the fact that she can see me sitting in front of her.

"Miss Mbalenhle Miya." She says, closing the file and then finally looking at me

I have never been this nervous about speaking to Yvonne. She seems intimidating and I sit here trying to remember her usual self but it's hard when she is speaking to me so formally.

I nod.

"It says here that you completed your matric in 2012." She says

I nod again.

"And you don't have any university qualifications after that?"

I gulp, wondering where exactly it is that this conversation is headed.

"Look, Mbali. Over the period of time in which you have been working for me, you have shown consistent application and dedication to your work. What you did on
Friday, to be frank with you, you saved my butt and I was impressed."
She says

I exhale, fighting the urge to laugh at myself because I had already started contemplating my reaction to devastation. Plus she can't fire me, I'm pregnant.

"You seem too relieved." Yvonne says, looking somewhat amused by my reaction.

“I thought you were going to fire me.” I blurt

“No, contrary to that. I would like to propose an offer.” She says

I raise my brows instinctively. Offer? For me?

“It’s up to you but I want to suggest that you further your qualifications. It’s just a suggestion but we have a really good programme here at my firm. You can work here and study part time but there are terms and conditions to it and I think you should know that…”

Studying? My word, I had thought about it. I mean, I wanted to do it eventually but I figured that the opportunity would come much later in my life. When I establish my own financial freedom and I can dedicate myself properly to my schoolwork. I don’t know what to say.

“You really don’t have to agree, but Mbali this will be good for you and for your career. I have no idea why you didn’t just carry on with your studies after high school but this is a great opportunity and I thing you should take it.”

I nod my head, not necessarily agreeing but showing that I am truly considering what she is saying.

“There are benefits, the company will pay for your fees and your books and any other costs that you incur while studying. The catch is that you have to do something in marketing, sales or promotions.” She says

I don’t mind that. I really don’t. I love this job and I've fallen in love with marketing as an industry. I'm just wondering if I'll get the time to go to classes and work just as efficiently.

“Yvonne, I really appreciate the offer. There is a lot to think about right now. Do I have some time to decide? I just really need to think this through so I make the right decision.” I say

I can see that we are both in agreement about this issue, she too realises that this would be a sudden step for me to take.

“No, I totally understand. While you’re thinking about it, I'd just like to let you know that I too have decided to increase your salary. I mean, you really pulled through for me and this is well deserved.”

Okay, so maybe my day just reached its highest peak. Can things get any better than this? I get a raise? Do you understand just how much this means to me? I cannot begin to show my gratitude for this gesture to Yvonne so I sit there with a smile glue to my face, waiting for her to say something else.

“That’s all.” She says

I stand up, nodding yet trying to supress my urge to smile uncontrollably.

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“You’re going to take the offer, right?”

Yonda has been on my case about this issue for the past half hour. I understand that he is keen on seeing me progress but he isn’t giving me the space nor the time to think things through. We’re heading back to work, we both decided to grab a late lunch at a close-by café. It’s already 4 pm and it’s a pretty futile task heading back to work because I knock off at 4:30 pm, however I made the conscious decision to leave my laptop bag there and I have to trek all the way back to 16th to fetch it.

“I don’t know Yonda. I've already told you this, I just have to sit down and think this through.” I respond.

The wind is blowing gently though it is still cold and I can't help the clattering of my teeth.

“There’s nothing to think about Mbali. It’s a great opportunity and you should take it.
Yvonne doesn’t give those learnerships out to just anybody. Obviously, she sees a lot in you.” he is fiddling with the pocket of his trench coat as he says this. Yonda is a smart dresser, I think I have mentioned this. His daily attire is nothing short of dapper, he wears a tie religiously, his shoes are always finely polished and his pants look tailored for his body. It amazes how one can put so much effort into how he looks, however it is necessary because he works in advertising and his image determines his paycheque.

The office building is just a street away now, the streets are less busy than usual. People don’t come out to play in winter, the streets are barren. Even the vendors are few but when I pass by Mam’Jali’s stand, she is sitting with a blanket over her lower body. I smile at her, and she returns it as expected. Yonda has fallen into the habit of buying a fruit at Mam’Jali’s stand everyday but this always serves as a problem for me because Mam’Jali is convinced that Yonda and I have a thing going on. We make short conversation as I wait for Yonda to decide on which fruit it is that he will be having today. I ask about her son and whether he is doing well at school. She tells me that all is going fine however her neighbour has been giving her problems because he does not want to pay for the window which was broken by his son when he kicked the ball too hard and it shattered Mam’Jali’s dining room window. It is not fair really, especially now in winter, the nights are cold and no one should have to endure that.

When Yonda is done, having taken a peach, a banana and some pomegranate, we say our goodbyes and leave Mam’Jali to her chattering with the rest of the ladies who are selling their goods. Some people can be so happy with very little.

Our walk back to the office consists of funny bickering, the occasional pointing at unusually dressed individuals and because of me, we have had to stop at the flee-market because I saw a beautiful dashiki when we were passing by and I couldn't help myself.

"Isn't that…" he says suddenly when the office building is within our sight.

It is. What in the world he doing here?

"Is he being serious?" I ask with a tint of annoyance in my voice.

"I thought you guys broke up." Yonda says

I sigh, in absolute defeat because I realise that this is what my life has come to and I have absolutely no way of stopping. Yonda and I are walking towards him.
He is leaning on his car, dressed in faded jeans, a white sweatshirt and black cap. It worries me that I analyse him so intricately whenever I lay eyes on him. His phone rings, I know this because he reaches into his back pocket, takes one look at the screen and puts it back into his pocket. He is looking straight at me, even at this distance I can see the irritation drawn on his face.

"We did. I'm just carrying his child now so I have to put up with this." I whisper to Yonda, absolutely oblivious that I just revealed sensitive information in an obscure way.

"You're what?" he stops dead on his tracks. I stop too. Let's not be dramatic here man.

"I'm pregnant. Now come on, he's looking at us. You more than me so you have to watch it when we get to him because he might just kill you." –me

Yonda mumbles something inaudible and we carry on walking. I feel a brief drop of my heart as we near him. He looks really irritated but he shouldn't be here and I shouldn't care.

"Go fetch your bag." He says when I'm standing in front of him. He takes one look at Yonda and then looks back at me as to ask, "Why are you still standing here?"

I don't argue with him, it's never a good idea to fight with him when he is like this. So instead I turn and signal Yonda to do the same but he doesn't budge. What the hell is wrong with him now?

"Yonda let's go." I say, desperate to change his decided mind.

“No Mbali, I'll meet you upstairs. I'd like to speak to Mr Mthethwa.” He says. He doesn’t look at me when he says this. I know he is looking straight at Nkululeko, a
Nkululeko who is still leaning on his car looking like he has had round about enough of all of this.

I stand still. I will not be held accountable for leaving these two people alone. Yonda doesn’t know Nkululeko. That is the problem.

“But Yonda…”

“Baby, go.” Nkululeko says and his face softens as he says this. It makes me feel better but I still don’t trust him.

I leave nonetheless, rushing to get my bag as soon possible. Lord knows what they are talking about, God-forbid that it has to with me. I still don’t know why Nkululeko is here, and without calling first. I should be the irritated one here.

But really, who am I kidding?

I took the elevator in desperate attempt to get things done quickly. My computer is not off so I have to turn that off and pack up the files into my drawer. All of this seems to be taking longer than it normally would.

I throw things into my sling-bag in panic and take my laptop bag and then head back to the elevator. Jesus, I really hate these things.

It baffles me so much that I have to go through all of this troubling just because of a short-tempered man whom I have no personal relationship with. I worry that my life is not a normal one and so if people were to hear of my problems they would either judge me immensely or look at me the same way one would look at a mad man. But surely it cannot be my fault that I'm surrounded by such problematic individuals.

When I reach the secretary’s desk on the first floor, I put my laptop bag on her table as well as my sling-bag and then fix myself. I realise that I probably look terrible and even though Nkululeko and I are no longer together, I still care about what he thinks of me. Call me shallow, I don’t care.

As I walk back to Nkululeko’s car, I'm trying my best to not look like I'm rushing but I’m also doing my best to walk as fast as I possibly can. Much to my surprise, Yonda is no longer there. Nkululeko is still leaning on the car but he walks towards me when he spots me.

He takes my bags yet says nothing. I follow him back to the car in silence and because of habit, I just stand there waiting for him to finish putting the bags in the back-seat and then to open my door. He does this and it is only once I'm in the car that I realise that I should probably start trying to get rid of that habit.

For the first five minutes of the drive, we are both quiet. I'm contemplating whether I should ask all the questions that I have bubbling in my brain right now or if I should wait until we get 'home'.

"'I talked to your boss. You have the next four days off." He says, rolling his tongue in his mouth.

He is irritated. He does this when he is irritated. But wait, what does he mean he spoke to Yvonne? I don't want any days off work.

"When? Why?" I ask, shaking my head in disbelief.

"I was going to ask for your permission but you weren't at work. I don't want to fight with you, just trust me okay?" he says, looking straight ahead at the road.

Trust you with what exactly? I cross arms lean back on the chair, unwilling to speak to him because I fear that I will start spitting fire. So firstly, he arrives at my place of work uninvited and unannounced, then he has the nerve and audacity to speak to my boss and ask her for something I never agreed to. Then on top of all of that, he gets irritated because I was walking with a colleague of mine. Entlek what the hell were they even talking about?

"What were you and Yonda discussing?" I ask, sitting up again and looking at him, he remains unreadable. For the most part, his eyes are facing the road and I have no way of knowing what exactly it is that he is thing about.

He keeps silence for a second and I think of giving up on him as a whole until he clears his throat and I realise that he is going to start speaking.

"We were talking about you." he says as if trying to stop himself from clicking his tongue.

"What about me?" I ask

"He was telling me things that I already knew. Nothing even worth discussing…."-him

Like…

I don't ask, I just wait for him to continue but I can tell that his patience is wearing thin.
This time he takes his eyes off the road and looks at me, "He must watch it. I haven't shot anyone in a long time." he says

I absolutely cannot contain the smile that rushes to my lips. I swear to you, he says the dumbest things and they never fail to make me smile. I was angry a second ago but now I don't even know why I was angry.

"Mbalenhle, I'm driving." He says, a smirk covering his face.

“So? I didn’t even say anything. I'm just laughing at your madness.” I say

“Well it’s distracting because every time you laugh I want to…”

“No, it’s fine. I don’t want to hear it.” I say, raising my hand to signal his halt.

This time he is the one who is laughing. I let him have his moment while I try to gather myself back together. He is turning into the driveway now, one hand on the steering wheel and with the other he scratches his chin.

His beard is growing, he must shave. I don’t have a problem with beards but I don’t like it on him. It doesn’t look bad or anything but I'm just saying that I like him without the beard.

“Please shave that beard off.” I say as he switches the car off.

He raises his brow in concealed amusement.

“You don’t like it?” he asks, a grin attached neatly to his lips.

“I don’t.” I answer, trying my best to not sound as smug as I actually am.

“Maybe you should help me shave it.” he says, mischief dripping from his tone.

I cannot deal with this right now. I open my door and head out, rolling my eyes at his suspicious charm. He opens his door too and follows me into the house. This living arrangement is going to be tricky. I can't imagine myself staying with this guy for the next nine months. Like really, how am I going to survive?

“You know, at some point you're going to have to stop giving me those lustful looks that you give me.” I say in warning.

He shifts his eyes to his watch immediately then proceeds to say, “We’re going to be late.”

I roll my eyes at his attempt to change the topic, not a very well planned out move because as soon as I do this he lays the bags on the sofa and slowly loves towards me. I know that look on his face, it’s the same look that got me pregnant. The one no one warned me to stay away from.

“Nkululeko what are you…” I am moving back from him, although I realise now that this is going to be futile because I seem to be moving right into a wall. He knows this and I can tell because of that smug look on his face. He has me right where he wants me. I cannot, for the life of me, understand why he is doing this to me. Whenever I roll my eyes, he sees it as an opportunity to use his sexual advantage which is why I am in this very situation right now.

I have reached the end of my road, the wall right behind my back as I watch him approach me ever so charmingly, with his hands in his pockets and his head slightly dropped as to look at me from top to bottom.

Why is this happening? Why am I not stopping this?

At the end, his body is pressed against mine and I struggle to let out my breath because I know that it will land on his skin and it will leave him motivated. So, I hold my breath and defeated by his stance, I look into his yearning eyes. His head is lowered, but even so he is still tall enough that his lips fall so perfectly to the top of my forehead.

"Nkululeko please…" I manage

He pushes my head upwards by lifting my chin up with his two fingers. I am left with no choice but to look straight at him. He will be the death of me I tell you.

"Tell me to stop." He whispers ever so softly into the lobe of my ear and I'm left completely unravelled by the huskiness of his voice. I try aimlessly to speak but I am under his will and I know that I cannot do a single thing about it.

"I'm going to kiss you now Mbalenhle." He says, as though asking for permission but not really requiring it.

I gulp, knowing all too well that when he says something it's because he means it and I am doing absolutely nothing to stop this from happening.

His one hand reaches for mine and he raises it so as to pin it on the wall with his own. Even if I wanted to run, there is no way to do it now. His other hand travels to the back of my neck and he draws my face nearer to his own. I'm left completely defeated by his touch. His intended gentleness and the warmth of his body leaning against my own. Again his scent takes me hostage and I exhale into the nape of his neck, my one hand instinctively runs to the bottom of his sweatshirt.

The heat of his breath on the top of my mouth sends me moaning uncontrollably so I let him slide his tongue into my mouth and willingly lose myself in him.

He kisses me gently at first, slowly and calmly as though he is remembering how I felt like. Then his grip tightens on my hand and his body presses hard onto mine just before his kiss deepens and he explores me with an unquenched thirst. An ever-growing desire that I am still to fulfil.

He always gets his way. Even when I try by all means to be strong and assertive, I know that he will always have his way with my heart and with my

body. I let go of all my will and let him pick me up effortlessly to place me neatly on his waste and I wrap my legs around him, clinging on because I never want him to let go. The nearest room is the guestroom which is on this floor, it's the one I direct him towards with my eyes. With his hands now placed firmly on my ass and my mouth still on his, he walks to the bathroom. It baffles me how he can do this so gracefully but he can't even open a can of tuna without making it seem like a domestic hazard.

There is very little that is being said, just the occasional whisper into my ear, the fumbled curses that he lets out whenever I dig my nails into his back and my soft whimpers as his hands now travel to my breasts. The man knows the type of effect that his touch has on my body and he uses this to his full advantage because every time I try to pull away from him, he comes back with a force and I wilt right back into his arms.

He lays me on the bed, my unruly afro sprawls on the bedspread uncontrollably. I think he loves my afro, every time I comb it out, he sees it as an opportunity to play around with it.

To me, all of this feels so right but I know that I will wake up in the morning and regret every single moment of it. I will regret allowing myself to be seduced by this charming specimen who has ventured into unzipping my jeans. He has absolutely no patience this one. None at all.

I don't know how, but he is bow unclutching my bra. It is there and then that I decide that I want this. I want him and I want him in me. I am promising myself right now that when I wake up in the morning with his arms around my body, I will not panic. I will neither panic nor regret any of this because I am making the conscious (debateable) decision right now to let this man have me.

"I missed you yezwa?" he says, a smile sprawling on his face and I can't help but let out a slight giggle as I pull him towards me and bury my head into his neck.

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"Where are you going?" I mumble

Although I am drunk in sleep, I still manage to see the hovering figure over me. I cannot make out much because it is dark but I can see the silhouette of his body, he is putting on the t-shirt that was thrown on the floor.

He doesn't answer me, he just gestures me to go back to sleep and then bends to kiss me on the forehead. I fall back into sleep almost immediately.

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I wake up to find him sitting on a chair directly in front of the bed doing nothing but staring at me. He is dressed in a white collarless shirt and black tuxedo pants. He is not wearing shoes, instead he is wearing a black pair of

socks. I wonder what this is about, surely he has been sitting there for a long time but maybe not. Why is he dressed like that?

I sit up, stretching my arms and yawning in post-sleep exhaustion. He smiles at this sight.

“Is there a reason why you're just sitting there staring at me?” I ask

He leans forward, widens his legs and then puts his elbows on his thighs. I wonder if he is planning on answering my question.

“There is.” He says
I didn’t miss these answers. I roll my eyes as a reflex.

“You want to repeat what happened last night?” he asks, almost immediately.

Gosh no, I couldn’t be able to handle it. My body would protest.

“Fine. I'm sorry. But are you going to give me an answer at least?” I ask, shoving the blanket to one side and then getting out of bed. My stomach is small, but one can tell that I am pregnant simply by looking at me naked. I am not dressed, well not fully dressed, but I don’t care. I make the bed, with him staring at my semi-naked body and reach for the bath towel so that I can head to the bathroom.

He is acting strange, I don’t know what is going through his head but I can tell that he is facing some sort of conflict in there.

He grabs ahold of my waist before I can leave the room, I look at him, expecting some form of communication to occur but he says nothing. He pulls me really close to his body and lays a brief but unexpected kiss on my lips and then lets me go.

Okay, that really was strange.

I learnt very early in this relationship that Nkululeko is a man of few words. He has never been expressive, not when he was young and certainly not now. This is why I feel like I have made a breakthrough every time I get him to open up and have an actual conversation with me.

“Are you fine Nkululeko?” I ask just to make sure that he really is okay.

“I'm great s’thandwa sami.” He winks, and then turns to head to the balcony just as I exit the room. This is not the reaction I was hoping to get after forgiving this man and then on top of that, handing myself over to him with no debate whatsoever. I expected something else, I don’t know, perhaps some expression of happiness. Right now, he looks like he has too many things on his mind.

I soak myself in the bath tub for a good 25 minutes, nourishing my skin in water filled with his shower gel instead of mine. I want to smell like him, I want every inch of me to ooze of his presence.

I will never understand why he cheated on me, but what I have learnt is to accept it. Accept that it happened and then try by all means to rebuild our relationship.
He regrets it, he has shown me this with his words, his actions and generally his utmost being. I cannot hold on to something I can't change, especially knowing that I love him and understanding that it will never change. I'll just have to live with it, and many people might judge me for this but Nkululeko has been the only man to ever show me love. He has built my character, taught me to look at myself in a way that I never thought possible and for the most part, I have fallen so utterly and deeply in love with him that I can no longer imagine a life without him.

I step out of the tub and wrap the towel around my body. It's cold so I rush back into the room dropping my towel carelessly because I want to put on some lotion and get dressed as soon as possible.

He comes in when I least expect him to, actually he just stops at the entrance and leans on the doorframe. I let him watch because really, I have no reason to stop him.

"What do you want Mbalenhle?" he asks.

His question makes absolutely no sense to me so I shrug it off and carry to take out a pair of jeans from the drawer. I'm going to ignore him until he clarifies his question.

"Are you hungry?" I ask, sliding the grey jersey over my head. I take an afro-comb from the left drawer try to control this crown of mine.

"I am. But that's not the point here." He says

"Baby, what are you on about?" I ask, now glaring at him in slight confusion and amusement.

"I'm asking you to name it Mbalenhle. Name anything you want and I swear I'll bring it to your knees."
Okay, no. I know I have a rather unusual effect on him but this is just a tad bit too much don't you think?

"Nkululeko, I don't want anything. Actually, I wouldn't mind going down for some breakfast right now." I say, trying to manoeuvre my way out of the room. He is standing at the entrance, blocking me from getting out.

"I love you yezwa. Happy birthday." He says, looking down at my lips. For a minute, I think that he will kiss me but he doesn't. He just walks off and leaves

me by myself, trying to figure out how he even found out that today is my birthday.

I have butterflies fluttering in my stomach and I can't help it.

His knowledge of everything about me is all impressive, freakish and charming to me. I love him like that. All beautiful and stuff.

I eventually gather myself up and follow him to the kitchen. I'm surprised he didn't make a big deal out of this, the reason why I didn't tell him about my birthday but I guess I underestimated his intelligence.

"You know I meant what I said." He says, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt. I still don't understand why he is dressed like that, it's so unlike him to just wake up in the morning and throw on a suit.

"I know. But baby, I don't want anything. I'm fine. With you." I say, walking towards his and then wrapping my arms around his waist. He exhales and I feel his body loosen against mine.

"I love you Mbalenhle. I love you more than you think I do." He says

I don't respond to this, these are the types of things that he says every now and then that make me realise that he really is the best and worst thing that has ever happened to me. I swear I wouldn't trade these moments for anything else in the world.

"I'll fall next to you my love." I say and I have to balance on my toes so I can get my lips to his. This is something that has always amused him. He has this tendency of using his height to abuse me. Like for instance, sometimes when I'm late for work and he doesn't want me to leave him, he would take one of my shoes and just lift it over his head. It becomes annoying when I have to climb him just to get to my item.

This moment right here, is a defining one. For both of us and for our relationship. This man has hurt me, but he has loved me so deeply that I can forgive him for everything that he has done wrong. He has done so many things that show me that he loves me, he changed for me, he laughed for me and he grew just for me. That's the process we have both had to go through together, we have had to grow together and at some point we have had to grow apart. I love him so much for loving me just the way I am. I love him more because he has protected me from all the evils of this world, and I will always love him because he is the father of my child. I would never in a million years imagined my life to turn out like this, I have been through so many struggles that my eyes had become hazy to any possibility of getting out of that life that I lived. I will forever be grateful for the love of this family, they took me in when I

didn't even expect them to. It is so rare to find people who have money who decide to make their tables longer rather than building their fences higher.

I love my idiot, I love him because he is my normality. The one pillar that I know will remain after the winds have blown and the walls have fallen. In the rubble of the aftermath, he will be there with his arms reaching out to me.

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So, he knew about my birthday, he always has but he also knew that I was not one to have big celebrations. I don't like them and I don't want them. Malwande told me that last year Mseki threw her the mother of all parties in some secluded are of City View Mall. He rented the whole floor apparently, to me that sounds a tad bit too much.

He keeps glancing over at me even though he is driving. We are headed to Malwande's house for lunch. Nkululeko has told me that the whole family would like to be together to celebrate my birthday and I saw nothing wrong with that. It's a pleasant gesture on his behalf.

You know, I've never understood the architecture of Malwande and Mseki's home. It looks Tuscan but modern at the same time. I can't lie, the exterior doesn't look like it has Malwande's type of home. It looks like a house they just bought and lived in because it was huge and luxurious. The interior on the other had is a whole different story. When you walk in, you can immediately feel the essence of Lwande in each and every single detail of the room. From the tiny decorations at the end of each mantel, to the large key features of the room like paintings and the stone wall in the living room. It's a beautiful home, that I cannot deny and I'm sure they have a lot more like these. I know Nkululeko owns four estates excluding the house that he lives in on a daily basis so surely his older brother has more.

We are greeted by laughter and two little busy bodies running about for no apparent reason. Sbahle doesn't even stop to greet, she just rushes past us with no intension to show that she is acknowledging our presence. The noises from the kitchen are those of friendly bickering and sheer laughter. I hear the familiar voice of Mam'Mahlase, no wonder they are all in the kitchen. She is the only person who can make this family fight for space next to a stove. I wonder how she does it, perhaps it is because she has an odd way of ordaining a person with importance. She praises these men a lot, even when they do something so tiny she will go out of her way to express her pride in them. No man doesn't like to have his ego patted.

It is only when Nkululeko and I enter the kitchen that I realise that Ayanda is also in this crowd of people. He is the loudest one, the one who decides to shout 'happy birthday!' even though everyone else just waits for me to properly enter the room. It's his arms that reach for me first and he manages to swoosh me up. I protest in laughter and embarrassment. Why is no one stopping this idiot?

“Put me down Ayanda!” I scream, but everyone else thinks that this is amusing and they just let him tickle me senseless. I swear I would hit him in the balls if I wasn’t laughing so hard.

At last he lets me go and an enthused Mondli walks to me with a look of sheer mischief, this time I back away because I don’t want a repetition of what just happened.

Mondli laughs and assures me that all he wants is a hug and to say happy birthday so I walk towards him and he pulls me in for a hug and whispers ‘thank you’ into my ear. I look at him, wondering why he would possibly be thankful to me of all people but he doesn’t answer. I would ask but I'm being flustered around like I'm a hugging machine. Soon after I am in Mseki’s arms and then Lwande and before I know it I have been offered great wishes by seven different people. Much to my surprise, I do not recognise the last face. She had been standing at the far corner of the kitchen with her hands together. I had not even noticed her until she came over and embraced me. I was caught between two reactions: a ‘who are you?’ and a ‘thanks for the hug!’ I don’t know which one I ended up settling for but I hugged her nonetheless.

I move back to Nkululeko’s side with a smile on my face, the whole lot of them have carried on with whatever it is that they were doing. I get on my toes to kiss Nkululeko because I have figured that no one is watching but as soon as I lay my lips on his, I hear one of those taxi rank whistles and I shyly pull away and glare at Mondli because I know he was the one who blew it.

“Mjita, don’t you have anything better to do.” Nkululeko says, walking towards a Mondli who has now stood up from his seat because he can see that if he doesn’t move then he will most probably receive a good klap to his head.

Everyone else is laughing at this spectacle, except for the unfamiliar face. I am still to learn who she actually is. I go to join a conversation between Ntsiki and Ayanda just before hearing Malwande’s mom shouting at Nkululeko and Mondli to stop being childish and come help with setting the table. It’s funny to me how the woman can just speak and have her will be done. They listen to her more than they do anyone else.

“No, we met a long time ago.” Ntsiki says just when I join them.

Ayanda puts one of his arms around my shoulders and I lean into him, listening to Ntsiki. I'm trying to catch onto this conversation because it seems I have reached it while it is at its peak. I take it that Ntsiki is telling Ayanda about Msizi. She says something about after-school walks and unwelcome courting. She blushes at the mention of Msizi’s name and this makes me smile because I know I get the same when someone talks about Nkululeko.

“And you? You thought we wouldn’t find out about your birthday?” she says and raises her eyebrows in accusation.

I flush, slightly embarrassed now.

“I just figured you guys would make a big ordeal of the whole thing and I really don’t like surprises.” I say

Ayanda rolls his eyes.

“I can't blame you. You don’t know how much it took for us to convince Nkululeko that buying you a car would be a bad idea.” She says, shrugging it off like it’s nothing.

He was going to buy me a car? Let’s be glad he didn’t because I would've told him to drive it right back to the car dealership. Call it pride, but I will not accept cars as gifts. Not in this lifetime.

“That would've been a disaster.” I say, shaking my head.

“Mxm, you're so ungrateful.” I hear Ayanda mutter next to me.

I can't help but laugh at him, he will always judge me when it comes to my relationship with Nkululeko. He is the type that thinks that accepting money is a sign of appreciation and spending it is a sign of respect. I never could agree with him when it came to that aspect of life.

I can't help it, but my eyes wander to where the new face is standing. She looks uncomfortable, like she is a bit unused to all of this. Been there before. I wonder if it would be rude to ask who she is. I can't ask Ayanda, he doesn’t know a sibling from a stranger in this family.

“She’s with Mondli.” Ntsiki whispers when she realises that I've been staring at the girl but I can't help it, she is so unconventionally beautiful.

I force myself to look away when I realise that Malwande and her are heading towards us. I've never met any of Mondli’s girlfriends. In fact, I've never seen him with a girl so this is rare to me.

“Mnaka, come on. I want to show you something.” Malwande says as soon as she gets to us. She takes me by the hand and we both make our way out the kitchen leaving Ntsiki with Ayanda and the woman who I am yet to be introduced to. When we pass the living room, Nkululeko tries to grab me by the waist but Malwande pulls me away. This leaves an annoyed look on his face.

“No Nkululeko, I'll bring her back in a few minutes. Just occupy yourself with something else.” Malwande says, dragging me up the stairs and leaving a Nkululeko with a gloomy yet boyish expression.

I wonder where she is taking me, and for what exactly?

“Lwande, where are we going?” I ask

“You’ll see, don’t worry.” She says and I follow her to the guest bedroom at the end of the hallway. She hurries to one of the cabinet drawers and pulls out a black gift bag. She has this delightful smile on her face, a look of sheer excitement mixed with anxiety. I'm already shaking my head but she hands the bag to me and just waits there expecting me to open it.

“You really didn’t have to do this Lwande.” I say

She smiles so joyfully and when she does, she looks like a child.

“Just open it Enhle…” she says, trying to restrict her hands from moving.

I put the bag on the bed and open it reluctantly. Inside is a bag, scripted with the initial M.M.

Who customises a box? I remove the lid from the box and as much as I try to stop it, my jaw drops open at the sight in front of me.

It is grey, with beautiful rustic accents at the edges and an intricate royal pattern. It takes me a while to gather up myself right before I start screaming in excitement. This is the most beautiful sling-bag I have ever seen. I hug her while my screams fill up the whole room. I cannot believe this. I grab the bag, looking at it closely while trying to understand how something can be so beautifully made.

Lwande just stand there, looking very pleased with herself. When I look closely at the button, again my initials are finely engraved on it.

“Lwande! How did you…?
When did you even…? I'm going to cry! It’s beautiful!” I burst out in a fit of pure joy and uncontained excitement. I hug her repeatedly, with a smile attached to my face.

“Okay, quit crying. Let’s go back downstairs before Nkululeko comes looking for you.” she says, playfully rolling her eyes.

I giggle at her attempt. I don’t want to leave my gift here. I'm taking it with me.

The table is already set, funnily enough it actually looks decent. Here I thought nothing could ever go right if you combine these men. Mam’Mahlase comes in with a bowl of salad with Nkululeko and Mondli following closely behind her. I head to the kitchen to get the casserole and the rest of the bowls, on my way out I bump into the girl, I've resorted to calling her that because we have not yet been introduced, she laughs at her own clumsiness and opts to take one of the bowls from my hand and helps me put it on the table. People have already seated themselves in their places, I find a spot next to Nkululeko and sit down. The girl does the same next to Mondli? Who is this girl? I examine her more

precisely. She has a slender body, looks like the simple type, much like myself she has no make-up on. Her smile, which I see when she looks at Mondli and he makes some remark, is beautiful. It reveals a dimple on both her cheeks and her face looks much younger than she probably is. I don't know what draws me to this girl, perhaps it's the simplicity of her short hair, or the way her eyes glimmer when she looks at Mondli, or maybe it's her quiet nature. I don't know, she reminds me of me. I don't know why, I don't know how but she looks like she is a girl with a story to tell, a long story…

My thoughts are interrupted by the voice of Mam'Mahlase as she instructs Nkululeko to bless the food. He nearly protests but I pinch his thigh and hand him a warning look. The last time he was told to pray he said, "Siyabonga. Amen." I swear I thought it was a bad joke, Mam'Mahlase did not look pleased. Nkululeko, in fact this whole family, just isn't religious. I think one of these days I'll have to drag Nkululeko to church, although I can't lie, I haven't stepped foot in a church since I was 5 years old. I went to church with my mother, I have vague memories of Sunday school but that's just about as churchly as it goes. I've always had faith in God though, or rather a supreme power that has been with me from the very start of my journey. In many instances, I have seen this power show its strength, I have seen its grace and mercy. Yet there are other times when I have wondered where this power had disappeared to, when I was suffering alone and there was no light to save me. Even so, I never doubted the existence of God but what I had doubted repeatedly was His existence in my life.

I'm still staring at him when he makes no move to start praying, he looks right back at me and when he realises that I'll be upset if he doesn't pray he bows his head and clears his throat.

"Somandla…" he says

This is going well.

"…siyabonga. Amen."

Spoke too soon.

When we all look up I can read the amused expression on Mondli's face, the confused expression on the girl's face and the annoyed expression on Mam'Mahlase's face.

I feel like I fell in love with an embarrassment.

Mseki is the first one to grab the food, and just like that the conversations start flowing and the food starts circling the table. When I reach for the savoury rice, I feel a hand on my thigh and my eyes shoot back to Nkululeko. I slide back into my chair and take his hand into my own, then neatly place it back

onto his own thigh. He tries really hard to supress his laughter but at the end it defeats him and he ends up laughing at himself.

“Respect.” I whisper with a grin and then I carry on to dish the meat up for him.

“You kids must get married now. You’ve already impregnated the child Mthethwa. When are you going to marry her?” Mam’Mahlase says ever so unexpectedly. My first instinct is to yelp in shock but I refrain from doing so and just gulp.
What is this woman trying to do?

Nkululeko is exchanging a suspicious look with Mseki, but at the end he clears his throat and looks at Mam’Mahlase.

“I will Ma. All in due time.” He says

I turn my eyes to Nkululeko and for a second our eyes lock and neither of us want to look away.

I really do adore him. I adore him a lot.

And I'm also satisfied with his answer, it doesn’t insinuate anything and I'm pretty sure we’re both on the same page about marriage. If it happens, then it happens but it should not be anytime soon because neither we, nor our relationship are ready for marriage. Just because I'm carrying his child, doesn’t mean we have to rush into marriage. One can exist without the other.

“And wena Mondli?” she turns her eyes to Mondli with absolutely no realisation of the type of reaction that she receives from him.

He has paled, believe or not he actually looks like he is going to choke on his food. This question also seems to have affected the lady next to him. I'm going to have to ask who exactly this woman is because right now I'm literally sitting with a stranger.

“Ma, you know…” he starts.

“Ai suka, you're going to start with your “I'm young” speech. Don’t bother.” Mam’Mahlase says, waving her hand in dismissal at Mondli. The whole table bursts out laughing. This woman really does know how to intimidate the breath out of someone. I remember the first time I sat at a dinner table like this with all of them, after their trial, she had grilled me and I had to literally try to remember breathing skills just so I could answer one of her questions without sounding like an idiot.

That wondering hand again. It grips my thigh now and I nearly let out a yelp but I stop myself by shoving asparagus into my mouth. I look at him, my eyes wide in absolute shock. How does he not understand that we are at a dinner table? Where are the manners of this man? He has this very stupid smirk on his face, that boyish grin that always manages to unzip me.

He shifts his chair closer to mine unnoticeably, leans right next to my shoulder and whispers, "I want to go home. With you and with my baby."

I say nothing, I look straight at my plate and say absolutely nothing, but the tone of his voice and the scent of his body have me experiencing the ever so familiar feeling of butterflies in my stomach.

I have fallen deaf to the conversation that proceeds around the table, sure I can see all of their mouths moving but I can't hear a damn thing that either of them is saying because I am so lost in my own world of trying to supress a lustful moan.

This time, his travels higher, until it's touching the inside of my thigh and I squirm in my seat because that is the only way I know how to stop this sensation that has suddenly built inside my body.

"Nkululeko, please stop…" for the first time, I look him in the eye because unfortunately I have to whisper all of this so that all of these people do not see that
I am sitting next to a man who is ready to devour me right now. It's a fruitless act trying to intimidate him into leaving me alone, instead it is as though he has gained some sort of motivation and I have absolutely no way of stopping him.

"Ayanda, I need your help with something!" I blurt, all too loudly and I hear Nkululeko almost laugh next to me. He slowly covers his lower lip with his hand and stares at me. I am trying to avoid eye contact, no one is actually paying attention to us. They all seem to be engaged in their own conversations.

"Ayanda, let's go." Io eyeball him in desperation and luckily, he doesn't ignore me because he stands up and so do I.

It's fine now Mbalenhle, you can breathe. You're safe now.

"What is the matter with you?" Ayanda shouts in a whisper as soon as we enter the kitchen and the noise of the conversations at the dinner table has faded to nothing but incoherent mumbles.

"It's that man. I don't know what to do with him. I think we should switch seats." I say in weak desperation.

“What are you going on about? What man? Yours?”

“Yes mine! He’s going to make me reach orgasm in front of everyone!” I'm sexually frustrated. It’s actually getting on my nerves. Ayanda is…he’s laughing at all of this. This is not a joke.

“Argh, you called me all the way here to tell that? I'm not swapping seats with you. Tame your beast.” He says, rolling his eyes and ready to head back to the eating area.

Et tu Brutè?

“Ayanda I'm not kidding. I need your help!” I'm almost begging now and the more I do, the more he laughs.

“Just go out there and sit down. And grab his balls and see his reaction. You're being so innocent.” He rolls his eyes again and this time he actually leaves me standing there with my mouth wide open.

I have two choices here.
Either I stay here and fear my reaction towards the touch of that man, or I keep my head high and walk back in there with a new-found confidence in both my will and my dignity. Ayanda’s suggestion is out of the picture, it doesn’t even have a point to it.

I walk back, his eyes find mine before I'm even seated. He stands up, pulls my chair out and I sit. Then he sits on his own and for the first few seconds I think that he has calmed down. Little do I know.

“Lalela, let’s get out of here okay?” he raises his brow as he says this and I can't help my next move. But maybe it’s because I want to grab onto something to stop myself from acting like an idiot or because I want him to feel the same exact way that I do but at the end of it all I know that my hand is somewhere that it’s not supposed to be. He stands up almost immediately and I swear I surprise myself by letting out a loud laugh but I realise that everyone is looking at me so my laugh fades awkwardly and I look at a Nkululeko who is still standing.

“Thanks for the food guys. We have something to take care of back home so I think we’re going to just head back early.”

We do?

“Ma, thank you. I'll see you tomorrow.” He say, looking at Mam’Mahlase and then looking at me as though I should already be in the car, ready to go. I roll my eyes and stand up. I'm finding all of this amusing, the things a hand without a purpose can do. Honestly it’s amazing.

“Nihambe kahle bantabami.” Mam’Mahlase stands up to give me a hug first because I'm closer to her and then moves to Nkululeko, side-eyes him and then grabs him in embrace. This woman has absolutely no idea of the thoughts that are going through that man’s head.

Msekiwezizwe is the one to walk us out, when we get to the door he nods at me and offers me a smile.

“Have yourself a happy birthday Ntokazi.” He says and I nod and proceed to walk out, leaving Nkululeko and him together because there seems that there is something that has to be discussed.

Mseki is… I don’t know.
He’s not typical. He certainly isn’t the type of person to be approached easily, I feel like I cannot converse with him unless I have my words neatly planned out in my head and ready to answer intimidating questions. He is undoubtedly the head of this family, it’s in the way he speaks, the way he commands attention simply by existing. You can see this in their interaction, the way Mondli and Nkululeko hesitate to argue anything he says. He is always the man with the plan, the one who makes it very clear that stupidity is not part of his life and wasting his time is not a habit you should get used to.

I have the car keys so I open the car and take a seat. It dawns on me that I'm getting old and I still don’t know how to drive. I really have to learn. Maybe one of these days I can ask Nkululeko to teach me, or at least lend me one of his cars so I can familiarise myself with the whole concept of driving.

The driver-door opens, he takes a seat and I throw him his keys. I wonder what they were talking about, it was such a short conversation though so it couldn’t have been anything important.

“You should not have done that.” He says, as he starts the car. I know he doesn’t want to but a boyish smile covers his face and looks out the window thinking that I cannot see him blush.

“I made you blush.” I say, letting out a giggle because I cannot contain my amusement.

He shakes his head in slight irritation, “I'll make you pay for that.” He says

I like how he moves, the way he effortlessly talks while reversing the car, and the way his face changes even though he is looking straight ahead at the windshield. I like how his arms flex a bit when he reaches for the gear and how I can see the full extent of his jawline when he turns for a second to just look at me because that’s what he does and that’s what drives me crazy.

“I don’t mind baby. Make me pay.” I lean closer to him and I can see the discomfort that he suddenly feels as I near my lips to the side of neck and whisper it into his ear.

“Fuck, Mbalenhle I'm driving.” He says, clenching his jaw in what seems like frustration now.

He has no idea the type of effect he has on my body, I will torture him just enough to show him how I feel when he does these things to me. I can use sexual advantage too, two can play that game.

“You want me to stop Nyambose?” I ask, a smug look covering my very demeanour. I don’t know where I learnt these things but I'm barely even thinking, the look of desire on his face is enough to inspire me to torture him more than I already.

We’re very close to his gate now but I'm not done with him so I continue to place my head neatly of his knee. He doesn’t budge, I smile and then move it upward to his thigh and then just like he did, I squeeze the muscle of his thigh and watch him jerk in his seat uncomfortably.

“Baby…” he mutters but he keeps quiet before even finishing and I let out a loud laugh because I feel as though I have rendered his defeated.

The metal gates open and he drives in hastily. He is trying very hard to look as though my actions do not bother him. He tries to maintain a calm face but I can see that I am frustrating him and it makes me manically happy.

He stops the car right in front of the garage, looking all too happy to be out of that seat. I keep still, knowing that he will walk over to my side and open my door for me.

I swear I salivate when he puts one hand in his pocket and walks to my side, I can see him through the windshield. Dammit.

I expect him to open my door and let me out but he opens my door and with one hand he reaches for my waist and lifts me up before I can even get out of the car. My legs are wrapped around his waist already and I find myself breathing down his back as he isses my neck. I had a feeling this would happen, we haven’t even made it to the front door, in fact as far as I'm aware, he has pinned me to the side of his SUV yet my legs remain around him.

A slight moan escapes my throat as my body build with emotions of pure want.

“Nkululeko, lets…” I want to tell him that we should probably go into the house but I fail to speak because his mouth moves to mine and I forget whatever thought it was that existed in my head.

He kisses me, he kisses me deeply, slowly, gently, beautifully. He kisses me until I forget where I am and how exactly I got there, his hands are starting to wander and just as I am ready to undress him there and then he lets me go.

My mouth drops open as I watch him put his hands back into his pockets and walk towards the house as though he did not just deprive me of all my will and the leave me unsatisfied. I know what he is doing. He thinks I don't know what he is doing. My body is still aching for him.

I cannot stand for this, he cannot do that to me. That's pure evil, you don't do that to a person. I can almost feel the weight of his body against mine and it makes me so irrational that after a few seconds of just watching walk away from me and then head to the house, I decide to follow him with a plan in mind and a strategy in play.

We do this to each other all the time, one would think that our relationship is one giant game but we constantly have to outsmart one another just so our survival with each other is smooth and unpredictable.

I walk right past him, with a smirk on his face and a bottle of water in his hand.

He looks so smug.

I eyeball him, following him with my eyes as I head upstairs.

I have absolutely no idea how to put this thing on but I'm a strong woman, I'll figure it out. Once I've manoeuvred it onto my body, it fits me just snug enough over my stomach and unless you look really carefully, you can't make out that I'm pregnant. The whole bodice are is just lace and it's see-through so it serves absolutely no purpose aside from sex appeal. I wish I had the patience to wear the whole set but I had difficulty enough putting on this wired body suit, I have no time to put on the stockings, they're going to be ripped off anyways so why should I bother.

I'm trying so hard to contain the feeling of excitement and victory that is bubbling in my stomach, I want him to see me and I want his jaw to drop.

I'm walking barefoot across the house with nothing but red lingerie; that is what I have become in this life. I must finish what he started, and I must teach him not to mess with me.

He isn't even paying attention to me when I walk into the lounge, he is fully oncentrated on the television in front of him. I'm just nervous because I don't exactly know how this is going to play out. I take a seat next to him, wait for him to reach for the remote and for that glorious moment when he finally raises his eyes and realises that he is sitting next to a sexually deprived female.

And so, comes my glorious moment.

“Shit.” That’s the first thing he says. Nothing spectacular, nothing romantic, nothing even slightly respectful. He says ‘shit’.

I actually feel like standing up and just leaving him there in his gobsmacked phase but I must brave on because apparently, this is what God gave to me and I must do my best with what I've got.

When he tries to reach for me, I shift back. When he moves closer, I stand up. When he stands up I move back and when he moves with me I move towards him.

This is my chance, my opportunity to show him that he can't control every aspect of me. I need him to see that, plus I just want to punish him for what he did earlier.

I move towards him until my body is pressed right up against his, I move until I'm close enough to force him to move back to the couch and then I move closer until he falls into the couch and I'm standing, watching his eyes get smaller as desire surges through his face.

He grabs my hand when I least expect it, causing me to fall on top of him. This is quickly going south.

Before I can even protest, the strap of my bodice is already torn and I have no idea how it got to that state so quickly.

“You want to play?” he asks, in that boyish tone of his that always unravels me.

I bury my mouth into the nape of his neck, kissing with thirst and an unquenched desire. He moans softly as my hands serenade his body and this makes me gain control over my body again. I reach for his zip and unbutton his trousers. I can feel his fullness against my thigh and I struggle to contain the uncomfortable pain that has formed in my place of need.

He is going to drive absolutely crazy.

His hands are already placed on the edge of my corsage string. He is going to get frustrated because he has been trying to undo the corsage since he took hold of me and yet he is still unsuccessful.

Because I know that if he doesn’t quickly open this corsage, he will easily rip it off; I stand up and do it for him. I don’t know about this couch thing maybe I should use this opportunity to go to the bedroom. When I try to walk, he stands up and grabs my waist.

“Uyaphi?” he asks, his eyes glued to my lips.

“I was hoping you’d follow me to the bedroom Mr Mthethwa.” I say, right before laying a kiss on his mouth. It seems he is having none of it because he leads me straight back to the couch and I sit on his lap, ready to whisper sweet nothings into his ear.

My corsage drops to the floor and I'm left very much naked on top of him.

He is happy with himself. I am happy with him.

I unbutton his shirt now, leaving it all open but not fully taking it off. The revelation of his skin allows me kiss each and every inch of it. I kiss his shoulder, his neck, down to is chest and his glorious stomach. I kiss him until I grow and I am on my knees in front of him.

I have never done this before but I've been told it’s a good experience and I've been advised to try. Of course, then, I thought it was a joke but now I want him so much that I want to taste his everything. My job is easy because his zipper is already open. He shifts uncomfortable on the couch and almost lets out a plea of complaint.

“I want to play.” I say, only my eyes looking up to see a face so ready to give into anything I say. I have him vulnerable, I have him right where I want him and if I were evil I would walk away just like he did but I know that I want him too so I would be torturing myself if I did that.

I feel a sensation of excitement surging through my body, with one hand I reach for him and with the other for his thigh.

I grin.

Maybe I'm growing up. Or maybe I'm just having fun. Either way, this is most probably the best birthday that I have ever had.

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“Sometimes, life brings us people that completely change us. Sometimes, life brings us people so we can completely change them. Through all of this, what I've learnt for sure is that in life, the only constant is change.

I am not who I was. I never will be who I was but at the end of the day, I lie in the arms of this man and I am eternally grateful that he is in my life and that I have become this person that I am because of him."

Chapter Eleven

I realised that I wasn't ready to go back to school. Actually, it is more my life than me.
There are too many thing going on and adding school to the list would be a heavy burden to carry.

I'm three months along in my pregnancy, my stomach is starting to show and I'm learning to deal with this human inside my body. For starters, I had to sit down with my thoughts and come to terms with the fact that I am pregnant and there is nothing that can change that. I had to accept this child and I had to make myself realise that this child is not a curse. Although I might not be thrilled to be having a child at my age, I'm still pleased that I'm blessed enough to have it while I'm at a good place in my life.

Yvonne is very insistent on me taking maternity leave as soon as possible, I'm not having it though. This is also much to Nkululeko's dismay because nowadays all he wants to do is lock me up in that house of his. Half the reason why I'm not studying is because I have to work so I will not have anyone deprive me of that, plus I love my work and leaving it right now would be senseless.

Speaking of work, I just came back so now I'm trying to make a meal so I can feed myself and my man. I've gone to the doctor three times after finding out about my pregnancy, all three times they've told me what I already know: stick to a healthy diet, exercise, take care of my well-being. Same thing in different words.

Nkululeko is upstairs changing, he said he has a meeting to get to at 8 pm with some people that I didn't care enough to ask about.

I'm trying to get the mushrooms sautéed properly before I can add the rest of the ingredients but the ringing of the doorbell interrupts me. I know Nkululeko can't get it, Mam'Gabisile always leaves when I get back from work so I have to switch off the stove and then trek all the way to the front door to get the …

Flip.

He stands there, expecting me to let him in. I have absolutely no idea what to do, I can't damn well shut the door in Nkululeko's fathers face but I also can't let him in so I just stand there aimlessly, praying to God that Nkululeko will walk down those steps right now and fix whatever this is. My eyes are wide in shock.

What is the man doing here? Should I greet? I should greet.

“Sawubona baba.” I say, lowering my eyes yet making no attempt to move from the door so he can enter. Because my eyes have started to wander, I look behind him to see black Mercedes parked on the gravel road next to the stone wall.

“Sawubona ntombazane.” I don’t think I will ever get used to just how similar his voice is to Nkululeko’s.

Luckily for me, before I have to think up of a new way to get this man to stay outside while ensuring that I don’t seem disrespectful, I hear the distant whistle of Nkululeko and I know that he is done getting dressed and he coming here. I look at him before he reaches my side, trying to signal him that his mood might just drop to a good negative level.

Why am I this nervous about all of this? I don’t know, maybe it’s because the last time these two men were in the same room; all hell nearly broke loose.

When Nkululeko sees his father I move back. I don’t wait for a reaction, instead I just move right back into the house and let him stand where I was standing. I don’t want to get involved, not unless I absolutely have to.

“Baba.” He rolls his tongue in his mouth the same way he does when he is annoyed.

Mthethwa nods, and yet again waits to be let in however Nkululeko doesn’t even budge. No, he can't let his father stand out there.

“Ndodana, we have to talk.” Mthethwa says and by the tone of his voice I can hear that he is serious and showing any sort of disrespect to him right now would probably infuriate him. Nkululeko sees this too and this is why he steps back and his father enters the house.

I don’t know what to do with myself so I choose to go back to the pots.

I have never wished to have prepared samp like I do now. I wish I had come back from work and I had made samp, and tripe and steam-bread just for additional value.
What am I going to serve to the father of my baby’s father? Lasagne? He’s going to look at me like I'm an idiot? Had I known that he would come here, I would've prepared a full Zulu meal, heck I would've even tried my luck at brewing beer. I care about what this man thinks.

Wait, but what exactly could be the reason for him to come here anyways? He looked almost vexed when he arrived but I didn’t pay much attention to it.

I should serve him juice atleast. This is such an embarrassing position that I'm in.

I think I'll just grab everything that's an option to drink. I pull out the teabags, the coffee, the beer, the water and the cold-drink and I place all of this on the plate. I look at what I've done, I guess now that I'm really looking at it, it could be a bit too much but I'm better safe than sorry.

When I walk into the lounge, I find them seated on separate couches, Nkululeko stands up to help me with the tray.

"Whoa, s'thandwa sami. That's a lot." He remarks and instantly I feel like an idiot, when I look at it in retrospect though; I could've just come out here and asked Bab'Mthethwa what he would like to drink. Perhaps that would've been the smarter, more sensible choice.
"Siyabonga ntombazana," he says, regarding me with a warm tone.

The eyes of this man make me feel so tiny, I scurry out of the room back into the safety of the kitchen.

The food is going to be ready in 20 minutes if I assume correctly, however I wish so desperately that by that time, Bab'Mthethwa would been long gone.

I've grown so curious about what they could be possibly discussing that I've had to resist the urge to eavesdrop so many times.

Just as I switch the stove off, I hear the front door open, then the sound of what seems like normal conversation, and then the door closes.

I'm already waiting for Nkululeko with my arms crossed in the middle of the kitchen. I'm expecting answers here.

He comes in with a look of amusement and slight panic.

"Shit." That's the first thing he says, and he says it with his head in his hands so it worries me even more.

"Baby, what happened? Why was your father here?" I ask, eyes wide in anticipation.

"He knows you're pregnant." He says

What? How? Wait but what does that mean?

"How?" I look down at my stomach, this sweater is big enough to cover a 6-month pregnant lady. He couldn't have seen that.

"It was that idiot, Mondli." He replies, walking to the fridge to get a bottle of water.

"Mondli? Why would Mondli…"

“Him and Mthethwa are buddies now. Nx, I going to beat that boy.” He says. I know he would, but simply for the fun of it because if he was really angry it would show. Right now, he is bordering the amusement line and it seems to me like he doesn’t think that this is a big deal.

“What do you mean they are buddies? Since when?” my confusion has reached an all-time high.

Nkululeko walks towards me, puts his hands neatly around my waist and moves me closer to his body.

“It’s a long story but at the end of it all they dealt with what had to be dealt with. We have come to terms with the situation.” He says. It seems hard for him to admit this.

“What situation is that?” –me

He sighs, stretches his neck.

“Well you know I hate to admit this right?” he says

I laugh, looking up at him.

“Uhuh.” I reply

“But you're still going to make me admit it?” –him

I giggle at the boyish look on his face.

“Yup.” I say, trying to stop myself from smiling.

“Well, if you must know.
Maybe the man isn’t that bad after all.” He says so hastily that I almost don’t make out what he is saying.

“I'm sorry what?” –me

He raises his brow and I have to stop myself from blurting out my laughter.

“Look, he’s not that bad. I still don’t like him, but I respect what he did for my brother.
He took him in, he could’ve easily thrown ma out of his house but he didn’t do that and I appreciate that. Mondli seems to be showing more gratitude.”

“You see, that wasn’t that bad, now was it? So, what was he here for anyways?” I ask, realising that we still haven’t discussed that. Although I am happy about the fact that they could resolve a few of their issues.

He shrugs, lets me go, moves to the counter and leans on it.

“Nothing much. Said he’d shoot me if I make impregnating young girls a habit. I think he’s fond of you.” then he takes a gulp of his water.

How is he saying this with a straight face? I can barely manage my shock.

“He was joking, right? About the shooting thing?” I ask, just to make sure that I'm on the safe side of this family.

“I doubt it. He looked serious.” He shrugs again. One would swear that we are having a normal conversation.

“How are you not fazed by this?” I ask

“Baby, don’t stress. I won't make it a habit anyways so I have nothing to worry about.” He says.

That’s not the point, he said he’d shoot you and he wasn’t joking. Look at the bigger picture here.

“I don’t understand you people.” I say, shrugging and then grabbing the bowl so I can dish up.

“You people? Ouch.” He says in a mocking tone. “Plus baby, you don’t get to say that; I wasn’t the one who went out there carrying the whole of our liquids. What was that?” I can see that he is trying his best to keep a straight face but he’s going to laugh and I'm going to be more embarrassed than I already am.

“Your dad. He can do that to a person, I figured if I brought everything out and he chose for himself it would be better.” I say

“You couldn’t have just asked him what he wanted?” –him

“You mean talk to him? No.” I respond all too quickly.

“Suit yourself then babe, you should probably know that he doesn’t like drinks. At all.” He says

I'd actually like to slap that smug look off his face because he is acting like he is sympathetic of me when actually he is just patronising me.

“Mxm, when is your meeting ending anyways?” I ask, in slight irritation

He finds all of this amusing, “Half ten, I'll be back before eleven. You look cute, come here.” He says, walking towards me with a suspicious look of lust.

“Don’t touch me you idiot. You're not even finished getting dressed and you still have to eat and drive to your meeting. You're going to be late.” I'm serious about this even though he still thinks I'm joking.

“Fine mother.” He responds in a snarky tone.

Mxm.

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I have work to get done, I'm a bit behind because of that four day leave that I took, the appointments with the doctor and the fact that I’ve been a bit tired lately. So, I think I should take a shower and then settle down with my laptop and try to finish a few things.

My phone beeps. I ignore it because I know it’s probably Ayanda trying to bother me. it beeps for the second time and I pick it up to see Nkululeko’s messages.

“I miss you.” the first one. I roll my eyes.

“Do you miss me?” the second one. I start to blush.

“Aren’t you in a meeting? I have work to do.” I reply and then wait for him to text back because I know he will and because he always does.

“I am in a meeting, but these people are boring me. You think I should fire a few just for the fun of it?”

I find myself laughing at his stupidity.

“That would be evil. Do it.” I respond

He doesn’t reply for a good five minutes and I start to worry.
“I'm kidding Nkululeko.”

“Too late.” –him

What the…

“Nkululeko no, I was just joking.”

“Psych.”

Sigh

“Nx.”

“Don’t fall asleep okay.” –him

“Why not?”

“Because I like it when you fall asleep in my arms.”

I really do love him. I really do.

“Okay my love, I'll wait up. Now get back to your meeting.” I type

“Ngyak’thanda yezwa Mbalenhle?”

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I can hear the distant voices coming from downstairs, the laughter, the silence and then laughter again. I’m assuming that he is with his brothers. I get out of bed and then head to the bathtub. I'm done within 20 minutes but when I step out I can still hear the voices. Perhaps I should just go make them some breakfast.

I throw on a pair of jeans and a sweater, I'm no longer doing this to hide pregnancy but rather because it's cold lately and sweaters are the warmest things I own.

I head downstairs and find them all standing around the island table with pieces of meat in their hands. Well I guess the breakfast idea is out of the picture. I greet them, offer them something to drink and then move to Nkululeko so I can give him a hug.
“We were just talking about this idiot here...” he says, pointing at Mondli with his greased hand.

“Correction mjita, you were not talking. You were attacking.” Mondli replies. I wonder why they give him such a hard time.

“I told you mjita, I didn’t mean to tell him...” Mondli says in an innocent tone.

“You and your father must stop bonding over our business.” Mseki says, moves towards the fridge, grabs a bottle of ice tea and then sits on the stool next to the table.

I’m watching all of this with the intention of joining this conversation but I just can’t, their interaction fascinates me. How they speak to each other, how they exchange looks and then burst out laughing. It’s rather unusual, I never realised just how close they are.

“Bafo, we don’t bond over your business. We talk, and sometimes you two idiots come up in the conversation.” Mondli responds

“So, you’ve been going to KwaMashu?” I ask, this is the first thing I’ve said since I stood with them.

“I have, you should come with me sometime.” Mondli replies.

“Don’t be an idiot. You’re not taking my girl to your father.” Nkululeko interrupts

I fight the strong urge to roll my eyes at him

“He’s your father too mjita. But no, it’s good.” There is a slight moment of silence where they just look at each other without saying anything.

“Ekse, focus. There’s no use in fighting each other.” Mseki is the one who says this. I’m standing there, once again responsible for conflict amongst these siblings. It’s like every time I open my mouth about their father, I just cause trouble.

“We’re not fighting. I’m just letting him know that his father is not my father.” Nkululeko says and just like that I see Mondli getting annoyed and I know if I don’t say anything they will be at each other’s throats.

“Mondli, come with me. I need your help with something.” I blurt. I grab his hand before he can protest, I know for a fact that Mondli is annoyed; maybe even annoyed enough to pick a fight with Nkululeko. That wouldn’t be a good idea though, Nkululeko would beat him so I’d much rather take the underdog and try to control him then deal with the stupid beast.

We leave the kitchen, I turn back to look at Mseki and he nods at me. I have a vague idea of what that means. Mondli is reluctant to come with me but we end up outside, heading to the pool area. Although it’s cold, I doubt I care.
This gives me some time to have a long overdue chat with Mondli.

“Don’t mind him, he’s just being an idiot.” I say, now looking at Mondli.

He keeps silent for a minute or two.

“I know, I’m used to it.” He says, a slight smile reaching his lips. Perhaps he is not as irritated as I thought he was.

Mondli is a tall young man, handsome too if I do say so myself. He is also quite free-spirited, not in an obvious way but he is the easiest to talk to.

“Are you alright?” I ask

“I could ask you the same thing.” He responds and I find myself unable to answer.

“Look sisi, I know we never spoke about what he did but...”

“What he did is in the past. I’m over it.” I quickly respond. I don’t think I want to discuss this particular topic, and I’m sure if I did I wouldn’t want to discuss it with any of his brothers.

He keeps silent but nods in acknowledgement.

“So, you and your dad have been getting along?” I proceed, only so the silence doesn’t extend into a full awkward moment.

“We have, after a few arguments and all that shit. We resolved our issues. Not all of them but we’re good.” He says

Those morons in there could learn a lot from this boy.

“That’s good, I’m glad one of you is thinking straight.” I say, only half-jokingly

“Yeah well, one of us has to.” He responds.

I laugh

“You’re a hard-headed bunch.” I say

“Ouch.” -him. And with this we are both laughing.

“I don’t mean any offence but sometimes you guys can be hard to handle.” I say

“Yeah no, I get what you mean. At least we’re staying out of jail now.” He jokes.

Honestly what kind of conversation is this?

We sit down on the chairs at the poolside and talk. We talk and laugh and for the first time ever, I actually have a full conversation with a Mthethwa who is not Nkululeko. I even work up the nerve to ask him about the young lady from my birthday lunch. This is how I learn about Zabathwa Mkhize. He doesn’t say much but what he says speaks so fondly of her and I can’t help but wonder what her story is. I want to ask more, I really do but for some odd reason I still can’t get rid of the nervousness that I feel whenever I speak to one of these men. Mondli can’t be more than a couple of years older than me so it’s slightly easier but as for Mseki.
It’s almost impossible, we exchange smiles and a few compulsory words and that is where our interaction ends. He does not scare me as per se, but he has this riveting effect on my ability to speak whenever I’m around him. It’s amusing too look at, but when you’re me; it’s anything but funny.

I wonder how Mondli and Zabathwa met. I keep these wondering thoughts in my head so instead I suggest that we go back inside.

I’ll never understand why I was put in the path that I’m walking, but I’ll always be appreciative because now I have people like these, people to count on.

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“You can be such an idiot you know?” I say, throwing the cucumber into the trolley.

We have decided to get some groceries (me more than him). After his brothers left, I told him to take a shower so he can take me to the mall. He wanted to protest but he also knew that I was annoyed at him for what he has said to Mondli so instead he went upstairs and came back later dressed in jeans, a black jacket and a pair of Nike's.

"Mina baby?" He asks in a boyish, amused tone and I can't help but click my tongue at him. He always annoys me just for the fun of it.

"Yes! Why would you talk to your brother like that?" I ask, taking the mayonnaise and putting in at the bottom trolley.

He doesn't look half as worried as I am.

"He is a grown man. Come on s'thandwa sam, you're really going to get upset over that?" He asks

"I already am. Maybe you should try being nicer to people." I suggest, trying with difficulty to reach for the cereal on the top shelf. He walks to my side, takes the cereal and then puts it in the trolley.

Argh

"Why?" He asks, almost in genuine confusion.

I am baffled.

"Because Nkululeko that's what normal people do in this world, they are nice to each other and even nicer to their siblings."

He keeps quiet and we just walk, for those very few seconds, down the food isle.

"But I'm not normal people. I just don't see the logic behind what you're saying, Mondli has something to be grateful for when it comes to his father, I don't. I'm tolerating him as it is and that's not easy." He says.

I almost want to be done with this conversation because his thick skull is getting in the way of progression.

"Fine then. If you don't like your father, then you don't like him but stop giving Mondli a hard time about it." I say.

I walk in front of him now, to avoid any further discussion. I feel his arm wrap around my waist from behind and I'm startled at first.

"Leave me alone..." I say, trying to break away from him.

I barely notice the two middle-aged woman who stand behind us, waiting for us to step aside so they can pass by. They give us those judgemental looks,

the ones I assume your neighbour gives you when they pass you by the street and you're walking with a boy. I flush at this realisation and finally break free from Nkululeko's hold.

"You're embarrassing us." I say, trying to move back. We are in the middle of a grocery store acting like teenagers, that's the type of life I'm living now.

He grabs me again and this time I can't protest because he kisses my mouth shut and my thoughts completely disappear.

When he lets, me go, I'm in a phase of slight confusion. He tends to have that effect on me.

"People are watching us," I say, when I realise that a few teenage girls have been standing at the end of the isle, giggling at this sight of affection.

"Let them watch." He whispers but I pull away before he can kiss me again. He leaves me to be, looks back at the group of teenagers and then directs a dashing smile their way. The next thing I hear is a contained flood of deafening screams. I grab Nkululeko by the hand and drag him to the till before he attempts any more of his tricks.

I look back at the teenagers and smile. They wave and I can't help but laugh. I slap Nkululeko on the arm as he is busy unloading the groceries onto the conveyer belt.

"You're an idiot." I say, suppressing my laughter.

"Your idiot." He says, landing a neat kiss on my forehead.

I blush uncontrollably.

I really am stupidly in love with this man.

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I've been looking at this computer screen for the past 4 hours, trying to finish this report in time for tomorrow. The problem is that I've been getting so many distractions, like for instance Yvonne has developed a tendency of coming to check up on me every so often. She thinks I'm sick, I'm not. I'm just pregnant that's all. And obviously Nkululeko calls just to start trivial conversation and sometimes he just does it because he is in his office and he is bored. I'm starting to wonder about his job, I don't understand why he has an office but still wears his uniform. Plus, he doesn't wear his uniform everyday so that just baffles me even more. Another person who has been pestering me is Ayanda. He said he would come here later to talk to his mother and then take me out to dinner.

I haven't checked the time in a long time so I'm surprised when I realise it's 6 pm and I have completely neglected everything else. I pick up my phone,

finding three missed calls and one message. The first missed call is from a number I don't know. The second from Nkululeko and the third from Ayanda. I open the message by Nkululeko. He says I should have a nice time at dinner tonight. A smile crosses my lips. It happens every time I see or hear his name.

I finish up, text Ayanda to tell him that I'm done. Ayanda has a car now. A very unappealing silver-grey Honda that looks my age. He would care if he didn't buy it himself but he is proud of the fact that it is the first thing that he has ever gotten for himself. I'm proud of him too for that. He texts back saying that he is 20 minutes away.

I sit back into my chair and dial Nkululeko. He doesn't pick up. He must be busy. I try again 10 minutes later. This time he picks up.

"Baby." He says, his cool raspy voice serenading my ears. I blush instantly. This needs to stop, we've been together for so long, how does he still have this effect on me?

"Sorry I didn't pick up my phone. I had some business to attend to." He says

"No it's fine. I was just checking up on you, making sure your vital organs are still intact," I joke.

He laughs at this and I can almost tell that he is shrugging.

"I'm fine. I'm hungry that's all." He responds, laughter still lingering in his voice.

You are always hungry, my inner voice claws.

"I left some food in the microwave." That's my outer voice; the sane, normal outer voice with reasoning skills and a civilised personality. I have to cook these days because Mam'Gabisile took some time off, it's well deserved I have to say. That woman works way too hard.

"Okay. The guys are coming over. I hope you don't mind." He says

I never know how to respond when he starts acting like his house belongs to me. Why would I mind?

"Yeah sure. I don't mind. But you'll have to get some takeout because I didn't make a lot of food."

We have reached our okay moment. I want to hang up but I don't want to.

"You can hang up now." He says

I laugh

"Why don't you hang up?" I ask

“Because I asked you to hang up.” He responds.

“Okay then. I’m hanging up.” But I stay on the phone and wait.

“You know I can come get you from there, my bed is empty.” He says and I can imagine the delighted smirk on his face. It’s enough to charm the wits off me and have me agreeing to put my phone down.

“Okay, goodbye my love.”
I say and just like that I hang up. But I stare at my phone for a bit too long until I hear a clearing throat and I look up to find Ayanda standing in front of me. I didn’t see him approaching.

“Come on, I already talked to my mom. Let’s go.” He says in a very distant non-Ayanda kind of way.

I wonder what’s wrong. Perhaps he had an argument with his mom. I’ll ask later.

For now I just grab my bag, the one Malwande gave me for my birthday, I swear I love it more every day. And then we head out. Ayanda has been walking in front of me the whole time, I’m starting to get worried now. Anger has never been on the agenda of Ayanda Nxumalo. The closest I’ve seen to anger on Ayanda’s face is irritation and usually that passes within 10 minutes.

“Are you okay?” I ask when we’ve both settled into our seats.

“I’m fine.” He mumbles.

He’s not.

“Ayanda you know I can’t help you if you didn’t talk to me.” I say, almost in a plea.

“I don’t want your help Mbali. I said I’m fine so just drop it.”

Okay. I slide back into my seat, ready to have this drive in silence. I don’t know how to deal with an angry Ayanda. I have never had to deal with an angry Ayanda.

“We’re having dinner with Zabathwa.” He says, just before turning in the radio.

I’m surprised, to say the least. He could’ve mentioned this earlier, not that it would’ve change anything but this comes as a surprise to me.

“I didn’t know you guys were friends.” I say, in lame attempt to get him talking again.

He keeps silent for at least a minute
"We've hung out a few times. She's a nice person." He says.

I cannot respond to such answers, they are vague and tiring. So, I choose to keep quiet instead.

The restaurant in not far from my building so we get there within a few minutes, which is good for me because I don't think I want to tolerate this sour mood of his. The least he could do is just tell me what's wrong and then tell me he doesn't want to talk about it if that's the case.

We both step out the car, the valet attendant stares at the car and hands us a judgemental look but Ayanda hands her the key and walks off. Had it been any other day, we would've joked about this. Maybe even told the valet lady off.

When we enter the restaurant, we're shown to our table, a corner table next to the window. I haven't been to this restaurant before but it smells divine and I'm craving steak. I don't have cravings much but when I do, I have them bad.

We haven't spoken, I am not willing to try to engage myself into a fruitless conversation with an irresponsive person. I'm not being insensitive but it would really help me if he gave me something to be sentisitive towards

For what seems like the longest five minutes of my life, we just sit in silence and stare at our menus. We would order but we are still waiting for Zabathwa.

It would be extremely rude of me to take out my phone and text Nkululeko but right now Ayanda is inspiring me to do exactly that.

I'm rescued when I spot the familiar face approaching us, she really is one beautiful woman. She dresses well too. It's not until she has reached our table that I gather up my thoughts and stand up to give her a hug. Ayanda looks up at her, nods, and then goes back to looking at the menu. Zabathwa looks at me, as though seeking for an answer. I shrug because really, I have no idea what else to do.

She steals glances at me just before a waiter comes to take our orders. I know what I came here for so I sit there watching these two trying to decide between risotto and and seafood platters and whatever else there is on that menu.

At the end, we have all ordered and now because the menus are gone; neither of us have anything to hide behind. I'm starting to wonder what exactly the point of this dinner is when the 'host' is so detached from reality.

"We haven't really been introduced." Zabathwa says, looking at me now and I can tell that she is desperately trying to make this less awkward.
I offer her a smile, introduce myself as Mbalenhle Miya. I tell her a bit more about myself, where I work, what I work as, and just enough about my backround so that she doesn't realise just how screwed up it was. We talk,

right until our food is served. I think both of us have decided to ignore the elephant named Ayanda that is in the room.

While talking to Zabathwa I learn a few things: for starters, we are the same age, she has done more with her life than I have with mine, she speaks fast but she doesn't say a lot and she is in love with Mondli. They met during a seminar in Port Elizabeth. As to what exactly it was that brought Mondli to a seminar, I have no idea.

Zabathwa is originally from the Eastern Cape in Matatiyela. She was born and raised there until she was 17, I don't know the rest of that story because just when she was about to tell it, Ayanda mumbled something.

"Ayanda are you really not going to tell us what's wrong?" I ask, in slight irritation now because his mood is ruining this whole night for both myself and Zabathwa.

He stares at me, he says absolutely nothing. He just stares with fury radiating from his eyes.

"Do you care?" He asks, deepening his stare
"Of course, I care Ayanda, just tell me what's wrong and maybe I can help."

Again, that silence.

I'm just about to quit as I ready myself to shove the fork full of meet into my mouth. I can see just how uncomfortable this must be for Zabathwa.

"You can't help me. You can't do shit." He responds

Okay, wow.

I'm still battling with whether I should respond or if I should just let him cool off. If he is angry then he is directing it towards the wrong person. I'm starting to get irritated by his behaviour.

"Ayanda just tell me what's wrong, I'll leave you alone after that if you want but you have to tell me. You're making this very uncomfortable for Zabathwa and I, you can't just sit there and say nothing." I say.

"Everything is wrong. Everything is so damn wrong!" He shouts and this draws the attention of many of the other diners, I look at them apologetically and stand up so I can sit next to Ayanda.

"Talk to me then, tell me what's wrong," I'm desperate to get him talking.

"Just leave me the fuck alone Mbali. I swear I'm going to lose it."

"No, I'm not going to leave you alone Ayanda. I care about you and..."

“You don’t give a fuck about me. You don’t care and if you did then you would know that I’ve been crying myself to sleep the past few days because the man that I thought I loved is fucking married.”

What? Kagiso? But Ayanda hasn’t been acting any kind of strange these past few days. How was I supposed to know?

“Kagiso is married?” Shock still lingering in my tone.

He is close to a breakdown, at least he is no longer screaming but there are still a few unwelcome spectators.

“Mbali, I think we should leave. We can have this conversation at my place.” Zabathwa says, calling for the waiter.

I nod in agreement, Ayanda has fallen silent.

I hand the waiter my card, Zabathwa tries to protest but I dismiss her.

“Ayanda, come on let’s go.” I say

He stands up, grabs his keys and I take bag from my seat. People are still giving us curious stares and I honestly wish I could just shout at them so they can mind their own business.

“We’ll take my car. I don’t mind. Unless you’ll be driving Ayanda’s car because he can’t drive like this,” Zabathwa says

“No, I don’t have a license,” I respond

We all head to undercover parking. I don’t even take notice of her car but it’s nothing fancy.

I don’t even know where we’re headed to, I take out my phone and text Nkululeko to tell him that I’ll be home late.

“Why?” He responds almost immediately

“We have a friend emergency, you can fetch me from Zabathwa’s place” I reply

He calls. I decline it and then send him a message instead.

“Why are you calling?” I type

“Because I want to talk to you.”

“Can’t you type whatever you want to say?”

“I can, but I want to make sure you’re fine.”

The cons of being in love with a person who is over protective.

“Baby, I promise you. I’m fine. But Ayanda isn’t so that’s why we’re heading to Zabathwa’s.”

He doesn’t respond for a few minutes.

“Okay. Call me when you’re done. I love you.”

“I love you too. I will.”

I put my phone back into my bag and look at the review mirror to see a tired looking Ayanda. What kind of devastation is this that leaves Ayanda looking so hopeless?
If he has been going through such a hard time of late, why didn’t he just tell me? Why couldn’t he have just come to me and I would’ve tried my best to help him through this because he always does the same for me.

Zabathwa pulls up at a complex gate, we are greeted by a security guard and then let in. She smiles at the guard as we make our way to the parking lot. We all step out of the car. This is a bitter moment for all of us, maybe Ayanda can crash with Zabathwa just for tonight. I hope he is still willing to speak. He hasn’t said a word since we left the restaurant.

Zabathwa’s apartment is on the very first floor so there is no need to climb stairs or get into elevators. She switches on her lights to reveal a nice, cosy living space. It’s quite small but it’s clean so it looks bigger than it is.

“Would you like something to drink?” She asks.

“I want something strong.” Ayanda replies

No.

“He’ll have tea, he needs to calm down.” I interject.

“Stop acting like my mother, I said I want something strong and I...”

“Ayanda, I’m trying to look out for you here. Getting drunk is not the answer.” I respond, I swear I’m getting tired of him

We sit on opposite ends of the couch, Zabathwa sits on the ottoman and for at least ten minutes, none of us say a single thing.

“Ayanda say something.”
Zabathwa blurts, clearly, I'm not the only irritated person here. I feel like Ayanda is acting like a kid.

He keeps silent.

“Kagiso is married, why didn’t you tell me this sooner?” I ask.

“What for Mbali? It wasn’t going to change anything.”

“And this is? You sitting here giving us deadly stances. How is that going to change anything Ayanda?” I ask, I swear I am really close to just standing up and leaving because he isn’t being responsive and I get enough of that with Nkululeko.

“You don't understand. Too much shit is going wrong!” he shouts

“Make me understand then Ayanda. Make me.”

He sniffs, looks at me dead in the eye and then clears his throat.

“He is married, married with two kids. Do you understand that? And that’s not the crap that bothering me, I couldn’t care less about Kagiso. You are my problem
Mbali.” He says

Me? What have I got to do with this?

“Ayanda what do you mean?” I shift back into my chair now because I am honestly startled by the look on his face.

“Don't give me that shit Mbali. You knew about my mother. You knew Zwide was beating her but you kept quiet!”

I gulp, my throat suddenly dry. I have absolutely no idea what to say. I sit there, terrified of the look that is on his face. I have never seen him this angry. Never. No, Mbalenhle you have to do something, you have to say something. Anything.

“Ayanda…”

“Ayanda what? You're going to deny it?” he snickers

Okay no, I'm getting irritated now.

“You don't get to talk to me like that. I get that you're upset but you don't talk to me like that.” I say, and for some odd reason any sympathy that I felt for Ayanda just disappears. My head is clear and I am thinking all too logically.

“Guys, I think we should calm down. Talk about this once you have both calmed down.” I had completely forgotten that Zabathwa is here.

“I'm calm,” he says, his eyes don't budge from my own. I return his stare with just as much conviction.

“You’re not going to deny it?” he asks

“I don't have to deny anything, Yvonne is your mother. Ayanda I didn’t want to hurt you, I thought you knew, how couldn’t you? You live with her. You can't be angry at me for this.” I'm being defensive but its only because I genuinely don't think I should be getting blamed for any of this. In fact, I just want to go home.

I need to get out of this place. My heart is starting to hurt and I just really don't want to fight with anyone.

“I’m leaving, I'll let you think about this. When you’ve calmed down, you know where to find me.” I say, taking my bag and getting ready to leave.

“Mbali, are you okay?” Zabathwa stands up and reaches me before I get to the door.

“No, I'm not. But I will be.” I respond. I look at Ayanda once again, honestly, I have never seen him so distraught but right now I'm so irritated that being empathetic is such a farfetched idea.

After having unnecessarily banged the door on poor Zabathwa, I head to the parking lot. I feel like this is the first time I have gulped a breath of fresh air in ages. I feel like my lungs are on fire, I want to cry and scream and just let out all of this frustration that I feel. I also feel so guilty, I know that I should’ve told Ayanda about Yvonne. I could’ve, so many times I had the opportunity to do that but I chose not to because I was afraid it would hurt him.

I choose to text Nkululeko because I know he will know that something is wrong if I call.
He arrives within a matter of minutes, when I get into the car I greet and then look outside the window.

“You’re fine, right?” he asks, when he realises that I haven’t spoken since I got into the car.

“I'm great.” I respond.

There is silence, until he stops the car. Why does everything have to be such a task with this man? I said I'm fine.

“Baby, look at me. Tell me what’s bothering you.” he says

I sigh, trying by all means to swallow this lump that threatens to have me bursting into tears.

“Mbalenhle, I'm serious. We will stay here until you tell me what is wrong.”

“I said I'm fine Nkululeko, I am.” It’s stupid of me to even bother because I'm wiping tears from my eyes as I say this.

“No Mbalenhle…”

“Baby, I can handle this…”

“I'm sure you can. I am.
But the least you could do is tell me what it is that has you so upset.
I'm not getting into bed with you while you have tears in your eyes. Forget it.” He says

I really want nothing more than a shoulder to cry on and a pillow to cry in. Nothing more.

“I just want to go home.
I had an argument with Ayanda and I don't want to talk about it. I want to sleep sthandwa sam’. That’s all I want to do.” I say, finally letting all the tears fall from my eyes. He looks at me for a while, reaches over to touch my trembling bottom lip with his thumb. Then he wipes away my tears like he always does…
****

I've spoken to Zabathwa since that incident in her apartment. Actually, we went out for drinks and we got to know each other. She’s a great girl, nice to talk to and honestly, she just gives off a positive energy. By profession, she is a psychologist, which would explain why she psycho analyses everything. She’s a deep thinker, quite the opposite of Mondli actually so I don't understand how that works. Okay no, I'm nothing like Nkululeko either so maybe that doesn’t play as much of a role as I think it does.

I enjoy her company, but I still think there is something that’s left unsaid.

Unfortunately, Ayanda and I have had no contact at all. I thought about texting him but I decided against it at the last minute. It doesn’t help that I have to go to work and see his mother every single day of my life. It’s frustrating, I wish I could just scream at Yvonne. Ask her why she is still in that toxic marriage of hers with that treacherous man. It annoys me, my blood boils at the thought of it.

Sometimes I sit with my thoughts and I wonder whether I made the right decision by getting upset with Ayanda. I could’ve tried to be more patient. More understanding because honestly, it has to be very difficult to learn something like this. I think what frustrated him even more was the situation with Kagiso.

I know it’s hypocritical to say it now, but I never liked Kagiso. There was always something odd about him. Maybe it’s because the one time I met him, he smelt of baby food. I was just put off by that, and it was a strong scent so I didn’t understand why Ayanda was just sitting there, staring at him like he was a god of some sort. It disturbed me immensely that he had his eyes shut the whole way through the relationship. Ayanda saw what he wanted to see and I had warned him so many times about the fact that he had given his whole

heart to Kagiso. He had loved him with his all, uyasho umhlabeleli uthi, "Noma umthanda umuntu, mthande ubuyele nganeno." Unfortunately, I doubt that Ayanda has ever been one to take advise from singers.

Yesterday, we were over at Malwande's place for supper and amidst all the chitter chatter, I started thinking about all the things I promised myself not to think about. For starters, I think I want to get married. I probably shouldn't be having such thoughts because they might lead me to pressuring Nkululeko and that's the last thing I want to do. I have no idea how I even came to the conclusion of marriage, perhaps it has something to do with the fact that Ntsiki and Msizi are now engaged, perhaps I just really want to marry Nkululeko because it just dawned on me that I will love him till the day I day whether I have a wedding band on or not.
He is excited, so excited about the pregnancy and it makes me excited to see him excited.
Every so often, he just puts his ear on my stomach playfully. He is going to make a lovely father, much like his brother Mseki.

I can't lie to myself though, I have so much doubts in myself. I don't know the first thing about parenthood, which is nmost probably why I've stocked up on books about parenting methods and birthing techniques and basically everything that covers the aspects of being a parent. I am terrified, I fear that I might not be able to look my child in the eye and give heart to him or hear fully. There is still that pang of guilt that constantly lingers at the back of my head, reminding me that I'm not ready for motherhood.
Telling me that I don't know motherhood. These are the thoughts that sometimes keep me up at night, or waking up with my body drenched in sweat because they torment me in my dreams. I haven't told Nkululeko about this, I doubt I will. It is not as if it will change anything. I'm pregnant, what's done is done and it can't be undone. I'm going to have this child, and I have consciously decided that even though I might not be the best mother, I'll be the best I can be. Only time will tell what exactly my best will groom.

It's a Wednesday afternoon, I'm sitting at the corner couch at Kimton's Deli waiting for
Nkululeko because he said he wanted to discuss something over lunch. I have to be heading back to work in 20 minutes. I've been sitting here long enough to have all those thoughts rummaging through my head, I think a lot lately.

He arrives soon after I order a roast beef sandwich and a salad just so I feel better about myself. I must admit, I have been stuffing this body of mine with nothing but carbs and protein. In my defence, I head down to the gym twice a week. Although I doubt that counts because I normally have 15 minute sessions and then I'm interrupted by either Nkululeko, or my phone ringing or just pure procrastination.

I stand up to hug him when he arrives, it leaves him with a sour look on his face.

“What?” I ask

“You give me hugs now?” he enquires, his eyebrows raised

Sometimes this relationship requires a lot of tolerance, I stand up once again but this time I kiss him, and just as he tries to pull away; I pull him towards me and kiss him longer just so I can keep his mouth occupied. At my own will, I decide to let him go and take a seat, leaving him standing, just gawking at me as though I will be the cause of his defeat.

“You called, my prince. “I say, offering him a slightly mischievous smile.

“You answered, my queen.” He says, matching my mischief.

Every so often I wonder what my life would be like without him. It’s never a pretty sight I tell you. He has this way of just capturing my attention, my heart, my breath. I blush more than I can count when I am with him, I laugh and sometimes when he is being really stupid, I cry because of him.

“You might not like what I have to say, have you ordered?” he places his phone on the table and calls for the waiter.

I frown. What does he mean?

“I have. What’s this about?” I ask, suddenly concerned. See, we never spend my lunch hour together so I was surprised when he called and asked to see me. It sounded urgent so I figured I might as well just agree. Now he is just making me anxious by not getting straight to the point.

“Look, we all thought it might be a good idea to sit down with i-thayma so we could…”

“I-thayma?” I can't help it, I blurt it out which leaves him trying to supress his laughter.

“Yah, I mean; Mondli talked us into it but I wanted to talk to you first.” He says, looking as though he is yet to drop a bomb on me.

“Okay, I don't see why you have to ask me. I'm just surprised that’s all.” I answer although I know that there has to be some sort of catch to this. I know Nkululeko too well, had he just wanted to sit down and talk to his father, he would’ve done exactly that.

“Baby, thing is…”

I knew it. I let out a sigh of defeat.

“No, baby. It’s not a big deal but we just couldn’t ask Malwande and we can't go to Kwa-Mashu because we have a conference on Thursday and Mthethwa

said he wants to see us on Thursday. The only logical alternative is to have it at our place but we can just go to a restaurant if you're not up for it…"

Argh. Nx, he knows damn well that I won't let them go eat at some restaurant. To be honest, I would disagree to this but I can tell that it was their last resort. I'm just glad they have finally decided to patch things up. It gives me relief.

"No, it's fine. I'll see what I do." I say, letting out an exasperated sigh. At least now I can eat because the food just arrived, perhaps it will calm my nerves.

"Baby, don't get like that. If you don't want to it fine. "he says

"No, I want to. I'm serious sthandwa sami, I'll cook. I'll host it, I don't mind. I promise you. I'm just nervous Nkululeko, your father…"

"My father what…"

"Why are you looking at me like that? You know your father. The man is scary." I say

It is only then that he allows himself to fully laugh, I have to lift my finger to his mouth to make him keep quiet because people have turned around to look at us.

"He's scary? Baby come on, he isn't that bad." Nkululeko says, still struggling to maintain a straight face.

He thinks I'm kidding.
You know, I never thought I would meet anyone that could intimidate me as much as Nkululeko did before we were together. Little did I know that his father would make me feel so small without even uttering a single word.

"You think I'm kidding. Have you seen your father? He is just not a guy you talk to." -me

He shakes his head, still trying to look at me in the eye,

"Mbalenhle, I swear to you. He isn't as bad as you think. He actually starts being a human after you share a few laughs." He says

Okay, this is unexpected. What kind of relationship does he have with Mthethwa kanti?
All of a sudden, he is defending him. When did all of this happen? From my knowledge, the last time they spoke; Mthethwa promised to lodge a bullet in his head if he made impregnating girls a habit. When did this newly formed 'relationship' develop?

"If you say so, but I'm still not convinced." I say.

“Ayi, then baby I don't know what to tell you.” he says, taking a bite of his hamburger

“This is no wonder you have crazy exes.” I say, trying to supress my giggle

He almost chokes, I just sit there and watch him struggle to swallow the food that’s in his mind. I just realised I've never told him about that incident at Nino’s.

“What exes?” he asks, looking all too innocent.

“I didn’t tell you?” I ask, sarcasm dripping down my every word.

“You didn’t.” he mutters, trying to avoid eye contact. I'm finding this surprisingly amusing.

“Well, if you must know sthandwa sam’, I bumped into one of you exes at Nino’s while we were having dinner with Ayanda.”

“When was this?” he asks, making sure to keep his eyes on his meal

“Couple of months ago,”

“So how did you know she was my…” he doesn’t even finish his sentence. What is wrong with him?

“She is ‘an’ ex. No need to call her yours. But to answer your question, she introduced herself.”

“She what?”

“Yup.” I roll my eyes at this, “But don't worry. I can handle myself just fine.” I say

“What’s her name?” he asks, he’s being very careful here. Perhaps that is the reason why I am finding this quite hilarious.

“I don't know. How many exes do you have?” I ask, quite frankly.

This times he raises just his eyes, he looks trapped. This is fun, I should do it more often.
I think what scares him the most is the fact that I'm no longer giggling nor laughing.

“Angizwa…” he says

“No, you heard me, how many exes do you have?” I ask

“But baby, I mean…I don't…I don't keep count.” He says

Wow.

I guess he notices the look of pure shock that now covers my face because he quickly says, “No, that’s not how I meant it.”

I raise my brow. I love tormenting him, I should make it a hobby.

“Mhhm. Well, I didn’t get her name but she was short. A bit taller than me though, she had short hair, that’s all I remember.” Forgive me but I wasn’t paying much attention. I fail to mention that this girl is the very same person who thought it would be wise to send me threatening messages for a good four months or so.

He keeps quiet.

“Don't look so bothered.
I grow claws when it comes to you.” I say, offering him a smile and it is only then that I see him relax.

I think I scared him, he must know…

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“You know you don't have to do this if you’re comfortable with it sthandwa sam’.”

I'm leaning against the wall next to the kitchen, the intention was to go and take a few dishes but Mseki and Malwande are in there so I have opted to stop. As to why I am eavesdropping on their conversation, I have no idea.

“No, it’s fine Mseki. We talked about this. I'm fine with him.” Malwande answers.

I assume they are discussing Bab’Mthethwa. He hasn't even arrived yet, I was surprised when I saw Malwande arriving here with Mseki. Honestly, I didn’t think she would even entertain the idea of being here. Per Ntsiki, Msizi is hearing none of this so they both opted to go to the Free-State for some time together.

I'm still debating whether I should go in or if I should just go back to the dining room.
At the end, I head back to the dining room to find Zabathwa neatening up the table. I don't know where Mondli and Nkululeko have disappeared off to.

“And the dishes?” she asks looking at me and revealing a slight frown

“Malwande and Mseki are in there, I couldn’t interrupt.”

She shrugs, I move to the sitting area where I put the drinks earlier on. I'm nervous, I really would like to make a good impression. I look outside the

window into the backyard to find Nkululeko and Mondli talking about Lord knows what. It's only 11 am but the clouds have filled the sky and it looks much later than that.

"Mbali, come on. Stop staring." Zabathwa interrupts my train of thought by taking me by the hand and leading me back to the dining room. Malwande walks in right as we do, with Mseki heading to the sliding door. She is looking down, breathing slightly louder than normal.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

She looks up, revealing a smirk and then nods.

"What were you guys doing in there?" Zabathwa asks, giggling.

Am I the only person who hasn't caught onto this?

"Nothing. We were talking." Lwande says, blushing. For a second we lock eyes and instantly my face changes.'

"No, that's our kitchen. No, Lwande." I shriek, no.

"It just happened okay, I'm sorry. I cleaned up." She saying, trying her best to keep a straight face. Zabathwa is already laughing and I don't think there is a single thing that can stop her.

How could they? Who does that? That's not even their kitchen. My word.

"Ayi, Lwande. Control yourself. And that man of yours."

What kind of life is this? I ant even leave two adults together in a kitchen and trust them to not make love on our counters. I want to be annoyed but I'm finding this hilarious.

"Oh please, don't act like you've never done this." She says, waving her hand at me

"I haven't! Not in your kitchen anyways." I say, bewildered by her suggestion.

"You should try it out some time…" she says and carries on to lay the glasses on the table

"Zabathwa, stop laughing." I say, struggling to stop myself from laughing.

"I can't…" she barely manages, I think she's going to start crying. I can see the tears forming in her eyes which only makes me laugh harder. These people are absolutely crazy.

“You should loosen up about this, Zabathwa knows what I'm talking about. That’s why she’s laughing so hard.” Lwande say, which leaves Zabathwa laughing harder, I didn’t even think that was possible.

“You? Little ‘Miss Innocent’? She would never.” I say, right before the guys come back

“What are you two doing to my girl?” Mondli ask, when he spots Zabathwa and realises that she is on the verge of tears.

“Ask her.” I say, swallowing my laughter

“We have. I her kitchen.” Zabathwa mimes, looking straight at me but pointing at Malwande. What is wrong with these people?

I can't help but burst into laughter. This is going to be a long day.

“Aren’t you going to let us in on the joke??” Mseki asks, looking at Malwande.

“No babe.” She responds, rolling her eyes and with this he reveals a smirk. I've seen that before.

The doorbell rings before we can say anything else. We all fall silent, my heart drops. It’s him.

“Chill.” Mondli say, looking at all of us.

I have to be the one to open the door.

I’ve been nervous before, but I doubt it’s ever been this bad. This is why my hands shake when I try to twist the door-knob. When I finally do, I am greeted by a well dressed, middle aged man who is busying himself with the keys to his car.

I gulp, and then bow my head as I offer him a greeting. I don’t know how he reacts to this because obviously my eyes are aimed at the floor. I do however, hear his greeting. I reply and then move back so he can enter.

Maybe I’m overdoing this ‘mandulo housewife’ sharade of mine. To tell you the truth, although I know how to be the epitome of a Zulu housewife, I don’t think I can manage it for more than an hour. At some stage, I’ll forget that I have to be this respectful young lady and I might just laugh too loudly at the dinner table.

I follow Bab’Mthethwa to the diningroom, where everyone has fallen silent.

Mondli is the only person who makes an attempt to be welcoming towards his father. He stands up, to shake his hand. It’s a start, I can’t really say I expected them to hug.

“It’s nice to see you baba” Mseki says

Do you know the type of tension that needs to be cut with a saw? This is that type of tension.

“It’s nice to see you all.” He replies, taking a seat. Nkululeko stands up to pull out my chair so I can sit down.

Wait.

Shouldn’t I have dished up for him? How did I not think of this? But I mean, the food is on the table, he is a grown man; he can dish up for himself.

See how the housewife tendencies are slowly fading away?

“So, baba. How is business?” Nkululeko asks, looking straight at his father.

What business? How does he have ‘business’? He just came out of jail. Then again how can one afford that lavish lifestyle that he lives without generating an income?

“It’s going well. Very well.” He answers.

This is going to be long. Very long.

They converse, talking about politics and soccer and for a minute or two; everything starts to flow.

It is only when Malwande clears her throat and proceeds to offer Bab’Mthethwa some food that the whole table falls into silence.

She does not look him in the eye, she does not even attempt to raise her head. I did not notice her as she was dishing up but it she is holding a plate filled beautifully with assorted foods. Maybe we are the ones making this moment more awkward than it should be by keeping silent but I am not going to be the one who initiates a conversation with anyone right now.
Zabathwa is the only person who doesn’t look terrified, she looks somewhat confused. I’m scared. I can’t lie. I have this feeling that something is about to blow, somewhere. Perhaps this thing might be Malwande.

We wait, for a good minute or so just staring at Bab’Mthethwa and Malwande.

“Is it safe?” He asks, finally

I gulp

It is only when Malwande laughs and responds by saying, “Yes, it is safe baba,” it is only then that I exhale and seemingly, so does everyone else.

She stands up, plate still cradled in her hands and walks over to where Bab'Mthethwa is seated. With her head still bowed, she lays the food neatly in front of him and then stands still.

"Ngyabonga makoti." He says

That escalated fast. I sit there trying to figure out what exactly this might mean, is the hatchet buried or are they doing this for the sake of being civil? Either way, with that being done, she moves back to her own seat and of course because she is Malwande, she looks at everyone and says, "Why are you people staring? Eat your food."

And just like that, the throats are cleared and the dishes are circulated around the table.

The energy returns to what it was, talks about eThekwini construction and the and this ever changing exchange of ours proceed and further develop.

Every now and then it changes to the topic of soccer until Nkululeko braves himself

"And Pirates, you still have hope?" He asks, he is shady this one

"Ayi, mjita. We're trying to enjoy our food. Don't start with Pirates..." Mondli says

The rest of us can't help but laugh, from my knowledge, Nkululeko is the only one in this family who isn't an Orlando Pirates supporter.

"Myeke ndodana, Chiefs an Khompela are headed the same direction"- Ngabaza

"Ngeke baba, we are stable thina. We don't know this thing that Pirates is doing. 6-1, what is that? They get beaten like they are an NFD team?" Nkululeko responds, too smug for everyone's taste.

"You don't know what you're talking about mjita, these things happen to every team. They are just having a bad spell." Mseki joins in

The conversation could most probably go on for hours, that is the problem with these men: if you give them the right topic, they will speak the whole day. But if you don't, they might as well just sit and stare at each other.

There is very little talk between Mthethwa and the ladies, myself included. The only time we actually converse is when he asks me where my family is. I think about giving him the same vague story that I tell everyone else who asks that question but I opt for the truth. This truth is less brutal but nevertheless, it is the truth. Both my parents passed away, I am not in good terms with the rest of my family members on my father's side and I know very little about my mother's side. That's my truth.

Four hours later, when the sun threatens to set, Bab'Mthethwa stands up and announces that he has to be somewhere at 7 pm.

They guys stand up, leaving just enough time for Bab'Mthethwa to say his goodbyes and then wish us well. They all step out to the backyard and converse for another
30 minutes until he leaves.

You would swear they are the average black family living in South Africa. But that would only be because you don't know them. These men, this family, we are everything but average.

See this life never seizes to amaze me.

Chapter Twelve

I have to work late today, I've had to do this for the past three days. I won't dare complain because I don't want to seem like I'm suddenly whining about performing duties that are my responsibility. However, this pregnancy has been taking quite a toll on me because I've been so tired lately but today, much like yesterday and the day before, I made the decision to rather stay in late and get all of my work finished.

I know that Yonda is in his office; also buried in work so I figure I might as well go join him. We haven't spoken in some time so perhaps it might be nice to just chat, even if it's only for a few minutes. I have nothing to offer him but the jar of sweets which is always on my desk.

So I stand up and head downstairs with the jar at hand. The whole loft is dark, aside from the light that comes from his office. There is the sound of Kaylow escaping from his door, it's very soft and had there been other people; I would not have heard it. It reminds me of Nkululeko, quite frankly he is the only reason why I even know this song.

I knock softly on his door and wait for a response. I have to knock three times before he replies.

"Oh, hey. Mbali..." he says, finally looking up from his work.

I stand there, slightly undecided of what exactly I should do next. At the end I decide to smile and then put the jar on his table.

“I thought you might want some company.” I say, looking at the stacks of papers on his desk

“You have no idea how much I do. Why are you here so late anyways? Shouldn’t you be resting?” He asks

I hate it when this happens, when people start treating me like I’m sick. Pregnancy is not a sickness.

“It’s not that late, plus, I have a lot of work to do.” I answer, taking a seat on the chair opposite his own

“If you say so. It’s been a while.” He says

I let out a weak laugh, only because this is not the type of conversation I came down here for. I expected him to be somewhat friendlier. It’s not to say that he is being mean or rude, but his hostility bothers me.

“Yeah, it has been a while. We’ve both been busy.” I say, “Work, you know...” again I try to slice through the awkwardness but I seem to be failing. The last time I spoke to Yonda, he was staring straight at my boyfriend and he looked slightly annoyed at my presence. The next few times I saw him, we just passed each other and exchanged a few awkward looks. I didn’t understand what exactly it was that had made us grow apart but it happened and neither of us saw any use in trying to mend it.

“You know, Mbali I’ve been meaning to talk to you about...”

He stops speaking and we both look at the door. I could’ve sworn I heard the handle being turned.

We exchange confused looks but we opt to ignore it and he carries on to tell me that he has been meaning to talk to me about the Kappa account which he needs to pitch for next week. This isn’t the first time someone is asking me for help with such a huge client, sometimes I get junior partners who coming down to my cubicle for advise here and there. Honestly it creates a lot of pressure for me to perform, I think that is part of the reason why Yvonne praises me so much. She knows I’ll have to work hard to live up to the expectations of others, whether I want to nor not.

“Okay, no sure. I don’t mind.” I say, again I’m piling more work onto that mountain that’s already on my desk. Why do I always do this to myself?

We have reached the point of ‘okay’ in our conversation and this obviously serves as my que to leave. He looks tired, I should probably ask if he has been doing fine lately. He doesn’t look the part, or perhaps it’s because it’s late and he hasn’t gotten any sleep. That could be a rather reasonable explanation.

“You can keep those,” I say, looking at the jar, he has already started working his way to its way to emptiness. He smiles, and then nods. I know Yonda well enough to know that means ‘thank you’.

I stand up to leave, turning back only once so I can formally form my goodnight. I feel as though I have disappointed Yonda. I do not understand, although the way he looks at me might have something to do with it. Yonda doesn’t approve of my being with Nkululeko, but then again Yonda doesn’t know Nkululeko.

I leave his office with my heart having slightly dropped, that’s not exactly how I for saw that conversation going. But because I tend to be naive, I guess I just thought we would talk like we used to.

It dawns on me how I’ve had to lose such beautiful characters as friends these past few months.

First it was Yonda and then later it was Ayanda. I miss Ayanda so dearly but the last time I called him, he did not pick up his phone. That alone left me feeling unmotivated so I thought that going to his place of work would be a fruitless task.

I am paying absolutely no attention to the path ahead of me, imagine my surprise when I bump into someone. Before I can commence with my apologies, the sight of a silver pistol sends me gulping for both air and strength.

I force my eyes to look up, it is only then that my jaw drops open and I struggle with my next move.

“Don’t even think about moving before I tell you to.” She says.

I am shivering, my heart is beating rapidly and I feel my body loosen so much that I fear I might fall down.

“You can go now, move it.” She barks, her gun pointing towards the direction of Yonda’s office. Again, I swallow what little saliva I have left in my mouth.

Why is she doing this? Why would this happen to me? I have no one to call for. I cannot speak, dare I utter a word and I fear that the life of my child might disappear like it once did.

“You’re pregnant?” She looks disgusted.

In my life, I have crossed paths with many people. Never did I think that I could meet a person and then underestimate their will for revenge as much as I did this woman. My encounter with her was rather brief, I remember now how I had left that ladies room with a victorious smirk on my face. I also remember the

look of danger that had been painted on her own face, that very look that I chose to ignore is now glaring at me and threatening me with a bullet.

I am walking in front of her, not because I want to but because she has the gun close to my back; whispering instructions into my ear. Like how I should act normal and which path to walk in. I have no way of escaping her, at least I know I cannot escape her and stay alive. I know very little about fighting, I know less about handling guns so should I manage to get a hold of her firearm, I would not know where to start.

I knock on Yonda's door, however my breathing is failing on me. He had already gotten back to doing whatever it was that I had found him doing in the first place.

"Mbali, you forgot something?" He asks, looking up to find my eyes drawn so clearly with fear

The woman behind me comes in, she grabs my arm but this time her gun moves to my head. The sensation of the cold metal against my skin is enough to send me shivering.

Yonda stands up at the realisation of what is happening.

"Wait, what the..."

"Shut up. Sit down." She says, ever so calmly.

How can a person work up such bravery?

Yonda hesitates for a second, his eyes fixed on my own.

"He has nothing to do with this," I say, "Why don't you just let him go?" It takes a large amount of my strength to say this.

"So he can run and call the cops? You think I'm stupid? Wena, I said sit down or else I will blow out her brains!"

She is getting impatient now, perhaps the best thing for all of us to do is to comply with her instructions.

"Sisi, calm down..." Yonda says, retreating back into his chair.

Through all of this, I have fallen silent. I don't have anything else to say, in fact I have lost all hope of surviving this. If she does not kill me, I will die of shock.

We all stare at each other for those moments where there is complete silence. I assume she too is trying to figure out what exactly she should do next.

"Why are you doing this?" I manage

She doesn't answer. Not until a couple of minutes later.

"You want to know why I'm doing this?" She asks

I nod frantically

"You, stand up. Tie her up." She says looking at Yonda and throwing him a rope which she retrieves from the bag on her shoulder.

She is crazy. The eyes of a vengeful person are so clear to me, this woman here; she passed vengeful a long time ago. She is bordering mental and it is not a safe spot to find yourself in.

"I was pregnant too. Once upon a time." She snarls, looking at me from head to toe.

I disgust this woman. I can see this in the way she nearly clicks her tongue at the sight of me.

She pushes me over to Yonda. I know I have to sit down and he has to tie me up. He looks so apologetic but I know he has no choice so I cannot blame him.

"Real tight. If it's not tight I swear I'm going to shoot you." she says, again her gun points at Yonda.

He complies, although I know the rope could be tighter. Within a matter of minutes, my hands start to hurt as the rope rubs against my skin.

This woman is going to kill us, I don't know when she will do it but eventually she is going to kill us. There is no way out of this. This is how my story ends, how I take my last breath and you never hear of me again.

"You. Move. Here." She hands Yonda a pair of cuffs and then directs him to cuff himself to the table. He wants to complain, and I fear that the only reason why he isn't fighting is because I am here and he doesn't want to put my life in danger.

"Do it! Now!" she yells.

At the end, he kneels down and cuffs his left hand to one of the legs of the table.

With that being done, the woman puts her bag on the floor. Looks at me dead in the eye and reveals the same victorious smile I once had. My eyes burn as I try to withhold my tears from falling. I have accepted my defeat but it hurts. It hurts so badly to know that I am leaving all that I love behind and I am taking all that is loved with me. I know my child will not survive this, I am hoping for the absolute best but I know to expect the worst.

My thoughts scurry to Nkululeko. The way he looked at me this morning when I stepped out of his car. The look of adoration. I am coming to accept the fact that I have lived a life worth writing about. A life of both extreme suffering and complete happiness. It burns my soul to know that Nkululeko is going to lose me, it hurts more to know that I will be the one who takes what love he has for his unknown child. It hurts so deeply, it really does.

“Are you crying angel?” she asks, a look of mockery pointed at me

I blink, to stop the tears from falling. Dare I give her the satisfaction that she so clearly wants? Never.

“You want to hear a story?” she says, this time she smiles.

She is crazy. Undoubtedly and purely mental.

I do not respond. If she is going to kill me then she should spare me the annoyance of her voice.

“I was pregnant too.
Thought I would be a mother.” She rubs her stomach, looking out the window into the Durban city lights as she gets lost in her memories.

She fascinates me.
Although I am in pain and all I really want to do is just give in, she still fascinates me. Her choice to wear the colour black from head to toe also passes my mind. It is what I've always seen in movies, the villain is always drenched in black clothing. Perhaps my death is so premeditated in her mind that she even chose an outfit fit for it.

I don’t want to listen to her story of motherhood. I want to numb my body but clearly I am not going to get my way.

“He did that to me. Your beloved Nkululeko.”

What is she saying?

“You look surprised…” she slants her head, looking at me with her eyebrow raised.

I refrain from speaking.

“He is evil. He always has been. You just don’t know it yet.” She proceeds but this time she bends and rummages through her bag.

I swallow. Hard.

It is a bottle of petrol which she retrieves from her bag.

“This is how you die sweetheart. And I want your lover to suffer too. He made me suffer. Did you know that? He didn’t want my child. His child. I got rid of my child because of him.” She walks towards me, right until her face is in front of mine and I can almost feel her breath hitting my nose.

“Because he couldn’t love enough…” she snickers, like a child would when they repeat your speech. Then with that, she rolls her eyes, clicks her tongue and then turns right back around.

“You're both going to die. Or maybe I should say ‘all three of you are going to die’?” she has a natural deviousness in the tone of her voice. It’s enough to still me into paralysis. I don’t know what frightens me more, her or her story.

Even as she opens the bottle of petrol, the smell sends me coughing for whatever little air that I can trap into my mouth.

“I loved him so much…” she sighs, “so, so much.”

The first time that Yonda speaks is when the petrol hits the floor and it’s more of a plea for this woman to return to her sanity. I have no energy to beg. No will to fight. I just watch her, pouring the petrol onto the edges of the room.

“You’re very cute. Does he tell you that?” She laughs, “I’m sure he does.”

And then, when it seems like she is done, she stands still and reaches into her back pocket.

“I’m going to kill you, and I’m going to enjoy it. And you know what? Maybe if you were nicer to me the last time we met, if you had listened to me; just maybe, this wouldn’t be happening to you.”

She clicks her lighter, a flame ignites. She blows it out.

“You see, you were never part of my plan...” She looks at me, then her eyes move to Yonda, “Nor were you darling.” She points, all she uses is her gun. No fingers.

My mouth is dry, utterly and completely dry. My brain is about to be in the same state but for now I’m holding on. Only God knows to what.

She clicks the lighter again.

“I just wanted you to back off. I warned you but you chose to ignore me. And you know what’s worse?” She blows out the lighter again, “What’s worse is, I came to you. Looked you straight in the eye and you had the nerve to treat me like dirt. You’re going to burn for that. That was very rude of you. You hurt my feelings.”

At a distance, I can hear Yonda panting. He too has fallen victim to quitting, he is neither struggling with his cuffs nor pleading for mercy. He has accepted this predicament of ours.

“Hand me your phones.” She barks, looking at both of us. “I said give me your phones!”

I hear Yonda clicking his tongue, “How? You’re an idiot unjalo. Can’t you see that you’ve tied us up?” He asks, annoyed more than anything.

She turns her gaze to him. Stares at him for what seems like the longest minute. Then she walks towards him, kneels down and starts to pat him. Searching fruitlessly for his phone.

In the corner of my eye, I catch Yonda handing me a knowing look. I know what he wants to do. I cannot stop him, nor can I show him my disapproval. Even if I could, I realise that I would be too late, he grabs a hold of the woman. His free hand wraps around her neck. She tries to break free but fails, it is only in her third attempt that she manages to hit Yonda where it hurts the most and a moan of unfiltered pain escapes his mouth. He has not given up though, he grabs her by the arm, forcing her to fall back onto the floor. This is the time I use to try and loosen this rope that is wrapped so tightly around my wrists. My shoulders are in pain but my wrists have grown immune to it.

I have been tied up before.

Many of times I have had to untie myself from worse knots. I struggle, the screams and grunting as Yonda and the woman battle are the only noises keeping me alert.

The knot is getting looser, but I know it is far from untied.

It is only when I look up from the knot that I realise that the far corner of the office has erupted in flames.

I see the woman throwing her fists at Yonda, shouting ever so loudly. She struggles with this for yet another moment or two but at the end she manages to break away from him.

Panting and furious, she picks up her bag and stares at me. I am pleading with my eyes because I know that my words will fail me. The room is already filled with a dark cloud of smoke. My lungs feel as though they have been set alight.

With my next blink, she has disappeared. I can no longer see her.

My body falls into weakness, I try again to struggle with the rope but it is useless.

I don't know whether I should breathe or if I should hold my breath. The richness of the flames rises to the walls, leaving me trying to move back in the chair which I am tied to.

I do not know where Yonda is, I cannot see him but I hear something break. Something wooden and only then do I see Yonda's silhouette staggering towards me.

He broke the table.

He is coughing, so loudly that all I force myself to concentrate on are his coughs. I do not know where he disappears off to, but a moment later he emerges again. This time, next to me. He covers me with a damp peice of clothing. I do not know where he got it from but it is the only thing that relieves my lungs.
At once, he unties me. Although I am no longer able to move. I cannot. My body does not remember how to.

Yonda makes a move towards his bottom drawer. I do not know what he retrieves. I cannot see him, even though I know he is right in front of me. The flames threaten to come closer, the heat is unbearable. Never in my life have I felt the sensation of my skin slipping off my flesh. It is smouldering.

I am going to die.
Again, it dawns on me that I am going to die, my child is never going to get the chance to grow. I am never going to fully experience the love of my life. I will never know how it feels to truly give life to someone else's. It is over. And this life of mine can never be rewritten again. This is how I am going to die.

Lord. If this is what you have written for me, then so be it.

I hear Yonda, once again coughing. The only thing stopping my coughs is the cloth.

What happens next is a cloud of haze. I do not remember exactly how it happens or if it happens. All I know is that I feel Yonda fall to the floor, I hear him too. I do not, however, remember how a phone gets to my lap. Nor do I remember dialling emergency services. I remember very little. But I remember just enough to know that my body retires on me and I go into a stage of darkness. I close my eyes. But I still feel the full wrath of the heat, I still feel the burning sensation in my throat, I still know that death is near.

I allow myself to drift off, having accepted my death and having cried my last tear...

Chapter Thirteen

“Sir, you can’t be here.”

“Sir...”

It hurts.

“Sir, please. You can’t be here right now.”

It hurts so terribly.

****

My second child died because I had inhaled too much smoke.

The white coats told me she didn’t make it. She couldn’t survive.

Then, soon after, they left me alone so I could grieve in peace.

It was only after I had started biting the blankets to drown my sobs that they had come in again.

They said, “Hold her. She is getting restless again. She needs to rest.”

****

He came in every hour, we would look at each other. He would open his mouth to speak but then he would close it again without having said a word.

I could not eat. I could not sleep without the help of the pills and I could not feel.

I did not cry. I do not know why I did not cry. Perhaps I feared that the tears I would cry would understate my sadness.

He did not cry either. Or maybe he did. But I never saw him cry. In fact, dare I say I never saw him at all. For he was a shadow of what I once knew. Physically with me but his soul was dead.

I had loved him so dearly. Yet I had killed the only person that he might’ve loved more than me.

****

She would come in with a bowl of soup. Every so often she would try to start conversation. She would encourage me to be strong, and her attempts were always futile.

Her overuse of the word ‘mnaka’ was what reminded me of who she was. The bags under her eyes looked as heavy as the heart that I possessed.

It was awful. It was awful to see her suffer, it was awful to watch her watch me in pain.

She always tried to make everything seem like it was okay. Like it would pass.

She didn't know my pain. No one knew my pain.

****

When she had come in, I felt the need to talk.

She was the one I knew the least about. The one with no answers to my questions. She was the one who I saw myself in, for I too had no answers to my questions and I too knew nothing of this self that I was becoming.

I asked, "Where is he? He was with me. Is he fine?"

At first, she had said nothing.

And then she burst into tears.

It was not sorrow that had made her cry. I could see that very clearly.
She was filled with pity for me. That is the reason why she struggled to hold back her tears. Why her love had to come in to console her and he had to ask what had happened.

And then they both stood before me, clutching onto each other. They stared.
It was the first time I was seeing him look at me with a look of confusion.

He did not know what to do.

So instead of doing what all the others had done, trying to protect me from something inevitable; he told me the truth.

This is how I came to know of his passing.

I was told that he had not made it. That he had gone with the fire. It had consumed him.

Again. I did not cry. I just looked at her lover and I nodded. Then I grabbed my blanket and I covered my head.

****

There was little use in crying.

Yonda was gone.

So was my baby.

****

“Sir, I’m sorry. She needs to rest. You can’t be here right now.” The nurse says, looking at Nkululeko.

He could protest, like he has done for the past three nights but today he chooses to nod and he stands up to leave.

“I want to go to his funeral.” I say, just as his hand reaches for the door.

He looks at me, his expression is that of a pained man. As conflicted as he is, he nods.
Then he proceeds to walk out of the room.

I spend the rest of my night lying in bed, like I have for the past three days. I notice that the nurses and doctors keep coming in and out of my room. I doubt they do that for the other patients.

The last I checked, my phone was on the mantel next to my bed. It is still there. I pick it up. Stare at the screen and then I switch it off.

I’m sure the weather is beautiful outside, the Spring breeze enters through my window. It is the only thing that I can concentrate on. This is why I turn to my side and I gaze at the polka dotted curtains, as the wind blows them in its direction.

The first tear comes so unexpectedly. It falls onto the pillow and then disappears. But then my sobs grow louder. And then I start running out of air. And then my lungs start hurting. And then I remember that my child is dead.

My child is dead.

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They told me that I could be discharged later this evening. I am relieved because this way I can make it in time for Yonda’s funeral which is tomorrow morning.

He is from the Eastern Cape originally but his family moved to Kwa-Zulu Natal a long time ago.
This is why he is going to be laid to rest at his home in Mtubatuba.

The morning brings with it some new found sense of acceptance. Everyday I have to wake up and declare my acceptance of this situation. It is the only way I will survive.

I sustained a few injuries, my hand has been wrapped in bandages because I burnt it when I held onto a smouldering iron beam as I tried to stand up from the chair.

The smoke inhalation was just severe enough to kill my child.

My phone is still off. I expect to find more messages and more calls than I had yesterday before I switched it off.

I have missed calls from unknown numbers, a few from Nkululeko and a few from Malwande. Just before I can dial Nkululeko's number, the door opens.

These are the last two people I expected to see here. Well, at least not together and most definitely not at the same time.

Mseki drags two chairs from the far-right corner of the room and Bab'Mthethwa takes a seat in one. I wonder where Nkululeko is.

I can't imagine what I'm going to talk to these two men about. I have very little knowledge about what they would want to say to me. I have no will to live anymore,
I don't like listening to people talk. I don't like having to hear them offer me condolences and trying to sell me dreams of a better tomorrow.
I wish everyone would understand that the only way for me to deal with this is to ignore it until it goes away. That is how I deal with my problems, they are mine after all.

"How are you feeling ndodakazi?" Ngabaza asks, barely looking at me.

This must be rather uncomfortable for them. Sure we are all 'family' but the truth is that we barely know one another.

"I am feeling well Baba." I reply, this is the first time I have had to force out words from my mouth. The only person who I have talked to is Zabathwa.

She listened to me and she never ever tried to tell me that everything would turn out just fine. Because really, why would everything turn out 'just fine'? Why?
When I'm at such a terrible space in my life, when all my lifelines seem to be disappearing; how can a person possibly tell me that everything will turn out 'just fine'?

There is a long silence in which we all look down. Is this what they came here for?

"Who is that woman?" I ask. Finally because this is the one question that has been burning me.

They exchange looks.

“She was with Nkululeko.
She wasn’t happy when he ended things with her.” Mseki answers, then he pops his fingers and leans back into his chair.

Interesting answer. How stupid do these men think I am?

“Well I figured that one out when she was trying to kill me. I mean, who is she? What is her name? Where is she from? Why were they together? Did he love her?”

For the first time, I am speaking with absolutely no struggle. I know what I want to say, I know what I intend to achieve by having this conversation with these men.

“Her name?” Mseki asks, “You want to know her name?”

“Yes, I want to know her name,” I respond

He stutters. Hesitates to answer and then decides to keep quiet.

“We will handle this ndodakazi. Do not worry yourself about that woman.”

You know it was hard enough for me to tell them about this woman, the first time I retold the events of that night in Yonda’s office, I was telling it to the police.
And then the second time I was retelling it to Zabathwa. I do not know why I am making that woman carry my pain. I did not tell anyone else about what happened. Not Nkululeko, for he never once asked me about it, nor did I tell anyone else, however I knew that they knew. They always know.

“Has she been found?
What is her name? She told me she was pregnant once. What is her story Mseki?” I am not pleading, I am calm in fact. Suppose I could start yelling at them, I could order them to tell me what I want to know but I won’t do that.

“Her name is Lindaliyeza Makhaye. She used to work for one of our health institutions as a temp technician. That’s how she met my brother.”

Mseki is the one with all the answers, obviously because Ngabaza doesn’t know about this woman.

“So she fell pregnant?” I ask

“Nkululeko didn’t know about that.” Mseki respond all too quickly.

“How do you know he didn’t.”

“Because he told me so, I trust my brother. He would never lie to me about such things.” He responds

I sit there, trying to digest his words. They both look like they are trying very hard to not show the anger that keeps seeping onto their faces. It is not an easy thing to watch.

“She said to me that he was the reason why she had to get rid of her child. That’s what she told me.” I look up, to try and stop myself from crying. I cannot cry in front of these men. They will be utterly clueless of what to do, I don’t want to put them in such an uncomfortable position.

“She lied to you.”

He is angry.

“Focus on getting better ndodakazi.” Mthethwa stands up and moves to stand right next to my bed.

I gulp

“Sikhona. We are here for anything you need.” He says

“Well in that case then, I want her dead.” I answer.

They say nothing. Both of them. Again, they exchange looks but they remain silent. I do not know what possessed me to say such a thing but I will not take it back.

I want that woman dead.

They are the only people who can help me, especially Ngabaza. He is afterall, notorious for killing. Here is a good cause, he must kill her for me. She killed his granddaughter. It is only logical that he be angry about that.

The door opens before I receive a neat response.

Nkululeko looks as though he was not expecting to find these men here.

“Baba, mjita...” he says, nodding at Mseki and his father. They nod back.

“Sthandwa sam’, are you okay?” He asks, looking at me.

I nod.

“I’m fine sthandwa sam.” I respond

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I've always wondered what life underwater feels like. Sure, I've dived into the ocean and swam through the coral but I wondered what it would be like to stay

there forever. Perhaps life would be simpler if everything around you is refreshing.

“Mbalenhle.”

Contentment and happiness doesn’t exist in my life for more than a few moments at a time, and they are only illusionary. There is always something hidden.
Lying in waiting to spring up and ruin everything.

“Mbalenhle, baby. I'm coming in.” he says

I could hear his voice but distantly because my whole body was submerged under the water in the bathtub. It was silent there.

When he opens the door, I sit up and allow the water to only cover my body. He walks in and sits on the edge of the bathtub. I keep my head bent, looking at the water.

For what seems like the longest time, we say nothing. He just stares at me and I stare at the water.

I want to talk, I want to apologise for being the reason why he lost his child. I want to tell him that I wish I could it. I want to tell him just how sorry I am for being a burnden in his life even after he has suffered so much. I want to tell him that I love him more than I have ever lived anything and anyone. That without him, I would have never found reason to keep living. That he is my greatest love. My only love.

“Sthandwa sam, don't cry. Please don't cry.” He says, kneeling next to the tub.

I was speaking.

“Look at me Mbalenhle. Don't apologise. Don't do that.” He says, wiping my tears with his thumb.

I stand up, water splashes onto the floor and onto him. He stands up too and I throw my arms around him. allowing him to lift me up. My sobs turn into wails and his whispers turn into silence as he consoles me.

“Nkululeko, our baby. She’s gone.” I whisper.

He holds me tighter, my nude body warms because of his own. I feel safe. For the first time since that incident, I feel safe. It is only in his arms where I can truly feel safe and nowhere else.

I could not survive without him.

“I know sthandwa sam. I know.” He responds. Finally helping me out of the tub and walking me back to the main bedroom.

I grab the nearest nightgown and get under the covers, my hair wets the pillows but I do not care because my tears do the same. He gets into bed soon after. He pulls my body close to his and lays a kiss on my cheek.

Perhaps we are both broken souls trying to find parts in each other that will complete the other. Maybe we are what will complete each other. He will fix me, and I will fix him. and together we will grow. It is the only way forward, because forward is the only way to go.

****

“Are you sure you want to be here?” he is tightly squeezing my hand as we walk through the commotion that always goes on in every black funeral.

There are too many people here walking around aimlessly. I do not know who I should offer my condolences to so for now I will remain attached to Nkululeko.

Zabathwa and Mondli are here too, I think that has more to do with Zabathwa than it does with Mondli.

The spirit of respect has completely disappeared from our nation. This is what I think when I look around to see young ladies with glasses of alcohol in their hands, young men united in nothing but bottles of beer and shallow talk.

I am astonished, it is as though this is a celebration of some sort. People pay no regards to the heartache that comes with loss, that is the problem. Many these people just came here to feed themselves and leave. I cannot help but think of the family at this time. I don't know anyone from Yonda’s family. We had never gotten around to talking about that. He had mentioned once that he had sisters but he didn’t mention how many there were.

“I’ll be back Nkululeko.” I whisper so that he can let my hand go.

He looks at me disapprovingly but at the end he decides to let me go. I lay a kiss on his cheek and then signal Zabathwa to come with me. This is much to Mondli’s dismay because it takes quite some convincing for him to let go of her waist.

“Where are we going?” she asks, as I lead the way to what appears to be the main house.

The yard is filled with so many people, it becomes such a task to manoeuvre our way to the house. The house is less crowded however I hear the noise

coming from the kitchen, usual chitter chatter that goes on when there are women cooking. It is drowned by slight moments of nothing but silence.

What am I doing here?

Zabathwa follows me towards the kitchen. The women are chopping and slicing and moving around, none of them noticing that there has been an addition to the number of people in the kitchen.

Zabathwa and I both stand there, looking aimlessly at these women until one of them hands me a giant Tupperware bowl with potatoes and instructs me to start peeling. She does not even look at me. I do as expected, I would ask for Zabathwa's help but I see that she too has been tasked with the beetroot.

The woman converse as though they have known each other all their live, perhaps that could be the case but it is highly unlikely because they talk to us the same way.
Between exchanging looks of slight confusion with Zabathwa and peeling the potatoes, I realise that this is the first time I feel the urge to smile.

The atmosphere in this place is not like one would expect in a funeral, the women speak so fondly of Yonda. Each of them expressing what little they knew of him.
How he was such a smart young boy, another woman comes forward with a story about how she had caught him with one of her daughters and although she had showed disapproval back then, she was secretly happy that her troublesome daughter was finally with a good boy.

There is laughter and voices filled with great admiration for both Yonda and the Makhubalo family.

It is a shame that he had to pass so young. A real shame.

"What happened to your hand?" a voice behind me asks. I turn around to find a young lady, clothes in black from head to toe. She has a striking resemblance to Yonda, particularly the shape of her noise and her complexion.

I do not answer her. How do you tell a sister that you are the reason why their brother is gone?

Her eyes are red, I assume from crying, so is the tip of her nose. She looks at me expectedly.

"You're the woman. You were with him, weren't you?" she asks, suddenly looking like she has just pieced a puzzle together which she had been struggling to complete.

Zabathwa moves to stand by my side. At a distance, I hear a woman's wail coming from one of the rooms behind the kitchen.

My heart shatters.

I can almost feel the heaviness of my tears in my eyes. They threaten me ever so slowly, and torture me to burst out crying because that is what I yearn to do.

I nod.

I cannot deny it, she is right.

"Why are you here?" she asks, her face changes from depressed to enraged. "Zimasa!" she looks back and shouts. I look at the direction in which her shout travels, all the women in the kitchen have fallen silent. A second later, a woman emerges from the corridor and enters the kitchen with a child in her arms.

I stand still, trying yet again to swallow the lump of discomfort in my throat.

"Nobantu, stop shouting.
You will wake the baby." She too is drenched in black, however she looks more human that this woman in front of me.

"Do you know who this woman is?" she asks, pointing her index finger at me.

I sigh in defeat. I deserve this, don't I? This is what I get after all the horrible things that I have done in this life.

I was the reason my sister died, the reason her daughter was killed and I was the one who killed father. I am the reason why Nkululeko lost his daughter, the reason why this woman lost her brother. That was all me. No one else is to blame for that, for had I not existed, none of this would be happening.

"No Nobantu, what is the problem?" she asks, moving to stand next to this woman that she calls Nobantu.

"I'm sorry," I manage

It is all I can say, I surprise myself because I have not yet cried.

"Zimasa, she was with him. When he died. Do you remember what the police said?" Nobantu says, looking directly at me.

I cannot help but bow my head.

At this, the woman with the baby gives me the same disgusted look which was handed to me by Nobantu when she first realised who I was.

“The nerve of you. What are doing here? You are a curse to this family and you have the nerve to show up here and act as though you are grieving with us? What disrespect is this that you show so easily?” she asks, utter disgust seeping through her every word.

“Ladies, please. There is no reason for all of this…” I hear Zabathwa say from behind me

“And you are?” Nobantu asks, now turning her attention to poor Zabathwa who honestly has nothing to do with all of this mess.

“I am her sister and I do not appreciate the way you are treating her.” Zabathwa responds

I turn my head to look at Zabathwa, she looks quite irritated at all of this.

“Well then, in that case you can both leave. Neither of you are welcome here.” The woman with the baby says.

My first instinct is to nod and then walk away, but something urges me to speak. To somewhat defend myself.

“I didn’t mean for any of this to happen, I did not know it would happen.” I say

“But it happened, and you can't change any of this by apologising. Our brother is dead! He will never come back simply because you have now apologised.” Zimasa yells.

She is right, I should leave.

I look at her briefly, but even so, it is enough for me to tell that she is pained. She is hurting, much like myself. It was a bad idea to come here.

“Zabathwa let’s go,” I say, turning to Zabathwa. She looks at both the women, hesitant on whether to listen to me or not.

At last she starts moving but right before we exit the kitchen, she turns back and looks at the women once again.

She sighs, lifts her hand as though she will say something but she doesn’t. at least that is what I think before she opens her mouth.

“You know it’s funny that you say apologising will not bring your brother back. It is as though blaming other people for his death will.” She says

In with that, she starts to make her way out. I am still, just staring at the women who look as though they have been hit with more bad news than the death of their brother.

It is only once I regain my senses that I follow Zabathwa out, replaying the words that she said to try and comfort myself into believing that maybe all of this has more than me to blame for.

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On the ride back home, Zabathwa and I hand each other knowing looks. I smile briefly at her through the review mirror and she gives me a look of both assurance and comfort.

The way home is accompanied by the sounds of Kaylow as his beautiful melodies shoo me off to sleep. It is only now, as the harmonies of Greatest Love, echo through the car; that I realise that I have been tired.

I lay my head on the window and drift off to sleep…

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"Mbalenhle, why are you awake at this hour?"

My thoughts are interrupted by Nkululeko as he says this and opens the sliding door leading to the balcony. That is where he finds me, I hope I didn't wake him up.

"I couldn't sleep, I needed some air sthandwa sam'. Did I wake you up?" I ask

It is cold out here but he is wearing nothing but boxer shorts. I suppose he could be concerned too because all I am clothed in is a silk nightdress.

"No, but I miss you." he answers

"I'll come to bed soon…"

"No Mbalenhle. I miss you sthandwa sam'. I want you back," he says, reaching for my hands. He lifts them to his mouth and blows on them, making them warm as his breath hits them.

"Nkululeko, how is this so easy for you? I feel like giving up every day, but you…you never break down. How Nkululeko?" I ask, looking at him straight in the eye.

He moves my hands from his lips and puts them behind his back, wrapping my arms around his waist in the process.

"I can't tell you how," he responds, "but I can tell you why." He continues

I keep silent, waiting for him to go on.

I let go of him because I can tell that he wants to move. He does, puts his hands on the railings and looks at the distant ocean waves as they crash onto the shore.

“Mbalenhle, we can't both break down. It hurts me to see you cry yourself to sleep
sthandwa sam, I don't like it. I want to be there or you. to help you through this…”

“What about you? Who helps you Nkululeko?” I ask, before he can complete his statement.

“Having you in my life is enough. Knowing that you are still here, with me. That’s all that keeps me alive.” He responds

I believe the sincerity in his words, but I don't understand it. I don't understand how he has not shed a single tear. He loved his child. He was so happy when he found out he was going to be a father and then that was taken away from his so unexpectedly. There was no warning, no time to get used to the idea. It just happened and it baffles me how he can be so strong in all of this.

“You can talk to me. I don't want to be the reason why you bottle everything you feel. To me, you’ll always be the Nkululeko I fell in love with. And believe me, I love you so much. So much.”

I see him rub his face slowly, he does this when he has nothing to say.

So we both stand in silence, looking towards the ocean as though every wave will bring with it answers to our questions.

“I brought that woman into our lives.” He says when I least expect him to

I look at him, the pain and guilt in his eyes is so evident. How could he say such a thing?

“No Nkululeko you…”

“I know I did. She was my problem, but because of that she ended up yours as well.” He says

I do not know what to say to him, how to convince him that I don't see this the same way.

“You can't say that, that woman came into your life but you made it clear when you no longer wanted her there. You can't blame yourself for that.” I try to reason with him but it does not look as though it is working.

“Nkululeko, look at me.” I say

He does.

“I'm not going to let you think that. Blaming yourself won't help, it never does.” I say, remembering Zabathwa’s words.

I don't think that I will ever forget what she said to those women right before we left Yonda’s funeral.

“Ngabaza told me what me what you asked of them that day at the hospital.” He says

Immediately my heart drops and I feel it fall into a pit of darkness.

“I don't want you thinking like that, that woman is in jail. She will stay there forever.” He assures

Why can't she die? How is it fair that she gets to live and my child doesn’t?

“She deserves more than that Nkululeko and we both know it,” I say. I will not show him my anger but I think he can see that this is not sitting well with me.

I am baying for blood, I want that woman dead.

“She is sick. She needs help.” He says

“What she needs, is to die.” I respond.

“Mbalenhle don't say that…”

“Why are you defending her Nkululeko?” I am enraged now, and I do not care if he sees it. why is he being so forgiving? It is neither in his nature nor is it necessary.

He keeps quiet.

“Answer me dammit!” I yell

“Because I killed her child! I did that! She told me that, I looked her in the eye as she did. And I didn’t give a fuck! Are you happy now? I drove her crazy, that was all my doing and it was all because I couldn’t fuckin care enough about the woman.”

What is he saying?

“Nkululeko, you what?”

He keeps silent, do those few odd minutes I try to conjure up possible explanations for what he is saying. Surely he does not mean what I think he means.

“What do you mean? What do you mean? You looked her in the eyes Nkululeko, please answer me.” I plead.

He looks at me, his eyes bloodshot.

“I agreed to meet up with her once, after things had ended between us. She said she was desperate to see me so I ...”

“Is this going to break my heart?” I ask, even before he can proceed with what he wants to say.
It is essential that I ask this, for I fear that if this is going to break my heart then I will no longer be able to take it. I am human after all, I can only take so much.

“It might.” He answers

I surprise myself because all I do is nod and prompt him to go on. Perhaps I need to hear this.

“So we met up, to talk. She told me she was pregnant but...” He says

But Mseki told me that he didn’t know. Why would these people lie to me?

“You knew? Nkululeko...”

“Baby, wait no. I knew she was pregnant but I also knew that it couldn’t have been my child.” He says, grabbing my hand. I want to push him away so badly but instead I fixate my eyes on his.

“She wasn’t lying? You made her lose her child?” My greatest fear here is that I will break down, that I will break down and I will not recover. That is what I fear the most.

“I should’ve known she wasn’t well, I should’ve seen it. But instead I treated her badly and I was the one who drove her into doing what she did. She wasn’t lying when she said that but Mbalenhle, I swear to you with what I love the most, she was not carrying my child.”

“How do you know?” I need to sit down, but then again I need some fresh air. So I slide to the floor while staring blankly at the ocean. He sits down too.

“I know because she told me she was two weeks pregnant, we had broken up for a month and I hadn’t touched her since. It was part of the reason why I treated her so badly, to me it just didn’t make sense why she would even bother making such an accusation. I didn’t think it through, I didn’t see any signs of her being unstable, instead I just...”

“Nkululeko when you say you treated her badly, what do you mean?” I ask

He lets out a deep exasperated sigh even before I can complete my question

“I may have lost my temper but...”

My heart drops immediately. I wonder how much a person is meant to handle in this world, and you know what’s so unfair? Some people live such easy lives, the biggest heartache that they can imagine is losing a parent or a sibling yet in this very same world, you find people who have endured brutality and blow after blow but still they stand. I cannot fathom why others are given a bigger burden to carry in this life, are we not living in a society that is constantly advocating for equality. How then, do all the bad things pile up and then throw themselves at all the good people? What did I ever do to deserve such ill-treatment from life? Here I am with the man I love so dearly but I fear that he too will break my heart. Why?

“I didn’t hit her Mbalenhle. I don’t hit women.” He says

I sigh, I am yet to figure out whether it is a sigh of relief or of fatigue.

We both sit in silence for the next thirty minutes, at the end I decide to shift closer to him and lay my head on his shoulder.

He is a good man, although he may doubt it and sometimes I may have my doubts about it, he is still a good man. Sure, I understand why he would think to blame himself for all of this mess but the woman was crazy and regardless of whether he had seen it earlier or not, she would’ve done something bad at some stage. She was hungry for revenge, I could see it so clearly in her eyes. He cannot carry the consequences of her behaviour as his own problems. That is something that I will not tolerate.

“You must learn to forgive yourself. For whatever you think you might’ve done wrong, for whatever you think might’ve done but didn’t do. You have to learn to forgive yourself Nkululeko.” I whisper.

He lifts my head from his shoulder, turning me to face him.

“Maybe we both should.” He finally says

Maybe he is right.

Chapter Fourteen

I have to pass by the hospital today for some medication. Apparently, my body is not done with healing so I have to be consistent in making hospital visits and having my medication prescribed because the prescription changes every so often.

I'm taking driving lessons from Mondli so he is the one that dropped me off here. I still get nervous around him, I stutter when I have to speak but that's only because I feel so embarrassed about having him see me in the state that I was in a month ago.

I am healing, slowly but surely. It helps to have a man like Nkululeko by my side who is so determined to see me happy again. He makes me happy.
He is one of the few things that have remained after the storm that hit my life. He is tarnished sure, but he remains nonetheless.

Dr Murigan, the gynaecologist that I am meeting with, has an office which is situated on the third floor. I have to trek all the way there because my intolerance of elevators has increased drastically over the past few months.

After conquering the first flight of stairs, i have to rest at the passage. I am interrupted by a familiar voice. A voice that I had almost forgotten.

“Mbali?” It says

I turn around

My eyes glimmer with both tears and incoherence.

“Ntombi?” I ask, it is her. In the flesh. She is in front of me. She is pregnant.

My heart shatters at the realisation. It is not jealousy, or perhaps it is. I don't know anymore. I am just pleased to see her here.

“It's so nice to see you...” she says, just before she erupts in laughter and grabs me in a hug. Her belly touches my empty stomach.

I am delighted to see her. I really am.

“It's great to see you too,” I say, smiling and then examining her. I do not realise that I am staring until she calls my name once again.

“How are you doing?” She asks, the same beautiful smile that I remember so clearly still stuck on her face.

“You're pregnant.” It is not what I intended to say.

“Yes, I'm married. How are you, how have you been...” she holds on to my shoulders, as though making sure that I am real. “Did you get out?” She asks, her smile changes into a frown.

I sigh, my heart is heavy.

“I did.” I answer

“I'm glad.” She lets my shoulders go and for a minute we just look at each other.

“You should call me. We should catch up. Right now I have an appointment with the gynae” she says, glancing at her home screen.

Of course she does. So do I. But for completely different reasons.

She rushes off after we talk for a few minutes and exchange numbers.

I can tell, she is not the same Ntombi. She definitely doesn't look the same and she sure doesn't sound the same. There is an appealing aura about her, a certain spring to her step.

As I watch her walk off. I think back to when we were young, when we would sit for hours and joke about how life would be like after high school.
We both thought it would be easy, that high school gives both an NSC and a free pass to life. We were naive, even at such a ripe age we were both very naive.

She had a pained look when she asked me if I had made it out of there, as though she was happy that I had but surprised that I was alive. I could've asked where they disappeared off to, I could've asked why they had left so hastily and without so much as a warning.

I know I have to move on upstairs so I make my way up again. This time I do it with ease because I have gained some sort of stamina from seeing Ntombi.

She is the average girl walking down the street, nothing particular about her. Her personality, as I remember it, was golden. The type of girl who would speak logic but make it sound more profound than it actually was. I never forgot her, perhaps every now and then she would slide swiftly away from my mind but I never forgot her. She is what kept me through my days at school, she never knew just how much she was helping me and what her presence actually meant to me. I will always be appreciative of that.

I'd love to think that I'm a strong woman, because obviously I'm still alive even after life has thrown the hardest challenges my way. I just can't help but think that it could been worse. A week ago, the doctors confirmed that I could still be able to bare other children, after two miscarriages, to me that sounds like a blessing.

I will never tell Nkululeko about my first pregnancy, it is of no relevance in our lives.
Yes, it happened but now it's in the past and disclosing it to Nkululeko will only break his heart and leave him bitter. There is no use.

“I have an appointment with Dr Murigan.” I say to the occupied young lady at the front desk.

She looks up.

“I'll see you through in just a second Ms Miya.” She says, offering me a smile.

I wait for her to finish with busying herself with a stack of papers and then follow her to Dr Murigan's office.

“She'll be with you in just a minute.” she says, again offering me a smile and then moving to close the door as she leaves.

I decide to rummage through my handbag for my phone before the doctor arrives.

I send a text message to Nkululeko, asking him to pick me up in an hour.

Then I open my own inbox and find old messages from people who have somehow seen the need to offer condolences. A lot of the messages are bank notifications and messages from Vodacom. The newest message is from a number I don't know.
I ignore it at first and instead open the one that's from Malwande. It says she would like us to have brunch at Ntsiki's place on Wednesday.
Apparently this is something worthwhile because Msizi has finally agreed to talk to Ngabaza.

I open the message from the unknown number, at first I don't pay much attention to it because it is long and I dont have time to read it because Dr Murigan opens the door and enters while apologising for her non-punctuality.

I put my phone back in my handbag and focus my attention on her...

You know, sometimes life has a way of humbling you. A way of dismantling you until you are nothing more than shattered pieces of your previous self. But even so, it is up to you to chose how you handle it. I read once that that life is like play-dough, it is what you make of it. For others, it's harder because they have nothing so they either make nothing or they find something. For some it is hard because they have too much and they end up lost in all that they have. But then, there are others. Others who fall victim to life and it completely destroys them. They choose to give up, they choose to let go of that grip and they let themselves fall even without knowing what they'll fall into.

“Sthandwa sam.” He says, then lays a gentle kiss on my forehead.

He opens my door and I enter, I switch in the radio and sit back as the sounds of Gaopele fill the car.

When he has seated himself comfortably in his own seat, he doesn't start the car. He just looks at me. I ignore him because I know I'll start blushing if I look back.

“You're okay Mbalenhle?” He asks.

I sigh, I have heard this question so many times.

“I am Mthethwa. I love you.” I assure him

He stares again, this time I flush.

“Good then.” He answers

I roll my eyes and search for my phone in my bag. The intention is to look as though I am busy so that I don't have to look at Nkululeko's provoking faces as he drives.

I remember the message that I hadn't read. Perhaps I shouldn't read it. Many it one of those letters of condolences again. But something prompt me to open the message.

"I could've talked to you in person, I probably should've. I want to apologise, for all that I said. I was hurting and obviously I didn't mean half the things that came out of my mouth..."

When was this sent?

I press the 'back' button and look at the time of reception. It reads 11:24 am.

I open the message again.

Why would Ayanda send me a message with a number I don't recognise?

"I've had difficulties over the past few months. With accepting my reality, with recognising what my life has become. You kept me sane. You made me feel like there was nothing wrong with me but I was always fighting my own demons. I knew all too well that everything would catch up to me."

What is this?

"I was a failure, a coward. I couldn't stand up to my father, I couldn't stand up against him and I couldn't stand up for my own mother. So I blamed you because you were the only person I knew who could take it. I've watched you grow, I've watched you mature into a woman. I was so proud to see you develop into yourself Mbali. I could've shown my pride in you. You held yourself together, even though I knew how hard you had it. You never told me

but I always knew. I could see a scorned woman, one doesn't have to known much to see that. "

The tears have already formed in my eyes. My heart is breaking.

Again.

"I want to say goodbye, I want to wish you great happiness and I want you to know that you deserve nothing less than the best. I am sure you are tired of being offered condolences but I had to cry myself to sleep every night because I wasn't there for you when you needed me the most. I never told you this, but you were my only friend. The only friend I've ever trusted, the only friend that if ever loved. You were what I needed and it pained me to know that I pushed you away. You are a wonderful woman, worthy of a man who will love and cherish you."

And so they fall. Once more, they fall hard and I can't stop them. I hear his voice, so distant even though he is sitting right next to me.

“Sthandwa sam...Mbalenhle. Baby. Talk to me.” He says.

He grabs the phone from my hand, keeps silent and scrolls through the text. At the end, he settles with, “Shit.” Then he slowly closes his eyes and takes a deep breath in.
Then he starts the car again.

Contentment and happiness doesn’t exist in my life for more than a few moments at a time, and they are only illusionary. There is always something hidden.
Lying in waiting to spring up and ruin everything.